THE MERMAID CALL

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For Laurie

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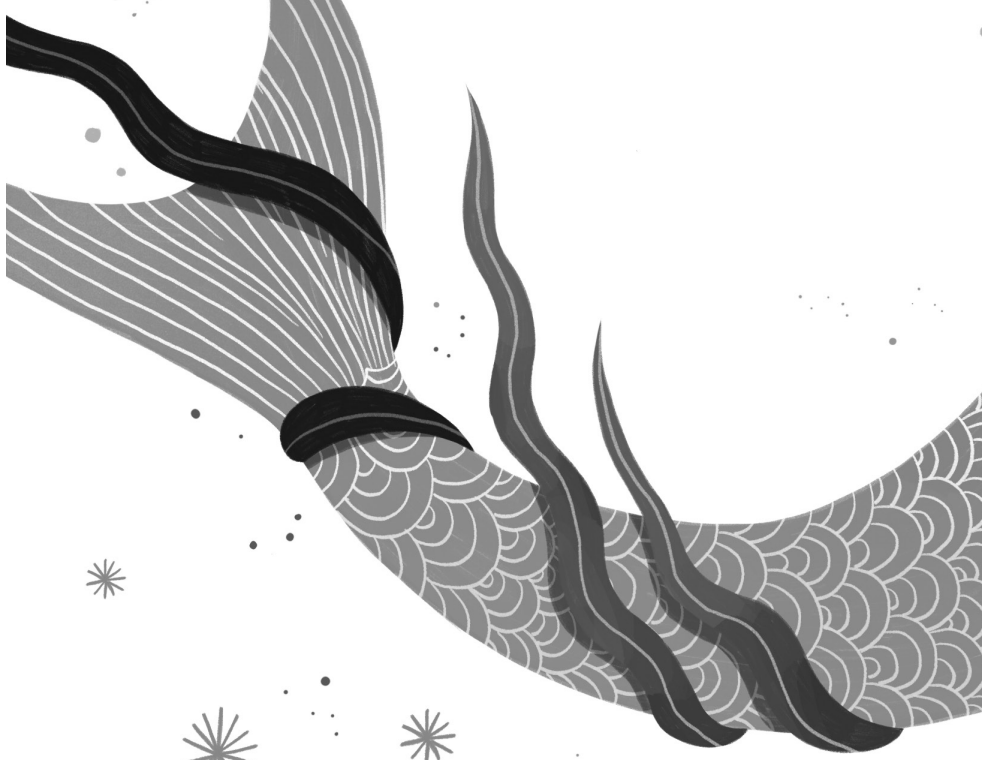
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Prologue

Whose mirror have you been looking in?

Mimi's question was swimming through my head as I stared at my reflection in the oily surface of the pond; shiny greens, blues and pinks from the minerals feeding the cave.

Whose mirror have you been looking in, Vivien?

It was the question Mimi – my gran – asked whenever I turned on myself ("too ugly", "too curly",

"*two* big feet").

As if the answer could be my way out.

The darkly coloured water seemed to shiver. I glanced sharply back around our new prison, from its star-studded black ceiling to the shadowy rock ledge behind me. Lit only by the glow from my head-torch, my new friend was lying as still as Sleeping Beauty. Waiting for her wish to come true. It sent a fiercer surge of panic hurtling through me, a greyhound after a rabbit: *she needs help!* I began lowering myself into the pond, legs immediately starting a frenzied doggy-paddle – it was deep and cold; lake-cold. Fixing my eyes on a shaft of grey liquid light beneath the water, I prepared to dive: torso stretching; arms pointing; fingers together in an arrow. A tankful of air into my lungs, and … I sliced through the water; deep, deep down.

Water's my ally. In water I can be dainty and delicate; fast and fierce. I can be anything I want to be. Water turns me as regal as a swan. In water I can be a shark, a dolphin … a mermaid. Except – my hands immediately met an ice-cold wall of resistance. Now water was the enemy. Like an army of serpentine soldiers I had to fight; a witch I had to foil, or she'd cook us in a cauldron of frog legs and fish eyes. My heart sped up. The lake wanted to keep us here, trapped for eternity.

I could already sense my lungful of oxygen leaking, straining for air from the pit of my stomach. A faster kick of legs, a stronger sweep of my arms; deeper still into the cold, wet darkness. The water kept pushing and slapping as, eyes stinging, I swam on, to fight those serpentine soldiers, escape the cauldron-witch.

To reach another world.

Whose mirror have you been looking in?

I knew the answer. I knew now whose story I had been trapped inside.

Welcome to Lake Splendour

There has long been a tale of a freshwater mermaid at Lake Splendour. Invading Romans thought she was the goddess Amphitrite. From the twelfth century, there was talk of a vengeful Lake Mermaid, called Melusine, haunting their waters. When village fisherfolk discovered a queen conch shell at the bottom of the lake, they took it as proof she existed. They used the shell to beg the Lake Mermaid for miracles and mercy; for fish, not the floods and fog that plagued their livelihoods.

Then, in 1914, two 15-year-old village girls, Lydia and Violet, declared the Lake Mermaid spoke to them through the ancient queen conch shell. Soon after, they completely vanished. On their return, months later, the girls claimed they had been summoned by the powerful Lake Mermaid, who was fighting for a better world where mermaids ruled beyond the water. They said the Lake Mermaid had sent them back to help with the Great War on land, and they would rejoin her once the battles of men were done.

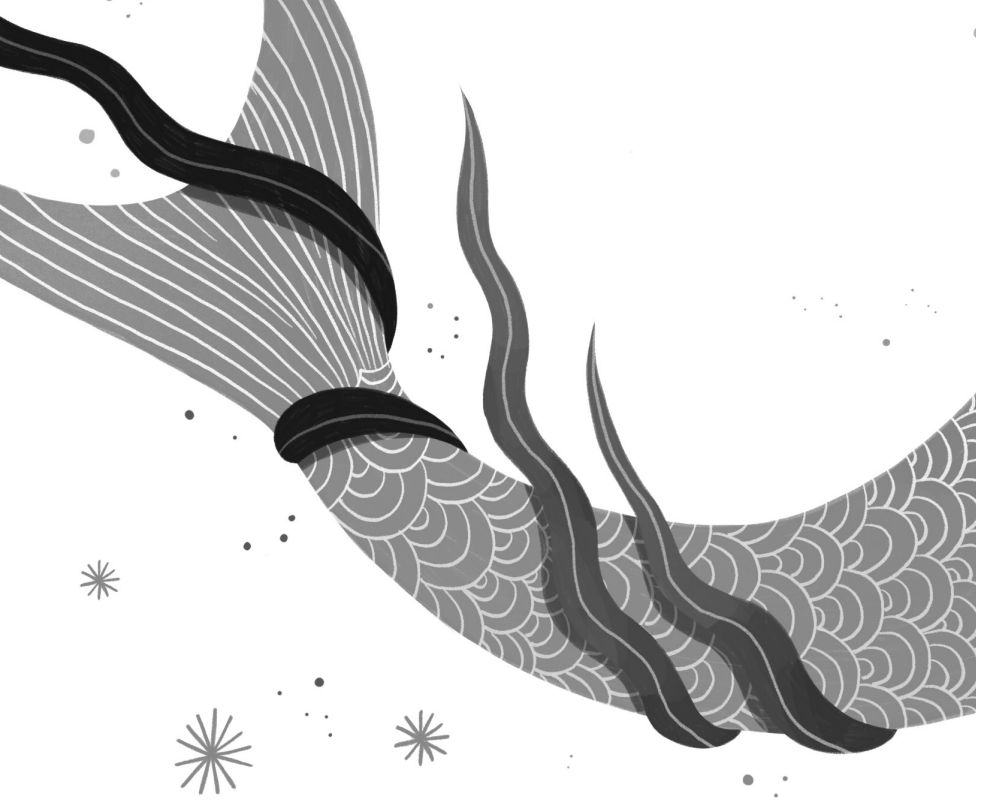
Alas, they would never return to her. When the trenches took the lives and limbs of so many of Lake

Splendour's workers, it was Lydia and Violet who stepped in, using their tale of meeting the great and powerful Lake Mermaid to single-handedly save the village by encouraging visitors to come and spot the legendary mermaid for themselves.

Known as the Mermaid Girls ever since, they led a movement of tradeswomen to build the tourist trade you see today: from hotels and tearooms to boat trips and mermaid arts and crafts (we even have mermaid fruit and veg!). People from far and wide continue to visit to seek their own Lake Mermaid adventure! What will yours look like?

We wish you a very warm and watery welcome to Lake Splendour!

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Mum's Homecoming

Two Weeks Earlier

Hair. I suppose you could say it all started with hair: short, long, glossy, greasy, straight, wavy, curly – *very curly.*

Hair. It's what I think of first when I picture Mum. And right then Mum was all I was thinking about. She was arriving that very evening! My stomach could not stop *whizz-pop-banging*. After three years of *might be*, *would she*, *why hasn't she?* Mum was coming home to

Lake Splendour – her and her fairytale head of spun silk.

Hair. It's what greets me first when I catch my reflection. Mum's crowning glory bypassed me. I have thick and wild, sort-of-toffee-coloured, tight coils of curls that never – *ever!* – grow past my shoulders (I have tried; I have tried very hard). My hair is the first thing people notice about me (I wish it wasn't), and *not* in the way people notice Mum's. I get whispers, a lot, behind my back; sometimes fingers reach out to touch. I have to act like I don't notice, or that I don't mind, or *ha-ha, that's so funny*, when they snigger, "She's been electrified!" or "Check out the bird's nest!" *again.*

I'd asked Mimi, my gran, that morning if I could buy some hair straighteners for Mum's homecoming ("No way, no chance!" she'd said), and I was trying to think of other ways to tame my frizz, when Eleni clicked her fingers.

"Are you listening, Vivien?"

Hair. It's what Eleni had done to hers that was still bothering me. She'd chopped her black mane off to her chin last Saturday and I'd been sitting opposite Imposter Eleni all week. The worst part was she'd not told me she was going to do it, when we share if we're planning to trim our toenails! Well, we used to. Eleni was changing.

"I said Hero invited us to sit with them – the MPs." Eleni was pointing tentatively across the school canteen to the table where the Mighty Protestors were sat: badge-wearing Hero; Jadon and his nose stud; Emma with the diamanté eye patch; Khalil, who wore mascara; and Skye with the blue-tipped braids. Older, cooler students with rebellious twists to their uniforms and confident, podium-loud opinions. Frankly, they were scary.

"Nope, I prefer it here," I said, and stabbed a soggy, fat chip with my fork.

"But it's the last day of term. Wouldn't it be fun to join them?"

Fun? I nearly choked on my chip. As fun as being forced to take maths GCSE four years early. No way could I sit with the MPs and pretend to be cool, rebellious, confident. I was useless at pretending.

"Hero is amazing." Eleni was still gazing misty-eyed in her direction.

My stomach shrank a little. It had not escaped my notice that Eleni's new hair was a mirror-copy of Hero's. (And yes, that *is* her real name.) She had been kissing the ground *All-hail-Hero* walked on ever since she led our climate change march a few months ago. Eleni no longer seemed to care about our own campaigns – *Improve School Dinners!* and *Oi, Stop Your Littering!* "Childish",

she'd called them yesterday.

"We talked for ages when Hero came in for her battered haddock last night." Eleni pushed her glasses up her nose. "She wants me to get more active with the MPs."

I sat back so hard my canteen chair bounced. *That's it!* I had an urge to grab a fistful of Hero's badge-filled jacket and remind her: *Eleni Christofi is* my *best friend, not yours*. Huh, like I'd dare. I had a doctor's note the day they gave out backbones. I shifted lower in my seat; I'm your keep-the-peace-and-everyone-happy type of person. *Nice*, *polite*, teachers report (plus "should speak up more"). I never argue with anyone, never fall out with Mimi, not one row with Eleni in all the years we've been best friends; I'm even pleasant to cold-callers. There should be a bone for that.

Eleni was making that chewing face, when she's not sure how to say something, until: "The MPs are anti-mermaid." She said it really quickly, like pulling off a plaster with words.

"What? How can anyone live here and not love mermaids!" I was aware I was spluttering, but *blimey* – Lake Splendour *exists* because of our annual Mermaid Festival. It's bigger than Christmas round these parts. There's a costume parade with fancy floats and a park

funfair and the Lake Race. And it was all happening in just two weeks' time.

"The MPs want the Mermaid Crown to be stopped," Eleni replied hesitantly.

"Never!" I drew a breath like she'd just uttered the worst swear word ever. "The Crown is the heart of the whole festival!"

You get to enter if you're a girl between nine and sixteen, and you win this amazing crown. (That's *you* as in *everyone-you* … not *me*.) But the *biggest* thing is the crowned mermaid gets her picture in the national newspapers. It's how we keep tourists coming.

Eleni was screwing up her nose like there was a bad smell. "Don't you think the Mermaid Crown is really, really sexist?"

I shook my head quickly. "Boys can enter to win King Neptune's trident."

"It's not the same, Vivien." Eleni took off her glasses as if she wanted me to go blurry. "Hero says the Mermaid Crown is just a beauty pageant for girls."

"Err, not true. It's judged on a *really* good costume." Wig. Tail. Shell accessories. The usual.

"Then why is it always the popular, pretty girls who win?" Eleni retorted. She flicked her head back at our year's Princess Table behind us: a poster for the Mermaid

Crown if ever there was one. Not one of them was a Curly. Not one had my broad swimmer's shoulders. They all had small feet ("Where *did* you get your size sevens from, Vivien?" *Thanks, Mimi*). The Princess Table all had long hair (*they* were allowed straighteners!) and no spots (witchcraft; must be), and our blue tartan school skirt looked sleek on them, not potato-sack. I picked at mine and added weakly, "But the Mermaid Crown is a festival tradition."

"Hero says traditions are just an excuse not to change. She says mermaids were invented by the pat-ri-archy." Eleni stumbled over that last word. Then she closed her eyes, like I wouldn't understand.

My shrunken stomach shrivelled. *All-hail-Hero.* I stared down at my plate of soggy, fat chips and greasy, thin gravy that – *actually* – really did need *Improve School Dinners!*, before I said quietly, "Yeah, but we *sell* mermaids. We *need* the Mermaid Crown." That's *we* as in my family's shop, Enchanted Tails. "If we don't make enough from the tourists this summer, we might go bust."

Mimi said we'd had the worst year ever for takings; we were already more hard up than usual. I was having to wear last year's blue anorak (already second-hand) because Mimi couldn't afford to buy me one of those

trendy puffer jackets everyone else has. Museums would soon be queuing up to put my phone on display. My stomach grew some lumpy potatoes to fill my potato-sack skirt.

"Sorry, I know mermaids matter more to you," I heard Eleni sigh. This time we both went eyes-to-our-plate quiet. The high-pitched shrieks from Princess Table seemed to get louder. "So what time's your mum getting here?"

I looked up again, relieved. Eleni's eyes were doing an olive branch. "After seven-ish tonight!" (Everything was an *ish* with Mum.) "We can pause *Improve School Dinners!* if you want, prioritise *Oi, Stop Your Littering!*" I could compromise. Mum was all that mattered right now.

Mum was finally coming home.

So, I'd not seen Mum in three years. Which, *yup*, is a massively long time not to see your nearest and dearest, I know, but you have to understand: Mum's a free spirit. Mimi says she was born flying. ("Whoosh, out of the womb!"). She flew away from Lake Splendour well before I was born and again after she'd had me. "Like a stork: delivered you, then took off." Mimi would flap her arms like it was no big deal.

Mimi says she's afraid Mum will never be able to settle in one place, which is why she's had to raise me. Mimi might be my gran ("Don't you ever call me Gran!") but I suppose she's more like another mum; she's even the same age as some of my friends' parents. She's beautiful like Mum is, just a little more lined and saggy … and strict.

Mum, the stork, works on cruise ships. She's forever travelling to exotic locations, so it's not her fault she can't see me all that much. She always writes *Wish you were here* on the postcards stuck to our fridge. And every birthday I get a mermaid doll from all over the world. We're talking:

Hawaiian mo'o
Estonian näkk
South American oriyu
Sirena of the Philippines
Japanese ningyo
West Africa's Igbagbo and Yemoja
South Africa's Kaaiman

I keep them lined up on the shelf above my bed even though Eleni says they creep her out ("They're plotting something"). So what if they are: they're beautiful and Mum chose each one, parcelled it up, stuck on a postage stamp. So every one, I treasure.

I'd already made my usual peel-off from Eleni at the shopping precinct. We'd not mentioned *All-hail-Hero* and her anti-mermaid views again. It wasn't worth losing my best friend over. Plus, it's not like I don't have a number-two friend as well. That's Erik. He's in my swim club and he's the best at somersault dives.

I continued down Lake Mermaid Road alone. It's only me who lives right at the lakefront, above our shop. Eleni lives above her family chippy, Poseidon. It started as a Greek Cypriot restaurant, then Eleni's mum and dad realised tourists form bigger queues for fish and chips than for their famed chicken souvlaki (even though their souvlaki is *DE-licious*). Most kids from my school live on the modern estates higher up the hill, in those look-a-like houses I've always envied because they have gardens big enough for trampolines and parents who mostly come in twos and cars fit for families.

I passed by Fin's Waves, where the old ladies envy my natural curls (yes, you heard right; old ladies fashion their perms on me. Now do you feel my pain?). I was busy comforting myself with a mental list of all the things Mum and I could do together, what with summer holidays starting tomorrow. Headed *Keep it fun for Mum* because I think she gets bored easily. She's used to excitement, thrills, see? I reckoned if I could make it

really exciting, she might not fly away too soon.

Maybe not ever again? (*Double whizz-pop-bang.*)

On past Nature's Bounty, our fruit and veg shop. In tourist season they showcase their daily produce that "most resembles a mermaid". Today's: knobbly turnip with a flick of a hairy tail. Past Neptune's Inn (Mum often stays there. She needs her "own space") and Splash Tearooms (serving the best conch cream horns). Even our bank has a shell-framed cash machine, and don't get me started on our fishmonger's or we'd be here all day (mermaid-scale mussels, anyone?).

It started drizzling as I passed the shell shop (Conch Curios) and the sky had turned the same mournful ash-grey as our village slate and stone. I pulled up my anorak hood to protect my hair from the frizzies. Lake Splendour is as north as you can go in England before you become Scottish. It rains *a lot* (hence trusty anorak) and even on summer days the sun hardly ever wants to get its hat on. But today – I hugged Mum's visit tightly to my chest like it was Christmas Eve – the sun (wherever it had gone) might as well be dressed in rainbow brightness.

I paused to happily pick up a crisp wrapper and put it in the bin. Fact: we lose countless lake birds to the perils of littering. Our village council spends more on litter-

picking than libraries! Chew on that, *All-hail-Hero*.

At the bottom of the road and there it is: the postcard shot of our lake. Silvery water topped by majestic green and grey craggy mountains and flanked by sloping hills of fir trees on either side. Follow the path round to the right of the water and you soon reach our Shell Grotto and the Illuminated Cave where the village's famous Mermaid Girls, Lydia and Violet, said they met the Lake Mermaid in 1914. Ever since, people have been visiting the cave to try their luck at capturing that million-dollar mermaid photo, you know, like they do with the Loch Ness Monster or Bigfoot or the Abominable Snowman.

Along the lakefront, mermaid bunting had been strung up between the cast-iron lampposts in readiness for our week-long Mermaid Festival. In a fortnight there'd be wooden huts lining our wide promenade, selling chocolate mermaid tails and edible shell necklaces; plastic crowns and tridents; long nylon wigs galore. The first Saturday of the festival launches the Mermaid Crown: colourful floats leading a parade of girls dressed as mermaids to snag the sparkly tiara, and (not so many) boys kitted out to win Neptune's trident. The crowning and trident-ing takes place on the Sunday in the Shell Grotto. A week of funfair and fireworks, and the festival

closes the following Saturday with the Lake Race. I was finally old enough to swim in it this year. And Mum just *had* to stay for it! You see, if my mum had been given wings, I'd got fins. My insides tickled – maybe Mum would even watch me win the race! *Triple whizz-pop-bang*. OK, so it was the Mermaid Crown that Mum won when she was my age, not a swimming race, but maybe I could prove to her I was good at something, that I was worth visiting. I pictured myself stepping up to the podium to receive the trophy, Mum bouncing up and down and clapping the hardest of anyone. "My brilliant daughter!" she'd squeal.

The image sent me flying past the row of lace-curtained bed and breakfasts (Mermaid's Rest; Siren Slumbers), all of them displaying mermaid-shaped *Vacancies* signs (one or two with accompanying dead flies). I whizzed by Atlantis Arcades with its flashing mermaid lights and piped music, until, *there*, just before the lake curves back up towards the mountains – Enchanted Tails. I had to hurry and change in case Mum was (miraculously) early. I planned on wearing the dungaree dress and stripy top Mimi got me last Christmas. My stomach twisted: was it grown up enough for Mum? I'd already decided to put my hair up (last time Mum made a comment about it being too bushy and bothersome). Maybe I could sneak

a spray of Mimi's knock-off Chanel (Mum also said I always stink of chlorine).

It's fair to say my stomach was now *whizz-pop-banging* like the festival fireworks. I didn't know how I was going to keep calm till she arrived! Mimi was in the shop window arranging a new display of children's mermaid costumes on cut-out card mannequins. I drew up to the glass, squashing my nose against it and raising monster claws to make Mimi laugh. Mimi has the same conker-brown hair as Mum, though she never bothers with make-up or fancy clothes; just her usual rope plait and tattered, green lace-up boots.

She spotted me.

She didn't laugh.

Her mouth was drawn into a thin line like she was gripping a row of sewing pins between her lips.

Straightaway, my stomach dropped like an anchor. I knew that look well, the same look when Belle our ancient gerbil died a year ago; the same look she had the last time Mum was supposed to be coming.

Which meant I already knew what she was going to shout through the glass even before she opened her mouth. I looked away, back at the lake, a sudden urge to plunge into the cold water, anything to get away from—

"Your mum called. I'm sorry, Vivien. She's cancelled again."

My dreams of summer fizzed and dissolved like some cheap chemistry experiment.

I refocused my eyes on the window. From Mimi and her shiny plait to my own reflection: frizzy hair and broad shoulders.

Mum wasn't coming – because I just wasn't good enough.