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VIVI
CONWAY

AND THE
SWORD OF LEGEND

Lizzie Huxley-Jones

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KNIGHTS OF

Chapter One

The problem with growing up listening to bedtime stories about monsters, magic and myth is that you don't really question it when a lake summons you.

The lake, my lake, is calling to me, and has been for about a week. It's a pull in my chest, a gnawing in my brain. I couldn't tell you *how* I know it's the lake, but I feel it in my bones when I'm awake, and it's woken me up several times, as though someone has been calling my name.

And the worst part of it all is that it doesn't weird me out. That much.

Maybe my understanding of what is "normal" is a little, erm, warped. But you don't grow up autistic and weird without realising your version of normal is quite different from everyone else's.

Mumma's stories definitely haven't helped there either.

A sensible person might question why a whole load of water would be almost-talking to them, never mind how that could even happen. And I get it, it's weird. But, somehow, I know I have to be there. To listen, maybe? To find . . . something. I don't know. Nothing is clear.

I just know that I have to go and say goodbye to the lake. Like the way you know when it's going to rain, or when a cake will turn out just right. Mumma always calls those feelings "kitchen witchery", but I always thought it was just luck or something like that.

A goodbye is probably all it wants, right?

It all started the day Mam came back from London, having set up the new house ready for us to move into. The Mums had decided we'd move away from Wales at the start of summer. Mumma's work had been trying to promote her to the London office for years, but she didn't want to uproot me when I'd finally got comfortable. Then, things went bad.

Kelly Keane and I had been best friends since we were in nursery and I hadn't needed more friends, because I had Kelly. But then she met Danielle, and then Paul came along too. Neither of them liked me. And soon,

neither did Kelly. At first, I kept going to school, but everything quickly went from bad to worse . . .

After I missed the last three months of Year Six, the Mums decided a fresh start would be a good thing for us, and by that point I was so tired I just said yes. I would be starting secondary school along with everyone else in September, but not in Wales. In London. But being the new kid would probably work in my favour. If everyone already had their friend groups from primary school, maybe no one would bother me. I hoped so.

Anyway, that night, the Mums and I sat around our craggy old table eating peanut butter noodles when a huge rainstorm appeared from nowhere, rattling the windows of our old farmhouse. There'd even been flooding throughout the valley, so the farmers had had to go out and rescue their sheep, moving them to safety.

And ever since that storm, ever since I realised we really were leaving, I've heard the call. It's kind of taken over my brain, clouding out any other thought.

I had thought, to start with, that it was just the usual anxiety about things changing. My therapist Dr. May says that most autistic people struggle with change and newness, and we'd spent the summer

talking through my worries about moving and having to start going to school again.

But, as I lie here at five in the morning on the day we move house (and country). I can finally, *really* hear it. It's a half-heard whisper. *Come here. Come look.*

I have to go, and that means sneaking out before the Mums wake up.

I've never snuck out before. We live miles from the next village, surrounded by farmland in the gap between towns, the sort of house you pass on the way to somewhere else. Plus, I really can't lie. My face always gives away exactly what I'm thinking, and the Mums can spot a half-truth from across a room. I don't like lies, even the ones that are supposed to be kind to spare people's feelings when the truth isn't very nice. If I insisted I had to go, the Mums probably would take me to the lake. But moving day means a schedule that probably shouldn't be messed with, and they both seem really stressed out – Mumma keeps doing this weird pasted-on smile every time I ask her something, while Mam just spends all the time making lists and aggressively chewing gum. It just makes more sense for me to go while they're asleep.

Slipping out from under the covers, I lightly avoid

the creakiest floorboards around my bed. In an old farmhouse, that's easier said than done. The light outside is a golden dawn, the weather finally clearing. I empty my backpack out onto the bed and cover the things I had packed for the car with the duvet. It isn't a convincing person-in-bed substitute, but it's the best I can do given all my stuff is in boxes. Thanks to Mam's trusty black Sharpie and slightly intense moving organisation system, I find my rash guard and swimming shorts quickly, throwing them into my backpack. If I'm going to go all the way up there, I may as well swim too.

There's no point changing into today's clothes and getting them potentially mucky, so I just pull on my warmest knitted jumper and bright raincoat over my pyjamas. Hopefully no one will spot me in luminous yellow; in Wales you can never be too prepared for rain.

I creep out, and go down the stairs on my bum, just to be safe. All the rugs that usually cover every floor are rolled up in tubes downstairs, so every step echoes around the empty hallways.

Something gets caught in my hair. I leap away, holding my breath so I don't yell, and bat whatever it is away from my face. Squinting through the darkness

and hoping I've not just destroyed a spider's hard work – I'd feel bad about ruining their webs, but also would rather not have their packed lunch flies in my bird's nest of hair – I see that luckily it's just the last of Mam's lavender, picked from the hillside and hanging up to dry. I let out the breath, and pad through the empty kitchen.

My muddy yellow wellies wait at the back door ready to be slung in the boot of the car, and I wriggle them on, wincing at the cool damp inside. The big bronze key is in its usual place on the spice shelf, even though that's now totally empty. It turns easily in the lock, and I close the door behind me with one quick, quiet tug.

I find my bike leaning against the side of the house, and walk it down our drive, just in case I immediately crash loudly into something while trying to be stealthy.

Helmet on. Bike light lit. Mysterious expedition to a lake in the wee hours of the morning without any supervision is officially go.

The roads are completely empty, though I can already hear Mr. Bevan, one of the farmers, starting up his tractor somewhere in the distance. It's not quiet in the country, though everyone thinks that. Sheep call to each other as they wake up, and insects

buzz. Birds sing from the hedgerows that border the winding roads. A bat flits through the air ahead of me, catching the last night-time bugs before it goes to roost. I want to slow down, to watch the nature I grew up with wake up for one last time, but I can't get caught out here. Everyone knows everyone around here, and I'm the only kid who ever goes up to the lake, so anyone awake at this time would know that it's me, that weird scruffy Conway girl. No one else from school goes up there unless they're dragged by their parents; they all say I'm some kind of pond-loving weirdo.

It probably is a bad idea, but once I'm away from the house, pedalling hard, I stop caring. I just want to be in the lake one last time. My lake, which is actually called Llyn (Arian), is bright blue ice-cold crystal water and sits at the foot of a group of mountains. I've been swimming there at least once a week since I was small, when Mumma got really into outdoor swimming. One year she made us go on Boxing Day when snow had runoff from the peaks, but that was kind of torturous and luckily never repeated.

Soon I'm off the road and onto the walker's path, which leads up to the lake. I breathe a sigh of relief that I've passed no one, or at least I'm pretty sure

I haven't. Years of cycling here means I make quick work of it – I know where all the potholes are, where it gets muddiest, where rabbits like to dash across.

But also, the pull in my brain seems to be getting louder, turning into a buzz. And the closer I get, the more frantic it sounds. The pulling-buzzing-drumming makes my legs churn faster.

Over the rise, glistening in the morning light, is my lake. Turquoise and gold-light dappled, the clearest water I've ever seen. In the low light, it looks lorded over by the peaks of mountains on three sides. People around here say it was a seat of power for giants, maybe even their throne. The air is so fresh.

An ache blooms in my chest. This is the last time I'll be here for . . . I can't even imagine how long.

I don't know how to be a London person. In Wales, I can follow the seasons with the changing colours, and when the wind blows the right way I can taste salt from the sea, sharp and sour on my tongue. And I know the land, because of Mumma's stories. When I was small, Mumma used to take me out walking, just the two of us. The night before, she would tell me a story set in the place we were going to visit, and the next day we would look for proof

of the myths. I was so determined that one day I'd find a door in a tree trunk, a keyhole in a stone, even a hidden castle. I always hoped I'd find a whole other world, that I'd discover magic. That I'd be part of something bigger than just this.

But now I'm leaving, so I guess that hope has to stay here. I'll leave it in the water.

I lay my bike on the grass, throwing off my rucksack with it. No one is around, so I drop my pyjamas in a crumpled heap and slip into my swimming kit.

Get in the water. Go on.

It must be my own thoughts, but . . . it doesn't sound like me. I shake it off and stand at the water's edge in the muddy sand.

Some people like to test the temperature with a toe before they get in, but I think the best way is to just stride in purposefully. So, I do, breathing deeply in shock as the icy water laps against my belly. The water is chilled by the night.

A little way out, I float on my back, and every muscle relaxes. The water threads through my mussed-up hair.

And finally, the pulling starts to dull, like a released breath. Relieved that my brain feels finally clear, I dive down below the surface, kicking hard with my legs.

My tummy skims along the lake bed. I love seeing how far I can go on a single breath.

Just as I'm about to surface for air, I see a moving shadow in the distance. A quick dart, like a fish. A *big* fish. I didn't know there were any in here.

I break the surface and wipe away the hair matted on my face. What was that?

I tread water, watching for any movement. A fluttering feeling grows in my stomach as I realise everything is really, really quiet. The gnawing in my head is gone. And so are all the sounds of the country. No birdsong, no insects, no sheep.

Across the lake, the water starts to stir. It's . . . a wave? Waves don't just appear in lakes.

My heart pounds in my chest. Maybe coming here was a mistake. I should get out, quickly.

Before I can finish the thought, the wave grows, white-tipped, a tsunami ready to drown me.

And inside the wave, I can see the shadow. It is much, much bigger than I thought. Whatever is in the water with me is definitely not a fish. Its shape is all wrong.

There's a monster in the lake, and it's coming right towards me.