VIVI CONWAY

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Vivi Conway and the Haunted Quest

Lizzie Huxley-Jones

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KNIGHTS OF

For my sister, Julie - my lighthouse, my inspiration, my home.
I'm so glad to have you.

Chapter One

I've been keeping secrets.

And man, is it hard.

I think this is the first time in my whole life that I've been keeping quite so many secrets, which has been a challenge. After all, I hate lying, I'm not good at it, and apparently what I think and feel about any situation shows up right on my face.

But I've had no other choice.

I've *had* to keep secrets, even if I hate it.

In the last two months, things got really weird, really fast. I don't mean *there were a few coincidences in a row* kind of weird. It's more y*ou have magic, ghosts are real, there's whole other worlds alongside ours* type of weird, and that's just the headlines.

Dara, my best friend, says that these secrets aren't really

the same as lies, but the way this has all spiralled out, filling every inch of my life, means I have to come up with lies to cover our tracks. Like, no, I'm obviously not going to tell my Mums that I'm tired because we were up all night roaming the Unlands, so I have to pretend we were having too fun a sleepover to fall asleep. That's a lie.

Holding all of it in makes my insides itch, but there's nothing I can do about that. My old therapist Dr May would say I should learn to sit with the bad feeling so I can work my way through it, but then again, I'm not sure her advice is applicable in magical situations.

Half the problem is that there are so many secrets, and lies that go along with them, that it's all getting out of hand.

Obviously I can talk to my closest friends – Dara, Chia and Stevie – about how I'm a calon, tasked with stopping King Arawn from destroying our world (somehow), and that I can control water. It's hard keeping all that from my Mums, even though I have to. They trust me so much and are so happy I made friends in London, that it hurts my heart a little when we go out on missions, because they just think we're hanging out as friends. I mean, we are friends, but friends who fight monsters. It's different.

And then they just think Gelert is an enormous stray I brought home from the park one day, not a thousand-year-old ghost dog who helps me sneak out the house with his not-quite-teleportation powers. Who else's parents would be like 'wow thanks for bringing home a giant creature to live with us'? Perhaps there's a kind of magic at work there – Gelert says magical things act differently to how we expect, so maybe that goes for ghost dogs too.

It's not even just my parents. It's everyone else's family too, and even our Science Club teacher, Mr. Reynolds.

So that's a lot, before we even get to the fact that Chia was kidnapped for a whole week by monstrous coraniaids who stole her and a load of other kids to the Unlands. And how all the adults forgot it happened at all.

Or that Isabella, the girl we left behind, is still missing.

And then there's my secret. One I haven't told Chia, Dara or Stevie yet. That Arawn turned up in my dream with Nimuë. That he grabbed me and pushed her into the water. That I don't even know if she's alright because I haven't been back.

I want to live in denial and tell myself it was just a nightmare. Even though, in my heart, I know it was real. The moment he arrived, everything got colder,

more closed in – like the whole space had changed. And the skin on my face where he grabbed me tingles horribly whenever I think about it. Chia asked me about it once because I kept rubbing at my face, and I lied, said it was eczema.

I can't help but think of his final words to me – *you will learn where your true place is.*

If I tell them what happened, it makes it undeniably real, and something we have to deal with. And it only happened once. Maybe that'll be it, and soon Nimuë and I will speak again, and everything will be fine.

We've got enough on our plate right now with looking for Isabella, and finding a way to stop Arawn from taking more children or even taking over our world. We still have three more calonnau to find. That's more important right now.

Typically, holding all these secrets inside has given me the worst stomachache. Which wouldn't be a huge problem most of the time, except right now; I'm at Dara's house for an early-birthday pizza party.

"Dara McLeod, if you're going to use that red shell on me I am going to deck you," snaps Stevie, not taking her eyes off the screen.

"I wouldn't," they protest.

"You would," chorus Chia and I.

We've only been playing Mario Kart for a few hours, and while in the real-world Dara might be kind and thoughtful, in-game they're pretty ruthless. I'm last out of everyone because, as always, I got distracted trying to find secret routes on the map rather than actually race because I'm terrible at driving. Plus, Stevie and Dara are competitive enough for the four of us.

"If this steering wheel wasn't screwed onto the table, and expensive, I'd throw it at your head," Stevie huffs menacingly at Dara. Dara's brother Lachie is so obsessed with Mario Kart that his parents got him this fancy table-mounted wheel with actual pedals, but it turns out it's much easier for Stevie to use than the little controllers anyway. It gives her a major road rage vibe. Terrifying, really.

Dara's dad, Bruce, walks into the room. A tea towel is slung over his shoulder. "Sounds like things are getting nicely violent in here," he says with a laugh. "How about we throw a bit more sugar into the mix?"

"Is it time for cake?" Dara squeaks.

When Bruce nods, we all pile through into the kitchen. Dara's mum, Fionnuala, sits at a big table in the middle of the room. I only met her for the first time today

because she's studying to be an architect, so is always really busy working. Lured by the promise of cake are Rabbie, who is on his phone as usual, and Lachie too. Callie the dog sits expectantly at Bruce's feet, just in case there's something she can eat.

I might not have wanted to face cheesy pizza, but I think I can overcome the ache for Bruce's baking. He always makes something amazing when we come over, and today is no different. He sets down the most enormous chocolate cake, topped with strawberries and piped gleaming chocolatey icing. In the centre is one big lit candle, like Dara is turning one instead of thirteen. Bruce lights it with a weird lighter that looks like a USB.

We all sing Happy Birthday, and it's only halfway through that I realise I'm singing the Welsh version instead – *penblwydd hapus i chi*. I don't have time to feel embarrassed about it, because Fionnuala bursts into a round of *co-là breith sona dhut*, which is appears to be the Scottish Gaelic version. Bruce joins in, belting it out, and even Rabbie sings alone. Callie barks enthusiastically, and Lachie groans but does join in, if a little reluctantly.

"It's important to remember your heritage Lachie," Bruce says, patting his shoulder.

"Do we have to remember it so loudly?" he grumbles.

It's not Dara's birthday until the 22nd which is five days away, but that'll be in the middle of the school week, so they get a double birthday this year.

"Make a wish, Dara," Chia says.

Dara wriggles up on their seat to kneeling, so that they loom over the cake.

There're so many things I'd wish for. For us to find Isabella, and the other calonnau soon. That Nimuë is okay. For Arawn to be gone, and for this to be over.

"Take a deep breath, down into your stomach," instructs Chia.

"Oh perfect. A spray of cheater slobber on top," teases Stevie.

Bruce gives her a wink. "It adds flavour."

When they try to blow out the candle, it doesn't go out at all. Their second try makes the flame wiggle a bit, but it's still there. Maybe I'm imagining it, but it looks bigger.

Beside me, I spy Chia ready a tiny gust of wind under the table, just in case.

"Are you getting sick honey? Maybe you shouldn't be blowing all over the cake . . . " murmurs Fionnuala.

"I was just trying not to spit!" They laugh awkwardly, and when they try again, the flame goes out.

Exactly as they click their fingers behind their back.

Strange.

No one else seems to notice or hear the click, too excited about the cake being carved up by Bruce. I decide to ask them about it later, seeing as I actually feel hungry for once.

"Not for you girl," Bruce says to Callie, whining at his feet, as he passes me a plate.

The cake is as delicious as I'd hoped.

We needed today. Not just to celebrate Dara; I feel like we've all managed to relax a little. It's been a month since we fought the coraniaids in the Unlands and rescued the other stolen children. A month since we left Isabella behind.

We've felt that loss hard, all of us. Like we didn't do the one thing we're supposed to do – save people from Arawn. It's especially hard for Chia, because she and Isabella knew each other in the Unlands, and we all know that nothing bonds you like constant imminent danger. Plus, she was stuck there for so long. I know that weighs on her. She's been trying so hard to be her usual sunny self, even though it's been so tough for her. I almost wish she'd let herself crumble so we could look after her.

I think, of all of us, Dara feels the weight of the plan going wrong the heaviest but they also refuse to talk about it. I guess we're similar.

Thankfully, Stevie channelled all her fury into a search and rescue plan. The portals made by the coraniaids are somehow all still open. Over the last month, we've been back to the Unlands every other night. I quietly knew we weren't going to find Isabella. The bird-shaped burn scar on the inside of my wrist is a reminder that she was already in Annwn. The burning portal we saw her through is gone. When we found our way back there, there was no window into a golden world. It was just a blank wall.

I'm not sure how we'd even get to Annwn to get her back, if that's what we need to do.

Instead, Chia and Eirlys (her and Rhiannon's horse) have mapped pretty much all of the Unlands using her symbol marking method. I think Eirlys is good for Chia, and she seems to have really leaned into the horse-girl life. Sometimes, when we're there, I swear I see a look in her eyes that tells me she'd just keep riding on if we let her. I don't quite understand it yet.

We made lots of miniature maps as we went, and Dara drew it up into one big map on some of their mum's giant paper.

I'm pretty sure we have almost all the Unlands parallel to South London mapped out, which feels

important even if we're not sure it'll be useful yet. It gave us something to do. But it feels dead there, totally empty apart from the coloured crystals lighting the way.

Luckily, no one seems to have accidentally walked into any of the portals and gone missing, or we'd have heard about it on *Strange Britain*. I've only had the occasional check in from the Ghost Queen since we last spoke. She's another thing I don't quite understand yet. Is she really an ally, or is she like Emrys, someone we have to be careful of? I don't really know.

I'm snapped out of my thoughts by Bruce tapping a cakey fork against his mug of tea to get our attention. "Now, if I might have the stage for a moment," he begins. He wipes his hands on his apron to make sure they're cake-free. From the windowsill he takes a silver padded envelope the size of a book, and sets it down in front of Dara.

"For me?" they ask, taking it gently.

"What is it?" sniffs Rabbie, looking up from his phone briefly.

"In part, the reason we're having this little do for Dara early," Fionnuala says with a knowing smile.

"For Dara," they read aloud, before tearing into the envelope so violently I worry they are going to rip up what's inside. They tip it upside down, and out falls a

large bronze key with a clatter that makes us all jump. Followed by it is a folded slip of paper that slides out.

They turn the key back and forth in their hands. It looks old. "What is this for?"

"I'm going to guess the answer is in the letter," says Stevie, peering over their shoulder.

"Oi, don't read other people's letters."

"I wouldn't have to if you were quick about it."

"It's my birthday. I can take my time."

"It's not really your birthday though is it."

Dara gasps in mock shock, and for a moment I think they're going to wrestle for it, but Stevie pulls a stink face at them and sits back down.

The one thing I can rely on is Stevie and Dara's bickering.

With a loud clearing of their throat, Dara begins to read.

Dear Dara,

We cordially invite you to spend your October half term with us on Ynys Enlli for a week of beach combing, hiking and as much apple pie as you can possibly eat. Your friends, should they wish to join us, are also invited. Your Dad has all the details.

You'll find out what the key opens when you get here.

Your cousin,

Meredith

"Woah, sick," they gasp. "Is this real?"

"Aye," says Bruce with a nod.

"And we're *really* going?"

"If you want to. It's your invitation after all."

Dara jumps up with a shriek of glee, dancing around the table. "I'm so happy! I've always wanted to go and we've never had time, and I *never* get to see Meredith or Uncle Russ and Uncle Ianto. How are we getting there? Who is going? Can I really bring all my pals? When do we leave?"

And through their joyful shouting, I realise what they're talking about. I know that island. The letter writer called it Ynys Enlli, but most people would know it as Bardsey Island. It's off the Northwest coast of Wales, quite a lot further along from where I grew up. Mumma and I always wanted to go, but we'd never had luck with the weather. It's another place of many stories. Some people think it is Avalon, the final resting place of Arthur.

Dara is going for definite, but what else did that letter say?

Your friends . . . Could I go too?

"I don't think I've ever seen anyone so happy to get a letter," murmurs Stevie.

"Where's this island you're going to then?" asks Chia.

"Wales,' I say, my voice croaky. 'It's in Wales."