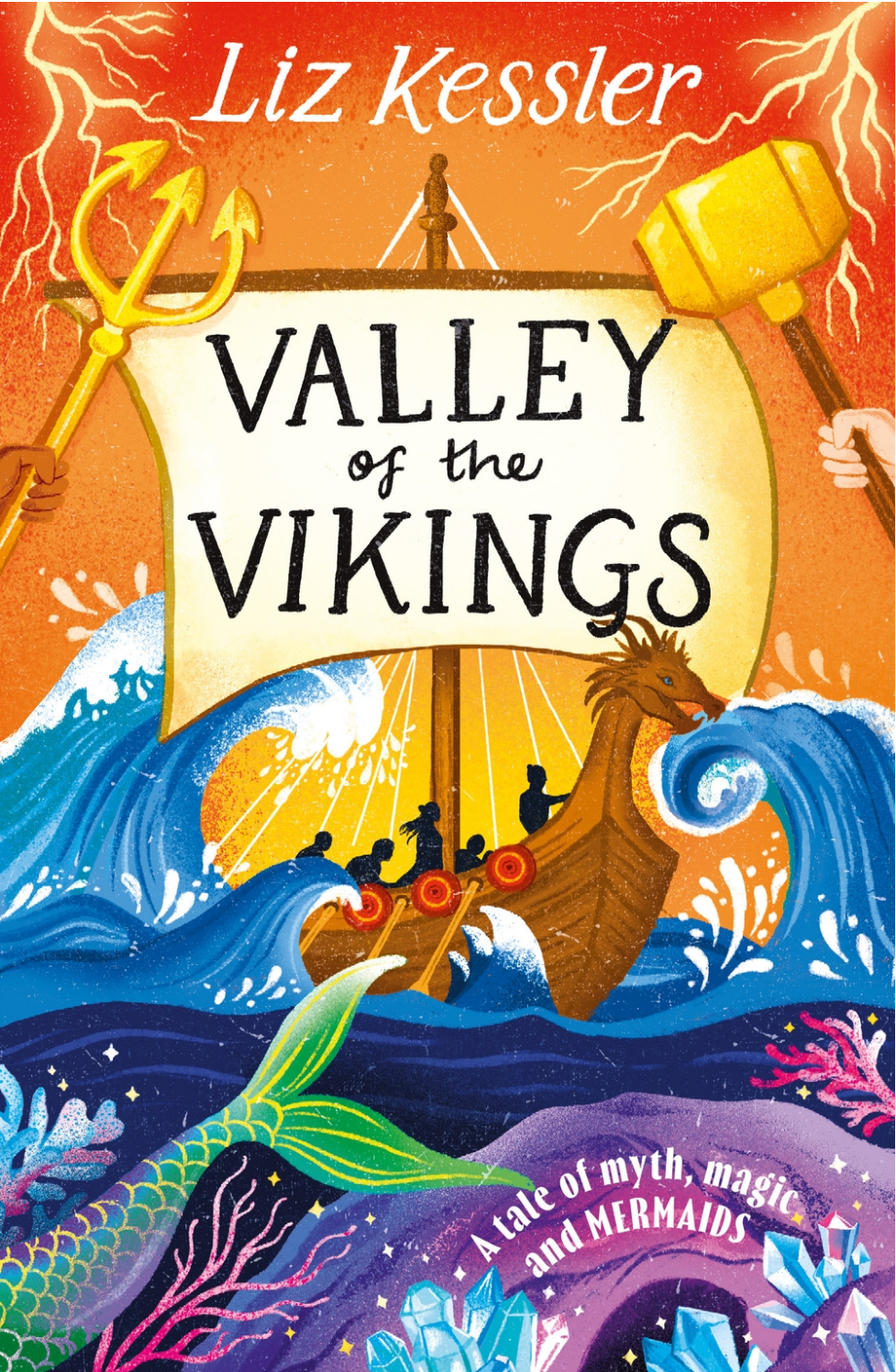
Liz Kessler

VALLEY of the VIKINGS



A tale of myth, magic and MERMAIDS

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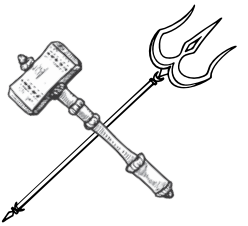
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It was the most glorious ship you could imagine and it danced on the waves like a ballerina: tiptoeing across oceans with an elegance rarely seen before – or since.

It was built to survive, though the waves that day would put it to the test.

Waves like these were only talked about in hushed voices, as though describing them out loud would invoke the wrath of the ocean giants.

Surely, such things could not exist. But today it seemed they did. The grandest ship ever built seemed little more than a toy, tossed by the waves, which treated it like prey they wished to play with before consuming.

The ship rolled and slid, leaning one way, heeling over the other. Its billowing sail was flung to the fore, the rear, inside out and back again. The ship teetered over the mountainous waves, now more like an acrobat than a ballerina, listing and lurching at impossible angles. All aboard were terrified, but no one showed it.

'Hold tight!' their leader cried. 'We can survive this! We know what those two are like. It won't last forever. It never does.'

'It's never been this bad before!'

'Just hold on. Trust me. Have I ever let you down?'

The crew all knew the answer to this: their leader had *never* let them down and never would. So, they held on to any part of the ship that seemed stable enough to sustain them as the waves crashed, turning the deck beneath their feet into a pool and blinding them with salt from the fierce spray.

The only things towering higher than the waves were two looming figures: one rising fiercely from the sea grasping a golden rod entwined with writhing, spitting sea serpents; the other in the sky brandishing something dark and deadly that vanished among the thundery clouds.

Their voices carried across the violent night as they exchanged curses and threats.

Only snatches could be heard by those on the ship.

'… never win …'

'… stole from me …'

'… thought we had a deal …'

'… traitor …'

The two bellowed at each other, on and on. They had never fought like this before, it was true. And the

bond that had once brought them together became meaningless among the weapons they hurled at each other. And hurl, they did.

The air began to crackle with danger and menace as they drew closer to each other.

'… curse you for a hundred years …'

'… curse you for a *thousand* years …'

'… a thousand it is, then …'

From the sea, a shape was held aloft. A trident, glinting like diamonds against the sky. From above, another weapon was drawn. It looked like a hammer.

And then—

The weapons clashed. The most enormous bolt of lightning forked across the sky, lighting it up. It seemed the whole world was on fire. Everything was electricity: beginning with the weapons, encircling the sky, and finally spearing the ocean.

The pair were powerless to do anything but watch as the force of their fury and combined magic split the ocean in two.

'No!' they cried in unison. The first time they had agreed on anything for many months.

The ocean became two mountains of water, and the ship—together with its crew —toppled over the edge and into the chasm.

The pair scrambled to undo what they had caused. But it was too late! The ocean closed again, the sea calmed and the storm died as swiftly as their anger.

The time for curses and threats had passed. Now, all that was left was regret. Filled with blame and guilt, they parted as the sun's light returned.

Their union was over, the ship was lost and the world would suffer the consequences for the next thousand years.

One



The sun beamed through the porthole in my bedroom as I got ready to go out. I was meeting my best friend Shona at Rainbow Rocks, our special place.

Mum came in from the living room. We call it a saloon, since we live on a boat. Me, my mum and my dad. My dad's a merman so it's the only way we can all live together. My mum's a human, and I'm semi-mer: a girl on land and mermaid in water. I get the best of both worlds. And the coolest place to live too.

'Dinner's at six,' she said. 'Don't be late.'

'I won't,' I said, kissing her cheek before stepping out onto the jetty and hurrying along it towards the pier.

In the old days, when no one knew I was a mermaid and it was pretty much illegal for humans and mers to mix, I used to sneak off in the middle of the night to swim in the ocean so no one saw my legs transform into a tail. First, my legs would go numb, then fuse together, eventually disappearing altogether and transforming into

a shimmering, sparkling, purple and green tail. Thankfully, the old days are long gone, and I don't need to hide who I am anymore.

I passed the amusements at the end of the pier where my other best friend, Mandy, lives with her parents. She was upstairs in her room and she flung her window open when she spotted me.

'Emily! Are we still meeting tomorrow?' she asked.

'Definitely!'

Mandy's a normal girl so she can't swim to Rainbow Rocks with me. We'd made a plan to hang out at her parents' amusement park tomorrow instead. Like I said, I get the best of both worlds: two best friends—meeting up at some magical rocks with one today and an afternoon with rides and games with the other tomorrow!

'See you then!' She closed her window and I walked to the end of the pier. I found myself having a quick look around. I guess it's still a habit from the days when I had to be sure no one was watching.

Then I climbed onto the ladder and stepped down into the sea.

The water was cold at first and I gasped. But as I lowered myself into the ocean, all I could feel was the same warm, calm glow I always felt in water.

I closed my eyes as my legs started to go stiff. I ducked below the surface as they joined together.

Then the best part. I looked at my body and couldn't stop myself from smiling as my legs disappeared altogether.

My tail had formed.



Diving deep, I swam through the warm currents: floating over rocks where pink and purple seaweed flapped as if it was waving at me; swimming next to shoals of tiny fish who kept pace with me before darting away and racing off; gliding along with swift flicks of my tail.

I hadn't been in the sea for a few days and it always felt like coming home.

Before long, I came to the bay where I was meeting Shona. Shona's a full-time mermaid, not a part-time one like me. Rainbow Rocks is where we first met. It's a group of beautiful rocks that catch the sunlight and the waves so perfectly, the water glistens and sparkles every colour of the rainbow.

When I'd first met her, Shona had been sitting on the edge of a rock, brushing her hair and singing. The kind of thing you'd expect from a mermaid! She still loves all that kind of stuff. But I think she secretly likes coming on adventures with me more!

I swam up to the surface. She was there already. 'Emily!' she called, and waved from the rocks. I swam over and pulled myself up beside her. We fell into a slippery hug.

'It's been soooooo long!' she said, and I laughed. It had been a week. As a semi-mer, I alternate between Shiprock School with mermaids and Brightport High with regular humans. Last week had been a Brightport High week. 'We've got so much to catch up on.'

We perched on the edge of a rock, our tails in the water while we talked about everything and anything.

After a while, Shona slid into the water. 'I dropped my hairbrush while I was practising for my B & D exam the other day, and I found something under the rocks when I was searching for it,' she said, beckoning me to join her. 'I've been dying to show you. Want to check it out?'

'Of course!' All the adventures we'd been on together, and Beauty and Deportment was still one of Shona's favourite lessons.

I slipped into the water and we swam together around the rock pools. The sunlight beamed on the waves, sending bright rainbows into the air as we flicked our tails.

Shona pointed ahead, at the largest of the Rainbow Rocks. 'It's under there,' she said. 'Come on.'

We ducked and swam through the sandy channels between the rocks. I always loved coming here. The colours were so vibrant; even the sea life seemed more vivid than anywhere else. A pair of two-tone fish dashed by, flashing blue and yellow as they passed. Below me, a round, flat fish kept pace with us, its body a myriad of

shades, its tail turning the water into mini rainbows with every swish.

'We're here,' Shona said, diving deeper. We'd reached the base of the largest rock. 'Look, there's a channel under the rock.'

I peered across to where she was pointing. All I could see was sand, with seaweed swaying from side to side above it.

Shona saw the confusion on my face. 'Behind the seaweed,' she said. 'Follow me.'

Shona swam ahead and moved the seaweed aside like a curtain. Behind it, the sand dropped quite suddenly. It looked like a dark cave under the rock.

Shona turned to me. 'See?' she said with a smile.

'How have we never found this place before?' I asked as we moved towards the cave.

'I know, right?' Shona said. 'I guess we've never had any reason to be here. The rocks are so pretty, I've never really explored what's around them.'

I couldn't help smiling.

'My brush landed just outside the seaweed curtain and I couldn't resist looking behind it. I was too nervous to swim into the dark cave on my own, but now that you're here …'

As her words trailed away, a shiver went through me, making my tail twitch. Part excitement, part nerves. 'You're sure it's safe?' I asked.

Shona shrugged. 'I guess if we're together, it'll probably be OK.'

I grinned at my best friend and swam a little closer to the cave. 'There's only one way to find out,' I said.

And, with that, we dived and swam side by side into the dark.



We swam through the rocks, feeling our way along the sides until the space opened out into a wide pool.

Above us, shimmering rocks threw a hazy light onto a strip of sand, and we stopped in the centre of the pool, turning slowly to take it all in.

'What is this place?' I whispered.

'I don't know, but it's swishy!' Shona replied. *Swishy* is her favourite word, and I had to agree. The seabed was an almost-perfect circle of white sand. The rocks that surrounded us glistened in ever-changing colours, like all the others at Rainbow Rocks. Somehow it felt even more special here. Untouched. A secret, magical place, just for us.

'Let's explore,' I said.

I ducked and swam around the edge of the sandy pool, peering into the cracks and crevices. Under the first rock, I found a few abandoned razor clams and a pointy stone covered in spiky sea urchins. A shoal of

tiny black fish zoomed out from underneath the next rock, like a bunch of us in a hurry to get out of school on a Friday afternoon.

I looked into a crevice between two big rocks and disturbed a hermit crab who seemed distinctly unimpressed. He snapped his pincers at me, and I quickly moved on.

Between the next two rocks, there was an opening that was wider than the others. Wide enough to squeeze into.

'Hey, let's see what's in here,' I called over to Shona.

As I edged into the opening, I saw something glinting. Was it just the rocks, shimmering like the others? No, it was more than that. It gave off a hazy bluish light.

I flicked my tail and edged forward. The opening grew narrower the further in I got. Darker too, and I could no longer see anything ahead, other than the blue light, glowing faintly in the darkness. *What was it?*

Reaching into the fissure, I felt along the rock, trying to avoid sea urchins. There! Something was lodged in a crack at the back. I took a tight hold of it and pulled. Bit by bit, I edged it out, until it was free.

Closing my hand around whatever it was, I reverse swam out of the crevice until I was back in the wide pool. Shona was waiting for me.

'Anything interesting?' she asked.

'I don't know yet,' I replied. I opened my hand to study the object in my palm.

At first glance, it looked like a murky brown piece of metal, bent out of shape, and I wondered why I'd been so keen to get it that I'd scratched my arms on the jagged rocks and pricked my fingertips on urchins.

I studied it more closely. The metal was curved into an oval with a gap where the two ends almost met.

'It looks like a bangle,' said Shona, as she looked over my shoulder.

I pulled the ends away from each other and slipped it over my wrist. 'You're right!' It wasn't just a bit of bent metal at all. A strange current ran through my body, all the way to the tip of my tail. What was an old bangle doing lodged down here under the rocks?

I rubbed the sand and dust and seaweed marks off it and saw what had been giving off the light. The bangle had a bright blue stone in the middle of it. I'd never seen such a clear colour on a stone before.

'Let's go up and have a better look at it,' Shona said.

We hurried back along the channel and hauled ourselves out of the water onto Rainbow Rocks.

I held my arm out and Shona examined the bangle. The stone sparkled in the light.

'Wow,' Shona gasped. 'It's a crystal. Look how it's glinting.'

I moved my arm. Shona was right. The crystal glinted and glimmered, flashing sparks of light across the surface of the sea.

'It's totally swishy,' Shona said.

'It is,' I agreed, rubbing more of the dirt off it. The crystal glowed mysteriously; I could almost feel it. I wasn't sure if it was a physical tingle or the excitement of finding something so beautiful, but I knew I liked it.

All too soon, the sun dipped towards the horizon.

'I need to go,' I said. 'I told Mum I'd be home by six o'clock.'

We parted with a hug and a promise to meet again soon, and I started swimming back to Brightport.

As I went, I kept glancing at the bangle on my wrist. There was something about it that gave me a funny feeling in my tummy. Whatever it was, I had the sense the discovery was going to lead to something exciting.