

"Twinkle" by Monica Lucas, Meade County

r. Twinkle is a 30-foot penguin that Nana and Nora met over a year ago. He just showed up one day in Nana's backyard. He wouldn't leave until they finally climbed up his back and sat in the large red two-person seat attached to his upper back. They were astonished and terrified the first time he took off flying, since both had been certain that penguins couldn't fly. However, they had also never seen or heard of a 30-foot penguin.

Mr. Twinkle never spoke or even made a sound. He simply appeared and wouldn't leave until Nana and Nora were safely secured in the seats attached to his back. His path never varied. He simply went straight up - through the clouds until he reached one of the worlds that lay hidden there.

They had visited cities in the lower-level clouds, mountains in the high clouds, and farmlands in the middle areas. They had been tentative about sliding off Mr. Twinkle's back to stand on the surface of a cloud, but had since become accustomed to it. The surface of the clouds varied as did each location.

Everyone in these cloud worlds seemed to have heard of the amazing detective skills possessed by Nora and Nana. They were summoned regularly now to help with both major and minor difficulties. Of course, not being allowed to leave until the case was solved was always enough of an incentive for them to solve the case.

So now, here he was again, standing in Nana's yard, blocking the entrance to the garage as Nana drove into the driveway. Nora excitedly exclaimed from the backseat, "Mr. Twinkle is here!" Nana wasn't quite as excited. She parked the car and they got out.

"Mr. Twinkle," Nana said with exasperation, "I have groceries in the car and Nora has a ballgame today. We can't possibly go with you."

Mr. Twinkle didn't budge and both Nana and Nora knew it was useless to argue. They both knew that even trips that lasted days in the clouds were only a matter of minutes on earth. With a sigh, Nana followed Nora as Mr. Twinkle bent down to allow them to climb up his back. Once they were safely buckled in, he bent his knees, and with a small jump, they were off.

It was, however, always exhilarating to travel above the city and into the clouds. They watched as their neighborhood homes grew smaller and smaller. Today was one of their most beautiful trips as it was nearing dusk and the sky and clouds were streaked with a mix of reds and pinks. Nora waved to old friends from previous adventures, as she passed through the lower-level cloud cities. Mr. Twinkle began to slow when they got to some extra puffy cumulus clouds near the center layers. He suddenly swooped left and landed softly.

Nora and Nana took a few minutes to look around before sliding down. They were used to being greeted as soon as they landed, but no one was in sight. Mr. Twinkle impatiently shook them and they hurried down. As always, Mr. Twinkle left them immediately.

They stood firmly on a white sandy beach looking toward a beautiful ocean surrounded by low cliffs and rocks. Nora quickly headed to the water's edge to put her feet in the water. Nana

slipped off her shoes and quickly followed. Living in Kentucky, they didn't get to visit an ocean often and took a few minutes to enjoy the beauty and the feel of the water lapping their feet.

Nana finally spoke. "This is lovely, but we must be here for a reason. I wonder why no one is here to greet us?"

Nora nodded in agreement. "Maybe we are early. Maybe there is a clue. Maybe..." Her voice trailed off as they heard a soft voice. Both listened. "Did you hear that?" Nora continued.

Nana nodded and they continued to listen. They only heard the soft lapping sound of the ocean waves on the sand. After a few minutes, they decided to sit on the rocks overlooking the ocean and wait for a bit. They climbed on the rocks and sat down facing the ocean.

Suddenly, they saw a woman swimming not far from shore. They watched as she went under water and didn't resurface. They stood and watched, growing more concerned. The woman still hadn't surfaced.

"We have to help her!" Nora cried as she moved closer to the edge.

"No!" Nana cried, putting a hand out to stop her. "Neither of us are good enough swimmers to go that far out. Let's call for help."

They both began to yell for help and were starting to climb down from the rocks when they heard a voice – that soft voice again. "It's ok." The voice murmured. "I'm ok."

Nora and Nana turned quickly to see the young woman in the water in front of the rocks. They quickly climbed down closer to the water to see what help she might need. Nora reached out a hand to her, but she just smiled and turned away. She abruptly dove under the water again, but this time, they could clearly see her. They stared in amazement as they now saw instead of legs, she had a fishtail.

"A mermaid!" Nora exclaimed excitedly. "It's a real mermaid!" She jumped up and down excitedly.

Nana shook her head and started, "There is no such thi..." But she didn't finish her sentence. She had come to realize in the cloud worlds impossible things could happen. She looked at her excited granddaughter. Mermaids were in all her favorite stories and costumes, as with most six-year-old girls.

The mermaid resurfaced and Nora besieged her with question after question, not even waiting for a response. The mermaid finally smiled and held up her hand. "Wait." She said softly. "Let me tell you why I summoned you here."

Nora looked at Nana and smiled broadly. A mermaid was their contact person and Nora couldn't be happier. She clapped her hands together, then sat quietly on the rock nearest the water to hear

what the mermaid had to say. Nana looked closely at the mermaid. She decided that if mermaids aged the same as humans, this was a young mermaid. She soon found out that she was correct.

The mermaids spoke. "My name is Vivianne. I am the youngest mermaid in my family. I am 13 years old. I was traveling to surprise grandmother with my first solo trip. Along the way, I have lost my magic pearl necklace. The necklace gives me many powers, the most important being able to breathe underwater." She looked up at us sadly. "For now, I can only stay under a few minutes without having to come up for air. No one will be looking for me because my parents believe me to be with my grandmother and my grandmother didn't know I was coming. I have been here for nearly two days." She tossed her long hair away from her face and continued. "When I heard about you and how you have been helping around here, I knew you would be able to help me. So that's why I called for you."

Nana nodded slowly, wondering what they could possibly do to help. But Nora was nodding enthusiastically. "We would be happy to help you, Vivianne. Just tell us what to do."

Vivianne continued her story. "Without my necklace, none of my magic works for me. But I can share my magic with someone else. I have a small amount of magic in the two seashells that I wear clipped in my hair." She looked at us with her huge green eyes while she reached up and touched the small shells. "If you each take a shell, it will give you enough magic to allow you to swim to the queen's cave to get help. Only the queen can replace my necklace."

Nora stood, ready to dive in. Nana was more hesitant. "Just a minute. Tell us a little more about what we need to do. How will we know where we are going? Are you saying that with the shells we will have the ability to breathe underwater?"

Vivianne hesitated briefly before replying. "When I place the shells in your hair, you will transform temporarily into mermaids. You will have enough time to get to the queen before the spell wears off. However, you must go directly to the queen. You will not have time for any detours or distractions."

Nora didn't hear any of the possible problems. All she heard was that she was going to become a mermaid. She was ready to help.

Nana watched as Vivianne hesitated again.

She finally continued. "Remember, I am young and my powers are not that strong. I only have enough power to get you to the queen's cave. You must get there on time so that the queen can give you stronger powers to get back to me."

"So, you are telling us, that we may die if we get distracted and don't get there in time? What if there is a problem? What happens?" Nana asked.

Vivianne nodded. "That is correct. When time runs out, you will become human again. That would not be good when you are so far from the surface of the water. But, you are my only hope." She continued. "I know you can do it."

“I know we can too!” Exclaimed Nora. “Let’s go now.”

Nana nodded as she slipped into the water. Vivianne took a shell from her hair and clipped it in Nora’s long hair. She whispered some words and Nora’s eyes grew large. Nana watched as Nora’s legs immediately turned into a mermaid tail.

Vivianne then approached Nana. She unclipped the second shell and attached it to Nana’s hair. She whispered softly into Nana’s ear and moved back. Her transformation happened quickly and she also felt delighted upon seeing her mermaid tail.

“Go quickly!” Viviann whispered. “The time has begun. When you dive straight down from here, you will see pink glowing orbs near the ocean floor. All you need to do is follow them to the queen’s cave. You’ll know it when you see it.”

Nora gave a quick wave, then disappeared under the water. Nana held her breath and did the same. When Nana could no longer hold her breath, she realized that she didn’t need to. She could breathe and talk normally.

They swam deeper and deeper until they saw a glowing pink orb on the ocean floor. Looking around, they saw another not too far away. They began following the orbs and Nana finally relaxed. Nora chattered away as if everything was normal.

They had been following the orbs for a while when they noticed two large sharks ahead. They hesitated, not sure what to do now.

The sharks, sensing their fear, turned toward them. They seemed to smile when they saw Nana and Nora - a scary, hungry smile. The sharks quickly darted toward them just as they swam quickly away.

They swam zigzagging and looping, swimming as fast as they could until they finally found a large rock formation to hide in until the sharks passed. When they finally swam out, they looked around cautiously.

“I think we lost them.” Said Nana. “Yes.” Agreed Nora. “But, now we are lost and we have spent a lot of time off of the path. I don’t know what direction to go, do you?” She asked.

They swam nearby searching until they saw some beautiful glowing purple orbs.

“Oh no!” Exclaimed Nora. “These are the wrong color. How will we ever find the pink ones again?”

Just then, a small seahorse approached them. He had been watching and asked if they were lost. Nora explained their situation. He smiled at them and told them not to worry. “All orbs lead to the queen’s cave! Just continue following the purple ones. You will be there soon.”

He was right, and in just a matter of minutes, they saw the queens cave ahead. Vivianne had been right. It would be hard to miss. The entrance to the cave was adorned with jewels and minerals from the sea and had a beautiful coral entryway.

Nana and Nora swim quickly to the entrance. They were about to enter, when they were stopped by the largest rainbow fish they had ever seen. "Where do you think you're going?" The rainbow fish asked angrily. "This is the queen's cave and I am her head guard. No one goes in without my permission!" He frowned at them.

"We must see the queen immediately!" Nora told him.

"Not today!" He replied. "The queen's schedule is full. She can see you in three days."

"Three days! Screeched Nana. "We can't wait three days. Vivianne sent us and we must see her today."

"Vivianne?" Questioned the guard. "Why did she send you?"

Nora quickly told him the story of the lost necklace. He told them to wait as he hurried away. Just moments later, he returned. Nora's eyes bulged when she saw the queen mermaid following him.

Nora imagined she must be the most beautiful mermaid ever. Her long golden hair flowed past the tip of her tail. Her eyes sparkled like sapphires, and her bodice and tail were completely covered with glowing jewels.

She gave a slight worried smile to Nana and Nora, then asked. "Where did you leave Vivianne? Was she ok or has she grown weak?"

Nora and Nana looked at each other. "She seemed fine." Replied Nana. "She spoke very softly, but acted okay."

"She will continue to grow weaker until you get the necklace back to her. You must go quickly before she becomes too weak." The queen said.

She placed the necklace around Nora's neck. She then touched Nora's shell, followed by Nana's. They each felt a boost of energy.

"You will now be able to safely return to her. Which path did you follow to get here?" She asked.

"The pink one." Nana answered quickly, without sharing details.

They followed the queen out of the cave as she led them to the pink orbs. "These will get you back to her. Please go quickly." She gave Nora a hug and thanked them for their bravery.

The trip back was fast and without any problems. When they surfaced, they saw Vivianne cowering against the rocks and swam quickly to her. She was very pale and weak. Nora quickly slipped the necklace from her own neck and onto Vivianne's. Immediately, the color returned to Vivianne's face and she became stronger.

When she spoke to them, her voice was strong and clear. She thanked them over and over for saving her life. They all hugged.

Suddenly, Mr. Twinkle appeared on the shore and they knew it was time to go home.

Vivianne told them to keep the shells and if they ever returned, the shells would let her know they had returned. After another hug, Nana and Nora swam to shore. Just as they reached the beach, their legs returned. They climbed on Mr. Twinkle's back and strapped in to their seats for the quick flight home.

Although it seemed they had been gone all day, the ice cream in the grocery bag was still frozen solid and only a minute had passed on the clock. They carried the groceries inside silently, each thinking about their latest adventure.

Finally, Nora spoke. "I bet I'm the only girl in my school to ever become a mermaid."

Nana answered. "I imagine you are the only girl on earth to ever become a mermaid!"

They smiled happily and continued to put the groceries away.