

The Edge of Beyond

By Nicola J Bolton



CANIS OCEANVS

This book is dedicated to my family.

This Book Belongs To:

.....

The Edge of Beyond

By Nicola J Bolton

*Born to the sound of crashing waves
Feared by mortals, strong and brave
Pirates, sailors, turn and flee
There be Merdogs in the sea!
Eyes of green and fishes' tails
Coats of brown and paws with scales
Merdogs may be friend or foe
Hear their calls when wild winds blow.*

~Coombe Appleby Merdog Song

*What seas did you see
Tom Cat, Tom Cat
In your sailing days
Long long ago?
What sea beasts were
In the wavery green
When you were my master?*

*I'll tell you the truth
Seas barking like seals
Blue seas and green
Seas covered with eels
And mermen and whales*

~Dylan Thomas - Under Milk Wood



Chapter 1

Shattered

Juliet Fairisle returned to Coombe Appleby for the first time in five years.

It was a mild Saturday night on April 5th when she drove back to that sleepy little Dorset coastal town that had been the scene of so many indescribable events that would be forever etched in her mind. Seeing the Merdog statue still standing firm in the town square brought the memories flooding back. She shuddered as she remembered her encounter with the Merdogs, the Black Unicorns and the battle in the world beneath the waves. At times it had seemed like a dream; the product of an overactive imagination. But she had experienced it, the Merdogs were real. Truth, as it had been noted, was often stranger than fiction.

Juliet's return to Coombe Appleby was also tinged with sadness. She'd not been in touch with Ed or Pete for two years now. At first it seemed like the three of them would be friends for life, seeing as they'd all survived the ordeal with the Merdogs. It had been a life changing experience in more ways than one. But people move on, and alas, Ed had his own life now, working in London. Pete was working for a ferry company in Portsmouth. The phone calls and emails became less frequent.

Juliet herself had changed. Now twenty, she was just starting out on her own as an artist. Money was still tight, however. University had left her with debts but it had been worth it. Although the small flat she rented in Weymouth wasn't much to shout about, it was a start. Flat was the wrong word really, it was more of her art studio. But the satisfaction she got from painting made it all worthwhile. Her paintings were starting to sell and word was spreading thanks to the internet and local newspapers.

On the main road through Coombe Appleby, Juliet turned left and headed down a short ginnel to the coast road and towards the beach. The small shops were closed and dark. Aside from the faded-brass glow of the street lamps, the only lights were in some rooms above the shops, the Merdog Inn pub at the end of the road and the cottages beyond. Coombe Appleby was still the quaint little English coastal town, shunning the tourist trade that other coastal communities so avidly pursued. It was this slow, measured pace of life here that she had loved, growing up here as a child, but as she knew from past events, the sleepest town harboured the wildest secrets.

As she strolled down the sloping coast road through pools of amber light, through layered night shadows cast by wind-sculpted pine trees, she saw no movement other than her own. A faint breeze whipped up from the sea ruffled her long auburn hair. The sound of a car heading down another road broke the silence briefly, but after that the only sounds were the soft slap-slap of her flat soled shoes on the narrow footpath. Looking around, Juliet could be forgiven for thinking she was the last person on Earth right now.

She stopped and turned to observe the sea. Moonlight reflected off the gently heaving water looking like it was scattering diamonds on every wave.

Juliet pondered whether to head down the narrow steps and onto the beach itself. She wasn't afraid of walking along the beach at night; Coombe Appleby had never been a hotbed of crime. Here, crime tended to involve theft of garden gnomes or the occasional borrowing of rowing boats without paying the hire charge. People here still left their doors unlocked.

Juliet clutched the gold amulet she wore around her neck. She had worn it constantly ever since the Merdog encounter five years ago, although she always kept it hidden under her clothes. If people ever asked about it, which luckily hardly ever happened, she told them it was an old necklace that belonged to her grandmother or something she'd picked up in a charity shop. The truth of course was that it had been given to her by Melgrim, the former leader of the Merdogs. And as it had been back then, she was sure it would always be her guaranteed protection from harm. That is why she would never be parted from it.

Clutching it as she stared forlornly out into the inky darkness, she wondered if she would ever see a Merdog again. Perhaps never. Meeting them may have been a one-off experience and the amulet she now wore would be her lifetime souvenir of that wonderful encounter.

Juliet made up her mind to have a quick stroll on the beach. There was still time. She didn't want to be out too long as she had promised

her parents she'd visit them tonight. She glanced at her watch. 8.15pm. Just time for some sea air. Above the thin fog, the sky held only scattered clouds and the full moon's silver-yellow radiance penetrated the fog, providing sufficient illumination for her to see where she was going. Some nights the fog was too thick to see anything.

Unlike other towns in Britain, Coombe Appleby appeared to have been left behind. There were no speed cameras here - no humps, bollards or signs cluttering up the roadsides. CCTV cameras - so abundant in modern Britain - were absent from Coombe Appleby. Even the town's lone phone box was an old red one that harked back to a simpler age. Internet access was still difficult to obtain, although this was of little concern to the mostly elderly residents that lived here.

The white foam of the incoming waves surged out of the black sea; the wide half-moon of sand gleamed palely between the lapping tide and the rocks, and the mist itself was softly aglow with reflections of the spring moonlight. As she headed down the stone steps and walked across the beach to the firmer damp sand at the water's edge, Juliet felt wonderfully alive. As a creative person she always found inspiration in beaches and the sea.

Suddenly, as she was passing a pair of seaweed encrusted rocks in the middle of the beach, Juliet became aware of a car inching its way along the coast road above the beach. Instinct was telling her to be on her guard, but she was not immediately alarmed. The car stopped. Figuring that it was quite possibly someone who like herself wanted to observe the sea or perhaps someone passing through the town and was lost, she headed south again along the beach, inhaling the fresh sea air. She went only fifty yards however before she saw movement from the corner of her eye. The car was on the move again, thirty feet above her, a dark shape. It slipped out of sight behind a large clump of trees.

Juliet halted and squinted up at the rocks, waited for the car to re-emerge and carry on along the coast road. It didn't. Maybe it had turned and gone up Sycamore Lane. That would explain it.

Juliet shivered. She'd spent enough time on the beach now. Time to head back. She turned and sprinted back towards the steps that led back up to the coast road. It was only when she reached the steps that she realised she'd been running so hard that her heart was pounding.

She raced up the steps and almost stumbled. The steps were slippery with sand and there was no handrail - surely a health and safety officer's nightmare. At the top she emerged back onto the coast road and cautiously glanced around. The road was deserted; no cars lurking nearby. Juliet relaxed and headed back up north. Her past

experiences had made her more jumpy. She could see her silver Nissan Micra parked further up the road.

The rev of a car engine caused her to look round. About a hundred yards behind her a car was slowly drawing up alongside the kerb. A black car, like the one she'd seen earlier. It had no headlights and the driver didn't switch off the engine. Was the driver waiting for someone? Maybe it was a taxi, but Juliet just had that feeling that it wasn't...

She broke into a run, and at the same time the car roared into life and hurtled down the road after her, mounting the footpath. Juliet gasped and dived out of the way just in time; any later and it would have slammed right into her. She lost her balance and stumbled into a bush. The driver slammed on the brakes, put the car into reverse, and headed back for a second attempt, but Juliet was ready this time. Picking up a lump of brick, she hurled it at the offending vehicle. It struck the car's rear window. At the same time, her own car's alarm went off, flashing, beeping and causing lights in the houses opposite to come on.

The black car's driver sensed that now was not the time to continue and roared off up the coast road, tyres squealing. Panic stricken and trembling, Juliet fumbled in her pocket for her car keys, switched off the alarm and climbed into her car, instantly locking all the doors. Her heart was pounding like crazy.

"That driver just tried to kill me," she repeated over and over. As her breath returned, she started the engine. She had to get out of there. All peaceful thoughts of earlier had been shattered.

On the way back to Weymouth she tried to understand what had just happened to her.

"Somebody tried to kill me."

"Why would anyone want to kill me?"

"Why?"



Chapter 2

First Impressions

On Sunday April 6th, Chris Newall was driving back to Weymouth after spending the morning familiarising himself with his new surroundings. Although he'd been on the road for more than an hour, nothing he had seen so far had made much of an impression on him.

"Too much like Cornwall," he remarked to Guinness, his two-year old black Labrador. "Although without the pasties."

Guinness stuck his head out of the Land Rover's window and looked rather unimpressed also.

"Never mind lad, we'll get used to it. This is our new home now. Weymouth has a beach, just like St Ives. It'll be doggy heaven. Just hope my new job will be okay."

Chris had just moved to Weymouth from Cornwall after securing a job with Condor Ferries as a ship's officer.

"Maybe I'll reach the rank of Captain one day," he chuckled.

Five miles from Weymouth, Chris took the road which led through Coombe Appleby. A few cottages were tucked into the hillside among the trees, their thatched roofs and chocolate box appearance leading Chris to wonder if he'd stumbled onto the set of *Midsomer Murders*.

"What's this, the land that time forgot?" he remarked as he passed the ancient red phone box. "Even Polperro was more modern than this."

The sign at the side of the road read "WELCOME TO COOMBE APPLEBY - Our Cider is Legendary, Just Like Our Merdogs."

"Merdog," Chris sniffed. "Wonder if that's slang for the people who live here?" Then he passed the Merdog statue.

"Oh, so that's a Merdog," said Chris. Guinness sniffed the air and let out a whine.

"What's the matter, macho man, not scared of a stone dog are you?"

The Labrador cowered in the seat.

As Chris continued to head along the road, a peculiar sense of wrongness immediately overcame him. Quaint cottages, tea shops, a small post office and other *Midsomer*-esque buildings lined the left side of the road, while to his right a long line of pine trees obscured the coast road and sea beyond. There was nothing out of the ordinary here save that the whole area seemed to be stuck in a 1950s time warp, but to Chris's eyes there was an indefinable though powerful strangeness about the place that gave him a chill.

He could not identify the reasons for his instant negative reaction to Coombe Appleby, but maybe it was because the place was so darned sleepy.

"If ever a community matched the description of ghost town than this is it, Guinness," he said out loud. The dog also seemed to sense the unease.

"I wonder if anyone's actually alive here?" Chris joked.

The white stucco post office gleamed as if it were built from sun-bleached bones. Many of the shop windows were veiled with ice-white reflections of the sun as if painted to conceal the activities of those who worked behind them. The shadows cast by the pine trees were stark, spiky and razor-edged.

With no traffic behind him, Chris paused to study the shops in greater detail. Presently, the door of the cottage next to the post office opened and an old couple emerged.

"Looks like there's life here after all - just."

The old couple also struck him as wrong, though his reasons for thinking ill of them were less definable than those that formed his impression of the town itself. They walked briskly, purposefully, heads up, with a peculiar air of urgency that seemed odd in lazy, seaside town like this.

Chris sighed and continued down the road. He noticed the old man watching him with the suspicious glance that greets all outsiders. He felt like Dennis Weaver in the film *Duel*, having been run off the road and was now surrounded by unfriendly locals of some Californian backwater in the middle of the desert. Except this was rural Dorset. Still, he had that notion that the old couple were thinking the same thing as him - that he had no right to be driving through here.

Chris told himself that his imagination was running wild. He'd read too many Stephen King novels. At least, that's what he kept telling himself.

"Well come on, Guinness, let's get back to Weymouth." He sped up and the uneasy feeling left him as soon as he drove out of Coombe Appleby.

“Wouldn’t fancy being stranded there on a dark night,” he joked as he headed back towards civilization. “Inspector Barnaby would have a field day in that village.”

Juliet had slept uneasily all night; her slumber disturbed by flashbacks featuring Merdogs and the mysterious black car. When she awoke she was sheathed in a film of sweat. Bleary eyed, she stumbled out of bed and headed to the window. It was a beautiful day. From her flat she had a good view overlooking Weymouth harbour. The ferry was just inching out of port, off on another crossing to the Channel Islands.

Soon the main holiday season would be starting and the hotels and guest houses would be busier than ever.

Juliet dressed quickly and brewed herself a cup of tea. As she relaxed and ate breakfast, a loud bang outside her door brought her to her senses. She froze. After last night she was on her guard. More bangs followed and she could hear a man’s voice. She tiptoed to the door and peered through the fisheye lens. Something black darted down the corridor, followed by a man and a shout of “Guinness!”

Juliet opened the door but before she could step out, a black Labrador knocked her to ground and proceeded to lick her to death.

“Guinness!” Chris shouted, grabbing the dog’s collar. “Bad dog! What have I told you about jumping up at strangers? Oh God, I do apologise.”

Juliet staggered to her feet. Guinness, who had pulled free, ran round her in circles, a whirling dervish of black fur and slobber.

“I’m so sorry,” Chris repeated. “He’s always like this when he meets new people. I hope he didn’t hurt you.”

“It’s okay, I’m fine,” Juliet laughed. “No worries, I love dogs.”

“Well thank goodness,” Chris replied. “You laugh like a regular person. The way you were running up the stairs last night, I thought maybe your flat was on fire.”

Juliet brushed herself off and looked up at Chris. He was blonde, blue eyed and in his mid-twenties at a guess. “Yes, I was in a rush... I’m Juliet by the way, Juliet Fairisle.”

“Pleased to meet you,” he replied shaking hands. “I’m Chris - Chris Newall and I’ve just moved in here. So I guess that makes us neighbours. Oh, and you’ve already met Guinness.”

“Yes and he’s lively, isn’t he! As a matter of fact I’ve just brewed up, fancy a cuppa? You look as if you could do with one.”

“Thanks, that’d be great,” Chris replied. “Been out all morning getting my bearings. I start work with Condor tomorrow so I’ve got a

lot of stuff to sort out.”

The two talked for a while, although Chris couldn't help but notice one of Juliet's paintings looked familiar.

“Let me guess - that's a Merdog, yes?”

Juliet spun round. “Uh...yes. You've heard of them?”

“Well not really, but I chanced upon this small village on my way back to Weymouth and there was this statue that looked just like the dog in your painting.”

“Coombe Appleby,” Juliet replied. “I used to live there.”

“Not the liveliest of places.”

“It has its moments.”

The painting was a vivid one. “It's very powerful,” said Chris. “Looks angry, almost, especially with the red in the background. A fearsome looking dog. These Merdogs, are they some kind of legend?”

“You got it,” Juliet said, and proceeded to tell him of the legend.

A full hour went by before Chris suddenly realised that he might be overstaying his welcome.

“That was a fascinating story, Juliet, however I'm sure I've taken up too much of your time.”

“You don't need to go on my account. It's nice to have someone else to talk to for a change.” She offered him more tea but he politely declined.

“Guinness needs his walk,” he said. “Perhaps I'll see you around. Thanks again for the tea.”

“You're welcome,” Juliet replied.

Not long after he'd gone, the phone rang. Juliet hesitated and then picked up the receiver.

“Hello?”

“Hello Juliet,” the raspy voice answered.

“Who is this?”

“I want something of yours.”

“If this is a wind up...”

“We'll be meeting soon...watch your back.”

The caller hung up.

Feeling vulnerable, Juliet hurriedly bolted her front door and wondered what to do.



Chapter 3

Stalked

From the east, twilight drifted down on Coombe Appleby as if it were smoky purple light. The evening breeze was chilly and sea fog began to blow inland. A single car pulled up on the coast road, where a lone pedestrian was waiting. The car's blacked out window was wound down.

"Well, did you get it?"

"She escaped."

"That's not good enough, Foster."

"She knows. She's already had one warning."

"I want that amulet, Foster."

"Mr Fox...er, I mean Sir...perhaps it would be better if we kidnapped her as well as just taking the amulet. There's no telling what sort of information she could know."

The tall pedestrian was silent for a while. "Very well. Bring her to me. The sooner we can begin this expedition the better. The Navy may already be onto us...I just get that feeling."

"Understood sir."

The car drove off.

The pedestrian known as The Fox turned and looked out to sea. "Four years of searching...four years of surveillance. Now what I seek is finally within my grasp. For so long believed to be a legend...but I have always believed it to be true."

The Fox grinned to himself. "Soon the sea will reveal its secrets."

After she had checked in, Juliet stood for a long time at the big window in her room at the Royal Hotel on the Weymouth seafront. The earlier phone call had unnerved her to such an extent that she

decided to spend the night in a hotel. She could call the police - but what for? One threatening phone call? The police rarely turned up for more serious crimes so they were hardly likely to investigate such a trivial matter as one malicious call. But was this just the start of something more sinister?

Juliet went over and over the call and the car incident in her mind. Why would someone want to harm her? She had no enemies - not that she knew of, and to her knowledge she had never upset anyone. Maybe it was a case of mistaken identity. Had she unwittingly gotten mixed up in some kind of criminal activity? One of the theories she kept inventing made sense. She was completely stumped, but afraid. Something wasn't right, she could feel it. It was that same feeling that she'd had five years ago.

"Oh God...could it be something Merdog related?" Without thinking, she gripped her amulet tightly. It seemed inconceivable, yet in her heart it all made sense. She wondered if Chris Newall might somehow be involved.

"No way," she said softly, as if speaking to her own vague reflection in the cool glass. "He was genuine. I just knew he was..."

From the window of her hotel room she had a good view of the promenade below and the beach. Quite a lot of people walked up and down the promenade; nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Just a normal night in Weymouth. The ferry sounded its horn as it returned to port.

After an unappetising sandwich and a cup of coffee, Juliet propped herself up in bed with pillows, and called her mum on her mobile. She answered almost immediately.

"Hi Mum," Juliet ventured.

"Where are you, Ju?" her mother replied. "I've been trying to call you all day. I thought you were coming to visit last night."

"I'm sorry, events overtook me," she continued, lying. "Had a big painting to finish."

"You are coping okay in that flat?"

"Everything's fine, Mum." Juliet hoped her mother wasn't thinking otherwise, as she had an uncanny habit of sensing when her daughter wasn't telling the truth.

Juliet slumped back on the bed and sighed. She wanted to confide in her mum about what had happened but she couldn't. A horrible thought entered her mind. What if her phone calls were being monitored? For her parents' safety, she mentioned nothing.

"Ju - you still there?"

"You bet. I'll try and call round sometime next week."

"Okay love, well you know we're only a few miles away."

“I love you Mum.”

“I love you too Love, take care.”

She hung up.

After the call, Juliet sat on her hotel bed and watched a repeat of Life on Mars on the TV. Aloud, she laughed at Gene Hunt’s un-PC comments, which temporarily took her mind off recent events.

After the programme had finished, she felt the need for a drink.

“Oh damn,” she muttered, realising she’d failed to bring a bottle of water with her. Then she remembered that there was a vending machine down the corridor. She switched off the TV, grabbed her room keys and purse and headed towards the north end of the first floor to where the vending machine was.

At the end of the long corridor, she pushed through a heavy fire door and stepped onto a landing where the machine stood to the left of the head of the stairs. It was well stocked with Coke, 7-Up and other fizzy drinks.

As she inserted coins, Juliet heard the door on the staircase below her open with a faint but protracted squeak of hinges. She expected someone to ascend the stairs below her. Only as she inserted another coin did she realise there was something sneaky about the way the door opened; the long, slow squeak - as if someone knew the hinges were un-oiled and was trying to minimise the noise.

With one finger poised above the 7-Up selection button, Juliet hesitated, listening.

Nothing. It was as silent as a tomb.

She felt exactly as she had felt on the beach the previous night when she’d spotted the car. Her flesh prickled. Juliet had the crazy idea that someone was on the landing below, holding the fire door open now that he had come through it, and was waiting for her to push the button so that the squeak of the door’s hinges would be masked by the clattering of the can dropping into the trough at the bottom of the vending machine.

Juliet knew herself well. She was a modern woman, not given to hysteria or nervousness. Her experiences battling Cassandra five years ago had been a learning curve. Still, she did not doubt that there was a hostile presence at the lower landing, out of sight around the turn. Instead of pushing the vendor button to get her 7-Up, she stepped quickly and quietly to the fire door and pulled it open.

She glimpsed movement at the distant end of the ground floor hall. Someone ducked back through that other fire door into the south staircase. She didn’t absorb many details of him, only a shadowy form, for he had not been on the red carpet in the corridor itself but at the far threshold and therefore able to slip out of sight in a second.

The door eased shut in his wake.

At least two men - she assumed they were men, were stalking her.

Below, in her own staircase, the un-oiled hinges of that door produced a barely audible squeak. The other man evidently had tired of waiting for her to make a covering noise.

Juliet could not go into the hallway. They'd trap her between them. She could scream in the hope of calling forth other guests and frightening the men away but that might elicit no help - what if they had guns? They could be gun-toting maniacs ready to open fire on everyone. No, screaming would make things worse.

Someone was slowly ascending the stairs below her... Juliet turned away from the corridor, stepped to the west door, ran down the stairs and back to the reception area. The man behind the counter was the same one who had given her the room key earlier. He was tall, in his forties, with greying hair and was clean-shaven. He got up from his chair as she told him, a bit too breathlessly, what had happened.

"Well...this isn't some crime-ridden London suburb," he said when she had finished. "We don't get that kind of behaviour here in Weymouth. This hotel was featured in the Daily Telegraph, you know. We got some favourable reviews..."

"Look. I'm telling you, it happened," Juliet insisted, nervously glancing back the way she'd come.

"Oh I'm sure you saw and heard someone but not muggers or rapists. We do have several other guests and they were probably heading to the vending machine like you."

"Listen mister..."

"Miller. Vince Miller."

"Listen Mr Miller, it wasn't like that at all." Juliet felt like a skittish, foolish woman even though she was nothing of the sort. "I'm not imagining things. These guys were up to no good."

"Alright, alright. I think you're wrong, but let's have a look."

Though Miller's smug, patronising tone infuriated her no end, Juliet did not argue with him but followed him back up the stairs. She felt like a little kid being escorted back to her room by a father determined to show her that no monsters were lurking under her bed. Miller opened the door through which she had fled the stairs and they went inside. No-one waited there.

The vending machine hummed as they passed it. They crossed the small space to the door that led to the ground floor hall, pulled it open and looked around.

"Nobody here," he said, nodding towards the silent corridor. He opened the other doors as well and looked right and left. Deserted.

"Did you put your money in the machine but didn't get your drink?"

Miller asked as he let the door swing shut.

“Yes.”

“What did you want?”

“Um...a 7-Up.”

At the machine, he pushed the correct button and a can rolled into the trough. He handed it to her.

Carrying the can, a hot blush on her cheeks and cold anger in her heart, Juliet followed Miller back to her room. No-one lurked.

She was hesitant to enter the room even though she had the key.

“Let’s check it out.”

Miller gave it a thorough inspection but it was deserted.

“Feel better?”

“I wasn’t imagining things.”

“I’m sure you weren’t,” he replied, still patronising her.

As he returned to the hallway, Juliet added, “They were real and they were here but I guess they’re gone now. Probably ran away when I ran to get help.”

“Well, all’s well then,” Miller replied. “You’re safe. If they’re gone then it’s almost as good as if they’d never existed in the first place,” he said with a hint of sarcasm.

It took all of Juliet’s restraint to avoid saying more than “thank you,” then she closed the door. On the knob was a lock button, which she depressed. Above the knob was a dead-bolt lock, which she also depressed. A brass security chain was also provided; she used it. She went to the window and examined it to satisfy herself that it couldn’t be opened easily by a would-be assailant. Besides, she was on the first floor. An intruder would need a ladder.

For a while she sat in bed, listening to distant noises in the hotel. Now every sound seemed strange and menacing. Three incidents so far. The car. The phone call. The hotel stalkers. What next?



Chapter 4

Escape

Chris Newall's day had been rather uneventful, and he was looking forward to starting his new job tomorrow.

"Don't worry, Guinness, you're coming too," he said to the Labrador. It wouldn't have been fair to have the dog shut up all day in the flat, so a colleague had kindly agreed to letting him put Guinness in the ferry office down at the harbour whilst he was working on the ferry. Although Chris would have been quite happy for his charming new neighbour Juliet to keep Guinness company - if it meant that he could get to know her a bit better... Suddenly, Guinness' ears picked up. The dog growled softly.

"What's the matter Guinn?"

The dog rose to his feet and padded towards the front door, sniffing it.

Outside came the sound of furtive footsteps and hushed voices.

"Just some of the other tenants. Best get used to life in a flat, lad. Walls tend to be thin." Chris wasn't bothered about thin walls. He'd grown up in a semi, where every sound the next door neighbours made could be heard quite clearly.

Guinness refused to settle. He sensed whoever was outside the front door wasn't friendly.

"Lie down, Guinness," Chris ordered. The Labrador ignored him.

Then Chris too, heard the click of Juliet's front door opening and someone going inside.

"Ah, so she's back at last, where's she been all day?"

Guinness suddenly started barking. At the same time on the other side of the wall, something crashed to the ground. Maybe a table, or Juliet's easel? The sound of a man's voice got Chris' attention. He could just make out the muffled words.

“Damn it, she’s not here...she’s not here! “

“Get the bitch...”

“Of course she’s not here, she’s onto us, but I’ve got a message from Anderson - she’s reportedly at the Royal Hotel..”

Chris was alarmed. Who were these men and why were they after Juliet? She was in big trouble for sure. Did she owe them money? He simply couldn’t believe that the sweet young woman who’d offered him coffee earlier could be mixed up with either drug dealers or whoever these guys were.

Guinness was going crazy. All at once, Chris smelled smoke. Rushing to the front door, he gingerly opened it and peered out. Smoke was billowing from inside Juliet’s flat.

“God almighty, they’ve torched the place!” he gasped. Other people heard the commotion and were rushing up the staircase.

“We’ve got to get out of here fast - and we’ve got to get to that hotel,” said Chris. “Come on Guinness!”

Man and dog raced down the stairs and down to the car park.

Safely locked in her room at the Royal Hotel and dressed for bed, Juliet drank 7-Up and tried to watch the ITV News but she couldn’t get interested in the report about security alerts at Heathrow Airport. The more time that passed after her unsettling experiences in the hotel’s corridors, the more she wondered if indeed she had imagined being stalked.

As Scrooge had believed of Marley’s ghost, so Juliet began to view the phantoms that had frightened her earlier as nothing more than an undigested bit of beef, a blob of mustard, a crumb of cheese. With that revolting sandwich she’d eaten earlier, that could make sense.

As the report on the woes of Heathrow Airport continued, Juliet got up from the bed and went to the bathroom to brush her teeth. As she did, she heard someone try the door to her room. The small bath was off the smaller foyer. When she stepped to the threshold, she was within a couple of feet of the door to the hall, close enough to see the knob twisting back and forth as someone tested the lock. They weren’t even being subtle about it. The knob clicked and rattled and the door clattered against the frame. She dropped her toothbrush and grabbed her mobile off the bed. To her horror it didn’t respond. The battery was flat. She’d meant to charge it earlier, and the call to her mum had used up what little power it had left.

She hurried to the telephone on the beside table.

No dial tone.

She pressed the cut-off button, tried dialing 999 but nothing worked.

The phone was dead.

Now what?

As Juliet put down the useless phone, the doorknob stopped rattling. She stood by the bed for a while, listening, then ventured warily into the foyer to press her ear against the door. She heard male voices further down the hallway. The men were speaking in urgent, raspy whispers and she couldn't make out anything that was being said.

She was sure they were the same ones who had stalked her, unseen, when she had gone to the vending machine. Now they were back. And somehow they had knocked out the phones so she couldn't call for help. It was crazy, but it was happening.

Their persistence indicated to Juliet that they were not ordinary rapists or muggers, or indeed rapists or muggers at all. They were focusing on her for a reason. And the only reason they could possibly want to focus on her would be because of the Merdogs. But how could they have known about that? Apart from Pete and Ed, she'd never mentioned a word of it to anyone, not even her parents. Not that anyone would have believed her anyway. All through university she'd kept herself to herself, focusing on her work, revealing nothing out of the ordinary. Could Pete or Ed have spoken out? Maybe the men had got to them already - what if they were dead? Were the men stalking her MI5 agents? Or even worse, were they supernatural stalkers, like the shape-shifting Black Unicorns of five years ago? Was it Cassandra all over again?

Gooseflesh prickled her bare legs and she felt vulnerable in pyjamas. She dressed quickly, laced up her trainers, grabbed her bag and hurriedly checked she had her purse and passport inside. She wasn't alone in the hotel. There were other guests, Mr Miller had said so. Maybe not many, perhaps only another two or three. But if worse came to worst she could still scream...

Low, hoarse voices hissed and muttered at the far end of the hall - then a bone jarring crash that sounded like a door being broken down. She gasped in surprise. Another crash followed at once. She heard a door give away at another room. A woman screamed, and a man shouted, but what followed next was what brought a chill of horror to Juliet. Gunshots. Four gunshots. Dear God, what was happening out there? Some kind of blood-crazed mob rampaging through a friendly, well-established hotel in the charming seaside resort of Weymouth?

She heard more screams, gunshots and the sound of rooms being ransacked. When the screaming stopped, Juliet broke out of her trance of terror and went to the phone again. The line was still dead.

Where was Miller? Had the men shot him too? Or was he a member of the savage gang in the corridor? They had already broken

down two doors. They could break down hers too. Instinct was telling her that she was the one they were after. She had to get out of this hotel fast.

Juliet grabbed the chair from the table by the window, hurried to the door with it, tilted it and wedged it under the knob. She was convinced they were after her because of something relating to the Merdogs and were hell-bent on finding out the truth. That explanation didn't account for their attack on the other guests, who had nothing to do with her. It was crazy. She didn't understand what was happening, but she clearly understood the implications of what she had heard. Whoever these men were, they were ruthless, willing to kill anyone standing in their way. It was like being trapped in a nightmare.

She heard those voices again. Not at the end of the hallway any more. Near her own door. Approaching. She wished the door featured one of those fisheye lenses like on the door of her flat.

Something hit the door. Hard.

Juliet raced to the window, which wasn't of the modern white double glazed type. Fumbling with the latch, she slid the movable pane aside.

Again the door shook. The boom was so loud that Juliet felt she was inside a drum. It would not collapse as easily as the other guests' doors thanks to the chair but it wouldn't hold for much longer.

Juliet sat on the ledge, swung her legs out and looked down. The fog-dampened promenade glistened in the dim yellow glow of the streetlights above twelve feet below. A high jump but a risk she had to take. She couldn't see any other pedestrians walking past. The seafront of Weymouth was eerily deserted.

The men fired gunshots at the bedroom door. Wood splintered.

Juliet jumped off the windowsill. She landed on the wet footpath and skidded due to her rubber soled shoes, but did not fall.

Overhead, in the room she had left, wood splintered more noisily than before and tortured metal screeched as the lock on the door began to disintegrate. Juliet wondered what to do for a split second, but her prayers seemed answered when a Land Rover screeched to a halt in front of her. It was Chris.

"Get in quick!"

She didn't have time to protest, for as soon as she'd jumped in and Chris slammed his foot on the accelerator, a crash echoed through the night - the sound of the door to her room going down which was followed by shouts of frustration as her pursuers entered the room in search of her.



Chapter 5

Captured

The Land Rover roared away from the Royal Hotel.

"Thank your lucky stars I got here in time," Chris said as Juliet got her breath back. "You're mixed up in something big, aren't you? Who is it who's got it in for you?"

"I wish I knew," Juliet replied. "All I know is that they won't rest until they've got me. By the way, thank you so much for saving me."

"No worries," Chris replied. "I'm afraid I do have some bad news though - they've torched your flat..."

Juliet fell silent. "Damn. Now it's personal..."

"I'm so sorry. But at least you weren't there when it happened. Where are we going?" Chris asked.

"Well, I'm making it up as we go along. At the moment, we're just going."

Driving out of Weymouth, Chris held his speed slightly below the speed limit and made no effort to beat traffic lights as they turned yellow ahead of him. The last thing he wanted was for the police to pull him over.

"Listen," he said to Juliet. "I can take you to the ferry terminal at Portsmouth if you want. If you can get out of the country you might be safe."

"Thanks. I'll do that. But God, I'm so tired. I just want to get some rest." They passed a sign for a Travelodge two miles ahead.

Chris frowned. "It's a risk staying here longer than we have to. Those guys will stop at nothing to..."

Juliet looked at him pleadingly.

"Okay, well one night at the Travelodge, but we leave first thing tomorrow morning at the crack of dawn."

"You're right, it is risky but I'm getting pretty good at taking risks,"

Juliet replied as they pulled into the car park. “No-one’s following us and I pray that those guys haven’t already intercepted this Travelodge and bugged it.”

“So much for my first day at work,” Chris remarked as they went in. “I’ll be sacked before I’ve even started.”

“I’m sorry I got you involved in all this.”

“Hey it’s fine. And I was the one who got myself involved - by racing to the hotel to rescue you. Look on the bright side, you’re not on your own now. This could be the start of a great adventure!”

Juliet smiled back, wishing she could be more positive.

The night passed without incident. Next morning, feeling more refreshed, Juliet and Chris wasted no time in vacating their rooms, ready to continue their journey to Portsmouth. Guinness was none too pleased at having being made to spend the whole night in the Land Rover.

“I’ve got to let him out for a bit to stretch his legs,” said Chris as Juliet climbed in.

She observed the other cars on the Travelodge car park as Chris took Guinness for a quick walk on the grass verge by the hotel. Nothing out of the ordinary, a maroon Nissan Micra, an old Volkswagen minibus with curtained windows, a white van and a black Audi. She didn’t give any of them a second look.

Presently, Chris returned. “Alright, we’re ready to go.” He opened the back door and Guinness jumped in.

“Are you ready?”

“I’m ready.”

He started the engine and the Land Rover headed towards the exit. Just as Chris checked his rear view mirror, he noticed the black Audi pull out of its parking space.

On the way to Portsmouth, Chris continued to glance in his mirror. The Audi was with him all the way.

“We’re being followed,” he said. “Not to alarm you further of course.”

Juliet also saw the Audi. “I saw that car parked up at the Travelodge. It wasn’t there when we arrived last night. What if it tries to run us off the road?”

“Like in that movie, *Duel*?” Chris said. “I have an idea, and if it works we should be free of them, at worst it’ll bide us some time.”

“Nothing bothers you, does it? Not even the fact that there’s some gun-toting possible MI5 agents pursuing us.”

“What can I say? I’m a laid back guy. Easy going is my middle name!”

The April day was warm and clear, and the sunshine was diffused in

parabolic rainbow arcs across the Land Rover's windscreen. Squinting through the glare, Chris almost failed to see Varlow's Budget Car Hire of Dorset approaching on his left.

"This is it," he said, and pulled to the kerb, stopping fifty yards past the place. He shut off the engine and got out of the car.

The black Audi was not yet within sight on the road behind him. He hurried to the front of the car, opened the bonnet, and ordered Juliet out of the car. Tossing her the dog lead, he said, "We're gonna have to abandon this car but make it look as if it's broken down. If we simply abandon it they'll know we're on to them. It just occurred to me that the guys following us could have planted a tracking device in my car so they don't lose us. It makes sense. Just play along with what I'm going to do."

Juliet fastened the lead to Guinness' collar and the dog jumped out of the car. "But Chris - your car, it's..."

"Cars can be replaced - your life can't," he replied.

The Audi drove past them. Juliet didn't look directly at it but recognised it from the corner of her eye. For a minute or two Chris pretended to study various things in the engine compartment. Poking this, wiggling that. Leaving the bonnet up, he got behind the wheel again and pretended to start the engine. He got back out and began looking at the engine again.

Peripherally, he saw that the Audi had turned off the road. It had stopped in a shallow parking area in front of a derelict pub. He nodded to Juliet.

"Into the showroom."

The salesman was a cheery-looking, balding man of about fifty, wearing jeans and a checked shirt. He swung his feet off the desk, got up from his chair and addressed the two customers.

"Dave Varlow, at your service. What can I do for you? Oh, just a moment." He reached over to the portable TV that stood on his desk.

"No, that's okay, leave it on," Chris said.

"Portsmouth supporter, eh? Well, they're losing so far."

"What's the cheapest car you got ready to go?" Chris asked. "Me and my...friend here don't want anything special, just a reliable car for a few days."

Varlow liked the look of this customers. "Well I got a Nissan Micra, nothing much to look at but still got plenty of life in her. No bells and whistles but radio and..."

"That'll do. We're in a hurry."

"Wish all customers were like you!" Varlow added. "I'll just get the paperwork."

Across the road, a man appeared on foot, coming from the direction

in which the Audi was parked. He stood at the bus stop, watching intently.

“Sign here please,” Varlow said.

The man at the bus stop was wearing a suit but no tie and wasn't carrying anything. No long-range, high-powered listening device that Chris could make out, he was obviously just keeping watch. Varlow followed Chris' gaze.

“That fella at the bus stop, he a friend of yours?”

“No, never seen him before.”

From another drawer, Varlow withdrew a set of keys as Chris placed his credit card in the chip and pin machine.

“Where is it?” Juliet asked. Varlow pointed at the car through the window.

“Thanks for your help. Better get going then.”

With hearts pounding, they headed outside to the silver Nissan Micra.

Across the road, the man at the bus stop looked impatiently left and right, as though disgruntled about the unreliability of public transport.

The engine of the Micra started at once but it was tinny compared to the Land Rover. The upholstery was worn and a Magic Tree air freshener hung from the rear view mirror. Guinness sniffed back seats with a distinct lack of enthusiasm.

“Let's get out of here,” he whispered to Juliet.

Without looking at the man at the bus stop, Chris drove out of the car park and back onto the main road, driving past his abandoned Land Rover. The black Audi was still parked in front of the derelict pub. When Chris reached a crossroads just past the Audi, he put his foot down heavily on the accelerator.

In the rear view mirror he saw the man from the bus stop hurrying towards the Audi, which was already backing into the road. If there had been a tracking device fitted to his Land Rover, it was of no use to the men now. They would have to maintain visual contact and risk following him close enough to blow their cover - which they presumably thought they still had.

Within four miles, Chris lost them at a major junction when he sped through a yellow traffic light that was changing to red. When the Audi tried to follow him it was thwarted by surging cross-traffic. Even over the noise of the traffic he heard the sharp whine of their brakes as they slid to a halt to avoid a collision.

An hour later they arrived in Portsmouth and Chris abandoned the Micra in a side street.

“We'll have to continue the last bit on foot,” he said. “It's only a five minute walk to the ferry terminal.”

Guinness was pulling hard at the leash. A host of new smells met his nose but there was no time for exploring.

"Heel, Guinness," Juliet said as he almost pulled her arm out of its joint. Portsmouth's vast ferry terminal came into view and it was as busy as ever.

"Which ferry?" Juliet wondered.

"I'd go for the bigger P&O one. Portsmouth to Le Havre. Those fast cats are too small. Plenty of places to hide on the bigger ships."

"Good thinking."

"Let's just check we've got everything we need before we try and board. We don't want any hold ups." They ducked into an alley and Juliet fumbled in her handbag.

Suddenly, from behind a large wheeled waste bin a man jumped up, struck Chris on the back of the head with a club and he fell to the ground unconscious. Juliet screamed in terror, let go of Guinness' lead and the dog went berserk, barking and growling at the attacker. "Chris!" she yelled. "No, Chris!"

"Get that bloody dog before it blows our cover!"

"Run, Guinness, run!" Juliet screamed as two men grabbed her and covered her mouth. Before she knew what was happening she was being carried out of the alley and bundled into the back of a van, along with the unconscious Chris.

From behind the bins, Guinness watched from a safe distance. The Labrador whined forlornly as his master and friend were driven away.



Chapter 6

To Catch A Merdog

Chris awoke to a throbbing headache and blurred vision. He groaned, feeling like he'd just come out of a coma.

"What happened?"

It took several more minutes before he finally realised he was in some kind of windowless cell and that his hands were tied. A quiet, low humming sound echoed through the confined space - the kind of noise you hear in an aircraft cabin. Eventually it dawned on him that he wasn't on an aircraft at all, but a ship.

His head throbbed like hell. When he came to his senses he wondered where they'd taken Juliet. Chris cursed himself for not getting her onboard that ferry, but maybe it wouldn't have made any difference. Maybe those who were after her were one step ahead and had infiltrated the ports and airports already.

Juliet was being held in the captain's cabin. It was useless trying to escape; she'd already tried that, and her arms ached from fighting with her captors earlier. From the outside, the *Liparus* resembled any other research vessel. It was scheduled to sail out today on a mission to study ocean currents - at least, that was the covering story. The truth, as she was about to find out, was rather more disturbing.

Presently, she heard the cabin door being unlocked. The door opened and The Fox walked in. Juliet clenched her fists.

"I'd advise you to put that idea out of your mind," he said, holding up her Merdog amulet. "I have what I want now."

Colour drained from her face.

"Why would you want that? It's just an old necklace my nanna gave to me. It has no value except sentimental value. Give it back!"

The Fox's eyes narrowed.

"Your face tells me that you're lying to me. I would think carefully

about lying further - you wouldn't want any harm to come to your little friend Chris, would you?"

"Let me see him!" Juliet yelled.

"Relax, his stubborn head is tougher than mine. Right now we have important things to discuss. Welcome on board the good ship *Liparus*, by the way. The name might be familiar to you. I named this ship after the one in that James Bond movie - the ship that swallowed submarines. Except that my ship will swallow up something far more valuable than a sub - figuratively speaking."

He dangled the amulet in front of her. "Now I have this precious trinket, but I won't be throwing you overboard just yet. You're more use to me alive. We're going on a little voyage now. I hope you're not seasick. Such a pretty amulet, don't you think?"

"What is it that you want?" Juliet said firmly, trying not to be intimidated.

The Fox smiled. "I would have thought you'd figured that out by now. I want...a Merdog."

Juliet's eyes widened. "You're insane!"

He laughed. "My real name is Max Jennings. To those that know me, I am The Fox, and a wily one at that. I always get what I want, one way or another. Ten years ago I began researching paranormal activity. Of what organisations I have worked for, well that is of no concern to you. I wanted to prove the existence of the unexplainable. UFOs, mysterious sightings - you name it. Most turned out to have mundane explanations. Then I chanced upon the Merdog legend. At first it seemed laughable. Yet the more I probed it, the more credible it became. My investigation led me to Coombe Appleby - quaint little village. That's when I discovered this.."

He held up an ancient, leather-bound book. "This book explains all about this amulet of yours. There is an inscription on the rim of it - similar to those you see on a pound coin. At first glance I thought it was written in Welsh, but it's actually written in Fengrian - according to this book an ancient language used by the Merdogs. It's a strange language to understand. It appears to have English, Latin and Gaelic words mixed in with the sounds made by dolphins and whales."

*"Lir et Llendys Or tyll
Mterte est Reguva carpe myll."*

He looked at the book again. "Translated, it reads:

"When you wear this golden band, you hold Regneva in your hand."

"In the book it says that Regneva can be found at the edge of beyond. Regneva is of course, the world beneath the waves. A place

for Merdogs to dwell. The gateway to that world is through an enormous whirlpool. The book goes on to explain how Neptune made these amulets for his Merdogs to give to land-dwellers (humans) who were of compassionate heart. Although it is forbidden for Merdogs to set foot on land, they are permitted to rescue sailors shipwrecked at sea or anyone drowning. You're a very lucky girl to have this amulet. So tell me, who gave it to you? Which Merdog saved your life?"

"None, I found it on the beach at Coombe Appleby one day when I was beachcombing."

"Methinks you are lying again." The Fox pulled a revolver from his pocket to frighten her into confessing.

Juliet had to think fast.

"The Merpuppy's name was Darkeye, and it was I who rescued him, for he had made the mistake of setting foot on land and becoming trapped in fishing nets. I freed him and was given the amulet as a reward."

It was still a lie, but he believed her this time. "Now we're getting somewhere," he smiled. "I don't know if you are aware of this, but whoever holds this amulet has the power to open the portal to Regneva - to command the Green Whirlpool." He stopped and sniggered. "Foolish creatures these Merdogs, to put their trust in us humans, don't you think?"

"You can't capture a Merdog," Juliet said. "You have no idea of the power they wield when they are in the sea. They can control the whole oceans, the tides - everything. Plus they're huge - bigger than a normal dog."

"When I say catch, I don't mean that in the conventional sense of course, with bait and a trap. The Merdog will come willingly to me when I read this inscription. You see, the purpose of this amulet is to protect its wearer from harm. Whenever that person is out at sea, he or she can call forth a Merdog and open the portal to Regneva simply by saying this Fengrian inscription three times. You didn't know that, did you?"

"No I didn't," Juliet sighed. She remembered the amulet glowing that time when Snarlgard had been trapped by the Iron Collar.

"Anyway Juliet, sit back and enjoy the voyage. We're heading out to Sailor's Folly, twenty-eight miles southwest of Coombe Appleby. Treacherous currents there, and the book mentions that this is the spot where the Green Whirlpool has been known to appear most often."

The Fox left the room, locked the door and Juliet was left alone once more. For the first time, she broke down and sobbed, her head in her hands. It all seemed hopeless.



Chapter 7

Voyage of the Damned

“Welcome onboard the *Liparus*, matey,” The Fox said to Chris in a mock sailor’s voice. Chris groaned and looked up at his captor.

“Your little girlfriend Juliet Fairisle has been most co-operative.”

“If you’ve harmed one hair on her head, you filth...”

“Temper, temper. You’ll see her soon enough.” He slammed the door shut and locked it and headed to the bridge.

“Sir, we’ve got company,” the captain said. “Behind us. It’s a Navy frigate. Been shadowing us since we leave Portsmouth.”

The Fox was unconcerned. “Where we’re going it won’t matter. Let them follow us. They’ll get the shock of their lives when we get to Sailor’s Folly.”

The sea had become more rough. Large waves were pounding the hull of the *Liparus*.

“Won’t be long now. Stay on this course.” At that point The Fox uttered the Fengrian words three times.

Over on the Royal Navy frigate *HMS Preston*, the crew was becoming alarmed.

“That *Liparus* is starting to list quite badly. Look at it!”

The first officer came rushing up. “Captain, what’s that roaring noise I hear?”

Captain Dodds peered through his binoculars and pointed directly at the course they were heading. “There’s a huge hole in the sea!”

The sight of it took their breath away. Less than one nautical mile southwest was a gigantic whirlpool, more than a mile wide in a complete circle, whirling around like a tornado with a massive hole at its centre. The roaring noise increased until it filled the air for miles

around. Captain Dodds watched it with awe.

"I've read about giant whirlpools like this. Tidal surges, strong currents, riptides, you name it. But never in my life have I seen a maelstrom like this. It's...unreal."

The officers' faces radiated fear. "Sir, we're heading straight for it, we'll be sucked in!"

Captain Dodds shook his head. "Trust me, it's not this ship that'll be pulled into that whirlpool, no, that's where *Liparus* is bound for."

The first officer was horrified. "My God, they're done for - is that whirlpool what they sailed out to research? I thought they were marine biologists."

"I don't think they're biologists at all, but alas, I fear we'll never know now. Change course," Captain Dodds ordered at once, "or we'll find out what the earth below the high seas looks like!"

The *Liparus* began a sickening list to the right. Chairs and tables slid around and anything that wasn't nailed down was hurtled across the cabins. It was like a scene from the movie *Titanic*. Juliet clung on for dear life. Looking through the porthole, she gasped in terror at what she saw.

"The...Green Whirlpool."

Up on the bridge, the crew wrestled hopelessly with the controls.

"Sir it's useless. We can't control the ship!"

The Fox smiled. "There's no need," he said, holding up the amulet. "See? Just as I said. The Green Whirlpool has appeared. Now it will take us down to the seabed and down to where we want to go. Relax, men, you're not going to drown. Forces beyond the realms of rational thought are at work here. Just brace yourselves."

Liparus seemed to be almost tottering on the brink of the whirling water tunnel now. The terrifying greeny-grey walls revolved at a breathtaking speed; a gaping hole reaching down, down into a mysterious darkness.

The crew of *HMS Preston* watched silently as *Liparus* caught the spinning edge of the Green Whirlpool. Halfway round the giant maelstrom it spun, hanging a split second in midair with its entire keel visible, then it was pulled bow first into the murky abyss. *Liparus* was gone into the depths, never to be seen again.

A gasp of horror arose from the crew of the frigate. Almost as soon as it had appeared, the Green Whirlpool began to shrink rapidly before disappearing once more, seemingly satisfied now that it had swallowed

a ship. The shaken sailors had no option but to return to Portsmouth. The ship they had been pursuing had been claimed by the sea and its mysterious secrets had gone with it.



Chapter 8

The Edge of Beyond

The Green Whirlpool continued to pull the *Liparus* slowly down the one mile depth of the area of the English Channel known as Sailor's Folly. As the ship touched the sea bed, the waters parted further, and then the seabed itself began to open; a crack turning into a hole and widening, like sand slipping through an hourglass. The Fox was wild with delight. "It's happening! It's all happening!"

In the cabin, Juliet watched from the porthole as the ship was pulled down into the abyss beneath the seabed. Travelling through the whirlpool was the same as it had been when she'd passed through it five years ago with Ed, Pete and the two Merpuppies, Touchstone and Brimstone. But this opening up of the seabed was new and terrifying; she didn't recall seeing this last time.

"I've got to get that amulet back," she said to herself. "If I can get hold of it then I can use it against Fox and protect myself and the Merdogs. And Chris."

Slumped against the wall in the windowless room that he was locked in, Chris hadn't witnessed the whole spectacle of the Green Whirlpool. He could feel the sensation of the ship being pulled down - it was like being in a lift but he had no idea that they were actually below the seabed right now. Strictly speaking, they weren't beneath the seabed anymore but between dimensions.

After what seemed like an eternity, the ship came to rest on ground - or whatever, with a sickening bump. The force threw Chris across the room. When he got to his feet, he realised the impact had broken the

door off one of its hinges.

“This time I’m out of here,” he smiled.

Juliet felt sick with fear. Heaven knew what was going to happen now. She had no idea that the amulet that the former Merdog leader Melgrim had given her was capable of so much. Why had Melgrim not explained this to her, Pete and Ed at the time? Maybe it was because she had only been fifteen back then. Maybe it simply hadn’t been necessary to. But Cassandra had been a serious challenge - could she have been defeated easier if the amulet’s full potential had been revealed?

But that was then and this was now. Right now she had to focus on getting it back from The Fox. Which was not going to be easy.

Suddenly, she heard someone knock on the door, followed by a familiar voice.

“Juliet, are you in here? It’s me, Chris!”

“Chris?!” Waves of relief swept over her.

“Hang on, I’ll break it down. I found an axe!”

Chris smashed at the door with all his might. Wood splintered in all directions and Juliet was terrified that any moment The Fox or one of his henchmen would come running and fire their guns at him, but maybe they were too preoccupied with the arrival in Regneva. Eventually the lock broke and she was free at last.

“Thank God you’re alright!” she said, flinging her arms round him, which took him quite by surprise.

“Well I was just about to say the same thing about you!” he spluttered.

“Listen, I’ve got to get that amulet back. The Fox stole it from me when we were ambushed in Portsmouth. That’s what this whole thing’s been about.”

“That pendant you wore? But why?”

“You’re not going to believe this.”

“Try me.”

Juliet took a deep breath and began to tell him everything.

When she’d finished, he stood there blinking in stunned silence. He could tell from the look in her eyes that everything she’d just told him was the truth.

“What an adventure!” he said at last. “Had anyone else told me all that, I’d have laughed it off as a joke. But it’s really true, isn’t it?”

“Yes. And now that amulet is no longer a blessing but a curse. I don’t know how exactly but The Fox discovered that there’s a command you can use to control a Merdog. With that command a

Merdog will allow itself to be captured. The consequences of a Merdog being revealed to the human world is unthinkable.”

“They’d put the poor beast in a zoo,” Chris replied. “People would sure pay good money to see something like that.”

“Except that if a Merdog remains on land for longer than three days it will lose its immortality and will never be able to return to the sea. It will become land bound - just like the Newfoundland did.”

“Wha...Newfies were Merdogs?”

“Once long ago, so the legends go. The Newfoundland Merdogs chose to live on land and live among humans and gave up their sea controlling powers. But they still have webbed feet - a lasting throwback to their original Merdog heritage - and of course they love the water. The official history of the Newfoundland breed of dog is that the breed originated in Newfoundland from a breed indigenous to the island, that later became known as the St John’s Dog. The speculation they may be partly descended from the big black bear dogs introduced by the Vikings in 1001 A.D is based more in romance than in fact.”

“Wow, you’ve really researched this, haven’t you?”

Juliet continued, “It is said that their size results from the introduction of large mastiffs, brought to the island by many generations of Portuguese fishermen, who had been visiting Newfoundland since the 1400s. By the time colonization was permitted in 1610, the distinct physical characteristics and mental attributes had been established in the breed.”

“So that’s the human version, and the Merdog version is that Newfies were once Merdogs who evolved to live on land.”

“In the early 1880s fishermen from Ireland and England travelled to the Grand Banks of Newfoundland, where there they described two main types of working dog: one more heavily built, large with a longish coat, whereas the other was lighter in build, an active, smooth-coated water dog. The heavier one was the Newfoundland and the other was the known as the Lesser St John’s Dog, the forerunner of the Labrador Retriever. The dogs were used in similar ways to pull fishnets and heavy equipment.”

“I wonder if Guinness is part Merdog? He certainly likes water.” Chris paused. “Aww damn it, poor Guinness, poor innocent Guinness. Left to fend for himself in Portsmouth.”

“Don’t worry about Guinness,” said Juliet. “I have a feeling he’ll be alright. Right now, we need to think about how we’re going to get off this ship...” But their conversation was rudely interrupted.

“Leaving us so soon?” it was The Fox. He cocked the revolver and pointed it at Juliet. “You’re far too useful to me my pretty. Besides just

where were you planning to escape to? In case you haven't noticed, we're no longer on Earth..”

He signalled at the men to restrain Juliet and Chris. Their hands were tied behind their backs and the two of them were frogmarched off the ship. Then The Fox decided Chris was surplus to requirements.

“The girl stays with me. As for him, he can stay on the ship.”

“Right you are, sir. Shall I kill him, sir?” Juliet froze at those words.

The Fox shook his head. “Leave him be...for now. I will plan an amusing death for him later.”

Chris was dragged back on the ship and pushed into a storeroom, where the henchman bound his feet together. “Just to make sure you don't break free.”

“Oh, and here's a little something to keep you occupied while you're here,” laughed The Fox. He tossed the frayed, leather bound book at him. “You might struggle to turn the pages, however. This book has been of good use to me but like you, it has outlived its usefulness.”

The Fox didn't know it yet, but in discarding the book he had just made the biggest mistake of his life.

The storeroom door was closed and Chris was left in the cramped space with only the meagre yellow light from a single bulb to illuminate it. He struggled with the cords that bound his hands for twenty minutes before he finally felt them loosening.

“Should've used a stronger rope,” he laughed as he untied the cords binding his feet.

He was about to jump up and race off after Juliet, but then he remembered the book that The Fox had thrown at him. He picked it up. The book had no title but it was plainly very old and the pages were worn and yellow like parchment. It appeared to have been written by hand, at a guess in the eighteenth century, but he couldn't be sure. The language was suited to Nelson's time and hard for him to understand.

“Come on,” he muttered, flicking through. “If this book tells you everything about Merdogs then there's got to be some kind of message in here about how to stop the amulet being used for evil purposes.”

Frustrated, he tore at the already damaged spine of the book. The leather strip came away in his hand. To his surprise, it revealed a barely legible scrawl of writing underneath.

“Now we're getting somewhere,” Chris smiled as he squinted to read the words. Reaching in his pocket, he found a biro.

“Eureka!” he cried. Hastily writing something on his hand, he tossed the book aside and stood up.

“If I manage to pull this off, not only will I have saved the life of a

Merdog, I might also have won the heart of Juliet. Now I mustn't screw this up. If I get the timing just right...it's a risk, but I've got to do it."

Afraid but also thrilled that he had found a solution to the predicament, Chris fantasised about sharing his life with Juliet. In only a few short days he'd started to really fall for her. He was 25 and had never met a woman who he was truly attracted to, until now. He wasn't going to lose her because some of some mad bloke with a Merdog fixation.



Chapter 9

Who Dares Wins

As though they were in the bowels of some enormous cave, The Fox, Juliet and two henchmen scrambled on through dark rocky tunnels.

This wasn't the Regneva Juliet remembered from last time. She assumed this was a different "entrance" than the first time. It was bleak, but not like the ravaged area from before, when Cassandra's evil had caused the Demdron territory to decay.

Demdrons - she remembered Sparkchaser, the merry little winged Fox Terrier ... not a terrier at all but a species of Merdog able to change form. What had happened to him? Did he still live with Ed's aunt and uncle in Coombe Appleby? Had he not sensed the impending danger that the Merdogs were in? Maybe he had lost his ability to talk or sense anything since choosing to live with humans as a pet dog. Although he insisted he would not become land bound like other Merdogs.

The Fox was growing impatient. Over an hour now and no sign of anything significant. Any moment now he expected the cavern to open up into a huge sprawling landscape - like Lucy entering Narnia for the first time in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. As far as he was concerned, the four of them were still in the wardrobe.

"Come out, Merdogs!" He yelled. "Where are you?" He gripped the amulet so tight his fingernails went white. "I command you to answer me!" He uttered the Fengrian words a fourth time.

From deep within the tunnels came a deep, roaring noise. A few rocks fell from the ceiling. Juliet trembled.

"Where are the Merdogs?" The Fox yelled, grabbing her shoulders. "Tell me where they are!"

"I-I don't know!" Juliet repeated. "They're down here somewhere,

they must be! Maybe that amulet isn't as powerful as you think..."
He pushed her aside and stormed ahead.

Meanwhile, Chris continued to follow the four of them. He could hear shouting in the distance; they were quite a way ahead.

"Where in God's name am I? Am I really beneath the sea bed?" he remarked as he fumbled along the lightless tunnel with only a small Mag-lite torch to show him the way. He was terrified that the torch beam would be seen by The Fox and blow his cover.

The Fox could feel the amulet getting hotter in his hand. He squinted as he saw the tourmaline stone in the centre starting to glow.

"Just like the book said. It glows in the presence of Merdogs!"
Quite suddenly, light appeared at the end of the tunnel.

"Could this be it?" he said hopefully, breaking into a run. What he saw took his breath away. The tunnel opened up into a wonderful panoramic view of a vast landscape punctuated with wide valleys, fields, rivers and tall mountains beyond. At first glance it looked like rural Switzerland, yet the more he looked the less Earth-like the landscape appeared. It contained elements of all well-known places on Earth - Norwegian fjords, Monument Valley in the US, Niagara Falls, the Great Lakes - as if someone had decided to create a little version of Earth without all the urban and industrialised areas.

Of course, that was exactly what it was. Regneva had been created by Neptune himself to provide a little version of Earth for his Merdogs, as they were forbidden from setting foot upon land.

"According to that book, he dipped his trident into the sea, spun it round and created the Green Whirlpool, which bore a hole deep under the seabed. Then he threw rocks into the hole. The rocks became land beneath the seabed. Allegedly. But there's got to be more to it than that. This is certainly a wild and unchecked world. No mown grass here, well Merdogs don't use lawnmowers, do they?" He laughed at this, in spite of himself.

Juliet felt tears pricking her eyes. Regneva was exactly how she remembered it from five years ago. The same beauty, untainted by humans. She felt disgusted to be here.

"This is no world for us, Fox - you'd do well to remember that."

"Silence, girl," he replied. "I grow weary of you. Soon I'll leave you and your little fancy-man to become food for those hungry Merdogs. What do you suppose Merdogs eat anyways? The book never mentioned that."

“They eat fish,” she said. “When they eat at all, that is. The Merdogs aren’t the only animals down here - occasionally you will find mermaids and mermen, but they prefer to stay in the oceans. Only the Merdogs were cursed with that burning curiosity to explore the world of Man...”

“Smart girl, you sound as though you were a Merdog yourself,” The Fox sniggered.

They stepped out of the cave and walked across a wide field full of knee high grass.

“You’d expect it to be more overgrown than this. I bet they’ve bewitched this land in some way to stop it getting completely out of control. Look at those clouds - where does that sunlight come from if we are no longer on Earth? So many questions! I will interrogate a Merdog, find out all their little secrets.”

Juliet remembered that the previous Merdog leader Melgrim had told her that Regneva was between dimensions, yet still received sunlight. It was hard to understand. That was what made the Merdogs so unique, so fascinating. She refused to believe that a Merdog would willingly submit to human command, no matter the amulet’s power. They were more - much more. The Fox was underestimating them.

As they passed a huge, weathered rock formation, Juliet spied something standing atop it, something huge and dark in colour. She glanced up. It was a Merdog, and it was watching them. Even from a distance she could see its two radiant emerald eyes shining. The Fox noticed her staring and looked up.

“Aha...there it is!”

The Merdog began to descend the rocks with the grace and agility of a cat. Even its huge fish tail did not hamper its ability to leap from rock to rock without slipping. It landed a few feet from them and The Fox and his henchmen were visibly awestruck at just how big it was - almost as big as a horse. Juliet’s mouth fell open. She’d recognise that mottled brown fur anywhere. This Merdog was none other than Snarlgard!

“Snarlgard!” she blurted out without thinking.

“What, this beast has a name?” The Fox gasped.

Snarlgard lowered his head. “Miss Juliet Fairisle,” he said with a voice as deep as a cannon. The other two men cowered in fear. This beast was like something from the pages of a fantasy novel. And it could talk!

“Jesus...it really is a talking dog...” they muttered.

Snarlgard was advancing towards them.

“Run away, Snarlgard! Run far away! Your life is in danger, he wants to capture you!” Juliet screamed.

“Gag her!” The Fox yelled at his men. Juliet was quickly restrained.

“Let me go, you pair of maniacs. I swear you’ll pay for this, you’re making the biggest mistake of your life!”

But Snarlgard did not heed her advice. “No, I shall turn and face my foe.” He stood two feet away from The Fox.

“You have called for me and now I must answer you.”

“You’re a smart animal,” The Fox smiled. “I must thank you for your co-operation.”

Snarlgard wasn’t fooled. He knew that The Fox had taken Juliet’s amulet by force, for the girl would never have tried to endanger the Merdogs like this. But with the amulet in the hands of her captor, she couldn’t use the Hidden Power to defend herself. And he had to obey whoever held the amulet in their hand.

“I will co-operate fully, but only on the condition that you release Juliet Fairisle immediately.”

Whilst this conversation was continuing, Chris arrived at the end of the tunnel. He took a step back as he saw the enormous fishtailed dog speaking to The Fox.

“Good heavens...” he whispered. Then he saw Juliet. Hoping not to be seen, he slipped out of the tunnel and inched along the edge of the field before crouching behind a rock.

“Very well,” said The Fox. He turned to his men. “Release her.”

Juliet tore away from them and headed down into the valley.

“Stupid girl,” The Fox laughed. “Where on Earth does she think she’s going? Gone to get help?”

“She is a human worth ten of you,” Snarlgard replied.

“Watch your tongue, Merdog,” The Fox replied, his voice soft and dangerous.

“What is it you wish of me?”

“You shall return to the human world with me,” The Fox said. “With you I shall silence my critics once and for all.” The Fox had far more ambitious plans for the beast but wasn’t prepared to reveal them all - yet.

“As you wish,” Snarlgard replied.

The Fox looked around. “Where are the others of your kind? Are you the only creature down here?”

“My brethren are not always in Regneva,” the great Merdog replied. “They travel through the Earth’s oceans controlling its currents, its tides, keeping everything flowing. We are, after all, creatures of the sea. Regneva is merely a bolt-hole for us, for when we yearn to walk on dry land.”

Watching Snarlgard was heartbreaking.

“Why doesn’t he fight back?” Juliet said to herself as she watched.

“Can he really not fight back? Is the amulet that powerful?”

Suddenly Juliet jumped as something touched her shoulder.

“Chris!”

“Ssh, keep your voice down, they’ll hear us!”

“How did you escape?”

He winked at her. “They didn’t lock the door...”

She was so relieved to see him.

“Listen,” he said softly. “Listen carefully to what I’m about to tell you.”

The Fox, his men and Snarlgard headed back into the tunnel.

“They’re going back to the ship,” said Chris. “He’s luring the Merdog back, just as he wanted.” Then he explained what he’d discovered on the spine of the book.

Juliet’s heart beat faster. “Then you mean...”

He showed her the word he’d scrawled on his arm.

“One little word, that’s all it takes to bring this to an end. It’s the destruction command. When this word is uttered by whoever’s holding the amulet, it will destroy itself and the person holding it. Death. You see, when a merdog gives you an amulet it’s for life. You can’t be free of it. When that person dies, the amulet destroys itself. These amulets are only given to those with the purest hearts - the Merdogs knew what they were doing when they gave you one, they couldn’t have picked a nicer person..”

Juliet smiled shyly. “But...The Fox got hold of it.”

“And it’ll prove to be his biggest folly. All we have to do is get him to say the word. You got a small piece of paper?”

Juliet fumbled in her pocket. “Only an old shopping receipt.”

“That’ll do.” He wrote the word on the back of the receipt. “Right, let’s go rescue a Merdog!”

“Will this really work? It all seems too easy.”

“Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Better than doing nothing. You know, a few years ago when I was in Cornwall, I rescued a seal pup that had been abandoned on St Ives beach, then a dolphin that had beached itself. Now I’m helping a Merdog. Perhaps I should’ve been a vet, not a ferry officer.”

Juliet laughed. “I bet you can do anything when you put your mind to it.”

They raced back to the tunnel.

Back in Coombe Appleby, dark clouds had gathered in the sky. In Portsmouth. *HMS Preston* had returned to port and its shaken crew disembarked in silence. The atmosphere was tense and the sailors

sensed that *something* was going to happen, something that couldn't be described.

In one particular house in Coombe Appleby, the mood was very dark indeed. Mrs Fairlsle had been trying to contact her daughter all day now, but unsuccessfully. Her phone was constantly engaged.

"It's not like her to be on the phone so long," she said to her husband. "Something's wrong, I can just feel it."

Mr Fairlsle switched on the TV just as a regional news bulletin was starting. "Oh my God!" he shouted.

"What is it?"

He pointed at the TV. The headlines flashed across the screen. *Major fire at block of flats in Weymouth.*

The newsreader began, "*In what is believed to have been a gas explosion, one of the flats at Devonshire Court in Weymouth was completely destroyed this morning. Residents heard a massive explosion...*"

"Juliet!" Mrs Fairlsle shouted, then the newsreader revealed that the flat was believed to be empty at the time.

"We've got to find her!" Mrs Fairlsle shouted. "She might be in the hospital."

"I'll get the car keys," Mr Fairlsle replied. "Don't worry, Love," he said, comforting his distraught wife. "Our Ju is a smart young woman. I'm sure she'll be safe."

The Fox reached the ship.

"Sir, how are we going to get back the way we came?" one of the men asked.

"With our four legged friend here, that's how," The Fox replied.

The men gulped. They did not relish the prospect of sharing a ship with a horse-sized, talking dog that was capable of who knows what.

"Get on the ship!" The Fox shouted to Snarlgard. The Merdog said nothing but nodded and quietly leapt upon the deck.

Suddenly, a voice broke the silence.

"Hold it Fox!" Chris yelled. The Fox spun round in surprise.

"How did you escape, you insolent lout?" he snapped.

"We have an important message for you," Juliet replied. "You'd better read it or you won't be able to continue your journey."

The Fox was convinced she was just stalling for time.

"She speaks the truth," Snarlgard interrupted.

As Merdogs were said never to lie, The Fox turned and walked towards Juliet. "Very well, what is this message?"

She handed him the crumpled up till receipt.

“A receipt from Tesco? Is this some kind of joke?”

“The other side,” she said calmly. The Fox turned it over and blinked at the single word in capital letters.

“Morder?”

Everything seemed to unfold in slow motion for a second. The amulet in The Fox’s hand suddenly hummed and flashed. By the time The Fox realised he’d been tricked it was all too late. The amulet exploded as though it had been a bomb; electricity shot from it, engulfing The Fox, blinding him before his body was ravaged by over a million volts. He cried out in horror as the forces engulfed him. Juliet, Chris and the men looked away; Snarlgard stood on the bow of the ship watching impassively.

The Fox was dead, burned beyond recognition.

“Well done,” Snarlgard said at last. The two men drew their guns in panic. One bullet missed Juliet by millimetres, but Chris pulled her out of the way just in time.

But Snarlgard wasn’t going to let them get her. No longer meek and at The Fox’s command, he roared terrifyingly and leapt from the ship, charging towards the men. They turned and fired several rounds at the Merdog but the bullets had no effect on him, they simply bounced straight off him. They didn’t know that the Merdog was immortal. They dropped their guns and prepared to run, but before they could run anywhere a loud rumbling sound above them made everyone look up. Water burst through the ceiling of the cave as though the sea was breaking through.

“What’s happening?” Juliet screamed as water began to pour from every crack. One massive wave swept The Fox’s two henchmen away. Snarlgard instinctively rushed after them as the bone chilling water began to flood the cave.

“Hang on!” Snarlgard shouted. Even though the men had tried to kill him, he felt compelled to save their lives, as all Merdogs were compelled to rescue humans. On this occasion he was too late however; they had perished along with The Fox.

“The portals to Regneva are shifting,” Snarlgard replied, swimming towards Juliet and Chris who were clinging desperately to a rock. “When the Destruction Command is used it also causes the gateways into Regneva to shift. It’s not the end of the world, but I must get you two out of here. Climb on my back and hold on tight. The water shall not harm you when you’re with me.”

They didn’t need telling twice. Juliet leapt onto the Merdog’s back and pulled Chris on.

“Just pretend you’re riding a horse - a very furry horse,” Snarlgard chuckled.

“Sure...no problem,” Chris stammered. “A furry, talking horse. I can deal with it. I’m cool.”

Snarlgard roared. A huge funnel of water engulfed the three of them. Chris feared he was going to drown, but as the water washed over him he realised that it was no longer cold and he could breathe perfectly well under the water.

“Are we fish?” he said.

“Merdog power,” Juliet whispered. “This is how they rescue people drowning at sea. They control the waters and bring the person safely back to shore.”

Like a bubble floating up from an undersea volcano, the great Merdog carried Chris and Juliet up through the hole in the seabed, up and up, through a spectrum of green and blue water, from dark up to light, as though going from night to day under the sea. Finally they broke the surface and were greeted with noisy seagulls and bright sunlight.

Several grey seals barked at the Merdog’s arrival; dolphins and other marine animals swam around this Guardian of the Sea.

In the distance, Juliet could see the Dorset coastline.

“Only three nautical miles to Coombe Appleby,” Snarlgard said cheerfully. The Merdog swam through the water at a remarkable speed. Even being a legendary creature with unique powers, Chris was amazed at how fast he could swim. At a guess, they seemed to be travelling at forty knots, the same rate as one of the high speed ferries he’d worked on.

“This is just amazing!” he cried as the wind rushed past them and dolphins tried to keep up with Snarlgard. “This is something I’ll never forget as long as I live.”

Juliet patted Snarlgard’s neck. “Well, was this the adventure you’d expected?” she asked Chris.

“Better than anything I’d expected!”

The Merdog’s feet scraped the bottom and the half-moon beach of Coombe Appleby drew closer, oddly but thankfully deserted.

Snarlgard stopped. He didn’t dare risk stepping out of the sea and onto the land.

“This is as far as I go,” he said.

“Thank you, Snarlgard,” Juliet said, tears running down her face.

“No, you are the ones in need of thanks,” the great animal replied. “To aid a Merdog once was remarkable, to do it twice is extraordinary.” He turned to Chris. “That was such an excellent plan you devised.”

“Glad to help, Mr...Snarlgard, sir,” Chris smiled. “Can I pet you?” he said, reaching out a hand.

“Of course.” Snarlgard large tail thumped the ground in delight. He

was just like a regular dog when patted.

Juliet looked sad. "Now my amulet's gone...I feel like I've lost contact with the Merdogs."

Snarlgard turned and licked her face. "Brave girl, you'll never lose contact with us. Who needs an amulet anyway? We'll always be friends with you...you are Juliet Fairisle - Guardian of the Merdogs."

Suddenly the sound of barking made everyone look around. A familiar black Labrador was galloping down the beach towards them.

"Guinness!" Chris shouted, overjoyed that his pet was alive. "How did he get all the way out here?"

Snarlgard smiled. "I told him to come and wait for us here," he said. "I sent him a subtle message...he's smart, for a land-dwelling dog."

Guinness stopped running in circles round his owner and stood in front of his much bigger aquatic cousin. He regarded the Merdog silently as though he understood that he was in the presence of a creature that commanded great respect. Snarlgard nuzzled the Labrador affectionately. "Take care of my friends, Guinness," he said. "I must return to the sea now."

Juliet flung her arms around the huge dog's neck. "Take care. Give my regards to Fengrim, Growlfang and the others."

"I will. And you take care also. I predict a glorious future for you, my friend."

Juliet, Chris and Guinness stood and watched as Snarlgard bade them farewell. The Merdog swam out to sea, then with a final dive vanished beneath the waves. The earlier dark clouds had given way to a beautiful spring day. All was well with the world once more.

Juliet turned to Chris. "One problem's been sorted but I guess I'll be looking for a new flat now, guess I'll have to move back in with my parents for a bit."

"Well, you're welcome to stay in mine," Chris replied. "I don't know how much it was damaged, but if it's still standing and safe.."

"You mean it?"

"Well it's not the Ritz but me and Guinn don't mind and we'd love to have you join us. I cook a mean stir fry if you're interested."

Juliet smiled. They kissed for the first time but were interrupted by Guinness.

"Alright boy, we'll get you some food. You've had a long journey all the way from Portsmouth."

"Let's get to my parent's house. I could murder a cup of tea!"

Guinness bounded towards the steps that led back up to the coast road. Juliet and Chris followed, holding hands. Behind them, the sea was as calm as it had ever been; it was at peace with the shore. In the centre of Coombe Appleby, the ancient Merdog statue still stood

silently from atop its plinth. Then out at sea came a ripple, a contended howl carried on the wind, and then nothing more.

The End

Notes From the Author

The story of the Merdogs goes back as far as 1997-8 when I enjoyed childhood holidays in Bournemouth and Cornwall. During a trip to the Isle of Portland and the Scilly Isles, I became fascinated with the beautiful scenery, the legend of the "Roy Dog" and the nautical history of the place. It wasn't until 2003 that I finally got round to writing *The Merdog's Realm*, which took several weeks but was very rewarding. This was the first time I'd ever written a proper book. The real Merdogs of the world are of course the Newfoundland dogs and the wonderful harp seals that cluster on the beaches around Cornwall.

It is my ambition that one day *The Merdog's Realm* and its sequel will be enjoyed on television as a short live action or animated mini-series. Until then I urge you to visit the areas featured in this book; the village of Coombe Appleby is of course fictitious, but was closely based on the charming town of Bridport. The Royal Hotel in Weymouth where Juliet stayed, is also real and I had the pleasure of staying there once.

For more information on my books, please visit my website:

www.nicolajoannebolton.com

~Nicola

