

Chapter 1

In which Eddy falls out with his mother

Storm bruised clouds, heavy and foreboding, hung over the depressed suburb of Chorland Green. In the road, oil streaked puddles could be seen, every one a dead rainbow. Eddy Stone sat on a low wall opposite the multi storey car park, his trademark scowl on his face. Today was his fifteenth birthday, but there wasn't much to celebrate. In fact, Eddy's life had been woefully short of any glint of happiness for some time.

"They won't come," he muttered to himself, kicking the sides of the wall with his heels. "Like I care anyway. I don't care about a damn thing in this lousy place."

He clenched his hands into fists, wondering who he could vent his frustration on.

"That old fart who lives down the road there, long overdue for a well aimed brick through the window!"

Eddy had built up a reputation for himself in the local area, due to his favorite pastimes of vandalism, graffiti and general misbehavior. Annoying others was one of his few enjoyments in life, and he'd been in trouble with the police a few weeks ago. Next week it could be something more serious. Experimenting with drugs, then a criminal record, then probably jail.

The rain came, slow at first, and then gradually increasing in intensity. Eddy muttered a few choice expletives to himself. The weather had wrecked his afternoon plan of destruction to Mr Gartside's windows.

"Well the weather won't save you, Farty Garty! I'll be back, same goes for that annoying cow in the off license."

Eddy sloped off back to the place that he called home. The towering block of flats overlooking the car park. The place where he had spent his whole life. Familiar, but not welcoming. Years of under-investment had left the flats looking like they should have had the word 'condemned' written across them. Most of the inhabitants were elderly and unemployed people. People trapped by circumstance and on the outskirts of society. The place itself represented injustice and broken dreams. There were those who dared to dream of course, had high hopes and aspirations but were unsure how to turn them into reality.

Eddy lived with his mother in 45 Ambleside Court. Eddy preferred to call it 'Darkside Court', as that sounded so much better. The sun never seemed to shine here, the shrouds of gloom were never lifted.

Eddy's father had passed away two years ago. That was what

blighted his life and refused to go away. It was a raw wound that cut right through him. Eddy had never allowed himself to grieve properly for his father and this was the root of his problems. His dad had been the only one with time and understanding to listen to him. They had done everything together; weekends at football matches, day trips and stuff like that. Then he was taken away. A heart attack. He was 45.

“Aye, and you caused it,” his mother had scorned. “Nothing but trouble. You always have been and you always will be. You’ve never done anything decent in your life. You won’t get any qualifications, or even get a Saturday job in the chippy. No one will employ you.”

Eddy had never been close to his mother. She had never really loved him. Had it not been for his father, he would probably have been dumped on a doorstep as a baby. But at least he’d had the support of his father for thirteen precious years.

The air in Ambleside Court bore the smell of turpentine, cigarettes and damp. In corners of walls, dark mildew could be seen. The ground floor window ledges were full of dust, chewing gum and dead bluebottles. On the third floor, the sound of televisions, crying babies and raised voices echoed down the corridor. Eddy returned to the flat. Slumped in a chair and watching some daytime soap opera was his mother.

“About time you showed up, where’ve you been again?”

“Mind your own business.” Eddy replied.

“Your uncle’s sent you a message,” she continued. “Remember? Him down south?”

Eddy vaguely remembered visiting his uncle as a small child. It was a world away from this God forsaken place. He remembered his irritating cousin Pete, who was always smiling and laughing and so much better at everything else than him.

He opened the envelope and unfolded the long handwritten letter. The envelope bore a stamp which had a small illustration of a dog on it. Eddy didn’t pay it much attention. On closer inspection, the dog appeared to have the tail of a fish. Below the illustration were the words: ‘Coombe Appleby. Our cider is legendary, just like our Merdogs’. Eddy was astonished to find three banknotes in the envelope.

“Sixty quid?” he said aloud. “He wants me to go and stay with him!”

“He’s daft to send cash to you,” his mother replied. “All you’ll do is go out and spend it on booze and fags. Mind you, Stan always was a strange one. He’s going worse with age, it seems. Your father used to say he lived in a world of his own, talking about trees and dogs! He’s a nutcase!”

Eddy was incandescent with rage. “Yeah? Well he’s shown more of

an interest in me than you've ever done. I can't do a sodding thing to please you, can I? Well you've always wanted me out of the way, haven't you, Mum? Looks like your wish has been granted. First thing tomorrow, I'm packing my bags, catching the first train out of here and going to stay with him. To hell with you!"

Tears pricked his eyes as he stormed into the bedroom, slamming the door.

Outside, his mother continued to shout.

"About time you cleared off. You're about old enough to leave home! Fifteen, that's the age for runaways, isn't it? There's no child of mine in this home anymore!"

Those last words cut him really deep.

"It is time," he said, "to get away from here and away from her."

Eddy looked at the envelope again with its curious stamp.

"Our cider is legendary, just like our Merdogs. What the hell are Merdogs?"

Chapter 2

Which introduces an old man and a yew tree

Trees, fields and houses all raced past the window as the train hurtled along. Eddy passed the time by listening to the music on his iPod. Some hours later, he was woken from an uneasy sleep by a stranger's voice.

"Excuse me," the old bearded man in the trilby asked, "but is this seat taken?"

Eddy yawned and rolled his eyes. "Does it look taken to you?" he snapped.

"Ah, thought not," the man replied. "Such a relief to rest one's weary feet at last! Do you know I've been standing ever since I left Carlisle?"

"Dear me, that *is* a shame," Eddy muttered with more than a hint of sarcasm.

"Indeed," the man replied. "But not to worry, eh?"

Irritated by the man's inability to take offence, Eddy turned to the window and ignored him.

"Have you traveled very far?" the man continued. "Myself? Well I'm going to visit my elderly sister in Bournemouth. Dear, dear Marjorie. It's been simply ages. She doesn't travel well you know, due to in-growing toenails."

Eddy groaned and closed his eyes. He really wished the man would go away.

"All on your own? You're going to meet someone too, I shouldn't wonder. Probably a family member?"

Eddy said nothing and kept his eyes shut.

The man in the trilby was still intent on conversation. "In search of adventure, perhaps? In search of something out of reach to many?"

"Oh shut up you stupid old git!" Eddy yelled without opening his eyes. "Just leave me alone, will you?"

Eddy then opened his eyes. The old man was gone. How could he have disappeared so suddenly. "An old bloke like that couldn't have got up and walked all that way up to the next carriage in just a few seconds." Yet there was no sign of the old man, who moments ago had been chatting away so intently. Why would he get up soon after sitting down to a much wanted seat? Why? There was something odd about the whole thing.

Nobody else on the train was paying any attention to Eddy. The clattering noise of the refreshment trolley being wheeled down the aisle raised a few heads. Confused, Eddy decided to forget the brief encounter and catch up on some much needed sleep. Hopefully there

would be no more strangers disturbing him.

When he awoke much later, the landscape had changed considerably. Vast expanses of oilseed rape fields could be seen. The earlier rain sodden clouds had given way to a cheerful azure sky. The brightness of the afternoon sun met Eddy's eyes and he narrowed them against the glare. In the distance something was shimmering. Yes, it was the sea. On the horizon it sparkled, like multi-faceted crystals.

"Journey's end at last," Eddy said. "At last. I've had enough of this train."

The station at Bournemouth was bustling. A sea of people poured out of various trains; families, old people, students and tourists. Eddy virtually fought his way through the crowds as he headed for the ticket office. The thought of another train journey to Coombe Appleby displeased him. But he had come this far, and what was another thirty minutes?

The suitcase he was dragging seemed to be getting heavier with every step he took and it was a relief to get on a train that was virtually empty. Eddy took a look at his surroundings. This train wouldn't have looked out of place in an Enid Blyton novel, or maybe something older than that.

"I can't believe they still run trains like this," Eddy said to himself.. "It's a fossil!"

As the archaic train pulled out of the station, Eddy sat back in his seat. Things began to take a much gentler pace. Leaving the chaos of Bournemouth behind, the train passed through sleepy little Dorset villages, with their chocolate box image.

Thirty minutes later the old train ground to a halt at the tiniest and most quaint of stations. Eddy looked out of the window. The sign read clearly: 'Coombe Appleby'. And there was another illustration of a fish tailed dog.

"A Merdog?" Eddy wondered. "It must be the emblem of this place."

Not merely sleepy, but dead, was the general impression of Coombe Appleby. Hardly a soul was about. In one of the cottage gardens an old lady was planting marigolds, and in the lane a small child was ambling along.

Coombe Appleby was situated right on the seafront, and some of its houses were perched precariously close to the edge of the cliff. Yet even the sea appeared comatose. Hardly a wave. No breeze to be felt either.

The first thing that took Eddy's eye was the imposing yew tree on the cliff top. Eddy's opinion of trees was that they were put on the earth for only one thing -climbing!

“Just have to do it!” he yelled, racing over to the tree and dropping his heavy suitcase on the ground. Finally, something interesting, or so he thought.

He scrambled up the trunk of the gnarled old tree. Grabbing the higher branches, he pulled himself up and found a comfy little niche in the fork of the tree.

From within those withered branches came a low moan, rising to what sounded like a growl. Eddy stopped. The entire tree was trembling. Every branch and root started to creak and groan. Maybe it wasn't safe to climb such an old tree that was virtually on the cliff edge...

All at once the tree jerked suddenly and Eddy lost his footing. He was thrown to the ground and landed a few feet away. He was just about to dust himself off and climb it again, when a cheery voice distracted him.

“Eddy! Is that you? By the devil, it is! Didn't waste much time, did you? Knew you couldn't wait to come and see us! Hahh! It's been a while hasn't it, but we've been expecting you! Coombe Appleby welcomes you back!”

Uncle Stanley was standing right behind him.

Chapter 3

In which Eddy learns about Merdogs

"It's fantastic that you decided to come and visit us," Uncle Stanley bellowed. "Pete will be over the moon. Been ages lad, simply ages!"

"Yeah, well..." Eddy shrugged his shoulders. "Had to get away from my mum, didn't I? I couldn't take any more of her."

Uncle Stanley gave a sympathetic smile. "Aye, well your mum isn't the easiest of folk to get along with, is she? Never mind, it's a good excuse for coming down to see your Uncle Stanley, isn't it! We're going to have a great time! You'll find plenty of things to do in Coombe Appleby without them walkie talkies!"

"What?"

"Mobile phones," Uncle Stanley replied. "Everybody seems to have them these days."

Uncle Stanley and his wife Pat lived with their son in a whimsical little cottage named Windy Nook. Pete had been nicknamed Barnacle Bill of late, due to the fact that he often took part in harvesting shellfish. He seemed to delight in this somewhat corny nickname though.

The old oak door of the cottage opened stubbornly with a creak and a groan and the scent of home cooked cinnamon buns wafted from the interior.

"Mind your head lad!" Uncle Stanley yelled. "That ceiling's a low one, and you've grown a lot since you last came here. Aunt Pat's been baking; just smell those buns and cakes! You'll be no doubt hungered after such a long journey? It's a long way from Chorland Green! What were you doing up yonder tree on the cliff?"

"Oh, just taking a look around." Eddy muttered.

"Ha! Would take a brave soul to climb that yew!" Uncle Stanley exclaimed. "I swear it has a mind of its own! Pete had a go at it once and nearly broke his arm falling out of it. Can't trust that tree! Bet our Merdogs have put a spell on it or something!"

"Merdogs? What are they?" Eddy asked with a total look of confusion.

Uncle Stanley laughed, making his corpulent frame shake.

"Blimey, you haven't been introduced to our legendary Merdogs, have you? They are to Coombe Appleby what the Loch Ness Monster is to Scotland! I tell you, they live in the deepest fathoms of the sea! My ancestor Percival actually saw one during a storm...and so did the Romans!"

"Yeah, right!" Eddy replied, decidedly uninterested. Uncle Stanley continued, "After you've had some dinner, I'll get Pete to take you to

see the statue. I don't reckon you've ever seen it before. Can't recall taking you to see it when you were a nipper But now's the time for you to see what centurion Prestonius and Percival saw. A great sight it is. People come from all over to see our Canis Oceanus...that's what the Romans called Merdogs."

Eddy gratefully sat down at the kitchen table. His stomach cried out for food.

"My, my, it's my favorite nephew from far away! Come here and give your Auntie Pat a great big...hug!"

"No, I don't do hugs!" Eddy shouted.

"Well if you won't, then I will!" With arms the size of tree trunks, the flame haired woman grabbed her reluctant nephew in a tight bear hug that would make any wrestler proud.

"It's been simply ages!" she kept repeating, almost suffocating Eddy. "And when did you decide to dye your hair pink with green stripes?"

"When I decided to make a statement against authority," Eddy snapped.

Auntie Pat laughed as though this were the funniest thing she'd ever heard.

"Oh, you're a funny one, Ed! It suits you! We need a little color around here! I keep meaning to decorate this kitchen with some wonderful primrose yellow...so delightful!"

Eddy was grateful for some food at last. He'd not eaten anything since that horrid sandwich at the train station. Having lived on junk food most of his life, a three course meal was a pleasant change. And he had to admit that nothing bought in a supermarket could rival Auntie Pat's home cooking.

All of a sudden, the kitchen door flew open and Pete came rushing in.

"Thought it was you, Eddy! I haven't seen you for years! Yes, I knew it was you! It's great to see my only cousin again after such a long time. How long are you staying with us? I'm off work for a fortnight, isn't it brilliant? You couldn't have come at a better time. We're going to have such a great time, doing loads of fun stuff..."

"He can stay as long as he likes!" Uncle Stanley bellowed before Eddy could answer.

"Oh, and he needs introducing to the Merdogs! Pete, go and take him to see the statue!"

"Righto Dad," Pete said, adjusting his glasses. "We can go now if you've finished eating, Ed...um, what have you done to your hair?"

"What's wrong with my hair, for God's sake?" Eddy exclaimed. "I happen to like having green and pink hair. I can dye it any color I like, can't I? Are there laws in this village against green and pink hair?"

Pete just laughed as he compared his cousin's hair to his own ordinary blonde crew cut. "Don't stress, Cuz! It's just that we never see anyone with hair like yours round here. I like it though, it looks cool. Now, let's go and see the Great Merdog of Coombe Appleby!"

Everybody in the village was so laid back. It Eddy a while to get used to this. Nobody seemed to respond to his angry outbursts, and this frustrated him at first. And just what was so important about a boring old statue?

The village square was diminutive and fringed by stately oak trees and thatched cottages. In the middle was a huge stone plinth, and there was the statue, plain to see.

A huge dog resembling a Labrador, with the tail of a fish and a great ridge of scales down its back like a crest, stood atop the plinth, its mouth wide open as if it were howling. There was something about this statue that made it different from all the others. Eddy didn't know what it was, but there was just something...

"Look at it!" Pete shouted. "That's the great Merdog of Coombe Appleby! This statue was erected in AD 61, built by the Romans. It's so very old, but the plinth was added years later, replacing the old one. The statue's ancient, yet it's hardly been damaged by the passing of time. Anyway, Percival is said to have seen a Merdog standing on the cliff top, next to that yew tree, in 1666. That was the year of the great fire of London and the reign of Charles II. According to legend, the beast warned villagers that a terrible disaster would occur. A ship would run aground on the treacherous rocks of the Needles..."

"What are the needles?" Eddy interrupted.

"Oh, you know, those great chalk points off the Isle of Wight," Pete said. "Anyway, Percival went and told the other villagers what he had just heard, but as they all considered him to be the local nutcase, nobody took a blind bit of notice. Sure enough, a great merchant ship ran aground three days later with the loss of over a hundred men."

Eddy did not care for legends or history. "Yeah, but surely nobody believes he saw a big talking dog..."

"Percival wasn't the only one to see a Merdog, oh no. Thousands of years earlier, the Romans saw one...remember it was they who built the statue. In the remains of the Roman villa a few miles from here there's a mosaic floor with Merdogs on it. Canis Oceanus, the guardians of the sea."

"Eddy shrugged his shoulders. "Oh yeah, and what did the Merdogs do? Warn the Romans of invading Gauls?"

"Hmm, I bet it was more like barbarian tribes of the Icenii," Pete replied, obviously enjoying the subject. "The villa is part of the Roman fort of Aborcastrum...the name means 'tree camp' or something. I bet

it's because of all the oak trees that surround the area. Maybe there were more in Roman times. Fascinating language, Latin."

"So fascinating, it's dead!" Eddy muttered.

"Read the inscription on the plinth," Pete said. "Can you see? It's in Latin too."

Eddy stared at it. "Well I don't know any flaming Latin words! What does it say?"

"Magnus canis im oceanus, vigilantus et fortis. Which means, 'great dog in the ocean, watchful and strong'. And look, carved into the bottom of the plinth are pictures of Roman centurions. Isn't this just the best statue ever? The villagers are so proud of their Merdog. You'll never find it in a museum."

"That statue looks creepy to me, I mean the whole thing freaks me! Look at the eyes on that dog. They stare right at you!"

"Imagine seeing the real thing then!" Pete replied. "Hey! There's Juliet Fairisle. She's our local artist!"

Eddy looked round. A tall, slim girl about the same age as him with dark brown hair, was walking towards them. She was carrying a sketchpad under one arm.

"Hello Pete. Enjoying your time off? I've just been to the craft shop for some new paintbrushes. Who's your friend?"

"My cousin Eddy! He's come from way up north to visit me. We haven't seen each other for ages. I was just showing him our Merdog."

"Oh yes, I remember you mentioning him. Well, pleased to meet you," Juliet said, holding out her hand.

Putting on his best scowl, Eddy shrugged his shoulders. "Yeah, hi."

"Not the most talkative of people, your cousin?" Juliet said to Pete.

"Ah, he's alright really, aren't you Cuz!" Pete said, nudging him. "He's not got used to this place yet, but he soon will. A few days of sea air and he'll be a barrel of laughs!"

"I hope it'll be soon!" Juliet laughed. "Nobody wants to see a face like that; it'll frighten the horses!"

"True!" Pete replied. "But not the Merdogs, eh?"

"Oh nothing frightens them, not Roman soldiers or a sulky tourist."

"Tourist?" Eddy snapped.

With that, Juliet was on her way, humming to herself as she strolled up the lane.

"Can we get back now?" Eddy pleaded. "It's getting late and I'm sick of standing by this statue. Besides, I could be missing some great telly."

"If you wish," Pete said. "Dad will be checking the shipping forecast on our television, but there's a small black and white portable in the spare bedroom where you'll be sleeping."

“Black and white tv? Oh that’s...unreal!”

The Merdog statue was left alone once more. As the sun lowered towards the horizon, the cold stone was bathed in golden rays. And on the cliff, the ancient yew tree trembled with the advent of twilight.

Chapter 4

In which Eddy has nightmares

Alone in his room that night, Eddy had at last time to sit and think. This place was a million miles from the miserable existence he'd left behind. Maybe it would be okay to leave his attitude problem behind too? Eddy wasn't very good at being civil to people, mainly because being shouted at was all he knew. The cheerful, sunny personalities of his uncle and cousin were new to him. Despite his sulky exterior, he was delighted to be in the presence of those who liked him and wanted to listen.

All of a sudden, he remembered Juliet Fairisle, the girl he'd met earlier at the statue. He hadn't exactly introduced himself in the nicest of ways.

"I will make an effort to be more polite," he told himself, shocked at what he was saying. Only yesterday he had been planning to vandalize cars. Was the seaside charm of Coombe Appleby starting to work its magic and smooth out those rough edges? It seemed like it.

Darkness had folded in like bat wings. The black mantle of night was dotted with myriad stars. High up in that dark empyrean, a full moon shone radiantly.

The air was windless. Soundless. Eddy checked his watch. Half past nine. He opened the small window and glanced at the small window and the tendrils of fog hovering over the sea. It was thickening by the minute and moving inland. Soon, visibility would decline rapidly. Eddy was amazed at how quickly it developed. A single, forlorn streetlight highlighted the churning veils of fog in a spectral illumination.

From behind a twisted oak tree to the left of the streetlight, a swift shape cloaked by shadow and fog darted across the road and disappeared behind a small bush. So quick were its movements that it was barely visible for a fraction of a second, yet Eddy had noticed its movement. It was impossible for him to decipher what he had seen, except a black mass. Certainly it wasn't a person, unless they were crouching on all fours. Could it have been a dog? Possibly, but why would a dog be so secretive and dart from one place to another? Not the nature of the beast, surely. It could have been a fox.

Eddy's eyes remained on the bush. Nothing leapt out from behind it. Meanwhile, the fog increased in density. After another minute or so he decided that he had been snookered by moonlight and mist, two adept deceivers. There was nothing there. It had been a trick of the light.

He closed the window and drew the curtains, shutting out the

moon's pale glow.

Tiredness crept upon him unexpectedly and he gratefully climbed into bed. It would be a relief to enjoy a peaceful night's sleep for once without being constantly disturbed by loud music, rowing neighbors in the other flats and his mother banging on the door. He gave into the tiredness and was dragged down into an ocean of slumber. Outside, the fog continued its advance.

Hours later Eddy was a world away, caught in a dream, where he was running like he had never run before. He was in a field of knee high grass. Something was chasing him. Looking round, he could see only darkness. Void where there had once been a field. Then he could see two shining blades. Blades of knives? Spears? Whatever they were, they were getting closer, along with two pairs of burning red eyes. To whom did these eyes belong?

Eddy turned to run, tripped and banged his head. All at once he was in another dreamscape, this time in a deep forest. No blades or eyes this time, just unseen obstacles. A thousand traps to ensnare his feet and bring him crashing down. But he must not fall, for the fire was closing in. Acrid smoke stung his eyes and throat, blurring the way ahead. Coughing and choking, he struggled on. The heat from the blaze was intense. Flames crawled, lizard-like, up trees, engulfing them, consuming and destroying everything in their path. The edge of the forest lay ahead, running parallel with a steep bluff. Something was moving on the top of that bluff.

With a wildly beating heart and profusely watering eyes, Eddy caught sight of two black horses on that sheer cliff. It appeared to be watching him. Trying to get a better look, he stumbled and fell down into a terrible chasm.

The walls appeared to be bleeding. Red liquid oozed from the rocky clefts and trickled down towards him in many rivulets. Closing his eyes tightly, Eddy could hear a voice calling his name. It was Juliet Fairisle, but where was she? The blood ran free, rushing towards him like a nightmarish tidal wave.

"Fear not, young Eddy Stone, death shall not touch thee." a second voice called out, sounding so wise and calm that for a moment his fear subsided.

From above came a huge slab of rock, hurtling towards him. He opened his mouth to scream but the scream died of fright before it even left his throat. "Oh God, help me, No! No!"

Eddy awoke with a start, thrashing about wildly in bed. Drenched in sour sweat and trembling, he sat up, trying to get his breath. Just a nightmare, but what a night terror it had been. The room was shrouded in darkness. He could hear the faint crashing of the waves

in the distance. Eddy had never had a nightmare so chilling and vivid before. Was this a warning of things to come?

“It’s nothing really. Just the product of a wild imagination. It doesn’t mean anything.”

It had certainly shaken him though, for his heart was still beating against his ribs. He settled back down and closed his eyes. Barely a second later, a piercing howl rent the air, shattering the calm. Eddy held his breath. Then came a second howl, as though a demonic wolf stood out there, baying for blood. The cry ended with a low moan. And then a third call, shrill and nerve fraying. There was a note of terror in it, of distress. Silence. He waited. He could feel his pulse throbbing in his neck.

Just a few moments more. Nothing. Shaken by those fearful cries, Eddy drifted back into a dreamless sleep.

Out on those windswept cliffs, a hunched dark figure, fearful and motionless, watched the sea intently.

“It is just what we all feared. Cassandra has indeed returned.”

“Young Darkeye, why leave the safety of the sea? On land, you are vulnerable, visible to the Land Dwellers! You cannot use Hidden Power on the land.”

“I am afraid of what is to come, Leaf,” Darkeye replied. “You are only a young Merdog, like myself. I am afraid of what is to come.”

“I too am afraid,” the hunched figure of Leaf replied. “The hour when our great leader Melgrim will face his greatest challenge draws near. I must return to the sea and call upon the others.”

Leaf jumped effortlessly off the cliff and back into the crashing waves. Away from the seashore, the small bewildered Merpuppy Darkeye waited under a bush.

“It won’t be long. She will come. She will never rest until she’s destroyed our race and reclaimed the sea as her own, just as she tried to do before...before Neptune was...defeated. Without us to control the sea, nothing stands in Cassandra’s way. I am too afraid to return to the sea at this moment in time. I shall remain here until the one I have called for comes to me. For how long I do not know. But I simply cannot return.”

Chapter 5

In which we meet a Merdog

“Wake up Eddy! Wake up!”

Eddy mumbled something and pulled the bedcovers back over his head.

“Aren’t you going to get up? It’s nearly eight o’ clock!” Pete yelled.

“What? I never get up before lunchtime! What are you playing at?”

“In Coombe Appleby we are a community of early risers. There’s plenty to see and do, that’s why you need to get up now! You’ll be suitably refreshed after your night’s sleep, I trust?”

“Such as it was,” Eddy groaned. “I had a dreadful nightmare that woke me up. Then I heard these weird howls outside. Do people keep wolves round here?”

“I heard those cries too. It was strange, wasn’t it? I looked out of my window but couldn’t see anything. They seemed to be coming from the sea.”

“Perhaps it was one of your legendary Merdogs then!” Eddy joked.

After a hearty breakfast, Pete suggested a walk down to the caves would be an interesting way to spend a morning.

“Caves?” Eddy said. “What kind of stuff do you have here?”

“It’s really quite spectacular! There are rock pools on the beach at low tide, masses of shells, and hundreds of little caverns down by the cliffs.”

“Shells and stuff. That’s a kid’s idea of killing time. Sounds like a wasteland to me!”

“Wasteland? I think you mean wonderland! Oh come on Ed, enter into the spirit of things! Why on earth did you bother to come here and see us if you knew you’d hate it so much?” Pete continued.

“Well...just had to get away from my mother. Drove me up the wall.”

“Heh, well your mum isn’t here is she? So chill and smell that sea air!”

Auntie Pat was busy in the kitchen making yet more of her delightful cakes. She appeared to be in a world of her own as she hummed away to herself. Eddy came lumbering in and pinched one of the ginger biscuits that were cooling on the sideboard.

“Where’s Uncle Stan gone?”

“Ah, he’s off down on the boats, love,” she replied. “Today’s ideal for catching some fine marlin. He has to get there early before the Merdogs eat up all the best fish!”

“Not Merdogs again,” Eddy muttered. “The whole thing is seriously sad!”

Pete and his reluctant cousin headed down the lane to the beach. Long fingers of shade ran across the cobbled stones. A few souls were active here and there. Seagulls called noisily to each other and oak trees shuddered in the faint morning breeze. Eddy observed each house as he walked past. Small neat gardens filled to the brim with all manner of blooms; marigolds, geraniums, gladioli and so on. Not to mention the various water features, statues and sundials that populated each lawn.

“Down these steps and we’ll be on the beach,” Pete said. “Watch yourself. They can be a bit slippery with all this wet sand. And there’s no handrail.”

The narrow, twisting steps led down into a canopy of foliage. Eddy wondered where on earth he was being led. All at once the tree canopy disappeared and opened out onto the seashore.

The beach was full of completely white sand, which was like a half moon, curving round the rugged cliffs. The sand was nice to walk on. Any footprints made on it soon filled up again. It was dotted with various shells, scattered driftwood and seaweed.

“I found an old boot here last week,” Pete said. “Rust and salt leather. Could have come from anywhere. It’s amazing what gifts the sea leaves for us.”

Eddy hardly thought an old sea tossed boot counted as a gift. “Uh yeah, and what else did you find?”

“Being as I am, a qualified beachcomber, I was lucky enough to find a spar of timber last Monday. Could have made a chair, a coffin or a bed out of it. Two years ago there was a mariner’s skull washed up. Bleached white it was, sand spilling from it. Maybe he was a victim of the sea. Yesterday I found nothing at all, just came home with a bit of a chill. The sea was cold with mermaids and Merdogs.”

“About those strange cries last. Did you think any more about them?” Eddy said, curious to know.

“Nah, most probably one of Baker’s dogs. He has two Irish Wolfhounds up at his place, not far from old Greenacre Manor, long derelict. They do tend to be somewhat vocal creatures but they be the gentlest of animals. Come on Eddy, I’ll introduce you to the simpler pleasures of life...beachcombing. Let’s see what we can find. One person’s rubbish is another person’s treasure.”

Eddy was just about to examine a piece of driftwood, when he had the unmistakable feeling of being watched. He stood up and glanced around. Small waves broke onto the shore.

“Hello again!” a voice called. It was Juliet Fairisle.

“Hi Ju, you sprang up from nowhere!” Pete shouted. “Are you out doing some painting again? It’s quite early.”

“Just looking for inspiration, really. And a walk along the beach is usually the best place to find it. Oh hello Eddy. Are you settling in?”

“Yes. It’s like, okay round here. I can handle it.”

“Oh that’s good. You seemed a bit out of it yesterday. I guess that was the result of your long train journey.” She turned to Pete. “Are you looking for shells?”

“Sort of. I was just introducing my townie cousin to the delights of beachcombing. Why not join us?”

“An excellent idea. Three’s a crowd!”

The three of them continued walking along the beach, savoring the clarity of the air and peaceful surroundings.

“Just up here,” Pete said, “are these caves I was telling you about. You can just walk inside. I had some fantastic adventures in these caves when I was little. You know, pirates, treasure and all that great stuff!”

The mouth of the first cave was small but it opened up into a huge space inside. A large red shell gleamed dully in the light. Juliet picked it up and listened to it.

“Ah, the sound of the sea,” she remarked. “Every wave that dies upon the beach whispers a little song to a shell. It’s a labyrinth inside. I wouldn’t like to go in because I may never come out again.”

Eddy glanced at Juliet as if she were from another planet. Which, in a way, she was! Her personality was the complete opposite of his.

The cave’s interior was cool and damp, with a hollow, echoing sound that was magnified in the confined space.

“Hey, look at this,” Pete said. “Paw prints. Some dog or other animal has been in here. Definitely a dog, in my opinion. A big dog.”

“And that big dog is still in here,” a deep, booming voice answered him.

The three of them froze, wondering who was the owner of that malevolent voice.

They stared, terrified, into the black void in front of them, the heart of the cave, from where something was advancing towards them.

“For heaven’s sake, let’s get out of here, there could be a murderer lurking in there!”

Eddy yelled, turning to run, but he slipped on the wet ground and fell on his side. The silence from the others forced him to turn round and confront whatever had revealed itself.

Slowly he turned round. It had come into the light. All the blood drained from Eddy’s face. His eyes widened. Standing in front of them, not more than three meters away, was an enormous brown dog. Almost the size of a horse it was, but it was the eyes of the beast that held Eddy, Pete and Juliet in its thrall. They shone like twin globes of

polished emerald. The teenagers stood in silence for several seconds.

Pete gasped, almost choked. His voice was trembling with fear and emotion.

“It...you...are a Merdog, aren’t you? The...Guardians of the Sea?” his voice trailed off as the huge animal stepped closer.

“You are indeed correct.” Its voice was loud and majestic. “I am Snarlgard, one of the Guardians of the Sea.”

Chapter 6

In which we meet Melgrim, Leader of the Merdogs

They stood stupefied as the beast spoke to them. Nobody said a word, until at last, Eddy ventured a comment.

“Umm...okay, a giant dog. Like, this is ridiculous. A giant, talking dog. Now that’s even more ridiculous...I should go and wash my brain...this has messed with my head alarmingly!”

Snarlgard lowered his noble head. “You do wrong to mock us, Edward Stone,” he bellowed. “I see further than you do. Here ends myth.”

“How do you know my name? I can’t take this in!”

“Nor I,” whispered Juliet. “It’s incredible. The Merdogs of Coombe Appleby are legendary, but that’s all they’ve ever been, legends. This changes everything.”

“Yeah, but this dog could be an animatronic couldn’t it?” Eddy said. “There’s some geezer sat inside pressing the buttons who’s heard my name, and...”

At that point, Snarlgard opened his mouth. His eyes blazed with cold fire. The great beams of light from them lit up the whole of the cave from floor to ceiling like verdant lightning. Eddy, Pete and Juliet covered their eyes at once, for the awful brightness would have blinded them.

“I AM NO ILLUSION! I AM NO MYTH!”

Eddy Stone fell to his knees, terrified of the animal’s presence.

“O-okay...fine. I believe you. Just don’t hurt me!”

“It is a strict rule that Merdogs and land dwellers should never meet. But we have crossed paths now and where do we go from here? A great evil is coming...” Snarlgard’s voice trailed off.

“Please,” begged Juliet, her voice trailing with emotion. “What do you want from us? Have you come to warn us?”

Snarlgard stared at her with his blazing eyes.

“You need not fear me, for Merdogs do not seek to destroy, only to preserve. We are the Guardians of the Sea. A Merdog who appears on land does so only when a great danger is imminent. A great enemy threatens our race, our world and your world too. It is you three who shall now be put to the test. What lies ahead is a great battle in which Merdogs shall form an alliance with you, the chosen land dwellers, to aid us in our fight.”

“What? What must we do? Whom are we expected to fight? I’ve never fought with anyone in my whole life!” Juliet said. She could scarcely believe what was happening. Only this morning it had been

an ordinary day and she was as carefree as the wind in the trees. Now she was struggling to come to terms with the reality of Merdogs, and a great challenge!

“There can be only one who will answer your question,” Snarlgard continued. “Our wise leader, Melgrim.”

“He who must be obeyed!” another voice replied from deep within the cave.

“Young Darkeye, reveal yourself!” Snarlgard boomed. “Darkeye, he is a Merpuppy of Mercalla and Growlfang. Come forth and make yourself known.”

A small, hurried figure scuttled into the meager light and stood next to Snarlgard. About a quarter of his size and much less threatening, it was clear to see that here was a Merpuppy indeed.

“Greetings Edward Stone! I called for you last night. Only you didn’t come out of your abode. I was calling for your help!”

Eddy’s face paled as he remembered those haunting cries. “Y-yes, but I didn’t know it was a...Merdog! I’m here now!”

“Indeed,” Snarlgard announced. “You are here now.”

“The dream. It was so vivid,” Eddy mumbled. “I’m sure it means something now.”

“It was a warning,” Snarlgard said. “A warning of things to come.”

“You will join us in our fight, won’t you?” Darkeye asked, regarding Eddy with his bright, green eyes. Eddy looked at the others. Did they have much of a choice?”

“It is time to meet with our leader, Melgrim,” Snarlgard told the bewildered trio. “Come. Follow me.”

They walked out of the cave and onto the deserted beach. High, rolling clouds drifted westward on a calming breeze, while the skies turned a deep blue. Pete glanced around. There wasn’t a single person about to witness the extraordinary events.

They stared at the two creatures leading them down the shore. In the sunlight their unique appearance was plain to see. Snarlgard’s fur was mottled with dark green and brown patches, not unlike the markings on frogs and toads. His long fish tail ended in two large and powerful fins with ridges on each side. Darkeye, as his name suggested, had one eye a darker hue than the other.

The warm sun beat down on them, mingled with the plaintive cry of seabirds. Above the tide line, a small stone cairn had been built on the shore. Snarlgard placed a great web-footed paw on one of the stones.

“I’ve never noticed that there before.” Pete whispered.

Snarlgard tilted back his massive head. “Melgrim, oh Great Leader. I call you now.” And he howled an earth shattering cry that rent the air. It bounced off the cliffs and echoed down the empty beach. Then

came a roaring noise.

Sighing restlessly, the boundless sea broke large rollers into white cream which hissed hungrily up to the tide line. A sea breeze, with no clouds to chase round the cerulean vault of the skies, spun dry sand into dancing spirals.

The churning mass of sea foam gradually became more agitated. Everyone waited in silence. What followed took Eddy, Pete and Juliet's breath away.

"A hole in the sea, look!"

Less than half a mile from the shore was a gigantic whirlpool, spinning round like a tornado with a massive hole at its heart. The roaring increased until it reached a crescendo and filled the air. They watched it impassively.

From the depths of the whirlpool rose a great black shape, surging towards the shore at a terrific speed. Almost as quickly as it had appeared, the maelstrom vanished, leaving the sea calm once more.

The black shape rose out of the water and raised its noble head.

The sight of it made Juliet feel faint. It was beyond her wild imagination.

"All hail Melgrim! Great Leader of the Merdogs!" Snarlgard's voice boomed. He raised a paw, as if to salute him.

Eddy, Pete and Juliet stood in awe of the indescribable beast standing before them. He was huge, as large as a Shire horse and as far away from any pet dog they had ever known. His fur was jet black. A great length of green ridges ran along his back and his enormous green tail shone vividly in the sunlight, as though it were speckled with hundreds of tiny crystals. So radiant were his eyes, it was as though he could see right into your soul and read your deepest thoughts. His voice was firm yet calm.

"Why have you summoned me to the surface, Snarlgard? To meet with those we should never cross paths with?"

"Oh Master," Snarlgard replied. "These are the ones we have been waiting for. They came to me. I did not seek them out. Young Darkeye knew that Edward Stone would be..."

"Fool mortal humans?" Melgrim wondered. "Hmm, I do not doubt their ability to use the Hidden Power though. They may have all the power they need, if they care to look for it. Yes, maybe they can aid us in the battle against Cassandra...Arch Nemesis of Regneva. Let us hear the mortals speak for themselves!"

"But of course, leader." Snarlgard replied.

"Edward, Pete and Juliet. You are the three land dwellers I shall place my trust in. On you our lives may depend. In particular, it is Edward Stone who bears the burden of this challenge." Melgrim stood

silent. Everyone stared at Eddy.

"Your arrival in Coombe Appleby was timely. Time is a precious commodity."

"What is this terrible battle, and who is Cassandra?" Juliet asked.

Morgrim sat down and began to tell the story...

"Long ago, when the world as you know it was far younger, the great King Neptune ruled the oceans. Now you land dwellers know about him rather well, but I bet you didn't know that he was a dog-lover. Neptune kept many loyal pet dogs -those dogs were us -his Merdogs. We faithfully kept watch over his oceans while he kept their raging powers under control. It was our duty to rescue drowning land dwellers we happened to chance upon too. Technically we were forbidden to ever set foot on land and make friends with them, but saving their lives was acceptable. Life was very pleasant for us all. Now, some gods and goddesses are good and some are evil. Cassandra was one such goddess who wanted more power than what she had been given. No-one knows exactly where she came from, but she used her powers for evil and became a powerful sorceress. She wanted more power, and upon seeing the awesome power of the sea she tried to persuade Neptune to hand control of the seas over to her. Naturally he refused so Cassandra, with the help of two unicorns she'd converted to evil sidekicks, challenged Neptune to a fight. He came off worse, alas. It is said that you cannot kill a god, but Cassandra did. Before he was gone forever, Neptune made a plea to us Merdogs, and handed control of the seas to us. We were now the Guardians of the Sea. Added to that, he bestowed us with the ability to talk and to understand any language a land dweller might speak.

The battle with Neptune left Cassandra weakened, so much so that when she tried to battle us, she was doomed to fail. Fengrim, our leader, and oldest Merdog, defeated her and cast her far away into oblivion, but she succeeded in transforming him into a tree so that he could never return to the sea. Melgrim took over as leader and life returned to normal, but life without Neptune was very different. We had a very important job to do now and we swore that we would never break the promise to our beloved master. Before he went, Neptune created a little world beneath the waves for us -a land called Regneva, identical to the land that you live on. It was created so that we could enjoy the beauty of your world without having to set foot upon it, if that makes sense? For you see, Merdogs lose their immortality once they set foot on human shores.

"And now Cassandra has returned?" Juliet said.

"Yes. This time she will try to destroy us and reclaim the sea as her

own. She will then be able to destroy our world and yours. That is why we need your help."

Chapter 7

In which a frightening encounter at Greenacre Manor occurs.

For a few moments everyone stood in silence. Gentle zephyrs ruffled Melgrim's glossy fur, which oddly, wasn't wet even though he'd just stepped out of the sea.

"Now we must part, my friends, for the time being," Melgrim announced. "Remember, you mustn't breathe a word of this to another mortal soul. Do you understand?" His green eyes were as radiant as glowing embers.

The three of them nodded, though things could hardly carry on as normal. What a tremendous secret they had to bear.

"I sense your fear," Melgrim continued, staring into Juliet's frightened eyes. "Do not be afraid. We are with you. In you we trust, if you'll trust in us."

"We believe you!" they gasped.

Then he placed his massive paw on the stone cairn once more. With a deafening crack, the stones all crumbled. In a hollow where they had stood were three amulets. Each one was on a long golden chain, glinting in the sunlight.

"One amulet for each of you," Melgrim said. "Take them, they are sure protection against harm. They come from our realm, Regneva. Keep them close to your hearts. The power they contain shall come to you when danger looms."

Eddy, Pete and Juliet bent down to pick up their amulets. "Look! They have our names engraved on them! How?"

The amulets were indeed unusual and intricate. Each bore an engraved Merdog on a gold disc, surrounded by small pearls, moonstones and tourmalines. The overall design had a Celtic feel to it.

"Hey," Eddy shouted. "What was it you said about their special powers?" He turned round to face Melgrim but he had vanished. Snarlgard and Darkeye had also gone.

There was nothing but a set of paw prints in the sand leading back into the sea.

"How did they disappear so quickly?" Eddy said. "It was as if they just..."

"Back to their realm," Juliet whispered. "Where they will be safe... for the time being, until their great enemy comes."

"I don't want that time to come!" Eddy yelled. "I can't deal with this, it's too much to take in!"

Juliet and Pete stood beside him. "But we're in this together right?"

What happened today is something that affects us and only us.” Juliet said.

“Heh, mainly because the rest of the village would think we’d gone completely potty if they heard us talking about an encounter with Merdogs! Just like old Percival and the Romans all those years ago!” Pete interrupted.

“They were all right, weren’t they? They must have seen Melgrim or Snarlgard all those centuries ago!”

Eddy looked surprised. “You seriously think the dogs are that...old? I thought the average age of a dog was thirteen years. I had a dog once, and that died when it was only six. Had kidney trouble you see. My dad had to take it to the vet and have it put down. I hated him for doing that. God, I loved that dog. One of my best friends...”

“Will you forget about pet dogs, Eddy! The Merdogs are nothing like the dog you had as a child. Legend tells us that they are immortal as long as they stay in the sea. But as soon as they set foot on land, they become mortal, and they can be trapped, hunted and killed. So Snarlgard, Melgrim and Darkeye took a great risk to find us.

Whatever great evil is threatening them, it is serious to make them leave the sea, and we must take it seriously,” Juliet said. “Los Famosos Aguaperros!”

“Pardon?” said Pete.

“The Famous Waterdogs, in Spanish. That’s what my mother Isabella calls the Merdogs. I wonder if they dwell in the Mediterranean sea too, near Malaga.”

Eddy was confused. “Your mum lives in Spain?”

“Well, not anymore. She’s Spanish, and one day, while she was out on the beach painting, she met an English fisherman named Jim Fairisle. They fell in love, got married and moved here to Coombe Appleby. Then I was born not long after. We do make regular trips to Malaga to see my grandparents,” Juliet continued. “But my mother says that the Spain she knew and loved as a child is very different now. It’s gone all commercialized and busy, she hates that. Too much noise and too little culture.”

“You can get cheap beer in Spain,” Eddy piped up. “Of course, I suppose it depends on the exchange rate. It’s all Euros now, isn’t it?”

Juliet rolled her eyes and said nothing. Glancing towards the sea, the lonely figure of Merrow Island in the distance was shrouded in a layer of mist.

“Come on, let’s take a stroll up the coast path. Up past old Greenacre Manor,” Pete suggested helpfully. “We can take a better look at these amulets and think up some kind of plan.”

“Think of a plan? Oh yeah, we’re just going to fight a monster of the

universe and save an entire race of sea dwelling, talking dogs. Yep, I can handle that. All in a day's work!" Eddy said, in a sarcastic tone of voice.

The path up to Greenacre Manor was a steep one. To the unfit walker it was a torturous route, and dangerous in places due to the loose rocks on the cliff.

On the summit stood the ancient manor, abandoned for nearly twenty years. But no longer empty, for inside its walls a servant of evil was lurking. Cassandra had returned. In the darkness she was waiting, with her two Black Unicorns, Nox and Erebus. Waiting. Waiting for a chance to put her great plan into action. Tall, and draped in a long red robe, she stood motionless, a statue. Her face was eggshell white and her long hair was as black as the two unicorns stood beside her.

"Soon, my precious ones," she told them, "soon I shall capture and control a Merdog. Nothing can prevent it. And when I have one, others will follow." She gave a cruel laugh; a laugh that was shrill enough to shatter fine crystal.

"How long must we wait, oh Great One?" Erebus enquired.

"Until our powers are completed. In this darkness, I feel them returning. Being held in the Green Whirlpool suppressed and weakened them. But never fear, it won't be long now." And she gave a second laugh.

"Sorceress! I sense the presence of mortals!" Nox interrupted her in his rasping, ugly voice. "Neither one, or two but three! What do you wish us to do?"

A frown spread across Cassandra's face. "Why, they are in league with the Merdogs! Three mortals! Three small and insignificant mortals! Melgrim's greatest folly! These three shall be his downfall! He has actually placed his trust in land dwellers! Hah! I should laugh myself stupid, it's too easy!" Then she composed herself and turned to the unicorns.

"It is really quite simple. You shall lure those blundering souls right here. There we shall give them a few surprises. But they shall not escape. And sensing their peril, a Merdog is certain to come to their aid. And then I shall capture that dog."

"Oh Sorceress, what then shall we do with the mortals?" Nox asked, his crimson eyes blazing like the gates of Hades.

"After I have captured the Merdog, their fate is of no concern to me. Kill them, destroy them, turn them to stone, or better still, turn them into trees. They can stand alongside Fengrim! We need more trees around here!"

The two unicorns darted off, quick and fluid, racing towards the

outside.

“Change now,” Erebus instructed. “The perfect disguise. The perfect trap.”

All at once the two beasts began to change. Bones, muscles and tendons all reshaped and reformed under their skin, moving around in a grotesque display of shape shifting. The metamorphosis was rapid and disturbing, but instead of two unicorns, two old, withered men stood on the doorstep of Greenacre Manor.

“It is done,” Nox said, his movements stiff and jerky like a puppet. “Look! They approach...make haste!”

The two old men hobbled over to the path where Eddy and the other two were walking.

“Stop, stop! Help us! Help please, youngsters!” they cried out, waving wrinkled, arthritic hands.

“What’s up with these two old codgers?” Eddy remarked. “Looks like they’ve escaped from a local geriatric home.”

Juliet elbowed him. “You’re so offensive, Eddy! Can’t you see they need help?”

“I was never too keen on coffin dodgers,” Eddy continued. “I mean they do tend to cough a lot, don’t they? And the ramble on...”

“For heaven’s sake Ed, shut up!” Pete snapped, glaring at him. “We can do without your smart remarks. Show a bit of respect.”

They walked up to the two elderly men. “Tell us what’s wrong,” Juliet asked them. “Is someone hurt?”

“Oh yes, yes. My brother and I, we were just taking a stroll round here and we heard somebody screaming for help. Inside that old house, some kids were playing and they got into trouble because... well, part of the ceiling collapsed. They’re trapped, they are!”

“How dreadful!” Juliet exclaimed. “Poor kids, we must get help, let’s go and see if we can do something.”

“I could ring 999 on my mobile,” Eddy shouted. Then he remembered he’d left it at home. “Oh damn,” he muttered. “Anyone else got a phone?”

“We haven’t got mobiles,” Pete said. “Nobody ever uses them round here. They wouldn’t work.”

“Why’s that?” Eddy replied. “No masts nearby?”

“Oh plenty. But for some reason, they just can’t seem to get them to work. It’s the same with Internet access. The village hall tried to set up a website about Coombe Appleby? Could they get an Internet connection -no way. Nothing works. No wireless hotspots either. It’s as if something were trying to prevent modern communications from reaching our village...”

“Guess we’ll just have to venture in ourselves then,” Juliet said.

“Come on, hurry!”

Eddy reluctantly followed. “Those two old geezers give me the creeps. They couldn’t look us in the eye. There’s something odd going on! And this old house doesn’t look safe at all. Suppose we go in and the whole house collapses. Then we all die. That wouldn’t be very good, would it?”

“Shut up!”

They crept up to the door. It was a huge, ancient construction with a cast iron lion’s head door knocker. And it was ajar. The three of them crept inside. It was pitch black and a strong musty odor prevailed.

“Ugh, it stinks in there,” Eddy said, gasping for air. “There could be anything inside there, dead animals, human corpses and stuff.”

“Hello? Anybody in here?” Pete yelled. There was silence. He pushed the door wide open. It made a groaning creak on its rusted hinges. Several chunks of wood broke off, along with large cobwebs which stretched across the doorframe.

“Is anyone in here?” Eddy yelled. “Shout if you can hear us...oh yuck!”

“What’s wrong?” Pete asked. He looked down and saw that Eddy had trodden in the rotting muck of a dead crow.

“Ugh. How did that get in there?”

Eddy grimaced as he lifted his foot off the revolting carcass. “I don’t want to know!”

They ventured further into the manor. Floorboards creaked underfoot and the furtive sound of mice could be heard.

Suddenly the ancient door slammed shut behind them! The three of them now stood in total darkness. A hideous bout of laughter echoed off the walls.

“Oh God, what’s happening?” Juliet whispered as she turned to try and open the door but it wouldn’t obey. Moments ago it had been an old, warped door. It could have been kicked down with a little effort. Now it was firmly shut, like the rigid steel door of a vault. They were trapped!

“What the hell is this?” Eddy yelled, getting very annoyed. “Someone’s playing a trick on us. Those stupid old gits! Why on earth did we have to listen to them? If I see them again I’m going to...”

“Smash our faces in? I don’t think so, you foolish boy!”

Eddy froze as the two hunched figures appeared in front of him. The old men laughed and gave toothless grins. Old gits are we? Is that what you think of us? Is that what you see?”

Eddy couldn’t speak a word. He was paralyzed with fear. Pete and Juliet stood behind him, their faces contorted with shock. The old men stared at the three of them with empty eye sockets. Their faces

seemed to be bulging into a shapeless mass.

“W-what are you?” Eddy gasped.

“Want to know who we are? Your questions are tiresome!”

They watched in horror as the two old men began to transform. Bones snapped, muscles expanded and a wet crunching sound was heard as their bodies changed from human to animal. Their necks widened; veins and sinews straining wildly. Fingers and hands shrank away into cloven hooves. In a matter of seconds, Eddy, Pete and Juliet were staring at two Black Unicorns. Their horns glinted with shards of silver. Fire danced in their mad eyes. Their nostrils flared wildly.

“Oh God, no,” Eddy gasped, barely able to speak. The dream. It was true. “You were the ones chasing me!” Tears welled up in his eyes. He had never been so terrified in all his life. Everything unfolded in slow motion as Erebus reared up on his hind legs, ready to strike. Eddy closed his eyes and collapsed in a heap. This was surely the end. Pete and Juliet fell to their knees. The shining horn drew closer...

Chapter 8

In which Cassandra appears

When Eddy awoke his head was throbbing. It was like a million cold spiders inside his skull, scurrying and manifesting. Everything was a blur. Groaning, he glanced around. He was lying on his back in total darkness. The stench of decaying matter was like the breath from a tomb. His whole body was tightly bound with thick ropes.

With a throat as dry as bleached bones, he called out weakly. "Pete? Juliet? Where are you? Are you alright?"

"Here, Ed. We're right here." came their muffled replies.

"My head's banging," Eddy gasped. "Where do you think we are? A cave or something?"

"No, I think we're still in Greenacre Manor," said Juliet. "Down in a cellar or something. Those unicorns obviously made us unconscious. We could have been down here for ages!"

"Who knows," Eddy muttered. "They seem to be capable of anything. I bet they've cursed this place. How did everything get so bad? I never meant for this to happen! Heck, I never believed in Merdogs! I thought it was all a legend. First I find out that they exist, then we end up being held prisoner by...unicorns?"

"Or maybe they weren't unicorns," Pete replied. "They're shape shifters. Do you think they could be evil demons or something? Unicorns are supposed to be creatures of purity and innocence..."

"And also imaginary creatures! But not anymore!" added Eddy. "They're here! Black Unicorns! They must be the great evil that Melgrim was talking about. Wasn't there a sorceress called Cassandra?" Suddenly a loud rumbling sound silenced him. "Ssh, what was that?"

"I don't know, but we've got to find a way out of here," Juliet said. "Oh but it's hopeless, we're all tied up." Her eyes filled with tears. "I can't handle this! I don't like it one little bit!" She wept with the knowledge that she may never see the safety of home again. Or maybe there was nowhere safe anymore. "Why have we been drawn into this terrible nightmare?"

Pete did his best to console her. They were all bewildered, hungry and tired. Of the three, Eddy remained stone-faced, concealing his fear.

The Black Unicorns! He could not get those fearful images out of his mind. Those great shining eyes, red and ominous. Their stomach churning metamorphosis from human to beast had unnerved him.

Eddy had seen many a grave sight in his life. The effects of drug

addiction. Hollow eyed addicts with gaunt, ashen faces trudging around the estates of Chorland Green. They sought out their next fix like ravenous wolves. Children old before their time, the result of caring for many siblings and sick parents. But this was something else completely. Had it been some low budget horror movie it would all have been a laugh. Except it was real. It was very real, and terrifying.

Juliet had composed herself, for nothing is ever achieved by sitting around and lamenting. "We need to get out of here," she said at last. Pete and Eddy stared at her. "These ropes are so tight. And they've probably got some kind of magic on them, preventing us from ever being free."

"Not these then!" Juliet smiled, pulling her arm free. "Look!"

That made Eddy think. "They assume we're no longer a thorn in their sides."

"What do you mean?"

"Well...if the unicorns, or whatever they were, considered us to be a great threat, wouldn't they have killed us or ensured that we couldn't interfere again? We're still alive. We're uninjured. There don't seem to be any weird spells on us. And remember what Melgrim said? We have all the power we need if we care to use it. Perhaps the power comes to us when we really need it. These amulets he gave us -they keep us safe from harm! So what's our problem?"

"Fighting talk, Ed," Juliet said in admiration. "We're with you. Friends, right?" She held out her hand.

Eddy laughed, for the first time. "Well I would shake hands but I'm still tied up. Perhaps you could lend a hand?"

"No problem at all!" She set to work on the offending ropes. In no time Eddy and Pete were free.

"Just standard knots," Juliet remarked. "Not very strong."

"Thank heaven for that," Pete said, rummaging in his pocket. "Ah, here it is! I knew this mini torch would come in handy!"

He switched it on. This frightened the darkness and it fluttered giddily around him as he waved his torch.

"Well, isn't life exciting!" he thought. "Everything can change all of a sudden and for no reason at all! How comforting a light can be!"

The small intense beam cut through the blanket of shadows, highlighting the cobwebs that clung to the cellar walls.

"The door's over there," Pete said. "Be quiet now. I'll go and try it."

Breathlessly he walked over to the door, holding the torch tightly. With his hand on the cold iron handle, he turned it. Wonder of wonders, the door opened, creaking as one might expect from something so old. Ahead lay a staircase winding upwards, gray and fragile like the skeleton of some prehistoric animal. It was lost in

darkness at the top.

With every movement that Pete made, the shadows danced on the walls around him. It was much too beautiful to think of being frightened.

“Well, I don’t trust these rickety stairs!” he exclaimed. “Anybody want to go first?” Juliet volunteered. “Rickety stairs are the least of our worries. Steady as we go!”

Every step made the stairs groan underfoot. After what seemed like an eternity, they reached the top. Another door came into view. And it was unlocked. They opened it together and the brightness of daylight dazzled them for a few seconds.

In front of them lay age-old rocks with steep, sharp sides, and they stumbled past them. They were gray and full of crevices. The path leading away from their dark prison was as small and insecure as they were. Groping their way forward together, Eddy nearly tripped several times, until at last they rejoined the coast path.

Slowly, they turned their gaze to the manor. Bleak and foreboding it stood, unwelcoming and harboring residents of evil. Right at the top, a cloud of frightened swallows flew dizzily backwards and forwards. On no account would they stop and perch on that roof.

“I feel a little faint.” said Juliet weakly.

“We’re out of that hell hole at least,” Eddy replied. “But for God’s sake let’s get out of here and back to the village.”

“Just give me a minute to sit down.” Juliet went and sat on a rock a little way away, facing the sea.

It was warmer now, and a southwest wind was blowing gently across the bay. Juliet stared at the ground. At her feet lay the skeleton of a long dead bird, tiny, frail and white. She laid it on the rock and it was immediately blown off by the wind.

Eddy came up behind her. “Are you alright?” he ventured.

“I guess so. Let’s go and get some food. I feel uneasy staying here.”

It was a relief to get moving again, away from doom laden Greenacre Manor. The horrendous encounter had left the three of them feeling on edge. Yet the derelict building was no longer the abode of Cassandra and her unicorns. Having disposed of the interfering mortals, they had transferred themselves to a second place. A place where they would not be disturbed, and that place was small, uninhabited Merrow* Island.

It was there that Cassandra held up the greatest thing she had ever made in her whole evil existence.

“Here,” she said. “Here it is!”

“Is it complete, Sorceress?” Nox and Erebus answered.

“Indeed, my dark servants. It is complete. The Iron Collar is here. Cursed be this collar! Fire, brimstone and a thousand shards of pain! Arrogance! Oppression! Its strength is unrivaled.”

She held up the massive iron collar. It was a heavy, ugly contraption, two feet in diameter. Long cruel spikes projected from it, along with black crystals. Even crystals, treasures of the earth, could be transformed into stones of evil with one touch of Cassandra’s hand.

At first glance the collar resembled a medieval instrument of torture. But there was no doubt as to what animal it was going to be worn by.

“The Iron Collar!” Cassandra repeated. “It is with this that I shall finally capture a Merdog! Once encased around the neck of the beast, it can never be removed. The Merdog shall be under my control.”

Marrow -a mermaid believed by Irish fishermen to forecast a coming storm.

She was in her element, reveling at the thought of the power she could wield over her unfortunate victim.

The ground was hard and hot. A sea of red heather covered the slopes, and below the rocks it was warm and peaceful.

Something made Juliet turn and look across to Merrow Island. Today, more than ever, it seemed so terribly, terribly alone.

“It isn’t an island that would be easy to get to know,” she thought. “It wants to be left in peace. A perfect place for someone to seek solace.”

Chapter 9

In which Snarlgard is captured

Far out on the eastern side of the island stood a little house made of stone and cement. It was fixed firmly to the rock with lots of iron clamps. Its back was round like a seal's and it looked straight out to sea through a tiny, substantial windowpane. The house was so small that you could just about stand up without banging your head on the ceiling. A fisherman had built it for himself over two hundred years ago.

Eddy sat on a bench in the village square in the shadow of the Merdog statue. He put his hands on his head and gazed at a cloud moving slowly across the sky.

Nobody wanted to talk about the morning's events. Eddy tried to block the images of the Black Unicorns out of his mind but the images continued to haunt him.

"The island," he said to Juliet. "I saw you looking at it."

"Merrow Island. I usually only watch it when it's stormy," she replied vaguely.

Pete nodded seriously. It was just the right thing to do if one liked big waves; gazing out to sea, watching breakers as high as mountains coming and going.

"There was something," she continued. It worried her and made her feel uncomfortable.

"What do you mean?"

Something wrong. Bad. Very bad indeed. Can't you feel it too?"

Eddy had tried to ignore the uneasy feeling that had been gnawing away at him ever since they had escaped from the manor.

"Yes. I sense that something is going to happen. Listen you two, when we awoke and found ourselves in that cellar we were alone in the manor. The unicorns had gone. Vanished. I sensed it when we were down there. But they're still around."

"And I have a hunch that those sinister beasts have taken refuge on Merrow Island," Juliet said. "It's uninhabited. Nobody ever sails out there, for there are so many submerged rocks surrounding the island that it's easy to run aground."

"How far is it from the shore?" Eddy asked.

"Exactly one mile. Just far enough to be isolated but not completely cut off from civilization"

"So what do we do now?"

Pete interrupted them. "I don't know about you two, but I think a

good lunch is called for. We carry on exactly as normal. Remember, don't mention a word of this to anyone. Just be yourselves!"

"Like anyone would believe us?" Eddy said. "I have a feeling that things will happen when we least expect them. As my dad once said, always expect the unexpected."

"True. But for the time being, we just go about our daily lives, right?"

They all agreed. They had encountered something unthinkable and frightful and that was only the tip of the iceberg. But they had escaped from the first trap. The important thing at the moment was to eat. And with that, the matter was settled.

At the edge of the cliff path there was nothing but the great, empty sea. The water heaved against the rocks and sank back clumsily.

Snarlgard lay in deep slumber, hidden in the shadows. How many fathoms down, he could not be sure.

He had slept contentedly all day since his encounter with the land dwellers. And he would have continued to do so had it not been for the sixth sense that roused him from his sleep.

Slowly he stirred to begin his ascent to the surface. Why he was being drawn to the upper world, he could not tell. Upwards he swam, his great paws fighting against the water and his tail pushing him further. He was wide awake now. More wide awake than he had ever been before.

A hundred tiny sprats swam round him, their high pitched, almost inaudible voices shouting to him: "Please don't go! Not safe! Not safe! Merdog not leave safety of water! Danger lurks among bricks and mortar!"

The fish swam right in front of him. Snarlgard could have eaten all of them in a single gulp. But fish were his friends, as were all the creatures that dwelt in the sea; the mermaids and mermen, whose songs and stories he would listen to for ages. Merdogs eat very rarely, for they have more time than anyone else in the world. In the sea they are immortal.

"Merdog not go from safety of water! Danger lurks among bricks and mortar!" the fish repeated in falsetto squeaks.

"Now, now," Snarlgard said comfortingly. "I shall return."

His noble head appeared above the surface of the sea. The faint sound of waves breaking on the shore could be heard. In the distance stood Merrow Island.

"Why do you call me?" Snarlgard wondered. "What ails you?"

Far away, a bird called; the island seemed completely at rest.

Snarlgard became intensely fascinated. He was sure that whatever it was concerned him and none of the others. He must go to the island

and see for himself.

Something was calling him and he wasn't afraid.

"I'm coming!" he shouted, and with great swiftness he headed towards the island with all speed.

The black exterior of the Iron Collar glinted in the sunlight, but the crystals glowed with something altogether more sinister.

"He comes now," Cassandra's voice echoed like a deathly wind.

"Sorceress! How shall we snare the beast?" Erebus asked.

"Patience, my precious one. Wait and see. The collar shall do its work. Wait and see. The Merdog approaches!"

Snarlgard reached the shore of the island. Gleaming chalk pinnacles towered above him. Cautiously he placed one paw on the narrow shingle beach. Venturing onto land was always a risk. Even with only one foot on land, he felt instantly weakened. He wanted to return to the depths of the sea, to return to immortality. But he couldn't.

Slowly he steeped out of the water and onto the beach. Sniffing the air, his nostrils dilated. He looked up at the sky. High up in the clouds, a lone seagull flew round and round. He sensed the presence of something, higher up on the beach. What was it? A hundred scents met his nose; all of them alien to him.

"Here I am! Come to me, whatever you are! Why do you hide?"

"I hide no longer," the dark voice uttered, and Snarlgard froze in mortal fear. From behind a withered furze bush, something black and swift lunged at him, fastening itself to his neck. Snarlgard had no time to fight back; the thing had clamped itself tightly round his neck in a vicelike grip. Rearing wildly, he attempted to shake it off but it wouldn't, of course, yield.

"What is this hateful device? Release me at once!"

"The collar that holds you can never be released!" Cassandra replied, walking out to face her victim. With a voice that could turn blood to ice water, she stared into the Merdog's eyes.

"The Iron Collar has done its work. I have captured myself a Merdog! Revenge! Sweet and wonderful revenge. It is useless to resist now, you are under my control!"

"Cassandra! Sorceress of evil!" Snarlgard exclaimed. "So you have returned. And I thought it impossible. I tried to deny it, but I always had a feeling you'd return one day. But you can threaten all you like. Regneva shall never fall to you, and we shall never surrender!"

Cassandra laughed in his face. "You are an ignorant race. Did you honestly think you could defeat me? Your precious Fengrim succeeded in trapping me in the Green Whirlpool for centuries, but I was not destroyed! I was simply held in suspension, waiting for the

chance to break free and return to finish what I had started. And what of Fengrim? Look where he stands! On top of a cliff! He is nothing more than a withered old yew tree!”

Snarlgard bared his teeth. “You underestimate the power of Merdogs, Cassandra.”

“Oh no. It is you who has underestimated me. Look at you now. The Great Guardian of the Sea. Your own curiosity was your downfall!”

Nox and Erebus appeared, their eyes shining and their black forms darker than ever in the brightness of the sun.

“So this is our great enemy? Is this who we have been waiting for?”

“One of many, my precious unicorns. With one Merdog prisoner, soon others will follow. Come now. See how the sky is changing. A great storm is approaching. Dark clouds are gathering. Dark, like the fate that awaits you, Merdog! Now come! We’ll do our best with cold iron bars.”

The Iron Collar had indeed made Snarlgard helpless. He was furious with himself for allowing himself to be captured so easily. He was scared, not for the fate that awaited him but for the safety of his race, his world and the human world.

Chapter 10

In which our three friends sail to an island

After a hearty meal of steak, chips and salad, washed down with cups of tea, Eddy, Pete and Juliet felt much better than they did earlier.

The village clock tower struck four o' clock.

"Gosh, it's later than I thought," Juliet remarked. "How long were we actually trapped in Greenacre Manor?"

"A couple of hours, I guess," Eddy replied. He hadn't bothered to check his watch all day. "It was long enough for me to get pins and needles in my back and cramp in both legs!" he moaned.

Juliet couldn't help but laugh. It took her mind off things for a few moments.

"Well I really should go home now. I did promise my mother that I'd help her with the housework, although I doubt I'll be able to concentrate on anything."

"We'll meet up here first thing tomorrow, right?" Pete said. "I think we should go to Merrow Island."

Eddy looked unhappy. "Sail across in a tiny boat? I'm not keen on sailing! It could be..."

"Dangerous?" Juliet interrupted. "Yes, great danger does lie ahead. But we can't just sit here and do nothing, can we?" If we do, the Merdogs will probably seek us out one way or another. They chose us above all others. We must do what we can." Her voice was firm. "Have you got your amulet?"

"Of course," Eddy replied. "I'm wearing it. Very bling, isn't it?"

"Cool. I'll see you tomorrow then. I'll borrow one of my dad's boats. We'll take a little tour of Merrow Island."

They said their farewells and headed home. Eddy was unsure about Juliet's plan. "Why is she so keen to visit that island?"

"She thinks something's going on there, and she's probably right. Juliet would never lead us on a wild goose chase. She's almost... psychic."

Uncle Stanley and Uncle Pat were none the wiser when their son and nephew came strolling in.

"Ah, there you are! Have you been having adventures on the beach? I bet you've been in those caves, haven't you?"

Pete replied quickly. "Um yes, that's right. Tomorrow we're going, er, watercolor painting with Juliet."

"A talented young lass, that one!" Uncle Stanley replied. "A fine artist! Heh, Eddy, there's never a dull moment in Coombe Appleby,

lad! I bet you're having a great time staying here, aren't you?"

"Oh yes Uncle. A great time." He turned to his cousin. "Let's go and watch TV or something, shall we?"

They spent the rest of the afternoon wandering about the house at a loss. Both their minds were wandering and neither could concentrate on anything else apart from the Merdogs. Eventually, overcome by their experiences, Eddy decided to have an early night. He'd need it. Uncle Stanley assumed the bracing sea air had got to him!

Eddy was fearful of what might happen. These were events beyond his or anyone's control. He thought of home, way back in Chorland Green. And his mother, he'd barely given her a thought since arriving here. Finally he became too tired even to worry about the Black Unicorns and their mysterious powers.

Eddy was awoken from his sleep by a humming noise. He opened his eyes to discover that the whole bedroom was illuminated in an eerie green light. He realized it was the amulet, which he had left on the bedside table. As he reached across to pick it up the bizarre charm evaded his grasp and rose into the air, where it hovered right in front of him. Its brightness was so intense that he had to shield his eyes. The amulet was spinning, and in its center was a glowing void where the engraved Merdog image had been. Then a voice spoke to him:

"Edward Stone, this is the voice of Regneva. You have called upon to help one of our denizens, Snarlgard. Your comrades Peter and Juliet shall join you. It is paramount that you travel with all speed to the place that you call Merrow Island."

"What's happening? It's the middle of the night! I'm dreaming, really I am!" But in his heart he knew that this was no dream. He was being called and he must respond.

"Okay. I hear you, but this is uh, a bad time."

"Time waits for no mortal being," the amulet replied. "The sands of time are running out for Snarlgard. Soon his powers will be lost."

A vision appeared and Eddy saw Snarlgard for himself, trapped and ensnared by the Iron Collar. He was shocked by what he saw. The proud, impressive beast he had met on the beach was little more than a shadow of himself. Snarlgard was a poor prisoner, held down and weakened by the collar's force.

"What's that horrid thing round his neck?" Eddy asked.

"It is the Iron Collar, Edward. The work of Cassandra."

"And the Black Unicorns?"

"They are servants of Cassandra; messengers, minions, they are under her control, they do as she says. Now I must not detain you further," the amulet continued. "Go to the island. You will know what

to do. Your friends are expecting you.”

The amulet’s brightness faded to a dimmer hue before it was extinguished completely. It hovered for a few more seconds before dropping to the floor. The room was shrouded in darkness once more.

Eddy sat down on the bed in a total state of confusion. Claspings his head with both hands, he wondered why this whole nightmare was happening to him. He didn’t have time to reflect though, because there was a furtive knock on the door. It was Pete.

“Ed! Are you awake? Something’s happened!”

“Yes, I know. Do we really have to go?”

Pete was as optimistic as usual. “What, you’d rather stay here and miss out on a fantasy adventure? Sure, it’ll be risky in places, but think of all the wonderful things that may happen!” Pete painted such a glowing picture of everything that it was impossible not to be enthralled.

“We’ve got no choice anyway. If we just ignore the amulet’s call, something would probably hunt us down. Besides Ed, Snarlgard’s life depends on us. We’re talking Merdogs here. These amazing animals chose us to help them!”

Eddy took a deep breath. “Right. Well I guess I’d better get dressed. Will Juliet really be waiting in the village square?”

“You surely don’t doubt the amulet’s word?”

“Erm, no.”

“That’s settled then! We’ll take some torches, food and blankets. Going out through the back door will be quicker. Mustn’t risk waking up my parents.”

“I can see you’ve thought this whole thing out. What about the boat?”

“Plenty of boats down at the jetty further up the beach. We’ll borrow one of the small dinghies. It won’t take long to sail a mile to the island.”

The thought of boats and water upset Eddy. “I can’t swim!” he said.

“Oh don’t worry about that! If you fall in, we’ll drag you out!”

By the light of a cold fruitless moon, the two hurried figures made their way down the deserted village lane. Everything was so quiet and still; there wasn’t even a faint breeze. The stately oaks lined the village square, their leaves motionless. Then the Merdog statue came into view, the moonlight shining on its cold stone form. And at the base of the statue was Juliet, huddled against it like a small child afraid to leave its mother’s side.

“Thank goodness! You received the message too!” she said. “I was beginning to think that it was only me. Ssh, give me the torch!”

“Try not to make so much noise, Ed!” Pete scolded after his cousin had stumbled on the uneven path.

“It wasn’t my fault! Your council should tarmac this bit! It’s full of potholes!”

“Quiet!” Juliet said. “Listen, there’s a boat down on the shore. Let’s get to it and sail to Merrow Island as quickly as possible.” She checked her watch. “Half past midnight. You know what they say about this time of night. It’s the witching hour.”

“Actually it’s early morning now,” Eddy pointed out. “I’d just like to tell you both that I really don’t want to go to this island. I bet it’s the kind of place where people get strangled. In fact I wouldn’t be surprised if someone was being strangled right now. Like now!” He crept up behind Pete and jokingly put his hands round his neck.

“Aggh! Will you cut it out? This is no time for fooling about. We have to get going. Come on, the boat’s waiting and the sea is still. Perfect for a rapid crossing.”

He led the way down to the beach. Eddy followed last, subdued. His attempt at humor had not stopped his fear.

Just as Juliet had said, the boat was waiting for them on the shore.

“Perfect,” said Pete. “Let’s hope it doesn’t take too long to start the motor. Too much noise.”

They pushed their craft into the water and loaded the bag of supplies. There were also oars, just in case the motor broke down.

Pete and Juliet climbed in and Eddy reluctantly followed.

“Relax! Juliet and I have been around boats all our lives. You’re in safe hands!”

Eddy had no choice but to take his word for that. Pete started up the motor. With a spluttering noise it stopped a few times but finally burst into life and the dinghy set out, leaving the shore behind.

“Clear, isn’t it?” Juliet said. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen such a flat calm.” Eddy said nothing. All he could do was to stare forlornly at the safety of terra firma, shrinking further and further away. The vastness of the sea and the smallness of the boat did nothing but make him shudder.

Something sinister and crimson was glowing on Merrow Island. It was no longer the isolated yet hospitable place it once was. As the tiny boat made its way towards that unwelcoming island, the sea remained as calm as a millpond...

Chapter 11

In which Snarlgard is rescued

Pete was steering the boat. He held the rudder tightly in one hand, feeling that he and the boat understood each other. He and the others just looked as tiny and as helpless as they had been walking along the coast path from Greenacre Manor. Now they were gliding across the vast sea in the silent, blue night.

The torchlight lit the way, just as if Pete had drawn a firm, bright line across a map saying 'from here to there. That's where we're going. There, our island will be the center of the world; it will tower proudly above the dangers of the ocean at its feet'.

He wondered why he was undertaking this journey. He wondered why he, Eddy and Juliet had been the ones who had encountered the Merdogs. Truth was being stranger than fiction.

"You don't feel the cold, do you?" he said to Juliet, who was gazing out at the stars, the night breeze ruffling her auburn hair. "Look, it's the darkest part of the night. Sailing by night is very difficult. One has to be on watch all the time."

"Oh yes," she replied, and turned to Eddy, who was engulfed in a thick blanket. He was humming monotonously to himself.

"A real landlubber you are and no doubt," Pete remarked. "Fear not, Ed, I've endured ferry crossings that are far worse than this tranquil voyage!"

"This could just be the calm before the storm!" his weary cousin replied. "Here we are, in the middle of the night, in a dinghy, sailing towards possible doom." He glanced at Juliet. "What happened to make her like that?"

"Who?"

"That Cassandra woman. Did somebody do something to her to make her so awful?"

"Only the Merdogs themselves could answer that," she said. "Maybe nobody did anything at all, no-one bothered about her, I mean. She may not even remember. She's like the rain or the darkness or a stone that you have to walk round if you want to get past. Do you want some coffee? There's some in the thermos in the holdall."

"Not just now," Eddy replied. "The Merdogs have glassy eyes like fish. I know they're half-fish anyway, but did you see how they sparkled? I wonder how they learned to talk and have the same intelligence as us? Do you think Cassandra ever had a friend at all?"

Juliet sighed and said, "I doubt it. If she is as evil as we're told then you mustn't feel sorry for her. You seem to imagine that she longs for

happiness, but all she really wants to do is to destroy the world. Remember what Melgrim told us? She has special hatred for the Merdogs because of their connection to Neptune -they were his pets. Neptune battled Cassandra, she defeated him and was then defeated by Neptune's loyal pet Fengrim, who defeated her but was turned to stone as a result. Like the Devil, I believe she thrives on the evil of mankind. At least that's my theory."

"She could be the Devil then, couldn't she?"

"Perhaps," said Juliet, in a vague sort of way. "Satan wears a mask that looks like all our faces."

The faint breeze was stronger now. Pete sat bolt upright. "Now," he said. "We're almost there, coming in on the leeward side of the island. I just don't understand why the lighthouse isn't working."

"Perhaps the keeper's sick," said Eddy.

"No, it's been an automated lighthouse for years. It's got to be the work of her. She's made it stop working, shrouding the island in darkness. Light represents good and the darkness, evil. Think about it, why does she have unicorns that are black and with red eyes? Unicorns are supposed to be white."

"Hmm, don't know," Eddy said. "I guess white unicorns don't look mean enough?"

"Unicorns are symbols of purity and innocence! Didn't you learn anything at school?"

Eddy shrugged his shoulders. "I hated school!"

"Bet you were always playing truant!"

"Better than being in the local comp!"

Out of the night loomed an enormous shadow. Merrow Island itself was towering over them, looking at its three visitors carefully. They all felt the boat strike against the shingle beach. Pete cut the engine and it came to a standstill. Eddy sensed that they were being watched and everyone remained huddled together, not daring to move an inch.

"Did you hear that?" Pete whispered. "Such a sad sound."

Juliet listened. "Yes it is. But it's only those aspens; they always sound like that."

A group of wind-swept aspens were growing between the rocks, their leaves blowing in the breeze coming off the sea. They were trembling violently and one shudder after another passed through them.

"All ashore who's going ashore." Pete announced as he tied a length of rope around a tree stump to moor the boat.

Eddy leapt out and ran up the beach, grateful to be on land once more. A mile away, the lights of the mainland twinkled in the distance.

He was shocked at how far away it seemed.

“Now we must all stick together from the very beginning.” Juliet said, a hint of nervousness in her voice.

“Trust you to say that.” Eddy mumbled.

Pete sat on a rock further up the beach, the torch on the ground in front of him. He cast a long shadow. He wished he could sleep and give himself up to his dreams, blue and rocking like the sea.

Juliet was watching the sky from a high vantage point. Below her, the island lay in the moonlight, actually looking like a big gray dog stretching itself with both paws resting in the sea. Its tail was a long narrow point at the other end of the island. Its back was bristling with aspens but its eyes were invisible.

“No ordinary island,” she said. “Not now. Not anymore. It goes down to the bottom of the sea quite differently from the others. Things will happen here.”

“Have you seen anything, Ju?” Pete said, clambering up the rocks to where she was standing on the chalk pinnacles.

“Not a whisper. When I gazed at this place from the mainland, there was some kind of...presence. Something glowing. It’s gone now though. Perhaps the evil has left once again. It never lingers. Shall we go and see if we can find Snarlgard?”

“Come on Eddy!”

Together they shuffled along, towards the small stone house where Snarlgard might be held. If they did find him, how could they free him?

“Do we have a key in these amulets that will release that collar thing?”

“I’m not sure,” Juliet replied, clutching her amulet tightly. “Perhaps there is no key to open it and it has to be removed in a different way.”

Snarlgard lay quite still. His breathing was shallow. All fight and pride was ebbing out of him. His heart, heavy as lead, continued its labored beating. In less than two days his powers would be lost forever. He would be condemned to dwell on land as a miserable black dog. The Iron Collar was part of him now; it’s grasp held him in its thrall. Snarlgard prayed for the hand of death to touch him. He would rather die than spend a life on land, never able to return to the sea, to his world beneath the waves. He would be mortal, unable to talk, to make plants grow and create the great waves.

“She could have turned me into a tree, just like she did to Fengrim. But no, she simply wanted me as her prisoner. And where is she now? Am I to wither and starve here? Alone and unseen?”

Perhaps being a tree would be better. The shame of becoming a land dog would be too much to bear. In the eyes of humans, he would

be nothing more than a pet.

“A pet! What a poor specimen I would indeed become! Curse this evil! Curse you, mordant Sorceress! And your damned unicorns! May the fates blast you and your sardonic minions to the depths of Hell!”

He roared in anguish, making the walls of the ancient house shudder. He howled in abject misery, as if by doing so he could release himself from the pain. And he whimpered for himself and for his people. If they ventured ashore they would surely end up as prisoners too. How many other Iron Collars were waiting to trap them? How could he prevent them from doing so? If only there was a way. The situation seemed hopeless, but then the thought of Eddy, Pete and Juliet came to him.

“The chosen three,” he whispered. His verdant eyes radiated despair, yet dignity. “Do you hear me? Do you come?”

“You heard that, didn’t you?” Juliet said. “There’s something in that old lodge. Come on, we must go and find out!”

She raced up the overgrown path, her skirt catching on the brambles.

“In here! I think Snarlgard may be in here!” Taking a deep breath, she placed her hand on the rusty latch.

Snarlgard had closed his eyes. The darkness had completely wrapped itself around him. Time was the only thing that he had in the world. Suddenly he sensed movement outside. Somebody was about to enter! He knew it wasn’t Cassandra, for a sorceress would never use a door. You never saw her come and you never saw her go. She had so many ways of disappearing and reappearing. She could turn with ease from one thing to another, trees, mist or rocks. But whatever Cassandra turned into, it was always bad. If she became a mist it would be stinging and poisonous. If a tree, it would be black and devoid of leaves.

Whoever was about to enter had to be a land dweller. Snarlgard hunched himself up against the wall, trying to become as small and insignificant as possible. Yet he could not hide his huge body. He was completely at the mercy of human eyes. They would point, stare and gasp at him, maybe even run away screaming. Then more would come, dragging him away, never to see the waves again. He’d be locked in a cage at one of their zoos. How people would pay to see a Merdog! Of course, after three days he would become nothing but a small, shabby black dog, similar to a half starved Labrador, broken in mind and spirit. A landbound Merdog cursed never to find happiness.

“Well, what does it matter? I cannot fight back with this collar around my neck. It has robbed me off all my strength and ability. Just

let them come.”

The door opened and the glare of torchlight shone forth, startling him.

“Snarlgard! It’s you! We’ve found you!” Juliet turned and shouted excitedly to the others. “I’ve found him!”

The brightness returned to the Merdog’s eyes. He was amazed to see the three of them again.

“You...came! You have found me, my brave friends. I was wise to place my trust in you, so was Melgrim. But alas, I fear there is nothing else you can do for me. The Iron Collar has done its work. It can never be removed. I am Cassandra’s prisoner. She waits for the others to follow.”

“Where is she?” Eddy asked.

“No longer on this island,” Snarlgard replied. “Who knows where she is right now?”

Juliet’s eyes filled with tears. “It’s not fair! The whole thing isn’t fair!”

She knelt down in front of the giant dog and placed a hand on his head. His fur was thick and oily. “What did you do to deserve this? What?”

Snarlgard raised his head. “Child, do not shed tears for a Merdog. It is by my own foolish curiosity that I find myself in this predicament. I must await my fate. But even if I should turn to sea foam or become clouds in the sky, I shall always remember you and your kindness.”

Pete placed a comforting arm around Juliet. They were all crying. Eddy was distraught and he didn’t know why. Crying at the hopelessness of the situation. He was crying over a dog! Snarlgard was going to be lost, all because of one person’s evil. There was nothing they could do.

And then, quite suddenly, something began to happen. The amulet that Juliet had been holding started to glow. It broke free from her grasp and hovered in the air above Snarlgard’s head.

“What’s happening?” she cried, wiping her eyes. The amulet blazed, lighting up the room like a million rays of sunshine. The beams it emitted shone down on the Iron Collar. The dark crystals protruding from it began to crack. Eddy, Pete and Juliet covered their eyes. The light was blinding. The crystals shattered, quite unexpectedly, and the collar began to groan. Snarlgard realized what was happening.

Soon he would be free! He could feel the evil grasp weakening.

“Now! Release me!” he bellowed. The collar’s great iron spikes crumbled with an almighty crack and the hateful thing broke away in two large pieces. They fell to the ground, smashing as if the collar had been nothing more than porcelain. And as soon as it had been destroyed, the amulet ceased to glow. It fell out of Juliet’s hand, cold

and lifeless once more. She picked it up.

“It...you...you’re free! What did it do?”

Snarlgard rose to his feet. His green eyes flashed with fire. “Did you know what that was, Juliet Fairisle? That was the amulet of kindness. You see, when Morgrim gave you those amulets, he didn’t say that they responded to the people who own them, only that they will protect you from harm.” He turned to Juliet. “The amulet didn’t destroy the collar by itself. Your kindness made it do that. Thanking you is too little to offer you, my friends,” he said to them. Then he gazed at the open door. “Come, there is nothing more for us on this island. It is time for us to return home.”

Chapter 12

In which fog appears

Snarlgard raised his head and stared at the sky.

"The moon is on the wane," he said. "Bizarre, how quickly it manifests itself. I am uneasy. This fog is not like others. I sense a malevolent presence."

A look of horror appeared on Juliet's face. "The boat's gone!"

Indeed it had. There was no sign of the dinghy anywhere. It had simply disappeared.

"Now what? Oh Pete, didn't you moor it properly? We're stranded on here!" Eddy wailed. "Just what I always wanted!"

"I'm sure I secured it," Pete said. "I can't understand how that's happened!"

"My dear friends," Snarlgard announced. "The very least I can do to repay you all is to ferry you back to your domain. Nothing is faster than a Merdog in water. Climb on my back!"

Eddy paled. Traveling in a boat had been bad enough for him. "Erm, you'll be able to carry us all? Like, I don't want a horse ride."

"Snarlgard glanced at him and laughed for the first time. It was a gruff, deep laugh.

"Edward, I sense your unease. But your fear is unnecessary. In the sea I am invincible. Now shall we make haste?"

"Unless of course, you want to stay on Merrow Island," Juliet said.

That seemed to decide the issue.

"No way am I staying on this God-forsaken place a moment longer!"

"Relax, Ed," Pete said to his nervous cousin. "If you fall off, you can grab hold of Snarlgard's tail."

"Oh very funny!" He wasn't too keen on this method of transport at all, but there was no choice.

A low moan echoed from the windward side of the island. Inevitably, Snarlgard's rescue was not going to go unnoticed. From the east came wails that would literally put the hairs up on the back of the neck.

"Snarlgard," Pete said, "what are those cries?"

The Merdog turned towards the brittle aspens, which were trembling in the night breeze. There they were, about a hundred yards away and closing, the two shadowy figures of Nox and Erebus.

"They were bound to come sooner or later," Snarlgard said. "We have to leave -now! Get on my back, quickly!"

The Merdog crouched down to allow the three of them to hastily clamber onto his back. Eddy trembled like an aspen himself as the pounding hooves grew nearer; even from fifty yards away their eyes

were so vivid. "Oh God..." he whispered. The Black Unicorns terrified him more than anything else in the world. Pete grabbed Snarlgard's magnificent green mane and threw one leg over, scrabbling desperately against the dog's side. It must have hurt Snarlgard but he sensed the danger he and his friends were in.

"No!" the hateful voice of Erebus boomed. "They're on his back!" "They've freed the Merdog! Stop them! Stop them!"

Pete managed to pull himself into a better position on Snarlgard so that he was no longer leaning to one side like a stunt rider. He buried both hands into the thick mane, grabbed fistfuls of fur and tried to use it as a substitute for reins.

Running faster than the wind, Snarlgard reached the edge of the beach. He thundered into the sea, leaving fountains of spray in his wake. His three passengers were instantly soaked but they clung on desperately for dear life, wondering if they would be able to survive the one mile journey back to the mainland.

Eddy glanced round and saw something behind them, racing towards them. It was low and fast, about twenty yards away and closing. Behind it was another. Eddy knew it was them, the Black Unicorns. Though they were well clear of the island now, their demonic pursuers had not given up, sea or no sea.

"Faster!" Eddy yelled. "They're still coming!"

Snarlgard worked his great haunch muscles, tearing through the water with the grace of a soaring eagle. He was not breathless. He was not even remotely flagging. He was back in the sea -his sea. Once more, he was untouchable.

"The unicorns cannot harm us," he said, ever so calmly. "They are powerful yes, they can do a lot of harm. But they cannot use their powers in the sea. Water is their weakness. Everybody has a weakness."

Snarlgard surged on through the waves, his body at one with the sea. In a matter of minutes they were halfway back, swifter and quieter than any boat. The unicorns were startlingly quick in the water but they were no match for the Merdog. When Eddy dared to glance round, he did not see the two pursuing figures, although they could still be following in those multi-layered shadows. A turquoise candescence along the western horizon had faded to a deep purple and visibility was declining rapidly with the encroaching fog. The waning moon thrust a silver-bright point above the line of the coast in the east.

Eddy remembered the fog on that first night in Coombe Appleby. That was when he had had that terrible dream, so vivid and chilling.

Five hundred yards to go until they would reach the safety of the shore. Coombe Appleby appeared only as a black, bristly mass

vaguely silhouetted against a marginally less dark sky. Eddy wished he had night vision to instantly locate the safety of four walls.

Pete felt the Merdog's hot breath streaming past him in crystallized plumes and his own breath smoked from his open mouth. His heart pounded in time with the frantic thrashing of paws and he felt almost as if he, Pete, Juliet, Eddy and Snarlgard were not humans and animal, but one being, sharing the same heart, blood and breath.

Though they were all fleeing from possible death, the three riders were pleasantly thrilled whilst they were terrified, and that realization startled them. Facing death, or in this case something perhaps worse than death, was peculiarly exciting and darkly attractive in a way and to an extent that they could never have imagined. They were almost as frightened of the unexpected thrill as of the malignant creatures that had been chasing them.

Eddy clung tightly to Juliet, sometimes bouncing dangerously high on the Merdog's back but holding fast. With every wave-pummeling yard he grew more confident that the great evil of Cassandra was not so much of a threat at all. He was buoyant with heart and endurance. With only a hundred yards to go before he would set foot on dry land, Snarlgard veered towards the half moon of the beach, not straight towards the coast path but in that general direction and

Eddy fell.

He had loosened his grip for a fraction of a second, stumbled and lost his balance. He tried to recover, failed, and fell, yelling in terror as he crashed backwards into the inky blackness of the water. He met it with numbing impact, driving the air from his lungs and banging his teeth together. Eyes wide with fright, Eddy thrashed about wildly, gasping for breath.

"I can't swim!" he babbled. "Help me!"

It was then that the coldness of the sea penetrated him, a dozen or so knives of ice all stabbing his body. On Snarlgard's back, with his feet and legs submerged, the water had felt warm and he'd hardly been aware of it.

Eddy gulped and tasted seawater in his mouth. There was something thick and wet on his face. He realized that it was a large piece of seaweed and as he brushed a hand off his face he sank below the surface. But Snarlgard was there for him. With eyes glowing as though they were molten, the water was no longer a fear for Eddy. He was completely submerged, yet he found he could breathe as freely and easily as he could on land. Opening his eyes, the icy cold shrank away.

He was standing on the seabed, gazing up at the surface, fifteen feet up. Everything was so still and peaceful. Then in an instant,

Snarlgard's jaws clamped round the collar of his jacket and yanked him upwards. There were bubbles around him as he broke the surface. But Eddy had no need to cough and splutter.

"Ed, are you okay?" he heard Juliet shout.

"Never better! Just then, when I was in the water, covered over, my head felt cool and everything kept still. I could breathe underwater! Oh it was wonderful, but how could I do it?"

Snarlgard's eyes had faded once more. He could make humans breathe underwater by just thinking about it.

"Ah, just a simple little talent that all Merdogs learn," he said. He recounted the countless seafarers who he had saved from drowning over the centuries. "Not that any of those land dwellers could ever explain what had happened to them!"

Eddy's feet scraped the bottom and at last the welcome sight of the shore drew closer and closer. They were home.

They all leapt off Snarlgard's back and waded ashore in the knee-deep water. Marvelous it was to be back on the mainland.

"Thank you Snarlgard!" Pete said to their unique new friend.

"No, it is you I must thank," the Merdog replied. "It was you who chose to come to the island, facing great peril. And the Iron Collar, for all its strength and evil, could not hold against an act of kindness. Dear friends, this is by no means the end of the adventure." His voice shrank to a whisper. "For the time being, we must part again. Go home and sleep without dreaming the whole of the time."

"Must you go?" Juliet said.

"Yes. I must return to Regneva. I have been away too long. Farewell, good land dwellers...for now. We shall meet again soon!"

Snarlgard turned and ran back into the sea. They watched him go. His body sank into the rippling water and disappeared from sight. As the ripples spread out, there came forth a bubble which rose to the surface and broke. There came a second, and a third and then there was nothing more.

Alone on the beach, the three friends realized how cold and wet they were.

"Let's get back." Juliet said. The events had taken their toll and her body was crying out for sleep and a warm bed. Soon they would be safe under blankets, far away from the shores of Merrow Island and the Black Unicorns. Once more the loathsome beasts had disappeared, for now.

As they ran up the sloping lane through pools of amber light, through layered night shadows cast by the wind-sculpted pines and oaks, they saw no movement other than their own and the sluggish, serpentine advance of the fog through the windless air.

The white foam of the incoming breakers surged out of the sea in ghostly, phosphorescent ranks and the wide crescent of sand gleamed palely between the lapping tide and the coastal bluffs. The fog was aglow with the reflection of moonlight. Silently it continued to churn, the eddying tendrils all but engulfing the motionless trees.

Chapter 13

In which Eddy and Pete receive a warning

Across the sombre gray clouds, lightning followed a jagged course like cracks in a china plate. In the unsheltered back garden of Windy Nook, the stone ornaments glimmered briefly with hard edged reflections of the storm light. The wind gusted, whipping up the trees. Rain beat with sudden fury against the cottage windows, then streamed down the glass, blurring the view beyond.

“Blooming weather,” Uncle Stanley muttered from the comfort of his armchair, leaning back and folding his arms. “Don’t know what’s got into it! A whole day wasted. So much for me doing my gardening! It’d be foolish to go out in a tempest like this!”

“Ah cheer up, love,” Pat replied, peering round the kitchen door. “If you’re feeling bored, there’s always these dishes to be washed!”

Uncle Stanley buried his head in the pages of the local gazette. He was intrigued by the article in the center pages. ‘Mysterious disturbance on Merrow Island’. It was reporting that the lighthouse had suddenly stopped working and that a couple of locals had reported seeing unusual lights on the island late last night.

“Listen to this,” Uncle Stanley said, reading out the paragraph. “After a thorough search of the lighthouse, no signs of suspicious activity were found. The lighthouse is now in full working order. The coastguard was surprised by the cloven hoof prints on the island, however. It is almost inconceivable that cattle could have been present. The island is only sixty acres in size and has no large animals on it. For the time being, those hoof prints remain a mystery.”

Pat laughed. “Stranger things have happened! I don’t suppose cows could have swum across? Then again, you never know round here! Do you reckon it was kids messing around?”

“Nah, you don’t get any trouble from youngsters round here,” he replied. “They’re a good lot in this village. Anyway, nobody ever sails to Merrow Island, it’s just a lump of rock in the sea. Hasn’t got anything worth looking at, like caves or anything, like that Scottish island. What was it called again?”

“Staffa.” Pat replied.

“Aye that’s it. Merrow has been uninhabited for years, mind you, that old fisherman’s house is still there, such as it is. I suppose some rich person may decide to convert it into a holiday home in the future.”

“Mmm, perhaps,” said Pat. “Where are Pete and Eddy today? They’ve been ever so quiet; not getting up until after lunchtime.”

“Well there isn’t much to get up for. Pete said he was upstairs

reading. I reckon Ed's gone back to bed! Oh well, that's up to him!"

Outside, the storm-dark afternoon sky grew steadily darker as the thunderheads changed color from gray to blue black, thickened and pressed closer to the earth.

Lightning zigzagged across the sky. The day flickered and, for just a second or two, so did the lights of the cottage.

Uncle Stanley stared at the ceiling. "Flaming heck, someone's mad up there. I hope we don't get another ruddy power cut. That last one went on for ages and I missed Songs of Praise."

Lightning slashed through the panoply of clouds again, nearer this time than before, and it seemed to strike the ground no more than two houses away. The ensuing crash of thunder rattled the cottage windows.

Auntie Pat used the interruption provided by the thunderclap to consider something. "Aye, well I have plenty of candles in the attic, just in case. And don't forget, you can always listen to the radio."

The lightning flashed again. This time it seemed to flash even closer than before, only yards away. Thunder cracked, then cracked again. The lights dimmed, fluttered, then reluctantly came to full power.

Eddy was alone in his room, gazing out at the incessant rain and wondering where the Black Unicorns were manifesting themselves at this moment in time. For the past few minutes he'd been aware of the distant wail of sirens. Fire engines. Now they were rapidly growing nearer, louder.

"One of those last two bolts of lightning must have caused some real damage when it touched down," he said to himself. He stared at the other cottages down the lane, but couldn't see smoke rising from the rooftops. Maybe it was too wet for smoke to be seen. Visibility was reduced by the water-spotted pane of glass and curtains of mist and gray that wavered and billowed outside.

The sirens swelled. Evidently there was more than one truck. It sounded like they were only next door. As the first siren dwindled just a little, new ones shrieked in the road behind them.

"That sounds serious, doesn't it," Pete said, walking into the room. "Must be at least two engines responding. Maybe a house has collapsed."

"I can see smoke," Eddy said as his cousin squinted through the small window for a better look. Then a thought snapped into Eddy's mind, startling him as if a whip had been cracked in front of his face.

"Something's wrong...here." A powerful, inexplicable current of panic surged through him. He gripped the window frame so tightly, that his fingernails blanched.

“Wrong...so wrong.”

The air was suddenly oppressive and heavy, as if it was no longer breathable but a noxious gas.

“Get back from the window!” Eddy shouted, although he couldn’t understand what he was so afraid of. What was he so scared of?

“Ed, what’s wrong with you?” Pete said, stepping back, and that was when it happened.

A murderous barrage of lightning flashed like a volley of mortar fire, five or six great bursts in quick succession, nerve fraying and teeth jarring. The sharp bursts of purple-white light produced a series of strobe-light images.

A wind lashed pine tree was struck by lightning, then an ominous dark shape rose from the midst of the explosion, a torpedo-like thing, spinning straight towards the window. Though it all occurred in less than a second, it had a surreal, slow motion quality by the flickering light in the room.

Eddy turned to his cousin, who had thrown one arm up in front of his face. He raced over, lurched sideways, seized the sleeve of his jumper and pulled him down towards the floor only a fraction of a second after the lightning had splintered the tree. A huge tree limb burst through the window just as he was pulling Pete out of the way. One heavy branch swept across Pete’s head, ripping his glasses loose.

“Oh God, your eyes!” Eddy thought, then they both fell backwards. The limb of the shattered tree slammed down on top of the desk in a spray of water, glass, broken window frame and chips of bark. The desk collapsed under the brutal impact of the ruined tree.

Eddy found himself lying on his back. The lights had gone off. He stared in shock at the shards of glass and pine needles littering the carpet. Pete groaned and staggered to his feet.

“Good heavens,” he gasped. “That was a bit close, wasn’t it! Good job you pulled me out of the way or I would have been flattened! Thanks, Cuz. You okay?” Eddy nodded; he was still in shock.

As lightning continued to stab down from the turbulent sky, wind roared through the missing window and stirred some of the loose pine needles into a frantic, dervish like dance. The whirlwind, accompanied by the booming music of the storm, spun its way round the bedroom towards the bedside cabinet. A calendar flapped off the wall and swooped round the room on wings of May and December, darting and soaring as if it were a bat. The small painting on the wall rattled on its hanger, trying to tear itself free. Small sheets of paper from a notepad floated off the bookcase and slithered along the floor like snakes.

Eddy and Pete had the eerie feeling that all the movement in the

room was not solely the result of the wind but a presence. Dark forces were at work in the bedroom, flexing their occult muscles, incarnating themselves in a body composed of pine needles and paper.

“Ed, this is freaking me out,” Pete said, rubbing his forehead, where he felt a small wound. His heart was pounding as his throat was dry. “Thank God you pulled me out of the way.” he said again.

“They’re trying to kill us, aren’t they!” Eddy shouted. “They want to stop us from helping the Merdogs. Cassandra and her unicorns. They trapped us at Greenacre Manor, then tried to trap us on Merrow Island. They removed our boat so we couldn’t get back. They send fog to confuse us. But so far they’ve failed. Cassandra will surely want revenge on us for freeing Snarlgard. She’s created his whole storm. The falling tree was meant for me. Don’t you see? Everything fits together. She’s all around us, watching, waiting...tormenting.”

Eddy was shaking, cold and more afraid than he had ever been. The formless, shapeless thing in the room, its very presence, had pushed a panic button deep inside him. Instinct told him to be afraid.

A dervish of windblown needles and paper whirled across the floor, directly towards him. It was a column about two feet in diameter, five feet high and composed of dozens of little pieces of this and that. It stopped very near to Eddy, writhing, churning, hissing, changing its shape. Both of them felt threatened by it. As they gazed up at the whirlwind, Eddy had the crazy notion that it was staring down at him. After a moment, it moved off to the left a few feet, then returned, paused in front of him again, hesitated, then scurried busily to the right, but it came back once more.

“Can’t make up your mind whether to swoop down and tear me to shreds?” Eddy yelled at the wind-shaped phantom. He wondered if it intended to suck him out through the hole in the wall and up to the heavens, like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz. He’d seen that film several times.

“It’s just a whirlwind of lifeless junk!” Pete shouted angrily. “Pine needles and bits of paper!”

Then without warning, the whirlwind increased its fury and bore down on Eddy. Black smoke appeared from nowhere, spinning and entwining between the fluttering debris. Eddy and Pete were no longer observing a mass of fluttering paper, but a dark mini-tornado. The stench of ozone was overpowering.

The gaseous horror spoke to them in a choking, sinister voice that sounded neither male nor female, but the warning was clear enough.

“Don’t interfere, land dwellers, or you shall regret it!”

“God almighty.” Pete said, barely able to move.

Then the lightning stopped. The thunder decreased from a roar to a

rumble, fading like the noise of a passing train. The smoke dispersed and disappeared back through the broken window, leaving the whirling column of debris to subside on the floor, where it lay in piles, fluttering and quivering as if exhausted.

The lights flickered back on and Eddy and Pete dared to breathe. In the relative quiet that followed in the wake of the fast diminishing thunder, they felt their strength returning. The clinking sound of mildly disturbed wind chimes in the garden could be heard.

“Eddy! Pete!” Uncle Stanley called, rushing into the room. “Are you two okay? I heard...oh blimey, the tree! What a mess!”

“We’re alright Dad,” Pete said quickly. “The tree just missed us, although the desk’s wrecked!”

“Thank heaven for that,” Uncle Stanley replied, surveying the damage. I’ll block up this hole with some planks of wood as soon as that tree’s been cleared. By all the saints, that storm came from the Devil himself! Come down into the kitchen, lads, we’ll take a look at that head of yours, Pete. Looks like one of those branches caught you.”

In the cottage next door, a baby began to cry. There were shouts of alarm, and dogs barked. One or two car alarms had gone off. Amid the chaos and uprooted trees, the Merdog statue still stood firm.

Chapter 14

In which Eddy falls down a hole

Cassandra was incandescent with rage. She could barely comprehend the fact that the Iron Collar had been destroyed.

“Mortals! The same three who are in league with Melgrim! How I loathe and despise him! Now Snarlgard has been released. I simply cannot fathom how...”

Erebus attempted to calm the enraged sorceress. “Great One, were you not most gratified by my storm? It has wreaked havoc for sure on their abodes.”

“And I with my whirlwind,” Nox interrupted. “Such raw power I unleashed on those unsuspecting humans. I threatened them, warned them not to interfere. Surely no sane mortal would ignore such a warning!”

“Let us hope not...” Cassandra replied. “But land dwellers are a curious race. Now that they are involved with the Merdogs, they are unlikely to stop interfering, are they? But they can be stopped from thwarting my plans.”

The Black Unicorns regarded her with crimson eyes.

“They’re protected from harm by three amulets. The amulets from Regneva, created by Neptune himself!”

“Indeed, Sorceress, we remember,” Erebus replied. “Unpleasant.”

“My dark servants, I want those amulets. Destroy them, and plot incredibly unpleasant deaths for those three mortals.” A cruel smile appeared on her cold face.

The morning in Coombe Appleby was high and blue, pierced by cliffs as white as angels’ robes, graced by green trees and by the smooth contours of the beach, still asleep under that summer mantle. The air was so clear that it seemed possible to look all the way to Bournemouth if not for the obstructing terrain.

Eddy Stone stood in the garden of his uncle’s house, staring across at the downward sloping country lane to the woods in the east. The mostly deciduous trees crowded close to one another and pinned inky shadows to the ground, as if night never escaped their grasp even with the rising of the sun.

The silence was deep. It was perfect for Eddy to collect his thoughts. His mind struggled to comprehend the indescribable events that had occurred since his arrival in the village. He was wondering how much longer he, Pete and Juliet would be able to keep the whole thing secret. But that, was the least of his worries. The warning in the

whirlwind was enough to prevent him from thinking about anything else. Suppose the three of them heeded its advice and ignored the Merdogs? What would happen? Would the world come to an end? If Cassandra destroyed the sea, the whole planet would grind to a halt. That nightmarish thought was unthinkable.

As Eddy pondered about the situation a little longer, his confidence in himself increased. “Yeah, so what have I got to complain about?” he said to himself. “The Merdogs could have chosen anyone out of billions of people. But they chose three, and I’m one of them.” He remembered how he’d cried at the sight of Snarlgard trapped by the Iron Collar, and how Juliet’s amulet had destroyed it. That fateful morning in the cave when they met a Merdog for the first time; it was beyond all imagination. And that thrilling ride from Merrow Island, with the Black Unicorns in pursuit, falling into the sea and being able to breathe underwater. It had all been wonderful, frightening, beyond belief and a hundred other things. But this was no dream. It was reality. One thing was for sure, he could not return to Chorland Green until the whole thing was over.

“Maybe it doesn’t end,” he said. “Nothing makes sense anymore. Talking dogs in the sea, unicorns, messages in whirlwinds, mad sorceresses – God, it’s like I’m living out a fairytale.” He wondered whether there would be a happy ending to this tale. It was then that an image of his father came into his head.

“I wish you were here with me, Dad,” Eddy muttered wistfully. “Then everything would be easier to understand.”

Nothing moved across that vast panorama of sky except for two birds of prey – peregrine falcons, circling soundlessly high overhead. It was shortly after ten o’clock and the whole village was still steeped in silence.

Eddy wondered what was so special about Regneva, the undersea realm of the Merdogs. What were they guarding down there? A portal to a parallel universe? A crystal with the power to control the weather or something? This was the stuff of sci-fi novels.

“It could be nothing at all,” he said out loud again. What was special to a Merdog might be of little interest to a human being. No, perhaps a land dweller couldn’t appreciate it. He had rather thought that Regneva would be something mysterious and magical. Whatever it was, Eddy had a feeling he would see it for himself sooner or later. His many thoughts were interrupted by shouts from his auntie, in the kitchen.

“Eddy! Are you planning to stand in the garden all day looking up like that? Only most folk wait until dark to go stargazing.”

Eddy spun round. “Oh, I was just watching these...er, two birds.

Hawks, I think.”

“Aye, them’s peregrine falcons,” Auntie Pat replied. “There’s a lot of them nesting on the cliffs. Magnificent creatures. I think they’re the most beautiful birds in the world. Have you ever seen them swoop down from the cliffs? Magnificent.”

Presently, Uncle Stanley and Pete walked into the kitchen.

“Ah, there you are, lad!” Uncle Stanley addressed his nephew. “Fancy coming on a trip to Mortbury Rings?”

A blank expression appeared on Eddy’s face. “Um, what’s that? A shop?”

“Lord no!” Uncle Stanley replied. “It’s an ancient monument. A stone circle actually, and far more impressive than Stonehenge in my opinion. It’s only a five mile drive and I thought you’d fancy a change of scene after bein’ stuck in the village for the past few days.”

“Sure. I’ll come.” Eddy said. It would be a relief to get away from the oppressiveness of Coombe Appleby, and its Merdogs.

Uncle Stanley was very proud of his ancient Morris Minor. It was cobalt blue and made a sound similar to a jetliner taking off, but seemed roadworthy apart from the rubbing fan belt.

“Ain’t she a beauty!” Uncle Stanley said with more than a hint of pride in his voice.

Eddy rolled his eyes. “Actually Uncle, there’s really no stigma attached to being a regular user of public transport these days.”

Uncle Stanley looked as if he’d been stung by a wasp. “Public transport? Mutterin’ Merdogs, that’s no way to travel! Better off goin’ by ‘orse and cart than by one of them ruddy buses. They never come on time, you know.”

They climbed in. Pete chose to sit next to his cousin on the back seat.

“Nobody fancy sittin’ up front?” Uncle Stanley asked. “Oh well, just so you know, travel sickness is worse in the back.”

Pete whispered, “I’m still thinking about that storm.”

“Like I could forget? I just hope nothing happens while we’re away. Suppose Juliet...”

“What are you two whisperin’ about? Are you playin’ Chinese whispers?”

“Nothing Dad,” Pete said. “Really, it’s nothing.”

As Uncle Stanley backed the car out of the ramshackle carport and onto the driveway, two large falcons sprang off the front garden wall and flew across the bonnet of the car with a great flapping of wings. He jammed on the brakes and stalled the engine. The falcons soared high into the empty sky.

“Stupid bloomin’ wildlife,” Uncle Stanley muttered.

Across five miles of Dorset countryside, the falcons tracked the car from on high. Eddy and Pete could keep them in view either by peering through the wing mirror or simply by looking out of the side window, depending on the position the birds chose to monitor them. Sometimes they flew parallel to the Morris Minor, keeping pace, and sometimes they rocketed ahead so far that they became only specks, nearly vanishing in the sky, only to double back and take up a parallel course once more. Uncle Stanley failed to notice them, but the falcons were with them all the way.

He parked the car outside the Mortbury Arms. “Well, we’re ‘ere,” he said. “We’ll walk up to the Rings and then grab a spot of lunch. Blue winds blow up ‘ere, the sort that’ll give you a horse’s appetite.”

As Eddy stepped out of the car, a peregrine falcon was perched on the wall outside the pub. He assumed it was one of the creatures that had been following them. It remained on the wall, watching him as he slammed the door. The falcon took flight only when someone came out of the pub.

The ancient megaliths that made up Mortbury Rings were bleak and imposing. Many visitors had been enchanted by the circle of stones. They drew mostly New Age travelers and hippies.

“They’re dead popular with the tree-huggin’ lot,” said Uncle Stanley. “And no wonder. Aren’t they something?”

“Yes Dad,” said Pete, despite having seen them many times before. “It’s nice to see them again.”

Eddy wondered what Juliet would say if she saw the stones. No doubt she would have launched into some long-winded paragraph about pagan rituals and nature worship. He walked over to the stone that was nearest to the edge of the cliff. The wrinkled sea heaved against the rocks at the bottom. Eddy expected to see a Merdog’s head appear out of the foam but there was nothing in those swirling waters. He felt the sudden urge to look at his amulet, but when he fumbled in his pockets he realized with horror that he’d left it behind in his bedroom.

Eddy was instantly uneasy. He knew the amulets offered protection from harm. How could he have been so foolish as to leave it behind – after all he’d been through? But he didn’t get the chance to think about the amulet anymore, because without warning two peregrine falcons swooped down at him, scratching and pecking his head.

“Aggh!” Eddy yelled in surprise and shock. In a scene reminiscent of Hitchcock’s ‘The Birds’, the falcons dive-bombed and pecked at him, drawing blood.

Eddy’s fingers were instantly slick with blood. It streamed down his

hands as he desperately tried to shield his face against the sharp beaks and talons. “Help me!” he yelled. “Pete! Uncle Stanley!”

“Good Lord, what’s going on?” Uncle Stanley gasped as he raced towards his nephew. “What the devil’s got into these birds?” He raised a hand to grab Eddy but was instantly beaten back by the fury of the falcons.

“Evil little beggars!” he winced as one of the birds took a chunk of flesh from his hand. “God almighty...”

Eddy buried his face in his hands, which bore over a dozen cuts, stumbled and fell against one of the stones. Curling up into a fetal position, he tried to protect himself from the birds as much as possible. Terrified, he wondered if they would kill him and then consume his body like ravenous vultures, but before the birds could launch another attack the ground suddenly imploded beneath him and he was plummeting down a terrible hole into unfathomable darkness.

“Eddy!” Uncle Stanley shouted, trying to reach his nephew, but he was too late – Eddy had gone. Almost as soon as the ground had swallowed him, the two falcons ceased their attack and flew off in a flurry of wing beats.

Pete watched them soar up into the pendulous clouds that were gathering in the sky. At a high altitude the birds circled above Mortbury Rings like helicopters maintaining surveillance. Circling and circling, gliding on rising thermals. Silent as stalkers in a dream, patient and mysterious.

Eddy opened his eyes and groaned. Looking up, he expected to see the top of the hole and Uncle Stanley peering down, calling his name, but he could see nothing above him but spikes. Dizzy and confused, he tried to work out what they were. He’d landed on his back so hard, it was a miracle he hadn’t broken any bones. Gazing at the spikes, he finally realized that they were icicles. A hollow, echoing sound met his ears – like running water and a breeze blowing through a tunnel. Where had he heard that sound before? Casting his mind back, he recalled the cave on the beach where he had first encountered a Merdog. Evidently, he had fallen down a disused mine or well shaft...but that was impossible, for as Eddy gazed around he could see nothing but ice. There had to be a source of daylight somewhere, for the jagged crystal points were gleaming and a faint light lit up the ice cave in a turquoise glow.

“An ice cave!” Eddy whispered to himself. For a few moments he savored the cool, still interior of the cave. Not a breath of wind stirred in its frozen heart.

The stabbing pain from the wounds inflicted by the falcons brought

tears to his eyes. Gritting his teeth, he fumbled in his pocket for a tissue to stem the flow of blood. By pressing his hands against one of the huge chunks of ice, he numbed the raw, stinging pain. The coldness was such a relief from it. A minute later, he removed his hands and flexed his fingers. They were still bleeding, but not as badly as before. Wrapping the tissue round them, he realized the problem he faced. He was trapped.

“Just how am I going to get out of here?”

Chapter 15

In which we meet more Merpuppies

“Eddy! Eddy! Can you hear me?” Uncle Stanley shouted, staring wildly into the hole. There was no reply from the darkness. “Eddy! Are you there? Please answer me!”

“Oh no, he’s not...dead is he?” Pete sobbed. “We didn’t reach him in time...” his voice trailed off as he looked helplessly at his father.

“Hang in there son, your cousin’s a tough un, I’m sure ‘e’s alright. We have to go and get some help. Run to the pub, lad and call for an ambulance. Eddy could be lyin’ unconscious down there, and that’s why ‘e’s not replying.”

“Right Dad,” Pete said, trying to compose himself. “And you’ll have to get your hand seen to.”

Uncle Stanley looked at his bleeding hand. “Aye, that’s a fair cut,” he remarked. “I don’t know what on earth got into those birds. There’s never been any reports of peregrine falcons attacking folk...seagulls maybe, falcons never!”

Down in the cave, Eddy had at last managed to halt the bleeding of his hands. Gazing around at his frozen surroundings, Eddy’s eyes took in the various shades of blue. The crystal pinnacles dispersed the light like giant prisms, breaking it down into all the colors of the spectrum. Bright rainbows of red, green and yellow were projected all around the cave. It brought to mind images of the Aurora Borealis. Watching the prismatic lights was soothing and dreamlike. Eddy sank into a tranquil state of mind. Here was a secret cavern, untouched by the chaos of the upper world. He had quite forgotten the awful incident with the falcons when the peaceful ambiance of the cave was shattered by two macabre voices, uttering a sinister rhyme.

“We are the Monsters, from the Deep
When we’re awake, we’re not asleep
When we’re asleep, we always dream
Of hearing fearful mortals scream!”

Eddy felt his skin prickle and his heart thud against his chest. The voices uttered a second verse:

“We are the Monsters, from the Deep
And softly, deftly, do we creep
Towards our unsuspecting prey

Who'll never again see light of day!"

Unnerving laughter rent the air, echoing off the walls of the ice cave.

"We are the Monsters, from the Deep
Mortals hear our calls and weep
Death for them grows ever near
When our mordant cries they hear!"

"Who are you?" Eddy demanded, his voice hoarse with fright. He'd just about had enough of being frightened for one day. "Reveal yourselves to me! Why do you hide? Are you afraid?"

"Should we do as yonder mortal says?" the first voice asked.

"Yes, brother dear, polite introduction pays!"

The voices softened, and no longer had the sinister tones that they first had. Now they sounded childlike and mischievous.

"Come on," Eddy said. "I'm not afraid any more. Do you have names, whatever you may be?"

"Touchstone and Brimstone are our names, Merpuppies we, who play great games!"

A huge sense of relief washed over Eddy. "Merpuppies? Thank goodness. Well, where are you? Aren't you coming out?"

"Who this mortal is, I think I know."

"He be from Coombe Appleby though!"

"Eddy Stone, yes it is him, chosen by our great Melgrim!"

And then, the two Merpuppies revealed themselves.

"Greetings, Eddy! You are not alone, when you be with Touchstone and Brimstone!"

Eddy smiled as he regarded the two creatures standing before him. "You know my name, do you know who..."

"No Merdog hasn't heard the tale, when across the water you did sail."

"To rescue Snarlgard from the mess, created by the Sorceress!"

The first Merpuppy was charcoal gray with a red zigzag patch across his face. "I be Touchstone, hear me cry," he announced.

"And Brimstone, I," the second replied. She was unique among Merdogs as being one of only a few who had pale, sandy colored fur.

"That's why my sister's name is Brimstone!" Touchstone said. "As golden as sulfur...smell it and groan!"

"Excuse me," Eddy interrupted, "but do you two always speak in rhyme?"

Touchstone regarded him with radiant green eyes. "To speak in prose would be most wrong. That's why we're rhyming all day long!"

“And Darkeye? Is he your brother?” Eddy enquired.

“Young Darkeye no, his parents be,”

“Mercalla and Growlfang, so you see.” Brimstone added. “We are the Merpuppies of Zulema and Cairngorm, he who gave me my golden form.”

“Oh I see,” Eddy said. “Well that clears that up.”

“Do not like our cave of ice?” Touchstone asked. “Methinks it’s very, very nice.”

“It is indeed, oh brother dear, and the sea is very near.”

“Yes, the cave is nice, but what’s the point of it? Does it serve some useful purpose?”

Touchstone cleared his throat and announced proudly, “Our cave, it leads to yonder home, beneath the churning ocean’s foam. The falcons cannot harm you here, the Green Whirlpool is what they fear!”

Eddy sat up with a start. “You two know about that falcon attack?”

“Indeed we do, but falcons not who did attack, rather two unicorns, with coats of black!” Brimstone said.

“I should have guessed it had been those two again,” Eddy sighed. “They followed me to the stone circle. I thought they were going to kill me.”

“We saved you in the nick of time, a thoughtful plan that was most sublime. They didn’t get the thing they craved...we stepped in and you were saved!” Touchstone added. “Do you know what they wanted from you? Your amulet with stones of blue.”

Eddy thought quickly. “The amulet! I left it behind on the bedside table. I was just thinking about it when the falcons attacked me. Listen, I have to get out of here, what about my uncle, and cousin? They’ll be worried about me. I bet they’ll have called the entire fire brigade and ambulance service. I have to get back.”

“No time for that, my dearest Eddy, you have a meeting with Melgrim, so you must be ready! Juliet Fairisle must come too, and cousin Pete, send him through!”

Touchstone alighted on one of the ice pinnacles. “Merpuppies possess a special little magic,” he said to Eddy, “to never use it would be tragic.”

Back at the site of Mortbury Rings, Pete and Uncle Stanley were growing frantic, waiting for help to arrive.

“What’s keepin’ ‘em so long?” Uncle Stanley muttered.

Pete walked over to the edge of the hole and peered in once more. “Eddy! Are you there? Speak to me! Speak...AGGGGHH!!” The hole swelled to twice its size and Pete tumbled down into its depths.

“Oh Lord no, not him too!” Uncle Stanley raced over, but before he could do anything, the hole closed up and ceased to exist.

“Mutterin’ Merdogs...” he said breathlessly. “I swear this site’s cursed!”

Chapter 16

In which the Green Whirlpool appears

Nox and Erebus were circling around Mortbury Rings and surveying the events very carefully. Uncle Stanley was shouting in desperation for his lost cousin and son.

"This is the work of the Merdogs," Nox muttered. "They took the mortal away from us. Now they've taken the other one too!"

"The first one didn't have the amulet though. That is probably why the Merdogs stepped in to save him, because he was defenseless," Erebus replied. "What about the other one?"

"They're up to something. They'll have a secret cave down there that leads into the sea. We'd better go and tell the Great Sorceress."

"Methinks she will be most displeased about the matter," said Nox.

"Most possibly yes, but if we don't tell her she'd find out sooner or later. She can read minds, you know." The two falcons headed back to the woods that were near to Coombe Appleby.

"It is indeed displeasing!" Cassandra shouted when told the latest news. "And so is this practice of moving from place to place. This dark wood, it will do for the time being. Darkness is what empowers us, my servants. Without it I cannot thrive. When night falls I shall seek out and kill those two mortals. I've had enough messing around. The time has come for them to be seen to."

"Oh Great One, you will only be able to kill the one they call Eddy Stone. He is without the amulet. As for the girl, she was not there. She must be still in the village," Erebus said. "What about her?"

"The girl is the least of my concerns at the moment. "What I want is Eddy Stone...dead! Tonight we shall be ready. I know the entrance to the ice cave. Two Merpuppies shall be easy victims...if we get to them before they have the chance to get back into the sea."

Cassandra shrank back into the shadows of the wood. With her presence, the trees seemed to lean away from her. The birds flew away and all fell very still. And just like before on Merrow Island, a dark cloud hovered over the woods.

Juliet Fairisle had been busy helping her mother with various chores. It had helped her to take her mind of things for a while.

"It's too quiet," she told herself. "Something's bound to happen soon. I sense it. I think I should go and see Eddy and Pete."

She hurried into the lounge and put on a cardigan, not noticing the precious amulet fall out of the pocket and slip down the side of the

couch.

"I'm just popping out for a bit, Mum," she called out. "I won't be long!"

"Of course you won't!" her mother replied from the kitchen. "Your father's bringing home some marlin for tonight."

As Juliet left the house and headed down the lane towards Stanley and Pat's house, she had an unmistakable feeling that someone or something was watching her. It was in the woods. She glanced across at those inky shadows, as black as funeral shrouds. A winding path led into the woods.

Juliet sensed that whatever lurked in there was not welcoming. Could it be the Black Unicorns again? She heard nobody else nearby and wondered whether to satisfy her curiosity and venture into the woods.

Cassandra was indeed watching, from the gloom beneath the trees. Here was the perfect chance to lure her victim and put an end to her interfering, although she hadn't decided whether to kill her straight away. Nox and Erebus were, as usual, watching her intently.

"Go ahead Nox, you know what to do."

"Yes, Great One. I shall bring her to you." The unicorn's body began to change, as though he were composed of molten rock. In a matter of seconds he had transformed himself into a small child.

Juliet saw the boy emerge from the edge of the wood. As soon as she saw him, she sensed that he was in danger.

"Keep away from the wood," she whispered. It was a dangerous place for such a young child. He appeared to be no older than three, and had bright blonde hair. Evidently, he must have wandered outside from his home and his parents might be unaware of his disappearance.

"I should at least go and take him home," Juliet said. "It won't take long." She was fond of children, having done work experience in a local nursery some years ago.

As she approached, the boy darted back into the trees. "Oh no, don't go back in there!" she shouted, but to no avail.

Tall, summer-dry grass lashed at her legs as she angled out towards the trees. Following a narrow, winding path, the land began to slope into a shallow gully. In more than half the wood the trees grew far enough apart to allow the sun to penetrate the underbrush and shed light on the trail. However, a dark cloud hung over the wood today. Through the interlocking branches, Juliet could see the gathering cumulonimbus. She hoped that there wouldn't be another bad storm like yesterday, which had caused major damage to several cottages.

There was no sign of the boy. Juliet wondered how on earth such a

small child could have disappeared so quickly. She descended further into the gully. The trees flanking the trail gave way to low, impenetrable tangles of bristly gorse. A few immense ferns, ideally suited to the coastal environment, overgrew the path and Juliet shivered as she pushed through them, for she felt as if scores of small hands were grabbing at her.

A broad but shallow stream cut a course through the bottom of the gully, and she paused by its bank to catch her breath. Most of the streambed was usually dry at this time of year, but yesterday's storm had replenished it. Inches of water moved lazily through the channel, glimmering in the meager daylight. A few trees had been uprooted, and others were leaning dangerously.

Behind her, a hundred yards away from the gully wall down which she had just descended, something shrieked. It was not an entirely human cry, not that of any animal either. The first call was answered by a second, in a noticeably variant voice.

Juliet froze, one hand against the deeply fissured bark of a pine, under a canopy of branches. She looked back and listened as the unseen creatures simultaneously began to wail, an undulant cry reminiscent of a pack of baying hounds. The sound was so cold it penetrated her flesh and pierced like a needle to her marrow.

Their baying was probably a sign that they had trapped her, so they no longer needed to be quiet. Juliet suspected that they could sense her every move. Feeling vulnerable and alone, but determined not to fall victim to the puling hunters, she turned and scrambled up the trail towards the southern rim of the gully. Soon she would be out of the woods and onto the beach...but where would she go from there?

"Pete!" Eddy exclaimed as his cousin came crashing down through the ice ceiling. "How...what? Ed, is that you? What's happening? Where are we?"

"A most unconventional meeting, I have to say, but alas it is the quickest way!" Touchstone interrupted. "Pete Stone, welcome to our cave...the situation's turning grave..."

Eddy struggled to explain. "They're Merpuppies, Pete. They brought me here, saved me from the falcons. They said I have a meeting with Melgrim. I left my amulet at home and..."

"I've got mine though," Pete said, "and as soon as you fell down the hole the falcons flew away!"

"Not falcons Pete. They were the Black Unicorns, Nox and Erebus, in disguise. They wanted my amulet."

Pete glanced at the Merpuppies. "Where do we go from here? And who are you two?"

“Touchstone stepped forward. “Sincere apologies to you, Pete! No introduction and we’re to greet! Touchstone I and Brimstone she, brother and sister, Merpuppies we!” His green eyes widened.

“Well...nice to meet you.” Pete said. He stretched out a hand absentmindedly, as if he were about to stroke a family pet.

“What does he want me to do?” Touchstone said, staring at the outstretched hand.

“To shake a paw and welcome you,” Brimstone replied. “It’s what land dwellers and their land dogs do.”

“Ah, now I see!” Touchstone said, stretching out a webbed paw. “So pleased am I to meet thee! A strange custom, I must say, but I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Guess we’re all here at last,” Brimstone said, “now before any more time has passed...”

“We’re not all here though,” Eddy shouted. “What about Juliet? Are we supposed to carry on without her?”

Suddenly, Touchstone’s eyes lit up. “The Fairisle girl, she is in danger...from someone who is not a stranger.”

Eddy and Pete stared at each other. “What do you mean? Who’s after her? Is it the Black Unicorns?”

“Cassandra be in the coastal wood...is that fully understood? Chasing Juliet out to sea, who can save her...you and me!” Touchstone said to his sister.

“She has no amulet any more, she’s unguarded on the shore. We shall lead her to our cave, your friend Juliet we shall save!”

The Merpuppies did not linger a moment longer to explain. They raced out through one of the labyrinthine passages towards the sea.

“Why would Juliet forget her amulet?” Eddy wondered.

As the woods opened out onto the north end of the beach, Juliet raced across the sand. A breeze off the sea was just cranking up, faint but chilly enough that she was glad to be wearing warm clothes. She crossed the soft sand towards the tall pine growing on the beach and so radically shaped by coastal winds that it reminded her of an abstract sculpture, all curved lines and sinuous form. On the damp sand at the surf’s edge, with the tide lapping at the strand inches from her shoes, Juliet dared to look behind her. She was glad to be out of the woods but the cries of her pursuers were surging towards her from that arboreal gloom.

“You want me?” she said through gritted teeth, “then come and get me!” She broke into a run, heading north along the curving shoreline.

Further back on the beach, time-worn rock formations and lone pines stared back at her. After running less than one hundred feet up

the beach, she heard a shrill, haunting cry that halted her. The sound was distant, rising and falling, rising and falling, then fading.

Chilled more by that strange call than by the brisk sea air, she wondered what creatures the Black Unicorns had become this time. Although it had been partly a canine howl, she was certain it had not the voice of a dog. Though it was also marked by a feline wail, Juliet was equally certain it had not issued from a cat.

She did not wait a second longer to analyze the sound. Resuming her run and scrambling up the beach, she reached the bottom of the cliff path which would lead her back to the village. Juliet was pretty sure that the Black Unicorns wouldn't attack her amongst other people...she would be safe if she could just get back home.

Atop the bluff that overlooked the half-moon beach, the same uncanny cries cut the air again. She ducked from antler-like tree branches that marked the cliff path. Pain was stabbing at her legs; she'd been running for a while now and was starting to tire. But knowing she must continue, she willed herself on. The beach had come to an end now and the only thing at the bottom of the cliff that she ascended was churning sea.

Those dreadful cries rose up behind her again, still in the woods but much closer than before. The two voices howled simultaneously, a pack of baying hounds at her heels, although they were not dogs at all but shape shifters, strange and terrifying.

Abruptly Juliet ensnared her foot on a tree root, tripped, tried to stop herself from falling and stumbled into thin air. The cliff path curved sharply round and with nothing to grab hold of, she tumbled down the cliff face, screaming.

The angry shrieking of her pursuers grew louder, nearer, and now the voices had a more frenzied quality.

Juliet hit the water with a great impact but it was deep, and with no submerged rocks nearby she was unhurt. Thrashing wildly, she clawed her way to the surface of the water, gasping for breath. As she broke the surface and stared up at the cliff from where she had fallen, the sight of Nox and Erebus staring back at her almost stopped her heart. Then she remembered that the sea was their weakness.

"You can't touch me now!" she yelled up at the hateful creatures. "You're too late!"

Erebus was enraged. "You foolish land dweller. Do you think you've outwitted us? Where are your Merdog friends now?" He aimed his horn directly at Juliet's head. "Mortal, you are insignificant...and defenseless No amulet can save you now."

A dazzling bolt of lightning burst forth from the tip of his horn. Almost at the same time, Juliet felt something grab her feet and yank

her down under the water. Any later and the lightning bolt would have killed her. The bolt hit the water and was magnified immensely, but its intended target had vanished beneath the waves. With nothing to strike, the lightning crackled and fizzled, before fading away.

Juliet opened her eyes and found that she was breathing freely underwater. The two Merpuppies swam around her, their eyes shimmering like crystals.

“Greetings, Juliet, so glad you arrived. Any later and you wouldn’t have survived!” Touchstone announced. “We must make haste, for your friends are waiting nearby. We must hurry, you’ll find out why!”

“I can breathe underwater!” Juliet said. “How...”

“I’m sure you’re aware now that Merdogs can make land dwellers breathe under water. We had to save you from certain slaughter.” Brimstone said. “Brimstone and Touchstone be our names, Merpuppies we, who play great games!”

Flanked by the two Merpuppies, Juliet found that she could swim through the water so quickly and easily that it was just like flying in a dream. In no time at all she saw something white and blue glinting above the surface of the sea. They had arrived at the ice cave.

Eddy and Pete sensed movement in the passages. “Do you think they’ve returned?” Eddy said. “I can hear...”

Touchstone and Brimstone scuttled into view, leading Juliet behind them. “We found your friend, she was nearly killed...luckily we came... and she isn’t chilled.”

Despite being soaking wet, in the presence of the Merpuppies Juliet did not feel cold at all. She laughed at the sight of Eddy and Pete.

“It was just meant to be, wasn’t it! We’re together again! Look at this ice cave!”

Touchstone broke up the happy tableaux. A loud roaring sound rattled the cave and icicles began to crack and plummet from the frozen ceiling.

“The cave’s being destroyed, it’s time to leave...through the Green Whirlpool...do you believe?”

“I believe anything now!” Eddy shouted. “What’s happening? Why’s the cave falling to bits?”

Brimstone looked very grave. “Cassandra’s angry...very angry... stark raving mad. Isn’t she just so very bad? She’ll never give up her quest...the Great Sorceress does never rest.”

“Hah!” Eddy shouted. “Her stupid unicorns couldn’t catch us, could they? They failed each time!”

“Go!” Touchstone yelled, “Don’t delay...she’s coming and you three she’ll slay! All of you, hold hands and follow my sister and me...in Regneva you’ll be free!”

“Regneva? The Merdog’s Realm? Are we going to the...” Juliet gasped. Suddenly a great void opened up in the darkest passage of the ice cave. Except it was no longer a passage, but a great swirling whirlpool, verdant and churning.

“This is it!” Touchstone yelled.

“This is what?”

The tremendous suction caught the five of them and dragged them into the whirlpool’s heart. At the same time, the ice cave exploded into a thousand shards. Cassandra had found them, but she was too late. Eddy, Pete and Juliet had entered the Green Whirlpool...

Chapter 17

In which land-dwellers set foot in Regneva

From the moment Eddy, Pete, Juliet and the Merpuppies entered the whirlpool, utter deafness overcame them. Holding desperately to each other, they tried to summon faces from their memory but could not recall a thing. Eddy's imagination was as blind as his eyes. His interior world wasn't a bottomless pit of darkness but a blank wintry whiteness, like a vision of driving snow. And so were the frigid, glacial depths that he and the others were being dragged into.

The intense suction of the whirlpool was like a great hand pulling them down. It was useless to resist the force, and at any rate there was no going back now. The ice cave had ceased to exist; any thoughts of returning to the human world would have to wait until later.

The five of them were passing through a doorway, a threshold. The crashing waves of sound arose from the whirlpool's swirling interior - except that it wasn't a whirlpool anymore but a long tunnel. It was marbled with blue-white veins to rival the consuming brightness at the core of a star. The pulsations swelled and heaved like strobe lighting...fire and thunder hammering, vibrating and throbbing. The pounding surrounded them as though they were inside the beating heart of a leviathan. Then, all of a sudden, there was blackness, silence and cold.

When Eddy and the others awoke they were in possession of all their senses again but didn't dare open their eyes. Everything was still muddled. The next thing Eddy knew when he half opened his eyes was that there was a soft green light on him from above and darkness below. He didn't seem to be standing on anything, or sitting, or lying. Nothing appeared to be touching him.

"Are...we here?" he whispered to the others, but got no reply. Almost at once Eddy felt that he was rushing upwards. His head suddenly came out into fresh air and he found himself on a small patch of grassy ground. Rising to his feet, he noticed that his hands no longer bore the cuts inflicted by the falcons. They had completely healed. And neither was he dripping wet, as one would expect after being immersed in water. He and the others were perfectly dry. Juliet, Pete and the Merpuppies were standing a few feet away.

"Are you okay Ed?" his cousin shouted.

"Umm...yes. I think so. Are we here?"

"See our world, how the badness has started," Touchstone whispered. "Cassandra, she is so cruel hearted!"

They glanced around at their surroundings. Eddy was standing on

the only patch of grass in the whole place. Stone pillars and buildings rose all around them. They appeared to be standing at the entrance to a small long-abandoned village. The settlement was bathed in a dull red light, not at all cheerful.

"I don't think much of this," Eddy said. "Is this the great Regneva?"

"It all feels so sad." Juliet murmured with something like a shudder.

The sky above them was very dark -a blue that was almost black. When you had seen that sky, you wondered how there could be any light at all. Looking back, there was no trace of the whirlpool from which they had just passed through. All five of them, without quite knowing why, were talking in whispers.

The ancient looking stonewalls and pillars rose very high all around the buildings. The windows in the houses were without glass, through which nothing but darkness could be seen. Further on, there were great, pillared arches yawning blackly like the mouths of railway tunnels. The entire area felt so cold and devoid of life or laughter, it was like every breath of happiness had faded away.

The stone of which everything was built was darkened, not unlike the smoke blackened houses of some northern mill towns. It was plainly very old. Many of the cobbled stones that paved the ground were cracked and worn. Few of them fitted together any more. Some of the arched doorways were half filled up with rubble.

Eddy kept glancing all around him; half afraid that somebody or something was watching him from the shadows while his back was turned.

"This place is nothing but ruins," he said at last. "It looks so old, almost medieval. Does anyone actually live here?" He stopped to listen to the dead, cold, empty silence. You just couldn't imagine anything growing or living here at all.

"This is only one part of Regneva, our land," Touchstone said. "No longer is it very grand. The Village of Demdron was so delightful, but Cassandra's evil has made it frightful."

"It's almost like...decay," Juliet said. "This is where it starts. If she's allowed to continue, the whole land will become dead and lifeless, just like this."

"Quite right," Brimstone said. "Now you see, we have to fight."

"Cassandra will never stop until all Regneva is finished, lost and gone. Then she'll start on your world too! What a predicament to be in!"

They all stopped and stared at him. "Touchstone! That didn't rhyme!"

"Ah, a mere slip of the Merpuppy tongue! I confess I said that, very wrong!"

“Where are we going?” Pete asked.

“To meet with Melgrim -soon we shall find him.” the Merpuppies replied.

“The landscape will get better in time, we’ll travel away from this village of grime.”

Eddy, Pete and Juliet saw for themselves the effect that Cassandra was having on the Merdog’s world. The lifeblood was slowly ebbing away. The scent of change and decay was in the air. Where there were once forests, now there were dead trees. Dried riverbeds, ruined dwellings and darkness were evident as far as the eye could see. There was myriad rock formations dotted across the land, each one gloom laden and unwelcoming like the ground that they stood on.

“I thought that you guys were invincible,” Eddy said. “Like, don’t you Merdogs have the power to stop all this?”

“Not on our own,” Brimstone replied sadly. “The Great Sorceress’ evil is much greater than before, as it has shown. If only our great Fengrim was here. It was he who made the ultimate sacrifice in defeating her the first time.”

“Fengrim. Yes, Melgrim told us the story about how he defeated Cassandra the first time.”

“The first of the Merdogs. He was a wise and powerful beast, and that’s just saying the very least. Legendary is his story, Melgrim shall tell it a second time in all its glory,” Touchstone said. “He will tell you how it all began...so we must reach him swiftly, if we can.”

At the edge of the Demdron territory the five friends arrived at a long tunnel. “This is it,” Touchstone said, entering the lightless passage. Slowly, the others followed him, unable to see a thing. Eddy was terrified that he would trip or walk into something. After what seemed like an eternity of groping along in pitch-blackness, the welcome sight of daylight greeted them at the end of the tunnel. The view that met their eyes was breathtaking. Lakes, trees and rich scenery that was beyond any panorama witnessed on a postcard could be seen all around. Although it was reminiscent in some places to the Norwegian fjords; Eddy, Pete and Juliet sensed that this was not an earthly place. It was a different world, hidden away from all others. To Juliet it was like the imaginary worlds in the stories she’d read as a child...Narnia, Alice in Wonderland, Neverland...although this place stood squarely on its own as a new and enchanting realm – the Merdog’s Realm.

Juliet was intrigued by the number of small round clouds that dotted the azure sky. “Unusual clouds...” she muttered.

“Ah, not clouds, Juliet! Those be the Demdrons, and there never were more curious creatures, soon to meet you.” Touchstone replied.

“Demdrons? What are they?” Pete asked.

“See for yourself,” Brimstone said, looking up at the sky, where one of the clouds was heading straight towards them. As it drew nearer, they all realized that it wasn’t a cloud at all but what appeared to be a winged fox terrier.

“All hail the Demdron!” The Merpuppies chorused together. “You’d never believe that Demdrons are a species of Merdog, would you? They’re ever so different from us, and that’s true.”

Eddy, Pete and Juliet regarded the winged dog standing before them. Then before they could say anything, it spoke to them.

“Oh woe, woe, most dreadful woe!” the Demdron wailed. “I didn’t catch a wink of sleep last night. Just couldn’t fall asleep!”

“Why was that?” Touchstone asked.

“Because I forgot to close my eyes!” came the Demdron’s reply.

Juliet giggled. “Oh dear...that is a problem!”

“Not the most, er, intelligent of creatures, the Demdrons.” Brimstone said.

Eddy, Pete and Juliet were most fascinated by the curious animal, which continued to speak extraordinarily fast, hardly letting them get a word in.

“Yes, yes, a Demdron am I, and how I like to fly! Unusual for a Merdog to hate water, isn’t it, but we detest the stuff. Our domain is in the air, but there’s nowhere to lie down in the sky, so we can transform ourselves into clouds. We Demdrons are an important race, for we were Fengrim’s messengers. Now we are the messengers of our great leader, Melgrim! Pleased to make your acquaintance, I go by the name of Sparkchaser. Horrible what’s happened to the Village of Demdron isn’t it? The village that was named after us?”

Juliet managed to interrupt Sparkchaser before he could start another sentence. “How come you look so different from all the other Merdogs, like Touchstone, Brimstone and Melgrim?”

The Demdron regarded her with his small, bright eyes. “Ah, well. Demdrons cannot truly be called Canis Oceanus. That’s what human land dwellers used to call Merdogs many years ago, in what you would have called...medieval times? As a separate species, you will never find us in the sea. We never had a form of our own to speak of, we used to be ever so boring...just like Touchstone and Brimstone!”

“We’re not boring, you cheeky beast!” the Merpuppies replied angrily.

“...As I was saying, we Demdrons needed a look to make us unique. As having the important honor of being Fengrim’s messengers, we needed to look like messengers. And nothing is faster than wings gliding on the wind...is this making sense so far?”

“Oh yes,” Eddy, Pete and Juliet said together. “But you look just like

a fox terrier, why is that?"

"Fox terrier?" the Sparkchaser said, amazed. "So that's what those land dwelling dogs were called! Well, one day, about two hundred years or so, we Demdrons chanced upon the human world and caught sight of one of those fox terrier dogs. That's when we decided once and for all what we wanted to look like. So Melgrim used his power to transform us into the beast that you see before you now. And we've been like that ever since. Before then we just looked a bit like Touchstone and Brimstone...very boring!"

Touchstone growled at Sparkchaser. "I think we've heard enough about your 'proud' race! Your insults to us are such a disgrace! But now we must meet with Melgrim," He turned to Eddy, Pete and Juliet. "You shall hear the full story from him." He turned and led them onwards down a winding path.

"I say, I think I'll just tag along with you," Sparkchaser said. "To have land-dwellers in Regneva is indeed a unique event. We all know of the great things you did to free Snarlgard."

Melgrim lived in a great ice cave, identical to the one made by Touchstone and Brimstone but on a much grander scale. On the outside it resembled any other cliff you might see on a coast. Its entrance was small and unimposing but it opened out into a massive chamber dominated by tall pillars. The floor was bright and green and glasslike in appearance.

"Agate and quartz, this what this cave is made of," the Demdron said. "Bet you thought it was ice, didn't you!"

"We did!" Eddy said. "I thought this was another ice cave like the one the Merpuppies created."

"Ice isn't popular with Melgrim," Sparkchaser replied, fluttering his wings. "Too cold."

Touchstone looked afraid. "Yes, but making ice caves is a lot of fun, that's why ours was done. Mustn't tell Melgrim though, or we'll be in a lot of woe!"

"Well we won't say anything!" Juliet sniggered.

"Been naughty Merpuppies, have you?" Sparkchaser taunted them, fluttering overhead but remaining just far enough out of reach when Brimstone took a swipe at him with her paw.

"Hush now," Touchstone said. "We're here. Just wait a while and do not fear."

"I shall go and call the Great Leader." Sparkchaser said, fluttering off into the blue-lit passages of the chamber.

"Little bug eyed twerp!" Touchstone was heard to mutter under his breath. Seconds later, the booming voice of Melgrim echoed down the passages.

“Come in! Enter, Edward, Pete, Juliet and Merpuppies. It is time for you to hear the story and meet the others.”

Touchstone and Brimstone led them down a corridor and into a great hall, filled to the brim with Merdogs.

“Isn’t it busy in here!” Sparkchaser replied, reappearing from nowhere. “Methinks the whole clan is here! There’s Snarlgard and Growlfang, Mercalla, Zulema, Cairngorm, Darkeye, Scuttle, Dreamcatcher, Guzzle and Bravesong...”

“Silence all!” Melgrim boomed, standing above all the others on a great stone plinth overlooking the hall. “Do come closer mortals and sit down. First, I shall explain to you how it all began...”

Eddy, Pete and Juliet made themselves as comfortable as possible at the foot of the plinth, looking up at the mighty animal above them.

“This is such an interesting story.” Sparkchaser whispered to them as he alighted on a small rocky stump nearby.

Melgrim cleared his throat, while a few of the other Merdogs coughed and scraped their feet on the floor. Then he raised his head and stared at the ice blue ceiling.

“Long ago,” he began, “the malevolent Cassandra wanted to rule the earth...”

Eddy listened in awe as the great Merdog told the story that explained how everything began...

Chapter 18

In which Merdogs sing sea shanties

There was a deafening silence from all the others in the great chamber, who sat enthralled as Melgrim continued his story. Even Sparkchaser, difficult to silence at the best of times, sat totally spellbound. When Melgrim had finished, Sparkchaser flew over to his three human companions and whispered, "I told you it was an interesting story, didn't I?"

Eddy and Pete said nothing. They were still staring at Melgrim. But Juliet was bursting with questions.

"This calls into question the human theory of how the world began," she whispered to the Demdron, who was listening intently. "It's like the kind of thing I've read in books about Greek Mythology. But in the Bible it says..."

"Merdogs know nothing of human religions," Melgrim answered, leaping down from on high to stand before her. "Are we not atheists then? For thousands of years we have lived, separated from the world of the land dwellers, living in our own world, that which you are now experiencing." He regarded her with his great green eyes. "We mean no disrespect to your beliefs," he said.

"What do you believe?" Juliet asked.

Melgrim stared at the ceiling. "I believe...that everything begins and ends at exactly the right time. What is, is what must be. When people suddenly die, it is fate that chooses who will die and who will continue to live. No matter how sudden it may appear to us, everything begins and ends at exactly the right time."

Eddy turned round. "My dad...what right did they have to take his life away? Why?" He stared at the floor, clenching his fists.

Melgrim walked towards him. "You never allowed yourself to properly grieve, Edward. And why was your father taken away from you when you needed him most? Has his death not given you the strength and determination to stand on your own two feet and make choices?"

"What choices? What have I achieved in my life? Nothing? Nothing but trouble, that's what my mother said. All I did was screw everything up, get into fights, vandalize things."

"That was because you were angry and upset that your father had died," Melgrim said. "You were venting your frustrations on everything. But you did make a choice didn't you? You chose to visit your uncle in Coombe Appleby. It was also your calling. Snarlgard, Darkeye and myself sensed that you would be the one to help us, so we indirectly

called you. Your uncle sent you a letter and some money inviting you to stay. And you accepted his invitation.”

“Well I wanted to get away from my mother, didn’t I? She was making my life hell. I didn’t really want to come, but it was better than staying in Chorland Green.”

“You were never alone on your journey, Edward,” Melgrim continued. “On your journey down I sent a messenger to watch you. Do you not remember the old man?”

Eddy’s eyes widened as he remembered the mysterious old man who had sat next to him on the train, then disappeared. “He...I -I knew he was odd. Who was he?”

“Why, me in disguise of course!” Sparkchaser interrupted. “Did I not mention another little secret? I am the only Demdron who can disguise himself as a human land dweller. And blooming difficult it was too. I couldn’t stay in that form for very long. That’s why I left so soon. Even before you arrived, Melgrim and the others had a feeling that you were someone special.”

“Do you remember when we first met on the beach? I was summoned to the surface by Snarlgard and I offered you and your friends three amulets.”

“My amulet!” Eddy remembered. “I’m afraid I left it behind. I can’t believe I forgot it. The Black Unicorns wanted it.”

“No need to worry,” Sparkchaser said. “I shall get it for you, and yours too, Juliet. Down the side of the...now what’s the name for those things in the land dweller’s houses that people sit on?”

“Armchairs? Couches? That’s the one. I’ll go and bring them straight away.”

“Much obliged, Sparkchaser,” Melgrim said. “Take the quickest portal.”

“Indeed, oh Great Leader. Indeed.” With a furious flapping of wings, the little Demdron had flown out of the chamber and out of sight.

Juliet declined to ask how he would retrieve the amulets, for it was obvious to her that some kind of magical ability would enable him to do so.

“My friends,” Melgrim said, staring at Eddy, Pete and Juliet. “As I previously said about things beginning and ending, soon the sun will set on my time here.” His voice was marked with a note of sadness. “Sometimes the right way is not the easiest one.”

“Melgrim, what do you mean?” Juliet asked him, not liking what she was hearing.”

“It is nothing for you three to worry about,” the great Merdog replied. “When the time comes, I shall be prepared. What lies ahead is a great battle. Cassandra will soon unleash the full force of her powers. It

won't be long now before she will have regained the strength she had before she was defeated the first time."

Pete looked at his cousin. "What does that mean for us?"

"Keep your amulets with you at all times," Melgrim said. "If you believe in yourselves, there is nothing you cannot do. Hold true to this belief."

Juliet nodded at him. "We shall do. We'll be okay, you two. We share something extremely powerful."

"What's that then?" Eddy asked.

"Friendship. Not that we always were such good friends of course," she laughed, remembering her first meeting with Eddy. "You were so reluctant to talk that evening at the statue!"

"I was tired after that nightmare train journey that's all! So would you have been if you'd had endured that hellish trip!"

"Whatever you say, Ed," Juliet laughed, playfully elbowing him.

Melgrim smiled at them. "You are correct, friendship is very powerful. And nobody knows that more than Snarlgard."

Sparkchaser traveled between two realms and passed through the clouds. Using one of his many shortcuts, he entered the human world. Spreading his wings, he descended upon Coombe Appleby.

Auntie Pat was in the kitchen, busy baking yet more biscuits. Few things in life delighted her so much as baking. She was not fond of shop-bought food, believing that homemade cakes and loaves were far superior.

"It's such a shame that folk today haven't the time to bake their own food. Some can't even boil an egg. They work such long hours," she said to herself. "It is sad that people can be so unhappy when they have plenty to spend. Money can't buy you real happiness, just material things."

A swift white shape darted in front of the kitchen window. Auntie Pat only glimpsed it for a fraction of a second.

"Good heavens, was that a seagull? It nearly hit the window. I'd better take a look outside and see if it's on the ground."

Sparkchaser folded his wings. "Hmm, it would be really handy if I was able to transform myself into something else other than an old land dweller and a cloud. Neither is suitable for this job. So I'll just go as myself."

He stood on the doorstep, wondering how to get inside. Presently, the back door opened and Auntie Pat found the small dog sat on the step.

"Oh, hello little chap, where did...you come from?" she looked with some bemusement at the wings, which were tightly folded against the

dog's back. "E, heavens to heart failure, who did that to you? Young uns playing tricks on poor beasts again. Are you lost?"

Sparkchaser looked up at her with his beady little eyes. "Oh no, if you please, good land dwelling' lady, I know exactly where I'm going. Love to stop and chat with ye but I is in a bit of a hurry, like. Do forgive me." And without hesitation, the Demdron scuttled past her and into the house in search of the amulet.

"Oh lordy! Oh merciful heaven! The dog's possessed! I'm seeing things! I'm...I'm...going to...she grabbed the side of the doorframe and fell flat on her back, out cold from the shock.

Sparkchaser located the amulet in no time at all. "Ah there you are, my beauty," he said, picking it up from the bedside table. "Now just for the other one, at the girl's house." He flew out of the room, down the landing and back past poor Auntie Pat who was still lying on her back in the doorway, out for the count.

"Poor mortal land dweller!" Sparkchaser muttered. "I really shouldn't have done that, but seeing the look on their faces is such fun!"

Juliet's mother was busy painting in the garden. Sparkchaser alighted on the garden wall and watched her for a few seconds.

"She's in a world of her own," he said to himself. "She won't see me at all." He hurriedly swooped through the open kitchen window and into the sitting room.

"Blow me down, what bizarre things these land dwellers have." He did not notice Jem the tabby cat sneaking up behind him.

"The amulet's down the side of one of these things," Sparkchaser said to himself. "If I could only just..."

The cat hissed.

Sparkchaser spun round. "Yikes! Fool mortal feline! Would you like to communicate?"

Jem arched his back as he faced the intruder. He detested dogs and birds. Now here was a creature with the qualities of both!

"Not fond of fireside chats? Ah, I guess not."

Jem lunged at the Demdron, attempting to take a swipe at him with his claws.

"Great realms of Regneva! Now there's no need for that kind of behavior I'll leave as soon as I find what I'm looking for." He swooped into the air to avoid the cat's advances and Juliet's amulet tumbled onto the carpet.

"What luck! There it is! He dived down to pick it up, and at the same time Jem pounced, pinning down Sparkchaser.

"Can you fly now?" Jem said at last, "I think not!"

"You thought wrong then, didn't you?" Sparkchaser replied, and his body began to transform into that of a cloud. The cat squealed as the

great mass of cumulus filled the sitting room. Sparkchaser floated into the air. "Now I really must make haste!"

The cloud shot out of the room with such force that ornaments fell off the windowsill. Jem fled in a wild panic as Sparkchaser escaped through the kitchen window once more and up into the sky.

Mrs Fairisle felt a sudden breeze and glanced behind her, only to see her cat come charging out of the cat flap like a frightened rabbit.

"What on earth's the matter with you, you crazy animal?"

Sparkchaser returned to Melgrim's cave in no time at all.

"Well, that was interesting. Had a good one to one with your cat, Miss Fairisle! And he was delightfully unfriendly! Can't say the same about your pleasant Auntie Pat, Eddy! She fainted with delight when I spoke to her!"

"Sparkchaser, you didn't attempt to communicate with another land dweller, did you? Please tell me you didn't!"

"Oh Great Master! No harm was done! She will wake up and believe that it was all a dream! Do not fear! I was not seen by anyone else!"

"Let us hope not then," Melgrim replied. He was thinking about Cassandra. "Now, why don't you three experience all that Regneva has to offer? It is right and proper that you see for yourselves why our world is so special. Perhaps, Sparkchaser, you would oblige?"

"Indeed, oh Great Master. But not until I and the others have sung our song!"

Touchstone and Brimstone came up behind him. "Ah, the song that Merdogs sing, in your ears and minds it'll ring!"

Sparkchaser cleared his throat and announced to the others, "Your attention please, we are all to engage in the Great Song of the Merdogs, 'Below Us, Only Water!'"

And this is what they sang:

"Below us, only water
That's what land dwellers say
In their boats atop the sea
Where they're sailing every day

Below us, only water
They'll never know what be
Lurking in those fathoms deep
Or in the great Yew Tree!

Below us, only water
It's a long long way to sink

Drowning under crashing waves
A horrid thought to think!

Below them, only water
But to us, the way
Regneva is our sacred land
So hear us when we say.”

There was much cheering and stamping of webbed feet as every Merdog joined together for the final verse.

“Below you, only water But you three know that now The secret realm where Merdogs dwell I bet you wonder how!”

Eddy, Pete and Juliet all clapped together. “Well done, well done. A spirited performance!” Pete said. “Do you sing very often?”

“Oh we sing all the time,” Sparkchaser said happily. “How about this one? It’s a land dweller’s song. They wrote it in honor of us Merdogs! I love the phrases they use! ‘Born to the sound of crashing waves!’”

“Those are the words inscribed on the statue in the village!” Pete said. “Well, what better than to sing it! It’s a brilliant song, even if it does describe us as ‘worthy foes’.” The Merdogs raised their heads and began to sing a deafening rendition of the Coombe Appleby song.

“Born to the sound of crashing waves Feared by mortals, strong and brave
Pirates and sailors turn and flee When they see Merdogs, out at sea.
Eyes of green and coats of scales Tails of fish and coats of scales
Nobody knows where Merdogs dwell Deep in the ocean’s depths of hell
Born to the sound of crashing waves Feared by mortals, strong and brave
A Merdog is a worthy foe Hear their call when wild winds blow!”

Chapter 19

In which Cassandra invades

Cassandra was standing on the edge of the cliff, gazing coldly at the sea which she so detested. Her icy stare was colder than the frigid waters beneath her.

"The Merdogs believe that Regneva is further than any measure made by a sorceress. Well, not for much longer. Soon I shall be able to enter their world and destroy it and its inhabitants. There I shall crush Neptune's beloved pets and the sea shall at last be mine to control. So much power -the crashing waves! Unlimited power! I shall have it all!"

The sea, normally so calm and peaceful, raged and tore at the horizon. It was agitated by the presence of the sorceress. The rain poured down from the doom-laden clouds and Cassandra smiled. She loved the fury of the storms she created. The sea was some angry beast now, set loose on the unsuspecting world. It roared and ravaged with furious claws, crashing against the cliffs and scraping against the golden sands, which now looked gray like everything else.

The sky echoed the anger of the sea, rumbling deep like an enraged god. The black clouds heaved, rolling on, an endless heaven.

Raising her hands to the sky, Cassandra felt the full strength of her powers returning. She turned to laugh at the Yew Tree, Fengrim. Further up the cliff it stood, straining against the force of the wind.

"Look at you, Fengrim! You are nothing but branches and leaves! Who's going to stop me now? Melgrim, the current 'Great Leader'? A Merdog who has to call upon land dwellers for assistance? Such trust is his greatest folly. Your race is a weak one, Fengrim. And this time they shall be defeated. Neptune was foolish to hand over control of the sea to his pets!"

Cassandra uttered a maniacal laugh, scarlet lightning blazing in her eyes. Her long black hair billowed in the mighty wind, but she stood firm. Nox and Erebus appeared by her side, ready to serve their malevolent sorceress to the very end. The residents of Coombe Appleby meanwhile remained in their homes, hoping that the storm would soon pass.

"The three land dwellers have been taken into Regneva!" Nox said. "What fools they are, Great Sorceress! You shall claim three human victims too!"

"Yes I shall, Nox. One cannot destroy enough of the living!"

The first flash of lightning came, covering everything in a white, ghoulish glow. For a mere moment the intensity of Cassandra's storm

was blinding. Then the flash was gone, lost in the obis of time. The thunder came, a creature's bellow sounding almost like a Merdog itself. Cassandra could almost see its growing eyes. As it fought against her evil, so its spittle of anger rained, increasing with each roaring cry, every attempt to cut the ground below with its claws.

And still the sea crashed and heaved, reaching its fingers to the wicked sorceress above it. The white horses galloped and reared, shaking their foamy manes and whipping their whitened tails, frenzied by the forces that Cassandra was inflicting on the world.

Blazing, like a phoenix ball of fire, Cassandra fought against the resistance of the Green Whirlpool. It rose out of the swirling waters like a gigantic eye. Through the sea spray it looked at her and she returned its gaze.

Uncle Stanley had been forced to abandon the fruitless search for his son and nephew. The emergency services could find no trace of the sinkholes through which Eddy and Pete had vanished down.

With a heart as heavy as an anchor, he reluctantly gave in to the fierce storm and prepared to go home.

"Oh Lord," he sobbed, "What do I tell Pat?" He was inconsolable as the fireman announced that it would be too dangerous to continue the search in such fierce weather conditions.

"We'll resume at first light," the fireman said. "Mr Stone, we should take you home. There's nothing to be gained from stopping out here."

Eddy, Pete and Juliet opened their eyes to the magic and beauty of Regneva. All along, they had expected the Merdogs to dwell in some cave on the seabed. But here was a complete world, with fields, rivers and trees. It was indescribable. The surroundings were a feast for the eyes, but unusual. Juliet was intrigued by the trees, which appeared to be growing upside down. Sparkchaser fluttered around the heads of the curious visitors.

"Well, what do you think of it so far? Pretty neat, eh? Of course, you've seen nothing yet! When we get to Pacific Merdog territory, things will really start to pick up."

"Pacific Merdogs?" Eddy said. "Who, or what are they?"

The Demdron took a deep breath. "Well they're Merdogs of course! Were you expecting dragons or griffins, perhaps? In Regneva, there are only Merdogs, but we're not all the same! Take me, a Demdron, for example. As I'm sure you'll agree, I look nothing like Melgrim or Snarlgard, as you found out earlier."

"So there are even more different species of Merdog, then?" Eddy continued. "How many are there in total?"

“A different species for every sea and ocean on Earth,” Sparkchaser replied. “The Pacific Merdogs, the Arctic Sea Merdogs, the Atlantics and so on. Melgrim, Snarlgard, Darkeye et al are Atlantic Merdogs. The Arctic Sea Merdogs are the most unusual and secretive of all.” Sparkchaser paused. “They...remember. Nothing you ever say to them is forgotten. The things they can recall...it’s just amazing! But nothing beats having wings, does it?”

“Uh, I guess not,” said Pete. “When do we meet the...”

“Others? All in good time, my dear land dweller. All in good time!”

The three friends continued down a winding path, with Sparkchaser leading them. All around them they could see Merdogs going about their peaceful business and enjoying the delights of their world.

“Rubies and sapphires mean nothing to us,” Sparkchaser said. “There is only one thing that is precious to a Merdog. Freedom.”

Juliet cast her mind back to the incident with Snarlgard and the Iron Collar. “Precious indeed,” she whispered. “So, with your world all here, how come Merdogs are known as Guardians of the Sea? Do they spend much time actually in the seas?”

Sparkchaser fluttered down beside her. “But of course, young land dweller! Without the sea, there would be no Green Whirlpool, which as you know by now is the gateway to Regneva. Neptune created many great things, Regneva included. In the vast oceans, the powers of Merdogs are enhanced. Neptune placed us in charge of the seas, and thus we became its Guardians. Without any god to control its extreme powers, the sea would have destroyed the whole land dwelling world. Have you not wondered why your scientists and marine biologists...I think that’s the name Melgrim said...have never discovered Merdogs? We keep ourselves well hidden. It was almost as if we didn’t exist...” Sparkchaser’s voice trailed off as he noticed that every other Merdog in the vicinity had fallen silent. They were all staring up at the sky, which had turned a macabre shade of red. The Demdron’s eyes radiated fear. With the orange hue of the sun reflecting on the rivers and lakes, it brought to mind the appearance of flowing blood. But the sudden appearance of a dark shape high in the crimson vault sent chills through Sparkchaser’s body.

“It’s an omen,” he said. “Blood will be shed. Oh, this is where it starts. I know now that a terrible thing is coming...”

“What do you mean?” Pete asked. “What’s wrong?”

“Blood will out! Oh no, it’s going to be so terrible my friends, so terrible! I sense death. Lives are...in danger!”

Juliet attempted to calm the frightened Demdron, who was rapidly getting more and more alarmed, trembling in mortal fear.

“Oh God!” Juliet exclaimed, pointing across at the surrounding area.

“Look! The landscape! It’s...fading!”

“Not only fading, but it’s turning black!” Eddy said. “Ugh, I don’t like it. Sparkchaser, what on earth’s happening to Regneva?”

“Cassandra!” Sparkchaser uttered, and then he would say no more. A swirling cloak of menacing darkness, spreading like spilt ink, was gathering along the western horizon, above the mountainous plateau of the Pacific Merdog territory. The land, which only minutes earlier had felt so safe and bright, now harbored a sinister presence. The trees and bushes leant away from the mountains, their roots creaking. If they had had feet they would have run, far from the darkness as fast as they could.

Sparkchaser was a quivering wreck. “Oh she’s cold! So very cold! She wants to make us all cold too. My nose will be frozen. And my wings will be frozen. She makes everything ice. Not pretty ice caves like Touchstone made, though. This is ice imbued with the dark evil. Satan’s crystals...the same ones from the Iron Collar! Come, we must get back to Melgrim’s cave. For the time being, we shall be safe there...it is the last bastion of defense against the sorceress.”

With hearts beating as though they would burst, the four figures turned and fled, along with hundreds of other Merdogs. The Demdrons spread their wings and filtered down from the sky whilst the various species of Merdogs deserted their hidden domains in the mountains and all headed towards the cave.

Melgrim was standing at the entrance. He looked extremely grave. What he was seeing, he did not like.

“How...is this possible? Cassandra has tried many times to enter Regneva. But every time she has failed. Now somehow, she is slowly managing to infiltrate our world. I fear her powers are greater than they have ever been.”

Snarlgard crept outside and stood beside him, staring at the mass influx of Merdogs approaching the cave. “We’re being invaded, Great Leader. But why do they run? Are we not in the presence of those with the Hidden Power?” It was then that the great green eyes of Melgrim lit up once more.

“The Hidden Power,” he said. “I think now may be the time to use it.”

Chapter 20

In which a nightmare comes true

Cassandra watched them as they ran. She followed them down the shifting shades of color, through turbulent water and troubled ground. The land dwellers would be shining ornaments in her dark halls. Brightly they would glow, their light resisting the choking swathes of her darkness. She had to stop them. They belonged to her now. They would never be free or be at rest.

“I shall murder their sleep. In their realms of dream, I shall serenade them with death songs. And if they die, then they shall not be at peace. I shall have an eternity with which to torment their souls.”

Her black hair was soft and flowing, and her piercing, dark eyes shone. She almost held Regneva in her hand – a precious flower that she would soon crush. For so long it had been tantalizingly just out of reach. But now it was almost within her control.

“There will of course be fierce resistance from the Merdogs. Defeating them shall not be easy, but I shall defeat them.”

Cassandra had every confidence that the combined strength of the land dwellers would not be enough against the might of her newly acquired powers, amulets or no amulets.

“It will be like trampling insects underfoot!” she remarked.

The road back to Coombe Appleby was unlit for most of the journey. Mature oaks and beeches, their branches tossing wildly in the wind, leaves scattering everywhere, replaced the lampposts as Uncle Stanley arrived back at the cottage.

“Mr Stone, are you sure you’ll be all right?” the voices of the firemen asked. Uncle Stanley did not answer. He got out of the fire engine and walked mechanically towards the front door as if in a trance.

“Thanks...for the lift,” he murmured.

“We’ll find them, Mr Stone. I promise you, we’ll find them.”

Dizzying patches of light from the rising moon shone through the racing clouds. In the middle of the lane lay the bloody remains of some small animal, which had been run over. Uncle Stanley looked round. All up the lane he saw corpses of rabbits and hedgehogs; small beasts crushed to death on that uneven road. It looked like the scene of a massacre. Had all these creatures perished in the storm?

Thunder... or was it? He heard the thud of hooves and turned his head towards the east. Four horses were tearing across a field, their eyes wide and terrifying. Evidently, the storm had unnerved them.

Uncle Stanley could almost feel their hot breath and heavy, mad

animal scent. From the leaves of the tree above him, an owl screeched, startling him for a moment. The night was alive and agitated by the weather. Uncle Stanley hurried towards the door with a sense of dread. A flock of black birds, possibly crows, lifted from the hedge and clouded the moon, screaming curses.

Stanley Stone was seized by fear. It was wrong. It was as if every living thing was trying to warn him of something. The lane was full of mangled corpses, the trees were full of alarmed birds, the fields full of mad horses – Coombe Appleby was a village in the grip of fear.

As he placed his hand on the door, two pairs of red eyes gleamed at him from the distance. Foxes, he thought, but in an instant they blinked and disappeared. He went inside and slammed the door, relieved to be away from the storm. This was Mother Nature at her most powerful. She was angry and afraid. He would continue to wonder what had been the cause of the recent bizarre events in the village. The violent storms, the strange lights on Merrow Island, the falcon attack...and the loss of his son and nephew. He prayed to God that they were still alive.

“Help them, dear Lord,” he whispered. “What does it all mean?”

Eddy, Pete and Juliet raced along the path towards Melgrim’s cave. Merdogs and Merpuppies, Demdroms and the like ran alongside them, each trying to reach sanctuary before the other.

“We’re nearly there!” Juliet shouted. “Just a few more yards...”

She fell. She had put her foot in some depression and went down, dragging Eddy and Pete with her.

When they stood up, the welcome entrance to Melgrim’s cave was nowhere to be seen. They were no longer on the path but in a long stone walled corridor lit with candles. It resembled the interior of some ancient castle.

“What’s happening? Where are we?” Eddy gasped. He wondered if they had all been teleported to another place.

“In trouble, unless I am very much mistaken,” Pete replied.

At the end of the corridor was a red curtain. It was most likely concealing a way out. They hurried towards it. Juliet pulled the curtain across and a cloud of leathery wings flew straight into their faces.

High, piercing squeals shattered the air. Sharp little claws and flapping wings tangled in Juliet’s hair and tore at her scalp. She stumbled backwards and Pete quickly stepped in to beat off the flying creatures.

Bats. That’s what they were. The three of them looked up and in the flickering light saw scores of tiny winged mice darting about aimlessly as if pursued by all the devils of Hades. Eddy wrenched the

curtain from the rail to reveal an open doorway. Cold air flooded into the corridor, extinguishing the candles. In the ensuing darkness, the bats wheeled about and flew out of the doorway, still screaming as they vanished into the night. Eddy turned to Juliet, who looked pale and on edge.

“One hell of a shock!” he said, with the ghost of a grin. “Are you okay?”

She nodded. “It’s just one fright after another. Bats have got radar. They don’t fly into people’s hair.”

“They were freaked. Something spooked them. It must be You-Know-Who, the witch of Doom.”

Juliet nodded. “Cassandra. It must be her. She’s trying to stop us again, isn’t she? Now what do we do?”

They gazed outside at a vast forest that spread out towards the horizon.

“I don’t know whether we’re still in Regneva, or in another dimension or back home. But this certainly isn’t Coombe Appleby!” Pete said.

“We’ve got to get out of here and find our way back to the Merdogs,” Juliet interrupted him. They could be in need of our help. They’re facing their greatest enemy now. You know she’ll stop at nothing until she’s destroyed them.”

Cassandra was watching the three friends decide what to do. She had placed them in her own landscape, a nightmarish place that she had simply created in her imagination. With her new and enhanced powers she could transfer people into her own imaginary worlds and control them like puppets.

Enjoying herself immensely, she called for her two Black Unicorns.

“Let us have a little bit of fun and games with these three mortals,” she sniggered. “I wonder...do they like forest fires? Trees always look better when they’re being destroyed. Nox, Erebus, go and liven things up for them. Chase them, terrify them...and I shall sit back and enjoy.”

“Yes, Great Sorceress. At once.” The two beasts galloped off towards the unsuspecting trio.

At night the sky above the forest was pale blue and hollow like a mussel shell on the seashore. The light lingered on the hill line, where trees were dark.

“Do you think Melgrim has sent us here so we shall be safe?” Juliet said.

Eddy looked frustrated. “Why would he do that? I very much hope that he hasn’t, because we’re not achieving much out here in God knows where.”

The sound of pounding hooves rent the air, and silenced them abruptly.

“We’ve got company.”

Through the bramble strewn field that they had just traversed came the galloping figures of the Black Unicorns, with their eyes as red as rubies.

“Oh no,” Juliet said, chills hammering down her spine. “Not...again.”

She reacted quickly. “Come on, split up, one of us will have the chance to escape! Two unicorns can’t chase three separate figures, can they?”

“What difference does splitting up make? I’d rather die together with you two than all alone. They’re capable of anything!” Pete yelled, but at the same time he and Eddy obeyed her command and shot off to the right and left of the forest.

Juliet ran straight on. She had been fleeing for so long now, it seemed. She scarcely could face another pursuit from the demonic unicorns. But she had made one thing crystal clear to herself. She was never going to surrender to Cassandra’s evil, or Cassandra herself.

“If I shall die, I shall die fighting,” she told herself as though she were a soldier in a brutal war.

Eddy ran through the western side of the forest, not knowing where he was going or how long far he would have to run. Any person who thought he could out-run a horse, or an evil unicorn with mysterious powers was foolish beyond the extreme. There was no way he could remain one step ahead from Nox and Erebus. As he raced on through clumps of stinging nettles, a bright yellow spark shot above his head. Was it a shooting star? Whatever it was, it distracted Eddy so much that he tripped in the tangled mass of bramble and bracken and fell down.

He swore to himself as he pulled himself up from the damp foliage, his hands and forehead marked with cuts. Then the unmistakable odor of smoke met his nostrils. Eddy turned round, expecting to see the Black Unicorns standing over him like lions cornering a gazelle. But instead he saw a fierce wall of heat and light...fire!

Eddy felt as though his blood had turned to ice water. It was the scenario from his dream, no, nightmare. The nightmare he had endured on the first night at Coombe Appleby. It had been a warning of things to come. And now Eddy was living out his worst nightmare. He tried to convince himself that this was all just a dream and he was in fact safe at home, snuggled under warm blankets. But he knew it was true.

“Got...to run. Got to run!”

There was no sign of Nox and Erebus. Perhaps they had not started the fire; perhaps this was something even beyond their control. The flames were angry and closing rapidly, swallowing up the trees and shrubbery, hungry mouths of dragons who consumed everything in their path.

Eddy could see grotesque eyeless faces staring back at him from the blaze. It brought to mind images of a Jack O' Lantern.

Once more he forced his tired body into a shambling run. Clouds of heat wafted over him. The crackling roar of the fire was increasing.

What happened in the dream? Eddy was frantic as he desperately tried to flee from the inferno that was pursuing him. Try as he might, he could not get away from it, or out of the trees. The fire seemed to have a mind of its own. No matter how much he darted and deviated off the path, the flames remained behind him.

The welcome sight of open ground lay ahead, and behind that was a high cliff. That was when Eddy saw them. Nox and Erebus stood on the top of that cliff, watching him. This was their fire.

Eddy had never wanted to destroy anything so badly in his life until now. Every ounce of hate and frustration raged up inside him. He hated the Black Unicorns. He hated being tricked, manipulated and tormented by enigmatic foes he could not comprehend. He...

The ground opened up, a yawning abyss, yielding utter darkness. Eddy tumbled down this chasm, which tapered down into a tiny pit at the bottom with barely enough room to move.

Cassandra watched him fall. "He's persistent," she said. "But let's try another little surprise." She raised her long white fingers to her forehead.

Eddy withdrew his hands away from the walls of the chasm as he felt a thick, viscous liquid trickle down through his fingers. Blood. Shocked, he realized the walls were bleeding. It came thick and fast, cascading down in myriad rivulets. Soon it had pooled around him, reaching his ankles. The bottom of the pit was filling up. He would soon drown. Drowning had always been his worst nightmare. Drowning in blood would be even worse.

"My amulet, where is it?" He reached in his pocket and pulled out the tourmaline-encrusted charm. It wasn't glowing. It was supposed to glow when he was in danger and keep him safe from harm."

"Come on you stupid thing, please help me! Don't do this to me!" He clutched the cold amulet tightly. It did not respond.

Then Eddy cried. He wept properly for the first time in years. He cried for his father, for the hopeless situation he was in and for everything that had gone wrong in his life. Crying was proof that he was still human. Crying meant that no one had stolen his soul. He

was still Eddy Stone. He was no longer ashamed to cry.

The voice spoke softly to him as the blood flowed all around him. "Do not be afraid."

Eddy wondered if he had died and was in the presence of God. As he looked up, the blood filled pit he was trapped in melted away and there was nothing surrounding him but blueness.

"I'm dead," he said to himself. "This is what it's like to be dead." He looked up and down. He was just floating. Eddy didn't feel like crying any more. The feeling he felt was one of peace...safety and security. It was so sudden though, was he really in a celestial place?

"Not dead..." the voice said again. "I have rescued you from the mind of a sorceress. At this moment in time you are in limbo."

"I'm not dead!" Eddy was shocked and delighted. "Who are you? What's limbo?"

"Relax," said the voice. "Fengrim is with you."

Chapter 21

In which Fengrim sends a message

The calming, rhythmic voice spoke to Eddy again as he floated in that azure mantle.

“She cannot harm you now. Not here, at least. You are safe.”

“But what of my friends?” Eddy asked. “Where are they now?”

The voice of Fengrim told him not to worry, for Hidden Power was with them.

“It comes from the heart,” he said. “Your two friends are good in heart and mind.”

A sudden flash of blue light had interrupted Cassandra’s mindscape, and she turned around to see Nox and Erebus running towards her.

“Sorceress! The boy has vanished! What do you wish us to do?”

Cassandra’s eyes blazed as brightly as the raging forest fire she had created. “No, that’s not possible. He was trapped in a pit of blood. There was no way he could have escaped. He is in my mindscape. I control where he goes!”

“He has gone, Great Sorceress. The pit has...also gone.”

Cassandra’s face twisted into a look of complete and utter rage. “Merdogs!” she yelled. “It has to be the Merdogs! They shall be vanquished!”

Eddy looked around his empty surroundings. “Fengrim,” he said, “you’re the first of the Merdogs, aren’t you?”

“Indeed yes,” the calm, emotionless voice replied. “I am the one transformed into a tree by the sorceress. But it was you who gave me the power to free you,” he said.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand,” Eddy said. “I don’t even know how myself and the others ended up in the stone corridor. One minute we were in Regneva and then...”

“Cassandra transferred the three of you into her mindscape. She was going to kill you, but not the others.”

“Pete and Juliet! What is she doing with them? Can’t you save them too?”

“I can do nothing more. Remember, I am a tree still, not a Merdog. Cassandra wishes to invade the minds of your friends and use them as puppets.”

“Fengrim! You’ve just rescued me, now you tell me there’s nothing you can do for my friends?”

“I did not rescue you Edward. You did that yourself. It is called Hidden Power.”

Cassandra was no longer an observer. She drifted through dreams, looked through mirrors and pools of water, reading the minds of the land dwellers. What she wanted was to enter the mind of one of them and control that person entirely. She had never attempted it before, but now her powers were incredibly strong; she might even try to enter the mind of a Merdog. The thought of entering people’s dreams and minds delighted Cassandra. Of course, she would turn the dreams into terrifying nightmares. How could the Merdogs stand in her way now?

“They did me a favor,” she said. “By defeating me the first time, I and my unicorns grew stronger...stronger even than Melgrim! I am invincible! They cannot hope to defeat me this time.” She turned to the Black Unicorns. “Soon we shall have our world. Do you remember how I said it would be? All of the planet shall be flooded -Neptune’s greatest nightmare shall come true! I shall destroy everything and enjoy doing so.”

Then she began to wonder if her great powers could extend to beyond the earth, Regneva and the oceans. Was the universe within her reach? How far could she go?

“Great things are coming,” she said. “But first, my unicorns, we must deal with the small matter of the Merdogs. They may have rescued one of their human friends but they shall not have the other two. They are mine. Let’s see how the great Melgrim thinks of a way to rescue them this time. Entering the minds of these foolish mortals shall be fun. They’ll be a sort of practice, if you will. The success of my mind control will determine how effectively I will defeat the Merdogs later on.”

“Sorceress,” Erebus interrupted, “if by chance I could suggest something, wouldn’t it be easier to just kill the two land dwellers and be done with it?”

“Hmm, just to kill them is too easy. That’s not achieving anything! Control and manipulation is what I thrive on, it drives me. The longer I can prolong their suffering, the better. And that works best when they are alive.”

Juliet and Pete were no longer in the forest. It was very still and peaceful, the rural setting where they stood. Haunting music fitted like a dream to the scene that they were in, the velvety soft colors of night echoing the lush and beautiful threads of song.

“Listen,” Juliet said. “Doesn’t that music sound so lovely? It’s

almost as if it were the work of angels. Are we still in Regneva? Is it the song of Merdogs?"

"I don't know," Pete replied. "It's hard to describe, but I would very much like it to continue. Where do you think Eddy is?"

"Not far away." Juliet whispered, barely concerned. The music was gently wearing down her caution and fear, lulling her into a trance.

The mindscape seemed to enclose her in the soft glow of light, the drifting sound and the deep colors. The music flowed, rippling like water through her soul and thoughts.

Eyes watched her, the cold and evil eyes of Cassandra.

"That's it, my servant, don't fight it, let it flow all around you! Just a little more."

Juliet hummed away to the melodic lines and felt perfectly contented and happy. All the morbid, worrying thoughts had melted away. In fact, she could no longer remember anything. The meeting with Melgrim seemed a million miles away. It had faded into oblivion.

"I've...got her," Cassandra said.

Eddy woke up, feeling something brushing against his face. All the sounds and smells felt very strong to him. Looking around, he realized that he was slumped in the branches of a tree. The sound of crashing waves met his ears. He was in the yew tree on the edge of the cliff!

"I'm home!" he gasped. "I'm alive, I made it." He could not see his friends. They must still be trapped in Cassandra's mindscape.

Fengrim's voice sounded from within the trunk of the ancient tree.

"Believe...in yourself. Believe in the power of your dreams and your imagination."

The voice uttered nothing more.

Eddy realized that Fengrim's message had told him what to do. He had prayed for himself to be returned home, asked the amulet for help, and in doing so had summoned Fengrim.

"I did it all by myself," he said without really understanding any of it. "The Hidden Power is there. I must use it to rescue my friends."

He jumped down from the tree. "Thank you, Fengrim. Now, what must I do?" He clenched the amulet in his hand. "Think!"

It was the morning after the storm, and once again the residents of Coombe Appleby were surveying the damage to their cottages.

"Someone up there's really got it in for us," one said. "I've never known such fierce weather. It's totally out of character."

Uncle Stanley had thought about little else except his missing son and nephew. He'd spent all night and morning comforting his distraught wife and wondering what on earth he could do. He waited

for the phone to ring, the emergency services explaining that they'd been found safe and well, but the phone remained silent.

Eddy paced up and down under the tree, trying to think of something. He so desperately wanted to run up the lane and into his uncle's house, be comforted and enjoy a hot meal. But he knew he could not return home, not yet. How would he explain to his uncle about Pete? And then there was Juliet too. This was a job that could not be left unfinished -he was their only chance of escape. As he gazed up at the clouds drifting across the sky, it came to him.

Chapter 22

In which Eddy faces a challenge

“Imagination!” Eddy shouted out loud. “That’s what I need to use!” If Pete and Juliet were trapped in mindscapes, perhaps he could use his own mind to free them.

Black space fell away in front of him. He gasped and almost dropped the amulet. He was being drawn into something without even thinking about it. Eddy was no longer on the cliff by the tree, but in the middle of a vast expanse of grassland, with only a clump of forlorn trees behind him.

“Thank heavens that there’s no blazing forest this time,” he muttered. Of course, when you’re trapped in someone else’s mindscape, anything can happen.

Everything seemed as fragile as paper. With just one thought, it could all disappear. It was like a dream, when you’re trying to get somewhere but you can’t. Eddy’s knees wobbled and he fell to them. Wherever he was, it was night. It was also chilly. No rain had fallen but the air was heavy and oppressive. Thunder rumbled in the distance and a new storm appeared to be on the way.

“Please God, not another storm...” he whispered. He knew they meant trouble.

A river-cold wind came out of the east and made the trees behind him dance. The starless, moonless, utterly lightless night pressed close around him and seemed like a living thing. Rain began to fall.

“Oh, great!” Eddy cursed.

Presently, a welcoming cottage materialized out of nowhere. A shelter from the rain perhaps, but was it a trap? He walked towards its friendly door, so reminiscent of his uncle’s house. Eddy felt as though he were a leaf carried along by cool currents towards a great waterfall.

As he entered the cottage he sensed the presence of someone.

The lounge was cozy and illuminated by the glow of a log fire. In the ancient looking chair by the fire sat Juliet. She fixed her eyes on him in an emotionless stare as he entered the room.

“What? Juliet...how did you get here?”

She blinked but didn’t move. Her fingers were digging tightly into the chair arms so much that her fingernails blanched. It was then that Eddy noticed that her eyes were shining gas-flame blue, not their normal hazel color

“Hey!” Eddy yelled. “What’s wrong with you?”

Juliet’s eyes electrified, shining bright as though they were lasers.

“What a lovely dream,” she said at last, in a completely different

tone of voice that was devoid of any intonation.

“What dream?” Eddy asked her as he walked over. He was unsettled by her odd behavior

Juliet was being carried along on the river-like sound of the sloughing wind. Her mind was not her own.

“The knife,” she whispered, rocking back and forth. “I have the knife.” Her fingers curled slightly, as though she were grasping a solid, but invisible object.

“The knife...” she whispered, and the second of those two words reverberated softly through the cottage walls. Her voice was dry and brittle, with a sound like dead autumn leaves underfoot.

“What the hell’s wrong with you, Ju? It’s me, Eddy!” Chills shook him. This was not his friend talking. He knelt down and stared into those bottomless blue eyes. She appeared to be in some kind of trance.

“What’s your name?” he asked her.

Silence.

“I said, what’s your name?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where have you come from?”

“Nowhere.”

“Where are the Merdogs?”

“What are Merdogs?”

Eddy paused. Had her mind been completely erased? Did she have amnesia? He decided to continue and see if he could somehow break her free from the trance, if that’s what it was.

“How do you feel? Happy? Depressed? Indifferent?”

“Scared,” Juliet said, in a small shaky voice.

“Scared? What of?”

“Scared, lost in time, like tears in the wind...it’s coming.”

“What’s coming?”

“Behind me!”

“What’s behind you?”

Juliet’s eyes widened. She was still staring at a distant point, but now there was terror in her eyes.

“What’s behind you?” Eddy asked again.

“Oh God!” Juliet said miserably.

“What is it?” He took her by the hand. Her face was bloodless.

Silence.

Eddy tried to reassure her. “Relax, it’s going to be fine. Just relax and be calm. Calm...like a cloud, far above everything, drifting and floating.” The tension went out of Juliet’s face.

“All right,” Eddy said. “Now, tell me what you’re afraid of.”

Juliet remained silent.

“Come on Ju, what are you afraid of? What’s behind you?”

“Something...”

“What?”

“Something...”

“Can’t you be more specific?”

“I -I don’t know what it is, but it scares me.”

“Do you know where you are?”

“No.”

“What do you see?”

“Nothing.”

“You must see something!”

“Darkness.”

“A dark room?”

“No.”

“Well, is it like you’re outside at night?”

“No.” Her eyes were vacant and glassy.

Eddy wondered where on earth this conversation was heading.

“I’m going away now,” Juliet said. “I’m floating.”

“Huh?”

Suddenly she shot up out of the chair onto her feet. She began screaming and yelling in a fit of hysteria.

Eddy grabbed her arm. “No!” he said sharply as he received several glancing blows in the process of restraining her.

Juliet thrashed, trying to break loose. Her forehead was strung with beads of sweat. She was wan and her blue eyes looked haunted.

“I hate you!” she yelled at the top of her voice. “I’ve been sent here to kill you!”

The voice didn’t belong to Juliet. “You shan’t thwart me again!”

Her face was distorted by anger. “You can’t stop me, you can’t!” Her eyes were wild. She shouted at Eddy with such force that she sprayed him with spittle.

Eddy desperately tried to restrain her as she blurted out obscene language to him. Holding her by the shoulders, he at last managed to calm her down.

“It’s okay...”

“I have to kill you, you know...then I must kill all of them too.” Her voice kept changing, alien one minute and then sounding more like her own. Eddy realized that this had to be the work of Cassandra. She had possessed Juliet, but the girl’s mind was trying to free itself. This was Eddy’s challenge. He had to free her, or heaven knows what the sorceress would make her do. He did not doubt for one minute that she would try to kill him.

“You’re going to...DIE!” Juliet yelled as her eyes blazed. “I will enter your mind too!”

“No! No, I am not going to die. You can’t do it.”

“Yes I can!”

“No you can’t. Your evil will never prevail.”

Juliet was struggling. Eddy envisioned a brick wall guarding his mind. “You can’t reach my mind, you can’t!”

Juliet found herself blocked by the brick wall.

“So you’ve put up a barrier, have you? Do you honestly think I can be stopped by bricks and mortar?”

Eddy concentrated. “This is my wall. It is like no other. It is harder than diamonds, harder than anything. It has the protection of Fengrim.”

That word enraged the possessed girl. She continued her efforts to break into his mind, thrashing wildly.

“NO!”

She squealed as her body jerked and she was thrown to the floor like a rag doll. She was free. Eddy’s mind had been too strong for Cassandra. He knelt down and hugged Juliet, who was sobbing. Gazing into her eyes, he saw that they were hazel once more.

“What...happened?” she cried.

“Ssh, you’re safe now,” Eddy said. “That was Cassandra controlling your mind just then. She tried to enter mine, but she couldn’t. My mind was too strong. We’re safe now. I don’t think she’ll try that again.”

“When will this nightmare end?” Juliet whimpered. “Where are the Merdogs? And where’s Pete?”

Eddy continued to stare into her frightened, bloodshot eyes. Where indeed was Pete?

Chapter 23

In which Eddy, Pete and Juliet are prisoners

Melgrim paced slowly back and forth. He could not determine what had happened to the three land dwellers and this trouble him greatly.

“What has she done to them?” he said gravely. He turned to the other Merdogs.

“Look at us, we’re supposed to be great creatures, and we can’t even help the three land dwellers who came to help us! Is this what we have become? Is this what Cassandra has reduced us to?” His green eyes lit up with the anger and frustration of it all.

“Are they prisoners in the human world or somewhere else?” Snarlgard asked.

“That’s just it,” I don’t know,” the weary Melgrim replied.

“If I could perhaps volunteer to go and look for them,” Sparkchaser interrupted. “Nothing is faster than a Demdron on the wing!”

“Don’t be such a foolish beast,” Touchstone and Brimstone muttered. “Your powers are the very...least.”

“What do you intend to do if you encounter Cassandra? I doubt very much that a single Demdron could...”

“Silence!” Melgrim interrupted Growlfang before he could finish.

“You may go, Sparkchaser, if that is what you wish. I admire your courage and determination. The rest of us need to prepare...”

The great audience of Merdogs regarded their leader with some bewilderment. “What must we prepare for, Great Leader?”

“For a battle! This is what we knew would eventually come. We shall face the final confrontation, where sorceress and Merdogs come together. It is our only chance to try to defeat our terrible nemesis once and for all.”

The whole cave fell as silent as a tomb. Melgrim stared at his congregation. “My fellow Guardians of the Sea...what are we?”

“Born to the sound of crashing waves!” came the deafening reply.

“Feared by mortals, strong and brave!” Sparkchaser added.

“Exactly,” said Melgrim. “Our precious land of Regneva shall not fall to the hands of an evil sorceress who seeks only to destroy. If Regneva dies, so will the world of the land dwellers. There will be nothing but...ice.”

“I think that decides the issue then,” Sparkchaser said. “I shall go and see if I can locate the three of them.”

The eager Demdron spread his wings and prepared to enter the

human world once again. He had no idea where his three friends were being held, and certainly he had no idea that they were prisoners in Cassandra's mindscape, but he could not rest until he had done something, even if it would be a fruitless search.

Eddy and Juliet walked out of the cottage. The rain had ceased, and the whole surroundings appeared to be transforming.

"Where's she taking us now?" Eddy wondered.

"It's bound to be unwelcoming," Juliet replied. "But at least we're together."

"If only Pete was here though, then we really would be together."

As they made their way along a winding path, Eddy turned to look at the cottage that they had just left. Suddenly it vanished before their very eyes.

"Keep walking," he urged. "This path probably leads to another trap, but I can't bear to stand still one minute."

"Eddy! We're not standing! We're falling!"

And they were falling, down another deep hole. But they didn't hit the bottom with sickening thuds as they expected. Instead, they floated gently down onto a solid concrete floor.

"What is this place?" Eddy whispered, looking around. He gazed up at the sickly yellow hue of artificial light. It appeared that he and Juliet were in a large warehouse. Rows of metal shelves spread out behind them, and large crates and boxes were packed into every corner.

Juliet sniffed the damp, musty air. "This place feels ever so familiar, but I can't place it, I just can't. Why would she place us in a warehouse?"

A look of horror spread across Eddy's face. "Look out!"

A forklift truck was speeding towards them, with the haunting figure of Pete at the controls. His eyes shone electric blue, just like Juliet's had done in the cottage.

"It's Pete! Now he's possessed too! Get out of the way, quick!"

They dodged the truck in the nick of time, but as they got to their feet, the vehicle stopped and reversed towards them.

"Split up!" Juliet shouted. "He can't chase both of us. We must find a way of getting him off the truck and freeing his mind somehow. You've got to do it Eddy, you freed me, your mind is stronger than Cassandra."

Eddy shot off down the rows of high shelves as fast as he could. This damned endless pursuit, that's what it seemed. Would it ever end? It was like some kind of computer game where you kept reaching the next level but never quite succeeding.

The forklift truck was behind him, closing rapidly. Pete's face was twisted and demonic like the devil himself. With each moment he grew

closer to his fleeing victim.

Juliet meanwhile had scrambled up the row of shelves with the agility of a cat. As she crouched on the top of the twelve-foot high shelves she got a clear view of the entire warehouse. About fifty yards to the north was the way out. If she and Eddy could just get to it in time...

Eddy was running out of breath. The truck would catch him in seconds, probably impaling him with its lethal spikes.

"Eddy!" Juliet yelled, racing along the top of the shelves. "Climb up and follow me! Quick! I've found a way out!"

He looked up and saw her running above him. With the truck barely three feet from him, Eddy threw himself to the ground and ducked under the bottom row of shelves. Any lower and he couldn't have fit underneath it, but luck was on his side for once and he crawled under it with room to maneuver

The forklift truck screeched to a halt. In the precious seconds that followed, Eddy crawled out from the shelf and began to ascend the tall row as fast as he could. Juliet stretched out a hand and pulled him up.

"There's a door over there," she said, as he tried to catch his breath. "We've got to get to it. If we run along the top of these shelves we can get there, but there's a big jump further along."

"Well, let's do it!"

The two of them sprinted across the top of the shelves, Juliet in front, as it was too narrow to run side by side. They hadn't run very far, when a deafening thud and shudder brought them to their knees. Pete was attempting to ram the shelves with the forklift truck.

"Oh God no!"

Juliet got to her feet and pulled Eddy up. They had to reach that door! Pete reversed and slammed the truck into the metal shelves once more. The sound of steel cracking and buckling filled the air. The truck engine roared wildly as Pete revved up for another strike. He charged towards the row of shelves once again, just as his two victims leapt from it and onto a pile of boxes.

Crash! The forklift plowed into the shelves with such force, that it sent a shower of sparks into the air. The metal became impaled on the forks, and Pete desperately tried to reverse but found that the truck was pinned down.

"He's trapped!" Eddy shouted as he and Juliet raced towards the door like a pair of hares. "We'll make it!"

The door loomed towards them, a welcoming portal offering sanctuary.

"Game over!" Eddy laughed.

Juliet dared to look behind her. "Not yet!"

Somehow, Pete had managed to free the truck and was once again zooming towards them, metal and wire entangled in the forks. He was not going to stop.

“Open the door!”

Eddy and Juliet went inside and didn't bother to slam it, as the truck would smash through it like matchwood. Their only escape was up five flights of metal stairs. They didn't hesitate to ascend them.

With a bang reminiscent of an exploding bomb, the forklift truck smashed through the door just as the two of them had climbed the first lot of stairs.

“Don't stop, just keep going!” Eddy yelled.

The stairs were agony for them; steep metal steps that tortured their already tired muscles. But freedom and safety was tantalizingly close...

A loud creak rent the air and the stairs began to groan and shudder. Below them, the forklift truck was continuing its trail of destruction.

“Eddy,” Juliet whispered, “the staircase is going to collapse!”

“That thought had occurred to me,” Eddy replied, irritated. “Your habit of stating the bleeding obvious is really starting to...”

Suddenly something quick and white flew right over his head. Raising one arm, Eddy lost his balance and grabbed the handrail just in time to stop himself tumbling backwards down the stairs.

“Hello comrades!” a familiar voice called

“Sparkchaser?”

“Dearie me, we are in a bit of a pickle, aren't we?” the Demdron said. “I suppose you're wondering how I managed to find you. That is of course a long and complicated story, best saved until later. Now, I think it's time to put an end to this crazy chase!”

Chapter 24

In which our three land-dwellers race against time

Uncle Stanley did not dream often, and he was even less often plagued by bad dreams. But that afternoon he had fallen asleep in his armchair, too tired even to keep worrying about his missing son and nephew. His sleep was continuously disturbed by nightmares. Several times he stirred, came half awake and heard himself gasping in panic. Once, drifting up from some hideous and threatening vision, he heard his own voice crying out wordlessly in terror and he realized that he was thrashing and twisting in the armchair, torturing his arthritic shoulders. He tried to awaken but could not; something in the dream, something dark and menacing, reached up with icy, clammy hands and pulled him down into deep sleep again, down and down all the way, into a lightless place where indescribable Black Unicorns gibbered and chuckled in mucus-wet voices.

An hour later, when he finally woke up and managed to cast off the clutching dream, Uncle Stanley was standing in the middle of the lounge several steps from the armchair, but he had no memory of getting to his feet. He was shaking and sheathed in sweat.

Eddy and Pete are trapped! Trapped where? Just like the dream. What about the dream? Merdogs! What the hell have Merdogs got to do with it?

Already the memory of the nightmare had begun to fade and only fragments of it remained with him, evaporating as though they were splinters of ice. All he could remember was that Eddy and Pete had been in awful danger. And somehow he knew that the dream had been more than just an ordinary dream.

As the nightmare receded, Uncle Stanley became uncomfortably aware of how gloomy the lounge had become. Before falling asleep he had drawn all the curtains to block out the sun, which had now disappeared behind gray clouds. He had the irrational but unshakable feeling that something had come up from the dream, something evil and mysterious that was no longer a creature of imagination, but one composed of solid flesh. Now it crouched in a corner, watching, waiting.

“Stop this, you stupid old git!” Uncle Stanley shouted out loud. “But the dream was...only a dream.”

Still drugged with sleep and slightly confused, he stood in the middle of the dim room, rocking from side to side and listening to the rumble of thunder. Upstairs he could hear the noise of the vacuum cleaner, which his wife was using in the bedrooms. Cleaning always helped

her to take her mind off things.

Uncle Stanley wondered if he was still under the influence of the dream, misinterpreting what he was seeing. What did it all mean? Were Eddy and Pete being held prisoner in some secret place? Was that why the emergency services could find no trace of them?

“Stanley...”

He thought he heard something call to him from over where the bookcase was standing, directly behind him. Judging from its slurred, distorted pronunciation of his name, its mouth was severely malformed.

“There’s nobody there!” he told himself. Nevertheless, he did not turn round. When the rumbles of thunder subsided and the sun began to shine from behind the drawn curtains, the air in the room seemed thicker than it was before. The room seemed darker too despite the brightness outside.

“Stanley...”

A hovering mantle of claustrophobia settled over him. The dimly visible walls appeared to ripple and move closer, like the reflection of water on the ceiling of a cave.

“Stanley...”

He stumbled to the nearest window, banging his hip against a table and nearly tripping over a chair. He pulled the curtains open and bright, welcome sunlight poured into the lounge, forcing him to squint but gladdening him as well. He leant against the window and stared out into that cloud-plated blue sky, resisting the insane urge to look over his shoulder to see if there really was something monstrous lurking there with a hungry grin on its face. Uncle Stanley drew deep, gasping breaths, as if the daylight itself – rather than the air – sustained him.

The thunder had passed and the mass of cumulonimbus was fragmenting to leave behind a pleasant afternoon. When he’d blinked the last grains of sleep out of his eyes, when his nerves had stopped jangling, Uncle Stanley turned round and surveyed the room. A quiver of relief swept through him, relaxing his muscles.

He was alone.

He could hear the sound of the vacuum cleaner and the mantel clock ticking.

“Well Mutterin’ Merdogs, I’m alone! What did I expect, a green goblin with three eyes and a mouthful of sharp fangs? Honestly, Stanley Stone, you’d better watch yourself or you’ll end up in a Dorset rest home, sitting all day in a rocking chair happily chatting away to Merdogs and unicorns while smiling nurses wipe drool off your chin!”

Uncle Stanley never worried about creeping senility. He led such an

active life in Coombe Appleby, working on the fishing trawlers, experiencing the harshness of life at sea in the merchant navy and working hard all day. He knew he was as sharp and alert as he had ever been. He was fifty years old, not ninety. But what did the future hold?

He was still disturbed by the crazy notion that something had been in the lounge with him a few moments ago, something hostile and supernatural. And why did Merdogs feature so heavily in his dream? He knew that they were to Coombe Appleby what the Loch Ness Monster was to Scotland. But they were only a myth, kept alive to entertain tourists. The statue in the village square was little more than a decoration. But in his dream, he had seen them, great fish-tailed dogs with soulful eyes shining like emeralds and webbed feet plowing through the waves. They had seemed so real, so lifelike.

He'd never experienced a dream even one-tenth as vivid as that one. Although the grisly details had faded away, he could still recall the mood of it – the terror, the gut-wrenching horror that permeated every nasty image...of the Black Unicorns.

Sparkchaser flew in front of Eddy and Pete. "It's now or never!" he said.

"What can you do?" Juliet yelled. "Pete is...possessed, just like I was."

"I'll free him," the Demdron replied. "We have to get back to Regneva right now! A great battle is looming!"

"Between Cassandra and Morgrim?"

"Between Cassandra and all the Merdogs," Sparkchaser replied. "It is the ultimate battle between good and evil."

Pete appeared at the foot of the ruined stairs, his eyes blazing. Small flecks of froth appeared at the corners of his mouth.

"Got to...kill you..." he mumbled.

"No you don't!" Sparkchaser's eyes began to glow a deep purple hue. He muttered something inaudible as he slowly drew the evil out of Pete.

"What's he doing?" Eddy said to Juliet.

"The same that you did to me," she replied. "He's using his mind to break Cassandra's hold over Pete. Look!"

There was a colossal flash of light, and Pete fell to the ground. A great black cloud surged out of his mouth and vanished into thin air.

"Pete is back..." Sparkchaser panted. "She will not possess him a second time. Cassandra cannot possess the same person twice."

"Oh thank God," Juliet said, rushing over to help Pete, who was groaning and in a total state of confusion. "Well done, Sparkchaser."

“All in a day’s work! What are Demdrons for?”

“Where am I? What’s happening?” Pete said, looking round.

“In the mindscape of Cassandra,” Sparkchaser replied proudly. “It’s all been rather interesting, but the time has come to return to Regneva...urgently. The Merdogs need your help more than ever before. It is now that you will be put to the test.”

The thought of an almighty battle sent fear through Eddy’s heart. But there was never a convenient time for a fight. He remembered Morgrim’s words: “Everything begins and ends at exactly the right time.”

The warehouse began to disintegrate all around them and the walls faded. Large patches of darkness were appearing.

“Sparkchaser! What’s happening?”

“The mindscape is dissolving! Cassandra is no longer concentrating on possessing minds; she’s off to Regneva, stronger than ever, to battle with the Merdogs! We have to get out of here immediately or we’ll be trapped in a blank mindscape!”

“How on earth are we supposed to get out of here? We don’t even know how we got here!” Eddy yelled.

Sparkchaser threw back his head and howled several times. Almost at once, two other Demdrons appeared out of nowhere.

“Ah, Juppy and Cyndra, I was wondering when you two would show up.”

“Are they all ready, Sparkchaser?” said Juppy, furiously flapping his wings.

“Yes. Juppy, you take Juliet, Cyndra, you can carry Pete. I will carry Eddy. Hurry now, no time to lose!”

“Carry us?” Eddy, Pete and Juliet chorused together. “Erm, no offence, but don’t you think we’d be a tiny bit er, heavy. You’re all so small!”

“Small yes, but endowed with incredible strength!” Sparkchaser said. “I forgot to mention that strength is another thing that Demdrons have in abundance, besides brilliant senses of humor Now, prepare for the return to Regneva!” With that, he transformed into a cloud. “Climb on, Eddy!”

The three of them quickly obeyed as Juppy and Cyndra also transformed themselves into clouds. Almost as soon as their human passengers had climbed on, the clouds shot off through the waiting portal and out of that hated mindscape forever. But the question was, would they reach Regneva in time, before Cassandra had wreaked havoc?

Chapter 25

In which a battle begins

The heavy clouds above Regneva began to build. No longer was there a peaceful ambiance, which the Merdogs sought so hard to preserve. A choking, sinister atmosphere prevailed; Cassandra had finally managed to invade their realm. With her she brought a vast army – a horde of Black Unicorns, all of them products of her dark imagination. Always by her side however were the true unicorns, Nox and Erebus. Faithful unto the end, no matter what might happen.

In the confines of Melgrim's great cave, Demdrons clung to the earth and shivered. They were afraid to stay in the sky – no longer was it their domain. Everyone had assembled in here, having no idea just what forces Cassandra intended to unleash on the world. It was simply a matter of waiting.

Touchstone and Brimstone huddled in an alcove amongst Snarlgard and Darkeye.

"Snarlgard, we will defeat her, won't we?" the Merpuppies uttered in frightened voices. They had never shown their fear until now.

Snarlgard himself looked afraid. "Of course we will," he replied, trying to remain calm. "Melgrim shall see to that!" Although deep in his heart he feared that the leader of the Merdogs would pay a heavy price for defeating the sorceress once and for all.

"The Land Dwellers! They shall help us!" Darkeye interrupted.

Other Merdogs looked bewildered and upset. "And just how exactly? They've disappeared! Abandoned in our hour of need! How could they?"

"Gone?" Snarlgard bellowed. "You cannot mean it. They couldn't just leave, not just like that. They must have been...taken."

"Sparkchaser has gone to find them!" Growlfang said at last. "Melgrim knows that Cassandra kidnapped them. The two other Demdrons Cyndra and Juppy have gone to bring them back...back to Regneva! If they can return in time, I just know everything will be alright!"

As Growlfang uttered those words, Eddy, Pete and Juliet were indeed on their way back to Regneva. The Demdron's portal proved to be the quickest way, saving a long passage through the Green Whirlpool. With every passing second they grew confident that they would reach their Merdog friends in time.

"What are we going to find when we get there?" Eddy whispered to himself. "And what are we expected to do? How can we stand there

and defeat..." His words were cut short as the clouds they were passing through parted to reveal Regneva's shores far below.

"We're back! We're actually back!" Eddy yelled.

"In the nick of time though," Juliet said. "Look over there! It's horrible!"

And horrible it was! The rapidly advancing march of the Black Unicorns. Their hooves pounded the ground, and each one had blazing red eyes and shining horns. Every horn was dripping with the sound and smell of death. Now it was clear to see the danger the Merdogs were in. For so long they had remained untouchable in their secret world beneath the sea. But now their world had been invaded and they were no longer immortal. Cassandra and her army could inflict harm...death.

The sorceress herself stood on a high plateau with a sword, staring down on the world which she hoped to destroy.

"Where are you? Come out, Merdogs! You cannot hide from me! Is this what you call Regneva? The fabled Merdog's Realm? It is nothing but trees and rivers! Is that the best you can do! Where are all the wonderful things that land dwellers speak of?"

The Merdogs left the security of the cave and came out to face their vile enemy.

"Well, well, what a pitiful little army." Cassandra remarked as the Merdogs came into view. Melgrim stood amongst them.

"You've no quarrel with them, just me. Why did you not come alone? Why bring an army of unicorns to shadow you?"

"You're hardly in a position to be asking such things, Melgrim! You too have your followers, such as they are." She turned and sneered at the three approaching land dwellers.

"Human mortals! How many times do I have to kill you three? You keep coming back for more, don't you?"

Melgrim, his voice calm and measured, replied simply, "Not followers, Cassandra. Only friends. Brave friends whose kind hearts shine through. Your nightmarish mindscapes were no match for their Hidden Power."

Cassandra's face was contorted with fury. She knew that her attempts at invading their minds had failed.

"The choice is yours, Melgrim. You either surrender to me or die."

"Merdogs will never submit to you! Our great master Neptune gave us the task of guarding his seas, and we shall defend them to the last!"

"Then DIE!" With that, she ordered the army of unicorns to circle and fight outward.

"Destroy the whole damned lot of them!" she blazed, raising the sword in her right hand, the hilt of which was decorated with black

crystals.

“Look at her, she’s completely demented!” Eddy shouted. “Have you ever seen anything like her?”

“She is so dangerous but the unicorn army is nothing more than a mass of illusions, mirages and products of the imagination,” Sparkchaser answered. “Only Nox and Erebus are truly capable of causing real harm. The others are sure to be a diversion.”

“If we could kill those two, it might weaken Cassandra somehow.” Pete said.

“Kill them? How exactly?” Sparkchaser quivered, flapping his wings furiously.

“With that sword?”

Regneva’s shores were disturbed by the sound and smell of battle. Merdogs and Black Unicorns fought wildly, teeth snapping, horns stabbing, hooves kicking. Only Nox and Erebus remained out of the fray, standing beside Cassandra, who was observing the action.

Snarlgard and Growlfang fought together, taking two unicorns at a time, while Mercalla and Cairngorm tackled another four who were heading straight towards their Merpuppies.

“Let’s see how they like a little bit of fire.” Cassandra said, and Nox obliged, firing a bolt of lightning from his horn.

Melgrim saw a flash of yellow erupt in the trees to the west and recoiled instantly. Merdogs feared fire above everything else. Fire was their weakness; how it terrified them; how it consumed everything in its path.

Eddy picked up a rock and hurled it at one of the unicorns. “Take that, you stupid old nag!” he shouted. The unicorn turned on him at once, revealing a mouth full of needle-sharp teeth.

“What a stupid thing to do, you foolish boy,” it hissed.

Eddy dodged out of the way as the hooves pounded the ground on what seconds earlier would have been his face. He stumbled and fell. The unicorn reared up once again for another strike.

“Cornered rat,” it snarled. “This time I won’t miss!”

Eddy felt something hot glowing on his neck. Clutching it, he realized it was the amulet, which was glowing brightly. The light shone at the unicorn, causing it to retreat suddenly, silenced with fear.

“Point the amulet at it!” Sparkchaser yelled. “Do it now!”

Eddy obeyed, and the light beam blasted a hole right through the unicorn’s body. But there was no blood or torn flesh, just a neat hole. He could see the other unicorns through it. It was as if the light beam had punched a hole into black paper.

The unicorn was fading, like smoke tendrils that were wafting away. In a matter of seconds it had ceased to exist. It was, after all, just an

illusion.

“Well, what are we waiting for?” Eddy said, standing up and shouting to his friends. “Let’s finish these unicorns! The amulets destroy them!”

Each blast of light from the amulets destroyed one unicorn. Already, Cassandra’s army was severely depleted.

“They’re all fading! We’re winning!”

Amidst the crackling of flames and snarls of fighting beasts, a roar came from atop the plateau. Melgrim had found Cassandra, and now he raked viciously at his foe’s body with his claws, his teeth seeking the sorceress’ throat.

Cassandra raised the sword but was unable to use it, as Melgrim had pinned her to the ground. The Merdog had never been violent in his life, but he never wanted anything so badly as to kill Cassandra.

The Merdog’s great webbed paws pressed down hard on her chest and she called out to Nox and Erebus.

“Help me! Now! Kill him now!”

Nox charged at Melgrim, but before he could drive his horn into the Merdog’s side Sparkchaser intervened and attacked the unicorn’s neck, snapping and biting, as he’d seen fox terriers do.

“Sparkchaser! Be careful!” Melgrim warned. “Keep clear of the horn!”

The plucky little Demdron darted out of the way just in time as the enraged Nox fired lightning bolts at him. In the heat of the moment Melgrim temporarily loosened his grip on Cassandra. He had forgotten that she still held the sword. As they both rolled over in a shower of dust and torn grass, the long blade ran him through.

The dust crimsoned as Melgrim and Cassandra fought like mad creatures, a flurry of claws, kicking limbs and snapping teeth. The Merdog had his paw on her throat but as he prepared to clamp his jaws around her neck, he felt a fierce sear of pain in his right side. It was so sharp that it took his breath away. Melgrim had never felt such pain before. Being immortal for so long, pain was something that he had never experienced.

Cassandra felt his grip loosening and rose to her feet, pushing him to the ground.

“Well, what are you waiting for, Melgrim? Why don’t you come and finish me off? Weren’t you about to decapitate me?”

Morgrim looked all around him. Regneva was going up in flames, but the army of unicorns had vanished. He could see Erebus holding the three land dwellers and the other Merdogs at bay.

Cassandra laughed savagely as she stared down at her wounded enemy.

“The sword was invented by Land Dwellers, oh great Melgrim. They say that a pen is mightier than a sword, but a sword is mightier than a Merdog! Didn’t you know that?”

Juliet noticed blood seeping from Eddy’s back.

“Oh God, one of the unicorns got you. Are you able to move?”

Eddy staggered to his feet. “It’s nothing serious. I’ll live. What’s wrong with Melgrim?”

“Stay where you are!” Erebus yelled.

The hated sorceress on the plateau above them threw the sword to the ground.

“Your precious leader put up little fight against cold steel.” she smiled.

“Oh no!” Eddy said, charging towards the cliff. “He’s been wounded!”

“Return to me at once!” the snarling Erebus bellowed, but Eddy ignored him. He didn’t care if the beast hit him with a dozen lightning bolts. He had to reach Melgrim.

“Melgrim! You’ve got to get up! What happened?” He raced over to the Merdog laying slumped on the ground. Cassandra smiled cruelly as he knelt down beside him.

“Let go of my paw, friend,” Melgrim said weakly. “This is where I rest!”

Eddy stroked the scarred and grizzled head. “What do you mean?”

“She got me, Edward. I’m afraid it had to be. I was not strong enough. I’m not getting up from here. Stay with me, good land dweller.”

Eddy realized then what had happened. The sword had done its work; the Merdog was dying. Sorrow radiated in Eddy’s eyes as he whispered to Melgrim: “Is there anything else you need?”

Melgrim squinted through his emerald green eyes. “Not a thing, my good friend. You’ve done quite enough. You’ve destroyed a whole army of unicorns. And look, the fire is dying away too. It has nothing to sustain it. You, Pete and Juliet have been my three true friends. Nobody could ask for more than that.”

Eddy nodded silently as tears ran down his face.

“Fengrim...will soon be with you,” Melgrim grunted. “Now I must leave you.”

Eddy stayed. He held onto Melgrim, leader of the Merdogs, until his green eyes clouded over and finally closed. Melgrim smiled as the sounds of the land faded.

Calm as a millpond and blue as a sapphire, the sea stretched away to meet a far horizon. He swam alone in that vast water as a wind blew silently and took him away...

Melgrim was dead. Everyone stood in sad confusion. Eddy was trembling. His head was nodding up and down. Juliet raced up the slope to join him.

“Ed...”

Nox was charging straight towards him. Quick as a flash, Eddy grabbed the discarded sword and hacked off the unicorn’s blazing horn before it had a chance to strike. Nox crumpled to the ground as though his bones had melted. Evidently he was powerless without the horn.

“That’s for Melgrim!” Eddy shouted, fighting back tears.

Cassandra turned on him as she took in what he had done.

“My precious Nox...you wretched denizen of the land!”

“And this...is for Melgrim too!” Eddy continued, picking up the severed horn. He winced in pain as he grabbed it, for the horn burnt anything it touched.

Events unfolded in slow motion.

“Put that down, you foolish mortal!” Cassandra shouted, but Eddy was running towards her.

“Never!!”

He plunged the horn into the sorceress’ dark heart.

Cassandra was undone by her own evil. The malevolent forces in the horn engulfed her body, overwhelming her, consuming her. She began to disintegrate and fade away as a black mist. So perished the Sorceress of Evil and her dreams of conquest.

As she faded away, so did Nox. Erebus meanwhile found himself transforming. The blackness began to fade...fade to white, and the red hue of his eyes returned to blue. He was his old self again. Erebus was a pure white unicorn, as gentle and innocent as all unicorns are intended.

Sparkchaser rose into the sky. “The sorceress is dead! She is defeated! Cassandra is dead! Dead!”

Chapter 26

In which the ebb tide occurs

On the weathered cliffs above Coombe Appleby, the old Yew tree was changing. Slowly, its branches began to creak and the leaves trembled. The roots of the tree rippled and swirled like tentacles and began to transform. Fengrim was changing – soon he would be a tree no longer! It had happened, it had finally happened! The Merdog knew this day would eventually come and he would be free once again. But the world he had left behind when he had been transformed into a tree was beyond recognition. In place of great swathes of countryside were cities and towns, villages, motorways and factories. This was the world of the land dwellers now. Fengrim knew this, and his realm was Regneva, the place that had been created by Neptune for his Merdogs to live in peace. Regneva was the world beneath the sea, the world accessible through the Green Whirlpool and the Highest Clouds.

Branch and leaf died away. In their place came billowing brown fur and shining eyes. In the moments that followed, the tree had ceased to exist and it was as if there had never been a tree. In its place stood a great Merdog, as big as a shire horse. Fengrim had returned!

He surveyed the vast sea in front of him, waves gently lapping the beach below. He saw the three land dwellers lying face down on the beach. They were the ones who had brought him back.

“Fengrim...is it you? Have you really returned?” Sparkchaser asked in a frightened voice.

“Yes. It is. I have returned, Sparkchaser, my faithful messenger. And what good news do you bring?”

“Oh great Fengrim,” the Demdron babbled, “there’s a lifetime of news to tell you! The news of thousands of years! But first I must deliver ill tidings. Melgrim, our leader, is...dead.”

Fengrim’s eyes reflected the sorrow of Melgrim’s loss. “I knew that she would get him in the end.” he said.

“Ah but Cassandra, she is dead too. Finished! Lost! Gone! It’s all over now, Eddy saw to that. He picked up the unicorn’s horn and killed her himself. She died because of her own evil!”

“Melgrim’s death has not been in vain,” Fengrim replied. “Regneva, and all those that dwell there are free once more from the ever present threat of danger. Tell me, my dear Sparkchaser, are there any more casualties?”

“Alas, only poor Melgrim and the horrid Black Unicorn, Nox. But hark at this, the other unicorn transformed into a pure white beast once

the sorceress was slain!"

"Back to how it used to be," said Fengrim. "But let us waste no more time. Our three saviors lie unconscious on the beach, it is time we went to show our appreciation."

Eddy could feel the soft, damp sand pressing against his face. The sound of the gently crashing waves and cry of seabirds was faint, like a distant memory.

"Wake up, Edward," Fengrim's voice called to him. "Wake up, and see what you have done!"

Eddy opened his eyes, and the brightness of the early morning sun was the first thing he saw. It was the start of a new day. Looking up, he saw the creature standing a few feet away on the beach.

"Melgrim?" he blinked in disbelief.

"I am Fengrim," the Merdog replied. "Do you not remember my voice?"

"Y-yes, I do now," Eddy said weakly. "You're...back."

"You have freed me Edward! You and your brave friends! Cassandra is dead! You destroyed her! She can never return!"

"For Melgrim..."

"Melgrim thanks you," Fengrim continued. "He sensed that his death would come. He is the first of our species to die. He had become mortal like you because of Cassandra's invasion. You were his true friends. Merdogs and land dwellers were never supposed to meet, but you three put an end to that. And perhaps Merdogs don't want to be immortal anymore. Who wants to live forever?"

"But when you die, you're dead forever." Eddy said.

"All the more reason to be more appreciative of the short time one is alive." Fengrim replied, gazing up at the sky.

Juliet and Pete, awake at last, came to their senses and took in the sight of Fengrim standing before them.

"Merdogs are only immortal in the sea," the great animal continued. "Maybe the time has come for a change?"

Eddy shook his head. "I don't understand."

"Oh, to take a lesson from you land dwellers. We are born, we live a little, and then we die. But new people are born to take the place of those deceased."

"Oh Leader," Sparkchaser interrupted. "You're not going to leave us too are you? Please don't die! After so many centuries being a tree..."

Fengrim laughed for the first time, and it is comical indeed to see a Merdog laugh.

"Oh Sparkchaser, I have not returned to die, but to take the place of Melgrim, brave leader of all Merdogs. But one day I will die, as will you

and our three friends here. The cycle will begin all over again when new Merpuppies, Demdrons and land dwellers are born in the future. Everything begins and ends at precisely the right time.”

“That’s what Melgrim said,” Eddy whispered, recalling that time in the cave. “It still feels so cruel, him having to die. It did not feel like the right time.”

“Edward, life is cruel. I’m sure you yourself are fully aware of that.” Eddy nodded. Death is never an easy thing to face, and there are always harsh lessons to learn in life.

“Look, the tide is on the wane,” Fengrim said. “And see, there they are! All of them! The Merdogs whose world you’ve saved! Snarlgard, Growlfang, Mercalla, Cairngorm...they’re all there!”

Eddy and the others regarded the immense crowd of Merdogs and Demdrons staring back at them. They were all there, even Touchstone and Brimstone.

“You wouldn’t forget us humble beasts?” the Merpuppies asked. “A faded memory would be the very least!”

“How could we ever forget you?” Juliet said.

“I could easily forget you,” Sparkchaser cut in. “Unless of course, I was an Arctic Merdog. Now those poor beggars never forget a thing! Bless ‘em!”

“Our journey back from Merrow Island,” Snarlgard added, “with land dwellers on my back was most exciting after being freed from the dreaded Iron Collar!”

Suddenly, silence fell upon the beach. A snow-white unicorn was walking towards Eddy.

“Who’s this?” he muttered.

“It’s me, the one called Erebus, I believe. But no longer am I a Black Unicorn. I am what I was before. Thank you.”

“Oh, you’re most welcome.” Eddy said. What does one say to a unicorn?

“Erebus shall, of course stay in Regneva,” Fengrim said. “We’ve never had any other beasts but Merdogs there. Change...is good.”

A fresh breeze blew down the beach, ruffling fur and hair.

“It is time for us to go now.” Fengrim said.

“Go? But aren’t you going to stay a bit longer?”

Fengrim shook his head. “I must return to the Merdog’s Realm! I’ve been away far too long...ten thousand years? No, maybe more, I really cannot say. The time has come for you three to return to your homes too. There are people there who’ll be no doubt concerned for your welfare.”

Eddy paled. “Oh my...my uncle, he thinks we’re still trapped underground...he’ll be worried beyond belief!”

They didn't want to part from the Merdogs, but that time had come. For so long, so it seemed, the three friends had become a part of the mysterious worlds under the sea, beyond all imagination. It was like they had lived out a dream, and now the dream was over; they had woken up.

"Return to Regneva!" Fengrim yelled. "Farewell good land dwellers. I am so eternally grateful for what you have done. Your story shall become a legend. And what you have done shall never be forgotten. Whenever sadness or misfortune becomes you, I shall be there. Keep your amulets close to your heart, and Melgrim shall watch over you too. He is still with us, whenever the wind blows across the sea and the white horses leap. Come, my fellow Merdogs, it is time to go home."

"Not I, Fengrim," Sparkchaser replied. "I wish to remain here with these land dwellers. I couldn't bear to let them go, and besides, they'll need all the help they can get!"

"As you wish," Fengrim replied. And with that, he summoned his entire race back into the sea. Waves whipped up, foam crashed on the shore, but the Merdogs had all gone. All but one, and he was a Demdron named Sparkchaser.

"It'll be tough living among humans," Eddy told him. "You won't be able to speak or fly in the presence of others. They'd just never understand. And how on earth would we hide your wings?"

"Oh, did I forget to tell you? I've learnt to make them invisible...quite a nifty trick, don't you agree?"

Eddy, Pete and Juliet all laughed. This was the end of this adventure, but perhaps there would be more to come...

Epilogue

Autumn leaves turned gold, drifting down to carpet the ground around Coombe Appleby in the soft misty morning. Fruits that had ripened on bough and vine would soon be harvested and eager children would soon collect chestnuts.

Juliet Fairisle stood on the edge of the cliff; the very spot where Fengrim's tree had stood. As she gazed at the restless sea she was aware of someone's presence behind her. Eddy met her gaze.

"Where do we go from here?" he said.

She turned back to the sea. "Oh, who knows where life will take us?"

"Do you think we'll ever see the Merdogs again?"

"I'd like to think that we will, but it may not be for a very long time." "What about Sparkchaser? Where is he now?"

"Ah," Eddy laughed. "Settling in quite nicely in my uncle's cottage, keeping him, Pete and my aunt busy! She swears she saw a dog just like him, that it had wings and it spoke to her. Of course, I keep telling her it was just a dream!"

Juliet smiled. In many ways it had all felt like a dream. Everything had been said and done; the encounter with the extraordinary creatures had been an event that only they had witnessed. They had been invited to a world beneath the sea, and myth and become reality.

"What are you going to do now, Eddy?" Juliet asked. "Are you going home?"

"I feel this is my home now," he replied. "So much has changed since I came here. I feel I can no longer return to Chorland Green. I'm not the person I used to be."

"There are jobs here," Juliet said. "You could go to the college in Bournemouth, get some qualifications, and a part time job."

"I intend to. I don't think I could leave the sea now. But I'll try to mend my relationship with my mother too."

"Still got your amulet?"

"Yes. Always. It may come in handy one day."

"Come on then. Do you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to plant a tree. A yew tree in memory of Melgrim. It shall grow exactly where the other once stood."

"The Merdog who so longed to be...in his realm beneath the sea." Eddy replied wistfully.

As the two friends strolled away from the cliff, the sun began to break from behind the clouds. In the village square, the Merdog statue stood as firm as ever.