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Opening extract from

# The Crossing of Ingo

Written by

**Helen Dunmore**

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# The Crossing of Ingo

by

Helen Dunmore

HarperCollins *Children's Books*

# CHAPTER ONE

"I see that the guardian sharks have returned," says Ervys. Both he and Saldowr glance upwards. Far above them, shadowy shapes patrol, gliding across their territory and then turning with a whip of the tail.

"Yes, they are back," says Saldowr. His face is watchful. "They gave you no trouble on your journey to the Groves of Aleph?"

"No trouble at all," says Ervys with cold satisfaction. "The sharks and I know each other well."

"Perhaps a little too well," murmurs Saldowr.

Ervys doesn't reply. His powerful tail stirs as if he'd like to lash out at Saldowr, but he does nothing.

"The sharks also know it is their duty to guard the Groves of Aleph," continues Saldowr, still watching Ervys closely. Ervys's face remains expressionless, but his broad, muscle-packed shoulders give a small shrug. Saldowr lets it pass.

Ingo needs every drop of strength that Saldowr possesses now. Ervys grows bolder day by day. The wound that almost killed Saldowr when the Tide Knot broke has been slow to heal, but he cannot allow himself to relax for a second. Ervys has lost

one battle, but this is war and there are many more battles to be fought. He has more followers now than ever. Already too many of the Mer are forgetting what they owe to the human children who ventured to the Deep, fought the Kraken in all his shape-shifting terror and defeated him. They listen to Ervys rewriting the past and telling them what their future should be. Saldowr has his own spies hidden among Ervys's supporters. Ervys sways the crowd with his speeches just as the sea sways great ropes of oarweed.

"Human beings have always longed to rule over Ingo! We know from the gulls that humans are growing ever more ambitious and greedy for Ingo's wealth. They are no longer content with polluting our world and killing its inhabitants. Now they scheme to trap the tides and give themselves the tides' power. They plot to build metal monsters and plunge them down through the waters of Ingo, so that their arms can beat the sky and destroy the birds that travel over Ingo. Who knows what humans will plot against us next? They must be driven out of Ingo! If we are forced to shed their blood, then so be it!"

Saldowr knows how Ervys's voice thunders out over the crowds, and how they roar back their agreement.

"Fight for what is ours by birth and by blood! Defend Ingo! I offer myself to you as a leader who will sacrifice the last drop of blood in his body for the Mer and for Ingo that is ours by birth!"

The crowd roars again. Saldowr's spies make sure to join in the applause. They gaze at Ervys with a look of blind faith, so

they won't stand out from the crowd as Ervys's gaze sweeps over it.

"Follow me, and I will make you free," declares Ervys. "You will rule your own lives. You will not need Saldowr or those half-and-halfs who dare to meddle in the affairs of the Mer." There's a murmur of protest, but Ervys is on to it immediately.

"You say that they saved your own little ones from the Kraken? You think that's a reason to be grateful to them? I tell you, the Kraken only woke in the first place because it felt the polluting presence of humans in Ingo. I tell you again, the Kraken is sleeping now. His lair lies deeper than the trenches of the Deep. You have no cause to fear him any more. The Kraken will not wake. Saldowr tells you stories to keep you afraid, so that you will cling to him like children. But you are Mer!"

"Yes, Ervys, we are Mer!" bellows back a hand-picked group of Ervys's closest supporters.

"Then will you join with me to cleanse Ingo of humans?"

Again the group yells its answer: "Cleanse Ingo of humans! Cleanse Ingo of humans!"

More and more of the crowd join in. But not everyone, Saldowr's spies tell him. Not yet.

"The time has come to fight!" Ervys's voice thunders above the tumult. "If we are weak, the humans will take over Ingo as they have already taken over the whole of the dry world. We must fight for what we love! Fight for what is ours by birth and by blood!"

"Ours by birth and by blood!" roar his supporters.

As the clamour swells Ervys holds up his hand for silence. Instantly there is a hush.

"Will you take me as your leader?"

A second of silence, and then a crash of voices: "*Ervys! Ervys! Ervys!*"

And now Ervys is here in the Groves of Aleph, in Saldowr's own domain. He is growing bold – or more likely, he wants something. Saldowr will not challenge Ervys yet. The tide is running too strongly in Ervys's direction, sweeping too many of the Mer with it. This thing must run its course if Ingo is not to be torn apart.

"So tell me, Ervys, exactly why you have come," says Saldowr aloud. He speaks calmly, and a flicker of scorn crosses Ervys's face. He wants a fight, but Saldowr refuses to give him one.

Ervys tosses back his thick mane of dark hair. Light ripples over his body, emphasising the blue tinge of his skin. His eyes glitter.

"I am here because it is time to gather the cohort of young Mer who are of age to make the Crossing of Ingo," says Ervys. "The Assembly must choose which of them will make the Crossing."

"Indeed," agrees Saldowr. "I am not forgetful of my duty, Ervys. I shall make the Call as I have always made it, and the Mer will hear it as they have always heard it."

"As you have always made it," Ervys repeats. His eyes flash mutinously. "Saldowr, I have come to the Groves of Aleph alone, without protection. I have shown trust in you."

"I am honoured," says Saldowr politely.

"I have done this so that you and I can speak frankly. There is no one to hear us. We two can drop the pretence that things now are *as they have always been*. The world is changing, Saldowr! The Mer must change with it. They must learn to find the old in the new."

"You are right," says Saldowr. His eyes gleam with mischief as he notes the surprise that Ervys cannot quite hide.

Then Ervys's expression darkens. "*You* are no friend of change, Saldowr."

"I tell you, Ervys, *you* are the one who wants to shut the door against the future, not I."

"It's time for the Mer to have a leader who has their true interests at heart," replies Ervys.

Saldowr laughs softly. "Is that the sum of the change you are talking about, Ervys? A leader? And who might that be, I wonder? We Mer have never needed *leaders*. We have had our guides and Guardians, and they have served us well. The Mer were glad enough to accept my guidance when the Kraken woke and their hearts were cold with fear."

"But the Kraken is sleeping now. There is nothing more to fear from him."

"Tell me, Ervys, what makes you so sure of that? Everything that sleeps knows how to wake again, except the dead. The Kraken, I think, is alive."

The Groves appear to have grown darker. Perhaps heavy black clouds have swept over the sun, high above in the Air. A restless current ripples the folds of Saldowr's cloak. Faro, hidden behind a heap of rough boulders, presses himself flat against the sand. He must not move. If Ervys even suspects that he's here, listening...

And Saldowr must never know. He sent Faro away to the borders of Limina, to give company to an ancient Mer woman who was about to leave Ingo and enter the other world, from which no one ever returns. Fithara had always liked Faro. She used to pop sea grapes into his mouth when he was little. Saldowr said, "Stay there with Fithara until I send for you."

Faro sat with her for a while, until Fithara grew tired and closed her eyes. He had never disobeyed Saldowr before. He knew he ought to stay, but fear had been gnawing in him all day. Saldowr had tried to get him well away from the Groves of Aleph. Faro was sure there was a reason for it. Saldowr would never have sent him so far away just because he wanted to be alone. If Saldowr ever seemed to need solitude, Faro would vanish in the flash of a tail.

There must be some danger that Saldowr didn't want him to share. But if there really *were* danger, Faro's place was at Saldowr's side. Even if it went against Saldowr's command, he must go back.

As he swam down towards the Groves he came face to face with the guardian sharks who patrolled against intruders. Faro was used to them. He'd known them since he was too young

to talk, and they knew him. They understood that Faro had his duty with Saldowr. The sharks knew about duty because theirs was inherited from their ancestors. They must challenge any stranger who might threaten the Tide Knot or its Guardian.

But today the sharks seemed to have forgotten that Faro wasn't a stranger. Instead of giving way immediately as normal, the lead shark blocked Faro's way and stared at him with a cold, malevolent eye. However well you think you know a shark, there is a place inside it that you can never reach. Faro knew that. Sharks are not swayed by sympathy or pity. They carry out their duty without emotion. For a few seconds, as he gazed into the eye of the lead shark, even Faro was afraid. The shark's jaws moved, as if he were thinking. Faro hung still in the water, his heart racing. Slowly, very slowly, the cold eyes seemed to remember who he was. Grudgingly the shark moved aside to let him pass.

Everything in the Groves appeared silent and deserted. For a moment Faro wished he had not come back. Saldowr would be very angry at his disobedience. *But*, thought Faro, *I am Saldowr's* scolhyk *and his* holyer. *I have to be with him if he needs me.* Cautiously Faro swam forward, keeping in cover behind weed, boulders and the uprooted trunks of huge branching weeds. For once he was grateful for the devastation left behind when the Tide Knot broke. It hadn't all healed itself yet and the debris gave him plenty of hiding places. He glided from thick, tangled weed to the shelter of a pile of rocks, and settled himself to wait, his tail curled under him.

Faro did not hear them coming, but suddenly they were there, close together, in front of Saldowr's cave. Ervys and Saldowr. Faro's fists clenched in shock and anger. How had Ervys dared to return to the Groves of Aleph? And why was Saldowr talking to him so calmly? Ervys had no right to be there after the way he'd plotted against Saldowr.

*Saldowr should have banished him when he had the chance*, thought Faro. *Ervys was weak then, after we defeated the Kraken. If Saldowr had used all his powers, we would never have seen Ervys again.*

But he must not be disloyal to Saldowr, even in his thoughts. Whatever Saldowr had done or not done, he had good reason. *It will be part of a pattern that is too big for anyone else to see*, thought Faro hopefully.

Ervys looked formidable. Resolute. His defeats seemed to have done nothing but polish his anger and his hunger for power. Faro looked at the tall, powerful figure, and dread rippled through him. But Faro refused to be afraid. He was about to fling back his head defiantly, but just in time he remembered that he must be still and silent. There would be plenty of chances to confront Ervys, he told himself. Now he must watch, and listen, and wait...

"...the Kraken, I think, is alive," says Saldowr, and Faro watches the Groves darken.

"Are we going to talk about the Kraken for ever?" demands

Ervys. "It's time to move on. The Kraken is sleeping."

"Let us hope he does not turn over in his sleep and remember us," says Saldowr. "But you are right in one thing, Ervys. It is time for me to make the Call. It takes many days to bring together all the young Mer who wish to make the Crossing of Ingo. "

Ervys swishes his tail. "There are many among the Mer who will not answer when you blow the conch," he says, putting the faintest emphasis on the word "you".

Faro has to dig his nails into his palms to stop himself from crying out in protest at this insult to Saldowr. But a small, reluctant part of his mind knows that Ervys is telling the truth. Many of the young Mer in Faro's own age group have turned away from Saldowr and everything he stands for. They follow Ervys now. They want what he promises them – freedom, independence, an end to this mingling with humans. Pure-blooded Mer must unite and build a future together. If that means that they have to fight, then so be it. Only old people and has-beens say that the Mer must resolve all their conflicts peacefully. Ervys is a real leader, a man for our times.

Saldowr's silence goads Ervys into recklessness. "Many among the young Mer no longer recognise your authority, Saldowr," he says.

"I am aware of that," answers Saldowr quietly.

*Why won't he fight?* thinks Faro, burning with anguished fury against Saldowr. Why doesn't he destroy Ervys now that he's got him here alone? *Saldowr could do it; I know he could.*

"Then let us act on it," says Ervys smoothly. "Let us make the Call together. You will call your people, and I will call mine."

"They are not *my people*," says Saldowr with sudden anger. "I am privileged to be Guardian, no more than that. The Mer belong to no one but themselves."

Ervys looks at him consideringly. "Do you agree that we should both make the Call?"

Saldowr appears to be thinking deeply. His cloak swirls around him, his hair flows across his face, hiding it. At last he draws himself upright, pushes back his hair and says, "We will each blow the conch in turn. But hear me, Ervys, everyone in the age group for which the conch blows must be free to answer its summons. No one shall be prevented, understand me? *No one.*"

The power than Faro has longed to see is alive in Saldowr now. His eyes burn with inward, hooded fire. Ervys moves back, just a little.

"Of course," he says, with the first touch of uncertainty in his voice.

"I want to hear none of your talk of pure blood, and half-and-halfs. Neither from you nor from your followers. Ingo can only be healed when it accepts that it is not complete in itself. Do you understand me?"

Ervys raises a hand in protest, and then slowly his hand drops to his side. *How can he understand?* Faro wonders. *Even I don't understand what is in Saldowr's mind now.* But after a long hesitation Ervys bows his head in agreement.

"Wait here while I fetch the conch," says Saldowr with all the old authority in his voice.

Saldowr swims to his cave entrance and disappears inside. Faro watches Ervys closely. The man's face is knotted with concentration. He is thinking something through, and Faro wishes he knew what it was. When Saldowr emerges with the conch in his hand, Ervys shakes his head as if a shoal of tiny fish were nibbling at his skin.

Faro eases himself a little way further around the side of his boulder, holding a bunch of weed in front of his face to camouflage it, and peering through the strands. The conch is as big as a man's head. It is full of lustrous, changeful colours: dark at the tightly whorled tip, pearly at its broad base. Saldowr lifts it high and flings back his head. His lips touch the lip of the conch. Water pulses through it, building up pressure, and the conch begins to sound.

At first the Call is no more than a palpitation of the water. Faro is disappointed. He has heard the sound of the Call before. Even though he was always too young and he knew that the Call was not meant for him, his whole body had thrilled down to the tip of his tail. Perhaps the Call doesn't sound the same if you are too close to the conch.

But the Call grows. It begins to beat the water like a whale's tail, sending waves of sound to crash against Faro's ears. Now he hears it truly. It enters his body and vibrates against every part of it. The Call is in his muscles, in his bone. It is inside his heartbeat. It grows louder and louder

until his whole body shivers with the impact. He wants to leap through the water, to turn a thousand somersaults, to fly down the currents like a dolphin. This time, the Call is for him.

Faro curls up tight, tight, hugging his tail. He must not be seen. If Ervys and Saldowr knew that he'd watched this...

The Call thrums through him, on its way to the ends of Ingo, on its way to the ears of the young Mer who are ready to hear it. Elvira hears it as she sorts red weaver-weed to make dressings for wounds. Her skin prickles and her eyes grow brilliant. Girls diving with dolphins hear it and backflip, stunned, listening. Boys surfing wild currents hear it and fight their way out of the surging bubbles, shaking their hair out of their ears. The Call flows over the rocky cradles of Mer babies. Ancient Mer shake their heads and smile, remembering the past as the Call rushes past them. Mothers press their young children close, glad that it's not yet their time for danger and adventure. The Call races through Ingo, into every underwater cave, through the hulls of sunken treasure ships, into coral reefs and gullies where conger eels live, through kelp forests and shadowy underwater caves, searching out the Mer who are ready to make the Crossing of Ingo.

The Call is like a snatch of music thrilling through Ingo, so irresistible that those who hear it will do anything to hear it again. It's time, the Call says. Time to leave your family and your home behind. Time to say goodbye to all the places where you've played and learned and slowly grown up. Time for your

own journey to the bottom of the world and for your own adventure.

At last, Saldowr lowers the conch. "Your turn," he says, passing it to Ervys.

The conch must be much heavier than it looks. Ervys's shoulders sag as he takes its weight, and for a second it looks as if the conch will fall to the sand. But Ervys braces himself and lifts the conch to his lips.

The Call is different this time. Ervys blows a harsh, blaring sound. It is loud, but it does not touch Faro. He hears Ervys blow on the conch, and feels nothing. *But some of the Mer will answer it*, thinks Faro. *Some of them, who won't answer Saldowr, will answer Ervys. They'll come to the Assembly chamber and present themselves as candidates for the Crossing of Ingo, because Ervys has blown the conch.*

It's an ugly thought. Faro doesn't understand why Saldowr even let Ervys lift the conch. He could have smashed Ervys's skull with it. *If I'd been holding the conch, that's what I would have done*, thinks Faro. Ervys's body would have drifted down to the sand, his tail limp and his blood making red smoke in the water. Faro's eyes sparkle as he considers the defeat of his enemy.

But he's getting cramped, hiding behind these rocks. Surely Ervys will leave now that he's got what he wants. Ervys lowers the conch. Saldowr swims forward and takes it. He seems to hold the weight without effort. Faro thinks that the lustre of the conch looks less bright now that it has been blown. It will be put away and it won't emerge from Saldowr's cave for another

five years, when the next group of young Mer is ready to take on the challenge of the Crossing.

But if Ervys gets more power, everything will change. He won't blow the conch for the whole of Ingo as Saldowr does. He'll blow it, but only for his followers. Instead of a whole age group of the Mer travelling to the Assembly together, there will be angry arguments. Fights, maybe.

Faro's fists clench again. He wants to leap through the water to Saldowr's side and fight for him. Now's the time to stop Ervys, while he's alone and before he can grow any stronger.

It's already too late. Ervys turns with a twist of his broad, powerful shoulders, and strikes off through the water with a blow from his tail. In a surge of bubbles he is gone, and Saldowr has done nothing to stop him.

But Faro is still stuck behind his rock. He can't come out now. Saldowr will know that he saw and heard everything. His fingers tingle with cramp, and he unclenches his fists. His tail aches for free water.

"Come out now, Faro," says Saldowr.

Faro's heart jumps in his chest like a fish on dry land. Saldowr has turned to face the rock where Faro is hiding. His face is stern. Faro braces himself. This is the worst thing he has ever done. He has spied on Saldowr and eavesdropped on his conversation. How could he have been so stupid as to believe Saldowr wouldn't sense his presence? Saldowr had only kept silent until now to shield Faro from Ervys's fury. Cold, heavy trepidation fills Faro. He's not afraid of any punishment, but if

Saldowr says that Faro can no longer be his *scolhyk* and his *holyer*, he would rather die. He can't imagine a life where he doesn't serve Saldowr, and where Saldowr no longer teaches him and prepares him for the future.

All these thoughts flash through Faro's mind in a couple of seconds. Already he's swimming out from behind the rock. He won't make Saldowr call him twice. He swims to within an arm's length of Saldowr, and then the Guardian of the Tide Knot holds up a hand.

"Why did you disobey me, Faro? I told you to stay at the borders of Limina with Fithara until I sent for you."

Faro bows his head. He could argue, but he will not.

"You should not have seen me blow the conch. One day I would have shown you, but not this time."

Perhaps Saldowr is going to bar him from making the Crossing. Faro bites his lip, staring at the sand.

"Look at me, Faro."

He looks up.

"You are loyal. You want to serve me."

Faro nods.

"You must believe that there is a pattern in what I do. You were angry because I did not attack Ervys. But if I had done that, Ervys's followers would have risen up in fury. They would have said that their leader had been killed by my treachery. That I had invited an unarmed man to come to my cave alone. That I did not care about the Mer, only about clinging on to my own power. Understand me, Faro, I would have lost my influence

with the Mer. Without their trust I can do nothing. Even those who follow Ervys, I think, still trust me in their hearts. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Saldowr," says Faro reluctantly.

"You want to fight." Saldowr's voice is warmer now. There is humour in it, and affection. Faro looks up, full of hope. Perhaps Saldowr is not going to send him away. Perhaps he is not going to bar him from following the Call.

"You must wait, my son. There will be a time to fight, and we must be ready for it. If we act too soon, we destroy all our chances."

Saldowr is still holding the conch as easily as if it were one of those fluff feathers that drift down from under a young gull's wings and lie on top of the water.

"You heard my Call," he says.

"Yes," replies Faro.

"You will answer it. And there are others who will answer it. Your friends. They will hear the Call but they will need your help to reach the Assembly chamber. You must go to them, Faro."

"To Sapphire and Conor?"

"Of course."

The echo of the Call seems to thrum through Faro. Sapphire and Conor will hear it too. Their Mer blood will dance in their veins as his does.

"We'll come to the Assembly together," he says eagerly. His blood tingles, turning a hundred somersaults in his veins. "All of us together."

"Listen carefully, Faro. Your friends are called not only for themselves, but for the healing of Ingo. If those who come from the world of Earth and Air, and who have both Mer and human blood can be called and chosen, and can complete the most important journey in the life of the Mer, then there is hope that Mer and human will come to understand each other in peace. But where there is a great prize to be won then there is also great danger."

"Ervys will try to stop us."

"Yes. You must be prepared for that. Now go to Sapphire and Conor. Quickly, Faro."