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Opening extract from

Ingo: The Tide Knot

Written by

Helen Dunmore

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The TIDE KNOT

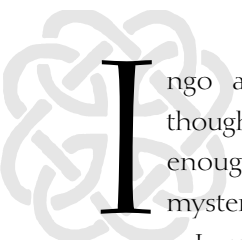
by

Helen Dunmore



HarperCollins *Children's Books*

CHAPTER ONE



Ingo at night. It's not completely dark, though. The moon is riding high, and there's enough light to turn the water a rich, mysterious blue.

I am deep in Ingo, swimming through the moonlit water. Faro's here somewhere, I'm sure he is. I can't see him, but I'm not scared. There's just enough light to see by. There's a glimmer of rock – and a green and silver school of mackerel—

Imagine being lost underwater in total blackness. I'd panic. But it's dangerous to panic in Ingo. You mustn't think of the Air. You must forget that human beings can't live underwater, and then you'll find that you can.

Faro was here a moment ago, I'm sure of it. He's keeping himself hidden, but I don't know why. Even if it was totally dark, I expect he'd still be able to see me through the water. Faro is Mer, and he belongs here. Ingo is his home. And I'm human, and I don't belong.

But it isn't as simple as that. There's something else in me: the Mer blood that came to me and my brother Conor from our ancestors. It's my Mer blood that draws me to Ingo, beneath the surface of the water. I'd probably drown without my Mer blood – but it's best not to think of that—

"Faro?" Nobody answers. All the same I know he is close. But I won't call again. I'm not going to give Faro the satisfaction of thinking that I'm scared, or that I need him. I can survive in Ingo without him. I don't need to hold on to him any more, the way I did last year when I first came to Ingo. The water is rich with oxygen. It knows how to keep me alive.

I swim on. This light is very strange. Just for a moment, that underwater reef didn't look as if it was made from rock. It looked like the ruins of a great building, carved from stone thousands of years ago. I blink. No, it's a reef, that's all.

Why am I here in Ingo tonight? I can't remember clearly. Maybe I woke up in the dead of night and heard a voice calling from the sea. Did I climb down the path, down the rocks to our cove, and then slip into the water secretly?

Don't be so stupid, Sapphire. You don't live in the cottage any more, remember? You've left Senara. You're living in St Pirans, with Mum and Conor and Sadie. And Roger is never far away. How could you have forgotten all that?

So how did I get here? I must have come down to

Polquidden Beach, and dived into Ingo from there. Yes, that was it. I remember now. I was in bed, drifting off to sleep, and then I felt Ingo calling me. That call which is so powerful that every cell of my body has to answer it. Ingo was waiting for me. I would be able to dive down and down and down, beneath the skin of the water, into Ingo. I would swim with the currents through the underwater world that is so strange and mysterious and yet also feels like home.

Yes, I remember putting on my jeans and hooded top, and creeping downstairs in the moonlight from the landing window. Stealthily unlocking the front door, and then running down to Polquidden Beach, where the water shone in the moonlight and the voice of Ingo was so strong that I couldn't hear anything else.

And now I'm in Ingo again. Ever since we moved to St Pirans I've been trying to get back here, but it's never worked before tonight. There's too much noise in St Pirans, too many people, shops, cafés and car parks. But at night, maybe it's different. Maybe the dark is like a key that turns the lock, and opens Ingo.

"Greetings, little sister."

"Faro!"

I turn in a swirl of water and there he is.

"Faro! Where've you been? Why haven't I seen you for so long?"

His hand grasps mine. Even in the moonlight, his teasing smile is the same as ever.

"We're here now, aren't we? Nothing else matters. Sapphire, I've got so much to show you."

He lets go of my hand and backflips into a somersault, and then another and another until the water's churning so fast I can't see him at all. At last he stops in a seethe of bubbles, and grabs my hand again.

"Come on, Sapphire. Time to go. Night is the best time of all."

"Why is it the best time of all, Faro?"

"Because at night you see things you can't see by day."

"What things?"

"You'll see."

We join hands. There's a current racing ahead, the colour of the darkest blue velvet. We plunge forward. The current is so strong that it crushes me. I'm jolting, juddering, struggling in its grip, but I can't break away. It's got me, like a cat with a bird in its claws. It's much too powerful for me, and it knows its own strength.

This is like the moment when you get on to the most terrifying ride of all at a theme park and you're strapped in, helpless to escape. The ride begins to move and you see a mocking smile on the face of the attendants and you realise that they don't care at all. But Ingo is no theme park where people lose their jobs if they kill the customers. Anything can happen here. If I die now, no one will ever know. They'll only say that I drowned, like they said Dad drowned.

Don't panic, Sapphire. Let the current take you where it wants. Wherever you go, you'll be safe. Reassuring thoughts echo in my head and I'm not sure for a moment if they are my thoughts or Faro's. Are we sharing our thoughts again, the way we did last summer? *Relax, let the current take you. Don't resist it, or you'll get hurt.* Jolts of force shake me. I'm afraid, I'm afraid, I can't breathe—

Don't ever think of breathing or not breathing. Air is another country and it means nothing here. Think of now. Think of Ingo. Here. Now.

The words beat in my head like a pulse. *Here. Now. Let go of everything and see what comes to you.* I've done it before, but it's never been as hard as this. Ingo at night is so dark, so vast. Not a safe playground but a wild kingdom. You could so easily lose yourself here. A tingle of pure fear runs through my body. *No, no, Sapphire, that's not the way. Panic is making you deaf and blind.*

I stop fighting. It feels like coming out of a cage. I am free and safe in the heart of the current. There's Faro, a little way ahead of me. His tail gleams blue in the moonlight. I can't see his face, or his hands, or any of him that seems human. Only the strong tail, like a seal's tail, driving Faro through the water. We are travelling faster than I've ever dreamed of swimming, flying through Ingo in darkness.



By the time the current swerves away from us, throwing us off into calmer water, we must be miles and miles from land. I'm exhausted. It seems that even Faro's tired, because he pulls my hand and we swim down and down to the sea bed. Here the sand is deeply ridged, and we sink into one of its sheltered hollows to rest. It is almost totally dark down here.

"Where are we, Faro?" My voice echoes strangely.

"Close to the Lost Islands."

"Why are they lost?"

"They're not *all* lost. Some of them still rise above the surface. There are still humans living there. But the largest islands came to us hundreds of years ago, in a single night."

"Came to you? What do you mean? Was there a battle?"

"Yes, there was a battle, but not with guns or swords. The water rose and the islands fell to Ingo."

"But, Faro, what happened to the people who were living there?"

"Some were lost," says Faro with cool indifference. "Some took to their boats and made for the nearest islands that were still above water."

"Why did the sea rise?"

"It was time for it to rise, I suppose," says Faro. I can't see his face clearly in the gloom, but his voice is maddeningly calm.

"Faro, please don't talk like that. As if everything is – well – *fate*. We should be able to make things better.

Change the future. Those islanders could have built a sea wall, couldn't they, to keep the sea out? That's what people do in Holland. They build dykes and ditches. *They* don't drown. They're brilliant engineers."

"So I've heard," says Faro thoughtfully. "They're very obstinate, those people in Holland."

"The point is, Faro, that countries don't *have* to drown. Holland proves it. It's the other way round there. They *reclaim* land from the sea. Did you know that?"

"For now, they take land from Ingo," Faro reflects, "but that doesn't make it theirs. What works today may not work tomorrow. Weren't you saying just now that we should be able to make things better, and change the future? I agree. It would make things better for the Mer if Holland were to grow... smaller."

"But why, Faro? Why? Isn't Ingo strong enough already? The oceans are greater than the land. Don't you know that?"

Dad taught me that. He took me way out in his boat, the *Peggy Gordon*, until I could clearly see how small the land looked, and how insignificant, compared to the hugeness of the sea.

"Why do you want more and more and *more,* Faro?"

"You humans are the ones who want more," says Faro fiercely. "You want the whole world to bow to human desires."

Faro's argument is making me uneasy. "Can we… could we go to the Lost Islands?" I ask quickly.

"Everyone's going to the Lost Islands tonight."

"Why?"

"There's a Gathering. Look over there."

"It's too dark."

"*Look*, Sapphire. Open your eyes."

I peer through the deep dark velvet of the water. Yes, there are shapes and shadows, shifting with the pull of the currents. There's a group of them, close together. A shoal of fish swimming to their feeding grounds, maybe. But they're too big for fish, surely; they're as long as – as tall as—

"Mer, Faro! Look! They're Mer!"

I'm seeing the Mer at last. Faro's people. The curtain that has hidden them from me every time I've visited Ingo has lifted at last. They are moving fast, in a group of twenty or so. They're a long way off, and they don't notice us. They seem to shimmer as they swim, as if they're covered in fish scales. But I know from Faro and his sister Elvira that the Mer aren't really covered in scales at all. That's for fairy stories where mermaids bask on rocks, combing their hair and singing to sailors. The real Mer are not like that. They're more powerful, more complicated and much, much more real. I blink, and the Mer have gone.

"What were they wearing, Faro? What's all that shiny stuff?"

"Mother-of-pearl on cloaks of net, I should think. That's what people generally wear to a Gathering when it's moonlight."

"How beautiful. Have you got a cloak like that?"

"What do you mean?"

"Have you got one? A cloak like that? In your wardrobe or whatever?"

"I'm not going to the Gathering tonight, so why would I have a cloak? I'd make one if I was going."

"Do you mean that you make a new cloak every time there's a party? I mean, a Gathering."

"Of course. They take days and days to make. The patterns are complicated."

"Then why don't you keep them? You could have a beautiful collection of cloaks."

"Collection!" says Faro with scorn, then he lowers his voice as if what he's saying is dangerous and not to be overheard. "Listen, Sapphire. A long time ago, some of the Mer started to *keep* things. They grew so proud of what they had *collected* that they became rivals, then enemies. It nearly brought us to war."

"Do the Mer fight wars?" I ask in surprise. Faro has always given me the impression that Mer life is peaceful.

"We almost fought a war then. We were ready to kill each other."

"We have wars all the time. I've seen them on TV."

"Is TV real?" asks Faro curiously. "I thought it was stories humans make up for one another."

"The news is real."

"It's good to know about the human world," says Faro with decision. "Some Mer say that we should keep right away from it, but I think how you live is interesting."

"You make me feel as if I'm in a zoo, Faro!"

"Zoos! How can you humans keep creatures trapped in cages for pleasure when they are begging to be released?"

"Humans don't hear them. We can't talk to animals, you know."

"I know. I'm sorry, Sapphire."

Faro presses my hand in sympathy. If, like him, you can talk to whales and dolphins and sea urchins and sea eagles, then no wonder he thinks human life is a bit limited...

This seems like the most important talk I've ever had with Faro. It's the first time he's admitted that things have ever been less than perfect in Ingo. In the quiet darkness it's easier to speak openly, and not to start arguing—

"I wish I could see those islands," I tell him.

"We can go now if you like?"

"Really?"

"Yes. I can't take you to the Gathering. It's too early for that, and the Mer wouldn't like to see you there. But we could go to one of the other islands."

We swim out of our hollow. There are currents everywhere – not as powerful as the one we rode on, but little flickering currents that wash over our skin. The light is stronger now, and as we swim along the sea bed I realise that it's because the water is growing shallower.

"I don't want to go back into the Air," I say in alarm. I don't want to burst through the surface of the water,

only to find myself marooned on some strange island miles and miles from Cornwall.

"We're not leaving Ingo. But we're coming to the islands, Sapphire. Look ahead."

It's strange – like coming inshore on a boat, except that the land where we're about to beach is underwater, lit by moonlight falling through water. There are the rocks. There's the beach. A long wall juts out. It must have been the harbour wall once. On the drowned shore there are the crumbled remains of buildings which must have been cottages. Their doorways are empty. I suppose the doors have rotted away. The empty window sockets make the cottages look as if they have got hungry, staring eyes. Instead of slate tiles on the roofs, there's seaweed waving gently in the current.

It all makes me shiver. I'm afraid of what might come out of those empty doorways: a scuttling family of crabs, or a conger eel, or a jellyfish with long, searching tentacles. I'm not afraid of any of these creatures usually, but they shouldn't be here, in human houses. There should be fire here, the smell of cooking and the sounds of human voices and laughter. I turn away.

"Don't you like it?" Faro asks.

I shake my head, and my hair floats across my face like seaweed, hiding it. I'm glad that Faro can't see my expression. I don't want to look any more, but the drowned village seems to be casting a spell on me. I stare at the little cobbled road leading up behind the cottages,

and the strong, square tower of what must have been the village church, long ago. A weathercock still stands there. I wonder if it still turns from side to side when the tide moves. Does the weathercock still think that the wind's blowing it? It is all so empty, so sad and so silent. Like a graveyard.

"We come on pilgrimage here," says Faro.

"Pilgrimage?"

"Yes. Pilgrims come from far away to see the power of what Ingo has done here. Where there was land, now there is water."

"Great," I say bitterly. "I hope they enjoy it."

"You're angry," says Faro, "but you shouldn't be. In Holland they force the sea back, and you say they are brilliant. Here the sea rises and the land falls, and you think it's terrible. But it's just what happens. Like the tide. At low tide you can walk safely in a place where six hours later you would drown."

"But it's not tides that did this. It's something much more powerful. A whole island has drowned, Faro! How many villages were there?"

"I don't know. Many, I think."

"And how many people drowned?" I say, half to myself. I may have Mer blood in me, but no Mer blood could be strong enough to make me happy here. "It's so desolate," I go on, trying to make Faro understand. "This island wasn't part of Ingo and it didn't want to be. It isn't really a part of Ingo now. It's just dead."

"You're wrong," says Faro passionately. "Every year it's more alive. Look at how much is growing there now. Look how rich the water is." I can't bear to argue with him, and besides, I know we are never going to agree. With a part of myself I see what Faro sees: the beauty of the seaweed waving above the cottages, with thick stems and feathery branches; the schools of silvery, flickering fish; the sea-anemones and limpets that have made their home on the fallen stones. The part of me which is Mer thinks it is beautiful, but the part which is human thinks of all the human life that's been swallowed up by salt water.

"What's the matter, Sapphire? Why are you screwing up your face like that?"

He really doesn't know. Faro knows a lot about the Air, but not that humans weep.

"I'm sad, that's all. It's called crying."

"I've heard of that," says Faro eagerly, "but I've never seen it." He makes it sound as if I was performing a juggling trick. "Show me how you do this crying," he goes on.

"No, Faro, it doesn't work like that. I don't want to cry any more. I've stopped, look. But what do the Mer do when they are sad, if they don't cry? What do you do if someone dies?"

"We keep them in our memories."

"I think we should go," I say abruptly. I want to get away from this place, with its mournful atmosphere.

How could this have happened? How did the sea rise so suddenly that whole islands were swallowed by it, and people didn't even have time to get into their boats and escape?

I take a last look at the drowned village. There are the hulls of fishing boats chained to the harbour floor. They wouldn't float now, even if you could bring them to the surface. Sea water has rotted their timber. What would the people who lived here think if they could see this?

I can't help it. Tears are prickling and stinging behind my eyes again. It hurts more to cry in Ingo than it does in the Air. I don't want Faro to see how upset I am, or to watch me with his bright, curious eyes as I do this strange human thing called "crying", so I put my hands over my face. What was it called, this drowned village? It must have had a name.

Tell me what you were called, I say very softly inside my head. *Tell me your name.*

No one answers. The sea surges around me, lifting me. There's no moonlight any more. I can't see anything. Ingo is dark and full of sea voices that seem to come from everywhere. The sea lifts me again, and carries me away with it.

I wake in my bedroom in St Pirans, struggling out of a sleep that sticks to me like glue. My room is very small, only wide enough for my bed and a narrow strip of wooden floor. There's a shining pool of water on the

floor. My porthole window is open. Maybe it's been raining and the rain has blown in. No, I don't think so. I dip my finger in the water and taste salt. Ingo.

The house is silent. Everyone in St Pirans is fast asleep. I look at the digital alarm clock that Roger gave me after I missed the school bus for the third time. Its digits glow green. 03:03. There's a heap of wet clothes on the floor by my bed – my jeans and hooded top – and my hair is wet. I must have changed into these pyjamas after I got back, but I don't really remember. It's all cloudy.

But the memory of the drowned houses is all too clear. The windows looked like empty, staring eye sockets in a skull. I don't want to think about it. I want to push it out of my mind.