

Chapter 10

The ice palace

Meanwhile, far away in the uncharted reaches of the Northern Ocean, two bears were adrift in a fishing boat.

They saw it coming, but there wasn't much they could do about it. The hurricane, that is. They saw the waves soaring and crashing. They saw the clouds turn into waves and the waves into sky.

They took down the sails and stowed them. They took down the masts and lashed them to the deck. They shut themselves in the cabin and waited for the worst.

Soon it was like being inside a tumble dryer, as the boat lurched ninety degrees one way, then ninety the other. They kept expecting it to turn completely over, but it never quite did. Sometimes it rode the crest of the highest wave. Sometimes a giant wave crashed over it and the bears thought it would sink without trace.

As the boat went down it took in water and the bears floated around the cabin like rubber ducks. But as the waves tossed it up again the water drained away.

Hours later, bruised, dizzy, sick and exhausted, Mungo and Grizzly looked out on a calm sea. It was hard to believe a Bearloch fishing boat had survived a hurricane.

"Well, stone the bonxies!" said Mungo. "We made it. It's like I've always said: 'With a little bit of help a bear will always get by.'"

"More like a whopping miracle," said Grizzly.

"Exactly," said Mungo. "Just like I've always said."

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A few minutes later, Mungo said, "Well, stone the bonxies!" For, once he had taken in the calm sea, there was another wonder to be seen.

Right ahead of them a white mountain loomed out of the ocean, for all the world like one of the great peaks of the Far Northern Lands.

"It must be the Island of the Bishbirds," said Mungo.

"No," said Grizzly.

"Why not?"

"Because the Island of the Bishbirds is black. That there is white."

“But the picture in your study doesn’t have to be right, you know. Or maybe it was black but now it’s changed. You can never tell with Bishbirds.”

“That,” said Grizzly, “is not an island. It’s an iceberg. It’s a whopping great mountain of ice.”

“So it is,” said Mungo, who never minded being corrected.

“What’s more: we’re heading straight at it,” said Grizzly.

Soon they realised how this was happening. There was opening in the side of the iceberg, like the entrance to a tunnel, and the sea flowed through it. The current was taking them inside the iceberg and it was too late to do anything about it.

It was just as well they had taken down the masts because the ceiling of the entrance was low and icicles dangled dangerously close to their heads.

But soon the tunnel opened out into a huge cavern of ice. It was stunning. For once Mungo had nothing to say but, “Oo-oo-hhh!”

It was a kind of ice palace. Somehow (they could not tell how) it was lit up with light that shone through ice, reflected off ice, sparkled on ice. There were ice sculptures everywhere.

Across the ceiling flew great ice albatrosses, snowy owls, arctic griffins and pterodactyls. On rocks of ice in the water sat great walruses, mermaids and manatees. There were ice bears, some of them swimming, but they were, of course, polar bears, not brown bears.

From the sea to the ceiling reached huge columns of ice, decorated with leaves and fruit. A more than life-size mammoth stood poised on a rock of ice. Mungo and Grizzly only just avoided his tremendous icy tusks as their boat slipped past.

It was all icily spectacular but also icily cold. As the bears shivered, they became aware of music. A voice cold as ice was singing:

I am the spirit of ice

I am the heart of the cold

mother of minus degrees

millions of ice ages old.

Ice maidens dance to my tune

creatures of less than a night

fragile as snowflakes on glass

they melt in the light of the moon.

*Sometimes my song is of fright
icicles jut from my jaw
sometimes I sing of delight
from a frozen heart songs cannot thaw.*

*From the tip of my glacial snout
to the fathomless depths of my roots
in fog or in sun or in pitch
I am stone cold within and without.*

*Millions of ice ages old
mother of minus degrees
I am the spirit of ice
I am the heart of the cold.*

The song was all around them, and now there were living creatures also flying around them: dragonflies breathing out frozen breath, transparent flying serpents, and moths the size of a bear's head, with wings like snowflakes. All these looked as though they were made of ice, but they were not sculptures.

“Shall I p-p-p-play the p-p-p-pipes?” said Grizzly, teeth chattering.

“N-n-n-not yet. I d-d-d-don't think they mean to harm us,” said Mungo.

“The p-p-p-pipes would p-p-p-probably f-f-f-freeze up-p-p-p anyway,” said Grizzly.

Gradually ice was forming all over the boat. The bears stamped and jumped to ward off the cold, but they too would have frozen had not an entrance to a tunnel appeared, like the one that had brought them into the palace.

As the boat drifted towards the open sea again, they saw that it was passing between two more ice statues. They were enormous birds, made of ice but tinted with hints of all the colours of the rainbow. Their great beaks pointed out to sea as though to show the bears where to go.

“Bishbirds!” said Grizzly as soon as they were safely out of the iceberg.