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Opening extract from

Mel Foster and the Demon Butler

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Chapter One
The Thing in the Ice

The director of the orphanage had predicted that Mel would come to a bad end. Looking at the sea of ice, Mel decided this was probably it. He was about to meet a bad end at a very bad end of the world, a place the sailors called the North Pole, or as near as a ship could get.

The *Albatross* had been stuck since midnight and the sea at the stern had solidified. There was ice everywhere – and not a crack or a chink through which they could escape. The seamen said it was now a waiting game: would the ship's sides cave in under the pressure or would they all die of cold and hunger first?

'A third choice, please,' Mel muttered as he bent over his sail-mending, but no one took any notice of the cabin boy. Usually a sunny-natured person, gifted in making mischief and breaking rules, the prospect of

imminent death was dampening even Mel's high spirits. He sat back against the ship's lifeboat on the main deck, huddled in the canvas he was sewing, trying to think of a bright side to the situation.

Nope. There wasn't one.

He blew on the tips of his fingers, nimbly ducking the cuffs of passing crewmen.

'Your orders, Captain Mariner?' called Able Seaman Ishmael. The sailor was leaning over the side, thumping the ice with a pole to gauge the thickness. Ishmael had a shaven head tattooed with a map of the world which he'd had done in Singapore. Unfortunately, the ink had been substandard and become a puddle of blue like a bruise.

No finding your way home from that noggin, thought Mel.

The captain appeared on the balcony of the bridge, ten feet above the main deck. The iron plating was treacherous and his peg leg slipped on the ice. He flung out an arm and gripped the railing with his hook, producing a teeth-aching screech of metal on metal. A veteran of a hundred voyages, his single brown eye burned with fiery defiance against the terrible odds they faced. Captain Mariner had surrendered so many bits of his body to nature – to storms, sharks and scurvy – that he had no intention of giving up any of his remaining limbs to frost.

'Take a party of men over the side, Mr Ishmael. We'll

cut our way free, damn my eye if we don't.'

Mr Wallace, the scientific explorer who had commissioned this voyage to the north, popped up at the captain's side like a jack-in-the-box. To Mel, his shiny pink face looked like a partially sucked boiled sweet spat out on the pavement. From the scientist's eager expression, it was clear that he had no notion of the danger they were in.

'But we can't retreat, captain!' exclaimed Mr Wallace, his voice a squeak of excitement. 'We're so close!'

'Close to our deaths, sir.' The hook now pressed against the scientist's chest, snagging on an ivory button. 'We have proved beyond doubt that you cannot sail to the Pole even at the height of summer. If you persist in your intention of planting the British flag on that spot, your only recourse is to go on by foot. I believe it is that way.' The captain swept his hook to the featureless north. 'Good luck to you.'

Mr Wallace smoothed down the ruffled fur of his coat. 'But . . . but I have no sledge – no dogs!'

'Then it seems this expedition is at an end. We turn back – if we can.'

The captain clumped away, leaving the scientist facing a prospect of ruined ambitions. He gave a little whimper, like a kicked puppy.

Mel shook his head in disgust. Mr Wallace was a complete waste of cargo space!

'You heard the captain, lads. Look lively.' Ishmael

gathered a party of the stoutest men in the crew and they lowered the boat over the side of the vessel. The *Albatross* was a rusty black steamer with a single smokestack and two masts to assist the engines. The warmth from the boilers kept the sea around the stern from freezing, but a few feet further off the cold was winning.

'Boy, come keep the brazier alight.' Ishmael had put a small stove on board the ship's boat to warm the ice-smashing party. He was one of the kinder men on the crew. The other seamen had no patience with the succession of cabin boys they called Lady B's Orphans. They enjoyed plaguing the youngsters. Mel had been told that none of his predecessors had survived more than six months, and Mel had already managed five.

Perhaps he wouldn't make the full six after all?

Glad to have something to do other than wait for death, Mel slid down the rope to join the men. Overhead, a bow of green light writhed snakelike across the dark blue expanse, twisting from east to west. Some of the more superstitious men crossed themselves.

''Tis only the Northern Lights,' scoffed Ishmael. As an American from Nantucket, land of the free and home of reason, he had no patience with Old World beliefs that said the glow marked the passage of a demon to Earth.

Pulling his woollen cap over his ears, Mel sketched a secret little cross over his heart. Better safe than sorry.

A hungry wind prowled the snowy wastes. At the edge of the sea ice, four men clambered out, ropes tied round their middles. The remainder of the party stayed in the boat, primed to reel their fellows in quickly. No one could survive more than a second or two in that water. The advance team called out that the ice was thick enough to support their weight, so the rest were given the order to follow.

Ishmael passed out the hatchets, pickaxes and poles. The seamen began hacking at the ice on two sides. The plan was to carve notches like a tram track, break up the ice in between and so clear a space for the hull to plough through. Further on, a second party of men lit fires in hopes that the ice would melt and be easier to remove. Mel poked the brazier in the ship's boat. It didn't take a genius to know that this method of retreat would be too slow, like a snail trying to ascend Mount Everest. He cupped his hands, blowing on the bluish tips of his fingers. His knitted gloves had worn away at the ends and he was in constant danger of frostbite. He rubbed his palms together, then tucked his hands under his armpits and huddled by the hot metal side of his stove. At least for now he was warm; it could be worse. He whistled a snatch of a favourite song to keep his spirits up.

After several hours of chipping and hauling ice, the ship had retreated about a hundred yards from where she had come to a halt that morning. The men were now

hauling a huge block out of the water, much thicker than the sheets they had previously removed. From his vantage point, looking at it sideways, Mel caught a glimpse of a black streak trapped inside the ice. If he had to place a bet on what it was, he would plump for a dead seal or fish. Preserved in ice, it might serve to feed the crew and keep starvation at bay a few more days.

'Mr Ishmael.' Mel stood up and waved at the able seaman. 'I think there's something inside that piece.'

With colourful curses, the men heaved the block on to the ice floe. Once out of the water the slab proved much easier to move, as they could slide it. Ishmael ordered the men to spin the block so he could see what they had caught.

He scratched his bald head somewhere near Australia. 'The boy's right. Here: light this.' He passed Mel a pole with a pitch-covered rag at the end.

Dipping the tip in the brazier, Mel then clambered out of the boat to hand it back. Ishmael held the flames against the place where the black streak was nearest the surface. In the rippling heat of the fire, the ice began to melt. When he judged that he had done enough, he handed the torch to Mel and knelt down by the side of the block. Taking off a glove, he broke off the last film of ice and touched the thing.

'By the great whale . . . it can't be!' He whipped his hand away as if he had been burned.

Mel crouched beside him. 'Is that . . .' he swallowed,

feeling sick, 'is that *human* hair?'

'Mr Ishmael, why have you stopped work?' called the captain from the stern of the *Albatross*.

'We've found something, sir.' Ishmael hurriedly put his glove back on. 'A body in the ice.'

A few feet away from the captain, Mr Wallace craned his head over the side. 'A body, you say? Oh, that is wonderful!'

Not for the poor victim, thought Mel sourly.

'I've heard of finding mammoths in the ice, but never a human. It could be the missing link to prove that humans came from apes, as Mr Darwin claims. Bring it on board and let me examine it!'

Mel added 'wildly optimistic' to the other things he knew about the scientist.

Captain Mariner scowled at Wallace. 'Whose ship is this, sir?'

'Um, yours?' replied the scientist, just intelligent enough to give the right answer.

'I give the orders here. We've no time for idle scientific curiosity.'

Mr Wallace looked dismayed for a second but then searched for a persuasive argument. 'Captain, think how much credit this discovery will bring. We live in an age of marvels and the great monster hunt is on. Strange discoveries are dug up daily all over the Empire: bones of creatures as big as dragons – mummies and shrunken heads – fortunes built, reputations made. You

want to be part of that, don't you?'

The bristling black brow over the captain's remaining eye shot up. 'Fortunes?'

'Yes, yes. The Queen is bound to pay well to see this wonder. The more unusual, the more she will give. Think how much a half-ape, half-human will bring!'

'If it is an ape-man. It is more likely to be an unfortunate sailor who went over the side from a whaler.'

'Then let's bring it aboard and examine it more closely.'

Captain Mariner rubbed the scarred space where his left eye had once been. 'Men, bring that thing aboard.'

'But sir, it weighs close to a ton!' objected Ishmael. 'Shouldn't we melt the ice from it first?'

'It mustn't be completely unfrozen or it will rot away before we can reach London.' Deciding to join the party on the ice, Mr Wallace was now struggling with the ropes to climb over the side. The captain gestured to a sailor to assist him. As much as the crew despised their passenger, no one wished to dump the man who paid their wages into the Arctic Ocean. That would put an end to any hope of a bonus.

The captain was already losing interest in the find, content that it would keep Mr Wallace out of his way. 'Mr Ishmael, melt as much of the block as you deem necessary but, for the love of Neptune, send the men back to work smashing a course through this cursed

ice. Put the boy on the task – he can be spared.'

'Aye aye, captain.' Ishmael ordered two sailors to lift the brazier out of the boat and place it on a wooden pallet so Mel could move it slowly around the block. He handed Mel a scraper and chisel. 'You understand what you have to do?'

'Aye, Mr Ishmael.'

'Carry on then.'

Mel picked up his tools and hacked at a corner, humming to himself.

Mr Wallace staggered across the ice to where Mel was working.

'No, no, this will not do.' He gestured to the black hair straggling out of the hole Ishmael had made.

'Sir?' Mel tried to sound polite.

'We can't have the ape-man exposed like that. You need to make sure that part goes under ice again.'

Mel scratched his nose. How was he to both melt and freeze the body? Mr Wallace had no idea how difficult his task was already in the sub-zero temperatures.

It's a good job, Mel thought, *that I'm not easily spooked*. Life in the orphanage had cured Mel of that: he'd often had to help the undertaker. Among the coffins and wood shavings he had learned then that bodies were just bodies; rich and poor, young and old, everyone was the same in death. 'I'll do my best, sir.'

The chill penetrating his thick fur coat, sheepskin gloves and fleece-lined boots, Mr Wallace slipped his

way back to the ship, leaving the cabin boy, dressed only in woollens and ragged hand-me-down trousers, to finish the job.

Mel sighed and moved the brazier. He chipped away at the ice, deciding he would deal with the removal before he attempted to restore a covering to the head. *Chip-chip*. The block whittled away piece by piece. Wind licked his cheeks. In the long daylight of the northern summer, the fragments of ice glinted. They brought to mind the diamond necklace he had once seen around a noblewoman's neck, a rare flash of beauty in his life. Lady Bracknell had worn the gems to visit the poor unfortunates at Mr Squeers's Orphanage and wrongly thought the attention of the children had been for her. To a soul, they had been calculating how many pies just one of those jewels would purchase. Lady Bracknell had passed down the line of orphans and finally reached Mel, one of the oldest inmates.

'And you are?' she had demanded, her gold spectacles held to her eyes as she inspected him like an insect pinned to a card.

'Melchizedek John Foster, m'lady.'

'Ha ha ha!' Her laugh had caught everyone by surprise, matching their shock when Mel had released a box of frogs in the middle of the Sunday sermon. 'What an extraordinarily large name for so small a person.'

'It was chosen by Dr Foster, the gentleman who found the boy while on a visit to Gloucester. The doctor

is a patron of this establishment,' explained Mr Squeers quickly, as if he had to apologize for the selection of one so grand. He pointed to the smiling portrait of Dr Foster that presided over the dining room, transferring the blame to Mel's sponsor.

'Boy, what do you think of your name?' asked the lady. She smelt faintly of lavender water and smoke. Iron-grey hair swirled high on her head like a guardsman's helmet.

'I think I might grow into it, given time,' Mel said cautiously. He was proud of his name – he had found it in the Bible, which gave it the ultimate stamp of approval.

'Indeed, you might. Or you might not.' She dug in her handbag and pulled out a folded banknote. 'This boy, Mr Squeers: this is the one I will send to join the merchant navy.' She handed him the money. Her cold smile was not reassuring.

With that announcement, Mel's future had been decided.

'And now I'm chipping ice off a corpse,' Mel muttered to himself. 'Look how far I've come.' Wiping away the fragments, he stepped back to take a better look. The ice distorted its contents, but he guessed the creature was about seven feet long with masses of dark hair. Oddly, it seemed to be wearing a white dress. It then occurred to him that it could be a shroud. Sailors were buried at sea sewn up in sailcloth, last stitch through the nose

to check they were really dead. The ocean had begun to unwrap this one. The chances of it being an ape-man were fast disappearing, royal favour and scientific prizes vanishing like steam from the smokestack. Mr Wallace was not going to be pleased.

Peeking over his shoulder to check no one was watching, Mel stuck his fingers into the hole Ishmael had made. The hair was silky soft. The temptation to go further was akin to picking at a scab, wrong but impossible to resist. He wriggled his fingers deeper so he could touch the scalp. Strange: it felt warmer than his own skin. A little flick of static cracked between his fingertip and the thing's head.

'How are you getting on, boy?' called Ishmael.

Mel snatched back his hand. 'Very good, sir. Almost done, I think.'

'Then let's get it aboard. Ewan, Matthews: help Mel get that thing on to the ship.'

Sliding two ropes around the coffin-shaped ice block, the sailors used the loading tackle to lift the corpse up to the deck. The job passed with relative ease now that Mel had removed most of the ice.

'Where do ye want this stowed, captain?' asked Ewan. A burly Scotsman, Ewan had frost on his bristling red beard and brows.

'In the hold,' said the captain. 'Mr Wallace can play with it there.' He scowled at the men on the ground. 'Mr Ishmael, bore holes in the sea ice and see how

thick it is. I am minded to ram a passage.'

Mel decided to follow the thing. Having been on the ice for most of the day he thought he deserved a chance to warm up. He clambered down the ladders to the deepest of the storage compartments, cheeks tingling in the relative warmth of the interior.

'*Things are seldom what they seem*,' he sang under his breath, picking up a popular tune that had been doing the rounds of the London glee clubs before he left on this voyage. '*All that glitters is not gold*.' He looked forward to the moment of the scientist's comeuppance.

When he got to the hold he found Mr Wallace instructing the sailors to pack the slab with straw on a narrow shelf. Pleased to be rid of it, Ewan banged the block into the steel side of the ship. The resulting boom sounded ominous.

'Careful now: we mustn't spoil it!' squawked Wallace.

'What do ye think tha' is, sir?' asked Ewan as he held a lantern over the face. Hair obscured the blurred features.

'Ugly looking bug, ain't he, guv?' smirked Matthews, a thin cockney with no more bulk than a bundle of sticks.

'It is not a bug.' Wallace frowned at the sailors. 'It is the missing link.' He patted the ice, his signet ring rapping on the surface. 'This discovery will make us famous.'

The ice cracked. Like an egg hatching, the split travelled all the way through the block and a large fragment sheared off.

'Quick, do something, men!' Mr Wallace tried to push the ice back together but he didn't have enough hands to accomplish the task. 'I told the captain it was too warm down here! Oh, dodo droppings! It's coming apart.'

It was far too late to stop the ice falling away: half the body was exposed, one arm dangling, blackened nails touching the floor.

'Tha' isna ape-man,' said Ewan.

'No sailor neither,' added Matthews with ghastly relish.

'It's a girl,' said Mel, creeping a little closer.

'No, that's not a human!' Mr Wallace peered at the arm with a magnifying glass. 'Gentlemen, we have found ourselves a genuine monster!'