

Black Marlin

By Ben R. Williams

Chapter XII: The Church of the Old Ways

While I had drifted to the dark depths slowly and gently, I snapped awake suddenly and violently, filled with the total certainty that I had awakened not on the mortal plane, but in Hell's fiery inferno. I felt as though I'd been plunged into an oven; my suit was sodden and sweat stung my eyes. I forced them open to find one of the more baffling sights that has ever greeted me, a sight quite confusing and particularly detailed, though it was fortunately (for the reader's purposes) seared into my memory, allowing me to describe it in detail.

The first thing I noticed was the roaring fire. The hearth, which had previously held only a small, smoldering log, had now been stoked fully a-blaze, producing a fire suitable for smelting iron. I was no longer in the windowed great room where old Graber had presumably drugged our Exploratory Team; I was now in a much smaller, windowless room opposite the great room (I could see the sofa that had once cradled me through the flickering flames of the chimney's open hearth). The others were scattered about the floor with me, all of us bound with rope (one knotted rope

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held together our wrists, another our ankles) save one: Nine, who was oddly absent.

The strangest feature of the room, however, involved that massive chimney. From the great room, it offered no ornamentation, merely featureless stone-work. This opposite side, however, was intricately detailed. Five cubby-holes had been installed where a mantle-piece would normally be mounted, and each contained a small wooden trifle: a bird, a sheep, a ram, a calf, and an ox. And above these, jutting out at least four feet, the enormous, impassive stone head of a cow.

"My God," Pincus muttered blearily, "It's... it's..."

A concealed door to the left of the chimney flew open and in marched a grinning, shirtless Abram Graber, dragging Nine behind him, the poor lad's wrists bound by a tight rope and leader.

"LE HA'AVIR BA'ESH!" Graber shrieked, and then dissolved into a cackling fit.

"Mr. Pincus," I said, "I feel it would be in our best interests to extricate ourselves from this situation as quickly as possible."

"Indeed, Isaac," Pincus replied, "I feel this is the sort of situation where Mr. Mulligan's skill-set is of the

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most use to us. Tell me, could you roll into him a few times and attempt to awaken him?"

"I'm up, God dammit," Mulligan murmured. "What the fuck is going on?"

Graber dragged Nine before the fire, pulled a leather bag from his pocket, and emptied a small quantity of flour into his hand, which he heaved into the roaring flame. The flour popped like gunpowder as Graber began to chant in a low voice:

"First MOLOCH, horrid King  
Besmear'd with blood  
Of human sacrifice, and parents'  
Tears,  
Though, for the noyse of Drums and  
Timbrels loud,  
Their children's cries unheard that  
Passed through fire  
To his grim Idol..."

"Say Mulligan," Pincus said, "Have you any ideas on how we are to free ourselves from these bonds?"

"Sar, it's pow'rful warm in here, innit?" Nine cheerily garbled to Graber. "Ought ye not t'row a little water on yer foir?"

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I watched in horror as Graber removed a short, twisted blade from his belt. I feared he'd use it on Nine, but no! Instead, he dragged its tip across his sunken, flabby chest, leaving a bloody hash-mark. In the fire's glow, I could see eleven more such marks, puckered and faded over untold years.

"I fink you done cut yarself, sar!"

"Him the AMMONITE

Worshipt in RABBA and her watry

Plain,

In ARGOB and in BASAN, to the

Stream

Of utmost ARNON. Nor content with

Such

Audacious neighbourhood, the wisest heart

Of SOLOMON he led by fraud to

Build

His Temple right against the Temple

Of God..."

"Bill!" Mulligan yelled. "Bill, wake up, dammit!"

"Mm?" Bill moaned. "Wh... what?"

"Roll towards me, Bill! I need your hook!"

I heard the sounds of struggle on either side of me as my companions attempted to free themselves, but I found

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myself transfixed by the old man's terrible ceremony. As I watched, Graber ran a hand across his bloody chest and smeared twin streaks of crimson across young Nine's cheeks!

"Rouging up me ol' cheekies, aye, sar?"

"On that opprobrious Hill, and made

His Grove

The pleasant Vally of HINNOM,

TOPHET thence

And black GEHENNA call'd, the TYPE

Of Hell!"

"God dammit, Bill!" Mulligan bellowed, "Move the hook to your left! No, your LEFT! Jerk it, damn you, and snap my bonds!"

Chaos surrounded me! To my side, Mulligan and the Captain wrestled back to back, the Captain's hook slowly fraying the knot which held Mulligan's wrists. I snapped my attention back to Graber, who, possessed of uncanny strength for one so ancient, grabbed Nine by the arms and lifted him into the air.

"Whatcha doin', sar?"

Graber's blind eyes rolled back in his head; his body trembled; his lips pulled back in a rotten, devilish grin. The sheen of sweat on his body caused him to seemingly glow in the firelight.

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"ALL TO MOLOCH!" he shrieked, and heaved Nine into the chimney!

"NO!" Pincus howled!

"SHIT!" Mulligan added!

"AIIIIIIIE!" Nine replied, then said nothing at all!

There was a dry pop as Mulligan, fueled, no doubt, by rage, snapped the weakened rope which held his wrists. His hands now free, he rolled onto his back and jerked loose the knot which bound his ankles. He was on his feet in a flash.

"ALL TO MOLOCH!" Graber shrieked, twirling about in a fit of religious ecstasy, "PRAISE HI-"

Graber's statement was interrupted by Mulligan's fist, which plowed into the side of his skull with such force to nearly fracture it. Graber fell to the ground before his evil hearth, a dust cloud of flour billowing out from the point of impact.

"Is he dead?" Bill barked.

Mulligan knelt at Graber's side and pressed his index and middle finger to the old man's wattled neck. He paused a moment, then, satisfied that there was still a pulse, slapped Graber across the face.

"Hey. Wake up."

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Graber's eyelids fluttered. He stared sightlessly up into Mulligan's great bearded face, his jaw working soundlessly in the repulsive fashion that the elderly are so fond of.

"All... all to Moloch..." Graber muttered.

"You! Old man!" Bill said, writhing worm-like on his belly in an attempt to inch closer to the hearth, "Have you seen the Black Marlin?"

"The... the Black Marlin?"

"It is a ship! The captain is a pirate by the name of Andy! He has kidnapped my dear wife, old man, and I seek revenge upon him! Has the ship passed by?"

Graber's toothless mouth stuttered into a smile.

"Mayhap. If I tell you, will you spare me?"

"Absolutely," Mulligan said.

"The ship stopped here not two months ago. The one you call Andy bartered with me, two hens for a barrel of water from my cistern. He was heading south for the Horn. Drake Passage."

Bill sniffed, fighting back tears. "Was a woman with him? Dear Mary? A woman so beautiful even a blind man would be left thunderstruck? Was she in good spirits?"

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Graber coughed, a few drops of blood spilling onto his grizzled chin. "Aye. I recall her. She spoke little. She seemed well."

"Good," Bill said, unable to hold back his tears any longer. "Good."

Mulligan grabbed Graber's arms and lifted him to his feet. The old man was a-tremble, the shock of Mulligan's blow still reverberating through his elderly frame, yet the bos'un held him steady.

"Kind sir," Graber muttered, "Could you help me to my chair? I must rest a spell."

"Sure," Mulligan said, "Want me to wipe your ass for you, too?"

"What?"

"All to Moloch," Mulligan said, and flipped Graber into the fireplace as easily as one might heave a bundle of kindling! The old man burst into flames, screaming in agony, though much like Nine, his screams were, quite thankfully, short-lived.

Mulligan slipped an ivory-handled straight-razor from his boot and knelt next to the Captain, slicing through the ropes which held him.

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"Diplomacy!" Mulligan grumbled, "What horseshit. Diplomacy has never gotten anyone anywhere. Now killing, on the other hand..."

"I will admit," Pincus said, "That this particular application of the principles of diplomacy was a failure. However, to disregard the entire concept based on a single application would be foolish."

"What happened?" Weems said groggily, "Did I miss anything important?"

"I beg your pardon, 'consul,'" Mulligan continued, helping the freed Captain to his feet, "But it seems like every time you run through the diplomat routine, I end up having to beat the hell out of someone and we leave less one cabin boy. I'm merely suggesting that we could save time by greeting all strangers with a display of withering violence."

"Fair, Mulligan, yet I must remind-"

As Mulligan knelt to saw through Pincus' ropes, the door burst open once more. It was the hollow-eyed boy, Graber's right hand, his Peabody rifle raised before him, a bead drawn on Mulligan's head. The only sound, the crackling fire. The only smell, that of barbecue.

"Boy!" Pincus said, "Lay down your weapon, I beseech thee! I know well you understand English, so hear my

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implorations! I understand that you are upset with our actions, yet your master forced our hand. I am sorry that the situation ended as it did; not on Graber's account, but on yours. Yet hear me now and know I speak truth: you have experienced life outside of this island, and if you stay your hand, you'll experience it again. We will bring you with us, the newest crewman on our good ship *Temperance*. You will see wondrous sights, boy, vistas few men have ever laid eyes upon. Do you tire of rabbit stew? Then you'll dine on steak, fish, fruit, ambrosia! Do you tire of answering to a teetotaler? Aboard the *Temperance*, no one is judged by his fellow man. And treasure! There is a long road ahead of us, the road of trials, yet treasure waits at the end, and you will get your share, boy! All this can be yours; all you must do is stay your hand and lower that weapon!"

The boy beetled his brow, his small brown face straining from contemplation. The rifle stayed motionless in his hands, its black eye never leaving Mulligan's forehead. With but a twitch, old Mulligan would've been dispatched from this Earth, and I could see in the hard set of his jaw that he realized this too, and was facing his potential mortality with characteristic aplomb. As the boy

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tossed the Peabody to the floor, I saw the line of that jaw soften.

"Thank you, boy," Pincus said, "What do you say of diplomacy now, Mulligan?"

"Horseshit," Mulligan said, and resumed sawing at Pincus' ropes.

I heard a clicking of boot heels to my side as the good Captain cautiously approached the hollow-eyed boy. The boy was anxious, yet Bill's amiable grin seemed to melt him a bit, and as Bill laid his good hand upon the boy's head and tousled his shaggy hair, I saw a different side of the Captain, a warm and genuine side not tainted by the cancerous pain that wormed through so much of his soul.

"You shall be our new cabin boy," Bill said to the lad. "And we shall call you 'Ten.'"