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Black Marlin

A Novel by Ben R. Williams

Chapter 14: The Swiss Cartographers

The galley was the very picture of gaiety, or at least whatever passed for gaiety among our rather morose crew. Mr. Weems was seated in the corner by the woodstove, a mountain dulcimer spread across his lap, plucking out a merry Appalachian tune, while Papa Shillingi stood nearby tapping his toe and puffing his peace-pipe. Ten sat cross-legged on the floor at Weems' feet, observing wide-eyed, the boy perhaps never having been acquainted with music before (and, while I appreciated Weems' desire to share his hobby, it was possibly not the finest introduction the lad could have experienced). Mulligan and Pincus, meanwhile, sat at the meal table, steins of beer before them, discussing some humorous (and, from what little I could gather, terribly vile) incident, pausing occasionally to laugh uproariously. Even the subterranean Mr. Snuff peered up at the proceedings via a trap-door installed beneath the table, quite possibly for that exact purpose, a pair of smoked lenses shielding his unaccustomed eyes from the comparatively bright light of the galley. The good captain, however, was nowhere to be found. I went to the wooden beer

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keg positioned near the pantry, grabbed a stein of my own (a heavy pewter piece adorned with a bas relief of Dionysus frolicking with his various Maenads), filled it with the foamy lager, and set off below-decks in search of Captain Bill.

I was first inclined to investigate the Captain's Quarters, that crimson-doored Porta Sancta branching off from steerage, and the sounds of rustling within immediately indicated that my instincts had paid off. I rapped upon the door merrily and the rustling stopped.

"Only Isaac could possess such a gay rap," came the Captain's muffled response. "Come in, young man."

The Captain sat hunched at his desk, rubbing his hand along the scaly back of his stuffed pangolin. A dram of scotch sat nearby, and from the Captain's glazed eye I could tell it was not the first dram he'd quaffed since retiring to his chambers. I sat down across from him and took a sip from my stein.

"I assume," Bill said, "That you have sought me out to invite me to join whatever merriment is unfolding above-decks."

"Yes, sir," said I. "I thought you'd perhaps enjoy hearing Mr. Weems pluck his dulcimer."

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"Confound his dulcimer!" the captain barked, banging his hook against the table. I recoiled a bit in my seat, giving the Captain pause. Bill snatched up his glass of scotch and took a swig, eyeing me sadly (though not humorlessly).

"It pains me to lose a man," Bill said, resuming his soulful rubbing of the pangolin's scutes. "One would hope that all captains mourn the loss of a crewman, but I, Isaac, as a man of passions and sentiments, feel the wound more deeply than most. Nine was a mere cabin boy, the most expendable man aboard the *Temperance*. Yet when we lost Nine, we lost a piece of ourselves. It is difficult to abide it. Nor can I easily abide merriment following the passing of a crew member; I'll allow it, but I won't join in. I once lost an entire crew, Isaac, every man aboard the ship save this fool-hardy figurehead, and it quite nearly broke me."

Captain Bill kicked his tattered boots upon his desk and reclined in his wingback chair, settling in for what I immediately assumed would be a quite involved yarn, a tale of such length that it might require multiple chapters to unfold fully. I was, as you shall see, quite correct in this assumption.

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"It was a bit over six years ago, Isaac. My Mary had been kidnapped but a few months. I had considered shying away from the working world and taking up a life of idleness and leisure, but I realized, were I to do so, that my sorrow would turn inward and eat me from the inside out. My maritime skills having been ably proven by my previous years of experience, I was quickly hired to captain an independently chartered Swiss research vessel on a two-year cartographical study of the islands of the South Pacific. It was simple work; the cartographers had extensively researched every rumor of uncharted islands that passed their way. My only job was to follow their navigational instructions and keep them from falling off the boat. This latter part, I will confess, was not always the easiest task; there is no creature on Earth more depraved and out-of-control than a drunken Swiss cartographer, as I am sure you already know. Nonetheless, three months in, the voyage was largely without incident. But then..."

Bill poured a fresh Scotch, quite nearly to the brim of his highball glass, and took a long sip before continuing.

"It was a small island, volcanic in origin, a domed pile of rocks surrounded by a circular scrap of jungle. I cannot recall where it lay, exactly; I believe a few

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hundred miles south of Easter Island. It was a tiny, wretched place, surely not large enough to support even the adventurous Polynesians who had fanned throughout the Pacific in their long-boats. Or so we thought. We found a small beach, just large enough to offer a berth for two or three of our smaller research boats. I anchored perhaps a hundred yards out. You can get quite close to a volcanic island, even in a ship this size; the sub-marine drop-off is precipitous. Just as we were about to lower the boats, the natives appeared.

"They were a bedraggled bunch, dusky-skinned and flat-faced, their loin-cloths tattered and mossy, their tattoos faded and inept. I was more beggared of wisdom than I am now, if you can believe it, and I assumed at the time they were simpletons. And yet, as they peered at us from their sandy shore, and we peered back from the safety of our ship, they produced conch horns, Isaac, and they began to blow.

"The conch horn is not generally known for its melodic complexity, yet the music that greeted our ears was among the most beautiful I've ever heard. They played five, perhaps even ten minutes, a song of infinite twists and crescendos, as fascinating and thrilling as any piece composed by Wagner. Their women, beautiful creatures,

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danced and gyrated before the horn-players, the erotic sparkle in their eyes visible even from a distance. And then it stopped; the horns fell silent; the women stood still.

"What were we to do, Isaac? God in Heaven, what were we to do but what we did? I told the cartographers to gather their instruments, their drums and glockenspiels and triangles and tubas and violins. And so they did, and they played as well as they could from the deck of the ship, honking and blatting and sawing the strings, returning the gesture of good-will that the natives had so graciously extended to us (though, it must be said, not nearly so beautifully). And once the cartographers ceased their playing, the natives dragged out their long-boats and began paddling in our direction. The cartographers, meanwhile, lowered their small research boats and paddled out to meet their new friends.

"It was a scene of unimaginable carnage. The natives descended upon the Swiss with vulpine brutality, bashing in skulls with stone axes, garroting men with palm-rope, even launching volleys of fiery arrows. What weapons did the cartographers have? Naught but sextants. It was a short-lived battle, and within moments, the only remaining evidence of the entire crew was the blood in the water and

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the pieces of flaming maps floating through the salty air. And then, as I stared in horror, the natives began paddling straight for the ship, straight for me!

"I had a cartridge rifle. A man with good aim and a repeater can make short work of twenty men with stone-age weapons. But I fired nary a bullet, Isaac, so horrified was I by what I had done. I had made a terrible judgment call; as a result, for reasons I could not fathom, my entire crew was dead. It was the first time I realized the power a captain holds in his meager hands, the ability to not only make fortunes, but destroy lives. An inept baker can do no worse than make a sub-par savory; an inept captain can become an inadvertent murderer. As the gravity of this horrible realization thrummed through me, the natives clambered up the side of the ship. An old and withered man in a flowing head-dress of albatross feathers, their Chief, nocked an arrow in his warped bow and hauled it back, aiming its jagged obsidian tip directly at my forehead. I was a second from death, Isaac. And what did I do?

"I grabbed the Chief's wrist and re-angled the bow, aiming the arrow squarely at my own eye-socket. I have seen an arrow, even a bullet, bounce off a man's skull, you see. I did not want the Chief to make this same mistake. And I said to him, in a horrifying croak I could scarcely

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recognize as my own voice, 'Kill me, you son of a bitch. Do what I am too coward to do myself.'

"The Chief paused. A smile creased his haggard face. And then, for reasons I assumed to be borne only of cruelty, he laughed and lowered the bow. He muttered some incomprehensible instruction to the burliest of the natives, who promptly slung me over his shoulder. I did not fight him, for so confused was I that I knew not what to do.

"They carried me back to the island, back to their sad village. It was a pitiful place, their tents and lean-tos constructed haphazardly, as though something had interrupted the builders in mid-construction. No pigs or chickens wandered the grounds; their sole source of food appeared to be caged rats and giant loathsome crickets trapped in grass baskets. Even their fires burned pitifully, as though ashamed to glow too brightly for fear of mockery. The burly native placed me, quite gently, before the fire, and offered me a skewer of roasted crickets. The Chief and his tribe gathered around me, fascinated, and out of politeness, I dined on those terrible morsels, pausing occasionally to spit out an antennae or particularly bristly leg. Suddenly I heard a rustling behind me. I turned to see a white man sauntering



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out of the jungle, loin-clothed and tattooed as the natives, looking every bit the convert save for the wire-rim spectacles perched on the bridge of his nose. He sat down next to me and jerked a cricket from my skewer.

    "‘Hello,’ he said, in a stately British accent, ‘Welcome to the village of the Tim-Tams.’”