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Black Marlin

A Novel by Ben R. Williams

Chapter XV: The Village of the Tim-Tams

Satisfied that his earlier point (regarding the mysterious loin-clothed British gentleman welcoming him to the village of the Tim-Tams) had found firm purchase in my mind, Captain Bill continued his narrative:

"The Tim-Tams! I'd heard rumors of their existence, Isaac, but never did I think I'd lay eyes on a living Tim-Tam, much less find myself a guest in their village! I informed the Britainer that I was under the impression that the Tim-Tams had gone extinct, wiped out when the volcano that had formed their island exploded violently more than a hundred years ago. But no! The gentleman corrected me.

"You see, the Tim-Tams had arrived on their island sometime during the 17th century. They found a prosperous place, a veritable Garden of Eden. The cliffs were steep, but over-laden with trees bearing delicious fruit and all manner of fat, flightless birds. They were overjoyed to find such a haven, and for many years they lived in peace and comfort, their population quickly rising, their days idle and pleasant. They named their rocky central mountain 'Mon-Bonapuka,' roughly translating to 'Mount Benevolent,'

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and they held frequent ceremonies to the kind gods that had delivered them to their wondrous home.

"And then, one day, tragedy struck. A subterranean geological cataclysm occurred, and the island dropped one hundred feet in a matter of hours. Their orchards sank below the churning waves. Their bird-pens were swallowed up. All but one village disappeared. And most of the Tim-Tams fell into the ocean to be crushed by either the pounding sea or the various brutal rock-slides that tumbled continuously down the stony walls of Mon-Bonapuka.

"This, as you may imagine, had not only a terrible physical effect on the few remaining Tim-Tams, but a profound psychological effect as well. At first, they wondered why the same gods who had brought them to this one-time paradise would take it away so violently. Then they began to wonder if those gods ever existed to begin with. And finally, they came to believe that the gods did exist, but they were not gods of kindness, oh no! They were gods of pain and cruelty, toying with humans for no greater reason than sheer meanness. Having realized this, they acted accordingly.

"Mon-Bonapuka was re-named Mon-Malapika (Mount Vicious). No longer did they celebrate the god of the fat flightless bird or the god of the Sugar-Fruit Tree; they

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created new gods and cursed their terrible names. Lo-Calabinpok (God-Who-Takes-Our-Loved-Ones); Lo-Putakrinchuk (God-Who-Poisons-Our-Water-Supply); Lo-Batataktuk (God-Who-Is-Generally-A-Bastard-To-Us). Now, in the small remaining amount of spare time when the Tim-Tams were not scrounging for food or picking the recently discovered Cornea-Lice from each other, they spitefully celebrated their existence by burning their new gods in effigy.

"This was all well and good, I said, but why did the Tim-Tams slaughter my men and then suddenly decide to spare me? The British gentleman had an answer to that query, as well. The Tim-Tams, you see, had once believed that the finest way to celebrate their old gods of joy and abundance was through the composition and performance of beautiful conch-horn melodies. After the cataclysm, however, they had to re-evaluate all aspects of their lives, music included. It was decided that they would no longer play their songs in celebration, for they had nothing left to celebrate. Their chief had decreed that music would now be played only as a dire warning, a challenge to any who approached their tragic island home. The islander, you see, can rarely conceive of a world beyond his island and assumes that experiences are the same the whole world 'round. When the Tim-Tams played their seemingly-merry tune, they were

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actually playing a grim threnody challenging us to either leave or face their wrath. By playing a song in response, we met their challenge and raised it, leaving them little choice but to attack (an unfortunate misunderstanding which has caused the Tim-Tams a fair amount of grief over the years).

"But why, then, did they spare me? The answer is simple. When I re-aligned the chief's bow for a better kill-shot and dared him to end my life and suffering, the chief saw within me despair, loneliness, anguish, horror; in short, he recognized that within my sunken chest beat the very heart of a Tim-Tam. To kill me would be to kill a fellow tribesman. This would be anathema to a Tim-Tam; misery, as they say, loves company.

"For an outsider to be inducted into the tribe of the Tim-Tams was a rare (if unfortunate) honor. The British gentleman (who would not offer his Christian name, but only his Tim-Tam name, 'Crikacruk,' or 'Pain-Ghost') was, prior to my arrival, the only newly-minted Tim-Tam. He had once sailed in the Queen's navy and been quite well-regarded within it. All that changed when he received word that his new wife had taken up with his identical twin brother, a noted dipsomaniac who, utilizing his uncanny resemblance, had managed to abscond not only with Crikacruk's wife but

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also the entirety of his bank account. This caused Crikacruk to seek comfort in the bottle, and one night, while drunkenly perambulating about the deck of his ship, he slipped and fell into the sea! He bobbed for hours, treading water and watching the ship's lights dim into the distance, before deciding to cease all motion, blow out his lungs, and slip quietly into a watery grave. Just as he dipped below the surface, a friendly leatherback turtle rose from the depths! Crikacruk gripped the turtle's shell, and it began to ferry him across the waves, always taking care to keep his head above water! It was a miraculous (though not unprecedented) example of nature's rare kindness, which made it all the more unfortunate when the turtle was suddenly attacked by a large thresher shark. But all was not lost! Crikacruk gripped the thresher's tail and held on for dear life, skimming across the water at great speeds, knowing not where the thresher headed but hoping the course would eventually bring him near land. This plan was dealt a devastating blow when the thresher was devoured by a giant squid. I should probably mention at this time in the narrative that Crikacruk's tale is wildly implausible and he may in fact have been either lying through his teeth or become delusional as a result of malnutrition brought on by a diet of crickets and rats, but the overall point is

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that Crikacruk seemed to drunkenly ride an unending food chain of increasingly terrifying nautical beasts until he eventually arrived at the shores of the island of the Tim-Tams, exhausted and terrified, sun-burned and sun-stroked, begging for whatever end might come. He was instantly initiated.

"I remember little of my own initiation ceremony. I remember the chief offering me a wooden dish containing some sort of weak broth, or perhaps a tea. It was possessed of a disgusting flavor, and I immediately felt my stomach cramp and churn. Suddenly, I was awash with horrific visions and hallucinations. Now, I have tried opium and its distillates, Isaac, including laudanum and the occasional sip of paregoric to sooth the nerves. The experience, it should go without saying, is quite pleasant. Whatever root or flower had been steeped in this broth was the vicious black sheep of the opiate family, conjuring up every tragedy and horror I had ever experienced. I re-lived the night I lost my eye and hand (a story for another evening, perhaps). I watched the Swiss cartographers die once more, watched the sea turn red with blood. I saw other visions, too, portents of the future, the silver calabash and man in white robes! But above all, I saw Mary, dear Mary, the love of my poor life, being taken from me by Savage Andy, that

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cruel pirate, over and over and over again, and the God damned Black Marlin sailed through all my dreams.

"When I awakened from the opiate's spell, the chief was hunched over me, a mournful smile creasing his haggard old face. He spoke in Tim-Tam, yet I understood every word, well-versed was I now in the language of sorrow. 'Sail, on Brother Tim-Tam,' he said. 'Sail on, Dead-Man-Who-Cries.'

"I left that very evening, aiming my ghost ship toward Mexico, with nothing on my mind but sweet tequila and sweeter Mary. But one day, Isaac, I shall return to the village of the Tim-Tams, assuming Mon-Malapika has not yet sunk completely into the ocean.

"I can no longer recall precisely why I began telling this story. I think it had something to do with my aversion to losing men, though the point got lost somewhere along the way. It is time to retire to bed. Good night, Isaac."

The Captain rose shakily from his seat and collapsed face-first into his canopy bed like a puppet heaved into a toy-box by a careless child. I picked up my now-empty beer stein and exited the room, setting course for my hammock, the Captain's tale weighing heavily on my mind. But all situations appear worse at night, and I hoped that the morning's brightness would clear the cobwebs from my own

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mind, though Bill's, it now seemed, was swaddled in
darkness perpetual.