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Black Marlin

A Novel by Ben R. Williams

Chapter XVII: Signs and Wonders

Night fell across the Atlantic as Mulligan, Pincus, and I sat around a small green-felted table on the gently rocking deck, a swaying oil lamp illuminating our cards and chips. I eyed my hand: a two, a three, a six, an eight, and a Queen, all but two of different suits, though I'm certain that if a fifth suit existed, that final card would have borne its symbol. I was once more on the losing end of a spirited game of Mulligan's Draw.

"All in," Pincus said, shoving his munificent pile of chips into the tottering pot.

Mulligan leaned across the table, stroking his spade-like gray-shot beard. "Bullshit."

Pincus chortled. "A most intriguing accusation, sir, though I hope you realize that all accusations must be backed up."

"You're goddamn right I realize that. I realize things all the live-long day."

"If you say so."

"I certainly do."

"Perhaps you can prove it."

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A cherry-wood box rested on the table's surface, "The Prover" carved roughly into its top. Mulligan flipped open the lid, revealing a .44 special and a handful of bullets. He removed the revolver and cracked open the top-break cylinder, loaded three bullets and snapped it shut.

"Three bottles on the gunwale, Isaac, if you please."

I rose from the table (being careful to slip my cards into my coat pocket, for while I would confidently trust my life to my shipmates, I would never entrust them with my purse) and crossed to the starboard gunwale. I plucked three empty ale-bottles from a barrel set against the gunwale for the precise purpose of Mulligan's Draw. As I set up the bottles, however, I drifted my gaze to the open ocean, the black expanse glittering in the light of the waxing moon, and it was then that I noticed something quite odd, a sight that at first glance would not appear out of the ordinary if one were close to shore, but a hundred nautical miles from land appeared quite strange, and, it must be said, a bit disturbing. What I saw, you see, was a long-boat, rocking gently alongside us, no more than twenty feet away from the Temperance's side, its signal-lanterns extinguished, a dark figure hunched within.

"Halloa, there!" I cried. "Are you lost at sea, sir?"

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Mulligan appeared next to me as if by magic, brow deeply furrowed. "Who in God's name is that?"

"I haven't the faintest, bos'un."

Mulligan gripped the gunwale tight and leaned out, squinting his eyes at the dark figure in the drifting long-boat. Suddenly, a glimmer of recognition seemed to fall across his creased face, and he spat into the water.

"Pincus!" said he, "Fetch me a pike, and make it quick!"

Behind me, I heard Pincus scatter. The boat was drifting past us with some rapidity, and Mulligan and I followed it, walking along the deck towards the stern, keeping pace with the phantom boat.

"Do you know the fellow, Mr. Mulligan?"

"No," Mulligan said, and then added, quite ominously, "But I suspect we've crossed paths."

Pincus returned with two pikes and handed the longer to Mulligan. I stepped back to allow them to do their work; they both reared back and heaved the pikes as far as possible, holding fast to only the barest end of the wood handle. Pincus' implement splashed into the water, and he quickly reeled it back to try again; Mulligan's connected with a solid thud. He jerked the pike's handle, drawing the boat slowly towards the Temperance's side.

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"Pincus!" said he, "I've got her! Fetch a ladder so we may board."

As Mulligan tugged the ship closer, his face turning crimson with exertion, Pincus hurried away. Within seconds, he returned with a rope ladder, fastened one end to the gunwale, and heaved the rest over the side. It landed inside the long-boat with a clatter.

Mulligan drew one of the big Webley revolvers from inside his pea-coat and set upon crawling over the gunwale, hooking his boots into the rope ladder.

"I'll investigate this situation," he said gravely, "Just hold those pikes steady, Pincus."

"Aye," Pincus said, and with that, Mulligan quickly descended the ladder, his head dropping from sight. A moment later, we heard his boot-heels thud against the long-boat's deck, slowly cross its length, and pause.

"Isaac!" said he, "Come see this."

With no small amount of trepidation, I heaved a leg over the gunwale's railing and hooked my own shoes into the rope ladder, a staggeringly treacherous invention if ever there were one. The ropes are slick, difficult to cling to under the best circumstances, yet also barnacle'd in spots, the calcified beasts eager to slice open a fleshy hand. To make matters worse, each movement sends the ladder swaying

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and wiggling, creating in the climber the sensation of attempting to grapple with a great buttered serpent, which it goes without saying is the most dangerous serpent of them all. Nonetheless, I managed to descend the ladder without much incident, and within no more than ten minutes, I found myself standing beside Mulligan in the mysterious long-boat, his silhouette blocking my view of the boat's lonely captain. Mulligan popped a match beneath his nail and lit the boat's signal lantern, shedding a guttering orange light on the proceedings. Mulligan glanced to me, his face lit ghostly.

"I am going to step aside and let you look upon this boat's owner," Mulligan said. "Do not be frightened."

"Perish the thought," said I.

Mulligan stepped aside to reveal a most hideous sight: the boat's captain was not merely dead, but dramatically dead, reduced to nothing more than a rag-clad skeleton bleached beneath God knows how many days at sea! Its hands still limply clutched the boat's twin oars; its head tilted back, the jaw yawning wide as if howling at the night sky! I felt a scream burst through my throat!

"Ahhhh!" said I, "I am frightened!"

"Knock that off," Mulligan muttered. "I've never known a skeleton to cause a man harm, except for one incident in

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Haiti. Yon corpse presents no danger to us; what his presence signals, however, is quite a wonder. Have you heard the men speak in hushed tones of Old Charon?"

I cast my mind back; the name seemed vaguely familiar.

"I cannot say."

Mulligan lowered his voice to a conspirator's whisper. "Old Charon is a whale. A sperm whale. And not just any sperm whale, but the biggest and cruelest fish in the ocean."

"Whales are mammals, sir," came Pincus' voice from above. "Cetaceans."

"You're a citation! Now, as I was saying, Old Charon has been carving his path of destruction through the watery parts of the world since before either of us were born. There are some who even claim him to be a Creation Whale, one of the prototypes that the Lord first put upon this earth, un-killable by mortal man. That, obviously, is bullshit, but it should serve to indicate the severity of the situation. Charon has destroyed a dozen ships in his time, battered them apart with his snout, eaten the sailors as they bobbed helplessly among the floating ruined timbers. Men have tried to slay him, sure. They have sent out their long-boats, stabbed him with harpoons. They can kill him no more than an agitated sand-fly may kill a grown

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man. Their harpoons land, the tethers connecting them to the angry beast. He then takes them on an unending Nantucket Sleigh-ride, dragging them hundreds of miles from their ship, baking them in the sun. They die of thirst, sun-stroke, starvation. Old Charon has accumulated many long-boats in such a fashion; it is, in fact, how he came to be named after that unholy ferry-man of the River Styx. Wherever he goes, he drags a small fleet along the waves behind him, a fleet of the damned and lifeless, and he ferries those poor souls across the seven seas, ultimately depositing them at the banks of whatever dark cove he calls his home."

Mulligan tapped the toe of his boot against the long-boat's deck.

"Sometimes, of course, the harpoon tethers break under the strain of their haul, the boats cast adrift in the middle of nowhere. This is one of those long-boats. It is a sign that Old Charon has passed through here. I cannot say how recently, nor can I say which way he was passing. But the fact that we still live means we have not crossed paths with him; we are quite likely following in his wake."

"My God," said I, "We must inform the Captain!"

"No!" Mulligan barked, "That is the worst thing you can do!"

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Mulligan leaned in close and slung an avuncular arm about my shoulders.

"It won't be any great revelation if I tell you that our esteemed captain—my own brother—is occasionally prone to eccentric notions, and he has taken a quite dangerous notion regarding Old Charon. The Captain, like several of us aboard the *Temperance*, is a skilled scrimshander, likely the most talented among us. He has etched his intricate carvings on all manner of bones; walrus tusks, narwhal horns, and of course whale-teeth. Yet he prizes the teeth of Old Charon above all others. Much like the Orientals, Bill believes that the rarer and more majestic a creature is, the more mystically potent its component parts become when jerked from the host body. Simply put, he believes that if he can collect just one of Old Charon's teeth, he can etch into it a most beautiful design which he intends to present to his beloved Mary. This will win her heart anew and prove the lengths he is willing to go to in order to retrieve her; namely, he is willing to battle the Devil Himself. It is a bit of a monomaniacal fixation for the poor man."

"If I may," Pincus said from his perch above, "The scrimshaw'd tooth cannot be the Captain's monomaniacal

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fixation, as he is already monomaniacally fixed on finding the Black Marlin."

"Pardon the interjection," said I, "But I thought his monomania centered on the retrieval of his beloved kidnapped wife Mary."

"I consider those twin monomanias to be but different sides of a single coin," Pincus said, "As the only reason the captain is obsessed with the former is because it will allow him to retrieve the latter. Were Mary not aboard the Black Marlin, nor Black Andy the pirate captain, it would be but a meaningless boat. The tooth of Old Charon, however, represents a totally different fixation. Perhaps the Captain is in fact afflicted by a binomania: Mary/Black Marlin and the tooth."

"Yet the tooth," said I, "Is but a means to an end, the end once more being his Mary. No, Mr. Pincus, if you'll forgive me for saying so, I think the good Captain is afflicted with but one—"

"Shut the fuck up!" Mulligan said, not unkindly. "Just don't mention this boat to anyone, all right? Now, let's return to the deck and finish our game."

"Indeed," Pincus said, holding the ladder fast so that we might clamber back up the Temperance's immense side. "I

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feel that a nice, quiet evening spent playing cards will ease all of our-

A flash of light at the south horizon, blindingly white, like a magnesium flash-bulb! The southern sky glowed ominously as some fantastic light show—its source concealed by the curvature of the globe—raged madly and fitfully, strange shadows flickering across the bottoms of the clouds. I had never before seen anything like it; it was as if the world's largest ball-lightning was casting a shadow play upon heaven's bare stage. The overall effect filled me with foreboding, made worse by the low rumble which now washed across our deck in waves, almost inaudible yet strong enough to rattle glass and vibrate the warped deck!

"Mr. Mulligan," Pincus said, gazing down at us from the gunwale. "Do you think we should go investigate?"

Mulligan tamped a wad of tobacco into his briar and grimaced at the horizon. "Why not?" he said. "Probably nothing."