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Black Marlin

A Novel by Ben R. Williams

Chapter XXI: The Lonesome Spire

I awakened on deck the following morning to find Mr. Weems in his customary position angling from the gunwale. Normally the sport of fishing seemed to fill him with uncanny delight, yet today he seemed withdrawn, his head turtled down to his shoulders, the tip of his sea-rod not proud and erect but pointed flaccidly to the gentle waves. It was clear he had withdrawn from the rest of the ship to gather his thoughts like so many fish, and also gather fish. I immediately recognized that he was in need of friendly discourse.

"Halloa, Weems!" I cried, wobbling towards him, "Pleasant weather, eh? Do you know the noble etymological origins of the word 'angling?'"

"Ah, fuck," Weems said.

"You see, the word 'angle' is simply a corruption of the word 'angel.' The ancient Greeks saw no difference between the fisherman and the angel, for just as angels are reapers who gather and separate the just from the wicked, so too do fisher-men gather their subjects from below and

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separate the delicious from the unpleasant. You, Mr. Weems, are a subject of Christ the same as Gabriel, wielding a rod instead of a trumpet, perhaps, but no less anointed in the Master's glory."

Weems paused to consider this. "What the hell are you talking about?" said he. "Are you already drunk? It's ten in the morning."

"Mr. Weems," said I, "You wound me. If anything, I'm still drunk from the night previous. You'll pardon me if I expectorate from the gunwale."

Our pleasant discussion of Biblical terminology and vomiting was suddenly interrupted by a loud sound of dragging. I turned to see a resplendent sight: Professor Francis Darling, his white linen suit all but glowing in the cold southerly sunlight, a fishing rod in one hand and a rope in the other; connected to it, his coffin, which he pulled across the deck behind him.

"Hello there, gentlemen," he said in his oaky drawl. "Might I join you in a little fishing?"

"Of course!" said I. "How does the day treat you, Professor?"

"It treats me well, Isaac. I just talked to your Captain about our coordinates. We're well into Drake's Passage, and it shouldn't be long before we run across my

old partner. Once that business is put to rest, we'll hunt down your Black Marlin. In the mean-time, I sure could stand to wet a line."

"After you," Weems muttered. "It's a big ocean."

"Well, I'll try to leave a couple fish for you, friend."

The Professor leaned his rod against the gunwale. Unlike the sea-rod Weems held, Darling's was far shorter and stubbier, the line thicker.

"Nice rod," Weems said, and even a deaf man could have noted the hint of derision in his voice.

Darling knelt at his coffin. "Son, you should know better than anyone that it isn't the length of a man's rod, it's what he does with it. Ain't that right, Isaac?"

I did not know how to reply, as I am not terribly experienced when it comes to fishing. Furthermore, I was too enthralled by Darling's coffin. Since his arrival, every man aboard the ship had held a keen interest in the contents of that mysterious casket. Captain Bill held that it likely contained the remains of the Professor's beloved late wife. Mulligan felt it held no mystery at all, merely the Professor's supply of jerky, tobacco, and whiskey, the Southern gentleman's holy trinity. And Mr. Pincus remained convinced that it contained a vast fortune, one we should

consider stealing at some point. Yet as the Professor unlocked the latches with a silver key fastened to a ribbon stitched into the lining of his frock coat and opened the coffin wide, I remained puzzled by its contents. On the top level, it contained books, journals, a handful of pistols, and numerous glass jars. Yet beneath that, I saw something I could not account for: a series of dusky, crudely whittled spheres, perhaps three dozen in all, each about the size of a Civil War cannon ball.

"Professor Darling," I asked, "What are those odd spheres inside your coffin?"

He offered a grin, revealing what seemed like fifty or more perfectly white teeth. "All in due time, friend Isaac. I have another treasure to show you first."

He rummaged a bit amongst the glass jars before settling on one, a half-gallon in size. He held it to the sun. Inside squirmed a half-dozen enormous insects, thick and black, their movements labored beneath the sheer weight of their chitinous shells.

"A jar of bugs," Weems said. "Truly, wonders surround us."

"Now now, Mr. Weems," Darling said, "I hear tell that you're a biologist by trade. I'd expect you to take a keen

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eye to these fellows; I doubt you've seen their like before."

Weems studied the insects, eyes squinted behind his wire-rim spectacles. "They're walking sticks, I'd wager," he said. "I've seen similar species, but never any so large."

"Nor have I," Darling said. He unsealed the jar's lid and prised one of the creatures free. He opened his fist, and though I expected it to skitter away, it merely sat calmly, twitching its stubby antennae.

"Some years ago, I found myself... shipwrecked, we shall say, on a rocky spire in the Tasman sea. It was a grim situation. I had little water and nothing in the way of food. I couldn't see a lick of land around me; it was somewhere beyond the earth's curvature. So isolated was I that I couldn't even spy a single bird; the spire was too far a-sea for any to roost there. And so I explored the rocky tower, hoping against hope to find something, anything. Perhaps a natural spring, or a tidal pool, anything that might offer me sustenance. Just as all hope was lost, I spotted it, high up on the rocks: a tiny depression in the side of the stony wall, and within it, a lone bush, not even three feet high. I clambered up to it, and it was there that I found them. A whole colony of these

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insects, clinging tenaciously to life in their lonesome oasis.

"The first day, I merely watched them. The second day, I named them. This one, if you're curious, is The Right Reverend Aloysius Colqhoun. And on the third day, my stomach rumbled so fiercely that I decided to eat them. This, I soon found, was impossible. My teeth could not penetrate their iron hulls, and I was too weak to pull them apart by hand. I thought all hope was lost, that I would starve to death on my lonesome tower. But necessity is the mother of invention, so they say, and it was then that an idea formed.

"I removed my coat and began to tug at a loose string. It gave quite easily. For the next day I sat there quietly, fastidiously unwinding the threads of my coat, until I had but one long white strand a few hundred feet in length. I tied one end to the bush, and to the other end, I tied the largest of the insects, Eduardo Padilla, the Disgraced Picador of España. I heaved him into the foaming sea.

"I was surprised to find that the string became taut within mere minutes. So dense is the carapace of these strange insects that they will not float on the sea. They sink like stones. I've never seen anything like it. And, after perhaps an hour, maybe two, the bush began to rattle.

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I wound the line back in and at the other end found a monstrous fish, some jellied horror from the ocean's floor. Hideous though it was, I did not complain. I sustained myself in this fashion until my rescue. And of course, I brought my friends with me when I departed, leaving the spire uninhabited once more.

"What makes these insects so peculiar, gentlemen, is that very few of the ocean's denizens have the jaws to crack them, yet those that do will strike nothing else. When angling with these beauties, I have never caught a fish that any man could identify. We shall see what I catch today."

And with that, Darling jabbed his hook into the fat bug in his palm and heaved it overboard. It sank out of sight in a second.

Before Weems or myself could speak, we heard approaching footfalls. Captain Bill stopped behind us, his brass spyglass clutched loosely in his hand. While the Captain had never appeared hale and hearty, he now seemed gaunter than ever, all but swimming in his ragged pea-coat, his lank grey hair blowing about his head like a withered mock halo. A cigarette clung to the corner of his mouth, and he took no pains to remove it before speaking.

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"Darling," he said, "What is the name of the ship you seek?"

"She is called the Bounty Maroon, Captain."

"Soon she will be called the Sunken Driftwood," Bill said, "For she's disabled and foundering less than one nautical mile from us. Assemble your crew and be quick about it."

"Aye aye," Darling said, though Bill was already stalking away, adrift and foundering himself in the sea of his monomania. "Weems, watch my rod; I entrust it to you. Isaac, gather up Mulligan, Papa Shillingi, Mr. Pincus, and young Ten. I will ready the gangplank to dock."

Darling offered me that same be-toothed smile and held his hands to Heaven. "God smiles on us today, friends! Soon, my affairs will be settled and the location of your Black Marlin will be revealed!"

I attempted to smile back, though for no reason I could name, I doubted every word.