

Ben R. Williams 2012

Black Marlin

A Novel by Ben R. Williams

Chapter XXIV: A Vision Quest

We gathered in the darkened galley, each man aboard the ship huddled around the weathered dinner table save Mr. Snuff, who poked his ghastly head through the trap-door installed to provide him his meals. Before us sat a sizzling fry-pan of quivering white tentacles, twitching and jerking erratically, though whether the motion was caused merely by the oil or by some residual nerve-impulse was difficult to say. I inhaled deeply of their scent; it was atrocious.

"So Weems," Pincus said, "How does this ritual proceed?"

"I know we must eat the tentacles," Weems said. "As for quantity, I do not know."

"There are seven of us," Pincus noted, "Yet the octopus is endowed with eight arms. We could save one for later. Or perhaps the Captain should receive two. Or perhaps we could divide the remaining tentacle into seven small portions, weigh each, and divide them equally between-"

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"Jesus," Mulligan said, stabbed a tentacle with his pen-knife, and shoved it into his mouth. It briefly adhered to his cheek with one of its foul sucker-plates, but few creatures can withstand our bos'un's hearty chewing, and within a matter of moments it was gone. The rest of the table followed suit.

I will confess that I experienced some trepidation upon biting into the tentacle, as I feared its flavor would match its foul scent. I was wrong, however; the flavor was infinitely worse. Just as it has been observed that a raw oyster tastes of the sea, the tentacle tasted of a particularly rotten portion of the sea, such as a bloated whale-corpse or a nest of writhing mucuous-clad hagfish. By the time I had choked back the foul lump, the other men had finished, and Mulligan was nearly done with his second helping.

"Well," Weems gagged, wiping at his tongue with his handkerchief, "Does anyone feel differently?"

"Maybe a little," Shillingi said. "Wait... no, still right as rain."

"Are you certain that this is the correct octopus?" Bill said. "We need this vision quest, Weems. We require guidance."

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"I am certain," Weems said. "Perhaps it takes awhile. Or perhaps it was not a sufficient portion, though for all I know, that was the last white octopus in the seven seas."

A stirring thought, and not the first time such a thing had happened. Every sea-man was familiar with the tragic tale of Steller's Sea Cow, a fat, slow-moving member of the delicious manatee family which, within mere decades of its discovery, had been hunted to extinction by rapacious sailors. The anecdote always filled me with sorrow; never would I have a chance of my own to witness, and then bludgeon and devour, a Steller's Sea Cow. Surely there is a lesson there, though I leave it for a greater philosopher to expound upon.

"If we cannot find guidance in this octopus," Shillingi said, producing a bottle, "Perhaps we can find it within this bourbon. Gentlemen?"

"A sound plan," Captain Bill said. "A goddamn shame, this. We're running out of options, men. Your octopus has failed us, Mr. Weems."

"My apologies," Weems said. "Apologies. Apollo. Jeez."

Shillingi uncorked the bottle of bourbon and several birds flew from its neck, growing in size as they exited and disappeared into the ceiling.

"Oh," Shillingi said, "It's filled with birds now."

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"Passenger Pigeons, most likely," Weems said. "Their numbers have been greatly reduced. Perhaps they've gone into hiding. Hiding in bottles."

"So it seems," Pincus muttered, rubbing his face until his mustaches fell off and began to inch across the table like some sort of inching worm. "Somebody grab that thing. I don't know what it will do."

"God damn it," Bill muttered darkly, "Is this what we're reduced to, sitting in a dim galley, eating octopus, watching a man's moustache crawl away, and seeking signs and symbols in nothing like Worm staring at the Swedish dolerite dike, howling 'LUND' when no message exists, well then lund ho indeed, men, for the runes are mere cracks, our octopus mere flesh, and our voices flit away as smoke in a windstorm. Who let this dog in here? Is it my familiar? No, it looks too hale and hearty; it must be Prince Rupert's dog, recovered from the silver bullet. Mulligan! Bos'un! You Eminence Grise! Drive him out! Fetch my Puckle Gun!"

"My God, Captain, I can't help you! Can't you see I have problems of my own to deal with?"

From my vantage, it appeared as though Mulligan were simply sitting stock still with his hands flat upon the table, a look of terror on his face.

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"Mulligan," said I, "What grieves you so?"

"Stop talking to me," Mulligan said. "Unless you want this great bear to finish me off and turn his amber eyes on YOU."

I began to sense that something strange might be occurring. I glanced around the table to determine which man was most level-headed. Mulligan sat at the table, the cords standing out from his neck, grappling a bear on a different plane. Pincus rooted around on the floor for his moustaches. Shillingi appeared to be floating near the ceiling. Weems had begun carefully dissecting a piece of cured ham. Mr. Snuff had ceased to be human and had transformed into an abstract concept. Only our Captain seemed to have his reason about him, as he stood at the galley pantry assembling some variety of sandwich. I joined him and placed a hand on either of his shoulders.

"Captain," said I, "Would you like to take the air?"

Bill stared from my one hand to the next and back.

"Jesus," said he, "How many of those things do you have?"

"Just the two, Captain, to my knowledge."

"All right, then, outside it is."

We strode out to the deck. It appeared far smaller than I remembered, and I told the Captain as much.

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"That is why I fell in love with the Temperance," Bill said. "It is larger inside than out. Few ships employ theoretical geometry; it induces madness in the crew. Would you like a bite of my Monte Cristo?"

Bill offered up his sandwich, which appeared to be comprised of ham, burlap, and a sextant between two pieces of hard-tack.

"No thank you, sir."

"It is your loss," he said. "I have been called the Count of Monte Cristos, due to my love of sandwiches, prison escape, and horrible vengeance. I should tell you Isaac, when you first joined our crew, I was not in favor of it. I said that you were weak, and stupid, and unsightly, and that you'd be a burden on us all. One night I nearly smothered you in your sleep, to end not only our misery but your own. But at times like this, I can honestly say that I'm glad I haven't murdered you."

Try as I might to prevent it, I felt a tear well from my eye and roll down my cheek.

"Captain, you are the father I never had."

Bill smiled kindly and gazed out at the frigid, turbulent sea. "The sea," he said, "What a great and terrible cocksucker it is. What can be said about it? That it is unreadable and murderous? The same can be said of

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most women I've known. But not my Mary, no, not her. She is the kindest woman I've ever known, a lighthouse beacon in an ocean of pain. I wasn't always like this, you know, a vicious senescent creature. I used to laugh and dance and gambol. I used to care about things. She made me that way, Isaac. She made me a better man. And whatever changes she instilled in me, the sea has robbed me of them, robbed me of everything. It took my Mary away. It took my hand and eye. It took my love, my hope, my will to live."

The Captain lurched forward and leaned against the rail, waving his hook angrily like a demented orchestra conductor, and screamed at the sea.

"You've bled me dry, you heartless bastard!" he shrieked. "What more is there to take? What more can I give? My tattered clothes? My flesh? My bones? Take it all! And here, take this shitty sandwich!"

Bill heaved the inedible mass into the sea. It fell apart instantly, the components bobbing on the boiling waves.

"It looks like a little island chain," I remarked, though it seemed as if the words came from somewhere beyond my own imagination.

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The Captain stopped. He tapped his hook on the rail, staring at the broken, water-logged sandwich. "Yes," he said, "An island chain. The Sandwich Islands."

Shillingi floated amiably past us, performing a mid-air breast-stroke.

"Hello gentlemen," said he, "Have I missed anything important?"