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Black Marlin

A Novel by Ben R. Williams

Chapter XXV: The Ring of Salt

While I cannot say precisely when I fell asleep on the day of the Vision Quest, nor how long I was asleep, nor what actions I performed while adrift in my octopus-induced spiritual reverie, I can tell of the dream that awakened me. I will do this now, for we all know that there is no speech more fascinating than another individual relaying the content of his dreams in great detail. In the dream, I was back in my childhood home, in the basement I loved so dearly. Here were all of my childhood possessions: my cornhusk mattress, my collection of unusual bottles I'd found, my library of nearly three volumes of classic Romantic literature, and of course, my collection of unusual bottles I'd found. For a moment, I was totally at peace, surrounded by the comforts of my lackadaisical youth. Suddenly, footsteps on the stairs! At first I thought it was merely my father, descending into my room to dig a potato or rutabaga from the earthen walls. But no! It was Old Scratch, Nick himself, also known as Satan or the devil if you prefer. He was seven feet tall, his skin red as a cherry, his cloven hooves clopping on the dirt floor,

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his sneering face mysteriously resembling that of my father. He raised his pitchfork above his head as he approached me, and then, with a savage down-swing, buried its tines in my belly!

"You're a failure!" he boomed, twisting the pitchfork deeper and deeper! "A FAAAAAIIIIILURE! And nobody loves you!"

The pain was excruciating, and no matter how I tried to bat the pitchfork away, it remained securely plunged within my torso. And then I awoke, a feeble groan of agony still trickling from betwixt my lips. Normally when one awakens from a nightmare, he begins his day awash in relief. I, however, found no succor upon greeting the morning; the pain in my belly continued unabated, a twisting and clutching, as though some frightened woodland creature had crawled inside me and were attempting to dig its way out.

I rolled over with a groan and opened my sleep-crusted eyes to find myself on the galley table. Shillingi sat at the table's head, the only other occupant of the room, his great muscled bulk settled upon a chamber-pot, a small cheroot jutting from between his lips.

"He... hello, Shillingi..." I muttered with Herculean effort. "P... pleasant weather, eh?"

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Shillingi wiped a pint of sweat from his glistening head and moaned. "Oh, ain't nothing pleasant about this, Isaac. You got the gut-twist, too?"

I answered by curling into the fetal position and clutching my wounded belly.

"Yeah, yeah, it's real bad. Every man aboard the ship has it. Except maybe Mulligan; nobody's seen him in days. That damned octopus has done a number on us."

"Days?" I asked. "Shillingi, it was only yesterday we ate the octopus."

Shillingi shook his head and carefully tapped his cigar ash into the chamber pot. "Nope, it's been a week at least. You've been out of your head. Just yesterday, you insisted that the Captain perform a ceremony to legally wed you to the sea."

"That's preposterous!"

Shillingi pointed a finger at me. It was at this point that I noticed I was wearing a wedding dress. A quite attractive one, at that, if perhaps a bit ill-fitting.

"God only knows where you got that thing," Shillingi said. "You kept telling us that you weren't going in for that eggshell bullshit, you wanted white. You poor bastard."

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"Shillingi," said I, forcing myself painfully upright, "What in God's name has happened here? Please, start from the beginning."

Shillingi sighed. "Isaac, I don't know if it's a custom where you come from to have a long conversation with a man trying to take an awful shit, but in my neck of the woods, it's frowned upon. Go talk to the Captain. He's at the wheel with Pincus."

It is, of course, quite easy for a man at sea to become accustomed to the crudeness that so often rears its head when a number of men are confined to a relatively small area far from the civilizing influence of the fairer sex. Shillingi was correct. I gathered up my train and painfully exited the galley.

The deck was a scene of unaccountable chaos. A dead mako shark lay lengthwise across it facing me, buzzing with green-bottle flies, its lips (as much as the shark can be said to have lips) smeared with some red paste to resemble lip-stick, a flowered sun-hat perched on its head. Weems sat on the gunwale, his pants around his ankles, his posterior pointed a-sea, his face buried in his hands. I shuffled past, not wanting to disturb him, and ascended the short flight of stairs to the ship's wheel.

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I nearly stepped upon Pincus' belly. He lay on his back, an arm blocking his eyes from the sun's harsh rays. His white suit-pants had been cut off at the knees to resemble a young boy's knickers. The reason for this remained unclear. As my shadow fell across him, he spoke.

"Reaper?" said he, "Have you finally come to answer my death-prayer?"

"Nay, Pincus, it is merely I, faithful crewman Isaac Laquedem."

Pincus groaned, his belly trembling. A disconcerting rumble issued forth from that mound.

"Damn," he said.

I continued my sad shuffle, the twisting in my digestive organs intensifying and dropping off, ebbing and flowing like some vast body of water. When I arrived at the wheel, I noticed that someone had affixed a crude scarecrow to the ship's wheel and dressed it in our Captain's ragged clothes. It was weathered and leathery, a most grotesque sight. I nearly screamed when it cleared its throat.

"Isaac!" Bill said.

He shook his hook in my face, beckoning me. I gingerly lowered myself to the planks before him, seated like a child awaiting a story. With a little luck, I would be able to avoid soiling myself in his presence.

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"I used to keep logs," the Captain said, the words hissing through his chapped lips. "Captain's logs. I recorded in them the Temperance's every move. Every port we stopped at. Every stranger we spoke to. Every word, every detail, written pain-stakingly in my own cramped hand by oil lantern. Having no idea where to search for my Mary, I suppose I decided to find her through process of elimination, taking detailed notes on every place she wasn't until I eventually found myself at the place where she was. I kept the logs in the closet in my quarters. And do you know what happened, Isaac?"

"No," said I.

"One night, a water-spout spontaneously formed beside the ship. A sea-tornado. It died just as quickly, causing only slight damage to our masts, a freak occurrence of the sort that occurs out in this lonely place. I suppose that the sudden drop in barometric pressure caused some atmospheric abnormalities. My compass cracked. A port window shattered. And a jug of red wine exploded in my closet.

"The logs were ruined, drenched in wine, the pages rendered illegible. Seven years of my life, Isaac. Seven years lost to drink. I heaved the books into the sea.

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"I almost quit. It was a savage blow to my morale. But I continued on, continued our aimless drift about the watery parts of the world. I never told the men the logs were destroyed. I suspect they think I keep them still. I haven't recorded a word of our journey since. I continue because I must, but each dead-end strikes closer to my heart, saps more of my spirit away. I find myself stymied at every turn, beset on all sides by failure, and moving with increasing torpidity. A snail bound by a ring of salt. And if this most recent lead, flimsy as it is, leads to nothing, do you know what I shall do, Isaac?"

"No, Captain, I do not."

"I shall continue," Bill said, staring out to sea.  
"Because I am an old fool who can do nothing else."

I rose shakily, planting a hand on our bereaved Captain's shoulder.

"Then let crack the sails!" said I triumphantly! "Have Snuff pour coal in his engines! I have a feeling, Captain, whether engendered by faith, hope, or residual psychotropic octopus residue, that our mission will near its end in the Sandwich Islands! So full steam ahead, say I, and let us whip through our remaining oceanic stretch like a startled race-horse, nostrils flared, lips be-foamed, and pissing munificently!"

"While I appreciate your strange and distasteful analogy, we are creeping along at a single knot, as someone dropped the anchor and there isn't a man aboard the ship presently stout enough to haul it back in."

"I am," came a burly voice from behind us. I gingerly rotated to see Gus Mulligan standing straight as a fence-post at the capstan, a crown of sea-bird feathers atop his head. He sipped from a flower-laden coconut.

"Mulligan!" said I. "Where have you been?"

"I was off having an adventure. Jesus, are you fellows still laid up? It's been a week."

"Its effects did not affect you?" I asked, being careful not to transpose my pronunciations.

"I woke up the next morning with a mild hangover. When a pod of dolphins broke the waves next to the boat and Weems announced his intention to 'lose his mermaid cherry,' I decided it was time to drop anchor and leave you gentlemen to your devices."

"Well Mulligan!" said I, rubbing my hands together with glee, "I eagerly await your exciting tale of adventure! Please, spare not a word in painting the tapestry!"



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Mulligan drained the remainder of his drink, sniffed at a belled purple flower, and pitched the coconut overboard.

"You know what?" he said, "It seems like no one on this boat can take a shit without telling a long-winded story about it. I'm sick of it. I like doing things, not talking about things. All you need to know is that I brought back a new cabin boy."

"Excellent news," Bill muttered. "Let's see him."

Before the cabin boy could reveal himself, a tiny man stepped from behind Mulligan's leg, standing no higher than three feet, an impish smile on his face, a great mop of thick raven-black hair atop his head.

"Jesus God, Mulligan!" I exclaimed, "Some savage homunculus draws near! Guard yourself!"

"Hey, fuck you, wedding dress man," the little fellow said.

Mulligan frowned, his great walrus-y mustache drawing like a bow. "This is Chester, our new cabin boy," he said. "He's a midget, you ass."

I did not know at the time what a "midget" was, nor do I know now, but I was instantly struck by how much smaller this man was than a normal man. He was the height of a child, you see, yet made haggard by time, producing an

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altogether uncanny effect that did not sit well with me. I cannot say what rendered "Chester" (assuming that to be his real name) so much smaller than usual - perhaps a fall from some great height - but at the risk of sounding prejudiced, I took an immediate dislike to him based solely on his appearance.

"Your new name is Eleven, little man," I said to him, speaking loudly, so that he might understand.

Chester scowled at me, hate burning in his eyes. I knew immediately that my initial assessment of his character was wholly correct.