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Black Marlin

A Novel by Ben R. Williams

Chapter IV- The Augur

As I walked at Mulligan's side while whistling a jaunty tune, I could not help but notice that our current stroll was marked by a furtiveness that our previous jaunt had lacked. This owed partly to the unpleasant circumstances under which we had departed from the Mournful Turnip, but also owed largely, I felt, to the lack of Pincus' gentlemanly counter-balancing presence in our company. Mulligan was not an unfriendly sort, but was possessed of unwavering determination, extreme reticence, and a face as unreadable as the Sphinx. I could not pretend to know precisely where he was leading me, though to raise the question struck me as a faux pas. And so I followed, ever-whistling, as Mulligan broke from Manteo's main thoroughfare and charted a new course through the woods, breaking a path through the brambles and briars with no more concern for the pricks than a bear might possess.

I have, over the years, been told many secrets for navigating a forest when one is without the aid of a compass. The only secret I could recall involved observing which side of a tree's trunk supports lichen, but I could

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not recall which cardinal direction the lichen points toward, removing much of the utility from the trick. I have also, of course, attempted to observe the location of the sun in order to determine my direction, but my lineage has long been afflicted with enfeebled pupils, causing any attempts to establish my bearings by sol's rays to end with me hunched, blinded, and grasping for assistance in a mole-like fashion. All this is to say that I found myself completely lost, though I suspected, based on the gently sloping, marshy earth, that we were approaching one of the edges of Manteo Island, presumably in the direction of the ship Temperance docked in those brackish waters of Shallowbag Bay.

I am generally a merry soul, rarely allowing the shadows of horror to gain purchase on my heart, but I must admit that a certain uneasiness stole over me amongst the knotty pines of Manteo. We were, after all, not far from Roanoke Island and the fabled Lost Colony that vanished there, leaving behind only the word "CROATAN" carved on a tree trunk. Where had those poor souls disappeared to? Were they murdered by Indians? Called home by God? Or had something sinister and unfathomable taken place, some bit of cosmic horror unknown to man? Surrounded by the rachitic

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pinetrees and their dangling beards of Spanish moss, the latter seemed most likely.

"Mulligan," said I, "Do you believe in the supernatural?"

"Of course," he replied, squishing determinedly through the swampy loam. "We are surrounded by the vengeful dead."

This was not the answer I had hoped for and did little to ameliorate my anxieties.

"Mulligan," said I, "Tell me of the Temperance, or any subject, really, so I am distracted from the frightening thing you just said."

"The Temperance is a fine ship," Mulligan said, swatting absently at a biting fly that had settled on his neck. "It began life as a whaler. On its first voyage, it was horribly damaged when a raging sperm whale heaved itself on board. After limping back to port, it was purchased by an explorer set on some sort of half-cocked arctic expedition. In preparation, he converted the Temperance into a steel-prowed ice-breaker and outfitted it with twin steam engines, though kept the sails. His goal was to find the Northwest Passage, not realizing that it had already been discovered and that it was also a solid mass of pack ice at the time he chose to navigate it. I

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believe the crew froze to death somewhere near Greenland. After the summer thaw, a Canadian entrepreneur salvaged it, repaired it, and brought it back to the Americas, converting it into a whaling-themed riverboat that trolled the Mississippi in search of gamblers. It was during this period that Captain Bill went aboard and won the ship in a game of five-card draw."

"Captain Bill? Is he the Captain of the Temperance?"

"Very astute there, Socrates," Mulligan (flatteringly) replied. "You'll meet him soon enough."

"I must ask, Mulligan, what will the Captain have me do aboard the Temperance? I have little experience as a sailor; so little, in fact, that I have none. Nor do I have much to offer in the arena of physical fortitude; I generally have to lie down for a spell after a particularly forceful sneeze. I also have a strange growth on—"

"No need to sell yourself, you already have the job. Mr. Pincus and I were both impressed by your poorly-planned display of drunken lunatic bravery outside the aquarium, and drunken lunatic bravery is all a true sailor needs."

I mulled these thoughts over with a certain amount of pride. Perhaps I could blend with these Argonauts after all, assuming a steady flow of courage-inducing spirits. Still, a pressing question remained:

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"But what, Mulligan, is the Captain's goal? Why do you sail?"

Mulligan paused, a wry grin playing on his lips, and tucked his packed briar between his teeth. "Why Isaac," he said, popping a match beneath his thumb-nail, "We sail for the two most righteous causes known to man: money and vengeance."

I nodded and watched Mulligan light his pipe, small blue puffs regularly exiting the bowl like smoke from the jury-rigged steam engines of the *Temperance*. Truly, these were two causes I could support wholeheartedly. What is the purpose of law but the moral application of vengeance? In a very real sense, this mysterious quest for revenge was no different from a judge's mission to indict a guilty party. And does the judge work pro bono, or is he paid for his judgments? Certainly the latter. One of the founding principles of our United States is a man's right to earn a wage, and that wage carries a religious sanctity: "In God We Trust" is writ right upon the dollar! In joining the crew of the *Temperance* to assist in their noble quest, I was no mere sailor; I was a model American, a Platonic ideal of the Patriot. Money and Vengeance? Bold Stripes and Bright Stars!

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These cheerful thoughts completely eradicated any concerns I had once held regarding imagined spirits haunting these lonesome woods. And it was at this point that I heard a stirring somewhere to my right, and, turning, saw a ghastly bearded crone clad in rags race shrieking from the shadows, blind eyes rolling in her head, hideous claw-hands clutching at my arm. Her toothless mouth lolled open and out buzzed a high-pitched titter:

"Eee hee hee! Good evening, boils and ghouls!"

Though I attempted a display of stoic bravery, it for some reason manifested itself in the form of a scream so forceful that it propelled me backward into Mulligan's waiting arms. The crone continued:

"Vengeance? Money? It's doom you seek! Such horrors you'll witness, hee hee! Monsters from the ocean's deepest depths! Oh, you'll 'sea' plenty of those! Hee! A whale towing Charon's grim boat on a Nantucket 'Slay'ride! You'll be 'whaling' when you meet that fellow, eee hee! Be sure to dress 'taste'fully when you meet... a tribe of cannibals! Ooo hoo hee! And what about the old man who worships that cruel cow-headed king? You'll be 'moo'-ved... to terror! And so many other frights await! The man in white robes! The silver calabash! The green flash! The arctic wasteland and

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the black pyramid! Hee hee! Death awaits, Isaac! Deaaaath!
So stay 'tomed'! Hee hee hee hee!"

And with that, the bearded crone turned and loped back into the underbrush, dissolving once more into the inky shadows of the primeval forest.

I attempted to turn and ask Mulligan if he had any thoughts on the sudden arrival and just-as-speedy departure of our sooth-saying guest, only to realize that my joints and ligatures were quivering in terror and my mouth was a shrunken rictus of fright. Thankfully, Mulligan snapped me from this piteous state with a fatherly swat across the crown.

"Pull yourself together," he said, sternly puffing his pipe, "You'll never get anywhere in this world if you fall to pieces every time a blind hermaphrodite predicts your doom via pun-laden gibberish monologue."

This much was undeniably true, and I encourage you, reader, to remember the same when you are inevitably confronted by a blind death augur. We must take these portents of evil in stride, and worry about our fearsome future only when it becomes our catastrophic present. I brushed the shredded, smoldering tobacco flakes from my coat (Mulligan's pipe having been slightly up-ended onto my person when I violently recoiled into his torso) and

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squared my shoulders, and off we went through the Manteo woods, Mulligan once more in the lead. Faintly, I smelled salt in the air. Onward, onward, to the Temperance!