

Black Marlin

A Novel by Ben R. Williams

Chapter VI- Captain Bill's Pangolin

Mulligan and I stood in the steerage room before an ornate door, painted crimson, its dentil trim filigreed with swirls of gold-dusted paint, a small sign above reading "Captain's Quarters." In the door's center, at eye-level, a sliding shutter latched from within to allow the Captain a peep at whoever waited without. The door was small, yes, but its magnificent accoutrements, coupled with the high rank of the gentleman within, lent that door a great deal of gravitas. I was reminded of the Porta Sancta at St. Peter's Basilica, opened by the Pope only on Jubilee, and half-waited for Mulligan to strike the wall with a silver hammer in order to grant us access to the treasures within. Instead, he merely knocked.

"Bill," said he, "It's Gus. I've got the new guy with me. Open up."

From within, I heard a heavy sigh, followed by shuffling footsteps, followed by the shutter latch rattling free. I tilted up my chin and stood as gallantly as possible, vision locked on that slender strip concealed by the shutter, always eager to make a fine first impression,

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and eager too to look deep into the eyes of that man who drew such profound respect from his crew, soon to be my leader, my father-of-the-seas, my Captain!

I was surprised, then, when the shutter slid back and revealed only one eye, its twin concealed by a black patch. Strands of long grey hair hung down over the man's face, and what I could see of the pale blue depths of the good eye conveyed such horror and sorrow that I knew, immediately, that the great Captain Bill could be but one man: the drunken Cyclopean aquarium lunatic.

"Uh," said I.

The shutter snapped shut once more, and a moment later, after the brief rattle of a pull-chain lock, the crimson door opened inward, offering full view of Captain Bill, he of the tattered Coat of Theseus and the shining hook!

"Hello," Captain Bill said, and extended the hook towards me. I gripped the cool brass and gave it a neighborly shake.

"My name is Isaac, sir," I said, "And it is a pleasure to apparently be a member of your crew."

Bill withdrew the hook and used its point to scratch at his tangled grey beard. "Tremendous. Please, come inside."

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Mulligan and I stepped into the Captain's quarters. Based on Captain Bill's previous comportment, I had anticipated a cluttered rat's nest of empty bottles, tear-soiled handkerchiefs, and stacks of plates covered with the deteriorating remains of previous meals left uneaten. Instead, I was surprised to find the opposite: a clean, tasteful study appointed with leather, mahogany, and stuffed beasts from around the world. In the center of the room stood the Captain's great desk, covered with loose journal pages and well-worn maps; before it, two chairs bolted to the floor (like all pieces of furniture aboard a working-ship). Left of the desk, a canopy bed, antique and oddly feminine, the sheets of pink silk (though, it should be pointed out, jumbled and piled as though the sleeper had spent the better part of the evening thrashing about in a fit of pique). Right of the desk, a series of fine bookshelves packed with strange and elderly volumes, the spines crinkled from years of use. Additionally, a cabinet was mounted beside the bookshelves, which Mulligan moved towards immediately upon entering the room, and, opening it, revealed a grand assortment of liquors, one of which he removed and poured into three glasses. Captain Bill, upon seating himself behind the desk, waggled his hook toward one of the chairs across from him, indicating me to be

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seated. I settled into that exquisite leather seat and surveyed Bill's silent zoo in wonder. One never realizes the miraculous variety of fanciful creatures scattered about our planet until one sees their sawdust-filled severed heads mounted upon a wall. The lion, bagged in mid-roar; the white polar bear, a born man-eater; the buffalo, that shaggy behemoth so beloved by the American savages! Yet there was one creature I could not identify, an odd scaled creature, small enough in stature to be mounted in full and presented atop a bookshelf, looking less like one of God's creations and more like the representation of a taxidermist's odd sense of humor.

"What a fine menagerie you possess, Captain!" said I. "But one creature is beyond my powers of identification; what, pray, is that scaly beast atop the book-shelf?"

"Very astute, Isaac." Bill rose from his seat and plucked the animal from the shelf, then placed it before me on the desk. "You have chosen my favorite trophy as surely as a reincarnate lama picks the treasure of his predecessor. This, young man, is a pangolin, a scaled ant-eater from the jungles of Africa. Mr. Weems presented it to me some years ago."

Here Mulligan briefly interrupted by placing a glass of liquor before each of us, which my highly-tuned

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olfactories immediately identified as a scotch, and, more importantly, a very old scotch, of a finer pedigree than I had ever before sampled. I waited for the Captain to take his drink before sipping my own, though he seemed too focused on the pangolin to even notice the arrival of his beverage. As Mulligan seated himself next to me, Bill continued:

“A wondrous creature, the pangolin. Possessed of sharp claws which he uses to tear open termite mounds and strip bark from tree-trunks in search of the fat grubs beneath. But his hide, ah, that’s what intrigues me. When threatened, the pangolin curls into himself, and these hard scales render him an impenetrable sphere, safe from danger. Would you take your bare hands and try to prise him apart? You’d be a fool; these scutes are keen as razors.”

Bill fixed me with his eye, his mouth drawn into a grimace. “I admire in the pangolin what I do not possess myself: a tough hide capable of withstanding the slings and arrows of an immoral world. Of course, I speak metaphorically; I do not wish to physically resemble the pangolin, as that would be monstrous.”

I hefted my glass and offered up a toast: “To the pangolin!”

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Captain Bill stayed my hand, though not unkindly: "No, friend Isaac, there is but one toast we offer up to Anacreon aboard this ship; to Mary!"

"To Mary," Mulligan agreed, lifting his glass.

"To Mary," I added, and then we three drank. The scotch tasted like an ancient peat bog that had filtered through a burning salt mine, though it was far more delicious than that description would lead you to believe. Captain Bill plunked his glass down atop the desk and rubbed his eye with the heel of his left hand.

"I suppose, Isaac, that I should tell you of Mary. Of why we sail these seven seas."

I looked to Mulligan for guidance, though he only stared ahead stonily, his beard and heavy mustache pulled downward in an inscrutable frown which lent him a rather walrus-y appearance.

"Sure," said I.

Bill reached out his left hand and wearily stroked the pangolin's hairy proboscis. "I loved once, Isaac," said he. "There is no greater joy to be found in this life. Depending on circumstance, there is also no greater agony. It is in the hands of fate, on the whims of the Moirae; Clotho tied together sweet Mary and I; Lachesis measured out the length of our lives together; abhorrent Atropos

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cut our love short. Mary and I were to be wed, you see, seven long years ago. A mere week before the wedding, she disappeared, kidnapped. I launched my own investigation; I questioned her family, her friends. I learned the name of her kidnapper, but more importantly, I learned the name of his ship."

Captain Bill leaned forward dramatically, his voice a growl: "The Black Marlin."

"S'wounds!" said I, immediately realizing that should I choose to convert my tale into a written narrative, this would be an excellent candidate for the title.

"And now," Bill said, relaxing into a less dramatic posture, "I sail the world with my trusty crew: Mr. Mulligan, our boatswain; Mr. Pincus, our diplomat; Mr. Snuff, our engineer; Mr. Weems, our naturalist; Papa Shillingi, our mysterious Negro islander; and Nine, our cabin boy. And now you, Isaac, our naïve idealist. I cannot offer you much in the way of regular pay aboard the *Temperance*, but as long as you serve on our crew, your needs will be met, I assure you. Further, I will tell you this: the day that we find the Black Marlin and kill that kidnapping pirate Savage Andy, I will reclaim the hand of my sweet Mary, and I will leave you, and the rest of the crew, to take possession of Andy's treasure. You will all

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be free to live out the rest of your lives in the lap of luxury; all I ask is that you help me to become reunited with my lost love."

I rose from my chair, back straight as a ramrod, and snapped a salute to Captain Bill. "I will stand boldly by your side, my Captain."

Bill tapped his hook thrice to his chest in a gesture of returned solidarity, or perhaps indigestion. "Good. Gus, I trust you to find some work for Isaac to perform. Now I ask you both to kindly take your leave, as I intend to become very drunken and pace the room cursing God for some time."

Gus rose from his chair. "Of course, Bill. If you need anything from me, just yell."

Bill nodded and resumed sadly stroking his stuffed pangolin, a mournful and somewhat unsavory glimmer in his eye. Mulligan and I stepped outside, pulling the door shut behind us. Immediately, muffled sounds of weeping and execration wafted through the crimsoned oak.

"The Captain," I said, "Seems like a man possessed by a monomaniacal fixation on the tragedies of his past."

"Yes," Gus said, "He's pretty fucked up, all right."

"I find it odd," I continued, "That you, Mr. Mulligan, a man who seemingly values cold logic and ratiocination,

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would be the right hand (no pun intended) of a tempestuous romantic ruled by violent passion."

"We all have our reasons for being on this ship," Mulligan said. "Some of the men aboard the *Temperance* have nothing left for them on land, while others have lost the ability to survive in normal society. I have skeletons in my closet, but the reason I'm here is simple..."

Mulligan looked up at the bronze plate which read "Captain's Quarters."

"...I cannot turn my back on my brother."