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Black Marlin

A Novel by Ben R. Williams

Chapter VII: The Code of Conduct

I followed Mulligan up the steerage stairs, reeling from his startling revelation. How shocking that these two men, Boatswain Gus Mulligan and Captain Bill Mulligan, one robust and logical, the other frail and histrionic, could have sprung from the same loins! Standing back to back, they would be the very picture of Janus, Gus facing boldly eastward to the future, Captain Bill gazing mournfully to the west. Appropriate, then, that upon cresting the stairs, Gus made a bee's line to the quarterdeck, home to wheel and binnacle, eager to steer our ship into whatever new horizon awaited!

As I followed Mulligan to the wheel, I could not help but notice that a series of transformations had taken place while I was below-decks. Firstly, the sun, which had previously been fairly suspended in the sky, was now in rapid descent, leaving only a glowing red half-circle above the town of Manteo still visible behind us, as though a wedge of blood-orange had been placed atop the village, crushing its inhabitants in a flood of wholesome citrus. Secondly, the ship, which had previously been propelled by

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steam-engine, was now silent but for creaking timbers, powered by the east-winds alone, the sails fat and billowing (most, anyway; the mizzen-masts sagged a bit, covered as they were in burn-marks and holes from some mysterious prior disaster).

Mulligan gripped the wheel tight, consulted the compass (floating gently within the binnacle), and gave the wheel a small adjustment, no more than a ten degree rotation. Satisfied, he leaned back against the wall of the afterhouse and lit his briar, puffing a bit of blue smoke through his nostrils.

"What is our next destination, Mr. Mulligan?" asked I.

"South," he replied. "Do you need anything, Isaac? Are you hungry? Thirsty?"

"A bit thirsty, I suppose."

Mulligan produced a half-full bottle of whiskey from his pea-coat and tossed it into my awaiting hands. I uncorked it and took a sip, then passed it back to him.

"Perhaps I should drink some water at some point," said I.

"Let me tell you the most important rule of the Temperance," Mulligan replied, though not in acknowledgement of my statement. "If you need anything, you get it. If you want to do something, you do it. Many ships,

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even those operated by pirates, have a hierarchy, a code of conduct. Bullshit. Why does a man take to sea if not to escape from society's rules? I tell you, Isaac, that's what's wrong with America. They call it the land of the free, but it is a land of regulations. If you live off the land and need nothing from no one, why should you pay taxes? I don't give a good God damn about McKinley, so why am I paying his salary? I'd just as soon shoot him! And what if I can't afford to pay taxes, so I hire a master printer to ink me up a few hundred dollars? Suddenly that's illegal, too! And God forbid you should beat your ex-wife's new lover to death with an axe-handle! The police won't even ask if the man deserved it; they'll just label you a criminal."

"Did you beat a man to death with—"

"The point is, Isaac," Mulligan said, taking a sip of whiskey himself, "We are all grown men aboard this ship, except for Nine, and we answer to no one. If the Captain asks me to do something, I'll do it only if it is what I already intended to do. And sometimes I may yet do the opposite just out of spite. Having said that, if you wish to perform a duty aboard this ship, I will not stop you. If you'd like, I can ask Mr. Weems to teach you the fine art of sea-fishing tomorrow."

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Fishing! It is said that if you give a man a fish, he will eat for a day, yet if you teach a man to fish, he will eat for life. I have most frequently heard this phrase uttered by condescending wealthy types whom I have asked for a dollar, yet in spite of that, I found myself eager to learn the trade from the frequently mentioned though not yet formally introduced Mr. Weems, who, based upon his multiple foreshadowings, appeared to me to be a potentially important figure in this narrative.

"That sounds wonderful, Mr. Mulligan!"

Mulligan paused and pointed westward, and, following his finger, I witnessed a glorious sunset over the town of Manteo, a last thin wedge of golden sunlight rapidly diminishing into nothingness, that blood-orange sun leaving behind a scrim of grapefruit-colored clouds, a concave celestial amphitheatre fit for the works of angels.

"No matter how many sunsets I see," Mulligan said wistfully, "I'll never understand why everyone has such a hard-on for them. Anyway, I'm going to go into the galley, eat a steak, and then fall asleep at the table. It is a fine night for sleeping outdoors; I'd suggest you take the hammock suspended between the main and gallows."

"Certainly," I said, "But who will keep an eye on the ship's wheel?"

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Mulligan banged his fist thrice on the wall of the afterhouse behind him. Within seconds, a small hatch popped open, revealing the smiling grime-streaked face of a grubby young tow-headed lad.

"Aye, wot can I do fer ye, Mr. Molligan?"

"Nine," Mulligan said, "Please watch the ship while I get some sleep."

"Aye, sar, aye!"

The lad shimmied from the hatch, recalling in my mind the time I once saw a half-deceased possum wriggle from a drain pipe, badly and hilariously frightening an aged debutante. The boy tumbled to the quarterdeck and began vainly dusting himself off. He extended a filthy hand to me.

"I'm Nine, and you must be Mr. Isaac wot I hard about today!"

"A pleasure," said I, wiping my hand on the leg of my trousers. "I must ask, why do they call you Nine? Surely you must be older."

"Oh, yar," Nine said, "I'm sixteen, sar, no whelp here, no. I can't terrectly say why they calls me Nine, though Mr. Molligan says it's not of impartence."

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"It's not important," Mulligan said. "Good night, gentlemen." And with that, Mulligan retreated into the galley.

"So what duties do you perform aboard this ship, young man?"

Nine removed a small chunk of sea-biscuit from the pocket of his coveralls and began gnawing at it with relish, spitting flecks of it into my personal space as he spoke.

"Oh, a bit of everyfing, sar. I scrubs the decks, I do, and watch the ship's wheel at noight when Mr. Molligan retires. I cleans the chamber-pots and spittoons, and sometimes I dance fer nickels. Once I seen a dog! Hang on just a minnit, I fink one of me baby teef has come loose."

Here the lad paused, stuck a grimy paw into his be-crumbed mouth, and removed a large black molar, which he casually placed in his pocket.

"Miz Toof-Fairy'll be greetin' ol' Nine tonight, that's fer true!"

"Yes," I said, attempting to conceal my profound disgust. "Well, I'm off to bed. Good night, lad."

As I walked through the gallows, I could still hear the boy jabbering on after me: "Aye, goodnight, Mr. Isaac!"

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Don't worry about no goblins nor booger-men comin' after ye, ol' Nine'll box their ears, 'e will!"

As the boy's gibberish trailed off, I found the hammock that Mulligan had alluded to, strung between the gallows and the thick trunk of the main-mast. It was a sizeable hammock, suitable for cradling a large man or perhaps hauling a sea-cow from the ocean, and as I kicked off my shoes and clambered atop it, I could feel the gentle rhythms of mother ocean rocking me to and fro, lulling me to sleep. Such a grand sensation, that feeling of being untethered and free, bobbing along through that great blue vastness that covers our planet, the cares of the day drifting away like moths scattering in the first rays of morning light. Though sailors are considered a rough-and-tumble sort, I admit that there is a certain ridiculous appeal to a life on the seas; the ship is a great placenta, ferried on the amniotic waves across Gaia's great womb. Or perhaps it is more like an egg; in either case, I speak from experience when I advise you not to bring this theory up in front of sea-men, as they find it effeminate and diminishing, and as they realize that the veracity of the theory conflicts with their own self-image, they will offer a counter-point in the form of a rabbit-punch to your solar plexus.

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As I laid in the hammock pondering these thoughts, my half-lidded eyes drifted up to the sails, and, beyond them, the gradually emerging stars. And, just as I was on the verge of drifting into sleep, I saw a strange sight: a dark figure, naked from the waist-up, slowly descending the main-mast with feline assuredness. Assuming this to be a shadow-vision brought on by intoxication combined with the hypnagogia one experiences in a semi-paralytic sleep-state, I merely closed my eyes and attempted to roll onto my left side, my preferred position for a greeting from the Sand-Man.

Surprise, then, when I was suddenly jerked from sleep by the sensation of a large figure, perhaps twice my size, climbing into the hammock with me. He positioned himself with his front to my back and draped a crushing, be-muscled arm over my shoulder. The black hand at the end of said arm dropped into my face, and I could see, up-close, the strange tribal markings inked onto it, intertwining and linking with each other, at times almost resembling a facsimile of the very pattern of the hammock's weave.

"Papa Shillingi?" said I.

"Saluton, amiko," came the groggy, baritone reply.

"Is this your hammock I've mistakenly laid claim to?"

"Yes."



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"Would you like for me to find alternate accommodations?"

The reply came not in words, but in a great buzzing snore. Shillingi's heavy arm had me pinned; I had no choice but to be the little spoon in his bed-time silverware arrangement. I closed my eyes, my breath reflected back to me by the coconut crab-sized paw that laid over my face. Sleep did not come easily, yet I felt comforted to know I had been so readily accepted by this motley crew. Fellowship can feel exhilarating, though, at times, it can also feel rather weird and unsavory.