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Black Marlin

A Novel by Ben R. Williams

Chapter IX: Sturm und Drang

The tempest broke suddenly and violently, like a troupe of carnival folk bursting into a tavern ten minutes before closing-time. The fat, bruised clouds above us cracked open and a gushing torrent fell upon us, the rainwater noisily bruiting its path across the deck and through the scuppers. Weems gripped my arm and shook two bloody flounder filets in my face, rivulets of water dripping from either side of his wolfish grin.

"Quick, Isaac, to the galley!"

We hurried across the deck, darting between the mast-poles, our bodies as drenched from stem to stern as the good Temperance herself, and though I desired to retreat to drier accommodations as much as Mr. Weems, I found myself stopped and transfixed by an odd sight at the ship's wheel: Captain Bill, soaked rags clinging to his bony frame, gripping the wheel tight and laughing maniacally, while young Nine, with little regard for his own comfort, stood beside him on tip-toe, vainly attempting to cover the Captain's head with a dainty pink frilled parasol which served as an altogether poor umbrella. Captain Bill stared

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directly into the flashing storm-clouds, eyes wide with some mysterious emotion half-way between joy and terror, and screamed into the baleful morning:

"Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow! You cataracts and hurricanes, spout 'til you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks! Fill our sails, you whoreson clouds, and carry our ship to whatever meretricious port the Black Marlin calls home, and once there, Dear God, may you send a fiery corpusant directly through the skull of the damnable pirate Andy; a mercy compared to the havoc my hook will wreak! Oh Lord, you vicious old trickster, you capricious old pain-monger, if you cannot set our course for Mary, then set it for the shore, and send down one of your tornadoes to lift me from the deck and sling my sorry ass straight into Potter's Field; no need for the gravedigger, I'll fill in the pit myself! Oh you vicious, calamitous, fetid-

I felt a strong hand grip my wrist and tug me into the galley; it was Mulligan, heavy mustache constricted into a walrus-y frown.

"Best not to listen when Bill is preaching; his rage can be mesmerizing."

I glanced around the galley, allowing my eyes to adjust to the comforting darkness, lit only by a flickering

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lantern and the glow of a roaring Franklin stove. Weems hunched above its flat top, pouring oil into a frying pan to cook his still-twitching flounder meat. In the center of the room, seated at the head of a great long table, sat my bunkmate Papa Shillingi, massive and bare-chested, his flesh covered in eldritch blue line-work and flourishes which no doubt told the arcane legends of his dark island people in some strange script unknown to the civilized world. In one massive hand, he gripped a jar of pickles; as I watched, he fished one out and bit it in two, his crunching mastications audible even over the booming thunder. Mulligan sat down beside him, and I took the seat opposite.

"Kruela tempesto," Papa Shillingi muttered around a mouthful of pickle. "Bad juju."

"There's only one remedy," Mulligan said.

Shillingi placed his pickle-jar upon the table and reached into a leather bag hanging from his waist; he removed a tobacco-pouch and a long pipe, similar to the "peace-pipe" so beloved by the Indians, its bamboo length adorned with sea-bird feathers and small rodent skulls with great black eye-sockets. As Shillingi opened the pouch, I anticipated that he would remove a small quantity of burley, but he instead produced a tobacco unlike any I had

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before encountered, a strain with an odd mossy hue and a sweet, pungent aroma. It was not shredded or flaked, but rather pressed into clumped nuggets. He placed one of these into the pipe's bowl.

"Say Papa Shillingi," said I, "I believe your tobacco has turned."

"It is 'insulo tabako,'" he said, offering me an uncanny smile. "Much better."

Mulligan nodded. "Everything is better with island tobacco."

Shillingi popped a match against the table's grain and held the flame over the tobacco clump, took a deep pull from the pipe, then passed it to Mulligan, who followed suit. There was little smoke in the air, as the two seemed intent on holding it deep in the lungs, yet what smell I could detect was atrocious. Still, when in Rome, as they say, do as the Romans do, so when Mulligan offered up the pipe, I took a mighty drag from its stem.

I was initially certain that a prank was being orchestrated; the "island tobacco" was harsh to the extreme, burning my lungs as though I'd filled them with hot coals. I attempted to emulate my fellow sailors and hold the smoke, yet I could not endure it as they could; it

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exited my nose in a series of painful, hitching coughs, which set my brothers a-chuckle.

"It'll be easier next time," Mulligan said, his former frown dissolved into a tranquil grin.

I opened my mouth to inform him that there would not be a "next time," then paused. This remarkable tobacco seemed to be having an efficacious influence on my disposition! All at once, it seemed as though my previous concerns (my burning lungs, the roaring storm, the barely concealed madness of a large portion of the crew) began to flit away like startled songbirds. A pleasant euphoria welled up within me, similar to the disconnect one feels when imbibing a fine liquor, though free of the corresponding emotions of confusion and impotent rage. These men sharing the galley with me were not merely my brothers of the Temperance; it seemed clear that they were my brothers in a more indefinable cosmic sense, and I loved them for it; I further loved the delicious scent of the frying flounder which wafted up from the stove.

We sat in silence, passing the pipe amicably. In time, Weems joined the Circle of Peace and shared of the totemic pipe, offering up in return the two flounder filets, which, due to a sudden spell of ravenous hunger which had fallen upon our group, we decided to eat not with fork and knife,

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but rather by tearing apart the flaky meat with our bare hands. Satisfied, we reclined in our chairs. Mulligan, having had his fill of insulo tabako, packed and lit his customary briar and ascended into reverie:

"I've never visited Papa Shillingi's native land," he said, squinting his (strangely blood-shot) eyes, "Nor could I tell you its general location; perhaps the Polynesias, perhaps the islands off South America. I will say, however, that he has told me tales of his homeland, and those I've been able to decipher have been fascinating. It is a land untouched by the Missionaries, never sullied by the shame and propriety that those misguided kill-joys bring with them. There is no government, necessarily; there are Chieftains, but they do not place themselves above their people; they work alongside them. The women go bare-chested; they have no sense that this is wrong, and, if I may editorialize, I personally feel it is very much right. There are several of these paradises still scattered about the watery part of the world, though, of course, far fewer than there once were. The peaceful nature of these primitive lands makes them especially susceptible to conquerors. Nonetheless, when I hear tales of places like Shillingi's palm-tree'd utopia, I am struck by the notion that government and civilization, as we understand them,

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are a pair of hateful shit-heeled twins who should be beaten to death in the street like rabid curs.

Metaphorically speaking."

"Mulligan," said I, "If you have seen these lands, or know where to find them, I wonder why you wouldn't put down your bedroll and make a life among the savages."

Mulligan leaned back in his chair, his spine popping against the back like a string of Chinese fire-crackers. "Ah, Isaac. Such places are for me to visit, but never to settle. I cannot co-habitate with the peaceful; I have too much violence in my heart. Once a man has tasted the coppery tang of blood, wine is a poor substitute."

"Trinki sango," Shillingi muttered, then chuckled darkly.

"I will share a story I once heard," Mr. Weems said, the lamplight transforming his beady eyes into flickering gems within dark caverns. "I met a dispossessed islander several months ago when we visited Portsmouth, and he told a most frightening tale. It seems that a white man visited his island home, a place similar to the paradise Mulligan just described. The white man arrived early one morning, his small boat over-laden with goods to be traded. He was dressed in finery, the islander said, a suit so white that it dazzled the eye. He was a merry soul, filled with good

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cheer, and met the islanders with such kindness that they had no doubt of his wholesome intentions. They helped unload the crates of treasures from his boat and carried them into the center of their community. The man spoke beautifully of his love for their island—most incredibly, he spoke in their rare language!—and delighted the islanders with feats of magic. He produced birds from his hands, strange and beautiful creatures unlike any the people had before seen. He offered the chief a grand cigar, then lit it with a blue flame produced from his fingertips. He found a small frog which one of the children was roasting over a fire; he took the frog, held it tight in his hands, and breathed onto it. When he opened his hands, the frog was restored to life. The islanders, naturally, held the man as a savior, perhaps a reincarnation of one of their mysterious gods. And then the man announced that he had a great gift to offer up to the island. The villagers gathered in close to see it. The white man opened one of his crates, a very large and heavy crate that the islander I spoke to had himself helped carry. The man in white climbed into the crate. The villagers stared in wonder, unable to imagine the miraculous display which would surely follow. And imagine they could not, for those simple people would never have conceived of the white man's purpose: the

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crate's walls fell away, revealing a massive gatling gun of Civil War vintage, and the white man, hand on the trigger, proceeded to mow the islanders down, leaving none alive, or so he thought. The islander I spoke to, grazed by a bullet, dropped and feigned death. Wounded and frightened, he watched silently through half-lidded eyes as the white man boxed up his equipment and carried it back to his boat, ferrying those massive crates on his broad back, crates so heavy they would have buckled even a circus strong-man. And then, his task completed, the white man simply left, taking no spoils."

Mulligan sighed. "Jesus, Weems, we were having a good time."

"But Weems," said I, "What was the man in white's purpose? Why slaughter the villagers if not to loot the village?"

Weems leaned forward and tented his fingers above the table's scarred burl. "Perhaps, Isaac, he was simply an asshole."

All at once, a great clamor issued from outside the galley, a pealing tocsin which cut through the burbling thunder. A scurry of footfalls pattered up to the door, which suddenly burst open, revealing a drenched Captain Bill, great bell held in one hand, the other fitfully

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jerking the clapper. The Captain smiled at us, ceased his bell-ringing, and, in a quiet, gleeful voice, made the following statement to the room:

“Land ho.”