

Butcher's Tale

This is a story about a boy. Not a prince or a knight, not a great scholar and certainly not a hero; just a skinny young boy with no mother. *Not very interesting*, you might think. You might rather hear a story of great battles, revenge, love and intrigue. I do have some stories like that, but I think you'll find this boy had as interesting a story as anyone. You will meet a skinny motherless boy, but when we leave him he'll be on his way to becoming one of the most feared men alive: Marlon The Butcher, men call him. I don't think he liked that name, but great men often have very little say in how the world sees them, and that was certainly the case with Marlon.

There are thousands of stories I could tell you about Marlon The Butcher. I doubt there's a soul left in this world could tell you which of them are true and which are lies, but if you knew The Butcher as I did, you would agree that almost all of them *could* have been true... and that is what makes him fearsome. But I will not tell you a Butcher tale to make you afraid. The tale I tell you now is about how a skinny young boy with no mother found the path to his destiny.

A lifetime ago and far to the North, there was a grubby little village on the sea. The village has long since been washed away, and its name is remembered in no book.¹ Entire generations of its people were born there, lived there and died there, and nobody outside of the village would ever know they had lived. As I say, it was just a grubby little village, with nothing remarkable to set it apart, save that it was so isolated.

The entire village was set into the sloping face of a great hill that ran down into the ocean. Every house, shop and stable in the village faced the water. In the morning, the sun rose from across the sea, and by suppertime it was hidden by the wooded hill behind them. Summers were cool and winters were bitterly cold. Nothing ever changed and nothing unexpected ever happened, unless a day passed without rain.

Near the center of the village, halfway up the slope, was a house like all the others, made of wood, clay daub and a roof of thatch. It was slightly larger than most of the others, but only because it was both house and shop, and still quite small for all that. It was a butcher's shop. The butcher's name, like his village, his sires, his neighbors and his friends, has been forgotten. But his son was named Marlon.

On this particular day, as on most days, Marlon's father was dead drunk and not to be found. This left his son and apprentice to begin the day's work, which was also common. All day long, he slaughtered farmers' livestock and cleaned the kills of the successful hunters. He had his own maul, quite heavy, which he used to dash out the brains of the live ones. It almost never took more than one swing to kill them, but he would usually give them two or three to stop the irritating twitch that often follows grisly death. He had his own knives, too, and kept them treacherously sharp; to touch one of the blades was to leave your blood upon it. He would use them to drain the throats, split the carcasses and remove the hides. Dirty work to be sure, and Marlon didn't like it, but he was unusually gifted at it.

¹ The proper name of the village described in this story remains unknown, as is stated above; however, in the years following Marlon the Butcher's royal pardon and privateer status, it is commonly referred to by historians and cartographers as Marlon's Village.

Slaughter and dismemberment didn't come easy to him because he was particularly deft with a blade, or because of anything his father and master had taught him. Marlon experienced life from an unusual point of view: He saw the world as if through the eyes of an observer. To him, the bodies of pucks² and gulls and fish were mildly interesting, but he could cut them to bits, spray himself with their blood and scrub their brains out of his hair without feeling the slightest twang of remorse, or even distaste. He had a profound lack of empathy, an absolute inability to understand death or a creature's desire to live. I would argue that this talent was the single most crucial trait in making him the man he would become. The day eventually came when he learned pity, even compassion, for men if not for beasts. But here, still a dirty-faced boy in this nameless, muddy village, as he coolly hacks a warm puck into chops, he is yet far, far from that day.

As usual, Marlon's mind was far from his work. Most likely he was imagining his next swim in the ocean, what hunting would be like, or what a woman looks like beneath her clothes (which were all perfectly common imaginings). Whatever he was thinking, it ended abruptly when another boy burst through the door.

"Marlon!" he cried, out of breath. The boy (whose name is also forgotten, even by Marlon himself) was Marlon's friend, a year older though not so tall. "A boat!"

"What boat?" asked Marlon, as he reached for a fresh bird.

"A strange boat, na from here!"

Marlon looked up at that. "What mean ya, 'na from here'?"

"A long, black rower, with strange men aboard! Just ashore!"

That was enough for Marlon. He left the dead puck where it lay and ran out the door after his friend, leaving a trail of blood, lard and feathers behind him as he ran.

Marlon's village was the only settlement on a great island, and more than half the island was so rocky and barren as to be considered uninhabitable. The island wasn't on the way from anywhere to anywhere else, and strangers were as rare as diamonds here. But every now and again, usually after a great storm, a ship would be just visible on the horizon, and the entire village would turn out to see. On the most rare of occasions (even the oldest could remember no more than seven times), a ship would sail right up to the village, stop at the pier, and strangers would come ashore.

If Marlon's friend were to be believed, this had just happened, was happening *now*, and for the first time in their lives. As they ran down the slope, he told Marlon a long rowboat with twelve men pulled around the horn, into the bay and up to the pier. They had no sail, no food, no water and no supplies of any kind, which meant they must have come from a larger vessel. But no one saw that ship. Just a long rowboat, bearing twelve men.

Marlon and his friend ran all the way to the pier, which was abandoned except for some locals, who were huddled together staring mistrustfully at the strange vessel in the water. It was just a simple rower, but different than the fishing boats of the village: unusually long, unusually thin and as black as ash. The oars were of the same wood and

² A flightless bird unknown in modern ornithology. Similar to the penguin, but with a longer, narrow beak, much fatter and covered in thick brown feathers. As the puck's diet consists solely on what they can burrow out of the sand, the variety described here is found only in temperate coastal regions. Though usually found to form their own "communities" in the wild, in Marlon's Village they were apparently farmed and, in some cases, domesticated.

color, and were fixed to the boat with heavy-looking iron rings. Not a beautiful craft, but in a place like this it drew the eye.

The strangers were already out of sight. Marlon looked around and saw a crowd of people, mostly children, gathered around the windows of the public house.

The public house was a bad, smelly place, dirtier even than the rest of the village. The floorboards were soaked with blood and drink, and the air stayed thick with poisonous smoke and evil stories. Even in a village of fishmongers and puck farmers, it was a distasteful place to be seen. Marlon knew the public house well; for him, it was a source of shame. He was too young to give it his custom, but his father spent nearly every night there, and on the mornings when he didn't come home it was Marlon's unpleasant task to walk down to the public house and half-lead, half-carry his father home. Marlon felt the eyes of the barmaid and the fishwives looking from their windows and imagined the contempt they must feel for them both. In truth, Marlon got their pity as often as not, but nevertheless, for him it was humiliating.

Though the onlookers felt safest watching from outside, Marlon had been in the public house many times, and was known there. While the others cautiously peered in through the windows, Marlon slipped in through the front door. Through the corner of his eye, he saw his father asleep at his usual table. But his attention was fixed on the bar, where sat twelve men.

Their clothes were long-sleeved and loose fitting, and were so faded that they were all very nearly the same dingy color. They all wore at least one sword, some two, and they slung them across their backs the way the hunters wore their quivers. A few wore hats with silly-looking wide brims, but most had hoods that covered their brow, and one had wrapped his head and hands in cloth completely. What little of their skin was showing was dark and weathered, almost cracked-looking, and very nearly matched the leather of which their boots were made.

Except for him whose head was covered, they were very loud, and seemed to quite enjoy all the attention they were getting. Some of them had taken their hats and hoods off, and they kept the barmaid running for drinks continuously. Eventually, she gave it up and put everything she had on the bar.

The strangers had a queer way of talking, Marlon thought. At first he thought he was hearing a completely different language, but realized after some time that it was just a dialect so alien so as to render it nearly unrecognizable. Still, there were many words he had never heard before, and listening to them speak, he was utterly transfixed.

So transfixed was he that he attracted the strangers' attention. The man whose face was hidden had been watching him since he entered the room, and as Marlon stood gawking in the doorway, more and more turned to look. Finally one of them, who had flaming red hair (the first Marlon had ever seen), spoke to him, or rather seemed to bark at him. What he said Marlon didn't understand, but it had sounded to him like a question.

"Thy words be strange ta me," Marlon replied.

At this the strangers howled with laughter. Another of them spoke: "Never mind what he said, Boy. What do you want? Have you brought gifts for us, your guests?"

This Marlon had understood. "I be here for ma da." And he pointed to the corner table where his father slept.

The strangers howled again, with something more like mirth this time. "Your father needs babies to show him the way home? I hope you got your brains from your mother!" And they laughed most loudly at that.

When their cackling had died down, the barmaid said to Marlon, "Offer no mind, Marlon, take thy da and ta house with ye both." And she waved him off. Marlon went to his father, gave him a shake and a word, put his arm around his waist and dragged him to the door. The strangers' laughter followed them out, except for the one whose face was hidden. He made not a sound.

Marlon stamped through the rain, up the familiar street of mud to his home, his father slumped across his shoulder, grumbling incoherently. Behind him, Marlon heard the barmaid shriek: "Oy!! Give back ma tumbler, and where's th' shine for ad last round, ay?"

Marlon looked over his shoulder at the scene; the barmaid was out in the street, looking wet and crossed, her fists on her hips; the strangers were leaving the public house, led by the red-haired man. He had a full tumbler in his hand, and he turned and raised it to the barmaid, as if toasting her health. She squawked at him again: "Ye leave ad tumbler and pay me for ma trouble, else ma man'll thrash thee as thy own mam shoulda!!" And as everyone watched, the man pulled out two small gold coins, held them up to her, dropped them into his drink, and gulped it all down with a single heft of the glass. Most everyone watching got a good laugh at this, and as they laughed and cheered, the red-haired man bowed dramatically, grinned at the barmaid and flung the tumbler hard into the public house sign, where it smashed with a bang. And with that, the twelve turned and laughed and sang their way back to the pier, and the barmaid yelled her curses through the rain after them. "Four-legged wretch!!" she screamed. "Corpse-lover!! A curse on thee, and thine!! Ye'll soon wish ye ne'er soiled thy boots here, I wot!

"Ye'll soon wish th' sea'd taken thee!!"

Marlon didn't pay the woman any undue attention then, but he never forgot her words, or the venom that was in them. After everything that came to pass, he wondered about them. Unlike most seafarers, Marlon never put much stock in curses, witchcraft or other such superstitions. But all the same, his whole life he was careful never to cross a barmaid, and by all accounts he was always courteous to his hosts, females most of all.

The next day, Marlon was once again working alone, as his father slept off his drink in the loft above the shop. One of the village's farmers brought him a cart full of pucks, and he had spent all morning killing and cleaning them and salting the meat. He thought about the strangers. According to his friend, they left the village straightaway, and the rowboat had reappeared soon after bearing twelve other men who, after buying a few supplies, had also gone straight for the pub.

"They must be come from a bigger boat," his friend had said excitedly.

"Of course, stupid," replied Marlon. "No food nor water on ad little rower."

"How many do ye re'n there are?"

"We see how many times th' rowboat come back," said Marlon.

"Want ta go look at th' new ones?"

"Ye saw them. Did not ye say they look just th' same?"

“Aye, but they shall not long be here, surely! Gray and fat will we be, fore nother outsider float in!”

Marlon didn’t speak for a moment, seemingly intent on plucking his bird. After a time, without looking up, he said, “Want a look at ad ship?”

His friend’s eyes went wide. “Ad *big* ship?”

“Aye.”

“We do not know where it is!”

“Just out of sight, in the cove beyond yon horn ta th’ east. Where else could it be? Would be within sight of our village else!”

“What if they see us?”

“Ye’re a stout one. Be that a ‘no,’ then?”

Now his friend was silent.

“I mean to see it, and soon,” said Marlon, “fore they shove. Come with?”

Barely an hour later, Marlon was out of the shop, over the hill and halfway down the north slope towards the cove. His nervous friend slogged along behind, struggling to keep pace. The north slope was heavily wooded, and there were no real paths through it, but the forest hid a freshwater brook that fed into the cove. (An easier, if less direct, way to the cove would have been the beach, but they were not anxious to be seen by the outsiders, or indeed their own fathers.)

After another hour, Marlon stopped. His friend bumped into him. “Oy! What...”

Marlon shot him an angry glare, and whispered. “Snap it! We’re near th’ sea; we’ll spy th’ cove from yon tree line, and not be seen.”

They left the stream, and sneaked through the last hundred yards of forest. The canopy was so dense they could not see the ocean until they were nearly at the very edge of the trees. When they got there, they were not prepared for what they saw.

Even if they had known exactly where the ship was anchored, they could not have come out closer to it. A long stone’s throw directly in front of them was a hundred-hand-high, two-hundred-hand long, two-mast, shallow-bottom sailing vessel. Though not, to any experienced seaman, a particularly large craft, it was the largest man-made thing either of the boys had ever seen, and they were in awe.

All Marlon’s life he would remember his first glimpse of that ship, and he recounted the experience often. *“I had never seen a lovelier thing,”* the Butcher later said, *“and still I have not. To my boy’s eyes, she seemed massive. She was like a living thing, rising and falling gently with the tide, as if she were sleeping. Her white sails billowed like clouds. Her black hull shone like obsidian. Her bowsprit pointed just over my shoulder, and beneath the bowsprit was the finest work of craftsmanship I have ever seen: her exquisite figurehead.”*

“Once my eye fell on her, I could not tear it away, and it has yet to find her worthy rival. Her face was haughty and passionate, amazingly full of life, and lust. Her hands were spread at her sides, as if offering herself to me. Her hair looked as though it had once been fixed, but had fallen, and flowed long at her back. Her chest was bare, and between her perfect breasts I saw her one flaw: the hilt of a knife, thrust deep into her heart. The other boy may have taken the knife as a sign of death, but I knew what it meant. That knife said, ‘Fight on, my enemy, for you cannot slay me.’ The other boy saw

*a wooden corpse, but I saw the figurehead's bloodless wound and her smile of defiance and knew her for what she was: timeless, ageless, deathless.”*³

Marlon's friend shoved him. “Marlon! *Marlon!*”

“What?”

“They're coming!”

And they were. The long rowboat, or another just like it, was carrying twelve men directly towards their hiding place. “Damn me, a fool,” hissed Marlon. “They fill their water casks at this stream, never doubt it.”

“Come on, run!”

Who knows what would have happened had the sailors caught the boys... probably nothing. But they were outsiders, and fierce-looking, and boys were boys. So they ran.

When they were well up the slope and a safe way off, Marlon laughed of their escape, and the other boy crowed of his own bravery. They had seen something nobody else in the village had ever seen, and they were extremely pleased with themselves.

The sky darkened as they came within sight of the village. Marlon's companion was still talking, fantasizing of what the other boys and, especially, the girls would think when they heard what he and Marlon had done.

Marlon was fantasizing too, but not of village girls or petty boasts. Marlon's fantasy was of the sea. He wanted a sword to wear on his back, and a hood to cover his brow, and skin that was dark and weathered. He wanted to cross the ocean, to see other lands that surely lay on the other side and, if he so chose, never return. But most of all, he wanted to know the story of the black goddess with the knife in her breast; he wanted to know her, to know that ship, and for her to know him in return.

Another day went by. Another day of rain and mud, and for Marlon it was another day of brain-addling slaughter in the shop while his father slept in the loft. The strangers kept coming to the pier in groups of twelve, they continued to get drunk at the public house, and occasionally Marlon would go and get another look at them, but it was uneventful, and he was already tired of them.

It wasn't the men that interested him anymore. Now it was the ship. More and more his mind returned to her. *So beautiful are ye*, he thought. *I wonder how old ye are? Where were ye made? Where have ye been? How many men have died in thy service?*

Marlon mindlessly slit open another puck, pulling out the entrails for what seemed the millionth time, the task carried out with mechanical familiarity. He tried to focus on his work, but he was hopelessly distracted. He wanted to go to the sailors, and pester them with his questions. *They'll just mock ye*, he told himself. *Don't waste thy breaths*. But he longed to know more of the ship. *Go back to the cove tonight, get another*

³ Of course, we now know the figurehead to have been in the likeness of the warrior-queen Yrilia, posthumously worshipped as a goddess. Marlon was known to have kept that very figurehead on his flagship for many years. Less well known is that his infatuation with her ran so deep, whenever his flagship sustained enough damage to render it unsalvageable, he had the Yrilia figurehead removed and fixed to the replacement vessel. Though the Butcher was noted for his disregard for most seafaring superstitions, this is one habit he clung to for the better part of his career, and given his devilish good fortune at sea and in battle, it is difficult to fault him for it.

look at her. That's what he would do. He would wait until his father went out, and he would sneak down to the cove and see her again.

What if she's gone by then?

She won't be.

Ye can't know sure.

She'll be there.

Gone by morning then, or the morning after that. All they wanted here was water and liquor. They won't stay long.

What then?

Abruptly, Marlon lay down his knife. He laid his hands on the table, lowered his head and thought. What then indeed? What if when next he looked, the ship was gone?

He would die.

He had felt trapped on this island his whole life. He had never felt like he belonged here. Deep down, he thought of the island as a cold, wet place to sit while he waited for fate to find him.

And yesterday he had seen a ship. A magnificent black ship that called to him.

If that ship left, he would never see her again. And there would very likely not be another for many, many years. Maybe ever.

The thought was too much to bear. Marlon's heart sank. For the first time, he felt truly lost. What if that ship was the very thing he had waited for, and he had missed it? What if he had missed it? What could he do now?

Calm down, he told himself. If I be meant to be on that ship, on it I'll be. If fate has written it, even my own actions could not prevent it. When the moment comes to act, I will know it.

When my moment comes, I will act.

That was what Marlon was thinking when all Hell broke loose.

A skull splitting crash, a hellish fireball, a rainstorm of iron and splinters and mud and rock, and the world Marlon knew was dead. The workshop, the ceiling, the loft, the house were all gone, flicked aside by a Godlike hand. Marlon was flat windless on his back without realizing it. He looked up and saw sky as ash and splinters rained down, stinging his face. Through the ringing in his ears, he heard the deafening crashes of other houses being destroyed. Through his back, he felt the earth heave again and again. He was too shocked to blink, cry or scream. He spared hardly a thought for his father, who had been asleep in the loft and was certainly dead. Marlon just watched, unmoving, as the world ended, awestruck for the second and final time in his life.

How long he lay there I cannot say. When he finally crawled out of the wreckage and looked around, he stood in ruin, and the ruin did not stop at his doorstep. Most of the shop had been strewn up the hillside, struck by a great force. Half the village was destroyed, and houses were still crashing down. Down the slope, fires raged. The very earth erupted all around, sending mud and soot, rocks and men flying into the air. The clamor was deafening. All was panic, all was terror, all was chaos.

Those who still lived ran. Everyone ran, some up the slope, some to the shore, and some out of sheer panic. Most of them sobbed, many of them screamed, a few of them prayed, but they all ran. All but Marlon, who stood and watched.

He saw the villagers running, and he heard their words. They cried of angry gods and the world ending. As their homes burned and the earth seemed to swallow them, they prayed to their water god to forgive them and protect them and end their suffering. For only gods had such devastating power, such terrible wrath. But Marlon knew better. When he had climbed out of the wreckage, he saw his ruined village, the fires, the bodies and the craters like everyone else, but through the rain and across the sea he also saw dark shapes on the horizon... shapes that could only have been ships. Although he had never imagined such power and knew nothing of guns, he knew one thing: men, not gods, had done this. Even before he had seen the ships he was struck with the knowledge that there were men in this world who wielded the ruinous power of gods. In that same moment, he knew his destiny. He would become one of these men. No one had known it, but he had always been one of these men. And now that they had found him, he would join them.

The strangers be part of this, thought Marlon. *They may have done it, or they may not have done, but they be a part of it, never doubt it. I must find them.* And he tore up the slope, towards the woods, where hid the brook, which led to the cove where his dark lady was anchored. Before he'd gotten fifty yards, though, he heard a voice behind him shouting his name, and he turned.

It was his friend, scared out of his mind and crying. "Wait for me!"

And Marlon did. "Come on, follow!"

They ran together then, Marlon out of purpose, his friend out of terror and because he thought Marlon was as afraid as he. At first there were others running, too, but after a time there was no one left but they two. "Marlon, where do we go?" the boy panted.

"We go ta th' cove, ta find ad black ship."

"Why?"

"I mean ta join them."

"*Join* them?" Marlon's friend stopped running. Marlon stopped too, looking impatient.

"What mean ye, Marlon, *join* them?"

"What would ye have us do? Village is in th' ground. Your house gone, Da's shop gone. Nothing back there but driftwood and ash. Few greys running around in circles, mayhap, but most of them be dead too, most like."

Marlon's friend started to cry again. Marlon felt foolish. "Come with me," he said. "They've a ship. We'll go."

"I cannit go," said the boy.

"Well, I cannit stay."

"What do we, then?"

"Do as ye like," said Marlon. "But I leave ma home this day, and call it home no more." They stood there for a moment, looking at each other. "Come with?" Marlon asked again.

"Scared I am," said the boy.

Marlon had tried kindness, but daylight was fading. "I cannit wait. Last turn. Do ye stay or go?"

Again, silence. Finally he said, "I stay, Marlon."

Without wasting another second, Marlon hugged his friend goodbye and dashed into the woods. His friend watched him go without a word. Whether he ever regretted his decision to stay, no one can say, because not a single soul from that village has ever been seen.⁴

Marlon tore through the forest, as fast as he had ever run, stumbling over roots, scratching his face on branches, bashing his shoulders into trees, his legs bleeding from thorns and brambles, beyond the pain, beyond exhaustion, beyond his lungs crying for air, down the slippery slope towards the cove. He must get to the ship. This was his fate, he knew, the ship was here for him and he could not miss it.

He heard the ocean before he saw it. The brook he had followed began to widen. Finally, he was here. He would see his ship again, would swim out to her, climb aboard and see his new home for the first time. No longer a butcher's apprentice, he would be a sailor, with dark skin and squinty eyes like the others, with stories and...

Marlon burst panting through the tree line and onto the beach.

Overhead, the sky was dark with rain. He stared out across the deep blue of the cove.

It was empty.

The ship was gone.

Marlon stared at the ocean in disbelief, willing it to change. He had been so sure...

The ship was gone. She had left him.

He sank to his knees, gasping for air, shivering with cold, eyes shut in despair.

What was I supposed to do? Should I have sneaked aboard the ship yesterday? Should I have tried to befriend the men in the pub? Should I have followed them away from the village when it was destroyed? Are they even alive? Perhaps their ship was destroyed, too! God, what am I to do now? Not a sailor, and now not even a butcher! No house, no ship, nothing, I am stuck here, with nothing and no one. Fate came for me, but I was too slow, and now I am lost.

There he knelt for an hour or more, shoulders stooped in defeat, watching the tide as it lapped at his knees.

Then he saw a speck sail from around the horn.

His heart leapt and he sprang to his feet. Was it the ship? No, there were no sails. Could it be the vessels that destroyed the village? No, there was only one, and it was too near.

He watched as the speck took shape, and eventually his sharp eyes saw oars. It was the sailor's rower. And it was fast approaching.

Instinct told him to hide, and he jumped into the brush at the tree line. Like before, the sailors were rowing straight for the brook, straight for Marlon's hiding place.

⁴ After the Butcher's betrayal of the Pirate King Harry Comstock and the annihilation of the Sturgian Armada, he found his way back to the island village where he was born. Not only did he find no inhabitants, he found no houses, no boats, no skeletons, and very little wreckage. The only sign of life on that beach was a large and thriving community of wild pucks, growing fat off the bounty of the sea.

Just as evening light began to fail, the rowboat dug its nose into the stony beach, and four men jumped into the tide to pull it ashore.

Marlon could just make out their faces. A few were familiar to him: they were from the first group Marlon had seen in the pub, including the one with the covered face and hands. All of them seemed agitated. Marlon strained to hear what they were saying, and caught most of it:

“Someone get his feet!”

“We’d be better off not moving him! Leave him in the boat!”

“He’ll freeze to death. Get him on the beach and we’ll make a fire!”

“And you’re an idiot. If the Sturgians patrol the beach they’ll see us and blow us to Hell! He’s dead anyway, let’s put him out of his misery.”

“Morgan, what say you?”

“I say they’re both right. The Sturgians might see a fire, but Randall won’t live the night in that boat, he’s soaking wet and freezing. The captain won’t like hearing we let him die for nothing.”

“The captain don’t need to know!”

“You two pluck some shrubs and lay them over the rocks. You four lay Randall across them and get him out of his clothes. You take the water skins and fill them all. Everyone else gather driftwood and tinder and we’ll make a fire. Under this first tree here, in case the rain starts up again. If we’re fired upon, we’ll leave him and take to the woods. But we’ll not kill him for convenience.”

As Marlon watched, four men reached into the rowboat and lifted out the body of a man. *He must be the one they call Randall*, thought Marlon, which meant he was still alive, though he didn’t look it. His shirt and coat were torn to bits around the middle, and he was drenched in blood. *A fire won’t save that man*, Marlon knew. Then he realized that he had seen Randall before.

Though muddy and matted, the man’s hair was a flaming shade of red. He was the man who had taunted Marlon in the pub, whom the barmaid had cursed so hotly. Though it was most likely at the cost of her own life, her wishes for Randall seemed to have been fulfilled.

Marlon stayed hidden while the sailors went about their tasks. His mind raced. Should he reveal himself, ask them to accept him into their band? He thought not. These were not men who would have pity on an orphaned boy, or anyone. If not for the one named Morgan, it sounded like they would have killed their own mate just now. No, his moment to act had not yet come. He would sit patiently and wait for it.

Before long, the sailors had built their little fire, and they all huddled around it on the northeast side, blocking the flames from the sea. On the other side lay the mortally wounded man, unconscious on his bed of ferns. And beyond him, just five paces away and hiding behind a tree, sat Marlon, listening.

Marlon learned a great deal that night. He learned that these men were not just sailors, but pirates. They had strayed far from their usual territory, in part because the Sturgian navy (whoever they were) had grown in strength and was becoming far more aggressive. If the village had had any assets to speak of, these men would’ve very likely sacked it, but when they discovered it was completely devoid of wealth they were content to eat their food, drink their liquor and fill their water casks.

He learned that Sturgian warships had followed the pirates from their own waters, and that it was they who destroyed the village. That morning they had found the pirates' ship and pursued them, but when they found the ship too fast to catch they returned to the bay and pounded the village to dust, in hopes of killing whatever pirates happened to be ashore. The public house where they had been was leveled, one of the pirates had died, and Randall (apparently the crew's quartermaster) was grievously injured.

Most importantly, Marlon learned that once the Sturgians were safely away the pirate ship would return to pick up any survivors. They would return to this cove, perhaps in a matter of hours.

That would be his moment.

Hours passed. The pirates slumbered, usually leaving two awake to watch for ships and keep the fire burning. Marlon did not sleep. Nor did he move. He just watched the ocean for a long, black ship.

Finally, an hour before dawn, he saw her. He saw her before any of the pirates did: a long, tall shadow sailing across the dark blue horizon, big and beautiful, turning into the cove towards the mouth of the stream.

It was all Marlon could do not to jump up and down and shout. *They'll see her*, he said, *they'll see her in a moment...*

"Oy! It's here!" said one of the lookouts, finally. "Wake up, mates, it's here, we're leaving!"

The pirates got up quickly, kicked the fire apart, and hefted Randall back into the rowboat. Within moments, they stood on either side of their rowboat watching the ship, waiting for it to stop.

Marlon waited, too. It was almost time to move, but not yet. Not until the rowboat had shoved off. Just a little longer...

There was little light to see by, but on the ship, it looked as if the sails were being furled. The ship began to slow.

Several minutes drug on, and the men on the shore shoved their rowboat back into the water and climbed aboard. As they began to row, Marlon's muscles tensed. *They'll have to*, he thought. *The tide is strong. They'll have to do it any moment now.* The rowboat was now well away, getting smaller. *Almost time... almost...*

And then it happened. Through the darkness, he saw the ship's anchor drop.

Marlon sprang onto the beach and dove into the tide, swimming as hard as he could. The rowboat was far, far ahead, and gaining. *Good*, he thought, *it will be too dark for them to see me. But if they get too far ahead...*

This was the most important moment of Marlon's life, and he knew it. He swam hard for the ship, the only real ship he had ever seen, and if he didn't catch it, the only ship he would ever see. The rest of his life depended entirely on how fast he could swim.

The sky was beginning to brighten, and far ahead, Marlon thought he saw a rope ladder being thrown over the side.

Halfway there, he thought. *Halfway there. Don't let them see you.*

The first two pirates were on board now.

Swim wide, he told himself, *around the far side, where no one will be looking. They'll all be looking at their mates in the water. Give them berth, stay out of sight.*

Now all but three were aboard, and the last two were tying ropes to the rowboat.

Don't splash too loudly, or they might hear you. Around the far side, just under the bowsprit...

As he swam around the bow, he caught his last glimpse of the rowboat as it was hauled up the side, the wounded man undoubtedly in its belly. They were all out of the water now.

Almost there! Faster! It has to be now!

A clanking sound told Marlon they were hoisting the anchor. Without a moment to spare, he grabbed hard onto the anchor chain and was pulled forcefully into the air.

The next moment, Marlon was perched on the anchor itself, swinging just below the edge of the deck and out of sight. As the ship wheeled around and headed out to sea, he got one last view of the island where he was born. After an hour he saw what was left of the village: it reminded him of a cook fire that someone had kicked apart, scattering charred wood and ash all about. A few fishing vessels floated free in the bay, most of them damaged and apparently with no one aboard. At that great distance and dim light, he couldn't see if there were any people on the shore, but he tried. He looked with curiosity, but not with regret or remorse. He wasted not a thought of whether he would ever see it again or who had survived, wondering instead what his new life would be like, and where he would be tomorrow.

He sat there perched on the anchor until the island was out of sight, and for a while longer, hypnotically watching the ocean pass beneath him. Though he was well out of sight of the deck, he could hear the pirates talking heatedly above. He could just reach the deck, and carefully pulled himself up and peered over the edge. There were about seventy men, and they all faced the opposite side, where the men from the beach were presumably standing. It sounded like they were discussing the attack on the village, what had happened to Randall and the other who had died. Marlon heaved himself up, climbed over the rail and crouched against it, silently waiting for them to notice him.

After several minutes, one of them did. It was the one with the covered face and hands. He made no visible sign of surprise or anger, but after a moment he pointed Marlon out to another man, who seemed surprised enough for them both.

"OY! Look at this! Oy! Who the Hell is this?"

Every man aboard turned and looked at Marlon, all of them shocked and outraged at the uninvited passenger.

"Who is that?"

"He's that idiot whelp from the village!"

"Well, who brought him?"

"We sure as Hell didn't! I never saw him before!"

"How did you get here, Boy?"

"Captain, what do we do with him?"

One man strode out of the crowd and straight toward Marlon. Marlon stood to meet him, but the man was half a head taller than he.

"How did you come to be here?" the captain shouted. "I warn you, you'd best be truthful."

"Spied thy ship yesterday, from th' woods. When th' village fell, came ta join ye."

The men were silent now. The captain was not satisfied, however. "Gods, his accent's so thick I can barely understand. That's not what I meant, Boy. How did you come to be *here*, on my ship?"

"Swam."

The captain frowned at this. A few men muttered, a few snorted. He looked past Marlon over the edge of the ship, then turned back to his men.

"This boy rode up the anchor chain while we pulled up our survivors."

More muttering. The captain seemed somewhat impressed, if still a bit suspicious.

"You want to join us, whelp?"

"Aye."

"You know we're pirates?"

"Aye."

"Do you know what that means?"

"Means ye live on th' sea, and that men who destroyed th' village be thy enemy."

"All men are our enemies, boy."

Marlon was silent.

"What's your name?"

"Marlon be ma name."

"What the Hell kind of name is Marlon?"

"I think... a fish."

A titter went through the men. "Named for a fish. Well, you've proven you can swim a fair bit, perhaps the name suits you better than it would me. All right, Marlon, what else can you do?"

"Else?"

The man came close, and spoke more softly: "If we're to take on a new man, even if we've lost a few, that man needs to have some worth. What good are you to us?"

Marlon looked down and thought hard, desperate. He was a butcher's son! All he could do was slaughter animals and cut up their flesh. He was just a boy; he had no skill they would value. But he was clever, this boy. Not yet learned, but shrewd and full of guile. *What I need, he decided, is to do something that would impress them. Do something they could not, or would not, do themselves. Then I will have their respect, and they will not be able to send me back.* He raised his head, and spoke clearly to the captain. Nobody knew it then, of course, but the story of what happened next would be told and retold in hundreds of languages for generations to come.

"If ye shall not have me on thy crew," he said, "I shall hire passage on thy ship."

The crew exclaimed at the boy's boldness, laughing and talking. "Hire passage!" Spat out the captain, smiling in spite of his exasperated voice. "What care we for your passage? Where would a shit-kicker like you go?"

"Shall let ye know when we get there."

The crew howled at this. Nobody had ever seen anyone speak so boldly to the captain, let alone a scrawny boy whose life was at risk. "You'd have us take you with us, would you, your by-God-highness? Until you're quite through with us, your bloody little majesty? And how will you be paying for this pleasure cruise?"

Marlon pointed to the red-haired man, who lay pale-faced and dying on the deck. "*He* shall pay."

Now all were silent. Apparently they hadn't found that comment quite so funny as the rest of it. The captain looked grim now. "Randall has paid quite enough, and is in no position to pay for any damned thing more. Now if you're quite ready, Your Worship, you insolent little fishmonger, it's time you had another swim."

But before the captain could grab him, Marlon held out his hand and shouted, "*Hold!* Ad man asked me here, and he *shall* pay my fare! Had two golds he promised me, and hath them still! He shall pay!"

The captain looked angry and thoroughly out of patience, but narrowed his eyes and asked, "Why the Hell would Randall give you two pieces of gold? Did anyone else see this?"

But before anyone could answer, Marlon said, "Prove it I shall." And he strode over to where Randall lay, sank to one knee, stuck two fingers of each hand deep into the man's belly wound, and pulled.

There was a slow tearing sound, like an old, wet sail that had finally given way. Fresh blood gurgled from the wound, red mixing with black, quickly filling the ragged hole and spilling freely onto the deck.

Initial grunts of surprise turned to silence. All stood and watched, and nobody could believe what they were seeing. Marlon looked around and saw that he had everyone's attention. He removed his fingers from the wound and roughly crammed his left hand, halfway to the elbow, into the man's belly.

He dug around in the dying man's guts for what seemed an age. With a look of concentration on his face, while threescore pirates quietly looked on, he pushed and pulled and squirmed around in bloody filth, his hand deep inside Randall's belly. Finally, he pulled his hand free of the now-dead man, slopping blood and bile onto the deck.

Marlon walked, dripping, back to the captain. He held up his arm, which was completely drowned in gore. With a steady hand, a slow pulse and an expressionless face, he turned up his thumb and forefinger. Pinched in-between them, glinting slightly as the blood ran off of them, were two gold coins.

"Thy payment, Captain."

The captain stared at Marlon, unmoving, hating him. "You have just killed that man."

"No, Captain, the thing what struck him killed him long afore."

The captain did not speak for some time, staring at the boy, apparently deciding what to do next. He eventually spoke, but so softly that only Marlon could hear:

"May you and I never find quarrel with each other, young master." And he held out his hand, into which Marlon dropped the two bloody coins. "I shall keep these to remind me of that."

Then the captain raised his voice enough for all to hear. "What is your proper name?"

"Marlon, Butcher's Son," said Marlon.

"Did your father die when the village fell?"

"Aye."

"Then you are no one's son. You are Marlon the Butcher."

Marlon frowned slightly at this, but made no gesture of disrespect. "Aye, Captain."

“You’ll have to learn to speak properly. I will apprentice you to our surgeon for now. He’s a fine sawbones, but we’ll all be glad to have a younger man training up to take his place. Especially one with ice in his young veins.” The crew mumbled agreement at this.

“Very well, Marlon the Butcher, Sawbones’ Apprentice, you are a member of our crew. I forbid vengeance be taken upon you for the death of Randall, and any man who yet desires it must first kill me. You will have one half of one share of all plunder, and a full share once you’ve proven yourself worthy of your water ration. You forfeit your share entire for disobedience or laziness. Cowardice or treachery against me, or Master Surgeon, you forfeit your life. Do you agree?”

“I do.”

“Welcome to the Requiem, where you will almost surely spend the rest of your days.”

So began Marlon the Butcher’s life on the sea. Ordinarily, when a man was inducted into the crew of the Requiem, he might get some rough slaps on the back, an invitation to drink, perhaps find himself in a wrestling match or a game of cards. But no one came near Marlon. He got a few nods of respect, an occasional grin, but that was all. Whatever his reasons, and however richly Randall may have deserved his fate, the crew had just watched Marlon murder one of their mates with his hands, and none of them would ever forget it. Now that he was a member of the crew, most of them wondered if the time would come when he would do the same to them. Some of the men hated Marlon for what he had done, and a few would try to avenge their unhappy friend, to their own misfortune. But most of them were already afraid of young Marlon the Butcher, and the rest of the world would soon follow.