

The Storm

Waves crashed against the ship's hull, rocking it like a child in a cradle with its force, but the rhythmic sound could not soothe the Captain like it ordinarily did as he stared out at the horizon. They had left days ago and had taken the small villages warnings with little heed, and now, as the rolling clouds surging towards them matched the stormy grey of his eyes, he regretted not accepting their offers to stay in the local tavern. They had said a storm was brewing, could tell by subtle signs all over their island, but when they had left, the sky was cloudless and blue for as far as the eye could see. Naturally, he had been too eager to get back onto the ocean where the deck swayed with constant motion, and salty air clung to every surface to listen when there was no immediate sign of danger. But the dark clouds before them had emerged in a matter of moments, a full storm waiting to swallow them where there had been calm waters minutes before.

The ship creaked and groaned from the violent barrage against its sides, but the Captain had no fear that it would fail to hold up. They had sailed through worse and through dangerous, uncharted waters, and if the gold glittering in the belly of the ship had anything to say, it would prove they had been quite successful in their endeavors. Focusing on the knowledge he'd gained over past adventures, the Captain reassured himself and tried to bury his growing unease that something about this storm was different, unnatural.

The Captain's mind flitted back to the image of the gold sitting in his hold and began to muse over what they could do when they reached the next port. A smile eased the deep crease between his brow and softened the hard lines of his face, his sun-dried lips cracking at the effort

as he pondered about Port Royal. Perhaps he could treat his men to a lavish night at the largest pub the port had to offer, or he could have *The Mermaid* repainted and docked for maintenance. He pictured a fresh layer of paint marking the ship, letting all who laid their eyes on it know that *The Mermaid* had come for them, and with her came her crew, her Captain.

Below him, shouts ripped him from his fantasies as men rushed across the deck, securing everything not already fastened down and preparing to outrun the storm, or, Triton forbid, wait it out. He shook the lingering promises of fresh paint and soft touches from his mind, for if they were going to spend their loot, they first had to survive the mounting storm Poseidon had hurled upon them.

Around them, the wind picked up and gained in intensity every moment longer they stayed out on the water, and the Captain secured his nearly black hair to prevent the harsh burn of his salt-licked curls whipping across his face.

He watched his men as they struggled to prepare a moment more before making his way to the helm, careful to keep his grip as the waves beneath them grew hungry. The ship's now constant harsh rocking forcing the Captain towards the starboard side where he relied on the rail to hold himself upright as he descended the staircase to the deck, and from his elevated position, he could see the thin film of foamy water settling at the base of the steps. The sight of the swishing remnants of the sea building and fleeing from the deck sent his steps stuttering, nearly sending him sprawling down the remainder of the staircase, but regardless, he hastened his pace until his boots hit the weathered wood below him with a small splash.

All around him, the cries and shouts of his men drowned out even the sound of the churning sea. Shoulders and elbows collided as the men slid to-and-fro in their hurry to get to

their destinations as the constant echo of splashing water beneath their feet served as a reminder of the water that strived to consume them. After an exceptionally rough elbow ripped a pained hiss from the Captain and left him clinging to the taffrail, he dismissively ushered off the fumbling cook who had struck him and focused on weaving through the moving bodies without causing or receiving another such injury. Below him, his boots struggled to grip the boards as he moved away from the rail to escape the freezing water that had splashed up all around them and left his billowing blouse clinging to his goose-freckled skin despite the heavy tailcoat jacket hiding most of the thin material from view.

Cannons not firmly secured slid and splashed across the deck and only gained momentum with each tilt of the ship, and men struggled to dodge the animated artillery as they fought to control the straining sails as the wind gradually gained strength. The Captain squinted as his eyes strained to gain a view of the helm when a sudden cry erupted mere feet behind him and left a sharp ringing in his ears. He froze with the blood trying to surge through his veins and quickly turned to look as the chaos continued to ensue unchecked around him. Men bumped into the Captain as he stood motionless and listened for another sound, making it difficult for him to stay upright without moving closer to the rail when he heard it again, a frantic voice begging for help. The Captain felt his heart lurch in his chest as the familiar voice grew panicked, and the man's desperation grew tangible.

He scanned the deck around him, searching for any sign of what happened to the voice's owner as someone rushing to avoid the path of a rogue cannon crashed into him from behind and knocked him forward onto his knees with a sting. Lifting himself with the support of the taffrail, the Captain stiffened when at the rail's base, a pair of weathered, angry hands stared back at him

from where they desperately clung for dear life even as they visibly slipped. Lunging forward, the Captain came eye-to-eye with the cook whose flushed face laid hidden just below the edge of the deck with fear and relief. The cook flashed a blackened gapped smile at the Captain and called up to him in a gravelly voice, "Captain! Thank the Gods!"

Shifting his grip to the man's wrists, the Captain attempted perilously to lift him only for the cook to slip further and further with every move to raise him onto the deck until the dark water's had gained such intensity and he'd sunk far enough that the dark waters lapped at his bare feet. The Captain's stomach churned as he struggled to maintain his grip on the cook's water slicked skin, and desperately, he called back for more men. Footfalls joined the constant low roar of the heavy cannons sliding back and forth from the port and starboard sides in time with *The Mermaid's* rocking before several pairs of hands reached around him to grab ahold of the pleading man below. The next time the ship rocked back towards the port side, they all heaved as cool water splashed up around them, further soaking them till the chill began to settle in their bones, and slowly, they pulled him inch by inch over the rail. The group crumbled atop one another as they struggled to catch their breath when a sudden shout rang out across the deck, sending them all scurrying to their feet despite their burning lungs protests. "Get out of the way!"

The back end of a large cannon surged towards them, gaining speed every second as it maintained a barreling path right towards the gasping men. In the efforts to run away, limbs flailed wildly, sending men toppling back down onto the deck. Untangling himself and rolling to the side, the Captain dragged those he could reach from the writhing pile of bodies as the cannon approached ever closer. Panicked, the men still trapped amongst one another cried out

desperately for help as they tripped and slid over the water-covered deck. Towards the back of the group, the cook stilled as he steadily watched the cannon and sobbed freely as it inevitably blasted through them and the rail behind them. Heart wrenching screams tore through the air as it lifted several men and carried them over the deck and into the thrashing waters below as the men who had managed to evade their deaths gripped crushed and broken limbs tightly against themselves. The rest of the men stood shell-shocked for a moment as the screams of their fellow crew were swiftly cut short and the only sounds left were the crash of waves, the swelling howls of the wind, and the quiet whimpers and sobs of the men still lying on the deck. Slowly, the Captain broke from his stupor and rose from his kneeled position and rushed towards his injured crew.

All at once, every available crewmate joined the Captain and pulled the injured men away from the now broken rail before carrying them below deck, careful to avoid the still rogue cannons. Despite the frantic pounding of his heart, the Captain ushered the men still capable of working to double their efforts before turning his stormy gaze once again upon the helm. A now visible silhouette wrestled with the wheel, and careful to avoid the edge and loose artillery, the Captain made his way to the starboard side's ascending flight of stairs that led to the soft grunts and curses coming from above that were effortlessly carried away by the biting wind. Though his legs burned from the effort of staying upright and an overwhelming weight had settled over his heart, the Captain forced his legs to carry him faster up the steep stairs to reach the oh-so familiar silhouette he had seen moments before.

His voice was gruff and breathy as he shouted up the steps, "William!"

The growing howl of the wind blew his feeble attempt to reach his first mate back at him, his

voice echoing in his ears as he tried once more to be met with only the now constant screams of the raging wind. The soles of his boots tried to slide beneath him as he rushed up the steps, and right before his head could peak over onto the helm, the wind carried down a pained curse.

Upon the helm, William fought to keep his hold on the wheel that yearned to send them to the freezing depths and leave them at the sea's mercy. Feeling his grip beginning to slip, William let loose a howl of frustration when a warmth enveloped him, and, aghast, he pushed back to feel the hard lines of a chest behind him.

The Captain reached around the smaller man to place his hands over William's failing grip and pinned him against the wheel. Purposefully, he leaned over William, ignoring the tickle on his face from the blonde tufts of curls sticking up all across his first mate's head, and tried to spread himself to cover as much of the smaller man as he could with his brawny stature to block the barrage of wind pelting against them and its lingering sting. The Captain's voice was quiet as he lowered his lips to be level with William's ear to avoid shouting over the constant howl of the wind as he sought to reassure his long-time companion, "Don't worry, love. I've got you."

The deafening howl of the wind made it difficult to hear any reply, but he was sure his words reached the smaller man against his chest when he felt him shiver.

"Captain, Drake, she can't endure this. We need to dock! Tell me you have a plan!" The smaller man had shouted to be heard over the storm, his voice dripping with the same fear that threatened to spill over from his unfathomably deep green eyes that the Captain found himself drowning in. The two stood so close he could feel the smaller man's stress as though it were a palpable sheet gently constricting around him, and swiftly, he looked out onto the darkening waters around them. He knew the closest port was at the very least another day's journey and

would require they sail straight through the now rumbling clouds, which could cost him and his crew their lives if they even dared. Racking his brain for any idea to escape the storm, the Captain felt his pulse begin to reverberate in his temples.

"We'll try to turn back and outrun the storm. The port is too far." The Captain's voice was firm and left room for no argument, but this did little to balm the quickly fanning fire behind William's eyes.

"Captain, we could make it to The Grim Isles and wait for it to pass. We could dock in a matter of hours!"

The Captain stared down into the indignant eyes below him, his expression blank, yet his voice revealed the thinly veiled anger simmering beneath, "You would have us risk everything we've worked for, would risk execution and imprisonment by having me sail us straight into the hands of a naval fort? No, if I die, it will be at the hands of the sea, not at the hands of any man."

Leaving William no further chance to argue, the Captain stepped away from the wheel to lean over the deck and ordered the men to bring the ship about before sending William down to assist the crew. Seething, William stormed down the steps as quickly as the unrelenting rocking of the ship would allow, leaving the Captain alone to stare out at the miraculously azure sky that remained unencumbered behind them. The Captain's eyes glued themselves to the calm seas that laid just beyond the storm's reach, even as the waters around them picked up in ferocity to match the wind's own bloodlust. His muscles strained and trembled at the force it took to resist the pull of the wheel and instead turn it sharp enough to divert their path to the small port they had departed from mere days ago, and his voice came muffled through his teeth as he called out a warning to the men below, "Helm's a-lee!"

The Captain let out a hearty laugh as the wind caught the sails, and the ship lurched forward beneath their feet, still viciously swaying side to side. Below, the crew rushed to mind the stays, and an overwhelming warmth released in the Captain's chest at the same moment he felt a pressure lift at the feeling of the wind pushing them away from the tumbling clouds that continued to pursue them from behind.

The clouds flashed with fury, and almost in answer, the sea began to thrash all the more violently, and the wind howled as it quickly shifted direction, taking with it the wind that had lifted *The Mermaid's* sails moments ago. The hair-raising rumble of thunder gave the crew little warning before a piercing crack split the air and a flaming ark of lightning struck the mainsail.

The blast of lightning tossed back the crewmates closest to the sail as a fire burst to life and began eating its way down the mast. The Captain felt the ship lurch as the steady force behind it suddenly vanished, and abandoning the wheel, he stumbled his way down the steps and onto the deck. He looked back over towards the horizon and felt his heart jump into his throat. Struggling to breathe, the Captain stared wide-eyed at the flashing clouds as they plowed towards them at monstrous speeds. Everything below the clouds was shrouded in shadows as though it were a curtain being drawn on a window, and swiftly, *The Mermaid* was fully consumed by the raging storm.

The Captain and William worked to drag the injured men below deck into their rooms where the doctor was rushing to bandage and check on his fellow crew members. Blood trailed down the steps after the bodies of its owners in a glorious ruby web that spread across the cracks in the wooden floors with each tilt of the ship. As the two made their way back towards the stairs leading out onto the upper deck, leaning against the walls to balance, the Captain turned up his

nose at the sharp metallic smell hanging in the air and winced when the gut rolling sounds of William gagging mingled with the haunting creaks and moans of the sea bashing the ship's belly. Quickly, he moved back to pull William through and out into the fresh air when they paused, and the only sounds around them were the wails of the ship's boards.

The Captain turned to look at the deck above him, straining his ears and squinting at the wood as if willing it to disappear and show him what laid beyond them. Suddenly, he heard it again. A soft thud as something struck the deck, followed by another and another until they came pounding down at a steady rhythm with the loud pitter-patter of rain pelting down alongside it. The Captain moved back and blinked painfully, rubbing at his stinging right eye where a raindrop had managed to find a crack in the boards. Knowing his eye looked as red as the coral decorating the reefs, the Captain hid his temporarily impaired vision from William and instead moved towards the stairs to the upper level, now desperate to get to his remaining men.

Grunts of pain and curses drifted down below as the hatch was thrown open and the remaining crew that had been above deck stumbled down the steps and came eye to eye with their bleary-eyed Captain. The skin not hidden beneath cloth and layers to protect from the sun were painted blues and purples as deep bruises blossomed across their arms and peeked out on their backs and chests. The Captain and William swiftly parted to make room when two of the lesser injured men shuffled through the group with an obviously unconscious man whose blood dripped down his face from a large gash in his brow. William grimaced as they passed, heart heavy as he noticed the soft splatter of the man's blood hitting the floor was lost in the sea of rain pelting down above them.

Clearing his throat, the Captain turned towards the group of men in front of him, fighting

hard to hold his composure, “Tell the men, I’ll be pouring glasses of my best bumbo in the Mess. Those who wish and are able, are welcome to join me.”

Before even finishing speaking, the Captain had continued past the men and towards his cabin and then presumably the Mess whilst the men and William stared dazedly at one another before turning to complete his orders.

In his cabins, the Captain stood by the door and watched the swirling waters outside his port window before slowly making his way to his desk. Scanning the top, he reached for the nearly full bottle of liquor that shined like honey when held up to the firelight that shined from his lantern.

The Captain glanced down at the dim light flickering on his deck and couldn’t fight the irk in his cheek as a small smile fought to get loose. One of his men must have come and lit his lantern when the ship’s hull first became drowned in shadows, and the Captain roughly wiped away the moisture that had escaped from its confines behind his lashes. Tightening his grip around the bottleneck to stifle the tremble in his fingers, the Captain stuffed down the image of the bleeding and doomed men all around him that still looked to him for hope as he turned back to the door.

Waiting till the pressure in the back of his throat and the burning in his eyes eased, the Captain stood in front of his door with his hand resting on the cool metal of the knob. Desperately struggling to think of anything else, his thoughts turned back to the men around him, and quickly, the Captain threw open the door and made his way to the ship’s dining area, willing the heat in his eyes to pass as he walked. By the time he entered, the warmth in his face had faded, and a few men had already gathered around the table with bandages zigzagging across

their bodies. Upon his appearance, the men subtly smiled and nodded up at the Captain as more men filtered into the room from behind him. Seemingly frozen to his spot by the entrance, the Captain physically shook himself free as a soft clatter dragged his eyes up to meet William's, who sat down stacks of glasses and began passing them around.

The Captain popped the cork from the bottle and swiftly went around the table and filled the small glasses resting in front of each man before taking his own seat at the head of the table. William took the seat to his right and quietly the Captain inched his hand beneath the table to intertwine his fingers with William's shaking ones as he turned his gaze to the men before him, "Does anyone remember our trip to the jungles of Barbados?"

From beside him, William's laugh rung out across the room as a stout Gunner a few seats down stood from his seat, "Aye! How about the rubies and gold we found stashed away in that temple?"

Soon the room was alight with laughter and voices as everyone added on to the memory. "Davey had to get 10 stitches after that fight with the natives!"

"And Seadog was sick for a week when he got ahold of their liquor!"

An explosion of dishes and pans shattering and sliding across the floor silenced the men and made everyone cling to the nailed down table as the waves outside pulled *The Mermaid* further and further into the water with each tilt. Grounded in their seats, the Captain did his best to talk over the breaking glass and stormy waters, "Who remembers the white sandy beaches off the Pearl Coast? I realize we were shipwrecked at the time, but it wasn't the worst island to be stranded on."

Conversation quickly picked up as the men laughed and recalled fond memories, and the Captain smiled as the joyous sounds drowned out the wails from the battered ship. Drinks were passed around and tossed back by the group as the storm raged on, and a few more men, escorted by the doctor, joined the group as they regained consciousness or were deemed able to leave their quarters.

Outside the ship, the fire ate its way across the deck and remained unbothered by the pouring rain. Lightning lit up the sky in flashes as the central mast groaned and splintered from the fire's heat. The Captain and the crew struggled to hold onto the table as the ship tilted nearly fully onto its side, and once they realized it had yet to swing back the other way, they all quietly sat and watched one another. The Captain squeezed William's hand in his beneath the table as a loud crash suddenly shook the ship before they felt themselves sinking further down in the churning waters.

The sound of rushing water was their only warning before it began to stream into the room and lick around their ankles like a pack of rabid hounds. As water filled the ship, it gradually righted itself, and the men silently passed around what remained of the bumbo as the water steadily rose all around them. The Captain let the bottle pass over him, and as the water neared their waists the men sat in solemn silence, each knowing their inevitable fate as the icy water quickly reached their shoulders. The Captain felt as though he was submerged in ice, and after having long lost the feeling in his fingers he blindly attempted to squeeze William's hand he hoped was still entangled with his own. As the water rose past their noses, several men submerged themselves and breathed the scathing water deep into their lungs, hoping that by embracing the watery grave around them, they would be swiftly delivered into the sanctity of

Davy Jones' Locker.

The Captain stared bleary eyed at William, who with a final nod, joined the crew beneath the surface. A sob racked through the Captain as bubbles rose next to him before ceasing just as quickly as they had appeared. He strained himself out of his seat and took one final breath of air as the water fully submerged him.

Blinking away the sting of the salt water in his eyes, the Captain squinted through the murky water around him. He felt his heart heave with relief yet shatter in his chest when he was met with only cold darkness in every direction. As the pressure in the Captain's chest built until he felt his lungs spasm in desperation, he trembled in the water and released the remaining air from his lungs.

Bubbles blindingly floated leisurely to the surface as the Captain struggled to breath in his first gulp of the water around him. His throat burned like molten fire and the pain forced him to breath in more in desperate attempts to find air. Each breath felt as though a grater was pressing against his lungs, tearing him apart from the inside. The mounting burn in his chest eased to a numb ache as he continued to struggle for air in the salty water around him until his vision began to fade at the edges, and smiling, the Captain let himself fade into the dark nothingness around him.

Long after the sand had settled around *The Mermaid* where she rested past the deepest currents, glowing creatures made their way through the twisting walls and splintered wood to investigate the new treasure lost to the sea and its lifeless guardians, who sat seated around a table with drinks in hand, and its captain, who clutched the frozen fingers of the man beside him, a small smile still etched onto his face.