Legends Live On

 Bursts of energy shot through the air - breaking through the thick, black clouds. The drumming of thunder claps fell in rhythm with the wave’s crescendo, and together they broke through the wind’s wailing. The crew’s yells and shouts scattered with the exception of the man at the stern of the ship. He stands firm and never once flinches from the bullets of rain hailing down on to them. He spits out commands in a lost tongue to the rowers in an effort against the Gods’ challenge.

 The limited who could be spare, glided across the deck as they start to tie down the sails. He watches as they climb the rope ladders, fighting the force of the wind’s gusts. No man wants to fall victim to the sea’s ensuring symphony. Some who are smart enough, wrap their arms and legs around the rope before the worst gusts thrash them around while others drop like shooting stars into the abyss. He looks back to the rowers and wipes his face. Waves jump over the ship’s railing and grasps rowers in an unforgiving grip. Others rush to pull them back, but the power of the sea is unmatched. More waves crash against the deck and hold them down, helpless as they watch their crew mates pulled into the embrace of the sea.

 Anger begins to boil at the base of his neck. No matter how revered and powerful these Gods may be, they will not harm another member of this ship. His eyes dart across the faces of each member left. The pale, hollow faces etched into the stone of his memory. Once he lands on the one he was searching for, he roars against the cacophony. With some confusion, the helmsman begins the trek to the main mast where he collects the excess rope. Holding the bunch in his hands, he looks up - lost like a scared child - until he is stolen by the sea. Letting out an agonizing wail as the man at the stern watches the helmsman disappear.

 For a moment, everything is silent.

 The wind no longer in his ears. The rain no longer stung against his skin. The flashes of lightning illuminate the darkness for seconds.

 Long enough to see a body pulling itself up from the side of the ship before a thunder clap erupted and the fight roared back into action.

 As he caught his breath, the helmsman tied the rope around his waist and then proceeded to make his way towards the man at the stern with determination. The man at the stern shouted and quickly gestured with a wide sweep to the deck. The helmsman froze for a moment, and the man at the stern ferociously shouted again while looking at the man with a steely gaze. The helmsman nodded. Without a moment’s haste, he begins to weave each rower securely to the ship and stations himself at the base of the main mast to wait for the the crew members up top. The man at the stern clutches the ship’s side railing and pulls himself closer to the center of the deck. Sea spray licks at his hands, taunting him.

 As he nears the first row of rowers, they shout and holler at him. Instead of making haste, he locks onto the rail with a deadman’s grip and anchored himself. He fixed his gaze onto the rowers. Their expressions, no longer confused, twist with pain as their eyes widen, fixed above his head. He quickly empties all air he has and fills his lungs to the brim before he is jostled by the sea’s grip. The initial punch hit him directly in the chest, pushing out precious reserves. He focuses all his concentration onto the burning vines coursing through his arms, envisioning himself as a great yew tree like the ones that build the forest near his home. His shoulders ache from branching out for so long with tons upon tons of pressure pushing against them. He is only a man. The sea’s spindly fingers curl underneath his own, but he clamps down on the rail. Each time he finds more difficult than the last. He shifts his head, taking in his enclosure. Air bubbles dance around him like woodland nymphs. The streaks of lightning dart above him, revealing the spider webs of sea foam closing in on him.

 The sea released its grip, no longer entertained. Gasping for breath, he unlocks himself from the rail nearly falling. He catches himself and staggers for a moment, where he gazes to the crew who vary between looks of disbelief and astonishment. Slowly rising, he lets a determined battle cry grow until he stands tall and bellows against the wind with the crew soon joining in with a freshened sense of will power. Watching his men work with purpose once more, he is filled with burning pride.

 Over the course of the next few hours, the crew pushed head on into the storm as they out maneuvered the sea’s attacks. He stands next to his helmsman keeping a watchful eye on the growing waves. He will not tolerate any more games on his ship. If the sea wants to play with them, then they will no longer abide by the rules of nature. As he stays silent and solemn, his helmsman continues to feed encouragement and hope to everyone on aboard by singing an old tune of courage. Saved only for moments of assured failure, all villagers have recognized this song as a means to convey when man has exerted all energy and effort before giving up. The helmsman’s resonant voice overpowers the shrieking wind and fuels the rowers’ moral. In each look exchanged by crew member, there is a spark ignited. They will pull through this together - there is no other outcome that they will accept.

 Through the night and into the following days, the ship and sea continue their battle of wits. While the sea may have the Gods’ strength and upper hand, the ship wages on. They waste no time charting the stars like they once did during the nights where the sea was the heavens’ mirror. Now, they focus only on progress and the tide. Dodging whirlpools and bracing sudden impact from the waves, they crew pushes through their fatigue and hunger. Their longing for solid ground and familiarity give them all the reason to continue to fight. The age long desire to be remember as legends, though, is an additional reward no man can resist. It’s only a matter of time before either player forfeit the game.

 On the third night, a silent truce was made: no player would advance and each will have a single night’s rest. All the crew members, from the rowers to the men who were at the top of the masts, found a place on the deck to stretch out and sleep. The man at the main mast and the helmsman took shifts keeping watch over everyone, wary of any mischief that could arise in the middle of the night. The man leans against the mast. His ears ring from the drastic volume change from the roaring storm to the deep snores. It’s the first night in years, it feels like, that he can look up at the sky and trace the constellations once more. The echoes of past laughter and lyrical storytelling float through his mind as he recalls tales of the legends etched in the heavens, never to be forgotten. He closes his eyes as he takes a deep breath. Before he wakes up his helmsman, the man silently words a prayer to the messenger God. He thanks the God for relieving them for one night.

 As the warm halo of morning began to hover over the horizon, the helmsman watches the surrounding. The water laps softly at the ship’s hull and glistening with the stretching rays of sunlight. He sighs at the sight. Pushing off the mast, he crouches down by his companion. Wrinkles and age lines run across the man’s face, and the helmsman wonders what wisdom hides beneath the outrageous stories and stoic expressions. He gently shakes the man, who bolts up right nearly knocking the helmsman off his feet. And for split second, the helmsman thought he saw terror in the old man’s eyes. Just as soon it sparked, it faded and the old man was on his feet, offering his hand to the helmsman. They have much work to accomplish before the sun rises.

 Each of the crew members helps prepare for the final round of the game. If any of the safety ropes looked the slightest bit frayed, they were tossed into a spare barrel. No longer concerned about the state of the masts, the men who would have been up top will rotate with the rowers during calmer moments of the storm. Every man will need to be at their peak strength and wits for them to come out on top of this. As the final rower is tied into place and the helmsman checks all the connections, the old man watches as the thunder heads roll closer towards them. Streaks of lightning almost reach the rising, choppy waves. With no hesitation, the old man shouts orders to the rowers who begin to move in unison. They cannot waste any advantage they might have.

 The rowers heave together to push the ship forward - closer to home and closer to their families. Even with the strength of this crew, the storm nips at the back of their heels. Toying with them before it makes its first move. Waves splash to the top of the deck, dragging their cold, sharp talons across crew member’s legs and feet. The thunderclaps’ booming laughter echoes around them. What really keeps them on edge though is not the sea or the clouds, but the wind.

 Normally so vocal in their game, the wind has yet to announce its presence. Licking his thumb, the old man raises his hand above his head as he squints his eyes. Who has tamed this creature? Or is it just another of the sea’s strategy to trick them?

 After some time, their advantage comes to an end. Looming over head and surrounding them, thunder heads rumble with streaks of light coursing through them. The old man swallows a heavy gulp and rushes through the center aisle between the rowers barking out orders. Once he gets to the end of the rows, he moves to the stern where he kneels beside the other crew members as he checks their connection. One of the members offers him the end of the rope, but he shakes his head and stands upright. Looking over the expanse of the ship, he watches the rower’s muscles strain against the current. The waves leap over the rails like raiders from an enemy ship. Lightning that was once stewing up above now whip across the sky like bolting warhorses.

 With a sudden crack in the air, the game begins once more. The sea churns and bubbles as it slowly grows more vicious. More focused on the crashing waves that swallow the rowers, the old man moves between the aisles to help them back into their positions and check if they need a reprieve. As he helps one of the rowers back into their seat, the old man begins to slide away from the rower and is jostled to the opposite side of the ship. His head bounces off the hard, deck as his limbs get thrown against the rowers’ benches. Unable to move, one of the rowers pulls the old man against his legs and holds him in a steely grip. The old man looks up and watches as the young rower yell across the ship. He couldn’t make out what was being said, all he could hear was the static in the air. He squeezes shut his eyes for a moment to try alleviating the throbbing in his head, and when he wakes up, he is greeted by the concerned gaze of the helmsman. Peering down at him, the helmsman tries to talk to him, but the old man merely blinks at him.

 The helmsman quickly pulls him up and puts the old man’s arm over his shoulders. The helmsman slowly steers them both to the stern of the ship, only pausing to brace for an oncoming wave. Dragging their feet and drenched by the stinging, cold water, the two of them sit down with the rest of the crew. Trying to hold his head up, the old man watches as the helmsman ties him to the rest of the crew. He tries to push the helmsman’s hands away, but the helmsman bats them away and secures him down.

 The helmsman faces the old man where he then holds the old man’s face in his hands, and he no longer looks like the unsure child he once was. Now looking at the old man is a calculating and calm man. The helmsman gives the old man a reassuring nod before darting to the main deck.

 Trying to hold heavy eyelids open, the old man watches the helmsman take over his position. The young man moves without hesitation through the sloshing water that pools the deck to make sure that another crew member is okay. He bellows against the sea’s roars to get the attention of a crew member at the stern when it is time to switch with a rower. The old man chuckles lightly as tears begins to creep up on him and fall down his face, mixing with the sea spray. The sea bashes against the hull, and the ship rocks onto one of its sides for a moment only to come barreling down and crash into the waves to right itself. Sobs rack the old man’s body and his hands shake as he reaches out to the crew member next to him. Seeing the glassy eyes of the other man, the old man squeezes the other’s hand and gestures for the other to continue with the next crew member. As they hold onto each other’s hands and grasp onto life, the old man looks up to the sky. Rain hits his face in piercing bullets once more, but the old man does not turn away as he begins to stutter a prayer to any merciful God that would listen. Spitting and sputtering out water, he pushes through the prayer and squeezes both hands before he closes his eyes and hangs his head low. He has done all that he can to get these men home. Whether they make it out alive is now in the hands of fate and the helmsman.

 Being thrown from one side to the opposite, the helmsman slides from one rower to another making sure they’re safe and strong enough to continue. With one rock to the ship though, he grabs onto one of the rowing benches. Looking to the stern, he notices all the crew members holding hands as the old man mumbles something to the sky. He squints and looks past them to see a growing wave closing in on them. Yelling out for the rowers to heave stronger, all the helmsman can do is watch in horror as the wave follows and quickly gains on them. His heart plummets as the stern of the ship is picked up by the wave, and he watches the group slide closer to the deck. The rower’s benches pile back onto one another as they scrape against the deck to the bow. He pushes away from the bench and twists himself so he slides on his back until his feet hit the main mast where he turns to watch the ship continue to be picked up by the sea. His heart pounds against his chest as the water flows over the stern railing and rushes down towards him.

 “Please, Gods, help us. Forgive us for our foolishness.”

 Looking away from the cascade, the helmsman focuses on the flapping sails above when he notices the wind’s whistling layer on top of the sea’s symphony. Instead of sweeping against the deck like it last did, the wind now fills the sails to their edge. With a new force, the ship pushes on and slices through the churning sea. The helmsman watches with astonishment as the stern pushes down against the wave to return to sea level and speed through the storm. Laughter pushes past his lips.

 The helmsman watches the sky as they move, and he sees the transitions from the rumbling storm heads to the gray, overhanging clouds to blue skies. Pushing upright and leaning against one hand on the mast, the helmsman looks across the deck. Crew members clamber to their shaking legs. Some were looking at their hands and touching their arms to make sure that this is reality - that they are alive. For a moment they all looked to one another and cheered, the helmsman smiled and let them have this before shouting out orders to clean up the deck and get the injured down below.

 As he walked across the deck making sure everything was in order, the helmsman looked out to the horizon. In the near distance, was the unmistakeable coastline of home. He shifts his to the sky where clouds drifted peacefully and seabird screeches are the only thing heard above.

 “Thank you.”