



Over the blank darkness of his eyelids, Mick could picture a whole world before him. Rolling fields of green grass and brush sprawled to the horizon. Deer, squirrels, and chipmunks, extinct animals he'd never seen but often imagined, ran freely beneath the trees. Cutting through the earth, the rich dirt Mick wished so badly he could feel beneath his feet, was a stream. A narrow, winding brook that trickled as it flowed.

Mick wondered what it must've been like to look at a view with so little water. Then he opened his eyes and water was all he could see.

His boat, a welded contraption of metal and sails, was surrounded in every direction by an endless ocean that stretched long past the horizon. The sea was all he knew. It was all anybody knew, for that was what life had become. Sailing ships, living in barges, and passing on stories of the world before, which Mick knew were mostly exaggerated tales that stretched the imagination further with every generation that told them.

Except Mick was surprised to find he was wrong. There was a dark spot that sat along the water in the distance. Another vessel of some kind. The rare passerby in a road that was as vast as the planet itself.

Mick could've avoided it for a number of reasons. Lord knew he could deal without the trouble. But the vessel's course was taking it in an odd direction. Maybe they were lost and needed help. After a lifetime of racking up bad karma, Mick never wasted an opportunity to atone for his past.

He approached the vessel slowly, which turned out to be a raft way too small to be in these waters. A single woman stood at the helm to greet Mick. She seemed young, inexperienced, and alone, yet not at all afraid of the pistol Mick aimed in her direction. She wasn't even surprised by it, which was strange given that there weren't many working firearms left in the world.

"Easy, friend," the woman said with her hands raised. "I come in peace."

With his weapon still trained on her, Mick scanned the raft and noticed a series of crates filled with assorted items. Too many for any one person to want, need, or use in a lifetime.

"You a trader?"

She smiled and nodded. "Name's Olivia."

Mick returned the gun to his waistband. "You have any matches to spare, Olivia?"

"Matches?" she repeated. "Haven't been asked for those in a while. Hold on."

Her head disappeared into one of the crates, scouring for some hidden treasure amongst the rubbish.

"You looking for waterproof or the useless kind?" she yelled over her shoulder.

Mick thought her joke was tacky. He laughed anyway.

She re-emerged from the crate and reached over the small gap between their vessels to hand Mick a tiny matchbook.

"What do I owe you?"

Olivia smiled and shook her head. "Don't worry. It's on me."

Kindness was rare in a world built on survival. Mick had encountered it before on a few notable occasions. Just never from a stranger.

"Really?"

"Sure," Olivia said with a casual shrug. "Call it a new customer special."

Mick thought for a second before realizing the trader's generosity wasn't completely out of benevolence. "You're just gonna gouge me next time, aren't you?"

"That's commerce for you," Olivia remarked with a proud smile.

Their conversation was barely a minute old and already it felt like the most genuine exchange Mick had in awhile. The woman exuded earnest warmth and a bubbly disposition like she was from another dimension. One where everyone hadn't been hardened by hunger and seawater. She didn't belong here, which made Mick all the more inclined to help her.

"Maybe I can thank you with a map," he offered.

She looked at him peculiarly. "Why you say that?"

"There's not much over the way you're going," Mick said and pointed towards her heading. "Just water, water, and more water."

Olivia giggled.

"What's so funny?"

"The place I'm looking for isn't on any map."

Her answer took him by surprise.

"That's impossible," he muttered. "The entire ocean's been charted for over a hundred years. If there was something over there then people would know about it."

"Unless the guy who lives there doesn't want them to."

There was never any doubt in Mick's mind that she was telling the truth. Honesty just seemed to radiate out of her. "Who is he?"

"Calls himself Captain Truman. Rumor has it he's retired in a tower from the old world. Place is barely thirty feet high now, but it used to be a library. Library means books. And books mean..."

"Answers," Mick whispered under his breath.

Olivia didn't say anything else.

"You want to learn where the ocean came from," Mick said. It wasn't a question. He knew it for a fact.

Olivia tilted her head to the side, examining Mick, curiously taking him all in.

"You do too," she observed with a subtle smirk. "I can see the thirst for knowledge in your eyes. You hate not knowing how the world got this way. You want to understand who you are and why you're stuck in an endless loop of sailing without an end. A life that exists for the sole purpose of survival, am I right?"

Mick didn't reply. There wasn't any point. She already knew the answer.

"Why don't you come with me?" she asked, eagerly.

"I...can't."

Olivia's brow furrowed, puzzled by his reluctance. "Because?"

"I have obligations," he said, gesturing to the cargo behind him. "Orders that need delivered. Contracts that need fulfilled."

Olivia examined him again, surveying every inch of her expression before coming to a conclusion. "You're not ready for it."

"For what?"

"The truth," Olivia replied with a smirk.

Mick was caught off guard and rushed to stammer out a reply. "I—I do. I just—"

Olivia raised a hand to cut him off.

"You don't have to explain, Mick," she said gently, as a teacher would to a struggling student. "I'll be back again."

She pushed off his boat before he could offer a rebuttal.

"When it's your time to understand," she stated while drifting towards the horizon. "I'll be there to guide you."

Olivia never looked back. Mick knew because he watched her the whole way. It was only after she disappeared into the cloudy backdrop that he wondered how she knew his name when he never recalled giving it to her.

Mick wanted to ponder that a bit more. As he set his course he let his mind drift with the current, wondering where Olivia came from and where she heard about this mysterious Captain Truman. But it wasn't long before the clouds darkened overhead and Mick spotted another vessel adrift in the choppy sea.

He found it strange that in an ocean so vast he would encounter two boats in such a short amount of time. As it came closer, though, Mick realized it wasn't a boat but a

ship. Nothing too big, just a small schooner, but enough that it dwarfed Mick's tiny one-man craft.

As the two vessels approached each other Mick waited for the ship's crew to greet him, but no one came. Curious, Mick tied his boat to the hull and climbed aboard. There wasn't a soul in sight, and his calls for hello went unanswered.

It wasn't the first time Mick encountered a ghost ship. Not even close. Between starvation, dehydration, and downright insanity, sailors were known to throw themselves overboard, leaving their vessels to the sea's mercy. It was sad, but Mick didn't mind. It just meant whatever they left behind became his.

Eager to see what they had, Mick lifted the hold's trap door. There were several toolboxes that Mick wasted no time scrounging through, but he barely got started when a voice addressed him. "Thieving, are we?"

Mick didn't look up right away. He paused, slowly moving his hand to his waistband. He shot up to his feet and aimed his pistol at the smiling man before him.

"Guess you just couldn't give it up," the man said, gleefully.

He looked a bit different than the last time Mick saw the man's blood-covered face. Now he wore a cloth eye patch and touted a short beard, but his features were unmistakable.

"Luis," Mick grumbled like the name was a curse. "I should've known."

"Of course you should've. You were the one who taught me this scam, remember? When we were partners."

Luis's smile slowly transformed into a grizzled scowl. It was clear he hadn't come to terms with how they left things.

"That was a long time ago," Mick said, on the verge of pleading to convince himself. "And I wasn't raiding this ship. I was just trying to salvage what I thought was left behind."

"Well, we are raiding yours," said a woman who emerged from behind Mick.

"So tell us what you got," ordered another.

Mick subtly glanced over his shoulder at the two sword tips held barely a foot from his cheeks. The blades were held by two women named Sam and Gwen, former mercenaries rumored to be running with Luis these days.

He thought about lying to them before realizing it was pointless when they could just check his cargo themselves. He had a better shot at getting out of this alive if he didn't try to hide anything. "Medical supplies on their way to a village on a derelict oil platform."

Luis's smile returned. "Sounds like a payday, gals."

"Come on, Luis. People really need this stuff."

"Good," Sam said with a chuckle. "That means it's expensive."

Gwen leaned in, brushing the sword's rusty edge against Mick's cheek. "All we have to do is claim ownership."

"You do that and he dies," Mick pointed out, nodding in Luis's direction.

He didn't know how much either woman cared about Luis's life, but it was the only leverage he had at the moment.

"You could come with us," Luis suggested, softly.

Mick jerked back in surprise.

“There was a time when being a pirate was all you cared about, Mick. The only thing on your mind was the next hunt. The next score. The next kill. Then you started rambling on about self-worth and respect, like those things mean anything in this damned ocean we live on. It’s not too late, though. These ladies have become admirable partners, and I’m willing to bet the four of us would be unstoppable. I’ll even forget that you gave me this.”

Luis playfully tapped his eye patch, but it was all part of the game. Mick knew his old partner was serious about welcoming him into the crew. No judgments. No grudges. No hard feelings.

That was the point, though. There was no going back for Mick. Luis knew that better than anyone, which was why his sincerity dug so deep. He knew full well that Mick resented the possibility of returning to his old life.

“So what do you say, old friend?” Luis teased with open arms. “You ready to rule this pathetic toilet of a world?”

There weren’t many good options for Mick. Embracing Luis, even as a ruse, was out of the question. He could pull the trigger. It would most certainly cost him his life, but the thought of killing Luis did have its appeal, even if he would only be able to enjoy it for a moment.

Mick weighed his options against the backdrop of water crashing against the ship’s hull. The pirates waited patiently for him to make a decision, and he knew they would have stayed that way forever until he did.



Keeping the gun's sight on Luis's grin, Mick's eyes dropped to the deck. The ship's hold was still open in front of him, and Mick noticed a bag of shiny crystals in the corner; flare rocks, sailors usually called them.

Without hesitation, or thinking the plan through, Mick lowered his gun and fired at the bag. The crystals exploded in a blinding flash of light that only he was ready for. Luis, Sam, and Gwen all cursed and shielded their eyes while Mick leapt from the deck to his boat below. He untied the rope and quickly pushed off to begin his getaway, eager to get a head start before the pirates recovered.

"You can run, Mickey boy," Luis's voice boomed from behind him, "but you're forgetting who has the faster ship!"

Mick didn't turn around. He didn't have to. He already knew the schooner had begun its pursuit, and Luis was right. There was no way he could outrun them. He had to think of something and quick. That was when the darkening clouds on his port side caught his attention.

"I'm going to enjoy skinning you alive and using your flesh as a sail!" Luis taunted. "You hear me, Mick?! A slow death's too good for you. I'm going to..."

His voice trailed off once he realized Mick had veered his boat hard left and was headed straight for the storm front. A line of black clouds cut straight across the sky. Roaring cracks of thunder echoed behind the dark veil of pouring rain.

Mick didn't hesitate. He knew the odds of his tiny vessel surviving such a squall were slim, but it was better than letting Luis capture him. Far better.

He wasn't sure if Luis would chase him into the storm. His ship wasn't exactly outfitted for it either, yet, sure enough, Mick looked over his shoulder and saw the

schooner right behind him. It seemed his old partner was willing to risk everything for a little revenge. Not that Mick could blame him. He did rob the man of his eye.

Mick hit the storm's thick wet air like a wall. At first the rain pecked his skin a little at a time, but then it picked up and began pelting Mick's face like tiny, liquid bullets. The rough water smacked hard against his boat, jostling him from side to side as he futilely tried to navigate the current. He rode the waves the best he could, climbing rolling swells nearly triple his height.

Glancing over his shoulder, Mick saw that Luis's schooner wasn't fairing much better. His ship was bigger and could take a bigger punch, but that also meant it was more complicated to sail. Mick could see the three-man crew scramble around the deck, frantically trying to keep themselves on course.

He didn't care where he was headed, not that he had much say in the matter. Violent gusts of wind pounded him from every direction, rendering his boat completely at their mercy. Lightning snapped all around him, followed by deafening thunder that boomed so loud it nearly blew him over.

The shockwave jerked his boat forward. It was only when Mick looked back that he realized Luis had rammed into his stern. Luis leaned over the bow of his ship, his scowling face spewing some sort of profanity-laced rant, or so Mick assumed. He couldn't hear him over the driving rain and thunder.

The chase continued as the storm intensified. The two vessels were so close they were almost interlocked, barely avoiding the bursts of lightning that struck from the twisted clouds above. The bolts came quicker and closer until one crashed between the two ships, blasting them both into a million shards of debris.

Shrapnel exploded, sending the four sailors soaring through the air before colliding into the tumultuous water. Mick's body, reeling from the impact, went limp and rose to the surface. He could barely move, just float on his back with his eyes closed as the torrential rain continued to bombard his face.

Mick had no idea where Luis landed, let alone Gwen and Sam. Not that it mattered. Without a ship there was no way any of them were surviving the storm, which was just fine for Mick. He'd escaped death enough times to know the bill was overdue. He was always going to die on the water. Wasn't a matter of "if" but "when."

Despite the storm raging all around, Mick felt oddly at ease. This was the way it was always supposed to be. Like his destiny had finally been fulfilled.