

A Safe Port in A Storm

By Scott Cimarusti

“A safe port in a storm...that’s what you are.”

That was what he always said to me right before heading out to sea for another six months, at least. Usually longer.

The life of a merchant seaman was never an easy one—even in less troubled times. Even a simple barmaid like me understood that.

But to his credit, he always remained honest and forthright with me—never making false promises that he knew I’d never believe anyway.

I can still see his face in the rosy light of dawn... The sharp tang of the ocean air filling my room, the chintz curtains swaying in the breeze that carried the hollow and distant calls of seagulls.

Just like so many times before, he would gently grasp my chin between a calloused thumb and forefinger, tilting my face upward so he could kiss me firmly on the lips one more time. His eyes would find mine, and he would utter those words to me that I so longed to hear:

“A safe port in a storm...that’s what you are.”

And my heart would swell, the color rising in my cheeks and a dreamy smile blooming on my face.

Those would be his final words to me until the next time he made port for an all-too brief stay.

The last time I heard those words from him was almost three years ago; far longer than he’s ever gone before without returning to me.

And I fear now that I may never hear him speak those words to me again.

News from the sea is agonizingly hard to come by—especially reliable news. But based on what little I’ve been able to piece together so far from seamen on other returning ships, any remaining lingering hopes are rapidly slipping from my grasp like rainwater through my fingers.

The sailors speak of a storm unlike anything anyone’s ever seen. The way they describe it, it’s as if the gods themselves reached down their mighty hands and stirred up waves taller than the mast of any ship; the lightning flashes too bright to behold, the thunderclaps deafening to the ears. And a wind that would shred the sails and splinter the masts of any vessel daring to defy it.

They all end their varying accounts the same way: slowly shaking their heads and lowering their gaze to avert their eyes from my desperately expectant stare. Then, with no further words necessary between us, I silently serve them their drinks and resume my place behind the bar, awaiting the next seafaring stranger with a tale to tell.

Tomorrow, it will be exactly three years since fate and the sea stole my beloved from me. And I will be there to meet him on the docks—whether he is returned to me or not.

I awoke this morning to a chill wind that I wouldn't have expected for another two months at least. It was the kind of furious gale that rattles the window panes and stirs up the withered autumn leaves—noticeably out of place here in the middle of summer.

Shivering, I went to the window to shut it—my gaze falling on the horizon, as it always does, hoping to find the familiar silhouette of the *Persephone* there, safely returning my beloved to me.

Alas, the *Persephone* remained stubbornly absent as it has for the past three years.

Yet, something else lingered on the horizon.

Ominous leaden clouds amassed there instead, forming an almost solid wall of an approaching storm.

I shut the window against the ill and icy wind and began to dress for the long lonely day before me.

The hands on the mantel clock across from the bar could not have moved any slower, it seemed. I lost count of how many drinks I spilled throughout the course of the day with my eyes constantly wandering to the front window and the advancing clouds beyond.

Finally, after realizing that I was probably spilling more drinks than I was serving, the innkeeper dismissed me for the rest of the day so I could begin my lonely vigil even earlier.

Stepping outside onto the weather-beaten pier, I immediately had to cinch my manteaux closer to my throat with one hand while steadying myself against the railing with the other. The wind had grown in ferocity, howling like a feral thing, its fangs and claws almost immediately rippling the fabric of my dress and piercing my flesh. The ominous clouds I had spotted earlier now eclipsed a greater portion of the sky, bringing an early twilight to the day, casting everything in a grayish/purplish hue.

My footfalls on the creaky and unsteady planks of the pier were carried off by the prowling wind before they could even reach my ears. A nervous anticipation was rising in my chest—though for what, I could not guess; for I felt certain that the *Persephone* would not be arriving today, and my beloved would still remain lost to me.

I cast a glance behind me, the wind whipping my hair into my face like widow's veil. I watched the shopkeepers and tenants as they lit feeble candles to dispel the approaching darkness and shuttered their windows against the approaching storm. I could almost see myself through their eyes; a lone figure clad in grey marching toward inevitable heartbreak and disappointment—too stubborn or foolish (or both) to know better and seek shelter. But that did not deter me; my feet, still undaunted, propelled me forward in spite of my rapidly dwindling hopes and toward the vacant horizon and the rapidly advancing storm clouds that lurked there.

Off in the distance, I could hear the lonely clang of a bell buoy being buffeted in the merciless gale. May the gods be with any wayward traveler—by land or by sea—this day.

I finally reached the end of the pier, the salt-stained and sun-faded planks groaning beneath my feet; the rickety railing offering me little in the way of support or reassurance. The sky was now the color of a fresh bruise, the wind whipped into a mad frenzy. I could barely maintain my footing. But with my head held high, I wrapped my arms even more tightly around myself as I awaited whatever punishments the storm had in store for me and the rest of the town.

And just when I thought I was unable to bear the wind's abuses and icy talons a second longer, all was suddenly still.

My heart thudding in my ears, I peered around nervously, fearing an even harsher retaliation from the storm.

Then, an odd, yet strangely familiar chill passed through me—causing the fine hairs on the back of my neck to bristle and gooseflesh to rise on my arms.

And with it, a whisper—more felt than heard, which tore the breath from my chest:

“A safe port in a storm...that's what you are.”

And with that, the clouds were suddenly rent to tatters, the bright summer sunshine bursting through and warming my face to match the swell of warmth in my heart.

My beloved had returned to me as promised.

And I would await him again next year and every year until it was my time to accompany him out to sea.