

## *Piraeus, March 17, 322 BCE*

The solitary gull flew in from the sea riding on the wind. It fluttered to a landing and perched on the top of the wall, barely half a metre above her. It was no fortuitous landing; little did she know... *They'd already met.*

A flurry and a shake said *hello*. There was no response. It waddled a few steps toward her. It hesitated. Cagily, it lurched on. Then a screech followed by a grunt. *Nothing...* It was directly over her now, peering down. *It's me*, an affective coo pleaded. Still nothing. Its linguistic options had all but run out.

It bobbed its head and waited in expectation. But it wasn't a day for bonding. To the bird, she was no ordinary human; there was only one other like her. If she'd stroked and caressed it once, she'd done it hundreds of times. This time though, she didn't look up; *it was just another bird.*

The girl stared ahead. And although she only perceived its presence subconsciously, its forewarning was not lost on her.

But it was the sky that said it best. *This was hardly a day to be putting out to sea.*

The gull had hitherto flown over the ship and looped twice on the starboard side, diagonally above where the youth stood. It then headed straight back to the point on the shore where she herself was standing. For the bird, *he* was an equally important human. It had approached the ship so closely he almost had to beat it away. It squawked in protest and wheeled back round twice more. But its presence hardly registered with the human; it wasn't the only squawk in the sky... Besides, *most of these seagulls looked the same.*

Back on the wall, it began putting on a show. It quivered. Its head darted to one side. It preened its left wing. It grunted. It squawked. Some bird sense told him it had an audience of two humans now. Sadly, for them it was a bridge too far. It flapped its wings. It was pinpointing her position to him from the embankment where it had just landed, *not that he noticed.* But he had already made out the petite figure anyhow. She was alone by the high stone wall at the back of the bustling crowd, gathered on the quayside. Her head, bowed now and hidden beneath a veil, jerked intermittently. She was weeping.

The girl raised her head. The scene was fathomless, the foreboding palpable. Fleeting, she stared ahead as though willing it, daring it all to be untrue; the boat had still not weighed anchor. *Would it ever?*

The gull squealed; it was not pleased. It strutted back and forth along the wall, jerking its head as though it had some special entitlement as a seagull. Alas, seagulls' rights didn't exist, *try telling him that...* But its

protestations were achieving nothing. Still, it hung around for she had rarely not fed him. *A few crumbs wouldn't have gone amiss...*

Maybe it was the wrong place, perhaps the wrong time. Together yet again, but worlds apart. How was *it* to know...

Menacing clouds rumbled and rolled. The sky rocked. It was up to no good.

The youth, contrarily, implored the ship to set sail. Lingered on the upper deck, alone and restless, he struggled to stay positive. He hung back circumspectly from the gunwale as though an extra few centimetres would suffice to distance himself from her even more. A lump formed in his throat. The knot in the base of his stomach tightened. He gripped his clammy hand round the bottom of the bristly rope that protruded from the gunwale towards the top of one of the masts. He fidgeted with the strands.

The voyage had been due to commence thirty minutes earlier. He shared her frustration, albeit for contrasting reasons. If the commander was going to postpone the ship's departure, it would only prolong their ordeal. It was already excruciating for both of them. For all that, the vessel remained stubbornly still at the quayside.

His deep love for her apart, the moral liability lay heavy. She had been inconsolable. They'd planned to wed within weeks and now he was leaving. He had been adamant that it was only a brief goodbye, *she must stay strong*. Her sorrow was tinged with anger; *it was easy for him to say*.

Overcome by a powerful premonition she would never see him again, her mood descended into a bottomless plunge. Instantly, she abandoned her discretion. Her soft weeping turned into loud, violent sobs. He had forsaken her. *How could he?*

Alarmed, the bird shrieked. It had never seen her like this. It flapped, lifted off and soared away. It wheeled several times as it waited for all the others that had been following in from the sea in its trail. Once it had woven into the anonymity of the flock, it became *just another bird*. The girl's body shook as she continued to cry convulsively, amid a cacophony of seagull sounds.

The gulls were heading further inland, seeking shelter from the approaching tempest. But they weren't going just anywhere. They were on their way to their favourite hangout: the place on the very top of the hill. Some things never changed; it must have been embedded in their genes.

A few curious bystanders turned and stared. Mindful now that she was causing a scene, the girl buried her head in her hands and her lamentations became suppressed whimpering. *Somebody or something would keep them apart*. Why he had to go, she didn't know; *he wouldn't say...* beyond that it was the *adventure* of a lifetime. It was a weird excuse, totally out of character for him. What's more, *you don't postpone your wedding to*

*suddenly go on a sea voyage.* Bitterly, she stared back at the boat that was about to spirit her dreams away.

Mentally, she was in unknown territory, a terrifying place inside her head, much darker than the sinister sky above her; perhaps some earthly *Hades*. She did not know, she could not know, how to react. Something wasn't right. Her world was being ripped apart. Anything could happen. Whatever it was, she clearly wasn't a part of it, if not a monstrous victim. *How could she forgive him for this?* And yet, she would kill herself rather than live without him.

He wanted to tell her the truth. It was not just for *his* future. It was for *theirs*. But to elaborate would only lead to more questions. The youth harboured a secret he could not tell.