

ACTION

In this episode: Dirck van der Voort and his fleet of merchant ships are heading home to Amsterdam after trading in Livorno. On board are his great aunt Margaretha and beautiful Maria, who has quit her cloister in Assisi in hopes of finding a happier life in Amsterdam.

Homeward bound, Dirck steered the *Amsterdam Ascendant* through the outer fortress islands and around Corsica. With every tack and shift of the sails, he began noticing men bumping into each other and lines slipping from hands, leaving sails to flap. The wind was not especially strong, the sea was relatively calm, but Maria was on deck, and the men were mesmerized. Dirck ordered the carpenter to construct makeshift chairs on the rear deck for the women and erect a canvas barrier to conceal them. In time the novelty of Maria's presence diminished, and the rhythm of sea life was restored.

The fleet successfully navigated its way back through the Strait of Gibraltar and into the Atlantic Ocean. Off the coast of Portugal, storm clouds appeared on the horizon. They coalesced and grew taller, and the Dutchmen were treated to a brilliant display of lightning. There were oohs and aahs, as flashes of light exploded and danced through the cloud bank. It was a heavenly sight that went on for hours.

Then the cloud bank started marching toward them.

Dirck ordered the women into the cabin and the men to secure everything on deck and to haul in the sails, except for a small one. That sail plus the rudder would hopefully allow the *Amsterdam Ascendant* to track through the massive swells that were on their way.

The storm advanced, pushing wind ahead of it. Gusts snatched lines from hands, and sails flew loose and rap-rap-rapped. The sea grew turbulent and washed across the deck. Sensing that the storm was going to be ferocious, Dirck sent the men below to ride it out. After closing their hatch securely, he, the carpenter and first mate Rykaard Jr. sloshed across the deck to the captain's cabin. Dirck opened the door. Margaretha and Maria were huddled together and staring wide-eyed at him.

"Rykaard's going to stay with you," Dirck said to the women, "You'll be safe."

Before stepping into the cabin, Rykaard paused. "Dirck, are you *sure* you don't want my help?"

"No, you're too valuable. If anything happens to me, you'll need to take over." Dirck grinned at the carpenter, who was tall and muscular, "Anyway, I need his strength to help muscle the tiller, plus he knows how to make repairs."

The carpenter forced a confident look and followed Dirck to the helm, and they lashed themselves to it.

Lightning was flaring all around, and thunder clapping in close succession—Flash—BOOM!—Flash—BOOM! Swells were becoming massive.

"*We're in for it now, cap'n!*" The carpenter's bulging eyes were fixed straight ahead.

Dirck turned and saw a wave exploding over the bow. "*Hold on!*"

A wall of water smashed into them and exited over the gunwale. Coughing and sputtering, the two scrambled to their feet and prepared for the next onslaught.

The storm raged on, with waves smashing into the hull, seemingly from every direction. The *Amsterdam Ascendant* pitched and yawed violently. Above the din of the storm, Dirck heard a *creeeak* coming from the center of the deck. While blinking water from his eyes, he watched with alarm as the longboat broke loose, torqued sideways, scraped along the deck—crashed into the mast—and skidded toward the starboard gunwale. A final push from a wave washing across the deck shoved the longboat through the gunwale and into the raging sea, taking rigging with it.

Creeeak . . . CRACK! A tremor ran through the ship.

"Saint Francis give us courage," Margaretha prayed and pulled Maria tighter to her.

"Heavenly Jesus—don't let me die—not *now!*"