

# The Tide's Falling

## I.

“Remember this, Millie?” The man held out a paper with a thin hand mottled in scars, sitting up suddenly from the dingy bed. Dull light spilled through the tattered blinds, catching all the paleness of his skin. Outside, the steady lapping of waves only accentuated the unevenness of his breathing, the words a minimal but obvious toll on him. The woman at the desk beside him gave a half-hearted glance, eyes jumping not to the yellow page, but to the many ailing marks on his hands. She turned back. Her own hands fell to her lap, smoothing out the non-existent wrinkles of her dress.

“Of course, your hand, I just treated it this morn-”

“The map, lovey.” He turned the hand over, a thin sheet fluttering as she snatched it from him.

*She isn't so scattered*, he thought to himself. *I can't believe she still doesn't want to talk about it.*

Her face softened for a moment, only for it to harden with a scowl.

“What about it?”

“Well, I was thinking, maybe soon-”

“No. No, we are not talking about this.”

“Please-”

“We're not... we're not going there today.” She set the paper down on her desk with a heavy sigh, standing and crossing the few paces it took to sit beside him on the bed. She pressed a kiss to his brow, heart dropping at its warmth. She pressed a hand to it.

“Dear...”

“It's not bad-”

“Goodness, are you ever going to learn to trust your wife-”

“-are you ever going to let me finish my damn sentences?” he yelled. He dragged a hand down his face, exhaling deeply, shakily. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.” Silence.

“No, I’m sorry. I keep doing that... how are you... so, so patient?”

“There’s little time to waste on being angry.” Time. She hated thinking about it. *Think of something else. Time, time... thyme... coriander!*

“Oh! Goodness, I still need to get that shipment down to Mrs. Miry! I’m sorry love. It’s just the temperature you’ve got?” He nodded, folding away the disappointment on his face as Milena went to fetch her satchel.

“Then I trust you remember where the yarrow is. I’ll be back soon. Please rest.” She flew out the door, a flash of sage green and warm brunette. The man hesitated, reaching for the map, forgotten on the desk.

“Vandair... the other side of the Balsaric. Hmm.” Tracing shaking fingers over the island’s image, the world began to blur around him, beads of sweat clinging to his forehead. He took a few deep breaths, before steadying himself to stand. A splitting pain wracked his body, the force sending him to the ground with a muffled groan.

Meanwhile, with nothing but a mule and a small cart, Milena ran to the harbor, where Donovan Barton waited with some boxes of herbs and spices. He whistled a light tune, running a thumb over his knuckles. His head flicked up at the sound of heels on the cobbled road, and to his amusement but not surprise, Milena had once again foregone riding the mule to tug it forward. She had little to defend its reliance. She swore it wasn’t usually stubborn, but her having to lead the creature on was a common enough occurrence.

“I’m so sorry, the time escaped me this morning, I didn’t mean to keep you waiting,” she huffed, tugging the lead. He waved her off and chuckled at the mule’s protests.

“You’re forgiven. Milena. You’ve been consistent on pickup for the better part of a decade now, I won’t hold it against you this time. How’s Arnold?” Just as she got the first box loaded into the cart, the emotion started to overwhelm her. How much right did this man have to know about her husband’s state? *Enough*, she thought. He did know them well enough, the three growing up close. And he did, after all, already know enough to ask after Arnold with an exact intonation, to ask with worry but not condolence. But she didn’t know what to say.

“He’s doing better. Exhausted, but things haven’t been as bad.”

“In a rush today?”

“Yes. For Mrs. Miry, do you remember her? She wanted some coriander for her kitchen. She’s expecting guests today, needed this as soon as possible.” She hurriedly finished loading her boxes while Mr. Barton prattled off some story about Mrs. Miry. He was still hung up over her leaving his cousin at the altar... except for the fact that she eventually returned. She did, after all, start a family with him, and even Mr. Barton was familiar with the Miry boy. Milena only let Barton continue to blather knowing he’d be too wrapped up in his rambling to ask after Arnold again. Then he started to go on for too long, interjecting odd criticisms of her character between the creaking of wooden boxes hitting the floor of the cart.

“That’s enough, Barton. Mr. Miry’s forgiven her at least once, I can assure you no one cares anymore. Just tell me you’ve had no luck or life of substance since your great call to the sea if you’re going to be a bore to talk to.” He chuckled, taking off his head scarf to wipe the sweat on his face.

“Not as many maidens as I expected, out there on my journeys from here to Livenwail and back again. You’d think after sailing such a steady course for so long I’d’ve found one.” The route to Livenwail was indeed a predictable one, only being about a day’s journey out. The neighboring port provided what couldn’t be grown in Milena’s small trade village, which had only been a trade stop or passing point for travelers. It was exceptional that she and Arthur had decided to settle and build a life there. But that, she’d recently come to think, may have been in vain.

“Keep looking, I’m sure she’s out there,” she said sharply. She mounted the mule, ready to depart when he replied:

“None as crazy for adventure as you were... that’s what I need. Someone like you.” She dropped the mule’s reins in surprise. Turning only partly, she gave him a sideways glance. *A woman like me, huh? Strange way to say it.* She gave an abrupt nod and said curtly:

“Trust me, there are. Good day.”

“Wait! Next week’s order?”

“The same. Now goodbye, Barton.”

Mrs. Miry’s home was beautifully situated a mile or so down the stretch of the bay signaling the end of the harbor and the start of the beach. The house itself wasn’t grand by any means, but it was the nicest home in the village. What truly spoke to the relative wealth of the Mirys was the symmetrically cobbled road leading up to a two-storied, beige-bricked house. At the end of the road, right at the front door, Mrs. Miry stood with crossed arms and a child tugging at her ivory skirts, a mild breeze fluttering about them.

“They’re almost here, Callum, be patient please.”

“Momma, I want to see the horse.”

“It’s a mule, dear, it’s not a-oh! Milena!” The mule stopped with a light tap to the side, letting its passenger ease off. She quickly gathered a small box and delivered it up to the waiting Mirys.

“Good morning Elisa, Callum.”

“Mrs. Wright, I want to pet the horse, can I?” he asked shyly. She chuckled, gazing into his wide eyes, feigning consideration before giving a nod.

“My mule? Why, of course. Carefully now, he might bite your fingers.” While the child went to prod at the mule, the two women finished their transaction.

“He didn’t even say good afternoon in return. Good afternoon, Milena, sorry about the boy.”

“Oh, he’s quite fine. He’s getting so big,” she said as if she hadn’t just seen them two weeks ago.

“He’s getting to be quite the handful. I’m lucky he’s still sweet with us, at least. My husband at Callum’s age, goodness what a-oh, how’s your husband?” Milena clumsily pocketed the money, clearing her throat. She kept her hands hidden.

“He’s doing better today.”

“You look nervous dear, are you sure you’re well?” She paled suddenly, losing her words to the lump in her throat.

“Of course, of course. I just... worry. You know how these things are, they get better, they get worse.”

“Usually they just get better,” Elisa sighed, and in that instant, Milena saw red. But just for that instant, as a child’s laugh cut through the air. They both turned to see Callum holding an open palm under the mule’s mouth, laughing at the tongue darting out to lick it.

“Callum, don’t let it lick you, those things are dirty!” Elisa shrieked, running to pull him away. She ushered him inside, the box under one arm and his hand in her other hand, only turning to say a compulsory goodbye, before shutting the door.

As the dying day beat down over her, making her hair hot to the touch, leaving her skin rough and red-patched, Milena angrily made her way back through the cobbled streets, down to her house by the underside of the south docks. Even despite the immense discomfort, she could only focus on one thing: Arnold.

*Why did I just leave him with yarrow? God, I hope it helped. What if he got worse? He's done it before, he could've been lying to me and he could've been much worse off than I thought. Oh no. What if he-no. No, not yet, Arnie didn't die yet-no! No 'yet', he's not going to die! He's fine, he has to be, this is just... a process. We'll heal him eventually. We-* her hand stopped on the doorknob. *We have to make it through.* She opened the door with a vehement push, crying out in alarm. Arnold stirred from his place by the stove, lifting his hands in defense.

“Arnie? What in the world are you doing?”

“Why, I was just preparing myself a stew. Would you like some?” he calmly asked in turn.

Milena shuddered against her anger, turning her gaze to trace the walls. Arnold in turn smiled at her, even as she dared not look. His eyes, aged and wizened far beyond their years, still contained the wonder of a young man, one dazzled by the simplest of things. The explorer, the wanderer... the ever patient. Milena started to tear up.

“By God, Arnold. I... I shouldn't be mad at you, and I wish I could say that I'm not. I'm sorry to be, but what are you thinking? You're in no condition to be up!”

“Well, then why am I up?”

“Now is not the time! You're ill, Arnold. I understand that maybe your mind's gone a little off and you can't quite process this, perhaps you don't know how out of it you are, so-”

“Remember Newman’s Port?” he asked softly, raising a ladle from the pot. He beckoned for her to come closer. Tentative were her steps, though she still moved forward.

“What?”

“Newman’s Port. It’s where we first went out, remember? Your mother was so mad until you showed her that satchel I bought you. You never stopped using it, did you?” She shifted defensive hands to the bag still hanging from her shoulder. Even now it was a beauty that should’ve been far out of their means, dazzling even Milena’s stern mother years ago.

“Of course not. It’s served me well.”

“Took some mending over the years, hasn’t it? After our third wedding anniversary...”

“So it did. Why are you telling me this?” He slowly lifted the ladle to her mouth, letting her part her lips just enough for him to slip her some broth.

“Just something I noticed. You’ve been awfully worked up lately. You needn’t be so worried all the time. I’ve been just as right as rain. Feel.” He stooped down comedically, guiding her hand to his forehead. At the moment he was relieved from the overwhelm of the fever and the flare of pain. He wouldn’t tell her, of course, that he feared it wouldn’t stay that way.

“You’re right.”

“The yarrow worked today.” He grinned a wide, uneven grin. She turned her hand to caress his cheek.

“You’re right. My goodness, what have you been up to all day then?”

“Not much. Reading. Baking. Did you smell the bread on your way in?”

“No... oh, I shouldn’t have been so harsh. I’m so terribly sorry.” She started to sob, sinking into his chest as he pulled her in. He certainly seemed a lot better off, standing steady as ever.

“I know you worry, but I’m alright. We’re going to be alright.” He gently stroked her back. “It’s all going to be alright.”

## II.

*Apothecary*, said the old wooden sign hanging above her front door. *Apothecary*, Milena scoffed internally, as she packed her third box of oranges that morning. Of course she still saw the occasional in-home patient, and she still dealt in her medicinal wares and consultation services, but with the bad turning of the tide a few years ago, on top of the development of Arnold’s condition, took to delivering herbs alongside her usual wares, then spices, and now here she was, a clinician carting oranges around town.

The previous two weeks had passed slowly and uneventfully as always. Milena had her orders and shipments to attend to, and Arnold had more time to put the house in order. He cooked every day, and for once Milena felt just the slightest bit of weight fall off her shoulders. Arnold could imagine the future unfurling before them. He could envision working again, then their financial woes washing away, and, eventually, the open seas.

Then the fits of pain began.

Slow and interspersed at first, to where Arnold could excuse it as overexertion. But by the end of the first week, he was wracked by sharp pains without origin. And in an instant, undressing one



night to bathe, a series of bruises on his ribs darkened any future prospects. Still, he kept a brave face.

“Now you’re sure you’re okay?” asked Milena at the door, shifting a small box to her hip. She balanced two others on top of it, smiling at Arnold’s gentle nod and insistence at escorting her out.

“Of course. You go now, I’ll stay in bed, I promise. I hate aggravating it as much as you do, believe me.”

“Very well then, I’ll be back before nightfall. If you need anything, get the neighbors. I’m serious.” He pressed a kiss to her forehead.

“As am I. Stay safe, love.”

The townspeople seemed to extend extra kindness that day. Or perhaps it was her just noticing that the path to the harbor was cleared for her as she once again struggled with the mule, and the appearance of stray children to hoist a few boxes into the cart in exchange solely for a root to chew on and a pat on the head. Even Barton seemed to tire of his own complaints, and Mrs. Miry avoided the usual doling of reprimand in her presence. And still, her chest felt weighted by a dread she couldn’t place. Arnold had been doing well for far too long now. Despite all her hopes, she knew such a change couldn’t have just happened. Not without something in exchange.

“Milena, are you alright?” She was finally asked at the Mirys’ front door. She nodded, hurrying to situate the mule. Callum hobbled out of the house with a single flower.

“Of course, I should get going now-”

“It’s mid-day, you could spare some time for tea and a chat, can’t you? An orange, perhaps?”

“Mrs. Wright, I grewed this for you!” Callum cut between the two women to hold up a tiny yellow flower, cupped between his two hands. Milena’s expression softened.

“Callum, that’s a weed!” Mrs. Miry scolded, pushing him behind her. The flower fell to the ground and, in the rush of movement, was flattened under her heel.

“I really must go, I need to check on Arnold,” Milena snapped suddenly, turning without so much as a wave farewell. She couldn’t let them see the tears the little flower put in her eyes.

The world began to overwhelm with waves, calls of salutation and her name passing softly from mouth to mouth, swallowing the road entire. News would get around soon that she was the one appearing to be ill now, the paranoia driving her forward feverishly, heart pounding. She got some distance away from the people, back down to the docks as the sun was beginning to set once again. She left the mule on the hill and started to wade out into the tide, falling to her knees as the weakness she felt building up finally began to consume her. She couldn’t feel what started first, the gasping breaths or numbness in her face, quickly spreading down to her hands and feet. She punched down into the water. *Mrs. Wright. I am Mrs. Wright as much as I am Milena, stop trying to rip him away from me!* She dug her fingers into the sand and began to scream.

She didn’t know how long the screaming lasted, just that she was eventually pulled back from the water, shivering, drenched, and hoarse, chest still shuddering with dying sobs. The sky had darkened almost completely.

“Milena?” She looked up at the familiar voice.

“M-my apologies, Mr. Bart-Barton. I just, I-I, I just...”

“It’s alright, Mrs. Wright. I understand. You should really get back home now. Here.” He pulled off his coat, carefully placing it on her shoulders. “I wish you well.”

Before she could get a single word out, he disappeared into the night. *It's nightfall?* She bolted up and ran, sprinting fervently all the way to her front door. She struggled with the handle, praying under her breath that it would be just like two weeks before, when he was smiling and bright in the kitchen, standing painless, fearless. But when she opened the door, the house was dark. Not a sound, save for a raspy call of her name.

The next hour passed slowly, Milena experimenting with treatment after treatment, giving dose after dose of syrups and tinctures. She began boiling water, bringing steaming bowls of it up to his face in hopes of easing his breathing. In a single moment where he had stilled, she caught the map at his side. She seized it, ready to tear it apart when Arnold cried:

"Wait!" She dropped it in alarm, frozen.

"Millie, Mil-Milena, listen to me." He covered her hands with his, sinking back into the pillow.

"Go. Go find it. Don't tear the map apart, please. There's still hope. Just, don't wait on me." Tears pricking her eyes, she shook her head.

"Darling, I'm only going for you."

"I'm never going to be well enough to board a ship again, much less on a journey such as this.

I'm sorry lovey, this is the end of the line for us." Just then, a violent cough shook him, and he

pulled his hands away to bring his arms up to cover his mouth. She could feel some stray droplets of spit and blood on her cheeks, physically unmoved but deeply stirred as Arnold gasped for air. She brought the steaming bowl back up to his face.

"Breathe, come on, breathe. Slowly, slowly now... please," she begged quietly, sitting square across him on the mattress now. He lurched, dropping his head onto her shoulder as if attempting an embrace. She held the bowl out to the side.

“I can’t,” he sobbed. Gripping at her blouse, he only burrowed his head harder into her shoulder, coughing and shaking again.

For several more hours, she rotated between boiling water and herbs, and sitting with him in their bed. By midnight her jars were all empty or otherwise disturbed, the moonlight catching on an uneven tide of glass, tracing tears that wouldn’t stop, darkening the blood that splattered from him.

“I think it’s passing,” Milena whispered hopefully, tearfully. The man’s lips moved as well, but no sound fell from them.

“It’s going to pass, and we’re going to be fine,” she repeated, cradling his head to her shoulder, shushing into the silence. It took a moment for her to realize the silence had sunk even deeper. She was the only one shaking now.

“Arn-Arnold? Arnie? Come on, open your eyes love. J-just op-open your eyes. Wake up. Wake up! Please!”

### **III.**

Milena gazed upon the sun setting over the harbor, reveling in what could be the last of the autumnal warmth. Storms had been wracking the village relentlessly and sporadically for the past three weeks, each one longer and stronger than the one previous. She knew if it was going to happen it had to be that night.

The summer had been devoid of light. The months passed with Milena condemning herself to her home, relying on Barton to help her maintain her shop. She still took the occasional person

seeking her consultation, but not once did she dare to step foot outside. For a while, he delivered her shipments, brought her meals, and even tended to the home. Finally, as the summer waned, he found himself in the good graces of a young woman he'd met on a delivery, and so he left with her at Milena's soonest assurance that she could manage on her own. She didn't know how to admit she'd miss him. He was the last to leave her. Others had already tired of her perpetual grief and distanced themselves, one at a time. Right before Barton left, Milena found herself completely alone save for the few minutes his weekly delivery report took. She spent most days afterwards wandering the house, often sitting in the bed where Arnold had spent the majority of his last few months. There was a deeply set dip in the mattress, and when she curled into it, she could almost feel him around her.

Arnold's urn sat on top of the map for a long time, collecting dust over the passing weeks. Milena dared not speak aloud in the house when she was alone. She kept waiting for his response. *Yes lovey, we're going to be fine.* She wondered whether he'd get the chance to maybe dust the shelf and the urn when he got the chance... and she laughed. It was abrupt, tight, tinged with tears. *Silly Millie, he can't dust the urn, he's stuck in there!* How morbid the thought... she shook it off with a sigh and a palm to her forehead. For what it was worth, the grief clung less and less heavy as the days passed. She knew it'd continue to exist. But... maybe the worst of it was over. She chuckled at that too. It'd never be over, maybe the worst was yet to come. She only knew one thing for certain: she hated sitting in that house. It drove her mad. She almost ached for that frenzied run on the day he died, how the world felt rolling under her heels, the mule's leathery reins firm in her hands, the blazing energy stirring in her soul, how warm it all

felt before sunset, even the release of that scream, disappearing into time for a single moment. She reached for the urn. She stopped.

Their wedding, while dateless due to the fact that they eloped and married an indeterminable number of weeks apart, was also at the end of a particularly brutal summer. Pirates or something of the sort came and attacked the neighboring village, and so a horde of injured and ill people arrived at the harbor, in one large group numbering by dozens. Milena, at that time being only one of three apothecaries, was overworked and wrung through by her service. Their original honeymoon plans were to sail out, somewhere, anywhere. However, they were deterred and decided to wait a year. Then another. And then another. Eventually, the plan grew bigger, expanding to that map, that damn map and that rumored island on the unexplored partition of the Balsaric Sea. Vandair. Rumored to be lush with life unique and strange, plants in colors unseen, animals in shapes and sizes unknown, the air and land unlike anything ever felt anywhere else. But the plants were what excited her most. There could've been plants quite possibly harboring stronger healing properties than anything she had on hand, plants that could've saved Arnold's life. Life. *Life*, she decided. *I need life*. She lifted the urn gently, cradling it in one arm while carefully taking the map with the other.

She brushed her hair back, as a soft gust of wind frenzied around her, keeping her gaze to the lapping of deep aquamarine waves at the ship's hull. Her belongings were already loaded, and so all she had to do was board. But first, she wanted the moment to breathe in the air, and admire her ship. It was humble, but had a gorgeous interior, and though small compared to most vessels, was all she needed. She hated to admit it, but even that would not have been possible to attain

while Arnold was alive. She detested the feeling of excess money in her hands each time Barton had returned from running her errands, dropping necessities and then extras at her feet with a shrug and an antsy foot. “What’s all this,” she’d ask. “Why, the things you sent for, and a little gift,” he’d responded. Even after Barton’s own handsome share of profit, she’d had too much. She knew she wasn’t charging extra for any of her services, and even if she did, nobody on the harbor could afford to pay higher fees, nor were they especially generous. Widow or not, she was still just a vendor and they still had their own lives to get on with. So, she finally came to accept that the dream never would’ve come to be unless by some miracle Arthur recovered and had been able to return to work.

She bought the boat on a whim. A young couple looking to settle right by the harbor had met her by chance, when the husband arrived at her door searching for a remedy to some minor ill of his wife’s. They conversed quietly, quickly, and without a second to even consider regretting it Milena had offered her home in exchange for their boat. This was shortly after Barton’s departure, and Milena’s announcement to the village that she would no longer be available for her services. Alone as she was, signing the agreement felt powerful. It was like something new surged in her, as if the world was watching now, gently pushing her to go, applauding each new step.

She snapped out of her reverie with tears in her eyes, involuntarily having been rubbing the rein she kept in her coat pocket. Her mule was the hardest to part with. Before sunset, she had made her final stop at the Miry residence. Elisa greeted her with surprise, as if she couldn’t believe her eyes. She was resistant at first, until Milena showed her how beneficial the mule would be for

travel, transportation, and even labor if a plow could be worked onto it. She figured Callum had taken a shine to it as well, his face lighting up when he got a hold of the lead. The farewell was cordial, the yellow flower still a pang in her heart, and the recollection of the Mirys coldness remaining a bitter memory. She didn't expect to be back for a long time, if she returned at all. But for all the peril of pirates and tempestuous seas and the possibility of falling as gravely ill as Arnold had, she still ached to leave.

All things decided, there was nothing in particular to look ahead to aside from her ambitions of Vandair, but nothing behind her to stay for either. She was frightened, thinking suddenly on how alone she'd be out on the sea. She almost wanted to fall back into the dip in the bed, or the shore with her knees digging into the sand and water rising around her. She took a deep breath, shaking the thought away. For now, she only needed to get as far as the next neighboring port, where she planned to work her way up to a bigger vessel, or perhaps into some crew of travelers. Beyond that, she didn't know what to expect. Maybe she'd reach Vandair, or maybe she'd disappear into the sea. But, with the urn beside her, as she set her sails, she grew viscerally aware of one thing: there was no time left to lose.