

Subject: 'The Tide' by Corrin Westwood

Word Count: 1496 words

The morning air was bitter. The type of cold that nips at your fingers and nose. The type of cold that catches in your hair and burrows itself deep, deep down into your bones. The old man pulled his gloves over his hands and stamped his booted feet to warm himself up in preparation for his morning duties. He peered out of his single-pane windows that were coated in ice and gazed over the cliff-side to the endless expanse that was the Sea. He noted that the waves racing in to meet the cliff edge were the colour of gunmetal and frothing at the bit to reach their destination. He was drawn into the rhythmic pull and push of the crashing waves. He felt himself hypnotised by the powerful depths that drew men, women, and children aplenty to their fateful watery graves. One could easily be fooled into thinking that the Sea was merciful. One could convince oneself that she would cradle you and keep you afloat if you were to dive right into her arms. One would be very, very wrong.

The old man was a dear friend of the Sea. Some might say she was his one true love. They had known one another since the day he was born, thrashing, and screeching into the hull of the small rowboat his parents had sailed across the ocean. He was greeted by the Sea as soon as he entered this world and would return to her welcoming arms when it was his time to check-out. He was raised in a stone cottage overlooking the Sea, the very same one he lived in now, at the highest point of the Maretown Cliffs with his Ma and Pa who were both sadly long gone from this world now. The cottage was small, cold, and bare but it was fine enough. It was home and he always had his Sea to gaze upon.

Growing up he had spent hours upon hours down on the beach at the base of the cliffs, catching crabs in the rockpools and skimming stones across the surface of the Sea. He would race home just before dinnertime with the wind in his hair and the sea salt forming a sort of protective layer on his skin. His Ma would greet him with a soft smile and a remark about how he ought to be careful, for one of these days he might end up lured to sea by one of the notorious sea witches that lurked around the Bay, waiting for their next victim. He would chuckle and race to the dinner table to wolf down his serving of sea broth and bread. He loved his Ma and Pa very much. They were both sea folk and taught him everything about the tides and how to navigate the Sea. He knew that if any other lady from the nearby village should come visiting, they would most likely faint from shock when they caught sight of his Ma, legs bare, dress hiked around her thighs, knee deep in the Sea holding a net and a fearsome expression. They would be in awe of his Pa who was a magnificent sailor, he had sailed all across the ocean before settling on the edge of Maretown and he could read the tides like it was second nature.

When the old man was a boy just turned ten, his Pa had taken him out to sea on his treasured rowboat. They went out past the Bay and kept going until the small cottage was barely a dot when he looked back towards the shore. He peered down into the dark blue eyes of the Sea, entranced by the swirling current that rocked them as a mother rocks her child to sleep. He knew then that this force, this mistress, this Sea would forever hold him in her clutches no matter how far he ran, she would always be beckoning. He turned to his Pa and studied his grey flecked hair that was being buffeted every which way by the wind, he noticed the lines that paved his Pa's forehead and the taught muscles in his shoulders as he steered the little rowboat further out to sea.

"Pa, why do you love the sea so much?", he asked. His Pa looked down at the rippling waves that clawed at the little rowboat. *"I do not love the sea, my boy, I fear her, I respect her, I worship her, as you should too. She is a mighty goddess and the provider of all life. You see how she has shaped those cliffs? You see the caves she has created? Those caves are home to a great many creatures. You see the rockpools that you so love to play in? How they are always topped up full of water so that the crabs have a nice, safe place to call home? The Sea does that. She ensures we have rain when our crops need nourishing. She helps man to find new land and feed their families. She keeps us safe. She keeps us alive and when we die, she takes us away to rest."* The boy once again peered into the vast blue sea and tried to comprehend what his Pa had just told him. The rest of their journey was spent in thoughtful, reflective silence and that night the boy dreamed of floating along the bottom of the sea, caressed by the current and at the mercy of the tide.

After that day, the old man went with his Pa on every sail out to sea. He learnt how to navigate and row, how to read the currents and how to record the tides. He came to understand his Pa's reverence for the Sea and developed his own wonder and respect for her. One day he trailed after his Pa towards the boat shed and was caught off guard when his Pa took the path towards the top of the cliff instead of carrying straight on towards the shed. Frowning, the boy hastened his pace to keep up, the air in his lungs turning hot and tight as they climbed the path up and up. It felt like they would soon be in the clouds they were that high up. Just as the boy was sure he was going to collapse if they went any further, the path opened up into a clearing with towering trees standing guard around a vast, shimmering lake with small streams veering off and away from the great body of water. The boy couldn't believe his eyes. It was like entering another world entirely. The noises that he was so accustomed to hearing in his cottage by the sea were muted as if they had walked into a mirror world and had left their home on the other side. Blinking, the boy asked his Pa where they were.

"This is Lake Centurion – the oldest lake known to man. It is said that the first man to ever be created was born from the depths of this lake. I think you are old enough now to learn

about our history, and the history of the Sea. You see, she is not just out 'there' at Land's End, she is also 'here' and 'everywhere'. She is the rivers, and the streams, and the lakes, and the waterfalls. She is the rain; she is the water from the well. She is all-encompassing. I want you to understand this because it is our duty to keep her safe."

The boy was confused, "*How can the most powerful thing on Earth need our protection?!*"

His Pa looked at his son with a grave expression, "*Because, son, man seeks to destroy her. They think they can control and manipulate her into doing their bidding. They steal her creations without paying any tribute. They seek to pump their waste and their rubbish into her, and we cannot allow that to happen. We must fight to protect the Sea, and her rivers, and her lakes. We must teach others to do the same, son, it is our life's purpose."*

The boy looked into his Pa's eyes, those deep, blue eyes, and he nodded.

The old man shivered in the harsh wind as the pebbles cracked underneath his heavy boots. He wound his way down the cliff path and sighed with satisfaction as the beach appeared before him. He surveyed the children with their families wrapped up in their coats and hats, bags of rubbish piled between them as they continued their search for more to collect.

He looked to his right at the netting that they had placed over the pipe outlet to stop litter from entering the Sea. It seemed to be holding steady.

He walked down until the waves lapped at his boots. He bent down and gently placed his hands in the soft, sea foam.

"I will protect you, my Sea", he whispered into the cold, morning air.