

## **Gone with the Tide**

*By Jordan Connelly*

Her legs were on the verge of collapsing, her lungs screamed for more oxygen with every strangled gasp, and her vision had begun to blur with the exertion. But Alice knew she couldn't stop. If she stopped, her life was surely over.

“Alice!” She could hear the disgruntled shouts of the other villagers as her uncle shoved past them, his gait erratic and unsteady. “Alison Carter, you get your scrawny arse back here this instant! Do you hear me?”

This only prompted Alice to run harder, faster; faster than she ever had before. Her red hair billowed behind her like a sail catching wind as her feet pounded against the cobblestone path. She could see it now: the ocean, its steely blue waters restless beneath a slate grey sky. There the path sloped downwards, leading to the port, which so happened to be filled to bursting with sailors preparing to set out on their next voyage.

Alice couldn't allow them to leave without her.

“Alice!” The young girl threw a glance over her shoulder. Her uncle had kept a steady pace but was faltering, his face a hue reminiscent of Alice's hair. Whether it was from the unexpected chase or whiskey, she was unsure.

In her moment of distraction, Alice's foot caught on an upturned stone, sending her sprawling on the path. A heartbeat later a hand found its way into her long red tresses, dragging her backwards.

“Gotcha!” her uncle spat over her screams. “Now shut it, you lil' cretin!” He gave her a firm shake. “I said shut it!”

All around them passersby began to turn, watching the scene with no little fascination. Their expressions portrayed their uncertainty as to whether or not they should intervene. If they had known Alice's intentions--her yearning for the open waters, her desperation to be free of her uncle's household--would they have helped her? Or would they look on her with scorn adorning their brows, telling her what she'd been forced to hear for the past four years: "*You ungrateful little girl. You should count your blessings that you were taken in at all.*"

"Let me go!" Alice struggled against the plump man's hold, twisting and writhing until she caught another glimpse of the sea. Tears blurred her vision, turning the world into a mess of colors. She bit her lip until copper burst in her mouth.

*So close, her heart wailed, You are so close! Don't let him have his way!*

Her uncle grabbed another fistful of her hair and dragged her close to his face; the stench of alcohol on his breath made her gag.

"You brat," he seethed, panting between words. It was clear he had not yet recovered from his run. "This is how you repay your aunt and me, when we have done nothing but show you mercy? When we have *clothed* you and *fed* you and given you *shelter!*" His hand tightened in her hair; Alice winced. "You should be crying with joy that we took you in after your bastard of a father--"

In that moment, something in Alice's heart snapped. She had grown numb to the verbal assaults dealt by her aunt and uncle, but she refused to have her father's name sullied in the mouth of an idle drunkard. "How *dare* you speak of my father that way!" Adrenaline morphed the next few moments into a blur. Alice clawed at her uncle's arms and kicked at any body part she could reach. The unfortunate recipient of her anger happened to be the man's groin.

Her uncle emitted a sharp, strangled cry, bloodshot eyes wide in his red face. His hands flew from Alice's hair to clutch at his pants as he crumpled to his knees.

"You...you lil' wench," he croaked.

"My father was a better man than you could ever hope to be," Alice declared, her miniscule chest heaving for air. "You would do well to remember that, *Uncle*."

Her heart soaring with new found hope, Alice spun on her heel and disappeared into the crowd. The port was closer now; she could smell the salt on the air, fresh fish, men who had not bathed in days, maybe weeks. To others it was a foul odor, but to Alice it was finer than the most expensive of perfumes. The air was heavy with hearty laughter and coarse shouting.

As Alice bobbed and weaved her way through burly sailors shouldering cargo, she couldn't help but feel immeasurably pleased. Her uncle wasn't the brightest of men to begin with, but she had still managed to outsmart and outmaneuver him. The first phase of her plan was complete.

It was now time to find a captain.

Alice swallowed against the bitter taste in her mouth. This was the trickiest part of her plan and the one bearing the greatest risk. Not all sailors were good men--she was not so naive as to believe otherwise. She could already spot a number of them eying her with too great an interest. With her wiry frame and astonishing red hair, she could be sold off, carted away, forced into an unsavory life that almost made Alice physically ill. Yes, she needed to find a captain—but she would not settle for just any sailor. It would have to be a man she could trust. A respectable figure. If she could not find such a man— well, she hadn't really thought that far.

Alice stretched on her toes, but everywhere she looked she was confronted by walls of solid muscle. She could hardly see where the shore ended and the sea began anymore, only the massive hulls of ships, their masts piercing the bruised sky above.

She wandered closer to the ships, searching for what her young mind believed to be a captain-ly figure. Perhaps an older gentleman, garbed in fine clothing, his black boots polished to shining perfection. His posture would be erect and he'd give off an aura of unquestionable authority, always ready to give the order to set sail.

An image came to mind then, of a man disembarking his ship with all the regality of a king exiting his palace walls. A shock of coppery hair that burned in the light of early dawn. The smell of parchment on an old cloak.

Alice shook herself from the reverie. After her father's last departure, she would visit the harbor every day to await his return. By the end of the second month, Alice had forced herself to face the fact he wouldn't be coming home. She hadn't allowed herself to visit the harbor since.

Perhaps that was for the best.

"Oi, you. Ain't you a bit young to be wanderin' the harbor by yerself?"

A strong hand found its way to her shoulder. To Alice, this was an obvious ploy by a friend of her uncle sent to chase her. Red-hot panic imprinted itself upon her heart like a brand as she whirled on her heel, steeling her resolve.

"I'm sorry," he said, catching sight of her stricken expression, "I didn't mean to startle ya. Are ya lost? Where're yer parents?"

Alice eyed him warily. The man was older, at least in his mid-forties, barrel-chested with broad shoulders. Wrinkles about the eyes and mouth adorned his sun-browned skin, and his black hair was streaked through with silver, giving him the scruffy appearance of a weathered sailor. What struck Alice, however, were his eyes: they were the palest of blues and soft as violets. She took to him instantly.

Alice inhaled deeply. "I haven't got any parents," she replied. As she spoke she pushed back her shoulders and lifted her chin defiantly.

The man's lips stretched into a grin; his wrinkles deepened. "You don't, eh?" he inquired. With a soft grunt, he dropped into a crouch, enabling him to look up into Alice's stern face. "Then what's a lil' lass like you doing in this big port all by yerself?"

"I've come to join a crew."

The man raised an eyebrow. "Whatever for?"

"I want to be a sailor," Alice declared, "and sail the high seas like my father once did."

"Like yer father," the man echoed. Alice puffed out her cheeks indignantly.

"Yes."

The man eyed her once more. "He must've been a great sailor, then, to inspire ya so." He paused. "Tell me, lass," he said eventually, "what's yer name?"

"Alison Carter. But you may call me Alice."

"Of course, Miss Alice. If that's the case, then you can call me Cap'n Walsh."

Alice sucked in a sharp breath. "You're a captain?"

"Indeed I am."

She eyed Walsh from head to toe. His face radiated the dependability every captain should have, but his clothes were ragged and worn from extended periods at sea. She eyed his scuffed boots with distaste.

"You don't look much like a captain," she said after another moment of inspection.

"And yer an expert on the subject?"

Alice wasn't sure how to respond to that.

"How old are ya, Miss Alice?"

“Eleven. But I’ll turn twelve by the end of next month,” she hastened to add.

Walsh grinned at her. “Then ya just haven’t met enough cap’ns yet. I assure you that I happen t’ have my own crew on my own ship.” He twisted slightly, pointing over his shoulder. Anchored in the port behind them was a large ship with a decidedly beaten blue hull. Its sails had been drawn in, and a variety of men dashed to and fro on deck.

“Her name’s *Saoirse*,” Walsh said proudly, noticing how Alice’s jaw dropped upon sight of the sailing vessel. “Had ‘er specially built m’self by only the finest shipwrights.”

Alice’s words left her as a whisper. “She’s beautiful.”

“Glad ya think so, too. So, Miss Alice.” Alice returned her attention to the captain, honey irises meeting powdered blue. “Ya say yer lookin’ for a crew?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Whaddya have to offer?” Walsh leaned back on his haunches and made a point of looking Alice up and down. “When I look at ya, all I see is a scrawny lil’ girl who hasn’t even grown into her ears yet.” He laughed as Alice’s hands flew up to the sides of her face.

“I-I can work,” she stammered. She could already feel the heat creeping up her neck, staining her skin crimson. “I can help in the kitchen and mop the deck, do laundry—“

“Any man can do those things.”

“But I’d make it easier,” Alice insisted. “I’ve done housework all my life, you know. And I spend whatever free time I have in the port. I’m sure I know how to tie the basic knots and how to raise the sails.”

“And what about fighting? Pirates are nasty, lil’ lass. Ya’d just be a liability.”

“I’ll learn. I’d be the greatest sailor you’ve ever seen, just watch.” Alice bit her bottom lip, still sore from where she had punctured the skin earlier. “Please,” she whispered.

The two stood in the middle of the bustling port, eyes locked in a silent battle of wits. Walsh's eyes darted across her face, taking in the desperate pucker of her brow to the way her fingers curled in the fabric of her trousers.

"Ya think you've got what it takes?" he inquired at last.

"I know I do."

Walsh laughed heartily. The mere gesture brought an uncertain grin to Alice's lips.

"I like yer spunk, lass." Walsh scratched his beard and nodded in the direction of *Saoirse*.

"Come along, then."

Alice found she'd been paralyzed by the captain's simple words. "I-I beg your pardon?"

Walsh paused, studying her over his shoulder. "Yer on my crew now," he stated, one brow raised and mirth dancing in his eyes. "Now pick up the pace; I don't tolerate slackers on my ship."

Alice remained stunned motionless a moment longer. She had spent years staring out over the vast waters of the sea, rippling beneath the moon and stars. *What would it be like, she'd wonder, to put this wretched place behind me and see the world?*

Now, after years of wishing and watching and waiting, she had been handed the opportunity to find out.

Alice lurched into motion, dashing to keep up with Walsh's long strides.

"Yes, sir!"