

Series Title: Following Tides
Chapter Number: Prologue
“Beginnings”
Author: D. Sanders

=====

Twenty-four winters long in life, though seemingly much older for the wisdom and power contained within the eyes and spirit of the man who stood proud at the stern of his Ship “the Crimson Lady”, Vangel, son of Alexandre, son of Dmitri, son of Anastas, the seventh son of a seventh son, of a seventh son. Sometimes called the “StormBringer”, sometimes known as Captain Vangel DarkTide, always known to those close to him as simply Van, born upon the sea to live and die upon her beauty and bounty.

Van, like his forefathers, had traveled the oceans from the cold waters of the north and far south to the warm, hurricane ridden tropical east and west along the planets equator. Many eons ago, the planet once boasted large continents, and lands far and wide that the sea had reclaimed much of when the polar ice caps had melted and the sea level had risen to reclaim the low-lying lands. Only sparse Islands remained of once vast continents, and around those islands, man made dwellings like water lilies of wood and iron, the floating cities congregated. No one actually lived on the precious areas of Dry Land; those were cultivated with tender care for food and fresh water.

Between these aquatic cities lay vast leagues of deep water, teeming with marine life, danger and piracy.

Van, like his forefathers was a pirate of pirates. Taking only from the strong and leaving the weakened remains of humanity to struggle on in survival untouched. Purging them of danger, one pirate at a time, business for Van was always booming. The environment bred tyrants like stagnant ponds bred mosquito larvae.

“The Crimson Lady” was a vast and swift galleon. Red Sails flapped in the wind as her crew scuttled about their daily duties. “The Crimson Lady” held a hundred crewmen and women in her cabins tucked in her great belly. She had four full decks below. The lowest level held the bilge pumps, the armory, the water distillation machinery, and several, massive storage holds. The Second level was where the livestock of goats and pigs were kept. High windows, just above sea level, let in light, and because both species of animal could live on other foodstuffs beyond grains and grasses, the Crew of “the Crimson Lady”, had meat and milk for health.

A greenhouse of sorts was also on this level, where the cultivators grew tuberous root vegetables in row after carefully tended row. Long boxes of carefully packed and fertilized earth held the staples of the crew’s diet. Potatoes, carrots, turnips, beets, onions and radishes, anything that grew well underground with limited light was grown down below decks. The third level was where the main crew cabins were and each man had his own small, but private cabin to call his own. In the center was the galley and communal room where off duty sailors played cards, and shared companionship and frivolity. There was a separate bathing facility, enough for twenty men at a time to take care of personal hygiene.

Captain Van was adamant his crew be clean for the very simple fact that filth promoted illness, and illness in close quarters was not a welcome bedfellow, especially when the last healer on the Crew had finally succumbed to old age and passed a few months earlier. Van had not yet found a replacement and seeing as water was abundant, the distillation machinery could produce five hundred gallons of fresh water daily so they were never short of good clean water, and soap was never short on supply.

The fourth level held the cabins of the senior crew and those who had partnered each other or had children. The Captain's cabin had windows that spanned the aft and looked upon the wake of water the ship left behind her. It was a large, luxurious cabin. Complete with separate sitting room, bathing chamber and bedroom. The Healer's cabin, now standing empty and the first mate's cabins were closet to the captain's quarter's from there, following rank order the rest of the cabins spread out from there, the remaining space was for the most precious cargo storage rooms for food and other vital necessities that could not be grown, processed or manufactured on board filled the last level below decks.

There were two open-air decks above these four. The first deck was open on all sides with just pillars and railings to support the upper deck and held nothing but a vast greenhouse from prow to stern. The main upper deck floor was made of glass so that natural light fell to the deck below. On any normal ship this would seem folly, and that would be true had the captain of that ship been a normal man. Captain Van was no ordinary man; he was called "the StormBringer" for a reason.

He could call the winds, he could tame a tempest, and he could bring rain to a parched quiet island. He was the seventh son, of a seventh son, of a seventh son. Magic was as part of his being as breathing. The enchanted glass floor would never break, not even if the mast somehow splintered and fell would the surface so much as crack. Nor would a man slip and fall, he could walk as easily across the glass bottom as he could if he walked across the wooden earthy floors of the other decks.

Unless of course he was naturally clumsy in rough weather. Not even enchanted glass could stop a man falling ass over tip over his own two feet.

The spell Van had wrought over his ship had taken years. Protections built one on top of the other to keep his crew safe. Fire would not burn the timbers, seams would not break in even the coldest of waters, the sails would never tear, the ropes never fray, and the nets never fail to catch. It had taken long labors to the point of exhaustion over several years, but these spells would remain, even if Van lost his life. They were imbedded into the vary natures of the objects he had wrought them upon. Only a wizard stronger than himself, and only one who knew the magic that had been called to make the spells, could even hope to unweave them. And take just as long to undue as they had taken to build.

"The Crimson Lady" would never sink so long as she had men in her belly to provide for.

The main deck held the chicken coops for poultry and eggs, the sheep who provided wool and mutton, and the workshops, from woodworking, to the smithy, to the textiles and weavers. The star watchers had an observation room and lookout at the top of the mast, and the First Mate and his crew were hard at work piloting "the Crimson Lady" to where Van ordered her to go. She was a virtual floating and self-sufficient city in and of herself.

The greenhouse deck was one of Van's favorite retreats. He would sit among the grapevines and smell the sweet tang of fruit. His magic keeping them always in bloom. There were blossoms next to ripe fruit on all the vines. The potted fruit trees were arranged along the center. Apples, pears, oranges, lemons, limes, cherries, plums, peaches, apricots and figs. All dwarfed in size, but always in fruit. The grapevines grew along the railings on either side. Up the pillars string beans and peas trailed. Potted tomato bushes hung low with their bounty, squash trailed along the floor and pumpkins like large boulders grew large enough to sit on. In dark corners, mushrooms were cultivated, and a solitary avocado tree with it's dark green, teardrop shaped fruit sat at the stern, welcoming the sun. Any man was free to come to the greenhouse deck whenever he wished and eat his fill. A hungry man was a discontented man. Van was no fool. He treated his men like the treasures they were. They were loyal, hardworking warriors, and he valued each and every one.

From the littlest kitchen boys to his first mate. He knew all their names, their ranks, their faces and even their favorite foods.

He had gotten the avocado tree for Mischa, the ten-year-old son of Ivana, his head cook. The lad was currently finishing one and polishing the pit on his shirt and placing it in the bucket that collected the seeds. Nothing went to waste onboard the Crimson Lady, and Mischa waved a happy salute to Van, he waved in return as the lad scampered back off to his duty helping his mother in the galley.

Workers turned soil and watered plants all around Van as he plucked a pear and sat down on one of the pumpkins to eat it as he watched the horizon and the setting sun. Tomorrow would be a busy day for all. His scrying mirror had shown him that by midmorning they would run across the pirate ship "the Wraith" if they headed due east.

Captain Yvan was a cruel tyrant and Van had been trying to catch him going on three years. Ever since he'd come upon the wreckage of a small craft with just two survivors, Ivana and Mischa, they'd been half dead when his men pulled them aboard.

Their entire family wiped out and everything taken, down to the last fishing net.

Van despised men like Yvan. He raped the innocent, killed the weak, and lived off the backs of slave conscripted labor.

Van also chased this man for quite a different reason. Every time Van found "The Wraith" in his scrying mirror, HIS image appeared.

Not Yvan, Yvan was nearing fifty winters and the first time Van had seen the image he was barely a boy of fifteen winters and then he had seen a child near ten. Tawny blond with jade colored eyes.

Every time the boy returned he as a little older, Van knew this boy had to be a crewman of some sort on Yvan's ship. Every image made Van ill to look upon. The lad was beaten, tortured, starved and his eyes were filled with resignation to a hollow fate. Yet, despite it all, strong, defiant, proud and beautiful.

Van had fallen in love years ago with this boy, turned handsome youth in his mirror. He would save him tomorrow if he could and the gods of the winds and seas willing.

He would need all his strength, Yvan was no easy foe, and Van's magic would take a beating. So Van finished his rounds of his men, took his meal in the galley over beer with the blacksmith. Played a few slight of hand tricks for Mischa before taking his leave and finding his bed for the night.

Ilya was always cold it seemed and tonight was no different from the last where he curled up in a coil of rope in the storage hold. A dirty cup of water in his hands and a leftover stew he had managed to scrape off the plates before he washed them.

That too was stone cold but it was food and he needed it. He'd spent all afternoon expending his energies healing a pair of idiots who'd gotten into a drunken brawl that turned knife fight. Ilya's tasks on board "the Wraith" were simple. Do as he was told or be beaten. Whether it was washing dishes, mending nets, or healing fools.

Ilya was born in a vast floating city that surrounded a small island where his mother grew grain and then milled it into flour. His aunt grew cane and made sugar. His grandmother had been a great healer and it was from her blood his gifts came.

It was a calling, a need. He could not ignore suffering or pain, physical, mental or otherwise. Just like his grandmother.

His fatal mistake at a tender nine years old had been to walk past a great hulk of a man and before he could think, reached out and healed the man's hand that had been cut from netting.

Yvan had been that man. He'd had his men grab Ilya and that was the last Ilya had seen of his family ten long winters hence.

If he refused to heal even the most minor of scrapes, he was denied rations and given the lash.

He'd stopped complaining about wasted magic fairly quickly. Oh how his grandmother would be furious. She'd always said, "A fool learns his lessons if given time to properly feel the error of his ways. And the gift is there for those with the greatest need first, not to those who would buy it's favors and force it's use for trivial matters."

Ilya suspected Grandmother had met Yvan before and had come up with that saying. Or at least a butcher akin to the likes of him.

Ilya finished his sparse meal and pulled the spare netting, still full of the odors of salt and fish, over him as a makeshift blanket and tried to get comfortable to steal a few hours of sleep before Yvan found him and put him to work again.

The dream came again. The Same Dream that had come to him repeatedly over the past decade.

Fog was thick, and one could barely see one's hand before one's face as Ilya stumbled through the battle taking place on the upper deck of "the Wraith."

He was sobbing with the pain of death, his gift crying out to those in need all around him. Men clawing at his legs pulling him down. He fell over a man with an arrow standing like a sentinel of death out of his right eye. His left no longer with sight.

He fell forward into the arms of a Dark Angel. He was tall, with long waves of raven black hair and eyes the color of the stormy sky. The cold Grayish blue color of his eyes at odds with the warmth they held behind them. The Handsome young Angel smiled at him, and held open his arms in welcome.

Ilya fell into them and a blanket of protection encased him as those arms enfolded him against a strong warm chest. The noise of the battle faded away, no sounds of screaming, no clash of metal on metal, stillness like the eye of a hurricane fell upon him and the whisper of a baritone in his ears made him shiver in his sleep.

"At last I found you. Fear no more, hate no longer, peace be with you now and always, Golden keeper of my soul." A kiss was placed on his temple and the warmth spread throughout him like the sun breaking over the eastern horizon. He felt alive and on fire and he trembled with anticipation still wrapped in warm arms.

Ilya always jolted into wakefulness here with a groan of disappointment. Whether he was dreaming about his own death or not, Ilya could never deny the effect the man in his dreams had on him. He was always in a cold sweat and painfully aroused.

"They say when Death comes, it's as welcome as a lover I suppose. I fear it not if that is my reward." Ilya said to the heaven's as he tried again in vain to go back to sleep.

He was just drifting off when the alarm sounded and Ilya rushed up the stairs to the main deck. A Thick fog was rolling in from the west, a huge white bank of it and moving fast.

"All Hands on Deck! This is no natural fog! To arms men!" The first mate called and men rushed to their swords and their bows.

Ilya stared wide-eyed where he wedged himself into a corner. He was no fighter; he'd like as not chop off his own head if he held a sword and shoot his own men if given a bow. His work always came after the fighting, and he swallowed the bile rising in his throat.

The men's anxiety was already making him sick, by nightfall he'd be purging over the railing until he passed out himself. Being a healer was a curse almost as much as a blessing. He felt other's pain, sorrow, anxiety and fear. He ignored them while he worked but once the work was done, after absorbing their foul effects all day he'd have to purge them the only way he knew how and that was to allow the sickness to wash through him in a physical manifestation.

And having only a small portion of stew in his stomach, he'd feel miserable tonight with the dry heaves no doubt. So he hunkered down and tried to close his eyes to calm himself and shut out the emotions around him and waited until he was needed.

Series Title: Following Tides
Chapter Number: One
“Coming Home”
Author: D. Sanders

=====

The fog had rolled over “the Wraith” in waves and then out of the confusion men erupted, spilling over the railings in battle cries and inducing panic. Ilya watched in fascinated horror, it was just like his dreams. This was his dying day, he knew his torment was over at last and he greeted his death with a contentment that swelled up from within. His nightmare would soon be at an end and his rest would come to his willing breast.

Forced from his hiding place he stumbled half in trance across the deck. The fog parted and standing on the railing was the Dark Angel himself, holding his arms wide in enchantment as he directed the fog and lightening fell from his fingertips. Ilya was sobbing with joy as he stumbled toward him and the Dark Angel turned and the lightening stopped and he jumped from the railing to enfold Ilya in his arms.

“At last I found you. Fear no more, hate no longer, peace be with you now and always, Golden keeper of my soul.” A kiss was placed on his temple and the warmth spread throughout him like the sun breaking over the eastern horizon. He felt alive and on fire and he trembled with anticipation still wrapped in warm arms.

“Dark Angel, my dreams told me of you. Take me, I come to death willingly.” Ilya shuddered breathing in the scent of the Dark Angel who held him tightly. He smelled of spiced wine, sandalwood and the sea. Strong arms held him close, and in Ilya’s vision he saw that the left arm of his beloved angel was bleeding. Strange he thought in the back of his befuddled mind, that his angel bled as a man, but Ilya and blood called to one another and instinct took over and Ilya laid his hand on the arrow gash wound and it closed and faded.

“The only death you will see my love is that of this life you’ve known.” Van sighed, his whole body alive with joy at having this youth walk so assuredly and willingly into his arms as if he’d known, just as Van had known, they were each a part of something that made a complete whole. Then the lad laid his hand on the shallow wound on Van’s arm and Van gasped as magic touched and flowed over and into him, like a warm, bright caress of a lover on his senses. This boy, barely a man was a healer, and a healer unlike any Van had ever known.

This young man’s inner magic was breathtakingly beautiful and soft and it electrified Van’s senses as much as it soothed and comforted. “Godstruth!” Van had to blink away the sensation he had wanted to fall headlong into. The youth was in a haze, a healer’s instinctive trance, it was no wonder Van felt intoxicated and the youth so disassociated from reality. This battle chaos would make even the strongest healer shut down in confusion.

“Petr!! Quick!” Van called his First Mate and literally scooped up the dazed youth and placed him in the large man’s arms.

“Quickly, take him to my cabin and shut the door. It will shield him from this nightmare. No healer can withstand such close combat on their senses. Get Ivana to tend him, he’ll be sick soon enough, he’ll need food enough in him to lose later.” Here Van laid another kiss to Ilya’s forehead. “You’ll suffer no more, I promise you love.”

“Aye Van. Poor lad, just you hold on.” Petr said scrambling back over the gangplanks that “The Crimson Lady” had thrown out in order to board “the Wraith.” Ivana saw Petr dash back out of the fog and she followed him seeing what he carried.

“Hurry Lass, get him food, we got a healer here.” Petr said dashing down to the first level towards Van’s cabin.

“Mercy! Gods help him! Who keeps a healer on deck during a battle?” Ivana gasped dragging Mischa behind her and piling him with wineskins, bread, cold meats and cheese on a tray.

“Take those to him love. I’ll bring him some of the tea old healer Rukia used.” Mischa nodded and Petr was just setting a confused Ilya in bed and as the door shut he seemed to regain a little of his senses.

“What on? Where?” Ilya gasped as the wine was pressed into his hands.

“Questions later young sir. Captain’s orders. Drink and eat and stay in here until after.” Petr said as Ivana rushed in with tea.

“Drink this first dear. It’ll help block the emotions and pain from up above. Mercy me what idiot keeps a healer up in the middle of that sort of mess? Are they trying to drive you mad and hurt you? A lot of good you’d do them if your mind broke to bits under stress!” She said sitting beside the youth in Van’s bed.

He blinked still confused but did as told and sighed as he drained the cup. Immediately feeling less befuddled and clearer witted. “What is that?”

“Spelled Tea. Van made it for our last healer. It keeps you from getting lost in the chaos out there. It will help ease the purging later.” She said patting his knee and then reaching up to grab his chin and look at his face.

“Handsome indeed. Too thin but that’s nothing a few good meals down you won’t cure. Godstruth, but Van was right. He knew he’d find you today and mores the better I say if that’s how that cursed lot treated a healer. Healers are more precious than even fresh water in these times. And such a young, handsome one too. Perhaps Van will be happy at last, chased your image for years he has.”

“Who’s Van?” Ilya asked trying to disentangle himself from his remaining confusion.

“He be the Captain of “the Crimson Lady” here. Right concerned about you he’s been for damn near ten years. You’ve always been just out of his reach you have. Go on sunshine eat up. You can hear and eat at the same time.” Ivana smiled as She handed Ilya a slice of bread and cheese.

“I’m on “The Crimson Lady”!” Ilya gasped, the one ship Yvan feared the most! Yvan was doomed.

“Aye, fastest and safest ship on the seas. Welcome aboard son.” Petr grinned and Ilya deflated into soft pillows in sheer overwhelmed wonderment. He’d always longed to be aboard one of the red sailed ships, the stories were everywhere. Men like Yvan feared them all, and common folk revered the red sails like floating salvation.

“I’m so confused.” Ilya’s voice was full of confusion and suppressed hope.

“I thought you might be.” Came a voice from the door and the Dark Angel was there, smiling. Ilya brightened and fell into those stormy eyes. “Petr, you’re needed above now. I’ll take over here.”

Van crossed the floor and Ivana smirked as she took Mischa’s hand and left Van alone with the healer youth. Van took up her vacated place on the edge of the bed and reached out and took Ilya’s hand as he sat. Ilya clasped back afraid to let go, afraid this wonderful spell would break. His dream was real, and far better than he’d ever dared hope.

“Dreamed of me have you?” Van asked, an eyebrow quirked in query. Ilya flushed and nodded.

“Aye.”

“Then we’re even. Seen you many times myself when I scry.”

“Ah.” Ilya said not having a clue what ‘scry’ meant, but assumed it was magic. Yvan didn’t hold with wizards and their ilk.

“You’ve no idea what that is do you?” Van chuckled and Ilya smiled shyly and shook his head.

“I thought as not. Yvan does not care much for my methods. Nor I his. Let us just say I can see things when I seek them. I’ve seen you many times. Pray tell me your name.”

“Ilya.”

Van leaned close and looked deeply into large green eyes. “Ilya, long have I hoped to have you here with me. Pray tell me you’ll stay by my side.”

“I always went to you in my dreams though I knew not why. I feel I will, nay, I MUST follow where you take me sir.” Ilya said honestly from his heart which pounded with joyful hope swelling in his chest.

“Not sir. Never sir. Van, call me Van.”

“Van.” Ilya smiled and met Van’s gaze equally and they were both lost.

“I’ve Loved you so very, very long.” Van breathed leaning closer and Ilya’s eyes fluttered shut as if still in his dream.

“And I you in my Dreams.” Ilya replied and fell headlong into heaven as Van’s lips pressed against his own and Ilya’s parted in joy. His dream lover was real, the love was real, he cried for sheer joy.

“Ilya, my dear love. Weep no more.” Van held him close, silent tears of his own falling down his cheeks as he sat up and wiped Ilya’s cheeks. “Eat now if you can, I know healers weaknesses and you will be in much need for a full belly later. It’s easier to purge something than nothing.”

“Aye. I will. You are right.” Ilya said shaking off the moment to attend to his body. Van poured them both wine.

“We have minor injuries, your men were not quite so lucky. We do try to do less killing, sometimes it is not so easy.” Van sighed, he never liked killing.

“With Yvan’s lot? They kill themselves like as not. It is kill or be killed with them. You could do no more, and they have done worse.”

“I’ve no doubt of that. But enough talk of matters neither of us can change. Restore yourself my love. I will aide you above when you feel you can take a turn with the wounded.”

“I will finish this glass and we may go. I’ve healed with less.”

"No doubt of that either. No more Ilya."

"You always told me that in my dreams. I believe you my Dark Angel."

Van laughed. "Dark Angel?"

"It is what I always called you in my Dreams."

"I shall have to break that image you have of me." Van winked with a chuckle and held out a hand to help Ilya rise. "Shall we?"

"Aye." Ilya smiled and held Van's hand as they made their way above decks together hand in hand, fingers entwined.

The moment they reached the upper deck, Ilya, like every other healer Van had known seemed to go into an ordered trance. His gifts surging to the surface where he glowed with a golden hue across his sun darkened skin.

His bare chest throbbed like a heartbeat of inner strength as he walked on silent bare feet directly toward the most severely injured. Ilya knelt beside the man with a large gash in his side and just closed his eyes as his hands pressed against the wound.

"Mercy!" The man gasped in almost orgasmic wonder. His eyes wide as Ilya worked. "It's like... the old man never healed like this!"

Van smiled over Ilya's shoulder. "I know. A lover's touch he has. Shall I fetch your wife?" Van asked with a saucy knowing wink as Ilya leaned back, the wound gone.

"Boy, bottle that gift and you'll make hefty profit." The man laughed and Ilya blushed but smiled.

"I can't help it. Sorry."

"Don't be daft lad! Marvelous, I feel twenty again." The man clapped Ilya's shoulder. "Suppose that be close to your soft years I'd reckon."

"Aye, Twenty summers in a few more moons." Ilya said standing and moving to his next patient, Van right behind him to offer support when he grew tired.

Everyone Ilya touched repeated their amazement as he touched and healed them. A few finding their mates and disappearing quickly, the effects Ilya left behind in his wake were potent indeed.

He then came to the prisoners, his former shipmates. Here he paled. "Traitorous Dog! Healing them first? Where's your loyalty?" Several men shouted in anger.

"Where's your honor of a man of his gifts? Abuse your good fortune and lose it. Where was your appreciation of him when it mattered? I think you should be asking yourselves that first. He is not and was never obligated to help you, but he comes still to your aid does he not?" Van retorted taking Ilya's elbow and lending support to failing magical stores while he tended the bound prisoners. Among them was Yvan. Ilya's hands trembled as he healed his minor wounds.

"A curse upon you boy. You'll rue this day you leave my good graces."

“Your good graces never kept me from hunger, your rutting dogs of men, or the lash. Yours and theirs. If that is ‘good graces’, I think I shall take my chances with your curse.” Ilya replied, his eyes and voice steady and cold as he tended Yvan’s injuries.

“You had food and shelter, what more would a man want? Ungrateful!”

“I had food if I could salvage any from the dirty dishes. I had a coil of rope to sleep in. What more could a man want? How about the family you took him from? I never hungered with them, never felt the lash and I had shelter. You gave me far worse and demanded far more. Yes, I am ungrateful to you. I am more than grateful to this blessed crew who freed me from you.” Ilya said finishing and turning away to the next patient. Unshed tears in his eyes, he was proud, he would never shed them and show his deeply rooted pain and sorrow in front of Yvan or his men.

Van smiled, loving this creature and his strength and bravery more and more every passing moment.

Once the wounded were tended and the dead given to the sea Van had the main mast of “the Wraith” cut leaving only the minor sails in tact. They were crippled but not handicapped enough where it was be a given death sentence. They left the food and water on board for the crew’s survival, but emptied the coffers of all tradable valuables and then set sail. It would be a long time before Yvan bothered them again, starting from scratch as he was with just his ship and men to his name. That was if his men didn’t kill him first.

Val sat by Ilya at the aft of the upper deck where he had indeed lost what little sustenance he had in his stomach and then sat on shaky legs on a nearby barrel. “Did your healer go through this too? Or am I just cursed?”

Van laughed handing Ilya a strip of damp cloth to wash his face and wipe his mouth with. “All healers I know must purge what they swallow metaphorically. You can only absorb and disperse so much disease and pain before it makes you ill too. Drink the tea I make and you’ll not suffer so badly. It won’t stop the purging, but it does make it less harrowing and easier to bear later.”

“I do hope so. I feel like I’ve been swallowing half the ocean at the moment.” Ilya sighed tipping his head back and closing his eyes. He felt a hand in his hair and he opened his eyes to look up at Van standing beside him.

“You do look green, you should eat, and it will help settle your empty stomach. Come on.” Van took Ilya’s hand and led him to the lower deck to the Greenhouse.

“S’truth! I heard but nary believed! Eden on the waves!” Ilya gasped as Van led him down the stairs.

“Aye, and open to all. Whenever you are hungry or just simply desire it, make welcome of all that is here. That is what it is here for.” Van smiled at Ilya’s wide-eyed, childlike expression of wonder.

“I don’t even know what most of this even is, let alone what it tastes like. Unless it’s a turnip. I’ve had plenty of those in my time.”

“Those are grown on another level. Those don’t need as much sunlight. I never cared much for them myself, but they are good for a diet occasionally.” Van grinned, plucking a plum and handing it to Ilya.

“What’s this called then?”

“A Plum. It’s sweet, it’ll be nice to clear out the aftermath of your purging which I know is making your mouth feel like a bilge pump currently.”

“Aye to that.” Ilya chuckled and took a bite. The juice he wasn’t expecting dribbled down his hand and chin as his eyes rolled in ecstasy.

“Nice isn’t it?”

“S’truth! Never had the like in my life I haven’t. My aunt used to give me sugarcane to chew as a boy, but not as sweet in that state before it’s been refined. Only sweet I had before. If you need to be finding me, I can wager you’ll be finding me here!” Ilya laughed a rich, bright tenor.

“Same here. I love the greenhouse gardens, it’s peaceful here.”

“Aye, warm with life growing all over. Even a healer can feel that kind of aura.”

“Aye, so I suspected.” Van smiled looking over Ilya as he scanned the garden with his eyes. He wore tattered half legged breeches, bare to the knee and bare to the navel. His skin was dark from the sun, and his blond hair was streaked with white from its bleaching rays. His eyes alive with magic and wonder. He was beautiful from the ends of his hair to the tips of his toes, an aspect of the sun itself. When he turned to smile at Van, Van knew he’d never tire of that sight.

A bell rang and it made Ilya jump. “What’s that?”

“That would be Mischa ringing the bell for the meal. We usually have it mid-day, we were a bit busy this morning so we’re eating a bit late today.” Van winked offering his arm to Ilya. “Shall I show you where our galley is?”

“Lead on.” Ilya smiled taking Van’s arm as they headed down to the galley on the third level.

Ivana was immediately at Ilya’s side chattering happily. “Now you sit right down lad.” Ivana practically shoved him onto the end of a bench as Van sat opposite amused. There was no rank order in the galley, you sat where there was room and helped yourself from the bowls on all the tables. Ivana was piling a plate to overflowing and thrusting it under Ilya’s nose.

“You tuck into that sunshine. I know healers get powerful hungry after a purging, so start on but save room for pie. Olga made her rhubarb pie, and I know young boys I do.” Ivana winked and Ilya liked her immediately and just did as he was told.

Petr joined them at the table as the bowls got passed around and everyone took a meal in shifts. Petr joked amicably but ate in a hurry, his job was up top and he wanted to get back to work so his pilots could get a break and eat too. “Wonderful to have you on board Ilya lad. I feel a might safer knowing we got a healer on board again. You need anything lad, you just tell old Petr here.” He said with a wink as he headed back off to work.

“Amazing. What a difference.” Ilya said and Van nodded.

“Aye. We’re a family here Ilya. Better to work together when you can enjoy your work and your bedfellows. We don’t tolerate trifles. Any man wants to leave he can, I don’t conscript sailors.”

“Any man daft enough to WANT to leave, isn’t right in the head methinks. Such a wonderful crew. Me mam used ta say that the ships with red sails were touched by the gods themselves. I remember meeting one once, right afore I got taken by Yvan. “The Handmaiden”. She had red sails too. Mam sold a lot of flour to that one, and they paid her more than she asked.”

“Ah, “The Handmaiden” belongs to my Father. I know her well. I was born on that ship.” Van said closing his eyes in fondness.

“Fascinating! Not many red sails though. I only saw the one, but heard of the others. Yvan didn’t dare messing with ‘em. No wonder.”

“The red sails are my family’s trademarks in a manner of speaking. There are actually more than you think. My grandfather Dmitri still sails “the Lark”, my father “the Handmaiden.” And I have six uncles, five cousins, six brothers and two sisters with their own ships. We all run red sails.”

“S’truth! Big enough family?”

“Aye, it’s why we all need our own ships. We spread like fungus.” Van chuckled and winked and grabbed a flask of wine and once more offered his arm to Ilya. “Up for a tour, or would you like to rest a while?”

“I’m getting a little tired, but not so tired I don’t want to see this lovely lady stem ta stern.” Ilya grinned taking Van’s arm.

“Then let me show you around your new home.”

Seeing a vessel you loved through the eyes of another was like seeing it brand new all over again. Van was having as much fun showing Ilya his ship as Ilya was having exploring it. Friendly greetings from the crew followed them throughout the tour and Ilya felt awash in kinship he hadn’t known in years. He felt like a long lost son coming home to his family again.

The children, too small for heavy labor still scuttled about running odd chores or just simply playing with each other. Ilya found himself the center of a game of tag for a moment while four small boys chased each other around his legs, none of them over five years old. The smallest, a red haired imp that greatly resembled the big and burly and equally redheaded First Mate, Petr.

“That’s Gregori, Petr’s grandson.”

“I noticed the resemblance.” Ilya chuckled as the group raced off, replaced by the ten year old Mischa that Ilya had met briefly earlier.

“Mam was lookin’ for ya Van sir. She said ta tell ya not to forget Master Ilya’s tea. She sent a bag of it and said to make sure he drank some afore bed.” Mischa grinned handing the bag of dried leaves to Van.

“I hadn’t forgotten, but thank her for saving me a trip to the galley.” Van winked pocketing the tea as Mischa raced off again with a grin.

“Ivana reminds me of my mam.” Ilya chuckled and Van nodded.

“Aye, and mine. I’m surprised she doesn’t send a note to remind me to brush my teeth at night.” Van said with a laugh in his voice as they climbed the stairs back onto the Greenhouse deck, there they settled down at the prow to watch the waves with the wind in their faces and shared the skin of wine Van had slung over his shoulder during the tour. The sun was setting on the western horizon making the waves turn a brilliant golden edged red and orange. Ilya closed his eyes and turned his face to the wind.

“If I’m dreaming, I hope never to wake.” He sighed as Van moved behind him where they sat on the deck, Ilya leaning back against his chest.

“Aye. Me too.” Van returned the sentiment as silence fell between them and they took peaceful comfort in the simplicity of each other’s presence. It was as natural as breathing. Everything fell into brilliant clarity and purpose.

They sat that way for a long while, until the sun finally vanished beneath the horizon and the moon cast her glow on them.

Van seemed to shimmer in the moonlight. Whereas Ilya was the color of midday sunshine. Van was midnight mystery. His dark raven black hair hung straight and long down to the middle of his back. Tied at the nape of his neck with a black silk scarf, the strands waved in the wind and caught the light and cast off blue shadows from its rich depths. His skin was pale against Ilya’s like moonshine and cream, his stormy eyes were clear and reflecting the soft light of the night. He wore a loose white linen shirt, the laces open at the neck and his colorfully embroidered vest hung open. His black leather breeches and knee high boots polished and gleaming in the limited light.

He and Ilya were of a similar size for the most part. Van had a few years of growth on Ilya and that was just the natural filling out as a man does at this prime stage of male life.

He would probably always be just a few inches taller than Ilya and slightly broader of shoulder due to his frame, but when Ilya finished filling out, there would be very little difference in their builds. Ilya would only ever be just shade smaller, hardly enough to notice.

“What did you used to dream?” Van asked breaking the prolonged silence as his arms found their way around Ilya’s waist where they sat together.

“You. Today. Always the same. Since the first night Yvan kidnapped me a decade ago and at least once a week since. I saw you, just as you are. Standing there on the deck, holding your arms out to me, saying the same things you said to me. I thought you a merciful dark angel of death. You gave me much comfort in my dreams when I had none.” Ilya said barely above a whisper. Sinking into the warmth pressed against his back where Van had wrapped around him from behind. “You? What did you see?” Ilya asked in return, just as curious.

“I’ve been seeing you just as long. Only it was always different, I watched you grow up really. The first time I saw you, you were probably Mischa’s age. The look of loss on your face nearly crippled me. I was finishing the building of this ship with the help of my father and brothers and was about to cast her off and I asked my scrying bowl to show me a course. It showed me you. Every full moon I got another glimpse of you, I began to long for those moments when I’d see you again. I ached to know who you were and why I kept seeing you. It wasn’t until recently I saw beyond your face to the ship you were on. All I knew is I loved you desperately and never knew who or where you were. Last year, I saw more. I saw Yvan beside you or rather I saw him beating you. I have never in my life been so angry. If I’d had the power to reach through my bowl and throttle a man I would have done so right then. I’ve been chasing his wake ever since.”

Here Ilya turned and with a hand reaching up behind Van’s neck he pulled Van’s face down where he placed a gentle, loving kiss on his lips. “I am eternally glad you came.” Ilya smiled as Van leaned back from the kiss a smile to mirror Ilya’s on his own lips.

“As am I.” Van replied running a hand down Ilya’s thick mane of golden hair. The humidity making it wavy in a myriad of short, shaggy layers that hung just below shoulder level and tied uselessly into a pony tail at the nape of his neck with just a spare bit of leather lacing. Most of his hair escaping confinement and blowing about in the wind. The moon was high and the ship silent as most of the crew settled for the evening and just a few night crewmen going about their business quietly around them. Van stood and held a hand down for Ilya who took it lightly as they traversed their way back down to Van’s cabin.

Once inside Van directed Ilya to the bathing room where he joyously shed his breeches for the first proper bath he'd had in his life. He was clean, but had never had the luxury of immersing himself in a tub of fresh clean and scented water.

The heat was glorious and the fragrant spicy sandalwood oil Van had added to the water filled his olfactory senses and he almost fell asleep in the tub before Van poked his head in with a chuckle.

"Don't drown in the bath love. While you've been relaxing I've raided the stores. I've got you a nightshirt at least for now. Tomorrow we'll go see about outfitting you properly. I've chucked those useless breeches out the window and good riddance." Van said with a wink as he tossed a towel to Ilya as he climbed out of the bath.

"Then what shall I wear to go out if you've chucked my only pair of britches? Not that I'm shy mind you, but I fear wearing my tackle out around ladies on deck might raise a few eyebrows." Ilya said as he scrubbed his hair dry with the towel, standing stark naked in the room.

Van smirked. "I don't mind the view." He drawled and got a towel thrown at him for his efforts.

Van laughed as Ilya pulled on the soft linen shirt that hung to his knees as he curled up on a low couch, bolted to the floor so it didn't slide about in rough waters.

Van handed him a teacup steaming merrily. "Ivana's orders."

Ilya took the cup and drank with a smile on his lips. The tea tasted like any other tea, but its effects were drastically different. He felt restored and at ease and very much content.

Van pulled his own nightshirt on and blew out the lamps as they curled up on the couch together to watch the sea through the many floor to ceiling windows of Van's cabin.

"What a beautiful view." Ilya sighed curled up like a cat against Van's side.

"Aye, you are." Ilya looked up to see Van looking at him with desire in his eyes. Ilya smiled and stood. Setting his teacup on the table then turning toward the built in bed in the wall. Wide and comfortable and he shed his nightshirt as he sank into the mattress.

Van seeing an invitation for what it was shed his own shirt and followed Ilya to bed. Sinking into welcoming arms as he pressed Ilya into the mattress and kissed him like he'd wanted to all day long, deep and devouring as tongues delved deep and moans were swallowed.

Van's hands explored and caressed as he was pulled tightly against Ilya's chest. Hands running down his back sending shivers down his spine. Oh but it was beautiful to find one's soul and capture it in your arms. They'd each had lovers, but never ones that they'd loved more deeply than just pacing fancy and affection. This was different, it consumed, it burned, it was hunger and it was a feast of senses.

Magic flowed between them, making a deeper connection of spirits. Van's vast power mixed with Ilya's healing glow. They blended and mixed without contrast or conflict, one joined the other seamlessly and it was a drunken feeling for them both to feel the magic they held within mate as surely as their bodies would soon follow. It was making love more than in the physical sense; it was all senses moving in unison.

Van's name was moaned in wonder as the scent of the sandalwood oil once more filled the room as Van prepared Ilya for their joining and his name was cried out in ecstasy as they finally joined in body as they had done in spirit.

Ilya's name was sung like a prayer and uttered like a curse as Van set their pace and short nails dug into his back as Ilya clung to him as their bodies crashed together akin to the rising of a great storm.

The room became almost suffocating as breath grew labored and ragged and bodies grew slick with sweat. Muscles screamed in protest and abuse but they pressed on as the storm grew in intensity. Higher and higher they climbed, and they rolled like waves in a tempest before the storm finally broke free with a fury and force neither of them had known before.

Ilya cried out first, Van's name ripped from his throat and all the air rushed from his lungs as his body grew taught as a bowstring and then suddenly was released. He came in great body spasms of release, his muscles gripping Van and dragging him over the edge to fall over into the tempest as well. Ilya's name was sobbed into his neck and Van's shoulders shook with the force of his climax. Wave after wave and seeming never to cease once they'd begun.

It took several moments of long gasping intakes of breath and aftershock tremors before either of them could speak or move again. The last of the clouds of their storm evaporated as sweat began to dry on abused flesh and bodies disengaged as Van rolled to his side from atop Ilya to fall boneless into the mattress beside his lover.

Van reached up and smoothed sweat soaked hair off Ilya's brow and Ilya's deep green eyes in the darkness appeared like grayish orbs, shimmering with tears. Van's eyes were equally as wet as they held each other's gaze for what seemed like hours before either of them spoke.

"I've always dreamed of this moment. It pales to reality my love." Van whispered kissing Ilya's brow where they lay face to face sharing a pillow.

Ilya closed his eyes as the kiss warmed his brow. "Aye, my Dark Angel lover always left me yearning. It was well beyond worth the wait to have you at last." Ilya replied, as his arms held Van's hips loosely.

"Never a truer sentiment uttered." Van said around a huge yawn as he blindly reached for the cover, dragging it over them both as they settled deeper into the soft mattress. Ilya rolled over to face the wall and Van spooned up behind him and before either of them realized they'd fallen into exhausted sleep, light was shining in the room as the morning meal bell rang.

In a pair of brown leather breeches and a loose pale green linen shirt borrowed out of Van's chest. Ilya padded barefoot beside Van to fill their rumbling stomachs.

A few tasteless and saucy remarks were made as the crew watched the pair shovel food into their faces as if they hadn't eaten in weeks.

"Work up an appetite captain?"

"Wonder what ya did to stir up such a hunger in ye I do."

"He looks better in green than you do Van. Help dress him this morning?"

Both men weathered the good-natured teasing with grins, winks and smirks for the most part. It wasn't like either of them cared or was even remotely trying to hide the fact they were now indeed lovers.

"Oh you lot of gossips, worse than grandmothers with nothing better to do you are!" Ivana scolded setting a cup of newly churned butter on the table at Ilya's elbow, running a motherly hand through his hair after.

"You, my dear sunshine are in desperate need of a haircut of sorts."

"Don't you touch him with sheers Ivana! Leave him be, he's good as is." Van protested and Ivana placed her hands squarely on her round hips.

"He looks a rumbled mess Van."

"I like it that way."

"At least let me tame it for goodness sakes. He looks like he's just fallen out of bed!"

"I know."

"Oh for goodness sakes, Van. You can wipe that smirk of your face, no innuendo at the breakfast table damn it!"

Ivana rolled her eyes at her captain who was chuckling into his tea and then turned to Ilya. "Seriously sunshine, you're too handsome by a half to let this lout here let you run around all shaggy."

"You don't have to sleep with him. I do. I sort of like him in a good temper. I'll leave it for now."

"Well said!" Van cheered and Ivana threw up her hands in defeat.

"Men!" She stormed off back to her kitchen.

Ilya's feet kept twitching as the tanner measured his feet for boots, he was extremely ticklish near his toes. "Van, really. I've never worn shoes in my life. I don't need them."

"You will want them soon enough in winter love. Or climbing rope ladders."

"Perhaps in the cold, but I've no problems with ropes, I've got enough callous to prove it and please, just don't be cross if I don't use them until winter."

"I shant be cross love. They're your feet not mine." Van winked as Ivana trotted in with a basket under her arms.

"These are all we had in his size. I'll have more made up for him soon enough. Lordy sunshine, look at your poor feet. Haven't you ever protected them?"

"I believe there is an echo in here." Ilya said rolling his eyes and Van chuckled.

"I've already scolded him Ivana. You're late and he shot down all my arguments for wearing boots already."

"Well he's right Ilya. Wear your boots!"

Ilya scowled as the tanner finished measuring his feet and he stood up crossing his arms over his chest. "Look, I know you're just trying to be helpful, and I am grateful. Can we agree on one change at a time please?"

“Aye sunshine, alright.” Ivana said handing him the basket and then turning to head back to work on the midday meal.

Van and Ilya headed back to their cabin to make room for Ilya’s new clothes and to make room for Ilya in general. Seeing as it was highly unlikely he was going to be sleeping in any bed but Van’s.

As Ilya folded his new clothes, Van stood looking at the wall that was against the healer’s cabin. And Ilya felt the power in the room shift and surge as Van held up his hands. The wall rippled like water and not wood as it shifted shape and an archway with carved columns appeared connecting the rooms. Van stepped through and the wall that held the door to the hall outside went through a similar metamorphosis and the door that had been there vanished.

“This would have been yours anyway, might as well just shift a door or two so we don’t waste the space.” Van said turning to survey the room layout. Things began moving around the room reordering themselves. The main entry anteroom remained untouched from Van’s original cabin. That was always just a meeting place and office anyway already separate from the private space and seeing as the private space had almost doubled, Van went about reordering things. The Bed in the old healer’s room began to enlarge, giving them room to both enter from the foot of the bed rather than the side so they wouldn’t be crawling over one another if one was sleeping while the other wanted to get up. It was wise to have a bed surrounded on three sides for rough and rolling waters, it made more sense to have the open side at the foot rather than along one side.

The old bed reordered itself into a smaller cot-like sofa, daybed alcove for lounging comfortably in with a good book or cuddling close with wine. A low table grew up from the floor in front of that space for the resting of cups or feet if so inclined.

The trunk that Ilya had just packed his clothes in flew into their new shared bedroom space and grew into a larger wardrobe that matched Van’s which also sailed itself into the new bedroom. The old bedroom and living area, was now just one large living space. Several comfortable chairs and couches, tables and bookshelves lined the room. Ilya just stood gaping where he stood in shock.

“There, I think that will suit us better.” Van grinned as he flopped into the new alcove where their bed had been.

“Is that how you built the ship?”

“Pretty much. It’s matter for matter Ilya. I can’t make something from naught. But I can transform like for like, shift matter around and reform it into something else. Some of the matter from the old bed I put into this new little table when I shrank the bed and the rest of the matter I took away from the bed, I put into the chest to make it a wardrobe. I just shifted things around.”

“S’ttruth! Can you only do that with inanimate things? I mean can you so that with people and such?”

“It’s tricky with living things and I can only take a part of someone and move it elsewhere on their own person. You cannot, or rather should NEVER move matter that belongs to each other somewhere else. It can be done but it’s damn ugly and deadly if you do. I can shift you or myself around for instance, say if I wanted to look like a big dog or something yes. But I’d kill you if I tried to make you, say, into a pair of nightstands. Living things you only shift shape, nothing more unless you’re a spiteful evil bastard. I’ve known a few of those types to kill by pulling apart matter they shouldn’t.”

"You've just melted my brain. But I get the point. No shifting your tackle either, any bigger and I'd be walking bowlegged today. You're big 'nuff how your mam and daa made ya!" Ilya wagged a finger at Van where he sat.

Van howled with laughter and wiped a tear. "I promise, love. I promise."

"Just makin' sure." Ilya winked as he went to put the shirt he still held in his hand away in his sparsely filled new wardrobe.

He felt Van sidle up behind him. "Wanna test the new bed?"

"Thought you'd never ask." Ilya laughed as they fell into bed laughing and shedding clothes in a hurry to sport about again.

They didn't reappear again until the dinner bell and once again were ravenously hungry.

Life was suddenly quite grand.

Series Title: Following Tides
Chapter Number: Two
“Nanta”
Author: D. Sanders

=====

Over the next few weeks Ilya settled into his new life as if he'd known no other. He spent most of his time on the greenhouse deck cultivating a section of the garden that grew medicinal herbs. Thankfully even on Yvan's ship, he'd been allowed to have a few boxes of earth to grow herbs in like his Grandmother had taught him.

Rukia's old garden and workroom was arranged just like his Grandmother's had been and Ilya was whistling a happy tune where he sat cross-legged on the floor with a small mortar and pestle grinding the small white blossoms he'd picked into a fine white powder. Mischa had become a superb helper and eager student. He didn't have the healing gifts, but he had the desire to learn herbal craft so Ilya sat down with him in the herb garden with their tools of the trade and he pointed out each plant and taught Mischa their properties. Today they were grinding Maiden's Breath blossoms into fine powder.

“What do these do again?” Mischa asked as he ground away diligently.

“A few things. Mainly women will sprinkle a little of this into their morning tea and it helps for a few different reasons. For most they'll use it so they can control their moons so they don't get a babe they might not want or can't take care of just now. Others want to have babies but they have irregular moon cycles and this will help make 'em regular so they can get pregnant. If a man takes it in his tea, it makes him less potent and less likely to father babes if he doesn't want any or rather his mate doesn't.” Ilya winked at Mischa before continuing. “It can also be used in greater doses to help induce labor for pregnant women and in even greater quantities it can make them miscarry. You may be a bit young for all this Mischa, and I don't know how much yer mam's told ya about babies and such but, if you wanna learn, I'm gonna tell you the truth.”

“I sorta know. I mean... I know what yer wanker is for when I'm older. Mam told me that much.”

Ilya laughed. “Aye, that's what it's for. Don't ya ever use it if the lass says “no” you got that? I don't like using this powder on lasses who said ‘no’ but still had men take 'em anyway. No lass wants a babe that came from a man who took something from her he shouldn't have. And if you ever do somethin' like that, I'll cut yer wanker off for ya. Understood?”

“Aye.” Mischa shuddered.

“Good boy.” Ilya said tapping out his powder into a collection container and going to work on more. They didn't have any of this on hand, since Rukia had passed and all that he had made had already been used up. This item was high on the request list; just under headache powder and muscle ache salve.

“How come you don't have a lass to use yours on? Most of the men do.” Mischa asked and Ilya choked. He did say he was going to tell the truth.

“I'm different. Let's see if I can't put this in general terms for a ten-year-old. There are basically three types of people if you get right down to it in the broadest, bare bones sense. There are people like yer mam. Folks like her, when they grow up; they want to have lovers the opposite sex only. Boy and girl couples. Then there are those who love both genders equally. Them folks they'll have lovers and fall in love regardless of their partner's gender. Then there are people, like me for instance, who love others and take lovers of the same gender only. It's a bit trickier than that and you sort of figure the most of it out when you're older anyway on your own. You'll just

know what you like eventually, when you get old enough to start liking things in a grown up way. You gotta hit puberty first. That's when you'll know what you like personally."

"Girls are strange. I like boys better."

"All boys your age say that. You'll more like as not change your mind once you hit puberty in a few years. You might not, but most folks end up like your mam. And that's a good thing, or else there'd be a lot less good kids like you." Ilya ruffed Mischa hair.

"Pubity, that's like when you get hair down there on your bits and under your arms and on your chest? Like Orin did last year? 'cept he don't have none on his chest. Just his bits."

Ilya laughed. "Aye. You get hair; you start getting bigger fast, your voice changes. A whole lot of stuff goes on with your body when you're a teenager. I was thirteen when I got my hair and my voice started changing. I grew about ten inches in five years. I out grew everything I owned faster than I could get new. It's damn awkward for a boy and I know you got questions, you ask me anything you want to lad. I know you won't wanna ask her mam this stuff. It's alright; it's natural not to want to ask your mam stuff like that. I used to ask our cook those things when I started changing. He was the only nice person on that ship and he understood what it's like, like I do now." Ilya said as he helped Mischa tap his powder into the rapidly filling container. Work went faster when you talked and the lad was eager for a male ear to bend.

"When did you know you liked boys?"

"When I was about fourteen or fifteen I figured it out. But then I was a little different. I was already in love. I actually fell in love when I was about your age, I only realized I was well and truly in love with another boy much later." Ilya smiled as he moved to pluck more blossoms off the lower ground cover plant.

"With who?"

"With Van."

"But you just met!"

"Aye, that's true. But I had a dream. I used to dream it all the time. He was always in that dream. Just like he used to see me in his big stone bowl, I used to see him in my dreams. We've loved each other a very long time."

"So that's why Mam was saying Van was happy at last. He always seemed happy enough to me, I could never understand that. It's like I suppose, when you miss something. Even though you can laugh, you miss things like I miss my Daa."

"That's very close to the truth of it. We didn't precisely miss one another, but we longed for each other. They are similar emotions. Like you miss your daa and you'd give anything to be there again with him right?"

"Right."

"That's longing. That's what Van and I had. It didn't stop us living our lives, but it was always there in the back of our minds all the time. You're a very smart lad."

Mischa grinned he felt like he had his big brother back now that Ilya had come on board. Granted all the men always let him ask questions, but they were always so busy with their jobs. Ilya always had time for Mischa and even let him help and never made him feel like he was being patronized or indulged.

"I have another question."

"You're full of them this morning, spit it out then lad."

"How come most healers are girls? I heard mam say the other day how rare it was for men to be healers and that we had two."

"That's a quirk of nature lad. Your mam is right. About nine out of ten healers are women and the ones left over are men like me. We're what you can call 'balanced'."

"What's that mean?"

"Remember when I said there were three types of people? And I was the type that liked my own gender? That's sort of why. I'm, I guess you could say, I'm as much a woman on the inside as I am a man for lack of a better way to describe it." Mischa made a confused face after Ilya's answer.

"You'll understand that answer when you hit puberty too. I can't understand it much beyond that myself. It just is that way, a quirk of nature. Mother nature has her own way of ordering things." Ilya added as they topped off the container and cleaned up their mess. They took a break to raid the peach tree together before Ilya sent Mischa back to his mother and he began making the rounds of crew who'd asked for this particular powder. He walked the crew cabins and began knocking on specific doors. Olga was his first stop, newlywed and not wanting children just yet. She opened the door and almost cheered.

"I just took my last dose this morning! Ilya I'd have YOUR babies in gratitude for this." Olga said as Ilya scooped some powder into her container from his.

"Isn't the point of this stuff NOT to have babies in the first place? Besides, I think Mikhail would have something to say about that and take it out of my hide." Ilya winked in return where she slapped his arm with a chuckle as he headed on to his next stop, distributing medicinal powders to a very grateful female populace. Keeping a little on hand where he placed it in a cabinet in his workroom in the corner of the greenhouse deck, it was hardly bigger than a glorified cupboard next to the herb garden. It was a small eight-foot by eight-foot room. It held shelves floor to ceiling on three walls and up against the fourth was a narrow shelf table where he could work on either patients or potions. Utilitarian, small and convenient to his supplies. He secured the containers and locked up the cabinet shelves so the bottles didn't come tumbling out in rough waters then trotted down the stairs to his cabin to wash up just as the midday meal bell rang.

Van was just heading out of their cabin as Ilya reached it and he brightened as Ilya came through the door. "Hello beautiful." Van said planting a kiss on Ilya's cheek as he closed the door.

"Hello handsome. What have you been up to this morning? I haven't seen hide nor hair of you since breakfast." Ilya asked as he washed his hands and stripped off his shirt to give himself a cursory wash before he headed down to lunch.

"Had a meeting with Petr and Mikhail this morning. We're getting low on staples like flour and sugar so we poured over maps for an hour and a half trying to plot a course to the nearest supply island. Then I spent the rest of the morning up in the observatory with the star charts and went scrying for a bit. If we can make good time, and I just called a strong east wind so we will and that will push us through quick enough so we can not only re-supply our stores at the island, we'll have at the very least a three day window there and then another push southwest where we'll hit a small family supply fleet and we should hit it about a day before they get hit by a real nasty

bastard. Another dog I've been itching to smack for a while. We can save the fleet and bite Captain Smirnov in the balls."

"I do hope the only balls you bite are mine love." Ilya waggled his eyebrows and Van laughed.

"My Love Bites? So, you like those do you?"

"You couldn't tell?"

Van laughed again before he leered suggestively.

"I should not encourage you in the middle of the day." Ilya said dropping his damp towel over Van's head and moving to change into a clean shirt.

"No, you should not." Van agreed leaning against the door to wait for Ilya before they headed to lunch together.

"Seriously though Van. Smirnov isn't alone anymore. You do know he's got a wizard now don't you? Yvan called Smirnov a weak bastard resorting to magic, but you and I both know that changes things for you."

"No I didn't know. That's news to me. Do you know who he's running with now?" Van asked perking up; this did change 'things' and tactics greatly.

"Let me think a minute. Starts with an 'R'. Rabin, Raplin?"

"Raskin?"

"That's it!"

"Shit. That's not good news. He's a twisted bastard. Remember when I told you've a seen a man split matter that shouldn't be spilt? He was who I was talking about. I thought he drowned. I thought I sank his damn ship. He is not going to be happy to see me again. I was only twelve when I took him on before though and that was when I was still on "the Handmaiden" so we have a little advantage, but not much. Damn, I'll have to plan a defensive."

"Well don't do that on an empty stomach love. Come on, we've got a week at least right?"

"Closer to two, but yes."

"Then you've got time. I hear your stomach from here love and mine is having a love affair with my spine at the moment. I'm starved, let's eat." Ilya said grabbing Van's hand as they headed to the galley to eat and talk over the meal with Petr and Mikhail with the new revelations and complications.

"Right, so we'll meet up with this bastard four days after we restock at Nanta Island right?" Mikhail asked and Ilya's spoon clattered to the table as he froze in shock.

"What did you say? Nanta?" He gasped and Van turned to stare at Ilya concerned.

"Aye. What's wrong love?" Van asked as Ilya suddenly burst into tears.

Ilya grabbed a cloth to wipe his eyes, Van moving closer worried, but when the cloth fell away, although still crying, Ilya was smiling.

"I was born on Nanta. My family is there. Oh god I never... I gave up hope so long ago I forgot we might end up there again someday." Ilya said wiping away his tears. Van smiled and took Ilya's hand.

"So, you think your mother will like me? Or should I make myself scarce?" Van teased and Ilya chuckled.

"It's not me Mam you need worry about Van love. Me Gran now? You best be a good boy or she'll turn you over her knee." Ilya grinned.

"That's a Grandmother's job isn't it?" Van chuckled wondering if he could strengthen the wind a little more to make better time so Ilya could have a day or two more with his family before they left again.

"Aye." Ilya's voice was a longing whisper. Van vowed to make "the Crimson Lady" sail as quickly as he could.

Van managed to stretch their window to five days. A nice long and overdue visit home for Ilya who nervously wrung his hands in anticipation as they dropped anchor and dropped the long boats to glide into one of Nanta Island's floating ports. A crowd gathered upon seeing the red sails and children ran along the narrow steel paths that connected the floating sections of the city catching the mooring lines as the long boats made port. Ilya scrambled out of the boat like a man possessed and scanned the crowd for a familiar face. An old man saved Ilya the trouble.

"S'truth! It can't be! Ilya?"

"Olaf! AYE! Where's me mam?"

"Same place lad. Go on!"

Ilya grabbed Van's hand in a vice like grip and set off at a run. Van could hardly keep up as Ilya zigzagged on none to steady pathways that moved and swayed with every sure, barefooted step Ilya made. He was breathing heavy as Ilya began to shout.

"Mam! Mam! Petra!" Ilya hollered her given name as it dawned on him she'd no longer recognize his voice. A woman with the same brown skin, same jade eyes, same tawny hair and exact same facial features came rushing out of a small dome shaped dwelling and her eyes widened with shock then joy as she uttered a strangled cry and dropped all that she was doing in order to race toward arms held open wide.

"ILYA!" her son's name was torn from her lungs as she launched herself into his arms and he caught her up in his own, his own throat croaking with sobs of released anguish and joy as he crushed her close in his arms.

She was a tall woman and she didn't have to pull Ilya down very far to cover his face in jubilant kisses. She smothered him with affection as they cried together and then laughed as Ilya picked her up and spun her around.

"I missed you so much mam." Ilya finally found his voice again as he set her down.

"I missed you too. Where's my little boy gone?" She asked stepping back to take a good long look at the young man who stood before her.

“Ye didn’t ‘spect me to stay a little forever now did ye?” Ilya asked as he turned to Van and pulled him close. “Mam, this is Van. Van, me mam. I’ll tell you the whole lot of it later mam, but Van is responsible for getting me free from where I was and well... to make a long story short, he’s my partner.”

“And husband when we find someone to give us a proper bonding. I can bond my own crewmen but a Captain can’t very well bond himself. It’s a pleasure to meet you Ma’am. Ilya told me much about you on the way here.” Van kissed the back of her hand and she just took her hand back and crushed him in a firm hug.

“Its just Mam to you too then.” She chuckled taking both their hands and leading them back to her home as two other figures came running and calling.

“Gran! Aunt Preda!” The entire scene was repeated all over again before they ever made it inside where another surprise met them.

“Mam?” A small boy around five years old, also the spitting image of his mother just like Ilya was in her likeness, stood there in the doorway and Petra knelt beside him. Ilya followed suit smiling brightly.

“Yuri, this is your big brother Ilya. I told you about him before.”

“Hello Yuri. I sure didn’t expect you.” Ilya beamed, he had a brother he had never known about and he was thrilled and about ready to burst with happiness.

“You ain’t mad at me are ye?” Yuri asked and Ilya quirked an eyebrow.

“Why would I be mad at ye?”

“Cause I took your place.”

“Oh Gods love you little one. Of course not, and ye didn’t take my place. I think mam can love two just as much as one now can’t she?”

“I suppose so.” Yuri said shifting from foot to foot looking none too pleased and a little scared.

“Listen love. I’m not taking your place either. Can you spare a hug for your big brother?” Ilya asked running a tender hand through the boy’s hair.

This seemed to brighten a boy’s spirits and he was folded into a warm embrace before Ilya scooped him up onto his back and trotted him inside piggy-back. The lad won over immediately by his elder brother as he laughed at the spontaneous ride.

The family settled down on the floor, Yuri on Ilya’s lap as Ilya told them all that had happened since he’d been taken. To them he had just vanished and the not knowing where he’d gone had sat like a lead weight in their hearts for years.

Ilya spared them the details of his life on board “the Wraith”. He never mentioned the beatings, he didn’t have to, and Yvan’s reputation preceded him. “Oh love.” Petra cried and Ilya comforted her with an arm about her shoulders.

“Don’t cry mam. I was alright. I had my dreams in tact. A very special one kept me going.” Ilya began describing how for years he’d dreamt of Van and how much of a shock it had been to learn Van wasn’t a dream at all.

Van interjected his side of the story here where he sat beside Ilya, his arm around his lover's shoulders. "So you see, by the time we finally met, we'd known and loved each other for years. I do hope I have your blessings. I love your son very much."

Petra smiled and laid a hand to Van's cheek. "You didn't even have to tell me. I can see it in both your eyes. Aye, my blessings and my love to you both. I do demand however you humor me and bond before you leave. I would very much like to be there to witness my son's bonding."

"That can be arranged I think. You find me a Captain or a Holy man and I'll provide the setting. What do you think Ilya? In the Greenhouse?"

"Under the Cherry tree, aye." Ilya grinned; he couldn't wait to show his mother his home and the Greenhouse he adored.

"Greenhouse?" Petra asked and Ilya smiled.

"Just you wait and see mam. It's like nothin' you ever dared dream. I wouldn't want my bonding anywhere else. It's an Eden on the waves it is."

The conversation continued late into the evening and Van and Ilya made a pallet of blankets and pillows on the floor for the night. Petra had gotten up in the middle of the night to get a drink and just stood there watching them both sleep for a long time.

If she had any doubts Van loved her son, they were driven away by the sight of him sleeping. He had spooned up behind Ilya, it was obvious from the way they lay this was a natural and preferred sleeping arrangement for them. One of Van's arms was tucked under Ilya's neck serving as Ilya's pillow, and the other arm was draped almost protectively over Ilya's waist. But it was the unconscious murmur Van uttered that melted her heart. Even in his sleep, Van told Ilya he loved him and Ilya smiled in response, neither of them ever waking.

Petra found her bed again with a light heart. She'd never worry about Ilya ever again, not when he had a partner like Van at his side. Her son would always be loved and happy and that was what any good mother ever wanted for her children after all.

It was just after dawn when Yuri shook Van's shoulder to wake him. "Hurry, two more red sails just threw anchor and the boats are comin' in!" Yuri squealed with excitement. The fog of sleep evaporated immediately as Van sat up tumbling Ilya off his arm and waking him in the process with a start.

"Two?!" Van asked blinking and pulling on his vest.

"Aye!" The boy confirmed racing outside.

Van grabbed Ilya's hand and together they reached the crowd just as the long boats made port.

"I'll be damned." Van grinned as a figure much broader of shoulder and years smiled and held up a hand in salute as they docked.

"Oh do tell me already Van I know they are your family, but which ones?" Ilya asked almost as excited as Van.

"That's my Father and my oldest brother Sergei I believe. Can't see Sergei yet, but that's his ship "The Nightwind."

Van's father was already striding purposefully across the deck and met his son in a fierce bone popping hug and hardy slapping of his back. "No bigger I see." He joked and Van grinned.

"Still growing that paunch I see."

"Cheeky little brat." Alexandre said stepping back and looking Ilya up and down. "So I see you at last. He finally caught up with you I see."

"Aye Sir."

"None of that Sir business. Did I make it in time for the bonding? Been pushing for twelve days since I saw the event in my bowl."

"Aye father. We just landed last night." Van beamed glad his parents would at least be there.

"Where's mam?" Van asked scanning the boats.

"Where she always is, pulling up the rear of the boats because she's never ready, even when you give her days to plan. There she comes now." Alex chuckled as a gorgeous and tall woman with raven black hair to her knees stood waving and calling. Ilya liked her immediately. Van, like Ilya favored his mother in looks.

Van helped her from her boat and just stood holding her close for a long moment before she smacked him to let her go where she then turned and hugged Ilya before making him turn every which way for inspection.

"Young, handsome and talented. A healer like me I see." She winked and Ilya smiled.

"Aye mam."

"HULLO!" a Man bellowed from his boat waving, a younger version of Alexandre, nearing forty winters.

"Sergei." Van supplied the name as the boat was moored and he leapt out of it to repeat the bone crushing hug on Van to mimic their father's. Beside him stood a woman, rather plain in beauty in the common sense, but she wore a commanding beauty the way she carried herself instead. She was regal, but had kind eyes. Dark auburn hair contained in a serious bun at the nape of her neck and a boy of around twelve grinning at her side. Van turned to smile at them both.

"Still hold my brother's leash Anya?"

"Aye." Her whole face came alive with devilish wit in her smile and eyes.

"And you, when did you get so big? It seems almost last I saw you, you pissed on my best shirt while I was trying to change your nappies."

"Uncle Van!" The child was mortified and Van laughed leaning over to hug him.

"Andre, this is Ilya. Ilya, my nephew." Van introduced and Ilya smiled at the boy fondly as more and more people began filling up the port with voices raised in fond greetings as old friends and families reunited.

"I claim the honor of being the one to unite my brother in bonding. It's not everyday we cross paths and for no occasion more joyous than perhaps another birthing celebration." Sergei clapped Van's shoulder.

"True, true. I'm honored and would love for you to bond us Brother." Van smiled as Van and Ilya's mothers found each other and began chattering happily about their sons. Sonja inspecting Yuri closely.

"You produced two healers. He will be as strong as his brother in time." Sonja said looking deeply into Yuri's eyes.

"So his Gran says. Healer's run in our family she also says."

"She's right it seems." Sonja grinned as everyone began gathering in the larger warehouses and wine barrels and food from all three ships began arriving and an impromptu feast in the open air began. Hundreds of people laughed and ate and drank and just made merry for a pre-bonding feast.

"Tomorrow I'll see the last of my sons bonded I am feeling old." Alexandre said still smiling and holding up his wine in a toast of goodwill.

Yuri was playing with another one of Van's nephews of the same age. It looked like a miniature version of Van and Ilya cavorting about in a game of chase.

"The only sad part about this Van. We shant have that ourselves." Ilya sighed watching the children play.

"What? Children?" Van asked seeing what Ilya was watching.

"Who said that? We can if you wish it."

"What? Van love, last I looked I was not built for the carrying of babies."

"No, but there are ways you realize. A few actually. We can find a surrogate mother if we wish it and if you'd feel up to being a lass for nine months I can shift you into a woman long enough for the cooking of a babe."

Ilya paled. "You can do that?"

"Aye."

"Please don't." Ilya held his tackle protectively. Van laughed.

"Good, I do tend to prefer you with your bits in place. I can't with a woman, I tried. I stay limp as a noodle. If we do decide to have children, I'll have to make her look like you or else I'm going to be useless in the making of children myself." Van grinned and Ilya nodded.

"I'm feeling idiotically jealous at the thought. But you're right, if we want children it's necessary. I would love one with you someday. I really would, I love children."

"Aye, so do I. I'd raise a boat full with you. I'm used to large families." Van winked and Ilya smiled ear to ear.

"So I noticed. Besides, wasn't there something about Seventh Sons of Seventh Sons being a lucky number?"

"Aye. All my brothers are wizards like father. But the seventh of a seventh is very strong. And every seventh of a seventh is stronger than the last. It's a quirk of nature."

"Seven, I don't even want to think how raising seven children feels like. Talk about bedlam."

"That's the truth. But fun. I love all my brothers and sisters very much. Growing up was an adventure in mischief."

"I'll take your word for it." Ilya chuckled. "I'll make you a pact. If you can convince six women to bear. I'll let you twist me around so I can take the seventh."

"You're not a betting man much are you?"

"No, but I don't know six women daft enough to surrogate."

"You're gonna regret that Ilya. I can be persuasive and I certainly wouldn't mind a boat full of children of my own." Van grinned evilly and Ilya smiled.

"Then you have a bet. But do let's space them out a little? I don't want all seven of them at once."

Van laughed. "You're on love. You're gonna lose this bet."

"Probably. But I wouldn't have offered if I didn't want them either." Ilya grinned as he leaned over to kiss his mate.

"You're wonderful Ilya. Absolutely perfect."

"Say that when you've got a woman in your bed for nine months."

"I'll always say that. Whether you are wearing a body of a man or a woman, It's you and your soul I love." Van said as Yuri and Sascha streaked by laughing and joined in their game of chase by several other children. Nanta was full of the joys of youth.

Series Title: Following Tides
Chapter Number: Three
“Aspects & Accidents”
Author: D. Sanders

=====

That evening all three ships tied themselves together and the gangplanks were out so folks could mingle and traverse the ships to share company. Ilya gleefully dragged his Mother, brother, aunt and Grandmother around “the Crimson Lady” giving them the tour as Van pointed out special points of interest.

Naturally the favorite spot was the Greenhouse deck and as Yuri gaped and Van led him around by the hand showing him around and giving him something from practically every tree, Ilya was showing his grandmother his section of garden.

“Good boy, I see you remember your lessons at least.” She said smiling proudly at him.

“Aye, Gran. How could I forget with you as my teacher?” He replied kissing her cheek as they rejoined the others watching Yuri get sticky fingers from the fig tree as he tasted foods he’d never even heard of let alone seen.

“You were right, it is Eden on the waves.” Petra said taking Ilya’s arm in hers as they watched Van and Yuri.

“It is. I’ve never been happier in my life Mam. Van is such a good man, he really treats everyone on board like his own personal family.”

“He learned that from his Mam and Daa. You can see that just by looking at them all together. I always said the red sails were God touched. They are truly the servants of higher powers, I feel so much safer knowing they travel these waters to protect us.”

“Aye. Mam, they do.” Ilya said as Van’s young six-year-old nephew Sascha came galloping down the stairs making a beeline for Yuri.

“Yuri!” Sascha almost plowed Yuri over grabbing his hand and grinning ear to ear. “Come on, Daa’s gonna do fireworks with Grandaa! He said we can watch from the observatory!”

“Mam? Can I?” Yuri was bouncing on his toes like a coiled spring.

“Just be careful going over the planks now. Go on.”

“Whoopee!” Sascha squealed dragging Yuri behind him. Van felt Ilya slip under his arm.

“Do you see what I see?”

“Aye.” Van said noticing the instant bond those two had as well.

“What are you too whispering about?” Petra asked crossing her arms over her chest.

“Fireworks.” Ilya said and Van grinned, there were indeed sparks between those two.

“Come on, let’s go watch the show.” Van said changing the subject and joining everyone else up top just as the first of many fireworks lit up the sky.

The following morning, the entire family and anyone who could cram themselves onto the decks of “the Crimson Lady” stood watching with smiles on their faces as Van and Ilya stood together under the blossoming Cherry Tree. Both were dressed all in white finery as Sergei stood between them.

“As Captain of “the Nightwind” and by the laws of the sea which grant me the power to stand witness before these two, I am honored this day to proclaim Vangel Alexandrevich, Captain of “the Crimson Lady” and our Dearest Brother bonded to Ilya Petravich, Honored Healer of “the Crimson Lady”, United and Bonded in Mutual Declarations of Devotion to Each Other and Their Willing Consent to the Match. May they walk together in honor and love and may the rings they now wear shine as a symbol of their union. May they be as solid and unbroken as the circles of gold they now wear. Congratulations, Van and Ilya, live long and rejoice as one.” Sergei said and Van and Ilya smiled at each other as they slipped golden bands on each other’s fingers and kissed deeply as the sea roared with cheers all around them.

The celebration was still going strong late that night when Van and Ilya managed to slip away to their cabin.

Van was pouring them wine as Ilya stood looking at the ring on his finger, a smile of unfettered happiness and contentment on his lips as Van slipped up behind him handing him a glass.

“I have never been happier in my Life.” Ilya said turning to face Van, ignoring the glass and wrapping his arms around Van’s neck instead kissing him deeply and chuckling as Van tried not to drop the glasses in both his hands.

Van managed to steer them close enough to a table to set the glasses down and gather Ilya in his arms. “Nor I.” He finally managed to reply as his fingers went to work on the lacings of Ilya’s shirt. Kissing bits of his neck as he worked to undress his spouse.

“Van. I’ve been thinking.”

“That can be dangerous.” Van purred as he discarded Ilya’s shirt and his own.

“I’m serious. Something you said yesterday has had me seriously considering complicated matters.” Ilya said and Van paused. The tone in Ilya’s voice was troubled and he stepped back to place his hands on Ilya’s cheeks.

“Whatever is wrong love?”

“Nothing and everything.”

“Talk to me beloved.” Van said leading them over to the edge of their bed where they sat down together.

“I’ve changed my mind about our bet.” Ilya began and then just entwined his fingers in Van’s before he continued, his eyes downcast as he continued.

“I cannot bear the thought of you or rather anyone else sharing what we have. Call me jealous or selfish or whatever you wish. But I don’t love my own body more than I love you and Van I don’t want children from anyone else. Not that I wouldn’t love them, but if anyone is going to bear your children I want it to be me and no one else. I want to look my children in the eyes and see as much of me in them as you. So I guess what I’m saying is all bets are off I want, no I need this. I’d rather be a woman than have you with anyone else.”

"Stop, Ilya love. This is painful to hear. You sound so sad beloved. I would much rather it is you than anyone else too. I just wanted YOU to have the choice in the matter. I wanted you to know you had options."

"I don't want options. I'm selfish I don't want to share you with anyone."

"You're not selfish. I certainly don't want to share you with anyone either. You're my spouse and I'd rip the head off anyone who even dared leer in your direction. If you want to talk jealousy, you're not alone love."

Ilya chuckled. "Aye. Possessive of each other aren't we?"

Van grinned. "I think we're allowed love. I don't mind you being possessive of me certainly. I do belong to you heart and soul."

"As I belong to you Van love."

"There is one major point here though love. I don't even know if I can perform. I've told you I tried a few times with women. Not so much as a stir. We might not even be able to."

"I had thought of that. We can only try and see. Will you shift me?"

"Now?"

"Why not? I'd rather experiment first to see if we are even compatible before we try in earnest only to discover greater disappointment later."

"You're right. Perhaps if we're not trying for children it will be easier."

"That was my thoughts too."

"Alright love. Stand up a moment." Van smiled and he pulled Ilya between his legs where he sat on the edge of the bed and Van undid Ilya's breeches and peeled them down beautiful long legs. He paused to nuzzle Ilya's manhood. "I will miss this."

"So will I. Just, just let's not talk about that. This is hard enough on my pride." Ilya swallowed hard.

"Aye love. I know exactly what you're feeling. This is not easy on the psyche."

"No it's not." Ilya shut his eyes and took a deep breath.

Van rested his hands on Ilya's narrow hips and also shut his eyes. "Let the inner opposite aspect out." Was all he said and Ilya felt a spell from those words rise from within. Van's hands on his hips were warm and tingled where they sat. It was over almost as quickly as it had begun. Ilya felt the power fade and was almost afraid to open his eyes.

It wasn't until Van spoke he dared. "S'truth!" He gasped and Ilya opened his eyes to look at Van who was staring at Ilya wide eyed, his hands twitching on Ilya's hips.

"I must make for an ugly woman." Ilya sighed seeing Van's shocked expression and Van only looked up shaking his head looking quite stunned.

"No you don't. Godstruth I would have never in my life expected this. You're... you're. Look at yourself!" Van gasped turning Ilya to face the mirror. "I only called your inner self out. You're

always balanced naturally, I just asked the spell to switch your aspects. You're still balanced just in a female skin rather than male." Van said and Ilya gaped at his reflection.

He was beautiful. He was still slender and firm, but the edges had softened. His long legs still shapely and refined but with a woman's tone to them. His hips rounded softly in smooth lines and his chest that had once had soft pectoral muscles now rounded in small breasts. He had what would have been called a boyish figure on a normal female but it was still beautiful to behold. His face was a little smoother but still unmistakably Ilya's face. What had been handsome on a male frame was beautiful on a woman's. His Hair had grown and rather than stopping just past his shoulders now stopped at his waist. He turned she stood looking at a reflection Ilya couldn't even begin to describe. "That is what you would have looked like had you been born a girl. My god you're beautiful." Van breathed, his arms encircling Ilya's slender waist.

"That cannot be me!" Ilya began and then gasped. Even his voice had changed. He was no longer a tenor, but a sultry alto. Van shivered the voice shot through him like a dart.

"I even sound different!"

"Aye." Van almost purred in response.

"Van you're trembling." Ilya said turning from his reflection to look at Van.

"I'm in shock. I'm..."

"I can see what you are. You're saluting me."

"I never thought I could. But you, you're..."

"Love makes the difference I guess." Ilya smiled folding himself into Van's arms. "Can you love me like this?"

"Can I? Oh Aye." Van said smiling picking up Ilya and placing him or rather her in bed. Showing his lover that indeed no matter which aspect he wore, loving it was not ever going to be a problem.

Ilya felt pampered as a cat where he lay as Van ran fingers through his hair. "I could get used to being a woman. That felt entirely different, but no less incredible."

"Tell me what it was like. You have a unique perspective now my love." Van purred nuzzling a delicate curved jawbone where it met Ilya's ear. Ilya shivered in response.

"I'll not lie. I do prefer you taking me elsewhere. Not that that part isn't also on this new body. But still the difference in and of itself is hard to describe. A much deeper sensation and the difference in the culmination was a shock. It's true that they say it takes longer for Women, but the build up was long and drawn out and I thought I was going to go crazy there a few times. The climax itself is vastly different. I felt like my entire insides were going to explode out of my skin." Ilya turned to smile at Van.

"You looked it. You still make the best face though when you come. Just that face alone is my downfall. You make me feel a right smug bastard when you make that face. It's nice to know I put it there in the first place."

"Van, you are a wonderful lover. You have every right to feel smug. You earn it." Ilya chuckled reaching over to pull Van closer to kiss.

"Shall I earn it again?"

"If you feel up to it."

"More than you know." Van almost growled as he devoured his spouse again. They were too exhausted to do anything else other than blindly find blankets to cover up with before sleep. They'd turn Ilya back into his male aspect the morning, Van was too tired to risk magic anymore that evening. The experiment a rousing success. It was nice to know that they would be able to have children together eventually and that the only woman ever to rouse Van's interest was Ilya's female aspect.

It might have been the boyish figure, it might have been the knowledge that Ilya really was truly male underneath, it might have been the simple fact that they loved each other or it might have been the combination of them all together.

The reason really didn't matter. In the end they had the reassurance they would someday be able to have children together without outside assistance.

It wasn't even true dawn yet when Ilya awoke in almost a panic. Van was still heavily asleep and Ilya's sitting bolt upright didn't even disturb him. Ilya stumbled out of bed and almost fell as his new center of gravity threw his balance askew. Moving around as a woman was going to take practice. But that was a thought far from his mind as he stumbled into the bathing room and gripped the sink and splashed cold water on his face. He blinked at his reflection, trying to deny what he was feeling. "No, no, no, no. Oh no." Ilya muttered over and over knowing no matter how many times he said it, it wasn't going to change anything.

He fumbled around and found a robe and pulled it on tight and made haste up the stairs, tripping a time or two before finding his center of gravity in his hips rather than his chest where it had been the night before and moving accordingly. Once on deck he very carefully walked across the gangplank that lead to "the Handmaiden" and a tired guard gave him a hand across.

"What's wrong lass? You seem desperate are ye alright?"

"No, Aye, I... I need Sonja. I have to talk to her at once. It's me, Ilya."

"Lord what happened?"

"Long story. Please where can I find her?"

"This way." The man led Ilya down almost a mirror copy of "the Crimson Lady" or rather the Lady was a copy of this maiden. And in the very same place Van and he shared a Cabin, lay Alexandre's and Sonja's. He gently knocked on the door, shifting foot to foot nervously when a bleary eyed Sonja opened the door, gasped in shock, then physically dragged Ilya inside and set him in a chair. She was now wide-awake and Alex was snoring in the next room.

"What on EARTH did you do?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

"Humor me."

"We thought we'd try, you know, in case we wanted children later."

"Later is here!"

"I know!" Ilya groaned almost in tears.

"When?"

"It woke me up. I'm not crazy then. This. I mean I've seen it in others, but feeling it in yourself? I had to be sure I wasn't sensing something gone wrong."

"No, it's not wrong. You're sensing things exactly as a healer would. And I can tell you from experience feeling your own is drastically different and much, MUCH more intense. No wonder it woke you up, you had double."

"I know! We weren't even TRYING. We just thought we'd test it first for later. And not only does the bastard give me a woman's womb, he give me one with two damn eggs already IN IT!"

"Now you really do sound like a woman!" Sonja cackled finding a kettle to put on to boil for tea.

"That's not funny!"

"But it's true. You're not the first to call a husband a bastard for being fertile." Sonja grinned sitting down beside Ilya.

"I was not ready for this. Not in the slightest. And not only am I pregnant, I'm carrying twins! Although that might be my fault. Fraternal twins run in my family. My mam and aunt are twins. Oh god my brain hurts." Ilya groaned rubbing his eyes.

"That probably is your fault. I wager Van only called out your inner aspect right?"

"Aye."

"So then yes, the twin part is your doing not his."

"It's a boy and a girl."

"I know, I can tell too silly boy. Girl. Whatever." Sonja laughed again and Ilya scowled at her.

"The boy is strong." Ilya said closing his eyes. "And the girl not quite as strong but she has both our talents."

"That's usually the case Ilya. Wizards always breed true. All of their children will have the gift. But your gifts will only pass to your daughters unless you have a son as balanced as you are."

"I knew that much. I didn't know about the wizards always breeding true though." Ilya said and Sonja nodded as she finished brewing the tea and handed Ilya a cup.

"Always. Sons or Daughters. Unless there is a cosmic fluke and that's not likely, not in this bloodline. Welcome to the wonderful world of toddlers who blow things up."

"Shit."

"You said that right. Raising wizards is not easy."

"I'm scared enough at the moment. I don't need you adding to my panic mam." Ilya scowled again just as a frantic knock came to the door.

"That's your adoring husband panicking as well. Shall I let him in?"

“Aye. Oh god how do you TELL HIM something like this?”

“Just tell him dear.” Sonja said opening the door and a half dressed Van came stumbling in.

“Ilya! Oh thank god. The night crew told me you came here. Are you alright? The aspect spell didn't hurt you did it?”

“Van you might want to sit down.” Ilya said still sitting on the couch, his hands wringing the fabric of his robe nervously.

“What's all the bloody noise in here? What on Earth?!” Alexandre said stumbling into the room and catching sight of a female Ilya on his couch.

“Ilya what's wrong?” Van asked sitting on the arm of the sofa staring a worried hole into Ilya's frame.

“Our little test was a rousing success, Daa.” Ilya said looking up into Van's face that blanched visibly.

“What?”

“You heard me.” Ilya shot back and Van slipped off the arm of the couch and onto the floor stunned and white as a sheet. Alexandre began guffawing in laughter clapping his son's shoulder where he still sat on the floor in a tumble of shocked limbs just staring slack jawed at Ilya before regaining his senses and a drunken gleam came into his eyes and he smiled brighter than the sun.

“Really?” Van asked, unmitigated hope in his voice.

“Aye. Twins.”

Once more the stunned expression captured Van's face and Sonja was afraid Alexandre was going to choke up a lung as he laughed hard enough to begin coughing in earnest.

“T-twins?”

“Aye, a Boy and a Girl.”

“You can tell that?”

“Aye. All healers can. They woke me up this morning when your little soldiers succeeded in conquering my defenses. You can sense enough to feel life auras Van. You can feel them too. Here.” Ilya took Van's hand and placed it on his stomach and Van closed his eyes.

“S'truth! One of them is a fiery little cuss!”

“That would be your son.”

“The other is definitely a healer. I recognize that type of aura, it matches yours, but I do feel power of my sort there too, much more muted.”

“And that would be your daughter.” Ilya said and Van suddenly burst into tears and just grappled Ilya against his chest and sobbed.

“I'd say I'm sorry. But I'm not.” Van choked out and Ilya just held him back and cried with him.

"I'm scared to death, but I'm not sorry either. I wasn't expecting this at all. Not. At. All. But oh Gods now that I can feel them? I can't help but love them." Ilya replied losing himself into the joy of the moment.

"Aye." Van sniffled as Sonja came over to lay a hand on her son's hair.

"Congratulations. Next time you test something, a little Maiden's Breath wouldn't hurt." She winked and both Ilya and Van chuckled.

"Tosh! Van's just proving he's smack on true just like the rest of us. Fertile as they come." Alexandre bellowed and Van chuckled.

"Daa, you big soft bear. You just want more grandchildren to dandle on your knee."

"That's true! That's true! The more the merrier!" Alexandre said flopping onto the sofa to bestow a huge bear hug on Ilya. "Not that we don't realize what you've given up lad in order to do this either. You're still my son and only a damn secure man can wear an opposite aspect with pride. You wear it well. It's not easy to give up what you did."

"I didn't give it up. I do expect my wanker back eventually. I have no idea how to even visit the water closet in this body yet!" Ilya groaned and that set Alex off again.

"Oh really!" Sonja rolled her eyes and smacked her husband on the back of his head. "Just sit down on it Ilya, nature will do the rest! Honestly! Men! You make it seem like the world's ending if you don't have a penis dangling between your legs. Thank all the Gods Ilya will at least learn to appreciate what we women go through for you Neanderthals!" Sonja stated as she went to the door and opened it. "Now out with you two! Go do silly stupid things together for a day. This is your first bonding day, you're not supposed to be spending it with your parents but each other. Now shoo. And go think of names or something." Sonja ordered them out and Van laughed and led Ilya out by the hand. The sun was just rising, so not many people were stirring yet. They'd have time to shock them all later with the change in Ilya's aspect and condition.

Series Title: Following Tides
Chapter Number: Four
“Treading New Waters”
Author: D. Sanders

=====

Ilya fell into bed the minute they reached the cabin and threw an arm over his eyes. Van crawled in beside him a meek expression on his face. “Don’t worry love, I’m not angry at you.”

“I didn’t think you were, I am sorry though that this was forced upon you so suddenly.”

“Don’t be Van. It’s as much my fault as yours. I am a healer, the minute we realized we were too tired to change me back I should have thought about Maiden’s Breath. I just made a batch the other day. I know what happens when precautions aren’t taken. However, I’m not about to go near the stuff now. We made our bed and we’ll sleep in it.” Ilya said turning his huge green eyes toward Van. “I did and do want this. I love them already, I can feel them all the time. That’s why I went to see your mother. I didn’t expect to feel like this. Most women can’t and don’t feel anything, that’s why most don’t even realize they are pregnant until a month or two down the road when moons stop, it’s because I’m a healer I feel them at all and because I am the one pregnant I feel them intensely. They flared to life and brought me out of a sound sleep like trumpets blaring. I thought I’d gone off the deep-end.”

Van chuckled. “Tell me what it’s like, please.”

“Well, when I’m dealing with pregnant women, it’s like they carry around a little extra glow about them. That’s how healers always know immediately when a lass is pregnant; we see it plain as day. For me, it was like the sun didn’t rise, it exploded. A big, great, screaming cosmic boom. Twice in rapid succession. I knew the very instant it happened, not even a second after. It was instantaneous and blinding on my senses. It still is blinding. They are all over my senses. I can feel my body feeding them power like a funnel. I can still feel everything else, it’s not distorting my normal senses toward others. But my self-awareness just went into over-drive and then some.”

“Fascinating.”

“Disconcerting, it will take getting used to. I nearly fell ass over tip just trying to walk. A woman’s body has a different center of gravity. I just spent the last twenty years balancing myself in my chest. I have to learn how to use hips I’ve never had in order to keep from falling over. I’m lucky I didn’t tumble myself over the gangplank trying to get across.”

“Mercy! That different?”

“Switch yourself and find out.”

“That’s a good idea.” Van said and the next moment Van was there in all his female glory. A Handsome sharp edged woman. Not beautiful, but comely and stately regal. He stood and wobbled. “Wow, I see what you mean.”

“You have a nice ass.” Ilya chuckled from his view from behind and Van turned and winked.

“Why thank you.” He said looking at himself in the mirror and his rather large breasts. “These are bloody deformed.”

“Not to some men love. You’d turn a lot of heads with that figure. Beautiful hourglass you’ve got going on there.”

“You do realize if people knew what we were doing in here, they’d all have coronaries?”

“Probably. Only YOU get to change back with only me seeing you like this. None of my clothes are going to fit right. But at least I don’t have boobs like yours.”

“S’ttruth! Amen to that.” Van said as he tried walking around the room getting used to the shift in gravity. “I must say in all honesty never being a boob man, I could get used to yours. Perfect little handfuls.”

“You can stop that train of thought right there. Once your little ones are weaned I want them gone.”

Van turned and grinned. “I’m only teasing.” He said with a wink as he shifted back into his male aspect.

Ilya grinned right back. “I know. I’m just giving you hell for knocking me up.” Ilya said getting up and heading for the bathroom. “Now the real test. The first piss. Wish me luck!” He said as he shut the door. Coming out not looking happy “That is going to take getting used to as well. Wiping every bloody time, what a mess it is and I don’t want to know what moons are like. The minute these babes are here I’m taking Maiden’s Breath with a vengeance. I do not want a moon!”

Van was trying hard not to laugh and failing miserably as Ilya ripped open his wardrobe only to find his clothes fit horribly. Too tight in the hips and posterior and too loose in the crotch. The shirts were fine, but he’d need new pants before these gave him fits of frustration. He was hungry though and eventually he was going to have to debut in this new body. Better sooner than later he reckoned and he ended up wearing a pair of Van’s pants in the end since they were slightly bigger and fit his hips better. “We’ll hit the stores after breakfast.” Van said as they headed up the stairs to face the world.

The galley was already full and Ilya shocked even Van when he just hopped up on a table and clanged a serving spoon against a pewter plate to get everyone’s attention.

“Don’t ask, just accept the fact I’m gonna look like this for the time being and if anyone of ye dare call me a lassie or ask me to flash my tits you’re gonna loose a wanker the old fashioned way, I’ll rip it off. Got it? I’m pregnant and in a foul humor and those of ye with children and wives you’ll understand. Those of ye that don’t ask someone who does. Thank you, end of announcement, Carry on.” Ilya said jumping off the table and not a single person moved. Everyone sat there like stunned turkeys about to be beheaded. Van followed Ilya’s wake just grinning and shaking his head.

“Captain?”

“Don’t ask Mikhail, don’t ask.”

“Did he say pregnant?”

“Aye.”

“No!”

“Aye.”

“But I thought ye both, ye know, couldn’t with a lassie.”

“Yeah, well. Just don’t ask how it happened. Please, I don’t want to explain it and he’ll murder me if I do.”

“Point taken Van mate.” Mikhail just patted Van’s arm in sympathy. He had a pregnant wife too, and just as unexpectedly and she was making him feel as much of a dog as Van was likely feeling at the moment. Perhaps even more so, Olga was a female naturally, he certainly was never gonna ask how in one night Ilya went to bed a man and came to breakfast as a woman. Although looking at him, it was Ilya all over, HE was still the same where it mattered, he was as feisty as ever no matter what shape he was wearing.

Ivana however was a different matter and a law unto herself. “At least you have decent looking hair this morning.”

“Ivana.” Ilya’s tone was warning. She took no notice.

“Don’t you Ivana me. I know perfectly well how grouchy you are this morning and how grouchy you’ll be every morning for the next nine months. It’s part of the price boy-o. You won’t get no sympathy here.”

“I don’t want it.”

“Good. You’ll need new clothes won’t ya?”

“Aye. Nothing bloody fits this morning. Men’s pants are not cut for women’s asses.”

“Aye, ride right on up don’t they?” Ivana winked and Ilya semi-smiled.

“And then some.”

“Wait until you’re around eight months and about ready to pop. Even your skin feels like it doesn’t fit.”

“Spare me until I get used to this body first. I was a bloke yesterday remember?”

“Aye, too true. Eat up love and we’ll go hit the stores after while everyone else is restocking. We’ll have some private time to get you outfitted.”

“I refuse to wear a dress.”

“Give me a little credit boy-o.” Ivana winked, ruffed his hair and went back to the kitchen. Van was staring into his food trying to avoid setting Ilya’s temper off.

Petra stood and gaped at her son turned temporary daughter as he explained what had happened, looking quite beautiful in a pale green sleeveless tunic gathered and belted at the waist and light airy knee length trousers. Still barefoot and his longer hair simply braided down his back. He looked the atypical ‘tomboy’ girl on the outside. And seeing as he was indeed male on the inside, he wore the new look extremely well and was turning quite a few heads from people in Nanta who didn’t know who “the pretty blonde lass” really was.

“How much flour you have mam? We’re gonna ration it out since Daa and Sergei wanna stock up to.” Ilya said moving onto business at hand.

“We already split it three ways in the warehouse, we had quite an excess last year and a good thing too, there’s plenty for all three ships and Nanta. Same for the sugar crop. We’ll be able to

stock all three vessels to last you until next harvest. That is if the person taking over for us knows what he's doing."

Ilya froze. "What?"

"Oh dear I forgot, you'd already gone off! I was sittin' with Anya all night, wonderful woman! It seems "The Nightwind" is short a healer and you know yer Gran is getting on in years and this is a perfect retirement for her not to mention a dream you can't let pass especially at her stage of life. We got two other healers in Nanta, she shant be missed. And well what with Yuri also bein' like you, she'll have more time to train him proper to take over for her when she just can't go on and then she can retire on the waves in a wonderful ship! Besides, he and that adorable little Sascha of Anya's really hit it off like two peas in a pod and Yuri don't make friends easy, he's shy, and that life is so much better for him than this place. So we're going too. Aunt Preda and I will work the greenhouse on "the Nightwind" and Anya's already seeing some of our seedlings transplanted and I'm taking the small hand mill so I can probably produce enough flour daily to feed a crew in between stock stops and keep the stores topped up. Same with yer aunt."

"Oh Mam! That's wonderful news!" Ilya cried and hugged his mother fiercely laughing his mood exceedingly bright.

"Aye. Anya was telling me that the whole family fleet meets every two years for a reunion so we'll see each other more often than if I stayed here. That there is the best news right there. I guess they have a secret island all their own."

"Aye they do. Van told me about it. It's magic shielded so it can't be mapped, only the red ships and a few select others even know it exist. It's only small but big enough for them all to meet and have their reunion and trade crew around. Van said it keeps the blood from getting to inbred that way."

"Very true. That is a danger when you've limited space and bedfellows. Anya told me that the elderly crew folk retire to the island to live out their days. She says the greenhouses on the ships are peanuts to the island, one huge greenhouse of eternal summer. Great on old bones."

"Aye, that's what Van told me too. It's nice to know eventually Gran will get to live her end days peaceful like that one day. Van also said they keep their larger livestock herds there to graze on the mountain grasses and such. He can't wait to show it to me. He said he has a little one-room cabin right in the middle of a pine grove there and he said they have a vineyard there where all the wine they carry is made by their craftsmen and caretakers who live on the island. Not all of them are retired hands. I learned that when I asked where all the wine onboard came from since I couldn't find where they'd make it. Same with the beer, I never saw hops or barley on the greenhouse decks."

"Anya told me that too. They also keep their overflow bounty there. Silly to carry it all about all the time when they don't need it. It goes into mutual coffers for the entire family to use. They've worked out a very functional honor system that seems beneficial for all involved."

"Aye. They do, and any man stupid enough to break their honor and trust deserves to be throttled. I sure wouldn't want to piss off an army of wizards, would you?"

Petra laughed. "Nay. And it explains why they always overpay when they use stocking islands. They dole out their excess wealth to folks who really need it. Never a kinder lot of folks I ever met. I feel so damn honored and proud to be movin' to help them in their work. I now know how you felt when you told me."

"Aye. It's like serving the gods own chosen. They do so much good in this forsaken world. I'd give my life for them all."

"Let's do hope it never comes to that love." Van said as he caught the tail end of their conversation. Ilya smiled up at his husband.

"It's true love. I'd die for you if I had to."

"I know beloved. As I would you, and again I Pray it NEVER comes to that. I want to retire to that island with you someday too you realize. Old and gray and crotchety and saying things like 'when I was a boy we didn't do this and that' and 'what are the youngin's of today thinking?' and things every old dotard spouts." Van grinned and Ilya laughed.

"You're going to be one amusing old fart."

"Aye, and you too my feisty one." Van winked as Yuri and Sascha came out from the dome dwelling.

"I'm all packed Mam. Sascha helped me!" Yuri beamed and Sascha looked pleased with himself. It really was like looking at miniature versions of himself and Ilya, Van noted and just met Ilya's eyes with a smile. One day those two would be saying vows similar to the one Van and Ilya had spoken the day before. Van would bet money on it. Hell, he'd bet his ship on it! Everyone it seemed would begin treading new waters in the morning when they all left Nanta.

Ilya bid his family a teary-eyed farewell the following morning. "the Nightwind" was going to head North to pick off a raid on a supply station in three weeks. "the Handmaiden" would follow "the Crimson Lady" to help against Raskin in four days and then set herself due south for a rendezvous with a deep sea fishing fleet that would be raided by none other than Yvan who had nothing to lose at this point. He was going to be soundly thrashed again he'd hopefully learn his lesson this time around, but probably not, men like him never learned.

After that Alexandre would head to the island. Dmitri was finally retiring after nearly ninety years at sea. "The Lark" would be overhauled and little Did Sergei's oldest son know, but in less than a year, when he turned thirteen, the ship would become his and he'd spend the next two years making it his own before casting off. Most of the time new ships were built in that time period. But Dmitri wanted to retire and wasting a perfectly good ship when there was a new wizard about to come of age was folly. The family wasted nothing, and by the time Andre was finished tweaking her, "the Lark" would be different enough to be wholly his anyway. It was also tradition that every new son of age got something from his senior wizards to add luck to his ship. Van already knew what he was going to give his nephew. He'd already purchased it, a beautifully carved stone bowl made out of rose quartz. He'd found it on a little supply island that had a quarry and he'd commissioned the bowl right then and there. Quartz made excellent scrying bowls. Van knew, his was quartz too.

Van was checking his own bowl up in the observatory to see if anything had changed in their plans when Ilya knocked and entered.

"You sure you should be climbing up this high when you're still wobbly down low?" Van asked and Ilya grinned as he sat on the corner of the table.

"I'm getting the hang of it now. I've a couple of days practice in me." He winked as he set a flask of wine in front of his husband. "You've been up here all morning, I thought you might be thirsty round about now."

"I am and thank you for looking out for my health."

“That is my job is it not?” Ilya quipped right back, uncorking his own flask and taking a nice long drink. “And no I’m not daft enough to drink wine in my state, it’s just apple juice, don’t give me that look. Who’s the healer on board?”

“Point taken. If anyone knows how to take care of a pregnant body, you do. Scolding accepted beloved.”

“Good.” Ilya smiled taking the small sack slung off his shoulder and setting it down on the table. “I brought you some fruit for you to stash up here too, you forget to eat when you lock yourself up here to go snooping about the ocean.”

“I do. I do. Pull up a chair and I’ll take a break with my lovely spouse. Toss us that dagger there love and I’ll slice up these apples.” Van said as Ilya took a dagger in its sheath off the peg on the wall and handed it to Van. He flopped into a comfortable chair across the table from Van and just took in the view from the large open windows that spanned the small circular room at the very top of the main mast. One really felt the sway of the ship at this apex, it was almost enough to make Ilya queasy in his new state of body. In a few months he’d not be able to come up here at all until the babies arrived.

Van handed him a few of the cut segments and watched Ilya eat them absently as he admired the view from the observatory. The sunlight in his hair was almost mesmerizing and Van was getting hot under the collar. How he wished there was more room in the observatory.

“I could lean over the table if you’d like.” Ilya purred catching Van’s gaze with a smirk on his lips.

“Reading my mind now?”

“Van love, you can’t hide it when you’re turned on. Your eyes give you away.”

“Do they?”

“Aye.” Ilya said slipping from his chair to sit on the table in front of Van. “It’s perfectly safe you know. You won’t hurt our babes any. I can see that in your face too.”

“You’re positive?”

“Van, just who do you think you’re talking to here?”

“Stupid question. Come here gorgeous.”

Van didn’t get any further work done before the mid-day meal and they both looked happily rumped as they climbed down to eat.

Ilya was curled up in the alcove with a book, dressed in a night shirt, his hair unbound and drying from his bath and his long legs curled up under him as Van came in looking worried, “Van?” Ilya instantly set down his book and padded over to take Van’s discarded garments as he shed them and started to fill the bath for himself.

“It’s that bastard Raskin. I think he knows we’re coming to head him off. One minute the ship was there in my bowl and the next gone. He’s cloaked himself somehow from my seeking. Daa confirmed it, he can’t see him either. I don’t like not knowing where my enemies are so Daa and I are pushing wind for speed now, we want to beat him to the fleet. He’ll only be able to go as fast as Smirnov’s ship will allow. We do have the bonus of speed and we know he can’t see us. But

he felt us somehow. I don't like that, that's a new trick he's learned." Van said as he climbed into the bath and let Ilya scrub his back for him.

"You're tight as a anything, relax love. One day at a time." Ilya said having Van shift positions so he could grip his shoulders. Ilya poured some scented oil on his back and worked Van's shoulders. Within minutes Van was purring like a kitten.

"Love you have forever to do that. Magic hands you have."

"No magic. Simple good old fashioned massage." Ilya grinned, moving to wash off the oil before beginning to wash Van's hair. Van was totally relaxed by the time Ilya finished and allowed him out of the tub to dry off.

"You spoil me." Van said planting a kiss on Ilya's shoulder as he toweled off.

"Absolutely I do. I like you in good humor. You spoil me then." Ilya winked moving out of the bathroom in an almost swagger. Van just chuckled and hung up the towel to dry as he pulled on his own nightshirt and fell into bed beside Ilya.

"Love, don't ever lose your sense of humor. I don't think I could live without it now." Van said as they snuggled down under the covers and blew out the candles.

"You big soft hearted romantic fool. I love you." Ilya said using Van's chest as a pillow.

"I love you too. Goodnight love."

"Goodnight my lovely Dark Angel."

"Now who's the romantic fool?"

Ilya just chuckled as they fell into relaxed silence until morning.

By the following morning they had reached the fishing fleet, seven small ships dwarfed by the massive galleons "the Handmaiden" and "the Crimson Lady". Van and Petr easily swung themselves over to one of the ships with swing lines and were welcomed by the Commodore of the small fleet, "I met "the Lark" years ago. Great old Chap Dmitri Anastasovich was 'er Captain."

The old Commodore said shaking Van's Hand. "My Grandfather." Van smiled and the old man nodded.

"My father and I have come to warn you. You've got Smirnov on your tail last we looked and according to our calculations, they'll be hitting you midday tomorrow if nothing changes."

"What on Earth would HE want with our poxy fishing fleet. We port on the Isle of Candok about fifty leagues of here. We're just food supply for the folk, a small supply island. We only grow tuber vegetables for the most part. We taint got nothing worth the trouble it takes to attack."

"We know. There's something else they're after but for the life of us we can't figure it out." Van began just as his Father and his first mate, Petr's eldest son, Nikolai managed to get close enough to swing over themselves and join in at this part of the conversation.

"Father, I do wish you'd stop swinging over. You're sixty."

"The day I can't hold a bloody rope is the day I retire boy." Alexandre shot right back with a glare. But Van was right, he wasn't as young as he used to be, but damned if he'd tell the boy that!

At this point both he and his father sensed a presence and both heads whipped around. This was no doubt what Raskin was after. A girl of about fourteen came up on deck, dripping with untrained power. She was carrying netting baskets she'd just mended below up on deck.

"S'truth! That lass needs to be trained!" Alexandre gasped "One panicked reaction and the whole fleet can sink." He added and the old man's eyes widened.

"Oksana? Me granddaughter, best fingers with a needle since her Gran. Why? What's wrong?"

"Power and a lot of it. Does magic run in your family?" Van asked watching the girl stack her netting.

"Not a drop of it. Although, her mam wouldn't say who fathered her. Might be his stock."

"Probably. And I can tell you now from experience with Raskin, he's looking for her. He'll use her power like a well to drink from, slave her and breed her. Magic is not usually quite so strong in women as men. Not in this lassies case though, she'd be a powerful sorceress with the proper teaching." Van said as Alexandre nodded.

"Aye. It's wise to let her come with us Old man. My wife and I will take care of and teach her. I taught seven sons and two daughters I have." Alexandre said smiling at the pretty young girl.

"Take Oksana? Her mam will have heart failure."

"Not forever old man, she'll be allowed to come home AFTER we make sure she's not a danger to herself or others anymore. It's more than folly to let her go without teaching. There are more bastards out there like Raskin who'll snap her up before you can blink. You have my word and honor I'll protect her like me own daughter." Alexandre said and the old man just waved it off.

"It's not a question of yer Honor Captain. Everyone done know red-sails are always the ones ta trust. Can we leave the choice up to the girl? She's a good-girl, as levelheaded as they come she is. We'll let her decide her fate?"

"Fair enough." Alexandre nodded as the Old man hailed the girl over. She smiled and bowed trying not to look intimidated. She had courage in her and Alexandre disarmed her with a brilliant smile. Van smiled to himself, his father had won over harder edged children with that smile of his. The epitome of grandfatherly charm.

"Oksana, the Captain Alexandre Dmitrivich here would like ta talk to ye."

"Me?"

"Aye lass and a serious matter we'd like to discuss with you."

"It about the things I do isn't it?"

"What things child?"

"Ye gods all sorts of crazy things started happenin' when I got me moons. I'd just wish fer something, oh like a sharper needle or something and it'd happen. Crazy nightmares started happenin' and I'd wake up and my room would be in shambles. It's right scary and I don't know how I'm doin' it! Mam said me Daa was a wizard and I never believed her, until now. I just always

thought it was a story she told me since I never knew my daa and every little girl likes to think her Daa is powerful strong. I don't know how to make it stop."

"That girl is precisely why we want to talk to ye. Me son and I sensed you right when we came aboard."

"Daa's right lass. Power will come full strength to ye when you reach puberty if you have it in ye. Wizards always breed true, so if your daa was a wizard, and lookin' at you I have no doubt he was. It's important you learn how to use what you were born with so you don't hurt yourself or others you love." Van said and the girl nodded almost desperate.

"Please! How do I learn?" She pleaded and Alexandre took her hand.

"If you'll come with me child, I promise to teach you everything I know. Ask Van, I'm not such a tyrant task master am I boy?"

"Do you really want me to answer that question truthfully daa?" Van grinned and winked at the girl who laughed.

"Cheeky boy. Don't scare the girl!"

"Course not. She looks tough enough. It's not easy lass, it's powerful hard work and will take you quite a few years to learn properly, especially since you're a lot older than most when we start learnin'. But me Daa is good, he'll make sure you're properly safe and protected while you learn. I strongly urge you to go with him. Me mam will help you too, you'll like her and she'll love you. My sisters are all gone with families of their own now, she'll have fun with a new girl around for her to dote on." Van winked and the girl was at ease.

"I'll work hard I promise! I'll earn my keep!"

"None of that child, no earning keeps. Just you concentrate on learnin' what I teach you. You'll earn your own merits out in the world one day. I just expect you to use your gifts for the betterment of mankind and not for selfish pursuits. That is why I teach you and for no other reason. You give back what you've been given, that is the will of the gods. I am just their servant as much as you are. They led me to you for a reason, I don't argue with the will of the Gods."

That statement right there won the girl and her grandfather over without any further reservations. That was the law of their world that any good, honest man lived by. Give without thought of reward, help when you can, love your fellow man, appreciate your good fortune and share it with others who need it too.

"SMOKE TO THE WEST!" Came the bellow from up in the crow's nest and all eyes turned west to see a cloud billowing up at the horizon.

"That's Candok!" The old man gasped. Van and Alexandre gave each other grave looks. Raskin had changed course and attacked the island rather than the girl to draw her home and away from them.

Both men ran to shout orders to their men. "Go get your things child, hurry." Alexandre said and the girl raced downstairs to gather her belongings. She was back up top in just a few minutes and Nikolai swung her over to "the Handmaiden" followed by Alexandre.

Van and Petr were back on "the Crimson Lady" in a flash and a strong east wind filled sails. They out paced the small fleet within moments, there was nothing the men on the fleet could do anyway and they wasted no time setting course to the island.

Sonja was immediately by the girl's side. "Come on love, let's get out of the way of the crew. You can tell me all about what my husband is doing bringing pretty young strangers onboard." Sonja grinned, knowing perfectly well just by touching the girl 'why' but it would distract the child from worrying too much. She could see the smoke, she'd have to shut herself up inside her shielded cabin until she was needed to heal anyway. Ilya was doing the same thing on board his ship, sitting in seclusion, building up stores and drinking tea like there was no tomorrow, waiting.

Sonja but her own kettle of tea on as she sat with Oksana on the low sofa.

"Now child, my name is Sonja, but you can call me Gran if you'd like, lord I'm old enough for it now. I have grandchildren your age." Sonja smiled, she was still a handsome and beautiful woman. A single patch of silver in her hair at her left temple the only sign of age.

"Captain Van looks like you." Oksana remarked and Sonja chuckled.

"Aye, he does. Took me eight children to get one that looked like myself. He's my youngest of nine, and about to make me a Gran again he is. Got twins on the way he does." Sonja chattered as she poured tea for them both. "You should have seen Ilya when he realized, I thought Van was going to lose his manhood right then and there. That'll teach those two from messing about without thinking." Sonja laughed again and Oksana stared at her.

"Ilya is a boys name."

"Aye, aye. It's a long story love. Let's just say my dear foolish son and his dear foolish spouse thought it would be a good idea to test a hair-brained theory out on themselves. On their wedding night no less. They thought that they might want children someday so they figured they'd see if they could switch Ilya's aspect. He's a healer, and is quite balanced and is equally female and male in spirit. So my son, whom is quite a powerful little cock-brained wizard, switched Ilya's aspect into a female form rather than his male born one. They we're worried that because neither of them were attracted to females in the physical sense they might not be able to have children. Needless to say, male or female, Ilya has my son well and truly wrapped around his little finger. By morning they both had a surprise waiting for them. Ilya was pregnant with twins. So there's no changing him back now until the little ones come. So just mind you sweetness, he's still getting used to being in a girl's body, but he's not a girl. He's as sweet as they come, but a little touchy about his new looks."

Oksana laughed. "I'd imagine so. Men do take pride in their bits and bobs don't they?"

"Aye lassie!" Sonja cackled, loving the sharp girl. "So when you meet Ilya, make sure you talk to him as a boy and not a girl. It'll make him feel better." Sonja winked and Oksana nodded grinning.

They continued gossiping together over spelled tea and Sonja was thankful the shields in the cabin also kept out noise and commotion from up on decks. The girl didn't need upset just yet and Sonja knew come nightfall there was probably going to be many tears shed.

Series Title: Following Tides
Chapter Number: Four
“Battle at Candok”
Author: D. Sanders

=====

Raskin fumed, he knew when he was being spied on and only those accursed red-sailed wizards and their distorted sense of morals even bothered. It was a waste of talent in his opinion. Power was meant to be used, not doled out in bite sized portions for no other benefit than to protect the stupid masses. What good was power if you didn't use it for yourself first? Those righteous red-sail wizards called it selfish, Raskin called it looking out for ones self first, pure and simple. So the minute he sensed them looking his way, he shut them out, threw up tighter shields and had the dolt Smirnov change course to the island itself. Once there, Raskin took a long boat into the city and went straight to the woman.

“Where is the Child?” He asked as the woman mending nets outside her dwelling looked up and gasped as recognition dawned on her.

“You can leave you bastard. Drugged me you did and left me with child. I'll not have her know you, you're no father.”

“So it's a girl is it. Where is she?”

“Not here and you'll not see her.”

“Stupid woman, do you think I care about a fatherly bond here? I've use of her now that she's of age, that's all. If you value your life, where is my daughter?”

“Safe away from you.”

“Safe is relative woman. I left you alone to raise her until she came of age. Wizards always breed true, and her talents are mine. Tell me where she is!”

“No!”

Raskin held out his hand and the woman began clawing at her throat as it constricted and her air stopped. “Tell me!”

Defiant eyes met Raskin so he reached inside and pulled apart her matter, leaving nothing but a wretched heap of flesh where the woman had sat. Raskin turned to his cowed sailors. “Burn this whole stinking city and find me all the girls between fourteen and sixteen years old. My daughter will either be among them or out on the fleet that will come in when they see the smoke.”

“Aye sir.” They saluted and the wailing and shrieks filled the air as the smoke burned black.

“Mercy!” Van gasped as he caught sight of the fires all around the island where the floating city of Candok burned around the stock island. He saw Smirnov's ship anchored at a safe distance and Van shouted orders. “RAMMING SPEED!” Van was furious, all those innocent lives being spent needlessly. Van threw up shields all around the prow to protect his ship from the impact and he called a massive gust of wind to build up even more momentum as his ship turned to hit straight on the starboard side of Smirnov's vessel. “ALL HANDS BRACE YOURSELVES!” Van called out as they drew closer, Smirnov's men abandoning ship like rats. The impact was shattering. Smirnov's ship cracked and the main mast tumbled, smashing the deck. Van reached and pulled

matter from matter, sending bits of the ship flying off in every direction. A bolt of lightning stuck “the Crimson Lady” on her port side, bouncing harmlessly off her shields and Van turned.

“I’ll kill you this time Raskin.” Van muttered remembering a similar scenario twelve years earlier, Raskin was a butcher. “Hard to Port! Bring her around to Candok!” Van shouted just as “the Handmaiden” reached the city and dropped anchor almost right on top of it. Alexandre on deck throwing his own lightning back at the point where the lightning had flared to attack “the Crimson Lady.” The crew of “the Handmaiden” were already surging off her decks, swords drawn and shouting as they rushed Smirnov’s men. Some grabbing the civilians and getting them out of harms way. Van dropped anchor and his own men joined the melee while he and his father concentrated on finding and flushing Raskin out.

Ilya tumbled from his alcove when they’d rammed Smirnov. “What the bloody hell?” Ilya swore, the shields in the cabin so tight no sound penetrated. “Just what the hell do you think you’re doing Van!?” Ilya said running to the window seeing men in the water swimming madly away from debris filled waters. “You rammed them? Boy you must be pissed off Love.” Ilya muttered to himself as he raced to the door and up onto the deck.

“What the hell are you doing up here?” Van asked as Ilya reached his side.

“Same question I was about to ask you. Oh my god!” Ilya gasped as he caught sight of the city and he was about to run for a long boat when Van gripped his arm.

“Wait! Not yet.”

“Like hell not yet! People are dying down there. Civilians!”

“And a lot of good you’ll do them killed. Raskin is still loose! Stay here! That’s an ORDER!”

Ilya gave Van a look that well nigh defied description. Van was of course right, but Ilya had a temper of his own, and Van had just set it off. “Love, please.”

“That’s better.” Ilya scowled and just moved off to the side out of Van’s way, coiled like a spring and ready to leap into action the minute he got the all clear.

“Van call a rain or something, we have to put the fires out! People are burning and choking to death!” Ilya shouted and Van nodded holding his hands up and the clouds began to darken and gather and a downpour fell on the city.

Once the men were subdued Van took Ilya by the elbow. “Now we can go, I’ll look for Raskin by your side. Father will do the same with Mother.” Van said and Ilya was in the long boat before Van could finish his sentence, his medicinal backpack already slung on his shoulders. Van noted thankfully Ilya was wearing if not boots, sandals that would protect the soles of his feet from broken glass and debris. He still couldn’t get Ilya in boots. Sandals were better than nothing.

They pulled up to a pier at the same moment as Alexandre and Sonja, along with a terrified, but in control young teenager. “This is Oksana, she’ll guide us. Stay strong love.” Sonja held the girls hand as they climbed out of the boats.

“Never you fear pet, we’ll do all we can.” Ilya said laying a hand to her hair before turning to face inward, everyone soaked to the skin as the rain fell. “I think you can turn off the water now love, the fires are out.” Ilya turned to Van who nodded and clapped his hands, the rain stopped and the clouds began to part.

“Look sharp, point guard around us!” Van ordered and men, swords drawn surrounded the group as they rushed to help the wounded. Alexandre and Van scanning all people with their senses to find a trace of power. Van picked up a trail and pointed. “This way, I sense magic here.”

“Me mam lives that way!” Oksana cried and both Sonja and Ilya grabbed her hands and Alexandre and Van we’re hard pressed to keep up.

“What good is a guard if they go about doing things their own way anyway?” Van grumbled and Alexandre just held up his hands as they ran behind their spouses.

“Healers, give a toss about their own safety, get used to it son. They are a law unto themselves.”

Ilya pulled up short and turned and crushed Oksana against his chest blocking her view. His eyes met Van’s in anguish. “What? Mam? MAM!” Oksana struggled against Ilya, her face mashed between small breasts.

“Wait love. Van hurry!” Ilya pleaded and Van raced past and swallowed his own cry. He held up his hands and scattered the remains into dust. He came back over and laid a hand against the girls hair where Ilya still held her protectively. “I’m sorry love. I didn’t want you to see that.” Ilya said stepping back with a look of extreme pity and sympathy on his beautiful face.

“What?” She asked as Ilya let her see again.

“Evil, purest evil love.” Ilya sighed as they came across the first wounded.

“Oksana! Get ye away love! He killed yer mam and he’s lookin’ fer ya!” One elderly lady cried who’d seen the carnage and conversation first hand.

“Who?!”

“Said he were yer Father! Heard yer Mam tell him to bugger off she did! He tried to force her ta talk! Said something about breeding true and come ta take his daughter back. Yer mam just spat in his eye she did! Poor love.”

“Enough!” Ilya said forcibly. “We can figure out the rest.” He did not want the old biddy to keep taking. No child should know how gruesome a parent’s death was. Death was a harsh enough pill to swallow.

“Aye. Enough.” Sonja said wrapping the girl in her arms. “Yer mam was a brave lady to face a wizard to protect you dearest.” Sonja said wiping her eyes and then kneeling where her body had been and folding her hands in her lap. “I promise to take care of her for you, mother to mother. Your daughter I’ll keep as my own, I vow to your spirit. Rest in peace ma’am.” Sonja spoke softly to the departed spirit of Oksana’s mother.

Oksana sobbed and it was Alexandre who picked her up like she weighed nothing at all and just sat down with her in his lap to let her cry herself out against his chest. He stroked her hair in comfort. Val remembered many times as a boy he’d used that same chest for comfort. Oksana would be alright in time, his parents would indeed raise her as their own child from here on out.

Ilya turned to one of the young crewmen, hardly older than Oksana, seventeen at the oldest. He took him by the elbow and spoke softly. “Gather her things for her, she’s in no state of mind to be able to do it herself now. Take everything that looks even remotely sentimental. She’ll want them later.” Ilya said and the guard nodded.

“Aye, she will. Poor lass.” He gulped and went inside quietly.

“Take her back to the ship, have her drink this in tea, it will help her sleep.” Ilya said to another guard pressing a small packet of herbs into his hand and Alexandre himself carried her back. He’d return as soon as the girl was settled. Van turned to his mother and Ilya after the girl was out of earshot.

“Raskin’s daughter. S’t ruth! Poor girl. No wonder he was after her, blood to blood is a powerful tool.” Van said and Sonja nodded.

“Aye, I should have never brought her here. She’s just so damn sharp-minded and she wanted to help. Ilya love that was wonderful fast thinking. Let her memories of her mother be of her smiling face and not a mangled corpse.” Sonja sniffed and Ilya nodded.

“I know. But let’s not dwell on what we cannot change. Van any inkling on the bastard?”

“None. He’s shielding himself well or else he’s dead. One or the other. Either way, he’s stranded here, Smirnov’s ship is destroyed. Petr and Nikolai will have the prisoner’s rounded up by now.” Van stated turning to one of the men. “Go grab every able bodied man and woman, start getting the wounded gathered together.”

“Aye Captain!” The man said dashing off and getting to work.

“You, comb the dwellings, get everyone out and gathered on the island. Have the locals give a headcount. Find out who’s missing, what happened, how it started and if anyone has seen Raskin alive or dead.”

“Aye Sir!”

“When my Father gets back, we’ll sweep the area and see if we can’t dig up his hiding place. Until then, contain the non-injured prisoners I don’t care how you do it, keep them in the water for all I care at this point. Bloody bastards.”

“Aye Captain!”

“Mam, Ilya you WILL stay at my side at ALL times. I don’t want you wandering even ten paces away. Until I get confirmation I don’t trust a bloody stray dog at this point.”

Both Ilya and Sonja nodded as they followed Van back to where the wounded were being gathered. Both of them pushed any other troubles out of their minds as they set to work. Both humming with power of a different nature as they set wrong to right.

Had Van known how close to the mark he had been, he’d have chased down the lad Ilya had set to work gathering Oksana’s things. The lad packed everything, and when a black cat rubbed up against his legs the boy smiled. “Heya puss. I bet yer miss Oksana’s. You’d better come along too. Bet you can cheer her up better than the rest of us.” The youth said tucking the unresisting cat under his arm as he carried Oksana’s belongings back to “the Handmaiden”.

Raskin purred, he’d have her soon enough. He wasn’t foolish enough to attempt anything while onboard a red-sail. That would be courting disaster. But he would be near enough to begin using her and building his stores. Carefully though, Alexandre was powerful and his son even more so, if they got so much as a whiff of magic they’d fall on him and kill him before he could blink. No, he’d just spy for a while, learn all he could about his enemies and then first opportunity slip away, taking his daughter with him.

Andrik gently knocked on the door of the guestroom next to the Captain’s cabin, Oksana’s new room onboard “the Handmaiden” and the ship’s cook Olya opened the door. “I brought the lassy’s things.” He said quietly and Olya, a plump, pleasant faced old woman nodded and let him in.

Oksana was half asleep, the tea working. She began to sit up in bed and Andrik just smiled and laid a hand to her shoulder. "No need to get up fer the likes of me Miss. I just brought your things." He said setting the cat down beside her.

"What? Who are you kitty?"

"He not yours?"

"Nay."

"Well, looks like he is now then." Andrik smiled petting the cat's head. "Sneaky puss, making me think I had better pack you."

Oksana chuckled. "That's a cat for you. We'll just have to call you 'sneak' then won't we?" Oksana said scratching the cats ears and chin as he curled up beside her.

"Well, I'll leave Sneak here to watch over you then shall I?" Andrik said standing. "Get some rest Miss, it'll be a'right you'll see."

Oksana smiled weakly and Andrik returned the smile before excusing himself to go to work.

"Andrik is a good boy. " Olya said sitting back down beside the girl on a chair beside the bed. "He was the only survivor of a horrible hurricane that destroyed his family's ship. We found him adrift and almost starved to death clinging to what was left of the mast. Round about your age then, not even fifteen yet at that time, all arms and legs he was, that were a couple years ago now. He's worked hard ever since, even though the Captain tells him often enough not to try so hard." Olya chatted as Oksana's eyes grew heavy. She would be fifteen soon, three more moons. Just last week her Grandaa was talking about how she should have been thinking of marriage soon, that life already seemed a world away as she succumbed to the drug in her tea and fell into a deep sleep.

Ilya and Sonja shared groans and commiseration as they lay flat on their backs in the cool shade of a dwelling. Van was there, handing them both cool damp towels with one hand and putting cups of juice in their other hands. "What a pair you are." Van said sitting down on an overturned crate as both healers drained their cups of juice and washed their faces with the towels.

"I so hate that part." Ilya said tossing his towel aside and flopping back down on the cool tile of the floor.

"Aye son, Aye." Sonja groaned, her head between her knees.

"You both realize if you didn't work until you dropped you wouldn't be trying to vent a colon out your throats later. There's a concept of pacing and breaks that elude you both."

"Has to be done love. I'd rather hork up a lung later than know that because I stopped when I could go on, someone suffered."

"He's right Van. We live, it's just unpleasant later."

"I'd pick another word rather than 'unpleasant' mam. Gruesome is closer." Van said as Alexandre stepped inside.

"Not a dang blasted thing. You?"

"Same as you Daa. Not a trace. I was checking rats just to be safe." Van sighed.

"I even went and checked their bloody sheep. He's gone without a trace."

"He'll turn up eventually. He always does." Van said rubbing an aching temple. Ilya reached up and Van just snatched his hand instead. "I'm okay love, nothing your powders won't cure later. Save yourself the trouble." Van kissed Ilya's palm instead. Ilya smiled and laid his head on Van's knee. Van felt his knee tingle and his headache evaporate. "You little shit."

"I love you too." Ilya grinned, exhausted to the bone.

Oksana woke up around dinnertime when Sonja came to wake her. "Come dear, we're having dinner in our cabin tonight." Sonja said leading the girl next door, Ilya and Van were there seated together on the couch, both looking as tired as Alexandre and Sonja.

This was the first chance Oksana had to take a good long look at Ilya. She or rather He was beautiful. His long blond hair was hanging in a braid over his shoulder and he was dressed in knee length dark blue airy cotton pants, with a sky blue sleeveless tunic. His dark tanned arms and legs were well toned and the simple leather sandals laced around a delicate ankle. Large green eyes were set wide in a stunning face. If he looked this beautiful as a woman, Oksana wondered what he looked like male. He smiled at her as she sat beside him at the small table and he took her hand. "I'm sorry for earlier. I'm sure the last thing you wanted was an up close and personal view of my breasts. It was all I could think of at the time, I sort of forgot they were there." Ilya said and Oksana smiled at him.

"It's all right. I know why you did it, and I'm grateful." Oksana replied and Ilya leaned over and kissed her cheek.

"It's my calling love. I can't let people suffer if I can stop it." He said as Alexandre walked over to lay a hand on Oksana's hair.

"Enough talk of what is passed. Tonight let us just simply be family. Tomorrow comes soon enough and we part again." Alexandre said pulling up his chair.

"Part?" Oksana asked.

"Aye, Ilya and I have our own duties we have to attend to. It's not often you will see two red-sails together, we don't often cross paths while at sea. This is a big ocean we travel and there are only twenty-one of us all together." Van said and Alexandre nodded.

"Aye, down to twenty soon when your Grandaa retires. From here lass we sail to our Isle. We're going to meet up with my father there to help him settle, most likely unwillingly, into retirement. This will give me time to teach you in a very safe environment. You couldn't have come on board at a better time. Normally we are at sea in twenty moon intervals. We all meet on our Isle every twenty-first moon for four turnings. That is when we all rest, change crew, recharge and visit each other. We will be staying longer this time. I'm meeting Daa there and rather than head out only to turn around and go right back again, we'll stay."

"Aye. Our reunion is in five moons hence. By the time Daa got there and helped Grandaa settle, we'd all be on our way there anyway." Van grinned as Oksana nibbled at her dinner sitting fixed to her chair in fascination.

“There’s also the shipbuilding. To make a long story, short. Every time one of our boys or girls come of age, fifteen to be precise, we build them a ship of their own. This reunion, my Grandson Andre will turn thirteen, so he will not be sailing off the isle this year. He’ll stay until the next reunion, using those Twenty-months in building his ship, or rather re-outfitting his grandfather’s to make his own. By the end of the reunion he will be of age, and will set sail on his own vessel to carry on our work. It’s tradition. One of the ships will stay behind to help the boy and that will be us rather than his father this time. It will give me time to teach you and you can learn best by helping Andre build. Good hands on learning in safety.”

“That’s an excellent plan Daa. Although Sergei will probably stay a while too, it is his firstborn’s first ship.” Van said with a smile.

“Aye. True. His Daa is right proud of him and he should be. Andre is already doing good supervised Captain’s work. He’ll be ready.” Alexandre said sawing into his chicken and wagging his knife around for emphasis as he talked. “And no doubt you’ll stay when your firstborn sets sail.” He added.

“Yes, and double the work unless they decide to stay together.” Van said smiling and Oksana brightened.

“That’s right! You’re having twins aren’t you?” She asked and Ilya nodded.

“Aye. And Van’s probably right about them staying together. Our son will be Wizard and our Daughter a WizardHealer. That’s a rather good working partnership. Every ship needs a Captain and a Healer that work well together.” Ilya smiled up at Van.

“It’s common to see either siblings or partners in those roles. They can scream and rant at each other without offending too greatly and getting away with it pretty much.” Sonja said grinning at her husband.

“Pretty much.” Ilya winked and Oksana giggled.

“I’d noticed that. Most of the ships that have a healer, the healer is like you said, either a sibling or a lover. Or it’s such a large age gap where it’s almost a parent-child relationship.”

“See I told you she’s a sharp girl. Aye, It’s a match that works.” Sonja said giving her husband a withering look. “Most of the time. He still pisses me off occasionally.”

“Like you don’t give me new gray hair every time you go tear-assing off without a thought devil-may-care then puking up your toes after? Think again woman!”

“Gee, where have I heard that argument before? Hummmm?” Ilya hummed under his breath and Van gave Ilya the same withering look his mother had just done to his father.

“Right, let’s see. The pier was on FIRE, there we’re swords clashing everywhere, a wizard loose, and arrows flying and you ready to jump off the side and swim for it, wearing bloody useless shoes, biting my head off and pregnant no less. Right. I don’t think so Ilya. You’re as bad as me mam there.”

“Hey at least I put on the shoes you’re always harping about and not too subtly I might add, to get me wearing. See? They’re still on too.” Ilya grinned holding his foot up and wiggling his bare toes in his indeed, useless sun-sandals. The soles hardly thicker than parchment and held on with thin leather crossed lacings. They were nothing more than pleasure shoes for walking across sun heated sand and nothing more abrasive. They looked to fall apart just breathing on them wrong. Sonja cackled.

"I just adore you Ilya." She chirruped.

"Thanks Mam." Ilya beamed and Van scowled at the pair of them.

Oksana laughed. "I am sorry, but you're all so wonderfully, NORMAL. I always thought, you know, you red-sails folks were always so serious all the time."

"Hardly. Life would be so boring." Sonja grinned pouring more juice in Oksana's cup. "Eat up dear, there's plenty." She winked and Ilya chuckled into his peas. He was going to miss Van's parents tomorrow. Sonja was the best ally he'd ever had.

No one noticed the cat curled up on the chaise listening while pretending to sleep, one eye focused on Van. Raskin seethed. The upstart little child that had beaten him once before. So he had a spouse and a pregnant one. Here was Van's weakness, Raskin would bide his time, go to the isle he'd never known existed and watch. Sooner or later they would let their guard down and he'd pay Van back for bruising his pride.

He'd take away what Van loved most. His spouse and his unborn children.

Series Title: Following Tides
Chapter Number: Five
“Safe Harbor Isle”
Author: D. Sanders

=====

Van was sitting in the alcove watching Ilya pad about the room, from the bath to their bedroom. Gloriously nude and at four and a half months pregnant, starting to really begin showing in earnest. It seemed overnight he'd gone from a flat stomach to a rounded firm dome. Van couldn't resist and Ilya would punch him for it... again. But he snuck up behind him anyway and began rubbing the bulge growing in his middle.

“Van.” Ilya's tone was irritated. “I am trying to get dressed. Will you please stop rubbing my stomach every time I walk by?”

“I can't help it love. It's too tempting.”

“Shall I gouge out your eyes so you aren't so tempted?” Ilya asked trying in vain to find something in his wardrobe that fit. Nothing did anymore and he was at last going to have to cave in and start wearing the maternity clothes. It stuck in his craw, like sour milk stuck to the bottom of a glass. Because up until this point at least the clothes he'd worn looked like men's clothes for the most part. These were definitely designed for women, complete with embroidery that Ilya had tried picking out to no avail.

“Ouch. Sour puss.”

“Look, I feel rotten. I throw up my guts every dang-blasted morning, every day without fail for three months in a row. I can't even stand downwind in the greenhouse without catching a whiff of something that has me leaning over the railing yakking like I healed five hundred sailors with scurvy. I have to take a piss every five minutes, none of my clothes fit anymore and I'm having to resort to the frilly maternity crap and I have a husband who obsessively tries to polish my stomach to a nice sheen every time I walk by. You stay bloody cheerful.”

Van just opened and shut his mouth with an audible click of his teeth. Anything, he said at this point would put him in the doghouse. He did manage to look sheepish and Ilya sighed. “I'm sorry I snapped. God I am glad I don't have these hormones normally.”

“Don't apologize love, It's okay.”

“No, it's not. They're your children too, you can't help but be excited and I know that. Logically. Mentally right now I'm a coiled spring about to snap. One minute I'm high as a kite over a bowl of frozen berried ice. The next I'm wanting to give everyone a case of the runs in a sadistic rage. There is no happy medium like there used to be I'm up and down like a ship in a tempest.”

“I do believe you're allowed love. It's your body going through all these changes. It's normal.”

“Yes but I shouldn't take my temper out on you either. I'm sorry.”

Van just stepped forward, wrapped Ilya in his arms and kissed his brow. “Beloved, you rant at me whenever you feel like it. Better vent it that swallow it, I know you don't really mean any of it.” Ilya nodded into his chest, in tears again. He was crying at the drop of a hat these days, again, normal behavior during pregnancy. He just let Ilya cry and then took up Ilya's discarded shirt and pulled it over his beloved's head. “Alright now love?”

“Aye.” Ilya wiped his cheeks.

“Good. We should be seeing Safe Harbor Isle by mid-day. You can rest properly on dry land for the first time in your life and have the babes before we set off again. I’d rather you there with other healers for that.”

“Aye, me too. At least we timed our little ‘accidents’ to coincide with the reunion.” Ilya chuckled.

“That I think was just dumb luck.” Van winked as he knelt to help Ilya on with his sandals. Van hated the functionality of them, but he couldn’t deny they looked divine on Ilya. They framed his ankles and foot quite nicely. Ilya had a beautiful shape to his feet in both forms. It was why Van wanted him to take care of them they were too pretty to mess up. Feet were normally not so nice to look at, Ilya’s were. But then, Van was admittedly biased on anything concerning Ilya and his looks.

“Probably.” Ilya agreed wiggling his toes. He knew Van would react by kissing each toe. “You’re so bloody predictable. You have a foot fetish.”

“I have an Ilya fetish.” Van grinned standing and pulling Ilya up with him. “Shall we go up top?”

“Aye, I want fresh air. Badly.” Ilya said allowing Van to lead him to the greenhouse deck where they watched the horizon and any land breaking the horizon.

They did indeed come within sight of land by mid-day. “You have excellent inner time keeping.” Ilya grinned up at Val who turned to smile at him.

“All my life.” Van winked as they both stood leaning against the railings watching the landmass in the horizon grow larger. Seven other Red-Sail ships in sight as well coming from all directions. Van dragging out his telescope and showing Ilya the ships and telling him the name of each one and which Aunt, Uncle, Cousin or Sibling was it’s Captain.

“The Crimson Lady” was the last of the ships to pull into her designated moorage. There would be no anchoring and dropping of Long boats this port of call. Each ship has it’s own dock that the pilots carefully guided their ladies into. Ropes swung out and the residents and already docked crews set about catching them to secure the ship in place.

The planks dropped and happy men and women began racing down to greet friends and family they hadn’t seen in almost two years.

The last down were Van and Ilya and they were swept off in a gaggle of dark haired siblings. All eight of Van’s brothers and sisters descended on Ilya eager to welcome him to the family. Thankfully Sonja had already appraised her offspring on Ilya’s unique situation and they all greeted their new *Brother* happily.

“God Ilya, you have the most gorgeous green eyes I’ve ever seen. Too bad my brother got you first.” Tanya, Van’s sister closest in age to her youngest brother gushed hooking her arm through Ilya’s as Van’s only other sister, Nicola grabbed the other one. Both women mind-numbingly beautiful and sharp edged. They both looked like Alexandre, extremely handsome women indeed. They both had black hair like all the rest of the siblings. Sonja’s blood gave all her children blue-black hair that just shone in whatever light was available. Both of Van’s sisters wore long braids down their backs and dressed like men. They were Captains and Sorceresses in their own rights and dresses were not functional for the jobs they held and wore proudly.

“Oi! Stop right there you two! Don’t you dare go carting off my spouse you wicked girls! I know what you’re up to!” Van shouted from amidst his brothers.

“Off to tell him all your deepest darkest secrets? But of course brother dearest!” Nicola cackled, just like Sonja.

Ilya grinned, he was going to adore Van’s sisters, he just knew it, especially if they were anything like Sonja, which appeared to be the case.

“Save some stories for us!” Rurik, the sixth brother called out and Nicola saluted as they dragged Ilya off, Van didn’t find him again until much later and the smirk Ilya wore made Van groan where he sat by a campfire with his father and mother.

“Glad to see your eyebrows grew back.” Ilya quipped.

“They didn’t tell you that!”

“Oh aye they did slick.”

“I was ten!”

“Poof.”

Alexandre was choking. “I forgot about that one.” He gasped laughing. “Did they tell you about the time Van thought it would be a good idea to make himself a hiding place in the storage rooms on the bottom level and managed to close himself in? When we finally realized the shit was missing and found him it took me seven hours to un-shift that door, he put such a tight protection spell on it, it locked it from shifting all together.”

“DAA! I was six! How was I supposed to know?” Van groaned flopping down in the sand pouting.

Ilya was laughing so hard he was crying. “Oh don’t you laugh Ilya!” Petra appeared with Yuri and surprise, surprise, Sascha attached to Yuri’s hip.

“Oh no.” Ilya knew he was in for it.

“Yes, yes ‘oh no’. Who mixed itch-weed instead of talcum into Old Man Olaf’s rash powder? I thought he’d like to kill you. Poor old man walking around with his groin on fire.”

“Oh that’s bad.” Van shuddered.

“It was white! And like you I was six. Gran never labeled anything back then. And I was itching up to my elbows too, that’s why I knew I messed up and I did run right over to tell him.”

“Too late by a half.”

“Aye too late.” Ilya shook his head. “He tanned my hide good and for good reason.”

Stories of their youthful exploits were parried back and forth from parent to parent and Van and Ilya just took it all in stride. It was funny looking back on it all.

Sascha and Yuri were sitting in wet sand at the shoreline not far off wearing nothing but short pants making a mess of themselves, squishing the sand between toes and fingers, making little balls of it to throw at each other and laughing like a typical pair of five and six year olds. Several of the other children of the same age joining them, but it was Sascha that Yuri clung too, he was painfully shy of the others until Sascha showed him encouragement. Ilya was watching them as Petra spoke. “It’s nice to see him playing finally. He’s always so shy around any one other than Sascha.” She remarked and Ilya turned to her.

"You know why don't you? You've got to see it. I saw within an hour tops that first day they met on Nanta." He asked and she shook her head.

"It's a bonding. Like Van and I have. Stronger even than ours, ours is only a very strong spiritual connection. Theirs is a true soul bond. Don't ever try to separate them, it won't happen. You'll kill them if you do."

"What?"

"Aye, I see it too." Sonja said crossing her eyes to look at them.

"What?" Petra asked again.

"In Wizards and healers, we have a heightened spiritual awareness. That's why for all those years I kept dreaming of Van and he kept finding me in his bowl when he wasn't looking specifically for me. It was our sixth senses pointing us toward our soul mate for lack of a better term. We aren't *true* soul bound, but damn close. If, the gods forbid, something happened to either of us, the other wouldn't die. We'd grieve a long, very long time, and probably never re-bond. However, in a true soul bound? If one goes, the other will go soon after. The spirit dies, literally." Ilya explained.

"Like Old Mother Tubbs? She and her husband were together, goodness sixty some odd years. She died last winter of the lung rot, gods rest her suffering soul and Old Man Tubbs just went from perfect health to naught. Dead for no reason, in a matter of a week. Gran said he'd lost the will to live."

"Precisely mam. The soul withers. It's too attached to the other to survive alone. Those two don't realize it yet, they are only little, and only have the needs of any typical child, but the need to be together is evident already. Tell me, how often do you find Sascha curled up in Yuri's bed in the morning or vice-versa?"

"S'truth, at least twice a week. They sleepwalk and neither of them ever suffered it before."

"You hit the nail on the head mam. It's like moths to flame, they can't resist it, they touch all the time, they hold hands, they sit hip to hip, they can't help it and they don't even realize they're doing it." Ilya grinned.

"Well I'll be." Petra said watching the boys again. Ilya was right, hand in hand they played. Yuri stumbled and Sascha was right there brushing the sand of Yuri's legs. Both laughing and then up again, hand in hand as they pelted across the beach.

"So I take it I'll be seeing Yuri like you one day?"

"That I can't say. Maybe. But you'll see him bonded to Sascha no doubt. Whether they have children is up to them, but more than likely. And had it not been Sascha, it would have been another similar boy. You know male healers are all like us mam. Equally female and male and always bent to same gender lovers."

"I knew that much." Petra said still watching her youngest. "Well at least I like Sascha. He's a real sweet boy. I bet you were too eh Van?"

"Me? Oh hell No. I was a right ornery shit."

"But that's why we match. I was no saint. Yuri and I are like night and day personality wise. I was really out-going, talk to anyone and everyone, apt to jump in shark infested waters just to ride a

dolphin. A complete hellion. Yuri is totally my opposite there. So his match is going to be of similar temperament.”

“Very true.” Sonja remarked grinning at Ilya. “It took a hellion to tame one.” She winked.

“Whereas there we have a nice, sweet boy protecting a smaller, shy one. Simple as that, for now. When they hit puberty? Who knows?” Ilya smiled at his mother who groaned.

“There’s no point in worrying about it is there? And absolutely NO chance in keeping them apart either before they’re ready?”

“Not a hope in hell. You know what it’s like when you’re young, you’ll FIND a place if you want it badly enough. And the ready part? Leave it to them, they’ll be ready when it happens, the love is already there.”

“Enough. I don’t want to go down that conversation trail yet, he’s only five.”

“And your baby a while longer yet.” Sonja said passing out wine flasks and juice as they sat around the fire as evening fell.

Series Title: Following Tides
Chapter Number: Six
“Ilya’s Ordeal”
Author: D. Sanders

=====

The months seemed to fly by and Ilya grew to love Safe Harbor Isle like a true home. He and Van shared a small cabin in a pine grove and the smell was divine coming in their open windows. Ilya was sitting by a roaring fire, snug and content, Oksana’s cat Sneak had seemed to have taken a liking to him and was sitting on Ilya’s lap, or what was left of his lap, purring. Ilya felt bloated as a soaked sponge. He couldn’t see his feet anymore, he couldn’t get up out of a chair without assistance, his back ached, but he was happy. “Goodness gracious but I think your children are using my spine as a jump rope tonight.” Ilya chuckled looking over to Van who was dozing in a chair over a book.

Van got up to lay a hand on Ilya’s stomach. “S’ttruth. We’re having acrobats!”

“Tell me about it.” Ilya chuckled shooing the cat off his lap and gripping Van’s arm to pull himself off the chair. “I’m going to lie down love, I’m having dreadful lower back pain tonight. Will you go get your mam? This is one of the signs of labor and I want her opinion.”

“What? You mean like Labor, labor?”

“Van don’t get in a state. It might be nothing at all. Right now its just back pain.”

“But you might be in labor right now?”

“Yes, I might. I don’t know yet.”

“But you’re only eight months!”

“And carrying twins, early is not uncommon with twins, they run out of room eventually love. Can you please go and get your mam?”

“Aye! AYE!” Van was running hell bent for leather down the mountain trail.

Ilya chuckled and shook his head. “What a fool.” Ilya chuckled turning down the covers.

“Aye, a great fool.” A voice from behind made Ilya whip around and a man with dark narrow eyes and a sneer on his face stood there.

“Who the hell are you?” Ilya demanded.

“Your worst nightmare Lass. My name is Raskin and I have been waiting for just this moment!”

Ilya paled. “VAN!” He screamed and then grabbed the dagger from off the side table and centered all his gifts within to protect the children and faced the bastard across the room.

“Oh, yes, do call him, I do so want him to see you die for what will seem to be no reason at all. You are about ready to birth two wizards, it can be... dangerous on a mother.”

“Go to hell you bastard, touch my children and so help me I’ll haunt you and all your descendants for all eternity!” Ilya growled.

“So the wench has spirit.”

“And a set of big hairy balls when I feel like it or haven’t you snooped enough as a cat to figure out I’m not a woman.”

“Close enough healer boy. You certainly always take it as woman, that’s close enough.”

“God no wonder Van wants to murder you. You’re a pig.” Ilya stood and then almost dropped the dagger as he doubled over in pain as a contraction hit and his water broke. Gripping the table to stay on his feet, he could not fail now, he closed his eyes and stretched himself out farther than he ever had before and screamed for help with his powers.

Every wizard in the entire encampment heard the silent plea and Ilya felt invisible hands at his throat.

“What did you do?” Raskin was furious, the lad’s power had shot through him like a dart.

Ilya opened his eyes and hatred filled them as he looked into Raskin’s. “Wouldn’t you like to know?” Ilya sneered right back and then he heard the shouts and the rushing of many feet coming up the trail. Van’s voice shouting his name over them all. Raskin flew into a rage and Ilya felt the shifting of his body and he fought against it, for every bit Raskin pulled, Ilya used his healing gifts on them to pull back and heal. It seemed to last forever as time slowed to a crawl when suddenly Raskin let go, shifted back into his cat form and fled. Ilya was panting on the floor when Van burst in.

“ILYA! Oh god!” Ilya was bloody and tattered gasping for air.

“The cat! Get the cat! RASKIN!” Ilya sobbed as another contraction hit and this time blood poured from between his legs. The wizards ran off in search of the cat and every healer converged on Ilya shoving Van out of the way.

“You’ll do no good here boy! How he survived a Wizard trying to tear him apart I’ll never know.” The first said wringing her hands in worry, moving to grab clean towel and linens.

“No time Elena! He was trying to shift Ilya! Dear God Ilya how?” Sonja cried, cradling Ilya in her lap on the floor.

“Healed as he tore. Oh GOD!” Ilya cried out in agony.

“Breathe Ilya, breathe love.” Sonja said sitting at Ilya’s head stroking his brow and feeding him her strength, he had none in him at all, he’d spent everything calling for help and to protect his children, he’d hurt himself right down to his very core, he was charred from the inside out. No healer had this kind of power, Ilya had tried using his gifts the way a wizard did. His own children must have helped him send out the plea for help and they were all dying if they didn’t get these babies into the world immediately.

“Just cut me! CUT ME! They’re dying!” Ilya sobbed as Elena rushed over with a scalpel and another put a leather wrapped stick in his mouth and Ilya bit down as Elena cut his abdomen open and Van stood in numbed horror watching his husband literally be gutted and torn open and his children dying and Van powerless to help.

Ilya howled in pain as Elena literally reached inside to pull out the first babe, handing it quickly to Marlena who rubbed it fiercely with a towel and holding the babe upside-down to shake gently the fluid from it’s lungs. The second babe was pulled and the scene repeated. Ilya wailing in pain and torment.

Then first one and then a second cry came and Ilya sobbed for joy as he heard his children take their first breath of life and cried. He clung to Sonja sobbing. "Safe, they're safe. Merciful Gods thank you!" Ilya sobbed, his voice ragged and gasping.

"And now you Ilya, don't you dare give up on me boy!" Sonja ordered glowing white-hot as she poured her strength into Ilya. "Van! Now come help me now! I'm losing him!" Sonja ordered and at last he could help and Van dove behind his mother holding her with one arm and finding and clasping Ilya's hand with the other.

"Ilya beloved hold on please!" He sobbed opening the floodgates to his immense stores of power and giving everything he had. A small spark was added and Van felt small hands encase his where he held Ilya's.

"Hold on big brother." Yuri's small voice spoke, sounding tearful, serene and quiet adding his love for his brother into the mix. Ilya's Grandmother taking hold around Yuri's. Silent and focused. Old strength came from her and they all pulled from Van, taking his energy and transmuting it into their healing talents. They pulled and pulled from him until he passed out from total exhaustion never knowing if they'd succeeded or not.

"Van? Van love, wake up beloved." Came Ilya's voice. Van woke up from the worst nightmare he'd ever had only to realize it was no nightmare, the room was filled with healers all sleeping on the floor or silently working. Van lay beside Ilya who was propped up in their bed looking bedraggled and beaten, but whole.

"Ilya!" Van sobbed sitting up and was about to crush Ilya in a hug when he realized there was something in Ilya's arms. Van reached out with shaking hands and pulled back the blankets to see two tiny babes, one attached to each of Ilya's swelling breasts. "Oh gods." He breathed.

"Say hello Daa." Ilya's voice was exhausted but happy. He gently disengaged one from his breast and passed it to Van who carefully moved to cradle it, pulling back the cover to inspect the newborn. This one was definitely his son, Van was weeping as he ran a finger over blond hair and fair skin. "Your firstborn." Ilya whispered resting his chin on Van's shoulder.

"Hello Danil." Van breathed in wonderment. They'd already chosen the names, but he was the first to speak it out loud to the babe, naming him for the world to hear and the spirits to mark it for all time.

"And your daughter." Ilya laid the other babe in Van's arms and taking back their son.

"My precious Danica, oh so beautiful." Van was sobbing with joy. His daughter had his coloring, his hands were trembling as he stroked her tiny round cheeks and thick black hair soft as down. "Ilya, oh Ilya." Van choked and just turned his head to kiss his beloved who had given him the world at almost the cost of his life.

"Beloved, what happened?" Van asked and Ilya shook his head.

"I'll tell you later love. Enjoy your little ones right now. That's all I want to do right now. It took too much to get them here and I am just going to relish them at the moment. I'm even beginning to really like my breasts. This feels fascinating. I'm positively giddy."

Van chuckled, Ilya's sense of humor was never far from the surface, even when he looked and felt like death warmed over. Van looked from his Daughter to his Son and back again, drinking them in, memorizing every tiny, wrinkled feature. Danil was huge compared to his sister, and neither of them much bigger than Van's hand. "So small, Gods I feel like I'll break them."

"You won't Daa." Ilya ginned, "Gods, what are they gonna call me? Mam? I never even thought about that. That is going to break brains seeing a bloke called 'mam'. But I technically AM their mam aren't I?"

"Aye. But you're also their Daa too. You ARE a bloke. Mamdaa?"

"That sounds like a disease or a great bloody snake. And Daamam is even worse, people will think my children are swearing at me all the time."

Van laughed. "Mam or Daa it doesn't really matter does it?"

"Mam. It'll keep us straight and we'll know which one of us they want at least. If I can deal being in a woman's body, I think I can deal being called Mam. There's always DaaDaa too. Ah hell. I give up for now. We've time." Ilya smiled leaning over to nuzzle his son's hair. "Gods they smell so good. I love how a newborn smells."

"For now. Stinking nappies aren't so nice." Van retorted and Ilya grinned evilly at him.

"You'd better help change them. No running off and hiding like most fathers I've known."

Van looked already guilty as charged.

"Okay, give me my Grandbabies, you need much more rest Ilya. That's enough for now." Sonja said and Ilya nodded he knew he was pushing it and smiled as Sonja leaned over to take Danil and Petra appeared to take Danica.

"Besides, it's Gran's turn to love on her grandbabies." Petra cooed rubbing her nose against the babes. "She looks like Van head to toe."

"She's got good genes." Sonja grinned, her granddaughter looked like her too. "And this big brute is Ilya all over. He's gonna be a handful." Sonja chuckled as the babies were carried off and Ilya sighed and sank bone weary into his pillows.

Van moved to cradle him and wept into Ilya's hair. Ilya reaching up to lay a hand on Van's hair. "I'll be alright love. I will. The worst is over."

"Tell me what happened, I'm going crazy beloved."

"Aye." Ilya sighed moving to lay cradled in Van's arms, looking up into Van's tormented eyes.

"The cat was Raskin. The moment you left he shifted. He had every intention of making it look like I'd died giving birth I think. He's a pig bastard of a man. We argued. And I don't know what I did. I just knew I had to do something to get your attention. Screaming wouldn't help, you'd never have heard me. So I just focused everything I had, like I do when I'm healing a really serious wound. And rather than feeding it gently, I pushed it out as hard I could, thinking of only one word. Help."

"You sent up the biggest damn signal flare I've ever felt love. It literally knocked me clean off my feet and I rolled about twenty feet down the hill I was running down a moment before. That's one hell of a push you have. I've never known a healer with that kind of strength. You used a wizard's spell. Only you shifted thought and not matter. The word 'help' was ringing in my ears and everyone else's. Even the crew heard you."

"Raskin went ballistic. He began tearing at me then and again I just reacted, I had no time to think about it. Every time he pulled, I pulled back. Like when I'm healing torn tissue, it's what it felt like

so that's what I reacted too. And then he suddenly stopped and ran and not a moment later you burst in."

"It's your reactions that saved you and the children. He was trying to shift your matter apart and every time he grabbed a piece of you, you snatched it right back from him. Again, you were using a wizard's spell, shifting matter, you shouldn't be able to do that." Van was trembling at the thought of how close Ilya had come to death.

"I felt strange. I felt Danil and Danica in the back of my senses like I always did during the pregnancy. I told you how I could feel their emotions, what limited ones they had. I can do that with everyone and they were angry, not scared, but angry. Extremely angry, it was like a rage. I think perhaps we can thank our children for helping me do things I can't normally do. I do believe they were helping me pull back what he was trying to take while I was healing what he hurt. It's the only explanation I can come up with."

"That's probably exactly true. They were only aware of you, your rage and your need and like you just reacted to the stimulus. You wanted to pull so they pulled. I have heard of Newborn wizards reacting to the mother's stress and literally killing her by reacting to it. But you didn't panic, you kept focus and told them what to do and they did it."

"Now what Raskin intended makes sense. I thought it strange. And you were gonna tell me about wizard babies reacting to stress when?"

"Um, never. Like you needed that sort of stress? I was going to be there, monitoring, it's RARE."

"Nice bloody secret to keep Vangel Dmitri Alexandrevich!" Everyone in the room winced. Ilya was fit to be tied and letting his husband have an earful.

"It's RARE, why worry you over nothing?"

"Nothing my ass! Where were you during our last conversation? Did we not just agree our children took on a full-grown wizard while still in my bloody womb?! That I, in my STRESS, was directing a full blown wizard duel like an orchestra conductor?!"

"Okay, you have a point. But under NORMAL situations it's RARE."

"You had better be thankful I'm weak as a kitten or I'd bloody throttle you, you bastard! Don't you DARE keep secrets like that from me again!"

"Can you two stop arguing already, you're upsetting your children. Do you want another explosion in here?" Sonja said from her chair and Van and Ilya shut up immediately.

Ilya tried rolling out of Van's arms in a huff and only proceed to pull his stitches across his middle and sobbed in pain and anger. Van threw back the cover, the bandage wrapping Ilya was red with blood. "Ilya!"

"Don't touch me!" Ilya slapped his hands away sobbing.

"Get out Van. Give him time to calm down. He's right, you should have told him. He's a healer he knows how to handle stress. *That* is what saved his and your children's lives." Sonja said, her face angry as she moved to help Ilya. Van fled and went to go take out his anger on something else. Preferably out of Raskin's hide.

Series Title: Following Tides
Chapter Number: Seven
“Van’s Wrath”
Author: D. Sanders

=====

Van found his Father with his Grandfather and neither of them looking in a good temper. “Van! How’s Ilya? The Babes?” Alexandre asked seeing his son appear off the path.

“Danil and Danica are the most beautiful things I’ve ever seen. And Ilya is probably getting ready to ask for a sundering of our bonding. And I wouldn’t blame him if he did. I did a very foolish thing and I know better.”

“That’s not good to hear. What did you do?”

“I didn’t tell him how newborn wizard gifts can react to stress. I didn’t want to worry him about it.”

“That is asinine! He’s a HEALER, he knows better than you do about stress! You broke his trust because you didn’t trust him with the truth!”

“I know. I KNOW! I didn’t think!” Van sank down on an old stump of a tree, his head in his hands miserable and hating himself.

“No you didn’t.”

“I already hate myself okay? Can someone please tell me what is happening down here? I have a husband and children that almost died and I want that bastard’s beating heart in my hands.”

“We haven’t found him yet, he’s hiding somewhere with no way off this Island. We’ll find him.”

“I’ll find him. Can someone please go up and stay with Ilya. Mam threw me out and Ilya won’t even look at me and they’re unprotected if Raskin is still skulking about.” Van’s voice was hollow, he was utterly dejected and the only thing keeping him going was his anger.

“We’ll go. Don’t do anything else stupid boy!” Dmitri said smacking Van, hard, on the back of his head. Alexandre gave Van a withering look and followed his father up the hill to sit with the Healers and Ilya to protect them. Sonja met them outside.

“Did your idiot of a son tell you what he’s done?”

“Aye. Stupid. He knows better. How’s Ilya?”

“Miserable. He’s half gutted from us having to literally CUT the babies out of him last night, with no pain blocks of any sort, there was no time and none of us have enough strength back yet to heal that wound from the surgery. There were too many other ones inside to deal with last night. He was bleeding to death and was charred right to the bone from magic. We almost lost him. He directed a full-blown wizard’s duel as a conduit between the babes still in his bloody WOMB and Raskin, while trying to heal himself at the same time AND protect the babies. Any lesser man or healer would have died LONG before help came. Then on top of everything else, he finds out his husband is keeping dangerous secrets he didn’t THINK were important enough to tell his own spouse. Had Ilya been anything but a healer, that secret WOULD have killed him. You can thank his good sense and stress management skills for them surviving at all. The only thing keeping Ilya going right now are the babies, he feels betrayed.”

“Good Gods!”

"Aye and a half. I've half a mind to turn Van over my knee right now."

"Can you take my power and heal what's left?" Alexandre asked and Sonja shook her head.

"Not yet, we're all frazzled to the quick. Yuri is still passed out cold sleeping and Sascha has plastered himself beside him in a trance feeding Yuri his strength. That soul bond is very real and very strong and took a beating last night as well, someone kept trying to keep Sascha from coming up here thinking he was just a panicking six year old waking up from a nightmare. A very real nightmare and thank God Petra was there and brought him up here. We could have lost them too."

"I need a drink." Alexandre ran a hand down his face in shock.

"Don't we all. Did you find him?"

"No. Everyone is out looking for him now. Andre and the other little ones are guarding the docks with the crews. Every other Wizard over the age of fifteen is out combing the Isle. We'll find him, he can't go far."

"Then all we can do is wait. Now a break from all this madness. Come meet your newest Grandchildren. The prettiest damn babies I've ever seen. I'll give our son this much credit, he makes pretty babies."

"I'm pretty sure Ilya had a hand in that, he's pretty enough for ten men and women combined." Dmitri said as they followed Sonja inside. First they went to Ilya who was pale and drawn where he lay in bed. Dmitri sitting down and taking his hand.

"Lad, never doubt a minute that we all love you very much. I know how wretched you're feeling at the moment. If it's any consolation, Van is just as miserable right now in his heart. He'd never hurt ye intentionally, he'd rather die."

"I know." Ilya turned his face away as tears ran down his cheeks.

"He may have made a dreadful mistake, but his intentions were pure. They really were. He thought he was helping you. He loves you more than I've ever seen him love anything in his life. He hates himself right now. He thinks he's lost your love. The only thing keeping him from breaking down right now is his anger at Raskin. I fear he may do something even more foolish in his state of mind. He doesn't care at this point whether he lives or dies and if he finds Raskin before the others, the fight will be most ugly."

"Oh gods! Someone stop him!" Ilya sobbed and tried to sit up. Dmitri pushed him gently back down. "We will and are doing all we can love. Just don't let go of that love, that's your strength. Yours and His." Dmitri said running an ancient weathered hand down Ilya cheek.

"Van." Ilya hiccupped as Sonja came over and held a cup to his lips.

"Sleep love. You need rest." Sonja said and Ilya drank and in his weakened state was asleep almost immediately.

"Daa?"

"We were too hard on him. Yes. he made a great mistake in judgment, but he's young. He'd die before he let harm come to Ilya or his children and we know that. Van's greatest gift is his compassion and devotion and we just tromped all over it right when he was at his weakest moment making him worse than he already was. Alex you'd better go find him."

“Aye Daa.” Alexandre rushed out and Dmitri rubbed his eyes and felt an elderly woman pat his shoulder. It was Ilya’s grandmother.

“Hell to get old isn’t it?” She asked and Dmitri chuckled.

“Aye. Now where are my Great Grandchildren then?” He asked and Sonja led him over the makeshift bassinet they’d made out of a pair of trunks. Dmitri reached over and stroked soft newborn hair. “You were right Sonja love. Prettiest damn babies I’ve ever seen.”

Van, sword in hand, slashed his way through the forest growth, a single burning hatred in his breast that he took out on the brush with every stroke. He didn’t want Raskin dead, he wanted him to suffer. To pay for every death he’d caused with every drop of his blood. Val would render him apart piece by every filthy piece. Then he’d rip out his heart with his bare hands and crush it for the pain he caused Ilya. His stormy eyes burned with cold-blooded fury.

A blast of power almost knocked Van over, but his senses were sharp and he deflected the blow. The quail had been flushed from the bushes. “You’ve nowhere to go Bastard. Show yourself!” Van spat.

“Did your pretty Catamite tell you he loved you before he died?”

“He lives, you lost again. You couldn’t beat me when I was twelve, you’re not going to now. This is my arena you’re in, you’ve no hope of getting out of here alive.”

“Oh big words from such a little boy.” Another blast from nowhere and another block.

“Is that all you can throw at me? Parlor tricks?”

“I’m just warming up boy.”

Another hail of lightning and Van focused his senses to detect where they were coming from. Up above. Sitting in the pine was the cat. Van shifted his form and a huge eagle shot into the air screeching into a tree.

His talons wanting to sink into flesh. More lightning and Val screeched as his talons bit into flesh that wrapped around him in coils, constricting. Another shift and the mongoose sprang free from the coils sinking its teeth into the snake’s neck.

Falling from the tree and shifting as they fell snake and mongoose were mountain lion and a snarling black wolf. Snapping, biting, trying to tear each other’s matter apart through shields that buckled and crackled. The magic calling every other wizard in their direction like a homing beacon.

The fight raged, the Wolf felt claws slash his hindquarters just as his teeth sank into the jugular and shook. The Lion roared and slashed again, but the wolf with stormy gray eyes held firm, letting the lion tear him apart as he held on with all that he was worth. Blood pumping into his mouth, choking him, blinding him, his rage boiling hot as he focused all his strength like a dart and pushed. The lion screamed as matter began flying apart in gruesome gory efficiency. Leaving a single beating heart, which the wolf smashed with his paw turned hand.

Naked, bloody and utterly spent Van collapsed just as he heard his name being shouted by his father. Raskin was gone, Ilya was safe, his children were safe. Van’s wrath fled in waves, and when the only emotion sustaining him died, Van let the darkness take him home with a single word on his lips that fell like a whisper on fallen leaves. “Ilya.”

Alexandre felt the blast of immense power roll over him just as he came insight of Van shifting from wolf form to smash a heart with his bare hand before collapsing himself. Bloody, torn and bleeding to death. "VAN!"

Sergei surged past his father Rurik on his heels. They scooped Van up in their arms and raced him back to the cottage.

Sonja shrieked at the state of her son. "Hurry! He's bleeding to death!"

"We can't! Oh gods, there's no one here stable enough!" Sonja wept ripping bandages and pressing a compress into Van's gaping claw wounds on his thigh and chest. "Van! Van!" His mother screamed he was lifeless, he wasn't even trying, he'd given up. There was nothing left.

"Van!" Ilya's voice sobbed as he fell out of bed to stumble in frantic need to reach his beloved. Ilya fell on top of him, gripping and grasping hands clawing and beating Van's chest. "VAN!"

"Ilya! Stop!" Sonja cried out as Ilya began to glow and slip into a catatonic trance.

"Everyone! Lend Ilya your strength! Do it now!" Wizard after wizard, fathers, brothers and sisters came in to lay hands on Ilya's back. Everyone sobbing and sending everything they had into Ilya. They watched Van's hands reach up to grasp Ilya's waist and hold on, fear of loss, fear of pain, desperation to cling to the man he loved showing white in his knuckles as he began to fight his way back from the brink of death. His wounds closing and healing with nothing more than Ilya's sheer will power and love.

Van took a huge intake of breath, his eyes opening wide in feral madness before clearing and a strangled cry escaped his lips. "Ilya! NO!"

The glow began to fade and Ilya blinked weary eyes as he came out of his trance. "Yes beloved. I told you before I'd die for you."

"Ilya! Ilya! Oh gods no." Van wailed, Ilya was fading.

"Danica, Danil." Ilya rasped. "They're calling me."

"Mercy! Quickly look at Them!" Sonja cried taking the brightly glowing babies from Their beds and laying them on Ilya's breast. Van laying his cheek on his children's backs weeping.

"Please, oh please." He begged falling into the glow himself. It was blindingly bright, all four were encased in a brilliant golden glow and as the glow faded, all four were sleeping soundly.

"A miracle." Alexandra gasped. Falling to the floor weeping.

"Nay. Love." Dmitri said leaning over to stroke a tender newborn's hair. "Love is their power. Get them all in bed."

Van was laid in bed first, Ilya by his side and their children atop Ilya's breast where they nursed contentedly in their sleep. Van rolled and wrapped his arms around Ilya and his children and shuddered as he coiled around them all protectively.

"Let them sleep, they'll be all right." Dmitri said ordering everyone out.

Series Title: Following Tides
Chapter Number: Eight
“Epilogue”
Author: D. Sanders

=====

“Daa! Hurry!”

“I’m hurrying I’m hurrying.” Van chuckled as Danica and Danil, each four-year-old had a hand clamped onto his index fingers and were pulling him across the greenhouse deck to the railing facing the prow of the ship. “I don’t know what the rush is, it’s not like we’re there yet.”

“Is that it though?” Danica asked pointing at the horizon.

“No love. That’s just the sea. Just like it was the last four times you two dragged me over her to point at waves. You won’t be able to see it at least until mid-afternoon. We just had breakfast.”

“Ah Daa you’re such a spoil sport.” Ilya’s rich tenor and very male again form chuckled as he dandled their two-year-old son, Evgeni, on his narrow hips. The toddler was getting sticky fig fingers all over Ilya’s shirt. Ilya just rolled his eyes. “Little stinker, when did you snatch a fig?” Ilya chuckled going over to a pail of water and trying in vain to wash little fingers and his shirt. Van sniggered, the toddler was more of a handful than Danil and Danica had been put together. Ah, the glorious terrible twos.

Ilya rejoined them at the prow. “DaaDaa, were we really born on this Island?”

“Aye you were. We kept you in trunks.” Ilya grinned and Danica’s eyes went wide.

“No!”

“Aye. You came early and your Daa and I forgot to bring a bassinet. So your Gran put you in trunks.” Ilya teased, it was technically the truth, everything else about their birth and how they had miraculously saved their DaaDaa’s life, they wouldn’t know until they were much, much older. It was too much for little minds to understand. They were happy enough being typical children tormenting their loving parents.

“Daa! Is that it?” Danil pointed once again to a wave.

“No son. I told you, not until much later today.” Van rolled his eyes.

“You realize we are going to be saying this all morning if we don’t change the subject. We should have let it be a surprise.” Ilya said as Evgeni stuck sticky fingers in his hair. “Ouch. Take the baby Van. Ouch, let go love.” Van held the baby as Ilya freed his hair.

“We are waiting for the next one Van!”

“Aye, that’s what you said after the twins remember?”

“I mean it this time.”

“Sure you do love.” Van leaned over and kissed his husband. “How about we go have a story time?” Val turned to the twins who cheered.

“Then nap time.”

“DaaDaa!” They whined.

"You know that only works on your Daa. He's the sucker. Come on." Ilya took their hands and led them down the stairs and Van bounced the toddler on his hip as he followed them down to the nursery Van had built next to their cabin. After a story and a little creative spell work on wound up children. All three were down for a nap and their parents spent a little quality time together over a hand of cards and coffee.

"Uncle Yuri?" nine-year-old Danica Ilyava spoke gently, finding a nearly fifteen-year-old Uncle alone on the beach in tears. "Are you okay?"

"Aye. Fine."

"No you're not. I can feel things like DaaDaa and you. You're sad."

"Aye, but I'll be okay. I'm just being silly. I'll come back to the party in a little while." Yuri reassured his niece, she was reticent to leave, but left anyway to celebrate the completion of Sascha's ship "The Golden Sun." The end of the week would see him casting her off. The Sixteen-year old however, unlike his brothers and cousins, didn't seem anxious about it at all and had gone missing from the celebration.

"Yuri?" Sascha called out, his mellow baritone was concerned. He had grown very tall and broad of shoulder like his father and grandfather, and his voice had practically changed overnight. He was as mellow as his voice, and Alexandre often remarked he was sixteen going on forty-seven. He was exceedingly mature for his tender years, he'd be a remarkable Captain.

"I'm here." Yuri answered, wiping his eyes. His soft, understated tenor fell from the shadows as he stepped out and into Sascha's arms.

"I hate when you cry Yuri. Please, tell me what's wrong?"

"You know what's wrong. I don't know what I'm going to do without you."

"We still have a week and I don't want to think about it." Sascha said holding Yuri tightly. Somewhere along the line over the past few years, their relationship had changed. They were much more than friends and they both knew it and were trying to deny it and failing.

Sascha being older, of age and leaving, had thrown their world into chaos and now things were needing to be said that were so hard to say. "I can't stop thinking about it. Sascha I feel like I'm DYING inside."

"Aye. Me too. The thought of leaving you behind is killing me."

"Sascha, I love you, I've always loved you. I can't let you go, I can't..." Yuri broke into sobs and Sascha held him close.

"Oh gods Yuri. I love you too. I feel so damn angry that I have to leave you behind I want to scream. This hurts worse than the time I thought you were dying after healing your brother. This is that nightmare all over again for me."

"Sascha..." Yuri turned his shimmering green eyes upward, he was much shorter than Sascha now, he was almost delicate in comparison to Sascha who had sprung up in height over the past two years. Sascha fell into those eyes, the golden sun he held in his arms and the person he'd named his ship after without telling him.

"Yuri. You are my Golden Sun." Sascha breathed leaning down to finally taste those lips he'd been yearning to kiss for years. Yuri's arms clung in desperation to Sascha's neck clinging to the youth he loved more than life itself.

Knees gave way, mouths opened, strangled cries of love long denied burst free as hands battled with clothes. Sascha's lips in his hair, his neck, his ears, made Yuri quiver with need. "Sascha, Sascha." His voice echoed his need. Sascha moaned as he buried his lips in the curve of a graceful neck as his hands divested Yuri of his breeches and his hand found purchase on Yuri's equally straining desire.

"Sure?" Sascha moaned and Yuri nodded almost frantically.

"For years." He whispered and Sascha sat up on his knees to push his breeches down, freeing his hard and weeping erection.

"Turn over beloved. I'll go slow. Tell me if it hurts." Sascha said breaking off a piece of a nearby aloe plant and coating himself with it as Yuri got on his knees, ready and shaking with fear and need.

Sascha took the excess aloe and gently tried to prepare Yuri with shaking hands, at Yuri's hiss of breath as a finger invaded virgin territory, Sascha pulled back as if burned.

"No Sascha, don't stop, Please don't stop!" Yuri begged and Sascha replaced his finger, Yuri moaned deep in the back of his throat.

"Good?"

"Aye."

"Tell me when you think you're ready." Sascha trailed kisses down Yuri's back as his fingers worked diligently, loosening, stretching, loving and longing.

"Now."

Sascha scrambled to his knees and pushed. Yuri cried out, but not in pain. "SASCHA!"

"Yuri! Yuri! Yuri!" Was grunted with every thrust of hips. "Turn over, I want to see your face." Sascha said slipping out as Yuri rolled to his back and Sascha hooked beautiful slender legs over his shoulders and pushed again and again, until he was covered and dripping with sweat, Yuri long since having come and was whimpering with joy as Sascha filled him completely.

Sascha saw spots in his eyes as he finally came in hard thrusts, deep inside Yuri who was weeping and clinging to Sascha like he was afraid to let go.

"Bond with me Yuri. I can't leave you, not now, not ever, I love you with my very soul. They will have to let you come with me if we're married."

"Aye! Oh Aye! Aye! Sascha! I love you!"

"Well it took you two LONG ENOUGH!" A very pregnant again with son number four, Ilya chuckled as he and Van walked up the beach, catching a very naked couple in a very compromising position.

"Sascha, its usually good manners to propose to the one you love BEFORE you actually screw them into the sand." Van added and both boys blushed hotly.

“Oh dear, well enjoy the evening loves, we won’t wait up.” Ilya waved over the top of his head as he and Van walked past chuckling.

Sascha and Yuri burst into a fit of embarrassed giggles and laughter.

“You want to again?” Sascha asked and Yuri smiled.

“Oh, Aye. But let’s get off the path shall we?”

END