

*Series Title: Following Tides III**Chapter Number: One**"Skanda"**Author: D. Sanders*

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Tomas was up in his observatory scrying. Snow and Ice met him and a spinning compass pointing due north and an Isle he'd never seen came into view. "What on earth?" He was confused and pulled out his charts and maps. There was nothing charted in that direction from Safe Harbor so he asked for the course again just to double check. And once again the same images came.

"Oh ho! Interesting..." He jotted notes on a map and took them to his father.

"There's nothing there on any maps."

"I know, but I checked it twice in my bowl Daa. Same course both times and it was definitely an Island. Looks like I'm off on an adventure."

"Take extra stores, that water is full of Icebergs and not a supply Island for six weeks hard sailing in any direction."

"I'm going to, already stocking extras. I'm going to take Elena as Healer this tour of duty. She's from cold climes and we work well together. I don't want to take a journey like this without a good experienced healer. I'm also taking Igor; he's the best mapmaker we have. We'll at least chart a new Island if nothing else."

"Aye, good thinking. When you off?"

"Stocking now, three days I think, four if we drag our feet, five if mum tries to tie me down." Tomas winked at his father who chuckled.

"Your Mum loves you. She still sees her baby boy."

"Like you don't daa?"

"I never said that." Sascha winked folding up the map. "But I can't deny you're a good captain. Call us if you need us."

"Absolutely. Good night Daa."

"Night son."

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Four Days later "the Handmaiden" set course and sailed north with two extra passengers. Alexandre and Sonja.

Tomas worried for their health, they were both over ninety even if they didn't look it yet. They both had strong blood and adventurous spirits and Wizards and Healers did live a long time naturally. Magic extended normal life spans by a good fifty years or more in most cases. Great-Great-Great Grandfather Anastas had lived to almost one-hundred and eighty before he'd passed. So at the least Alexandre and Sonja had about twenty or thirty years left in them if they retired

properly. Which they weren't about to do it seemed. "We're not in the grave yet boy!" Alexandre grumbled. Sonja just smiled.

"You're going into cold climes. I like Elena lived in very cold waters; I want to be here just in case she needs a hand. Cold has it's own dangers. Extra power to keep the ship warm will come in handy with your Grandaa at the very least. He's not so old he can't produce heat, he is full of hot air."

"Woman, I'll give you hot air!"

Tomas laughed. They were still ornery, that was for certain and extra help might not be a bad thing after all. Besides, Alexandre hated retirement with a passion. He was still a formidable Wizard and he just had to have one last time on the sea. Once a sailor, always a sailor. Retiring to a landlocked life never sat well when the sea was in your blood. Tomas was going to let him have it. He even vacated his cabin for them, and they balked adamantly.

"This is YOUR ship now son. Your Gran and I just need a bed; I don't need room to keep charts and maps anymore. I am no longer this ship's Captain. You are. Keep your rooms, next door is fine, Sergei's old bedroom is more than sufficient." Alexandre and Sonja insisted and refused to budge. Tomas just did as told as they sailed north into the unknown on an adventure that beckoned them ever northward.

The image in the bowl never changed. Tomas would watch it for hours, anticipating. He knew. Deep down he knew he was going to have the adventure of a lifetime.

Something was there that he was meant to find.

And find it he would.

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Tomas was up in his observatory, bundled up against the cold. While inside it wasn't so bad, he warmed up the inner spaces with the help of Alexandre, but the open air was bitter cold and Alexandre was pouring most of his strength into the Greenhouse deck to keep eternal summer there to protect their main food supplies. Just like the years of layered spells from retired wizards kept Safe Harbor in eternal summer. Alexandre's layers on the greenhouse he'd built would long outlast the wizard who cast them, but adding more daily didn't hurt. Not when they were as far north as they were. The nights were long here, the waters frigid, and no land or ships in sight for weeks. They were sailing off into uncharted waters now, guided by experience, intuition and little else other than Tomas' scrying telling them they were still on course.

Tomas looked up from his bowl and gasped. He ran to the window, blinking his eyes to make sure. Yes! "LAND HO!" he yelled as he stepped outside and gasped as freezing air attacked his lungs. He bundled up against the elements and scrambled down his ladder as his men hurried to the prow to get a glimpse.

Tall snow capped mountains came into view first on a large Island. There was no floating city here; it appeared everyone lived on the land itself. Small villages dotted the coastline and whaling ships were moored in a large harbor.

A lighthouse cast it's light on the waters and huge icebergs floated down from further north and a fog horn blew and several smaller ships came out to greet the unexpected red-sailed ship. Men,

all platinum blond or variations thereof with shocking blue eyes like icy skies, sporting thick, braided and colorfully beaded beards, dressed in heavy furs were on the decks of the fishing boats. All of them armed with fishing spears.

Tomas ran up the white flags and held up his arms. "Ahoy! WE COME IN PEACE FRIENDS!" He shouted and several confused looks answered him until one man, obviously the captain barked orders in a language none of them knew then held up his hands.

"COME TRADE?" He shouted and Tomas answered.

"AYE!"

"THROW TOW! WE GUIDE IN!" The other captain shouted and Tomas had the men throw out a towline and they were guided to port through rocky and dangerous waters.

Once moored the plank was thrown down and Tomas went alone to meet the crowd gathering. He shook the hand of the man who had guided them in. "I am Captain Tomas Saschavich, I and my crew will not trouble you, on my honor and word as a Red-Sail Wizard."

"Very Few make journey here. Trade welcome, Pirate not. Hear story of red sail we trust for now. I Johan Bjornsson. Welcome to Skanda." They shook hands and bright white teeth flashed in Johan's face and Tomas returned the smile.

"Thank you for your welcome. Igor!" Tomas called his first mate and Igor came down with men, laden with baskets of fresh fruit, "We would like to thank you for your warm welcome. Please accept our goodwill in return. May we have many years of good trade between us." The baskets were laid down and people gasped and Tomas handed Johan a fresh, ripe and bright red apple.

Johan bit into it and then clapped Tomas' shoulder, hard. "Welcome True! Come, we have drink New Friend!" He laughed.

"Aye. Igor, please distribute the gifts then dismiss the crew to stand down. Grandaa?"

Alexandre and Sonja joined Tomas. "Johan, my Great-Grandfather Alexandre and my Great-Grandmother Sonja." Tomas introduced and Johan shook Alexandre's hand and then kissed Sonja's

"Any man honor his fathers welcome. Come out cold, fine beer we share and good meat." Johan led the group into a large tavern on the pier where a meal of whale meat steaks and roasted potatoes was served. Everyone was fair-haired and blue eyed. From the oldest grandfather to the youngest babes in arms. The language barrier would be difficult, it seemed very few people spoke the same language as isolated as they were. They had traders come maybe once or twice a year if that. A few pirates had ventured this far only to be driven away by the reef that protected the island. There was one narrow way in, and "the Handmaiden" had barely cleared it.

The culture was very male oriented. The women were quiet and served with shy smiles, looking at Sonja in awe, a woman with rank was unheard of. The female sailors with the crew receiving the same awed looks. Tomas, a strikingly handsome man was getting looks of a different nature. He TRIED keeping his eyes to himself but there were quite a few pretty faces in the crowd. He smiled at a few and they blushed and hid giggles under their hands and Sonja kicked him under the table.

Johan said something to one of the girls and she nodded and left only to return with someone that positively took Tomas' breath away. A young man no older than Tomas, his face clean-shaven and surrounded by a furred hood which he pulled down when he entered.

He was beyond handsome. His hair so blond it was almost white, and his eyes the palest blue, ringed in a darker blue. Tomas was so taken he barely noticed the looks of disgust from other men and the women turning away from him. But he did notice the silent shunning. The youth walked over and stood eyes downcast from Johan, answering his summons.

"He knows your language. The ger will translate for you while you here." Johan said and Tomas wondered what a 'ger' was.

"I am Leif, I hope I may be of helping you." He said in a soft tenor. His eyes never lifting. Tomas wanted to jump all over the handsome lad right then and there.

"It is a pleasure to meet you Leif." Tomas held out his hand to shake and Johan reached out and pushed Tomas' hand down.

"He's a ger. No need for honor. He will help you only because he knows your tongue. Go wait outside Ger."

The lad nodded and pulled up his hood.

"Outside?" Sonja asked almost aghast and Johan nodded.

"Gers have no place with us. He dishonored."

"Pardon my asking What is a ger?" Tomas asked, aching to know what this poor lad had done to be treated as if he was a leper.

Johan spat. "One who takes no wife by choice. Takes lover of same flesh. He will wear no beard no pass on name. Have no sons. Gods cast out of light. Out of favor."

Tomas' gut suddenly ached and his meal soured in his stomach. Now he noticed more, only men with wives wore beards. It seemed only one type of love was accepted here and all others that didn't produce offspring were shunned. The poor lad!

He wanted to leave the longhouse tavern right then and there but decorum prevented it. Thankfully Sonja saved the day. "Tomas love, I fear the cold is making my joints ache. Forgive me Johan, I beg leave. I'm sadly old and my bones do not like the cold." She lied through her teeth.

"Aye, aye. Go with honor, we talk more in morning." Johan smiled and Sonja faked stiff joints as Tomas offered her his arm. The youth was waiting for them outside and Sonja snaked her hand around his heavily coated elbow.

"Come with us love." She whispered and the lad followed dutifully.

Sonja dropped her act the minute they were out of sight and back on "the Handmaiden".

"Of all the! Come here love." Sonja pulled Leif behind her with a purpose and headed down flights of steps into the warm and welcoming galley. Leif's eyes rounded and Tomas gave him a

wink. They rounded even more and Tomas would have sworn he blushed. Sonja pushed him onto a bench just as Alexandre came in.

"Woman! You'll get him in trouble!"

"Horse shit!" Sonja swore as she piled warm food on a plate and shoved it under the lad's nose. "Tuck in bright eyes." She smiled at him, but Leif never budged.

"Better do as my Gran says Leif. She doesn't like to be told no." Tomas encouraged but the lad sadly shook his head 'no'.

"I no can. Not allowed."

"I don't care what they told you love. It makes me sick and if you're assigned to me as my interpreter then I say you interpret something warm in your belly. Standing out in the cold? Mercy! Stupid!"

"I Ger. I cannot."

"And that's another thing! Ohhhhhh I want to strangle something!" Sonja said plopping down across the table from Leif and wagging a finger at him. "You, there is absolutely NOTHING wrong with you boy. I give a toss what they told you in this ass-backwards place. Isolated, in-bred and intolerant!"

"Sonja! You can't judge them. They live hard lives here."

"I lived in a place just like it! I know! That's what makes me so damn mad! They treated boys and girls like him just the same way. It's asinine!"

Leif looked shocked and Tomas sat down beside him and smiled. "They told us what 'ger' meant. That's why she's pissed."

"Oh." Leif said grasping Sonja's tirade.

"Love just eat please. Humor and old lady, there's no one here who thinks you dishonorable. Please."

"Thank you Honored lady. I beg forgive Skanda, it is way of law. I, how I say? I most touched but fear punishment."

"No one will know. It's just us here. Go on... eat. Roast Pork with applesauce, bet you never had that." Tomas said pushing the plate closer and grinning like an idiot at the youth.

"Nay." Leif eyed the plate and then back to Tomas then back to the plate. It smelled wonderful and his stomach betrayed him by growling.

"See! I'm a healer boy and I know when someone is starving. They pulled you away from your own meal now eat."

Leif sighed and took up the fork. "Thank you. Yes, I did not eat. You most wise. My mother was healer-witch. You scold like she."

"Your mother was smart then." Sonja winked and Leif smiled, a warm smile that transformed his face into an even more pleasing countenance.

"Aye." Leif said taking a bite of the meat and closing his eyes in joy. "Never in life so good."

"Well there's more where that came from lad. Pass us a plate of that love. I never did like whale meat and I'm hungry as a bear too." Alexandre said as they joined Leif in a meal in the deserted galley.

Series Title: Following Tides III
Chapter Number: Two
"Leif Johansson"
Author: D. Sanders

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Over the meal they learned that Johan was Leif's father and that was why Leif also spoke the language of traders. He'd learned it from him as a boy. He had been stripped of his surname when he was discovered to be a "ger". Sonja gently prodded the story out of him, urging him subtly with her gifts to purge the emotional baggage he carried.

"I very young. Fourteen winters. I helping father when meet trader. Man-grown twenty and one. He very kind to me. Make me feel good inside. I know not then what wanted; just know I like him much. He was soon to be leaving and he be asking me to share meal. I know not then what he be meaning, soon learn. He kiss me and I very much liked. Father came and be seeing kiss of dishonor. Trader sent away no more welcome, I no longer son of Johan. I ger, dishonored." Leif sighed, a tear in his eye that he refused to let fall. "That long time pass, five winters ago."

"Oh love." Sonja took his hand. His life destroyed by a kiss.

"It long time now. Old hurt."

"Still pains you though love." Sonja said holding his hand.

"Aye. But I be having my animals still. They no judge."

"What do you raise?" Tomas asked. His heart ached for Leif. A kiss, a lousy kiss and he'd paid for it dearly. It was time to change the subject.

"Most wonderful beasties I have. Suri Alpaca. No more fine wool you touch! Here!" This brightened Leif's features and he handed Sonja his scarf.

"My word! Feel this!" Sonja gasped and all hands felt the finely woven colorful garment.

"S'truth! What's an Alpaca? I've never heard of it."

"Want I show you? Not far!" Leif smiled and Tomas nodded.

"Show me tomorrow love, I have to play the old lady tonight. Go on Tomas I want a full report!" She said going to hand the scarf back to Leif who shook his head.

"You keep in me be giving thanks. Warm you better healer Sonja lady." Leif bowed and Sonja wrapped it around her shoulders and stroked her cheek against the fibers.

"Boy I'm taking you home with me! Sweet child! Thank you."

"Most welcome. Come I show you yes?" Leif asked turning to Tomas who nodded.

"Aye." Tomas smiled pulling his coat tighter about him as he followed Leif down the gangplank. He seemed excited and animated and once again Tomas was falling headlong into an impossible crush. He dare not try anything, not if a kiss came at such a price! He'd be on his best behavior and not woo anything on two legs. Especially not handsome blond boys with killer blue eyes.

They walked to the edge of the village; a small cottage was set apart from the rest surrounded by rough fences. Leif led him through the gate and Tomas just gaped as about seven of the most strangest looking creatures came trotting over to encircle their master.

They looked like walking piles of knotted dread-locks of thick bright white fleece. They were small, probably no more than thirty-five inches tall at the withers and their extremely long necks came up to man-height and their short muzzles made almost human faces as they snuffed Leif's hair and nibbled his jacket front. "Come, they lovers. Like being pet." Leif laughed as one whiffed his ear.

Tomas felt something butt his back and he turned and got a head stuck in his chest. He laughed and reached up and sank his fingers in the softest coat he ever felt. "Incredible!" He gasped and another butted him and he had two hands full of friendly creatures trying to eat the buttons off his coat.

"Stop, forgot. Like buttons." Leif chuckled patting noses away from Tomas' coat. He reached down and scooped up a baby. "Baby call cria. Even softer when baby." Leif said handing the little creature to Tomas who held it and stroked its chin. It sang! It didn't bleat it sang, a trill of sweet delight as Tomas petted it.

"I have never in my life seen anything like this. I think I'm in love!" Tomas chuckled as he doted on the cria in his arms.

"Easy to love yes. Sweet creatures and most smart. Can sense blizzard, can walk hard mountain trail no fall, look at feet." Leif showed Tomas soft padded feet they had no hooves or claws, just toe nails on unique shaped, long toed paws.

Tomas was in awe.

"No even be needing fence. It for to keep out not in. They no are wandering beasties. Hard to spook. Only need simple shelter, they always warm even in coldest weather. No be messing nasty either. Smart Suri are being they drop in same corner of pen all times. Make easy clean, they no like mess. No bite either, no sharp teeth. Only eat grass and chew cud. They spit though if no like you. Rare though." Leif continued showing Tomas his beloved animals.

"How long do they live?"

"See the big male there? He older than me. Can live almost thirty years, but most near twenty or twenty-five."

"Unbelievable!"

"You like?"

"Aye. Are they hard to raise?"

"No. Eat only very little Grass or Hay. Chew cud. No oil in wool, like sheep, make clothes that no harm skin on even baby tender skin. And as can see are gentle beasts, loving. Only need small area for pen. Drink very little water. Must be clean fresh though, they not drink dirty water, no like. Can get too warm in summer, must have shade then."

"I'd love to have a heard of these at home. My mother and I bet most if not all of the craftswomen at home would love them for their wool, not to mention the creatures themselves."

"Mother like wool?"

"Mum loves to sew and knit, Aye. She'd think of a million different colors to dye them in half the time. The other half she'd be playing with the herd itself. My mother is as gentle as these creatures. She's a healer like Sonja too."

"Mother sounds nice. How warm where live?"

"Always summer, but my family are wizards, we can control temperature. We could make them a winter sanctuary. They'd be comfortable all the time."

"You WIZARD?"

"Aye."

"Really?"

Tomas laughed at wide-eyed wonder. "Aye."

"I let you take some then for your mother and good home. If they be happy then I happy. Will give good herdsire and dams, they give one cria only at time, twin most rare. Take eleven moons birthing time. Need shear twice year, full grown can give ten pounds or more wool in year."

"What price?"

"Nothing to good wizard home. I just be glad seeing good care. I have little room here."

"I can't let you GIVE me a herd!"

"Can. Like Captain Tomas, love my Suri like children. They like you, they tell me want go."

"What? You can speak to them?"

"My gifts. I hear animal thought. Cria love chin scratch, want stay with you. Says good heart, speak true words. Cannot lie to animals, they always know."

"Leif, I can't just take them from you." Tomas was flabbergasted.

Leif just smiled and closed his eyes. "They see high mountains and sweet grass. Many peoples on your summer isle, many red-sail ships. Many childrens come to play with them; old-ones come home for end days will care for them. Will have much clean snow they see you will give and the land know nothing but love. Happy place, safe place. They want go very much to your home."

Tomas' jaw dropped, Leif had just described accurately an island he'd never seen. Leif opened his eyes you could tell he had seen Safe Harbor Island in his minds eye, through Tomas' memories that the alpaca in his arms had shown it's shepherd. Longing was in Leif's eyes, bitter happiness. He wanted his beloved animals there, but would miss them when they'd gone. Leif was spellbinding and Tomas was lost entirely he wasn't in a crush, it wasn't infatuation, it wasn't lust over a pretty clean face, Tomas was in love. The head-over-heels, sweep you away without expecting it, fill you to your core with warmth kind of love. Like his alpacas, Leif inspired great depths of feeling. You couldn't help but be taken in by his gentle, steady, strong and peaceful acceptance of the world that filled his persona. He had a great deal of honor; he was nothing but

pure honesty and truthful grace. It was no wonder the animals adored him; they saw the real Leif inside. The purest of souls.

"Would you come with us?"

"Cannot leave, they no let me. I Ger, have no rights. I property of village like Suri."

Tomas felt crushed and angry and almost bereft. Leif reached over to stroke the cria that Tomas still held. "No feel such pain for me Captain Tomas. I be very much liking you too. I am being sorry to cause you poor feelings."

"Is she telling on me?" Tomas asked looking into the big, deep brown eyes of the alpaca cria who cooed and laid her head against Tomas' chest. Such an affectionate little creature.

"Aye. Be careful while here Captain Tomas. No let them know you ger, they be most angry and lose trade. No be making my mistakes."

"They aren't mistakes. You can't choose it, you are or you're not."

"Aye. I know, but law is still there and you no be changing it. Please no let them know what you be. Treat me like animal, no honor, it is expected."

"I'll be careful and I refuse to treat you poorly." Tomas said and Leif looked up and gave him a desperately sad and resigned to loneliness for all time look that clenched his heart.

"Please. For sake of me, be worse on me if you show me kindness. It is law, you must not show me honor. I only talk when talk to, I answer question, I translate. No more. Cannot. I Beg you."

"I agree in protest for your sake."

"Thank you Captain Tomas."

"Just Tomas please. We are alone."

"Thank you Tomas." Leif said turning toward the cottage. "Come it be cold. I make fire to warm you before you be leaving for walk back. Talk outside danger. Many ear." Leif said opening the door and leading Tomas inside.

"Will you be in trouble if I come in?" Tomas was terrified now of hurting this youth even more than he had been.

"No. We have what you call excuse. I am be giving you Suri, it considered trade and hospitality. Law give me at least so much to survive I am not forbidden trade. I am forbidden other things."

"Please tell me. I do not wish to make a mistake that may harm you." Tomas said as Leif took their coats and hung them by the fire. Leif's colorful sweater looked warm as he stoked the fire. Once his bulky coat was off, Tomas got a good look at the young man beneath it. He was perhaps a few inches shorter than Tomas, and his average build was slender but defined, the sweater hugged a nice torso and arms. He was built very much like Ilya was, long graceful lines, but strength in perfect proportions. His face was smooth, high cheek bones, an oval face and strong jaw. One hundred percent male in design. His strong and defiant chin would have been lost under a beard; he was far too nice to look at to cover up with whiskers.

His hair was all one length and cut short at chin level. It parted naturally to the side and Leif kept absently hooking it behind his ears as one side determined to keep falling into his face, hiding half of it in shadow until it was once more tucked back behind an ear. The ends curling up to frame his chin. It was thick, but the strands delicately fine and shimmered like moonlight on snow in the fire.

"Please sit by fire. Lips on you blue Tomas." Leif smiled and Tomas sat in the chair by the fire as Leif settled on the stone hearth itself, hugging his knees. Tomas waited for him to speak.

"The people here do not mean to be cruel. They are good people. Work hard, life not easy here. Summer only two moons longs and even then snow never melt completely. To have many children is god blessing. Lose so many women to birthing. To them, being ger is evil born. God forsaken. Law says honor gods, honor fathers, honor mothers, honor children. To them, they see Ger as turning back on Gods. So they turn backs to one who is bad luck. I bring disfavor from gods if they honor one cast out from light. They seek not to harm me because they are cruel. They are afraid I bring down anger from gods. So I go not into the longhouses where they eat, I drink not their water so I do not taint it. I do not speak to the ones the gods favor. My eye must not look upon, my hand must not touch. I must repent for dishonor until I die and am judged and cast down or forgiven. You must not talk to me Tomas outside unless I am being of service. I am not considered a person. I am an evil born creature that is repenting sins. I work, I sleep, I eat, I drink always alone. If I break my honor again, I will be killed before I can bring down the anger of gods on all. Dishonor has only one chance to be saved. Repeat sins and Die."

"But you're not evil."

"No, am not. I be thinking when Die I may be forgiven."

"There is nothing to forgive you for!" Tomas wanted to cry.

Leif looked up and smiled. "You most kind. I be not forgetting you when leave. I feel good know you thinking me good man. It helps. Thank you."

"I bet they blame you for blizzards? A poor harvest? A natural sickness?"

Leif just nodded.

"Excuses."

"Beliefs."

"Excuses masked as Religion. You don't deserve this!"

"I be making you angry. Forgive, only speak truth." Leif looked sad, it clung to him like a shroud.

"I get angry when people hurt others whether they mean to or not. Leif let me take you from here!"

"I cannot. My life not belongs to me now. Belong to gods and village until I leave on death spirit journey. Then I be free. You take my Suri, in a way I go too then." Leif sighed going to get Tomas's coat off the peg.

"Any longer stay and will then be trouble. Sunset, I must not go out again until light. Only allowed to walk in light, it cleanse my soul."

Tomas took his coat then took Leif's hand and clutched it tightly in silence before he turned and headed back out again.

Leif sat in the chair Tomas vacated and cried. He wanted to go more than anything, wanted to leave and never look back. But as a ger he would never leave, he would live and die in this little cottage he built with his own two hands and live alone for the rest of his natural life.

He prayed he would be forgiven and it would be a mercifully short life.

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Tomas sat with his head in his hands and told Sonja and Alexandre what Leif had told him.

"There's nothing we can do?" Alexandre asked and Tomas shook his head.

"I don't think so. Now I know why I was shown this place. It wasn't to chart an island. It was to find him and help him. We have to stay until I can figure a way out to help him. Gran, he's so sad, so alone! It's cruel!" Tomas threw his empty mug of beer across the room in passionate anger. Sonja raised her eyebrows in perplexity; Tomas never lost control like this. He was acting like his father when it concerned Yuri. Levelheaded and steady as a rock unless his soul bonded was stressed and then he was a passionate whirlwind.

Sonja worried her lip; she did not want to jump to conclusions when Tomas was showing all the signs of a soul connection. He could just be tired and the boy's story was indeed enough to make even the gentlest of people furious. She'd have to see them together to be sure. She didn't want to think of them being soul-bonded; it would make things for them even more painful to endure. She prayed it was a connection like Van's and Ilya's, it would not harm their health to the point of death if they parted. They'd grieve and would never find other partners but they'd live.

Which was more than likely going to happen with Tomas and Leif if Tomas couldn't find a way to take Leif with them, somehow.

Leif was resigned to his fate, he was brought up to believe what was being done to him was something he deserved. He'd take the abuse his whole life and never question it. Tomas showing up was going to be painful to the extreme for Leif. Seeing another Ger with freedom and honor while he had none would make him miserable even more than he already was. Sonja's heart ached for the child. Ached for them both, this was not going to be an easy port of call, not in the slightest.

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Series Title: Following Tides III
Chapter Number: Three
"The Pain Love Brings"
Author: D. Sanders

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The next morning, Leif was waiting for Tomas and Sonja on the pier next to the gangplank. He looked frozen to the bone as they walked down to meet him.

"Goodness Child! How long have you been standing there?" Sonja gasped; wearing the scarf he had given her.

"Not long. Hour maybe."

"An HOUR? Why on earth didn't you tell someone to fetch us?"

"Gran, he can't." Tomas sighed wanting to throw his own coat around Leif to warm him up. "In the future, we'll come to you Leif. Please don't wait for us outside. Gran is never on time."

"That's true. Mercy, warm him up Tomas!"

"Gran, I can't. Do you want to see him suffer?"

"No, no. Oh damn it, just lead me to your beasties Leif, I'm dying to see them."

Leif smiled and nodded leading them back to his home where Sonja got a similar welcome as Tomas. She squealed like a young teenager and settled on a nearby stump, arm full of adorable Cria.

"That one love you much Lady Sonja. Ask no put down and keep scratch."

"Love, I've no intention of putting this darling down any time soon." Sonja laughed getting little trills of contentment the more she scratched. Like Tomas, she was head over heels in love with the affectionate and fascinating creatures.

The old herdsire came up and laid his chin on Leif shoulder. Leif took on a glazed look as if he were in deep conversation with the male. "He says he will pick your herd, he approves and would very much want to choose your herd for you."

"You really can talk to them?"

"Not so much talk as in words. Images, emotions, pictures in my head. They understand our words their language is feeling."

"Love I'd take them all home with me. This will certainly give me something to do when I retire. That's for sure." Sonja smiled as the Dam of the Cria Sonja was holding came over and settled next to Sonja her chin resting on Sonja's shoulder where she sat, whiffing Sonja's hair.

"Dam approve you. They be part of your herd. Dam happy, says you will have tender hand when time shear and no cuts. They sense you healer they no sick when care by you, make them happy." Leif almost had a tear in his eye as the Herdsire went walking through the small herd separating members and nosing them over toward Sonja.

A young male butted Tomas as five dams and their young walked over to gather around Sonja. "He says he young, strong will make journey as Herdsire. All his dams and young he take. Anxious for new pasture he says, he promise you good herd, asks not geld sons and come back for more dams in five turnings. Make large herd, much wool, he tell you when you may geld later."

"How do you know all this?" Tomas asked and before he could catch his breath his head swam with images and emotions. Pride, adventure, strength, peace, mountain trails, Leif combing his fur, tending and clipping toenails. He saw each cria and its dam and saw their names in his mind.

"Wow. Alright Hern, you're the boss. I see what you mean now." Tomas said and the male snorted and nodded then moved off to graze.

"Tomas?" Sonja asked and he shrugged.

"I've no idea Gran, he just popped right in my head." Tomas rubbed a temple. "Is that how you talk to them?"

"Aye. You only other able to hear them. Perhaps it be wizard blood in you make you hear feeling." Leif said looking at Hern who snorted and nodded his head, shaking his neck in confirmation.

The dam next to Sonja turned her head and nibbled her cheek so she'd make eye contact and then it was Sonja's turn to make a face awash in euphoria. "Mercy! What powerful emotions. They're emphatic! That's how they communicate!"

Leif nodded. "Aye. Strong they are, not like ox or sheep. Suri have many emotions, make easier to talk."

"You can talk to other animals?" Tomas asked and Leif nodded.

"Not as easy as Suri but yes. Sheep slow minded, scare easy. Ox lazy. Smarter the beastie, easier to talk to. Dog fun, strong love in dog. Cat always be reminding you how lucky you be to be worth attention." Leif grinned and Tomas laughed.

"I'll have to introduce you to my ship's cat, Czarina, she thinks "the Handmaiden" is hers." Tomas grinned and Leif smiled.

"She is cat. Way they think." Leif grinned right back as the herd wandered off to graze and Sonja stood brushing off her skirts.

"Well, I've had my morning shocks. I guess we'd better move into the marketplace and check out the goods." Sonja said hooking her arm through Leif's. "Support an old lady?"

"You need no support, you fib. Make joy in my heart knowing you Lady Sonja."

"Leif dear, the joy is mine. I never met a stronger empath in my life. Usually it's only human emotions empath's can feel."

"I cannot feel human emotions, only animal. Try with human, feel nothing."

"Frequency Gran. I felt the difference; they feel at a higher mental pitch. Maybe he's only able to hear the higher levels." Tomas said as they walked up the path.

"You're right! That's it. Fascinating, I want to study you Leif. How many more of our brood have these abilities we've never tapped into?"

"Who knows Gran, who knows?" Tomas shrugged as they met up with Alexandre looking over intricately carved furniture in local rustic designs. Deer, elk, alpaca, bears, and woodland themes brightly decorating table legs, headboards and various other pieces of furniture.

"Finally! I thought you'd never bring the lad back woman! Leif good boy, ask the man what he wants for this table here? Beautiful craftsmanship!"

Leif did not make eye contact and translated Alexandre's request. The man replied smiling at Alexandre and totally ignoring the boy.

"He says has matching chairs. Will trade you table for twelve bushels of fruit like you give yesterday. Wife will preserve. No preference, mix preferred. Trade you four chairs for twenty gold or equal value hard money."

"Done!" Alexandre held out his hand and shook on the deal. Alexandre dug out his purse and added two extra gold pieces. The man grinned.

"He says will bring over packed safe for journey and have cart to pick up fruit." Leif translated as Alex shook the man's hand again and nodded before they carried on through the market. Sonja still latched onto Leif's arm. She could get away with it; sometimes being 'old' had its advantages. No one scolded Leif for being a translator and ready crutch. Even if Sonja was perfectly sound. Oh yes, being old had definite advantages. She could feel Leif's comfort in her presence; he'd lacked human contact in far too many years.

Tomas internally thanked his grandmother for being a sly and devious old bat. He certainly couldn't comfort Leif like he wanted to, but she could and did. He could feel Leif's happiness touch him, his genuine affection for Sonja was keen and he appreciated her concern.

The next stop was an alpaca wool market. Colorful blankets, capes, coats, sweaters, scarves and gloves of all shapes and sizes lined the tables and hung on lines. An entire row of stall after stall. Sonja was latched onto Leif dragging him down store after store while she spent a fortune. From virgin bolts of the woven fleece, so thin and tightly woven it could be cut, dyed and sewed like cotton fabric, if wearing layers of this material it would keep anyone warm in sub-zero temperatures. It would make perfect undergarments for cold climes, and using it as lining in other materials would double its original value. Or just simply using it alone as baby blankets or throws while curled up in a chair. Sonja was making enterprising plans for her retirement. Already wondering where she could get her hands on the loom that made this fabric. She found a woman willing to sell her one and that too was bought and paid for with great glee.

She moved next to skeins of yarn in every shade of the rainbow, some still in virgin white for Yuri to work her magic on. She also bought several blankets, one for each of her children and one for her and Alexandre, several more finished sweaters, scarves, mittens, ponchos and capes for the various grandchildren and great-grandchildren, wrapping a bright green scarf around Tomas' neck in the process because it brought out his eyes. She was a woman possessed, and Tomas noticed Leif's face was turned down politely, but he wore an amused smile on his lips.

As they walked away, Tomas almost missed Leif's comment spoken under his breath. "Green does suit much. Match eyes."

Tomas smiled to himself feeling warm to his toes at the compliment as he found a group of his men to cart back Sonja's multitude of purchases.

It was lunchtime and they paused at a stall selling meat pies and ale. Tomas without thinking purchased food for Leif and when Leif did not accept, Tomas' heart fell into his shoes. "Cannot Tomas. But thank you for thinking me."

Tomas wanted to cry. "You can't even eat?"

"Not of their food no. Please no make scene. I fine. Have food in pocket. Eat please Tomas." Leif said sitting down and taking a small piece of what looked like stale bread out of his deep coat pocket, followed by a shriveled half of a roasted onion and washing it down with some clean snow he scooped out of a nearby drift. He looked used to the tasteless humble fare.

Tomas never tasted his meal as it struggled past the lump in his throat. Sonja didn't fare much better. They would now take meals only on the ship if Leif could not join them in public.

Lunch put a damper on the mood, and the rest of the afternoon just saw them walking stalls without seeing much. And by dinner Sonja was ready to drag Leif onto the ship and once more he shook his head.

"Cannot, not much light left. Must go home before dark, days short. I be much enjoy today, will be here in morning again for you."

"We'll come get you." Tomas said Leif smiled.

"No trouble come and wait. Like looking at ship, very big. Biggest I see in life. Beautiful, I come look while wait. I be fine. Have night good sleeping." Leif bowed and then rushed home before he was caught out after dark.

Tomas was in a black mood all night long, ate little and drank a lot. He was in a foul humor. He couldn't stop thinking about Leif and the more he thought about him, the worse his mood became, he got up, went and grabbed a basket and began raiding the greenhouse and the stores in the galley pantry. It was very late and everyone was well in bed by the time he finished packing the basket, capping off his raiding by grabbing a bottle of mead and tucking that into the basket as well before slipping on his coat and casting a cloaking spell about him and walking deliberately towards the small cottage at the edge of village.

He knocked softly at the door and a sleepy and tousled Leif, wrapped in a colorful blanket answered the door. He saw nobody there and thought he must have heard the knock in a dream until the door pushed open by itself and then shut again. Once inside Tomas dropped his spell and Leif stood there in shock. His mouth open in a silent "o".

"Shhh. Just a Cloaking spell." Tomas winked and spoke in a whisper. Striding over, grabbing Leif's hand and steering him to the table. "Here." Tomas set the basket down on the table in front of a now wide-awake Leif.

"What being this?" Leif asked also in a whisper. The light of the dying fire barely illuminating the room.

"Midnight snack. Please take it."

Leif's hands were shaking as he uncovered the basket and saw the succulent bounty before him. "Tomas. Why?"

"Why not?" Tomas replied both voices still hushed as he reached over and opened the bottle of wine, taking out two cups from the basket and pouring them each a drink. Tomas held up his cup. "To you and your health." He took a drink; Leif was still sitting stunned in his chair, hands wrapped around his cup.

"Tomas." Leif spoke his name with wonder. Tomas just reached over and urged Leif to drink.

"Please Leif. Enjoy the moment; no one knows I'm here. No one saw. Please."

"Aye." Leif closed his eyes and drank. It was the sweetest wine he'd ever tasted. "What be this?"

"Mead, it's made with honey off our Isle. Here, eat too. Mead will go to your head if you don't eat with it." Tomas reached in the basket again and laid out cheeses and grapes, soft fresh rolls and bits of cold roasted chicken and pork. Leif shivered, the room was cold and Tomas moved them nearer the nearly banked fire which blazed up a little from Tomas' magical urging as he sat Leif down on a rug on the floor, Tomas sat cross-legged down beside him, pulled Leif's blanket up around his shoulders then he lifted a grape and pressed it to Leif's lips.

"All warm?" Leif nodded in a haze. Tomas smiled. "Good. Now taste."

Leif, too astonished and speechless to argue, let Tomas feed him foods he'd never seen or tasted. Cheeses were creamy and soft. Bread was moist and fresh, the meats full of flavor and the sweet juices from fruit was like ambrosia on the senses.

Leif was lost in sensation. He was swept verily off his feet by Tomas' affectionate attentions as his strong calloused fingers pressed sinful delights and treasures past Leif's lips. He was heady and full by the time Tomas paused, he felt drunk with pleasure as Tomas leaned closer, a hand carding its way through Leif's hair and coming to rest at the back of Leif's neck, pulling him closer. Leif just closed his eyes; he was in a wonderful dreamlike state. Tomas was suddenly his entire world. Tall and ruggedly handsome, broad of chest and shoulder with narrow hips and long sturdy muscled limbs. Short dark hair like the night sky, eyes the color of fresh grass, skin like moon glow. He was as exotically beautiful to Leif as Leif was to him. Desire roared to life and Leif's heart pounded in his ears as he let Tomas pull him closer without resistance.

"I am so very much in love with you." Tomas whispered, his lips so close to Leif's the breath of his whisper could be felt against them. Leif shivered and this time not from cold. No one, not even the trader who had given him his first and only kiss had ever told Leif he was loved before. No one but his mother had ever spoken those words to him and never like this. Never so evidently and utterly true. Leif could feel it in his very soul, he could tell deep down that Tomas had never spoken these words to another and he meant every word spoken with passionate sincerity. Leif's heart swelled to bursting. He couldn't speak, he was taught as a bowstring with sweet anticipation and his lips gently parted in welcome as Tomas' found purchase.

Leif melted into Tomas' arms as he rolled Leif into the rug on the floor. His body half atop Leif's, chest to chest and heart to heart, arms holding each other as they lost themselves to the kiss. Tomas ran gentle kisses across his face, his jaw, nibbled at ear lobes and at his throat. Every touch of his lips making Leif tremble and submit to sweet torture. His hands were lost in Tomas' soft hair as he nipped and dripped kisses across Leif's collarbone.

They were drinking in each other's senses. Breath was coming in sweet gasps of pleasure as Tomas' fingers found the laces of Leif's long fleece nightshirt and deftly pulled them open to expose more of his smooth chest. Sitting up for a moment to pull his own shirt off, a broad chest with a thatch of dark black hair between strong pectoral muscles came into view and Leif's hands reached up to touch the soft skin and softer hair. Hands splayed across twitching chest muscles, he could feel Tomas' heart pounding in time to his own.

Leif was flushed where he lay on his back in the fur rug. His hair fanning out from his pate like a halo. Tomas slid his hands up under Leif's nightshirt and pushed it up, Leif lifting as Tomas removed the garment and tossed it aside. That had been all Leif had been wearing and Tomas was left with no doubt Leif's desire was echoing his own as his hand gently caressed an erection that lay against a smooth firm stomach.

"So beautiful." Tomas' breathed leaning over to nuzzle Leif's aroused sex. Leif moaned in the back of his throat. Tomas took a deep breath and shuddered at the glorious smell of arousal. Leif was a willing virgin, in desperate need to feel loved. Tomas took his time, kissed every inch of exposed skin, tasted every curve, stroked every line until Leif was mewling and weeping with joy as he shuddered and came as Tomas's lips and mouth surrounded his aching flesh.

Tomas discreetly spit the fluid into his palm and then used it in ways that had Leif once more panting and weeping. Fingers probed and pushed, using Leif's semen as a lubricant. Tomas felt Leif relax as he was invaded and once there, Tomas undid his breeches with one hand and shoved them down passed his hips, freeing his own aching need as he continued to caress and prepare his virgin lover with his other hand.

"Relax beloved." Tomas whispered as he positioned himself and pushed.

An aching sob gurgled in Leif's throat, but not from pain but sheer pleasure. His hands gripped Tomas' shoulders as Tomas slowly took his own pleasure. Languid and long drawn out movements, Tomas would not rush this, he loved this man to the point of obsession. He would give to Leif everything he had in his power and make his first experience something he would never forget. Leif needed this, Tomas could feel the desperation fill his core and a light of love and desire settle in his heart.

This was deeper than love; this was a much stronger connection. It was not soul-bound but close enough to feel like one. This was what Van and Ilya shared, a tight spiritual bond that transcended emotions and amplified them. Tomas came in sobs of his own as he crushed Leif's mouth in a devouring kiss to choke back his cries of release. They clung to one another, weeping as one as love took hold and refused to let her sacrifices to fate go. It was bittersweet torture on their heightened senses.

How would they ever face tomorrow? Knowing that come dawn they could not acknowledge this connection to one another and Leif would never be able to leave with Tomas. They would have to part and it would leave them both bereft for the rest of their lives. Because once joined only death would sever their bond.

They cried agonizing tears as they held each other and wept themselves to sleep.

It was first light when they awoke still wrapped in each other's arms, frozen with cold on the floor. Tomas moved them off the hard floor and into the narrow bed as they shivered and crawled under blankets.

"Tomas..."

"I know beloved. I know. I will not be seen when I leave. I would rather die than cause you more pain."

"My heart being already broken, love you with ache in soul. But not ever forget love you show me, worth all pain to know."

"Beloved I'll find a way. I promise."

"Tomas, heart of mine. Make not promise cannot keep. Please."

Tomas just sighed and kissed Leif's hair atop the head resting on his own broken heart. The sun was rising and Tomas sadly crawled out of bed and got dressed again. Leif was curled up in bed wrapped in furs and blankets watching Tomas dress with tears shimmering in his eyes.

Tomas bent to kiss him. "I love you."

Leif smiled solemnly "Love Tomas too. Hurry, being caught must not be heart of mine."

Tomas nodded and vanished from sight again. The door opened then closed and a few sounds of crunching snow underfoot could be heard and then silence.

Leif fell back into the pillows and cried. His heart shattered to pieces even as it swelled with love. Love was indeed a double-edged sword and caused equal amounts of pain and sorrow as it did delight and joy.

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Sonja was on deck waiting in her robe, she'd been up half the night with worry as she heard footsteps coming up the plank and then saw Tomas materialize on deck out of his cloaking spell.

"You're soul bound to him aren't you?"

"Nay, but close enough to hurt like it Gran." Tomas sighed heavily as she took his hand and they walked to his cabin. Tomas was bone weary and his soul felt torn open and bleeding.

"Love we'll find a way." She said as they entered his Cabin and she put the kettle on to boil.

"I said that too and he told me not to make him promises I couldn't keep. Gran I love him so much I can't breathe. I don't know how we're going to survive this torture."

"You will. Hurts like hell, but you will."

"I wish I could be as sure about it as you seem to be. I'm exhausted." Tomas said as she passed him a cup of tea.

"I'm not surprised. You smell like you had a good night though."

"Gran!"

"Hon, please. I know you and you smell like Leif and a few other things unmentionable."

"You seem to be mentioning them just fine." Tomas scowled. Sonja just smiled, waiting.

"Well?" She drawled when no explanation was forthcoming willingly.

"Gods Gran! What do you want? A detailed bloody description?"

"No. I want to hear that Leif smiled at least once last night."

"Aye Gran. I wouldn't trade last night for the world. Happy now?"

"Aye. Get some sleep. I set a guard watch for him. I'm having him brought on board the minute he gets here. I can get away with it, they won't bitch if I order him about and I am ordering him in here with you. No one on board will tell or talk and no one else will come in here. It will be safe and my excuse is I am asking him about the care of our new herd."

"You certainly thought this out."

"Boy, it's called experience and old women get away with murder." Sonja winked leaving Tomas to fall into bed to sleep, it was just newly dawn, he had a few hours left to sleep until morning proper.

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Series Title: Following Tides III
Chapter Number: Four
"Divine Intervention"
Author: D. Sanders

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Leif's eyes were red rimmed as he crawled out of bed, going back to sleep had been futile in effort, his mind was in chaos and his heart in agony. So he just washed his face and dressed warmly to go stare at his beloved's ship until he awakened. He waited until the sun broke the horizon and as the light of day dawned he was free to leave his home. He walked slowly up the path and paused at the gangplank, taking in the majesty of "the Handmaiden" she was a magnificent ship indeed. A voice broke him out of his thoughts.

"S'truth. Early today lad. Come on board, Sonja's orders." The young night guard said from the deck and Leif stood rooted to his place, until Sonja herself came up, still dressed in her robe.

"I thought I felt you. Come up here love." She held out her hand and Leif walked up the plank and took it. Out of sight from the village she hugged him fiercely. "You're hurting child. I could feel you off a mile away with this sort of emotional ache."

"Much pain yes. But good in way. Not be forgetting any of you, for whole rest of life." Leif held her back he loved this woman dearly, she reminded him of his own grandmother.

"We're going to find a way love, have faith in us. We won't leave you behind."

"Please. Make not promises. It not that I trust not. Law for Ger strict. I be not leaving, Gods will be angry and punish village if go."

"You don't believe that do you?"

Leif just shrugged. "After my sins? I never am being forgiven now anyway. I am weak man."

"You are in love. No gods I look to have ever punished a man for something they gave to him in the first place."

Leif looked stunned, he'd never looked at it like that before. "No babe from this love. Wrong."

"Tosh! Come let me tell you about my son and his HUSBAND Ilya and their eight children."

Leif looked stunned again as Sonja led him inside and sat him down in the galley as she made him eat while she talked.

"He turn into woman?"

"Van changed his aspect so they could have children together. Ilya is very much a man. He wore the body of a woman so they could have children. And as soon as he could, Van would change him right back into a man. Those children have two fathers and you've never seen a closer family. They just saw the last of their children off on their own ships. Those two are suffering an empty nest right now."

"I never hear such things. Wizard way much different."

"It's not common knowledge that wizards can go mucking about with people's bodies in that manner. They can though, and they do in cases like Van and Ilya's when it's needed or desired. Like in Tomas' mother's case."

Sonja went on to describe Yuri and how she had been born a male but had always desired to be female. She told how Yuri and Sascha had been bound together since children and the night they changed Yuri's male aspect into a female one and had never changed it back. Yuri was transgendered and living as a female, happy in her new aspect and life. "Tomas would walk through fire for his mother. We all would. She may have been born a he, but Tomas' father loved Yuri enough to make the change and make it permanent. Love is blind to gender Leif. Real love. Like you feel for Tomas and he feels for you. He'll move mountains for you if you give him the chance and believe in him."

"You give me, much to think about. Very confusing but I believe you speak true."

"I do love. You and Tomas belong together and I'm gonna make damn sure you two stay together. Now let me show you to him, he's probably snoring his head off. I only just left him when you arrived." Sonja smiled taking Leif's hand and leading him to Tomas' cabin. "Just go in, I daresay he won't mind." Sonja winked leaving Leif to quietly push open the door and step inside, shutting it with a soft click behind him.

Tomas was flat on his back, spread eagle on the bed. The covers pulled only up to his waist and his bare chest rose and fell with the breath of sleep. Leif's heart lurched, Tomas was so very handsome and Leif remembered the feel of that soft fur on his chest beneath his fingers. He quietly took off his coat and laid it on a chair then padded softly over to pull the covers up over Tomas. Intending just to watch him sleep a while when Tomas' eyes blinked open sleepily and he smiled. "Leif? What are you doing here?"

"Could not sleep. Go back sleep heart of mine. I sorry I wake."

"Nonsense. Get in here." Tomas smiled, flicking the laces on Leif's shirt. "Lose this though would you beloved?"

Leif smiled and stood, pulling off his shirt over his head and half way off felt a hand tug his belt free. "And these too while you're at it." Tomas' voice was a sleepy and husky. Leif could no more deny Tomas his wishes as he could deny breathing. So he complied and slipped nude into Tomas' bed. Tomas wrapped around him, kissing him soundly and just held Leif against his chest.

"Sleep beloved. Sleep where I can feel you near."

Suddenly Leif was very tired he had been running on pure misery and crying always made one weary. But feeling Tomas' heartbeat against his cheek, feeling warm arms hold him loosely, Leif nestled close and both were soon asleep.

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Tomas awoke to the feeling of being petted. Leif's fingers were stroking the hair on his chest. "I feel like a cat." Tomas chuckled and turned his face to Leif's.

"Soft like cat. Like your fur."

"I must say I like the lack on you. No face that lovely should be hidden by whiskers."

"Cannot grow anyway. Forbidden. But agree with Tomas. Whiskers be good only for catching crumbs. Not like. But wear for good reason here. Keep face warm."

"True. But I can't abide a beard. They itch. And speaking of which if I don't shave today I'll be scratching my chin raw." Tomas chuckled rubbing the dark stubble on his chin.

"Aye, new whiskers itch much. Want I shave you?"

"Razor at my throat already beloved?" Tomas grinned and Leif chuckled.

"Tomas most funny. Come I make you clean shave. I also say face too nice to be being covered up with beard." Leif smiled and stood, pulling Tomas into the bathroom across the room then finding the razor and cake of soap on the sink lathered up Tomas' face. He had a gentle touch and soon Tomas was sporting the closest shave he'd ever had. Not a razor burn in sight. "Love, you are wonderful."

"I shear alpaca, whisker much easier." Leif smiled washing off the razor as he felt a smooth chin slide up his spine giving him the shivers.

"We'd better make an appearance. As much as I'd love to spend all day in here with you naked, we shouldn't push our luck."

"Aye." Leif agreed as they dressed and headed out to face a very long day trying to pretend they didn't love each other desperately.

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It was positively maddening wandering around the marketplace all day not being able to make eye contact or touch. Tomas was looking through some nice bear fur pelts when Johan approached and glowered at Leif.

"What being this Ger?" Johan held up the basket Tomas had brought food to Leif in the night before.

"That would have been food I gave to him. Trade is not forbidden him is it not?" Tomas asked and Leif's relief washed over Tomas' senses. He was grateful for Tomas' fast thinking, he was terrified.

"Filthy Ger. I watch you, you being once more too friendly with Trader. Taking no offense Captain Tomas, beware the Ger, he evil soul." Johan's voice dripped with malice.

"I'd have to disagree with you. He has been nothing but a great deal of help to us. I am a healer! I can sense duplicity! He is an honest, thoughtful and honorable lad." Sonja shot right back and Johan's lip curled.

"See with eyes of mother, blind to fault. Women no can see this evil."

"Again, I disagree. I may be a woman, but I've lived more turnings and seen more of this world than you good sir. I have seen evil, true evil. I have seen men rape and pillage. I have seen whole fleets destroyed, I have seen children murdered and I have seen good men suffer in the name of the gods when it is man's will and judgment that persecute him. Nay Johan, I have seen evil and it is not in this man-child!" Sonja spoke vehemently and Johan narrowed his eyes. She'd struck a nerve and the wrong one.

"Filthy Ger, Gods punish you they will for blinding good old women with your shadow. Go, now."

Leif was trembling visibly, his head hung in shame as a crowd gathered to watch. Leif nodded and without meeting anyone's eyes took a step forward to leave.

"What has he done? Eat food I gave him because he traded us alpaca? Treat us with respect? Do as he was TOLD to do? Why are you punishing him?" Tomas asked desperate to stop this madness.

"His black Shadow creep from evil spirit over hearts of good decent traders. He foul beast, dirty Ger." Johan turned and hurled the basket at Leif who was now a good twenty paces away, he had not paused he was doing as he was told. The basket hit Leif on the back and he stumbled but did not turn or look up just kept walking. "Faster Ger! Foul Beast!"

"This is crazy! That boy did nothing!" Sonja was aghast, she could feel Tomas' anger raging as he tried to contain it and she felt Leif's utter terror.

"Good madam, forgive my harsh words. I fear he too close to you. Hear he even on your ship, will send holy man to cleanse his shadow from vessel. He know not to be going on your ship."

"I TOLD HIM TO! HE TRIED TO TELL ME 'NO' SEVERAL TIMES BUT I TOOK HIM THERE, I MADE HIM GO! I NEEDED TO ASK HIM QUESTIONS! DO NOT BLAME THE CHILD FOR MY ACTIONS AND DOING AS I TOLD HIM TO!" Sonja yelled, her own anger coming through.

"See? His cursed spirit cause good people anger. He will not be troubling you again."

"What are you going to do to him?" Tomas' voice shook, he too was now terrified.

"Gods will decide his fate."

"What is THAT supposed to mean?" Sonja demanded, clutching Tomas' hand. Leif had TRIED to tell them what would happen and they still got him into serious trouble.

"Just that. He will face Gods for punishment. I will translate for you now in place of Ger."

"I'm done for today now. You've ruined my mood!" Sonja growled and Johan patted her shoulder like she had no brain in her head at all and was a weak, overly emotional ninny of an old woman, needing indulgence.

"There now madam. Trouble Ger is gone, your mood lift soon from his evil."

"Oh horse shit! Don't you patronize me! I have GRANDSONS older than you! Tomas we're done here!"

"Aye." Tomas and Sonja hurried back to "the Handmaiden" and once up the plank, Tomas shifted into a cloaking spell.

"Hurry son! Stop this insanity!"

"No need to tell me Gran. Have Grandaa make a simulacrum spell, make it LOOK like I am here walking around decks!"

"Aye. Go!"

Tomas, thoroughly cloaked, raced to Leif's home. He rushed in and found Leif sobbing with hysteria curled up in a fetal position on the bed.

"Beloved!"

"Tomas, Oh no Tomas! Leave! Please, beg you leave! If they being find you here worse! Much worse!" Leif begged not knowing where Tomas stood in the room with him still being invisible.

Tomas was going to reply when the door was kicked open and Johan strode in with four very large men. Tomas barely got out of the way before they almost trampled him. Johan grabbed Leif by the hair and pulled him to his knees and onto the floor. "Filthy Ger! Think I not see you turn eye to traders? Think we not see you have look of one that taste man flesh? You stink like woman! Second sin cannot be proven, Gods will see you punished! They see all!"

A man with a sinister smile stepped forward, he wore a necklace of bear claws around his neck, held a staff with a bear skull atop it and had a beard so matted and encrusted with food it made Tomas shiver as he stood in silent horror, ready to do whatever it took to save Leif. "I come being checking on you this morning. Fear soul temptation during your penance. Find food of lovers, two cups wine used. Proof of spilled man seed by fire. You take lover last night, which trader be bedding you?"

"My own seed you found, it forbidden not to touch one self, no other here. Find two cups because I share thank you drink with Captain Tomas who bringing me food for Trade of herd. No one blame good ship crew. No Ger outcasts be making! I Ger, no one else! I take punishment, I prove they being good peoples. They be Gods blessed people! Will give life to allow good people stay welcome in Skanda! They bring much good here. If must punish me, I take with all soul ready!" Leif lied and begged to save Tomas and his crew, his eyes desperately pleading that Tomas stay silent.

"You lie, but cannot prove. Take him up to holy height. If the gods find favor he will return in seven days, he will return as Ger to finish his penance. Be lying and death claim him!"

Four men grabbed Leif and shoved him out the door, Tomas followed. They walked for what seemed miles up a steep mountain trail to a tiny cabin that had no glass in its wide open windows, no hearth to build a fire in and no door to bar out the cold. Tomas watched in horror as they made Leif hand them all of his clothes, leaving him naked in the freezing temperatures. This was a death sentence and they KNEW it! This wasn't giving Leif to the "gods" this was giving him to the cruel elements! He'd die by nightfall of hypothermia. No one could survive seven days of bitter cold with nothing to his name but his pride and pride was all Leif had as he stood there rigidly defiant. Refusing to cover his nakedness as he stood there proudly, nor even shiver willingly in front of men who sneered at him.

"If you not come down in seven days, we know truth. Bones will lay with others here, no burning rites, no honor." The men turned and began to walk away and Leif felt invisible arms enfold him from behind and a coat wrap around him.

"Tomas, no. Cannot." Leif whispered as the men vanished down the trail.

"Bullshit. I'm not going to let you die. This is my fault!" Tomas whispered right back holding tightly Leif's shivering form.

A crack of a twig made them both turn and a huge golden alpaca stepped from the trees. Leif fell to his knees, pulling Tomas with him. A strong voice, not an image or an emotion but a clear voice echoed in both their heads. Leif prostrated himself in the snow, flat on his belly in reverence, dragging Tomas down face first in the snow beside him.

"Man child, my chosen one who hears my creatures and Man gifted of goddess sister powers listen well and believe. Leif, child of honor, never have you lost faith, never have you doubted. Tested by man in sorrow your hand and heart never turned from the light. We watch, we know, we see. Fear not, we will not forsake you. Believe." The voice began and then lips nibbled Leif's hair in a kiss and warmth flooded him. He felt no cold and a great peace settled in his heart.

"Man, my sister and brothers to whom you look also mark you as theirs. Share god blood, god powers. Yes, did not listen to my Leif, but not to blame. Know not all the laws man made here in my domain. You listen to god laws written upon your soul. Believe in my sister and brothers who claim you as theirs and return to your ship and wait. We will not sunder what is to be. Long parted my brother's servants and mine. Since the time the great seas rose and the waters took the lands. My servants isolated, my brother's servants too far from these waters. It is time to find each other again, to work as brothers. Change comes to those who wait. Did I not show you this path in your god wrought stone?" Tomas' mouth went bone dry. This was a god talking in his head; his whole body was numb with shock, but nodded in answer to the deity's question.

"Go and wait. Dawn of Seventh Day look to the path. See changes made, wrongs righted. Speak to my healer-daughter of the south; Tell her what I have told you. She too, always believed in me. Held my hand in her darkest days, saw my light. She will recognize our meeting in your eyes. Now go son of my sister flesh. Stay with me, son of mine. My light will shelter you."

Tomas and Leif looked at each other and Tomas laid his hand to Leif's warm cheek lightly before standing and bowing to the shining golden beast and obeying. The beast nodded to Tomas and then bent a long neck once more to affectionately nuzzle Leif's hair. "Lament no more my Son. You are my chosen one. You will bring change here. Then must leave and take my light with you beside the god warrior people of my sister. Just as my daughter went with them, so will you."

"Father, I believe in you. I always have."

"I know my son. Your faith strong. He is your warrior protector for you my chosen one. Take the love I send to you, it is not against our Will. Man laws, man hate, man ignorance, man punishments. We do not punish for what we send. We do not punish at all. We only guide, we only teach, We gave you free will and ask you heed the Laws of ours that are but three, written on the souls of all men to know. First, Give without thought of reward. Second, to Help all in need without pause, for you one day may be the one in need. And Last and most important. Love each other without conditions or reserve."

"Sonja told me that Father."

"Aye. My daughter knows. Listen to her well, she will never lead you from my path. She walks it beside you. "

"Aye." Leif shivered with wonderment and not from cold as he sat with the golden alpaca in the snow, a patch of brilliant spring grass and white snowdrop flowers around them.

"Rest against me my son. Sleep and Dream of Knowing. Show you Truth you need know. I will wake you in seven days."

Leif did as told, curled up against the soft golden wool against his side and slept and Dreamed.

~*~*~*~*

Sonja was pacing Tomas' cabin, Alexandre by her side when Tomas returned. She was about to frantically burst into a million questions when she deflated and fell into a chair.

"You've seen a GOD!"

"Woman don't talk crazy!"

"No Grandaa. She's right. He said you'd know."

"Tell me everything he said!" Sonja hurried to grab Tomas' hand and Tomas told her, every unbelievable moment of it.

"He was warm. It's ten degrees below zero out there and Gran I swear I touched Leif and he was WARM! If I doubted the Gods at all, even after huge golden alpaca's start talking in great booming voices in my head, if I doubted Leif's instant recognition of him, if I doubted anything up until that moment, that right there would have made me a believer. I smelled roses!"

"I was a girl. Probably no more than ten when a huge golden polar bear began coming to me. Telling me I was going to leave one day and sail the world and bring people together that had been torn asunder. He smelled of roses, he spoke in my head, told me I'd marry a man with the flesh of his sister and my children would spread throughout the world, bringing light to shadowed places. I doubt not Tomas nor should you. He came to me only in my dreams, but they were very, very real."

"I need a drink!" Alexandre bellowed from his chair and Tomas smiled at his Grandfather.

"Pretty shocking to hear you're the spawn of a goddess isn't it? He called Leif his 'chosen'; he called me 'son of my sister flesh'. That can only mean one thing can't it?"

"Aye son. Wizard gifts have to come from someone first do they not? I'm pretty sure it's pretty diluted by now, but you cannot deny you're different. Why do healers and wizards live so long? Why can we do things no one else can? We're here for a reason Tomas. Only they know that reason. Moreover, when they deign to intervene personally? You'd better do as told!"

"Aye." Tomas said falling into thought. Sonja and Alexandre excused themselves to leave him when Tomas felt a presence tug his senses. It felt exactly like he had felt in the presence of the alpaca God. He followed it up onto the deserted deck and then down the gangplank to the water's edge. A dolphin was there and it clicked at him, swam away down the shore and then back. It wanted Tomas to follow him, so he did.

Past the edge of the village to a small inlet. There on a rock, sat a stunning woman, her gown undulating like the sea, falling into the waters at her hidden feet, her skin was scaled like a fish and her hair, long, blue-green gossamer fins. "Sit my son." Her voice was like the waves crashing on the sand. Tomas sat on the beach, cross-legged, facing her in awe.

"My brother who called you. I who lead you. Change comes in time, change comes slowly, and no mortal may see all things as we see. Think you not simply-minded Tomas of my blood. We come not for trifles, but to guide and to teach. Teach you now what you feel but do not know. Feel the tides, they ebb and they flow; feel the air as it cools. The ice is growing thicker, the land

is returning once more. All things change, in time. One day when man no longer remembers these times, they will return to the lands they lost. Wiser yes, but still man. Memories are short, times past forgotten. Mistakes will be made again and the cycle repeated." She began and Tomas saw things in his mind he could never hope to describe.

Tall buildings made of steel and iron, huge metal ships, millions of people on vast areas of dry land. He saw those cities laying in ruins deep beneath the seas. Relics of a fallen history.

"Those were your ancestors. Great civilizations that used and wasted brought this rising of the sea. Learned too little too late. Failed to listen to our chosen ones and paid the ultimate price. My chosen ones, my most favored children, my red-sails. My sons and daughters bring peace. You are justice, you are protection, and you are charged with the duty to be my warriors. You guard the ones whom my brothers send to you. It is their voices that change times. You carry them to be heard by mankind torn asunder. You already guard the current chosen ones with you. Those whom my land brothers touch. Sonja, the mother protector. Ilya, the scale of human balance. Yuri, the healer of souls. Leif the voice of truth, the song of those with no songs."

Tomas just sat there, imprinting her words on his psyche for all time.

"My children of my flesh are stronger because it is their duty to protect. You carry my blood, thus you carry my gifts. You pass my gifts onto your children and they theirs. I gave my children freewill and as you have learned some of my children over changing times have turned from my light. Met you them you have, those wizards who take my blood to court tempting darkness. They lay in shadow. My light lies in you, my red-sails. You must grow stronger, reach out further. You must always take those sent to you from my brothers and reach out to all who will listen. There is much of this world you have yet to reach. Remember your duty and reach, to teach, to make mankind remember, to give hope, to restore faith. Voice of Truth in peril. In seven days when my brother brings Leif down from his teachings, one of my sons will seek to betray his birth-duty as my son, he already likes in darkest shadows. He will feel the loss of his control and power over this land, it is he who made the corrupt laws of man that Leif endured, that Leif will cast ever into darkness. It is then Leif will be in greatest danger. We only guide and we only teach. It is you, our mortal chosen who must protect each other. It falls to you Tomas to protect the one my brother sent to you. You are Brothers, Comrades, Lovers. To my warriors are the chosen sent. Alexandre protects Sonja-chosen. Vangel protects Ilya-chosen. Sascha protects Yuri-chosen. You, Tomas shall protect Leif-chosen. As it was years before you current chosen, as it will be after your mortal lives fade."

"Always my mother." Tomas replied and the goddess smiled.

"Always for all times. The cycle will ever repeat until end times. I will send my warriors and my brothers will send to them the chosen. You teach others to: First, Give without thought of reward. Second, to Help all in need without pause, for you one day may be the one in need. And Last and most important. Love each other without conditions or reserve. THOSE are the laws of this world. Continue to Heed them well. Tomas, my warrior son."

The goddess fell like rain back into the sea and Tomas sat there for a very long time unmoving. He had not felt the cold until she vanished; now his bones were frozen solid as he returned to his ship. Stunned with Divine Interventions and shocking revelations.

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Series Title: Following Tides III
Chapter Number: Five
"Truth in Peril"
Author: D. Sanders

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Leif awoke feeling rested and warm. Golden fleece still beside him. "Wake my chosen. It is time." The voice was soft and almost sad in Leif's head and Leif just turned and embraced the Alpaca God's neck.

"I not being afraid. I believe." Leif said and the gentle puff of an alpaca kiss touched his brow.

"I know my chosen. Your trials you face have never been ones we would see visited on our children. That makes us sad. We do not seek suffering. But there are Laws even Gods must follow. We cannot take away suffering, we can only counsel. Suffering and Pain go hand in hand with Free Will."

"But so does Love and Joy. I learn that when meeting Tomas. Hurt yes, but no be trading joy. You send me joy and most grateful I be."

"Ah, dearest. That is why you are my chosen. My voice of Truth. Now come, we must walk."

The alpaca stood and Leif with him. Leif realized then he was no longer naked. He wore a simple white robe. Open to his navel with a simple belt at his waist and stopping at his knees. He was barefoot and his hair was crowned in snowdrop blossoms. The flowers of summer, that bloomed for only one day at the midsummer solstice. It was still late-autumn. He walked with his arm across the large Alpaca's withers and where the golden God tread snow melted and green grass dotted with snowdrops were left in his wake. He smelled of floral scents Leif had no name for, his coat warm and soft. Leif walked as if in a dream, he felt no fear, no hate, no pain and no cold, just the complete serenity of inner-peace as they moved toward the village, the sun slowly rising in the east.

Tomas was up all night. And just as the first rays of false dawn permeated the sky, he set off fireworks from his fingers. Waking the entire village as they came out still half asleep Tomas stood at the edge of his ship at the top of the gangplank. Addressing them all once they'd gathered to see what the commotion was. "He's coming. I'd recommended you all go and greet him with the honor he deserves."

"The Ger will not return! You know not our Laws! God Forsaken! Ger foul unnatural beasts! Gods will punish his sins!" The Holy shaman spat and Tomas glared at the old Wizard.

"I know the Laws better than you old man. Or rather I just follow them better than you. You know very well what is written on your soul! First, Give without thought of reward. Second, to Help all in need without pause, for you one day may be the one in need. And Last and most important. Love each other without conditions or reserve. The Law of Ger is a falsehood. Man created. You will repent yourself old man!"

"Trader know nothing! Come to path then! Nothing come! See yourself! No Ger come back from God Holy Height! Ger accursed! Gods will punish! See my people! See the TRUTH! Ger will not return!" The old shaman, with a righteous sneer of triumph led his people to the edge of the village as a golden light filtered down from above. It had been seven days of freezing rains and snow. Temperatures sub-zero during even daylight hours, at night it grew so cold, even with fires

blazing in all hearths people awoke to frost on top of their bedding furs! The Ger would not have survived the first night. Tomas strode up to the front of the crowd beside the old shaman. Sonja and Alexandre right behind him.

"You Filthy Ger too! It be your man-seed I be finding in Ger dirty cottage!" The shaman growled like the bear totem he tried to emulate. Tomas smiled, eyes fixed to the path.

"Oh Aye. I don't deny it, Leif is my beloved and my lover you snooping busy body. Sniffing about in his furs like a dog looking for a bone. He did not lie it was his semen you found. Mine was... elsewhere. Did you just now figure that one out old boy? Do I threaten your manhood? Is that why you torment men like us here? Are you afraid we might want you or something? Hate to break it to you, you stink, you need to wash that nasty beard free of crap and the rest of you too for that matter. In your current state a pig wouldn't bed you willingly."

"Dirty Ger!"

"I beg to differ. I think you're an intolerant, self-righteous, power-hungry, insecure, cruel bastard who got a hard-on once for another man and either got turned down or got scared and then abused your power and punished the man you lusted after and then continued to punish "gers" like him, like YOURSELF ever since. Am I close? I think I am spot on actually. It makes me sick!"

The whole village stared at the men arguing, jaws agape. Tomas was right; the Ger laws had only come into being within the last forty years. The first Ger punished and dishonored had been the Shaman's own kin. Tomas was opening several eyes. Including Johan's.

"You talk against the Gods! You will leave at once Trader!" The shaman spat, furious.

"Oh no. I think I'm going to stick around for a moment here. Making sure you behave yourself. I'm not leaving until the show is over."

Just then the crowd gasped. And the whole field of snow turned to grass and flowers before them like a carpet of midsummer. The frigid air warming by leaps and bounds. The Shaman's eyes widened.

Leif still walking serenely beside his God came to the edge of the village just as dawn broke. Tomas smiling at him with deepest love and affection, The shaman bearing a look of wrathful fury and the entire populace of enraptured villagers were gathered there waiting for him to arrive.

Tomas went to one knee. The villagers following suit. The shaman sputtered with indignant rage still standing. "Trickery! Magic! Trader Ger filth helped you! You should be Dead dirty GER!!"

"Nay, I am not dead Shaman Oleg. I be being very much alive. I be thinking you should be bowing to God. Show no honor to him Shaman."

"A GOD? THAT? It be one of your beasties! Just filthy wizard Ger magic! How else he know you be coming alive? He be doing this to trick us! Save his Ger lover! Stinking Ger, trader magic nothing more!"

"Nay is not. Very much real Shaman. When I be being taken up to Holy Height, being stripped naked to live seven days, You be knowing I should die, just like other Ger you send to die, sad bones laying there, denied honor and cruel death. Many sad spirits live on holy height sent to die horrible death Like your kinsman, Æinridi, who only crime in life be he loved Thorir. Thorir much

love Æinridi. No crime at all, nothing but good honor love. When you no could have Æinridi, you grow deep jealous, you hate lover Thorir, you take Æinridi up mountain, he beg you not! You Rape kill him, Thorir come, find Æinridi soul lost! Thorir rage, fight him not fair, no magic Thorir have. Soul lost! You blame Gods punish and send both to die! Make good people believe! Later follow Asgaut and Brand, Gæda and Øystæin and much other. Your hate has sent you into shadow. Kill us all in hate you try! Because no could have love of one you wanted. It not being us with evil soul, is you. Soul lost in Shadow, many years gone in darkness now. You being in Lost faith, you turned back on Gods. Embrace hate you did. Repent now and being soul clean again. Let go loss, let go jealousy, let go anger, let go hate! Law says, Love each other without conditions or reserve! Ger is just one of many good loves. All equal in eyes of Gods!" Leif said to the shaman then turned to face Tomas. Love shone brighter than the sun as their eyes met.

Leif walked forward and Tomas stood to walk and meet him halfway where Tomas knelt again before Leif and took his hands in his own. As he knelt his own clothes visibly bleached into a blinding white and his own hair was suddenly crowned with the small white blooms. Leif had appeared before them in wedding white, his intended now matched him and met him on the field as the sun shone down upon them as the sun rose above the horizon. This was to be their bonding day.

"I am your Protector. Your Friend. Your Brother. Your Lover. I was lead to you as you were lead to me. Now and always will I be by your side beloved. I love you, and bond myself to you as your husband. If you will but have me." Tomas vowed kissing Leif's hands he held. Leif smiled down, love shining in his eyes.

"Heart of Mine Tomas. I go where you go. Friend, Brother, Lover too. Meant for you as meant for me, Soul love in us deep, a strong bond we be sharing. Now, always together, my husband, my mate, my life." Leif replied as Tomas stood.

The Alpaca God walked forward and first kissed Leif's brow then Tomas' as his head dipped low and he rested his soft golden fleece upon the joined hands between them. Upon their ring fingers, light coalesced in blinding radiance as two golden bands appeared on their hands. The same brilliant shade of gold of the God joining them together.

Their vows of love had been spoken before the God himself and the union divinely blessed.

From the sea dolphins, seals and sea lions sang a deafening chorus of jubilation and all eyes turned to see a goddess standing there on the waters. She smiled and held up her hands and a rainbow streaked across the sky. "Tomas! Charge you do I protect the Chosen Voice of Truth. Remember thy duty! Remember the Laws written upon on your soul Flesh of my Flesh, Blood of my Blood! First, Give without thought of reward. Second, to Help all in need without pause, for you one day may be the one in need. And Last and most important. Love each other without conditions or reserve!"

"Aye. Lady mother. I vow to you, to your brother Gods and to my beloved. I will not forget!"

"Leif! Chosen one of my Brother, Voice of Truth, the Song of Those with no Songs, I charge you too. Forget not thy duty. Go with my Red-Sails. Speak Truth to all and for all men to hear. Give voices to beasts in need, teach others what Truth you now know!"

"Aye, Lady mother. I vow."

"Then be blessed and let no man tear asunder the laws written on all men's souls." The goddess faded into the sea and the Alpaca turned to Leif.

"Truth in Peril. Guard well Protector of my Chosen." He ordered.

"Aye my Lord. Always." Tomas said as the Golden God then turned to Sonja who stood next to her husband in awe.

"My daughter chosen. Mother Protector. Long have you served me strong and faithful, I am pleased." He said and his form shifted into a huge polar bear in the same golden color as he walked over to her and she wept into his fur as she hugged his neck and he licked her face.

"Cry not daughter chosen. Much work for me must still be doing. Teach well the lessons to the children who follow. Return to Safe Harbor. Raise the new herds, teach the children. Pass on the many lessons you have learned. Come to me when your years expire. But not so soon as you fear beloved chosen, much work you still have before you." He said and Sonja nodded. He then turned to Alexandre.

"Great Warrior, kept safe my chosen through many Perils. Saved her in her darkest hour, loved her through her brightest, and made Nine healthy warriors together. Time to rest Warrior. Time for protecting over, time for simply loving now. This must be last voyage. Son of my Sister Goddess."

"Aye my Lord. I know. I think I can handle just loving her here on out. Always have and always will." Alexandre replied and the Polar Bear simply faded into golden motes on the sunlight.

No one spoke, no one dared breathe. They had just witnessed a Ger marriage that the Gods themselves not only blessed but had officiated themselves for all to bear witness. Proving that for years the Island of Skanda had been following a false prophet. Persecuting and tormenting innocent men in the name of the Gods.

Tomas stood behind Leif, his arms wrapped around his shoulders. Watching The shaman like a hawk watched a mouse. Oleg was fuming with hatred. Johan was the first to disengage from the crowd and he fell weeping at his son's feet.

"Forgive. Son please forgive. Beg you I do."

"Father. Please not be begging. You, listen to false words only. You believe in heart they from Gods. You did only what you believe to be good and true. I know. Nothing to forgive my father. I never stop loving my father. Never will." Leif held open his arms and his father crushed him in an embrace.

"Lies! Deception! Johan do not be fooled!"

"Feh! I only being fooled by you! Do you not feel the God's light on your soul? Not deception! Real!"

"Trickery!"

"Nay! Not. Look at our people touched! Only you seem not to feel Truth!"

"Ger! Curse upon you!" The shaman in his fury raised his hand and Tomas held out his hand and the power the shaman threw at them glanced harmlessly aside.

"I am much stronger than you Old Man. Raise your hand to my spouse again and I will judge you with the powers given to me. My duty in this world is to protect it from shadow men like you. This is your only warning. Turn to the light or be cast out for all time."

"Blasphemy! WICKED GER!"

The shaman never finished raising his staff. Light encased him and he fell lifeless to the ground. He slept a sleep he would never awake from. He lived still but forever in dream.

"Perhaps in dreams you will once again see the light. You will awaken if you let go of your hatred old man." Tomas said turning to Johan.

"He is your kinsmen, He is yours to care for."

"Aye Captain Tomas sir. Sven! Take him home. Let sleep in own bed. Dream of Light I pray."

Several young men carried the old Shaman off home. The people would tend his fire to keep him warm while he slept.

The rest turned to Leif. "I cannot be being new Shaman. I must leave with husband. Other work I need be doing. Need not shaman if all listen and remember what happen today. As Gods say, we all be having Laws written on soul. Must need be reading them with hearts." Leif smiled as Tomas tucked an arm around his shoulders. The Warmth of the God's presence was fading, the true season's temperatures were returning and Leif was shivering standing half dressed and barefoot in the snow.

"I will be taking my beloved in to warm him. Let us feast tonight in celebration!" Tomas cried and everyone cheered. He reached out to shake Johan's hand. "I know it's a bit late. Seeing as he is already my husband. But may I also have his father's blessing?"

"Aye. With joy." Johan smiled and shook Tomas' hand.

"Then until tonight." Tomas smiled scooping Leif up into his arms and carrying him across the deepening snow. Leif was freezing cold to the touch and Tomas was not about to have him walk barefoot in snow.

Once up the Gangplank Tomas set Leif down and leaned over to kiss him tenderly. "I love you." He sighed as he stepped back from the kiss. Leif smiled up at him and wrapped his arms around Tomas' waist.

"I be being much love with you too Tomas heart of mine. Seven days dream of this day. Five-year weep for believing never to have, nineteen year long for."

"Ah beloved, no more. Whatever road we take now, we take together."

"Aye." Leif smiled and Tomas grabbed his hand.

"Come on, I'd better go introduce you to my parent's. Mum will kill me when she finds out I got married without her here." Tomas grinned and Leif laughed and let Tomas lead him down stairs toward their cabin.

"We had no choice. Gods marry us, Tomas not even time to propose me before I be being given to him in white! Not that I be minding. I think she being forgive."

"You don't know me mum. I'm in for a guilt trip for the rest of my life over this. Divine Intervention or not!" Tomas laughed as they reached their cabin and shut the door behind them.

Series Title: Following Tides III
Chapter Number: Six
"A New Life"
Author: D. Sanders

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Tomas and Leif had just walked in the door when a voice in the mirror shouted his name.
"TOMAS!"

"Mum? Daa? Vangel? Ilya, Andre? Why are all of you doing calling me at once?" Tomas asked as faces undulated in his mirror. Leif stood jaw hanging to his chest as people's faces churned in the mirror making him almost seasick.

"What do you mean why? We all just get every mirror on every ship broadcasting to us as my son is standing there in a field getting married, by two GODS no less, and he asks us what we're doing here?" Sascha grinned, he and Yuri the clearest of images.

"You saw?" Tomas asked and Yuri smiled, dabbing her eye with her sleeve.

"Aye baby, we all saw. Oh gods." Yuri croaked in happy tears and Sascha chuckled.

"Your Mum's been blubbering since it started." Sascha grinned turning to look at Leif frozen stiff at Tomas' side. "Well? Are you going to introduce us to your handsome spouse son or not?"

"Oh Aye! Aye. What I was bloody coming in here to do when you threw me for a loop Daa!"

"Boy gets married by two gods and WE throw him for a loop?" Van teased and Ilya chuckled.

"Ha, ha Uncle Van."

"Oh do get on it with!" Sergei bellowed and Tomas just shook his head resigned to always having one demanding and quirky family to deal with.

"Leif, let me point out the faces then." Tomas said literally pointing with his finger and as he spoke their names, each face took on a clarity as it was spoken. "That's me Daa and me mum. Sascha and Yuri."

"I am most being honored meeting you. Tomas and Sonja much telling me of you. Make joy in heart meet good Mother and Father."

"Oh how sweet. The joy is all ours Leif son. Welcome to the family." Yuri smiled sniffing and dabbing her eyes and Leif was enamored. Sonja had said she was beautiful; she was more than beautiful and much, much younger than he had expected. She could only have been in her mid-thirties but looked in her mid-twenties. Fabulous, blemish free skin in a dark tan color. Tomas favored his father's coloring but indeed had his mother's stunning green eyes. He could see why Tomas adored his mother. She was easy to fall in love with. The alpaca would just adore her.

"Aye welcome son. What a morning you two had! We saw it all from the minute you appeared on the field. It was right confusing and none of us know what the hell happened to lead up to this shocker, but I assume we'll be getting details? Right Tomas?"

"Aye Daa. Give me a minute there's all of you here you know! There are a lot of introductions to make. One bloody thing at a time Daa!" Tomas rolled his eyes and then hurriedly introduced the rest of the family in the mirror. His grandparents, his Brother and his wife, His uncles Van and Ilya, and so forth and so on. Once the family members were named off. Tomas sat on the edge of the table and pulled Leif into his arms, smiling at his husband and looking into stunning blue eyes. He was looking at Leif as he narrated the last week of events to waiting ears.

"How do I make this short? It's complicated."

"I be thinking just tell all, no way keeping short." Leif grinned and Tomas chuckled.

"Aye, you're right. Make yourselves comfortable and no interrupting with questions until I'm bloody finished or we'll be here all damn day." Tomas began as Leif settled beside him on the table and they held hands while Tomas talked.

"Okay, you're all getting the bare bones version here. You all know my strange vision in my bowl. That was apparently a God Directive. If you want to get technical EVERY TIME we scry, we're getting a god giving us counsel and advise. So I hare off here. I'm not here an hour when I see this face come walking in and lose it, I was drooling in my shoes."

"Tomas never be telling me that!"

"Well love it was true!" Tomas laughed and continued.

"That didn't last long before I felt sick to my stomach. Long story short, they call men like us here "Gers" and up until this morning and for the past forty some odd years men like us literally were persecuted. No rights, no honor, no social interaction. It was treated damn near like leprosy. And the only reason we even met Leif in the first place was he could speak our language and they assigned him as our interpreter. That night he showed us his animals, and we got a new herd of beasties coming home with us that will knock all your socks off. I'll save the explanation of Alpacas when you all can actually see them yourselves. Fabulous animals. That's when I learned Leif's gifts. He can talk with animals. Well he can communicate is more accurate I guess. Animals emote rather than talk and again come our next reunion; we're going to be testing everyone to see if anyone else has these untapped gifts. It's High frequency empathic reception in a nutshell. Right, where was I? Okay, me standing in nifty animals and learning about one certain blond and blue eyed boy. Before the night was over, I was head over heels, knock you down in love. But I was a good boy for a change and kept my hands to myself and went home right pissed off at his forced way of living." Tomas said then chuckled remembering Sonja's reactions.

"And if you think I was pissed? You should have seen Gran! Swore the air purple she did."

"That does sound like me mum." Sergei laughed and Tomas nodded.

"Okay, day two. We're out in the market; Gran is spending a bloody kings ransom out there. Leif and I trailing in her wake. Lovely morning that was. I spent all of it staring a hole in Leif and trying not to make it look obvious."

"You not obvious. But I could tell I be being watched. Most nice." Leif smiled and Tomas smiled back.

"Right, back on track again. So shop until we drop basically until lunch. I forget he can't eat with us, and then get pissed off all over again. I stewed all afternoon. He had to be inside before dark since he's wasn't allowed out after sunset. So I stewed some more until about midnight. Decided to just say 'Fuck it' and I grabbed him food, tossed myself under a cloak spell and high-tailed it to his cottage. Woke him up, barged in, plopped him on the floor and fed him."

"You most insistent I be eating and drinking. I half sleep! Still feel like dreaming when you come. It most nice, never forget." Leif's eyes met Tomas' and Tomas just lifted Leif's hand to kiss it.

"Needless to say, that was a very nice night. I felt our soul-connection loud and clear. I knew I'd have to move mountains to keep him. It was a very painful night too. The laws hanging over our heads were, in a word, suffocating. Our love would kill him if it was known. So come dawn, I was back under a cloak and leaving. Felt like my bloody soul was bleeding to death."

"Aye. Hurt much."

"Enter hell from here. Neither of us expected that, while we were out, the shaman was in Leif's cottage sniffing out evidence. He found our meal and even dug through furs to find, well..." Here Tomas had the decency to look sheepish "You know what happens to sheets after. We missed a spot basically. Utter chaos, they came took Leif away up into mountains. Like they do all 'Ger' who are suspected of, you know, being HUMAN. So up he goes to be so called out and judged by the gods. I follow them up under a cloak ready to just kidnap him away if I had to. The old bastard used religion as a convenient way to dispose of Ger. He'd Strip them naked in the harshest climes I've ever felt and make them live Seven days alone up on top of that mountain. It's a death sentence. There were bones everywhere up there. They left and the old bastard was SMILING! Gods I was livid and worried out of my mind! I go over and wrap my coat around Leif ready to drag him back and he refused to go! Leif is stubborn as hell, Uncle Ilya you two will get along fabulously."

Ilya just laughed but didn't comment.

"Next thing I know, I'm face down in snow and a GOD is talking in my head. Tells me to basically bugger off and wait, he's not mine yet to protect. I needed to be elsewhere waiting. So you don't tell a God 'no', so off I went to wait and worry. Then SHE turns up, tells me all about Wizards being from her blood, tells me what we have to keep doing as her warrior sons, and let me tell you when Gods speak, you can't help but listen. Basically we Wizards are like her judge and jury. She said we are here to protect and we'd better keep right on doing it, because occasionally her brothers select special people to send to us. We're supposed to be their guardians and transportation while they go about influencing people around them. She told me Gran is one. Mum is one. Ilya is one and now Leif is. She said that's how it is and how it will be after us. So here we are. You all saw the rest of it. Leif not only comes down alive and whole. The God brings him down dressed up like a bridegroom! I can take a bloody hint! Not like I wasn't going to bond to him anyway, but ya know, actually proposing to him would have been nice! But again, you tell a GOD 'no'. Next thing I know, I'm also dressed in white, I'm dribbling love sonnets like an amateur bard, and I have Gods wedding me and giving me orders. Then I'm stopping a hateful and insane old man from murdering my new spouse. Then all of YOU are in here waiting. There, you're all up to speed."

"Wow." Van was bug-eyed and said no more.

"Yes, Wow. And forgive me mum; I'm about to be rude. But I'd like you all to piss off now for a while. As you can well see, I have a gorgeous new husband, freezing here dressed in a bloody

sheet in sub-zero weather outside and I'm off to warm him up with a good old-fashioned bonding day snog. So please if you don't mind, get out."

Sascha laughed. "Right, we're gone! See you later!" Everyone was laughing as images faded and the mirror only reflected the two of them sitting on the table facing it.

"What snog?"

"I'm about to show you beloved. Come here." Tomas picked up Leif and tossed him into bed with a bounce. Leif was laughing as Tomas proceeded to show him what "snogging" meant. They were sweaty and breathless by the time Tomas was finished.

"Mmmm, Like snog much." Leif purred where he lay sated.

"I thought you might." Tomas grinned as he pulled the covers up over them. "And After a nap beloved, I'll teach you what 'shagging' means."

Leif laughed, he had a fair idea now what it meant. "Tomas, heart of mine, most funny. I be seeing I be laughing much with you."

"Perfect. As it should be. Get some sleep beloved it's been a long night and even longer morning."

"Aye." Leif said snuggling up and falling into the warmth that Tomas radiated. This was heaven on earth.

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That evening, under the spell of summer on the decks of "the Handmaiden" a wedding feast was served. Tables brought up from the galley lined the edges of the main deck, leaving the center free for dancing and mingling. Tomas brought out his mandolin to play along with the other musicians and got a pleasant and unexpected surprise. Leif 'borrowed' a fiddle from one of the musicians since his was back in his home, and proceeded to demonstrate he was no slouch of a musician himself as he sawed the instrument in half with a bright lively jig. One more thing they had in common and would be able to share with one another, Tomas thought his face was going to fall off, it hurt from constant smiling.

Leif finally got his first glimpse of the greenhouse deck and he wandered the gardens in awe. "I cannot be imagining whole island like this being." He said in wonder, exceptionally warm as he tugged the laces free on his shirt. His body was acclimated to cold, he'd have to get used to warmer temperatures. Sonja turned up and grinned.

"I know son. Hot as hell in here to people like us at first. I remember. I wanted to run around naked that first year, thought I'd never cool off. Cold baths help a lot."

"Aye. Feel much hot in here. Never get like this, not even summer here this warm."

"It's a balmy seventy-three degrees in here. This is pleasant, wait until we hit the equator and it's a hundred-degrees in the shade!" Tomas chuckled sitting on a convenient pumpkin.

"I be in bath and not be coming out then!" Leif grinned right back, his mind not being able to fathom such heat. He'd never felt air warmer than sixty degrees in the worst heat wave they'd ever had on the Island.

"Love you running around naked is fine by me." Tomas winked as the tour continued and Leif learned his new home.

That evening Tomas was getting ready for bed and Leif was curled up on a chair, a huge, fluffy, smashed face, white Persian cat with big blue eyes was curled up on his lap purring.

"I see Czarina found you." Tomas winked from the bathroom, wrapped in a towel and brushing his teeth.

"Aye. She be telling me rules." Leif chuckled as his fingers worked her soft fur behind her ears.

"Rules?" Tomas quirked an eyebrow.

"Aye. She say I take her place in bed and no like. But willing to let me have place in bed since her man like me. Says no destroy my shoes if I give good scratches. We make deal."

"Threaten to shit in your shoes for sleeping with me?"

"Aye. I tell you before. Cats have own way seeing world. Cats own us, not us them."

"Czarina you little bitch!" Tomas wagged a finger at his cat. She ignored him.

"She be Cat. Her way. Deal fine, like much Tomas cat. No pain to scratch ears to be saving my shoes." Leif grinned rubbing his nose against the cats. He got a lick before she hopped off and made herself comfortable in the middle of the bed.

"Don't get comfortable Cat!" Tomas ordered her, combing out his wet hair.

She ignored him as usual, groomed herself a minute or two before settling down to sleep and going off in a huff when Tomas picked her up and deposited her on the couch instead as he and Leif went to bed themselves.

She was sitting on Tomas' pillow, between them, come morning. Her butt right in Tomas' face, her chin resting on Leif's forehead. It appeared she liked Leif more than Tomas this morning and was teaching Tomas a lesson in manners. How dare he usurp her and order her about.

"Damn cat." Tomas grumbled shoving her behind off his face as he got up to wash the hair she had shed on him out of his mouth. Leif was still asleep, and Czarina decided to groom his hair like he was her kitten, still pointedly ignoring Tomas.

Tomas just chuckled and put the kettle on to boil. It was time to get up anyway.

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The next few days were spent getting all of Leif's alpacas installed for the ship. These were his children in a way and not a single one was going to be left behind. All forty of them. Five herdsires, twenty dams, four of them pregnant, five yearlings and five Cria. This was the new herd of Safe Harbor, a strong and healthy one at that. Leif was, even when an outcast Ger, respected for his prime animals. He had the best herd stock and always had the gentlest hand with their care.

He had always been present at every birth, even for others. His gifts kept the Dam at ease in her labor and the Criá would immediately trust its human shepherds thereafter. It had Leif's calming influence over it at first breath. He would be teaching Sonja his secrets in communication since she too was an empath who could pick up the emotions at higher frequencies. Since the herd was about ready for shearing, they'd wait until they reached Safe Harbor and got them settled. He'd then teach all who wanted to learn and help raise the new herd how to properly go about shearing them. There was a knack to it to avoid cutting them and getting the most useable wools in large, easily managed sections and Leif wanted to make sure those he was entrusting his 'children' to, knew how to care for them.

Leif spent most of the first day building a pen on the upper deck for them. Tomas had some of the earth from their current pen at Leif's cottage transported over and spelled it so the grasses would grow constantly and their soft feet would be protected from the hard glass bottom. They'd also be fed from said grass cushion while they made the journey back to safe harbor.

They were not going to wait until the reunion to get the animals back home to Safe Harbor. They were not sea faring creatures and not food-stock animals, they were wool and pack animals only and it would be a hard enough journey just getting them to their new home over the next eight weeks.

A special section was made for them in their pen to drop their dung and a cushioned bed of hay was set-aside especially for Hjorn, the eldest, twenty-five year old Herdsire and Leif's life long friend. He was old and needed special attention. Leif was affectionately getting him settled for the journey first. His animals adored him, and likewise Leif was in his element surrounded by them.

Czarina had taken to trailing him wherever he went, rubbing up against his legs, getting underfoot and just giving him all her undivided attentions.

"She acting like I be her baby." Leif chuckled one evening as Czarina perched on the back of the chair and was constantly grooming Leif's hair.

"You can shoo her away."

"I being all right. She like and I no mind. Hair wash and knot will comb out later." Leif grinned as he tended and mended Alpaca tack and bridles for the trip at the table. Working a rag dipped in softening tanning oils into the leather strips and checking all the buckles for wear and tear while Czarina completely soaked a section of his hair at the back of his head with her tongue, Tomas was highly amused by it all and he noted that Leif had the patience of a saint.

Once the animals and all their needs where seen to and they were happily settled on board, Leif and Tomas packed up the little cottage. Leif's few belongings were transported over and put away in chests and on shelves in the cabin he now shared with his husband. The little cottage looked bare as they stood there doing one last look over to make sure they had everything.

"It still like dream. Hard to believe I be leaving tomorrow. Hard believe married to Tomas. Hard be getting used to, but much happy I am." Leif turned to smile up at Tomas who leaned over and kissed him.

"I know. I certainly wasn't coming here thinking I'd be sailing off with a husband either. Nice though isn't it?"

"Aye. Most nice."

They walked back to the Village that evening and the entire population turned out in the longhouse to give a farewell feast for Leif and Tomas. Johan looked subdued, he'd lost five years of his son's life and now that his eyes had been opened his son was leaving.

"Father, I come back visit someday. It not being over, we have much time rest of life. I be knowing love me as love father. We be being all right."

"Aye. Just worry now. You not sailor. Hard life."

"I learn father." Leif chuckled. "If not, I just being sick over side much."

This made his father laugh. "You will see much things. Bring back much stories."

"Aye. Will be writing them down for all so I be not forgetting. Tomas give me book with empty pages and quill with ink inside. No mess inkpot. He call it fountain pen. Ink no smear, no run when wet. I be keeping what he call journal. He keep one too, show me how. Stories I keep for you. Our language be teaching Tomas too, we want learn. Be teaching children too, so next time coming red ship, peoples be talking better."

"I be teaching too our children. I be seeing much new trade in future now."

"Aye. Tomas map us, other peoples now be knowing we here now. Much changes coming, world becoming open to us now."

"We will change with times. Cannot be being closed to different people. It be good change."

"Aye father, good change."

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They'd been out to see a week and Leif was looking green. He hadn't found his sea legs yet. The alpaca were fine and the transition wasn't as hard on them as it was Leif. Tomas handed him a cup of tea.

"Gran said drink it and you'll not be so queasy love. You're just seasick."

"Being sea-near-dead. Up down all time. Take much getting used to it."

"Land-lubber." Tomas teased as Leif drank the medicated tea.

"Aye." Leif grinned as the tea settled his stomach and he managed to choke down his breakfast.

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They headed straight to Safe Harbor and Leif gratefully hugged the beach. Literally falling onto dry land with a whoop of joy, he'd gotten his sea legs after four grueling weeks, but once a land boy always a land boy and he was grateful for the break. Even if he was sweating like a pig and walking around dressed in barely more than his underwear.

Tomas wasn't complaining about the view. Leif was a fine specimen of healthy twenty-year-old male. Quite easy on his husband's eyes.

Leif watched Tomas and Alexandre and a few of Alexandre's brothers work a mountain and a wide meadow with their magic. Snow fell in perfect fat flakes and you could see the barrier of summer and winter where they met. Outside this section the air was a humid eighty-degrees, a tropical paradise. Inside the winter barrier, temperatures were a just under freezing, thirty degrees, the alpaca loved it; this was glorious eternal springtime for them. No fencing would ever be needed; there were no predators on Safe Harbor Island. They would not leave the barrier; it was far too warm for them on the other side and they knew it instinctively. They cavorted in their new pastures, running and jumping about and tearing up sweet grass in mouthfuls. The Cria drinking and splashing in a fresh and ice-cold stream that fell down from the mountains toward the sea. Fresh crystal clear water, clean snow, tasty grass and a huge meadow to play in and a mountain covered in redwood conifers and young pines to climb and explore. Leif was awash with their joy.

The wizards then shifted cut lumber into a beautiful barn, mimicking the craftsmanship of Alexandre's table to look like a Skandan barn. It was open on one side so the animals could come and go as they pleased. Several shearing stalls, a large room to hold hay, and a tack room. Leif whistled merrily as he hung the tack up on hooks. Still half naked and not a shiver in sight.

"Aren't you cold?"

"Love, this being spring to me. Very nice in here. Be perfect, Suri love."

"So do you I see. I can build us our home here off the barn if you'd like. Whenever we come back we each have our own places. I never got around to building my own yet. Would you like it here?"

"Oh aye. Be close to Suri, much like. But not off barn, alpaca clean, but still will smell like barn. There, by trees being nice. Will make nice smell pine inside, be being easy to cut firewood."

"Love, you married a wizard. There's no need to be swinging an axe again love. But you're right, we'll have a nice mountain view there and you'll be able to see the whole meadow." Tomas said as Tomas and his family set to building He and Leif their own home on the Isle. Tomas made it look very much like the cottage Leif had left behind. He cried grateful tears. He had a little of his homeland here so far away.

If Leif could give up his home and life and endure being on a ship for Tomas, Tomas would endure the gentle wizard-winter climate they'd created for Leif and the Alpacas. He had to admit, a big welcoming fireplace, a huge carved four poster bed with bed curtains to pull against the chill, rugs and furs and alpaca wool woven blankets in bright cheerful colors covering the floors, bed and walls made a cozy and rustic little sanctuary. It also wasn't like he couldn't walk twenty feet out of the barrier into summertime either. He'd live. Even if handsome young husbands were being evil little shits and throwing snowballs at an unsuspecting wizard spouse. Tomas shivered as it trickled down the back of his neck, Leif had impeccable aim with frozen projectiles. "You'll pay for that! Come here!" Tomas grinned and chased Leif across the field.

He was fast on his feet too. Tomas was winded by the time he caught Leif and tackled him into a pile of fresh snow. The local children coming to watch the building laughed and played in the snow with the alpacas and Leif grinned and taught children who'd never seen snow how to have proper snowball fights, make snow angels and snow men.

Leif was a huge hit with the children. Sonja was getting her alpaca workers and volunteers together and they all were bundled up, playing with the Dams and the cria while the herdsires

and geldings played with the children. It was a beautiful homecoming for them all as they got to know their new land and people.

They spent that first day just acclimating to their new home and family. Leif met Alexandre's older and also retired brothers, he met the locals, he played with the children. He walked the beach with Tomas and watched in awe Tomas surf waves on a flat board.

Leif had never set a toe in the ocean; waters where he lived were far too cold to be swimming in. So Tomas had to coax him into the water. "Got to learn to swim love. It's vital to know just in case you fall overboard."

That logic was enough to sway Leif into the water. It was cold, but nice on his hot skin. Tomas was holding his middle while he attempted to learn to move his arms and legs right. It would take a few days, but they had time. They weren't intending on leaving any time soon. There was much for Leif to teach the locals in the care of the new herd. He would supervise the training of the new shepherds and also teach Sonja and the other women how to card the wool, thread it, and how to use Sonja's new loom. There was a lot of work to be done and "the Handmaiden" would more than likely be sitting in her moorings until the reunion again in fifteen months giving Leif ample time to teach others his craft while he got a crash course in learning to be a sailor, like learning how to swim for starters and moving on from there.

That night as Tomas took a nice hot bath inside their new little cottage, he watched through the open door as Leif pattered about the living space. Hanging their instruments on pegs on the walls, tripping over Czarina who had made her presence known in the room, Leif just chuckled and stepped over her, as he laid out the blankets on their bed and tied back the bed curtains. He was always industrious, always doing something of some kind; Leif and the word Lazy could not be used in the same sentence without extreme irony.

"Love you are making me tired watching you. Do you ever take a break?" Tomas called out and Leif turned and smiled.

"Be needing to be done."

"You're just futzing now. You've moved that rug four times. If you need to keep busy, there's a nice big tub in here and a husband who'll let you futz with him."

Leif laughed. "You just being always in heat Tomas." But he walked into the room anyway and plunged a hand under the water to grip Tomas's manhood. "See." Leif chuckled at Tomas' hiss of breath, giving him a teasing squeeze and then removing his hand.

"Tease."

Leif stuck his tongue between his teeth in a grin and winked before he began to undress and slipped into the tub with Tomas. "I like tease. Tomas very... receptive."

"I'll show you receptive."

Leif just smiled and hummed as he leaned over for a kiss. "Later heart of mine. Me be wanting futz more as you say. Wash your hair I want do. Hair so soft, I like much. Then shave you; I like be doing that too. Then maybe I be done. Maybe not." Leif winked as he shifted to sit behind Tomas on the edge of the tub. Soaking his hair and deft fingers on his scalp made Tomas purr in delight and bliss, the same skilled hands with a sharp razor went to work on Tomas' chin and once again, a clean close shave was smooth as silk to the touch.

"It's my turn laddy-o." Tomas said making Leif switch places with him. Tomas lathered his hair and it was Leif's turn to moan.

"Oh, that being nice."

"Aye. I'll make you relax if it kills me." Tomas leaned over and kissed the end of Leif's nose.

"I much relax. Just excited to be being here. Like wonderful dream."

"Aye. I've never been happier beloved."

"Same me. Much happy, much love feel you and for new home. Look forward many year with you." Leif smiled up at Tomas and Tomas drank in that look of love and affection.

"Many years indeed beloved. Growing old with you will be a joy."

"Aye. Bounce grandbaby on knee, tell fib story by fire, drink good beer, laugh much. Aye, be much joy."

"Grandbaby?"

"Aye. You not be wanting baby of own someday?"

"Well yes, but I never really thought about it much."

"I in no rush, but Gran Sonja be telling me of Uncles. You be able switch me. I think not really want being woman at all. But would try if we can have child of own. Like children much I do."

"I'll keep that in mind then for when we're ready to try for a family. I've no desire right now to be a Daa. I just want to be bloody selfish and have you all to myself for now."

"Then we be being very much in agreement. Want selfish time with Tomas too. But someday yes. Must pass wizard blood on, part of your duty and being with you mine as well, SHE tell you that no?"

"Aye SHE did. But not immediately. I'm not ready."

"Aye, me not either. Long time off yet for us."

"Aye. But we can practice a bit until then." Tomas grinned and Leif laughed.

"You need no practice. I hear much story of you. Know from experience Tomas love know what he doing."

"Gran ratted me out?"

"Aye. I honored being lover you choose over others."

"Love. I may have had a dozen partners. Only one I loved." Tomas leaned over and kissed Leif soundly and Leif melted.

"Be showing me again talents?" Leif asked as he suggestively climbed out of the tub. Leaning over slowly to pick up a towel off the floor, Tomas groaned.

"Oh aye beloved. Oh Aye." Tomas smiled seductively as he followed Leif into their bedroom and shut out the cat.

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**EPILOGUE* (Ten Years later)*

"They're here!" Yuri cried as she saw "the Handmaiden" make port and she pelted across the pier in excitement. Sascha right on her heels. Tomas and Leif came walking down the plank all smiles, a ten-month old baby on Leif's very sturdy and slender and male hip. He had not liked being a woman at all, the same as Ilya and the moment the baby was weaned Leif was right back into the skin he fit best in. Not to mention he said he made one hell of an ugly woman in his opinion. Tomas denied it, but Leif knew better. His face was suited for male features, square, cut and lean. He called himself horse-faced as a woman. He and Tomas had very differing opinions on the matter.

But nevertheless, after nine years together they had finally decided to start a family and their son Bram Leifsson-Tomasvich, a double surname to reflect their joint heritage and culture was born on their tenth anniversary. Yuri had only seen her first and only grandchild in a mirror and she was dying to get her hands on him. He was chewing Leif's collar as they descended. He had silky fine hair like Leif's, but black as the night sky like Tomas'. His face and eyes were definitely Leif's and his skin a shade between the two of them. He got the best features from them both. He was a handsome little brute.

"Oh gods let me see my grandson!" Yuri squealed taking the baby off Leif's hip and showering his little pudgy face with a myriad of kisses. "Oh I could eat him up! Who is Gran's big boy?"

"We've lost my mother and our son for the duration of the reunion." Tomas chuckled as hugs were exchanged and news shared.

"How was your journey?" Sascha asked as the family headed off the pier toward the longhouse.

"Not too bad. Five or six stubborn pirates. Mainly dealt with bad weather rescues this time out. Bad hurricane nearly wiped out Nanta's crops. I spent quite a bit of energy there spelling the fields and rushing a new harvest growth. They'd totally lost all the mature growth. Pretty bad. You?"

"Your mum and I finally made the trip north, met your Father Leif. Nice chap, he sends his love and asks we pass on a guilt trip on to you. Says it's been six years and he'd like to see you again."

Leif chuckled. "Aye. We are planning on going after we leave here. He has not heard about Bram. We figured we'd tell him he had a grandson in person. Easier to explain HOW if he can see. Aspect changes are not something my people have even heard of let alone seen. Not that I be showing them what I look like as woman. Most ugly."

"Oh not again, you're not ugly!"

"Not as man no. As woman horse-face, you fib to make me feel better."

"I don't fib. You're not ugly damn it. You're not a goddess no, but you're far from ugly."

"Tomas bias."

"This is an old argument." Sascha grinned as they reached the longhouse and Sonja came over to greet the baby. Tatiana with her arms holding a stuffed toy that looked like an alpaca.

Well, vaguely like one, you could tell an eleven-year-old made it. "For my nephew!" She grinned and handed it to her big brother.

"Did you make this?" Tomas asked indulgent.

"Aye. All by myself! Mum didn't help me at all!" She was pleased with herself. She'd made it from the tightly woven alpaca fleece that Sonja made. Soft and filled with unprocessed fleece, perfect for sleeping babies to cuddle up with at night.

"Why don't you give it to him?" Tomas handed it back to his sister who went over to her new nephew and it went straight in his mouth.

"Success! If it goes in his mouth love, he likes it." Tomas laughed and Leif rolled his eyes.

"Being most things he loves much then. Chew on dry dung-rock if give him. Cut teeth on table leg if let!" Leif mumbled under his breath at Sonja who laughed.

"He being a handful?"

"He being Tomas son much. I have two hand full." Leif grinned and Sonja cackled.

"You married him."

"Gods have much sense of humor I be thinking. But I have much fun. They both be bring me many smiles." Leif grinned, watching Sascha bounce Bram on his knee.

"That they do love. That they do!" Sonja grinned as food was passed around and the family reunited and gathered to meet the newest member. Who was chewing on whomever held him as he was passed around from hand to hand.

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Johan saw the red sail in the distance and hurried to send out the guide ships. Three other traders were in port and the once small village was now a bustling port of trade. As the ship drew closer and Johan realized it was "the Handmaiden" he dropped all he was doing in his hands and raced to meet his son and son-in-law.

Johan's jaw dropped to the vicinity of his shoes as Tomas and Leif walked down the plank, a toddler shaped bundle of coats propped on Leif's hip.

Leif smiled as they stopped and turned to indicate the eighteen-month-old baby on his hip. "Father be meeting Bram, Your grandson. Bram can you say Herga?"

"HEGA!" The babe said hello, badly, in Leif's tongue.

"Herga Bram. Really being Grandson? When adopt?" Johan asked stunned.

"No adopt. Tomas and I be birthing him, he being mine. Look at face, not tell mine?" Leif asked and Johan took the child and settled down with him on his lap.

"How? I seeing both Tomas and Leif in him! How?"

"Well Johan, that's a long story. Let's just say I have a few tricks up my sleeve and your son was a daughter for about a year." Tomas winked and Johan once again looked like a stunned reindeer.

"You were woman?"

"Just long enough being to have son with Tomas. I still man, just have Tomas change body for little while. Hard to explain. I know nothing how he does change either. Wizard do many things I have no way describe. But we want son, so we have Bram."

"Name him after Mother Father?"

"Aye. I like name, Tomas too. Come it being cold, no want Bram catch cold, not being used to cold he not. Inside please, talk much over warm drink."

"Aye. Welcome home son. And Hergastol Meina An Lina Bram dotta!" Johan said bouncing his Grandson inside to immediately show him off to everyone who'd listen to him babble on like a proud grandfather.

"What did he say love?" Tomas asked as they followed. He knew a good portion of the language now, but not all.

"He say 'Welcome Home Mine Most Loved Grandson Bram'." Leif smiled almost tearful with happiness and firmly at peace inside.

Just over a decade ago, he would have never dreamed he'd hear his father say those words. Gers had no sons, had no honor. But times do indeed change and people change. Leif had everything he had ever desired. He had his honor restored, he had his beloved husband at his side, they had their son and they were always welcome in Skanda and Leif drank in his homeland.

He may travel the world at his husband's side. Working with animals and people in places so far away from this land he'd never have imagined them as a boy. His home on Safe Harbor was a little pocket of nostalgia and yet no matter how far he went, no matter where he was, Skanda was always a part of him and it was good to be home again.

BE ENDING NOW