

Prologue

In the foothills of the Iberian Mountains . . .

Cahe Vehswo was in the field repairing a wooden fence. It was less to keep the wolves out than to keep the stupid sheep *in*, where the only slightly smarter child-shepherds could watch them.

It was a beautiful day, almost sparkling. The pines weren't yet brittle from late summer heat and the deciduous trees were in full glory, their dark green leaves crackling in the wind. The mountains were dressed in midseason blooms and tinkly little waterfalls. The clouds in the sky were ridiculously puffy.

The only off note in nature's symphony was a strange stink when the wind came up from the southern lowlands: burning animal fat, or garbage, or rot.

Everyone in the hamlet was out doing chores in such forgiving weather; rebuilding grapevine trellises, chopping wood, cleaning out the cheese barrels. No one was quarreling—yet—and life on their remote hillside seemed good.

Then Cahe saw something unlikely coming up the old road, the King's Road. It was a phalanx of soldiers, marching in a surprisingly solid and orderly fashion considering how far they were from whatever capital they had come. With their plumes, their buttons that shone like tiny golden suns, and their surprisingly clean jackets, there was almost a parade-like air around them. If not for their grim, haughty looks and the strange flag they flew.

An order was cried; the men stopped. The captain, resplendent in a bright blue cap and jacket, rode up to Cahe along with his one other mounted soldier, who carried their flag.

"Peasant," he called out—somewhat rudely, Cahe thought. "Is this the township of Serria?"

"No," the farmer started to say, then remembered long-forgotten rules for dealing with people who had shiny buttons, big hats—and guns. "Begging your pardon, sir, but that's farther along, on the other side of Devil's Pass. People call this Adam's Rock."

"No matter," the captain said. "We claim this village and its surrounding lands in the name of Tirulia!"

He cried out the last bit, but the words bounced and drifted and faded into nothing against the giant mountains beyond, the dusty fields below, the occasional olive tree, the uninterested cow. Villagers stopped their work and drifted over to see what was going on.

“Begging your pardon again, sir,” Cahe said politely. “But we’re considered part of—and pay our taxes to—Alamber.”

“*Whatever your situation was before, you are now citizens of Tirulia, and pay homage to Prince Eric and Princess Vanessa.*”

“Well, I don’t know how the king of Alamber will take it.”

“That is no concern of yours,” the captain said frostily. “Soon the king of Alamber will just be a memory, and all Alamber a mere province in the great Tirulian empire.”

“You *say* Tirulia,” Cahe mused, leaning on the fence to make his statement sound casual. “We know it. We buy their salted cod and trade our cheese with them. Their girls like to wear aprons with braided ties. Perde, son of Javer, sought his fortune down south on a fishing ship and wound up marrying a local girl there.”

“Fascinating,” the captain said, removing one hand from his tight grip on the reins to fix his mustache. “And what is the point of all this?”

Cahe pointed at the banner that flapped in the breeze.

“That is not the flag of Tirulia.”

In place of the sun and sea and ship on a field of blue that was familiar even to these isolated people, there was a stark white background on which a black-tentacled octopus with no eyes gibbered menacingly. It looked almost alive, ready to grab whatever came too close.

“Princess Vanessa thought it was time to . . . update the sigil of house Tirulia,” the captain said, a little defensively. “We still represent Tirulia and the interests of Prince Eric, acting for his father, the king, and his mother, the queen.”

“I see.” Another villager started to speak up, but Cahe put a hand on his arm to stop him. “Well, what can we do, then? You have guns. We have them, too—to hunt with—but they are put away until the boars come down from the oak forests again. So . . . as long as the right tax man comes around and we don’t wind up paying twice, sure. We’re part of Tirulia now, as you say.”

The captain blinked. He narrowed his eyes at Cahe, expecting a trick. The farmer regarded him mildly back.

“You have chosen a wise course, peasant,” the captain finally said. “*All hail Tirulia.*”

The folk of Adam’s Rock murmured a ragtag and unenthusiastic response: *all hail Tirulia.*

“We shall be back through this way again after we

subdue Serria. Prepare your finest quarters for us after our triumph over them and all of Alamber!”

And with that the captain shouted something unintelligible and militaristic and trotted off, the flag bearer quickly catching up.

As soon as they were out of earshot, Cahe shook his head wearily.

“Call a meeting,” he sighed. “Pass the word around . . . we need to gather the girls and send them off into the hills for mushroom gathering or whatever—for several weeks. All the military-aged boys should go into the wilds with the sheep. Or to hunt. Also, everyone should probably bury whatever gold or valuables they have someplace they won’t be found.”

“But why did you just give in to him?” the man next to Cahe demanded. “We could have sent word to Alamber. If we’d just told the soldiers no, we wouldn’t have to do *any* of this, acting like cowards and sending our children away into safety. . . .”

“I did it because I could smell the wind. Can’t you?” Cahe answered, nodding toward the south.

Just beyond the next ridge, where the Veralean Mountains began to smooth out toward the lowlands, a column of smoke rose. It was wider and more turbulent than what would come from a bonfire, black and ashy and ugly as sin.

“Garhaggio?” someone asked incredulously. It did indeed look like the smoke was coming from there. From the volume and blackness there could have only been scorched earth and embers where that village had been just the day before.

“I bet *they* told the captain no,” Cahe said.

“Such causeless destruction!” a woman lamented. “What terrible people this Prince Eric and Princess Vanessa must be!”

Eric

Eric woke up.

He was having that dream again.

It came to him at the strangest times—when reviewing the menu for a formal dinner with Chef Louis, for instance, or listening to the castle treasurers discuss the ups and downs of dealing with international bankers. Or when his beautiful princess went on and on about her little intrigues.

All right: it was when he was bored and tired. If a room was stuffy and he was sleepy and could barely keep his eyes open.

Or right before he fell asleep properly, in bed—that moment between still being awake and deep in dreams. The same split-second when he often heard angelic choirs

singing unimaginably beautiful hymns. He could only listen, too frozen in half-sleep to jump up and quickly scribble it down before he forgot.

But sometimes, instead of the choirs, he had this:

That he was not Prince Eric wed to Vanessa, the beautiful princess. That there had been some terrible mistake. That there was another girl, a beautiful girl with no voice, who could sing.

No—

There was a beautiful girl who could sing, who somehow lost her voice forever on the terrible day when Eric fell asleep. He had been dreaming ever since.

There were mermaids in this other world.

He had known one. Her father was a god. Eric's princess was an evil witch. And Eric had touched greatness but been tricked, and now here he was, dreaming. . . .

He looked down suddenly, in a panic. His arms were crossed on his desk over pages of musical notation, supporting his dozing head. Had he spilled any ink? Had he blurred any notes? A rest could be turned into a tie if the ink smeared that way . . . and that would ruin everything. . . .

He held the papers up to the moonlight. There was a little smudging, there, right where the chorus was supposed to come in with a D major triad. But it wasn't so bad.

His eyes drifted from the pages to the moon, which

shone clearly through his unglazed window. A bright star kept it company. A faint breeze blew, causing the thick leaves of the trees below to make shoe-like clacking noises against the castle wall. It carried with it whatever scents it had picked up on its way from the sea: sandalwood, sand, oranges, dust. Dry things, stuff of the land.

Eric looked back at his music, tried to recapture the sound and feel of the ocean that had played in his head before waking, aquamarine and sweet.

Then he dipped his pen in ink and began to scribble madly, refusing to rest until the sun came up.

Scuttle

It seemed as if all of Tirulia were crowded into the amphitheatre. Every seat was filled, from the velvet-cushioned couches of the nobles up front to the high, unshaded stone benches in the far back. More people spilled out into the streets beyond. No one was going to miss the first performance of a new opera by their beloved Mad Prince Eric.

It was like a festival day; everyone wore whatever colorful thing and sparkly gem they had. Castle guards stood in polished boots along the aisles, making sure no fights broke out among the spectators. Vendors walked among the crowds both inside and out selling the bubbly, cold white wine Tirulia was known for along with savory little treats: bread topped with triangles of cheese and olive oil, paper cones filled with crispy fried baby squid, sticks

threaded with honey-preserved chestnuts that glittered in the sunlight.

It would all have made a fabulous mosaic of movement and colors and dazzle from above.

And it did for a certain old seagull named Scuttle, who was quite enjoying the view.

He and a few of his great-grandgulls (sent along to watch him) perched on the rail above the highest, cheapest seats in the theatre. While the younger ones kept their sharp eyes alert for dropped morsels, ready to dive down at the tiniest crumb of bread, Scuttle contented himself with just watching the pomp and muttering to himself. Only one great-grandgull remained by his side, trying to understand what he saw in the human spectacle below.

The costumes were lavish, the orchestra full, the sets cunningly painted to look more than real: when a prince produced a play, wealth showed.

And when that prince came out to take his seat in the royal box, arm in arm with his beautiful princess, the crowd went mad, howling and cheering for their royal artist. Sometimes called the Dreamer Prince and even the Melancholic Prince for his faraway looks and tendency toward wistfulness, Eric looked momentarily cheered by this expression of love from his kingdom, and waved back with the beginnings of a real smile.

Vanessa gave one of her grins, inscrutable and slightly

disturbing, and pulled him along to sit down. With her other hand she stroked the large nautilus necklace she always wore—a strangely plain and natural-looking ornament for the extravagant princess.

The orchestra tuned, and began.

La Sirenetta, a Musical Fantasy in Three Acts

In a magical kingdom by the sea, a sad and handsome prince [*tenor*] longs for someone to share his music and his life. While he and his friends celebrate his twenty-first birthday on a decorated yacht, a terrible storm arises. The prince is thrown over the railing of his ship and is almost drowned but for the intercession of a young and beautiful mermaid, who has the voice of an angel [*first soprano*].

Upon recovering, the prince declares he will marry no one but the beautiful girl who rescued him.

Then a *different* beautiful girl appears [*same first soprano, different costume*], who, although she has the shining red hair of the mermaid who saved him, is *mute*! So she cannot be his one true love. And yet, as they spend their days together, he slowly falls for her.

But then a rival comes onto the scene. A handsome woman [*contralto*] serenades the prince with the same song the little mermaid once sang and casts a spell over him, causing him to forget the pretty girl with no voice.

[Note: The contralto is a large, full-busted singer, a favorite of the audience. She gets a standing ovation when she appears, smiling slyly.]

Hypnotized, the prince arranges for the two of them to be wed immediately.

In an aside, the princess-to-be admits to the audience that she is actually a powerful sea witch. She desires revenge on the mermaid, whose father, the King of the Sea, cast the witch out of his kingdom years before. By failing to marry the prince herself, the mermaid will have neglected to uphold her end of a bargain, and the sea witch will keep her voice forever.

The sun [*baritone*] then sings about the tragedy of mortal life, which he has to witness every day among the humans below him on earth. He also sings about the peaceful happiness of the immortal mermaids, and how love makes one foolish—but exalted. He drifts across the stage, and, with a clever bit of scenic machinery, begins to “set” as the ballet troupe comes out for an interlude before the finale: the wedding scene.

The prince and the false princess come out dressed

splendidly and singing a duet—but the prince's words are about love, and the princess's are about conquest. The mute girl looks sadly on.

Then, just as the prince and princess are about to recite their final vows, Triton, King of the Sea [*bass*], resplendent in green and gold armor, appears with a crash of drums. He and the sea witch sing back and forth, trading insults. Finally he raises his trident to attack . . . and the sea witch points to his youngest, favorite daughter, the now-mute human standing sadly in the corner. With her other hand, she shakes a large painted prop contract.

Defeated, Triton gives in. He trades his life for the little mermaid. The sea witch casts a terrible spell, and with a puff of theatrical smoke the King of the Sea is turned into an ugly little sea polyp, which the sea witch holds triumphantly aloft.

[As a puppet manipulated by the contralto, it even moves a little, which draws a gasp from the audience.]

Triton's daughter turns back into a mermaid and jumps sadly into the sea. The prince and the false princess are married. The false princess croons triumphantly to the little polyp that was once Triton, and talks about how she will keep him forever in a vase in her room.

The moon [*mezzo-soprano*] comes out and sings an ethereal, haunting version of the sun's aria. But hers is about the

inevitability and sadness of love, and questions what makes a happy ending. For if the little mermaid had stayed at home and remained a mermaid for all her days, ignorant of love, would that really have been better?

Scuttle

The crowd went mad. If the subject matter of the opera seemed a little fantastic, if the end a little gloomy, if the orchestration maybe just a *tad* simplistic compared to works by more professional, starving musicians—well, it mattered not. Never before had the amphitheatre been witness to such a display of clapping, screaming, stomping of feet, and whistling. So many roses were thrown at *La Sirenella* and the sea witch that they were in danger of suffering puncture wounds from the thorns.

Everyone was already clamoring for an encore performance.

“Perhaps we should,” Prince Eric said. “A free performance—for all of the town! At the end of summer, on St. Madalberta’s Day!”

The cheers grew even louder.

Nobles seated closest to the royal box made a show of appropriately classy, restrained enthusiasm—while keeping their eyes on the prince and princess. Only a fool would have failed to notice certain similarities between the sea witch and Prince Eric’s beautiful wife, Vanessa. That night in the great stone mansions, over tiny cups of chocolate and crystal glasses of brandy, there would be much discussion of the thousand possible shades of meaning behind the words in the lyrics.

But the brown-haired princess was grinning and laughing throatily.

“*Eric*,” she purred, “that was positively *naughty*. And *wonderful*. Where do you *get* such *imaginative* ideas?”

She coquettishly took his hand like they were newlyweds and walked out proudly with him into the crowd, beaming as if she were also the mother of a very talented and precocious boy. Her two manservants trailed behind them, looking back and forth at the crowd with suspicious smiles, seemingly ready to kill at a moment’s notice should it be required.

Nothing was required; everyone was joyous.

Among the hundreds of people and creatures that were audience to this spectacle, only one was flummoxed by it.

Scuttle stood stock-still, an unusual pastime for him. Two *very important things* had been revealed in the play. And while he was as scatterbrained as a seagull generally is

(perhaps more so), the wisdom of his long years made him stop and try to focus on those things in his muzzy mind, to remember them, to pay attention to his quieter thoughts.

“PRINCE ERIC REMEMBERS WHAT HAPPENED!”

he suddenly cried out.

That was the first thing, and it was easy.

“Even with the whammy laid on him!”

Scuttle had been there when the land-walking mermaid had failed to win Eric’s heart, the sun had gone down, and he had married Vanessa instead. Scuttle had seen the mighty fight break out between ancient powers, so poorly captured in the paints and papier-mâché below. He had seen the ocean swell and waves rent in twain by the power of Triton. He had watched as the King of the Sea traded his life for his daughter’s and the sea witch, Ursula, destroyed him. The red-haired girl became a mermaid once more and swam sadly away, voiceless forever. Ursula-as-Vanessa remained married to Eric and now ruled the kingdom by the sea with little or no useful input from her hypnotized hubby.

“Yup, check and check,” Scuttle murmured. “And somehow my boy Eric knows this. But how?”

And what was that other thing?

That important thing?

The . . . *almost-as-important* thing?

Or was it actually *more* important?

“Waves rent in twain by the power of Triton,” Scuttle

repeated to himself aloud because he enjoyed the sound of his voice and the big, epic words. His great-grandgulls rolled their eyes at each other and flew off. All but one, who sat watching him curiously.

“And the King of the Sea traded his life for his daughter’s, and Ursula destroyed him. THAT’S IT!”

Scuttle squawked, jumping up into the air in excitement. He beat his wings and the few lingering spectators covered themselves with their arms in disgust, fearing what the bird would do next.

“KING TRITON IS STILL ALIVE!”

“I’m sorry?” his remaining great-grandgull asked politely.

“Don’t you get it?” Scuttle turned to her and pointed at the stage. “If everything else in that show was true, then Ursula still has Triton as her *prisoner!* He’s *not dead!* C’mon, Jonathan! We got to go do some investor-gating of this possibility!”

“My name is Jona, Great-Grandfather,” the younger gull corrected gently.

He didn’t seem to hear.

With a purpose he hadn’t felt since his time with the mermaid Ariel, Scuttle beat new life into his tired old wings and headed for the castle, his great-grandgull gliding silently behind.

When the king and queen of Tirulia decided that the time had come for each of their children to assume the roles and habits of adulthood—and, more importantly, to move out of the main palace—Prince Eric quite unsurprisingly chose a small castle on the very edge of the sea.

The giant blocks that made its outer walls were sandstone, light in color and far more evocative of the beach than the granite and grey stone with which other ancient fortresses were built. A welcome addition by Eric's grandfather featured a walkway out to a viewing deck, supported by graceful arches in the manner of a Roman aqueduct. The two highest tiled towers cleverly recalled architecture of more eastern cities; a third was topped by a pergola covered with grapes and fragrant jasmine. The great formal dining room, another modern addition, was finished in the latest fashion with floor-to-ceiling windows.

In fact, all the public and fancy rooms—every single bedroom in the castle, except for the lowliest servants' quarters—had a view of the sea.

This was of great interest to the humans who lived in the castle, the villagers who bragged about their castle, and the Bretlandian visitors taking the Grand Tour who stopped to sketch the castle.

But the windows were of *especial* interest to the flying and scurrying members of the kingdom.

It was well known to all the local seagulls where the kitchens were, of course. Their windows were the most important. Boiled seashells, some with tidbits still stuck on; avalanches of crumbs that had gone stale; meat that had been left out too long; fruit that had rotted . . . All of it got dumped unceremoniously out the windows and into a hidden section of the lagoon. Hidden to humans, that is.

It was also well known that Countess Gertrude, a cousin of Eric's, was much enamored with anything that flew and could be counted on to stand at her window for hours, enticing gulls, doves, sparrows, and even sparrow hawks to land on her hand for a treat.

The Ibrian ambassador, Iase, paranoid and terrified of poison, was constantly tossing whatever he was served out the closest window.

Anything that got dumped out of Princess Vanessa's window, however, was known to be actually bad for you: sharp, and often *really* poisoned.

After a moment's precipitous scrabbling, Scuttle managed to perch himself on the lintel of this last unglazed window, his great-grandgull just beside him.

"Huh. Nice digs," he said, looking around with interest. Then he settled himself in to wait.

Seagulls might be a little scattered and unable to focus—sometimes greedy, and borderline psychotic if it came to

fighting over a real prize—but the one thing they *could* do was wait. For hours if they had to: for the tide to go out, for the fishing ships to come back in, for the wind to change, for the pesky humans to leave their middens to those who so rightfully deserved to plunder them for treats.

Jona cocked her head once, observing a chambermaid dumping a chamber pot out the side of the castle, into the sea.

“And humans complain about *our* habits,” she muttered.

“Shhh!” Scuttle said, keeping his beak closed.

Eventually their patience was rewarded. Vanessa came sashaying in, leaving her two manservants outside.

“I’ll see you boys later,” she purred. They bowed in unison, almost identical twins in matching uniforms that had costlier jackets and prettier feathered caps than other castle staff.

The princess began to disrobe, pulling off her gloves, her mantle, and the wide hat that topped her dark hair. This was brown velvet with golden medallions around the crown and the plumes of rare foreign birds in the band . . . and she still left it carelessly on her bed. She quietly hummed one of the arias from the opera, one of the *mermaid’s* arias, and then opened her mouth wider and belted it out, knocking the seagulls back a little with the force of her musicality.

It did not sound like when Ariel used to sing.

Oh, it was the mermaid's voice all right, and the tune was dead-on. But it was too loud, and the words had no soul, and the notes didn't flow from one to the other harmoniously. It was as if a talented but untrained child with no life experience to speak of had suddenly been commanded to sing a piece about a woman dying of consumption who had lost her only love.

Scuttle tried not to wince. Seagulls of course had no innate musical abilities themselves—as other birds loved to taunt—but the song still sounded blasphemous in Ariel's voice.

Vanessa laughed, purred, and made other noises with her throat Ariel never would have. "Did you enjoy that, mighty sea king? The little song from a lovesick mermaid?"

"*I don't see a mighty sea king,*" the great-grandgull whispered to Scuttle. "*Maybe she's mad.*"

Scuttle had no response. He frowned and ducked and peered back and forth into every corner of the room that he could glimpse from the window. But there was nothing, not even a small aquarium, that might hold a polyp.

Vanessa paused in front of the overwhelming collection of bottles and trinkets on her vanity: musky perfumes in tiny glass ampoules, exotic oils in jars carved in pink stone, enough boar-bristled brushes to keep an army of princesses looking their best. The one thing she didn't have—which Scuttle would not have realized—was a maidservant

performing these ablutions *for* her. She made a kissy-face into the mirror and then moved on, disappearing from view into her closet. It looked like she was holding something, but it was hard to be sure.

The two birds strained and leaned forward, trying to follow her movements.

“I’m so sorry you missed such a wonderful opera, Kingy,” she called from the darkness. After a moment she came back out wearing a bright pink silk robe. Now they could see that she carried a bottle half hidden in her voluminous sleeve. “But I think Eric may put it on again, one more time. Not that you’ll get to see it then, either. Such a shame! It was so *imaginative*. It was all about a little mermaid, and how she loses her prince to a nasty old sea witch. The *hussy*.”

She paused . . . and then cracked up, her delicate mouth opening wider and wider and wider, billows of distinctly non-Ariel laughter coming out.

She turned to hold the glass bottle up to regard it in the light coming from the gull-decorated window . . . and the gulls gasped.

It was a narrow glass cylinder, like that which a scientist or a physic might use when doing experiments. On top was a piece of muslin held on with gobs of wax. Inside was filled with water . . . and one of the most horrible things Scuttle and Jona had ever seen.

A dark green mass, gelatinous, with a vaguely plant-like shape filled most of the bottle. One knobby end kept it rooted on the bottom of the glass. Toward its “head” were things that looked like tentacles but floated uselessly in the tiny space; these were topped with a pair of yellow eyes. A hideous cartoon of a mouth hung slackly beneath. In a final bit of terrible mockery two slimy appendages flowed down the sides of its mouth, aping the sea king’s once foam-white mustache and beard.

The great-grandgull turned her head to avoid gagging.

“It’s him!” Scuttle cried—at the last second covering his words with a squawk, remembering that the sea witch could understand the languages of all beasts, same as Ariel.

Vanessa spun quickly and suspiciously.

Jona thought fast. She pecked at her grandfather—realistically, as if she were trying to steal a morsel from him.

Scuttle squawked.

“What the . . .”

“*NO IT’S MY FISHY!*” Jona screamed. She widened her eyes at him, *willing* him to understand.

Her great-grandfather just stared at her for a moment.

Then he relaxed.

“What? Oh yeah, right,” he said, giving her a big wink. “No—my—great-grandgull—that—is—my—fish!”

They both fell off the ledge, away into the air, wheeling and squawking like perfectly normal seagulls.

Vanessa ran to the window but relaxed when she saw just a pair of birds, fighting in midair over some nasty piece of something-or-other. With a snarl and a flounce she turned back inside.

“That was some pretty smart thinking back there,” Scuttle said, giving his great-grandgull a salute.

“What now?” she asked.

“Now? We go find *Ariel*.”