Cast:

$$ circus caste

$ René = Elf

$ Max - juggler, Ring master, Romany

$ Madam Tzigana - Max’s wife, fortune teller, Romany (looks indian)

$ Sam/Szmuel - very tall (2.3m) clown - Polish

$ Sylvie - bearded lady - french partner to Sam

$ Django - strong man, Romany

$ Casimir (m), Cararina (f), Esmeralda (f) - acrobats and children of Max + Tzigana

$ Alexandru and Dorina (romanian) acrobats, jugglers, knife throwing act.

$ Sigurd - norwegian clown and juggler

$ Felix - half french, half african. Lion tamer and elephant wrangler

$ Larisa (romanian, w felix)

$ Laura (Polish) gymnast and acrobat and part time clown

$ Liana (romanian) juggler, acrobat, part time clown, Laura’s lover

$ Mirela - Polish - general cooking, cleaning, sewing, sex

$ Roxana - Romanian same as Mirela

$ Sorin (m Rom) Django’s lover, general roustabout

$ Stefan (m Polish) general roustabout

$ Pierre/Lars - Troll.

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It was the avalanche that did for him. One moment he’d been walking across the snow in the high alps, the next he’d heard a rumbling sound, and barely had time to curl into a ball before a wall of snow swept him down the mountain, tumbling over and over, into oblivion. His last thoughts were *If I can stay near the surface, they can dig me out eventually.*

Buried deep in the snow, he froze solid. Trolls could survive freezing: dig them out, place them somewhere warmer than freezing, and eventually they would thaw, and wake up. One of the advantages of being living stone.

He woke with a start, dreams swirling and fading. Memory not working properly. *Who am I? Where am I?*

Voices, human voices. Someone kicked him, hard, and he grunted. His body still wasn’t working properly, it was difficult to move. His eyes couldn’t focus. Blurred shapes loomed over him, surprise and laughter in their voices. They seemed to be digging him out, but then he felt steel cables being wrapped around his arms and legs. Woven from fibres of steel, they were effectively unbreakable. The cables told him that, they spoke to him, in a similar manner to stone and rock. Troll hunters. They could mean death, or a fate worse than death. He was at their mercy, and they were known not to possess any.

They dug him out, and secured him as they went. Rather than thrash around for their amusement, he lay quiescent, biding his time. Let them think he was sick, listless. He listened to them talking.

Their language was semi familiar, but difficult to understand. These were not the humans he was used to. There were familiar words here and there, but not enough for him to understand them.

They pulled him free, and cut off his clothing, leaving him naked in the cold. Trolls were used to cold, the mountains were always cold. Naked, he resembled a hairless gorilla, short bow legs, long arms, barrel chest, his skin was the colour and texture of granite. His head was round, with a small nose, dark eyes with no hint of white, and fangs.

They forced him into a cage, with heavy steel bars, and made him secure. The cage was on wheels, and made so horses could be hitched to pull it. It might be possible to break the door, or perhaps the floor or roof, but that could wait until the humans were asleep.

Cold and miserable, he sat down stoically and resolved to watch and listen. The Troll gods had obviously abandoned him. As he surmised, they hitched up horses, and slowly drew the cage down the mountain over rutted roads.

Lars. His name was Lars Copperhead, he remembered. So much was still shrouded in fog. I speak several languages, but they are difficult to understand. The more he listened, the more words he could recognise. It was mostly Norse, but with a different pronunciation, and many unfamiliar words.

Towards evening they entered the outskirts of a town, where there were other wagons pitched in a camp. There was a collection of motley humans, and a few cages containing animals. Someone placed straw in his cage through a hatch, along with an empty bucket, and a tray containing a bucket of water and a haunch of raw meat. At least they didn’t intend to starve him.

*They are treating me like a caged animal, except the Mr. Elephant is allowed out of his cage. I have to escape. But how? I cannot break these cables the way I could break chains. And then what? I don’t look human, they’ll hunt me. Likely catch me within a day. For now, bide my time. Work out what they want with me.*

Trolls can’t cry, tears would freeze on their eyes. Lars moaned quietly as if he were in pain. His family lost, his clan lost, alone in the world, with little hope of improvement. Krum, the senior troll god, didn’t care. He gave a troll strength and wits, and expected him or her to make their way in a cruel and capricious world. Thus he should watch and learn, and act when chance gave him an opportunity.

Humans came to gawk at him the next day, and the next. He used the empty bucket for his toilet, and placed it by the hatch door, where whoever fed him replaced it with an empty one. He tried talking to them, but they spoke a strange language.

On the third evening, one of the troll hunters came to see him. He was heavily bearded, muscular, and spoke a dialect of Norse that allowed Lars to understand a little of what he said.

“Well, troll, you have a new owner. I wish you luck for what it’s worth.”

“What do you want of me?”

“Ho, your accent is barbarous. I thought you might understand language. I’ve sold you to the circus, cage included. Your new owners will be along soon. None of them speak Norwegian, you’ll have to learn their language. So long, sucker.”

Lars fell asleep reflecting on what his words had meant. The gist that he understood was he was a slave with a new owner. It confused him to be called a breast-feeding babe.

He was rudely awakened by lights and banging on the cage bars. Several humans were looking at him, gesticulating, and talking in an unknown language. The tallest one and the shortest one were carrying lanterns.

*Do not show anger. Talk softly.* “What do you want?” Lars asked as gently as he could manage. He spoke Norse, in the hope that one of the four understood. They were an odd looking bunch of humans.

One was immensely fat, looking in his coat like an egg with a small head on top. The second had a heavy beard and padding in the chest area that made him think of breasts. The third was very tall and slim, with one arm about the shoulders of the bearded one. The fourth was short and slim. His entire stance reminded him of an Elf.

The short one spoke in strangely accented Troll speech. “Well Troll, so you are our monster. Are you well? I expect you’d like out of your cage?”

“By Krum’s balls I would, Mr. Elf. And a wash, and clean clothes. I’m not a monster.”

“Promise me you’ll behave and I’ll try to talk the humans into letting you out.”

“I give my word of honour as a Troll bard and druid.”

“Accepted.”

Could he trust the Elf? Only the gods knew.

By now the others were clamouring to know what was being said. The Elf spoke for several minutes before he turned back to the Troll. “They want some proof that you are civilised. Tell me your name, then perform a bow from the waist, as you would in greeting a Troll noble.”

“Very well. The human form of my name is Lars Copperhead.” Lars put his right hand on his navel, his left behind his back, bowed forward from the waist and bobbed his head. The he stood back and spread his hands. “How was that?”

“Wonderful.” The Elf turned back to the humans. There was more conversation, and then the fat man produced a bunch of keys. He pointed one out to the Elf, and handed him the bunch.

The Elf took them with a grin. “Well Mr Copperhead, I have the key to open the cage door. I know you will behave civilly, but if you fail, they will put you back in the cage. They were sold a monster, they believe you capable of monstrous acts. I am called René, by the way. That is also a human form of my name.”

The Elf appeared to hover in mid air for a few moments, and then there was a click and the sound of chains being unwound. René opened the cage door and settled on the ground. “Please to come out, Lars.”

“I would love to, René, but I am still bound by steel cables, as you can see.”

“Helat’s hairy twat!” René swore in old Troll speak.

The Elf hopped into the cage, inspected the fastening of the cables, and shook his head. “I need to magic them open. Please cover me, I don’t want the humans to see.” He bent to one binding, jangling the keys.

“If I had a cape, I could cover you with it, but alas I am naked.” Lars stated the obvious, in the way of Trolls.

The binding shimmered and clinked open. “One down. You other arm please. They really didn’t trust you, did they?”

“They were Troll hunters. Trolls can break iron chains. But steel cable is treacherous. I could have broken these iron bars, but not the cables.”

“I suspect, if you put your mind to it, you could have broken the locks. They are iron.” The second one clinked open. “Now your ankle.”

“I hadn’t realised. So I could have escaped.”

“Mmm. But you have nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. Here, the circus folk will treat you like a person, just one more freak. You can hide in plain sight. That’s the last, you are free. But you must behave like our guest, until they accept you.”

“Thank you. I will be guided by you. You are the only person I can speak with.” Lars leapt to the ground, René followed.“What did you mean ‘just one more freak’?”

“I will explain that later. First, introductions with your new friends.” René said something to the others, and all the Troll caught was ‘Lars’. Then he turned so he could see Lars and the others. “This is Max,” the fat man, “he is Romany, and our boss. He also speaks French, and probably several other languages. He is a juggler. This is Szmuel or Sam,” the tall man, “he is Polish but he speaks German and some French. He is a clown. This is Sylvie, she is Sam’s wife. She speaks French and German. She is also a clown.”

Max started speaking, the other two were nodding agreement. René conversed with him for a minute or two. “It seems you will share my caravan tonight. This will be temporary. They all say welcome, Max wants to know what your skills are. I told him you are strong and clumsy, you would make a good clown, we can train you as a body guard, and you can help with set up and tear down. I’ll explain all that later. Max will find you some clothes and a blanket, I will show you where the pump is so you can wash, and Sylvie will find some soap, a wash cloth and a clean towel. So, we are in business, non?”

“Ah, yes.”

“Tell them oui. It means yes. And non means no. Your first French lesson.”

Lars obligingly said “Oui.” The others smiled.

Sylvie jerked her head. “Allons y.”

“That means let’s go. It’s going to rain soon. I don’t like to wear wet clothes. Follow me.”

René followed Sylvie to a tent, and he and Lars waited outside until she returned with a basin with soap and a cloth, and a larger cloth for a towel. She said something to René. She disappeared back inside.

“She says you will need shoes to walk from the pump, or you will get your feet muddy. There’s some in one of the trunks that might fit you.”

Sylvie returned with an overcoat and two leather pouches that would slip over his feet and tie around his ankles. They looked too large even for his feet.

At Lars’ question René replied “I think they are from a clown suit that is no longer used. Either that, or they’re for the elephant. She has big feet. Let’s hurry, I want to be home before it rains.”

Lars expected a well with a bucket, and had to be shown how to use the pump. “And be gentle. This is made for humans, you can break it easily.”

Lars worked the pump carefully. “How does it work? Magic?”

“I’m not sure how it works, but it isn’t magic. I think the upstroke sucks water from the well, and the down stroke spits it out. We would have to pull it apart, and I don’t want to do that. Stand on the stone while you wash, it will keep your feet clean.”

“René, can I ask you a question? Sylvie is human? And female?” Lars was soaping himself carefully.

“Yes, as far as I know.”

“She has a beard. I thought only Dwarf females had beards.”

René laughed softly. “Yes, it is a mystery. She says she is female, human, and she has a beard like a Dwarf female. I don’t know what she looks like without clothes, but she is different from normal humans. Maybe she really is a Dwarf.”

“She is to tall to be a dwarf.”

“Really? I always thought Trolls were really big creatures, but you’re a bit short for a Troll.”

“Mountain Trolls are not as tall as lowland Trolls.”

“There you go. You’re short for a Troll, she’s tall for a Dwarf. You are both unusual. Do you remember I told you that here in the circus, you will be just one more freak? The bearded lady is a freak, I am a freak, her skinny giant of a husband is a freak. We put on a show for the amusement of other humans, and they pay us for amusing them. In any town or village, humans might throw stones at us if we were by ourselves. But here, we are safe. We freaks protect our own. Here you can belong, be part of a family.”

That statement was deep for Lars, and he would have to think it over later. The idea that he could belong, have an extended family, was appealing. “Humans are crazy!”

It was quite late, nearing midnight. Lars, René, and the rest of the circus performers were sitting in the large tent. Most were drinking, some were eating. There had been shock initially when everyone had been introduced to Lars, but he sat quietly drinking a large pale of water, chatting with René when he translated their conversations, and their initial shock and suspicion had abated.

Lars was dressed in a pair of patched clown trousers, his elephant booties, and a greatcoat that concealed much of his body, though the sleeves reached only to his elbows. At René’s suggestion, he demonstrated a few tricks, such as changing his skin colour and pattern to resemble his surroundings, and the fact that a sharp knife could not cut his skin.

“He’s like a stone.” several people said.

“He is living stone.” René explained.

“Then we shall call him Pierre, since it means rock in French.” Max suggested.

Lars was agreeable. “René, you will have to remind me for a few days what my new name is.”

“Pierre is also very strong. Perhaps he could do parts of the Strongest Man in the World act.”

“That is taking my job!” the resident strong man, Django, complained. He was another Romany.

“Not necessarily.” René countered. “I’ll bet you that Pierre can lift a horse under each arm. I don’t think you can do that.”

“No, probably not! But that is not fair to me. Being the strong man is my job. If he starts doing things like that, people will want to see him, not me.”

René spread his hands. “It was just a suggestion. He has to do something to earn his keep.”

“Yes, let him be the ogre in some of the clown routines. He looks very convincing.”

“Maybe not.” Max cut in. “He would scare people, and then they wouldn’t pay to see us. He’d have to be in a cage, and René and Sylvie will be very upset if we do that.”

“Yes, he’s a person! You can’t put him in a cage.” Sylvie protested. “They put me in a cage when I was younger, and Max and René got me out, as you all know. Do any of you want to be in a cage? Well? I thought not.”

“Thank you Sylvie, very eloquently put.” René remarked. “Pierre is new, we’ll have to see what he is good at, and we have to see about getting him his own wagon. Mine is too small for him.”

“And we can’t afford that.” Max said. “We spent money to buy him from those bandits. It can wait, and you can help him be useful. And teach him French, most of us speak French.”

“We should never have spent money.” Django started.

Madame Tzigana, the fortune teller and Max’s wife, cut him off, “The spirits advised me to do that. You can’t go against what they advise.”

“Shove it, Tzigana.” Django switched to Romany. “Save your talk of spirits for the marks who pay you to tell them stories.”

“You shove it!” Madame Tzigana replied in kind. “We wouldn’t have come here at all unless the spirits had advised us to come this way.”

“She has a point.” René replied in French. That way the others who didn’t speak Romany ould understand what was being argued about. “Why would we come all this way north unless the spirits advised her that we should? That implies that God arranged for us to rescue Pierre, and rescue him we did.”

At this point Sylvie joined in supporting René and Madam Tzigana, while René turned to translate for Lars. He added, “It’s nothing personal, Lars, but you should have your own wagon. What happens if I want to bring home a girl for some fun and games? You’re going to get in the way.”

“I could always go for a walk.” Lars pointed out reasonably.

“It’s not the same. Besides, it could be raining or snowing outside. Just a minute. Ah, Django has lost the argument. He doesn’t really like people. He even has arguments with his boyfriend, Sorin, over there. And Madame Tzigana has decided to price wagons at the next town. But you will have to learn some skills, and become part of the act. She says to tell you she had to spend their money to buy you from the Troll hunters, and you should work for her to pay back that money. Do you think that is reasonable?”

“Well, you rescued me, so I owe you a favour for that. If she had to give her money, then I owe her a favour as well.”

“You are supposed to work to earn money, and use that money to buy your wagon. But she will lend you the cost of the wagon so you can have it sooner. Do you agree? We need to find something you can do to earn money, but we will talk about that later.”

“I agree.” He was here among them, they were telling him there were some rules he had to follow. In exchange he would belong. It made good sense.

“Pierre agrees.” René said in French. “He’s not sure what work he can do, but if we show him what we do, he can see what he is good at. As I said, he is strong, and a bit clumsy.”

Later that evening, René cleared some space on the floor of his caravan and made up a nest for Lars with the blankets. “I hope you don’t snore, my big friend, or I’ll have to send you outside.”

Lars shrugged. “I don’t know. When I’m asleep, I can’t hear myself.”

The next morning, Pierre proved to the entire circus that he could indeed lift a horse under each arm and walk around with them. He also made friends with both Mr. Lion and Mr. Elephant, whose cages he had to clean. Later he came to talk with René.

“I have noticed that Mr. Elephant is female. I am very sure of that.”

“Yes, you are right. I think it was a joke by Felix or maybe Max to call her Mr. Elephant. I don’t think the townspeople realise that ‘he’ is really ‘she’.”

“I would think that anyone from a village would notice.”

“Of course, Pierre, but villagers do not have money for us. This is why we set up in towns, and we just travel through villages.”

“Oh, there is so much about the human world I have to learn.”

Sylvie seemed to have taken a motherly interest in Pierre. Two days later she brought two pair of dungarees that she had remodelled to fit him. “These are new, they are strong, and he can wear one while the other is washed and dried. And at the next town, he should buy a pair of stout boots. Those booties are developing holes from his claws.”

René thanked her, and Pierre managed to say “merci beaucoup”.

“Pierre told me his booties don’t have a god grip. He has never worn boots. We might have to see if we can get some sandals made.”

“Won’t his feet get cold?” Sylvia asked René.

“No. He can walk barefoot in the snow. We should ask Madame Tzigana whether she will pay for his sandals, otherwise we’ll have to have a whip round for the money.”

“She was happy to pay for the dungarees, and I offered to alter them. I hope he likes them.”

“Oh he does. I just have to talk to him so he doesn’t feel he is under an obligation to pay you for them. He is a bit simple, compared with you and me.”

“He has a childlike quality about him. Innocent almost. We have to look after him.”

“We do, Sylvie. I think it is falling mostly to me, but I appreciate your help.”

“Thank you.” She smiled. “Please let me know if he needs any more sewing done. He is family now.”

Sylvie kissed René on each cheek, then did the same to Pierre. Pierre clumsily copied how René had respond. Sylvie patted his cheek and left.

“What was that ritual?” Pierre asked.

“It is a French custom for greeting someone you respect. She didn’t do it when she arrived because her hands were full, so she did it when she left. You copied what I did quite well. She likes you.”

One day, Pierre was amusing himself and Mr. Elephant by throwing a large ball to her. She would catch it with her trunk, or pick it up if she missed, and try to throw it back to him. It usually went wide and high, forcing Pierre to run in an ungainly fashion to catch it. He seemed to drop it at often as he caught it, but both of them seemed to be having fun.

Max, Sam, Felix and René stopped to watch. Max and Sam decided they could use that in their act.

When they explained that, Pierre shrugged. “It is not work, I am just keeping her amused.”

Max explained “Our work is keeping our audience amused. The ungainly way you run, and the comical way you miss catching the ball most of the time will amuse people. We’ll try it tonight, perhaps for five minutes, and see how it goes. We consider that work, just as much as mucking out the cages is work.”

“They really want me to drop the ball most of the time?” He asked René. “I could catch it every time, but I don’t want to hurt Mr. Elephant’s feelings, because she can’t catch it very well.”

“You’ve answered your own question, Pierre. When you go on stage, you don’t want to hurt her feelings, especially in front of the crowd. And now I think of it, if she enjoys doing it, and you enjoy doing it, then that is the best work you can have.”

Sylvie and Mirela, the Polish seamstress and cook, ran up a clown costume for Pierre, one with sleeves long enough for his arms, and trews short enough for his legs. He looked a bit confused up on stage, but threw the ball to Mr. Elephant and chased it when she threw it back. Eventually she tired of the game, shook her head and threw the ball to the back of the stage. Pierre waddled over to pat Mr. Elephant and then led her off stage to her holding pen.

Felix came and patted him on the back, talking rapidly in French. All Pierre caught was “bon”, which he now knew meant good.

He asked René later, when the Elf had finished his act. René told him, “Hey big man, they cheered, they laughed, they clapped. That means they enjoyed watching you play with Mr. Elephant. That’s what being on stage is all about. You do something that amuses people. You did it well.”

Pierre laughed. “I amused them? Humans are crazy.”

“Yes.” René smiled. “We both know that. Felix said you knew Mr. Elephant was getting bored, and you did exactly the right thing. He is proud of you.”

“She told me she had played enough. I asked her if she wanted to go out the back, and she said yes. Can’t humans talk with animals?”

“Not that I’ve noticed. Even Felix can’t talk with them, although he tries.”

“Oh, there is so much I don’t know about humans.”

The circus made good money, since circuses were rare this far north. Pierre urged them to go south. “The rains will come in two or three weeks, and most roads will be impassable for our wagons. And then the snows will come just a few weeks later. If we don’t leave soon, we’ll be stuck till next summer.”

There were arguments from some if the troupe because the money was good, but saner heads prevailed, and they returned to Oslo.

Pierre got his own caravan a week later, much to René’s relief. They had to buy a horse as well, and here Pierre insisted on choosing. He walked through the yard, patting each horse, spending a minute or two just talking quietly before moving on. One heavy draught horse that seemed skittish caught his eye.

“What’s the matter boy? I know you’re not happy.” Pierre patted the horse gently for a few moments while half the troupe watched and advised him to choose another. The horse trod on his foot.

“That doesn’t hurt me.” Pierre lifted the horse off its feet and placed it gently down again. “Let’s have a look at that foot.”

The horse walked away, just far enough to get in a good kick. It would have sent a human flying. Pierre grunted but was otherwise unmoved. “I’m heavier than I look. You want to try that again? Or will you show me your sore foot?”

The horse lifted a hoof. “No, the one that’s sore. Show me.”

The horse looked at Pierre for a moment then obediently lifted a different foot. Pierre inspected it. “He’s been badly shod. There’s a nail gone into the quick.”

The salesman didn’t want to know about it, protesting that there was nothing wrong, and ordering that no one was touching the horse unless they bought it first. Pierre picked him up in one hand, saying “René, we have to help him. Can’t you see it?”

“Yes. Mr. Salesman, be quiet.” He spoke modern Norwegian, of which Pierre now had some understanding, enough to follow the gist of a conversation. “My friend wants to buy the horse, but that horse is not going anywhere with that shoe. If you agree to fetch the farrier to replace the shoe, my friend will put you down and we will buy your horse. Now be reasonable.”

The salesman agreed, and as soon as his feet touched the ground he started running. René gestured, and the salesman tripped. Django and Max helped him to his feet. Max said in Norwegian “My friend and I will escort you to the farrier, unless you want to put the horse on a cart.”

“The farrier won’t make home visits!” The salesman protested. René translated.

“Then I’ll carry him.” Pierre squatted, then stood with the horse across his shoulders. Max and Django escorted the salesman, René walked with Pierre, several of the troupe followed behind, and a small crowd of onlookers crowded around. The farrier’s wasn’t far, perhaps fifty meters. The farrier was convinced to make this his priority job, and removed the mis-driven nail. “Leave it like that until the hoof settles down. If you’re worried about infection, put a few drops of akvavit in the nail hole night and morning for three days.”

Pierre assured everyone the horse was feeling much better. Max paid the farrier, and escorted everyone back to the horse yard. There he drove a bargain with the salesman about the quality of the horse, subtracted the cost of the farrier, and ended paying about a quarter what the salesman has asked for originally. Max was the consummate salesman, able to leave the other person happy with his bargain.

René and Sylvie rode with Pierre as he guided his caravan back to the fairground. Sylvie asked Pierre through René, “Pierre, what made you carry the horse? It could have walked there.”

Pierre thought about that. “I find two reasons. Firstly, I demonstrated to Mr. Horse that I am the one in charge; secondly, you and René tell me we are in show business, so I put on a show. When people ask about that show, everyone will know we are from Max’s circus. C’est bon, non?” He finished in French.

“C’est bon, oui!” Sylvie replied.

By this time Pierre had made friends with all the horses the circus owned. His main job was care of the animals, including mucking out pens each morning. He performed a few simple clown routines on stage each night, which earned him respect from the troupe. He also helped to set up the tents and pull them down and pack them away.

He had friends, he had food, he had a place to sleep that was warm and dry, and he was by and large content with his lot. He still hoped one day to return to the mountains, and his clan, but that would be in the future. He was living stone, and stone was patient.

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Part 2 -

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“I have noticed that Sylvie is spending much time in our company.” Pierre observed during a lull in the conversation. Pierre, René and Sylvie were sitting on the deck of a cargo ship, drinking beer and watching the distant coast. The entire circus was en route from Oslo to Bremen in Northern Germany. The ship was a modern steam powered one, larger and much more stable than the older wooden boat they had taken from Denmark on the way north. The sea voyage would take roughly two days.

From Bremen they would travel overland into Netherlands, Belgium and France. The troupe had voted to bypass Denmark for Germany because the cost was similar, the weather was predicted to become bad within the next week, and Denmark’s roads were not as good as those in Germany. They always spent more time in France than anywhere else. During winter the circus travelled around the South of France, away from the snow.

“She is my friend, and she likes you.” René replied. “But I will ask her.” He switched to French. “Pierre is concerned your husband may become jealous. I told him we are good friends, and you like him and want to be his friend. And we know Sam trusts you.”

“Yes, all that is true, mon cher ami. I am most comfortable in your company. When you or Pierre look at me you see another person. When any one else except Sam looks at me they see a woman with a beard, or perhaps a man in a dress. Humans see ugliness, my friends in the circus see another freak, you two don’t see a freak.”

“Thank you, we’re both touched.” René translated for Pierre.

“Did she say humans? She knows we are not human then.”

“Forgive me, but Pierre asked if you think he and I are not human?”

Sylvie laughed softly. “I know he’s a Troll, and you’re an Elf. But you’re people, better people than humans. You don’t seem prejudiced.”

“Oh, there have been wars between Trolls and Elves, but humans wiped out most of us. The few of us left try to get along as best we can, and conceal ourselves from humans. But at least most humans don’t believe we exist, and they have lost their hatred for us. I know you’ve been on the receiving end of that hatred as well.”

“Yes, they put me in a cage, as you know. You know my story, but Pierre doesn’t. I will tell it briefly now, you can tell him the details later. I was brought up as a girl, and I was mortified when I started growing a beard. I mean, I had started menstruating, I thought I was normal. I tried shaving, but everyone in my village knew, and I was treated cruelly by most.

“I ran away, was taken in by a circus...”

René explained to Pierre “It wasn’t our circus, but another with many Hungarians and Romany.”

Sylvie continued “They took me in, but they forced me to provide sexual services to the single men in the troupe, plus some paying customers. Eventually I managed to ran away from them, this was in Germany, but they caught me and put me in a cage. A few days later you, Max, Sam and Django came along and broke me out of the cage. That was eleven years ago. I don’t know why they never came after me ...”

“Max noticed the circus owner had a case of stolen whisky in his wagon, and reported them to the local police.” René laughed. “The police found stolen goods in several caravans, and arrested half the troupe. They spent several nights in gaol. We waited a few days to avoid seeming suspicious, then packed up and left.”

“I would have thought keeping people in cages was illegal in Germany.”

“I’m sure it is,” René replied, “but Germany seems to have two classes of people: Germans and everybody else. Jews and Gypsies are definitely second class, along with circus freaks and Slavs.”

“I don’t trust them any more, I wish we were sailing straight to Amsterdam. How did Pierre end up in a cage?”

“He said they dug him out of an avalanche, put him in chains, and stole everything including his clothes.”

“Maybe they thought he was an abominable snowman? Although he hasn’t any hair.”

“I think he was wearing trousers and jacket made from polar bear skin. So he would have looked like an animal.”

René turned to Pierre.“When did you get caught in the avalanche?”

“I don’t know the date in your terms. It was the fourteenth year of Queen Bekeldhur . I am pretty sure I was frozen for a time, so it could have been months, maybe longer. It was autumn, now that I think of it, and when they dug me out it was late spring. Why?”

“I have not heard of your Queen. The only one I know is Ishildur. She was Queen when I was learning Troll speak. I think you might have been buried a much longer time than you think. You speak a very old dialect of Norwegian, and your Troll speak is also old. Then again, perhaps you have been out of touch with the human world for a while.”

“We haven’t had a Queen Ishildur for neigh on four hundred years.”

“Mmm, I was going to say that I learned Troll Speak around one hundred and sixty years ago. It’s a puzzle. We are talking about the Queen in Trollheim?”

“Yes, but when I was trapped, I was much further south than Trollheim, the mountains just north of lake Vangsmjøse. I don’t know the names of the mountains in Norse.”

“You were trapped in the avalanche, you went to sleep, and when you woke up they were digging you out, but they put chains on you as they freed your arms and legs. They knew what they were doing, they were prepared. I’m guessing you’d been there for some time, visible below the surface ice. The only thing that makes sense is if you’d been frozen for centuries. But that’s not possible, is it?”

“Maybe. There are legends about trolls disappearing in bad weather and returning tens of years later, thinking they’d been gone only a handful of days. That means I have no family to return to.”

“You said you knew that when you woke. We’ll save up money, and visit there one day. Until then, your family is Max’s circus troupe.”

René shortened the timespan to between twenty five and fifty years when he translated for Sylvie. She didn’t need to know they would both outlive her by many years.

“Tell him we will do everything we can to make him feel like family with us. Poor thing.” Sylvie said.