



THE MASTER AND THE MONKEY

LUKE SEVERN

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A short story based on the Gandalf's Fist concept
album of the same name.

BY

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PROLOGUE

Pierre Du Gateau, was not a happy frog, nor was he the humblest, or indeed the politest of creatures. He sneered down at his new companion with the gloomy contempt that one might witness a drunken Laird expressing upon finding a deceased vagabond in his parlour. The bitterness and nihilistic exhaustion that surged within Pierre with every bundling lurch the Monkey made filled him with rage, his face twisted and contorted as the two emotions fought a tireless battle upon him.

He let this bitterness simmer for a long time, but at once suffered a epiphany he felt appreciation towards Francois for the role in his rescue, he now felt only the icy chill of resentment. He looked down at the seat that held his legless body. What once he considered a throne, adorned upon the crown of his rescuer, he now regarded as a transient prison to which he bobbed around as an un-tethered buoy may in a busy harbour.

As he slouched uncomfortably back into his unrelenting carriage, Pierre fixed his eyes against the horizon, with a grimace that said he knew this would be a bad day...

CHAPTER 1

Pierre sat atop of rock, perched in the crease of Francois' pork pie hat, their day had gone from bad to worse, first Francois had eaten something that didn't agree with him, then to compound matters Pierre had lost the last of their money to a bat called Maurice in a game of dice. This had made Francois even more miserable than normal and they were having a raging argument, interspersed with Francois gushing from both ends.

"I'll win some more money," Pierre said defiantly, "we've been in worse situations before."

Francois glanced up, "Like when?" He asked petulantly.

"Well in case you hadn't noticed," Pierre replied, refusing to be down hearted, "I have no back legs, so from here on in, everything other than being served as a side order in a French restaurant is a plus."

Francois tutted, "Always with the legs Pierre, change the record will you!" He turned a slight shade of green and began retching some more into the hole in the ground.

"Ah but you see my dear mammalian brother," Pierre replied wistfully, "it is the legs that maketh the frog and without them I can no longer be whole nor will I ever succumb to such a dreadful melancholy." Pierre reached down into the pouch around his stumps and pulled out a small flask, after sipping from it he turned back to Francois. "Right come on Francois, pull yourself together and lets head for the Clearing, I'll point out some leaves on the way and settle that bubbling gut of yours, I won't be able to pull you out of your stupor while you're like this," he paused,

knowing that what he was about to say would infuriate his friend,
“and to be fair Francois, I did tell you not to eat that fruit.”

CHAPTER 2

Francois swung from branch to branch, letting the motion take him as he slipped into his familiar rhythm, Pierre was singing merrily as he always did when they travelled, strapped into his harness high on Francois head. The forest was alive with sounds, the other monkeys jabbered in the distant and the odd rumble and crash indicated that some larger creatures were hidden by the approaching gloom.

Pierre's baritone voice rang out over that, adding to the symphony of the forest, #Oh what a glorious thing to be, a legless frog in the hat of a monkey...# Francois liked the song, it was one of his favourite travelling songs and the melody of Pierre's voice and the rhythm of the swinging brought a sense of contentment to Francois, he had forgotten their poverty and the fact that he had spent the entire day squatting over a hole, his day was improving and he hoped that the evening might lead to a blast behind the bushes with some young lovely.

Pierre's singing stopped abruptly as he plucked a fly out of the air with his long bulbous tongue, he swallowed before clearing his throat and launching into another song. A snarl below them brought them up sharply and the whole forest erupted in a screech of monkeys and chatter of birds as some unseen predator launched an attack on one of the floor dwelling critters. "Sounds like someone got unlucky tonight," Pierre said, as Francois resumed his swinging, "I hope it was no one we know."

Francois swung to the edge of the clearing; he stayed high up in the canopy and scoped the activity in front of them. "It looks all clear," Francois said to Pierre.

“Yes my friend, let us go make some money,” Pierre replied with a sly look in his eyes.

Francois stopped, lifted off his hat and looked sternly at Pierre, “I’ve seen that look before Pierre,” he said, “let’s keep a low profile, hey? I just want to catch some tail and then get back out into the woods.”

“I have no plans to cause havoc, but if havoc finds us in the meantime, that is no fault of mine.” Pierre smiled, laughed and added, “Do not worry Francois; I am sure that this visit will be less eventful than the last.”

The Clearing was a bustling commercial centre within the forest, market traders sold their wares and tavern keepers plied their punters with ales and spirits, it was the place where Pierre felt most at home.

Francois on the other hand saw the Clearing as a necessity, but a disaster waiting to happen; because whenever they visited, Pierre would get blind drunk and Francois would have to rescue his little friend.

Francois fixed his hat back onto his head, scaled down the tree to the forest floor and headed towards the nearest tavern. He gently lifted Pierre off his hat and settled him onto a small cushion at the end of the bar, “Right then Pierre, I will leave you to it,” he smiled at his friend, “I’m off for some tail.”

He turned and fixed Pierre with a stern look, “And for the love of god Pierre, please at least try and stay out of trouble.”

CHAPTER 3

As Francois disappeared into the crowd Pierre turned his attention to the tavern keeper, a friendly looking badger with a glint in his eye. “Bar Keep, a thimble of your finest mead please.”

The badger turned towards Pierre, “Ah Frog,” he said his smile fixed, then slowly turned into a frown, “I remember you, you caused a ruckus last time you were here.”

Pierre did the best to look chastised, “My Zebra striped friend, you do me a disservice; I have never frequented this fine establishment before and require only a little of your service, a little mead and if it could be arranged a little credit until my furry friend returns with our coins.”

The badger was unconvinced by Pierre’s assertions, “Hmmm, well I would believe your story except for three things; One: I happen to have seen you in this bar on no fewer than a dozen occasions, Two: how many two legged frogs do you think there are in this forest and Three: you are Pierre du Gateau and everyone in the Clearing knows you and knows to distrust you.”

Pierre took in the badger’s words and sighed, “Well....” he drew a breath, “I accept that I am Pierre Du Gateau, the finest frog in the entire forest and I also accept that my attempt to deceive you was ill advised and foolish.” He glanced around as if his next statement should be heard by only the badger and himself, “And.... I also know that you sir are indebted to a certain dark shaman called Sulink, for the acquisition of this aforementioned fine establishment.” He paused for dramatic effect, glancing around as he did so. ” And.... that the previous owner, a fine

family of upstanding weasels were sold out to the authorities for some minor misdemeanour, by some shaman or other..."

The badgers jaw had dropped as Pierre revealed what he knew and he quickly gathered his composure. "Shush, hush there now, no need to make a scene," the badger said quietly, putting his face close to Pierre. "What can I do to make you forget our little disagreement?"

Pierre's expression brighten somewhat, "Well then Bar Keep, shall we discuss a tab and a drink?" He rubbed his chin thoughtfully, "All this masticating has made me rather parched."

CHAPTER 4

Francois wound his way through the market stalls, stopping briefly to look at some of the delicate fruits and nuts that one of the stalls sold. His stomach rumbled, his earlier gut rot had subsided after eating the leaves that Pierre had recommended, but he was hungry now and had no money to buy anything.

He wandered away from the stall and carried on towards the Stump, this was where his own kind hung out in the Clearing; it was ruled by the Alpha pair of Kenneth and Hattie. Hattie was a great aunt on his father's side but they were not close, so much so that the last time he was here she'd had him beaten for fooling around with Gwen, one of the young girls in her care.

But that was a week ago and he was sure that he could sneak in under the radar and get some tail, after the day he'd had, the thought of diving for a bit of rough and tumble with Gwen or one of the others, made his heart soar and his loins swell.

But luck was not on his side, as his daydreaming meant he walked headlong into Drake, one of Kenneth's enforcers. "Well now, look what we have here," Drake said, "I didn't think you'd show your face around here for a while." He adjusted the stick that he held as a club. "What are you doing here Francois?" Drake asked, "you know what'll happen if Hattie catches you here again."

Francois was happy that it was Drake he had bumped into and not Terry, Drake had always been firm but fair, following Kenneth's orders but not spitefully prosecuting his own agenda as Terry did. Francois picked himself up and dusted himself off, "Drake," Francois said. "So good to see you," he lied. "I'm just off

to see Aunt Hattie," he lied again, "I wanted to see if we could work out the issues that arose during my last visit."

"Uh-huh," Drake said unconvinced, "I'm sure you are, I don't believe even you would be stupid enough to try and sneak in here and get away with one of the girls again."

Francois set his face with a state of shock, "Drake you do me a disservice, I have just come to make amends with my favourite Aunt, I have no ulterior motive other than fixing the bonds that tie our family together."

Drake looked at him with a sense of disbelief and disgust, "You are not my family Francois, just because my Cousin and your great Aunt are Alphas, does not make us relatives." Drake prodded Francois solidly in the chest with his stick, "And besides, I'm pretty certain that OUR families have disowned you."

"That makes my journey here, ever more important," Francois replied, "how am I to redeem myself in the eyes of our family if I cannot even visit." He steadied himself under the watchful eye of Drake, "If you could just point me in the direction of my Aunt, I will be on my way."

Drake shook his head in disbelief, "Very well, I'll escort you there; see that you don't go astray."

"Now then Drake my friend, there's no need for that," panicking slightly, the last place he wanted to go was to where his Aunt was, if that happened his day would end on a very sour note and he'd probably get a beating just for the cheek of showing his face. "If you can just point me to where she is, I will find my own way; I wouldn't want to take you away from your post," he tried to subvert a smile and clapped Drake on the shoulder, "you don't

know who could try and sneak in while you were away from your position.”

Drake looked around and realised the truth in Francois’ words, “Very well, but keep out of trouble Francois, I have no wish to see you beat and banished.” He turned his gaze away from Francois and pointed in the direction of Hattie, “But steer clear of Terry, he is after your blood, Gwen is promised to him you know?”

Francois nodded to Drake and smiled, “Thank you for the warning,” he turned and walked in the direction that Drake had indicated, he got thirty paces away then turned and headed in the opposite direction, away from his Aunt and hopefully towards a rumble in the bushes.

CHAPTER 5

Pierre was getting slightly intoxicated; he had grown bored of baiting the badger and was playing a game of dice with a shrew and two pelicans. He had managed to win over 200 groats, even though he had started with nothing, the pelicans were losing badly and they had yet to work out that their losses were down to Pierre's cheating rather than pure bad luck.

Steve the Shrew had worked out that Pierre was cheating and as a consequence kept looking past Pierre to the darkened edge of the clearing. But unfortunately for Pierre he was A) too intoxicated to notice this and B) enjoying himself so much that he was oblivious to anything other than his accumulation of wealth.

Wealth was unfortunately Pierre's downfall; it was why he had lost all of his money to the devilish Maurice and it was why right now he couldn't see the danger that was approaching.

"Sevens," shouted Pierre, scooping some more money into the pile in front of him, "20 groats on nines." Pierre announced to the table, with intoxicated triumph.

Geoff the Pelican looked at Pierre; he counted through his coins and sheepishly slid them into the middle, "I only have 18 left," he said.

"Well..." Pierre said, exhaling loudly, "I will let you off with that," he looked straight at Geoff and rolled a coin back and forth across the table in front of him. "But if I win, unlikely as that may be, you will owe me 2 groats and I would be willing to come to a prior arrangement with you."

Geoff eyed Pierre with his glassy beady eyes and said sharply, "Roll the dice frog; if you win we'll talk." Geoff glanced around at the others and added, "But if I win, I'm back in the game and your deal is not necessary." The others nodded in agreement.

Pierre stared into the dark glass eyes of the Pelican, "Is that really wise? My Avian friend, a prior arrangement could..."

"Just roll the dice frog," the second Pelican Alan snapped at Pierre, gnashing his beak menacingly and pushing 20 groats into the pot.

"Okay, but it's your funeral," Pierre announced, "Shrew are you in?" He asked.

Steve stared for a long time at Pierre before simply adding, "Yes, 20 that it is not nines."

Pierre rolled the dice and a five and four came up, "It seems to be my lucky day, my friends," Pierre laughed heartily and began to scoop the coins towards him.

Steve shot out a hand and grabbed hold of Pierre's hand, "Just a second there Frog," he said sharply, "I believe that you are a cheat and a fraud."

Pierre took on a state of mock surprise, "My dear Shrew, me a cheat?" Pierre said, "The dice are just with me today; it is nothing more than luck."

The Pelicans were looking from Pierre to Steve, "What evidence do you have for treachery Shrew?" Alan said, as he banged his beak on the table in front of Pierre.

Steve puffed up his little chest, trying to look intimidating, which for an animal of his size looked ridiculous. "A friend of mine

knows this frog by reputation, he is a treacherous creature and is not to be trusted,” he said.

Pierre racked his brain trying to work out where this was going, his intoxication had subsided and he was weighing up his options. Who was this mysterious friend that the Shrew was talking about and could he make his escape; he glanced at the Pelicans and decided they would have no hesitation in swallowing him whole,

The Pelicans however were no longer looking at Pierre, but had fixed their attention on Steve the Shrew, “How can we be sure that you’re telling the truth?” Alan asked.

“Me,” said a voice from behind. A fluttering flurry of movement instantly stilled as Maurice the Bat landed on the table next to the pile of coins. “I know that he is a cheat because those dice are dodgy and I know this because he stole them from me!”

CHAPTER 6

Francois sneaked around the base of some discarded packing crates and took a quick glance towards the group of monkey's lounging on the ground. The group was the harem of girls that lived with the tribe and were guarded by the brutish Terry and another of Kenneth's guards.

Francois needed a distraction, something to remove the guards and free the path for some action; what could he do? He glanced around quickly and managed to find oily rags amongst the rubbish in the packing crates; fire he thought... I'll light a fire and distract the guards.

He backed around the crates and headed to an area of dried grass, out of sight of the guards; he set the rags on the floor and lit them with his lighter; he heaped some dried foliage onto the smoking pile then headed towards the harem.

The smoke began to curl into the sky; the guard's heads went up and sounded the alarm as the fire took hold. Fire was the great fear in the forest it caused instant panic amongst the entire group of monkeys gathered around the stump. Terry and the other guard stomped off towards the flames shouting for water to be brought.

Francois leapt from his hiding place and swept into the group of girls; he grabbed Gwen's hand and shouted, "Quick this way," towards the others.

Gwen looked at him wide eyed, "Francois?" She said, with wonder in her voice.

“Yes my dearest it is I,” Francois replied quickly, flashing a smile, “come all of you away from the flames.” Francois led Gwen and some of the others away from the smoke and away from Terry.

Shouts were coming from all across the Clearing as everyone started to spot the smoke and flames leaping into the sky. The dry foliage of the Clearing had spread the fire to the empty packing crates and the fire surged quickly as it found new fuel to burn.

CHAPTER 7

The Badger and a group of drunkards had gathered around the table, attracted by the raised voices, Maurice settled onto the table next to Steve. "So then Pierre why don't you let these fine fellow's know how you have been cheating them," Maurice announced to the table.

Pierre glanced around at the table and looked astonished, "What kind of world are we living when a fellows good luck is automatically assumed to be cheating?" He looked at Maurice, "And what is this talk of trick dice, I knew nothing of these dice being dodgy; I do not even know how such things could be done." He then glanced back to the two slightly infuriated pelicans, "And what does it say of the character of my accuser, if he accepts the ownership of such dice; it is not my character that is under question here but that of this flying interloper."

Alan the Pelican turned towards Maurice, "The Frog has a point Bat; I do not know you and trust no one but my companion here," he motioned towards Geoff. "If these dice are dodgy, then I condemn the three of you," he pointed towards Pierre and the two small mammals, "you all seem to know too much about all this." He turned his attention back to Pierre, "We came for an honest game and if that is not what we have had; then we will require compensation from the others around this table."

Steve and Maurice leapt up and down pleading their innocence. Pierre sat quiet and still, watching the events unfold; he realised that he could still come out of this with some money. He had taken money from the Shrew which he had no intention of returning, even after paying back the Pelicans and providing compensation; he would still end the night up.

Pierre cleared his throat, "Okay my Avian friends, I will return to you the money that I have won from you and as a gesture of goodwill will provide you 10% interest in compensation."

Steve and Maurice looked at Pierre in horror, "What?" Steve shouted, "You cheat us then think you can just walk away, I want compensation as well frog."

Before Pierre could reply Alan turned on Steve and said, "I have no interest in your squabbles; you can sort them out amongst yourselves." He turned to Pierre, "Your offer is satisfactory Frog, I accept that you may be party to this deception, but your integrity has shone through by your willingness to settle." He turned back to Steve and Maurice, "And what say you Shrew? And you Bat?"

"Me?" Maurice said in astonishment, "Why should I pay you compensation? I haven't even played in this game."

Alan turned his beak towards Maurice and rapped it on the table, "Because you, you flying vermin have accepted that these tricky dice are yours; so I lay the blame of my ruined evening's entertainment squarely at your feet."

Geoff nodded in agreement as did Pierre, "I believe he is right Maurice, just pay the man and be done with it," he said barely containing his smile. Pierre counted out his coins and slid them across the table towards the pelicans, "Apologies gentlemen, another time, in better company perhaps?"

Geoff inclined his head slightly, "Agreed frog, but we'll bring the dice next time."

Alan rapped his beak on the table again, "Paying up time," he said towards the Mammals.

Reluctantly Steve counted his coins out and pushed them across the table towards Alan. Maurice sat there a ball of rage; he couldn't believe that his attempt to take more money off of Pierre was leading him to hand over coins of his own.

"Now Bat," Geoff said to him.

Maurice Reached into the pouch around his waist and lifted out his coins, "How much?" he asked shaking with fury.

"Call it 30 Groats," Alan replied.

Maurice shook his head and handed over the coins. "Are we done?" He asked the now happy Pelicans.

"Oh yes," Geoff replied, as he and Alan rose from the table and headed out of the tavern area.

Maurice turned to a smiling Pierre, "Right then you Amphibian bastard; give me the rest of your money, NOW!"

CHAPTER 8

Francois led Gwen and three of the others into the forest and shouted, “We should be safe here,” he announced finding a sheltered hollow behind some bushes.

“Shouldn’t we go back?” One of the others, Maddy asked.

“No the main thing is to stay clear and safe, no sense in endangering our own lives,” Francois replied.

“Yes, Francois is right,” Gwen replied, “the others will get it under control.” She led Francois slightly away from the others, “What are you doing here Francois?” she asked, “I thought you wouldn’t be back for weeks, after the beating Hattie gave you.” She reached up and stroked his furry cheek, “I was worried about you,” she added.

‘Jackpot’ thought Francois, before quickly subduing his smile, “There was no need to worry, my dear Gwen,” he replied. “I have just been biding my time, allowing my aunt to calm down, before returning to make amends.” He smiled at her and gently stroked her arm before saying, “I was just on my way to see Aunt Hattie when I saw the flames and instantly thought about you and your safety.”

“Oh Francois,” she sighed, “You are so thoughtful,” Her face dropped into a deep frown,” but some of the other girls have been saying such bad things about you.”

Francois gulped, “What kind of things?” Knowing exactly the kinds of things the other girls would have been saying, all true mind you, but Gwen was a sweet girl and he had to keep her on side.

“Things about you being an outcast from the tribe and that you treat girls really badly,” She looked deeply into his eyes, “but it’s not true, is it Francois?”

“No my dearest, it is not true, this misunderstanding between Aunt Hattie and myself will pass,” he told her, “and as for treating girls badly, I have only been with Leyla and I have already explained her jealousy to you before.”

“I know that, but it wasn’t Leyla this time,” she dropped her eyes to the floor, “it was Misha and Francine.”

Francois gulped again, slightly louder and he quickly composed himself, hoping that Gwen had not heard. “Oh?” He said, hopefully sounding surprised.

Gwen continued to look at the floor but replied, “Yes, they said that you had bee....”

“Gwen,” Maddy shouted from behind them. Francois and Gwen looked around, “We really should head to the Stump and let the others know we are safe.”

“Yes we should go,” one of the other girls Robyn added, suspiciously looking from Gwen to Francois, “All of us.”

Francois nodded, happy to distract Gwen from her train of thought, “Good idea, we should go find Drake and let him know we are all okay.” He motioned towards the stump, “Lead on girls, we will be right behind you.”

CHAPTER 9

Pierre looked back at Maurice and had to smile; he had known full well the night before after taking Maurice's dice that there would be comeback, he just hadn't assumed it would be so soon.

"Now then Maurice, I assume that your Shrew friend here was a plant to see if it was I that had taken your dice, well," he raised his voice so that the others around the table could hear. "I would like to have it set straight; that I only stole your dice so to prove that you cheated me with these very same dice yesterday, when you cleaned me out." Maurice's eyes narrowed, "Because," Pierre continued, "If you are accepting ownership of these trick dice, then I would like to be reimbursed with the 70 groats that you conned me out of yesterday."

"Shame, shame" shouted one of the drunks who was listening to the heated conversation in the tavern.

"Shut it, you drunken fool," snapped Maurice.

"And as for you, you planted Shrew," Pierre said to Steve, "If you believed me to be using trick dice from the beginning, then I call you out as collaborator and do not owe you anything."

Maurice flapped once and landed at the foot of Pierre's cushion, raising himself up to his full extent on his wingtips. "Now listen hear, you silver tongued bag of slime," Maurice said menacingly to Pierre, "I will not have you sully my bad name in this place, you have already cost me more today than I expected," he glared at Pierre and growled, "if you think I am paying you another Shilling you are sadly mistaken."

“Well then Maurice, we are at a stumbling block, because there is no way I am paying either of you anymore,” Pierre shifted slightly on his cushion and took another swig from his thimble,” I say we bring in a mediator, someone impartial who has nothing to gain or lose.”

Maurice settled back on his haunches, he mulled it over before turning to Steve, who simply shrugged then nodded. “Fair enough Frog,” Maurice agreed, “But whom?”

“How about the owner of this fine establishment,” Pierre suggested, “And the loser, in our little dispute pays compensation to the Bar Keep for bringing our row to his door.”

Maurice mulled it over, looking the Badger up and down, “Okay,” He shouted across to where the badger sat, “Bar Keep, come settle this dispute, there’s 5 groats in it for you.”

The Badger sauntered over to the table and looked at the protagonists in the dispute, Pierre swivelled round and looked at the badger, “Now then Bar Keep, I will assume that you have heard most of what has gone on here tonight, being the alert and highly respected publican that you are.”

“Stop trying to butter him up Pierre,” Maurice scoffed at Pierre, he turned to the badger, “Essentially what the manipulative little frog is trying to say is that, we know you have heard most of what has gone on hear this evening and we like you to settle this dispute; so that both parties can go away, satisfied that they have not unfairly treated.”

“Hmmm...” The Bar Keep said, “Okay I will be judge in your little dispute.” The Badger looked from Pierre to Maurice, “Right, just

to be clear I don't care about either of you, but since you have disrupted my bar this evening, I will take your money."

Maurice nodded, "Fair enough Badger, I accept that you'll be partial," he looked at Pierre. "Essentially you have to decide whether I have been wronged, or the whether this treacherous Frog has been wronged."

Pierre shook his head at Maurice's words, "Well I only have one thing to add and that is that I hope you make the right decision, I would hate to think that you try and weasel out of this."

Maurice looked at Pierre with a puzzled look on his face; unfortunately for him in looking at Pierre, he missed the Bar Keep turning slightly pale.

The Bar Keep cleared his throat, "Well after careful consideration, I rule in favour of..." he paused for dramatic effect, "The Frog."

Pierre smiled to himself, "Thank you, Bar Keep, I know you made the right decision."

Maurice sat there fuming, "Yes, thank you Bar Keep," he said sarcastically, "What do I owe the filthy Amphibian."

The Badger looked down his nose at him, "Pay him his 70 Groats, then pay me my 5 Groats then get the hell out of my Tavern, you are not welcome here again.

Maurice opened his pouch, took out his coins and handed a pile to Pierre and a couple to the Badger. "Thank you Maurice, we'll call it even," Pierre said with a smile.

CHAPTER 10

The girls set off in front of them, Francois held Gwen back; he pulled her close into his chest, "I care for you a great deal Gwen." He gazed deeply into her eyes, "The past is the past and cannot be changed, but what we do in the future is not set and I will do you no wrong." Francois was happy to see Gwen's heart soar as his words lifted her; there were advantages to hanging round with a wordsmith like Pierre.

"Oh Francois," she said, a flash of love spread across her eyes, but as quickly as it was there it was gone, "but there's also another problem, it's Terry." She tore her eyes from his, "Kenneth has promised me to Terry; once my season comes round I'm to be his."

Francois instantly saw an opportunity, a way to get what he wanted, if only for now. He now dropped his own eyes feigning hurt and said, "Oh Gwen, what are we to do, if only you could be mine till Terry snatches you away."

Gwen's face went still, until a smile spread across her lips, "Oh but Francois don't you see," She raised his fallen head and looked devilishly into his, "I can be yours until I'm on season and I wouldn't be breaking the rules."

Francois let a smile spread across his face; she believed it was her idea and yet he was still getting his own way, "That's a wonderful idea my dear, this day just got so much better."

CHAPTER 11

Pierre was sitting back at the bar sipping from his thimble; the Bar Keep had asked Pierre to pay his tab, which he had readily done. His head was now happily swimming and his money pouch was full; Maurice and Steve had left with their metaphorical tails between their legs.

There was a fire on the far side of the Clearing that was spreading towards the market district; some of the tavern occupants had left and headed into the forest to escape the flames. Pierre however had stayed, mainly because he had no means of getting away but also he assumed that if the fire was serious Francois would arrive as he always did.

“Did I tell you Bar Keep, how I lost my legs,” He said to the badger.

“No Pierre I don’t believe you ever had,” The Badger humoured him, everyone knew the story of how Pierre Du Gateau had lost his legs; but since Pierre was about the only customer left in the bar, the Badger was willing to listen to the story again.

“Well it happened three long years ago, back then I was just a simple frog, with not a care in the world, I lived with 100 of my relatives in a pond just outside the village of Gautiere.

It was a happy time for me, spending my time either swimming or sitting in the sun; I had the pick of any young frog in the pond and enjoyed winter when I would crawl into a hole and hibernate till spring.

But one day that all changed, at dusk one evening as we were croaking our hearts out as we loved to do of an evening, figures loomed out of the dark.

These figures were people and they wanted only one thing, us, all of us; or to be more precise they wanted our legs. They were farmers, frog farmers and our pond was part of the harvest; they came at us with nets and boxes and I saw many of my friends and family taken and then they came for me.”

Pierre looked wistfully into the dark sky; the red glow of the fire silhouetted the trees surrounding the Clearing. “Do you think we should go?” He asked the Badger.

The Badger peered into the glow of the fire, “No I think we shall be alright Pierre, the market traders appear to have put it out; although judging by the smell,” the Badger sniffed the air deeply, “I think they’ve broken kegs of beer over it.”

“Ah what a waste,” Pierre said wistfully, “Where was I? Ah yes the Frenchmen that’s what they were, the farmers they were Frenchmen,” he said shaking his head. “Apart from crows, the French are frogs’ natural enemies. So they captured us and took us to a back alley restaurant; where this happened,” he motioned to his stumps, “I sat there for hours in that box, hearing the screams of my people being tortured and killed and then it was my turn.

The lid was lifted and a gloved hand reached in and clasped around my middle; I tried to struggle, but to no avail. The chef was too strong, he held me down and I saw glint of the knife gripped in his hand and then.” He paused, staring down at his stumps, a flash of anger crossed his eyes and then a look of tired

resignation settled on face. "And then I blacked out and when I woke up, I looked like this."

The Badger looked at him and shook his head, "A sad tale Pierre, but tell me how did you escape?" He was humouring Pierre, he already knew the rest of the tale, but knew that Pierre would brighten once he told of his escape and subsequent rise as master trickster of the Clearing.

"Well Badger, good of you to ask," Pierre replied.

CHAPTER 12

Francois and Gwen lay together on the ground hidden behind some trees at the edge of the Clearing; Francois lay staring up into the sky, Gwen was curled around him, her tail contentedly swishing from side to side. "Did I ever tell you my dear, how I met my friend and counterpart Pierre?"

Gwen stirred slightly, "No Francois, I don't believe you have," She replied.

Francois shifted slightly so he could gaze down upon her face, "You obviously know about my capture and incarceration by Gustav the Bavarian?"

She nodded sadly, "We all know about that Francois, it was a very difficult time for your poor mother, god rest her soul."

"Indeed," Francois dipped his head in sadness, "well in a way it was my fault for venturing so close to the City, but I was busy minding my own business, when I was snared by a trapper and sold to Gustav. Gustav was a musician an organ grinder and my job in slavery was dancing and doffing my pork pie hat, taking money off punters.

It wasn't a bad job, all said and done and Gustav was firm but fair, but I hated it; three long years I worked my way around the countryside tethered to the organ or tied to his waist. Then one ordinary day we were in the small village of Gautiere, Gustav had set up in the town square and had attached my leash to his organ as usual.

But fate had conspired against him and my leash worked loose, he was away with the music, eyes closed playing one of his

thumping melodies. I was dancing a jolly jig and holding out my hat for any spare change, when I realised I was no longer tethered to the organ; I gazed around and realised that no one had noticed, so I did what any self respecting slave would do, I ran. I was away and down the end of the street before Gustav opened his eyes and noticed I was gone; I ducked into an alleyway and was free.”

He stared up into the dark sky, looking at the bright stars that shone down upon them, he propped himself up on his elbows and stared lovingly down at Gwen, “But I am repeating myself that story you already know, Pierre as he was known then, just plain simple Pierre, was having a worse day than I, taken from his home and brutally mutilated by a dastardly French chef.

Well fate brought us together, me in my day of triumph and Pierre in his day of despair; the alley I had stumbled down led around the back of Chateau Gateau the restaurant where the captured Pierre was being butchered and at the precise moment that Pierre was being attacked I passed the open restaurant door and heard the screams.

I don’t know why I stopped, but the piercing screams coming from within drew me in. I was on the threshold of the door before I knew what was happening; I saw Pierre laying on the butchers block, legless and helpless, his little eyes closed and the Chef looming over him with a knife. I lunged forward and jumped onto the chef’s back, the chef startled by my attack slashed wildly with the knife; I immediately leapt from his back onto the counter and in a moment of clarity lifted the lifeless Pierre up and darted for the door before the Chef had a chance to lay a hand on me.”

Gwen hugged Francois tightly, "That was very brave of you Francois," she said her eyes filled with tears of amazement, "I never knew that you had taken on a human like that, it is a wonder that you were not hurt."

It was not a wonder at all, as that was the fabricated version of events; what had actually happened was that after his escape from Gustav, Francois had been rooting around in the bins behind the restaurant when the chef had thrown out the waste from his cutting block, including the now legless Pierre. He had lifted Pierre from his offal burial and gently placed him in his upturned hat; Pierre had stirred and then opened his eyes and looked up at Francois and had uttered the first words ever spoken between the pair, "What the hell are you looking at, you disgusting, shit throwing ape."

Francois had embellished the story somewhat and now gazed down lovingly at Gwen, "It was a moment of madness, I guess instinct just took over," he said smugly.

CHAPTER 13

The Badger had left Pierre to his own thoughts and his now full again thimble of mead. Pierre was content, he had a pouch full of coins and he was so lost in his own contentment that he did not notice an ancient hairless anteater ambling along the bar towards where he was propped. The Anteater climbed up onto a bar stool and coughed gently, "Excuse me," the Anteater said to Pierre, "do you mind if I prop myself up here on this bar and share a drink with you?"

Pierre looked around and glanced at the Anteater, "My dear old insect eating brother, not at all, I would be glad of the company," Pierre told him. "Can I get you a drink?" Pierre asked.

"That would be most kind," the Anteater replied, Pierre clattered a couple of coins onto the counter and he motioned to the Badger for a fresh round of drinks.

"So what brings you to the Clearing old timer?" Pierre asked, gazing up at the wrinkled old snout that supped gently at the drink that the Badger had left on the bar.

The Anteater set his drink down onto the bar and turned to Pierre, "Well," The Anteater said with a sigh, "I have come for the Mead, which I thank you for and also to find a buyer for a few items I have collected here and there."

Pierre looked past the bar over towards where the fire was still raging, "I don't think the market will be open for the rest of the day, looking at that," he said pointing towards the clouds of smoke.

"No probably not," he said sadly, "I could smell the fire as I was approaching, but once I saw that the bar was still open, I assumed it wasn't too serious."

"Who knows, it's probably the monkeys that set the fire, there always banging rocks or rubbing sticks together." He paused, thinking of Francois, then shook his head of the thought, he again assumed that Francois would appear when he was finished with his monkey business, he chuckled to himself at his pun, then realised that the Anteater was looking at him with a puzzled look on his face.

"Sorry my friend, I was thinking of my companion and hoping that he hasn't got himself into any bother," he told the Anteater.

"No problem, I often find myself wool gathering, especially in these days when I don't move as quickly as I used to," the Anteater replied.

"Ha, I don't move at all anymore," Pierre chuckled, rubbing his stumps.

The Anteater nodded sadly, "No I suppose you don't."

"Well then let me see what you have for sale," Pierre said, "I may be able to give you some pointers of which traders may be able to help you and which will try and rob you blind."

The Anteater thought for a moment before nodding and reaching down into a satchel slung around his neck and bringing out a handful of trinkets and a small velvet pouch. "That would be much appreciated, most of this stuff is junk but I have a couple of items that I'm hoping to get a pretty penny for."

The Anteater spread his items across the bar in front of Pierre, keeping the velvet pouch close to his old withered hand. The Badger had noticed the Anteaters collection and was slyly watching out of the corner of his eye.

Pierre cast an eye over the items that were laid in front of him, a few pieces of scrap iron, a couple of pieces of glass and some copper wire and some other worthless knick knacks, then there was the mysterious contents of the velvet bag. Pierre looked up at the Anteater "Well these I would take to Devant the smithy," he motioned to the iron and copper. "The glass and the other bits I would take to Nortan over at general goods and if he offers you less than half a shilling, I'd talk to Big Gork over in the far corner; who will probably give you a better price."

The Anteater nodded in thanks, "That just leaves the contents of this," he patted the bag on the counter. He slowly untied the velvet bag and slid what looked like a plain wooden playing card box onto the counter, he opened the box and Pierre and the Badger tried to peer in to see what it contained. It was a small vile of viscous black liquid, the Anteater looked up at Pierre and with a sound of awe in his voice said, "This, as I am led to believe is Dragons blood."

CHAPTER 14

Fransois and Gwen were part way through round three when a shout came from nearby; it was loud and terse and sounded just like Terry. Fransois and Gwen froze and listened carefully; there was more than one voice, a female talking quickly and quietly to the loud booming male. It was Robyn and she had led Terry back to where Gwen and Fransois had disappeared.

"Shit," Fransois said, "Gwen my dear, I fear I may have to leave you before we finish this little tete a tete."

Gwen disengaged herself from Fransois and turned to face him, "Oh my darling, go, go, flee, but remember my heart is always yours." Gwen said tears filling her eyes.

Fransois, kissed Gwen deeply, "I will try and return to you before you are in season," he said, holding her in his arms.

Another shout came from closer, more than one male voice, a whole squad of Kenneth's enforcers.

Fransois took one last look at Gwen, gave her a quick lob sided grin then turned and ran, straight into the trees, swinging for his life.

CHAPTER 15

Dragons blood?" Pierre said in true amazement; The Badger, who had been leaning in to look at Anteaters items, had gone very pale.

"You brought Dragons blood here?" The Badger said, "But... but you know that dragons can smell their blood from miles away." The Badger eyes were drawn to the fire still raging on the far side of the Clearing, "Have you opened it?" He asked the slightly startled Anteater.

"No, I haven't," the Anteater said, "I would do no such a thing; it came to me in the box and the bag."

The Anteater looked flustered and started to pack away the vile of blood; the badger shook his head, "You've doomed us all, you decrepit old fool," the Badger shouted, snatching the cup that the Anteater had been drinking out of, "Get out and away from here, you'll get us all killed."

Pierre sat looking at the vial as it disappeared back inside the box and into its bag, "Wait," Pierre said holding up his hand to the Anteater, "how much do you want for the vial?"

"What?" The Badger said, looking at Pierre in horror, "Pierre you can't seriously be thinking of taking that vial from this cretin?"

"I happen to know, that there are many myths about Dragons and their blood and that you have just showed that you are the cretin and a superstitious bugger to boot." Pierre gave the Badger a dismissive look, "Get away with you, you nosey bugger," he turned to the Anteater; "come on then my insect eating friend, name your price."

CHAPTER 16

Francois swung through the trees, circling the outside of the Clearing heading for the bar where he assumed Pierre would be, he could hear the commotion behind him as Terry found Gwen and he swung higher up into the trees to get a better view of the area. The fire he had lit was slowly being brought under control, with teams of woodland creatures, bucketing water from the stream onto the heart of the blaze.

Suddenly a hooting shout went up above him, "He's there," a lookout was a hundred yards from him, staring directly at him, in his hesitation looking at the fire, he had not noticed the look out. "Terry, Drake he's just sitting there in the tree," the lookout shouted, hurling his spear directly at Francois.

Francois was instantly a blur of legs and arms as he scrambled from his perch and shot down the trunk of the nearest tree and darted onto the floor. The spear whistled through the space where he had been, glancing off a branch and tumbling to the forest floor, Francois grabbed the spear and dashed into the Clearing.

CHAPTER 17

Pierre sat staring at the Anteater, the Badger had shuffled down to the other end of the bar muttering to himself; The Anteater sat sliding the velvet bag across the counter, back and forward.

"I don't know frog, I'm not sure what is it worth," the Anteater said.

"Where did you get it from?" Pierre asked, "And how much did you pay?"

The Anteater took a deep breath, "I was left it in someone's Will, an old friend of mine passed on about 6 months back; last month I was tracked down by the executor of his estate and presented with this bag, the box an and the vial within it, I haven't opened it." He looked at Pierre with a hint of fear in his eyes, "To be fair I don't know what to do with it, I assumed that here in the clearing there would be someone willing to take it off my hands," he motioned towards the Badger, "I'm a little bit like your friend here, afraid and unsure, but I knew it would have value to someone, so here I am and here it is."

"I'll give you 30 Groats for it," Pierre said with no hesitation.

"Well, that seems a small amount for something so rare," said the Anteater, "how about 50."

Pierre looked at the elderly Anteater and tried to work out if he was being conned, was the story of it being bequeathed in the Will a layer of deceit to get Pierre to part with his money, what if the blood turned out to be nothing more than a dark pigment.

“42,” Pierre replied with more conviction than he felt, “for the lifting of the burden off your elderly shoulders.”

The Anteater mused a moment, “45 and we’ll shake on it,” he said extending his hand towards Pierre.

Pierre looked from the hand to the eyes, trying to see if he was getting a good deal, but the Anteaters face lined and wrinkled as it was, was expressionless.

“Deal,” Pierre shot his hand into the clawed hand of the Anteater. Pierre reached into his pouch and removed a collection of coins and counted them onto the counter, he would be poorer because of the transaction, but if it really was dragons blood, then it’s overall value could be priceless and Pierre had heard a few myths of his own about the blood that were well worth nearly a third of his money. “A pleasure doing business with you old timer,” Pierre said.

Even though the Badger was down at the far end of the bar, he had seen the transaction take place and piped up, “You’re asking for a world of pain, dealing with that kind of thing Pierre, he said. “I want no more part of that kind of craziness, so kindly turn around and leave, both of you.”

The Anteater, shuffled backwards, “Of course Bar Keep, I am sorry to have brought my troubles to your door, please forgive my indiscretion.”

The Badger just waved him away, “Just go and cause trouble someplace else, or if you can, not at all.”

Pierre shrugged, “But my dear Badger without my simian friend I have no means to leave your fine establishment. As you can see,” he said pointing to his stumps with a sly smile on his face,

“the procurement of dragon’s blood has not enabled me to grow back lost limbs.”

CHAPTER 18

At that precise moment, Francois dashed into the bar, his hat was askew, he was panting heavily and he carried a short flint tipped spear, "Pierre, we have to go," he said breathlessly.

"Oh, well, I seem to have outstayed my welcome anyway," Pierre replied, turning to the Badger and Anteater, "Gentlemen, it's been a pleasure."

Francois lifted Pierre off the counter and placed him on top of his hat, "You'd better strap in Pierre, it's going to another one of those exits," Francois told him.

"When do we not have one of those exits my friend," Pierre replied, fastening a small strap to a loop in his belt. "I have some great stories to tell and from the look of you, so do you," he laughed.

Francois scampered through the bar area of the Clearing, heading in a direction hopefully away from their pursuers. "Stories will have to wait for now my friend; it's going to be a long night."

Shouts and screeches spread across the clearing as Terry and his friends checked in carts and overturned barrels, throughout the bar area; they approached the Badgers bar and upon enquiring found that the Bar keeper had not seen a banished monkey or his amphibian friend.

So the search went on, in fact no one admitted seeing either of the pair and Terry broke his spear shaft in frustration as it seemed that Francois was going to slip through his grasp again.

Just as he was giving up hope, a lookout on the far edge of the Clearing started shouting and hooting, Drake who was closer to the lookout, turned to Terry, "He's there Terry, staying low, weaving between the market stalls; Kenneth and Hattie have made pursuit as well, they're taking this as a personal affront to their authority."

Terry glanced at Drake as they ran in the direction of the lookout "They'll let me have my vengeance won't they Drake?" He asked, "He's defiled my given woman; I want his head on the end of a spear."

Drake nodded, "After his performance today, with the fire and all, I wouldn't be surprised if they ripped him limb from limb."

CHAPTER 19

Francois had ditched the small spear he had been carrying, as it was hindering his running, he was now running dog like on all fours; he wanted to make it into the trees, get airborne and settle into his swinging movement. He ducked under a market stall and caught his breath for a moment; he could hear shouts and crashes coming from two directions now and was worried that they were going to be surrounded.

“Any ideas Pierre?” He asked his friend.

Pierre paused to look out at the approaching groups of spear armed monkeys, “I suppose surrender isn’t an option?” He asked.

“No my friend only blood will settle this I’m afraid,” Francois replied. “Most of it mine, I think.”

“Blood hey, hmmm...” Pierre looked down at the small velvet pouch strapped to his belt, “Well a drop wouldn’t hurt,” he said mostly to himself. He reached into the velvet bag, removed the box and took out the small vial. “Francois I have a plan.”

CHAPTER 20

Terry, Drake and the other enforcers approached the market and were surprised to see Francois standing on top of one of the market stalls bold as brass; Kenneth and Hattie along with a group of about twenty other monkeys were standing in a rough ring around the fugitive outcast.

But they were stationary, nobody closing in, their spears were pointed at Francois, but everybody was still, all staring at the small figure of the frog perched high on Francois hat.

“Chief, you waited for me,” he said addressing his leader, “I thought you would have torn him limb from limb by now.”

Kenneth grunted, “A bit of a change of plan, Terry, seems that our young friend is more resourceful than we thought.” He didn’t look around at Terry as he spoke but kept his attention firmly fixed on the Frog.

Terry took a step forward, “What do you mean, a change of plan?”

Kenneth step forward and put a muscular arm in front of his chief enforcer, “Seems the little bastard has a bit of a trump card, that vial up there that the frog is holding is dragon’s blood and if we don’t back off the frog is going to splatter some all around here.”

Terry turned and stared at Francois and the little vial held by the legless frog, “Dragon’s blood? There’s no way he has that, it’s rarer than rocking horse shit.” He turned back to Kenneth, “It’s a bluff chief, it has to be,” he took another step forward.

Pierre sat holding the lid of the bottle open, as soon as he had opened the bottle he knew he had the real deal, the colour, the

consistency and the faint brimstone smell, all pointed to one thing an actual vial of Dragon's Blood. "I wouldn't come any closer if I were you, the smell is already in the air, the Dragon will already be on its way, but if I drop this on the ground, it soaks in and never goes away, the dragon might not be able to locate a whiff on the air but a drop on the ground, well..."

Pierre pretended to tip the bottle slightly, Terry froze to the spot. Kenneth stepped in front of his enforcer, "Today is not the day," he said to Terry. He turned to Francois and Pierre, "But know this Frog your life is forfeit, you and the Francois here are dead critters walking, we will track you, hunt you down and kill you, you can't hide behind that forever." He motioned for a gap to be made in the circle, "Let them go."

Francois slowly stepped off the market stall; Pierre stoppered the vial and held it tightly to his chest as they made their way towards the edge of the Clearing, once at a suitable distance, Francois broke into a trot, then swung up into the trees, "Seriously Pierre, Dragon's blood, sometimes your ingenuity amazes even me," Francois laughed. "What's actually in that vial?" He asked.

"Well Francois," Pierre said, "

I didn't know until we were actually on top of the stall, but I'd have to say that this is 100% pure dragon's blood."

Francois' heart nearly stopped and he missed the branch he was reaching for, they plummeted about 50 feet through the canopy before instinct kicked in and Francois snatched a branch out of mid air.

“Where? How?” Francois shook his head in disbelief, “Holy crap Pierre, I think we’d better tell those stories now, you first.”

FIN.