

An Exercise in Unlikelihood

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My Entry for the competition

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The first thing having four older brothers teaches you is not to give lip to anybody bigger than you are. The second thing it teaches you is how to run. Fast. "Get back here you little brat!" Jean glanced back over his shoulder as he ran, to where a very worn-out oversized man was keeling over his heels. He grinned. "No Mr. Morris, I don't think I shall!" He shouted and took a huge bite out of the yellow apples he had so neatly lifted from Mr. Morris's store. Sweet juices burst over his tongue and he sighed with pleasure. "Exquisite. No wonder you get away with charging two silver each for these." He raised up the neat bag carrying almost two dozen of the prized apples. "How much does that set you back roughly?" Morris's face took on a convincing shade of tomato. "I'll have your guts for garters you conniving little thief!" He began starting running after him. "That was about the time Jean figured he should start exercising his legs rather than his mouth. But even saying that, he couldn't deny himself a wry grin as he ran. Two dozen apples. His pride tickled pink at the concept of such a rare prize. His brother could say what they liked about his age and lean stature, but after this, even they'd be forced to admit it. Jean made a bloody fine thief. If he managed the getaway, that was. Old Mr. Morris might have been getting on in years, but for a wobbling pauper he couldn't half run. Maybe he'd grown up with four brothers too, thought Jean. Or maybe he just really loved those damned apples. He figured the latter more likely as he sprinted his way back into the main thoroughfare. What he saw there drained his face of all colour. There was a wall. A moving, shifting, swelling wall of people, bulging against the buildings and threatening to burst like a fat man's artery. He couldn't believe his ill luck. How could chance be so very fickle; giving him the most perfect picking of apples, at the perfect moment, for the perfect price, and then turn around and do this? "Psst! Jean! Up here!" came a voice from the rooftops and suddenly Jean's heart blossomed with fresh hope. He smiled up at the fellow face of mischief. "Pierre. I don't suppose you could lend a hand here? Or a rope, maybe?" "You know my rates." Pierre replied. "I'll get a share or your little ride into the dirt right here." Jean held up one of the shiny apples for inspection. "Would this do?" Pierre's face split in half with the mirth that poured out of his smile. He quickly threw down a rope. "Get up here then. And hurry up, Mr. Morris is just around the corner!" He needn't have said it, Jean could already see for himself. Bounding around the corner like a bull, Mr. Morris howled his complaints at Jean's fastly climbing figure. "I'll have your hands boy! And your kidneys! And I'll have your liver sold to the butchers you little twerp! You will regret this!" But that seemed to be all the poor fat fool could manage. He started coughing, and before long was retreating into the alleyway in the grips of a wheezing fit. Jean reckoned he could still hear him cursing when we was back in the market square. "I almost feel sorry for the bugger," he said, munching into the soft flesh of another apple. Pierre scoffed. "Sorry? For him? The man's a slime Jean, and a stick too. Finds any kids hanging around his stalls he beats 'em till their backs are bleeding. Don't go sparing no sorry old Morris." Jean nodded in uncomfortable silence. Somehow his apple didn't taste quite so grand anymore, so he hurled it against the nearest window. "Hey, what'd ya think you're doing! That's good money you're throwing away!" said Jean, standing and scuffing his shoes against the sandy square rooftop. "I'll bet some kid gets beaten because of me being a fool then a few extra coin won't cheer me up." "You ain't no fool Jean. You're a hero! Best p'nt in the country, and everyone knows it now. And whenever anyone asks, I can say that I knew you first." "Yeah, you can tell them that Pierre. Tell them all about how you helped Jean beat some orphan's back." Pierre winced and looked away. "That ain't your doin' Jean. Old Morris's always been that way. Don't you go living down what you've done. You scored one back on him ya know? Delivered justice and all that. Reckon that's a good thing to do these days. Like a knight. A proper one." Jean smiled, but his heart weren't in it. "I'd best get going back home now anyways, or my brother'll eat all the good meat. Thanks for the shimmy," he said, then made his way back towards his district. "Dinner was soup again. And just like he'd said they would, his brother's got the good meat. All that was left for him was the crust of a stale loaf and a few cold gibbets from the chicken carcass. His brothers all leered at him as he ate it. "That's what you get for being out all day playing games with those stupid friends of yours. When you going to man up Jean? When're you gonna get a real job?" "I don't need no real job," he mumbled as he stirred his supper. "Oh, yeah. I forgot. Don't be in the presence of the Great Jean of Bastonne? Most famous thief in all of the land." He stood up then, walking in a strut and tilting his nose towards the ceiling. "And everyone knows Jean of Bastonne is welcome anywhere. Isn't that right Jean? Eh? Look at me Jean!" he snapped, but Jean didn't move his eyes from his bowl. "Yeah, that's right. Not so loud in this house are you? Not so loud. Not got so many friends." "I don't got no friends." Jean shouted, throwing his spoon at his eldest brother's head. "You beat up the last one I ever had! You've beat up every friend I ever had." Michael lunged towards his brother in a rage, clutching his head where the spoon had hit him. "You think so do you?" he spat in Jean's soup. "You think we're the reason you're life's headed for the shitter? No. You and I both know the reason you don't live is because of us? Yer a freak." And that was the line. Right there. That was the line stepped over, pissed on and rubbed clean. There were nothing else for it. Jean flipped the table, spilling his dinner all over the floor. His mother was screaming from the kitchen but he didn't listen, he was too busy pounding Michael's face into the ground, watching lips splitting under his knuckles and feeling warm blood spilling from his brother's nose. He thought he should be chuffed with that. He got one more clean shot in before his other brothers dragged him off, but he didn't mind. Even as Michael thumped away at his ribs he was fuming and swearing at the top of his lungs. That was the one thing, the one word Michael couldn't say, that no one could say and keep their teeth in their mouth. No one called him a freak. Nobody. He had a fitful sleep that night. The bruises and breaks hurt whichever way he tried to lean, and his skin was soaked by a sheet of cold sweat. But worse

than all those were the visions. The nightmare visions of his brothers standing round him, taunting him like they always did. Only this time, Jean wasn't helpless. He had power lurking under his skin, like the numb feeling you get before pins and needles start. He pointed a finger out in front of him, and watched as one by one his brother's burned away, melted by that ancient force beating through Jean's body. Magic. It were a morning when Jean woke, not that there was much unusual about that. The sun looked slightly higher in the sky though, which meant he'd missed the sunup meal. So there were nothing else for it but to go to the marketplace. He tried not to think about anything that had happened the day before, but the thing about that is when you're trying not to think about something, that's all you think about. Jean's mind was seething with crazed dreams about magic and sorcery. Standing in front of an army and waving in away with a hand. Quenching a fire in a blazing forest. Wealth. Status. A better life for him and his ma. And yet nothing had sounded quite so terrible to him in all his life. He kept his eyes on the ground as he entered the square, frightened that just by looking up he'd release some wild power amongst the townsfolk he had grown to love. He followed his feet till he reached the milk stall, which suited him just fine since he'd not had a drop since two weeks ago. "Hey there Nicci. I don't see you've got a spare bottle for a poor beaten boy would ya?" came the pleasant voice of the milkmaid. Jean had a real shine for her, back when things were more alright. "Tilt ye chin up, so I can see yer face." Jean did so, and Nicci's face cracked open with worried surprise. "Jean! What do you want?" "I just want a little milk that's alright. Token for old times and all that." he said, putting on his best winning smile. "Nic passed him a bottle with a shaking hand. "Y-yes, of course Jean. Anything for an old friend. Now get out of here. Please." Jean's eyes shot up at her forehead. "For real? Wow. Thanks a bunch Nic." he grabbed the bottle before she could take it back. he walked away grinning. "Nic was a nice gal, but no one gave something away for free fer no reason. Maybe she had a shine for him too? His heart buzzed at the thought. Then, "Are you barking mad?" scolded his ears, and he was being half-carried half-lifted into the nearest alleyway. A fleshy hand clamped itself over his mouth. "They're lookin' for you!" Jean flailed trying to wheel about so he could see his attacker. He wouldn't do it, he wouldn't use it, he wouldn't kill them, he wouldn't. Then the arms were off of him and he was staring into the horrified face of Pierre. "Pierre! What's ya doin'?" "I think it's fairer of me to be doin' the askin' now. Is it true?" "Is what true?" "Do you have magic?" and Jean quailed into silence. There was something terrible in his eyes as he spoke, part-fear, part-envy but mostly just a hardened resolve to see something through to the bitter end. "Is it true? Do you have magic?" Jean groaned as he felt the tiled floor. He'd been found out. One of his brother or his mother or just some observant twit had ratted him out. He was done. Finished. Good as dead. "I was so careful!" Pierre drew in a quick breath. "Then it's true?" "It is because where was the point in denying it now? His world was shrinking around him, falling in on itself. Minutes ago he'd had dreams, ambitions, plans. Now what did he have? Just the cold stone floor beneath his cheek. He felt like he was waiting for an execution. "That's that Mr. Morris. I always told you he was a slime." Jean frowned. "Mr. Morris? What do with this?" "It were him that put the price on yer head." "A price on my head?" Jean pushed himself into a stall. "For two dozen apples?" "Ah, but that ain't all. Not even half of it. See, he's blaming you for every robbery in the month. Year maybe. Says there ain't no stopping you. And how've ye been doing it ofcourse? Magic. It's quite clever really. Because if they catch you and find you've got magic, you'll be as good as guilty to us regular folk. How'd he know about your magic anyways?" Jean spat on the cobbles. "Michel. He must've told him all about me. Dirty little rat. I get the chance to see his rotten face again?" "So what's the plan?" cut in Pierre. "The guards are all looking for you. I even got people on the roofs." "I don't have a plan Pierre, it's over. I'm finished." "You can't be a thief in all Bretonnia! And you have magic! Lady keep me sane; you're crazy not to try and escape." "I can pick pockets and steal from market stalls! What chance have I got against the Lord's whole city guard?" "You've got magic!" "But I can't use it! It's not a good thing Pierre, it's a curse! I can do things. I can hurt people with my thoughts. I can make people for saying the wrong words; I can use it against people." "Then you can learn, can't you. There's a lot of magicians going round, you could find one! Get out of the city, learn magic, you could do anything! The peasant who became a lord. In control of his own destiny." Jean's eyes darkened. "That's crazy talk. And besides, there ain't no magicians here, they're all in service of that high majesty on her pretty horse." "Not here maybe, but in the Empire, I hear they've got magicians in every town there! Just imagine it! The poor wizard, learning magic in the Imperial Schools of Magic. You'd be the stuff of legend Jean." And stupidly enough, Jean found himself believing. Just a little. Somewhere in his stoppered heart gleamed a little life. Maybe he could do it. Was it possible? Could one boy outrun a city guard, flee the country and learn the High Arts of magic? Pierre answered his wordless question "You're the best thief in Brionne. If anyone can do it, you can." And now his eyes were shining with something different. A wholehearted belief in what his friend could accomplish. And just like that Jean's mind was made up. "Alright. But how do I get out of the city?" Pierre grinned. "I was hoping you'd say that." "Getting through the city weren't no easy chore. Just like Pierre had said, there were guards on almost every street corner, looking lively like and eyes peeled for any kid with a likeness of Jean. Without Pierre's help, he knew he wouldn't have been able to sneak past them. But the thief was meant to travel alone, so the two of them managed to get through by flitting from shadow to shadow across the city square. They were headed towards the wall, and the outer city. Jean knew better than to come here unless he had to, the desperate and diseased were all that cluttered those sordid streets and he hadn't a mind for catching his death for the sake of a stroll. He started to doubt Pierre's judgement. "Where is it we be going?" "I told you. There be a passage out of here, beneath the wall. They don't know about it, they'd never think of setting foot down here, and even the soldiers don't like it. Nobody knows it is but me and one another." "Reckon you'll have to tell me where the bloody passage is about now." Jean muttered and laughed. "Not far now. Just a couple more wait. Can you hear that?" Jean cocked his ear up towards the open air. He could make out something. A regular beat in this maze of confused scents and noises. Sounded like boots. Not just regular boots but a calculated, military stepping that buzzed inside his ears â€˜ dozens and dozens of filed soldiers getting closer by the second. The pair of youths shared a glance, then bolted. Weaving in and out of compressed bodies and vaulting over stalls and debris, they made their way closer towards the city walls. They were almost in sight of them when

Pierre shouted "This way!" and they headed sharply east, to where a small boy stood outside a large dilapidated building. Pierre started shouting "Get the latch open!" The boy ran inside while the other two stood catching their breath, listening to the sounds of the advancing army "How the hell did they find us?" breathed Jean. "Doesn't matter" said Pierre, he put an ear to the ground. This passage here is an abandoned sewer. Stinks something rotten; and the stone's real shaky. If that army passes over us they'll probably cave the whole thing in over our heads. So move fast, but for The Lady's sake try not to touch anything. And with that, Pierre shot in after the younger boy, diving feet-first into a wooden trapdoor barely wide enough for their shoulders. Jean cast one furtive glance back towards the main street "the formation of soldiers visible now, then tumbled down after them. The smell was repulsive, but they didn't let it slow them down. The tunnel was already shaking on either side of them, sliding stones scattering at their feet as they dashed towards their freedom; a blazing light some distance ahead of them. They abandoned caution, sprinting with all their might as the tunnel supports started collapsing, bringing down huge slabs of rock. Duck. Turn. Bolt. Nearly there now - nearly within reach. One final push, one final burst and they were through, feet slapping earth and skin bathing in the oils of the sun; dancing, singing in their triumph against unlikelihood. They'd escaped the city. They were free.