The moon was half full, a pale ship riding stormy seas. In the cobbled street, two figures were wending their way home, neither entirely sober. One was short and slim, dressed in green, with shoulder length blond curls escaping from his green beret. His features were handsome in elfin manner. The taller of the two seemed fat and mis-shapen. His legs were short and bowed, his arms long and powerful, his chest was a huge barrel, and his face would have looked good on a gargoyle. His bare head was hairless, and he was dressed in brown dungarees, brown workman’s boots and a big brown overcoat.

They were laughing at a shared joke, when the smaller man stopped and sniffed. “Do you smell that Pierre? Something not right?”

The big man inhaled, sniffing loudly. “There’s snow in the wind, damp cobblestones, wet leaf litter, cooking smells and smoke. Wood stoves, wood fires. Why what can you smell Rene?”

“All that and more. There’s a taint in the smoke, like singed wool, perhaps even scorched paint.”

“Maybe someone has left a blanket near a fire to dry?”

“We wouldn’t smell it here.” the smaller man countered. He turned into the wind, sniffing. “It has to be that way.” Rene led Pierre towards a gravel side street.

“It would be easier to see if it were daylight.” the big man complained. There were no streetlights here.

Rene chuckled. “Pierre, the fire would be easier to see at night. The smell is getting stronger, we should hurry.”

The village consisted of two cobbled streets that crossed back near the café they had come from, along with several gravel roads leading away from the village, the houses becoming spread out the further out they went.

They rounded a bend and Rene pointed to flickering yellow light. “That’s the fire Pierre!”

“Maybe someone is roasting chestnuts on a bonfire?” It didn’t seem like a house fire, just flickering light on trees.

Rene broke into a run. “And maybe the house is on fire.” Pierre broke into an ungainly run, trying to keep up with Rene.

The smaller man vaulted the front gate, Pierre crashed into it, smashing the gate.

“I keep telling you that you don’t know your own strength. You should open it first.” the smaller man chided.

“I don’t mean to break things, you know that. They make things for humans, not me.”

From where they now stood they could see flames at the back of the house. “Shout to wake them up - you have a voice as big as your body.”

“I’ll wake them up.” Pierre filled his lungs and bellowed “HEY IN THERE! WAKE UP! YOUR HOUSE IS ON FIRE!” in a foghorn voice fit to wake the dead.

Rene ran to the front door, tried it. “Damn! It’s locked!”

“Shouldn’t we try to put the fire out?” Pierre asked. “Here, let me.” He smacked the palm of his hand against the door, breaking the door jam and forcing the door open.

“And I suppose you’ll tell me that was a polite knock on the door? I could have opened it by magic. First we rescue people, then we put the fire out.”

Any further conversation was interrupted by a woman screaming “The children! My god! The children!”

Pierre and Rene burst through the door into a sitting room. To their left was the sitting room, ahead was a corridor full of leaping flames, and to their right was a door to presumably a bedroom. A woman in a night dress stood by the door screaming and a man in pyjamas making futile attempts to pass into the flame filled corridor. The flames, fanned by the open door, were crowding into the sitting room.

“Pierre! Find the children and save them. I’ll get these people out.”

Pierre knew he wasn’t as smart as humans, and Rene often had to explain things to him, but this was action, this was physical, and he was good at that. “How many children?” He asked, pulling the man away from the flames. “Where?”

“Three.” The man gathered his wits. “Down the corridor.” The man gestured. “Boy on the left, two girls on the right. How? The flames.”

Pierre wrapped his greatcoat about him. “My hide is thick.” He sucked in a huge lungful of air and stepped into the flames, ducking to bring his head below the band of smoke crawling along the ceiling.

The paint on walls and floor was burning, acting like tinder to the wood behind. There were two doors visible, one left, the other right, both beginning to burn. The flames were hot, but his skin resembled granite, tougher than leather, and would protect him for a time. Boy on the left, girls on the right. Boy first.

“Boy! Are you awake? I am coming to save you!” He tried not to break the door in his haste.

There was a bed, and flames dripping through the ceiling. Pierre wrenched the blankets from the bed before a squawk alerted him to a small boy huddled in a corner. “Quickly boy, wrap yourself in these so the flames won’t hurt you.”

The boy didn’t move until Pierre picked him up, whereupon he began to struggle. “We don’t have time for games!”

Pierre rolled the boy in the blankets and ran out of the room. When he reached the sitting room Rene was still trying to get the woman outside.

“The boy is safe.” Pierre called as he ran outside, placing the boy on the ground near the man. “Get outside!”

The screams of the two girls were audible. Pierre picked the woman up and unceremoniously dumped her beside the boy. “See to your son.” He took off back inside the house at a run.

In his haste he mis-stepped and fell through the burning floor of the corridor. He cursed as he extricated himself. Wood was treacherous, friend to fire. You could trust stone, but not wood.

The door to the girls’ room was on fire, and the layer of smoke was down to a meter from the floor. There wasn’t much time. He burst through the door. The far wall, nearest the kitchen, was on fire, along with part of the floor, and most of the ceiling. The two girls were huddled in the corner nearest the outside wall, furthest from the flames. There was a window in that wall, but smoke was already down to the sill.

“Girls, we’re going.” He dragged blankets from the bed, shook them free of embers, tossed them onto the girls. “Wrap yourselves in blankets, quickly!” He was still thinking of taking the girls back through the corridor.

Pierre turned to look around the room when the ceiling collapsed. He threw himself across the girls, bracing his arms against the wall, shielding them with his own body. The collapse seemed to happen in slow motion, and several burning brands and embers struck him in the process.

Eventually things stopped falling and with a roar he shook the burning things from him. The two girls looked at him in fear. For his appearance or their situation? There was no way he could take the girls back the way he had come. He sucked in a lungful of clean air from floor level, then stood and smashed the window with his fists. This was the only way.

When the girls didn’t move, he picked up one and passed her through the window, dropping her gently onto the flower bed. The second stood mutely and let him lift her through the window. It was only then that Pierre realised he was too big to pass through the window. The beds behind him were on fire now, and the heat was intense. It would be sad if he died here today. He had his strength, and human dwellings were flimsy, there was a chance.

Clenching his fist, he smashed it like a sledge hammer into the bricks below and to the right of the window. On the second blow, several bricks crumbled, and then each blow knocked out more bricks. By now his overcoat was on fire, and he was rapidly running out of air. Given time he could smash a hole big enough, but he was out of time. There was a gap beneath and to the right of the window, but the frame still prevented him from going through. He struck the frame with his fist, but it held. Treacherous wood. Already his exposed skin was scorching. In desperation he grasped the frame, pulling it from the wall, then slipped sideways through the opening.

Cool fresh air met him, and he dragged in several lungfuls. The distraught mother was hugging her children, the man hugging them all. There were neighbours crowding around the family. Something white and fluffy shot between his legs, and Rene laughed. “That’s their cat! The family is complete.” Then Rene walked around Pierre, inspecting him. “You smell of hot metal and stone, and your coat is smouldering.”

Pierre shucked the coat, standing in his dungarees with most of his chest and back bare. His skin was like granite. He ran a hand across his head. “I think my coat is ruined, and I scorched my head, that’s what you can smell.”

“You can buy another coat. Perhaps you should have worn a hat. I thought you were fireproof.”

“Not really.” Pierre replied in a matter of fact tone. “Trolls have tough hides, but we can burn if we are in a fire long enough. After a few minutes our skin starts to scorch, and then it becomes painful and dangerous.” He remembered stories of what superstitious humans had done to his people in the past, what some had tried to do to him years ago, before Rene and Luc had found him and saved him. But that was then. Fire was friend to humans, but treacherous.

“I understand.” Rene replied. “Humans tend to fear anyone who is different. You and I are different.”

Neighbours were crowding around watching the house burn, consoling the family, discussing Pierre’s daring rescue. No one dared go inside. A little later the fire brigade turned up and put the fire out, but by then the house was gutted. Pierre and Rene made a quiet get away.

“Aren’t you cold without your coat?”

“Not really. Heat and cold doesn’t affect trolls all that much. It’s really cold on mountains, I’m used to it. I expect everyone at the chateau will be asleep by now.”

As it transpired, Monsieur Luc, or Lord Lukeios – the chateau owner, was waiting for them. Once they told him their story, he said “That was well done, both of you. Now where will they sleep tonight? Their home was destroyed.”

Lukeios telephoned father Marcel, one of the few people in the village with a phone, and spoke for some minutes. “Father Marcel said they are staying with a relative tonight, perhaps tomorrow as well. After that they will stay here until their home is rebuilt.”

After that incident, Pierre was accepted by the whole village as a good man. He might look a bit odd, and was perhaps a little slow of wit at times, but he was no longer a monster.