

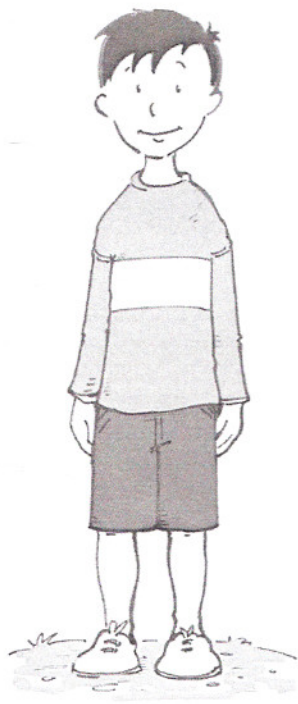
The adventures of Luc and Lucie

Madagascar

Episode 12

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Madagascar

Lucie sat at the kitchen table sucking a pencil thoughtfully. It was half past three and she was trying to finish her homework. Both Luc and Lucie had to write a paragraph on 'The most exciting thing that ever happened to me.'

"I'd much rather be in school on Wednesday afternoons," she complained, "than having to do all this homework." She turned to Luc who was scribbling away busily. "How can you think of what to write?"

"Easy," he replied. "It was after we'd completed the puzzle, discovered the key and then that moment when it changed into a real, golden key."

"You can't write that. They'll think you're mad. In any case you're telling everyone about the quest and that's a secret."

"Mmm, I didn't really think about that. I suppose you're right. Perhaps I'll write about winning the photo competition at the Summer Camp instead. You could write about winning the swimming competition."

"Not really very exciting."

"I'll know, I'll write about the Safari Park and how the car broke down in the lion enclosure."

They moved into the little room where their computer was and Luc settled down to write his paragraph while Lucie wrote down a few ideas on a sheet of paper. They were concentrating so hard that they didn't hear the gentle swish of wings nor notice the scrape of claws as the parrot landed on top of the filing cabinet.

"That's what I like to see
- people hard at work,"
drawled Pirate lazily.

"So you're finally back," said
Luc without raising his head.
"We'd given you up. It's the
middle of October."



"I've been finalising our travel arrangements," said the parrot
loftily.

"What travel arrangements?" asked Lucie.

"We're off to Madagascar today."

"But it's term time," said Luc. "I've got a volleyball match tomorrow and Lucie's doing a history project in the church."

"You can easily do both - no problem," said the parrot airily.

"No problem?" they shrieked together. "What about tickets and how can we tell Mum and Dad?"

"Calm down" said Pirate. "I'll explain everything. First, you have the key safe?"

The children nodded and Luc produced it from a box hidden at the back of a drawer in the filing cabinet.

"Do you remember the old man?"

"The one in the station singing 'Savez-vous planter les choux?'" said Luc.

"The one who talked to me during the Carnival parade," added Lucie.

"Well," continued the parrot, "he is called Kreios, the Enchanter. He doesn't really live in this world. His country is in the fourth dimension where...."

"The fourth dimension?" interrupted Luc.

"Where time in this world doesn't count," continued Pirate. "We work together there. Although he is a kind and generous person he has enemies who are jealous of his possessions and want to take over his land themselves. Their leader is called the Deimos or the Terror. The Enchanter refused to give up anything to them so they stole his daughter away and brought her to this world. You can imagine how he felt. He's desperate to get her back. He doesn't think they'll harm her because then they would have no hold over him. He knows they're keeping her imprisoned somewhere so he sent spies to try to find out where. He has no power in this world and came in disguise and I came with him to see if I could find her. Our only solution was to look for help among people of this world - and we found you. Our enemies

realised what we had done and employed the rat to watch you night and day. He's still around so we must keep a sharp look out for him. The only way the spies could avoid him and make contact was through the puzzle. You were brilliant to decode the message and find the key. Now we have to find his daughter and set her free. So - we are now looking for the Enchanter's daughter Sélène and we know we have to start in Madagascar. Luckily they speak French there as well. I have made contact there with the bird community. They have been looking out for anything suspicious. This is a much more dangerous mission than the quest and I will quite understand if...."

As the parrot had been describing the situation, the old magic had begun to work and Luc and Lucie felt themselves being drawn into the events.

"I have some questions," said Lucie. "First how can we go without Mum and Dad noticing? How can we be back in time to go to school tomorrow? How are we getting there? Don't we need some jabs before we go?"

"I said to you earlier that in the fourth dimension time doesn't really count so you won't seem to have been away at all. As for the way we're going, I'll explain in a minute. You're right Lucie, normally when people go to Madagascar they have some injections and take malaria pills. We, in the fourth dimension, have special protection and I shall give it to you. Did you find anything on the computer about Madagascar?"

"Yes, look," said Luc. "If I type in <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/madagascar/explore/maps.html> there's a map and it shows where Madagascar is - it's a huge island off the coast of Africa. I'll just print it off."

The parrot was impressed. "Very good I didn't think....."



"It's capital city is Antananarivo," interrupted Luc.

"Type in the website for Antananarivo, Luc," suggested Lucie. Luc typed in <http://www.lostworldarts.com/madagascar/antananarivo.htm>.

"Look, there it is at night. Is that where we're going?"

"No," said Pirate. "We were going there but I heard just the other day that Deimos's men had left the capital and moved down south so we are now following them to Tolagnaro - or Fort Dauphin in French. Why don't you type in <http://www.flickr.mud.yahoo.com/photos/yilud/92326614/> and see what happens."

Luc quickly typed that and immediately found photos of a beautiful sandy bay.

"Ohhh. Just look at that," said Lucie "perhaps we can go swimming."

Pirate looked serious.

"Somehow I don't think so Lucie. Look, this time things may become really dangerous. It's not like wandering round the Musée D'Orsay or ski-ing in the Alps. We are going away from France and our enemies are ruthless and cruel people. You don't have to continue if you'd rather not. I'll quite understand."

Luc and Lucie, without looking at each other, spoke together.

"We've come so far, we can't give up now."

"You're sure about that?"

"Absolutely sure."

"Right, I'll give you the *protection*," said Pirate and hummed very softly. It seemed to Luc and Lucie that they were surrounded by thousands of tiny silver stars which tingled as they touched their skin and then slowly faded away.

"There, you're now safe from all diseases."

"We'll bring the map with us," said Lucie "and what about a torch and some warm clothes?"

"A torch might be a good idea," said the parrot "but it's warm down there so you won't need any more clothes. Don't forget the key and keep it very safe. Come on, get ready, we're off."

Lucie snatched a torch from the shelf. Pirate hovered in front of the computer screen, with his beak just touching it.



"Lucie," he said. "Hold on to my tail feathers. Luc, put your arms round Lucie's waist. Nowwww....." and he emitted a high pitch squawk. There was a roar and it seemed to the children that they were being sucked headfirst down a dark tunnel and then suddenly catapulted into daylight and onto the soft white sand of a gently curving beach.

"That was amazing," said Luc. "Better than the rides at Disney World."

"Just look where we are," said Lucie. "It can't be real. I must be dreaming." But it **was** real from the scent of the sea and the sounds of children shouting as they surfed in the waves to the wind blowing through the trees at the edge of the beach and people sipping the local drink, ranon 'ampango, and chatting in the café under its brightly coloured awning. The sun was low on the horizon. The sea looked very tempting.



"Couldn't we just go and paddle for a few minutes? It's so....."

"Don't even think about it. Quickly, off the beach under these trees," whispered the parrot urgently. "You mustn't draw attention to yourselves - nobody can see me. Listen, a bird, a Vanga, is meeting us here in Fort Dauphin. I'll just fly around and see if there's any sign of him. You stay here for the time being. Also keep watch. Look out for a really bright blue bird and.... don't forget the rat."

With that he flew off behind the trees.

The sun dropped below the horizon and suddenly the beach changed character. It became unfriendly, even menacing. The surfers came out of the sea and went off home. The beach café closed and its clients drifted away as the awning was rolled up and the door locked. It felt abandoned. There were birds in the trees but it was difficult, in the fading light, to see whether they were blue or not. Minutes dragged by and both Luc and Lucie began to feel increasingly anxious. Insects buzzed around them and in the bushes they could hear noises. They were both wondering whether the rat was there. To break the silence, Luc suddenly said "I'm feeling quite hungry."

As he spoke, an old man, who had been selling melons at the far end of the beach walked past.

"Have some melon," he said, handing them each a slice of water melon. "It's the end of the day and I haven't sold these. It's getting dark. You shouldn't stay here on your own, but then you have your parrot with you."



"But how do you....?" Luc's voice trailed off. "You're the Enchanter aren't you?"

The old man smiled. "I'm just a man who sells melons. Do your best to help me won't you?"

And with that he disappeared up the track behind the trees. Luc produced his penknife and they were eating their slices of melon when Pirate appeared, carrying a small bundle in his beak.

"Thought you might be hungry so here are some local specialities I spotted in the market. They are called mofos - sort of savoury doughnuts, they smell good."

Luc and Lucie unfolded the bundle and ate them immediately. They were *very* good.

"Any sign of the vanga?" Pirate asked.

"Well," said Lucie, "we haven't seen the bird but we have met an old man who gave us these slices of melon. We think he might be the Enchanter."

Before Pirate had time to respond a small blue bird landed on the sand nearby.

"Savez-vous planter les choux?" asked the bird.

"Je le sais bien," replied Pirate humming a few bars.

"Good" said the bird. "You must be Pirate and Luc and Lucie. Vanga at your service. Follow me."

He flew further into the bushes where they were safer from prying eyes.

"This is what I have to report. A private aircraft landed yesterday at Fort Dauphin. Three men and a young woman got out. One of the men picked up a truck they had hired and I heard them arranging to stay for at least a month in a bungalow in the Berenty Reserve. This is rather strange. People usually stay a week at the most. They said they were television people making a film about the animals there but I didn't believe them. They didn't seem to have any equipment."

"What is the Berenty Reserve and how far away is it?" asked Lucie.

"It's a place where animals and birds can live safely and visitors can come and see them," replied Vanga.

"Oh, a sort of nature reserve," interrupted Luc.

"Yes, that's right and it's particularly the place where the lemurs live and I'm relying on them to help us. One of my friends is a lemur, a sifaka - she's very beautiful. She's called Séraphina and she can move at the speed of light up in the treetops. We need to get there first and I have an idea. One of the men has come back in the truck today to get some supplies

at the store here. He's loading up at the moment so perhaps you could somehow get a lift with him."

"How far is it?" asked Lucie again.

"Well it's about eighty kilometres..."

"Eighty! How ever long is it going to take to reach it?"

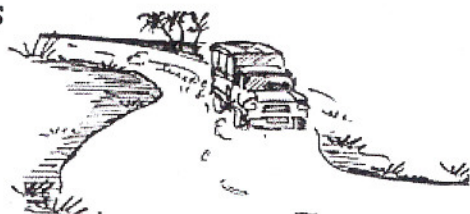
"Well the road is not very good but he does drive fast - so I'd say about two hours."

"Two hours...!"

Luc and Lucie looked at each other wondering what had they got themselves into but there was no turning back.

Pirate didn't look too enthusiastic either. They followed the blue bird through the scrub until they found themselves at the edge of an open square. They stayed behind the trees watching as the man loaded up his truck, first from the stall piled high with fruit and vegetables, mangoes, grapes, pineapples, avocados, lichee, nuts, tomatoes, bananas, scallions and turnips. He was helped by the owner, a wrinkled old man in a red T-shirt and

shorts with a frayed straw hat crammed onto his head. They both went into the store and came out with a sack of rice and then a second time for a crate of beer. They threw a tarpaulin over the vegetables and crates of beer and secured it with rope and went into the store to arrange payment. Luc and Lucie saw their chance. They ran out from the tree and quickly squeezed in under the tarpaulin. They could hear the driver approaching, talking on his mobile, finishing his conversation.



"Yes, I understand all that but the bungalow is safe enough. Better to be with all the tourists - you don't stand out as a visitor. Yes, of course, the locks are strong. I made sure that the window couldn't be opened too. There's a strong mesh - keeps unwanted visitors out and our guest perfectly safe. I'm just setting off - so see you in about two hours."

The truck revved up and tipped to the left as it set off. As the sacks of vegetables rolled toward them and the crates slid down the floor, Luc and Lucie prepared for an uncomfortable journey. Pirate and Vanga huddled together on the outside in a fold of the tarpaulin to protect themselves from the wind and the dust which the truck caused as it sped along the road.

Wedged in the dark among the crates of beer, Luc and Lucie suddenly wondered how they were going to get out without being seen. It was all right for the birds - they could simply fly away. No point in worrying. Time went endlessly by and in the dark, bounced and bruised as they were, the children gradually fell into a sort of half sleep. They were both beginning to feel very sick and tearful and exhausted (though neither admitted it) when the truck stopped, suddenly.

"Now what?" they thought.

The driver was on his mobile again.

"Just to let you know that I'm in the Reserve. I seem to have a puncture. Can one of you come out in the car and help me change the tyre. I'll stand in the track - and bring a torch with you. I realise you won't want to leave our guest unattended, but I'll definitely need someone to help me."

They heard him jump down and then the crunch of his boots getting fainter as he walked down the track. After a minute or two Lucie gently moved the tarpaulin and Pirate said quietly "It's all right he's gone. Vanga is keeping an eye on him."

Luc and Lucie straightened their cramped legs and clambered out. In the gloom they were aware of trees towering above them as their eyes gradually became accustomed to the half light. Something circled above them and then Vanga suddenly swooped down and joined them.

"Here she comes, my friend the sifaka," he said "she'll take you the rest of the way."

Up in the trees a sinuous white creature swung from branch to branch and came lower and lower until she was near them. She rested on one of the lower branches.



"Lovely to meet you my dears. I'm Séraphina."

Elegant and sophisticated, she had the softest, silkiest coat of white fur and a crest of black fur surmounting her head. She stretched her slim white limbs gracefully through the leaves and curled her long white tail round the branches to steady herself. Two piercing eyes encircled in yellow peered at them from the black heart shaped fur of her face.

For once Pirate seemed lost for words. She smiled at him.

"I am to take you all to the bungalow. We can't follow the track because the truck will catch up with us so we need to make our way through the trees. You and I can go the simplest way - up high," she said to Pirate. "I'm afraid you, Luc and Lucie, will have to *fight* your way along the path because we're in what's called the Spiny Forest. We'll lead the way and keep close to you."

Lucie turned on the torch and in its light they saw a narrow path leading into the intense darkness of the trees. For a second the children looked at each other and images of their village, their school, their home, mum and dad, Picasso and Josephine, appeared in their minds. All that seemed so far away. Could this be a dream after all?

"Come on," said Lucie "let's go!"

The full moon emerged from behind a cloud as Séraphina was so white the children could follow her as she swung easily and rhythmically above them. But for them it was

different. Trees twisted in every direction. Their branches gnarled and curling round each other snatched at the children as they dragged themselves along the path.

"Definitely not a dream," muttered Luc as great spikes tore at their clothes and their arms. He felt they were in some sort of horror film where trees came to life and attacked human beings

"Worse than being in the truck. At least there...."

"Not much further," whispered Séraphina encouragingly swinging down to the lower branches."

"From up there we can see the lights of bungalows."

Gradually the path widened and eventually they found themselves at the edge of the forest, facing a clearing and a row of bungalows. On the verandas people were chatting and eating and drinking and suddenly the nightmare seemed to be over.

Séraphina swung down from the trees.

"We've arrived," she whispered. "Don't talk. Follow me round the

edge of the clearing keeping in the shadow of the trees."

They crept silently after her to the last bungalow. Nobody was eating on the veranda there.

"Wait here," said Pirate. "I'll be back in a minute," and he flew off. A moment later he was back.

"Deimos's men are working on a laptop in the front room. Selène is lying on a bed in the back room. We'll have to plan this very carefully. We'll have to get her out of the back window and you two will have to take her immediately to the bungalow over there where there are a lot of people. She'll tell them she's being kept a prisoner. Ask them to keep her safe while I contact the Enchanter. The glass window is open but there's a strong mesh locked in front of it. Have you got the key?"

"Yes" said Luc, producing it from the depths of his pocket. It glinted in the moonlight.

"Let's see if it really works," whispered Lucie.

There was a scutter in the undergrowth, unnoticed by them all and a black shadow sped round the bungalow and into the front door.

"I'll fly over first and contact her," said Pirate "and make sure she's ready." With that he flew over to the lighted window and then they could see a pale face peering through the mesh. Suddenly there was chaos. Everything happened at once: Vanga flying in saying the truck was on its way; the frantic squeaking of a rat, and the sound of the truck roaring up to the bungalow; the desperate efforts of the children to unlock the mesh window; three men rushing into the room and bundling Sélène into the truck and the truck disappearing into the darkness. Then there was silence.



They all looked at each other in horror and despair. They had been so close to rescuing Selene. They'd seen her clearly, smiling and eager to escape; but, at the very moment the key had opened the mesh window, the men had burst in and grabbed her.

"So," said Luc gloomily "she's gone."

"That horrible rat," said Lucie eventually. "It must have been with us in the truck somewhere, followed us up the path and listened to our plans."

"What shall we do now?" said Luc "and how on earth are we going to get home?"

"Follow me" said Pirate and they went into the bungalow. "All is not lost."

There on the table was the laptop. The men had been in the middle of writing a report which ended:

The captive is at present in a bungalow in Berenty Reserve in Madagascar but this cannot be a long term solution. The owners are unwilling to extend our stay for more than another two weeks and we have received information that the Enchanter's spies may have discovered that we are here. We are therefore proposing to transfer the prisoner within the next few days to the house we have negotiated in Tunisia. We shall go to...

"Tunisia!" said Luc "That's where we're going during the Christmas holidays to see our relatives - if we ever get home that is...."

"Getting home is not a problem," said Pirate "but I am sad to leave this beautiful place and our new friends."

Seraphina smiled at him gently and Vanga said "Come back any time - we've not really shown you anything of the island."

"Time for us to go," said Pirate reluctantly, gazing sadly at Séraphina, and then to Luc and Lucie. "Come to the laptop and type in your email address." They followed his instructions. "Now stand exactly as we did to come."

So they did that: Pirate's beak against the screen, Lucie touching his tail feathers and Luc's arms round her waist. Then there was a squawk and swoosh and they were away down the tunnel and out into their computer room in Charmante La Forêt. The clock on the wall said 3:35.

They all stood looking at each other despondently.



"This time we failed," said Lucie. "We've never done that before."

"At least we know where they're taking her and we can try to find her in the Christmas holidays," said Luc, unusually cheerful.

Pirate fluffed out his multicoloured feathers disconsolately.

"Black and white is so very chic isn't it?"

"Hi children, I'm back," called Mum cheerily, but as she came into the room her voice changed.

"What on earth have you been doing? I can't go out for five minutes..."



Luc and Lucie looked at each other. Their T-shirts were torn and their arms dirty, scratched and bleeding.

"I expect you've been in the woods looking for late blackberries again instead of doing your homework. Please change at once and finish your homework before Dad comes in, otherwise no supper! Those T-shirts can go in the bin."

Luc and Lucie meekly did as they were told.

"Some blackberries," murmured Pirate thoughtfully.