

Some years ago I had a peculiar dream. Imagine flying down a swirling green tunnel at some terrifying pace until a sign appears in the distance, pointing left and flashing “Macks”. I don’t exactly know how, but I swerved enough, eyes closed and screaming of course, to take this new tunnel that led toward Macks, whoever or whatever that might be.

When I opened my eyes again, I found myself standing before a stone cottage in the middle of a large open field. Grass flowed on in every direction and a lake shimmered just off to my right. Upon the roof of the cottage was a black sign that read:

Macks One Stop Character Sthop

A ‘t’ in the word Shop was crossed out and replaced with an ‘h’, so that it might once have said ‘stop’ but now said ‘shop’. Two round windows were placed either side of a red wooden door. Somewhat muddled-headed, but pleased I wasn’t dead at least, I dusted myself off and approached the door. An enormous foghorn sounded as I opened it and I looked around in terror.

“Don’t worry sir, it’s just my customer alert. Please come in,” a smartly dressed man instructed me from the far end of a shop packed with hundreds of fantastic creatures crowded together on shelves, as though I had entered a zoo for all beings imaginable, and even those unimaginable. A ball about the size of an orange but made entirely of writhing blue snakes hissed at me as I approached the man, while nearby, a large, legless fairy whispered to a tiny three-eyed pussycat labeled ‘Simsimwelp’ that I ‘looked odd’.

Another sleepy creature seated beside them, one that looked like it had its legs stuck on its shoulders, was being serenaded by a big toe that had its own toes. A miniature dragon with a broken wing (looking very sorry for itself) wept on a shelf beneath the strange pair, while further along, a silver wizard sat hunched over his crystal ball. I was alarmed to find that he too was watching me very closely, and even turned his head to give me a withering stare.

As for the shopkeeper, well, he looked as normal as a shopkeeper can, except that after he’d jumped up from behind the counter, I discovered he was only half my size.

He was not a dwarf, at least he didn't look like one, but just happened to be a man half the dimensions of a normal man.

"Mack at your service," he said, trotting around towards me. He pumped my hand and asked, "Now then good sir, what you after? You don't look familiar. New to the game?"

"Game?" I asked, puzzled.

Mack was a clean-shaven man of unknowable age, with a dark head of straight black hair and the clever, trustworthy eyes of an honest businessman.

He wore a red silk shirt under a black silk jacket and a pair of shiny black shoes that positively glowed with polish. He stroked his chin as he studied me with a shrewd look,

"You've never been here before, but I can guess what you're after. You're after a gnome."

"I...I am?"

"You bet. Problem is, don't get much demand for them, you see."

"Oh."

"Although, depending on the type of gnome you're after, I might just be able to rustle something up for you"

"I didn't know they came in types," I mumbled, wondering what it was about my face that made him think I was in need of a gnome. "Don't gnomes just...loiter in the garden?" I asked, mostly to be polite.

"Oh no! Just a moment. I'll get the book."

He removed a very large, leather-bound book from a low shelf and trotted back to his rocking chair. It squeaked and immediately began rocking at a sickening pace. The little man cried out in alarm and thumped the hand rest. The chair promptly slowed. His hand hovered over the rest for a moment as though he expected more chair-tomfoolery. The chair rocked calmly however, so the man opened the book,

"Well now, we got silver gnomes, golden eyed gnomes, dark gnomes...hmm, I think they are the evil ones...sound interesting though," he began, his face hidden behind the pages, "let's see, what else...worker gnomes. They're the normal models, mostly found in gardens and the like. That's probably what you were thinking of. I'll give you a good price on them, don't you worry about that."

He turned the page and suddenly thumped the book, "Gotcha you brute! So you've been hiding in here have you? Right, back to the box for you!" He held up a snow-white lizard and explained, "this little devil's been on the run for days."

Mack hopped up again to drop the creature into a round wooden box beside a group of singing chestnuts. The chestnuts were out of tune, and I could see why the lizard had tried to escape his nutty neighbours. Mack then returned to his book,

"Hmm, where were we...yes, looks like we might have a few green gnomes too. Recent arrivals."

"Green gnomes?" I asked, interested despite myself, "what do they do?"

He turned a few heavy yellow pages until he came to an index of some sort,

"...Green gnomes, *gnomius emeraldii*: 'a rare breed of forgotten gnome, never found above ground. Said to have discovered the first core'...of what, I don't know...but 'developed magical powers as a result...Only gnome breed believed to have magical powers.' Sound good, ey?" he asked, looking up with a winking eye. "You'll probably be wanting one of them."

Before I could remind him that I'd never really wanted a gnome in the first place, let alone a green one, the foghorn wailed and I tuned around in fright. Coming through the doorway was a troop of the strangest creatures I'd ever seen. A two-headed goblin led a group of six small gargoyles into the shop. The stony creatures carried a throne on their backs, and upon the throne there sat a king looking bored. He was dressed in a pair of red pajamas and had a golden crown perched on his head. The creatures carrying him looked glum and hard done by, but the two-headed goblin dressed in a silver gown appeared quite pompous. The two heads looked at me as though I had been discovered in one of their ears and they frowned together. Mack called out politely from behind the counter,

"Hello Minsy!" he saluted one of the goblin heads. "Oh, and Insy, I didn't see you there. How are you?"

"Fine, thank you," they replied very seriously. "His majesty requests an item of yours."

"Aha, what'll it be this time?"

The king called down from his throne,

"A-Thesius."

"Bless you!" said Mack.

"No! A Thesius."

"Bless you!" said Mack again.

"Ba," said the king in a fluster, "I want a Thesius. It's the name of a small wizard-king I want for a play."

"Oh, I see. One moment."

While I stood there watching, a creature resembling a weasel crossed with a dog got into a fight with a golden dragonfly fluttering around in a cage. The weaseldog snarled and leapt at the cage as the dragonfly banged its wings against the metal. Mack dipped into his pocket and removed a round steel plum. He threw the plum straight past the king's entourage at the two trouble makers, and as it crashed into the cage, he cried out,

"Norbitts! *Norbitts!!* Get up here will you?"

Mack ran over and rattled the cage with a large silver spoon, apparently an item he used when trouble of this nature arose. He gave the weaseldog a couple of decent knocks on the snout as well, just for good measure. A strange head popped up behind the counter and Mack called to it,

"Norbitts, can you look after the king while I go into the basement? These two are at it again, so you might want to move the cage over there."

Mack spent the next few moments giving instructions to Norbitts, a colourful metallic man made out of loose-fitting metal plates. Norbitts didn't say anything, but squeaked and rattled over towards the two creatures with a look of despair. Evidently he had been through this sort of thing many times before.

"Right," said Mack nodding and wringing his hands, "time to get this Thesius from below. Do you want to follow me down? We can have a look for your gnome as we're at it."

So we left the poor Norbitts alone, struggling under the weight of the cage as he hauled it from one part of the shop to another.

“Just one moment your majesty!” Mack called as I followed him behind the counter. “I’ll have to check the basement for that one.”

The king nodded impatiently. Just in front of the rocking chair there was a round hole that had been cut out of the floor. Winding down into the darkness beneath the shop was a rickety wooden staircase that looked ready to collapse.

“Watch your step,” said Mack courteously, “I keep meaning to repair this, but no time these days.”

Mack slid down the curving balustrade with ease, but since I was afraid the whole thing would collapse under me, I took my time. When I was about halfway down, I heard Mack flick a switch, and the whole chamber beneath the shop filled with light.

Oh, the noise! It was like he had just switched on the lights at a zoo for blind monkeys who’d suddenly regained their sight. All manner of shrieks, whistles, horns, mutterings, gasps, snorts, whispers, yells, moans, catcalls, bellows, screams, and even some sounds that there are no words for, came echoing up from the basement floor. Mack dimmed the lights (a hundred or more firebrands hanging from the ceiling) and it grew quiet again.

I reached the floor and looked around the basement in wonder. Along the many rows of wooden shelves, thousands upon thousands of characters and creatures stood packed like sardines. They hooted and hollered. Some shouted welcomes. Others pleaded for mercy or not to be bought too cheaply. Still others even argued about what kind of creature I was. But most of them simply ignored us and scratched away at their antennas or skins or capes or furs. Mack must have overheard some of their conversations, for he asked,

“Where *are* you from, human? Don’t get many your size...not that that can’t be changed, hmm.”

He looked at me and his eye twinkled, as though he had just thought of something very clever and businessy – something in which I might just play a part.

“Ah, Calladin actually,” I replied carefully. Mack stroked his chin, inspecting me as though I were a small pot of gold. Finally he nodded, as though he had reached a conclusion.

He trotted off towards the shelves, passing some kind of computer attached to a short metallic arm stretching out from the wall. Just above the computer there was another round window. Since we were underground, I couldn't understand how this was possible, but as I had seen so many strange things already, I was not too concerned.

A long row of shelves vanished off into the darkness on my left, and about twenty paces over to the right, another shelf rose up towards the ceiling. The basement was littered with various lost character parts and limbs and wheels, all scattered along the dusty shelves or abandoned on the floor.

Mack removed a firebrand from the wall and led me down one isle. I studied his strange creatures in amazement,

"What type of humans *do* you get then?" I asked as we passed a bag of talking lemons. They were arguing about the true meaning of chaos and gave me a sour look.

"Mostly little ones," Mack replied offhand. He held the torch above his head as he searched along the upper shelves. Every so often we would pass a letter or a symbol signifying what category we had entered. We were now in section Γ and it appeared many of the creatures here were allergic to fire. They crept back from the shelf edge as he held the torch aloft. A clock saying the time backwards began stealing some of the flame from Mack's torch, sucking it into a dark void that shimmered around its hands as it repeated,

*Tick tock, time will stop
bring me the Key from the Golden Lock.
tick tock, time will stop
bring me the Key from the Golden Lock'.*

We moved on and Mack continued explaining,

"I get your little humans coming through every now and again. They're usually looking for...imaginary friends? I think that's what they call them. I have a whole section out the back filled with all the ones that get returned after a few years. Phew, are those guys bitter..."

Mack shook his head, evidently recalling the bother those unloved imaginary friends had given him in the past.

“But mostly folk just need a character for a play, or a pet, or a hero for a story, or something to entertain them with magic you know...anything really. Ah, here we are.”

We came to a symbol that looked like a backward C hanging on the air, as though it were a silver moon. Mack flicked the moon with his fingers and it spun around in space. Even after it had stopped spinning, its little eyes continued to whiz around in fast circles. But now at least it looked like a proper C. The light of Mack’s torch fell across a black, star covered box. Mack bent to open the lid. Immediately a strangely dressed wizard popped up and threw his arms out wide, giving us a splendid, happy yawn,

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

He went happily, as if he wished to give us both a very big hug. His rosy eyes sparkled merrily, and his long red cape, one covered in golden stars and moons that glittered every time he moved, flowed down from his arms so that it was hard to tell where his sleeves stopped and the rest of the gown began. Upon his head, he wore a short square hat that looked to be made of red felt, and around his chin, he sported a wispy silver beard. The tips of his golden boots curled up from underneath his gown, and to be sure, I was very impressed with Theseus – the smallest wizard-king in the kingdom. Mack dropped the lid into place again and lifted the box off the shelf,

“I have no idea how it got mixed up in this lot,” he frowned, “I really should get this place organised. Oh! Your gnome! I forgot. Hmm, better follow me up again and we’ll give this to the king - Oi! Cut that out!”

He shouted at a windmill chasing a miniature lady vampire across the floor. He booted the wooden windmill into the shelf. The lady vampire tried to thank Mack by sinking her fangs into his ankle, but the storekeeper simply knocked her away with the tip of his shiny shoe,

“That’s the end of it, both of you. It’s not too late for me to throw you in the pit.”

At the mention of the word ‘pit’, all the creatures in the basement suddenly became quiet.

A purple crayfish with wings half scuttled, half flew away from the angry storekeeper. Once it was out of sight, Mack gave me a sly wink,

“That always gets them, ho ho,” he chuckled, “no such thing of course, but they’re not to know that,” he tapped his nose as we walked back to the rickety staircase.

Another outbreak of chaos occurred on one shelf. Mack dipped into his pocket and threw a second steel plum at a pair of bickering, shrunken ogres dressed as knights,

“It never ends,” he sighed before whizzing up the staircase. I followed him up to the shop floor, only to find that the king had fallen asleep in his throne. His golden crown lay fallen down over his nose and he looked rather comical sitting there in his red pajamas. After a cough from either Minsy or Insy, I couldn’t be sure, the king awoke with a splutter,

“Yes yes, put them all to death...on with the show then, ey, what’s this,” he looked around in surprise, “oh, Thesius, indeed...yes. Did you find what I’m looking for, Mack?”

“Yes, your majesty. One red star please.”

The two-headed goblin dropped a sparkling red star into Mack’s outstretched hand. The storekeeper handed the box over to the goblin who passed it up to the king. The gargoyles lurched upright and turned towards the door. The king was clearly delighted with his new actor, for as soon as it was out of its box, he began tickling its beard and rubbing its belly and pretending to hide its hat, all the while giggling and kicking his feet as though he’d just received a brand new toy. As he disappeared outside, we discovered that the king was wearing one of those pajama pants with a little flap on the bottom, and unfortunately, someone had forgotten to button it up. Mack shook his head,

“Dear-o-dear,” he sighed as the king’s white bottom was carried outside, “if only his mother could see him now...Ah, Norbitts!”

The metal man, who had fallen into a heap of nuts and bolts in the corner, suddenly stood up and began swaying around like a rusty sign,

“Go into the basement and find me the order for Doctor Greywig. I think it’s in isle 893, but it could be in isle 4. Just check in between will you?”

The robot’s head suddenly fell off.

“Ah ah ah, don’t play that game,” said Mack, unimpressed, “you know I don’t fall for that. Go on, off you go.”

Norbitts stooped to pick up his copper plated head. He screwed it back on with a shriek of metal and plodded miserably towards the basement. Mack reopened the book,

“Riiiiight...let’s see now. Green gnomes...green gnomes. Hmm, none close by.” He thumped the page in anger.

“Oh, really, it’s no fuss,” I began, “any old gnome will do. In fact, I’m not sure-”

“No no no,” he waved dismissively, “if it’s green you want then it’s green you’ll have. I’ll just have to look in the database to find it.”

I wanted to point out that it was he who had suggested I take a green gnome in the first place, but the ground had begun to shake beneath my feet. Another, more violent tremble followed. Then a third. It was like somebody or something very large was rocking the house. Mack pulled a fob watch from his coat pocket,

“Half past the hour of the rocking horse, maaaasster,” the clock said to him with grave authority.

“That’ll be Nuggles then. Excuse me sir.”

Mack trotted to the window and put his head out. I leant out from the second window, keen to see what was causing all the mini earthquakes. Strolling slowly towards the shop was a huge pink thing. And believe you me, ‘thing’ is the only word you could use to describe such a strange creature. It looked like a gigantic pink jellybean, but covered in large purple spots. It must have been over fifty feet high! It had no face except for a pink horn-like hairdo that rose up and out from the top of its head. Little wisps of hair sprouted at the base of the horn, and although it did not have a neck, a round, head like object poked out from the top of its pink body. In one arm it carried a huge cane basket. Its feet were like rhino feet, and although I could not explain how, it looked like it was walking backwards while walking forwards,

“What is it?” I asked very quietly.

“You tell me then we’ll both know. I’ve had since it was a baby and I don’t know what it is so I can’t even sell it. It’s too big to fit in the basement and I can’t give it away. The only thing I can do is to make it run errands for me. She’s a sweet kid, but boy I wish I could get rid of her.”

The said creature which Mack had named Nuggles swayed towards us. As it approached, Mack called from the window,

“Nuggles! I need you to go and get me two Oggle eggs and a cloud of steam from the market. Can you do that?”

The strange creature squeaked and turned around on the spot. It gave Mack a friendly wave and began strolling towards the lake.

“Oh, and Nuggles?” Mack called again.

The creature lifted its head and squeaked in question,

“Make sure they’re Rospin Oggle eggs, okay? Not the Quizzle kind. They give me gas.”

Nuggles nodded and squeaked again. It was an odd sound coming from a thing so large and I almost felt sorry for her. Maybe one day she would find a nice home, maybe as a door warden for a dragon, or even as a giant’s pet. Mack sighed when she stumbled into the lake and nearly dropped her basket. Once she was safely across, I followed Mack back into the basement where Norbitts was rattling around mournfully. I wondered if the robot had ever taken a holiday, as he looked as miserable as a robot can. Mack beckoned me over to his strange computer that had no keys but was instead surrounded by many horns, levers and touch-pads.

“This is my database,” he remarked, adjusting a large dial on the side. “We should be able to bring it up through here...just a little bit of age...and beard...”

He flicked a series of levers until all his bearded characters began scrolling down the screen. Every now and again he blew one of the horns. His hands moved very quickly, with every horn blast bringing another creature up on the screen. Unfortunately, very few resembled gnomes.

“This is the noisiest computer I have ever heard,” I informed him. He whacked the side of the database,

“I’ll say. The blinking thing’s been on the blink since I got it. Hello! I think that’s done the trick!”

He laughed as a whole series of gnomes began scrolling down the screen. Every photo had a name and a number printed beneath it, as though it were a history of all the criminal gnomes from around the world. Before the pictures stopped scrolling, Mack looked up at the ceiling in alarm. He leapt onto his computer and stuck his head out the underground window, a curiosity I still find difficult to understand even now. He cursed, and even though I didn’t know most of the words he used, I knew they were bad.

The ground beneath me began to shake and tremble, and at first I thought the strange creature Nuggles was on her way back. I was even more surprised to see the head of a giant clown appear way up above the window. I could see most of the creature except for his boots.

He was covered in huge brightly coloured rags, and must have been over three hundred meters high! Mack shouted angrily,

“Watch where you’re going you crazy hobo-clown-freak! You nearly crushed my laundry last time with your clown boots!”

The clown stopped to look down in displeasure at the red-faced Mack, who quickly jumped down again and hit a large button fitted into the wall beside his computer screen. The giant’s face vanished behind what appeared to be an immense umbrella opening up above the house. A terrible noise shuddered over the house like that of a hundred cars being dragged down a road. I shouted,

“What’s going on?”

“I’m plagued by giant clowns!!” Mack yelled over the racket, “this one likes to blow his nose when he gets angry. The last time he came past I nearly drowned! Crazy two-bit-”

The rest of what he said was lost over the nose blowing, and I was glad Mack had installed the umbrella, lest we all drowned. He stood there cringing, as though expecting a blow, until the noise stopped. The umbrella retracted, and Mack hopped up to look out the window again. The clown had gone and he shook his head in anger,

“Crazy fool nearly crushed half my shop last time. There’s a group of ‘em all walking round and causing mischief. I should really set a trap...”

But whatever clowntrap he had in mind was promptly forgotten as the little shopkeeper returned to his screen of gnomes.

“I guess you don’t want evil gnomes, ey?” he asked.

“Ah, well, I haven’t really thought about it. It’s very distracting here.”

With a touch of his finger, most the gnomes that happened to be eating their own heads or glowing with black fire suddenly disappeared. When only a few remained, one caught my eye, and I remarked,

“But that one looks interesting,”

“Right you are. Let’s bring him up.”

He tapped a few pads, twisted a golden knob, and after a final blast from a horn, everything disappeared on the screen except for the said gnome and second less intelligent looking one who peered out from his portrait like someone peering up at rain clouds from a window. Mack frowned,

“Looks like we got a double up. I hate it when this happens.”

Before I could ask what a double up was, an immense fly loomed up above one of the shelves behind us. I drew back in fear, but Mack, without looking, simply picked up a creature he’d been using as a paperweight and tossed it casually over his shoulder. His eyes never left the screen. The paperweight, a stone frog wearing slippers and smoking a pipe, croaked in alarm as it flew over the shelf and crashed into the fly’s eye. The fly then slowly sunk back beneath the shelf and I saw no more of it.

“Donald’s pet,” was all Mack offered in explanation. How it got into the shop, or indeed who Donald was, remains a mystery to this day. Mack squeezed another horn. The second gnome disappeared, and all that remained on the screen was a single photograph, a few lines of symbols and the word:

THE ADDER

Mack read quietly for a time, then pursed his lips,

“He *is* an interesting one...at the end of the evil category, so I don’t know if he is good or bad. Strange. A nasty looking one though, isn’t he?”

The Adder, as the gnome seemed to be named, did not look like the normal type to be found in any garden. He wore a tattered black and hooded gown that seemed decades old, and his only working eye glowed with a strange blue lustre. The other eye was stitched shut. I shivered,

“Are you sure he’s not a villain?”

“I don’t think so. But it says here he lost his eye after being chased out of a gnomic village, and is suspected of being a false witchdoctor. Although there is nothing to say he’s bad. I’ll tell you what – take him, and if you don’t like him, I’ll give you a trade in on another. But only if you do me a little favour in return, because I don’t normally do trade-ins.”

I looked at him carefully,

“What kind of favour?”

“Nothing serious. Just a matter of publicising my shop in your world. You see, I’ve got this shipment coming in, in ohh...about a hundred years in your time, and I need most of this lot out before the next batch arrive.”

I was surprised by the strange request and asked,

“How am I supposed to do that?”

“Well, I don’t know! Write about my shop or something. Tell people. You know how to get here. Just give them directions and tell them to turn left at the sign. And tell them not to worry about money. You’d be surprised what people carry in their pockets when they don’t know it.”

“But no one would believe me,” I answered, as I could hardly tell people about a place that didn’t exist.

“Oh, I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” he grinned, “you just have to want to believe! And you can tell them I said that as well. If your folk have come before, then they’ll come again. No doubt about that. They just need to be told, that’s all. So do me a favour, tell ‘em all about the place and I’ll give you a discount next time you come. But no guarantees mind! I’m only giving you the option of a trade-in on this one because you seem to be a bit confused about what you’re actually doing

here. Otherwise I never give guarantees for any character. Actually, I should put that on the sign. While I remember – Norbitts!!”

Norbitts came clinking and clattering around from isle 4. He looked very forlorn, but a silver key sat in the middle of his metal claw,

“Ah! Good work Norbitts,” Mack said proudly, “I see you have found the Key from the Golden Lock. Doctor Darkwig will be very pleased. Now I need you to do something else.”

Norbitts trembled as though he was about to blow steam from his ears. He threw down the key in a fit of temper,

“Now now, enough of that,” said Mack wagging his finger at the robot, “I want you to add ‘No Guarantees Whatsoever’ to the sign above the roof. And get rid of that blasted ‘T’ that’s still sitting up there confusing folk. It’s ‘Mack’s One Stop Character Shop’, not ‘One Stop Character Stop’. I told you to take that down last time.”

Norbitts’ head dropped in defeat. It was if the whole world had just fallen down around his cogs. There seemed to be no end of work for poor Norbitts. The robot man trundled unhappily across to the staircase, creaking and groaning his way all the way up to the top. Mack picked the key up from the floor,

“Clever little chap this one,” he said holding it up to the light.

Black runes ran along its surface, and, as I watched, the key changed from pure silver into grey smoke, flickering in Mack’s palm as though ready to escape into the air.

“What does it do?” I asked in wonder.

“Time freezes for whoever uses it to lock the Clock of Ages. Handy if you’re running late I suppose. Could cause a bit of a problem in your world though,” he said thoughtfully, “as you fellows seem to run on time...”

I remembered the strange clock that we had passed earlier and I guessed it to be the very same Clock of Ages of which Mack spoke.

“But where were we?” Mack scratched his head. “Oh yes! Is it a deal then?”

I thought quickly. I wasn't really sure what I would do with the strange gnome once I had him, but he did seem remarkably unique. And as the shop was designed for folk wishing to use characters in plays and stories, I decided that, well, the gnome could certainly be useful to someone who wrote about gnomes for a living, or even someone just looking for an imaginary friend. Perhaps even *I* could write a tale with the strange creature playing some kind of cameo role. Who knew? The whole thing intrigued me, as I found the idea of other people stumbling across Mack's shop in their dreams as something quite wonderful. So I nodded,

"It's a deal."

I went to shake his hand, and was again surprised to find a gnome about the height of a beach ball balanced on it. The gnome, the same dark, hooded creature from the computer screen, turned to regard me with his brightly glowing eye. I gave him my second hand to lean on, and he rustled like old leaves as he carefully placed his staff onto it – a strangely shaped one hewn from some kind of black stone. After peering at me for a moment, he coughed and looked away.

"And there you have him!" Mack proudly introduced the gnome by tapping it on the head, "The Adder, also known as The Ageless One. Rumoured to be immortal. Can read runes and all."

"But he's not green." I pointed out.

Mack's mouth fell open, as if he had forgotten.

"That's right. Oh well, I said I'd give you a trade-in if you're unhappy with him. But I am sure you won't be. Will you take it?"

A thought occurred to me,

"But...how do I get him back to my home?"

"See, there's the rub. As a human, you don't. Unless you write a little story for this chap, he'll remain a creature of your imagination only, or maybe make his way back here somehow and you won't even have him in your thoughts. But put him in a story, and he'll be yours, and real, forever. See?"

I frowned. I had never heard anything like this before. It sounded like a sham.

"No, not really," I said.

“Well, you will.” Mack assured me as he headed back towards the staircase. “So, you’ll take him?”

The gnome had started chanting softly in my hands. I must admit, looking at him made me want to have such a creature for my own, even if I did run the risk that it would place a curse on me, or more likely vanish when I returned to my cottage. I nodded and said ‘okay’ but Mack was already back on his shop floor. I carried my new gnome up the stairs and found Mack tapping away at the till on the counter – a strange golden device also made of many levers and cogs.

“Right then,” he hummed, “one Adder – do you want anything else with that?”

“Ah, like what?”

“Humour. Smells. Advanced magic...anything you like really. I have a menu of all the options you can have with any character...for a small fee of course,” he smiled.

“No, the normal model seems curious enough, thank you.”

I sat the creature on my shoulder, a little uncomfortably, but from there he gave a soft, whispery chuckle of approval. Just then the door alarm went off again (this time it sounded like a seagull fight) and in came a tall woman dressed from head to toe in silver. She rushed over to the counter like an overexcited butterfly,

“Mack! You have to help me. I need a snow flake that won’t melt, and, and I need him to be smart and clever, because he needs to sell raindrops for me – and – when I’m not at home, and I need - ”

“Whoa, easy there Lady Winter,” Mack interrupted the breathless woman, “I’m serving this gentleman. I’ll just be one moment.”

The tall woman nodded quickly and looked at me impatiently. Lady Winter wore a very tall silver hat upon her head that was long and round like a cylinder. She had a very long dress on as well. It looked like a silver waterfall that flowed behind her everywhere she went. Mack gave me a polite smile,

“Sorry about that. Okay, let me see...” he tapped at the till again, “that’ll be one Adder, standard...hmm, plus the favour

of course...right, trade-in option – yes. Err, Okay! One golden star please,” he said, extending his hand.

I rummaged in my pocket. The first thing I pulled out was a round ball of blue liquid. It was filled with hundreds of tiny white dots that looked like stars. Mack’s eyes light up,

“Whoa! Easy there! Too much! I can’t break a Dolphin. Check again there sir. There must be something smaller, no?”

I dipped back into my pocket. After clutching at a selection of objects, I pulled them out to discover a piece of lint, a string, two golden coins, a small spanner (which I was surprised to find in my dreams since I had been looking for it in my house for ages) and finally, sitting on the edge of my thumb, a golden star that looked better suited for a Christmas tree, except that it was glowing with stardust. As I reached out to drop it into Mack’s waiting hand, the little man suddenly threw up his arms and shouted,

“Watch out Lady Winter!!”

I turned to see Lady Winter poking her finger into a long rectangular box. She gave a great yelp of pain and pulled it out again. Unfortunately for Lady Winter, a snake with a dragon’s head had attached itself to her finger. Mack leapt over the counter and tried to pull it off, but just as he did, two pale blue creatures appeared in the corner of the store and Mack cried out again. The newcomers looked like of a couple of bouncing blue bowling balls. They squeaked with awful, high-pitched squeals and began sucking the characters off the shelves with their mouths. The ball creatures were shoplifting Mack’s characters!

“Globs again!!” Mack shouted in rage.

The little man dashed at them with his arms flailing. He jumped up and tried to squash one, but as soon as it was under his foot, it vanished, only to reappear again next to his shoulder. Lady Winter continued to struggle with the Dragonsnake as it bit deeper into her finger. Her screams filled the shop as I fought valiantly to free her.

“Norbitts!!!” Mack cried as the second Glob reappeared above his head.

The robot had just finished painting *No Guarantees What-*, and was taking a well-earned rest on the roof when Mack’s cry

caught him off guard. He stood up in fright, but since his balance wasn't good at the best of times, he stumbled. With a shattering crash, Norbitts fell backwards through the roof. The robot tumbled headfirst onto the shop floor, covering everybody in dust and bringing half the tiles down around his head. The characters screeched and hooted crazily, shouting at me to do something. Luckily the surprise reappearance of Norbitts frightened away the thieving Globs, but some of the other characters saw it as the perfect chance to escape. A blind bat and a snowman wearing a top hat made a dash for the window. The snowman quickly melted, but it was only the sharp thinking of Mack that stopped the bat from slipping out into the sky. He dived smartly to his left and caught it by the wingtip.

In all the commotion, the gnome fell from my shoulder. But as he fell, he smacked the Dragonsnake with his staff. It yelped and withdrew into its box. The Adder landed heavily, but got back on his feet and began shuffling around on the spot. Lady Winter gave him a very cold kiss on the top of his hood after I had picked him up again,

“Oh, my little hero! Isn't he adorable!!”

She clasped her hands in front of her and beamed at the less than pleasant looking creature. The Adder frowned, as though unused to such compliments. I returned the gnome to my shoulder, and Mack, after screwing Norbitts' arm back into place and dusting the robot with a handkerchief, finally took my golden star as payment. He then mopped up the snowman with the hanky, gave the hanky to Lady Winter as a bandage (who had been busy sucking her finger), retied the blind bat to its spot upon the shelf and dropped the snowman's hat onto a tiny, tap dancing hat rack.

“Sorry about that,” said Mack as we stepped over Norbitts and a portion of the roof, “doesn't usually happen.”

“I would hope not.” I said, looking around at the characters returning to their seats upon the shelves.

Some of them were clapping and throwing petals, as if the whole series of events had been a performance for their amusement. Only the stone wizard was not amused, and he gave me another of his withering looks. He accompanied me

outside where we spotted Nuggles, the strange thing that could only be called a thing, waltzing slowly back over the lake. Her basket was full and she squeaked a greeting to Mack. Mack shouted from the step,

“Did you get Raspin Oggle eggs?!”

Nuggles stopped. Although she didn’t have a face as such, I can safely say that she looked puzzled. She gave a long, unhappy squeak or moan.

“Better go back then,” Mack shouted, “and get some roof glue this time! Oh, and some more screws for Norbitts,” he added as the pink creature waded back towards the far side of the lake.

Mack turned to me with his charming smile. He certainly looked very calm for someone who’d just had their whole shop collapse around their ears,

“Don’t worry,” he said as though reading my thoughts, “we’ll get this place fixed up in no time. I’ll get Norbitts onto it straight away. But I should really get back to Lady Winter – you *will* remember to advertise this place when you get back, yes? I want loads of you coming through by this time next century.”

I agreed and shook his hand as a posse of giant clowns strolled across the horizon.

“And remember!” Mack called over his shoulder as he trotted back through the door. “No guarantees! Only a once off trade-in for you. See you again soon!”

The last thing I heard before he shut the door was Lady Winter piping something excitedly and Mack telling Norbitts to pull himself together. So I wandered away, not sure where to go next. Thankfully the gnome coughed and pointed to the ground, his way of telling me that he wanted to get off. I dropped him onto the grass where he scratched the rough shape of a diamond out with his staff. When the diamond was complete, he filled it with runes, and then remarked in a whispery voice that sounded like snakes slithering over grass,

“Your way home, friend.”

He pointed upwards and slightly to the right. I looked in that direction and saw my desk shimmering in the air with my room faintly visible around it. The next thing I knew, I was

whizzing through the tunnel again – this time with the gnome upon my shoulder.

“Remind me to tell everyone about Mack’s shop,” I heard myself say sleepily before being awoken by Penelope, my delightful cat, purring happily on my lap. I searched the room, but, as expected, the gnome had vanished.

Mack was true to his word however. Now that Penelope’s tale is written, I occasionally catch sight of the Adder lurking in the shadows of my room. And as you can see, I have since been back to buy more characters, so do pop in every so often to read a chapter from the Tales wherein these characters reside. Till then, just remember...

Left at the sign!

And be sure to write your own stories for the characters you buy!