

A Spark of Magic

By
Declan Mungovan

Prologue

The Chief Admiral had just promoted himself to the top job earlier that morning and was still unsure of what his new responsibilities involved. He had considered the title of admiral but decided that adding the word chief made the whole affair sound far more official. His second in command approached and handed over the golden trumpet of Rigol.

“Chief Admiral, the fleet is ready sir, your orders?”

This is where things could get tricky. The Chief Admiral had discovered that one of the drawbacks of promoting yourself to the leader of a large navy was that lots of important decisions had to be made. He wasn't known as a decisive man. It wasn't that he cracked under pressure. The fact of the matter was that the Chief Admiral had a vague understanding of the limits of his own intellect. He was well aware that at any moment one stupid decision could be the difference between epic glory and catastrophic failure.

“Assemble the men,” he declared after clearing his throat. He wasn't exactly sure why the men needed to be assembled, but it sounded like the kind of thing someone in his position would say.

“Aye sir. An inspirational speech before battle?”

“The men, assemble them,” he repeated in an attempt to delay answering the question.

The Chief Admiral turned around and gazed out across the bay. The water was swarming with hundreds of ships of different shapes and sizes. Large wooden galleons with massive sails mingled with destroyers whose long oars jutted out into the sea. It was the largest armada of warrior ships assembled in several generations, or so the Chief Admiral had concluded. Counting was never one of his strengths. Muscle strength on the other hand was something he could easily comprehend. He never saw the need to learn numbers higher than the number of muscles he was able to flex on his own body¹. He deduced through his limited use of counting that there were far more ships in the water than flexible muscles on a typical man.

His second in command returned leading a cohort of hundreds of warriors. All were beefy men with square jaws, the shortest among them standing a respectable six feet five inches tall. The Chief Admiral climbed onto a nearby boulder to address the crowd. They all huddled around their leader preparing their minds to be inspired. Some in the front row knelt down on one knee so those further back could see.

The Chief Admiral at this stage was regretting his earlier decision to assemble the men, but now that they had gathered he felt something should probably be said. He re-adjusted his fleece shawl, cleared his throat and in a booming voice declared:

“Today,” he said before pausing. He was happy that he had chosen such a fine opening word. He thought it was an accurate word to use as it wasn't yet tomorrow and yesterday had already passed. He continued, “Today, we embark.” He paused again, proud he had remembered the word embark. He felt it was a far smarter word than journey, which was the first word that came into his head.

¹ The chief admiral thought he could count to 142, but he always left out odd numbers as he found them harder to remember.

“Today we embark,” he bellowed, “on a great journey, a journey across the ocean.” Many of the men nodded their heads at this stage as everything their leader had said so far in his fine speech was entirely true.

“A journey to plunder our sworn enemies,” he added to great cheers. The Chief Admiral really liked how the speech was going so far. He was sure that it was time to wrap it up while he was on a roll, before he said something foolish.

“To Innis Freeish we journey, to our bounty!” he said and all the warriors burst into rapturous applause. Some of the warriors were so moved they wiped tears from their faces.

The Chief Admiral felt his earlier uncertainties about leadership melt away. He was now confident that he was exactly the right person for the top job. He had a transcendent feeling that no man in history had been more suited for a job that he was to lead these men at that moment in time. He looked down at the golden trumpet of Rigol in his hand and was overcome with a desire to blow it as loud as he could. He placed it to his lips and emptied all the air from his lungs into the instrument. The resulting sound created a noise so deafening that birds nesting in the cliff top perch of Thole several miles away were startled.

Chapter 1

Three Months Earlier Innis Freeish

War was the last thing that the Leprechaun inhabitants of Innis Freeish were thinking of, they hadn't even thought to invent a word for that particular pastime. Its inhabitants went about their business blissfully ignorant of any great threat that might be brewing their way. One such leprechaun was sixteen year old Buck Snagglepot. He worked at the third largest bank on Innis Freeish. Floor number ten to be precise. Desk number twenty-two to be even more precise.

His summer intern position as junior account processor was far from his idea. It was a job whose title exactly describes its function: processing accounts, during the summer, and as a junior intern.

The surface of his small wooden desk was strewn with stacks of yellow parchment and various ledgers. Rows of similar desks and busy leprechauns spread out across floor ten in all directions. The rustling of paper and inking of quills was amplified by the stoniness of the building. The entire bank was constructed of stone bricks. Long narrow windows on two of the walls created a tapestry of light that decked floor ten and its workers with a mesh of illumination. An imposing stairway at the front of the room functioned as the way in, but more importantly to Buck, as the way out.

Buck hated the uncomfortable suit he had to wear for work. It was an obscure version of green; the specific shade he couldn't recall. To make matters worse he was supposed to top it all off with a ridiculous bowler hat² that was the same colour as his suit. The sweltering summer heat made him pull and yanked at his green tie throughout the day.

He stared at the ledgers for a moment then let out a deep sigh. The endless columns of numbers and tabulations held little interest to the young leprechaun. To kill some time Buck started doodling a magical spell on the margin of one of the ledgers using his sea gull

² While bowler hats were rarely worn socially by the wider leprechaun community anymore, employees of PJ Freeman were expected to adorn their heads with them as a way of showing customers the bank was in touch with its proud historical roots.

feathered quill. Defacing bank property could get him into serious trouble which is why he was skilled at hiding his own doodles. A well-coordinated magical twirl of his quill saw the text slowly dissolve from sight. Buck sometimes envied how the ink would simply disappear, leaving no trace behind.

“Snagglepot!” came a belligerent voice from behind him.

Buck looked around and saw his duty manager, Mr Quid, staring at him angrily. The clank of his boots on the stony floor echoed throughout the room as Mr Quid marched over to Buck’s desk. He came to a stop in front of Buck and folded his arms.

“Did I just see you defacing PJ Freeman property,” he snarled at Buck, “or do my eyes deceive me?”

Mr Quid had held the same title and position as Buck just two years earlier. But he now wore a dark green bowler hat and suit designating his new duty manager role. Mr Quid relished being in charge of something. The sense of importance he felt from his slight level of authority gave him an enormous feeling of personal achievement.

“Defacing company property?” Buck enquired with a puzzled look on his face.

Mr Quid grabbed the ledger and slid it closer for a better look. He quickly scanned a few pages but found nothing amiss. To save some face he asked:

“How much work have you completed today?”

“I’m on target.”

“On target?” Mr Quid exclaimed, “At PJ Freeman’s we strive to exceed targets, not just to be *on* them.”

Mr Quid tried to intimidate all the junior account processors on floor ten, usually with very little success. He handed back the ledger and gave a condescending look that he had been practicing at home all week in the mirror.

“I used to do your job,” he then proudly announced, “a lowly junior accounts processor dressed in lime green. Now I’m wearing dark green with manager level responsibility. You would do well to emulate my great success.”

Mr Quid disliked Buck’s attitude towards accounts at PJ Freeman’s. All of the other leprechauns on floor ten were capable of either meeting, or exceeding targets. Buck didn’t seem to be passionate about accounts, and this infuriated Mr Quid. He wondered how he would ever get promoted from duty manager to floor manager if every single member of his team wasn’t working to full capacity. To make matters worse, Mr Quid believed Buck’s untidy hair made a mockery of finance³. The duty manager took pride in the professional shape of his own orderly haircut. Mr Quid liked to describe a leprechaun’s hair style as a window into one’s inner self and a display of personal financial fortitude. He hoped that when others gazed upon his own haircut they would marvel at its beautiful efficiency and staggering economy.

“A target missed is an opportunity lost,” Mr Quid started preaching, “and an opportunity lost is a shame indeed”.

Buck had heard this hundreds of times. It was the bank’s motto and emblazoned in gold letters above the front entrance to their bank⁴.

“A shame indeed Mr Snagglepot. A shame, indeed.”

³ Lately Mr Quid had taken to secretly measuring the hair length of all the floor ten employees. He was concerned that Buck’s independence was having a serious impact on the overall average.

⁴ Buck appreciated the thriftily short motto of one of the other major banks on Innis Freeish called Goldpack Investments whose slogan “We’re fantastic!” presumably made manager scathing end a lot quicker.

“Yes sir,” said Buck, hoping to end their encounter.

“Well then, you’d better get working,” said Mr Quid, tapping on the ledger.

Mr Quid had tried to have Buck expelled from the bank on several occasions, but his complaints had always been met with indifference by those in positions of higher authority. This was a source of great embarrassment for Mr Quid. He carried his limited authority like a heavy sword, lacking both the foresight and experience to wield it with any great skill or purpose.

“No more dilly dallying Mr Snagglepot. A focused mind is a happy mind. And a mind focused on accounts is the happiest of all,” said Mr Quid as he tapped on the ledger again, “continue failing to exceed your targets and I’ll have you locked up in Crypta.” Crypta was the PJ Freeman vault. Mr Quid liked to imagine he could lock up interns in Crypta for under performing at their job. His occasional jokes on the matter were met with giggles by himself alone.

Mr Quid adjusted the lapels on his suit in an attempt to draw attention to its colour then turned on his heels, and marched away.

Buck looked back at the ledger entitled “Median Butter Milk Prices for the Southern Lowland Areas”.

Buck heard a deep sigh of befuddled confusion coming from the desk beside him. It was Branna Greenwhistle. He sat furiously analysing some yellow parchment with a pained expression on his face. The Greenwhistles were well known on the island for their attention to technical detail. Buck imagined that any errors on the documents held few hiding places from Branna’s probing eye. Even though Branna was the same age as Buck he looked much older due to his larger physique⁵. Branna had ruby red cheeks that gave him the impression of being either extremely healthy or extremely unwell, depending on his posture.

Branna leaned over in his desk and presented the parchment to Buck and asked:

“Is this a six or an eight?”

“Six. I think.”

Branna stared at the number again more intently then went back to work without acknowledging Bucks help.

The fading sunlight indicated that Buck, along with all the other leprechauns on floor ten, had completed their work for the day⁶. He looked back and saw Mr Quid busy lighting lanterns at the other side of the room. This enabled more committed staff members to continue accounting in spite of the fading light. Buck saw his chance. He quietly closed his ledger and shuffled to the exit as quietly and as quickly as he could.

After descending ten flights of stairs he felt relieved to remove his bowler hat and tie. It was always the first thing he did as he walked out the arched entrance of PJ Freeman’s. He crossed the courtyard of the bank and sat on the grass covered wall beneath a drooping willow tree to wait for his father to finish work. Buck Senior had a habit of working past his contractually obligated hours. Looking at the ten story hulking mass of PJ Freeman’s in front

⁵ It should be noted that larger is a relative term, as the word large could rarely be applied to anything on Innis Freeish.

⁶ PJ Freeman had a policy of not allowing clocks or watches in the working hall

of him filled Buck with both a respect for the labour required to construct the building, but also a disdain for the labour that took place inside it's walls.

Buck nodded to some of the other leprechauns who were making their way home from the bank in groups. Branna Greenwhistle passed by completely oblivious of his surroundings as he scanned the yellow parchment he had been working on earlier. He often took his work home with him, and this was one of those particular days. Buck suspected he didn't do it to impress Mr Quid, but simply because he loved his work so much. Mr Quid was willing to turn a blind eye to ledgers leaving the office once it resulted in more work being completed.

Buck's position on the wall afforded him a majestic view of the ocean that spilled out from the cliff edge in the distance behind the bank. The retreating sun painted vibrant reds and oranges across the horizon. But the sunset paled in splendour to the magnificence of the Innis Freeish rainbow that constantly hung above the island. The leprechauns simply called it the Arc. The semicircle draped the sky reflecting reds, greens, blues and some lesser known colours onto the glistening waves below.

Starting from the centre of the Arc, the colours slowly bulged and pulsed toward the outer edge, causing a cascading glitter of mixed colours to sprinkle from its surface, before finally dissipating into thin air.

It was one of the few facets of magic that was tolerated on Innis Freeish. There was a general ignorance on the island as to how it functioned, but there was an understanding that the Arc somehow hid the island from outside hostility. As the leprechauns had no military or armed defence of their own, the Arc was their first, and only, line of defence. But no leprechaun on the island had ever seen it do anything, other than the slow rhythmic pulse they saw it perform on a daily basis. Buck found it unfortunate that most of the others took the breath-taking beauty of the Arc for granted.

Most of the bank's employees had left by the time Buck Senior emerged from PJ Freeman's. He approached Buck with a giddy smile on his face.

"I closed out that Huckleton whiskey account today son. You should have seen me," Buck Senior said as he stroked his moustache. Buck Senior's moustache dominated his face. Not because it was overly large in size, but rather because his other facial features provided such poor competition. His moustache had held onto most of its red colour over the years, even though the remaining hair on his head had long ago surrendered to grey. Buck Senior was wearing a similar styled suit to Buck, just a slightly different shade of green.

"Everything in the ledgers balanced," he said while miming some fancy ledger work, "even the stuff that wasn't supposed to. It was beautiful. " Buck Senior had a habit of performing air accountancy when reliving some of his proudest work.

"That's great Dad," Buck said while trying to sound impressed.

"I wanted to take the ledger home to show you and your brother, but Mr Glendacob said no. Bank policy, you know how it is. How was your day?"

"Magical," Buck replied sarcastically.

"Keep working at it," he said with enthusiasm, "you'll soon have days like mine. There's nothing like the thrill of writing that final number into the opposite column and realising everything has balanced out. Now that's real magic. I might be in line for a promotion at the end of the cycle, if I keep balancing at this rate anyhow. Who knows, I might be managing the Huckleton account on my own this time next year."

Buck managed to fake a smile to appease his father. All Buck dreamed about was one day becoming a skilled magician. But the days of making a living from magic was long

gone his father would firmly remind him. All serious leprechauns focused on accountancy these days. So Buck found himself working with accounts like his father, and his father's father, and the fine tradition of Snagglepots working with accounts trundled on.

Buck hopped off the wall and the two started walking home together. Innis Freeish was mostly a rural island of open pastures, rolling hills and moss covered walls. Roads on the island were small pathways that connected together different communities of leprechauns. Grass sometimes grew in the middle of the roads but was mostly kept in check by the constant trundle of leprechaun boots.

PJ Freeman's was located in the most affluent parts of Innis Freeish in an area called Glen of the Fine Dwellings. All of the island's banks, and most of the richest leprechauns' houses, were clustered together in this community. All the buildings in Glen of the Fine Dwellings were built from sandstone bricks.

"Not only is sandstone brick superior structurally to limestone brick," Buck Senior started to say as they left the PJ Freeman courtyard, "but sandstone affords all the benefits of elevated social status my son." Buck hated it when his father started talking about the advantages of sandstone over limestone; he'd heard the speech hundreds of times.

As the king of PJ Freeman's, Thornbow Silverline's house took pride of place next door to the bank. It was a typical leprechaun house for that part of the island. It had four bedrooms over two floors with exposed brick, a thatched roof and a strong wooden door. Since leprechauns had never thought to invent glass, all windows on the island had wooden shutters that were closed when it got chilly. A rather plain square garden of grass adorned the front.

Buck glanced at the Silverline house to see if Penny was back from her embroidery lesson. He knew how much she hated those classes and was always eager to leave as early as possible. A thin trail of smoke coming from the chimney told him someone was at home. Buck Senior noticed the direction of his son's gaze.

"A Silverline, of all leprechauns," he said smiling while shaking his head, "friends with my own son. If only your mother was alive today to see this. But don't imagine it will last unless you climb your way up the ranks of management like Finbar."

Being compared to his brother Finbar was another thing that really got on Buck's nerves. Which was unfortunate as Buck Senior also had a habit of doing it regularly.

"What makes you think she's into all that?" Buck added.

"A Silverline, not interested in banking! Have you been eating some of Fido's num nums?"

"Just because she's a Silverline doesn't mean anything," Buck replied.

"It means one thing. It means she's a Silverline. And the Silverline's are into banking," Buck Senior said with a tone that implied the discussion was over. The two continued walking in silence as they passed some of the other banks in Glen of the Fine Dwellings. Looming sandstone structures cast a long shadow over the pair as they walked⁷.

Having left Glen of the Fine Dwellings behind the Snagglepots happened upon a most curious sight on their way home. A small brown Shetland pony was galloping along the road against them in the direction of the Glen of the Fine Dwelling. But galloping isn't really the correct word, for galloping implies grace of movement and swiftness of speed. The pony that approached Buck and his father looked as though it had completely forgotten how to be a pony, and was suffering from severe distress as a result. Its legs were flailing in the most unusual running technique Buck had ever seen.

⁷ Leprechauns walked everywhere on Innis Freeish, even the wealthy, so traffic accidents were a rare occurrence.

To make matters more ridiculous the pony was making a strange panicked screeching noise that neither Snagglepot had ever heard before in their lives. The fact that it was almost dark at that stage made the encounter even more bizarre.

Buck Senior looked around in all directions while squinting his eyes to see if he could find the pony's owner. With the exception of a few trees and stone hedges here and there, it was open fields, and nothing else.

"Most peculiar," he said as much to himself as to Buck.

Buck Senior stopped the animal in its tracks as it passed them. All ponies on Innis Freeish wore grey blankets on their backs with their names embroidered in red lettering on the bottom. The pony they encountered wore no such blanket.

"A pony without a blanket, most peculiar indeed," he added in the same tone. Buck Senior stared into the pony's eyes for a moment. He saw a level of wildness in the animal that alarmed him. It was a mixture of senseless urgency combined with frantic confusion.

"Where are you going to in such an awkward hurry mister?" he asked the pony in a hushed voice. Shetland ponies are incapable of understanding spoken word or speaking it themselves so Buck Senior's question was more rhetorical in nature.

"We'll have to find out where you..." but before Buck Senior could finish, the pony reared up on its hind legs, and sped off in the direction of Glen of the Fine Dwellings. It continued with the same undignified running style as before. The screeching continued unabated.

"What in the world got into that fella," Buck Senior said, "running crazy like he'd just seen an elf."

Buck was secretly relieved the pony had fled. While he was intrigued and concerned about the animal in equal measure, he was also eager to get home. He wanted to practice some magic before meeting Penny the following morning. Employees of PJ Freeman were given one day off work each week for personal time.

"I'll file a report with Abnor first thing Monday morning," said Buck Senior.

Abnor was the Department for Abnormal Affairs. It was an organisation that documented anything that occurred on Innis Freeish that was considered out of the ordinary⁸. The senior council of elders liked to highlight the important role Abnor played in keeping them informed of any potential elf activity on the island.

"Do you think he'll be alright?" Buck asked.

"He's heading in the right direction anyway," Buck Senior replied without explaining what he meant. "Let's be getting home, the night is almost upon us."

It was pitch black by the time the two Snagglepots arrived home to their limestone cottage in a small town whose official name was the Village of Reasonable Aspirations. The locals simply called it the Village, while the residents of Glen of the Fine Dwellings shortened it to Assville⁹.

Buck Senior lit a couple of lanterns in the living area of their cottage. He then sat down on an old rocking chair and picked up a parchment with some financial information written on it. The living area was sparsely furnished with a few wooden chairs and a small

⁸ To date Abnor had received three separate reports from Mr Quid regarding Buck's hair style and attitude at PJ Freeman.

⁹ Needless to say the residents of the Village of Reasonable Aspirations didn't take too kindly to the name Assville. No one in the Village had yet come up with a nickname for Glen of the Fine Dwellings yet. Partially because they all had hopes of one day moving there into a sandstone brick house, and didn't want to find that they had been hoisted by their own petard, so to speak.

table. An open fire was the centerpiece of the room; some pots, pans and other cooking tools hung down from the hearth. Buck went straight to his bedroom as his father started saying something about sandstone again.

"You need to set sandstone as a major goal in life son, it's a higher quality of stone you see," Buck Senior was explaining while half looking at the page right in front of him. But Buck had already closed his bedroom door at that stage.

Even through the Snagglepot cottage was small, it was more than big enough for two leprechauns. An average cottage in the Village would typically accommodate five or six leprechauns. Their limestone cottage consisted of three rooms: two were bedrooms while the third, and largest, functioned as a family living and cooking area.

Finbar's success at Goldpack Investments allowed him to rent his own cottage in a different part of the Village. Buck missed having his older brother around but was consolidated by the fact that he got his own bedroom. The books on Buck's small book stand rustled from a slight breeze that entered through the open window. He lit a small lantern that was attached to the wall.

"Fido?" Buck enquired.

Fido was Buck's pet puka. Pukas were little creatures native to Innis Freeish's only forest known as the Bushy Brush. They were sometimes taken in by leprechauns as pets when they were found injured, as Fido was. Relative to a leprechaun they were about the same size as a squirrel, with bright bushy tails and compact little faces with pointed ears resembling a baby rabbit. Their chestnut coloured fur was silky to stroke and very water resistant. This characteristic was particularly useful as pukas loved swimming, but hated getting wet.

Buck always left his window shutter open while at work so Fido could come and go from the house as he pleased. Pukas were very social animals and would often meet in groups together somewhere in the Village during the day. All the others pukas in the Village were in various stages of recovery from different injuries.

Fido peaked out from underneath Buck's single bed. He had been sleeping, and rubbed his eyes with his little hands. In spite of the slight limp in his right hind leg, Fido sprinted across the room on all fours. He then climb up Buck's leg and sat on his shoulder.

Pukas were very intelligent for their size. They communicated with each other using a string of chirping sounds that leprechauns couldn't understand. They also displayed a capacity for affection towards the world that is rarely seen in living creatures. It was one of the reasons they made such great pets.

"Hey little fella. How are you?"

Fido let out a few chirps then started rummaging around Buck's breast pocket using his tail for balance. Buck knew he was looking for a num num.

Num nums were the roasted fruit of crannor trees that grew in the Bushy Brush. The small red berries turned pale blue when heated, and caused a type of hyperactivity in pukas when eaten.

"Hey, I gave you a num num this morning. And one when I came back for lunch as well. It's too late now Fido," Buck explained.

Fido crossed his arms and frowned.

"Sorry," Buck added.

Fido looked Buck in the eyes for a moment then gave him a hug. Pukas liked hugging.

Fido climbed down from Buck's shoulder and ran to the bookshelf, and pointed at one of the books. He was jumping up and down with a big smile on his face. Fido wanted to

see Buck perform some magic, and Buck was thinking the same thing. He grabbed one of the books and laid it open on his bed. He had been practicing one specific spell for over two weeks and wanted to have it perfected to impress Penny the following morning.

"Okay, but I have to be quiet," Buck said to Fido.

Buck wasn't in the mood to be lectured by his father about performing magic. Buck Senior was worried that his son's interest in magic, and lack of interest in banking, would ruin his friendship with Penny.

"Their class of leprechaun have no time for magic," he would often remind his son. "They can afford to buy whatever it is they want."

The use of magic had increasingly been viewed as a pastime of the lower classes of society on Innis Freeish. An inability to pay for something with hard earned gold coins was seen as a personal failure in life. Deep rooted in leprechaun culture was the desire to portray one's family as being better off than one's neighbours. As the generations went by the upper classes gradually abandoned magical pursuits as a show of their superior buying power. And so the middle and lower classes followed suit in an attempt to keep up with the *higher ups* as they were called. By the time Buck developed an interest in magic it had been all but banned on Innis Freeish.

For the next hour an array of unusual coloured lights and popping sounds took the place of the boring lantern light and stillness in Buck's bedroom.

Chapter 2

The king of PJ Freeman, Thornbow Silverline, was a stern man of strong convictions. His opinion on a leprechauns place in society was rock-solid. Unsurprisingly, he vocally disapproved of his daughter's friendship with Buck.

"A Snagglepot, of all leprechauns," he said to Penny as she made her way to the front door of their cottage. The Silverline living area was twice the size of the Snagglepot's. The hearth of their fire was noticeably larger and their pots and pans were clearly newer.

Thornbow's greatest fear was that Buck and Penny's relationship would evolve into something more than just friendship. He had tried to put a stop to it in the past but had failed miserably at every attempt.

"It's my life Dad, I can choose my own friends," she replied while opening their wooden front door.

There was a spark of resolve in her blue eyes that Thoenbow may have valued had she not been born a girl. Penny had always insisted on doing things her way, she even refused to wear a dress like the other respectable young girls in Glen of the Fine Dwellings.

"Girls don't wear pants Penny," he pleaded with her.

"This one does obviously," she replied without missing a beat.

"What will the neighbours think?" he asked not expecting a reply. "And that blue cardigan. You look like one of the lower downs. The neighbours will think we're broke!"

Penny's mother, the diminutive Plum Silverline, tried to reason with her daughter. "Listen to your father honey, he knows what's best," was all Plum could muster.

Plum's slender frame and short stature contrasted Thornbow's shadowing presence and stocky physique. Plum's role in arguments with Penny usually amounted to nothing more than a vocal backup of whatever point it was her husband was currently making.

There were many aspects of life on Innis Freeish that Penny really hated. Ranked number one on her list was the expectation that girl leprechauns should be seen rather than heard. And being seen wasn't actively encouraged.

Penny ended the argument with her parents by marching out of the Silverline house, her long auburn hair trailed in her wake.

The king and his wife stood in their living area feeling perplexed. Thornbow ran his fingers through his hair. The king's hair cut was so neat, so tidy, its edges so sharp that his head could have been used as a sun dial had he cause to sit still for long enough. It's gravelly colour made it look like it might have a gravelly texture as well¹⁰.

Offering Buck a summer internship position in his bank was a way of keeping a firm eye on his daughter's friend. Keep your friends close, but keep your enemies in your employment was one of his sayings. Besides, he thought, maybe a long summer of accounts was exactly what the young Snagglepot needed to straighten him out. Not that he would approve of his daughter being friends with a Snagglepot even if he was good at accounts and had neat hair. Buck was one of the lower downs after all.

Thornbow Silverline had four daughters; his two eldest were already married to leprechauns of what he considered of fine social status. Both marriages met Thornbow's seal of approval, which was convenient as he was the one who had organised the introductions. His two son-in-laws had risen to prominent positions at PJ Freeman and they often cut their hair more than that once a week. The king would frequently describe them as fine young respectable leprechauns who owned nice sandstone houses.

"Where did we go wrong?" Thornbow asked his wife.

"It's that Snagglepot boy," Plum responded with a shake of her head, "he's the cause. And what kind of hair is that? He looks like a fishrechaun".

"And she's still no interest in the embroidery classes?" Thornbow inquired.

"She approaches them with indifference, and nothing more."

Thornbow was convinced that it was through excelling at embroidery that his daughter would give up her foolish behaviour. His two married daughters were keen embroidery enthusiasts and he was immensely proud of how they turned out.

He had tried to introduce Penny to what he considered some of the most eligible young friends on Innis Freeish. According to Thornbow they were the finest young boys and girls that Glen of the Fine Dwellings could muster. Hard working, well-mannered and practically minded leprechauns with great prospects. Exactly the kind of friends he himself would have liked to have known as a youngster.

¹⁰ Mr Quid greatly admired Thornbow Silverline's hair. The feeling would have been mutual had the king of PJ Freeman any idea who Mr Quid was.

Thornbow sat down on a wicker seat and picked up some sheets of financial reports. Outwardly he appeared to be inspecting the transactions. Secretly he was contemplating his next move.

As Penny was leaving her parent's house in Glen of the Fine Dwellings, Buck was in his bedroom packing a grey backpack. He was meeting Penny in an hour near the olden pier. Buck felt much more comfortable in his casual cloths now that he had a day free from his stuffy PJ Freeman's suit. He wore a dark grey loose-fitting flax shirt, baggy woollen blue pants and plain sandals.

Buck carefully placed one of his magic books into the bag and covered it with a spare sweater. Fido jumped into Buck's bag and peaked out.

"You can come, but only if you behave."

Fido vigorously nodding his head.

Buck turned back to his bookshelf and looked at its contents. He was the proud owner of ten books on magic, all stolen from the Innis Freeish library. It had been against the rules to take these kinds of books home, and the library administrators had begun destroying the remaining magic books several years ago. Buck had smuggled them out by switching their front covers with gardening book covers. Leprechauns have little time for gardening. And so it was gardening books that found their way into the library incinerator¹¹. Buck Senior couldn't understand why his son had so many gardening books, but didn't mind so long as he wasn't thinking about magic.

Buck picked up 'Killroy Strangefellow's Tome on Advances in Applied and Theoretical Magic'. He leafed through a few of the pages. The faded text and frayed edges betrayed the old age of the book. Aside from Buck it had been many generations since eyes had studied the contents.

Buck was still struggling with the opening chapter of Killroy Strangefellow's influential work and finding the going tough. He had accidently turned Fido's fur purple a week earlier while trying to levitate an acorn. Fortunately he was able to reverse the spell before his small friend noticed anything was wrong.

Buck placed the book back on the book shelf. He would only have time to show Penny one spell before Sunday's yik-yak. The yik-yak was a weekly event where all the leprechauns on the island learned about the monomyth. The book hidden in his bag, 'Artright Humperman's Introduction to Magical Pursuits', would have to do. It was the easiest of all the books he had and the least likely to mess up. The spell he had been practicing on the margins of various PJ Freeman's ledgers was on page seven.

Buck made his way to the front door of their cottage with Fido on his shoulder. Buck Senior was smoking his pipe on the rocking chair in the living area. The yellow parchment he was looking at the previous night was on his lap. Buck assumed the document must be important to warrant so much of his father's attention.

"You'll be ready for the yik-yak at noon?" Buck Senior enquired.

"I'm just meeting up with some friends."

"Would a certain young Silverline leprechaun happen to be included in this group of friends?"

¹¹ The librarian, Mr Fillus Crosshedge, had once opened one of these switched cover books before a burning and, looking at the unfamiliar subject matter, announced "Golly, magic is a complicated affair" and simply threw the book into the fire, none the wiser.

"And?," Buck asked.

"Just remember," Buck Senior said as he got up from his chair, "tell her all about your successes on the tenth floor. Any errors you spotted in the ledgers, improvements you've suggested to your duty manager, that sort of thing."

"She'll be fascinated."

"Of course she will. Who in their right mind wouldn't be?"

Buck Senior looked at his son for a moment then cleared his throat. "And don't feel shy," he said coyly, "about mentioning that Huckleton account I balanced yesterday. Even though I was using that cursed new font¹²."

"Why would she care about the Huckleton account?"

"Well, it's an important account. I even got stuff to balance that wasn't supposed to. Her father might find it interesting."

"I'll see if it comes up."

Buck opened the door and was about to leave when Buck Senior grabbed his arm.

"And no magic son, alright? Like Finbar."

"See you at noon Dad."

Buck closed the door and started walking in the direction of the olden pier.

The olden pier was a crumbling wooden structure that provided the perfect hide out from inquisitive eyes. Inquisitive eyes on Innis Freeish tended to report magical happenings to Abnor.

The pier stretched over twenty feet into the air and protruded across the southern beach into the chilly water below. A leprechaun standing beside it was dwarfed by its size. It was supported on both sides by a wall of timber planks. During the day sunlight snuck in through a multitude of cracks on every side to illuminate the inside with sharp rays of light. Buck would often stare up at the pier and wonder what fantastically large ships were once moored at its side in times gone by.

Buck was thinking of the spell he had been practicing the night before as he approached the olden pier from a small dirt road. It was still early on Innis Freeish and the crisp morning air filled his lungs with freshness.

Buck took a num num out of his bag and handed it to Fido who gobbled down in extra quick time. Crumbs flew everywhere. Fido then climbed off Buck's shoulder to the ground below. He then let out a few chirps and quickly limped down the side of a steep sand dune to the beach below. The tide was out which meant the entire base of the pier was accessible.

Buck took out his copy of Introduction to Magical Pursuits and went to page seven. He was reading the first paragraph when he received a soft but firm blow to his left arm. It was quickly followed by a challenge:

"Last one down is a rotten tuna," Penny said excitedly.

Wasting no time Penny started sprinting down the sand dune. Buck followed her in hot pursuit but was unable to catch up before getting to the bottom.

"Getting slow in your old age Snagglepot," Penny said with a playful smile on her face.

"A punch in the arm and a head start," Buck added while rubbing his arm, "and you think that's fair?"

¹² Swatchtail New was half the size of the previous font used at JP Freeman. Management defended their choice by highlighting all the additional numbers that could now be packed into a single sheet of parchment.

"But I'm just a poor defenceless little girl," Penny said pouting her lips.

"Defenceless? Yeah right."

"So what is it this week?"

"Follow me," Buck replied.

Buck pushed aside a loose timber plank that opened a gap large enough for them both to slip through into the underbelly of the pier. Fido had already snuck in through a small hole. He was leaping around on the sand pretending to fight off some imaginary foe with an even more imaginary sword. With one fatal thrust of his sword Fido vanquished his enemy. He stood on his hind legs, raised both his arms and took a bow to no one in particular.

"That's one bizarre puka, you know that?" Penny said as she looked at Fido.

"Tell me about it," Buck replied, "but in his defence, he's just eaten a num num."

Buck placed Introduction to Magical Pursuits on the ground. He picked up a handful of sand with his right hand and tightly clenched it with his fist. He then placed his left hand flat out on top of his fist and started making a series of rotations with both hands. He finally whispered something to his fist before opening it. Then, nothing.

"So is something supposed to happen, or do we just...?" Penny started to say before Buck interrupted her.

"Close your eyes."

"Why?" Penny asked cautiously.

"Just trust me".

Penny closed her eyes but did so with a suspicious look that said this better be good. She also folded her arms to highlight her reluctance.

A moment later a few grains leapt out of Buck's hand and were accompanied by quiet popping sounds. The popping carried on for around five seconds then the grains of sand started to glow bright yellow.

"What's happening?" Penny asked nervously.

"No peeking."

The glowing sand then slowly rose from Buck's hand before hovering in front of his face for a moment. The grains finally spread out, flying to different locations underneath the pier. There they floated in the mid-air, producing a bright yellow glowing light.

"Now, open your eyes."

Penny opened her eyes. She was impressed, very impressed. The glowing effect of the sand generated a delicate radiance that mixed with the natural sunlight to form a beautiful floating vista of illumination. Even Fido calmed down for a moment and seemed to be spellbound by the beauty of the sight.

"Not bad Snagglepot, not bad at all," Penny finally said.

Buck was relieved he had managed to pull it off. It took all his concentration to keep the sand from falling. He was also trying to make it look effortless, which it wasn't. And he would have succeeded in keeping the sand both floating and glowing a little longer if there wasn't a loud banging on the side of the pier wall.

BANG – BANG - BANG.

The sand fell straight to the ground and resumed its regular non-glowing sandy colour.

"In the name of the Department of Abnormal Affairs," shouted a male voice from outside, "open up. We have reports of unauthorized magic at this location."

Buck looked at Penny and shook his head.

"Come out with your hands up," the voice instructed, "and prepare to surrender."

Buck shouted back, "that wasn't even funny the first time you did it Banyan."

"We also have confirmed reports you're harbouring a puka that's not right in the head," the voice added.

One of the wooden panels swung open and Banyan Bollard stuck his head in. He looked at Fido, "no offence little fella."

Fido was too busy fighting another imaginary enemy to take any notice.

Banyan was one of Buck's best friends. His scraggly dark hair had often singled him out for additional bullying when growing up. The other leprechauns in his class at school would normally tease him in the form of a crude rhyme in an attempt to rile him up. Unfortunately for Banyan they were usually successful as he was quick to temper. This led him down the path to physical fights at regular intervals.

Banyan's grey pants and red shirt were noticeably more worn than either Buck's or Penny's. He had a patch on the left knee of his trousers, and another on the buttocks region. His shirt was starting to look frayed at the sleeves, it had seen better days.

Banyan joined them under the pier and did a little curtsey in Penny's direction.

"What finds the royal princess in such a ram shackled structure as this? And in the company of one of the lower downs?"

"Get lost Banyon," Penny replied.

"Her royal highness is not amused?"

"Call me her royal highness again and you'll find out just how amused I am."

"What do you think Buck?" Banyon asked, "I've been on the receiving end of her right hook before".

"I'm staying out of it," Buck replied as he picked up his copy of *Magical Pursuits*. Banyon noticed the cover¹³.

"Tell me that's one of your magic books," Banyon pleaded, "and that you two haven't been practicing gardening down here."

"Have you ever seen floating sand that glows?" Penny asked.

"No."

"Well I have, it was one of the most amazing things I've ever seen," Penny said.

"I want to see," Banyon said with great concern, worried he had missed out on something.

"Maybe you should have been here on time?" Penny threw back at him.

"I'm afraid your father's head wasn't around to use as a timepiece Penny," Banyon replied.

Penny took a few steps closer to Banyon: "Well at least he isn't a..."

"A what?" Banyon asked.

"Nothing."

"Guys!" Buck interrupted, "look at Fido."

They looked around and saw Fido chewing on his tail. It was a habit of his to nibble the end of his tail whenever he felt stressed or frightened. When Banyon saw this he put his arm around Penny.

"Just playing Fido," Banyon said cheerily, "we're best of friends."

Penny didn't look too comfortable in Banyon's embrace, but she managed a smile. "All best of friends Fido," she said reluctantly.

Buck felt a tinge of jealousy shoot through him when he saw Banyon's arm around Penny. But then he just reminded himself of how often Banyon teased Penny, there was obviously nothing between them he assured himself.

¹³ The cover was for an incinerated book called: "Going clear: A leprechaun guild to de-weeding weeds."

When Fido saw the hug he scampered over to Banyon and joined in, although lower down at the foot level.

"Come on guys," Buck said as he placed the book safely back into his bag, "we don't want to be late." Fido climbed back onto Buck's shoulder and grabbed a chunk of Snagglepot hair for balance.

"Let's skip it this week," Banyon pleaded.

"You can skip it if you want," Buck replied, "but I'm not getting in trouble."

"It's so boring!"

"It's only an hour a week Banyon," Penny reminded him.

"And we told Molly and Dolly we'd meet them before it starts," Buck added.

Banyon reluctantly joined then as the friends left the olden pier behind to make their way north towards the Valley of Fictus.

The small dirt road from the olden pier joined a slightly larger road heading toward the Valley of Fictus, where their Sunday yik-yak took place. The walk usually took half an hour at a leisurely pace.

"I wonder if it's this sunny on Faylinn today?" Buck asked.

"Come on," Banyon said, "you don't really believe in all that?"

"I believe Faylinn is real," Penny added defiantly. Truthfully Penny wasn't at all convinced about the existence of Faylinn, but she saw an opportunity to wind up Banyon.

"You're right Penny," Banyon said, "an island of fairies, all flying around the place doing magic. That seems really likely."

"It's mentioned in a few of my book," Buck added.

"See, it's mentioned in his books," Penny said, "several of them."

"All leprechauns know fairies don't exist," Banyon said, "next you'll tell me you believe in Tir na nÓg."

"I definitely believe in Tir na nÓg," Penny said as though not believing in it was an insult to her personally, "an island where nobody grows old, who wouldn't want to live there?"

"You, for one," Banyon replied, "And it's not going to work Penny, so don't even bother trying".

"You've never seen anything unusual out at sea?" Buck asked Banyon.

Banyon had been out to sea because he came from a family of fishrechauns. These were leprechauns that made their living from fishing. Fishrechauns lived in small shale brick huts near the coastline of Innis Freeish. Both Thornbow Silverline and Buck Senior considered shale an extremely poor construction material for housing. They had good reason to believe this as shale bricks were notoriously easy to damage. Fishrechaun's often spent several hours a week repairing their hut.

"The only thing I've ever seen at sea has been fish," Banyon said.

"No mermaids then?" Buck joked.

"The only half fish half girl I've ever seen is standing right beside me."

"Ha, ha," Penny said sarcastically, "you're so funny."

"But you've never fished past the Arc," Buck said referring to the Innis Freeish rainbow, "who knows what's out there?"

"Elves," Banyon replied quickly, "poisonous elves, that's what's out there."

"I hate to admit it but he's right," Penny agreed, "elves would like nothing better than to see every leprechaun wiped off the face of Innis Freeish."

"See, even Penny agrees with me".

"Who knows what's out there is all I'm saying," Buck said.

"Elves," replied Penny and Banyon in unison.

As Buck, Penny, Banyon, and Fido got closer to the Valley of Fictus they were joined by other leprechauns on the road walking to the yik-yak. They were mostly greeted with polite nods. Several of the leprechauns who recognized Penny gave confused stares as they looked from Penny to Buck to Banyon and back to Penny again. Buck heard the words Silverline, Snagglepot and fishrechaun being whispered on several occasions between the passers-by.

The Valley of Fictus formed a natural amphitheatre big enough for the entire population of Innis Freeish to assemble in. Spread out in front of Buck and his friends was a powerful and commanding open space. The flanks and sloping central plain of the valley was covered in luscious green grass that provided comfortable seating. Numerous Shetland ponies were mixed in with the thousands of leprechauns¹⁴.

"Do you see Molly or Dolly anywhere guys?" Buck asked as he looked around the crowd. "Molly said they'd be around here somewhere."

Fido quickly spotted Molly Coppertrot a short distance away. He let Buck know by pulling on his hair, letting out a few chirps and excitedly pointing in Molly's direction. Buck walked over to her, followed by Banyon and Penny.

As soon as Molly saw the gang she formed the biggest smile her small leprechaun face could muster. Molly had the uncanny ability to make others around her smile through sheer force of presence. One of her philosophies was that a greeting wasn't a greeting unless accompanied with a hug. She provided a hug to each of them in turn.

"Yay! We're all here," Molly said as she rubbed Fido's fur, which he clearly enjoyed. Buck thought that if Fido had been born a leprechaun, and a girl, he would have been very much like Molly Coppertrot. The two shared an optimism towards life that defied Buck's understanding.

Molly's freckled face heightened whatever emotion she happened to be feeling. Smiles seemed brighter while frowns seemed darker. Not that Buck had ever seen her frown very often. Her shoulder length rose coloured hair seemed to provide the perfect frame for her smile. Penny couldn't imagine herself wearing the bright yellow dress that seemed so fitting on Molly.

"We're sitting over here," Molly said as she took Penny by the hand and led the group of friends through the crowd. "I told Dolly to keep enough space for us all."

"I love your cardigan Penny," Molly said as they passed by families sitting on the ground together. Leprechauns usually attended the Sunday yik-yak with their parents until they reached their teenage years. They generally went with their friends after that.

"Your dress is very...bright" Penny said as she struggled to find the correct ending to the sentence.

"I know right," Molly enthusiastically interrupted, "thanks! Here she is."

They found Dolly sitting on the ground on her own staring at some twigs. She had arranged them into some complex pattern that she was studying. Even though they were identical twins, very few on Innis Freeish had trouble telling Molly and Dolly apart.

"Dolly, everyone's here," Molly said as she placed hand on her sister's shoulder. Dolly's black dress couldn't have contrasted Molly's any more if it had tried.

¹⁴ Only the sick and elderly ever used ponies for transportation. It was seen as an insult to the ponies to carry a healthy leprechaun who was capable of carrying themselves.

"Hi guys," Dolly replied without looking up at them. Others would have misinterpreted Dolly's behaviour as rudeness, but her friends understood it was just one of her quirks.

"What are you working on?" Penny asked Dolly.

"Who knows, right?" Molly's interrupted, "but the shapes look really pretty if you ask me."

Dolly looked up from her twigs for a moment and flashed a freckled scowl in her sister's direction. She then looked back at the pattern on the ground and simply said:

"Equilibrium."

"What's that one for?" Banyon asked as he pointed at a small twig in the centre.

"What do you know about Cackletop's¹⁵ law of motion?" Dolly asked without looking away from her twigs.

"Nothing."

"Then it's just a twig."

"Oh."

Buck recalled how Dolly would always finish her mathematics assignments in school long before everyone else. She could focus on problems with an intense concentration that made the other students in her class seem like wild pukas with a bag of num nums. Branna Greenwhistle alone could match her focus, even if he couldn't match her intellect.

"How's your job going?" Molly asked Buck after they'd all sat down on the grass beside Dolly. "Is it getting any better?"

"Nope."

"Do you think you'll ever like it?"

"Nope."

"Then you need to quit."

"Tell that to the moustache," Buck said referring to his father. Buck sometimes called his father the moustache when he was feeling frustrated with him.

"Buck's too much of a sattle to stand up to Buck Senior," Banyon teased.

"I'm not a sattle," Buck replied defensively.

Banyon put his index finger under his nose in the shape of a moustache.

"Now you listen here mister," Banyon said to Buck in a funny voice, "I'm a Snagglepot, you're a Snagglepot, my father was a Snagglepot, and his father one too. And we all worked for PJ Freeman's."

"Leave him alone," Penny said while she fought off a fit of giggles.

"To be fair Penny," Buck said, "that's a pretty accurate impression."

"Ahh, you were pretending to be Buck Senior," Molly said smiling, "I just got that. Your finger is his moustache, very funny. Now do Penny's dad!"

Banyon was fixing his hair and about to start his Thornbow Silverline impression when a hush rippled across the crowd. It was a hushed silence that meant the yik-yak was about to start. The entire gathering looked to the bottom of the Valley of Fictus, and to a long heavy table made of thick oak called the Counter of Merit. It was decorated with an intricate spiral pattern expertly chiselled onto the surface. If Buck and his friends hadn't seen the Counter of Merit up close before they wouldn't have known what they were looking at from their distance. Behind it was a large banner that laid out the guiding philosophy of the monomyth. There was only one decree written on the banner. It simply read "Tit-for-Tat."

¹⁵ Cackletop's law of motion describes the projected path precious metals takes when catapulted into a large body of water.

A leprechaun dressed in a long green and gold coloured robe approached the Counter of Merit to address the gathering. This was the grand yik-yaker, and his name was Barnabus Crouchfoot. He was a wrinkly man. The appearance of his wrinkles was exaggerated due to the complete lack of hair on his head¹⁶. Barnabus was one of the longest serving yik-yakers in Innis Freeish history. It was a position that typically went to the most learned and wisest leprechaun on the island. His job at the weekly yik-yak was to create scenarios that the leprechauns could discuss among themselves in groups, using the philosophy of the monomyth as guidance to solve them. Only those in the first few rows near the counter could hear the grand yik-yaker speak. These leprechauns then told those behind them, and message would be passed along in this fashion until it reached everyone gathered in the Valley of Fictus.

After a few minutes the first scenario made its way back to Buck and his friends. An overweight leprechaun with a slightly crooked nose sitting in front of Penny turned around and addressed the group:

"You discover several gold corns on the ode, what should you doodle? Pass it on."

"That's a difficult one, I wonder what it means?" Molly said.

"It means we're sitting too far back, the message is distorted," Dolly replied after slightly repositioning one of her twigs.

"Tit for tat, tit for tat, hmm," Molly pondered.

"I'll pass it on," Penny said as she turned around to address a young family behind her, "you find several gold coins on the road; what do you do? Pass it on."

"Ahh, that makes more sense," said Molly.

"Keep them," replied Banyon.

"No," said Molly slightly shocked at the suggestion.

"Spend them then."

"No Banyon, think. Tit-for-tat, what would you like someone to do if they were your coins that were found?"

"I think the answer that Molly is looking for," Buck interjected as he smiled at Banyon, "is that you should try to find out who lost the coins and then return them to the owner."

"Perfect," said Molly as her face lit up. Fido let out a big smile and raised his arms on seeing Molly's reaction.

"I hate this!" Banyon exclaimed as he lay back on the grass.

"It's just an hour a week," Molly reassured him.

"You know what we could be doing now that's more fun than this?" Banyon asked.

"What?" asked Molly.

"Anything."

Banyon folded his arms behind his head and started looking for funny shapes in the clouds. He was about to point out a cloud he thought looked remarkable like Buck Senior's moustache when he noticed a sea gull circling the Valley of Fictus with something tightly clutched between its legs. He thought no more of it until two more sea gulls joined the first, all grasping onto something.

"That's weird," Banyon said.

"What?" enquired Buck.

"Those gulls circling overhead."

¹⁶ Anyone who met him unanimously agreed; Barnabus Crouchfoot looked remarkably like a new born leprechaun, except in an old man version.

Buck looked up and saw several more sea gulls join the original group. Then some more. And more again. Before long the flock had grown to almost a hundred birds circling over the Valley of Fictus, each one grasping onto something between their legs. Their numbers started to grow so large that a great shadow was cast over the valley. The sight of so many sea gulls loitering in the sky caused quite a commotion among the leprechauns; no one had ever seen such a thing.

One of the sea gulls suddenly made a steep dive toward the assembled crowd. Buck was sure the bird was going to crash straight into a group of elderly leprechauns when, at the last moment, it pulled up and released whatever it was holding onto. It appeared to Buck to be small black canister of some kind, but he couldn't be sure.

All of a sudden the rest of the flock started swooping and diving toward the ground. Each one released their payload before sharply pulling up. A sense of panic and confusion set in as the birds squawking and screeching causing some leprechauns to run for the hills. By the time the last bird had dropped its cargo there were hundreds of similar black canisters littering the ground. The sea gulls then casually flew away as though nothing out of the ordinary had just happened.

Buck approached one of the black canisters. He could see other leprechauns unscrewing the top, which he did as well. He pulled out a piece of parchment that was rolled up inside it. He saw that each one of the canisters nearby contained the exact same message. In bold letters, and with perfect grammar and spelling was written:

"PREPARE FOR WAR"