

IMP (International Myth Protectorate)

CHAPTER 1:

Luke leaned in closer, examining the old guinea pig cage. "I don't see anything. Just sawdust, and the water bowl," he said.

"Just keep watching," replied Ethan, his eyes fixed on the cage. Lifting the side door an inch, he slid a carrot through the gap, closing it quickly. Nothing happened.

"You're having a laugh," Luke started, but stalled when the carrot lifted into the air, shifting to the left as it did so. The tip of the carrot disappeared. Luke stared at the carrot. Although unable to see what had hold of it, he could certainly hear the crunching.

"See," grinned Ethan, "told you so. I think it's a pixie."

Luke squinted. "All I see is that carrot disappearing. What makes you think it's a pixie?"

"Well, the blue skin and pointed ears sort of hint at it from what I remember from the old fairy tales mum used to read to me. But to be honest, I Googled it. A Pixie is the closest approximation I found. I didn't find any photographs, just rough sketches from random fanatics, and all of those were slightly different," he replied. "I can't believe you can't see it."

"You don't think it's because it bit you, do you?" Luke asked.

Ethan scowled and rubbed the bandage on his left arm. "Maybe," he said.

"Put your hand in and see if we can get it to do the same."

"No way," shrieked Luke, "I don't want rabies."

“What makes you say that?” asked Ethan. “Why do you think you’ll get rabies?”

“I’m just guessing. Our Tina found a rabbit last year that had it. It was foaming at the mouth and everything. We all ended up getting shots, just in case.”

“Well, this doesn’t seem to be foaming. Just sitting, watching.”

They stared at the table. Ethan focused on the creature and Luke scanned from side to side across the cage in the hope he would at least see some movement and know where it was.

“Anyway, what are we going to do about it?”

“I’m going to video it and put it on my blog to see if anyone else can see it. Maybe someone can properly identify it, or at the very least, tell me if they’ve been bitten and say if I should be worried.”

“Hmm. I think you’ll be seen as a nutcase, more like. People will think it’s a hoax.”

The carrot had now completely disappeared, stalk and all. As they watched, the shavings were redistributed into a pile as the creature settled back. It stared at Ethan with large brown eyes, with occasional glances towards Luke. Ethan stared back. He felt a little sorry for it but was determined to stick with the plan and show off his prize. He reached into the top drawer of his bedside cabinet and pulled out a small digital camera. “Smile,” he said and clicked the shutter. The creature didn’t move.

Luke grabbed an apple from the side. Ethan watched the creature’s eyes follow it. It licked its lips.

“It looks hungry,” said Ethan.

“Where is it?”

“It’s in the back corner. Over there,” Ethan pointed.

Luke opened the hatch and rolled the apple inside.

The pixie looked from the apple to Ethan, across to Luke, and back again, as if deciding. Finally, it reached out with an unexpectedly large four fingered hand and plucked the apple from the floor. Luke stared as the apple hung in mid-air. A crunch broke the silence, and a bite mark the size of a fifty pence piece appeared.

The creature rolled the piece around its mouth, then munched, still watching Ethan. It smiled, showing two rows of small shark-like teeth. No apparent malice or concern, just quiet contentment. Ethan switched the camera to video mode and filmed the creature for a minute, then lowered the camera.

“Come on, let’s put this online.” Ethan went to his desk, logged onto his laptop and plugged in his camera.

He stretched his fingers in front of him as if he was a pianist about to play his latest concerto. He glanced over at the creature, who had now finished the apple and was looking back expectantly. Ethan opened his blog. He typed, *This is not a Hoax!!!*. Then he described the creature in as much detail as he could.

‘Small, about nine inches in height, large hairy feet and four fingered hands, blue skin and wearing a green toga.’

“A toga?” exclaimed Luke, reading the text over his shoulder.

“I don’t know how else to describe it.”

Luke looked over at the empty cage and frowned. “Do you think it’s intelligent?”

“Maybe,” Ethan shrugged. He continued with his blog: *‘This creature was found trapped in a wooden bird feeder in our garden. It has small sharp teeth and definitely bites as I have the marks on my forearm to prove it.’* He considered

unwrapping the bandage to do just that, but thought better of it, as blood from the injury was already seeping through the gauze.

He continued: *'Other than not liking to be man-handled, it seems relatively tame and happy to eat anything I push its way,'* then added, *'... so I guess I'll have to keep the cat away from it ... :smiley-face:'*

He uploaded the image and video as attachments before adding a hopeful, *'If anyone can confirm what this is, then please contact me ASAP.'* He clicked 'Tag' and 'Publish', then sat back with a sigh.

"What now?" said Luke.

"We wait and see if I get any responses."

"No. I mean with that?" Luke pointed at the cage.

"I guess it stays in there for now."

"No. I mean, what about that and your stepdad? Isn't he due back from work soon? You know what he's like ... He's like, allergic to everything. Remember that time with the guinea pig last year?"

Ethan cringed at the thought. Another friend had given him a guinea pig and cage last year. The cage he was using for the pixie was the same one. John had come home from work one evening and at first, he seemed OK. But that was before he'd broken out in a rash and couldn't stop sneezing. He hit the roof. He'd thrown both cage and guinea pig into the back garden. Ethan had found the cage later when John had gone to bed. No sign of the guinea pig, but he'd been determined to keep the cage just in case.

"I suppose so," Luke said, but he could see the issue. As clear as he saw Gerry, his guinea pig fly. "Guess there's no guarantee that he can see this, though. You can't."

“But he still might react to it. Even if he can’t, he might be able to smell it. And if not, isn’t he going to ask why you still have the cage?”

“It doesn’t smell.” Ethan leaned in and took a deep breath.

“But he’ll still see the cage,” Luke insisted. “And what if that creature moves when he’s in here?”

“Hmm. I see what you mean. Maybe I’ll tuck it in there.” Ethan lifted the cage and placed it at the bottom of his wardrobe. He dropped some of the clean clothes his mum had brought in earlier on the top. He leaned his tennis bag against it.

“There. What do you think?”

“Okay, I guess. Let’s just hope.”

“Cool. It might take a while for any responses to the blog. Wanna go to the reccy for a bit?”

“OK. But you’re going to have to cover that too,” Luke said, pointing at Ethan’s bandage.

Ethan grabbed a rugby shirt from the pile of clothes. “Let’s go,” he said.

Glancing back at the wardrobe one last time, they headed out.

#

Deep beneath the mountain peak on a remote island in the Pacific Ocean, screens were flashing up a variety of images, videos, and articles from across the globe. The International Myth Protectorate headquarters, or IMP for short, is very well hidden. For nearly three hundred years, they had worked hard to not only protect the constantly endangered mythical creatures under their care, but also themselves. In the early days, they had twisted facets of folklore to hide IMP abilities and

movements from the general population. During the 1800s, one standard counter measure was the use of stories like Hansel and Gretel to keep locals away from areas such as the black forest. Over the last century, before human genome mapping became a reality, they had altered the DNA of each species they protected. This enabled new-borns to come into the world protected by frequency distribution skin pigmentations. Occasionally, reports would appear in the media of creature sightings, but these had been brief glances. A figment of a human's imagination. Countless reports of people swearing they saw something out of the corner of their eye. A shimmer, then it was gone.

More recently, they had used magnetic disruptors around IMP facilities to bounce radar signals. The IMP technicians had deployed proximity visual masking watches to each field operative, enabling them to move around undetected for short periods of time. They had also inserted ocular implants and transportation chips under the skin to enhance the watches, enabling the use of the GCN (Global Crystalline Network).

Now, data flows to and from satellites and is captured by the GCN. It's sifted through as it comes in, through some of the most technologically advanced computers the world had *never* seen, and that was just how IMP liked it.

Today, Mike was sitting in his usual desk, scanning through the red reports which highlighted the most likely sightings. Spotting a flag against a blog, he began a series of drill down routines to locate not only the owner of the site in question but more specifically, the location of the sighted creature. He had his suspicions. A few more seconds and windows of data started flashing up. Mike scanned the screen. Location confirmed. Images downloaded and corroborated by three regional data

servers. Addresses of the capture and captivity points. Names of the blog owner confirmed. Owner's friends and family cross-checked.

"Ivan," he called, "you may need to give Rachael a call. I think she's still in the UK and it looks like we have a local RC job."

A Release and Cover job could become complicated depending on the situation. The remit for a field operative was simple: recover the captured creature at all costs. Following relocation, HQ would release a series of fake news reports.

Ivan wandered over and peered at the screen. At four foot two, he was quite tall for a dwarf and was just high enough to see the displays without standing on a box.

He stroked his beard and frowned. He jumped up on the chair next to Mike. "OK. Punch it," he said.

Mike touched the screen in front of him and selected the European map. A couple of pokes and prods later, he had the image focused on a small red dot tagged '*Rachael*' currently flashing near the London Eye. He pressed the dot and selected call. Almost immediately, a security camera nearby re-focused on Rachael and presented the image on the screen. To cover the camera's hijack, a replay of the last ten minutes began looping into the output so that whoever owned or operated the camera in the normal world was none the wiser. Mike and Ivan watched Rachael as she placed her takeout coffee on the bench and tapped the face of her watch, then pressed her middle finger into her palm. As she was in a public place, she lifted her mobile phone to her ear. She didn't need the phone because her implants provided near perfect communication directly with the console in IMP HQ, but it minimised any quizzical looks passers-by might give her during the conversation.

"Hello," Rachael smiled and winked at the camera above her.

“Hi Rachael. How’s my favourite goddaughter? I see you’ve got your usual pick-me-up.”

“Hi Ivan. That’s good timing. I’m fine, thanks.” Rachael raised her latte skyward. “According to the barista, this is the new Columbian blend. Stronger than my usual but not bad. I’ll bring some back with me when I can.”

“Sounds good.”

“Yeah. Well, I definitely need the extra kick today. I’ve just finished dealing with those damn pixies in the London underground again. The whole system is being plagued by doors on the tube that won’t shut, or they’d shut and then open up again. Of course, you could hear the usual complaints over the tannoy: *This train is now ready to depart. Will passengers please stand clear of the closing doors?* Mostly, it was the pixies playing silly beggars again. Anyway, I think I’ve got them back under control. At least for now.”

“That’s good to hear. That tribe is getting too unruly.”

“Yeah. That’s the second time this month. The head of the tribe kept mumbling something about being oppressed. That one’s got a few screws loose, if you ask me.”

“Oh dear,” Ivan chuckled. “We’ll have to keep a closer eye on them.” He turned to Mike, “Can you add them to the amber-list please Mike.”

Mike nodded and returned to his console.

“It’s been a while. The council of elders seem to have been running you ragged lately, what with Iceland, Norway, Albania and now the UK,” Ivan said. “Oh, by the way, the council wanted me to pass on their congrats following that small dragon issue in Albania last week. I’m glad you got it contained.”

"Aww, that's sweet. Yeah, it's been pretty hectic, but it's nice to be appreciated now and then." They saw a wry smile curving across her face. Lowering her voice, she said, "It was a close call with that dragon. The bugger really didn't want to play ball. I might need to put in a requisition for a new set of gloves though. This one gave my pair a crispy edge."

"I'm sure that can be arranged."

"Oh, and we're going to have to keep a closer eye on that weyr too. They seem to have formed a fascination with planes."

"Understood." Ivan rolled his eyes.

Ivan looked at Mike, who simply nodded confirmation of another amber-list addition and returned to his console.

"Anyway. How's the family, Ivan?" she asked, her smile widening once more.

"They're all fine. Jim is in school now, and Kirsty has taken a job in the hospital. Martha said to say 'Hi' next time we spoke and to invite you and your mum over for dinner."

"That'd be wonderful. I'm hoping to get back soon and have some quality time with mum. I'll let you know as soon as I can and please thank Martha for the invite."

From the corner of his eye, Ivan could see Mike tapping his watch. "Will do. Listen, Rachael, I know you're quite busy, but if you've finished in London, we have a code 347 RC job in Loughborough. It's about one hundred and ten miles northwest of you as the crow flies. By my reckoning, you could be there in less than five minutes using a portal jump, but you may need to wait until night before you attempt a recovery."

"I'm sending the tracking signal to your watch now," interjected Mike. "I've been to that town. It was a few years ago on a previous mission, but if I remember

right, the portal exit point is near the town centre as the UK Ley lines run through the middle of the central park under a monument. Hopefully, this will mean a less conspicuous arrival.”

Rachael’s watch vibrated, and the display changed to show a map with a flashing green light indicating her destination.

“There’s another thing,” Mike said, but hesitated. “There’s a bit of a complication.”

“Complication? What kind of complication?”

“Well ... It looks like the boy who caught the pixie *can see him*.”

Rachael looked back up at the camera open mouthed. “How is that possible?”

“We don’t know enough at this time. We’ll do some more digging and try to update you later.”

© Trevor Flanagan