MINISTRY OF MISCHIEF

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For the mischievous imps reading
this book right now.

Are you ready to open the door
into another wild adventure?

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Chapter One

Imps in Humanrealm



Hello and a big meow from your favourite intergalactic news station: it's *Boo's News,* with a fresh broadcast LIVE from the breakfast table! I'm joined by my special guest—

'HUMAN JOEY! Your face is weird. Are you daydreaming again?'

Actually, never mind – but THIS reporter can confirm huge excitement in the air today, ready for tomorrow's football smash! Willow Avenue FC is taking on the St Aelfward's Eagles in a rumble for the ages, a head-to-head showdown, a . . . okay, well, it's a friendly match. But the winner will go confidently into the upcoming SUMMER TOURNAMENT!

'You *are* daydreaming! Hello? Hello, Joey? JOEY!'

Keen *Boo's News* fans will know: life hasn't been the same since our trip to ANOTHER WORLD before the Easter break. Back here in the Human World – or, Humanrealm, as our 'visitors' call it – things are . . . kind of wild, actually. We have a lot to catch up on! To all our readers, listeners and viewers out there, this is Joey Joseph—

Next to her, a secret someone had had quite enough of this. A spoon went flying, yanking Joey rudely from her thoughts – and from *Boo's News*: the imaginary news bulletin always ticking in her head . . .

'Whoa!' exclaimed Mum, over by the kitchen counter. 'Whatever's got into you? I should be the one with the nerves today!'

At the breakfast table, Joey shrank sheepishly lower in her seat. She tried to ignore the sound of angry chewing in her ear.

'Sorry, Mum. I'm just s-so *excited* for tomorrow's match, that's all.'

'HEY!' shouted the voice only Joey could hear. 'Stop ignoring me!'

'You've got the whole of today to get through before then,' Mum pointed out. 'Your friends will count on you to cheer them on tomorrow; don't use up all your energy now!' She was oblivious to the racket; she saw and heard only Joey at the table. To Mum, the kitchen was probably nice and quiet.

Looking down at her left wrist, bound in plaster and covered in drawings and well-wishes, Joey sighed. She wanted more than anything that she could join her friends on the actual pitch – but it was too risky with a broken bone. Instead, she was helping Mrs Powell, Willow Avenue FC's

coach, to boost morale and hand out the team bibs. She felt a flash of jealousy, remembering that rival team St Aelfward's had proper football shirts with their names and numbers on the back and everything . . .

'Okay,' the voice in her ear declared, 'it's come to this. I'm going to say your name *once per human second* until you look at me! Joey. Joey. JOEY!'

'I'll be fine, Mum,' Joey said, before taking a big slurp of her orange juice. 'I-I think I'll drop in on Sam today, to see how he's doing. He's going to be striker tomorrow, to fill the gap after—'

She looked down at her cast again. The memory flooded over her.

After I was on a pirate ship falling from the sky, about to be crunched up by a mad alligator king. Then – somehow – I used a strange power to open up a portal-door back to our world and—

'After I broke my wrist,' she finished, adjusting her glasses.

'You'll be striking again before you know it,' Mum reassured her. 'Now, have you seen my car

keys? I was sure I had them a second ago . . .'

The bridge of Joey's nose felt a bit sweaty, as it usually did when having to hide the truth from Mum: the terrible, awesome, mind-blowing truth that, just a month ago, Joey had been a HERO. Little Joey Joseph, scruffy Joey Joseph, Joey Joseph with her mousy brown hair and skinny legs and rumpled school uniform . . . had saved herself and her friends. Mum had no idea about any of it, and especially not about—

'HUMAN JOEY!'

When Joey finally glanced over, sharp teeth were chomping moodily on mushy cereal. 'AHA!' her companion shouted. 'So you *do* know I'm here!'

Joey peeked over at Mum. She was busy mumbling about her keys and checking in the microwave. Sometimes she left stuff in weird places.

Mum couldn't see or hear Szlice, but she could definitely see and hear Joey. It would look really weird if Joey started talking to herself. Joey kept her voice low.

'Of course I know you're here, Szlice. How could

I miss you, when you're being so *loud*. What's wrong now?'

'Hmph. Well!' Now that Szlice had Joey's attention, she seemed unsure what to do with it. 'It's . . . it's this human food!' she finally settled on, jabbing a red claw gingerly into her bowl.

'What about the food?' Joey asked, against her better judgement.

Szlice grinned the biggest, meanest grin Joey had ever seen.



'It's DISGUSTING! Really, Joey, you could have rustled up something nicer, considering I am your GUEST!'

Szlice – the creature perched in the chair next to her – was absolutely not human.

She resembled a large, red lizard, with a tail that curled around in a jagged spiral. Her

eyes, conniving and cruel, were even more knife-like than her wicked claws. Double rows of teeth ringed her mouth, now downturned in sulky disapproval.

Szlice was an imp. A creature from another world: IMPWORLD, in fact. It was a mountain kingdom in an enormous cavern, with a giant mushroom at its very heart.

The imps were cartoonish, monster-like creatures of every shape and size and colour imaginable – but they all had the same purpose. Impworld's very reason for existing was to bring bad luck to Humanrealm and keep the balance between good fortune and bad.

This bad luck was the goal of the Ministry of Mischief, which just about every imp had worked for, once. Every time something went wrong in Humanrealm (like stubbing your toe, or getting a paper cut, or looking for ages for something only to find it was in your hand the whole time) there was one thing you could be sure of: there was an imp secretly nearby!

Joey hadn't been back to Impworld since their last

adventure . . . when Szlice's gang had kidnapped her and taken her there through a magical door.

Speaking of which . . .

'Have you thought,' Szlice suggested casually, 'about opening a door back to Impworld?'

Joey looked at her in horror.

Please don't tell me you can read minds now . . .

'Szlice, we've been through this,' she began, watching as Mum left to search between the sofa cushions. 'You know I would open a door again if I could.'

It wasn't that she hadn't tried. Joey had no idea how she'd managed to summon a magic door before; there was only one imp in all of Impworld who could do it, and that was Mizz Forchoon, Szlice's teacher. All Joey knew, in the moment when all seemed lost, was that she'd found the power within herself.

That power, Joey was sure, had run out. She'd used it all up, and so Szlice and her imp friends were now stranded in Humanrealm. Joey touched the white streak in her hair absently: a gift from her near-death experience last month. 'I know you don't

want to be stuck here with me—'

'Hmph!'

'And believe me, *I* don't want you stuck here with me either . . .'

There was a pause. Szlice's scales rippled from nose to tail with a papery *snick*.

When she spoke again, it was with dangerous calm. 'What do you mean by that, Joey?'

'Oh, Szlice, I didn't . . .' Joey cleared her throat. She knew Szlice had feelings, deep (deep, deep, deep) down. 'I just meant, I know it's hard being trapped far from home. A-and wouldn't it be better to be back in Impworld and working for the Ministry again? As a bad luck agent, you'd get to come to Humanrealm all the time—'

'Okay! Grandad's here!' Mum bustled back in, trying to pull her coat on with one sleeve turned inside-out. She jingled her keys. 'And look what I found in my slipper! I'm off to my interview. I'm sure ninth time's the charm!'

Joey knew that job hunting was hard, but Mum always kept a smile on her face. Joey smiled too,

gathering up the two cereal bowls. She had to scoot Szlice's out from under her claws. Mum blinked in surprise.

'Two bowls? You were hungry this morning!'

'Ah, sorry. Yes. I-I'm going to call on Sam after I've said hello to Grandad – I need my energy!'

Mum laughed, planting a lipsticky kiss on Joey's forehead. 'Oh, Joey. Wish me good luck? I feel like working at the dentist's would suit me perfectly. Could you picture me at the reception desk? Answering the phones?'

'Good luck, Mum. You are amazing! They would be lucky to have you!'

Szlice left the table with a dramatic sicky noise. She flattened herself against the wall to avoid Grandad as he emerged through the kitchen door – first his nose, then his moustache, then the rest of him, as usual. 'It's certainly a lucky day!' he announced, beaming from ear to ear. 'Every traffic light was on green this morning!'



Across the road, Joey knocked three times on Sam's door. Grandad had slathered her in suncream and reminded her to wear her cap – it was her favourite, covered in an alien eyeball print. She was armed with her trusty backpack (well-worn and weighed down with something heavy) and her new football (shiny and unscuffed and bought with her pocket money). On the doorstep, a giant ginger cat gave her a slow blink.

'Hello, Boo!'

In reply, Boo – the namesake of *Boo's News,* the special news project straight from Joey's brain – rolled lazily in the sun.

Joey didn't have to wait long before Sam's dad opened the door. 'Oh, hi Joey! Sam's upstairs in his room – come on in.'

'Thank you, Mr Shepherd!' Joey slipped off her trainers; Sam's parents had just had new carpets fitted. Next to her, Szlice slithered in without so much as wiping her feet. She peered disdainfully around, lingering over the family photos of Sam and his mum, dad and little sister.

'How's the arm, Jo?' Sam's dad asked, unaware of the imp standing right next to him.

'It's healing! Slower than I'd like, but . . .'

'You know, when I was your age, I broke my wrist. Skateboarding! I did this cool kickflip and—'

As Sam's dad spread his arms out, the coffee cup he was holding sloshed dangerously. The brown liquid inside threatened to spill over, promising doom to the beautiful cream carpet.

'Oops!' he laughed, luckily catching himself just in time. 'Um. Maybe let's not tell Sam about that! We have a bet on who'll be the first to spill something.'

On the sunny landing, the door to Sam's room was ajar. Inside, two figures were lying upside-down on the bed, their heads dangling towards the floor.

One was Sam, Joey's oldest friend. His long legs were propped against the football posters on the wall. His curly hair fell away from his forehead and his eyes were closed, half-asleep. He wore an orange T-shirt and shorts – perfect for the summer, though

Sam's shins were nearly always bare, even when it was cold out.

The other figure was a strange creature indeed. He was yellow all over with a bulbous head that was equally as big as his body, giving him the shape of a number eight. His ten eyes drooped. Either side of his head, where his ears might have been, delicate fronds flopped lazily.

This was Warezit: another imp, part of Szlice's team that were stranded in Humanrealm.

Sam sighed deeply. 'So, what do you want to do today?'

'I dunno,' Warezit mumbled in reply. 'What do you want to do?'

'I dunno, how about you?'

'I was asking you, though.'

'I asked you first.'

'Hmm.' With enormous effort, Warezit glanced at the clock on Sam's bedside table. It was shaped like a dragon, with the clockface in its claws. 'No, I asked you a human hour ago, so technically I was first.'

‘That’s . . . wait, Joey?’ Sam rolled upright, spotting Joey peering in. Despite nearly kneeing himself in the chin, he grinned. ‘Hi! Am I glad to see you!’

‘Looks like you guys were a little lost without me!’ Joey stepped into the room. She tried to spin the football on her fingertip – a move that never worked – and somehow managed a perfect rotation.

Odd, she thought to herself. She cleared her throat. ‘Hi, Warezit!’

‘Hello, Joey,’ Warezit said. He flopped off the bed with a squeak, bonelessly bouncing to his feet. ‘Ugh. Good day for a nap, I think.’

‘Is no one going to greet *me*?’ Szlice griped. Joey and Sam looked on, bemused, as Warezit rolled his ten eyes and the imps began to bicker.

Being marooned in Humanrealm was really taking a toll on the imps, Joey thought. There was a reason why, out of the three (Szlice, Warezit and their third friend: Stubbz), Joey had been the one saddled with Szlice at her house. No one else could stand the red imp’s bad temper. But it seemed that

life for Sam with Warezit wasn't all sunshine either.

'Joey, he's driving me mad,' Sam whispered in Joey's ear. 'I dunno, I just feel like . . . I want to sleep. All the time. Like all of my get up and go has, er . . . got up and gone. I'm not even looking forward to tomorrow's match!'

Warezit yawned loudly, while Szlice grumped about 'team leaders' and 'respect' and 'rubbish, no good, USELESS bad luck agents!'.

Joey gave Sam a sympathetic look. 'Someone from the Ministry of Mischief will be back for them, won't they? Mizz Forchoon is their teacher! She can't just abandon them here; Impworld needs bad luck agents, or there'll be no bad luck at all!'

'Right, it's just . . .' Sam ran a hand tiredly down his face in a very Warezit sort of move. 'Has it been . . . a month since you escaped from Impworld? How long is that in Impworld-time? Could something bad have happened to the other imps – and that's why Forchoon hasn't come to get these ones?'

Now that Joey thought about it . . . she hadn't spotted an imp in the wild – that wasn't one of

Szlice's gang – since their escape from Impworld. Prior to their adventure, she'd seen imps all the time in Humanrealm, usually from afar, while daydreaming out of the classroom window or in the car or zoning out while watching television. Mrs Powell, her teacher, had always said that Joey's imagination was fantastically wild.

But, as it turned out, these creatures were very much real. And now that Joey's best friends could see them too, the imps were suddenly shy?

Meanwhile, Szlice and Warezit's argument had devolved into shoving. Sam's bedside lamp was knocked over and his pillow went flying.

Joey sighed. In all the weirdness of looking after stowaway imps and the excitement of the upcoming football game . . . she hadn't realized how bad the situation actually was.

'We need a team meeting. Let's grab Marcie-Lynn and Harry. Even if Impworld doesn't need help, there are imps here who *definitely* do.'

Chapter Two

A Secret Report



To joey or sam

If youve come to call for me, my dad is going out so I have gone to marcies!

See you there
Harry

Note in hand, Joey walked alongside Sam, Szlice and Warezit. The sun was higher in the sky now and the pavement was hot enough to make the imps scuttle for the shade. Fortunately, Marcie-Lynn's street was lined with trees, giving shelter from the sticky heat.

'I wonder what position Harry's playing in tomorrow's match?' Sam mused. 'Ahmad's got new goalie gloves, so I hope Harry's ready for him!'

Harry – Joey and Sam's neighbour – didn't go to their school any more. He was at St Aelfward's Academy for Boys, and therefore on the rival team. They were friends, though things hadn't always been that way. In fact, Joey's group and Harry Hatchitt had been SWORN ENEMIES before everything had changed. Before Joey and Harry had been taken to Impworld together.

And it turned out: they weren't so different, after all. In fact, Harry was . . . surprisingly . . . quite an *okay* sort of kid. Working together to get home, they'd had to leave old arguments behind. They were just Joey and Harry, fighting to escape. And now . . .

They came to a green gate. Marcie-Lynn's grandparents loved gardening, and it showed; the borders were bursting with wildflowers, and the circle of the lawn was well-kept around the old tree in its centre.

Beneath it, sitting peacefully on a picnic blanket, were three familiar faces.

The first was almost as short as Joey, with floppy hair and ears that stuck out a bit. It was Harry, holding out a cup for a refill from the teapot. As usual, he was wearing his favourite football shirt; he was just as obsessed as Joey was. New, though, was the pink friendship bracelet on his wrist.

Clutching the teapot's handle was Marcie-Lynn: one of Joey's most precious friends. Marcie-Lynn was tall and broadly built, and wearing a purple T-shirt with a cat on it. She had painted her nails in a rainbow of different colours.

'More tea, Stubbz?' she asked, after she'd filled Harry's cup.

'Yes, please!' said the blue imp sitting next to her. His pointy little hand, also covered in rainbow nail

polish, lifted his teacup delicately. The rest of him was round and densely armoured, with a segmented back like an armadillo. His two antennae gave him a beetle-like look, and they perked happily as the 'tea' flowed (though it looked more like orange juice).

'UGH. Why've we stopped?' Szlice demanded grumpily.

'We're here,' Joey explained, unlatching the gate. The picnickers had spotted her and were already waving them in.

'Joey! Sam! Come and sit with us!' Marcie-Lynn called.

'Look at my hand!' Stubbz added. 'It's *poll-ish*! Doesn't it look good?'

Szlice narrowed her eyes at Marcie-Lynn's handiwork. 'Hmph. Imps are only supposed to be one colour. I'm red. Stubbz is blue. Warezit is yellow.'

'I can do yours if you like, Szlice,' said Marcie-Lynn kindly. 'But Stubbz has three more hands first.'

Szlice turned her nose up, but eyed the brightly coloured little bottles curiously.

'No sign of Mizz Forchoon yet, I take it?' Harry

sighed, grabbing more cups from the basket.

'Nothing,' Joey confirmed, setting down her backpack with a heavy *flump*. 'No sign of any imps, actually – apart from these usual suspects.'

'Doesn't that seem strange to you all?' Sam said. 'It can't be a coincidence – Mizz Forchoon should have been here by now, surely? We need a *Boo's News* meeting, all four of us together. Seven, including guests.'

One of the guests in question slammed her red, scaly fist down on the basket, making the china inside rattle.

'What help is a MEETING?' Szlice shouted. 'We should never have turned our backs on the King – just look what's happened! Not only are all the doors closed – *there are no doors any more*!'

Harry scrunched up his nose. 'Szlice, the King is an impostor, remember? He's a big, fat alligator from Humanrealm *pretending* to be an imp!'

And working all the imps into the ground, making bricks to expand his palace, Joey added to herself silently.

'I'm just saying,' Szlice insisted, 'back when we worked for him, we could come and go between Impworld and Humanrealm all the time, no problem! Forchoon never once left us behind. And we always had an emergency door, just in case.'

A look passed between the four humans. They had heard this tale before; the longer Szlice was stuck here, the more fondly she looked back on the memory of the mad king. She seemed to wilfully forget that he tried to eat her – more than once.

'Well, there is no emergency door this time,' Joey said firmly, unzipping her backpack. 'You said it yourself; Forchoon never left a bad luck agent behind. She'd be here if she could, which means . . . something's gone wrong.'

Onto the blanket she thudded a gigantic folder, covered in stickers and stuffed full of paper. Sheets spilled out wildly, covered in fantastical scrawls of ink that zipped and zoomed over every line.

This was the heart of *Boo's News*: the special project that the friends had been working on since last summer. *Boo's News* was an intergalactic newspaper

(and future TV show and podcast) reporting on everything and anything. If something exciting was happening, *Boo's News* was on the case! In this trusty folder was almost every issue ever made.

The sight of her own messy writing still made Joey's stomach squiggle, just a little bit. She shook herself; now wasn't the time for embarrassment.

'Let's think about what we *know* for sure,' Sam said.

'We start with the facts,' agreed Marcie-Lynn. She eased out a wedge of paper. It was covered in Joey's spidery writing and had little drawings of imps in the margins: imps of every shape and size and colour.

These latest pages made up the *Boo's News* secret edition, all about reporters Joey and Harry and their unexpected trip to Impworld.

'Well . . . the imps are very hardworking,' Joey said slowly.

'But easily swayed by giant alligators,' Harry added, with an apologetic look towards the imp gang.

Warezit shrugged. 'No, that's fair.'

'Careful, you!' Szlice jabbed a claw in Harry's direction. 'That's THE KING you're talking about!'

'Yes, the King that tried to gobble you up!' Joey reminded her. 'Maybe this is exactly what's happened – the King has a huge appetite, so maybe he's eaten . . . everyone?'

'Or,' Sam said, as Stubbz turned a paler shade of blue, 'maybe he's shut the Ministry of Mischief down completely? He *was* worried about spies!'

'That's right!' gasped Marcie-Lynn. 'Didn't he accuse you of being – what was it? Spites?'

'Sprites,' Joey confirmed grimly, turning a page to find a set of new drawings, done by Szlice's impish hand. These were pictures of the sprites: enemies of Impworld. They were, allegedly, terrifying beasts with fanged maws, multiple eyes and blade-like feathers . . .

Warezit hummed thoughtfully. 'If the King has shut down the Ministry, and all the doors with it, then trust me – no one's getting out. No one except Forchoon, anyway.'

'Forchoon's worked for the King since the

beginning,' Szlice puffed. 'She's *loyal*. She knows how important her job is! There's no way she'd be foolish enough to go against his orders.'

'Szlice,' Warezit said flatly, 'you're going to have to accept that the King is evil. We all saw it. It's why you had your change of heart, after all; why you chose to save the humans and return them home!'

Szlice's scales rippled. 'That's . . . that's—'

'Okay everyone, let's calm down.' Joey sensed another fight. 'Stubbz, why don't we paint another of your hands?'

Stubbz sniffled. He held out one of his four hands – an unpainted one – for Marcie-Lynn to take.

There's something we're missing, Joey thought to herself, laying out the loose sheets on the blanket between them – a scribbly drawing of the alligator Imp King, his jaws open wide. Then a slender imp with a fox-like face and backswept horns, drawn in jet-black charcoal: that was Mizz Forchoon, the imps' teacher. Finally, some hideous sprites, hungry for battle . . .

A fourth picture was placed beside the three. Joey looked up, catching Harry's gaze.

He nodded.

It was the Mumshroom: the giant, red-capped mushroom at the centre of Impworld. She was the size of a building and could think and feel, knowing every single imp in the kingdom. She was, after all, their mother. All the imps had been born as tiny spores, floating down from her gills.



Perhaps it was strange, but Joey had felt a connection to the giant mushroom when she'd met her in Impworld.

'Could we send her a message?' Sam whispered, as though reading Joey's mind. 'Could the Mumshroom help us? She's a big deal in Impworld, right?'

'I . . . I don't . . .'

'Marcie!' someone shouted from the front door. Marcie-Lynn's grandma leaned out, her purple hair catching the sun. 'Marcie, is . . . oh! Yes! Joey, you're here! Great!'

Joey got to her feet. 'Here I am! Is everything okay, Mrs Macleod?'

'Call for you! Your mum's on the phone!'

Her heart in her mouth, Joey nearly tripped on the blanket in her haste to run over.

Marcie-Lynn's grandma beckoned Joey into the familiar kitchen. The fridge was covered in drawings and doodles and photos of Marcie-Lynn with her grandparents. There was a loaf of fresh bread cooling on the countertop. Joey's

tongue felt heavy in her mouth as she accepted the phone . . .

'Hello, Mum?' Joey suddenly wished for someone to hold her hand, but her friends were all still out in the garden.

Mum's voice came through, giddy with excitement. 'Oh, Joey! Wonderful news! I start on Monday!'

Joey almost dropped the phone. 'You got the job?'

'I *did*! Isn't it great? I've had some serious luck – I ended up being the only one there, actually, since no one else made it to the interview! But then the dentist said I was an ideal receptionist.'

What Mum said next, Joey didn't hear. She glanced to Mrs Macleod's purple hair . . . to the cooling bread . . . and then to her right.

A newcomer leaned in to listen eagerly to the call. They were Joey's height and mostly human-shaped, with pointed ears peeking out beneath minty-coloured hair. Delicate-looking wings fluttered, thin as tissue paper, puffing out a cloud of glitter. In their diamond-like eyes – compound eyes, like

an insect – Joey's stunned face was reflected back at her. This was no imp.

'Wowee!' the creature exclaimed, shivering with barely contained glee. Sharp little fingers were like needles in Joey's arm. 'What wonderful news, Joey! Isn't that so LUCKY!'