

A R T E M I S

F O W L

T H E A R C T I C I N C I D E N T

E O I N C O L F E R



PUFFIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Putnam Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Books Australia Ltd, 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia

Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2

Penguin Books India (P) Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India

Penguin Books (NZ) Ltd, Cnr Rosedale and Airborne Roads, Albany, Auckland, New Zealand

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

www.penguin.com

First published 2002

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-14-192957-6

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A Psychological Assessment

Extract from *The Teenage Years*

By the age of thirteen, our subject, Artemis Fowl, was showing signs of an intellect greater than that of any human since Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Artemis had beaten European chess champion Evan Kashoggi in an on-line tournament, patented over twenty-seven inventions and won the architectural competition to design Dublin's new opera house. He had also written a computer program that diverted millions of dollars from Swiss bank accounts to his own, forged over a dozen Impressionist paintings and cheated the Fairy People out of a substantial amount of gold.

The question is, why? What drove Artemis to get involved in criminal enterprises? The answer lies with his father.

Artemis Fowl Senior was the head of a criminal empire that stretched from Dublin's docklands to the backstreets of Tokyo, but he had ambitions to establish himself as a legitimate businessman. He bought a cargo ship, stocked it with 250,000 cans of cola and set course for Murmansk, in northern Russia, where he had set up a business deal that could have proved profitable for decades to come.

Unfortunately, the Russian Mafiya, decided they did not want an Irish tycoon cutting himself a slice of their market, and sank the *Fowl Star* in the Bay of Kola. Artemis Fowl the First was declared missing, presumed dead.

Artemis Junior was now the head of an empire with limited funds. In order to restore the family fortune, he embarked on a criminal career that would earn him over fifteen million pounds in two short years.

This vast fortune was mainly spent financing rescue expeditions to Russia. Artemis refused to believe that his father was dead, even though every passing day made it seem more likely.

Artemis avoided other teenagers and resented being sent to school, preferring to spend his time plotting his next crime.

So even though his involvement with the goblin uprising during his fourteenth year was t
be traumatic, terrifying and dangerous, it was probably the best thing that could have
happened. At least he spent some time outdoors and got to meet some new people.

It's a pity most of them were trying to kill him.

Report compiled by: Doctor J. Argon, B. Psych, for the LEP Academy files.

PROLOGUE

MURMANSK, NORTHERN RUSSIA, TWO YEARS AGO

THE two Russians huddled around a flaming barrel in a futile attempt to ward off the Arctic chill. The Bay of Kola was not a place you wanted to be after September, especially not in Murmansk. In Murmansk even the polar bears wore scarves. Nowhere was colder, except perhaps Noril'sk.

The men were Mafiya enforcers and were more used to spending their evenings inside stolen BMWs. The larger of the two, Mikhael Vassikin, checked the fake Rolex beneath the sleeve of his fur coat.

'This thing could freeze up,' he said, tapping the diving bezel. 'What am I going to do with it then?'

'Stop your complaining,' said the one called Kamar. 'It's your fault we're stuck outside in the first place.'

Vassikin paused. 'Pardon me?'

'Our orders were simple: sink the *Fowl Star*. All you had to do was blow the cargo bay. It was a big enough ship, heaven knows. Blow the cargo bay and down she goes. But no, the great Vassikin hits the stern. Not even a back-up rocket to finish the job. So now we have to search for survivors.'

'She sank, didn't she?'

Kamar shrugged. 'So what? She sank slowly, plenty of time for the passengers to grab on to something. Vassikin, the famous sharpshooter! My grandmother could shoot better.'

Lyubkhin, the Mafiya's man on the docks, approached before the discussion could develop into an all-out brawl.

'How are things?' asked the bear-like Yakut.

Vassikin spat over the quay wall. 'How do you think? Did you find anything?'

'Dead fish and broken crates,' said the Yakut, offering both enforcers a steaming mug. 'Nothing alive. It's been over eight hours now. I have good men searching all the way down to Green Cape.'

Kamar drank deeply, then spat in disgust. 'What is this stuff? Pitch?'

Lyubkhin laughed. 'Hot cola. From the *Fowl Star*. It's coming ashore by the crate-load. Tonight we are truly on the Bay of Kola.'

'Be warned,' said Vassikin, spilling the liquid on to the snow. 'This weather is souring my temper. So no more terrible jokes. It's enough that I have to listen to Kamar.'

'Not for much longer,' muttered his partner. 'One more sweep and we call off the search. Nothing could survive these waters for eight hours.'

Vassikin held out his empty cup. 'Don't you have something stronger? A shot of vodka to ward off the cold? I know you always keep a flask hidden somewhere.'

Lyubkhin reached for his hip pocket, but stopped when the walkie-talkie on his belt began to emit static. Three short bursts.

'Three squawks. That's the signal.'

'The signal for what?'

Lyubkhin hurried down the docks, shouting back over his shoulder. 'Three squawks on the radio. It means that the K9 unit has found someone.'

The survivor was not Russian. That much was obvious from his clothes. Everything, from the designer suit to the leather overcoat, had obviously been purchased in Western Europe, perhaps even America. They were tailored to fit, and made from the highest-quality materials.

Though the man's clothes were relatively intact, his body had not fared so well. His bare feet and hands were mottled with frostbite. One leg hung strangely limp below the knee, and his face was a horrific mask of burns.

The search crew had carried him from a ravine three clicks south of the harbour on a makeshift tarpaulin stretcher. The men crowded around their prize, stamping their feet against the cold that invaded their boots. Vassikin elbowed his way through the gathering, kneeling for a closer look.

'He'll lose the leg for sure,' he noted. 'A couple of fingers too. The face doesn't look too good either.'

'Thank you, Doctor Mikhael,' commented Kamar drily. 'Any ID?'

Vassikin conducted a quick thief's search. Wallet and watch.

‘Nothing. That’s odd. You’d think a rich man like this would have some personal effects, wouldn’t you?’

Kamar nodded. ‘Yes, I would.’ He turned to the circle of men. ‘Ten seconds, then there’ll be trouble. Keep the currency, everything else I need returned.’

The sailors considered it. The man was not big. But he was Mafiya, the Russian organized crime syndicate.

A leather wallet sailed over the crowd, skidding into a dip in the tarpaulin. Moments later it was joined by a Cartier chronograph. Gold with diamond studding. Worth five years of an average Russian’s wages.

‘Wise decision,’ said Kamar, scooping up the treasure trove.

‘Well?’ asked Vassikin. ‘Do we keep him?’

Kamar pulled a platinum Visa card from the kidskin wallet, checking the name.

‘Oh we keep him,’ he replied, activating his mobile phone. ‘We keep him, and put some blankets over him. The way our luck’s going, he’ll catch pneumonia. And believe me, we don’t want anything to happen to this man. He’s our ticket to the big time.’

Kamar was getting excited. This was completely out of character for him.

Vassikin clambered to his feet. ‘Who are you calling? Who is this guy?’

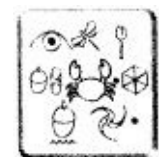
Kamar picked a number from his speed-dial menu. ‘I’m calling Britva. Who do you think I’m calling?’

Vassikin paled. Calling the boss was dangerous. Britva was well known for shooting the bearers of bad news. ‘It’s good news, right? You’re calling with good news?’

Kamar flipped the Visa at his partner. ‘Read that.’

Vassikin studied the card for several moments. ‘I don’t read *Angliskii*. What does it say? What’s the name?’

Kamar told him. A slow smile spread across Mikhael’s face. ‘Make the call,’ he said.



THE loss of her husband had a profound effect on Angeline Fowl. She had retreated to her room, refusing to go outside. She took refuge in her mind, preferring dreams of the past to real life. It is doubtful whether she would have recovered had not her son, Artemis the Second, done a deal with the elf Holly Short: his mother's sanity in return for half the ransom gold he had stolen from the fairy police. His mother fully recovered, Artemis Junior focused his efforts on locating his father, investing large chunks of the family fortune in Russian excursions, local intelligence and Internet-search companies.

Young Artemis had received a double share of Fowl guile. However, with the recovery of his mother, a moral and beautiful lady, it became increasingly difficult for him to realize his ingenious schemes. Schemes that were ever more necessary to fund the search for his father.

Angeline, distraught by her son's obsession and afraid of the effects of the past two years on his mind, signed up her thirteen-year-old for treatment with the school counsellor.

You have to feel sorry for him. The counsellor, that is...

ST BARTLEBY'S SCHOOL FOR YOUNG GENTLEMEN, COUNTRY WICKLOW, IRELAND PRESENT DAY

Doctor Po leaned back in his padded armchair, eyes flicking across the page in front of him.

'Now, Master Fowl, let's talk, shall we?'

Artemis sighed deeply, smoothing his dark hair back from a wide, pale brow. When would people learn that a mind such as his could not be dissected? He himself had read more psychology textbooks than the counsellor. He had even contributed an article to *The Psychologists' Journal* under the pseudonym Doctor F. Roy Dean Schlippe.

'Certainly, Doctor. Let's talk about your chair. Victorian?'

Po rubbed the leather arm fondly. 'Yes, quite correct. Something of a family heirloom. My grandfather acquired it at auction at Sotheby's. Apparently it once stood in the palace. The

Queen's favourite.'

A taut smile stretched Artemis's lips perhaps a centimetre. 'Really, Doctor. They don't generally allow fakes in the palace.'

Po's grip stretched the worn leather. 'Fake? I assure you, Master Fowl, this is completely authentic.'

Artemis leaned in for a closer examination. 'It's clever, I grant you. But look here.' Po's gaze followed the youth's finger. 'Those furniture tacks. See the criss-cross pattern on the head? Machine tooled. Nineteen twenty at the earliest. Your grandfather was duped. But what matter? A chair is a chair. A possession of no importance, eh, Doctor?'

Po scribbled furiously, burying his dismay. 'Yes, Artemis, very clever. Just as your file says. Playing your little games. Now, shall we get back to you?'

Artemis Fowl the Second straightened the crease in his trousers.

'There is a problem here, Doctor.'

'Really? And what might that be?'

'The problem is that I know the textbook replies to any question you care to ask.'

Doctor Po jotted in his pad for a full minute. 'We do have a problem, Artemis. But that's not it,' he said eventually.

Artemis almost smiled. No doubt the doctor would treat him to another predictable theory. Which disorder would he have today? Multiple personality perhaps, or maybe he'd be a pathological liar?

'The problem is that you don't respect anyone enough to treat them as an equal.'

Artemis was thrown by the statement. This doctor was smarter than the rest. 'That's ridiculous. I hold several people in the highest esteem.'

Po did not glance up from his notebook. 'Really? Who, for example?'

Artemis thought for a moment. 'Albert Einstein. His theories were usually correct. And Archimedes, the Greek mathematician.'

'What about someone that you actually know?'

Artemis thought hard. No one came to mind.

'What? No examples?'

Artemis shrugged. 'You seem to have all the answers, Doctor Po. Why don't you tell me?'

Po opened a window on his laptop. 'Extraordinary. Every time I read this...'

'My biography, I presume?'

'Yes, it explains a lot.'

'Such as?' asked Artemis, interested in spite of himself.

Doctor Po printed off a page.

'Firstly there's your associate, Butler. A bodyguard, I understand. Hardly a suitable companion for an impressionable boy. Then there's your mother. A wonderful woman in my opinion, but with absolutely no control over your behaviour. Finally, there's your father. According to this, he wasn't much of a role model even when he was alive.'

The remark stung, but Artemis wasn't about to let the doctor realize how much. 'Your file is mistaken, Doctor,' he said. 'My father is alive. Missing perhaps, but alive.'

Po checked the sheet. 'Really? I was under the impression that he has been missing for almost two years. Why, the courts have declared him legally dead.'

Artemis's voice was devoid of emotion, though his heart was pounding. 'I don't care what the courts say, or the Red Cross. He is alive, and I will find him.'

Po scratched another note.

'But even if your father were to return, what then?' he asked. 'Will you follow in his footsteps? Will you be a criminal like him? Perhaps you already are?'

'My father is no criminal,' Artemis pointed out testily. 'He was moving all our assets into legitimate enterprises. The Murmansk venture was completely above board.'

'You're avoiding the question, Artemis,' said Po.

But Artemis had had enough of this line of questioning. Time to play a little game. 'Why, Doctor?' said Artemis, shocked. 'This is a sensitive area. For all you know, I could be suffering from depression.'

'I suppose you could,' said Po, sensing a breakthrough. 'Is that the case?'

Artemis dropped his face into his hands. 'It's my mother, Doctor.'

'Your mother?' prompted Po, trying to keep the excitement from his voice. Artemis had retired half a dozen counsellors from St Bartleby's already this year. Truth be told, Po was on the point of packing his own bags. But now ...

'My mother, she...'

Po leaned forward on his fake Victorian chair. ‘Your mother, yes?’

‘She forces me to endure this ridiculous therapy when the school’s so-called counsellors are little better than misguided do-gooders with degrees.’

Po sighed. ‘Very well, Artemis. Have it your way, but you are never going to find peace if you continue to run away from your problems.’

Artemis was spared further analysis by the vibration of his mobile phone. It was on a coded secure line. Only one person had the number. The boy retrieved it from his pocket, flipping open the tiny communicator. ‘Yes?’

Butler’s voice came through the speaker. ‘Artemis. It’s me.’

‘Obviously. I’m in the middle of something here.’

‘We’ve had a message.’

‘Yes. From where?’

‘I don’t know exactly. But it concerns the *Fowl Star*.’

A jolt flew along Artemis’s spine. ‘Where are you?’

‘The main gate.’

‘Good man. I’m on my way.’

Doctor Po whipped off his spectacles. ‘This session is not over, young man. We made some progress today, even if you won’t admit it. Leave now and I will be forced to inform the Dean.’

The warning was lost on Artemis. He was already somewhere else. A familiar electric buzz was crackling over his skin. This was the beginning of something. He could feel it.

WEST BANK, HAVEN CITY, THE LOWER ELEMENTS



THE traditional image of a leprechaun is one of a small, green-suited imp. Of course, this is the human image. Fairies have their own stereotypes. The People generally imagine officers of the Lower Elements Police Reconnaissance squad to be truculent gnomes or bulked-up elves, recruited straight from their college crunchball squads.

Captain Holly Short fits neither of these descriptions. In fact, she would probably be the last person you would pick as a member of the LEPrecon squad. If you had to guess her occupation, the catlike stance and the sinewy muscles might suggest a gymnast or perhaps a professional potholer. But take a closer look, past the pretty face, into the eyes, and you will see determination so fiery it could light a candle at ten paces, and a streetwise intelligence that made her one of Recon's most respected officers.

Of course, technically, Holly was no longer attached to Recon. Ever since the Artemis Fowl Affair, when she had been captured and held to ransom, her position as Recon's first female officer had been under review. The only reason she wasn't at home watering her ferns right now was that Commander Root had threatened to turn in his own badge if Holly was suspended. Root knew, even if Internal Affairs wasn't convinced, that the kidnapping had not been Holly's fault, and only her quick thinking had prevented loss of life.

But the Council members weren't particularly interested in loss of human life. They were more concerned with loss of fairy gold. And according to them, Holly had cost them a fair chunk from the Recon ransom fund. Holly was quite prepared to fly above ground and wring Artemis Fowl's neck until he returned the gold, but that wasn't the way it worked: the Book of Fairy Law, the fairy bible, stated that once a human managed to separate a fairy from his gold, then that gold was his to keep.

So, instead of confiscating her badge, Internal Affairs had insisted Holly handle grunt work – somewhere that she couldn't do any harm. Stakeout was the obvious choice. Holly was farmed out to Customs and Excise, stuck in a Cham pod and suckered to the rock face

overlooking a pressure-elevator chute. Dead-end duty.

That said, smuggling was a serious concern for the Lower Elements Police. It wasn't the contraband itself, which was generally harmless junk – designer sunglasses, DVDs, cappuccino machines and such. It was the method of acquiring these items.

The B'wa Kell goblin triad had cornered the smuggling market and was becoming increasingly brazen in its overground excursions. It was even rumoured that the goblins had constructed their own cargo shuttle to make their expeditions more economically viable.

The main problem was that goblins were dim-witted creatures. All it would take was for one of them to forget to shield and goblin photos would be bouncing from satellites to news stations around the world. Then the Lower Elements, the last Mud-Man-free zone on the planet, would be discovered. When that happened, human nature being what it was, pollution, strip-mining and exploitation were sure to follow.

This meant that whichever poor souls were in the Department's bad books got to spend months at a time on surveillance duty, which is why Holly was now anchored to the rock face outside a little-used chute's entrance.

E37 was a pressure elevator that emerged in downtown Paris, France. The European capital was redflagged as a high-risk area, so visas were rarely approved. LEP business only. No civilian had been in the chute for decades, but it still merited twenty-four seven surveillance – which meant six officers on eight-hour shifts.

Holly was saddled with Chix Verbil for a pod mate. Like most sprites, Chix believed himself God's green-skinned gift to females, and spent more time trying to impress Holly than doing his job.

'Lookin' good tonight, Captain,' was Chix's opening line that particular night. 'You do something with your hair?'

Holly adjusted the screen focus, wondering what you could do with an auburn crew cut.

'Concentrate, Private. We could be up to our necks in a firefight at any second.'

'I doubt it, Captain. This place is quiet as the grave. I love assignments like this. Nice 'n' easy. Just cruisin'.'

Holly surveyed the scene below. Verbil was right. The once thriving suburb had become ghost town with the chute's closure to the public. Only the occasional foraging troll stumble past their pod. When trolls began staking out territory in an area, you knew it was deserted.

'It's jus' you an' me, Cap. And the night's still young.'

'Stow it, Verbil. Keep your mind on the job. Or isn't private a low-enough rank for you?'

'Yes, Holly, sorry, I mean, yes, sir.'

Sprites. They were all the same. Give him a pair of wings and he thought he was irresistible.

Holly chewed her lip. They'd wasted enough taxpayers' gold on this stakeout. The brass should just call it a day, but they wouldn't. Surveillance duty was ideal for keeping embarrassing officers out of the public eye.

In spite of this, Holly was determined to do the job to the best of her ability. The International Affairs tribunal wasn't going to have any extra ammunition to throw at her if she could help it.

Holly called up their daily pod checklist on the plasma screen. The gauges for the pneumatic clamps were in the green. Plenty of gas to keep their pod hanging there for four long, boring weeks.

Next on the list was thermal imaging. 'Chix, I want you to do a fly-by. We'll run a thermal.'

Verbil grinned. Sprites loved to fly. 'Roger, Captain,' he said, strapping a thermoscan bar to his chest.

Holly opened a hole in the pod and Verbil swooped out, climbing quickly to the shadows. The bar on his chest bathed the area below with heat-sensitive rays. Holly punched up the thermoscan program on her computer. The view screen swam with fuzzy images in various shades of grey. Any living creature would show up, even behind a layer of solid rock. But there was nothing, just a few swear toads and the tail end of a troll shambling off the screen.

Verbil's voice crackled over the speaker. 'Hey, Captain. Should I take 'er in for a closer look?'

That was the trouble with portable scanners. The further away you were, the weaker the rays became.

'OK, Chix. One more sweep. Be careful.'

'Don't worry, Holly. The Chix man will keep himself in one piece for you.'

Holly drew a breath to make a threatening reply, but the retort died in her throat. On the

screen. Something was moving.

‘Chix. You getting this?’

‘Affirmative, Cap. I’m getting it, but I dunno what I’m getting.’

Holly enhanced a section of the screen. Two beings were moving around on the second level. The beings were grey.

‘Chix. Hold your position. Continue scanning.’

Grey? How could grey things be moving? Grey was dead. No heat, cold as the grave. Nevertheless...

‘On your guard, Private Verbil. We have possible hostiles.’

Holly opened a channel to Police Plaza. Foaly, the LEP’s technical wizard, would undoubtedly have their video feed running in the Operations’ booth. ‘Foaly. You watching?’

‘Yep, Holly,’ answered the centaur. ‘Just bringing you up on the main screen.’

‘What do you make of these shapes? Moving grey? I’ve never seen anything like it.’

‘Me neither.’ There followed a brief silence, punctuated by the clicking of a keyboard. ‘Two possible explanations. One, equipment malfunction. These could be phantom images from another system. Like interference on a radio.’

‘The other explanation?’

‘It’s so ludicrous that I hardly like to mention it.’

‘Yeah, well do me a favour, Foaly, mention it.’

‘Well, ridiculous as it sounds, someone may have found a way to beat my system.’

Holly paled. If Foaly was even admitting the possibility, then it was almost definitely true. She cut the centaur off, switching her attention back to Private Verbil. ‘Chix! Get out of there. Pull up! Pull up!’

The sprite was far too busy trying to impress his pretty captain to realize the seriousness of his situation. ‘Relax, Holly. I’m a sprite. Nobody can hit a sprite.’

That was when a projectile erupted through a chute window, blowing a fist-sized hole in Verbil’s wing.

Holly tucked a Neutrino 2000 into its holster, issuing commands through her helmet’s com set. ‘Code Fourteen, repeat Code Fourteen. Fairy down. Fairy down. We are under fire. E3

Send warlock medics and back-up.'

Holly dropped through the hatch, rappelling to the tunnel floor. She ducked behind a statue of Frond, the first elfin king. Chix was lying on a mound of rubble across the avenue. didn't look good. The side of his helmet had been bashed in by the jagged remains of a low wall, rendering his corn-system completely useless.

She needed to reach him soon or he was a goner. Sprites only had limited healing powers. They could magic away a wart, but gaping wounds were beyond them.

'I'm patching you through to the commander,' said Foaly's voice in her ear. 'Standby.'

Commander Root's gravelly tones barked across the airwaves. He did not sound in the best of moods. No surprises there.

'Captain Short. I want you to hold your position until back-up gets there.'

'Negative, Commander. Chix is hit. I have to reach him.'

'Holly. Captain Kelp is minutes away. Hold your position. Repeat. Hold your position.'

Behind the helmet's visor, Holly gritted her teeth in frustration. She was one step away from being booted out of the LEP, and now this. To rescue Chix she would have to disobey a direct order.

Root sensed her indecision. 'Holly, listen to me. Whatever they're shooting at you, it punched straight through Verbil's wing. Your LEP vest is no good. So sit tight and wait for Captain Kelp.'

Captain Kelp. Possibly the LEP's most gung-ho officer, famous for choosing the name Trouble at his graduation ceremony. Still, there was no officer Holly would have preferred to have at her back going through a door.

'Sorry, sir, I can't wait. Chix took a hit in the wing. You know what that means.'

Shooting a sprite in the wing was not like shooting a bird. Wings were a sprite's largest organ and contained seven major arteries. A hole like that would have ruptured at least three

Commander Root sighed. Over the speakers it sounded like a rush of static.

'OK, Holly. But stay low. I don't want to lose any of my people today.'

Holly drew her Neutrino 2000 from its holster, flicking the setting up to three. She wasn't taking any chances with the snipers. Presuming they were goblins from the B'wa Kell triad, on this setting the first shot would knock them unconscious for eight hours at the very least.

She gathered her legs beneath her and rocketed out from behind the statue. Immediately
hail of gunfire blew chunks from the structure.

Holly raced towards her fallen comrade, projectiles buzzing around her head like supersonic bees. Generally, in a situation of this kind, the last thing you do is move the victim, but with gunfire raining down on them, there was no choice. Holly grabbed the private by his epaulettes, hauling him behind a rusted-out delivery shuttle.

Chix had been out there a long time. He was grinning feebly. ‘You came for me, Cap. I knew you would.’

Holly tried to keep the worry from her voice. ‘Of course I came, Chix. Never leave a man behind.’

‘I knew you couldn’t resist me,’ he breathed. ‘I knew it.’ Then he closed his eyes. There was a lot of damage done here. Maybe too much.

Holly concentrated on the wound. Heal, she thought, and the magic welled up inside her like a million pins and needles. It spread through her arms and ran down to her fingers. She placed her hands on Verbil’s wound. Blue sparks tingled from her fingers into the hole. The sparks played around the wound, repairing the scorched tissue and replicating spilt blood. The sprite’s breathing calmed, and a healthy green tinge started to return to his cheeks.

Holly sighed. Chix would be OK. He probably wouldn’t fly any more missions on that wing, but he would live. Holly laid the unconscious sprite on his side, careful not to put pressure on the injured wing. Now for the mysterious grey shapes. Holly upped the setting on her weapon to four and ran without hesitation towards the chute entrance.

On your very first day in the LEP Academy, a big hairy gnome, with a chest the size of a troll, pins each cadet to a wall and warns them *never* to run into an unsecured building during a firefight. He says this in a most insistent fashion. He repeats it every day until the maxim is etched on every cadet’s brain. Nevertheless, this was exactly what Captain Holly Short of the LEPrecon Unit proceeded to do.

She blasted the terminal’s double doors, diving through to the shelter of a check-in desk. Less than four hundred years ago, this building had been a hive of activity, with tourists queuing for above-ground visas. Paris had once been a very popular tourist destination. But inevitably, it seemed, humans had claimed the European capital for themselves. The only

place fairies felt safe was in Disneyland, Paris, where no one looked twice at diminutive creatures, even if they were green.

Holly activated a motion-sensor filter in her helmet and scanned the building through the desk's quartz security panel. If anything moved, the helmet's computer would automatically flag it with an orange corona. She looked up, just in time to see two figures loping along a viewing gallery towards the shuttle bay. They were goblins all right, reverting to all fours for extra speed, trailing a hover trolley behind them. They were wearing some kind of reflective foil suits, complete with headgear, obviously to fox the thermal sensors. Very clever. Too clever for goblins.

Holly ran parallel to the goblins, one floor down. All around her, ancient advertising hoardings sagged in their brackets. *TWO-WEEK SOLSTICE TOUR. TWENTY GOLD GRAMS. CHILDREN UNDER TEN TRAVEL FREE.*

She vaulted the turnstile gate, racing past the security zone and duty-free booths. The goblins were descending now, boots and gloves flapping on a frozen escalator. One lost his headgear in his haste. He was big for a goblin, over a metre. His lidless eyes rolled in panic, and his forked tongue flicked upwards to moisten his pupils.

Captain Short squeezed off a few bursts on the run. One clipped the backside of the nearest goblin. Holly groaned. Nowhere near a nerve centre. But it didn't have to be. There was a disadvantage to these foil suits. They conducted neutrino charges. The charge spread through the suit's material like fiery ripples across a pond. The goblin jumped a good two metres straight up, then tumbled, unconscious, to the foot of the escalator. The hover trolley spun out of control, crashing into a luggage carousel. Hundreds of small cylindrical objects spilled from a shattered crate.

Goblin Number Two fired a dozen rounds Holly's way. He missed, partly because his arms were jittery with nerves. But also because firing from the hip only works in the movies. Holly tried to take a screen shot of his weapon with her helmet camera for the computer to run a match on, but there was too much vibration.

The chase continued down the conduits and into the departure bay itself. Holly was surprised to hear the hum of docking computers. There wasn't supposed to be any power here. LEP Engineering would have dismantled the generators. Why would power be needed here?

She already knew the answer. Power would be needed to operate the shuttle monorail and Mission Control. Her suspicions were confirmed as she entered the hangar. The goblins had built a shuttle!

It was unbelievable. Goblins had barely enough electricity in their brains to power a ten-watt bulb. How could they possibly build a shuttle? Yet there it was, sitting in the dock like used-craft seller's worst nightmare. There wasn't a bit of it less than a decade old, and the hull was a patchwork of weld spots and rivets.

Holly swallowed her amazement, concentrating on the pursuit. The goblin had paused to grab a set of wings from the cargo hold. She could have taken a shot then, but it was too risky. She wouldn't be surprised if the shuttle's nuclear battery was protected by nothing more than a single layer of lead.

The goblin took advantage of his reprieve to skip down the access tunnel. The monorail ran the length of the scorched rock to the massive chute. This chute was one of many of the natural vents that riddled the Earth's mantle and crust. Magma streams from the planet's molten core blasted up through these chutes towards the surface at irregular intervals. If it wasn't for these pressure releases, the Earth would have shaken itself to fragments aeons ago. The LEP had harnessed this natural power for express surface shots. Recon officers rode the magma flares in titanium eggs in times of emergency. For a more leisurely trip, shuttles avoided the flares, ascending the chutes on hot-air currents to the various terminals around the world.

Holly slowed her pace. There was nowhere for the goblin to go. Not unless he was going to fly into the chute itself, and nobody was that crazy. Anything that got caught up in a magma flare got fried right down to sub-atomic level.

The chute's entrance loomed ahead. Massive and ringed by charred rock.

Holly switched on the helmet's PA. 'That's far enough,' she shouted over the howl of core wind. 'Give it up. You're not going into the chute without science.'

Science was LEP-speak for technical information. In this case, science would be flare-prediction times. Accurate to within a tenth of a second. Generally.

The goblin raised a strange rifle, this time taking careful aim. The firing pin dropped, but whatever this weapon was firing, there wasn't any left.

'That's the problem with non-nuclear weapons, you run out of charge,' quipped Holly,

fulfilling the age-old tradition of firefight banter, even though her knees were threatening to fold.

In response, the goblin hefted the rifle in Holly's direction. It was a terrible throw, landing five metres short. But it served its purpose as a distraction. The triad member used the moment to fire up his wings. They were old models – rotary motor and a broken muffler. The roar of the engine filled the tunnel.

There was another roar, behind the wings. A roar that Holly knew well from a thousand logged flight hours in the chutes. There was a flare coming.

Holly's mind raced. If the goblins had somehow managed to hook up the terminal to a power source, then all the safety features would have been activated. Including...

Captain Short whirled, but the blast doors were already closing. The fireproof barriers were automatically triggered by a thermo sensor in the chute. When a flare passed by below, two-metre-thick steel doors shut off the access tunnel from the rest of the terminal. They were trapped in there, with a column of magma on the way. Not that the magma would kill them – there wasn't much overspill from the flares. But the super-heated air would bake them drier than autumn leaves.

The goblin was standing on the tunnel's edge, oblivious to the impending eruption. Holly realized that it wasn't a question of the fugitive being crazy enough to fly into the chute. He was just plain stupid.

With a jaunty wave, the goblin hopped into the chute, rising rapidly from view. Not rapidly enough. A seven-metre-long jet of roiling lava pounced on him like a waiting snake, consuming him completely.

Holly did not waste time grieving. She had problems of her own. LEP jumpsuits had thermal coils to disperse excess heat, but that wouldn't be enough. In seconds, a wall of dry heat would roll in there, and raise the temperature enough to crack the walls.

Holly glanced up. A line of reinforced ancient coolant tanks were still bolted to the tunnel roof. She slid her blaster to maximum power and began sinking charges into the belly of the tanks. This was no time for subtlety.

The tanks buckled and split, belching out rancid air and a few trickles of coolant. Useless. They must have bled out over the centuries, and the goblins had never bothered replacing them. But there was one left, untouched. A black oblong, out of place among the standard

green LEP models. Holly positioned herself directly underneath and fired.

Three thousand gallons of coolant-enhanced water crashed on to her head at the very moment a heatwave came billowing in from the chute. It was a curious sensation being burned and frozen almost simultaneously. Holly felt blisters pop on her shoulders only to be flattened by water pressure. Captain Short was driven to her knees, lungs starving for air. But she couldn't take a breath, not now, and she couldn't raise a hand to switch on her helmet tank.

After an eternity, the roaring stopped and Holly opened her eyes to a tunnel full of steam. She activated the demister in her visor and got up off her knees. Water slid in sheets from her non-friction suit. She released her helmet seals, taking deep breaths of tunnel air. Still warm but breathable.

Behind her, the blast doors slid open and Captain Trouble Kelp appeared in the gap, along with an LEP rapid-response team.

'Nice manoeuvre, Captain.'

Holly didn't answer, too absorbed by the weapon abandoned by the recently vaporized goblin. This was the prize pig of rifles, almost half a metre long, with a starlite scope clipped above the barrel.

Holly's first thought had been that somehow the B'wa Kell was manufacturing its own weapons. But now she realized that the truth was far more dangerous. Captain Short pried the rifle from the half-melted rock. She recognized it from her *History of Law Enforcement* in service. An old Softnose laser. Softnoses had been outlawed long ago. But that wasn't the worst of it. Instead of a fairy power source, the gun was powered by a human AAA alkaline battery.

'Trouble,' she called. 'Have a look at this.'

'D'Arvit,' breathed Kelp, reaching immediately for the radio controls on his helmet. 'Get me a priority channel to Commander Root. We have *Class A* contraband. Yes, *Class A*. I need a full team of techies. Get Foaly too. I want this entire quadrant shut down...'

Trouble continued spouting orders, but they faded to a distant buzz in Holly's ears. The B'wa Kell was trading with the Mud People. Humans and goblins working together to reactivate outlawed weapons. And if the weapons were here, how long could it be before the Mud People followed?

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