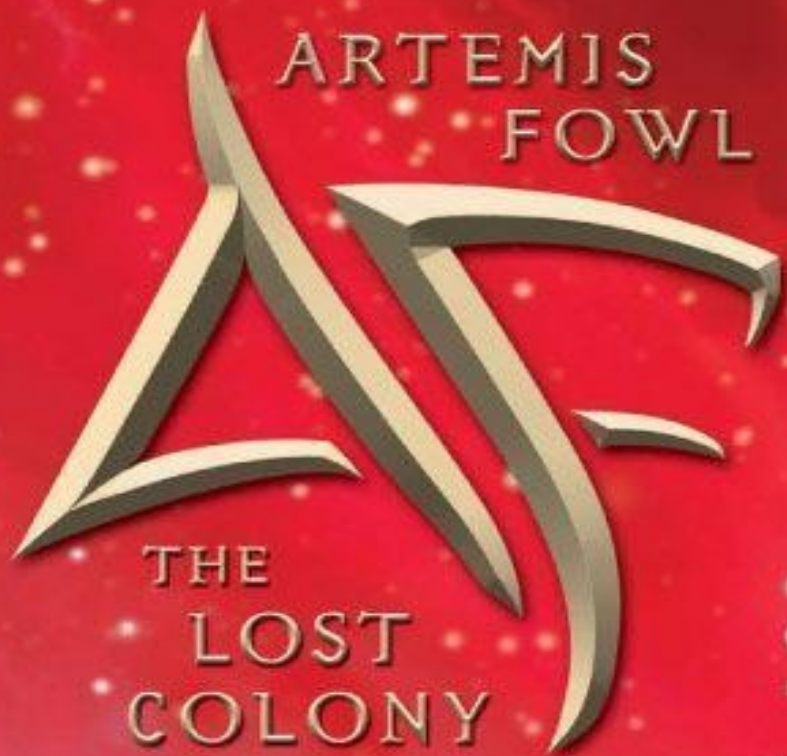
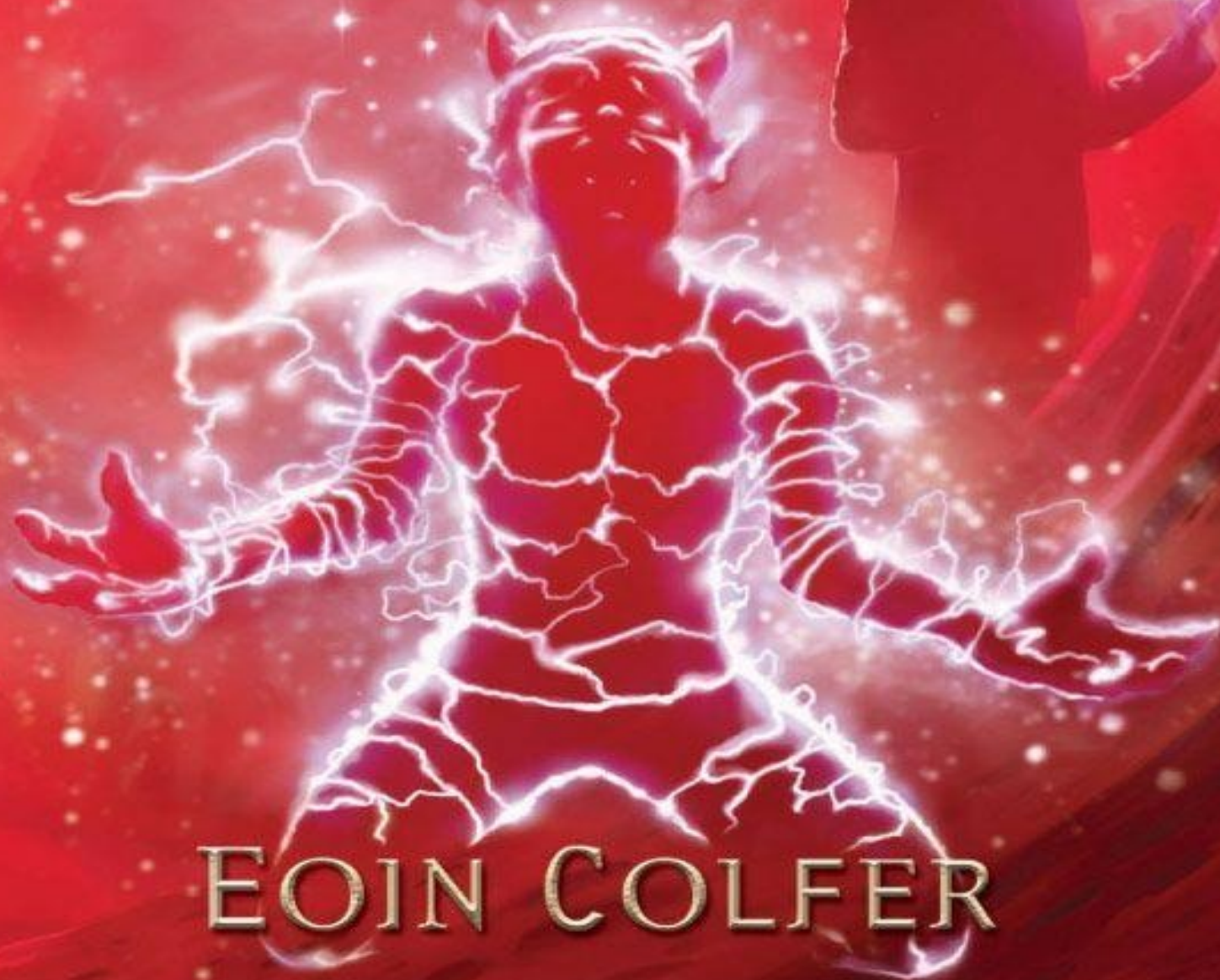


ARTEMIS
FOWL



THE
LOST
COLONY



EOIN COLFER



THE LOST
COLONY

EOIN COLFER

Disney • HYPERION BOOKS
New York

HYPERION BOOKS

New York

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OTHER BOOKS BY EOIN COLFER

Artemis Fowl

Artemis Fowl: The Arctic Incident

Artemis Fowl: The Eternity Code

Artemis Fowl: The Opal Deception

Artemis Fowl: The Time Paradox

Artemis Fowl, The Graphic Novel

Artemis Fowl: The Arctic Incident, The Graphic Novel

Airman

Half Moon Investigations

The Supernaturalist

The Wish List

Eoin Colfer's Legend of Spud Murphy

Eoin Colfer's Legend of Captain Crow's Teeth

Eoin Colfer's Legend of the Worst Boy in the World

Benny and Omar

Benny and Babe

For Badger. The man. The legend.

BLAST TO THE PAST

Barcelona, Spain

Happy was not a word often used to describe Artemis Fowl's bodyguard. *Jolly* and *content* were also words that were rarely applied to him or to people in his immediate vicinity. Butler did not get to be one of the most dangerous men in the world by chatting with anyone who happened to stroll past, unless the chat concerned exit routes and concealed weapons.

On this particular afternoon, Butler and Artemis were in Spain, and the bodyguard's Eurasian features were even more taciturn than normal. His young charge was, as usual, making Butler's job more complicated than it needed to be. Artemis had insisted that they stand on the sidewalk of Barcelona's Passeig de Gràcia for over an hour in the afternoon sun, with only a few slender trees to provide them with cover from the heat or possible enemies.

This was the fourth unexplained trip to foreign locations in as many months. First Edinburgh, then Death Valley in the American West, followed by an extremely arduous trek to doubly landlocked Uzbekistan. And now Barcelona. All to wait for a mysterious *visitor*, who had not as yet made a appearance.

They made an odd couple on the busy pathway. A huge, muscular man: forties, Hugo Boss suit, shaven head. And a slight teenager: pale, raven-haired, with large piercing blue eyes.

"Why must you circle so, Butler?" asked Artemis, irritated. He knew the answer to his own question, but according to his calculations, the expected visitor to Barcelona was a minute late, and he allowed his annoyance to transfer to the bodyguard.

"You know perfectly well why, Artemis," replied Butler. "In case there is a sniper or a audiotech on one of the rooftops. I am circling to provide maximum cover."

Artemis was in the mood to demonstrate his genius. This was a mood in which he frequently found himself. And, as satisfying as these demonstrations were for the fourteen-year-old Irish boy, they could be intensely irritating for anyone on the receiving end.

"Firstly, it is hardly likely that there is a sniper gunning for me," he said. "I have liquidated eighty percent of my illegal ventures and spread the capital across an extremely lucrative portfolio. Secondly, any audiotech trying to eavesdrop on us may as well pack up and go home, as the third button on your jacket is emitting a solinium pulse that whites out any surveillance tape, human or fairy."

Butler glanced at a passing couple who were bewitched by Spain and young love. The man had a camcorder slung around his neck. Butler fingered his third button guiltily.

"We may have ruined a few honeymoon videos," he noted.

Artemis shrugged. "A small price to pay for my privacy."

"Was there a third point?" asked Butler innocently.

"Yes," said Artemis, a touch testily. Still no sign of the individual he was expecting. "I was about to say that if there is a gunman on one of these buildings, it's that one directly to the rear. So you should stay behind me."

Butler was the best bodyguard in the business, and even he couldn't be a hundred percent sure which rooftop a potential gunman would be on.

"Go on. Tell me how you know. I know you're dying to."

"Very well, since you ask. No sniper would position himself on the rooftop of Casa Milà, directly across the street, because it is open to the public and so his access and escape would probably be recorded."

"His or her," corrected Butler. "Most metal men are women these days."

"His or her," amended Artemis. "The two buildings on the right are somewhat screened by foliage, so why handicap yourself?"

"Very good. Go on."

"The cluster behind us is financial buildings with private security stickers on the windows. A professional will avoid any confrontation he is not being paid for."

Butler nodded. It was true.

"And so, I logically conclude that your imaginary sniper would pick the four-story construction to our rear. It is residential, so access is easy. The roof affords him *or her* a direct line of fire, and the security is possibly dismal or, more than likely, nonexistent."

Butler snorted. Artemis was probably right. But in the protection game, *probably* wasn't nearly as comforting as a Kevlar vest.

"You're *probably* right," admitted the bodyguard. "But only if the sniper is as smart as you are."

"Good point," said Artemis.

"And I imagine you could put together a convincing argument for any one of these buildings. You just picked that one to keep me out of your line of vision, which leads me to believe that whoever you're expecting will turn up outside Casa Milà."

Artemis smiled. "Well done, old friend."

Casa Milà was an early twentieth-century dwelling designed by the Spanish art nouveau architect Antoni Gaudí. The façade consisted of curved walls and balconies topped by twisted ironworks. The walkway outside the building was thronged with tourists lining up for an afternoon tour of the spectacular house.

"Will we recognize our visitor among all these people? Are you sure that he is not already here? Watching us?"

Artemis smiled, his eyes glittering. "Believe me, he is not here. If he were, there would be a lot of screaming."

Butler scowled. Once, just once, he would like to get all the facts before they boarded the jet. But that wasn't the way Artemis worked. To the young Irish genius, the *reveal* was the most important part of his schemes.

"At least tell me if our contact will be armed."

"I doubt it," said Artemis. "And even if he is, he won't be with us for more than a second."

"A second? Just beaming down through outer space, is he?"

"Not space, old friend," said Artemis, checking his wristwatch. "Time." The boy sighed. "Anyway, the moment has passed. It seems as though I have brought us here for nothing. Our visitor has not materialized. The chances were slim. Obviously there was nobody at the other end of the rift."

Butler didn't know what rift Artemis was referring to; he was simply relieved to be leaving this insecure location. The sooner they could get back to Barcelona Airport the better.

The bodyguard pulled a mobile phone from his pocket and hit a number on the speed dial. The person on the other end picked up on the first ring.

"Maria," said Butler. "Collection, *pronto*."

"Sí," replied Maria tersely. Maria worked for an exclusive Spanish limousine company. She was

extremely pretty and could break a breeze block with her forehead.

“Was that Maria?” said Artemis, mimicking casual conversation perfectly.

Butler was not fooled. Artemis Fowl rarely asked casual questions.

“Yes, that was Maria. You could tell because I used her name when I spoke to her. You don’t usually ask so many questions about the limo driver. That’s four in the past fifteen minutes. Why *Maria* be picking us up? Where do you think *Maria* is right now? How old do you think *Maria* is?”

Artemis rubbed his temples. “It’s this blasted puberty, Butler. Every time I see a pretty girl, I waste valuable mind space thinking about her. The girl at that restaurant, for instance. I’ve glanced in her direction a dozen times in the past few minutes.”

Butler gave the pretty girl in question an automatic bodyguard’s once-over.

She was twelve or thirteen, did not appear to be armed, and had a mane of extremely tight blond curls. The girl was studiously working her way through a selection of *tapas* while a male guardia perhaps her father, read the paper. There was another man at the table who was struggling to stow a stack of crutches under his chair. Butler judged that the girl was not a direct threat to their safety, though indirectly she could cause trouble if Artemis were unable to concentrate on his plan.

Butler patted his young charge on the shoulder. “It’s normal to be distracted by girls. Natural. If you hadn’t been so busy saving the world these past few years, it would have happened sooner.”

“Nevertheless, I have to control it, Butler. I have things to do.”

“Control puberty?” snorted the bodyguard. “If you manage that, you’ll be the first.”

“I generally am,” said Artemis.

And it was true. No other teenager had kidnapped a fairy, rescued their father from the Russian *Mafiya*, and helped put down a goblin revolution by the tender age of fourteen.

A horn honked twice. From across the intersection, a young lady gestured through an open limousine window.

“It’s *Maria*,” said Artemis, then caught himself. “I mean, let us go. Maybe we’ll have better luck at the next site.”

Butler took the lead, stopping traffic with a wave of one massive palm. “Maybe we should talk to *Maria* with us. A full-time driver would make my job a lot easier.”

It took Artemis a moment to realize that he was being ribbed. “Very funny, Butler. You weren’t joking, weren’t you?”

“Yes, I was.”

“I thought so, but I don’t have a lot of experience with humor. Apart from Mulch Diggums.”

Mulch was a kleptomaniac dwarf who had stolen from, and for, Artemis on previous occasions. Diggums liked to think of himself as a funny fairy, and his main sources of humor were his own bodily functions.

“If you can call that humor,” said Butler, smiling in spite of himself at his own memories of the pungent dwarf.

Suddenly Artemis froze—in the middle of a heaving intersection.

Butler glowered at the three lanes of city traffic, a hundred impatient drivers leaning on their horns.

“I feel something,” breathed Artemis. “Electricity.”

“Could you please feel it on the other side of the road?” asked Butler.

Artemis stretched out his arms and felt a tingle on his palms.

“He’s coming, after all, but several yards off target. Somewhere there is a constant that is not a constant.”

A shape formed in the air. From nothing came a cluster of sparks and the smell of sulfur. Inside the cluster, a gray-green thing appeared, with golden eyes, chunky scales, and great horned ears.

stepped out of nowhere and onto the road. It stood erect, five feet high, humanoid, but there was no mistaking this creature for human. It sniffed the air through slitted nostrils, opened a snake's mouth, and spoke.

"Felicitations to Lady Heatherington Smythe," it said in a voice of crushed glass and grating steel. The creature grasped Artemis's outstretched palm with a four-fingered hand.

"Curious," said the Irish boy.

Butler wasn't interested in *curious*. He was interested in getting Artemis away from this creature as quickly as possible.

"Let's go," he said brusquely, laying a hand on Artemis's shoulder.

But Artemis was already gone. The creature had disappeared as quickly as it had come, taking the teenager with him. The incident would make the news later that day, but strangely enough, in spite of the hundreds of tourists armed with cameras, there would be no pictures.

The creature was insubstantial, as though it did not have a proper hold on this world. Its grip on Artemis's hand was soft with a hard core, like bone wrapped in foam rubber. Artemis did not try to pull away; he was fascinated.

"Lady Heatherington Smythe?" repeated the creature, and Artemis could hear that it was scared. "Dost this be her estate?"

Hardly modern syntax, thought Artemis. But definitely English. Now, how does a demon exiled in Limbo learn to speak English?

The air buzzed with power, and white electrical bolts crackled around the creature, slicing holes in space.

A temporal rent. A hole in time.

Artemis was not overly awed by this; after all, he had seen the Lower Elements Police actually stop time during the Fowl Manor siege. What did concern him was that he was likely to be whisked away with the creature, in which case the chances of him being returned to his own dimension were small. The chances of him being returned to his own time were minuscule.

He tried to call out to Butler, but it was too late. If the word *late* can be used in a place where time does not exist. The rent had expanded to envelop both him and the demon. The architecture and population of Barcelona faded slowly like spirits, to be replaced first by a purple fog, then a galaxy of stars. Artemis experienced feverish heat, then bitter cold. He felt sure that if he materialized fully he would be scorched to cinders, then his ashes would freeze and scatter across space.

Their surroundings changed in a flash, or maybe a year; it was impossible to tell. The stars were replaced by an ocean, and they were underneath it. Strange deep-sea creatures loomed from the depths, their luminous tentacles scything the water all around them. Then there was a field of ice, then a red landscape, the air filled with fine dust. Finally they were looking at Barcelona again. But different. The city was younger.

The demon howled and gnashed its pointed teeth, abandoning all attempts to speak English. Luckily, Artemis was one of two humans in any dimension who spoke Gnommish, the fairy language.

"Calm yourself, friend," he said. "Our fate is sealed. Enjoy these beautiful sights."

The demon's howl ceased abruptly, and he dropped Artemis's hand.

"Speak you fairy tongue?"

"Gnommish," corrected Artemis. "And better than you, I might add."

The demon fell silent, regarding Artemis as though he were some kind of wondrous creature. Which, of course, he was. Artemis, for his part, spent what could possibly be the last few moments of his life observing the scene before him. They were materializing at a building site. It was the Casa Milà, but not yet completed. Workmen swarmed across scaffold erected at the front of the building.

and a swarthy bearded man stood scowling at a sheet of architectural drawings.

~~Artemis smiled. It was Gaudí himself. How amazing.~~

The scene solidified, colors painting themselves brighter. Artemis could smell the dry Spanish air now, and the heavy tangs of sweat and paint.

“Excuse me?” said Artemis in Spanish.

Gaudí looked up from the drawings, and his scowl was replaced with a look of utter disbelief. There was a boy stepping from thin air. Beside him a cowering demon. The brilliant architect absorbed every detail of the tableau, committing it to his memory forever.

“Sí?” he said hesitantly.

Artemis pointed to the top of the building. “You’ve got some mosaics planned for the roof. You might want to rethink those. Very derivative.”

Then boy and demon disappeared.

Butler had not panicked when a creature had stepped out a the hole in time. Then again, he was trained not to panic, no matter how extreme the situation. Unfortunately, nobody else at the Passeig de Gràcia intersection had attended Madam Ko’s Personal Protection Academy, and so they proceeded to panic just as loudly and quickly as they could. All except the curly-haired girl and the two men with her.

When the demon appeared, the public froze. When the creature disappeared, they unfroze explosively. The air was rent with the sounds of shouting and screaming. Drivers abandoned their cars or simply drove them into store windows to escape. A wave of humans withdrew from the point of materialization as though repelled by an invisible force. Again, the girl and her companions bucked the trend, actually running toward the spot where the demon had shown up. The man with the crutch displayed remarkable agility for one who was supposedly injured.

Butler ignored the pandemonium, concentrating on his right hand. Or rather, where his right hand had been a second earlier. Just before Artemis fizzled into another dimension, Butler had managed to get a grip on his shoulder. Now the disappearing virus had claimed his own hand. He was going wherever Artemis had gone. He could still feel his young charge’s bony shoulder in his grip.

Butler fully expected his arm to disappear, but it didn’t. Just the hand. He could still feel it in an underwater pins-and-needles kind of way. And he could still feel Artemis.

“No, you don’t,” he grunted, tightening his invisible grip. “I’ve put up with too much hardship over the years for you to vanish on me now.”

And so Butler reached down through the decades and yanked his young charge back from the past.

Artemis didn’t come easy. It was like dragging a boulder through a sea of mud, but Butler was not the kind of person who gave up easily, either. He planted his feet and put his back into it. Artemis popped out of the twentieth century and landed sprawling in the twenty-first.

“I’m back,” said the Irish boy, as if he had simply returned from an everyday errand. “How unexpected.”

Butler picked his principal up and gave him a perfunctory examination.

“Everything is in the right place. Nothing broken. Now, Artemis, tell me, what is twenty-seven multiplied by eighteen point five?”

Artemis straightened his suit jacket. “Oh, I see, you’re checking my mental faculties. Very good. I suppose it’s conceivable that time travel could affect the mind.”

“Just answer the question!” insisted Butler.

“Four hundred and ninety-nine point five, if you must know.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

The giant bodyguard cocked his head to one side. “Sirens. We need to get out of this area, Artemis, before I’m forced to cause an international incident.”

He hustled Artemis to the other side of the road, to the only car still idling there. Maria looked a little pale, but at least she had not abandoned her clients.

“Well done,” said Butler, flinging open the rear door. “Airport. Stay off the highway as much as possible.”

Maria barely waited until Butler and Artemis were belted before burning rubber down the street, ignoring the traffic lights. The blond girl and her companions were left on the roadside.

Maria glanced at Artemis in the mirror. “What happened out there?”

“No questions,” said Butler curtly. “Eyes on the road. Drive.”

He knew better than to ask questions himself. Artemis would explain all about the strange creature and the shining rift when he was ready.

Artemis remained silent as the limousine swung down toward Las Ramblas and from there into the labyrinthine back streets of downtown Barcelona.

“How did I get here?” he said eventually, musing aloud. “Or rather, why aren’t we there? Or why aren’t we *then*? What anchored us to this time?” He looked at Butler. “Are you wearing any silver?”

Butler grimaced sheepishly. “You know I never usually wear jewelry, but there is this.” He showed one cuff. There was a leather bracelet on his wrist with a silver nugget in the center. “Juliet sent it to me. From Mexico. It’s to ward off evil spirits, apparently. She made me promise to wear it.”

Artemis smiled broadly. “It was Juliet. She anchored us.” He tapped the silver nugget on Butler’s wrist. “You should give your sister a call. She saved our lives.”

As Artemis tapped his bodyguard’s wristband, he noticed something about his own fingers. They *were* his fingers, no doubt about it. But different, somehow. It took him a moment to realize what had happened.

He had, of course, done some theorizing on the hypothetical results of interdimensional travel and concluded that there could possibly be some deterioration of the original, as with a computer program that has been copied once too often. Streams of information could be lost in the ether.

As far as Artemis could tell, nothing had been lost, but now the index finger on his left hand was longer than the second finger. Or more accurately, the index finger had swapped places with the second finger.

He flexed the fingers experimentally.

“Hmm,” noted Artemis Fowl. “I am unique.”

Butler grunted.

“Tell me about it,” he said.

DOODAH DAY

Haven City, The Lower Elements

Holly Short's career as an elfin private investigator was not working out as well as she'd hoped. This was mainly because the Lower Elements' most popular current events show had run not one, but two specials on her over the past few months. It was difficult to go undercover when her face was forever popping up on cable reruns.

"Surgery?" suggested a voice in her head.

This voice was not the first sign of madness. It was her partner, Mulch Diggums, communicating from his mike to her earpiece.

"What?" she said, her voice carrying to her own microphone, a tiny flesh-colored chip glued to her throat.

"I'm looking at a poster of your famous face, and I'm thinking that you should have some cosmetic surgery if we want to stay in business. And I mean real business, not this bounty hunting game. Bounty hunters are the lowest of the low."

Holly sighed. Her dwarf partner was right. Even criminals were considered more trustworthy than bounty hunters.

"A few implants and a reshaped nose, and even your best friend wouldn't recognize you," continued Mulch Diggums. "It's not as if you're a beauty queen."

"Forget it," said Holly. She was fond of the face she had. It reminded her of her mother's.

"What about a skin spray? You could go green, disguise yourself as a sprite."

"Mulch? Are you in position?" snapped Holly.

"Yep," came the dwarf's reply. "Any sign of the pixie?"

"No, he's not up and about yet, but he will be soon. So stop the chatter and just get ready."

"Hey, we're partners now. No more criminal and police officer. I don't have to take orders from you."

"Get ready, *please*."

"No problem. Mulch Diggums, low-life bounty hunter, signing off."

Holly sighed. Sometimes she missed the discipline of the Lower Elements Police Reconnaissance Squad. When an order was given, it was followed. Although, if she were honest, Holly had to admit she had gotten herself into trouble more than once for disobeying a direct command.

She had only survived in LEPrecon for as long as she had because of a few high-profile arrests. *And* because of her mentor, Commander Julius Root.

Holly felt her heart lurch as she remembered, for the thousandth time, that Julius was dead. She could go for hours without thinking about it, then it would hit her— every time like the first time.

She had quit the LEP because Julius's replacement had actually accused her of murdering the commander. Holly figured with a boss like that, she could do the Fairy People more good outside the system. It was starting to look like she had been dead wrong. In her time as LEPrecon Captain she had been involved in putting down a goblin revolution, thwarting a plan to expose the subterranean fairies.

culture to the humans, and reclaiming stolen fairy technology from a Mud Man in Chicago. Now she was tracking a fish smuggler who had skipped out on his bail. Not exactly national security stuff.

“What about shin extensions?” said Mulch, interrupting her thoughts. “You could be taller in a few hours.”

Holly smiled. As irritating as her partner was, he could always cheer her up. Also, as a dwarf, Mulch had special talents that came in very handy in their new line of business. Until recently, he had used these skills to break *into* houses and *out* of prisons, but now he was on the side of the angels, so he swore. Unfortunately, all fairies knew that a dwarf’s vow to a non-dwarf wasn’t worth the spiteful sodden handshake that sealed the deal.

“Maybe you could get a brain extension,” Holly retorted.

Mulch chortled. “Oh, brilliant. I must write that one down in my witty retorts book.”

Holly was trying to come up with an actual witty retort, when their target appeared at the motel room door. He was a harmless-looking pixie, barely two feet high, but you didn’t have to be tall to drive a truck of fish. The smuggling bosses hired pixies as drivers and couriers because they looked so innocent and childlike. Holly had read this pixie’s profile, and she knew that he was anything but innocent.

Doodah Day had been smuggling livestock to illegal restaurants for more than a century. In the smuggling circles he was something of a legend. As an ex-criminal, Mulch was privy to criminal folklore and was able to supply Holly with all kinds of useful information that wouldn’t find its way into an LEP report. For instance, Doodah had once made the heavily patrolled Atlantis–Haven run in under six hours without losing a fish from the tank.

Doodah had been arrested in the Atlantis Trench by a squad of LEP water sprites. He had skipped out en route from a holding cell to the courthouse, and now Holly had tracked him here. The bounty on Doodah Day was enough to pay six months’ rent on their office. The plaque on their door read: *Sho and Diggums. Private Investigators.*

Doodah Day stepped out of his room, scowling at the world in general. He zipped his jacket then headed south toward the shopping district. Holly stayed twenty steps back, hiding her face underneath a hood. This street had traditionally been a rough spot, but the Council was putting millions of ingots into a major revamp. In five years, there would be no more goblin ghetto. Huge, yellow multi-mixers were chewing up old sidewalks and laying down brand new paths behind them. Overhead, public service sprites unhooked burned-out sun strips from the tunnel ceiling and replaced them with new molecule models.

The pixie followed the same route that he had for the past three days. He strolled down the road to the nearest plaza, picked up a carton of vole curry at a kiosk, then bought a ticket to the twenty-four hour movie theater. If he stayed true to form, Doodah would be in there for at least eight hours.

Not if I can help it, thought Holly. She was determined to get this case wrapped up by close of business. It wouldn’t be easy. Doodah was small, but he was fast. Without weapons or restraints, it would be almost impossible to contain him. *Almost* impossible, but there was a way.

Holly bought a ticket from the gnome attendant, then settled into a seat two rows behind the target. The theater was pretty quiet at this time of day. There were maybe fifty patrons besides Holly and Doodah. Most of them weren’t even wearing theater goggles. This was just somewhere to put in a few hours between meals.

The theater was running The Hill of Tailte trilogy nonstop. The trilogy told a cinematic version of the events surrounding the Hill of Tailte battle, where the humans had finally forced the fairies underground. The final part of the trilogy had cleaned up at the AMP Awards a couple of years ago. The effects were splendid, and there was even a special edition interactive version, where the player could become one of the minor characters.

Looking at the movie now, Holly felt the same pang of loss as she always did. The People should be living aboveground; instead they were stuck in this technologically advanced cave.

Holly watched the sweeping aerial views and slow motion battles for forty minutes, then she moved into the aisle and threw off her hood. In her LEP days, she would simply have come up behind the pixie and stuck her Neutrino 3000 in his back, but civilians were not allowed to carry weapons any kind, and so a more subtle strategy would have to be employed.

She called the pixie from the aisle. "Hey, you. Aren't you Doodah Day?"

The pixie jumped from his seat. He fixed his fiercest scowl on his features and threw it Holly's way. "Who wants to know?"

"The LEP," replied Holly. Technically, she had not identified herself as a member of the LEP, which would be impersonating a police officer.

Doodah squinted at her. "I know you. You're that female elf. The one who tackled the goblin. I've seen you on digital. You're not LEP anymore."

Holly felt her heartbeat speed up. It was good to be back in action. Any kind of action.

"Maybe not, Doodah, but I'm still here to bring you in. Are you going to come quietly?"

"And spend a few centuries in the Atlantis pen? What do you think?" said Doodah Day, dropping to his knees.

The little pixie was gone like a stone from a sling, crawling under the seats, jinking left and right.

Holly pulled up her hood and ran toward the fire exit. That's where Doodah would be going. He went this way every day. Every good criminal checks the exit routes in whatever building he visits.

Doodah was at the exit before her, crashing through the door like a dog through a hatch. All Holly could see was the blue blur of his jumpsuit.

"Target on the move," she said, knowing her throat mike would pick up whatever she said. "Coming your way."

I hope, thought Holly, but she didn't say it.

In theory, Doodah would make for his bolt hole, a small storage unit over on Crystal Street, which was set up with a small cot and air-conditioning unit. When the pixie got there, Mulch would be waiting. It was a classic human-hunting technique. Beat the grass and be ready when the bird flies. Of course, if you were human, you shot the bird, then ate it. Mulch's method of capture was less terminal but equally revolting.

Holly stuck close, but not too close. She could hear the pitter-patter of the pixie's tiny feet scurrying along the theater's carpet, but she couldn't see the little fellow. She didn't want to see him. It was vital that Doodah believe he had gotten away; otherwise he wouldn't make for his bolt hole. In her LEP days, there would be no need for this kind of close-up pursuit. She would have had complete access to five thousand surveillance cameras dotted throughout Haven, not to mention a hundred other gadgets and gimmicks from the LEP surveillance arsenal. Now there was just her and Mulch. For her eyes and some special dwarf talents.

The main door was still flapping when Holly reached it. Just inside, an outraged gnome was flapping on his behind, covered with nettle smoothie.

"A little kid," he complained to an usher. "Or a pixie. It had a big head, I know that much. Hit me right in the gut."

Holly skirted the pair, shouldering her way onto the plaza outside. Outside—relatively speaking. Everything was inside when you lived in a tunnel. Overhead, the sun strips were set to midmorning. She could trace Doodah's progress by the trail of chaos in his wake. The vole kiosk was overturned. Lumpy gray-green curry congealed on the flagstones. And lumpy gray-green footsteps led to the plaza's northern corner. So far, Doodah was behaving very predictably.

Holly pushed her way through the ragged line of curry customers, keeping her eyes on the pixie

footsteps.

“Two minutes,” she said for Mulch’s benefit.

There was no reply, but there shouldn’t be, not if the dwarf was in position.

Doodah should take the next service alley and cut across to Crystal. Next time, she resolved, she would go after a gnome. Pixies were too fast. The fairy Council did not really like bounty hunters, and tried to make life as difficult for them as possible. There was no such thing as a licensed firearm outside the LEP. Anyone with a weapon, without a badge, was going to prison.

Holly rounded the corner expecting to see the tail end of a pixie blur. Instead she saw a ten-ton yellow multi-mixer bearing down on her. Obviously Doodah Day had finished being predictable.

“D’Arvit!” swore Holly, diving to one side. The multimixer’s front rotor chewed through the plaza’s pavement, spitting it out at the rear in inch-perfect slabs.

She rolled into a crouch and reached for the Neutrino blaster, which had been on her hip, until recently. All she found was air.

The multi-mixer was swinging around for a second run, bucking and hissing like a mechanical Jurassic carnivore. Giant pistons thumped, and rotor blades carved scythe-like through whatever surface fell beneath their blades. Debris was shoveled into the machine’s belly to be processed and shaped by heated plates.

It reminds me a bit of Mulch, thought Holly. Funny what crosses your mind when your life is in danger.

She backpedaled away from the mixer. Yes it was big, but it was slow and unwieldy. Holly glanced upward to the cab, and there was Doodah expertly manipulating the gears. His hands flashed across the knobs and levers, dragging the metal behemoth toward Holly.

All around was pandemonium: shoppers howling, emergency sirens sounding. But Holly couldn’t worry about that now. Priority one. Stay alive. Terrifying as this situation might be to the general public, Holly had years of LEP training and experience. She’d escaped the grasp of far quicker enemies than this multi-mixer.

As it turned out, Holly was mistaken. The multi-mixer was slow as a whole, but some of its parts were lightning fast. For example, the containment paddles—two ten-foot-high walls of steel that slotted out on either side of the front rotor to contain any debris that might be thrown up by the rotor blades.

Doodah Day, an instinctive driver of any vehicle, saw his opportunity and took it. He overrode the safety and deployed the paddles. Four pneumatic pumps instantly pressurized and literally blew the paddles into the wall on both sides of Holly. They bit deep, sinking six inches into the stone.

Holly’s confidence drained down into her boots. She was trapped with a hundred curved steel blades tearing up the ground before her.

“Wings,” said Holly, but only her LEP suit had wings, and she had given up the right to wear them.

The paddles contained the vortex created by the blades and turned it back on itself. The vibration was terrific. Holly felt her teeth shake in her gums. She could see ten of everything. Her whole world was bad reception. Beneath her feet the blades greedily chewed the pavement. Holly jumped at the left-hand paddle, but it was well lubricated and slipped out of her grasp. Her luck was equally bad with the other paddle. The only other possible avenue was straight ahead, and that wasn’t really an option, not with the deadly rotor waiting.

Holly shouted at Doodah. Maybe her mouth formed actual words, but she couldn’t be certain, not with the shaking and the noise. Blades snicked through the air, grabbing for her. With each pass they tore strips from the ground beneath her feet. There wasn’t much ground left. Soon she would be feeding the multi-mixer. She would be shredded, passed through the machine’s innards, and finally laid as a pavement slab. Holly Short would literally be part of the city.

There was nothing to do. Nothing. Mulch was too far away to be of any assistance, and it wasn't likely that any civilian would attempt to mount a rogue mixer, even if they had known she was trapped between the paddles.

As the blades closed in, Holly gazed toward the computer-generated sky. It would have been nice to die on the surface. Feel the heat of the real sun warm her brow. It would have been nice.

Then the rotor stopped. Holly was sprayed with a shower of half-digested debris from the mixer's stomach. A few stone slivers scratched her skin, but that was the extent of her injury.

Holly wiped the grime from her face and looked up. Her ears rang with the engine's aftershock and her eyes watered from the dust that settled on her like dirty snow.

Doodah peered down at her from the cab. His face was pale but fierce.

"Leave me alone!" he shouted down. His voice seemed weak and tinny to Holly's damaged eardrums.

"Just leave me alone!"

And he was gone, scurrying down the access ladder, maybe heading for his bolt hole.

Holly leaned against one of the paddles, allowing herself a moment to recover. Tiny sparks of magic blossomed on her many cuts, sealing them. Her ears popped, whined, and flexed as the magic automatically targeted her eardrums. In seconds, Holly's hearing was back to normal.

She had to get out of there. And there was only one way. Over the rotor. Past the blades. Holly tipped one gingerly with a finger. A droplet of blood oozed from a tiny cut, only to be sucked back in by a blue spark of magic. Those blades would cut her to ribbons if she slipped, and there wouldn't be enough magic under the world to stitch her back together again. But the rotor was her only way out otherwise she would have to wait until LEP traffic arrived. It would have been bad enough causing that kind of damage with the weight of LEP public liability insurance behind her, but as a freelancer she probably be thrown in jail for a couple of months while the courts decided what to charge her with.

Holly threaded her fingers between the blades and gripped the first bar on the rotor. It would be just like climbing a ladder. A very sharp, potentially fatal, ladder. She stepped on a lower bar and boosted herself up. The rotor groaned and dropped six inches. Holly held on, because it was safer than letting go. Blades quivered an inch from her limbs. Slow and steady. No false moves.

One bar at a time, Holly climbed the rotor. Twice, a blade nicked her flesh, but the wounds were not serious and were quickly sealed by blue sparks. After a brief eternity of utter concentration, Holly pulled herself onto the hood. The hood was filthy and hot, but at least it wasn't sharper than a centaur's tongue.

"He went that way," said a voice from ground level.

Holly looked down to see a large frowning gnome in a city services uniform pointing toward Crystal Street.

"He went that way," repeated the gnome. "The pixie who threw me out of my mixer."

Holly stared at the burly public services guy. "That tiny pixie threw *you* out?"

The gnome almost blushed. "I was getting out anyway, he just tipped me over." He suddenly forgot all about his embarrassment. "Hey, aren't you Polly something? Polly Little? That's it. The LEP hero."

Holly climbed down the cab ladder. "Polly Little. That's me."

Holly landed running, her boots crunching on pebbles of crushed pavement.

"Mulch," she said. "Doodah is coming your way. Be careful. He's a lot more dangerous than you thought."

Dangerous? Maybe, maybe not. He hadn't killed her when he'd had the chance. It would seem that the pixie had no stomach for murder.

Doodah's stunt with the multi-mixer had caused chaos in the plaza. Traffic police, nicknamed

Wheelies, were pouring in, and civilians were pouring out. Holly counted at least six LEPtraff magna-bikes and two cruisers. She was keeping her head down, when one of the traffic officer hopped off his bike and grabbed her shoulder.

“Did you see what happened, missy?”

Missy? Holly was tempted to twist the hand on her shoulder and flip the officer into a nearby recycler. But this was not the time for outrage; she needed to redirect his attention.

“Why, thank goodness you’re here, officer,” she twittered in a voice at least an octave higher than her normal tones. “Over there, by the multi-mixer. There’s blood everywhere.”

“Blood!” exclaimed the Wheelie, delighted to hear it. “Everywhere?”

“Absolutely everywhere.”

The traffic cop dropped Holly’s shoulder. “Thank you, missy. I’ll handle it from here.”

He strode purposefully toward the multi-mixer, then turned back.

“Excuse me, missy,” he said, recognition glimmering in his eye, just out of reach. “Don’t I know you?”

But the hooded elf had disappeared.

Ah, well, thought the Wheelie. I should probably go look at the blood everywhere.

Holly ran toward Crystal Street, though she felt sure there was no need for haste. Doodah had either decided that there was too much heat on him to reveal his bolt hole, or Mulch had him. Either way it was out of her control. Once again she lamented the loss of LEP backup. In her Recon days, all it would have taken was a quick order into her helmet microphone, and every street in the area would be cordoned off.

She skirted a street-cleaning robot and turned onto Crystal. The narrow street was a service lane for the main shopping plaza, and consisted mostly of delivery bays. The rest of the units were rented out for storage. Holly was surprised to find Doodah directly in front of her, rummaging in his pockets, presumably for the access chip to his unit. Something must have held him up for a minute. Maybe he had ducked behind a crate to avoid the Wheelies. Whatever. She had another shot at him.

Doodah looked up, and all Holly could do was wave.

“Morning,” she said.

Doodah shook a tiny fist at her. “Don’t you have better things to do, elf? All I do is smuggle a few fish.”

The question cut Holly deeply. Was this really the best way to help the People? Surely Commander Root had wanted more from her. In the past few months she had gone from top priority surface operations to chasing down fish smugglers in a back alley. That was quite a drop.

She showed Doodah her hands. “I don’t want you to get hurt, so stand perfectly still.”

Doodah chuckled. “Hurt? By you? Not likely.”

“No,” said Holly. “Not by me. By him.” She pointed at the patch of mud under Doodah’s feet.

“Him?” Doodah looked down, suspecting a trap. His suspicions were absolutely correct. The ground beneath his feet fizzled slightly as the surface earth shivered and bounced.

“What?” said Doodah, lifting one foot. He would doubtless have stepped off the patch if he’d had time. But what happened next, happened very quickly.

The ground did more than just collapse, it was sucked from below Doodah with a sickening slurping sound. A hoop of teeth cut through the earth, followed by a huge mouth. There was a dwarf on the other end of the mouth, and he breached the ground like a dolphin jumping, driven apparently by gas from his rear end. The ring of teeth closed around Doodah, swallowing him to the neck.

Mulch Diggums, for of course it was he, settled back into his tunnel, taking the unfortunate pixie with him. Doodah, it has to be said, did not look quite so cocky as he had a second ago.

“A dwarf . . . dwarf,” he stammered. “I thought your people didn’t like the law.”

Holly peered into the hole. “Generally they don’t. But Mulch is an exception. You don’t mind he doesn’t answer you himself. He might accidentally bite your head off.”

Doodah squirmed suddenly. “What’s he doing?”

“I imagine he’s licking you. Dwarf spittle hardens on contact with air. As soon as he opens his mouth, you’ll be locked up tight as a chick in an egg.”

Mulch winked at Holly. It was about as much gloating as he could pull off at the moment, but Holly knew that he would spend the next several days boasting about his skills.

Dwarfs can tunnel through miles of earth. Dwarfs have jet-powered rear ends. Dwarfs can produce two gallons of rock spittle every hour. What have you got? Besides a famous face that keeps blowing our cover?

Holly peered into the hole, the toe of one boot hooked over the edge. “Okay, partner. Good job. Now, can you please spit out the fugitive.”

Mulch was happy to oblige. He hawked Doodah onto the lane’s surface, then clambered up himself, rehinging his jaw.

“This is disgusting,” moaned Doodah, as the viscous spittle solidified on his limbs. “It stinks too.”

“Hey,” said Mulch, injured. “The smell is not my fault. If you’d rented storage on a cleaner street . . .”

“Oh yeah, stinky? Well, this is what I think of you.” Doodah attempted a pixie hex gesture, but fortunately the rock spittle froze his arm before he could complete it.

“Okay, you two. Cut it out,” said Holly. “We have thirty minutes to get this little guy to the LEP before the spittle loosens up.”

Mulch peered over her shoulder toward the mouth of the lane. He turned suddenly pale underneath his coating of wet earth, and his beard hair bristled nervously.

“You know something, partner,” he said. “I don’t think we’re going to need thirty minutes.”

Holly turned away from her prisoner. There were half a dozen elves blocking the entrance to the lane. They were LEP, or something very like it. They wore plain clothes with no markings or insignia of any kind. They were official, though. The heavy artillery cradled in their elbows attested to that. Holly noticed with some relief that none of the guns were pointed at her or Mulch.

One of the elves stepped forward, popping the visor on her helmet.

“Hello, Holly,” she said. “We’ve been looking for you all morning. How’ve you been?”

Holly swallowed a relieved sigh. It was Wing Commander Vinyáya, a longtime supporter of Holly and Julius Root. Vinyáya had blazed the trail for all females in the forces. In a five-hundred-year career, she had done everything from leading a Retrieval team to the dark side of the moon, heading up the liberal vote on the fairy Council. In addition to this, she had been Holly’s flight instructor in the academy.

“Fine, Commander,” said Holly.

Vinyáya nodded at the solidifying mass of rock spittle.

“Keeping busy, I see.”

“Yes. That’s Doodah Day. The fish smuggler. Quite a catch.”

The Commander frowned. “You’re going to have to cut him loose, Holly. We have bigger snails to pop.”

Holly placed her boot on Doodah’s midriff. She was reluctant to jump through LEP hoops, even for an undercover wing commander.

“What kind of snails?”

Vinyáya’s frown deepened, cutting a slash between her brows.

“Can we talk in the car, Captain? The regulars are on the way.”

Captain? Vinyáya had referred to her by her old rank? What was going on here? If the regulars were LEP, who were these fairies?

“I don’t trust the force as much as I used to, Commander. You need to give me something before we go anywhere.”

Vinyáya sighed. “Firstly, Captain, we’re not the force. Not the one you think, anyway. Secondly, you want me to give you something? I’ll give you two words. Care to hazard a guess what they are?”

Holly knew at once. She felt it.

“Artemis Fowl,” she whispered.

“That’s right,” confirmed Vinyáya. “Artemis Fowl. Now, are you and your partner prepared to come with us?”

“Where are you parked?” asked Holly.

Vinyáya and her mysterious unit obviously had a serious budget. Not only were their weapons state of the art, but their transportation was way out of the usual LEP league. Within seconds of scraping Doodah Day and slipping a tracker into his boot, Holly and Mulch were strapped into lounge seats in the back of a stretch armored vehicle. They weren’t prisoners, exactly, but Holly couldn’t help feeling that she wasn’t in control of her destiny anymore.

Vinyáya took off her helmet, shaking out long silver hair. Holly was surprised.

The commander smiled. “You like the color? I got fed up dying it.”

“Yes. It suits you.”

Mulch raised a finger. “Sorry to interrupt the salon chat, but who are you people? You’re not LEP, I’ll bet my bum-flap on it.”

Vinyáya swiveled to face the dwarf. “How much do you know about demons?”

Mulch checked the vehicle’s cooler and was delighted to find sim-chicken and nettle beer. He liberated both. “Demons. Not a lot. Never seen one myself.”

“What about you, Holly? Remember anything from school?”

Holly was intrigued. Where could this conversation be going? Was this a test of some kind? She thought back to her history classes in Police Academy.

“Demons. The Eighth Family of the Fairy People. Ten thousand years ago, after the battle of Tailte, they had refused to move underground, opting instead to lift their island out of time and live there in isolation.”

Vinyáya nodded. “Very good. So they assembled their circle of warlocks and cast a time spell over the island of Hybras.”

Mulch burped. “They disappeared off the face of the earth, and no one’s seen a demon since.”

“Not quite true. A few have popped up over the centuries. One quite recently, in fact. And guess who was there to meet him?”

“Artemis,” said Holly and Mulch simultaneously.

“Exactly. Somehow he was able to predict what we couldn’t. We knew when, but our where was off by several feet.”

Holly sat forward. Interested. Back in the game.

“Did we get Artemis on film?”

“Not exactly,” replied Vinyáya cryptically. “If you don’t mind, I’ll leave the explaining to someone more qualified than me. He’s back at base.” And she would say no more on the subject. More infuriating.

Mulch wasn’t one for patience.

“What? You’re just going to take a nap? Come on, Vinyáya, tell us what little Arty is up to.”

Vinyáya would not be drawn. “Relax, Mr. Diggums. Have another nettle beer, or some sprin

water.” The commander took two bottles from the cooler and offered one to Mulch.

~~Mulch studied the label. “Derrier? No thanks. You know how they put the bubbles in this stuff?”~~

Vinyáya’s mouth twitched with the ghost of a smile. “I thought it was naturally carbonated.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought until I got a prison job at the Derrier plant. They employ every dwarf in the Deeps. They made us sign confidentiality contracts.”

Vinyáya was hooked. “So go on, tell me. How *do* they get the bubbles in?”

Mulch tapped his nose. “Can’t say. Breach of contract. All I *can* say is it involves a huge vat of water and several dwarfs using our . . . eh”—Mulch pointed to his rear end—“. . . natural talents.”

Vinyáya gingerly replaced her bottle.

As Holly sat back in her comfortable gel chair, enjoying yet another of Mulch’s tall tales, a niggling thought nudged through. She realized that Commander Vinyáya had avoided answering the dwarf’s initial question. *Who were these people?*

Ten minutes later, that question was answered.

“Welcome to Section Eight Headquarters,” said Vinyáya. “Forgive my theatrics, it’s not often we get to wow people.”

Holly didn’t feel very *wowed*. They had pulled into a multi-story car park several blocks down from Police Plaza. The stretch armored vehicle followed the curved arrows up to the seventh floor, which was stuffed below the craggy ceiling. The driver parked in the least accessible, darkest space and then switched off the engine.

They sat for several seconds in the damp darkness, listening to rock-water drip from stalactites onto the roof.

“Wow,” said Mulch. “This is something. I guess you people spent all your money on the car.”

Vinyáya smiled. “Just wait.”

The driver ran a quick proximity scan on the dashboard scanner, and came up clean. He then took an infrared remote from the dash and clicked it through the transparent plastic roof at the rock face overhead.

“Remote-controlled rocks,” said Mulch dryly, delighted at the opportunity to exercise his sarcasm muscle.

Vinyáya did not respond; she didn’t have to. What happened next shut Mulch up all on its own. The parking space rose hydraulically, sending the car catapulting toward the rock face above. The rocks did not move out of the way. There was no doubt in Holly’s mind that when rock went up against metal, the rock would win. It made no sense, of course, that Vinyáya would bring them here only to crush the entire party. But there was no time to consider this in the half second that it took the stretch vehicle to reach the hard unforgiving rock.

In truth, the rock wasn’t hard or unforgiving. It was digital. They passed right through to a smaller car port built into the rock.

“Hologram,” breathed Holly.

Vinyáya winked at Mulch. “Remote-controlled rocks,” she said. She flipped open the rear door and stepped out into an air-conditioned corridor.

“The entire headquarters has been hewn from the rock.

Actually, most of the cave was already here. We just lasered off a corner here and there. Forgiveness for all the cloak-and-dagger stuff, but it’s vital that what we do here at Section Eight remains secret.”

Holly followed the commander through a set of automatic doors and down a slick corridor. There were sensors and cameras every few paces, and Holly knew that her identity had been verified at least a dozen times before they reached the steel door at the end of the corridor.

Vinyáya plunged her hand into a plate of liquid metal at the door’s center.

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