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opening extract from

Artemis Fowl and the Atlantis Complex

written by

Eoin Colfer

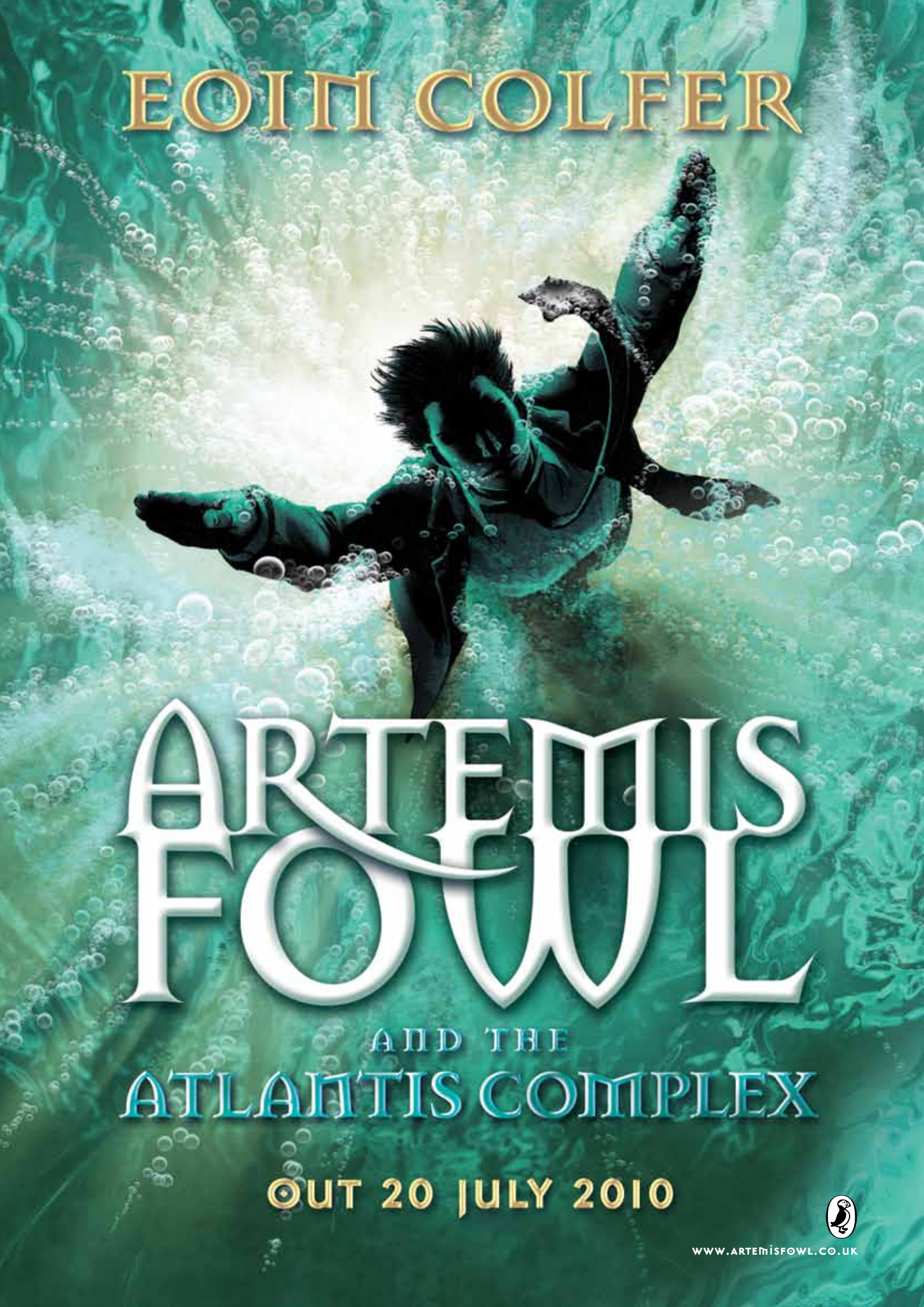
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AND THE
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Chapter 1: Cold Vibes

Vatnajökull, Iceland

VATNAJÖKULL is the biggest glacier in Europe with an area of more than five thousand stark blue-white miles. It is for the most part uninhabited and desolate, and, for scientific reasons, the perfect place for Artemis Fowl to demonstrate to the fairy People how exactly he planned to save the world. Also, a little dramatic scenery never hurts a presentation.

One part of Vatnajökull that does see human traffic is the Great Skua restaurant on the shores of the glacier lagoon, which caters to groups of ice tourists from May to August. Artemis had arranged to meet the proprietor at this *closed for the season* establishment very early on the morning of September first. His fifteenth birthday.

Artemis steered his rented snowmobile along the lagoon's rippling coastline where the glacier sloped into a black pool dotted with a crazy-paving pattern of broken ice plates. The wind roared around his head like an excited crowd in a stadium, carrying with it arrowheads of sleet that peppered his nose and mouth. The space was vast and unforgiving, and Artemis knew that to be injured alone on this tundra would lead to a quick and painful death – or at the very least abject humiliation before the popping flashes of the tourist season's tail end, which was slightly less painful than painful death but lasted longer.

The Great Skua's owner, a burly Icelander in proud possession of both a walrus moustache with the wingspan of a fair-sized cormorant and the unlikely name of Adam Adamsson, stood in the restaurant's porch, popping his fingers and stamping his feet to the rhythm and also finding the time to chuckle at Artemis's erratic progress along the lagoon's frozen shore.

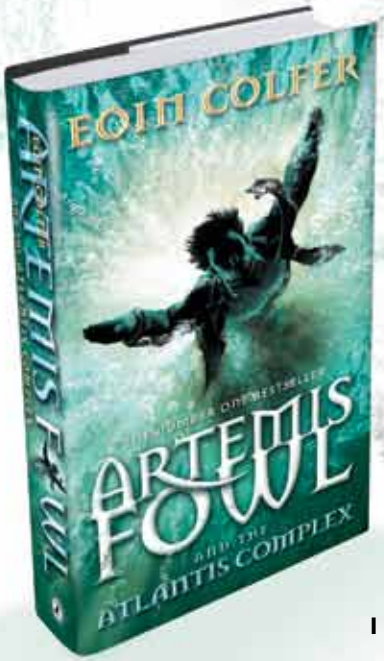
'That was a mighty display,' said Adamsson when Artemis finally managed to ram the snowmobile into the restaurant's decking. 'Hell, *harður maður*. I haven't laughed that hard since my dog tried to eat his reflection.'

Artemis smiled dourly, aware that the restaurateur was poking fun at his driving skills, or lack thereof. 'Hmmph,' he grunted, dismounting the ski-doo as stiffly as a cowboy after three days on a cattle drive, whose horse had died, forcing him to ride the broadest cow in the herd.

The old man actually cackled. 'Now you even sound like my dog.'

It was not Artemis Fowl's habit to make undignified entrances, but, without his bodyguard Butler on hand, he had been forced to rely on his own motor skills, which were famously unsophisticated. One of the sixth-year wits at St Bartleby's School, the heir to a hotel fortune, had nicknamed Artemis *Left Foot Fowl*, as in he had two left feet and couldn't kick a football with either of them. Artemis had tolerated this ribbing for about a week and then bought out the young heir's hotel chain. This choked the teasing off abruptly.

'Everything is ready, I trust?' said Artemis, flexing fingers inside his patented sola-gloves. He noticed that one hand was uncomfortably warm; the thermostat must have taken a knock when he'd clipped an ice obelisk half a mile down



the coast. He tugged out the power wire with his teeth; there was not much danger of hypothermia as the autumn temperature hovered just below zero.

'And hello to you,' said Adamsson. 'Nice to finally meet you face to face, if not eye to eye.'

Artemis did not rise to the *forge a relationship* lure that Adamsson had tossed out. He did not have room in his life at the moment for yet another friend that he didn't trust.

'I do not intend to ask you for your daughter's hand in marriage, Mr Adamsson, so I think we can skip over any ice-breakers you may feel obliged to offer. Is everything ready?'

Adam Adamsson's pre-prepared ice-breakers melted in his throat and he nodded half a dozen times.

'All ready. Your crate is round the back. I have supplied a vegetarian buffet and goodie bags from the Blue Lagoon Spa. A few seats have been laid out too, as bluntly requested in your terse e-mail. None of your party turned up, though – nobody but you – after all my labours.'

Artemis lifted an aluminium briefcase from the ski-doo's luggage box. 'Don't you worry about that, Mr Adamsson. Why don't you head back to Reykjavik and spend some of that extortionate fee you charged me for a couple of hours' usage of your frankly third-rate restaurant and perhaps find a friendless tree stump to listen to your woes?'

A couple of hours. Third-rate. Two plus three equals five. Good.

Now it was Adamsson's turn to grunt and the tips of his walrus moustache quivered slightly.

'No need for the attitude, young Fowl. We are both men, are we not? Men are entitled to a little respect.'

'Oh, really? Perhaps we should ask the whales? Or perhaps the mink?'

Adamsson scowled, his wind-burnt face creasing like a prune. 'OK, OK. I get the message. No need to hold me responsible for the crimes of man. You teenagers are all the same. Let's see if your generation does any better with the planet.'

Artemis clicked the briefcase's lock snap precisely twenty times before striding into the restaurant.

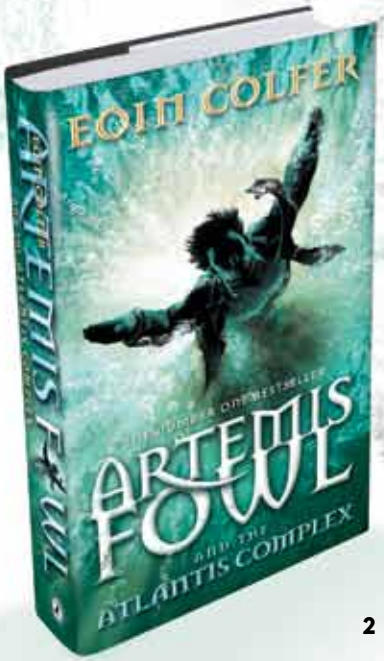
'Believe me, we teenagers are not all the same,' he said as he passed Adamsson. 'And I intend to do quite a bit better.'

There were more than a dozen tables inside the restaurant, all with chairs stacked on top, except for one, which had been dressed with a linen cloth and laden with bottled glacier water and spa bags for each of the five places.

Five, thought Artemis. *A good number. Solid. Predictable. Four fives are twenty.*

Artemis had decided lately that five was his number. Good things happened when five was in the mix. The logician in him knew that this was ridiculous, but he couldn't ignore the fact that the tragedies in his life had occurred in years not divisible by five: his father had disappeared and been mutilated, his old friend Commander Julius Root of the LEP had been murdered by the notorious pixie Opal Koboi, both in years with no five. He was five feet five inches tall and weighed fifty-five kilos. If he touched something five times or a multiple of that, then that thing stayed reliable. A door would remain closed, for example, or a keepsake would protect that doorway, as it was supposed to.

Today the signs were good. He was fifteen years old. Three times five. And his hotel room in Reykjavik had been number forty-five. Even the ski-doo that had got him this far unscathed had a registration which was a multiple of five, and boasted a 50 cc engine to boot. All good. There were only four guests coming to the meeting, but including him that made five. So no need to panic.



A part of Artemis was horrified by his newfound superstition about numbers.

Get a grip on yourself. You are a Fowl. We do not rely on luck – abandon these ridiculous obsessions and compulsions.

Artemis clicked the case's latch to appease the number gods – twenty times, four fives – and felt his heart slow down.

I will break my habits tomorrow, when this job is done.

He loitered at the maître d's podium until Adamsson and his snow tractor had disappeared over a curved ridge of snow that could have been a whale's spine,

then waited a further minute until the vehicle's rumbling had faded to an old smoker's cough.

Very well. Time to do some business.

Artemis descended the five wooden steps to the main restaurant floor (*excellent, good omen*), threading a series of columns hung with replicas of the Stora-Borg mask until he arrived at the head of the laid table. The seats were angled to face him and a slight shimmer, like a heat haze, flickered over the table top.

'Good morning, friends,' said Artemis in Gnommish, forcing himself to pronounce the fairy words in confident, almost jovial, tones. 'Today's the day we save the world.'

The heat haze seemed more electrical now with crackles of neon-white interference running through it and faces swimming in its depths like ghosts from a dream. The faces solidified and grew torsos and limbs. Small figures, like children, appeared. Like children, but not the same. These were representatives of the fairy People and among them perhaps the only friends Artemis had.

'Save the world?' said Captain Holly Short of the LEPrecon. 'Same old Artemis Fowl, and I say that sarcastically as *saving the world* is not like you at all.'

Artemis knew he should smile, but he could not, so instead he found fault, something that would not seem out of character.

'You need a new shield amplifier, Foaly,' he said to a centaur who was balanced awkwardly on a chair designed for humans. 'I could see the shimmer from the front porch. Call yourself a technical expert? How old is the one you're using?'

Foaly stamped a hoof, which was an irritated tic of his and the reason he never won at cards. 'Nice to see you too, Mud Boy.'

'How old?'

'I don't know. Maybe four years.'

'Four. There, you see. What sort of number is that?'

Foaly stuck out his bottom lip. 'What *sort* of number? There are *types* now, Artemis? That amplifier is good for another hundred years. Maybe it could do with a little tuning, but that's all.'

Holly stood and walked lightly to the head of the table.

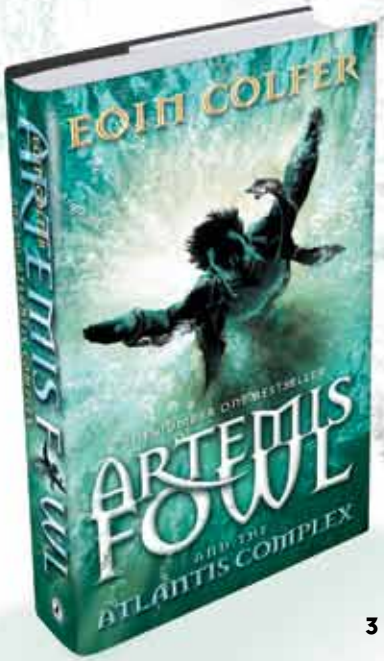
'Do you two have to start with the sparring right away? Isn't that getting a little clichéd after all these years? You're like a couple of mutts marking territory.' She laid two slim fingers on Artemis's forearm. 'Lay off him, Artemis. You know how sensitive centaurs are.'

Artemis could not meet her eyes. Inside his left snow boot, he counted off twenty toe-taps.

'Very well. Let's change the subject.'

'Please do,' said the third fairy in the room. 'We've come across from Russia for this, Fowl. So if the subject could be changed to what we came here to discuss . . .'

Commander Raine Vinyáya was obviously not happy being so far from her beloved Police Plaza. She had assumed command of LEPgeneral some years previously and prided herself on keeping a finger in every ongoing mission. 'I have operations to get back to, Artemis. The pixies are rioting, calling for Opal Koboi's release from prison, and the swear-toad epidemic has flared up again. Please do us the courtesy of getting on with it.'



Artemis nodded. Vinyáya was being openly antagonistic and that was an emotion that could be trusted, unless of course it was a bluff and the commander was a secret fan of his, unless it was a double bluff and she really did feel antagonistic.

That sounds insane, Artemis realized. *Even to me*.

Though she was barely a metre tall, Commander Vinyáya was a formidable presence and someone that Artemis never intended to underestimate. While the commander was almost four hundred years old in fairy terms, she was barely middle-aged and in any terms she was a striking figure: lean and sallow, with

the reactive feline pupils occasionally found in elfin eyes, but even that rarity was not her most distinctive physical characteristic. Raine Vinyáya had a mane of silver hair that seemed to trap any available light and send it rippling along her shoulders.

Artemis cleared his throat and switched his focus from numbers to the project, or, as he liked to think of it, *THE PROJECT*. In the end, when it came down to it, this was the only plan that mattered.

Holly punched his shoulder gently.

'You look pale. Even paler than usual. You OK, birthday boy?'

Artemis finally succeeded in meeting her eyes – one hazel, one blue – framed by a wide brow and a slash of auburn fringe that Holly had grown out from her usual crew-cut.

'Fifteen years old today,' muttered Artemis. 'Three fives. That's a good thing.'

Holly blinked.

Artemis Fowl muttering? And no mention of her new hairstyle – usually Artemis picked up on physical changes straight away.

'I . . . ah . . . I suppose so. Where's Butler? Scouting the perimeter?'

'No. No, I sent him away. Juliet needed him.'

'Nothing too serious?'

'Not serious but necessary. Family business. He trusts you to look after me.'

Holly's lips tightened as though she had tasted something sour.

'He trusts somebody else to shepherd his principal? Are you sure this is Butler we're talking about?'

'Of course. And, anyway, it's better that he's not here. Whenever my plans go awry, he's close at hand. It's vital, *imperative*, that this meeting goes ahead and that nothing goes wrong.'

Holly's jaw actually dropped in shock. It was almost comical to see. If she understood Artemis correctly, he was *blaming* Butler for the failure of previous schemes. Butler? His staunchest ally.

'Good idea. Let's go ahead, then. The four of us should get this show on the road.'

This from Foaly who had spoken the dreaded number with no thought for the consequences.

Four. Very bad number. The absolute worst. Chinese people hate the number four because it sounds like their word for death.

Almost worse than saying the number four was the fact that there were only four people in the room. Commander Trouble Kelp had apparently not been able to make it. In spite of their historic dislike for each other, Artemis wished the commander were here now.

'Where is Commander Kelp, Holly? I thought he was attending today. We could use the protection.'

Holly stood at the table, ramrod straight in her blue jumpsuit, acorn cluster glittering on her chest.

'Trouble . . . Commander Kelp has enough to deal with in Police Plaza, but don't worry. There's an entire battalion of LEPtactical hovering overhead in a shielded shuttle. Not even a snow fox could make it in here without a singed tail.'

Artemis shucked off his snow jacket and gloves. 'Thank you, Captain. I am encouraged by your thoroughness. As a matter of interest, how many fairies are there in an LEP squadron? Exactly?'

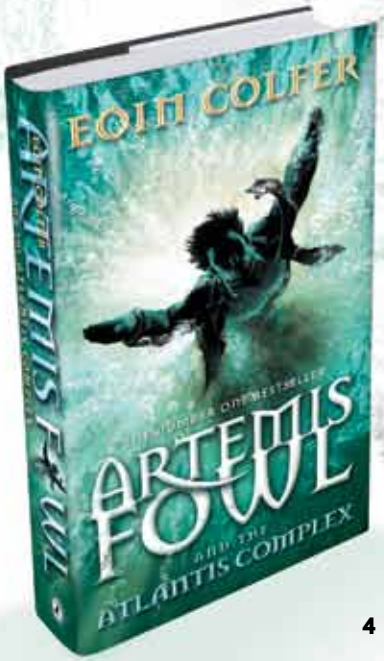
'Fourteen,' replied Holly, one jagged eyebrow raised.

'Fourteen. Hmm. That is not so . . .' Then a light-bulb moment. 'And a pilot, I presume?'

'Fourteen *including* the pilot. That's enough to take on any human battalion you care to throw at them.'

For a moment it seemed as though Artemis Fowl would turn round and flee the meeting that he himself had requested. A tendon tugged at his neck and one forefinger tapped the chair's wooden headrest. Then Artemis swallowed and nodded with a nervousness that escaped from him like a canary from a cat's mouth before being swallowed back down.

'Very well. Fourteen will have to do. Please, Holly, sit. Let me tell you about the project.'



Holly backed up slowly, searching Artemis's face for the cockiness that usually dwelled in his smirk lines. It was not there.

Whatever this project is, she thought. *It's big*.

Artemis placed his case on the table, popped it open and spun the lid to reveal a screen inside. For a moment his delight in gadgetry surfaced and he even managed a faint grin in Foaly's direction. The grin stretched his lips no more than a centimetre.

'Look. You'll like this little box.'

Foaly snickered. 'Oh my stars! Is that . . . could that possibly be . . . a laptop? You have shamed us all with your brilliance, Arty.'

The centaur's sarcasm drew groans from everyone.

'What?' he protested. 'It's a laptop. Even humans can't expect anyone to be impressed by a laptop.'

'If I know Artemis,' said Holly, 'something impressive is about to happen. Am I right?'

'You may judge for yourself,' said Artemis, pressing his thumb against a scanner on the case.

The scanner flickered, considering the proffered thumb, then flashed green, deciding to accept it. Nothing happened for a second or two then a motor inside the case buzzed as though there were a small satisfied cat stretching in the case's belly.

'Motor,' said Foaly. 'Big deal.'

The lid's reinforced metal corners suddenly detached, blasting away from the lid with a squirt of propellant, and suckered themselves to the ceiling. Simultaneously the screen unfolded until it was more than a metre square with speaker bars along each edge.

'So it's a big screen,' Foaly said. 'This is just grandstanding. All we needed were a few sets of v-goggles.'

Artemis pressed another button on the case and the metal corners suckered to the ceiling revealed themselves to be projectors, spewing forth streams of digi-data that coalesced in the centre of the room to form a rotating model of the planet Earth. The screen displayed the Fowl Industries company logo surrounded by a number of files.

'It's a holographic case,' said Foaly, delighted to remain unimpressed. 'We've had those for years.'

'It is not a holographic case – the case is completely real,' corrected Artemis. 'But the images you will see are holographic. I have made a few upgrades to the LEP system. The case is synced with several satellites and the onboard computers can construct real-time images of objects not inside the sensors' range.'

'I've got one of those at home,' mumbled the centaur. 'For my kid's game console.'

'And the system has smart interactive intelligence so I can construct or alter models by hand, so long as I'm wearing v-gloves,' Artemis went on.

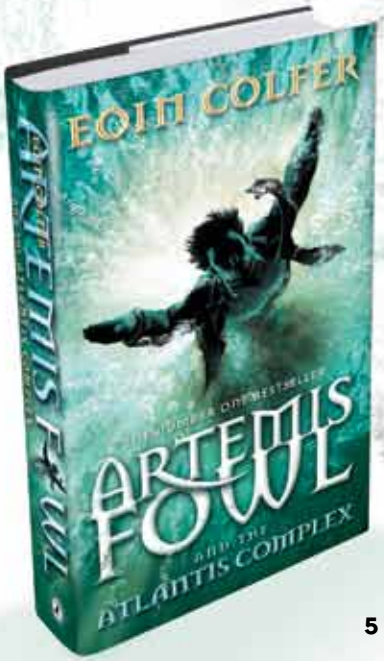
Foaly scowled. 'OK, Mud Boy. That *is* good,' but he couldn't help adding the P.S.: 'For a human.'

Vinyáya's pupils contracted in the light from the projectors. 'This is all very pretty, Fowl, but we still don't know the point of this meeting.'

Artemis stepped into the hologram, and inserted his hands into two v-gloves floating over Australia. The gloves were slightly transparent with thick tubular digits and an unsophisticated polystyrene-look render. Once again the briefcase's sensor flickered thoughtfully before deciding to accept Artemis's hands. The gloves beeped softly and shrank to form a second skin around his fingers, each knuckle highlighted by a digi-marker.

'The Earth,' he began, ignoring the impulse to open his notes folder and count the words. He knew this lecture by heart.

'Our home. She feeds us, she shelters us. Her gravity prevents us from flying off into space and freezing, before thawing out again and being crisped by the sun, none of which really matters as we would have long since asphyxiated.' Artemis paused for laughter and was surprised when it did not arrive. 'That was a little



joke. I read in a presentation manual that a joke often serves to break the ice. And I actually worked ice-breaking into the joke, so there were layers to my humour.'

'That was a joke?' said Vinyáya. 'I've had officers court-martialled for less.'

'If I had some rotten fruit, I would throw it,' added Foaly. 'Why don't you do the science and leave the jokes to people with experience?'

Artemis frowned, upset that he had ad-libbed and now could not be certain how many words were in his presentation. If he finished on a multiple of four which was not also a multiple of five, that could be very bad. Perhaps he should start again? But that was cheating and the number gods would simply add the two speeches together and he'd be no better off.

Complicated. So hard to keep track, even for me.

But he would continue, because it was imperative that *THE PROJECT* be presented now, today, so that *THE PRODUCT* could go into fabrication immediately. So Artemis contained the uncertainty in his heart and launched into the presentation with gusto, barely stopping to draw breath in case his courage deserted him.

'Man is the biggest threat to the Earth. We gut the planet of its fossil fuels then turn those same fuels against the planet through global warming.' Artemis pointed a v-finger at the enlarged screen, opening one video file after another, each one illustrating a point. 'The world's glaciers are losing as much as two metres of ice cover per annum, that's half a million square miles in the Arctic Ocean alone in the past thirty years.' Behind him the video files displayed some of the consequences of global warming.

'The world needs to be saved,' said Artemis. 'I realize now, finally, that I must be the one to save it. *This* is why I am a genius. My very *raison d'être*.'

Vinyáya tapped the table with her index finger. 'There is a lobby in Haven, which has quite a lot of support, that says roll on global warning. The humans will wipe themselves out and then we can take back the planet.'

Artemis was ready for that one. 'An obvious argument, Commander, but it's not just the humans, is it?' He opened a few more video windows and the fairies watched scenes of scrawny polar bears stranded on ice floes, moose in Michigan being eaten alive by an increased tick population and bleached coral reefs devoid of all life. 'It's every living thing on or underneath this planet.'

Foaly was actually quite annoyed by the presentation. 'Do you think we haven't thought about this, Mud Boy? Do you think that this particular problem has not been on the mind of every scientist in Haven and Atlantis? To be honest I find this lecture patronizing.'

Artemis shrugged. 'How you feel is unimportant. How I feel is unimportant. The Earth needs to be saved.'

Holly sat up straight. 'Don't tell me you've found the answer.'

'I think so.'

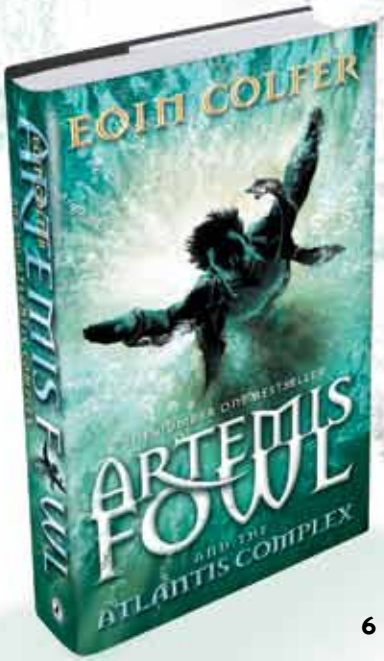
Foaly snorted. 'Really? Let me guess: wrap the icebergs maybe? Or shoot refracting lenses into the atmosphere? How about customized cloud cover? Am I getting warm?'

'We are all getting warm,' said Artemis. 'That is the problem.' He picked up the Earth hologram with one hand and spun it like a basketball. 'All of those solutions could work, with some modifications. But they require too much interstate co-operation and, as we all know, human governments are not good at sharing their toys. Perhaps, in fifty years' time, things might change, but by then it will be too late.'

Commander Vinyáya had always prided herself on an ability to read a situation, and her instincts were loud in her ears like the roar of Pacific surf. This was a historic moment; the very air seemed electric.

'Go on, human,' she said quietly, her words buoyed by authority. 'Tell us.'

Artemis used the v-gloves to highlight the Earth's glaciated areas and rearranged the ice mass into a square. 'Covering glaciers is an excellent idea, but even if the



topography were this simple – a flat square – it would take several armies half a century to get the job done.'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Foaly. 'Human loggers seem to be getting through the rainforests a lot quicker than that.'

'Those on the fringes of the law move faster than those bound by it, which is where I come in.'

Foaly crossed his front legs, which is not easy for a centaur in a chair. 'Do tell. I am all ears.'

'I shall,' said Artemis. 'And I would be grateful if you would stifle the usual expressions of horror and disbelief until I conclude. Your cries of astonishment every time I present an idea are most tiresome and they make it difficult to keep track of the word count.'

'Oh my gods!' exclaimed Foaly. 'Unbelievable.'

Raine Vinyáya threw the centaur a warning look. 'Stop acting the bull troll, Foaly. I've come a long way for this and my ears are very cold.'

'Should I pinch one of the centaur's nerve clusters to keep him quiet?' asked Holly with barely a grin. 'I have studied centaur incapacitation, as well as human, if we happen to need it. I could knock out everybody here with one finger or a sturdy pencil.'

Foaly was eighty per cent sure that Holly was bluffing, but all the same he covered the ganglia over his ears with cupped fingers.

'Very well. I'll keep quiet.'

'Good. Proceed, Artemis.'

'Thank you. But keep your sturdy pencil at the ready, Commander Short. I have a feeling that there could be some disbelief on the way.'

Holly patted her pocket and winked.

'2B hard graphite, nothing better for a quick organ rupture.'

Holly was joking but her heart wasn't in it. Artemis felt that her comments were camouflage for whatever anxiety she was feeling. He rubbed his brow with a thumb and forefinger, using the gesture as cover to sneak a peek at his friend. Holly's own brow was drawn in and her eyes narrow with worry.

She knows, realized Artemis, but what Holly knew he could not say exactly. *She knows that something is different, that the even numbers have turned against me. Two twos are four fairies spitting bad luck on my plans.*

Then Artemis reviewed this last sentence and for a second its lunacy was clear to him and he felt a fat coiled snake of panic heavy in his stomach.

Could I have a brain tumour? he wondered. *That would explain the obsessions, the hallucinations and the paranoia. Or is it simply obsessive compulsive disorder? The great Artemis Fowl felled by a common ailment.*

Artemis spared a moment to try an old hypnotherapist's trick.

Picture yourself in a good place. Somewhere you were happy and safe.

Happy and safe? It had been a while.

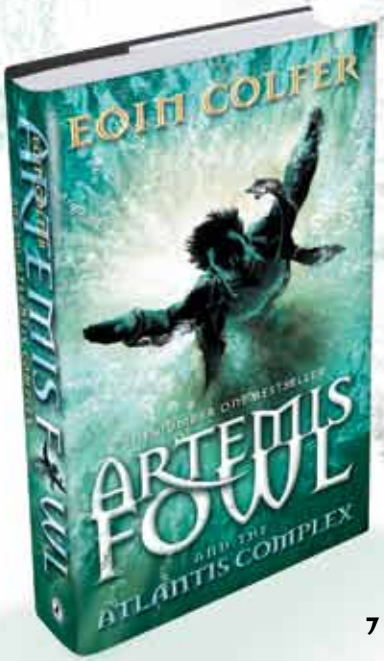
Artemis allowed his mind to fly and he found himself sitting on a small stool in his grandfather's workshop. His grandfather looked a little sneakier than Artemis remembered and he winked at his five-year-old grandson and said:

Do you know how many legs are on that stool, Arty? Three. Only three and that's not a good number for you. Not at all. Three is nearly as bad as four and we all know what four sounds like in Chinese, don't we?

Artemis shuddered. This sickness was even corrupting his memories. He pressed the forefinger and thumb of his left hand together until the pads turned white. A trigger he'd taught himself to elicit calm when the number panic grew too strong, but the trigger was working less and less recently, or in this case not at all.

I am losing my composure, he thought with quiet desperation. *This disease is winning.*

Foaly cleared his throat, puncturing Artemis's dream bubble. 'Hello? Mud Boy?



Important people waiting, get a move on.'

And from Holly. 'Are you OK, Artemis? Do you need to take a break?'

Artemis almost laughed. *Take a break during a presentation? If he did that, he might as well go and stand beside someone wearing an I'MWITH CRAZYT-shirt.*

'No. I'm fine. This is a big project, the biggest. I want to be sure that my presentation is perfect.'

Foaly leaned forward until his already unsteady chair teetered dangerously. 'You don't look fine, Mud Boy. You look . . .' The centaur sucked his bottom lip, searching for the right word. 'Beaten. Artemis, you look beaten.'

Which was the best thing he could have possibly said.

Artemis drew himself up. 'I think, Foaly, that perhaps you do not read human expressions well. Perhaps our faces are too short. I am not beaten by any manner or means. I am considering my every word.'

'Maybe you should consider a little faster,' advised Holly gently. 'We are quite exposed here.'

Artemis closed his eyes, collecting himself.

Vinyáya drummed the table with her fingers. 'No more delays, human. I am beginning to suspect that you have involved us in one of your notorious plans.'

'No. This is a genuine proposal. Please, hear me out.'

'I'm trying to. I want to. I came long way for that exact purpose, but all you do is show off with your suitcase.'

Artemis raised his hands to shoulder level, the movement activating his v-gloves, and tapped the glacier.

'What we need to do is cover a significant area of the world's glaciers with a reflective coating to slow down the melt. The coating would have to be thicker around the edges where the ice is thawing more rapidly. Also it would be nice if we could plug the larger sinkholes.'

'A lot of things would be *nice* in a perfect world,' said Foaly, once again making smithereens of his promise to keep quiet. 'Don't you think your people would get a tad upset if little creatures pop out of the ground in spaceships and start carpeting Santa's grotto with reflective foil?'

'They . . . we . . . would. And that is why this operation has to be carried out in secret.'

'Secretly coat the world's glaciers? You should have said.'

'I just did say and I thought we agreed that you would hold your peace. This constant haranguing is tiresome.'

Holly winked at Foaly, twirling a pencil between her fingers.

'The problem with coating the icebergs has always been how to deploy the reflective blanket,' continued Artemis. 'It would seem that the only way to do it would be to roll the stuff out like carpet, either manually or from the rear of some kind of customized snow crawlers.'

'Which is hardly a stealth operation,' said Foaly.

'Exactly. But what if there were another way to lay down a reflective covering, a seemingly natural way.'

'Work with nature?'

'Yes, Foaly. Nature is our model; it should always be.'

The room seemed to be heating up as Artemis drew closer to his big reveal.

'Human scientists have been struggling to make their reflective foil thin enough to work with, yet strong enough to withstand the elements.'

'Stupid.'

'Misguided, centaur. Not stupid, surely. Your own files . . .'

'I considered the foil idea briefly. And how did you see my files?'

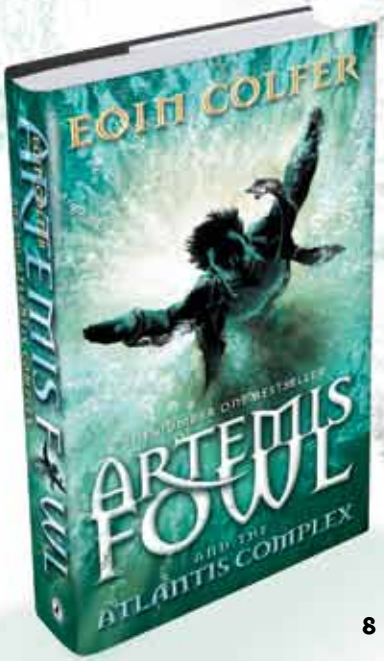
This was not a real question. Foaly had long since resigned himself to the fact that Artemis Fowl was at least as talented a hacker as he himself was.

'The basic idea is sound. Fabricate a reflective polymer.'

Foaly chewed his knuckles. 'Nature. Use nature.'

'What is the most natural thing up here?' said Artemis, giving a little hint.

'Ice,' said Holly. 'Ice and . . .'



'Snow,' whispered the centaur almost reverentially. 'Of course. D'Arvit, why didn't I . . . Snow, isn't it?'

Artemis raised his v-gloved hands and holographic snow rained upon them.

'Snow,' he said, the blizzard swirling around him. 'No one would be surprised by snow.'

Foaly was on his feet. 'Magnify,' he ordered. 'Magnify and enhance.'

Artemis tapped a holographic flake, freezing it in mid-air. With a couple of pinches he enlarged the ersatz flake until its irregularity became clear. It was irregularly regular, a perfect circle.

'A nano-wafer,' said Foaly, forgetting for once to hide how impressed he was. 'An honest-to-gods nano-wafer. Smart?'

'Extremely,' confirmed Artemis. 'Smart enough to know which way is up when it hits the surface and configure itself to insulate the ice and reflect the sun.'

'So we impregnate the cloud province?'

'Exactly, to its capacity.'

Foaly clopped into the holographic weather. 'Then when it ruptures we have coverage.'

'Incremental, true, but effective nonetheless.'

'Mud Boy, I salute you.'

Artemis smiled, his old self for a moment. 'Well, it's about time.'

Vinyáya interrupted the science love fest. 'Let me see if I've got this straight. You shoot these wafers into the clouds and then they come down with the snow?'

'Precisely. We could shoot them directly on to the surface in dire cases, but I think for security it would be best to have the seeders hovering shielded above the cloud cover.'

'And you can do this?'

'We can do it. The Council would have to approve an entire fleet of modified shuttles, not to mention a monitoring station.'

Holly thought of something. 'These wafers don't look much like snowflakes. Sooner or later some human with a microscope is going to notice the difference.'

'Good point, Holly. Perhaps I shouldn't lump you in with the rest of the LEP as regards intellect.'

'Thanks, I think.'

'When the wafers are discovered, as they inevitably will be, I will launch an Internet campaign that explains them away as a by-product from a chemical plant in Russia. I will also point out that for once our waste is actually helping the environment and volunteer to fund a programme that will extend their coverage.'

'Is there a pollution factor?' asked Vinyáya.

'Hardly. The wafers are entirely bio-degradable.'

Foaly was excited. He clip-clopped through the hologram, squinting at the enlarged wafer.

'It *sounds* good. But is it really? You hardly expect the People to stump up the massive and ongoing budget for such a project without proof, Artemis. For all we know, it's one of your scams.'

Artemis opened a file on the screen. 'Here are my financial records. I know they are accurate, Foaly, because I found them on your server.'

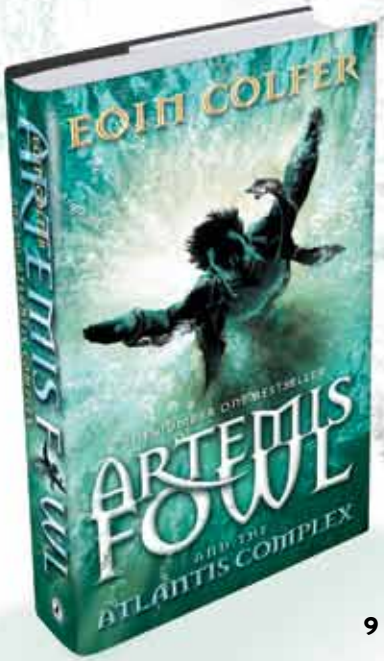
Foaly did not even bother blushing. 'They look about right.'

'I am prepared to invest everything I have in this project. That should keep five shuttles in the air for a couple of years. There will be profit on the back end, naturally, when the wafers go into production. I should recoup my investment then, perhaps even turn a respectable profit.'

Foaly almost gagged. *Artemis Fowl putting his own money into a project. Incredible.*

'Of course I hardly expect the People take anything I say on face value. After all, I have been –' Artemis cleared his throat – 'somewhat less than forthcoming with information in the past.'

Vinyáya laughed humourlessly. 'Less than forthcoming? I think you're being a



little gentle on yourself for a kidnapper and extortionist, Artemis. *Less than forthcoming?* Please. I find myself buying your pitch, but not everybody on the Council is as charitable towards you.'

'I accept your criticism and your scepticism, which is why I have organized a demonstration.'

'Excellent,' said Foaly eagerly. 'Of course there's a demonstration. Why else would you have brought us here?'

'Why else indeed.'

'More extortion and kidnapping?' suggested Vinyáya archly.

'That was a long time ago,' blurted Holly, in a tone she would not usually take with a superior officer. 'I mean . . . that was a long time ago . . . Commander. Artemis has been a good friend to the People.'

Holly Short thought specifically of a close call during the goblin rebellion when Artemis Fowl's actions had saved her life and many more besides.

Vinyáya apparently remembered the goblin rebellion too. 'OK. Benefit-of-the-doubt time, Fowl. You've got twenty minutes to convince us.'

Artemis patted his breast pocket five times to check on his phone.

'It shouldn't take more than ten,' he said.

Holly Short was a trained hostage negotiator and found that in spite of the importance of the topic she was rapidly shifting focus away from nano-wafers and towards Artemis Fowl's mannerisms. Though she commented occasionally as the demonstration progressed, it was all she could do not to cradle Artemis's face in her hands and ask him what was the matter.

I would have to stand on a chair to reach his face, Holly realized. *My friend is almost a grown man now. A fully fledged human. Perhaps he is fighting his natural-born bloodthirsty desires and the conflict is driving him crazy.*

Holly studied Artemis closely. He was pale, more so than usual, like a creature of the night. A snow wolf maybe. The sharp cheekbones and triangular length of face added to this impression. And perhaps it was frost, but Holly thought she could see a streak of grey at his temples.

He seems old. Foaly was right: Artemis looks beaten.

Then there was the number thing. And the touching. Artemis's fingers were never still. At first it seemed random, but, on a hunch, Holly counted and soon the pattern was clear. Fives or multiples of five.

D'Arvit, she thought. *Atlantis Complex*.

She ran a quick search on Wicca-pedia and came across a brief summary:

> **Atlantis Complex:** (At-lan-tyss) is a psychosis common among guilt-ridden criminals, first diagnosed by Dr E. Dypess of the Atlantis Brainology Clinic. Other symptoms include obsessive behaviour, paranoia, delusions and in extreme cases multiple-personality disorder. Dr E. Dypess is also known for his hit song 'I'm In Two Minds About You'.

Holly thought that this last bit was possibly Wicca-humour.

Foaly had reached the same conclusion about Artemis and said as much in a text message he buzzed over to Holly's helmet, which sat on the table before her.

Holly tapped her visor to reverse the readout then read the words.

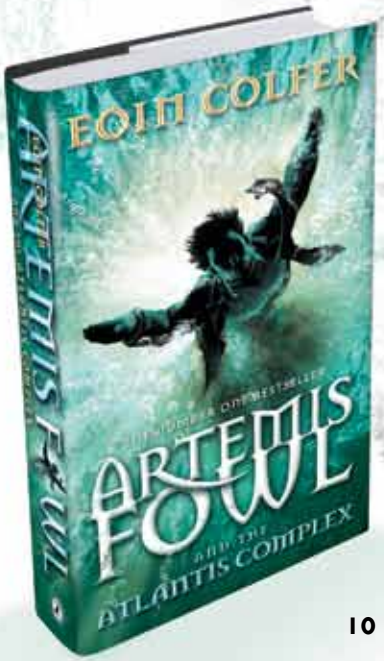
Our boy is obsessing. Atlantis?

Holly called up a Gnommish keyboard on the visor and typed, slowly, so as not to attract attention.

Maybe. Fives? She sent the message.

Yes, fives. Classic symptom.

Then seconds later.



A demonstration! Fab. I ♥ demonstrations.

Holly managed to keep a straight face in case Artemis happened to stop counting long enough to glance her way. Foaly could never concentrate on anything for very long, unless it was one of his beloved projects.

Must be a genius thing.

It seemed as though the Icelandic elements held their breath for Artemis's demonstration. The dull air was cut with haze that hung in sheets like rows of laundered gauze.

The fairy folk felt their suit thermocoils vibrate a little as they followed Artemis outside to the rear of the restaurant. The rear of the Adam Adamsson's establishment was even less impressive than the front. Whatever lackadaisical effort had been applied to making the Great Skua hospitable obviously did not extend to the back of the building. A whale mural, which looked like Adamsson had painted it himself using a live Arctic fox for a brush, stopped abruptly over the service entrance, decapitating an unfortunate humpback. And in several spots large sections of plaster had split from the wall and been tramped into the mud and snow.

Artemis led the small group to a tarpaulin, which had been pegged over a large cube.

Foaly snorted. 'Let me guess. Looks like a common garden tarpaulin, but is actually cam foil with rear projection set to look like tarp?'

Artemis took two more steps before answering, then nodded towards everyone to fix them in their places. A bead of sweat ran down his back, generated by the stress of losing his battle to obsessive behaviour.

'No, Foaly. It looks like a tarpaulin because it is a tarpaulin,' he said, then added. 'Yes, a tarpaulin.'

Foaly blinked. 'Yes, a tarpaulin? Are we in one of your Gilbert and Sullivan operettas now?' He threw his head back and sang, '*I am a centaur, yes, a centaur is what I am*. It's not like you to wax, Artemis.'

'Foaly is singing,' said Holly. 'Surely that's illegal?'

Vinyáya snapped her fingers. 'Quiet, children. Contain your natural disruptive urges. I am most eager to see these nano-wafers in action before taking a shuttle closer to the warm core of our planet.'

Artemis bowed slightly. 'Thank you, Commander, most kind.'

Five again, thought Holly. *The evidence mounts*.

Artemis Fowl twirled a hand at Holly Short as though introducing himself to a theatre audience. 'Captain, perhaps you would remove the cloth. You have an aptitude for taking things apart.'

Holly was almost thrilled to have something to do. She would have preferred to have a serious talk with Artemis, but at least tackling a crate did not involve ingesting more scientific facts.

'Happy to,' she said, and attacked the tarp as though it had insulted her grandmother. Suddenly there was a knuckle knife adorning the fingers of her right hand, and three judicious slices later the tarp fluttered to the ground.

'You might as well do the crate while you are about it, Captain Short,' said Artemis, wishing he could sneak in an extra word to bolster the sentence. Immediately, Holly mounted the crate and apparently punched it into sections.

'Wow,' exhaled Foaly. 'That seemed excessively violent, even for you.'

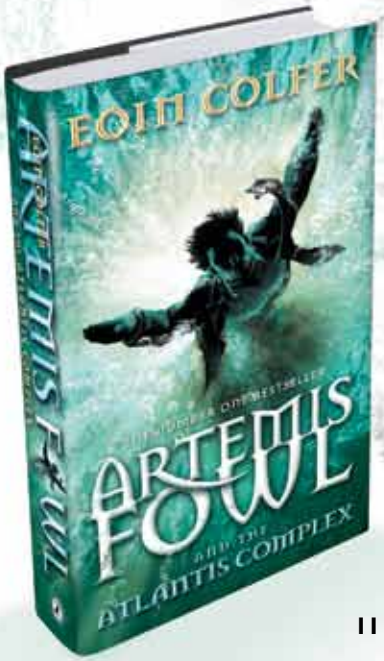
Holly descended to earth barely making a footprint in the snow. 'Nope. It's more of a science. *Cos tapa*. The quick foot. An ancient martial art based on the movements of predatory animals.'

'Look!' said Foaly, pointing with some urgency into the vast steel-grey gloom. 'Someone who cares!'

Artemis was glad of the banter as it distracted from his loosening grasp on the logical world. While the fairies enjoyed their customary back and forth, he allowed his spine to curve for a moment, let his shoulders dip, but someone noticed.

'Artemis?'

Holly, of course.



'Yes, Captain Short.'

'Captain? Are we strangers, Artemis?'

Artemis coughed into his hand. She was probing. He needed to ward off her attentions. Nothing to do but say the number aloud.

'Strangers? No. We've known each other for more than *five* years.'

Holly took a step towards him, her eyes wide with concern behind the orange curve of visor.

'This five thing, Arty. I'm worried about that. You're not yourself.'

Artemis swept past her to the container that rested on the floor of the crate.

'Who else would I be?' he said brusquely, cutting short any possible discussion on the state of his mental health. He waved impatiently at the ice haze as though it were deliberately obstructing him, then pointed his mobile phone at the container, zapping the computerized locks. The container looked and sounded like a regular household refrigerator, squat, pearlescent and humming.

'Just what they need in Iceland,' muttered Foaly. 'More ice-makers.'

'Ah, but a very special ice-maker,' said Artemis, opening the fridge door. 'One that can save the glaciers.'

'Does it make Popsicles too?' asked the centaur innocently, wishing his old buddy Mulch Diggums was there so they could high five, a practice so puerile and outmoded that it would be sure to drive Artemis crazy, if he weren't already crazy.

'You said this was a demonstration,' snapped Vinyáya. 'So demonstrate.'

Artemis shot Foaly a poisonous look. 'With great pleasure, Commander. Observe.'

Inside the container sat a squat chrome contraption, which resembled a cross between a top-loader washing machine and a stubby cannon, apart from the jumble of wires and chips nestled under the bowl.

'The Ice Cube is not pretty, I grant you,' said Artemis, priming the equipment with an infra-red signal shot from the sensor on his phone. 'But I thought better to get production moving along than spend another month tidying the chassis.'

They formed a ragged ring round the device and Artemis could not help thinking that had a satellite been observing the group they would look like children playing a game.

Vinyáya's face was pale and her teeth chattered, though the temperature was barely below freezing. Chilly in human terms, a lot more uncomfortable for a fairy.

'Come on, human. Switch this Ice Cube thing on. Let's get the dwarf on the mudslide.'

A fairy expression which Artemis was not familiar with, but he could guess what it meant. He glanced at his phone.

'Surely, Commander. I will certainly launch the first pouch of nano-wafers just as soon as whatever unidentified craft is passing through the airspace moves on.'

Holly consulted her visor readout communicator. 'Nothing in the airspace, Mud Boy. Nothing but a shielded shuttle full of hurt for you, if you're trying to pull some kind of trick.'

Artemis could not stifle a groan. 'No need for the rhetoric. I assure you, Captain, there is a ship descending through the atmosphere. My sensors are picking it up quite clearly.'

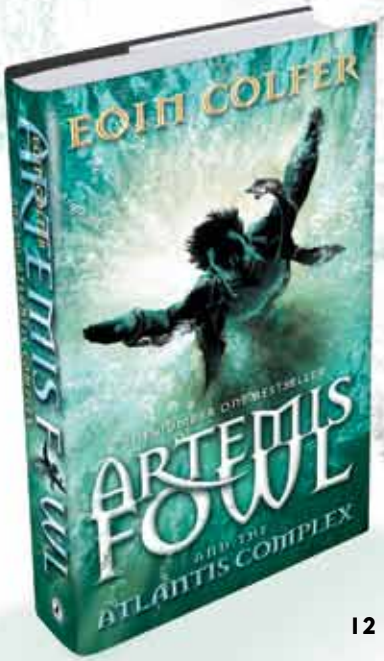
Holly thrust her jaw forward. 'Well, *my* sensors aren't picking up a thing.'

'Funny, because my sensors *are* your sensors,' countered Artemis.

Foaly clopped a hoof, chipping the ice. 'I knew it. Is nothing sacred?'

Artemis squared his shoulders. 'Let's stop pretending that we don't spend half our time spying on each other. I read your files and you read the files I allow you to steal. There is a craft which seems to be heading straight for us and maybe your sensors would spot it if you used some of the same filters I do.'

Holly thought of something. 'Remember Opal Koboi's ship? The one completely built from stealth ore? Our pet geeks couldn't detect that but Artemis did.'



Artemis arched his eyebrows as if to say *even the police officer gets it*. 'I simply looked for what should be there but wasn't. Ambient gases, trace pollution and such. Wherever I found an apparent vacuum I also found Opal. I have since applied the same technique to my general scans. I am surprised you haven't learned that little trick, *Consultant* Foaly.'

'It will take about two seconds to sync with our shuttle and run an ambience test.'

Vinyáya scowled and her annoyance seemed to ripple the air like a heatwave.

'Run it then, centaur.'

Foaly activated the sensors in his gloves and screwed a yellow monocle over one eye. Thus wired he performed a complicated series of blinks, winks and gestures as he interfaced with a v-system invisible to all but him. To the casual observer it would seem as though the centaur had inhaled pepper while conducting an imaginary orchestra. It was not attractive, which was why most people tended to stick with hardwired hardware.

Twenty seconds more than two seconds later, Foaly's exertions ceased suddenly and he rested palms on knees.

'OK,' he panted. 'Firstly, I am nobody's *pet geek*. And, secondly, there may be a large unidentified space vehicle headed our way at high speed.'

Holly instantly drew her weapon, as though she could gun down a spaceship that was already falling on them.

Artemis rushed towards his Ice Cube, arms outstretched maternally, then literally stopped in his tracks as suspicion filled his heart with heat.

'This is your ship, Foaly. Admit it.'

'It's not my ship,' protested Foaly. 'I don't even have a ship. I come to work on a quadrocycle.'

Artemis fought the paranoia until his hands shook, but there seemed to be no other explanation for the arrival of a strange ship at this precise time.

'You're trying to steal my invention. This is just like the time in London when you interfered in the C-Cube deal.'

Holly kept her eyes on the skies, but spoke to her human friend.

'I *saved* Butler in London.'

Artemis's whole frame was shaking now. 'Did you? Or did you *turn* him against me?' The words he spoke disgusted him, but they seemed to push through his lips like scarab beetles from the mouth of a mummy.

'That's when you made your alliance against me, wasn't it? How much did you offer him?'

For a long foggy breath, Holly was speechless, then: 'Offer him? Butler would never betray you. Never! How can you think that, Artemis?'

Artemis glared at his fingers as if he half hoped they would reach up and strangle him. 'I know you're behind this, Holly Short. You have never forgiven me for the kidnapping.'

'You need help, Artemis,' said Holly, tired of talking around the problem. 'I think you may have a condition. It might be something called the Atlantis Complex.'

Artemis stumbled backwards, knocking against Foaly's hindquarters. 'I know,' he said slowly, watching his breath take form before him. 'Lately, nothing is clear. I see things, suspect everyone. Five. Five is everywhere.'

'As if we would ever do anything to hurt you, Artemis,' said Foaly, patting the hair Artemis had ruffled.

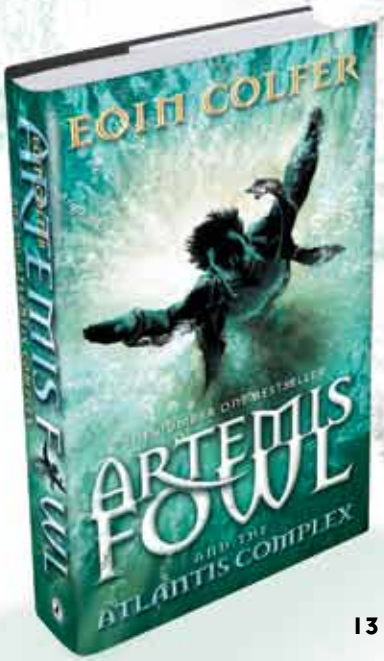
'I don't know. Would you? Why wouldn't you? I have the most important job on Earth, more important than yours.'

Holly was calling in the cavalry.

'There's a UC in the atmo,' she called into her communicator, using that soldier shorthand that seemed more confusing than plain speaking. 'Descend to my seven for evac. Stat.'

A fairy shuttle fizzled into visibility seven metres overhead. It appeared plate by plate from stern to aft, the soldiers inside visible for a brief moment before the hull solidified. The sight seemed to confuse Artemis even further.

'Is that how you're going to take me? Scare me into voluntarily coming aboard,



then steal my Ice Cube?'

'It's always cubes with you,' noted Foaly somewhat randomly. 'What's wrong with a nice sphere?'

'And you, centaur!' said Artemis, pointing an accusing finger. 'Always in my system. Are you in my head too?'

Vinyáya had forgotten the cold. She shrugged off her heavy coat to gain some ease of movement.

'Captain Short. The crazed human is your contact – put him on a leash until we get out of here.'

It was an unfortunate phrase to use.

'Put me on a leash? Is that what you've been doing all this time, Captain Short?'

Artemis was shivering now, as though a current passed through his limbs.

'Artemis,' said Holly urgently. 'Wouldn't you like to sleep for a while? Just lay your head down somewhere warm and sleep?'

The notion took hold in some corner of Artemis's brain. 'Yes. Sleep. Can you do that, Holly?'

Holly took a slow step forward. 'Of course I can. Just a little *mesmer* is all it takes. You'll wake up a new man.'

Artemis's eyes seemed to jellify. 'A new man. But what about *THE PROJECT*?'

Easy now, thought Holly. *Move in gently*. 'We can take care of it when you wake up.' She slipped the thinnest wafer of magic into her upper registers; to Artemis it would sound like the tinkling of crystal bells on every consonant.

'Sleep,' said Artemis, softly in case volume broke the word. 'To sleep, perchance to dream.'

'Quoting theatre now?' said Foaly. 'Do we really have the time?'

Holly hushed him with a glare, then took another step towards Artemis.

'Just a few hours. We can take you away from here, from whatever's coming.'

'Away from here,' echoed the troubled boy.

'Then we can talk about the project.'

The shuttle's pilot fluffed his approach, carving a shallow trench in the surface with his rear stabilizer. The cacophonous splintering of sugar-glass-thin ice plates was enough to sharpen Artemis's pupils.

'No,' he shouted, his voice shrill for once. 'No magic. One two three four five. Stay where you are.'

A second craft introduced itself to the melodrama, appearing suddenly in the distant skyscape as though crashing through from an alternate dimension. Huge and sleek like a spiralling ice-cream cone, trailing tethered boosters, one errant engine detaching and spinning off into the heavy grey clouds. For such a huge ship, it made very little noise.

Artemis was shocked by the sight.

Aliens? was his first thought, then: *Wait, not aliens. I have seen this before. A schematic at least.*

Foaly was having the same thought. 'You know, that looks familiar.'

Entire sections of the giant ship were flickering out of sight as it cooled down from its steep atmospheric entry, or re-entry as it turned out.

'That's one from your space programme,' said Artemis accusingly.

'It's possible,' Foaly admitted, a guilty tinge blossoming on his rear cheeks, another reason he lost at poker. 'Difficult to tell with all the erratic movements and so forth.'

The LEP shuttle finally touched down, popping a hatch on its port side.

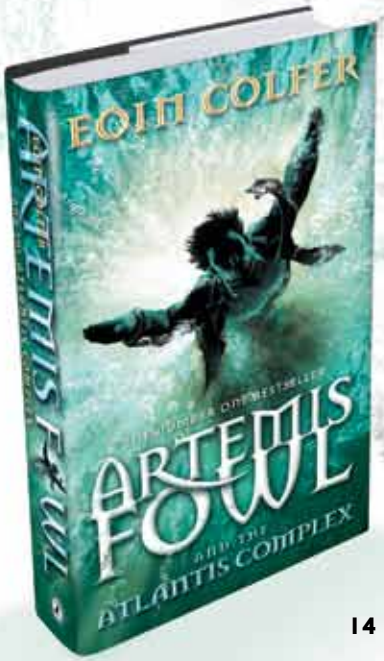
'Everyone in,' ordered Vinyáya. 'We need to put a little distance between us and that ship.'

Foaly was three or four steps ahead. 'No. No, this is one of ours. It shouldn't be here, but we can still control it.'

Holly snorted. 'Sure. You're doing a great job of it so far.'

This comment was one more than the centaur could bear. He finally snapped, rearing majestically on his hind legs, then bringing his front hooves smashing down on the thin ice.

'Enough!' he roared. 'There is a deep-space probe bearing down on us. And even if its nuclear generator does not explode, the impact blast wave alone will be



enough to destroy everything in a fifteen-mile radius, so unless that shuttle of yours can travel to another dimension, boarding will be about as much use as you would be at a scientific convention.'

Holly shrugged. 'Fair enough. What do you suggest?'

'I suggest you shut up and let me deal with this problem.'

The term *probe* generally brings to mind a small, spare craft, with perhaps a few sample jars in its hold and maybe a rack of super-efficient solar cells clamped to its back, but this machine was the polar opposite of such an image. It was huge and violent in its movement, jarring the air as it bludgeoned through, jumping in lurching leaps, dragging tethered engines behind like captured slaves.

'This thing,' muttered Foaly, blinking to activate his monocle, 'seemed friendlier when I designed it.'

The soldiers were ordered to hold their positions, and the entire group could only watch as the giant ship bore down on them, screaming ever louder as its soundproofing waffling was scored. Atmospheric friction tore at the probe with jagged fingers, tearing huge octagonal plates from the hull. And all the while Foaly tried to gain control of it.

'What I'm doing is going through the shuttle's antennae to get a good fix on the probe's computer, see if I can find the malfunction and then maybe I can program in a nice friendly hover at thirty metres. A little more shield would be nice too.'

'Less explaining,' said Vinyáya through gritted teeth, 'and more fixing.'

Foaly kept up his line of drivel as he worked. 'Come on, Commander. I know you military types thrive on these tense situations.'

Throughout this exchange, Artemis stood still as a statue, aware that should he release the tremors they would engulf him perhaps forever and he would be lost.

What has happened? he wondered. *Am I not Artemis Fowl?*

Then he noticed something.

That ship has four engines. Four.

Death.

As if to confirm this thought, or indeed prompted by the thought, an orange bolt of energy appeared at the very tip of the descending craft, roiling nastily, looking very much like a bringer of death.

'Orange energy,' noted Holly, shooting it with a finger gun. 'You're the explainer guy, Foaly, explain that.'

'Worry not, lesser intellect,' said Foaly, fingers a blur across his keyboard. 'This ship is unarmed. It's a scientific probe, for gods' sake. That plasma bolt is an ice-cutter, no more than that.'

Artemis could hold in the tremors no longer and they wracked his slim frame.

'Four engines,' he said, teeth chattering. 'F-f-four is death.'

Vinyáya paused on her way to the shuttle gangway. She turned, a sheaf of steel hair escaping her hood. 'Death? What's he talking about?'

Before Holly could answer, the orange plasma beam bubbled merrily for a moment then blasted directly into the shuttle's engine.

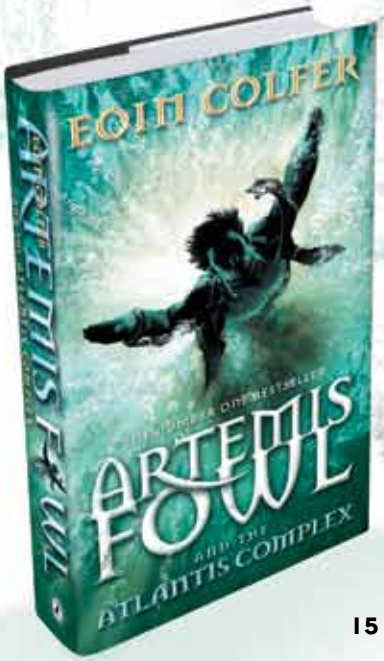
'No, no, no,' said Foaly, speaking as one would to an errant student. 'That's not right at all.'

They watched horrified as the shuttle collapsed in a ball of turgid heat, rendering the metal shell transparent for just long enough to reveal the writhing marines inside.

Holly dropped low and dived towards Vinyáya who was searching for a pathway through the flames to her men inside.

'Commander!'

Holly Short was fast, actually getting a grip on Vinyáya's glove before one of the shuttle's engines exploded and sent Holly pin-wheeling through the superheated air on to the roof of the Great Skua restaurant. She flapped on the slate like



a butterfly on a pin, staring stupidly at the glove in her hand. Her visor's recognition software had locked on to Commander Vinyáya's face and a warning icon flashed gently.

Fatal injury to central nervous system, read a text on her screen. Holly knew that the computer was saying the same thing in her ear, but she couldn't hear it. *Please seal off the area and call emergency services.*

Fatal injury? This couldn't be happening again. In that nanosecond she flashed back to her former commander Julius Root's death.

Reality returned in a fiery heatwave, turning the ice to steam and popping the heat sensors in her suit.

Holly dug her fingers into the roof slush and hauled her upper body higher. The scene played around her like a silent movie, as her helmet noise filters had expanded and ruptured in the nanosecond between the flash and the bang.

Everyone in the shuttle was gone . . . that much was clear.

Don't say gone, *say* dead – *that's what they are*.

'Focus!' she said aloud, pounding a fist into the roof to emphasize each syllable. There would be time to grieve later; this crisis was not yet past.

Who is not dead?

She was not dead. Bleeding but alive, smoke drifting from the soles of her boots.

Vinyáya. Oh gods.

Forget Vinyáya for now.

And in a snowdrift underneath the eaves she spotted Foaly's legs doing an inverted gallop.

Is that funny now? Should I be laughing?

But where was Artemis? Suddenly Holly's heartbeat was loud in her ears and her blood roared like the surf.

Artemis.

Holly's journey to a crouch was harder than it was supposed to be and no sooner had her knees found purchase than her elbows gave way and she ended up almost back where she'd started.

Artemis. Where are you?

Then from the corner of her eye Holly saw her friend loping across the ice. Artemis was apparently unharmed, apart from a slight drag in his left leg. He was moving slowly but determinedly away from the burning shuttle. Away from the crank and blackening of contracting metal and the mercury drip of stealth ore finally reaching its melting point.

Where are you going?

Not running away, that was for sure. If anything, Artemis was moving directly into the path of the still-falling space probe.

Holly tried to scream a warning. She opened her mouth but could only cough smoke. She tasted smoke and battle.

'Artemis,' she managed to hack after several attempts.

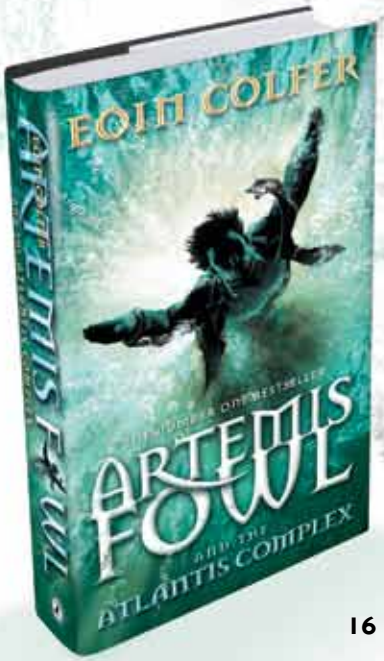
Artemis glanced up at her. 'I know,' he shouted, a ragged edge to his voice. 'The sky appears to be falling but it isn't. None of this is real, the ship, those soldiers, none of it. I realize that now. I've been . . . I've been having delusions, you see.'

'Get clear, Artemis,' cried Holly, her voice not her own, feeling like her brain was sending signals to someone else's mouth. 'That ship is real. It will crush you.'

'No it won't, you'll see.' Artemis was actually smiling benignly. 'Delusional disorder, that's all this craft is. I simply constructed this vision from an old memory, one of Foaly's blueprints I sneaked a look at. I need to face my dementia. Once I can prove to myself that this is all in my head, then I can keep it there.'

Holly crawled across the roof, feeling her insides buzz as magic went to work on her organs. Strength was returning, but slowly, and her legs felt like lead pipes. 'Listen to me, Artemis. Trust me.'

'No,' Artemis barked. 'I don't trust any of you. Not Butler, not even my own mother.' Artemis hunched his shoulders. 'I don't know what to believe, or who to



trust. But I do know that there cannot be a space probe crash-landing here at this precise moment. The odds against it are just too astronomical. My mind is playing tricks on me and I have to show it who's boss.'

Holly registered about half of that speech, but she'd heard enough to realize that Artemis was referring to his own mind in the third person, which was a warning sign no matter which head doctor's theories you subscribed to.

The spaceship continued to bear down on them, unaffected by Artemis's lack of belief in its existence, shunting shockwaves before it. For a memory made flesh it certainly seemed very real, each panel richly textured by the tribulations of space travel. Long jagged striations were etched into the nose cone like scars from lightning bolts, and buckshot dents peppered the fuselage. A ragged semicircular chunk was missing from one of the three fins, as though a deep-space creature had taken a bite from the passing craft, and strangely coloured lichen was crayoned in the square patch vacated by a hull plate.

Even Artemis had to admit it. 'That doesn't seem particularly ethereal. I must have a more vivid imagination than I had thought.'

Two of the ship's silencers blew out in rapid succession and engine roar filled the bowl of grey sky.

Artemis pointed a rigid finger at the craft. 'You are not real!' he shouted, though even he did not hear the words. The ship was low enough now for Artemis to read the message written in several scripts and pictograms across the nose cone.

'I come in peace,' he mumbled, and thought: *Four words. Death.*

Holly was thinking too, images of tragedy and destruction flashing past like the lights of a train carriage, but there was one other notion holding steady through the chaos.

I can't reach him from this rooftop. Artemis is going to die and there's nothing I can do but watch.

And then a hysterical afterthought.

Butler is going to kill me.

