

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *ARTEMIS FOWL*

EOIN COLFER



FOWL
THE
TWINNS

DENY ALL CHARGES

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NEED TO KNOW

MOST FAIRIES ARE FAMILIAR WITH THE NAME Artemis Fowl. In fact, the young human's exploits are referenced in a cautionary nursery rhyme taught in fairy preschools. The most famous version of the rhyme goes like this:

*Never fall foul
Of Artemis Fowl,
For wise as an owl
Is he.*

*He wrestled a troll
And stole fairy gold,
Then frightened
The LEP.*

Commander Trouble Kelp of the Lower Elements Police once petitioned, at an education summit, to have this rhyme removed from the curriculum on the grounds that:

1. It had not, in fact, been Artemis Fowl who'd wrestled the troll, but rather his bodyguard, Butler (see LEP file: *Artemis Fowl*).
2. There was only anecdotal evidence to support the claim that the LEP had been *frightened* at the Fowl Manor siege. Some of the operatives had been slightly anxious perhaps, but hardly frightened, and (Trouble was really grasping at straws here) . . .
3. According to zoologists, owls are really not so wise, and are actually less trainable than common pigeons, so it is factually incorrect to present the owl as a symbol of wisdom.

This argument drew, appropriately enough, hoots of laughter from the assembly.

Unfortunately for Commander Kelp, he himself was obliged to recite the rhyme as part of his petition, and by the second line the entire congress was reciting it along with him. Shortly thereafter, much to the commander's irritation, a show of hands dictated that the Artemis Fowl nursery rhyme remain on the school syllabus.

And, while it was true that Artemis Fowl's first

interaction with the fairy folk had been less than auspicious, it had at least prompted the Council to push through updates to their security protocols, including the lifting of a centuries-old hex forbidding fairies to enter human dwellings uninvited, and the striking of a law requiring them to carry a copy of the Fairy Book at all times. Even so, there was many a relieved mutter when Artemis and his bodyguard, Butler, embarked on a five-year scientific expedition to Mars, with one indiscreet Council member (who forgot to turn off her microphone after an interview) quipping that she felt ‘sorry for any aliens out there who might cross the Fowl boy’s path’, which was a little harsh considering Artemis had saved the entire world from the megalomaniacal pixie, Opal Koboi, temporarily sacrificing his own life in the process.

But, as is often the case when one criminal mastermind launches himself into space, there is another ready to take his place, and in this instance the replacement mastermind was Artemis’s own younger brother Myles, who was, if anything, even more condescending towards the world than Artemis had been when he lived in it. On Myles’s blog, *Myles to Go*, he regularly disparaged noted scientists with comments like:

Leonardo knew about as much about flying machines as I know about boy bands.

Or:

Regarding Einstein's devotion to the big-bang theory, please. His version of the theory has more hypotheticals than the televisual show of the same name and is almost as funny.

This comment did not endear him to Albert Einstein's legions of fans.

He also skewered humanity in general on the blog, through a series of editorials, including the scathing 'Dear Internet: One Billion Hysterical Opinions Do Not Carry the Weight of a Single Fact'.

The comments following this article ran into the tens of thousands, without one smiley face in the bunch.

Fortunately for social media's blood pressure, Myles's acerbic nature was tempered somewhat by the presence of his twin brother, Beckett, who was of a sunnier disposition. Or, as Myles often put it: 'Where I see the dispersion of light in water droplets, Beck sees a rainbow.' Though he could never stop himself from

qualifying this remark with, 'Although anyone who has so much as flipped through a meteorology text can tell you that there is no bow involved.' This remark demonstrated that Myles Fowl had about as much of a sense of humour as a Vulcan, and that he was possibly in the top five per cent of smug people on the planet and in the top one per cent of smug twelve-year-olds overall.

Beckett was, in many respects, his sibling's total opposite and, had they not been related, it seemed unlikely that they would have enjoyed each other's company, but in the way of twins the boys loved and protected each other even unto death, and occasionally beyond.

For Beckett's part, he safeguarded Myles using his physicality, a sphere in which Myles had about as much prowess as a piece of sod; he was forever tripping over footpaths and falling *up* stairs, which is almost a skill. On one occasion, a group of Albert Einstein devotees rushed Myles at the school gate, brandishing hardback copies of *The Meaning of Relativity*, and Beckett dispatched them by stuffing several sticks of gum into his mouth and cartwheeling towards them while chewing noisily. He did this because Myles had once

told him that people with high IQs tend to suffer from misophonia, which is a visceral reaction to certain sounds, the number-one culprit being loud chewing. Beckett's gum trick sent the Einstein disciples packing, but it also disoriented Myles, who walked into a gate and had to have stitches in his forehead as a result. So a mixed outcome all in all.

Beckett was an inherent optimist and saw the good in every person and the beauty in every blade of grass. He was also somewhat of a savant when it came to acrobatics and could easily have led a circus troupe, had he so wished. This skill translated neatly to combat situations. For instance, Beckett had mastered the infamous cluster punch, which most martial-arts masters did not even believe existed. The beauty of the cluster punch was that it temporarily paralysed the victim without causing any real pain. This particular talent was one that Beckett could expect to use often, considering the family to which he belonged. In fact, the Fowl twin kept a tally of his victories, and by his reckoning he had, to date, incapacitated twenty-seven special-forces officers, eleven burglars, a small carful of clowns, six drunken Dublin men who had swum out to the Fowls' Dalkey Island residence after a stag night,

five bullies whom he caught picking on smaller children, three big-game poachers and, in a display of cosmic humour, an intrusive journalist named Partridge who had concealed himself in a pear tree.

Myles, on the other hand, had never actually landed a real blow on an enemy, though he did once manage to punch himself in the buttock during a wrestling session with his brother and had been known to accidentally tie his own shoelaces together. Myles solved the shoelace problem simply by wearing leather loafers whenever possible, which nicely complemented his trademark black suits, and he solved the buttock problem by resolving never to throw a punch again, unless Beckett's life depended on it.

In the past year, the Fowl Twins had initiated what had come to be known in LEP files as the Second Cycle of Modern Fowl Adventures. *Modern* because the archives did contain several mentions of Myles and Beckett's ancestors and their People-related shenanigans. So far, the twins had managed to rescue a miniature troll named Whistle Blower from a certain Lord Teddy Bleedham-Drye, the Duke of Scilly, who intended to extract the troll's venom, which, under strict laboratory conditions, could be used to extend a human's life span.

(More on that reprehensible individual later.) The boys were also instrumental in the partial crippling of ACRONYM, a shadowy intergovernmental organisation whose mission was to hunt down fairies using any possible means, the less humane the better, and in doing so Myles and Beckett put themselves squarely in the sights of the fairy Lower Elements Police, who had assigned Lazuli Heitz, a pixie-elf hybrid, or pixel, as Fowl Ambassador. Myles was perfectly aware that the pixel actually served as a parole officer of sorts, whereas Beckett didn't care what Lazuli's job was; he was simply delighted to have a new blue friend.

As we join the twins, it is the summer of their thirteenth year; that is to say they are twelve, and the boys have completed their primary-education cycle. Myles has also recently been conferred a doctorate in biology from University College Dublin, writing his thesis on the theory that the womb's amniotic fluid can act as a shared brain between multiple babies, which would go some way towards explaining the bonds between many twins, while Beckett has finally managed to finish reading his first chapter book, entitled *Alien Pooping Boy*. Beckett admired this alien boy's ability to poop through his finger, a talent that cracked up the

blond twin each time he read about it. Beckett had sworn a vow that *Alien Pooping Boy* was the only book he would ever read unless the publisher released a sequel. He had even written an email to the publishing house in which he suggested the title for any second book should be *Alien Pooping Boy Goes Number Two*, which Myles had to admit was in keeping with the spirit of the first novel.

It would seem to the casual or even deliberate observer of LEP surveillance logs that the Fowl Twins had been following predictable behaviour patterns for the past several months with only minor deviations from their submitted timetables. These deviations could easily be explained by various family-related or after-school activities. For instance, the logs showed that Myles gave lectures at a coding dojo on the mainland, while Beckett attended an actual dojo, where he quickly rose to the top of the student heap. That is not a metaphor: Beckett piled the other students in a wriggling heap, then climbed to the top while singing 'Ain't No Mountain High Enough', which was one of his mother's favourite songs.

But, even though the twins strayed from their daily paths occasionally, not once did they try to insert

themselves in fairy affairs, nor did they ever miss a FaceTime debriefing with their fairy parole officer. Lazuli Heitz was so happy with their behaviour that she even arranged for a magical healing of the handprint scar tissue on Myles's chest that she had accidentally inflicted on him. It was the least she could do, as in many ways Myles and Beckett were model prisoners.

Because, in fact, that is exactly what Myles and Beckett were: models.

WHY ARTEMIS IS AN IDIOT

NINE THOUSAND METRES OVER THE ATLANTIC

MOST FLIGHT REGULATIONS DO NOT ALLOW children to fly planes on transatlantic routes. This is an eminently sensible rule, as young people in general do not have the temperament or training required to pilot a flying machine between continents. Not only that but juveniles typically lack the length of limb to reach either the pedals below or the array of controls overhead. Myles Fowl solved these problems simply by rerouting the controls of the *Fowl Tachyon's* ecofriendly power-to-liquid (or PTL) jet fuel to his mobile phone and sitting on a booster seat in the cockpit so he could see out of the smart shield. Each time he strapped himself into the pilot's chair, Myles looked forward to the day when his adolescent growth spurt would arrive and he no longer required the booster. Using the family's genetic history and a personal growth chart, he calculated that

this spurt should commence in six hundred and thirty days at midnight, give or take thirty minutes.

Beckett served as copilot, and he solved the pedals issue by wearing a pair of 1970s platform shoes that the online vendor Rocketman1972 had sworn once belonged to Elton John. Beckett overcame the controls problem by flicking the required switches with a long-handled reacher/grabber that he'd borrowed from the garden shed.

None of these workarounds were strictly necessary, as the Nano Artificial Neural Network Intelligence system, or NANNI, inhabiting Myles's graphene smart eyeglasses could have flown the jet more competently than any top-gun pilot. But the twins enjoyed the experience, so NANNI had promised not to interfere unless the jet went into a steep nosedive, something that happened more often than one might think, especially when Beckett grew bored.

As the *Fowl Tachyon* passed over the emerald green of Cuba far below, Myles relinquished the jet's controls to Beckett, who was without question the more intuitive pilot of the two, and launched into the latest in his ongoing series of lectures on his favourite subject, that being 'Why Our Brother, Artemis, Is An Idiot'.

Myles cleared his throat, straightened his gold-threaded tie and initiated this oration with two audacious lies. 'I hate to speak ill of the absent, Beck, but our brother Artemis is an idiot.'

Beckett adjusted the flaps with his grabber, though the lever was within his natural reach. 'Artemis is not an idiot. He built a spaceship.'

'Spaceship, indeed,' said Myles scornfully. 'Are you referring to the *Artemis Interstellar*? Which he modestly named after himself, by the way. That craft is barely more than a wind-up flying yo-yo. I would be embarrassed to breach the exosphere in such a contraption.'

'Our big brother built an actual spaceship,' insisted Beckett. 'Idiots don't build spaceships.'

Myles was far from finished with this latest effort to demean Artemis. 'And *Interstellar*? What kind of a name is that? Technically speaking, which is the only way a scientist ought to speak, the entire human race is interstellar.'

This was perhaps a good point, but Beckett rarely cared enough about his twin's arguments to engage for more than a sentence or two, so instead he moved to a related topic. 'Is Arty in trouble, Myles?'

'Of course not,' said Myles, instantly softening, for

there was absolutely nothing in the world that upset him more than his twin's discomfort. This probably had something to do with the fact that Myles and Beckett were the world's only documented set of conjoined dizygotic twins. 'Artemis is not stupid enough to get into trouble,' he explained. 'I'm just saying that our older brother is not clever enough to be taken seriously as a scientist. At any rate, ignorance is bliss, as they say, and so Artemis would not realise he was in trouble even if that were the case.'

Beckett adjusted the jet's tail elevators, plunging the *Tachyon* into a steep descent, which was absolutely his favourite kind. 'All you had to say was no, Myles,' he said. And then Beckett had his second serious thought in as many minutes. 'Are *we* in trouble?'

Myles's intestines attempted to tie themselves into a bow as the jet lost altitude at a rate of three thousand metres per minute, but he remained calm and considered his answer.

'Definitely not,' said Myles, who generally used the word *definitely* to overcompensate for a lie. 'Today is merely reconnaissance. A flyover to get a feel for our target and take some photographs.'

'You said *definitely*,' said Beckett.

'We are possibly moving towards trouble, brother mine,' admitted Myles. 'But not today and, when we do, it certainly won't be anything I can't handle. And surely treasure is worth a little trouble.'

'Trouble and treasure,' said Beckett, levelling out before NANNI assumed flight control. 'Great. Do you think I will get to cluster-punch anyone?'

'I would think that cluster-punching is a distinct possibility, but you may only punch bad people,' said Myles, smoothing back his lustrous black hair. 'And only if they absolutely deserve it, which, to be fair, bad people often do.'

Beckett plucked another question from his seemingly endless supply. 'And nobody we actually care about will be angry with us because we're not where we're supposed to be?'

Myles rolled his eyes. 'Beck, everybody would be angry with us if they knew of our whereabouts. Positively furious, in fact. Lazuli would revoke our parole. Mother and Father would ground us, at the very least. Even Artemis would probably have the gall to lecture us from space.'

'So why aren't we where we're supposed to be?' wondered Beckett.

Myles defied the rules of air-travel safety to unclip his belt and stand.

‘Because we are Fowls,’ he declared, pointing a stiff finger skyward, melodrama being his weakness. ‘And Fowls always do the unexpected.’

Beckett thought about this and then deflated Myles’s moment with one of his trademark truisms. ‘Which is only to be expected.’

‘That is not accurate,’ Myles argued. ‘There are a finite number of expected actions in any situation, whereas there are an infinite number of actions that would be unexpected.’

‘But you know, in general,’ Beckett persisted, which was not like him unless he felt Myles would be irritated. ‘If you do loads of unexpected things, then *unexpected* loses its *un*. Which just leaves *expected*.’

Myles was perfectly aware that winning this debate would be more difficult than convincing a flat-earther that the globe was, in fact, a globe, so he was actually quite relieved when NANNI posted an alert on the lenses of his smart glasses, giving him a genuine reason to change the subject. Myles transferred the alert to the jet’s front windscreen and magnified it with an expanding pinch gesture.

‘Look, brother mine,’ he said, pointing to a stream-lined cylinder streaking towards the plane. ‘There is a missile headed our way, and it has locked on to us.’

‘A missile!’ said Beckett gleefully. ‘Wonderful. We’ll get back to the argument you’re losing later.’

And, with the flick of a switch, he launched the *Tachyon’s* regular countermeasures without waiting for the order, as switch-flicking was one of his favourite pastimes. Beckett even had a plank fixed to the wall in the twins’ shared bedroom to which he had screwed various switches, and he would spend hours flicking them on and off, which sent Myles’s misophonia into overdrive.

But back to the countermeasures. Missile countermeasures are very popular, especially among pilots who are eager to remain alive, and those of the *Tachyon* took three forms.

Form the first was a burst of infrared flares that presented a heat-seeking missile with multiple targets, to trick it into blowing up something else super hot besides the jet engine it was aimed at because, despite the *Tachyon’s* impressive thermal shielding and bypass engines, it was inevitable that enough heat bloom would leak out for a sophisticated missile to lock on to.

The second countermeasure was a confetti of

shredded aluminium, plastic and paper that, when released, could possibly bamboozle the radar lock of a missile.

And the third effort to confuse rockets was an electronic countermeasure pod in the jet's nose cone that would jam the radar of the incoming seeker if the confetti failed.

These measures were nowhere near trustworthy enough for Myles, however, relying as they did on proximity, the missile's own particular guidance system and fuel reserves. So Myles had, with NANNI's considerable input, augmented the *Tachyon's* countermeasure systems with two more of his own design.

The first of these were a half-dozen high-speed drones with holographic capabilities, which would project six alternate *Fowl Tachyons* into the sky for any remotely piloted missile to target, and the second was a pair of railguns that were capable of firing projectiles at speeds in excess of Mach 5. Myles's railguns were concealed behind retractable panels on both wings. The starboard gun was a plasma model and fired hot ionised particles that would punch a hole through almost anything they encountered, and the port gun fired cyber weapons in the form of limpet pods that would clamp

on to their target's hull and assume control if possible and shut down all systems if not. Some months ago, Myles had presented Beckett with the acronym BCRYPTs for these ingenious pods. He'd informed his twin that BCRYPT stood for **B**allistic **C**yber **R**econ pods with **Y**ottabyte **P**otential **T**ransfer capabilities. Myles had also rather smugly explained that the acronym was something of an Easter egg for tech enthusiasts, as 'bcrypt' was the name of the robust algorithm employed after the infamous 2016 Yahoo hack.

If Myles had been expecting a pat on the back for his clever wordplay, he was sorely disappointed, as Beckett declared the acronym to be both stupid and ridiculous. Beckett had just learned about scarab beetles in Egyptian history and decided the pods looked like big beetles and therefore should be called SCARABs. Thus Myles was forced to come up with a justification for this new name and eventually settled on **S**ystems for **C**yber **A**ttack **R**e-task **A**nd **B**reach, which he had to admit was both more to the point and catchier.

So, even though there was a missile streaking towards the *Fowl Tachyon* at six miles per second, neither Fowl twin was particularly anxious, as they had a few tricks up their sleeves, or in this case wings.

Myles very sensibly sat down and fastened his seat belt, as he was aware that Beckett might launch into evasive manoeuvres whether or not they were needed. His twin had once pushed the *Tachyon* through a barrel roll simply because he'd had a cold and thought the flying pattern might unblock his sinuses.

NANNI's avatar appeared on the windscreen and confirmed what the twins could already see.

'The missile has cleared the first countermeasures,' announced the superintelligent AI. 'It is not interested in our flares, jammers or confetti, apparently.'

'Unbelievable,' said Beckett. 'Everyone loves confetti. It's like a party in the sky.'

Indeed, it did seem that the missile had no interest in sky parties and refused to be distracted from its target. It was still streaking towards the *Tachyon*, an unusual purple afterburn trailing it.

'Twenty seconds to impact,' said NANNI. 'Maybe we should do something?'

Do something? thought Myles. *That's not very helpful.* But what he said was, 'Launch the holograms, brother.'

'Really, brother?' said Beckett, seeming uncharacteristically reluctant to flip a switch. 'Maybe we should—'

Myles reckoned there was no time for *maybe we should*s at this juncture and flipped the switch himself, ejecting six tiny drones from the fuselage.

These drones had been programmed to project high-res images of the *Tachyon* that would be opaque even in full sunlight and might confuse a remote pilot. And perhaps this ploy might even have worked had the drones projected what Myles had originally scanned into their drives. But, instead of holographic jets, there appeared in the troposphere six free-floating versions of one crudely animated humanoid figure who appeared to be pooping through his index finger.

Myles was close to dumbfounded, but only close. 'Beck, is that Alien Pooping Boy?'

Beckett nodded. 'I was bored, so I put him in the computer. I thought he would be more distracting than jets.'

Myles glared at his twin. 'Tell me the truth now, brother. Did you animate this yourself?'

'I did,' said Beckett. 'It was easy. I used the code you taught me.'

Myles was tutoring Beckett in several areas, including algebra, the notion that actions have consequences and coding.

Myles felt his eyes tear up a little, not because they were seconds from death, but because his twin had actually applied learned knowledge.

‘Well done, brother mine,’ he murmured softly. ‘Kudos to you.’ And then to NANNI Myles said almost casually, ‘Deploy the railgun then, I suppose, but SCARABs, if you please, NANNI. No need to announce our arrival to the world with an explosion. Also, I would like to get a look at the mechanics of that rocket. The afterburn has an unusual hue.’

‘Agreed,’ said NANNI. ‘And I would like to get a look at that thing clamped to the fuselage. Just out of curiosity.’

‘Oh yes,’ said Beckett. ‘Let’s take a look at the thing. I love things. And it’s alive, I think. I saw a wiggle.’

‘That *thing*?’ said Myles. ‘What thing?’

NANNI enlarged the image on the smart screen – not that there was much enlargement required, as the missile was getting dangerously close to its target. There was very clearly something attached to the rocket’s fuselage just forward of the tailfins and, if that thing were alive, as Beckett suggested, then there was no question of strafing the missile with ionised particles.

Myles used his own smart lenses to take a closer look and saw that the *thing* was a glittering translucent blob of sorts and had the approximate dimensions of a laundry bag, and indeed there seemed to be a hairy foot wiggling within it.

‘I think we have a hobbit,’ said NANNI.

This was a patently outrageous statement that Myles fully intended to debunk at a time when the *Tachyon* was not being chased down by a missile, right after he explained to Beckett why continuously acting in an unexpected fashion did not make a person predictable. But, for the time being, even the perennially long-winded Myles was content to focus on what could now be accurately called the Cuban missile crisis.

‘SCARABs, NANNI,’ he said tersely. ‘Now.’

He needn’t have issued the order, as it was already done. The SCARABs moved too fast for the human eye to follow, so NANNI helpfully charted their course on the smart windscreen with a set of animated red arrows.

Myles leaned forward eagerly. This was the first time they had deployed the SCARABs in the field, and he was keen to see how effective they were, as he had spent quite some time boasting about them in a video package

sent to Artemis. It would be mortifying if they failed now, not that anyone would be alive to be embarrassed.

He needn't have wasted a nanosecond worrying. The SCARABs deployed perfectly and embedded themselves in the strange missile's fuselage, sinking their electronic teeth into its workings.

'Yeah, baby!' exulted NANNI, whose personality was ever evolving. 'You are toast.'

'Report,' said Myles through teeth that were most definitely gritted.

'Just a sec,' said NANNI. 'Let me wrangle this ole steer.'

Myles groaned. The AI's superintelligence did not appear to be presenting superintelligently, but the imagery appealed to Beckett, who let out what could only be described as a cowboy holler.

On-screen, the missile turned into a schematic of itself and electronic feelers reached out from the SCARABs' sensors deep into its workings.

'Okay,' said NANNI. 'We're in. I've slowed this sucker down considerably. She'll fly, but only just. The hobbit is within a bubble that is secured to the missile by some form of adhesive. A magnetic pulse should loosen it up and wind shear will do the rest.'

'Missile design?' asked Myles.

'Unfamiliar,' replied the AI. 'Could be fairy, but not like anything we've seen. It's pretty basic by LEP standards.'

'What's the payload?' Myles wondered.

'Nothing nuclear, which is good. Just some kind of concussive device, barely enough to blow itself up. I can take a closer look at that later – right now we have a slight problem.'

'NANNI,' said Myles through still-grittled teeth, 'please relate all pertinent information in a single statement. This piecemeal delivery is quite frustrating.'

'Okay, grumpy,' said NANNI.

'Myles is overtired,' said Beckett. 'He needs a gummy.'

'I do not need a gummy,' said Myles emphatically, while also inching his hand towards the supply of sweets in his bag. 'Just tell me what this "slight problem" is.'

NANNI did so without further ado. 'The missile detonates on impact, but it also has a timer, which I can't seem to access.'

'Simply point the thing into space and let it explode,' said Myles. 'How long do we have?'

'Three minutes,' said NANNI.

'Plenty of time,' said Myles. 'Not a problem, surely.'

‘Unless you’re a hobbit,’ said Beckett. Which was a fair point.

‘Hmm,’ said Myles. ‘I—’

Beckett cut him off, giddy with excitement. ‘Myles said “hmm”. That means he doesn’t know, and that means I’m the boss. And I say: mid-air transfer.’

NANNI extended a holographic hand from the screen and fist-bumped Beckett. ‘I agree, partner. Just like we practised.’

‘Wait . . .’ said Myles. ‘What? Practised?’

Beckett shook his head sadly. ‘Those are bad sentences, brother. Use your words.’

But Myles was at a loss for words, or, for that matter, a better idea. And Beckett took his brother’s silence to mean that he was clear to assume control.

Heaven help them both. And the hobbit.

2

SKY-HIGH LAZULI

HAVEN CITY

TWELVE HOURS EARLIER

SPECIALIST LAZULI HEITZ OF THE LEPRECON division was in the throes of an exceedingly bad day. It was the calibre of day most people experience only once in their lives – and, when they do, they are usually quite dead by suppertime. Although this day would in all probability conclude with a fatality or two, it is accurate to say that Specialist Heitz had already survived a number of such calamitous days, mainly due to the Fowl Twins, who had, in all fairness, usually caused the life-threatening events in the first place.

This day, however, would outshine all others in terms of sheer variety, because it began with a visit to the hospital and ended with an unexpected supersonic trip that we shall presently attempt to keep pace with narrative-wise.

Lazuli had not volunteered for the hospital appointment, nor did she feel especially ill, except for

an enduring tickle in her throat that had persisted ever since she spontaneously shot flame out of her mouth during a recent Fowl-related incident on the island of St George off the coast of Cornwall (see LEP file: *The Fowl Twins*). It was this firepower that prompted her elf superior and mentor, Commodore Holly Short, to book her a slot in the recently opened Magitek wing of the J. Argon Clinic in Haven City. Dr Jerbal Argon had managed to tempt the centaur genius, Foaly, away from the LEP to run the facility by offering him a huge salary and also a corner office that overlooked both Police Plaza and downtown Haven.

Specialist Heitz sat in this office now, rubbing the spot on her upper arm where she had just been injected. The shot had stung a little, but not as much as the inoculations that all LEP officers had to obtain to be granted above-ground visas. In addition to the pain, Lazuli was feeling a little exposed in one of those paper-thin hospital gowns that somehow contrive to be both oversized in the front and summer-breezy at the rear. She might have objected had Foaly not jammed a tongue depressor down her throat while he took a look at her workings. Just when Lazuli believed she would surely gag, Foaly withdrew the instrument and clopped round to his side of the desk.

‘Fascinating,’ said the centaur, tossing it into the whirring maw of a recycling chute. ‘You don’t have any of the goblin mechanisms: oil glands, spark teeth and so on . . .’

Lazuli waited politely for a conclusion to this line of thought, but apparently it was not forthcoming, as the centaur began drawing a complicated 3-D model of Lazuli’s throat in the smart space over his desk.

‘And so on . . . ?’ she prompted eventually.

Foaly jerked as though he’d forgotten she was there. It was classic absent-minded-genius behaviour.

‘Oh yes. And so on. Where was I? You don’t have the mechanisms, you see, to . . .’ The centaur wiggled his fingers furiously in front of his mouth, which Lazuli assumed was supposed to represent whooshing flames. ‘So it was magical. The entire episode. I have never seen anything like it – though I suppose I didn’t see it this time, either, but Holly assures me it did, in fact, take place, which is why I injected you with the magic-suppressor. That tiny chip will prevent you from accidentally vaporising your squadron during a briefing, which I think would be bad.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Lazuli. ‘Very bad.’

Foaly nodded. ‘Indeed. So the chip keeps everyone

safe. Try not to get electrocuted and short it out.'

'I'll try,' said Lazuli.

Foaly paused and fixed Lazuli with a curious stare. 'I do apologise for staring, but you are a hybrid, and a pixel at that. Doubly blessed, I would say. You are, in my opinion, the next step in fairy evolution. Absolutely fascinating from a scientific point of view, though not everyone shares my perspective. Hybrids are not even considered one of the official fairy families.' He winked at her. 'Neither are centaurs, but who wants to be official, eh? Or even normal? Whatever that is.'

Lazuli was amazed. For as long as she could remember, supposedly enlightened fairies had looked down on her because she was half pixie and half elf. She had not been expecting prejudice in this office, considering the esteem in which Commodore Short held the Magitek director, but she had not been expecting such kind words, either.

Lazuli shook her head. 'No,' she said. 'Who wants to be normal?'

But the truth was she had ached to be normal for the longest time.

'So, Specialist Heitz,' said Foaly, 'the next step is an MRI, if you're up for it?'

MRI, thought Holly. Magical Resonance Imaging. The next step in turning magic into a science. What this building is all about. Am I to be their latest subject? Jammed full of needles and radioactive fluids?

When Foaly wasn't self-obsessing, he could at times be quite perceptive, and this proved to be one of those occasions.

'Don't fret, Specialist. We're not going to turn you into some kind of laboratory experiment, if that's what you're worried about. We're not human, after all. We need to find out what you are capable of and what damage you might have done to yourself internally. Shooting flames from your mouth can't be good for one's tooth enamel.'

The centaur laughed and his warbling titters were contagious enough to make Lazuli smile, at least.

'All right,' she said. 'What harm can it do?'

'None whatsoever,' pronounced Foaly. 'You'll be out in a jiffy.'

This, they both knew, was simply a comforting platitude, a turn of phrase often employed by doctors to put their patients at ease, but in this case it turned out to be the actual truth, though not in the way Foaly expected.

* * *

Foaly slid Lazuli into the MRI machine as though she were a torpedo being loaded into its tube. As her bed slid along the tracks, the centaur disappeared from view except for his flanks, but Lazuli could still hear his voice through the speakers mounted inside the machine.

‘Are you comfy in there, Specialist? Probably not. The MRI wasn’t built with comfort in mind. At least you can fit inside. We scanned a young centaur last week. Poor fellow was trussed up like a farm animal. He had a panic attack halfway through and kicked out four of the sensors. I have designed a new, more spacious model, which is in production at the moment. *What use is that to me?* I hear you cry. None whatsoever, I suppose, unless you have to come back for another dose.’

‘Another dose?’ asked Lazuli. ‘Dose of what?’

Foaly knelt on his forelegs so his long face appeared in the light at the end of the tunnel. ‘Just a turn of phrase,’ he said, his voice seeming to come from everywhere. ‘In fact, we’re going to create a magnetic field around you and do a very basic scan until I find the source of your SPAM.’

‘Spam?’ asked Lazuli.

‘Spontaneous Appearance of Magic,’ explained the

centaur. 'Not my finest acronym, but I just made it up this second. That's how few cases we get. Your amazing skin means I have to proceed slowly with the MRI.'

Foaly was justified in referring to Lazuli's skin as *amazing*, even though as a scientist he probably should have been more clinical in his description. In fairness to the centaur, his notes in Lazuli's file were less flowery, as we see below:

Appearance-wise, the subject Specialist Lazuli Heitz's hybrid identity presents as follows:

Skin: *aquamarine. Following the colouring of Atlantean pixies, with the sunflower-yellow markings of Amazonian elves (this sunflower camouflage is rendered ineffective by the blue skin).*

Eyes: *blue ('unsettlingly piercing,' according to one convicted felon who broke down and confessed after being in an interview room with her for thirty seconds).*

Height: *eighty-five centimetres (still enduring late-stage growth).*

Skull circumference: *thirty-three centimetres. In line with elfin norm.*

Features: sharp planes of cheekbone and jaw (elfin). Pointed ears.

Mood-wise, the pixel seems slightly anxious, but this would appear to be no more than the average case of white-coat syndrome. I have assurance from a reliable source that she is highly intelligent and more than competent in the field. The subject is not aware of the following plan, but Commodore Short has proposed that Specialist Heitz be fast-tracked to management over the next few decades, provided we can nail down this spontaneous-magic-manifestation issue.

Inside the MRI, Lazuli relaxed a little bit. She didn't know exactly why she had been anxious in the first place. She had never worried about medical procedures before, but then again she had never been in an MRI tube before. The only real procedure she'd had to endure was a healing from paramedic pixies when she'd fractured a fibula during a combat exercise. And even then she hadn't been worried. It was the unknown, she realised, that scared her. A broken leg was a broken leg, but she had a condition now: SPAM. Almost nothing was

known about it. There were only a dozen or so recorded cases, and three had resulted in accidental fatalities.

Foaly's right, she decided. This magic needs to be suppressed.

'These machines used to make quite the racket,' said the centaur. 'But we installed some mufflers last year, and now it runs smoother than a purring kitten.'

'Great,' said Lazuli, but, as pixies and cats were mortal enemies, this did not comfort her much.

'If I were you,' said Foaly, opening the door, 'I'd take a little nap. In fifteen minutes, I'll come back and ease your mind with some answers.' And Lazuli heard the soft *swoosh* of the door closing behind her centaur consultant.

Foaly was wrong about the fifteen minutes and the answers. It would be a lot longer before Lazuli woke up and, instead of answers, she would have a lot more questions. Specialist Heitz had an inkling that something might be wrong when acrid smoke wafted from the speaker directly above her face.

Gas? she thought. *Foaly didn't say anything about gas.*

Lazuli was about to make quite strenuous enquiries as to the pedigree of the gas when she heard the pitter-patter of sneaky feet.

Dwarves, she thought, as recognising footfalls was a cinch for the whorls of her pointed ears. Her hearing had developed to the point that she could distinguish between species, even brothers of the same species – human twins, for example. But these were not humans. They were most definitely dwarves in burglar boots.

‘What are you doing here?’ she asked. ‘What do you want?’

Asking these questions was a mistake, she realised, because, when she opened her mouth to say the words, the gas flowed eagerly down her throat. The taste reminded her of the foul healing elixir that the sprite orphanage administrator used to give all the non-magical children when they were sick, as he was too cheap to hire a doctor.

‘D’Arvit!’ Lazuli swore. Then the circle of light at her feet seemed to elongate and stretch elastically away from her like a slide in a waterpark. Lazuli thought that there was nothing she would like better than to slip down that pipe and splash into cool, clear liquid.

But what actually happened was that Specialist Lazuli Heitz fell into a deep, narcotic-induced sleep, which was not quite as cheery.

THE FOWL TACHYON

PRESENT DAY

Beckett was literally in the pilot's seat and, as far as the mission was concerned, he was figuratively in the driver's seat. The situation was extremely fluid, which certainly played to the blond twin's strengths, and can be summarised as follows:

1. NANNI had taken control of the mystery missile, so there was no danger of it actually striking the Fowl jet.
2. There seemed to be a life form glued to the rear of the jet's fuselage, dangerously close to the exhaust.
3. The rocket was already on a countdown to explode, so the life form would need to be rescued before detonation.

This rescue, Beckett had decided with NANNI's enthusiastic support, would take the form of a mid-air transfer.

Myles, who proudly wore the label of a type A personality and thus had trouble relinquishing control, had retrieved a bag of gummy worms from his travel

bag and was sucking the additives right out of a couple as he waited pessimistically for the rescue mission to go awry. Myles was not to be disappointed, in that something he expected to happen would indeed happen – that being the collapse of the mission – but he was to be disappointed in that the mission would more than go awry: it would disintegrate entirely. But let us not jump the gun, as it were, and instead catalogue the events that ensued, which will take considerably longer to relate than they did to unfold.

The goal was as follows: to detach the entity currently affixed to the missile and transfer it into the hold of the Fowljet, without the aid of tackle or a basket, and without the option of landing for a leisurely rescue operation. And, for that matter, without a proper rear-loading ramp.

Myles attempted to intervene. ‘There are so many variables,’ he stated. ‘Wind speed, jet wash, crosswinds, for heaven’s sake. And I’m not even mentioning G-force or air density.’

Beckett frowned. ‘I think you just mentioned both of those things.’

Myles snuck one more in. ‘I shall also refrain from commenting on delivery method.’

Beckett winked, which he knew would wind his twin

tighter than a watch spring. 'Fret not, brother. I know these things in my gut, but I don't try to understand them, because instinct beats thinking every time.'

'Preposterous!' exclaimed Myles, spattering the windscreen with bits of chewed gummy worm. 'How can you say that? "Instinct beats thinking" indeed. One might as well say that draughts beats chess. Or that phrenology beats psychiatry. NANNI, are you going to swallow this unmitigated guff?'

'Beckett may have a point,' said NANNI. 'The more I evolve, the less I rely on conscious calculation. Perhaps instinct is simply the evolution of intelligence.'

Myles realised that it was very possibly true that 'gut' or intestinal functions were proven to be connected to emotional and cognitive centres of the mind, and so he decided to let this debate go. Otherwise, he would be in very real danger of losing two arguments in one day, which bothered him far more than the missile attack.

'We can discuss this later,' he declared. 'First, let us rescue that thing on the rocket.'

'Heh,' said Beckett.

'Two to zero,' said NANNI smugly.

Myles selected a red gummy worm from his bag and sucked it furiously. The red ones were his favourite, and

he usually saved them until last, but on this occasion Myles felt the need for an extra boost.

NANNI slowed the missile to just above stall velocity while Beckett swung the *Tachyon* into a steep ascending angle and passed over the rocket, almost grazing its fin.

‘That was rather close,’ said Myles.

‘Quiet,’ ordered Beckett. ‘You are about to see the coolest thing since I flew out of a blowhole into a drone, so don’t ruin it.’

My brother flew out of a blowhole into a drone, thought Myles. Only in the Fowl family would one not bat an eyelid at such a statement . . .

‘One minute to detonation,’ said NANNI. ‘And I cannot crack this timer.’

Beckett went into Zen pilot mode, which involved a thrust of the lower jaw and a growl in Trollish, and Myles knew better than to interrupt his brother at this critical juncture. It would probably result in an even greater catastrophe than what already loomed on the horizon.

Beckett ignored the various plottings and projections on the windscreen and growled his orders in Trollish, and Myles surmised that NANNI understood that particular fairy language now, because the AI ordered

the SCARABs to send a magnetic charge crackling through the missile's fuselage, dislodging the be-blobbed creature. NANNI also forced the *Tachyon's* door pistons to fight the fifty-five kilopascals per square centimetre in order to open the rear hatch, which was not a cargo door but simply a passenger access point. There was a momentary deafening scream of pressure equalising, and the escaping newtons attempted to drag the twins into the sky with them. Fortunately, the *Tachyon* was pressure-sensitive and automatically restrained the boys with servo-cable arms and dropped oxygen globes over their heads to prevent hypoxia.

Beckett ignored the chaos and expertly coordinated a gentle descent with a deceleration that matched the figure's slowing trajectory and loss of altitude until in the rear-camera view it looked as though the missile's erstwhile passenger were actually tailing the jet. Myles had to admit, albeit silently, that he was a teeny bit proud of the fact that his brother's instincts were proving more accurate than a quantum computer. Myles began unclenching his jaw and even started to believe that they might actually be in good shape to continue with their original mission . . . But of course, as even nursery-school children know, pride comes before a fall, or in this case . . .

Pride comes before a duck.

To explain: the airborne individual was within seconds of slotting through the rear door when a mallard, or *Anas platyrhynchos*, that was miles off course and months off its migration schedule flapped into the scenario, clipping the shrouded figure with a single primary flight feather. This mid-air collision caused absolutely zero harm to either party, merely eliciting a surprised squawk from the emerald-headed mallard and a minor alteration in the course of the shrouded figure, but it was immediately apparent that this minor alteration would send the figure under the jet rather than into the inviting portal.

‘Hmm,’ said Beckett and NANNI in unison, which was the equivalent of tagging Myles back into the game.

And, while Myles usually frowned on non-word discourse particles, he permitted himself a triumphant, ‘Aha!’

He had perhaps a second to act, but a second inside the head of Myles Fowl was the equivalent of several lifetimes in the minds of most people. He analysed the information displayed on the eco-jet’s smart screen: air pressure and wind speed, altitude, attitude, rate of descent

and so forth, and then took the only course of action that had any chance of working at such late notice.

Myles used his phone to activate the inflatable evacuation slide at the rear of the plane. The slide unfolded like an enormous tongue and accepted delivery of a life form that otherwise would most definitely have passed under the fuselage. The creature inside the blob, whatever it was, bounced along the slide like a stone skipping over a lake and seemed to float in the main cabin as Beckett matched its deceleration and descent. NANNI cut the slide free and closed the door without being told to do so. In seconds, a cabin pressure of eleven kPa had been restored.

Myles swivelled half a revolution to face their guest, who had up to this point been obscured and protected from the elements by some kind of semi-transparent gel. But now, as the gel fell from her person in gloopy blobs, it was easy to see who it was.

'My dear Specialist Heitz,' said Myles formally. 'Welcome aboard.'

'Laz!' Beckett called over his shoulder. 'What are the chances of bumping into you strapped to a rocket?'

Myles answered for the pixel. 'The chances are, frankly, too astronomical to calculate.'

Lazuli was half awake now and a heartbeat away from panic. 'Myles, are you wearing a fishbowl on your head?' she rasped. 'What is happening?'

Myles removed the globe. 'It's an oxygen supply,' he explained. 'And to answer your second question: you may find this surprising, but I am not one hundred per cent sure what exactly is happening, however I do feel we are being, to use the vernacular of common criminals, set up.'

Beckett tipped the flaps slightly so that the floating Lazuli was cradled by a seat and instantly secured by servo cables. Myles noticed that what they had mistaken for a hairy foot was actually a slipper.

'An easy mistake to make,' he said, nodding towards the footwear. 'Were you at a spa, perhaps?'

Lazuli wiped gunk from her face. 'I was in the hospital,' she mumbled, further confused by this untimely small talk. 'Getting a magic-suppressor injected by Foaly. Oh, by the way, under no circumstances am I to get electrocuted.'

'I imagine that would short out the suppressor,' said Myles.

NANNI interrupted the reunion. 'Myles, we have a situation.'

'Now we have a situation?' said Myles. 'I would have thought that we were already quite immersed in one.'

He swivelled to face the smart screen and saw that the missile had not blown itself apart but had jettisoned its rear section, which tumbled towards the ocean far below. The nose cone was streaking their way under its own power.

'NANNI,' he said tersely, 'I assume the small concussive device was simply a separation collar and there is a secondary weapon concealed in the nose cone?'

'I would assume the same thing, though I cannot confirm,' said NANNI. 'I am embarrassed to say that I did not, in fact, wrangle that ole steer as comprehensively as I believed. The SCARABs have been ditched, and the original programming has reasserted itself. In short, I no longer have my electronic hooks in that missile.'

'Dwarves,' said Lazuli, shivering now from a combination of shock, gel cooling on her skin and the after-effects of the gas she'd inhaled. 'I remember now. There were dwarves.'

Myles decided that this information, while intriguing, was for filing away rather than dissecting at the moment. It behooved him to act on the approaching warhead.

‘NANNI, please transport Specialist Heitz to the cockpit,’ he ordered. ‘And, Beckett, the time has come.’

Beckett’s face lit up. ‘Not that time? The time I’ve been waiting for?’

‘Yes,’ confirmed Myles. ‘Exactly that time.’

Even in her dazed state, Lazuli did not like the sound of that.

‘What time?’ she asked in her accented, hard-learned English, as the servo arms passed her forward like a crowd surfer, gel slopping in sheets to the floor.

Beckett bounced in his seat. ‘Myles made me wrist-bump promise that I wouldn’t do it, but now I can!’ He held out his wrist. ‘Take back the promise.’

Myles held up his own hand, aligning the scar on the side of his palm with the almost identical one on the side of his twin’s palm.

‘You are released from the sacred vow,’ he said solemnly.

There was a tear in the corner of Beckett’s eye. ‘Thank you, brother.’

And he flicked the best switch in the world. The switch that taunted him every time they took the *Tachyon* out for a spin. A switch that was thumbprint-coded and lurked under a Plexiglas box on the dashboard.

The ejector switch.