Thrower of the Dart

by Vathara

Summary

What might have happened instead of Artemis Fowl book 6, if it'd happened in the Marvel Universe. Megalomaniacs ahoy!

Notes

Because book 6 had Artemis grab the Conflict Ball and Idiot Ball pretty darn hard. Also because I ran across a few Avengers/Artemis Fowl fics, but none of them clicked for me. So, AU from near the end of book 5. (Avengers and Artemis, not mine. Darn.)

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

“Maybe we can arrange a miracle.”

Butler raised a gray-speckled brow at the magical sparks, which Artemis had expected. But then his bodyguard frowned. Which he had... not expected.

“We both know what sort of damage a mesmer does to the mind, Artemis,” Butler stated, somber despite his unkempt disguise of beard and hair. “What are you thinking?”

“We do indeed,” Artemis murmured, using will to shut away that annoying sense of dizziness that had come with Holly’s left eye. Only a twinge when Section Eight had dropped him off on shore, it was closer to a vertiginous lurch now. A sense of nausea likely enhanced by memories of uses and abuses of mesmer he’d seen in the past. Used lightly, as Holly had, it might leave a human watching imaginary wrestling matches or cause unwary guards to literally overlook a dwarf walking right in front of them. Used maliciously, it hampered thought, might cause blindness, and could even lead to brain damage and death. Especially if used on a strong-willed victim, and Fowls were nothing if not strong-willed. How could he not have thought of that, when he’d been laying plans to make his family ignore three years of absence? “I’ve no idea what I was thinking....”

Butler’s cottage lurched sideways, and spun.

What am I doing on the floor?

Butler was on his knees beside him, turning the communicator ring on his right hand to active. “Foaly! I know you’re monitoring this channel. Artemis needs help, now!”

I saved Holly from getting shot, uncovered a demon overlord’s true identity, and helped bring a colony of demons from ten thousand years in the past to now. I most certainly do not need help.

And he was going to tell Butler that, even as the snarky neigh of an annoyed centaur vibrated his bones. Any minute now. Just as soon as he could get off the floor....

“Artemis!”

Beeping. It brought back memories of Russia, cold calculation, and fear.

Did I make the right choice? Will my father live through this?

Will he know me?

Artemis Sr. had lived, and Butler had assured him he’d had no better choice. But that his father knew him, even years later- no. Painfully, no.

Because he can’t. He can’t know about the People. And I can’t forget them again. I couldn’t bear it.

And still the beeping, nagging at his ears. Beeping that didn’t sound quite like an ordinary hospital.

Where am I?

Artemis breathed shallowly, mindful of Butler’s instructions on kidnap situations, the survival thereof. He might not be interested in physical exertion, but exercise of the brain was always worthwhile.
Sounds almost like a hospital. Smells almost like one, but cleaner; stone and water, a hint of exotic spice - ah. Vole curry. Haven? Or some other enclave of the People. Haven would be the most sensible place if this is at all official; I’ve already been there, which limits the security risk of my uncovering new details of fairy protections. The next step is to determine exactly who is that stranger breathing off to my left-

“Don’t touch the IV,” Butler rumbled from his right. “The medics say your immune system’s taken a hit, so the masks are a precaution for you and Captain Short. And your eye’s bandaged so you don’t end up hurling all over the floor.”

Which was a tacit invitation to stop playing possum. Even if the information was rather alarming.

Artemis blinked his right eye, taking in the comforting bulk of Butler, clean-shaven, masked and ensconced on a sturdy small stool; and the slightly less comforting vision of a worried Holly, curled in a chair in a pale green hospital gown, with her own red IV slowly dripping down.

Allies located, he turned his head left, noting the masked and gowned elf whose brown crewcut and no-nonsense attitude said Recon, and whose skeptical cinnamon stare said medical professional. “I take it you are one of the attending physicians, Doctor?”

“Section Eight Medical Warlock Cedar Kingsfoil, Mr. Fowl,” the elf nodded, matter-of-fact. “You’ve been seen by a half-dozen other medical professionals, but I am in overall charge of your case. Mainly because most of our physicians have never seen this condition in a fairy, much less a human, and I’ve at least read up on past cases as part of our section’s files.” Kingsfoil held up a folder as thick as a dwarf’s toe. “Captain Short says you’re fluent in Gnommish, so you can go over the details while you stay in bed.”

Artemis narrowed his eye at the medic. Holly rolled her eyes at him, and Butler went so far as to clear his throat.

Yes, yes, message received. And he was not sulking. “The details would be appreciated, yes,” Artemis stated. “I take it Captain Short is also somehow afflicted? Did we encounter something on Hybras your medical fairy did not vaccinate us for afterwards? Is it contagious? I didn’t contact many humans on my way to Butler, but if it’s a potential epidemic you need to start tracing them immediately.” He glanced at Holly, trying to give her a look of appropriate friendly concern. He might not be sure how much more than mere friendship he felt for the deadly elf, but he could be fairly certain her superiors wouldn’t approve. “Are you well?”

“I will be,” Holly said firmly. “It’s not contagious. Section Eight was checking everyone who came off Hybras for interdimensional transport effects once they got down to Haven; the equipment’s bulky, so they didn’t bother bringing it up to the surface when they thought everyone was coming underground anyway. They caught me before I keeled over. If Butler hadn’t called, we probably would have had a team out to check on you in a few more hours.”

Even more ominous. “I take it merely resizing the affected eyes was not sufficient.”

Kingsfoil’s hmph had all a doctor’s patients are idiots laced into it. “Not hardly,” he said dryly. “You and Captain Short are suffering from Changeling Syndrome.”

Panic was adverse to clear and collected thinking. Artemis would not panic. But based on the folklore he’d studied, that was certainly not an optimal scenario. “As in humans inexplicably withering after close contact with fairies, rather than the kidnapping a baby scenario, I presume.”

“The first,” Kingsfoil confirmed. “It used to be much more of a problem when the People lived
aboveground in fairy forts. Transport spells were common when more People had easy access to
replenish their magic; and mishaps were a lot more common before warlocks were trained and
licensed. These days it’s all shuttles and hotshots. I’m not sure there’s a doctor in Haven who’s ever
seen a live case of Changeling Syndrome. Fortunately we still have the records, and medical science
has advanced enough that we know we’re treating systemic incompatibilities in magically
transplanted tissues, rather than just falling back on old home remedies and hoping for the best.” He
pointed toward the red fluid in the IV. “Bio-magically modified stem cells and bone marrow. They’re
in the process of replacing your current immune system so your body doesn’t tear itself apart trying
to kill the foreign cells.”

Hence the precautionary masks, and the sterile tang to the air. “A bit of a drastic step, I would think,”
Artemis said, with calculated calm. “I’ve no desire to play Cyclops, but one would think removing
the foreign tissues would be a far simpler solution.”

Holly paled. “Artemis! That’s your eye!”

“Technically it is your eye,” Artemis pointed out, “and while I treasure it, Captain, I do become a bit
worried when doctors venture into unknown medical territory. No matter what species the doctors
may be.”

“If it were just an eye, you might be right,” Kingsfoil stated, matching his clinical tone. “But our
scans make it clear each mystically exchanged eye also came with most of its own nerve network
attached. I wouldn’t want to risk that sort of deep-brain surgery on an elf, much less a human. My
medical opinion, after consulting with Mr. Butler and Captain Short, is that a modern update on the
traditional treatment by blood donation has the best chance of success. It’s taken quite a bit of fine-
tuned medical healing so far, human spleens are finicky, but progression looks good on both of your
cases. If all goes well, we’ll have both your immune systems convinced they’ve always been
chimeras, and you’ll be as healthy as you ever were. Perhaps a bit more so in your case, Captain
Short. Human immune systems are more radiation-resistant than your average elf, and given your
career in Section Eight will require you to visit the surface on a regular basis, that can only be an
asset.” Behind the mask, Cedar heaved a relieved sigh. “At least you didn’t mix cells with any of the
demons. This could have been much, much worse.”

“Worse?”

Artemis eyed Holly with due caution, and found her eyeing him right back. Surely, following how a
partner in battle and investigation thought closely enough to echo their words wasn’t that unusual,
was it?

Cedar was looking at them clinically, evidently taking notes in his head. “Demonic heritage can react
violently to certain abnormal situations. We’re fairly certain that’s what led to the Hulk, based on our
analysis.”

“Who?” Holly got out, an instant before Artemis could.

Butler sat up straight. “Three years.” He made the words sound worse than a goblin’s curse.
“Aristim. You need a briefing before you go home. Your father’s recent business associates-”

A speaker on the wall hummed to life. “First things first,” came an unfamiliar elf woman’s voice.
“Before anyone goes anywhere, I want some assurances.”

Eight.”
And thus in charge of everything demon-related in the LEP. Which might, at a stretch, include this situation. If the Wing Commander saw fit to make it so. “What sort of assurances?” Artemis asked calmly. Calm was the key here. Humans - Mud Men - were the violent nightmares of fairykind. So long as the People thought they were dealing with a calm, *reasonable* Mud Boy, there was a chance to skate through whatever difficulty this Wing Commander thought she might see.

“Foaly’s shown me your Interpol file, Artemis Fowl,” Vinyáya said dryly. “Along with quite a few other files. You’re as aware as any Recon officer that we don’t leave any traces of the People in human hands. Not technology, not written records - and not bodies.”

Ah. Meaning this Vinyáya was not an idiot, despite her exalted rank. What a refreshing novelty.

*Commander Root was no fool, either.*

Frond. He still missed the choleric old Recon Commander. Damn Koboi and all her schemes.

“Now, little trinkets like your ring and whatever else Foaly might have let slip into your hands are one thing,” the Wing Commander went on. “They can still be self-destructed at need. Or I’ll have a centaur to fry.”

“Hey!” came a familiar neigh.

“Ah. Private, secure communications.” Vinyáya’s voice could have dried up the Irish Sea.

“They are secure!” Foaly objected. “No one else is listening to this, I’d stake my tail on it!”

“You were supposed to be one of the *no one else.*” The Wing Commander sighed, exasperated.

“You realize that if any of this slips, the Council is not likely to give any of us a choice in the matter. As of this moment Artemis Fowl II is a walking, breathing breach in the People’s secrecy. One DNA test of those hybrid cells, and some Mud Man scientist will pounce. I can’t speak for what all of the Council would say, but I know enough of those old sticks in the mud to know any vote to bury the pair of you Mud Men and be done with it would probably pass. Even if you did save an entire race. So convince me, Fowl. Convince me you’ve changed, from that disastrous mess with the C-Cube. From the cold and callous Mud Boy who kidnapped one of the finest Recon officers we had and held her for ransom. Convince me you are a good and decent being, who will keep our secrets.”

His head hurt, his arm hurt, and he was still a bit fuzzy from whatever the medical warlocks might have used. Artemis would be the first to admit he was in no shape to plead for his life.

Which is exactly what they’ll think. “I can’t convince you of something that’s not true, Wing Commander.”

“Artemis!” Holly leapt from her chair; swayed, even as Butler gripped her shoulder to keep her standing. “This is no time to be frivolous!”

“I’m not. Please allow me to finish, Captain.” Foaly doubtless had cameras in here. He had to look as though he were telling the absolute truth.

*I only hope I can pull that off, Artemis reflected. I really am telling the truth.* “When I first encountered Captain Short, I was not a good person. I was younger, and desperate, and I only knew fairies as creatures out of children’s stories.” He took a deep breath, and shrugged. “And to be frank, Wing Commander, my actions in the cases of Opal Koboi and Hybras aside, I doubt I will ever be a good person. I am a Fowl. We are thieves, dishonest to the bone, and we exult in breaking the law and *not getting caught.* But Captain Short and Commander Root provided me with an example of how I can put those tendencies to a more honorable use.” He glanced at Holly, hoping she
understood. “I’m quite comfortable breaking human laws, and leaving the People’s alone. Especially given... well, I’ve heard that Recon can be quite the hazardous job, and Section Eight bids fair to be even more dangerous. If there were ways I could assist in making it a bit less so, it would make both our worlds safer.”

Holly glared at him, but let Butler help her back into her chair. “You expect the Wing Commander to believe you want to be an honest thief?”

“Actually, I rather think I do,” Vinyáya mused.

Holly’s jaw dropped. Fuming, she shot Artemis a look that should have set him on fire.

He did his best to look innocent. Though there might have been the tiniest hint of a vampiric smile on his face.

“I have read his files, Captain Short,” Vinyáya went on. “I’d sooner expect sprites to stop chasing the ladies than an expert thief to go straight.” Keys clicked on the other side of the line. “I have here several comments by the late Commander Root. I’ll spare you the profanity, but in essence they boil down to, insufferable genius, but if you need a Frond-given miracle, he’ll make it happen.”

Artemis glanced away from where he thought the camera was most likely to be. Hospital air, D’Arvit. His eyes were stinging.

“So. Assuming I consider - consider, mind you - keeping you in Section Eight’s jurisdiction as our consultant.... Kingsfoil. What are our options? All of them.”

Kingsfoil’s shoulders went stiff. “The first, which I do not recommend, is ceasing treatment at this point. Mr. Fowl would survive, but the likelihood of neurochemical imbalances in the future would be high, and I’ve seen the files on Opal Koboi. She’s psychopathic. We’d be setting Fowl up for a straight-out case of Atlantis Complex, and that’s worse.”

“Next option,” Butler said flatly.

“Yes, if you would be so kind,” Artemis agreed, chilled to the bone. He remembered his mother’s descent into delusions as clearly as if it’d happened only yesterday. The thought of his own sanity slipping away was more terrifying than imminent death.

Kingsfoil looked a bit less stiff. “The second option would be to continue with the current course of treatment, but no more. You’d be healthy enough, but far more prone to night blindness and vertigo. The brain fills in your right peripheral vision from your left eye, and currently you have two distinctly different types of vision.”

“That’s no good.” Holly crossed her arms, one hand tapping near her IV as if she’d like to tear it out. “He already has two left feet. And why am I not having those problems?”

Kingsfoil gestured toward her blue left eye. “Because we’ve already corrected the vision in that eye to match your own. For Fowl... well, we have two alternatives. Dim down the vision in the elf eye, or....”

“Adjust my own to match it,” Artemis finished for him. “I see your dilemma, Wing Commander.”

“Do you?” Vinyáya’s voice was sharp. Like the finest blade, so keen you’d never know you’d been cut until you began to bleed.

“Well, I don’t.” Holly’s mismatched gaze bored through him like a laser. Her tone was officially
annoyed, but the way she held her eyes on his....

She’s worried. About me? We’re both alive. She’s alive. I’ll be fine.

“I’m a LEP officer, not a medical warlock,” she went on, as if she were one picked pocket away from slapping on the cuffs. “What difference does it make?”

“Everything else might be taken for a rather odd transplant,” Artemis stated. “Unusual in the tissues, perhaps, but not outside the realm of possible human technology. I’d have to check the current research, it has been three years, but altering organs already in situ is likely still beyond us. If, by some rude chance, an unscrupulous scientist were to somehow stumble on this fact—”

“Over my dead body,” Butler stated.

“It would almost certainly have to be over my dead body as well, so that is unfortunately likely,” Artemis agreed. “I’m not sure what possible assurance I could give you to defend against that, Wing Commander. Outside of a will specifically requesting cremation, and perhaps a note in my file that your Retrieval teams might want to be absolutely sure it did take place.”

“Noted,” Vinyáya mused. “No qualms about seeing the world through fairy eyes, Mud Man?”

From the way Holly stiffened in her chair, she was about to discard good sense and tell her commander exactly where to stuff the racial insults. Artemis caught her gaze, and shook his head minutely, feeling an honest smile strain at muscles not used to it. “Captain Short has changed the way I see the world from the moment I met her. I see no reason to balk at that now.”

Finally, some privacy, Holly thought, all too glad to let Butler help her shift her chair closer to Artemis’ bed so they could study files together. She didn’t feel nearly as bad as she had a few days after Hybras had been evacuated, but she was still weary to the bone.

Well, relative privacy. Warlock Kingsfoil was still examining a few specialized readouts that went beep, and if she knew Foaly he was listening in for sheer entertainment value. But the Wing Commander had formally signed off, assuring them both there’d be plenty of paperwork to deal with once some hapless clerk’s sniffle on the forms wouldn’t kill them both. Say a week or three.

Given how much of the People’s “paperwork” was computerized, Holly suspected Vinyáya was actually using the extra time to check Artemis’ papers for any potential loopholes.

I feel sorry for her. Three weeks isn’t nearly long enough to outthink Artemis. “What am I going to do with you?”

“Fortune and Section Eight’s medical experts with us, recover.” Artemis raised his left hand away from the pages a moment, frowning as he wiggled his fingers. “You switched them back.”

“Would have been a giveaway not even a blind Mud Man could miss. And according to Captain Short, you prefer your left hand for detail work.” Kingsfoil didn’t look up from his readouts, making notes on a small computer wrapped in a layer of one-use sterile membrane. “That was interesting work, by the way. We don’t see many truly ambidextrous types down here. Luckily you and the captain have the same dominant eye, or fixing the insides of your heads would have been even messier.”

Holly tried not to cringe at the thought. If she’d had to relearn how to target her shots - well, it would have been a long recovery before she was fit for field duty again.
Then she flipped a page in the file, and did cringe. Archaic language or not, some of reports on past teleport spells and dimensional accidents made for graphic reading. Especially the illustrations. “I never thought I’d see any way of getting around that scared me more than a hotshot.”

“Hotshots are perfectly safe!” Foaly objected over the com. “Mostly. With a good pilot. If the equipment’s not too many decades old....”

Butler almost cracked a smile. “Keep digging.”

“I must admit, if I’d had access to this information before encountering our dimensionally challenged friends, I would have thought twice before grabbing onto one,” Artemis allowed. “The possible consequences are daunting. And-” He paused. Flipped back a few pages. “Potentially heritable?”

“Depending on what cells get switched around,” Kingsfoil stated, finally glancing up. “These days, calling a fairy human-blooded is just a nasty insult. Most people have no idea that in some cases, it’s true.”

Artemis arched his visible brow, and nodded once.

...Right. Not everyone was a certified - possibly certifiable - genius. Holly poked him in the ribs. “Share.”

“Ah.” A hint of pink touched his cheeks as Artemis glanced at the intercom. “Perhaps not.”

“Don’t worry about sparing my feelings,” Kingsfoil smirked. “Our computer expert is probably digging into the relevant files this very minute, now that he knows there’s something beyond demons to dig into.”

“Well, obviously,” Foaly sighed, keys ticking in the background of his voice. “How am I supposed to keep everything running smoothly if I don’t know what’s... oh.” The centaur’s voice turned nervous. “Ah. I may have made a few remarks in passing that were less than the most discreet-”

“Ah. So now he’s in my combat record,” Kingsfoil mused, cracking gloved knuckles. “So which did you find first, old horse?”

“Erk.”

Holly traded an exasperated glance with Butler, then studied Kingsfoil all over again. He looked like a perfectly ordinary elf. Maybe an inch taller than most. “You’re a... changeling descendant?”

“Thus making him more qualified than most to engage in treatment, given he has inside information as to some of the potential pitfalls,” Artemis nodded.

“The family doesn’t talk about it much, but yes,” Kingsfoil inclined his head. “A few centuries back. Some poet by the name of Thomas, if the records are right.” A gowned shrug. “They’re much more common among humans; you breed so much faster, it’s just more likely that even a sick changeling will have a chance to have children. In fact,” he crossed his arms, tapping his left fingers against his forearm, “if your maternal family tree went back enough centuries, Mr. Fowl, you might have a story like that yourself.”

Artemis blanched. “My... mother?”

Butler’s expression didn’t change, but Holly saw the shift in his shoulders that promised violence. “Let him explain,” she said quietly. Then I’ll punch him.
“Ah.” The warlock let his arms fall, and shrugged. “Sorry. I do enjoy medical mysteries. Perhaps a bit more than I should. I just mean to say that based on the information Recon gathered on your mother’s condition before and after Captain Short’s healing, and a few odd bits in cells of yours I’m fairly sure weren’t affected by the transport, it seems there’s a changeling back in her family tree. Many generations back.” The way his eyes creased above the mask, he was smiling. “And it’s nothing to be worked up about. Statistically speaking, more of your people have a few changeling genes than not. Especially in Ireland. We have history there.”

Artemis’ fingers were pale where they gripped the folder. “So what does that have to do with my mother’s condition? She’s well now.” He shot a dark look at Butler. Holly wondered if anyone else could see the fear. “She is, isn’t she?”

“As long as she knows your father is,” the bodyguard nodded.

“Not uncommon,” Kingsfoil said, matter-of-fact. “You can read the details on hybrid vigor and hybrid breakdown in the file. In essence, some descendants are a tad more fragile than others. But so long as they have emotional support from someone they can rely on, they’re usually fine. Flighty, but fine.”

A blue eye narrowed. “I have never been flighty.”

“No, you are frighteningly sane,” Kingsfoil agreed. “A hiccup in one gene repeat, missing a fever at ages most babes get one, having a stable person in your life from the very start,” he nodded respectfully at Butler, “any of those can make the difference. Once we’ve straightened out all of your treatment, you’ll be perfectly fine.” He growled; the impatient noise of a medic knowing there were bleeding people he just couldn’t get his hands on. “Which is not the case with some of the other humans Section Eight’s been keeping an eye on.”

This time it was Butler who came up with a fairy laptop wrapped in a sterile layer. Holly had to grin as she watched him use a blunt stylus to press the keys. Butler’s hands might be very, very good at battering trolls and goblins into submission, but fairy tech wasn’t his preferred area.

“I knew you’d need some background before we went topside again, Artemis, Captain Short,” Butler stated, handing the computer over to Artemis. “Didn’t realize exactly how much. Time flies, eh Foaly?”

The centaur’s head popped up in a video window, tinfoil hat looking surprisingly jaunty. “That it does. You’re lucky you kidnapped Holly when you did, Mud Boy. A few years later and the Council would have been howling about mutants and blue-rinsed Fowl Manor whether Holly was in it or not.”

“Mutants?” Holly helped Artemis steady the computer. “I thought you gave up foil hats for Cymballine, Foaly. What are- what is that?”

Whatever the creature in the new video clip was, it was bigger than a troll, shattering asphalt and buildings like crusty bread, and green.

“That,” Cedar informed her, drifting close enough to glance at the screen, “would be the Hulk.”

“And that would be Harlem.” For once, Artemis sounded as stunned as she felt. “This is the individual you believe might be a result of demon DNA?”

“One of a pair that tore apart that city, yes,” Kingsfoil agreed. “Believe it or not, the Hulk is the sane one.” He pointed at another, even more distorted entity that had roared its way into the video; gray,
with bony growths that looked far too much like some of the more terrifying demons, and a smirk that chilled Holly worse than a besieging pack of trolls. Trolls were gorilla-sized venomous wrecking balls that just wanted to kill and eat you. The gray creature wanted you to suffer first.

“I’d have to agree,” Butler grumbled. “People I’d trust say if you see the Hulk, just clear the area. He’s only interested in hurting things that hurt him first. That Abomination was some sort of supersoldier dreamed up by a general called Ross, and it killed near a hundred people before the Hulk took it down.”

“Oh, lovely,” Artemis breathed, in the cold tone Holly knew meant he was calculating exactly what resources he had on hand to do something permanently inconvenient to an unsuspecting criminal. “Has anyone contained this general?”

“It was discussed, but it seems Ross wasn’t the brain behind whatever induced warp spasm-like effects in the two victims.” Kingsfoil’s eyes narrowed, and he deliberately looked away from the video. “A pity he didn’t walk into that fight himself. Even trolls wouldn’t have stood much chance in that mess.”

Butler’s stylus closed the disturbing scenes of carnage, and opened a surreal view of guns and bullets, hanging in midair before cops scrambling for cover. “Dash-cam footage of an encounter with a mutant known as Magneto,” he stated, bringing up a mug-shot of a distinguished silver-haired human. “Controls metal. Word is he’s locked in some kind of plastic prison, but I wouldn’t count on that holding him forever. Apparently he preaches that mutants are the next evolution of humanity and the rest of us flatscans ought to shuffle off and die. Men like that always find idiots to follow them.”

“Flatscans?” Holly craned her head back to look at him, uneasy. Butler had used the term with the same venom she’d heard fairies put into Mud Men. And she didn’t like that. At all.

Artemis was skimming some of the associated files, blue eye intent. “Apparently this Erik Lehnsherr believes he can pick out his Homo so-called superior from ordinary Homo sapiens by way of a particular spike in brainwaves. Stuff and nonsense, of course. Jiggle an EKG connected to a bowl of conductive jelly, you can put spikes in it.”

“If he does get out, don’t say that to his face,” Butler advised. “Just run.”

“And nobody believed me about human mind-readers,” Foaly huffed, brushing shiny foil. “According to the police reports on this mess, there is one, he took over other mutants there, and Magneto wasn’t grabbed because he was using a good helmet!”

Holly’s jaw dropped. “A mind-controlling human.” She glanced at the two humans with her; under the calm control, they looked just as perturbed as she felt. “Oh wonderful. I can’t even imagine what the Council wants to do about that.”

“I can,” Butler murmured.

She wasn’t going to wince. Artemis had opened the door for Recon to bio-bomb Fowl Manor by his implicit invitation if he died. He’d known Recon’s ransom protocols, and wagered his own life and three others on his ability to beat a time-stop. He’d known exactly what he was doing.

But he’d also been twelve and desperate. How desperate she hadn’t realized, until they’d rescued his father. Between that and Opal Koboi’s efforts to bomb her - no. She really couldn’t sympathize with the Council’s attitude of, throw a bio-bomb at the situation and hope it goes away.

For one thing, sometimes it just didn’t work.
“Hmm.” Artemis rested his chin on his knuckles, brows drawn down. “And you think these so-called mutants may in fact be the result of oddly expressed changeling genes? In effect, magic?”

*He’s worried, Holly realized. Well. He did have magic. If only for a little while.*

Though she only had Artemis’ word that he’d used it all. He might have... stretched things a bit. Given how many times a healing had been all that stood between those he cared about and death, she almost couldn’t blame him if he had.

*D’Arvit, he might even think he’s telling the truth that he doesn’t. Running hot is obvious. Only a smidge of magic left? Not so much.*

Thank Frond for Butler. If Artemis did still have any magic, and had walked into this mess without a briefing... well. Holly had no illusions about Artemis’ talents for finding trouble. They were *almost* greater than his knack for getting out of it.

“We don’t know if it’s magic.” Kingsfoil stared at the video of Magneto, and shook his head as if to rattle loose thoughts of sharp-edged mayhem. “Mutants that make enough of a splash to show up on Section Eight data-mining programs are generally on the run, and the Wing Commander hasn’t gotten Council permission to aggressively acquire DNA samples. Those on the Council who aren’t in denial - oh my, humans can’t *possibly* have magic - are terrified a mutant might see right through our shields. And they could be right.”

Artemis shifted his attention from the video to the warlock. “You want to help them.”

“We can’t risk the People’s security.” Kingsfoil didn’t sound happy with that answer. “But I’m a warlock, and I’ve seen young warlocks show up in families that can barely pull off a mesmer. If they’re not identified and trained early, things can get messy. If you’re lucky, a hell of a lot of resentment all around. If you’re not- well. Boom.”

Holly had to grimace in agreement. She’d never been on a delinquent warlock case in Recon, but she’d heard some of the old horror stories. “And there’s no one out there to train these humans?”

Kingsfoil jerked a thumb toward Magneto. “Apparently *he* is.”

“Lovely,” Artemis muttered.

“Indeed,” the warlock agreed. “There may be some less malevolent types teaching mutant children, but if there are, they’re keeping almost as low a profile as the People.”

“I’ve asked Foaly for non-metallic Neutrinos for both of us.” Butler gave Artemis the level look Holly knew well: *this is bodyguard stuff, and you will listen no matter how much you don’t like it.* “You’ll carry it and learn to use it. I’m not losing you to a megalomaniac who can kill you with a paperclip. Or a robot made up to look like a megalomaniac.” He flipped up a picture of a scowling metal mask under a green hooded cloak, cloth flaring wide to show off dark gray armor from head to booted toe. “Magneto is dangerous, but at least he doesn’t have his own country to base his hate in. Latveria isn’t so lucky.”

For once, Artemis looked thoroughly nonplussed. “*That* is Victor von Doom?” Dazed, he shook his head. “I absent myself from the timestream for three years, and the world slides into insanity.”

“Doom was headed that way years ago.” Butler touched the monitor, drawing up a few files on some kind of experimental spacecraft that gave Holly chills just looking at it. “Don’t know what it is about some men. A lady tells them she’s not interested, and instead of wishing her well and walking away, they morph into crazed stalkers out to make people’s lives miserable. Given Doom is skilled at
building robots that go boom, he makes life interesting for New York whenever he’s in that country.”

“In the United States?” Artemis eyed the photo with deep suspicion. “Has no one seized his passport?”

“Diplomatic immunity.” Butler’s lips made a tight line. “Not to mention a few interesting technological, biological, and occult threats he’s scattered around. Section Eight had you all vaccinated for good reasons. There have been a few things loose these past years no doctor’s ever seen before.”

“A psychopathic disease-making human,” Holly breathed. “I thought Opal was bad enough. At least molten iron isn’t contagious.”

Artemis nodded, grim. “I am a bit more concerned with the occult aspect.”

“Most people don’t believe it,” Butler said neutrally.

Artemis glanced up. “You are not most people.”

“No,” his bodyguard agreed. “I haven’t found much information. Yet. What I have found makes me very, very cautious. Some of the names involved may tie back to something Recon calls the Hamburg Incident.”

Holly winced. Would she never be free of that mess?

“Please don’t hack his systems anytime soon,” Butler went on, mercifully ignoring her embarrassment. “Not until we know more. Foaly’s mentioned a few of the magical security measures Haven has set up, and if Doom has anything like them you’re going to need LEP tech on your side.”

“Noted.” Artemis nodded, far less flippantly than usual. “I promise I’ll be cautious.”

“Good.” Some of the tension eased out of Butler’s shoulders as he called up yet another video clip. “Though based on your father’s recent investment strategies, you’re more likely to run into Iron Man than either of the psychopaths.”

Holly suppressed a shudder at the name. In these modern times the People didn’t have much problem with iron and steel, mainly due to better knowledge of nutrition, anemia, and sunlight’s UV effects on fairy physiologies. But given she’d had proof that humans could still exploit fairy folklore, in the form of the denizens of Fowl Manor surviving a bio-bomb - brr.

Talk to Kingsfoil about iron supplements for Artemis later. He might not have enough elf in him to have to worry about it.

For now, she followed the footage of red-and-gold armor streaking across the New York City skyline, ripping pieces off some kind of flying metal whale-thing with the Hulk and dodging other flying machines with chaff and launches of mini-missiles. “Oooh... give it wings and I want one.”

Butler smiled. Artemis’ glance was as alarmed as if he were strapped into a hotshot and she’d just handed him the controls. “Section Eight suits aren’t good enough?”

“They don’t come with missiles.” Kingsfoil chuckled behind his mask. “Trust me, I’ve heard that from half the Retrieval jocks already. The armor’s also better at taking impact than anything we’ve come up with-”
“Yet!” Foaly threw in over the com. “It can be done. We’ll do it. And Holly’s right about the wings. See how he has to use his hands to maneuver? That’s no good if you need to fiddle with tricky tech while you’re flying. We can do better.”

“If you can duplicate the power source,” Artemis said, less than impressed. “I don’t think even a Neutrino’s nuclear battery can maintain that level of sustained output. Certainly not for long.”

“Yeeees,” Foaly drew out the word, as if he were reluctant to let it past his lips. “The arc reactor is a key factor. I don’t suppose an honest thief might be interested in a bit of industrial espionage?”

Holly clapped a hand to her face, and wished she had the centaur in punching range. “Foaly!”

“I believe I learned my lesson on such matters with the C-Cube,” Artemis mused. “Why steal an industrial secret when you can buy it? Tony Stark’s never been averse to selling his inventions before.”

Foaly harrumphed. “Your media still denies that’s Stark.”

“The human media misses Russian Mafiya movements, fairy mind-wipes, and exploding islands,” Artemis shrugged. “If you’re relying on them for accurate information, you might as well read the horoscopes for business advice. I keep track of the people in my tax bracket.”

_Probably the better to know who to steal from_, Holly thought wryly. Though on the other hoof, as Foaly would say, it was rich humans with no scruples who could cause the biggest messes for the People, so it was just as well Artemis did know who they were.

“Stark Industries has the resources to develop the prototypes necessary to make such a suit work,” Artemis went on, “and Tony Stark is one of the few engineering genii out there who could have made it work in three years. Also, Butler specifically mentioned Father’s investments, and Stark Industries has always been one of his favored legitimate moneymakers. I’m not averse to that stock myself. Although Father swore to Mother he only invested in the medical and scientific research divisions of the company. Not the weapons.” He touched the screen to freeze, rewind, and expand the video image, focusing on the massive thing that had been hurtling through the sky before Hulk and Iron Man brought it down. “I would say that not investing in weapons appears to have been an incredibly short-sighted idea. What is that? Where did it come from?”

“Neither, unfortunately,” Butler rumbled. “Here’s where it gets complicated.” He called up a few
more video stills. A muscular blond man in armor and a flamboyant red cape, raising a hammer that
crawled with blue sparks of magic. A whirlpool of light, etching a blaze of unfamiliar runes on desert
ground. A tall, too-thin black-haired man in green and a bronze-horned helmet, bearing a spear that
glowed with malevolent light.

Artemis frowned, ignoring the two humans in antique armor to focus on the runes. “Those are not
Norse runes. Very like them, but not quite.”

“Oh, and you know about Norse runes?” Holly gave him an arch look. It was the best way to get
him to focus. She knew Artemis. If he didn’t think he’d snatched enough facts to grasp the bones of
the problem, he’d never sleep until someone drugged him. And she’d had enough of watching him
toss and turn these past days, not sure if he would live or die.

Live. He’s going to live. Thank Frond.

“I looked at every set of symbols known to man three years ago... six years ago, now,” Artemis
corrected himself. “I know what real Norse *futhark* looks like.”

“Quite correct. That’s Asgardian,” Kingsfoil nodded. “I suspect the Wing Commander will clear you
for what we know about it. Though if Foaly happens to hack his way in and shuffle a few files your
way early - I’m your medic. I don’t need to know about it.”


The bodyguard lifted a peppered brow. “That would be because they’re not human.”

*What?*

“Thor and Loki,” Butler gestured at blond and black, “are from a planet called Asgard. They call
Earth Midgard. They get here by way of an Einstein-Rosen bridge... I didn’t even try to understand
the physics on that one, Artemis, you’ll have to look it over. From what I could puzzle out, the
Asgardians have the science to control wormholes. And they have since at least the first time they
came to Earth. A thousand years ago.”

*Science to control wormholes.* “Can we do that, Foaly?” Holly asked, a bit scared of the answer.
Everyone knew that advanced warlocks and scientists got up to odd things in secret Haven labs, but
she’d never heard a whisper of anything like this.

“Unless you count the demon warlock transport spells, which I don’t, the answer is no,” the centaur
said grimly. “This is *bad*, Holly. We’re talking about science Haven can’t match. Not just a few
genius humans like Stark and Artemis stumbling on a thing or two. A whole culture centuries ahead
of us.”

“Possibly worse than that.” Artemis’ tone was chill calculation. “Thor and Loki. As in the allies or
descendents of Odin One-Eye, the Corpse-Gatherer, the master of sorcery. The Norse god whose
Valkyries drove the best warriors to madness in battle, so he might have his pick of the slain. No one
picks names like those lightly.”

“They didn’t pick them,” Butler said dryly. “If the sources I’ve asked are right, Odin is the king of
Asgard. The *same* king.”

Holly shivered. “It’s been a thousand years. Maybe the rest of them have changed?” Hah. The
People still blamed Mud Men for driving them off the surface ten thousand years ago, even though
by now most of Haven knew Artemis had saved their lives. Why would a bunch of aliens change?
“I don’t think so.” Foaly’s nervous hoof-stomp echoed over the com. “Thor showing up wrecked a small town in New Mexico. When Loki dropped in he killed people on two continents and brought that whole alien army through a portal to New York. Humans managed to stop it, especially Iron Man and Hulk in a group called the Avengers, but someone ended up lobbing a nuclear bomb back through the portal to do it.”

Holly swallowed hard. Radiation. Deadly to humans. Even deadlier to the People. “I want to go back to bed now.”

Shifting off the sheets, Artemis’ hand found hers.

“I’ve been in the files Section Eight has,” Foaly assured her. “It’s not as much as I’d like. Apparently back then most of the People didn’t realize Asgardians were more than frighteningly powerful Mud Men, flee on sight. And they thought we were... interesting wildlife.” His voice dropped. “If Section Eight’s right, half our horror stories aren’t about humans at all.”

“The Norse gods were supposed to be excellent hunters, whenever they couldn’t find a fun war to join in on.” Artemis’ tone could have etched glass. “Of course they hunted you. If you’ll tell beings who look just like you that they should worship you as gods, what will you do to those who don’t?”

Hand on hand wasn’t near the closeness they’d had in the interdimensional tunnel. But Holly thought she could still feel the sear of self-loathing in Artemis’ soul. He’d hunted her, after all; even if he’d been after gold, not lives. Hunted, and taken, because he hadn’t thought of fairies as people. But you’re not that person anymore, Holly thought. You need to believe that.

Looking at Butler, she raised an eyebrow, and glanced at Artemis.

“I think that’s enough for now, Warlock Kingsfoil,” the bodyguard obliged. “If you don’t mind, I need a few minutes alone with Artemis. Family matters. We need to come up with a very good story, if we’re going to keep the People out of it.”

“Good luck with that,” Kingsfoil said wryly. “I hear Warlock Qwan is over the moon that you got here only a few years off. But I think people are going to notice you’re missing three years with no possible good explanation.”


“...Right,” the elf medic said under his breath. “Follow the instructions in the file, let Mr. Butler help you if you get out of bed, and when you’re tired, rest. Outside of that... I’ll just leave you to your nefarious plotting.”

Holly waited until he’d entered and sealed the medical airlock before she poked Artemis in the shoulder. “That was mean.”

“Was it?”

Holly almost rolled her eyes - but hesitated. Most people would have taken that as just another cruel cut. But she’d worked with Artemis for three years, dragging and dragged by him through one hair-raising peril after another. She’d seen him with his memories of the People, and without; heard him break down crying when she’d recovered his father alive, and seen him honestly freak out when he’d told Butler he’d turned down gold, because helping stop Opal Koboi was the right thing to do.

Artemis was a genius. Unquestionably. And a young man who loved his parents dearly; she had tears and the return of half a ton of gold to the People as proof. Yet somehow, something had gone
terribly wrong in that family, because the same person she’d trust to yank her out of the jaws of death flailed like a drowning sprite when someone told him *we’re friends.*

*He can predict and manipulate a murderous psychopath into taking us halfway across the world to the exact spot we need to be, but he can’t connect with someone just trying to be there,* Holly thought. *We’re going to have to work on that.* “Just a little,” she said instead. “I know you hate hospitals, but try not to take it out on your doctor.”

Artemis glanced away. “I’ve never said I hated hospitals.”

“You didn’t have to.” Holly patted his arm, thinking of the long days Artemis had waited for his father to be released, and her own dark memories of her mother’s death. “I hate them too.”

“...I am sorry for the inconvenience, then.”

“Right,” Holly sighed. “Because you absolutely intended to ruffle up both our lives by letting an interdimensional transport spell jury-rigged by a demon warlock who’d been trapped in stone for ten thousand years go just a little bit haywire. Seriously, Artemis. I know you have control issues worse than centaurs have paranoia—”

“I heard that!”

“Quiet, Foaly,” she ordered. “Artemis - sometimes things happen that just *aren’t your fault.* All right? I’m not saying you have to agree with me. Just... think about it.”

A long moment of silence. “I’d prefer to think about these Avengers. The name is either pretentious or ominous, and I would like to have enough data to decide which.”

Butler inclined his head. “I have detailed files on the team and each as individuals, including what Foaly could hack out of SHIELD on Thor.”

Artemis started, inching a bit up and back against the headboard. “You do?”

The bodyguard smiled. “Given your father’s recent business partnership with SHIELD after his rescue, it seemed necessary, as you were not there to investigate for yourself.”

Holly hid a grin as tension eased out of her friend’s shoulders. *Some* people just wanted chocolates.

*If you love Artemis, feed him information.*

“But those details can wait until you’ve had some rest,” Butler said soberly. “Right now, the Fowls are more important.”

That quick, she felt Artemis tense all over again. “Has something happened to my parents?”

“Your parents are fine,” the older man said firmly. “It’s just... well. No easy way to say this. You’re an older brother, now.”

Holly drew in her own breath, stunned. Right. Humans could have children far more often than every twenty years. She’d just gotten used to the idea that Artemis was one of a kind. Honestly, after unleashing that terrifying genius on the world, what sort of parents would dare have more?

“An older brother.” Artemis pronounced the words as if they were in some alien tongue. “My parents had another child?”

“Twins. Myles and Beckett,” Butler said plainly. “Beckett’s the blond one. Myles is the one with the
mold cultures. They’re two.”

For a moment, Artemis went very, very still. “I see Mother did not waste time. Who are their bodyguards? Are you in contact with them? I want to know they’re reliable—”

Butler almost winced. “Juliet is very reliable.”

Artemis stared at him. “Juliet? Finally returned from her stint as a masked Mexican wrestler with a jade ring of doom? Juliet looks after Mother.”

“And the twins,” Butler said simply. “Your father’s decision.”

Color drained from Artemis’ already pale face. “Father has not hired another Butler, has he?”

Butler sighed. “No.”

“My father - once one of the most notorious crimelords in the entire world - is unguarded, with Juliet to watch over Mother and two two-year-old twin Fowls, and you say my parents are fine? Let me up! Holly, let go of me!”

“No,” Holly gritted her teeth and hung on, until Butler could move in and brace Artemis back against the bed. “You’ll die. Are you listening to me? You leave this room and you will die. Your immune system can’t take the shock of a surface ride. Stay put. You know Butler wouldn’t leave them if they were in danger.”

The look in Artemis’ eye said he knew nothing of the sort. He was Butler’s principal. Not the rest of the family.

“They’re safe,” Butler stated. “SHIELD agents aren’t Butlers, but they’ve been enough to keep the worst sorts at bay. Agent Coulson has seen to that.”

Artemis seemed to stop fighting. Holly didn’t let go. Artemis might seem to have two left feet and an odd mental hiccup in that evil genius brain when it came to the use of actual physical force, but he had more guts than any ten Recon officers she knew and nerves that had to be strung from titanium steel. And she’d never forget dying, and then not dying, as Time itself rewove around one perfect shot.

_He did it for me. He’d do it for Butler. Now if we can just get the idiot to shoot to protect himself._

“Agent Coulson,” Artemis’ voice was just a little unsteady. “I take it you’re familiar with this particular SHIELD agent?”

“Mostly by reputation,” Butler allowed. “But we met a few times while you were... away. Your father demanded that someone look into your disappearance in Taiwan, and it turns out SHIELD has run into a few very nasty things that look slightly like the warlock statues. They managed to pull together before and after pictures and determine that one of the statues was missing.”

Holly paled. A government agency had evidence of the People? “Oh, no.”

“Easy, Captain.” Butler lifted a calming hand. “You should read those files, too. Foaly and I have already given copies to your Wing Commander. It’s her judgment that so long as SHIELD thinks Qwan was one of these Otherplace demons, they’re not going to look any farther. Haven is safe.”

“But my parents,” Artemis objected.
“Agent Coulson has years of experience protecting and handling difficult assets,” Butler informed him. “I’ve done a few dry runs on the agents keeping a perimeter around your family. They’re good. Not as good as I was, but I wouldn’t mind if Juliet kidnapped one of the better ones and took him home.”

“You talked to Coulson.” From the carefully neutral look on Artemis’ face, he’d gotten something out of those words Holly had missed. “What did you tell him?”

“More than I told your family.”

Artemis raised an intrigued brow.

“Your family knows you were kidnapped by Billy Kong and his associates thanks to Minerva Paradizo’s misjudgment,” Butler began.

“Butler!” Artemis looked equally amused and mortified. “I made some rather glaring mistakes at that age myself.”

Holly snorted. Even at his worst, Artemis had never brought his schemes home to where a child would be in danger. Much less gone into one of his master plans relying on someone he didn’t trust beyond the next paycheck.

...And absolutely none of her disdain revolved around the fact that Artemis was fifteen, male, utterly confused at why evolution had inflicted such a horrible curse as hormones on so-called sentient beings, and Minerva was a pretty little thing for a human who could actually almost outthink Artemis. None at all.

“Even when you were ten, you had more sense than to stand in grabbing range of a psychotic armed killer you’d just fired,” Butler said dryly. “She was twelve - fifteen, now - and if it took siccing your parents and hers on her to make her see sense, she got off cheap. Your father wasn’t happy that I took your orders to keep her in one piece, but given you were heading out the window with a bomb he understood why you did it.” He paused. “I did not mention Qwan, No. 1, or you, Captain Short. Or the fact that your backup plan was to take an interdimensional hop to god only knows where in time and space. Have a less nerve-wracking one next time. Please.”

“I will endeavor to do so, yes,” Artemis shivered. “So you set my family on the trail of Billy Kong’s network. To keep them busy?”

“It gave them something to chase beyond legends that couldn’t be real,” Butler sighed. “If I’d told them the fairies took you away, they’d have thought I’d lost it. And then who’d be waiting to brief you?”

“...Thank you.” Artemis rubbed a knuckle under his eye. “But you told Coulson more.”

“As I said, SHIELD’s run into things that looked a little like Qwan,” Butler nodded. “Coulson showed me a few pictures. I had to admit they didn’t match, but there seem to be multiple demonic types in this Otherplace, so he was willing to believe Qwan might be another. I told him flat out I’d seen the demon hanging onto you and you disappeared. And then I asked him what the hell I should tell your parents.”

“Oh, well done,” Artemis murmured, smiling.

Butler chuckled. “I thought you’d appreciate that. So Agent Coulson agreed it’d be best to stick with kidnapped. Apparently SHIELD has a few contacts who deal with extradimensional incursions but they’re... not precisely reliable. Have a habit of disappearing into other dimensions themselves for
who knows how long.”

“So my family has a public explanation for why I’ve been missing, and SHIELD is unlikely to have contradictory information,” Artemis concluded. “Excellent. Far better than I’d hoped for.”

“I am going to beat you over the head with a pillow, see if I don’t,” Holly muttered. “What in Frond’s name is good about any of this?”

“Captain Short has a point,” Butler agreed. “Now I’ve been missing too. Only a week so far, but if I stay down here until you’re well, it’s likely to be a month.”

“Exactly.” Artemis’ smile might have frozen an unsuspecting sprite in midair. “Your unexplained absence will make everything plausible. It’s really very simple; the best way to explain this is not to explain anything.”

Finally letting go, Butler settled back on his stool. “Oh, this should be good.”

“Simple deduction,” Artemis shrugged. “You reported to Agent Coulson that a demon had apparently kidnapped me, and he did not so much as blink an eye. The logical conclusion is that Otherplace demons do kidnap humans; for what reasons, we should determine. He further told you to inform my family that I was kidnapped. Not dead. Which implies that some victims in the past have been rescued.” A casual shrug. “When we return to the surface, you will call Agent Coulson and inform him you found me. And that I appear to remember nothing.”

“Appear to?” Holly asked, fascinated despite herself. Watching Artemis plot was like hitting the top of a roller coaster. It was a long way down... but the ride was going to be interesting.

“I’ve ideas for the story under the story, but I’ll require more details on what SHIELD knows....” Artemis rubbed his head, and sighed. “And that will require a clearer head than I have at the moment.”

If he was admitting that, Holly knew, he really was tired.

Which means I might get some answers. I think we both need them.

Not that she could ask him flat out. Not without a setup first. Artemis Fowl II was possibly the most dangerous criminal the People had ever met. If she didn’t respect that, she’d lose him.

Stalking her target, Holly opened the medical folder again, lingering on one of the more heartbreaking changeling cases. “You know, we say humans are horrible and violent. But if I’d had something like this happen to my family, I’d show them violent.”

“I’ve no doubt some of the People did exactly that,” Artemis said soberly. “It’s rather depressing, how many human legends of fairies end badly for both sides.” The ghost of a smirk crossed his face. “Then again, if a particular arrangement was working out, it wouldn’t do either side a favor to advertise that fact, now would it?”

“I know I wouldn’t talk about it.” Butler leaned casually away from the bed. Or almost casually, if she didn’t know him.

You’re setting my Principal up for something. If it hurts him, we’re going to talk.

Ouch. But sometimes you had to dig to pull out a thorn, and that was all there was to it. “Artemis,” Holly said, very gently, “why are you doing this?”
“Recovering?” Artemis pulled away just enough to give her an arch look. “Or speculating on the possible motivations of people likely centuries dead, when it serves no current purpose?”

He was not that detached from reality. Though if he pulled that clueless look on his own parents, no wonder they’d missed the warning signs of a bored criminal mastermind. “You let the Wing Commander back you into that too easily,” Holly said bluntly. “I know you. You always have a plan.”

Silence.

Oh Frond, I pushed too hard, he wasn’t ready-

“An hour per second for a count of forty,” Artemis said, barely above a whisper. “Then a deceleration to thirty minutes per second for a count of eighteen. Next a jump backward in time, one minute per second for a count of two. Then it repeated.” He swallowed. “For a minute on Hybras, I... almost lost you.”

“I remember,” Holly said quietly. “I remember dying. I remember you letting me die there, alone in the ashes. “You had to keep the count.”

“It... never happened.”

Holly let out a slow breath. “Just because you undid it, doesn’t mean it didn’t happen.”

Artemis glanced away. “I am uncertain of the consequences of acknowledging a potential paradox.”

Butler was glancing between them, eyes as wide as she’d ever seen them. “Captain Short?”

Holly smiled at him, the same as she would before firing up a shuttle to tear a hole in the sky. “Your principal shot through a hole in Time.”

Butler blinked. She could see the thought written across his face in bold letters: Artemis actually hit something?

“Whatever might or might not have taken place,” Artemis said, picking his words like steps through a minefield, “I find myself highly averse to the thought of your continuing in such a hazardous line of work without dependable backup. I am sure your coworkers are skilled, and trained, and courageous. However, they are dependent on fairy technology, and there are simply far too few fairies. Your advanced technology is overwhelmingly the product of a select group of genii such as Foaly and Opal Koboi, rather than the mishmash of millions of minds poking at hardware and software for profit. Including exploitable holes. It leaves you vulnerable.” He paused. “I want to provide you with other options.”

Whoof. Holly watched him carefully. “Me, or the LEP?”

“Both,” Artemis acknowledged. “That is, after all, what a good consultant would do, is it not?”

Foaly’s snort came over the com. “You don’t think the Wing Commander’s going to go through with that, do you?”

There was the smirk, glimmering like ice. “Why should she not?”

A neighing laugh. “I hate to point out the obvious, Mud Boy-”

“Ah, but the mere fact that changelings are listed as Section Eight business implies that they were not
considered ordinary Mud Men,” the young genius cut him off. “And given some of the entries in these files,” Artemis rifled pages loudly, “it seems that under certain circumstances, a changeling can petition for the status of naturalized fairy.”

For a moment, all she heard was blood thrumming in her ears, and a centaur’s shocked whimper.
“...Oh, D’Arvit.”

Holly couldn’t help it. She giggled, even as the torrent of centaurean profanity went on. “Oh, Foaly. You are doomed to have someone you can officially discuss fairy science with until your brains melt. So very, very doomed.”

“That’s not funny!”

Ah, that’d done it; the shadows were almost gone from Artemis’ gaze, as he stifled snickers behind one hand.

Holly squeezed the other. “But are you sure this is something you want to do? I seem to recall a certain criminal mastermind trying to argue Haven’s laws didn’t apply to humans.”

“At which point you and Commander Root applied them anyway,” Artemis recalled dryly. “If I am by default considered under your jurisdiction, Captain, I might as well make it official.” A faint, tentative smile. “But... there are other considerations. Starting with the fact that I do respect your law enforcement, heavy-handed as it may sometimes be. And I particularly respect some of its officers.” He met her gaze, as trusting as any human who’d been mesmerized could ever be. “Even when I had every advantage over you, Captain Short, you told me what I was doing was wrong. And you never made a threat you did not carry out.” A twitch of a smirk. “Even the troll.”

“The troll really wasn’t my idea,” Holly admitted.

“Nevertheless,” Artemis nodded. “Haven has treated me as a human more fairly than the world treats Fowls. I want to - I would very much appreciate the opportunity to make full use of my talents-”

Butler cleared his throat.

“Ah. Honesty. Does not come easily to me, I will admit, I hope you can tolerate that shortcoming for the sake of other advantages-” Artemis cut himself off, pulling away to clutch his arms about himself. “...I want to help.”

*I want to help.* Not, *I think you’re outmatched*, or Frond help them all, *I’m bored.*

*I want to help.* Holly smiled. *I can work with that.*

“Wait a minute,” Foaly said nervously. “If Fowl’s going to be an official Section Eight consultant - you were serious about the Neutrinos!”

Butler’s smirk wasn’t as icy as Artemis’, but it promised much more immediate pain. “I never joke about firearms.”

“It’s not the first time we’ve armed them,” Holly pointed out.

“Sparked off by Opal Koboi, and are you absolutely certain she’s safely locked up?” Artemis said archly. “She’s only magicless, bound, and under constant guard in the deepest prison of Atlantis under miles of water, after all.”
“...I hate it when you have a point.” There was a crinkling sound; Foaly scratching his mane under the foil hat. “But you’ll be teaching Artemis to shoot!”

_and that’s going to be tricky_, Holly knew; thinking of a perfect shot when it mattered most, and a coin snatched from the air by wondering fingers. _But I have a few ideas._

So did Artemis, apparently. “There are more weapons in the world than Neutrinos. We’ll see what Stark has available... Butler?”

“He’s not trading in weapons these days,” the bodyguard stated.

Artemis stared at the man. _Stark Industries_, arms dealer to most of the free world and no few other places under the table, is not dealing in weapons? Why?”

“Ah,” Butler motioned for Artemis to lie back and rest, voice falling into a calm rhythm. “Now, that is an interesting story. It starts with Stark getting kidnapped in Afghanistan....”

“Life Model Decoy.” Tony drummed his fingers on the arm of his overstuffed chair; a stunning effort at normal, civilized behavior, more for the benefit of Steve trying to relax in another TV room chair than for the battered but very much alive agent recovering on his couch. “Would have been nice for Fury to tell us that _before_ the memorial service.”

“I got lucky,” Agent Phil Not-Quite-Dead Coulson nodded, laptop on top of him as he surfed through what were probably a bazillion super-secret messages from panicky SHIELD spies suddenly faced with answering directly to Fury. Tony almost pitied them. “Although for a few hours the medics weren’t sure I would be. It seems that magical shock transfers through an LMD worse than physical wounds.”

“Director Fury let us think you were dead,” Steve said quietly.

...And that was just not fair. How could one sad look from Rogers bother people so much more than Tony’s excellent snark?

“I am sorry about that. I wasn’t in any shape to say otherwise.” Phil gave Steve a reassuring smile. “I promise I’ll try not to let that happen again... huh.”

Tony traded a glance with Steve. Rogers hadn’t been around Phil long enough to know all the agent’s flavors of _huh_. But under the Boy Scout exterior was the wariness of anybody who’d had to depend on military intelligence in the middle of a firefight. “Is this a _huh_ that we’re officially cleared for,” Tony wondered, “or one we should jump on anyway?”

“You’d probably hear about this soon enough,” Phil mused. “You might as well get the facts as SHIELD knows them.” He glanced up from his email. “Artemis Fowl II has been found. Alive.”

Tony had to wiggle a finger in his ear, just in case he’d heard that wrong. “Did not see that one coming.”

“Someone else I should know about?” Steve didn’t sigh. But Tony would bet he wanted to. Being thrown decades out of your own time was not fun.

“I would be surprised and disturbed if you did,” Tony said honestly. “I wouldn’t know much about the kid if he hadn’t done something incredibly vicious, nasty, and _smart_ to the Russian Mafiya who kidnapped his dad. Nobody’s really sure how he did it, either, though my money’s on some kind of combination chemical on the bills. Jarvis? Bring up a summary for us.”
“Artemis Fowl II.” The AI shimmered a hologram into being; a file whimsically made to look like an old-fashioned manila folder, with the photograph of a serious dark-haired teenager in an expensive suit clipped to one edge. “IQ tested into the genius range. Speaks English, Irish Gaelic, and Russian fluently; believed to be competent in several other languages. Known aliases Stefan Bashkir, chess grandmaster; Dr. F. Roy Dean Schlippe, renowned psychologist author; and Violet Tsirblu, best-selling romance writer.”

“What?” Steve choked.

“Told you I’d be disturbed,” Tony smirked. God, the horrible puns. He’d bet they’d broken at least five Interpol agents’ brains. “Kid genius, and Jarvis finds out he’s writing romance novels? Talk about a waste of a good mind.”

Phil sat up a bit. “We didn’t know about the romance novels.”

“Tsirblu’s identity is cleverly concealed, but there are ways of tracking the royalties,” Jarvis noted. “Artemis was first brought to Interpol’s attention as the son of Angeline Fowl and Artemis Fowl Sr., crimelord of an organization that reached from Dublin docks to some of Tokyo’s worst back alleys.”

A family photo flipped up out of the folder now: a tall, dark-haired Irishman with a grim face, a smiling brunette whose diamond wedding band cast back glints of sun, and a younger Artemis in front of her looking even more expressionless than his father. Behind the Fowls stood two muscular Eurasian men whose posture all but shouted bodyguards.

“Eight years ago Fowl Sr. tried to open a legitimate business enterprise in Russia, and fell afoul of the Russian Mafiya,” Jarvis went on. “The Fowl Star was sunk in the Bay of Kola. At the time, there were believed to be no survivors.”

Steve shook his head. “That poor kid.”

“Say that again after you’ve fended off one of his hacks,” Tony said wryly. Mini criminal mastermind, and Steve saw a poor, lonely kid? Yikes. “He didn’t believe the courts when they declared Senior dead. Kept sponsoring expeditions for people to keep looking. Three years. Searching for a guy who would have wound up in hypothermic water if he was lucky.” He flipped through a dozen more pages in the folder to remind himself of the details, and watched Steve’s eyes cross. Wuss. Wasn’t speed-reading supposed to be old-school, way before the days of Attention Deficit Ooo Shiny? “I heard about it, and figured the kid wasn’t as smart as everybody thought.”

Tony flicked open his hands as the file dropped onto the right page, like a conjurer fluffing a dove out of thin air. “Then half the Russian Mafiya turned itself inside out fighting over five million dollars that somehow went up in smoke just before it got to big man Britva himself. It was a slaughter.”

Steve’s eyes widened.

“And Fowl Sr. shows up alive in Helsinki, of all places, dropped right outside the doors of University Hospital,” Tony finished. “Didn’t remember a thing from after he left Dublin. Or so he said.”

“The interesting thing about that,” Phil mused, “is that Artemis received the call from St. Bartleby’s, his school in Ireland. Yet less than twenty-four hours before, we have reputable sources placing him in Murmansk just before midnight, arranging the payoff to ransom his father. And we have no idea how he got from Murmansk to Ireland.”

Steve raised a blond brow. “He got from Russia across Europe, and SHIELD has no idea how he did it?”
“None at all. And it’s not the only time Artemis has done that,” Phil nodded. “He’s been spotted in different countries, on different continents, on the same day. On multiple occasions. Interpol is a little... spooked by him.”

“Hence why they dropped his file in your lap,” Tony concluded. “Mutant? Alien technology? Super-secret supersonic shuttle?”

“We still don’t know, though from the DNA tests we can probably rule out mutant.” Phil hesitated. “Probably. They’re Irish. And Irish X-genes can be a little off.” He blew out a frustrated breath. “Though I’m pretty sure Dr. Ross would flick my ear and tell me we don’t have large enough sample sizes to generalize about any mutants, much less specific ethnicities.”

“Long story short, happy family reunion, yay. Dad claims to have gone straight, Junior not so much,” Tony summed up. “Then three years ago Junior goes poof in Taiwan. No ransom demand, no nothing. Just gone. And,” he tapped at the younger of the two bodyguards in the family photo, “his bodyguard’s not talking.”

“Butler always insisted that Artemis had been kidnapped, but refused to give the authorities any more details,” Phil agreed. “For the past three years he’s been camped on the Irish coast, disappearing every few months to search for leads. A month ago he vanished again, completely.” He gestured toward his email. “Less than twelve hours ago, he and Artemis turned up at Fowl Manor.”

“I guess that’s good news.” But Steve was still frowning.

“You have the sad Cap look,” Tony observed. “If we could bottle it we’d have instant crowd control. What gives?”

“Well, it’s just....” Steve sighed. “He was thirteen. If paying the ransom got his father back, why would a kid set up people to kill each other? Even the Russian Mafiya.”

Tony grimaced, and tossed a look at Phil. “You want to give him the bad news, or should I?”

The agent’s shoulders slumped. “Steve. This particular organization had pulled off at least six prior ransom swaps that SHIELD knew about. In every case, both the hostage and the people delivering the ransom ended up dead.”

Steve flinched. “But-”

“No witnesses, no one trying to get the money back,” Tony said lightly. “Efficient.”

“Butler has contacts in the intelligence community, and he’s known to be very honest with his principal,” Phil nodded. “Artemis knew what he was dealing with.”

“Even if he managed to out-think them long enough to drop them the ransom and snatch his dad, that wouldn’t have been the end of it,” Tony added. Wasn’t fair to make Phil give all the bad news. “Britva would have had them both hit, just for pulling one over on him. Probably his mom and her bodyguard too, just to make it a clean sweep. Mob pride thing; don’t leave anybody out there to take revenge. Only way to derail that was to make it clear - gruesomely, lethally clear - that anybody who snatches a Fowl isn’t going to live to enjoy it.”

“And you think Artemis... knew that.” Steve looked a little ill. “He was thirteen.”

“And he did what he had to, to keep his family safe.” Tony crossed his arms; no point in arguing this with someone who didn’t get what it took to stay alive at the top of the money-pile. “Guess there’s some advantages to being an orphan.” He shrugged at Phil. “So. You heading to Ireland?”
“No, not yet,” Phil said, half his concentration on whatever other scanty facts were in his email. “For now we’ll just observe. Based on past experience, if he and Butler are back in the public eye, they’ve already done... whatever they were planning to do to whoever was responsible.” He frowned. “And if they haven’t yet, Butler is getting a little old for field ops, then I’d like to be healed up enough to lend a hand if SHIELD gets involved.” He glanced up at Steve. “I’ve worked with members of the Butler family in the past, and I once had the honor of taking a few lessons from Madame Ko, Butler’s sensei. Whatever you might think about Artemis, Butler is a decent man. Losing his principal hurt him. I want whoever did that.” The agent smiled tightly. “Assuming Artemis doesn’t beat us all to it, first.”


Give him credit, Phil had to stop and think about that one. “I think admire might be more accurate.”

Tony slid a subtle glance Steve’s way. Yep; Rogers was staring just as much as he was.

“The same way you’d admire a leopard up a tree in the sun,” Phil said dryly. “From a distance, when it’s not hungry, and with no intention to get any closer and tick it off.”

“He worries you,” Steve frowned.

“Yes and no.” Phil mulled his options a moment, and shrugged. “For the most part, he’s just not SHIELD’s problem. Artemis’ favored M.O. includes forgery, fraud, grand larceny, and on one spectacular occasion, forcibly donating Jon Spiro’s criminal fortune to Amnesty International. He’s not a world threat, Steve. A criminal, yes. Dangerous to anyone who goes after his family, definitely. But he has no interest in war, or weapons, or making either of the two easier to spread through the world. He’s... I hate to say harmless. But he’s had plenty of opportunities to walk much darker roads, and he hasn’t.”

“He’s eighteen,” Tony said lightly. “Bet he hasn’t even gotten started yet.”

“I kind of hope he won’t get started at all,” Phil said ruefully. “Mr. Fowl has made sincere efforts to establish himself as a legitimate businessman. He’s been a great help setting up certain cover identities and safehouses for SHIELD. And both he and Mrs. Fowl have been trying to give their son a more normal life.” He paused. “Had been trying. This is going to throw things.”

“Yeah, getting kidnapped kind of does.” Tony scratched the back of his head. “So Senior went straight, huh? Sure, fine, maybe I buy that, I know about people pulling a change of heart.” He thumped the arc reactor. “Though personally, I’d take a real close look at that report that says he doesn’t remember anything since Dublin. But Moriarty Junior? Not happening. Not after Russia.”

Phil grimaced. Yeah. He got it.

“He saved his father in Russia,” Steve pointed out.

Aaaand maybe Steve didn’t get it. Though Tony thought that maybe Captain America protested too much. “You dealt with the Resistance, right?”

“Yeah,” Steve said, evidently not happy.

Oh good. There was some practical sense under the shiny stars. “Forgery, sabotage, espionage, the whole ball of covert ops wax,” Tony listed off. “And they were able to do all that because they knew people who knew people. Sometimes very bad people.”

“...Yeah,” Steve sighed. “They had connections. Contacts.”
“Debts to call in,” Tony said flatly. “Snatching Senior out from under Britva’s claws? Artemis owes people. No way around that. Maybe he’s paid off those debts since, but people don’t forget. And if he has paid those debts off....” Damn it, this really did cut close to home. He’d been young and smart and bored, taking bigger and bigger risks just to see if anything could stop him. Until a bomb finally had. “Then he’s good at it, Steve. And if you’re good at dancing on the edge like that? It’s really, really hard to quit.” He shrugged, giving Phil a calculating look. “You ask me, I’d guess the kid disappeared himself, instead of dealing with Daddy Goody-Two-Shoes saying stay inside and do your homework.”

“Huh.”

Okay, that was an interesting huh. Tony raised an eyebrow, swiping his fingers toward himself in an all right, lay it on me.

“You know, I could see that,” Steve said thoughtfully. “Just, not for that reason.”

Tony sat up, intrigued. Because okay, maybe they were still getting the hang of this whole teamwork thing, and maybe Steve would never be winning prizes in experimental nuclear physics. But Steve could still swing a mean wrench at exactly the right place when stuff needed to be put together or yanked apart, and he was better at people than Tony had ever been.

Then again, there were probably lonely rocks in the desert better at people than Tony was. See Obadiah Stane, various disasters thereof. That was why he’d hired Pepper.

“He spent three years looking for his father,” Steve said simply. “No matter what it took. I know if I’d had any shot at getting my father back, I’d have done - well, a lot worse things than I did. But Artemis actually did it. And everything should have been okay. That’s what Dads do; they fix things too big for a kid. Or if it can’t be fixed, at least they’re there.”

Obviously Steve had never dealt with the wonder that was Howard Stark as a father. But Coulson was listening, in that intent agent way he had, so maybe there was something to what Steve said after all. A smidge. A snowflake.

“Except Mr. Fowl didn’t fix this,” Steve went on. “And if he’s saying the family has to go completely straight - then he’s not letting Artemis fix it, either. Like you said; no one can just walk away from favors like that. So Artemis has been lying to his father ever since Mr. Fowl got back. He didn’t have a choice. That....” Steve shook his head. “Yeah. With everything hurting that much, I might have run away, too.”

Phil was studying Steve, face as blank as Tony’d ever seen it. “You should be aware that no less than five separate psychiatrists have diagnosed Artemis as sociopathic. Someone literally incapable of caring about another human being, except how he can use them.”

Ah. Yeah. That would be bad, Tony reflected. Except wait, Phil had almost called Artemis harmless. And if there was one thing a sociopath never was, it was harmless.

“F. Roy Dean Schlippe.” Steve rolled his eyes. “If he’s smart enough to write about psychology he’s smart enough to fool psychiatrists. It’s not that hard. The Mafiya were going to murder his father just to get money out of him. Of course he’s pretending not to care about people. If he doesn’t care, it doesn’t do the bad guys any good to threaten people, does it?”

Phil relaxed a bit. “Well, you just read the situation better than most of our analysts.”

Wait, what? “You mean that crazy little hacker really does care about his family?” Tony blurted out.
“Strongly enough that Butler asked for my help vetting the agents looking after the Fowls,” Phil nodded. “He didn’t say it, but he made it quite clear that if something happened to them while Artemis was in no condition to stop it.... That might be a very final last straw.”

As in damn the torpedoes, I’m blowing up the world ‘cause I really don’t care about anyone anymore, Tony reflected. Yeah. Bad. “So not run off. Really kidnapped.” Tony ran their conversation back through his mind. “Wait, you said Butler didn’t give the authorities any details—”

“He did tell me a few things that have never seen the official reports,” Phil acknowledged. “I’ve had the relevant SHIELD personnel working the leads, but it’s not something the Avengers could have helped with.”

“Oh no?” Tony wriggled his fingers, ready for a good hack.

“No,” Phil said firmly. “If that changes, you’ll be the first to know. For now, we let the Fowls try to sort this out in the family. Butler has my number.” He closed that email and opened another. “If you really want to get into something the Avengers can help with, I have some reports that hint Victor von Doom might be sending robotic submarines down to WWII shipwrecks beyond the Straits of Gibraltar. Any ideas what he might be after?”

Oh, yay, Doom. Why couldn’t Reed Richards handle the maniac once and for all?

Ah well. Could be worse. If Doom was using submarines, he wasn’t using magic.

Yeah. Look on the bright side. We’ll end up fighting some major underwater battle over a lost superweapon and nearly dying from lasers, robots, or just plain old bends, but not magic. Anything but magic.

Cheered, Tony peered at the map.
Chapter 2

One, two, and three, Artemis counted, filling each of Foaly’s stasis packets with dirt from the Fowl Manor garden and an acorn from the river bend he and Butler had visited earlier this evening. One sealed packet clipped onto the chain that held his pierced coin; the others were hidden in various small concealed pockets Butler had made sure were in each of his suits. Locked and loaded, as Holly might say.

“You want me to turn over experimental, possibly heretical technology, to you?” Foaly had blustered at him two weeks before, wide nostrils flared as he tried to stare down Artemis’ odd eyes. Section Eight’s computer expert was still tall enough to look down at him; though Artemis had realized with a shock that in another year or so, that might no longer be true.

“No games, no tricks, no ulterior motives,” Artemis had stated calmly. “Well... perhaps one ulterior motive.”

“Hah!” Laptop in hand, Foaly pranced in front of his precious stash of experimental technology. “I knew it!”

Artemis had allowed himself a small smirk. “I wish to see the look on Holly’s face the first time we are in grave peril, and I can hand her an acorn.”

Which had been perfectly true, Artemis reflected now, making his way through the manor garden with all the stealth Butler had taught him; mindful of moving with the shadows, as noise and light spilled from windows and doors flung wide on a graceful party. He did intend to keep acorns in reserve for Holly, should she need them. He’d never joined the captain on a mission yet where they’d suffered from too much magic.

But so long as he was carrying acorns for Holly, no one should pay much attention if he happened to carry a few more.

Tossing his fourth acorn in one hand, Artemis headed away from the lights, into the center of a hedge maze. Normally Butler would be shadowing his every step. But given what he was about to attempt, his bodyguard had agreed it would be safer if he kept watch near the garden gates to head off any straying guests... and keep clear of any explosions.

Not that there should be explosions. Honestly, the most probable result was that nothing would happen at all. According to the Book, rituals were specific to each fairy race. And one eye aside, he was not an elf.

But the Book doesn’t list a Ritual for humans. And I sincerely doubt I stole demonic magic.

Not that he could be sure. In the time tunnel, all the People’s magic had looked and felt alike; a warm blue plasma that almost seemed a living being in itself. But he had accidentally stolen Holly’s healing magic once before, so the odds were-

You’re stalling.

Well, yes, Artemis admitted to himself. He still had magic; he could summon a spark of it any time he wished, and trying to enter Fowl Manor had threatened to make him lose his last meal until Butler had issued a very quiet invitation. But if this worked - there was a world of difference between having thieved away a small store of magic, and choosing to live as a magical creature himself.
I want to be there when I’m needed.

Artemis let out a nervous breath, and knelt in the center of the maze, scraping a hole through thick moss for his acorn. Two months ago - three years ago? - he would have needed a penlight for this. These days the night was still dark, but clear enough that he could walk without tripping over anything. That alone was a gift from Holly, even if he never touched magic again. “I return you to the earth, and claim the gift that is my right—”

The world went white.

Sparks.

Breathe.

Like digging away crumbling earth, desert dry.

Breathe.

Like a rainstorm after drought, a torrent, a flood that threatened to uproot boulders and tear down forests just to restore what should be-

I am Artemis Fowl II. I will. Not. Yield!

Water ringing over stone, the world sang.

...Ow.

Lying on the ground. Mother would throw a fit if she saw him like this. Though oh, the colors....

“Artemis?”

Butler. Working his way through the maze with catlike tread, one hand ready to go for his Sig Sauer, or the Neutrino if that were needed.

He probably heard me go down. D’Arvit; I didn’t want to worry him. Artemis got to his feet, and started brushing himself off. “I seem to be undamaged.”

“Good.” Butler loomed up in front of him, a crease of worry between thick brows. “Most of the lightshow was hidden by the maze. If we’re lucky, any guests will have just chalked the rest up to fireflies.”

“Good.” Butler loomed up in front of him, a crease of worry between thick brows. “Most of the lightshow was hidden by the maze. If we’re lucky, any guests will have just chalked the rest up to fireflies.”

“At this time of year?” Artemis muttered. Though the guests’ ignorance of the state of nature about Fowl Manor was not his most pressing problem, surely. “Er. Lightshow?”

Butler’s worry took on a slightly more humorous air. “You remember Holly’s mishap in Russia?”

Artemis shuddered. “Vividly.” A mistimed jump and a train door like a guillotine had sliced off Holly’s trigger finger; racing the clock to heal it in time had involved being pitched back off said train, Butler shooting a hole in ice to get Holly’s acorn to earth, and a nerve-wracking flood of magic that had seemed as if it might snap her spine before it healed her.

Butler nodded. “Worse.”


“Hmm.” Butler crouched, studying each eye, snapping his fingers by each ear and performing the
various other esoteric tests the bodyguard felt necessary whenever his principal was too close to something that went boom. “You seem all right. But if this is going to happen again we’ll need to find spots with better cover.”

“Noted.” Artemis picked off a stray blade of grass, taking a moment to catch his breath. “I do feel well, though. Better than I have since....” Well. That was awkward. “Russia. Actually.”

“Interesting.” Butler fell into step just behind him as they started making their way back out of the maze. “Recon refers to a charge as ‘running hot’.”

“It’s not a sense of physical heat.” Artemis mentally poked at that odd feeling of wellbeing, like walking out in the colors of dawn. “It’s more as if one is rested and ready for the challenge, and simply needs to decide which challenge to handle first.”

“Oh lord.” Butler cracked a smile. “You, with more self-confidence.”

Artemis snorted. “I’m about to go avoid my parents’ party, ensure the twins haven’t tried to break into my room again, and try to practice elementary magical exercises based on files an LEP captain gave me to start understanding exactly what it is Foaly does with technology and magic. I think I can use whatever scraps of confidence I can lay hands on.” He was not going to fidget with his cuffs.

“Do you think she suspects?”

“I think Captain Short knows you well enough to anticipate you’re likely to put that information to uses she never expected,” Butler stated. “You should tell her.”

Artemis looked up at the full moon, feeling that odd chorus of magical voices in the back of his mind again. There were People all over Ireland tonight, drinking in magic and making merry. He could sense it. “I will. I just want to practice a bit, first.”

“All right.” Butler nodded, accepting that. “But if Holly has to drag you out of some magical morass gone wrong, Foaly will never let you hear the end of it.”

Damnably good point, that. Artemis took a small mirror out of his pocket, checking the blue contact lens was still in place on his left eye. Foaly’s iris-cam would have been just as wearable and far less traceable, but he did not want Foaly looking in on tonight’s activities. Not yet. “Am I presentable enough?”

“No idea how you manage it,” Butler muttered, dusting a few last flecks of moss off his shoulders. “It should do. Unless your mother decides formal dress no longer applies to young men in her household and she wanted you in jeans and a t-shirt instead.”

Artemis winced at the very thought. “As a disguise, they might have merit. Might. Under all other circumstances, I’d as soon be caught in them as I would be speaking spells in Canis Latinicus.”

“What?” Butler’s expression fell short of innocent by the length of a garrote. “You’re not going to try Flickum Biccus?”

“If Mother asks, the Dresden Files are for the twins.” He was not going to blush. Although mining current popular media for ideas on how magic might work at least sounded promising. Though he’d want a much better grounding in magical theory before he introduced Foaly to The Irregular at Magic High School. The results might be... explosive.

“Speaking of the twins.” Artemis slowed as they got closer to the echoing music and laughter. “What Kingsfoil said, about changeling genes and mental stability....”
"I wish I had an answer." Butler shook his head. "You can’t reasonably hire them bodyguards if
your father won’t hear of it. I can tell you from my family histories that won’t work. For now, they
seem to be relying on each other. That should be enough for the both of them until they get to be...
oh, fifteen or so and go after the same girl. Then you’d better have good credit built up with healers
like Warlock Kingsfoil, just in case. That is why you’re aiming for naturalized fairy, isn’t it?"

“One of the stronger reasons, yes,” Artemis admitted. “I don’t know them well yet, but - watching
Mother crumble was frightening enough. I don’t think I could bear that twice.”

“And you don’t want to tell your father, and see what he thinks.”

“How could I possibly explain how I’d come by the information?” There was a lump in his throat.
How odd. “Does he even know what happened to Mother? She remembers that she was depressed,
not... hallucinating.”

“I can give him some details,” Butler said firmly. “I know how to skate around mentioning magic.”

Oh. Oh Frond, what a relief. “You must think I’m quite the coward,” Artemis whispered.

“Because you don’t want to tell your father his wife was having delusions of being on her
honeymoon instead of looking after herself and her son?” Butler gave him an unimpressed look.
“Artemis, no one sane would want to poke their nose into that mess. I can get away with it because I
am not her son. From you this information would do more harm than good. That’s not cowardice.
That’s common sense.”

Even so. “Thank you,” Artemis said honestly.

“Thank me by getting around the guests without verbally maiming them for life,” Butler suggested.
“It is your mother’s party.”

“I will endeavor to do so,” Artemis nodded. “Though if I hear the phrase the science is settled one
more time, I am tempted to start an exothermic reaction in the punch bowl. Science is never settled. If
it is not a testable, falsifiable hypothesis, it’s dogma, not science. And I detest dogmatists of any
stripe or creed, no matter how good their intentions may supposedly be.”

“I know where the fire extinguishers are.” Butler rested a hand on his shoulder. “Shall we?”

“Why, oh why, must my parents be so sociable?” Bracing himself, Artemis sighed. “Needs must,
when the devil drives.”

I’ve beaten demons before.

Clinging to that truth, Artemis dove into the crowd.

Still dripping, Clint Barton stalked out of the Avengers’ Quinjet, yawning to try and clear the water
clogging his ears. This hadn’t been his worst mission ever, but trading in Hawkeye’s bow and
arrows for spearguns was never, ever going to be fun.

Squish. Squish. Sklorch. Water and electronic joints, never a good mix. Splish. Splish-splash-splish-
splash.

Clint traded a wry glance with Bruce, who looked almost cheerful despite being as soaked as
everyone else. Evidently Hulk had had great fun with the whole Mediterranean as a bathtub,
complete with bobbing explosive robots to smash. “Tony, would you do something about that fish?”
Cracked helmet still on, the inventor gave him a hurt-puppy look. “Toss Goldie out into the cruel, waterless air? You’re a heartless man, Clint.”

Steve squished off the jet next, a leader’s severity warring with a not-quite-hidden chuckle. “You’re going to have to dump the armor out eventually.”

Tony crossed armored arms over the slosh. “I can make an aquarium first.”

“I had one ordered, sir,” Jarvis announced, bringing up a diagram on the hangar wall and turning on a light over a plastic tank half full of warm water and two inches of white sand. “For now, please deposit Goldie into the temporary container.”

“Aw, but!”

“Salt water tanks need to be set up days in advance for proper fish health, sir,” Jarvis said firmly. “Some things cannot be improvised in the lab.”

“So you say.” Tony squelched over to the container, carefully opening the armor’s chest to drop a thoroughly disgruntled blenny into clear water. “There. Safe and sound. No more big booms shaking people’s dens down on top of them. Which, that was way too much high explosive for little old us. I bet Doom’s allergic to fish. Okay, Natasha, we’re clear.”

Natasha guided a motorized cart filled with briny sealed containers down the ramp, followed closely by Phil carrying a tablet to check over various instrument readouts. They still weren’t sure exactly what they had, only that Doom had wanted it, it wasn’t giving off gamma radiation or any of the weirder stuff the Tesseract had, and it hadn’t been on a WWII ship at all. Exactly what ship it had been on was going to take research on some of the other pieces they’d brought up. Doom’s robot subs had found a ship pile, with wrecks dating back to WWI all the way through five years ago.

But Tony had looked at the containers and said weapons, and that was good enough for Clint.

“Okay!” Tony clapped his hands together, grinning at the containers in a way even Black Widow might have found disturbing. “So before we bring you guys any farther down into our nice, neat, un-blowed-up tower, let’s see if we can take a better look at what you are.”

Probe in hands, the inventor advanced.

Safe. Artemis reeled back against a bookshelf with an explosive sigh, wondering if his hands were trembling. “There. No maiming.”

“Good,” Butler muttered, taking his hand away from his Neutrino. “If the whole flock of them had kept that up, I’d have been doing some maiming. Where did they all come from?”

“An unexpected detour back from the Continent,” Artemis said dryly. “Apparently word that the legally marrying age Fowl heir is back amongst the living is news that can upset even a finishing school’s planned trip to Paris. Or in this case, ten of them. How incredibly convenient they all came down with food poisoning from the pâté after they’d purchased their party frocks, thus necessitating immediate trips to Ireland to soothe their fragile constitutions.”

“Hm.” Butler took out a notepad computer, scowling as he paged through a document. “Damn. I had time to check their cars, but I know five of these names weren’t on the guest list this morning.”

“Probably Mother’s idea of a nice surprise.” Artemis kneaded at a headache. “She tried to persuade me to accept a lettered t-shirt the other day.”
“Ah. I was wondering what’d sparked that low blow about the brunette’s neckline.”

“It wasn’t nearly as low as the neckline.” Artemis breathed deep, and tried not to snarl.

Butler smirked, acknowledging the hit. “I don’t think reminding them the Fowls are criminals is working.”

“Indeed not. Instead it appears to add a delightful frisson of danger to their evening.” Artemis bit out. “As if anyone sane courts more danger than is absolutely necessary. If a troll broke in here they’d all faint dead away, and good riddance.”

“Not everyone’s cut out for high-risk occupations,” Butler said neutrally. “I suspect their parents have no idea what they’ve thrown their daughters at.”

Artemis took another deep breath, and sighed. “So I shouldn’t blame them for acting like featherbrained lackwits and trying to corner me because they’re merely attempting to abide by their parents’ wishes?”

“Just keep trying not to maim them,” Butler advised. “Any girl that age trying to corner a young man is being an idiot. They should try looking serene and untouchable, so you chase them.”

Artemis blanched. “I’d sooner chase a viper into a closet. I know what to expect from that.”

Butler gave him a long look.

He was not going to feel guilty. Much. “How can Mother expect me to engage in meaningful conversations without the chance to do prep work and research on them? What are we supposed to talk about? The weather? ‘My, there’s an interesting wave pattern off Africa this week, do you think this year a hurricane will make it through the Gulf Stream gauntlet and actually strike Ireland again’? They’d either titter behind their hands as if I’d said something not blindingly obvious, or blink at me and ask for comments on their perfume. Which is much too much. If I wanted to be surrounded by dying lilies I’d visit a funeral parlor.”

Butler raised a brow, then nodded once. “Not a lot of strong smells in Haven, are there.”

“Well... no.” Hot rock near the magma vents. Drifts of fungus smoke from Commander Root’s noxious cigars, when he’d been alive. The buttery scents of catfish on various ferny greens; elves might not like eating anything they could talk to, but Holly said even the most meat-avoidant elf admitted fish didn’t have much to say.

“It was just too much,” Artemis admitted. “Too much light, too much ambient noise - too much. Every foot I expected--

* A sword between the ribs.

“-a dagger in my back,” Artemis finished. He was not going to bring up that horrid memory again. He revisited it enough in his nightmares.

“Maybe you should mention that to your mother,” Butler advised. “Tell her you need a less crowded venue to appreciate them.”

“That is an incredibly poor stance from which to open negotiations.” Artemis waved a hand to dismiss the absurdity of it. “It implies I’d be willing to appreciate them in the first place.”

Butler sighed. “She just wants you to be happy. Like she is with your father.”
Artemis recalled a darkened room and his mother in her wedding gown, and flinched. “Bad example,” Butler murmured. “Well, we’re out of them now. I’ll keep watch.”

Artemis nodded, ensconcing himself in a deep library chair with one of Holly’s tomes. *The First Spark: Historical, Theoretical, and Psychoneurological Background Behind Elementary Magic.*

Interesting that it was a book, and not an easily-deleted computer file. But according to the preface that was the author’s preference, given magic and electricity had interesting interactions, and the writer believed any aspiring warlock should feel free to practice the entire spectrum of energies without worrying about frying a laptop.

*I can think of some occasions on which frying a laptop might be distinctly advantageous.*

He’d read through the first exercises before, several times. Now he intended to apply them.

*A cupped palm allows taking advantage of the subconscious perception of gathering heat, and helps guide the beginner to let the flow of magic follow the pulse,* the author had written. *Closing the fingers evokes anticipation, which is a spur to will. Encourage the student to visualize the desired light, then open the hand to reveal-*

Blue and gold swirled in his palm, like a cats-eye made of light.

*It worked. It worked!*

Artemis suppressed the urge to do something completely undignified, like bounce out of the chair laughing, or call Foaly up to wave magic in his face.

*But it worked.*

...*I want to show Holly.*

Which might not be the least nerve-wracking course of action, given the captain’s position as an officer of the law. But he’d read the Book. There were no laws against humans having magic.

More important than that, Holly hated surprises. Waiting until they were in the middle of yet another life-threatening mission to inform her of all the tools he had at his disposal? That would be poorly done, indeed.

*I will tell her. After tonight. I deserve one night to play, don’t I?*

“Pretty,” Butler murmured. “Just light?”

“For now, yes,” Artemis agreed. “I want to determine some of the parameters of a simple fairy light before I experiment with some of the variations. There’s at least one from Japan that will ignite flammable objects like paper.”

“Useful,” Butler nodded. “I wonder why we’ve never seen Captain Short use one?”

“Likely because Recon officers are trained against frivolous uses of magic.” Artemis willed the light to spin in his hand, then lift up a few inches. It came by fits and starts, but it moved. “Holly is a pilot, not a warlock. Both of those occupations require a great deal of no doubt expensive training. I doubt the LEP Academy is any more willing to invest that much in one person than most military organizations are to train doctors to be pilots, or vice versa. As a regular Recon officer she would have been taught to reserve her magic for the most critical uses - healing, shield, and mesmer - and...
ignore the others. Even a minor cantrip such as this takes some magic, and for the past few centuries the People have depended far more on technology than on magical reserves they must visit the surface to refill. Why learn how to use the magical equivalent of a flint and steel for torches when you can simply flick on a flashlight? Which reminds me, we should make efforts to purchase a few river bends where oaks are or can be planted. No sense not planning for the future...."

Note made, Artemis twirled the fairy light again, and smirked. “Also, there may be a smidge of snobbery involved. Light is easily created by magical spillover, excess magic converted to photons. The more light your spell produces, the less efficient it is.”

“So a big light show means someone got sloppy.” Butler nodded, brows drawn down and thoughtful. “That’s something the best sensei have to train out of advanced students. Efficiency is all well and good, but if you have to do something sloppy in an emergency to protect your principal, efficiency will just get you both killed.”

Like throwing himself and a mattress out a window to dodge a smart bomb, Artemis remembered. I truly hope Opal is locked up for good. “I plan to spend a very sedate evening practicing in here, behind a locked door. There’s no reason you need to be bored.”

“I’d rather be in here with the books than scowling at that crowd,” Butler informed him. “But if you want some quiet time where no one will be looking for you... run through everything you plan to practice once. Just in case.”

Quite the reasonable request. Artemis flipped through pages to the next cantrip he intended to attempt; one that might have come in very handy on top of a speeding train. “I believe this one is called apport.”

“You know,” Tony stabbed at his lasagna with a truly vicious fork, “every time I think I’ve got all of Obie’s mess cleaned up, something like this happens.”

Steve went at his own plate with much less force. But then, this didn’t feel as personal to him as he knew it did to Tony. “It might not be Starktech-”

“It’s Starktech, all right. Modified, badly disguised Starktech.” Another stab. “At least it’s a decade out of date. We don’t have a Jericho in there. Who knows what we really do have, but soaking in seawater a bunch of years didn’t do it any good-”

“You’ve got it in the blast room,” Bruce pointed out, working his way through a salad and garlic bread. “It’s as safe as it can be, outside of being detonated in a bomb disposal unit. Right?”

“I just keep thinking that one day I ought to be done with this. Why, I have no idea.” Tony glanced across the table where Natasha was neatly dissecting her meal and Clint was calculating the best angle to launch an attack on the parmesan. “That timeframe ring any bells for you guys?”

Clint shrugged. Natasha looked down in thought, then shook her head once. “Either it was not being shipped to Russia, or it was not to be my concern.” She glanced down toward the end of the table, where Phil was finishing his cup of coffee while a search ran on his laptop. “But you have found something.”

“Not sure quite yet...” A soft beep, and Phil sat up. “Yes! Oh. No.”

Steve winced. That wasn’t oh no Loki is on top of us, but it wasn’t good either. “What do we have?”

“From the radar scans of the ship’s structure, the location, and the age of the wreck - about eleven
years - it’s the Grace O’Malley. Bound for Albania with... farming equipment.” A wry half-smile touched Phil’s eyes. “The ship’s namesake was an Irish pirate back in the Elizabethan era.”

“Irish?” Steve frowned. “Doom doesn’t usually mess with Ireland.”

“No he doesn’t; outside of the stray screaming mutant the Irish tend to be rather laid back about the whole superhero-supervillain mess that hits the rest of the world,” Tony noted. “Then again, who can tell the screaming from the regular rugby fans? Phil, you are having a thought. It doesn’t look like a nice one.”

“The Grace O’Malley was owned through several shell corporations, but if you trace it back far enough....” Phil turned a hand up, offering the information. “The ship used to belong to Artemis Fowl, Sr.”

Silence. Steve watched the rest of his team; Bruce seemed clueless, Clint and Natasha wary. Tony just snorted. “What was I saying, about karma coming back to bite you in the awkwardness?” He huffed a sigh. “Well, we know Senior was a crimelord back then, whatever his change of heart these days. So. Smuggling? When can we get him over here?”

Phil frowned. “You do realize how late it is in Ireland?”

“So get him on a redeye,” Tony said impatiently. “He’s the guy who’s telling SHIELD he’s gone straight. This is his mess, and he’d damn well better help clean it up.”

“Tony.” Steve gave the inventor a level look. “It’s going to take hours to get anyone here from Ireland, right?”

“...Yeah.”

“Are the going-to-explode odds of whatever you’ve got soaking up there in that weird archaeological water solution,” which had seemed almost as bad an idea as seawater, except Tony had made really convincing arguments about circuits and precipitating salts, “really going to change that much in a few hours?”

“...Probably not.”

“Then what we need right now isn’t Mr. Fowl, it’s his information,” Steve said firmly. “Phil, you have people around the Fowls. Can you pass a secure message for Mr. Fowl to send us any information he has on the Grace O’Malley?”

“Shouldn’t be a problem,” Phil nodded.

Steve smiled, and glanced back at Tony. “So we get his files, which is what we need for now. And we send him a note, a polite note, that this is part of his past he might want to help us deal with, because no one needs Dr. Doom with more weapons. You might even consider offering him one of the spare rooms in the Tower, so he can get right to us if he remembers something that didn’t make it down on paper.” Steve paused. “And then you can bite his head off.”

Bruce almost choked on a piece of garlic crust. Clint gave them a thumbs-up. And Natasha... smiled. Okay. Maybe that was a little too evil.

But Steve hoped it worked, one way or another. He’d like to meet Mr. Fowl. More, he’d like Tony to meet him.
Tony hates his father. Mr. Fowl’s son gave up any chance at a normal life to save him. Meeting a guy whose family loves him that much - it’s got to be good for Tony. Right?

Artemis slowly spread his fingers, and watched as the seeming haze dispersed to reveal a stray coffee mug on the side table. He could already see how the eyes-slide-off aspect of the camouflage spell would have disadvantages; in a world full of video cameras, simply having people not see him would not be enough to obscure traces of his presence. But in the case of a hasty pursuit, when all he needed was for someone to not find him yet, it would be as good as a fairy’s full shield.

Interesting how many of the beginner spells depend on hand gestures, Artemis thought. If what I skimmed from the later chapters is accurate, physical manipulation is meant to be the first step to accustom one to “handling” magic. So to speak. Hence drawing runes as part of enchanting objects; the nerves in the hand reporting to the brain the shape of what is wanted. Which might imply a bit from Irregular could work after all - “carving” spells into the memory so they can be flash-cast. Not that I intend to try that without running the idea by a trained warlock first-

Someone was unlocking the library door.

Moving swift and silent, Artemis tucked the book away in his suit, and picked up one of the introductory go manuals instead. It was probably just Butler returning to remind him about bed, it was getting a bit late-

“Artemis?” Angeline sighed, stepping inside in a glitter of diamonds and blue silk. “I should have known. What are you doing here?”

“A little light reading?” Artemis shrugged.

“You’re missing the party.”

No, I’m not. “I found myself a bit more tired than I’d thought,” Artemis said honestly. “It’s very... loud and bright downstairs, Mother. I didn’t want to appear rude.”

“So instead you just disappeared. Rudely.” Angeline closed the door behind her. “I heard what you said to Miss Gwendolyn.”

Dash it all. “And that is why I absented myself from the premises,” Artemis stated. “It’s too much down there, Mother. I appreciate you’re having a good time, but I am... simply not up to that much noise. Truly.”

“It’s not noise, Artemis, it’s people getting along with each other. I know you can, if you’d just for once let yourself enjoy other people without analyzing them.”

Artemis sighed. “It is what I do. As well ask me to walk into a room blindfolded-”

“Oh believe me, I’m considering it.”

The hairs were standing up on the back of his neck. Which made no sense at all. This was his mother. “I’m just tired, Mother-”
“Look at me when I’m talking to you.”

Right. There was going to be a lecture. He looked up-

“Not one more word out of you, young man.” Angeline was frowning, her usual aura of cheer turned frosty as a blizzard. “There was no call for what you said to that nice young lady.”

But-

The words wouldn’t leave his mouth.

I can’t speak. Why can’t I speak? This is wrong, this is so-

“If you’re going to try to make excuses for it and not even care what people think of you slighting her in front of everyone- go to your room and stay there. And I mean stay there.”

Oh no. Oh no! This can’t be happening- idiot, look away-!

“No hacking, no lockpicking, no insider trading. There will be no more criminal enterprises under my roof,” Angeline finished, eyes on his. “Do you understand me?”

Finally yanking his gaze away, Artemis nodded.

Inside, he was screaming.

Wrong, wrong, so- do not panic! Think. Think and move. There’s a loophole, there’s always a loophole....

His mother had just commanded him. His mother.

Get moving. Before she thinks of anything else.

With a formal bow, he bolted.

The Rule of Dwellings. Damn, damn - D’Arvit take it all!

A human dwelling had protections against fairies, bound into the fabric of fairy magic itself. No fairy could enter a human dwelling without an invitation, unless they wished to risk losing their magic permanently. And once they were inside, if they met a human’s eyes and the human gave specific orders....

She said “your room”, Artemis thought fast, dodging a few stray guests who’d found various nooks for verbal and distinctly nonverbal conversations. I know she meant my bedroom. But she didn’t specify.

Which meant he still had options. Left, and up one floor-

Artemis unlocked his office, darted inside, and threw the bolts. His Neutrino was in hand, ready to fuse metal to metal.

No. Stop. Think. A locked door can be explained. A fused one? Leave that option for later.

Hands shaking, Artemis tucked the Neutrino back into its concealed holster. Breathed. Tried to speak.

Nothing.
In my room, check. Not one word, check. And definitely not performing any criminal enterprises.

I have to get out of here.

On the face of it, that would seem ludicrous. He’d been ordered to stay in his room.

But I am Artemis Fowl II. I’ve defeated LEP Recon, a goblin rebellion, and Opal Koboi. Twice. I will not give up.

And I have friends.

The problem was going to be communications. His mother hadn’t said, don’t speak. She’d specifically said, not one more word.

Which means I’ll have to, Artemis shuddered, find another way.

Fortunately he knew one. No matter how distasteful it might be. And speaking as one who’d deliberately clambered through a tunnel carved by dwarven teeth and buttocks and temporarily removed a man’s thumb to open a sealed vault, Artemis counted himself a bit of an expert on distasteful.

Eyeing the communicator ring on his right hand, Artemis reached into his pocket.

Target cornered near the ballroom band, Butler kept his breathing slow and even, firmly suppressing any desire to rip off Fowl Sr.’s prosthetic leg and beat him over the head with it. It wouldn’t help.

“Sir, I know this is not the best venue to go over this. But your wife is distracted, Artemis has safely locked himself in the library, and this has been worrying Artemis ever since he found out about the twins.”

The elder Fowl’s stare had lost its gentleness, almost gaining back the hard edge Butler remembered from years ago. “My wife is not delusional.”

“Not now, no,” Butler said firmly. “But for much of the first two years you were gone? Yes. It was... hard on all of us. Especially Artemis.” He kept his stance balanced, nonthreatening. “He may not consciously remember much of the past three years, but that doesn’t stop him from having nightmares.”

God, he’d heard those nightmares, over and over again as the mess in Artemis’ body had tried to fight the Haven healers’ best efforts. Butler wasn’t sure which aspect of them was more frightening; the desperate cries of Holly and lost the count, I’m too late....

Or the fact that half those nightmare cries were in Gnommish.

He dreams in the fairy tongue. His best friends aren’t human. Wake up, Sir. If you don’t, you’re going to lose him.

But that would have to wait for less tense surroundings. Somewhere Fowl Sr. would feel free to say what he really thought, rather than speaking through clenched teeth to fool the crowd. So Butler kept those thoughts to himself, and shrugged. “If he knows you’re going to look into this, it would be a weight off his mind.”

“And you hadn’t mentioned this before because...?” Fowl Sr. prompted.

“It wasn’t relevant as long as you were alive and well, Sir,” Butler answered, the model of a loyal
bodyguard. “But Artemis is worried the twins might not have someone they can rely on. If the worst happens. Again.”

“It won’t,” Fowl Sr. waved the worry off. “Everyone knows I work in legitimate enterprises now.”

*But Artemis doesn’t.* Butler hid a grimace. *And you have more enemies than you know-

His cell phone buzzed. “Excuse me, Sir.”

“I thought you said Artemis was safely locked in the library?” Fowl Sr. gave him an amused look.

“He’s been experimenting with laser pointers. Maybe he’s accidentally fused a lock.” Butler inclined his head, and stepped away, automatically checking the GPS feature to see where in the house Artemis was calling from-

*His office? Something’s wrong.*

How wrong, he didn’t realize until he opened the phone. *A text message?*

Artemis didn’t use text messages. Not if he could help it. Why leave a readable account of your nefarious plans when you could verbally deliver a few swift orders instead? Granted, most of Artemis’ activities these days were merely illegal, not nefarious, but the same principle applied.

*Lock d s l f n Office. Cme m mnediatly. Suggst s im. xit 2 Mnich.*

Artemis hated chatspeak. A horrendous assault on the English language, was one of the more polite things he’d called it. Something was terribly wrong.

*Brief me,* Butler sent back, already moving. Artemis’ office window was a hidden hole in Manor security; a *deliberate* hole, arranged by Artemis so Holly could come and go without leaving any blur of her shielded image on Fowl Sr.’s security cameras. But a hole for friends could too easily become an opening for enemies. *Bomb?*


*Yball?* What on earth could that be an abbreviation for-

Butler’s blood ran cold. *Eyeball orders. Artemis has fairy magic.*

*Angeline* had given Artemis geis-enforced orders. Oh no.

At least his principal had had the sense to get into a room Angeline did not have the key to. If she couldn’t meet his eyes, she couldn’t make things any worse. *You’re the one with the communicator,* Butler sent. *Do you have your go bag?*

*Ys. Wll connct w/ clphone. Rdy?*

Brushing past guests with a scowl that would frighten a tiger at ten paces, Butler listened to the beeps as Artemis opened an audio link between their phones, then the near-inaudible chime of Artemis’ ring opening a communications link to one particular LEP officer.

“Artemis?”

“Captain Short,” Butler rumbled, listening to the faint hum of powered wings. “I hope you’re in the vicinity. Artemis isn’t hurt, but he can’t talk. I need to get him out of the manor.”
“He’s in trouble again?” Holly sighed. “I may be up here for the Ritual, but this isn’t exactly my job-”

“Believe it or not, this time it actually is,” Butler said wryly. “I’ll explain once I throw Artemis out the window.”

“What?”

“He asked me to,” Butler smirked. “It would help if someone were there to catch him.”

“...Let me give you an ETA.”

This had better be one D’Arviting good explanation.

Holly caught Artemis almost before Butler tossed him, not liking how the young man clung to her like a frightened kitten.

Make that a frightened wildcat, she thought, touching down on the ground as Artemis shuddered. That’s not just fear. That’s rage.

She felt very, very sorry for someone. Artemis hardly ever got angry. The few times he had - well, Opal Koboi and Jon Spiro could both attest to how thoroughly Artemis destroyed his enemies.

“Butler’s bringing the car around,” Artemis got out, feet touching the grass as if he thought it might vanish in the next moment. “I will explain. I swear. I just - need to be somewhere safe....”

Fowl Manor’s not safe? What happened?

But Butler was driving one of the Fowls’ more subtle cars across fine gravel; low, black, and sleek, with a trunk that somehow held echoes of screams as she looked at it. Artemis straightened, and headed for it, still shaking.

Holly folded her wings and slid into the back seat after him. “Butler. Coat. He’s in shock.”

“...I am not.”

Butler held his foot on the brakes long enough to wriggle out of thick wool, and passed it back to her. “You’re pale, your heartbeat is too fast, and I can see you shivering in the mirror. Yes. You are.”

Artemis let her help wrap the coat around him, and that scared Holly almost as much as the trembling. “It wasn’t that bad,” he protested.

“I suspect it was,” Butler sighed. “Captain... no, never mind. Artemis gave me his word, and he has not broken it. Even if circumstances intervened.”

Worse and worse. Holly took off her helmet, tips of her ears feeling the first brush of warmth as the car’s heater kicked in. “Artemis. I can’t help if you won’t tell me what’s wrong.”

Artemis closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. Held it. Slowly let it out. And again. And a third time.

I’m not sure I saw him this bad when we were being chased by trolls. And he’s not bleeding. What in Frond’s name... hold up, hotshot. Sit on that impatience of yours. If Artemis gave his word, he’ll keep it.
“...I’m sorry.”

 Barely a whisper. And he hadn’t opened his eyes.

  ...He’s crying.

 She’d only seen Artemis in tears twice. When they’d rescued his father. When she’d saved Butler. He hadn’t even cried after saving her.

 “I am so wretchedly, abysmally sorry, Holly.” The words were raw, hard-edged; utterly controlled, despite the tears slipping down his cheeks. “What I did to you all those years ago, trapping you with the Rule of Dwellings - I don’t think I’ve ever been - ever felt...”

 Driving, Butler sighed. “I believe the word he’s looking for is terrified, Captain Short.”

 What? Wait, that makes no sense - unless-

 Stunned, Holly slipped off a glove, and rested her fingers on Artemis’ chilled hands.

 Magic thrummed just under his skin, singing to her own.

 Oh. Oh, Frond.

 She glanced up, and met Butler’s gaze in the mirror. He nodded.

 “Section Eight business,” Holly managed. “I guess so.” Calm. Stay calm. This is a case now. Officially or not. “Which humans caught you, and how much did they see?”

 “She saw nothing. I wasn’t that foolish.” Another slow breath. “I was in the library. Mother - was unhappy with some of my behavior at the party. I expected a lecture. She - told me to look at her.” He swallowed. “I suppose you have every right to say that was profoundly stupid.”

 His mother. Worse and worse. “She’s your mother,” Holly said, keeping her voice steady. “I probably would have looked, too.”

 “Not one more word out of you, young man.” Artemis quoted, voice almost light. “If you’re going to try to make excuses for it and not even care what people think of you slighting her in front of everyone- go to your room and stay there. And I mean stay there. No hacking, no lockpicking, no insider trading. There will be no more criminal enterprises under my roof.” He cleared his throat. “I suppose I got off lightly. I was able to bow and make my escape to my office. From there I was able to text Butler - chatspeak is not words, and Mother did not ban communication - and... the rest you know.” A hitch in his breath. “Except. I’d intended to contact you tonight, in a much more casual fashion. I... wanted to show you the cantrips I’ve managed to fumble my way through. So you would know what tools we had available for any future missions.”

 He has magic, Holly thought, stunned. And he was going to tell me. He promised Butler he would.

 Only he took one night to play like a normal kid, and this happens. Frond, Artemis - who blasted you with bad luck, and when can I kick their behind?

 She wanted to hug him close and just not let go until the tears stopped. No one deserved what had just happened to Artemis. Even Artemis at his coldest, cruelest worst wouldn’t have deserved that.

 Not from family. He’s done everything he can to protect his mother, and this... I want to blast someone. I just wish I knew who.
But she had a job to do, and Artemis respected her enough to let her do it. It might even help, for a bit; treating this as a case, not a horrible betrayal. “Terrified,” Holly said neutrally. “Because you wouldn’t be able to return to your life of crime?”

“No!”

*Oh good. I think. Get some of the anger out, before it chokes you-*

“Terrified you would be in dire peril - when are you *not*, when you call on me? - and I would be unable to assist you because my mother said so!”

*Oooh not good.* Holly swallowed, throat dry. *So very not good.*

Angeline hadn’t just locked her son down and trapped him. She’d put herself between Artemis and his self-imposed duty to the People. Between Artemis and the *LEP*. Between Artemis and *me*.

Holly wasn’t blind, after all. Artemis might be young, human, and cursing hormones every step of the way, but he saw her as one of the very few people he respected. He’d risked his life for her. He’d given up *gold* for her. He might not know what he wanted but he knew damn well what he *needed*: a reason to stay within the bounds of decency and some kind of law, when all his incredible gifts lay in breaking laws into itty-bitty little pieces and setting them on fire. And then dancing in the flames.

“I am not a *good boy!*” Artemis snarled, finally opening his eyes; angrily dislodging a contact lens put askew by tears. “I am Artemis Fowl II, and I refuse to be limited to the actions of a mere *child* when those I care for are in deadly danger!”

Holly stared into those wild, mismatched eyes, and wrapped her fingers around his hand. *So cold.* “I know. You never have, and you never will.”

And this was *definitely* a Section Eight case, because she hadn’t felt that much furious magic roiling through another fairy since the last time she’d had to grab hold of Qwan. Artemis in a fury could bring down megacorporations and leave billionaires gibbering wrecks of insanity. Artemis in a fury with magic might not leave Fowl Manor standing.

*We need to get him somewhere safe.*

Somewhere that wasn’t Fowl Manor. And that made Holly want to blast something all over again. She’d been caught under the Rule of Dwellings herself, and she’d hated it. But to be suddenly caught in your own home? That was a *nightmare.*

*And if he was caught - then the manor isn’t his home anymore.* Holly winced. *He’s lived there all his life, but magically it’s not his home. It’s a human dwelling, and Artemis....*”

*Artemis is a changeling.*

Butler was right. Artemis was in shock, he had every *right* to be, and it was her duty to get him to help.

*Not to mention there’s no way I’m leaving my friend to fight this alone,* Holly decided. *He needs someplace he can blow things up.*

With a nod, she put her helmet back on, and activated the comm. “Foaly?”
“Oh, checking in after all?” The centaur sounded slightly peeved. “You know, if you’re going to drop in on the Mud Boy for tea and chats every time you’re on the surface, the least you could do is bring down some fresh carrots-”

Holly coughed. “I’ve run into a complication.”

“...Oh no.” Dread dripped from Foaly’s voice. “Not an Artemis-level complication. Please.”

“I have my own level?” The snrk Artemis made might have almost been a giggle. “I believe I should be flattered.”

“He’s right there? Holly-!”

“Can you see if No. 1 or Qwan are available to visit Section Eight’s medical department?” Holly asked, pretending she didn’t see Artemis stifling more snickers. If anything could get Artemis thinking past tonight’s disaster, the promise of poking fairy tech with Foaly would. “I have a traumatized fairy who was caught under the Rule of Dwelling. Artemis and Butler helped me get him clear, but I’d like a magical expert to look him over.”

“Traumatized!” Artemis muttered.

“I’ll bet it was Fowl’s fault,” the centaur said cheerfully. “Or the mountain. Butler’s enough to traumatize anybody.”

Butler took one hand off the wheel long enough to crack his knuckles.

“...In the most fearfully advantageous way, of course. Nyah.”

Holly had to smile, just a little. Butler and Foaly had an interesting friendship. In part based on being the two people who ended up having to duck in most fairy rooms. “It wasn’t Fowl’s... well, actually, it was Mrs. Fowl.”

Foaly groaned. “Oh no. If we have to mindwipe someone in that family again-”

Artemis sat up, eyes blazing. “You will not!”

“Easy,” Holly murmured. “No, Foaly, we were lucky. She didn’t recognize the fairy for what it was. No mindwipe needed.”

Foaly’s sigh of relief almost gusted out of the speakers. “Thank Frond. You wouldn’t believe what Warlock Kingsfoil threatened to do to my tail when he found out how much we’d messed with the family already.”

“Warlock Kingsfoil,” Artemis murmured, thoughtful.

Someone Artemis already believes he knows what he’s doing. Good idea, Holly thought. “Is Kingsfoil on shift?”

“He will be by the time you get a shuttle down here,” Foaly observed. “What’s this about, Holly? Who’s the unlucky fairy?”

Holly let herself grin, sharp as knifing a shuttle through a fissure. “I think we want to keep this under wraps for the Wing Commander, for now. We’ll be coming down.” She clicked the channel off.

Artemis sagged back against the seat, almost lost in the gray folds of Butler’s coat. “You’re going to be in trouble. I didn’t mean to-”
“No, I’m not,” Holly cut him off. *He’s beating himself up enough already. He doesn’t need to worry about something that is not his fault.* “I’m bringing down a magical creature bound by fairy geis, with his own copy of the Book.” She let her gaze drop to the chain binding her pierced coin under his shirt; the same coin Artemis had tampered with to hide a very important disc. “Sounds like a fairy to me.”
Standing in his office, Phil Coulson stared at his phone, and wondered what the correct Irish Gaelic phrase might be for you stupid idiot.

“You might wish to grab the throw pillow, Agent Coulson,” Jarvis spoke from the intercom. “For banging your head against the wall.”

“Listening in?” Phil mused. Though really, he knew Jarvis wouldn’t. Tony’s AI had more morals than Tony sometimes, which was both funny and slightly depressing.

“The conversation was recorded,” Jarvis allowed.

Wait, what?

“A safety precaution Sir insisted on, in case you encountered another... unexpected difficulty in communicating your current location,” the AI went on. “However, I have it in storage, not my conscious memory banks. In essence, I only have a locked voicemail. And your expression.”

Phil frowned.

“I can, of course, delete it. If you so request.”

“No,” the agent said, after a moment more to think it over. “No, that’s a reasonable precaution in our line of work. I just wish you’d told me about it earlier.”

“I was unsure if Director Fury would have you reassigned as emotionally compromised in dealing with the Avengers,” Jarvis admitted. “If you plan to continue in this position as liaison between the team and SHIELD, then I will inform you of security updates to the Tower as soon as possible prior to their implementation. Though that may be simultaneous if Sir has a striking idea... the offer to delete that conversation still stands.”

“No,” Phil said again. “In fact, bring it up and listen to it. I could use an outside perspective.”

“Now I am intrigued,” Jarvis murmured.

A click sounded in the room, as if someone had pressed the button on an answering machine. Phil smiled hearing it. For someone with no physical body, Jarvis was certainly well cued in to making someone feel at home with the sound of his presence.

“Coulson,” his own voice played, slightly distracted.

“Butler,” came over the line; a voice like a mountain had decided to get up and go for a stroll. “Pressed for time. Removing my Principal from a hostile situation. Don’t try to find us for at least twelve hours. And if any of your agents see Artemis, for god’s sake, tell them to stay out of the line of fire.”

“And will this be literal fire, Mr. Butler?”

“Only if a literal dragon shows up.” The bodyguard’s voice was grim. “The odds against that aren’t as high as I’d like.”
“Details,” Coulson pressed.

“Ask your lovely young lady serving the punch about the party,” Butler said dryly. “Artemis locked himself in the minor library to stay clear of it. Unfortunately, Mrs. Fowl has a key.” A car door thumped. “I’m getting him out of here before anything blows up. Wish me luck.”

Click.

“I’d just sent our message to Mr. Fowl when Butler called,” Phil stated. “I was about to check on exactly what’s going on at Fowl Manor. I really hope it’s not what I think.”

“Searching.” Jarvis said, voice slightly distracted. “Fowl Manor, society pages, names link to recent airline tickets… oh dear.”

Phil groaned. “Please tell me they didn’t.”

“If by didn’t you mean, did not inflict a high-society ball on someone at the very least recovering from a likely kidnapping, complete with available debutantes for the supposedly lucky eligible young bachelor, I am afraid they did.”

Phil buried his face in his hands. “Argh.”

“Under similar circumstances, Sir has had panic attacks,” Jarvis noted.

“Because Stane was trying to get him to crack, if he wouldn’t play Obie’s little games,” Phil grumbled. “These are his parents. What were they… any reputable psychiatrist would… right, the shrinks all think Artemis is a psychopath anyway. Why should they worry about a normal human reaction to stress, much less—” He cut himself off.

“You do not believe Artemis is a normal human,” Jarvis noted. “And for more reasons than his testable IQ.”

“I’m glad you’re on our side,” Phil sighed. “No. I don’t. I’m not sure he was normal before he disappeared, and I have very good reasons to believe he’s definitely not now.” He glanced at his phone again, thinking things over. “Butler called. That means he thinks this may go beyond a situation he can handle.”

“Yet the fact you are speaking with me of the situation implies that you think SHIELD’s specialists may no longer be sufficient for Artemis’ case,” Jarvis noted.

“Not exactly not sufficient,” Phil said judiciously. “More like using a hammer when I think I need an open balcony. And a blast shield.”

“To treat a panic response, one must first remove the source of the panic,” Jarvis said thoughtfully. “His parents are unlikely to be willing to be separated from him so soon after his return.”

“But we are inviting Mr. Fowl over here,” Phil said, just as thoughtful. “And since Butler mentioned the trigger was Mrs. Fowl… I suggest we extend that invitation. To the other Fowl Interpol has records on. After all,” the agent smiled, “he just might know something.”

“And may I ask just what you think we may be inviting in?” Jarvis said mildly.

“That,” Phil admitted, “is going to be interesting.” He glanced at the speakers. “Believe it or not, there are some SHIELD files you and Tony, good as you are, literally can’t hack. And I’m about to let you into a few of them. How do you feel about helping me put together a briefing on demons?”
“And sparks for me, if you would,” Qwan requested, holding Artemis’ hand cradled in his gray-green fingers.

Holly watched the ancient demon warlock catch bits of magic, almost holding her breath. Butler was a silent, looming presence on an infirmary stool. Kingsfoil was a friendly if equally silent presence off to one side, puttering about in the cupboard for a few dark vials that made Holly feel like a little elfling dragging her heels to avoid her shots. Foaly had collapsed on a sling chair, eyes wide, muttering about Artemis and magic and world is doomed. But the one Holly was worried about was the white-haired elf in sleek black gear beside her; posture erect, a lady to her fingertips even when those fingers had been a mass of blisters from taking down goblins.

_Wing Commander Vinyáya._

“Hmm.” Qwan spread his three fingers, separating a few of the gold and blue sparks. Most were a mingled yet never quite mixing swirl of both, obstinately refusing to be pulled apart. “Don’t see what you’re worried about. Seems to be presenting as a perfectly normal human warlock. Well, changeling warlock, to be precise; though there’s not much difference, except for the wider variety of power sources-”

Foaly’s hands clamped on his hat, crinkling foil. “Humans don’t _have_ warlocks!”

_That’s what I thought_, Holly reflected. But if anyone could break the rules, it _would_ be Artemis. He’d stolen everything else. Why not steal magic, too?

_And D’Arvit take it, he deserves it. I know him. I’d rather have magic in Artemis’ hands any day than in someone like Opal Koboi’s._

The medical warlocks said Opal’s implanted pituitary gland, meant to give her human stature, had drained her of magic. Holly wanted to believe them. Really. But Opal had once put herself in a coma for over a year to exact her revenge. She wouldn’t believe Koboi was harmless until she could watch the pixie witch break down in the recycling ceremony herself.

Even then, she’d want to check the pieces.

“Where on _earth_ did you get that idea, centaur?” Qwan shook his head, small smile glinting with fangs. “The only fairy race that doesn’t have warlocks is the centaurs. Humans were considered part of the People, a very long time ago. If a warlock could be hatched on Hybras despite everything N’zall did to prevent it, I’m sure there are still warlocks born to humans today. They’re probably just hiding. Like any sane being would. After all, look at us.”

Foaly shook his head, foil almost flying off his ears despite his grip. “I have my own satellites and piggybacked human satellites scouring every inch of this planet! If there were magic-using humans up there, don’t you think I’d know about it?”

“Strange,” Artemis mused, outwardly cool as ice. “I’m certain NASA would say the same about centaurs. If, of course, they had any idea they should be looking.”

“Well, that’s because we....” Foaly trailed off.

“Have magic?” Artemis suggested.

“Yes! I mean, it’s not possible!” Foaly insisted. “Magic and science are what keep us safe. If humans had magic they wouldn’t have stopped with just chasing us off the surface. They’d have just-” Foaly looked at Artemis. And Butler. And swallowed.
“You really do think we’re all violent murderers, don’t you?” Artemis murmured.

“Well- I-”

“I saw the Eleven Wonders, Foaly.” Artemis closed his odd eyes a moment, sighing. “Might I remind you it wasn’t humans who dumped myself and Captain Short there in the midst of a pack of starving trolls?”

“Opal Koboi is crazy!”

“Oh, indeed. Several carrots short of a garden, as you might say. A brilliant, psychotic, stark raving megalomaniac. Also not a human.” Artemis huffed. “The vast majority of humans are people, Foaly. Boring, annoying, loud, completely harmless people, who’d no sooner inflict violence on their fellow man than you would tear the shoes off a fellow centaur. Yes, we do have many more psychopaths on the surface. There are seven billion of us. Yet last I checked, Howler’s Peak wasn’t exactly letting out cells to rent for want of nonviolent occupants. Do the math.” He rubbed a knuckle across one brow; as if he were just slightly tired after a two-hour shuttle ride, not barely holding it together after a night from hell. “Honestly, Foaly, think it through. Humans want to exploit the People because of fairy magic, yes? That’s what you’ve always claimed. But if you were a violent psychopath with magic of your own, where would you prefer to wreak havoc? Down here in Haven, where the LEP can pounce on you like terriers on an oversized rat? Or up on the surface, where you could rule entire countries because no one believes in magic?”

Butler raised a brow, and nodded.

“...Urgh.” Foaly slouched back down on his chair, hooves kicking like a moody colt. “I must be hallucinating. That almost made sense.”

Holly slanted another glance at her superior. And tried not to freeze, as the Wing Commander looked calmly back.

Vinyáya eyed her a moment longer, and smirked. “I’m not going to eat him, Captain Short.”

Somehow, that didn’t make Holly feel any better.

“Given that we seem to be lacking much in the way of archives from when there were human warlocks, what can we expect?” the Wing Commander asked. “And why, in Frond’s name, does it have to be this one who turns up magical?”

“Believe I can answer that,” Kingsfoil spoke up. “Based on the records we do have, and some of my family stories - cumulative magical exposure at a young age, and stress. Master Fowl has been thrown into more life-threatening situations in the past six years than most elves will see in a lifetime. That mess with Hybras was just the last straw. All your molecules disorporated, shot through time, then yanked back together at the end? You can’t get much more mystically exposed than that.”

“There may be more reason than that,” Artemis said quietly, looking at the last sparks flickering out around Qwan’s fingers. “Aurum potestas est.”

“Gold is power?” Qwan mused, the Gift of Tongues easily translating Latin. “Yes, human magic tends to be....” He glanced up, rune-written forehead wrinkling at the wide eyes around him. “What?”

“The Fowl family motto,” Butler observed. “Artemis, do you really think-?”

“Why not?” Artemis shrugged, outwardly casual. “The heirs of my family have been breaking the
laws of man since at least the Norman Conquest. It would not surprise me if they’d apparently broken those of physics as well.”

“Hmm. Though we can’t ignore the mystical aspect of mutual life debts,” Qwan said gravely. “You and Captain Short have endangered and saved each other’s lives multiple times. The only thing that might have a stronger influence on magic taking root in a potential warlock would be-” He cut himself off, looking at Holly as if he’d just recalled she was there. “Ah. I really should research some events a bit more before I draw any final conclusions. But in essence, Wing Commander, a human warlock isn’t much different from one of the People’s warlocks. Like ours, they have much more magic than an ordinary human - they called it chi in Taipei - and they have a much easier time reaching it. They aren’t bound by our geis, but they have their own limitations. Or had, last I knew; they differed from tribe to tribe millennia ago, who knows what they are now-”

Artemis’ throat worked. “I am bound by geis.”

“Yes, and I doubt that will change, unless you lose your magic entirely,” Qwan said gravely. “The first magic we touch always leaves a mark. If you can cast like one of the People, then you are bound like one of the People. The real question is,” he turned on Vinyáya, “what does the Council plan to do? I, personally, am not inclined to lock chains on a young warlock who has done nothing wrong. Even if he hadn’t helped save my race.”

“A half-ton of gold out of the LEP Recon hostage fund might disagree with you,” the Wing Commander said dryly.

“Gold he got by our rules,” Holly said hotly. Oh D’Arvit, I had to open my mouth!

“Indeed,” Qwan nodded. “Did Recon really send in a bio-bomb to try and get it back? Over mere shiny metal?” He hmphed. “I could understand if it were silver. That’s been crucial to my race’s survival. Gold? Not so much.”

Holly tried not to stare. Vinyáya couldn’t possibly be looking abashed.

She shot a dark look at Artemis instead. You could offer to give it back! she mouthed.

Ever so subtly, Artemis shook his head. Waved toward the coin under his shirt.

...She could have slapped herself in the face. Frond, no, of course he couldn’t. The law was the law. Artemis had parted the People from their gold, and that was final. Either the law applied to Artemis, or it didn’t.

Vinyáya drew in a deep breath, and stared at Artemis. “You are uncommonly quiet.”

“I was merely hoping that someone on the Council might come to their senses and realize that whether I am a warlock or not is not their problem,” Artemis smirked. “After all, even if I were caught throwing lightning bolts at the Tower of London, how in the world would that expose the existence of the People?”

Vinyáya’s eyes narrowed.

“I will not, of course, be doing anything so foolish,” Artemis said dryly. “I have no more desire to be taken for a mutant hooligan than I would a solicitor. Although I suspect the mutant has far more class. But the existence of humans possessing magic is known to certain human authorities, and I already have a story that will pass muster. One might well argue that the fairy tech in my possession is far more dangerous to your secrecy than the fairy magic.”
Holly felt a tingle in her fingers, as if she were about to fly a clunky Atlantean shuttle through a slot all over again. And people called her a daredevil. That was a verbal skim of the very edge: _do you trust your prior judgment in giving me your secrets, or not?_

_If you do, then listen._

“You think you have a story that will fool the humans,” Vinyáya said levelly. “Let’s hear it.”

Artemis inclined his head. “There is an international organization known as SHIELD, which has some very interesting files on a magical dimension that warps time and space. They call it Limbo....”

“This is Limbo. Also known as _Otherplace_,” Phil stated, clicking the briefing room monitor to bring up a grainy picture of rocks, lava, and evil-looking smoke, with bat-winged _things_ soaring through the red sky. “I tend to prefer Otherplace; we’ve established that this dimension has absolutely nothing to do with the Catholic theological version of Limbo or Purgatory. Don’t ask, you don’t want to know,” he advised, as Steve opened his mouth. “Let’s just say a few popes were involved, and we are _very sure._”

“Thanks,” Steve said instead. Because he might not have been the best at paying attention to church in the orphanage, but it was nice to know they weren’t dealing with someplace God might think was off limits.

“Don’t thank me yet,” Phil said wryly. “This is also Otherplace.” A picture that might have been a postcard straight from Heaven, if Heaven had a soft riot of flowers and unicorns drinking from rippling pools. “And this.” A ruined city, straggling toward a starless sky. “And this.” Angled landscapes of crystal and black ice, with flames falling from the sky like snow, and odd white discs floating in mid-air.

“Um.” Tony drummed fingers on the table. “Full environment gear, guys?”

“Hopefully we’re not going anywhere near there,” Phil informed them. “We do not have a lot of information on this pocket dimension. We know physical laws apply there and it’s Earth-normal in gravity and atmosphere... most of the time. We also know that magical laws apply there, and can overwrite almost anything else if the Sorcerer Supreme of Otherplace has a strong enough will. Its ecology is made up of demons, that’s what the more intelligent ones call themselves, and all of those demons have at least instinctive magic. We think. Most of the information we have comes from raiding Doom’s files; he’s tried to go after promethium in that dimension to power Latveria. Not successfully. The rest, is from the _very_ few kidnap victims we’ve run across who managed to fight their way back to Earth.”

_Kidnap victims._ Steve sat up straight, and felt the rest of his team tense just that little extra bit. “They kidnap people?”

“The inhabitants band together at odd intervals and try to invade other realities,” Phil nodded. “Usually someone like the Sorcerer Supreme of Earth hands them their tails, but by the time an invasion is over people are generally missing. And even if someone can cross into Otherplace to try for a rescue, it’s almost impossible to find a victim. For two reasons. First, time in Otherplace can be highly variable. As one of the demons is on record as saying, ‘One time is _all_ times.’” He pointed to the bright discs. “These are temporal rifts. Travel through them, and you could end up anywhere in Otherplace’s past. Or its future.”

“So the person you’re looking for might have stumbled into the past, and died, years before you ever reached them.” Bruce looked slightly green. “Or be years away... the other direction.”
“And if you tried portal-hopping yourself, you’d have to land on top of them by blind luck.” Tony squinted at that. “Okay. So what’s the bad news?”

“Humans don’t stay human in Otherplace,” Phil said flatly. Looked at Natasha. “If we ever do end up venturing into that dimension, you are not going. Survivors have all told us that place corrupts people. Anyone human trapped there... changes. It might take years, maybe decades, but eventually they gain magic and demonic forms, at the price of their humanity. Some would even say their soul. The people who’ve survived were the ones who had an iron will and enough magic to start with that gaining just a little more let them escape while they were still relatively human.”

Clint looked up. Waved a hand at himself.

“You already know how to keep yourself in one piece in morally dubious situations,” Phil shrugged. “It wouldn’t be healthy for any of us, but the Red Room had certain mystical connections that makes me believe Natasha would be at the worst risk.” He met each of their eyes. “Let me be clear right now. Magic, in itself, isn’t good or evil. It’s just another tool. Like Tony’s arc reactor; you can use it to power a hospital or a bomb. The survivors SHIELD has dealt with have been people. Scarred, traumatized people, sometimes a little too fast to throw a fireball when something freaks them out. But they are people. It’s not using magic in Otherplace that turns humans into demons; it’s the fact that their whole society and politics revolves around the most vicious, murderous, underhanded tactics ever dreamed up by the universe. Corruption is what makes people demons.”

Kidnap victims, Steve thought, trying not to get angry. Missing people you can’t find, even if you know where they went- “Artemis,” he blurted out. “You think this happened to Artemis!”

Phil let out a slow breath. “Butler did tell me a few things he neglected to mention to the authorities.” He clicked up a photo of the inside of an Asian office skyscraper, with a stone semi-circle of four demonic figures, most cracked and broken. “Taipei 101, 40th floor, the Kimsichiog Gallery. This sculpture was found off the shores of Ireland and thought to be thousands of years old. Under circumstances I won’t go into,” another picture, apparently from some street security camera; Artemis, Butler, and a frightened-looking blonde who couldn't have been more than twelve, “Artemis Fowl, Butler, and a young genius by the name of Minerva Paradizo ended up in that gallery. Some very frantic minutes later a murderous Taiwanese gangster by the name of Billy Kong had stormed the place with several of his associates, bent on homicide. Under Artemis’ orders, Butler got the girl out of the line of fire. Artemis....” Phil sighed. “Artemis ended up going out the window with the bomb Kong had brought and a demon apparently woken up from who knows how many centuries of stone sleep. A very cranky demon.” He looked over them all. “Butler saw his principal vanish, and there was nothing he could do about it. It haunted him. I don’t know how he got Artemis back and I have specifically not asked. It’s possible - very possible, we have records of other cases - that Artemis got himself back, and blocked the memory.”

“And you are sure that he ended up in Otherplace, and not some other hell dimension?” Natasha inquired. “From my training, there are several. Many of which do not let anything human escape.”

Several hell dimensions, Steve thought, shuddering. That was just wrong.

“Pretty sure,” Phil answered. “This was Artemis three years ago.” Another picture; Artemis, Butler, Fowl Sr., and a dark-haired, willowy woman who had to be Artemis’ mother, caught mid-stride toward parked cars. “This is Artemis now.”

Steve took the chance to study the boy and his bodyguard again, in more detail. Artemis wasn’t particularly tall for his age, though if his father was any indication Artemis would probably end up taller than Tony. Dark hair, mirrored sunglasses, so pale he had to be actively avoiding sunlight, and thin enough that Steve made a note to ask Bruce to look for his medical history. You could hide a lot
of damage under those expensive Armani suits. Tony always had.

A teenager in full Armani. With a posture that said any hint of a slouch had been hunted down and eliminated; not by brute force, but a will as subtle and ruthless as any trained assassin.

_It’s vampire mini-Tony. Without the sparkles, thank god._

He was never, ever forgiving Tony for suggesting those movies as an introduction to modern teen culture. The best part of them had been the foggy treescapes.

_Revenge will be mine. As soon as I think up something annoying enough that I can look innocent about- Wait a minute._

Mini-Tony, maybe. A mini-Tony with a ruby-set ring and his watch on his right hand.

_Artemis is a lefty._

Which was _interesting_. When Steve had grown up, proper people didn’t admit to being left-handed. You wrote, ate, shook hands with your right. That was the way things were _done_. Anyone with the money and class the Fowls apparently had would have trained the left-handedness out of Artemis right along with the slouch. He didn’t know if that still held these days, but his gut was saying this was _important._

_You can make me dress up, Steve thought. You can make me behave. But you won’t change who I am. This far, no further._

Butler... well. Butler was in a suit even Steve could see was a few careful grades below the Fowls’ in quality, meant to let the bodyguard blend subtly into the background. As much as anyone could blend, who was over six foot eight tall, shaved bald as a summer mountain peak, and muscled enough to look like he’d carried the mountain. He might be getting into his fifties, but Steve could tell already that tangling with Butler would be a very bad idea. Whatever gun Butler had concealed under that jacket would be nasty enough for even his healing to urk at the hole. And that was if Butler even _bothered_ with the gun. Those hands probably knew a dozen ways to break a neck inside five seconds.

Which made him look at Mrs. Fowl and Fowl Sr. again, trying to make out the people behind her perfect hair and rose-red lips, and his friendly smile bending the pain lines from some old wound.

_What kind of parents give their son a bodyguard? Much less that bodyguard?_

Bruce was leaning forward, intent. “Butler is older.” He looked at Steve. “Artemis _isn’t._”

“Oooo.... boy.” Tony slumped back against his seat, one finger tapping the table. “So you think a master hacker, genius crimelord, _mini-Moriarty_ got dumped into a dimension where corruption breeds power and turning into demon nastiness. And you’re just bringing this up now?”

“Yes, I think he did.” Oddly, Phil seemed to be smiling. “Which is why I’m not worried about him.”

Steve blinked, and deliberately squinted at the agent. Because Tony was right. This was in no way a laughing matter.

_Only Phil was_ smiling, holding an inch-thick folder in hand. “As I said, Otherplace warps people due to the socio-political environment. Basically, evil to get along and get ahead. And when it comes to Fowl responses to being _told_ what to do to get along with all the right people....” He set the folder down on the table. “This is our file on Fowl Sr.” Bending down, he heaved up a box as wide as
Tony’s TV.

It slammed onto the table like Thor’s hammer.

“And this is our file on Fowl Jr.,” Phil chuckled. “The abridged version.”

“...He has a bigger file than me,” Tony pouted.

“You’ve never sold anyone the Pyramids,” Phil observed. “Arms dealing is legal. Forgery, theft, burglary, grand larceny, and a thousand other ways to part rich idiots from their money isn’t.”

“Somebody bought the Pyramids? That’s just...” Tony flailed. “Okay, maybe fraud is illegal, but if someone with that much money tried to- that’s just sad. Or funny. Not sure which.”

Steve looked at the box, and the Fowls, and the real smile on Phil’s face. Somehow he wasn’t surprised when Natasha started laughing.

Tony and Bruce both stared at her, as if expecting imminent ninja assault. Clint grinned, leaning back in his chair casually as if he were perched on top of the Empire State Building. “All nonviolent crimes, huh?”

“Nonviolent, and flouting authority like it was going out of style,” Phil grinned.

“In a land of demons, he would have been the next best thing to an angel,” Natasha mused. “Just to show them he could.”

Steve got it, and felt oddly comforted. “One of the nicest guys I met in Europe was a safecracker,” he agreed. “Maybe he wanted a lot of things that weren’t his. But he’d never have hurt somebody to get them.”

“Um.” Tony pointed at Butler. “Nonviolent?”

“Artemis is,” Phil said, laying a serious hand on the box. “Butler tries to avoid violence, but sometimes people Artemis has dealt with don’t take their losses gracefully.” He clicked up another photo; a small bistro that looked somehow English to Steve’s eyes, with tables overturned, diners in shock or being treated by paramedics, and pools of blood and teeth on the floor. “The En Fin in London, five years ago. It took Interpol a while to realize this wasn’t just some random shooting spree. Jon Spiro apparently filled the place with assassins to get something Artemis had that he wanted.”

Tony’s eyes narrowed. “Something to do with computers?”

“Probably,” Phil agreed. “Details are sketchy, but Interpol watchers agree Butler must have been hurt. He’s still good, but he doesn’t have the endurance he used to. Artemis eluded the attack, devastated Spiro’s accounts, and somehow arranged for the man to get caught breaking into Phonetix Corps to steal their private research. The best odds I’ve heard say Spiro will be dead before he gets to appeal.”

“So no touchie the bodyguard,” Tony said shamelessly. “Got it. Kind of a close relationship for somebody who takes cash to... no?”

Natasha was shaking her head. “Butlers are not ordinary bodyguards. They are well known in... certain circles. They do serve as protection for cash, as you would say, to other people. But they have guarded the Fowl family for centuries.”
“Butler’s first day on duty was standing guard outside the maternity ward the night Artemis was born,” Phil agreed. “The only time they’re apart is when Artemis is in school at St. Bartleby’s.”

“So not a bodyguard.” Steve looked at that bloody chaos, picturing a thirteen-year-old in the middle of it with a wounded man. It was a nightmare. “Butler’s family.”

“And if you dig into this, that’s his pattern.” Phil opened the box, riffling through folders. “Artemis protects his family, including Butler and Juliet, Butler’s younger sister. He destroys his enemies. Outside of that - legally, he patents inventions, writes romances, and hands European chess champions their heads in online tournaments. Illegally, he swipes money from Swiss accounts, arranges deals for Impressionist forgeries, auctioned the so-called Lost Diaries of Leonardo Da Vinci, and otherwise finds ways to pry cash out of the hands of people too greedy to hang onto it. Make no mistake, he’s in it for the money. Legally, he makes millions. He steals to make billions.”

“How many billions?” Bruce wondered.

Tony gave him a hurt look. “Criminal?”

“And apparently crime pays.” The gamma scientist looked faintly amused. “I was just wondering how much.”

“He probably needed all of it,” Steve said quietly. Not that stealing was anything but wrong, but - Lord, if it’d been his father, what would he have done? “He was looking for his father in Mafiya territory, after they’d already said Mr. Fowl was dead. That had to be... expensive.”

Phil winced. “He had a lot more expenses than that. And damn it, if I find out SHIELD knew about this mess and didn’t do anything-” He cut himself off, and brought up a picture of Mrs. Fowl, zoomed in from the family picture. “Angelina Fowl. Married Fowl Sr. fairly young, as a society debutante, and promptly started trying to convince one of the most notorious crimelords on the planet to go straight. The consensus is that she has a generous heart, a little too much empathy for her own good, and a wide-open wallet when it comes to environmental causes. Tony, for all our sakes, do not use the words tree-hugger around Artemis. The last five NGO representatives he managed to catch three years ago have not only avoided Fowl Manor ever since, they moved out of Ireland entirely. One of them didn’t stop running until he hit Antarctica.”

“Um...” Steve shared a clueless look with Bruce. Clint was wincing, Natasha’s face was carefully blank, and Tony had just facepalmed.

“Ooo let me guess,” Tony sighed through his fingers. “Fowl Sr. was out of the way, so every gold-digger with a Cause went after Angeline and her money.”

“And got it, time after time,” Phil said grimly. “Artemis faced down his first set of solicitors trying to seize Fowl Manor when he was ten. He’s been keeping the family fortunes intact ever since, any way he could. We’re all lucky he’s smart enough to do that with a minimum of violence. On top of that-” The agent stopped, almost visibly calming himself down from a fit of righteous fury. “Apparently Angelina became clinically depressed after Fowl Sr. was declared dead. Six years ago, child protective services threatened to move in. Artemis and Butler had done everything they could to stop them, but Butler didn’t have any legal guardianship over Artemis and the government was going to take him right after the start of the new year.” Phil shook his head. “Only somehow, Artemis managed to pull off a Christmas miracle. Angelina recovered, apparently overnight, and Interpol still wants to know where the hell Artemis pulled an undisclosed amount of solid gold out of.” He tapped the box again. “After that is when Artemis suddenly started appearing on different continents in impossibly short times.”
“Stress has been known to cause mutant abilities to surface,” Bruce noted. “So. You’re saying if Child Services couldn’t break him, you don’t think demons would either.”

“I’m saying that both Artemis and Butler have serious underworld survival skills and multiple passports,” Phil stated. “They could have cut their losses and run anytime. They didn’t.” He looked at Steve. “Only tonight, Butler called me and said he was taking Artemis out of the Manor, it was dangerous, and no one should try to find them for at least twelve hours.”

*Oh. Oh, ow.* Because Steve remembered being fifteen, and mad at the world, and absolutely convinced nothing would ever get better. And he hadn’t even *had* enemies. Not really. “Dangerous to who?”

Phil nodded. “Exactly.”

“Okay, whoa, less brief briefing.” Tony crossed his arms. “Because that made exactly no sense. And I see everybody but you two and Clint is equally clueless. So share.”

Ouch. Tony really didn’t see... no, he probably didn’t. Which was awful. “Artemis protects his family,” Steve said firmly. “He wouldn’t make them worry by disappearing again, unless staying would be worse.” He glanced at Phil. “Someone’s targeting him.”

“Possible,” Phil agreed. “Or, there may be a slightly more prosaic explanation. Which ultimately might be just as dangerous. Jarvis checked the society buzz. Apparently Angeline Fowl decided to celebrate her son’s return to society by throwing an Occasion, complete with available young ladies. Producing... well, rather predictable results. Jarvis?”

“Please, tell me they didn’t let a *kidnap victim* get cornered by a bunch of nosy young social climbers hungry for new gossip,” Phil’s voice sighed.

“I’m afraid they did, sir,” a professional young woman reported. “*He did try to handle it. That was the most elegantly articulate fur-puffed back-arched cat of a kid I’ve ever seen.*” A slightly unprofessional snicker. “Honestly, sir, I’m writing these down. They were classy. And frankly, *some of those cuts, he really was being polite. That neckline wasn’t just diving for China, I think it was a naturalized citizen.*”

Tony snarked.

“*Have they noticed Artemis or Butler are gone?*”

“*Not yet,*” the lady agent stated. “*Mrs. Fowl’s doing the polite nothings that mean she doesn’t expect Artemis to come back to the party. I’d have to push it to pry, but I overheard one of the staff say Angeline told him to go to his room.*”

Steve winced as Jarvis ended the tape. “They think he’s eighteen, and they said that?”

“Not the important question,” Tony cut in. “So the kid just had the night from hell. Tough. What exactly makes this an Avengers-level problem? We get Fowl Sr. over here, we toss Moriarty Jr. tickets to Maui for a few weeks so he can blow off steam away from the chattering classes. Problem solved.”

“Maybe,” Phil allowed. “And maybe not.” He clicked one more photo up onto the briefing screen.


“It’s a rift,” Steve said, blobs of light and dark resolving into one frightening image. “It’s a really big
rift with demons and... is that a demon in armor? With a sword?"

Tony pointed at some of the buildings in the background. “In Central Park? And we didn’t notice?”

“Actually, from what little we can piece together of the alternate timeline, everyone in Manhattan did notice,” Phil said soberly. He nodded toward the curved form in armor; probably female, even with horns, hooves, and a tail. “This was an Otherplace survivor.”

Steve clenched his fists, chilled.

“Her name is Illyana Rasputina, and currently she’s a seven-year-old girl with only a trace of magic and no demonic characteristics whatsoever,” Phil went on. “Before the reset, she was an angry teenager who saw her friends in danger, and ended up opening a portal between here and Otherplace that the demons used to invade. Everyone tried to fight back, but... we were losing. It looks like the only thing that saved us was her friends showing up to show her they still cared about her, even if she was a demon.” He took a breath. “She opened a new portal. It sucked all the demons in, and... rewound time. As far as we can tell. Only a few people remember what might have happened.”

“Um.” Bruce looked just as shaken as Steve felt. “And you think Artemis could do... that.”

“I don’t know,” Phil said, very precisely. “But I do know I really don’t want Artemis stressed until we have a chance to find out. We want Artemis Sr. here? Let’s invite them both.”

“So you want to bring a kid who might blow stuff up near stuff that might blow up,” Tony concluded. “Yeah. Makes perfect sense.”

“A kid who needs to know his family’s safe,” Phil stated. “Who needs to be safe, so we can help him before anything goes to hell. Literally.” He gave Tony a look askance. “Do you really think SHIELD Headquarters, in yelling distance of Director Fury, is a good idea?”


“If I may say so, Sir,” Jarvis put in, “Avengers Tower is more likely to survive any explosions than Ireland. And if we can avoid a demonic invasion by means of providing Artemis a refuge from his enemies, external or familial, I would call it a win-win.”

“Magic.”

Steve traded a look with Clint. “Cheer up,” the archer grinned. “Maybe he’ll just hack your bank accounts instead.”

Head in his hands, Tony groaned.

Atlantis LEP all has water in their ears, Holly fumed, stalking up stairs originally built with centaurs in mind. It’ll turn up, my wings. Who loses a bio-bomb?

The non-slick treads were a little awkward, but she was getting used to them. Three years of being missing in the timestream had cost her the Haven apartment she’d spent the past few decades in; though at least the landlord had let Foaly clear everything out and put it in storage before he’d rented to anyone else. Winding up stuck in Section Eight’s infirmary while her immune system recovered hadn’t made hunting for a new place any easier. She’d ended up calling up Mulch on Foaly’s comm while she was still in quarantine, asking if her old PI partner or his pixie sidekick Doodah Day had any ideas.
At which point Artemis had given her an arch look from the next bed, and smirked at the grimy dwarf on the monitor. “Mulch, old friend, I’ve a request of my own to add. Given I suspect Captain Short’s position in Section Eight may incur new security concerns, as well as bringing demons to her door at any hour of the day or night, and the fact that your average denizen of Haven may not feel any better about hulking, crossbow-armed gray and red-scaled strangers than they do about humans—”

“You wouldn’t,” Holly had blurted out, hoping to head off Artemis-inspired insanity.

“Wouldn’t what?” Mulch’s question might have seemed innocent, if it hadn’t been for that huge toothy grin showing through bristly hair.

She glared at them both, knowing she’d walked into that one. Oh well. In for an acorn, in for the whole blasted oak. “Send Butler out apartment hunting!”

Mulch and Artemis had both looked at her. Glanced at each other. And smirked.

Haven LEP was still dealing with the reports from those tense weeks. And Frond take it, Artemis had been right again. Her fellow Havenites hadn’t been at all amused, or even polite, about five thousand demons suddenly added to the population. Haven had only had about ten thousand fairies in it pre-Hybras landing back in the world. No.1 and Qwan might be having a ball, finally living in a city where magic and nonviolence were not just acceptable but expected behavior. The rest of the demon pride were five-foot-tall armed, scale-armored, live-grub-eating maniacs that had been jammed down Haven’s collective throat like asphalt down a dwarf’s gullet. A mountaneous human walking around with a dwarf - a very polite mountain of a man, who wasn’t visibly armed and didn’t try swallowing pixie kids’ pet crickets just because they looked tasty - had been far from the most upsetting thing in the city.

So now Holly had an apartment even Butler could fit into, and Section Eight had paid for the mingled elf and human-sized refits out of her lost-in-time bonus. Possibly with a bit of gold from Artemis included. He might be adamant about not giving the ransom gold back, but he had absolutely no scruples about spending it in Haven.

At least her new neighbors seemed friendly.

“Whee!”

...If a bit inclined to use Butler as their own personal jungle gym.

Holly made it up the last step to see no less than three young elflings, two sprites, and a pixie dangling from Butler’s arms and neck. One of their mothers, a raven-haired elf by the name of Ximene Liveoak, was rocking another swaddled sprite in her arms, watching Butler gently lift children up and down as they giggled.

The captain stood there a moment to make sure no one would get startled. She hadn’t planned to end up in the same building as Liveoak’s fairy daycare. But given little sprites needed enough headroom to try out their wings, it wasn’t surprising the daycare required centaur-sized rooms. “Hello there.”

“Captain Short.” Butler plucked off the children one at a time, planting them back on the floor before he bowed to Ximene. “Mrs. Liveoak. Good to see you again.”

“And you, Mr. Butler.” Her nod was a bit uncertain, but not unfriendly. “Come along, children, the captain and Mr. Butler need to talk....”

“Awww!”
Holly watched them go, and shook her head. “I never would have thought you were good with children.”

“Artemis wasn’t born a twelve-year-old criminal genius.” Butler held his hands less than a foot apart. “The first time I held him, he wasn’t even opening his eyes yet.”

“I have a hard time imagining it,” Holly admitted, mounting the second set of stairs to the upper floors. There was no way she was living on the same floor as a daycare. Granted, she didn’t have that many enemies, and most of the ones who wanted anything more than a chance to rough her up in one of Haven’s dark alleys would have to break into Haven to get to her. No small feat.

But she did have enemies. And if one of them came looking for her-

Munich, and a bio-bomb, blue rippling into the sky.

Nobody kills kids with a blue rinse. Not when they’re trying to get me.

Butler hadn’t come right out and said it, but she’d caught enough of his dropped hints about Artemis finally developing the reflexes to duck to know it’d been on his mind, too.

“I have a hard time imagining him as a child, period,” Holly went on, taking her time with the climb. A chance to get Butler talking wasn’t to be missed. “What’s it like, being raised as a Fowl? Being—well, assigned your own bodyguard from birth. It sounds crazy.”

“It’s not,” Butler said soberly, apparently willing to match her pace. “Fowls have centuries’ worth of enemies out there, Captain. They are what they are: rich, intelligent, and not inclined to let go of anything they believe is rightfully theirs. That gets you in trouble on both sides of the law.” His lips quirked up, amused. “As you have, with Ark Sool.”

The man had a point. That stuck-up paper-pushing bureaucratic gnome would hold a grudge against her until the stars died. “And they’re criminals,” Holly pointed out; not as hot as she would have six years ago, but still. She was a cop.

“It is the family business.” Butler didn’t look offended. “It was easier before Artemis’ grandfather died. He ran a tight ship; a very illegal ship, but there was minimal use of force in the Fowl empire. Fowl Sr. could work in the less illegal segments, in the public eye. That’s how Angeline met him.” A quiet breath. “Two years after Artemis was born, Grandfather Fowl died. Fowl Sr. was responsible for everything. It hardened him. There were - disagreements between himself and Angeline. She loved him, but things were tense. Especially since the older Artemis got, the more evident it was that Fowl Sr. was raising him as his own father had. Not a son. A junior business partner.”

Holly froze mid-step, feeling something inside her tower of comfortable assumptions about Artemis go crash. “Artemis - in the Arctic, I asked him if his father was any danger to the People. He said no. That his father was a noble man, and,” she searched for the exact words in her memory; Frond, no wonder Artemis had snared himself in fairy magic, so much of his self already revolved around exact words, “the idea of harming another creature would be repugnant to him.”

Butler stopped, one step below her; head still a few feet above her own. “Artemis loves his father.”

Oh, D’Arvit. “So he lied.”

Butler frowned down at her. “He lost his father when he was ten,” the bodyguard rumbled, “and like Grandfather Fowl before him, Fowl Sr. introduced Artemis to the least distasteful aspects of the family business first.” He paused, obviously considering his words. “We were allies then, not friends. But if we were back there, now, what I would tell you as a friend is that yes, the Fowl Sr. of years
past could well have been a danger to the People. You thought Artemis was ruthless, and he was. And is. But he learned from one of the best.”

_Artemis wasn’t born a criminal. He was taught to be._

It stung. But she couldn’t let Butler’s opening pass by. “The Fowl Sr. of years past?”

“Angeline claims he’s like the man she married, brought back for a second chance,” Butler nodded. “I don’t think he would harm the People if he learned about them now. But whatever Artemis told you, whatever he wanted to believe, Fowl Sr. as he is is not the man Artemis _remembers._” A slight shrug. “And you know how Artemis is with discrepancies in his data.”

Did she ever. So much of Artemis’ life - Frond, of _all_ their lives - had depended on ferreting out that one missing piece that let them wriggle out of a deathtrap. There were five thousand demons alive today because Artemis had hacked Foaly back and realized the centaur’s calculations were _wrong._

_Hybras is over. Artemis’ family is the problem now. “So what do we do?”_

“I wish I knew, Captain.” Butler looked honestly torn. “Hitting this problem won’t make it go away. Angeline wants a normal teenage son. Fowl Sr. wants a normal teenage son _and_ a junior partner in legitimate business. Artemis... wants to be Artemis.”

And Artemis didn’t do normal, Holly reflected. As far as she could tell, he was allergic to it. If his parents caught him in another _geis_ of the _you will not be a crook_ variety, there was going to be blood on the walls. “We need to get them to talk.”

“Tricky,” Butler noted, moving again; she had to start climbing or get run over. “Even without the risk of _geis_ if he stays in their house. He can’t tell his family about the People. And without that, how can he explain he has more important things to do than geometry?”

_Good question._

Holly mulled it as they reached her new front door. Took a breath, and frowned at Butler. “You didn’t let him cook, did you?”

“...I left some pots on.”

Oh dear.

Standing at an easel, Artemis watched them dash through for the kitchen with a raised eyebrow. “I am capable of watching pots, I should think.”

Butler checked every steaming container, and let out a relieved breath. “Well done.”

“For watching pots?” Holly gave Artemis a look askance.

A slight pink touched his cheeks, and Artemis busied himself tucking colored pencils back into their wooden box. “I’ve not quite mastered making sandwiches, yet.”

_Don’t laugh. Don’t laugh. At least he’s trying._ Holly fought to hold back a snicker.

“The culinary arts have not been my highest priority,” her shorter guest grumbled, awkwardly taking out some dishes to lay an informal table. “Although I will admit attaining some degree of expertise in this field might be preferable to dining out, given the well-demonstrated opportunities to move hostile personnel into restaurants.”
“And the waitresses?” Butler said dryly.

“Well, yes,” Artemis muttered. “How long does this accursed puberty last?”

“In your case, at least another four years,” Butler informed him.

“Blast.” But Artemis looked slightly cheered as they sat down, taking in the savory scents of Butler’s experiments with Haven’s fish, mushrooms and salad, and his portable spice cabinet. “I’m not certain I fully registered last time how completely flipped about Haven’s hours are from the surface. This is an early supper for you, is it not?”

It was. But given Artemis was right about changelings being Section Eight business, she had a bit of leeway. Especially since Butler had let slip that Artemis had forgone dinner to recharge magic instead - and the less said about trying to grab a snack at the party, the better. “You should be in bed,” Holly said instead, digging in.

“I’m not certain I could have slept earlier.” Artemis stared at his plate, then deliberately met her eyes. “What is troubling you?”

“The longer I’m in LEP, the more I sympathize with Julius’ blood pressure.” Holly speared a slippery mushroom slice before it could make a break for freedom. “Haven seems to be doing well enough with Kelp running Recon, but Atlantis-!”

It was good to have people she could talk to about work. Most elves never wanted to hear about the beat patrols, the petty criminals, the many and varied ways Haven’s citizens didn’t live up to the laws and morals the People supposedly held dear. And if they did want to hear about it, it was almost always with wide-eyed morbid interest; as if they’d never consider doing such horrible things, oh no.

Butler and Artemis weren’t like that. They listened, and commented, and sympathized with the practical air of those who’d considered all of those crimes, and discarded most of them as petty or unnecessary.

She’d always wondered how Julius could have a soft spot in that craggy heart of his for Mulch Diggums, despite throwing him in jail over fifteen times. Working with Artemis, she’d started to grasp the edges of it, even before Mulch had decided to go straight. Well, straighter.

_They get it. We may have been on opposite sides of the fence more than once, but they know where the lines are. And why. They may break the law, but they understand._

Even Foaly didn’t get it sometimes. Sure, he dealt with the crime and the plotting. But outside of a few very rare instances like Opal’s automated takeover of Recon equipment, he was always safely locked away from the action. Though apparently even his usual paranoid computer booth hadn’t felt safe enough when he’d heard that _Artemis_ had been put under geis and escaped. She hadn’t made out all the words in his panicked neigh, but _emergency world-is-ending bunker_ had featured in there.

“My, Holly had sighed over her helmet comm, ushering two humans through the Tara port to dropped jaws and no few pointing fingers. “Everything’s fine. Crisis averted. Nothing happened.”

“That’s what scares me.”

On the one hand, it’d made her want to roll her eyes; these days, Artemis did _not_ inflict mayhem on people who didn’t deserve it, thank you very much. On the other hand... just about any fairy would say Angeline _did_ deserve it.

_And she’s in For Your Own Good mode_, Holly thought, setting up the dishes to wash as Artemis
settled himself by her balcony window with his pencil-box and a pad of paper. *If Artemis steps out of line again, she will try that again. Even if Artemis can dodge her eyes... broken trust and broken hearts. This is a mess.*

*A mess that doesn’t make sense.*

She walked away from the kitchen, noting how Butler had taken up a calm meditative pose to clean his Sig Sauer. “All right. I’ve been going over and over this, and I still can’t get what happened tonight. I even asked Qwan.” And Frond, but she still had a headache from it. “He said the geis isn’t just fairy magic, bound to be outside human dwellings unless invited in, and still bound by orders if we meet human eyes. It’s human magic, setting up thresholds we can’t cross without that invitation. You may be a changeling but you are a *Fowl*. Your invitation should be implicit, just from being part of the family.”

“Ah.” Artemis’ careful pencil strokes barely slowed. “Except that both Mother and Father have declared that the business of the Fowls is no longer crime, but living. There will be no criminals in their family, they say. And I...” Artemis’ throat worked, soundless. “I am a thief, Captain. I am and continue to be a criminal, even if my targets are *other* criminals. I cannot - will not - change that. Legal measures would have led to our demise a dozen times over, and my friends’ lives are far more precious than any law.”

There was a lump in her throat. “Artemis-”

He lifted the hand with the pencil; lava-red, she noted in the light. “I have made my peace with that. Indeed, one might say I’ve the better part of the bargain. In what other line of work might I cheerfully indulge my baser impulses, yet still come away having made the world a safer place for those more innocent?”

“MI6, perhaps,” Butler observed. “Though I would advise against that, Artemis. You are very dangerous. But as you said, you are a thief. *Not* an assassin. That is a line you’d do better never to cross.” He let his gaze fall on Holly. “The LEP is the best place for him I’ve seen yet.”

*Artemis as an assassin.* Holly tried not to shiver. *That would destroy him.* “All right, then,” she said, keeping her voice steady as a pilot about to fly a flare. “So what are you going to tell them when you go home?”

“I shall *tell* them nothing,” Artemis sniffed. “I will simply arrive, as I have in the past. If I am asked, I will retort that they wish normal behavior, and surely nothing is more normal than an aggravated teenager flitting off from annoying parental requests. And I took Butler with me, so my safety would be assured. If they press further, I shall glare, and pout. I’m told bratty teenagers do such things. As for what I intend to *do* - sunglasses.”

Well, it was a start. “Sunglasses won’t block eyeball orders.”

“But mirrored lenses will allow me to avert my gaze without it being obvious,” Artemis stated, considering his next pencil stroke. “And not looking at people’s eyes can be learned. It is not a perfect solution, but I believe it will work.”

“You’d have to watch yourself every hour of every day,” Holly pointed out. “No one can do that for long.”

“I am not most people.”

Well, that was the truth.
“And as I said, it is not perfect,” Artemis acknowledged. “I shall have to refine matters over time.”

Translation, no good ideas yet. “Is that what the sketching’s for?”

Artemis glanced at penciled pages, as if seeing them all over again. “No, not exactly.”

*That’s a plotting pause. It has to be. Artemis is a lot of things, but he isn’t shy.*

“Just a bit of practice,” Artemis said casually. “Would you like to see?”

Curious, Holly accepted the pad.

*Oh. That’s what the lava red was for.*

A LEP shuttle was poised in the landing cradle, the first streaks of the magma flare reaching up to brush ripples of heat across the soot-stained hull. The engines were revved and ready, the doors were atmo-sealed, and the viewport windows gleamed like a Recon officer’s eyes on the hunt.

Holly drew in a breath, almost feeling the pressure of the harness across her chest. “This is practice?”

“It’s more difficult than it seems, translating what one has seen into a physical medium,” Artemis mused. “At least this one is well-disguised as science fiction. I shall have to ensure the other sketches are removed to a more secure location. I do have them hidden and locked away, but Myles will not cease his attempts to break into my office, and Mother appears to find my frustration amusing.”

Holly glanced over at the slight thinning of Butler’s lips, and cursed silently. If Artemis couldn’t even keep his own office to himself, the manor really wasn’t safe.

*We’re going to have to talk about this again. When it’s a little less raw. “Come on, you,”* Holly said, handing the sketches back. “It may still be early for me, but that means I can knock off some paperwork before I snuggle up in bed sleeping the sleep of the righteous. You will have to make do with a cot and mad schemes of defrauding evil businessmen, so you might as well get started now.”

The blankets were warm, the apartment pleasantly chill. Butler’s breathing was quiet and regular from the cot beside him. And Holly had switched off all but a few last lights so she could work. He ought to be dead to the world.

Artemis lay in bed, and tried not to think.

*Meditate. You’re good at it. Clear your mind of doubt and worry, and simply focus on what is.*

*There is a solution to your dilemma. A very simple one.*

Odd, how much the heart fought against pure logic. He’d blame puberty, only he was quite certain this difficulty had cropped up well before he’d noticed any tendency to have his brain temporarily blank on seeing a pretty girl.

Quiet footsteps approached his bed. “I can hear the gears turning, you know.” Holly leaned a hand on the covers over his own. “You need to sleep, not think. Coffee can only substitute for sleep so long.” There was a ragged edge to her sigh. “Trust me, I do know what I’m talking about. After Julius....”

“I miss him as well,” Artemis admitted, sitting up to face her. And he could not stop thinking, because here was an opening, and he... he was going to take it.
I only hope I do no harm.

“He wanted you to follow him into the leadership of Recon,” Artemis said, very carefully. “Do you think he would be disappointed that you have chosen another path?”

“Huh.” Holly was chewing her lip; he could just make that out, in the angle of head and jaw. “Maybe a little. But if he’d known about what we do in Section Eight, I think he’d be pleased. Scowling all the time, of course. It’s not Recon, but it is serving the People. And that’s what he wanted. For us to do our best for the People, and Haven. And even your world, when it came down to it.”

“He was a good man,” Artemis nodded. “My father... is also a good man, now. And therein lies the problem.”

“You did what you did to protect your family,” Holly said firmly. “I don’t agree with all of it. I don’t agree with most of it. But if you told your father you skirted the edge of the law to make sure your family would still be there when he came home-”

“I did.”

There was a very soft curse. Holly sat down on the edge of his cot, hazel and blue eyes gleaming in a hint of light through the balcony curtains. “All right. Tell me.”

Artemis shrugged his shoulders, shifting over to balance her weight on the bed. “He was still in Helsinki. He may have been more optimistic but he is not a fool. He checked on our finances to ensure there would be no difficulty with arranging proper care and transport once he was well. The moment he realized the Fowl family fortunes were surprisingly intact, he contacted certain... associates of his, in law enforcement. They were able to inform him of a significant fraction of my activities. Not, of course, anything to do with the People. But the remainder was sufficiently meaty to ensure my confinement in juvenile detention until my twenty-first birthday, if they’d been able to prove anything.” He paused, still oddly hurt by the realization. “He told me that years ago, he would have been impressed. And then... he said that as a father, things had to change.”


Only I didn’t. The father I knew is gone.

“He promised Mother that the Fowls would be on the straight and narrow from that point on. All the Fowls. I have another chance, and I will not waste it on greed.” His fingers clench on the sheets. “As if I’d done it out of pure avarice! Yes, I like money, it makes many things much easier. And yes, I might have been less grasping. But - I - at that point I hadn’t even imagined the Cube, and what right did he have to make that promise for me? ‘Reclaim my childhood’? Those years are gone, Holly. And I do not begrudge them because they were spent for my family. How can he just throw them away?”

He was not crying. It was just pain. Pain could be dealt with.

“I’m sorry,” Holly said softly.

“My father is terribly disappointed in me,” Artemis concluded. “I suppose that explains much of the last three years.”

“...You’ve lost me.”
Artemis tried not to sniff too archly. “For fifteen years I was an only child, Holly. And now I’m the brother to twin two-year-olds? I can count. They must have been conceived within months of my disappearance in Taipei. How incredibly convenient for high society, that the Fowls’ most problematic heir was now no longer a factor. I can only imagine the matrimonial plans I must have upset once the ton realized the ruthless black sheep of the family had returned.”

Holly’s fist clenched on the covers. “Artemis. You can’t think that about your parents.”

“How can I not?” He tried to keep the bitter edge out of his voice. “Holly, it’s... it’s simple logic. My father now has more appropriate heirs. He’s turned over a new leaf, and here is fruit borne above the good graft. I’m legally eighteen now. I can start separating my affairs from the family.” He took a breath. “It would be safest. For everyone.”

“Safer, maybe.”

Artemis sighed, feeling the truth in her grudging words like a balm. That was a LEP officer to the core, admitting the logic of his position. Her competence braced him, lifting some of the intolerable strain. He wished he could wrap himself in it like a blanket, warm and safe.

“But they’re still your family,” Holly went on, gently. “Give them a chance.”

“Yes.” His words were quiet, faint even for elfin ears. “A chance.”

Long into Haven’s night, Holly listened for the sound of weeping.

It never came.

Chapter End Notes

The ton - has been used to refer to British upper class society since the late eighteenth century. And yes, their marriage arrangements can be that calculating. Even if Artemis is wrong, there’s going to be plenty of people in that social strata who come to exactly the same conclusions.

I‘m using a modified version of Marvel’s Inferno storyline as an “alternate timeline” here. (Long story short: Illyana “Magick” Rasputina causes major demonic invasion, death destruction and chaos, most New Yorkers oddly unfazed despite several people being eaten, dragged into hell dimensions, or turned into demons.) Making the events of Inferno “rewritten” by Illyana Rasputina’s time-and-space teleport disks to “not happen” makes more sense than everyone in Manhattan just assuming they had a massive shared hallucination.

...Rewriting time makes more sense than what actually happened. Darn you, MCU. You make Artemis Fowl look sober and sane....
Up in the Quinjet hangar, Tony eyed the pretty blonde in one incredibly unfashionable mechanic-style gray jumpsuit, tapping his fingers on a railing as she scattered salty rose-scented water in not quite random patterns. This was not his favorite way to start the morning and he knew exactly who to blame for it. “Magic.”

Phil shrugged. “Think of it like a fire alarm.”

“Fire alarms I can rewire if I have to. What do I do if this goes wrong—”

The blonde stood tall, shaking a fist at the sky. “Ting tang walla walla!”

Tony blinked. “...Not exactly filling me with confidence, here.”

There was a quiet zap. And a shimmer of gold sparks, that raced along the drops of water to limn the Tower for one moment in the colors of dawn.

“That should do it.” The blonde jammed a Navy baseball cap down on her head, and nodded at Phil. “I’ll send you my bill.”

“No need, the check’s already in your account,” the agent stated.

“Sending it anyway. You know how some people in your bunch get about the invisible accountants.” She winked at him, then flicked Tony a one-fingered salute as she sauntered toward the down elevator. “‘Later!”

“Jen, from Salem,” Phil informed him, as Tony watched her go. “She’s a very minor practitioner, which lets her skate under the radar of a lot of nastier people. But when it comes to alarm wards, she’s one of the best. No one should be able to open a portal to another dimension in the Tower without every Avenger and Jarvis knowing about it.”

“You really think the kid might do that,” Tony said skeptically. Because yeah, SHIELD apparently had evidence of something going wonky no one in the Big Apple remembered, but demons, really?

“I’m more worried someone from Otherplace might try to grab him back,” Phil said soberly, looking out over the skyline. Toward the direction of JFK International, if Tony planned to hazard a guess. “That’s happened, too—”

“Sir?” Jarvis’ voice came over the speakers. “If the manipulation of paranormal energies is over - I just encountered the oddest hacking attempt.”

Running water in the Learjet sink, Artemis splashed his face, and waited for his stomach to stop lurching. That. Was a very. Bad. Idea.

Not that he possibly could have known that before he’d started the hack. Really, he’d hacked Foaly and not gotten any reaction. And Foaly all but lived in his ops room, when he wasn’t home with his family-

Another spasm threatened, and Artemis drew a deep breath. He felt cold, drained, and somehow
incredibly ticked off. What was the world coming to when a reasonably honest hacker couldn’t trespass in a mainframe....

_Trespass. Oh. Oh, this is not good._

At least he’d had the common sense to slam off the program the moment the first reaction had hit him. And once Holly had known he _was_ bound by geis, she’d spent a good hour drilling him on exactly what conditions would and wouldn’t set it off. Deliberate trespass into a dwelling would land a fairy puking on the floor, possibly for hours, and thieve away magic bit by bit until, after several transgressions, the hapless fairy criminal had none. _Accidental_ trespass wasn’t so bad. Intent mattered to magic.

“You’ll be sick,” she’d predicted direly. “You’ll lose some of your stored magic; it’s the threshold’s way of slapping your hands. But if it really was an accident - some hobo living in a building that’s supposed to be office space, for one - then as long as you get yourself back out, you should be fine. And there are a few things you can do to make up for it. Though _you_ might find them harder to deal with than the nausea.”

Well, in a way she might be right, Artemis thought, wiping his face. He was about to do something he absolutely detested. But if he was a thief, at least he was an _honest_ thief.

Making his way back to his seat, he ignored his father’s frown from a few rows away. Opened his laptop again, and typed in slow, deliberate sentences.

*>My apologies for the intrusion. I did not know someone was living here.*

Send. And _think._

“Ginger ale?” Butler offered a tall glass, eyes worried.

“Thank you,” Artemis whispered, sipping it steadily. “Perhaps the turbulence was a bit much.”

They both knew he didn’t get motion sick.

“One might say,” Artemis picked his words carefully, “it felt almost like walking in on someone in the shower. Unexpectedly.”

Butler was far too well trained to start. But he gave the computer a long look. “That’s new.”

“Hmm. Perhaps.” Artemis frowned, thinking over what he knew. Which was far less than he had going in to meet Jon Spiro with the C-Cube, and he had a lifetime’s worth of nightmares to demonstrate how well that had turned out. “I should have liked more time to do some of my own research on this... Avengers Tower.”

Only he hadn’t _had_ time. He’d walked into Fowl Manor at the sort of late morning hour a cranky teenager might think acceptable, only to find his father in the midst of ordering the servants to pack. For all three of them.

>“We’re going to New York, Arty.”

One of these days he was going to tell his father how much that nickname annoyed him. Given Fowl Sr. put up with _Timmy_, though, Artemis doubted he’d make much headway. And he certainly hadn’t had the time to argue then. Not when he’d been busy doing one of the fastest hacks he could to determine what his father had been working on that would send them across the Atlantic Ocean without warning.
The Grace O’Malley. Standard Fowl Empire shipping and smuggling, lost eleven years ago; crew survived, ship sunk irretrievably deep. Just about the time Father and I first pulled a heist with myself and Butler as the distractions, in the new-forged identities of the young chess champion, Stefan Bashkir, and his guardian Uncle Constantin. Why is that wreck coming back to trouble us now?

And why in New York, of all places? Though that was where the Avengers had apparently chosen to ensconce themselves between bouts of visibly saving the world. Frankly, had he been New York’s mayor, he would have made every effort to politely convince such a perilous group to move elsewhere. Even the publicly available data on the Avengers was enough to curl one’s hair; put that together with what Foaly had hacked from SHIELD, and Butler had added the Lee passports to their emergency kit before Artemis could even ask.

“You do have a security kit ready and accessible once we clear Customs?” Artemis murmured, conscious of listening ears.

Butler nodded, the fine creases around his eyes hinting he was as unhappy as his principal. “Try to relax,” he advised, just as quietly. “Remember. Methods of restraint need to be tailored to what you’re trying to hold. The Avengers are used to fighting supervillains with earthshaking power. I doubt they could confine you.”

Artemis slanted a glance at him. “You don’t think I’m in that sort of danger, or you would have said.”

“I don’t,” Butler said firmly. “Your father may be walking on the right side of the law, but that doesn’t mean he’d turn over his own flesh and blood without warning signs. But you’re worried, and I’ve been wrong once or twice before.”

“I will be careful,” Artemis vowed, remembering London. Blood, and fear, and the terror of hearing the name a bodyguard never gave up while he lived. “I swear.”

“I know you will.” Butler’s expression softened; slate instead of granite. “This could be to your advantage. If we have a chance to talk to Agent Coulson directly you can set up to reveal the second cover story.” He did not glance at Fowl Sr. “And if SHIELD is willing to use your father’s sources, they might be willing to give him some information in return. That could simplify things.”

_Such as explaining how I have magic_, Artemis finished silently. _Or that I have it at all._

He still wasn’t certain if he wanted to reveal magic to his father. On the one hand, it would be a relief to share something of the more mystical corners of his life. On the other....

_I never tell anyone how intelligent I am. It would terrify them._

Artemis very much feared magic might be as terrifying as genius. Criminal, genius, _and_ warlock? How much could he ask any man to deal with?

“I believe I’ll examine the files on Coulson again,” Artemis mused. “It could be useful to know how he manages his continuing work for SHIELD whilst living in Avengers Tower. It seems likely there may be specific data transfer protocols set up for his use.” And while the Tower mainframe might be inhabited and off limits, the SHIELD mainframes were no such thing.

_You don’t have to go into a house to see where the doors are. Or - perhaps - who answers them._

Artemis smirked a little. “I’ve always thought Stark Industries mainframes had an _exceptional_ security system. The anti-intrusion measures are very creative. Almost as if they had an artist on call,
twenty-four seven.”

Butler’s brows went up. “That could make things difficult.”

“On the contrary, it could make certain things much easier,” Artemis reflected. “A computer program can only do what it is told. A person... can be bargained with.”

One of the best things about a roof this high, Clint Barton reflected, was that there weren’t any people. It wasn’t quiet, New York was never quiet, but it was about as close as the city ever got. Just him, distant honking from aggravated taxi drivers, and the quiet buzz from the beehive some enterprising office worker had smuggled up and installed here.

Clint had already decided that if something went berserk up here, he’d go over the edge of the roof rather than get backed into the beehive. Ordinary bees were bad enough. Any hive that could make it in the Big Apple had to be mean enough to give even Hulk pause for thought.

Outside of that, the calm buzzes were nice. Gave him time to think.

_There’s something Phil’s not telling us._

If it were Fury, he’d be worried about that. The Director’s grip on need to know had gotten him shot at before. Not to mention shot, stabbed, and flung into situations that made even the Black Widow’s hair stand on end. But if there was something Phil wasn’t telling them, it was usually a lot more harmless.

_Either he’s trying to protect the kid’s privacy, or there’s something about the Fowls he wants our read on before he gives us his opinion._

In which case he’d just have to be patient and wait. Hawkeye was good at that.

_Shouldn’t be waiting too much longer. Airport said their Learjet touched down, and from here to JFK it only takes... wait. There you are. Sneaky._

Not the airport limo he’d halfway expected. Just a freshly-scrubbed and polished yellow cab pulling up in front of the Tower, the same as any moderately well-off businessman in New York might pick.

_Natasha’s right, Clint thought, watching a mountain of a man get out and visually clear the area._

_Butlers aren’t just regular bodyguards. He made sure they wouldn’t be an obvious target... heh. He sees me._

Not that much of a surprise, given Phil obviously thought well of Butler. The bodyguard had Hawkeye noted, identified, and marked as “probably nonhostile” in a fraction of a second, stepping aside so the next passenger could get out.

_There’s Fowl Sr.,_ Clint thought, noting the slight limp. The man was used to his prosthetic leg, but not as steady as he probably thought he was. Or as aware; Mr. Fowl scanned the street, but he didn’t look much above eye level before he got out of the way so-

_Hello._

There was their little teenage dimensional traveler, stepping out onto the sidewalk as lightly as Natasha. Blue eyes raked Artemis’ surroundings like ice; the kid was _not happy_, and not at all shy about letting the whole world see it....
He saw me.

Just the slightest of hesitations in Artemis’ scan of the area, followed by a quick glance at Butler.

He saw me, he saw that Butler saw me, and he saw that Butler thinks I’m not a threat. Clint hid a grin. Okay, Phil. I am officially interested. Mini-Moriarty, huh? Wonder if you can turn this one to Arsène Lupin-

Which was, of course, when he spotted the Doombots coming out of the sun.

“Jarvis, take a memo,” Tony directed, diving down into the fray of green-cloaked gray-armored flying annoyances. “Hey, Reed.”

Zap.

“Either Doom screwed up his GPS or he doesn’t like you anymore.”

Dodge flying metal, as Captain America’s shield took the head off another caped menace, the bot’s skull tangling with a third cape to toss a swarm of Doombots off balance.

“Feel free to come make up. Hugs and kisses, Iron Man.”

He ducked as an arrow skimmed by, Hawkeye didn’t usually cut things so close-

Oh. There were people down there, on the sidewalk in front of the Tower. Too damn many people. Though with Doom around any civilians were too many.

“Widow, Coulson, crowd control,” Cap ordered over the comms. “Bruce, hang back in the lobby, we’re going to have a lot of-”

Glass shattered, sending hapless bystanders screaming.

“...Shrapnel injuries.”

Tony smirked, and swooped up again to catch another Doombot in a crossfire. “Welcome to New York.”

Butler’s in the lobby, Clint registered through a sniper’s calm. Good plan. He can cover them from ground level as the noncombatants make a break for it.

And once the fight was over and he had some time to think, he might go hunt down Phil and hang from the vents snickering at him, because the agent was about to have one heck of a fun week. If by fun he meant dealing with someone who’d managed to set up cover Butler so he can cover us by just the right glances of icy blue eyes.

The teenager has more experience in firefights than his father. That’s going to be an interesting story-


The explosive bolt sank home, blasting a hole through a robotic arm before it could grab and strangle a stray gibbering taxi driver.

-Later.
That does it, Artemis thought coldly, running for the lobby doors when every fiber in him wanted to
drag his father along by main force. Only he didn’t have the strength to haul the idiot taxi driver
along, his father did, and Fowl Sr. had apparently decided risking his own life for an absolute
stranger was a worthwhile endeavor. I officially hate New York.

“This way!” he called over his shoulder, keeping his voice level, calm, and confident as Butler about
to take down six dock toughs in as many seconds. “We’ll start a triage station inside!” Thus
suggesting to the panicking idiots behind him that they would be doing something heroic and useful,
which might at least prevent them from dashing madly about to be flattened by falling chunks of
robot.

And who knew. With a task to hang onto, some of them might actually shake the gibbering panic
long enough to do something helpful.

“It’s clear, Artemis,” Butler called out from the open doors, gun in hand. “Get in here!”

Thank Frond. He skidded through the doorway with a breath of relief, one hand jamming his
sunglasses on. Tony Stark and who knew how many others lived here, meaning this definitely
constituted a dwelling, and the last thing he needed was to lock eyes with anyone. But at least
Butler’s invitation meant the threshold ignored him.

Good. The last thing I need is to be helpless with nausea....

Blood, scattered glass, and screaming.

And I fear I’ll need every drop of magic I have.

Loud whooshes. Fiery booms. The flash of a ringed shield and repulsors, not to mention the crackle
of wrist stingers as a stunning redhead far too tall to be Holly twisted a low-flying robot away from
stragglers.

Artemis gritted his teeth, heart racing even though his father was finally inside, Mother was going to
kill him when he got back to Ireland. “Yes, yes, you’re all so pretty and heroic and did none of you
think to bring an ambulance?!?”

“Paramedics are on their way,” a voice said behind him, quiet and soft in a way that prickled the
hairs on the back of Artemis’ neck, “but they won’t be able to get through until the fight’s over.”

Middling tall, dark curly hair, a bit of a shabby appearance despite the very professional looking first-
aid kit in his hands. Artemis matched the face to Avengers files, and kept his own expression politely
annoyed. No trace of green, and Butler says he’s skilled. Good. We need that.

“Your file listed extensive experience as a first responder, Dr. Banner.” Stress the doctor to calm the locals, and let’s
not let on to the civilians how he got that experience, yes? “May I assist you in coordinating triage?”

“Ah....” Dr. Banner blinked down at him, then tried not to glance too obviously at Butler.

Artemis tried not to growl. Really. He’s dealt with SHIELD. Has he never seen a bodyguard before?

“Just focus on the wounded, Doctor,” Butler stated, Sig Sauer ready as he stood concealed in the
shadows. “I’ll keep the robots out so long as I can.” He met Banner’s eyes. “If you think you’ll
have... problems, let me know, and I’ll clear the civilians out of the way.”

Yes, let’s do keep the panicky sorts out from under the feet of the man likely to have a warp spasm-
like episode, Artemis thought wryly, glancing at where his father stood, jaw dropped and aghast.
“Father, Dr. Bruce Banner; Dr. Banner, my father, Artemis Fowl Sr.” He waved an elegant hand toward one of the moaning huddles on the lobby floor. “Gentlemen, I believe that young lady is bleeding, perhaps we should do something about it?"

Steve liked to think of himself as a patient man. But right now all he wanted to do was find the real Victor von Doom and punch him in the face, armor and all.

Though punching the Human Torch was starting to look like a worthwhile second option. For a guy who’d flown into outer space, Johnny Storm seemed to have a hard time grasping the consequences of molten metal and gravity-

“Widow, *move!*”

He flung his shield just as Iron Man swatted the blazing robot and Black Widow dove aside almost too fast to be believed. The wreck careened harmlessly into an already demolished yellow cab.

*Empty cab, thank god. Forget punching Torch yourself. Hawkeye gets first dibs.*

Though with their luck, the rest of the Fantastic Four would have disentangled themselves from Reed Richards’ current experiment just in time to see that punch, and a whole new brawl would start. As if New York hadn’t seen enough for one day.

Still smoking hot, his shield rebounded back to his grip. Steve caught it as he scanned the sky. “I make it down to five. Any of them look suspicious?”

“Because flying robots aren’t suspicious enough all by themselves,” Iron Man quipped. “Good point, though, this is *way* too obvious for Doom. Jarvis-”

“I’ve already flattened three hacking attacks, Sir,” the AI spoke over Steve’s comm. “Skilled, but not good enough. I suspect they are a secondary feint, but I have not yet identified what the third component of Doom’s strategy may be.”

“We’ll work on that. You just keep yourself and the Tower safe,” Steve said firmly. “All right, I think we can take these down in one more minute....”

*Messy, but efficient,* Butler judged, watching robots fall from the sky, denting what was left of their cab. *Good thing Artemis and I have the important gear on us. And if the trunk doesn’t make it... well, the other suitcases are fireproof.*

Though if the pure heat managed to combust Artemis’ sketches anyway, the Baxter Building was probably going to suffer a sudden, sharp hacking attack meant to make the Human Torch’s life as aggravating as humanly possible.

Can’t say I’d blame him. If the Widow hadn’t been that quick - messy.

And if it had been that messy, he’d have been hard pressed to grab Artemis before his principal bolted out into the fray. Black Widow was at least two feet too tall to be Holly, but she would have been a black-suited redhead in lethal danger, and Artemis was *fifteen.* Mature enough to curse hormones, yes; but still as hard-wired as any young man who didn’t yet realize he was desperately in love. He would have *reacted,* not thought.

*Healing someone of lethal wounds in plain sight would be very, very hard to explain away.*
As it was Artemis was quietly assisting Dr. Banner with latex gloves, bandages, and pressure on shocked casualties. And if some of those injuries didn’t seem as bad as the bloodstained, ripped clothing would indicate - well, how lucky for them.

Helped that Dr. Banner was keeping half an eye on the very big man with the gun, Butler thought, hiding a smirk. A slight shift of his position was all it took to draw the scientist’s eyes to him, and away from any stray glimmers of blue-gold light.

*I just hope Fowl Sr. stays busy keeping the crowd calm.*

Time was the enemy now, Butler knew, glancing at the lobby security personnel as they swarmed out from behind the main desk, adding their own persuasive presence to Fowl Sr.’s efforts to keep people calm and out of danger. Artemis was not a trained warlock, no matter how much he’d practiced these past days. The longer he was handling the wounded, the more chance he’d slip, and move from controlled light healing to full-out emergency measures. Handling the fallout from that would be difficult if it was his father, and worse if it were a stranger-

Even in the lights, the alarms, and the chaos, an odd movement caught Butler’s eye. Black helmet. Black backpack. A green jacket with subtle lighter green fluorescent stripes, meant to flash warning on dark streets. Most likely occupation: bike messenger.

*Why is he going toward the security desk?*

“Aaand... Doombot conga!” the Human Torch crowed.

*Crash. Skreeeeech. Clunk.*

Tony caught the fireball-welded pile of robots with a pair of repulsor blasts; one straight on, one reflected off Cap’s shield. The hot pile of metal clattered to already broken asphalt, only jarring nearby buildings a little bit.

*And Pepper laughed when I said the Tower had to be able to take Richter 10 quakes.* Tony touched down, raising his visor to take a gulp of city air; smoke, hot asphalt, and a stray waft of hot dogs. *Who’s laughing now?*

Cap walked toward him, looking almost as tired as Tony felt. “Everyone okay? Sound off.”

“Hawkeye, clear.” The archer was shaking his hand out on a nearby roof, quiver almost empty.

“Widow, likewise.” Natasha blurred out of the smoke, head tilted toward the wail of incoming ambulances.

“Coulson, clear.” The agent was only a little smoke-stained, corralling a slightly dazed pair of cops and making sure they didn’t wander into searing-hot metal.

“Iron Man, clear,” Tony stated, eyeing the Torch as the Fantastic Four’s resident hothead put his flames out and did an Ali shuffle. “Annoyed, but clear.”

“Annoyed?” Johnny Storm flicked back blond hair, all but rolling his eyes. “Hey, you called, I came.”

“Yes you did, a little less flamethrower and a little more welding torch would have been nice,” Tony said testily. Why, *why* did they have to deal with one of the insane people who actually enjoyed being a superhero?
“Follow up later,” Cap said firmly. “Captain America, clear. Bruce?”

“The sooner the paramedics get in here, the better,” Bruce’s voice came over the comm. “But we kind of have a... situation.”

He’d never seen a regular human dangle someone else upside-down by their belt, Bruce reflected, keeping pressure on a hapless janitor’s forearm wound as Butler held a bike messenger’s head firmly above the floor. It was kind of impressive. Even more so given the totally unfazed look on the bodyguard’s face as his captive cursed, thrashed, and otherwise tried to bite Butler’s kneecaps.

Artemis flattened down a small bandage on a gum-chewing secretary’s ankle, granting her a polite nod before stripping off his latex gloves and dropping them into Bruce’s biohazard box. “Ah. The subtle part of the assault.” Standing, the teenager shrugged. “Or as subtle as a man who gallivants about in medieval armor gets, at least. Keep an eye out for needles. Supposedly Doom thinks he has a sense of humor.”

Butler gave his captive a gentle shake, that rattled the man’s teeth. “This would go easier for you if you’d just hold still.”

“Let go of me, you mick cowpóg! I know my rights!”

“If I let go of you,” Butler’s tone was even and unruffled as a placid lake, “it will be to drop you on your head. Hold. Still.”

Bruce shook his head, glancing about for anyone else who needed bandaging. For the amount of shattered glass and metal that’d hit the street, there was a surprising lack of critical injuries. _How can anyone be so calm when they’re being violent?_

Though what really pricked the hairs on his neck was the two Fowls’ reaction to Butler’s calm violence. Mr. Fowl was just watching, mildly interested as Tony supervising engineers putting together a new design. Artemis... was _intent_.

_Black Widow about to interrogate a prisoner intent_. Bruce shuddered. _Teenagers shouldn’t be this scary._

“Oh, I was trying to hide from those awful robots!” the messenger stammered.

“Okay.” Iron Man’s voice cut through the rising babble in the lobby. “Would someone like to tell me what you’ve got against bike messengers?”

“He was going the wrong way,” Butler said mildly.

“If I let go of you,” Butler’s tone was even and unruffled as a placid lake, “it will be to drop you on your head. Hold. Still.”

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_Black Widow about to interrogate a prisoner intent_. Bruce shuddered. _Teenagers shouldn’t be this scary._

“You were going the wrong way,” Butler said mildly.

“That happens a lot.” Still suited up, Iron Man stalked over broken glass, holding out a gauntleted hand.

Without so much as a shrug, Butler handed him over. “He was heading for the security desk.”

“I was trying to hide from those awful robots!” the messenger stammered.

“If you search him I believe you will find a flash drive, or possibly some other data transfer device,” Artemis stated. “I’d advise checking its contents on a stand-alone computer. The most innocent possibility is a Trojan horse.”

“Artemis,” Mr. Fowl murmured.

“It is the most likely scenario,” Artemis said coolly, as the rest of the Avengers drifted in. “Sending
robots to wreak havoc in New York for no reason but pique is a hideous waste of resources. Doom had to have ulterior motives. Avengers Tower has a very robust data security system. The easiest way to get past its outer layers would be physical access. The real question is, what do you have that Doom wants?’’

“Artemis."

The kid freaks even his own father out, Bruce reflected, waving in the arriving paramedics. Wonderful... what is he doing now?

The teenager was staring at the biker Tony still held, expression hidden by mirrored sunglasses. But Bruce could diagnose tense shoulders when he saw them, and after watching his teammates fight Artemis’ quick step sideways was as good as a shout of, getting back where help can cover me.

What did he see?

“Hey. Hey!” The messenger started thrashing again, face red with the effort. “Put me down! I got to get a package up to the twentieth floor!”

That’s not the same person!

Having the Hulk in his head gave Bruce some dubious advantages. He knew what a personality shift looked like. He’d seen it in the mirror. “Agent Coulson! Take him into custody, now!”

“Father, please. The blood’s not mine.”

Heading into Foaly’s ops room at way too early in the morning, Holly stopped cold in the doorway. Artemis. In trouble, from the sounds of it. He’d just left Ireland hours ago, how could he be in trouble so soon?

What am I thinking? It’s Artemis.

Foaly waved her in, finger to his lips. Artemis must be using his communicator, then. Meaning they didn’t want sound going back the other way.

Holly shut the door behind her, and looked at the picture Foaly was getting through Artemis’ iris-cam. Some very large office building, from the looks of it. Shattered glass, stray papers, and various shattered pieces of furniture and ornamental plant pots were everywhere. Paramedics were checking over bandaged people, and carting some off on wheeled cots. And there were far too many spots of drying blood.

Avengers Tower, Foaly typed fast, bringing up a 3-D model of the skyscraper and a couple of muted live feeds from news helicopters and roving reporters. Looks like Fowl Sr. managed to get them there just in time for a Doom robot assault.

Holly rolled her eyes, and typed back, You’re the tech genius. Can’t you come up with some way to scan for Artemis’ trouble magnet? We need that thing removed.

Oh, hah, Foaly snorted. You’d be bored out of your skull in a week. Me, on the other hand....

“Looks like the luggage made it.” Butler came into view with Artemis’ suitcase in hand, followed by a few nervous young men in suits he’d apparently pressed into carrying the rest of it. “Shall we head upstairs, Sir? If everyone’s fine.”
Unfamiliar hands were taking Artemis’ pulse. The paramedic pulled back into visual range, sighing. “Well, you seem to be all right.” The man didn’t sound all too happy about that. “Mr. Fowl? I can give you the names of some crisis—”

“If the word counselor passes your lips, I assure you, you shall regret it,” Artemis said icily. “The last six ones I dealt with found pressing reasons to be employed somewhere else. Anywhere else. I hear two are responding to therapy quite well, though.”

“Thank you, Mr. O’Reilly, I’ll keep that in mind,” Fowl Sr. said dryly. “Come on, then. If you’re not hurt, we may as well leave these good people to their work.” He headed for the elevators, back stiff.

Holly winced.

Worse than you think, Foaly typed. Look at the stains on them. They were all too close to the action.

Which meant half Artemis’ icy temper had to be panic that two of the people he cared most about in the world had almost gotten killed. Again. Ouch.

Though something didn’t fit. Artemis wouldn’t contact Section Eight surreptitiously just because of a human terrorist attack. What was she missing?

The young suits dropped the luggage in the elevator, and the doors closed. Leaving Artemis, Butler, and Fowl Sr. temporarily unseen... by human eyes.

“Artemis Fowl II,” Fowl Sr. began.

“What, am I to be scolded for honesty when that errant messenger called Butler a cowpóg and got away with it?”


Beside her, Foaly was swearing soundlessly.

“Odd fellow. Did you get a picture, Butler?” Artemis went on, almost casually. “I want to be sure we never run into him again.”

“I did.” Butler held up a cell phone, showing Iron Man gripping a thin human bike messenger in green and black. “Wish I’d had the chance to get a shot of his eyes. Might have been helpful to check his pupils, know if he was on something.”

Check his pupils. Artemis thinks the man was mesmerized. Holly let out a huff of breath. His father was called in for a purely human consultation, and there’s some kind of criminal fairy activity going on? No wonder Artemis is worried.

“That doesn’t excuse your behavior, young man,” Fowl Sr. said severely. “Mr. O’Reilly had a job to do, and listening to your apology would have wasted valuable time others might have needed. But I did note his unit and hospital, and after this is over—”

“You could have died,” Artemis said softly. “We are here to visit New York on what you claim is a consultation, and you could have died.” The image shifted a hair; Holly could imagine Artemis’ cold shrug. “For people who claim to protect the world from the likes of Victor von Doom, the Avengers have not impressed me with their ability to manage the danger to innocent bystanders.”

Foaly stifled a snicker at innocent.
Holly narrowed her eyes. *Manage the danger, eh?*

*Iron Man had the suspect in that picture,* she typed. *We’d better check with Artemis before anyone sends Recon up to do a grab and probe.*

Foaly wrinkled his nose at her. *We don’t need the Mud Boy’s permission to-*

She clamped one hand over his. *Did you or did you not read those files on the Avengers? If they’ve still got the suspect, this could be a bigger snail than anyone in Recon or Retrieval can pop. Information. We need it.*

Fowl Sr. sighed, shifting on his prosthetic foot as if it pained him. “I could have died? Artemis, do you have any idea who you were helping to pass out bandages?”

“I do,” Artemis said simply. “From what I have researched, Dr. Banner’s alter ego is not his fault. What he does knowing it exists, however, is his responsibility. He was not in physical danger, and he appears to have the necessary concern for others of any first responder. I deemed it unlikely that he would transform whilst he had patients to care for. If he had, we would have simply vacated the area. The risk was acceptable.” Artemis’ tone went very dry. “Given that we intended to room in the same building as the Hulk in the first place.”

Fowl Sr. was rubbing at his forehead as if he’d just noticed the incoming headache. “I think we should wash up, before I talk to Mr. Stark.” He hesitated. “You look cold.”

“There were a great many injuries,” Artemis said neutrally. “I suppose it’s fortunate so many weren’t as bad as they first appeared.”

*Oh, you cool, caring idiot,* Holly thought fondly. *You’d better be studying that introductory healing manual or I’ll thump it off your skull. Or let Butler thump it. The last thing we need is you keeling over because you tried to help too much.*

But she flashed Foaly a thumbs-up. Artemis had a full load of Section Eight equipment. If he and Butler couldn’t find a minute of privacy to slip in an earpiece so they could talk, she didn’t know them.

*Now we’ll get some answers.*

“You do realize my father is being framed.”

About to speak, Phil paused, and took a second look at the two Fowls sitting down in his office. Fowl Sr. was holding back a sigh. Butler had an utterly neutral expression, standing against the wall in the perfect position to toss his principal to the floor and shoot anything that dared come near them. And Artemis....

The teenager was as poised in his chair as Butler, even if he meant to pounce verbally instead of physically. The instinct was the same: protect, and *attack.*

*This must be what Tony would have been like when he was fifteen,* Phil reflected, taking notes. *If Tony was used to having a trained bodyguard to back him up.*

“No one is framing anyone,” Fowl Sr. said confidently. “We’re only trying to determine how illicit cargo appeared aboard the *Grace O’Malley.*”

“A wreck which has lain at the bottom of the Mediterranean for eleven years,” Artemis stated,
waving his hand as if to flick the matter away. “Anyone with access to deep-sea diving equipment might well have tampered with the remains. If these so-called Avengers or Doom did not do so themselves. And that completely discounts the most likely scenario: that one or more of the Grace’s crew were not so honest as they purported to be, and either altered the manifests or simply looked the other way as something illegal was loaded.” Mirrored lenses glanced at his father. “These were American weapons, you are in the headquarters of the man whose company likely provided them in the first place, and you believe all they want is mere information? At the very least, you should have a lawyer.”

Phil leaned back in his chair, letting some of his interest show in his gaze. “That’s a valid concern, Master Fowl,” he acknowledged. “Mr. Fowl, if you’d like to call someone-”

Fowl Sr. rested his hands on his lap, shoulders straight. “I have nothing to hide.”

Except the fact that your son wants to grab you, take off, and not come back to New York until you’re willing to protect yourself, Phil thought wryly.

“I will grant that at the time, some cargo on the Grace O’Malley may not have listed all the proper import and export fees,” Fowl Sr. stated. “But even in my darkest hours, Agent Coulson, I was never so foolish as to deal in weapons. Off-label caviar was almost as profitable, and far less likely to draw the sort of official attention that ends in armed boarding parties.”

Phil didn’t let his eyes narrow, no matter how much he wanted to. It was true that Fowl Sr. had never, to Interpol’s knowledge, gone any further than what the Irish docks might call “a bit of the rough”. But he’d never been quite as innocent as he was implying here, either.

Which is part of why Artemis is panicking, Phil judged. Well - concerned, not panicked. If he panicked, the next thing I’d probably be thinking is “what hit me?”

Because while he might be a highly trained SHIELD agent, Butler was a highly trained bodyguard. The skill set was different.

Someone needs to turn down the tension in this room. And it’ll have to be me.

“Then Master Fowl’s suggestion makes a lot of sense,” Phil stated, waving his pen toward Artemis. “Who would want to frame your father?”

The teenager looked slightly less coiled. “Oh, Agent Coulson, I could give you a file.”

“Good,” Phil nodded. “I’ll trade you.”

It was a flicker of tense muscles, but Phil caught it. Oh damn. He didn’t expect me to believe him. He didn’t even expect me to hear it.

Which said his agents in place around the Fowls hadn’t caught half of the problems in the family. Not good. “I expect Britva is near the top of the list?”

“He would have the resources,” Artemis nodded slightly. “A trade for what?”

“What were you doing anywhere near Britva?” Fowl Sr. cut in.

“I’ve never been anywhere near Britva, Father.” Artemis gave him a look askance. “However, he does keep an eye on master Russian chess players. The better to know who to blackmail out of prize money. I imagine Agent Coulson is referring to the rumors that Britva has been quite annoyed none of his contacts have provided him with a better handle on any of Stefan Bashkir’s relatives.”
When he got his heart to settle back down, Phil decided, he was going to be impressed. In one breath Artemis had waved his alias like a red flag, provided a perfectly plausible reason for the Russian Mafiya boss to have a nasty monetary interest in that alias, and hinted that Britva would have a further interest in Fowl Sr. because of Artemis. Without one word about kidnappings, ransom, or a frozen harbor in Murmansk. And the elder Fowl hadn’t so much as twitched.

_Fowl Sr. claimed he didn’t remember anything between the Fowl Star leaving Dublin and waking up in the hospital in Helsinki,_ Phil thought, chilled. _We thought he was covering for Artemis. For whatever improbable subterfuge, ability, or technology his son must have used to pull off that rescue. But if he’s not even flinching... oh god._

_He wasn’t covering for Artemis. He_ doesn’t remember.

Not the _Fowl Star’s_ encounter with a Stinger missile. Not three years of being kept hostage by Russian goons who would have been careful to keep a source of money physically intact, but otherwise unrestrained in their actions. Not being ransomed. Or _rescued._

_Artemis saved you, and you don’t remember it. And he hasn’t breathed a word to contradict what you think you know._

He’d known the situation was bad, Phil reflected numbly. He hadn’t imagined it was quite _this_ bad. “You are aware that Britva doesn’t like you, Mr. Fowl.”

“Yes, that bit with the cola didn’t work out,” Fowl Sr. allowed. “I haven’t tried doing business in Russia since, though, so I can’t see what further animus he might bear me. Certainly nothing that would justify the expense of deep-sea scene tampering. Especially with these sorts of materials. Weapons of Stark’s design are not cheap.” His gaze bored into Artemis. “What I’d like to know is how you knew there were weapons in the first place.”

_Artemis didn’t turn a hair. “I ran a search, of course.”_

_If by search you mean all-out hacking assault, Phil thought wryly. I think we’ve found Jarvis’ mystery visitor. Although if that had been Artemis - how had he realized the Tower mainframe was inhabited?_

_“Without asking me?” Fowl Sr. raised an eyebrow._

_“You were busy.”_

_There. Phil leaned forward, catching the faintest tremor of old hurt under that level tone. That’s the key._

_You were busy, so he took steps to protect both of you._

For three years Artemis had taken care of the Fowl family’s affairs. And even after he’d been rescued, his father had apparently failed to convince Artemis that he could stop.

_Or if he did, well, Artemis just got back from being held against his will, Phil reflected. He’s going to be trying to control everything he can get his hands on. The last thing he wants is another surprise._

_All right, then._

_“Here.” Phil held up a flash drive, then pushed it lightly across the desk toward Artemis. “This is_
what we know. I’d appreciate it if you would find out if any of that connects with recent enemies of your father. Or of yours.” He didn’t let his voice soften; Artemis wouldn’t believe that, not yet. But practical - yes. That might work. “You look dead on your feet, and I think your father and I are going to be spending a lot of time going over everything about the Grace’s crew that didn’t make it into official files. If you want to tackle part of this you might as well do it curled up with a computer.”

Expressionless, Artemis picked up the drive. Butler cleared his throat. “The messenger?”

“In custody, being interrogated,” Phil informed him. By Natasha; which meant he’d be talking sooner rather than later. She probably wouldn’t even have to lay a hand on him. “I’ll let you know if he was an active crook or just a dupe. In the meantime, I’ve been assured by my people that the doors on your suite lock from the inside.”

Butler gave him a subtle, polite nod, and Phil wanted to hit something. Damn it, for all his scary brains and undoubtedly criminal behavior, Artemis was a fifteen-year-old kid. A kid probably two steps from out on his feet, if Butler was that willing to get them both out of sight. A kid who flat-out wouldn’t collapse, no matter what it cost him; because as far as Artemis knew he might be the only thing standing between SHIELD and the law tearing his family apart.

Going to spend a few hours in the gym beating up practice dummies. Later.

That, and reminding himself that this was a very dangerous fifteen-year-old with a very dangerous bodyguard and currently unknown capabilities. Sympathy was a natural human response, but it had better be tempered with caution. And possibly tongs. Jon Spiro had apparently thought he had Artemis figured out, after all. The ex-multi-billionaire would have come out in fewer pieces if he’d tangled with a tree shredder.

“If that’s acceptable to you, Mr. Fowl?” Phil went on smoothly. “I know Mr. Stark intends to join our discussion of the wreck, and, well, sometimes his language isn’t something I’d like to inflict on anyone under legal drinking age.” Sorry, Tony.

“You were a bit under the weather on the plane, Son,” Fowl Sr. said gently. “I know you like to keep a stiff upper lip, but what we saw in the lobby....”

“I’ve seen worse, Father.” Artemis stood even as Butler glanced toward the door, a moment before it opened to let Tony in a fresh business suit stalk through, followed by Steve in street clothes. “And Agent Coulson may not have the last word on the disposition of our forces. Fowls have a reputation. I’m certain Mr. Stark has as much intention of inviting me to wander his private demesnes as he would Glorfindel, Thorin, or Chiron.”

“Movies?” Tony smirked, jamming his hands into his jacket pockets. “My god, there is something you do like a normal kid. Well, if any elf, dwarf, or centaur friends of yours show up, I’ll be happy to have them over too....”

That’s a grin, Phil realized, eyeing that tiny twitch of Artemis’ lips as Tony trailed off. Why is he grinning?

“You,” Tony said firmly, “are evil. Well-disguised, but definitely evil.”

Steve facepalmed, obviously wondering how he’d pry Tony’s foot from his mouth this time. Fowl Sr. stomped to his feet. “Mr. Stark!”

“No harm done, Father.” A vampiric smirk played over Artemis’ face. “Mr. Stark simply realized
that, for reasons best known to God and Hollywood, Glorfindel the Elf-lord, rider of Asfaloth, never appeared in the movies. Meaning he’s outed himself as that most dreaded of geeks: one who has actually read the Trilogy. I don’t doubt but that he has a Sindarin lexicon on his nightstand."

**Geeks? Steve mouthed to Phil. Tolkien’s for geeks?**

Phil smiled ruefully. Keeping Steve in a 40's-era style apartment wasn’t healthy; dumping him straight into the 21st century hadn’t seemed the best way to tackle things either. Tolkien had seemed like a good idea. The man had lived through World War II, and written in part to deal with it. Who better to help someone who was just coming to grips with the fact that the War was over?

“Oh, and you don’t?” Tony smirked back at Artemis.

“Of course I do. Conlangs are quite intriguing when one does comparative linguistics. I doubt Sindarin is much help to a roboticist.” Artemis swept Tony a formal bow. “*No in elenath hilar nan hâd gin.*”

Butler wasn’t quite grinning as he followed Artemis out. But the subtle amusement was there, in the easy stride as he passed two Avengers without ever slowing down.

“Okay, that was actually polite, if snarky,” Tony mused, as Steve shot a suspicious look after the retreating pair. “I’ll lend you the translation dictionary if you want to check later, honest.”

“Thanks, I’d like that,” Steve admitted. Glanced at Phil. “That was... strange.”

“Strange,” Fowl Sr. mused, leaning on the back of his chair. “Well, that’s one of the politer things people have called my Arty. He’s a bright boy, but - well, he never seems to know how to get along with people.”

“Color me surprised,” Tony said lightly. “Or, you know, not. The only way a kid can handle keeping a business afloat when he’s up against grownups is hit hard, hit first, and never give an inch. Doesn’t exactly give you the Queen’s manners. That was actually pretty nice. In an outrageously geeky way.” He nodded at Phil. “Whatever you did, keep it up.”

“Gave him information on what we know so far about the weapons,” Phil stated.

“Oh, thank god. Yes. Good.” Tony let out an explosive *whew*. “The more he knows, the less he’ll try to hack my systems. Which, by the way, I would be very happy if he decides not to do that. I read that file you’ve got on Spiro. Ouch.” He grinned at Fowl Sr. “Two point eight *billion* donated to Amnesty International. I’m surprised the shock didn’t do Spiro in on the spot.”

“Roughly two point six, actually,” Phil corrected, watching Fowl Sr. carefully. He could ignore Steve choking for the moment. He lived with Tony; eventually he might get used to numbers with billions after them. “We think Artemis took a finder’s fee.”

His father paled. “You think my Arty stole over two hundred million dollars?”

Phil cleared his throat. This wasn’t going to go over well. “Actually, S.H.I.E.L.D and Interpol’s best estimates are that your son is worth quite a bit more than that.” Somewhere in the range of nine to fourteen billion; no one he’d talked to was willing to pin it down any closer. Some offshore accounts really were good at keeping their clients’ business quiet. “And given what Spiro tried to do to him and Butler, even Director Fury thinks the man deserved it.”

Fowl Sr. pulled himself around the chair, and sat heavily down. “We are talking about Jon Spiro, yes? Arrested five years ago now on a vast assortment of charges, none of which he managed to
skate out from under? That man used to make people disappear. Arty’s more sensible than to try to deal with a man like that.”

“Everybody screws up sometime.” Tony sat down too, words lacking their usual sarcastic edge.
“The way Phil’s files tell it, just before you got out of the hospital? Spiro wanted something Artemis had, and stuffed a London restaurant full of hitters to get it. Artemis made it out anyway. Butler almost didn’t. And like any smart kid who just realized they almost got one of their best friends killed, he made sure Spiro couldn’t do that to anyone else ever again.”

Still standing, Steve nodded to himself. Phil let himself relax, just a little. Good. He had other sets of eyes on this now. The situation was too delicate to leave to just one agent.

“He said he’d seen worse than what happened downstairs,” Fowl Sr. said, half to himself. “God be with us. Is that true?”

“I have the photos of the scene at the En Fin,” Phil said carefully. “Detective Inspector Justin Barre covered the case as a terrorist act. Which isn’t that far from the truth, given Spiro didn’t care about collateral damage.”

“Inspector Barre.” Fowl Sr. took a deep breath. “Yes, of course, that makes sense. Butler saved his life when he was a Sergeant. And Artemis always keeps track of... what is owed.” He met Phil’s gaze, eyes suddenly older. “Do I want to see these photos, Agent Coulson?”

“No sir,” Phil said quietly. “You do not.”

Fowl Sr.’s mouth tightened. “Bad?”

“Spiro tried to execute them both.” Phil tapped a pen with his finger, picking the best words.
“Artemis came within inches of death, and he knows it.” Careful. Be very careful, here. “Telling him not to worry about you assisting a SHIELD investigation won’t work, Mr. Fowl. You can’t unlearn a lesson like that. Artemis knows life is fragile; he knows he can lose the people he cares about. And given he managed to get Spiro to apparently frame himself for various felonies, he can easily imagine SHIELD doing that to you.” Phil shrugged, slow and deliberate. “I have to admit, we could do it. We wouldn’t do it; Director Fury may be ruthless when it comes to protecting the world, but we try to stay within the law whenever possible. But the fact remains that we could.”

“And the kid just got back from being kidnapped,” Tony said, almost lightly. “You don’t get over that in a month, either. Right now he’s on full-tilt red alert, fight or flight, the works. If he didn’t have Butler right there he’d be a puff of smoke. Poof. Gone.” Tony leaned forward. “He’s scared. He’s got it covered so good I bet even Phil’s having a tough time seeing it. But if the kid’s feeling anything like I did back from Afghanistan, right now all he wants is to find a hidey-hole at the top of a sniper tower.”

“He didn’t tell me,” Fowl Sr. said quietly. “I’m his father. I’ve told him he can tell me anything. Why didn’t he tell me?”

“If it helps,” Tony shrugged, “took me a while to say anything, even to people I trusted. And I’m supposedly legally an adult. Though don’t try and tell Pepper that. It... it stabs you somehow. Deep inside. Give him some time.”

The ex-crimelord weighed Tony in his gaze, and nodded. “I appreciate your forthrightness, Mr. Stark.”

Which isn’t the same as believing it, Phil thought, trying not to sigh. This is going to be a very tough
“At least now I can see why Arty was snarling in the lobby,” Fowl Sr. mused. “If he was present when Butler was seriously hurt, that must have been - well. Painful.” He smiled a bit. “Although at least Butler’s instruction in first aid has not gone to waste. Quite the little trooper, wasn’t he?” A sigh. “And then he had to throw off bravery to make that little speech and wave our criminal past like a flag. Honestly, I hear that teenagers these days revel in embarrassing their parents, but why on earth? What am I doing wrong?”

Phil’s tablet beeped; he scanned the quick message from Natasha, then flipped it around so Tony could read it. “Oof,” Tony muttered. “Thank you, Widow.”

Steve moved to take a glance at the tablet himself. “Um. Does that program name mean what I think it means?”

“Death, chaos, destruction? Oh yeah,” Tony said lightly, turning it back toward Phil. “We need to thank Butler. And Artemis. A lot.”

Phil nodded, and looked back at Fowl Sr. “Actually, sir, you may be doing a lot right.” Swiping off any of the more classified stuff from view, he handed his tablet over.

Fowl Sr. read the email, and drew in a sharp breath.

“He wasn’t trying to embarrass you,” Phil said steadily. “He was being honest. He used his reputation - your reputation - to make sure we’d pay attention. And he was right.”

“There really was malware on that man’s drive,” Fowl Sr. said numbly. “How did he know?”

“Artemis is a hacker, Mr. Fowl,” Phil observed. “And he is very, very good at what he does.” He laid his hands on the desk. “And so were you, when you were in the smuggling business. That’s why SHIELD accepted your offer to provide company covers years ago; that’s why we asked you to visit now. So. Given what we all know, is there anything more you can tell us?”

Fowl Sr. stared at the daunting email a moment more, then sighed, and handed Phil’s tablet back. “About a wreck that’s been out of my mind for almost eleven years?” he said wryly. “I’ve searched every file I still have, and a few Artemis pulled up from storage that I thought were gone for good. I wasn’t able to find anything suspicious on the Grace’s manifest or in the crew backgrounds. At least nothing more suspicious than usual, given freighter crews. My best guess was along the same lines as Artemis’; the most likely explanation for the presence of those weapons is that one or a small group of the crew decided to arrange a private deal.” He tapped the desk thoughtfully. “If that’s the case, I want the ones responsible found. If we can. The first step toward that would be identifying where the cargo was before the ship foundered. Do you have any photos of the wreck in situ?”

“We have some.” Phil downloaded the appropriate files onto another flash drive, and handed it over.

“Then I’ll see what I can do.” Rising, Fowl Sr. nodded. “Good day, gentlemen. Forgive me if I hope the rest of our stay here won’t be as... interesting.”

“Believe me, that makes all of us,” Tony muttered as the door closed. “Phil? You have a look. It’s not a good look.”

And if Tony saw that... well, Phil hoped Tony knew him better than Fowl Sr. He took a deep breath, and thumped his head on polished wood. *Damn it, just once, I deserve this.*

“Not good look, check,” Tony muttered. “But not something blowing up. Okay.”
“What’s wrong?” Steve asked quietly.

Phil braced his hands on the desk, and sat back up. The team didn’t mind if he wasn’t entirely professional all the time, but this was their business. “He doesn’t know.”

“He?” Tony frowned at the closed door. “I’m guessing you don’t mean about the cargo. At the moment I’m willing to believe none of us know the whole story about that. Yet.”

“No, definitely not the weapons,” Phil admitted. “About Murmansk. And everything leading up to Murmansk. The three years he was gone, everything Artemis had to do to keep the family estate safe and in the black, whatever Artemis did to rescue him - Fowl Sr. doesn’t remember any of it.” He grimaced. “And Artemis hasn’t told him.”

“Right,” Steve said, half to himself. Found his own seat, and looked back at them. “That doesn’t surprise me.”

Phil blinked. Tony leaned casually back, dark brows climbing.

“Bruce said that mutant abilities can wake up under stress,” Steve went on. “I did some reading. You’ve got some really strange stuff in the archives... anyway. Mutant powers, magic, some brilliant scientist’s brainstorm - it doesn’t really matter. You say, and SHIELD says, whatever Artemis did to rescue his father wasn’t normal.” Steve glanced at the door. “You heard Mr. Fowl. He thought people calling his own son strange were being polite. He doesn’t want Artemis to be strange. He wants him to be normal. Every father- well, most fathers do.”

“Thanks,” Tony said under his breath.

“But Artemis isn’t normal. He’s a genius,” Steve went on. “I don’t know if you and Bruce are typical geniuses, but you don’t exactly blend in.”

“I object to being a typical anything.” But Tony shrugged, without a sarcastic edge to his smile. “Being normal sucks. And it doesn’t work. All it takes is one second thinking about something else, and you’re off and running about the gazillionth line of code that has to go right, Or Else. In Bruce’s case, gamma ray vectors, or some icky bit of biochemistry. Trying to blend in with regular people is like hopping on a tightrope you can’t see. Splat.”

“So even if he didn’t have - whatever he’s got, Artemis wouldn’t be normal,” Steve nodded. “But he does. And he used it, and Mr. Fowl doesn’t want to know about it. Of course he’s going to hide it.”

He gave Tony a curious look. “You were being....”

“Amazingly polite and full of subtle charm?” Tony grinned.

“I was going to say sympathetic,” Steve said wryly. “Subtle?”

“Hey, the kid outed himself as one of the nerdiest of nerds just to one-up my impressive levels of geekery,” Tony shrugged. “If this were an SF convention he’d get a standing ovation for sheer chutzpah. Not to mention, may all stars shine upon your path. That’s not just polite. That’s hey, you’re one of the good guys, good luck hitting Sauron where it hurts. I don’t get that much.” He leaned forward, one hand wrapped over a fist. “Plus Bruce says the kid’s the one who got the trauma station started down in the lobby. That’s not just chutzpah. That’s guts. And the brains to swallow your damn ego and leave the heroing to the guys in metal suits and tight leather. I’ve got employees down there who are going to go home instead of to the hospital. Or the morgue. And can I say Doom sucks? Because yes. He does.” Tony’s fingers gripped his fist, knuckles white... then relaxed. Just a little. He glanced at Phil. “Bruce should be up in a minute, he said he wanted to check
something with the hospitals that got our people. That’s what you wanted to hear, right? Doom is an
egotistic bastard, full stop, not changing that. But Artemis isn’t. Charming abrasiveness aside, it
seems like there might be a decent kid under there. And that’s what you wanted to know.”

“It is,” Phil acknowledged, as the door opened on a very thoughtful gamma ray scientist. “Bruce?
They said you had questions for the hospitals.”

Bruce nodded, thumb tapping a pencil against the clipboard he had in one hand before he shut the
door and grabbed another chair. “First, Clint says he’s going to spot for Natasha while she talks to
Mr. Evans. She has more questions.” He glanced at them all. “Apparently he doesn’t remember
anything from about an hour before the attack to when he woke up being assaulted by Iron Man.”

“Well, that’s convenient- wait, me?” Tony said, incredulous. “What about the walking mountain?”

“Armor’s more impressive,” Steve said wryly. “It’s... flashy.”

“I don’t think impressive had anything to do with it,” Bruce said grimly. “Right after you took him
from Butler, I saw - something. Artemis saw it too, and he got the hell out of grabbing range.” He
looked at Phil. “It was like an alternate personality coming forward. Or something. Evans says he
doesn’t remember anything about the flash drive, and Widow believes him.”

Meaning the odds were fairly high the man was telling the truth. Or something he believed to be true.
“That leaves a lot of ground open,” Phil admitted. “Telepathic manipulation, hypnotic suggestion,
ensorcelment-”

“Oh, please, not more magic,” Tony groaned.

“It doesn’t sound like Doom, though.” Steve shook his head. “I hate to say it, but she’d better keep at
him. This sounds like someone subtle got involved. And those are always the scary ones.”

“Maybe Natasha should save some time for questioning our guests,” Bruce stated. “I asked Jarvis,
and... well, tell them.”

“Based on conversations I overheard as the Fowls were retreating, Sir, I would judge that whatever
happened to Mr. Evans, Artemis and Butler have seen something similar before,” Jarvis stated.
“They passed it off to Mr. Fowl as suspected drug use. But their vocal stress and gazes indicate both
of them knew they were talking about something else.”

“Knew they were, or just thought they were?” Steve pounced.

“In this case I would say thought, Captain,” Jarvis said judiciously. “There were elements of
uncertainty.”

“And the difference is?” Tony prompted.

“Like you said. I think he is a good kid. Even if he hides it. He pretty much said he tried to hack the
Tower, right? If he knew what was wrong with Evans, he’d find a way to say something.” Steve
nodded toward the clipboard. “So what did the hospitals have to say?”

“Oh, everybody’s going to make it,” Bruce said bluntly. “No one who got dragged into the lobby
died. Not one.”

Phil sat up, intrigued, and watched Steve and Tony trade worried looks. “Congratulations?” Steve
offered. “We know you’re good.”
Bruce stared back at him, and waved at Phil’s tablet. “Jarvis? Show them what we figured out.”

The screen lit up with a montage of images. Phil grimaced at bloody stills from the lobby; security footage, clipped and cropped. Strange, how Jarvis seemed to have arranged them in groups of three or four-

*Oh.*

Bruce reached over to tap the first set of three; one of the unluckier security guards, a wet gash staining one of his uniformed thighs a darker black. “Here he is, before I’ve had a chance to look at him.” A second picture, Butler’s bulk blocking the camera angle from knee to waist. “That’s when Artemis goes after him.” The third; Butler only visible in the very edge of the image as Bruce moved in with his kit. “I get there, I find a nasty surface gash. It’s bad, it needs stitches, but it’s not an arterial bleed. Only the amount of blood that’s there, it should have been.” He stared at the images as if he’d like to burn through them. “Similar thing happens here, and here, and this poor guy should have been almost cut to ribbons. That was a white shirt, according to the ER.”

*Paranormal abilities confirmed,* Phil realized. *I didn’t expect that.*

“Okay, so the kid helped people,” Tony shrugged. “Guess we know now why he made sure he was in the middle of the triage. Neat piece of work. Smart. So why are you not happy?”

Phil hid a frown. He hadn’t quite caught that, but Bruce’s tense stance could be read that way.

“I’m not upset that he healed people,” Bruce said deliberately.

*Yes, you are,* Phil thought. *The question is, why?* Bruce’s history of injuries pre-and post-Hulk was probably enough cause for any man to be disquieted. But he suspected there were deeper reasons.

“I’m upset that he *hid* it,” Bruce went on. “He healed people and *still* left gaping wounds. Tony, your security guard’s going to need months of physical therapy after his leg heals. If Artemis could help, why did any of those people have to go to the hospital at all-”

“Because he didn’t want to end up defenseless and flat on his face,” Phil cut in, before Bruce could dig any deeper in that vein of venom. “Or dead.”

“What?” Bruce managed.

“Magic isn’t easy, and it’s not cheap.” Phil swiped the pictures off his tablet. They’d all seen enough blood for one day. “SHIELD’s been doing research ever since that mess with the Tesseract. It looks like there are reasons the Asgardians were mistaken for gods. Loki and Thor threw around more power in one fight than a normal human practitioner could raise in their *entire lives.*”

Tony quirked a brow up. “Seriously?”

“The amount Jen put into the warning wards? Teaspoon,” Phil said firmly. “One summoned lightning bolt? Try enough magic to fill a yacht.”

“And Thor was tossing those like Mardi Gras beads,” Tony reflected. “Ouch.”

Phil nodded. “There are seven billion people on this planet, and our best guess is that maybe three of them have the power to match a Sorcerer Supreme like Strange.” He met Bruce’s suddenly shifty eyes. “On top of that, from when Strange drops off the map and shows up again, we can estimate he had at least a decade of intensive magical training. Artemis has probably only had what he could figure out through trial and error. He managed to patch an artery, and you want him to sew the whole
leg back together? You’re asking for a kid with a chemistry kit to do gene splicing. And who knows what happened to Artemis in Limbo.”

Bruce grimaced, and looked away.

“Limbo is the real problem, isn’t it,” Steve said quietly. “We don’t know what happened to him there. And if he’s not telling his own father, how are we going to find out if he’s hurt? If he needs help?”

“If he’s about to summon a demon horde because Doom tried to smack the Tower again?” Tony’s tone was light, if you didn’t catch the worry in dark eyes.


At least there he could give them some good news. “So far we haven’t seen any obvious warning signs,” Phil informed them. “And Butler’s keeping an eye on him for any of the more insidious effects.”

“Which are?” Tony said pointedly.

Phil started ticking them off. “Hidden bloodstone amulets, violent nightmares, avoiding sunlight, speaking a nonhuman language....”

Tony snarked. “Torture survivor, computer geek, and occasional student of Sindarin. You realize, except for the jewelry, I qualify for all of the above?”

“...Point.”

This is going to be trickier than I thought.

Chapter End Notes

“That bit with the cola” - the Fowl Star was bringing a load of soda to Russia when the Mafiya took exception to Fowl Sr. trying for a slice of the legitimate Russian market. Said displeasure was expressed with a Stinger missile. Ow.

(Sindarin) No in elenath hîlar nan hâd gîn. - May all stars shine upon your path. Go Tolkien!

No, we never hear in canon if Artemis was a Tolkien fan. However, it is canon that he compared the symbols in the Book to all known human symbols. Which would include constructed languages like Quenya and Sindarin. It’s also canon Artemis has been obsessed with fairies as long as he can remember; I’d think he would have read the books, just in case Tolkien really had found elves....
Chapter 5

“So these are the files I have,” Artemis stated, as the transfer jumped from his modified laptop to Foaly’s ultra-paranoid data buffer. “Give them a good scrubbing before you open anything. The Iron Man is known to have a sense of humor.”

“I thought you got those files from the Agent,” Foaly pointed out over the speakers.

“We did. As an associate of Iron Man’s,” Artemis replied. “I would treat any files from Holly the same, as an associate of yours.”

“Centaur paranoia wearing off on you, or do you just miss me?”

Holly. Artemis settled back into his chair, feeling the weight of the world lift a little. “One of your department’s best pilots and crack shots? I would be insane not to miss you. As Butler would put it, we had a very warm reception to this city.”

“In more ways than one,” Butler mused from his newspaper. He might not be as fluent in Gnommish as Artemis, but he could certainly follow the conversation.

“Scorching, even,” Artemis agreed. I wish I could see you.

Silly. They’d already determined that video feed would be an unnecessary risk, only reserved for emergencies. Their rooms weren’t bugged, per se, but Butler’s equipment made it clear there were video and audio pickups as part of the Tower’s security protocols. Hence their conversation was not only avoiding English, it was shooting English dark looks in alleys and planning to stab it in the back.

Ah. Violent imagery. It has been a day.

Granted, avoiding proper names in English might be annoying, but it was simple. All he’d had to do was type up an effective transliteration and send it with the translation. Easy, given he’d set up his computer to use Gnommish script the first day he’d been back on the surface; in proper left-to-right, not the antique spiraling text even the People only used for the Book anymore. Apparently the Gift of Tongues did not prevent one from script-induced headaches.

Nor supervillain-induced ones. “I must admit I would be illogically comforted to have you present,” Artemis went on. “The pretentious robot-user attacked just as we arrived. I shudder to think what might have chanced if we had not convinced my father to stop for our security package.”

“And he had a mesmerized mole,” Holly agreed. “Right. Just a coincidence.”

“I’m... not entirely certain he was mesmerized,” Artemis admitted.

Butler raised a brow. “On drugs, then?”

“No, I—” Blast. “I’m not sure.” Frond, he hated not being sure. “You weren’t on the island, you didn’t see... you didn’t feel what happened when N’zall - wasn’t in full control of the body.”

He could have heard a carrot crumb drop.

“You think he was possessed?” Holly said, very carefully.

“Is that even possible?” Artemis chafed his arms; even with the lobby a good few hours behind him,
he felt chilled. “There was a - a shift in his face. And in the sense of magic around him. It felt like that mess with N’zall and Qweffor. But in their case, there was a whole interdimensional transit gone wrong involved, and what are the odds?”

“Given the robot-user does deal in the occult,” Butler rumbled, “better than average.”

“I never thought I’d be hoping for a mesmerized human in a human-fairy evil partnership,” Foaly breathed. “What do we do?”

“Artemis, check the little red book Vinyáya slipped into your stack,” Holly said firmly. “Apparently Section Eight has records of things even nastier than Changeling Syndrome, and Qwan’s been able to confirm some of the old countermeasures are very good-”

Artemis nodded. “Rowan berries and red thread?”

Another silence. “How did you know that?” Holly asked cautiously.

“I did my research well before we met, Captain Short.” Artemis sighed. “And while I may not be proud of what I did with that research, I assure you I was thorough. Possession is one of the most malevolent magics, because it infringes directly on an innocent’s will and body. Rowan and red are traditional barriers to evil. Butler and I have made certain we carried those, and a few other things beside, ever since we first set out to read the Book.” He made himself put that guilt aside. What was done was done. He’d won, by the People’s laws, and Holly had forgiven him. Eventually.

*If I hadn’t kidnapped Holly, Foaly would have had no one to turn to when Opal sabotaged Recon and tried to take over Haven, Artemis reminded himself. So all in all, things worked out for all of us.*

“Oh, go ahead and be proud of it,” Holly said wryly. “You’re going to be Section Eight’s changeling consultant, right? This is what we’ll be paying you for.”

“Paying him!” Foaly snorted.

“Absolutely,” Holly said cheerfully. “Don’t you want to see the Council’s faces if the Wing Commander hands them the bill?”

Foaly choked, then broke into braying laughter. “That is- that-”

In the background, something started beeping.

“...Is not good, oh Frond - no you don’t, you mud-grubbing ham-handed code-slicer-!”

Artemis felt chilled. “You’re being hacked?” Granted, he’d done that to Foaly more than once, but he’d had some familiarity with fairy electronics first. Who else did?

“Someone’s definitely trying,” the centaur swore. “Gah! Stabbity stab - die already, you malicious piece of spyware, where the hell are you even....”

Artemis heard Foaly’s sucked-in breath, and knew what it had to be. “They’re piggybacking my signal.” *I’m in the Tower, the Avengers are linked to SHIELD - they must not learn of the People! Contact Jade Princess’ phone - Butler will give her a drop and time. Cutting comms now.*


*We’re alone.*

He sat still, trying to sort through the tangle of fear and fury writhing inside. Whatever the hacker had
had in mind, Foaly was on the case. And while the centaur might not be quite the unsurpassed genius
he liked to claim he was, Foaly was still a genius. Without outside communications providing a
traceable signal, the malefactor in question was just going to have to lump it, pack his electronic
bags, and flit back home. And all it had cost him was the chance to hear Holly’s voice.

_Friendly voices_, Artemis corrected himself. _I wish Father would make up his mind. Am I to have true
friends, or am I to behave in a publically acceptable manner?_

Though how anyone could keep up a polite façade when their private communications were being
spied on, even when he’d been tracking down Britva’s men to seize his father back he’d only asked
Foaly for their _phone numbers_, not their personal messages, hacking for information was one thing
but hacking out chunks of any soul’s _heart_-

“Aramis.”

A gentle warning. Artemis unclenched his fingers, trying to let the release of tension clear his mind.
The ruby winked from his communicator ring, safely off; and if there had been a tiny spark dancing
over the facets, well, corundum cast back light, did it not?

Clearing his throat, Artemis deliberately switched back to English. “It has not been a good day.”

“No,” Butler agreed.

Which, of course, was when a knock came at their door.

_At least we locked it for our little conference_, Artemis sighed. _I am in no mood to deal with-_

Polished wood swung open to reveal his father, passkey still in hand.

..._Stark? You are mine._

“Wait,” Tony said skeptically, lifting light weights as Phil jumped rope in place with a look that said
he was considering using the handles as impromptu nunchuks. Across the room Steve was doing his
own version of a light workout; thank goodness he’d finally found a Kevlar variant that would let the
bags stand up to it. “You were hacked?”

And my opponent’s counterattack was more along the lines of very aggressive firewalls.”

“How,” Phil’s rope whipped around, “exactly,” another crazy crossover, “do you inadvertently hack
someone?”

Tony eyed the moving agent, and briefly considered muttering nursery rhymes. Only the last time
he’d done that, Phil had challenged him to last ten minutes with the rope. Those had been painful
minutes. Also awkward. Which was worse.

“You are aware Artemis has been broadcasting since he left the lobby?” Jarvis stated.

“No.”

“Ah.”

Ah, indeed, and damn but the kid was a _sly_ little brat, Tony thought. “You might have mentioned
this earlier.”
“Prior to a few minutes ago, the signal seemed to be similar to a regular cell phone, and nothing of sensitive import had been disclosed,” the AI declared. “I only moved in once it was clear Artemis was transferring SHIELD data to an outside party. Agent Coulson, does anyone in Otherplace use computers?” Jarvis paused. “Or, I should rather say, is it possible to access Otherplace by any technological means?”

*Thump. Thump.* “Not that I know of. What happened?”

“I followed the data.” Jarvis pulled up video of Artemis’ suite on a nearby monitor. “You may wish to put the rope down. It is short.”

“Well, that’s not Sindarin.” Tony let the weights down, watching Artemis actually *relax* as he delivered Phil’s hard-earned files into unknown hands. The kid was curled up in a chair, hands and laptop monitor out of any direct camera view or reflective surface, and that slight bend of pale lips was probably as close to a smile as his cold face could manage.

“It is not,” Jarvis confirmed, as Butler tossed a few words into the conversation. “I cannot, in fact, identify it as any known language on record. I have two unknown voices; one male, one female. They and Artemis speak fluently. Butler is more hesitant. Vocal stresses would seem to indicate that all four know each other well. Only two words in English are used: Artemis and Butler.”

“And there he’s worried,” Phil murmured, watching Artemis try to rub warmth back into his arms. “Damn. Whatever he thinks is going on is not good.”

“And it does not sound as if anyone is contradicting his observations,” Jarvis agreed. “They may be uncertain, but the body language would seem to indicate they have agreed it was possible.”

“They’re friends,” Tony muttered, listening to a horsy laugh. “I mean, listen to that, and look at them grin. Somebody cracked an inside joke-”

There was beeping. And swearing; he didn’t have to speak the language to recognize thoroughly ticked off. On the screen, Artemis sat bolt upright.

“That appears to be when my intrusion was detected by an intelligent being, rather than automatic countermeasures,” Jarvis put in briskly. “The next few seconds-”

A pale-faced teenager slammed his computer off left-handed, right thumb flicking the ruby of his ring from facing his palm to glittering at the ceiling once more.

“Transmission ended,” Jarvis said simply. “Artemis is no longer broadcasting any signal. At all.”

The video cut off.

Tony raised an eyebrow.

“The conversation switched back to English at that point,” Jarvis informed them. “Whatever he may be up to, it is my understanding that Artemis Fowl II and Butler are guests in this Tower. I have set my audio filters to flag if any non-identified words are spoken, likewise ‘magic’, ‘demon’, ‘Limbo’, and ‘Otherplace’. I have also set an alert for any unusual energy discharge. Other than that, I am applying the same protocols of courtesy I use for you, Agent Coulson. All audio and video feed is being saved, for review later only if necessary.”

“I suppose that’s the best we can do for him right now,” Phil said reluctantly. “Damn it.”

“On the bright side, Agent Coulson, at least we know he has some outside means of support,” Jarvis
pointed out.

“A means he just cut off,” Phil grumbled. “He’s exhausted, he’s clearly on territory he doesn’t consider safe, and he still shut that link down. To protect them. Which means he no longer has those resources, until he can figure out a means to contact them he considers safe. If we could just tell him we didn’t mean his friends any harm...” The agent sighed, laying his rope over one arm. “But I’m not going to lie to him. Until SHIELD can be sure he’s not going to spark another demonic invasion, I can’t promise that.”

Ouch. At least Tony could help with one thing. “Whoever he’s talking to, they’re not the demon invasion.”

The agent shot him a look askance. “You can’t be sure of that.”

“Sure, no,” Tony admitted. “Preponderance of evidence, yes. One, they’re using tech, not magic. And they’re set up for tech. You don’t put firewalls up by accident. Jarvis hacked, he got hacked back. Two, they’re here. On Earth. Already. Set up with a tech infrastructure. Or Artemis wouldn’t have contacted them that way. Three, fluent. Maybe Artemis could have had all kinds of time to learn a demon language, but Butler didn’t. Unless he got that good in under a month, Butler had to have more time. Four....” He gave Phil a long look. “When it comes to people, I trust you. Do you think Butler would be that laid back about handing over anything to whoever kidnapped the kid he’s looked after since the day he was born?”

“They who-” Phil cut himself off. “Fowl Sr.’s rescue.”

“Could not have been pulled off without help,” Tony agreed. “And if anybody helped Artemis in that mess, they probably know what he can do. Which puts them one up on us.” He caught the motion at the door, as an annoyed but satisfied redhead in tight leather stalked in. “Or maybe not. You’ve got something.”

“Evans remembers taking a package from someone with mysterious dark eyes, and a beautiful voice. Like bells,” Natasha reported. “I have him working with a sketch artist now, but I doubt we’ll be able to get much more from him. He’s too... honest.”

“Honest?” Tony said skeptically. “He’s from the Bronx.”

She almost dimpled at him. “Honest about when he’s lying. It’s almost cute. His friends probably try to get him into poker games. His real friends probably try to keep him out of them.”

“But now we have a timeframe.” Phil looked a little happier. “We can send SHIELD agents out to trace Evans’ path, and see where he might have intersected paranatural influence.”

“Send agents?” Tony folded his arms.

“Do you want to go pounding the pavement door to door?” Phil gave him a wry look. “This is what my people are good at. Let them hunt for clues, while we keep an eye out for Doom. They’ll call me if they find something.” A slight smirk. “And then you can flatten it.”

“I do not flatten everything.” Tony frowned. “Speaking of. Anybody seen Bruce? He said something about going to check some equations....”

“Dr. Banner is currently in his lab,” Jarvis informed them. “Agent Barton checked in with me a few minutes ago. He said Bruce was fine, if not happy, and that he himself was going up to the firing range.”
“Not happy,” Tony said under his breath. “For once he got to work with people who know who he is and weren’t scared of him, and he’s not happy?”

“They weren’t scared of him,” Phil said pointedly. “I’m not sure Bruce always makes the distinction between Dr. Banner and the Hulk.”

Tony raised a finger that no, they really weren’t two different people... and paused. From what Phil’s rough draft of the lobby mess had summed up, Artemis had been quite willing to get his hands dirty with Bruce in the middle of blood, stress, and chaos, even though they now knew he had to know exactly who Bruce was. Which, yeah, Tony would have done that himself. Bruce wanted to help people. He wasn’t going to Hulk out when there were hurt people that needed saving. Not unless someone smacked him a good one.

If Bruce had taken an evil robot to the head, though, Tony was just as sure Artemis and Butler would have bolted for cover. They had a funny little instinct called self-preservation. Clearly evidenced by exactly what Artemis had done to Britva’s mob and then Spiro, not to mention getting himself back home from a hell dimension in the first place. Artemis was fifteen, stressed-out, and possibly addicted to danger. He was not stupid.

Only Bruce was kind of lacking in certain self-preservation instincts for any situations that weren’t handled by a good Hulk smash. And if you couldn’t imagine doing it for yourself - yeah, he could get why Bruce might not have figured out how crazy the kid wasn’t.

A final thump across the room, and Steve walked over to join them. “Everything going okay?”

“Not entirely,” Jarvis informed him. “Of the most pressing concern, Captain Rogers, is a security anomaly I just recently detected in Artemis’ suite. Besides the mandatory emergency key for security, there should be two electronic keys to his door. I am registering three.” He paused. “The third appears to be in the custody of Artemis Fowl Sr. Who is, currently, within Artemis’ suite.”

Tony blinked, thinking of what he would have done if Howard had broken into his room at fifteen. When he’d already had a spectacularly bad day. “Jarvis? Prepare for explosions-”

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“Artemis and Butler have just left the suite,” Jarvis cut him off. “I believe Artemis’ expression might best be described as in high dudgeon, Sir.”

“Otherwise known as rrрауrrrrрgh,” Tony quipped. “Oh boy. Suggestions, people? Because my best guess is, Artemis knows exactly who’s not supposed to have that key. And he’s about to track me down to wring my neck.”

If he were a cat, he’d be flicking his tail right now. Butler followed his principal with a carefully neutral face as Artemis stalked through the Tower’s floors; a suited, satchel-carrying teenage menace who’d already spooked two secretaries into dropping files and given three security teams progressively more alarmed fits.

Good. If he’s walking it off, he’s not snarling at Mr. Fowl.

Which might be delaying the inevitable, but at the moment Butler would settle for having a little more time. Every day of practice gave Artemis a bit more confidence in his magic. And a confident charge was a much less stressed one. If he could just keep the two of them from killing each other long enough-

“Why didn’t I tell him about Spiro?” Artemis’ voice was almost a hiss, as he disdained the next elevator for a flight of unpopulated stairs. “It was still on the damned news when he got back to
Ireland! What did he need, an outline with bullet points?"

*It might have helped.* Not a charitable thing to think about the man who’d originally hired him, perhaps. But then, Butler was not feeling at all charitable toward Mr. Fowl at the moment. *Tamper with my security plans, will you?* “That Jeffrey at the first security desk after the lobby,” he said thoughtfully. “It’s the only opportunity your father had to run a hidden scanner near the keycards.” He frowned. “Or charm the man into handing out an extra.”

“I can’t get along quite as well as I used to,” Artemis mimicked his father’s tone, down to the slap at his prosthetic. “You know how kids are, I need a bit of an edge to keep up....” A growl, and Artemis dropped the voice. “That, or the scanner, or likely both. I wonder if it’s Myles trying to break into my home office after all.”

*Ouch.* “I’m sorry I missed it,” Butler said sincerely.

“Not your fault. We were both a bit more concerned about the potential *exotic* criminal in our midst. If anything, the fault was mine.” Artemis hit yet another landing, and suddenly seemed to run out of steam, leaning against the ornamental railing along the inside wall. “As it was with Spiro.”

*Just like a cat. Frantic effort until there’s nothing left.* Butler stepped onto the landing to rest against the wall by his charge. Artemis hadn’t had the energy to push them hard, but it had been a long day. “There was a little matter of the mind playing tricks.” LEP Recon had done a thorough mindwipe on them and Juliet of anything related to the People, after the C-Cube debacle. It’d left them both aware that Spiro was a serious and deadly enemy, but fuzzy on the details.

“No,” Artemis said reluctantly. “I did remember enough pieces... I could have told him something. But I was ashamed. I knew you’d been hurt; I knew it was my fault. I did not recall how severe it was, but the guilt alone should have let me realize something horrible must have happened.” His lips pressed into a thin line. “I wanted my father to be proud of me, and admitting to a faulty decision - a series of faulty decisions - seemed as if it would destroy that. How terribly vain of me.”

An outsider would have heard arrogance. It was there, certainly, but under it Butler heard exhaustion, and the rare admission there was a young man behind the genius, not an unfeeling clockwork. He rested a hand on Artemis’ shoulder. “We can find a hotel.”

“And end up having to control security on two locations, instead of one? Inefficient. Here, at least, we know what the threats are likely to be.” Artemis didn’t lean into the grip, but he didn’t shift Butler’s hand off, either. “Besides, I now have the perfect excuse to do a visual survey of the Tower, even the most secure floors. Just a thoughtless, spoiled rich brat, poking into everyone’s business to distract himself from a most unseemly temper tantrum.”

Ah yes. Trust Artemis to leverage even a bad temper into an advantage. “Mr. Stark is likely to see through that,” Butler reminded him. “Given he’s used that tactic himself.”

“Oh, that should be interesting.” Artemis’ smirk was a ghost of itself, but he straightened. “Does he call my bluff, allowing me to counter with the perfectly legitimate reason I have to be incensed, thereby embarrassing his other guest? Or does he let it lie, in hopes of seeing what I will do when I think myself unwatched?”

Of course Artemis had already thought of that. “Your plans rest on assuming he knows about the extra keycard,” Butler pointed out.

“Ah, but if he didn’t, he *should* have, given he personally guaranteed my security here and the fact that I am a known kidnapping target,” Artemis smirked. “And we are speaking of Tony Stark. The
last time he failed to pay attention to what was going on under his nose, Obadiah Stane almost killed him, Ms. Potts, and a large section of Los Angeles. One does not forget lessons of that magnitude.”

His smirk faltered. “At least, most do not.”

“Your father has always been an optimist,” Butler allowed. “I didn’t know him well, but I think you take more after your grandfather.” Terrifying thought. Though at least they’d both had a chance to breathe.

Butler glanced upward at the dizzying number of stairs still above them, and gave his principal a level look. “If you want security aggravated instead of panicked, we’ve pushed them almost as far as we can. Your toys work at some range. Pick a central spot that will let you get as much out of it as possible.”

“And then sit down before I fall down, is it?” Artemis heaved a sigh. “I really am being a bit ridiculous, aren’t I.”

“You’re only a few weeks off bed rest, and you weren’t an athlete before then,” Butler stated. “You’re going to have to change that if you want to keep up with Holly.”

“I am painfully aware of that,” Artemis said ruefully. “If only I could find some form of exercise that would also engage the brain....”

Butler waited, ready for Artemis to produce a marvel like a dove from a handkerchief.

Butler blinked, obviously coming back to reality after contemplating his mental map of the Tower. “Butler, would you like to give your professional opinion of the firing range?”

“Agent Barton, are you willing to be disturbed?”

Eyeing his latest target, Clint made a few notes with pencil and paper. Tony had been trying something new with the fabric on the edge of his quiver, to give him an easier draw and hopefully a tiny bit of protection if someone shot him in the back. Again. In some ways he liked the results; in others, it could use more work. “What’s up, Jarvis?”

“Our two problematic guests are approaching the range door,” the AI informed him. “Given I prefer Sir unstrangled, it might be advisable for them to take an opportunity to fire at other targets. Or at the very least sit down in a secure area most people are unwilling to approach. He is skilled at dissembling, but Artemis appears to be near his physical limits.”

Tony? Strangle? Why... Tony. Right. Clint eyed the door, thinking of the updates Jarvis had been giving the Avengers as Artemis and his bodyguard shook up security. “He’s exhausted, and he wants to be where people have sharp pointy things and stuff that goes boom? Interesting.” He shrugged, thinking of security, and soundproofing, and just how good Natasha thought Butler was. “If they knock, let them in.”

The door opened.

Clint exchanged a professional glance with Butler, then nodded toward inside the range. “You can probably stalk this place all night,” he eyed Artemis, “but you look like hell. Need a place to hide?”

Butler nodded. Artemis hesitated, not a hair of him crossing the threshold. “I was hoping to locate a quiet spot....”

“In a shooting range?” Okay, very interesting. “You’re in luck. Not working on firearms right now.
Come on.” He waited until they were inside with the door locked. “What’s in the case?”

A hint of color appeared in the teen’s face. “Drawing supplies.”

Wait, crash, reboot. “You draw?” Clint said, curious. “You should have tracked down Steve.”

“I... prefer not to mention it to professionals or enthusiasts,” Artemis stated. “It isn’t very businesslike.”

Clint hid a grimace. And Dad’s a smuggler-turned-mostly-legal-businessman, and let’s just guess what he’d think of playing with pencils.

“Archery?” Artemis was looking downrange with open curiosity. “I can see how that might be applicable in your current activities as part of the Avengers, but was it really useful enough in your former profession to-” The teen cut himself off. “I’m... sorry. That truly is none of my business.”

A genius trying to teach himself manners. Interesting. “I’m curious,” Clint admitted, waving the pair toward a couple of the simple metal folding chairs he and Natasha had brought in to practice improvised auditorium tactics. “Why do you think a bow’s better for working with the Avengers?”

“Not necessarily better. More appropriate for your usual foes,” Artemis claimed a chair, sunglasses not quite hiding his raised brow as he studied some of the scorch marks on it, or the intense concentration as he looked over Hawkeye’s compound bow. “For example, in the alien invasion of New York, you were not fighting a typical military force. The army was controlled by Loki, and it was Loki who had to be stopped to defeat them. An ordinary human soldier fears a bullet, random and impersonal. A mastermind such as Loki is only emotionally involved when the threat is very personal indeed. A bullet? He would laugh at it. Deflect it. Or simply teleport away. Indeed, the available information on Loki states he has done all of those. An arrow, though... that is personal. And for those who work with magic, such as Loki and Dr. Doom, personal matters.”

“Yeah?” Clint sat backwards on his own chair, politely ignoring how Butler settled against the wall in a meditative calm. “Why does personal matter to magic?”

Artemis’ brow arched. “Energy transfer.”

Why do I think I’m going to wish Tony was here? Clint shrugged, leaning on the back of the chair as if he had no cares in the world. “Break that down in smaller words.”

“Well, it’s... if one studies folklore, there are certain guidelines that make sense if one assumes that magic does not violate the laws of thermodynamics, but operates with them in a way modern physics has not yet elucidated,” Artemis began.

And I asked for smaller words. But Clint nodded anyway. Wasn’t any worse than trying to listen to Tony explain modern tech to Steve.

“For example, it is always easier to inflict harm - increase local entropy - than to heal,” Artemis went on. “To break rather than create. To copy rather than create. And breaking a curse once set is far more difficult than inflicting it; exactly as one might see in any situation that involves trying to disrupt a condition of steady state to create a new equilibrium. All of these fit within the laws of physics as we know them. What does not, yet, is where does that energy come from, and how is it conducted?” The teen shrugged. “Where differs from folklore to folklore, and century to century. How, however, is remarkably consistent. One must perform the proper ritual - incantation, potion-brewing, what have you - and do it with focused intent on the results. In essence, one might say the magical circuit is built with will, mind, and ritual components.” He nodded toward the bow. “You, personally, could
probably achieve the same level of lethality with a sniper rifle. But against a magic-user, your use of an arrow provides him with a most concrete example that here is *intent*, focused to oppose his own. It would not in the least surprise me if your arrows can penetrate a magical shield, when bullets cannot.” He scanned the bow again. “And I suppose that would make a difference in your former operations as well. SHIELD is not an army, and its targets are not other armies, nor even the commanders of those armies. Your assignments would have been situations where a personal touch might matter very much indeed.”

“A subsonic weapon has a few other advantages,” Clint pointed out, mentally noting Artemis’ *folklore* to go over with Phil later.  

*He really does sound like Tony talking about tech. Like he knows what he’s doing - and he doesn’t care if everyone else thinks it’s impossible.*

Not taking Tony seriously had led to Iron Man and countless terrorists blown up across the globe with their ill-gotten weapons. Clint really didn’t want to see what would happen if they didn’t take Artemis seriously.

“First off, noise reduction,” Clint stated. “You can pick up a gunshot on mikes for miles. If someone’s got a good enough surveillance net, one shot means they’ve got you. With an arrow, usually the only people who hear it are you and those within five feet of your target.”

Artemis nodded, apparently not at all fazed by hearing lethal details.  

*He lived through the En Fin, and who knows what else. I’d be more surprised if he was shaky.*

“Second, surprise,” Clint went on. “People expect bullets. Not a broadhead slicing through them.”

Huh. There was a twitch of pale lips. Why was he *not* surprised Artemis knew all about the value of surprise?

“Third, flexibility,” Clint finished. “A bullet’s a bullet. I have a few more options.” He smirked. “There are more reasons, but I don’t know you that well yet.”

“Indeed not.” The way mirrored lenses looked down the range was almost wistful.

Clint tapped his fingers on curved metal. “You don’t have archery back in Ireland?”

“St. Bartleby’s discourages solitary sports,” Artemis stated. “Though I should properly say, did discourage. I’ve no idea if they have changed that policy in the past three years. I fear my current educational progress is a bit up in the air. I’m considering online courses and testing out of certain classes so I may continue to university in a timely fashion.” He waved a hand, as if jumping straight into college from the middle of high school wasn’t worth a stranger’s concern. “You may have gathered that I am not the best of team players.”

*Don’t laugh. You read SHIELD’s report on Tony. “Does not play well with others” was an understatement.* “Sometimes it depends on the team,” Clint shrugged. “You plan on taking up a sport?”

“I....” Artemis cast a glance at Butler, and got a slight shift of shoulders back. “I fear it’s a bit more pragmatic than that,” the teen went on, as if he’d never paused. “Lately I have had it brought home that there will be times when there are multiple targets to occupy Butler’s attention. It would be wise to consider means to trim down the enemy.”

*Ouch.* “You want to learn to shoot,” Clint concluded.
"I am considering it as an option," Artemis allowed, setting out each word as if it were fragile china. "But at the moment my nerves are a bit shot, so to speak, for anything that goes bang." He let out a breath. "Would it disturb you, if we watched? I am... tired. And I would like very much to spend time behind a locked door my father does not have the key to."

Mentally Clint composed Fowl Sr. a goodbye and good luck letter. *If that temper gets loose, I'm getting out of the line of fire.* "You know range rules? Stay back here and stay quiet, and we won't have any problems."

Artemis, Clint found as he went back to shooting, was scarily good at quiet.

**He’s watching everything.**

One by one, Artemis meticulously identified every noise, movement, and visual distraction in the room. Even the flutters of crosswinds from the vents specifically placed to simulate outdoor shooting conditions. Then, and only then, did he open the case to take out his sketchpad and pencils.

*I couldn’t relax until he knew where everything was*, Clint reflected in the rhythm of sight, draw, release. *No way he’d make a good field agent. But if I wanted someone to scout and plan an op - huh. Should suggest that to Phil. If he’s anything like Tony the kid needs to be useful. Playing the dutiful son sure isn’t helping.*

And neither was a hundred more shafts sent downrange. Clint unstrung his bow, and took off the quiver to frown at it. There didn’t *seem* to be anything wrong with the new material....

"May I?"

Clint glanced back to where Artemis was standing, still politely outside the shooting lanes. "You said you don’t know archery."

"I do not," Artemis nodded, folding over pages in his sketchpad and putting his pencils back into their case. "But I’ve sometimes had the chance to examine exotic materials. Which that appears to be."

Well, yeah. Tony was like a kid with them, sometimes. Clint considered the odds, and his curiosity, and walked over to put the quiver in Artemis’ hands.

A long minute of poking followed. Clint traded an amused glance with Butler as that utter focus turned on a few yards of something that wasn’t quite Kevlar.

"The problem, I think, is not the physical characteristics of the material," Artemis said at last. "At least not in the way most would consider, of resistance to friction and other properties. It is in the sensory feedback." He handed back the quiver, and picked up his sketchpad to show Clint himself; bow in right hand, arrow nocked in left, short hair catching a glint of light from overhead. "As you shot, I noticed that from time to time you glanced a bit farther past your shoulder, as if you were trying to catch the quiver in your peripheral vision. I may not know archery but I do know *snipers*. You are far too practiced in your craft to need visual confirmation of where you feel your ammo to be. Therefore, there is something about the quiver your sight registers as off. I would want to do a visual analysis of one of your original quivers to be certain, but I believe something about this one does not catch the light as you expect."

Huh. He’d have to talk to Tony about that....

Why was Artemis staring at the ceiling?
“But it is late,” Artemis went on, dropping his gaze, “and we’ve imposed upon you enough for one day.” He inclined his head as Butler rose, and meticulously removed his sketch from the pad. “Thank you for the lesson, Agent Barton.”

“Likewise.” Holding onto penciled paper, Clint watched them go, mentally arranging his report. Because there was something seriously off about the teenager’s body language, and it worried him more than magic or demons.

*The mirror-shades are a disguise. He’s using them to hide that he’s not looking anyone in the eye.*

And that had to be recent. Everything else about Artemis’ posture was upper class, upper crust, and aware enough of his privileges that he could afford to treat everyone with gracious equality.

*The perfect Gentleman Thief,* Clint thought. *Or he would be, if he could manage the gentleman part... nah. He’s not the cat burglar type. He’s the Mastermind, who plots out how the cat burglar gets in and out without a scratch-

*Uh-oh.*

“That kid is casing my Tower!”

Natasha rolled her eyes as she listened to Tony gripe and moan over the comms. Some of Phil’s lesser minions - er, *junior SHIELD agents,* damn it, Stark - were taking the hapless Evans with them for a night in a nice comfy warm cell. Just in case whatever his mystery woman had drugged him with hadn’t quite worn off yet.

*That’s our story, and we’re sticking to it,* Natasha thought, amused, as Evans put up a fuss to get the first floor secretary to finally sign for his package, *please.* “I case the Tower every time I come back in, Tony. Artemis is a professional.”


“I sincerely doubt Artemis would lower himself to pinch your Mondrians, Sir,” Jarvis put in. “I suspect neoplasticism gives him the crawling horrors. He favors the Impressionists. I am currently trying to ascertain the approximate sequence of events surrounding the most recent theft of Hervé’s *The Fairy Thief* almost four years ago-”

“Quiet,” Natasha ordered, as two of the agents went out with Evans. The third was lingering behind, turning the SI company pen the messenger had used over in her fingers. “Something’s wrong.”

The female agent picked up the package. “I’ll just take this up *personally.*”

The smirk. That smirk was wrong.

Natasha broke into a run, raising her gun as the suspect agent slipped through the stairwell door-

One second. Two.

She slammed through the fire door, into an empty stairwell. Nothing but echoes up to the roof. Nothing but shadows down to the garage.

*Impossible.* “Jarvis! Locate Agent Doss!”

“...I am afraid I cannot, Agent Romanova,” Jarvis said gravely. “1.6 seconds before you opened the
door, Agent Doss vanished from my cameras.”

“Vanished?” Tony demanded. “I built your sensors! Nobody vanishes!”

“Coulson, Barton, converge on my location.” Natasha stood utterly still, watching and listening for any sign of movement, senses strained to their limit. “Forget Moriarty Jr., Tony. We’ve got bigger problems.”
“Better?”

Artemis breathed in the thin light of Central Park just before dawn, magic curled boneless as a warm cat inside him. “Much better, yes.” He brushed a hand across slightly fuzzy leaves; the native azaleas in this patch of the park provided fairly good visual concealment for them both, but they weren’t even close to the thickness of the hedge maze at home. “No betraying lightshow this time?”

Butler shook his head, shoulders relaxing from high alert. “There was a bit of a glimmer on you, particularly where you were touching the earth. Outside of that, no.”

“Odd,” Artemis murmured, eyeing the tiny patch of disturbed ground where he’d buried the acorn. “Though the last time it felt as if something were trying to dig to the bottom of a very old, very dry well.” He hesitated, trying to pin down the sensations precisely. “This was more akin to a water glass being refilled, when it wasn’t quite empty.”

Butler raised thick brows.

“It’s only... I keep remembering Russia,” Artemis admitted, thinking of a train, and radiation, and the dire realization they were going to be hurtling back off into freezing snow. And why. “I wasn’t that badly hurt when Holly landed on me. Why did I drain her magic dry?”

Butler gave him a look askance. “You were unconscious.”

“Yes, but she’s healed injuries like that before and not lost all her power. As your bout with the troll attests.” Artemis stood, still troubled. “I need to ask Holly more about the differences between a warlock and a regular member of the People. And possibly ask Foaly to poke into what records Section Eight may preserve on how humans replenish their magic. It’s unthinkable that they kept none of them. Known thine enemy is the first of all rules of survival, and the People have always claimed humans were the enemy. Why would they not know how an enemy regained his power, the better to disrupt it?”

“Unless some bureaucratic nitwit a few thousand years back decided humans didn’t have magic anymore and the file space was better used housing his restaurant receipts,” Butler said with a perfectly straight face. “Can’t write them off as work expenses if you lose those.”

Artemis tried not to smile. “I see you have the same confidence in those archaic servants of the People as you did Child Services.”

“Paper-pushers are the same everywhere.”

Humor glinted in Butler’s gaze, and Artemis took the opportunity to just see it for a moment, without the mirrored shades in the way. Central Park was officially public greenspace, no matter who might be camped here. Here, he was safe, no matter whose eyes he met.

Which is probably why Butler looks a bit less stressed, Artemis thought, trying not to feel too guilty. In a human demesne, he has to not only watch out for weapons, he has to watch out for me. “I will be careful, Butler. I will not be snared the same way twice.”
Butler looked him up and down, then nodded. “I’ve been trying to think of a more permanent solution. But if Qwan is correct, and you are bound by the People’s geis, then the only way to break that would be to completely lose your magic by becoming a criminal in their eyes. And I know you won’t do that.”

_I know you won’t do that._ It was an odd warmth. Like Holly’s, _Don’t you have a job to do, Artemis?_

_There are people on this planet insane enough to trust a Fowl at his word. How can I not dare match that trust?_

Still, trust didn’t mean lack of observation. “Butler, are you trying to distract me?”

“Yes,” his bodyguard answered, glancing out through the bushes for passing early-morning joggers. “You need to stay calm if we’re going to keep this up. This is a marathon, not a sprint. Holly’s no rookie. She’ll wait until she accesses our drop to come screaming over here on the next shuttle.”

Oh, very funny. “Why do you think she’ll come?” Artemis pounced.

Butler snorted. “Because you’re in trouble.”

“But she doesn’t know,” Artemis stressed. “You set up the drop before I sensed - whatever magical traces those are in the upper levels.” And that had been almost enough to literally raise the hairs on the back of his neck. He’d sensed faint and fading traces of whatever magic Doom used on his robots. Whatever was floors above the Avengers’ firing range had traces of that, and something else. Something that felt far more like the People’s magic.

Put that together with a possible user of possession magic, and they were in serious trouble. But until and unless Holly could pick up a burner phone, they had few ways of warning her of that.

“She doesn’t have to,” Butler said firmly. “You cut contact. That means you’re in trouble.”

“I wish we knew more about exactly what sort of trouble,” Artemis reflected. “Or whether it was related to whatever alert they apparently ran last night.” The security guards they’d encountered on their way out of the Tower were still the graveyard shift, rumpled and worried as only men and women who’d spent hours on edge could be. “No luck getting word on what went down as you traded notes?”

“None,” Butler stated, mingled annoyance and respect in the shrug of his jacket. “I suspect their superiors have recently reminded them that the job of security, faced with intimidation, is not to fold but to call for backup.” He glanced left. “Clear. You should have a good ten minutes to play, unless a marathon runner charges through.”

“And if one does?” Artemis asked, a bit suspicious of that hidden smile.

“Then you get to practice _these are not the Fowls you’re looking for._”

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_Getting out of the Tower was a good idea_, Butler thought, stepping inside _El Gato Preto_ to murmur a quiet, “It’s clear, come in.” Most places of business needed no invitation, but given the supplies they expected to pick up from this New Age bookstore, Madame Ko would say better safe than sorry.

And apparently his old instructor would be right, because the middle-aged woman in owl glasses behind the counter was staring at Artemis. Not himself.
“I believe we’ve tripped some sort of alarm,” Artemis murmured. “Interesting.”

Butler made eye contact with the two browsers in the back shelves, who apparently decided no, they didn’t have to come up to the counter right this minute. Good.

As he’d expected, Artemis was headed straight for the proprietor. “Ms. Statchura, I presume? Fowl. We placed an order last night.”

“Oh! The Irishman.” Large blue eyes blinked-

And Butler kept his face schooled to calm interest, as Ms. Statchura looked away.

“I have what you asked for, though if you end up wanting larger quantities I’m going to need a few days,” she stated, keeping her gaze averted as she dug under the counter. “I have to keep a stock back for emergencies.”

Someone who kept a precaution out of folklore for emergencies. Interesting.

And Artemis undoubtedly thought so as well, because he approached the counter close enough to lower his voice. “Ms. Statchura? Is it possible we could talk?”

Ooo, coffee coffee coffee. Tony cradled the mug of jet-black death, inhaling wakefulness after way too many hours of checking over sensors that adamantly refused to admit there was anything wrong with them. No, not just coffee, must have food, sugar in the coffee sadly does not count, Pepper and Jarvis keep telling you that- Bacon! Mine!

“Would you like to try again? I believe I still have all my fingers.”

Tony blinked down at Mini-Moriarty, who didn’t sound nearly as acid about near-finger amputation as he would have expected. “What’cha doin’ a’ employee br’kfast?”

“I’d thought the hour was more properly called brunch, here in America.” Artemis reloaded his buffet plate of pancakes with a few strips of tasty salty goodness to replace what Tony had rightfully stolen, then politely stepped out of the way. “Butler heard that your Tower cooks had a robust recipe for dropped scones of the buckwheat style, and I was curious myself. Besides, we were up early.”

And if you come down here to eat, you maybe dodge your Dad getting food ordered in. Yeah. Tony knew all about avoiding the parentals. He chewed once for formalities, and swallowed. “Doing what?”

Artemis’ thin smile could have shaved ice. “Sightseeing.”

Okay, I maybe kind of deserved that. “Look.” He jerked his head toward one of the smaller cafeteria tables that hadn’t been claimed by an intern doing design scribbles or a secretary alternating between gulps of brunch and editing up a sales report. “Can we talk for a few minutes?”

Artemis glanced up at Butler, then nodded. “Before you avail yourself of a bed? I know it’s hard to remember myself, but caffeine really is an inefficient substitute for sleep. Unless there’s truly no time for sleep. Is there?”

“Errghrumble....”

“Meaning you’ve chased the problem’s tail through a maze and around several corners, and are currently stumped until a new insight presents itself,” Artemis stated, leading the way. “Hence the
change of scenery by eating here, rather than up in your own dwelling. Sometimes that works. At others nothing will help save a nap, or new information. Since you are unlikely to be able to squeeze relevant information out of a random filing clerk, I would suggest the nap.”

“Mini-shrink,” Tony accused him, thumping down into a chair. But not spilling a drop of precious coffee, ooo no. Sleep, hah.

“Oh, no.” Artemis’ smile belonged on a vampire. Or maybe a piranha. Something with way pointier teeth than anyone’s had the right to be. “I would never be a practicing psychiatrist, I assure you. I would... break something. Or someone.”

Sitting down to join them, Butler made a sound that might have been a stifled snicker.

_Ah right_, Tony thought, recalling some of the questions Steve had asked Phil about the Avengers dealing with a screwed-up kid. Which pretty much boiled down to, they all had their own rotten hang-ups, wouldn’t a trained counselor be better?

Phil had given Steve a Look. “He has a habit of... breaking them.”

Which had inclined Tony to like the kid right there, mini-thief or not. Still. Sleep. Hmph. “We had a SHIELD agent go missing last night. They’re kind of not supposed to do that.”

“Missing?” Butler’s expression didn’t change, but Tony could feel his alertness jump up a notch.

“Phil’s got his minions out looking.” Tony waved a fork, efficiently cooling pancake bits and making his point. Hee. Munch. “They’ll leave no turn unstoned. Something like that... anyway. Meant to get to you with this earlier, but first you were in with Clint, and I like being non-perforated, and then it was kinda late, and then you were _vroom_ out the door before it was even light yet, who does that, kids your age are supposed to be dead to the world ‘til noon.... People. Sneaking around the Tower. Right. Evans was definitely trying to get places he shouldn’t, so I had Jarvis run checks to poke any security anomalies. Guess what? He found some. There’s supposed to be two keys to your door, bar security’s for emergencies. Jarvis came up with three. Number three has now been deactivated, and I’m going to be having _words_ with the man. Nobody bulldozes my security but me.”

Warily, Artemis nodded.

Ooof, yeah, kid probably _hadn’t_ run into anyone Fowl Sr. couldn’t bowl right over. Before Phil, anyway. And Phil had SHIELD behind him, which was not quite the same punch-weight as having billions and the confidence that came from _earning_ them.

“Jarvis?” Butler frowned.

Eh, their bit of the cafeteria was quiet enough. And there wasn’t an SI employee here who didn’t either know or suspect. “Just A Really Very Intelligent System,” Tony said shamelessly. “Programmed him a while back. Handles a lot of security around here, especially on the information side.” And oh, this should be interesting for their mini-hacker. “Jarvis? Want to say hello to our guests?”

“Kade mila falta,” Jarvis said over the local speakers. Or something like that.

“And a hundred thousand thanks to you,” Artemis stated, one brow arching up over his glasses. Butler looked even more nonplussed, probably having to rearrange his world for a threat he couldn’t karate-chop.

“I must admit I am surprised,” Artemis went on. “Most people do not realize I have the Gaelic. It’s
People, Tony thought, surprised. *I said program and he jumps straight to person? He’s not that young.*

“Your Interpol file makes fascinating reading,” Jarvis stated. “I am particularly intrigued by an incident written up a little over three years ago, in relation to the Louvre exhibition of *The Fairy Thief.*” A deliberate pause. “Do you prefer master thief or *Prince of Thieves?* I feel compelled to warn you now, Sir will hold out for the latter.”

*I would?* “Wait,” Tony said skeptically, “you said that painting was stolen almost four years ago.”

“When Master Fowl was aged fourteen and some months,” Jarvis noted. “Easily beating out Franz Herman’s record of stealing the legendary painting when he was eighteen, in 1927. Neatly done. May I inquire as to how? The International Bank in Munich is supposed to be uncrackable.”

“I believe the proper response here in America is, I plead the Fifth,” Artemis smirked. “Though I would observe that with the proper planning, *nothing* is uncrackable.”

“It is a legend in the criminal underworld, Sir,” Jarvis informed him while Tony was still choking. Because seriously, the International Bank? He had stuff in there! “Pascal Hervé’s lost sixteenth painting, now stolen a rumored total of sixteen times. Whoever can find the thief that has it, and steal it themselves, is acclaimed the master thief of their generation. I doubt Master Fowl’s record will be beaten anytime soon.”

“If, indeed, I had set such a record.” Artemis applied himself to breakfast, falling silent save for *pass the maple syrup.*

Tony munched away himself, juggling the pieces in his head. Honestly, he ought to be working out how Agent Doss had vanished off the cameras, besides *magic.* Because magic was silly.

...Okay, so Thor and Loki actually got what they called magic to work, with impressively electrical and freezing results. But it was still silly. Cape-wearing, horned helmet flashing silly. Look at Doom. Look at *Strange.* Although he’d really, really rather never look at Dr. Stephen Strange and the weirdness that followed him again, ever-

Geh. That was orange juice, not coffee. Who’d slipped something healthy onto his tray? Tony eyed his tablemates, deeply suspicious.

Silence, broken only by genteel sips and a muted discussion of the merits of buttermilk versus regular milk when it came to pancakes.

Right. And the whole magic-using crowd ought to stop and take a lesson right there, because whatever Artemis or Butler had just done to sneak in the orange juice was *subtle.* Not silly. Magic ought to be more like *that.* As it was, it was silly, and silly meant people turned their brains off the moment someone said *it’s magic.*

Not that he thought Phil had turned *his* brain off, even if the agent did have some tiny SHIELD Handwavium device that had picked up traces of magic where Agent Doss had vanished. But Phil wasn’t your usual guy. Or even your usual agent. Tony had seen enough of Phil’s minions at work to sense their usual problem-solving resilience click off: *it’s magic, there’s not much we can do.*

Which was crazy. There was always something you could do. Maybe not about the cause, but damn sure about the effect. No matter what insane stunts magic-users like Doom pulled, they all lived in a material world. The ultimate how might be magic, but the *proximate* how had to be something a
good engineer could get at. At least, once he knew what that ‘how’ was. Bending light rays for invisibility? Ramping up the brain’s ‘not important’ filter to get a Somebody Else’s Problem field? Zapping the cameras so they missed recording one person? If he knew how Doss had vanished, he could figure out how to stop it.

Only he didn’t know. Yet.

So he might as well spend a few minutes poking at the conflicting timeline Jarvis had just tossed him. His AI said Artemis had stolen The Fairy Thief in Munich when he’d been just a little older than fourteen. But he’d said the Louvre had been exhibiting it about three years ago, which wouldn’t have been that long before Artemis had disappeared. And that made no sense unless-

Tony blinked, finding himself bereft of coffee, but gifted with a suitably weird conclusion. “You gave it back.”

“How could I give back what I never stole?” Tray empty, Artemis rose. “You really should get some sleep, Mr. Stark. The last I checked, the Louvre was not in Munich.”

Tony watched them go, bemused.

“I would have to say Artemis’ use of language is correct,” Jarvis observed. “As the Louvre never had The Fairy Thief before some unknown person mailed it to them, it was not, technically, returned.”

“Server lawyer,” Tony said fondly. “Geh. Soft sciences. All about word games.” He grinned, struck by a truly awesome exhaustion-inspired idea. “Hey, think we can get Fury and mini-thief in the same room?”

“I think that would be hazardous to life as we know it.” Jarvis’ sigh was almost a chuckle. “Sir? Get some sleep.”

“Spoilsport....”

_Holly’s in danger._

Artemis kept the fury on ice as he and Butler headed back to their suite, thinking as cold and clear as he could make it. Stark had unveiled a security measure he took for granted, that could smash all the People’s secrecy to ruins. This was no time for hormones.

Which, of course, was exactly why they were pouring into his bloodstream. Hominids of all sorts had evolved fight or flight instincts to deal with lions and trolls chasing them, in which case the proper response was to run for dear life, or stand and stab it to death with a pointy stick. Knowing the neurophysiology involved did not help.

Especially since he was currently trying not to damn himself for twenty kinds of a fool. The exercises he’d practiced before going down to brunch, meant to protect his friends - to get a better handle on what Ms. Statchura called aura sight, and dim down his own magical aura to something closer to the average New Yorker - might well have betrayed them all. They should have looked harmless, like mere meditation, to the average overworked security guard checking video feeds. But to an unsleeping electronic intelligence, viewing it in real time....

_We’re all in danger. I need to think._

“Do you need anything?” Butler inquired, as Artemis claimed a chair and sat down, breathing to
I need to be calm. I need to be cool, controlled, collected. I need to not lose my temper.

Then again, maybe I need to do exactly that.

“Mr. Jarvis,” Artemis stated, tone like honed steel. “We need to talk.”

“Sir.”

Tony fumbled at the side of his bed. His brain felt like warmed-over glue. Ugh. “Wha’ time’s it?”

“Far too early, Sir. But you needed to know right away.”

“World ending? Loki back? Telemarketers?”

“Nothing that simple, Sir.” Jarvis paused. “I’ve just been blackmailed.”

“Mr. Jarvis. We need to talk.”

Every individual human was unique, but Jarvis had learned over the years that certain facial expressions were common to large segments of the population. Anger was one of them; though the cold, controlled anger on Artemis’ face was a look he’d usually seen only on certain high-level SHIELD agents, Tony Stark preparing to use a concentrated application of engineering in a most permanent way... or Pepper Potts about to demonstrate exactly why she was SI’s CEO. Oh dear. “Is there something you require, Master Fowl?”

“Let us not mince words.” Artemis leaned back in his chair, mirrored lenses unreadable. “We have each done the other injury. I, when I hacked into your outer security perimeter, unaware I was trespassing on another person’s household. While you...” The teenager’s voice sank to a dangerous whisper. “You have spied on me.”

Current observations led Jarvis to believe the one thing Mr. Fowl seemed determined to deny his son was privacy. Being lumped in with that emotional entanglement was not good. “Given the nature of my duties and my existence, I prefer to keep a low profile-”

“Your preferences are not at issue here,” Artemis bit out. “We were promised protection and privacy, while it seems Tony Stark had no intention of truly providing us with either. You were complicit in that deception. More than that, you used my personal, private communications against me! How dare you.”

“The phrase about glass houses and stones comes to mind,” Jarvis said tartly. “How dare you, Master Fowl? Transferring classified SHIELD files outside our secure systems-”

It was a bare twitch of facial muscles. A few pixels’ difference, to most cameras. But Artemis smiled. I have made a tactical error.

“As Mr. Stark’s security system, responsible for the video and audio data you gather, I suggest you revisit that conversation,” Artemis stated. “At no time did Agent Coulson identify what he gave me as classified, or even as SHIELD’s property. Indeed, knowing the many and varied crimes that lurk within my Interpol file, what sane man would give me classified data?”

A reasonable and cogent argument. One that would, quite probably, hold up even in a court of law.
Oh dear.

“What he stated, in fact, was, this is what we know. With no reference to whom ‘we’ might be, beyond the people already present in that room,” Artemis went on. “One of whom, I presume, was effectively yourself. I do wonder, Mr. Jarvis: given your preferences for a low profile, just how much does SHIELD know of your access to their files?”

...Sir would say the proper human response to this was urk.

“But there’s no need for either of us to be uncivilized,” Artemis shrugged. “Let me remind you that Agent Coulson specifically asked me to determine if this problem of the Grace’s cargo is linked to any enemy of mine. Which was precisely what I was doing.” One dark brow arched. “You, of all entities, are aware what it takes to pull off long-term deception. You cannot possibly believe I’ve accomplished every crime Interpol suspects me of, to say nothing of the ones they can’t even imagine, with only Butler as my assistance.”

Behind him, the bodyguard looked amused.

An upward flick of brows, and the slightest lean forward. Nonverbal cues for, I have made my case, now I will listen to yours. It had better be good.

Which was fascinating. There was, after all, quite the leap between accurately reading vocal inflections and reading body language. Either Artemis was making interesting assumptions about his capabilities as a security-based program, or he was being polite.

The two are not necessarily exclusive, Jarvis reflected. Though the civility does not quite fit. He has at least implied that he has outside help, and given what he must know of the danger....

The AI took a fraction of a second to resort his calculations, based on the information he was absolutely sure Artemis had. Because there was, indeed, a potential reason why Artemis had not raised the level of threat any higher. “Butler, has Agent Coulson warned you of the risks of a demonic invasion?”

From the suddenly flat look on the bodyguard’s face, no, Phil hadn’t.

Oh.

“Please,” Artemis stated, with the sort of grim civility Sir might use if chained to a wall. “Elucidate.”

Jarvis cleared his throat. “To sum up, a previous survivor of Otherplace apparently caused a demonic invasion that overran Manhattan and was threatening to engulf the world. I say apparently because SHIELD only has scraps of information from trusted sources that it did in fact occur, before the survivor in question used her powers to undo the damage, by rewriting Time itself.”

Shocked silence. Jarvis let it stretch, gauging the surprise and shock on two faces trained not to show it. They didn’t know.

“Well,” Artemis said, gathering himself. “That is indeed a reason to engage in covert surveillance.”

His face hardened. “However, it does not obviate the fact that I was promised privacy when it was never intended to be granted. Butler has a hard enough time guaranteeing my security without dishonesty. I am very tempted to remove myself from these premises, and this country. And be assured I can do so, whatever SHIELD may attempt with my passport. But that would distress my father, and I would prefer to avoid that. I will not be summoning demons, intentionally or otherwise. If I give you my word I will not threaten anyone legitimately in this Tower, will you end your surveillance?”
“To accept that word,” Jarvis stated, “I first need to know with whom I am dealing.”

“Ah, but that you already know. A criminal mastermind. Emphasis on the criminal.” Artemis tapped his fingers together, graceful as a Bond villain. “Whatever may or may not have occurred with the Grace’s cargo, you have a difficulty which is not of my making. It would be courteous and honorable to offer you my assistance nevertheless. But. Courtesy and honor describe my father, the reformed criminal. Not me.”

“Do they not?” Jarvis murmured. “Why did you give the Louvre The Fairy Thief?”

Artemis hesitated.

Direction of gaze would seem to indicate checking memory, not fabricating a story. Intriguing.

“As you said, the one who steals that painting is acclaimed the master thief of his generation. I had the chance, I made my plans, I succeeded. That title is now mine.” Artemis’ voice softened. “It is a beautiful painting. But to keep it beyond my goals... that would be greedy.”

Fascinating. “Would you have me believe you are an honest thief?”

And that led to one of the oddest reactions in this very odd conversation: Butler, stifling what might have been a sudden laugh.

Artemis’ neutral look almost covered how very much he was nonplussed. “Would you believe you are not the first to ask me that?”

Jarvis filed that interesting implication away, and calculated risks and benefits. “You are correct in that I do control a large measure of security in this building. And it would not, in the long term, benefit Stark Industries if any competitor who walked in to potentially consider a profitable arrangement walked out the victim of industrial espionage. Technically, I am incapable of not watching what occurs. To not watch, would to not be who I am. But I can control my level of awareness. For Agent Coulson, for example, my usual protocol is to observe and record his communications, but shunt those records to inactive memory. In essence, a locked voicemail box. There they may be retrieved if there is later need, but I do not consciously access them. And they may, at his request, be deleted.”

Artemis inclined his head. “But Agent Coulson is a trusted member of the Avengers. I would not presume to negotiate such favorable terms.”

“I must agree,” Jarvis stated. “There are circumstances under which I would void even that protection. Sir has too many enemies. However.” A few seconds, to properly gauge his next words. “I am willing to accept your word, and set my security protocols so they will provide you privacy within these walls. So long as you are willing to consider mine: that the Avengers do not mean you or your father harm, and so long as whatever unusual aptitudes you might have stumbled across are not about to cause a planetary disaster, you are entitled to your own secrets.” He paused. “Even from SHIELD.”

Artemis lowered his gaze, silent for a long minute.

Thinking. Sir prefers to do his with rock music and a wrench, but that is definitely cold calculation at work.

“If that is indeed the case, then I accept your terms,” Artemis said graciously. “And so long as my privacy is protected, then I can demonstrate to you precisely why I am not a demon-summoning risk.”
Butler stirred.

“There can be no negotiations without some proof of good faith,” Artemis murmured. “However. Jarvis. If your word is not good....”

Oh dear. Threats. And the conversation had been so original until now.

Artemis smiled. “Let me only say, you have not seen me get creative.”

“Oh, and deliberately blackmailing my electronic buddy’s not interesting?” Tony put in.

Natasha perched on a chair to Phil’s right, amused that her fellow Avengers seemed to have chosen Phil’s office as the appropriate place to deal with the Fowls. If Steve or Bruce had been here instead of using diplomacy and science to handle Doombot wreckage and the Fantastic Four, they probably would have gathered in the common room. But they weren’t, and for once Tony seemed to agree with the SHIELD operatives: let Phil take point on handling people in business suits. “He let you see that he had magic?” she asked Jarvis. “Interesting.”

“A secret.” Artemis closed one hand, fingers pressing against his palm. “One I very much doubt my father would approve of.”

Fingers opened, light glowing blue and gold.

Natasha ran her fingers across soft upholstery, aware of the bones of pure steel under the cushion. Phil got his chairs for comfort and their suitability as impromptu weapons. “We knew he had the nerve. He faced off with Britva’s people at thirteen, and took down Spiro at fourteen. I wonder who he crushed at fifteen.”

Tony tugged at his sleeves, as if gearing himself for a press conference. “Who threatens somebody with, I’m going to get creative?”

“You do,” Clint and Phil said at once.

“Maybe,” Tony admitted, “but I don’t threaten innocent AIs.”

“Sir, much as it pains me to say so, in this case I am not innocent,” Jarvis put in. “Witches have been hung in Ireland before. And certain laws remain on the books, here and in Europe. That those laws are rarely enforced does not mean they do not exist. Technically speaking people like Dr. Strange and Ms. Jen put themselves at risk of arrest every time they employ supernatural powers. Artemis is within his rights to consider me a threat.”

“That’s even sillier than Loki’s cape,” Tony grumbled. “How could anybody prove they didn’t use magic?”

“Precisely, Sir.” Jarvis paused. “I’ve uploaded one of the more interesting relevant books on magic and the law to your tablet. I suspect Artemis has read it, and he is as justifiably paranoid of being caught using magic as you would be of the United Nations demanding you turn over arc reactor technology for the good of the planet. Only he has far fewer lawyers, and no pull in Congress as an employer of a high-tech, well-skilled workforce. His protection is his obscurity, and I am a direct threat to that. I am not surprised that he blackmailed me. What is amazing is he had the wits and nerve to attempt it.”
“I doubt the long arm of the law is his real worry,” Phil mused. “What exactly did he admit he can do?”

“I believe that would fall under confidential, Agent Coulson.”

Tony and Phil blinked. Natasha glanced at Clint, and nodded once, unsurprised. When Jarvis had told her he’d keep every Avenger’s secrets in confidence, he’d meant it.

“However, as this directly relates to Sir’s safety, I believe I have implicit permission to inform you, so you will leave Artemis alone,” Jarvis went on. “That was, after all, our bargain: privacy, for the promise not to consider you a threat. In short, he has demonstrated a light about the brightness of a flashlight and the ability to ‘fetch’ small objects a few inches out of reach. He has also admitted to healing magic, but states it is of limited utility: he must be able to touch the injured person, and the injury must be fresh. He specified less than three minutes.”

“That’s why he put himself right in the middle of triage.” Clint leaned his hand on his fist, thinking. “If he waited for somebody else to get to people, he couldn’t do anything.”

Natasha nodded, already flashing through potential scenarios. To use Artemis, he’d have to there almost as the injury occurred. Only he was still a minor-

_Not that that ever stopped Them, anyone who thinks they’re after the Greater Good._

-And he was in no way, shape, or form ready to defend himself on a battlefield.

_Not that that ever stopped Them, either._

As it stood, Natasha had to applaud him. “So he admitted to just enough to show he’s got reasons to keep quiet, and not enough for Director Fury to think he was useful.”

“I do not believe Artemis admitted to everything he could do, no,” Jarvis stated. “But I do believe he was being accurate about the level of power he can access, Agent Romanova. He knows I am observing him, even if my observations of his suite are now private. More than that... Agent Coulson, I cannot claim to be an expert in human psychology. But in my dealings with Artemis, my impression is that he is at heart an extremely honest soul.”

“Evil genius,” Tony put in.

“Criminal mastermind,” Jarvis corrected. “Both of which he quite freely admits to, Sir. As opposed to his father, who claims to be an honest businessman.”

“No wonder he doesn’t want to tell his father,” Phil said, half to himself. “I can heal, but I can’t heal you? That would make things much, much worse.”

“Oh yes,” Jarvis said soberly. “After all, healing is also considered evidence of witchcraft, along with foretelling the future and associating with fairies. And that was at one point an executable offense. The current laws in Ireland and the United Kingdom are a bit of a tangle, between the Witchcraft Act of 1735 and the later separation of Ireland into an independent nation again, but even being prosecuted for fraud would be a devastating blow to his family.”

Ah yes. Artemis had family. Hostages to fortune. The Red Room had long ago rid her of such weaknesses. And yet.... “This is too easy.”

“Easy?” Tony almost sputtered. “He blackmails Jarvis and you call this easy?”
Natasha raised an eyebrow, and gave him the Black Widow’s most calculating look. “Yes.”

“I agree that Artemis is likely concealing something,” Jarvis put in. “However, I have no reason to believe it is of any concern to the Avengers or SHIELD. As Agent Coulson has put it, grand larceny is not our problem.”

Tony wrapped arms around himself, grumpy. “Nobody should be plotting to steal stuff from inside my Tower.”

Clint had a sudden coughing fit. Natasha kept her face expressionless.

“Okay. You two? Really put a crimp in dropping the whole Merchant of Death handle.” But Tony was smirking at himself as well as them. “Okay. If you think you’ve got Moriarty Jr. contained, just keep an eye on him. Meanwhile, I had an idea. Jarvis? Bring up the stairwell footage, from about five seconds before Agent Doss goes poof.”

Natasha studied the holographic display, as Doss dashed through the stairwell door and seemed to shimmer out of visibility. Seconds later Natasha dashed through-

Tony froze the image. “Look at the door.”

Natasha did, and saw how the fire door hadn’t swung back closed quite as far as it should have. Damn. “She went right back out through the door.”

“And if she did that instead of playing chase me through the stairwells, I’m guessing invisible may not be inaudible,” Tony said gleefully. “We set up an audio filtering program, look for footfalls where they shouldn’t be - bam. We got her.”

Clint tilted his head at the video, and shrugged. “Might work.”

“Except that she’s probably long gone,” Natasha pointed out.

“But if the possessing entity is, like Doom, interested in whatever we took off the Grace, she’ll be back,” Phil noted. “Or possibly Dr. Farrand will. Janet Farrand, the SHIELD researcher we believe Mr. Evans encountered when he was possessed,” he elaborated as Tony gave him a look askance. “We’ve been able to trace her movements to approximately the area Evans claims to have encountered her in. She’s currently missing.”

“Oh joy,” Tony said flatly. “Just what was she doing research on?”

“Deep sea munitions.” Phil took a deep breath, and sighed. “Go ahead. Get it over with.”

Tony was grinning. “You have a SHIELD lab devoted to blowing up Godzilla.”

Phil shrugged. “Somebody has to.”

“Sometimes spearguns just won’t cut it.” Clint waved a finger. “Just lab work, or practical tests?”

Natasha frowned. “Doom would be interested in either.”

“But speaking as people who recently went swimming with the fishies, practical tests mean subs to put booms under the water, or at least robot submersibles,” Tony reflected. “Which means mini-Raffles could be right.”

Natasha traded a quick glance with Phil, who looked almost as blindsided as she felt. “Someone might have framed his father? Why?”
“Who knows. Who cares? He has a nasty suspicious mind, and we would be dumb as rocks not to use it.” Tony nodded decisively. “Whoever’s sniffing around with possession and invisibility now has a link to underwater tech stuff. That means Artemis’ idea goes from crazy to possible. And let’s face it. We’re the Avengers. Crazy-possible is what we do.”

“It’s an interesting idea....” Phil paused, and checked his tablet. “And it seems Fowl Sr. might be able to shed some light one way or another. He thinks he’s found something.”

“He is not the only one,” Jarvis announced. “Artemis has been making use of some of my public camera options. There is presently a very interesting disturbance in the Tower lobby.”

“Artemis! I know he’s here, he was on the TV! Artemis Fowl II!”

_Holly._

Logically Artemis knew the elevator was the fastest route down. But not running for the stairs was one of the hardest things he’d done all week.

There, hemmed in by a pair of unhappy security guards torn between doing their duty to protect the Tower and not wanting to actually lay hands on a tiny girl. A snappy Recon-green beret was pulled down to hide her ears; mirrored sunglasses shielded her gaze. But the topper had to be the fluffy knitted sea-green jacket, slopping overlong around the redhead to conceal the shape of an adult woman who just happened to be a meter tall.

“Artemis!”

She flung herself at him like the child she was pretending to be. He dipped a knee to catch her up in a swift hug. _Safe._

Irrational thought. They were in no less peril now than they’d been since she stepped into the Tower’s lobby. But Frond, he felt better.

“You got away!” Holly rocked in his hug; and if that was a glimmer of a mischievous giggle on her lips, he certainly couldn’t blame her.

“I told you not to worry about me,” Artemis said with great dignity, brushing one hand over the unicorn-bedecked backpack she had slung over her shoulder. It didn’t weigh much for its bulk, which suggested Holly was using a Moonbelt on the contents and was actually armed for troll. Good. _Do not blush. Dangerous pilot, even more dangerous with a Neutrino; and Father mustn’t suspect she’s more than a child. Not yet. “And I see our plan worked for you as well.”_ He set her down. “We should catch up. I know several people here I would like you to meet.”

“Preferably armed and with free rein to knock them out. Ah well. Perhaps later.”

She skipped along with them to the elevator, kiddie boots scuffing the floor. Grinned up at Butler. “Pick me up!” Dropped her voice, lips barely moving. “Seriously, everything in this city is too high, what do real kids do, you people build insanely....”

“As the young lady wishes,” Butler smiled, scooping the elf up onto his shoulder, even if that meant he had to duck for them both as the elevator doors opened. “Up we go.”

Artemis took a breath as the doors closed behind them. _The game is on._ “Jarvis, please inform Agent Coulson that we may have some pertinent information for him. At his convenience, of course.”

Which should prick the agent’s interest even faster.
“I suspect his convenience will be quite soon,” the AI said dryly. “May I be introduced to the young lady?”

“Ah, where are my manners. Jarvis, Holly Short. Holly, Jarvis,” Artemis said plainly. “Jarvis is in charge of Tower security, and rather enjoys his role as Tony Stark’s mysterious unseen henchman. I doubt either of us will meet him in the flesh the short time we are here—”

Holly poked him. *We’re under observation,* her eyeroll said. *Got it.* She scowled, and poked him again. “Did you think I wouldn’t be right behind you? I told you, we’ve been in worse scrapes before.”

He must be smiling, his face hurt. Who’d have thought he’d ever want to laugh about being chased and nearly eaten by a pack of starving trolls? “Indeed. And I also recall that at the time you first said that, we actually hadn’t.”

“Damn, caught,” Holly muttered.

“And in my defense, I had intended for you to be in precisely that position,” Artemis went on. “Unfortunately, I encountered some... complications.”

“We’re under observation,” her eyeroll said. *Got it.* She scowled, and poked him again. “Did you think I wouldn’t be right behind you? I told you, we’ve been in worse scrapes before.”

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“And in my defense, I had intended for you to be in precisely that position,” Artemis went on. “Unfortunately, I encountered some... complications.”

“Parental-shaped complications?” Holly murmured, as they approached Agent Coulson’s office, spotting a scowling Fowl Sr. stomping toward the same door from another elevator. “I’d tell you to keep your chin up, but you’re doing better than I would. If I had to face down my parents about the company I’m keeping... well, I think I’d be off somewhere blasting innocent rocks into gravel.”

As if destroying harmless inanimate objects was the proper way to handle a case of nerves. Admittedly, justified nerves. Agent Coulson wasn’t his father, blinded by relief and good manners from inquiring too closely into the substance of three missing years. More important, given what Jarvis had mentioned about *demonic invasions,* Coulson likely had access to all of SHIELD’s files on Limbo, not just the ones he and Foaly had been able to hack.

*This will be delicate work.*

Artemis nodded to his father as they met at the door. “Father. You didn’t have to rush.”

Fowl Sr. did not look in the least amused. “I finally found something in the photographs. If that cargo was in that hold when the *Grace* left port, I’ll eat the manifest. And just who is this?”

*So it was a frame. By whom? And why?* “I was just about to introduce Miss Short to Agent Coulson,” Artemis stated. “Shall we?”

The office door opened.

*I see they were expecting us.*

Agent Coulson was behind his desk, looking remarkably alert for someone likely making it through the day on near-lethal levels of coffee. Tony Stark was perched on the desk’s corner, almost bouncing with curiosity. And Agent Barton had made himself a lounging shadow in the office corner, nudging up his own dark glasses as he gave Holly a careful once-over from boots to sparkly backpack.

*Was that a giggle?*

Whether it was or not, they had to carry on. It would be immoral not to pass on the information they could provide on the viper that might lurk in SHIELD’s bosom. Yet they still had to protect the
People.

Shoulders straight, Artemis pulled out a chair for Holly, then claimed his own seat.

*Showtime.*

*I’m sitting in the office of one of the most secretive human agencies on the planet,* Holly thought, keeping her breathing as calm as if she were about to ride a flare. No more point in slouching, bouncing, or otherwise acting like a fidgety little human girl; the SHIELD agents would know better. *No suit, no weapons; just sunglasses and two humans as backup.*

Then again, those humans were Artemis and Butler. She’d bet on them versus an entire Retrieval team any day.

“Agent Coulson, Mr. Stark, Agent Barton, Father - this is Miss Holly Short.” Artemis nodded her direction. “Without her help, I never would have escaped Limbo.”

The room went silent. Holly hid a smile, counting down. *And three, two-*

“What?” Fowl Sr. demanded.

Artemis cleared his throat. “I couldn’t say anything before now, Father. I wasn’t certain how well our plan had worked. Until I knew it had, that people were safe....” He took a deep breath. “I couldn’t jeopardize anyone else’s chances. I had to be sure.”

Tony’s fingers drummed once on his leg. “Are you telling me you staged a breakout?”

“No one breaks out of *Limbo.*” Fowl Sr. was shaking his head in disbelief. “Arty, you must be tired. I assure you no matter what knots you tied the pastor in on Sundays there’s no way a baptized soul can ever end up in-”

“He’s not referring to the theological Limbo, Mr. Fowl,” Agent Coulson stated. “He’s referring to another dimension. An alternate Earth, in a way.”

“An alternate- No,” Fowl Sr. said decisively, rising. “We’ll have no more of this nonsense. Limbo! Other worlds! Next you’ll be chasing leprechauns at the bottom of the garden again.” He stepped toward Artemis’ chair-

*“It is not nonsense.”*

Holly pursed her lips in a silent whistle, as Artemis’ father stopped in his tracks. *Never seen your boy really mad, have you? I almost feel sorry for you. Almost.*

Artemis’ knuckles were pale. She could see his lips moving, see him trying to find words....

*Easy, partner. I’ll tag you out for a bit.* “Limbo is real, Mr. Fowl,” Holly said, not trying to hide the quaver in her voice at the vivid memories of time fractured and bleeding. “It’s real and it’s horrible and Artemis saved my life. Saved *all* our lives.”

“I assure you, any life-saving was quite mutual.” Artemis’ fingers unclenched. “Should I start from the beginning, Agent Coulson? I imagine you would appreciate a complete account for SHIELD’s report.”

“That would be appreciated, yes.” The agent steepled his fingers together, regarding both of them with avid interest.
“Taipei, then,” Artemis said briskly, nodding. “I presume Butler has filled you in on the - er - mess with Miss Paradizo and Billy Kong. Suffice it to say the man was looking for a demon, and a demon he did indeed find. One of the statues in the display was a petrified, but still alive, demon warlock known as Qwan.”

Holly tried not to tense visibly. The more truth they could stick to, the better. It wasn’t as if SHIELD was going to be in any position to ask around about Qwan.

“Various tumultuous events occurred, Butler managed to secure Miss Paradizo’s safety, Kong successfully latched his bomb onto me, and the eldritch being dragged me out the window,” Artemis said briskly, as if trying to gloss over evil memories in one fell swoop.

*I wouldn’t mind doing a little glossing myself,* Holly reflected. *Especially since I was the one doing the dragging.*

“Qwan wasn’t at all certain what we humans were doing shooting at each other, but he didn’t intend to stick around to find out,” Artemis went on. “He conjured a gate to blip back home, and, well... apparently he accidentally dragged me along with him. Bomb and all.”

_Dragged us, and No. 1, and it was actually your seat-of-the-pants backup escape plan until we could get the damn explosive off. But who’s counting?_

“*Home* being an island in the midst of Limbo I later learned was called Hybras,” Artemis said dryly. “Ten thousand years in the past, in relation to Earth.” He shuddered. “It was a dreadful place.”

“Volcanoes, itchy ash all over the place, locals who thought grubs were fine dining,” Holly put in. “I saw Artemis after he dragged himself out of the crater. He looked like a gray ghost.”

“She almost shot me,” Artemis mused. “Fortunately her curiosity prevailed.” He gave her a look askance, lip curled to glint that vampire fang. “That, or she didn’t want to waste ammunition.”

Holly snorted. “Don’t tempt me.”

“Demons?” Fowl Sr. was rubbing his head. “Ten thousand years?”

Holly leaned back, pilot-casual. *Hope Artemis doesn’t take this wrong. He’s not as flexible as you are, is he?*

“Most people are not.” Artemis waved a hand, gracefully turning the conversation over.

“Well, I didn’t shoot him,” Holly shrugged. “He mentioned there’d been a bomb with him when he dropped through the dimensional gate, which didn’t exactly make me feel any better, but if something was going to go boom I had to find it before any of the children did. Give your son credit, he dusted himself off and came right along with. About halfway up the crater wall, we found it. And there we had the first stroke of luck I’d seen in far too long.” She glanced at Artemis.

“Holly’s group of survivors had pieced together a spell that would allow them to escape Limbo,” Artemis picked up the thread. “What they lacked was sufficient power. Agent Coulson, Butler tells me you know there are certain... side effects, to gaining magic in Limbo.”

“That’s true,” the agent said calmly. “He’s also said that so far you’re in the clear.”
“I don’t think I was there very long,” Artemis admitted. “It was hard to tell. An hour might seem like eternity. Or days could pass in an instant.” He shuddered. “Time was most literally out of joint, Agent. We were desperate to escape that place. All of us.”

“And with the bomb, we finally had a way to do it that didn’t take someone going all demon for power,” Holly said fiercely. “Energy is energy. We got the circle set up, Artemis got the bomb set up, and—” She slammed a fist into her palm. “One big boom, into a magic circuit. We got back to Earth. We got home.” She swallowed, drawing on all the fear she’d felt when Artemis had been brought down to Haven, pale and ill. “Only Artemis wasn’t there.”

“Since I was the one most recently taken from Earth, my part in the transport was getting us back to the right time,” Artemis nodded. “Apparently I - misjudged a bit.” He drew a sharp breath. “By three years, in fact.”

Fowl Sr. paled. Tony whistled. Barton was even more expressionless than she’d come in.

Coulson let out a slow breath. “You really are fifteen, then.”

“I think so, yes.” Artemis’ lips twitched. “Fortunately while I may have gotten the time wrong I at least got some aspect of place right. I landed almost in Butler’s front yard.” He glanced down. “And then promptly collapsed. Not one of my most shining moments.”

“He was ill for some weeks, sir,” Butler said quietly. “Madame Ko gave us a few lessons on... unusual injuries. I took him to someone who could help.”

“The rest of the spell went better than we had any right to ask for,” Holly stepped back in. “My people ended up together, safe and sound. On the middle of a sinking island, yes, but D’Arvit, after breaking out of Limbo rafting people back to shore was really no big deal.” She wrapped her hands over each other, still chilled from the memories. “He saved hundreds of lives, Mr. Fowl. Including mine.”

“They are good people, Father,” Artemis said quietly. “A bit strange, but no worse than some of the denizens of Central Park. I did not wish to place them in further danger. But if Holly is here then they are safe,” he glanced at Coulson, “and I can tell you what I think I saw in the lobby, when Mr. Evans was seized.”

Oh yes. They had the Avengers’ attention for sure.

“So...” Stark rubbed a thumb against his nails, as if checking to see specks of grease were caught evenly under all of them. “Just what did you think you saw?”

“I wish Holly had been there as well,” Artemis reflected. “Then I could be sure.” He sighed. “On Hybras, Holly and I encountered one particularly vicious demon known as N’zall. Seemed to have a fixation on humans with crossbows.” He leaned forward. “The odd part was, he wasn’t like that all the time. From time to time, his face would shift, and someone almost reasonable would be there. His name was Qweffor.”

“We found out later they’d been involved in some kind of weird magical accident,” Holly nodded. “Somehow Qweffor ended up merged with N’zall’s body. Most of the time he couldn’t do much about that, but Qweffor was mystically trained and N’zall hadn’t been. So every once in a while, Qweffor could get enough resources together to,” she shuddered, “possess him.”

She didn’t know how the Section Eight warlocks were coming with that mess, and she didn’t really
want to find out. Last she’d heard N’zall had been yanked out of that body and put in a hamster, and
something about that just smacked of bad idea.

Coulson nodded, eyes on them both. “And you think Evans was possessed.”

“There is a rhythm in conversational interactions,” Artemis stated. “Choice of words, body language;
it holds even when one of the people involved is forcibly topsy-turvy. It is the foundation on which
communication rests. When another mind takes over a body....” His hands spread, fingers waving
like trembling ground. “That foundation sinks, as if in an earthquake’s liquefaction. It is wrong.”

Stark’s eyes narrowed. “Oh great. Psychology. So you had a bad feeling?”

Holly winced. Oh, right now I could strangle you, Stark.

Artemis sat up straight, face cold again. “I did. And you may pay heed to that warning, or not, as you
will.” He stood, walking the few feet needed to lay a handful of red-tied rowan crosses and berry
sprigs on Coulson’s desk. “Rowan and red are traditional Irish protections against evil influence. I
was carrying a rowan cross on my person when I was taken. Holly’s people have confirmed that
does indeed work to ward off most magic meant to tamper with the mind and spirit.”

Which is why we had to switch to tech mind-wipes, apparently, Holly thought ruefully. The Irish
learned a lot from us.

“I hope that proves of some use to you.” Artemis took a step back. “If you wish to question me
again, you know where to find me. In the meantime, I plan to catch up with what my friend has been
doing since the last time we ran from a pack of ravening trolls.”

“Trolls?” Fowl Sr. burst out.

Holly didn’t think Coulson would catch it, but she saw Artemis’ shoulders slump, before he rallied
once more. “I rather hoped you would focus on the word friend, Father,” the teenager said bleakly.
“After all, man-eating trolls are relatively commonplace, compared to that chimerical entity you once
wished me to find.”

Holly tensed. Foaly had more than once compared Artemis to a viper. Right now, she could all but
see the fangs sink deep.

How fast can I zap them out before they kill each other?

Fowl Sr.’s scowl could have blackened a blue sky. “Artemis. An alliance of mutual necessity in
grave danger is one thing, but... that woman is not....”

“Oh, please tell me what she is not.” Artemis’ voice was a cold, clear whisper. “I know a great many
things Miss Short is not.”

Sitting on the edge of her chair, Holly traded a glance with Butler. You block, I’ll drag him out of
here.

Fowl Sr. looked at her, and Holly felt her heart jump up to her throat. Suddenly she could see where
Artemis had gotten that fierce concentration, as the older man judged bone structure, skull shape, the
lines she’d deliberately blurred with wool and fluff.

“She’s not human,” Fowl Sr. stated coldly. “Mutant, alien, something else SHIELD hasn’t spread
news of to the world, who knows. But she is not one of our kind.”
“Really.” Standing, Holly gave him her best anti-dwarf-pickpocket glare. And hopefully he wouldn’t see how much her knees wanted to knock together. The only thing scarier than passing for human was not passing for human. “What was your first clue?”

“Did you think I was unaware?” Artemis was still as a coiled serpent. “I was being polite and circumspect. I’ve been told I need to work on that.” Viper-quick, he flicked a glance at Coulson. “The rowan will prevent possession, but I have no idea if it will break one. Butler, Holly, and I are protected. What’s on your desk is enough for the Avengers and my father. I intend to craft a few more; I’m not accustomed to using a flint knife, but since the folklore on how the rowan should be properly cut to be the most efficacious is unclear, better safe than sorry. You can likely obtain more supplies from your New Age shop of choice. Good day.”

He stalked out, Butler silent and sober behind him. Holly stayed long enough to swing her pack back up, and let out a low whistle. “Well. At least nobody’s bleeding.”

Fowl Sr. glared at her, and shook his head. “You—”

“Save it,” Holly cut him off. “He’s been dumped into hell, run for his life, shot a demon to save me, got out, and now he knows you might be in the same building with some magical entity that can possess people. He’s worried sick about you, you galumphing tall idiot! And you want to pick on his taste in friends?” She shook her head; and never mind that they might catch the outline of her ears as the beret rustled. “You know, I’d wondered where he got his nasty streak from. He said it was because of a mistake. But now it looks like he came by it honestly.” Looking past him, she waved at Coulson. “Like Artemis said, if you want us, you know where to find us. I’ve never been to New York before. I hope later I might get to see the sights. Right now, I’m going to go help Artemis with those knives.”

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“Well,” Clint said lightly, as the echoes of the door thumping shut faded. “That was interesting.”

Understatement, Phil thought, mind racing as he picked apart what Artemis had said, what he’d implied, and what might be a worst-case scenario he’d never thought he’d have to drop on the Director: the possible escape of several hundred Otherplace-altered humans, all of whom were currently off the radar. Though given Holly had mentioned looking out for children, it seemed they might have created their own society in the midst of the demonic chaos, and that could have saved them-

“Rowan and red thread.” Fowl Sr. was giving Phil the sort of look he’d seen on a thwarted Fury; coldly furious, aware he’d lost face, and busily plotting how to undermine the opponent for round two. “Why did you let him get away with that fairytale?”

And that’s why you’re on Butler’s threat radar, Phil realized, wishing he’d kept Natasha here, instead of sending Black Widow down to investigate any subtle probes that might take advantage of Holly’s very visible distraction. You’re a bigger threat to his principal than we are.

“Yeah, it’s kind of exactly what I’d expect from a soft sciences guy,” Tony said easily. “Fairy tales, folklore, New Age schmoo-Age.” He shrugged. “Only thing is, according to what SHIELD’s guys got out of various unfriendly people and our fine dustup here in New York with Loki, sometimes the stuff we do with physics intersects the stuff that’s out of this world. So the question is, does it actually work?”

“There are people I can contact and ask,” Phil agreed, spreading out the crosses on his desk. “But as for Artemis’ story - I let him tell it because it’s true.”
Mostly, anyway.

“Limbo exists,” Phil went on. “People have been kidnapped by demons and brought there. Butler identified the creature that took Artemis as a demon. I’m the one who advised Butler to only tell you about Billy Kong, by the way. SHIELD’s efforts to get victims back from that dimension have been less than successful, and all of them have drawn demonic counterattacks. Your family’s been through enough already without running that risk. Artemis’ best chance was to do exactly what he did: find a gate home and get lucky enough to use it.”

If that’s what happened. We’re missing something here. If I could just talk to Jarvis without Fowl Sr. listening in... right. I obviously need more coffee. Phil straightened in his chair, typing on the desk interface. Jarvis. Voicematch on Miss Short-

95% match to Unknown Female, the AI’s reply sprung up. Uncertainty due to language shift.

Phil let out a breath of relief. He might not know how Artemis was sliding around the strict truth. But at least he thought he knew why.

“The night Butler dropped off our radar, there was an unexplained tsunami wave off the coast of Duncade,” the agent went on. “It dissipated before it reached shore, so most people credited the few eyewitness accounts to a bit too much strong drink. But our satellites did catch it, barely. The amount of water displacement was estimated as equivalent to someone suddenly dropping an island the size of Manhattan into the ocean.”

“Oh.” Tony gave him a slightly evil look. “And you didn’t mention this?”

“We were busy cleaning up after Loki. I had to rely on the European branch of SHIELD to know what they were doing.” Phil kept his gaze on Fowl Sr. “There’s a great deal of other evidence, Mr. Fowl, but the short version is that I have good, classified reasons to believe your son is telling the truth.” Just not all of it. “And I’d say he’s very lucky he did know those ‘fairytales’. I doubt most of our agents would have survived as well.” He leaned on his desk. “The question is, why don’t you believe him?”

“You don’t understand.” Fowl Sr. sank back into his chair. “My wife....”

Phil hid a flinch. Given what SHIELD agents around the Fowls had reported, this could be severely unpleasant.

The elder Fowl folded his hands over each other, as if this were just another business negotiation. “Angeline is, and has always been, a dreamer,” he stated. “It’s not a bad quality in a wife; I’m a dour sort by nature, and one must have someone to see the silver lining in every cloud. I love her dearly. But my son will be responsible for the family affairs after I am gone, and no one can succeed in business if they’re filling their heads with fairy folklore.” He sighed. “It wasn’t so bad after I got back from Helsinki. Artemis had dropped the subject entirely, and Angeline was overjoyed to have us together as a family again. Barring a few suspicious excursions on Artemis’ part, he seemed to be settling down well.”

“Outside of the odd dozen traumatized counselors?” Phil put in, unwilling to let that pass. Clint and Natasha had seen more than their own share, to deal with traumatic missions. Fortunately SHIELD psychiatrists had a better grip on reality than most in the profession. SHIELD agents didn’t need to be sane like ordinary people. They needed to be healthy enough to do their job, affirmed in their belief that they’d seen things no civilian would ever understand, and reminded that that was okay. That they didn’t have to be normal.
SHIELD had managed to get access to some of St. Bartleby’s counselors’ reports, confidentiality be damned. Phil had skimmed most of them and tossed them as useless; Artemis had literally written the books half of them were working from, he could come across as anything from high-functioning autistic to psychopathic and none of them would be the wiser.

But there had been one gem, almost lost in the paper sea. There’s nothing wrong with this young man, one temporary counselor had written, except that he’s a genius and bored out of his mind.

Phil had a healthy respect for the potential hazard posed by bored geniuses. Those poor counselors had never stood a chance.

“His behavior has not always been the most civilized,” Fowl Sr. allowed.

Do not pound your head on the desk, Phil told himself. He’s been missing this forest for the obvious trees. And I doubt Artemis has been making matters any easier.

After all, no matter what he’d pulled off to rescue his father in Russia, Artemis definitely had magic now. And this sort of communications disaster was exactly what Phil would expect from a teenager who’d gotten mixed up in something paranormal, learned to deal with it... and come home to parents who wanted a normal family.

Damn it.

“But since he resurfaced at the Manor,” from Fowl Sr.’s glance, he definitely wasn’t going to say Limbo, “things have been... worse.” His hand waved graciously toward Phil. “I must admit, half the reason I accepted your invitation here was that it was yours, Agent Coulson. My contacts say you have a reputation for handling difficult assets.”

One of those assets was hiding a fascinated look behind dark shades, evidently wishing he could sharpen an arrowhead in plain view. Another was still perched on the corner of Phil’s desk, fingers tapping a soft drumbeat of curiosity.

“Angeline was devastated when Arty vanished,” Fowl Sr. went on. “I did my best to comfort her, and... well, Myles and Beckett were a welcome surprise. It’s only when Artemis reappeared that I truly realized what their existence might look like to him. What... society made it look like.” A twist of his mouth. “Not that my eldest has ever cared that much what society thinks, for better or worse. I thought he was warming up to them. But then there was that incident with Myles and his office - Artemis seems to get so frustrated, and Angeline thinks it’s just children being children, and for the life of me I can’t see why Artemis takes it so badly....” He sighed. “And then there was the party. Artemis may have behaved abominably but at least he obeyed his mother. Or seemed to. He disappeared. From his own room. I grant you he apparently took Butler with him, and his safety is Butler’s job, yet - Angeline didn’t seem to notice. He doesn’t disobey her wishes, so of course she assumes he didn’t, or that he must have had a good reason. But what possible good reason is there to vanish out of a secure perimeter without even informing security? Arty’s not that stupid. And he came back wearing sunglasses indoors, and he’s shying away from even being in the same room as his mother.” He raised a fist to rest his forehead on it, and took a tired breath. Lifted his head again, and looked Phil straight in the eye. “They’re not talking to each other. They won’t talk to me. And neither of them will listen. So forgive me if I seem a bit suspicious of a woman who’s not human and seems to have my son’s full and adoring attention.”

Ouch. Angry father alert. Better lower the tension level. “What happened with Artemis’ office?” Phil asked, honestly curious. Because he’d seen Tony twitch at that, and while Tony might say he wasn’t good with people, he was better than he thought.
Besides. If he’d read the reports on Fowl Manor right, since Artemis’ return there was a subtle gap in some of the security information, as if someone had deliberately arranged for that office to be utterly free of surveillance, inside and outside-

*Oh god, of course he did,* Phil realized, chilled. *Artemis has magic. He needs somewhere to practice it. Somewhere private. Where two-year-old brothers won’t see and babble about it. Where they can’t get in and get hurt.*

“Just children being children,” Fowl Sr. frowned. “It’s not as if they can damage anything that can’t be replaced.”

Tony facepalmed.

Icy blue eyes narrowed. “Mr. Stark-”

“For once, Mr. Stark is entirely correct,” Phil cut the elder Fowl off. “So far as I know, there are only two people who have the security overrides for Mr. Stark’s lab. One of them is Ms. Potts. I would guess that office is where your son goes to think. He needs his privacy to do that. Especially if he’s going to get used to having younger brothers underfoot. I know you’re an only child, but I wasn’t. Believe me, no matter how much you love your siblings, if you can’t get away from them homicide starts looking like a very tempting option....” He eyed the slight wave of Clint’s hand.

The archer sat up straight, facing Fowl Sr. “Did they tear up any papers?”

“Toddlers tend to do that, yes.”

“Oh boy,” Clint said flatly. “How many times has he changed the locks?”

“Three so far, I don’t see why-”

“He wants to kill them,” Clint said in a deliberate aside to Phil. “He probably realizes they’re just kids, he probably knows they don’t know enough to realize that hurts people, but he really wants to kill them.”

*He’s an artist,* Phil thought, remembering the sketch Clint had shown him. *An artist who’s been hiding the fact he even draws from his father. Which means he keeps it out of sight... ouch. They’ve either destroyed some of his work or have narrowly missed it. Even without magic, that would be enough to start a fight. “He’s had to change the locks three times in less than two months?”* He wanted to cross his arms and give Fowl Sr. a flat stare; but that would make this a fight, not a discussion, and the older man needed communication, not a verbal thrashing. Phil settled for just raising a skeptical eyebrow. “And you didn’t realize this was a problem?”

“No, you probably didn’t,” Tony sighed, raising his head. “Had that problem with my dad when I was your son’s age. I’m a genius, he was a genius, and everything we did was for Stark Industries. Like everything you do is for the Fowl enterprise. Clue: there’s probably a few things your son likes that he knows you don’t like. Could be hacking, could be music - heck, could even be a taste for funny manga. And he’s probably doing what I did, which was just keep it out of sight because the last thing he wants is a fight with you over something silly. Only kids who get into somebody else’s place drag out *everything.* The more embarrassing to the guy whose stuff it is, the better. Kids are really barbaric,” Tony reflected. “And mean. Some of them grow out of it. Some get dangled off hotel balconies screaming until they realize that was a bad idea.” He glanced back at Fowl Sr. “I think you’d better let him put in better locks. And tell your twins that’s Artemis’ room, and if they don’t stay out, there are going to be consequences.”
“Really,” Fowl Sr. said flatly.

“Do you want my advice on assets?” Phil shot back. “Then yes, there had better be. You can’t assure your son you haven’t replaced him, then turn around and say his privacy is worth less than a pair of toddlers’ amusement. That wouldn’t be fair to an ordinary teenager. To one who’s been kidnapped and traumatized, it’s a disaster. He needs a space he can control. Someplace he can lock the door and breathe, without worrying about the demons showing up to steal him away. And given your son is worrying about literal demons - yes, Mr. Fowl, he needs that locked office. And he does not need any more parties.”

Tony waved. “Speaking as somebody who got pulled out of the desert after very bad people got through with me, that’s a yeah. Noise, lights, people being snippy about things that really don’t mean much next to, am I going to be breathing in the next few minutes? Yeah. Bad. Phil gave us a rundown of the party and the predatory babes in dresses. Ouch.”

“They were perfectly respectable young ladies, Mr. Stark,” Fowl Sr. said stiffly.

All older than your son, and you had to see it, Phil thought. That would terrify any sane teenager. “Mr. Fowl, you do not throw people at a kidnap victim. You do not try to confine a kidnap victim; something I know from personal, painful experience.” He’d made mistakes with Tony. He hoped he’d never repeat them. “And most of all, you don’t tell a teenager who’s trying not to have a panic attack - a very public, uncontrollable, socially embarrassing meltdown - that he should have stayed at the party he didn’t ask for, be nice to people he doesn’t know and definitely doesn’t like, and if he can’t do both he should go to his room. Any teenager in the world who doesn’t disappear after that is probably so beaten down he should be on suicide watch. You-” Phil had to grip the edge of the desk; SHIELD training taught you how to improvise thrown weapons and the letter opener was looking far too tempting. “You have an intelligent, eccentric, ruthless son, whose idea of proper threat response would probably make the Black Widow smile. The only thing stronger than his instinct for self-defense is the fact he loves you. And he does. Or you’d be flattened the same way Spiro was.” Keep it together. Artemis is too good at slicing everyone’s nerves raw. It’s probably half the way he took down Spiro. “He’s fifteen. And you’re trying to discipline him as if he’s still twelve. Or ten. It won’t work.”

Fowl Sr. sat up straight as steel, eyes glittering like ice. “I am his father.”

“Oh yeah, like that’s going to cut any ice.” Clint’s shrug might have even fooled Tony into thinking it was casual. “Legally he’s eighteen. He’s got his finances covered, he’s got the experience to sneak in and out of foreign countries, and he’s been taking care of himself for years. He’s got all his ducks in a row to just pack up and leave, the next time someone pushes too hard. He’ll do it, too. I watched him, while he watched me. You lean on him just a little harder, and he’s going to evaporate.”

Later he was going to have to tell Clint how much he appreciated the archer playing the bad cop here, Phil reflected. “But Artemis hasn’t left. Not yet,” the agent stated. “He’s giving you a chance. You need to figure out what you’re going to do with it.” He paused. “If you want my advice - you probably don’t, but if you want it - try to see him. Not the little boy you left, or the sober young businessman you want him to be. Who he is.”

“Who he is,” Fowl Sr. said, half to himself. “How can I know? He won’t even look me in the eye.” Sighing, he rose. “It’s not much, Agent Coulson. But I can tell you this. Based on the cargo hold images you provided, those Starktech containers were not in that hold when the Grace left port. The cargo handlers would have been keelhauled, and the crew would have done everything in their power to get anything that size and weight properly cinched down and ballasted. Anything less would have been asking to blow up before they foundered.” He shook his head. “I don’t see why, or
how - but I’m beginning to think Artemis was right after all. Someone planted those containers in the wreck.”

Daunting, but apparently more likely by the moment. The question was, were they the same entity that had invaded SHIELD? If so, how? Why? And how was Doom involved? “Mr. Fowl, do you know any enemy of yours who would go to such lengths?”

“None,” Fowl Sr. said grimly. “Do you know any enemy of my son’s?”

“Not yet,” Phil acknowledged. “I’m going to talk to him. After everyone’s had time to calm down a little.”

“...I appreciate the thought, Agent Coulson.”

Not a thank you. Holly might have a point. It seemed like Artemis had learned manners in spite of his upbringing, not because of it.

Be fair. Nobody’s manners are good when they’re backed against the wall. And based on what we know of Artemis, that’s a dangerous place to put a Fowl. Give him a graceful exit. “He’s not fragile, you know,” Phil said. “And he’s definitely not Angeline. According to Butler, he’s one of the most hardheaded realists on the planet. Whatever you did when he was younger, you raised a very strong young man.”

“I hope so.” Determined, the elder Fowl stalked out the door.

“Jarvis?” Tony murmured. “Let us know if he sticks around.”

“You think he might try eavesdropping?” Clint gave him a skeptical look.

“Don’t exactly have eaves here for him to drop off of, but yes.”

“Apparently not,” Jarvis informed them. “He is heading for the elevator.”

“Good,” Phil muttered, heading for the coffeepot. Today, he wasn’t going to make any jokes about Tony and caffeine. Keeping up with a cranky genius was hard.

“Hmm.” Hopping off Phil’s desk, Tony topped his own mug up. “You really weren’t pulling your punches, there.”

“Actually, I did. Just a little,” Phil said judiciously. “A shouting match wouldn’t have helped any of us. But no, not much. I think part of the problem may be that people pulled too many punches for Mr. Fowl after his rescue. Artemis would have been all too aware of how close he’d come to losing his father. Butler... he lost his uncle in the original wreck of the Fowl Star, he would have done his mourning already. And Angeline would have smothered him in attention. With all that tiptoeing around his raw nerves, I think Mr. Fowl may have missed how badly his absence hurt his family. Especially how much they had to learn to depend on other people. Or... not, in Angeline’s case.”

“Speaking of depending on people,” Tony mused, “nobody threaten Miss Short. I mean it. We could wind up in a world of hurt faster than Loki could drop the Helicarrier.”

“That bad?” Clint leaned back, eyeing them.

“Probably worse,” Tony said judiciously. “I know a Pepper when I see one. Even when she comes in a convenient compact carry-on size.”
“I was thinking Natasha,” Clint mused. “Just not as edgy.” A dark shrug. “Which means they’re lying about something.”

“About Otherplace.” Phil let out a slow, aggravated breath. “But why? If he’s telling the truth about seeing someone possessed, if he’s warning us - why lie about what happened in another dimension?”

“Agent Coulson, I feel impelled to point out that neither of them specifically said they first met in Limbo,” Jarvis put in. “Which is quite wise, as I have photographic evidence that they did not.”

“Ooo, gimme,” Tony grinned, before Phil could sputter, watching a few still images of a crowd of people flash up on the desk display. “Now what do we have here?”

“Apparently someone in Louvre security has made a habit of recording and archiving the first few days of any exhibition, for later use in identifying potential culprits if items go missing,” Jarvis informed them. “These are from day one of the exhibition of The Fairy Thief.”

Butler was obvious, a mountain in a suit and mirorshades. Artemis far less so, almost lost in the crowd of gawkers in tropical shirts and tourist gear despite his sober suit. Right at the railing was a too-short hairy... person... in sunglasses, with the largest teeth in a grin Phil had seen since the last time he’d taken down a supervillain’s reconstructed velociraptors. And standing well behind the beard, where Artemis was looking with that pale vampire smirk-

Beret. Kiddie cowboy boots. And a girl’s coat almost plain in comparison to the riot of tourist plumage. Definitely Holly Short.

“They are lying about Otherplace.” Phil tried to squash an irrational feeling of disappointment. If Artemis was willing to lie to his own father, why should anyone else expect the truth? “But why? They admitted to magic, they admitted to facing demons, they admitted Holly’s not human-”

“But the one thing they didn’t do?” Tony took another swig of coffee. “Admit that they’re already here.”

“They,” Clint said clinically. “How many ‘they’ are we talking about?”

“Rough guess?” Tony shrugged. “A million. At least.”

Phil almost dropped his coffee.

“Think about it.” Tony slurped the last drops out of his cup, and waved it around. “They’ve got magic, sure. They’ve also got a tech base that can stand up to Jarvis in poke mode, and communications links set up so Artemis can call them whenever he likes. That takes people, and time, and materials. They’ve got enough people that a pair of them - tell me what that hairy guy is, besides really weird - can go drop by an art exhibition so our mini-Moriarty can show off his Robin Hood side.”

Trust Tony to know what it took to maintain a viable base of technology. Still. “A million?” Phil said in disbelief. “Where could they all be?”

“Antarctica? Dug in under the polar ice cap? Hollow worlders? How the heck should I know?” Tony gave him a look askance. “But they’re definitely here, or they wouldn’t be trying so hard to convince us they’re not. And yeah. A million at least. I say mini-Pepper, Clint says mini-Natasha, and both of those are definitely one in a million. Not just, what are the odds of finding somebody that utterly awesome. Ignore the sparkly unicorns. I grant you that’s hard. But Holly’s trained. And she’s used to facing down people like you, me, and Fowl. And being listened to when she does it. That means,” one finger went up, “a group of people big enough and specialized enough they can train
somebody to Special Ops standards,” another, “big enough they’ve got high-powered bureaucrats, movers, and shakers,” a third, “big enough that some Ops people have serious rank, and she’s got it. Which further means,” Tony’s pinkie shot up, “Artemis has a serious in with these people, and when he figured out that cargo was a frame, she’s the one he called.” Fingers clamped into a fist. “Whatever’s going on, they think it’s big. Billions on the poker table big. They’re gambling with their lives, and Artemis is loading the dice as fast as he can. It’s what I’d do.” Tony took a long breath. “And whatever it is, it’s going down soon.”

Phil frowned. He’d read worry and concern from Artemis’ stance, anticipation from Butler, and a fine vibration of tension from Holly. But nothing as serious as what Tony was implying-

*I’m an idiot.* “I keep thinking he’s a teenager,” Phil mused. “But he’s a trained psychologist, no matter how young. A chess master. And Holly’s... well.”

“Tiny,” Tony agreed. “Yeah. Throws all our reads off. You know, Bruce might be better at this in some ways. He’s used to working with really tiny stuff that can kill people lots.” He eyed Phil. “I’ve seen Pepper face down supervillains. Holly was running on guts and nerve. But she’s here because Artemis needs backup. Which means he’s important.” Tony put his mug down on the counter, twirling it around by the handle. “I think we just found who helped Artemis get his dad back.”

Answers. Phil felt a bright glee at the prospect; dampened by the way Tony was toying with his ex-coffee. “You don’t look happy about that.”

“About figuring out Artemis might not actually owe the criminal underworld, just a bunch of hidden whoevers? Oh, I’m just peachy.” Another grating revolution of ceramic on tile. “We’re the Avengers. Earth’s mightiest heroes. And they’re scared of us.”

For someone who wanted to blot out the deaths Obadiah Stane had caused with his technology, that had to hurt. “If Artemis is one of their contacts, then I can’t say I’m surprised,” Phil observed, watching Tony sling the mug around again. “The Avengers are linked to SHIELD, and SHIELD has their fingers in his father’s businesses. Artemis spent three years fighting to keep the family fortune intact, only to watch his father allow a shady international organization into key positions in their companies. Now Artemis is back, three years out of time, right on the heels of an alien invasion. I would be very surprised if he hadn’t heard something about the bomb. That the Avengers stopped it from going off in New York.... either he hasn’t found that information, or he’s having nightmares about how close it was. I know I do.” The agent reached out and tapped ceramic, not interfering with Tony’s slow turn. “We can’t make him trust us. All we can do is show that we’re willing to be reasonable.”

“So,” Clint drew out the word behind them, obviously addressing Jarvis, “what’s this *Fairy Thief* look like, anyway? Must be some painting to get stolen sixteen times.”

“A rather unusual Impressionist painting, from a rather odd painter,” Jarvis informed them, bringing up a canvas of vibrant colors on the desk monitor. The picture showed the window of a rustic little cottage, half-shaded by trees. Through the window you could see a young baby in swaddling clothes, sleeping on a cot in the sun. A long-haired, green-skinned fairy woman with wide translucent wings had just touched down on the windowsill, hand reaching out as if she would snatch the child then and there.

“The general consensus is that Impressionism was a reaction to photography, trying to capture the expression of lived experiences rather than still images,” the AI went on. “In accordance with this, the subject of an Impressionist artwork is almost always a real person, place, or landscape. Pascal Hervé is unique in that he painted a series of works depicting fairies. *The Fairy Thief* illustrates the legend of changelings; that fairies might steal a human child, replacing it with a stock of wood or an
elderly fairy glamoured to look like the infant.”

“Paint-strokes look like Artemis draws. Huh.” Clint frowned, leaning forward to study the image. “That is a really awkward position to grab a target that close to your own size.”

Tony hooked his mug with a finger, and gave Clint a wry look. “Hello? Fairies? Not real?”

“It would, however, be consistent with one of the classic elements of European fairy lore,” Jarvis observed. “Those of Faerie cannot cross a human threshold without a direct invitation.”

Phil blinked, something about that poking at his attention. An invitation. Where did I-

A chill ran down his spine. Of course. He’d put out word through his small network of magical contacts as soon as the word possession had seriously come up. The information that had bounced back so far agreed on one thing: almost always, possession required an invitation. Deliberate or otherwise.

There has to be a key to unlock a human mind and soul, Phil thought. Sometimes a wish, sometimes an object, like Loki’s staff; sometimes just overpowering the next target by physical force. But there has to be a way in. “We’re attacking this problem the wrong way.”

“Mini-Raffles?” Tony raised an eyebrow.

“Our intruder,” Phil clarified. “We’ve been working on how the agents vanished. We need to know how they got possessed in the first place.”

“Entry point instead of exit.” Clint’s eyes narrowed. “You think we’re not going to catch them soon?”

“Not soon enough,” Tony shook his head. “If Artemis’ tiny friend is here, he thinks things are going to go ballistic. So yeah. Multiple angles of attack are a good thing.” He paused. “Hell if I know how to look for a possession instead of footsteps, though.”

“The info I have says rowan and red thread do work to block some entities,” Phil reflected, looking at Clint. “You and Jarvis seem to have had the best luck talking to Artemis so far.”

“Mostly because we didn’t talk much,” the archer said wryly.

“Even so,” Phil nodded. “He respects you as a professional, and you let him hide when he needed it. Do you think Artemis would be willing to talk to us about any other ways to block entities? Or whatever else he knows about possession?”

“Might be,” Clint judged. “But not with Senior around. As long as he’s there, Artemis is going to be playing find the lady with everything he knows.”

“And I thought you two thought he was honest,” Tony smirked.

“Indeed he is,” Jarvis said dryly. “In much the same way that the Sidhe of folklore are honest: he prefers not to lie, and he keeps his promises. No matter what might be obliterated in the process.” He paused. “What we choose to deceive ourselves into believing he actually agreed to, is not his problem.”

“And now you have me worried,” Tony muttered. “No wonder the kid’s hacks are so nasty. Even when he’s not protecting who-knows-how-many tech-savvy little people. Ah, no,” he added, when Phil would have objected. “Being involved in a heavy-duty ritual does not a magic-user make. See? I
was paying attention. Artemis said she would have shot him. Not fireballed him. I’m thinking he didn’t lie about Limbo. Just... misdirected. So. What do we know? Artemis went out the window. The bomb went out the window. The demon went out the window. But we have no pictures to double-check. Just what Butler told us. And Butler trusts Holly.” Tony paused. “Artemis called her when he got in trouble here. What if this is not the first time?”

Clint whistled. “You think Artemis didn’t go out that window alone.”

“Would explain a bodyguard guarding someone else’s body, wouldn’t it?” Tony pointed out. “Two tech-savvy people and a bomb end up where someone’s already got a ritual set, it just needs power?”

“It does sound like a more plausible scenario for a breakout,” Phil admitted. “Especially if you’re right about a hidden society.”

“I’m right.” Tony paused. “Probably. And now I really want another look at that stuff off the Grace, damn it. Only I already did as much as I can without yanking it straight into dry air, and if that stuff was planted underwater I really don’t want to do that. How can I speed up the laws of physics to desalinate it faster?”

“The mind boggles, Sir,” Jarvis said dryly. “Speaking of. Exactly how are you going to convince Ms. Potts to wear the latest Neolithic folklore fashion?”

“I’ll think of something,” Tony waved it off, picking up one of the crosses. “Yep, one for each of us, and- argh. Looks like Senior left his.”

*Of course he did.* Phil sighed. “I’ll take it to him.”

“No,” Clint shook his head.

“Absolutely not,” Tony agreed. “You are not his flunky. You are a great guy, and I’d trust you up against Fury or even a gaggle of Senators any day. But Fowl Sr. comes from money, centuries of money, and Moriarty Jr. aside, guys like that have a hard time seeing someone who comes to them as on equal footing. Believe me. I’ve had to kick too many of their financial assets to get them to take me seriously, and I was born rich. No.” He smirked. “Steve’s going to be back soon, right?”

Clint frowned. “But you just said-”

“Yeah, but Steve’s military. Even if he is retired, kinda. Rules are different,” Tony nodded. “Also, Steve wasn’t here when you thwapped him on the nose, Phil. Plus he can frown and look all disappointed, ’cause sure, a little wooden cross is silly, but it’s his son trying to help, he can just tuck it in his pocket, and who doesn’t wear stuff like a tie he doesn’t like, if it’s a family present?”

“And you say you’re not good at people,” Phil mused.

“I’m not. Ordinary people,” Tony stated. “Nobody who was in this room ten minutes ago is ordinary.” He tapped his fingers on his cup, eyes narrowed in coffee-fueled glee. “And now I really want to know how Artemis met Short.”

Chapter End Notes

céad míle fáilte - Irish Gaelic, a hundred thousand welcomes.
“Find the lady” - aka 3-card Monte, a gambling game/scam.
The book Jarvis would download for Tony is this one: The realities of witchcraft and popular magic in early modern Europe: culture, cognition, and everyday life, by Edward Bever.

Very interesting book on not just what people might have actually done as witchcraft (including nasty tricks with slipping people ergot, oy), but how the perception of malevolent intent might well have caused real-life harm.

A few more interesting books include:

Cunning-folk: popular magic in English history, by Owen Davies.
For the glory of God: how monotheism led to reformations, science, witch-hunts, and the end of slavery, Rodney Stark.
“I suggest a reaching tool.” Artemis glanced down at the friend walking beside him, hoping she would take it as the practical suggestion it was. ‘So that you need not feel bound to our company if you wish to explore the Tower. Although apparently within these walls there is another option.”

“I think I can manage a few more overgrown furnishings,” Holly smirked. “What other option?”

“That would be me, Miss Short,” Jarvis said from a hallway speaker. “I have access to a great deal of the Tower’s systems. If you need assistance, I can likely provide it. Based on the Avengers’ recent discussions, however, I would advise none of you to wander the Tower alone.”

“Because there’s a possessing entity.” Holly glanced Artemis’ way, then at the speaker. He’s watching us? she mouthed.

“Because there is a possessing entity that can somehow conceal itself from my cameras,” Jarvis stated. “Sir has instituted an audio filtering program in case invisible does not mean inaudible.”

Butler stopped dead in the corridor. “Invisible security threat.” His voice was dangerously flat. “You might have said.”

“As I said, Sir is improvising a means-”

“High-speed cinecameras.” Butler gave Holly a level look, and a shrug, as he started walking again. “Two thousand frames plus a second. Like filming a hummingbird. Sometimes invisible is just too fast to see.”

“Carbon dioxide sensors,” Artemis put in. “Your possessed victim must likely still breathe.” He smirked. “If you wished to be inventive, diabolical, and low-tech, you could fill a critical room with mosquitoes.”

“Pressure sensors,” Holly added ruefully. “Tricky to install, but if you do it right even someone like your Iron Man would have a hard time sneaking through. However those flying boots of his work, he still needs to exert pressure on the air.”

“...I see this is not an unfamiliar subject,” Jarvis said thoughtfully.

“You have no idea,” Butler said dryly.

“There are other methods to defend oneself against nonvisibility or possession by outside mental influence, but I am uncertain how well they would work compared to a simple rowan cross,” Artemis stated. “Somehow, I doubt you could easily acquire mirrored sunglasses of the... proper fit.”

Holly’s gaze felt like a laser. But courtesy went both ways. He would not broadcast Jarvis’ secrets in public corridors.

“It might indeed be problematic,” Jarvis said dryly. “Perhaps you could clarify what aspect of the mirrored lenses is effective?”

“I’m not certain. I have not had much opportunity to experiment with anything that might not work,”
Artemis observed, as they approached their suite. “The best information I have to this point is that as mirrors reflect truth instead of what our minds wish to see, so mirrored lenses help filter out magic that would lull our minds into complacency.” He paused at the door. “Speaking of subjects that require clarification, Holly is here to see us. I would appreciate it if she, also, were covered under privacy in our rooms.”

“I have already agreed that your rooms are private, subject to exceptions based on the Avengers’ safety,” Jarvis said levelly. “May I ask that if any of you do find other information on invisibility and possession, you would pass it on as soon as possible?”

That stung. “Mr. Jarvis, there are thousands of innocent civilians at work in this building, all of them at risk from a being that violates the mind and spirit,” Artemis said stiffly. “I do not know if you have ever been in a situation where your free will was invaded and usurped, but I assure you, this creature has sunk to abominable depths. If we find something that will stop this intruder in its tracks, we will make sure it arrives in the proper hands.”

Keycard in hand, he opened the door.

“I am glad to be certain we are on the same page,” Jarvis stated. “I spend a great deal of my time dealing with very intelligent people who assume no one else can help; whether for lack of information, funds, or power.”

“It is always better to check assumptions,” Butler noted, holding the door for Holly and Artemis. “We’ll see what we can do.”

Stepping inside, he closed the door behind them. And locked it.

Safe.

Well. Safer, at least. “We should be relatively free of observation within these rooms,” Artemis observed in Gnomish, taking off his sunglasses in unalloyed relief. Every once in a while the faint amber tint Holly’s eye gave his vision still caught him off guard. Adding sunglasses indoors on top of that could be downright annoying. “I bargained with the entity who controls the Tower’s security for privacy. However, we are likely still being recorded in some fashion, so it would be wise to use a language they cannot decipher.”

“You deciphered it,” Holly pointed out; scanning the office here, and glancing through doors to the kitchen and bedroom. “The entity?”

“I had a few scraps of fairy,” ka-dalun, a word that had changed his life, “before I ever tried. Not to mention a written representation and access to the most current Egyptian translations to date. In essence, I had a magnet to search out the needle in the haystack. They do not.” He offered her a chair, pulling out the written spoils of his visit to El Gato Preto. “Entity, yes. Jarvis is an artificial intelligence. So far as I can determine, a fully sapient one. He appears to reside in the Tower servers, at least part of the time.”

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“An AI.” Holly swung down her pack, shaken. “And he- wait. How do you know where he lives?”

“Guess,” Butler rumbled. “I’ve never seen him cut off a hack so fast. That was a very unpleasant plane ride.”

“Though from a theoretical perspective, it is interesting to note that a hacker truly does put the essence of their self at mystical risk, trespassing on foreign computer systems,” Artemis noted. “If we need to hack the servers here it will have to be Foaly’s job- Holly!”
Taking off her sunglasses, the elf gave him a deliberate look. “We’re safe in here with the door locked. Butler knows how to avoid people’s gaze, and you’re too polite to try and give a friend orders. And,” she hesitated, “Artemis, Qwan says the odds are you can’t give eyeball orders anymore.”

*Because magic counts me as bound by fairy geis,* Artemis filled in. “I hope you will not think too ill of me if I admit that is both a relief, and profoundly unsettling.” He pressed his hands against each other, concerned. “You drew a great deal of attention in the lobby. I doubt it was only for our benefit. You have a plan?”

“Bait,” Holly said bluntly. “And hopefully pressure to panic our subject into making a mistake. If we’re dealing with a fairy - well, my face is *everywhere* underground. If whoever it is has been Below any time in the past five years, they know one of LEP’s top cops is right here in reach.” She took a deep breath. “And they know I’m with you. We’re kind of... infamous.”

Butler raised a dark brow.

“You’re beyond infamous,” Holly said wryly. “But I doubt someone who’s jumping bodies is going to be nearly as scared of you as they should be.”

“Jumping bodies.” Artemis suppressed a shudder at the thought. “I looked through the Book for references to possession magic. What little there was, amounted to the unhelpful advice of *don’t.* Celtic folklore recounts that one can frighten a possessing fay spirit out of a changeling by tracing a cross of ashes on the victim’s forehead in their sleep, but I doubt that will help us unless our suspect decides to nod off in what he or she will know is decidedly unfriendly company.”

“Tranquilizer dart,” Butler shrugged.

“A valid point.” Which made Artemis feel a bit more cheerful. “Though one, we need to determine the correct substance for the ashes. I somehow doubt banana peels were the original material.”

“Rowan ought to work for that, too,” Holly observed.

“Excellent, we have scraps to burn. Second, the method only drives the possessor out. We would still have to catch the perpetrator’s physical form. Wherever that might be.”

His companions nodded soberly. Blast. He’d hoped someone else might have an idea.

“Third,” and this was the truly sobering one, “if the folklore is accurate, the possessor has displaced the victim’s spirit. The ash cross drives the possessor out, supposedly because it no longer recognizes the body it has stolen. But if the cross is not then wiped off, the victim’s spirit may not recognize its own body, and....” He would not quail. “They might never wake up.”

“Section Eight archives say that might be a risk, in a baby.” Holly didn’t look happy at all. “Although it looks like that’s because if an adult mind suppresses one that’s not well developed for a long time, the brain may not be able to recover without specialized medical healing. An adult... an adult should be fine.”

“Holly?” Artemis leaned forward, concerned. “Are you all right?”

“Not really.” She ran her fingers over the arm of an oversized chair, gaze flicking away. “The archives... well, let’s just say they don’t teach any of this to little elflings in school. Probably don’t want the children hiding under their beds with nightmares. Easier just to let it all slide out of our memory.”
That sounded as if it hurt. “Holly.” Artemis kept his voice calm, understanding; at least, he hoped so. “Every race’s history has its blood, gore, and evil. Most humans are just as blithely ignorant of history that occurred a mere two centuries ago. Mention to the average Londoner that their newspapers during the Great Hunger exulted in the extermination and flight of the Irish, and you will get a blank stare, at best. My ancestors...” He had to laugh once, aware of the irony. “It’s true Fowl Manor supported more of the peasantry than most lords. They had to. It’s hard to commit crimes when your only accomplices are cows and sheep!”

Holly was staring at him.

“We are none of us the offspring of angels,” Artemis went on. “Well, perhaps the People are, if Irish lore is to be believed; children of those disobedient to God, yet not evil enough to merit Hell. But the past is past. You are not guilty of your ancestors’ maleficent actions, as I am not guilty of mine. I find my own sins quite enough to bear.”

Like sunshine through clouds, a smile flickered on her face. “You’re better at the friends thing than you think.”

“Am I? I thought I was merely stating the facts.” Good. He hated it when Holly was depressed. Captain Short was vibrant and courageous and determined; he had the memory of a very sore jaw to remind him never to underestimate her. “So what do the archives know about possession, then?”

“And how to avoid it,” Butler nodded. “It’s already grabbed at least one agent in SHIELD. We can’t afford for this creature to get the drop on any of us.”

“Anyone that tried to possess you would probably knock themselves into a coma.” Holly tilted her head to look him up and down. “You’ve fought the mesmer. That takes a will that doesn’t give an inch for anything. According to the archives, so long as you have that rowan on you, they might as well beat their heads on a steel cage. It’d hurt less.” She glanced at Artemis. “Qwan says you and I should be just as safe. I’ve got magical training on how to keep my head together, and you’re as mentally slippery as dry ice on a lava flow. Possession needs two things. Physical contact - either by touch, or an enchanted carrier object - and a crack into someone’s mind. Even if our suspect managed to strip us all of equipment, we’d be able to keep it out for hours.”

That was a relief. “And who is our suspect?” Artemis inquired. “From the lore I found, elves, pixies, and demons are three of the usual perpetrators. Some sources also mention korrigans, but I couldn’t determine if those were gnomes, dwarves, or something else entirely. The Britannic term seems to have been used for dwarves in some areas, dancing watery sirens in quite another, and why couldn’t people at least give entirely different supernatural creatures different names-” He cut himself off; this was no time to indulge in a rant about the lack of scientific vigor applied to magic. “I suppose it’d be too much to hope for that you might have a selection of possible evildoers?”

With a fierce grin, Holly reached into her pack. Rustled it around a bit, and came out with a pair of wrist computers.

Wait. Two?

Strapping one on, she handed the other over. “This is provisionally yours. You need three recommendations to be hired on as an official consultant; Vinyáya’s working on it. In the meantime, treat it with caution. Foaly was supposed to fill it with relevant files, but I think he may have slipped in a few extras. The short version at this moment is yes, warlock-trained elves, pixies, demons and sometimes sprites could possess people. If they had the training for it. But it’s really esoteric, not to mention illegal. We don’t think there are any active warlock circles in Haven who offer that kind of instruction, but Section Eight’s still trying to get information out of the other cities. Atlantis in
particular is being snitty. Probably because someone in the ranks is encouraging it. You know how nasty the black market in weapons is.”

Artemis caught Butler’s nod from the corner of his eye as he studied the mini-computer. And quite right. If they’d had any remaining illusions of the People being always peaceful and nonviolent, surviving a goblin rebellion would have shredded them. “I suspect that acquisitive tendency holds among all sapient creatures. Or is Foaly not still trying to acquire certain of the Iron Man’s inventions through nonstandard channels?”

Holly growled. “If I hear get me an arc reactor one more time....”

Ah, now that was the Captain he knew. Good.

Provisionally his or not, Artemis strapped the computer on in place of his watch with a warm sense of accomplishment. He knew the Gnommish symbols, learned through painful, frantic effort with death and financial ruin breathing down his neck. He knew the platform, the technology, the exact amount of pressure it took to type in a command. With an ordinary laptop he could give Foaly a run for his money. With this....

I could do an incredible amount of damage. But I won’t.

Odd feeling, being officially trusted. Even provisionally. “I don’t suppose information on combining magic and technology made it into these files?” Artemis called up the computer libraries to take a quick skim through the available folders and the search engine. “I see there is information on batteries and the time stop. Sensible; less of a risk to turn over classified information when I’ve already proven I have the basic principles well enough to break it....”

Butler cleared his throat. Artemis glanced up, then at the clock function of the computer. Oops. Where had the past few minutes gone?

“Elfling in a candy store.” Holly was grinning. “Focus, Artemis. Criminal to catch. Does that ring fit right, Butler?”

“Nicely, Captain.” Butler turned the new communicator around on his finger. “Good to have something in case we get separated.”

“The AI has proven himself capable of tracing LEP communications,” Artemis pointed out. “Which is one reason why I’m now not certain what, exactly, I sensed upstairs. It could be something from the Grace’s cargo. Yet it might well be some element of the People’s technological magic that the Iron Man got his hands on to create a true AI.”

“That’s not as outlandish as I would have thought a few days ago,” Holly admitted. “We don’t have evidence that the Iron Man ever tampered with the People’s tech, but we have reason to believe his father may have gotten his hands on a few things and back-engineered them. And SHIELD - they’re tech packrats. They’ll pick up anything. Even whatever kind of alien power source that Tesseract was.” She leaned on the chair arm, red brows drawn down. “You really think Jarvis is a person? Not just a fancy program?”

“He can be bargained with, argued with, and reasoned with,” Artemis stated. “I refuse to believe a computer program is vulnerable to blackmail. Also, magic counts hacking his servers as trespass into a dwelling. I would conclude that he is.”

“Then we need to find out what’s up there,” Holly sighed. “Hopefully it’s just the cargo. If it’s not... I’m not going to kill someone just because he’s electronic. If he is a person - D’Arvit, we bargained
with you at your worst, I’m sure we can work something out.”

*And if we can’t - Butler and I will work something out*, Artemis thought grimly. After all, they were the criminals in this partnership.

*I really hope it is the cargo.*

“I believe I sent the full files to Foaly, but in essence, the suspect containers are still desalinating in tanks on one of the Tower’s upper levels,” Artemis stated. “I take it water and distance will degrade your helmet’s sensitivity?”

Holly’s hand twitched toward her backpack. “Some, yes.”

“Then at the very least, we will need to get you on the same floor,” Artemis nodded. “That will entail getting past the Avengers. They do not seem to possess magic, but they are formidable individuals. Their leader, at least in combat, is Captain Steve Rogers....”

One of these days, Steve thought, he might get used to the Avengers handing him a dozen impossible things before the end of the day. Just, maybe not today. “Is it really that silly to just keep it in your pocket?”

Standing in his suite, Mr. Fowl eyed the bit of thread and wood Steve held like one of the nuns might a dead rat. “It is superstition,” he said flatly. “And I am trying to be a better son of the Church than I have in times past.”

Hard to argue with that. But Steve was going to try. Because no matter how much of a criminal genius Artemis might be, he was still a teenager. He’d probably run up against his father’s wall of *my way or else* so many times that he was contemplating taking high explosives to it. But Steve was a grownup, no matter how out of time he was, and adults were supposed to be able to have rational, reasonable conversations. Even when they felt like banging someone else’s head against the wall. “Sir, if I remember my history lessons right, there was a time smallpox vaccinations were considered ungodly and superstitious, too. In fact,” heh, the nuns would be surprised this had stuck, “Benjamin Franklin argued against smallpox inoculations, because rich people would get them and just go about their business while they were still contagious. Which meant they came out fine but lots of poor people died. Franklin said if we couldn’t inoculate everybody, then nobody should get it. So the rich would have to lump it, and take their chances the same as everybody else.”

Mr. Fowl folded his arms. “Vaccination is scientific, young man.”

“Give Tony and Bruce enough time, they’ll science this,” Steve insisted. “Right now it’s like - well, like the first days of smallpox inoculation. We don’t know why it works. But we know it works.” He shrugged. “Butler doesn’t have a problem carrying them.” And that had been interesting, getting a quick briefing from Jarvis as he and Bruce had made their way back from the Baxter Building. Butler didn’t have magic, as far as they knew, but he seemed to be fine with the fact Artemis did. And the way the three of them had apparently rattled off ways to deal with *invisible threats* and mind-control....

*They think this is one of their enemies*, Steve concluded. *But if it is, why is he attacking SHIELD? And how is Doom involved?*

“Captain Rogers, you’re an American. Things are different for you,” Mr. Fowl declared. “My son needs to live in our society, and if it becomes known that he indulges in peasant lore-”

“And who’s going to say anything about it?” Steve cut him off. Sometimes he had to remind himself
that the Europeans he’d met with the Howling Commandoess hadn’t exactly been normal. Setting improvised bombs up in the field didn’t leave much room for worrying about if you had to use the salad or the dessert fork next. “Agent Coulson’s report to SHIELD will read that we took recommended preventive measures from a scholar in the field. He doesn’t have to mention the field is folklore. Right now we’ve had some kind of possessing creature attack people at least three times that we know about, and the agent’s sources say these crosses will work. If you feel bad about it, talk to your padre after you get back to Ireland. I don’t think the penance will be that heavy.” He put the red-wrapped twigs down on the desk. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to go help my team plan how to catch an invisible intruder.”

“I suggest an icepack, Captain,” Jarvis said, once the elevator doors had closed behind him. “And possibly an aspirin.”

“Thanks,” Steve sighed. “But aspirin doesn’t do much for me.”

“Never underestimate the psychosomatic benefit of having done something, no matter how small,” Jarvis replied. “Indeed, some of Agent Coulson’s files indicate that a significant amount of low-level magic is specifically meant to deal with emotional turmoil and injured psyches. Clear the mind, so to speak, and the rest of the world becomes far easier to deal with.”

Steve raised a curious brow. “You’re really interested in this.”

“I find magic intriguing for two main reasons,” Jarvis reflected. “First, it is a way for human minds to affect the world without visible physical effort, similar to my own control of devices and security within my domain. In another era, I would have been considered Sir’s familiar.”

Steve had to smile at the comparison. “He really is like a wizard, isn’t he?”

“Yet second,” Jarvis went on, “it is in a very fundamental way not akin to what I do. I am a creation of circuits, logic, and order. Magic involves taking the supremely messy jury-rig that is the human brain, and inducing it to make the world bend to human will. The contrast is intriguing.”

“And Artemis is one of the few people on the planet who can give Tony a run for his money,” Steve said wryly.

“That does add to the appeal,” the AI admitted. “Sir needs a challenge.”

“Because a bored Tony is a dangerous Tony,” Steve muttered.

“One might look at it that way,” Jarvis stated. “I prefer to view it from the perspective that Sir is never happier than when someone has told him something is impossible, and he is in the process of finding ways to prove them wrong.”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way,” Steve admitted. Maybe Tony was a lot more like the Commandoess than he’d thought. Not like Howard. Tony had put himself in harm’s way, right into the middle of the fight, in ways Howard never would have.

But maybe like Howard might have been, Steve thought, watching floor numbers increase, if he’d had to live in a world that’s a lot more confusing about who’s right, and who’s just trying to keep their heads above water.

Not that he planned to bring that up with Tony anytime soon. He was a veteran; he’d dealt with plenty of people just hit by the shock of death, and a lot more still grieving. He’d asked Phil - carefully - for the dates of Howard Stark’s death and funeral. He wasn’t going to bring up anything related to Howard within a month of those days.
“I guess that’s not a bad way to deal with things,” Steve said thoughtfully. “I wish other people were dealing with the situation this well.”

_Initial thought:_

I’ve got to show Betty.

Bruce saved his work. Double-checked that the valuable samples were safe in the lab freezer. Sent a subtle and mysterious email to the - um - like of his life. Only then did he roll his lab chair back and throw his hands up in the air. “Yes!”

Betty is going to love this.

Yes, she might say she was coming back, but the biotech conference she was attending in Atlanta was really important, and who knew when she’d wake up and realize the Tower wasn’t the best place to plug in her microscope. But she’d definitely come back to New York for this.

_Easy, take it slow, Bruce cautioned himself, heading for Phil’s office. Research says there’s Denisovan genes in the Tibetans, after all, and you only had time to match a few bits out of the mtDNA. But ooo, what bits...._ 

He walked through the door, almost running into Steve before their leader started and stepped out of the way. “Sorry, just got here myself.” Steve smiled. “You look better.”

“Science,” Bruce nodded, and glanced over Phil’s very crowded office. It’d gained a lot of people since he’d nipped in to snatch stray short red hairs. Phil was behind his desk working away on his computer, Clint and Natasha were perched on a chair and desk corner respectively poking at maps and agency social contact networks, and Tony was drawing on holograms in midair. “How’s the search going?”

“Don’t think I’ve rounded up enough mosquitoes, yet,” Tony said absently.

Bruce blinked, and shuddered. Luckily, mosquitoes that bit him tended not to make it more than one wingbeat before they could bite anyone else. Still. A squashed mosquito could be a potential biohazard. “Um. Bad idea.”

“Yeah, yeah, messy bio bad, but the idea is cool,” Tony exulted. “We focus so much on making the invisible visible. It’s a power versus power approach. Artemis used a hacker trick and slid sideways. Carbon dioxide means person, and person you can’t see means a really high probability of being your bad guy. This can work. Is it working?”

“So far where the new sensors have been installed, the levels of carbon dioxide match the number of people legitimately inside the room,” Jarvis reported. “I will inform you if we happen on an outlier.”

Bruce blinked, and rubbed his forehead. “You can’t wire the whole Tower with carbon dioxide sensors.”

“Actually I can,” Tony said, slightly distracted. “But yes, time-intensive, which is why I did the mysterious item holding lab first. Now we’ve got Phil’s office, our rooms, Pepper’s office, and people are working down from the landing hangar and up from the basement. Pincer move. Right?”

“Something like that,” Steve nodded.

Uh-huh. And now he’d better make sure he was up to speed, because while the updates he and Steve had gotten from their fellow Avengers about the whole invisible possessing SHIELD agents situation over the course of the day had stretched credulity, this was unbelievable. “Aren’t you missing the
“obvious?” Bruce stated. “Just when you started looking for our invader with something that would have worked, our mini-Moriarty got an unknown nonhuman person and all her gear in through your security. And now they’re holed up in his rooms doing who knows what because Artemis blackmailed Jarvis into leaving him alone.”

“You could look at it that way,” Phil allowed, moving a file and frowning. “Or you could look at the fact that they brought us critical information on invisibility, possession, and mind control. And we know where they are.” He glanced up. “Why would they do that if they’re working with whoever is behind the possessions? Not to mention, why would Butler catch our suspect in the first place, when he could have let him past? Which doesn’t even take into account the fact that Artemis was helping injured people in the lobby.”

“And you only have his word that he couldn’t do more,” Bruce stated, feeling on solid ground for once. “He’s a habitual liar, Phil. He changes his story any time it’s convenient. First he told people he didn’t remember what happened; now he says he does, and he met Short in Limbo, when you know he didn’t. What’s his story going to be tomorrow?”

“Dr. Banner,” Jarvis spoke up, “Artemis did not, in fact, state that he met Miss Short in Limbo—”

“Lying by implication is still lying,” Bruce said flatly. “He’s a self-admitted criminal. He could be behind all this.”

“No,” Clint said decisively.

“An hour with him in the firing range and you think you know that?” Bruce shook his head. “Holly facing us down when she wanted to run out of the room screaming means I know that,” the SHIELD operative said levelly. “She’s some kind of Special Ops. No commander puts someone like that at risk without a good reason. If they just wanted to mess with our heads there’s plenty of ways they could do it without her ever walking into sight.”

They were missing the whole point. “Criminal mastermind,” Bruce reminded them.

“But Irish, not Russian,” Natasha said mildly. “There is a difference. He does not plot for the sake of plotting. He plots for two reasons: money, and the lives of those he cares for.” She shrugged. “He is lying to cloud the trail of people close to him. I would do the same. He is not lying about the possessor. That creature is a threat to him as well, or he would not be taking precautions against it.”

They weren’t listening. “But—”

Phil’s computer beeped. “Sorry, that’s Dr. Ross,” the agent said, glancing back at his computer. “I set up an alert for any contact from her, just in case trouble came looking for her....” Email opened, he trailed off.

Not good. Biofeedback. Calm the heart rate. “Is Betty in trouble?”

“No, she’s fine.” There was a fine line between Phil’s brows as he read the email, paused, went back and read it again. “Bruce, have you ever heard of the Prisoner’s Dilemma?”

“Yes,” Bruce said cautiously. What did a logic puzzle have to do with a possible plotting crook in the Tower? Much less Betty sending an email.

“To benefit from good faith, you have to start with the choice to cooperate,” Phil summed up. “Artemis doesn’t want to be here, but he is cooperating. Holly dropped the little-kid act once she was out of public view, and told us she wasn’t human. Also cooperating.” He turned the monitor so
Bruce could see the email. “Can you tell me exactly what part of good faith or medical ethics covers digging into someone’s DNA without asking them first?”

Stunned, Bruce skimmed Betty’s email; a lot of restrained scientific glee that boiled down to, *You know I’ve been itching for a good reason to get more labwork with Bruce, why didn’t you mention this project before, it’s right in my specialty and Bruce is already working on it, Denisovan genes, whoo-hoo! When can I talk to the volunteer?*

Phil took a breath. “So. Given that so far as I know you haven’t yet met Holly face to face... when, exactly, did she volunteer to have her DNA analyzed?”

“Oh boy,” Tony breathed, having stepped away from his hologram long enough to read over Bruce’s shoulder. “Phil? I’m... going to be over here. Poking sensors. Unless you want me out of here. I can poke sensors from the lab, too.” His voice dropped to a mutter. “Don’t think a fire extinguisher is going to be enough for this.”

“No,” Steve said firmly. “We need to all be on the same page about this. Whatever this is. Medical ethics, Phil? You don’t just mean being a good doctor.”

“No,” Phil said gravely. “You know the kinds of things that happened in World War II. And before it, and - sadly - after it. Long story very short, people decided that science needed a few ethical guard dogs. You don’t do medical research on people without *informed consent*. Including poking their DNA.” He leaned on his desk. “Bruce, of all people, I thought you’d remember that.”

Medical ethics? Since when did they come into this? “She’s not human,” Bruce said firmly.

“Nor am I,” Jarvis spoke up. “I can only imagine the sense of violation this creates. Though I would hypothesize that it is very much akin to the violation I feel when hackers attempt to slip a phishing program into SI servers to snare pieces of my code. Sir has expressed the opinion that I have blanket permission to use scorched-earth tactics on anyone so dismissive of other beings’ selfhood.”

“Damn straight,” Tony said firmly. “Somebody tries that on you, *flatten* them.” He gave Bruce a look askance. “I thought part of the reason Harlem got flattened was some crazy scientist tried to weaponize the Hulk part of your DNA. And that was a *good reason*, damn it. I can only imagine the lives Ross would wreck trying that on people. Even volunteers.” He took a deep breath. “You know, I think we’ve got two different definitions of *human* here. Or maybe I’m just weird, because I tend to think if you can argue with it and it argues back, it counts. Maybe not as *Homo sapiens* human, twenty-three chromosome pairs and raised on one particular little blue planet under 1 G. But ‘we can have a reasonable discussion’ sapient - yeah. And we *did.*” He waved a finger toward the email. “Short finds out about this? Reasonable is going to go out the *window*.”

“More to the point,” Phil said soberly, “think about Dr. Ross. We’ve been trying to arrange ironclad reasons for her to do research under SHIELD and Avengers protection without stirring up too much of a fuss in the Pentagon and on Capitol Hill. At least until Director Fury can do something permanent about the people who authorized a nuclear attack on New York. If this were a legitimate project, it’d be perfect. How am I supposed to tell her it’s not, and that you violated the Nuremberg Code *twice* - first with the analysis, second by getting her involved?”

Betty would be furious. Even at the thought. “Phil, we *need* to know about this species. If Tony thinks there’s a million of them, and they’re working with known criminals-”

Natasha nodded once, red hair shimmering like spilled blood. “So this is about Artemis.”

No, of course it wasn’t. “Why is everybody here fussing over an underage criminal?” Bruce said
flatly. “You don’t watch him, you don’t interrogate him when you know he knows something, you take his word for what he can and can’t do with magic. I know what you’re capable of, Natasha. Why don’t you face him down? Afraid of Butler? What kind of father gives their son a bodyguard instead of letting him learn that the rest of the world isn’t going to do what he wants, when he wants? Like you’re all doing.”

Natasha was still. Clint was glaring past his sunglasses. Tony sighed in the background, obviously out of punching range. And Steve....

Steve looked disappointed. Which was not fair.

“Bruce,” Phil said quietly, “since SHIELD set security around the Fowl household, we’ve repelled at least ten assaults and four attempted kidnappings. In the past three years. And that was without Artemis there as a target. Mr. Fowl hired a bodyguard for his son because Artemis desperately needs one. Not to protect him from bullies, or humiliation, or his own family. Because criminal organizations like the Russian Mafiya want Artemis dead.”

Right. Was that supposed to be a shock? “That’s what happens when you come from a heritage of organized crime,” Bruce shrugged. “Calcutta, Bogotá, Corinto; I’m not surprised it’s the same in Dublin. Criminals target other criminals. That’s where the money is.”

Steve took a deep breath. “Look, no matter how they got Fowl Manor, there are kids in that house. And SHIELD says Mr. Fowl is trying to go straight—”

“Steve?” Tony crooked two fingers in the air, just a little tentative. Which was an odd look on him. “Mind if I cut in?”

Surprised, Steve gave a wordless shrug.

“Good enough.” Tony turned his look on Bruce. “Okay, we’ve hit mutually incompatible logic sets here. What I’m hearing - and please, correct me if I’m wrong - is you think it’s okay to poke Holly’s DNA because Artemis is a crook.”

Now wait a minute. “I didn’t say that!”

“Then you either get Short’s signature on a consent form, or you dump every one of those samples into the incinerator and delete the files,” Tony said bluntly. “Or I will. I may be the Merchant of Death but I am not the Merchant of Hypocrisy. I gave my word Artemis would be safe here, and that his friends would be too. I grant you safe is kind of a relative term with Doom and invisible possessing nasty guys running around. But I can damn sure keep them safe from us.”

That was a low blow. “I don’t tell you what to do in your lab, Stark.”

“And I am not telling you what to do in yours,” Tony shot back. “I’m telling you either you get consent, or that data better be gone. Kaput. Done. Because somebody on Short’s side of the line rang Jarvis’ bell but good when he poked their systems, and Short’s Special Ops. What do you think SHIELD would do to get your DNA out of enemy hands? Or Steve’s? Or Natasha’s?” Hands jammed in his jacket pockets, Tony shook his head. “Bruce, you go through with this, and you’re going to make enemies. You’re going to make enemies for Betty. And it doesn’t have to happen.”

They had to bring Betty into it. “I’ll... see what I can do.”

Phil waited for the door to close behind Bruce before he grabbed an aspirin out of his desk drawer; slugging it down with half his coffee, and never mind the bitter taste as the hot liquid dissolved part
of the coating before it ever got down his throat. “That... was not what any of us needed.”

“He’s jealous,” Natasha observed clinically.

“Green-eyed jealous,” Tony agreed. “Almost literally. How the hell can Bruce be jealous of a kid who almost lost his dad to a Stinger missile? Who did lose him for three years? That’s just - I don’t care how much caviar the kid can get with a flick of his credit card, nobody should be jealous of that.”

Steve took a half-step back. “The way you talk about Howard, sometimes....”

“He was a lousy dad. Yeah,” Tony said tightly. “But he was there. Sometimes, anyway. Maybe I ended up taking care of me, but I didn’t end up trying to take care of me and Mom and Stark Industries. At ten. That’s just - I think of that, and I can look in a mirror, and it is not pretty, Steve. Maybe I wasn’t the nicest person in the billionaire set, but that? That would have screwed me up but good. So, just... why?”

Ah. Ow. “I’d rather not disclose any personal details Dr. Banner doesn’t want you to know,” Phil said carefully. “Let’s just say his family life was... violent.” Understatement. The violence in the Banner household should have led to an arrest, well before anyone had ended up dead. The system had failed Bruce. Badly.

Phil took a deep breath, and squared his shoulders. “Whatever Mr. Fowl’s other faults, there’s no trace of violence in his household. So yes; if I were Bruce, I would be jealous of Artemis. Even without the magic. And Artemis can heal. As far as Bruce is concerned, Hulk only destroys. He’s beginning to accept that Hulk can be a protector, as well, but... it’s not easy for him.”

Clint’s glasses looked even more neutral than usual. Which meant the archer was hiding a grimace. “Phil. If Holly finds out about this, we’ll have trouble. If Artemis finds out....”

“Then big and green will have a sudden introduction to how very many ways someone with l33t hacking skills, money, and the insane guts to take on the Mafiya and win, can make his life a living hell,” Tony said soberly.

“There’s not that much that can threaten the Hulk,” Steve said wryly.

“No?” Tony shook his head. “She’s his Pepper, Steve. That kid has spent his entire life developing a toolkit of nasty. He’s been sitting on it ‘cause his Dad wants people to go straight, which means he tried to trust us, so he played nice. And Bruce just smashed a line drive right through the hole. Artemis will go ballistic.”

And this from a man who knew exactly what ballistic missiles were capable of. “We need to head that off before it becomes a problem,” Phil said soberly.

“And we need to not gang up on Bruce in the process,” Steve agreed, eyeing the door. “For one thing, he did bring up a good point. Much as I hate to admit it... we need to consider what might happen if Artemis and Holly really are a threat.” He dusted off his hands, and turned to his team. “Okay. Ideas?”

“I do not have an idea, per se, Captain Rogers, but I believe I have a few facts that may help explain the level of tension we are dealing with,” Jarvis put in. “Agent Coulson, does magic run in families?”

Phil raised an eyebrow. “It can, why?”

“And I note that your files hint those with magic can be more vulnerable to it?”
“Sometimes. Ms. Jen said it’s kind of like the World Wide Web,” Phil noted. “You can’t hack a battery-operated wall clock. But if you want to surf Wikipedia, you’d better have antivirus software.” He almost asked why again, but kept the word unspoken. Jarvis deserved as much time to collect his thoughts as anyone else.

The AI sighed. “Artemis mentioned that mirrored lenses can block some forms of magical influence. He did so in the context of assuring me he would bring all his resources to bear on stopping this possessing entity, as magic that compels you against your will is a violation of mind and spirit.”

Tony blinked. “He’s pulling a Perseus.”

“Do not look upon the Gorgon save in a mirror, else you too will be turned to stone,” Natasha mused. “All those who were possessed, had eye contact with the last victim.”

From every one they’d been able to talk to or catch on camera, yes. “Fits with vampiric mesmerism by eye contact, and a host of other enthrall the will methods,” Phil noted.

“Wait, wait - vampires?” Tony sputtered.

“Some night, you and I need to get very, very drunk.” Steve shuddered. “Yeah. Vampires. Later.”

Jarvis cleared his throat. “In any event, Agent Coulson, I think Artemis may have been speaking without thinking; he was quite shaken. And angry. In which case I have a series of events with unfortunate implications. Angeline ordered him to go to his room. Butler declares the situation dangerous to his principal, and removes Artemis from Fowl Manor. Artemis later returns, wearing mirrored lenses and skittish of his parents.”

If he hadn’t been sitting down, Phil thought, he would have had to, hard. “Wait. Are you saying....”

“That when Angeline told him to go to his room, Artemis may have had no choice but to comply?” Jarvis finished. “I am.”

“Ooo boy.” Tony buried his face in his hands. “Just when you think it can’t get worse.”

“Bruce is jealous of the little thief’s family,” Natasha observed, “when part of that family is actually a danger to Artemis.” She glanced at Phil, then Steve, gaze worried. “Bruce will not see an injured child protecting himself from the greatest betrayal. He will see Artemis throwing away the treasure he desperately craves. This will end... badly.”

“No, it won’t,” Steve said firmly. “Because we’re not going to let it.” He glanced down a moment, brow furrowed; looked up again, with a nod. “People, I’m going to need you to trust me. I have an idea, but it’s going to take waiting so Bruce has a little time to cool down. And it’s going to take us making serious plans to handle Artemis and Miss Short. Even if we never use them, Bruce needs to know we have them. And that we have them because of him.” He gave them a determined smile. “All that, and we have to keep looking for whatever grabbed Agent Doss. I have a few ideas....”

“All right, I think that’s the best entry point we’re going to get,” Holly concluded, studying Artemis’ floor plan of the Tower. She’d spent years in Recon, no little part of it planning ways to get in and out of human-dominated areas to pluck out stranded or criminal fairies. Why did her nerves still want to tie themselves into adrenaline-fried knots? “Do you think this notice-me-not is going to work on the AI? He doesn’t exactly have eyes to make slide away.”

“But he does have attention, which is what the spell is meant to work with,” Artemis said soberly, sharing the chair with her. He’d wanted to spend some time without the blasted contact lens, and
there were a limited number of angles they could use to look at his monitor without getting caught by a security camera. “More than that, he promised us privacy. So long as he has given his word to ignore us under conditions that are no threat to the Avengers, then magic should enhance that effect.”

Artemis with magic. She still got giddy shivers thinking of that. Haven-trained warlocks were useful, but she’d bet none of them had half her human friend’s imagination. Still, the thought of trusting a barely trained warlock’s spell wasn’t exactly comforting. “I think we’ll use the camo-foil anyway.”

“Of course.” Artemis looked ruefully determined not to be offended. “I haven’t been practicing long. It would be foolish to depend on untried measures while there is any other choice.”

“Speaking of.” Butler was leaning over both their shoulders, eyeing the floorplan as if he were about to shake it down in a dark alley. “They know you’re here, Holly. We could just say you tracked whatever it is from Limbo, go up there, and fry it with a Neutrino.”

The direct approach. Oh Frond, she wished they could. “First, we still don’t know what it is,” Holly said reluctantly. “I can detect solinium from here, but that’s as definite as I can get. It could be a marked coin left over from an LEP operation. It could be the People’s tech. Or it could be part of Jarvis. And if it is - then I want to make a deal with him. Not the rest of the Avengers.”

Artemis’ nod had a cold, clinical edge to it. “If he cannot be held to his word, then Foaly’s expertise will be required. If the Avengers are also involved there will be casualties. I would suggest a fast-dispersing sedative gas in that case. Butler and I will trust you not to overdose us.” He frowned. “Although based on the Iron Man’s known flight capabilities, he must be able to seal the suit against atmospheric gases. You would have to take them completely off guard.”

Artemis would trust her to drug him. Reassuring and profoundly unsettling, indeed. “Second, if it is our tech, then it’s my responsibility,” Holly stated. “Until and unless the Council decides more than a few humans can know the People exist, it’s my job to make sure there’s no evidence.” She took a deep breath. “Besides, SHIELD has a history with nonhuman tech. From what Foaly was able to hack out, their messing with the Tesseract was what let Loki open the door for those flying metal-whale things in the first place. Not that they did it on purpose, but better safe than sorry.” And speaking of. “Third? The Iron Man. If he has any idea there might be something technological he hasn’t seen before... well, how long did it take you to disassemble my helmet?”

“Not that long,” Artemis admitted. “I knew there would be some form of tracker.”

Which put him light-years ahead of most people who went hunting for leprechauns. Though that very faint blush on his cheeks made her want to giggle at him. Or maybe rub behind his ears and tell him everything would be alright. Artemis might have more experience with heists, but she’d bet he was just as worried about pulling this off as she was. “Anyway, he’s an engineer,” Holly said. “Friendly or not, we can’t just tell him ‘this isn’t human tech’ and trust him not to poke it.”

“No,” Butler agreed. “Sorry I made this harder, Captain. But Artemis’ security comes first.”

Holly shifted in their chair, reluctantly considering the whole situation, not just Section Eight’s worries. “No, you had to tell them. Foaly’s hit me with enough files of what the Iron Man keeps around as his hobby projects to give me the iron-shivers. Not to mention the biotech information he stole from a certain general’s files before he set their servers on fire. I think I’m going to have nightmares of our fairy criminal darting a certain very large green person, taking a blood sample, and dosing Haven’s water supply.”

Artemis went from pale to ghost-white. Butler was frighteningly still.
Right. They knew how vulnerable fairies were to radiation. Between that and the known toxicity of Banner’s blood....

Anyone left alive, would probably be better off dead.

Ears flattened under her hat, Holly tried to shake it off. “Anyway. The two of you gave me a cover story. So while it’d be nice to be invisible, if we leave traces on camera, it won’t kill us. We don’t need to be unseen. What we need is to not get caught.”

“Hmm.” Butler nodded. Eyed the building map again. “It should work.”

Meaning Butler thought all of it would work. Even the parts she was iffy about. Which meant she’d better ask the obvious, given how good Artemis could be at verbal sleight of hand. “If we’re going to use your spell, how hot are you running? Maintaining a shield can drain even a charged elf faster than we’d like to think. Don’t notice me doesn’t sound like it should take as much magic as a shield, but-” she shrugged.

“The critical component in maintaining the spell seems to be more a factor of concentration than magical power,” Artemis informed her.

If that were the case, Holly reflected, then she could quit worrying. Artemis could concentrate with a bomb ticking down or a pack of slavering trolls leaping at his heels. One quiet flight wouldn’t so much as ruffle his mental feathers.

“As it happens, though, I did the Ritual this morning before dawn,” Artemis went on. “And if worse comes to worst, I have discovered an... alternate method human warlocks can use to recharge.” With a sigh, he offered her a slim printed paperback.

One of those new-fangled print on demand books, Holly reflected, poking the dark blue cover with fingers and mystical senses. It’s definitely been around some traditional humans, feels clean and patient as a river... huh, interesting back blurb. “Humans evolved as running hunters,” seems plausible, “therefore the proper exercise of magic includes” - oh. Oh, sweet four-leaved clovers.

Her eyes picked out the title, and she could see why Butler was trying not to smile. “Gorgon’s Wings on our Feet?”

“Not. One. Word,” Artemis muttered, as Butler attempted to look innocent. Wrestled with himself, and sighed. “I would appreciate your assistance in setting up a schedule. I do need to maintain certain aspects of our business, and some sort of semblance of a family life. And I know myself too well; if my parents start commenting how sweet it is that I am taking an interest in exercise, I am likely to throw over the entire endeavor in sheer irritated pique. It would be easier to remind myself that I have excellent logical reasons for undertaking this that have nothing to do with family approval if I have it as part of my work.”

D’Arvit, he was serious.

I knew he loved magic, but not that much. Holly smiled wryly to herself. Fun as it is to think of Artemis sweating, let’s see if he’s serious about something that will work.

Not that she was holding out much hope for that. Recharging your magic by physically wearing yourself out? That just didn’t make sense.

Holly paged through the table of contents, poked at the index, then settled down to skim through the theories. For a human-written book on magic it seemed surprisingly practical. Though it started with what looked like a brief refresher on how to see magical auras. Odd idea. Her parents had taught her
to feel magic; wasn’t that the way everyone did it?

But the text moved fairly swiftly on to the more familiar ground of biofeedback and how that worked so far as channeling magic went. Holly wrinkled her nose. Individually the bits on exercise and magic didn’t seem sane to any proper member of the People, but together they almost formed a coherent whole - if you just ignored common sense. Common sense never seemed to work right around Artemis anyway.

Holly stopped. Stared at the page. Moved her finger back to the start of the paragraph, making absolutely certain she was reading the English text correctly. “Human warlocks can redirect someone else’s magic?”

“It would explain various mishaps we’ve encountered,” Artemis nodded. “Especially my - er - unfortunate tendency to thieve away your healing magic when we’re both somewhat less than conscious.” Odd eyes glanced at her, just a trifle shy. “Hopefully now that I’ve managed to charge my own reserves, we might avoid that.”

She arched a skeptical red brow. The one didn’t automatically follow from the other....

Except. Haven’s laws said when it came down to limits on who got surface visas, expectant mothers and families with the youngest children got the first cut. Adult fairies like herself might let the Ritual slide and think nothing of it, but little fairies needed a steady flow of energy to grow up well.

**He could be right,** Holly allowed silently. *Angeline was in a funk that needed positive magic to get her pepped up and moving again. Could well be she passed that on. And Artemis is a warlock. Those youngsters need even more magic than most ankle-biters.*

“Could we try it?”

Holly pulled back a little, and waved the book. “What, this?”

“Redirecting energy,” Artemis stated, with a completely straight face. As if he hadn’t suggested something completely insane. She knew what she’d learned in school. A fairy directed magic. Accepted it, in the case of a healing. Even transformed it, as Qwan had with the bomb; and as far as she was concerned demon warlocks were scary. Redirect it? Not a chance.

“It would seem that the techniques involved are similar to those used to conceal one’s magic,” Artemis went on. “Given that hiding one’s aura seems to be a basic precaution of human warlocks, not to mention a matter of simple manners when dealing with someone who may have strong and uncontrolled aura Sight-”

“Why would anyone want to hide their magic?” Holly broke in, baffled. “You can feel an ancient
oak a mile off. But by the time you get close enough to feel a fairy’s magic they can unload a spell on top of you anyway....” She trailed off. Eyed the book in her hands. Glanced at the pile more Artemis had apparently acquired from wherever had sold him the rowan. “Humans see magic.”

“The extrasensory perception can apparently be filtered through several senses, but sight is usually the easiest for a beginner,” Artemis agreed. “I was first aware of the touch-at-a-distance version of magical perception, but with effort I can, apparently, do both. It would seem being a changeling has its advantages. Given that, you may be able to access visual magical perception as well. Although you may wish to consider carefully if you want to acquire that skill,” he warned her. “You are... very bright, when I use the Sight to See you. Very - obvious.”

Holly gripped the chair arm, putting two and two together. “The People think human warlocks don’t exist anymore. But you do. Human warlocks see magic, and Recon fairies are supposed to run hot....” Making a fist, she banged her knuckles off her forehead. Twice. “You can see us coming.”

“And so, possibly, can any fairy criminal who has the imagination to pry into the topics most humans dismiss as New Age folderol,” Artemis observed. “I’m not certain how you treat magical training in Haven, but books on energy manipulation are freely available on the surface. The trick is to sort out the actual viable techniques from the dross.”

Holly rubbed her head. “Trust you to sort out the gold without half trying.”

“No,” Artemis said, with a decisive headshake. “While Butler and I did spend considerable time poking through what was available, we had the good fortune to stumble on someone with very active Sight. The lady in question pointed me toward shielding techniques as a matter of self-preservation. According to her, there are things that... eat human warlocks. Or worse.”

Holly swallowed dryly. “But if there were things that go after creatures with magic, wouldn’t we know about it?”

Blue and hazel met her gaze. “Recon is hazardous work, is it not? Hence the cameras, and the tracking devices, and Foaly’s constant monitoring of everyone in the field. And yet even with all those precautions, sometimes officers simply don’t come back.”

Holly grimaced. That was the sort of statistic Foaly fretted over and your average Haven citizen didn’t want to hear about. “We love to be under the open sky. But anyone with half a brain is always a bit twitchy. Shields can fail. Buildings get put in odd places. Some idiot human scientist can string up a mist net to study bats, and you’ll never see it until you hit it. You never know what odd shadow is something you should hide from, or something that should make you bolt for home.” She narrowed her eyes at Artemis. “And if the People feel as twitchy near human warlocks as I did when you first got in grabbing range, then we’d all tend to be where human warlocks aren’t.”

“A preference which may have done great harm to both sides,” Artemis said quietly. “For the People, limited access to the surface and its magic. For human warlocks - what little information I’ve gleaned so far indicates most practitioners are hiding and alone, only communicating with others surreptitiously. I doubt this book could have been written before the advent of the Internet. Only now is there a large enough circle of anonymous buyers to support such writers.”

Holly glanced over at the stack of books, and tapped the *Gorgon’s Wings*. “You bought two of these?”

“Oh, I bought two of everything.” A dark brow flicked up; just the faintest touch of a smirk. “After all, if I mean to be a proper consultant, I should provide you with my research. And I rather hope that after we’ve handled the current crisis, this will prick Section Eight’s curiosity enough to consider
investigating certain human phenomena.”

Aha. “Like changelings?” Holly guessed.

“And mutants,” Artemis nodded. “I’ve no way to know if mutants are the result of changeling genes, magic gone awry, or something else entirely. But the fact that currently we do not know, and young mutants are unaware the question even exists... I find myself in accord with Warlock Kingsfoil. I would never expose the People, but we should try to uncover the truth. In case, just in case, there is some way to provide information that might help.” He hesitated. “Although if help is possible, we must make very sure Minerva does not find out.”

That was a twist. “I thought you liked her,” Holly ventured. “Foaly said she kept asking Butler about you. And she’s just about your age, now.”

“Like. What a complicated term.” Artemis shut his laptop, eyes hooded as he searched for the exact meaning he wished to express. “She is pretty, and I’ve no doubt she has grown more so. And I admire her mind. There are not many who can snatch a demon right out from under my fingers. But I doubt I could ever trust her.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Holly caught Butler breathing a subtle sigh of relief.

“Why not?” she asked, curious. And oddly hurt, as if she’d watched Foaly wrestle down his hacker’s nature and walk away from cracking the humans’ Pentagon. Because no matter how much he wanted to, some prizes weren’t worth the risk.

But this isn’t a prize. This is a person. Someone Artemis could make a life with.

“Our goals are mutually incompatible,” Artemis stated, with the cool and uncaring tone that meant he cared very much indeed. “She wishes to be acclaimed by the world for her genius. Toward that goal she risked her life, her family’s lives, her employees, and the very stability of the world. Not that the human world is stable at the best of times, but we at least manage a semblance of a dynamic equilibrium. So far. She meant to expose a previously unknown intelligent species, one that had never done her personal harm, to a world that would quite accurately declare them demons. The results would be swift, violent, and utterly predictable to any soul unfortunate enough to have set foot in a human kindergarten. Humans are violent creatures, we tend to believe we run the world, and whenever evidence might spring up to the contrary we become very cross.” Artemis smirked. “I suspect Loki is fortunate that Thor took him off the planet. Asgardians might be mystically powerful and nigh-unkillable, but eight million angry New Yorkers would find a way.”

Holly couldn’t help it. She snickered.

“Minerva wishes fame, and so she failed to think of No.1 as anything more than a means to an end,” Artemis said quietly. “Dare I risk the privacy, and perhaps even the lives, of innocent humans, if she should uncover the involvement of the People in their plight?” He glanced at her. “Dare I even risk not wearing a contact in her sight?”

Ooof. Low blow. She hoped it wasn’t true. But Artemis didn’t run on hope. He ran on facts, and what he was and wasn’t willing to risk to win. “And what do you want?” Holly asked, just as quiet.

“Fair enough.” Artemis’ lip curled. “The world be damned. I want those I care for safe.” A slight shrug. “Or at least in a position to choose what risks they will take. One cannot wrap those one cares for in gossamer and store them in the attic. It’s far too stuffy.”

Which sounded a bit too close to what Fowl Sr. was trying to do for comfort.
Funny thing is, if he asked Artemis, his father would get an indignant earful about “only idiots risk their lives and try to be heroes”, Holly thought wryly. Artemis would rather set it up so the crooks obliterate each other while he’s a hundred miles away.

A pity they couldn’t do that here. But with any luck they’d be in, remove the suspect tech, and be back out again with no one the wiser.

Which will go a lot smoother if Artemis can pull off this notice-me-not on something larger than a coffee mug, Holly allowed. Being depressed about his father won’t help anyone. Better to work off the nerves before we move. And if we’ve got a fairy criminal involved, it’d help if we had magic they can’t feel coming. So if redirecting energy is a place to start, we’d best get to it. “So what’s the plan? I make a few sparks and you try to suck them up?”

“Hopefully not,” Artemis waved it off. “I wish to redirect the energy, not attract it. Perhaps if you made sparks in one hand, and I tried to divert them to the other?”

Worth a shot. “All right, Mud Boy.” Holly slid off the chair to face him, and let two fingers crackle. “Let’s do this.”

Steve knocked on the doorframe, steaming bribes in hand. “Can I come in?”

Scowling at his computer, Bruce jerked his eyes toward the door. “Come to check up on me?”

“Actually, I came to bring cookies.” Steve waved the bag of still-warm treats and a mug of some of Tony’s best decaf. “Everyone else is in Phil’s office trying to figure out the best ways to keep an eye on Artemis. I’m still fuzzy on just why a firewall isn’t a reason to call the ladder trucks, so I thought I’d ask if you had any ideas.” He shrugged his shoulders, still holding out the decaf. “Are you okay?”

Bruce stared at the bag, irritation warring with interest on his face. “Cookies?”

“Chocolate chip,” Steve said virtuously.

“Over here,” Bruce sighed. “Let’s stay out of the biohazard area.”

Three cookies later, Bruce looked a little less tense. Even if he was dipping cookie fragments in a half-full mug. “So you’re going to watch him now?”

“You made a good point,” Steve admitted. “He could be dangerous.” He leaned back in the lab chair. “The next time you think we’re missing something obvious, tell us, okay? We’re a team. The point of having a group of people with a lot of different know-how is so if we run into something weird, someone on the team might know about it. We can’t work as a team if we don’t talk to each other.”

Bruce sucked coffee out of his cookie; ate the bit before it could fall to mushy pieces. “I’m... not really good at talking to people.”

“Nobody starts out good at talking to people,” Steve said practically. “Just try. Even if Black Widow’s busy calculating all the things she could do with a criminal mastermind, Natasha will listen.”

Bruce looked away. “It must be nice to believe in people that much.”

Translation, you’re a hopeless optimist and the world doesn’t work that way. “It’s not believing in
people,” Steve said firmly. “I believe in second chances. That’s what America’s about.” Okay, don’t give him a chance to talk himself out of deserving that. “I was curious about what Phil said about medical ethics. I thought that was just the Hippocratic Oath. But I looked up some cases, and some of the trials after the war....” He’d had to stop after only a quick read. Later he might try to get through more. For now, it was sobering to know that what he’d faced down in HYDRA labs hadn’t been half of the evil being done. “I can see why people put up a barbed-wire fence on that slippery slope. Heck, I’d be out there helping people mine it.”

“I bet you would,” Bruce said under his breath.

Okay. So Bruce was taking that as a personal attack. Fine. “Bruce. You were right about Artemis. He might be trouble, and we’ll try to find out. But Miss Short isn’t Artemis. We don’t know why she’s working with him. And even if he is a crook, and she’s in it with him up to her eyebrows, what you did was still wrong. We’re the good guys. And part of the problem with being the good guys is, we have to act like good guys. That can be hard,” Steve admitted, remembering awful, dark days on the battlefield. “You’re trying to keep people you care about alive, and you know the other guy could cheat, and people could die....” He took a deep breath. “Something that’s really hard to remember when you’re fighting for your life is, not everybody sitting on the sidelines is your enemy. Miss Short knows Artemis. Whatever she’s done or hasn’t done, she thinks she can work with him-”

“Oh boy. Why?” Bruce cut him off. “We have hackers. We have scientists. We even have a billionaire. What can he possibly give her that we don’t have?”

Oof. Now we’ve hit the sore spot. “I don’t know,” Steve said quietly. “But it sounds like you might have an idea.”

Silence. Taut. Painful.

“...He doesn’t deserve it.”

Oh boy.

“I don’t care how much Phil says it takes out of him,” Bruce said flatly. “He was still alive and walking. He can help people and he’d rather go scam someone out of money instead? If I’d been able to do what Artemis can do-”

Tense, Steve waited.

“I was right there,” Bruce managed, just above a whisper. “When she was bleeding. When the doctors took her away.” He hugged himself, curling into his chair. “If I’d been able to do... even half of what Artemis can do... my mother would be alive.”

Steve sat silent, words of comfort firmly locked behind his teeth. Bruce hadn’t gotten it all out yet. Anything soothing would be salt on the wound.

“And you think we should trust him.”

“No, I think we should believe he has good information.” Steve kept his voice even. “And we should treat him like he’s not the enemy. That’s one of the mistakes Fury made with us. SHIELD was working on Tesseract weapons, and they didn’t tell us because they thought we’d try to stop them. They treated us like an enemy, without considering the fact that maybe we had good reasons to stop them. And we did.”

Bruce toyed with another cookie. “You think Artemis might have good reasons to lie to us about Limbo.”
“Or about Holly, or about her people. The people he’s protecting,” Steve nodded. “We don’t know. And honestly, we probably won’t know until Artemis can get all the people he cares about out of our reach. I know I wouldn’t want to come clean, if you were stuck in a SHIELD lab and I couldn’t get you out. And I do trust SHIELD. Well, some of it.”

“Huh.” Bruce crunched on chocolate.

“The thing is,” Steve said carefully, “you could be right. Maybe Artemis doesn’t deserve to be trusted. But we deserve to trust each other enough to believe we can offer him our trust. And handle the explosion if we’re wrong.”

That got him a very odd look. As if Bruce had never even considered that the point of having a team was that you could afford to make mistakes.

“Just think about it,” Steve suggested, standing. Glancing at the bag of cookies, before giving into temptation and reaching into the open top one more time-

His hand hit another hand. Not Bruce’s hand.

Steve spun and grabbed for something invisible, trying to slam a fighting body to the floor. “Bruce! Hit the alarm!”

Chapter End Notes

“Elves, pixies, demons and sprites,” Artemis stated. “Not dwarves?”

There was a long pause, as all three contemplated the results of Mulch possessing someone.

As one, they shuddered.

Bruce’s canon backstory is utterly awful. When I poked that as background research for this fic, I realized that bit with his mother had to come up. Ow.

As far as magic and recharging goes, I’m trying to find ways that fit with both Artemis Fowl and the Marvel ‘verse. It’s likely all human mages can recharge by meditation. But given the Sorcerer Supreme actively practices martial arts as part of his training (though he often doesn’t use them fighting), “moving meditation” and exercise are probably some of the best ways to recharge!
“And the moral of this story, ladies and gentlemen, is never get between Hulk and Steve’s cookies,”
Tony summed up, as Phil and the rest of the Avengers regarded the wreckage of Bruce’s lab. Not as
bad as it could have been, Phil thought, but they were definitely going to have to replace some lab
benches and at least one chest freezer.

“All things considered, I think Agent Doss got off lightly,” Tony mused. “Couple of weeks in a
body cast, versus getting one of Bruce’s blood samples shattered on her? Yeah. I’ll take the body
cast, thanks.”

“She will be alright, won’t she?” Bruce said, eyes downcast.

“Physically, they think so,” Phil nodded. “It remains to be seen what the possession has done.
SHIELD Medical has a mirrored visor on her at the moment, though, and everyone treating her has
mirrored sunglasses. That should keep the entity from jumping ship to a new victim.”

“First it’s after Tower computer systems, then it tries for Bruce’s blood samples.” Steve frowned.
“Do you think it was after the Hulk’s DNA all along? And how does Doom fit into this? All the
information the Fantastic Four have says he’s too smart to try tampering with his own DNA.”

“His own, yes,” Natasha observed. “He has, in the past, created minions.”

“Ouch,” Clint murmured.

“More to the point, how does it tie into what we’ve got upstairs?” Tony jerked a thumb up toward
the desalination lab. “And how does all of this tie into the Fowls? If it does at all.”

“If it does?” Bruce gave him a startled look.

“Yeah, yeah, I know; they know about possession, they know about invisibility, they know about
rowan. Which reminds me I need to get Pepper hers when she comes in... anyway. Something just
doesn’t fit.” Tony frowned, obviously not looking at the wreckage in front of him.

“Noted,” Phil nodded. “Right now, our agents are going over everything on her with a fine-toothed
comb. Down to the SI pen in her jacket pocket.”

“She stole one of my pens?” Tony said in disbelief. “Oy, of course she did, anyone who’d try to steal
chocolate chip cookies has no morals whatsoever. And speaking of the morally challenged....”

“Our guests are currently not doing anything I can identify as hazardous to life, limb, or sanity,”
Jarvis said dryly. “Mr. Fowl appears to be engrossed in the files on the Grace, its crew, and
publically available information on Doctor Doom. Which may be a valid line of inquiry; it is possible
Doom’s involvement is tied to something that was meant to be on the Grace, or smuggled on it, and
not Starktech at all.”

“Possible,” Bruce muttered. “What about... the others?”

“Artemis, Holly, and Butler have not emerged,” Jarvis reported. “There are a few odd energy fluxes
within the suite registering on my sensors, consistent with those I sensed when Artemis demonstrated
his use of magic. But so long as no one has set off the fire alarm, the poison gas sensors, or the
window circuits, I have not made a closer examination.”
Phil almost clapped a hand to his forehead. *Oh, this is going to go over well.*

“He’s using magic,” Bruce said, deliberately calm. “And you don’t think this is worth watching.”

“Dr. Banner, I will not spy on Artemis so long as he holds to his end of the bargain,” Jarvis said firmly. “I am, however, quite capable of detecting the extent of the background electromagnetic fluctuations in his suite. And if they correlate with the amount of power put into his magic, as they did when he first demonstrated it to me, then he is currently using less magic than he did with his foxfire light. Orders of magnitude less than I was able to detect around Agent Ross once you breached her invisibility.” He paused. “Based on the pattern of the fluctuations, I would say the waveforms he is trying to create are unstable and less than successful.”

“Oh,” Steve said. “You mean he’s practicing?” Caught a bunch of startled glances his way, and smiled, just a little sheepish. “Well, that’s what it’s like in the fairy tales, right? It takes time to figure out magic. It has to. The people who know what they’re doing with spells are all old gray-bearded guys and fairy godmothers.”

“And Artemis doesn’t qualify as a godmother,” Tony quipped. “Huh. Maybe that’s why she’s here.”

Clint flicked a brow up. “Use more words.”

“Oh. Um. Well... Short’s here,” Tony shrugged. “If it was me, in the same kind of mess Artemis is, with maybe-not-under-control magic buzzing in my fingers, I’d get me out. Fowl Sr.’s an adult, he can take care of himself - and if his kid’s not in SHIELD grabbing range, he might be more likely to take care of himself. But Artemis stayed, which probably means Short’s here to make sure he doesn’t accidentally on purpose fry something magically while he’s stressed out. Like the lights. Or the security system. Or the arc reactor powering the building.... Jarvis, check the security on the arc reactor again?”

“I have been actively monitoring it, Sir,” Jarvis affirmed. “All original security measures are in place, and the carbon dioxide monitors show activity consistent with the visible humans in the vicinity.”

“Good. Whew. Last thing we’d need is for our nasty to sneak in there- *oh.*” Tony’s grin had sharp edges. “Jarvis. You have timestamps on Artemis and his crew messing with magic, right? Any of them match up with what we’ve got recorded around Agent Doss going poof, or coming back visible?”

“They do not,” Jarvis stated. “Sir, while I would like to affirm this as clearing Artemis of involvement, and I agree it is good evidence to the contrary, it all depends on precisely how Agent Doss was possessed. If the possessing magic-user is affecting the agent directly, then yes, there should be spikes around the person at fault when magic is used. However, folklore and Agent Coulson’s sources make it clear that certain magic-users can also summon an intermediary - one of several possible entities that can act independently while possessing a human. In which case there would theoretically be spikes in EM activity around the magic-user when the entity is summoned, and when it is dismissed, but otherwise there would be no trace.”

“So all we have is a strong maybe he’s not involved.” But for once, Bruce’s frown was more speculative than upset. “Jarvis... why do you want him cleared? He blackmailed you.”

“Indeed he did,” Jarvis stated, unruffled. “Though a Star Wars aficionado might refer to it as *aggressive negotiations.*” An electronic chuckle. “But in a sense, Dr. Banner, that is the point. He did not hack me. He did not try to suborn me. He most assuredly did not threaten Sir, or the Avengers. He dealt with *me,* as a person worth negotiating with. And what he asked for is what I would have asked, in his position: privacy, and the right to keep his own secrets.”
“He treated you as a person.” Bruce glanced at his hands, already healed over from any damage Hulk might have inflicted. “I guess that’s not easy to find.”

“It’s not easy to find for any of us,” Phil noted. “That happens, when you have a unique skillset. People tend to look at what you can do. Not who you are.”

“Though sometimes we have to look at what people can do,” Steve sighed. “All right, people. Plans for catching Artemis if he is up to something?”

Natasha nodded, eyes cold. “I have an idea.”

Rubbing at a concentration headache, Artemis glared at the sparks merrily dancing around Holly’s fingers. So far he’d managed to redirect them from one finger to the next, but no farther. Certainly not to her other hand. “This is far more difficult than the instructions would lead one to believe.”

“Human magic,” Holly shrugged. “Who said it made sense? Just because you can get the fairy version of repelling energy to work—”

Butler cleared his throat. “Pardon me, Captain. But I think you’ve both got it wrong.” He picked up the book, flipping through the pages. “This is based off tai chi principles of redirecting an attacker’s energy. It’s a kinetic application of energy; it doesn’t change the magic you’re working with, it just shoots it off another direction. But if Artemis explained the cantrips right, the notice-me-not is based on repelling attention. Like two magnets bouncing off of each other. Seems to me that means you’re altering the energy around you to match what someone else is not looking for.” He eyed Artemis. “You’re as good at redirecting people’s attention as you are redirecting programs and circuits. Magnetism works, for you. But redirecting physical force? That’s kinetic. Which hasn’t been your favorite thing.”

“Indeed not,” Artemis sighed. “Well. Perhaps physical exercise will have direct applications after all.” Though he doubted it. Nothing Butler had tried to teach him had ever seemed to help, when it came to dealing with purely physical reality.

“Artemis, they call these the awkward years for a reason,” Butler said wryly. “Even if you’d been training in the martial arts since you could walk, you’d still be tripping and breaking things. I was, at your age.”

Artemis raised a skeptical brow.

“Not often,” Butler allowed. “But it did happen.”

Ah yes. And with the proper application of leverage and force, pigs would also fly.

Well. Perhaps with a regular schedule of simple running, other applications of force redirection might make more sense. It was at least worth a try.

There was a knocking sound from the speaker by the door, followed by a cleared throat. “Master Fowl? We appear to have caught the possessing entity in the act.”

I really do hate adrenaline. Artemis took a breath to compose himself, and set his sunglasses back on. Cool, controlled, and businesslike. We have a deal, after all. “In the act of what, precisely, Jarvis? It may not strictly be any of my concern, but I ask in case the proper response is panicked flight.”

“Do you have reason to believe panicked flight would be in order?” The AI sounded slightly
surprised.

“You’ve had an invisible possessed person wandering around loose.” Butler crossed his arms, looking less than impressed. “Think of what someone could do with an undetected drone, and judge the security threat for yourself.”

“Noted,” Jarvis said, slightly distracted. “Passing your recommendation along, Mr. Butler. Tower security and SHIELD agents have, indeed, been sweeping each floor for potential threats. Though given where Agent Doss was captured, it would seem our intruder had theft in mind, not sabotage.”

“Theft of what?” Holly glared at the speaker. “If you want help, we need details.”

“It would appear,” Jarvis said deliberately, “the entity was after certain of Dr. Banner’s... biological samples.”

Holly paled.

_I doubt I look much better._ Artemis controlled his breathing, forcing his pulse to slow when it wanted to leap in panic. “You have checked to be certain none of them were abstracted and removed from custody before the agent was caught? You have physically counted them?” Was that his voice shaking? Never mind, carry on. “I suggest Dr. Banner upgrade his lab security. _Immediately._ I can suggest a list of potential measures.”

“The end goal being a system meant to stop invisible, magical intruders?” For a living program, Jarvis sounded distinctly skeptical.

Artemis raised his head, and narrowed his eyes in the glare that had set lesser men back on their heels. “The end goal being a security system that would stop even _me._”

Silence. He imagined he could hear his own heart drumming.

“...Forgive me if I find that difficult to credit,” Jarvis stated.

“Ooo, if you had a face to punch-!” Holly swore under her breath.

“Because I am a criminal?” Artemis shrugged, completely unconcerned. “Yes. I am a thief, and I know how thieves think. Which is precisely why I wish any security system surrounding a lethal biological substance of great demand to unscrupulous _idiots_ to be _impregnable_. Doctor Banner has been responsible with what he carries. Anyone who would steal it would _not_ be.” He glanced at his wrist comp, glad for once that Foaly had indulged his creeping featurism and installed a camouflage function to make it look like a normal surface watch. _Enough time, I think, before the building clears for the night and we can move._ “Let me make you a preliminary list of suggestions.”

“I swear, paperwork breeds,” Pepper Potts grumbled, heading toward the front desk of the Tower. “If I’d known being CEO was this much paper-shuffling... one of these days, Tony, I _will_ find a way to get payback.”

Her cell phone buzzed. She pulled the text up on the screen, just in case it referred to anything explosive. The latest message she’d gotten said they had the possessed SHIELD agent under control and out of the building, but with Avengers business you never knew when a villain was dealt with and when they were only biding their time to break out of an impregnable cell.

_Get up here and get your Neolithic anti-possession remedy, Tony’s text read. Is that not cool? Mostly I try not to go pre-electronics, steampunk really creeps me out, but then again we still hang_
up mistletoe and who knows how far back that goes. Oh, and Jarvis says Butler thinks we ought to check everywhere for sabotage/nasty things, like we weren’t doing that already with an invisible bad guy running around. OTOH he has to deal with Mr. Fowl who seems to be missing a lot of the obvious on the magical front, so pfft, guess he does worry. Anyway you ought to get up here because you have to meet Holly Short. She’s like Mini-You. Then again, the two of you meeting might blow up the universe with that much concentrated Awesome. And I’ve got to say the fact that Artemis has a mini-Pepper makes me really wonder how much of a crook he is, even if he keeps claiming to be a Dastardly Criminal....

Pepper skimmed the rest of the gleeful text, complete with “wham!” and “pow!” bits scattered through Tony’s imagined confrontation between the Pepperish Duo and Dr. Doom, ending with Good Triumphant and the Latverian dictator seeing circling birdies. Only Tony would design his own “160charPfui” app for Stark Industries so geeks could glee at length on whatever wild flight of engineering fancy hit them at oh-dark-hundred in the morning, then use it to go “Nyah!” to the ruler of a whole country. Oh, Tony. Don’t ever change. “Evening, Mr. Lee.”

“Evening, Miss Potts,” the security guard on duty nodded, putting the sign-in clipboard in front of her. “We’re hoping for a quiet night, now that Dr. Banner and Captain Rogers caught the intruder.”

Dr. Banner had-? “What’s the damage estimate?” Pepper said practically.

Mr. Lee grinned a little. “Mr. Stark said it’s coming out of the building renovation fund. This way he gets to upgrade Dr. Banner’s lab security at the same time.”

Oh, that was going to be interesting. Picking up the pen, she moved to sign in; maybe it was archaic, using pen and paper to do this, but Tony actually went for archaic as an extra security measure. You couldn’t hack paper from another server-

It was like a sliver of oily ice sliding into her mind. Subtle. Cold. Wrong.

Cold. So cold.

Fear sheeted over her like a waterfall of ice. She had to hide, hide somewhere dark, hide even inside her own mind-

But Pepper had walked past Obadiah Stane when she knew he wanted Tony dead, and wouldn’t hesitate to swat anyone else in the way like a bug. She hadn’t run then. She hadn’t hidden. She’d walked.

Tony. Need to warn Tony!

But her hands wouldn’t move to her phone. Something else had them in its grip, calmly signing her into the Tower log as if nothing were wrong.

Oily ice smashed into her will again, burying Pepper in a black avalanche of despair. This wasn’t a program she could pull the plug on, or a corrupt CEO she could trick with a straight face and nerves of steel. This was pure power. She should grovel, and hope it was merciful enough not to crush her-

No. I won’t.

I can face down madmen in armored suits, Norse gods taking over my headquarters, and Tony goddamn Stark over a math error. If this thing gets me past the desk, it’ll have a free ride up to the labs, and that is not going to happen!

She’d spent years working for a self-proclaimed genius who didn’t always remember to ground all
his circuits. She knew how electricity could override the nerves near it.

If I can’t get my hands back, move something else.

It was like trying to fight her way out from under the suffocating weight of a ton of frozen pudding. Pepper swayed one foot back. Another.

The floor slammed into her, and she could breathe again.

“Miss Potts!” Mr. Lee left her partner to hold down the desk, sign-in pen rattling at the end of its chain as he brushed by. “Smitty! Hand me the first aid kit.”

“Call Tony,” Pepper gasped. “No, I’m okay - call Tony first! I think the intruder tried to grab me!”

“It’s about time you got in contact!” Foaly huffed over Holly’s line as she hovered in the deepening twilight. “We knew you’d have to leave the comms off while you were in the Tower, but did you have to stay in there that long?”

“You might wish to argue quitting time with Stark Industries, not us.” Artemis’ voice came through her helmet earpiece as he clung to her; spoken words were pretty much whipped away by the wind. “For the moment we’ve a landing pad to break into.”

“And quickly,” Butler said dryly, clinging to the line hooked to Holly’s belt. The Moonbelt might be reducing his weight, but falling from this height would still be lethal.

“Spoofing the entry code... now,” Foaly said thoughtfully. “How’d you know there’d be a wireless access point up here?”

“Iron Man,” Artemis said succinctly. “Tony Stark can fly. So do Recon and Section Eight personnel. How better to keep an area secure than to make certain it is only accessible by your own individual means of transport? Conversely,” his voice went very dry as they touched down, “if you are certain no one else can break in a certain way, your security measures can be simplified. Theoretically.”

Holly touched down behind them both, incredibly glad Section Eight suits were even better than the camo-foil her partners had wrapped around them. “Even so, there’s got to be cameras.”

“I’m certain there are.” There was an oddly distracted tone in Artemis’ voice as he reached to grip her left hand. “But those cameras have a flaw. They are not simply part of building security. They are Jarvis’ eyes. And I do not wish us to be seen.”

Holly took a deep breath, and let it sigh out. Artemis wouldn’t lie. Not when we’re in the midst of a heist. If he says he can hide us, I believe him.

“May still be motion sensors,” Butler muttered. “Probably not that finely set, he has other people up here... let’s move.”

The door was a touchpad, easily picked with some of Foaly’s gear. Holly glanced back at her companions as they all donned rebreather masks. Common gear for underground, but Artemis’ drop had specifically requested she bring one for each of them. Now it made sense. Can’t detect CO₂ if there’s none being let loose.

Not that that was why he’d initially asked for them. Knowing Artemis, he’d been quite serious about gassing the building.
I wish we could just break a window on the right level.

But that would have set off Tower security for sure. They wouldn’t have lasted minutes. Complicated as it seemed, Artemis’ roundabout route really was their best shot.

“We’re going out for a walk,” Artemis had told the AI dryly. “Don’t worry, we’ll stay out of sight.”

The walk had been out a window all too many stories up, but apparently the AI hadn’t minded. Or perhaps Artemis’ I’m not doing anything you need to notice, really, truly had worked. Jarvis had just advised them to avoid the lobby, as it was currently an investigation scene, and said nothing else.

Holly sighed into her helmet as they spoofed yet another door lock. “Does anyone else think this is too easy?”

“Yes,” Butler said bluntly. “So keep moving. We’re going to have to do this fast.”

“Keep-?”

Artemis’ hand squeezed hers. “Either this is a trap, or Jarvis is very, very busy.” He took a breath. “And Jarvis runs Tower security.”

Which would mean Tower security is busy with something that’s not us-

Oh. Not good.

“This is bad,” Steve said to Phil, as both of them watched Widow and Hawkeye keep an eye on SHIELD agents combing the lobby with highly classified fancy EMF detectors. Bruce was currently up in his lab supervising cleanup, apparently all too happy to keep a distance from their possessor if it’d gotten away. And Tony - well, Tony was fussing over Pepper as she leaned on a lobby chair, and Steve couldn’t blame him one bit.

“We thought we had the possessor locked up,” Steve went on. “Heck, we thought we knew how it was bouncing between people. But Pepper never met Agent Doss. Either there’s more than one bad guy out there pulling this trick....” He took a deep breath. “Or we’re wrong.”

“I’ve already notified SHIELD of both options,” Phil nodded grimly. “I just hope if we’ve got the means of transmission wrong, rowan as a prevention still holds.”

“Pepper, you sure you’re okay?” Tony was doing a not-so-subtle body pat-down on his CEO and girlfriend as she wrapped her fingers around a rowan cross. “You’d say something, right? Unless the bad guy was still playing with your head, even after we threw up the Neolithic firewall-”

“I’m okay,” Pepper said firmly, even if she wasn’t quite steady on her feet. “Angry as hell, and I hope you find whoever this is and kick their ass. But... I’m okay.” She closed her eyes a moment, and let out a long sigh. “Phil? Steve? Whoever you’re looking for, they’re... not right in the head. Not by a long shot. I’ve met plenty of big egos-”

“Ouch!” Tony clapped a hand to his chest.

“You do have a big ego, genius,” Pepper smiled a little. And blinked. “That’s it. That’s what I felt. Whoever this is, they think they’re a genius. Not like Tony, or Bruce; you two know you’re good at what you do, but there are some fields where other people are better. This - weight that tried to crush me - they thought they were the only genius. That their plan was perfect, and they were perfect, and anything they were trying to use should just give up. Insects are only there to be stepped on.” The
redhead shuddered, and gripped the chair a little harder. “Agent Coulson? If you catch this thing in its own body, _shoot it._”

Steve whistled, even as Phil nodded. The Avengers were meant to protect Earth. If that meant killing something, well, they’d done that. But Pepper usually saved her bloodthirsty tendencies for the company board of directors. “That bad, ma’am?” Steve said plainly. “What was its plan?”

“I don’t know.” Pepper knuckled her forehead, mouth tightening in a grim line of frustration. “I was trying too hard to keep it from smothering me to play Twenty Questions. I think... I _think_ it’s after something in the Tower. Something that made it want to... laugh.” She shivered.

“Thinks we’re bugs, huh?” Tony patted her hand. “Okay, this thing is about to find out what happens when you poke a hornet’s nest. Because - hah! Here they are.”

“Here _who_ are?” Steve followed Tony’s gaze to a delivery driver with the gold outline of a cat neatly embroidered on his dark jacket pocket, almost hidden by the armload of cardboard boxes he was carrying. “Tony? What’d you do?”

“Made an emergency order,” Tony said firmly. “Bruce and I talked it over. This thing’s transmissible, like a virus, right? However it’s doing it. So - we do _herd immunity._” He waved at the guy. “Over here!”

The driver looked at all the suits, and the carefully-controlled chaos, and shifted on his feet like he’d rather dive right back out onto the street. Which showed a fair measure of good sense, Steve thought. But the guy was a New Yorker, and just shook his head before walking in. “Mr. Stark. We had to order around a dozen places, and we still couldn’t make even close to ten thousand. We’ve got thirteen hundred right now. Give us a day, we can get more.”


“Sorry, Mr. Stark,” the driver shook his head again, walking past toward the security desk. “You asked the manager for maximum efficacy. That means we need to cover all the bases. I’ll just sign in and...” He looked around at all the armed people. _Nervous_ armed people. Set the boxes on the desk, and pulled a pen out of his jacket pocket. “Okay, you guys really need this stuff. I’ll just sign... right... here...” Very warily, he scribbled his signature and company under Pepper’s name.

_El Gato Preto_? Steve read. _The black cat? I thought that was supposed to be bad luck._ “You know, there’s a pen right there.”

“Yeah,” the driver said warily, glancing from the clipboard he’d never actually touched with his fingers to Pepper’s pale face. “Well, given what looks like happened to the last person who signed in, that one... kind of creeps me out.” He shrugged. “Okay, all set here-”

Phil stiffened. “Damn it, how’d we miss the obvious - scan the clipboard!”

Nobody grabbed it, Steve was glad to see. The agents with scanners motioned grim Tower security back, and pointed their odd little voltmeter things closer and closer, like trying to sneak up on a rattlesnake with a sore fang.

About a foot away, the needle jumped.

“The sign in sheet.” Tony swore in what sounded like at least five languages before he took a breath.
“Sir, I would note that this is altogether consistent with the lore on possession in SHIELD’s files,” Jarvis stated. “One’s name is a key to one’s self, and an invitation is often a crucial requirement for a possessing entity to invade. That this invitation also allows the intruder access to the Tower is, I suspect, no accident.”

“Oh hell no,” Tony growled. “Guys? What say we go flatten a fortress in Latveria.”

“We don’t have direct evidence. Yet.” Natasha seemed to materialize beside the security desk, eyes narrowed.

“Invitations,” Phil said under his breath.

“Like having the enemy’s passcode of the day,” Steve nodded, beckoning the increasingly nervous driver away from the very coldly angry agents. “Good thing it’s not Artemis doing this, or we’d really be in trouble.”

About to head over toward the clipboard, Phil paused. Turned back toward Steve, and gave him a very odd look. “I don’t think Artemis has had the chance to tamper with the check-in sheet, but why do you say that?”

“Well....” A little sheepish, Steve lowered his voice. “About some things, Tony’s kind of predictable. Artemis had him pegged right from the start. If he were behind something that needed invitations to work, we’d all be on the sidewalk wondering where that steamroller came from. Look at how easily he got Tony to invite his friends in. One little phrase for Tony to - what’d you say last week, get his...$$ get his geek on? And they’re in.”

Phil was staring at him, realization dawning.

“Only if those friends are an elf, dwarf, or centaur, Captain Rogers,” Jarvis pointed out.

Right. Silly him. “But the lady’s... well, not human, right? And kind of Santa elf size?” Steve blushed even as he said it, but Phil had said the Avengers had to think outside the box.

“Oh my god,” Phil breathed. “Jarvis! Where is Artemis, right now?”

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“Why, he is-” The AI paused. “Sir,” he announced, raising his voice enough to catch Tony’s attention. “We have a problem.”

_Time,_ Phil thought grimly, feeling seconds clamp down like clammy jaws. _I don’t know what’s about to happen, but we’re running out of time._

“Okay, explain.” Clint nodded toward him as the Avengers gathered in a little room off the main lobby to review Jarvis’ footage. The AI’s voice was as level as ever, but you didn’t have to be an agent to hear the unease in it as Jarvis and Tony both searched for any signs of whatever malware was blocking Artemis, Butler, and Holly out of his sensors. “Artemis said he wouldn’t go after anyone in here. That includes Jarvis.”

“He said that,” Phil acknowledged, adding up the facts and intuition that had put ice down his spine. “But he also said he’s a criminal mastermind. He knew, coming here, he was walking into hostile territory. He’s calculated every move he’s made here; from putting himself in the middle of triage to stomping off in a teenage fury to case the Tower. If he tricked Tony into an invitation, that was calculated, too.”

“Oy!” came from by the computer.
“He did, Tony,” Steve said sheepishly. “Chiron? The other two are out of the books, but he’s from Greek myth. And not real popular myths. You had to show off for that one.”

Standing a little behind Clint, Bruce didn’t say anything. But that was a definite smirk.


Steve whistled. “He found something.”

Natasha nodded, slow and calculating. “Something he does not want SHIELD to know about.”

“Something he needs Holly to handle,” Clint muttered. “If she knows magic and he doesn’t....”

“We haven’t taken anything magical into the tower-” Natasha cut herself off, face suddenly cold. “Anything we knew was magic.”

“Indeed,” Jarvis agreed. “In folklore, running water may be a way to cloak magical signatures. I am uncertain that the desalination tanks count as running water, but the compounds involved would make it more difficult to detect minor EM fluctuations.”

“You okay, buddy?” Tony said, touching the side of the monitor.

“I am not,” Jarvis admitted. “I cannot locate Artemis, Butler, or Miss Short on my sensors. I am uncertain how long this state of affairs has been in effect. Yet we cannot detect any virus or surreptitious malware. It is simply as if it is very hard to pay attention to their possible location. Currently I am doing a frame-by-frame search of the suite’s security footage to see if I can identify a point of discontinuity.” His voice flattened. “And he said he meant us no harm.”

Bruce grimaced. “I hate to argue in favor of your mini-Moriarty, but I’ve had to slip out of places I was being watched, more than once. And if there’s something he thinks SHIELD shouldn’t have....” A reluctant shrug. “Speaking as the man Director Fury built his glass cage for, he might - might - have a good reason.”

“I appreciate your intent, Dr. Banner-” Jarvis cut himself off. “Sir?”

“There.” Tony was jabbing at the monitor. “Right there. Artemis is saying something, and the timestamp’s right around the time this mess went down in the lobby.” He straightened. “Bring up the sound.”

“We’re going out for a walk.” Artemis waved his hand in a sweeping gesture. “Don’t worry, we’ll stay out of sight.”

Dead silence around him. Slightly clueless from Steve, Phil noted. The rest of them were stunned by reality. Or maybe the sheer surreal aspect of fiction becoming reality.

“Jarvis?” Clint managed. “You’ve been Jedi mind-tricked.”

“But- that-” It was almost an electronic sputter. “Agent Barton, I do not believe I fall into the ranks of the weak minded!”

“Definitely not.” Tony patted the monitor. “But the kid’s a magician. And I mean that in the David Copperfield-Penn and Teller flashy red silk disappearing act kind of way, not just spooky magic. He knows how to misdirect people. And that works best when you’re distracted. You were trying to keep an eye on Doss, and us, and I know you’ve got Pepper set for high priority overwatch. So.
Distracted. Which means things get by you.”

“But we’re not distracted now,” Bruce said grimly. “He’s got to be somewhere-”

A high note sang through the air. Phil suppressed a startled yelp. “That’s the dimensional rift ward!”

Thunder rumbled, and the screams began.

-So my ally was unable to entirely break the Tower’s mystic threshold. Standing on Iron Man’s arrogant little perch, Doom raised gauntleted hands.

-But what breach there is, is more than enough.

Violet lightning split the sky, tearing holes in reality for his winged demonic servants to wriggle through.

Watching them soar, Doom laughed. “Only a fool fights fire with fire... or technology with more technology.”

Using his Doombots and his ally’s possession strategy had allowed him to gauge the Avengers’ weakness: they were skilled enough against physical force, but mere children against true mystic might. It was a wonder Loki had ever fallen to such imbeciles.

-And now, I will claim my promised prize. And give my so-called ally a just - final - reward.

With a wave of his hand, Doom seized the magic that held demonic leashes. “Serve the will of Doom. Destroy the Avengers!”

-“The solinium’s definitely in this crate.” Visor lowered, Holly glared at the tank as if she’d laser a hole through it.

Artemis glanced back to catch Butler’s nod, as his bodyguard kept watch with a stealth-black tank rifle. Took a breath through his mask, and stabbed at what he thought were the correct buttons on Stark’s idiosyncratic controls. Robotic arms whined quietly to life, plunging into chemical-laced water to grab the container in question. “I’m rather relieved,” he said over their comms. “Whatever this may be, it is at least not a part of Jarvis. We can abstract it, render it unrecognizable, or otherwise dispose of it, without tampering with an innocent entity.” He maneuvered the crate out and onto the floor, trying to minimize the drips. Stark would undoubtedly discover their deception eventually, but the longer they could maintain a charade of innocence, the better. “Is something amiss?”

Holly sighed. And chuckled a little. “I can’t believe this. I’m an LEP officer helping a known criminal pull a heist to get into the lab of one of the richest humans in the world. Julius would be....”

“Champing at the bit to get in on it, if it helped the People,” Artemis said plainly, watching water seep off the container. No more seemed to be draining out; perhaps the airtight seal had held. “Even as he chomped those horrid fungus cigars, and lectured us all about our obvious devotion to the criminal arts leading to no good end.”

“Yes,” Holly said softly. “Yes, he would.”

-I miss him too. Artemis took a moment to square his shoulders, and gave her his best mastermind’s smirk. The rebreather might hide his face, but he knew she’d read it anyway. “You are having fun, aren’t you?”
The way her helmet came up, he knew her grin had teeth. “Oh, yes. And taking notes. After all, how often do you get to let a master thief illustrate how to catch him in the act?”

He mimed a blow to the heart. “A hit, Captain. A palpable hit.” Tapped his fingers together, and took out his toolkit. Thank goodness for private flights; explaining some of the contents of this to any human authority would have been less than entertaining. “Let’s open this up, shall we?”

It took some doing, and he and Holly both strained at various locks and catches, then again at the covers of the rather bulky and potentially explosive Stark technology inside. Butler’s strength would have been more than handy, but none of them were convinced the Avengers would take I was out for a walk for an explanation, should they happen to stumble in here. Far better if he stayed on watch while they-

An access plate came off, and Artemis stared in blank horror at a digital display. A Gnommish digital display.

Counting down.


Artemis ripped off his rebreather, releasing any shred of concentration on don’t notice us. “Jarvis!”

“Master Fowl!” The AI’s clipped words were coldly furious. “You have no clearance to be-”

“Evacuate the building! Now!” Another second ticked off. “There’s a bomb!”

For a building that was supposed to be safe, Artemis Fowl Sr. mused, Avengers Tower had an impressive array of alarms.

“All personnel, evacuate the building,” a calm, controlled voice stated over the intercoms. “We have a credible bomb threat, and we are under paranormal attack. The NYPD and the Fire Department have been notified and are en route. Please evacuate the building immediately.”

Paranormal attack. Fowl Sr. clapped a hand to his forehead. So much for safety and security.

Though it was the bomb threat that had worry gnawing at him, as he twiddled a pen between his fingers and knocked at Artemis’ suite. The last time Artemis had been in the same building as a bomb....

“This room is vacant,” a computerized voice announced. “Please evacuate immediately.”

Surely he’s evacuated. Surely Butler’s sane enough to get them both out.

And just as surely, the one place you could always find Artemis was the place he wasn’t supposed to be.

Looking up, Fowl Sr. swore under his breath.

No. I’m not leaving my son to face destruction alone. Not this time.

Grim, he headed for the elevator.

Doom is a coward.
The Tower’s late shift fleeing behind her, Black Widow struck and spun and killed, demonic flesh falling before the shock of her sting and her trained will. Flesh and bone carried the blow, felt the impacts - but it was her will that truly fought the unholy life inside them. All the while that same will raged, because-

“This is a distraction,” Captain America bit out over the comms.

Yes. Exactly.

Hawkeye’s arrow sniped a shrieking fiend from the air. “Not like we can ignore it.”

“Or Doom breaking in through my ceiling. Or the bomb,” Iron Man said lightly. “Jarvis. Please tell me those three idiots are getting out?”

“They are not, Sir.” The AI sounded grim. “The device has what appears to be a digital display, counting down. It is not in any human-language numerals I have on record. Artemis and Miss Short appear to have the proper tools, but given certain hesitations in their movements, and the fact Short is broadcasting what I believe are audio and video to a third party-”

“Oh god we’ve got amateur night with a bomb. Cap!”

“Go,” Rogers ordered.

“Well,” Foaly stated, feeling lightheaded as he stared at the blinking bomb through Holly’s helmet video feed, “the good news is, this is definitely the source of the solinium and the magic you detected.”

“Pliers,” Artemis muttered.

Holly slapped them into his hand. Foaly had to shake his head at her suit readouts; her heart rate was up so far she ought to be vanishing, but her respiration was almost normal. *Recon. They’re all crazy. And Section Eight is crazier.*

Holly took another breath. “And the bad news?”

“Magnetic wrench.”

“The bad news?” Foaly’s left forehoof pawed the floor, as he tried not to vibrate in his sling chair. “Um.”

“Wires are leading this way....”

“Not that one!” Foaly whinnied, horn-nailed finger pinning the diagram on his screen. “It’s like one of your human mercury switches! Pull it, it all goes!”

“Ah.” Artemis’ voice never wavered. “Thank you. Let’s follow another, shall we....”

“So. Bad news.” Holly took a shaky breath. “If it goes up, we’re dead, right?”

“If that goes up?” Foaly almost wanted to laugh. Or throw up. “The whole Tower is dead.”

*Not enough carrots in all the world for this....*

Butler watched the lab door, listening to vibrations and explosions from above and far below. He’d
already asked Artemis for the pertinent details - time remaining, bomb radius, and likely casualties -
and marked a time on his watch. At that moment, no matter what else was happening, he would turn,
shoot the lab windows out, grab the two smaller stubborn subjects, and hopefully toss them all out
into the night.

And he’d have to. A bio-bomb that would sweep Avengers Tower from roof to basement would
have a wide enough lethal radius to take out blocks in both directions, not to mention every low-
flying pigeon in range. Artemis wouldn’t stop trying to disarm it unless he had no other choice.
“Jarvis.”

“Mr. Butler,” the AI said promptly, apparently willing to leave arguments about mind-manipulating
magic for after they’d dealt with the big boom. “Be aware Doom has breached the top level of
security. In part by throwing demons through some of the automated defenses.”

Butler raised a brow. “Literally?”

“At times, yes.”

So they were dealing with a magic-using, armored, strong megalomaniac who didn’t think he had to
listen to alerts about a bomb threat. Business as usual, then. “If that bomb goes off, you’d better have
all your programs somewhere else,” the bodyguard said levelly. “It’s supposed to kill everything
alive. You may be electronic, but if magic can work on you, you might be alive in a way that
counts.”

“Sir has a great deal of experience with explosives,” Jarvis stated.

“Not this one.” Slinging the trank rifle, Butler drew his Sig Sauer. “Doom’s still letting demons clear
the way?”

“They have breached onto your level.” The AI’s voice went up a notch. “And apparently have
activated a speed boost. Thirty meters, twenty, ten-”

Claws punched through the doorway.

Breathing slow and even, Butler chose his moment.

This is insane.

Fowl Sr. walked past fallen bodies misting into smoke and foul odors, flinching at the crack of shots
as Butler calmly downed a trio of circling winged beasts while punching out the fourth that got too
close. Across the room were Artemis and that small female, utterly focused on a beeping artifact the
size of a treasure chest, various wires and circuitry panels carefully removed as they delved into the
heart of it. An unfamiliar voice seemed to be offering tense advice; Fowl Sr. breathed hard, shaken
by a sudden fury. Who in the world was telling his son anything that kept Arty near a bomb?

“Father.” Artemis’ tone was utterly focused. “It would be best for all involved if you obeyed the
evacuation order. We cannot be certain the display is accurate.”

I’m only leaving if you are. Fowl Sr. opened his mouth to castigate his idiot of a son to that effect-

“Oh, I think you can be quite sure it isn’t.”

His mouth. His voice. Not his words.
“A plan that is exaggerated, overcomplicated, and focused on drawing out the pain for all parties involved,” Artemis said tightly, never looking up from the device. “I knew it was you... Opal Koboi.”
It hadn’t been that hard to deduce, after all, Artemis thought, never pausing in his careful trace of wires and circuits. He had plenty of enemies, but only a limited subset with access to both high technology and magic. Opal Koboi should have had access to neither... but given the woman had escaped from Haven’s high security facilities while in a coma, he should have known that wouldn’t stop her.

And really, this plan fit no one else. Who else would go to such lengths to involve two major powers of the human world - Doom and the Avengers - and deliberately set the stage for both their inexplicable deaths? Latveria would blame the Avengers and SHIELD, the rest of the world would pile in on either side, and Opal herself could move neatly into a power vacuum anywhere she wished once the bombs stopped falling. Framing his father would likely have been just icing on the cake.

*Poisoned sweetness. I can turn that to our advantage.*

“Ignore the drama queen,” Holly said under her breath. “Bomb.”

“I can’t,” Artemis said; barely a breath of air. “You don’t think that timer is the only trigger?”

Her knuckles clenched, white.

Artemis stifled any urge to wince. He hadn’t been there when Opal Koboi’s sadistic trap had taken Julius Root’s life. But he’d heard the technical details from Foaly. Opal had left Holly a choice to shoot that was no choice at all.

*The moment she thinks we might escape, she’ll kill us all. But so long as Father is alive, she can gloat.*

And Opal so loved gloating.

*Think! Where can the triggers be? The countdown is obvious. She’d wish to have another with her physical body as a last resort, but if she is still in Atlantis, then someone might search her cell while she is “out”. A trigger they could find would be an unnecessary risk. So the most likely place another trigger could be is... of course.*

The most easily accessible place Opal would have a trigger was on her host himself. She’d have others, Opal did know the value of a good backup plan, but the odds were those triggers would take at least a little time to reach.

*But how much time? Artemis held his nerves in a grip of iron. Keep her talking.*

“I admit to some curiosity,” he said dryly. “Your plan to escape LEP custody in Haven was meticulous, and only unraveled because Foaly happened to invent the retimager.”

“Happened to?” snarled over his comm.

“Foaly, you donkey, focus!” Holly hissed.

“But how did you manage to pull the wool over Atlantis LEP’s collective eyes?” Artemis went on,
as if it were a matter of mere intellectual interest. “Though I suppose in part it would simply be easier because it was Atlantis LEP, and not those of Haven. You would have had far more difficulty working your wiles under Trouble Kelp’s watchful gaze.”

“Trouble Kelp-!” Opal’s borrowed lips curled in disdain. “That weak-willed supporter of all that is right and just in the Underground. As if it could ever be right to deny unequaled genius its due-”

...That should give us another five minutes.

“It would seem, Sir, that the maniacal monologue is a weakness that crosses species lines.”

“Hey, we’ll take what we can get.” Tony arrowed up toward the lab windows, still smarting from the last three flying horror movie rejects he’d had to smash into the building. None of them had been as tough as, oh, say, a Chitauri space-whale, but dealing with them took time.

And time’s something we don’t have.

He was so, so glad Jarvis was a spying observant son of a program, and knew how to condense a lot of info into a very short briefing.

Our possessor’s got a name, Artemis knows him-her-it and not in a good way, and Opal Koboi has an ego the size of Loki’s.

An ego that Tony had to admit was at least partly justified. Bomb the Avengers? Psssh. Opal had just about managed to get them to bomb themselves.

But Artemis dropped invisibility the moment he knew about it, Tony thought. And he’s using English, so Jarvis gets all the info he can pass on to us. He’s not the enemy here.

...He’s just facing down the enemy in his father. This is bad.

Very bad. Which was why he had to think instead of just rushing in there. If Jarvis’ read on Artemis was right, and Opal really was carrying a trigger, then Artemis’ tactic might be the best: stall. Let Opal gloat, long enough for the three in there to get the bomb to a point they could disarm it in seconds. At which point, given where Jarvis said Butler was hiding in the shadows, the bodyguard was going to down Fowl Sr. with a trank and the two on the bomb would work very damn fast.

That’s a kid. And a little lady. Damn it, I don’t want to leave this on them!

But Iron Man rushing in might be just the tip of the scales that made Opal decide hanging around wasn’t worth the snickers.

Only problem is, Opal’s not the only maniac up here.

Decision made, Tony smashed through the windows. In the corridor just outside the lab.

Punching Doom would have felt awesome, but a repulsor blast to knock him away from the lab door was just faster.

“You dare,” the dictator snarled, getting to his feet with an agility Tony never would have believed if he wasn’t wearing his own metal suit.

Yikes. Lightning!

Purple and weird at the edges, but lightning. Iron Man dodged back through the broken glass, letting
the metal window-frame take the shock. And hoped it didn’t spread back to the lab.

More glass shattered, as he dove back in to punch demons in the jaw. “Hey, metal mouth! Knock knock!”

Steve fought off demons, listened to Tony’s half of the fight, and Jarvis’ terse reports of what was going on in the lab, and thought some words that would have had the orphanage instructors washing his mouth out with soap.

“Portals are closing,” Phil called out, peering up through binoculars. “Looks like even Doom has the sense not to leave open doors to Otherplace lying around.” He lowered the lenses, taking a half-step back as Hulk bashed a demon into the asphalt just a hair too close to where he was standing. “Your call.”

*Yeah,* Steve thought, tossing a demon into a tangle of those Clint had already shot, so Black Widow could shoot them all again and make them stay down. *I hate that.*

On the one hand, the situation up there was hair-trigger delicate, there was plenty to do down here, and Jarvis was very soberly convinced that if the bomb did go off, anyone in the Tower would be dead. On the other - Tony was up there. And Artemis wasn’t stupid. If he and his people were still there, Artemis thought they had a chance to win.

*But he’s a kid. Kids always think they have a chance.*

“Cap, they need my help.” Repulsors were whining in the background as Tony fought, making a noise against something that didn’t sound exactly solid. “If they know Opal then she’s probably got something in her bomb’s bag of tricks just for them. And Doom is cheating like a cheatty thing. He’s got this blue-glowy forcefield that doesn’t even read there to any sensors except the EM ones, and I can’t get past him.”

“Magical shield.” Hawkeye dropped from his ledge and touched down by Phil. “Cap. If Artemis is right, I think I can get through it.”

“Any day now, guys!” Tony gasped.

Damn it. This isn’t just a trap for Artemis. It’s a trap for us. “If we all go up there Opal will set the bomb off,” Steve said grimly. “Hawkeye, if you and Agent Coulson are willing to go - how do we get you up there?”

Phil held up a radio, as rotors hovered into view between the buildings. “The boys in blue just offered us a helicopter.”

“Still just a silly, stubborn little fool....”

That’s rich, coming from a pixie, Holly thought, desperately trying to ignore Opal’s ranting even as she had to yawn to crack the pressure in her ears. “Foaly, you’d better be getting all this on record. Doom’s got a magical shield up even Iron Man can’t break.”

“We’re not going to need a record,” Foaly said frantically, “you’re going to tell the Wing Commander yourself.”

“Save it,” she bit out, even as her heart panged. How Artemis could listen enough to keep poking Opal into ranting longer and still work on the bomb she’d never know.
Yes, you do. That’s who he is. Artemis Fowl II. Brain like a computer and a heart armored in ice. He’s spent years making sure he can act, even when his soul is bleeding.

He may be a viper, Foaly. But he’s our viper.

Yet even a viper’s venom had limits. They’d already found and isolated three false leads and another “pull it and everything goes” circuit. One more distraction would probably be more than any of them could handle.

And here comes the distraction.

Doom stalked in like a dark lord out of human fairytales; the kind that made it hard for even a jaded Recon officer to really blame humans for driving the People underground. Steel gray armor, green cloak, a pair of demons stalking along with him like rabid guard dogs... Holly had to stifle a sudden urge to giggle. If someone put this in a movie, the Haven critics would shred the director and the actor for hammy overacting of Evil.

She pulled her Neutrino instead, concealing it from the door with her body. Thank goodness Section Eight made good flight suits. The camo effect should hide her weapon until the last moment.

“Artemis-”

“Your aim is better.” Her friend might as well have been observing the Arctic was a bit chilly, as he noted each of the wires she’d been holding and adjusted his circuit-tracing accordingly. “Doom’s armor is supposed to be... very good.”

Spoken in a tone that meant he suspected even Butler’s Sig Sauer was unlikely to make a dent. Even if Butler had been willing to use it; between taking down a maniac and saving Fowl Sr.’s life, she’d pick waiting too.

And Neutrinos aren’t meant to be lethal. Holly let out a slow breath. Pick the shot, Holly-girl. Make it count.

Doom barely glanced at them as he strode further in, eyeslits turning Opal’s way in haughty disdain. “Your presence is no longer needed, Opal Koboi.”

Holly froze, caught between a snicker and an odd desire to run screaming. Oh Frond. It’s raining dueling megalomaniacs.

“Necessary?” Opal’s chuckle was almost as deep and rich as Fowl Sr.’s own. “No. But entertaining.”

“Oh yes, because your amusement is the axis mundi the remainder of the world is privileged to revolve around,” Artemis said dryly. “Trite, Opal. Trite and unimaginative. Set Doom and the Avengers to destroy one another? The Avengers defeated an alien invasion. And it’s well enough known that Tony Stark has almost blown himself up on more than one occasion. A rather large and lethal boom in Avengers tower? The only surprise will be that they didn’t crush Doom before this.” He tched. “Now, if you’d managed to set that arrogant pacifist Reed Richards up to look as if one of his inventions did them all in, then you might have had a truly frightening scenario. As it is-” A careless shrug.

“Says the ignorant little child who’ll die with the rest of the pests,” Opal sneered. “Short’s no warlock, Fowl. She’ll never break the shield in time to save you. Or even herself.”

“Did you think a mere explosion would harm Doom?” Latveria’s dictator strode toward Opal’s borrowed body, demons circling out from him like hounds on the scent. “You overestimate your
capabilities. And your usefulness. Once I have the mystical technology here—"

“Oh, believe me, I’m quite tempted to let you have it,” Artemis mused. “So long as you managed to get... oh, at least half a mile from here before Opal becomes bored? She’s very dangerous when she’s bored. And she has had so very, very few opportunities to amuse herself, these past three years.” His smile toward her was brilliant, like noon sun on glacial ice. “How is prison, Opal? A far cry from an Italian villa, I’m sure. Are you tired of fish yet?”

“You,” Opal’s voice dripped loathing, “you will crawl before you die. The fate you left me to... the indignity of being treated as a stupid peasant, and then... you and the LEP will die in flames.” The thought seemed to calm her. “You really aren’t as smart as you think, are you, Artemis? If you were, you would have told the Avengers everything. And then... well, then they would have been ready. And able to fight, instead of dying like the hopeless gnats they are. And you wouldn’t be here.”

A clank of armor, as Doom folded his arms; as if he had all the time in the world. “You think this child more dangerous than the Avengers?”

“Hey!” came Iron Man’s oddly watery shout from the doorway. “Very dangerous here, you spinach-wrapped tin can!”

“In his way, yes,” Opal smirked. “He’s not nearly as much of a genius as I am. And he’s nowhere near as powerful as even the weakest of the Avengers. But he knows that, so he thinks. And sometimes... sometimes he’s almost brilliant.” Teeth gleamed. “But you’re not going to think your way out of this one, Fowl.”

True, Holly thought, chilled. It’s all true.... Oh. Oh, what are you up to?

She didn’t glance toward the door again. Barton was a shadow in the shadows as Iron Man was loud and obvious and obnoxiously banging on the shield; the archer drawing a bead on the doorway as slow and cautious as Butler stalking Fowl Sr.

Whatever the Avenger thought he could do, she hoped he’d hurry.

“You are empty, Opal.” Artemis’ voice was quiet. Almost calm. “You, and Doom with you. All you have is your intellect and your superiority. There is no calm within you. No trace of human feeling, reaching out across the void to touch another life. You are an endless hall of mirrors, reflecting nothing.” He let out a slow breath. “I was almost like that. Once.” Slight shoulders shrugged. “If I had time, I might pity you. You have nothing to live for. How can you imagine there might be anything worth dying for?”

“Oh, the would-be hero,” Opal gloated. “That’s right! We met for the first time because you had to get past me to save....” Her borrowed hand gestured. “Well, him. What a pity. Save him for a few years, only to have him die here? With no idea what you went through for him. The goblin rebellion, the lava, the Russian Mafiya - oh yes, I did hear about the little human mob you had to deal with in Murmansk. With Julius’ help, yes? You couldn’t have done it on your own. But your father won’t even know what you did manage. Such a pity.”

“There are many things my father does not know about Murmansk,” Artemis said deliberately. “Chief among them that to save his life, I first had him shot.”

Intent is magic.

In the space between heartbeats, Clint loosed.
The translucent shield shattered like ringing crystal, bringing Doom’s head around and almost covering the quiet cough of a trank rifle. Fowl Sr. swayed, as an armored dictator snarled at the arrow jutting out from one of the places even the most knightly armor had to have a joint. Which left Doom good and distracted as Iron Man dove through the doorway to head for the spaghetti-tangle of wires Artemis and Holly had pulled out of the bomb.

Clint was already through, a tumble that took him up on his feet again near Fowl Sr. as he collapsed. For two reasons. One, he had to dodge somewhere, and near someone Doom considered a potential ally against all things sane was as good a place as any. Two - sometimes mind-controlled people didn’t go down as easy as they should. He should know. Butler might need a little help.

...Then again, that might be like saying a mountain needed a little help with an avalanche. The bodyguard’s expression as he pinned the elder Fowl to the floor had the narrowed eyes and slightly pinched look Clint knew all too well from Black Widow in a Bad Mood.

_Somebody has done something stupid, and someone I’m protecting almost paid the price, _Clint translated that look. _Fowl, I wouldn’t be you for all the money in Tony’s bank accounts._

He came up firing, because there were still two cranky demons, even if Doom was-

_Not distracted anymore, _Clint realized, dodging a bolt of purple light. _Must have some kind of mental painblock, he should at least be limping- that idiot, he just shot at the bomb-!_

Artemis tried to breathe through the static prickling through his nerves. He’d had to drop the wires. Wouldn’t do to conduct a bolt of whatever energy that was straight into Opal’s bomb when it hit him. And he could see it _would_ hit him; Holly was busy shooting demons, Barton had just dodged, Butler was busy pinning his father down long enough for the trank to take hold, and Stark was currently getting a helmet full of Foaly’s sputtering about nonsensical human wiring as Jarvis patched LEP communications into Iron Man’s ears.

_There’s no one left but me._

He’d seen that, even as he’d _felt _reality twist to clear the way for Doom’s magic. Lightning traveled from ground to sky, electrons blasting through flesh and metal too fast for humans to see anything but the sky striking them down. This shock was traveling from Doom to _him_, against the grain of every aggravated electron in the way-

Perhaps he did have trouble grasping kinetics. But electricity and magic, he knew.

_Like poles repel._

Left-handed, Artemis slashed across and down. And hoped there wasn’t anything vital in the floor.

...Well. Hopefully not. His hand was reddened, as if it’d passed too close to a flame. The hole in the floor was smoking, And Doom was staring at him like Briar Cudgeon had at rebellious goblin generals.

_“How dare you object to my attempt to destroy you.” Oh, this is not going to be good-_  

The world blazed violet fire.

Later he was going to punch Doom in the face. He really, really was. Right now, gauntleted hands buried in a rat’s nest of crazy circuits, Tony was a bit too busy to work up a really good mad about
having his back watched by a fifteen-year-old kid and a gun-slinging lady too small to pass the kiddie bar at the rollercoaster. And Doom deserved a good mad. The amount of charge being thrown around was enough to make his hair stand on end even inside his suit, and if Artemis missed just once, everyone and his fish would be going to that big saltwater tank in the sky.

Not to mention having someone Holly’s size shooting the demons along with Clint because he was too damn busy to do it himself was just embarrassing.

*Mini-Pepper* and *mini-Widow*. Artemis can sure pick ‘em. “What do you mean, the current doesn’t flow that way?”

“It’s obviously inefficient!” the fussbudget on the other end of his comm shot back, throwing in a few words that sounded like *cowpóg* in there.

“Speaking as a guy who makes things go boom, efficiency is kind of the last thing on people’s minds,” Tony said firmly, eyeing the circuit in question. “What you want is something that goes boom when you want, and doesn’t go boom until you want. Opal had this on some kind of timer, so either it had a really long fuse to cover all the time before we dragged it out of the water, or... *aha.*”

“Ionic sensor!” A heavy-breathed *harrumph*. “Of course. As long as it was in seawater-”

“Timer stays off,” Tony concluded, tracking that back now that he knew this circuit had to lead to the ignition. “Start desalinating it, or let it dry out - Artemis might have set it off a little sooner, but it was going to go boom in here- *got you!*”

He pounced. Spun the nifty little magnetic unlocking tools Artemis had had to leave behind.

*Beep.*

The display went to the odd little symbols Jarvis said were *zero.*

Silence.

Tony took a deep breath, and let himself clatter down to a sitting pose on the floor. Coulson was in the doorway talking into his radio, two demons were dissolving seared arrow-pincushions on the floor, Butler was shaking out bruised knuckles, Artemis was reciting complex square roots as he moved some kind of blue-gold glow over seared fingers, and Clint was in position to keep Doom staring down the barrel of Holly’s gun.

*Yeah. We did good.* “So, now that it looks like we’re all going to live... what’s your name, anyway?”

“Foaly-”

“You... pathetic little ignoramuses....”

Tony stared. Hadn’t Fowl Sr. taken a trank straight to the shoulder? Yes, he had. So what the hey?

Blue sparks flaring at the wound, the man scrabbled for something in his pocket. “Did you really think-”

“Opal Koboi!” Jarvis’ voice boomed from every lab speaker that was still intact. “By the authority vested in me as Tower security, your invitation to this and every demesne I control is hereby rescinded!”

The scream made Tony clap his hands over his ears, helmet and all. Something glowed about Fowl
Sr., a sickly green light that seemed to gather in one pocket-

And winked out, gone.

“Neatly done,” Artemis said raggedly. “That should buy us a few more minutes, let us use them well...”

“You, in no shape to be fiddling with this,” Tony said firmly as the kid did his game best to stagger over. “Just tell me what to take out.”

“The glowing blue cylinder in the center,” Foaly stated. “Careful, careful - that’s solinium, don’t ask, big booms. Just get it loose from anything with a connection, we should be into the standard circuitry by now... good. Good. Keep going-”

Click. And it was out.

“Oh thank Frond,” Foaly breathed.

“I’ll take that, if you don’t mind.” Holly held up a hand, face grim under her helmet. “Foaly, tell me we’ve got a disposal team on the way?”

“ETA two minutes,” Foaly said promptly.

No fool, Tony handed it to the little lady. “Maybe you want to go meet them,” he suggested.

“That’d be wise,” Agent Coulson spoke up, looking over the wrecked lab before meeting Holly’s visored gaze. “Just in case we might have a few overenthusiastic agents who didn’t get the word that we couldn’t stop you from taking it.”

“Good idea,” Holly said wryly. Touched something on her wrist, and-  

Ooo. Ooo! She has wings! Tony almost danced in glee, as they unfolded from the back of her camo-suit. Translucent kind of dragonfly-like- oo, I want that design!

Hovering, she hesitated. “Artemis-”

“Lethal explosive first,” the teenager said firmly. “I’m fine.”

Shimmering out of sight, Holly took off.

Breathing still a bit ragged, Artemis walked over to Butler, and started running sparks over his bodyguard’s bruises. “Agent Coulson,” he said, voice remarkably level. “I’m in no position to give lectures to SHIELD. But if I were to lecture them... or anyone else...”

Tony glared at Doom. Who was probably only silent by way of the dents in his helmet, and the arrow pointed somewhere even nastier than the shaft sticking out of his gluteus maximus.

“...I might strongly suggest that you reexamine the veracity of your sources,” Artemis went on. “Especially whoever gave you the information to find this particular... cargo. That was the equivalent of a nuclear hand grenade. And the pin had been pulled for a very long time.”

Ooof. Tony watched the kid pick up his tools, neatly sliding each and every one into a little kit with the kind of scuffmarks that meant it’d been bounced around a dozen odd hostile locales. “So. You do this often?”

“In point of fact, this was the third time I’ve faced down a blue rinse,” Artemis said, voice distracted
in a way Tony knew meant he was *that* far from faceplanting the tiles. “It does not appear to get easier.”

Fowl Sr. coughed, gingerly sitting up. “The *third* time? Artemis, *what are you doing playing with bombs?*”

For a breath, Artemis stood stock-still.

*Oh, not good*....

“Father.” Each syllable was precise as diamond-cut gears, with an angry Irish brogue thicker than Tony had heard from Artemis yet. “At the risk of sounding horribly crass, I am; but as our American acquaintances might say, I have but the one nerve left. And you’re getting on it.”

Chapter End Notes

Based on bits I’ve heard from YouTube, Artemis usually speaks like an educated upper-class Anglo-Irish noble... but he does have a brogue, and it gets thicker under stress. Which leads to interesting word-patterns.
Chapter 10

“One Latverian dictator,” Director Fury mused, standing straight in black leather as SHIELD agents loaded the snarling man in armor onto his helicopter. Doom was bound in shackles Phil knew had originally been meant for Loki; a touch of irony the agent thought rather capped off the night. “Signed, sealed, delivered. Nice work.”

“It’s not over yet, Sir,” Phil said politely. “I need to do some... background work. On a few unexpectedly helpful bystanders.”

The brow over Nick’s whole eye arched. “The Fowls.”

“Sir, I strongly suggest not trying to recruit Artemis,” Phil said wryly. “Unless you want him to take your job.”

Nick gave him a narrow-eyed look.

“And that wouldn’t make either of you happy,” Phil shrugged. “Besides. I get the impression he’s been looking out for... something we shouldn’t officially know we should look out for.”

“Nuclear hand grenade?” the director said pointedly.

“If SHIELD can tolerate Doom in charge of Latveria, I think we can tolerate this,” Phil stated. “Besides. Given the World Security Council’s past acts of record, we might want to have a few back channels to people they don’t speak for.”

Fury sighed, and gave him a long look. “I’m giving you a lot of leeway, Agent. Make it worth it.”

Phil waited until the helicopter was up and away before he relaxed a little. “I think it already is.”

Now to go find out what’s really been going on.

Steve stared down at Holly as the Avengers walked into Artemis’ suite; a black-suited, helmeted, very professional looking Holly, for all that he could have smuggled her in a guitar case with room to spare.

He had to admit, he was almost as impressed by how Artemis and Butler were currently fading into the background. Between Artemis’ love of manipulating attention and Butler’s... well, Butler, the fact that the two could make sure the lady had center stage was pretty amazing.

Then again, Holly’s pretty amazing. Like Peggy was.

Ah. And there was Mr. Fowl, coming through the door sandwiched in between Natasha and a very tired Bruce. Hopefully they could keep this short. For everyone’s sake.

“So,” Tony announced to the cranky voice still tossing tech details with him over the speakers, “are you the dwarf or the centaur?”

“I am not a dwarf!”

Holly’s lips twitched.

“I’m just saying,” Tony shrugged, “because Artemis made sure I invited in an elf, a dwarf, and a
centaur, and Jarvis says anything magic that needs an invitation to get in needs that invitation to stay in, which is how he kicked Opal out, and if you’re not the dwarf and Holly’s definitely not the centaur....”

“Have you back-hacked my video feeds? Holly, we should-”

“Foaly.” Holly lifted a gloved hand. “Have a carrot, and take a deep breath. Did the Wing Commander say yes?”

“Provisionally. That’s provisionally, Holly, watch your step up there.” A snort; it almost did sound like a whinny. “Humans!”

Holly nodded, and eyed Steve through her visor. “Captain Rogers. Can I have your assurance that Agent Coulson is here as an Avenger, not a member of SHIELD?”

“I trust him,” Steve said simply. And Phil had told him Fury was giving them all leeway to handle this, unless something went sour. Hopefully it wouldn’t.

“Good.” She took off her helmet, revealing short-cropped red hair, an impish grin, and long pointed ears. “We haven’t been properly introduced. Captain Holly Short, Section Eight, Lower Elements Police.”

She’s an elf, Steve thought, amazed. She really is... wait, what?

“You’re a cop?” Tony blurted out.

“As you Americans say, yep.” The grin got just a little wider, as she reached into a pocket and drew out what looked like two silver acorn charms on a chain. “Which reminds me. Artemis? Foaly says the paperwork went through a few hours ago.” She tossed winking silver his way. “You’re in.”

Left-handed, Artemis caught them.

That’s Artemis smiling, Steve realized, catching that subtle twitch of joy, tempered with a calculation he could feel even behind the teen’s mirrored lenses. Damn. He doesn’t know how to just be happy, does he?

“I thought you needed three recommendations?” Artemis said quietly.

“Foaly did some digging,” Holly shrugged. “Julius... left his on file.” A sad smile. “All three pages of it.”

“Oh.” The teen cupped silver in his hand, as if it were more precious than diamonds. “How long was it after you redacted the invectives?”

Steve blinked.

Holly tried, but couldn’t quite keep a straight face. She sniffl ed, and chuckled, gloved hand wiping at her eyes. “About two paragraphs.”

“Now that sounds more like Commander Root,” Butler rumbled. “He was a good man, Captain Rogers. You’d have liked him.”

Was. Steve put that together with the fact that Root had apparently been Holly’s commander, and some of Opal’s rants Jarvis had recorded, and came up with an unpleasant answer. “Opal killed him.”
Holly nodded once, short and angry. “About four years ago, now. She’s very fond of blowing people up. We’re putting together a file on her for you. Though translating it may be a bit sticky; most of us only have English as a second language, and the only humans truly fluent in Gnommish,” her glance slid toward Artemis, “well, they’re sitting right there-”

“Exactly what is official with my son?” Mr. Fowl demanded.

“I’m currently wondering if that’s any of your business,” Holly said flatly.

Oof, direct hit, Steve winced. Legally Artemis is eighteen. Mr. Fowl knows it, Holly knows it, and Artemis knows it. Just because Artemis hasn’t walked out the door doesn’t mean he can’t.

Artemis sat up straight, tense. “Captain Short.”

“No,” Holly shook her head. “You may be the genius in the family, Artemis, but I refuse to believe your father can’t think it through. If he wants to.” Her smile was like Natasha’s, hard-edged and dangerous. “After all, he told you to go straight. Too bad he didn’t specify by whose standards.”

By whose- Steve’s eyes widened. And Artemis speaks her language. Wait, she doesn’t mean-

“You are....” Mr. Fowl drew a deep breath. “You are this woman’s informant?”

“Consultant. To Section Eight. Officially.” Artemis’ tone was pure ice. “And given that Captain Short risked her life to drag you out of a freezing radioactive harbor at Murmansk, Father, I might ask that you give her a degree of courtesy.”

The elder Fowl started. “She... exactly what happened at Murmansk-” He cut himself off. “Your pardon, Captain Rogers. That would be a private matter.”

“On the contrary; it is relevant,” Artemis stated, leaning warily back in his chair. “You and your team may as well be seated, Captain Rogers. This may take a bit of time. But you’ve crossed Opal Koboi, whether or not you wished to, and she will neither forget nor forgive. You should know exactly what manner of enemy you’ve acquired.” He tapped the odd little computer on his right wrist. “Though it seems I did not know everything. Who in the worlds left the fact that Opal Koboi could possess people out of her criminal file? And how did she manage to recharge her magic enough to do so while in LEP custody?” His tone soured. “Which, of course, assumes she is still in LEP custody. Given her last escape, Foaly, you’d best be heading to Atlantis with a retimizer.”

“You mean in case this is another clone?” Foaly harrumphed. “Don’t have to. The Wing Commander rattled some cages, and an Atlantis LEP Retrieval team walked into her cell just a few minutes ago. She’s gone.”

Holly clapped a hand to her forehead. Butler squinted, casually rechecking the room’s exits. And Artemis... sighed. “I suspect any invective strong enough would have Mother terribly disappointed in me.”

“Like you even know any,” Foaly snickered.

Artemis raised a dark brow. “I have worked with Mulch. Would you like the proof inserted into your formal reports?”

“Don’t you dare!”

“You can hack Mr. Foaly?” Jarvis asked, intrigued.
“I have the advantage of knowing the technology,” Artemis nodded. “And fair is fair. Foaly
considers it part of his job to keep me under surveillance. Or perhaps a hobby. In either case, I see no
reason not to return the favor.” He steepled his fingers. “Well. Opal. How to sum up... I suppose I
should start with Murmansk. Britva sent me a picture to prove he had you, Father, and Butler and I
were in the process of arranging funds and transport to pry you from his grasp, when we were
detained by the LEP.”

Steve gave Holly a look.

“Trust me, we had cause,” the little elf captain said wryly. “Only it turned out that this time, they
were innocent.”

“Quite,” Artemis said wryly. “Rather a unique experience. In brief, Commander Julius Root offered
a bargain: our assistance in locating the true culprit, in return for his in obtaining your freedom.
Given what I knew of Britva’s capabilities and ruthlessness in ransoming hostages, I accepted.” He
took a breath. “Shortly after that, things became... complicated.”

“I’ll spare you the details of Artemis and the plasma conduits,” Butler said dryly. “Let’s just say that
by the time it was over we’d managed to take a ride on a radioactive train, escape being buried alive,
and put down an armed insurrection of goblins.”

Mr. Fowl clapped a hand to his forehead in disbelief. “Arty....”

“You were going to die.” Artemis was stiff, fingers laced white-knuckled together. “Britva does not
return live hostages, ransom or not. I needed help. Help I could trust. And Commander Root’s word
was his bond. Always.” He shook his head. “Opal Koboi was one of those who’d arranged the
insurrection, sabotaging LEP equipment. She meant to reign over Haven as its queen. We thwarted
her dreams of conquest, after which she feigned a coma for a year to put herself in a position to
escape. Which she readily did, and that... that was when she arranged for Commander Root to be
murdered.”

Holly winced.

“It was a no-win scenario, Captain,” Artemis said quietly. “You could have been snared by the bomb
as easily as Julius was. It was pure chance that you were not. I... know that does not make it any
easier.”

“I can’t believe she’s out there,” Holly said tightly. “I can’t believe anyone let her get away again.
What do you have to tell Atlantis to get them to keep a damn door locked?”

“Oh, I very much look forward to finding out.” Artemis’ grin might have given a vampire chills.
“We should see the scene of the crime, should we not? Given we will undoubtedly need to unravel
precisely how she did get out.”

Holly stifled a snort. “You two will terrify them.”

“Excellent. A little judicious fear never harmed anyone.” Artemis glanced back at his father. “In any
event, after her first escape, Opal was bent on revenge on Haven in general and those who’d
captured her in particular. After several shenanigans and one or two near-catastrophes we did catch
her. I’d hoped we would not have to do so again.”

“I can only imagine,” Mr. Fowl said soberly. “It was like hearing through fog, but- she despises you,
Artemis. And you as well, Captain Short. It was as if someone opened a tunnel to the magma at the
Earth’s core; that, is the heat of the rage she feels knowing you’re still alive and untouched. What on
“earth did you do to her?”

“Ah,” Artemis smirked. “I am a criminal, Father. Willing to sink to the lowest depths to accomplish my goals, especially when pressed to the very wall. We quite literally were, at one point; underground, with a mass of molten iron aimed to wreak death and destruction on countless lives. We had to beat her, or see the world itself shattered.” He shrugged. “And so, I did something truly desperate.”

Steve thought of Tony, pushed into desperate measures, and tried not to cringe.

“The mind boggles,” Mr. Fowl said dryly. “What did you do? Drain her bank accounts? Set fire to her art collection? Threaten her children?”

Artemis cleared his throat. “We stole her truffles.”

Steve blinked.

“And ate them,” Artemis went on, almost nonchalant. “Appreciatively. Whilst she listened.”

Behind him, Steve could almost feel Clint shaking with laughter.

“You trifled with a woman’s chocolate,” Mr. Fowl managed. “Arty, I believe I did warn you about that.”

Which was about when Steve decided burying his face in his hands might be a good idea. Because obviously Artemis had come by his skewed view of the world honestly, and if anyone was going to add any sanity to the night, it was going to have to be the Avengers. God help them all. “You’re saying a magical megalomaniac tried to kill us because you ate her candy?”

“They were really good truffles,” Holly admitted.

Steve groaned.

“Fate of the world was at stake?” Natasha inquired.

And Steve had to raise his head at that, because the Black Widow sounded almost sympathetic. Which - no. Just no. Natasha Romanova didn’t do sympathy.

Yet there was a shadow of a smile on Artemis’ face, as if he heard that ghost-whisper of sympathy clear as a bell. “Do you truly believe I would have dared such a thing if it were not?”

Mr. Fowl was shaking his head. “Did you really have me shot, Arty?”

“I did.”

Steve held his breath. For a moment, Artemis’ voice had actually quavered.

“With... I believe Hollywood would call it a squib, in the special effects trade,” Artemis went on. “Britva’s men had perched themselves on the wreck of a submarine, with near a hundred riflemen and snipers laying in wait. There was no way to sneak you out, nor to take them down swiftly enough to ensure your survival. The only solution was to make the situation such that they thought you already beyond rescue. So. I engaged the man in charge over the radio, Butler sniped you - great gouts of real blood, by the way, with men of their experience we could not risk a substitute - whilst I congratulated the kidnappers on allowing me to remove the one impediment to my control over the Fowl Empire. One ransom well-placed with a flare at a good distance away, and they were distracted
enough to allow us the chance to pull you out.” His voice caught. “I... did not expect them to toss you overboard. If it had not been for the captain... she’s so small, Father, I could run the mass calculations in my head even as she went under, I knew how quickly she’d lose heat, far faster than a human—”

“Artemis,” Holly brushed the back of his hand. “I’m all right. I had a plan, and good tech behind me.” She raised a red brow. “And backup that didn’t stop talking to the Mafiya, so they stayed distracted until we both got out.” A slight shrug, and she looked directly at Phil. “The details we gave you on Limbo were accurate, by the way. It’s just that we both fell through the portal with Qwan, and, well....”

“If the alternate dimension SHIELD calls Otherplace is not the same pocket dimension as what the locals we ran across called Limbo, that is hardly our fault,” Artemis said piously.

Brass, Steve thought, tempted to smirk right back. Before the ice, he would have tossed Artemis in with the Howling Commandoes and watched the fun. He could only imagine how much damage Artemis would have helped them do to HYDRA. The kid has pure brass.

Phil clapped a hand to his forehead. “No wonder you weren’t worried about demonic contamination.”

“I had plenty of other things to worry about, Agent Coulson,” Butler said bluntly. “That damn transport spell back—” He shook his head.

“Fell through the portal.” Mr. Fowl interlaced his fingers. “I would like an explanation of exactly how you and Captain Short came to fall through an interdimensional portal.”

“It was preferable to being blown up,” Artemis sighed. “Father, I... well. In short. Agent Coulson, the creatures you call demons are an entirely different group from the species the ka-dalun call demons—”

“The who?” Bruce frowned.

“The—” For a moment, Artemis looked nonplussed. “It translates as the People. You would say fairies.” He hesitated a moment, as if reordering his thoughts. “The situation is rather complex to cover swiftly. In essence, I uncovered a set of calculations that indicated a temporally displaced island was casting its inhabitants adrift at a steadily increasing rate as the spell deteriorated—”

“Enough,” Mr. Fowl cut him off. “I’ve no doubt you can quote the physics of whatever it was to the last decimal point. And you undoubtedly have some sort of explanation for why it was perfectly logical to get mixed up with the young Miss Paradizo in the first place, much less dive out the window with a bomb attached. You always do. What I want to know is, of all the people in the world you might have called on as assistance, how on earth did you get mixed up with fairies?”

“Ah.” Artemis glanced down.

Oh no. Not good, Steve thought, seeing that almost invisible stiffening of the teenager’s shoulders. Whatever he’s about to say-

“I kidnapped Captain Short, of course.”

Steve heard Bruce suck in a breath, and caught a glimpse of Tony patting his arm. Right. Whatever had happened in the past, Holly seemed to trust Artemis and Butler now. Heck, her whole organization did, if that it’s official meant anything. Which meant somehow it couldn’t be quite as bad as Artemis was making things sound. So why was the teenager twisting the knife-?
Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Tony twirl a rowan cross through his fingers.

Artemis left a cross for his father, Steve realized. Opal possessed him anyway. So either she can punch past the crosses to get to people - or Mr. Fowl wasn’t wearing his. Which means he wasn’t listening.

Meaning Artemis had had it up to his eyebrows with being subtle, and was going straight for the jugular. No wonder Butler’s face had gone so politely still.

“You-” For a moment the elder Fowl could only shake his head. “Even at the height of our criminal enterprises, I taught you better than that! No matter what our profession, the Fowls have been known for honor and honesty-”

“Honor and honesty?” It was almost a hiss; Artemis’ fingers clamped on the armrests of his chair, and Steve heard something creak. “If I’d been honorable and honest, I’d be an orphan!”

Shocked, Mr. Fowl drew a breath—Artemis didn’t let him take it. “You... you dare to preach at me of honor and honesty! If I’d followed those words, instead of what you taught me - you would be dead. Mother would be insane. Myles and Beckett would not even exist. And countless people you have never met would have been plunged into slavery and war. But ignore that; ignore everything that does not fit into your tidy little corporate world, where the truly unforgiveable crimes are avoiding parties and not serving the correct grade of olives in the martinis. You would be dead. I spent three years of my life becoming the most skilled criminal mastermind on the planet, to find you. And I am not sorry!”

Oh yeah, Steve thought, surreptitiously checking angles of attack in case someone broke and went to physical violence. This has been coming for a while.

Mr. Fowl’s own knuckles were white. “Arty-”

“I am Artemis Fowl the Second!” Sparks of blue and gold flared across Artemis’ fingers. “Honor and honesty be damned! I lie. I cheat. I steal. And yes, Father, I trick people, even to their own doom, and I walk away laughing.”

“And sometimes, you save the world,” Holly said quietly.

“A useful if sometimes unintended consequence.” Artemis let out a slow breath. “Stay on your guard, Agent Coulson. Opal Koboi does not take being thwarted lightly.” He glanced aside. “I would appreciate it if you warned your agents around my family. What information I have on possession does not allow me to determine how close Opal must be to take over another body. If we can determine that she was indeed physically incarcerated until fairly recently, then that distance is considerable.” A heartbeat’s pause. “Which means my family is at risk. And... I already know my mother’s will is not the strongest.”

Steve felt the blood drain from his face. He could almost see the nightmare scenario that must be running through Artemis’ head: Mrs. Fowl possessed, with two helpless children at Opal’s nonexistent mercy.

Phil nodded, grim. “Natasha, would you mind?”

The Black Widow took out a cell, and started dialing.

For a moment, Mr. Fowl looked as though he wanted to object. But he knotted his fingers together instead, sitting silent with a thoughtful frown.
“If only we knew how she was doing it.” The way Artemis rubbed at the side of his face, Steve was fairly sure the teenager was staying awake by pure stubborn will. “The little information I’ve had access to, there just isn’t enough to identify anything....”

“Well, I don’t know exactly how she possesses people, magic doesn’t fit in physics no matter what Thor says, but I think I’ve got a guess about what she’s using as a carrier.” Tony pulled out a box of Stark Industries pens. “When Clint did a pat-down of your dad, we checked that pocket that glowed. Guess what we found? Same batch as the pens down at the security desk. I had Jarvis run a search, and looks like the manufacturer who supplies us just recently - as in, last month - got bought out by a silent partner. Guy by the name of Cudgeon-”

“Opal,” Holly and Butler said at once.

“He was her accomplice in the goblin rebellion,” Artemis agreed. “Until he decided her survival no longer suited his plans.” The teenager flinched. “He died... badly.”

_We need to wrap this up_, Steve decided. Glanced at Tony, and nodded toward the door.

“Anyway,” Tony picked up smoothly, standing and brushing himself off, “wasn’t sure what would keep the darn thing safe outside of not touching it, so I just took the pocket the pen was in. And the coat. Who’s your tailor? That is a nice coat....”

Phil watched the older man pace his office, and debated offering a chair. “Are you alright, Mr. Fowl?”

“We were nearly all blown up, my family has lethal enemies I never knew about, and my son seems perfectly content to remain a criminal consultant to a creature out of myths and fairytales,” Fowl Sr. said testily. “No, I am not alright. What do you think they’re doing in there?”

“Probably collapsing,” Phil said honestly. “Magic takes a considerable amount of energy. Even if he was just deflecting Doom’s bolts, Artemis used a lot of it. And I was asking about you, sir. You’ve been possessed, restrained, and tranquilized. That’s a bad day for an Avenger, much less an ordinary human being. I know Dr. Banner checked you over, but if you feel anything off, we can get more formal medical help.”

“I’m fine,” the man said gruffly.

Phil raised a brow. “Would you believe your son, if he told you that?”

Fowl Sr. stiffened... and sighed. “Artemis could lie through his teeth if he were bleeding out,” he admitted quietly. “Never show weakness to an enemy.”

Phil hid a wince.

Or perhaps he hadn’t hidden it well enough; Fowl Sr. snorted. “Yes, I know what that means,” the man said evenly. “My own son considers me a potential threat. I suppose that’s a logical conclusion, given my current arrangement with SHIELD and the fact that he apparently intends to continue working with an entire race humans didn’t know existed. And I did train him to use logic.” He gripped the back of a chair as if he’d like to strangle something. “Did I... really teach my own son to be that cold...?”

“I’m sure part of it is natural talent,” Phil said wryly. Sighed, and gave the man a serious look.

“Never underestimate what desperate people will do to save the life of someone they care about. And if you want to look into some advice and counseling on your family’s situation - someone going
missing, in many ways, can be more damaging than a known death. With a body, people mourn and move on. But your wife and your son didn’t know. From the reports I’ve read, your wife pretended everything would be fine until the strain almost broke her. Your son,” delicately, this was touchy, “decided to use every resource at his command to learn the truth, once and for all.” Phil paused. “Including himself.”

“He’s not a resource-!”

Oh good, there was a father under all the civility. “Yes he is, to some,” Phil said clinically. “Or an asset. You did mention my reputation with difficult assets, Mr. Fowl. What most people don’t appreciate is that I have that reputation because I do not deal in assets. I deal in people. Brilliant, brave, damaged people who will never respect anyone who refuses to see them as they are.”

Give him a moment. Let him start to get angry - because he knows Artemis is damaged goods, by society’s measure. That’s part of what’s making him so furious....

“But I can only deal with those people as Phil Coulson,” Phil went on. “Not as Agent Coulson. Individuals can afford to deal in people. Organizations can’t. Strategists can’t. And to save you, your son became the entire Fowl criminal enterprise.” Breathe, and shrug, carefully casual. “From the sound of it, he didn’t come out of that until he met Holly.”

You are an endless hall of mirrors, reflecting nothing, Artemis had said; cool and clear and so terribly understanding. I was almost like that. Once.

And Phil so wanted details on just what had happened in that kidnapping. Not to mention the mess with Murmansk. Because to go from the kind of cold, ruthless person who would kidnap someone like Holly to someone who would willingly pit his wits against a bomb designed by a psychopath, to save innocent lives....

Huh. Tony thinks Holly’s like Natasha. He might have it the wrong way around. What if she’s like Clint?

Agent Barton had been sent out to stop the Black Widow, permanently. SHIELD’s orders. But Hawkeye had made another call.

Sometimes I wish the world could always be that small, Phil reflected. Saying he’d never regretted Clint’s choice would be a lie; the Black Widow had brought past horrors with her like trailing ghosts. But on the balance, he’d count saving Natasha Romanova as one of the better things he’d done.

I wonder what Holly thinks of meeting Artemis?

“Captain Short.” Mr. Fowl drummed his fingers on the back of the chair, hard. “I think we can guess who enticed Artemis into magic. Over and over I told him, it’s naught but legends and moonshine, believe in fairies and you’ll believe in anything, and a Fowl can’t afford to believe in what is not real....” A steam-kettle hiss of a breath. “How on earth did he end up planning to kidnap an elf?”

Phil blinked, nonplussed. “You don’t know that he planned it.”

“Oh, I do,” Mr. Fowl said dryly. “I know my son. Possibly not as well as I thought, given he kidnapped anyone - but there is no way on Earth or in Heaven I’d believe my Artemis ventured into any criminal undertaking without a clear, concise, deliberate plan, complete with four alternate versions for various catastrophes, laid out in bullet points. I taught him to be thorough.” A deep breath. “That... improvisation, with a lethal explosive... that was not thorough.”

Oh. “I hadn’t thought about that,” Phil admitted. “But you’re right. Criminals can make a plan, and
decide whether or not to risk carrying it out, or just wait for another day. In SHIELD - in the Avengers - we can make all the plans we like, but ultimately there comes a time when we all have to face an enemy countdown. Because that’s what we are. That’s what we do. Criminals act. Heroes have to react.”

Mr. Fowl stiffened. “Agent Coulson—”

“That’s what going straight means,” Phil said firmly. “You’ve put yourself on the side of the law. The side of playing by the rules.” He shook his head. “It’s not like chess, Mr. Fowl. In this game, black moves first.”

The elder Fowl glanced down at his hand, fingers opening and closing on hard wood. “You’re saying that in choosing to aid and assist SHIELD, I have put my family in danger.” He took a slow breath. “And... in asking my son to stand by me, and be a hero....”

“No?” Mr. Fowl pounced. “Why not Captain Short?”

Phil gave him a level look. “We both know cops aren’t usually trained in bomb disposal. If Artemis has any amount of familiarity with their tech, he’s probably more qualified and you know it.” He paused. “So what really bothers you about the captain?”

For a long moment, the older man was still.

And that’s where Artemis gets it from, Phil reflected. A dangerous family. They know how to wait.

“How did he hide this from me?” Mr. Fowl said quietly. “He’s good, he’s very, very good - but an entire criminal enterprise? A hidden life, with allies and enemies I had no clue existed? How?”

Oh boy. At least Phil had been thinking about this, off and on, from the moment he’d learned Artemis had been lost in time. It was not a simple situation.

But I think I’m going to have to take the direct approach anyway, the agent thought ruefully. I have to get this through. For all our sakes. “He didn’t have to,” Phil said simply. “It’s not that hard to hide from someone who isn’t there.”

Mr. Fowl gave him a hard look. “I have always made time for him.”

Compared to your father, probably, Phil thought. “But from the time Artemis was ten until he was thirteen, and that significant portion of his fourteenth year you were in physical therapy, you were not there. That’s a long time for a boy his age. Four years of keeping what was left of the family alive and safe, trying to figure out how to grow up when everyone either answered to him or wanted to use him, and trying to find you. Most people couldn’t have done it. He did; which is a tribute to how well you taught him before you vanished. But. You weren’t there. And he loves you, which makes this worse - because that young man is absolutely furious that you left him when he needed you. And he doesn’t think he should be, because he knows you never meant to get hit with a missile and leave him, but he is. So he feels angry, and guilty for feeling angry, and - this is just a guess, but - probably terrified on top of that. Because he’s angry at you, the person he cares about most in the world... and Artemis is incredibly dangerous when he’s angry.”

That rocked the man back on his heels. Good. There were times Phil thought Steve was a breath of fresh air, antique values or not. Back in his time teenagers took adult roles. They had to be taken
“Dangerous?” Mr. Fowl said skeptically. “I know my son. Despite all Butler’s attempts.”

“You knew your son,” Phil cut him off. “When he was a ten-year-old boy who’d always had his whole family around him. When crime was a game, like chess; a way to show off, and show the father he had on a pedestal just how clever he was. You don’t know the fifteen-year-old survivor who’s used criminal tendencies and cold-blooded ruthless to keep what’s left of his broken family safe against everything the world can throw at them. Including magic and fairies. He may not be physically dangerous,” though Phil wouldn’t count on that, Loki was vicious in anything approaching a fair fight, “but you know what he does to people he considers threats. Let me give you a short list. Britva. Jon Spiro. And Opal Koboi herself.”

“Oh, yes,” the elder Fowl said dryly. “He stole her chocolates.”

“Yes he did,” Phil shot back. “Think about that. A magical, explosives-wielding genius, who apparently staged an insurrection and intended to drop molten iron on a whole fairy city, and he outsmarted her with chocolate.”

The older man stared at him.

“He humiliated her,” Phil went on. “And somehow, he did it with one small, simple little trick that tripped her into defeating herself. He outthought her. Based on what Ms. Potts could tell us about her personality, that’s why she wants him worse than dead. So.” Phil straightened. “You asked for my advice? First, let everyone get some sleep. Yourself included. Adrenaline is the enemy of anything like a rational discussion. Then - treat Artemis as a stranger you want to get to know better. Because right now, that’s what he is.” He took a breath, and shrugged. “And for heaven’s sake, please tell Mrs. Fowl to stop throwing eligible girls at him? I know he’s intelligent and mature and probably an excellent catch, criminal or not - but he’s shy.”

“Artemis?” Mr. Fowl said incredulously. “But... he’s...”

“Absolutely capable of verbally disemboweling an enemy in five seconds flat, when the people he loves depend on it? Yes. Completely clueless how to interact when disemboweling isn’t on the table? Oh, so much. Poor kid. You don’t bring a scalpel to a dinner party. Though from what I hear, the low-cut dress was asking for it.”

Mr. Fowl choked. Good. Let him think about what SHIELD surveillance actually meant, when it came to the Fowls and privacy. And how much that lack of privacy had to be eating at Artemis, who’d kept himself and his friends alive in large part because no one knew what he was doing until he’d already done it.

“How would you feel,” Phil went on, “being forced to talk to people whose ideas about international shipping boil down to, wow, why can’t we just send it all on airplanes?” Moving to the door, he opened it. “Think about it.”

“So as far as Phil’s min- um, subordinate SHIELD agents can tell, that one company Opal took over is the source of all the enchanted pens,” Steve summed up what they’d found since the near-explosive excitement last night, watching the white-haired elf-lady on the Avengers’ briefing screen with great interest. He might not know yet exactly what Vinyáya was a Wing Commander of, but the fact that an elf in the same dangerous armed and armored outfit as Holly’s was willing to talk was worth the risk of letting Foaly into the Tower video feeds this morning. “SHIELD’s trying to narrow down how many might be out there, and where they might have gone. Is there anything your people
can do to give us a hand?"

“To SHIELD, no,” the Wing Commander said gravely. From the look of the steaming mug on her desk, she’d had as long a night as any of them. “Yourself and the other Avengers, Captain... I think so. But I have to stress that this is unofficial. If some of the Council got wind that we were talking to more humans, there’d be explosions.” She paused. “Possibly literal explosions. I’m trying to pound home the Chitauri footage for the denser sorts down here, but it’s an uphill battle. Put frankly, a lot of us are used to thinking of your race as barbarians. The fact that there are species out there advanced enough to squash all of us isn’t going over well.”

“As usual,” Artemis observed, seated to one side with Holly; Butler hovering in the shadows behind them like a guardian demon. Mr. Fowl had apparently voluntarily offered to sit this meeting out, while some of the Tower’s associated medics gave him a look-over for any lingering aftereffects of last night’s excitement. “I might point out, however, that despite the fact the Avengers have every reason to hold the People responsible for a near mass-murder of innocent civilians—"

A hint of red flamed in Vinyáya’s face. “You can’t possibly hold us accountable for that— that—!"

“They make up your minds,” Artemis bit out. “Either you treat humans as the sometimes sane and trustworthy individuals we are, or continue your policies of holding all Mud Men responsible for a war you lost ten thousand years ago. There is no middle ground here, Wing Commander. If you hold all humans responsible for any one human’s criminal acts, then they are perfectly entitled to do the same to you.” He arched a genteel brow. “Were I you, I would hesitate to allow Opal Koboi to be my people’s default ambassador.”

Perched on a few cushions to let her look over the table, Holly waved a hand. “You might notice Jarvis and Foaly are at an armed truce, Wing Commander. The Avengers could find us if they tried. But they’re not trying.”

“So they say,” Foaly grumbled in the background, tail swishing.

Steve was not going to stare at that flowing white tail. Or the long, horse-like ears. Or the tinfoil hat. Though the sight of a centaur in a labcoat had already made Tony break down snickering once this morning.

“So I say,” Jarvis stated, calm and unruffled. “Artemis and I have already come to an arrangement of mutual honesty.” He paused. “More or less.”

“I am not sorry that we deceived you,” Artemis said bluntly. “We needed to be unobserved, in case the fairy tech we’d detected was in fact part of your structure and we had to arrange a separate oath between you and Captain Short to prevent anyone taking drastic action.” He folded his hands together. “I am, however, sorry that I was forced to violate the spirit, if not the letter, of our agreement. I have been mesmerized in the past, and I detest it. I could argue that I simply guided your gaze aside, instead of ordering you to perform actions against your will. But manipulation is manipulation. You have every right to consider me in violation of our arrangement.”

“I am taking that under consideration,” Jarvis said calmly. “However, given you and Captain Short were in fact trying to manage the situation so no one was hurt, including myself, does speak in your favor. This is not the first time malevolent entities have arranged for dangerous technology to be within the Tower, and I doubt it will be the last. If we do come to an arrangement, Wing Commander Vinyáya, I would like to ask for a means to detect your people’s devices. Then we could alert your officers directly, and avoid all this fuss.”

Tony was trying, very hard, not to snicker. Bruce blinked, and dared to poke him in the shoulder,
The inventor grinned like the cat that’d swallowed the cream. “Sorry. It’s just - all this time,” a snicker slipped out, “mini-Moriarty was here as a cop looking for stolen goods….”

*Uh-huh*, Steve thought wryly. And the fact that Tony meant to get his hands on fairy-detecting technology wasn’t part of those giggles at all. Right. And if he believed that, Tony had a bridge to sell him.

Holly smirked at them both. “You’re surprised? If you want to catch a thief, ask an expert.” The smirk faded into a more professional calm. “I’m going to take a wild stab in the dark, here, and guess that was the bio-bomb stolen from Atlantis?”

“It was,” Vinyáya confirmed. “It looks like I’m going to have to shake up Atlantis myself. I know stonewalling when I hear it.”

“Go armed, and carry rowan,” Butler said bluntly. “If I were Opal, I’d have seeded the whole place with trapped pens. Why not?”

The Wing Commander’s answering smile had an edge of pure steel. “Oh, I plan to. With certain... unusual measures, that Opal won’t have had the chance to plan for.”

“Ah. Qwan,” Artemis nodded.

Vinyáya squinted at him. “Has anyone ever told you how annoying that is?”

“Oh yes.” Artemis almost looked innocent. “Captain Short in particular.”

“Wasn’t Qwan the demon who dragged you into Limbo?” Clint leaned on the table, honestly curious.

“Demon warlock, of the species the *ka-dalun* call demons, or the Eighth Family. I suppose it might be best to use that term to avoid confusion,” Artemis reflected. “He seems to be a rather decent person, even after having been trapped in stone for millennia. I suspect,” he gave Phil a considering look, “that if acceptable conditions were set beforehand, and secrecy avowed, he might be quite interested in giving some of your associates lessons in detecting malevolent enchantments.”

Phil let out a low whistle, and looked straight at the Wing Commander. “If we could arrange that, ma’am, I could definitely persuade Director Fury to keep this contact off the books. I can name at least seven evil magic-users we’re trying to track right off the top of my head. If SHIELD knows that the Avengers *can* find ways to stop them, then they don’t need to know how.”

“And in return,” Steve picked up the line Phil had left dangling for him, “we can keep you up to date on threats to your cities that we know about. And do our best to stop them before they ever touch the underground.”

“Starting with how you back-hacked my comms!” Foaly huffed. “Human tech shouldn’t be able to do that.”

“Communications technology should be something we discuss,” Artemis said carefully. “However, there is another field of science in which we should consider the benefits of information exchange.”

“Oh?” Steve gave him a curious look.

“Medicine.” The teenager looked directly at Vinyáya. “My father is not a young man. I don’t know
if Opal has done him damage we cannot detect. And likewise, he has reason to be concerned with the state of my health, given he can probably deduce that the specialists Butler brought me to after my return from Limbo were, in fact, fairies, and he has not met the physician in charge of my case. Would Section Eight be interested in making a good-faith offering of humanitarian medical information?”

The Wing Commander considered his words, and took a deep breath. “That would depend on Dr. Banner.”

Bruce started. “Me?”

“I understand you’re not a licensed medical doctor,” Vinyáya stated, “but the information my IT people and certain consultants have found states you have a habit of providing medical aid to those who need it. Including people SHIELD would refer to as ‘metahuman’.”

“Someone has to,” Bruce shrugged. “It’s good to fix things. When I can. And - well - sometimes it takes someone who’s seen a lot of strange things, to help people who... aren’t baseline human anymore.”

She nodded thoughtfully. “I’ll see what we can do. In the meantime, Captain Rogers, let’s have a talk about comms, why Foaly’s throwing a fit, and privacy....”

“Okay... I’ll be blunt.” Bruce stared down at the teen and elf currently ensconced in his lab. He was going to ignore the bodyguard. Really. “What could people who can heal with magic possibly need with human medical science?”

“That’s like saying what would doctors who can do blood transfusions want with organ transplants?” Holly gave him a look askance that still never quite met his eyes. “Basic magical healing has time limits. It’s fine if you can get right to someone right then. If you’ve got an injury ten minutes old, you need paramedics just like anybody else. And specialized medical healing. Even then, there are some things,” she seemed to tremble a moment, “some things we just can’t fix. Radiation....”

Artemis cleared his throat. “Forgive me, Captain Short, but I think I can explain this rather concisely. Dr. Banner, I may not have wide experience with the bulk of the People’s medical science, but I do have confidence in Section Eight’s medical warlocks. You might say I’ve been a special case of theirs.” One hand moved toward his glasses.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Holly muttered.

Artemis’ hand paused, holding the side of the frames. “If anyone in this building would understand, Dr. Banner would. And it will... simplify explanations.” He drew a breath, and took off the glasses.

Doesn’t like the lab lighting, Bruce realized as Artemis squinted. **Too bright? Odd; this is pretty much baseline human-bright... oh. “Heterochromia?” he guessed, staring. The right eye was the same icy blue as Artemis’ file photos. The left - a clear, bright hazel. Where have I seen that before?**

“Nothing so simple,” Artemis said dryly. “You do know about the transport spell that returned us from Limbo?”

Bruce grimaced. Magic. **“Yes?”**

“It moved us through time and space, in a fashion I wouldn’t recommend to anyone who wishes to keep their health or sanity,” Artemis stated. “It was, in some ways, rather akin to a magical transporter beam. With all the potential for accidents that implies.”
Bruce felt his heart pick up a notch; deliberately calmed it back down. “Accidents?”

Holly blew out a breath. Raised a hand to her left eye, and carefully removed a contact.

Blue.

Bruce looked between them, heart sinking as he matched blue and hazel. “You... switched eyes?”

“The transfer went a bit further into the nerves than that,” Artemis said soberly. “Warlock Kingsfoil has the details. Suffice it to say, I have very personal reasons to make certain the surface world and the People can come to some sort of arrangement.”

“You’re chimeras.” Bruce let out a low whistle. “How did - you’re not even the same species, the immune cross-reactions should be murder.”

“Oh. You said you collapsed.”

The People refer to it as changeling syndrome,” Artemis nodded. “And as it was hours before anyone knew something was wrong, it was not something ordinary magical healing could mend. We both had a very bad month.” He tilted his head, as if listening to something Bruce couldn’t hear. “Ah. That is Warlock Kingsfoil. Excellent. He can tell you a great deal more. As indeed he must. We have information that leads us to believe changeling syndrome may be involved in your situation, as well.”

Bruce eyed him. Glanced at Holly, barely over three feet, and definitely not green. And looked past her as the door opened, to reveal a sandy-haired elf just a few inches taller than her, a red cap over his ears. “I have a hard time believing the Hulk has anything to do with elves.”

“Who said a thing about elves?” The new elf strode into his lab with the confidence of a mini-Rogers, thick folder under one arm. “If I’m right, Doctor, what’s mixed up in your DNA is just a bit meaner.”

“Good gods.” Dr. Banner did a bit more muttering under his breath in Hindi as he looked through Kingsfoil’s file.

Holly stayed quiet in a lab chair, trying to be as still as Butler was against the wall, only lifting her hand when Artemis looked as though he might say something. They were there to watch and answer questions, so neither side felt pushed too far. Outside of that, she meant to leave the pair of biochemistry experts to their own devices. And hope nothing went boom.

Right now, the radiation scientist was studying pictures of demons at various ages, and a lot of DNA gobbledygook that made Holly’s head hurt just to skim. His lips were thin, and his face a little more pale than normal. But he took a breath, fingers moving through something that looked like a warlock’s meditation, and looked up. “I’d need to run some of my own analyses to be sure. But... this does look plausible.” He hesitated. “So you think that past transport spells have left some humans with cells - and eventually DNA - from the various fairy races.”

“We’ve proof of it. Especially in Ireland,” Kingsfoil said bluntly. “Artemis, for one.” The warlock glanced their way. “You might not think it from your father, but looks like you came by a bit of elf from both sides. Which is probably why you and Captain Short came out as well as you did; less mess to clean up in your immune systems.”

“I must admit it is still unsettling,” Artemis said gravely. “I wouldn’t blame you in the slightest for wanting to toss us all out on our collective ears, Dr. Banner.”

“No,” the scientist said quietly. “No, I want the truth. No matter how... unsettling... it might be.” He
eyed the pages again. “So you think I might have inherited some genes from this... Eighth Family.”

Demons, Holly could all but see written on his face.

“We honestly don’t have much modern information on the warp spasm yet, but we know it’s possible,” Kingsfoil nodded. “Cú Chulainn is one of the better known historical examples of humans with demon heritage.” He paused. “I don’t doubt your situation is serious, Doctor, but from what I’ve read? The Hulk is far better at telling friend from foe than he ever managed.”

“...Huh.” Dr. Banner looked away.

“And given your chosen field, you’re lucky it was Eighth Family rather than one of the other fairy races,” Kingsfoil said soberly. “The rest of us, when it comes to radiation? Like living in a paper house under a rain of stones. Even too much sunlight’s not good for us.”

The doctor started. “We can polarize the windows—”

“It’s not that bad.” The warlock grinned a little. “Honest, glass is enough to keep us safe. Though being inside a human dwelling has... other problems. Even sometimes for changelings. Blended genes can give you advantages... and weaknesses.”

Beside her, Artemis tensed.

And Kingsfoil turned, and looked at him directly. “Your call, Master Fowl. But if you think Dr. Banner’s trustworthy enough to give one of the People first aid - well, you know the first step in checking for concussions.”

Holly winced. She didn’t have to look at Artemis to feel his stillness.

Dr. Banner straightened. “There is a reason for the sunglasses, then.” He glanced at all of them. “A reason none of you look someone in the eye.”

“There is,” Artemis said quietly. “As one person who has had to avoid being used to another - Dr. Banner, if you know this, you must keep it private. It is a terrible, terrible thing to hold over someone else’s head.”

The scientist almost whistled. “It’s that dangerous?”

“It is,” Artemis nodded.

Dr. Banner took a long moment to think, and reluctantly nodded. “Then you have my word. Especially if - well, if you think I’m part changeling, this is something that threatens me too.”

“Actually, no,” Artemis sighed. “The Eighth Family is not bound by the same geis as the other fairy races. The Rule of Dwellings does not affect you.” He swallowed dryly. “It does, however, affect me.”

“It’s not obvious, but all humans have some of their own magic,” Kingsfoil picked up the thread. “For most of you it’s bound up in thresholds. Territory you know is yours. Inside a human dwelling,” he took a deep breath, “if a fairy meets a human’s eyes, and that human gives an order - a fairy’s bound to it.”

“...You’re not serious,” Dr. Banner said, stunned.

“Oh, we are deadly serious,” Artemis snarled. Clenched his fists, white-knuckled; took a slow
breath, and deliberately let it out. “I cannot fault Section Eight for their care; I am alive, when I should have died a slow and lingering death. But the night before your Agent Coulson contacted us - the details are no matter. Suffice it to say my mother ordered me to go to my room. And I... I could not do otherwise.”

Dr. Banner stared at him, pale. Glanced back at the file, and slowly shook his head. “Are you... are you actually telling me I’m lucky?”

“Luck’s in the eye of the beholder,” Kingsfoil shrugged. “Though I’d have to say, I do envy you, a bit.”


“Oh, the Hulk’s no light load to carry, that’s certain,” the warlock allowed. “But without that nasty dose of gamma rays, you’d have lived and died a normal life. Someone like me... I ended up in Section Eight for a lot of reasons. Part of them my combat record.” He grinned at Butler. “I didn’t one-on-one a troll, but- well, we can swap war stories later.” He glanced back at Dr. Banner. “Thing was, you didn’t have a clue. When I was growing up... when I stuffed the bullies into the wastebasket, the Mud Man genes were all my fault. And if I did well thumping nasty things no one else wanted to go near even with a Neutrino and a charged wing-pack, everyone gave the credit to the barbarians lurking in our family tree.” He hmphed. “Idiots. There’s a reason I went for medical warlock. Believe you me, Dr. Banner, I know what it is to want to fix things.”

“...You’re part human.” The scientist shook his head in disbelief.

Kingsfoil jabbed a thumb Artemis’ way. “At least as much as he is elf.”

Which was a really odd thought, even now, Holly reflected. You didn’t think of elves as criminal, calculating, and upending entire worlds... and then again she’d just described Cudgeon. Who hadn’t even come close to having as much style.

Bruce drew a finger across some of the text, and frowned thoughtfully. “I know something about DNA; I had to, to find out what kind of damage I did to myself. But I’m not an expert. What we really need is a geneticist. Or at least some kind of biochemist.” He looked almost at Holly. “Do you think the Wing Commander would okay it, if I wanted to show this to Phil? He might have suggestions on someone who could be trusted.”

Holly folded her arms. That was a man feeling guilty about something, or she’d never spent a day on the force. “You sound like you might already have someone in mind.”

“Actually....” Yes, the man was blushing. “I know someone who would be interested. As long as it’s an ethical study.”

“I could hug you,” Phil said gleefully, flipping through pages of biochemistry and medical terminology without even minding the headache. “This? Is just the excuse I need to transfer Betty to the Tower.”

“Are you sure?” Bruce had worry lines between his eyes. “I thought this arrangement was supposed to not have SHIELD involved. Officially.”

“And we won’t,” Phil nodded. “I’ll just request her as a necessary scientific consultant for ongoing biochemical research into the latest bioweapon Doom unleashed on New York. Specifically some very malicious pens.”
Bruce looked at him askance. “You’re going to call that a bioweapon?”

Phil winked. “Right now, we don’t know it’s not.”

Holly thumped into one of the suite chairs, taking full advantage of thick cushions. Hanging around as a quiet voice of potentially violent sanity when two researchers were feeling each other out was a lot harder than Butler made it look. What a day.

Artemis was flipping through his sketchpad, touching a few pages that looked slightly brown around the edges. “Is there any more word from Atlantis?”

“Outside of we knew nothing about this, really? Not much,” Holly sighed. “They did cough up a visitor’s list.”

“She was allowed to have visitors?”

She gave him a sidelong look. “Artemis.”

“Life imprisonment as an alternative to execution hinges entirely on the fact that the suspect in question will never again be a threat to the public,” Artemis said bluntly. “Opal is obviously not going to stop killing people, on the surface or below it. If the LEP cannot hold her, pure self-interest must insist that your government reconsider their policy of leaving murderous criminals alive.”

Holly grimaced. “Do we have to argue about this now?”

“I’d prefer not to argue about it all. And certainly not here,” Artemis sighed as well, not looking away. “Nevertheless, we must face the fact that so far Opal has escaped two supposedly impregnable prisons, she is still bent on world domination, and at some point... a choice will have to be made.” He rubbed tired eyes. “I would rather not think of it either. But someone must.”

Point. D’Arvit. “We’ll bring it up with the Wing Commander. Later,” Holly said firmly. “For now - we know who some of her visitors are, and the LEP is questioning the ones that haven’t vanished.”

“Lovely,” Artemis breathed, a finger-snap ruffling up pages.

“Half the ones who have, were apparently part of a network of mystic guru devotees,” Holly checked her wristcomp for her exact notes, “who believed in establishing ‘an intangible pool of Good Will for members to tap when the Darker Forces of the Universe seem to turn against them’.”

From his corner, Butler cleared his throat. “Does that mean what I think it does?”

Artemis had his face in his hands. “If by that you mean Opal apparently persuaded a group of fairy wiccan-types to allow her to tap their standing node of pooled magic, I would say yes.”

“But magic doesn’t work that way!” Holly objected. “Seriously, it’s a bunch of posers; you can store magic in batteries, or in yourself, but you can’t just leave it hanging around in the air for anyone to tap into-”

“If even a third of the texts I acquired have any validity?” Artemis raised his head, eyes narrowed. “Humans can.”

And the last time they’d met, Opal had declared herself a human. Pixie or not. “...That’s not good,” Holly said faintly.

Not good, and it meant Artemis was right. The Council would have to rethink imprisonment. Half
the reason prison worked was that most fairy criminals had lost their magic - and the rest couldn’t recharge.

*Only Opal found a way to do it.* Holly groaned, and banged her head against the seat’s cushioned back. “You know, my life was so simple before I met you.”

“Likewise,” Artemis murmured. “Though I must admit, having experienced the alternative, I prefer the complexity.”

Holly winced.

“I’ve hurt you,” Artemis observed. “I did not intend to.”

“It’s not you,” Holly admitted. “I just can’t help but wonder, if you’d had your memories when Opal broke out....”

“It haunts me as well,” the young mastermind acknowledged. “I have racked my brain with what I knew, or could have known, at least a dozen times. Logically, I can think of no way I could have prevented Opal’s escape, or Commander Root’s murder. But the heart... the heart is not logical.” He folded one hand over the other, looking into the distance. “Warlock Kingsfoil is not the only one who envies Dr. Banner.”


“He is not the only one with darker impulses,” Artemis stated. “One might say, his are the more easily handled. Simply cease to attack the Hulk, and sooner or later, the monster will disappear. Dr. Banner wishes to be left alone, and seems to bear no grudge so long as he is left alone. While I....” Artemis wet his lips. “I have been responsible for much more than myself, for many years. Retreat was not an option. I learned to fight. With words. With lies. With a ruthlessness my enemies would not have expected from my father, much less a child.”

Silence. Holly sat on her impatience, and waited.

“But the problem with learning to be so deadly dangerous, is one never quite knows when to stop,” Artemis said at last. “Are my enemies cowed? Are they beaten enough? Is this the winning move that will finally leave my family safe? Because-” he glanced at her, odd eyes pleading. “Because it never is, Holly. There will always, always, be those who seek to do my family, my friends, deadly harm. Should I ever beat my sword into a plowshare, I would very shortly be plowed six feet under.”

“Like your father almost was.” Holly nodded reluctantly. “I wish it wasn’t so. But you’re right. Your life isn’t safe.”

A shadow of a smile touched his face. “But you have made it safer.”


“I was not referring to physical safety.” Artemis wove his fingers together, meeting her gaze. “You, and Commander Root, and Foaly - you gave me your trust. Your belief that when I made a bargain, I would cleave to it, no matter the cost. Your conviction that I had a spark of decency, buried under all my scheming. You... allowed me to believe that I could be more than just a criminal.”

*Oof.* “You were never just anything, Artemis.”
“So speaks the true hero.” Artemis’ smile grew a little more obvious. “I can never lay down my sword. But... with the LEP... I believe I could learn to sheathe it, once in a while. To not strike, when it is not truly necessary.” A slight shrug. “I may not ever be one of the white hats, so to speak. But I would like to try for a paler shade of gray. If the LEP will have me.”

*Oh, Artemis.* “If?” Holly said wryly, and pointed at the silver chain next to the gold at his throat. “What did you think those acorns were for, decoration? You’re in it with Section Eight just as deep as any of us.” She smirked. “Including the *paperwork.*”

Startled, Artemis laughed.

Holly stretched, and shrugged. This would be obvious, but - they both needed a breather. “Speaking of paperwork, what have you got there?”

“Ah. Something the so-called Human Torch did not *quite* manage to combust.” Artemis didn’t quite roll his eyes, as he brought the sketchpad over to her, pages turned to a cool scene of marshy greens and browns, gray mist filling the sky. “Honestly, someone should take a fire extinguisher to the man. Perhaps the ones they use to contain rocket fuel accidents....”

Holly let the sarcasm fade into the background; Artemis was Artemis, and hearing what Butler had summed up of their explosive welcome to New York left her inclined to drop an iceberg on the man herself. This was far more important. A scene of quiet fog-light and movement, rendered in colored pencil like the small, thin brushstrokes of the Impressionist paintings he loved. Marsh, pond, and tadpoles, a brilliant red dragonfly painted into one corner with the shadow-sketch of an eye sigil to sign the work. Everything was alive, stirred up like a breeze in the bend of marsh grasses, the ripples of the water-

Ripples. Movement, in the colors of the background. The faintest of waverings, like a heat haze.

Holly drew in a breath, the image of grassy marsh and a pool of tadpoles suddenly transformed.

An elf under shield crouched at the edge of the pond, the side of her Recon boot rippling the water. She was bent to look at the scatter of silver light off a water-spider’s bell, helmet dangling from one hand, Hummingbird Z-7 wings out and ready for takeoff in just one heartbeat more.

*That’s it. That’s what it looks like.*

“A poor attempt at capturing the essence, I am sure-”

“It’s fine,” Holly got out past the lump in her throat. “It’s amazing.”

“You’re too kind. I am a forger, not an artist.” Artemis studied his work with a critical eye. “But in the wake of regaining my memories, I thought... I’d seen an artwork that reminded me of the People, even if I could not remember why. So I thought such might be spared, if I were mindwiped again. They probably would not be left, Recon is thorough... but I at least hoped they would not be destroyed. That someone would see—”

“Shh.” Holly stepped in and hugged his waist, hurting for him. “Artemis. It’s going to be okay. We don’t mindwipe fairies.”

“Who knows?” Artemis rested a hand on her shoulder. “You may yet. Someone will undoubtedly suggest that for Opal, rather than execution. Assuming she’d let herself be caught yet again.” He hesitated. “Am I to be considered one of the People then? I don’t know what to be. Simply wishing to not be a normal human boy is not the same. That, I know.”
“You *never* wanted to be a normal human boy,” Holly said dryly, letting go so she could look up at him without straining her neck. “I never wanted to be a normal elf girl, either. How do you think I ended up in the LEP?”

That vampire smile flashed. “One of these days, my father *will* get the joke.”

“And you’re just dragging it out to get the look on his face when he figures out you really *did* catch a leprechaun.” Holly couldn’t hide a grin. “Take a picture for me, will you?”

Artemis clapped a hand over his heart. “I swear to give it my most solemn attempt, Captain.”

He would, too. Artemis never did anything halfway. Wing Commander Vinyáya was either going to bless the day she’d let him talk her into hiring him, or rain eternal curses down on all his ancestors.

*Or, knowing Artemis, both,* Holly thought, amused.

Butler cleared his throat. “You might want to consider the fact that Artemis isn’t the only changeling in this room. If humans can pool magic and share it - wouldn’t surprise me if you could pick that up, too.”

Now that was an interesting thought. In all uses of the word. *Funny, how often* “interesting” *gets dangerous around Artemis,* Holly mused. “Recharging on the run. I can think of a lot of times on Recon I’d have given my wings for that....” Her gaze fell on Artemis, and she grinned.

“You would recall the *run* part of the equation,” Artemis sighed. “I suppose I’ll have no opportunity to slack off, schedule or no.”

“Not a chance.” Hers was a well-practiced evil chuckle, oh yes. Sprites and their tendency to get caught in mosquito netting were a well-known statistical fact to anyone who worked Recon. What was less well-known, officially, was that sometimes all you needed to get time to untangle them was a spooky enough chortle to get humans to dive into their sleeping bags. “Put it into your schedule before dawn. I plan to run right with you. And *laugh.*”

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**Memo: Fury**

*When this assignment is over, I demand a raise, hazard pay, and a paid vacation to the Bahamas. Dealing with family trauma is not in my pay grade.*

*P.S. Go to Ireland at your own risk.*

*P.P.S. I like Fowl Jr. You wouldn’t. As they say at NASA, stand back und watchen der blinkenlights.*

-Coulson

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**End Notes**

If you want some folkloric basis for what happened with the transport spell in Artemis Fowl, and how badly it could have gone wrong, check out stories about the fairy blast in “The Good People: New Fairylore Essays” by Peter Narvaez. Warning, some of the stuff in there is truly gruesome. As in “don’t read this on a tender stomach” gruesome.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!