

ARTEMIS FOWL

CHAPTER I: THE BOOK

H Chi Minh City in the summer. Sweltering by anyone's standards. Needless to say, Artemis Fowl would not have been willing to put up with such discomfort if something extremely important had not been at stake. Important to the plan.

Sun did not suit Artemis. He did not look well in it. Long hours indoors in front of a computer screen had bleached the glow from his skin. He was white as a vampire and almost as testy in the light of day.

"I hope this isn't another wild-goose chase, Butler," he said, his voice soft and clipped. "Especially after Cairo."

It was a gentle rebuke. They had traveled to Egypt on the word of Butler's informant.

"No, sir. I'm certain this time. Nguyen is a good man."

"Hmm," droned Artemis, unconvinced.

Passersby would have been amazed to hear the large



Eurasian man refer to the boy as *sir*. This was, after all, the third millennium. But this was no ordinary relationship, and these were no ordinary tourists.

They were sitting outside a curbside cafe on Dong Khai Street, watching the local teenagers circle the square on mopeds.

Nguyen was late, and the pathetic patch of shade provided by the umbrella was doing little to improve Artemis's mood. But this was just his daily pessimism. Beneath the sulk was a spark of hope. Could this trip actually yield results? Would they find the Book? It was too much to hope for.

A waiter scurried to their table.

"More tea, sirs?" he asked, head bobbing furiously.

Artemis sighed. "Spare me the theatrics, and sit down."

The waiter turned instinctively to Butler, who was after all, the adult.

"But, sir, I am the waiter."

Artemis tapped the table for attention.

"You are wearing handmade loafers, a silk shirt, and three gold signet rings. Your English has a tinge of Oxford about it, and your nails have the soft sheen of the recently manicured. You are not a waiter. You are our contact Nguyen Xuan, and you have adopted this pathetic disguise to discreetly check for weaponry."

Nguyen's shoulders sagged. "It is true. Amazing."

"Hardly. A ragged apron does not a waiter make."



Nguyen sat, pouring some mint tea into a tiny china cup.

"Let me fill you in on the weapons status," continued Artemis. "I am unarmed. But Butler here, my . . . ah . . . butler, has a Sig Sauer in his shoulder holster, two shrike-throwing knives in his boots, a derringer two-shot up his sleeve, garrotte wire in his watch, and three stun grenades concealed in various pockets. Anything else, Butler?"

"The cosh, sir."

"Oh, yes. A good old ball-bearing cosh stuffed down his shirt."

Nguyen brought the cup trembling to his lips.

"Don't be alarmed, Mister Xuan." Artemis smiled.

"The weapons will not be used on you."

Nguyen didn't seem reassured.

"No," continued Artemis. "Butler could kill you a hundred different ways without the use of his weapons. Though I'm sure one would be quite sufficient."

Nguyen was by now thoroughly spooked. Artemis generally had that effect on people. A pale adolescent speaking with the authority and vocabulary of a powerful adult. Nguyen had heard the name Fowl before—who hadn't in the international underworld?—but he'd assumed he'd be dealing with Artemis senior, not this boy. Though the word "boy" hardly seemed to do this gaunt individual justice. And the giant, Butler. It was obvious that he could snap a man's backbone like a twig with those mammoth hands. Nguyen was starting to think that



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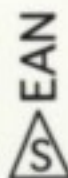
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