



ARTEMIS BEGINS

BY EOIN COLFER

I have four brothers. That's five boys altogether all living in a small house, which is a recipe for major property damage at the very least. As kids, each of us had our assigned roles in the family, pretty much like the members of boy bands do today. Paul, the eldest, was the wise and reliable one. I was the aspiring writer, bespectacled and be-notebooked. Eamonn was the tearaway, never without a nest of twigs in his hair and a bleeding cut on his knee. Niall was the cutie-pie blond baby. But the brother with the most interesting role, as far as an aspiring writer was concerned, was brother number three: Donal. Donal was the young criminal mastermind.

Donal has always been the fixer in our house. If someone was in trouble, Donal could get them out of it, especially if

the someone in trouble was himself and the trouble was of the kind visited on a little boy by his angry mother when the boy had totally smashed something he had been expressly forbidden to touch on pain of death or at the very least no TV for a week. Donal was always touching those kinds of things and often smashing them into more pieces than there were of Humpty Dumpty post-wall tumble. (What was an egg doing perched on a wall anyway? And why would all the king's horses be so upset about one egg? It all sounds suspiciously like forced rhyming to me.) Donal's tried-and-true method for getting out of trouble was to use the fact that our mother liked him quite a bit; in fact, it could be said that she loved him lots then and still does today in spite of all the mayhem he caused in the 1980s.

Donal callously played on this love to escape punishment. Even from a young age, his method was infallible: blink in a cute, babylike fashion and declare in a babylike voice how much he "wuves his mommy." The key element in his whole scam was the aforementioned babylike-ishness, which cleverly transported my mother back to the day when Donal was a mere baby who could do no wrong, when the summers were longer and the music charts were full of actual songs that a person could sing along to.

And so no matter what Donal had been caught doing,

he invariably got off with a mild tousling of the hair and perhaps, in extreme cases, a little finger waggling, which really ticked off the rest of us, who had to bear real punishments when we were caught doing anything wrong. But as much as we resented Donal's untouchable status, we also admired him a little bit. After all, what mother's son wouldn't like to be able to gurn his way out of trouble whenever it suited him?

As Donal grew, so did his experience and the intricacies of his plans to avoid punishment. And it wasn't long before we started turning to Donal in times of trouble to see if he could work some of his magic for us. Obviously we were prepared to pay. That went without saying. Donal was a payment-orientated kind of guy from a very early age who wouldn't tie a toddler's shoelace for less than a bag of gummi bears. So we went to him bearing gifts of potato chips or Wham bars or space poppers and begged him for a strategy to dig us out of the hole we were in. Once I scratched the door of Dad's car with my bike handle. The car was only secondhand, which was the equivalent of brand-new for us, and I knew I was for the high jump. (This is a metaphor. We didn't have an actual Olympic high jump in our garden. The official run-up track alone would have to be twenty meters long. Where do you think we

lived, Buckingham Palace?) Donal took a look and gave me a bottle of Mom's nail varnish to cover the scratch. It was a close enough match, and I was in university before dad noticed the camouflage. This little favor cost me more than candy. In payment, Donal forced me to call him by the title Sir Donal, Prince of Goodness, for an entire month.

This went on for a few years, and Donal got a bit of a reputation as the neighborhood fixer. Kids came from blocks away to hear his wisdom. They came with bonbons in their wagons and left with favors, tricks, con jobs, and sob stories. But Donal's *pièce de résistance*, the one that the kids still talk about in the school yard, was pulled off in our own house with our own baby brother.

It happened like this. Every parent has to have an interest to stop their children turning them into blubbering head cases who sit in corners sucking their thumbs and flipping through photos of times when they were happy. In my mother's case this interest was amateur dramatics.

She was the Wexford Drama Group's leading actress. She played everything from a Southern belle to a society heiress. And one year, for her portrayal of an eighteenth-century island girl, my mother brought home the award for All-Ireland Best Actress. This was a proud moment for the Colfer family.

We were shown the crystal plate engraved with my mother's name; we were even allowed to run our fingers along the carved facets and watch the light refracted along its edges. Then the plate was placed in our display case and we were warned never to touch it again. A warning like this pretty much ensures that the plate would be touched often and inevitably broken by one of the brood.

My baby brother, Niall, was the unfortunate who was destined to become the breaker. It could have been any one of us, as we regularly took down the plate when my mother was occupied. We used it to do crayon rubbings; we rolled its edges through uncooked pastry. It made a very effective puck in table hockey, and of course if a person felt like balancing something on his forehead, the award plate was the perfect size.

It was the table hockey that was to be Niall's downfall. As the youngest in the family, he was a little short for the table and had never actually won a game, and so he decided to get in a little solo practice. It was only when he had struck the plate a square whack and it was skittering toward the other end of the table that it dawned on his pea brain that if there was no one at the receiving end, then the plate would fly off and, presuming gravity didn't suddenly fail, crash to the ground.

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Gravity did not fail, and my mom's All-Ireland Best Actress crystal plate fell to the tiled floor and smashed into a thousand rainbow pieces. Three pieces and he might have been able to jigsaw them back together and it could have been days before Mom noticed. But a thousand? His goose was cooked.

There was only one person to turn to. Niall rushed into the garden where Donal was burying our neighbor's G.I. Joe so he could blackmail him for his pocket money later. I, in my role as budding writer, was observing and taking notes.

We knew Niall was in trouble when we saw him coming. He had not done his hair, and Niall always did his hair before venturing outside. He was very vain about his blond mop, still is. And there were twin streams of mucus streaming from his nose, which either meant that he had eaten pepper again or that he had been crying.

"Donal! Eoin!" he cried. "Help! Help!"

I waved my hand across my face, Obi-Wan style. "I am not here," I said.

Niall was six, so this did not compute. "Huh?"

"I am not here," I repeated, jiggling my head for effect.

Niall's mucus glands went into panicked overdrive. "Eoin is dead!" he wailed at Donal. "And his ghost is sitting on the grass right there."

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"Eoin is being a writer," said Donal, and Niall instantly calmed, as everybody knows that writers do stupid things all the time.

Niall's calm evaporated when he remembered his own crisis. "I broke Mum's award. She'll be back in a minute."

Mum was in the front garden chatting to our neighbor. Niall had mere moments before she stepped inside to find her beloved plate shattered.

"You broke the award," said Donal, who did not seem too upset; in fact, he seemed delighted that someone else was in trouble for a change.

"Yes. I broke the award."

As I was taking notes I decided that I would edit this conversation, as it was getting a bit repetitive.

"Who broke the award?" asked Donal, dragging it out.

Niall pointed to his own head. "It was me. I broke the award."

Donal mashed a clod of clay onto G.I. Joe's head. "Well, if you're the one who broke Mum's award, you might as well leave home now, because she's going to go straight to DEFCON four."

Donal loved using military terms to confuse his little brother.

"DEFCON four?"

"Oh, yep. I remember a milkman made the wrong delivery once. Gave Mom a bit of cheek, and she went from zero to DEFCON four in six point three seconds. Broke every bottle of milk in the lorry. Stamped on all the yogurt cartons. It was a massacre."

This was good stuff. I wrote as quickly as I could. Donal was a gold mine.

Niall's face fell. "A massacre?"

He was a clever boy. Only six years old and already he knew what the word "massacre" meant. He tugged on Donal's mucky sleeve. "You can help me, Donnie. You know stuff. Everyone in the estates knows you have powers."

Donal was torn. On the one hand there is nothing a big brother likes better than seeing his little brother up to his neck in trouble, especially when that little brother is such a cutie that trouble usually slides off him. But on the other hand his professional curiosity was aroused. Could he get Niall off the hook for such an extreme crime? If he managed it, the name Donal would become legendary around the estates.

I could be bigger than Santa Claus, I imagined him imagining.

Eventually Donal thought of a plan that could both dig Niall out of the hole he was in and inflict a little

brotherly pain at the same time. Perfect.

"I will help you," he said magnanimously.

"Thanks, brother," said Niall, collapsing in a grateful heap. "He's great, isn't he, Eoin?"

"I am not here, remember?" I said. Some people are a bit slow to catch on.

Donal brought Niall to the top of the stairs, where they waited for my mother's return. I followed a couple of spaces behind. I had an idea what was coming but it would have been wrong of me to intervene, just as it would be wrong of a nature reporter to come between two monkeys in the wild.

"When Mom sees the smashed award she will be furious," Donal explained.

Niall nodded. "DEFCON four."

"Exactly, grasshopper. So, my job is to somehow turn that fury into sympathy. I have to do something so extreme that Mom won't even remember why she was angry in the first place."

Niall was nodding like a little bobblehead toy. He would have done anything. Anything.

"All you have to do is kneel here, at the edge of the stairs, and when I give the signal, scream like you're in great pain."

"What's the signal?" asked Niall, which I thought was a fair question, but Donal would not have agreed with my thought had I voiced it, which I didn't, as I was merely an observer.

"What's the signal?" Donal repeated, shocked. "What's the sig . . . Are you questioning my methods? Are you trying to run the show? Maybe I should just leave you to get out of trouble yourself and see how far you get."

Niall's nose candles dripped in shock. "No. No. Don't go. I'll be good."

"You will be obedient," corrected Donal. "Like a puppy!"

"Woof," said Niall.

"Okay. You'll know the signal when you see it." Donal poked his head between the banister posts. "Now we wait."

It was not a long wait. Mere seconds later we heard the familiar snick of the front door closing and the mutter of Mom's voice as she complained to herself about the person she had just been talking to. We followed her footsteps down the hallway and into the kitchen, where the crystal shards would be winking a Morse code of guilt that read: NIALL NIALL NIALL.

"Niall!" my mother shrieked, being well-versed in crystal codes. "Niall!"

"Here we go," said Donal, rubbing his hands.

Niall pointed at the rubbing hands. Was that the signal? He was afraid to ask.

Mom was on the hunt now. She picked up the trail of muddy trainers coming in the back door, followed it to the bottom of the stairway. From above, her body language seemed a little hostile. An impression that was not helped by the wringing of a dishcloth between her fingers.

"Mom is wishing that was your neck," said Donal to Niall with a merry wink.

"Niall," called Mom. "Niall!"

Her eyes swept up the stairs, following the trail of mud, and just before her gaze rested on the culprit, Donal decided that it was time for the signal.

In one violent motion, Donal elbowed Niall off the top step and sent him tumbling down the stairs.

"Scream, grasshopper," he called after his rapidly descending brother. "Scream your little lungs out."

Niall did not need to be told twice; in fact he didn't need to be told once. He screamed with great gusto and in genuine fright, pausing only to take a mouthful of carpet at every revolution. Down and down he went, making a xylophone of the banister posts with his legs, bashing the air from his lungs. And when he finally came to rest at my mother's feet, the fury was whipped from her face like a

tissue in the wind and replaced by maternal concern.

“My baby!” she cried, sinking to her knees, cradling Niall’s head, the broken award utterly forgotten. “My baaaaby!”

On the top step, Donal surveyed the scene with some satisfaction. He had, he knew, saved Niall’s hide while simultaneously securing his place in local legend.

He shot a salute down to his bleeding baby brother and whispered, “You’re welcome.”

Donal actually patted himself on the back, then turned to me and said, “Did you get that, writer gimp? I am the biggest genius wot you shall ever meet. You should do a book about me.”

I could only stare in awe. There was no doubt that he was an evil genius, but likable, too. A curious mixture. Surely people would like to read about a boy like this.

And the seeds for the Artemis Fowl series were sewn.

The following day, Mom remembered the broken award, and Niall was grounded with no TV for a month. Donal never mentions that part.

