

PROLOGUE

Ériú; Present Day

The Berserkers lay arranged in a spiral under the rune stone, looping down, down into the earth—boots out, heads in, as the spell demanded. Of course, after 10,000 years underground, there were no physical boots or heads. There was just the plasma of black magic holding their consciousness intact, and even that was dissipating, tainting the land, causing strange strains of plants to appear and infecting the animals with uncommon aggression. In perhaps a dozen full moons the Berserkers would be gone utterly, and their last spark of power would flow into the earth.

We are not all disappeared yet, thought Oro of the Danu, captain of the Berserkers. We are ready to seize our glorious moment when it comes and to sow chaos among the humans.

He sent the thought into the spiral and was proud to feel his remaining fairy warriors echo the sentiment.

Their will is as keen as their blades once were, he thought. Though we are dead and buried, the spark of bloody purpose burns bright in our souls.

It was the hatred of humankind that kept the spark alive—that and the black magic of the warlock Bruin Fadda. More than half of their company of warriors had already expired and been drawn to the afterlife, but still five score remained to complete their duties should they be called upon.

Remember your orders, the elfin warlock had told them all those centuries ago, even as the clay was falling on their flesh. *Remember those who have died and the humans who murdered them.*

Oro did remember and always would. Just as he could never forget the sensation of stones and earth rattling across his dying skin.

We will remember, he sent into the spiral. *Remember and return.*

The thought drifted down, then echoed up from the dead warriors, who were eager to be released from their tomb and see the sun once more.

A COMPLEX SITUATION

From the case notes of Dr. Jerbal Argon, Psych Brotherhood

1. Artemis Fowl, once self-proclaimed *teenage criminal mastermind*, now prefers the term *juvenile genius*. Apparently he has changed. (Note to self: *Harrumph.*)
2. For the past six months Artemis has been undergoing weekly therapy sessions at my clinic in Haven City in an attempt to overcome a severe case of Atlantis Complex, a psychological condition that he developed as a result of meddling in fairy magic. (Serves him right, silly Mud Boy.)
3. Remember to submit outrageous bill to Lower Elements Police.

4. Artemis appears to be cured, and in record time too. Is this likely? Or even possible?
5. Discuss my theory of relativity with Artemis. Could make for a very interesting chapter in my V-book: *Foiling Fowl: Outsmarting the Smarty-pants*. (Publishers love the title: *cha-ching!*)
6. Order more painkillers for my blasted hip.
7. Issue clean bill of mental health for Artemis. Final session today.

Dr. Argon's office, Haven City, the Lower Elements

Artemis Fowl grew impatient. Dr. Argon was late. This final session was just as unnecessary as the past half dozen had been. He was completely cured, for heaven's sake, and had been since week eighteen. His prodigious intellect had accelerated the process, and he should not have to twiddle his thumbs at the behest of a gnome psychiatrist.

At first Artemis paced the office, refusing to be calmed by the water wall, with its gently pulsing mood lights; then he sat for a minute in the oxygen booth, which he found calmed him a little too much.

Oxygen booth indeed, he thought, quickly ducking out of the chamber.

Finally the door hissed and slid aside on its track, admitting Dr. Jerbal Argon to his own office. The squat

gnome limped directly to his chair. He dropped into the embrace of its padding, slapping the armrest controls until the gel sac under his right hip glowed gently.

“Aaaah,” he sighed. “My hip is killing me. Nothing helps, honestly. People think they know pain, but they have no idea.”

“You’re late,” noted Artemis in fluent Gnommish, his voice devoid of sympathy.

Argon sighed blissfully again as the heated chair pad went to work on his hip. “Always in a hurry, eh, Mud Boy? Why didn’t you have a puff of oxygen or meditate by the water wall? Hey-Hey Monks swear by those water walls.” “I am not a pixie priest, Doctor. What Hey-Hey Monks do after first gong is of little interest to me. Can we proceed with my rehabilitation? Or would you prefer to waste more of my time?”

Argon huffed a little, then swung his bulk forward, opening a sim-paper file on his desk. “Why is it that the saner you get, the nastier you are?”

Artemis crossed his legs, his body language relaxed for the first time. “Such repressed anger, Doctor. Where does it all stem from?”

“Let’s stick to your disposition, shall we, Artemis?” Argon snagged a stack of cards from his file. “I am going to show you some inkblots, and you tell me what the shapes suggest to you.”

Artemis’s moan was extended and theatrical. “Inkblots.

Oh, please. My life span is considerably shorter than yours, Doctor. I prefer not to waste valuable time on worthless pseudo-tests. We may as well read tea leaves or divine the future in turkey entrails.”

“Inkblots are a reliable indicator of mental health,” Argon objected. “Tried and tested.”

“Tested by psychiatrists for psychiatrists,” snorted Artemis.

Argon slapped a card down on the table. “What do you see in this inkblot?”

“I see an inkblot,” said Artemis.

‘Yes, but what does the blot suggest to you?’

Artemis smirked in a supremely annoying fashion. “I see card five hundred and thirty-four.”

“Pardon me?”

“Card five hundred and thirty-four,” repeated Artemis. “Of a series of six hundred standard inkblot cards. I memorized them during our sessions. You don’t even shuffle.”

Argon checked the number on the back of the card: 534. Of course.

“Knowing the number does not answer the question. What do you see?”

Artemis allowed his lip to wobble. “I see an ax dripping with blood. Also a scared child, and an elf clothed in the skin of a troll.”

“Really?” Argon was interested now.

“No. Not really. I see a secure building, perhaps a

family home, with four windows. A trustworthy pet, and a pathway leading from the door into the distance. I think, if you check your manual, you will find that these answers fall inside *healthy* parameters.”

Argon did not need to check. The Mud Boy was right, as usual. Perhaps he could blindside Artemis with his new theory. It was not part of the program but might earn him a little respect.

“Have you heard of the theory of relativity?”

Artemis blinked. “Is this a joke? I have traveled through time, Doctor. I think I know a little something about relativity.”

“No. Not that theory; my theory of relativity proposes that all things magical are related and influenced by ancient spells or magical hot spots.”

Artemis rubbed his chin. “Interesting. But I think you’ll find your postulation should be called the theory of *relatedness*.”

“Whatever,” said Argon, waving the quibble away. “I did a little research, and it turns out that the Fowls have been a bother to fairy folk off and on for thousands of years. Dozens of your ancestors have tried for the crock of gold, though you are the only one to have succeeded.”

Artemis sat up straight; this *was* interesting. “And I never knew about this because you mind-wiped my forefathers.”

“Exactly,” said Argon, thrilled to have Artemis’s full

attention. “When he was a lad, your own father actually managed to hog-tie a dwarf who was drawn to the estate. I imagine he still dreams of that moment.”

“Good for him.” A thought struck Artemis. “Why was the dwarf attracted to our estate?”

“Because the residual magic there is off the charts. Something happened on the Fowl Estate once. Something huge, magically speaking.”

“And this lingering power plants ideas in the Fowls’ heads and nudges us toward a belief in magic,” Artemis murmured, almost to himself.

“Exactly. It’s a goblin-and-egg situation. Did you think about magic and then find magic? Or did the magic make you think about looking for magic?”

Artemis took a few notes on his smartphone. “And this huge magical event—can you be more specific?”

Argon shrugged. “Our records don’t go back that far. I’d say we’re talking the surface days, more than ten thousand years ago.”

Artemis rose and loomed over the squat gnome. He felt he owed the doctor something for the theory of *relatedness*, which would certainly bear some investigation.

“Dr. Argon, did you have turned-in feet as a child?”

Argon was so surprised that he blurted an honest answer to a personal question, very unusual for a psychiatrist. “Yes. Yes, I did.”

“And were you forced to wear remedial shoes with stacked soles?”

Argon was intrigued. He hadn't thought about those horrible shoes in centuries; he had actually forgotten them until this moment.

“Just one, on my right foot.”

Artemis nodded wisely, and Argon felt as though their roles had been reversed and he was the patient.

“I would guess that your foot was pulled into its correct alignment, but your femur was twisted slightly in the process. A simple brace should solve your hip problem.” Artemis pulled a folded napkin from his pocket. “I sketched a design while you kept me waiting these past few sessions. Foaly should be able to build the brace for you. I may have been a few millimeters off with my estimate of your dimensions, so best to get measured.” He placed ten fingers flat on the desk. “May I leave now? Have I fulfilled my obligation?”

The doctor nodded glumly, thinking that he would possibly omit this session from his book. He watched Artemis stride across the office floor and duck through the doorway.

Argon studied the napkin drawing and knew instinctively that Artemis was right about his hip.

Either that boy is the sanest creature on Earth, he thought, or he is so disturbed that our tests cannot even begin to scratch the surface.

Argon pulled a rubber stamp from his desk, and on the cover of Artemis's file stamped the word FUNCTIONAL in big red letters.

I hope so, he thought. I really hope so.

Artemis's bodyguard, Butler, waited for his principal outside Dr. Argon's office in the large chair that had been a gift from the centaur Foaly, technical consultant to the Lower Elements Police.

"I can't stand to look at you perched on a fairy stool," Foaly had told him. "It offends my eyes. You look like a monkey passing a coconut."

"Very well," Butler had said in his gravelly bass. "I accept the gift, if only to preserve your eyes."

In truth he had been mightily glad to have a comfortable chair, being more than six and a half feet tall in a city built for three-footers.

The bodyguard stood and stretched, flattening his palms against the ceiling, which was double-height by fairy standards. Thank god Argon had a taste for the grandiose or Butler wouldn't have even been able to stand up straight in the clinic. To Butler's mind, the building, with its vaulted ceilings, gold-flecked tapestries, and retro sim-wood sliding doors, looked more like a monastery where the monks had taken a vow of wealth than a medical facility. Only the wall-mounted laser hand-sanitizers and the occasional elfin nurse bustling past

gave any hint that this place was actually a clinic.

I am so glad this detail is coming to an end, Butler had been thinking at least once every five minutes for the past fortnight. He had been in tight spots many times, but there was something about being confined in a city clamped to the underside of the Earth's crust that made him feel claustrophobic for the first time in his life.

Artemis emerged from Argon's office, his self-satisfied smirk even more pronounced than usual. When Butler saw this expression, he knew that his boss was back in control of his faculties and that his Atlantis Complex had been certified as cured.

No more counting words. No more irrational fear of the number four. No more paranoia and delusions. Thank goodness for that.

He asked anyway, just to be certain. "Well, Artemis, how are we?"

Artemis buttoned his navy woolen suit jacket. "We are fine, Butler. That is to say that I, Artemis Fowl the Second, am one hundred percent functional, which is about five times the functionality of an average person. Or to put it another way: one point five Mozarts. Or three quarters of a daVinci."

"Only three quarters? You're being modest."

"Correct," said Artemis, smiling. "I am."

Butler's shoulders sagged an inch with relief. Inflated

ego, supreme self-confidence. Artemis was most definitely his old self.

“Very good. Let’s pick up our escort and be on our way then, shall we? I want to feel the sun on my face. The real sun, not the UV lamps they have down here.”

Artemis felt a pang of sympathy for his bodyguard, an emotion he had been experiencing more and more in recent months. It was difficult enough for Butler to be inconspicuous among humans; down here, he could hardly have attracted more attention if he had been wearing a clown suit and juggling fireballs.

“Very well,” agreed Artemis. “We will pick up our escort and depart. Where is Holly?”

Butler jerked a thumb down the hallway. “Where she generally is. With the clone.”

Captain Holly Short of the Lower Elements Police Recon division stared at the face of her archenemy and felt only pity. Of course, had she been gazing at the real Opal Koboi and not a cloned version, then pity might not have been the last emotion on her list, but it would certainly have ranked far below *rage* and *intense dislike bordering on hatred*. But this was a clone, grown to provide the megalomaniacal pixie with a body double so that she could be spirited from protective custody in the J. Argon Clinic.

Holly pitied the clone because she was a pathetic, dumb creature who had never asked to be created. Cloning was

a banned science, both for religious reasons and for the more obvious fact that, without a life force or soul to power their systems, clones were doomed to a short life of negligent brain activity and organ failure.

This particular clone had lived out most of its days in an incubator, struggling for each breath since it had been removed from the chrysalis in which it had been grown.

“Not for much longer, little one,” Holly whispered, touching the ersatz pixie’s forehead through the sterile gloves built into the incubator wall.

Holly could not have said for sure why she had begun to visit the clone. Perhaps it was because Argon had told her that no one else ever had.

She came from nowhere. She has no friends.

She had at least two friends now. Artemis had taken to joining Holly on her visits and often would sit silently beside her, which was very unusual for him.

The clone’s official designation was Unauthorized Experiment 14, but one of the clinic’s wits had named her Nopal, which was a cruel play on the name Opal and the term *no pal*. Cruel or not, the name stuck; and now even Holly used it, though with tenderness.

Argon assured her that Unauthorized Experiment 14 had no mental faculties, but Holly was sure that sometimes Nopal’s milky eyes reacted when she visited. Could the clone actually recognize her?

Holly gazed at Nopal's delicate features and was inevitably reminded of her gene donor.

That pixie is poison, she thought bitterly. Whatever she touches withers and dies.

Artemis entered the room and stood beside Holly, resting a hand lightly on her shoulder.

"They're wrong about Nopal," said Holly. "She feels things. She understands."

Artemis knelt down. "I know. I taught her something last week. Watch."

He placed his hand on the glass, tapping the fingers in sequence slowly, building up a rhythm. "It is an exercise developed by Cuba's Dr. Parnassus. He uses it to generate a response from infants, even chimpanzees."

Artemis continued to tap, and slowly Nopal responded, raising her hand laboriously to Artemis's, slapping the glass clumsily in an attempt to copy his rhythm.

"There, you see?" said Artemis. "Intelligence."

Holly bumped him gently, shoulder to shoulder, which was her version of a hug. "I knew your brains would eventually come in handy."

The acorn cluster on the breast of Holly's LEP jumpsuit vibrated, and Holly touched her wi-tech earring, accepting the call. A quick glance at her wrist computer told her that the call was from LEP technical consultant Foaly, and that the centaur had labeled it *urgent*.

"Foaly. What is it? I'm at the clinic, babysitting Artemis."

The centaur's voice was crystal clear over the Haven City wireless network.

"I need you back at Police Plaza, right now. Bring the Mud Boy."

The centaur sounded theatrical, but then Foaly would play the drama queen if his carrot soufflé collapsed.

"That's not how it works, Foaly. Consultants don't give orders to captains."

"We have a Koboi sighting coming through on a satellite. It's a live feed," countered the technical consultant.

"We're on our way," said Holly, severing the connection.

They picked up Butler in the corridor. Artemis, Holly, and Butler were three allies who had weathered battlefields, rebellions, and conspiracy together and had developed their own crisis shorthand.

Butler saw that Holly was wearing her business face.

"Situation?"

Holly strode past, forcing the others to follow.

"Opal," she said in English.

Butler's face hardened. "Eyes on?"

"Satellite link."

"Origin?" asked the bodyguard.

"Unknown."

They hurried down the retro corridor toward the clinic's courtyard. Butler outstripped the group and held

open the old-fashioned hinged door, with a stained window depicting a thoughtful doctor comforting a weeping patient.

“Are we taking the Stick?” asked the bodyguard, his tone suggesting that he would rather not take *the Stick*.

Holly walked through the doorway. “Sorry, big man. Stick time.”

Artemis had never been one for public transport, human or fairy, and so asked, “What’s the stick?”

The Stick was the street name for a series of conveyor belts that ran in parallel strips along Haven City’s network of blocks. It was an ancient and reliable mode of transport from a less litigious time, which operated on a hop-on / hop-off system similar to certain human airport-walkway systems. There were platforms throughout the city, and all a person had to do was step on a belt and grab hold of one of the carbon-fiber stalks that sprouted upward from it. Hence the name *Stick*.

Artemis and Butler had of course seen the Stick before, but Artemis had never planned to use such an undignified mode of transport and so had never even bothered to find out its name. Artemis knew that, with his famous lack of coordination, any attempt to hop casually onto the belt would result in a humiliating tumble. For Butler, the problem was not one of coordination or lack of it. He knew that, with his bulk, it would be difficult just to keep his feet inside the belt’s width.

“Ah, yes,” said Artemis. “*The Stick*. Surely a green cab would be faster?”

“Nope,” said Holly, hustling Artemis up the ramp to the platform, then poking him in the kidneys at just the right time so that he stepped unconsciously onto the belt, his hand landing on one stick’s bulbous grip.

“Hey,” said Artemis, perhaps the third time in his life he had used a slang expletive. “I did it.”

“Next stop, the Olympics,” said Holly, who had mounted the platform behind him. “Come on, bodyguard,” she called over her shoulder to Butler. “Your principal is heading toward a tunnel.”

Butler shot the elf a look that would cow a bull. Holly was a dear friend, but her teasing could be relentless. He tiptoed onto the belt, squeezing his enormous feet onto a single section and bending his knees to grasp the tiny stick. In silhouette, he looked like the world’s bulkiest ballerina attempting to pluck a flower.

Holly might have grinned had Opal Koboi not been on her mind.

The Stick belt trundled its passengers from the Argon Clinic along the border of an Italian-style piazza toward a low tunnel, which had been laser-cut from solid rock. Fairies lunching al fresco froze with forkfuls of salad halfway to their mouths as the unlikely trio passed by.

The sight of a jumpsuit-clad LEP officer was comon

enough on a Stick belt, but a gangly human boy dressed like an undertaker and a troll-sized, buzz-cut man-mountain were quite unusual.

The tunnel was barely three feet high so Butler was forced to prostrate himself over three sections, flattening several handgrips in the process. His nose was no more than a few feet from the tunnel wall, which he noticed was engraved with beautiful luminous pictograms depicting episodes from the People's history.

So the young fairies can learn something about their own heritage each time they pass through. How wonderful, thought Butler, but he suppressed his admiration as he had long ago disciplined his brain to concentrate on body-guard duties and not waste neurons being amazed while he was below ground.

Save it for retirement, he thought. Then you can cast your mind back and appreciate art.

Police Plaza was a cobbled crest into which the shape of the Lower Elements Police acorn insignia had been painstakingly paved by master craftsmen. It was a total waste of effort as far as the LEP officers were concerned, as they were not generally the type who were inclined to gaze out of the fourth-floor windows and marvel at how the sim-sunlight caught the rim of each gold-leafed cobble and set the whole arrangement a-twinkling.

On this particular day it seemed that everyone on

the fourth floor had slid from their cubicles like pebbles on a tilted surface and gathered in a tight cluster by the Situation room, which adjoined Foaly's office/laboratory.

Holly made directly for the narrowest section of the throng and used sharp elbows to inch through the strangely silent crowd. Butler simply cleared his throat once, and the crowd peeled apart as though magnetically repelled from the giant human. Artemis took the path into the Situation room to find Commander Trouble Kelp and Foaly standing before a wall-sized screen, raptly following unfolding events.

Foaly noticed the gasps that followed Butler wherever he went in Haven, and glanced around.

"May the fours be with you," the centaur whispered to Artemis—his standard greeting/joke for the past six months.

"I am cured, as you well know," said Artemis. "What is going on here?"

Holly cleared a space beside Trouble Kelp, who seemed to be morphing into her former boss, Commander Julius Root, as the years went on. Commander Kelp was so brimful of gung-ho that he had taken the name Trouble upon graduation and had once tried to arrest a troll for littering, which accounted for the sim-skin patch on the tip of his nose that glowed yellow from a certain angle.

"Haircut's new, Skipper," Holly said. "Old Beet Root had one just like it."

Commander Kelp did not take his eyes from the screen. Holly was joshing because she was nervous, and Trouble knew it. She was right to be nervous. In fact, outright fear would have been more appropriate, given the situation that was being beamed in to them.

“Watch the show, Captain,” he said tightly. “It’s pretty self-explanatory.”

There were three figures on-screen, a kneeling prisoner and two captors, but Holly did not place Opal Koboi right away because she was searching for the pixie among the standing pair. She realized with a jolt that Opal was the prisoner.

“This is a trick,” she said. “It must be.”

Commander Kelp shrugged. *Watch it and see.*

Artemis stepped closer to the screen, scanning the picture for information. “You are sure this is live?”

“It’s a live feed,” said Foaly. “I suppose they could be sending us a pre-record.”

“Where is it coming from?”

Foaly checked the tracer map on his own screen. The call line ran from a fairy satellite down to South Africa and from there to Miami and then on to a hundred other places, like the scribble of an angry child.

“They jacked a satellite and ran the line through a series of shells. Could be anywhere.”

“The sun is high,” Artemis mused aloud. “I would guess

by the shadows that it is early noon. If it is actually a live feed.”

“That narrows it down to a quarter of the planet,” said Foaly caustically.

The hubbub in the room rose as, onscreen, one of the two bulky gnomes standing behind Opal drew a human automatic handgun, the chrome weapon looking like a cannon in his fairy fingers.

It seemed as though the temperature had suddenly dropped in the Situation room.

“I need quiet,” said Artemis. “Get these people out of here.”

On most days, Trouble Kelp would have argued that Artemis had no authority to clear a room and would possibly have invited even more people into the cramped office just to prove his point, but this was not most days.

“Everybody out,” he barked at the assembled officers. “Holly, Foaly, and the Mud Boy, stay where you are.”

“I think perhaps I’ll stay too,” said Butler, shielding the top of his head from lamp burn with one hand.

Nobody objected.

Usually the LEP officers would shuffle with macho reluctance when ordered to move, but in this instance they rushed to the nearest monitor, eager not to miss a single frame of unfolding events.

Foaly shut the door behind them with a swing of his hoof, then darkened the window glass so there would be

no distraction from outside. The remaining five stood in a ragged semicircle before the wall screen, watching what would appear to be the last minutes of Opal Koboi's life. One of the Opal Kobois, at any rate.

There were two gnomes onscreen, both wearing full-face anti-UV party masks that could be programmed to resemble anyone. These had been modeled on Pip and Kip, two popular kitty-cat cartoon characters on PPTV, but the figures were still recognizable as gnomes because of their stocky barrel torsos and bloated forearms. They stood before a nondescript gray wall, looming over the tiny pixie who knelt in the mud tracks of some wheeled vehicle, waterline creeping along the legs of her designer tracksuit. Opal's wrists were bound and her mouth taped, and she seemed genuinely terrified.

The gnome with the pistol spoke through a vox-box in the mask, disguising his voice as Pip the kitty-cat.

"I can't make it any plainer," he squeaked, and somehow the cartoon voice made him seem more dangerous. "We got one Opal, you got the other. You let your Opal go and we don't kill this one. You had twenty minutes, now you have fifteen."

Pip the kitty-cat cocked his weapon.

Butler tapped Holly's shoulder.

"Did he just say—?"

"Yeah. Fifteen minutes, or Opal's dead."

Butler popped a translator bud into his ear. This was

too important to trust to his dubious grasp of Gnommish.

Trouble Kelp was incredulous. “What kind of deal is that? Give us a terrorist or we kill a terrorist?”

“We can’t just let someone be murdered before our eyes,” said Holly.

“Absolutely not,” agreed Foaly. “We are not humans.”

Artemis cleared his throat.

“Sorry, Artemis,” said the centaur. “But you humans are a bloodthirsty bunch. Sure, we may produce the occasional power-crazed pixie, but by and large the People are peace-loving folk. Which is probably why we live down here in the first place.”

Trouble Kelp actually snarled, one of his leadership devices—which not many people could carry off, especially when they stood barely more than three feet high in what Artemis was sure were stacked boots. But Trouble’s snarl was convincing enough to stifle the bickering.

“Focus, people,” he said. “I need solutions here. Under no circumstances can we release Opal Koboi, but we can’t just stand by and allow her to be murdered either.”

The computer had picked up the references to Koboi on-screen and had elected to run her file on a side screen, in case anyone needed their memory refreshed.

Opal Koboi. Certified genius pixie industrialist and inventor. Orchestrated the goblin coup and insurrection. Cloned herself to escape prison and attempted to lead the humans to Haven.

Responsible for the murder of Commander Julius Root. Had human pituitary gland grafted to manufacture growth hormone (subsequently removed). Younger version of Opal followed Captain Short from the past and is currently at large in present time line. It is assumed that she will attempt to free her incarcerated self and return to her own time stream. Opal is in the unprecedented position of occupying places one and two on the LEP Most Dangerous list. Categorized as highly intelligent, motivated, and psychotic.

This is a bold move, Opal, thought Artemis. And with potentially catastrophic repercussions.

He felt rather than saw Holly at his elbow.

“What do you think, Artemis?”

Artemis frowned. “My first impression is to call it a bluff. But Opal’s plans always account for first impressions.”

“It could be a ruse. Perhaps those goblins would simply shoot her with a blank?”

Artemis shook his head. “No. That would deliver no payoff other than momentary horror on our part. Opal has planned this so that she wins, whatever the eventuality. If you free her, then she’s free. If the younger Opal dies, then . . . Then what?”

Butler weighed in. ‘You can do all sorts of things with special effects these days. What if they computer-graphic her head to explode?’

Artemis was disappointed in this theory, which he

felt he had already discounted. “No, Butler. Think. Again, there’s nothing to gain.”

Foaly snorted. “At any rate, if they do kill her, we will know very soon whether this whole thing is real or not.”

Artemis half laughed. “True. We will certainly know.”

Butler groaned. This was one of those times when Artemis and Foaly were aware of something *sciencey* and assumed that everyone else in the room also had all the facts. Moments like this were guaranteed to drive Holly crazy.

“What are you talking about?” shouted Holly. “What will we know? How will we know whatever it is?”

Artemis stared down at her as though waking from a dream. “Really, Holly? You have two versions of the same individual occupying a time stream, and you are unaware of the ramifications?”

Onscreen the gnomes stood like statues behind the shivering pixie. The armed one, Pip, occasionally checked a wristwatch by tugging his sleeve with his gun barrel, but otherwise they waited patiently. Opal pleaded with her eyes, staring at the camera lens, fat tears streaming down her cheeks, sparkling in the sunlight. Her hair seemed thinner than usual and unwashed. Her Juicy Couture tracksuit, purchased no doubt from the children’s section of some exclusive store, was torn in several places, the rips caked in blood. The picture was super-high-def and so clear that it was

like looking through a window. If this was a spurious threat, then young Opal did not know it.

Trouble pounded the desk, an affectation of Julius Root's that he had adopted.

"What are the ramifications? Tell me."

"Just to be clear," said Artemis, "do you wish to be told what the word *ramifications* means? Or to know what the ramifications *are*?"

Holly elbowed Artemis in the hip, speeding him along. "Artemis, we're on a clock, here."

"Very well, Holly. Here is the problem. . . ."

"Come on," pleaded Foaly. "Let me explain. This is my kingdom, and I will be simple and to the point, I promise."

"Go on, then," said Trouble, who was known for his love of *simple and to the point*.

Holly laughed. A single harsh bark. She could not believe everyone continued to act like their everyday selves even though a life was at stake.

We have become desensitized, like the humans.

Whatever Opal had done, she was still a person. There had been dark days when Holly had dreamed of hunting the pixie down and issuing a little mud-man justice, but those days were gone.

Foaly tugged at his outrageously coiffed forelock.

"All beings are made of energy," he began in the typical pompous *imparting important info* voice that he used

at times like this. “When these beings die, their energy slowly dissipates and returns to the earth.” He paused dramatically. “But what if a being’s entire existence is suddenly negated by a quantum anomaly?”

Trouble raised his arms. “Whoa! Simple and to the point, remember?”

Foaly rephrased. “Okay. If young Opal dies, then old Opal cannot continue to exist.”

It took Trouble a second, but he got it. “So, will it be like in the movies? She will fizzle out of existence, and we will all look a bit puzzled for a moment, then forget about her?”

Foaly snickered. “That’s one theory.”

“What’s the other theory?”

The centaur paled suddenly and uncharacteristically yielded the floor to Artemis.

“Why don’t you explain this bit?” Foaly said. “I just flashed on what could actually happen, and I need to start making calls.”

Artemis nodded curtly. “The *other* theory was first postulated by your own Professor Bahjee over five centuries ago. Bahjee believes that if the time stream is polluted by the arrival of the younger version of a being and that younger version subsequently dies, then the present-tense version of the being will release all its energy spontaneously and violently. Not only that, but anything that exists because of the younger Opal will also combust.”

Violently and *combust* were words that Commander Kelp understood well.

“Release its energy? How violently?”

Artemis shrugged. “That depends on the object or being. Matter is changed instantaneously into energy. A huge explosive force will be released. We could even be talking about nuclear fission.”

Holly felt her heart speed up. “Fission? Nuclear fission?”

“Basically,” said Artemis. “For living beings. The objects should cause less damage.”

“Anything Opal made or contributed to will explode?”

“No. Just the things she influenced in the past five years of our time line, between her two ages, though there will probably be some temporal ripples on either side.”

“Are you talking about all of Opal’s company’s weapons that are still in commission?” asked Holly.

“And the satellites,” added Trouble. “Every second vehicle in the city.”

“It is just a theory,” said Artemis. “There is yet another theory that suggests nothing at all will happen, other than one person dying. Physics trumps quantum physics, and things go on as normal.”

Holly found herself red-faced with sudden fury. “You’re talking as though Opal is already dead.”

Artemis was not sure what to say. “We are staring into the abyss, Holly. In a short time, many of us could be dead. I need to stay detached.”

Foaly looked up from his computer panel. "What do you think about percentages, Mud Boy?"

"Percentages?"

"Theory-wise."

"Oh, I see. How likely are the explosions?"

"Exactly."

Artemis thought about it. "All things considered, I would say about ninety percent. If I were a betting man and there was someone to take this kind of bet, I would put my last gold coin on it."

Trouble paced the small office. "We need to release Opal. Let her go now."

Now Holly was uncertain. "Let's think about this, Trubs."

The commander turned on her. "Didn't you hear what the human said? Fission! We can't have fission underground."

"I agree, but it could still be a trick."

"The alternative is too terrible. We turn her loose and hunt her down. Get Atlantis on the line now. I need to speak to the warden at the Deeps. Is it still Vinyáya?"

Artemis spoke quietly but with the commanding tone that had made him a natural leader since the age of ten.

"It's too late to free Opal. All we can do is save her life. That's what she planned for all along."

"Save her life?" objected Trouble. "But we still have . . ." Commander Kelp checked the countdown clock. "Ten minutes."

Artemis patted Holly's shoulder, then stepped away

from her. "If fairy bureaucracy is anything like the human kind, you won't be able to get Opal into a shuttle in that time. What you might be able to do is get her down to the reactor core."

Kelp had not yet learned the hard way to shut up and let Artemis explain, and so kept asking questions, slowing down the process, wasting valuable seconds.

"Reactor core? What reactor core?"

Artemis raised a finger. "One more question, Commander, and I will be forced to have Butler restrain you."

Kelp was a breath away from ejecting Artemis or charging him with something, but the situation was critical, and if there was a chance that this human could in some way help . . .

He clenched his fists till his fingers creaked. "Okay. Talk."

"The Deeps is powered by a natural fission reactor in a uranium ore layer set on a bed of granite similar to the one in Oklo, Gabon," said Artemis, tugging the facts from his memory. "The People Power Company harvest the energy in small pods set into the uranium. These pods are constructed with science and magic to withstand a moderate nuclear blast. This is taught in schools here. Every fairy in the room knows this, correct?"

Everyone nodded. Technically it was correct, as they did know it now.

“If we can place Opal inside the pod before the deadline, then the blast will at least be contained, and theoretically, if we pump in enough anti-rad foam, Opal might even retain her physical integrity. Though *that* is something I would not bet my last gold coin on. Opal, apparently, is prepared to take the risk.”

Trouble was tempted to poke Artemis in the chest but wisely resisted. “You’re saying that all of this is an elaborate escape plan?”

“Of course,” said Artemis. “And not all that elaborate. Opal is forcing you to release her from her cell. The alternative is the utter destruction of Atlantis and every soul in it, which is unthinkable to anyone except Opal herself.”

Foaly had already brought up the prison plans. “The reactor core is less than a hundred meters below Opal’s cell. I’m contacting the warden now.”

Holly knew that Artemis was a genius and there was no one more qualified to second guess kidnappers, but they still had options.

She gazed at the figures onscreen and was chilled by how casual the gnomes seemed, in the light of what they were about to do. They slouched like adolescents, barely glancing at their captor, cocky in their abilities and not even a jot self-conscious about their cartoon-character smart-masks, which “read” their faces and displayed the appropriate emotions in exaggerated cartoon style. Smart-masks were very popular with the karaoke

crowd, who could then look like their idols as well as trying to sound like them.

Perhaps they don't know exactly what's at stake here, Holly thought suddenly. Perhaps they are as clueless as I was ten seconds ago.

"Can they hear us?" she asked Foaly.

"They can, but we haven't responded yet. Just press the button."

This was just an old figure of speech; there was of course no actual button, just a sensor on the touch screen.

"Hold it, Captain!" ordered Trouble.

"I am a trained negotiator, sir," said Holly, hoping the respect in her tone would get her what she wanted. "And I was once . . ." She glanced guiltily at Artemis, sorry that she had to play this card. "I was once a hostage myself, so I know how these things go. Let me talk to them."

Artemis nodded encouragingly, and Holly knew that he understood her tactics.

"Captain Short is correct, Commander," he said. "Holly is a natural communicator. She even managed to get through to me."

"Do it," barked Trouble. "Foaly, you keep trying to reach Atlantis. And assemble the Council, we need to begin evacuating both cities now."

Though their real faces were hidden, the gnomes' cartoon expressions were bored now. It was in the slant of their heads and the

bend of their knees. Perhaps this whole thing was not as exciting as they had hoped it would be. After all, they could not see their audience, and no one had responded to their threats. What had started out as a revolutionary action was now beginning to look like two big gnomes picking on a pixie.

Pip waggled his gun at Kip, and the meaning was clear. Why don't we just shoot her now?

Holly activated the microphone with a wave of her hand.

"Hello, you there. This is Captain Holly Short of the LEP. Can you hear me?"

The gnomes perked up immediately, and Pip even attempted a whistle, which came through the vox-box as a raspberry.

"Hey, Captain Short. We heard of you. I've seen pictures. Not too shabby, Captain."

Holly bit back a caustic retort. Always avoid unnecessary confrontation with a kidnapper.

"Thank you, Pip. Should I call you Pip?"

"You, Holly Short, can call me anything and *anytime* you like," squeaked Pip, and he extended his free hand toward his partner for a knuckle bump.

Holly was incredulous. These two were about to totally incapacitate the entire fairy world, and they were goofing about like two goblins at a fireball party.

"Okay, Pip," she continued evenly. "What can we do for you today?"

Pip shook his head sorrowfully at Kip. “Why are the pretty ones always stupid?” He turned to the camera. “You know what you can do for us. We told you already. Release Opal Koboi, or the younger model is gonna take a long sleep. And by that I mean, get shot in the head.”

“You need to give us some time to show good faith. Come on, Pip. One more hour? For me?”

Pip scratched his head with the gun barrel, pretending to consider it. “You are cute, Holly. But not *that* cute. If I give you another hour, you’ll track me down somehow and drop a time-stop on my head. No thanks, Cap. You have ten minutes. If I was you, I would get that cell open or call the undertaker.”

“These kind of things take time, Pip,” persisted Holly, repeating the name, forging a bond. “It takes three days to pay a parking fine.”

Pip shrugged. “Not my problem, babe. And you can call me Pip all day and it won’t make us BFFs. It ain’t my real name.”

Artemis deactivated the microphone. “This one is smart, Holly. Don’t play with him, just tell the truth.”

Holly nodded and switched on the mike. “Okay, whatever your name is. Let me give it to you straight. There’s a good chance that if you shoot young Opal, then we’re going to have a series of very big explosions down here. A lot of innocent people will die.”

Pip waved his gun carelessly. “Oh yeah, the quantum

laws. We know about that, don't we, Kip?"

"Quantum laws," said Kip. "Of course we know about that."

"And you don't care that good fairies, gnomes that could be related to you, will die?"

Pip raised his eyebrows so that they jutted over the top of the mask. "You like any of your family, Kip?"

"Ain't got no family. I'm an orphan."

"Really? Me too."

While they bantered, Opal shivered in the dirt, trying to speak through the tape. Foaly would get voice analysis on the muffled mumbles later—if there was a later—but it didn't take a genius to figure out she was pleading for her life.

"There must be something you need," said Holly.

"There is one thing," replied Pip. "Could I get your com-code? I sure would love to hook up for a sim-latte when this is all over. Might be a while, of course, what with Haven City being in ruins."

Foaly put a text box on the screen. It read: *They're moving Opal now.*

Holly flickered her eyelids to show she understood, then continued with the negotiation. "Here's the situation, Pip. We have nine minutes left. You can't get someone out of Atlantis in nine minutes. It's not possible. They need to suit up, pressurize, maybe; go through the conduits to open sea. Nine minutes is not long enough."

Pip's theatrical responses were getting a little hard to take. "Well then, I guess a lot of people are going swimming. Fission can put a hell of a hole in the shield."

Holly broke. "Don't you care about anyone? What's the going rate for genocide?"

Pip and Kip actually laughed.

"It's a horrible feeling, impotency, ain't it?" said Pip. "But there are worse feelings. Drowning, for example."

"And getting crushed by falling buildings," added Kip.

Holly banged her tiny fists on the console.

These two are so infuriating.

Pip stepped close to the camera so his mask filled the screen. "If I don't get a call from Opal Koboi in the next few minutes, telling me she is in a shuttle on her way to the surface, then I will shoot this pixie. Believe it."

Foaly rested his head in his hands. "I used to love Pip and Kip," he said.