The Dead, the Broken, and the Living
by Kitsune Heart

Summary

Ever since Holly and Artemis met, their lives have been entwined. This does not guarantee a happy ending. One event in their lives, following three paths, could mean the difference between horror, adventure, and romance. Enemies, friends, and lovers.

Notes

This fanfic is the central point of the Dead, Living, and Broken Universes. The first part of each series, "Fowl Shorts," should be read to at least chapter seven before beginning this work, to comply with the author’s intended reading order.

See the end of the work for more notes
August 16, 2008-Fowl Manor

Angeline Fowl was no fool. She had graduated from her undergrad a year early (with high honors), despite earning two degrees: one in biology and another in political science. The following fall, she continued into her master's degree. It was in the final months of the program that she ran into Artemis Fowl, heir to one of Europe's largest criminal empires.

Initially, she thought he was just another of her family's many minor (and self-important) millionaire acquaintances. However, the presence of a staggeringly tall and rather solid-looking bodyguard (who spent most of the night glaring at anyone who came within three meters of his ward) was a bit out of place at the Ivy, even if most of the "businessmen" in attendance were a bit less than "legitimate." However, during the last round of cocktails, Angeline's inebriated mother had put an arm around her daughter's shoulder and pointed him out as the son of the most powerful criminal leader in Ireland. Angeline had smoothed her dress and sashayed up to the snappily dressed man. After inquiring if he was, indeed, the Artemis Fowl (he visibly preened at this, though his bodyguard moved a hand to his holster), she had smiled prettily...and began to tear him a new one.

Two days later, she received a call at her unlisted apartment phone. A week after that, she agreed to a date, intending to continue reaming him. The following spring, she married Artemis Fowl and they began planning their life together.

Over the years, she had dealt with many crises. Attacks by rival crime lords, the disappearance of her husband, and her eldest son's many quasi-legal (and often downright unlawful) adventures. For all intents and purposes, Angeline Fowl was unflappable.

But she just could not get over the pointy ears.

"The Opal Koboi from the past has escaped, but I must assure you, Mrs. Fowl, we are pooling all of our resources into capturing her. The Council is even approving a plan for Butler to connect with Madame Ko for intelligence. With adequate compensation to your family, of course."

Angeline settled a bit more languidly into her chaise lounge, cascading her curly brown hair over the edge and gazing at the...elf? Yes, a fairy elf. It seemed so redundant, but there was an important distinction. It was used in a manner similar to genus and species, as Artemis had explained shortly before introducing the Captain.

The LEPRecon ("God, that is such a horrible pun," Angeline had muttered when Artemis had given her some time alone to think over his revelations) officer was dressed in a black "shimmer suit" and held a matching helmet on her lap, over which she was making elaborate hand gestures. This being was only a little over half her son's height, yet she was a perfectly proportioned woman (ignoring the ears) with soft brown skin, cropped auburn hair, and a set of mismatched eyes to pair with her son's. Artemis had never taken after his mother (her brown hair and eyes seemed doomed to die out in this family), but Angeline was somewhat miffed that he had strayed even further from her genes by losing one eye to this elf, even if it was unintentional.

This "Holly" was obviously unnerved, based on her hand movements and somewhat rapid speech, but she appeared to be soldiering on through some sort of script, likely prepared for her by her superior officers. If Angeline was going to have any sort of meaningful conversation with this elf, she would need to be derailed, and quickly.
"My son appears to be rubbing off on you." Angeline broke in.

Holly looked flattered for a moment, but her face quickly shifted to horror. An interesting reaction, though understandable, when one considered what Artemis had said of their first and last adventures. "P-pardon me, Madam Fowl?"

Angeline saw another opening and rolled her eyes in a manner that Juliet would have found quite impressive. She thrust a palm in front of her in imitation of the blond's annoying "talk to the hand" phase back in the 1990s. "Call me 'Angeline,' please. 'Madams' are either over eighty or manage a whore-house."

Holly seemed mystified at this idea. "But...I'm 82." Or was it 85?

Now even Artemis was off kilter. He had never heard his mother curse, much less say "whore house" so casually. "Mum, I think she was just trying to be respectful."

"Given that she is going to be paired with my minor son while hunting down some sort of underworld megalomaniac, I would prefer 'friendly' to 'respectful.'" The fairy was now thoroughly off her train of thought. She tapped her fingers on the helmet and looked down at it, as if trying to tell the gear that she disapproved of its presence. Angeline guessed that the Fairy Council was probably using the helmet's many features to monitor this meeting, and Holly was less than pleased at their interference. When the girl (she may have been twice Angeline's age, but Angeline couldn't help but think of her as anything more than a young woman) continued, she had obviously abandoned the script. "Ma...Angeline, the People have had a lot of...issues with your son, but I consider him to be a friend. However, we have found that everything has to be out in the open with him or else we tend to find ourselves...well, screwed over." She glared at Artemis, who shrugged, in no way apologetic. "The Council just wants to find out your...demands regarding Artemis's help."

Angeline tapped a finger on her lips, considering this. Perhaps her husband would have taken this as an opportunity to establish a sort of fairy life insurance policy on the Fowls, should Koboi get through security at the Manor, but Angeline did not like the idea of putting a premium on the lives of her loved ones. It would turn failure into the simple matter of a debt. "I...cannot forbid my son from helping you. He may be physically underage, but the law will soon consider him an adult, and he has mentally been so for years. I do, however, expect you to do everything in your considerable power to keep him, if not out of harm's way, then at least out of the grave."

Holly nodded. "I can't promise anything, but I have put too much energy and magic into Arty to lose all of that hard work."

She called him "Arty." Interesting. Mrs. Fowl felt a desire to hug this small person, but she knew the tricky part of her negotiation was coming up. She could not diminish her advantage by showing too much affection. "Now, Butler, on the other hand..."

Both adventurers looked troubled. They had worked as a pair on occasion, but people tended to get mortally wounded when it was just them. Of course, when Butler was around, there were still mortal wounds. It was just that he was the one sporting them, and Butler seemed fairly skilled at escaping death. "Mum, Butler has been involved with this for years."

"Yes, and I shall have to speak with him about that. Allowing my son to go off and put his life in danger to save the world is in direct violation of his job description." She let Holly sit with her jaw dropped for a few beats. She needed to increase the tension in the room just enough to make her demand appealing. "He is, after all, under the payroll of the Fowl Empire. Not Artemis himself."
Only Artemis's father or I can 'lend him' past his normal duties, and only if we feel we have received 'adequate compensation.'"

She could see the list of fairy assets running through Holly's mind. Gold. Silver. Technology. "Extinct" plants and animals.

"I will need your assistance, Captain Short."


"At my fourth child's birth."

Holly's helmet crashed to the floor. Artemis's eyes went out of focus from the strain of trying to process this. His mother needed to stop winding up pregnant whenever he went time traveling. "Mum, you're...you can't be...meno—"

Angeline was actually a little offended. "Artemis, I must remind you that I had you rather young. I am barely 45 years old, a little early for the 'change of life'. Your mother is not too old for this, yet." As she finished saying this, both of their eyes were drawn to Holly.

The elf began by biting her lips and squeezing her hands together. She progressed to squirming and looking everywhere but at the expectant mother. Finally, she could take it no more and leapt to her feet, grabbing Angeline's hands and bouncing about like a hyper schoolgirl. "You're pregnant? You're having a baby? You're expecting a child?" Her voice had risen an octave from just a minute ago.

Artemis was thoroughly mystified.

Angeline's head nodded, trying to keep up with the elf. "Yes, that is what I implied by mentioning 'birth'. I'm about three months in, now."

Holly closed her eyes and bounced a bit faster, obviously trying to avoid squealing. She pounced on her helmet and looked straight into it's visor. "Please? It's an easy request! No gold!" She looked over her shoulder at Angeline. "You just want me there for healing, right?"

Well, there was the ulterior motive of including a new family friend in the event, but that could remain Angeline's little secret. She nodded. "Just in case. The doctor says everything is fine, but you never really know."

Holly and Artemis both cocked their heads slightly. For the first time, Angeline noticed the flesh-colored plugs in their ears. Artemis was stoic, but Holly began to bounce again. "I have to warn you that I'm nor a warlock medic and magic around birth is really temperamental, but...they'll allow it, if we get to use Butler." She went into her own little pleasure-filled world, temporarily oblivious to mother and son.

Angeline tittered "She's acting just like Juliet did when I called her. Is she always like this?"

Artemis was still fixated on the fairy. "No. The only other time I've seen this was when Butler showed her the armory." He scowled and finally looked at his mother. "Juliet already knows?"

"Well, I needed a nanny, since Miss Book seems to want to stay as far from us as possible. Besides, did you know that woman tried to put a diaper on Myles?"

Artemis coughed. "Really? What a preposterous idea... Speaking of, do the twins know, yet? I'm assuming you told father."
Hmmm...she would have to work on that "father" thing, since she had managed "mum." "Yes, Timmy is out negotiating with Mater Misericordiae. You'd be surprised how hard it is to reserve a room for a month. As if I knew the birth date already." Perhaps at one point in her life, this statement would have sounded a bit pompous to Angeline, but pregnancy has a way of diminishing all contrary arguments to something that sounds roughly like "blah, blah, blah." "Now, the twins...well, I think they are a bit more observant than even you, Arty. Not quite as intelligent, perhaps. I suppose we'll have to tell them about Holly, if she is going to be running around the Manor at the end, though I'd rather keep your father out of this. He's a good man, but perhaps it's best not to...tempt him."

Artemis was going to protest, but Holly jumped to his mother's side, again taking her hand. She had subsided from bouncing to squirming like a puppy being commanded to sit. "I'm sorry. I'm not normally like this. It's just...fairies can only have a child about every 20 years, and my only married friends are just beginning to toy with the idea. Babies are a big deal to the people."

The only male in the room looked intrigued. "How big of a deal?"

Holly considered this. "Ever been to a festival?"

He considered this. "You throw a festival when a baby is born?" He sounded amused.

Holly's face was absolutely serious. "I mean, it's mostly just the parent's neighborhood, plus friends and coworkers, so only about 200 people attend, but you get the idea."

Angeline sighed and melted into her seat, finally feeling free to indulge in a little unhindered gestation. "Excellent. I think my baby is in good hands."

Holly beamed. "You can be sure of it! I had to take extra units on birth when I was doing first aid. Something about being the only female in my field." She gave a momentary scowl before returning to her exuberance. "Don't worry about a thing. I've got this completely under control!"

February 3, 2009-Fowl Manor

Holly vaulted off the Fowl's dining room table, grabbing two fistfuls of Butler's suit as she landed, face pressed so close against his that their eyes nearly touched. "Get the car NOW. Something is wrong. There is wet junk everywhere."

The twins, who were both in the middle of their breakfast cereal, looked at each other and calmly put their spoons down. Artemis, who had a piece of toast held in his mouth, which he had been slowly eating while typing, lost hold when his jaw went slack. It fell butter-side down onto the keyboard, but he did not seem to notice.

Butler plucked her off, holding the Captain by the back of her bomber jacket in a manner similar to how one handles posturing kittens. "It's called 'amniotic fluid,' Holly. Artemis, could you go check on things? The eggs are going to burn if I leave them."

Fowl Sr. had left only a few hours ago with the bag holding Angeline's suitcase for Mater Misericordiae. The labor was a week early, by the doctor's predictions, but time and babies wait for no man. Thus burdened with this task, Artemis retreated upstairs. He returned soon, looking rather green.

Now Butler was alarmed. "Is there a problem?"

Artemis shook his head. "No, according to the books, it looks fairly...mostly...norm—" He fell to
the floor in a dead faint.

Butler tutted and hoisted his principle onto his shoulder before heading to the carport. It figured. He had a police veteran who saw people eviscerated on a nigh-yearly basis and a genius one residency away from a medical degree, and neither of them had the nerves for a simple birth. Myles said it best: simple-toons.
"In 1957, Hugh Everett III proposed a radical new way of dealing with some of the more perplexing aspects of quantum mechanics. It became known as the Many-Worlds Interpretation. According to this interpretation, whenever numerous viable possibilities exist, the world splits into many worlds, one world for each different possibility (in this context, the term "worlds" refers to what most people call "universes"). In each of these worlds, everything is identical, except for that one different choice; from that point on, they develop independently..."

From "The Many-Worlds Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics" by Douglas S. Jones.

**Arrival**

"February 3, 2009-Mater Misericordiae University Hospital, Dublin, Ireland

A simple movement can change the world forever.

Inside the contracting womb of Angeline Fowl, her unborn child floated aimlessly, though it sensed the change in the warm sea that surrounded it. Yet there was nothing the baby could do to stop this unwelcome alteration in its home. The child would have to wait, clenching and relaxing tiny fingers, for whatever was coming.

Out from its belly, a red cord connected to Angeline's bloodstream, filtering in the nutrients and oxygen the baby needed to grow in these past nine months. Up its chest the cord snaked, looping loosely around the neck, turning under itself before connecting to the placental sac.

Angeline Fowl's labor stretched out another six hours after her entourage's arrival, with Artemis and Holly spending the majority of that time sitting in one of the hospital's spare rooms (wealth has its privileges, including privacy). Artemis, while intelligent in most other matters, had chosen to remain in blissful ignorance of childbirth after he encountered his first video of a "crowning." Not an uncommon decision among men of all ages and intellects. Thus, only versed in pregnancy and birth up to that point, he was not very concerned with the extended stay.

Holly Short, however, was not as ill-versed. As a LEP officer, she had taken all standard first aid courses, including a specialized unit on magic-assisted childbirth that the higher ups had insisted she take shortly after being admitted to LEPRecon. She hadn't been particularly pleased with that bit of interference, but it had seemed a small price to pay for a position in Reconnaissance. Thus, when the seventh hour of labor was ending and no beaming doctor had come into the room, Holly placed a hand on Artemis's shoulder, jolting him out of his doze. "I should go in." She did not voice her full thoughts, lacking the stomach to continue with "something is wrong." Humans were not as technologically advanced as the People, but childbirth was a mostly routine medical event in this century. Or the population boom could give you that impression, at least .

Once Artemis had responded with an almost imperceptible nod, the elf shielded, slipping out of the waiting room and following a passing nurse into the maternity ward.

Holly had assisted in one birth during a LEP mission (a pixie whose smuggler boyfriend had held out a bit too long during a hostage siege), and thus she was still unaccustomed to the sounds of labor. A hall filled with half a dozen birthing women was, frankly, terrifying. Not only due to the sounds of distressed women and bustling doctors, but also because of the mixed smells of blood, sweat, and terror. Despite the chaos of rushing doctors and nurses, Angeline's room was fairly easy
to find. Holly simply looked for the door with the highest volume of people move in and out. Holly narrowly avoided the bustle and slipped inside, her instincts moving her to a dark and secluded corner before the horror of Mrs. Fowl's situation revealed itself.

There is a certain undeniable element of glamor to being a doctor, on most occasions. Even childbirth, a rather messy process, is considered to be a thing of beauty. Yet when a woman on her fourth child enters her seventh overall hour of deep labor, all style is lost. The head doctor's face, which Holly could only see in profile, was gleaming with sweat and marred by a few small smears of blood. Many of the assisting doctors' and nurses' faces were approaching his slick white pallor, with a wide array of damp hair beginning to sneak out of hair nets and ponytails.

A fresh pair of nurses entered the room, their crisp white scrubs contrasting sharply with their comrade's damp gray uniforms. Each was pushing a rolling table, one filled with an array of silver instruments and the other supporting a strange device with what looked like two air hockey mallets connected to a LED-filled gray box. After coaching Angeline through a protracted contraction, the doctor stood and turned towards the nurses.

Holly gasped, flattening herself further into the corner.

The doctor's front was covered in blood, his hands dripping slightly. A nurse stepped forward, removing his apron and replacing them with a clean ones, which quickly began to soak up some of the blood that had remained on the doctor's scrubs. He carefully removed his gloves and tossed them aside, instantly replacing them with a new white pair. These, at least, did not soak through.

As the doctor refreshed himself, a haggard nurse grabbed Angeline's IV drip, adding two new pouches to the tube. One was the dark red of blood, the other clear. The pained woman's cries quickly began to subside and she fell into a deep sleep. Her charge now safely anesthetized, the same nurse began to swath Angeline's stomach in a brown liquid that smelled faintly of nail polish remover and iron.

The head doctor paused a moment, taking in his staff. Everyone in the room seemed to stop their rapid movements, merely looking at each other and taking a collective breath. They nodded. A nurse picked up one of the instruments and handed it to the doctor. He seemed to fortify himself, turning around quickly. He paused only a moment to aim before cutting into Angeline's taught stomach, filling the world with a new flood of blood.

From there, things moved quickly as Angeline's womb was opened. Holly heard a stream of curses and saw the doctor make a few more cuts. What he lifted out first looked for all the world like a dirty rag. Then Holly recognized the umbilical cord and realized that it was the child, gray and stillborn.

"No..."

It wasn't just Holly that said this. All of the attendants looked horrified as the doctor began to work on the child, first using a blue rubber ball to suck the fluids from its mouth and nose, then tapping it on the back and feet. The tension in the room rose with each remedy the doctor attempted. Finally, he turned the baby onto its back and a nurse rolled the cart with the odd box forward. The doctor lifted its mallets and, inexplicably, stopped to yell "CLEAR!" at the top of his lungs.

The mallets descended on the baby, which jerked violently, arms flailing. Again and again, the fetus was jolted, but Holly was as aware as the doctors that it was hopeless. The baby was dead and had likely been so for hours.

Holly looked at her hands. Useless.
Angeline had asked her to be there in case anything happened, but there was nothing she could have ever done, even if she had been in the room with Angeline since their arrival. No magic could heal a child long dead in the womb. All Holly could do was brush Angeline's arm after she was sewn back up, to help stop her thick bleeding and send out waves of positive energy, as she had done at the end of the Fowl Manor siege. It would not stop the pain, or even dull it, but the mother would not be locked in mourning as she had been after the loss of her husband.

Artemis Fowl II was another matter. He had lulled himself to sleep after Holly left, consciously trying to make up for the energy he had lost in their drive to the hospital, while also subconsciously attempting to keep his mind from making any unpleasant conclusions. Yet once his comrade in arms unshielded in front of him, snapping him to wakefulness, all pretense of blissful ignorance vanished. Holly displayed a steady mixture of loss and helplessness.

Artemis's face moved rapidly from disbelief to horror and finally into rage. "No...it...use your magic! You promised Mum that you'd be here for the birth! You said you'd help!"

Holly reached out, grabbing the boy's hand and holding it tight. "I warned you, Artemis. I said I'd do whatever I could for your mother, but babies...newborns...magic doesn't work like that. Magic sees a child at birth as being in its natural state. Even if they're born dead. Not even No. 1 could do anything about this. This is how it was meant to be."

"No." Artemis shook his hand, trying to escape Holly's grip. "No!" Tears began to stream down his cheeks, flying off in the violence of his denial. "NOOOO!" He gave an almighty movement, wrenching his hand free. It rose towards the ceiling and, in a split-second decision, he reversed the motion of his hand, bringing it down.

Holly staggered back, a hand flying to her left cheek. Her ears heard the sound only nanoseconds after the force came, but it took her several moments to process what had happened. She looked up at Artemis, struggling to catch his evasive eyes. "Artemis, you hit—"

"Get out," her friend snarled. "Get away from my family, you...you bitch. Stay away from us!" His glare darkened from the fire of anger into a cool hate, the force of the gaze weighing down on the diminutive figure in front of him. "I know No. 1 removed the inhibitions on entering human dwellings, so I had best warn you now. Curse or no, none of the People are allowed within the grounds of Fowl Manor ever again. And if you ever want to try, I give my personal guarantee that a little nausea will be the least of your worries. Or, more accurately..." He smiled. That long hidden vampire's smile that Holly had been subject to only when he was a pre-teen. Did he realize that his upper lip raised itself ever so slightly, baring his incisors? That his eyes went totally blank, while his voice sent ice through the room? "It will be the last of your worries."

Holly was a level-headed fairy, but being reminded of the young and unscrupulous Artemis while facing this older, wiser individual destroyed her reason. She shielded and ran from the building, knocking into several astonished nurses as she left.

Artemis had been an enemy to the People once and their friend countless times. She knew his moods. The turn of voice that revealed his mental state. She could recognize what was coming. Artemis Fowl had just given her a warning. He was now, once again, an enemy to the People. He would not attack them outright, but he was not afraid of them and would retaliate if he ever believed them to be a threat.

He never made idle threats and, if anyone was going to destroy the People, Artemis Fowl was the man.

End: The Dead
February 3, 2009-Mater Misericordiae University Hospital, Dublin, Ireland

A simple movement can change a world forever.

Inside the contracting womb of Angeline Fowl, her unborn child stirred, squinting in dissatisfaction. It sensed the change in the warm sea around it and struggled against this unwelcome alteration in the environment.

Out from its belly, a red cord connected directly to Angeline's bloodstream, providing the nutrients and oxygen needed to grow in these past nine months. Up its chest the cord snaked, looping loosely around the neck, tangling under itself before connecting to the placental sac.

The child jerked its arms aimlessly, its vision blurred, instead mostly processing with touch. Its two tiny hands slipped beneath the umbilical cord, setting off barely formed warnings in the infant's mind.

Thin arms lashed out, pushing at the cord, which slid down, settling around the child's chest. The baby struggled a few more moments before settling, less than satisfied, but no longer distressed.

Holly unshielded in the camera-free waiting room after Angeline's stretcher disappeared. For the next two hours, she and the boy genius sat in companionable if tense silence. Holly occasionally placed her pointed ears to the door, listening for any crises. That was how she heard the pounding footsteps and the words "stuck" and "compression."

Fairy birth, especially for elves, pixies, and sprites, is remarkably similar to that of humans. Thus Holly knew it was time to step in. She gave a nod to Artemis, who looked unnerved by this development. Shielding, she slipped out of the door.

The hall was chaotic with medical personnel, especially near the last room, where Juliet and Butler stood guard. The invisible fairy tapped their legs in passing, alerting them to her presence. Juliet gave a slight nod, but Butler did not move. He did not feel the need to give proof that he had received the signal. It was a given.

Inside the delivery room, the doctors were spouting jargon that Holly only dimly understood, even with assistance from the Gift of Tongues. Words like "fully dilated" and "in the canal" told her that the birth was moving along, but other phrases like "the cord is tangled" and "stuck at the cervix" gave her a pretty clear idea that things were amiss. Then Holly understood. The baby was wrapped up in its own umbilical cord, which was being squeezed in the birth canal, cutting off the oxygen supply. Holly was no warlock medic, but she knew what needed to be done. Either someone had to reach in and untangle the cord or a C-section had to begin immediately.

The head doctor, positioned in the "seat of power" at the end of Angeline's bed, waived at two nurses and gave his orders. "Go. Full surgery kit and crash cart, now!" One darted off, but the other stayed, frowning. "Nurse, I said—oof!"

"Oh, no, you don't." She muttered, hip-checking him aside. She wore a standard green nurse's smock, but her demeanor marked her as a senior staff member. Undoubtedly, she would receive a disciplinary hearing for disobeying such a direct order. Holly found she liked the woman immediately "There isn't anything better for a child than being dragged, kicking and screaming, into the world, and your damned surgery hot-shotting isn't going to change that."
Holly watched in utter astonishment as the woman donned a glove and plunged her hand under the privacy sheet, squinting in concentration. Her tongue even stuck out slightly as she muttered. "Well, now, just the chest? Tricky little one, aren't you? There we go..." Then her hand was out, a bit redder and wetter than before, and she used her clean hand to pat Angeline's belly. The entire process had taken twenty seconds. "There, now, ma'am, go ahead and give it a push."

From there, it was merely a matter of the scandalized doctor reacting fast enough to catch. The new Fowl child's ear-splitting cries filled the room.

Holly darted behind Angeline, nervous of discovery despite her shielding, and began rubbing her fingers on the exhausted woman's upper arms. "It's over, Angeline. The baby is here." She released a slow trickle of magic, giving the mother a good jolt of energy.

"My baby," Angeline whispered. Then, louder, "What is it?"

Holly craned her head over the bed, trying to catch a glimpse of the child. 'Dear Frond, I forgot how ugly newborns are. All red and...blue at the tips?' Surely a trick of the light. The odd shading disappeared almost immediately, to be replaced by a rosy pink. Before Holly could give a response, the heroic nurse chimed in, handing the child to her mother. "A girl, Mrs. Fowl. A beautiful girl."

And, of course, she was. Elves are very emotional creatures and babies are always the pride of the slowly reproducing fairy society, so Holly was hooked almost immediately "What's her name?"

"I think...Shana." Angeline mulled this for a few moments before giving a smile that had faint, mischievous connections to her first son's grin. "Shana Holly Fowl."

Holly felt her ears burn. She reached out, brushing her hand along the infant's forehead. 'Heal,' she thought, sending another small trickle of magic through her fingers. There were no injuries on the child, but the magic would give her a heightened immune system for a few weeks. The blue sparks traveled briefly on her skin before settling in her eyes, turning the chocolate irises momentarily into Fowl blue. Holly frowned, but a gurgle from Shana instantly cleared her expression and Holly had to struggle to avoid a squeal.

It was hours before the sparks were explained.

"Brain damage," The doctor said.

The Fowls were frozen. Angeline and Artemis Sr. sat holding hands, Angeline's knuckles turning white as she clench at her husband. Myles and Beckett, who had been standing on tip-toe to offer fingers to Shana in an effort to determine whom she loved best, both subsided from the cradle. They did not have as much knowledge of the field of psychology and medicine as their older brother, but even Beckett knew that this was not a good thing. Holly, who was crouching under the low-hanging sheets of Angeline's bed, clenched her fists. 'Of course, magic enters the brain through the eyes!'

It was Artemis Fowl II who spoke up next. "What kind of brain damage are we facing? What functions will this affect?"

"Purely mental functions, most likely. We ran some simple tests, and all of her physical reflexes are fine. Superb, in fact. The best I've ever seen."

"What a comfort," Artemis muttered, "she'll be great at football."

Artemis Sr. finally spoke, his voice going uncommonly deep as he sought to protect his family from the doctor's news. "Then, what, precisely, is the problem?"
The doctor swallowed. The Fowls were supposedly removed from their roots in the criminal underworld, but even average men were known to attack when their family was threatened. He opened Shana's file, looking through a hastily scrawled sheet and a few print outs of Shana's MRI. "It' a bit early to get a full idea, but as far as we can tell after one scan, hypoxic-ischemic encephalopathy, with the majority of the damage in Broca's area. She only lost oxygen for a few minutes, but...they were important minutes."

Angeline choked out her first words since the doctor had entered. "So...what should we expect?"

"A general impairment of most cognitive abilities. Specifically speech. She probably won't begin to talk until a few years after her peers, and then she will progress at a much slower rate. The damage is equal to what we see in mild to moderate mental impairment. At best, she will advance to about the end of primary school."

"She will be able to perform most basic tasks, but expect the language barrier to cause significant problems in her social interactions. If she can overcome that and speak moderately well, she should be able to find employment. Without speech..."

Timmy raised his hand, silencing the man. "Leave, please. My family needs...time alone."

Perhaps Mr. Fowl recognized his eldest son's need for privacy, as he did not object when Artemis stood and strode out of the room after the doctor. Holly caught the slight "come with me" twitch of Artemis's fingers and closely trailed the boy into their former waiting room. Once the door was closed and locked, she unshielded and instantly felt his hands on her shoulders, squeezing.

"Heal her."

Holly blinked, a bit disoriented by the sudden demand. "Heal her?"

"Yes, I know," he spoke quickly, looking around the room as if he suspected a hidden observer. "It will look a bit suspicious when the next scan shows no damage, but medical miracles are not unknown, especially in the brain. They'll just say it's a remarkable organ and the staff caught it in time. No one will really question it."

Holly knew she would only get one chance to explain herself, so she reached up and placed a hand over his lips. "Artemis, listen to me. Remember when I healed Butler during the Spiro fiasco?"

Artemis nodded, his warm lips brushing her palm, sending an alarming jolt down her arm. "You had to freeze him right away, or his brain would have died, along with his body. Even with that, it was a tricky healing. Brain damage is irreversible, even with magic." Now Artemis's eyes were widening. "Artemis, I gave her a healing right after she was born. Most likely that healing helped her circulation and stopped further damage. Shana...is not going to get better."

Now Artemis jerked away from her, putting his hands out to keep her from approaching. "No. Call Foaly. Call Trouble. Get a warlock down here. Get N°1 down here!"

Holly began shaking. She had faced a fully armed B'wa Kell platoon and went in, neutrino blazing. Yet put her in front of Artemis, desperate for help, and she was a mess. "It won't work. Birth is a risky time for fairies. Magic at this stage is unreliable, at best. You can ask Foaly and N°1 all you
want, but their answer will be the same. This is it."

Artemis's eyes were tightly closed, lines appearing on his forehead. He was too young. Far too young for those lines. "Fine, I'll go out to the car and call them." He began to take long strides to the door.

Holly grabbed his arm. "Artemis, your family needs—"

"DON'T YOU TALK ABOUT MY FAMILY!" He wrenched his arm free, knocking the elf off balance. His hand hovered in the air, poised...

He clenched his fist and let it settle at his side. "Go home, Major Short. Section 8 did not authorize you for leave past the birth."

"A-Artemis?" Major Short?

He rubbed the hand that had been so tempted to... 'What did I want to do?' "I said go home. My family has no need of you, anymore. I will contact Foaly should I ever need the People's assistance again." He stopped rubbing his hand and tossed a small object towards the astonished fairy.

Holly had to dart to the side to catch the poorly aimed toss. When she looked in her cupped hands, she was confused for a moment. It was an ornate ring. Then she understood and looked up at her friend. "Artemis, you can't do this. You're cutting yourself off from the People with Koboi still loose!"

The boy sighed, shaking his head. "No, Short, I am not cutting myself off. I am cutting you off. If the People need to speak with me in regards to Koboi, I will need to speak with someone a bit higher up on the chain of command. Vinyáya, Trouble, or Foaly at least, though the Council itself would be preferable." He strode to the door, but paused before exiting. "I have no more time for lackeys."

By the time Holly had blinked away her tears, Artemis was gone. Within an hour, she was back at the Tara shuttleport and on the next shuttle to Haven. Two hours later, she finished briefing Vinyáya and headed back to her apartment. Three hours after this, Vinyáya received a request for personal leave from Major Short, the time period indefinite.

No one saw Holly for three days.

End: The Broken

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Universe 3

February 3, 2009-Mater Misericordiae University Hospital, Dublin, Ireland

A simple movement can change a world forever.

Inside the contracting womb of Angeline Fowl, her unborn child thrashed. Things were changing, and and the baby did not like it.

Out from its belly, a red cord connected to Angeline's bloodstream, providing the nutrients and oxygen needed to grow in these past nine months. Up its chest the cord snaked, looping loosely around the neck, tangling under itself before connecting to the placental sac.

The baby could not cry, but it opened and closed its mouth, arms waving about. In a moment of
serendipity, one of its arms touched the underside of the umbilical cord and, on instinct, pushed. The rope loosened before slipping over the child's fingers. The cord floated upwards, clearing the head and uncoiling languidly.

The baby fussed a few moments more, then a strong contraction came and it began to slip into the ludicrously small birth canal.

With each birth, a woman's labor generally gets easier and shorter. Angeline Fowl had already delivered three sons, the last two as twins, and all born naturally. Having gone through three sets of Lamaze classes, Angeline was now the master of labor. It only took thirty minutes to get a doctor into her private room, but by the time the doctor arrived he barely had time to scrub in before coaching her through the last pushes.

Artemis and Holly (the latter shielded) were faintly surprised when a bemused nurse emerged and pronounced Angeline "a very fertile cannon. Congratulations on your new sister." Then she sauntered off, beaming.

Artemis grinned and turned to Holly, who had de-shielded the moment the nurse left, and raised his arms. The elated elf leapt into them, laughing wildly. The child had only barely arrived, but she was already drunk with the event. Any fairy connected to a birth was known to be elated for days on end, with proud parents commonly spending half a decade in bliss. "Congratulations indeed, Artemis! You hardly need me here."

He laughed and set Holly down, clasping her tiny hands between his. "'Hardly need' you, Holly? I'm afraid I would still be passed out if you weren't here. That was easily the most terrifying two hours of my life."

Master of Lamaze Angeline was, but no woman spends over an hour in traffic with her son, his bodyguard, and a fairy police officer to coach them through labor without some degree of distress. Artemis had seen a side of his mother he never wished to see again. It had been...bloody.

The Major reached up and lightly slugged Artemis on his shoulder. Quite a stretch for the one meter tall fairy, though she had enough power behind it to rock his shoulder back. "Oh, come off it, Artemis. You're no worse for the wear. A new suit, perhaps, but I'm sure you'll get over that."

For the first time, the Irishman looked down at his suit jacket and saw the thin coating of viscera. He tore it off and tossed the double-breasted Zegna onto one of the many empty chairs. Fairy technology did extend to dry-cleaning advancements, but he doubted even that could help save his clothing this time.

A little wobbly, they went back to their seats, glowing. They sat in companionable silence for several minutes, Holly musing on Mud Man infancy. 'Let's see...Foaly said they spend about 1 year crawling instead of 18 months, and the two-to-three pattern holds until puberty, when it jumps to eight-to-one, then—"'

Holly gave a little start. Her hand, which had lain on the arm rest, was enveloped in a cold, faintly sweaty, and trembling palm. The Major swallowed, but kept looking ahead. She was sure that, if Artemis saw her eyes, they would be dilated in a mixture of excitement and apprehension. So they continued in silence. From her peripheral vision, Holly saw that Artemis had his head back, resting against the wall, eyes closed.

Finally, he spoke. "I do need you, Holly." Then silence closed in again.
Hesitantly, Holly turned her hand and rested it palm-to-palm with Artemis's, fingers twining. They sat that way for nearly two hours. Then another nurse entered (with Holly shielding a moment before) to invite them in to meet Artemis's new sister.

Her name was Lucy ("Because of the diamond you gave me, Artemis. 'Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds.'") Juliet Fowl, and she was perfect.

He could have been mistaken, but as Artemis held his new sister, he thought he saw the infant's wispy hair part for a moment, as if a soft breath from a kiss had brushed her face. Yet he could not be mistaken in the feel of a warm pair of lips touching his cheek for the briefest of moments, the phantom leaving a trail of tears on his pale skin.

**End: The Living**
The Dead

February 10, 2009—Ireland, Fowl Manor

Artemis Fowl was rather fond of his computer. Of course, there were dozens of PCs, MacBooks, and laptops in Fowl Manor, but the pride of his heart rested in his study. Running on his own constantly evolving Fox OS, which was sophisticated to begin with, the speed of the machine was only increased by the top-shelf (and occasionally home-manufactured) parts.

The speed of the processor was admirable, but the true star, in his opinion, was actually the keyboard. After having broken three plastic keyboards in one day, Artemis had commissioned a stainless steel case with 150 keys (far above the standard layout), each under 1 cm on a side (perfect for his nimble pianist fingers). None of the keys were labeled, which was perhaps for the best, as "Tara cameras," "air cannons," and "release the gas" would have taken a bit of explaining. Finally, the alphanumeric section was blank, mapped to his own key use statistics. It could be toggled between the Latin alphabet, Japanese, Russian, Gnomish, and Centaurian layouts.

Thus, when Mulch's visit was over, Artemis was very sad. He would need a new keyboard.

Mulch did not like greetings. He was a fairy of action, and thus started his conversation with Fowl by kicking the genius's chair, spinning him to face the irate tunneler. "What in the name of Frond and his queen do you think you're doing?"

Artemis pinched the bridge of his nose, as much to relieve the tension in his head as to avoid breathing in Mulch's scent. "For most people, I would say 'as if you don't know,' but you obviously do not know, so I shall clarify. I am programming and I need all of my concentration. Please be so kind as to climb back into the hole you crawled out of and leave me in peace."

Dwarves are known for their stubbornness. After all, when working through a tunnel, if they found their way blocked by a bit of indigestible rock they merely came after it with high explosives. Thus when the Mud Boy tried to turn away from the fairy, Mulch merely grabbed the chair's arms and held them firmly. "I don't care what you are doing now. I meant what you the other day." He pushed on the armrests, angling the chair so that Artemis was pitched forward, his face coming much closer to Mulch's gnashing teeth. "You. Hit. Holly."

The boy tilted his head slightly to the side, affecting a puzzled look. "So?"

"'So?" Mulch sputtered. "Is that all you can say? Not 'it was a mistake' or 'I never should have done it' or 'I'm sorry'?"

Artemis flicked up his fingers in sequence as he counted off his answers. "One: I meant to do it. Two: I would do it again. Three: I'm not." He jabbed his hands at Mulch's, shoving the dwarf away from the chair. He turned back to the computer screen. "I will let your invasion of Fowl Manor slide. You have assisted me many times in the past, and you aren't precisely an exemplary member of fairy society. However, I warn you and the People again: Fowl Manor is off limits and my retaliation will be swift if my demands are ignored." He began typing.

Mulch should have left. He knew Artemis personally, and this did not feel like the Artemis he had
so often stood beside. Unfortunately, Mulch was angry. He cared about few people, but he was fond—no, he loved Holly like a sister. So, instead of leaving the boy in peace, he grabbed the back of the chair and, using all of his strength, turned Artemis Fowl back to face him.

Artemis had not expected Mulch to act, so when he felt the chair moving, he grabbed for the closest thing to his hands: his keyboard. 90 degrees into the turn, the cord snapped and Artemis barely managed to grip its end. The force of the turn flung the keyboard far from the center of movement, and at 180 degrees into the turn, the stainless steel peripheral caught Mulch in the temple, sending him staggering back. He wobbled a bit before collapsing on the ivory white rug behind Artemis's desk.

Artemis continued to revolve about a dozen times, and each time he faced Mulch's prone form a different emotion passed through him. Shock. Horror. Pity. Fear. Little by little, he processed the sight of the dwarf's bleeding forehead, which was steadily staining his favorite carpet. For the first few turns, he waited for the blue sparks that would remove the bloody dent from the digger's forehead. Then he remembered that the ex-con had forfeited his magic years ago. Shakily, Artemis stood and covered the few paces between himself and the dwarf.

Mulch put a hand to his temple, then brought it away and stared at the layer of blood on his palm. "Tara. Get me to Tara. I need a warlock medic."

Three things about Artemis now conspired against Mulch. 1) He was logical, capable of analyzing the countless permutations of actions and identifying the most beneficial path. 2) He was cold enough to follow even the most extreme path, if it would help achieve his ends. 3) Madness ran on his mother's side of the family.

'Tara?' Artemis thought, narrowing his eyes. 'I'm sure that's just what they want. Get me to Tara and mind-wipe me again. Put me under surveillance. Get one over on the Mud Boy.' The keyboard, which had been swinging slightly, brushed his leg. Artemis's eyes narrowed and he smiled indulgently at Mulch. 'Not for a little bump. Oh, no, that would be a waste of time. If he needs a warlock, he is getting one.'

Brute physical strength was not Artemis's forte, but he was quite familiar with the principles of physics, having written a few tracts under one of his many pseudonyms, Mollie Q. Lar. Similarly, Mulch could not name the rules, but he had an intuitive understanding of how objects moved which was crucial to tunnel work. So when Artemis Fowl wrapped the cord around his hand and began swinging the keyboard in a tight circle, the injured party felt it was time to speak up. "What do you think—"

Artemis wasn't thinking anything when he dropped his shoulder and opened his hand, letting the keyboard snap to the end of its cord and slam into the dwarf's open mouth. Not thinking felt oddly good. Especially as he saw a dozen teeth fly from Mulch's mouth. Of course, not thinking for any length of time is rather difficult, as the many volumes written on the basics of meditation will confirm. As Artemis approached his former partner-in-crime, now sprawled and hemorrhaging from the mouth, a though struck him. 'I wonder if they replace themselves like a shark, or if they are irreplaceable but constantly growing, like a rabbit?' He liked the latter. Not only did it mean that this moment was a crippling move against the invader, but he preferred the rodent imagery. It made his next task easier.

He knelt on the rug and took one of Mulch's hands. Briefly, the dwarf tried to squeeze, attempting to form a connection with the Irish boy. Artemis frowned and forced the fingers flat, holding the hand firmly, palm down, on the carpet. With his other hand, he gripped the keyboard on the end that had not struck against Mulch's mouth. The other end actually had a few teeth embedded
between the keys. Impressive. "Mulch?"

Mulch was dazed and in pain, so his response of "Whrrr?" was not particularly promising for the conversation Artemis planned to hold. Still, nothing to do about that, now.

"I have a few demands for the LEP. They are very simple, nothing so extravagant as a pile of gold, but it is very important that you repeat them to Major...er, the Council precisely. So I am going to do something to help you remember."

Mulch desperately wanted to stand and make a run for it, but the two impacts to his head had severely impaired his movement. He tried to move his legs, but they only flopped a bit. "Nrrrr. Fake meh fooooo Fara."

Artemis shook his head. "Messages first. It will be quick, I swear. Let us begin." Artemis rested the end of the battered keyboard on Mulch's pinky. "Number one: All hacking into Fowl Manor and Fowl business computers will cease." He raised the keyboard and slammed it back down.

Mulch heard his finger snap and, a moment later, felt the stab of pain travel up his arm. He howled, shaking so violently that he appeared to be having a seizure.

Artemis paused and looked at the door to his bedroom. He smiled. "A good thing the rest of my family decided to pass up on the soundproofing after...the incident. My room wouldn't be done for a few more weeks, otherwise." He turned back to Mulch, now resting the keyboard on his ring finger. "You see, I had to get it done quickly. Mum...isn't taking things too well. Dead babies can do that, I understand. I believe her crying would have made me go a little...mad."

Mulch finally calmed enough to get a good look at Artemis's face. What he saw terrified the dwarf. Artemis's smile was wide, showing every one of his bright teeth. His hair was disheveled and shining with the oil left from several days without a wash. He seemed eager, licking his lips before speaking again. "Number two: Stop following the Fowl finances, including our various...alternate identities." Again he slammed down the keyboard, sighing tenderly at the crack of Mulch's finger.

Artemis had three more demands: turn off or remove all cameras the people used to track the Fowl family; close any departments of the LEP devoted to analyzing his psychological profile; and never use any fairy or hacked human satellites to scan within a three mile radius of Fowl Manor grounds. Unfortunately, Mulch passed out after demand four, but Artemis was confident that the Council would get the point. He felt for Mulch's pulse. 'Amazing. Two impacts to the head, quite a bit of blood loss, what appears to be a broken nose, and a thoroughly broken hand, and the heartbeat is quite strong.'

Artemis dropped his mangled keyboard and ran a hand over a clean section of the carpet. "Like the design, Mr. Diggums? Woven with yarn from a dozen angora rabbits. Each had white fur, but with some slight pigmentation. The weaver was able to create a subtle but beautiful spiral pattern" He sighed and shook his head. "Unfortunately, I believe your blood is going to break up that spiral irreversibly. Perhaps Foaly could get the stains out for you? It would make a wonderful addition to your office."

Mulch gurgled through a mouthful of blood.

"Oops." Artemis rolled the fairy on his side, letting the blood gush out of his mouth before it drowned him. No sense in killing the messenger. Or was he the message? No matter. Even the LEP would be able to work this one out.
Artemis folded the rug around the dwarf, pleased that it was a rather thick weave. It would take a while for the blood to seep through. He inspected the room, picking up the teeth that had flown free of the nightmare mouth and wiping up the blood splatters. After placing the teeth in the bundle, Artemis took two ties from his closet and secured the edges of the rug, creating a small though somewhat weighty package. The boy wasn't terribly strong, but he had one of the People's moon belts and the dumbwaiter went into the kitchen. From there it was a short trip to the carport.

Hill of Tara (E1 Shuttleport)

Despite their frequent involvement with the fairy world in the past few years, few of the People deigned to notice humans. Thus, when an unmarked black car stopped on the N3 and dumped a white rug, the shuttleport staff waived it off as another littering Mud Man. The McGraney family would remove the item tomorrow.

An hour before dawn, a pixie returning from completing the Ritual commented on the rug. "A bit bloody. Be a shame if the Mud Men started dropping off their...misdeeds."

This caught the attention of the terminal director, Nimbus. "Bloody? I wasn't bloody when...oh, gods, something is alive inside there!"

Minutes before dawn broke, Chix Verbil (as the LEP officer in residence at Tara) and an accompanying warlock medic brought a half-dead dwarf into the shuttleport. Civilians were standing around the walls, murmuring among themselves as the warlock tended the digger's wounds. "Barbaric." "He looks like a car got him." "Is that Mulch Diggums? Didn't he help out your sister with evidence for the divorce?" "Dear Frond, look at his hands! The bones are sticking out!"

The shuttleport's main television screen flickered on, showing a live connection to Police Plaza. An array of fairies looked out anxiously on the dwarf, but at the fore stood two elves and a centaur. Holly, Trouble, and Foaly. The female elf's face turned white. "Mulch!" She gasped, reaching out, even though she knew that the screen was unlikely to even be pointed at her friend.

The patient, who had recovered consciousness when the officers placed him on a stretcher, raised his good hand. The warlock was busily pulling at the broken fingers of his other hand, moving them back into the skin and into as much alignment as possible before healing. "I appreciate the concern, Holly. A bit more than I thought I'd get tonight, considering..." He shrugged, looking embarrassed. Technically, he had broken the law by going to the surface without a visa, though he doubted that anyone would try to prosecute him.

Foaly was appalled, but he couldn't bring himself to leave off the normal banter with his tentative friend. "What, got in a fight with a land mine?" Everyone could detect the centaur's nerves. He was tossing his tail and trotting in place.

Mulch smiled. Police Plaza and the shuttleport had the uncomfortable honor of seeing new teeth pop out of his gums. More a shark than a rabbit, it seemed. "Nothing so intelligent. I ignored Holly's warning."

All present, both on screen and in person, turned to the Major, who stood with hands over her mouth. "He...he couldn't!"

Mulch reached up and felt his jaw, working it back and forth. "I didn't think he had it in him, either. Guess he just keeps surprising us."

The Broken
"Rise and shine, Mud Boy."

Artemis bolted up, forcing his eyes as wide as possible, willing his pupils to expand in the darkness. Perhaps not effective, but certainly instinctive. He was in his chambers, it was three in the morning, and he was not alone. "Butler?" He called, cursing his unarmed state. The bodyguard had warned that remaining unarmed with Koboi on the loose was a terrible idea, but Artemis had rejected the idea of getting a gun, due to Myles and Beckett's curious nature. Perhaps something should be added to his bedroom. A Fowl coat of arms on a shield would be better than nothing.

Artemis was brought back to reality and calmed at the same time when his nose detected a peculiar and strong odor. "Mulch? What do you think you are doing in my bedroom in the middle of the night?"

The ex-con's face caught a ray of fading moonlight from the massive windows behind Artemis's bed, showing off his wide smile and shining teeth. "Not here for a lover's tryst, I assure you." Confident that he had the multi-millionaire's attention, he hopped off the bed and trotted to the ensuite dining nook, where he began to rustle through the sparse cabinets. They lacked normal gourmet Fowl fare, but he at least found a packet of water crackers and a fragrant cheese in the mini-fridge. "Join me for a snack and make this a talk over some grub, or let it remain a lecture?"

Artemis did not budge from his bed. "If you did not know, this house has a week-old baby in residence and my bedroom will not be sound-proofed for another few days. As such, my sleep is a valuable commodity. Take that," he waved at the food, "with you if you wish, but leave me and come back at a more reasonable hour."

Before he could retreat under his duvet, an insistent cry filled the Manor, causing Artemis's skin to visibly crawl. He was one of those siblings that could not stand hearing such cries, and doubtless would have ran to the rescue if a bell-like voice had not joined in. Angeline was rising to attend to her daughter. Artemis glared at Mulch, as if he had caused the distress.

"Babies." The dwarf said, chuckling. His teeth were full of cracker pieces and a light green cheese. "They have a delicious sense of irony."

Sighing, the Irishman slid out of bed, stretching and walking barefoot to the kitchen. He fished a bottle of mango juice out of the fridge and joined his occasional ally at the table. "Well, what is it this time? I'm assuming it isn't about Koboi, or I would be speaking with the LEP."

"Nah, not Koboi. That sprite disappears and she really goes off the radar. No, I'm here for personal reasons."

Artemis raised an eyebrow, a skill he was inordinately proud of. It was purely a genetic thing, but still terribly expressive. "Mr. Diggums, I have never known you to have 'personal' interests not associated with gold or a lack thereof. I should remind you that the Fowl Empire has gone legitimate."

"No, no, Artemis, I'm not looking for gold. I've got a tidy business with Doodah, plus the benefit of getting to spend my money outside of the penal system. Besides, you wouldn't believe what I get to write off at tax time."

Artemis grunted. "Noting your talents, I do not think I would be."

Mulch nodded, conceding the point. "No, I'm not here about gold. I'm afraid joining your little
A superhero group has caused a few...unexpected attachments. Not my style, but you lot grew on me."

Artemis stared at Mulch rather blandly. He had no intention of prompting him and providing more fuel to his talkative flame.

Recognizing the obstinate pause, Mulch gave an equally obstinate grunt. "I'm talking about Holly."

It was really amazing how the boy could school his impressions. The flicker in his eyes was merely recognition of the topic, rather than any sort of emotional response. "The Major? I have no desire to speak of her." He took a sip of juice and continued to gaze on Mulch. No childish "Holly who?" or "Why would you want to talk about her with me?" Just an acknowledgment and dismissal of the subject.

"Well, I do!" Mulch snapped, and a snapping dwarf is rather alarming. Crackers and pulverized rock shards were jarred from between his teeth and a sound akin to a miniature jackhammer filled the room. "It's been three weeks, and she hasn't been back to Police Plaza or Section 8 since she came back. She's lucky she got so much overtime and accumulated vacation from the Hybras mission, or else she would be looking at a hearing for dereliction of duty by now."

"I'm glad to see that the LEP has a good benefits program."

Mulch sighed. What sort of Creator would give a genius a love of sarcasm? "She barely eats. Foaly and I suspect that she only does so when we bring her food and stay to watch."

This caused something of a reaction, though not precisely the one Mulch intended. Artemis looked disgusted. "I had no idea Major Short was anorexic."

Mulch slammed his hands on the table. "You know damn well she isn't that daft!"

The Fowl boy shrugged. "Then perhaps she should consult a nutritionist."

"A nutritionist can't help someone who doesn't want to eat."

"Then a psychiatrist. Really, Mulch, I can not jump to the aid of every Recon officer with a case of the blues."

"Gods, give me strength." Mulch muttered, closing his eyes. He was still trying to decide if he would be best off simply knocking the boy out and dragging him back to Haven for an apology or merely trying to talk things out. Eventually, he subsided into his chair, deciding that abduction was not the answer. Not because of any moral qualms, but more because Holly was as likely to arrest Mulch as acknowledge that Artemis was underground. "Holly's a smart elf, Artemis. She knows she didn't do anything wrong and that she couldn't have done anything more to help Shana. She doesn't feel guilty."

Artemis narrowed his eyes.

"She feels betrayed."

Now his eyes shot open, a startled blue and shocked hazel trained on Mulch. Nothing was said, but they invited the detective to continue.

"Arguably the best friend she has ever had just told her that she ruined his little sister's life, and she can't convince the little genius," Mulch's sarcasm clogged the air, "otherwise. She has shown a dozen times over that she will do anything in her power to save you and yours, but the one time she
can't do anything, you throw her aside." He began crushing his crackers into the soft cheese, mixing it into a green ball. "Now, I'm surprised that she's even crying over an insensitive boob like you, but there is no accounting for females. They seem to think their men are worth something." He shoved the baseball-sized mass into his mouth.

Except for the crunch of Mulch's treat and the sip of juice, the room was silent. Mulch's mind was seething on all but one of its levels, the last of which was devoted to not biting the Mud Boy's right arm off at the elbow. Artemis's mind was also racing, but only on two levels, which was rather low for him. His subconscious was fixated on watching Mulch, making sure he had time to react, should the cavern of teeth approach. The conscious level was filled with variations on a theme.

'She's crying. She feels betrayed. She thinks...I'm worth something.'

Through the walls of the manor, Angeline's voice switched from an improvised melody to a soft version of "Scarborough Fair," Shana's early-chosen lullaby. Artemis downed the last of his mango juice and stood. "Shana will be asleep for at least a few more hours, and I need my rest. I believe Butler must have shown you in, so he can show you out."

Mulch clenched his fists. That was it, LEP reprisals or no, Artemis was going down. Literally. His knuckles cracked as he jumped off the chair and approached the undefended back of the arrogant git.

"Oh, and please tell Holly to stop moping, start eating, and get back to work. I know there was nothing she could do. N°1 told me as much. I just...don't want to see her right now." Artemis did not bother turning to face Mulch for a confirmation. He knew that by the time he was in bed and facing the rest of the room the dwarf would be gone. Instead, he settled into the down mattress and was instantly off to sleep. A much deeper, less troubled sleep than not long ago.

The Living

July 5, 2009-Ireland, Fowl Manor

Holly did her utmost to visit Fowl Manor frequently over the next year, taking every above-ground mission Section 8 or Reconnaissance (as she was still known publicly as a Recon officer, given Section 8's desire for secrecy) had available. Still, her visits were limited to about once every three months.

These visits brought out a new and...rather interesting side of Holly Short. She was not mushy, as one might expect, but actually fiercely protective. Angeline had enlisted Juliet Butler (off from wrestling for the first year of the new child's life, preparing for a dramatic comeback in the Spring) as a sort of unofficial bodyguard/live-in nanny, but Holly apparently disapproved of the assignment. She seemed to be losing faith in Butler, as well. Whenever she visited, Holly was constantly looking out windows, consulting with Foaly on his own Fowl surveillance, and conducting in-depth searches of the Manor.

Artemis was puzzled by the elf's erratic behavior until about a week after Holly's second visit, when the boy entered the Manor's kitchen to find Mulch noshing on half a turkey and a liter of frothy white milk. The genius did a rather justified double-take before pointing at the beer mug. "That's my mother's."

Mulch gave a little grin and lifted the mug, toasting his part-time partner. "Just leave a note for the milk man." He took a long drink.

Shaking his head, Artemis clarified. "Well, I suppose there is more, but I meant that she made it."
Now Mulch paused, smacking his lips. A thoughtful expression crossed his face. "Tell her to eat more spinach. She's a bit low on iron." Then he tilted his head back and poured the rest down.

"I'll...be sure to pass that on." Artemis knew that this was wrong on many, many levels, but he was having a hard time identifying exactly which ones. "Well, Mulch, what is it this time?"

The dwarf, whose mouth was full with a swirling mass of turkey, held up a finger in a request for a pause. Artemis had the time to pour himself a glass of pomegranate juice ('It's a good thing my growth spurts are over,' he thought as he poured, 'I do not think I shall be drinking milk ever again.') and sit before Mulch reached into his mouth and pulled out a perfectly clean bone. "Want to pull me for the wish?"

Artemis inclined his head graciously, but held up a hand in a very clear 'No, thank you my kind friend, but I shall never touch an object which has resided in your hellish gullet.'

Mulch shrugged and tossed the bone into the air, catching it deftly. His teeth pulverized it in an instant. "Right. Good job on cementing the rest of the foundation. The underground route is now 100 percent dwarf-proof, barring the use of explosives, and that's a whole different game than we're playing. Now, I got in through the second-largest room in the East wing—meeting hall, right?—by melting a corner window. In Haven, we just used thermal cameras for a while, but it was simple enough to cover the hole with a sheet of insulating tape. Except for double-paned glass with a pure-gas interior. I always liked it when they used helium, myself. Put that in and your intruder will get a nice high voice and the new mixed-gas interior will react to heat a bit differently. Enough for a camera to notice, if calibrated correctly, and I'm sure that isn't beyond your skills."

Artemis nodded, making a mental note. Fowl Manor was slated for window renovations, but helium fillers hadn't been on the order forms. That would require some private contracting. "Very good." The conversation stalled then, with Fowl swirling his glass like it was a fine wine and Diggums beaming in anticipation of praise.

When praise was not forthcoming, Mulch pouted. "What, no recognition of my ingenious suggestions?"

A dismissive gesture of the hand brushed the demand away. "You said yourself that this is a procedure already done in Haven, so you aren't exactly providing me with an unprecedented security tip. Besides, I have bigger things to worry about."

Mulch quailed. Generally, if Artemis Fowl had bigger things to worry about, Mulch had bigger things to run from. "What...er, kinds of 'things'?"

Artemis sighed and leaned back in his seat, running a hand through his hair. "Holly."

The dwarf's shaggy eyebrows shot up. "Holly? I thought things were right friendly, of late. Every time I see her in the underground she spends thirty minutes showing me baby pictures and nearly talks my ear off." He rubbed his short (for convenience in tunnels), yet undeniably pointy ears. "You'd think she popped out the beast herself."

Artemis nodded in commiseration. "Yes. Every time she visits she spends half her time inspecting the nursery for high explosives and the other half sending Juliet out for extra nappies. I'm afraid Juliet may deck her if she is given another 'assignment.'"

Mulch snorted and rolled his eyes. "Oh, that. It's just her elfin nature. The females are obsessed with the security of their infant family members. Comes from old Mud Men trying to exchange
'Changeling' babies with their 'real' child." The ex-con grinned. "We never took human children, of course. Turns out Mud Babies are just ugly."

The boy genius had taken in Mulch's statement (admittedly, Lucy had been alarmingly cone-headed at birth, though this had settled into a well-shaped cranium quickly), but was stuck on the second sentence. "Infant family members? Mulch, last I checked, her name wasn't Holly Fowl."
The last two words did something odd to his lips. He could feel each sensitive nerve tingle, leaving him warm.

"Ah, right." The dwarf smacked his forehead. "She did only heal your mother out of her depression, rescue your father from a mob by diving into arctic waters, save your sorry hide on well over a dozen occasions, and willingly go back in time to rescue your mother again. There's no reason that little orphan Holly should consider the Fowls an extension of her family."

Artemis knitted his eyebrows. "And what about sending Juliet out?"

A snort of laughter was the initial reply. "Well, I'd say, subconsciously, she's trying to get rid of a rival."

"A rival?"

"What, smart Mud Boy like you can't figure that one out?"

"There is no rivalry between Holly and Juliet." Artemis stressed each word, eyes boring into Mulch.

The dwarf stood, ready for his retreat. "Oh, of course not." He winked. "'Rivalry' implies an ongoing battle, and Holly won that long ago."

Artemis also stood, not liking the implications the reformed criminal was making. "And what makes you say that?"

Mulch was at the kitchen door, cracking it open to create a dwarf-sized escape. "If Juliet had won, you wouldn't be worried about Holly." Then he was gone, doubtless diving into the garden's soil the instant the door closed behind him.

Chapter End Notes

The Living Universe temporarily continues in "Fowl Shorts," chapters 8 to 15, and then returns to chapter 4 of this work.
Out of Sight

The Dead

September 4, 2014-The Lower Elements, Haven, warehouse district

Holly had been relegated to below-ground duties, but it wasn't all bad. She missed flying in fresh air, but she was lucky the higher-ups hadn't paired her with Corporal Frond for recordings and LEP press functions. True, half of her work was a desk job, but Trouble Kelp looked out for his favorite LEPRecon officer, placing her on every mission he got his hands on, along with her few remaining Section 8 tasks. B'wa Kell arrests and smuggling raids were occasionally interspersed with more sinister operations that smelled distinctly of the AWOL past Koboi.

Today was nowhere near so exciting, being another suspected B'wa Kell meeting, but still...action wherever she could get it.

At her flanks and back stood a dozen lieutenants and captains, including one or two female pixies. Barriers had been broken and Holly was enjoying having these bright-eyed fairies in her squadrons. Not all of them were as lax in the rules as she had been in her heyday, but they were universally fierce.

'92 years old and I'm already thinking I've past my prime.' She smirked, resisting the urge to shake her head, which would ruin her concentration on the shabby warehouse in front of her, where the occasional bloom of fire confirmed that goblins were in attendance.

The good old days were certainly past. She had only been on the surface five times in the past half-decade, and only then to perform the ritual. In fact, Trouble had been so worried that he had made her go to Canada and had come along as her guard. 'More paranoid than Foaly,' She thought, though she suspected the Commander had a few ulterior motives in accompanying her so closely. 'I really should talk to him about—' Her mind cut off abruptly when she saw a pair of fairies de-shield in front of the warehouse doors. One shot a steady Neutrino blast along the seam and the other lashed out with a rather impressive kick. The door slammed open, revealing a mob of startled goblins.

"Freeze, flame breath!" The kicker yelled, leveling his Neutrino into the crowd.

'I've really got to work on their witty repartee,' Holly had just enough time to note before all hell broke loose.

September 4, 2014-Fowl Manor

Artemis had augmented his sparse exercise regimen in the last few years, adding in more strenuous activities like jogging, but he had decided to keep up his horseback riding. Myles and Beckett had begun to learn the finer points of equestrianism (or at least more than "PONY!") and his parents had always been avid riders. Thus, this activity had turned into one of their rare family outings, though the man was riding alone today. Artemis considered riding to be adequate exercise for his lifestyle, if done properly, and he especially loved the ability to remain in refined style during the activity. Even if English riding outfits were a bit more...form fitting than his beloved suits.

There were roughly a dozen horses kept at the Fowl stables, which Artemis took out in turn, but his favorite was a black mare he had purchased and broken himself shortly after returning from
Hybras. On her forehead was a brown marking which, when combined with her color, supplied her name. Or, at least, this was the story he had told his family.

"Settle, Acorn, settle." He soothed, cinching the saddle and slipping on a bit-less bridle. Perhaps not the standard equipment in English riding, but he had found the family horses much more responsive to him since—

Artemis's eyes closed tight against the memory. His left eye a bit tighter than the right. Then the moment passed and he vaulted to the saddle, once again thankful for the form-fitting yet stretchy jodhpurs. With a slight tightening of the boy's legs, Acorn trotted out of the stable and began her journey around the Manor grounds.

Holly felt the delicious strain and light tear of her leg muscles as she launched herself into the warehouse, gun firing at five rounds a second, 'Frond, there are a lot of them,' her abnormally calm mind commented. There were easily six dozen goblins, ranging in age from adolescent hoodlums to hardened bucks long out of their prime. Her helmet worked automatically, taking pictures of each goblin, sending these back to the Police Plaza databases for analysis. The database retrieved 3 dozen warrants, six prior warnings, nine unpaid parking tickets, and three particularly interesting notices.

"Greeble Grack, B'wa Kell major. Marr Hesen, B'wa Kell major. Kitane Scree, missing person. Contact with other known B'wa Kell members is a direct violation of Hesen and Kell's parole conditions. Detain immediately." As this information was relayed, circles appeared around the three goblins, green for the missing person and red for the majors. The latter were easily identifiable, as they were easily the eldest meeting attendants. Also, they collapsed to the ground seconds after Holly's entrance, knocked out by the subcutaneous sleepers. The last goblin, however...

"Aw...you are after my own heart." Holly muttered and she couldn't help but smile. This last goblin had a thin red ridge running from the tip of her nose to its shoulder blades. Goblins didn't have much sex differentiation past this ridge, given that they all had to be rather formidable to survive, but it was still odd to see a female consorting with the B'wa Kell. Many fairies were still surprised to learn that there were female goblins, which was a bit of an odd realization, as even dwarves had their better half. Female goblins were generally much smarter than their male counterparts, mostly living as productive members of society. After all, someone had to post bail for the dim sons and husbands.

As the female turned to face Holly, the elf noticed something rather alarming. She held no fireballs. 'Oh, d'arvit. Not the canons.'

Two white-hot streams of fire erupted from the goblins nostrils as Holly reached the first row of crates. Using them as a ramp, the elf launched herself into the air, turning a lazy somersault. The jet of flame followed her to the zenith of her jump, only halted by the goblin's limited range of motion. Holly landed and immediately shoved her hand in the back of her head, where she felt a puff of heat-damaged hair sneaking out of her helmet. She examined the ash on her glove, then snarled at her opponent. "I was growing that out."

The captain smiled and darted her tongue out, moistening her eyeballs.

"Ooooo..." Holly recognized that kind of attitude. A runner! "Dibs!" She barked, just as the goblin barreled out of the warehouse. True, she wasn't above ground, but Holly could still savor the chase!
Acorn’s pacing was steady, from walk to gallop. A true joy to ride. Artemis let the mare set her own gait, feeling the frisky animal move smoothly into a trot, then a canter, and finally into a full gallop. Artemis moved his body in time, remaining firm in the saddle, alternately surging forward and settling back with the motion of the horse. Very soon, a thin sheen of sweat appeared on horse and rider and Artemis felt his heartbeat rise.

Holly and Kitane each had their own advantages. Kitane knew the warehouse district almost instinctively. She had long roamed the district, contacting key goblins, insinuating herself into the new B’wa Kell. Holly, in comparison, had four decades of physical training behind her. Her muscles were strong, but compact. Her stride was swift, but balanced well with her endurance. Her reflexes were superb. The fact that Scree couldn’t run and aim at the same time, unlike Holly, was also a big plus.

Darting down alleys, ducking under construction scaffolds, and vaulting over crates…it was a wonderful work out. Holly felt her heart begin to hammer.

Acorn crested a hill and Artemis's face was covered with a rare smile. In front of him stretched a small valley containing a miniature cross-country jumping course full of sudden turns, dips, water obstacles, and other challenges. Without any urging from her rider, Acorn surged forward and down the slight incline. If not for the first jump, situated halfway down the hill, Artemis would have released the reins and thrown his hands into the air. His heart leapt to his throat and hammered wildly.

Then the world went mad. One moment, Holly had her Neutrino trained on the goblin's back, finger down to the first click. The next, her sight ruptured, the left side of her vision replaced with the head of a horse and a blur of grass, trees, and fences.

"D'arvit!" She swore, realizing her depth perception was ruined before she recognized that she was not merely seeing with jumbled vision, but was actually seeing two different scenes.

Artemis, in contrast, saw a dimly lit alley filled with broken boxes and long planks of wood, as well as a running...green figure. He immediately shut his left eye, but found that this vision did not disappear. 'My God, that's...a goblin.' And he understood. Opening both eyes again, he concentrated on the jumps. Acorn was taking them at full speed and he would find himself with a broken neck if he was not wary.

In the underground, Holly had come to a similar conclusion. This vision was not to interfere with her mission. She had to catch the goblin now, before the loss of depth perception presented Scree with an escape. The goblin was about 50 feet ahead of her and was coming to a chain link fence, half blocked with piled boxes and a few dozen planks of wood leaning precariously on said boxes. The goblin threw herself at the fence and climbed.

'Stop and shoot? No, no depth perception, and the damn helmet won’t aim fast enough to get her on this side. Climb after? No, it’s chain link, she'll just drop to the other side and fry me as I climb. Then the only thing to do is...' Her mind left off analyzing as Holly's feet touched one of the wobbly planks. It's top rested on the fence, creating a steep and bouncy ramp. The major never broke her stride to balance, instead rocketing up the slope.

Feet before Holly reached the top, Scree hit her own summit and stood, preparing to jump down.

Artemis had a good idea what was coming and he didn't like it.
Holly Short flung herself through the air, slamming into the goblin's back. She grasped the creature's wrists and folded into herself, forcing her captive to match her curves. They tumbled over the fence and into another pile of boxes, which only slightly cushioned their fall. Blue sparks erupted on Holly's back as dozens of splinters worked their way out of her skin. Holly gritted her teeth and rolled out of the boxes. She tightened her grip on Kitane's wrists, pointing the flame-throwing hands away from the boxes and buildings. Her captive screeched, sending columns of fire into the sky. Holly didn't mind this display. It would exhaust the goblin's magic and merely bring in the LEP sooner.

Artemis didn't mind, either, but that was because he was too busy being queasy. Holly had spent years training herself to handle in-flight nausea, but Artemis had no such advantage. The elf's fall did not mesh well with his vision, completely disorienting him for the jumps. Acorn was now merely taking him along. She did seem to sense her rider's distress, however. With a mighty leap, she cleared the final hurdle and sunk her hooves deep into the grass, coming to an abrupt stop.

Artemis fell from her back, landing on his knees and vomiting. Once his heaving ceased, he tottered and fell, lying on his back and looking at the sky. For a moment, Holly and Artemis had an odd sort of mirror vision: one of the artificially lit "sky" of Haven, and the other of the blue and cloudy sky of Ireland.

Then their hearts finally began to slow, Artemis's vision fading into full blue and Holly's into dingy gray, leaving them both gasping and confused on the ground.

Despite the blasts, it took nearly ten minutes for the LEP to arrive, by which time Kitane had drained her magic and resorted to cursing. Holly was actually quite impressed with the goblin's vocabulary, but had gone from bemused to irritated by the time Trouble Kelp vaulted the fence and stood over them, beaming.

"Another stunning catch, Major Short." He slipped the cuffs on Scree before lifting his favorite female officer from the rubble. "You really do deserve a thank you, and since the Council won't fork up the money for any more bonuses or paid leave, the burden of bolstering your moral falls upon me." He gave a small, but theatrical bow, looking up at her as he tried to suppress a grin.

Holly sighed and dusted herself off. A fine layer of soot covered her uniform, dulling the gleam of her visor. "The fact that I make 90 percent of the 'stunning catches' in the LEP has nothing to do with your moral initiative, Commander?"

Kelp was not what one would call a particularly attractive elf, having spent most of his life on vigorous training instead of beauty treatments. Still, his chin was firm, his nose had only one unfortunate bend from being broken, and he had always found a warlock medic in time to reattach his teeth. It was hard to find better in Retrieval, and the looks he had preserved were bolstered by a strong personality, which was half the reason he'd become Commander. "Absolutely nothing to do with it, Major, and if you want fewer rewards from me, I would advise you to stop being so good at your job. So, Monday after work—"

Having finished her rather ineffective toilette, Holly bushed past the Commander and commandeered the nearest LEP magna-bike. "I'm sorry, but not now. I need to talk to a demon."

Later, at Police Plaza...

Holly scowled. "Look, I don't need an explanation. Just tell me: can you stop it?"

N°1 sighed. "Oh, certainly. Just lend me your knife and get ready to heal."
Holly was a bit too smart to go along with this. That did not mean that the elf was willing to take today's development without protest. "Then what happened?"

Her demon friend rolled his eyes dramatically. "Oh, so now you want an explanation." Holly's intense glare informed him that, yes, indeed, she did. "Very well, it's quite simple. You saw through your old eye, even though it was up in Ireland and not in your pretty head." N°1 was studying flirtation, and knew that the older woman would be less likely to eviscerate him than his demon sisters. Demon warlocks did eventually tend to find mates, but only after they had become full adults. Warlocks never morphed, but they did go through a rather lengthy puberty. N°1 had gone through the normal growth spurt, and was now nearly one and a half meters tall. A giant among the fairies. Unfortunately, he retained his baby features, and thus couldn't approach a female demon without losing a chunk of skin. Holly was a much safer option.

"Ah, of course." Holly cooed, making the male lean back and question his conclusions. Holly did not coo. "I was having a bit of trouble figuring out how I was seeing a green hill and a bloody horse!" Her hands slammed onto the desk between them, sending an echo through her office. "Now, can you tell me why that happened now, and not at any other time in the past six years?"

The demon sighed to mask the gradual loosening of his nerves. "Well...magic is an interesting force, to say the least. You should know that, what with your minor in the subject. It is...unpredictable. Chaotic. Capricious. Whimsical. Erratic. Fickle. Chan—"

N°1 held up his palm, halting N°1’s segue into a sesquipedalianist monologue.

"Right...well, eye exchanges are virtually unheard of. Oh, there are the occasional legends. The Eye of Vecna and so on, but nothing verifiable, and none in which there was a true swap of eyes between two living parties. We are ignorant here. Virtually anything could happen." N°1 held his hands palm-up up to illustrate their lack of information.

Consternation greeted this. "Then why is it happening now? We've had our eye switched for over six years, yet this is the first time that I have so much as glimpsed anything."

N°1 was silent for several moments. His fingers occasionally twiddled as a new thought crossed his mind, but he scowled seconds later, dismissing it. Finally, he burst out with "Magnets."

Holly blinked. "Magnets?"

N°1 drummed his fingers on the edge of the desk, crouching down a bit further on his digitigrade legs. Fairy furniture was rarely suitable for tall demons. "I am not explaining myself well. The main variable is what you have seen."

"What I have seen?"

"Yes. In all things—magic, biology, physics—opposites attract. In the case of magnets, a positive and negative charge come together, in a sense molding to each other and canceling each other out. Consider your original eyes as positive and negative. In the past, you and Artemis were often together. You saw the same sights. Your swapped eyes were...settled. They 'felt' that their charge was dispelled. However, since your...falling out, your lives have become radically different, your sights so mismatched that your eyes began to feel separated. Perhaps in another universe, even a small similarity in your daily sight—talking with Foaly, for example—would have...discharged them."

"Discharged." Holly replied, voice rather bland. "So there is some sort of charge building between my eyes."
The tall, lithe fairy shrugged. "It is an analogy." When Holly did not protest, he continued. "The 'charge' grew until a moment when your bodies were aligned. Heart rate had something to do with it, no doubt, but it can't have been everything. You'd be having visions whenever you were doing paperwork or sitting down to a meal. I believe that the major factor here was your emotions. From what you described, I believe that you both were feeling a sense of...exhilaration, pride, and perhaps a bit of fear. Sharing these strong emotions was enough to finish the link between your eyes and...viola"

Holly's voice went even duller "Voilá, indeed. So, tell me, great wizardly consultant, how do I keep this from happening again?"

"I'm a warlock.," N°1 muttered, then grinned. "I hardly think this vision will be an issue for you, Major. I know Kelp throws you the occasional bone, but emotionally charged moments are not your standard duty, and Fowl isn't exactly an adventurier." Seeing the elf's argumentative look, he continued quickly. "Still, if you are concerned with a possible repeat, you can do two things. One: go above ground in Ireland and look at anything that you think Fowl might see with your eye. That will decrease the 'charge.' Or, two: do things to experience emotions that Fowl is simply not likely to share."

Holly looked pensive. "The former would take a lot of fighting against the Council. The latter..." Now she brightened. "N°1, thank you for your help, but I believe that I need to speak with Commander Kelp for my debriefing." She stood, the action quickly copied by her demon friend. There was something in her smile that N°1 had never seen before. Some apprehension, but also a great deal of...anticipation?

A few pleasantries and the two parted ways. The demon shifted between his large feet for a few moments, unsure of himself. Then he darted off towards the Operations Booth. Foaly must know what was going on in their friend's head.

Out of a desire to avoid repeating myself, I will only say that Artemis Fowl II came to the same conclusion as N°1, but in one tenth of the time.

Of course, he could not go down to Haven to sync up his eyesight, but Artemis was a master of scheduling. 'The majority of LEP missions take place during night in Western Europe, seeing as the fairies were a largely nocturnal species. In addition, most missions must come in the days before and after the full moon, when fairies were more liberal with their magic, so I will spend those hours in research and avoid any physical activities or corporate takeovers. Simple.'

He brought up his daily schedule and instantly frowned, massaging the bridge of his nose. "Ah, yes...the twins' birthday." Fowl Manor was not prone to parties, but Myles and Beckett were wild for their 10th birthday celebration. Of course, it was a Fowl event, so Artemis was not surprised to see a large number of his father's business associates on the guest list. Three-fourths of the way down, he frowned.

Reginald Clampett, Miss Virginia Clampett. Andrew Veidt, Miss Claire Veidt. Gaspard Paradizo, Miss Minerva Paradizo. Theodore Howell, Miss Candice Howell. Henry Pewterschmidt, Miss Leila Pewterschmidt. Robert Wayne, Miss Bernadette Wayne.

"Oh, I can not believe this," He muttered. Artemis was familiar with these names. They were among the richest men in Europe...and their daughters. Daughters between the ages of 16 and 30. The young man knew what this was, though he was uncertain if he should blame his father or his mother. Artemis wasn't what one would call "fond" of courtship, having only been in three situations that may have been vaguely misconstrued to resemble a "date" (one of which involved
tarantulas). His parents had been generally hands-off in regards to their son's social life, enough was enough, apparently. Unfortunately, when presenting Artemis with candidates, they defaulted to the family's normal social ties, which left him with a rather small and disagreeable pool.

Minerva, however...that was at least a pleasant surprise. The Paradizo's were not quite in the same social circle as the Fowls, but the family was familiar with the French genius and her plastic surgeon father. 'I'm sure she already understands my parent's little plot... In fact, her father has probably done something similar, by now.' He mused a bit, then nodded to himself. 'Very well. My parents want an alliance, but I shall form a coalition.' He opened his e-mail program and began typing.

Good evening, Minerva. No, I do not have a response to the advancement of your kingside rook, but I assure you that I shall respond by midnight. This message is about a far more important tactical maneuver.

Would you be so kind as to join me as your escort and co-conspirator at the twin's birthday celebration? If I am getting these 'subtle' jibes, then you are, no doubt, likewise plagued. A united front is strongest. Best wishes, Artemis.

The Broken

July 1, 2014 (Day)-Fowl Manor

Artemis Fowl was not an early riser by nature, but he had come to recognize the advantages of waking at a decent hour. Mostly the advantages of getting work accomplished during the flow of business, rather than in the middle of the night, when employees were off duty. He had synced up his alarm clock to go off five minutes before sunrise, giving him just enough time to drag his pajama-clad body across the manor to the east-facing kitchen. Once there, he stood before the windows, taking in the rising sun (about the only natural light he would get all day). By the time it had dispersed the fog around the Manor, he was awake and ready for the most important task of the day.

Artemis leaned over the kitchen counter, arms lying crossed below him to support his torso, and waited.

A small girl walked into the kitchen, rubbing one eye with a clenched fist, holding onto the edge of her nightgown with her free hand to prevent an embarrassing tumble. Her head was covered in a mass of curly brown hair, most of which had been tied back before going to bed, though a liberal collection of strands had escaped in the middle of the night. When she finally stopped rubbing her face and looked up at Artemis, she revealed chocolate brown eyes that were already pleading.

Artemis smiled at his youngest sibling, Shana. She was only five years old, but already looked like a miniature version of her mother. Angeline would never admit it, but as her only daughter and the only Fowl child who had retained their mother's looks, Shana was clearly the favorite. Artemis had come to terms with this long ago, though mostly because the girl was easily his favorite sibling.

"Good morning, lil' sis." Artemis said, using perhaps the only truly informal greeting he ever indulged in.

The girl wiggled her fingers at him and climbed up a rather tall stool so that she could sit at the breakfast counter. The first time she had tried this, Artemis had nearly had a panic attack, certain that she would fall and crack her head open on the black stone floor. Instead, she was at the top before he could get around the counter, looking amused at his reaction. She had completed the
climb every day since, never so much as losing a footing.

"All right, then. What will it be today?" Artemis reached up and tapped one of the skillets suspended over the counter. "Bacon and eggs?"

Shana's brown eyes widened in alarm. She shook her head, pointed at the stove, and then put her fists together, expanding them quickly, her cheeks puffed out.

Artemis scowled. "That only happened once!"

Shana shook her head, holding up three fingers.

"No, the other two times were just fires, not explosions." Artemis held his chin up, trying to look dignified, but he realized that his case was rather weak. He sighed. "Cereal?"

A nod confirmed the meal choice. Shana drew two concentric circles in the air.

"Cheerios, then." Artemis began preparing two bowls, all the while talking to his little sister. "Mum and Father called in late last night. The Hawaiian geothermal plant is going well, bit it will be at least another week before they're home." He began rummaging in drawers. Juliet was visiting the Manor and had volunteered to wash the dishes after dinner, which meant Shana's favorite spoon was now missing. "The twins should be doing a video conference from school at noon, so no running off. Ah ha!"

Artemis removed a bright red spoon with a plastic cardinal on its top from the miscellaneous utensils drawer, plopping it, with some fanfare, into Shana's bowl.

Shana was ready to eat, but paused, frowning. She pointed at the table and began drawing boxes and curves, then looked up, a question clear on her face.

"No, Minerva is in Las Vegas for her cousin's bachelorette party, remember?"

Shana nodded, sucking air through her teeth, clearly remembering the Frenchwoman's tirade over the upcoming weekend of debauchery. Suddenly realizing that a normally filled weekend was unscheduled, she drummed her hands on the table in excitement. Turning in her chair, she leaned over backwards, giving her brother a hopeful upside-down look.

He chuckled. "Yes, certainly, we can go to Blarney Castle."

With a tremendous smile on her face, Shana spun around. She held out a hand, thumb curved downward while the rest of her fingers arched into a half circle.

Artemis copied the gesture, connecting their hands to form a heart.

Their morning ritual over, Shana began to eat. Between bites, she looked about the kitchen, waving at Butler and Juliet when they arrived to prepare their own meals.

Artemis smirked at Butler's rolling eyes. Shana had room for two deep loves in her life: Angeline and Artemis. Certainly she loved the rest of her family, but she shared her thickest bonds with these two members of her inner circle. Angeline was held close in the mutual devotion of a mother and her youngest child, but Artemis and Shana had bonded in their own manner.

It had begun only a month after the girl's birth, when Angeline was forced to begin bottle feeding after her milk had dried up. Shana had done well for an entire day...and then refused to eat the next morning. She was approaching her twelfth hour of fasting and non-stop crying when Artemis
turned an avocado-esque shade and asked for a chance. Shana had lain in his arms, inspected him blearily, and began feeding. Since that moment, except for when Artemis was out of the country (and only when Shana had been given ample notice), Artemis was responsible for the first meal of the day.

Butler was still slightly annoyed over the girl's insistence, but it was impossible to change her mind. The only person who could have done it was Artemis, and he wasn't helping. It was hard to debate with Shana, for Shana had never spoken a word.

July 1, 2014 (Night)-Police Plaza

Holly was perhaps a bit more battle-scarred than most fairies her age, but with good reason. One did not make enemies with megalomaniacs and geniuses without facing severe consequences.

Holly was now missing most of her right ear, the injury seeming to be connected to the thick red scar that began on the side of her chin, journeying down her neck and disappearing into her work jacket. Most officers would either heal away their scars or show them off, along with wildly exaggerated stories about how they were obtained. When asked about this one, Holly would merely glare and say, "It's a lesson: stop being stupid." That was enough to shut up even the most brash of officers.

Despite the supposed stupidity, she was still the star of Recon and the gem of Section 8, but Holly was older. Wiser. And more determined than ever.

So when Trouble and Vinyáya summoned her to the Retrieval Commander's office, her heart began to race. 'Calm down, Holly. It's probably just an update. They wouldn't arrange a meeting if anything big was happening.' Of course, they had never arranged a meeting at Trouble's office before, so this, in itself, was odd.

Taking a moment outside of the Commander's door, Holly smoothed out her office uniform (a stiff dark-green sports jacket and similarly uncomfortable black pants) and coached her breathing to a normal rate. The she knocked on the door and edged in.

Trouble and Vinyáya were at the desk, Trouble in his chair and Vinyáya on a corner that had been cleared of the various display tablets, charts, bags of evidence, and food wrappers that overran the surface. Vinyáya was bent over and jabbing at a tablet, speaking quite animatedly and flicking a lock of her silver hair off the screen every so often. Her face was flushed with the force of her argument, though the twist that was displayed on her thin lips whenever she stopped talking showed that she was enjoying herself.

Trouble wasn't displaying any enjoyment, but his responses were quick and always caused Vinyáya to pause. They were either having a battle of the minds or of wills (or perhaps both), and the impetuous new commander was putting his unpredictability against Vinyáya's experience. Both had once had similar arguments with the late Julius Root.

Reminded so suddenly and harshly of her old commander, Holly felt the familiar stab of pain and renewal of resolve. Nine years and it was still hard. Shaking the feeling off, she sharply clicked her heels together and saluted her two commanders. "Major Short reporting."

Both looked up, giving almost casual salutes in response. Trouble waved at the only other chair in his office, which sat across from his own. It looked (and was) quite uncomfortable, with a bend in the back that forced officers to sit on the edge, spines rigid, lest they slide off. Legend had it that Julius's own commanding officer had bent it while smashing the chair over the brash elf's head.
Holly sat and almost immediately felt her back groan as if it recalled the many hours spent at the bad end of Root's rants. "Is something wrong with the Koboi case, sir?" She addressed Vinyáya, though Kelp appeared to be the one in charge of data today, typing away on his tablet and bringing up files.

Vinyáya spoke slowly, pausing to emphasize certain words, making it obvious that she had rehearsed this speech. "There have been some concern filed in regard to your behavior of late."

For perhaps the first time in her career, Holly was surprised at such a complaint. Compared to her early Recon days, when she had been considered a hot-headed if effective officer, Holly was now practically the poster-girl for the LEP. Her captures were many and without complications; her Section 8 work was swift and completed under budget, as well as ahead of schedule; and she had even developed a sort of mindless state that let her tolerate a day of paperwork. "My behavior, Wing Commander? Last month I was nominated Officer of the Year, and nothing negative has happened since."

Vinyáya shook her head, silver hair flashing in the fluorescent light. "No, not your work behavior, that has been exemplary. I mean you...personal behavior."

Not liking where this conversation was leading, Holly droned back. "Personal behavior?" It was more a challenge than a question.

The Wing Commander did not look pleased at being the orator today, giving Trouble a glare. The male elf merely hummed, obviously feeling her glare and not caring. Being the Commander had its perks, delegation among them.

So, crossing her arms and tapping the heel of a shoe against Trouble's desk, Vinyáya soldiered on. "Well, there have been some concerns since the...Atlantis incident, but most of us just thought it was shell shock. We wanted to give you some time, but...it's been two years. It's like the LEP is your entire life, now."

Holly was puzzled. This had been one of the positive traits Root had put down on her quarterly assessments. "And...?"

"You seem to do nothing outside of the LEP." Vinyáya clarified, though perhaps not too well. "You work out more than any officer of your rank. You seem to have no hobbies, not even Crunchball, which you used to play with Trouble and I regularly. You barely ever see Caballine and Foaly, and they have a child that you were absolutely wild over two years ago. Despite your fitness initiative, you seem to eat nothing but take-out. As far as we can tell, you don't relax, you don't socialize, you don't..." She seemed to be trying to come up with another trait.

"Date," Trouble supplied, a definite snarkiness to his tone, then cringed under the glares of his two female comrades. Holly was a bit more intimidating than Vinyáya when you got her truly angry, and the women combined was somewhat terrifying.

Holly furrowed her brows. "I don't see how this is in any way the LEP's concern."

Vinyáya was taken aback by the sharpness of the elf's tone. "Well...technically, it isn't."

Holly was smug and wanted to lean back in her chair, but the odd angle jabbed her kidneys when she tried. What came next, however, destroyed her small triumph.

"It is, apparently, Dr. Argon's concern."

Holly shot to her feet, upending the chair. She was having a hard time forming a coherent thought,
much less a sentence, in the wake of this revelation. "Dr. Argon? But he's...a psychiatrist! He was the one who lost Opal Koboi!"

Trouble was relieved to note that she didn't mention his own brother's involvement in the initial escape. He spoke up, flicking his finger across a file on his tablet, wirelessly transferring a copy to a second, blank tablet at the end of his desk, which he handed to Holly. "He also analyzed Artemis during the siege." He paused at Holly's almost imperceptible grimace. "That is why he is so interested in your behavior. There are three major players in the security of the fairy realms: Artemis Fowl, Opal Koboi, and you. He has worked with two of those players, and when the third begins to act like a social recluse, the good doctor feels it is his 'civic duty' to get involved."

Holly, sneering, scanned the digital pages. "You mean he wants to analyze me at triple pay and on the LEP's dime. I—" She got to the last few paragraphs and stumbled on her words. She read carefully before looking up at her superior officers. "This is a request—"

Vinyáya snorted. '"Request' is putting it rather generously."

The Major nodded. "This is an order by the Council to undergo an analysis." She looked at Vinyáya concerned. "Why did you do this?"

The older woman raised her hands in defense. "I voted against it, Holly, but no one else did. The People are jumpy after the escape of the second Koboi, and you were—"

Tossing her head in the air, Holly broke in. "I was doing my duty!" The skin around her scar stretched, pulling the right side of her face into a deeper scowl. "Everyone in the LEP knows that, and now you are serving me with a notice to go see this quack once my shift is complete!"

There was a tense silence in the room. Vinyáya and Kelp looked behind Holly, causing her to spin about, expecting the Council or Argon to be listening in at the door. There was no one, however, and Holly returned to face her coworkers, who were busy toying with their hair (Vinyáya) and the piles of junk on their desk (Trouble). "What? What is going on?"

Trouble cleared his throat. "Check the timestamp."

Perplexed, Holly scrolled to the top of the file, but her confusion was not lifted. "What. It says 02-07-2009, 00:00. What's so..." She looked up, darting her eyes between the elves. "That's tomorrow."

Trouble nodded. "This is a copy of the e-mail that will be sent to you in a few hours, at midnight. It's not the official orders."

"...and...?"

"That means you are not currently required to follow these orders."

"...once again, and?"

Vinyáya sighed, rolling her eyes, as if to ask the heavens why her officer was so daft. "Let's face facts, Holly. Dr. Argon has been disgraced among the People since he lost Koboi. He needs to find a way to redeem himself. And if he does so by finding the mental imbalance in the elf who is supposed to clean up after his mistakes..."

Holly pondered this, righting her chair and sitting again. "So you think...he is likely to diagnose me with something just to help himself?"
Trouble was again searching through his files. "Let's put it this way: a troll has a better chance of being admitted to Atlantis University than you have of being declared sane."

Holly cringed. "And once his diagnosis gets out..."

Trouble nodded. "Goodbye LEP." He flicked a new file to Holly's tablet, a half-smirk crossing his face. "Which is why you aren't taking the test."

"I don't see how I can avoid it. If I don't take the test, I'll be out of the LEP."

Vinyáya motioned for Holly to continue reading her tablet, including the new document. "Chix appears to have run into a spot of luck, lately. He's finally put the money together for an auxiliary set of wings for integration, to make up for his old injury. He needs a week's medical leave. Starting at midnight, as it happens."

Holly face was beginning to shift into comprehension. Chix was the LEP's man on the surface, handling the greatest security risks in E1, assisted by a port-employed set of guards. "And being the only LEP officer in the port..."

"Means that your shift does not technically 'end' until you're relieved."

This was exactly the solution they needed, but Holly remained skeptical. "It's only for a week. I'll still have to see Argon at the end."

Vinyáya laughed, sounding almost sinister. "On, no, Holly. A week is all I need." She held up a hand, glaring into her palm. "They sprung this vote on me, but I'll get it overturned. I just need to remind them that I've got them by the balls."

"Some quite literally." He flinched automatically, barely avoiding Vinyáya's swinging fist. "You know, I was going to nominate you for the Council once Lope stepped down..."

"Really?"

Holly sighed. The office pool on when those two would switch from screaming at each other in the office to screaming at each other in far more private locations was getting pretty popular. She had her money on the next solstice. "Can we stop the slapstick for a few more minutes? What am I supposed to do?"

Vinyáya looked at her prize officer and rolled her eyes. "Isn't it obvious? Get on the next shuttle—I've already purchased your seat and had Foaly arrange the visa—and relieve Verbil before you read the orders. If it doesn't look like you're avoiding them, the Council can't do anything."

When Holly only nodded, the Wing Commander slammed her hands on the table. "NOW!"

Holly shot up, her tablet clattering to the ground. She snapped a quick salute, turning to leave even before the commanders returned the gesture. She was at the door in three long strides, wrenching it open.

A squat dwarf stood in the doorway, his fist raised and frozen a moment from knocking.

Holly jumped back, startled. "Councilman Cahartez. Er..." She swallowed hard, trying to find a greeting. Instead, she nodded and slipped around him, trotting off down the rows of offices and cubicles.
Cahartez looked at the two elves at the desk, then over his shoulder to the vanishing elf female. Slowly, his footsteps echoing in the large room, he walked to the guest chair, never taking his eyes off Vinyáya. Until his foot tapped something plastic.

He bent, picking up the tablet from the floor. His face was expressionless as he flipped through the documents, nodding slowly. "E1. Quite the cushy position." He caught his fellow Council member's gaze. "Obstruction of justice is a crime, Vinyáya."

Her nostrils flared. "I wasn't aware that Holly was accused of something illegal."

The dwarf's lips curled into a sneer. "You really must think she's crazy if you're trying to save her."

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The Living

May 12, 2014-Fowl Manor

Holly Short was one of the youngest majors in LEP history, as well as being the first female officer to be admitted into Reconnaissance. After joining the dangerous squad, she went on to become the most successful Recon jock (with the possible exception of Julius Root) in a millennium. Her marksmanship was unparalleled, surpassing even what Foaly could create with his aiming systems. She had mastered five different fairy martial arts and taught one of the most rigorous and popular combat classes in the entire LEP. She was also a member of the secretive Section 8, where she had also proved herself exceptional, despite being placed alongside such phenomenal officers as Wing Commander Vinyáya. She had saved the world on several occasions, coming to see it as something of an unlisted duty on her job description, for which she would really love a pay raise.

She also loved Hide and Seek.

Lucy was in the entrance hall, her count up to seventy, when Holly literally slid into Artemis's bedroom, a wild and wide smile on her face. She was wearing a pair of Lucy's extra-fluffy pink cashmere socks to mask her footsteps, which also allowed her to skid on the hardwood floors quite well. They clashed horribly with her loose green drawstring pants (which passably matched her white spaghetti-strap shirt), but Holly was a bit more concerned with finding a hiding place that Lucy wasn't familiar with than making a fashion statement.

Artemis, sitting at his desk, was somewhat used to these unexpected entrances (mostly when Holly and Lucy barged in asking where to find something in the Manor), and thus did not stop his computer programming until the elf dived onto his bed, at which point he raised an eyebrow and focused closely on Holly. She slithered to the head of the bed and burrowed, almost dwarf-like in speed, under the mass of decorative pillows. Artemis had to admit (at least to himself) that he was impressed. The mass of cushions barely rose with the form of the fairy under them. Holly, good sport that she was, rearranged her drawstrings, draping them out of a small gap in her cover. However, the bedding was done in an array of greens and the stings appeared to be just another fringe to the pillows.

A voice from the entrance hall called out loudly enough to be heard in Artemis's room. "98 Atlantis, 99 Atlantis, 100 Atlantis!"

Holly had accidentally taught the new Fowl to pace her counting fairy-style.

She had, however, failed to teach the girl to move like a fairy. Lucy made no more noise than the average five-year-old...which was still roughly the decibel level of a charging bull troll. Of course stealth was not a major concern for a seeker. She proceeded to tear through every room on the
Manor's first floor before making a beeline for Artemis's room. Not that Holly generally hid in the Fowl heir's room, but Lucy had noted a conspicuous lack of clicking and realized that her biggest brother had been distracted from his typing.

"Hoooooooly. Auntie Hooooooooly," she crooned, poking her head into the room.

Holly had been declared an "auntie" quite early in the child's life and would have been in the running for the position of godmother, if not for her residence in Haven.

The child began to search the room, opening a rather wide array of redwood and stainless steel furniture. She took care to look at the vaulted ceiling of each nook. Holly was well known for bracing herself in corners and halls, descending an instant after her playmates passed. She had once even managed to get past Butler using this tactic. *Just* once, of course.

Lucy still had the childish exuberance that allowed her to enjoy a game Artemis would have declared to be juvenile when he was only three, but, like the twins, she combined it with the Fowl genius. Thus, she did not search in any spaces that were obviously too small for the elf and quickly began to eliminate hiding places.

When Holly had entered, Artemis realized that there was no way he would be able to concentrate through the game. Now he sat, elbows on the desk, palms cupping his cheeks, and watched. Lucy occasionally turned to study his eyes (unlike most of the Fowls, she had inherited all of Angeline's physical features, including wavy brunette hair and chocolate brown eyes), but always found them locked on her. Once she turned her back, his eyes would flicker to Holly's hiding place and his smirk would grow a fraction larger.

Lucy worked from the door towards the back of the room, keeping guard over the exit. Artemis's king-size bed sat at the end of the bedroom, the headboard resting against enormous French windows (a security nightmare, according to Butler, even if it was paneled with bulletproof glass) and the girl soon began to cast suspicious glances its way. The sun was beginning to set, casting an obscuring and slightly blinding light over the west end of the bedroom, helping Holly in her efforts to remain hidden.

Finally, Lucy stood before the bed, bending very slowly before yanking up the bedskirt. Finding no fairy, she frowned. Then her eyes finally descended upon the drawstrings. She climbed over the wrought iron footboard and crawled towards the head. A few feet away, she paused and hunched her legs, catlike. There was tense silence for nearly a minute, then, "Got you!" She sprang, diving headfirst into the pillows.

Holly came surging back, laughing uproariously, and tossed Lucy back on the duvet. The next moment, she was after the girl. "Tickle fight!"

Artemis's grin turned to a genuine smile. 'She has my poor sister seriously outclassed. There is no way a five-year-old can fight off a combat expert.' Still, he did not interfere, but merely watched.

The setting sun caught Holly's hair, causing it to glow and illuminate the major's face. The halo of light seemed to extend to her offset eyes, sending them shining and highlighting their contrast. Even her skin glowed and, combined, with her wide smile, Artemis thought that she resembled a de-winged angel.

And, like angels, Holly was magnanimous. She soon took pity on the thrashing child and left off the attack. When Lucy finally caught her breath, she beamed back at Holly. "I found you!"

"I thought I had a good spot! How did you do that?" Holly said, playing along. She even looked a
bit disappointed, as if the loss were a genuine mark against her extensive training.

Lucy pouted, but she had not yet mastered her facial expressions enough to fool Holly or the older Fowls (Myles and Beckett, on the other hand, where still subject to her whims). "Well, you had to be inside. If we could play outside..."

The was only a moment's hesitation, felt by both of the regular adventurers. Holly took far more top-side vacations than almost any other fairy, and the Council was fully aware of what she did in her free time. She had promised (on pain of a pink slip) to remain inside the Manor during daylight hours, as the grounds were subject to frequent visitors.

"It takes you fifteen minutes of searching inside, and you want to let me loose on the grounds? Let's get your time down and then we'll talk, okay?"

A protest was obviously on the way, but it was drowned out by a ringing call from Angeline. "Lucy! Bedtime!"

Now the pout was real. "Aw...but it was my turn to hide..." Still, there was a crafty gleam in her eyes. "I am so terribly wound up...how will I ever calm down enough to sleep?"

The elf had heard this sob story too many times to be taken in. "Well, that's too bad. I was almost at a really exciting part of the time travel adventure..." Holly had begun telling Lucy about her various missions with and against Artemis on the girl's third birthday. The young girl had actually spent four months glaring at Artemis when the tales began before Holly got far enough into the B'wa Kell Rebellion to redeem her brother.

Lucy's acting skills disintegrated at the idea of missing a night of the story, especially when she so rarely saw the fairy. "Oh, well, Butler's been teaching me meditation and Juliet says warm milk is good, so I think I can get to sleep. Please tell me more about going back in time!"

Chuckling, the elf pushed the girl to the edge of the bed. "Off with you. I'll be in when you've 'ohmed' yourself calm." At her bidding, the child ran off, leaving Holly to catch the last rays of the sun.

Realizing that he was unlikely to get any more work done that night, Artemis sighed, stood, and crossed the room to sit on the side of the bed. "You know, with you being an only child, I am constantly waiting for you to come for a visit and have trouble interacting with her, and yet you never do. I certainly had trouble with the twins at times."

Holly shrugged, stretched, and fell back on the mass of pillows, having become quite comfortable with them during her brief residence. "Oh, she has her moments. I thought 'the terrible twos' was just a saying, for one." Her eyes closed lightly and a smile graced her lips. "She's worth it, though."

A hush filled the room, leaving Artemis to look at the elf. Casual observers would have thought her asleep, but Holly had spent nearly all of her time off (and a good portion of her LEP hours) at Fowl Manor or on missions hunting down past Koboi (who had been finally caught in the now-infamous 'Holy Water Sprinkler' incident) with Artemis. He now knew how the Major's face relaxed when she had truly fallen asleep and recognized that she was merely resting. So, rather than moving and breaking the spell, the Irishman just watched her. He tried to avoid focusing on the light rise and fall of her chest, certain that would bring out an inconvenient reaction in his body. So he shifted his gaze, but found little respite as he instead took in her taught, ribbed stomach and the crease at each leg leading down to her—

"I want one."
Normally a master of his emotions and reactions, Holly tended to destroy his calm. If Artemis had been drinking anything, it would have soon covered the windows. As it was, he came back with "Hmmm?" while his mind rushed out with "one WHAT?" Then, once he realized what she was speaking of, he managed to come back with a very intelligent "What, now?"

Her eyes flashed open, accompanied by a faintly devilish smirk, and Holly kicked him lightly, though she did not move from the pillows. "Get you mind back in line, Mud Man. Someday, with the right elf, I mean."

Rubbing his "injured" stomach, Artemis backed down the bed before continuing. "With the right...elf, yes? Chix will be so disappointed."

Holly glared in response, quite clearly affirming Artemis's decision to retreat, as she was a bit too comfortable to move for a truly adequate response to that jibe. Instead, she lay in sullen silence.

After giving her time to brood, Artemis had to alleviate his curiosity. "So, what will you do with your job at the LEP when you do have a child?"

"Arty, I am surprised at you." She played with a thin gold band on her right ring finger, moving the tiny diamond around to be clutched in her fist and then to its proper position on top. "In this day and age? I am not leaving the LEP, so he will just have to be a stay-at-home father."

Artemis nodded sagely. "Ah...then Commander Kelp will be disappointed, too." He was instantly battered with a half dozen pillows, thrown quite accurately by the fuming fairy. He was only rescued from a more direct attack by a plaintive "Auntie Hoooooooolly" drifting from Lucy's room.

"Auntie Holly" pointed a warning finger at Artemis before sliding off the bed.

"Wait, Holly!" Artemis jumped up and rushed to her side. "Can I take you home tonight? I need to show you something just outside Tara." At her suspicious glare, he continued. "It's concerning the people." At her even darker suspicions, he scrambled. "Nothing bad. You have my word. I just...need to speak with you."

Holly considered refusing. The last thing the Council wanted her to do was to leave the Manor with the havoc-inducing human, but, before she could respond, he had clasped her hands and caught her eyes. She broke. "Oh...all right, Artemis."

A rare, genuine smile transformed the genius's face. "Excellent! Just come to the carport when you're ready." Another call for 'Aunt Holly' began to pull her away. "I promise, you won't regret it."

Holly had a bit too much experience with Artemis to really believe that, but she just nodded and extricated her hands, drifting off to her storyteller duties.

After the Major left, Artemis did something very uncharacteristic. He clenched his fist and pulled it quickly to his waist. "Yes!" Then he crossed to his desk, withdrawing two items from a keypad-protected drawer. One was a sheaf of papers encased in a small green folder. The other was a box only about as large as Artemis's outstretched palm and covered in black velvet. He tucked both into an empty laptop case and made for the carport, not bothering to seek out Butler.

He needed to do this alone.
Celebration

The Dead

September 9, 2014-Reynard's Bistro, Haven

Holly was not what one would call a "dress girl." In fact, she had only owned one dress in her adult life, and that had been a bridesmaid's outfit which she had rather gleefully burned after the wedding. Given the demanding schedule of a LEP major, she also didn't own much casual clothing beyond exercise gear and could easily go two months between laundry trips.

This was not to say that she arrived at Reynard's, one of Haven's most exclusive eateries, in jeans and a t-shirt. In fact, she wouldn't have even been acknowledged by the staff in such clothing. Instead, Holly had dusted off her LEP formal attire, which she had last worn to her promotion to major. The uniform was composed almost entirely of forest green, with slightly lighter trimming on the arms and legs, accompanied by a similarly colored hat, shiny black boots, and gleaming brass buttons. For official LEP functions, she was also required to wear white gloves, but Holly detested the easily stained things. The final touch, her silver and gold major's acorns, gleamed on her chest. Despite its intended use as formal attire, LEP "dress greens" were actually quite form fitting, with a noticeable tuck in the waist for females. All of the jackets buttoned up to a thick collar, which was stiff enough to keep officers from looking down more than a few centimeters.

So, of course, Holly turned heads as she entered Reynard's. The green of the outfit set off the fire-red of her hair, and anyone who was able to ignore her trim form were caught by her mis-matched eyes. More than a few fairies found themselves thinking 'Oh, to have those looking up at me...' The thoughts were not made in an idolizing sense.

The restaurant had a soft feel, full of red, green, and blue satin cushions over faux-wood furniture (the People having long ago given up real wood, though their counterfeits would have fooled any Mud Man antique dealer), all set off by stained glass lamps dimmed so that it took Holly a moment to adjust her eyes enough to find the maître d's desk. He ignored the officer at first (LEP paychecks rarely managed to cover even an appetizer at Reynard's), until Holly placed a hand over the sprite's reservation schedule.

"I'm looking for Commander Kelp. I'm a bit late off work and he said he'd have our seats and orders by now."

The maître d', a rather short sprite whose green skin clashed horribly with his daffodil yellow smoking jacket, gave a very dramatic and obviously fake gasp. "Ah, Major Short! We have been anxiously awaiting your arrival." Of course, they hadn't, but obsequious and obviously false statements were a part of the dining experience.

Trouble had been staring moodily at his drink when Holly entered, but immediately brightened when the Major sat down. "Holly. Twenty minutes late, as usual"

She gave a very loud sigh, smoothing a napkin over her lap. "Well, Commander, if you didn't load me down with paperwork I would be able to get off work on time."

A grunt from her superior officer dismissed this idea. "If I gave you less paperwork, you'd spend more time out raiding warehouses and saving the world."

"And if I save the world more often, you'll have more excuses to ask me to dinner."
Trouble lifted his glass of red sim-wine and nodded, eyes sparking. "Duly noted, Major. Duly noted."

Fowl Manor

Artemis was glad that his brothers were entering their "tweens," though he wasn't particularly enthusiastic about the party. He had missed the terrible twos, but no one had mentioned the often chaotic and annoying five-to-nines. Artemis had been a rather sedate child, privately tutored and home schooled for many years before his mother attempted to forcefully socialize him at Saint Bartleby's School For Young Gentlemen. Myles and Beckett, in contrast, had been set up on numerous play dates and enrolled in a normal (if private) school from the start. They combined typical Fowl genius (Myles, in particular) with adolescent energy (Beckett, in particular) and early socialization. The result was two boys smart enough to blow up the school chemistry lab, foolish enough to do so, and charismatic enough to get away with it.

The event was really two separate parties. The twins, their classmates, and a few other young millionaires were out exploring the Fowl grounds, watched by Butler. They returned every few hours for food or presents and their delighted cries drifted across the grounds. Inside Fowl Manor, the parents, business associates, and debutantes were engaging in some of the most boring conversations known to man.

"Phonetix is averaging a daily two point increase, you know."

"Well, Fission Chips is facing bankruptcy in the aftermath of all those investigations. You can expect Phonetix to prosper a bit. Now, Ocean King Labs, they are doing remarkable things. Going public on the stock market next week."

"Yes, and their primary investors will immediately call for a cut in R&D. Really, private investing is far superior to public trading."

This conversation, with slight variations in companies and syntax, was repeated roughly every fifteen minutes, along with commentary on the food, Fowl Manor, Fowl Sr.'s latest marathon, how stunning Angeline was, the weather, and Fowl Jr.'s sudden decision to escort the French beauty, Minerva.

"Now, Mr. Fowl, one would think you invited us on false pretenses." One father, who looked remarkably like Mr. Monopoly after a year-long Godiva binge, chortled. "One questions why you bothered to invite us." He was one of those men who could mask his voice and face, but not his eyes. There was a definite anger in them as they darted to the circle of young adults in the parlor, where Artemis and Minerva sat thigh-to-thigh, going over a sheaf of papers.

Artemis Fowl Sr., in contrast, was a master actor. His face lit up in joy at this stab against his hospitality and a warm laugh filled the room. "Mr. Veidt, this is a birthday party for my twin sons, not some sort of...horse auction." He rested a hand on Veidt's shoulder, perhaps unintentionally pressing a nerve cluster that momentarily sent a shock of pain straight down his guest's right elbow. "One would think you are trying to sell off your daughter to little Arty."

His opponent frowned at this, huffing through his flabby cheeks. There were only a few interpretations of Mr. Fowl's words, and none sounded particularly flattering for his family. "Er...no, of course not." It was fairly obvious where Artemis Fowl II got his planning and political genius. The disgruntled father gave a dignified harrumph and asked Mr. Fowl about the latest developments in Giovanni Zito's wind farm.
In the parlor, Master Fowl (or perhaps Mr. Fowl, given his none-too-recent transition into adulthood) was going over a set of blueprints with Minerva. The woman, having had nearly a decade to flit between professions, was now trying to establish herself as an architect, competing to design a new archival facility in England. The design called for a mix of aesthetic appeal and fine-tuned robotics that was challenging the ringlet-clad Frenchwoman. She had spent the majority of the last month in planning. Artemis was tearing her design apart.

"Why are these arches there?" He almost snapped at her, barely keeping his voice at an acceptable level as he pointed out the entrance hall, which was decorated with five arches along its length.

"They're for decoration." Minerva prepared for an argument.

"Decoration. Why?"

Minerva sighed. "To look pretty, Artemis. To make the building feel more...human. Welcoming."

"This building is a completely automated facility for preserving some of the rarest books in the world. Unless you have permission from a college official, no one is allowed to touch these books. In fact, no one is allowed inside the building proper unless they are encased in what amounts to a HazMat suit. It is, for all intents and purposes, a human-free zone. Your design does not need to make this building welcoming. It needs to be efficient, and these arches take away nearly one hundred cubic feet of storage space. If the entrance needs to be made more welcoming, the college can buy some flower pots."

The geniuses stared at each other. Minerva's gaze burned, while Artemis looked both cold and amused. Even the surrounding young adults, who had spent the last hour talking about the difficulty of their liberal arts degrees, took note of the showdown. More than a few of the women considered the benefits of having the couple suddenly split.

These were, of course, the ones who had never met Artemis Fowl II.

Minerva squinted, obviously contemplating something beyond her design. Everyone, including her own father, was frightened of that intense gaze. Except Artemis. He merely returned a rather toothsome smile that sent a chill through the room.

Finally, Minerva mumbled and erased the hall, beginning a new outline for a smooth, efficient passage. Halfway through the first arch, however, the unnecessary pressure she placed on the lead caused it to disintegrate on the paper. She clicked her mechanical pencil and sighed. "Tsk...and I didn't bring a refill, either." Minerva turned on her sweet, pleading face, directing it at Artemis. "You wouldn't happen to have draft-grade lead I could borrow? I'd hate to let this design escape my mind."

Those who knew Minerva (with the exception of Artemis, who was collected, as usual) displayed some sort of surprised twitch. Minerva Paradizo did not forget designs and it was only marginally more believable that she had failed to bring enough materials to sketch all of Rome. Surely the Fowl heir would know that?

The boy genius nodded, standing and offering a hand to his partner. "I've not sketched anything since the Zito renovations, but I am sure I have some available."

Minerva graciously accepted the hand, then turned to pick up her sketches. The guests would never be able to swear that she had done it on purpose, but the French woman bent sharply at the waist, causing her already short skirt to rise alarmingly high. Then she was standing straight again, hand resting lightly on Artemis's arm. "Shall we?"
Again, no one would vow that it happened, but as the pair walked away, many suspected that they heard one bitter word from the circle of women.

"Tramp."

A four-course meal and an entire bottle of sim-wine had been drunk by the two Recon officers. Discussion had meandered from work to Crunchball, then on to Foaly and Caballine's new foal, and finally back to Holly's last mission.

Trouble had deigned to unclasp his collar enough to move his head and neck freely after the second glass of wine and had been enjoying himself much more since the release. "Really, Holly it was a spectacular catch. Foaly made a holographic recreation. You look like an action star."

Holly had been carefully watching Trouble's intake and was matching him, glass for glass. Despite this, far more buttons had been undone on her jacket, giving all present a lovely view of her neck, down to a shadow of cleavage. She was now running an idle finger ('Truly the Devil's plaything' thought Trouble.) up and down the neck of her glass. "Foaly is known to exaggerate a bit...it was pretty good, though." She took a sip, darting her tongue out to catch a stray drop that was sliding down the outside of the glass. The smile she sent Trouble's way was soft and gleamed with wine.

Trouble tugged at his collar. Suddenly horrified at this gesture, he let his hand fall to the table...only to find it half-covering Holly's own hand. 'Was that there a second ago?' To avoid a new nervous gesture, he squeezed. "You really are one of the best officers the LEP has...ignoring the paperwork you pass on. Vinyáya has done me a great favor by loaning you. Even your training class gets rave reviews." He tried to smile roguishly, but the grin was tainted with uncertainty.

"There's no hard feelings between us about that first class, right? It was a stupid hazing move, and you've certainly proved yourself since."

"Oh Trouble," She sighed, turning her palm up and returning the squeeze. "There are all sorts of hard feelings between us."

Holly wondered vaguely, through the haze of alcohol, if 120-year-olds could have heart attacks. Trouble certainly looked shocked enough. "I-I mean...you..."

Holly rolled her eyes. This was far more work than she had bargained for. "Trouble, this is the fifth 'celebration dinner' you have invited me to in the last quarter alone. I believe it is time for you to drop the pretense and ask me the question we both want to hear."

Visions of official dinner dates began to dance in Trouble's head. He hid his grin behind the Atlantean red. "And what question it that, Major?"

With her free hand, Holly crooked her finger at Kelp, drawing him over the table. She leaned over herself and paused next to his ear, letting her lips brush lightly across its surface. Both felt sparks that had nothing to do with healing and Trouble involuntarily tightened his grip on Holly's hand, along with the fit of his trousers.

Her breath stirring Trouble's hair and raising goosebumps down the length of his neck, Holly whispered: "Will you come home with me tonight?"

Trouble looked grave. He sat up straight enough to appear in a military tribunal. His lips were pursed as he looked down on his Recon subordinate, contemplating her. For all the scrutiny he gave her, Holly did not move, except to look up into his eyes. Slowly, he removed his hand from Holly's and raised it in the air.
"Check, please."

The Broken

July 1, 2014-Fowl Manor

"Butler...seriously. Can we get them out of here?" Artemis glared at Juliet, who was on her back under a rather impressively weighted barbell, her taught stomach rippling with laughter as she did her sets. On the next bench over, Shana was examining her hands, engrossed in some sort of private finger game. Every so often, the child would look up at her brother and give a very small smile. She seemed amused, which was probably what bothered Artemis more. Juliet could ridicule him for his physical imperfections, but his own little sister? Unbearable.

Butler shook his head. "Juliet needs to strengthen her shoulder. That fall she took off the turnbuckles has put her out of enough work without delaying her physical therapy to suit your ego."

Artemis frowned, inspecting his fingers. Were his nails cracking? One too many punches. His wrists hurt, too. 'I really should look into some softer equipment. I am liable to break a finger on that blasted punching bag...' "It has nothing to do with my ego. I just don't think Shana should see me fighting."

Juliet was forced to re-rack, lest her convulsions cause her to drop the weights. She sat up, scooting to the edge of the bench and dangling her taped hands between her legs. "No worries, then, Artemis. Unless the girly flailing I've been seeing is what you consider 'fighting.'"

Shana gave the pair on the mats a bit more focus, though this was still not all that much. Her eyes were distant and she kicked her legs as if bored, but made no move to push Juliet to leave the room for more interesting activities.

Butler tried not to show his agreement with Juliet's appraisal, but it was hard. As he was, Artemis wouldn't last thirty seconds in the ring with anyone over the age of twelve. Rather disappointing, especially after you considered his impressively fit father. The man completed a marathon with a prosthetic leg and Artemis had yet to do a simple 5km jog. "Look, we have a big day tomorrow, so let's make this an easy one, and then off to bed. Artemis, if someone attacks you, what is the first thing you do?"

Artemis rolled his eyes, holding his hand up rather limply as he listed off the steps. "SING. Solar-plexus. Instep. Nose. Groin."

Butler shook his head. "No, not with me as a trainer, you don't, and not in this sue-happy world. What did we discuss last session?"

The young man actually winced as he realized he'd been wrong. Admittedly, SING was a set of attacks that nearly every self-defense instructor espoused, but Butler was correct. Anyone that Artemis retaliated against would likely use his attack as an opportunity to sue. "Ample warning. I am to warn my assailant, unless it is obvious that they intend to kill me quickly."

Butler clapped his hands once. "Excellent. So...what comes first in that?"

Artemis's eyes darted to the girls. Very quietly, he gave his response.

This was, apparently, unacceptable. Butler cupped a hand around his ear, yelling like a half-deaf codger. "Eh? What?"
Artemis repeated himself, but only marginally louder.

"Oh, come on," Butler crossed his arms, "no one is going to let you go if you're that quiet. Louder."

When Artemis did not make any moves to respond, Butler bellowed. "LOUDER!"

"LET ME GO!" Artemis snapped, clenching his fists and eyes closed. He felt ridiculous doing this exercise. Seriously, among his many enemies, would any send a hit-man so timid as to let go after a little screaming? For that matter, what was the chance his attacker wouldn't use...oh...a sniper rifle?

"Then?" Butler began to circle behind his charge. Perhaps, this time, he could get Artemis to react.

"I'M WARNING YOU!" Artemis wanted to turn his head to follow the voice of his moving bodyguard, but that was not part of the training exercise. If he did that, Butler was likely to ask him to start over again.

"Finally?"

"THIS IS YOUR LAST CHANCE!" His body began to tense. This was it. 'You can do this! All you need is to get in one good hit and Butler will leave off this silly posturing.'

"And if he does THIS?" Butler grabbed Artemis's upper arm.

"SING!" Spinning, Artemis brought up his free elbow, putting as much force behind the move as he could muster. He felt a satisfying thump as it connected.

Butler looked down. "That's my hip, Artemis."

"It's not my fault that you're so bloody tall!"

Juliet fell back on the bench, burying her face in her hands to try to stem some of her snorting laughter. "Ah...Artemis...it's good to see that some things never change."

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**E1 chute**

Getting Holly a berth on the next shuttle to the topside of E1 hadn't been terribly difficult, as it was two weeks to the next full moon, but Holly still found herself relegated to coach. Sitting between an elderly dwarf and a pixie with a newborn child (part of her was both amused and disgusted to note that two of her three neighbors were drooling and farting freely), she began to have second thoughts. 'I haven't been in Ireland since...'

She had a hard time thinking of her last trip. The joy of Shana's birth was tinged with the sorrow of her mental impairment, causing enough emotional turmoil to confuse any elf for months. Adding the loss of one of her best friends had been enough to ruin Holly for years. She'd returned to work after Mulch conveyed Artemis's message, but much of her spark had disappeared.

'And then, just when I'm feeling better—' She gripped the lapels of her jacket, pulling it a bit further up her neck.

"Ma'am?" Inquired a sprite stewardess who was hovering in the air above Holly's seat. Not all stewardesses were sprites, but flight did bestow certain advantages in their duties. "You have a call on the shuttle line. Urgent."

Holly frowned. "Ma'am?" When did I become a "ma'am?" Then the rest of the pixie's words began to trickle through. Calling in to a moving shuttle was tricky and, thus, expensive. Which meant that
there were two possible callers. "What did she say?" Holly asked, as casually as possible.

"He said," the fairy replied, placing the barest of emphasis on the gender, "that it was urgent and classified. I'm afraid there was nothing else."

'Not Vinyáya, then. The Council.' No doubt Cahartez, ready to order her to check her messages. 'I take this call and my career is over. I don't and I'll be given just enough time to be court-marshaled. What am I going to do?' She rubbed a hand through her buzz-cut hair, hoping to rub in some inspiration.

"Ma'am?" The sprite ventured, toying with a strand of her long black hair. "Shall I tell him you have flight sickness?"

Holly looked at the pixie in utter astonishment.

The smaller woman winked, then gave a tiny salute. It was clumsy. Obviously not the gesture of a true LEP officer. "Major Short?"

Grinning, Holly gave a tiny nod. "Although...knowing it's me, indigestion might be more believable."

"Well, I did think the grub pot pie looked a bit off...more towards beetle than egg." Now grinning with that mix of insanity and mischief that only sprites could pull off, she took a palm-sized digital tablet from her pocket and flipped through a document before handing the device to Holly. "Could you...?"

Holly inspected the tablet, going forward and back a few pages before her expression did its best to match the sprite's. An autograph book. It was full of signatures from politicians, actors, musicians, and LEP stars. She saw many autographs from her Section 8 coworkers, as well as signatures from Bom Arbles, Julius Root, and about three dozen from Chix Verbil. "Of course! I'd be honored." Holly added her mark, pausing a moment to add a rough drawing of a Neutrino 2000.

The sprite took her tablet back, obviously barely containing a squeal, and flew to the head of the shuttle.

Holly stretched as best she could, checking the flight status on the mini-screen embedded in the chair before her. Fifteen minutes to safety.

It was dark in nearly every room of Fowl Manor, with the exception of Artemis Fowl's chambers, which were only dimly lit by a single computer screen and a small television. The latter provided somewhat educational background noise as a science news program droned on about erratic weather patterns, the discovery of a new species of vole, an advance in brain surgery by the famous Dr. Giordano, floods in the American mid-west, a sudden dip in the Nevada Zebra-tailed lizard population, and an Appalacharian kook who claimed to have a tissue sample from a "missing link." At this last story, Artemis grunted in disgust and turned off the television, stretching in his chair to relieve the cramps caused by his day "in the office" and night of research. He felt driven to work until he dropped, as all of the next day would be spent visiting the south of Ireland. Normally, Minerva would have visited over the weekend, brainstorming alongside him, but her involvement in the bridal party removed this avenue of assistance.

Giving his brain a few moments to relax, Artemis opened his security feeds. A myriad of cameras on the Manor grounds and in various Fowl interests were "public" to his family, but a switch into the Gnomish alphabet on his keyboard brought up a secondary set. Several dozen viable Ritual
sites, Sprio's old office, Giovanni Zito's wind farm, the main desk at E1, and a half-dozen other sites of supreme importance to the People.

Nothing.

Nothing exciting ever happened with the fairies, these days. If he was lucky, Artemis caught a glimpse of one performing the ritual or of Chix sleeping at his desk, but little else. The two Kobois were on the loose, but it felt less like the world was holding its breath and more like it was yawning dismissively.

Looking at the clock, Artemis groaned. 11:55pm. 'Fine,' he reassured himself, 'just five more minutes on the Spiro parole expose, then to bed. I can do that.' Settling back into research/hacking mode, Artemis continued his work, quickly losing himself in the welcome feel of plotting.

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**July 2, 2014-E1 Shuttleport**

Holly was no longer seated before the ride came to a complete stop. Some of her fellow passengers glared at the "LEP hot shot" for standing at the hatch while they docked, but the cheery manner of the sprite stewardess allayed most complaints. A shift of Holly's work jacket as she ostensibly looked for a document in a breast pocket, displaying the buzz baton strapped to her side, silenced the rest.

The pilot finished docking and sauntered back, giving Holly a visual once-over before beginning to slowly work on the door. "No full moon, so it's either a vacation or you're relieving good old Chix."

"Lieutenant Verbil is going with you back to Haven. Medical leave."

At this, the gnome brightened. "So you'll be on the route for a bit, then." The door hissed with the last bit of depressurization, but the diminutive fairy did not open it. Instead, he leaned against the door, giving Holly a much longer look. "How about you join me for a drink once my rounds are done?"

Inwardly, the elf groaned. Despite the countdown in her head, Holly decided to do this gently. "I'm afraid I can't drink while at E1. Regulations." She smiled softly, adding whatever tint of sadness she could muster.

This was a mistake. The pilot was used to a far sterner set of refusals from his flight attendants. "Oh, no worries. I'm sure there's a place in the port we can go and not be seen." He raised both eyebrows. "Your quarters, perhaps?"

Holly felt a spike of ice drill down her spine. In an often-practiced movement, she tilted her head back and to the side, as if studying the gnome. The effect was to bring her battle wound into the light and open her jacket collar. What had once been a bit of missing flesh (a not too uncommon occurrence among the long-eared People) and a thin line revealed itself to turn into a red weal the width of two fingers, extending down her neck and into her blouse. "I'm afraid that is also against regulations."

The effect was immediate. Looking away from her, the gnome popped the door open. "Yes, well...a pity. Perhaps...some other..." He hid behind the door. In the most manly way possible.

"I doubt it." Holly whispered, stepping into the shuttleport and pulling her jacket closed around her neck.
Chix was waiting at the director's desk, next to his luggage and a bored looking Nimbus. Once he caught sight of his relief, he gave the smallest jerk of his head towards the shuttle's main communication screen before saluting.

Holly glanced up to see a feed from the Council's chambers. Vinyáya stood at the back, face blank, while Cahartez sat front and center, grinning.

Holly returned the salute, quickly launching into the formalities. "Lieutenant Verbil, by order of—"

"Check your office messages, Major Short." Cahartez broke in, tapping a digital tablet on his lap.

Holly paused a moment, then looked up, eyes closed as she smiled radiantly. "Once I am done here, Councilman. Now, Verbil, by order of Commander Kelp, I—"

"This can not wait, Major." Cahartez stood, clenching a fist. "You ignored the call made to the shuttle, so do not act as if this is something to be put off!"

Gritting her teeth, Holly continued, lips barely moving. "I am here—"

"NOW, Major Short! That is an order!"

Holly looked up, chewing on her cheek. One look at her messages and their plans were ruined. She focused on Vinyáya.

The woman gave the slightest of nods.

Locking eyes with Cahartez, Holly gave what barely could have been considered a smile, but could certainly never be proved to be a snarl. "Disobeying, sir. Lieutenant Verbil, I am here to relieve you."

Chix grabbed her hand, giving it a strong shake. The turn of his lips was remarkable similar to the one the sprite stewardess had been sporting. "I leave my post in your hands." He snatched up his luggage and began threading his way through the passengers, who were milling about, fascinated by the proceedings.

"Lieutenant Verbil," Cahartez barked, halting the sprite's progress, "go back and reclaim your post. Major Short is in direct defiance of the Council."

The green-skinned fairy looked up at the main screen, shaking his head. "No can do, Councilman," he said in a voice that evoked the California surfer dude, "I'm on medical leave. I need an examination and a doctor's approval before I go back. Regulations. Not worth my job to defy doctor's orders."

A vein appeared on Cahartez's temple. "Very well. Vinyáya, get an officer up there to relieve Major Short."

Vinyáya's smile was twice as deadly as Holly's, but just as unimpeachable. "Certainly. Nimbus, since we're connected, can you book those seats for us?"

The elf-goblin hybrid behind the desk, having failed to notice the visual daggers flying about, smiled at the pretty elf females. "Certainly. Let's see...that would be...50 troy ounces."

"In gold?" Cahartez choked.

Vinyáya shrugged. "Two last minute tickets to one of the most popular shuttleports...sounds about
right, really. Shuttles are private businesses, after all."

The vein on Cahartez's temple throbbed dangerously. If punctured, it would likely shoot blood about fifty feet. "No, we will not be using a shuttle. An old-fashioned pod will do."

Vinyáya played with her long silver hair, ostensibly searching for split ends. "Coming up, certainly, but can Major Short be trusted alone in a pod back down? There have been rumors of mental instability, if I recall."

Cahartez gripped his tablet, alarming cracks emitting from the delicate equipment. "Too true. Very well. I will speak to Commander Kelp about sending up a Retrieval escort."

"You're certainly welcome to try."

"And if I do not get help from that quarter, I will ram an order from the Council right by you, Vinyáya!"

She snorted. "Using Council powers to force a Commander to detain a fairy who has merely delayed checking her e-mail? That is an odd political maneuver."

With a roar, he threw the tablet against the wall, smashing it to a million pieces. "I will not be defied!"

The silver-haired elf looked at the pieces of the tablet, as if wondering how so many little bits could fit into such a small device. "You are not being defied, Cahartez. You. Are being. Ignored."

She smiled brightly, like a young elf flirting with her first paramour.

Holly's roiling emotions finally settled on amusement as Cahartez began barking straight into Vinyáya's unresponsive face. As the Council's feed finally cut out (shut off by Lope, who, while torn on the entire subject, did not think it proper for a brawl among the top Lower Elements officials to be broadcast to E1), she gave Chix a grateful look. "You, green-boy, have just saved my hide."

He waved this off. "Don't mention it. Last bit of payback for saving my life in E37. Just...do me a favor, will you?"

A request for a favor from Chix made Holly instantly wary. The last time he'd asked for a favor and she'd acquiesced, they'd gone on very awkward date and been unable to say a word to each other for three months. "What is it, Lieutenant?" She put a bit of extra force on his title, hoping to remind him of their status as coworkers.

"Use the spare chair in the closet, will you? I've got mine nice and broken in."

Shaking her head at this, Holly smiled. "Of course. Off with you, now. I want to see you flying out of that shuttle this time next week."

His first concern addressed, Chix waved to Nimbus. "Hey, no hard feelings over losing that bet?"

The hybrid scowled. "Yeah, sure. No idea what possessed me to back the Airwalkers for Crunchball champions..." He squinted at his screen, as if that would give him an adequate explanation, then shook his head. "Hurry up. Your shuttle awaits."

With a little trepidation and a lot of excitement, Chix bounded into the shuttle, leaving Holly to her post.
The exposé was coming along nicely. Without really noticing, Artemis's five minutes extended to a half-hour of work. He was just putting on the last touches when his cursor seemed to become possessed. Instead of a simple arrow, it displayed a horseshoe.

Artemis rubbed his eyes, scowling. "Not funny, Foaly," he muttered, typing furiously, fighting for control of his computer. "I'm too busy for games."

With commendable speed, the centaur brought up the surveillance system, switching into the fairy feeds.

Artemis cursed, typing even faster. He had installed cameras on most of Ireland's Ritual oaks in the last few weeks and he wanted to keep the list a secret for as long as possible.

Yet Foaly completely bypassed the oak feeds, instead bringing up the E1 shuttleport.

With a shout of triumph, Artemis reclaimed his computer and moved to close the feed of Chix at his desk.

Then he froze.

Chix was not at his desk. In fact, he was nowhere to be seen. Instead, the corner of the screen showed a lithe elf struggling to pull a chair out of a rather crowded supply closet. She looked annoyed at her task, forced to dodge falling items with every tug,

"It...can't be." Artemis whispered, zooming in on the female.

A little shorter than average. Flaming red hair. Wearing a Major's silver and gold acorns.

She looked up at the screen (though she did not realize there was a camera focused on her, of course) and Artemis felt his stomach drop. Mismatched eyes, one hazel and one ice-blue, both shades which he saw every morning in the mirror.

"Holly..."

She had changed very little in the past six years, all things considered. Her face was a bit more angular and half of her right ear was missing, the loss seemingly corresponding to a scar on her neck. She was still strong. Still determined. And still beau—.

Shaking his head, Artemis tried to clear the thought. When he focused on the screen again, a small box had appeared in the lower left corner. Foaly waved at him, quite obviously amused at his meddling.

"I thought you'd like to know." When he received no thanks, he snorted and broke the connection. Yet not before noting the locations of the new cameras.

Artemis wasn't sure how he was supposed to feel. After all, he had broken off contact with Holly years ago, even if he still conversed with Foaly for the Koboi case. He knew how he did feel, however: nervous. Uncontrollably agitated.

When Butler came in the next morning with Artemis's breakfast tray, he experienced the oddest feeling of déjà vu. His charge sat at the computer desk, gazing intently at the screen, face pale, tinged with blue around the eyes. On the screen, a female elf was spinning around in an office chair, clearly bored out of her mind and trying to get some sort of high from the dangerously fast rotations. Except for the elf's freedom and Artemis's move out of his father's old study for a setup in his own room, it was like the siege of so many years ago.
"New camera?" He inquired, setting the tray down.

Artemis took some moments to process this intrusion on his thoughts. "Hmmm? Oh, no. It's E1."

Frowning, Butler stood behind Artemis, inspecting the feed. "Unless something awesomely funny happened with the Ritual, that is not Chix. When did he take—" The he finally managed to form a complete mental image of the slightly blurry spinning fairy. "Is that Holly?"

"Yes. She has, apparently, taken over E1."

"She doesn't seem too happy about it." The bodyguard tried to remember if Artemis had ever spun about in his chair like that. Most likely the thought had never entered his mind.

"Well, she was always one for action," Artemis murmured, obviously only giving Butler a modicum of his attention. He hadn't even noticed the food, though he had never been too attentive to his meals.

"You know," Butler ventured, "we could always stop by. Tara isn't too far out of our way. Say 'hello,' have a nice chat. I always liked Holly. A good head on her shoulders and a strong right hook. Admirable qualities in a woman."

The suggestion finally seemed to bring Artemis out of his reverie. With a few swift keystrokes, he shut off the computer. "That will not be necessary, Butler. The trip to Blarney Castle and back will take up enough of the day, as it is." He reached for a slice of toast, munching on it with little enthusiasm.

"Six years is a long time, Artemis. A lot can happen in six years. Aren't you curious?"

Artemis looked to the small collection of photographs on his desk. Mostly, these were of his family, in various combinations, but a prominently placed 8x10 held his attention.

In it, he stood under a maple tree in the middle of its autumn change of colors. In front of him was a radiant, ringleted blond. His arms were draped around her shoulder and their fingers entwined over her heart. They were ignoring the camera (unaware that Angeline had snuck into the garden to catch this candid scene), eyes closed. Her head leaned back slightly to allow his lips to meet hers in a soft, familiar kiss.

"A lot has changed, Butler. Call to make sure our reservations still stand."

Shaking his head at the boy's stubbornness, Butler walked out of the room. Something needed to be done and he knew that Artemis would never do it on his own.

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The Living

May 12, 2014-Fowl Manor

Lucy was the perfect audience, so long as she wasn't getting standard "fairy tales." Holly had once tried to tell the People's version of Cinderella (involving a Haven elf girl and an Atlantis sprite boy), but the child had quickly caught on to the story and finished it herself, all while looking quite affronted. So Holly began to tell the (slightly edited) tales of her adventures with Artemis. Lucy delighted in these unpredictable stories and would begin pestering Artemis for his version once Holly left. She never asked for Artemis's version first, however, seeming to have taken his first and third adventures with the People a bit to heart.
"So, there I was," said Holly, using the classic storytelling phrase common to all soldiers, frat boys, and fishermen, "your brother beaten to a pulp and me facing down an angry gorilla about to give me the same treatment. I decide the only thing to do was use his own language, so I hunkered down and started hooting and screeching. 'Leopard! Climb!' And that big brute nearly wet himself, he ran away so fast!"

Lucy cheered, punching the air. "Alright! Oldest trick in the book!"

Holly had her doubts about this, but perhaps it was. The old "stop thinking about killing me and look at that saber-toothed cat!"

"What happened next?"

Of course, Holly remembered quite well what happened next. Her cheeks and lips burned briefly, but her dark complexion kept the flush fairly well hidden. "Well, we realized that little Artemis had—"

"Wait, wait, wait!" Lucy shouted, waving her hands in Holly's face to stop the fairy's rapid speech. "What about Artemis? That ape smashed him!"

Holly sputtered. "Oh, yes. I healed him, then we had to go after the lemur." She smiled broadly, hoping they could continue quickly.

Lucy was having none of this. Her once waving arms now crossed themselves. "You're hiding something." She was always aware when the elf was leaving out a portion of the story, but most often she let it slide. After all, the first time she had done so was at the end of the B'wa Kell Rebellion, when Holly claimed that Briar Cudgeon had been detained by Butler while Koboi was being knocked out. She hadn't even mentioned what his sentence was at the end of the tale and it was not hard to see what that meant. This, however, was an omission in a rather safe place. Artemis was alive and whole, so there was no death or dismemberment to cover up. "Tell me. Now." Her voice was rather demanding, an echo of her older brother's more imperious tones.

The ever-emotional elf felt her flush deepen. "What makes you say that? It was pretty simple. I healed him, we moved on."

It was the "we moved on" that set Lucy's mind in rapid motion, and once she realized what had transpired she was out of the covers and bouncing in hyperactive pleasure. "You kissed! You kissed Artemis, didn't you?"

"No, I did not!" Holly hissed, trying to stop the aerobics and get Lucy back under the covers. She had given her denial far too quickly, however, causing further squeals of joy until Holly was forced to admit defeat. "Yes, all right! Just a peck."

More excited yet incredulous looks were Lucy's reply.

"Okay, so it was a bit longer than a peck! But it was just once."

This statement finally rang true and Lucy immediately stopped hopping, her face falling. "But...it's been almost six years. Why haven't you kissed him again?"

Holly recalled all of the tense moments that she and Artemis had shared a few months ago. 'We were so close, but now that I know that—' Running a hand through her hair, Holly tried to brush these thoughts away. "It was a mistake, Lucy. Elves are very...emotional. We can be impulsive. Your brother knows that. He understands."
The human child frowned. "I don't. You like him, so why not kiss him?"

With a sigh, Holly peeled back the covers, motioning her (finally) obedient charge back inside. "He's one of my best friends. Of course I like him, but...just as a friend." Seeing the still skeptical look on the child's face, she kissed her forehead, causing the concentration wrinkles to instantly ease. Only a Fowl would have wrinkles at five years old. "Besides, if you haven't noticed, I'm an elf. Humans and elves...it just doesn't work."

When Lucy did not reply, preferring to clutch the top of her covers and brood, Holly ruffled the little girl's hair and moved towards the door. As she reached the frame, the child's voice halted her.

"That thing you said...about humans and elves not working?"

Holly nodded in acknowledgement.

Lucy tugged on the top edge of the covers, as if it had personally offended her. "Hasn't anyone ever tried? Can you say it didn't work if no one has ever tried?" She smiled, hopeful.

Holly's return smile was sad and small. "Yes, they've tried. I...I looked it up."

Lucy dropped her gaze, tracing the pattern on her covers.

Holly turned back to the door and disappeared down the hall, holding back a single tear.
Touch

The Dead

September 9, 2014-Fowl Manor

Artemis heard his bedroom lock click into place, but did not visibly respond to the sound. He quickly rifled through a desk drawer, picking up a small box of pencil lead in his right hand and a silver letter opener in his left. Turning, he kept the latter hand in the drawer, closing it as much as possible while blocking the view of the drawer with his body. Butler had warned him enough times for the lesson to be ingrained in Artemis's brain: even law-abiding millionaires could be kidnapped or killed. Socialites weren't normal assassin material, but Artemis had been attacked by stranger people than Miss Paradizo.

Minerva was slowly passing through the room, gazing about in appreciation. Artemis's chambers were little better than her own, but that did not mean that she couldn't appreciate the decor. Her hands rested momentarily on an oak table, a Louie 14th arm chair, and finally settled on a chest-high marble chess table, standing on its own and lit up by a rather plain wrought-iron chandelier. She smiled and tapped her fingers across the white pieces before resting on a bishop that had been hovering at the edge of the board. She moved it near the center, then caught Artemis's eye.

"Checkmate."

Artemis blinked in surprise, going over all of the positions to which the bishop could have moved. When he could not find a permutation that would result in such a loss, he stormed forward to join his opponent at the table. "That's impossible! I have my king..." He trailed off, stomach souring. There was the bishop, perched in the middle of the board, threatening only a knight and a rook. He looked at Minerva, who had her head tilted slightly, gazing down at Artemis's left hand. Specifically, at the sharp letter opener scratching the side of his trousers. 'How could I be so stupid!'

"You—"

Minerva's hand shot out, catching Artemis's wrist. Neither of the geniuses were particularly strong, but Minerva had learned the value of a professional (and slightly sharpened) manicure. Her nails bit into his wrist.

Artemis hissed through his teeth and dropped the silver weapon, hoping to alleviate the pain. He was not successful.

Now Minerva lifted her gaze, her head at an almost quizzical angle as she stared at Artemis. When she spoke, her voice was soft, as if comforting a frightened dog. "I am as displeased with my father's matchmaking efforts as you are. However, I do not appreciate you using me to get your parents to desist. As if pretending to be with me was merely a convenient front."

Artemis's eyes widened. "I didn't—"

"Tais-toi!" Now all pretense of tenderness was gone. Her sea-green eyes were livid. "Artemis, I do hate to use such a...cliché saying, but it is only fair to warn you: I am no one's pawn. Not even yours."

Artemis had opened his mouth to respond, but was halted when Minerva used her free hand to grab
his tie, pulling the Irishman in and lunging forward herself until their lips crashed together. Protests turned quickly to a gasp and Minerva took advantage of the man's open mouth to flick her tongue inside. After she had accomplished a few slow sweeps, Artemis's shock faded and he did something he rarely indulged in.

He let someone else take over.

Minerva led her escort to the bed and pushed him into a sitting position on the edge, climbing on top to straddle his hips. She was so light, but her body felt substantial as Artemis wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her closer. Looking up through the curves of her chest, Artemis indulged in a wicked grin.

It barely caught her attention, but Minerva had enough presence of mind to be intrigued. "Que?"

"Pawn to G4."

Minerva cursed, but her fury was quickly erased as Artemis dug his fingers into curly blond hair, bringing her lips down to his.

'Oh, God, she's good at this. It feels so...' He was forced to leave off thinking about the act (which included a surprising amount of grinding on her part), turning his over-active mind to mathematics in an attempt to stave off the rising fire. Still, his pulse shot up and Artemis could not stop himself from opening his eyes to watch Minerva's face as they kissed. This did little to stall his progress.

'Ah, eureka!' His brain crowed in triumph. 'The twin-prime conjecture. It's so simple! I never considered carrying the x to...woah! I should really put a stop to that.'

He did not "put a stop to that." Artemis felt his pulse pounding as he slipped a hand up the back of Minerva's blouse, wondering how far she would let him go.

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*September 9, 2014-Haven (en route)*

Despite his previous years of licentious behavior, Trouble had cooled down since taking on the mantle of Commander. Now, if asked to describe himself, Trouble Kelp would have used phrases like "tough," "innovative," "go-to," and "a gentleman." If asked to describe Holly Short, after blushing, he would have said "independent," "stubborn," "brave," and "a true lady...even if she wants to hide it from the other officers."

Thus, as their cab approached his apartment building, Trouble was trying to remember where he had left his coffee grinder and whether he had two clean mugs to drink from while they discussed their potential new relationship.

Holly would have used a slightly different set of words to describe herself, as Trouble realized after he closed the front door, when he promptly found himself with his back against the wall. Literally. Holly was pressed against the startled Commander, standing on the tips of her toes, pressing her lips against his in an insistent kiss.

Trouble's combat training had reacted enough that he'd slammed his hands palm-down on the door in an attempt to soften the impact. Now they moved up just as quickly, wrapping around the younger elf's waist and lifting her slightly off the floor to give her more height for the kiss. She responded by wrapping her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck.

By the time Trouble had managed to work his mouth free, their breathing was ragged and the light movements of the Major against his hips had caused a pleasant mix of discomfort and warmth. He
kept his head leaned back to free it of Holly's questing lips. "Er...coffee?"

She snarled. "Fuck coffee."

This shocked him a bit. Beyond the occasional 'd'arvit,' Holly did not swear. Perhaps that female goblin had rubbed off on her. Still, he managed to quip back, "Oh, is 'Coffee' my new nickname, then?"

Now Holly was putting pressure on the back of Trouble's head, trying to pull it to hers. She was smiling playfully, but Trouble got the impression that the game would soon be over if he did not give in. "If you want it."

Thinly (and needlessly) veiled double-entendre recognized, Trouble allowed her to catch his lips. He walked a bit unsteadily into his bedroom, tumbling them both onto the mattress. With commendable speed, two jackets and a pair of shirts flew across the room.

Holly's heart rate jumped up at the sight of Trouble's bare chest. 'Oh gods...how is it that he never manages to keep a girlfriend?'

Then, something clicked into place. One moment, Holly was admiring the night's conquest, trying to decide if she should let him continue undressing for her amusement, or if she should even the score and go completely bare-chested herself. The next, she abruptly lost focus, jaw dropping in utter confusion. Through her right eye she saw Trouble, who was rather proud of her reaction to his half-naked state. The look he gave her was easy to understand: "You think this is good? Wait for the other half."

Through her left eye, a pale Mud Woman's face was pressed close to her vision.

Hundreds of miles above, Artemis also found his vision fractured, half full of a very enthusiastic Minerva and the other occupied by a shirtless male elf. Faced with such an unexpected sight, he did what most heterosexual men would do: he flung himself back, away from Minerva, nearly falling off the other end of the bed. He barely caught himself, ending in a reclining position, his legs splayed before him.

Holly, covered by her muscular superior officer, did not have the luxury of mobility, and opted instead to close her eyes. This did not have even a hint of the desired effect, as her left eye still looked out on a puzzled and panting woman, a rumpled men's dress shirt, and trousers with a rather noticeable—

Holly's eyes shot back open to see Trouble hovering above, looking rather concerned, but she could not address his feelings just yet. Her head lashed from side to side. 'Gods, please! There!' Trouble's bathroom door was open, revealing a full-length mirror on the back side. Holly's more rational mind realized that if one half of her vision was capable of seeing the position she was in, then the other half would certainly relay this scene, and this wasn't necessarily a desirable event, given her state of dress. There was no helping it, however, so Holly merely looked directly at the mirror and mouthed a short sentence: "Close your eyes!"

Artemis understood immediately, closing his eyes with such fervor that he began to develop a headache. An instant later, Holly did the same, though with a bit less violence.

The following half-minute was much more awkward for Holly than for Artemis. After all, Trouble was crouched over her, as if in the middle of a modified push-up, trying to determine what had happened to his formerly enthusiastic partner.
Moving very slowly, Trouble shifted to sit down at her side, doing his best to avoid touching the flinching elf. "Are you...okay? Do you want to go home? I'll call you a cab." The mattress creaked as he began to rise.

Holly's hand snapped out, grabbing Trouble's wrist before he could fully get on his feet. There was a tense moment as Holly felt him focusing on her, not sure what to do. 'Oh, d'arvit, he is not going to stay if I don't look at him.' Realizing that there was little else she could do, the woman finally worked up the courage to open her eyes.

She saw nothing but Trouble swallowing down his nerves. What came from him next was an impressive stream of babbling. "It's totally fine, Holly. I'll get you a ride and wait out in the living room. I mean, this is the first date—if this is a 'date'—and the entire thing is a shock to me and I didn't think you would even want to tonight—not that I didn't hope when you said you wanted to come home—but I wasn't planning so I wasn't disappointed. We can have a few more dates—that is, if you want to go out again at all—and I'll wait for you to be ready—if you ever are—and oh Frond, don't hate me, please." This was all said in one breath, leaving him deflated and a bit red in the face at the end.

Holly gritted her teeth, clearly alarming her dinner partner. 'Oh, no. There is no way I am letting that pompous Mud Boy ruin the best night I've had in a decade!' The Major reached out and began to rub the tips of Trouble's ears.

Blessedly, tension flew out of his body at the caress, though he made no move. Kelp was waiting for a more direct permission, fearing that he would again startle the female elf.

"Shut up and get back down here," She ordered.

Trouble's eyes nearly rolled into the back of his head as he lay at her side. He growled, dropping his head to nuzzle the woman's neck. "My ears. That's not fair..."

'Assuming that Holly did not...er...extricate herself, her pulse will not lower significantly. I, on the other hand, have had time to rest and my pulse has dropped dramatically. This connection is not likely to maintain itself with a 5-beat-per-second difference in our heart rate, not to mention the switch in our emotions. Therefore, it should be safe to open my eyes.'

Artemis did not open his eyes.

Yes, he was probably correct, but Holly was the vengeful type. If he was wrong, she was entirely prone to retaliate by giving him a close and sustained look at male elven nethers. He felt a bit sick at the very thought, wanting to stick out his tongue, as if to scrape off a bad taste. Not a great analogy for his peace of mind.

'Pull yourself together! Holly is not the type to be sidetracked, least of all by some strange telepathic interruption. She is determined. She is stubborn. She is...'

The image of Holly laying on a bed, short hair splayed across the sheets, looking directly at him (well, technically at herself in a mirror), and topless, but for a lacy black bra, filled his mind's eye. Not another vision, but a memory, as he had conveniently edited Commander Kelp out of sight.

'Oh. Now, that is rather inconvenient.'

A shuffling came from the opposite side of the man's bed. "Artemis?" The bed-springs creaked slightly as Minerva crawled towards him. "What are you doing? This isn't fair..." There was a pout in her voice that almost made Artemis feel sorry for her. Until she straddled his hips and began to
bite his neck.

'Now or never. God, if you even exist, I know that you are unlikely to listen to me in this situation, but please let my vision be my own.' Taking a deep breath, he opened his eyes and saw nothing but bushy blond curls and his bedroom. 'Thank you...' A second later, the thanks turned to a curse as a soft hand began to guide him back into a tricky situation. He tried to shrug Minerva away, but it was difficult in his unstable position. "Get off."

She nibble his collarbone, lips tight in a smile. "Well, I'm trying—"

"Get OFF!" Artemis dropped one arm out from underneath his body, shoving Minerva with his shoulder as he tipped sideways, tossing her over his body and onto the floor.

Minerva yelped, rubbing her injured backside. "Merde, Artemis! What is wrong with you?"

Artemis panted with rage and desperately controlled lust. "Get out. Now."

Minerva was about to protest, but she noticed Artemis's eyes darting towards the chess board. More specifically, to the sharp letter opener lying at its base. Standing, she tossed back her hair, looking down at him past her raised nose. "Oui. This was a mistake. How I convinced myself that I wanted a freak like you, I'll never know. Au revoir, Artemis Fowl." Minerva Paradizo stormed out of the room, sweeping her hand over the chessboard as she went, scattering pawns across the floor.

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**The Broken**

*July 2, 2014-E1 Shuttleport*

"Nimbus," Holly moaned, resting her chin on the customer side of the E1 director's desk. She had wheeled over from her own post after finally falling out of her spinning chair and had spent the last fifteen minutes in this position. No shuttles were expected for a few more hours (it not being a full-moon night), and even this would bring little for the Major to do. After all, few fairies brought anything up from Haven, and the port had its own crew for detecting the few smugglers that still tried to get things through. Holly was, in essence, a figurehead. "I'm bored. What do you do for fun around here?"

"Fun?" Nimbus scoffed. "I'm at work, Major, and so are you. We don't get to have fun until we're off, and you aren't off for a week."

Holly narrowed her eyes and turned her head, laying a cheek on the hybrid's desk. "I see. Vinyáya and Trouble don't want to protect me. They want to make sure I'm crazy."

Nimbus laced his fingers and placed them on his desk, leaning over in what he hoped was a fatherly manner. "Major Short. Your coworkers' political maneuvering aside, you have a duty to perform, and all at this shuttleport expect you to perform it to the best of your abilities."

"Then what is my duty?" Holly whined. She wasn't one to complain, but this was the worst job ever. No wonder Chix kept getting his pay docked for sleeping.

"Very simple. You are to hold down the fort."

Moaning again, Holly scooted her chair down the table, leaving a long cheek imprint on the formerly shining surface.

Nimbus rolled his eyes. Recon jocks.
Out and about, Ireland

Like many of her countryman, Shana was utterly in love with Ireland. With the free funds of her family and the time afforded her by home schooling, she took regular trips around the countryside, visiting tourist traps and local secrets alike, often dragging her eldest sibling along for the fun.

The day had been rather pleasant, despite the never-ceasing drizzle. Thanks to getting an early start (Shana and Artemis both sleeping in the back of the Bentley), they arrived at Blarney Castle a bit before noon. The party had gone through one of the standard tours before letting Shana loose on the stone. Juliet knelt at her side, trying to look attentive while still not touching the child. Despite the somewhat dangerous nature of the ritual, Shana had made it clear on several previous visits that she would not accept help. So her sometimes-nanny waited, smiling up at the tourists taking pictures of the girl, hoping that her presence would mask the fact that Shana was leaning over the parapet without any assistance.

Butler was really no more concerned for Shana's safety than Juliet, having taken this trip on nearly a dozen occasions. Still, he had his instincts and was long ago removed from parapet duty after it became obvious that he was incapable of kneeling at Shana's side without holding on to her legs. The girl's tantrums...had been intense. Instead, he stood on the ground level, looking up until his youngest charge peeked over the edge, waving at him before kissing the stone.

The quartet retired for a brief repast at Rock Close before moving on to Cork, where Juliet took over, indulging in some "light" shopping with Shana. €8,000 later, Shana and Juliet decided that they were sufficiently prepared for the coming season of fashion. Or that the boys had undergone enough torture. After a sunset dinner, they piled back into the Bentley and began the return drive to Fowl Manor.

Shana and Juliet sat in the back, the blond sending frequent texts on her cell phone, resulting in a blush that increased a small degree with each message (which Butler seemed very interested in, though he could get no information from his little sister). Shana was playing another finger game, this time apparently making her hands fight each other using rather unrealistic martial arts maneuvers. From his place in the front passenger seat, Artemis was doing his best to ignore the rest of the car, typing away on a netbook. He subliminally took in Dublin's scenery as they passed through, too busy in his digital world to notice the real world moving about him. In this calm reverie, Butler's sudden curse and jerk of the wheel was enough to freeze all of Artemis's muscles in preparation for a crash.

Instead, the Bentley went off the M50, careening through a traffic circle. Juliet was flung into her door while Artemis and Shana tilted over at an alarming angle.

"Maniac!" Butler yelled, shaking a fist at the rear-view window. "Did you see him? He nearly side-swiped us. Sorry, everyone. All okay?"

The girls gave their verbal and gestured assurances, but Artemis only glared. "You lie quite poorly, Butler."

The manservant looked at his charge and added a little pressure to the gas pedal. "What are you talking about, Artemis?"

"Besides the fact that driving conditions are relatively perfect, barring this laughable bit of rain? You spent years training under Madame Ko, and I know that her school includes sufficient behind-the-wheel instruction. There is no way that you would be taken off guard by a reckless driver." He gestured out of the window at a rapidly passing road sign. "We are now on the N3. Not the M50."
Artemis knew what was on the N3. He'd been driven there often enough before Shana's birth.

Butler grunted. "I had to. It was switch roads or get blindsided."

A snort showed that Artemis was unconvinced. "I doubt you'd need to go that far to avoid a crash, but if you insist... Take the next exit and go back to the M50."

Butler paused for a long time, his foot pushing further down on the pedal. Finally, as if coming out from a dream, he replied. "What was that? My age, I'm afraid..."

Breathing deeply though his nose, actually causing his nostrils to pinch together for a moment, Artemis calmed himself. "Turn around, Butler."

The driver considered this. "Well, at this point, it doesn't make a difference. We'll have to go back and then there's the traffic...we're better off just going straight through to the N51."

"Really. And this sudden desire on your part to take the N3 has nothing to do with a certain landmark?"

Juliet suddenly perked up. Her brother had managed to mention Holly's return to Tara before Artemis emerged to "cook" breakfast. She had bonded with the fairy a bit more before the birth and found herself missing the Major in the months afterward. It was hard for her to find female friends. After all, she wasn't arm candy, like most of the other female wrestlers, and that made things a bit tense in the locker rooms. "Hey, yeah. Shana, did we ever take you to the Hill of Tara?"

The girl shook her head, eyes wide in excitement. In fact, she'd been practically forbidden from visiting the rather close landmark. Minerva winced whenever it was mentioned, Artemis just ignored any conversation centered on the mound, the twins would look a bit sick, and her parents seemed to have no real interest either way, except to note that they were too busy for sightseeing.

Artemis held up a hand to halt her enthusiasm. "We are not stopping off at Tara. It's dark and the tours are long over."

"Oh, I would call it more of a visit than a tour," Juliet said, a small, entreating whine in her voice. "Come on...please?"

"No." Artemis snapped. "Butler, turn around. Immediately."

His old friend looked at the boy, the sigh he let out seeming to actually deflate him. "Fine, Artemis. Whatever you want. Yet again." He prepared to take the next exit, ignoring Artemis's indignation at the jibe.

"Keep going, bro." Juliet's voice was actually commanding. Compared to her normally low-key demeanor, this tone was enough to halt her brother for the few moments needed to avoid the next turn off, as well as causing Artemis to turn his body to glare at her between the front seats.

"Really, Juliet, if you have forgotten, you are an employ—"

"Shut up." Moving swiftly, she unbuckled Artemis, grabbed the Irishman by his shirt collar, and pulled him over the gearshift and onto the floor of the back seat. In nearly the same amount of time, she unbuckled Shana, hoisted her into Artemis's vacated spot, and strapped her back in. Juliet then leaned back, crossing her legs and looking down at Artemis, one of her arms stretched languidly on the back of the seats, the other propping up her head, elbow wedged into the corner of the door and window glass. "Get off the floor, Artemis. We need to talk."
From his place at her feet, he groaned. "Can't you start a conversation like a normal girl?" When she didn't answer, the man uncurled his tangled body and took a seat, wincing at the angles he had been thrown into. "I think you may have bruised my arm."

Juliet rubbed her own injury, being a rather severe shoulder dislocation that was only beginning to heal. "Oh, boohoo. Get over it. Now...why do you hate Holly?"

Artemis snapped his gaze from his upper arm to Juliet's face. "Pardon? I do not hate Holly."

"Bull," Said Juliet. "Before the birth, she was at the Manor practically every other day, glued to your mother's stomach. 'Collaboration on the Koboi case' only goes so far as an excuse, and it does not work when you've got a grown woman spending half her nights in the guest room. To go from that to never even speaking..."

Artemis copied Juliet's posture, but he failed to look nearly so cool as the blond wrestler. Perhaps it was the fact that she still had her fingers taped. Apparently, she considered this and her ring-adorned braid to be the height of fashion in any season. So he merely grumbled a bit and said, "I work with Foaly, now."

"Oh, and you are working so well together, what with your spectacular capture of Koboi and the last few years of calm."

"Sarcasm does not suit you, Juliet."

"And angst does not suit you."

Artemis finally looked away from Juliet, glaring out of the window at the approaching mound of Tara. His shoulders were tensed, as if guarding himself from his childhood friend.

Juliet looked at the roof (or, more accurately, the unseen heavens through the intermediary of the roof), the sense of hope she had begun to harbor at Domovoi's little detour quickly dissipating as the genius began to shut down. "Artemis. I know what happened tore you up, but you can't blame Holly."

"I don't blame Holly." His muttering caused the window he was looking out to fog up, though he made no move to clear the view. That would just mean he could see Tara clearer, and he didn't need that. This conversation was hard enough already.

"Then why don't you want to see her?"

Resting his head against the cool glass, he gave a single laugh. "She'd kill me."

Moving slowly, as if he were a cornered beast who could attack at her touch, Juliet laid her hand on his shoulder. "How can you know that?"

He moved his shoulder, not violently, but firmly enough to dislodge the woman's grip. Artemis did not give her an answer.

"Fine." Sinking back into the seat, Juliet ran a hand over her head, gripping the base of her ponytail. She looked out the front window. The exit for Tara was mere meters away, the hill a distant, dark shape cut out of the emerging stars. "But...what if she wants to see you?"
Everyone in the car seemed to be waiting for Artemis's answer. Butler stopped watching the road, which was mostly deserted at the moment, instead looking at his charge through the rear-view mirror. Shana was barely even blinking or breathing, holding quite still as she struggled to understand the brother she normally connected to without trouble. Juliet chewed on her cheek, trying not to hope.

Artemis did not move.

Slowly, they passed the turn off and the Hill of Tara began to recede.

Even Shana, who normally appreciated silence, began to fidget. Tension seemed to be emanating from Artemis, halting all further attempts at conversation.

Finally, Butler shook his head and put his foot on the clutch, moving into the next gear. He wanted to get away as soon as possible, before he pulled a J-turn and went to Tara despite Artemis's desires.

Moving with impressive speed, Artemis darted forward, grabbing the gearshift and transitioning into its highest setting before Butler managed to remove his foot from the clutch. The engine clunked loudly a few times before sputtering out. The wheels locked into place, sending the Bentley to a jerking halt.

Shana squeaked, but did not scream. Juliet cursed. Butler kept his hands on the wheel for a few more moments before realizing what was about to happen. Then he spun about, grabbing at the neck of Artemis's jacket.

Artemis pushed his door open and lunged outside. Grunting at the bodyguard's interference, he slipped out of the jacket, plunging into the overgrown plants lining the road.

Butler jumped out of the car after him, heart hammering. "Artemis! It's not safe to go alone!" Seeing the boy's head reappear in the cultivated section of the field, he made to follow his charge. Then Juliet appeared before her brother, arms wide and head down like a posturing sumo wrestler. "Out of my way, Juliet!"

"No!" She snapped back, sinking to an even lower, more solid stance. "He needs to do this. Alone. You know that."

Butler looked over her head, stomach sinking as Artemis grew smaller in the distance. "Artemis! Get back here!" When the boy did not respond, the Eurasian man tried to reason with his little sister. "What if he's attacked?"

She shrugged. "During an impromptu stop off the N3, a road which we didn't even plan on taking? If he is, then it won't exactly be the type of attack we could avoid in the first place."

"And what if he's attacked by Holly?"

Juliet snorted. "She would never."

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Nimbus looked at his screen, immediately tense. "It looks like we have a little after-hours visit. Four Mud Men, one on foot in the fields and the other three in a car." He glanced over his shoulder to Holly, who had perked up considerably. "That's you, Major. Stun first, then do a field mind-wipe. Probably just some drunk college boy out to tip old Bessie."

Holly removed the neutrino from her hip, spinning it on her trigger finger. "Sweet."
'I really (God, I hate running) should have (Cramp. Cramp! CRAMP!) considered letting Butler (D'arvit, rabbit hole!) drive me here.'

The bulk of Tara loomed ahead, but Artemis veered to the right. Now he bore down on a swath of trees and a cow standing nearby, chewing morosely on a bit of the wheat. Morosely...for a cow.

After five minutes running at full-speed, he was forced to slow, his steps shaky. Gasping, he built up what air he could, wheezing out a string of Gnomish, hoping there was a microphone nearby to pick up his words. "I need to speak to—"

"Shut it, Mud Man." A fairy in full (if out of date) LEP regalia shimmered into view directly in front of the cow. It pointed a gun at the man's head, not even bothering to sight. As if shooting at this distance was instinctive. "Night night."

Nearly deprived of air, Artemis's words were only a whisper. "Major Short."

The shot went wild, nicking his cheek and numbing the surrounding inch of flesh.

The elf did not lower her gun. Instead, she moved her head into line, actually bothering to sight. She did not speak.

Artemis began to think he'd made a terrible mistake. He'd practically blamed her for his sister's impairment, cut off contact for six years, and then showed up at Tara with no prior warning. What had he expected? A tear-filled reunion? "Major Short, I—"

"Stand down, Mud Man. This is the People's land once night falls and we will not tolerate trespassing." When he did not move, she made a show of clicking the level of her neutrino up. "Now, Mud Man."

Artemis focused on the ground, trying to control his panting and the heaving of his shoulders. The rain tonight was light, but it had already soaked through his hair and clothing, making both stick to his skin and sending a deep chill and shiver through his bones. Steeling himself, he looked up and took a step forward. "Major, I—"

With a little squeeze, she pulled the gun down to its first click. The barrel began to glow, the light momentarily hypnotizing Artemis, like a hare caught in strong lights.

Swallowing, Artemis took the briefest of pauses before stepping forward again. "Ma...Holly. I'm...sorry." He wanted to break eye contact. Escape. Anything to stop this confrontation. Once started, however, he could not stop, and nothing he had ever thought of for this meeting seemed to really be adequate. Of course, he'd never imagined Holly pointing a gun at his head, but that was besides the point. "You...you deserve a lot better than I ever gave you."

Very carefully, the elf moved forward, the gun still trained on his head. As she approached, her arm was forced to rise in smooth increments to maintain its aim. The glow never diminished and Artemis soon found himself looking directly down into the barrel. A bead of sweat dripped off his nose, hissing as it hit the hot core.

Freeing one hand from the gun, Holly reached up, removing her helmet. She let it drop to the ground, never once breaking their gaze. Her eyes blazed in fury, though her breaths remained deep and controlled. "Yes. I did deserve better. A lot better."

"I know, Holly. Can you ever for—"
Blindingly fast, Holly punched Artemis's chin.

The young man stepped back, eyes wide in shock. She was still quite strong, but the addition to his height caused her punch to lose some of its power, keeping him from blacking out or falling. "Holly—"

Another blow struck his stomach, doubling the genius over as the little wind he had regained was knocked out of his lungs.

Remembering perhaps the only thing he had taken away from his self-defense lessons with Butler, Artemis crouched to his knees and put up his arms, making his body as small as possible as he guarded his head from further attack. Holly merely began to strike his arms and sides.

"You jerk! How dare you. Do you know how long I waited?"

For a moment, Artemis was sure that Holly was crying. Her voice was shrill, but, when he peeked between his arms, there were no tears in her eyes. Her face was twisted in fury and the elf seemed unable to stop the blows, but she would not cry. 'Not for this stupid...infuriating...self-centered...'

"Holly, stop! I—"

"Stupid Mud Man! It's always whatever you want, isn't it? 'Give me gold. Save my family. Fix my messes.' What about everyone else?"

"Holly!" Timing carefully, he grabbed the woman's wrists, holding on as firmly as he could. One false move and he'd have a broken nose. "Stop this, please!"

She struggled against him for a few more moments before subsiding, fixing him with a glare. "D'arvit, Artemis! What about me? I missed you."

He smiled painfully, and only half because of the developing bruises. "I missed you, too."

"Then why didn't you call?" It was such a ridiculous situation. The spurned woman who had been sitting by the phone after a first date, only one hundred-fold.

Hanging his head, Artemis mumbled a response. "I didn't deserve to see you after...how I acted."

With a mighty wrench, Holly freed her wrists, holding her arms up, ready to strike again. "No. You didn't deserve it." She surged forward.

Artemis cringed, preparing for a new set of blows.

Holly's arms encircled his neck, her head burying itself in the curve of his shoulder. She dug her fingers into the back of his shirt, gritting her teeth. "D-don't you ever do that to me again. It's not just your decision. It's not fair to do that without asking me."

Wincing a bit at the nails gouging his skin, Artemis began to awkwardly pat the woman's back. Then he shook his head at his foolishness, pulling Holly into a tight embrace. "I'm sorry, Holly. I won't do it again." Tentatively, he ran a hand through her hair, trying to soothe the hysterical fairy before she carved bloody furrows in his back. "I promise."

They remained that way, taking a moment to calm down. It did not take Holly long and she was proud to note that she had avoided tears. 'Good. I'm not turning into an emotional mess just because the stupid Mud Boy is marginally less stupid. Commendable, Major Short. Truly.' When her breathing had returned to normal she tensed again, whipping the hand that still clutched her
neutrino from behind Artemis's back, the other arm still around his neck. She trained it towards Tara Hill, eyes steely again. Holly was still a soldier, even in the most dramatic of circumstances.

A moment later, Artemis heard the shuffle of parting wheat and the mutter of voices. He put a hand on Holly's shoulder, hoping the gun wouldn't be turned to his face again. "Wait. It's just Butler, Juliet, and Shana."

The female shot him a harsh look that instantly transformed into eagerness as she processed the words. "Butler? Juliet? Sh-Shan..." She looked frightened at the last name, head darting back to focus on the approaching trio.

"Artemis?" A female voice called. Juliet parted a particularly tall bit of wheat, bringing her party into view. "Artemis!" Then she spotted the elf in his arms. jerking her head back in a double-take. She soon began to grin. "Holly!" Leaving her lumbering brother and a small brown-haired child behind, Juliet ran forward.

Holly rolled her eyes at Artemis, but was soon also heading straight for Juliet. They collided, Juliet lifting the fairy and spinning her around.

"Fairy-girl, what have you been doing with yourself?" She placed her friend down, looking over her face with intensity. Hissing through her teeth, Juliet reached for the red scar on Holly's neck. "Where did that—"

Holly flinched back, abruptly ending their embrace and Juliet's question.

Artemis's brows furrowed at this, but before he could inquire further, Butler stormed up, grabbing the back of his collar.

The tall man gave his ward a good shake, as if that would help his words sink in. "Don't you ever do that again. That was a heart attack waiting to happen, and I can't protect you if I'm dead."

Artemis looked up at the furious face of his employee and felt thoroughly cowed. Smiling and shrugging sheepishly, he tried to convey this, but did not succeed very well. "Er...have you said 'hello' to Holly, yet?"

The bodyguard turned a rather intense glare on Holly, who did her best to look innocent. She failed miserably, perhaps due to her possession of a rather large gun.

His gaze eventually softened and Butler let Artemis go. Joining the women, he gave Holly a enormous bear hug, lifting her off the ground.

Artemis looked over at Shana, who was still standing before the thick wheat. She looked utterly baffled about why her extended family was standing about in a field with an oddly-dressed, pointy-eared, and very short red-head.

Her older brother gave an encouraging smile and stepped to the embracing trio, setting a hand on the Major's shoulder. "Holly, there is someone you need to meet." He gently turned the elf about, gesturing grandly at his youngest sibling. "I would like to introduce Shana Holly Fowl, my little sister." He focused intently on Holly's face, eager for her reaction at the name and title.

Holly tensed. Very carefully, the elf lifted her gun-less hand, facing it towards the ground in a placating gesture. "It's okay, Nimbus. They're friends."

Artemis looked up and froze.
Shana’s looked at the companions, pouting at her continued and deepening confusion. She reached out a hand for her eldest brother, fingers grasping at the air between them.

A short, faintly green fairy stood behind Artemis’s sister, an arm wrapped about her throat. With his other hand, he pressed a neutrino to Shana’s temple.

Dreamily, Nimbus, shook his head. His eyes were wide and unfocused. "No, Major Short. I’m afraid they aren't friends. At least...not mine."

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The Living

May 13, 2014-County Meath, Ireland

Artemis's grey sports car wasn't the most expensive, safest, or fastest in the Fowl fleet, but it was *his*. He had picked it out on his own (with a little help from a speed-high fairy) and had spent a little over three weeks working with Butler on customization. It was a stylish, yet common-looking vehicle, without a custom paint job (after Opal’s capture, Artemis had mentioned a desire to repaint it a bright red, but once Butler had said that he would also be responsible for painting the car on his own, Artemis had dropped the subject), spoiler, hood ornaments, or other *accoutrements* often seen on such high-end cars. If anything, it resembled a stripped down "economy" model.

Of course, economy models rarely contained a set of LEP equipment in a false-bottomed trunk, a state of the art computer system, or bulletproof frame and glass.

Holly liked the car, but, more importantly, she loved the sun roof. Near 1:00 a.m. and the end of the drive, Holly checked the car's proximity sensors and, finding no other cars close enough to worry about, she powered the glass open, hopping onto the roof. Laying down, she clutched the edge and let the wind lash through her hair. Flying was faster, of course, but wearing a helmet took something out of the experience. She got fifteen minutes of bliss before being brought back down.

"Holly," her driver called over the sound of the car and wind, "I hope you're done getting your adrenalin fix. We have arrived." True to his word, Artemis was pulling off the main road. Actually, "pulling off the main road" meant pulling off the *paved* road and into a heavily wooded parcel of land with only a rudimentary dirt path, enclosed by a stone wall. Surprised at the sudden change in environment, Holly was forced to slide down to the car's trunk (giving Artemis a dirty look for his short warning) in order to avoid being battered by the low-hanging branches.

Very quickly, the entrance was hidden around a bend and the car could go no further. Artemis stepped out, dragging along a half-empty laptop case.

Holly looked around and smiled in spite of Artemis’s mysterious behavior. The strand of trees was a bit overgrown (humans feared fire so much that they tended to put out any forest fire, leaving woods to accumulate fuel for future, more uncontrollable blazes) and quite wild. They were mostly a mix of ash, oak, apple, poplars, and rowans, many obviously quite old. "This is nice, Artemis, but what—woah!"

Her words were interrupted as Artemis placed both hands on her waist, lifting the rather light fairy off his car. She blushed a bit, her color deepening when Artemis twined their fingers together and began to drag Holly deeper into the trees. He was obviously following a path (likely a deer trail, judging by the relatively undisturbed nature of this wood) and was eager to get to the end. He occasionally looked back at Holly, a small curve to his lips that was both friendly and mischievous, as well as infectious. Holly found herself laughing as she was pulled over roots and through bushes. Artemis had obviously taken this path before, as he was only stumbling a few times a minute,
rather than constantly

Very soon, the pair emerged into a small, shady clearing. The air was rich with the smell of moss and rotting leaves, but thoroughly pleasant. A single, massive oak dominated the center of the clearing, its branches spread so thick that no other tree was able to grow in the shade created for a few meters around the massive trunk. The roots were gnarled with age, proclaiming this tree to be an ancient of its kind. Perhaps even 1,000 years old, and obviously the grandfather of this forest.

In the dark hours of the night, the clearing was hushed, not even disturbed by the snuffling of nocturnal creatures. Swallowing, Holly reverently approached the ancient oak. Its branches rustled, the light breeze seeming to cause them to reach out to the small elf, as if welcoming back a long-lost friend. A small depression passed by the roots, indicating that there was once a stream through this glade. Carefully, Holly climbed up the roots and stroked the trunk. 'You know the People, don't you?' She mused, a beatific expression on her face.

After giving her some time alone with the oak, Artemis Fowl II found a place to sit on one of the lower roots. Holly eventually turned herself away from the trunk and also took a seat, though a bit higher up, leaving their heads at the same level. Her eyes conveyed a dozen questions and Artemis removed the folder from his bag, presenting it to Holly in answer. "For the People."

Furrowing her brows in confusion, Holly opened the case and removed several papers, which she began to flip through. After several minutes of reading, she looked up at her friend. "What...are these?"

"Deeds."

This certainly did not clarify things. "Deeds?"

Artemis nodded, clasping his hands between his knees. An uncharacteristically nervous gesture. "Print outs of land deeds. For this forest and eleven parcels of land across the world. All of the other properties are relatively isolated, as the soil is a bit too poor for farming, and none are situated near any major rivers, thus making them unsuitable for a large population. The earth is passable, however, or at least enough for a few trees...and each has a small, twisting creek.

Holly made a choking noise. She looked at the grandfather oak, and then into the mass of ancient trees that surrounded the glade. Finally, she looked back at Artemis. "You're giving us...Ritual sites."

He nodded. "Around the world. And the ancient oaks to populate them. I'm unsure if a transplanted tree would be adequate, but there is nothing in the book against it. Of course, I have already taken the liberty," here he slapped the trunk of the old oak, "of contracting a company to redirect a small portion of the River Boyne through here. Ireland already has many Ritual sites, but another certainly wouldn't hurt."

Holly's hands were trembling, causing the papers to shuffle noisily. 'Am...am I crying?' She reeled, reaching up to wipe away her second round of tears that day, though these flowed much more freely than the few she had fought back with Lucy. "Artemis, we can't accept—"

She was stopped by Artemis placing his fingertips over her lips.

The young man shook his head, hair rustling lightly over his eyes, obscuring some of their mischief. "My mother and I have already worked things out with the family lawyers. The Fowls will technically own the land, but can not sell it or develop. Ever. In fact, there is also a stock portfolio dedicated to covering any taxes or legal fees associated with the properties. The Fowls
will have their name on the deeds, but this is the People's land. Irreversibly."

Holly began to surge forward to hug the smug man, but his hand automatically descended to her collarbone, pushing the woman back into her seat. "Artemis?"

He shook his head and, by the time he removed his hand, Holly could feel the violent tremors that betrayed his nerves. "That was for the People. This is for you." He reached into the laptop case and brought out a black velvet-covered box, holding it up in his cupped palms. "A late birthday gift."

Jewelry cases are fairly similar between humans and fairies, so Holly immediately felt her breath hitch and she pulled her hands close to her chest, wanting to avoid the box. When Artemis refused to lower his hands or explain himself, instead pushing the gift a bit closer to the jittery elf, she tentatively reached out and opened it. Instantly, the hitch turned to a gasp.

Inside was a gold necklace or, more accurately, a pendant. The chain was simple enough, though obviously made by a master craftsman, but the ornament was what caught the eye. Truly unique.

Encased in a thin mesh of gold wire was a small, battered acorn.

"Artemis...is this...?"

He smirked, though he appeared a bit unsure about the elf's reaction. "Yes. I hope you don't mind, but Mulch assured me there is nothing against it in the Book. It never would have grown in the Manor, anyway."

Shocked was an understatement. Holly scrambled for something suitable to say. Some way to deny this gift. "Artemis, I really can't—"

"Holly," He broke in, shaking his head and smirking that infuriating self-satisfied smirk Artemis turned on whenever he did something particularly clever. "Will you stop the modest refusals and turn around so I can put this on? It's only fair. You wouldn't believe how hard to was to convince the goldsmith to work with an acorn."

Holly blushed a bit and turned, sitting with her back to Fowl. 'I can't believe Mulch knew about this and didn't tell me! He knows I wouldn't be comfortable with...' This time, her mind did not halt, but instead trailed off from intelligent thought to simple senses.

Artemis's hands had descended in front of her face, holding a few centimeters of chain between his fingers. He let it rest momentarily at the hollow of the fairy's throat, rearranging the chain to drape over her shoulders. Then he let the chain slide between his fingers, the acorn pendant grazing down Holly's chest while the portion of chain on her shoulders brushed past. The pendant stopped perfectly at the crest of the woman's cleavage, sending a small shiver through her body, racing all the way down to her toes before rising and settling in her stomach and a region just slightly lower.

Then, Artemis began to trail his hands back, index fingers holding the chain in place while the rest of his fingers brushed her collarbone, shoulders, and neck. His hands were cold from the night, but Holly couldn't bring herself to care, merely focusing on the smooth feel of Artemis's fingers all over her skin. Just as Holly was sure the hands would begin to feel her rising goosebumps, they left and clasped the ends of the necklace together.

Holly looked down at the acorn, light from the gibbous moon catching on the gold mesh. Her body was burning and her mind had not yet regained control, fogged by confusion and a sudden desire. She turned to look over her shoulder. "Why—"
Artemis was already there, his lips meeting hers. There was an eternity of a pause as the two sat, eyes open and lips lightly touching. Despite the sour swirl of fear in his stomach, Artemis forced himself to remain perfectly still, allowing the elf to decide between her two warring emotions. It was terribly difficult, as he was also weighing a pair of further actions: run before the Major killed him or bring a hand up to the back of her head to force the elf into a stronger connection.

Finally, the female fairy reached a decision. With a moan, Holly Short closed her eyes and slightly parted her lips, accepting the kiss. She instantly felt Artemis wrap his arms around her waist, leaning forward to hold her tightly against his chest. She reached back, tangling her fingers in Artemis's hair, pulling his head closer.

They were unsure how long they remained like that, softly but eagerly exploring. Jolts went through their bodies each time their tongues tentatively touched, quickly retreating, unsure of the other's reaction or how to accommodate their size differences. It was, however, quite fun to experiment with solutions. Artemis, ever the gentleman, resisted the urge to let his hands wander, but he could not keep in a moan as the elf ran her tongue along his lips, lightly biting the lower bit of tender flesh. "Holly..."

The odd pair parted briefly as this word escaped his mouth. Something about the sound reached the elf's addled brain, causing her to gasp. "A-Artemis?"

Holly squirmed out of his grasp, jumping to a further root, where she crouched, panting. She looked suddenly feral, ready to bolt at a move from the human.

Artemis Fowl was rarely at a loss, but confusion was evident in his eyes as he attempted to balance after the removal of the stabilizing fairy body. He looked down at his empty arms. "I'm sorry, did I do something wrong? I know that was a bit...intense, but I tried to keep myself in control."

Holly longed to yell "That was you in control?" What came out was "That was a mistake."

It would have taken a well-aimed knife to inspire Artemis to make a more pained face. "Oh, another mistake kiss. You seem to make a habit of that."

There was that K-word already. "You show this," she gestured at the forest, "and this," the pendant, "and I think any girl would be a bit...overwhelmed."

There was a low rumble in Artemis's voice and his eyes were smoldering. "When most girls get land and jewelry, 'overwhelmed' does not tend to stop at a kiss."

"You...you expect me to...?" Holly's hands shot up to the necklace's clasp, fingers fumbling as she tried to remove the pendant.

Seeing this, Artemis left his seat and stepped forward, reaching out to the elf, eyes wide in panic. "Don't!" He clenched his fist, dropping it to his side and looking away. "I didn't mean...your acceptance of the gifts should not depend upon your acceptance of..."

"You." Holly finished, lowering her hands. The Major did not generally back down, but she found her gaze automatically focusing on the tree's roots.

"Then...you can't accept me?"

She sighed deeply. "Artemis, what were we talking about today?"

He frowned. Not in confusion, but in reluctant comprehension. "Children."
Holly nodded, sliding off the roots to pace in front of the trunk. "I wasn't just speaking on a whim. I really, really want to have a child someday."

Amazingly, Artemis Fowl, boy genius, was struggling with arguments. "Surely we could...try?" He swallowed and a pink tinge came to his cheeks at the idea of what trying would entail.

The elf was unsure if the sound she made was a chuckle or a sob. "If I know you, you've already looked this up. Fairy-human relationships rarely produce a child, and never when the potential father is a human. It's too much for our bodies." She shook her head, dismissing the entire idea. "I won't spend a century or less with you, only to have you die and leave me to find some elf I could tolerate long enough to father my child."

Artemis straightened up at this, clutching to a dim ray of hope. "You assume that you would stay with me, then?"

A scream of frustration filled the hollow, halting any more conjectures. Holly finally brought herself to lock eyes with Artemis. "Of course I do!" She balled her fists, as is tempted to strike the clueless male. "Artemis, you daft Mud Man! Sometimes I can't believe you even exist. That I've been so lucky to find you, even after you were such a prat to begin." She shook her head, striking her fists against the sides of her thighs. "Or so unlucky. I can have one of the two things I want most, and...well, I couldn't keep you nearly so long as I could keep a child. You can see the logic in that, right?"

He could, but Artemis couldn't give up. Not after waiting nearly six years for this moment. "Holly, just...what if we could? If anyone can find a way, it's me, and—"

"Stop it, Artemis!" Holly barked, tears finally dropping off her cheeks. "If you could change things...then you'd be everything I ever wanted. But...I'm an elf. And you're not."

There seemed to be nothing else to say. An enormous obstacle had been placed between them, and Holly was certain that even the great Artemis Fowl could not solve this quandary. Him for a few decades or a child for centuries. He made no efforts to argue further.

"I should...go now." Holly mumbled. When Artemis didn't respond, she began to walk out of the clearing, sending occasional glances back at the frozen human.

Artemis had been right to say that they were near Tara. After only fifteen minutes walking, she reached the shuttleport and was waiting for a seat home, just in time for her upcoming shift. She was halfway down the chute when a small scratch on her chest made her look down. The pendant was still there, the gold winking at her.

Holly picked it up between her thumb and index finger, holding the seed against the light. Then she curled her fist around the small pendant, resting her chin on her hand, trying to stop the thoughts at battle in her head.

Artemis had much further to go and no reason to get there soon. The sun was rising when he entered Fowl Manor and, with it, the rest of the Fowls stirred.

Lucy was already rampaging along the upstairs hallway when Artemis approached his door. She stopped directly in front of the doorknob, blocking his entrance. "Going to tell me your version tonight?" She batted long eyelashes, which always got a quick tousle of her hair out of her eldest brother.

This time, however, he only sighed. "No, not now, Lucy. I'm...not up to it."
"Oh." She frowned, quite seriously. Of course, a serious six-year-old is rather amusing, but Artemis remained stoic. So she decided to change direction. "You love Holly, right?"

He finally focused on her, shocked. "I...yes, I do."

Lucy crossed her arms and nodded, looking like a psychiatrist who had just reached a diagnosis. "I see. Well, she likes you." She said this with all of the confidence of any woman speaking to a dense man about emotions, her attitude all the more irksome because she was, undoubtedly, correct. Also, because she was all of five years old and lecturing her 20 (or was it 23...bloody time travel)-year-old brother. The child stood on tiptoes to give the genius a pat on his forearm. "She's just a bit confused right now. Give her time." Then she was off to cause confusion and chaos elsewhere.

Numb after this final revelation from his little sister, Artemis slipped into his bedroom, locking the door behind him. He burrowed into bed, searching for a faint scent left by the hiding fairy.

Chapter End Notes

The rest of Dead Holly and Trouble's night can be found in a lot more detail in "O Captain! My Captain!"
The Best Laid Plans

The Dead

September 9, 2014-Fowl Manor

Artemis only had a few more moments to fume before his body realized what had happened. With a suddenness that made him clench his teeth, he felt the pent-up hormones dig in, begging for a release. Had Minerva still be present, he would have easily given into her demands. 'Precisely why I made her leave. I can't. I just...' He couldn't be sure if things had continued in Haven, but matching Holly's emotions again would only bring more pain.

'He should really keep his hands off the Major.'

Artemis blinked, then shook his head, trying to clear it. Why this though had entered his mind, Artemis was unsure. Certainly he disapproved of Commander Kelp's pursuit of Holly, but this was not just because of their subordinate-superior relationship. It was something else. Something he couldn't name anymore. 'I just...Holly could do better.'

Memories of an old kiss surfaced, burning his lips. Perhaps that was where it had all gone wrong. One lie and he had lost his chance with Holly. Forever. Or perhaps it was when she had failed to save the baby.

'I wouldn't have hit her if she had just tried,' he raved. 'Now my family limps along with this...wound, and she is off shagging her boss! If I can't be happy, she shouldn't be happy.'

His lust finally subsiding into a throbbing anger, Artemis began to think rationally. In a two-day period, Holly and he had shared visions as many times. Of course, this was likely a fluke, but it illustrated their pull on each other. Perhaps they would only rarely share an emotion and pulse, but they could not specifically try to avoid the connection. Unless they surrendered to a life of desk work and celibacy, which was unlikely for the elf, at least. There was also no way that the Council would give either of them the leave to let their eyes adjust regularly, which meant that the potential for a connection would constantly grow. So there was only one logical solution. 'Swift, if a bit...messy.'

Artemis smirked, resting his fingertips together as he began to pull up phone numbers for old underworld contacts from the recesses of his mind.

He needed a nice, big bang.

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September 9, 2014-Trouble's apartment

Holly opened her eyes to slits and glared at the elf lying beside her. Of course. Nothing more than another failure on her rather long list. How could he do this to her? After all of the flirting and evasions, this is what he turned out to me? The stupid, selfish thief! He'd impressed her so much tonight, and now he did this to her. This was...unforgivable.

Trouble was a blanket hog.

It was growing quite cold in the room, giving Holly goosebumps in places that had previously only been noticed when she went to Haven's artificial beach. She had no idea where the thermostat or extra blankets were kept. Besides, she didn't want to leave the bed. It was pretty damn comfy.
Trouble had excellent taste in mattresses. 'Which figures, I suppose, considering all the jumping around he used to do.'

Moving very slowly, Holly edged a foot under the covers, grasping the top end at the same time and lightly pulling, trying to remove just enough of the material to warm her through the night. 'Careful...'

Trouble, besides being a cover thief, also seemed to be a light sleeper. Once the comforter was free and a light breeze entered his warm cocoon, the Commander awoke, looking at his companion blearily. "Holly?" He frowned.

'Oh, great,' Holly groaned, 'now he'll be sober and rational and kick me out.' She looked about the room, trying to remember where her clothes had landed.

Apparently, Kelp was only halfway to sober, as he let out a mumbled string of words, ending in "you're wonderful" and wrapped an arm around his somewhat startled bed-partner's waist. Pulling her onto his body, he reset his cocoon and was asleep again in an instant.

Holly blinked, then smiled drowsily, settling her head onto his broad chest. She listened to the Commander's strong heartbeat, feeling it almost hypnotize her back to sleep. Yes...she could get used to this.

An hour after he disappeared into his bedroom with Minerva, Artemis Fowl II descended the grand staircase, trying to ignore the stares of the guests. Minerva had, presumably, stormed down already and left with her father, as neither were present. Most likely she hadn't mentioned what had transpired to the guests, but rumors were either already flying or at least forming. After all, one did not sequester oneself in a bedroom with a beautiful young woman without people assuming the worst. Minerva's rapid retreat would merely further convince people that Artemis had attempted something unforgivable.

When the female guests universally leaned away from Artemis, his suspicions were confirmed. This would be making the rounds of high society for months. At least it meant his marriage prospects were temporarily ruined. Even his mother, master of the social scene that she was, would be unable to endear her son with rumors of an assault drifting about.

Angeline looked up, scowling at Artemis II. She did not normally scowl at him, but the situation warranted it. "Putting your hair back again, Arty? It doesn't suit you."

Artemis ran a hand over the nearly perfect curve of his hair, playing with the loose fringe at the back that could not be tamed. It had taken a few minutes to find his old gel, but he felt comforted by his childhood style. It was so precise, and he would need precision in the coming night. "I found it necessary to remove it from my eyes, Mother."

Angeline jolted, eyes darting to Butler, who did not react, as far as she could tell. "Mother." He hadn't called her that in years.

Myles and Beckett were gushing over the gifts from their family members and seemed oblivious to the exchange. Beckett, at least, only noticed the entrance of their older brother. He waved a palm-sized digital device at Artemis, grinning so strongly that his face scrunched up bit. There was a long smear of chocolate on his left cheek that no one seemed to have the presence of mind to remove. "Arty, thanks! I don't think anyone at school has a computer like this!" He set the item on the floor, folding out several panels until it was about the size of a normal laptop. Then he folded them in again until the device was smaller than a standard handheld gaming system. "Super-cool."
Artemis nodded, pulling an envelope from his breast pocket. "Quite. However, not sufficient to the day, I think?" Of course, any tech company on the planet would be begging Artemis for a mere glance on that pair of computers, but Beckett had never been one to recognize the eldest brother's achievements. Myles, on the other hand, was slowly turning his computer, analyzing each inch, trying to determine how it worked. A true Fowl, that one.

Beckett suddenly lost interest in his computer, sensing what was coming. When Myles did not shift his attention, Beckett elbowed his twin (subjecting himself to a rather intense glare) and pointed to Artemis. Angeline and Artemis I also shifted attention away from their private conversation (no doubt on Minerva's sudden departure), recognizing their son's penchant for a dramatic reveal.

"Ten. It's rather important, correct?" Artemis said, flicking a finger at the envelope, making a rather sharp snapping noise.

Beckett nodded rapidly, but Myles just shrugged. "I suppose the addition of a digit to our age is likely to only occur once."

Artemis couldn't help but be a bit surprised by this. Ten years old and already quite aware of his mortality. "Well, let's hope you're wrong. In the meantime I think this calls for a celebration. Or," he looked about the crowd and shrugged, correcting himself, "another celebration."

Beckett was squirming now, but Myles actually seemed bored with the proceedings. He preferred keeping his eldest brother in the realms of reality, rather than of drama, and the best way to do so was to not be impressed. "Maybe, but none are planned."

Flourishing the envelope, Artemis took a moment to build the tension. "Perhaps not planned by you, but I really don't think those computers are sufficient. Now, this...this is a start." With a little bow, he handed the envelope to Beckett, trusting in his exuberance to fuel the genius's ego.

Artemis was not disappointed. Beckett had barely opened the envelope, taking out a few sheets of A4, when his eyes went comically wide. He looked up, his biggest smile beaming out. "Disneyland Paris!"

Myles groaned, burying his head in a hand. Of course Artemis had to choose one of the most juvenile entertainments in all of Europe for their tenth birthday. It was insulting, as well as a bit infuriating, as there was no way Myles could back out without disappointing his brother. He glared at Artemis between his fingers, but the eldest sibling merely shrugged, grinning.

"Five admissions, with five first-class plane tickets to get you there and back." Artemis grinned, enjoying this moment. He liked being the generous older brother. Taking that finder's fee from Spiro allowed him quite a bit of generosity, but it was still always well-received by the excitable Beckett.

Close by, a soft, reasoning voice broke in. "Five tickets? Rather rude, Artemis, to leave Butler behind." Fowl Sr. tapped a finger on the armrest of his chair, inspecting his son. He'd done his best to teach the boy to be kind to the help after he had returned from Russia, but the head of the family never thought he would have to remind Artemis of this for the boy's own bodyguard. They were almost inseparable, and Timmy was sure that enough blood had flown about while he was absent to easily qualify them as comrades-in-arms.

Shaking his head and sighing, holding his hands out in a "what can you do?" gesture, Artemis clarified. "I'm afraid there are urgent matters I must attend to here at the Manor."

"Urgent matters at the Manor...that I don't know about?"
"Well, they are personal matters, Father. The Manor is just most convenient for my contacts."

Everyone in the room seemed to be paying attention, now. The Fowls were supposed to be separated from their roots in the criminal empire, but everyone—including his own parents—had their doubts about Artemis Fowl II's legitimacy. When he did not clarify, Angeline seemed about to speak, but halted, looking slightly beyond her eldest. A large hand descended on Artemis's shoulder.

"Madam," Butler rumbled, smiling at Mrs. Fowl, "let me talk to him for a bit. I'm sure I'll get him to come along on the trip."

Angeline hesitated, then nodded. "Very well, Butler. Please, talk some sense into him."

None too gently, Butler guided his principal through the Manor, until they arrived at the surveillance room. In previous years, it had been a rather simple affair, with a few monitors and cameras, along with a nice, big desk for Butler to lay out his work (an assault rifle that needed a cleaning, for example). In recent years, however, Artemis had expanded on the Manor security, adding in dozens of extra cameras, along with many interesting filter features that most governments would be quite interested in, which required many more computers to operate. Now the area was cramped, with barely enough room for the two men and their personal space.

Butler leaned against the door, crossing his arms and jerking his chin at the monitors. "The reason you're staying. Would it have anything to do with what I would find if I looked at the footage from your bedroom?"

"Didn't Mother forbid setting up cameras in the bedrooms?" Artemis said, inspecting his nails and reclining against the desk.

"I've had my reasons to disobey. Whatever happened to your office rug?"

Artemis looked up, his face a careful blank. He flicked a finger, as if ridding himself of a recently discovered piece of dirt found during his earlier search. "Terribly unprofessional of you, Butler, defying Mother like that. If you must know, I gave the rug to Mulch."

"I'm sure," Butler muttered. "You never answered my first question."

Shaking his head, Artemis, poked a dismissive finger towards the bank of computer monitors. "No, Butler. You will see nothing on that camera to clarify my reasons for staying."

This wasn't exactly a full answer, and Butler had enough time in Artemis's service to realize this. The fact that Artemis was evading the questions made him jumpy. "Artemis, you are going to tell me what is going on or no one is going anywhere."

Reluctantly, Artemis turned his gaze to Butler. His face loosened a bit, revealing a simple emotion: sadness. When he spoke, there was a small crack to his voice that hadn't been heard since he exited puberty. "I need to see her, Butler."

"Minerva?" Butler snorted, cutting his hand through the air to negate that idea. "I know Minerva, Artemis. She does not want to see you, now." In fact, she had pulled Butler aside and explained, in rapid French, why she was leaving. Butler was sorely tempted to give the boy a few thumps for mistreating a woman that way. Sure, he was supposed to keep the boy from harm, but Mr. and Mrs. Fowl wouldn't mind it if he knocked some civil sense into Artemis.

"Not Minerva." Artemis looked at the floor. His lips barely moved. "Major Short. Minerva is mad because...well, she made me realize that...she is not the one I want. I suppose that was exactly the
opposite of her intentions."

Butler clenched a fist. He longed to study the recording of the incident, but he knew Artemis would never allow it. At least not when he was actually present; and, knowing Artemis, he would destroy the recordings the moment he had access to a computer. He didn't need the recordings to come to a conclusion, though, so he steeled himself and said, "That's a damn lie, Artemis."

After a few beats, Artemis looked up. His eyes were closed and he was smiling quite enthusiastically, head tilted just a bit to the side. "Why, Butler, I'm impressed. However did you guess?"

"You called her 'Major Short.' If you wanted her, she would be 'Holly' again." Also, he probably wouldn't need to get rid of the family for something so simple as a confession of love. In fact, he could probably just walk around the Hill of Tara for a few hours and they'd send the elf up after him. With a gun, perhaps, but Holly would always hesitate if asked to harm Artemis, no matter what the man had done.

"Ah...an unforgivable lapse in acting on my part. Nevertheless, I do need to speak with the Major, and it will be much easier if no one else was in the Manor to disrupt us. Including you."

"She won't want to see you."

"What," Artemis whispered, "makes you say that?"

Butler crossed his arms, looking down at his charge. "I'm sure you know well enough why."

The dim light of the surveillance room momentarily caught in Artemis's eyes, making them flash like a cat's in the dark. The young man smirked, displaying an incisor. "That is a pity. I'll have to think of a way to get her here, now won't I?"

Butler stepped back. This...was new. He had seen Artemis's anger in the days following the birth, and he had always suspected (though he could never find any evidence to prove his theory) that something had happened in Artemis's room with Mulch Diggums. The Manor always carried a bit of the dwarf's scent for the week or so after his visits, but Artemis had said nothing about the tunneler. This, however...this was a coldness that he hadn't seen in Artemis since their first mission against the People. In fact, the bodyguard wasn't sure if Artemis had been this cold even back then.

Madame Ko's admonitions echoed in the bodyguard's mind: "Protect the principal. The principal is everything."

But...he wasn't. For the first time in his life, Butler looked at Artemis and wasn't worried about the genius. Instead, his mind flashed to the four people waiting in the main hall: Angeline, Artemis Sr, and the twins. If he remained here with them, what would Artemis do? Would he go so far as to...

Butler searched the young man's eyes, hoping for a comforting answer. He did not find it.

"I...I'll go start packing for everyone. The planes leave...?"

"At six. Plenty of time for the party to wind up, don't you think?" Now Artemis's smile was again amiable. A politician's smile.

Butler coughed into a fist and nodded. "Er...yes. I think so. I'll just...go, now."

"You do that," Artemis agreed, sitting down at a terminal, working his way though the recordings of his bedroom, deleting each in its turn.
The Broken

July 2, 2014-Hill of Tara

Butler was the next to speak, sending the briefest of glances towards Holly before returning his stare to his youngest charge. "Is it...?"

Holly nodded, carefully keeping her gun trained at the ground, lest it alarm Nimbus. This was not the situation to brandish a gun in without careful thought and great reflexes. "Mesmer, yes. Laid deep, I think. Powerful."

Juliet clenched her fist, the tape on her fingers cracking a bit. "That 'Koboi' I've heard such lovely things about?"

"Most likely. Despite his best efforts, Artemis doesn't have that many fairy enemies." Holly chewed on her cheek. "Though how she managed to get Nimbus...I mean, there's always at least one other fairy on duty in the shuttleport."

"A few moments while he was unguarded," Artemis muttered, his mind flashing through all of the permutations of movement that could save his little sister. "When no one was watching...damn! When Chix was sleeping!"

The elf considered this, then something found its place in her mind. "'A spot of good luck.' Of course! Koboi must have made Nimbus make that stupid bet so I would take Chix's place. She must have known that the Council would be...going after me." She halted herself just in time. No need for the Mud People to know that her own people thought her insane.

Again, Butler spoke up, his voice flat and tense. "Oh good, we know how she tricked us. Now, can we please address the need to get the gun away from Shana's head? Holly, can you put your own mesmer him?"

"With Koboi's power to fight against? No way. Who knows what traps she's set in his mind. If I try, 8-to-3 I end up turning my gun on you. Besides, it's against the Book."

"Right," Butler barked, reaching the pistol on his hip, "the direct approach, then."

"No!" Holly squashed herself to the bodyguard's side, hampering his draw. "He's not in control of himself, you know that. You'd be killing an innocent man."

Butler scowled at the meddling female. "I'm a bit more concerned about the innocent child." When Holly didn't move, he began to grind his teeth. "Stupid...why didn't I have her join Artemis's self defense lessons, instead of just playing spectator?"

"She's six, Butler," Artemis reassured, though he had little desire to do so. Keeping the bodyguard from despair would at least keep the dangerous man's mind sharp, should he need to bypass Holly and take the hybrid out. He addressed Nimbus, speaking in the clearest Gnomish he could manage in these circumstances. "Sir, just...put the gun down and let my sister go." "Yes, that's good. Remind him that she's a person, not a target." "I know you can hear me in there. Please."

Nimbus's eyes remained blank as his mouth morphed into a wide, tooth-filled smile. "It is good to see you've learned some manners, Fowl." The voice echoed with Koboi's influence, the odd clash of male and female voices sending trails of alarm up the backs of his/her opponents.

Artemis narrowed his eyes. "That's it. Butler, take—"
Nimbus tightened his finger slightly, taking the gun down to the first click and instantly silencing the young man. "Ah ah, Fowl. There will be nothing of the sort. Not until you're on your knees and the little girl is singing with the angels."

Holly huffed, both frightened and irritated. "Clever, Koboi. I love these pre-programmed responses of yours."

Despite Holly's sarcastic response, it appeared that Shana did appreciate Koboi's routine. She had brightened at the mesmered elf-goblin's last words then twisted her face in concentration. Taking a deep breath, she opened her mouth.

"Let. Me. Go."

Holly wasn't sure why the jaws of her human friends had dropped, but it deepened her unease. She resisted the urge to take a step back or raise her gun, but her entire body was tensed, ready to spring. "W-what's wrong?"

"I'm. Warning. You."

Artemis was incapable of tearing himself away from his sister, but he spoke through the corner of his mouth. "Shana...can't talk."

Holly scowled. "What do you call what she's doing, then?"

"This. Is. Your. Lllllllllast. Chance."

Juliet raised her head high, a sly smile emerging. "Ample warning."

Shana slumped forward, as if in a faint. The fairy holding her, only slightly larger than the girl, leaned after her, putting himself off balance as he tried to take on the extra weight. There was a long silence as the unbalanced hybrid tried to stand upright again.

The next movements came as a blur, but Holly's helmet managed to record it from its place on the ground. But only just managed.

Shana slammed her left foot before her body and slightly to the side, causing the wheat in front of her to fan out and fling dewdrops, which sparkled in the starlight. Using the momentum from this stomp, the child arched her body, back bending to nearly a right angle before her head crashed into Nimbus's chest. Solar plexus.

Next, using her off-balance step, she pivoted, lifting her other foot. She crouched slightly, spiraling in his arms and looking up at her opponent with shockingly blank eyes. She brought her shoe down again, landing her heel in the the exact middle of Nimbus's foot. Instep.

Pushing off from what was now her back foot and uncoiling her body from its crouch, Shana brought up a cupped palm, slamming it into her attacker's face. There was an instant snap and gush of blood. Nimbus's eyes went wide, losing some of the mesmer blankness as he fell away from the attack. Nose.

Finally, Shana placed both hands on Nimbus's shoulders, leaping off her back foot and swinging her knee forward. There was a loud thud, accompanied by a disturbing crunch right after contact was made. Groin.

As Butler's altercation with Luc Carrère proved long ago, a violent enough attack can break a mesmer. Literally busting ones balls was certainly "violent enough." This was somewhat
unfortunate for Nimbus, as he had just enough time to regain control of his body before the pain hit, crumpling him to the ground.

Holly stood, stunned, until her coworkers scream shook her back to reality. Giving Shana a somewhat wary glance, she darted past, crouching at Nimbus's side. After securing Nimbus's weapon ('Ah, Neutrino 2000, how I've missed you.'), she began sending healing sparks into the...affected area. The Major looked up, ostensibly to scout for any further threats, but the slight darkening of her cheeks betrayed her.

Shana watched Holly heal, head tilted slightly and blinking. Then her entourage recovered.

Artemis reached her first, sweeping his sister into his arms, her legs dangling like a rag doll's, for lack of a better metaphor. "Oh, God, Shana. That was...phenomenal. Don't you ever do that again."

Butler snatched the girl away, setting her back down and inspecting her for damage. "'Phenomenal?' 'Stupid,' you mean. One false move, and that man would have shot you. Do you understand?"

Shana glared, shaking her head. She moved her arms in what most would have seen as an imitation of Tai-Chi, but which all present recognized as a startlingly well-performed (if heavily abbreviated) routine of the martial art.

Artemis chuckled, the sound almost mad with relief. "Yes, you are pretty good. Has Juliet been teaching you on the sly?"

First giving a quick shake "no," Shana pointed to her eye, then to the bodyguard and principal. Both gaped, then looked at each other in prefect unison, then looked back to the child.

Holly, having finished her healing on the now-unconscious Nimbus, walked over. Crossing her arms and leaning back a bit, she inspected the girl. "You learned all that from watching?" She was obviously skeptical. When Shana nodded in response, she switched to bemused. "Then I suppose you learned to talk purely by listening."

Another nod.

"And you aren't talking now, because...?"

Shana crossed her arms, copying the elf's stance.

"Oh, fine," Holly muttered, beginning an inspection of the neutrino. "If you don't want to talk, then that's your prerogative."

Artemis wasn't sure which he liked more: the fact that Holly was so readily able to understand Shana (he doubted the Gift of Tongues extended to unofficial sign language) or the fact that she deemed the six-year-old's will a "prerogative," and expected her to understand. "Well...now what? Do the People have any clues on the Kobois you haven't been sharing with me?"

Holly frowned at the underside of the neutrino, ripping a small piece of paper away from a rather sticky blotch in front of the trigger. She looked it over, mouthing the word "Platinum?" from the paper's shining rainbow text. She handed it to Artemis. "No, but you can start your speculation by telling me where this is, for one."

Artemis inspected the business card. His stomach dropped. "Oh, I know where this is. How do they
say it... 'Everyman's cut-rate Babylon."

Puzzled, Juliet leaned over Artemis's shoulder. She brightened instantly, the trauma of less than a minute ago already forgotten. "'The Platinum Nighclub? Sweet! We're going to Vegas, baby!"

"Woah, woah, woah." Butler interjected, snatching the card away. "We are not going to Las Vegas."

"Of course not," Artemis replied, his tone laced with disdain.

Butler sighed in relief.

"You are keeping watch over Shana at the Manor. Holly, Juliet, and I are going to Las Vegas." He paused, turning to address the fairy. "That is, unless you wish to stay at E1?"

Holly set the neutrino to stun, cutting her eyes at Artemis. "And let you catch Koboi without me? Not a chance." She stroked her new gun, smiling fondly. She looked at ease for the first time that night.

"Oh," Butler muttered, "so good to see you're asking permission instead of blackmailing, nowadays. You just forgot one thing. I am going to knock you out before you can plot any further."

"And you forgot," Artemis countered, gesturing to Holly, "that I have fairies at my disposal."

Butler eyed the elf and her gun with some discomfort. He was relatively quick...for a man in his sixties. Holly was in her prime, with reflexes and an aim straight out of a dime Western. "Artemis, why are you so determined to go? I'm sure the LEP can get a team there long before you arrive."

"Oh, yes, a LEP squadron in a Vegas night club. Very covert-op. No, this requires a small team. Besides, it is obvious that Koboi intended me to go. She has my attention."

Holly rubbed her cheek against the gun, as if marking it with her scent. "More so than usual? Why?"

"In a little over forty hours, my girlfriend will be at this night club."

Holly nearly dropped the neutrino. She looked to Butler and Juliet, expecting their surprise to match her own, but they merely displayed rising unease. "G-girlfriend? Who?"

Artemis seemed offended at her tone. "Minerva, of course."

Now Holly did drop the gun, mouth hanging open.

"O...kay..." Juliet said into the stretching silence. She clapped her hands together, speaking as eagerly as possible. "Off to the Manor, everyone. You all," she pointed to the elf, child, and genius, "are going to get to sleep now, while Butler and I prep the Cessna. We take off for Los Angeles at seven a.m."

Holly's frown seemed to be a new fixture on her face. "Why L.A.? Vegas has an airport, right?"

"Oh, yes," Juliet said airily, "but if this is all about those Kobois I've heard so much about, I want a big gun on my belt, and I never did very well at smuggling and bribery. It's time for me to call in a little favor."

\[The Living\]
Holly's office was oddly sparse for an LEP major, though with her own good reasons. Except for her desk, chair, and a digital in (overflowing) and out (depressingly empty) tray, there was nothing in the office. She kept it meticulously clean in an effort to make it clear that she did not consider this to be her "home," and it had garnered some results. Roughly once a year, her office was almost assigned to a different employee, though the LEP database always caught the flub before Holly found herself blessedly unchained.

As per her agreement with Commanders Kelp and Vinyáya, half of her work time was at a desk and half was at whatever task Section 8 threw her way. Today was a desk day. Unfortunately for her workflow, Holly found herself too distracted to do any processing. Instead, she had spent the first few hours of her shift staring at the acorn pendant. She had not actually removed it since receiving the gift, so, to most of the passing LEP officers, it looked like Holly was staring quite intently at her chest. Considering that most of them had done the same, they were willing to forgive her focus.

"Only Artemis can take something from a traumatic event and make it rom—" she shut down her mind quickly. No, in no way would she call this gift...that word.

Holly wasn't a complete stranger to dating and relationships, but she hadn't been generally lucky in love. She had gone through dozens of first dates, getting "serious" with a handful of elves and even going to a few beds. Things had dried up considerably since she joined Reconnaissance and she had later been somewhat ostracized by her involvement in the Fowl Manor siege. Caballine had arranged a few blind dates for her friend, but none of these had resulted in a second date, and only one had been bold enough to steal a kiss goodnight.

Thus, Holly had never dealt with such a...personal ("Yes, "personal," good word.") gift before. She had especially never been placed in such a conundrum by a gift. 'Do I send a thank-you note, or is that too formal? I could send something in return, like it was an exchange, but what could I afford to match this?'

What Holly did not realize was that she never considered the simple possibility of returning the necklace. In fact, the idea of taking it off had only briefly occurred to her when she showered, and she had dismissed the thought. Already its weight felt familiar on her chest. No, her problem was to find a way to accept this incredibly romantic ("D'arvit! Bad word!") gift without reminding Artemis of what had happened the previous night.

The Council had not had nearly this much trouble. In fact, a team of warlocks (No. 1 in their lead) had spent the first few hours of the night working with one of the older oaks, extricating roots from the tangle of its brethren and transporting it to a likely site in India. There was a chute a few miles off from the protected land, and the addition of a Ritual site could help turn it into a fully-fledged shuttleport.

'Well...why not ring him, say thank you, but you've got a lot of paperwork, and hang up? Maybe not suave, but effective.'

Holly removed the two-way communicator from a desk drawer and sent out a call to Artemis. The first few rings ere expected, as Artemis was often occupied. The next were often associated with being in the middle of a meeting, but, as the rings mounted, Holly grew nervous. 'Is he...ignoring me? No, just a bad connection or something.' She shut down the call and was about to send another through, hoping for a better connection, when Commander Kelp stuck his head into her office.

"Holly, have you reviewed the latest B'wa Kell parole requests?"
"Er..."

He sighed, shaking his head, causing his burnt-orange ponytail to rustle at his back. "Holly, I know you aren't fond of office work, but it needs to be done today. Should I send them along to Grub?"

The last thing she needed was Grub coming to her, complaining about a heightened workload. "No, Commander, I'll be right on it."

Kelp nodded and disappeared, leaving Holly to slog through the documents. 'After I'm off,' she decided, 'I'll try again after my shift.'

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May 14, 2014-Fowl Manor

Night was well under way when Artemis was finally forced to abandon his bed. He had actually awoken late in the afternoon, but found himself unable to move. His fingers and toes tingled and, while he felt hunger pains, his stomach felt bloated, roiling whenever he thought of food. He managed to drift through half-sleep for a few more hours. Had a doctor been summoned, they likely would have told Mr. and Mrs. Fowl that their son was suffering from simple ennui, and that his lethargy would pass in a few day. They would have been wrong, of course, but no doctor sought out Artemis, his family deigning to leave him to his own devices, assuming he was in the middle of another of his all-consuming projects. Artemis was instead forcing himself to remain in slumber as long as possible, as sleep brought some respite to his racing mind.

Of course, the world seldom molded around the whims of Artemis Fowl. His desktop computer began to beep a request for a video conference around sundown, and repeated the request every fifteen minutes until 1 a.m., when Foaly decided to use more...effective measures. He began by hacking into Artemis's sound system and turning on the sub-woofer under his bed.

He continued by blasting the mating call of a bull troll.

Artemis shot out of his stupor, flattening himself against the French window behind his bed. For a moment, he opened his mouth to call for Butler, but then he felt the buzzing in his feet.

His computer buzzed to life, displaying a smug centaur, though Artemis couldn't see him from his current angle. "Awake, are we? And it's so late!"

Artemis didn't respond, too busy thanking God that he hadn't soiled himself.

"You know, I never took the great Artemis Fowl for a heavy sleeper." Foaly grinned. When his occasional rival/collaborator did not appear, he tapped on his camera. "Artemis? Will you get over here? I have a message from the Council."

The over-world dweller was suddenly quite glad that he had not changed out of his business casual clothing. The wrinkles couldn't be hidden, but Foaly did not strike him as very fashion-conscious. He composed himself and entered the study nook, running hands through his hair before sitting down. "Thank you for that wonderful wake-up call, Foaly. Perhaps next time you could use something more soothing. Like an atomic blast. Or a Wild West shootout."

"Nah. That would have woken up Butler, even if your room is soundproofed."

"Foaly, as delightful as this banter is, I was sleeping. I believe you said you had a message for me?"

Foaly put on his "serious face." He actually looked somewhat disappointed over the cutting short of their snapping, but he did have official business to conduct. "Ah, yes. After many hours of
intense deliberation, political maneuvering, and implications about various ancestors (ah, poor Vinyáya...), the Council voted 4 to 3 to say... 'Thanks'."

Artemis's voice was either drawling with sarcasm or slurred in exhaustion. "Truly, their unadulterated enthusiasm for this momentous advance in fairy resources is flattering. I reply with 'don't mention it.' Now, can I go back to bed, Foaly?"

Now, it should be noted that Foaly, like many master engineers and inventors, was not a master of social skills. He did not notice the slackness in Artemis's face or his light trembling. He also failed to catch the flatness of the human's tone, mistaking it for his normal scathing demeanor. He did, however, note that Artemis's e-mail had not been accessed in a over 24 hours. Even Julius Root, who had been a borderline technophobe, had checked his e-mail on a daily basis. So, despite his best judgement, Foaly decided to get involved. "Artemis, is everything alright?"

Artemis was, reasonably, surprised. Foaly rarely took an interest in him outside of official LEP business. "I...things have been better, yes."

To Foaly, this confession was even more troubling. Generally, when things weren't going well for Artemis, Foaly found himself spending half of his yearly budget in a one week period. It was best to stop things while they were just building up. "Is there...anything I can do? I haven't seen you this distresses since before Opal was captured."

The Mud Man looked surprised at this, automatically opening his mouth in a definite "no" shape, but he stopped himself before speaking the word. His face stuck that way, except for his eyes, which squinted ever so slightly. "Opal...I...perhaps there is something. Something you could not do."

Foaly did not like where this was going. "Artemis..." He said this sternly, shaking his head.

"Just...twenty-four hours, Foaly. I need you to shut off surveillance on me for one day."

The centaur snorted, tossing his mane. "Yeah, right. Do you remember what happened the last time I stopped watching you?" Of course the Mud Man did, but Foaly was not about to leave him any room to feign off the details. "Butler nearly died, the entire fairy world faced exposure, and you cut off Spiro's cousin's finger!" Ending strong did not appear to be Foaly's style.

"I know my track record is not encouraging, Foaly, but you must know what my word is worth."

"Artemis, the C Cube fiasco happened right after you vowed to never harm the people!"

A dismissive hand gesture came as Artemis's response. "If you recall, I said the People were 'safe from me.' The C Cube was not meant to expose the People and Spiro never realized its true provenance."

"Technicalities. What about when you lied to Holly about the Spelltropy?"

Artemis flinched. "If you recall, I never swore that she did it..."

The centaur did not look convinced.

Artemis sighed, laying his hands flat on the table, as if setting all his cards on display. "Foaly, listen. You've researched the Fowls extensively. You know that we may have been liars, thieves..."

"Murderers, philanderers, tax evaders, litterers..."
"But we have our word." Artemis finished for the centaur. "It's the one thing we had to maintain. When you make a deal with a criminal, people want some sort of assurance that they won't be betrayed."

"Oh, yes, honor among thieves."

"It is still honor." Artemis buried a hand in his hair, which made him look like he had just come off a two-week bender. "You know I'm right. Not I, nor any other Fowl, will break their word. Ask me to swear anything and I will do so."

Foaly considered breaking the connection right then, but what the human said was true. Not only Artemis, but Fowls for generations had conducted "business" on the strength of their vows alone. They were the centers of a criminal empire that spanned the globe, but Foaly had found no instance of a Fowl breaking his word, once sworn.

So the tech wiz gave it some thought before speaking. "Very well. Do you promise that the block will not result, directly or indirectly, with anything that could endanger, expose, harm, or in any way inconvenience the People as a whole or in any part thereof?" Foaly was a master of lawyer-speak, as he often had to negotiate his way through contracts for his various inventions.

Artemis, who always looked serious, did his best to look extra-dignified. "I swear it."

Foaly ruminated. "And the People will not disapprove of your actions?"

Now the man looked cagey. "Well, most likely the Council will decide to not tell the People, for a time." Seeing the centaur's expression, he rolled his eyes. "Which is what happens nearly every time I am involved with the People. However, I swear that the Council will generally...accept my actions, if not actually approving of them. At least a majority of the Council will, and a majority is all you need worry about."

Now it was Foaly's turn to squint in an utterly useless attempt to read Artemis's body language. "What do you have planned, Artemis?"

The genius put his palms face up, spreading his hands wide in what was meant to be a gesture of futility. "Getting a one-day block would be rather useless if you knew what I was doing. All will be revealed soon, I assure you."

A silence surrounded them and stretched out, during which time Foaly's tail twitched irritably while Artemis sat, impassive to the tension. It was nothing more than a match of wills between two long-time opponents.

Finally, with a stomp of his foreleg, Foaly crumbled. "Fine! twenty-four hours, and not a second more! And the instant the time is up, I'll be bringing up everything you've done in the past day for analysis. You won't have a bowel movement that I don't suspect of treason."

Despite himself, Artemis looked vaguely uncomfortable. "You...can do that?"

Foaly snorted. "How about I let you think on if I can or can't, eh Mud Man?" He began typing furiously, hammering out a simple program to delay reports on Artemis's activities. "Time begins when this video cuts out. And Frond help you if you do break your word."

"Thank you, Foaly."

"And I'd better not regret this!" He launched the program. Their connection beginning to fizzle out as the computer worked its way though the many methods Foaly used to observe Artemis, seeking
to break off the connection to this forbidden video feed.

Artemis grinned his all-too-familiar tooth-filled smile. "Just for a few hours, I assure you. Then you'll realize that this is for the best."

Foaly's eyes widened. "Artemis! What does that mean?" But the connection was gone, an after-image of Artemis fading out until all that was left was a Cheshire Cat grin.

"D'arvit!" Foaly began to chew on his knuckle. 'That Mud Man is up to something. I just know it... Oh, I want my tinfoil hat.' Unfortunately, he knew quite well that, whatever Artemis had planned, tin foil would do nothing to stop the headache it would inspire. 'Holly is going to kill me if she finds out.'
The Morning After

The Dead

September 9, 2014-Trouble's apartment

Trouble awoke to perhaps the most wonderful sight in the world: a beautiful woman languidly putting on her panties. Oh, there is certainly something to say about naked or undressing women, but the slow reclaiming of garments says a lot about how the previous night went.

"I never thought of you as one for sexy underwear," he commented, yawning.

Holly jumped ever so slightly, turning in midair so she landed facing Trouble, fists ready to strike. He sighed as her uncovered front came into view, causing a blush to appear on the woman's cheeks.

"I'm afraid this is the only set I own," she admitted, shrugging into a bra, her tone rather flat. It was hard to maintain a sense of decorum during "the morning after." Especially when your partner won't stop staring at you. Holly darted about the room to reclaim the rest of her clothing.

Trouble stretched, groaning as his backbone popped several times. "Ah. I suppose I'll just have to struggle through the horror of granny panties and sports bras, then." Grunting a bit, he sat up, mercifully covering his lower half with a pillow.

"Oh, no. I mean this is all I own, besides one pieces. It was a gag gift from Caballine." Holly, finally holding the rest of her clothes in a lump against her chest, paused before the bed and pursed her lips, thinking. "Or perhaps it was a suggestion."

Trouble hooked a finger in the waist of the lacy black boy-cut shorts, pulling his new lover close. He nibbled her stomach, causing Holly to squirm. Ticklish...interesting. "I'll have to send her a thank you note."

Breaking free of the Commander, Holly tapped him on the head. "You will not! You will let me get dressed and go to work. Unless you want to explain why I am late to Vinyāya."

Trouble grimaced. "You know, I'd rather keep my skin." As Holly's rear disappeared into her dress pants, he sighed again, this time in disappointment. He really wanted to call in sick to work for them both, but that just wasn't going to happen on a full moon. Far too hectic. So, instead, Trouble addressed Holly's now covered undergarments. "I've got to get you more of those."

Blushing, Holly shrugged into her jacket. "I don't think I'm comfortable enough in this relationship to let you buy me lingerie." Swiftly, she buttoned up and slid on her shoes and hat.

Trouble's toes tapped on the floor at the side of his bed. Then he took note of her words and sat up a bit straighter, chest puffed out. "Oh, so this is a relationship?" Half of his hair stuck up while the rest was smashed flat, making him look a bit less than professional and imposing. A few old scars and somevery recent red welts criss-crossed his chest.

Now Holly was finally smiling. She leaned over and kissed Trouble's cheek, running a hand through his long, currently-unbound hair. "Meet me after work for coffee?"

Trouble shook his head, forlorn. "Full moon. I've got ritual escorts in Tara." A few LEP officers were always needed to guard the ancient oaks (or at least, they were assigned to do so after Artemis
had kidnapped Holly so many years ago) or to help fairies to the sites. Even the Commander could only shirk this duty for so long before his subordinates began grumbling. Haven was a small city, and the LEP an even smaller community within, so it was a bad idea to irritate your coworkers. Office feuds could last centuries. "It'll be pretty late when I get back."

Holly sighed in disappointment and twisted her fingers into Trouble's hair. She wrenched his head back and crushed their lips together. The female only managed to break off when the higher-ranking officer reached for her jacket buttons. "I know it will be late. Meet. Me. For. Coffee."

"Oh..." Trouble winked, roguishly exaggerating the gesture. It made him look rather ridiculous, if somewhat endearing. "Coffee."

Holly shook her head, trying not to snicker, and pushed Trouble hard on the temples. As her fellow officer collapsed back on the bed, she sauntered out, trying to remember if she even owned a coffee pot.

Hill of Tara

Following his injury at the beginning of the B'wa Kell Rebellion, Chix Verbil had received a rather cushy job on the surface-side of the E1 shuttleport. Of course, he had been reprimanded after losing LEP equipment to the escaped convict Mulch Diggums, but it was a bit difficult to get fired for failing to secure a craft when the group piloting said craft saved the People from a mad pixie. Still, except for official LEP business, he was forbidden to leave the port. So when the Lieutenant received notice that he would be escorted for the Ritual on the following full moon, Chix had spent the rest of the month daydreaming about the excursion.

When Trouble arrived, shimmer suit wings extended (Chix frowned at this, as he was still a bit sensitive about his disability, and had not yet gathered the money needed for wing integration), the Commander actually looked more distracted than Lieutenant Verbil had been.

"Yo, Trubs. What on Earth has gotten into you? I've not seen you this pleased with yourself since your last promotion."

The greeting may have lacked the formal LEP salute, but the Commander didn't mind. Trouble may have been far above Chix in the LEP hierarchy, but they had worked together on the Fowl Siege, and just about every fairy on that detail had become very familiar with each other in months following. Chix and Trouble, as two of the more photogenic officers, had been on many talk shows together. The two were about as close as they could be, considering rank and their distant posts.

Trouble paused while putting on his moon belt. A goofy grin spread across his face and he proceeded to approach Chix with an almost drunk swagger. Still, he tried to keep his voice steady, reluctant to discuss the newest development in his life. His new lover would be less than pleased if he began to brag about their night together in too much detail. "Nothing got into me."

Chix laughed boisterously, catching the turn of phrase, and punched the elf's shoulder. "You scoundrel! Who is it?" Seeing Trouble's somewhat stern face, Chix raised a hand. "No, no, let me guess. Lili Frond."

Trouble snapped a moonbelt to Chix, instantly reducing his weight. "No, you know we're just friends. You are not going to guess, so just save yourself the effort and drop it."


With a low hum, Trouble's wings sprang into motion. "What, the HR clerk? No."
"Daisy Verbane?"

"The underwear model? No, and where did that come from?" He began to ascend, lifting Verbil gently from the ground.

"I had to make sure my options were still open."

"Hmmm..." Trouble did not bother to mention how unlikely it was that Chix would catch a millionaire underwear model who was also outside of his species. The sprite was rather hard to dissuade once he picked a target, and only a stern reprimand from Verbane herself would stop him. He began to slightly move his fingers, flipping through the various features on his helmet in preparation for the trip. "Well, speaking of options, we have two."

Chix blinked. He had been on a few of these escorts since his injury, but this was new. "And they are?"

"The LEP way: moderate speed, high altitude, gradual curves."

"Or...?"

"The fun way."

Chix grinned. "Fun is good."

Every Reconnaissance officer is something of a fly boy, but Trouble Kelp was their best known stunt man. He had even threatened to break Holly's reprimand record, but was prevented by his untimely promotion. Even the Council was loath to punish a Commander for fancy flying. For a second, Chix regretted his decision to trust in Kelp's flying skills, but that feeling was quickly lost in the following exhilaration. The trip took no longer than the normal route, but Trouble went at top speed, indulging in abrupt turns, somersaults, and teeth-grinding dives at the ground. Halfway through, Chix was hit in the face by a stray branch, but he was too distracted with laughter to care.

The flight was over far too quickly for both officers. Trouble unclasped the moon belt and both approached the ancient oak. It was a cool night, with only a few dark clouds drifting across the sky. Rain was expected by morning, brought in by the intermittent breezes that rustled the branches of the oak.

"Cotton Lake."

"No."

"Fern Casey?"

"No."

"Crake Cachy."

"She's a gnome."

"So. She's rich,"

"She's in jail."

"Well, then it's convenient for you."

Trouble gave Chix a friendly, but none-too-light smack on the back of the head. "Go. Get your
acorn. I've got a tight schedule tonight."

Personal feelings on the Ritual differ among fairies, varying from annoying chore to a veritable religious experience. Since the loss of his wings, Chix Verbil had used his magic to heal every paper-cut and perk up every sickly plant in the E1 shuttleport. Still, he only managed to use up his magic about once every year. The sprite wanted to savor this moment, so he searched the tree's branches for a ready acorn, finally cupping his hands tenderly around the nut. He brought it to his lips and whispered. "From the earth thine power flows, given through courtesy, so thanks are owed..." He paused.

From the corner of his eye, Chix saw Trouble leaning against the oak and making the "blah blah blah" hand signal. Chix frowned, but he merely continued with the recitation.

There was a crackle in the air, which Chix dimly recognized as electricity making its way though slightly damp circuitry. He turned to face the base of the oak, where a palm-sized screen flickered into life. It glittered with snow before tuning to the face of an Irishman in his early twenties. He was sitting in a stiff-backed antique chair, wearing an equally stiff suit. The room he was in seemed brightly lit, but that only served to bring greater contrast for the shadows under the human's eyes. "Very touching, Lieutenant Verbil, but I need to speak with someone a bit higher up, today."

Chix backed away, the grip on his acorn tightening. This was bad news of the worst sort. His damaged wings ruffled, longing to take off, but unable to go very far or fast. He would need Trouble for that.

The Commander, who had been standing a few feet to the left of the screen, circled around and nodded at the human. "Artemis Fowl. I trust this is important enough to set up a wireless transmitter in an ancient oak for a 'face-to-face' conversation, rather than just sending Foaly a message." He rested with his hands behind his back, legs at shoulder-width in the at-ease position, but Chix saw the twitch of fingers that ached for a Neutrino, betraying the Commander's casual demeanor.

Artemis wrinkled his nose in distaste at the stance. "I assure you, this is the best way to get my message across. I have a request. I need to speak with Major Holly Short." There was a little pause that Chix was certain was affected for the drama of the situation, then the Mud Man continued. "In person. Alone."

Those seemed to be the worst words the man could have possibly said. Trouble's hands flew from behind his back and grasped the Neutrino on his right hip. "This is something for Wing Commander Vinyáya to decide, and I can already tell you that she will not let any fairy under her command talk with you, as per your request." He was baring his teeth, hovering between a smile and a snarl, enraged by the genius and yet not wanting to provoke him. Technically, Artemis had been the one to strike up this conversation, but the human had already proved himself more than dangerous enough to make them wary. Who knew if he would use this conversation as the excuse behind an attack.

Artemis looked up, head tilted slightly, a finger to his lips, as if trying to recall something. "Oh, I apologize, Commander Kelp. The last time I checked, she was under you."

Trouble's face turned red as Chix looked at him, wide-eyed. "Seriously? Holly? You dog!" Such a revelation was enough to break through even this serious situation, but only for a moment.

Trouble made a cutting motion with his left hand to stop the sprite's congratulations. His eyes never left the screen. "Let me restate myself: Major Short is forbidden by the Council to have any interaction with you, in accord with your own wishes."
Artemis nodded and played with one of his sleeves, rolling it up to reveal a rather expensive-looking watch. "Yes, yes. This meeting is by my request, however, so there will be no repercussions is she meets with me."

Chix scoffed at this casual assurance. "You think that will change our mind? I thought you were supposed to be smart."

"Lieutenant Verbil!" Trouble snapped, silencing his charge before returning his attention to the screen. "I will say this one last time, Fowl: Holly is not allowed to meet with you, regardless of your wishes."

Artemis sighed theatrically, running a hand up the back of his neck. "That is unfortunate." He nodded to himself, a small twist in his lips. "Very well. As I will not be meeting with Holly tonight, there will be repercussions." Removing his hand from behind his head he pushed a button on the side of his watch.

The video feed of Artemis was replaced by a numerical display, starting with "00:30." Then it began to count down.

Trouble paled, then turned to Chix. "Get ready to fly! Now!" Without explanation, the elf jumped at the branches and grabbed an acorn. As he landed, his wings came into life, speeding him towards the sprite, who had just enough time to make his wings flutter a bit when the Commander picked him up, rocketing off across the river.

Technically, the Ritual calls for acorns to be planted a good distance from where they were gathered. However, magic is forgiving and adaptable, if a bit unpredictable. In a pinch, a distance of about 200 meters is acceptable.

Chix and Trouble landed after only a few seconds, but Trouble seemed to be in hysterics, sinking his hands into the damp, loose earth, tossing the earth between his legs like a busy dog. "15...14...13...dammit, Verbil, plant your acorn!" Kelp slammed a fist into the ground, squeezing his eyes closed as he planted the acorn.

Chix stood, confused, as Trouble was lit by a soft blue glow. 'He didn't say anything about being low on magic...' Then the sprite realized what was about to happen. Really, he should have understood long ago. After all, it was his job at the Fowl siege, and timers like that rarely meant anything good. Dropping to his knees, Chix tore at the ground, clearing out a small hole. With the distant screen displaying "00:03," he dropped the acorn in and held his breath.

The flow of magic into his body began as a warmth in his fingers, which quickly enveloped his entire body. Compared to the violent Ritual right after the injury that ruined his wings, it was quite calm, with a slight tingling burn, like mouthwash gargled a bit too long. Then he heard an eardrum-shattering sound from behind and the warm flow of magic turned sour and cold.

It was the only words that could describe the change, as magic continued to enter the sprite's body, though it felt...sickly. And the pain...it was like someone had ripped off his arms and wings, ending by punching a hole in his stomach. Gagging, Chix jerked his entire body, wrenching his hands free from the ground while his magic was still only half-full. He fell on his side, hands raised in the air, fearful that a connection to the earth would renew the unpleasant flow. It had felt like...dying.

Trouble shook the twitching sprite, sending in a spark of magic to make sure that he wasn't injured. It took the Lieutenant a long time to recover from the shock, but he tried to give a brave nod when he did, even if it made him throw up a little in his mouth.
Then both looked back towards the oak. Trouble shook his head and whispered, "D'arvit..."

Artemis had backed up his threat well. A multitude of charges had been placed throughout the tree, blasting off limbs. It was a relatively healthy oak, so there were only a few fires glittering where the branches had been, which were already going out, though they gave off a profuse amount of smoke. Beyond these minor injuries, however, the majority of the charges had been placed on the top of the trunk, completely severing it. The canopy lay in the river, blazing quite well due to all of the extra charges, while the lower half of the tree oozed sap, denuded of all but a few spindly branches. It was split cleanly down the middle.

Chix shook in horror and rage. 'That was what caused the change in magic. The oak is dying.' He staggered to his feet and approached the tree.

"Verbil, stop, there might be more explosives!" Trouble grabbed Chix's arm, but the other officer just shook it off and flapped his wings a bit to clear the thin river, landing next to the massacred tree.

The sprite shook his head as Trouble's continued attempts to stop him. There was no more danger from Fowl. There would be no point in killing them. Artemis's demand had been relayed to every top official in Haven by now, courtesy of Trouble's helmet, but that was only half of the message. The physical portion—of how a dying Ritual tree felt—was to be passed on by the oak's last visitors. Kelp had obviously planted his acorn soon enough to finish before the explosion, which left Chix to recount the souring of the magic.

He laid his palms on the tree's jagged wound and called on the little magic he had gained. 'Heal...please.'

Just as healing a foreign species was identical to healing a fairy, the same skill went into working on plants. Gnomes were the best at it (the Mud Men didn't come up with "garden gnomes" on their own, after all), but Chix had practiced quite a bit on the shuttleport's plants. It was merely a manipulation of the tree's life energy, causing it to flow a bit quicker, leading to a rapid mitosis and, thus, healing. Chix felt his magic began to siphon off as it sank into the trunk.

"Lieutenant Verbil! I said stop!" Trouble took a firmer grip on Chix's shoulder, pulling him away from the tree. Blue sparks snapped in the air as the connection was broken. Chix reached out to the tree, trying to push a last bit of magic through the air, but Trouble pulled him away.

Commander Kelp clipped a moon belt to Chix and took to the air, tapping on his wrist to open a line of communication to the shuttleports. "Evacuate all non-essential personnel to Haven and Atlantis on full shuttles. Bring back all available LEP officers ranked lieutenant or above, and everyone at the Fowl Siege, regardless of rank. And have them complete the Ritual," he paused and swallowed rather hard, "but not at site thirty-four. I want every officer, Recon or no, behind me and running hot. All officers are to report to the old Siege base."

Chix kept his eyes trained on the oak as slowly, the last of the magic he had given was used up, pulling the edges of the blasted trunk together and sealing in the sap. He smiled, but the sprite was still roiling inside. Yet he spoke almost casually. "I am going to kill Artemis Fowl."

Shutting off his line, Trouble nodded. "If every other fairy on Earth doesn't get to him before you."

Chix grinned, though not the normal smile of an excited sprite. This was a much harder expression. Determined. "Oh, no worries there. I'll make sure I'm the first."

The Broken
Artemis was not infallible, despite what may be believed from recountings of his adventures as an adolescent. He had just gone through an emotionally trying day. This, combined with the lack of sleep from the night before, caused his body to take control of the situation, sending him into a deep and impenetrable sleep the second he lay down.

His alarm sounded at the normal time, but Artemis merely rolled over and flailed his arm about until it turned off. This was actually the first time he had done so, and it took another half-hour for his internal clock to become disturbed enough to wake him.

When it did, he sat up at a perfect right angle, gasping like a chain smoker one week away from a trach tube operation. "Shana! She's going to kill me!"

Not even bothering to change out of his dark-blue button-up nightclothes, he careened towards the kitchen, bare feet slapping loudly in the empty corridors, as if to call out ahead and allay the temper of his charge. Only once had he failed in his duties, and the result had been a three hour tantrum and a week of reproachful stares.

Practically bashing one of the side doors open, Artemis arrived at the kitchen, greeted by...the smell of blueberry pancakes?

Artemis looked about, thoroughly flummoxed. Shana was sitting at the counter, kicking her legs in the distracted fashion common to all children. In front of her was a respectable plate of pancakes, which she was alternately playing with and eating. To either side were Butler and Juliet, both with much larger stacks, also chewing with enthusiasm. Despite the quite obvious presence of his three housemates at the table, Artemis realized that he still heard the hiss of the gas stove, along with the sizzle of cooking batter.

Looking up from the breakfast counter, he focused on the cook and felt a rather violent tug at his stomach. "Holly?" Then the evens of the previous night flooded back, creating another jerk, this time in the middle of his chest.

For a moment, the elf did not respond, focused on flipping a pancake. This was fine with Artemis, as it gave him a chance to recover from the shock of seeing her...like that.

Holly stood on a wooden stepping stool, which still barely allowed her to get at the stove. Like the boy, she was barefoot, but her allotment of uncovered flesh extended up to mid-thigh, where it was finally covered by one of Artemis's childhood dress shirts. The simple white garment was cinched around the waist with her gun belt, a neutrino dangling from it on either side of her hips, both on their most lethal setting. Holly was in something of a state of undress, but she would not be "caught with her pants down." Or off, as it were.

Duties on the stove accomplished, Holly turned on the stepping stool. This revealed that she had far too few buttons done up for a male's shirt, but a lovely number for a female's attire, stopping just short of cleavage. She waved the ladle at Artemis, then pointed it at an extra seat positioned on the kitchen-side of the counter, in front of which lay an untouched plate of pancakes. "Food." She said simply, half commanding.

Artemis could have responded in a variety of ways. Thanks (for the food), a simple greeting (or formal, perhaps), disbelief (that she was in his house), abject worship (that she had, again, saved his hide), or even silence.

He chose to be snide. "My God. You've been domesticated."
Artemis's reflexes were just good enough to allow him to dodge the flying ladle, though some of
the batter was scraped off on his cheek as it went by. The kitchen utensil turned projectile weapon
caused a rather impressive dent in the wall behind the boy, which assured him that something
would have been broken if he hadn't dodged.

Holly scowled, obviously furious at her miss, but the only other things she could reach to throw
were the spatula and the pan, both of which were vital to finishing her own breakfast.

Artemis held up his hands in surrender, claiming his seat, even if it did eman turning his back on an
irritated fairy with two guns. After taking a moment to recover from the attack, he focused on
Juliet, practically hissing at her. "That was your idea, wasn't it?"

She swallowed a large mouthful, all the time shaking her head, the gesture conveying her thoughts
of "Mmm mmm MMM!" just as much as it covered her denial. "Oh, no. She just came into the
hangar as we were finishing up with the Cessna. Said she wanted to cook. Seemed right antsy,
actually."

"No. I meant her...outfit."

Juliet lazily moved a bit of pancake around, soaking up a massive amount of maple syrup. She
popped it in her mouth before addressing her childhood friend, blessedly keeping the food from
flying into his face. "Got a bit of Nimbus's blood on her suit. Had to wash it out and let it dry, and
she needed something to wear in the meantime."

"Yes, certainly, but why did you give her...that?"

Juliet reached out and poked his nose. "To mess with your head."

Artemis scowled at Juliet. That look was easy to interpret: I shall destroy you and all you hold dear.

Juliet merely chomped down on another forkful, not at all impressed. You got used to Artemis after
two decades.

Artemis turned a much softer and more apologetic expression to Shana. He pointed to her food.
"Not...angry at me, then?"

The child put down her fork and formed the half-heart. Artemis returned the gesture, but Shana
only allowed their hands to touch briefly before shaking hers. She wasn't erasing the gesture, but
was merely saying saying he had misunderstood. She reformed the half-heart, using her other hand
to first point at Artemis, then to Holly. Her head tilted slightly. A question.

Leaning his entire torso over the counter and speaking in a whisper, Artemis did his best to explain.
"No, Shana. Holly is a good friend. An ally. We haven't seen each other in years. I love Minerva,
remember?"

Shana was puzzled, turning her head to appeal to Juliet and Butler. Juliet smiled around her fork
and Butler frowned severely. Huffing at their tight lips, the breath causing a lock of hair to fly off
her forehead, the child returned to her food.

Artemis settled in his seat, eyeing the food. It certainly looked edible. Still, this was Holly who had
made it. She didn't strike him as the type that spent much time in the kitchen. Though she did have
nearly ninety years behind her...perhaps the overall time she could have spent in the kitchen would
make up for a low average?

Now finished with the cooking, Holly claimed the last stool, also on the kitchen-side of the
counter, and began to eat. Seeing that Artemis had not done so, she gave him an offended look, at which point he took a bite.

After taking the time to chew, looking at the ceiling in contemplation, he nodded.

Holly returned the nod, as if acknowledging one of the most flattering compliments she had ever received, then began to work on her own meal. The silence continued for a few minutes as the quintet worked through their breakfast, Holly and Artemis chewing quickly to catch up with the rest of the party.

It was Butler who finished first, using this as an opportunity to look over Shana's head and address his sister. "So...who in LA owes you a favor?" He was trying to make the question off-hand, but the sudden tightening of his muscles wasn't very convincing.

"Jimmy," she responded airily, "who else?" The twist appearing on her lips betrayed her casual words.

Butler actually snarled. It was a completely primal sound, sending Holly's hand to her gun.

Artemis shook his head, disapproving of both reactions. To Holly, he tried to explain. "A former blue diamond. He owns the Farmer's Bar, and he's been dating Juliet...despite his age."

Juliet speared a pancake. "We are not dating. Plus, really, 'his age?' He's only forty-two. How old is Holly?"

Artemis frowned. "Ninety-two; but, if you recall, Holly and I aren't dating."

"See? It's a perfect analogy." She began sawing a bite more violently at her last pancake than was really necessary. "Regardless, twenty-seven and forty-two is not that bad."

"No," Butler's fist clenched around his fork, bending it, "but eighteen and thirty-three is."

Holly was impressed. "Eight years? Must be a pretty good guy to keep you that long."

Eyes going unfocused, Juliet smiled. "Oh yeah."

The fork was now little more than a spiny ball. "Why does he owe you a favor?"

Juliet swallowed the last bit of pancake. "A lady does not reveal her secrets. It's rrrrrude." She spoke with an affected trill and an extension of the pinky holding her fork.

Holly choked on her food, pounding her chest a few times to dislodge the mass of food. "Juliet? A lady? I must be out of the loop."

Artemis inspected her and nodded. "As loath as I am to admit it, I appear to be uninformed, as well." He pointed out the scar on Holly's neck. He now saw that it extended down her chest and past her collarbone, at which point it was finally covered by the shirt. "How did that happen?"

Holly looked at her chest, then quickly buttoned the shirt up to the collar. Rather than flushing, as all expected from the somewhat exposed elf, she paled. "It's not important."

"Really. It looks important."

"Well it isn't." Then she filled her mouth with another forkful of pancake, effectively ending all conversation until the plates had been cleared. Then all looked about, not entirely sure what to cover.
Butler, acting perhaps because he was (physically, at least) the eldest, addressed Holly. "We both know Artemis enough to realize that there is no stopping him. If I am to stay, then so be it, but I expect you to keep the kids in line."

"Kids!" Both Artemis and Juliet said, outraged, Juliet continuing the thought. "I am, like, just as far along in my life as Holly, proportionally. Further, even."

Butler ignored her. "And keep Jimmy's hands off my sister."

Holly considered this. "Stunning or lethal force?"

"Depends on where his hands go."

"HEY!" Juliet pouted.

Next, Butler addressed Artemis. "I don't think I need to tell you to be a gentleman, but just remember this: you may be running about Vegas with three women, but you are not Charlie, and they are not your Angels."

Artemis looked rather offended. "Certainly not. I've nowhere near enough Spandex for that."

The Gift of Tongues does not translate pop culture references, but Holly knew enough about Spandex to be thankful for his deficiency.

"Juliet." Butler finally turned his attention to his little sister, pointing with one massive finger. He held it there for a while, allowing her to come to her own conclusions.

The blond threw her hands in the air. "Fine, fine."

Stuck between her two guardians, Shana looked miserable.

Suddenly realizing the biggest kink in his plans, Artemis addressed the youngest member of his family. "Will you be okay while I'm gone?"

Shana put on a brave face, thrusting her entire arm out for an enthusiastic thumbs-up. "Kick. Butt!"

Artemis blinked. This talking Shana would take a bit of getting used to, even if she didn't seem to prefer speech. "You know...you've said thirteen words, and one is crude. Not a good sign."

The child lowered her chin, angling her eyes to look up at her brother and pout. She genuinely looked sorry, immediately earning an affectionate ruffle of her hair from Artemis.

Holly watched these sibling interactions with an unexpected bit of jealousy. Family had been conspicuously absent from her life for many years, despite Foaly's semi-adoption of his younger co-worker. His son, Flash, was rather fond of her, but the child was little more than an unofficial nephew. Seeking to throw off these reflections, Holly clapped her hands once, giving swift glances to all. "Well. I believe we have a flight to catch.

In the air over California

"A flight to catch" implies mass transit, but Artemis was not prone to something so banal. The Cessna was easily big enough for the questing trio, even allowing Juliet to set up a sleeping bag on the floor, where she promptly conked out for almost the entire trip. Like Artemis only a few hours before, her body was taking over to recover from the effects of a sleepless night.

Holly (sadly, back in her shimmer suit) sat in the co-pilot's chair, her legs crossed to keep them
from dangling over the edge. She flipped though an data tablet full of information on Koboi, making a few new connections with the information they had gleaned from the attack. She read rather quickly, but the connections were rather few. A mesmerized shuttle employee and a business card was not a lot to build on. "I can't make out why she's in Nevada, much less in the United States. It seems sort of counterproductive, given that neither of visit all that often. I mean, I've never even been on that side of the U.S." There was no question that Opal Koboi would feature Artemis and Holly prominently in whatever schemes she concocted. To a certain extend, she was predictable. Past that, she was insane.

"All roads lead to Vegas, I suppose. " Artemis had only visited the place a handful of times, but the tourist town did have an undeniable draw. The analogy with the often sordid city of Rome wasn't entirely inaccurate, in this context. "I would have chosen Monte Carlo for a last hurrah, but Minerva's cousin will go for the Hollywood stereotypes."

Holly looked up from her tablet, her icy demeanor cracking a bit. "Monte Carlo, really? Any firm plans in that direction that I should know about?"

Artemis checked his altitude, trying to use the task to hide a smirk. "Not that you should know about, no."

"'Not that...' Tell!" Holly put the tablet on her lap, suddenly rapt. "Foaly didn't say anything!"

"Did Foaly mention that Minerva and I were involved?"

"Well...no. But still. You'd think—"

"Perhaps I asked him to remain silent on my relationship? Or perhaps it is a secret, and even my family doesn't know?"

Holly gaped. Foaly could be secretive, but Holly didn't believe him capable of hiding something this big. At the very least, it would have gone into Artemis's case file, and someone in the LEP would have leaked the information to the tabloids. 'Though I haven't exactly been paying attention to magazines or television of late.' There was no reason that she should have needed to get this information that way, though. Someone should have told her!

"I'm going to kill him," Holly declared. Sliding off the seat, she approached Juliet, running hands through her short hair in an effort to grasp something, even if it wasn't a sense of sanity. "Dating? Perhaps. Marriage? No. This is too big. Juliet, wake up." Kneeling, Holly shook the blond's shoulder ever so slightly.

The effect was immediate. Juliet shot up, pointing at an imaginary figure in front of her, looking quite angry. "Hey! In Mexico, I've been allowed to drink for two years, and I can drink anyone in the league under the table, so don't give me that 'it's not midnight yet' crap!"

Holly sat back, tilting her head a bit to study the wrestler. When she seemed to have recovered enough, she asked, "Dreaming of Jimmy?"

Juliet scowled, rubbing her eyes. "Jerk wouldn't let me drink at his bar until I was twenty-one."

"How sad for you. More important things to discuss, here. Is Artemis engaged?"

A snort was her initial response. Once Juliet had taken the time to rub the gunk out of her eyes, she gave a more detailed answer. "No, sadly for Minerva. Unless she's great at keeping a secret and acting distressed, rather than just being distressed."
"Distressed?" Artemis finished leveling out the plane, waiting for the tower to give him permission to land. In the meantime, he turned in his seat to focus on the females. The man was clearly puzzled at this new set of information.

"Yes, you dolt." Juliet leaned back and sent a punch towards him, hitting his upper arm. It was light, fueled by a mix of affection and disapproval, though it still caused him to wince. "Five years is a long time to date and not get a ring."

"We're both only twenty-one. That is rather early to think of marriage. Besides, she never mentioned—"

"She shouldn't have to mention. You're a smart boy and she's not completely progressive. She wants—what's the term?—to be made an 'honest woman.'"

Holly gaped, turning to Artemis. "You mean you've—"

"That is certainly none of your business." Artemis spun back around, hunching over the yoke. The backs of his ears were turning red, and likely a lot more of him than the women could see.

Holly again appealed to Juliet, looking a bit disturbed at the idea. Not Artemis. Artemis was a social recluse. Awkward to the extreme. He just couldn't dosomething like that. Holly was fairly certain that such an act would rend the very fabric of space and time.

Juliet didn't seem nearly so distressed. She shrugged, playing with the jade ring at the end of her braid. "He did pay out of his own funds for the guest room to be soundproofed a few years ago, though he said it was to keep guests asleep when Shana cried. And the hall camera between it and his room is uncommonly...prone to blackouts."

"Faulty wiring," Artemis supplied.

"For five years?"

"Very faulty wiring. Now, if you would all stop speculating and be seated, we are landing in a few minutes."

Still reeling, Holly surrendered her seat to Juliet, moving to the back of the plane and shielding.

Butler had apparently completed the arrangements on his end, as an innocuous white truck with darkly tinted windows was waiting for them outside customs (where Juliet had unnerved an agent by miming "nothing up my sleeves" as Holly flitted by). Now fully rested (if awoken a bit abruptly), Juliet took the wheel, a huge smile on her face. "You two should sleep, now. That was an 11 hour flight, and there's only four hours from LA to Vegas. I don't want you zonked out when we get there." She looked at her passengers, studying their reactions. This attention to them was probably a mistake, as it showed that something was amiss.

Holly, sitting in the middle seat, the chest restraint pushed behind her back, immediately caught on and protested. "Oh no. I'm not sleeping just yet. I need to see this 'Jimmy.' If you're still seeing him after eight years, he must be something."

Juliet's estimate of a four-hour trip to Las Vegas wasn't really accurate. She completely failed to mention LA traffic. Two hours after they pulled onto the road, they had crawled from LAX to West Hollywood, where Farmer's Bar was located. It was merely one lot in a block-long concrete building, only differentiated from its neighbors by a dark blue awning and blacked out store-front. The hours proclaimed the bar open ("Well," Artemis had muttered, "I suppose it is past noon."), but no one was inside the dimly-lit and musky establishment, with the exception of the man behind
the counter. He was focused on a clipboard and the rows of high-end liquor at the back of the bar, muttering their names as he took stock.

Juliet crept up, making absolutely no sound, despite her rather high heels. Even when she vaulted the counter, balancing on her palms like a male gymnast on the pommel horse and lowering herself back to the floor, this time behind the counter, he gave no indication of noticing the woman. Then she covered barman's eyes, whispering in his ear. "Guess who?"

It was like an explosion. The man struck Juliet's hands from his eyes, spinning swiftly, elbow aimed at her face. Juliet leaned back, spine curving gracefully as she avoided the attack. However, this put her off balance, forcing the wrestler to take a few steps back as the man's assault continued. Very soon, she lay on the bar counter, an irate Asian man leaning over her. One of his hands slammed next to her face while the other rose above his head, poising the clipboard directly above Juliet's neck, metal clasps facing down towards the woman's jugular.

He froze, instinct halting as the body under him registered. "Juliet?"

Juliet smiled softly. "Jimmy Chu! Unless you've changed that lame joke of a name?"

"By God, no!" He laughed, leaning down and crushing his lips against hers.

Juliet wrapped her arms around the bartender's neck, playing with the man's low-slung, short ponytail. Little groans soon came from both, Juliet completely forgetting her companions.

Artemis looked everywhere but at the pair, inspecting the walls, which were full of framed photographs. Each showed a rather well-known celebrity, political figure, or millionaire, as well as an assortment of bodyguards. Of those few who wore sleeveless shirts, all proudly displayed a blue diamond tattoo.

Holly was not so discrete. Even if she was shielded, she didn't like feeling invisible, and that pair could have distracted each other in the middle of happy hour. After what she considered to be an appropriate period set aside for greetings, she elbowed Artemis. When he merely ignored the elf, she unholstered her neutrino, poking it in his side. "I promised," she whispered.

Artemis coughed several times before Jimmy looked up, clearly annoyed and dangerous.

"We're closed," he rasped, his intentions none too discreet.

Juliet smacked his chest. "Off. He's with me."

Jimmy did not move from the blond, instead narrowing his eyes at the poshly dressed young man. "With you?"

Hanging her head over the edge of the counter, Juliet gave her friends an upside-down roll of the eyes. "A mission, Jimmy. I believe you've heard of Artemis Fowl?"

The owner of the bar continued hovering a bit longer, as if reminding Artemis of where his territory extended. Then she stood, trying to smooth out his tight black shirt. Or perhaps he was using the movement to display the wiry muscles in his arms. He did not leave the bar or Juliet to greet his guest. "I've heard, yes. Then this is about business. Not pleasure."

Juliet pushed herself onto the counter, crossing her legs. She leaned back a bit, hands resting behind her back, both taking the weight of her upper body and deliberately curving out her chest. "For now..."
Beaming and again optimistic, Jimmy rested on the back counter. "Info? Government IDs? Insider access?" He ran a rather tidy business, sending bodyguards to the best sources in LA, getting a small cut for his recommendations. Perhaps not entirely legal, but he had long ago learned that his former coworkers (if other bodyguards could be called such) would simply keep pestering him for tips until he gave in. It was better to get paid than to get frustrated.

"No, Artemis could cover all of that. We need equipment."

"Oh, no," Jimmy shook his head, "not happening. Only full Blue Diamonds get guns here, Juliet. You know that."

She sighed, sticking out her lower lip. "Yes, I know, but my brother is in Ireland watching Shana Fowl. Otherwise he would be the one asking. So..." She batted her eyelashes and bit her bottom lip, shimmying her shoulders slowly. "Please?"

"No." The Japanese man responded immediately. "You need a diamond on your arm, or you get nothing. Not even a taser."

Tracing a curved signature in the counter, Juliet looked up at him from half-lidded eyes. "I've practically earned my diamond..."

"And we're practically dating." Jimmy's retort was obviously a sore spot, based on Juliet's momentary flinch.

She recovered quickly. Sighing, the lither woman slid off the counter, hips in full swing as she took the few steps to her part-time lover, resting delicate hands on the counter at either side of his hips. This pressed her body almost fully against the bartender's, her lips brushing along his chin and neck as she talked. "Oh...so mean. And after I was so nice to you." She began to nibble lightly at his neck. "Wasn't I so nice the last time we saw each other?"

Jimmy's face went stupid at her attentions. "Yes, you certainly were." He wrapped an arm around her waist, crushing their hips together.

"You know what was really nice about last time?"

"Mmm?" His other hand began to travel up and down her back, slipping a bit lower at every pass.

Juliet pulled her hand back, moving their lips close while still just avoiding a kiss. Both were panting now, eyes barely opened as they prepared for contact.

Artemis and Holly looked at each other (or Artemis did as best he could, considering her invisibility), obviously a bit disturbed by the behavior. Holly set her neutrino to its lowest setting, aiming at the pricey liquors above the couple's heads. She wasn't sure if alcohol doused on petting humans would have the same effect as water thrown on rutting cats, but she was willing to try.

Before the elf could interfere, Juliet ended things herself. Her lips brushing Jimmy's with every word, she dropped her bombshell.

"I didn't tell Butler."

Jimmy's complexion instantly turned bone-white.

"Now then." Juliet pulled back, instantly switching from long-denied lover to dedicated businesswoman. "I need two guns. One small. Maybe a derringer. The other a normal handgun. A sig, if you've got it. A few clips for each. Is that such a bad exchange?"
Swallowing, Jimmy barely managed to choke out a few words. "You're evil."

With a bell-like laugh, Juliet poked the tip of his nose. "Oh, no, lover. 'Evil' is the woman I need the guns for."

The Living

May 14, 2014-Fowl Manor

When Butler awoke at 5 a.m. and descended to the Manor's kitchen, he received perhaps the biggest shock of his life. Artemis was sitting at the table, two plates full of pancakes, sausage, eggs, and apple slices on the table, and no computer in sight.

Butler stood in the doorway for quite a while, watching his former charge. The man's head was tilted towards a sheet of paper, which he would write on for a few seconds before putting the end of the pen in his mouth and chewing pensively. So focused was he on this task that he did not notice the massive figure of his 'old friend' in the doorway. His writing, in itself, was odd, as Artemis did almost all of his composing digitally. The breakfast was even odder, as Artemis rarely cooked, though he had gained some culinary skills (mostly involving fire extinguishers, in the beginning) since the explosion sandwich nearly ten years ago. Thirdly, and perhaps most odd of all, was the fact that Artemis was up not only before dawn, but before Butler.

"Artemis?" The Eurasian finally ventured, snapping the writing man away from his composition.

"Ah, Butler. Awake on time, as usual. I have a lot of work to do today, and I need assistance, and you are the only person I can trust to help me. So, sit down and eat while I get the wine."

Butler obeyed the first order, but frowned at his plate (it certainly looked edible...) and eyed the man who was now moving somewhat jerkily across the room. "Now, wait a second Artemis. If we have a lot of work to do, then that means we'll be leaving the Manor soon. I can not go running around outside the grounds intoxicated."

Artemis was removing a rather small (and thus, most likely, terribly expensive) bottle of wine from an iced bucket, uncorking it despite the manservant's warning. "I am aware of that. We will each only be having 100 milliliters, and this white is from a rather weak vintage, so we should both be reasonably free of effect by six, when we leave." He placed two laughably small wine flutes next to their plates and poured. The wine had a definite golden tone, which was perhaps why the man had chosen it.

Butler knew how he took alcohol and recognized that Artemis was right on at least his ability to process the small drink. Still, he knew that something was going on, and he would have to look for as many opportunities as possible to eek out information from the plotter. "Well, isn't there something about not drinking before noon?"

As he placed two tall glasses and a carafe of orange juice on the table, Artemis considered this. "Hmm...well, I believe that only applies to if you have just woken up, and I have been awake for a good portion of the night. As for your 'indiscretion,' I shall just have to forgive you."

A long flight couple with insomnia, then. Perfect. Butler simple adored it when Artemis had jet lag. "Artemis I really don't—"

"Butler." Artemis sighed, locking eyes with his steadfast protector. "I just want to have one last drink with my greatest old friend." He raised his glass and inclined it slightly, clearly waiting for the bodyguard to follow suit.
The words hung in the air between them and Butler could almost believe that Artemis still had a trace of mesmer powers. How else could he explain the fact that he had taken up his flute of wine and held it a fraction from Artemis's own glass. "I believe you have some explaining to do."

With a placating nod, Artemis clinked their glasses together and sipped the light, sweet wine. "When do I not?"

In the air over Switzerland

Of course, Artemis rarely revealed all of his plans, and today was no exception. What he did reveal, however, did not please Butler in the least. "Artemis, can't you at least tell me why we're doing this?" They were in Artemis's pet project, the Cessna, and angling down towards Flughafen Bern-Belp, the airport serving the Swiss capital of Berne.

Artemis, who had been busy on his computer wiring money between his many bank accounts, shook his head. "I'm afraid if you knew, you'd tell Mum. And if Mum knew, I doubt even you could protect me from her wrath."

"That doesn't exactly inspire me with confidence."

"The truth rarely does, old friend."

A black Mercedes was waiting for them at the terminal and Butler was somewhat relieved to feel the tell-tale heaviness of a bulletproof door as he slid into the driver's seat. Still, Butler knew what was coming on this leg of the trip. He would have preferred to drive a tank.

Oddly, Artemis did not continue working on his laptop as they made their way though the streets. Instead, he spent most of the ride looking through the window at the trees and sky. Near the end of their ride, he whispered, "Fascinating."

Butler looked at Artemis through the rear-view mirror. The young man was...wistful. "What is, Artemis?"

"The sun."

Butler finally noticed that Artemis was glancing at the horizon and squinting before dropping his gaze and blinking furiously. The sun wasn't very far up in the sky, but it was a clear day, giving the beams of light their full strength. "Well, I never really looked at it. It's kind of a bad idea."

Artemis nodded, sinking back into his seat, closing his eyes to let them recover. "Yes, I suppose so."

Butler shook this off as he swept into an underground parking space connected to a a large off-white building. Once he opened the back door, Artemis seemed to stumble out of the car. He had been bolstered by the food, but was obviously still feeling the effects of his ennui. "Artemis, we'll be in the air a lot on this little mission of yours. Will you eat and get some sleep next time we're en route?"

Artemis grabbed Butler's arm, using it to pull himself into a better posture. He was thin and could even be described as lanky, but he still failed to rise as far as the sturdy Eurasian's collarbone. Looking up, still squinting a bit, he grinned. "You know what they say: I'll sleep when I'm dead."

"No. Knowing you, you'll stage a coup in Heaven over poor management of the universe." They strode up a set of steps to a surprisingly small set of doors. Surprisingly small, considering what was inside. Not the Swiss National Bank, but one of its more...unofficial competitors. Smart
investors didn't go through the country's central hub, which meant that this small building contained about ten times as much wealth as the bank of Switzerland.

"Heaven? Butler, I am touched at your faith in my virtue." Artemis passed through the doors, looking intrigued at the idea of a celestial takeover.

Butler followed him into the hall, the tap of their shoes echoing along the marble and cedar decorations that filled the massive, open first floor. "Virtue? No, Artemis. I suspect you'll get in on a technicality."

Artemis nodded and sat down in front of an ornate desk, startling the female banker sitting behind her computer. The desk was mostly empty, excepting the computer and a bronze name plate that proclaimed the woman to be "Chikako Mizuki, Head of Business Loans." Chikako assessed Butler and Artemis before minimizing the spreadsheet she had been consulting and folding her hands in her lap. She leaned back in her chair, whose head rest seemed to have been removed to accommodate her long up-do, crossing her legs and continuing to appraise her early-morning customers. Still, her tone was bright as she addressed them in French. "How may I help you this morning, sirs?"

Artemis removed his (legitimate) Irish driver's license, handing it to the woman, along with a card displaying his account number. "I would like to make a withdrawal."

"You'll have to..." she paused, looking up at Butler, who stood behind Artemis's chair, doing his primary job: being intimidating. She obviously considered a withdrawal beneath her, but she realized that she would need a better excuse than "that's not my job" to rid herself of this nuisance. She pulled up the young man's account, then breathed out slowly, her lips pursed almost enough to whistle, barely keeping the sound to a small stream of air. When she returned her attention to the Irishman, her face took on a different set of emotions, pouring on her charm. "Very well, Mr. Fowl. How much will you be withdrawing today?"

Artemis looked to his hand, twitching his fingers as if counting the money he would need. "Oh...all of it."

Her face froze in the smile common to all horrified service workers. "All...of it?"

Artemis breathed in sharply though his nose, considering things. "Oh...less about 20 million Euro, actually. I'll be wiring that out in the next few days, I suppose."

Her face did not alter significantly. "That...is still a lot of money, but we have it on hand." She began to rise. "If you can wait, I'll see if we have enough bills on hand—"

"Oh, no," Artemis shook his hand, catching her in a position between sitting and standing. "Not bills. Gold will be sufficient."

Now her face finally fell, for the first time obscuring some of her bright teeth. "Gold." The tone was odd. Not quite a question, but certainly not an acknowledgement. Incredulous. "...trust you will not be taking it out of the country? Removal of gold from Switzerland is strictly prohibited by the customs agency."

"Oh, certainly not," Artemis responded, and Butler became aware that the man was actually enjoying himself. "I shall merely be keeping it in my safety deposit box, at another location in Berne. I believe it wise to keep my assets in a more liquid form in today's market."

It would have to be a massive safety deposit box, though such things did exist in the city. The loan
officer's eyes flickered to a door behind the bank's main desk. Likely the hiding place of a larger security force than the simple guards on duty at the entrance. "I...I'll need to speak with my manager."

"Yes, I suspect you will. Please, tell Mr. Lautens that my time, like my gold, is valuable."

Within three hours (the surprising speed perhaps due in part to the surreptitious exchange of a respectable bribe), Butler and Artemis were back at the airport, finishing their last preparations in the terminal furthest from the major airlines. Butler was passing bar after bar of gold to Artemis, looking about nervously, in case any of the airport employees (despite the second sizable bribe, this time paid to the customs agent) noticed their haul. Artemis, for his part, was rather disinterested in the gold, instead periodically looking at his watch and frowning. As the last bars were being handed in, his cell phone rang. After glancing at the number, Artemis brightened, answering in perfect Italian.

"Doctor Giordano, excellent." He left off the storing and disappeared into the cockpit, pulling the privacy screen into place. It wasn't enough to mask the sound of the conversation, but he was more concerned with Butler observing his demeanor. "Yes, you received my message? ...I know it is unorthodox, but consider the benefits to others. ...That is a pity. I had already informed my bank that I would be wiring seventeen million Euro for your research...Yes, it is a simple procedure, isn't it?...No, you will not be held responsible. I will sign every paper you ask me to, for your protection...Why, yes, eight in the evening is perfect. Thank you for your assistance...Very well, I shall remember that. Good day."

Butler had just secured the door when Artemis snapped his phone closed and slid the privacy screen open. Butler sat in the copilot's seat and wiped his forehead, removing a bead of sweat. Craning his torso over the back of his seat, old spine popping deliciously in the process, he removed a few containers of food and water from the Cessna's small refrigerator. "Diamonds would have been a bit easier to transport, Artemis. We're going to lose a small fortune in bribes, based on your itinerary. If we don't get reported by the one honest customs agent in Europe."

"No, he is stationed in Germany." Artemis quipped, checking the plane's readouts. "The bribes will be a mere fraction of what we are transporting, as you well know."

Butler guzzled a bottle of water, then offered another to Artemis. "Well, this promises to be an interesting day. Drink?"

Pushing the cold bottle away, Artemis shook his head and began the pre-flight checklist. "No, not now."

Butler furrowed his brow, but did not press. Instead, he began the co-pilots portion of the checklist. He needed a plan. And quick.
A Tight Fit

The Dead

September 9, 2014-Outside Fowl Manor

Foaly was a little jealous. He'd had nearly three years to prepare for the return of Hybras, along with full support from the Council and most of the LEP (minus Ark Sool, until his removal) and a high-unlimited budget. Commander Trouble Kelp, however, managed an equal number of troops in under three hours, with more on the way. Sure, it was a logistical nightmare on the surface, but—d'arvit—he'd done it! Even N°1 and Qwan had joined the away team, with Qweffor serving as their intermediary with the underground. Trouble's task force was equipped with half of the LEP's service-ready equipment, every Shimmer Suit, and (last, but about a million places from least) some of the LEP's newest Neutrino models.

"You are so over budget." Foaly muttered, pulling up a full-size holographic model of the gun and displaying it alongside a miniaturized hologram of himself. About the only thing Trouble did not get on the surface that Foaly had managed to have for Hybras was Foaly himself. Though that could have more to do with his rather entrenched position in the Operations Booth.

Trouble grunted. "Budgets do not apply where Artemis Fowl is concerned." He was constantly angling his head to track the sound of incoming fairies, mentally tabulating his troops.

"True enough." Foaly cleared his throat and took a survey of the LEP officers in attendance. Half of the service's captains and majors were circling the display table, gathering the information they would pass on to the dozen subordinates that had been assigned to each for this mission. The only low-ranked officers were Chix Verbil (who had a decidedly white cast to his normal green pallor) and Grub Kelp (who was tugging on his brother's sleeve, a few breaths away from a panic attack). "Alright, everyone, listen closely. We do not know what Fowl has planned, but he has already proven himself a formidable enemy. Luckily for us, he has been out of contact with the People for half a decade and we have some surprises for him."

He halted the spinning of the Neutrino hologram and began to point out features. "Gentlemen...and lady," Foaly nodded to Vinyáya, who gave him an annoyed glare, "I present to you the Neutrino 4000. As could be expected, I've increased the firing speed and battery life, but they weren't generally an issue."

Wing Commander Vinyáya snorted. "You have obviously never been in a firefight."

"Yes, well..." Of course he had never been in a firefight! He just made sure to provide the weapons and armor that let the hotheads in the firefights live. "The true progress is in the aiming system. I'd had a lot of complaints in the trials, but with a bit of tinkering I've made manual aiming virtually obsolete. It has accuracy to within a millimeter for any target moving at less than 200 kilometers per hour within half a kilometer of the shooter. An aiming system that even Holly Short can't best."

"Oh, I doubt that."

Foaly whinnied in surprise and joy. "Holly! Another mission together, then?"

Holly pushed her way through the entrance to the tactics tent and removed her helmet, running a hand through her spiky hair, which was edging towards needing a trim if she wished to avoid it being called a 'pixie cut.' "Of course. I'm running low on overtime this year." Except for the helmet
and a spare wing rigging, she was still in her office uniform, having found it somewhat difficult to find an actual suit on the surface. She wasn't the only fairy who had been forced to go so ill-equipped, but the People were generally good at hiding their presence from Mud Men, even without a full array of LEP gear.

Vinyáya, who had spent the last few hours waiting (having arrived quite early in a shuttle filled with red-hot warlocks) shot her Section 8 subordinate a stern look. "If you do not mind leaving off the banter, we have a situation to contain."

Holly grabbed a chair next to her boss and straddled it, resting folded arms on the back. "Certainly. Contain away."

Foaly looked momentarily forlorn, but was appeased by the prospect of elaborating on his genius. "Very well. I left the most important feature for last. Corporal Kelp?"

Grub Kelp, who had somehow been unable to effectively hide under his desk while LEP officers were rounded up, gave a little jump. He looked at Foaly reproachfully, obviously not pleased with where things were headed. He was not a volunteer, and any time he was singled out as an example he tended to have to submit a mountain of complaints. "Yes?"

Foaly smiled in an almost fatherly fashion. "Please, pick up one of the Neutrinos and hit the red button under the trigger."

Grub had obvious misgivings. He looked to his brother, who nodded sternly. Trembling, he picked up the gun, pointed it straight in the air, and pushed the button.

Halfway down the barrel, a small series of bumps broke away, turning into a collection of metal balls. They were pushed out by bright white threads, which expanded in a sudden burst of light. Once that dimmed enough for the officers to see, Grub was revealed to be encircled in a shining net, the ball bearings whizzing around him like little electrons, hissing with speed.

Foaly grinned in anticipation. "All right. Who wants to throw something at Grub?"

The air was instantly full of coins, styluses, chap-sticks, rocks, hair pins, notebooks, keys, and a few shoes. Grub initially squealed in alarm, covering his head as best he could. When the onslaught approached the mesh, the ball bearings seemed to become attracted to the intruding objects, slamming into them with a near-deafening zap. All fell harmlessly to the ground in a circle around him. Once Corporal Kelp realized he wasn't about the be massacred, he smiled ecstatically. Until he remembered that he had been attacked by what seemed to be the entire tent. "I should file —"

"—this under 'amazing!'" Foaly broke in, distracting the elf. "Even the Shimmer Suit is not immune to all weapons, and it's especially weak against brute force, like a fight or gunshots. This shield will block anything that comes at it, providing it isn't too big. I based it on the Safetynet, though, obviously, it does more than just stop lasers. The electricity is normally held in the mesh by a series of magnets, but will be attracted to anything that approaches from the outside—you have no idea how hard it was to keep it from frying the subject inside the shield—and gives it a good thwacking with the ball bearings." He addressed Grub. "Thank you for your assistance, Corporal. You may shut off the shield, now."

Looking relieved, as he had tensed at the mention of a web of electricity surrounding him, Grub again pushed the red button, turning the shield off. A second later, he was hit perfectly between the eyes with an acorn by a patient and rather accurate fairy.
Holly jumped into the conversation, grinning a bit too wildly for simple curiosity. "Electricity and magnets...won't it be vulnerable to an EMP, then?"

Foaly snorted. "An EMP. Really, Holly? Not a chance. No, the only thing shutting this baby off is the wielder or a loss of power. It runs on the Neutrino's own nuclear batter, but...well, a big shield of electricity is a bit taxing. Fully charged, it will only last ten minutes."

Vinyáya looked contemplative. "An entire nuclear battery in ten minutes? Impressive. Less if we shoot, I'm guessing."

"Well, not by much, but that's the idea."

"And I'm assuming we can shoot with it on?"

"Of course! With the full aiming system, too. You'll actually need the aiming system. Distorted in there, isn't it, Corporal?"

Grub was still tending to his brow. "A bit like flying through a cloud. Just hotter."

Trouble rubbed his goatee, wincing a bit as he noted the prickle of stubble surrounding his well-manicured facial hair. He hadn't bothered to shave that morning, preferring the spend a few extra minutes sleeping and recovering from the intense night. "How many squads do I get to outfit today?"

Foaly began playing with one of his horns, avoiding the camera. "Er...squads?"

Trouble groaned. "Great, let me guess. It's just the one, and you didn't finish the safety tests."

Insulted, Foaly straightened his back and tossed his mane. "If you could stop being so pessimistic, Commander? I finished the tests this morning, and there are two on that table, if you hadn't opened your eyes."

There was a collective groan from the officers. Suddenly recognizing the questionable safety of the weapon he was holding, Grub set it gingerly on the table and took several steps back.

"So this was just more horsey posturing and no use to us?" Vinyáya snapped. "Thank you, Foaly. I was really wondering how to waste time in this delicate situation."

"Hey, hey," Foaly waved his hands, flaring his nostrils, "this is not a waste of time. Butler and the rest of the Fowls are in Paris and, from what I can tell since the surveillance on Fowl Manor was turned back on, no security detail has been hired to replace him. The Mud Boy is inside, alone, and with only a few guns and some obsolete LEP equipment for defense. You only need one of these neutrinos. Go in, bust into his stronghold, and knock him out with a low-charge blast. Retrieval will take care of it from there."

"And then what?" Holly said, pensive.

The other officers looked at her speculatively. She was a close friend of the Mud Boy in years previous, but everyone knew that there had been some sort of falling out between them.

Trouble in particular seemed disturbed, gripping the edge of the table rather tightly.

Foaly shrugged. "Well...trial, imprisonment, maybe a mind-wipe. That kind of thing."

Now Holly muttered so softly only Vinyáya could hear. "Yes, and imprisoning genius has gone so
well for the LEP in the past."

Commander Kelp stood, clapping his hands to get everyone's attention. "Alright. Vinyáya and I will discuss who gets the guns for the mission. In the meantime, everyone suit up. Shimmer suits to the lower ranks. If you were good enough to get promoted, you'd best not need the extra tech to survive. Dismissed!"

All in attendance (minus the two Commanders) turned quickly and began to file out of the tent. Holly was swift to follow, eager to get out of her office uniform and into combat gear. That is, until a heavy hand grabbed her shoulder, spinning her about to face Trouble. "Yes, Commander?"

"We need to talk," he said, then shot Vinyáya a look. "Alone."

Taking the hint, the Wing Commander made her way out of the tent, wondering out loud if N°1 could summon a meal.

Once the tent had emptied, Trouble grabbed Holly's upper arms and forced her to meet his eyes. "Go back to E1 and take the next shuttle to Haven. Now."

Holly didn't move. "Why? If anyone is qualified to deal with this situation, it's me."

Trouble gave her a single, small shake, hoping to snap Holly out of her emerging stubborn entrenchment. "No. You are the last person who should be here."

Shrugging and twisting her shoulders, Holly stepped back, breaking the male elf's grip. "What do you mean?" She snapped, again meeting his eyes. Now, however, hers were steely, challenging him to order her to leave.

'So she hasn't seen the vid...' That wouldn't last long, as Foaly would fill her in the second she put her helmet back on. It was best to reveal everything directly, before she could accuse him of hiding it from her. "When I was helping Chix Verbil with the Ritual, Fowl activated a monitor he left at the oak. He asked to speak with you."

"And...?"

"Well, I refused, obviously."

"You refused...without asking me?" She was glaring now, one fist clenched and the other reaching for her right hip. Luckily, she carried no neutrino on an office shift.

"The Council forbids any fairy to have contact with Fowl. I didn't need to ask you."

"Let's get one thing straight, Trouble." Holly grabbed one of his lapels, pulling down so the slightly taller elf was on her level. "When it comes to Artemis, you always ask me."

'So it's "Artemis" still? After all this time...' He felt a twisting in his gut. "What? Do you want to talk to him? Why?"


"Shouldn't it be?" Trouble reached out and tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear.

Holly stepped back quickly, shaking her head to dislodge his touch. "No. It will never be your business."
Trouble blinked, his arm hovering in the air and slight squeaks coming out of his mouth. He shook his head, then let his arm fall. "Holly, if you do not tell me these things, how am I ever going to protect you?"

"Whoever said, " Holly hissed, looking up at him through slitted eyes, "that I needed protecting?"

Trouble was put off by this wild shift in moods. She had gone from excited to enraged in just a minute of conversation. Not a promising sign for their relationship. "I'm your boyfriend. It's what I'm supposed to do."

"I don't believe we've established the boundaries of our relationship yet, Commander. So I suggest you back off."

Trouble clenched his jaw. Well, if she would call him by title, the she would get him by title. "Then it is my duty, as Commander, to tell you that you are in unnecessary danger. I order you to return to Haven."

"Then I regret to inform you, sir, that I am disobeying that order. Feel free to get someone to take me back to Haven, but they'd better be really strong or not above shooting an officer."

Trouble gaped. She had been so deadpan. As if she truly intended to strike out against anyone that got in her way. "You...you can't do this."

Holly sighed, rolling her eyes at the astonished man. "I thought you'd learned this already, but I suppose you could use a reminder. Pay attention. I'm Major Holly Short, and that," she pointed towards the Manor, "is another Fowl incident in the making. I can do whatever the hell I want."

Trouble didn't have the energy (and a large part of him wasn't sure if he had the will) for a standoff against Holly. He was about to reach for his radio to summon Vinyáya when a breathless gnome burst into the tent.

"Commander Kelp! You're needed in the communication tent!"

Trouble groaned. He already had a feeling about where this was headed. "Yes?"

"We just got lines set up and...there's a call for you. From Fowl."

He ran a hand over his smooth hair, squeezing his ponytail and grimacing slightly at the pull on individual hairs as his bindings tightened. "Of course. Tell him I'll be in momentarily."

The gnome nodded and took off as fast as his stubby legs would carry him.

Holly had turned to follow the messenger, but Trouble grabbed her upper arm, tugging her around to face him again. She used her momentum to raise her knee, intending to unleash a devastating attack, but Trouble had a few more years of hand-to-hand behind him. He also lifted his knee, knocking their lower legs together. Catching her foot, he stepped back down, trapping her boot under his.

"You are going to stay out of the sight, and you are going to be quiet. This is not male bravado, Holly. If Fowl knows you are already on the surface, that is valuable information. If you do anything to tip him off, I will have you demoted to Private."

Holly scoffed. "Oooh, a cut in pay. Excellent threat."

"In Traffic."
"...fine." Holly wrenched her arm free. "But...Trouble?"

The sudden, genuine concern in her voice soothed the Commander slightly, though he still felt tension at the mere idea of her being in the tent as he talked to Fowl. "Yes, Holly?"

She licked her lips, as if hoping the moisture would help her words come out a bit easier. "Be careful with Artemis. He's smart. He's going to mess with you."

Trouble snorted. "What? Blowing up a Ritual site right in front of me wasn't 'messing with me'?

She shook her head. "No. Not in the slightest."

Rolling his eyes, Trouble turned to the tent's flaps. "Very well. Warning noted. Let's go, Major."

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**The Broken**

*July 3, 2014-Farmer's Bar, Los Angeles*

"He seems...nice."

"Mmm."

"Not the type I'd imagined. A bit undersized for a bartender."

"Well, they're not all bloated."

"He certainly seems to like you."

"He'd better."

"...so, what did you do last time?"

Juliet shook her head, lips twitching as she finally chose two suitable guns. "Nice try, fairy-girl. I don't kiss and tell." The pair of fighting women were in a back room of the bar, allowing them a little private, unshielded conversation among the dimly-lit bottles of Jack and Jäger.

Holly drummed her fingers on the gun-covered counter, trying to look innocent. Of course a full-grown woman trying to look innocent is perhaps one of the wickedest sights in the world. "Oh, I didn't expect you to tell about the kissing..."

The blond wrestler tapped her nose in much the same way that one would reprimand a cat. "Bad fairy."

Holly shook her nose to shake off the poking, but she still looked amused. "Oh, come on. I've only got one girly instinct, and that's to gossip about sex. Indulge me."

Carefully, Juliet placed the guns in two holsters (the smaller in a holster situated quite low between her breasts, the larger in a hip holster under her jeans) and shrugged on a black dress shirt, fastening every button and leaving it untucked, quite effectively hiding both guns. "Oh, fine, but you have to give me details on your romps, first." She inspected Holly with unabashed curiosity. Her own "awakening" had been a slow process, over the course of several (rather infrequent) visits with Jimmy. Holly didn't strike her as the "I don't kiss on the first date" type, so the wrestler was deeply interested in the fairy's escapades.

Stiffly, Holly turned from the counter, making her way to the door. "Let's go."
"Woah!" Lunging forward, Juliet grabbed Holly's shoulder, spinning her about. "Just one minute! Look, you don't have to give me details, but no one has that kind of reaction without good reason."

Holly yanked herself free. "Nothing. Exactly nothing. Things have been...dry, lately." In more ways than one, in fact. She would have called it frustrating, but it really wasn't. She had been too fixated on the Koboi case to think much about relationships and their perks.

Juliet knew what she was about to do could ruin things. Holly was already sinking back into herself after barely being drawn out by the last day's interactions. Still, she had to at least try. Reaching out, she brushed Holly's torn ear. "Because of this, right? What happened?"

Holly slapped the woman's hand, the sound reverberating among the bottles of liquor. "I was stupid. That's all. We need to get going. If the traffic here was any indication, it'll be a decade before we get to Vegas." Careful to avoid any further grabs, the elf shielded and left the armory.

Juliet followed, concerned and confused. She would need to talk with Artemis about this.

After fifteen minutes of a rather physical goodbye, the questing trio had finally assembled back in the truck. Despite Holly's assignment by Butler to be the leader, it was Juliet who gave the orders. "Okay, you two. Sleep. The flight should have been long enough to tire you, and another four hours driving is just going to zonk you out further. I am not barging into that club alone, and you two will be useless to me if you're walking zombies.

Sitting de-shielded in the middle seat, Holly crossed her arms. "I've gone longer without sleep. I'll be fine."

Ten minutes later, jackhammer snores were coming out of the diminutive fairy.

Artemis looked at her in patent disapproval. An eleven hour flight and the subsequent jerky and hot drive had indeed tired him, but there was no sleeping with Holly making a noise that impressive. "Did she sound like this last night?"

Juliet, who had been popping in and out of the Manor as she prepared the Cessna, shook her head. "It's probably because her mouth is open. Watch." Reaching over, she delicately lifted the fairy's hanging jaw.

Holly gave one final and mighty snort, then was silent.

Sighing in relief, Artemis leaned against the passenger door, crumpling his suit jacket into a makeshift pillow. "Finally. I thought she was supposed to be a master of stealth."

"She's exhausted, Artemis. I'm not sure she even slept last night. Every time I looked in, she was tapping away at that blasted tablet you loaned her. She reminded me a bit of you, actually."

That was an interesting idea. Artemis quirked an eyebrow at Juliet. "How so?"

"Obsessed."

"Holly never struck me as obsessive before."

Taking her eyes off the road just long enough to look at Artemis, Juliet chewed the corner of her lips. "You know her better than me. What would make Holly act like this?"

Artemis looked over at Holly's massacred ear. He wanted to reach out and touch it. The remains looked jagged, but he was sure the would be quite soft. He had only touched Holly's ear's once,
and that was to disguise them from the Extinctionists. Even when she had been unconscious after their first meeting, he hadn't had the courage to inspect that part of her. It felt too...personal.

When Artemis did not give any real response, Juliet focused again on the road. She noticed a rather large pothole and curved around it. They avoided the deep middle, but still slipped a wheel into the shallow edge. The car rocked a bit and continued on.

Secured only by a lap restraint, Holly tottered and fell over. She landed none too lightly on Artemis's lap, a slumbering grunt the only indication that she noticed the change. She curled an arm under her head to form a pillow, the other draping over her eyes to block out the little of the setting sun that managed to get in through the blacked-out windows.

Artemis tensed against his seat, looking down at the sleeping elf. Very slowly, he reached out, wrapping his fingers around the collar of her Recon suit. He began to pull her back into a sitting position.

Juliet reached out, batting his hand away. "Leave her alone, Artemis. If you accidentally wake her up, she'll be too freaked out to sleep."

Artemis left his hand hovering at Holly's neck. "And why would she be so disturbed?"

The blond's eyes flicked at him, then did a rather thorough roll into the back of her head. She didn't say anything, but her disapproval at his denseness was fairly obvious.

Artemis focused on the sleeping elf splayed across his lap. She'd been so...intense since Nimbus had attacked. Every time she had loosened up a bit, someone had pointed out the scar and sent her retreating. It seemed that the only things that could draw her back out was talking with Juliet...or talking with him about Minerva.

Blowing a long breath out between his teeth, Artemis lifted his arm and rested it on the back of his seat. 'Women seem to have a knack for making my life far too complicated.'

Trying to ignore the fairy occupying his lap, Artemis drifted off.

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The Venetian, Las Vegas, Nevada

270 miles to the Northeast and several hundred feet in the air, Koboi slammed the door of the Venetian's penthouse suite. Kicking her shoes off so violently that they streaked across the entrance hall, barely missing an ornate full-body mirror, she screeched one rather eloquent word: "Men!" That said, she stormed into the brightly-decorated living room, where she sat on a cream colored couch and opened the two laptops resting on the table in front of her. She typed on them simultaneously, never once mixing their rather contrary messages, even as she continued to fume silently.

In the master bedroom, Opal sighed, pouring herself out of bed. Half-awake, she searched the dark room until she found and shrugged on a red silk bathrobe. Thus attired, the pixie floated into the main section of the suite, ready for the evening's debriefing.

Opal and Koboi had two years of co-conspiracy behind them and actually worked quite well together...now. The first (and most intense) negotiation had been over their shared name. Neither wished to adopt a pseudonym, even for the purposes of plotting. Thus, after three weeks of fighting, the human half of their duo had finally managed to come out on top. Her victory wasn't based on seniority, but more on the inconvenience of having to interact with humans without the aid of magic. The pixie Opal Koboi had, grudgingly, stepped down, allowing her future self the
more dignified name of Koboi, leaving herself as Opal. After that, things had gone swimmingly. By necessity, Koboi became diurnal, doing most of the leg work, leaving the firmly nocturnal Opal to head their night-time operations. The arrangement wasn't perfect, but little was in their lives.

Opal draped herself over the back of the couch (which left her feet dangling far off the ground), inspecting the computer screens. Finding nothing of immediate importance, she turned to her older self. "Did your mission go well?"

"Disturbingly," Koboi muttered. Her e-mail completed, she set it on a timer, ready to be delivered at dawn. "I hope you don't mind me tipping off the PD. 'What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas' really shouldn't go that far."

"Certainly, go ahead." Opal gave a little wave, as if granting permission. As if Koboi wouldn't take the action without her approval. As if they hadn't pushed their contacts—be it ever so slightly—with the mesmer during the last webcam meeting. "Did you catch sight of our guests? They landed in LA about six and a half hours ago."

"No, but it's a big city and I only stayed at the casino for long enough to find my mark. By the way, could you have picked a less attractive trio?"

Opal pouted, whimpering a bit at her partner's disapproval. "You can't exactly find the best on those dating sites. Be happy I found that group. Our next option weighed as much, but there was only one of him."

Koboi grimaced. "Charming. Well, the mesmer seems to be holding up well. Congratulations on attracting a bunch of weak sleaze-bags"

Now Opal was genuinely hurt. "Weak sleaze-bag" had actually been the words put down in their outline. It was like being chastised for hitting a bulls-eye. "It was all for the plan. You know that."

Finally clued into her partner's feelings (a rather impressive feat for the normally self-centered megalomaniac), the human left off her typing and leaned back. Her black leather pants and jacket creaked at the movement. She loved that sound. Fairy 'pleather' didn't have anywhere near as much aural appeal as simple cowhide, and the scent...delicious. She flicked her tight black ponytail over the back of the couch, rearranging the two loose bits of hair at her temples (the only measures she had taken to differentiate herself from her pixie half, who still wore her long hair unbound). "You did well. They have their tools and target, so all is proceeding on schedule."

A light came back into Opal's eyes. Her spine seemed to turn liquid as she curled over the back of the couch, stretching out her small body next to the other woman. Almost absentmindedly, she traced a finger along the seam of the human's pants. "So we have some free time?"

Koboi gave a little, startled jerk and looked down at the pixie lying beside her. The breath caught in her throat and her eyes went wide.

Opal had put on a robe, but she hadn't deigned to cinch it. Now, as she lay on the couch, the robe had fallen open, revealing an expanse of soft flesh from her hair line down to her toes.

As casually as possible, looking forward rather than at this tiny figure, Koboi let her fingers touch Opal's lips. Then she began to trail them down the pixie's neck.

At the touch, Opal closed her eyes, arching her back as the fingers drifted south of her collarbone. She laughed lightly as they brushed her stomach, then bit her lip as the human played momentarily with her navel before brushing just below. Not quite there, but so close...
Koboi leaned over, blowing lightly on Opal's lips. "I suppose we do have a bit of time."

Suddenly, Opal pushed herself up on her elbows, seeking the sweet connection.

Just as quickly, Koboi backed away, tutting. "I said we have time. Always so impatient."

Opal's eyes widened. "Can't we—"

"No."

Koboi interjected, not even trying to mask the harshness in her tone. With surprising ease, she captured Opal's wrists, wrapping the sash around them before twisting it through the center of the loops, leaving a few feet of silk free. Standing, she tugged on the makeshift leash.

Looking quite intensely and furiously at the wall, Opal rose, tugging at the sash. She was biting her lower lip, a pink flush on her sun-starved cheeks. "What if I don't want to?"

Bending over, completely unwilling to kneel before her younger self, Koboi tapped a finger to the side of the fairy's face, turning it until they were forced into eye contact. "Too bad, fairy. It's what I want, and I think we've firmly established that I get what I want."

Then, before Opal could protest, Koboi yanked on the silk, crushing their lips together. She grabbed the pixie's jaw, forcing her mouth open and thrusting her own tongue inside.

For a moment, Opal stiffened, squeaking. Then she began to tremble, her small tongue rasping against the wet mass forcing itself deep between her teeth. The pixie reached forward, clumsy fingers seeking out an agonizingly long series of buttons on the leather pants.

Gasping, Koboi straightened and stepped back. It took her a moment to summon the glare she sent down at the small figure before her. "A bit bold, are we?"

Opal stepped forward, pressing her body against the human. Her future self was taller, but she still managed to nuzzle into the woman's chest. The pixie took in a deep breath, savoring the dusty, sweaty smell of leather. "I suppose I'm just...growing up."

Koboi let out a bark of laughter. She had expected this. After all, if she was taking on the dominant role, then her past self would eventually need to liven up a bit. Shaking her head, as if disappointed (though the possibilities of a more aggressive partner were already beginning to drift through her mind), Koboi cupped her hand behind the pixie's neck, brushing her fingers through the soft hair at the nape. Then she turned, striding into the bedroom, pulling the small fairy after her.

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*They call her "Lady Luck."*

Holly shot up, tearing both neutrinos from her hip holsters and pointing them at the source of the brassy blast and unfamiliar voice.

*But there is room for doubt.*

Vision still blurry from sleep, Holly did her best to focus before she pulled the triggers. She was looking at a black and Day-Glo green plastic panel displaying the text "Folder 3 [Travel Music]-Track 10-LUCK BE A LADY TONIGHT" in blocky LCD letters.

A lightly tanned hand came into her vision, resting on the barrel of one gun and slowly pushing it down. "Sorry, fairy girl. It's king of a league tradition to play this on arrival. For good luck."

Holly resisted the urge to turn her gun on the speaker, though her mind hadn't completely caught up
with the last few days. She was only loosely restrained at the waist and she had her gun; so this was not another kidnapping.

Then things slotted back into place. Holly looked at the speaker to see a chagrined Juliet. Then to Artemis, who was looking out the window, brow furrowed.

Holly re-holstered her guns and elbowed Juliet lightly in the hip. "What's wrong with him?"

The blond sighed melodramatically. "Once again, he thinks he is the center of the universe. So, a bit of unwarranted guilt and turmoil, I suppose."

Artemis grunted at this idea. "If you would stop jumping to conclusions, we should be focusing on the task at hand." He pointed out the front window.

Holly followed his gesture...and felt her heart skip a beat.

What she saw reminded her of a trip she had taken with her mother in the 1940s. They and a few other female relatives from Atlantis had chartered a submarine to surface in the middle of the Pacific. When the passengers had taken to the top of the sub, all lights were turned off. The Milky Way and a full moon blazed overhead. There had been nearly enough light to read by, if you were able to pull your eyes away.

There were no stars in this night sky, but it was just as breathtaking. Each section of the horizon was dominated by a different monument. A pyramid, a facsimile of the New York City skyline, the Eiffel tower, a castle, an enormous needle tower, and a dozen other massive buildings. All of these were covered in lights that turned the desert night into a second day.

And the people! Thousands filled the streets, moving in and out of the glittering behemoths. They seemed to travel in small groups, mostly made of adults, though there were some family units. A few of the groups seemed to be made almost exclusively of one sex and were extremely excited. Bachelor and bachelorette parties, no doubt. Emotions seemed cleanly split, with little room for a middle ground: elation or despair.

Entertainers were spaced throughout the streets, but these were not simple jugglers or actors. They all wore elaborate costumes (skimpy and otherwise) and seemed focused around the entrances to the buildings, trying to draw more people in. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, they were all stunning. Not an extra inch of fat or a hair out of place.

"Woah." Holly whispered.

It was a fair description. The People had a few resorts, but nothing to this scale or so flamboyant. The humans had, once again, built a city that had no right to exist and proceeded to make it into the closest thing they had to a magical land.

"Yeah," Juliet murmured, obviously just as enraptured as the fairy. "The best or worst city you'll ever visit, depending on how Lady Luck treats you. I snatched the Heavyweight belt here a few years ago. Shocked the hell out of Hogman, I don't mind saying. Never expected it from Mexico's little Jade Princess. Pity it wasn't Pay-Per-View. I'd've had it made."

She broke off from Las Vegas Boulevard South, coasting down a side street. The glitz and glamour faded quickly, replaced by nightclubs with almost no windows and ludicrously long lines. The people in these lines were a bit more subdued than their casino-crawling neighbors, but they seemed to contain many of the last-hurrah parties.

Juliet swept into a velvet-roped lane, halting in front of a trio of red-vested attendants. Her
companions (Holly shielded, of course) followed. Keys tossed rather casually to the shortest of the attendants, Juliet prowled up the street. The men in the lines took in her long blond hair, silky dress shirt, and tight black jeans and began to edge forward. Then they saw her black and burnished metal steel-toe shoes and stepped back. Those were ass-kicking shoes, and no one messed with a woman in ass-kicking shoes in Vegas. They did not tend to be fashion statements.

There were roughly as many people in line for the Platinum Nightclub as were in Holly's LEP graduating class. Juliet not only walked past this line, but she completely ignored it, as if they were peons beneath her notice. Even Artemis seemed impressed...and perhaps a bit hypnotized by the exaggerated sway of her hips. It was impossible not to be. Even Holly was a bit enraptured.

The wrestler was soon at the open doors of Platinum, where a massive bouncer unclipped the green velvet rope to let her in.

Artemis, though fast on her heels, found himself shut out. He glared up at the guard. "Excuse me, but you let her in."

The bouncer poked a thick finger into the much smaller man's chest. "That, pipsqueak, is because she's a girl and she's pretty."

In the line, one quarter of the patrons looked offended at the first requirement, another quarter at the second. The other half of the line didn't flinch. They had been clubbing too many times to be insulted by this arrangement.

Juliet, finding herself ward-less, traipsed back. "He's with me." She smiled, as if that should solve the problem.

The bouncer looked legitimately sorry, but for no laudable reason. Losing a sexual beacon like this one would be a travesty. "Sorry, Miss, but there's too many men inside, already. We've got to keep the balance of the party." In truth, there were two women to every man inside. Also in truth, this was an abnormally high ratio. Three or four to one was management's preference.

For only a heartbeat, Juliet was forced to pause. Then she beamed at the bouncer, as if amused by his silliness, and grabbed the Irishman's hand. "This is my friend, Artemis."

Th bouncer raised an eyebrow, asking what her point was.

Juliet looked at the line, then cupped a hand around her mouth to direct the words away from them and directly at the large man. "He's gay."

Artemis's right eyebrow began to twitch.

Relieved, the bouncer unclipped the rope, guiding Artemis in with a hand to the small of his back. "Oh, good. We're low on subs tonight."

Artemis whipped his head over his shoulder. "I am not—"

WHAP!

Artemis was silenced by a rather sharp slap on the ass, courtesy of the bouncer. He needed a few moments to formulate an adequate response and remove the look of horror from his face, but Juliet pulled him away. The last thing Artemis saw before entering the nightclub was the large bouncer waving with his fingers and puckering his lips.

Holly followed, almost dying from her withheld laughter.
When the bartender at Platinum placed an open bottle of Smirnoff Ice in front of Minerva, the blond genius knew she was about to have a very bad night.

She pulled her glass of red wine (a barely acceptable vintage, despite it being the best in the house) to her chest, glaring down at the offensive malt liquor. "What is that?" She jerked her head at the drink, suppressing a sneer. It would not do to sneer. The bartender was being remarkable tolerant of her, all things considered. He'd even left several customers at the counter while picking out her wine, thus losing a sizable chunk of cash.

The bartender, who was in the middle of shaking his thousandth martini of the night ("Shaken, not stirred," he grumbled to himself. No one thought themselves wittier than a drunken tourist.), took a moment to shake the tumbler at the space behind the woman. "They bought it for you."

They. Double-joy. Placing her Cabernet on the counter as far from the bottle as possible, Minerva took a fortifying breath and spun on her bar stool.

She nearly screeched. For a moment, she thought she was encountering some new fairy monster, but they were just humans. Ugly humans.

The duo facing her seemed to be clones. Both had bottle-tanned skin, though in an unnatural orange, and not all that well applied. In particular, they seemed to have missed all of the skin around their eye sockets, creating a sort of reverse-raccoon mask. Their hair was bleached blond and gelled into spikes. The collars of their polo shirts were popped. Finally, and perhaps most disturbing to Minerva, they both appeared to be wearing two-dollar-whore pink lip-gloss. She had nothing against the metro-sexual thing, but the least they could do was pick a shade that flattered them.

The larger one, who sported a few more fake gold chains than his compatriot, jerked his chin up in a nonverbal "Yo." He continued in a half-drunk slur. "Hey, beautiful. How you gonna repay us for that drink?"

Minerva looked about the club, her scowl deepening. It hurt to admit it, but she wasn't the most attractive woman in the club. Of course, this was mostly intentional, as it was her third night of hopping, and she had decided to go low-key in an effort to avoid these types. Her cascade of curls was pulled into a ponytail, creating a sort of sea-anemone effect high on the back of her head. She wore simple blue denim capris and a black shirt, along with a jean jacket to disguise her "assets." Her soon-to-be-wed cousin had said she looked like "One of them...you know...the ones on bikes," so Minerva had acquiesced enough to put on a pair of silver stiletto sandals. Which, ironically, only seemed to enhance the image.

The mystery of her selection thus unsolved, Minerva heaved a great sigh, putting her hands together in front of her, as if in prayer. "I shall repay you...for this," here she reached behind her, pinching the neck of the bottle as if it were a mass of hair straight out of a public shower's drain, handing it over to the wingman, "by giving you some advice.

"First, ask a girl if she wants a drink before you buy it. It gives her a chance to politely refused without destroying you. Second, ask what she wants." She flicked a finger at the bottle, making it ring. "Those drinks are little more than frat-girl swill. If you'd found out what I like to drink, you would have realized that you just can't afford my tastes. Finally, ask her if she wants you to sod off once you buy the drink. As I do. Goodbye."

It really was a kind speech, given the weekend she had been through. She hadn't even poured the drink over the leader's head, as she had been inclined. Any woman who has been clubbing will
agree: she was being remarkably generous.

The duo did not see it that way, but they could wait. Thirty minutes and she’d say different, thanks to her own momentary lapse of attention, their rather dexterous friend, and the dark beauty they had met an hour ago at Harrah’s.

Juliet had done well in Madame Ko's academy, but she had a few unfortunate weaknesses that made becoming a blue diamond impossible. One was a respect for human life that extended past the principal. Another was an inability to focus and filter. Both had worked against her in Tunisia, and the latter was coming into play right now. Every blond woman in the club was catching her eyes, and there are a lot of blonds in Vegas. "Artemis, I don't see her. We need to get on the PA or something. Have you tried her cell?"

"Of course," Artemis muttered, trying to look over the heads of the clubbers. The had retreated to a dark corner of the room, Artemis and Juliet standing shoulder-to-shoulder before Holly, allowing the fairy to fade back into the visible spectrum (thus conserving her magic) while they formulated a plan. "It was the first thing I did. She's had it off all weekend. Her cousin confiscated it, I believe. Holly, could you fly over this mass and find her?"

Holly snorted, barely breaking away from her helmet's readouts to inspect the crowd. "What, in those bright lights, in front of a hundred people, in a Mark I suit? Do you want there to be an inter-species incident?"

"Right," Juliet barked before the fighting could begin, speaking with military efficiency. "Holly, perimeter sweep. You should be okay in the shadows. Artemis and I will cover the dance floor. Use your communicators for contact."

Artemis frowned, immediately finding the flaw in this plan. "I don't have mine." Juliet had heard the (much edited) story long ago, and, as flighty as she could be, she wouldn't have forgot that little detail.

The blond wrestler turned to Holly, hands on her hips. "Cough it up, fairy-girl. This is important."

Holly flushed, then scowled. Reluctantly, she unclasped the gold chain on her neck, sliding off an ornate ring and thrusting it towards Artemis. She looked quite unflinchingly at the ground, like a thieving child forced to give back the goods.

Blinking in surprise, Artemis plucked the ring from her hand, sliding it onto his pinky. He couldn't stop staring at the reddening elf. "You kept—"

"Break!" Juliet barked, as if ending a football huddle, grabbing Artemis's wrists and dragging him onto the dance floor.

Artemis lost sight of Holly and, by the time he looked back, she was gone.

The term "sea of humanity" is never so appropriate as when applied to a nightclub. The dance floor seemed about three sizes too small, resulting in a roiling crush of sweaty, hormone-filled bodies. Artemis soon found himself rather too well acquainted with a large number of the patrons. He followed after Juliet, pulled like a dinghy with a hole in it's hull. He found himself apologizing every few seconds to the newest person he had rubbed against. None seemed to really mind, and only a half-dozen even acknowledged his words.

Juliet was much more effective. She bounced along with the crowd, each moment snaking further through the mass of bodies. The rapid turns of her head seemed to be a simple explosion of
emotion, but were in fact an efficient series of visual sweeps. Very quickly, she made her way through the dancers, eliminating them quadrant by quadrant.

Despite the humans' respectable progress, it was Holly who found Minerva. To her credit, she activated her communicator immediately, but in the few seconds before Artemis answered she quickly called the LEP Ops Booth. "Foaly, get a good recording, will you? We might be able to use this if Minerva ever becomes a problem again."

As Foaly whistled in amazement and chuckled in Holly's ear, she spoke into her private communicator. "The main bar. I...think you'll be able to see her."

Artemis and Juliet turned, along with a large section of the dancers. Indeed, they could see Minerva. Everyone in the club could, actually.

The French beauty had taken to the bar's counter, where she was whooping, bouncing along to the music. At her feet, a rather large (mostly male) crowd had gathered to cheer her on. One man, whose complexion implied that he had been dipped in a vat of rancid Tang, was particularly enthused, spinning a jean jacket over his head. Obviously a part of the genius's ensemble.

'Reight,' all three adventurers thought, 'time to end this before more clothes go flying.'

The thoughts were a bit late, as it happened. Before any of her rescuers were halfway to the bar, Minerva tugged her black shirt off (thankfully revealing a similarly toned brassier, instead of pure flesh), whipping it about her head and screaming at the top of her lungs. "Party!"

Holly halted as an unexpected and rather heavy ball dropped to the bottom of her stomach. 'Holy...centaurs.'

Minerva had won the genetic lottery by being born a genius. Rather unfairly, she seemed to have hit a second jackpot, which only revealed itself in the years that Holly had been out of touch with her human allies. Everyone knows the phrase "hourglass figure," and that is what Minerva possessed...just with an extra thirty minutes on top.

Holly rubbed a hand along her neck, then yanked it away, grimacing. 'Karma must be a joke.'

Artemis Fowl, somewhat reasonably, was less phased by the sight, though the public nature irked him. Which is putting it a bit lightly. Juliet at his wing, he cut through the crowd, yelling over the music and catcalls. "Minerva, what is wrong with you? Get down from there right now!" Given the situation, it was a rather calm reaction, but he was already feeling an emotion he was not particularly prone to: rage. 'This is not Minerva's natural behavior. What is going on?'

Minerva looked down and squealed, surprising her human friends. It wasn't a noise one expected from the genius. "Arty!" She scrambled off the counter, barely avoiding grievous bodily harm, and wrapped her arms around her male counterpart's neck, covering it with an intense series of kisses. "I missed you," she moaned, her movements making that fact fairly obvious.

Now Artemis was sure something was wrong. Minerva was not prone to public displays of affection. Holding hands, quick pecks, and the like, certainly, but now...well, frankly, Artemis wasn't sure what to call what his girlfriend was doing. Though he was fairly certain it was illegal to do this in public.

He grabbed her shoulders, pushing Minerva far enough away to study her eyes. The pupils were extremely large, almost completely obscuring the irises, and she seemed to be having a hard time focusing on him. "Damn. She's been drugged. Some kind of amphetamine." He tugged the shirt
from Minerva's hands, trying to drape it over her chest. "Juliet, get the car and pull it around."

The sober blond nodded and disappeared, leaving Artemis alone.

This, as it happens, was a *bad move*. A trio of tangerine-faced men stepped to the fore. One grabbed Artemis by a wrist, forcing him to face the group. "Hey," the leader rumbled, "she was having a good time."

Artemis sized up the men. Frat boys, or at least in college. Not particularly strong, but you didn't have to be when there were three of you. "No, fools," Artemis said, none to generously, "she is under the influence of a drug. Ecstasy or something similar, most likely. I can hardly count the application of an amphetamine to her system as 'having a good time.'"

The leader looked at his buddies and all started to laugh. Returning attention to Artemis, he sneered. "Not yet." He jerked his chin up and smiled, displaying unnaturally white teeth. He seemed to like that gesture. It was rather eloquent.

Artemis looked about for Butler. Then he remembered his situation and looked about for Juliet. Then he paled. No guards. Just a stoned French girlfriend at his back and a shielded fairy somewhere in the shadows. A neutrino would be able to handle this group, but there was no way Holly could use it in a crowd.

He could not let this trio get hold of Minerva, so there was only one thing to do: be the heroic boyfriend. Artemis did his best to make himself look a bit larger, thrusting his shoulders back and craning his neck. "I must warn you that I am trained in the martial arts." He raised his fists like a boxer waiting for the bell.

The leader snorted. "Oh, yeah?" He held his arms out, opening his chest for an attack. "Go ahead, emo kid."

Artemis scowled. Emo kid! Okay, so the suit wasn't exactly perky and his hair was starting to cover his eyes, but he was *not* an emo. His lady's and his own honor thus insulted, Artemis felt a strengthening of resolve. Pulling his arm back, putting as much power behind the muscles as he could muster, Artemis took a step forward, sending a surprisingly fast punch to the other man's solar plexus.

The college boy barely moved. There was a soft "oof" of air leaving his lungs, but no great "woosh" that should have come with the wind being knocked out of him. The leader looked down at the fist still resting against his chest and smirked. "What? That's all?" He started to laugh, throwing his head back.

Artemis could feel the cold, familiar tickle of fear make its way down his spine. 'Well, three humans can't be as bad as one gorilla, right?'

Then Artemis felt a small fist rocket past his own, striking a spot just above the Irishman's impact.

The bleach-blond blockhead flew backwards, skidding on the floor for several meters before slamming into a wall. His arms flopped to the ground and did not move again.

The two remaining men watched the slide and rather sudden impact, then slowly returned their gaze to Artemis. There was a tense pause as all considered what to do next.

Finally, the shortest of the trio shrieked. "Oh, my God! *He knows kung-fu!*"

Not even bothering to attend to their unconscious brethren, the pair made a quick and rather wise
Artemis let out a few panting breaths. The movement wasn't enough to wind him, but fear had nearly incapacitated him. "Thanks, Holly," he whispered.

He felt a pat on his shoulder.

Then a voice called from behind them. "Holly? You mean Holly Short?"

Artemis turned to see Minerva looking about, beaming. This was going to be a fun night. Five women on his case, one of them stoned. "Come on, love. We've got to get you somewhere to rest."

"Noooo," Minerva whined. "I want to see Holly! I miss the little elf! Is she shielded? Holly, come here!" The genius began to stumble about, waving her arms in the quest for the invisible fairy.

Artemis turned a bit sallow, taking in the crowd. Most were laughing, but a few looked intrigued by this vivid hallucination.

Before she could continue with her summons, there was a slight fwap and Minerva collapsed to the floor.

Artemis felt a breath on his ear. "Just a tranq to knock her out. Sorry, but I couldn't let her keep babbling about fairies. Get her out of here now."

Artemis nodded and collected his girlfriend. Grunting, he carried her newlywed-style, barely able to rise from a crouch. 'I am going to have back trouble tonight...' Minerva was light, but Artemis was far from fit. In fact, he was rather impressed that he managed to do this bit of lifting. Perhaps training with Butler was paying off, weak punches notwithstanding.

The crowd, seeing that the drama was over, dissipated. This, luckily, meant that no one noticed the jean jacket that dropped, seemingly from nowhere, to cover Minerva's chest.

"Thanks, Holly," Artemis breathed.

"Don't mention it. I was afraid they'd burst if you ran into anything. I thought the cow hormone thing was a myth."

Artemis couldn't help but grin. Indeed, the perks of dating Minerva were not all mental.

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**The Living**

*May 14, 2014-Haven*

Crunchball was easily the most popular sport in the Lower Elements. The closest equivalents in the human world were squash and hockey, though the fairy sport had a much higher injury rate of those sports combined (or, indeed, multiplied). Teams of eight fought over a dozen fist-sized balls, striking them with hard-palmed gloves and rocketing them about a clear, sideways, cylindrical arena. On opposite ends of the ring, tucked into the curved ceiling, sprites darted about, protecting their dozen goals, which were barely bigger than the balls themselves. Except for the goalies, there were no real positions. Fairies tended to prefer a spot in the arena, but goals and saves could be made from any position, including hanging from the ceiling with grippy shoes. The balls were light and extremely bouncy, so it wasn't uncommon for a goal to be made after a ball had careened around the arena ten or more times.
'Artemis would love this,' Holly mused, tucking her stomach in to avoid a ball flying past, simultaneously throwing her own ball towards the ceiling. 'Of course, he'd be analyzing the physics involved. And he'd hate the crunch part.'

She was rather abruptly reminded of the "crunch part" when Trouble called to her from the opposite end of the field. "Mind off the Mud Boy, Short!" He shot a ball at the floor, sending it into a series of rapid bounces around the arena.

"I am not OOF!" Holly's protests were cut off as the ball caught her in the chest, right below the collarbone. It flew off as she fell to the floor, skirting past an alarmed Ash Vein and into her team's goal.

Vinyáya, who was standing nearly sideways in the middle of the arena, assisted by extra-grippy shoes, scowled at Trouble, sending a ball in his direction.

He merely leaned to the side, laughing. His laugh was brought to an abrupt halt as the ball ricocheted off the rear of the arena, slamming into the back of his head.

The shot didn't result in a goal, but Vinyáya couldn't bring herself to feel all that bad. "Game over," she declared, walking down the wall with jerky steps, fighting against her shoe's grip. "We've got enough bruises for one session without you lot starting a vendetta."

Trouble nodded, rubbing the back of his head. Sparks darted between his fingers as he approached Holly and knelt at her side. "Distracted today, Major?" He reached out and donated a few sparks to her already healing bruise. "Nice necklace, by the way."

Holly groaned and sat up as the healing ended. The elves grasped hands, Trouble lifting Holly up as he also stood. "I wouldn't say 'distracted.' More...er...

Trouble reached out and flicked the acorn, causing it to emit a small series of tinkles as it jumped about in its gold mesh. "I'd say you are. Wearing something like this during Crunchball is dangerous. Unless you want it lodged in your sternum." He was right, of course. There was a reason that amateur teams only tended to play around a full moon: full magic for healing.

Holly looked down at her necklace for perhaps the hundredth time that day. She was getting better at not looking, actually. "I...can't seem to take it off."

Trouble seemed alarmed. "Cursed?"

"Sentimental."

"Ah. Far more dangerous." He draped an arm around her shoulder, steering the younger elf towards the open door at the end of the arena. "Come on. Let's talk. Nettle smoothies, on me?"

Holly looked at the hand resting on her shoulder, then up to Trouble's face. "I don't think so."

He snorted at this. "Oh, in your dreams, Holly. Call it...suing for peace."

She couldn't help but smile at this idea. "Well, if you're buying, then I suppose that means my team won."

Trouble frowned. "You've got a smart mouth, you know that?"

"I've been told it's one of my more attractive qualities. Come on. I skipped breakfast to get here on time, and I'm starved. You better have the gold for a power-size."
"Congratulations, Master Fowl. It looks like you've grown a bit. Your inseam is longer. Shaping out to be a bit tall, I think."

Artemis looked down at the offending inseam, eyebrows squeezing together at the idea. "Really? I had assumed my growth spurts were over."

The tailor, a rather ancient man with a webbing of calluses and small scars on his hands from decades at a sewing machine, shook his head. "True, but you can expect a bit more growth. A few centimeters, at most." He spoke through wrinkled lips that held several pins. He would occasionally remove one of these pins and place it in the jet-black pants Artemis now sported. "Now, when you get older, you can also expect to shrink a few inches. One of God's cruel little jokes, I suppose."

Artemis gave a little "Hmmm" at this, but said nothing else. After a few more pins were added, his tailor waved the boy back into the changing room to resume less formal attire.

When Artemis came back out, he was holding a folded piece of paper, which he handed off to the old man, along with the pin-filled pants. "I need you to follow these specifications, Signore Moretti. I trust they are quite clear?"

The man looked over the list, not even bothering to take out a pair of glasses. Sharp eyes and a sharp mind, even at the respectable age of seventy, were one of his small prides. "Seven. Goodness. Quite an order. The math of this is simple enough, but...ten hours?"

Artemis shook his head. "A bit less, actually. Call in your assistants, if need be. I only ask that you make number five yourself."

Now Signore Moretti wished he did have glasses. It would be so much more dramatic if he could take them off and stare at the Irishman in astonishment. "What you ask is too much. I am a very busy man. It is nearing closing time, after all. I cannot..." He gestured helplessly, hoping the boy would understand. The boy was one of his most faithful customers, despite the pull of the dozens of much better-known tailors in Italy.

Nonchalantly, Artemis removed a check from his pocket and handed it over.

The tailor, so used to haggling, almost tore up the check the instant he took it. Then he looked at the numbers. And whistled. "I...think I can scrounge up a few assistants for after-hours work."

Artemis nodded curtly. "Finest materials, mind. I need to look my best."

"But of course. Only the best."

Butler watched this entire exchange with some interest. "Ten hours?" He said as they walked out of the shop, moving swiftly into their rented Bentley. "Normally you give him at least a few days."

Artemis shrugged at this. "The price seemed to suit him." He smiled indulgently at the little joke, ignoring the roll of Butler's eyes. "I will need you to pick these up. I shall be otherwise occupied beginning at 9pm."

Butler pulled into traffic, though Artemis had given him no destination. Sitting in a parked car was never a good idea for a millionaire. You were liable to be kidnapped or blown up that way. "I think I can finagle us seats at La Pergola. How does fagottelli sound for dinner?"
Sighing, as if hard-put by the suggestion, Artemis looked out of his window, determined to avoid the bodyguard's eyes. "It is ill-advised to eat within 12 hours of a major surgery."

Butler smashed his foot on the brakes, completely halting traffic in the already hectic Roman streets. He turned, glaring at Artemis from between the front seats. "Artemis. Explanation. NOW."

Outside Police Plaza

"Jerk," Holly muttered.

Trouble looked up from his nettle smoothie, straw still held in his lips. He moved it to the side of his mouth, as if reluctant to halt his nursing to talk. "What did I do this time?"

Holly shook her head, leaning it back to rest on the wall afterwards. They were both standing in front of Police Plaza, enjoying the last few minutes before their shifts began. In front of them, officers already on duty scuttled to and fro, bringing in suspects or dealing with the crowd of people always gathered in front of the station. Both were less than enthused about another day behind the desk, and actually found themselves envying the haggard elf who was trying to pull two full-sized demon bucks inside. "Surprisingly, it's not you, this time. Artemis."

"The Mud Boy." Trouble finally abandoned his straw. He wasn't one for gossip, but the drama with Fowl was more entertaining than just about anything else that would be presented to him today. "What did he do this time?"

Holly wished this wasn't normally such an apt question. Of course, most of the time, if a woman was seething about a man, it was reasonable to think said man had done something wrong, so perhaps it wasn't so terribly predictable of the human. "He was nice."

"Oh, such a travesty. Want me to shoot him?"

It was hopeless. Despite her mood, Holly had to smile, though she reached over and gave the male elf a good shove. "I'm feeling lenient. Just in the kneecaps."

Trouble studied her. Using his drink, he gestured at Holly's chest. "He gave that to you?"

The desire to hold the pendant was impossible to resist. Holly placed it on her palm, angling her hand so that the makeshift gem rolled about. The gold caught the light well enough, but the acorn was too old and battered. Thin lines from where it had scratched against the concrete in her cell marred the surface. "Yes," she smiled down at it, curling her fingers firmly about the pendant.

"Wow..." Trouble set his drink on the floor, no longer able to focus on his food. When he straightened, he put his hands behind his head, reclining against the wall. "He's got you good."

Abruptly, Holly let the pendant go, wrapping both hands about her drink. "I don't know what you're talking about. And, if I did, the insinuations would be insulting."

Trouble smirked, roguish "Holly, if I want to be insulting about this, I'll be insulting. You're going topside. Turning primitive. You want a good, hot mud bath."

With each jab, Holly's glare deepened. By the third, she had wound up her arm, preparing to throw the smoothie in Trouble's face.

"You love Artemis Fowl."
The cup smashed to the floor soaking both of their boots. Only Trouble noticed, and only long enough to look at them in distaste and kick the majority of the nettles off. Then he kicked them a bit more furiously, like a cat who has just stepped in wet grass. His brother wasn't the only one who was picky about his property. Trouble just managed it better.

"I do not love him."

Trouble looked up and was certainly not convinced, despite the female's stern tone. "Use his name when you say that."

Holly squinted, then sneered. "What? You think that will change things?"

Shrugging, Trouble waved her on. "Say that again, but say his name."

"Fine." Holly crossed her arms, holding her head high. "I do not love Ar—"

Trouble watched her, trying not to grin. She was like a streaming video that hadn't buffered enough before playing. Her face was completely frozen, except for the occasional twitch of lips as she tried to continue. Very, very slowly, she lowered her head, looking at her pendant.

Then she began to freak out.

"Oh...oh gods. Frond, Trouble, I lo..." She began to pace before him, tugging at her short hair. "No, I can't. Attraction, sure. He's an adult, now, and I'm not dead. This, though...this is wrong. I know I like Artemis, but I can't...I llll...I looo..." In a fit of conflicting emotions, she grabbed Trouble's collar, shaking him. "I can't even say that I do!"

Constantly expecting her to lash out with an attack to his groin for releasing her conflicting emotions, Trouble grabbed Holly's wrists, tugging them free from his jacket. He did not want her hands so close to his neck. "Welcome to 'No Duh Land,' Holly. All your friends have been waiting for you."

The removal of her hands proved to be a wise move on Trouble's part, as Holly began to clench and unclench her fingers, longing for a jugular. "Why are you even telling me this?" The look she gave him said the unspoken part of that sentence: You sick fuck.

"Let's just say that I owe Fowl." Now confident that his nether region and neck were out of danger, Trouble let Holly go.

She moved to his side, leaning her forehead against the wall, thumping it a few times. The stucco exterior did little to help the pain already developing in her head. "This. Is. So. Stupid. What am I going to do?"

"Well, there's always the option of...well, dating him."

Holly glared at Trouble, who raised his hands in defeat.

"Okay, bad idea." He considered her predicament. Then smiled. "Go talk to Vinyáya."

Holly blinked at him. "The Wing Commander? She doesn't exactly strike me as the touchy-feely emotional type. What's she going to do?"

"She...well, once she...Holly, just trust me on this." When the female didn't move, he gave her a little push towards Police Plaza's entrance. "Go! Consider it a part of the work I'm giving you for the day. It'll take you half the shift to find her, anyway."
The LEPRecon officer gave him a long look before nodding. Her shoulders tensed at the thought of the upcoming conversation. Vinyáya and a mushy heart-to-heart...it didn't seem right. Still, Trouble was fairly confident and he wasn't daft, despite what she would like to believe. Boots squishing a bit from the spilled smoothie, she trotted into the building.

Trouble watched her until she disappeared. Sighing, he kicked a more of the drink off his boots. "You better not screw this up, Fowl," he muttered. "She is far too good for you."

It was dark and silent in the Bentley. Butler had parked in an underground lot and the flickering overhead lights seemed incapable of penetrating the tinted windows. Every few minutes, a car would come through, it's headlights just barely illuminating the pair inside. Butler was leaned over the steering wheel, arms folded over top, his chin resting on them. In the back seat, Artemis was also hunched over, his fingers steepled, forehead leaning against his hands. His eyes were closed, but not in concentration. It had been a difficult plan to explain, in an emotional sense.

Butler cleared his throat. "You're right. Your mother is going to be livid."

"I told you, I left her a note."

"Oh, yes. 'Sorry, Mum, but this is the end. You'll never see your son again.'"

"It was a bit more eloquent than that, as you well know. Anyway, she will see me again, if all goes according to plan."

Butler finally turned to glare at Artemis. His hands clenched the wheel, causing the leather to squeak a bit. "I really don't know if that counts."

"It will bring her closure."

"She won't want 'closure.' She will want her son back!"

Artemis winced. "I have already explained myself, Butler. This is the only way. Down the other route...lies madness."

"Stop being so melodramatic." Butler wanted to reach out and shake some sense into the boy. "One girl turns you down and you become an angst-filled, hormonal prat."

Now Artemis finally snapped his eyes open. Cold and dangerous, they bore into Butler, nearly causing the bodyguard to back down. He was coming to resemble his father so much, these days. "She is not one girl, Butler. She is the girl."

"She'd better be," the Eurasian man muttered, "if you are going to end this life over her." He frowned, then thought of another point. "This appointment with Dr. Giordano. Is that really necessary?"

Artemis shrugged. "Perhaps not. However, it is a unique opportunity, you must admit. No one ever does this when healthy."

"Hmph. I wonder why. It figures you'd be so...utilitarian."

"Waste not, want not."

Butler's plans hadn't extended past finding out what Artemis's were. Once he had accomplished this goal, the bodyguard had been too stunned at the enormity of what Artemis was about to go through
to think of anything but trying to dissuade the young man. Now, finally, his brain dredged up something. The one person on the planet who could possibly understand.

"Artemis," he began, hesitantly, "I don't...approve of what you're doing."

"I don't expect you to approve of it, Butler. I expect you, like everyone else, to accept it."

The man couldn't take this distant, stern genius. He reached out and took one of Artemis's hands. The gesture, so uncommonly intimate, seemed to startle the younger man, but he did not pull back.

"I have spent my entire life protecting you, Artemis, but you know this has been more than a job for me. I always felt like you were...God, this sounds so corny, but you were the son I never had the time to have." His smile was pained and more than a bit embarrassed. "Even before your father left, it wasn't just my job to protect you. I raised you, so...to never see you again... I want you to consider the alternatives."

Artemis shook his head, blinking back a mistiness in his eyes. "I have considered the alternatives, Butler. You know I always do."

"For two days." The fact that Artemis's best plans were formulated in less time was not something Butler thought he should mention. "I was hoping you'd consider talking with...well..."

Artemis made the connection long before his friend could have ever voiced it. "Minerva."

"Yes." Butler squeezed the pale hand in thanks. This entire speech was far too difficult. "We have plenty of time until your appointment. We can fly straight to her villa, give you an opportunity to talk, and be back in Italy in time, should you decide to go through with this." He watched his charge's face closely, hoping to see the acquiescence that would give him hope.

Artemis, however, remained as expressionless as ever. He was obviously deep in thought, far beyond the reach of any more words.

Very slowly, he reached up with his other hand, cupping Butler's massive paw between his two small ones. "Very well, old friend. I...had intended to speak with Miss Paradizo, anyway. I suppose I can do it in person." As if completely exhausted by the effort, Artemis let Butler's hands go, falling back to his seat. "I'm afraid you will be disappointed, however."

Shaking his head, Butler returned his attention to the front of the car, starting it up. "Minerva has never disappointed me, Artemis. If anyone can stop you, it's her."
The Dead

September 10, 2014-Outside Fowl Manor

"Ah, Commander Kelp. So good to see you again. The LEP is getting better at setting up for a siege on my manor." Artemis nodded in approval, leaning back in his swivel chair, as if it would give him a better view of the elf. Of course, being that the only parts of Trouble he could see were displayed on his own computer screen, it did nothing to improve the visuals. Instead, it made the Irishman seem aloof despite the intensity of his gaze.

"Maybe you're just getting predictable, Fowl." Trouble grunted, taking a seat directly in front of the camera. A respectable blank space surrounded his chair, after which much of the force was ranged. This tent was much larger than the one Trouble had just exited, but the LEP forces were still crowded inside, desperate to find out what Artemis had planned and how they would stop him.

Rather than taking a place in the foreground, Holly slipped into a corner of the communications tent, well in the camera's blind spot. She settled in, crossing her arms as she observed the testosterone fueled (at least on Trouble's side) standoff.

Artemis tutted, shaking his head. "No, not at all. If I was getting predictable, I believe I'd have you out of your suit and tied up in my cellar."

'Oh,' thought Holly, grinning slightly, 'that image is so wrong.'

Trouble seemed to agree. He took out his Neutrino 3000 and began to spin it on his finger. "How about we stop the banter and get down to business?"

Artemis actually pouted. "This was a lot more fun with Julius."

Trouble looked up, sighting his gun at the image of Artemis on the large monitor. The human did not flinch in the slightest, but Trouble's message was clear. He could cut the connection at any time, and he was more inclined to do so with every comment.

"Oh, very well." Artemis leaned further back in the chair, resting his hands behind his head. "Where is Major Short, then? We don't have too terribly long until dawn, unless you've set up a time-stop."

"Major Short isn't here, Artemis, and she won't be coming." He lied so easily, despite the confrontation with the elf in question just moments ago.

Artemis laughed. More accurately, he cackled. "Oh, come come, Commander. The second she heard it was me, she probably stole the first shuttle she came across and flew on up." Now he leaned forward, head tilted as if he was sharing a delicious secret, the thinnest of smiles on his slightly parted lips. "I'm sure she's just..." he looked Trouble up and down, assessing him, "itching to see me."

Holly shivered. She had seen scheming Artemis before, but this was different. He was...predatory. Suddenly, Holly was glad that Trouble had kept her out of the conversation. If those intense mismatched eyes were to fall on her, she would be under his power just as surely as if she had been hit with mesmer.
Trouble was also reacting to Artemis. He was standing now, forcing the camera goblin to swivel the focus, tracking closely as Trouble approached the screen. "No. See, Holly has moved on. Unlike you. She is safely in Haven, going through her shift as scheduled. She's not coming, so stop asking."

Artemis laughed again, looking genuinely amused. "Ah...Commander, please. I need to speak with her. Holly dear, where are you?" He looked left and right, despite the fact that this would not change the view. For a brief moment, the Artemis on the screen looked directly at Holly, causing the Major's heart to drop, even if she knew he could not see her.

'H-Holly dear?' Her mind reeled. She took a step forward.

"She's not here!" Trouble bellowed, the intensity of his voice halting Holly's approach. "Now, listen to my demands. You will go onto the high lawn, unarmed, and wait for my squadron to pick you up. We will mind-wipe you, then your family, once they return. This will all be over in a few hours. You are obviously troubled by your memories. Not knowing about the People is bound to be less painful than losing contact."

Once again, Artemis gave that chilling cackle, holding it for a handful of seconds before descending into a sigh, his words now tinged with shrillness. "What do you know about pain, Commander? I know quite a bit. For the past six years, my life has been nothing but pain." He cut his icy eyes at Trouble, actually making several of the surrounding fairies take a few steps back. "I am giving you a chance. Send her out and we will solve this. You can have her back and the LEP will never hear from me again." He shrugged. "Otherwise, I really must continue with my plans as scheduled."

Trouble put up his fists, shaking them in mock-terror. "Oooooo. What are you going to do? Shoot down the moon?"

Artemis actually looked embarrassed "You know, I had considered it. Much quicker, but it's a bit hard to pull off on a few days notice. Besides, my earlier methods were quite effective."

Everyone in the room seemed to realize what was about to happen. Chix in particular processed the information rapidly, taking a step forward into the Commander's no-man zone. "No! Don't you dare! She's—"

Trouble spun around, training his gun on Chix's chest. It was effective in stopping the sprite, even if the Commander had no real intention of pulling the trigger.

Artemis nodded, smiling. "Well, that was no surprise. Unfortunately, she hasn't stepped forward herself, so things really must continue." The screen was abruptly switched to another display of a 30 second countdown, causing quite a few officers to give a startled jerk. They began to mutter amongst themselves, looking at Commander Kelp, Lieutenant Verbil, and Major Short in turn.

"No!" Chix screeched, pulling at his hair, shaking his head violently. "Not again!"

"Get me a feed on the Tara oak!" Trouble commanded, turning to another large screen near the front of the tent. "It's the most likely—ah!"

The screen turned on, displaying the feed from a pixie's helmet. LEP officers swarmed around an oak tree, denuding it of acorns as they performed the Ritual.

"Dear Frond...Retreat!" Trouble took a few precious seconds trying to figure out why the fairies on screen were not responding, then cursed and switched on his radio. "All fairies at the Tara oak,
retreat immediately! There's a bomb!"

The fairies in the tent began to swarm around the screen. Holly, cursing her height, was only able to advance halfway though the tent, stopping in front of the camera-gnome and giving all of the taller fairies in front of her rather dirty looks.

Quickly, the officers on screen began streaming away, many on foot. A few brave sprites and be-winged fairies began flying back and forth, picking up their flightless comrades and depositing them a safe distance away. The area cleared quickly, except for a pair of elves still struggling on foot, with three seconds left on the countdown.

With a roar of mechanics, a shimmer-suit clad gnome darted out over the camera pixie's head, dragonfly rigging struggling on its last drops of gasoline, howling with his adrenalin rush. He banked sharply, scooping up the two elves and heading back towards the safety zone. For a few seconds, it looked like he would collide with the camera.

Then the tree exploded.

It wasn't a set of small, well-placed charges this time. There was a blinding ball of light, then a shock-wave buffeted the air, sending the gnome tumbling and knocking the pixie onto his back. Shards of wood rocketed away from ground zero. A few hit the cameraman and his readout briefly showed a list of injuries. They blinked out one by one as his magic took over.

It took the pixie a few seconds to recover. When he did, he looked up to see the gnome holding one of the elves down. Its arm was bent at an extra angle, a jagged piece of white bone ripping through his suit. This was soon lost to sight as other fairies, running hot, began to tend to the wounded. The pixie looked back to the tree, which was now a smoking crater. The ancient oak that had served the most sacred site of the People for over 1,000 years was now nothing more than a handful of splinters lodged in various officers of the LEP.

The screaming numbed the mind.

It took Holly a moment to realize that not all of it was from the scene.

Chix Verbil was emitting a sharp keen, clutching one hand over his stomach, as if he felt sick. "He did it! He did it again, and he'll do it again and again and again! He'll get the trees and the shuttleports and every other site we hold sacred! Until he gets her!"

A few fairies turned to stare at Holly, but their concentration was again diverted as Trouble stepped to his sprite subordinate. He waited for a clearing to form around the frantic lieutenant. Then he dropped to one knee, spinning a leg under Chix and sending him roughly to the ground. In the next movement, Trouble was back up, his foot resting lightly on the lieutenant's chest.

"Listen to me, Chix. Listen, all of you! Twelve years ago, we were together at the siege, trying to save Holly from Fowl. We are not going to undo all of that by handing her over now." He waited, gauging the disabled fairy's hysteria. Once he was satisfied, he lifted his foot, allowing Chix to stand.

Chix was no longer frantic, but he jerked at even the slightest movement from the surrounding fairies. He blinked rapidly, a muscle over one eye twitching. His voice cracked as he spoke. "He'll keep doing it, Commander. Until he gets her, or until someone gets him." Before Trouble could respond, Chix began shoving fairies aside, staggering out of the tent. Tears flowed freely down his face.
"Status report." Trouble barked. "I want to know every nick and splinter. Anyone who is still running hot is to leave the scene and get to Fowl Manor immediately. This is not longer a covert operation or a siege. It's an invasion."

Holly felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up, accompanied by a thin sweat. 'That's weird. I'm not scared of an invasion, so why...' Slowly, she turned.

Artemis was back on the main screen. He smiled fondly, giving her a small wave.

Holly was not so amenable, now especially irritated at her own flightiness. Of course Fowl was still getting a readout from the cameras, and she had stepped right into its range!

She made a gun with her hand, pointing it at Artemis's head and jerking as if with the recoil of a direct hit. 'I'm coming for you.'

Artemis looked at his watch, then back up, wistful. 'I'm waiting, Holly dear.' Then the screen cut out.

Trouble broke away from the crowd of calculating fairies a split-second later, grabbing Holly's hand and pulling her from the tent and into the cool, star-filled night. "You have to go back. Now, before someone decides to get a posse together and surrender you to Fowl."

"What? No!" Holly dug her heels into the ground, halting their progress.

Trouble was furious. "Don't you get it, Holly? Half of the fairies in that tent are all for tying you up and throwing you to that maniac, and the other half are generous enough to give you a free hand and a gun."

"No, you don't get it, Trouble!" She flattened her free hand, bringing it down edgewise on his wrist, forcing him to let go. She turned to the command tent, keeping just out of Kelp's reach. "You need a fairy who can get inside without being attacked and take out Fowl when his guard is down. Which means me." She burst into the tent, reaching for the table that held the new Neutrinos. "Now, I'm taking a gun and—"

Holly froze.

Trouble entered soon after, grabbing her hand and tugging back towards the exit. "Out of the question! You are going—"

"Trouble."

Her voice was low, but it halted the Commander in his tracks.

Running her tongue along dry lips, Holly fought for her words. "Did you...do you have one of the Neutrino 4000s?"

The male elf let her hand go. "No."

"Does Vinyáya?"

He took a few steps to stand by her side. "No. She left right after the meeting."

"Then...why is there only one on the table?"

"D'arvit," Trouble rasped. "Where's Chix?"
July 3, 2014-Ceasar's Palace lobby, Las Vegas, Nevada

Artemis slammed his credit card and passport on the check-in counter of Ceasar's Palace, startling the man standing behind the counter. "We need a suite. Immediately."

The clerk looked at Artemis over his low-perched glasses, then past the young man at Juliet and Minerva (the last still passed out and now slung over the much stronger blond's shoulders). He frowned, reaching up to push his ill-fitting spectacles back up his nose. "Do you...have a reservation? You'll need a reservation for a suite." He didn't address the fact that one of the trio was unconscious. This was Vegas, after all. Half the hotel's guests would be near passing out at some time during their trip.

Artemis rolled his eyes and dug into his wallet, this time slamming a thick roll of bills onto the counter. "I believe we do."

At first, the attendant moved to push the bills away. Then he noted the denomination and turned the slide into a none-too-slick pocketing of the cash. His barely hidden sneer transformed into a bright smile. "Why, yes, you do." He began working on his terminal, "accidentally" downgrading the McLeary bachelor party from a suite to a premium room with little compunction. Bachelor parties were horrible guests. They rarely tipped and what little time they spent in their rooms was devoted to destroying them. "It looks like a spa suite is available." He activated a key card and handed it to the pale man, beginning his marketing spiel. "The hot tub is an amazing feature in that room. It looks out over—"

"That's nice," Juliet interjected, giving her conscious companion a push. "Don't bother with the turn-down service. We're good!" Heaving the burden a bit higher on her back and wincing a bit, the woman took off, paying customer trailing behind.

The concierge paused a moment, then shrugged. What happens in Vegas...

It didn't take long at all to get up the the Tower suites, though securing a private elevator was a challenge. One which Holly solved be hovering behind Minerva and moaning "I'm gonna be sick!" whenever the doors opened. This was warning enough for the other guests, who universally backed away, looking a bit nauseous themselves.

The suite is what Artemis would have called "plebeian," though most visitors to Vegas would never consider entering such a room, except perhaps for a honeymoon. The decor centered around soft creams and dark woods, with frequent yet dim lights that made the contrary tones blend together. There was only one bedroom, but the suite had its own living room, as well as a main bathroom that seemed to take up half of the suite's space. On entering, Juliet ignored the amenities and rushed to the bedroom, flopping Minerva onto the California king and collapsing beside her. Both let out little groans, though the wrestler was a bit more intelligible. "Artemis, I thought your girlfriend was supposed to be all...French and petite."

Artemis and Holly entered after her, the genius looking quite offended on his girlfriend's behalf. "She is. You are probably just out of shape."

Juliet grumbled and rotated her shoulder, gasping at a particularly painful grind. "Let's not go into fitness, Mr. Nine-Minute-Kilometer."

Holly leaned against the door frame, arms crossed. "I don't know about that. I think he got down to
"Tara in about 7 minutes, and that's a kilometer."

"That doesn't count," Juliet said, "he had a reason for that run."

Artemis began to rub his temples. The girls had never been this much trouble in Chicago, and now there was another one of them to deal with. He was suddenly rethinking his decision to take the place of an LEP team, even if the force would probably end up massacred. After all, at least he'd have some peace if he was still at home. "Can we focus on getting settled? We can't do anything until Minerva is detoxed. Holly?"

Disgruntled, Holly shook her head. "I used most of what I had left on Nimbus, and the Council finally caught onto the Sealed Acorn Units. I need to conserve what I have left."

The Irishman actually glared at her. Which was perhaps understandable, as he had been depending on fairy magic to fix his high-as-a-kite girlfriend. "Don't you ever have enough magic?"

"Well, if some Mud Men would stop treating me like a save point in a video game..."

Juliet threw her arms in the air, though she did not bother to sit up. It was too much effort for this particular moment. Maybe in a few minutes. Or months. She was in no hurry. "So we're in here for at least the night. Artemis, can you call Minerva's cousin and say...I dunno, you picked her up for an international lover's tryst?"

Holly nodded, slipping her helmet back on. "Good point. No sense bringing your police in here for kidnapping. I'll get Foaly to help me with a fly-by of the hotel. I doubt Koboi knows where we'll go, but I wouldn't put it past her to rig every casino for an unplanned demolition." At Artemis's approving nod, Holly shielded, becoming nothing more than a slight haze as she slipped out of the suite.

Artemis was a bit disturbed by how well Candice Paradizo took the news that her cousin had been picked up. Of course, part of that enthusiasm likely stemmed from the large amounts of liquor she seemed to have ingested, and the calls of "Take it off! All off!" in the background. He was suddenly seeing the bright side of his girlfriend being incapacitated.

His body, however, wasn't feeling so stellar. Artemis was just strong enough to carry his small girlfriend, but not without straining his back. Adrenalin had kept the pain away for the first 30 minutes, but now he could feel the muscles bunching up, threatening to bend him in two. After checking in on his blond companions (Minerva still passed out and Juliet sitting on the living room couch, debriefing her brother over the phone), he wandered into the bathroom.

It wasn't terribly impressive to Artemis, but it would do. A bidet, sauna, and soft color scheme did not constitute a "spa suite" to him, but the tub, at least, was adequate. It was the crown of the suite, as the concierge had tried to point out before Juliet rebuked him, surrounded by green and brown stone and set before an enormous window overlooking the Strip. Artemis filled the tub with near-scalding water and undressed. He winced as he stepped in, but soon was resting with his arms draped over the edge of the tub. As the muscles in his back began to slowly cooperate, his head fell back until he would have been looking at the ceiling, if not for his closed eyes.

'This is not Opal's style,' he mused, brow scrunching until several lines appeared directly above his nose. 'Individualized attacks, certainly, but what of a bigger plan? What of baiting us with a chance to stop her? She always loved to taunt us. Surely there is more to this than simply attacking Shana or Minerva."

"So serious," a voice whispered from behind the bathing man, shattering his concentration.
Artemis's eyes snapped open, heart leaping to his throat. 'Perfect. I shall die nude in the tub.'

Instead of a homicidal pixie, however, he looked into a much pleasanter visage. Minerva still looked a bit off, but she was obviously conscious enough to stand. "Tense, love?" Her words had lost much of the drugged slur, but what was left thickened her accent until she sounded like a bad impression of a Frenchwoman. "Can I help you? Shoulder rub?"

The man ran a hand over his face, pulling the skin down a bit as it passed. "Put your shirt back on and go to bed. We are facing a busy day tomorrow. I need you at full capacity, and you won't get there by not resting." He waved her off, a few stray drops of bathwater hitting the blond's bare stomach.

Idly, she rubbed the liquid in, giving a very slow shake of the head. "I'm not tired." She pouted, looking and sounding remarkably like a child being told it was nap time. "I want to help you now."

"You can help me by going to bed and letting me concentrate." He hated to sound snappish. The last time he'd used this tone, Minerva had made him sleep on the couch. At his own house. Still, she was not going to listen to him if he was indecisive.

Minerva seemed genuinely insulted. Her pique was short-lived, however, transforming into a playfulness that unnerved her significant other. She clasped her hands together under her chin, bouncing a bit. It was understandably hypnotizing, given her physique. "I was never a distraction before. In fact, I always knew how to help improve your concentration."

Artemis knew in an instant what was about to happen. His eyes snapped to the bathroom door and he cursed silently as he noted the lock's secured position. Short of busting down the door, Juliet could not enter, and such a violent entry was likely to result in hotel staff coming in. "Minerva, I don't think—"

First covering Artemis's mouth with a hand, Minerva slid into the water. Her blue capris were instantly soaked, turning a black that nearly matched her bra. She freed her curls from their ponytail, shaking her head a bit to let them cascade around her shoulders. They gleamed and looked wonderfully soft, especially paired with her milky skin. "That's your problem. Stop thinking and just go with it. It'll be just like at home." She leaned in, removing her hand from his mouth.

Artemis took in a deep breath. Before he could call out, Minerva covered his lips with her own, swallowing his squeak of protest.

"This hotel is a logistical nightmare," Foaly complained into Holly's ear as the elf began a series of tight spirals around the hotel, helmet sending back mountains of data for the centaur to analyze. The Vegas night was hot, but with a rising breeze that kept the elf from suffocating in her helmet. Her air filter did little to combat the smog, giving her a slight headache. There were a lot of pedestrians in Vegas, but they all had to drive in from somewhere, and that put a lot of strain on the environment and LEP equipment.

"What, can't get a good scan in with all of your celebrated equipment?" Holly teased, enjoying the flight despite the pollution and pain. This was where she was supposed to be: high in the air, gathering data. Finally, a return to actual Recon work.

"As much as I hate to admit it, yes. There's not too much we can do about security, since Koboi is as likely to send in a missile as plant a bomb. I mean, it almost worked before."

Holly nodded, even if Foaly wouldn't be able to see it. He'd get what the bob in her visuals meant.
"Well, picking up a bomb or anything else suspicious, then? Work on what we can do something about?"

Foaly let out a breath, a small whinny attached to the end. "Not a blip. This hotel is as clean as can be, minus all the thieves, shysters, and philanderers."

"Oh, stop exaggerating, Foaly."

"Welcome to Vegas, baby. Look on the bright side: if we ever need to blackmail the newest congressman from New York, we've got him covered. You wouldn't believe what he's doing to that blond..."

"Focus, Foaly. Any more tests we can do?"

"Eh...fly towards your suite so I can get a closer scan, for safety's sake."

"Roger." Streamlining her body, Holly shot several stories into the air before spreading her arms and slowing her wings to a hover. "Nothing on visuals," she said sliding sideways in front of the building, inspecting the window frames. "Getting anything on your..."

Holly stopped dead in the air. Then her heart began to beat at double-time, sending blood red-hot with fury through every vein.

Artemis was reclining in the suite's hot tub, straddled by Minerva and engaged in a rather tongue-filled kiss. His hands, which had been resting at the back edge of the tub, began to rise towards the woman's chest.

Holly growled, the noise momentarily throwing off her microphone, which wasn't used to such animalistic noises. Turning a backwards half-somersault, the elf rocketed back to the ground.

"Woah!" Foaly neighed. "Where are you going, Holly?" He obviously had not been paying attention to the more obvious details on the screen.

The Major gritted her teeth as she pulled out of the dive, darting through the casino entrance, staying low to the ground and darting through legs so her passage would be masked from the cameras by the hundreds of gamblers. "To kill a Mud Man."

There was a little bit of clicking over her speakers as Foaly rewound the footage. Then Holly could almost swear she heard the centaur grin. "Good to hear things are back to normal. Give him a good slug for me."

"You know, I was going to beat him within an inch of his life, so I'll just stick the murder charge on you." Tucking her arms in and momentarily clamping her wings shut, Holly squeezed through a closing door, entering the emergency stairway. Once inside, she snapped her wings back out and began a tight spiral, moving swiftly to the top floors.

Very slowly, careful not to spook his lover, Artemis raised both hands towards her chest.

Then something caught his attention. Through the window, he saw a small black cutout in the middle of the Vegas skyline. An elf-shaped cutout.

'Oh, God! Holly!' Artemis, who had been more than aware of his situation, became doubly conscious, this time adding in how it looked. He wanted to jerk Minerva aside and yell out the window, but before he could react the shadow disappeared.
Caring a bit less about letting Minerva down gently, Artemis finished raising his hands, pushing against the woman's chest. It was not a violent movement, but it caused her to slip off his lap, arms flailing as she fell underwater.

As their lips parted, Artemis saw a thin blue tendril stretch out between them. It snapped like a static charge and, an instant later, Artemis felt his aching muscles relax. A jolt of energy ran through him. His breath lost rhythm as he began to comprehend exactly what had happened. 'Oh...no. That is what Koboi did to her?'

Minerva surfaced, sputtering. Her normally bouncy curls were now plastered to her shoulders and chest, the water turning them a dull brown. "A-Artemis! I just want to help!"

Moving swiftly, if not gracefully, Artemis scrambled out of the tub. He grabbed a towel and, wet feet skidding a bit on the wood and black tile floor, he made for the door, wrapping the terry-cloth about his waist. He was making an utter mess of the expensive flooring, but he could cover the damages later.

Minerva was fast behind him, twice as much water cascading from her thick hair and now doubly form-fitting clothing. "Artemis, wait!"

Artemis was not obliging. Blessedly turning the lock on his first try, he wrenched one of the double doors open, spinning around the edge before pulling it closed behind him.

If not for his mostly nude state, Artemis would have been amused by the slam against the door and subsequent shaking caused by Minerva's furious pounding. Instead, he stood facing the door, holding onto the handle with one hand—est Minerva try to escape—and his towel with the other. With any luck, she was still too drugged to note that there was another door on the opposite end of the bathroom. Knowing Juliet, she would let the Frenchwoman chase Artemis around the suite (probably bringing Yakety Sax up on her phone as background music) until someone got injured.

The man did not have much time to worry about this embarrassing possibility. Behind him, at roughly head height, he felt a strong breeze that chilled his wet skin and heard a sweet voice. "Oh, Artemis..."

He turned (still holding the handle) to see Holly, wings a blur, smiling at him. "Holly! It's magic!"

She clapped her hands together, resting one cheek against them like a worshipful cherub. "No, Artemis. I believe the Vegas police would call it sexual assault."

"...what?"

His confused thoughts were brought into sharp focus by Holly's fist, which connected with his nose. Artemis had just enough presence of mind to continue securing the door as he fell against it, clutching his injured face. His nose didn't feel broken, but that wasn't for lack of trying. "No, Holly," he began again, his nose already letting out a small trickle of blood. "What Minerva did! It's magic!"

The buzz baton was out now, electricity snapping off its forked end. The mini-bolts cast an intermittent and not terribly comforting light on Holly's face. "I really didn't need to hear that." She arched her hand back for the strike.

A much larger, stronger hand enveloped Holly's before the blow fell. "Hold on, fairy-girl." Juliet lightly twisted at Holly's wrist, forcing her to drop the weapon. "I doubt Artemis is the assaulting type."
Holly shut off her wings, her weight suddenly pulling on Juliet's injured arm, forcing the wrestler to set her down. Still snarling, fingers itching for her neutrinos, the fairy pointed at a rather interestingly shaped fold in the male's towel. "Not the type? Then what do you call that?"

Juliet's eyes flicked down before glancing away. She shrugged nonchalantly, but was unable to keep in a smirk. "Adequate."

Artemis looked highly offended.

Holly, seemed a lot more disturbed than she had been a moment before. She mouthed the word "adequate," her bugged-out eyes turning it into a clear question. Shaking her head to get out of that crippling loop of thought, she focused her gaze much higher on Artemis. "You'd best explain yourself, Mud Man. I've got a respectable arsenal with me and a severe dislike of predators."

Finally wrenching herself from Juliet's grasp, she rested both hands on her two neutrinos, trigger fingers tapping the power-level settings, encouraging the man to explain. Very quickly.

Just as Artemis opened his mouth to do so, Minerva pounded on the door. "Artemis! Come back in here! I want to help you...we could..."

Juliet listened to the rest of the blond's sentence and was highly impressed. "Artemis, how did you ever convince her to let you do that in the first place?"

Holly unholstered her guns, letting them rest at her sides, safeties still on. No sense literally shooting herself in the foot if she got too angry to keep her trigger fingers in check.

Artemis swallowed, fighting down a blush. "I did not drag her in there. And I know what you saw, Holly, but I was about to push her away."

Holly was understandably skeptical. "You were kissing her."

"She caught me unawares. Besides, be happy that she did. There were sparks."

Holly did not look happy about this at all. In fact, she was gritting her teeth, beginning to angle her neutrino's towards Artemis's toes. "Yes...the little toe first, I think. Those aren't necessary, right? "Oh, goody. I was beginning to think your attraction to her was purely mental."

Juliet seemed to have caught on, her logic a bit less hindered by rage. "Sparks? You mean..."

"Magic, yes. I don't know how she did it, but it must be associated with her drugging." Artemis relaxed for a moment as at least one of the women in the suite transferred completely to his side. Then he tensed, eyes going wide as his drugged girlfriend again tried to open the door. He focused on Holly, not even bothering to hide the pleading in his tone. "Look, will you just trust me? Probe her for magic, like you did to me when Mum was sick. Juliet will hold her while you perform the test."

Before Holly could respond, Juliet nodded, advancing towards the door. Rougher than was strictly necessary, she pushed her charge aside. Just as another round of knocks began, she gently pushed down on the handle, easing the door open.

Minerva looked through the gap, smiling brightly. It was a debutante's smile, full of enthusiasm and teeth. "Juliet! I really need to see Artemis."

Juliet nodded, thoughtful. Then, with barely a moment for her companions to process the move, she had the other woman in an full nelson. Tapping the back of Minerva's knees to weaken her stance, they both sank to a kneeling position. The wrestler scrunched up her nose in irritation.
"Hurry up, fairy-girl. She's sopping wet!"

Holly took a step back. "Woah, wait one moment. Who knows what else Koboi did to her. I feel like she's going to...give me something."

Minerva sighed, straining towards her boyfriend. "Oh, I'm not going to give anything to you..." She batted her eyes, though the drugs in her system made the action clumsy, dimming the allure.

Holly waved a hand at her, appealing to Artemis. "Look," she seemed to be saying, "what did I tell you? Creepy."

Artemis, still holding onto his towel with one hand, pinched the bridge of his nose to release some tension and stop the slow trickle of blood that was finally reaching his chin. "Very well, I see your point. How else can we prove that Minerva has magic?"

Holly suddenly and inexplicably seemed to cheer up. She addressed Minerva directly, voice soft, much like a rescue worker trying to coax a scared dog off a busy street. "Okay, Minerva." When Minerva did not focus on the elf, she snapped her fingers a few times until the human did so. "I need you to do something for me."

Minerva pouted, though the expression was coquettish and not truly disappointed. "What if I don't want to?"

Holly considered this, then her mood became even lighter. She looked over her shoulder at Artemis, giving him a rather nasty smirk before returning to the conversation. "If you do what I ask...Artemis will kiss you."

Nodding so quickly that Holly was surprised her head didn't simply snap right off, Minerva agreed. Her entire focus was on Holly as the elf's new position as purveyor of kisses demanded.

Artemis took a step forward, a hand held out between the women. "Hold on, Holly. She is still—"

Smacking his arm away, Holly continued speaking with Minerva. "Clear your mind." When Minerva had closed her eyes, face slackening a bit at this minor meditation, the elf gave her next command. "Now, just think one word: 'Heal.'"

Softly Minerva repeated the word. "Heal."

Blue sparks exploded across her skin, over twenty years of environmental toxins being expelled in moments. The healing was relatively minor, so there was no thrashing about for a critical system's check. Still, Juliet let the genius go, backing out of the doorway. She had only seen two healings, and one had ended with a troll being throttled.

The procedure was over quickly, leaving Minerva slumped over, barely holding her body off the ground with splayed and shaking arms. When she looked up, her eyes were back to normal, though full of tears. Her voice cracked, clearly moments away from hysterics. "A-Artemis?" Violent tremors began to overtake her body.

Artemis stepped forward and crouched before her. "Shhh. It's okay." He wrapped both arms around her shoulders, gently pulling his lover into his body. "It's alright, Minerva. Come here."

Suddenly, Minerva shoved Artemis away, scrambling backwards. Slamming into the floor, the man gaped at her. "What in the—! What's wrong?"
The answer came moment's later. Continuing her scramble, Minerva disappeared into the bathroom. There came the sharp click of a toilet seat hitting the reservoir, followed by the wet, staccato splashed of vomit.

Artemis glared at Holly. "You made her sick? That was the big plan?"

The elf couldn't help but grin. "Be thankful you figured things out this soon. Much longer and the last of the drug would need to exit the other way. So, I'd advise you to stop complaining. You have something else to be worried about."

Artemis suppressed a groan. Murderous Koboi, sick girlfriends, vindictive elves...what next? "Really. Such as...?"

Holly winked. "You owe her a kiss."

From the bathroom came the words "Dieu aidez-moi!" Then another loud splash. It sounded like a thick hose filled with gelatin being emptied into a kiddie-pool.

Artemis swallowed, obviously trying to keep down his own bile. "Er...Juliet, shall we go down to the gift shops and get Minerva some dry nightclothes and a toothbrush?"

Juliet was similarly horrified and nodded eagerly. "And mouthwash." With remarkable speed, the humans began to collect themselves (and their clothes), darting out the front door.

Holly rolled her eyes, walking into the disaster area that was once known as "the bathroom." The floor was covered in a thin layer of water that was bound to ruin the wood, while a stunning variety of spa amenities were strewn about near the front door.

Minerva seemed to have finished expelling the drug and was now sprawled on her stomach in front of the toilet, arms over her head to block out the dim light. Except for a light shiver, she ignored the water pooled around her, only putting in enough effort to keep her nostrils clear of the puddle.

Sitting at the woman's side, Holly gently rubbed her damp back. "How are you doing, Minerva?"

Minerva shook her head, then groaned, squeezing her skull tighter. The small movement had apparently disturbed her already fragile guard against the pain. Even magic couldn't counteract hangovers and drug withdrawal. Only a removal of the poisons themselves ended the pain, and that took time. It was one of the reasons fairies dealt so poorly with alcohol. "Wh-where's Artemis?"

"Off to get you some pajamas and mouthwash."

"Oh." Minerva whimpered, looking up at the smaller woman, who was surprised to see tears streaming down the blond's cheeks. He voice sounded weak and cracked with misery. "I love him."

Holly paused in her comforting rub. Then she nodded, starting it up again and looking away. "As well you should."

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The Living

May 14, 2014-Tourrettes sur Loup, France

Minerva Paradizo's evening alone was abruptly interrupted by the purr of a car's engine.
"Huh," she mused, laying down her mechanical pencil, "Artemis here and with no warning...not good." Rising in one clean, elegant motion, she brushed the remnants of eraser off her white sundress. After taking a moment to run fingers through her curly blond hair, the woman stepped to her balcony, leaning over the white marble railing. Below her, the villa's long driveway ended in a circle before the front door. Where one would have entirely expected a horse-drawn carriage in the 1900's style, a rather nondescript black car was parking.

Minerva let long tresses drape over her shoulders, partially obscuring her face. It would allow a few more minutes to study the visitors before they felt the weight of her gaze, as well as masking her reactions.

Butler was the first out of the car, looking up and shading his eyes against the sun, which was beginning to fall behind the villa. He gave his young female friend a wave, which she returned with the barest twiddle of her fingers. The Eurasian seemed to steel himself and moved to assist his passenger.

Minerva bit her lip.

Artemis Fowl staggered out, gripping Butler's forearm for support. At the manservant's concerned murmurs, Artemis gave a small nod. It took him a moment to stand on his own. When he did, he looked up to his female double's balcony, though he did not bother to shield his eyes against the sun, merely squinting. Minerva had the distinct impression that Artemis wasn't looking at her.

"Minerva. Sorry to come unannounced."

He certainly didn't sound sorry, but the woman had a hard time disapproving of the man who had saved her life so many years ago. "You have broken the monotony of my afternoon, Artemis. I'm afraid I can not offer you much in the way of hospitality, however. A late tea?"

"Butler would appreciate anything you have to offer, but I must decline."

With a small hum deep in the back of her throat, Minerva flipped back her hair. She wasn't vain (oh...alright, perhaps a little), but she loved this movement. The sunbeams caught in her thick curls, creating an effect that more than one boy had described as 'divine.' "Once again you deny me the one thing I want, Artemis."

Perhaps her male counterpart was immune to goddesses. It made sense, given his own handle. He held his hands behind his back, like a soldier standing at-ease. "Would you join me for a stroll? There is something we must discuss in private."

Minerva felt a tingle in her throat and chest. Almost like tiny feathers were tickling her airways. It felt wonderful, adding to her anticipation. "Nothing would make me happier."

Artemis raised his eyebrows for just a moment, as if surprised at the idea. "I somewhat doubt that."

Butler gave his charge an stern glance before striding towards the villa. Before he disappeared below her balcony, his eyes darted up, pleading with his old companion. "I leave him in your hands."

That was rather intriguing. Butler had confidence in the safety of the Paradizo grounds, but the phrasing... He expected something more than mere physical safety. Guidance, perhaps?

As Minerva traipsed down the grand staircase, she couldn't help but be annoyed. One of the problems with being a socially competent genius was that people expected you to turn psychoanalyst on every acquaintance. Of course, she could try to prod Artemis until she discovered
whatever it was that had Butler so concerned, but the young man was a bit more adept at psychology than herself. He had the unnerving habit of recognizing her analysis and rigging the results. At their last dinner party together, she had diagnosed him as schizophrenic, agoraphobic, and possessing a latent Oedipus complex. Minerva had then spent the rest of the night trying to avoid the smug sod and later needed a rather intense scrubbing in the shower to get rid of the creepy feeling that he had inspired.

Artemis had a very under-developed sense of humor, but he loved screwing with people.

Minerva's irritation dissipated the moment she opened the front door.

Artemis was leaning against the porch railing, basking in a bit of sunlight. His eyes were closed and his face stoic, but it was impossible to hide his enjoyment. A pink tinge was already overtaking his exposed skin.

"Tsk. You'll burn if you aren't careful." She stood between him and the sun, voluminous hair blocking all of the harsh rays.

Artemis finally looked at her, but his eyes were a bit unfocused. "It won't be a problem for me by tomorrow."

Minerva took in the weak trembling that was overtaking his body. He looked ready to faint and his skin was not so much pale as pasty, covered in a thin sheen of sweat. With a shock, Minerva realized that Artemis was not masking any of his actions or words. He stood before her, more open than he had ever been to the young lady in her life. Asking for understanding.

She came to her conclusion a split-second later. "Butler doesn't know you only agreed to see me so you could say goodbye, does he?"

Artemis started, finally seeming to give the Frenchwoman his full attention. "How did you—"

Minerva tapped her temple. "Ah. Right. No, I suspect he doesn't. He's hoping you'll change my mind."

Minerva hooked her elbow around Artemis's, guiding the man down the front steps. She closed her eyes as he leaned against her body for support, sending little tendrils of electricity across her skin.

"Let's see what I can do, shall we?"

They began a slow circuit of the villa, taking detours through the many garden paths. As they walked, their conversation also wandered, touching on a handful of fairly random subjects. Their last chess game, Minerva's initial sketches for an automated archival facility ("Really," Artemis chided, "it is far to impersonal. Perhaps you could commission a mosaic of mural? It would maintain the efficiency of the design while adding some...spirit."). Lucy's schoolwork ("Addition," Minerva mused, "how droll."). and the social maneuvering of their peers, who had begun pairing off to cement the unofficial political and business alliances formed by their parents.

On this last subject, Artemis seemed quite disgusted. Not that he generally approved of the unofficial alliances, but today he was particularly annoyed. When she mentioned the near simultaneous divorce and engagement of a tech-baron's daughter, he actually grumbled under his breath. "They don't get it. It's not supposed to be easy to let go."

Minerva ruminated over this. It was the last clue she needed. Stepping into the rose garden, she sat them both down on the edge of a marble fountain. The final sliver of sunlight was disappearing over the hills, lighting up the arched water. Taking a deep breath, Minerva squeezed Artemis's
hands and said the words that she knew would break her heart. "Is she worth it, Artemis? This...sacrifice of yourself?"

Artemis studied her face. He was silent for several minutes, tracing each line, following the slow of her golden curls. He reached up, threading his fingers through her hair, watching each strand fall back to her shoulders. Carefully, he brushed a single finger along her cheek, removing a tear. She hadn't even realized it was there.

"Yes," he rasped, but he was smiling. His posture straightened, a weight suddenly gone. "As...contrived as it sounds, I can't live without her. She is too much a part of my life."

Minerva suddenly understood why Butler had brought them here. Why Artemis had took in her face so carefully. It was to see if he could live with the alternative. Suddenly, knowing that she had failed to meet Artemis's need, Minerva felt more tears beginning to slide down her face. They were silent and she let them go as they wished. She wanted dignity in this moment, not a fight against the emotions, which would only lead to sobs.

Still, there was no sense in not revealing the one thing she had thought of whenever she saw this phenomenal man. Not when there was nothing left to loose by speaking out. "I like to think that, in another universe...another set of circumstances...we could have been something."

Like so many other men in his situation, Artemis was astonished. He had certainly been attached to this woman, even when she was a young girl. He'd enjoyed her company at many socialite events. Minerva was capable of turning the most unpleasant of soirees into at least a tolerable—if not outright enjoyable—evening. Yet...romance? "Why didn't you say anything?"

She looked down at her hands, clutching at a bit of her dress. "At first I was embarrassed. I'd spent three years obsessing over your return from the time stream, and when you got back...I felt like I had nothing clever to say." She gave a small laugh, shaking her head at the foolishness of that younger self. Imagine, to have nothing to say to someone she had come to know so well in the years since. "Then, when I finally overcame that and we began to talk regularly, I began noticing...things."

"...things?"

"You talk about her all the time." At the further reddening of Artemis's face, Minerva let out a more genuine laugh, covering her mouth with a hand. She hadn't been a central figure in the Koboi team, but she'd been given enough free reign to notice the glut of gossip magazines covering the Artemis/Holly controversy, especially in the wake of the mad pixie's capture. The entire fairy world seemed to be placing bets on this inter-species relationship, yet Artemis was completely oblivious. Gossip rags were below his notice.

"Don't look so astonished. Of course you talked about her. Holly—" Minerva paused, realizing that neither of them had said the fairy's name yet, but Artemis did not protest her conclusion. "Holly is a phenomenal woman. It took me until your capture of Koboi to really understand, though."

Artemis tilted his head a bit to the side, curious, but he did not query her directly, instead waiting for Minerva to continue on her own.

"What you did...it wasn't to catch Opal, because you could have organized plenty of assistance with that."

"Are you saying I risked death and dismemberment—not necessarily in that order—just to impress a girl?"
Minerva rolled her eyes. So over-dramatic, even in his denials. Artemis really should have gone into acting. He would have made a wonderful villain. Or perhaps a heart-breaking Dr. Frankenstein. "We both know you were never at risk of anything, but otherwise...yes. You didn't do that for the world or the People or even to protect your family. You did that for Holly, and I...can't compete with that."

Artemis did not deny this final conclusion, and he looked ashamed that he couldn't. He had bonded with few humans, but he trusted and respected Minerva without reservation, despite their somewhat flawed first meeting. After all, people will do such rash things at twelve years old. "I'm sorry, Minerva. I just never realized."

Fingers light, enjoying this last familiar touch, she smoothed the hair back from his forehead. "Everyone misses one love in their life because of fear. I'm...grateful that you were mine." Leaning close, she brushed her lips over his forehead. A goodbye and a blessing. She hovered there, fighting the urge to lower her head or tilt up his chin to steal that longed-for kiss. "I hope you end up somewhere nice."

Artemis through of the contents of the Cessna and smirked. "I'm doing my utmost to arrange that."
Irreversible

The Dead

September 10, 2014 - Fowl Manor

Invulnerability was an interesting high. Chix could see why it had driven Koboi mad. Of course, he wasn't being affected by it. Not in the least. Maybe it was his noble purpose...or the fact that the shield would only last for ten minutes. Whatever it was, when the sprite entered the wide-open front doors of Fowl Manor (fondly remembering the time he'd blown them off their damn hinges), he felt an odd twist in his stomach. Not 'book barfing,' as that had been cured years ago. This was much more primal.

'He's just a man. Barely a man, in fact. He is alone, running around with wildly outdated weapons. I've got an impenetrable shield and forty years on the force behind me. He's done.'

That was...if Chix could find him. The shield may have been compatible with his weaponry, but the heat it put off was already causing the sprite to sweat, as well as throwing off his helmet's thermal imaging. His search would have to be low-tech and that did little to help his nerves. Chix wasn't obsessed with technology, but he could appreciate a little extra information when facing Fowl.

It wasn't yet fall, but a handful of dry, yellow leaves had blown into Fowl Manor, skittering over the Tunisian rug and wood flooring. All of the lights were off, but the blaze of Chix's shield managed to cast a dim blue glow on the main hall, though the light was constantly fading and increasing, causing shadows to suddenly come into focus and startle the already nervous sprite. His ears twitched, trying to catch any sounds that managed to make themselves heard over the crackle of the electricity, but nothing that gave him a clue managed to make its way through.

He was a well-trained soldier, so Chix began his search on the first floor, mentally dividing the Manor into quadrants, inspecting them in a methodical manner. Yet, with every door he kicked open, he knew he was making the wrong choice. Certainly, he did a thorough search of each room (wasting far too much of the little time he had), but they proved as empty as they felt.

So Chix decided to follow the next logical step. If his own equipment didn't work, then he would have to use the Mud Man's own technology. So he directed his steps to the Manor's surveillance room. This also proved to be a dead end. At first, everything appeared to have been switched off. Upon further inspection, Chix found that all of the power cables had been removed to keep any other intruders from using the Fowl family's own resources.

'O...kay...so he's waiting for Holly. Somewhere she would know to look for him. Where would she look?'

Then he knew. The place he would feel most comfortable. Most in control. His lair. His bedroom.

The main staircase was old, but well cared for. As Chix ascended, it didn't even creak, his nearly silent footfalls the only clues that someone was moving to the upper floors. The transient nature of the light from his shield made the second floor even more unnerving, flashing over the faces of Fowl's past, making it seem that their quirked lips moved, whispering a warning to their descendant.

Artemis's bedroom was halfway down the upstairs hall, its door cracked open. Chix craned his head, trying to see as much of the chambers as he could without approaching further. Light from
the moon lit up the room, but there was only a small slice of visibility. So, moving heel-to-toe to completely silence his steps, Chix made his way down the hall until he got close enough to flatten himself to the door opposite, checking his readouts. One minute left. Plenty of time.

Still, no sense being rash. Curling his hands around the small speaker on the barrel of the gun to muffle the beep of its settings, Chix spun the small dial on the readouts, switching it from 'stun' to 'char.' Screw procedure. He'd either be fired for unnecessary use of force or lauded as the hero of the People. He wasn't too particular over which.

Angling his body sideways to reduce his profile, thus cutting down on the area an enemy could attack, the lieutenant held the gun out at arm's length, completely steady. 'One good run, then you're in. Shoot at anything that moves.'

He took a deep, calming breath. Then burst into action. In three quick strides, he kicked open the door and charged into the room, bellowing with rage. "Fowl!"

Nothing. Well, not precisely nothing. An array of wood and chrome furniture, a few computers (also devoid of cables) and an enormous bed in front of a pair of open French windows. The wind was blowing in the wrong direction to get into the bedroom this way, but there was still a cold movement of air in the room which brought up goosebumps on Verbil's green skin. Excepting himself, the enormous room seemed unoccupied.

"Oh dear," a voice purred from behind, "that was rather rash."

'D'arvit! Behind the door!' Wings whirring to life for extra agility, Chix spun, leveling his neutrino at the back of the wood door. He shot off a dozen rounds, arms jerking so erratically with the recoil that he knew half of them went wild. Not enough would be off-target to spare the human, however.

Wood dust filled the front of the room, coating the sprite's visor. Chix flapped his wings to clear the cloud. Then he froze.

Hanging from the doorknob with several lines of duct tape, almost blown to oblivion, was a primitive Mud-Man device. A portable two-way radio.

The neutrino's shield began to flicker. In less than three seconds, the strands of electricity faded out, one by one. The metal balls clicked to the floor, rolling in all directions with a diminishing whirl, clicking as they hit walls and furniture. The reassuring vibration in Chix's hand ceased as the last of the gun's power leached away.

"Oh...Frond."

With a creak that sent the sprite's wings itching, the door across the hall opened. Artemis stood in the dark portal, the matching radio and doorknob in one hand, while his other reached out towards the fairy. He held a scratched but obviously well-maintained sig sauer. The man smiled, nodding in approval. "A shield. I must say, I wasn't expecting that. Foaly has been busy."

Chix had not been in the right mind to begin with, but this mild banter was enough to put him over the edge. He flung himself forward, teeth bared. "Monster!"

Casually, Artemis twitched his hand to slightly change his aim and squeezed the trigger.

Pain blazed in Chix's right shoulder in the exact same moment he heard the shot. It echoed down the corridors, bouncing back to attack his ears over and over again. He screeched, his charge effectively halted. The lieutenant grasped his wound, which was being covered by blue sparks. He was nearly full on magic, but sprites weren't the best of healers. The wound wouldn't kill him, but
he would need to see a real medic to get it fixed. Blood was already seeping through his fingers. Hissing through his teeth, Chix turned blazing eyes on Fowl.

"Butler was right," the boy mused, "a little self defense training is rather useful."

"Self defense? I doubt that was what you had in mind when you loaded that gun."

Artemis shrugged. "True enough. Come with me, Lieutenant. I believe I need to make another call."

Outside Fowl Manor

N°1 tapped his hard toe claws into the ground of the command tent, trying to act casual as he addressed the female elf sitting next to him. "So...you and Trouble?"

"Hmph." Holly responded.

"Last night?"

"Mmmhmmm."

"D'arvit," he muttered, "I owe Foaly a barrel of oats."

She didn't bother to move her head off her cradled palm and fist. This was no time for levity. Hunched over, Holly focused on the Manor camera's. They only had a few still operational, and none were upstairs, where Chix had disappeared. A few screens had been brought into the command tent so the ranking officers could monitor the situation without alerting the entire LEP that one of their own had placed himself in peril.

'Curse that stupid sprite! This isn't some goblin in a hole. This is Artemis Fowl and it is his home. Even I couldn't sneak up on him. Chix will be lucky to—'

"Screen five!" She crowed, finally straightening up as she focused on a single display. "They're coming out on screen five!"

Her announcement wasn't needed. Every one of the officers in the tent had caught the movement and were now focused on the slow progress of human and sprite down the stairs. Trouble in particular was rapt, not even bothering to blink. Lieutenant Verbil had begun that night under his protection and the fairy was still technically his responsibility. It was his job to bring the fool home.

"The security room," an excitable gnome finally yelled, "they're headed to the security room!"

On the screen, Chix seemed to realize the same thing. He glanced over his shoulder, sneering at his captor. Artemis said something, reaching into the breast pocket of his suit. He threw a single chord at Chix, its pronged end striking the prisoner's forehead and causing the lieutenant to wince, a new ooze of blood coming from the impact.

On Artemis's instruction, Chix knelt under the monitors and hooked up one of the computers. All in and out of the Manor waited, tense. Except for Artemis, who now leaned against the door frame, gun pointed at Chix's back as the sprite took a seat in the room's only chair.

In Haven, Foaly waited until the computer finished its initial loading. Then, with a few quick keystrokes, he forced the computer and its webcam into a conference call with the command tent.
Artemis appeared pleased when the chat window opened. "Ah, Holly dear! So good to see you."

"D'arvit!" Trouble spun in his seat to glare at his lover, who was sitting well in view of the camera, looking startled.

Artemis held his free hand out, as if to placate the Commander. "Really, Commander, the coverts-ops drivel was getting rather old. This just makes things easier."

With a final narrowing of his eyes, as if promising to have a rather intense conversation with Holly later, Trouble returned his attention to the mastermind. "Easier. Really."

"Oh, for me, obviously. Do you have anything you'd like to ask of your comrades, Lieutenant Verbil?"

"Fuck you, Mud Man."

"Hmmm." Artemis pursed his lips in consideration. "I doubt they'd comply. Although..." He looked to Holly, his eyes half-lidded, and smirked.

Holly bared her teeth. "I'd shoot it off."

Artemis actually winced at this, the fingers of his free hand clenching and clawing at the air for a moment. "I will take your word on that. Now, where was I...oh, yes. I need to speak with Holly."

"I'm listening." She leaned back in her chair, tapping a foot. 'Act casual. Do not let him get to you. That's what got Chix in this mess.'

Artemis shook his head, a small lilt in his voice. "Oh, no no no. That will not do. This is a private matter. Come in. We'll discuss it over tea."

"It's far past tea time."

"Coffee, then?"

Trouble tensed.

Holly frowned. 'No. There is no way.'

Artemis took in their reaction and smirked. "Ah. An inside joke, perhaps?"

Trouble glared at the human. "Go d'arvit yourself, Fowl."

Artemis frowned, tilting his head slightly. "Does that even conjugate that way? I'm afraid I never studied Gnommish cursing all that deeply."

Finally, the Commander seemed to have had enough. "Shut up. Send Chix out or else I will be sending an entire squadron of my best men in to take you out."

Artemis considered this. "Will Holly be with them?"

"No!"

Artemis snapped. "Pity. I have already told you, Commander. I do not want your best man. I want your best woman."

"And you are not getting her."
"You know..." Artemis shook his head, as if the entire evening was putting him out of his way. "I hate to repeat my threats. It makes me seem so...unoriginal. So, no tree, this time." He caught Holly's eyes, smiling fondly. "This is your last warning. Ready to go, Lieutenant Verbil?"

Trouble's shoulders seemed to lose just a bit of their tension. Everyone in the tent breathed out a sigh of relief.

Jaw still firmly set, Chix began to rise.

Then his head disintegrated into a red mist.

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The Broken

July 4, 2014-Ceasar's Palace, Las Vegas, Nevada

When Artemis Fowl next poked his head into the bathroom, he was quite obviously ashamed of himself. Which was understandable, given his hasty retreat in the face of vomit. During these sort of adventures, he was much more accustomed to things coming out the other end.

Holding out an enormous shopping bag as penance, he approached Holly and Minerva. Both were now sitting reclined against the light green cabinets. Minerva's head was tucked between her knees as Holly continued the soothing back rub.

"Er...clothes," Artemis said, mentally kicking himself for how brusque it sounded. Minerva, not trusting herself to look up or speak, lest more of her stomach project itself from her mouth, gave a thumbs up.

He could certainly do more than just hand off the items, though the genius wasn't sure exactly what task to perform. "Do you want my help? I'm afraid Juliet is hitting the bars for information."

A thumbs down which transformed to a finger pointed at Holly was his girlfriend's response.

The officer looked rather flattered. Rising, she shooed the invading male out, giving him a cheerful wave before slamming the door in his face. She still wasn't completely pleased with how he handled the seduction and wasn't worried about hiding that fact.

Artemis blinked at the door for roughly a minute, then retreated to wait in the master bedroom. He looked out of the window, temple resting on the cool glass. It was hours past midnight, but it seemed that every light in Las Vegas was still shining merrily, calling tourists out of their hotel rooms to take advantage of each minute of their stay. Artemis was not tempted, content to stay in this suite and muse.

Magic. Opal Koboi had done what he had only thought about for all these years: discovered how to return magic to humans. They had once wielded the gift; as recently as the last ice age, if his research was correct. Yet, with the retreating of the glaciers and the coming of the Neolithic Age, the gift had faded away, leading to fear among his species until, at the Battle of Tailte, the People had been forced to retreat underground.

Since then, the fairy races had carefully guarded themselves, drifting into legend and then—in this new age of technology—into mere "fairy tales." Discovery of magic among humans would be...a disaster. After all, if humans had magic, then it was possible that other elements of fantasy existed. Put seven billion humans onto the scent and it wouldn't be long before another fairy was captured. Then it was all over.
Artemis couldn't help but be intrigued. After all, if he could stop Koboi, she might be forced to reveal how she evoked the gift in Minerva. If he could unlock the magical abilities in his own family, life would be a lot easier. They could heal and protect themselves, almost completely obliterating security concerns.

'And maybe Shana could...'

The bedroom door clicked open, catching Artemis's attention. Holly entered, doing her best to support a wobbly Minerva, who was now clad in white satin pajamas, hair freshly washed of vomit and tied back.

Crossing the room, Artemis added his own arm to support the woman, guiding her to the bed. As she lay down, he sat on the edge, gently removing a stray strand of wet hair from her forehead, laying it carefully beside the rest of her locks. "Are you feeling better?"

Minerva smiled and yawned, filling the air with the smell of minty-fresh breath. "Yes, but...the kiss...can wait, okay? Until this is all over?" Her eyes closed slowly as the woman slipped into a deep, much-needed slumber.

Artemis smiled at her, taking one of his lover's hands in his, rubbing a thumb along the lines of her palm. "Thank you, Holly. You didn't have to do that."

Holly stood apart, halfway to the door, arms wrapped around her chest. She faced away from the couple, but seemed to have sensed that Artemis wanted her to stay a bit longer after helping. "Why didn't I have to? It seemed common decency."

Artemis opened his mouth, then closed it before rash words left. He continued to study Minerva's face, his back to Holly, just as her back was to him. Finally, he decided to try again. "Because she's..." Then he couldn't continue.

Holly, however, seemed to have no such problem. She knew Artemis too well to be oblivious to what he had meant to say. "Your girlfriend? That means I can't be nice to her?" Holly shook her head (though Artemis couldn't see her do so), utterly disgusted with the man's logic. "Just because she has you... Stop flattering yourself, Artemis."

Before he had a chance to respond, Holly swept out of the room, careful to keep the lock's mechanisms from snapping too loudly and awakening the recovering woman.

Artemis sat there a long time, still caressing Minerva's palm. He watched as goosebumps rose on her flesh at the initial tender touches, slowly retracting as they became familiar. Minerva was smiling softly in her sleep, letting out small sighs and clutching at a corner of the covers with her free hand, squeezing Artemis back every so often, though she mostly left him to the satisfying pets.

Over four years, and he was still fascinated by Minerva's skin. "Silky" did not even begin to describe it. Excellent genes and access to any beauty supply yet invented (barring fairy products) had given her flesh a softness and suppleness that Artemis couldn't resist, even if it was just for a small touch like this. She was...perfect. She always had been perfect.

Laying the woman's hand back down, Artemis stood, pausing long enough to lean over and place a soft kiss on Minerva's forehead.

She smiled, squeezing the sheets a bit tighter, but did not wake.

Taking care that the door didn't creak too loudly, Artemis left the room and closed the door behind him.
Holly was sitting on the enormous beige couch, studying her tablet. She angled her head slightly, aiming an ear at the man, but did not look up. "Shouldn't you be in there being the good boyfriend?"

Artemis joined her on the couch, copying the woman's cross-legged position so that they could face each other. "She's asleep, so I thought it might be time to be the good friend."

"You could certainly use the practice," Holly muttered, running her fingers along the bottom of the tablet to scroll through the pages.

"Quite right. So. Catching up time."

Holly leaned back an almost imperceptible degree. Her head tilted to the right, as if she were particularly interested in what she was reading. Her eyes did not move along the page, however, giving her inattention away.

Leaning towards the elf, Artemis tapped her right cheek, moving her head back so that the half-missing ear and deep red scar were highlighted. "What happened?"

She leaned back a bit further, but his finger followed, maintaining the contact that was already beginning to feel like a red-hot brand. "I don't want to talk about it."

"I DON'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT!"

Silence took over the room as Artemis sat, eyes wide, trying to understand what Holly had just done. He had never seen his friend like this. She was curling into herself, neck now bent so that her ear rested on her shoulder, hiding nearly all of the scar. Her eyes weren't closed, but they focused on the middle cushion of the couch. Her hand was clutching at the collar of her uniform, pulling it a bit tighter around the throat. This did nothing to further hide the mark. Artemis suddenly realized that she had been doing this constantly since Tara.

When she spoke, he had to strain to hear. "I was stupid, alright? Just...drop it."

He couldn't. While they had been cut off from each other for six years, the bond between elf and human had reforged with surprising ease, or at least it had on his end. Now he feared that the little warrior would break down if he prodded further, but he couldn't just let this go. Not after so many awkward evasions. "No. Tell me, or...I'll ask Foaly."

It felt like such a weak threat, but it got Holly's attention. "He wouldn't dare say anything."

Now was not the time to be soft, so Artemis gave a dismissive shrug. "Very well. I'll hack his systems and get the story according to the LEP."

The look she gave him was mocking. "Really. Do you think you can..." Then she remembered his past ventures into the centaur's security and glowered. "Yes. I suppose you could."
"Undoubtedly. Thus, would you rather tell me or have me read the official version?"

Holly didn't let her collar go, but she did uncurl her neck, now merely leaning against the couch to hide her scar. It was a bit less effective, but still evasive. "No, it's...less than flattering."

"How so?"

Holly frowned, disgusted at her memories. "They accused me of letting Opal Koboi free. In less than 'official' terms."

Now Artemis was hooked. He remembered the midnight call from Foaly two years ago. The centaur had refused to say anything more about the escape than that it had been executed by the Koboi of the past. He then proceeded to put such a heavy set of encryptions and traps around the information that Artemis had burned out a dozen FoxOS-equipped computers trying to break through. Foaly had eventually advised him to drop the subject. The fact that the centaur had been doing minor maintenance on his mind-wipe array while looking at a map of France had been a sufficiently pointed threat; Artemis had finally gave in.

"You know how it was, those first few years," Holly began. Her eyes were pointed towards Artemis, but he had the distinct impression that she was looking through him. "The occasional sighting. Some rise in crime and smuggling. Nothing we could track very well or that even indicated Koboi was active. Then, two years ago, everything went...silent."

She blinked and her eyebrows lowered, as if she was still confused by the development. "At first, we all hoped she'd just made a wrong move somewhere and was killed off by an angry demon or something, but the 'time paradox' idea made it pretty obvious that we couldn't believe that."

"I was...a bit obsessed with the case, as you can manage." At Artemis's nod, she smirked, suddenly cracking her guard enough to let out some of her old pride. "The top operative, actually. Still am. Every bit of data on that pixie goes through me. I realized that something was about to happen, so I went to Atlantis to head the guards."

"All the guards in the Deeps have decades of training behind them and were running about as hot as possible. So was I...which is the only thing that saved my life. They take prisoners in for monthly physicals, and I was heading up the team escorting her two weeks into my duties. Me being there...I think that's why the attack came then and not at a more lax time."

Artemis waited a long time for Holly to continue, but she did not. The elf seemed to think that she had given enough of an explanation, but Artemis was not satisfied. "So it was Opal Koboi who did that to you?"

Holly finally, obviously reluctant, removed her head from the side of the couch and let her collar go. She rubbed a hand over her neck, though not to cover the wound. She was merely touching it, as if she couldn't believe it was still there. "No one is sure exactly what she did, but do you remember Abbot's sword? With the spells on it?"

Artemis nodded, remembering her temporary death with a stab to his heart that seemed an echo of Holly's own temporary attack.

"No I thinks Koboi put something on the knife she was using. She came in, blasted away all of the other guards with those damn powers, and then...she went after me."

"Suicidal of her," Artemis said, trying to be supportive.

Holly couldn't help but smile at this, taking it for the compliment it was. Then she returned to
somberness, shaking her head. "I've never seen someone move so fast. Pixies aren't great at shielding—they specialize in hexes—but it was like she was modifying shield vibrations into movement. I could see her, but I couldn't react in time and she..." Here, instead of explaining, Holly made a quick downward slash at the air. "That was it.

"When I woke up two months later, I was back in Haven, half my guardsmen were dead, there were two Kobois on the loose, and I had this." She finally let the scar go and stretched out her neck, as if Artemis had yet to see it.

Artemis studied the scar for quite a while. Then he could resist the urge no longer. Moving slowly, giving Holly plenty of time to back away, he reached out his hand. She did not flinch, so Artemis lightly touched the remains of her right ear.

He was right. It was soft. Perhaps not as much as unmarred skin, but the scar was smooth. He traced down the cut-off end of her ear to the red curve on her jaw. The attack had narrowly missed her jugular, but the blood loss would still have been immense.

When he reached Holly's collarbone, he paused, realizing that he was on the edge of a far more private territory. Still, he could not stop now. So, clearing his throat, he asked the forbidden question: "How far does it go?"

Holly chewed her lip. "P-pretty far."

Now an even more tentative question: "Will you...show me?"

Holly took his hand, moving it away from her chest. "Artemis, it isn't important."

Twisting out of her grip, he placed what he hoped was a comforting palm on her shoulder. "It's important to me. Whatever Koboi did, I wasn't there to help you."

For a moment, Holly wanted to argue. She didn't need the Mud Man's help. Then she remembered all of their adventures together and realized that Artemis had always been the one to unravel the plots and give her the directions needed to save the day. Perhaps, had he been there, Koboi wouldn't even have dared to attempt an attack.

So, slowly, Holly set a fumbling hand to the zipper of her Recon suit, both thankful and angry that the blood on her one-piece had not come out, leaving her without that last garment to take off. She felt clumsy, taking far too long to undo the uniform. Despite the seeming eternity it took to move the zipper down to her navel, Holly found herself wishing another would pass again and allow her to remain hidden. It would not, however, so Holly took a deep breath and pulled back the right side of her Recon suit.

The scar continued in an almost straight line down from the elf's collarbone, right through Holly's right breast. Much of the flesh seemed to have been lost, causing the two halves to stretch and curve in where they had so ineffectively healed. Now she had two small bumps that barely rose above the level of her abdomen, separated by a dark-red cord of scar tissue, the shape clearly not matching the larger, smooth swell on her left side. The scar continued down her stomach before angling to the hip, where there was another divot of lost flesh from the weapon's exit. Small bits of shaped padding were placed on the inside of her suit, meant to fill in Holly's missing pieces.

Artemis clenched his fist, not sure what he should do with his hands. If he reached out, Holly would likely beat him senseless. If he did not, she would think he was disgusted at the sight. It was alarming, true, but Artemis did not feel repulsed. Merely saddened at the knowledge of what had caused the wound. It was the mark of a survivor.
So, instead of touching the rest of Holly's scar, he wrapped an arm around the fairy, pulling her to his body in the most comforting embrace he could summon. He wasn't very good at this and the entire situation felt awkward. He fully expected to feel a fist sink into his stomach as the elf's normal anger returned, but he had to do something. This was the only thing that made sense.

Holly stiffened at first. Then, tentatively, she circled her arms around Artemis, settling into the young man's chest.

"I could have prevented this," Artemis breathed, wrestling with sudden fury at himself. "I was just too...I'm sorry, Holly."

She shook her head. She wasn’t crying, but the world had gone blurry and her voice rasped. "It's not a big deal. Don't worry about it."

Artemis was shocked. "Yes, it is a big deal! You're..." He trailed off, unable to force the words from his mouth. 'Just say it, you fool!'

Holly didn't give him a chance. Moving with a fluidity that was astonishing, even after years of knowing her, she melted out of his arms, moving a few steps back from the couch. She focused on her front, raising the zipper much more efficiently than she had undone it. "I know what I am, Artemis. Go back to bed. You need your rest if you'll be facing down the Kobois."

"Holly, I—"

"Go. To. BED." Holly roared, but quickly subsided, crossing her arms in front of her chest and rubbing her upper arms. "Minerva needs you."

The man studied his friend, taking deep breaths to regain his composure. The glare she gave him was enough to fray his nerves and she was not letting up a single iota. It was difficult to say who was more stubborn in an argument on equal footing, but Artemis knew that he had begun this one on lower ground. Shaking his head, he stood and crossed to the bedroom door. Before he could open it, Artemis paused, fingers curled around the brass handle.

Not daring to look at Holly, he spoke to the door. "Don't you need me as well? I...I thought you couldn't do without me."

He could hear soft footsteps approach his back, but they stopped after only a few moments. Sighing, Holly returned to the couch, picking up her tablet and flipping through the documents. "I thought so, too. But you gave me six years to learn otherwise."

Artemis took a deep breath, looking up to the heavens. 'Once again, I have ruined everything...' Exhaling slowly, he entered the master bedroom, removing his clothes and sliding under the covers next to Minerva.

She stirred, reaching behind her back to take his hand. "Love...you...Artemis."

Slipping his other arm beneath the woman, Artemis pulled close, their bodies curving together until they lay flush from toe to chest. Artemis nuzzled into her neck, breathing in his lover's nearly unadorned scent, picking up the faintest hint of jasmine from her shampoo. "I love you, too, Minerva," he whispered, squeezing her hand back.

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The Living

May 14, 2014-Giordano Medical Facility, Rome, Italy
Artemis was exhausted, but he still had the strength for a few last instructions to Butler. Then the anesthetic kicked in and his head flopped back on the bed. A small entourage of nurses wheeled him out of the prep room and into the brightly lit surgery, working in advance of the doctor herself.

Butler wavered. He knew what he was supposed to do next, but it was all just so...stupid. Artemis opting for this irreversible path.

Clenching his fists, the bodyguard approached the head surgeon, Dr. Giordano. She was a thin brunette woman who didn't seem capable of lifting a finger, let alone a scalpel. Yet this matron was a forerunner in her field. Which, of course, was why Artemis sought her out.

She looked to Butler, giving that standard little jerk backward as the huge Eurasian approached, and waved her assistants off. The smile she bestowed upon him was genuine, but tinged with nerves. She was just far up enough in the social sphere to recognize the name of "Butler." One did not seek to mess with a patient's companion if he was known to be a deadly weapon. "Mr. Fowl is doing an amazing thing, tonight. Think of what we'll learn from this surgery! The lives we will save because he—"

Butler swept his hand through the air, silencing her. He had to crane his head to a forty-five degree angle to take in this small figure, and the result of such a downward stare was to increase the weight of his glower. "Pardon me, Doctor, but I don't give a damn about the random person who gets to live a little bit longer because Artemis went under the knife. I just want to make absolutely sure that you get him out of that operating room on time and alive."

Dr. Giordano wanted to feel offended, but found it difficult. What she was about to do was highly illegal. However, one did not get so far ahead in the field as she was without skirting a few laws and, occasionally, the Hippocratic Oath itself. The addition of money for her foundation to the already enticing prospect of the forbidden knowledge she would gain had erased the last of her scruples. Let the man be an eccentric, millionaire genius. So long as his check cleared. "It is his decision, sir. Every form he signed says so, and he signed a lot of forms."

Butler sneered. "Yeah. Good luck keeping your certifications if you ever have to use that defense in court. I hear Italian prisons are quite posh, nowadays."

She turned green at this thought. Even in her youth, the doctor couldn't have survived the Italian penal system, which was notorious for its overcrowding, ill-treatment of prisoners, and occasional epidemics, even into its current efforts at reformation.

Leaning down, Butler got close enough for his breath to ruffle the surgeon's hair. "But don't worry about the courts. Like I said: Artemis had better be alive when I come back to pick him up. If he isn't, then neither will you be, by the time I leave again."

As the Eurasian swept out of the clinic, his massive body seeming to melt into the night, Dr. Giordano leaned against the wall, a hand over her palpitating heart. Really, it was time to retire. These off-the-book surgeries were getting too risky.

Police Plaza

Holly popped her head into the firing range and let out a huge sigh of relief. "Vinyáya! You really need to check in with your receptionist."

After Holly had greeted the gnome who kept track of the Wing Commander and her duties, she had watched in amazement as he descended into hysteria. The repetitions of "not again" reminded her
that the silver-haired elf was not the most easy person to work under. Most of the time, her disappearances were due to Section 8 work, but the gnome's nerves were far too frayed to have been eased by this information, even if he was privy to the classified side of his boss's work.

When Vinyáya did not respond, merely tapping a bit at a touch screen embedded in the dividing wall of her staging area, Holly finally noted the noise-canceling headphone's over the councilwoman's ears. Neutrinos weren't terribly loud, but an extended session in a firing range did tend to irritate sensitive elven hearing.

Donning a spare set of headphones (which, thanks to modifications made by Foaly, also doubled as a two-way radio) from the wall, Holly approached. Once she reached her superior officer's back, she tapped the Commander's shoulder, though Vinyáya only acknowledged her presence with a curt nod. "Your secretary has been trying to find you for the past five hours. I think he's about to turn in his two weeks' notice."

Vinyáya finally took advantage of a lull in the training routine to glance over her shoulder. Her grin was just a bit malicious. "He's had that written up for three decades. He loves it." Then she seemed to take in Holly's demeanor. "Ah...finally." At the younger elf's puzzled reaction, the Wing Commander waved at the empty stall next to her. "Might as well get in some practice. I get the feeling you'll enjoy this conversation a lot more if you get to shoot something."

Holly had the feeling she would enjoy most of her conversations a lot more if she got to shoot something. Quickly checking a practice Neutrino out from the attendant, she stepped into the cubicle next to Vinyáya's. After tapping a bit at the touch screen, Holly raised her gun, setting it to the middle power level and resting her non-dominant fingers on the digital panel that would control the setting.

"So," Vinyáya began, "he finally did it."

A hologram of a gnome, tinged green, popped into existence. Holly flipping the setting to "stun" and hit the target in the chest. "'He'? 'Finally'?"

Vinyáya let out a volley of blasts, making it sound like she was obliterating an entire army. Noting the Wing Commander's proficiency at shooting, she probably was. "I think I figured it out after you came back from Hybras. I mean, the eyes? That was like destiny hitting you over the back of the head with a shovel."

Three dwarves, one red and two yellow, appeared. Holly shot the red one first, neutrino flipped to maximum output, then powered down to the middle setting to get his yellow companion. "'Destiny,' sir? Isn't that a bit...presumptuous?"

One did not call Vinyáya "ma'am." It reminded the veteran of her advancing age, and, while she wasn't vain, she wasn't exactly pleased to be reminded of her relatively isolated status in the LEP. The first female sub-commander, the only current councilwoman, and adding in her odd genetics (Silver hair? On a 600-year-old elf? Really?)...

"Of me or destiny?" Vinyáya did not seem in the least distracted by this conversation. Her shots were obviously instinctive and likely 100 percent accurate.

"Both, I guess. And everyone else I've been talking to, lately. I mean, even Trouble thought he had some advice to give me." A quintet of gnomes in orange got the fourth power level straight in the stomach and disappeared within two seconds of their appearance. "Trouble. He hasn't had a steady girlfriend since...well, ever, I think."
Vinyáya hummed and Holly could almost hear her eyes roll. "What did he say?"

"To go see you."

"Hmph. Wise boy."

Holly couldn't see into the next booth, but she was pretty sure the Wing Commander was smirking.

"Very well. Tell me the latest development in the ongoing drama that is your life."

Alternately flushing and fuming, Holly gave the (much edited in the steamier parts) recounting of the events of two night's previous. Vinyáya was completely silent through her speech and the Major soon found herself babbling, the imaginary weight of Vinyáya's disapproval bearing down on her. When she reached the kiss, Holly's shots went wild, obliterating a green-tinged elf with a level five shot between the eyes. The projector immediately shut down and Holly cursed. That was going to wreak havoc on her averages.

Resting against the dividing wall, the young elf ran a hand through her short hair in an attempt to attain calm, but the movement failed to even remotely accomplish this. Voice low, though picked up and relayed perfectly by the headphones, she finished her summary of the evening, as well as her feelings in the two days since. Shaking her head, she said, "How do I get over this, Vinyáya?"

Wing Commander Vinyáya barked a laugh, letting out a final volley of shots. The simulation proclaimed another perfect score as she stepped out of the stall to inspect her distressed subordinate. After a long, awkward silence, she said, "You don't."

This was not the answer Holly needed. She scowled. "Not funny."

"It certainly isn't. You want two things, one of which will make the other virtually impossible." When Holly didn't seem pushed towards resolving this dilemma, Vinyáya snorted in disgust. Why did the ranking officers insist on sending every love-sick fairy in the force her way? As if she was some sort of...advice columnist. "Look...I am not good at this. This 'love' thing. I've only had one real encounter with the subject, but, that, apparently, makes me the resident expert."

Now she felt nervous. Admitting that she didn't know what the hell she was talking about made it all the more apparent that bad advice from her could ruin everything for the red-head. She focused on her gun, searching for any scratch or smudge, though there was no way anything would have been damaged by that bit of light training. "A long time ago—Frond, I bet you were just a baby, if you were even born—I met someone. And...I thought he was amazing. Things in the force were a lot more...hostile back then, but he made me feel at ease. He made me happy. Then, one day I realized that the reason he made me happy was because...I loved him."

"So I waited for the perfect moment to tell him and say I wanted to be with him and all that mushy junk girls go through. And, before that moment came...he was gone. Killed in action." Vinyáya finally worked up the resolve to look up from her gun and found Holly was staring at her. She couldn't bring herself to lock eyes with her subordinate, but instead, blinking once to bring herself back in line and dissipate the moisture in her eyes, she went on. "Every day, I regret waiting. If I had something so big to say, waiting for the right moment wasn't going to make it any bigger. So...don't wait, Holly."

Holly swallowed hard. She suddenly realize that she knew very little about Vinyáya. The Wing Commander had been on the force for over five-hundred years, a point at which most would begin to consider retirement. Instead, Vinyáya had taken on the role of councilwoman as well as
becoming the head of Section 8. This sudden revelation allowed Holly, for the first time, to imagine a younger Vinyáya. Before a score of comrades had gone by, destined for death in the line of duty.

Holly placed her neutrino on the small table in her firing area. "I..." She coughed a bit to help dislodge her words. "I loved Julius, too. He was like a father to me."

Vinyáya finally focused on Major Short, eyes going wide. Her chest began to surge with repressed emotions.

Stepping forward, not sure if she was doing the right thing, Holly sought to lay a comforting arm around the elder elf’s shoulders.

Instead, Vinyáya shied away, holding a hand between them. "You thought that..."

Then she burst into laughter.

Holly wanted to say something clever like "Of course not! Who could have ever thought you loved Root? Fire and tinder, you two! Good joke, huh?" Instead, her words were muttered and peevish. "He always said you liked him."

"I said this was years ago, Short. Oh, I liked Julius, certainly. The best Commander I've served under—though don't tell Trouble that—but could you imagine putting up with his temper? I'd have killed him off in a week."

"Accidentally, I hope."

"Hmmm." Vinyáya exhaled slowly, shaking her head at the idea. "Go on," she said, sweeping a hand towards the exit, "talk to Foaly. He should be able to get you a surface visa and a shuttle all set up. I'll message in clearance, but just this once. Pick up the Mud Man, take him on a flight. It's a full moon. Show him the Ritual, maybe. It'll be romantic."

Holly considered hugging Vinyáya, but her Commander's little glare as she began the move was warning enough. Instead, she saluted, then burst out of the room at a full run. She wanted to be on the next free craft going up E1.

She had wasted enough time.
The Dead

September 10, 2014-Outside Fowl Manor

An instant later, the webcam lens was spattered with blood, cutting off visuals. The speakers shrieked as the microphone was momentarily overloaded by the guns report. There was a long creak of protesting chair joints, then a heavy thump.

Artemis gasped, then grumbled. "Damn...Holly dear, if you don't mind, please give me a few minutes. I need to put on a new suit. The Lieutenant splashed a bit when he fell..." The fairies heard a few more mutterings, followed the squeak of expensive shoes on wood flooring as Artemis walked off.

It took the tent nearly a minute to recover, and the first to move away from shock was Trouble, who transitioned to apoplectic with rage. "That—that vile—that bastard! What kind of 'warning' was that?"

From the corner of her eyes, Holly noticed No1 twitching, jaw hanging down. She lay a hand on the young demon's shoulder, trying to still his trembling. Instead, it seemed to snap the warlock from his trance. He scrambled out of the tent, closely followed by Qwan. The sound of retching soon drifted across the lawn.

Holly turned her attention to Commander Kelp, clenching her fists. "He wasn't warning you. He was warning me."

Trouble looked to the other officers. "Everyone out. Ranking officers, go find the best men we've got and get them in shimmer suits, and bring some warlock medics. We're bringing him in for a trial, which means alive. Understood?" He crossed to a small table, looking down at the last neutrino 4000. "I'll be out in ten minutes to head the invasion."

All nodded and left.

Except for Holly. She regarded the Commander. Once the rest of the LEP was gone, he leaned over, hands on the table to brace himself, head hung low. He looked utterly dejected, but there was no crying or even trembling. He was merely centering himself, preparing for the attack.

Holly rose and approached, trying to keep her tone as soft and rational as possible. "You know it should be me going in there."

Trouble dug his fingers into the table. "Go home, Holly."

"No." She stood behind him, placing soft hands on her lover's back, leaning her body against him so she could whisper in the Commander's ear. "Who knows what Artemis has rigged if an invasion is launched? He plans on letting me in, so I can get past his guard and knock him out. Simple."

"It is not simple." Trouble straightened and turned, grabbing her wrists. "He has too much of a hold on you. He always has. Go back to Haven. That's an order, Major Short."

She searched his eyes. Finding no doubt there, she gave a little, sad shake of the head. "You would put dozens of officers at risk just to keep me away from Artemis?"
He didn't even hesitate. "Yes." Part of his expression showed some shame at this, but the rest of him was too scared for the smaller elf to care. "No more grandstanding. Go to Haven or you're fired. I outrank you and I will dismiss you without any regrets if that's that it takes to keep you safe."

The woman freed her hands, laying the right on his face, thumb brushing along Trouble's cheek and to the edge of his mouth. She was studying him, as if memorizing how he looked at this moment. Finally, Holly smiled. "You know...I could learn to love you."

"H-Holly?" Trouble was barely mumbling. His heart buzzed at the words.

Holly rose to the tips of her toes, lightly brushing Trouble's lips with her own.

Commander Kelp wrapped his arms around Holly's waist, opening his mouth slightly, and was thrilled when she returned the gesture. He couldn't help but moan as the kiss extended into each other's mouths, a brace of tingles running down the sides of his neck and up to his ear-tips at the feel of her tongue moving smoothly against his. He focused solely on that kiss: a soldier going off to war, sharing one last embrace. He knew he shouldn't be thinking of Holly as "the girl I left behind," yet ever since she had stepped to their table the night before, opening up a new and exciting future, he had wanted to protect this small but strong creature. He needed to save her from always having to save the world.

Holly's left hand drifted down Trouble's neck and along his side, grazing past his hip, sending further jolts across his skin. Reluctant despite herself, she broke off the kiss, whispering, "Trouble...I'm sorry."

He sighed, content. "Hmmm?" 'She's going home. Thank Frond."

"You may outrank me," she said, voice barely a whisper, "but I outclass you." Holly seized the Neutrino 4000's barrel. Stepping back, she twisted her entire body, arm extended for maximum momentum, and slammed the butt of the gun against Trouble's temple.

He didn't even have time to cry out. Trouble Kelp collapsed to the ground, bleeding slightly from the head, unconscious.

Shaking her head at the man, Holly gave the gun a quick inspection. Satisfied that it wasn't damaged, she holstered it and walked out of the tent.

Then froze.

Vinyáya stood before Holly, arms crossed. She craned her head, looking past Holly to see Commander Kelp prone on the floor. Then she returned her attention to her Section 8 subordinate. There was a tense moment as they evaluated each other, trying to decide whether to fight, run, or cry out for help. All of the other officers seemed to have fled the vicinity of the command tent, leaving them alone in the dark night.

Just as Holly's fingers began to twitch, preparing for a grab at her gun, Vinyáya spoke. "The rough rule for healing is that nothing can live past four minutes, no matter how much magic a warlock medic pumps in." She let that statement hang in the air, which had grown phenomenally cold in only a few short hours, causing each panted breath to steam out of their mouths. "Do we understand each other?"

Holly furrowed her brows, then nodded once. "Yes, Wing Commander. I believe we do."

Vinyáya closed her eyes, hoping to find a few strengthening words for the Major, deeming the few she stumbled upon to be woefully inadequate. "I wish...there was some other way."
Holly clicked off the neutrino's safety, raising the power to maximum. "I don't."

Then, not even bothering to shield, she walked out of the encampment and towards Fowl Manor. There was no sense trying to hide. Artemis was waiting for her.

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**The Broken**

*July 4, 2014-Ceasar's Palace*

Juliet had traveled internationally far too often to be subject to jet lag. Sufficiently rested from her sleep on the flight over, the semi-bodyguard was up until dawn, club-hopping in an attempt to find their Tang-colored friends. She had little luck beyond a few bouncers who had tossed the trio out in previous nights. Minerva's attackers were just another set of anonymous, obnoxious Vegas tourists out making asses of themselves.

When she returned to the suite, Juliet found Holly still awake, though just barely. The Major was seated on the couch, studying her tablet and slowly leaning over it as she drifted off. Then, with a startled jerk, she would sit straight again and return her attention to the documents, blinking rapidly, only to begin the process again five seconds later.

Juliet tutted as she crossed the room, snatching the notes from her friend's hands. "You. Bed. Now."

This order was a bit too much like the one Holly had given Artemis only hours ago. She scowled up at Juliet, though her exhaustion hindered the conveyance of her disapproval "I need to figure out what's going on." She reached for the tablet, but Juliet just held it a bit higher, like an upperclassman playing keep-away with a first year.

"No. You need to sleep so you can be ready to fight, if needed. Artemis will figure out what the Kobois are doing. Like he always does."

Holly wanted to make a jump for the data, but she thought that might be undignified. Instead, she grumbled. "Oh, like he's really capable of planning right now."

'Great,' thought Juliet, 'more post-adolescent whining.' She was only five years older than Artemis, but she couldn't help but feel emotionally decades ahead of him. After all, at least she knew she had commitment issues. Now even Holly was making her feel like she was the true adult in this odd group. "Yeah? What makes you think he's unfit?"

Holly snorted, rolling her eyes, making Juliet wonder if the elf was mocking her or Artemis. "I suppose the hot tub thing wasn't enough?"

Juliet gave a single, hard laugh. "Oh, yes. I must agree. Artemis's girlfriend is possessed by some magic-laden drug into seducing him and he is so preoccupied with escaping her and telling you why she is acting strange that he fails to notice his body has unconsciously reacted to her advances." She shook her head, sighing. "I don't know where his parents went wrong..."

Holly gaped, startled at the rather apt description. "What? I didn't mean—"

"Look, fairy-girl," Juliet sat at Holly's side, placing the tablet on the coffee table, "have you ever known Artemis to be unfit for planning?"

"Well...no..."
"Then that's not really your problem, is it?"

Holly tried to come up with a good response, but it was hard to argue with the truth. Instead, she slouched into the couch and slammed the heels of her feet down on the glass coffee table, making it clatter and ring. "Fine! I'll step back and let the stupid Mud Man and his perfect Mud Girlfriend solve the great Koboi plot and save the day!" She threw her arms in the air and waved them about. "Woohoo!"

Juliet stared, a bit baffled. "You...you're bitter because you think Artemis and Minerva are going to stop Koboi without you?"

"No. I'm mad because I will—once again—be just a pawn in their plans." Pettishly, Holly kicked at the tablet, sending it sliding off the table. "I've spent the last six years hunting for Koboi, and the last two years hunting for two of her. Now I am so close to catching them and the self-righteous 'genii' are going to rush in and get her before I even have the chance."

Juliet pondered this, reaching (what felt like) terribly far back into her memories to pull out the psychology lessons she had taken as part of her blue diamond training. "This isn't about the credit, is it?" She said, pointing at Holly's ear. "This is revenge. I've got to say: I'm disappointed in you, fairy-girl. I thought you were bigger than that."

Holly grumbled. "No 'short' jokes, please." Shaking her head, the elf drew her legs up until she could wrap her arms around them, chin resting on a knee. "I have spent so long hunting the Kobois and the only progress I made wound up getting me this." She traced a finger all along her scar, moving from ear to hip. "This isn't about the credit, is it?" She said, pointing at Holly's ear. "This is revenge. I've got to say: I'm disappointed in you, fairy-girl. I thought you were bigger than that."

"Wouldn't it be okay," Juliet ventured, clutching her hands between her knees, "if someone else caught Koboi? So long as she was caught and brought to justice?"

"No," Holly said without hesitation. "This is my mission. I am the one bringing her in."

"Not even with help? Not even mine, fairy-girl?"

Holly began rubbing at her scar, then jerked her hand away as she realized what she was doing. "Show me where to go. Guard Sleeping Beauty and Prince Charming during the fight. But leave the fairies to me."

If the elf had been focusing on her companion, she would have noticed the slight twitch at the corner of her mouth. Juliet shrugged and nodded. "Sure. I can do that. Now, shall we kick the picture-book couple, as you'd have them, out of the bedroom so we can get a good sleep?"

Holly seemed quite pleased at the idea of turning out the geniuses. Then she noticed the slight
problem with their situation. "Er...one bed."

"Oh, that." Juliet stood, pulling Holly up after her. "It's a big one. You can sleep at my feet, like a little dog."

"Is the 'dog' comment supposed to be a subtle jibe about my poor attitude?"

"...I was being subtle?"

Several hours later, a refreshed Holly and highly disgruntled Juliet emerged from the bedroom. The wrestler was shooting rather dirty looks at her elven friend, rubbing her own shoulder. Holly was steadfastly ignoring the glares, taking a seat in a chair across from the couch, where Artemis and Minerva were looking at a set of rather complicated diagrams.

"Look, just add a few big windows so visitors can look at the machinery. That's decoration enough, I'd say."

Artemis was lecturing Minerva, who looked rather bored with the entire proceeding. When she saw the other women, she rolled up her blueprints with a decidedly final air. "Sore, Juliet?" There was something oddly light to her tone, accompanied by a raise of the eyebrows. She hadn't been too pleased about her exodus from the bedroom, as she was still dealing with the last of the toxins from her drugging. Artemis had only convinced her to leave the comforting cave by promising her the most elaborate room-service breakfast available, a good deal of which was still sitting on one end of the coffee table.

Juliet thumped to the floor next to the food, picking up a piece of quiche. "Only one bed, and fairy-girl here was too uptight to share it. Made me sleep in one of the chairs."

Holly leaned towards the food, sniffing. Once she determined that the quiche contained no dead animals, she picked up a piece and began eating it like a slice of thick pizza. In fact, this seemed to be what she had expected, as she gave the egg dish a startled look before swallowing. "Hey, I offered to fight you for it."

Artemis leaned back on the couch, playing with a strand of Minerva's long curls, ignoring his girlfriend's startled jolt at the touch. "Juliet, you turned down a fight?"

"No," the wrestler said, sulking, "I lost." Not enjoying her human friends' astounded reaction, she stuffed the last bit of crust into her mouth, indelicately speaking around the food. "Shouldn't we be discussing the psycho pixies?"

Minerva flicked her hand at the opposite end of the coffee table, where a laptop was displaying a screensaver of overlapping, brightly-colored horseshoes. "Foaly has been up all night analyzing security feeds, trying to figure out where the Kobois have been. He should be back—"

"Now!" A voice crackled from the computer screen. The horseshoes shot away from the center of the screen. Foaly was gnawing reflexively on a carrot as he brought up a set of cycling recordings around the edge of the laptop screen, keeping himself in the center. It looked like The Brady Bunch for stalkers. "She hasn't exactly been hiding her—er, their—tracks. Our time's Koboi is just waltzing about the city every night. Sometimes literally." Each feed showed a short human in all black, but in various locations. In one, she seemed to have eschewed her leather for a sequined dress, dancing with a tall, white-haired man in a tuxedo. "Pity I don't have the budget to monitor all Mud Men cameras. We would have caught her years ago."

Minerva squinted at the screen, then sighed, defeated. She reached into the pocket of her light-grey
slacks—Juliet having brought back her suitcase from the stripper-filled bachelorette party's hotel room—and pulled out a pair of half-moon glasses. "I really should look into contacts," she muttered, sliding them on and looking down her nose to inspect the computer without her farsightedness.

Artemis watched the woman closely as she did this. One side of his mouth was curved and his eyes were half-lidded. "No. You really shouldn't."

Minerva frowned, then looked at her lover, quite confused. She pushed at the bridge of her glasses with one finger, moving them further up her nose to get a better look at him. "Pardon?"

Foaly whinnied and clopped a hoof loudly, fighting for their attention. "Focus, Mud People. You can discuss Arty's little glasses fetish later." He seemed satisfied at Minerva's deep blush, but was unnerved when Artemis's enchanted expression did not disappear, merely switching to the centaur.

"Tell me, Foaly," Artemis breathed, delighting in the centaurs quick backwards shuffling, finally giving in and looking at the fairy in a normal fashion, "why do you lack fairy surveillance in Las Vegas? It seems a rather obvious location for smugglers to go. There must be a chute nearby, what with the nearby faults. Besides, there is already so much questionable business with humans that a little fairy debauchery seems natural."

Foaly nodded. "True, but it takes a lot of resources to monitor a city like this. Plus, the People don't generally like the desert. Sprites prefer the seaside, for the air currents; goblins might like the sun, but they can't catch enough food in a place like this; gnomes don't have enough plants to work with; elves—"

"Woah! Woah! Wait one second." Juliet leaned forward, wiping crumbs from her lips. "Plants? Gnomes? Those beefed up wrestlers Holly showed me? They work with plants?" She looked to her fairy friend, appealing to her for rationality.

Holly obliged as best she could, though she spoke quickly, annoyed with the sidetracked conversation. "Of course. Garden gnomes."

Juliet stared at the elf, trying to decide if she was serious. Then she realized that Holly must have been telling the truth, as Artemis had not protested. Groaning, the woman buried her head in her hands, rocking in her seat. She fought against the image of burly gnome wrestlers—easily her favorite part of this entire ridiculous magical world—prancing in fields of daisies.

For a moment, Foaly couldn't help but feel bad for this woman who was trying so hard to keep a hold on her sense of reality. There were more pressing concerns, however, so he moved on. "As I said, the People aren't fond of the desert. There's a chute out there, yes, but it's not used much. In fact, Trouble's backup for you will be the first fairies up in thirty years."

The moment he said this, Foaly knew he had made a mistake.

Holly flexed her fingers, speaking very carefully to avoid a descent into snarls. "Backup team? Why is Kelp sending...a backup team?"

Foaly twiddled his fingers on a keyboard, not actually typing, but seeking the soothing sounds of tapping keys. "Er...bringing the team, not sending it. He's heading Retrieval One, and Vinyáya will be waiting in the chutes with a wing of shuttles, if anything big comes up."

"You didn't answer my question. Why is there even a backup team waiting? Does Commander Kelp think I can't do this?"
"Holly," Foaly soothed in much the same tone he had used when his wife was having particularly bad mood swings before Flashdrive's birth. "It's just to pick up the Kobois and...well, if anything happens..."

Holly sprang to her feet, fists slamming down on the table, upsetting an ornate arrangement of fruits. Grapes rolled off the glass, the little "plock" sounds they made on contact with the floor obscenely loud in the silence created as Holly took a deep breath. When she spoke next, it was in a bellow so loud that the shriek of overloaded speakers caused Foaly to cringe, filling him with a sudden pining for Julius Root's somewhat calmer explosions. "Tell the Commanders that I am perfectly competent and will bring in the the Kobois on my own. Provided you and the Mud Man can leave off the segues and focus on finding the damned psychopath! So get moving, you hard-mouthed mule!"

Foaly stared at his best friend, waiting for her to return to sanity, along with the accompanying apology. It did not come. Slowly, he seemed to shrink, his flexible, horse-like ears flattening against his head. Looking down at his fingers, which had stopped tapping, he spoke, voice barely loud enough to transfer over the speakers. "Yes, Major Short."

The elf seemed to relax. "Good. Artemis, you work with the cen—"

"Don't you dare call me a centaur!" Foaly trumpeted. He reared a few feet, front hooves pawing the air, nostrils flared and emitting loud snorts.

Holly half-turned from the screen, waving off his bravado. "Very well. Just tell me when you find anything that's actually useful. Before the Kobois destroy the world, preferably." That said, she walked out of the meeting and back into the bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

Holly stood there, head angled back so she was staring at the ceiling, working hard to contain the water that was pooling in her eyes. 'Get a hold of yourself. This is a dangerous mission. You need to be in control. You can apologize later.' Taking deep breaths and reciting the Convict's Rights Decree in her mind, Holly focused on her body until the moisture in her eyes returned to a normal level. Sighing, she nodded once, pleased with her control.

With a soft click, the door opened behind Holly, giving the elf a soft thump on the backside. She stood aside to allow the intruder in.

Minerva only cracked the door enough to slip her thin frame through, clicking it closed immediately after. She appraised Holly for a while, face neutral, before she finally addressed the older woman. "Is there something I should know?"

Holly felt heat rise up the back of her neck, along with a crackle of nerves. Minerva couldn't think... "No. Nothing." This did not seem denial enough to the elf, but Minerva spoke before she could continue.

"Fine. Then I'm going to do what no one else seems to have the courage to do."

Holly was about to ask what that might be when Minerva slapped her.

The Frenchwoman wasn't particularly strong, but she was larger than Holly and it doesn't take much for a strike to the face to hurt. It snapped Holly's head to the side, raising a well-defined red mark. The officer choked a bit, too shocked to speak, then raised a hand to rest gentle fingers on the mark. It felt warm and she had to concentrate on holding in her magic to keep it from working on the impact. She wouldn't even bruise, but her powers sought to remove the sting.
"You..." She gulped in a breath, turning to look at the human. The utterly calm—almost analytical, really—gaze that Minerva focused on Holly finally caused the soldier's shock to disintegrate "You maniac! I haven't done anything but help you, and you slap me?" She wanted to knock this priss unconscious. Her fist was even clenched in preparation when Minerva cut her hand through the air between them to stop her train of thought.

"Non," she said, narrowing her eyes at Major Short. "This is not for me. That was for Foaly."

"Foaly!" Holly yelled, stepping in close to menace the blond. It was, sadly, hard to menace someone nearly twice your size, and Holly found herself forced to crane her neck back to continue glaring at Minerva. "Don't bother talking to me about Foaly. You don't know anything about what is going on here. He should know better than to waste time when the Kobois are involved."

Rather rashly, Minerva poked Holly's forehead, pushing the fairy a more comfortable distance away. At the end of the relocation, she flicked her finger up, resting the other hand on her hip, looking remarkably like a scolding mother. "Do you think I was on my back the entire time that I've been visiting Artemis?" At Holly's shocked reaction, she smirked. "I have been just as involved in the Koboi case as he has been and I have spoken privately with Foaly more than once."

"Congratulations," Holly said, reaching up to move the finger out of her face, "you've had a chat."

"Rather more. He wouldn't tell me everything, but I'm a bit more observant than Artemis in these matters." She shook her head, expression suddenly softening at the thought of the conflicted equine. "He's so worried about you.

Holly scowled, taking a few steps back and looking away. "I don't need someone to worry about me. I'm fine. I can do this on my own."

"Perhaps," Minerva nodded, "but I thought so once, as well. In the end, I was kidnapped, a species was almost destroyed, my father was nearly killed, and I lost three years I could have spent with Artemis."

When Holly did not acknowledge this bad track record, the blond sighed, shaking her head so that her curls rustled around her shoulders. "Holly...you need to ask yourself something: after all this is over and the Kobois are captured...what next?"

"The trial," Holly said quickly.

"That's not what I meant. What do you want in your life when you can't hunt Opal Koboi anymore?"

For the briefest of instants, Holly's eyes darted past the human to the door, trying to look through to the people beyond. Then she forced her eyes to focus on Minerva, though she knew it was too late.

Minerva's posture, already commendable, suddenly became perfect. It brought her head up a fraction, adding an imposing class that she normally eschewed for diplomacy's sake. "You want—"

A knock came, startling both women. They turned to the door, both feeling a roil of emotions and thinking the same thing: 'Please, don't let it be Artemis.'

This was one of those rare moments where the universe is kind. With a soft click, the door popped open and Juliet poked her head through. Her eyes flicked about, taking in Minerva's regal stance and Holly's sudden evasive attitude, as well as the mark on her cheek. When her eyes returned to Minerva, they narrowed in that perfect cutting glare inherited from the Asian side of her Eurasian background. It caused the younger blond to subside in an instant, taking a step back from both
Finally, Juliet spoke. "They found the Kobois. It...doesn't look good."

The Stratosphere, Las Vegas, Nevada

Tourists are often surprised on first entering the Stratosphere. Many expect that it is merely an enormous tower, but there is actually a rather large—if extremely bland, for Vegas—casino and hotel connected to the tower. After all, a thin needle would make for a poor money-maker in Vegas, where gambling is king.

While the exterior of the casino may be boring, the interior hearkens back to an older Vegas, with multi-colored patterned carpets, smooth-tiled ceilings, and a multitude of small, blinking lights. Of course, it also contained the normal glut of slot machines, bustling tables, mediocre restaurants, and mini-nightclubs. The building was suffused with the harsh smell of watered-down booze, a wide variety of foods, too-long unwashed bodies, and dirty coins.

Koboi did not seem bothered by the chaos, but Opal disapproved of the entire space. It was so...middle class. The pixie entered piggy-back on Koboi, competing for space against a bulging black backpack, her head buried in the crook of the older woman's neck. She wore a hot-pink rain jacket with the hood pulled over to hide her ears. It anyone was sober enough to get a good look at her face, they would instantly felt an unseen cube of ice slide down their spine. After all, no one expects to see centuries-old eyes staring out of a child. "You spent the last two years...consorting with this lot?" She muttered, not all that disapproving. "I do become persistent."

Koboi gave a whole-body heave, adjusting the fairy higher on her back. "I suppose so. It comes from the repeated insults. We do have an ego."

Opal, whose arms were wrapped around the human's neck for support, trailed her fingers along her partner's collarbone in a manner that would have thoroughly creeped out anyone under the impression that she was a child. She was sorting through her thoughts and felt that these touches helped to release some of the tension that blocked her focus. Finally she whispered, "What happens to us?"

Koboi nodded to a troop of tourists that parted in front of her to accommodate the "mother" and her exhausted "daughter." The Opal Koboi's rarely went outside together but, when they did, they found passersby to be rather cordial, getting out of the way so that the child would disappear before a tantrum started and hashed everyone's mellow.

"I don't know," Koboi admitted, frowning. She had been over this many times, but Opal liked to ask to see if anything else had been triggered by their plot. "I suppose you must get a mind-wipe and go back in time,"

This was never the response the pixie wanted, even if it must have been true. "Who does the mind-wipe, though. And why?"

Sighing, Koboi began to elbow her way through the small throng around the Stratosphere's elevator. There was no line, but many people were considering the somewhat expensive trip. Luckily, no one could understand the foreign words coming from the exotic mother and her similarly-voiced daughter. "Well, I like to think you do it yourself, after ruling with me for decades into my well-overdue death, going back in time to reunite with me that much sooner."

Opal moaned a little at the idea, licking Koboi's neck. "Standing beside you, queen and empress of
the world."

Chuckling, Koboi shook her head. "Allow me to give you a hint: don't trust anyone who asks you to be their empress. Now stop that!" She craned her neck away, but that did practically nothing to stop the pixie's nimble and well-practiced tongue. "You're on."

Opal sighed and rested her chin on her lover's shoulder, head tilted down so no one could see her face. Not yet.

"Good evening, sir," Koboi lilted, batting her eyelashes at the elevator attendant, who was busying himself with counting out his till. "We would like to go to the top."

The graying man sighed, looking at his double-fistful of bulls and lamenting his lost count. They always came whenever he was near the end. Looking up, trying to be as polite as possible—despite his true inclinations—he addressed the pair. "It's $15.95 for adults, but children under seven are only $10.00. How old is she?" He pointed to the "child" on the woman's back.

Koboi beamed just like the proud mother she was supposed to be. "She's six and eleven months! Isn't that right, dear?"

Slowly, Opal raised her head until the attendant caught the barest glimpse of dark eyes and a quirked mouth. "Yes," she trilled, voice laced with mesmer, "I am just a little girl. I am so terribly nervous about going up the big, phallic tower. Is it safe?"

Eyes fluttering, trying to accommodate this sudden intrusion on his consciousness, the man nodded. "Er...yes. Very safe."

"Oh, really? I don't think so. I think there is something wrong with one of the rides. We are the mechanics, here to fix it. Do not let anyone else up tonight, except our assistants. A black-haired man in a suit and two blond women."

"Yes...assistants coming. Fix everything."

Opal frowned and was about to correct the man's atrocious grammar, but Koboi reached up to place a finger on the pixie's lips. "Believe me, my sweet. It's not worth the effort."

Opal huffed. "Are you sure I grow accustomed to this?"

Koboi shook her head and sighed. "Actually, I never had a chance to see before I lost my magic, so I can't really say." At the end of a protracted shake, she kissed the pixie's cheek. "That won't matter after tonight. Now, shall we?" At Opal's nod, she handed a few bills to the attendant and accepted her change, walking through a turnstile and into the elevator.

"Tsk, tsk." Opal nipped at Koboi's earlobe as the elevator doors closed, satisfied at the fully-body shudder that she still managed to evoke, even though the human's ears were much less sensitive than her own. "So immoral of you."

Koboi pulled her head away from her other half's mouth. She really could not afford to be distracted right now. "Immoral? What did I do to finally cross the line?"

Opal giggled, amused by the human's evasions. "You cheated that man. I am nowhere near seven years old."

Within an instant of the elevator doors' closing, Juliet and Holly burst into action. Both seem
overtaken with the compulsion to check on their guns and other gear, leaving Artemis to finish consulting with Foaly, Minerva sitting at his side, somewhat stunned. Artemis was in his normal "plotting stance" of steepled fingers and intense glowering, swiftly batting aside most of Foaly's suggestions. "Really, now, Foaly. Do you think Koboi is going to fall for a simple sneak-attack while Holly is shielded? She isn't even wearing a shimmer suit, and they are certain to have set up their own surveillance system, or at least hacked into the hotel's feeds. No, sadly, we will not be able to launch a sneak attack. We must go in directly and swiftly."

In the middle of the two tech master's discussion of tactics, the woman frowned and leaned forward to get back into view of the screen. "Sorry to interrupt, but what is this 'we' you're talking about, Artemis? Have Holly head the LEP, if she's going to be proud, but what can you bring into this? Heretofore hidden kung-fu?"

Artemis blushed, wondering how much of his bravado from the night before she remembered. Minerva had never praised him for physical prowess (okay...well, one type), but no man wants to have their greatest failing analyzed by their significant other. "No, Minerva, I am not going to...'bust out' like Jackie Chan, or somesuch. I am there to handle the last-minute details."

"Last-minute details!" Minerva stood, grabbing Artemis's shoulders so he was forced to face her completely. "Listen to yourself! We have a pair of well-trained fighters in this hotel room and two LEP squadrons waiting out in the desert, and you are going to put your life in danger. Why?"

Artemis frowned, not really getting where the woman was going with her protestations. "That's...how we've always done it."

Minerva paused, then spoke very slowly, trying to make absolutely sure that her boyfriend understood her. "'We.' You mean you and Holly?"

"Well, obviously." Artemis raised an eyebrow. "Who else here has helped me defeat Koboi?"

Minerva tried to speak, but what came out sounded like a strangled peahen. After going through a wide range of notes, she finally seemed to break out of her shock, stamping a foot so furiously that the coffee table juddered, the metal breakfast tray clattering alarmingly. "Merde!" she spat out and stormed off to help Juliet with her last preparations.

Artemis looked at her retreating back, then to computer, brows lowered. "You're a married man, Foaly. Do you have any idea what is wrong with her?"

Foaly snorted and dug a hoof into the metal flooring of the Ops Booth. "Trust me on this, Mud Man: some mysteries are best left to the cosmos."

It was barely three miles between Cesar's Palace and the Stratosphere, but Juliet was not going to let her entourage arrive in less than phenomenal time. Not when two villains were perched on top of the spire with who knew what kind of plans and weaponry set up. So the three humans piled into the truck, which now felt a bit crowded with the exchange of an elf for a Frenchie. Holly took off separately, with instructions to meet them at the main elevator. Artemis had noticed Juliet's anger and the red mark on Holly's cheek, and was now trying to formulate a good action plan before they parked. It would be unwise to enter the fray with that kind of resentment floating around. Unfortunately, the presence of Juliet was making this task far more difficult than normal, as whenever he opened his mouth to address Minerva, the driver glared at them in the rear-view mirror, striking him down.
Minerva refused to be similarly chastised. Whenever Juliet glared, she glared right back. Artemis suspected they were having one of those private, utterly silent female conversations that so vexed males. The dirty looks were constantly intense, but altered ever so slightly each time.

"Fine," Juliet muttered after a dozen exchanges, "but you'd better realize there is a damn good reason she's here."

Minerva looked startled and Artemis was about to break down and request an explanation when Juliet swung the car right, taking advantage of the casino's valet service and herding her younger companions inside.

Artemis and Minerva balked at the decor, but Juliet grabbed their sleeves, pulling them after her. She served as path-maker, clearing the way for the timid geniuses, who followed her like the tail of a rather bright and destructive comet.

It didn't take her long to escort them to the main elevator, where a large crowd had begun to gather and mutter amongst themselves. Not being one for lines, Juliet shouldered her way to the foreground and began to fish in her pockets for bills. "Three to the top."

Artemis saw the signs of the mesmer immediately. The attendant moved slowly, blinking frequently. He had a hard time focusing on the customers, but once he did, he perked up considerably. "Ah, finally. Been waiting. Go up. Fix...it." He frowned, trying to remember what "it" was. Shrugging this off as the simple forgetfulness which comes with old age, he pulled a key out of his cash drawer, offering it to Juliet.

The semi-bodyguard eyed it for a moment, then appealed to Artemis. At his nod, she accepted the key and popped through the turnstile, Artemis and Minerva close behind.

"Well," Minerva said, "that was...easy!"

Artemis agreed, but he did not seem so enthusiastic. "Which means the rest of this is going to be very hard. Holly?" His eyes darted about, looking in every dark corner, seeking the haze of a Mark I suit. "Holly? Come on, I'm not sure if we're facing a deadline, and I'd rather have as much time to meet it if we are."

There was an irritated silence as they waited in front of the elevator doors, trying to block the entrance so the fairy could dart in. It was punctured by a huff from the male genius, who activated his communicator as the elevator doors opened. With each ring, his body became tighter and his eyes widened a fraction. "Oh...damn! Everyone, inside! Holly is going up there alone!"

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**The Living**

*May 14, 2014-Operations Booth, Police Plaza, Haven*

"Foaly! Visa! Now!"

The techie centaur turned about to find Holly standing before him, completely unable to contain herself. "Er...is there some emergency I don't know about?" That would be very, very bad. If there was an emergency and Artemis was not under surveillance, then it was a pretty good indication of who was the cause. The fact that he had taken off the surveillance himself...well, that would lead to an inquiry from IA, to say the very least.

"Yes! Well, I suppose not officially. And not for everyone." She shook her head, halting the rapid bouncing about of her thoughts, though it got her nowhere near coherent. "I need to talk with
Foaly's tail drooped to the floor. "D'arvit. I knew this would happen."

Holly's manic smile disappeared in an instant. Very, very quickly, anger flashed though her entire body. "Foaly...choose your words carefully. What would happen?"

He neighed a bit, shying off. His hooves shifted constantly, longing to bolt. Of course, Holly was at his only exit, but that did not negate his instinct to stampede "Just...calm down, Holly. Have a seat."

Telling Holly to calm down was probably counterproductive. She advanced on him, backing the centaur into a bank of computers. "What did you DO?"

"Nothing! Really!" He wrung his hands, cursing the wording in his job description which kept him a civilian. Sure, consultants and techies were paid a lot better than officers, but the LEP got to carry guns. "I did Artemis a favor."

"What...kind of favor?"

"Just a little one! I paused surveillance on him for twenty-four hours."

"Then," she tried to reason, a bit less than rational herself, as the hiss in her voice verified, "turn it back on," she pointed at the largest computer in the room, which took up the entire back wall, "and find out what he is up to. I swear, a girl wants to do something nice and romantic for a guy, and he goes off and stops surveillance on himself."

Foaly was about to point out the twisted, stalker-ish nature of that statement, but thought it better to remain silent and alive. "It's not that simple. I didn't pull surveillance. I paused it." When the elf did not look calmer, angrier, or like she even remotely comprehended what the tech adviser said, he elaborated. "Once the twenty-four hours are up, all of his activity will come in at once, but not before that time."

Holly looked to the offending computers, then waved them off as useless to her. "Just...hack it or something. I need to see Artemis." She seemed to be subsiding just slightly since Foaly had assured her the data would eventually come in. Holly trusted Artemis...to an extent. Anyone who ever trusted him implicitly was either very stupid or very smart. She was neither, and that meant his latest scheme would require some analysis. 'Just great. I need to run damage control on the man I...something.'

Foaly snorted and rolled his eyes. "I can't hack it, Holly. I made it un-hackable. No back doors to tempt me."

"You...what?" She squeezed the bridge of her nose. 'Centaurs. D'arvit, paranoid centaurs.' "You made a program that you couldn't hack. Isn't that one of those 'Could God create a sandwich so big he couldn't eat it?' things?"

"Er...no. I mean, I could try, but it would take longer to break through than is left on the clock."

"Great." Holly finally took the seat Foaly had offered so early in their confrontation. She dug her nails into the armrest, pulling up little black fibers and leaving slightly lighter trails in the fabric. "So now what?"

Foaly brought up the countdown. "We wait another two hours, figure out what your beau has been up to, then send you up on an LEP craft. I'll schedule that now." With that, Foaly began to finagle
"Fine." Holly crossed her arms and prepared for the wait.

Then her ears twitched. "Wait. My beau? Not you, too!"

Foaly snickered. "Oh yeah. Thanks, by the way. I just won the office betting pool."

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May 15, 2014-Southern Ireland

"My head...is killing me."

Butler looked over his shoulder to the young man lying on the Bentley's back seat. "That's probably because it is. Flying within a half-hour of surgery is generally not a good idea."

Artemis waved a hand about to both acknowledge and dismiss the reprimand. He buried his eyes in the crook of his elbow, trying to hide from the light. "No smart comments, please. I can't process things very well, at the moment."

Tutting, Butler pulled off the main road, following a small dirt path alongside a river. The car rocked slightly, but it was enough to turn Artemis's face all sorts of interesting colors. Butler couldn't bring himself to feel sorry for the boy, however. This was his choice, after all, and he could deal with all the discomfort until the very end, for all the bodyguard cared. "You should be in recovery right now. Not about to go on some one-man mission. Perhaps you can wait until—"

"No. There is no sense in waiting." Artemis finally sat up, though he had to swallow down a bit of bile brought on the the swell of pain. He picked a few napkins and a bottle of water out of the Bentley's small cooler, wiping a dry crust of blood from his nostrils with the dampened cloths, then downing the rest of the bottle. "If the Council discovers my plans, they will put me under constant guard. Perhaps even in one of their lovely psych wards." He winced and rubbed the bridge of his nose, then winced again and jerked his hand away. "I'm sure that would be a nice little feather in Argon's cap."

"Artemis," Butler ventures, "do you even think there would be a reason they would want to stop you from doing this?"

"No, I can't say that the thought crossed my mind."

"Of course." Butler glanced at the clock. "One more minute. Perfect timing, I think." They reached the end of the road, stopping before a pair of crossed wood planks. "You're sure they won't send a closer officer to get you? That would be a lot quicker, and I doubt you'll have time to get everything done if someone comes in from Tara."

"Quite sure. Few other fairies are willing to come within ten miles of me." Artemis began to take deep, bracing breaths. He jolted when a fresh trickle of blood came out of his nostril, but it was only a few drops, so he simply wiped it away. "Would you get the door, old friend? I need to conserve my strength for the walk."

There was a pause as Butler sorted through his feelings. Officially, he was supposed to do everything in his power to protect the physical well-being of this young man, and that certainly did not cover what Artemis was about to do. Yet...Artemis was not physical. The preservation of his mind was Artemis's primary concern in nearly every situation, and he expected Butler to adapt to this unorthodox goal in his body-guarding duties.
Butler had spent so much of his life protecting this man. Twenty-three years, if you counted the time he had waited on the Irish coast for Hybras to reappear. So Domovoi could not help but offer more assistance. "Do you want me to help? I could carry you—"

"No." Artemis leaned forward, resting a hand on his guardian's shoulder. "I must do this alone. You know that."

"I...yes." Butler nodded curtly and reached for the glove compartment. "I think you need this." Old hand trembling, he placed his loaded sig sauer into Artemis's palms. "In case things go awry."

The genius stared at it. He had fired a gun, certainly, but this was Butler's gun. He didn't even let Juliet touch it. "Old friend...you know that my plans do not tend to 'go awry'."

Butler couldn't help but chuckle at this. For the first time in his life, that chuckle was accompanied by an old man's wheeze. Perhaps it was best that Artemis was taking this step...he really should retire soon, and he would probably never do so with Artemis running about Europe, wreaking havoc. "Oh, yes. I know. However, when they do...just take the gun, will you? I'll feel a lot better."

Artemis looked at his oldest and best friend, trying to think of a good argument. He could do this without a gun. Yet no suitable protest presented itself, so, defeated, he made sure that the safety was on. No sense shooting himself in the foot. Walking would be hard enough as it was. "Very well. The door?"

Having had his second demand of the day met (and having failed on a dozen more-important goals), Butler got out and opened Artemis's door. He grasped the unsteady young man's forearm, assisting him out of the back seat.

"I really should have borrowed one of father's canes." Artemis took a deep breath and wiped a hand under his nose to make sure that a new trickle of blood had not begun.

There was a pause as the men studied each other. Both old long before their time, marked by their battles and sacrifices. Swallowing nervously, unaccustomed to the gesture, Artemis wrapped an arm around his guardian's waist in an awkward hug. "I suppose we shall meet again soon?"

"We'd better," Butler rumbled, briefly encircling his charge with both massive arms. Then, with one last scan of the surroundings for any signs of danger, he stepped back and waived his hand at a small, mostly overgrown path in the grass along the riverbank. "Watch your step. It's going to be really embarrassing if your little 'saving grace' finds you passed out after a tumble."

Nodding once, trying not to smirk (which wasn't terribly difficult, as he winced at the far-too-rapid movement of his head), Artemis turned away. "Goodbye, old friend." Then, constantly on the verge of falling over, he ascended a stone stile and began to walk across the fields.

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**Operations Booth**

"3...2...1...we are GO!"

Foaly began to type with furious speed. On the Ops Booth's main screen, dozens of windows began to pop up and consolidate as data connections were made. Receipts, flight records, passport inquiries, phone calls, and any other glimmer of electronic data Foaly could eek out flashed by. In the upper right corner, a map of Earth began to shrink until it displayed most of Western Europe. Red dots began to appear as Fowl's stops were confirmed, soon connecting with red lines, darker near the end of his journey and lighter at the beginning, to indicate his path and the relative times of each leg of the journey.
"My my. He's been doing some globetrotting. Switzerland, Italy, France, Italy again, and now back to Ireland. Got to say, I'm impressed that he got everywhere so fast. Must have taken quite a bit of timing and bribing. I knew I should have put a sleeper-seeker in him last time he visited. A lot easier to keep tabs on the boy. I'll check the Manor to see if he's home."

Holly, who was sitting in a swivel chair at Foaly's side, resisted the urge to throttle the talkative centaur and demand "Shouldn't you have done that first?!" Instead, she flickered her eyes over the various transactions and frowned. "His bank accounts have all been consolidated. And..they're empty."

Foaly whinnied as his feeds came up. "Maybe he's getting you an 'I'm sorry' present?"

Holly was about to snap that there wasn't enough money in the world for a gift big enough to excuse whatever this new scheme was, but the sight of the Manor cameras stopped her.

The thermal feed placed in one of the trees on the Manor drive showed that the old building was mostly empty, except for three figures in Lucy's bedroom and another two in Artemis's. The smallest in the first room was easily Lucy, but the other two were a bit too large to be classmates there for a sleepover. A glance at the twins' conjoined bedrooms confirmed that her older brothers were not in there room, instead staying with Lucy, which puzzled Holly. The two brothers loved their little sister, certainly, but she couldn't recall them ever sharing a room overnight with her.

Then she took a look at Artemis's bedroom and felt her stomach drop. The figures were the wrong size. Both average builds, neither imposingly tall. Perhaps one of the figures could be Artemis, but the lack of a massive form elsewhere in the Manor made it apparent that Butler was not in residence. And when Butler wasn't at the Manor, neither was Artemis.

"Do you have a feed into Artemis's bedroom?" Holly looked to Foaly, blushing a bit. She probably should have asked that question a long time ago, given...everything.

"Do I have a feed on the Mud Boy bedroom? I'd be mad if I didn't." With a few quick taps, the technician brought up a half-dozen displays.

Then he cursed.

Angeline and Artemis Sr. sat on their son's bed. The husband had his arms wrapped around his wife, holding her close. Her head was buried in his chest and she let out sobs violent enough to rock both of their bodies. Mr. Fowl's face was steady, but not devoid of emotion. There was a glint of pure fear in his eyes as he looked down at his hysterical wife.

"Oh. Oh Frond. Foaly, set up a video conference with Artemis's desktop." Holly tried to reach over the centaur's arms to perform this task herself, but he held her back.

"With his father there? If you haven't forgotten, we haven't told Mr. Fowl about the People. You'll need the Council to—"

"Foaly." Holly sank her fingers into his thick flank. It wasn't anywhere near enough to cause damage to the centaur's pelt, but the threat was there. "I would love to go to the Council and tell them you shut off surveillance on Artemis without telling anyone. Do you have Cahartez's mobile number?"

Foaly neighed at the clawing and threat. "Okay, okay! You'd better be ready to handle Mr. Fowl, though. He is not going to be happy that we've hidden this from him for so long.

Holly removed her nails from the techie an gave him a little push towards one of the smaller
monitors, leaving her to claim the main screen. "Bigger things to worry about, Foaly. Get moving."

It took the centaur only a moment to hack into Artemis's computer, dragging it out of sleep mode and pulling up a conference window. That done, he gestured for Holly to take over, moving on to process the other data.

Holly jumped out of her seat, wishing she could tap the screen to get Mrs. Fowl's attention. Instead, she settled for yelling. "Angeline!"

The human woman yelped, finally sitting up in her husband's arms. She looked about, bewildered. "H-Holly?"

Mr. Fowl scowled, not sure if he had actually heard anything. After all, it was certainly not a voice he had ever heard before...was it? "Holly? Who is Holly?" He was watching his wife closely. The man had not been present during her madness, but had heard plenty about the event and was constantly on guard, looking for signs of a regression.

Angeline stood, one hand still holding onto her husband, and looked about. "Holly? Where are you?"

"Angeline, no one is—"

"The computer, Angeline!" Holly did not have the time to let a well-meaning, but out-of-touch husband stall her. "I need to talk to you."

Mrs. Fowl looked at her spouse a moment, then dragged him to his feet, pulling Timmy with her to the computer. She sat him in the office chair (figuring he would probably need to be steadied a bit more than her in the coming minutes) and pointed to the screen. "That is Holly. Artemis's friend. Holly, where is my son? Please tell me he is with you in Haven."

"No such luck. Foaly pulled surveillance on him." Both women gave the guilty party a rather intense glare, though Timmy merely quirked an eyebrow. "We're trying to track him down now."

Artemis Fowl Sr. finally managed to speak. "Your ears are pointy."

Foaly, who had begun to work at a slightly smaller display to Holly's left, crowed in triumph and called out to the women. "Ah ha! France! Of course! He stopped at the Paradizo villa. I'll see if I can add Minerva to the conference." There was more furious tapping as he made the call.

Holly frowned. "Why would he go to Minerva? He just..." She blushed. It would be a bit awkward to explain to the humans that Artemis had just declared his intentions to the fairy and been shot down, only for her to reconsider things two days later. Especially when the elf was "meeting" his father for the first time (rescue from Russia notwithstanding).

Timmy blinked, frowning. "Your...eyes. They look just like Artemis's...wait. Why does Artemis have different colored eyes?"

Minerva's face suddenly appeared in the screen, splitting the window in half. "Ah, Holly. A bit later than I expected. I do hope you appreciate me staying up for this call."

"Shut it, Minerva," Holly snapped. She didn't dislike the Frenchwoman, but the human had done little to endear herself with the fairy since the entire demon-napping incident. "Where is Artemis?"

Minerva shrugged, fluffing up her thick blond curls. They looked a bit flattened, as if she had actually just woken up, rather than staying awake for the conversation. Her white and light-pink
silk robe added to that impression. "Ireland, by now. Can't you find him?" Her smile was pretty. And irritating.

Holly clenched the edge of the table, trying to retain a civil expression, if not a civil tongue. "Don't mess with me, Minerva, or, I swear by the Book, I will come up there and smack the merci beaucoup right out of you."

Minerva leaned back, quite obviously offended. "Whatever did I do to you?"

"Why does that man have horns?" Timmy asked, looking up at his wife and pointing to the screen. "And...why is there a horse in with all those computers? Oh...oh God. That's no horse."

"Indeed, it isn't," Foaly muttered. He stomped a hoof, snorting. "D'arvit! Where is that boy? Let me see if Butler ever found that camera I had you place on the Bentley while you were there the other day. I swear, he finds those things as fast as we can plant them."

"Holly," Angeline said, unfolding a piece of paper and holding it in front of the screen. "Artemis left this. Does it...mean what it sounds like?"

The computer automatically latched onto the document, scanning the note and splitting the screen into four pieces. The chat windows were now on top, a Gnomish translation of the note on the lower left and a map of Ireland (which was rapidly narrowing down as the Bentley was located) on the lower right.

Dear Mum and Da,

I know what I am about to do will shatter out family forever. I wish there was another way. Unfortunately, I seem to have inherited the despondency that comes with lost love that Mum fell to when you were missing, Da (that word feels so odd, even in writing, but I suppose I have few chances left to be so informal). I feel I am going mad and, when one takes into account my intellect and resources, it is obvious that I can not be allowed to become insane. I am sorry. This is the only way.

I love you both dearly.

Your son, always,

Artemis Fowl II

Holly felt her heart freeze. "That looks like...a..."

Minerva sighed at the elf's astonishment. She appeared rather bored with the entire proceeding. "A suicide note."

All focused on Minerva's screen, except for Foaly, who was muttering. "Carry the one, divide by..."

"That's impossible!" Holly clenched her fists. "Artemis would never...he has no reason..."

Minerva tossed her head, golden hair flying over her shoulders. "Oh, no? Nice necklace, by the way."

Holly's hand flew to the pendant, covering it. Angeline looked rather interested in that exchange, but she didn't have a chance to question it before Holly spoke. "That's not his way, Minerva. He wouldn't just...off himself."
"Oh, I agree." Minerva inspected the ends of her hair for frays. "He would have a to-do list to go through. Pay off debts, prepare for the funeral, do something for humanity, that sort of thing."

"One metric ton."

Holly whipped her head to stare at Foaly. "W...what did you say?"

The centaur swallowed, pointing at the relevant section of his data. "He must have had to bribe a lot of people, but it looks like Artemis nearly emptied his bank accounts to buy gold in Switzerland. One metric ton, give or take a few bars."

Holly could feel Minerva watching her, glorying as the elf began to realize what was going on.

"Oh...Frond. What else has he done?"

"Besides cranking up his frequent flyer miles? Looks like he paid a ludicrous sum to a tailor—no data there, it was a check—and donated," here, Foaly paused to whistle, "seventeen million Euro to a medical research foundation."

This last bit of information seemed to finally capture Timmy's attention, snapping him out of shock. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk and steepling his fingers, fingers touching just below his lips so all could see his pensive frown.

Holly felt her heart take a sudden leap. 'Oh...so that's what Artemis will look like when he's older.' She tried not to stare. Angeline was nice, but no wife would appreciate a younger (relatively) woman focusing so closely on her husband. 'I...could get used to that.' Then she shook her head, forcing herself back on subject.

"Was there any note attached to the transfer?" Mr. Fowl said.

Foaly tapped a bit more and nodded. "It says 'For your priceless services.'"

The head of the family nodded. "A bribe. Services and silence. Dammit, what is that boy thinking?"

Minerva inspected her fingernails. "That he would make an excellent test subject."

Everyone seemed to be trying to comprehend this statement. Angeline was the first to completely process it. Her hands flew to her mouth and she shook her head, trying to deny the knowledge. "No! A subject...he doesn't need...he could be killed!"

Minerva leaned back in her chair, rolling her eyes. "Well, that isn't exactly a problem if he intends to be the sacrificial lamb, is it?"

Holly felt a souring in her stomach extending into tingles in her limbs. She needed to move. To do something! But she had no mission. She had to wait for directions, but she wouldn't be able to hold herself in for very long. Holly looked between the Mud Women, but neither sought to elaborate. Mr. Fowl seemed to have comprehended, but he merely closed his eyes as he thought.

"What did Artemis do?" Holly finally stood, legs tensing. She looked to Foaly, hoping for directions, but he just kept tapping away.

"Something for humanity," Minerva said, smirking at the fair's slow processing. "A double donation. A bit of money and...a bit of himself."

Then it hit her. Holly staggered at the idea. "Surgery? He let someone experiment on him?"
"Well, he always was interested in medicine."

"Fron! Why would he—"

"Haven't you been listening, fairy?" The blond snapped, upper lip rising a bit at one corner in a dismissive sneer. "He won't need his body much longer, so why not do something noble? Highly illegal, of course, but money has a way of making things worthwhile, and law has never been Artemis's favorite subject."

There had to be a flaw in this argument. Suddenly, Holly latched onto an unexplained part of Artemis's itinerary. "And the tailor? How do you explain that?"

Minerva shrugged. "A new suit, on rush. Might as well go out in style."

That made far too much sense. Holly drummed her hands on the table, now bouncing on the tips of her toes, focusing an anxious gaze on Foaly. "You got him, yet?"

"Almost...there! Gods, why didn't I think of that before?" The centaur sprang to his hooves, crossing to the equipment cabinet. He tossed Holly a shimmer suit, helmet, and neutrino, not bothering to look back to make sure she caught them as he crossed again to a computer, pulling up her flight schedule. "Site fifty-seven, on the southeast coast. A bit of a flight from Tara, but no choice. We wouldn't get another officer out to catch Fowl if we offered instant promotion to Commander. There's a small shuttle waiting for you in the chute. Don't bother with regulations. Just punch it all the way to the surface, and then do the same to the coast. I'm talking land-speed records here, Holly, so don't hold back. We'll worry about tribunals later."

Holly turned from the screens, stripping off her office uniform and donning the suit. "Site fifty-seven. Isn't that—"

"Where you and Artemis met, yes. Returning to the beginning at the end. Like a bleeding poet, he is. Stop him, get him back to Haven. We'll get N°1 and the warlock medics on his case, see what was done and if we can fix it, but you need to get to him before he..."

Holly did not like that pause. Holstering her neutrino, she turned to her friend. "Before he what?"

Foaly eyed her, backing up a bit, as if he was at fault. Clicking away at a keyboard, he brought up a video feed focused on site fifty-seven's oak. On the edge of the screen, a Mud Man was approaching. Foaly zoomed in.

It was Artemis, of course. He was wincing with each step, reaching up to wipe blood away from his nose. The young man's suit and dress shirt were unbuttoned and waving in a light breeze, revealing his chest, which already had a few droplets of blood from his dripping nose. His breathing was labored and he seemed about to faint. Holly knew that Artemis was not physically gifted, but he was stubborn. He would not stop until his mission was finished. Over his left shoulder was slung a large and obviously full duffel bag. In his right hand was a gun.

He looked like an action hero.

Holly shuddered. Artemis was not supposed to look like an action hero.

Foaly pointed, rather unnecessarily, at the weapon. "Before he uses that."

Holly didn't even bother to leave the room before she activated her wings. The downdraft buffeted Foaly's mane and disturbed an array of empty food wrappers. Then she blasted out of the room, flying against the ceiling as she made her way for the Haven-side of E1.
Foaly whickered softly, collapsing back in his chair. He couldn't help but look up at the screens, as much as he feared what he would see.

Artemis had arrived at the oak and was now leaning against the trunk, forearm against the bark and his head resting against his limb. He was panting and occasionally heaving dryly, but otherwise seemed to be holding up quite well. Most likely hopped up on painkillers, though Foaly couldn't think of any Mud Man drug that good that wouldn't knock you out.

In another corner of his screen, Holly's helmet had already began to display the streets of Haven, startling the general populace. If she kept up that speed above ground, she would break Root's record.

In a third section, Angeline was now sitting on the edge of Artemis's desk, doing her best to explain the events of the past twelve years to her husband. He was alternately mystified and enraged. A revelation this big, after so many years kept secret, was likely to cause a nice, long fight once the crisis was over. No one hid something like this from their spouse without facing the consequences. Not even Angeline Fowl.

And, in the last corner, Minerva sat at her own computer, a small, mischievous smile on her lips, eyes focused on the screen as she waited for someone to notice her.

Foaly muted the feed to Holly and the Fowls. One front hoof digging into the hard floor of the operations booth, the centaur lowered his horns, aiming them at the French beauty. "What," he growled, "have you done, Minerva?"

The smile slowly widened, now tinged with...triumph? She ran a hand through her long curls, her voice a soft song. "I, dear centaur, have fixed everything."
One Shot

The Dead

September 10, 2014-Fowl Manor

There were a lot of things Holly didn't need for this mission: extra intelligence from Foaly, a map of Fowl Manor, or even thermal imaging. The instant Artemis had asked her to meet him, she knew where he would be waiting. After all, criminals always return to the scene of the crime.

So she did not feel altogether nervous about her lack of a Recon suit or helmet. Stopping to get a set would have aroused suspicions and possibly led to detainment while the LEP waited for Trouble Kelp to recover and explain the situation. Still in her office uniform, her only real gear the Neutrino 4000 held tightly with both hands, Holly entered the open front doors of Fowl Manor and went immediately to a door in the back area of the kitchen.

The cellar under Fowl Manor was fairly well maintained. In the past few decades, it had been turned from a simple storage room into a sub-level in its own right. The walls were coated in a white concrete which practically glowed in the glare from the long utility lighting. The uncovered tubes gave off a soft hum which seemed to fill the entire corridor, buzzing in Holly's ears. There were a few less well-lit side rooms in the underground complex, though none were firmly separated by a door. No, there was only one of those, at the very end of the corridor, normally secured by three deadbolts and a chain, but now left slightly cracked.

Holly didn't even try to be quiet. The light clunking of her thick-soled boots echoed across the smooth walls, disappearing down some of the offshoot rooms, returning much later and greatly diminished. She examined the harsh glow that came from the crack in the door, hoping to see a flicker that would betray the residence of a certain young human. No change in the light came, but, as Holly stood a few feet from the door, preparing herself for the charge, something caught her attention. The reason the door remained so slightly open.

A gun rested between the door and the frame. It was familiar. After all, it should be. She had seen it blow Chix's head off not ten minutes before.

A toneless voice reached out to her. "You may come storming in here and shoot me, if you wish, though I really do think we should talk first. For old time's sake."

Holly lined her arms up to sight along the neutrino, visage darkening. No, Artemis would not pull another switch on the LEP. He needed to see her directly, and he was cocky enough to believe that she wouldn't shoot him the second she kicked that door open.

'Pity he's was wrong,' Holly thought, taking the door at a run and kicking it with full force. It flew open, inside handle hitting the inside wall so violently that it buried itself in the concrete, keeping the door open.

Then, gun still at the ready, Holly's eyes flashed about the room, seeking her target...and she froze.

Artemis reclined on the wrought iron cot, long legs bent and slightly parted to fit on the inconveniently small mattress. He didn't seem to even register her violent entrance, instead gazing intently at his right hand. He was moving a small acorn across his fingers in much the same way one would perform a coin walk. His other arm draped over the headboard, hand dangling off the end casually.
'Pull the trigger. D'arvit, pull the trigger, now! He's just sitting there, pull the fucking trigger!'

Soon after the harsh reverberation of the breaking concrete from Holly's entrance faded, he looked up and gave a little jerk, as if he had just noticed the elf. Flicking the acorn in the air, he caught it between his thumb and index finger, holding his hand out to offer the seed to his would-be attacker. "Acorn, Holly? I'm assuming you were a bit too hot-headed to actually perform the ritual before I blew up the Tara oak. You never did have enough magic for the task at hand."

Holly felt a hot wave at the jibe. The fact that Artemis was correct made it all the harder to take. She had been too preoccupied with the officers' meeting to complete the Ritual, and the attack on the Tara Oak had been so swift it had taken even her by surprise. "Like that one will even work. It's year's old. I've got enough magic to take care of things," she said, posturing the best she could.

Artemis, of course, was not impressed. He tossed the acorn to the elf and sighed, shaking his head when she ignored it and the seed bounced into the hall. "No, I don't believe you do. It's going to get you killed, one of these days."

"Is that a threat?"

"Holly. I don't threaten. I warn. Now," he sat up straight, rubbing his hands together, "let's move onto business, shall we? As you can see, I am unarmed, so let's have a nice, calm talk."

Holly sneered, but she took a few steps into the room, curious despite herself. "You may be unarmed, but I know you, Artemis. You always have something up your sleeve."

He smiled. "Why, my dear Major, I am so terribly flattered! Are you trying to get on my good side? No matter. You are mistaken. I have no intention of attacking you. Just talking."

Now Holly stood in the center of the cell, gun still trained on the human's head. "Then talk, d'arvit! I always hated your grandstanding."

Artemis shrugged, but he didn't seem offended. "If you insist. As I'm sure you are well aware, certain...incidents have occurred between the two of us in recent days. Incidents that are proving highly disruptive to the normal flow of our lives."

Holly grunted at this formal wording. "That's putting it lightly."

"Indeed," Artemis nodded, bringing a hand up to tap a finger on his lips. "Now, I'm sure you are well aware, certain...incidents have occurred between the two of us in recent days. Incidents that are proving highly disruptive to the normal flow of our lives."

Holly shrugged, but she didn't seem offended. "If you insist. As I'm sure you are well aware, certain...incidents have occurred between the two of us in recent days. Incidents that are proving highly disruptive to the normal flow of our lives."

"N°1."

"Ah, splendid. I always liked the chatty little thing. It is obvious to me—and I doubt even you can escape this conclusion—that we simply can not continue these exchanges. Something pivotal will be revealed one day, and that will completely destroy the balance of power we have managed to establish."

Holly agreed, but she wasn't about to admit this. Artemis did not need further proof, and saying anything was bound to erode what little defenses she could maintain against the geniuses monologue. Instead, she sucked on her teeth, emitting a dismissive chirrup, and said, "So how are you going to avoid that, Artemis?"

He blinked at her, then gave a small laugh, shaking his head. "I had supposed that was rather obvious. I, logically am no longer welcome in Haven. Therefore, you must stay with me at Fowl Manor as my permanent guest." He smiled and held out a hand, as if waiting to pull her into this
new status as his hidden companion. Holly did not take the proffered hand, though she also did not back away. It was a ludicrous idea, and the man was sure to anticipate her refusal, as was proved when he soon dropped the hand, looking neither surprised nor disappointed.

"Artemis, you know I can't do that. I have a job. A life. I mean...I have a boyfriend!"

Artemis hummed and stood, clasping his hands at his back. He began to take slow steps around the room, keeping a constant distance from the elf. "Really? How is he feeling, by the by? From all signs, I should have expected to see him and not you."

Grinding her teeth, Holly did her best to ignore this question, but the evasion was answer enough for Artemis. He tutted, shaking his head as he passed behind her peripheral vision. "You really should know better than to engage in office romance, Holly. The power struggles...well, those are only fun if you can confine them to the bedroom."

Holly's ears twitched and tingled. She could hear his soft footsteps approaching her. Soon, she could even sense Artemis standing just inches from her back, his larger form and this all-too-familiar room sending her heart racing with anxiety, even if her professional side managed to keep her mind in order. It felt like her body was shrinking, becoming insignificant when faced up against the human. "I think it's best that you don't talk about things you know nothing about."

Artemis made a chuckle deep in his throat, his breath stirring Holly's loose hair. The man took a hand from behind his back, moving it slowly towards the small elf. "Holly dear, you should already know one of the most beneficial things about geniuses."

So light it almost tickled, he traced a finger along the hollow just behind the elf's ear, trailing it down her neck. "We have the most...robust imaginations."

Fireworks went off in Holly's head, a nauseating mixture of alarm and welcome. She spun about, her mind beginning to berate her for letting her guard down before it was sent scrambling by a stinging trail that blossomed around her neck. She stopped her revolution, looking up at Artemis's wide smile, the bottom of her line of sight just barely catching his clenched hand and a flash of silver. A dagger

"You were right, Holly dear," Artemis purred, closing the distance between them to cut off any build-up for an attack. "I always have something up my sleeve. I'd recommend not moving any more."

Holly tensed her arm, ready to bring the new neutrino up and into her opponent's stomach for a quick shot, but Artemis smiled and slightly parted his lips, urging her with a soft "Shh shh shh...my reflexes aren't phenomenal, but I can slide this up your chin and into your skull quickly enough to match whatever attack you wish to make, and I highly doubt you have enough magic to recover from that."

She swallowed, the slight movement causing her neck to flex a fraction, the dagger nicking a small vein and releasing a line of blood that pooled in the hollow of her throat before dripping over her collarbone and into her blouse. The wound healed in seconds, but the blood did not retract. This small inconvenience caused Holly's pulse to shoot up. If her magic wasn't putting the effort into capturing the blood, then her magic was drastically low.

"What are you doing, Artemis?" Each word caused a new minor scratch on her neck, each healed in instants.

Artemis did not lessen the dagger's pressure. Instead, he moved the hand that caressed the woman's neck further back on her head, burying his fingers in her short hair. "Mmm..." he sighed at the
softness, then tightened his fingers, pulling Holly's head further back so she looked almost directly at the ceiling, his grip tugging out a few hairs. "First, drop the gun, Major." When she did not, he pushed the knife, sinking its scalpel-sharp tip barely a millimeter into her neck, but that was enough to make her gasp in primal fear. "DROP IT!"

Holly was sure her fingers moved on their own, as her mind felt countless miles away when she head the clatter of the neutrino on concrete. Almost in the same moment, the knife exited her skin, though its tip still scratched along her neck.

"Very good," Artemis soothed, moving the blade edgewise along the woman's jawline, up to the dip behind her ears before sweeping it back down and to the other side, never cutting deeper than a day-old kitten's claws, but always cutting. "Now, my other solution is very logical, as you are sure to agree. Noting my activities, I'd much rather you didn't get a sneak-peak at what I'm up to, so..."

Holly instantly knew what Artemis had planned, and it caused her body to shake, a thin sweat trickling down her spine. "You can't do this. There are other ways!"

Sighing, Artemis began to advance, tugging on Holly's hair, leading her back to the cell's cot. "Oh, I have considered them, Holly dear. Sadly, I don't think I'd look dashing with an eye patch."

The words Holly wanted to throw back at Artemis died out as her legs tapped against the cold iron railing of the cot. With surprising strength and speed, Artemis wrenched his arm back, bending Holly sharply at the waist before she lost balance, crashing onto the squeaking bed. She tried to bring up her legs in preparation for a devastating kick, but Artemis followed her, allowing barely an inch to open between their bodies. He hovered over the small elf, knees digging into her thighs and lower legs trapping her ankles against the mattress. She gasped as his bony kneecaps dug into her legs, the full weight of the human focused almost completely on her lower body. She could have lashed out with her fists, but there wasn't enough leverage to get in a strong enough strike to move him away before the knife dug into her windpipe.

"Oh, Major," Artemis sighed, trailing the dagger's tip past her cheek and to the edge of her left eye socket. "I know this hurts," he murmured, adjusting his grip on the knife so his index finger steadied the blade. "It's meant to. Now, don't move too much. I'd hate to make an improper incision."

Holly found that she could keep her head perfectly still, even as the rest of her body convulsed. Perhaps there was some sort of self-preservation instinct in that, but she didn't care to analyze. "You don't have to do this, Artemis. Please..." Tears began to drift out of her eyes, brought on by a mix of not blinking and real fear.

"My dearest...dearest Holly," Artemis said, his voice tender and his gaze soft. Moving with precision, he slipped the tip of the knife into the small crease where her eyelids met, sliding the blade along at a raised angle, keeping the cutting edge up on the approach until the knife rested over her cheek bone, holding down the pliable flesh of her lower eyelid. Despite his steady hand, the tip of the dagger had nicked a few veins in the wet underside of the lid, creating bloody tears before the magic began working. "I think we both knew from the moment we met...that there were only two ways this could end."

Holly licked her lips. "I...yes." She only had one chance to distract him. Moving as smoothly as possible, she brought one of her hands up until it rested on Artemis's hip.

His body jolted, but his hand remained steady. For the briefest of instants, the man's gaze flickered down, returning to his task only a heartbeat later. But it was enough.
Fingers curled so her nails—cracked from so many hours on the most dangerous jobs in the force—caught on the fine threads of Artemis's black silk shirt, Holly inched her hand up the man's chest. She reached his neck and felt the pulse there pounding without the slightest hint of his normal control.

Before either of them could question the act, Holly twined her fingers into Artemis's hair and pulled him down until his lips rested against her slightly open mouth.

Both kept their eyes open, Artemis's registering shock. He jerked back, trying to escape the contact, but Holly merely lowered her eyelids slightly (trying to avoid a wince as her lower lid was split down the center by the increase in pressure) and flicked out her tongue to trace his upper lip.

Artemis groaned, opening his mouth to copy the flick, entire body (except, blessedly, his right hand) shaking as the tips of their tongues brushed together, then began to battle for possession of each other's mouths.

Holly felt as if her entire body were transforming. The chill at her back faded and a warmth began to spread from her stomach, turning into a sharp tingle in her extremities. When Artemis's knees finally left her thighs and their hips rested together, Holly broke off the kiss for a moment, gasping. She could feel his pulse at the contact, steadily growing stronger with each beat, and realized it also pounded in the hand holding the back of her head and under her own hand at his neck. When the human impatiently reclaimed her lips, she noted the strong throb there, as well. Now it was Holly that groaned, back arching.

Artemis growled in triumph and need. He had to touch her. More. Genius mind firmly subverted by unstoppable instincts, he jerked the knife away from Holly's eye, placed it on the mattress by her head, and wrapped his arm around the elf's back, pulling her to his chest. He whimpered, wishing he could straighten his back and keep contact at lips, chest, and groin, but knew it was impossible. It would have to be enough...but it wasn't enough! He wanted—no, needed more. "Holly..."

Holly felt her heart leap at the sound of her name moaned by the mastermind and couldn't help but respond. "A-Artemis!"

Their eyes had never closed. Without a moment of fading, their visions shattered in two until they saw the other on their right side and themselves on the left.

Artemis gasped, pulling back, his face breaking into a vibrant smile. "I knew it! You feel—"

He was silenced by Holly's finger, which had descended to his lips. She gave a small, shy mile that was betrayed by her half-closed, coy eyes. Blue sparks flared up on the left side of her face to heal the last nick of the dagger. "I thought you were smart. Couldn't you have figured out what I intended when I began?"

He chuckled and began to lower his head to catch her lips again. For a nanosecond, he thought the elf was rising to meet him. Then he realized otherwise.

Holly's forehead crashed into Artemis's nose, instantly breaking it and sending the genius reeling back. His blood came out in a rush, splattering over the Major's face.

Holly heaved her body, struggling out of Artemis's hold. She had just freed her hips and was backed against the headboard when the man fought through the pain. His eyes were no longer tender, but now finely focused. His hand shot towards her hip and, for a moment, Holly was sure he was going to drag her back under and pin her with his body.
Instead he grabbed the dagger and brought his hand back, grinning wildly.

Holly was momentarily blinded by the flash of light on the silver blade. On instinct, she tilted her head to the side.

The knife crashed into the outer ridge of her eye socket, catching for an almost immeasurably short amount of time before scoring across her skull and embedding itself in the wall behind.

Artemis rolled off the elf, leaving her pinned to the wall by the dagger, which had slipped between her skull and skin.

Holly watched him flop to the floor, unable to process through the pain. Then her eyes rose along his path and she saw the sig sauer lying in the doorway.

There wasn't even time to brace herself. Holly jerked her head sideways and slightly up, letting the knife cut through her flesh. Instantly, the healing magic took hold, sucking her skin back in place and stitching it together before her power sputtered out. Blood continued to pour from the incomplete healing.

Holly dived off the cot, hand shooting out. Her fingers curled around the neutrino, trigger finger slotting cleanly into place. Continuing the dive, she turned it into a roll, snapping her body out to kneel at the end and leveling her gun.

At the same instant, Artemis grabbed the sig sauer and spun about, sitting up and aiming.

The air was filled with two deafening cracks as Holly and Artemis both pulled the trigger.

The Broken

July 4, 2014-The Stratosphere

It was ridiculously easy to fool them. A few glares at Minerva and Artemis was too concerned with his social life to think of military strategy. Flying on her own to the casino had even been the man's idea. Holly simply failed to wait at the elevator.

The July night was almost intolerable, even with the conditioning provided by her suit. Holly skimmed up the tower, heat from the recently set sun still radiating off the concrete. She curved sharply around the lip of the disc and landed at the edge of the public viewing area, taking a few moments to process her new situation. There seemed to be some sort of evacuation in progress, which was severely annoying the visitors, some of whom were doing everything possible to remain up top. A sign near Holly's hiding place urged visitors to "Watch the fireworks from atop the fabulous Stratosphere! July 4, 2014, starting at 8:00pm."

Holly glanced at her moometer and converted the readout to human time. She grimaced. Of course. On top of everything, the sky would be filled with exploding magnesium, potassium, iron, and other materials in less than thirty minutes. Not the best flying conditions.

It looked like all the visitors left topside had been rounded up by a final employee. He was about to step into the elevator, but paused, looking over his shoulder. With a frown, he wheeled about and walked towards the center of the platform. "Ma'am, miss, you can't be up there alone. Didn't you hear the warnings or see the lights flash? I need you to come with me."

Holly's view was blocked by another series of signs and small booths, but she could hear the amused, dual-layered voice perfectly. "Oh, no. I'm with the engineers. I will be fixing the rides, so
you can just forget about me."

The worker squeezed his eyes shut, trying to fight off the mesmer, but soon gave up. "Er...right. Forget about you... Why am I standing around here?" Scratching his head, he returned to the elevator, which slid closed behind him.

Holly inspected the power level on her neutrinos. Stunning or charring? Official or satisfying? With a shrug, she set her 2000 to stun and the 3000 to maximum output.

From the other side of the divide, a voice called. Relieved of the mesmer tones, it was now soft and happy, pulling the elf in. "Major Short? We are alone, now. Shall we get on with the stereotypical hero-villain showdown, or do you need a bit of time to primp?"

Rolling her eyes, Holly unshielded and stood. She hadn't expected to have the element of surprise, but you could always hope...

She strode quickly through the human-sized benches, observation binoculars, and ride booths, stunning neutrino in her right hand aimed directly ahead. The top of the disc was like a small, not terribly good amusement park, complete with a liberal array of trash, which drifted along her path in place of the absent tumbleweeds in this wild west showdown.

Resting next to a ticket counter, crouched a bit to keep her head out of view, Holly took a few steadying breaths. Two shots. That was all it would take, and this would all be over. The Kobois knew she was there, but even they couldn't dodge a neutrino blast.

Again came the voice. "I know what you are thinking, Major, and it is nowhere near so simple. I mean, do I ever let things be that easy for you? Take us out and our plans still proceed on schedule."

Holly did her best to suppress a groan, but a few rumbles still passed through the air. She really hated geniuses.

2000 raised and sighted, Major Short spun on the very tips of her toes, flipping around the corner of booth.

The words "Insanity" blazed at her in bright green and purple letters, momentarily capturing the elf's attention. Through the safety gate, she saw a thrill ride whose only "thrill" seem to be spinning its riders out over the edge of the spire, letting them get a good look at the ground below. The main body of the structure was extended, leaving five pairs of chairs dangling at the end of green metal arms. Only one of the pairs of chairs were occupied. A human clad in black leather reclined across both seats, her legs bent to avoid the bump of the seat dividers, one arm dangling out the back of the car. She was looking over the edge, as if bored, trying to drop quarters from a roll onto the pedestrians far below. Each coin flicked off her thumb rang and flashed before disappearing into the desert night.

Between her parted legs, laying stomach-to-stomach, her arms encircling the human's neck, lay a disturbingly similar pixie. Looking sideways, chin resting on her shoulder, the small creature looked at Holly and smiled. "Major Short. I don't believe we've been properly introduced. I am Opal, and..." Here she stretched, brushing her nose on the underside of her future self's chin. "This is Koboi." Again, she looked at Holly, small lips parted as she licked them, eyes half-lidded. "We shall be your new empresses."

Holly flicked her gaze down a bit, but she wasn't worried about the pixie's mesmer, given that she had her helmet on. She just didn't want to focus on the pair. The People had long ago come to
recognize homosexuality as a normal facet of sexuality, but Opal-on-Opal action? That was just weird. "We've met. Now tell me what you're planning and I'll see that you're well treated."

The fairy tutted. "You really shouldn't lie, Major. We both know the only thing keeping you from frying us both is the fact that you do not understand our plan."

Holly's lips curved, displaying her canine teeth. "No, that wouldn't keep me from frying you both."

She brought up her other hand, raising the 3000 to a position just above the 2000, sighting on Koboi's head. "I'm sure I could get the info from either of you, with the right motivation."

Opal's eyes widened, bringing back some of the pixie innocence. Her arms wrapped tighter around her lover's neck, bringing her own head high enough to put them both in range.

At first, Koboi barely responded. She dragged one sharp nail down the paper coin wrapper, cutting it open. After rolling the loose change about in her hand, tiny smudges of light from their newly-minted surfaces trailing across her face, she flung them into the night. Now with both hands free, the eldest of the women turned to face forward and wrap her arms around the pixie's waist, nipping at her ear. "Don't fret, sweet. She's too noble to actually kill. Not without just cause."

"Just cause!" Holly began to move forward again. "You have given me all the 'just cause' I need!"

Opal, reassured by her lover, pursed her lips and considered this. "Hmm...I hope you aren't talking about your little injury. It would be just so disappointing if you decided to kill us over that and not your dear Commander Root." She finally let Koboi's neck go, clapping her hands in excitement. "Goodness, I didn't even think to ask! How did that heal? It took some very valuable time out of my escape to shape you, but I think the results must be quite impressive. After all, you were—at best—half a woman to begin with."

Holly seethed, fighting to keep her temper within the bounds of rational thought. She had only been this angry a handful of times and she knew a step more would utterly destroy her senses. It did not do to lose yourself around one Koboi, so going into a blind rage when facing two...

Opal pouted. "Oh, dear. She's being mature. This really is no fun."

"Hmm." Koboi nodded, also highly disappointed. "Well, I suppose we should just go into the next segment of the repartee."

"Oh, really," Holly said, rolling her eyes. "The part where you go on about your dastardly plans? What is it this time? Hypnotizing the president? Hacking the nuclear launch sites? Poisoning the water supply?"

"D'arvit!" Opal shrieked, looking to Koboi. "She figured it out! I am almost as impressed as I am pissed!"

Holly jerked her head back, narrowing her eyes. "The water supply? Really? That's so...1990's superhero cartoon."

Koboi was much calmer than her younger half, her reaction only another small hum and a twitch of the lips. "Oh, but you haven't guessed what we will be tainting it with."

"Cyanide, DDT, arsenic, what does it..."

Then Holly understood. Her mouth went dry and rage turned into a sudden cold fear. "What you gave to Minerva?"
"Minus the drugs," Opal clarified, scrunching up her nose. "That was just for the laughs."

"You're going to give back magic to the Mud Men? Are you crazy?"

Opal frowned. "I prefer 'eccentric.'" At Holly's continued shock, she again clapped like a giddy schoolgirl. "Come, now, Major. It's only a little magic. You'd get twice as much completing the Ritual."

"Humans using magic isn't the point, though," Koboi said, tone kindergarten-teacher-soft, as if she needed to remind her younger partner. "It's knowledge."

Holly made the connection herself, mind rushing between conclusions, each sending a small sour jolt out from her stomach, her body turning icy and her face growing pale. Mud Men were not illogical creatures. When people began to heal themselves and accidentally mesmerized their neighbors, it wouldn't take them long to recognize magic. And if magic existed, what of all the magical creatures? With over 6.7 billion humans watching, it would no longer be a question of if humans discovered the People, but when.

"Where did you hide it?" Holly demanded, trying to keep the quaver out of her voice. "Tell me where the serum or whatever you call it is hidden!"

Koboi snorted. "Hidden? It's in twenty canisters all along the Colorado River. Big yellow things, quite easy to spot. Garish, even. They should be going off in..." she checked her moonometer, "about ten minutes, actually."

Holly didn't need to do the mental math. Vinyáya's entire wing would have already heard the interchange and be on their way for a pickup, but an impromptu search for twenty canisters all along the river would take more than ten minutes. There was only one hope: the Kobois' desire to torment their enemies. "So what's the big super-villain incentive, then? How do I stop you?"

Koboi trilled out a laugh, squeezing her pixie lover like a stuffed animal. "Ah, that is the fun part! It's all very simple." Reaching into the breast pocket of her jacket, she pulled out a length of fine gold chain with a small burnished metal cylinder at the end. "This is the override for the detonators. Just click the button on top, this all ends, and you fairies can live happily ever after. Of course..." She unclasped the chain, curling it around Opal's neck and giving her partner a kiss on the cheek before she secured the override. "You have to get it, first."

Holly eyed the preening Opal and smirked. She activated her wings, hovering so her toes scraped the floor. "I don't think that's going to be an issue." Forming her body into an efficient arrow, Holly shot forward.

Opal squeaked and backed into the human's chest.

Koboi just grunted in disgust and pushed the fairy, toppling her out of the chair, her terrified shriek fading into the night.

Holly pulled up, stopping only a few inches from Koboi's smug face. "You...you just killed her!"

Koboi sneered, slouching further in her seat, as if preparing for a long wait. "Oh, please. You think she's not prepared for every eventuality?"

Holly saw Koboi's eyes brighten and heard a whir before she knew what was going on, but that was enough to save her. She kicked against Koboi's seat, rocketing away from the human. From her peripheral vision, a flash of silver came down, slicing through the knee of her Recon suit, exposing circuitry and a clean red gash. Blue sparks danced around the edge, pulling her skin back together,
though the blood continued to flow off. When the healing ended, Holly looked through the gash in her suit at a thin red scar.

She looked up very slowly, entire body numb, as if the injury had been laced with a tranquilizer. She knew better, however. The only thing slowing her was a very real fear at what she was seeing.

Opal was suspended hundreds of feet above the Las Vegas streets, her pink raincoat fluttering away on a breeze. She wore a matte black LEP suit, marred by a few rends where the Kraken had buried her and damaged the material six years ago. Instead of the normal blue curves at the edge of her suit’s rapidly beating wing tips, there was a yellow shimmer. The pixie and her partner had not been idle these past few years; Holly knew instantly that the wings had been modded extensively, and Opal Koboi was the Lower Element's leading wing engineer.

That wasn't what turned Holly cold. Her reaction was caused by what Opal held so loosely in her hand. An unadorned silver dagger, it’s blade a simple elongated triangle from hilt to glinting point. A coating of blood shone on the edge of the blade, small droplets being intermittently carried off by the wind.

"Remember this, Major." Opal cooed, running pinched fingers up the silver to remove the elf’s blood "I found it while escaping from the rockslide. A demon blade, obviously, lost during the removal of Hybras. Very fine work, but I didn't understand why it felt so...important. Until one of my fairy contacts had a little...'accident.' Then I just knew I had to show it to you."

Opal inspected the coating of blood on her fingers, pinching and parting them so she could watch the thin string that formed and quickly broke whenever her fingers separated. Smile widening, she popped her fingers into her mouth and sucked a bit, eyes rolling back as she appraised the snack. With a grimace, she removed her fingers, looking at Holly as if she had personally offended the inventor. "You taste terrible!"

Holly was trying to think of a witty response when a light began to blink in her helmet. Her two-way communicator with Artemis. Her time alone was almost over. Cursing, she darted at the pixie.

Opal giggle like a girl playing tag, flitting away long before Holly came near. "Come now, Major!" She threw the words over her shoulder, rising to the Big Shot spire, weaving efficiently between the steel mesh of the structure. "You don't spend decades making these things without learning to fly them. Impress me!"

Despite the taunts, Holly grinned, but only a little of that gesture was from the anticipated pleasure of fancy maneuvering. If she caught that obnoxious pixie, no one in the LEP would mind if she gave a little overdue discipline, and that knife looked quite promising...

Logically, Artemis and crew knew that this trip up the elevator would place them over 1,000 feet in the air, but knowing this and experiencing it were two very different things. The air felt thinner, if not colder, with a biting wind that caused their eyes to water. With visitors, the sight of Las Vegas stretching out all around before fading into pitch-black desert would have been intimidating. With only a half-dozen people up top, it felt like the night was swooping down on them, ready to fling the unwary over the tower's edge.

Artemis balked instinctively, then strode onto the circular path, looking about for his brash comrade. Juliet growled and took a few bounding steps until she was at point, also examining their surroundings, though she took in much more than the genius.

Minerva hung back, wrapping her arms across her chest as she looked about. Rashly, she leaned
against a rail to peer over the edge. The resulting vertigo was so bad that she spun about, looking up to try to ease her sudden disquiet. Then she gasped. "Artemis! The spire!"

Artemis and Juliet jerked their heads to take in the center of the tower, where a red and white mesh spire penetrated the sky. All of the emergency lights on the top deck had been turned off when the last of the visitors left, yet the spire was being highlighted by soft blue and yellow glowing streaks. "Holly!" Artemis yelled, stepping towards the spire, but this only brought him up against a slanted grey wall.

Holly seemed to have heard him, one of her tight turns losing a bit of its efficiency. Rather than slipping through a gap in the rebar to keep that minuscule, but never-lessening space between the fairies, she curved around the side.

This delay was all Opal needed. She performed a somersault so tight it seemed she should have snapped her spine, finishing it by slamming into the Major's lower back. They tumbled through the air, falling half of the distance down the spire before Opal disentangled herself.

Holly felt the pixie's mass leave. The elf folded her gymnast body until she was bent double. Reaching between her legs, she grabbed one of Opal's feet, their combined weight pulling on the pixie's speed-centric wings, forcing them into another descent.

Opal twisted about to glare at the elf, yelling something that the humans could not catch. Whatever it was, it just caused Holly to smirk. She pulled her knees as far up to her chest as possible, then shot them back out, slamming her feet into the pixie's chest.

Stunned by the blow, Opal was let free, falling towards the lower path, wings struggling to keep her aloft despite being placed below her. She stared at the sky, mouth wide, trying to work her way through the pain.

Holly dived after, eyes shining, left arm stretched out. "I've got it!" She crowed, voice laced with hysterical laughter.

Inches from the metal floor, Opal's eyes snapped back into focus, meeting up with Holly. She flipped her legs about, landing in a crouched position and launching herself back at the Major, blade arm outstretched

Holly gasped, but there was no time to evade. The cursed dagger entered her palm, breaking through the bones in her wrist and traveling smoothly up the length of her arm until its hilt rested against her hand.

Opal flew past, tracking the elf's quickly transitioning expression (confusion to agony) until it was lost from her peripheral vision.

A second later, Holly worked up the breath to begin an ear-shattering shriek. She dropped the gun in her right hand to grip the knife's hilt, but this touch was too much to tolerate on top of the already crippling pain. She had been injured many times while on the force, but they had always been fleeting broken bones and cuts that could begin to heal immediately. Her magic was sparking, but it couldn't do anything with the blade still inside.

Artemis was moving before the counterattack had even begun. He arrived in front of his friend soon after she started screaming. "Holly! Calm down! I have to get it out!"

She did not listen, merely registering the presence of another person. She began to back away, trying to hold her arm out to the side to keep it away from the human, though this meant she had to
let her injured arm go.

Grabbing the elf's now-free right hand, Artemis pulled Holly to him. "Holly, stop. It's Artemis. I'm going to help you." He had stopped yelling, though there was still an intense urgency in his voice.

It was this urgency that seemed to finally get through to Holly. The scream had finally run out of breath to propel it, turning into a series of rapid, panted shrieks. Holly did not acknowledge Artemis, but she did halt her struggles.

It was all the permission he needed. Curling his other arm around Holly's wounded limb, he jerked it back to his body, swiftly sliding his hand up her forearm until he grasped the hilt. Before Holly had the time to react, he wrenched his arm back, pulling the dagger free.

Building up another breath, Holly yowled again. Blue sparks seemed to pour out of the wound, pulling the skin back together. The keen descended into desperate gasps for breath as the elf fought for consciousness. She slumped against Artemis, momentarily too weak to do anything but explain.

"They're going to release the magic compound into the water supply. Opal has the override, but I can't catch her!"

Artemis looked up the the spire, which the pixie was circling, howling with laughter. He took several deep breaths, schooling his emotions. "Give me your wings."

Holly laughed. "Yeah, fat chance. You'd pilot yourself straight into the sidewalk. She's good, Artemis. She's doing things I've only ever pulled off in sims. I have to go after her, not any of you rookies."

Juliet and Minerva finally overcame their shock and ran up. Minerva was speechless, staring at the slowly lessening gush of blood from Holly's palm, hands flying over her mouth. Juliet was not so hindered, though she had rarely seen wounds this bad. "And how are you going to stop her? She just schooled you!"

Holly scowled, but seemed to agree. Standing, she began to work on her equipment belt, tossing it to the ground. She removed the power sources from the neutrinos and tossed them to Juliet for safe-keeping. "No more dead weight. She's unarmed, at least." Holly removed her helmet and tossed it to the ground.

"That won't be enough," Artemis protested, also rising. Fearful that the fairy would take off with a half-formed plan, he grabbed her wrist. "Besides, you're still injured."

Holly was about to protest that her magic would solve that when she looked at her palm. The wound was now only about as thick as a ballpoint pen's ink chamber, but it oozed blood, pooling in her palm before dripping between her fingers. "D'arvit! Don't let the Kobois have that dagger. It inhibits healing. I'm completely out of magic."

Minerva took a step forward. "I could—"

Juliet spun about and howled, "You could stay out of this and not become a worse liability!"

Minerva backed away, mouth moving as she tried to free her words, but soon found herself ignored. "I have to fly," Holly reasoned, knocking Artemis away and extending her wings with a loud snick. "Everyone do me a favor: don't die."

Artemis was again reaching out for the fairy, but he was nowhere near fast enough. Just as his
finger tips brushed against the elf's, she took to the sky, eyes darting back to their hands and smiling for only a moment before her wings hit full speed and sent her after Opal.

Juliet also watched the soldier fly off. After a long, wind-filled pause, during which they all tried to keep a focus on the rapidly moving fairies, the blond woman screamed in frustration and kicked the wall. "Well, that's just perfect. She'll never catch her at that rate. What do we do?"

Artemis squeezed the bridge of his nose. Then he smirked, lifting his head away from the pinch and looking down the curving path. "What do our plans always need?"

Juliet frowned, pondering this, but Minerva followed Artemis's gaze and copied his cocky grin. "A distraction."

Now Juliet looked further along their path, but she did not smile.

Just at the edge of their sight was a purple structure with five green arms, dangling over the strip. On the chair furthest out sat a casually reclining human, her ponytail draped over the back of a seat, one leg dangling in the wind. She held up a finger, curling it towards the human trio, inviting them into her mechanical spiderweb.

Juliet laced her fingers and stretched out her arms, the crack of each knuckle making Artemis cringe. "This," she said, setting off down the path at a trot, "is my kind of party. You two stay here."

"Not a chance," Artemis protested, taking off behind his unofficial bodyguard, though at a much less easy gait. "I may not be as strong as you, but I am not useless. Especially since this is Opal Koboi."

Juliet did not protest, though she seemed about to when Minerva came after them. One sharp look from the Frenchwoman was enough to spark a roll of the eyes, though not enough for further actions against her companions.

Koboi was quite obviously delighted with the development, squirming in her seat. The hanging seat swayed alarmingly, but the human did not seem to care. In fact, she began to kick her feet, moving the seat as if it was no more than a backyard swing set. "How splendid! You know, I never got to use many pickup lines, but I know there is one for this situation. How does it go...? Ah! If I made you come with just one finger, imagine what I can do with my whole fist."

Juliet halted at the safety gate to Insanity ('God,' she thought, 'that is just a cliché waiting to happen.') and gave one long shudder. "That's 'hand,' not 'fist'."

Koboi shrugged, opening her jacket and beginning to search through her inside pockets. "That all depends on your talents. Now, where did I put that...ah!"

There was a bright red flash that caused Juliet to take a step sideways and into the line between Artemis and Koboi.

The short human sighed in exasperation, shaking a vial full of nearly translucent red liquid, which caught the spire's many bright lights. "Mr. Fowl...I wish to make a deal."

Juliet began to take an angry step forward, but was halted by a thin, pale hand clamping on her shoulder. She stopped, but her body was tense, ready to spring. "Artemis?"

"I am always willing to hear out a deal." He stepped around the tall blond, striding until he reached the main support opposite Koboi's position, leaning against the purple curve as casually as one
should expect from a Fowl. He paused until his ladies-in-waiting stood at his back, then spoke in a suitably bored tone. "I'm listening."

"This," Koboi began, twisting the stoppered vial between her fingers like a miniature baton, "is the essence of human magic. Liquid Ritual, if you will. In return for holding off on whatever is involved in your pathetic attempt to save the day, I will give this vial—enough for a single dose—to you." She stopped twirling, sitting forward in her ambulatory seat, holding the vial out to Artemis, even if he was nowhere near enough to take it. "Just think: magic! You could give it to your beloved mother and prevent her from ever becoming sick again. Or you could become a little wizard, like your French pet. The possibilities are endless." She gave an enticing shake of the vial, raising her eyebrows. "It's a once-in-a-lifetime offer."

Artemis scoffed, adding a little dismissive laugh at the end of his incredulity. "Hardly. I could make that concoction myself."

Koboi did not seem impressed. "Truly? How?"

Artemis shoved his hands in his trouser pockets, shrugging "You've been sloppy, Opal."

"KOBOI!"

"Ah, pardon me. Koboi. I pieced things together once I realized that magic was involved. Just following your old MO, with the same unfortunate echoes in the biosphere."

Juliet understood about half of this, but Minerva gasped. "You mean—"

"The Nevada Zebra-tailed lizard," Artemis confirmed, giving an approving nod to the woman before returning his attention to Koboi. "So, you see, I could just make that serum myself, if I so wished."

"Perhaps," Opal agreed, though she did not look at all displeased. In fact, she fluttered her eyelashes at the genius boy, quite willing to take on the glare Minerva sent her way. "However, it took Opal and me two years to develop, and, taking into account our past experience in the field and a good array of fairy technology, I doubt you'd be able to match that. Do you really wish to spend years pursuing something you could obtain right now?"

"You assume," Artemis drawled, "that I want the magic. My mother is perfectly happy with a human life, after your interference, and magic really did not suit me."

"Then what about your sister?" Koboi purred, managing to feign concern quite well. "Do you really want to leave her the way she is? You could fix her!"

The wind picked up for a few strong gusts, flipping Artemis's hair into his eyes, obscuring them. Juliet took a step forward and opened her mouth to warn Artemis against the conniving fairy, but was silenced and halted when he raised a hand.

"There is one problem with that idea, Koboi."

"Oh," she said, quirking her head to the side in interest, "what is that?"

Artemis raised his chin quickly, flipping his hair back and out of his eyes so he could look down his nose at the suspended human. He smirked that beloved vampire smile. "Shana isn't broken."

Then he flicked his hand forward, two fingers pointed at the suspended human.
Juliet whooped in excitement, leaping onto the ride's main beam, expertly scaling the slick metal. "Less talking, more fighting!"

Koboi screeched and threw the vial at the side of the Stratosphere, delighting as the glass shattered on impact, the liquid oozing down the concrete as if she had injured the tower itself. Once again reaching into her jacket, she pulled out what appeared to be a smart phone and pushed a button. The gears of the ride clattered to life, sending the arms spinning.

"This is insanity," Minerva moaned, watching as Juliet stopped at the end of the arm, studying its speed.

"No," Artemis chided, pointing to the ride, "that is Insanity. This is just another day in the life." He was grinning, eyes flickering between the two humans on the machine and the two fairies in the air. Opal seemed to have noticed her partner's predicament, but it had done little to help Holly. Minerva also switched about her gaze, but she focused on Artemis at the end. "You've missed this, haven't you?"

"Like you wouldn't believe."

Far out on the ride, Juliet was amping herself up, waiting until the revolving arms reached top speed. "This is just like that stupid obstacle course Madame Ko put you through! Only no crocodiles!" She didn't mention the over 1000 foot drop and also did her best to avoid thinking about it as she threw herself through the air and landed halfway down on one of the arms, her impact making the entire ride sway alarmingly.

The speed of the spin shot her down another quarter of the way. The arms were not long to begin with and, when Juliet stopped, she found herself looking down at the raised and supremely confident face of the present time line's Opal Koboi. Juliet braced her left arm against the bars and began to reach down her top for the derringer.

Koboi seemed unconcerned with the fact that she was facing down a fifth of a mile drop, held in by centripetal force and her own grip on the seat, which were already proving insufficient as she began to slide off. "Congratulations on your belt, Jade Princess." The genius's cockiness became all too understandable when a shimmer exploded from her back, ripping through the leather jacket and forming into a pair of glittering green wings.

"Oh," Juliet said, eyes widening.

"But you really should be watching that shoulder."

"Shit."

Simultaneously, Juliet unholstered the derringer and Koboi's hand shot out, tight fist smashing into Juliet's injured left shoulder.

The young Butler's arm seemed to loose all strength, crumpling under her as the force of the spinning ride shot her face-first down the metal arm. She shot out her other arm just before hitting the curved back of the chair, hooking her elbow around one of the bars connecting the seats. Her body flipped out over the Strip before jerking her to a stop and sending her crashing into the seats' backs.

Koboi slipped almost casually out of her chair, following the spin of the ride's arms. She seemed to drift, moving to float next to Juliet. "I'll be needing this," she said, wrenching the gun out of Juliet's hand.
"No!" Juliet thrashed, trying to kick at Koboi's retreating back. "Artemis! Minerva! Run!"

"So single-minded," the former fairy cooed in approval as she touched down on the disc. She began to take light, hip-swaying steps towards the genius couple, raising the gun and focusing it between them.

"You can't do this," Minerva squeaked, trying to fight off a mental reprimand at the absurdity of the statement. She had a plan, after all. She just needed one second. Not even that. A flicker.

"Oh?" Koboi focused the barrel on the beauty's chest. "Why not? I have the mean, the opportunity, the will. Nothing can stop me."

"You're wrong," Minerva said, raising her eyes and locking them on Koboi's, voice dropping into bass tones. "Human, your will is mine."

The mesmer hit Koboi with full force. Minerva's will was strong, but so was the raven-haired woman, and she had years of practice using magic on fairies and humans. So, when Minerva's command of "Drop the gun!" came, Koboi delved into herself, tapping into deep mental reserves. "Do you really think," she hissed, arm shaking so violently that the metal buckles on her jacket's wrist clattered against the derringer, "that you can stop me with the magic I gave you?" Her finger began to squeeze on the trigger. Just a bit more...

"No," Minerva admitted, voice back to normal. Her gaze, shifted past the short woman and she took on a satisfied smirk. "That's her job."

Koboi's eyes shot wide. Looking over her shoulder, she expected to see Major Holly Short, ready for a powerful punch. Instead, she only saw the five spinning arms of Insanity. She had almost looked back when she heard Juliet's voice yelling. "Hey, Opal!"

Far above, Opal couldn't help but glance down at the edge of the disc.

Juliet spun into Koboi's view for only a second, her arms wrapped around a head rest, chin resting at the side of the chair as she sighted her pistol and pulled the trigger.

Koboi didn't even have time to move, merely letting out a startled "Hurk!" as the bullet pierced her back and exited her chest. The impact arched her body, momentarily lifting her toes from the floor. Then, with a soft, surprised "Oh..." gravity took over and the woman's muscles went limp, crumpling her to the ground. Her skull—still pixie-thin despite her human stature—hit the metal floor with a sickening crack.

"NO!" Opal screeched, immediately forgetting the game she was playing with the major, streaking across the sky towards her partner.

Holly did an almost curve-less 90° turn, following the pixie's descent. She stretched her hand out, fingertips scrambling for the shimmer suit boots. Just a small snag would take off enough momentum to—

Three screams came. Two of alarm and one of terror.

Holly focused past her prey and gave out her own cry.

Juliet arched through the air in negative parabola, her grip on the chair shattered by the recoil of the gun, flinging her into the smoggy Vegas sky. She flopped about on erratic axes, her rapid descent deepening her cries like a receding train's horn. For a heartbeat, the woman caught Holly's eyes and reached out. Then the contact was broken by her turns and she disappeared beyond the
end of the disc.

Holly looked down. Opal was slowing, almost at the side of her injured lover. The second she stopped, Holly could grab the inhibitor, knock the pixie out, and it would be all over. The maniac masterminds would finally be brought back under LEP control. She would be a hero again...

Opal touched down, crouching at Koboi's side, completely unguarded.

Holly rocketed past and shot down the side of the Stratosphere.

In moments, she caught up to Juliet, wrapping her arms around the tumbling woman's waist. They flipped through the air, the wing rigging struggled to correct their orientation. It rumbled a protest at carrying the extra weight and began to lessen the spinning. Soon, they were rising back to the disc of the tower.

"You stupid girl!" Holly spat out the words, the oddest mixture of fury and relief stealing over her. "I told you to leave the Kobois to me!"

Juliet, who finally seemed to have realized who saved her, threw her arms around Holly's neck, squeezing "No, if you recall, I said I'd leave the fairies to you. I went after the human."

Holly tried to sound terse, glad that Juliet couldn't see the grin hidden by her helmet. "Pass those technicalities on to Foaly. He's the one who'll have to explain me and why you didn't go 'splat' on the pavement."

Juliet was about to give a playful rejoinder when both women felt cold trails shoot down their spines at a hysterical sob from just over the lip. They crested to see Opal standing next to her fallen lover, holding out the derringer, flicking its aim between Artemis and Minerva.

"All this doesn't matter! In 30 seconds, the serum will be released, I will heal Koboi, and we shall usher in the new age of man! The only question is: which of you will bleed out first and which gets a second longer for me to aim again?"

Holly let Juliet go the instant they were over the ride platform. The blond landed running, Holly shot ahead.

It was just a few seconds. Minerva's eyes widened in primal fear and she took a step away from Artemis. She looked back at him as she retreated and the long-connected pair locked eyes. Her next step stopped the retreat, but the movement was enough to catch Opal's attention.

The pixie nodded in approval. "Good choice. He's just a man." Then she aimed at Artemis and pulled the trigger.

"Artemis!" Holly shrieked, the flash of the gun blinding her.

But she was already there, hovering right in front of Opal Koboi. The bullet knocked her back a few inches, but the stabilizing effect of her wings kept the elf close.

"Holly!" The call came from everyone but the fairies, who were looking down at the hole made in the officer's formerly unmarred breast.

In tandem, they looked up and exchanged smiles. Both triumphant, with Opal's quickly fading in confusion at her victim's expression.

In the silence that was only broken by the pounding feet of Artemis and Juliet, Holly reached out to
Opal, almost seeming to desire to caress the pixie's perfect cheek. Instead, her hand angled lower, resting at the scientist's collarbone.

"Click," Holly gargled and depressed the overrides's button.

Then Holly closed her eyes, falling back from Opal, the last of her breath escaping through her punctured lung.

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The Living

May 15, 2014-Southern Ireland

Artemis had never liked guns. They were...messy. Impersonal. Too easy. A tool for the impatient. Certainly, there was some skill in their use (one did not get to know Butler, Holly, and their ilk without recognizing this), but, without closely facing a similarly armed opponent, there was only so far that you needed to be trained to hold your own. Hand-to-hand combat, bladed weapons, those sort of things...they would have better suited Artemis's sensibilities.

Sadly, however, Artemis was not what one would call "physically gifted." The closest he had ever come to a six-pack was when he'd driven past a liquor store. So, a gun it was.

That did not mean he had to embrace the idea. As the genius finished his work at the oak and wandered back down the river, grunting with each step as he struggled to pull his feet out of the boggy earth, he held the sig sauer limply, finger nowhere near the trigger. Butler would have frowned at his inattention, but Artemis wasn't exactly concerned with being attacked.

He could feel a new ooze of blood running over his lips. That was going to become a problem very quickly. 'That would be rather embarrassing,' he thought, 'dying of blood loss before I finish everything.' Even as he thought this, his vision began to blur. With each pace, his knees buckled a bit more, bringing him closer to the ground before he managed to straighten. His vision resolved a bit between each footfall, only to become unfocused again with his next step, and it never returned to a clearer stage.

When black tendrils began to appear on the edge of his vision, Artemis fell to his knees, the fingers of his left hand digging into the damp earth. It was cold, and the breeze drifting across the landscape wasn't helping the convulsions that flashed across his body. Despite this, he removed his suit jacket, laying it across the duffel bag that now rested at his side.

This respite pushed back the darkness, but only slightly. His head throbbed along with his heartbeat and vision. 'No helping it. I can go no further. This will have to suffice.' Leaving the gun on the ground before him, he placed a fist to his chest, the other sinking deeper into the boggy soil.

Artemis began to move his lips in a final, silent prayer.

If Holly had paid attention to her readouts, she would have noticed that not only had she broken Root's over 90 years old land-speed record, but completely obliterated it. The actual speed was not important to the woman, however, so much as the fact that she was going as fast as possible.

Breaking the large majority of LEP flight regulations, Holly streaked across the countryside. Her path was completely straight, passing over cities and towns. Residents across the south of Ireland would be puzzled for quite some time as to why a sonic boom had echoed through the night.

And, of course, Ireland being Ireland, it stated to rain. A steady downpour that would quickly soak
anyone so unlucky as to be caught outside. Holly ignored the cold that crept into her suit, the liquid itself being kept out by the waterproof material. Rubbing a palm over her droplet-covered visor, she scanned the ground.

There! A single car, all lights off, parked at the end of a dirt road. Holly would recognize a Bentley anywhere. "Foaly? Where's Artemis now?"

There was a pause before the centaur tapped back into her helmet feed. "Not sure. Make a bee-line for the oak. He was heading back your way, based on the camera."

Holly unshielded and banked, slamming her hand into the driver's side as she passed. Butler looked up, a hand flying to his chest, though he didn't seem to be actually having a heart attack, based on the eloquent glare he sent after the fairy.

Holly was forced to slow down now that she was this close to the ground. Her speed still could have been considered ludicrous as she whipped through the trees dotting the landscape. Her wake pulled leaves and dead branches off, creating a swirling corridor of plant life and raindrops behind her.

Holly's fear made it feel like an age, but it took her very little time to find Artemis.

He crouched at the top of a small rise, legs folded under him. The setting moon shone on his face, the pale glow meeting pale skin and seeming to light him up against the dark Irish night. A hand was held to his chest, his lips moving with breathy, too-distant words. His other hand had sunk slightly into the bog, but this did not seem to bother him. Nor did the rain, which had plastered his hair down and completely drenched his clothing, the white fabric of his open shirt turning nearly transparent as it stuck to the young man's chest. His only reaction to the weather was an uncontrollable shiver, which made him look like an abused stray. Blood ran from his nose in a steady stream that was diluted by the rain, but it still stained his chest and the earth between his knees.

'Yes!' Holly felt like cheering. There was less than a kilometer between them. Ten seconds and this would be over. She could give a quick healing to stop that blood and—

Then Artemis opened his eyes and dropped the hand from his chest. It brushed against the loaded gun that lay on the ground.

Holly's mind didn't even have time to register shock or come up with a plan. The words that came from the woman were completely unbidden. A simple, instinctive response

"Artemis! NO!"

Artemis's head shot up. He saw Holly immediately A cocky grin overtook his grimace of pain. He wrenched his bog-imprisoned hand free, a fistful of soil coming with it. His other hand, which had hovered so close to the sig sauer slammed over the hole, fist unclenching at the last moment to drop in its precious contents.

With the last of his strength, Artemis took a deep breath and yelled over the storm: "So return your gift into the ground!"
"And all at once the crowd begins to sing/ Sometimes.../ We'd never know what's wrong without the pain/ Sometimes the hardest thing and the right thing are the same." -The Fray

**The Dead**

*September 10, 2014-Fowl Manor, holding cell*

The force of his own gun's recoil and the neutrino's blast flung Artemis into the hall and slammed him against the wall. He stood propped there for only a few seconds before his legs buckled and he fell over, landing on his side, arms splayed out in front of his limp body. This position could not hide the hole in his shirt, nor the ring of blackened skin surrounding a perfect circle of red, oozing muscles beneath.

Holly stood in the cell, holding her stomach. She felt sick. This was not how things were supposed to go. "I am...such a fool. I trusted you, Artemis."

She expected silence to be her only answer, so, when she heard a wet, rattled breath, the elf jumped.

"Well, we always did know...which of us was smarter."

Holly forced her weak legs to take her into the hall. Artemis's gun lay within his reach, but Holly wasn't really worried about that. No one who took breaths that quickly, which such loud popping and sucking noises, remained a threat. She wouldn't be surprised if the man's back was broken, as well.

Holly knelt at Artemis's side, wincing. Her entire body hurt. "You're dying, Artemis. Do you really need to get in the last word this time?"

His face was the only thing that moved. He smirked, a thin line of blood trickling out of the corner of his mouth. "Yes. After all, this really is the last word."

Holly studied her former friend. His breaths were obviously hard-won, struggling for every last second of his life. Except for the break in his nose, his face was unmarred by the short battle, remaining remarkably serene. Nothing like her own face, which was covered in viscera, her short hair framing the wet features, held down by sticky, cooling blood. For a moment, she longed for her dual vision to break and remove this view of herself.

Then she shook the thought off. As much pain as Artemis had caused her, she could not begrudge him this last connection in his dying moments. So, instead of leaving him to pass alone, Holly sat at his side and took the man's hand, giving it a light squeeze, not even sure if he could feel the touch.

He did not squeeze back, but his breathing eased, growing shallow and slow. "You...lied...to me," he whispered, eyes slowly closing.

"Me?" Holly said, a soft laugh in the word. "When have I ever lied to you?"

Artemis's lip's twitched around his words. "You said...my elf kissing...days were over."

Holly closed her eyes, tears washing two lines of blood away from her cheeks. She nodded, even if
she knew the dying mastermind could not see her. "They are."

Entire body screaming at the small movement, Holly raised Artemis's hand, cradling it in her own and bestowing on the back a gentle kiss. A stray, long-overdue spark of magic flared at the touch, bit it was far too little to do more than ease their pain for a few seconds.

With his next long exhale, Holly felt the pulse in the man's wrist stop and life slipped smoothly from Artemis Fowl's body.

The left side of Holly's vision turned black.

She held the kiss, bathing his hand with her tears, feeling as if her own heart must stop with his. She knew this wasn't love. It wasn't even friendship. This last contact was merely pity and remembrance for the boy she had once stood beside, facing off against the world. For what he...they could have been in a different world.

She could hear the footsteps approaching and knew what was about to happen, but Holly did not pull away.

With a crash, the cellar door was kicked open and a full LEP squadron pounded down the stairs.

"Holly!"

She opened her eyes and put Artemis's limp hand down, her lips tugged on by the drying blood, as if they still longed to be connected to her enemy. She turned her head slowly and looked down the hall at Trouble Kelp.

His face was filled with shock, twisting quickly into rage.

Holly licked her lips, tasting the bitter, ferrous mixture. "I'm...sorry, Trouble."

Commander Kelp stared at the blood-soaked elf, not sure what to do. He swallowed and shook his head slowly. "Medic. Go heal the Fowl boy. He's to stand trial."

A nervous-looking gnome darted her eyes at the Commander, ready to raise her hands in defeat and run out of the Manor. Kelp, sensing the fairy's unease, leveled a ferocious glare at the medic. She yelped and trotted forward.

Faster than the eye could track, Holly raised her neutrino and shot the gnome in her shoulder.

The fairy howled and took several huge steps back, disappearing into the armed squadron.

"Major Short!" Trouble barked, stepping forward. "Stand down and let Fowl—"

He was silenced by a shot at his feet, the energy blast melting a small section of the concrete floor.

Holly shook her head, urging Trouble to understand. She didn't want this. This wasn't how things were supposed to go.

Trouble clenched his jaws, the muscles in his neck tightening and standing out as his teeth scraped together. "Captain Vein: stun her, on my word."

A sprite obediently stepped forward, reducing the power of his gun and aiming carefully at Holly's chest.

Holly was about to open her mouth to beg Trouble to stop. Then something happened.
The left side of her vision began to brighten ever-so-slightly. She could see a glowing tunnel, its walls lined with blue stones. The view swiveled about, as if someone was inspecting the space. At one side, she saw the passage widen into a much larger structure. Balls of bright light darted about, red always falling and blue always riding.

Then the view looked to the opposite end, out to...herself.

Holly gasped and looked to the side, but saw no tunnel. Only a white concrete wall.

In the corridor, hands slowly rose into view. Red sparks whirled about them like massive electrons. There was what felt like a confused pause as the controller of the vision again focused on Holly.

Blue bits of light—so similar to, but obviously not from her magic—began to flow from her chest.

Then the watcher in the tunnel seemed to understand. Holding out a pale hand framed by an immaculately tailored suit, Artemis Fowl beckoned to Holly, waiting for someone to walk with him down the last road.

After a moment, Holly nodded and turned her gaze back to Trouble. Her tears began to flow faster. Gun arm still raised, she removed the hand from her stomach.

Now free of all preventative pressure, blood began to gush from the bullet wound Holly had been trying to block. It covered her thighs and splattered on the floor, quickly pooling on the cold concrete.

Wincing only a little, Holly Short wrapped her arm around the dead body of Artemis Fowl, pulling him to her chest. Her shoulders shook at the physical and emotional pain. Locking eyes with Trouble, she opened her mouth, blood dribbling from between her lips. Her words were gargled, but clear enough for all to her, if not truly understand. "I chose you."

Trouble's mouth opened slightly, the matching words waiting to escape. Instead, he looked to Vein and snapped his command. "Stun her!"

Vein was quick. Holly was quicker. Her finger slipped out of the trigger and moved to the small red button right in front, pressing down. Instantaneously, the electric and metal shield spread out, surrounding the Major and the body she held. The other neutrino's energy blast easily passed through, hitting Holly perfectly in the chest.

Her body gave one strong jerk, freezing in the air. Then she fell to the ground, still holding the activated neutrino 4000.

It took Trouble far too long to realize what had happened. Forgetting all procedures, he broke away from his squadron, dashing down the hall and falling to Holly's side. He reached into the shield, but his hand was immediately smashed by the metal balls, breaking every bone up to his elbow. They healed nigh-instantly and the moisture that began to build in his eyes was not from the physical pain.

"Major Short, turn off the shield!"

But it was too late. Holly's face was loose in sleep, but her arm around Artemis's chest and her hand on the gun remained tight, extending the shield to them both.

"Turn it off, Foaly!"

Hundreds of miles underground, Foaly buried his face in his hands, shoulders heaving. "If I
could do that, don't you think I would have done it for Verbil! I never hooked them up to the LEP's computers!"

"Oh...Frond," Trouble rasped. "How much energy does that shield have left?" He looked into the cell, but the Commander did not even need to speculate on the number of shots fired. It was a nuclear battery. Unless Holly had been discharging since she left the base, it wouldn't be enough to make a difference.

Trouble Kelp turned back to watch Holly. The elf he had just begun to really know. Coworker to friend to lover, and perhaps eventually to—

Holly's chest fell in a deep exhale.

Trouble sat at her side, frozen, waiting for the next intake of breath. When the knowledge finally came that it wasn't coming, he lowered his head, shoulders heaving as his tears fell to mix with Artemis and Holly's blood.

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**The Broken**

*July 4, 2014-The Stratosphere*

Artemis caught Holly's body and, in the next heartbeat, Juliet arrived behind Opal, clubbing the pixie across the skull. The blow was too much for the thin-skulled fairy, who fell to lay by her dead partner.

Artemis staggered under Holly's limp weight, sinking to his knees. The officer lay with her torso on his lap, her lower body splayed across the walkway. With a medical professionalism that belied his panic, the man freed one hand and felt for the hole at her breast, reaching around to the opposite side to find a matching hole. The bullet had gone through, despite it low caliber. At least there was that small blessing.

Artemis looked up to Juliet, barely able to speak around his rage. "Why did you knock her out? She has magic! We could have made her heal Holly!" Even as he said the words, he knew they weren't true. Opal would never spare a spark of magic for her enemies.

He searched for the fairy's pulse and found it easily next to her scar, but it was fading with each uncertain beat, the heart already seizing from lack of oxygen.

Juliet knelt to shake Opal's body, but without much enthusiasm. No one, least of all a pixie, would wake up quickly from a blow like that. "The LEP," she said, desperate for someone to help them.

Artemis jerked his head down the path. "Holly's helmet. Go!"

Juliet complied, glad that someone else was taking over now that the fighting was finished.

Artemis watched her go, wrapping his arms around Holly's limp body. How much time was left? One minute already gone. Thirty seconds for Juliet to get to the helmet. Another thirty for orders to be made, and then how long would it take a warlock medic—or even just an officer—to get here? Far too long. Four minutes: that was the limit for healing any wound. The Stratosphere's restaurant was too far off for their freezers to be a viable option. All he had was some sparse LEP equipment, a three-quarters trained bodyguard, and his...

"Minerva," Artemis breathed, trying to spin and look at his lover, but only managing a partial turn, held down by his tight grip on Holly. Still, he managed to focus on the woman who was staring
down at them, biting her lips, hands held together tightly against her chest. "Minerva, heal her!"
His voice broke. Artemis heard the desperation in that rough sound and fought to regain control of
himself. Falling apart would not help Holly live.

Minerva met his eyes, then quickly turned her head away. She seemed to be trying to say
something, her chest heaving with each mis-started word. Her hands clenched tighter together, as if
she were fervently praying.

"Minerva," Artemis choked out, feeling Holly's pulse stop under his fingers. "Save Holly...please."

Minerva looked up to the Vegas sky, where each star was washed-out by the glare of the city. She
was certainly not a religious person, but she seemed to be looking for an answer from above.
Something to take this out of her hands. But it was her decision alone.

Finally, so soft her words barely escaped the wind long enough to reach Artemis's ears, she spoke
into the night. "Merde."

Moving fast, as if to remove all possibility of further hedging, she knelt in front of Holly, leaning
over to press a hand over each side of the bullet hole. She glared down at the fairy, taking deep
breaths through her nose and speaking through clenched teeth. "Go on, then! Heal!"

Blue sparks erupted from Minerva's hands, not so much flowing out of the woman as being sucked
into the fairy. The magic glowed in Minerva's thin veins, lighting up her entire body. Soon, it
began to move down into her torso, then her arms, then her hands before finally sparking out at her
fingertips.

Most of her normal energy seemed to go with. Minerva fell back, barely managing to prop herself
up with shaking arms. Her body angled to the side, head hanging low and hair cascading over her
face. She gasped in deep breaths, too focused on simply inhaling to move the hair completely out
of her way.

Artemis felt Holly's chest and back, finding that both wounds were gone, though the flesh above
was slightly lighter from two new scars. Even the blood seemed to have been sucked back in.

But Holly was not breathing.

Artemis shook her, whispering urgently. "Holly? Wake up!" Her body flopped at the shakes, but
nothing else happened. Artemis felt for her pulse and found the barest flutter of an oxygen-starved
heartbeat. Her face was losing color and her lips and fingertips were beginning to turn a light blue.
She needed air. Now.

Placing both hands at the elf's cheeks, Artemis tilted her head back. Taking a deep breath, he
leaned over, eyes darting up to catch Minerva watching him, a hand over her mouth. Then he close
his eyes, laying his mouth over Holly's and sealing their lips together. He let out a single, small
breath.

Holly's chest rose and paused, as if her lungs were considering what to do with the air. Slowly, her
chest fell, the breath flowing back into Artemis. There was a long pause.

Gasping, Holly's sat upright, eyes shooting open. Her first breaths were marred by violent coughs,
but they eventually subsided to desperate gasps as her lungs became used to the idea of breathing
on their own again. When she returned to breathing normally, Holly leaned back, exhausted, and
found herself propped in a slight recline. Confused, she looked up to see Artemis looking down at
her, grinning with relief.
"Holly! You're alive!" Artemis wrapped his arms around the elf's waist, pulling her closer to his chest.

She laughed, immediately regretting the mirth, as it sent her into another series of hard coughs. "Of course I'm alive. I couldn't die yet. This is nowhere near dramatic enough." She felt quite pleased with her entire situation, but one missing detail began to prod at the back of her mind. "But...I was out of magic."

"I healed you," Minerva said, wincing at the sudden stiffness in her muscles as she stood. She hadn't realized how good magic could make you feel. Straightening, she flipped her hair back, wiping at her cheeks with the back of a hand. She turned to inspect Artemis and his fairy.

"You...saved me?" Holly furrowed her brows, feeling so small under the woman's gaze and in Artemis's arms.

"Of course. It seemed...'common decency,' was it?" Minerva teased.

Holly flushed, opening her mouth to make excuses, but was silenced when Minerva turned her back on the pair and continued speaking. "You took all my magic, little demoness. You'd better take full advantage of this second chance." Before anyone could try to protest or ask for clarification, Minerva opted for a dignified exit, walking down the pathway to join Juliet in hailing the LEP. The wrestler needed some reassurances about Holly and would likely need comforting once she processed what had happened with Koboi.

The man and elf watched her leave, Artemis content to let the silence between them be filled by the wind.

Major Short, however, was not an idle creature. There was still work to be done. She sat up, ready to inspect the two masterminds sprawled so close by, but came across a dilemma she hadn't anticipated. "Er...Artemis?" she said, looking up at him.

"Yes, Holly?" He again looked down at the elf, curious.

Holly felt her heat, which still hurt a bit as it recovered from oxygen deprivation, gave an extra-large, painful beat. "You...er...your arms." She poked at his hands, wondering if it was possible to blush so soon after dying of asphyxiation.

Artemis focused on his hands, blinking and looking as if he hadn't realized where they were. "Ah. Sorry." He let Holly go and gave her a little push to help the elf back to her feet.

The officer moved Opal's helmet, poking the pixie's cheek and lifting an eyelid. Satisfied at the lack of response, but fully aware of how unpredictable her old enemy could be, she took the derringer from Opal, flicking the chamber open to inspect it's load. It was a dual-shot and one bullet remained.

Holly regarded Opal, feeling a tingle in her hands. "Do you think Juliet realizes what she's done?"

Artemis sighed and shook his head, running a hand through his disheveled black hair. "No. And it's going to hit any moment now. I'm...honestly not sure how to handle that." He frowned at this admission.

"Must be nice," Holly muttered, sliding the chamber into place and taking off the safety with a pair of loud clicks. "Feeling bad about those sorts of things." She pointed her arm nearly straight down, not too bothered with checking her aim. This close and a headshot would be effective no matter where it hit.
Artemis watched Holly's hand and waited without comment.

Soon, her arm began to shake. Her voice did as well when she finally spoke. "No one in the LEP would be angry. I might even get a medal. No more breakouts or Koboi capers. It would be so simple."

Artemis still did not comment. Instead, he put out his hand, holding it palm-up next to Holly's waist.

She looked down at his palm, then at the unconscious form of Opal Koboi. Her free hand came up, rubbing at the deep-red scar on her neck. "So simple," she repeated in a wistful whisper.

Before she could rethink the move, Holly clicked the safety back in place and gave Artemis the derringer.

He didn't even show relief, merely laying the gun at his side.

Hands flexing, as if she wished the trigger was back under her finger, Holly said, "How did you know I wouldn't do it? The time paradox?"

"No, not really, though that is a good point," Artemis conceded. "It's just not who you are."

Holly faced him, the fight rushing back to her at his words. "Don't you dare," she spat out, "don't you dare say something like that. Six years, and you think you have all the info you need to analyze me after a few days?"

He couldn't help but smirk, even if he knew it would enrage the hot-headed elf further. "I didn't need two days, Holly. I know you. I understand you."

"No, you don't!" She wasn't even thinking of the words that were now tumbling out of her mouth. "You think you understand what's happened, but you just see what I've turned into, not what I've been through!"

Artemis was forced into one of those annoying blanks that only Holly seemed to inspire in him. Utter confusion. He blinked, trying to work through the woman's words. "What are you—"

"You said it yourself, Artemis. Or almost did, but were too tactful to finish." Holly's emotions were exploding out of her full-force, the words tearing at her throat. She didn't care that Artemis looked astonished. He knew. He always knew!

"You were going to say what I am, Artemis! I already know! I'm scarred. I'm deformed."

"I'M BROKEN!"

Her words assaulted the air, seeming to remain there long past their rightful time. Holly watched Artemis's face, awaiting confirmation.

He stared at her, flickering from his former confusion to alarm, from thence to an anger to match the elf's own, and finally turning severe. "No!" He shot back, snatching her wrist and pulling the elf back to him, despite the very real risk of physical harm from the hysterical creature. "How the hell could you think that was what I meant?"

Holly stepped back at the unexpected, uncharacteristic curse, but Artemis merely pulled her to him again. "You said—"
"If I'm not allowed to think I know you, then you certainly can't assume to know me." Artemis collected his thoughts, chewed on his cheek, and nodded. He needed to say this. "What I meant to say," he squeezed her hands and locked their eyes together. "It's important to me because you, Holly Short, are...the best thing that ever happened to me."

All of Holly froze, except her eyes, which darted across Artemis's face, searching for the truth. She did not have to search hard.

The hardened officer finally cracked. She hung her head, allowing the long-restrained tears to streak down her cheeks. "You...you..."

Holly surged forward, wrapping her arms around Artemis's neck. "You stupid Mud Man!"

Artemis rocked back with the force of her body, but soon brought his own arms up, pulling his friend to his chest. They nestled together, heads resting in the crook of the other's shoulder, Holly coating his skin with tears. They remained cradled together, needing the familiar comfort of a friend they had lost six long years ago. Finally, the LEP arrived and began to swarm around them, bringing their fight to an end.

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**The Living**

*May 15, 2014-Southern Ireland*

Blue light erupted from Artemis's acorn, suffusing him in nearly solid rays of magic and taking him out of sight.

The force of the released energy slammed into Holly's chest, shoving against her until her wings could not push forward. In fact, she began to inch back. She tore off her helmet and tossed it to the ground, but that did little to lighten her. Before too much distance was put between her and the human, she dropped to the ground and dug her fingers into the boggy earth. Squinting against the light, Holly clawed forward, wings giving her only an incremental advantage over the expanding magic.

Artemis was screaming. She couldn't see him, but Holly knew what he would look like. His face would contort as every muscle checked itself, the convulsions expanding to his limbs until they jerked about as if he held a live wire. Considering how much magic was in the air (Holly could even feel her own stores filling with the residuals), perhaps he was. 'Stupid Mud Man! Get cut open and perform the Ritual? Of course it's going to hurt.'

The screams suddenly stopped as an impressive string of languages began to fill the air. Quite a few of the words were of a decidedly earthy nature, shocking Holly. Still, given his situation, a little cursing could be expected.

Holly wasn't really sure how far off she was, but she must be close by now. Raising a hand, she cast it about, trying to grasp the boy and pull him free.

Artemis stopped speaking. Pale, trembling fingers reached out of the magic, seeking Holly.

She stared at them. "What the—"

In an instant, the magic flow increased like a star going supernova. Blue light took over the entire countryside and blinded Holly. She covered her eyes with a forearm, a bit too late to do anything, and cried out.
Then the light was gone, turning into small falling embers of blue magic which sparkled across the countryside like raindrops on a sunny day.

She didn't want to move, at first, sure that more light would come. Then Holly remembered why she was here and lowered her arm, looking at the sprawled form of Artemis Fowl. "Oh...Frond." This was wrong. "A-Artemis?"

"Gnnnnnn..." Artemis replied, hands twitching. "That was...unpleasant." He took a deep breath and tried to prop himself up. His hands slipped on the boggy earth and he slammed back down, barely keeping his nose and mouth from becoming buried in the mud.

"Artemis!" Holly gasped and went to his side, helping him into a sitting position. She placed her hands on his shoulders, eyes darting across his dirty face, which was slowly becoming cleaner as the rain continued to fall. "Oh, gods, Artemis...what have you done?"

Her tone sparked a fierce alarm in the genius. He groaned, burying his face in his hands and began to rock. "Oh, come on! I asked the magic to do one thing and it didn't listen? I'm a dwarf, aren't I? It turned me into a dwarf!"

Holly gave him a single shake to stop his ranting. "No, no! You're an elf!"

She gaped a second later as these words hit her fully. She licked her lips, illogically thinking that a clearer repeat would make it untrue, but needing to say the words again. "Artemis...you're an elf."

When Artemis finally overcame his fear and looked at Holly, he was smiling wider than she had ever seen before. Then he gasped, the smile disappearing in further shock and wonder. "I should have assumed...it makes sense. Genetically, I would be predisposed to find more favor in elven features, but the thought never really occurred to me. It's...gods."

Holly was flashing through emotions (including amusement as she realized Artemis had already begun to say oaths like a fairy), but was doing so far too quickly. Now she was the alarmed one. She hated it when Artemis began to talk like that. "W-what? What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Artemis breathed, reaching out to trace her cheek, looking a bit embarrassed when his dirty hand marked it with a small smudge. "It's just...you look even more beautiful to me, now."

Holly knew she was blushing, but she didn't really care. It was just too surreal. When was this going to sink in? The full implications would probably take days. Well, she could help it along. "Stand up. Let me look at you." She began to rise, pulling him with her.

Artemis was only halfway up when he stopped, hands locked on the waist of his trousers, and stammered, "I-I think the magic only went so far."

Holly suddenly realized that his normally well-tailored suit was ludicrously large. "Oh...um..." She wasn't sure how to handle this. She wasn't sure how to handle any of this.

Artemis Fowl was, however, ever himself. He spun a finger in small circles, pointed at the ground. "Would you mind...for my own modesty?"

"Oh!" She spun quickly, not really sure what Artemis was going to do to make a few modest moments worthwhile. Utilize long-hidden sewing skills?

Then came the sound of a long zipper being undone, followed by rustling. "Let's see...ah, number five, just as I suspected." Then more shuffling, this time sounding quite intriguing to Holly, as it came with a much shorter zipper rasp, though in less-promising upward tones.
"Alright. Decent, now. You can turn around."

Holly did so and groaned, massaging her temples. "Are you ever going to stop wearing a suit?"

Artemis looked pleased with himself. "Well? What do you think?" He held his arms wide, inviting inspection.

Nope. She still couldn't believe this.

Slowly, Holly approached, beginning a very slow circuit around Artemis. He had the same physique. Not gangly, but certainly not strong. She reached up to feel the small ridge of bone at his shoulders, hand jerking away right after, as if the presence of the vestigial wing-bone burned her. There were no surgery incisions that she could see, though he was wearing a suit, so perhaps that hid them. He was still so pale. It looked odd for an elf. So did his dark hair. Normally, elves tended towards red tones, but his hair remained black as coal. Perhaps not unheard of, but certainly not common. But what was common about Artemis Fowl?

Holly stopped in front of the human...no, elf and studied his face. No large changes there. Just a small alteration of angles leading to his...

Holly reached out and traced the curve of both of his ears.

Artemis breathed in quickly, eyes closing. "W-wow..."

Holly too her hands away, face reddening even further. "Er...sorry. Elf ears are very...sensitive."

"No, really?" Artemis shook his head, fighting back into his normal control. He looked at her somewhat accusingly. "You never told me that."

"Well, it didn't seem the sort of thing I should tell you, all things considered."

All things considered. His lower age, then his matched maturity hinting at future decrepitude. Her job, his past-time. The fairy society. Their species.

"You...did this..." Holly trailed off, not sure if she should say what was dangling on the tip of her tongue.

"For you," Artemis nodded.

"You are...in so much trouble with your mother."

Artemis flinched. "Ah. Right." He looked back down the riverside. "I suppose I really should get to that." He pulled himself up straight, causing Holly much dismay. He was easily five centimeters taller than her! Was there no justice left in the world?

Still, her mind supplied a devious little thrill: having to tilt her head back ever so slightly to meet his descending mouth...

"Holly?"

Holly jerked and focused back on the real Artemis. "Yes?"

"I'm assuming you're coming with me?"

"Oh. Yes!" She went to his side as the new elf stepped in the direction of the Bentley.
Which was fortunate, as he almost collapsed with that step, only saved by Holly's quick move to hold him up. "Artemis, what's wrong? Wasn't the Ritual successful?" Thoughts of a crippled Artemis, an outcast in the rarely impaired realms of the People, began to crowd her mind.

"Yes," he said, trying to reassure her. "I just haven't—"

Ggggggrrrrrrrup.

Holly looked at Artemis's stomach, wide-eyed.

"I haven't eaten in almost 24 hours. I'm afraid I never dealt well with low blood sugar."

Holly started to laugh at this, and it felt so good to laugh. Two days of turmoil released in one loud outburst. Artemis Fowl, defeated by the munchies.

She quickly gathered up the gun into the duffel back, slinging it over her shoulders. "Come on, Mud...gods, I'm going to have to give you a new nickname!"

Artemis seemed pleased at this, then realized he probably wouldn't get off easy. Holly was not a sentimental "honey" type. Before he could dwell too long on what his new handle would be, he found himself lifted into Holly's arms. On instinct, he wrapped his own arms around the Major's neck. Then he scowled.

"Aren't I supposed to be the one carrying you like this?"

"We aren't married, Artemis," Holly said, wings whirring to life. "Besides, you probably couldn't fly to save your life."

Artemis seemed pleased that this was just a lack of experience when Holly took off, twisting through the trees at an alarming speed. He squeaked, hiding his face in Holly's chest. Despite the distinct lack of masculinity in this situation, he found he quite liked the new position.

They reached the Bentley quickly. Butler was leaning against the driver's side door, scanning the horizon. When Holly unshielded in front of him and put Artemis down, the bodyguard raised his eyebrows. "Dashing of you, Artemis."

Artemis glowered, but he couldn't hold it long, quickly switching to a triumphant and terribly cocky smirk. "It worked!"

Butler shrugged. "When do your plans ever fail?"

"Too true!" Artemis beamed at his old friend, but soon his eyes widened in alarm. "You...are huge."

"That's what they tell me," Butler agreed, picking up Artemis and Holly at the same time, hugging them tight. He only let them back down when a pair of hands began to frantically strike his back, begging for air. "Well...ready to face the music?"

"I will face anything," Artemis promised, looking to the Bentley, "so long as there is some food in that car."

Butler nodded good-naturedly and opened the door, ushering both elves inside.

Artemis began to attack the mini-fridge before Butler even started the engine. "I'm starving. You'd think I did turn into a dwarf."
"It's not surprising," Butler said, pulling back onto the dirt road. "You didn't eat for two days, barring that little bit of breakfast almost a day ago. Add in a day of trotting about Europe, some brain surgery, walking to the tree—"

"Brain surgery!" Holly shrieked, looking at Artemis. "You had—"

She was silenced by Artemis's beseeching raised hand. "I only want to explain this once, so can we wait until we are at the Manor?"

Holly wanted to disagree, but what could she say? 'No, tell me now and bugger to your parents'? So she just sat back, sulking.

She didn't sulk long. Artemis found a mango smoothie and began to drink with great glee. Then he choked, barely managing to avoid coating his new suit in orange goo. Blue sparks flashed in his mouth. "What in the world?"

Holly giggled. She couldn't help it. He looked so astonished! "I guess you don't have control of your magic yet, despite that little bit you took in the time tunnel. It's fighting off the contaminates."

Artemis looked at the drink's label, as if it was committing a grave sin. "It says 'organic'."

She snorted. "Organic. Sure. Even if you didn't deliberately treat food, Mud Man pollutants are in almost all of the soil. If you can't drink that, then we'll just have to wait until you can get some food from the People. You'll survive a few hours without food."

Artemis sighed and tried to drink again, but couldn't keep down his magic. It had never occurred to him that Holly's body was constantly fighting pollution. She had never had this reaction in front of him. Perhaps she just held it off until she was alone, to avoid being rude. He, on the other hand, had no control over the full tank of magic pulsing through him. It felt faintly...tingly. And quite warm.

Holly looked over at the pensive mastermind and grinned. She couldn't resist. Placing both hands on the seat, she lifted her body slightly and scooted closer.

Artemis looked over as she put her hands on her lap and began to whistle innocently. He blinked and looked again at his drink.

Holly lifted and scooted again, again folding her hands and looking angelic.

Artemis was pretty sure he could see a little halo over her head. It was held up by a pair of twisted, spiky black horns.

A third time she scooted over, and now they rested thigh-to-thigh. Holly plucked the juice from Artemis and placed it in a cup-holder. When she sat back up, the woman leaned against the elven man, chest brushing against his arm, her nose barely touching his. "Artemis..." She parted her lips and—

"Hey!" Butler put the Bentley into a short series of swerves, breaking the pair apart. "I never had to deal with a hormonal principal making out in the back seat before, and I am not going to start now!"

Holly went back to her proper seat and crossed her arms, pouting.

Artemis just stared blankly ahead, clearly wondering 'What in the world did I just get myself into?'
It was a long drive to Fowl Manor. Holly had to give Artemis his first lesson in magic when the elves shielded on their way though the waking city of Dublin, as the Bentley wasn't sufficiently blacked-out enough for them to avoid notice. He tried to adapt this control to hold back his magic and drink, but had no luck. His stomach rumbled morosely.

They arrived at the Manor soon after sunrise. Holly told Butler to pull into the covered garage, eyeing the sun with distaste. She decided it was best to give Artemis his second lecture on magic. "Direct sun saps the People's magic. It won't kill you, but it feels terrible. Besides, you want to be running hot for as long as possible. It's the second-best feeling in the world."

Artemis's ears twitched a bare millimeter. "Second-best?"

Holly opened the car door and looked over her shoulder, biting her lower lip, full of mischief. "Second-best." Then she jumped out of the car.

Artemis followed, keeping far behind so he could look up at Butler. "Did she...just imply...?"

Butler chuckled and clamped a hand down on the confused elf's shoulder, nearly making his legs collapse under him. "You either need to brush up on elf mating rituals or Holly just loves messing with you." He paused, then grinned. "Possibly both."

"Right," Artemis said, watching the elf disappear into the Manor. "Perfect." Really, he should have been prepared for this. Remove a girl's inhibitions, and what happens? Chaos.

He trotted to keep up with Butler's long strides and they were soon a trio again, entering Artemis's bedroom with only a heartbeat's worth of hesitation.

Angeline and Artemis Fowl Sr. looked up and stood. Angeline from her place on the desk and Timmy from the computer chair, and much less steadily on the latter's part. The aging Fowl Enterprises president studied the black-haired elf.

"My God," he whispered. "Artemis made himself a midget clone." Then he looked to Holly. "And he expects it to breed!"

The female elf considered this and added a jaunty bounce to her walk. "Well, you're half right."

Artemis watched her, hands held out palm-up in a "What the hell?" gesture. Then he recovered and approached his parents.

"Mum...Da?" He looked up at them, uncertain.

Angeline looked between father and son, not sure what to do. Certainly, she wanted to take Artemis into her arms and then yell at him for worrying her so, but Timmy had always been the unpredictable variable in their family equation.

Artemis seemed to realize this, as well. He waited just out of arm's reach, not even truly conscious of his distancing. He swallowed hard. "D...Da?"

Timmy glowered. "I always thought I would prefer...'Pop'."

Artemis laughed and jumped forward, wrapping his arms around his father's waist. "'Pop' it is, then!" The tension rushed out of the room at this small acceptance, making all sigh a little bit.

Angeline leaned into her two men, practically glowing as they all wrapped an arm around an other, creating a small circle. "You silly...silly boy. What have you got yourself into, this time?"
"Nothing I can't handle, Mum." Artemis finally pulled himself away, trying to regain his composure. Really, these elven emotions were quite a bit stronger than his human ones. It was going to take some practice to avoid any more uncontrolled outbursts like that one. "Is it time to explain myself?"

"Yes," a honey-smooth voice came through the computer speakers. "I believe that is the next order of business."

Holly looked up and hissed. "Minerva!" She stormed to the screen, fists at the ready, even if there was nothing to hit. Nothing soft and squishily-satisfying, at least. "I think you should be going first. What were you trying to do, sending me off like that!"

Minerva yawned, leaning back in her chair. She looked exhausted after the sleepless night. The Fowls had presented her with a lot of questions, and they were hard to answer without giving too much away. "I thought...someone should be there. So Artemis wouldn't have to go through that alone."

Holly wasn't sure what to think. Minerva hadn't been as amoral as Artemis at his worst, but she was also never as good as the man at his best. She was self-serving, but not entirely selfish.

It was the woman's sad little smile that convinced Holly, inspiring her to mutter, "I... Thank you, Minerva." It was a grudging thanks, but still sincere.

"Don't mention it, Major," Minerva said, waving her hand at the elf dismissively. "Now, if you will, I'd like to make sure all of my theories were correct."

"As if you had any doubts," Artemis chided, urging his parents back to their seats and taking one of the spare folding chairs that Butler—in his ninja-like capacity—had snuck in while they were having their reunion. When all were seated, he checked each face. "Ready? I imagine this is going to take a bit of talking."

"D'arvit, Artemis!" Holly snapped. "Stop the teasing and just tell us what in the world you were doing!"

"Yeah!" Foaly said, his face popping up next to Minerva's. "I've got a feed going to the Council, so you'd better get talking. Once they get the microphone, you'll barely get a word in between their bickering."

Artemis nodded, leaning back in his chair. He scowled as his feet came off the ground. It seemed like puberty had just solved the height issue, and now he was back where he started... "Very well. From the beginning.

"Two nights ago, I professed my feelings to Holly Short."

Angeline broke in with a squeal. After a moment, she folded her hands on her lap and coughed. "Continue."

Artemis seemed rather smug at his mother's reaction. He always knew she liked Holly, though he wasn't sure if she liked the elf that much. "Right. Due to the difference in her species, Holly deemed the relationship impossible. I was...devastated, as you can imagine. I did not know what to do. Until Foaly called me up and so casually mentioned our old rival, Opal Koboi.

"It was like...well, as they say, a lightbulb went on. Nine years ago, Koboi forfeited her fairy nature and magic to become a human. Could I not try the opposite? I have delved into magic before, so it might still resonate in me, if I sought it out.
"I formulated my plans and waited for Butler. We shared one last drink—the People can not share liquor with humans—and set out. Butler, of course, did not yet know all of my plans."

"The drink should have been my first clue," Butler grumbled. "How many times has Mulch bragged that he could drink me under the table, then protested he would be kicked out of Haven if he tried?"

"Hindsight is 20/20, old friend," Artemis reassured. "Our first stop was Switzerland. I nearly emptied my bank accounts to purchase about a metric ton of gold."

"To bribe the Council to let you into Haven?" Foaly said, one of his horse ears tipped sideways as he listened to the small headphone feed from the leaders of Haven.

Artemis laughed, genuinely amused. "Ah...surely not. What are they going to do? Deny me access to Haven and let me run around the world until I'm caught be the human authorities and have to tell them I'm a fairy?"

Foaly looked blank for a moment, listening. Then he chortled. "Vinyáya says 'touché'."

Artemis nodded at what he knew to be high praise from the Councilwoman. "No, the gold is to establish myself in Haven. I don't intend to be a pauper, after all."

Holly didn't need to convert how much that gold was worth in fairy coin. She knew outright how much it was worth: a metric ass-load. Maybe not enough for a lifetime, but certainly enough for starting up. "But what about the rest of the money? What went to the tailor and Dr. Giordano?"

Artemis looked at her, eyes wide. "Stalker," he muttered, but it was in a teasing fashion that made her smile sheepishly, rather than sulk.

"I had Signore Moretti make me seven suits. I wasn't sure how tall I would be, so I wanted to have an array of sizes. I imagine he will be able to retire on that check."

"And..." Angeline bit the corner of her lips. "The doctor."

Artemis reached up and rubbed his nose. "Again, that was Opal Koboi. In order to become human, she had an artificial human pituitary gland implanted. Logically, I thought the process could be replicated in the opposite direction if I had mine removed. Endonasal surgery. Still brain surgery, but the recovery times Dr. Giordano boasts are quite impressive."

"Logically!" Holly finally found something worthy of yelling at. "Frond in Éire, Artemis! You thought the magic would turn you into an elf if you asked, but not if you had Mud Man hormones?"

He shrugged. "Well, I could have tried it without surgery. Either the transformation would be permanent, my pituitary would eventually turn me back into a human, or it wouldn't work at all. I had one chance. I doubt the Council would have let me near a Ritual tree after the first try."

Foaly broke in. "Vinyáya says 'damn straight'."

"Thank you, Wing Commander."

"She also says the Council is going to tax the hell out of your gold."

Artemis grumbled. "Send me a tax book, will you Foaly?"

"Already on your laptop, Mud—" He blinked, then snorted. "He needs a new nickname."
"Working on it," Holly reassured.

Timmy felt it was time to bring a sense of proportion back to the proceedings. "So. That's it? You leave a terribly vague note for your parents, galavant around Europe for a day, and change your species? Without consulting me?" He looked to the pretty—if somewhat intimidating—female elf. "How do you even know that she's worth it? Giving up your life with this family for an off chance with a fairy?"

"Pop," Artemis said, squinting a bit at the odd-sounding word. "How did you know Mum was worth it?"

"That was different! I gave up a life of crime. You are giving up the entire surface of the planted and everyone on it, including your family. I mean...Artemis, have you even kissed her?"

"Er..." Artemis cursed this uncertain sound. "Yes. Twice." He tried to look as if that were a terribly impressive feat. Though, when you thought about all they had been through, two kisses were actually fairly commendable for Artemis and Holly.

Timmy was nonplussed. "Twice. Truly. Well, you really thought this through, didn't you?"

"I have—"

"No! You did not!" Fowl Sr. slammed a fist on the desk, transferring the force to rise to his feet. He didn't normally shout at his children, but this...this was too much to take! "What about us? Are you just going to leave your mother and I? You brothers? What about—"

"Artemis?" A small voice called from the doorway.

All turned to see the three figures waiting at the portal to the bedroom.

Artemis stood, swallowing down the sudden obstruction in his throat. "Lucy..."
I recommend playing "Angel" by Sarah McLachlan for The Dead. The one with strong piano chords, not the live version. Just...do it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Dead

September 12, 2014-Haven

Trouble stood at the head of the procession. He wore his dress greens and his head was held high. Behind him ranged the entirety of LEPRecon. To his sides and far forward stood two long rows made out of the rest of the LEP and, behind them, the citizens of Haven.

He had done this before. Not often, but on occasion. He'd even stood beside Commander Julius Root for the ceremony once, though no other time had hit him this hard. Nor had there ever been such a turnout. Any criminal that could still avoid the shame of walking the streets in the last few days would find their job disturbingly easy. The Commander even suspected that the skeleton crew on the prisons was criminally understaffed, with the guards skipping duty to join the crowd.

The lights all over Haven were turned off, leaving only this one long street—beginning at Police Plaza and extending to the outskirts of Haven—to dimly light the cavern. Beyond the LEP, Trouble knew most of the People were also standing. Foaly, Mulch, and the rest would be at the end of this walk. Seeing them...

Trouble did not want to move.

At his back, a soft, slow tattoo began on a single snare drum. Counting down. Prompting him.

Despite his desires, Trouble was a well-trained officer, drilled in the academy to follow the drum. But he did not want to think about this journey. He would disgrace himself if he did.

So, following the insistent orders of the beat, Commander Kelp took the first step and let his mind go, freeing him from his body and journeying to the past.

September 10, 2014-Outside Fowl Manor

Oddly, Butler helped them.

When he brought the Bentley around the final corner and into the sight of the LEP, he did not turn the car around or even stop it in the middle of the road. Instead, he let it come to a smooth stop in front of Trouble.

He sat in the car for nearly a minute, ignoring the orders and questions from Mr. Fowl, as well as Mrs. Fowl's frightened moans. Then, grimacing as if the age of his joints had just caught up with him, the bodyguard opened his door and exited to stand in front of the Commander.
His words were simple and he said them as if he already had the answers. Given all of the years he had devoted to the protection of this family, perhaps his charges were so much a part of him that he did already know.

"Artemis is dead?"

Mr. Fowl stopped yelling for Butler to get them away from this strange army. Angeline, sitting in the back seat, wrapped her arms around Myles and Beckett, who began to tremble.

After a long pause, Trouble nodded once. "Yes. Holly, too."

"I couldn't go through with the trip. I knew something was wrong." Butler hung his head. The light wind played with the edges of his coat. "You'll be mind-wiping us, then?"

"Yes," Trouble agreed. "We can't afford to leave any memories that might spark a vendetta. Foaly assures me that he's strengthened the mental blocks. Nothing should be able to get through."

There was a pause, during which Butler turned to look at the Fowls. He licked at his lips, as if trying to clear the way for an apology for not protecting them from this attack. It did not come, so he merely turned back and sighed. "Good. I don't want to remember any of this."

Relieved at the easy acquiescence, Trouble raised a fist into the air.

From strategic spots along the road, five snipers raised their guns.

Before Trouble could move again, Butler spoke. "I'm sorry...for your loss."

Trouble stood there, unflinching. What could he say to this man that was true? Certainly not a return of the sentiments. Fowl was dead. The People would sleep easier. Trouble knew he would spend every night of the rest of his life alone, always waking with the expectation of holding a small, soft mocha body that he was only allowed to embrace once. A woman that he was never really sure was his.

Commander Kelp lowered his fist.

Five tranquilizers struck five targets, sending them to sleep in seconds. For them, it was all over.

Actually...for them, it had never even begun.

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**September 12, 2014-Haven**

Trouble was halfway there, but the end of the procession had yet to move. It would take them hours to complete the circuit of the LEP and citizens of Haven, but at least his duties would be done quickly. Then he could go, leaving Wing Commander Vinyáya at the end of the progress.

Trouble clenched his fists. *HER.*

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**September 10, 2014-Outside Fowl Manor**

"I never meant for this to happen," Vinyáya whispered, looking across the lawn. Butler and the Fowls were being carried into the Manor. The wipes had taken hours. The sun was now peeking over the horizon, trying to fight its way through the morning mist.

Commander Kelp looked at her, eyes blank. He was done yelling. IA would take over on that front.
For a moment, he wished Ark Sool was still in the service. That damn gnome might have been able to convey at least some of the rage Trouble felt.

Vinyáya crossed her arms, patting her shoulders to bring back some warmth. How had the People ever *thrived* in this climate? "We couldn't let him go to trial. You know that. He's a human. We have no jurisdiction, and we already failed to mind-wipe him once. This was the only way to keep the People safe."

Trouble considered this and nodded. The world—both above and below—would be safer without Artemis Fowl on the loose. If Trouble had entered the Manor alone, perhaps he would have made the same decision.

Yet he hadn't been the one to go in. Holly had.

Trouble looked away from Vinyáya and squinted at the rising sun. "How long have you been in the service, Wing Commander?"

She paused, considering this. "About...530 years."

"Straight into a supervisory position, then the last 200 years heading Section 8, plus fifty years on the Council. I even heard Principality Hill began courting you last season."

Vinyáya frowned. The socialites on the Hill had begun suggesting she take a vacant town house in their community. She hadn't even considered it, except as an indication that her triple salary had finally pushed her into the status of *nouveau riche*. "I wasn't interested. Too uppity. I'd have them asking for my vote every day."

Trouble grunted in approval. If there was one huge compliment you could give to the Wing Commander, it was that she followed Julius Root's philosophy of complete service to the People. "Good. That means you're doing well for yourself." Turning so that his entire body now faced Vinyáya, he pulled himself up to full height. "I want your resignation on my desk within twenty-four hours. You can stay on until the ceremonies are over, but you will be out of the force by the end of that day, or else I will make your suggestions to Holly a part of the Internal Affairs investigation."

Vinyáya gave a long gasp, letting it out again in one long, shuddering breath. She wasn't even middle-aged by fairy standards, but the deep lines around her mouth and eyes were etched in place by years of stress and responsibility. She nodded. "Yes, sir. May I suggest Ash Vein to take my place as Wing Commander? He may be from Recon, but he's the best pilot we have, now that..."

"I will consider it," Trouble assured her. "If you will excuse me, I have to supervise the cover-up. Do you know what those daft pixies came up with?"

Vinyáya shook her head. What could explain away a neutrino blast to the chest?

"A cooking fire." He let out a short, snorting breath. "The great Artemis Fowl, dead from a bit of burnt casserole." He was smiling, but it was sad and didn't last. "Dismissed, Wing Commander."

Vinyáya saluted, trying not to tremble as Commander Kelp copied the gesture and turned on his heel, walking stiffly onto the Manor's long driveway.

She watched him go, shivering as the cold wind brushed long strands of silver hair along her cheeks. "I'm sorry, Trouble. I *never* meant for this to happen."
The street was now almost full of marching officers. Only a hundred feet between Trouble and his final destination, with over a mile behind him. Normally he would have been proud of the rumble of the ground and the sharp crack that came with their every simultaneous, steel-toed step. Each swing of a leg was accompanied by a hiss as their uniforms slid against themselves, multiplied several hundred times over. Hiss-crack-pause. Hiss-crack-pause. Over and over, following the now drowned-out rhythm of the drum.

Except for a few sobs, the rest of Haven was silent. The procession would be broadcast by every television station, but the ratings would be horrible. After all, everyone in Haven was here, standing on the main street. A sizable portion of Atlantis, as well. No one would miss the chance to say—

Trouble clenched his fists, relieved as the small object he held jabbed into his left palm. It was a distraction, at least. It would help him remain in control for these last steps.

Commander Kelp forced himself to focus ahead and found he had to squeeze his hand again. Not now...

Foaly stood, entire body convulsing with sobs, leaning against his wife, who was also breaking apart. In front of them, a blond, tousle-haired foal looked at the approaching army, flipping his tail about. The child tugged on his father's black suit jacket, hoping for an explanation, but no one was paying any attention to him today. The boy's father had already struggled enough talking to the Commander.

"You know why she did it. Don't you?" Foaly asked as he reclaimed the two drained neutrinos and placed them on his crowded desk in the Ops Booth.

"No," Trouble admitted, though he wasn't really interested in what the centaur had to say. What did it matter?

"Holly didn't love Artemis. He lost his chance. Under different circumstances...maybe. But...they were meant to be together, in a sense. If not in life, then in death."

"They will not be together in death," Trouble rumbled, taking a step towards Foaly, ready to put the interfering techie back in line. He understood systems and programs, but not this. Not Holly. "He will rot in whatever hell his god reserves for murderers and madmen."

Foaly let out a soft puff of air, running a hand through his tangle mane. "I doubt death is really the end for Artemis Fowl."

The thought bothered Trouble greatly. It should be the end for him. Or at least the beginning of an eternal torment. "What do you think he's going to do? Pop back into his body? Is someone going to clone him for their own purposes?"

"That's absurd," Foaly cut in, finally looking angry at his Commander's petulance. "He's being cremated, and a clone would be useless. Soulless. A body with a big brain, but a big, empty brain."

"That's a relief," Trouble muttered, "but he was soulless to begin with."

"Don't fool yourself," Foaly said, beginning to send out a few inter-office messages, moving on to
shut off his monitors. His support team could handle clean-up. The official crisis was over for him, but he had to get home. His family had to be told. "Artemis always had a soul, but it was Holly who made it a good one. Without her by his side... Goodnight, Commander. I should get home to my wife. She'll need me."

September 10, 2014-Haven

Trouble took the last dozen steps while constantly on the verge of collapsing, forcing himself to not just run ahead and away from what came next. Instead, he went up three shallow stairs and across a small platform, stopping in between two ornate, rectangular depressions filled with grey mud. Then, still moving with the drum, he lifted one foot and set it down again, backwards. On the next beat, he lifted his other foot and spun to face the procession.

There were two sets of honor guards walking side by side in full dress greens. Each of the two-dozen officers held a black strap, which curved under their burdens, held at the other side by a partner. Six straps in all were needed to carry the figures. They were wrapped in shrouds made from woven grass, the covering so featureless that you couldn't tell which was male and which female. Or which should be lacking a head, but was disguised by the addition of a prosthetic.

A prosthetic head. It had angered Commander Kelp when he had noticed the wrappings, but the thought of the alternative—allowing Mr. and Mrs. Verbil to see a headless shroud taken through the streets of Haven—had calmed his protests.

The honor guards ascended the stairs and walked past the Commander, their lines of six stopping on either side of the two pits. They turned as one to face inward. Four drumbeats later, they grasped the straps with both hands. Another four beats, and they brought their left legs back, stopping with just their toes on the ground, heels up at perfect 45° angles. Another measure's pause, then they sunk slowly, taking to the end of the next measure to touch their right knees to the ground, heads bowed.

The unseen drummer gave the next section of the procession—the ranged entirety of the LEPRecon in ten perfect rows—enough time to reach the foot of the stairs. Then he gave a short cadence and brought them and the rest of the LEP filed behind to a last thundering step.

There was no crying from the civilians, now. All strained to hear, focusing on Commander Kelp.

He was not a natural public speaker and he had certainly never addressed a crowd this large, but Trouble's voice carried over the massed fairies. "Captain Chix Verbil," he began, tongue clumsy around the posthumous promotion. "Retrieval, first class. Knight of King Frond. Protector of the People."

The highest honors he had yet announced for any officer. His record in the LEP, a title given by the last of the Frond family, and a final honor from the Council.

Trouble snapped to his right in one movement, so fast there was no noticeable transition between the positions. A perfectly executed about-face, leaving him looking down at Chix's shroud. With another sharp movement, Trouble raised a hand to the brim of his hat, the rest of the LEP copying his salute. Exactly ten seconds later, he lowered his hand, the LEP following, and faced forward again.

Now...the part he was not sure he could complete, but also the part he would forever regret, should he fail.
"Major Holly Short. Reconnaissance, first class. Lady of King Frond. Hero of the People."

Hero of the People. The highest honor ever given to any fairy. To date, only a dozen had received the honor, with King Frond being the first, and Julius Root the latest...until now.

Again, the turn, the salute, the return to forward, but Trouble didn't even think about it. His mind had shut down, allowing muscle-memory to take over this last task.

There was no call for a 21-gun salute or cannon-fire. No sad song. Just two loud beats on the drum, followed by a short pause, repeated over and over again. The echo of a long-silenced heartbeat.

The honor guards lowered their charges until they floated on the mud, then folded the straps over their bodies. Hands free, one rested in a fist on the ground to stabilize them, while the other was held over their chests, tapping along with the drum-beat.

As the shrouded bodies began to sink, the drum slowed and softened. Soon, the ranged crowd could not hear it. Then, the officers lined up between the podium lost the sound. Finally, as Chix and Holly's faces fell into the decomposition vat, the drum gave one last tap. A heart stopped mid-beat.

Trouble looked down and opened his left hand, examining the old acorn held within. He had taken it from the cellar of Fowl Manor, longing for at least one thing to keep with him.

But it was no use. It was not now and never would be enough. He was too late. Too late to really say it...

September 9, 2014-Trouble's apartment

Trouble regulated his breathing for several minutes, the abnormally deep and long-spaced breaths making him a little dizzy. Then, once he was sure the woman lying on his chest was well gone into sleep, he opened his eyes.

The room was only lit up by the dim 11:15 a.m. glow from his alarm clock, but Trouble didn't even need that to see the face before him. He had stood by her side so often in the past few years that he could bring up a perfect likeness in his mind's eye.

Very carefully, Trouble raised his head off the pillow, angling it down until he placed a soft kiss on Holly's forehead.

She gave a small moan and lightly clenched her hands, but stirred no further.

"You know," Trouble whispered, laying his head back down, sighing contentedly, "it might be a bit early to say something like this, but...I think I love you, Holly Short."

That said, he allowed himself drift off to sleep, excited about the future and truly content for the first time in his life.

The Mended

July 4, 2014-The Stratosphere

Like human doctors, the warlock medics were bound to help all injured parties, regardless of villainy Once they were firmly secured by the LEP, Opal and Koboi were doused in healing magic.
Opal awoke and began to demand a lawyer.

Koboi did not.

Once Opal realized this fact, she became very quiet.

When N°1 and Qwan stepped out of Vinyáya's craft—shocking Minerva and Artemis, who hadn't seen the rapidly growing imp in years—she stirred, looking at them through the thin reflective band that had been placed over her eyes to halt any attempts at a mesmer. Her arms were shackled behind her back, keeping the pixie from removing the stray locks of hair that had fallen across her face. The two guards at her sides, who were busy aiming their guns at the kneeling woman's head, did not seem inclined to help clear her vision.

She looked between the demon warlocks, trying to decide who would actually speak with her. She settled on N°1, despite their violent past, and said, "Can you do it quickly?"

N°1 flicked an ear that was just beginning to develop the points of a full-grown demon, though he would never gain a full demon's body. "Yes. If you cooperate. I can have you back to your own time in under three hours."

Opal turned her body (making the LEP officers nervously adjust their aim) to look over her shoulder at the form laying behind her covered in a white sheet. "Good," she whispered. "I miss her."

Slowly, N°1 crouched in front of the woman. He lightly grasped her chin, bringing her face back around to focus on him. The warlock slid Opal's visor off, brushing the hair out of her eyes. "No," he said, his voice—which had only recently cracked into the deep tones of adulthood—dropping lower as he wrapped the pixie in his mesmer. "You don't miss her. In fact, you don't even remember her."

Opal's eyes were wide as the hypnotic words sunk in. Soon they lost focus, going soft and calm as the memories were removed and N°1 hit her with a magic-induced sedation. When he was done and stepped away, she stared into the distance, as if she were enjoying a particularly good daydream. Soon after, the techies came to take her away for a full mind wipe.

Artemis looked at N°1 as the demon walked to them, frowning, but curious. "Isn't using the mesmer on another fairy against the Book?"

"Do you see anyone who would prosecute me?" The demon's voice rumbled, his short, thick tail whipping about like a cross cat's. "Besides...she needed that. Foaly's mind wipes are good, but they can still leave you feeling like something is missing. And Opal Koboi is missing enough of herself already."

Artemis nodded, remembering how his own mind wipes had been incomplete, leading to a pair of fairy-related escapades. Perhaps two types of mind wipes would be more effective than one. He certainly didn't favor the pixie, but he understood N°1's charity. She had a little over a decade to live and it wasn't right to let her live in grief, even if she had no idea why.

"I think this should go to one of the demons," Artemis said, handing over the silver dagger. "A...non-violent one would be preferable, for obvious reasons."

The young warlock took it and flipped the blade about in his hands. Then his spiky ears flipped forward, focusing on the relic, as if it was making a sound. "Is this...is this the knife that wounded you, Holly?"
Holly was watching the blade carefully, nervous of it even when it was in the hands of a known friend. She gestured to her recently injured knee. "Opal hit me with it again. It's the one."

With undisguised enthusiasm, N°1 brought the dagger closer to his face, analyzing each line and muttering words under his breath, speaking so softly that even Holly's excellent elven ears could not pick out anything more than a syllable here and there. Very soon, he seemed unable to contain himself, pounding a foot rapidly on the floor, like a rabbit giving the alarm.

Qwan did not look nervous at the sound, but it certainly caught his attention. He came up to the adventuring party and his apprentice, pulling himself up to his full height. Despite the good posture, N°1 seemed to already be a few centimeters taller, and Qwan was obviously not enjoying this new quality in his ward. "What is it?"

They dropped into the demon cant, momentarily puzzling Artemis, who hadn't heard the odd pronunciations in years. The other humans were completely befuddled, but Holly was squinting, as if this would help her adapt to the accent, and it seemed to help. By the time Artemis's mind switched dialects, Holly's eyes were widening again, jaw dropping in increments with each exchange.

"—relatively simple," Qwan seemed to be confirming. "It's warlock-made, but likely by a rather flighty apprentice. That's why it didn't kill her."

"So you think I could do it?"

"Boy, Queffor could unravel this during his coffee break. At least on paper. The actual procedure will be complicated by the deep-tissue damage, and that could take weeks to heal. You'll need to find a doctor willing to pair with you to cover that."

"Dr. Ginko worked with me when the injury was made. I'm sure he'd help!"

"Well...in that case, it's just a matter of asking Major Short."

All present understood that they were talking about Holly, and all turned to look at her.

N°1 suddenly seemed to remember that there were other people involved. He ceased resembling an enthusiastic student discussing a breakthrough with his professor and bounded over to Holly. He knelt in front of her, sinking so low on his digitigrade legs that he nearly struck the ground with his stubby tail. The appendage was wagging so enthusiastically that his entire body shook, though he tried to steady himself as he took Holly's hands. "Are you willing to try? I'm sure I could do it."

Holly shook her head, but not in negation. Confusion had overtake her. "Do what?"

Laughing at the elf's disbelief, N°1 gave a small bounce, shaking her hands as he did so. "Now that we have the blade and can study the spells placed on it, I can create a counter-curse. Holly...do you want to remove your scars?"

She went blank at these words. Everyone studied her, trying to avoid unnerving the woman, yet unable to contain their curiosity. Even Artemis and Minerva, the experts on body language and psychology, were unsure of what she was thinking.

Holly looked down, taking one hand from N°1's grip and rubbing it on the right side of her face. Then, as if she has just realized what she was doing, she stopped rubbing, hand falling to her side, and took in a deep breath.

When she looked up again, she was grinning devilishly. "Can I...keep part of it?"
N°1 considered this and turned his head to look at Qwan, who nodded. He returned to his small friend. "Yes, I suppose so, but...why would you want to?"

Holly traced her scar from cut-off ear-tip to collarbone, illustrating the portion she intended to keep. "I makes me look badass."

Qwan shook his head in disbelief. "Holly Short needs help looking 'badass'?" He said the last word with extra pronunciation, like a parent meeting out slang to fit in with his children.

Holly nodded, trying not to laugh at herself. "When you're as small as me, you take every advantage you can get!"

"Splendid! Superb!" N°1 stood, pulling her along behind. "Come with me. I need to do a bit of study on your body chemistry so I can get started. I'll only need you a few minutes, but I want to try things out on that knee. Then you can return to your little sidekicks."

Artemis frowned at being called "sidekick," but found he couldn't remain mad when he realized that Holly was laughing with the sort of genuine mirth he hadn't heard since before Shana's birth. He wondered if anyone had heard that sound from Holly in the last six years. So he let her go, glad for this small gift. Holly would need healing beyond her physical wounds, but she had friends who could help with that. Including himself, hopefully.

In the meantime, however, Artemis had a different set of wounds to deal with.

"Minerva?" He turned to his lover, who stiffened at his attention, taking a step closer to the still-dazed Juliet (yet another portion of pain to address tonight). "Can we talk in private?"

"Ah. I think Juliet needs—oof!" Minerva curled up sideways as the other blond elbowed her none-too-gently in the ribs. She considered moving back to the Butler's side, but a slit-eyed glare from Juliet made her rethink that decision. "Talk. Yes, I suppose so." She walked to Artemis's side and they linked arms, making their way along the circular path until they were on the opposite side of the disc and free of the LEP.

"Minerva," Artemis began, unlinking them so they could face each other. "Back when Holly needed to be healed, you—"

"Artemis," Minerva broke in, head already hanging low. "You owe me something."

Artemis paused, trying to figure out what she meant. Then he remembered the third-party-promise from Holly and sighed, shaking his head. "Not now. We need to talk about this."

"Just...just give me a few seconds." Minerva looked up at him and lifted her hands until both rested on Artemis's cheeks as she leaned forward. "Just...a few..."

Their lips touched lightly, parted the smallest of degrees in one of those soft, long kisses enjoyed by familiar lovers. Those who realize they have all the time in the world to spend together, and who want to take all of that time.

When they parted, Artemis tried to speak again, but was halted by a single finger placed on his lips. Very, very softly, Minerva spoke. "Goodbye, Artemis."

He scowled. "On, no. You are not getting out of this talk that easily. Besides, the LEP won't even let you off the tower, yet."
"No," Minerva said, shaking her head, bright curls catching the multicolored casino lights and taking in the hues, tinting her hair fantasy shades. "I meant...farewell. I can't do this anymore. Us."

This was the last thing Artemis had expected to hear and he scrambled for an answer. "Minerva, no! If this is about Holly, I just wanted to talk to you about hesitating to heal her." He laid both hands Minerva's, which had remained on his cheeks, pulling his girlfriend closer, as if holding her there would counteract her words.

"Stop it, Artemis!" Minerva shook him off, taking a step back, finally removing her hands and pulling them to her chest. "It isn't about Holly. Not really."

"Nothing is going on, Minerva."

"Dammit, Artemis, will you listen to me?" She glared at him, but there was still a tenderness in her eyes, though they soon looked to the heavens, as if again appealing to them, this time to enlighten the oddly slow-moving man. "I know nothing is going on between you and Holly. You're not the type to do anything like that, and I highly doubt that Holly is, either."

"It's just...you have something I don't. This entire incident, you were going into things without hesitation. Eagerly, in fact. You said it yourself: you missed this. Having your life in danger, facing off against a villain, saving the damsel in distress." She grimaced at this all-too-accurate description of herself. "You loved every second of it."

"And when the time came for me to step up and do the same...I flinched." She shrugged, as if this was all the explanation needed, but then went on. "With Koboi, I knew Juliet was there to help us, and we just needed a few more seconds. With Opal to face and no one around to help... I could have stayed by your side or lived a little longer." She hung her head. "I decided to live."

"Minerva," Artemis said, trying to reason with his...was she an ex already? "It was just instinct. You're wired to live. I'm supposed to protect you."

"Don't give me that macho bullshit, Artemis!" Minerva glared at him, truly insulted. "You plot and plan, but you are not some action hero. If you are going to continue getting into things like this, you need someone to stand beside you when things get bad. Not a woman to stand behind you. And...that's not me."

Artemis reached out to the woman and found himself catching her hand quite easily. Yet it was only because she had reached out as well, giving his fingers a light squeeze before letting them go.

"Adieu, mon héros." Minerva said, taking advantage of Artemis's shock to walk away, leaving him alone over a thousand feet in the desert air.

"Well...what do you have to say?" Foaly clopped a hoof, arms crossed and watching Holly via mini-hologram. He needed 3D to get the full effect in this conversation, and d'arvit to the cost.

The elf shrunk into herself, trying to guard against the 10cm tall projected figure. "You aren't a hard-mouthed mule. You are a full Clydesdale among centaurs." She was muttering, but more in the way a thoroughly chastised toddler will apologize than in the tone of a sulky teenager. She glared down at N°1, who was holding the seated elf's outstretched leg, immobilizing her while he worked on her third-newest set of scars. It had been a productive night, as far as battle wounds went.

N°1 was trying to avoid looking too amused, fully aware that making one leg unable to move in no way disarmed the often temperamental fairy. Really, she had begun to acquire an almost Mud
Man-ish temper.

"Aaaaaaand?" Foaly leaned forward, which actually made Holly lean back. He'd acquired that fatherly talent of utter intimidation not too long after Flashdrive was born.

"And how do you plan on making that up to poor, little Flash?"

Holly knew what he meant for her to say. Caballine and Foaly were on the lookout for it almost constantly, and Holly had been their main supplier until two years ago. She just...she didn't want to. It was so...beneath her.

"I could...babysit him," she finally said, sullen.

Foaly whinnied in joy. "Excellent! Are you available tomorrow night?"

"No," a rough voice answered for her from the shuttle's doorway, "she isn't." Commander Kelp strode in, glaring way down at his holographic techie. "She still has a few days left on duty at Tara. Possibly more."

Holly gasped. "More, sir? I thought...is Chix alright?"

"Oh, perfectly," Trouble chuckled, thinking of his be-winged friend. "Sneaking his hand up the skirt of every nurse in the hospital. The thing is, he's going to need a lot of down-time and flight therapy to recover correctly. Which means we need someone else at E1 to help him along. Someone who can really push those new wings of his." Trouble inspected the slowly disappearing scar on Holly's knee. "Someone who also needs a little down-time for healing would be efficient. Would you be interested in temporarily sharing his post?"

Holly looked to her knee just in time to see the last red tinge disappeared, replaced by smooth brown. "I...Tara..." The middle of Ireland. Less than an hour's drive from Fowl Manor. An absolutely negligible flight time. "I...yes, Commander Kelp! But...just until both of our recoveries are over. Then I want back in Recon."

"Excellent, Major Short!" Trouble took her hand, shaking it and pulling the elf to her feet. "Now, go find that Mud Boy and tell him." He gave Holly a shove towards the door. "The patrols tell me he's off being—what do humans call it?—emo."

Holly smirked at this image and dashed out, head darting about to find her friend. It took a hint from a passing patrol gnome for Holly to narrow down her search. When she finally crossed to the opposite side of the disc, she found Artemis leaning against one of the upper railings, looking past the city lights and into the dark sands.

Levity. That was what she needed. "Do you know what excuse Foaly is giving for Juliet's fall? A rogue bungee jumper. It's the worst excuse he's made yet, but it might...Artemis?"

He hadn't moved. Tentatively, Holly went to his side, laying a hand as far up on his back as she could reach.

He looked down at her, startled by what seemed to be her sudden appearance. "Holly. Minerva...just broke up with me."

Before Holly could say anything, Artemis lay is head down on the cold metal railing and began to
Artemis composed himself before the next LEP patrol arrived and informed them that it was time to leave. The adventurers (minus Minerva, who had opted for a slightly less socially awkward exit on Vinyáya's craft) were standing by the elevator when the shuttles began to swoop away, threading a thin path through the beginning of the firework's display.

"Tell me, Holly," Trouble said over Holly's helmet, "does this make for a fine Hollywood ending?"

"You mean the clean-up crew flying off into some colorful explosions, leaving the heroin to take a four hour drive back to a little putt-putt plane?"

Artemis glared at Holly, resolving to berate her for insulting his Cessna later.

She could almost hear Trouble pouting. "We did offer you a seat. That would have been dramatic. The heroin leaving the Mud Men behind to find their own way home, standing at her Commander's side. The People would highly approve. Would do wonders for the romantic sub-plot, too."

Holly scowled. "Hey! You promised to never mention that part of 'The B'wa Kell Rebellion' movie again!"

Now he was laughing and Holly dearly wished you could punch someone over a helmet feed.

Artemis and Holly looked at each other, having only heard half of the interchange. She waved them off as the elevator pinged with its arrival. "Poetic license driving my reputation into the ground." She muttered something about "not sleeping my way to the top" and shielded, stepping into the elevator.

It was a swift ride down and a short walk out of the casino. The trio was ready for a quick escape, yet they were almost stunned when the truck was brought back from the valet with no incident. It was the only thing to go right in the last day.

All were sliding their seat belts on when a bright red Mustang screeched up behind them and a black-haired man tumbled out. "Juliet!"

The young Butler paused, key in the ignition and ready to go. Her jaw dropped. "Jimmy?" Rather ungracefully, given all of her training, Juliet tumbled out of the truck. Ignoring the glares of the valets, she ran to her lover, jumping into his arms. "How did you get here?"

"I drove." Jimmy said flatly and held her at arm's length, glaring. "What the hell were you doing? I had my radio on coming up and they said some blond had bungee jumped off the Stratosphere. I pulled over to find a TV, and of course it was you and of course the video showed a cord, but...that was not the angle of a fall when you jump. What is going on, Juliet?" He wasn't sure whether to be furious or relieved. Juliet was alive, but there was something much more dangerous going on here than she had led him to believe in LA.

Juliet felt her insides beginning to shatter, but not in an unpleasant manner. In felt much the way that a doctor must sometimes re-break a bone in order to set it correctly. Yes, this was what she needed. A Blue Diamond to coach her through...the kill. And a lover to hold her. "I'll explain everything over dinner." She paused, actually managing to grin. "Maybe a movie, after."

Jimmy had opened his mouth to ask a further question, then it was like something had just hit him in the chest. "Wait...that sounds like...a date." He wasn't sure what to do. Eight years waiting, and then she blindsided him?
"Yes. A date. Which means you're buying!" She pointed a finger at him accusingly, but the bartender didn't seem to mind the finances, raising his hands in surrender. "Just...one second." She put her hands to his chest, as if commanding 'stay,' and darted back to the truck.

"Please, please tell me you can find your way home without me." Juliet begged, leaning into the driver's seat.

Artemis eyed the steering wheel. "I hate trucks." At Juliet's falling face, he sighed, waving her out of the doorway. "But I can certainly drive this monstrosity. Go."

Juliet bounced with glee, taking a last moment to whisper, "Holly?"

"Go!" Holly laughed, giving the woman an invisible push. "But nothing about the People."

Juliet snorted. "He's a Blue Diamond, Holly. You think he doesn't understand 'need to know'?" That said, she popped back out of the truck and ran back to her...well, boyfriend, she supposed. With a relieved sighed, she buried herself in his arms, not minding the extra warmth he gave off.

Looking at the steering wheel like it was a pair of his father's dirty drawers, Artemis took the driver's seat and got them on their way.

Traffic was horrible as tourists rubber-necked at the exploding sky. Eventually, however, they made it through the city and into the nearly empty desert to the south. Holly unshielded, taking a stretch so thorough that Artemis was sure he heard every bone in her body pop.

"Another wild adventure over," Holly said, looking up at her friend, content.

"Status quo maintained," Artemis nodded.

Holly also looked ahead, bringing her legs up so she could wrap her arms around her knees. "I've got to disagree. Koboi dead, Opal back in her own time, Juliet finally dating that guy, and you...what happened with Minerva?" Holly had her suspicions, and none were too flattering for the elf. She wondered briefly about visiting the man's ex to set the woman straight. Artemis's words removed that idea.

"She said...she couldn't take the danger. She thinks I need someone who can go into a situation like that without a second thought. I suppose she's right. I need someone who..." He gripped the steering wheel tightly, making the plastic covering squeak. "Someone who will take a bullet for me."

Holly pulled her legs closer, head nestled between her arms to hide her face. "Do you mean...?"

There was a silence of several minutes as Artemis considered her hanging words, during which Holly felt her heartbeat shoot up with anxiety, drifting back down when nothing happened, only to shoot up again whenever the man opened his mouth. Finally, he began to speak.

"Logically...I know what I want." Another pause for consideration, during which he took his eyes from the empty road to look at his long-time friend. "But...I'm in a lot of pain right now. I just...can't." He almost looked ashamed as he turned back to the road.

Holly didn't need nearly so long to think. "I'm being stationed at E1 for a while. A year of so, I think. So, in my time off, maybe we could...hand out?" She held her hands out in the 'balancing surfer' position. "'Chill' as they say?"

"Chill..." Artemis smiled and nodded. "I think I'd like that."
Holly breathed out lowly, a ball of tension slowly unwinding in her stomach. "Me, too." That last unresolved issue set aside for the day, Holly suddenly felt the past few days' worth of frantic activity slam into her. Yawning, she stretched out across the seats, head not quite touching Artemis's, but close enough to feel his warmth. "Good night, Mud Man."

Artemis Fowl glanced down at her and smiled fondly. "Sleep well, my captain."

He expected the elf to remind him of her promotion, but an impressive snore was her only response. Artemis chuckled and reached down, tapping her jaw closed. Tentatively, he stroked her scar before returning both hands to the wheel.

The pair continued into the night, feeling whole for the first time in years.

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**The Living**

*May 15, 2014-Fowl Manor*

Lucy seemed uncertain for a second. Then she summoned her Fowl resolve and stomped across the room. When she reached Artemis, she stopped, glowering. She didn't even need to glower up. They were exactly the same height.

"How *could* you?" She whimpered, lower lip quivering and tears coming to her eyes.

Artemis swallowed. He had expected...what? To be gone before his siblings awoke, leaving his parents to explain? Doubtless they would have had to report him as a missing person again until he was eventually declared legally dead. Would the younger Fowls be told the truth of what he had done, or would his parents take the emotionally easier lie and say he *was* dead? "Lucy...I had to—"

"It's not fair! You didn't tell me!"

"I didn't tell anyone, excepting Butler, and that was just hours ago." His should have prepared an explanation, but Artemis had not wanted to think of this altercation. His words seemed useless, only further irritating his little sister.

Lucy was left enormously confused, squinting at her brother. "Why would you need to tell Butler? He was there, wasn't he?"

"Well, yes, but..." Artemis stopped, suddenly realizing that two very different conversations were taking place.

Everyone descended into rapid thought, trying to figure out what was going on. It was Holly who understood first. She tried to hold in her laughter, making her shoulders heave with the effort. "Oh...Artemis! You are *such* a bad big brother!"

He glared at the smaller elf, annoyed that she had caught on before him. "What did I do?"

"It's what you *didn't* do," Lucy whined, stamping a foot. "You never told me about Rathdown Park!"

Artemis wasn't really sure if his youngest sibling was serious. His twin brothers didn't, either, looking at each other and shaking their heads in a very exasperated manner.

"Lucy..." Artemis began, pointing to his ears. "Don't you think there are more *important* things for you to worry about?"
She tilted her head sideways. "Noooooo...?"

"I'm an elf!" More jabbing at his ears.

"...so?"

Beckett began to laugh. His slightly more controlled brother just briefly raised an eyebrow, looking rather like an Artemis on the opposite end of the hair color spectrum.

Artemis winced, really wishing to rub his nose, but that was still a bit tender, despite the magic. Women. Always defying his expectations and turning his carefully structured plans on their heads. If it wasn't his mother remembering the People or Holly refusing him, it was Lucy taking the entire world in stride. She was shaping out to be an amazing Fowl, what with her constant calm. Briefly, Artemis hoped she would make her future spouse take her last name and add another line to the empire.

Still, he could not keep on that train of thought long. He shook his head. "I. Am. An. ELF, Lucy. Doesn't that bear some sort of comment?"

She looked up, thinking about this, then shrugged. "No. Bedtime stories come first." At her brother's continued astonishment, she relented. "Besides, you were going to do this anyway, right?"

"I...what?" Artemis appealed to Myles, who was also taking this rather well, all things considered.

Myles nodded. "The way you fawn after her?" He said 'fawn' rather dismissively, making all in the room foresee his own set of dating issues in the future. "Personally, I always thought it would be Holly to switch. It was that or us having an elf/human relative, and that really did not sit well with us, mental-image-wise, after we figured out where babies come from."

Angeline looked terribly concerned. "You know...where babies come from?"

"Duh, Mum," Lucy said, giving a little disgusted sigh and roll of the eyes that hinted rather frighteningly at her teenage years. "I'm five. Plus, we have the Internet."

Angeline seemed highly put-out.

Artemis looked between each member of his family and gave a small grunt. "So the only two people here who seem surprised by this is my father and Holly. Don't I normally get to do a big reveal, or is that perk over?"

On-screen, Foaly raised his hand. "I think," he began, ears flicking about rapidly as he tried to ignore the screaming from the Council, "that the entirety of the Lower Elements is a bit...off-kilter. Or they will be, when the Council tells them."

Artemis nodded, somewhat eased. "I imagine so. Yet, still..." He looked to his mother, still finding her to be the one person who didn't seem to be acting as he'd expected. No emotional outbursts or accusations, beyond a little squeal of joy when he'd mentioned his profession to Holly. It did not fit into what he had mapped out in his head, and that bothered him greatly. "Mum...why are you taking this so well?"

Angeline studied her hands, as if they were the source of this vexing question. "To start, I think I'm just relieved your little note wasn't as dire as it sounded."

Artemis winced. "Ah, yes...I thought you would find a way to contact the People if you found out what I truly intended, and I needed as much time as possible for everything to proceed."
The nod she gave him was understanding, but still quite sad. "You are my son, Artemis. I always...I always knew you were different. And that those differences would one day take you away from me." She gave a quick exhale that was halfway to a laugh. "Admittedly, I never thought you would do so over a woman, but...you do love to defy expectations."

Artemis was going to agree when he noticed Lucy's quick glances between Angeline and himself. She frowned in a manner that was quite impressive for a five-year-old. "What does Mum mean, Artemis? 'Leave'? Isn't Holly going to move in with us?"

Myles and Beckett looked at each other again, though this time without any trace of amusement. They had certainly let Lucy in on their theories about Artemis doing the ridiculous thing of changing his species for Major Short, but hadn't expanded on the consequences. She would have worked them out on her own, given enough time. Now events had come to pass far sooner than they had expected and she hadn't had the time to mature enough to work out the logical conclusion of such a switch.

Thus, it was left to Artemis to explain, and he did so as gently as he could "Lucy...Holly always has to hide when she visits, so humans won't find her and realize fairies still exist, remember? If we stayed here, we'd be...prisoners. Not because of the family, but to save the People. Staying hidden like that, in one house...it would kill us. So we...I have to live among the people. In Haven."

Lucy shook her head, hair flying about. She again stamped her foot as she cried out. "No! It's not fair! You didn't ask me if you could leave!"

Artemis did not want to feel selfish for having made this sacrifice, but he couldn't help it. Lucy was right. He hadn't consulted any of the family, unless you counted his revelation to Butler. Given that the manservant had spent a good potion of the rest of the day trying to halt his plans, he doubted even that really counted. Certainly he had been conscious of what the change meant, but once it had taken place, he found that facing up to his shattering family was far more difficult than even the post-surgery trudge had been. "Lucy, if there is anything I can do—"

"No!" She screamed. "You can't do anything! This is all her fault!" She turned on Holly, storming to the seated elf and glowering down at her. "You took my brother away from me!"

Holly, who regularly faced down hordes of goblins, demons, and even a few rooms full of humans, backed away from the child. "I didn't mean to!"

"Then take it back! Give me back my brother!"

Holly looked at Artemis. The arrogant, often immoral man that had once kidnapped her, faked an interrogation, and held her for ransom, nearly destroying her career in the process. Who had gone behind the People's back to invent the C Cube, then kept his plans a secret from her until she had passed the point of no return and defied her own moral code by mutilating (even if temporarily) a human. Who had convinced her that she was a catalyst for a plague that could destroy both fairies and humans.

Artemis Fowl with another 1,500 or so years to live. With a veritable mountain of gold at his disposal and the newest fairy technology within his grasp. The biggest threat to the People since...well, ever, and he was about to gain resources that no human had ever even thought of. He could expose them with another moment's negligence, like he had nearly done with Spiro.

Then she remembered the countless times he had placed his own life at risk to save her or the people. Crawling through a tube of plasma. Going with her to Hybras. Flying over Ireland with Koboi on his tail. Crawling across the high lawn covered in blood.
And, though she tried her best to deny her strongest motivation, she felt the touch of tentative lips on her own, looking for the place they belonged. And finding it.

"Even if I could," Holly said, speaking as strongly as she could and looking Lucy straight on, "I wouldn't change him back. I..." She swallowed. Why couldn't she just say it?

Lucy seemed to be considering this answer, her dark glare growing deeper all the while. When Holly didn't squirm or shrink further, she leaned in, speaking in a guttural growl that was all the more unnerving from a little girl. "Fine. You had better be good to my big brother."

Holly sighed, relaxing a bit at this, but Lucy was not done.

"Because, if you hurt him, I will end you."

Holly's eyes widened and she nodded vigorously. "Yes, ma'am!" She wasn't being facetious with the title. There were echoes of the old, unscrupulous Artemis in that threat. The Council would be wise to keep a close eye on this girl.

It wasn't permission, precisely. Permission comes before events are set into motion. This was a grudging, threatening acceptance. All seemed to simultaneously unwind as they realized a sort of peace had been negotiated. Minerva and Foaly signed off, the blond collapsing back on her bed before the computer even finished shutting down, leaving the Fowls and Holly to work through the rest of the day.

The daylight and its accompaniment of humans made travel to the Hill of Tara impossible. Over the next several hours, Artemis and Holly told Lucy (with the rest of the Fowl clan ranged behind her) about the rest of their adventure back in time. A few bags and boxes were packed. Dozens of hard drives were copied to a data crystal in the Ops Booth for later pickup, then wiped clean. Holly tried to coach Artemis through suppressing his magic so he could eat, but the mouthful of sparks defied his efforts, making the young man look like an Irish Godzilla.

Every minute seemed to be filled with a thousand questions.

"Where will Artemis live?" Angeline asked, eyeing Holly sternly.

Holly had been flustered at that, but Artemis stepped in to say he intended to buy a small house near Foaly and Caballine.

Mr. Fowl was infinitely practical. "How will you make your money? Noting your tastes, that much gold won't last forever."

Artemis easily had enough money to establish himself for a few decades, but beyond that he could probably find a position in any of the tech companies. Holly could imagine Foaly becoming a bit worried at this and envisioned the centaur espousing a Fowl-Foaly alliance to avoid inconvenient competition.

Butler was also focused on life logistics, but of a more physical nature. "Won't the People be hostile to you, after all you've done?"

Perhaps, but not all of them. Holly was sure most would welcome the new elf, thanks to all he had done for them. In fact, the demons considered him to be the savior of their entire species. And if the demons wanted you to stay safe, you stayed safe.

Lucy, who had been watching Artemis's unsuccessful efforts at eating, wrinkled her nose. "What do fairies eat in Haven?"
Artemis shuddered. "You do not want to know."

The last question was, of course, the hardest one, and the one which no one wanted to bring up. It was Beckett who decided enough was enough and blurted it out. "How often will you be able to visit?"

Artemis looked to Holly, who chewed on her lip, thinking. "I've only been able to visit so often because I was the liaison for the People and the Council never really took that job away after Koboi was caught. With both of us in Haven...I'd be surprised if we could arrange an overnight once a year, when performing the Ritual."

"Once a year..." Beckett repeated, looking to the rug.

Lucy took Artemis's hands and began to sniffle.

While Artemis's pupils began to dilate with rising panic at the idea of another outburst, Beckett jumped in to save the day. "If it's going to be that long, you should show Lucy how to take care of Acorn. She's an easy horse. I think she should be Lucy's, now."

"Excellent idea!" Artemis responded quickly, taking off towards the coat closet in search of an umbrella to guard against the sun.

All the younger Fowls and Holly were about to exit the Manor when a deep cough caught their attention. Artemis Fowl Sr. stood in the kitchen, evaluating this quartet of short people. The lights in that room were still out and the sun had already passed overhead, leaving only a dim, reflected glow to come in through the windows.

"Major Short," he said, sweeping his hands towards the back of the kitchen to draw her inside. "May I have a word with you? Privately?"

Holly looked to Artemis. Not for permission, but for reassurance. At his nod, she swallowed and left the party to their adventure in the stables.

For a moment, she thought the Fowl patriarch was going to sit her down for a drink and negotiations. Instead, she followed him most of the way across the kitchen until she realized where he actually intended to go. Then she stopped, watching as the man opened the doorway to the cellar stairs. He clicked on the light and Holly's ears began to itch at the cold hum.

Fowl Sr. didn't even pause to look back and see if the elf would follow. He stepped down the stairs with a confidence that defied his lack of one leg.

Holly looked around to see if anyone was watching, but all were too involved in last-minute preparations to notice this meeting. For a brief period, she considered going for her neutrino, then scolded herself. This was Artemis's father, not Koboi or Cudgeon.

Still berating herself, Holly tapped down the stairs and across the hall, but she couldn't bring herself to take the final steps and join him in the room at the end of the hall. Her old cell.

Artemis St. was standing inside, hands clasped behind his back. He studied the cot and the hole where a brash female LEPRecon officer had smashed through to soil.

"A metric ton of gold for one fairy," he said, turning to Holly and raising an eyebrow. "It seems rather...odd."

"Odd?" Holly said, no idea where this conversation was going, but not entirely sure she was going
"My son got his gold...and still managed to keep his fairy."

Holly swallowed nervously, but did not glance away as she wished to. This wasn't a battle for dominance, but she felt that something needed to be proved here. "I believe...the People got to keep him."

"Indeed." Artemis Sr. reached up to bat at the pull-chord of the single lightbulb, looking altogether feline.

Holly had to wonder if she was the mouse. Again she berated herself, but remained wary.

"My son. My heir." He looked to the elf, an odd little smirk on his lips. Not amused, but...incensed. "I passed up several business alliances because company owners expected me to pair my son with one of their daughters. They always said my refusal was an effort to...hide something about Artemis. I suppose I can now just tell them he was a fairy."

For a moment, Holly didn't understand and felt her stomach sour at a threat against the People. Then her Gift of Tongues tried a less literal translation and she began to giggle. Still wary of Mr. Fowl's reaction, she covered her mouth with the back of a hand, hiding her amused face, even if she couldn't stop the sound.

However, Artemis Sr. had already finished his stern act, letting out his own amused chuckle. "You are a fascinating creature, Major Short. I can see why Arty has been drawn to you."

Finally at ease with these words and the camaraderie created by the subject of the younger Artemis, Holly entered the cell. "Despite my best efforts, yes. It's...'Holly,' if that's okay, sir." She prodded the frame of her cot with one foot, then played with the dirt, still wanting something else to focus on.

"Well. In that case, you must call me 'Timmy.' Or 'Pop.' Preference?"

She kicked a loose shard of concrete under the cot, then looked up to him. He was harder to face than Artemis when he had first kidnapped her. "'Timmy,' I think. I'll leave the other for..." She trailed off and coughed. No sense in thinking too far ahead.

Timmy seemed to feel it was time to finally address his real problem. "My son...doesn't know what he is getting into. Does he?" The man appealed to Holly to defy his conclusions, but the elf just nodded.

"Artemis knows a lot about the People, but that's all from texts and a few short visits to Haven. He might know a lot about us, but he doesn't really understand how to be one of us." She gave the father an apologetic look. "I mean...he didn't exactly fit in as a human, and he was born to that."

"Too true," Timmy said, waving off her guarded tone. "That is why I wanted to speak with you." He leaned over slightly to massage his knee, trying to relieve some of the strain placed on it by the artificial leg. "Life with the fairies is not going to be the series of adventures Angeline told me about. It is going to be...well, as close to average as you can get when you're my son. Which means he is going to have to do some very quick growing up and adapting. He'll need to learn to cook, clean, socialize, hold down a real job..."

Holly gave a little cringe at each task. Artemis could get a maid or manservant to help maintain his style of life, but it would be an enormous pull on his resources. One metric ton of gold was a lot, but you could not live on it for a pampered lifetime. Even Foaly couldn't afford hired help, and he
was one of the best-paid fairies she knew. "So...why are you telling me this? Shouldn't you talk to Artemis?"

"Perhaps," Timmy agreed with a shrug that said he actually didn't agree in the slightest. "Unfortunately, my son is...adverse to such activities. He must be forced into them, I think. And since you so kindly made him become a fairy—"

"I didn't make him become a fairy! He did that without asking me."

"I understand that, Holly." The elder Fowl watched his new elven acquaintance and gave an annoyed grunt. "I am not going to berate you for what has happened. I'm here to ask...a boon. On my son's behalf."

"A boon?" Holly pushed down a little suspicious twinge. She really needed to work on that response to the Fowls.

Artemis Sr. knelt in front of Holly and took her hands. "Will you...take care of my son? Teach him to be a fairy? Bring him out of his shell and put him into the real world? Make him take in some culture?"

It was a daunting task. Make Artemis into a normal fairy? Holly considered refusing. Then his last request tickled something in the back of Holly's memories. She smirked. "'Take in some culture...' I think I can do that."

"And one more thing?" Timmy looked as grave as Holly had ever seen him. And she had seen him standing at gunpoint in the arctic.

"Yes?" She asked, readying herself for the real request.

"If you and Artemis have a child..." Timmy took a deep, steadying breath. "Do not name it 'Artemis.' You have no idea what a cross to bear that is."

Holly had to laugh at this. "Well, your son bears it well." Still, she nodded in agreement. "I couldn't use that name, anyway. My great-great-grandaunt would kill me."

"Your...why?"

Holly savored having the upper-hand for the first time in this conversation. She patted the Fowl patriarch's forearm. "Have a seat. This is going be a bit of a shock..."

The drive to Tara was cramped, but no one complained or asked Butler to bring out a larger car. The Fowl family sat all together in the back seat of the Bentley, asking final questions and giving advice to their journeying son. Holly sat up front with Butler, nodding automatically at the various threats he urged her to watch out for. She was just trying to figure out why lobster attack was so important when the car stopped on the side of the road, close to a lone cow.

They all piled out and weighed Artemis and Holly down with duffel bags and a box each. The rest of Artemis's belongings (namely his gold) would need to be transported over the next few days. For now, the fairies staggered under books, laptops, and a few personal effects. They looked like two college students about to move into the dorms.

It seemed like the Fowls had been saying farewell all day, so they made this last goodbye swift. There was brief speculation on a Christmas visit. Then, before Lucy or Angeline could descend into tears, Artemis and Holly walked into the field and entered E1.
Chix Verbil, who was leaned back in his chair with both feet on the desk, opened one eye and closed it again as they materialized. Then both eyes shot open and he sprang to his feet, unholstering his neutrino and aiming at Artemis's chest. "Freeze, Mud Boy!"

"It was 'Mud Man,' Verbil," Artemis grumbled, not even bothering to break stride, merely following Holly across the shuttleport. "And even that isn't correct, now."

Chix looked to Holly, demanding some sort of explanation for why she was bringing Fowl here and why he was so...small.

Holly glared at Chix. "Lieutenant, do you ever check your messages?"

They passed by the officer's desk as he pulled up his full inbox and found the pertinent memo. "Holy..." Whatever he thought was sacred was lost to stunned silence as he watched the two elves take their place at the departure gate.

Both set down their boxes and bags, Artemis giving a little groan of relief and Holly rolling her eyes at him. "Be glad you don't have to move the gold. A few books is nothing."

Artemis sat on a box and rubbed at his arms. His suit was unacceptably creased by carrying so many things. "Remind me of that in the morning."

"Rather presumptuous to think I'll be there to remind you." Holly chided, taking a seat across from him on her own box. The view provided by the flimsy seat proved quite worthwhile when Artemis presented a pleasing blush.

"I didn't mean...you could call, Holly." He nodded at this, hoping he had back pedalled far enough out of a potential insult or presumption.

Tutting, Holly said, "You are going to be far to easy to mess with, Arty."

"Oh, so it's 'Arty' again?" He seemed to like this, hoping it was to be his new nickname, saving him from something more questionable.

"Only when you're being particularly immature." Holly gave an inward cheer at Artemis's offended look.

"I am not immature. I have never been immature. I am wise beyond my years." He raised his head, playing the worldly man. Sadly, he was still far too young to pull this off, despite his generally intimidating mien.

"I'll be sure to tell people that when I talk about my twenty-three year old boyfriend. I'm sure no one will say I'm 'robbing the cradle' if I claim you're 'mature.'"

Artemis started and his already complete focus on Holly became intense, pinning her down. All except her hands, which flew to cover her mouth. Had she gone too far in saying that? Artemis had said he changed for her, and certainly she had received every indication that he hadn't changed his mind, but was Artemis the sort of man that had to make everything official before saying something like that so casually? Would he feel the need to make all the advances in their relationship? If so, he was in for a harsh time with the aggressive female.

Rather than address her slip, however, Artemis took one of Holly' hand's in his own, looking down at the mixture of pale and dark skin with obvious fascination. "Right. That. I...I need to ask you something, Holly."
She felt dizzy, all of a sudden. It took Holly a moment to realize she wasn't breathing. When she managed to get enough air in, she squeaked out, "Y-yes, Artemis?" Surely he wasn't planning on asking...that. Surely?

"What I did...there is no turning back. I know without a doubt that this is what I want. Forever." He squeezed her hand and nodded to himself. "So, knowing this, do you...am I..."

Artemis looked up, fear clear in his eyes as they met Holly's. He had several more false starts before finally managing to get the words out. "Am I everything you ever wanted, now?"

She couldn't help it. Holly let out a great, relieved sigh, laughing a bit at the end. "Oh, Arty...Artemis...of course." She brought their hands up, fingers still entwined with his, and placed it on his cheek. "You always were. Everything and more. I was just too scared to see it.”

Artemis smiled and wrapped his other arm around Holly's waist, pulling her across the small gap between them until she sat at his side, angled so they could face each other. He shivered as Holly wrapped her free arm around his neck, fingers twining into his hair. Her scent overtook his senses. Pheromones. Now that was unexpected. And quite pleasant. "Really?" He asked again, their heads moving closer.

"Yes..." Holly breathed, her lips parting and eyes nearly closed, leaving her just enough sight to watch this young man who was bringing her inexorably closer to his body. With each syllable, their lips brushed together. "Always. I...I love you, Artemis Fowl."

He smirked in triumph, the twitch transferring across to the woman pressed so closely to his chest until they were both smiling. "Ah...excellent. I love you, Holly Short." Then, with the slightest squeeze, he brought her forward until their lips met.

Holly was vaguely aware that Chix was cheering them on in the background, but she couldn't really be bothered to focus on him. She couldn't focus on anything beyond Artemis's cheek under her hand, his hair between her fingers, his arm about her waist, and their lips moving so smoothly together. If their kiss under the oak had been intense, this went far beyond, powerful enough to burn away every sense but touch and every emotion but desire and love. After years of tentative approaches and awkward, mis-matched meetings, they came together and finally fit each other perfectly.

They even breathed together, avoiding all those awkward splutterings and gasps for breath common with inexperienced kissers. They went on like this for what felt like only seconds, but proved to be a bit longer when a shuttle pilot emerged from the chute and called for the last passengers, giving them a pointed glare.

They broke off with apologetic smiles and began to gather the luggage. Once Artemis's arms were full, leaving him undefended, Holly paused before lifting her own items. She turned to him, grinning. "Don't think you being 'everything' and all is going to stop me from giving you elf lessons." She reached out and poked Artemis's nose, making him briefly cross his eyes and lean back. Then she hoisted her portion of the luggage and began to stride towards the shuttle.

Artemis watched her a moment, then jumped forward. "Holly, wait! What do you mean 'elf lessons'? What do I have to learn?"

Holly laughed like a mad scientist, refusing to inform the confused man. He would know soon after they landed.
"No," Artemis said, crossing his arms and shaking his head with finality.

"Come on," Holly persisted, pushing the item in question across the table towards her new boyfriend. That word...was going to take a lot of getting used to. But there were more important things to worry about. "You have to do it. You'll get sick real quickly if you don't."

"Holly, I can balance things. I'm sure there are other fairies in Haven who don't..." He couldn't even bring himself to say it. The entire idea was repugnant.

"Artemis," Holly said, laying her hands flat on the table, as if showing all of her cards and making it apparent that she had won the entire pot. "Yes. There are vegetarian fairies. However, you had no problems eating meat as a human, so you are not getting out of this. Do it."

Artemis's eyes darted down to the plate. He tried to push it away, but found the path blocked by Holly's hands. "I will not."

"Artemis," Holly said, a cutting edge in her voice. She yanked a piece of the dish off, brandishing it at the man's face, trying to poke it past his lips before she was batted away.

Artemis had sudden, horrible flashbacks. He backed against the wall on his side of the two-sided dining booth and shook his head. "No! Go...go tell Foaly to find me an artificial pituitary. It's not worth it!"

Holly seethed. Then, with a rippling change that seemed to travel from her pointy ears to her toes, she smiled sweetly. Delicately holding the tidbit between her fingers, she left her own seat and slid into Artemis's side of the booth.

He clamped his jaws closed and turned his head away. She was going to attack, and there would be no escape! This was it!

Holly straddled Artemis, their bodies fitting together from chest to hips. Firmly, she grabbed his chin and wrenched it forward until his wide eyes looked into her half-lidded ones. "Oh, I assure you, Artemis," she purred, trailing her hand down his chest, moving with agonizing slowness. It stopped at his navel, eliciting a pained groan from the pinned man. "I am entirely worth it." She presented the new elf with his first meal in Haven. "Now...eat the spider."

Artemis whimpered, appealing to Holly with rather impressive puppy-dog eyes. When she merely shook her head, Artemis sighed and opened his mouth, letting Holly pop the tarantula leg inside. He chewed disconsolately. It wasn't as bad as he remembered, but that didn't keep him from sulking after he swallowed. "You are going to enjoy tormenting me, aren't you?"

"Yeah," Holly murmured, giving Artemis a quick kiss as his reward. "I really am."

The End

Chapter End Notes

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