

## The Earthquake's Message

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### Error: System crash in 5 4 3 2 1

Artemis couldn't believe what had just happened to him. For the first time in his life his computer had crashed on him. Recalling the computer manuals, whose many pages he had memorized to heart, he grumbled through all the common procedures. Today was supposed to be a great day for him. He had convinced his parents that he was too smart for any school, and they had surprisingly seen his point. Now he didn't have to waste time doing petty jobs such as "homework," and could instead work on other great projects of his. With school on his mind, he had already coded many computer programs that were mind-boggling to other programmers, but was no big job for the fairy code Artemis used, which had been painstakingly smuggled by Mulch Diggums, his flatulent friend. At the moment, Artemis' parents were on a business trip, and Artemis had invited Mulch over for a favor.

"Hello Artemis! Looks like you're having a bit of a computer problem."

"Yes, I do happen to have one, and I'm sure it's the computer program you gave me, Mulch," replied Artemis.

"What could be the problem with the disk? I stole it from FutuTech itself, they have the highest quality."

"There is the problem. I had the theory that this program could be a prototype, judging from all the marking on the hardware, but now that I know this is from the company warehouse, I can prove that the program isn't the final that I asked for. Anyway, that's not why I want you here right now. I wrote down the code of a program I want to make and I need this new fairy computing system that has pre-downloaded software, that isn't bugged. I need to you get it to me without fail, and no mess-up this time."

"Boy, you sure are asking me to become invisible. Listen, I know which computer you want. I've been eyeing it myself, and with the money you'll give me, I'll actually be able to buy it without stealing. Tell you what, I have a PI (Private Eye) meeting down in the Lower Elements with Doodah Day in two days. If I get the chance I might do some sneaking around and snatch it. I can't promise you the job will take one day though. Those babies are guarded up so tightly, I might have to make a plan. But a man's got to do what a man's got to do."

As if in response to the last statement Mulch opened up his bum flap and let one out. The effect was instant. Artemis' nose curled up in horror and refused to receive air. Of course, Artemis had predicted this event and pulled out a small gas mask from his pocket (he had already marketed this device, and it still pulls in a net income of millions each year). Mulch had already used the explosion as a smoke screen to escape the room unseen, a tool of his he used very often when stealing. As he started digging his way downward to look for some food, ruining the work of the Fowls' many garden keepers, he chuckled lightly to himself.

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Holly took out her blaster and fired two medium-rare shots at the ogre that was tormenting the high security building of the LEPrecon facilities. This was a terrible day. Two weeks, just two weeks after her promotion to co-commander of the complex, and every single troll in the entire Lower Elements had escaped from captivity and was mysteriously being held in mind control, forced to attack LEPrecon forces. Multiple attempts of the magical Mesmer technique had proved useless and Holly was

facing her final stand, unless she could pull off something brilliant. She had already lost all contact with the centaur Foaly, and had seen the end of every single officer under the control of Commander Kelp himself, except for him. He sat propped on top a small rise nursing a leg wound and firing a stun blaster similar to Holly's, but much more powerful.

Desperately, Holly looked for something that could save them from the giant coming their way now. She spotted one of the flare tunnels, transporting the "eggs" that fairies traveled in up to the surface. If she could trap the troll in there, hopefully, it would be blasted by the flare of heat from below. Taking a chance, Holly sprinted to Kelp and dragged him to cover. Using the last of her magic, she healed his fractured leg.

"Ready your jetpack, full speed. Stick close to me and don't waver off course. If the troll doesn't get into that transport tunnel, we're doomed," she ordered Kelp.

"Yes ma'am," Kelp shouted, as he readied the boost button on his Flight Bird jetpack.

Before she took off, Holly recalled that the only time she performed such daring maneuvers was when Artemis got them in a huge predicament. Although he was trouble, without him, she never would have gotten to this commanding level. Both officers walked up to the edge of the building for what they thought will be their last flight.

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Butler growled. He was stuck in his hospital bed for the fourth day in a row. He tried to recall why he was really here. The pain he was feeling came from his left leg. It all came back to him. He was sitting at the midnight café table waiting for Artemis to arrive and tell him of his new plan. There was a burst in the café, and a pot hurtled toward him. Dashing to an overturned table, he inspected the kitchen. There was an orange fire licking at whatever food it could give itself. A river of pale whisky coated the floor and was sprouting a thick wall of fire. Butler ran for the fire escape and pulled down the alarm. An indoor rain showered the fire and slowly drained it away. As Butler walked toward the kitchen, he could make out an unharmed cook on the floor reaching out for a cigarette. Butler whacked the drug out of the cook's mouth and dragged the cook out of the building. All the other cooks and customers had fled, leaving only the pair. There was an audible crack and visible lines worked their way around the café building. Butler tossed the cook as far as he could and tried to run away himself, but not before a slab of concrete pinned down his foot.

Butler now examined his foot. It was covered in inches of gauze and suspended so he could not move it. He was quite surprised that Artemis was not here. The boy had planned on meeting him, but what if the meeting was fake and was a plan to kill him? The one who had informed of this conference was a small woman, someone who worked at Artemis' former school. Opal! The name struck him like a bullet, rendering him unconscious.

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After a long night, Artemis had fixed all the problems with his computer. Before he went on with anything, he went through all the fairy code on the disk and restored it to its proper form. He traversed the stairs and walked up to his brothers', Myles and Beckett, room. He expected them to be awake and doing mischief by now. Once he typed the password on the safe lock, (if the combo was typed in wrong two times, you would feel a deadly shock to your body), he gently opened the door to find the room a scene of chaos. Myles had been performing one of his dangerous experiments, once again, and now the room was covered in a light coating of mud. Beckett was found under a desk, cowering from the site of the explosion, a large bucket that had been full of slimy mud.

"Myles, what have you done this time?"

“It wasn’t me! I swear! You can even ask Beckett.”

“He’s right; the ground just shook and the pot just went ‘boom!’”

“If the ground just shook, why didn’t I feel it?”

“Artemis simple-toon, you didn’t feel it because you were upstairs,” Myles responded, using one of his catch phrases.

“Oh, come on Myles, if there was an earthquake, it would already be on the news by now. You better clean this mess before mum and dad get back. If mum sees this, she’ll have a heart attack!”

Artemis was not that ignorant. He knew that this was no earthquake, but happening in the Lower Elements. He had to go see Butler. “Myles, Beckett, I have to go out for a while. I’ll be back in a sec.”

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Holly and Kelp had just gotten the troll’s attention. It howled at the multiple stun blasts and charged after them. Kelp kept up his fire and followed Holly’s path to the flare tunnel.

“Get ready to shoot those gates down,” she told him.

The troll started to throw things at the pair, and Holly had no other choice but to take a longer route. Kelp spotted the last of the city’s survivors being whisked away in an escape pod to the safety of other cities. He pushed the rate of his fire up to keep the troll distracted from civilians.

At last they reached the tunnel. They flew in and looped out, leading the troll inside. Kelp quickly shot down two gates, trapping the troll inside. Just as the two landed on top of the LEPrecon command building, a hot flare whisked the thick-skinned troll up to wherever he could go. The flare would not kill the troll, due to its thick skin, making it a problem for another day. As Holly conducted the routing systems check on her equipment, the last escape pod in the city flew up to them, piloted by none other than the genius centaur Foaly.

“You have no idea how glad we are to see you,” said Holly wearily, just as she collapsed onto a small bunk.

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“Butler, if what you are saying is true, then only one thing can be responsible for these events. First, an earthquake was targeted at our house in an attack on you. Someone in the lower Elements must want us dead, and if I had to make a bet who, I would say Opal Koboi,” Artemis lectured as he sat by Butler’s bed.

“That’s what I was thinking. Let’s just hope that Holly and Kelp can take care of this one.”

“If I know Opal, she’s smart enough to evade all of the LEPrecon and PIs in the Lower Elements. Well, first we have to get a fairy to heal that leg of yours.”

“Not this time, Artemis. I became much older after the last healing. If the same thing happens again, I might be pushed out of existence. Sorry, but this time, you’re on your own.”

This last statement of Butler’s was what Artemis feared. If he didn’t have Butler, the whole mission could be jeopardized, and now it was. No one who he could recruit to help him would have as much manpower as Butler, the man who could take down a whole squad of LEPrecon police when he was outnumbered and out-teched. Artemis said his farewells and left with a solemn look on his face.

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Opal Koboi was grinning like a madwoman. She was, after all, mad. Once her plan went through, she would have control of the Lower Elements. The Mud Men of above would finally have a meeting

with the people of the Lower Elements. Opal hated it when she and her brethren were called “fairies.” That would all change now, she thought. Behind her, a group of centaurs were preparing for the upcoming mission. Opal kept smiling. This time, those brats would pay for forcing her through years of waiting. A small escape pod dashed by her lookout point on top of the Haven City Mall, but this pod was out of place. The other pods had left hours ago. Opal got up. She held up her blaster and fired two shots into the air.

“Charge the ship!”

**End of Book 1 – to be continued in Book 2 – *The Warlock’s Orb***