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special edition:  
The Waning Moon  
by Courtney Hill

# The Waning Moon

Courtney Hill

*Run Artemis, run!* She told herself as she fled through the forest, urging her tired body on. *You have to keep on running!* She could hear the roar of motorbikes behind her, like the howl of starving beasts after their prey: always hunting, always searching, always hungry and never tiring.

She tripped over a root, grunting as her side slammed into the ground. She clutched the offended area as she stood back up. Blood seeped through her fingers. *Damn wound reopened again!* She had little time to dwell on this though as the sounds of the engines grew closer, forcing her on.

She stumbled into a tree, almost blacking out. *I can't keep going on like this,* she thought as she pushed herself past the evergreen. *I've lost too much blood.* She walked into a small clearing, desperate to find a hiding place.

She spotted a fallen tree overgrown with tall ferns, and while certainly wasn't the ideal spot, it would do the job. She stumbled over to the trunk and managed to crawl over it. Pressing her belly to the ground, she closed her eyes and took a few resting breaths, slowing her rapidly beating heart. *Okay Artemis,* she told herself, *you can do this. You just have to focus. Just focus.*

The motorbikes tore into the clearing and screeched to a halt. Artemis wasn't surprised. She hadn't had time to cover her tracks and, of course, the Doctor had sent only his best. She clutched her pistol, ready to use it if necessary, but pushed the thought aside though as she concentrated on the task at hand. It would be hard with the drugs still in her system, but she could do it if she concentrated...

"Where tha hell tha bitch go?" one of the bikers asked.

"I see tracks over there!" another said.

*What you see are animal tracks,* Artemis thought with the strength she had left. *They are animal tracks heading off into the forest.*

"Those are just some damn animal tracks Tweeker," the first man snapped. "Animal tracks headin' into Tha Forest. You should fuckin' know better than that."

"Yeah...you're right," the second man agreed, confused. "I-I don't know how I missed that."

"You're an idiot, that's how," the first man growled. "Can anyone see where she took off too?"

Artemis took another deep breath as she formulated another thought.

*You see a shadow running to the west in the shape of a girl.*

“Hey!” the second man, Tweeker, cried. “I see a shadow running to the west! In the shape of a girl!”

Sweat began to bead on her forehead as the effort needed to influence her thoughts began to take its toll. *You decide to chase after it.*

“I see it too,” the first man said. “Let’s ride!” With that, the three men started up the chorus of their motorbikes and headed into The Forest. As they took off towards their imaginary shadow the third man, the one who had not spoken, turned his head straight towards Artemis. Artemis gulped as he left, sure that if he had his visor off he would have been looking at her right in the eye.

But he left, and Artemis was allowed to heave a sigh of relief. That was all she had time to do before she passed out.

*The little girl ran fast, as fast as her small legs could carry her. Her breath was ragged and her white uniform covered in blood. So much blood. She hadn’t realized humans had so much of the stuff in them, or it would feel so terrible to watch the look in their eyes as it poured out.*

*She had to go, she had to get away. Get away from the blood, from the pleading looks, from the cold metal gun that felt so heavy in her tiny, tiny hands. But his sightless eyes watched her, following her no matter where she went, no matter how fast she ran. His sightless eyes were always there. “You’re mine,” those sightless eyes said, “and no matter where you go, no matter what you do I will find you, and I will have you.”*

*The girl screamed as the floor beneath her opened up and she fell into a pool of black blood. She struggled against the weight sucking her in, but it was too heavy with all of that guilt pulling her down. She looked up as she fell deeper and deeper into the pool of blood and above she could see those sightless eyes, knowing he had her. Even in death.*

She woke up with a start, her heart pounding. *Silly girl*, she scolded herself as she took a calming breath, *letting yourself getting worked up over a dream*. She peered out from her hiding place and looked up at the sky to find it was almost dark, and that she had been out for at least a couple hours. She cursed herself as she bandaged up her wound as best as possible. She had to get out of here. The three men she had manipulated weren’t stupid, and it wouldn’t take them long to figure out her shadow was exactly that.

She left the tree and headed northeast through the woods. Her body was drained, and she didn’t have much strength, so all she could manage was an

unsteady walk. She felt hot and cold at the same time too, and her vision was blurred. She couldn't allow herself any more time to rest though. She had to push on.

*I might actually make it*, she thought as she fumbled through The Forest, the idea giving her strength. *I might actually be free!* Suddenly though, she heard noise up ahead. Talking. She pulled out her pistol and hid behind a tree, peering between the branches.

The figures made their way through the woods and Artemis tensed, sure it was her pursuers returning for her. *I can't run*, she thought as she cocked her pistol, *I'm too weak. I have to stay and fight.*

As they came into her view though, she realized they weren't her pursuers at all, just four civilians. One was a tall black man in his forties, and somehow Artemis thought she should recognize him. He had sharp blue eyes, wore a simple black shirt tucked into blue jeans, and had a shaved head that showed the tattoo carved into the back of it.

Next to him was a blond girl in her late teens, her long hair falling past her shoulders in golden curls. She was beautiful in that wholesome sunny way, with milky white skin, flushed cheeks, and sparkling green eyes. The white dress with little flowers she wore showed her perfect frame off.

Then, there was the boy. Artemis was momentarily stunned by what she saw. He was perhaps the most beautiful creature she had ever seen. He was about the same age as the girl with jet-black hair that fell across sky blue eyes, and a handsome face that bore a small scar above his right brow.

She was so busy staring at him, she didn't notice the dying sunlight glinting off her pistol, but the older man did. "Hello?" he called out. "Whose there?"

Artemis' eyes went wide. Her wound had made her weak and sloppy. She pointed the gun at the man, trying to keep her hands from shaking. "Stay back!" she yelled.

The three creatures froze, looking at this odd girl in surprise. She was slight, like a wisp of stardust, with long silver hair and large violet eyes. She seemed out of place in the bulky army fatigues she wore, as though she should be wearing spider webs and petals instead.

"Holy..." the boy began.

"Kyle, keep Andrea back," the man ordered.

"But father..." the girl protested.

"Just do as I say," he barked then turned to Artemis. "What's a young girl like you doing out here in The Forest alone?"

"None of your fucken' business," Artemis snapped, trying to keep herself from seeing double.

“Father, she’s wounded and looks feverish,” the girl said.

“I can see that Andrea,” he said, keeping his eyes locked on Artemis. “Now, why don’t you give me that pistol before you hurt someone...” He took a step forward.

Artemis shot the gun, the bullet landing in a tree inches from the man’s head. The girl screamed as the boy pushed her to the ground, but the man didn’t even flinch. “Don’t you fucking patronize me!” Artemis yelled. “Take another damn step forward and the next one will be to your head.”

“Ray, watch it,” the boy said.

Ray held out his hand to silence them. “Look kid,” he said to Artemis, “no one here is gonna hurt you, okay? Now, you got a nasty wound there that needs to be looked at...”

“I can-I can take care of myself,” she said, amazed at how slow and blurred her own words sounded to her ears. She didn’t even notice Ray taking another step forward.

“Father don’t!” Andrea protested.

Ray shook his head. “The kid’s just scared, that’s all. If she wanted to really hurt me she would of done so already. Isn’t that right?”

But Artemis didn’t get a chance to respond. Artemis was passing out. And her whole world became darkness as she landed on the forest floor with a thud, pistol lying forgotten.

The three men rode out of The Forest to the edge of The City. The City was a large place, filled with tall golden towers and web-like bridges. It was the only sign of human civilization on this world, the rest of the planet uninhabitable due to the pollen of the Moonflower that lived in the heart of The Forest. Just outside of The City was a tall white building to which the three men were headed.

It bore no decoration, had no windows, it was just a large rectangular block with a single black door at the bottom. The three men walked up to that black door, taking off their helmets as they did so. The first was a tall mercenary looking man, with shaggy red hair and cold steel eyes. Several scars marred his rough face, one curling his lip into a permanent snarl. The second man was thin and wiry, with wild bug eyes and green hair. He kept looking around nervously, as though he expected something catastrophic to happen at any minute. The third man, the quiet one, had neatly kept brown hair and emotionless blue eyes.

“Please state identification,” a robotic voice requested from the black door.

The first man stepped up and said, “Steel McNabb, level blue clearance.”

A green light emerged from the door and scanned the man.

“Identification confirmed,” the voice said, “you may enter.” The black door opened and let him through, closing behind him.

The second man followed the same procedure. “Uhm, Billy Twig, level orange,” he said, one eye twitching.

“Identification confirmed,” the voice said, letting him through.

The third man stepped up to the door. “Dr. Taylor, top level clearance,” he said.

Inside, the tower was just as blindingly white. The only object to break its harsh glare was a black desk set between two elevator doors. “My I help you?” a colorless woman asked from behind the desk, her voice as lifeless as the machines outside.

“We’re here to see the Doctor.” Steel said.

“You are the three working on the Reclamation of Project Artemis?” she asked.

“That’s us.”

She pushed a button. “Then you may head straight up.” One of the elevators opened and the three men crowded in.

“Aww, man,” the bug-eyed man said, “we’re dead. We’re sooo fucken dead.”

“Shudup Tweeker,” Steel snarled. “We ain’t dead.”

“But we lost her,” Tweeker continued. “We lost the girl! The Doctor’s gonna be pissed!”

“It couldn’t be help,” Taylor said. “Her powers would fool even the most well trained of men.”

“I just don’t get it how she got ‘em back so quick,” Steel grumbled. “Tha bitch was suppose ta be drugged.”

Dr. Taylor shrugged. “Project Artemis was trained to be an assassin, a spy. She could have not been taking her medication for months and we wouldn’t have known. Not to mention we are making drugs for an alien creature whose physiology we know very little about. Her metabolism could have shifted, she could have developed a resistance. It is difficult to say.”

The elevator stopped and the door slid open. “Yeah, well lets see you say that to the Doctor when he finds out we didn’t come back with the girl,” Tweeker said as they stepped out.

They stepped into another white room with another single black door, where two large men in black uniforms stood on either side, genetically engineered soldiers of the Doctor’s Lab. The three men walked past the guards and through the black door. The floor and ceiling of the room they stepped into were stark white, and in the center was an all black counsel. Television screens lined all the walls of the large room, black and white security cameras

watching over every aspect of the Doctor's world.

The above-mentioned man was sitting there in the counsel when the three men walked in, looking up at them with his sightless eyes. It was said the Doctor had gone blind when he had contracted Moonsickness, an epidemic that killed hundreds of people each year due to the pollen of a flower native to the planet, and that it had been then the Doctor created the antidote to the disease, an antidote he had used to gain his current power, and still used to control The City. Only *he* knew how to create it, and made sure to keep it a closely guarded secret.

"Well?" the Doctor asked as the men came in. He wore a harsh white uniform, not baring a single stain or wrinkle. His was skin pale from lack of sunlight and worn from old age. Yellow fingernails curled from his fingertips, reminding one of the claws of a beast.

"We lost The Project in The Forest," Dr. Taylor said. "She threw an illusion at us. By the time we realized we had been tricked, she was gone."

The Doctor frowned. "Her medication is wearing off already. This isn't good, isn't good at all."

"She is severely wounded Doctor," Taylor said, glaring at Steel from the corner of his eyes. "Even Project Artemis could not have gone far without needing to seek some aid."

"I told you The Project was to be captured without harm," the Doctor snapped. "She is the last of her kind. If The Project dies, then all we've worked towards is lost."

Steel shifted slightly and frowned. "Believe me Doctor, I know," Taylor said.

"Do you know where you lost her?" the Doctor asked.

"Yes," Taylor replied. "In the northeastern corner of block twenty of The Forest."

The Doctor frowned. "Those are The Outskirts."

"Yes," Taylor said. "There are a few permanent settlements in that area though. We plan to scout them starting tomorrow."

"Good, go do that," he said, and the three men turned to leave. "Oh, and gentlemen."

"Yes Doctor?" Taylor asked, turning back to the old man.

"If Project Artemis dies because you two idiots shot a hole in her side then you better not bother coming back because you'll be dead too," the Doctor snarled. "Taylor, do try to keep a tighter reign on your men."

"Yes Doctor," he said, and with that the three men left.

*"What are you doing Dr. Taylor?" a young Artemis asked as she sat on a steel table.*

He attached electrodes to her forehead. "These are going to measure what is going on inside of you when we do our tests today," he replied.

The little girl made a face. "I don't wanna do the tests. I don't like them."

Dr. Taylor sighed. "I know Artemis, but you know you have to do the tests, and you know you shouldn't complain. It irritates the Doctor when you complain."

Her large violet eyes looked at one of the many cameras that were the all-seeing eyes of the Doctor. She shivered and kept quiet.

She dodged the bullets, pulling out her gun and shooting to take out her targets. One bullet each. Nice and easy, don't waste the ammo; you don't know when you might need it. Someone reached at her from behind, but the target barely had time to move before she had broken it into a million pieces. She didn't bother to check her targets to see if they were innocents or not before she fired. That was not part of the drill.

She came up to a single red button and hit it, the lights coming on to reveal a lone girl standing in a plastic town filled with dead plastic targets. The ten-year-old girl looked up at a booth in the corner with eyes far older than they should be, holding the gun with frighteningly casual ease in her one hand. "Good job Project Artemis," the Doctor said from the booth. "Now run through it again. I want you to finish faster."

"Yes Doctor." Artemis said, as she walked back to the starting point. It was useless to argue with the Doctor, it brought nothing but trouble.

She sat on a steel table as Dr. Taylor went through the physical: drawing blood, checking her pulse, and taking X-rays. The Doctor sat in a white chair with a strange man in a blue suit Artemis had never seen before. The blue suit. It seemed so bright and loud against the black and white lab. "Say ah." Dr. Taylor ordered. She obeyed.

"Yes, already at her young age she is stronger, faster, and better than any of the genetically engineered soldiers we use," the Doctor said to the man in blue.

"I thought the Ancients had psychic powers, what about them?" the man in blue asked.

"In the interest of everyone's safety, we suppress them with drugs. If she's going to do a mission, we take the medication away about a week before so she has some abilities."

"She must be quite useful. What about the DNA code? Have you cracked it yet? An army of soldiers like her would be powerful."

"No, I haven't. But we keep on trying."

"All right Artemis, now take a deep breath," Dr. Taylor ordered. She obeyed.



She brought the target into her scope, following the suited man with the intensity of a honed athlete. Easy Artemis, the twelve-year-old girl told herself, just nice and easy.

His head centered in the cross hairs and she squeezed the trigger, lodging a bullet in his brain that killed him instantly. As easy as that. People screamed and ran and blood pooled beneath the dead man, a shocking shade of red.

Artemis was momentarily stunned. This wasn't like practice. This wasn't like the obstacle courses she had to run again and again. He wasn't plastic or wood, he was real, and she had really killed him.

"Good job Project Artemis," Steel said into her headphones. "Now head back to base, the Doctor wants to see you."

"Yes sir," Artemis replied. Then, taking one last look at her first kill, she vanished into the shadows.

When she woke up she was in a strange room with wood walls, some rickety furniture, and a small window. She was glad that the window was open. She wasn't fond of closed spaces. She sat up in the bed, looking down to realize she wasn't wearing her own clothes, but a nightgown. She instinctively went for where her gun should be, but of course, it wasn't there.

*Where am I?* She thought, remembering the people in The Forest, her passing out. Artemis looked at her injury and found a clean white patch placed over a neatly stitched wound. They had healed her. But that didn't mean they were friendly. She pushed the sheets aside and moved to get out when her knees went weak and her vision hazy. She quickly scratched the idea and pulled herself back into bed. *I must of been sicker than I thought.*

Just then the door to the room opened and the boy from the day before walked in carrying a tray. "Hey, you're awake," he said.

Artemis felt her heart rate quicken and looked away from him. "How long have I been unconscious?"

"Two days," he replied. "Not very long considering the hole you had in your side, and the fever."

Artemis was stunned at how long she had been asleep, the rest of his words melting away. Two days. That was more than enough time for the Doctor to organize a search for her. "Where am I?" she asked.

"You're in the town Foxglove, in The Outskirts," he said. *That* at least was good news. The Outskirts were a loosely tied gypsy-like community with few permanent settlements. People came, people went, most of them bandits, and no one bothered to keep track. They lived outside the grip of The City,

on the edges of The Forest where The Patrol didn't go. Dr. Smith would have a difficult time tracking her down out here.

"But hey, you shouldn't worry too much about that stuff," the boy said, interrupting her rapidly racing thoughts. "You're safe now. Whatever happened, whoever was chasing you, they're not gonna find you here." He set the tray in front of her. "You need to worry more about getting better."

Artemis looked down at the soup before her, not sure how to deal with all of this. First of all, the only food she had ever consumed was the nutrient shakes and bars The Lab had given her. She had never had what a normal person would call real food. Secondly, she didn't know how to deal with the boy. No one had ever really been nice to her except for one person, and he had been killed because of it, and there he was smiling at her, as she looked at him with perplexed, mistrusting eyes.

"Go ahead," he said, "it's not poison, though I can't promise it'll taste decent. If we wanted to kill you we would of just left you in The Forest, you weren't too far from dead."

Artemis wasn't sure why, maybe she was too tired to fight, or maybe he was just too pretty for her to tick off, but she went ahead and picked up the spoon. She had seen it done enough times before, and it wasn't too difficult. At least she managed use it without spilling soup all over herself. "So whadda think?" the boy asked.

Artemis wasn't sure she knew how to respond. The nutrient supplements that had been her whole source of food since she could remember had been chalky and tasteless. This was something quite different. "It is adequate," she said.

The boy smirked. "Well, Andrea will be glad at least someone thinks that much about her cooking. By the way, my name's Kyle."

Artemis nodded her head. "I know."

Kyle waited for a second, and when she didn't offer it, asked, "What's yours?"

"My what?" She asked, confused.

"Your name."

Artemis froze. She hadn't planned for this contingency. She couldn't tell him her real name, not when the Doctor was looking for her. But what would be a suitable female name?

"It's all right," Kyle said, Artemis realizing she had taken too long in answering. "A lot of people around here don't want everyone to know their real names. We *do* have to call you something other than 'the girl who nearly blew Ray's head off' though."

Artemis felt blood rush to her face. "Oh. I, uhm, suppose I should apologize for that."

“Don’t worry about it too much, you weren’t exactly lucid when we found you,” he said.

Artemis played with her soup for a moment as she thought. “I suppose you could call me...Jane,” she said. It seemed like a normal enough name. The closest to a normal name she could think of anyways.

Kyle grinned. “Jane Doe, huh? That’s appropriate.” Artemis didn’t understand, and just kept quiet as she looked at him with those large eyes. “Never mind Jane,” he said, getting the feeling that this girl wasn’t exactly used to dealing with people. “You just eat and get some rest. I’ll let you be.”

He left the room and Artemis picked up a roll, sniffing it before taking a bite.

When she woke up again it was night, and there were voices coming from behind the door. Cheerful voices. Artemis sat up, more careful this time when she slid out of bed, and found her legs were steady. She fidgeted uneasily in the lacy nightgown, used the uniforms of The Lab.

She stood there for a moment, looking at the door. She wondered what she should do: go out the door or the window. Either one had their risks. One left her at the mercy of these people who had been kind to her but yet she barely knew, and the other left her alone in the outside world once again. *You have no real idea where you are, she thought, or how to act in this world. Plus your wound is still healing. These people have shown no signs of hostility, they have done nothing but help you, and this is the perfect place to hide from The Lab. You may as well stay until you have gotten your bearings.* Not to mention she found herself intrigued by the small group, especially the boy.

With that she clasped the doorknob and turned it, walking into the room beyond. The small living was like the bedroom she had come from: warm, cozy, and clean, but worn, with old furniture and the decor limited to a few pictures. The three people from the day before looked up at her.

“Ahh, so you’re up and moving,” Ray said. “Kyle told us you had woken up earlier today.”

“You shouldn’t be walking around though,” Andrea protested. “Your wound was deep and very infected...you need more rest.”

“I’m fine, thank you.”

“Well I’m glad you’re feeling better,” Ray said. “You gave us quite a scare there for a while.” He took a sip from his mug. “Looks like you had been running for mile with that bullet in you.”

Artemis remained quiet. “Hey,” Andrea exclaimed. “Why don’t you take my seat while I make you something to eat.” Andrea then fluttered off in a flurry of cream and pink. Artemis sat down.

“So...Jane,” Ray said. “What exactly were you doing out in The Forest all by yourself? Not a very safe thing for a little girl to be doing.”

She didn't even bat an eyelash. “I was being chased by soldiers from The Lab.”

“Really, why?”

“I don't know, maybe I was stealing weapons.” She looked at him from the corner of her eyes, wondering what sort of reaction she would get from him.

He grinned. “My, we watch our news, don't we?”

“I had wondered why you looked familiar earlier,” she said. “The Doctor hates you, you know.”

Ray shrugged. “The Doctor doesn't care for many of the people who live here in The Outskirts, and the feeling's mutual. This is, after all, the only place where you can escape his control.”

Just then Andrea flitted back into the room. “Dinner's served!”

“Well Jane,” Ray said, looking at the bowl Andrea placed in front of him dubiously, “you can stay with us as long as you need to. Anyone who is an enemy of The Lab is a friend to us.”

“Oh! We can go into town tomorrow and pick up some new clothes for you!” Andrea exclaimed obliviously. “It'll be fun!”

“You're such a girl Andrea,” Kyle said

“Is there suppose to be something wrong with that?”

Artemis didn't know what to think of all of this. She was so used to the cold impersonal glare of The Lab, that this warmth and overabundance of individuality was alien to her. “Do you think you'll be strong enough to go out tomorrow?” Ray asked as Andrea and Kyle continued to argue.

“I should be fine,” she replied absent-mindedly.

“Yeah, shopping tomorrow at ten then!” Andrea giggled.

*She was trapped. Trapped in a small, dark place like the cell with no light, no human contact, no room to breath. Artemis' breathing became irregular and shallow as panic settled in, throwing common sense out the window and driving her to madness. I-I have to get out of here! I can't breathe!*

*She began to claw at the walls that held her, not caring about the blood that poured from her fingertips. The wall started to crumble, but instead of freeing her, the rubble trapped her feet as more moved in to take its place. Wha..what is this stuff?! She then looked down and realized she was looking at human bones.*

*Artemis gulped, turning back to the wall and seeing it was made of nothing but a pile of dead bodies. Bodies of people she had killed. One of the rotted faces blinked and came to life, looking at her with a twisted smile. “Hey there Artemis, care to join us?” it asked and laughed hysterically.*

Artemis screamed as the walls grabbed her and began to pull her in, deeper and deeper into the darkness.

Artemis bolted out of bed when she woke up, sweat plastering the nightgown to her body. She leapt out the sheets, walked over to the window and pushed the curtains aside, taking in a large breath of fresh air. *Calm down Artemis, she told herself, it was just a dream, only a dream.* She got very little sleep that night.

Artemis sat outside the small house that morning, watching as the sun rose above the horizon. The house she was staying at was small and neat, not at all pretentious with neat little garden full of bright blossoming flowers that filled the air with their sweet scent. Beyond the tips of the evergreens of The Forest, the clouds were blushing a delicate pink as the sky turned from velvet black to silken blue. The moon that still hung in the sky was now painted a light gold, still visible, but paled under the sun's growing glory.

She watched with tears in her eyes, the beauty of it almost enough to chase away the memories of her dreams from the night before. Almost, but not quite. The door to the house opened and Ray stepped out carrying two large mugs. Artemis quickly wiped away the moisture and turned to him as he walked over to where she stood. "Here, have some coffee. Need it at this gawdawful hour in the morning," he said. "What the hell are you doing up at five?"

She took the cup. "I am used to being up early...Plus I wanted to see the sunrise." She had never seen a real sunrise before. She took a sip of the brew he had handed to her then looked at it in surprise.

"I tend to make it pretty strong," Ray said. "Too much?"

"No, no...I like it," she said, taking another sip.

"Yeah, let's you know you're alive." He took a drink from his own cup. "So Jane, you got any family?"

She shook her head. "No, they died shortly after I was born."

"How?"

The Doctor had told her they had died from illness, but Artemis knew otherwise. "They were murdered. The Lab killed them."

"I'm sorry."

She gave him a curious look. "For what?"

Ray shook his head and grinned. "Nothing. Don't worry about it." He then asked, "so how *did* you know who I am? Not many people do."

Artemis had known because The Lab had targeted him for assassination for stealing weapons. Artemis was told she would have to kill him if he

returned to The City. "I know a lot of things."

He watched her. "You know, they say the Doctor has one of The Ancients in The Lab. A girl. She's suppose to be about your age too. The last living survivor of the race that once inhabited this world. They say he's training her to be an assassin, using her telepathic powers for his gain."

"Yes, well, people also believe in god. But as far as I've discovered it's nothing but heresy."

"Ouch, bitter," he said. "The thing is though, I can't help but notice what an uproar The Lab has been since we found a certain girl in The Forest with a hole the size of a fist in her side."

She glared at him. "So, are you going to turn me in then? Because I would die before I would let anybody take me back to that place."

Ray didn't doubt her for a second. "No, I hate The Lab, so why would I help it get back its most powerful weapon?"

Artemis frowned. That's all she was. A weapon. An object for people to use to gain power and control, even out here. "Besides," Ray added, "we don't turn each other in here in The Outskirts. It's important to help your fellow man. If we don't, then who will?"

"I don't understand you," she said.

Ray patted her on the back, the touch startling her. "Give it some time kid."

The town Foxglove Andrea had so excitedly talked about consisted little more of a few poorly built shops looking like they were ready to fall to the ground with the next breeze. A small community of portable tents and vehicles was settled at the edge of this gathering of makeshift structures, where squatters came and went as they pleased.

Artemis spotted a boy amongst the squatters as they walked into town, his face smudged with soot. For a moment her heart stopped. He looked so much like *him*. But she shook herself and continued on. It couldn't be him, he was dead. Besides, he would have been older than herself by now if he was still alive.

Andrea grinned. "It's a perfect day for shopping, don't you think Kyle?"

"You guys can go shopping, I'm going to the bar," he said.

Andrea scowled as he walked off. "Sour puss." Artemis looked over at Andrea. "He works for Gun, the owner of the bar, as a bouncer. Without The Patrol out here to keep an eye on things, Gun is pretty much the only form of protection we have."

They walked into the general store, Artemis staying quiet as she simply took everything in. "Hmmm," Andrea mused as she looked Artemis over. "Better stick to cool colors with you. More emeralds, sapphires, and

amethysts.”

“Just not black or white,” she said.

They emerged from the general store two hours later, Artemis’ arms loaded with boxes. “I think that will do for now,” Andrea chatted obliviously. “And I am telling you, that dress I made you get is *fabulous*...”

“Get back!” Artemis yelled, sensing the danger that Andrea had failed to see.

“Andrea! Jane! Stay back!” Kyle yelled from the bar.

Andrea screamed as a spray of bullets flew their direction, Artemis dropping the boxes and pulling the girl into the store. Artemis went up to the door and looked out. There were about ten men out there all riding beat up motorcycles. They carried cheap, makeshift weapons with them, firing them wildly into the air.

“Who are they?” Artemis demanded.

“Outlaw Gangs,” Andrea replied, her voice trembling. “They go around intimidating and robbing people in The Outskirts who don’t have anyone to protect them.”

Artemis watched them for a second as they exchanged gunfire with the few fighters in the bar. “Amateurs,” she hissed, then turned to the store manager. “Hey old man! You gotta gun in here?”

The man behind the counter looked at her with large eyes. “Y-yeah, but it has no real ammunition. Just rock salt.”

“That’ll do,” she said. “Just get it for me, along with all the rock salt you got.”

Andrea watched as Artemis grabbed the gun and loaded it. “Wha-what are you going to do?”

“Get us out of this mess,” she replied. “You two get to the back of the store, find some cover. *Do not* move until I tell you otherwise.”

Andrea and the shopkeeper scrambled to the back as Artemis crept up to the side of the door, peering out. The bikers had barricaded themselves behind a fallen tree, and were still warring with the holdout at the bar. They hadn’t bothered to guard themselves from the other stores, probably assuming the bar was all they had to worry about, and the general store just happened to flank the bikers, offering Artemis the perfect opportunity.

*Damn this thing is old*, Artemis thought as she cocked the shotgun, bringing it up so she could look through the sight. She took in a deep breath, calming her mind. *Okay Artemis, focus*. She watched the bikers, opening up her other senses, and as she did so she found she could read the biker’s moves, could predict their actions a second before they saw them through.

Artemis was momentarily stunned by the strength of the feeling that poured into her. The Lab had always made it so she could use her powers on

missions, but they had always been diluted from the drugs still in her system. This, this was more power than she had ever felt before. She shook herself and turned her attention back to the enemy.

She picked her target, looping her finger around the trigger. She watched him for a full second before firing. Not blinking, not flinching, sitting still as a rock as she sent the salt flying. It hit the guy right in the shoulder and he yelped in pain, causing enough damage to make him drop his weapon, but not killing him.

Artemis cursed. "Piece of shit." She picked another target and fired, this time catching one of the bikers in the chest. By now the others were beginning to realize they had new problem to deal with and were turning to the general store.

She ducked behind the door as they opened fire, Artemis quickly reloading. *Only four more. Shit, better make 'em count.* She sensed a pause in the barrage and turned around and fired, hitting a guy in the face. She ducked back behind the door, waiting for another pause to come. When it did she fired again, two times, each one finding their mark.

One bullet left, and there were still four able-bodied shooters out there. "Andrea! Old man!" she yelled. "Is there a back door?"

"Yeah," Andrea replied. "It leads out into The Forest."

"Go! Now!" Artemis ordered. "Go back at least two hundred feet and lay in the undercover until I come and get you!"

"But what about the Moonflower?" Andrea protested.

"It's either that or a bullet! Now move!" They didn't argue further.

Artemis remained by the door, waiting. Sure enough there was the sound of footsteps as the men approached the store, rightly assuming she was out of ammo. As soon as the first man came up to the door she thrust the butt of her gun into his stomach, and he dropped his weapon as he doubled over. She shot the other man in the chest and kicked the first man in the chin. She picked up the fallen gun and shot the third man in the knee, then turned to the two left behind the tree and shot them. Hindering them and causing a lot of pain, but not killing.

The gunfire stopped, the entire town silent but for the wounded groaning in pain. Kyle emerged from the bar and walked over towards Artemis while several men quickly went to constrain the attackers. "Where's Andrea?" he asked.

"In The Forest with the shopkeeper," she replied.

"Let's go find them," he said, and looked over at her as they walked towards The Forest. "I don't know where the hell you learned to fight like that, but *damn*, I'm sure as hell not gonna piss you off."



Andrea sighed as she looked over Artemis' wounds back at the house. "Well, you managed to pull a few stitches."

"Nothing that won't heal," Artemis said.

"Yes, well, they won't if you keep on doing stupid things like that," Andrea retorted.

"I still can't believe you took them on like that," Kyle muttered, shaking his head. "You know, Gun is convinced you're trained by the military. He wants you to work for us at the bar like you wouldn't believe."

Artemis shrugged, not knowing what to say. After all, Gun was right, she had been trained by the military. "Not until she finishes healing up," Andrea said, "and that could be a good week or two."

"I should be fine..." Artemis began.

"No," Ray interrupted, "Andrea's right Jane. You need to let that thing heal."

Artemis scowled, but didn't say anything else. She wondered what she could possibly do for two weeks to keep from going insane from boredom.

It was a week after Artemis had received her order to rest, and she was sitting in a chair watching the sun set as Andrea dug in the garden. The young woman hummed as she pulled out weeds and pruned bushes, the sky above turning from pale blue, to bright pink clouds, then to lavender in the east.

She had to admit life with these people was rather nice. It was nice to have someone know her secret, to not be alone with some burden for once in her life. Plus the small family seemed to be genuinely kind. All these people seemed to be genuinely kind and that was something she wasn't used to. There had been only person in her life who had shown her such kindness, and her eyes misted over as though about Tommy

It had been the first time she had ever left The Lab, it's varying shades of black and white all she had ever known. The ornate over abundance of carved gold, crystal, and gaudy colors were enough to send her into visual shock. Not to mention the room full of people so different from the lifeless doctors.

She sat at a table next to the Doctor in her stark white uniform, watching the people consume food quite different from her protein supplements. The Doctor was talking to a large man sitting next to him.

"I understand you have decided to invest quite a bit of money in the alternative energy business," the fat man commented as he stuffed his face.

"Old energy resources from earth aren't going to last us forever, I'm surprised they've kept us going this long," the Doctor replied. "We have to find

an energy source from this planet that can sustain us for the future.”

The fat man smiled. “In other words you want to find it so you can control it.”

The Doctor smiled back. It wasn’t a very convincing gesture. “Why my dear sir, what would ever make you think that? You know I only have the welfare of our good City in my heart.”

Beside her, someone chuckled. “Would you listen to them? Talking politics like what they do now is really gonna matter in fifty years.” Artemis timidly looked over at the boy sitting next to her. “Yes, I’m talking to you,” he said.

Artemis quickly turned back to staring at her placemat. “Project Artemis is prohibited from speaking to the guests,” the Doctor said with a frown.

The boy looked at the fat man with large, if not so innocent, eyes. “Papa...” he began.

“Oh let them talk,” the fat man said. “Thomas isn’t going to corrupt her.”

The Doctor scowled. He knew he couldn’t say no to one of the most influential men in The City, that was why he would have him killed a year later. “Fine,” he consented. “Talk.”

Tommy smiled mischievously, an expression Artemis soon found he wore quite often. “So, Artemis huh?”

She nodded her head. “Ye-yes.”

“So Artemis, you dance?”

Tommy had been her first real friend, the only person who had treated her like an actual living being instead of an object. He had sat with her the entire night, telling stories of the politicians there and making fun of them. Tommy was always causing trouble.

He showed up at every event she went to after that, much to the Doctor’s chagrin. Even after his father died he did so, always sitting next to Artemis and chatting in his quick, sarcastic manner. He had even talked of helping her escape, to be free.

“Gosh darn it!” Andrea exclaimed, stirring Artemis from her reverie. “Stupid azaleas!” Artemis looked over as Andrea tore the offending plant from the ground and tossed it aside. She blushed when she saw Artemis staring at her. “I-I’ve planted azaleas here every year for five years straight, and every year they just die. I mean, I give them fertilizer, I water them, I cover them when it gets cold outside...but they just shrivel up.”

Artemis stood up and walked over to the plant, picking it up. She didn’t know if it was because the drugs were wearing off, if it was due to her new situation or what, but suddenly she felt a connection to the plant. It was as

though it was talking to her. Well, not really talking, but letting her know its feelings. Letting her sense the needs and desires, the joys and sorrows, it possessed. This connection grew to not just include the plant she held, but the dirt, the other flowers in the garden, and even into The Forest.

Artemis turned the azalea in her hand. "Plant them in the eastern corner, they'll thrive there. Then move the peach tree right here, it'll be happier."

"Oh, you garden?" Andrea asked.

"Not really." She then turned to the house, the overwhelming lull of the connection dulling her wits. "Kyle's coming." Just then Kyle walked out of the house, Andrea looking at Artemis in surprise.

"Hey Jane, I was going into town and was wondering if you wanted to go with and meet Gun," he said as he walked over.

"I'll go," she replied, dropping the plant.

"You wanna go Andrea?"

Andrea shook her head, still staring at Artemis. "N-no, I've got some transplanting to do."

Kyle shrugged. "All right then," he looked at Artemis, "let's go." They started down the road to the small town. "So Miss Jane, whadda think of our little town?"

"Nice," she replied, not sure what else to say.

Kyle was quiet for a moment. "Here for a week, beat the crap out a blood thirsty gang, and that's all you can say?" Artemis shrugged. "Well, I guess you don't need words when you can beat the shit out of anyone." Artemis grinned slightly and shook her head. "You know, I think that is the first time I have seen you smile. You should wear it more often, looks good on you."

Artemis felt blood rush to her face and quickly looked away. "So, you were a solider from The Lab?" Kyle asked.

Artemis looked at him sharply. "Ray told you..."

"No, I figured it out myself," he said. "The army fatigues you were wearing, the highly trained fighting style...not too hard to make a good guess."

"Well, yes then. I was an assassin."

"You seem pretty young to doing that kind of work," he commented.

"I was."

Kyle winced. "I shouldn't of brought up, should of I? I'm sorry, can you forgive me?"

Artemis managed a weak smile. "It is forgotten."

"Hey, I'll buy you a drink when we get to Gun's. He makes a mean Blood Mary."

Artemis grew alarmed. "A bloody Mary? He beats up a girl?"

"Oh dear Jane, you have quite a bit to learn, don't you?"

Several hours later Kyle and Jane stumbled out of Gun's bar, leaning on each other for support. A large man with an eclectic collection of tattoos leaned out the door way as they left. "Yeah Jane, you can come back whenever you're ready ta work! 'Till then, heal up!"

"Thanks!" Artemis yelled back a little too loudly.

They turned down the pathway back to the house, walking unsteadily. "Dude, dude, I cannot *believe* you beat Gun at arm wrestling. I just can't, I just can't believe it. It blows my mind," Kyle said.

Artemis giggled and drank from a bottle in her hand. "I love this alcohol stuff, it's quite delightful. Makes my head feel like bubbles."

"That's another thing I can't believe. You've never drank before. What? The Doctor had a rule against fun?"

Artemis snorted. "No shit. Damn bastard wouldn't let me piss without a goddman report."

"What about your parents? Didn't they have anything to say about all of that?" he asked.

Artemis frowned slightly. "I-I never knew my parents, they died right after I was born. The Doctor raised me."

"That sucks. How did they die?"

She shrugged. "He always told me the outside world killed them. But then, just about everything he told me was a lie."

"My parents died when I was young too," Kyle said. "Though mine died from Moonsickness, my little sister too. We couldn't afford to buy The Lab's antidote and the Doctor, being the warm soul he is, wouldn't give us any. So I stole it. But by then it was too late."

"And you made an enemy of The Lab."

Kyle grinned humorlessly. "Yeah, it's amazing how much interest they can develop in a twelve-year-old boy in a city full of crooks and murderers. So I came to the Outskirts and Ray took me in. Been here ever since."

Artemis clumsily handed him the half-drunken bottle. "Want some more?"

"Nah, I'm good. Can barley walk as it is."

Artemis took another drink. "This stuff makes everything feel warm and fuzzy."

Kyle smiled. "Yes, yes it does." They came up to the house and stopped, Kyle looking up at the night sky. "Full moon tonight. Isn't it beautiful?" Artemis just followed his gaze, continuing to suck on the bottle. "You know, you kinda remind me of the moon. Cool, quiet, all stardust and moonbeams." Artemis just froze with the bottle in her mouth. She *really* didn't how to respond to that.

“You’re a pretty girl, you know that?” he said with a sloppy smile. Artemis just shrugged as she kept sucking on the bottle, feeling more blood rush to her face if that was possible. Kyle sighed. “And I’ve drank way too much. Come on, let’s go inside before one of us passes out here in the cold.”

*She crawled through the duct system with a sniper’s rifle strapped to her back, the girl dressed in gray with her hair shoved into a cap. She came to a grate and pried it open, jumping out of the duct to land on a rooftop in the middle of the city, her eyes scanning every shadow.*

*“Position acquired,” she spoke into her headphone.*

*“Good,” the Doctor replied on the other end. “Now, go to the west wall. There you will see the Edgemont Building across the street. Target acquired?”*

*“Affirmative,” she said as she stepped up to the ledge, pulling her gun off her back.*

*“Good, now scan to the third floor up. Through the window you should see a formal gathering.”*

*She spotted the brightly dressed dancers through the large window. “I see it.”*

*“Your target will be a sixteen-year-old male,” the Doctor said. “Blond hair, blue eyes, six foot three in a black tuxedo escorting a blond woman in red.”*

*Artemis peered through her scope and spotted the target. “I have a visual...” the words died as she recognized the young man in the tuxedo. “T-Tommy?”*

*“Artemis,” the voice on the other end said, “if target is acquired then shoot. You understand me? Take out the target.”*

*Artemis watched as the only friend she ever had glided across the dance floor, oblivious to the danger that loomed over him. “Negative. Negative on target. There’s been an error,” she said.*

*The voice on the headphones became deathly calm. “No Project Artemis, there has been no error. You must kill him.”*

*“No!” Artemis cried. “I can’t kill Tommy! I won’t!”*

*“You can and you will Project Artemis, because I told you to,” he said. “Do you think he actually cares for you? Are you such a fool that you think you are something other than some bauble for this rich boy to play with? He’s human Artemis, and you are far from such. He has no real sympathy for you, an alien creature he couldn’t possibly understand. You are nothing more than some curiosity he took a moment’s interest in, and once he’s bored with you, he’ll toss you aside like an old rag.”*

*“No, that’s not true. Tommy’s my friend...”*

*“Things like you don’t get to have friends Project Artemis,” the Doctor said. “He’s a distraction, and he must be taken out. Either you do it, or I’ll send someone else after him.”*

*“No! I won’t let you hurt him!”*

*“You don’t have a choice,” he said then the speaker died.*

*“Doctor?” Artemis called. “Doctor!” She then looked at the building, at the ball, at Tommy wearing a large grin as she realized what was about to happen. “Oh God, please no.”*

*The aftershock of the explosion knocked her to the ground, a cloud of gray dust washing over her as the building collapsed to the ground. As she sat back up and looked down at the charred remains of the Edgemont she knew there was no way anyone could have survived. Tommy was dead.*

*That was the first time she had ran off. The Lab had found her a couple hours later in state of shock and when she had returned Dr. Smith had locked her in solitary confinement for a month, with food and water as her only contact to the outside world. It had driven her mad. She was useless for a full year after the incident, until rehabilitation brought her sanity back. But even then she never was fully the same. They considered her ruined due to the claustrophobia she suffered ever sense.*

She woke up feeling sick the next day, her skull pounding and stomach gurgling. She supposed the hangover had been enough to block her delicately growing psychic sense, which was why she never sensed the danger coming.

Ray burst into her room. “We have to get you someplace safe.”

She got out of bed, sensing his urgency. “The Lab’s here,” she said.

“And looking for you.” He grabbed her arm and pulled her through the house. “I got a place where you can hide.”

“Ray, let me go. If they see you here with me, they’ll kill you,” she said.

“Well, they just won’t see you here then, will they?” he replied. “And don’t even *think* about giving me that sort of talk. I don’t give up that easy.” They walked out the back door and into The Forest, behind her Artemis could hear the roar of engines as The Lab’s men pulled into town.

“Kyle...” she murmured.

“Don’t worry, the kid can take care of himself,” Ray said, pulling her deeper into The Forest, to the point where the tiny house vanished from sight. “This is around where we found you,” he commented as he pulled a small remote from his pocket. He pressed a button and suddenly the forest floor opened up, revealing a secret chamber beneath.

“You go down there and hide,” Ray said. “I’ll come back to get you when everything’s safe. There’ll be a light switch to your right, and some provisions under the far bench.”

Artemis gulped as she looked down at the large black hole, so much like the cell she’d been kept in for so long, and Ray saw the fear in her eyes. “Hey,

don't worry kid, I won't forget ya."

She nodded and quietly went down into the chamber, not having much of choice unless she wanted to fight The Lab. She looked back up at Ray as he closed the steel doors. "Like I said, don't worry. I doubt I'll be gone longer than five minutes."

She nodded her head, then the doors closed behind her and she was left alone in darkness. *Okay Artemis, she told herself, stay calm. This isn't the cell, this isn't the Lab. You're safe here.* But even as she told herself this, she could feel the undeniable panic settle in and begin to take over. Her breathing grew rapid and shallow, her heart pumped in her chest loudly, sweat started to form on her brow and her body shook.

*The light switch, I have to find the light switch!* She began to feel the walls for any hint of the object. "Dammit!" she sobbed. "Where's the mother fuck-en light switch!"

Suddenly she felt a knob and she pushed it. The room filled with light, and Artemis sighed with relief as she leaned against the wall. Then her jaw dropped at what she was. The entire room was filled with weapons. Guns, grenades, rocket launchers, swords and bows all lined the walls; some of the stuff he had she'd never even seen before. "Well, looks like someone has been busy."

He wasn't back for her in five minutes. In fact he wasn't back for her in five hours. And while the light had provided enough relief to keep her panic at bay, she still felt uncomfortable, and the prolonged stay in the small, crowded room was beginning to take its toll.

She decided to meditate to try to keep her mind from the growing pressure, but all she could think about was how crowded it was in the cell. Even the array of fascinating weapons couldn't keep her thoughts from it. It was getting so hard to breathe. She had to get out, *soon*. The only thought that kept her from running out there was a fear even greater than the sense of being trapped - The Lab.

Artemis nearly sobbed with relief when the door finally opened, Kyle standing on the other side. "Whoa, hey, take it easy there," he said as she all but stumbled out.

Artemis ignored him and sat on the ground with a thud, just breathing and grateful to be out of the dank hole. "You okay?" Kyle asked, his brows knit with concern.

"I...I...don't...care for...small spaces," she managed between labored breaths.

"I can tell," he said, walking over to help her stand up. She was still shak-

ing. “Come on, let’s get you back home. Those guys finally left.”

She nodded her head and let him help her along. It was then she noticed the bruise on his face. “They attacked you.”

“Yeah,” he said, “they got a little rough.”

Artemis looked away. *This is my fault*, she thought.

“Hey,” Kyle said, “don’t get that ‘if I wasn’t here none of this would of happened’ look on your face. They’re The Lab, they’re assholes. They’re always looking for an excuse to rough someone up. Besides, no one got really hurt. Just a few bruises here and there.”

Artemis still wasn’t happy. “Jane,” Kyle began in a singsong voice, “you better said that I’m right.”

“What?”

“Say that I’m right Jane, and you have nothing to be moapy about.”

“Why?”

“Because if you don’t, I’m gonna poke your shoulder until you do.”

“Poke my...” she began, when he started to poke her shoulder with his finger. Artemis scowled. “Is that suppose to do something?”

“Annoy you,” he said as he continued.

Artemis continued to scowl, getting more irritated because she soon realized he was right. “You can stop that now,” she said.

“Not until you say it.”

Artemis shivered. “Okay! All right! You’re right!”

“About what?” he asked as she continued to poke.

“I have nothing to moap about,” she added then pawed him away. “Now please, stop that!”

“Okay,” he said, “just wanted to hear that I was right.”

They started back towards the house. “I don’t understand you people,” Artemis muttered under her breath.

“Oh, and being a seventeen-year-old claustrophobic ex-assassin makes so much more sense.”

The weeks passed by as Artemis healed with no further incidents, and the odd girl began to get used to the life in the little town in The Outskirts, even began to like it. She had readily taken to gardening with Andrea during her recovery and found she a green thumb. Of course it helped she could talk to the plants. She also found a mutual interest with Ray when it came to his weapons, and they would often go to his hidden room and talk over his collection. Well, Ray mostly talked and Artemis mostly listened.

She soon was even well enough to start working for Gun, who was a



friendly ex-mercenary with a big voice and plenty of crude jokes. She wasn't exactly used to his ways, and didn't understand any of his jokes, but he was a nice man and that was all she cared about.

The job wasn't bad either. Only occasionally did large gangs attack like they had her first day in town, and even that had been subdued by The Lab's recent burst in activity. Most of her duties were restricted to breaking up fights and escorting the overly drunk home. Plus after the bar closed she, Kyle, Gun, and a few other workers would usually sit around and have a couple drinks, discussing the day's events.

Her and Kyle had gotten to the point, between working and living at the same places, where they spent quite a bit of time together. And Artemis found she didn't mind it. Kyle was witty and outgoing, always doing or saying something crazy, and always quick with a comeback. Quite the opposite of herself. Artemis found more and more she enjoyed having him around, and regretting it when they had to part.

Obviously everyone else noticed it too, and Gun was always making cracks that Artemis didn't understand, Kyle always blushing (which was unusual for him) and telling her to never mind. It had gotten to the point where Artemis felt so integrated into her new life she had even stopped referring to herself by her old name, and instead started using Jane.

There were times though, when she didn't feel so a part of everything. Like when she would be sitting in the bar after work, listening to their conversation and realize she had nothing to say. She had no exciting stories to tell, well, none that she would *want* to tell, and the only group of friends she had ever had consisted of a dead boy.

Not only that, but she didn't understand half the jokes anyone told her, cultural references confused her, and her conversation skills were so severely retarded they might as well not exist at all. Assassins didn't need to know how to make good conversation. Plus her psychic powers were growing stronger everyday, and while she did her best to hide them, it was difficult.

Ray just ignored her little slip ups: knowing what he was going to say before he vocalized it, wanting something and suddenly having it move across the room into her hand. But others weren't so collected about it, including Kyle. It just about killed her every time she slipped up in front of Kyle. He would always try to laugh it off but she could tell it bothered him, and every time one of her slip ups occurred everyone would get so quiet, giving her that same knowing look. They *knew* what she was, and she didn't need telepathy to understand that.

At times like that she *felt* alien. She felt as trapped and lonely as though

she were back in that cell. But most of the time she didn't feel that way. In fact she felt pretty good. Most of the time.

"Well, that's the end of another long day," Gun said as the last drunkard walked out the door. "Anyone care for a drink before they head home?"

"Sure," Kyle said as he sat at the bar.

"All right then, a beer for the guy, and a scotch on the rocks for the little lady," Gun said as he handed them their usuals. "You better watch out Kyle, she's gonna start out drinking you here in a little bit."

"She's already meaner than me, tougher than me, and stronger than me," Kyle said. "Can't you let me hold onto the last illusions of my manhood?"

"Ahh, you like 'em like that and you know it," Gun said with a wink. "Hey, next Saturday is Founder's Day. Got any plans?"

"Oh the usual. Drink, blow shit up."

"Well why don't ya do that here? I kinda got a little party goin' on," Gun said.

"Sure," Kyle said, then shot him a glare. "Just keep your paws off the girls you dirty old man. *Both* of them."

Gun chuckled. "What, you think I gotta a death wish? Ray'd kill me if I touched Andrea, and Jane here can just plain kick my ass. Though I have to say, I *do* like 'em a little on the rough side."

Kyle shot him a dirty look and Gun laughed. "Just joken' man."

But Jane wasn't paying attention to the conversation, hadn't even touched her drink. Her thoughts were elsewhere. "Gun," she said.

"Yes my little angel of sinful delight?"

Kyle gave him a weird look, and Jane just ignored it. "That shot gun in the back loaded?"

Both Kyle and Gun looked at each other. "Yeah, why?"

Jane unstrapped her pistol from her side. "Go get it. Now."

Gun didn't even give it a second thought and followed her orders immediately. Jane walked up to a window. "What is it?" Kyle asked.

Jane could sense it, could feel it coming. "Trouble," she said, "bad trouble." They both looked out the window to see a group of ten or twelve men come into town on motorbikes and A.V.s. They wore patched up armor and carried guns, all painted with the symbol of a red skull and bones. A flag that hung from one of the A.V.s carried the same symbol. Kyle swore.

"What?" Gun asked as he came back with the shotgun.

"The Red Skulls," Kyle replied.

"Mother fucker!"

Jane looked back at Kyle. "Bad?"

“Yeah, real bad,” he said. “The Red Skulls are known particularly for not being real nice guys.”

Jane looked back to the window as the two men talked. Strapped to the back of one the A.V.s was a white wolf trapped in a cage, his eyes a startling blue. He looked starved and crazed, his body inflicted with wounds and his fur matted with blood. *They've been torturing him*, Jane realized, *to get him to be a fight dog.*

Jane looked into those eyes, and something inside her snapped. She knew then and there she would free that wolf, and beat the shit out of anyone who was stupid enough to get in her way. “We have to get Ray,” Kyle said as Jane moved away from the window. “There’s no way we can take these guys on ourselves.”

“Agreed,” Gun said then looked up as Jane walked over to him. “Hey Jane, could you...hey!” Jane grabbed the gun from his hands then walked over to the door with her pistol in one hand and Gun’s shot gun in the other.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?!” Kyle cried.

“Beating the mother fucking shit out of some punks,” she snarled, cocking the shotgun and kicking the door open.

“Jane!” Kyle yelled.

“I know this may be not the time, but she’s pretty hot when she’s pissed,” Gun said.

Jane walked up to the gang and they laughed as they took notice of her. “Look whose come here to stop us,” one of them said, “a little girl.”

Jane fired the shotgun, blowing the man’s arm off. He screamed and fell to the ground, claspings the gushing wound. The others looked at their fallen comrade in shock, and Jane took advantage of this, shooting two men in the knees with the pistol. By then the others were up in arms, ready to fight.

The first shots missed her, Jane able to predict the bullet’s paths and deflect them using her psychic energy. Suddenly there were shots coming from behind too, and Jane looked back to see that Kyle had left the bar to help her. “Gun’s getting Ray!” he yelled as he fired.

“Shit!” Jane cursed, seeing the bullet heading towards Kyle’s skull. She deflected it with her powers, but in doing so let down her own shield. A bullet landed in her thigh and she hissed in pain. She fired the shotgun at the man who shot her, the bullet landing in his leg and taking his calf off. He collapsed to the ground.

By now the Red Skulls were beginning to realize they weren’t dealing with a normal human being as Jane continued to dodge and deflect bullets. Five of their men were down, two with missing limbs, while she continued to

attack with a bullet lodged in her leg. Jane fired, shooting the tires out of the A.V. that carried the wolf and putting bullets in the driver's arms.

Gun and Ray came into view, Ray with a grenade launcher. "I brought the cavalry!" Gun yelled.

The Red Skulls took one look at the grenade launcher, another at the unearthly girl, and decided it was time to get out of there. They quickly picked up their wounded and drove off leaving the ruined A.V., and the wolf, behind.

Jane limped up to the snarling animal, Kyle following closely behind yelling. "You fucken crazy bitch! What the hell did you think you were doing?! You coulda gotten yourself killed! Hell, it's a fucken miracle you didn't...Jane! Don't open that cage!"

She ignored him and shot off the lock, the wolf snarling as she opened the door. For a moment she looked into those blue eyes, and suddenly the wolf calmed down, becoming complacent and allowing Jane to touch him.

"Is that was this was all about?" Kyle cried, exasperated. "A dog?"

Jane picked the animal up. "No being should be treated like this," she said quietly.

"Jane, it's a damn animal..." he began, when she cut him off with a glare.

"No being should be treated like this," she snapped. "Starved, beaten, caged. Taken away from their people and their home. Spirit broken and abused. And for what? For what?! To serve someone else's sick purpose? To do their dirty work? No. No being should have to go through this. Human or not." Tears began to fall down her face.

Kyle's temper cooled. "Agh...you-you're right. I'm sorry. No creature should have to go through that. Could you let me carry the wolf though, you got a bullet in your leg."

Jane looked into the wolf's eyes for a moment before passing him to Kyle, the animal showing no sign of protest. "Come on Jane, we'll bandage him up and take care of him. And you too."

She nodded her head as she wiped the moisture from her eyes. Kyle looked up as Ray and Gun walked over. "Looks like we have a new pet."

Jane sat there as Ray finished patching up her wound, Andrea taking care of the wolf. "Ray, can I ask you a question?"

"Ask away."

"How did my people die?"

Ray looked up at her, then back at her injury. "The Doctor never told you?"

"No."

“Well I guess that makes sense, we’re the ones who did it after all.” She looked at him with startled eyes. “Yeah, you see we humans, we aren’t native to this planet. Your people were, and we just happened to crash land here.

“As you can tell we have fairly similar physiology, in fact nearly identical as far as genetics are concerned. Which is why I guess the Doctor has yet to figure what makes you different from us. Your people, the Ancients, lived in a fairly primitive hunter gatherer society but possessed extremely advanced cognitive abilities such as telepathy, and those powers could be enhanced by the Moonflower.

“Unfortunately, as is typical of two isolated cultures meeting for the first time, we brought disease. Wiped out most of your people in the first ten years, but it also turned out we humans have a deadly reaction to the Moonflower that we call Moonsickness, and it killed *us* by the thousands as well.

“Humans, in our typical manner, killed what we couldn’t understand. We slaughtered what was left of the Ancients, who we were convinced were poisoning us. They were no match for the finely tuned ‘death machines’ of my ancestors. The few that lived went deep into The Forest to slowly die off. The humans then built The City, the only place on this planet free from the Moonflower.”

“So your people killed mine?” she said in half-disbelief.

He nodded his head. “Does that make you angry at us?”

She looked at him with confused eyes, as though she didn’t know the answer. “I suppose it doesn’t make me happy. But, *you* didn’t specifically kill them; you’ve shown me nothing but kindness. It was someone from a long time ago whose dead already. No point in being angry at you for what a corpse did.”

“Are you angry at the Doctor for not telling you?”

The cold, questioning look in her eyes melted away to fire, and for a moment Ray was startled by the intensity of the hate in that glare. “Oh, I am angry at the Doctor, but for many reasons other than that.”

“Why are you angry at him?”

“Why?” She repeated incredulously. “Why? Because he trapped me in that damn prison, that’s why. Because he bent me, manipulated me, and twisted me into his damn perfect soldier. The only time I was let out of the training facility was for him to show me off to his cronies, or kill them. The only time I ever talked to anyone, besides doctors, was when political officials were permitted to ask me questions. And if anyone seemed to get too close to me they were called a liability and killed. Do you think I chose that life? Do you think that was what I wanted? I wasn’t a living being, I was a tool. I wasn’t a little girl to him, but a weapon he could use. You ask me why and I tell you

because before I came out here I had never even seen a damn sunrise.”

She turned away, her knuckles white. “I want to hurt him. I want to make him pay for what he did to me. I want to make him bleed and watch the light fade from his sightless, ugly eyes.”

Ray gulped, watching her sit there as she trembled with rage. This girl was one big mess, and he had a feeling it was going to take a long time to fix her, if she ever could be. “Hey, take it easy,” he said. “You’re no longer there, you’re here, and you’re not going back.”

“Damn right I’m not going back. I’d shoot a fucken bullet in my brain first.”

Within the week both Jane and Wolf, as she plainly called him, had healed up well. Wolf had become a part of the group just as Jane had, and was just as mysterious as his rescuer as well.

Jane fidgeted uneasily as Andrea looked over her wound. “Once again Jane, you have healed amazingly quick,” she said. “Just no dancing for you little missy.”

“I don’t think you have to worry about that under any circumstances,” Jane commented wryly.

“Is that a joke I heard coming from you!” Andrea exclaimed in mock surprise. “Oh dear Lord the Apocalypse must be coming!”

“Funny.”

Andrea smiled. “I have to say, you look very cute today. All dressed up for Founder’s Day.”

Jane squirmed in the little blue dress she wore, not yet used to the concept of them. “You think so?”

Andrea nodded her head. “Of course! You’ll have all the boys staring at you.” Jane blushed slightly at this. “And I know Kyle will love it.” Jane turned even redder as Andrea giggled.

Andrea knit her brows. “There is something missing though...A hah! I’ve got just the thing!” She walked over to a vase and pulled out a flower. “A flower for your hair, a blue Lilly.” She tucked the white and blue Lilly behind Jane’s ear and heaved a sigh of contentment. “There, perfect.”

Just then Ray and Kyle walked into the house. “You two ready to go?” Ray asked. “It’s almost dark out and the party’s about to get started.”

“Oh father, you have no patience,” Andrea said. “But yes, we are ready to go.”

“Bout time,” Kyle said, “thought you two were gonna take all night.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you,” Andrea teased. “Now come on Jane, let’s go.” They left the house and headed down the road.

“Wolf!” Jane called, and suddenly the white wolf came bounding out of

The Forest and ran over to her. He was a magnificent creature now that his wounds had begun to heal and he had gained weight. He was also gigantic with his large head coming up to Jane's chest.

Andrea found some excuse to get herself and Ray further ahead, leaving Kyle and Jane walking alone with Wolf. "You look nice tonight," Kyle commented.

Jane blushed and fidgeted with her dress. "Andrea helped."

Kyle grinned wryly as Andrea kept glancing back to see what they were doing. "Why am I not surprised?"

The small town of Foxglove was filled with people, all laughing and talking around a large bonfire. Colorful paper lanterns were strung from every eve of every building, music filled the air, and already sparkles danced in the darkening sky as the festivities began. "Come on, let's hurry up before the fire works start," Kyle said.

Jane followed him into the crowd, and before she knew it food was crammed into one hand, beer into another, and a seat had been found for her so she could take the pressure off her wounded leg. Even Wolf had managed to get a hold of a couple of hot dogs.

"You okay sitting over here?" Kyle asked. Jane nodded, enjoying the warm summer night and the atmosphere of the party. "Sure you don't wanna blow something up?" he persisted.

Jane smirked. "I've done enough of that in my day."

"But these have pretty colors," Kyle said. "And I know how you love pretty colors."

"I think that I will be quite all right with my beer and my sparkler," she said. Truth was, even though she *did* love pretty colors, she was nervous about the fireworks. Too many bad memories.

Kyle saw that look in her eye, and knew to back off. "Fine then, sparklers it is." He pulled a lighter from his pocket and set a sparkler off, handing it to her.

The party lasted well into the early hours of the morning, and it was late before Jane headed home, Kyle helping her walk so she wouldn't put pressure on her leg. "You sure you'll make it?" he asked.

She nodded her head. Her leg was sore, but not debilitating. "I'll be fine."

"There's a log where we can sit for a sec," he said. "If not for your sake then at least for mine. I'm getting tired lugging you around." They came up to the log and sat down, Kyle leaving his arm wrapped around her and holding her close. They sat in silence for a moment, looking up at the stars. "That was fun, wasn't it?"

"Until you and Ray tried to blow up that A.V.," she said.

“Ahh come on, it’s just been sitting there with bullet holes in it. Besides, I think Wolf liked it,” he said.

“Yes, that was why he left as soon as Ray pulled out the M-80s.”

“He did? I don’t remember that.”

“That’s because you were too busy looking for gasoline.”

Kyle laughed nervously. “Well hey, they’ve been meaning to put a hole there. A very large, deep hole...”

“Oh,” Jane said, taking him seriously. “Well then, I suppose you did give them that.” Kyle snickered. “What?”

“Nothing,” he said. “Just don’t...”

“Don’t what?”

Kyle just smiled and shook his head. “Never mind.” A shooting star streaked across the sky, fading into the horizon. “Quick, make a wish!”

“A wha...”

“Just be quiet and make a wish.” He looked up at the sky and remained quiet. Jane wondered if he had gone mad. A few seconds later he turned back to her. “Whadda wish for?”

“I don’t understand how making an arbitrary request on a random natural phenomena will...” she began.

Kyle rolled his eyes. “Oh just shut up and kiss me.”

“Huh?” She began, when she was quieted by Kyle’s lips pressed against hers.

“So, whadda think about that?” He asked after he broke the kiss. Jane giggled inanely, babbled something then fell over. Kyle looked at her lying on the forest floor. “I’m gonna be optimistic here and take that as a good sign.”

The tattooed kid sat in the black and white room lined with televisions, looking at the blind man who sat behind the counsel with dread. The Doctor sat there calmly as he bored into the kid with those sightless eyes, as though he could see into his very soul.

“So, you and your comrades were beaten up by a girl. And what has this to do with me?” the Doctor asked.

“Man, that crazy bitch didn’t just beat us up. She was-she was...it was like she wasn’t *human* or somethin’. She knew every move we’d make before we did! I shot her five times and I coulda swore each’d hit, but they just bounced right off her! It was creepy I tell ya.”

*That* caught his attention. “Really? Did you see what she looked like?”

“Hell ya. I’m sure as hell not gonna forget what that bitch looked like for *long* time,” he said. “And she matches your thing. Silver hair, purple eyes, short.”

“And where exactly did this incident occur?” the Doctor asked, voice



calm but knuckles clenched white.

“Ugh, some Outskirts town. I think it was called Foxglove or somethin’.”

“Very well, thank you for your information...” the Doctor began.

“Uh, doctor?” the kid said. “I heard there was a reward...”

He waved a dismissive hand through the air. “Yes, yes. Go and leave your contact information with my receptionist. If your assistance leads to Project Artemis’ capture you’ll be rewarded accordingly. You are now dismissed.” The kid didn’t lose anytime getting out of there.

As soon as the boy left, Steel walked in. “Well?”

“Tell Tweeker to take his men to Foxgolve, search for her there,” the Doctor said.

“We’ve been there already, found nothin’,” Steel said.

“Then search harder. I don’t care if you have to burn the place to the ground, I want her found,” the Doctor snapped.

“Yes Doctor.”

“Oh and Steel, don’t bother enlisting Taylor,” the Doctor said. “It seems as though he has been sympathetic with out little runaways...cause.”

“He dead?”

“No...just in place where he can think about the consequences of his actions.”

She clipped flowers from a rose bush, handing them over to Andrea who took them and placed them in a basket, talking as she absent-mindedly petted Wolf. “So anyways, I told Samantha she should just dump that jerk Skyler. I mean, if he can’t bother to spend five minutes with her, why should she waste her time? Don’t you agree?”

“I have no idea,” Jane replied truthfully.

“Oh Jane, you may be genius when it comes to gardening, and you may be able to beat up multitudes of bad guys, but when it come to people you are quite silly.”

“Hey there,” Kyle said as he came over, wrapping his arms around Jane’s waste and giving her a kiss. “Whatcha two doing out here?”

“Oh, just trimming the rose bushes,” Andrea said, “and gossiping. Though I think I’m doing most of the gossiping and she’s doing most of the gardening.”

“Gossiping about what?” he asked.

“Oh, nothing but local drama,” Andrea said. “Just enough to keep myself entertained.”

“No offense Andrea, but you could find a way to entertain yourself by watching paint dry,” Kyle said.

Andrea stuck her tongue out. “Better to be happy with what you got then

always wanting more.”

Kyle and Andrea continued with their light banter, but Jane ignored it, something else catching her attention. Wolf perked up, following her gaze. *Something's coming.*

“Jane,” Kyle said, “hey Jane. You listening?”

She turned to him. “Get Andrea into the house.”

Kyle frowned. “What is it?”

“The Lab.”

Kyle turned to Andrea. “Get Ray.” She left without another word. Jane pulled out her gun and cocked it. “Aww hell no, you aren't gonna fight them.”

“Too late to hide,” Jane said. “They're already here.”

Kyle looked up the road to see a group of soldiers coming from around the corner, a thin man with green hair in the lead. “Who is...” he turned to Jane and the words died on his lips. Her eyes were narrowed, her jaw clenched, her fists clenched tightly.

“Twecker,” she hissed.

“Well, well,” Twecker said as he walked up to the house. “Looks like the punk was right, you were hiding here.”

“I'm going to give you the chance to turn around and leave Twecker,” Jane said. “Go and tell the Doctor I wasn't here, and we can both leave this alive.”

Twecker laughed. “Or what? You and this kid gonna fight us? I think you're a little outnumbered.”

“No, I'll fight you.”

“Jane...” Kyle began.

“A little over confident aren't we Project Artemis? Big girl now that we're out in the big world. Reality check bitch. You're an alien, a freak. There isn't anyone in this universe, any place in this world, where you'll belong.”

“She belongs here,” Kyle snapped.

Twecker grinned. “Do you even know what Project Artemis has done? What she can do? I've seen her kill men with her bare hands, take them down in a single shot. She's an assassin, a murderer. Ever since she could walk Project Artemis has been taught one thing-how to kill. Isn't that right?” She didn't look at Kyle.

“Her name isn't Artemis asshole, it's Jane.” Kyle snarled.

Twecker laughed. “That's great! Jane. What, ya gonna go bake some apple pie now Jane?”

“I said to leave,” Jane hissed.

“Oh I'll leave, but you're going with me.”

“I'll die before I let you take me back.”

“Trust me, if I had a choice, that’s the way it would be.” He reached for his gun, and suddenly she knew what he was planning.

“Kyle!” she cried, pushing him to the ground as Tweeker fired his gun. She dodged the bullet, and as an automatic reaction fired her own, a single bullet lodging itself between Tweeker’s eyes.

“You...” Kyle began, when all hell broke loose.

“Run!” Jane yelled, raising a psychic shield as the soldiers fired. “Get into the house!”

“But...”

“Just go!” she screamed, and then next thing Kyle knew it he was back in the house, sitting next to a stunned Andrea.

“How did you...” Andrea began.

“Jane!” Kyle cried and ran up to the door. “I can’t open it!”

“It must because of Jane,” Ray said.

Outside Jane was battling the soldiers, firing her gun and doing her best to keep her shield raised. She could feel herself beginning to lose it though. Between her anger at The Lab, her concern for her friends, and Tweeker, she could feel herself starting to slip. She couldn’t let them do what they did to Tommy to her new friends, she just couldn’t take that, she had to protect them. One of the bullets hit her arm and she cursed, focusing her attention on the shooter. His heart exploded in his chest and he fell to the ground dead. Jane was stunned for a moment by the horror of what she had done.

But they didn’t give her time to think as they continued to fire. Jane felt closed in, trapped and scared. She could feel their hate and fear, and their emotions melded with hers, causing the long suppressed pain in her to flare up fresh and raw. She clasped her head. “Why won’t you just leave me alone!” Suddenly the jeep exploded, causing a soldier to fly through the air and the others to catch fire. Jane turned to the few stupefied soldiers left, unable to stop herself in her panic. Their brains exploded in their heads and they fell to the ground dead, blood spilling from their eyes, ears, and noses.

Jane looked at the bloody scene in stunned horror as her breathing slowed and sanity returned to her. Kyle ran out of the house, took one look at the bodies then got sick. “Jesus Jane, what did you do?”

She slowly looked back at Kyle, shaking as the words Tweeker had spoken played through her mind. *She’s an assassin, a killer. Ever since she could walk she’s been taught one thing-how to kill.* “I’m so sorry I did this to you,” she said, tears running down her cheeks. “I’m sorry I brought this upon you.”

His alarm grew when he saw her take a couple steps back. “Jane...” he began.

But she didn’t hear him. “You all would have been better off if you had

just left me to die in The Forest.” With that she turned around and ran.

“Jane, wait!” Kyle called after her, but she was gone.

She ran. Ran as fast and as far as her legs could carry her. She didn’t know where she was going, and she didn’t care, she just wanted to get as far away from that scene of bloody destruction as possible. Finally she collapsed to the ground from exhaustion, lying on a bed of moss dotted with delicate white flowers.

Tears fell down her cheeks as she stared up at the sky, the white puffball clouds reflected in her eyes. *I was a fool to think things could ever work out*, she thought. *That I could have a life in this world worth living. Tweeker was right. I’m an alien, that last of my kind. Who was I to think I could find a place where I can belong?* True, Kyle had known she was an assassin, but how could he not look at her differently after seeing that? Besides, now that The Lab knew where she was, they would stop at nothing to get her. What would that bring to her new friends? Nothing but death and pain just like Tommy.

Soon Jane began to realize everything was becoming hazy and blurred. *Wha...* She then smelled the light scent fill the air as her body crushed the flowers beneath her. *Moonflower*, she realized, *I’m lying on a bed of Moonflower*. The pain in her arm and leg subsided, and her body was filled with a sweet buzzing sensation. She smiled as she laid on her back, feeling as though she were floating, allowing the delicately scented Novocain to lull her into a deep, deathlike sleep.

“Doctor,” the voice of the receptionist said over the speaker, “ we have lost communication with the Foxglove group.”

The Doctor frowned. That could mean only one thing. “Thank you,” he said. “Contact Steel for me. Tell him I have an assignment for him.”

Kyle sighed as he finished off his scotch, looking through the window at the night sky. Wolf whimpered. “Yeah, I know. I’m worried about her too.”

“Don’t worry Kyle,” Ray said. “I’m sure she’ll show up.”

“You shoulda seen the look on her face, it was so sad. I’ve never seen anyone so sad.” Kyle shook his head. “I feel so guilty. Just sitting here while she’s out there all alone.”

She ran into The Forest Kyle,” Ray pointed out. “She can survive the Moonflower, *we* can’t.”

“Besides, I bet she’ll be back before we know it,” Andrea added.

“I hope your right,” Kyle muttered. Suddenly Wolf leapt up from the ground and stood with his hair on end, growling.

“What’s the matter with Wolf?” Andrea asked.

Kyle knew, Kyle knew with all the growing dread in his heart. “The Lab. The Lab’s back for...” There was a loud boom, and all became spinning chaos.

When Jane woke up, she felt as though she had emerged from the most pleasant and peaceful sleep she’d ever had. No nightmares had tormented her, no dark shadows pulling at her from her past, only sweet dreams of happiness filled her memory. She smiled and sat up, the problems before her suddenly not seeming so problematic. So she was an alien. She had found a group of people who accepted her despite of that. And while the incident with Twecker and The Lab had been terrible, it wasn’t as though she had set out to hurt them. She had defended herself and her friends. The Lab had left her little choice in her actions.

She was standing up, convinced she had her problems under control, when the worst feeling hit her stomach. It sent shivers up and down her spine and she knew, with terrible certainty, something very bad had happened back at Foxglove. She looked up into the sky and saw it was smudged with smoke, thick and black, carrying with it the scent of death.

“No!” Jane cried and ran back to the village, heart pounding and mouth dry with fear. As she got closer to the town the pungent smell of smoke grew stronger, fueling her desperation. She burst from The Forest, into the town, and was stunned by what she saw.

The entire town had been burned to the ground, slaughtered bodies lying in the open air to serve as food for vultures. “No...” she gasped, when she spotted one of the bodies. “Wolf!”

She ran over to the dead animal and buried her face in his thick, white fur. “Oh no, Wolf,” she moaned. She looked up to wipe her tears when saw another body, her tiny world shattering. “Kyle!” She crawled over to where Kyle laid, his stomach torn up and entrails on the ground. “Kyle, oh Kyle, you have to wake up.” She sobbed, cradling his head in her arms. “You can’t die Kyle, you can’t. Oh please Kyle, just wake up.” But of course, he didn’t.

She dropped Kyle’s head to the ground, her eyes glazed over and face lifeless. Dumbly she walked over to the house that for so little time had been her home. Her heart shattered into a million unfixable pieces. “Jane...” a voice whispered, so low she almost missed it. “Jane...” She turned to the voice and found Ray. Most of his body was crushed beneath a stone slab, but he was still alive.

“Ray!” she cried, and ran over to him. “Oh Ray, I’m so sorry! So, so, sorry! None-none of this would have happened if it wasn’t for me...”

“That doesn’t...matter now,” he said. “They took Andrea...you have to

save her.”

“Andrea...” she murmured, then narrowed her eyes. She found a new place to put all her grief and sorrow, into her thirst for revenge.

Ray nodded his head. “Move the stone...take the remote from my pocket...use my weapons...my armor.”

“But moving the stone right now could kill you,” she protested.

“I’m...already dead Jane. Just...just save my daughter.”

She could see he was telling the truth, and nodded her head. She removed the massive slab, revealing Ray’s destroyed body beneath, then found the remote in his pocket. She looked at the small, black square. This was all her fault, this death this destruction. If she hadn’t come here they would still be alive. Kyle would still be alive. *Death just seems to follow you wherever you go.* She knew The Lab’s capturing Andrea was a trap. They wanted her to go after Andrea that was the only reason why they kept the girl alive. She didn’t care though, she would make them pay. She would make them pay so dearly.

“Save her Jane,” Ray said. “Save her for me.”

She turned back to Ray, pulled out her gun and cocked it. She placed the barrel against his head and Ray closed his eyes. “My name’s not Jane,” she said with tears falling from her cold, barren eyes, “it’s Artemis.” With that she pulled the trigger and Ray’s body went limp, his soul going to join Kyle, Wolf, and the others in the smoke.

The receptionist sat in the black and white room calmly writing in her books and filing away papers. She looked up in mild surprise as the door exploded in, scattering large blocks of rock across the room. Artemis stormed in; shooting the guards that appeared, the girl wearing black body armor and carrying enough weaponry to run an army.

The receptionist hit a button that sounded an alarm, Artemis promptly shooting the woman in the chest. “Bitch,” Artemis snarled, walking past the dead body to the elevators. She pushed the button to the top floor, knowing exactly where to go. Of course she knew. She had lived her entire life in this building.

The elevator stopped between floors. This didn’t slow her down though. She knocked the top of the elevator off and climbed out, grabbing a hold of one of the cables and proceeding to climb up the building. She came to the Doctor’s floor and pulled out a large gun. She cocked it and pointed to the elevator door and fired. The bullet left a large dent in the door and caused her to swing on the cable, but she ignored this and fired again, leaving another

er large dent. After the fourth shot the door collapsed completely, and she leapt through to the other side.

Artemis shot and killed two guards that came at her. She came up to the door to the Doctor's room and knocked it over, but inside Artemis found nothing but an empty chair. The Doctor was gone.

"Well, well," a familiar voice said. "Look who decided to show up?"

Artemis turned around to see Steel flanked by Lab soldiers. Artemis narrowed her eyes and the men around Steel began to fall to the ground, clasp- ing their heads as blood gushed from their noses. "Holy shit!" Steel yelled.

Artemis held out her hand and suddenly Steel was floating in the air. He moved through the air, against his will, towards the girl and stopped inches before her with his feet dangling above the ground. "Where is Andrea, and where is the Doctor?" she demanded.

"You can go and just try to mind read me you little cunt, 'cause I ain't sayin..." he began.

"Yes you are, because I *want* you to say it" Artemis hissed, her voice ice. "You are going to tell me even if I have to slowly break every bone in your body, if I have to shatter every one of your teeth. Even if I have to skin you alive, pry back your finger nails, or rip you limb from goddamn limb you are going to fucken tell me WHERE THEY ARE!!" Her voice cracked and a few of the monitors exploded.

Steel gulped, knowing she meant what she said. The Doctor had pushed her too far. She had snapped. "Allmount Square," he said. "He plans to publicly execute her for harboring you."

She released him, and he fell to the ground. She cocked her head to the side, as if she was a radio honing in on a frequency then turned back to him, eyes glowing with quiet fury. "You lead the attack on Foxglove," she said.

He knew there was no point in lying. "The Doctor ordered it."

"You killed Kyle," she said. "You killed them all." She raised her gun and Steel closed his eyes, grateful that at lest his death would be quick. She fired and red blood splattered across the black and white room.

Calmly, she walked through the sea of bodies and took the stairs to go down to the basement. When she reached the basement she walked into a corridor of windowless steel doors, the guards looking at her in terror as she walked down the hall. Artemis ignored them. She came up to a button and pushed it, the doors sliding open to reveal tiny dark cells. Dr. Taylor walked out of one of those cells.

"Artemis?" He exclaimed. "Wha..."

"Get out of here, I'm going to blow this place up," she said.

“Artemis, you’ve been hurt,” he said.

She looked down and saw he was right, some of the bullets had found their target. Funny how she hadn’t noticed. “Never mind that.”

“Artemis, you need medical attention.”

“What I need is to destroy this place and kill the Doctor,” she said.

Taylor looked at her, and then sighed. “I’m sorry Artemis. I had hoped if you had escaped, you might be able to find some happiness.”

Her eyes softened. “I did for a while. For a while my name was Jane,” she whispered. “But that’s over now.”

“Is it? Do you have no other choice? Is this suicide mission the only way?”

“I died a long time ago Dr. Taylor,” she said. “This body is just a ghost from the long distant past.”

“Artemis...” he murmured.

She went cold again. “Go, get everyone out of here,” she ordered. “This place is going to blow in ten minutes.”

Ten minutes later Taylor stood at the edge of The Forest with the few ragged survivors left. They looked up as a loud explosion shook the sky and a series of bright orange blasts erupted from The Lab as the white monolith collapsed, sending a plume of gray dust into the sky. Taylor watched as the building fell, a symbol of cruelty and tyranny that had dominated The City for so many years.

“Good luck Artemis,” he whispered.

She walked through the streets as she headed towards Allmount Square, blood streaming from her wounds and fire burning in her eyes. Cars honked at her as they swerved to avoid her, but she paid them no mind, all her attention focused on one goal. One headed straight towards her and she waved her arm aside, her psychic energy knocking the car out of her path.

She stopped when she came to a large building. “Allmount Square,” she hissed, and went up the stairs.

She pulled out her guns as she kicked in the door, firing away. Obviously the Doctor had planned on her coming, for the place was filled with The Lab’s men, and Artemis was forced to raise a shield and fall back. Ahead she could see the Doctor standing at a podium, Andrea bound and gagged beside him.

Artemis narrowed her eyes, the sight of Andrea’s frightened face filling her with rage. She pushed her shield ahead of her and plunged into the sea of soldiers, everything blurring in Artemis’ mind as she battled, some other part of her taking over and pushing her on. Bullets flew across the room and



blood pooled on the cream marble.

A series of bullets hit Artemis in the chest and she grunted in pain, but her suicidal fury pushed her on. At one point she ran out of ammo and had to pull out two swords, falling to her knees as she swept the blades before her, cutting the legs out from under the soldiers.

She finally came to the podium, the last man screaming as she rammed the blade through his chest. She leaned on the blade for a moment, panting, drenched in so much blood she looked as though she had been stained red. "So Artemis, you came," the Doctor said.

"Go to fucking hell," she snapped and stabbed him in the chest with her other sword.

He looked down at the mortal wound in shock. "You...killed me," he gasped then collapsed.

Andrea was shaking as Artemis stumbled up to her and clumsily began to undo her bindings. She was dying. She could feel it. She just had to hold on for a little longer, just had to make things right. "Jane!" Andrea cried as she was untied. "Oh Jane, you're hurt!"

"Never mind that, you have to listen to me Andrea. I don't have much time."

"Jane no! You can't..." she began.

Artemis silenced her. "Andrea, listen to me! This is important." Hands trembling she pulled a vial from a compartment in the bottom of her boot and handed it to Andrea. "This is the cure for Moonsickness. I want you to take to a Dr. Taylor. You understand?"

"No Jane, I don't. Why can't you take it? Why..." Tears streamed down her face.

"I'm dying Andrea. I've sustained too much damage to live much longer," she said. "You-you must do this for me."

"No! You can't!" Andrea sobbed. "You can't leave me, you're all I have left! Ray, Kyle...they're all dead. You can't leave me alone in this world! You can't!"

Artemis threw up blood. "I really don't think I have much of a choice."

"Jane, I can't do this. I can't be responsible for this. I'm not strong like you."

Jane pressed the vial in her hand, smiling slightly. "Oh silly Andrea. You're far stronger than I could ever hope to be." She leaned over and kissed the blond girl on the forehead, leaving a smudge of blood on her brow.

"Jane, no!" Andrea cried as the other woman stood up. Jane just smiled, turned around, and left. Andrea ran after her, stopping in the streets as she watched Jane enter The Forest. She clutched the vial to her chest as the girl's slight figure disappeared in the trees, Andrea knowing she could not follow. She never saw her again.

# down in the dirt

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