It was around her neck. Oh gods, it was around her neck. Somehow, Legion had to try to force herself to be careful with her trembling breath; she felt the blade threatening to press right into her throat even further if she wasn’t careful. It was around the back of her neck, too, she couldn’t just pull away. She couldn’t just pull away. She wanted to just pull away, she just wanted to be anywhere but here, every muscle in Legion’s chest was strained trying to keep herself composed so that her breathing would cause her to physically hitch and drive her neck onto the razor wire but her muscles felt aflame as slowly Legion ran out of air and even though she was trying to reach up to push it away, every action seemed to just be drawing in the wire closer and closer to her neck and it felt as though it was starting to snake up across –

With a gasp, Legion woke up, her eyes shooting wide open as she instinctively curled up as much as she could, trying to make herself as small as she could, but there was something keeping her somewhat in place. She wasn’t at that base anymore. She was safe. She was caked in sweat and unbearably warm, but she was alive. She was going to remain alive, damn it. She was too fucking tired to die without getting at least one good night’s worth of sleep. With a deep breath in, Legion counted to four mentally, and as she let the breath out, she tried to force herself to collect herself and get her bearings. Once more, she repeated it; she never needed a third try. She had a killer headache, her breath reeked, and –

“Oh Dust,” she murmured under her breath as she realized that she had someone’s arms wrapped around her. Slowly, the memory fragments were falling into place: the first one was that she’d been drinking. With who? Crunch had invited her out, but… no, he left a bit earlier in the night, abandoning her with the rest of Ronin. Asshole. He’d been her exit strategy, and he’d left when she was in the middle of a shot. Without another way out of the bar, she’d been one of the last ones there, the only other ones being… Voodoo and Gemini.

Legion’s mind was screaming, even if she looked as stoically tired as she usually did. She never got drunk enough to pass the boundary to blacking out, but evidently, she’d gotten drunk enough last night to let her guard down. Mentally, she made a note to not drink until the next contract. She couldn’t afford something like that again with how Cascadia was currently going – they might have been winning, but that just left her fearful for when the tides turned. Maybe she was being pessimistic, maybe it was paranoid, but something about their victory after victory felt off to Legion. Almost as if it was too easy.

Solona had been a cakewalk, and the elements that were deployed to that offshore rig say that the security companies that the Federation hired were almost as pathetic. The reason they were drinking last night was to celebrate that last success, actually. That much Legion remembered.

She felt the person behind her shift slightly, and as they did, the last missing aspect of last night set in as she heard a tired mumble in her ear. “You good, Leeg?” Gemini’s voice was instantly recognizable, though the sobered – though very hungover – Legion was confused: she could have sworn that she’d seen Gemini pining after Fresh Meat in the past, the FNG too nervous to know how to actually respond.

“Yeah,” Legion responded, the usual flatness in her tone muted somewhat by her whispering. “I should be going, though.”

“Mmm… isn’t this your room, though?”

It was her room, though based on how empty and barren, it was easily mistakable for just an empty, unoccupied one. “Yeah,” Legion confirmed, “but I need to use the restroom.” That was only partially true; mostly, Legion wanted to wash the awful smell off of her. Her own smell was enough to remind her of the burning sensation of the hard liquor that she drinks, and after her dream, Legion just wanted to feel sterile for a little bit.

“Mmmm… okay,” Gemini murmured, seemingly content with that answer as well as on the verge of falling back to sleep at any moment. Without another word, her arms opened up and let Legion out. Like a rat, Legion took advantage of the escape avenue and got out of the bed, immediately making her way to her dresser to grab a change of clothes before she made her way into her bathroom. Compared to the rooms that the “officers”, including Hitman team, got, her room was far more cramped, and the bathroom showed that same design language in having barely enough room for her to get around in it or put anything down. Setting the clothes on what little counter space she had, she quickly grabbed her toothbrush, put some toothpaste on it, and turned the hot water dial of her shower all of the way open and got in.

It burnt, like usual, stinging indiscriminately across her skin and the fresh wounds that it bore. Across the back of her hand was a thin scratch, deep enough to cut her skin but not enough for her to even think about wasting Voodoo’s time; across her left wrist was a small burn from still-too-hot spilt coffee. Both screamed as she switched from brushing her teeth to trying to cleanse herself of the smell of last nights liquor, disappearing under the foam of first her shampoo and then her soap. Just as usual, there was more hair than a younger her would have liked to see falling down onto the drain, not one aspect of her sleep schedule, diet, or stress changing in the slightest. A younger her might have tried to change one of those; a younger Clarissa would have wanted her to smile at least a little bit more often and would have died if she saw what Legion now drank.

Legion made sure she didn’t spend too long in the shower. She didn’t have time to let her thoughts invade her mind today. It might have been a weekend, but just because most of Sicario – hell, most of Ronin – didn’t have anything planned didn’t mean that Legion didn’t. She was planning on getting ahead today, getting a few more orders pen marked and ready to go that, even if she couldn’t send them out until Monday, would at least make her life a bit easier come Monday and would let her focus on getting ahead on a different task then.

Dressed, she left the shower, and not to her surprise, Gemini was still there, but to her mild surprise, Gemini was awake. Despite likely having drunk more than she did last night and slept worse than she did – in the past, when she had been in a healthier place, Clarissa had a boyfriend at one point and a girlfriend at another, and though they never got any more intimate than cuddling, she’d been told several times that she had always been a rough sleeper – the far taller woman managed to look leagues better than Legion ever remembered seeing herself in the mirror, though that connection failed to stoke any deeper connection. “You look good,” Gemini said, and Legion must have only glared in reply without intending to, because she added, “I really mean it.”

“Thanks,” Legion mumbled afterwards, rolling her eyes even as she took the compliment. “I didn’t think you’d be awake.”

“Mmm, well, after losing my heater core –” Legion realized that must have been her “—I found it a bit hard to fall back asleep. Just a bit too cold for my tastes.”

“You must’ve loved the Creole,” Legion muttered, shaking her head. “You stayed why then?”

Gemini chuckled, amusement twinkling in her hazel eyes as she winked at Legion. “Mm, wanted to see you one more time before you threatened to do something awful to all my shotgun shells,” she joked. Legion rolled her eyes, once more, at Gemini’s comments. Then, taking in a deep breath, Gemini gently pointed out, “If you need –”

“You’re not my mother, and I’m fine,” Legion spat out on reflex, wincing at her own words after they came out. Gemini stared at her for a second, and for once, Legion almost felt ashamed. She’d been standing up too straight, she realized; slowly, she began to slouch forward once more, tilting her gaze slightly downwards.

“Mmm.” Gemini’s soft murmuring seemed to be coming out as a soft drumroll to a deeper thought, but no words came. Out of the corner of her eye, Legion saw movement, but she didn’t have time to react before Gemini’s arms were around her. It was unbearably tight and warm, but this early in the morning, Legion didn’t have the energy to struggle or to try to get out. “You’re not.”

Ever so slightly, Legion began to sink into the hug, disarmed by the simple callout; almost as soon as the taller woman had wrapped her arms around her, however, she was released, with Gemini making her way for the door. Her hand on the knob, she paused. “If you were worried, we didn’t do anything. As soon as you got back here, you passed out,” she explained.

Of all the things on Legion’s mind, what had happened last night wasn’t one of them. It still wasn’t, really, but she managed to squeeze a weak “good” from her voice.

Twisting the knob, Gemini began to step through the door, before she paused once more. “Also… Fresh Meat really likes you. Do you… want him to back off at all?”

With a deep breath in, Legion didn’t make any motions. Weakly, she just said, “I’ll tell him myself.”

Gemini nodded, and she left.

Clarissa was left alone once more. She dug this hole, but it was a familiar hole. Comfortable, almost. She couldn’t help but wonder, though, did everyone see through her that easily? Did they see her as a hard worker who maybe worked a bit too hard, or as a dysfunctional person who only existed to work? She knew, deep down, that she was the latter. She preferred being the latter, as it was better than being a dysfunctional person who had no reason to exist; through her work, she at least could help people she cared about. Make it easier for them. If they were happy, she could be happy too, at least somewhat. And it’s not like she was unhappy.

But maybe the fact that she wasn’t unhappy was the problem. The only emotions Legion recognized on a daily basis were stress and exhaustion, both distinctly unpleasant but not distinctly unhappy. Besides the occasional smile that Ronin sometimes got out of her (or, on a truly lucky day, the rest of Sicario), Legion didn’t feel anything that could even be related to happiness. Sometimes it felt good to finish work early, but she never let herself savor that, either. There was always –

She was thinking again, trapping herself in her own mind. Forcing herself to move, she went to the door and followed Gemini out of it, but the taller woman was already long gone. Shutting the door behind her, Legion couldn’t let herself stop. One foot after the other, she began to stalk through the halls. It was too early to start working; if she started working now, she’d end early, if she ended early, she’d have time alone, late at night again. Late nights and early mornings were, usually the worst. Too easy to fall asleep. Too easy to be forced to remember, with a whole lot of nothing to do.

Her hip felt empty without her pistol and its holster on it, but she didn’t dare turn back now to go get it. She just had to keep –

If there was one consistent problem to both Legion’s height and to her slouch, it meant that sometimes she was too busy looking at the ground to see the people right in front of her. She was stable enough to not go to the ground, but she couldn’t say the same for the other woman. Awkwardly, Legion looked at her, the vaguest suggestion of shock and perhaps awkward apologeticness tugging at her eyes and her lips and recognized it as none other than Prez.

“Oh! Sorry about that, Legion” Prez exclaimed, taking ownership of the mistake instantly.

“Don’t be,” Legion said. By the time the synapses fired to make her think that she should maybe offer out a helping hand, Prez had already managed to get herself back upright, Legion’s eyes tracking like a hawk – or maybe a vulture – the entire time.

“You’re up rather early.” Despite her usual annoyance when people pointed out the obvious, Legion couldn’t muster to be irritated with Prez right now.

Instead, she weakly snarked back, “One could say the same about you.”

Prez gave an amused, if slightly awkward, chuckle back as she brushed her hand against the back of her neck, shrugging. “Monarch prefers to work out early in the morning, cause it’s less busy, and she needs someone to spot with her. Plus, it helps me to work out too.”

“I see,” Legion said, preparing to move past Prez, until she hesitated as she remembered Prez’s prior offer. “Do you have time for coffee?”

“Well, I…” Prez began, before she made as close to eye contact with she could with Legion and cut herself off. “Of course I can.”

There was a softness in Prez’s tone that caught Legion off guard, and it made her suspicious. At some level, it felt too easy, and Legion was on step away from asking if Prez was pitying her, one wrong glance from lashing out with her cold tone.

Without another word, however, Prez began to walk off, and Legion’s silent approach to indignancy faded as Prez lead the way.

The first thing that Legion thought as she entered Prez’s dorm in the barracks was how simplistic it was, once the shock of finding out that Hitman’s flight chief and flight lead’s WSO hadn’t chosen the nicer rooms that the rest of Hitman had taken subsided. There were fairy lights strewn across the walls, replacing the harsh light that the rooms normally had with something at least a little bit softer – even if, in Legion’s snarking mind, they were a bit basic. On her desk was a single serve coffee maker, which she fed using two water bottles that she pulled out of a minifridge, and atop Prez’s dresser was a photograph that, Legion assumed, captured her and all of her family. There were some other decorations that didn’t draw they eye, nothing that proclaimed “Live, Laugh, Love” or similar “motivational” quote, but still what Crunch would jokingly insist upon calling “kitsch” whenever they stumbled upon something like that in the field.

Prez had instructed her to sit at a low, small, covered table in the center of the room and to wait for just a moment, which Legion did without complaint, sitting on her knees and rejecting the warmth of the table’s blanket. The decorations in the room had been enough of a distraction to let Legion’s mind wander without thought; her drifting mind was only called back into focus by Prez setting a mug that read “You’re awesome, keep that shit up” down in front of her and then sitting across from her. “So, what’d you want to talk about?” Prez asked, her tone simple – sweet and curious, almost, but not overtly so.

Legion’s brow furled. “How’d you know that I wanted to talk?”

“It was obvious that you didn’t want to be left alone, at least,” Prez replied, her tone just a twinge more indifferent. “I figured that you had something on your mind that you wanted to talk about.”

Her brow still furled, Legion muttered back, “I see.” For a second, she paused, before wrapping both of her hands around the cup of coffee and taking a sip. Too hot, though that wasn’t too much of a problem, but distinctly less sweet. Still higher quality than she deserved or cared to drink, but she wasn’t about to spit it out because of that.

“How’s the coffee, then?”

“Better.” The curtness of Legion’s reply, apparently, was enough to set Prez off, the slightly shorter girl breaking out in laughter at that. Prez’s amusement brought a slight redness to Legion’s cheeks, but she didn’t say anything more.

“I can… I can work with better,” Prez managed to stammer out once her laughter died down, but without the laughter, the room quickly fell back into an awkward silence. Prez clearly didn’t like it, even if Legion didn’t mind, and it drew her to pose another question: “What kind of coffee *do* you like?”

“Instant, cold. You asked that before.”

Prez blinked slowly back at Legion. Then, her eyes went wide, and she laughed a little bit more. “I did, didn’t I,” she murmured to herself at first, before adding more clearly, “I guess I owe you another cup of coffee then, and I’ll try to remember. I’m surprised you remembered that, though.”

With a shrug, Legion stated, “Good inventories demand good minds.” At some level, it was the nicest thing she’d said about herself in a while. A bit more softly, she added, “I mostly drink it just because it’s what I’m used to.”

“How much of that stuff do you drink that you’re used to MRE-grade instant coffee?”

Another shrug from Legion. “Most of Ronin’s.”

Silence fell down once more as Prez, astonished, just stared at Legion. “Wow, you *really* need to get a better sense of taste then, Legion.”

“My sense of taste is just *fine*, thank you.” Legion’s response was equal parts indignant as it was instinctive, her words lashing out surgically.

For a second more, Prez just stared. Then, she snorted and shook her head. “Sure, and I’m Hitman’s best pilot.” For whatever reason, Legion’s eyes fell to Prez’s own mug as she took a drink of it, and sure enough, Prez’s mug said “Hitman team’s best pilot (and friend)”. She raised a quizzical eyebrow, before Prez explained, “Okay, fine, it was a gag gift from Diplomat. Sue me.”

“Heh,” Legion softly let out as the corners of her lips softly flicked upwards. Prez’s own smile seemed to strength under Legion’s approving response, and though silence returned for just another few seconds, it was far more comfortable this time to listen to the creaking and hissing of the building. As her eyes drifted around the room, Legion couldn’t help but to comment, “This is an interesting room.”

“Oh? What makes you say that?”

For a second, Legion had to pause, narrowing her eyes a bit before resigning to shrugging. “You act very differently than most of the people who decorate their rooms like this.”

Prez just rolled her eyes. “If you want to call me a tomboy, you can just do it, I’m used to it,” she exasperatedly replied, adding, “You wouldn’t be the first here to do so.”

“Not a fan?”

“I’m just Prez,” she admitted. “Sometimes the people we work with treat me differently, and it feels like they’re just trying to call me cute and simplify me down to… well, just my gender.”

“Huh,” Legion murmured, “that does make sense.”

“You got anything like that?” Prez asked, obviously leading the conversation in a way to try and get Legion to reveal more about herself. “Things that people call you that bother you.”

“No.” Legion’s reply was honest. “There’s nothing that people say about me that upsets me. It’s how they act. They’re either afraid of me, or they think that I need their pity.”

“People pity you?” Prez asked, astonished. “You don’t seem very pitiful.”

“You haven’t seen enough of me, then,” Legion curtly replied, swirling around what was left of her coffee and staring into it.

“I don’t think many people get to see you that much,” Prez pointed out. “I mean, I’ve been with Sicario for a few years and I can only now count our interactions in person on both of my hands. Usually, it’s just dropping a form off and then disappearing.”

“I prefer it that way,” Legion admitted, before looking back up at Prez. “It’s not personal. It’s how I’d prefer most things be. Keeps things cleaner.”

“Y’know, I imagine that only makes some people want to get to know you better,” Prez pointed out with a small chuckle.

“It would be their loss, then,” Legion flatly remarked with a small shrug. “I’m not that interesting. I’m either sitting at a desk or counting shelves most days. Or shouting at people to fall in line.”

“Oh right, didn’t Crunch say somethin’ about that?”

“He’s exaggerating. He wouldn’t be a good storyteller if he didn’t.”

“I mean, I’ve heard of the briefings you give to some of the other mercs’ support forces. It always sounded like you’ve got a good grasp on the situation,” Prez pointed out. None of the words she said sounded like they were meant to be the vapid flattery that some people – especially Fresh Meat – liked to give her, but a genuine remark.

“Yelling at idiots what to do and what’s expected of them isn’t leadership,” Legion bitterly said. “It’s a sign of seizing as much control as possible.”

“Is that what you’re doing?” Prez asked, her tone soft and curious, but the words went off like a gunshot in Legion’s mind. There was a part of her brain that immediately went on the defensive, trying to play down how the words were echoing in Legion’s mind.

“Yes,” Legion weakly responded, her gaze returning to her mug once more.

“Oh, I didn’t –” Prez tried to begin to respond, but Legion shook her head and cut her off.

“It’s okay. Don’t waste your breath apologizing.”

“…is that why you worry that people think you’re pitiful?” Prez gently asked, and Legion heard her start to shuffle around.

“No, it’s…” Legion tried to begin, but she was quickly at a loss of words. She felt a gentle hand rest down upon her forearm, which she shook off without a second thought. “It’s a lot of things.”

“Do you want to talk about them?”

“No,” Legion honestly replied once more. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw what looked like Prez nodding.

“Alright. I won’t pry. But just know that people caring about you isn’t because they pity you, Legion. It’s because they just want you to be okay.”

“Yeah.” Legion’s voice was hollow now. “I know.” Her words were dishonest now, because she at some level, her brain refused to accept any truth found within Prez’s words.

“Alright,” Prez gently said, and Legion heard her take in a breath to say more, but a knock at the door cut it short as she stood up. “I… think that’s my cue that I’m actually needed in the gym now, sorry.” To Prez’s credit, her words came across as genuinely apologetic to Legion; in her time at Sicario, it was a tone she’d not heard often in words directed towards her. “Feel free to stop by whenever, yeah? I won’t presume anything about friendship, but I enjoy talking to you.”

“Yeah.” Beyond a slight coldness, Legion’s voice still lacked any emotion as she stood up herself and went over to the door. Opening it, she looked over her shoulder and said, “I’ll be seeing you, then.”

Legion didn’t wait to hear Prez’s reply, or acknowledge Monarch’s presence either, before she left. Mentally, she was already preparing to block this all off, to be filed and processed at another time when she had a bit more mental willpower and wasn’t nursing off a fading hangover. Besides, she had work to do.

All of the papers on her desk were tidier than how she had left them Saturday.

That was the first clue to Legion that something was wrong.

The second was the different handwriting on all of the forms she’d left unfinished; it wasn’t one she immediately recognized. Then again, she normally was the only one to touch any of these forms before she started submitting orders, so *any* handwriting that wasn’t her own set off alarm bells. They were all done right, too, which was something that surprised Legion as she double-checked every one of them, trying to recover her own sanity. Did she manage to come in drunk and forget that? She didn’t drink that much, but the possibility didn’t leave her mind; then again, she realized that the fact that the handwriting was more legible than her normal chicken scratch made it unlikely it had been a drunk her.

At some level, Legion was relieved to not have to waste her own time filling out these forms; at the same time, she was pissed that she had to waste her time double checking, as well as the fact that this meant that someone else was doing her own work for her. She lived for her work, so for someone to take her work from her was akin to the sin of taking part of her life to her mind. The only question that lingered in her mind was who would not only be stupid enough to do her job for her, but to do so on a *Saturday* when they could have spent their time doing anything else.

Someone clearing their throat tore Legion’s mind away from the countless papers in front of her, her head tilting ever-so-slightly to not just stare at her desk. There stood Fresh Meat, with a cup of coffee in each hand. “I, ah, figured you could use this after last night,” he nervously offered; his nervousness didn’t seem to be helped in the slightest from the death glare that Legion was – fully accidentally – giving him.

With a few slow blinks as she continued to eye Fresh Meat with mild suspicion, Legion finally nodded and shifted a bit more upright so that, instead of slouching over her desk, she was just slouching instead; when he offered out the mug, Legion simply took it and began to take a few sips. The coffee was burnt and, if she didn’t know better, Legion likely would have assumed that the kid in front of her didn’t know what he was doing, but if she had to guess, it was likely ruined by nervous indecision.

Still, it was decent enough for her second cup of coffee for the day.

“So, uh, was everything correct?” Fresh Meat asked, giving Legion a weak smile.

“It was good enough,” Legion curtly replied.

“Ah!” He paused. “That’s good!” His words were uncertain. “I noticed that you seemed to be a bit behind and could use some help, so…”

“Why?” Legion directly asked, catching Fresh Meat off of what little guard he had managed to rebuild.

After a second, he shyly asked, “What do you mean, ‘why’?”

“Why waste your time here? There are certainly better things you could be doing.” Legion was slowly slouching back over her desk, practically curling up around the coffee.

“Well, I thought that you could use the help, and…”

“Kid –” Fresh Meat was only two or three years younger than her, but it felt good to say nonetheless given that he was the newest addition to Ronin “—don’t waste your own time or my time by doing that. If you want to get into someone’s good favors, get into Gemini’s; don’t waste your time trying to get me to have a good opinion on you or trying to get into my pants.”

Fresh Meat took a step back as his eyes went wide. “Wait, do you think I’m trying to –”

“You’ve been following me around practically nonstop until I do something to deliberately get rid of you, helping me out with things I *don’t* need help with, and being overly kind with me. You’re either trying to get with me, or you’ve got too big of a heart for this line of work.”

The two of them were silent for the better part of a minute, Legion’s last words hanging in the air like a heavy fog. She felt a tinge of either pity or pain at how deeply she lashed at Fresh Meat, but the words had felt beyond good to say. By the time she was starting to get lost into her own feelings, she recognized Fresh Meat’s voice quietly ring out once more.

“I’m not. I’m just trying to help. You just seem like you need…”

“The most help,” Legion answered for him. With a sigh, she set down the mug and gently began to rub her temples with her middle finger and thumb on her right hand, before slowly shaking her head. “Look, New Guy. I get you’re trying to be nice. Just don’t waste it on me. I don’t want to make friends with anyone who I’m not sure if they’ll take a bullet or not.”

Fresh Meat took in a deep breath, and Legion simply watched as he tried to steady himself. After a moment or two more, he just said, “We don’t have to be friends, then. Just let me know if I can help.” There was an obvious tone of dejection in his voice, a tone that made Clarissa grit her teeth and pause for just one more second.

Then, with a one more sigh and one more shake of her head, Legion just said, “If you want to help, how do you feel about driving?”

Herself, she hated driving. The window was rolled down, and her head rested atop her hand as she leaned against the armrest on her door and stared at the hills. The snow that was there when they first landed at Rowsdower had melted with the season change, forcing Legion to actually remember how long that Sicario had actually been part of this contract.

The heroes of this contract, if the CIF grunts who’s murmuring she overheard was to be believed; the thieves of this contract who stole money that other mercs could have been making had it not been for that damned crown, if the whining of the other mercenaries at Rowsdower was to be believed. The low rumble of the eight cylinder engine filled her ears more than the sounds of the road, the wind, or the radio did; the truck that they commandeered from the motor was an older civilian model that no one would miss for the day. It was a mechanics dream truck, but to Legion, it was just uncomfortable and slow.

At least she didn’t have to drive it.

“So, what are we looking for when we get into town again?” Fresh Meat practically had to shout over the rush of the wind rushing into the cabin to get himself heard. Out of a desire to not have to do the same, Legion rolled up her window before she responded, peeling her eyes away from the land racing by as she did so.

“An outdoorsman’s shop first, then a pawn shop,” she calmly explained.

“Are you going to tell me what you’re looking for?” he asked.

“No,” she answered. Pulling down the mirror, Legion gave herself the vaguest look over that she could. Surprisingly, the tactical hoodie she wore, once stripped of its patches, pouches, and without any other gear passed surprisingly well as just normal – if maybe a bit dorky – clothes, and the aviators she was wearing… well, they covered up the bags under her eyes, and the person she used to be would be grateful for that at the very least. For a second, when she saw her hairline, she thought she saw a small patch of brown among the sea of grey and white hair that’d flocked to the top of her head over the “better” parts of the last decade, but when she looked back to the mirror to confirm, she couldn’t find it anymore. With a sigh, she returned to staring outside. “I need you to keep the car running.”

“You’re not expecting…”

“No, I’m not, but I’d rather be safe than sorry.” She fought the novice urge for her hand to drift over the gun she was carrying at her side, even if she desperately wanted to adjust it as she became acutely aware of the hammer digging into her side. At some level, though, it forced her to be cognicant of one thing she was grateful: though Ronin lacked almost any sense of standardization, at least most of them preferred some sort of Wonder Nine like the one she had herself.

Even if every single one of them that did had a different preference for ammunition type and load.

Without intending to, Legion let out a sigh. “Everything good?” Fresh Meat asked, his voice cautious.

The town was approaching now, and Legion could feel the vehicle slowing down. “Yeah,” she replied. “Everything’s fine.” For once, it didn’t feel forced. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Fresh Meat turn to her, pause for a second, before looking away once more with a small chuckle. Confused, Legion turned, and still unable to place the smile on Fresh Meat’s lips, she asked, “What’s up with the smile?”

“Don’t worry about it,” he replied with another small laugh. Legion just rolled her eyes and looked back out the window.

They spent a few more minutes driving like that, easily doing a loop through all of the small town Rowsdower was closest to in the time, and only spotting a chain coffee shop and a pawn shop for their efforts. It would have to do, Legion decided. Without much need for talk, the duo parked, and Legion went inside, a bell ringing as she entered while she was glancing over her shoulder for an extremely brief moment at the truck. There was a wooden smell to the pawn shop, but beyond that, it was surprisingly barren; rifles lined the back wall, some with bayonets and some without, the display case separating her from them was filled with a few pistols and revolvers, and the rest of the store was a mishmash of used tools, electronics, and accessories, with a few knives here and there. Upon a closer inspection of the rifles, Legion quickly realized that none of them were fit for any sort of usage whatsoever, at least not in their current state: she could easily recognize the sorry state they were all in. She had one easy guess where they came from, but she wasn’t about to say it out loud.

One rifle, though, did catch her eye: a bolt-action that she immediately recognized was missing most of its receiver. It had a bayonet, too – and out of all of the knives in the store, Legion easily recognized it as the nicest one. It wasn’t too combat practical, but it was polished to a shine, with a surprisingly beautiful handle for the broken state the rifle was in. A portly man wearing a red and black flannel, a toothy grin plastered on his face, had finally appeared from somewhere back in the shop, and he looked Legion up and down once. “Anything you’ve got your eyes set—”

“Yeah,” she interrupted, drawing an immediate frown onto the man’s face. “How much for the bayonet of that broken bolt-action?”

“Why, that rifle ain’t broken, it’s a perfectly damned fine rifle,” the man grumbled as he turned around to look at it, either lying right through his teeth or just that damned dumb. He gave a small chuckle as he saw the rifle, though, and the toothy grin seemed to gain a sly glint to it as he turned back around and stared down hard at Legion. “Well, that rifle there’s on commission as a *package* deal, so I can’t just—”

“Is one hundred credits enough for the knife?”

“Miss, I’m in a *legally-bind’n* contract, I can’t just sell you the knife. Now, if you want the package…” he curtly explained, even if he let loose a far heartier chuckle as he turned back around once more and grabbed the rifle, setting it down between them. “Now, if you *do* want it, I’m thinking… four thousand.”

“You’re kidding me,” Legion muttered under her breath. “It’s non-functional and you’re asking five times what the thing is worth new.”

“It is *perfectly functional*, and I think I know a thing or two more about guns than you do, lil’ thing,” the portly man explained. Legion had to physically bite her tongue to stop her response. “And due to the *war* goin’ on, everyone’s buying whatever they can get their—”

“Thirty-seven hundred.”

“Thirty-eight.”

“Deal.” Anything to get away from this bumbling idiot, even if it meant lower quality instant noodles for the rest of the month. Immediately, Legion reached back for her wallet, only just barely keeping her pistol concealed under her hoodie. As she flipped it open, she began to reach for her ID.

“Don’t bother wit’your ID. System’s been down for months now, so there’s no point in it.”

Legion just handed him a plastic card instead. Within the minute, the transaction was completed. “Would you like a case for that?” the man asked as she grabbed the dysfunctional carbine, but Legion was already almost out the door with the rifle as he finished the last word.

The truck, however, wasn’t where she left it. Legion’s grip on the rifle tightened a bit as she began to scan the surroundings, only lightening up as she saw the truck begin to pull up. With a solid thud, she opened the door and, with an even more solid slam, shut the door behind her. “Sorry about that, I figured…” Fresh Meat began, before tilting his head towards the two cups of coffee in the center console, “that it would take more than five minutes.”

Then, he paused.

“Wait, isn’t that the same kind of rifle that –”

“Crunch uses? Yes,” Legion answered. Setting the butt on the floor, she unmounted the bayonet, before lifting the rifle and tossing it behind their seats in the cab. Inspecting the knife in her right hand, she picked up her coffee with her left and began to sip it, only to stop as she saw Fresh Meat reach for the other cup. Glaring at him, he sighed, and pulled his hand away. “Alright, you deserve it.”

“You’re goddamned right I do.”