15.2x169mm, APFSDS. 12 gauge, brass shells, double ought buck. 7.92x57mm, tracer. 7.62x63mm, AP-I. 7.62x51mm, FMJ. 5.56x45mm, match grade. Legion watched as the last crates of each, all on their nice fancy pallets, got loaded onto the last Circus plane on base, a clipboard in her hands as her automatic-rifle-turned-marksman’s-rifle hung heavily off her back while she double checked everything else loaded onto the vast plane. Parts for their weapons, rations, explosives, everything that Ronin would need to fight as they always did for however much longer the conflict lasted; they fully expected that today would be the last day that any of them saw Rowsdower. It was what all the logistics and preparations that they’d put in place had been preparing for.

The other Circus transports had already been deployed, paradropping in Sicario’s paratroopers already; in just a few minutes, she’d be airborne too, setting up a logistical resupply first and foremost for Ronin’s elements already deployed. A few missing pallets had reappeared at the last minute, delaying them right as they had begun to pull out of the hangar to take off, and it was easier to leave the plane partially exposed to hastily load instead of following the true and proper procedures. With those last things secured and loaded, they could finally take off and rejoin the rest of the party – or at least Ronin’s party. The rest of Sicario could work with the CIF for now, but it isn’t like anyone expected for the conflict to last long. Prospero was the last city they had to take before they’d be able to take Presidia, and the Federation had already been faltering against every push made.

Prospero, Legion thought, what a weird name for a city; was it named after someone, or was it named after its prosperity? If it was the latter, it only helped fuel Legion’s unease about how easily the war had been going. For Sicario, for the CIF, for everyone but the Federation really, this war had been prosperous; she could only wonder how much Sicario’s top dogs like Hitman team had raked in during this conflict. Herself, she wasn’t too concerned about the money – no one on Ronin really was – but being able to live comfortably was definitely not something she knew that she would ever have to worry about.

If there was such a thing for her.

Legion’s brow furled as she looked out of the back of the open Circus transport, pausing for a second. They should be preparing to take off by now, but there wasn’t any update. Something felt off, and it was only further unnerving Legion about the current situation. With only the vaguest sense of trepidation in her steps, she turned to walk towards the front of the craft, moving past all of the cargo as she made her way to the cockpit. Every step she took, scanning the cargo up and down as she went, didn’t reassure her nerves, nor did the relative silence in the cockpit as she opened the door. “What’s going on? Why the fuck are we still here?” she barked, venom overwhelming nerves in her voice.

The copilot turned to her, and he just shrugged. “We don’t know. Tower grounded us for now.”

“Why the fuck did they ground us?”

“Didn’t say, just that there’s something going on. We’re waiting on an update.”

“No shit, there’s a war.” A dumbstruck Legion stared at the pilot, narrowing her eyes as she let her frustration overpower the deep pit of realization that something, most definitely, was wrong.

“Something more,” the copilot said.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” Legion muttered back, shaking her head. “Let me fucking talk to—”

The radio crackled to life loud enough that it interrupted Legion as she felt a tremble begin to shake the plane. “This is Izumi Station out by Soctavia City. This is a regionwide alert to anyone on this frequency. We have tremors spreading out rapidly from the Prospero hub. Stand by for further updates.”

“The fuck?” both Legion and the Pilot muttered on beat. Kaiser’s voice came on louder over the voice that had continued to speak, rambling on some sort of warning.

“Galaxy had sent out a warning to ALCON over Prospero, it just now reached us. Federation cruise missiles.”

“Reports of latent cordium reaction to atmospheric conditions. Everyone is advised to take shelter indoors effective immediately,” the unfamiliar voice underneath Kaiser’s reported.

The three of them in the cockpit began to stare at each other; the rest of the words were a blur. Out of the back of the plane, Legion stared as the last words of the jumbled transmissions rang clearly once more through her ears. “The Ring of Fire is going active in Cascadia! It’s cooking off!”

Without a word, Legion went over to her station aboard the plane as its – temporarily, admittedly – loadmaster and shut the cargo door to the jet. She could feel the entire airframe shuddering under her feet now; she had always hated whenever she had been put on one of these damned cargo buckets, and the sudden volatility of the situation wasn’t helping in the slightest. Slowly, the cargo door closed, and right as it did, Legion saw orange explosions begin to crest the distant hills around Rowsdower as the dormant volcanoes that, apparently, surrounded them began to cook off.

There wasn’t an overwhelming sense of dread or horror in Legion’s gut anymore. Now, everything that she had felt was replaced with an overwhelming sense of numbness. With a blank stare, she went back into the cockpit, and she ordered, “We have to take off now.”

“Are you crazy?!” the copilot responded. “The world’s ending out there! We have to stay in place!”

“We’ll die if we stay here waiting!” Legion shouted back.

“And we’ll die in the air, too!” An orange bolt of lightning punctuated his words.

“So will all of Ronin if we don’t get them these fucking supplies!”

Kaiser’s voice came on once more over the radio. “Miss Legion, Ronin is perfectly capable of handling themselves.” There were few people who could get away with addressing her like that, and besides Kaiser himself, the only other one was Kelleher. “Get that aircraft back in its hangar and shut it down and await further orders. We’ll be going radio silent until I say so. The rest of us still here will be joining you shortly but be prepared to leave.”

Legion didn’t find it in herself to keep arguing. Instead, she made it back to her chair and buckled in as she felt, slowly, the aircraft begin to taxi back into its nested home, and she could barely hear the hangar doors shut around it over the noises of the calamity outside. Time wasn’t making sense anymore to her, and right now, she wished she could have nothing more than a simple, boring, cup of warm instant coffee. Half of her mind was torn in two with the desire to get out of the plane, put on one of the masks that they wore when operating closer to exclusion zones like those at Yellowstone, and stare at the end of the world that seemed to be unfolding outside, while the other half had thoroughly frozen her in place to prevent her from doing anything that would even think about risking her own life.

She was smart enough to connect the dots; the world outside was burning as it had done four-hundred thirty-two years ago. To what exact degree, no one knew; she could hear the radio was now filled with the crackle and pops of the Cordium interference once more. She remembered it well from the Meilynx; that had been the last time until today that she’d served in a role far closer to what her Ronin assignment should have suggested. If today hadn’t gone the way it did, at least.

Without a thought, her fist came down on the console in front of her as her anger and frustration totally overwhelmed her, even if she came to immediately regret the act as the pain shot through her arm. A few seconds later, though, she heard the loading ramp set down on the concrete of the hangar; while the hangar wouldn’t be as well sealed as the pressurized airplane, it was enough to finally coax Legion from her seat. Slowly, the pathways that formed in her mind for over almost a decade of work with Sicario, with Ronin, with all these damned fools began to fire once more as she felt her feet begin to move underneath her once more. Her usual grim look was no different from the additional layer of grim that she normally felt, and it had only taken Legion a few moments of thought to realize that there was still plenty of cargo space left on this last Circus transport; even with whoever was still on base, there would be plenty of space for more to be loaded on.

The grim look on Legion’s face, if just for a second, bore a mild suggestion of a smile within the corner of her lips. She had work to do, Legion had realized. She could see the writing on the wall for what the orange that she’d seen ever-so-briefly outside had suggested for the long-term viability of Rowsdower. She wasn’t a damned fool.

She was Legion. She had work to do.

And so, donning a respirator that tugged at her hair as she began to step off of the plane, Legion did just what she did best, because it was the only thing that she truly believed in doing: she got to work.

She’d already been mostly done by the time that Hitman team had dared to reveal themselves as alive, hailing the entire base for any sign of life. If Ronin had been here, she would have questioned Kaiser’s decision to play dead; apart from her, Ronin wasn’t there. As far as she was aware, they were likely all dead now.

There wasn’t any grief inside of her. Not now. If it was going to threaten to bubble up, Legion had already forced that to be at a later time. She’d not been able to bear witness to whatever spectacles Hitman team pulled off, sealed up in the hangar of the last Circus transport, but her location let her bear witness to the chaos that ensued once their contact with the CIF had dared to poke his nose where it didn’t belong. As the operating leader of Ronin, it only made sense for her to be there.

The operating leader of Ronin. Those words felt weird as it bounced around Legion’s mind, but without any understanding of if the rest of the team was still alive, much less combat operable, and without them having any way of communicating that status with the rest of Sicario, that’s what she was now, wasn’t it?

It felt wrong. She wasn’t a leader. She could chew people into shape, maybe, but she wasn’t a leader. She never had been, and she never wanted to be. It wasn’t something unfamiliar to her, but the thought of doing it pragmatically alone was.

It wasn’t in her job description.

Then again, neither was surviving the second end of the world, and yet, she still managed to somehow pull that one off without any hitch.

The off-putting face she’d been wearing as she listened to Stardust ramble had only gotten worse when he revealed that he was going to be sending Kaiser off to assemble a legion of mercenaries, her scowl deepening as she glared at the air between the Cascadian and her boss. Without Kaiser, that, pragmatically, left one person with more authority than her, and that was Galaxy. Possibly Monarch, but they were even less apt for any sense of authority than she was, and Legion had gotten the impression by now that the pilot was Hitman’s flight lead less for their ability to lead and more for their ability to fly.

Kaiser was metaphorically sticking around, however. That meant she was too. Sicario had saved her from the worst aspects east of them on this continent, freed her from being stuck there for the rest of her life. She had her reasons to stay, but she was surprised to hear Hitman team still considering leaving. With his second case, however, Stardust managed to convince them to stay.

And Legion forced herself to try to forget what exactly he had to offer to them to be able to do so. It wasn’t for her to know, so with any sense in her mind, she knew it’d do her well to forget it. She set her mind on the present, instead: Legion still had a few more things to grab. Not supplies, this time: Circus was already loaded with those; she had to get the few things that she managed to gather for herself. Clothes and the like.

Stalking through these halls that were quickly about to become permanently lifeless brought forth interesting memories to Legion’s mind; she wondered if this is what it had been like for Ronin all those years before. The loose bouncing of her rifle against her back didn’t help settle her mind, nor did the flickering emergency lights. How easy the door to her dorm was to open, now, felt like a warning of how much danger she’d been in all along had anyone just taken the moment to try and put her in such, even if, surrounded by her family in Sicario, she’d been in perhaps the most secure place in the world.

Her mind paused, her hand lingered on the door handle, and her eyes scanned the still-mostly-blank room in front of her. Her family? It felt weird to her, even after this time, to even remotely consider that she’d perhaps let Sicario, as a whole, be that close to herself and her own identity, but if she was nothing but her work, and her work was for Sicario, it made some discombobulated line of sense.

The steps she took into the room were hesitant. She’d barely spent any time in this room, but now it was time to say goodbye. It felt weird. In all of the time that she’d spent with Sicario, she’d spent much of the time with her walls built up, keeping her separate and sterile from the rest. With Solana up, people had finally gathered the desire to try to worm their way in (had there truly been nothing better to do, she wondered, than try to waste time appeasing her?) it seemed.

After the better part of a decade with Sicario, she’d finally let them.

Though Legion was well aware that the world didn’t revolve around her, that the world didn’t care about her, at some small level buried deep within her mind, Clarissa felt as though this was her punishment for even daring to let that door be opened. She wouldn’t be hesitating here now if she’d never let them get their foot in the door.

With a sigh, she got moving. Her duffle bag was under her bed, still partially filled from when they moved into Rowsdower with a set of civilian clothes. Hoisting it over to her dresser and her desk, she gathered up what little she had. First was a second set of instant coffee, separate from the stuff she kept in her desk. Better two have two sources than just the one. Two turtlenecks, one with sleeves, one without – the latter of which Gemini had forced her to take as a gift. She still wasn’t sure how to feel about it. A mug, still stained at the bottom, that Prez had gotten her recently: on it was written “Logi-chan”. It made no sense to Legion, but when she asked Prez for an explanation, all she’d gotten back was a simple laugh before Prez had said, “Sometimes, you’ve just got to find something amusing and laugh about it without thinking about it too much, y’know?”

At the time, Clarissa didn’t know, but now, it got a dry chuckle from her as she remembered. A few more uniforms, including another one of her usual tactical hoodies. The last thing Legion packed was a knife: it was ornate and beautiful yet still somehow practical, and it was a gift from Crunch. If you were to believe his tales, he was a rather good knife fighter, too. She wasn’t sure how much she believed, especially when he tended to then adopt an even deeper Oceanian accent and say, “that’s not’a knife, this is a knoife!” and laugh at himself as if he was the peak of comedy. The memory earned another dry chuckle as she set it at the top of her stuff packed within her duffle bag, before zipping the bag up and hoisting it over her right shoulder.

There wasn’t any lingering happiness within Clarissa as she left her dorm, but she wasn’t sure how else to precisely describe the overwhelming lingering nostalgia within her system as she slowly paced her way back to the last surviving Circus transport. It wasn’t sadness or frustration as she recounted how she’d let down her guard and, if only temporarily, been rewarded for even thinking about the thought of trying to make a friend and, after the better part of a decade, finally work towards breaking down the barrier that she’d forced up between her work and her “social” life, even if the latter didn’t exist.

It wasn’t happiness. It wasn’t sadness. It just was.

Neither Legion nor Clarissa were entirely sure how that realization left them feeling, beyond hollow.

This was supposed to be home for… however long.

A tunnel full of abandoned construction equipment, temporary apartments for the workers who would have manned them, and the few aircraft that Sicario managed to save, all of which were full of their last few survivors. Some of the other survivors of Rowsdower were here too, other mercs that didn’t have the sense to flee, CIF troops that didn’t know where their command actually was.

Of Sicario’s ground troops, there was… her. Just her. A few injured troops from the other deployments. Their armored divisions were deployed with the missing Circus flights. Gemini – no, Gunsel squadron seemed to have been lost with all airframes unaccounted for, as was Cariburn squadron. Hitman was in rough shape, but they were all still alive.

It was her, Hitman team, and Galaxy. Her. Hitman. Galaxy. Legion had already found a desk in what she assumed to have once been a foreman’s office that she was claiming as her owns, and she found herself really wishing that she had found a bottle of liquor on her way out of Rowsdower. Or a packet of cigarettes.

Her, Hitman team, and Galaxy. That just didn’t sound right. She knew Kaiser was alive, but he wasn’t here right now; if he had any sense, he wouldn’t return and would run off with the money. She knew, deep down, that Kaiser would never do that, but deep inside of Clarissa’s stomach, she really wished he would. No one had any of the energy to offload supplies today, not even herself. She could see down the open hatch of that damned transport, all of the supplies loaded up. Outside, the crackling of a radio that was plagued with cordium interference, receiving some sort of updates about the world outside. She was trying her damnedest to tune as much of it as she possibly could out, but the little words that sank into her head weren’t pretty words. They’d be in this tunnel for some time still.

Legion got the feeling that, soon, she wouldn’t be left with much work to actually be able to do. Maybe she’d be able to rest for once, but even that thought wasn’t a comfortable one to her. Part of her was still holding out on the hope that the seemingly-sucidial gung-ho idiots she worked the most with had managed to survive, somehow, but every rational part of her mind told her that she was an idiot for thinking that anyone else on Ronin even had a chance of being alive right now. They would’ve been knee deep in Prospero by the time things started to go to hell there, likely lazing targets or something.

She missed them. Legion’s logic may have wanted her to begin grieving now, so that it could be brief. If she started it now, she could act as though she’d expected this. Legion would be able to just continue on after a few tears, perhaps a bit more coldhearted, but alive.

For the first time in a long while, Clarissa’s hope remained. Gently, she lowered her head down onto her arm, which itself had been resting on the desk in front of her for some time, and she let her eyes fell shut. Clarissa knew that it was highly improbable – no, it was most likely impossible – that anyone else on Ronin besides her was alive. Maybe Crunch, if he’d been doing his job as a sniper right, or possibly even Fitz, depending on where Federation armor had decided to hole up and how he had decided he wanted to go about his duties.

It was a pipe dream, both Clarissa and Legion knew, but as they fell asleep, it was enough to make it so that Legion’s dreams, for once, weren’t full of barbed wire.

Instead, just the void awaited her today.

Maybe it was deliberate, but as Legion looked over the supplies, now organized in store rooms and an empty bay – likely, at one point, designed to hold extra ventilation equipment in case traffic got backed up under this tunnel – she realized that she hadn’t seen the sky in two weeks. After she’d gotten everything off of Circus, she’d not been anywhere near the air to the outside, partially out of a desire to not want to have to wear a respirator, partially out of her own speed.

The first few days had been just simply memorizing the layout of the tunnel. It was all, then, that she had the energy to do. Other support staff, she began to realize, had made it too: there was someone else preparing food, some other people trying to assist here or there, and a lot of people, it seemed, just trying to get their bearings as she was. From there, organization had been easy, but as Legion witness more people seem to arrive, her first realization had been the supplies that’d been left here, even in combination with the ones that they brought, wouldn’t be enough for much more than another month at their current rate, and it seemed like new people were showing up every other day. A fighter here, a transport there. Nowhere near the bustle of Rowsdower, which was a blessing for making their current supplies last, but a curse, because most of the people Legion spoke to had little clues what was going on outside of their own aircraft.

She wasn’t nostalgic in the slightest for how left in the dark she was feeling; it reminded her too much of the home she’d left a long time ago and never had a desire to return to. The first week had been frustrating.

Slowly, Legion’s footsteps took her back to the room she’d been able to claim as her own. In size, it was somewhere between that of the dorm she had had at Rowsdower and a studio apartment, likely an incentive to keep the construction workers who would have once lived here in the corporate store so to speak. At least the water had been running by the time she’d arrived to claim this one as her own.

The second week had a breakthrough, at least, in supplies; though it was risky for people to fly in the atmosphere outside, some few fools were attempting to distribute leaflets anyways.

At least it provided a start, and a promise of the basics: food, for planes and for them, parts, and arms. From what it sounded like, the highway was near the center of all of this regions remaining CIF forces, so it would become the primary staging for a lot of things, which meant a lot of work for her. It took her mind off of things, but Legion was careful to avoid the remaining members of Sicario as much as she could in the days since.

Was her bed at Rowsdower this comfortable? She’d never slept in it enough to remember. There was less here to do than there was at Rowsdower, even when Solana was still operational, and it had forced Sicario to socialize amongst itself. The dim lighting of the windowless room would’ve been off-putting to any sane mind, but Legion didn’t mind the awkward orange haze.

She’d felt the knife Crunch had gave her in her hand once more, and she lazily brought it into view. The blade barely had any shimmer in the unnatural light down here, but even still, it reflected beautifully. Just as she began to mourn never taking Crunch up on his offer to learn his style of “knife fighting”, a knock at her door distracted her.

Setting it back atop all of the other things she’d not yet unpacked, Clarissa made her way to the door, opening it to find herself standing face to face with Prez, who held two cups of coffee in her hand and wore an awkward grin on her face. With a nod, Legion let Prez into the room and watched, a tilted up eyebrow quizzical. “Gotta suck up somehow,” Prez simply stated.

It was enough to get a snort out of Legion, even if she shook her head.

Prospero. Was it almost three months now?

The mask Legion wore was heavy to truly, properly breathe through, and her grip on her rifle tightened as she scanned around. There were parts of the city still too hot to traverse, but she could easily see why the CIF wanted to take the city once more. The base, underneath the city, still looked possibly functional. To take Presidia, it’d be a wonderful staging ground.

It still felt as though she was treading upon hallowed ground as she walked through the soot, which every step she took kicked up a fair bit of, just like light snow back home used to. Her rifle was heavy, even with the sling, and she could already feel herself having to will her body for each step forward. Hitman team had already cleared up the air as they were coming in for landing, and though the latent cordium had made it fuzzy, she’d heard most of the details from someone on the Federation side broadcasting to every channel his plane would let him, it seemed. She’d ask Galaxy for the rest later, after she returned to base.

Should she have been thankful that the CIF decided she was important enough to drag out here? She heard the crack of a lightning bolt somewhere in the distance, almost dragging her attention to it, but the ruined city ahead seemed to be calling to her. CIF forces were slowly beginning to roll in, and for a second, she hesitated. If she went in, she realized, she’d likely learn what happened to Ronin, and she wasn’t entirely sure if she could handle that. Legion could, or at least Legion could act like she could, but what would happen to Clarissa?

Was she even needed further? They’d made it clear that her assistance was appreciated, but not necessarily mandatory any further; she had every option to stop.

The rumble of an engine made up her mind for her. With just a few simple steps, she joined some CIF troops, who’s masks were just as fogged as hers, who’s uniforms matched with each other’s, and who seemed to be just as tired as she was, taking up the front passenger spot. The driver seemed mildly familiar, but only in the sense that Legion was pretty sure that he had been one of the survivors of Rowsdower too; he seemed to have the same level of familiarity with her, too. Maybe that’s why he waited.

Through the bullet proof windows, the city slowly passed. Even though they were almost certain there was no more Federation activity, the CIF was being smart, slow, and safe in how they advanced. Almost how Legion preferred to drive on the rare occasions she was forced to, but it was a far, far cry from how most of Ronin drove. Besides FNG, that was.

A glimpse of white paint caught her eye, poking out right at the corner of an alley. “Stop the vehicle,” she ordered.

“Ma’am?” At least he had the sense to address her properly.

“Stop this car,” she ordered once more, her voice firmer. There was something familiar about the symbols she was seeing, but she was too far, and moving too fast, to be able to make it out.

“Er, I’m not sure you have the authority to –” the driver began, his eyes drifting towards Legion. Then, he stopped as his sense kicked in, even though the other CIF personnel in the vehicle began to question. “Mercenary stuff,” Legion heard him add as she shoved her door open and stood up, which she only hoped was the truth.

They always had white paint in the storeroom; it wasn’t like her to have this be slipping her mind. She kept her pace moderate, just in case, but as she rounded the alley, she recognized the symbol immediately. Not for its meaning, but for the style. It was some sort of overly-tactical symbology used for communicating in code that Octo fell in love with, and Legion was still almost sure that it was because he saw it in a movie once and had decided to forever emulate it since.

It wasn’t recent, but Legion could tell, based off how specs of it seemed to have flaked off as she dusted the symbol and stuck to her glove, that it was painted after the soot fell.

Ronin survived the Second Calamity, as people had started to call it. She didn’t know if they were still alive, but they had at least lived through the end of the world.

Clarissa felt herself stand up a little bit straighter; her eyes had gone wide.

They were alive.

Ronin was alive.