Kaiser was alive, and he came back – not only did he come back, but he did so with an entire fleet of mercenary aircraft in tail. Outside of the highways tunnel, high up on one of the berms, Legion stood, staring skyward, nursing a cigarette, and leaning against part of the concrete arch of the top of the tunnel. Smoking wasn’t a habit she liked to nurse often – she didn’t want to have to mention any dependency other than the one she had with caffeine – but as she heard the bustle of the tunnel echoing out, she’d decided she could finally take a break.

A lot of Sicario’s elements were still MIA, likely KIA if she was being honest with herself, but Clarissa had already seen proof firsthand that Ronin was still alive. That paint had been applied after the dust had fallen on Prospero; there was no way in hell, even after the months in between, that the entirety of the team besides her had died. For every ounce of charisma that Kaiser had, each member of Ronin had a similar power to survive the improbable – really, the impossible.

Her team was alive. Her friends were alive. With a dry chuckle at the thought, the grim smile on Clarissa’s face turned a bit more genuine as she took a drag of the cigarette. After Presidia, Kaiser wouldn’t have to promote her just yet.

“Miss McClaine,” she heard a voice call out from below. Speak of the devil. Carefully, she began to shuffle her way down the berm, extinguishing her cigarette on the last concrete divider before she was on the highway’s asphalt once more.

“Sir,” she replied, only a vague suggestion of formality on her voice.

“I think you’re well aware of the current plans,” Kaiser began to explain, “in the sense that we’ll be moving on to liberate Presidia in the next few days.”

“Everyone knows,” Legion replied, flatly.

“Glad to see you haven’t changed,” Kaiser joked for a second, before he continued. “This is currently shaping up to be an operation that will require all hands-on deck –”

“So I’ll be fighting?” Clarissa interrupted.

“Not exactly,” Kaiser explained. “The northern suburbs of Presida, as far as we can tell, are completely unoccupied by Federation forces. We need a small force, then, to drive through and check so that we can then set it up as both a logistical forefront and a triage center as well, allowing us to organize the CIF and mercenary forces on two fronts. With Ronin currently out of the picture—”

“Sir, if I may, I have reason to believe that Ronin is alive.”

Kaiser paused for a second, considering Clarissa for a second as he scanned her up and down. “That’d make sense, but even if they’re alive, Legion, we currently have no way to communicate with them to relay these orders. As well, they’d be better off inside of the city itself, where they can organize strike forces and direct munitions.”

With a deep breath in, Legion nodded. “Understood. You want me to lead this force, then?”

“Still sharp on the uptake, I see,” Kaiser replied with a smirk. “Are you okay doing that?”

No, Legion thought.

“Absolutely,” Clarissa replied. There was a slight smile still on her face as she rolled her shoulders and, for the first time in a while, felt confident about the coming days. The worst of the conflict now was behind them, and rumors of a pending ceasefire were swirling among the CIF forces she was assisting in coordinating the temporary logistics for. With the amount of Independence forces, as well as all of the independent mercs, this was practically something that was going to be phone’d in by them all; it was just a last shot of securing Presidia before the end of the conflict. With how little resistance the Federation had been able to put up after Prospero – Kaiser had brought rumors of various Federation states considering leaving once they found out the Federation was at fault – it was impossible to even consider thinking that they’d lose.

“We’ll make them pay, Legion.”

Even when Legion started to think of all of the possibilities for this to go wrong, she wasn’t too pessimistic about the odds. At worst, a bloodbath that still results in their victory. No matter what, she knew that tomorrow would be the end of this, and Sicario would finally be able to leave and begin again once more somewhere else. She wasn’t sure if she liked that; Clarissa was finally starting to get used to Cascadia properly, and it sounded as though Hitman Team had some personal connections that might make it worthwhile for Sicario to take a break. Plus, given how many people they’d lost, she couldn’t imagine that they really had any capacity to actually leave Cascadia right now. They had enough of a hell of a time organizing their logistics to the highway, and that was *with* the CIF’s overwhelming support.

Legion, for once, decided to get an early rest, knowing already that tomorrow would be a long day. Sicario, Kaiser, the CIF, everyone was sure that it would be an easy day, an easy victory; Legion had her doubts, but the ignited kindling inside of her held some optimism for how tomorrow was going to work.

And for once, when she closed her eyes in her bed, Clarissa’s dreams weren’t filled with the barbed wire of her past.

She was grateful for her empty stomach as the helicopter jolted in the wind, Presidia’s downtown visible easily outside of the front of the helicopter. Legion’s grip on her DMR tightened with every shake of the airframe, but she could see the beginnings of the suburbs ahead of them. For once, she wasn’t tasked with riding along in the logistics plane or helicopter that, by now, should have already dropped the vehicles they’d be using to secure the northern suburbs. They looked empty now in the midday light, hopefully abandoned by civilians as soon as the Federation tried to take control. She’d heard the stories that Sicario told about the evacuation; the Federation’s all-call that anyone still in the town was with the Independence forces and to have free engagement had been expected – but not one anyone who she’d heard talk about it had been happy to hear called.

Looking back in the helicopter, her eyes gazed over the other ten troops around her. They were a mishmash of what remained of the Circus, troops that’d been injured during Solana and thus weren’t in Prospero, and CIF forces; compared to her nonstandard Ronin outfit, everyone else’s outfits seemed to blend. With a deep breath in, Legion closed her eyes and shook her head, letting the breath out as a long, soft sigh. Reaching to the foregrip of her rifle, she dragged back the charging handle on the right side of it and let the bolt slam back forwards, and a second later, she felt the jolt of the helicopter landing in an open cul-de-sac – even if she’d memorized the itinerary, it was still more luck than skill that she’d timed it so well. At the very least, it hadn’t been consciously intentional.

She was the last to dismount, and she watched as the squadron with her split themselves between three vehicles that had, at worst, been there for only an hour before them. No words were shared between them, but the majority of the CIF forces there chose their own vehicles, leaving two of the Circus with them and then Legion and the last two with the last vehicle. The engines started, and they were all off, with just the driver’s communicating between them as Legion simply radioed their status in. At first, they were slow and careful, clearing the edge of town precisely, but when it became readily apparent that the area had been a ghost town for at least a week, if not longer, they picked up the pace. Clarissa bit back her order for them to slow down; the faster they got this done, the more ground they covered, the quicker that she’d be able to find out the truth as to where Ronin is. If she had to guess, they were in the city proper; it only made sense that, without any resupply in sight, that the team would have gone guerilla in the heart of where the conflict was sure to progress by the end. She could almost picture Kelleher giving the orders as her gaze drifted between the passing buildings, every block cleared reported back as the squad grew further apart as each vehicle sought to cover more ground. Houses began to turn to shops and apartments, the suburb gradually growing more city-like as the suburbs smaller version of Presidia loomed ominously into view. The crack of a jet pushing past the sound barrier overhead reverberated through the vehicle, and when Legion’s eyes briefly caught sight of the tail, she saw two things: the mercenary roundel, and the white butterfly crown on the tail of an F/S-15 speeding into Presidia. In the distance, howitzers and other artillery pieces began to fire, and the orange, Cordium-laced trails of railguns firing filled what she could see to her southeast. They’d secured the forward operating area for triage, Legion realized, and more by now in the small head start from the rest of the fighting forces, and now it was time to –

“Driver, stop,” Legion ordered, and unlike the CIF forces, her Circus driver responded instantly. Opening the door, Legion’s rifle came to her shoulder naturally, though the barrel remained at the ground, as she recognized movement into an alley. She heard the others dismount behind her, and a question began to spring out as to her orders before a singular shot rang out, wide of all of them and impacting a building behind them. Footfalls went into an alley, but Legion could already recognize that this alley, based off of the shops, would likely end up in a dead end. Her rifle was held a little bit tighter, beginning to swing upright, as she slowly marched to the left corner of the buildings ahead, the other two behind her slowly filing to the other side. Down the alley, the person who’d shot at them – she recognized the Federation standard rifle first, and the Federation uniform second – was frantically staring at the closed in walls around them, eyes darting around, before they finally looked back out towards them. Their grip was sloppy on the rifle, as if they didn’t know – or didn’t want to – use it, and for a second, Legion paused. Then, slowly, she stepped out of cover, lowering her rifle as she did so. The two Circus besides her looked in confusion, and she just shook her head at them.

“D-don’t! I’ll shoot!” the soldier cried; voice distinctly feminine. Yet no shots came even as Clarissa took a step forward.

“Don’t,” Clarissa replied. “It’s over.”

“I-I…” Clarissa could easily recognize the soldier in front of her, like she’d been so many years before, was a conscript, here against their will. They were shakily holding their rifle, pointing it at her, but the barrel drifted so much with every frantic, scared breath the soldier was taking that Clarissa knew the bullets wouldn’t hit her even if the soldier did pull the trigger.

“You don’t want to do this,” Clarissa softly cooed. She could almost feel the bewildered stares of the Circus levelling on the back of her head.

“W-what choice do I even have, then! They’ll – if I don’t, it’s insubordination, they’ll –”

“They’ll what?”

“They’ll kill me!”

Clarissa paused for a second, and then just shook her head. “They can’t. The Federation is falling apart, if you just surrender now, you’ll live. I promise.”

With big doe eyes, the soldier looked into Clarissa’s own, and Clarissa could make out the tears that seemed to be streaming down their face. For a second, the soldier’s eyes darted towards the rifle, towards Clarissa, towards the two soldiers behind her that still had their own rifles trained, and with a shaky breath in, they nodded. “Okay,” they mumbled, and they nodded once more.

The two Circus members began to move forward, and Clarissa nodded. For a moment, she turned back around, back towards Presidia, and watched the chaos in the sky unfolding. The burning corpse of an airship was falling to the ground, likely to crush some part of the city closer to Presidia’s heart in the process, and she heard her radio light up in her ear. “Took you long enough. Ronin to all friendly callsigns.”

Clarissa gasped. She’d been proven right. Kaiser’s words in response meant nothing; she only continued to listen and heard Captain Kelleher describe exactly what she’d expected them to be doing to Kaiser. A smile formed on her face: her team – her friends, more accurate, as she was beginning to accept – were alive.

Maybe not all of them, but if Kelleher was alive, she had good expectations about –

A scattering of automatic gunfire broke out behind her, more reminiscent of a dropped open-bolt gun going off than any deliberate action. The first bullets hit into concrete, then Legion felt a searing pain on the outside of her right thigh before two crashing impacts knocked the wind out of her and her to the ground as she tried to recover from the unexpected blow. She could see the blood begin to stain the concrete under her as she tried to push herself upright, her ears unable to properly hear the commotion behind her.

Clarissa’s arms buckled; she’d been shot before, but usually, all of the rounds hit her armor. Not like this. Legion’s mind went to the worst case immediately: if her femoral artery had been included in the hit, she was already as good as dead.

Then, Clarissa simply passed out. There were no dreams in her blackness this time.

Winter was beginning to set upon the area that was once Rowsdower Air Force Base, and, in time, would once again be Rowsdower Air Force Base. In the months following the aftermath, what remained of Cascadia has established a memorial there, a monument to the mercenary forces that had fought in the war and the loses that they had suffered in the name of Cascadia’s independence – it had been debated for half of the time as to whether or not the mercenaries were even worthy of it, given that many of them had been fighting for money, if not the sheer thrill of combat, but eventually, it was decided that even if their cause may not have been just, their sacrifice for the cause was still worthy of remembering. At the center of the memorial was a flat, roofless rotunda, each pillar bearing a company that fought, the largest of which was Sicario’s. It was at the north point of the rotunda, in line with the tip of the circular star emblem all mercenary planes were born with; it listed the name of everyone who served – lived or died – with Sicario during the conflict by full name, as well as their tacname. In life, they were names Sicario rarely used.

Outside of the rotunda was a graveyard, which served as the gravesite for every soldier that had served at Rowsdower and died, even if a body hadn’t been found. After Prospero, and then Presidia, it was assumed untold bodies had been left simply unrecoverable.

Of those graves, there was one: Clarissa McClaine. AC 403 – AC 432.

A violent shake woke Clarissa up with a start, followed by the sound of wind buffeting the tent that she could now see surrounded her. There was an IV jammed into her left arm, some stitches on her thigh that she could feel even through the painkillers that they jammed her full of, and what was most definitely a broken rib based off of the bandages restricting her breathing. Should she have been surprised that she was still alive? She felt surprised, but in the back of her mind, two voices were shouting; one sang that she should be excited and relieved, the other was reminding her to simply wait for the boot to drop.

With a deep breath in, Clarissa McClaine closed her eyes and just listened to the world around her. She wasn’t alone in this tent, but she could hear the noises of other injured around her. There was a sound of commotion outside, but nothing unexpected for a war zone to her mind. For once, she realized, she was looking forward to seeing Voodoo’s face, even if Ronin’s medic had a reputation only surpassed by her for fear instilled in Sicario’s other members. The supposed witch doctor, and the tired logistics officer.

She could feel her consciousness fading once more, and thankfully, she was left only in the black once more. When she slipped back into it, it was with the sound of a lightning bolt’s crack, drawing her eyes to the flap of the tent. It reminded her greatly of the setting sky on a drawn-out day, but there was a haze to it like that of a wildfire.

Or the haze of when the mountains around Rowsdower erupted.

Clarissa slowly blinked, trying to disseminate whether that was correct or if her eyes had just been playing their mindless tricks on her. Someone came into the tent, but they seemed to be just as dazed as she was. CIF uniform. The commotion outside seemed to have picked up, and in the fluttering of the tent flap left in the soldier’s wake, Legion saw another orange bolt strike into the ground.

That had confirmed the doubt that had been brewing in her mind through the last bout of consciousness, but it wasn’t something that she was sure as to how she should react to. As far as she could tell, looking over the other people in the medical tent with her, none of them seemed to be Sicario. Not even any of the other mercs. Just CIF and, to her surprise, Federation troops.

She wondered what happened to the soldier that had surrendered, only to – seemingly accidentally, at least Clarissa hoped – shoot her while setting down their weapon. Were they still alive, or did the Circus not let that happen at that point? Gently, she squeezed her right hand shut with her eyes, trying to steady a breath. In the process of doing so, Legion felt herself pass out once more, where, finally, a dream awaited her.

She could recognize the snow immediately, but there was something different about the scene. She wasn’t in the weird civilian conscript uniform that had cemented itself in her mind, but her tactical hoodie instead. Black jeans, combat boots. Proper fighting gear. As she took a step, she felt her rifle bounce against her back; she heard the sirens start. She wasn’t supposed to be here, not like this. She had the power to change things, but for some reason, that only set off more alarm bells in Legion’s mind.

Instead, she slowly walked along the path that she normally would have. There was a rather large hole already cut into the courtyard’s fence, which only led to Legion’s pace slowing to a crawl; she forcibly slowed her quickening breathing as she felt the edge of the hole. It was a deliberate cut, still jagged slightly. Unlike usual, there were no screams chasing after her. Caution abundant, she moved forwards. She was operating under autopilot, even if her mind was forcing the actions out slower, she knew this path too well to deviate. It made no sense to.

All at once, the barbed wire appeared in front of her, but she was able to stop herself from falling into it. Legion wasn’t sure if she was glad she did, however, because she saw someone already stuck in it, already maimed.

She was already there; trapped under the barbed wire was Clarissa McClaine, all those years ago, still struggling. Slowly, she sat down into the snow besides the stuck woman. She lacked the tools to help free herself, so there was nothing else she could do but wait. And wait. And wait. For the Ronin who had saved her to show up.

She woke up before they did. She heard them in the distance as her dreams left her, but she didn’t see them. Instead, as her eyes blinked off the slip that’d came over them, she saw Kaiser, in a chair, at the foot of the bed. He was reading a book, but as he turned the page, he caught notice of her open eyes and closed it instead, turning to face her. “Good to see you’re still with us, McClaine.”

Two things immediately caught her attention: the fact that Arnold “Kaiser” Frenken had referred to her by name instead by callsign and the fact that his voice lacked any of the usual charisma, energy, and charm that had made Kaiser such a seemingly natural leader. As she looked around the tent, every other occupied bed only had CIF forces now, besides her own. “Sir,” she spoke, her voice cracking from dryness.

“Can you stand?”

Gently, she pressed her hand to the stitches. It had been a grazing blow, carving out a small chunk of fat and skin. It hurt, but as she put pressure on it, then shifted, she realized she could definitely stand. She nodded.

“Good. You’ve got to get moving,” he flatly explained, tossing a small black leather-bound booklet her way. “Get your things from the base.”

“The highway?”

“Correct. Grab your things,” Kaiser continued, but she had to interrupt.

“Kaiser, what the hell happened? I felt the ground shake from here!” She already knew, deep down, but she needed to confirm it.

He took in a deep breath and pinched at the bridge of his nose as he shook his head. “Another cordium bombing. Downtown Presidia is gone, with much of the city now in ruin. It’s all done now, but it’s all gone.”

“Where’s the rest of the team?”

“Didn’t you hear me? We’re done. It’s all gone.”

Those words let her finally acknowledge the hollow feeling in her chest, the worries that she’d hoped weren’t true, and she just nodded. “Understood.” She looked away as she took out her own IV – she’d never been a fan of needles – and stood, gently holding the booklet as if she was unsure what to do with it. Standing up hurt, the stitches searing with pain, but it wasn’t an unfamiliar sensation.

“Get your things. We’ll bury the rest.”

Besides the clothes that she was currently wearing, there wasn’t going to be a lot for her to recover from the base, but she understood why Kaiser was sending her back. It’d be the last time for her to truly say goodbye.

Neither of them said another word as she made her way out of the medical tent. She saw one of the Circus still nearby, and they locked eyes. With a small nod, they set out together.

AC 432. She’d turned 29 during the conflict, and she hadn’t even had the time to celebrate. Gently, she brushed her hand against the gravestone, staring at what used to be her name. For a second, she opened up the black booklet once more. “Claire Blackwell”. Even though the name was so close to what it used to be, she only rarely heard the name Clarissa during the majority of a decade that she’d spent with Sicario. Gently, from her side, she pulled out an ornate knife (had it not been for the light snowfall, it might have even glistened a bit in the sunlight) and knelt down besides the grave, and pressing it to the stone, she began to carve. It’d likely ruin the blade, she realized, and that was fine. It was a gift from a dead man, anyways. The memories she was forcing herself to remember now would do far better a nostalgia trip than it could ever do.

It didn’t take too long for Claire to finish her work. “Legion” was all the tablet needed added. With a deep breath in, she just softly shook her head as she stood up and stared down at the gravesite, a mixed sense of comfort and yearning settling into her heart. By official records, and now by her own account, the person she was once was now truly dead, leaving only her. It didn’t feel right to be allowed this “second” chance, even if, for her, it was a third. She left her hand resting on the top of the gravestone as she closed her eyes and took in one last deep breath, beginning to walk away as she left the breath out. Legion had made a lot of mistakes during her time, Claire had realized. Not in her work, which had always been flawless, but elsewhere.

But there was always one constant: she never made the same mistake twice. She wasn’t about to start now. Gently, she felt around in her pocket until she pulled out a small business card. Claire Blackwell had a few more months before the Cascadian Foreign Legion would be finalized, and its leader, one Arnold Frenken of Sicario fame, would need help.

It was an option this time. Ronin’s lifetime contracts to Sicaro, to Kaiser, had been served by all but her, and even then, he’d been clear that he didn’t expect her to return. Maybe she shouldn’t, but he was more than just a leader to her, a father to his men.

Out of everyone left alive from Sicario, Kaiser was now the closest thing she had to a friend. Claire realized she couldn’t afford to risk losing that.