The shitty lighting in the hangar that Clarissa “Legion” McClaine was stuck inventorying right now certainly didn’t help her waning eyesight. Her hands were shaking now from exhaustion, whatever was left in her system of the shitty instant coffee that she’d been cramming down by the spoonful hadn’t been giving her any more energy. Her eyes were struggling to focus, and in the back of her head, she was cursing out whatever idiot on Hitman team decided it was good to buy a plane that not only couldn’t mount anything besides their standard multipurpose missiles but also fired a different caliber cannon shell, had tires worth more than her monthly salary, and, based off of what she last remembered reading, flew worse than literally every other airframe that Sicario currently had.

She looked down at her clipboard again. No, actually, the damned thing didn’t even mount standard missiles, it only had fucking guns. As Legion’s mind processed that, it only exacerbated the sleep-deprived anger that she was feeling towards whichever Hitman idiot decided this was a good thing to spend however many fucking credits on. Still, she’d rather be here, getting ahead on tomorrow’s work, because somehow, despite the odds, she managed to finish her reports and orders early. Even if it meant trying to figure out some of the weirder details that would likely prop up for this plane’s maintenance and order the parts before the problems could even think about arising.

“Dustmother,” she mumbled softly, shaking her head. As she stood upright, she clanged her head on the underside of its wing, immediately falling down onto her back. Gently, she brought her left hand up to the top of her head and, satisfied with the fact that there wasn’t any blood on it – any blood that she could see, at least – she flopped her hand back down. Less gentle now, she returned the pen in her hand to her hair – only to find that there was already a pen there, so now there were two pens in her hair – and tried to push herself back upright.

She didn’t have the energy to push herself back upright.

The floor felt strangely comfortable, Legion thought as she felt her eyes fall closed and the blackness of passing out take over her once more.

When she became aware of her surroundings again, she wasn’t on the floor of Hitman’s team hangar. The area around her had morphed into a courtyard, an empty basketball court in front of her and a chain-link fence on the other side of that keeping her trapped in. She quickly became aware of the wall that she was leaning against, which she pushed herself off of as chills began to run down her back.

It was snowing out. Legion always hated the snow. It made doing anything difficult. The chills running down her spine, however, weren’t from the physical coldness of the air around her; they were from her mind recognizing once more the environment around her. “Not again,” she weakly muttered, forcing her eyes closed and hoping that, when she reopened them, she’d no longer be here.

When she reopened them, she was still in the empty courtyard. She tried again, closing her eyes and hoping for anything to change.

It still didn’t.

There was a slight shakiness in Legion’s breathing now. Behind her, she heard the sirens start once more. A few seconds later, the gunshots started, cracks and bangs coming from all around. None at her, not yet, but she knew if she stayed, they would be. She’d been shot once; having her brain relieve that pain again in a dream wasn’t something she wanted. Legion’s mind had already given her that dream once.

Deep breath, and a step forward. Legion slowly began to walk to the other side of the courtyard, to the fence. Under her bare hands, the metal of the fence felt like it threatened to freeze her skin to them, but as she looked up, she forced herself to become aware of the barbed wire atop it once more. She thought about the countless requisition orders that she’d filled out for materials like this and for its more painful siblings, and the thought drew a weak, tired, singular chuckle out of her.

At least it was only barbed wire, she thought, only barbed wire. Then, Legion started to climb, the tired woman’s movements surprisingly fluid, as if rehearsed a thousand times. At least in her dreams, she didn’t feel the same omnipresent exhaustion she felt in her daily life. Back then, she actually had some semblance of energy, even if her conscripters really didn’t want her to.

Back then, she wasn’t a soldier, even if she wore their clothes. She’d panicked. Though she still felt some of the same fear she felt then, it was dulled by the experiences that she’d had in the time since. As she began to near the top, Legion began to shift her weight to get to the other side, but in the process, she planted her right hand firmly on one of the barbs of the wire. The shock of the pain was enough for her to lose her balance; instead of dropping down like she wanted, she plummeted on her side to the ground.

Weakly, she tried to sit upright, but the second she put any force down on her left arm, she let out a large welp. Did the fall break it? In the back of her mind, she knew she didn’t have time to pause and think, her younger self screaming at her to ignore the pain and keep moving. Shifting slightly, she took advantage of her bleeding right hand instead to prop herself slightly upright before managing to get to her feet.

That was one wall that she made it through. The next one…

She heard shouting behind her. It was time to move. Weakly, she began to jog in the same direction that’d taken her to the first fence. She just had to run, she’ll make it this time. She’ll make it this time. For a split second, she turned to check back over her shoulder, to see if the soldiers were following her; in the time that it took her to do that split-second check, the razor wire fence she was still trying to figure out how to bypass caught her left arm, seemingly appearing out of nowhere. It cut effortlessly through the fatigues she was wearing, and only took slightly more effort to get through the skin on her arm.

She was stuck. This time, the pain didn’t draw any screams from her, but that was just because Legion’s mind was stuck on trying to manage the panic that was rising in the back of her mind. She hadn’t run that far, it shouldn’t be here, how did she run into it? It should’ve been another minute or two of running –

Enough, Legion decided. Taking in a shaky deep breath, she moved her bleeding right hand to try and tug the wire slightly away at a part where she didn’t see a blade, slow and gentle. She just had to get untangled, and she’d be fine. She could bypass it. She knew how.

She heard the soldier’s shouting behind her once more, and like that, her attempt at calming down shattered totally. She had to get out *now.* Yanking her arm out – an action that, while worked, deepened the cuts all over her hand and arm, she fell prone, and began to try to crawl. It’d cut her hair, her neck, her back, but she could get through. There was a gap, just barely big enough for her; she knew that from years of experience in working with concertina wire. She was making good progress, but it wasn’t a long distance. All she had to do was avoid –

A sharp pain coursed through her entire body as she put too much pressure on her broken arm, causing her to curl up in pain – an action that got her entire back truly caught in the razor wire. Every part of Legion’s body felt like it was on fire, the warmth of her own blood seeping out of the hundreds of cuts on her body being her only heat from the falling snow. She tried not to scream, but a bloodcurdling sound came out of her mouth nonetheless as she tried to fall back to the ground. She didn’t have any of the energy to keep crawling, she just hoped the pain would stop soon.

In the distance, she heard the soldiers again; suddenly, they were upon her. They were talking in words that Legion could understand but not words her brain was willing to make out, their voices simultaneously familiar and foreign at the same time as a siren’s call. She turned her head as much as she could to look at them, and they looked like amorphous military blobs to her eyes. Different from the people who had forced her to serve as a conscript, more disorganized, but familiar; in the dream, she wasn’t allowed to remember why.

One of them had bolt cutters. He opened them up, and to Legion’s terrified eyes, they seemed to be going in right for her neck.

Clarissa “Legion” McClaine didn’t shoot fully upright, but almost immediately as she woke up, she started to prop herself upright. Her body was drenched in sweat, causing her fatigues to awkwardly cling to her skin in all sorts of uncomfortable manners, her greyed hair matted to her face and neck, and, of all things, there was a blanket covering her – and the ground seemed surprisingly comfortable, too.

As she got her bearings, she realized she wasn’t in the hangar anymore: she was in a room, sparsely undecorated. Nicer quality than the barracks Ronin was saddled with, even if she never saw her own room in those barracks. Quieter, too. Based off of the two doors, it likely had an attached bathroom, too. Flyboys always had the nicest bunks on an airbase, Legion had realized during her time with Sicario, but this room lacked the usual flair that most of them had. Beyond the desk and the window that hadn’t even begun to let in dawn (though it was clearly threatening to start), the room… had nothing to it. Either whoever was here didn’t spend much time here, like her and her room, or they didn’t do much.

The words that she should have heard were echoing through her mind, now. Octo asking if they should kill her for the money, Crunch deciding to spare her. Her first encounter with Voodoo, who tended to the deep cuts across her back. Gently, she shifted upright, slouching over herself. Gently, she looked at the palm of her right hand: no scar. That was part of the dream. It changed, every so often. Small details like that. Sometimes, it hurt less; usually, it hurt more.

Her eyes drifted around the room once more. It really was a nicer room than most of the barracks at Rowsdower. Officer’s quarters, most likely, but… the CIF never entered any of the hangars Sicario were using; they were in charge of all of their own gear – she’d made sure of that the first time she caught some CIF POG almost fuck up her entire inventorying system.

She heard one of the doors to the room start to click, and on impulse, her left hand went to her hip where her carry pistol should’ve been. After that dream, her nerves were running high, and the fact that her pistol wasn’t there didn’t help. Trying to look as natural as she could, Legion let the tired look return to her face, a lethal gaze falling down onto her face.

“Oh. You woke up.” The voice was unfamiliar to her, as was the face of the pilot who was awkwardly stepping into what Legion could only assume to have been their room. “Sorry about… all of this. My WSO saw you passed out when she went to… well, begin looking over my new plane and decided that this was… my problem now. You’re Legion, right?”

Ah, this was Hitman’s flight lead, Legion realized. “Correct,” she flatly replied, her stare still threatening to burn a hole through Monarch’s forehead.

“I’m sorry that this is our… first real time talking, but Prez seems to really like you. I’m –”

“You’re Monarch. I know,” Legion interjected.

“Ah,” Monarch softly stammered, caught off guard as they continued to linger awkwardly in the doorway. “You, er. Seemed to be in a rather rough shape as you –”

“I’m *fine*,” came the curt interjection from Legion’s mouth before she could even think about blunting her words. It caught Monarch off guard once more, who stood there staring at her. There was a soft voice in her mind trying to coax her into apologizing, but before she even had the chance, Monarch just shook their head.

“If you… want to take a shower, I can grab a spare set of clothes for you. Or… if you’d be more comfortable with Prez –” Each of Monarch’s words were carefully placed, trying to neither offend nor insinuate anything, but that didn’t stop Legion from stopping them halfway through their words once more.

“I will,” she flatly said as she stood up from the bed, her slouch still present. She began to move to the other door and heard the door behind her start to close, but with a deep breath in, she turned and looked over her shoulder. “Thank you.”

Before the other door clicked shut, Monarch just softly said, “Yeah.”

Then, before silence could set once more, Clarissa “Legion” McClaine pushed through the door in front of her.

Before she served as the premier logistics coordinator between Ronin, Circus, and the various airborne forces that Sicario brought to the playing field, Clarissa wasn’t even a soldier. She was conscripted, but the shitty, backwater Periphery hole that she had called home offered “alternative” services to those who didn’t want to work in the military forces. Of course, that didn’t stop her from then being sent to a military base as a clerk, but it was removed enough from all the conflict and fighting that it felt safe. It could’ve maybe even been comfortable, but Clarissa remembered one thing: there was never enough hot water and what water there was was never hot enough, the memory sparked by the scalding water raining onto her skin. After all she’d been through, she found it surprisingly comfortable.

Awkwardly, she reached behind her head to undo the messy knot that she made daily to keep her hair in place without a hair tie. Hair ties were just one more thing to lose and, given the amount of damage her hair had already seen from stress alone, it was easy to realize that maintaining her grey hair wasn’t a high priority. It once was, Clarissa remembered as she tried to run a hand through it, though she stopped at the first knot. It was brown when she was still in the Periphery, just a little bit longer, and definitely cleaner. Her life had been easier back then; she had more time to actually try to care about it. She was just oversight to a military that was notoriously corrupt; the government apparently wanted to make sure no one had any wise ideas about stealing food so she was just there to overlook the numbers. They were always right, so it often felt pointless, but that never meant that Clarissa was not precise. At the time, she considered it a fault of hers, something she’d blame on her overly neurotic father.

He was a man obsessed with the old world, before all the ash had fell. The way he talked about it, it sometimes felt as though he loved the ghosts of past more than their family – it was obvious that he loved her and her mom, but it was unclear if he loved them more than the trash he dug out of the silt. He had a stockpile of “relics” in the basement of their home, meticulously organized. He’d spend weeks at a time, disappeared to some nice hole, only to return with a trunk load of bobbins that he’d spend the next week sorting. He was efficient at it, though: it wasn’t a “system” to her father, it was an *algorithm*, and if called it a system, he’d spend the next hour ranting about every reason down the river that you were wrong. Clarissa had learned that mistake on two separate occasions, but after the second, the mental connection that formed was finally strong enough to make sure that Clarissa had known the system better than she knew her right hand. Her was neurotic, but efficient. Efficient enough, at least, that it meant Clarissa was left passing out at a desk adding numbers, instead of in hangars and storerooms still counting.

Usually.

All the efficiency in the world didn’t mean that she mourned him never returning. All the efficiency in the world just meant that she was useful. She didn’t waste time. As much as it left her exhausted, Legion’s work fulfilled her. The systems she set up here actually mattered, they weren’t just a waste of time – and funds – because a pencil pusher in a corrupt capitol was worried about the corrupt military taking two packages of instant coffee for their daily rations instead of just one. It wasn’t pointless now, and she may have been more comfortable then, sleeping in a bed and taking care of herself, not stressed to the point that she wasn’t sure if the stomach pains were from the coffee or from her body trying to get her to slow down. She had a system, and it worked, and unlike then, she found a sense of joy in her work. She almost would have called it happiness, but at the very least, she would settle for it taking up all of her time. By passing out at a desk, it meant that she’d wake up later than everyone else and wouldn’t have time *to* waste.

Except for now. She had all the time in the world now. It wouldn’t matter if she spent all of her time in this shower or outside of it, she’d be left with the same thing: time to think.

Clarissa always hated the rare moments of introspection she got. Snow, sleep, and introspection: her three least favorite things.

Her hands paused as she grabbed the soap left in the shower. It was the name of some high-end brand that she only recognized from Sicario’s brief moments operating inside the megacity hellscapes of core Federation states thanks to all the advertising. It had never shown up on any of the supply paperwork, which meant either Monarch stole this from the Cascadians, or they were paying for it with their own funds whenever they did spend time in town. If it was the latter, she knew this bottle was worth… at least five containers of good, pre-ground coffee. What a waste of money, Clarissa thought. That didn’t stop her from scrubbing herself down with it, however. As her right hand – still no scar on the palm, she was now sure that the wound there had only been dream-inflicted suffering – ran down the very real scars on her left arm, she hesitated slightly. She wasn’t afraid of them, nor ashamed of them, but their presence was always an acknowledgement that the Clarissa she was died on the day that Ronin saved her life.

It wasn’t often that she wondered if that was a good or bad thing, and right now, she was doing her best to not try to wonder.

With a groan, Clarissa rested her head against the wall of the shower, resting her forehead against the warmed by steam tile as her eyes fluttered shut. She could feel a headache starting to set in, pressure slowly building behind her eyes and at her temples. Without opening her eyes, she flailed around as she tried to find the shower handle, accidentally turning the water even hotter before she managed to turn it off. She must have missed the door to the bathroom opening, because there was a neatly folded uniform resting on the counter besides the sink with, of all things, a white mug besides it. As the smell of soap and running water faded from her nose, she figured out just what the cup contained: coffee. Good coffee, too, based off of the smell. Grabbing a towel, she roughly patted her hair down besides curling it around her and she grabbed the mug, taking a sip.

It was sweet. Almost too sweet to her, actually. The instant coffee was bitter, and usually cold; this still had some semblance of warmth to it. It was too high-quality, too. Too many tastes to it. Whoever made it – somehow, she didn’t believe that damned pilot was the one who made this. Her gaze drifted to the uniform as her brow furled – it seemed to be taken right out of inventory. The inventory *she* managed.

Her gaze narrowed as she took another sip of the coffee. That better have damned well been marked down somewhere. Turning her back to the mirror, she rested against the counter and slouched forward a bit over the cup. How *dare* that pilot be nice to her. It made it a little bit harder to be pissed off at all the extra work that she’d been given. At least it wasn’t Ro—

Clarissa’s slowly drifting gaze caught sight of something out of place: a bright red sharps container. She knew that they only had a few of those, and because they were technically medical accessories, she wasn’t allowed to know *where* they were going. Only Voodoo did. Interesting. She finally figured out too, then, where the extra syringes ordered were going. Still, part of her mind was questioning *why* Monarch needed the extra medical supplies – were they diabetic? Even with Monarch’s supposed skills, the risk of a pilot just dying out of combat if supplies ran tight didn’t seem like something that Kaiser would risk.

It wasn’t her concern, at the end of the day, but it intrigued her. Gently, she brought the mug up to her lips once more.

“Dammit,” Legion murmured. “Empty already.”

With a sigh, she set the empty mug down and looked over the neatly folded uniform once more. It wasn’t too early to start her day, Clarissa admitted. After all, Legion had work to do.

“At this rate, we’ll have everything in place ahead of schedule!”

It was annoy Legion day, she had realized, because she hadn’t managed to shake off Fresh Meat in the past two hours. He’d apparently tried to bring her coffee again, but because she was already up and working and not asleep on a requisition form, she had initially missed him. Good, she’d thought then, because it meant she had more time to work, because he always was trying to talk to her. Normally, she could tune it out. Had she realized, though, that getting to work earlier meant that Crunch would send him after her to check in and help out if needed – FNG decided help out meant bringing *two* cup of coffee as well as chatter, apparently – she wouldn’t have tried to get ahead on her work yesterday.

That stupid mistake last night had thrown her entire schedule off. “Great, ahead of schedule,” she muttered, “until one of you idiots decides that if you tried using *this* carbine instead of the perfectly good one we already have ammo for because it *might* make you exactly six-point-nine percent more tactically efficient, making me have to source an entirely new ammo pipeline that no one else on Ronin will use. At least Circus makes all of their assholes use the same gear, even if it means I have to order more of it.”

“Ah, c’mon Legion, that hasn’t happened since Strelok last tried,” Fresh Meat tried to reassure her.

Legion stopped dead in her tracks. “No one has *tried* again because half of Ronin’s currently deployed to some off-shore rig, so they’re not here to bother me,” she mumbled, before shaking her head. “Fresh Meat, do you have something – no, *anything* – better to be doing right now?”

With a hum, Fresh Meat stopped besides her and started to look up a bit, thinking. “Well, Voodoo needed help finding his skeleton –”

“His *what*.”

“His skeleton! Y’know, like the ones doctor’s have in their offices?”

Legion paused, completely dumbfounded. With a small tilt of her head, she stared at Fresh Meat. “Most doctors *don’t have skeletons* in their offices. You’re thinking of a high school anatomy – wait, why the fuck does Voodoo have a high school anatomy skeleton in his office?”

“He’s Voodoo,” Fresh Meat responded. “So, no, I don’t really have anything else to be –”

“Yes you do,” Legion interrupted, looking around the storage room they were in and quickly making something up. “Go find Wraith for me and tell him the parts he ordered are here. Then, go find Gemini and tell her that I need her new shotgun.”

Legion watched as he gulped – good, one of those two made him nervous – and nodded. “Yes ma’am,” he replied, almost sounding slightly offended. It almost made Legion feel guilty, the keyword being almost. He scampered off, leaving Legion alone. She preferred it that way. It was easier to run through the system without him asking questions or making small talk, too.

Half an hour later, and the audit of Ronin’s inventory was done, something she could have gotten done with fifteen minutes quicker had Fresh Meat not been there, but at least she was still… an hour ahead of schedule. With a sigh, she left the storeroom and made it back to her desk. At least it was almost noon, now, thanks to the late sunrise that being this far north gave them as winter slowly died out. By all accounts, it was a lazier day than most of her norms. She even had time to eat lunch if she wanted to. Out of one of the desk’s drawers she pulled one of the many instant coffee packets that she’d raided from the MRE’s during their time at Rowsdower, before she stood up and began to walk towards the cafeteria.

She’d never actually spent much time there. Usually she was too busy to eat when everyone else was. That left her usually scrounging for light snacks throughout the day, though the copious amounts of instant coffee usually left her without feeling hunger for most of the day. Through the doors, Legion went, into a room full of mostly unfamiliar faces. Some were CIF, some were other mercs, and some were from Sicario too – but even then, she didn’t recognize most of them.

She did, however, recognize Ronin’s team lead, Crunch, at one of the tables that was empty except for him and one other girl who Legion didn’t recognize. Almost immediately, he caught Legion’s eye and waved her over, causing her to just shake her head and sigh – though, once she was done with her mild theatrics, she did give him a nod before going to get her food. Apparently, it seemed as though stir fry was the lunch option of the day: beef, rice, and a mess of vegetables all slathered in some sort of sauce that she didn’t recognize beyond it likely being from one of the Federation states on the *other* side of the international date line. Whether or not it was better than the perfectly good cup of noodles that Legion had abandoned in her desk, she hadn’t decided.

Through the crowded lunchroom she marched, before almost robotically sitting down at the table opposite of Crunch and the girl. “Ah, you *are* going to join us!” Crunch teased, seemingly playing up his heavy Oceanian accent for humor. “This here’s Prez, she’s Hitman’s crew chief as well as their flight lead’s wizzo.”

Legion gave a curt nod, not replying as began to eat. With a snort, Crunch explained to Prez, “Ah, don’t worry about her, she’s normally like this.” That earned a roll of Legion’s eyes, but Prez just chuckled.

“Trust me, Monarch’s not exactly much of a talker either. It’s a pleasure to properly meet you, Legion. I know I give you a lot of paperwork to do, but I don’t know if we’ve ever actually spoken,” Prez replied, and though Legion didn’t look up to her to make eye contact – the bowl of stir fry was *much* more interesting – Legion could almost hear the smile in her face. “Just get back to the story.”

“Ah right, where was I?” Crunch replied with his own chuckle, and Legion could see him start to shuffle – likely bringing a hand up to his chin in his usual over-dramatic fashion. “Right, so, we’d just airdropped and had began our assault on the *Meilynx* as your ace was decimating their air forces, and we had to protect Legion over there as we moved on the ship. Well, I say protect, but you should’ve seen her! It was methodical, poppin’ heads in order, one two three, and then repeating. She stole a fair number of *my* kills, even!”

“You’re exaggerating,” Legion muttered, looking up at Crunch with raised eyebrows.

“Please, if you weren’t more valuable as keeping our messes clean back at base, I’d try to steal you for the front-line more often, Miss Perfect Logistician,” Crunch teased back, almost cackling now. With a shake of her head, Legion sighed and rolled her eyes again, but she could tell that both Prez and him were thoroughly amused. “You should see her out in our longer ops too, Prez, she’s got a magical knack for coordinating supplies in the field, too. Hell, she’s not half bad at coordinating Ronin, either. I’ve even had Kaiser ask me why she’s not leading Ronin by now!”

“Oh, has he?” Prez replied, leaning forward slightly. “Well, why aren’t you?”

Once more, Legion was dumbfounded, looking at the two of them with a tired stare. To her, the answer was rather self-evident. “Have you seen the idiots that I have to coordinate already? There’s not enough caffeine in all of Cascadia to give me the energy to deal with them even more,” she explained in a simple snark, the corners of her lips turning upwards proudly.

A snark that got Crunch smiling even wider. “Ah, you say that, but I can see you smiling now. We even got the rare joke from you, Leeg!”

The smile didn’t fade, but Legion did roll her eyes once more. “Speaking of having no energy, though, you feeling alright?” Prez asked, a mild look of concern in her eyes. That threatened the smile on Legion’s face. “I found you passed out this morning on the floor of our hangar under Monarch’s new plane as I was checking to make sure it had arrived and we weren’t going to need anything right away, but when I found you there…”

“I’m fine,” Legion curtly replied.

“Just checking – oh, how was the coffee as well? Monarch told me she found the mug empty.” Now, even Prez was trying to make small talk. With a pleading inflection in the cold stare she shot at Crunch, she tried to look for a polite way out, but Crunch just smirked, winked, and stood up, muttering a small goodbye as he left.

With a tired sigh, Legion turned back to Prez and said, “Too sweet.”

“Ah, yeah, that’s my bad. Monarch drinks tea, and I usually drink my coffee sweet, so I didn’t know how to make it for you,” Prez explained. “If… you don’t mind, how do you normally like it?”

“Instant. Cold water,” Legion flatly explained, though – just barely – less curt.

“I’m… not going to lie, that sounds kinda awful,” an astonished Prez replied. “But I can try, if you’d like? Or just try making it less sweet, which sounds better.”

“It is awful,” Legion replied. For a second, she paused, staring Prez down. The mechanic didn’t blink, just wore a sweet smile. With the tiniest shake of her head, Legion just said, “And… sure. If you want.”

“It’s the least I can do for all of the shit I put on your plate,” Prez said, her tone level in its appreciative softness. “Just find your way back to Monarch’s room if you want me to make some, else I’ll just have to track you down.”

“Understood,” Legion said, turning back to her food. It seemed Prez had finished her own and was just sticking around to talk, so when Legion signaled she just wanted to eat, Legion heard Prez stand up.

“I’ll be seeing you, then!” Prez exclaimed.

“Be seeing you,” Legion replied. She still didn’t look up.