“Think we can afford to share a bottle of red at the end of today?”

Out of all of the things to be echoing around in Monarch’s head, she hated the fact that it was these words from Prez in particular. That’d been back in February, and it was already June now. Maybe it was the exhaustion of their contracts – Hitman, as the top-preforming squadron for not just Sicario but likely among the entirety of the CIF’s forces, was relied on almost too heavily for the months of work that they’d been doing – piling up as the preparation of the liberation of Prospero began, and now, as she flew, she felt some of Dip’s exhaustion in her as well.

Right now, out of every option that Monarch had, finally breaking into the bottle of wine that she’d gotten for her work in rescuing Wild Boar sounded beyond delightful, even if it meant likely being passed out in her room for the next couple of days. Just a few more sorties, and they’d be done with this hell, rich for a bit longer, and have time to take another vacation once more.

Maybe they’d go back to the Caribbean. Prez liked it there, and while Monarch wasn’t a fan of the beach, or the sun, or the whole being outside in her body that she still wasn’t the biggest fan of, the people she cared about –

“This is AWACS Galaxy to ALCON! I repeat, this is AWACS Galaxy to ALCON, ALCON, ALCON! We have incoming ordinance! Cruise missile type! Thermal signatures are off the charts! Hunker in place or get out of the area! All fighters, I’m sending IFF info! Intercept as many as you can!”

Without a second more of thought, Monarch felt her shove the throttle wide open as she began a bank, scanning through the world around her to try to identify any of the cruise missiles that Galaxy was talking about. The other shouts and screams over the radio started to get blurred out to Monarch’s mind as instinct took over; from what little she did process, Dip and Comic were freaking out as Galaxy, reasonably, got the fuck out. Monarch knew that, if Prez were here, she’d likely be encouraging for them to do the same.

Monarch was just barely able to destroy the first missile she saw before it was going to airburst, the rounds from her autocannon tearing it apart. She had more than enough energy to be able to make a sharp turn to snap onto the closest, and so instinctually, she performed it. Out of the corner of her eye, though, she saw a third missile.

And a fourth.

And then a fifth.

Already within the city.

The weapon selector flipped over to multilock, and a six of her own missiles were sent out exactly as she heard tone. Two more down, but when the last two of her own missile barrage were just about to reach the cruise missile, Monarch saw the missile detonate. She’d seen explosions like this rarely: occasionally, an airship would burst like this, but her most recent memory of an explosion like this was their last contract with the Federation before the war: when she blew up the Meilynx.

As Comic questioned over the radio what the hell were in those missiles, Monarch already knew what they were. Cordium. Wild Boar was shouting something, but by the time he’d finished, a sixth cruise missile had detonated in his sector.

Judging by her rapidly distorting HUD, that was the last of the cruise missiles in the city. Monarch turned back out to the countryside, trying to find the source of this attack.

And she gasped at what she saw.

There was a new voice on the radio, one that her HUD wasn’t identifying as familiar when it pinged her with a new voice. It was more… academic in tone, but it carried the same fear that everyone in the AO seemed to be feeling.

Just when she was able to start to properly process the fear in their voices, she heard Galaxy shout in her ear to brace.

And then everything went white.

The next hours were a blur. Even shooting down Master Goose squadron alongside that insane test pilot didn’t spark anything in Monarch’s mind. All she had on her mind right now was fear. Rowsdower seemed to be ruined, and when Galaxy had tried, no one had responded.

No response. Nothing from anyone. It was a graveyard.

The crazy woman had clocked Diplomat – Peter. Peter and Eve.

“I’ll tell you myself, Ms. London.”

Had Eve been saying something? Wait, Monarch recognized that voice. It was Kaiser. They were alive.

A long, shaky breath came out from deep in Monarch’s chest. They were alive. Prez. Robin. She was alive. It might not be all of Sicario, but her friends were.

There was more chatter, but Monarch was already preparing to land before it was even discussed over the radio. That guy from the CIF was on coms again, trying to get them to stay; Monarch already knew that whatever would happen wouldn’t be her decision – it’d all end up to how Peter and Eve felt. Everything just started to blur, and Monarch just nodded along with it all. She didn’t even care enough to actually look at the offer Stardust was giving them, only taking Eve and Peter’s reaction to it as enough of a confirmation that, whatever it was, it was going to keep them around.

And if it was going to keep them around, that meant Monarch would be staying as well.

When it was clear that the discussion was dying down, Monarch had already begun to walk off to the barracks to grab what little she had and leave. Using her spare flight suit as a makeshift bag, because lord knew where her actual duffle bag was and she didn’t dare waste time trying to find it, she filled it with a single set of spare plainclothes, underwear, and…

Bending down next to the desk she rarely used, she slid open one of the bottom drawers and pulled out the bottle of red wine from months before. It had a thin layer of dust on it now, given it’d been undisturbed since Kaiser had given it to her as an almost-ironic joke after their saving of General Elizabeth, as he knew as well as Monarch did that she rarely ever drank and, when she did, rarely drank wine. At the time, Monarch had just rolled her eyes, planning to just sell it later. It was a nice bottle, after all.

Now, Monarch was just doing her best to blot out the memory of the second detonation within Prospero that had killed Wild Boar Actual, alongside however many others. No matter how hard her mind tried, she couldn’t get the orange glow of the detonation unseared from her mind.

The flight to the highway that Peter had known about was easy enough. Without enough pilots on base, some of Sicario’s craft had to be left behind, and even novice-by-comparison pilots like Pre—Robin were being dragged into the cockpit as well to get what planes that were ready to fly out of the soon-to-be-gone base. Between Hitman 1, that left two planes: the SK.25U Robin was piloting, and Monarch’s new crown jewel: an F/S-15.

The soul surviving craft of the Circus was the first to touch down, to secure the area. Then went Prez, then Comic, then Dip, and then Monarch. Kaiser was out of country, and… Gunsel didn’t exist anymore. For now, it was just them.

Monarch’s first night in the tunnel they were using as a hangar was restless, to say the least, in the sense that she didn’t sleep at all. It didn’t seem like anyone was, really. They’d found what seemed to be lodging for maintenance personnel, as well as from the original construction workers out here, and began to settle into rooms, but it was still unfamiliar to Monarch. The dust hung chokingly in the air. By the time she decided to call trying to sleep quits, everyone else seemed to already be busy at work, so Monarch just retreated into the room she’d claimed for herself. At some point, she passed out; no one came to bother her though.

Then, a week passed. Some of the surviving rebel air forces touched down during the course of the week, but they were just as scattered as Sicario was, it seemed. Their orders remained the same, however: wait out the worst of this second Calamity and stay hunkered down. Slowly, the highway began to resemble more and more of an actual base, but Monarch chose to barely witness it. She was still showering, still eating, but she was doing it all on autopilot. Most of the time, she just laid on her bed in the dim light the old lightbulb provided, not changing out of the green cargo pants and black tank top she’d adorned when she first tried to poke her head out of her room.

It wasn’t until the end of the second week that someone actually attempted to drag Monarch out of her emotional stupor. There wasn’t a knock at the door to her room, just the noise of the door clicking open and someone walking in, shutting the door behind them. Monarch didn’t initially look at whoever it was, not until they sat down on the bed right beside her at least.

“Hey,” came the familiar voice of Prez – Robin. Robin. Her voice was soft and careful, and it left Monarch unsure of how exactly she should respond. The silence must have lasted for enough time to make Robin feel awkward, at least, because she continued without Monarch needing to say a word. “I’m not here to ask if you’re okay, because I know you’re not. I don’t think… any of us are. But I did want to remind you that… we’re here for you, Monarch. I’m here for you. We don’t have to try to deal with this alone.”

Monarch’s mouth felt beyond dry as she tried to respond, and she only managed to croak out, “I… know.”

“Good,” Robin replied without hesitation and with an awkward chuckle. Her voice was slowly rising out of the soft worry she’d spoken with before, but there was still a hint of nerves to it. “Do you want me to go, now?”

“…no,” Monarch replied, just as weak, as she pushed herself upright from her bed, swinging her legs down to sit upright next to Robin. “Could you… stay?”

“I figured you would say that,” Robin said, her chuckling turning into an actual laugh now – a laugh that managed to get Monarch to laugh, too. “Sure. Do you want to talk about anything, or…?”

“…Would you… like to share a bottle of red?” Monarch mumbled weakly, her face turning awfully red as she did so.

With a snort, Prez turned to face Monarch, and shot her a raised eyebrow. “You’re kidding. You actually remembered that. Why didn’t you ask to share one sooner? Let me guess, Kaiser even gave it to you right after that mission.”

“…yes.”

Prez’s laugh returned in full force as she cackled, shaking her head back and forth with a wild sense of disbelief. “Well, alright then! Let’s do this. Do you got any glasses, Monarch?” Monarch shook her head, which seemed to only make Robin even more amused. As her laughter died out into a small chuckle, Robin stood up and turned back to face Monarch, planting her hands on her hips firmly. “I guess that means that we’ll just have to share the bottle, then. Where’s it?”

“It’s… in the clean flight suit on the desk,” Monarch softly answered.

“The one full of – full of underwear?” Robin questioned as she took a step closer to the desk, confusion now full in her voice.

“Yeah,” Monarch mumbled back.

“*Please* tell me that this is clean,” Robin pleaded.

“It is!” came a shockingly loud and equally indignant reply from Monarch, who seemed to immediately recoil and wince at the sharpness in her own voice. “It… is,” she mumbled once more, tightening her ball into a fist. Surprisingly, Robin just chuckled at Monarch’s reaction as she, in surprisingly skittish movements, reached into the suit and felt around until she pulled out said bottle of red wine.

“…Wait, is this a wine that we’re supposed to enjoy cold?” Robin asked as she inspected the bottle.

“I don’t… think so. White wines are normally chilled, but reds are… room temperature? I believe,” Monarch quietly explained. “I know… Kaiser is big on wines. But he’s not here so… it’s not like we can really ask him…”

“Well, I’m sure it’s cold enough in this room that it’ll be fine either way,” Prez replied as she flopped back down on the bed. “Do you have a bottle opener?”

“I… thought it was a screw top,” Monarch admitted softly.

“…Did you not see the cork sticking out at the top?”

“I… don’t drink much…”

Once more, a laugh got drawn out from Prez. “I think you’re in luck, then, that I know how to remove one of these without a corkscrew.” For a second, Monarch just stared Robin down with both intrigue and, perhaps more so, confusion in her eyes as she watched her backseater fish around in her pocket for a set of keys that she promptly jammed right into the cork. Then, after she shot Monarch a sly wink, began to twist the key clockwise. Monarch’s gaze, for a few seconds, flicked between Robin and the bottle, before lingering on her. Prez was staring down at the bottle, seeming concentrating far-too-hard for what she was doing. *Did* she know what she was doing, Monarch wondered. Monarch opened her mouth to question her –

*Pop!*

Oh. “Cheers,” Prez said slyly, a smug grin plastered across her face as she offered the bottle out to Monarch. “It’s your bottle, so surely you should be the first one to drink from it.”

Monarch’s brow furled for a second as she stared down at the bottle, chewing softly at the inside of her lip as she tried to think through how the next few hours would go down. “Are we… going to be going back and forth, or… should we just drink our halves each?”

“Mm, well, it would definitely be easier to just drink half,” Prez agreed, stopping to think herself, “but I think it’d just be more fun to keep taking turns. Plus, where’s the fun in sitting sober as I wait for you to finish instead of getting drunk together?”

Simply nodding, Monarch took the bottle from her and immediately downed a heavy swig of the wine, offering it back out as she swallowed. It was surprisingly bitter – weren’t wines supposed to be fruity and sweet? – as it went down, with no real stand-out flavor among the large amount of alcohol that it seemed to pack. Someone with more wine experience might have been able to make a better understanding of it all, but to Monarch, it was just liquor. Fancy liquor, maybe, and with the Second Calamity outside, fancy liquor that might have cost as much as one of the cheap trainers Sicario sometimes flew, but just liquor.

Her face must have reflected the mild disgust she was feeling, because Robin chuckled and asked, “Not a fan?” before she took her own swig. Unlike Monarch, however, she seemed to actually enjoy it.

“Not… used to wine, I suppose,” Monarch muttered back.

“Really? I find that almost surprising, given your love for tea,” Robin teased without a moment of hesitation.

“Coffee is… too bitter,” was the indignant mumble Monarch let out as she took the bottle back and took a swig once more. It was a bit better this time, but that’s likely because she was getting drunk fast – after all, she hadn’t eaten today.

Oh, shit. She hadn’t eaten today.

Almost immediately, Monarch offered the bottle back out to Robin, the blush she’d felt earlier returning full force to her face. In a quiet voice, she heard Robin ask, “Everything good?”

“Yeah, I… I just realized that I hadn’t eaten today,” Monarch answered, adding in the weakest, most awkward singular chuckle possible.

For a second, Prez was silent, before she nodded. “Do you want to keep drinking?”

“…I would.”

The bottle was gone before either of them had properly realized that.

Conversation had been sparse between the two as the finished the bottle, but the ten minutes it took to finish hadn’t needed much. The most noteworthy thing of it all, Monarch realized, was just how much of a lightweight she was.

And how much of a lightweight Robinseemed to be.

Taking in a deep breath, Monarch prepared to try to say something. She wasn’t entirely sure as to what, yet, but her brain was fogged enough that the words would likely come to her without her needing to say any of them. Prez cut her off, however.

“Name,” she blurted. “You said when we were out of country, but our identities have been blown. Opsec’s fucked. Name.”

Monarch stared at Robin for just a second, mouth agape. Blinking slowly at her, she clicked her tongue and began to giggle. Then, as she thought, her laughter quickly died out. “It was… I had liked the sound of Elizabeth, but now…”

“The general…”

“Yeah…” Monarch softly muttered. Silence filtered in between the two of them once more. Then, with a loud snap as Robin snapped her fingers, a smile crept onto her face. “What about Elly?”

“Elly?”

“Yeah! It’s close, and it’s short, and *I* think it’s pretty,” Robin boasted, sticking her thumb towards her chest and wearing a broad smile once more.

“Why… would I care if you think it’s pretty?” Monarch confusedly muttered.

“A pretty girl needs a pretty name,” she simply said, and it was enough to draw another blush atop the drunken pinkness to Monarch’s face. She must’ve been making some sort of stuttering noise too, because Prez turned to face Monarch with a wide, goofy grin on her drunk face. Then, she fell forwards onto Monarch, wrapping her arms around the pilot – a gesture that, once the shock had worn off, Monarch returned. “Hey,” she babbled.

“I – hey?” Monarch stuttered out.

“I’m… really glad that you’re alive,” Robin muttered softly, muffled by fact that she was talking into Monarch’s shoulder. “When… everything started to happen, and the long-range comms went dead, we thought…”

“That we went dead too,” Monarch finished.

“Yeah...” Prez admitted, her voice weaker than before. Once more, Monarch opened her mouth to say anything, but even while drunk, all the words that were coming just felt wrong. So, she shut her mouth, and instead began to slowly brush her hand up and down along Robin’s back. “When we heard Galaxy trying to hail us, we… wanted to respond. *I* wanted to respond. Kaiser had to literally hold me back so I wouldn’t blow our attempt at playing possum. I was scared. I was so scared, Monarch. Elly? Can I call you Elly?”

“I… it’d work as a nickname, if I wanted to… still use that name. And… I like it to. So. Yes,” Monarch answered softly. Elly. It had a certain alure to it, in a way.

“Then we heard those other mercs, and… the explosions that followed. I… I’m so glad you’re still alive, Elly. And Di – Peter. And Peter. And Eve. But I’m really, *really* glad that you’re still here, Monarch. Elly. Monarch-Elly. Who else would I… be a wizo for?” Robin’s voice cracked, and Elly felt a few tears roll down onto her shoulder. Taking in a deep breath, Elly held Robin just a little bit tighter, and she felt the just-barely-shorter girl start to cry.

“I… was really scared too,” Elly admitted. “When we first arrived, everything seemed… too easy. And then there were… so many missiles. We tried. We tried so hard. And still… so many people died.”

“Do you think it’s your fault?” Robin asked, managing to stem her sobbing.

“No,” Elly answered, her voice returning weak.

“I… can tell when you’re lying,” Robin joked with a forced, broken chuckle, before she just shook her head. “Please… don’t blame yourself. You tried your best. You gave… those that survived enough time to get out of range as possible. You did everything you could. Sometimes, that’s… just not good enough. And that’s life.”

“And I hate that,” Elly whispered.

“Yeah. It really does suck sometimes. It sucks a lot.”

It was quiet, but Elly, for once, was the one to break it. “I was really worried that… I had lost you too. I don’t even remember the fight over Rowsdower. I was just… I think I had… already… given up kind of.”

For a few seconds, it didn’t look like Robin had heard her. Then, the drunk woman seemed to release her grasp on Elly, only to use the pilot as leverage to sit closer to upright, but her knees were definitely on Elly’s lap – rather painfully, too. With a deep breath in, she brought her forehead right against Monarch’s and muttered, “Well, you didn’t. I am still right here, and if you’re ever in a two-seater again, you can bet your pretty face that I will definitely be your wizo again. And you better not give up, or – and this is even if I’m dead – I’ll kick your ass myself. You got that, Monarch?”

At this distance, the alcohol on her breath was more than noticeable as it flooded Elly’s nose, and every breath either of them only seemed to add to the alcoholic stench. Without a word, Elly just nodded once, the motion as slight as possible as to not disrupt the balance of either of them, because in their current state, it was beyond likely that the slightest movement would lead to one – or both – of them toppling over.

“Good,” Robin softly muttered. For a few moments, things seemed to slow down between the two of them. Despite the smell, it was awfully comfortable.

Then, Robin shifted ever so slightly, and she gave Elly a kiss. Two, in fact: the first was on Elly’s cheek, and when Elly didn’t recoil away, the second was on Elly’s lips. Elly wasn’t sure how long it lasted, nor how to respond – so she didn’t, and just closed her eyes instead. It didn’t seem like Robin minded that, either; in fact, it almost seemed as though the woman had planned on that. Eventually, she broke off the kiss, and shifted slightly, knocking the two of them backwards onto the bed.

But she didn’t say a single word, and Elly, like usual, couldn’t think of anything to say either. Instead, it seemed as though Robin’s breaths were shallowing out, becoming slower and irregular too. Elly’s blush somehow managed to grow more intense as she realized that Robin was about to fall asleep atop her, and so, with all the grace of an awkward, lame dog, she slid out from under Robin and stood up beyond wobblily, before shakily stepping over to shut off the lights. Her gaze started to shift around the room as she debated what to do now. She was too drunk to try to find somewhere else to sleep – if there even was anywhere else to sleep at this time of night – but… something felt off about sharing a bed just now with Robin. There were too many emotions in her head to try to process, alongside all of the fears of the past weeks still haunting her mind. It was too much for Monarch to try to handle.

Grazing her hand against the wall, Elly sighed softly and felt herself slide down to the ground against the wall, curling up into a small ball once she landed. The floor wasn’t *too* hard or cold, at least. She could sleep –

Robin shifted rather loudly on the bed, letting out a weak groan as she did so. In a groggy, drunken voice, she mumbled, “H-hey Monarch? Elly, sorry.”

Shakily rising back to her feet, Elly nodded – and quickly realized that the gesture was imperceptible. Making her way back to her bed, she sat on the edge of it, and replied, “Yes?”

With a small chuckle, Robin weakly latched onto the fabric of Elly’s tank top and tried – and failed – to tug her pilot back down onto the bed. “Could you… please stay?” she mumbled, adding in an even quieter whisper, “You’re warm. It’s nice.”

With a deep breath in, Monarch gave another useless nod and laid back down besides Prez, who seemed to latch onto her instantly and pull her a bit closer. “Okay,” Elly said. And they stayed.