With all of the things Prez was hooked up to, neither of them wanted to risk a hug right now, even if Prez could feel every part of her heart yearning for the heat of physical contact right now.

They settled for holding each other’s hands, at the very least. Prez was too tired to say too may words to Monarch right now – her entire body felt bruised and broken, and the stiffness in her neck was beyond uncomfortable right now. Every so often, she gave Monarch’s hand a light squeeze, as if to remind her that she was still here, still alive, still breathing, but slowly, she heard Monarch seemingly drift off to sleep in that uncomfortable-looking chair as she felt the desire to do the exact same tug at the back of her mind once more. Awkwardly, she tried to direct her gaze to the clock in the room, and when she did, she realized it was still far too early for any sane person to be awake – especially not someone in her condition. With a weak sigh, she willed her eyes closed and tried to do the same to let sleep wash over her.

She tried to do the same to let sleep wash over her.

She tried – ah, dammit, Prez realized, her mind wasn’t letting her sleep.

Every bone in her body was still aching, and she was suddenly aware of all of the tubes and needles stuck into her. It wasn’t comfortable, not at all, and suddenly she yearned to be Monarch, sitting their in her chair. Prez tried her best to not think about the state that she was in, trying to force her mind to be unaware of all of the medical equipment around her.

All of the medical equipment around her…

It was as if a grinding gear finally slipped back into working order in the transmission that was her mind as Prez realized that she’d almost died today.

She’d almost died today.

There weren’t many moments as Monarch’s backseater that she felt any more at danger than she did on the ground. Maybe it was Monarch’s quiet confidence in the air, maybe it was the combined chatter of Comic, Diplomat, and Galaxy that soothed her even as she felt her vocal cords begin to fry as she warned Monarch about every missile sent their way and every pilot on their tail, and only now was her mind letting her look behind the veil of how close to death Monarch likely took them every mission that they flew.

And now she was suffering the consequences of it.

They didn’t even take any hits, did they? The entire evening was a blur in Prez’s mind now. They’d been over Presidia; they’d won. Then…

Then…

Crimson One.

“Right,” Prez softly mumbled as she squeezed her eyes shut once more. She didn’t want to see the orange glow that she’d saw for just moments then before her memory slipped away as, she logically surmised, her consciousness did the same.

Judging by the fact that the results of it had left her in a hospital bed, though, maybe they did take a hit? Prez had been shot once before, in her time with the Federation as a conscript, but it didn’t break her body armor; it felt similar to this. But if she’d been shot, surely she’d feel worse? Then…

She’d likely spent several minutes, at the very least, in various stages of conscious and unconscious.

She’d almost died from g-LOC.

From Monarch’s flying alone.

Her eyes shot back open as she stared at her pilot, who was still seemingly peacefully asleep. She couldn’t see the state that Monarch was in, but at least it was better that hers. Part of her was conflicted on that feeling, thinking that it didn’t feel right that Monarch got off seemingly unharmed now while she was… she was like this.

But part of her was just glad that her best friend was still alright, and still alive. On top of that, another part of her was just glad to still be alive, and with that, glad that they won.

Wait, if they won, why is Monarch in a Federation uniform? All of the sudden, a new set of doubts and confusion battered Prez’s mind. She was in a strange hospital, and the only familiar thing was now wearing the uniform of the people who’d spent the better part of the past year trying to kill them – and that they spent the better part of the year killing. Was Monarch a prisoner?

Did Monarch defect?

Deep breath in, count to four, deep breath out. Prez knew she was over thinking this, and in her current state, that wasn’t a good spot to be in. She let her eyes fall back closed. Monarch would explain this, if it was even worth explaining, and she was alive. That had to count for something. She wasn’t dead yet.

She wasn’t dead yet.

Everything else, Prez could put on pause. She just had to try to fall back asleep. She knew that willing herself to sleep wasn’t any more likely to actually result in her falling back asleep, but trying to sleep at least felt better on her tired mind than thinking did.

She’d gotten too confident, she realized as, finally, her consciousness was stolen from her once more; right now, she really wished that she had planned on getting shot down or crashing because she dearly missed the revolver that she would have normally been carrying.

A thud besides her is what woke her up in the morning as a mixture of metal and leather toppled onto the floor, jolting Prez awake. Monarch was no longer in the chair besides her, she realized, nor was Monarch still holding her hand. As she scanned the room, she realized why: Diplomat and Comic had shown up and were now standing in the doorway, and Monarch was making her way over to wrap them both up in a hug.

It was rare, seeing Monarch be this touchy, especially with people that weren’t her. Even though she never seemed *uncomfortable* around the other two in her circle, it wasn’t often that Prez saw them like this; usually, it was just Diplomat and Comic seemingly trying to dance around the idea of how close to one-another they wanted to be at any moment, with Monarch – and her, when she was included – just being left to watch.

They were talking in hushed breaths, it seemed, leaving Prez clueless to what was being discussed except for the occasional louder murmur that only confused her more than it answered anything. What little she did understand was that Comic went down first, and Diplomat was the first to respond to her beacon; they spent the night together, and now Monarch was discussing her night. Her face was contorting through emotions, but even through her relief to see all three of them alive and well, she felt her face contort as a shock of pain seemed to slash down her spine.

She must’ve made a noise, because suddenly, all three sets of eyes turned to her. Monarch’s brown eyes bore a look of caring concern, Diplomat’s blue eyes seemed to be full of remembrance, and Comic’s green eyes just seemed understanding. Part of Prez wanted to stand right up and to slap all three of them; she didn’t deserve their worry. She was fine.

Part of Prez knew, though, that she wasn’t fine; at the very least, she wasn’t in the same condition that she left base in yesterday. Perhaps a little bit too flatly, Prez just said, “I’m right here.”

Monarch immediately broke away from Comic and Diplomat as well as broke eye contact with Prez, returning to the chair she’d “slept” in overnight in such an awkward slowness that it was obviously forced. She didn’t have to say a word for Prez to understand that she felt bad, but now she was left staring down Diplomat and Comic, and she just didn’t know what to say.

Like usual, Diplomat was doing a hard job at covering up his stress: “So… how are you, Prez?”

“Exhausted,” she flatly said, before forcing herself to chuckle and forcing herself to try and smile. “Who knew how bad g-LOC could be?”

Comic awkwardly chuckled back. “Well, there’s a reason you’re the only one who could stand to be Monarch’s backseater,” she tried to joke.

Prez let out another chuckle, a little bit more earnest. “Hey, saying ‘could’ implies past tense, I’ll be fine,” she said, the smile a little bit firmer on her face as she made herself believe her own words. “If I lived through it, I can live through it again, even if I’m rich enough to retire and disappear now.”

“If Kaiser lets us,” Diplomat joked with a hoarse laugh. “He seems adamant on staying in Cascadia for now, and from the sounds of it, is trying to worm his way into what remains of Cascadia’s military.”

“Wonderful,” Prez said, shaking her head. With a furled brow, however, she turned towards the noise that had woken her up: it was a briefcase, and it was a briefcase that she recognized from when that bastard Stardust had convinced the rest of Hitman to stay in Cascadia. The power to *actually* disappear.

She still thought that was too much power for them. Her throat suddenly dry, she asked, “Is that why you two are here?”

“We’re here to make sure our friends are still alive, so I don’t have to frag Dip like I said I would,” Comic said with a surprising amount of snark. As she turned back to the door, she felt a hand on her shoulder; Comic had approached and was now gently resting one of her hands there. “And while Diplomat may be too scared to say it –”

“Hey!” he interjected.

“— we’re both very glad that you’re okay, Prez. After all, a deal to ensure our survival only works if we all survived, doesn’t it?”

Prez couldn’t help but to roll her eyes, even if she felt some tears slip out from her eyes. “It’s weird seeing you be so sweet, Comic. It’s almost scarier than seeing you truly drunk.”

Comic snorted and leaned back against the wall, removing her hand and looking back to Dip. “I think we can deal with all of that later. I think we’ll leave you two *lovebirds* alone,” she teased, tugging on Dip’s arm and dragging him out of the room.

It was only after Prez’s mind was done questioning the fact that it was *Comic* calling her and Monarch lovebirds, given how touchy and close the two of them had always been, that she felt a blush rise to her face. Partially out of frustration, and partially out of the fact that she wasn’t expecting to be called out on her emotions like that. She felt it fade, however, as she felt Monarch’s hand wrap around her right hand once more. Her voice effortlessly slipped back into her normal tone of reassurance, and this time, she managed to not wince as she felt a small dart of pain at the base of her neck. “I’m alright, Monarch. Promise,” she murmured.

“I can… tell you’re hurting,” Monarch weakly replied, giving Prez’s hand a gentle squeeze.

With a sigh, Prez nodded. “I am hurting, Monarch,” she confirmed, before adding in a bit lighter of a tone, “but I have to imagine Crimson One’s hurting more.”

Her joke drew a chuckle out of Monarch, but it was hollow. “I’m… sorry,” was all the pilot managed to muster after a small moment.

“The option was dead or… this, Monarch. You made the right call,” Prez reassured, but Monarch didn’t seem to fully believe it.

She didn’t open her mouth to reply, though, either.

“Hey, c’mere real quick Monarch,” Prez asked, which got Monarch to finally look at her again. Then, a confused look on her face, she leaned in, and Prez gave Monarch a small kiss on her forehead. “You always treat me just right, Monarch, believe me, and even after yesterday, there’s no where else I would have wanted to have been besides in the backseat.”

That seemed to do the trick, as a small smile finally crested on Monarch’s face. At first, she just nodded, but Prez felt her hand be let go. Then, she felt the back of Monarch’s hand – which, given all the years and all of the labor, had no right to be as soft was it was – graze across her cheek, before Monarch leaned in herself and gave Prez a kiss of her own, right on her forehead.

***\*\*\*Six months later…\*\*\****

“Oh goddammit, of course he had to get his grubby hands all over Kaiser’s work!” the man formerly known as Peter “Diplomat” Kennedy shouted at the TV. On screen was a resolution passed by a senator bearing the same last name, finally formalizing the new Cascadian Foreign Legion. Prez didn’t recognize him but could see the resemblance to Di—Quentin. Even after six months, she was still struggling with adjusting to the new names, and to adjusting to their new identities. And to her new life, even if it was temporary.

Two minutes, the doctors had told her. It’s how long her brain, based off of their estimates, went without oxygen. Even the lowest quality of Federation medicine, she knew, was still leagues beyond anything pre-calamity, but even then, that didn’t completely undue the damage. Until she recovered to the level she was at before – and who knew if that would even happen – she, as well as Monarch, planned on staying put, an ocean away, right in the heart of the falling-apart Federation.

At least her family was closer now, she thought to herself, because it was nice being able to see them more often. It helped, too, that Quentin and Jacklyn were visiting as Kaiser was still busy in Cascadia sorting things out.

…Jacklyn.

“Hey Comic, did you ever notice that your new name has the same ending as your old one did?” Prez asked in a quiet tone, only vaguely audible over the TV. Jacklyn, to her credit at least, turned to Prez and smiled.

“I didn’t, *Cassie,”* it was clear to Prez that Jacklyn was deliberately using her name, “but that’s a rather interesting thing to notice.”

It was still something that she was getting used to. Hearing Cassie instead of Robin or Prez. It still didn’t feel right to her, if she was being honest with herself, but she’d get used to it. The news on the TV had changed now, talking about how Cascadia had tracked down and, finally, killed the members of the former Hitman team of Sicario, who’d gone AWOL ever since the destruction of Presidia. It was a fabricated lie, of course, but one that meant that Cascadia got to profit even more off of the bounties that the Federation had set for them. She’d call it ironic, but Cassie doubted if that was the correct meaning of the word. In all of the weird jobs that she’s worked, knowing the definition of irony wasn’t something she’d needed, which sometimes still surprised her.

Monarch shifting behind her caused her to fall onto her back as the pilot stood up, as she’d been using her as a support for most of the time that they’d spent lounging here. For a second, Cassie laid there, sinking into the soft cushion as much as she could, before she became aware of the hand in her face – a hand which she took, tugging at it with all of her might to bring herself upright. Not a second after she was on her feet, however, and another burst of the slashing pain went right down her back once more, almost causing her to topple into Monarch, but the ever-so-slightly-taller woman managed to keep her upright.

“Thanks, Elly,” Cassie mumbled softly, which just got a weak chuckle back as the woman just nodded. It seemed that Jacklyn and Quentin got the same hint, because they stood upright as well.

“Same time tomorrow?” Diplomat offered, and both Prez and Monarch nodded.

“May as well make the most of the few weeks before Kaiser calls us back,” Comic said, managing to get a small laugh out of all of them before the two of them shuffled out.

Then, it was just her and Monarch. Elly. Elizabeth Brandt. It was hard keeping all the names straight, especially after calling Quentin and Jacklyn exclusively by either their tacnames for a year and, before that, a mixture of those tacnames and their old names for however long. At least she was able to keep Monarch’s clear in her mind. She was Elly.

It helped, too, that Elizabeth was the name that Monarch had wanted to choose so long ago. As the door clicked shut behind the other two lovebirds, Cassie slid a little bit closer to Elly, just trying to absorb some of the excess heat. The apartment they were renting was small, and had shitty heating that she just hadn’t had the energy to fix yet.

“Their names are… still difficult, aren’t they?” Elly quietly muttered, slowly drifting an arm around Cassie’s shoulder.

“Yeah,” she admitted even more quietly, turning her head into Monarch’s side. Gently, she felt Monarch’s hand rub up and down her arm, trying to be comforting, but it was still as awkward as Elly usually was.

“Do you… want to tell the doctors about it?” Elly quietly proposed.

“If it doesn’t clear up after a few more days with them, I will,” Cassie firmly said. “Let’s just head down. If I ever want to fly in your back seat again, I still have to get a little bit stronger.”

“Yeah,” Elly agreed. Slowly, her arm unwound from holding Prez close, and drifted to taking her hand instead.

“I’ll lead the way,” Prez stated, her tone firming up with a small degree of her usual confidence. It was the smallest amount of control that she could take over her current situation, but it’s what mattered. She started to walk, but heard a gasp come from Monarch behind her as the pilot remembered something. “What’s up?” she quickly asked.

“We still haven’t met your family. Well, I know… you’ve been to see them, I meant…”

“You and the other two,” Cassie finished.

“Yeah.”

With a deep breath in Cassie paused. “I’m still… afraid it’ll link everything together, Elly. I… may not have liked the offer, and getting rid of our old identities, but that doesn’t mean that I want to waste this chance, either.” As she turned back to face Monarch, Prez noticed the small frown forming on her face – a frown she was likely mirroring, if she had to guess. With a sigh and a shake of her head, Cassie offered up a concession: “Next week. Before they leave.”

Elly just nodded, but a smile was soft on her face. “Thank you,” she mumbled.

“Of course,” Cassie replied. Gently, Prez broke her hand out from Monarch’s, and instead placed Monarch’s face between both of her hands instead. “And… thank you. I know I’ve been… too stubborn to ask for help sometimes, but—”

This time, it was Elly who managed to fluster the woman who used to be Robin Kuo with a kiss. It was gentle and careful, as Monarch tended to be – it was hard to believe, sometimes, that this was the same woman who made planes dance as if they were a slot car on a three-dimensional rail – but it was filled with the same sense of passion that Prez had once left Elly stunned with.

“Sheesh, Monarch,” Cassie softly mumbled once they finally broke away, slouching a bit to duck under Monarch’s chin and rest against her neck, “at least take a girl out to dinner first.”

“We… have though,” Elly confusedly replied.

Cassie just shook her head. “Don’t overthink it, just shut up for a second.”

Gently, Elly asked, “Do you… want to stay like this for a bit?”

With a weak murmur, Prez replied, “We do still have an hour before we absolutely need to leave if I can find us a good route.”

“So we can stay?”

With a small smile, an almost imperceptible shake of her head, and a slight chuckle, Prez just said, “Sure.”