She hadn’t expected it to have been so easy to retake Presidia, but… here they were.

Even if the call for the ceasefire interrupted what would’ve been easy money, Monarch couldn’t complain. She’d tuned out a fair bit of the work; after the attack on the battlegroup almost ended in a suicide mission had Kaiser not arrived, this felt like a walk in the park, as though Monarch was just able to phone it in. Still, she pulled the throttle back, and gazed out at the city as voice after voice filled the comms, paying attention to none of them. Pulling the plane into a shallow climb, Monarch pointed the nose above the clouds and began to cruise northbound. If she had to guess, they wouldn’t be staying for much longer, and she wasn’t one for peace conferences – she’d much rather just get back to that grovel in the highway, get her things, and just figure out where Sicario was going from here. The F/S-15 prototype she was flying had just recently gotten the WSO spot in the back operational once more, and through both the comms and, somehow, over the roar of the jets, Monarch heard Prez let out a sigh of relief.

Comms, finally, grew silent enough for Monarch to hear herself think, until some jackass started to laugh. She couldn’t blame them, really, but that didn’t mean it didn’t annoy her still. They were pushing through the cloud cover now –

Wait, there were six cruise missiles heading towards Presidia, diving back down towards the city. “Prez, brace,” was all Monarch said before she whipped the plane back around, trying to intercept. Other people were screaming now in comms about being targeted by something. The only word echoing through Monarch’s mind now was a very, very simple “fuck”. Was she just too high to have been targeted by whoever this was? Was this deliberate.

When Monarch was back below the clouds, she saw the six missiles detonate, caking Presidia in that sickening orange glow she still remembered far too well from their operation in Prospero just a few months ago. “No, no no no,” Monarch weakly muttered.

“Oh god, oh god, oh please! Not now! Not after all this! Please, god!” Prez practically screamed from behind her, before collecting herself. Without a word, it seemed like both of them recognized the laughter now that it was echoing all by itself, without another IFF present as the Cordium interfered with most of the sensors. Even without sensors, Monarch could make out the sole plane still standing that wasn’t them – it was obviously a prototype, and it was flying right at them. “I don't know if I can do this, Monarch... I'm braced...” Prez mumbled softly, taking in a deep breath.

Monarch slammed the throttle forwards. She didn’t have to think about the rest of what was about to happen; she was already tuning out the madman’s ravings into her radio. She was so, so tempted to turn it off, but she couldn’t: not if anyone else was still alive and needed to reach her. There was no point in calling out her missile launches, so she didn’t. It’d be a waste of time, and time wasn’t something she had. Her rotary cannon roared, but she heard a voice echo through her skull – but it wasn’t rambling.

The lock warning blared in Monarch’s ears as she deactivated her AOA limiter, thrust vectoring right as a micromissile soared by. “Ah, god,” Prez mumbled as flare was dropped to confuse the rest, “Monarch…”

Quickly, Monarch tried to level the plane, but the second she did so, she saw a railgun shot soar overhead and had to flick the plane into another maneuver. “I can’t keep up, I can’t…”

They were once more in level flight, but Monarch heard Prez’s head slump into her seat over her radio, alongside an extremely weak “I’m sorry.”

No words came out of Monarch’s mouth as she yanked the stick back, but for once, Monarch felt fear. Not at death. She’d been ready for that for years to come. She thumbed the weapon selector over once, and she threw the plane into a reversal. Tone came not a moment too soon, and the remainder of what radar-guided missiles Monarch fired out. Without Prez, she didn’t know if they connected, but she could hear at least one report – as she flew into a ball of what seemed to be Cordium static. The controls locked up in the mixture of heat and electricity, but she wasn’t out yet. The now-ruins of Presidia gave Monarch a chance to duck out, to run.

But she knew that bastard would follow. Her controls were still barely responsive, and it felt like the system was now operating on pure hydraulics. Every maneuver she made would be hindered. She was already hindered. For all she knew, Prez was dead now, and though every prayer in Monarch’s body hoped it was just g-LOC, that could be fatal if Monarch wasn’t quick enough. She tried to steady herself. Monarch tried.

When she ducked back above the cover of the skyscrapers of the city she might have possibly gone on to call her home, she was on that bastard’s tail. Every single one of remaining infrared missiles went after its Cordium-powered engine, and through some luck, one managed to connect as the bastard pulled into a maneuver. The prototype was smoking bad now, Monarch saw as it pulled behind her. Some of the maneuverability was coming back, but it wasn’t enough.

With a deep breath, Monarch pulled her plane into as steep of a climb as she could, ignoring the disconcerting sound of Prez behind her. Every control was stiff, slowly loosening, but not fast enough. She wasn’t fast enough. As she scanned behind her, tracking the smoking prototype, she saw it coming right at her.

He was going to joust her. He’d truly lost his mind.

With a deep breath in, Monarch had one opening. She slammed the throttle back, as it seemed the crazed Peacekeeper was doing as well. She saw the orange glow as the plane’s mounted railgun charged, and Monarch grimly grinned. She closed the throttle and slammed open the airbrakes, reducing what little airspeed she had, and stalling the plane, dropping right as she saw the orange, Cordium-lace round slam through where her cockpit had been five seconds before. Disabling the AOA limiter once more as she jammed the throttle wide open, the engines providing just enough power and maneuverability that the stiff hydraulics meant nothing. The rotary cannon opened up once more, and she saw the prototype begin to tumble out of the sky as her own craft leveled out. He was saying something, some last words.

They were last words Monarch didn’t care to hear, as the afterburner behind her roared. Now was no time to go back to base, it was time to find the nearest airfield, the nearest highway, the nearest pretty looking patch of dirt, and get Prez out of that backseat. Monarch had no clue how long that dogfight had lasted. Everything felt like a blur. It could’ve been a minute; it could’ve been thirty. She wished she’d just blanked it out, like the rest of the day had been, but just like Prospero, every second was seared into her mind once more.

As an explosion rocked out behind her – the Cordium in that airframe detonating, most likely – another voice echoed through her radio.

Galaxy’s.

“ALCON! All survivors! A safe area…” Monarch started to tune out the rest, only returning back in when she knew Galaxy was finished. Not caring who heard her, nor which frequency she was on, she spoke.

“Galaxy, where is the nearest airbase? I have wounded aboard.” Monarch’s words were monotone, spoken with a sharp, harsh tone.

“Christ, Monarch, is that you? Are you –”

Monarch’s next round of words had a venom laced in her weak voice. “Galaxy, I need to know where the fuck that airbase is before my WSO dies.” Her voice cracked on the last word, and Monarch was just barely able to stem the tears that were trying to leak from her eyes. Not now, not when she had to maintain control.

Silence. Then, “Nearest outside of the city is… Johnston AFB. Bearing forty-five from the heart of Presidia, about one-forty klicks out. Last reports showed it as controlled by the Federation,” Galaxy reported back, his tone straightforward and composed, despite bearing a strange softness.

“Thank you,” Monarch replied.

“I’ve got you on Sicario’s frequency real quick, Monarch. There’s currently a rescue beacon that links up to Comic’s ID broadcasting,” Galaxy added a moment later. “We haven’t heard anything from Diplomat yet, though, and Kaiser’s status is unclear. If I get in touch with Stardust, I’ll send him your way. To make sure you can collect what we’re owed. I sure hope you know what you’re doing.”

To that, Monarch didn’t reply. She just set her course and kept the throttle as open as she could without running out of fuel, before adjusting her radio to be what she remembered the Federation emergency frequency to be and hoping that they hadn’t changed it during the war, and she began to speak once more. “Johnston Air Force Base, this is Hitman One. I am coming in for a landing with wounded on board. We need emergency medical treatment once we land.”

There was no response directed at Monarch, but over the radio, Monarch hear their panic. A nervous voice spoke back. “Er, Hitman One, we’re not seeing any callsigns—”

“I am with Sicario. I need to land there. I do not *care* what you do to me once I land, but my WSO is unconscious and needs medical treatment.” For all of the fear rampaging through Monarch’s mind, and for how rarely she used these damned radios, she was keeping herself surprisingly composed. There was an argument on the other side of the radio that she could only hear half of, and as much as she wanted to tune it out, now wasn’t the time.

“Look, do *you* know what happened in Presidia? I doubt it was the mercs, or the CIF. They’re already trying to gather survivors, if those scrambled transmissions meant anything. This is our only chance to find out. We should just – Hitman One, are you still there?”

“Yes.”

“We’ll see you when you touch down.”

It seemed the ATC got enough sense to mute themselves this time.

Monarch didn’t notice the time pass between the brief talk and when she set her battle-scarred F/S-15 down on the tarmac. The second the wheels stopped squealing, Monarch became aware of the two vehicles roaring up to meet her. One bore a red cross on it; the other bore at least seven soldiers.

With no care for procedure nor safety, Monarch killed the engines and, upon discovering the hatch seemed to be jammed in place, jettisoned it. Then, she sat, with her hands in the air, and she waited. Thankfully, it was the medics who came first, rushing up to the plane. The rest Monarch started to tune out the noise again as she just stared forward through the empty HUD until the soldiers came for her.

They took her flight suit from her, but Monarch should have expected that. She did expect the handcuffs and the cell, and the fact that everything hurt. Somehow, though, being stripped of her flight suit and given a Federation uniform to wear as a prisoner outfit – they must’ve run out of traditional clothes, Monarch realized, or were so disorganized they didn’t know where they were – was what made Monarch feel at her weakest. It was thoroughly night now, but Monarch paid that little mind. She hadn’t paid the sun any mind when it was dipping below the horizon when she landed, she wasn’t going to pay it any mind now that it was gone.

Her mind, instead, was much, much more worried about Prez. Every so often, a guard came by – some of them seemed more interested in seeing the “crowned mercenary” more than doing their job – and Monarch tried to ask, but most ignored her. One almost squeaked out a reply, before stammering that he wasn’t supposed to say anything and running off.

She must have passed out, because she awoke to the sound of her cell opening. She was staring down an older man, with balding grey hair and a weary look and a chair carried behind him. He was trying a weak smile as he sat down the chair in front of Monarch, which was more than Monarch could say about herself at least. Before Monarch could even shoot a word out, he spoke: “She’s alive, but we don’t know her state. Let’s get that out of the way first, merc. Now, Hitman One of Sicario, the ‘crowned mercenary’. Do you have a name?”

“…Monarch.”

With a sigh, the man shook his head and rolled his eyes. “A tacname works, I suppose. You *are* aware of the crimes we could charge you with would give me credit to shoot you, here and now, correct?”

“…yet you haven’t. But… yes,” Monarch answered. Her voice was weak in her throat once more.

“Part of that is because I’m not sure if executing you would count as a violation of the cease-fire, part of that is my own intrigue, and part of that is… respect for trying to save your WSO’s life, I suppose. Based off of the shape of your plane, I assume you were involved in whatever went down in Presidia?”

“Yes.”

“Wonderful,” the man replied not even a second after Monarch’s yes slipped out. Shifting forward in the chair, he leaned in and flatly said, “What the *hell* happened over there? One second, we had the ceasefire announced on the radio and had our last squadron stand down – if I had to imagine, *you* likely killed the rest – and the next we’re getting reports of a massive explosion devastating Presidia, and all of our comms are down.”

“Just like after Prospero.” It was a barely audible statement, a mumble that Monarch accidentally said aloud as she stared at the ground.

“Just like after Prospero,” the commander echoed. “So, what was it?”

“That bastard. The Peacekeeper,” Monarch managed to spit out, her voice – and all of the vileness in it – coming back in full force.

“More specific, please.”

“Crimson One.”

“…You’re going to have to apologize me if I don’t believe that. You wish to tell me that the Federation’s top ace, a Cascadian himself, took to deploying Cordium weaponry on his nation’s capital?” The commander wasn’t incredulous in his voice – it was a careful dig to find out any detail more that he could.

It worked. “With all due respect, *sir,*” Monarch spat back, her eyes narrowing, “throughout this entire conflict, the only scratches on any craft that I have flown have come from one of two things: a hint of lucky flak clipping my wings, or one of the people in Crimson squadron. If your records are as accurate as the logging software we use for payouts in Sicario, you’ll also know that I’m one of the few pilots to have ever shot down anyone in Crimson, and that I’ve done so enough times this conflict to make me a double ace there alone. There is one, and one person alone, who could leave my plane in a state like that, and he was over Presidia.”

“I have no doubts about that, miss. What I have doubts is that he was the one who fired the weapons that took out Presidia,” the commander countered, his tone as flat – colder, now, but monotone still – as he stared Monarch down still.

“…the exact details I remember are simple. I remember the call for the ceasefire, and everyone on the radio simultaneously excited and bitching. Then, I remember some *insane* bastard laughing, and six missiles like the ones that hit Prospero diving below cloud cover as everyone else cried about missile lock. He was loud enough in his ranting that it likely got picked up by my black box, too. I just… look. I just want to see my wizzo, okay? She passed out a minute into the fight, I think. I just… I want to make sure she’s okay,” Monarch rambled, her voice giving way several times through her explanation. Tears began to well in her eyes as she gripped tightly onto her knees, trying to control herself from shaking.

“I see,” the old man muttered. With a deep breath, he began his own diatribe. “If I had any guess, the Federation isn’t long for this world – not after Prospero, and if people put together those dots too, they’ll realize Presidia is our fault too. Crimson One might have gone rogue, or that might have been ordered and he was too far gone to abort the flight. It wasn’t launched from here. This cell is, in a way, more for your safety. There are a number of people here who’d like the chance to take a swing – or, more likely, a shot – at you. For what you did to their family, to their friends. I’ve been through enough wars to know that this one was just that, but them? They’re still young. Naïve. Half of them are conscripts unaware of how awful the situation was before the war began. We’ve already got a few inbound CIF flights to negotiate for control of this base – if they know you’re here, I imagine they’ll want to harass you the same way I did.

“So, Monarch. I can keep you safe, like a butterfly in a habitat, and let you rest here. Or I can let you go, and whatever happens, happens. Don’t expect anyone else to defend you – not for another few hours, assuming the CIF wants you around still. And I’d imagine what remains of Sicario is even further behind than the CIF. What’ll it be?”

Safety was a luxury few could afford. To some, it was tempting.

Monarch’s reply was instantaneous, if quiet. “I… don’t care about my own safety. I want… to make sure that she’s okay. Please.”

“That’s what I thought,” the commander mumbled. “Alright, Monarch, but I want one more question before I let you go: why become a mercenary? Ever since Prospero, we’ve been able to connect the dots on most of your squadron, but you stood out, in that we couldn’t. No records of you ever attending flight school, no probable causes. Only a civilian piloting license before Sicario.”

It caught Monarch off guard. With a deep breath in, she tried to calm herself down, but she couldn’t help but to wince. “It was… the only way I’d be able to fly the planes I wanted to fly,” she weakly muttered, tapping her head. “Regulations said so. Wasn’t… physically or ‘mentally’ fit at the time.”

“Desperation, then. Not the money?”

She shook her head no. “No other option. It’s… why I owe Sicario so much.”

“I see.” With a sigh, the commander shook his head before he leaned forward, pulling out a key as he did so, and unlocked Monarch’s cuffs. “I would say I’m sorry for what the Federation did, and for how we treated you, but I’m not one for lying. We did what we thought was right, and it sounds like that might be what you thought you were doing too. It’s the only reason I’m letting you out of this cell alive. Don’t make me regret it.”

Through the hollow feeling stuck within Monarch’s gut, there was a small mixture of both surprise and hope bubbling through. Squeezing her hand tight closed, she just nodded, opening her mouth for a second as if to try to say something, and shutting it once she realized no words actually wanted to come out. It seemed to be enough for the commander, who escorted her out of the cell – and not a step more. “The medical ward is across the base from here. You can’t miss it. It’ll be about thirty minutes before anyone realizes that I let you out, kid,” he explained. “Make the best of it.”

Now, Monarch felt words come out. “I will.”

Normally, Monarch didn’t keep her head held high, but it felt like she was slouching even more as she tried to make herself as small a target as possible. It was like being a nervous teenager all over again, but the extra weight of worry bearing down on her mind was not something she was keen on. Her paces were as long and quick as she could manage; it’d started raining while she was still inside of that cell apparently – she hoped there wasn’t Cordium stuck in these clouds and causing it to rain down on her now – and so getting out of it as soon as possible would be just as nice as getting to the hospital as soon as possible. It was hot, humid, and gross; she almost preferred the jail cell.

No one stopped her on her way to the hospital on base – they all seemed to have better sense than her to be out in the rain – which made it easy enough to get there undisturbed. She expected problems if she just walked in the front door.

With a deep breath, Monarch pushed open the front door and just walked right in, only hesitating for a second as she approached the desk. “I… need to see Robin Kuo, callsign ‘Prez’. Is she still here?”

“Hm?” the guy at the desk mumbled, looking up from the computer. “Oh, the girl from the plane earlier,” he muttered, before looking up at Monarch. “I’m sorry, we’re not letting any one on base see her; it’s on the commander’s orders.”

“He… was the one who sent me here,” Monarch replied, closing her eyes and squeezing her hand.

“Do you have a written order? He didn’t radio anything in.”

Monarch’s breathing was forcibly slow and steady as she reopened her eyes. “I was the other one in the plane. Please,” she weakly pleaded, staring the nurse behind the desk dead in the eyes. “Please. I — I know you owe me nothing, but. Please.”

For a second, silence as they stared at each other. The nurse’s brow furled, as if trying to figure out both how Monarch could be here if she was supposed to be a prisoner and his own emotions to finding out that the woman in front of him was the mercenary that, if Monarch had to guess, likely killed a friend or two of his. “My sister was one of the workers at the facility you attacked in Yellowstone, y’know,” he flatly stated.

“Oh. I’m –”

“Save it. She’s not dead, unlike a lot of people who’ve met you,” the nurse interjected as he stood up. With a sigh, he walked around the desk and towards a door. “Just follow me. If you were only in this for the money, you wouldn’t be here right now, nor would she. I don’t care about the rest. I’m just a conscript with medical skills.”

Why did she even bother trying to talk.

Monarch just followed behind. The nurse led her to an elevator and pressed a button on the inside for the fourth floor. “When the doors open, head left. Fifth door on the right side of the hall.”

She was on autopilot from there on out. The quickness in her pace from before was gone now, however; each step that Monarch took had a tremble to it as she hesitated, her mind filling with more than just worry. It reached its boiling point outside of the door. Prez would be inside, if the nurse didn’t lie to her. She was still alive. That’s better than the worst of the fears in Monarch’s mind wanted her to believe, and even then, other fears shouted in her mind about the state that Prez would be in. Whatever state it was, it would be Monarch’s fault, wouldn’t it?

Monarch gently opened the door. She paused for a second before entering, still hesitating, still scared. With her eyes closed, she entered, breaching the barrier, and then she opened her eyes once more. She couldn’t bear to look at all of the screens and bags attached to Prez – hell, she couldn’t even bear to look at Prez in this state – but Monarch forced herself to. To witness what she’d caused. That raving bastard was wrong: the fall of the Federation, its losses in Cascadia, and his own destruction of Presidia wasn’t her fault, but the state that Robin Kuo was in was solely Monarch’s fault. She could have dumped flares, chaff, and anything else and ran. Maybe that demon of a machine that Crimson One was in could’ve kept up, but at some point, it would not have mattered. There would’ve been more friendlies, or just anyone else, or maybe they could’ve just hidden, or bailed out once they weren’t over the Cordium slag that Presidia was now.

There was a chair in the room, besides the bed Prez was sleeping in. At least, Monarch hoped it was just sleep she was in right now. It was late in the day, after all, perfectly normal time to be sleeping, but she couldn’t escape all of the fears in her mind that it was worse. What if they had to put Prez into a coma for some reason, Monarch worried.

What if she’d never wake up?

The chair wasn’t very comfortable to sit in, but Monarch tried to find what little pleasure she could in it. At least she wasn’t standing, or still stuck in her jet and in her flight suit, even if she really wished she at least had the latter right now.

She wasn’t aware how long she passed out for, but at some point, Monarch had curled up in the chair, holding her legs tight to her chest. A light wrapping at the door is what forced her back into reality, and she stared at it as whoever was there let themselves in – the one con of hospital doors, of course, was always the lack of real way to lock them.

It wasn’t a doctor, though; Monarch would recognize the stained look of that specific CIF uniform anywhere. Captain Joshua Griffiths. Stardust. The sole reason that they were still in Cascadia, which itself was possibly the sole reason that they weren’t hunted down by other mercenaries already. “They told me I’d find you here,” he flatly stated, before tilting his head out to the hall. With weary bones, Monarch stood up and followed him outside, only briefly noting the briefcase he was holding.

“The ceasefire held, even with the chaos in Presidia, if you were curious,” he explained quietly. “At least, we think it did, because we haven’t received reports from anywhere elsewhere of attacks like that. It’s a matter of… getting soldiers back under control.”

“No one wants to believe that a rogue soldier could do that,” Monarch softly muttered.

“Monarch, six Cordium warheads leveled Presidia. If you want to tell me that Crimson One did that himself, I’ll listen, but it’ll be hard to believe you.”

Monarch just sighed. “You’re here for the deal, Stardust. Lets just… get this over with, please.”

“Alright,” he replied, letting out a sigh of his own. “Cascadia thanks you for your service, Monarch, but is now on the search for Hitman team. In six months, the Cascadian military police will catch up to and execute all members of Hitman team, but as of now,” Stardust began to explain as he fiddled with the briefcase, “You’re no longer the person behind that tacname. The papers in here give a birth record and id for an Elizabeth Brandt, Jacklyn Paris, Quentin Dempsey, Cassie Huey, Marshal Ruddy, and… Mario McRlwain.”

With a thud, Stardust closed the briefcase, and offered it out to Monarch, who took it without a word. “We found Galaxy, Diplomat, and Comic, and we think we’ve found Kaiser rallying a band of troops out of the city, but we’re still investigating that last one. The former three are currently on their way here, as this is the closest, still-operational hospital. Thankfully, after the CIF retreat from Presidia, most… civilians had left the town, and the Feds shot anyone who tried to return.”

“…Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I can tell you’re worried,” Stardust softly said, “because I am too. But the fighting is over now. We’re all free to go.” Quietly, he turned, and began to leave. “This is the last time I’ll have to deal with you, I hope, but I want to say… thank you again, Monarch. The world owes you.”

Monarch didn’t reply, just turning back inside of the room, shutting the door, and walking back to her chair instead. Setting the briefcase besides it, she curled up once more, and she closed her eyes. She wasn’t used to all of this talking. It almost felt like, somehow, she’d become the leader of Sicario, something that she wouldn’t have wanted for even a moment. Even being the “leader” of Hitman squadron sometimes felt like too much.

At least her wingmen were alive.

With a deep breath, a groan escaped Monarch’s lips, her eyes reopening. The room’s clock, right above the door, read it just past two in the morning. The noise of jets touching down in the distant felt too familiar to pay attention to, but now, it was somehow also too noisy to tune out.

“I really hope you’re okay,” she softly muttered.

There came a noise from besides her, which her gaze immediately snapped to. Prez was shifting in her bed.

That, alone, was enough to draw a gasp from Monarch.

“Prez?”

More stirring. Then, weakly, Robin Kuo opened her eyes, slowly blinking as she got adjusted to the world around her. Turning as much as the various things would let her, she tried to smile at Monarch, but winced once she felt all the pain that she was in. With a tired and strained voice, she just mumbled, “Hey… Monarch. Will… you stay here? Please?”

“Yeah. I’ll… I’ll stay, Prez.”