Galaxy had relayed the plan for the next mission as Hitman 1 flew back to Rowsdower as to expectation for the next flight. A groan had come from Prez as the WSO realized that it meant, just mere hours after the wheels of their SK.25U touched tarmac, they’d be lifting off again, likely in the same jet – just refueled, rearmed, and with whatever maintenance they could perform in the hours between. If Monarch had a similar reaction to her, the pilot didn’t show it, and besides the roar of the twin turbojets and the rush of wind outside of the canopy, there was a silence between them. Even the charismatic Galaxy seem to run out of conversation this early in the morning.

Fading fast, the adrenaline that had been pumping through her veins just moments before left Prez feeling particularly empty as it drained; the comparative silence to all the insanity of combat, especially as *Monarch*’s, particularly, WSO was almost dramatically drastic to all of the warnings, targets, and orders she had to pay mind to. The lead of Hitman would put her in an early grave if given the time, but at least the craziness she was put through was beyond lucrative. Sometimes, she couldn’t help but wonder if part of the reason Hitman had quickly become so notorious was due just to her pilot.

The voice of the ATC welcoming them home drew Prez out of her thoughts, if just for a moment. Though she’d offered to fly the plane back to Rowsdower – after all, if their airframe was going to be an attacker that was derived from a trainer that was derived from an attacker, the second set of controls might as well see some use sometimes – Monarch had, as expected, ignored her and maintained control of the plane. The stoic pilot rarely spoke, even to her. She wondered if Monarch even saw her the same way as Comic and Dip, especially after Galaxy’s comments this morning on the fact that it seems like the three Hitman pilots all hated each other. She knew it wasn’t likely a good question to ask, but it nagged at part of her mind, especially as it felt like Monarch had become even more stoic during their time in Cascadia.

A lightbulb clicked on in her mind as she realized at least something she could do to help her friend out. If she had to guess, Monarch was likely just as tired as she was right now, so the very least she could do was to make the pilot a cup of coffee. Or did Monarch prefer tea? She… didn’t actually know. “I suppose I could make—” Prez began to mutter, before the jolt of the wheels slamming down shocked her out of her verbal thinking – and literally jolted her mouth shut on her tongue. As they taxi’d in, Monarch seemed to look back towards Prez, but it was hard to tell if the pilot was actually looking at her through the visor’s shades or just looking over their temporary home of Rowsdower.

Still, the pain of her tongue wouldn’t stop her from enacting her plan. When the plane finally came to a stop, Prez sprung out of the craft in comparison to how long it too Monarch to get out – which, this time, she didn’t stick around to see. She was a woman with a mission, dammit, and she was going to carry it out.

Plus, without caffeine herself, she would likely have to be strapped back into the backseat of that plane by someone else while she was completely passed out, and she wasn’t about to live that kind of life.

“Monarch? I think he’s off in his room,” Diplomat told Prez when she peaked her head into the common room closer to where most of Hitman congregated on base. In each of her hands she was holding a mug, one with coffee and the other with tea. Ducking back out, she heard the conversation resume behind her as she scurried off towards the rooms themselves. It was noticeably nicer here than in the dormitories she’d ended up in, with this section of the base like originally for officers or something. The rebels, evidently, didn’t mind much where Hitman ended up after their performance spoke for themselves; nevertheless, Prez still felt a bit wrong being up here. Between her and Monarch, Monarch was easily responsible for a lot more of the work – and the glory – of Hitman 1 it felt like. She’d gladly taken up the less-comfortable bunk as result, leaving Galaxy to slide right in instead. His role as AWACS, after all, felt far more important than her role as WSO.

Even with her unfamiliarity, though, it didn’t take long for Prez to find Monarch’s room: it was the only one with a light still seeping through the bottom crack, as well as through the partially opened gap. That made Prez’s life easier, at least, because it made it so she didn’t need to awkwardly shuffle with two mugs to try and use a handle. Instead, she just pushed it in with perhaps a bit too much force and entered without even daring to knock. “Hey El – Monarch! I brought you coffee and tea, because I wasn’t sure which –”

And the second she did, she regretted it when she saw the state Monarch was in: their flight suit was discarded over a chair at a desk in the room, leaving them laying on their bed, staring and the sealing and just wearing a pair of loose-fitting thermal trousers and… a black, brand-name sports bra? Prez stared at Monarch, who stared back with both an equal amount of shock on their face – shock that was quickly replaced by fear on the pilot’s face. Before the usually stoic pilot could say anything, Prez’s face had already turned a bright red as she began to stammer out “Oh no, I’m so sorry, I didn’t know that you’d be – I – should I leave? I, ah, I’ll leave.”

For the woman who’d told almost the entirety of Sicario, at one point or another, to eat her ass and/or piss off, this display of blushing seemed almost uncharacteristic, but she’d entered this place prepared to potentially see a nude man, not this. Given Monarch apparent horror, too, her reaction wasn’t too far out of place it felt. A similar blush started to rise on Monarch’s face, and weakly, they just muttered, “Can I have the tea before you go?” Without another word, Prez just offered out the mug with the tea in it, averting her gaze. In an even weaker voice, Monarch managed to add, “You can stay as well. If you want.”

“Sure! Sure,” Prez quickly replied, still not looking at Monarch. “Do, ah, you want to talk about this?”

“…Well, it’s… what it looks like.” Monarch was slow to respond as they took a second to sip at their tea, and only a hare more confident too.

“That you’re… a girl?”

“Yeah,” Monarch weakly confirmed, uncertainty in the pilot’s voice.

“So… you’re trans?” Prez gently prodded.

“…yeah,” came the reply from Monarch, barely more audible than the fluorescent light in the room. Prez had turned back to her comrade-in-arms to see the pilot almost curled up around the mug now, staring at it.

“How long have you known?”

“Since… before the last contract. Quite a bit before. I think I started to figure it out when we started to fly together more regularly, but… it’s been a while. I’ve been on medication since… around December of last year,” Monarch explained. Her voice slowly grew steadier as she continued to talk, but it was clear that, perhaps in part because of how much she relied on Prez’s radio communications during battle, her voice carried an intrinsic uncertainty to it.

“So, during the last contract? In Creole?” Prez asked, her voice growing gentler as her own shock faded. Softly, she sat down on the bed besides Monarch on the bed, who remained mostly still except for her occasional drink of tea.

“Yeah. I was going to talk to the doctor… here about it today, but…”

“But we’re going to be stuck down in the Altor Desert,” Prez answered for Monarch.

“Yeah.”

“Are you going to run out of your medication?” Worry seeped into Prez’s soft voice as she gently reached out with her free hand and placed it on Monarch’s shoulder, who didn’t seem to react except to shake her head no.

“Not for a while. I… take shots, instead of pills, so I have a week-long window to… get more. And I still have a spare vial.”

Silence lingered between the two of them. For Prez, it was something that she had to process still. For Monarch, it was something that she still, very obviously, felt deeply uncomfortable sharing. Prez was the one to break it. “Would you like help with that ever?”

Monarch finally looked away from the cup she was clutching tight, a look of confusion obvious in her eyes. “You… know how to?”

“My only skill isn’t *just* being able to put up with your maneuvering, Monarch,” Prez couldn’t help but to tease with a small laugh, before she shook her head. “My aunt couldn’t afford a pump for her insulin until I started to work here, so I was the only one really comfortable enough with needles to help her out. Plus, one of my siblings came out as trans, so I also helped him there.”

“That… makes sense,” Monarch softly admitted, turning back to her mug as she sipped on it once more. With a small nod, she agreed. “I would like that. Thank you, Prez.”

“Of course, El – Monarch. Do you… have a new name chosen, by any chance?”

Monarch nodded once more and opened her mouth to speak before she apparently thought better of it. “Not while we’re… in country. Operational security.”

With a small tinge of regret for even asking, Prez nodded. “Right. Opsec. Does… anyone else know?”

“Kaiser does. I think… Galaxy suspects something is up, but… he might just think I’m gay.”

“You’d hardly be the first queer person among Sicario’s ranks,” Prez pointed out with a chuckle. It managed to draw a small smile out of Monarch. Then, a frown formed on her face. “Not Dip or Comic?”

Monarch shook her head no. “I… want to tell them, but I’m not sure. We’re all… stressed enough right now.”

“Yeah… alright, that makes… some sense, Monarch,” Prez said. A hint of nervousness seeped back in as she withdrew her arm from Monarch’s shoulder, looking down at her coffee herself. Slowly, she began to stand up, saying, “Well… I likely should –”

“Can you stay?” Monarch asked. Once again, her voice was almost mistakable for the hum of the room and the bustle outside.

“…Sure.” Prez knew that, worst case, all that would happen is either Galaxy or one of the other Hitman elements would crack some wise joke about it. It had happened before, after all.

The attack on the Solana Array went off without a hitch. Within the week, Hitman was out of that awful desert and back to Rowsdower. For Hitman 1, things were awfully silent. Patrols were being mostly led by CIF forces, and Stardust had nothing in particular for the duo to do. It was April 17th by now, and things were still mostly silent.

For Prez, that meant mostly a duty of maintenance work. Though many of the rebels on base held a bit of a distaste for the mercenaries still, even after all the work that Hitman and, really, Sicario were doing, they never paid her much mind. It helped, too, that the work she was doing she was doing for free. After all, whenever Monarch brought her up, it was more than enough to pay off parts of her own debts and any of her families as well.

Today’s busywork had set her loose on Sicario’s hangars at Rowsdower, but there was something bothering her: there seemed to be one plane too many, a stray F/F-18. The F/S-15 flown by Kaiser was here, as well as Dip’s MG-29 and Comic’s F/C-15, as well as the few planes that Monarch rotated through: an F/D-14, an Accipiter, and the SK.25U. She was on the wrong side to make out any insignia’s on it besides the standard Sicario mark on the new acquisition – was it one of Gunsel’s planes that just found it’s way into the wrong hangar? – so she went to round it –

And saw Monarch’s butterfly insignia up on the tail. With a click of her tongue, she approached the craft to try and pull the maintenance logs off of it, but the second she took a step closer, sirens began to ring across base. Were they scrambling? Frantically, Prez scattered from the craft and over to the SK.25U she’d last flown in to try and grab it, only to find it not there as she crawled up near the canopy.

Only slightly more composed than she’d been came Dip, who ran up to his fighter and was in within a flash, shouting as he did, “Monarch said something about his new plane, Prez! We’re playing intercept over the Bering Strait; all hands are on deck!”

It was a good thing that Dip’s back was to Prez, else the wince that she gave hearing Monarch getting misgendered likely would’ve outed her pilot. In a moment, she’d recovered, already sprinting back to the jet she’d been just at. There was a ladder to get inside properly nearby, she knew, but she knew how to get into a jet like this without needing to bother – until she felt a hand stop her from her climbing as someone else deployed an integrated boarding ladder. The hand on her shoulder was Comic; the other Kaiser. “Easy there you two,” Comic said flatly, “we’ve still got time.”

Diplomat’s stressed response sailed past Prez’s ears, only picking up Kaiser’s chuckle. Clearing her head with a small shake, Prez climbed up the ladder and into the craft, scooping up the helmet that she just barely saw in the WSO’s seat as she – perhaps more accurately – fell in. Clicking it on, she rushed through all of the procedures to get ready, trying to get the craft as ready as possible before Monarch showed up and finished the rest. She was just moments behind.

The rest quickly became a blur to Prez. It went from all of the prefight checks to suddenly being 10,000 feet up, bickering with Galaxy and warning Monarch of all of the incoming radar locks. Missile after missile went out, and after the first five, Prez stopped keeping track of Monarch’s score. Soon enough, the radio was full of conversation, with their transmitters still picking up both rebel and Federation chatter, with almost everyone seemingly immediately aware of Sicaro’s presence.

Of Hitman’s presence.

Of Monarch’s presence. “The Crowned Mercenary”, as they called her.

It took all of Prez’s physical and mental fitness to not pass out or get overwhelmed. During preflight, she thought she’d heard something about this craft not being loaded with flares, and she soon found out why the second that Monarch pulled her first turn using the AOA Module she had brought instead. Prez was suddenly very, very glad she hadn’t had anything to eat that morning.

If there is one thing that Prez noticed, beyond all of the chaos, was a simple thing present in almost every mention of the two of them. They were being called the “king” and being assumed to be a singular he. Though Prez was used to being ignored like this – it seemed almost standard practice for WSO’s that she spoke with to never get the same credit as the pilots, even if they did save their lives – she couldn’t imagine what it was like to be in Monarch’s spot.

But if Monarch was hurt by it right now, she didn’t say anything. The usual stoicism that took over her in flight was back in full force now as she weaved like her true namesake through the furball, downing Federation combatant after combatant. Even when the peacekeeping squadron showed up – those Crimson bastards again – Monarch didn’t seem to slow down; Prez was almost certain that Monarch made herself an ace once more against them.

The last conscious thing Prez properly remembered as they left the AO was someone with a rebel IFF chanting over the radio “The king is dead! Long live our new king!” and the chorus that followed.

Monarch’s aversion to *too* much interaction was always a thing that Hitman had gotten used to, and something that Dip and Comic always somewhat worked around. After the quad-ace-in-a-day touched back down at Rowsdower, they gave Monarch a wide birth to let the seemingly exhausted pilot get some rest in. No one seemed to pay Prez any mind and she lingered for just a moment longer in the back seat of the fighter, collecting herself for quite some time before she managed to pry herself from the plane. She’d let other people manage the maintenance on the craft, at least for now. She needed a break, too.

Even if, for her, taking a break meant checking in on Monarch.

As she slinked down the ever-increasingly-familiar halls, she made a quick detour into the common room closer to Monarch’s room to quickly brew a cup of tea to give to the girl she was about to harass. To her mild surprise, Dip and Comic weren’t here either: only Kaiser and Galaxy were present, talking in a hushed voice about something – a hushed discussion that was immediately canned when they noticed Prez’s presence, even if she was deliberately trying to not hear anything. There was an awkward silence in the room as the electric kettle took its sweet time to heat up for just a few seconds before Kaiser was the first one to break it.

“Ah, Prez! It’s not often that we see you in these halls; to what do we owe the pleasure?” the charismatic leader asked with a slight chuckle. Even though his tone was as polite as ever – even bordering on caring towards the short WSO – it still caused Prez to jump upright.

“Oh, y’know,” Prez replied, awkwardly fumbling her words slightly to give herself just a second more to think as she turned around, “Just… visiting Monarch. Checking in on’m, making sure that s—they’re alright, y’know?”

Though Galaxy’s brow furled just a little bit at Prez’s fumbling of words – suspicious, if slightly, but mostly curiously – Kaiser just chuckled a little bit more at her antics. When Prez looked back to him, they accidentally locked eyes, and when they did, the smile on Kaiser’s face seemed to grow just a little bit more as he not only gave her a knowing nod but a wink as well. “Well, when you do, be sure to give Monarch another round of congratulations for me. They definitely deserve it.”

Galaxy looked back to Kaiser, clearly still just as confused. “Ah, is there something I should know?”

Before Prez could attempt to stutter out an awkward defense, Kaiser’s hearty chuckle only seemed to continue. “Nothing to worry about, Galaxy. If that changes, you’ll know.”

Quietly, Prez breathed a soft sigh of relief as she turned back away. The other two seemed to resume on another line of conversation, and as soon as the kettle started to boil, she made sure to quickly pour two cups worth of water, put in whatever the first tea bags she saw were, and made a quick escape from the room. At least Kaiser would likely be sure to ask Galaxy not to tease her or Monarch about what just happened if she was lucky, and after today’s flight, Prez was pretty sure she could win every lottery in Cascadia (if they were still running).

Sadly, she’d face a new problem quickly: Monarch’s door was well-and-fully shut this time, leaving her without an easy way in. Next door, she could hear some rather loud noise coming from Dip’s room; it sounded like he and Comic were amid a rather loud conversation. With the smallest of frowns forming on her face, Prez took in a deep breath as she tried to think up a clever solution –

And she settled for banging her head against the door, not hard enough to hurt, but with enough force to hopefully at least get Monarch’s attention (though the small amount of spilt hot water definitely stung a little bit). A few seconds later, the door clicked open, and a confused Monarch with a mild look of annoyance strewn on her face stood staring down ever-so-slightly at her. As she recognized Prez, however, an awkward smile seemed to form on her face, though Prez lost sight of it as Monarch looked down at the ground and shook her head. Taking in a deep breath, a smaller – but more genuine – smile seemed to linger slightly on her face as she looked back up at Prez. “…Tea?” she asked, her voice quiet.

Prez nodded, and like that, Monarch stood to the side and let her in, standing perpendicular to the door and shutting it once Prez had entered with a gentle shove. Prez offered out a cup once more, which Monarch, once again, graciously took before sitting on her bed with gentle fall, leaving Prez to sit pretzel-legged on the floor. For a few more seconds, there was silence between the two as they both took small sips of their drinks, before Monarch asked in her usual small voice, “Did you… only come to bring me tea, or…?”

Shaking her head no, Prez gently replied, “No, I wanted to check in on you too. If that’s alright.”

Monarch gave a slight nod. “I… figured. I… imagine you’re not just asking if I’m… physically alright.”

“I already kinda figured you were exhausted, if I’m being honest,” Prez admitted, which drew out one of Monarch’s rare laughs.

“You’d… be correct about that,” she agreed in between her laughs. Once she settled down, however, the smile had disappeared from Monarch’s face. Taking in a deep breath, she shook her head. “There was… a lot today.”

“On the radio.”

“…yeah.”

Prez fought the urge to stand up and to try to give Monarch a hug; after all, she didn’t exactly know how the pilot would respond to that. The last time that Prez had visited, they’d spent the rest of their time together in near silence, close but not touching. “I… suppose I don’t really know what I can say that will help,” Prez quietly confessed, “but… for what it’s worth, I can empathize with how much that must have sucked.”

Monarch nodded once more, barely moving her head at all in the movements. She drew in a deep breath, as though she had a lot to say, but the only word that escaped her lips were a simple, even quieter, “...yeah.” Her eyes were trained on her cup, refusing to even look at Prez. From what little of Monarch’s face Prez could see, she was able to make out a mixture of shame, hurt, and regret plastered across.

For a second, silence returned between the two, but Prez was quick to try to deflect the topic to at least hopefully make things a little bit less awkward. “It’s not supposed to be a crown, right? It’s a butterfly?”

Monarch’s gaze returned to Prez, both confused and, if ever so slightly, amazed. “It is,” Monarch admitted without hesitation, before pausing and stumbling to add, “At least… originally. A… call back to an old metaphor I heard. ‘Float like a butterfly, sting—”

“Like a bee,” Prez finished. Monarch smiled, and she nodded. “I’ve always loved that phrase,” Prez added with a smile.

“It really is… a nice phrase. It was… a warning, really. But… I can see how it is a crown as well. I’m not… entirely upset with the interpretation, I just…”

“Aren’t a king?”

“…yeah.”

Quiet enveloped the room – even the conversation between Diplomat and Comic seemed to die down for a bit next door – as both Monarch and Prez seemed to struggle to follow through with another line of thought to add on. The overwhelming hurt and shame, at least, were now gone from Monarch’s face, replaced instead by an almost distant look as she returned to looking at her tea and drinking it, seemingly savoring every drop.

It was nothing like how Prez was drinking her own tea, as she’d downed most of hers already and set the mug down besides her. A small frown was forming on her face as she thought, and finally, Prez couldn’t withstand the urge any longer. Standing up, she shifted to sit on the bed, and the second she felt the bed underneath her rear, she brought Monarch into a tight hug.

Initially, it surprised her as she seemed to let out a small gasp, but quickly, Monarch seemed to ease into the hug, leaning against Prez for a little bit more support. “Thank you,” she weakly muttered, to which Prez just nodded and said, “Of course.”

For a while, they remained like that. Then, Monarch just said, “Your arms are… preventing me from drinking my tea.” With a small laugh, Prez let Monarch go, standing up as she did so. She bent over to pick up her cup before she went towards the door, only to stop when she heard Monarch’s weak voice speak up once more. “Could you… stay again, actually?”

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