The New Frankenstein

by Dancewithknives

Summary

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After the fall of Overwatch, Doctor Angela Ziegler tried to move on with her life, but after one thing lead to another, she finds herself embroiled in another web of conspiracies which will bring back secrets hidden in her past, cumulating in the lesson that life is a mistake that you can't run away from.

An Overwatch Fanfiction following game canon, exploring the backstory of many character but primarily the relationship between Reaper and Mercy. Not a ship fic. Approximately 70,000 words, 11 chapters, and will update at least once a week.

Illustration commissioned by Dr. Maniacal at DeviantArt.
“It is the way of men to make monsters… and it is the nature of monsters to destroy their makers.”

-Harlan Wade, F.E.A.R.

It was a cold drab April day in the alps of Switzerland. The snow was mostly melted, but the ground itself had yet to soften. The mixture of classic alpine architecture and modern construction was still dark and damp from the long winter’s thaw. The forecast said that it was supposed to be a partly cloudy day, that a few yellow rays of sunlight were supposed to finally hit the Swiss countryside; however, the smoldering debris from the other side of town had blotted out the light, even a week after the unexplained explosion had left the heart and innards of the building lifeless.

Halfway across town, a young, thin woman wearing a grey trench coat walked on a wet sidewalk with a duffle bag across her shoulder. She moved at a quick tempo, eyes down, straight ahead. The occasional passerby ignored her, for although civilian casualties were nonexistent, the blast was very close-to-home for the few that were out this morning. They were all afraid, confused and tired. Her path paralleled a public park, still vacant due to the frosty weather, but eventually the park turned into a wrought iron boundary.

Hedge stones lined the grounds as the blonde woman traveled down the way. She walked past the entrance, and kept following to the private grave markers until they changed from ornate stones of different colors, to uniform standing bricks, about two feet high. She stopped and turned to face into the burial grounds to see into the center of the cemetery. There, standing out from the identical grave markers, were two outliers. Standing about a foot taller than the rest, and adorned with a star at the top, were the tombstones of the Commanders of the unit.

Like many cemeteries across Europe, this place was the sacred burial ground for the brave men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice for the good of all mankind against overwhelming evil and tyranny. Just like the final resting places for the Americans, French, English, Russians, Germans, Poles, Italians, and every other nation that had shed blood on this continent, this small piece of land was the burial grounds for United Nations Task Force 284, better known as Overwatch.

Chief Medical Officer Angela Ziegler MD PHD, looked at the remnants of her comrades, those who were waiting for her and the soft ground of those who had recently joined them. Although twenty-five years old now, the sight made her throat swell and her eyes burn. It was a reminder of a lesson she had learned only one year after earning her medical license.

You can’t save all of them…
Not yet at least…

Angela stood alone at the fence line until a man walked up beside her and stood, likewise gazing out onto their troops.

“Your funeral was nice, Commander.” she said.

Commander Jack Morrison, wearing jeans and a black coat, stood beside the doctor and gave a long and heavy sigh. “It’s over, Angela. I’m done.”

The doctor closed her eyes, she knew this was coming. The errands she had just run gave it away, but at the same time it didn’t make the pain go away. “So that’s it. You’re just going to walk away from us all?”

“I tried my best, Lord knows I did. But I’m not commissioner Lacroix,” he replied, still facing ahead. Angela had to agree.

The late Gerald Lacroix was the darling of the UN. If he could court the Prima Ballerina Assoluta of the Paris Ballet, then a couple of bureaucrats would be child’s play by comparison. It was a shame what had happened to him, though; murdered by his own wife.

“But you can’t be surprised,” Morrison continued, “You saw what was happening, with the world, with… us…” he said, looking out at his tombstone sitting beside the marker of who he had once considered to be his best friend. “I know the UN ordered you to testify against our organization.”

“So you’ve been reading my mail, haven’t you?” she said, not in an accusatory tone, because in all actuality she had left the court order atop her desk for a reason. At the same time, dragging a dying man twice her size into her condominium didn’t leave her much of an opportunity to hide her dirty laundry either.

“The writing was on the wall. We were finished. We were only going to last another three months if we were lucky,” he said. Even before she had found him trapped beneath a blast-door in the rubble of their headquarters building, the doctor could see the signs that he was finished. In the months after the Commissioner’s demise, the tips of the Commander Morrison’s hair were starting to turn grey and recede. Lines were beginning to form on his face, and deep bags underneath his eyes were becoming a far too common occurrence whenever she went to check in on him.

Angela took a long breath and replied in an even tone, “Be that as it may. There are still people out
there who need our help, whether they want us or not.”

Commander Morrison sighed once more. “I was afraid you were going to say that.” He turned to face her and said, “Even on the inside, we both know who saw this coming and who is still willing to fall on the sword for Overwatch. Angela, I want you to go there and put an end to all of this.”

Angela looked the Commander in the eye, seeing the scorch marks in his hair, burns on his face and a large scar zagging from his temple across his nose and all the way down to his chin. It took her a moment to make sure that he was being serious, and when she realized he was being honest, demanded, “You can’t be serious!”

“Angela, listen to me. You know I would fight for every last one of you, but you need to trust me. Abandon ship while you still can. You have a long life ahead of you, trying to fight the inevitable isn’t worth jeopardizing your medical career. You can still help people, with or without the rest of us.”

She looked down at the sidewalk, his final orders being too much to look him in the eye. After a moment of considering how to protest, she took a breath and quietly protested “They’ll hate me for this. You know that.”

“I know.” he replied, “But if you care for them, you’ll end this before they can get into any more trouble. Blame Reyes, blame me, just try to save as many of the others as you can… starting with yourself. When the cards came down, you were the only one with a moral compass to do what was right rather than be a good soldier and follow orders. Everyone knew you objected to the more grey aspects to our organization.”

“It may be, Commander. But right or wrong, I still have a duty to treat those in need of my care.”

“I know, it’s not going to be easy, but this is our… your only way out without having to see the inside of a cell.”

Dr. Ziegler turned away once more, finding the dead to be easier to face. He was right. As much as she wanted to save it, she wanted to see it finished. Overwatch had lost its way. It had once been a beacon of hope to those caught in the robotic onslaught of the Omnic Crisis and a means for world peace. But nowadays the world looked at them as if they had turned into one of the monsters that it was made to slay. But her friends, he colleagues, her… family… She was going to be left all alone once again. The Judas. The Traitor. The one named, “Mercy”, saving herself first. That is what her commander wanted her to be.
Her American coworkers would often say, “When the going got tough, the tough got going.” She never really understood what the idiom meant, but it looked like it was happening before her very eyes.

Reluctantly, she nodded in agreement. “Alright, Commander. I’ll do as you say.”

“That you may not believe it, but you’re doing the right thing.”

*If it was right, then why did it feel so wrong?*

“What are you planning on doing now, Commander?”

Commander Morrison took the change of subject as a relief. “I’m not sure yet. I guess it’s time for this soldier to finally go home. I suppose my parents are probably still alive. If not, then one of my brothers or sisters probably still owns the family farm. If that’s not the case then I bet one of my old neighbors do.”

His statement struck the doctor like a stake had been pounded into her heart. *’I suppose my parents are still alive?’* How could someone be so casual about something like that? Angela stuck a hand into the neck of her coat, holding a golden locket and feeling the engraving fill the inside of her warm palm. Written in German were the words, “We’ll always watch over you, Angela”.

“How could you just say that?” she asked.

Commander Morrison quickly turned to his Chief Doctor once more, “Oh, dammit, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that… It’s just… well, we’ve all lost too many friends over these last few years.”

(Some more than others!” she snapped.

“I’m sorry, It’s just… believe it or not, Gabe wasn’t always like that.”

Angela closed her eyes for a moment to calm down. Commander Reyes had never liked her, it
seemed. Soon after joining the team he had dubbed her the “Princess”. Being only seventeen and fluent- albeit unfamiliar- in English she thought of it as a compliment. After a rather tone-deaf explanation that Switzerland didn’t actually have a central royal family, she learned that it wasn’t. But she believed Commander Morrison, she had seen the way he was with others, heard him laugh with Morrison about old war stories when she was passing in the halls. She always thought she saw shards of Reyes that weren’t just a smug abrasive demeanor when he was with young Fareeha, occasionally learning when the two would sneak into her office to steal the Doctor’s supply of lollipops on rainy days.

“Yes, Commander Reyes had the heart of a good man, even if it was as cold as stone.”

“I just can’t believe he actually went so far to try and kill me. I just can’t believe he was pushed that far over the edge. It just doesn’t make sense.”

“The worst betrayals are the ones we don’t see coming.”

“Yeah, well. He’s dead now. So that’s the end of that.”

“Are you sure about that?” the doctor asked. “You aren’t the only one with an empty grave out there.”

“Yeah, I’m positive.” The Commander shook his head, “Back when we were in Spec Ops we used to call him ‘Smokey’ because he always underestimated the blast yield of explosives. This time, I don’t know if he was gambling with his luck like always, or if he really just wanted to blow us both straight to hell.”

“But like I said, Jack, how are you so certain that he didn’t survive?”

“Angela, back when we were trying to hold the Omnic’s in South America back from getting to the States, we were using a state of the art experimental munition called ‘Greek Fire’, It was like the Napalm used a hundred year ago in ‘Nam. Big difference, though, is that Greek Fire was designed to cook the circuit board on a bot from the outside in. Once it started up, it never stopped burning. We had a reserve of it stationed in the hangar where Reyes ambushed me. A stray shot of mine hit a charge placed on the tank and I saw Gabe go up in flames. Trust me; he’s dead.”

“Hmm,” Angela nodded, “Well if you’re sure he’s gone, then he can’t cause us any more trouble.”
Commander Morrison balled his hands up into tight fists. “It just doesn’t add up. We were supposed to be above all of this petty infighting. We had the best training, best operatives, best equipment, and a mission that couldn’t have been any simpler. But we still lied, stole and went behind each other’s backs like thugs in the end.”

“It was inevitable.” The doctor replied, “I can’t say I had foreseen the conclusion, but something like this was bound to happen when my staff’s focus changed from the betterment of humanity to the efficiency of Overwatch’s ability to do its job. Absolute power corrupts, and the responsibilities we undertook are not meant for any mortal man.” The doctor pulled on the sleeve of her trench coat to reveal an antique analog wristwatch, an anniversary Rolex of sterling silver; a gift her mother had once bought for her father years ago. It was time to go.

Angela adjusted her shoulder, causing the duffel bag to shift and make a few sounds. “I decided against trying to go to your apartment, it would have been too suspicious if I had somehow gotten caught. Instead, I bought you four changes of clothes, some over the counter pain relief and fresh dressing, some toiletries, and about 40,000 dollars in cash.”

For the first that she could remember, Jack Morrison looked genuinely shocked. “Oh, geeze Angie, you didn’t need-”

“Angie… that was new. Freudian slip perhaps?” she thought. She didn’t give the protest a second thought as she interrupted him, “It’s fine. I really have no use for it.”

“But that’s a lot of money…”

“It’s just some cash I was holding on to from my Overwatch salary in case of an emergency. Finishing and implementing my father’s research in Nanobiotics had already made me a wealthy little girl before Overwatch became interested in me, and I still have my parent’s estate as well as a trust they made in my name in case anything happened to them. Believe me when I say that wealth matters little to me.”

Commander Morrison slowly reached out and grabbed the bag by the handle, slowly relieving the weight off of the young woman’s shoulder. It was at that moment that he finally understood the burden he had left for her. A beautiful and brilliant young woman with all of the money in the world, but nothing that she wanted, hiding herself away behind books or with her face stuffed into a computer screen to help those in need. Looking for a way to be the angel of Mercy for complete strangers with nothing to give back in return besides gratitude that, if even for a moment, would fill the emptiness in her heart.
Then, there was Jack Morrison, running away from the monster he created with his tail between his legs; leaving a woman to fight his last battle. Not against terrorists, Omnics, or bureaucrats, but the people who considered her a part of their family, her family. At that moment he almost felt the conviction to walk to Overwatch Ground Zero’s relief center and turn himself in, but he knew that it would have caused far more harm than good for her.

“Well… I suppose this is goodbye then,” he said, “thank you, Doctor. For everything. I’m glad that I could always trust you.”

Angela Ziegler nodded, saying, “yes, yes, just another skeleton in my closet, I suppose.” Yet, when she turned to leave she couldn’t. Something deep within her, something she had long since forgotten about, anchored her to the spot. It was at that moment the realization that this was probably going to be the last time she ever saw Commander Morrison hit her. Being both dead and headed off to another continent nullified any chance she would have of ever getting in touch with him. Even if by some odd chance they happened to meet at a clinic or on one of the millions of street corners around the world, what would be the chance they would recognize each other?

She looked into his sad eyes and remembered something from a long time ago, a feeling that she once but written off as a foolish waste of time.

She had just become a surgeon at a hospital in Zurich, and the demands for medical aid due to the Omnic Crisis, -as well as the groundbreaking completion of her father’s borderline Mad Scientist research into using Nanites to ease human suffering- had brought Angela to the forefront of the Medical world.

Universities, corporations, countries, and about every NGO had gone so far as to promise her anything that she wanted: any position; any salary; some even willing to part the sea if need be, to get her on their team. But not one out of the lot interested her more than the others. She then received an letter from a small UN based paramilitary task force that had received some publicity recently, requesting only a moment of her time to see if their organization could interest the young doctor.

She had initially scoffed at the idea of enlisting in Task Force 284. War had taken her parents away from her when she was a little girl, so why would she aid in some microscopic globalist force of thugs? Even though she had already made up her mind on the matter, she knew that the only kind thing to do would be to meet with them and let them try their best, so she did.

They say that the key to psychological warfare was to first know one’s enemy. The one thing that Overwatch understood that no one else did was that at the end of the day, Dr. Angela Ziegler MD PHD was only sixteen years old.
Lieutenant Jack Morrison, former US Special Forces Operations Division, clean cut and wearing his full dress uniform, had acted as if he was the last person to shout “NOT IT!” when it had come to meeting with the doctor. He was clumsy, stumbling over the words he spoke as soon as he read them from the dossier, evidently not understanding the slightest thing about the facilities that he tried to brief her about. He let it slipped that their organization was underfunded and that a Medical Officer was the second on their priority list behind hiring a janitor. But what he lacked in presentation he made up for in heart. He was honest, he was funny -even if his attempts at humor made no sense to the Swiss doctor- he believed in the things he was saying and wanted to make a difference in the world. But most important thing she recalled from that meeting was that, wherever he was from, -Texas, Indiana, Montana, Michigan? She didn’t remember- all she could think about after that meeting was how the humble farm-boy looked in that uniform.

Standing there on the sidewalk in front of the graveyard, that feeling came back to her, crying out from within her soul, telling her that if she didn’t act now, she would regret it for the rest of her life.

Angela stepped forward, leaned in, closed her eyes, and let her lips meet his face. She sucked in just a tiny bit, feeling the rough skin against her tongue, and then released, making a quiet *click* sound.

His skin was cold, limp, and lifeless. Jack Morrison the Man was as dead as Jack Morrison the Legend. The feeling in her chest, the one she had ignored for years until right then and there, shriveled up and died at that moment.

The Commander reached up with his hand and felt the warmth on his cheek, a look of self-loathing in his eyes. He couldn’t bring himself to look at the doctor anymore .

“Auf wiedersehen, Jack.” Angela whispered while turning around and walked down the street, using her blonde bangs to cover her eyes.

Jack Morrison stood there and watched her as she hurried away, her high ponytail bobbed atop her head in rhythm with her steps. He wanted to run after her apologizing for all of the things that he had gotten her into, but why would he? He was a failure as a Commanding Officer, and at that moment; as a man in general. He turned away and shook his head, preparing to do the last decent thing that he could for her; find a nice hole to crawl into and die.

Angela took a detour and walked around the block to clear her head before finally entering her
condo, only a few blocks away from the ground zero explosion at Overwatch’s Headquarters. She unlocked the old wooden door, let herself in, locked it again and set her keys in the bowl that sat on a table by the entryway.

Jack had turned the lights off before he left to meet her, and due to the secret nature of her guest, all of the drapes had been closed tightly to guard against the wandering eyes of any passersby. By reflex and memory, Angela slipped her coat off and placed it on a lonely hanger sitting on the far side of the coat rack in the entry closet. As soon as her hands were free, the doctor reached down and grabbed one of the many clean white lab coats on the opposite side of the closet and slipped it on over her black turtleneck sweater.

She walked through her dark living room, the light that managed to sneak past the blocked windows provided just enough illumination so she could easily step over all of the sporadically placed medical equipment, bloody gauze, used sanitary sheets, tourniquets and bowls of water that were once warm, but now cold and stained with a faint pink hue.

Although Angela knew the things that she had been able to do with her time as a member of Overwatch had benefited humanity, she was not blind to the evils that were afoot. It all started with the first suggestion that her Nanobiotics could be used as a weapon, and as much as she protested, she knew that her father’s work had begun to go down a dark path that could not be reversed. Yet, she couldn’t stop, not just because she cared about the members of her team, but because of the opportunities working with the organization had brought; the new fields to be discovered and innovation to be had.

People had always told her, even from a very young age, that it was alarming how much she took after her parents. Her mother had been a surgeon, and Angela understood why she had taken up that career. She enjoyed the work as well, and according to the colleagues of her late mother, she was probably the only person that could surpass her mother in the operating room. Yet, as she had come to discover there was only so much a surgeon could do. When a bone is broken, there are only so many ways for it to heal correctly. What had intrigued her more was learning how to prevent the injury in the first place.

Once across the living room, the doctor opened a door and walked down a narrow staircase, approached the door to her laboratory and activated the keypad to the lock.

Why fix what was broken when one could prevent the malady in the first place? That is why she had committed so much time into completing and fully realizing her father’s life’s work, his legacy. Overwatch allowed her to be right there on the cutting edge of science and struggle, seeing the challenges facing humanity first-hand and find ways to deal with new threats accordingly rather than in a publication eight months after the fact.
She, like her mother and her father before her, were healers. And to be healed, one must first be hurt.

The electronic lock made a satisfactory chime when the correct combination was entered. Dr. Ziegler entered the laboratory and flipped a switch, lighting up the small basement and its secured and sterile quarantine room. She walked inside and stood with her hands in the pockets of her lab coat, looking into the secured chamber and the charred body that was flaking, decaying, and healing all at the same time.

“Good morning, Gabriel,” she said. “It’s time to wake up.”
“Doctor, its time to wake up.”

Dr. Ziegler’s eyes opened on command to a direct, albeit very controlled, whisper. She rubbed the corners of her eyes with the tips of her fingers and arched her back, stretching her lumbar from the rigid support her seat had offered.

Once fully awake, she took a moment to recognize where she was, strapped to a chair inside of a VTOL, the red signal light being the only illumination she could see inside the vehicle. She looked down at the single row of the transport and counted fifteen other individuals, all men, silent, sitting up straight and staring across the bay at the wall between their opposites.

When the doctor met the eyes of the man sitting next to her, her memories returned. In what she assumed was earlier in the day, she had been providing relief work in a refugee camp in Eastern Afghanistan. She had been in a tent with a patient when a commotion started outside. Soon after, a white man who looked to be in his early 40’s pulled the canvas aside and walked in. Her previous work in conflict zones had taught her to put extra attention into memorizing who was in their security force and this man was not one of them, and he definitely wasn’t a doctor either.

He approached the doctor, asked her name, and once she confirmed her identity, ordered her to gather any equipment she would need and follow him. She could tell that for him it didn’t matter what he had interrupted. Be it childbirth, amputation, emergency shrapnel removal, -Luckily, it was just tetanus boosters for young children- he wasn’t going to take no for an answer. Since it was not an emergency, she complied before he had a reason to insist. She checked with her aide to ensure that the job would be done in her absence, returned to her tent, grabbed her medical bag and portable medical equipment, threw on a rain slicker, and followed him.

The camp had no dedicated landing zone for emergency airlifts, so instead the grey VTOL had taken to landing inside a dirt soccer field- to the anger of the children who had been using it -. The first sign of what was to come came when the doctor noticed that the grey transport had no windows in the cargo and personnel compartment, instead the bay had been painted to look as if it did. Then, she noticed the Identification on the flanks of the aircraft looked as if it had been painted on the day before, much like with the rest of the vehicle. Lastly, as the transport bay door lowered and the two embarked, occupying the two seats closest to the cockpit, Angela noticed that every other seat was already occupied, and that for whatever reason they had to pick up the young Swiss doctor, it must have been important.

Angela looked at her father’s old Rolex, it had been eight hours since she had been asked to vacate
her post at the relief center, and had just woken up on the shoulder of the man who had been the catalyst of the events that led up to now.

“Eight hours? Where are we?” she thought to herself. There was no way to tell from inside the tube, so instead she looked down the line of men sitting beside her and studied them. The red lights inside the cabin didn’t illuminate much, and even if it did the armor and webbings they wore didn’t seem to have any unit patches or flags anywhere. Although she couldn’t tell who they were or where they were from, she did know what they were.

Regrettably, her time as the Chief Medical Officer and Combat Medic of Overwatch had made her quite familiar with combat forces and their operations. This was not the first time she was relieved from a project to be dropped into what she could only suspect was a combat zone, nor would it probably be the last. She remembered the very first time she was deployed with Overwatch. She had been sent in with the second unit, and during the flight, found herself gripping her safety harness so tight that her knuckles were white and her nails had dug deep into her palms. She was with the less specialized agents, recruits enlisted from standard military outfits around the world. She remembered her virgin drop so vividly because it set the precedent for how to judge each following one. Vividly, she recalled watching the soldiers load live ammunition into their weapons and securing them midflight, checking to ensure watches were synchronized correctly and ensuring that all of their other gear was secured. There was idle chat and family pictures were being passed around to keep their mind off the coming battle while they waited. At one point, a soldier had unstrapped himself and began to walk down the aisle, admiring the unit that he was a part of and boosting the morale with bravado aimed at enemies that weren’t even there. When he reached young Angela, sitting in the corner and shaking far more than the transport, he began to speak to her, yet was actually addressing everyone else.

He assured her that there was nothing to worry about, but his tone and delivery was far more obnoxious than sincere. He declared that he and his rough and tough squad would protect her, he then continued going off on their equipment, that they had guns that could atomize cities, armor that could stop an entire mag of 5.56 traveling at 750 M/s, tactical cluster bombs, and even things that didn’t make sense like projectile knives, nukes and pointed sticks. It had become quite the disorder. Then the copilot became interested in the commotion, and ordered the soldier to be quiet and return to his seat. And that was the end of it.

To contrast, she could tell that the fellow passengers who accompanied her to their unknown destination were not common enlisted men. These were Tier One Operators, the very best troopers in the world. Angela understood that she was part of a mission as soon as the bay door on the VTOL closed behind her, but for these troopers it had been mission-time as soon as they rose from bed this morning. There was no bravado, no idle chats or jitters, just professionals waiting to do their jobs. They carried all of the equipment that they would need on them and nothing else. All of their weapons and gear stayed in their place throughout the ride, for it had already been checked, double checked, triple checked, and in the event that they forgot to double check it, they quadruple checked it.
That brought her to her original question once more, what was a civilian doctor doing within the ranks of this troop? Who wanted her here, and why?

The man who had requested her presence seemed to have an American accent, so her first guess went to one of the many elite units within the United States military. After all, the United States had held some presence in Afghanistan for almost a century. But her mind also pointed to Interpol, meaning that this was a multinational strike team and their unit leader just happened to be American. But her mind wandered back in time once more, back when she was just a little girl living in Zurich, back to when she first heard of the Nachtjägers.

Just like the Great War of 1940, Switzerland was officially a neutral party in the Omnic’s war against humanity. The Omics didn’t want to attack the mountain country, and Switzerland would only join the fight if it was provoked. Germany was the highest priority target for the Omics in Western Europe, and as such that was where stories of the bloodiest conflicts came from. But with the report of the horrors of war came romantic tales of the Iron Cross Crusader corps, men who volunteered to make the ultimate sacrifice, undergo radical and permeant genetic therapy that would leave them sterile and shorten their lives, but allow them to become mountain sized men, wear a metric ton of armor, carry heavy ion shields and charge straight into the robot horde and smash them to bits with jet propulsion rocket hammers.

Angela had served with one of those Crusaders later in life, and the rumors were true; the only thing larger than the legends of crusaders like Reindhardt Wilhelm were the men they were based on.

But there was more to those stories than just that. While the Crusaders defended the lines at the medieval castle of Eichenwalde, the real heroes of the defense of Germany stood in the shadows behind them. Nachtjägers, Night Hunters, elite members of the German Bundeswehr selected to be inserted into the Black Forrest far behind enemy lines, outmaneuvering Omnic thermal detection, and dealing crippling blows to the mechanical invaders before disappearing without a trace. Although it didn’t make much sense, those were who Angela imagined were flying in the seats next to her.

The unit commander stood up and walked down the line of seats and stood with his back to the transport’s hatch. Seeing that his move had garnered the attention of everyone in the troop compartment, he cleared his throat and said, “We are approaching our landing zone. From where we insert, we will be hiking two clicks West to where we are anticipating to make contact with the targets. Two days ago, two of the top most wanted multinational fugitives were detected out here in the Mountains. Intel suggests they were attempting to make contact with Talon.”

“Talon?” Angela thought, “That one of the groups Overwatch was aiming to bring to Justice.” She thought for a moment more, and if she recalled correctly, Commander Reyes and his Blackwatch troop dismantled them. How were they still around?
The commander continued “Counter Intelligence used an existing comm channel to draw them out of hiding, and it seemed to work. Satellite imagery looks to show two individuals in the area heading towards the coordinates provided. Targets are armed and very dangerous. Our Mission is to intercept and capture if possible, pacify if necessary. Questions?”

“Yeah,” someone in the transport asked, Angela didn’t see who. “What’s the indigenous population looking like? I’d hate to crash some boy scouts singing Kumbaya around the campfire.” Chuckles were heard through the cabin. Angela took the macabre joke as a relief.

“Nearest village is twenty clicks west, so unless we run into a goat herder, noncoms should be null…” Angela found the information fascinating, but still didn’t answer the question as to why she was a part of a manhunt. “Except for one. As you can see, the doctor is in the top of the field in Combat Trauma and will be assisting as necessary. She has experience in combat zones, but above all else, protect the civilian.”

In retrospect, Angela didn’t know why she was even wondering about her purpose on this mission. She’d been summoned for combat drops countless times before.

As if on cue, the VTOL slowed to a halt and hovered in the air. Soon after, the red ambient light turned to green and the door’s safety lock disengaged. The commander, done with his speech, hit a button on the wall, causing the ramp to lower and ropes deploy. Two by two, one soldier on each side of the aisle stood, grabbed their rifles, and rappelled down the rope. Playing her part like the others, Angela followed the soldiers until finally she stood before the opening besides the team leader.

Angela stood there and watched as he assessed the situation and scanned her down. He looked from her uncovered, helmetless head, down her rain slicker, and finally to the raised heel in her shoes and contemplated what to do next. It was at that moment that the doctor realized that her inclusion in the operation must not have actually been a part of this man’s plan, or the extra burden his choice. He had just played the mastermind role like it was second nature, not showing his displeasure to his men. Cracking his professional demeanor ever so slightly, he asked, “Are you.. uh going to need a hand getting down?”

“Danke,” she said, reassuring him with a smile, “but where we’re going, I don’t need ropes.”

The Doctor unzipped her rain slicker and let it fall to the floor in a heap. Angela was positive that the commander had been assured by his superiors that she was more than capable of providing medical assistance throughout the duration of the mission; but she guessed that he had only been able to take a limited glance into the doctor’s background, probably halting shortly after her schooling and inventions.
Standing before the commander was a modern day Valkyrie, she who watched over the watchmen, the neo angel; Agent Mercy of Overwatch.

Never leaving for a potential battlefield without it, the doctor wore the Valkyrie Swift Response Unit, consisting of a black rubber body-glove that covered her toes to her fingertips all the way up around her neck and the bottom of her hairline at her nape. Above the null suit was a layer of high strength impact gel to cushion any blows that the high tensile easy-flex breastplate that curved with her slim figure would receive.

Three layers of armor accented her hips, flexing to open as the exhaust for the suit’s propulsion system. Between the armored pads was a loincloth, reaching down past her carbon fiber nano weave tights, to her knee high metallic greaves.

To complete her ensemble, she pulled her medical bag out from where it had been stashed beside her six foot tall staff. Mercy reached into the bag and pulled out a golden half circle halo and placed the mounting brackets on the sides of her temple, allowing the air cushioned gel layer to adjust and fasten the accessory to her head. A light from within the halo glowed directly into her eyes, hitting a set of clear contacts and reading off the suits diagnostics.

Finally, the doctor flexed her fingers, hitting the controls hidden within the palms of her gloves, and like a Swiss army knife, the armor on her back extended and unfolded, first sticking out and then extending into three sets of metal fingers on her back. A yellow light engulfed the green interior of the VTOL from the machine on her back, and six yellow feathers made of hard-light material extended from the back of her suit.

Nodding her head, she took a step off the ramp and glided gracefully to earth, in a way that could only be described by the uninformed as the Second Coming of Christ.

Contrary to the worry of the Commander and a few of his troops, Mercy did not have any trouble traveling with the troop through the rocky, mountainous forest terrain of Afghanistan. The fact that her boots had heels to them did not affect her, she was actually well versed in taking her suit through uneven terrain. Any blisters, fatigue or general discomforts that she may have experienced were soon erased by the Valkyrie Swift Response Unit’s operator self-monitoring diagnostic. In short, the same Nanobiotics that were used in the unit’s emergency aid application systems had redundancies built in to keep the user energized, spry and in good health.
What did worry her, as well as the rest of the unit, were all the lights and monitors that the self-sufficient healing unit gave off. The night was dark, the eight hour trip into the middle of the badlands had left them to operate in the darkest hours of the night. It was cold, sure, but the new moon provided no illumination, and what little stars were out on the partially cloudy night were smothered by the thick pine tree canopy around them.

Mercy was not a warrior, nor did she ever partake in the more elite or secretive missions of Overwatch or Blackwatch; so when she first designed the suit she thought the extra lights, the emphasis on glowing material to indicate her purpose as a medical officer, and the bright nature of the hard-light used in her wings would help in her profession.

If only she could go back in time and smack her younger self for not installing an OFF switch.

But, she did what she could for the purpose of the mission. She kept her staff slung over her shoulder, not using it, and tried to fold the wings back as best as she could while still ready to deploy them at a moment’s notice. She still stood out in the center of their unit, but it was not as bad as it could have been. The rest of the troops all had their backs to her, leading, observing from the sides, and guarding the rear. Each one was equipped with Night vision goggles which let them burn through the shadows without giving away their position like she would have with wings fully extended.

At first the unit moved at an easy but purposeful pace. They had some hiking to do and there was no need to tire themselves out beforehand. Being in the center of it all, Mercy easily kept eyes on the pace of the unit. Looking at each one of the soldier and using her Heads up Display to view their vital signs.

But as time went on, the pace slowed, footsteps became deliberate and careful. Each soldier had their eyes down on the ground, watching where they were stepping as much as they were watching where they were going. Ultimately, Mercy felt that she was the only one making a sound in the empty Afghan forest.

Taking the unspoken clue, she began to watch where she was stepping, glancing between directly ahead of her and right at her feet. She prefaced every step by putting her toe down with the tiniest amount of weight, trying to see if she was about to step on something that cracked or crunch and stepping lightly if need be.

Then, she was being that one slowing down the unit. It was awkward, but she was trying her best. For too long Mercy focused on the ground, complacent, blind to the world around her. And when she looked up at the perimeter of armed men around her, she realized something. It was getting far too quiet.
She stopped moving, but the soldiers kept on walking; probably they had the same thought as her but were better equipped to deal with the situation. She listened, looking for the sounds of the forest. Owls cooing in the night? Nothing. An animal stumbling near their path changing course to avoid them? Nothing. Bugs buzzing around to latch onto someone for a small meal? Nothing. The steps from the spec ops soldiers around her? Not even they were making a sound at this point.

Something was about to happen. She knew it. She had been in too many combat zones to know this was a bad omen.

Then there was a sound. The units ahead stopped and readied their guns and so did the rest of the troops. It sounded as if a stick had scrapped sandpaper and soon after that, a classic stick and phosphorous match—a relic only found in the third world—was thrown through the air, landing into a pyre and lighting up the night.

Mercy’s sight was drawn to the flame in the dark night and foolishly watched as the bonfire exploded into the air. Petrol soaked wood lit up and ruined her eye’s natural adjustment to the dark. She could only imagine what the rest of the soldiers, wearing night vision goggles to see, would be experiencing at the moment.

The soldiers grabbed their headgear and threw it off, discarding it on the ground and returning to the battle as they began firing into the darkness.

Mercy covered her head and ducked to the ground as rounds from behind her passed by in her direction. The Commander, who she had been standing next to the entire time, stepped in front of her to block return fire from where he expected it to be coming from.

From between his legs, Angela could see the forward most units of their group; they were on the ground, against a tree. They looked dead.

Without a second thought, she slung her staff out from over her shoulder, tapped the inside of her free palm, and opened her wings again. With another tap of the controls, she took a step from her crouched position and dove, wings and propulsion system shooting her forward near the ground and to the side of a downed man.

“Hold on,” she called to the man on the ground. “I’ll be with you in a moment!” Behind cover, she crouched next to the man by the tree, bringing her staff to bear and activating it. Immediately, a trail of yellow healing energies shot from the spinning nanite generator at the staff’s head and entered into
the man’s torso. “Show me where you are injured.”

There was no response.

Was he dead?

Frantically, she grabbed him by the shoulders, and inspected what she could of the outside of the armor for bullet holes, entry wounds, exit wounds, blood, anything.

But there was nothing.

Confused, she looked in her Heads up display at the man, and finally noticed what was wrong.

Nothing. Her medical analysis equipment detected no harm had come of the man; blood pressure was fine, no signs of pain or injury. Just that his heart rate was very low. He was unconscious, and there was nothing her normal nano based remedies could do.

Finally, she noticed that in the gap between the armored plates that he wore, there was a hypodermic needle and syringe. She turned around, and observed for a moment. As the unit kept firing with automatic rifles, there was the ever so faint spit of a pneumatic air rifle. Soon after, another man fell.

She set down her staff, pulled out her medical bag and began rummaging through it. Trying to think fast she searched through her supplies, considering what she had that could nullify poisons within a bloodstream.

She found her auto-injector syringe gun, a pistol grip attached to a reusable needle housing filled with a supply of fluids that refilled immediately after use. It was filled with a blood thinner, designed to clear the bloodstream and open passageways, right before a small dosage of highly aggressive nanites targeted and expelled any toxins it could detect. It was designed for dealing with victims of snake bites, but this would have to do.

“I’ve got you in my sights!” called a hoarse, raspy voice.

Angela turned at the proclamation, and a bullet came whizzing by striking the injector in her hand,
shattering the capsule and sending the housing off into the open.

“DOCTOR. GET BACK HERE!”

Mercy grabbed her discarded staff on instinct, locked onto the commander, and flew to his side. “There’s a sniper,” she called. “Keep your heads down!” Although they probably didn’t know the weapon’s nonlethal payload, they knew the dangers of the shooter. But, as they kept firing at where they thought the shots were coming from, another attacker moved in from the side.

Appearing from behind a tree, a man -the one who tried to kill the doctor but only hit the tool in her hand- rounded a corner at the flank of one of the soldiers. Before the soldier could change his gun’s direction of fire, the attacker brought the butt of his rifle straight up and into the chin of the man, shattering his jaw and upper-cutting him onto his back.

Activating her staff, Mercy aimed and committed its healing energies to the wounded man. Soon after, he was healed, jaw fixed and back in place, but still out cold.

Moving like a blur from the tree where he uppercutted the previous soldier, the attacker rushed to the other side; crouched and rifle shouldered in an instant. He aimed and fired a quick burst into the side of a trooper in front of him, then another burst into the back of a man on the other side of the formation before taking cover and zipping away into the night.

Mercy changed her aim again and targeted the man who had been shot first. Her Display showed that his heart rate had increased due to the huge amount of pain, as well as broken ribs. However there were no lacerations, entry or exit wounds. As they were programmed, the yellow energy’s nanobots entered the man, targeted his broken ribs, mended them back into place, and provided some pain relief to the flaring nerve endings in his side. She looked at the ground, and in the light she could see that he had been hit by heavy duty, low velocity bean bag rounds. Not designed to penetrate the man, but instead hit him with as much force as possible. The armor stopped their entry, but at the same time made him a bigger target for rounds that hit like a thrown brick. Soon after, both men’s heart rates dropped to low levels while they lay unconscious on the ground.

In all of her years following troops into battle, never before had an enemy been so good at outsmarting her team. She was indeed keeping her team in good health, but never before had she not been able to act in the midst of a crisis. When the bullets had started flying she was frightened, she always was and she didn’t blame anyone else for feeling the same way. But now? Now she was terrified, because one of her worst fears had come to life.

Lives were in jeopardy, and there was nothing she couldn’t do about it.
The commander grabbed her by the shoulder, yanking her behind him. “Doctor, get behind me-e-e-eh.” The Commander’s hand, firm and tight at first, loosened as more weight was applied to Mercy’s shoulder. The pupils in his eyes were completely dilated and his head began to spin as he collapsed on her. Mercy pushed against the falling man with all her might, shifting him off of her as he went completely limp and fell to the ground beside her. She looked down at him, and sure enough, a small yellow vial was sticking out of his neck. Now that she had a better look at it, she recognized the contents being injected into the soldier’s neck as the same transfer fluid that her nanobiotics used. A very odd thought occurred to her, but she had no time to dwell on it.

The sounds of gunfire stopped. She swallowed hard, looked up, left, then right, and sure enough she was the last one standing. She looked around again, now trying to find the ones who had pacified fifteen highly trained and armed men, but had no luck. The world was quiet once more, and she was standing there like a lamb that wandered into a wolves den, standing around the corpses of their previous kills.

She took a step back, her wings and the bonfire from earlier lighting up the area. She felt as if her heavy breathing was the only things left in the world at the moment. She thought of running, but then she remembered that the nearest village was about 20 kilometers away. She knew it was over. She dropped her staff and reached her right hand down towards her hip, feeling the hilt of a small white blaster pistol, something she hated, but carried nevertheless.

“Hello there!” called a distinctly female voice. She drew the pistol, right hand on the trigger and left tea-cupping the base of the grip. She saw movement in the tree directly above her, and a blue triangle lit up the insides of a black glass helmet. The sniper. “Now don’t you run away now. We’ll just have to tranq you and drag you back here; and my hip’s starting to act up.”

“I… Vhat?” she said, accent slipping.

Back at ground level, the rough and raspy voice from earlier called out, “Put that down, Mercy. There’s nowhere to run.” The man revealed himself, and Mercy began to tremble.

From behind the tree, a man wearing an armored vest and red visor mask stepped out. He wore a white jacket over his armor, and although she hadn’t seen it, she knew that the numbers Seventy Six were embroidered across his back.

The Individual was known as “Soldier: 76”, infamous outlaw and vigilante. He was indeed on the most wanted lists around the world, and for good reason. This was the man who broke into a military instillation and stole their weapons, intimidated government officials, and had allegedly single handedly made gangs and criminal organizations disappear. He played by his own rules; and there
was nothing she could do to stop him.

“Stay back, I- I’m warning you.”

“Just put the gun down, Doctor. We just want to talk.”

“Well…” She stumbled back and closed her eyes, shouting, “My hours are Eight to Five; Monday through Friday and Noon to Five on Saturday. I can give you my card if you want an appointment.”

“I have a clear shot.” said the sniper.

“No!” called Soldier: 76, “We need her to trust us.”

She held a death grip on the gun, every finger squeezing so hard she felt like it would crack inside of her hand, except the most important finger, which was almost numb to her. Tears began to well up in her eyes, making her shaky aim even worse. “Why can’t you Talon thugs just let the world live in peace! Why do you want to hurt us all?”

“We do want peace, but years of fighting for it made us both realize that you can’t do it through legislation and red tape.” He was close to her now, his heavy pulse rifle being slung over his shoulders as he approached with his hands slightly up, palms open.

“Stay away from me! I’ve used this before… I was an agent of Overwatch!”

“I know.”

Back against a tree, Mercy stood with her gun aimed directly at the vigilante’s chest, where the armor was thickest. “I don’t want to hurt you. But I will!”

“No you won’t,” he said, now within striking distance, “we both know that.”

The gun was touching Soldier:76’s chest. “Please… just leave me alone. I promise I’ll act like I never saw you… I promise.”
The Soldier put his gloved hands on the pistol, gently wrapping his fingers around hers, gently but firmly removing her gloved hands from the grip. She let him as tears rolled down her cheeks. “I know how good you are at keeping secrets.” Gun now in his possession, he took it, flipped a switch, and held it with his fingers off the trigger. With his free hand, he reached up onto his mask and released it and removing it before handing the pistol back to Mercy.

“The safety was on.”

“Jack!?”
Switzerland, Eight days after the explosion at Overwatch Headquarters…

It was a cold April night, and as if God himself had had enough of Overwatch, a light drizzly rain began after dark, acting as a shower to wash away the smoldering remains of the old headquarters building still smoking into the sky.

The rain was dark and dirty, matching the intentions of a lone traveler walking down the sidewalk through the sleeping town. With hands in her pockets and a hoodie up, all but the bangs on the thief’s head were concealed from the more civilized world. She walked from streetlamp to streetlamp, not wanting to be out any longer than necessary.

Once she reached the gate to the town’s cemetery, she produced a key from her pocket, unlocked the padlock and slipped inside, leaving the chain hanging and lock undone. She walked from grave to grave, a small flashlight in tow; only flicking the light on to get a glimpse of the names before turning it off, lest she attract any unwanted attention.

As she walked, she could feel the difference between the frozen and the softer soil, a telltale sign of a recent addition. Imagining where she was, she flicked her flashlight on and saw the marker for her treasure.

“Cmdr. Gabriel Reyes”

Above the engraved name was a star, a crest adorning the top of the tombstone marked the life of the man below had been special; the General among the soldiers. Wrapped around the highest point of the star was a chain of gold.

Once she saw the gleam, the thief grabbed the shine in the dark and retreated, returned to the fence line and traced it back to the gate, leaving it open for the undertaker to think that he had forgotten to lock it for the night.

The woman returned to her home and once inside Angela Ziegler lowered the hood and shook her head, her bangs wet with the polluted water from the night outside.
She walked through her condo –now clean of any traces of Jack Morrison- and discarded her wet clothes in the laundry basket. Within a few minutes she was downstairs in her lab, wearing sweatpants and a plain t-shirt underneath her lab coat.

She stood in front of the plexiglas walls of the quarantine room and observed her guest. He looked like less of a man and more a mass of flies, growing inside of the dark central hive and escaping to the surface, where skin turned to flakes on contact with the air and decayed into a fine dust. He hadn’t said much to her in the time that he was in her care, but she imagined that his condition must have been excruciating.

Maybe he was doing it to frustrate her, or maybe he was doing it because he believed that he was her prisoner; either way he had been doing a masterful job of concealing how he really felt. Having one’s own flesh regenerate and decay within a rate of seconds had been unheard of by the doctor. The circumstances that caused such a unique outcome had to be far too specific and were unknown to her, or luckily anybody else to have the misfortune of replicating them. Which made Gabriel a very unique case, one that had yet to be seen, and one that may not be necessary to study to prevent the condition. The mystery of what was happening within Gabriel would ultimately die with him, unknown, non-understandable and incurable.

Well, not yet at least.

Angela had determined that this was not going to be the end. Whatever inflicted Reyes was a problem, and problems exist to be solved, when someone’s wellbeing came into play, giving up was unacceptable. It didn’t matter if it took an eternity, Angela was going to get to the bottom of it and cure Gabriel. The problem with all major breakthroughs throughout human history has always been their first step, and for Angola Ziegler, it came in the form of breaking the ice with a man who had somehow become grumpier in death than in life.

Gabriel Reyes was sitting on the cot in the quarantine cell, hands cupped together and head bowed, looking down at the floor in a way that looked to be some form of meditation or prayer. His decaying flesh stained the bedding he had laid on, and his white shirt and pants were covered in a soot like dusting of red and black flesh-dust. The man himself seemed to be a half decomposed body that had just been burned at the stake. Hair was gone, any loose skin already peeled away, leaving only muscle, bone and teeth leftover.

She walked away from the glass wall and approached the lab’s sink. She turned on the water, produced her raided relic from the graveyard and began washing it, rinsing off large pieces of debris and then running lathered soap along the golden chain, scrubbing it in with her fingers as best as she could.
“You know,” she said, “Jesse lost his arm during the explosion. I caught him outside smoking one of his cigars when it all happened. A piece of shrapnel went through the wall and got him.” It was true, Angela had been signing paperwork in her office before it had all went down. She happened to glance outside and saw the Blackwatch Cowboy leaning against one of the medical building’s brick walls. Right beside him was the fuel tank to the facility’s incinerator and the hazardous waste disposal unit. It was either out of pure stupidity or a want to liven up his day by antagonizing the doctor that he had snuck out and decided to take a break within easy viewing distance of her office, but the reaction he received was the same regardless.

She opened her window and started shouting at him to put it out, for the sake of his health and the sake of not blowing the building up. But as she shouted, he just kept putting a cupped hand to his ear, acting like he didn’t hear her. Finally flustered, The Swiss doctor marched to the armory, equipped the Valkyrie suit, and jumped out of her window to give him a piece of her mind. She was about halfway to the ground when the wall exploded.

“I tried the best I could to save the limb, but it was no use. It was completely destroyed by the time I got him stabilized.” After the explosion, a full evacuation of the headquarters was ordered. Their medical facilities were out of use at the moment, and it would be a while until supplemental medical assistance came. Although she should have stayed with the wounded man, she knew she would be better off getting the rest of her equipment. Once she did though, she had a feeling. Call it Divine Intervention, but for some reason she decided to go towards the epicenter of the explosion rather than return to where the wounded were being gathered. Soon after, she found Gabriel.

Done with the chain, Angela took the treasure and placed it in a shallow bowl of disinfectant, allowing it to become as sterile as possible. “All things considered, he seems to be taking it well. He is already being measured for an augmented prosthetic. I told him that it was a sign for him to stop, but…” Angela’s mind wandered to the image of Jesse McCree sitting up in a hospital bed, wearing a hospital gown and his favorite Stetson. The amputee as content as could be, a cigar in his remaining hand while watching old Road Runner cartoons on the television. “He insists that he came with a spare.”

Angela took the gold piece out of the solution and walked to the door of the containment unit. Turned the handle a whole 180 degrees to release the seal. She walked in, closed it behind her and resealed before looking at her patient.

He hadn’t moved since she started speaking. Shifting her gaze, she looked at the meal she made for him sitting on a tray. The white bread and lunchmeat sandwich was untouched sans the residue of burnt flesh in a corner. To her confusion, the fruit looked as if it had gone rotten, she made a mental note to be more careful at the store next time and possibly cut the sandwiches into smaller pieces for her patient. To her relief, judging from the leftovers on the spoon, she felt it safe to assume that Gabriel had eaten some of the soup that she made. That was where she hid the sedatives and pain medication.

She walked around the cot until she was directly in front of the Blackwatch Commander. At both of
their feet was a small puddle of water and a spilled cup, like it had fallen between his fingers.

“Gabriel, look at me.”

Like an old steam engine coming to life after decades of neglect, creaking and cracking was heard as Gabriel picked up his head and adjusted his hands in his lap. Staring up at her were dark red bloodshot eyes in hollow, eyelid-less sockets.

“I thought you might want this.” she said, extending her hand out and letting the chain fall, revealing a cross of gold hanging at the bottom. He looked at the token and extended his hand, slowly as to not disturb any unnecessary tender areas. Angela watched as he slowly opened the joints in his fingers, and took note of how it looked as if he had arthritis and began to think of ways to improve his condition. She lowered the cross until it was firmly in his palm and then let the rest of the chain drop, landing in a spiral on his hand. Slowly, his dark digits covered the golden relic and smothered it within his grasp.

For as opposite the two seemed to be, they did share one idiosyncrasy; the Germanic doctor and Hispanic commando were both Catholics.

The doctor took his spilled cup and food tray before exiting the habitat and sealing the door behind her. She set the tray on an open counter in her side of the barrier and looked back up to see him staring at the gift she brought from the living world above.

Commander Reyes was a cruel man, but he was effective, which made him good at his job as the Blackwatch Commander. Quick to scold and reluctant to praise, he made it apparent that Angela was a civilian and the rest of the team were the soldiers. If he didn’t have a use for someone, then he wanted them to stay out of his way. Get in his way or protest his choices, and then it was best keep a wide berth, professional ethics be damned. But when she found him in that crater…

“Gabriel, I just want to ask you a… personal question.” He turned his head to look at her. That was a good start. “It’s not for me per se, but… my parents.” Her Halo’s Head’s up Display reported his identity and vitals even though his body was completely unrecognizable. Even though he was the cruelest man she had ever met, Angela wept at what he must have experienced.

“When I found you, your body was burned completely, I didn’t know if any of your flesh could be rejuvenated, and this was the longest I had a patient flat lined before I could assist them.”

A teary eyed Angela had flapped her wings, sucking the oxygen away from the flames to reach the man, before she had slammed her staff down.

HEROES NEVER DIE!
“It’s just that... well, I want to know… when you died, did you see God?”

Gabriel stared at the doctor as if he was thinking of what to say, but then slowly returned to staring at the puddle on the floor.

Angela sighed, turned around and walked to her computer desktop, taking a seat in her swivel chair and logged in to her lab and research portal.

“Why are you doing this?”

Angela turned her head, still seeing Gabriel in his almost meditative pose. But ever so slightly, he turned to look her way. In a deadpan tone, she replied, “Everyone deserves kindness, Gabriel.” She turned to her computer screen, beginning a new research log. “Even you.”

______________________________________________________________

Afghanistan, years later....

So... Captain Amari and Commander Jack Morrison were still alive it seemed.

The three sat on small fallen logs around the bonfire that had started the ambush on the two vigilante’s hunting party. Mercy was on one side while the two allegedly deceased Overwatch Officers sat on the other. Between them, on a stump, leaned their weapons; Mercy’s Mk III Caduseus Nanobiotic Medical Application staff, Soldier’s heavy pulse rifle, and the Captain’s pneumatic rifle loaded with Biotic munitions. They were placed in a line next to each other much like their owners.

The Rifle had been sold to the doctor under the basis that it was to be used as a long range aid providing tool, but soon after seeing its design beside the Biotic grenades that could cause as much harm as good, Mercy realized that she had been bamboozled. Her father’s research was designed to save humanity, not bring it one step closer to its own extinction. In the end though, her name was listed in the weapon’s patent beside the name of the organization’s chief engineer. Although the damage had been done she assured the commanders that- much to Morrison’s grief, Amari’s annoyance, and Reyes’ amusement- any further application of biotic weaponry would result in the doctor’s immediate resignation. Yet, to Angela it felt as if it had been a lifetime ago, especially that a friend once thought to have met her end was still alive. When she thought back on it, it must have been seven years since Overwatch was disbanded, and two more since the Captain was declared killed in action.
Angela didn’t know what to think of the two sitting next to each other in front of the fire. On one hand, they looked terrible, living off the grid and beyond the law had brought with it a rather rough and nomadic lifestyle, keeping only the things they could carry and staying on the move constantly. Besides shows of general uncleanliness, the two did not look to have aged very well. Jack Morrison’s facial scar from Overwatch Headquarters looked as if it hadn’t healed well, scar tissue still visible in the dark night. Beyond that, the signs of stress that she had noticed near the end of his career had gone full scale, his hairline was receding and completely grey, wrinkles and bags folded his face, and she had also noticed signs of joint pain, boils and the whites of his eyes had begun to turn a tint yellow, clear signs of alcoholism.

The most striking thing about the Captain though, was an eyepatch over her right eye. A wound that she had somehow walked away from when everyone, including Angela, had assumed it fatal and abandoned her. She had to have been over sixty years old at this point. The Eye of Horus, a traditional Egyptian tattoo over her remaining eye, had faded and bent around her wrinkling skin. She walked with a slight hump to her back, possibly due to having to aim with her left eye although being right handed, and had already mentioned to having a bad hip.

But, with all of that being said, the way Angela noticed the two acted, gathering weapons and ammunition from their quarry, talking, and Jack taking a new pair of boots off of one of the soldiers before sitting next to each other on the log, they just seemed happy now. Their second wind in bringing justice to the world had put their lives back in line and given them the one thing that they needed; a purpose. In an oddly romantic way, they were like soulmates, a modern day geriatric version of Rhonnie and Hyde… or whoever those bandits were.

“You know,” Angela mentioned, “I can probably have something done for your eye, if you’d like.”

“Ah, never mind it. It builds character.” The old woman said, “plus, it helps to remind me to be more careful next time.”

“I still can’t believe you’re still alive. Fareeha will be so happy she’ll-”

“No!” Ana interrupted. “If I can do more good as a dead woman than I could in life, then its best to keep it that way.”

Mercy frowned, thinking of how twisted of a secret she now had to keep. “Are you sure, Ana? If one of my parents had survived and was hiding from the world… I mean, I just don’t even know how I would feel about it all.”
“Well,” the old Egyptian scoffed, “If she wants me back so bad, then all she has to do is make me a grandmother,” Ana’s eyes lit up as if she had remembered something. She pointed at the doctor with her thumb up and pointer out, much like the shape of a pistol, “which reminds me. I have a bone to pick with you.”

The doctor gulped, Morrison dropped his current task of tying his new set of boots and prepared to pounce if need be.

“What died and gave you permission to help Fareeha join up with Helix Securities?”

It was at that moment Angela felt that taking her chances running away from a mountain lion in high heeled shoes in some nameless stretch of Afghan wilderness would be better than answering that question. But, somehow, she managed to choke out the words, “her father…?”

“Fool!” she said, “I ruined my marriage trying to make the world a better place for my little Habitti, not put her in the front lines against it.” She continued her speech, but in incoherent and very angry Arabic.

Jack took the opportunity to change the subject, “You seem to be doing well, Doctor. I’m glad to hear you managed to get out okay.”

“You seem to be doing well too, Jack.” she lied. But, then she began thinking and doubts began to creep into her mind. “I heard on the way out here that you two were with Talon. Please, say it isn’t so after all we’ve done to try and stop them!”

Jack reassured her with a smile, “It’s alright. We used an old communiqué from years ago to arrange for this little meeting. Like my Pa always said, if you want to draw out the fox, you need to lay the right bait.”

“Meeting?” Angela thought. “Was all of this done for me?” the question in her mind struck her as too farfetched, too risky, but Jack had seen what she was thinking and confirmed her inquiry.

“We still have some contacts and favors on the inside. Once we knew that you would be in the same area as us, all we had to do was rally a hunting party and convince them to make a detour for you.”

“But… why?” she asked. Even for two old soldiers trying to stay dead, it seemed like the risks were
“Because we need your help, Angela.”

The doctor raised an eyebrow. “My help? What can I do that could help you? You’re not injured, are you?”

“No,” he said, “it’s not that, although we can get to that later. Angela, what we need you to do is look into something and see if you can find a solution for us.”

Mercy’s eyes wandered over towards the Biotic Rifle leaned against the stump, an uneasy feeling beginning to grow in the pit of her stomach, “I don’t know, Jack. What exactly do you think I can do for you?”

From a nearby rucksack, the ex Commander pulled out a tablet with a solar panel charger on its back. He tapped the display screen a few times and then stood, walked over and handed the device to the medic. “It’s a bit graphic,” he warned, “but just hit play when you’re ready.”

Angela hit the play button in the center of the screen and watched. From what she saw it seemed to be a security camera from the inside of a storage warehouse at a dockyard of some sort. The shot was grainy and not in color, but she could make out about nine individuals standing around a fold up table. It looked to be a deal of some sort. Four men stood on one side of the table with some sort of packages, they stood at attention and were motionless, bodyguards perhaps. Opposite to them were five other men who seemed to be the same except for one extra who looked to be the purchasing party.

The purchaser walked up to the table and set something down before asking something to the opposite side. She couldn’t hear what was said, thanks to the poor audio quality of the camera. But soon after the selling party responded, there was a commotion and everyone present jumped into action.

What looked to be a smoke grenade fell from the ceiling, but instead of continuing to emit a large cloud of opaque gas, a humanoid figure formed from the inside of the cloud. Everyone began reaching for different parts of their anatomy, some for their armpits, others for their waistlines, and one even for his ankle, but before anyone could draw a weapon, the intruder had pulled two guns from the insides of his trench coat. Holding them akimbo, he began to spin on the table, turning a gun in the direction of each person and firing, spinning like a madman and delivering hot death in 360 degrees.
After a few seconds he was the last one standing, dust began to settle, and his surroundings adjusted to being covered in bullet holes. He dropped his guns and began to cackle in the center of his killzone, the audio still not picking it up properly, but his body language showing more than would suffice.

A door was kicked in from the far side of the warehouse, another man came in, weapon ready, and fired two shots, striking the attacker clear in his back and shoulder. Some blood and flesh burst from the exit wounds, but what looked to be smoke kept began to seep out of where he had been shot. More angry than harmed, the figure turned, going back into the wraith like form and charging at the new arrival.

Bullet after bullet was fired into him, but each one seemed to simply pass through his ghostly form as if he were just a mass of vapor until he formed again, now walking up towards his attacker. The man backed against the door, repeatedly pulling the trigger even though his gun was empty. Nothing else left, he wound his arm back and threw the handgun at the ghost man before cowering away.

Angela quickly tapped the screen, pausing it before turning away. Jack noticed her displeasure and asked, “Did you finish it?”

“Must I?”

He frowned, but reluctantly nodded his head. “Yeah. The ending is the important part.”

Taking a breath, Angela flipped the tablet over once more and resumed the video.

The thrown gun bounced off of the attacker’s chest as he limped over towards his final prey. With his injured arm covering his chest as his shoulder oozed smoke, he aimed his free arm up, leveled his gun with the man’s head, and pulled the trigger.

Grotesque, but as Jack had promised, something did happen after that. Having killed the final man, the assailant waited for a moment in his haggard stance, but then the smoking stopped, and soon after that he stood up straight as he shrugged off being shot twice and stretched his neck, acting as if the wounds that had once crippled him were a minor inconvenience.

Mercy returned the tablet, finding what she observed fascinating, but still wondering what she was to do about it.
“Talon has rebound back from what we had done to them during our days at Overwatch.” Jack started. “That footage was from two months ago, a narcotics deal in Shanghai between the largest opioid provider in eastern Asia and a bagman working for the Triads. They’re throwing their weight around now, trying to see who’s willing to fight back. We have a mole inside Talon, they confirmed the alias of that man as ‘The Reaper’. You can see how dangerous he is.”

“Yes, I agree, but judging from the tape wouldn’t it be best to let it be if his targets are criminals? I believe there is a saying that goes ‘My enemy’s enemy is a friend’?”

“For the immediate future, it may be. But it would be more appropriate to say ‘My enemy’s enemy will eventually be my enemy’. This is the first video evidence of him, but reports of similar attacks around the world show a similar M.O. Single shooter taking out multiple armed hostiles from a single location, using the same explosive coated shotgun shell. This is a very dangerous man, Angela. We need to take him out.”

A morning briefing, a research project, experimentation, and execution… Doctor Ziegler felt a familiar urge from years earlier, a sense of excitement and mystery. A Commander, a doctor, and a soldier. A familiar sense of belonging to a dedicated team. This must have been how the other two felt.

“What would you like me to do, Commander?” she said.

Jack glanced over to Ana and she returned the look. In a way, the gang was back together, just like old times.

“According to our source, The Reaper ‘harvests the souls’ of the people he kills. It sounds a bit over the top, but you saw the video. He took two bullets and walked away afterwards. What we need you to do, is to look into how he may be using these ‘souls’ and find a way to either nullify his ability to use them, or counter it.”

“Hmm,” she wondered, “I’m quick to agree, but a soul? That leaves the realm of science and enters into spirituality. With the limited knowledge I have of the situation, I am not sure what I could do differently in comparison to what has been done to observe the supernatural since the dawn of human civilization.”

“You know, that’s what I thought when you briefed us on the capabilities of your Valkyrie unit, Doctor,” added Ana, “but then I saw you bring a man back from the dead in the middle of the
battlefield to fight again.”

“Touché.” If they had a few hours to spare, Angela could explain the intricacies of the Valkyrie Swift Response unit’s medical functions to refresh them on it’s revive protocol; but she accepted the old woman’s point.

“It’ll be dangerous,” Jack said, “you won’t have Overwatch there to protect you. Talon is also going after ex- Overwatch members. Apparently they have a tab for a target in Oasis, Code named: Animus. They have to be talking about you, doctor.”

Angela grimaced, Oasis was the world’s new forefront for science and research. Soon after Overwatch was finished, Angela had made her way to the phoenix that had risen from the ashes of Iraq due to her humanitarian work in conflict zones. Although she found her efforts more effective dodging bullets in the badlands than dodging traffic in Oasis, she was proud to be a supporter of the scientific city-state.

“I suggest you practice with that gun and use it well.” Said Ana, “Lord only knows I couldn’t teach you to fight.”

Angela gave a sheepish smile as she scratched the back of her head. Memories of waking up on the Overwatch Gymnasium’s floor in the early morning and having to scramble to get to the Medical wing before her shift began created a vicious cycle of fatigue that only got worse until the Captain and little Fareeha forced her to give up; for the sake of her own health, the organization’s wellbeing and their patience.

“It may be dangerous, and you know that I can’t have your back like I used too, but do you think you can help us, Angela?”

Angela smiled, it really was like old times. It was simple before, he had a problem she found a solution. But this was a new world they were in. Although things were much more complex, she broke it down into simpler terms. For her family, anything. “How will I be able to contact you with my findings?” she asked.

“Don’t worry about that.” Ana said, “we’ll find a way to get to you. Just keep your ears up and your eyes peeled.”

“Thank you, Angela,” Jack said, the words truly coming from deep inside his war torn heart “I knew
I could always count on you.”

“Always, Commander, Always.” She replied.

“That’s good to hear….” he began.

Being back together felt… good. It had been such a long time since Angela was told to turn her back on Overwatch that she had forgotten what this sense of belonging felt like. Her work since then indeed provided a sense of fulfilment to her, just as helping anyone who was in need did. But it never truly quelled the creeping sense of loneliness that she felt whenever her mind wandered before bed, or when she let go of the medical equipment and had to actually think about her life, about being there for others, but not expecting the opposite in return.

“… Because now we’re going to rob you.” He finished.

“I… What?” Angela’s warm and fuzzy feelings went dead cold.

“Yeah… being a vigilante doesn’t necessarily come with a salary and I can’t very much open a bank account being that I’m dead, so we have to take what we can when we can. How much cash do you have on you?”

“You… You… Shysters! Warum würde ich nie …URGHHHH!” she hissed, crossing her arms across her chest and turning her head away.

“Sorry, Angela. But let’s be realistic here, if you were the only one that didn’t have something missing, then it’d just look suspicious.”

“Of course, no wonder you didn’t lead with that before asking for my help.” she replied, looking away as the two began to paw through her medical bag like raccoons scavenging through a garbage can. “Anything else I can do for you?” she sneered.

“Yes,” Ana responded, “your hair band.”

Angela put her hands up in her hair, feeling the high ponytail securing her blonde hair up and out of
the way from whatever the pursuit of caregiving brought her way. Fingers around the elastic string, she asked, “Are you serious?”

Ana put her hands on her hips, “Oh, did you happen to pass by the convenience store between the drop zone and here? No? I didn’t think so.”

With three specific, deliberate, and obvious motions, she pulled the hair tie out, showed it to her old friend, and then flicked it into her lap.

Now with her hair flowing at her shoulders, Angela watched as the tools and supplies that she kept neatly organized in her bag were removed and inspected before being kept, or discarded into the dirt like common trash. Besides a pair of shears, various cutting implements, and a small mirror, most of the items that the two were going to keep were disposable items and drugs, all of which would be very easy to replace in the grand scheme of things.

“Any Jewelry?” Ana asked.

“Nein.” Mercy snapped, looking off into the branches above, trying to use her free hand to cover the watch on her wrist.

“Angela…”

“Oh fine. Take it all,” She snapped, “you’d better get your money’s worth from it, this was my father’s old watch.” She pulled the Rolex off and tossed it at her old commander who caught it in his palm.

The old soldier looked at the old analog watch in his hand and gave a heavy sigh before slipping it into an inner pocket. “Don’t worry. I’ll find a way to get it back to you. I promise.”

Not hearing him, Mercy grabbed the front zipper of her Valkyrie suit and zipped it down to reveal her chest. Morrison watched, but after staring for a second too long, spontaneously found a nearby tree more interesting. Gold glistened against her bosom in the warm firelight before she snatched it in her hand. With a tight fist, she began to lift the treasure to discard to her greedy friends, but midway up, she stopped, calming down and opening up her vicelike grip.

“I’m sorry I lost my temper… but I can’t let you have these,” Jack and Ana looked back and
inspected the golden trinkets. One was a locket, shaped like a rounded heart with engraving on the side and thick enough to look as if something could be stored within. Visually, it looked to have a high karat count and being a custom piece would definitely catch a significant price on the Black Market. The next item on the gold chain was a shining crucifix, small and common, it wasn’t anything too extraordinary except that at the end of the day it was still gold. “These were gifts, from my parents… before I went off to school.”

“It’s alright, dear. You can keep it.” The two didn’t even need to look at each other for approval. Ana reached inside of her cloak and felt the holodisk of her daughter, frozen in a moment of time when she was eight years old.

“Thank you,” she said, letting the gifts fall against her chest before sealing them away behind her zipper once more.

Free of the burden of what her old comrades thought of as valuable, Mercy clasped her hands together and asked, “So now what happens next? Do you two slip into the night while I wait here for my escort to wake and take me back?”

Jack slipped his visor back into position again, causing his voice to return to its gruff and gritty façade from earlier, “Well, you got most of it right. But you missed one thing.”

Perplexed, Angela asked, “Missed what?”

Instead of answering, Jack stood up and walked to his weapon. The doctor watched him and almost missed what Ana had said, only catching, “It’ll only leave a scratch.”

Angela looked back at the old woman and said, “I’m sorry, could you repeat that?”

And that was precisely when the tranquilizer dart pierced Angela’s neck.

Switzerland
There were many signs in her condo as to what had happened, but Angela left it to coincidence rather than evidence until she walked downstairs. About halfway down to her lab she could not deny the fact that there was a foreign odor in the air, a strangely pungent smell like decaying fish and fresh urine. One sniff of the stuff immediately cleared her nose, but she was not repulsed. She had been around enough operating rooms that the scent of ammonia was almost second nature to her, like a perfume.

Without urgency, she approached the keypad and began to tap in the combination, but a pillar of light on the wall convinced her to turn to the door which was already ajar.

She pushed the door open, walked in, and gave a heavy sigh.

All of her hard drives and data pads were in the sink, far below the waterlevel and judging from the smoke rising from the power strip, beyond repair. The console on her workstation must have been stabbed and pried open with some of her medical instruments before being smashed against the wall; its motherboard removed from the broken pieces of its casing.

Luckily, most of her other equipment looked to be untouched, she was grateful for the lack of wanton destruction to the other innocent gear, one less thing she needed to replace. The loss of her computer was tragic, but survivable; she could always buy another one. Likewise, her hard drives would be missed, it was always handy to keep backups of everything on separate devices, but luckily they too could be replaced and retained from the information she kept on a secure cloud server.

What really brought a frown to her face, though, was the pile of culture dishes in the center of the room, the source of the smell. All of the samples that she had gathered from her patient, decayed skin, saliva, stool, plasma, things she had to sneak out of him or go behind his back and take while he rested. All had been stored on ice to observe and analyze for a cure to his condition. It was all gone now, smashed in a pile, crushed, and then washed away in cleaning products, sterilizing the already damaged samples.

She put her hands on her hips and shook her head. Those were the things she couldn’t replace.

She looked up into her quarantine cell, half expecting Gabriel to be sitting there on the bed with his hands in his lap or reclined with his head on his pillow, watching with what little flesh he had left on his face in the shape of a smile, having fun at the doctor’s loss like a disobedient child in the principal’s office, knowing full well what he did.

She closed her eyes and let out a groan, this was like that time she had been ordered to drug test the members of Blackwatch. She watched him snicker as one of her newer recruits accidentally forgot to
seal the samples, and then accidentally tripped on a tile floor, and then accidentally aimed at her workstation.

But, there was no look of schadenfreude on his face, no glee at the mess he had made, no contentment for stretching the good will of the young doctor keeping a dead man alive in her basement. No, there was nothing there. Gabriel was gone.

“Well, it looks like the curious case of Gabriel Reyes has come to a close.” Angela thought to herself. She looked around for a bucket, mop, and empty bottles of detergent to start cleaning the mess, but something caught her eye.

The cell wasn’t completely empty after all.

Angela walked through the open door of the breached sterile-room and approached the bed. Left atop the comforter was Gabriel’s golden cross and chain, sitting like it had been set there for her. Next to it was a note.

“God is dead, Princess.”
It had been almost a year, but Angela would still find herself putting her hand on her neck, feeling the ghost of a mark she had received from a CO2 powered dart pistol. Although she swore that she still had a mark there and would often have a feeling on the offending area, her colleagues in the hospital assured her that it was not the case.

Back home in Oasis, the doctor walked down the halls of the Hygieia sector of the Asclepius Medical Center with an attaché case in one hand and paperwork in the other.

Dr. Ziegler found herself standing before a door to a private room and taking a long breath to calm her nerves. In all of her years working in medicine, never had she come across such an odd and unsettling patient. She had saved men from dying in the midst of a combat zone, healed skeptics who thought her methods were nonsense, and treated nomads who accused her of black magic, but none before had made her feel as uneasy as who was waiting on the other side of that door.

She looked herself over, checked that the records were correct, that she held the correct briefcase, and made sure that she was presentable in her teal blouse and black slacks. Lastly, she felt the inside of her lab coat’s pocket, making sure a very special instrument was inside before knocking on the door, put on a brave smile, and entered the room.

Waiting on the inside was an old woman wearing a long skirt and jean jacket sitting on a chair. Beside her, on the examination table, was a young girl wearing athletic shorts and a t-shirt. She had a very short haircut, allowing the heavy bandages wrapped around her head to cover her eyes comfortably without getting caught up in hair.

“Good Morning,” the Doctor said.

“Good Morning, Dr. Z.” they both said, the woman meeting her eyes, while the girl kept looking straight ahead.

Angela preferred her work, intellect, and proper bedside manner to communicate with her patients, but it would be a lie to say that she was always strictly professional. She knew what she was, a blonde woman with a pretty face. She knew how to persuade and charm her way to obtain what she was aiming for in her charges; be it knowing how to look, what to say and how to say it, or how to
lead them along to get herself out of a sticky situation. Yet, for as awkward as it was to admit it, none of those assets would work on this girl. What sat before Angela was as close to an arbiter of truth that could possibly be. No amount of charm, charisma, or feminine wiles could work on her, because little Katrina Bate was blind.

Blindness was not a simple one-size solution, some individuals diagnosed with blindness could actually see, but only in very poor condition. Others could see with attachments and equipment which matched whatever defect their eyes had and compensated for it to illuminate the world. Others could only see an unfocused world but could make out motion in close proximity. Some have even been able to see luminescent neon paint in incredibly dark conditions. But not Katy, she was tested and diagnosed as completely and utterly blind.

No one knows if it was genetic or not, which it truly could have been. But what they do know is that before little Katy was born, her parents were refugees escaping a conflict zone and the truck they were riding had a fatal run in with an improvised explosive device. The man who was assumed to be her father died immediately; her mother survived, but in a vegetative state. She was braindead by the time relief workers arrived to medivac the casualties to the safety of Oasis, but through quick thinking they managed to keep her body alive until they could safely induce labor and deliver the little girl before allowing the mother go on to her final resting place. It was assumed that the trauma experienced in the womb had caused the girl’s primary visual cortex to be damaged and retinal nerves to be inoperable, leaving her alone in a dark world.

Without any known family and taking the surname of the doctor who had delivered her, poor little Katrina was taken in under the hospitality of a Protestant orphanage. Through Sunday Mass, Angela had heard the story of the blind choir girl and taken pity on her. She had been sitting behind a couple recounting the story of the poor little girl when the gears in the good doctor’s head began turning.

The two had commented on how sorry they felt for the little girl who couldn’t see the beauty of the world around her and how there was nothing anyone could do about it.

Well... Not yet at least.

“Katy, I am glad to see your hair is growing back well. Tell me, are you experiencing any burning sensations of your eyes? Any more of those headaches? Pain or discomfort of any sort?”

The little girl, looking in the direction she had heard the voice answered, “No. The headaches in the back of my head are gone now... but now that I think about it, when I wake up I sometimes feel like my eyes are stinging.”

“That’s a good sign, it seems that everything is starting to activate properly. But on a scale of one to ten, how would you rate the unpleasantness? If it is too much, I can give you something to help with
“Not very. It doesn’t last for very long.”

“Okay then, you know if anything changes to have Sister Sarah call me, correct?”

“Yes!” Katrina answered, the nun in the corner nodded in silence.

Angela turned around and opened her case, removing a small monitor, two syringes, and two vials, one small and clear while the other was larger and glowed with a yellow hue.

“So… Dr. Z, you said that was a good sign? Does that mean that I’ll be able to see soon?”

Angela grimaced. This was where Katrina’s blindness left the doctor exposed. Still smiling - a strategy she knew kept her tone happy and pleasant - Angela replied, “It seems my earlier estimations had been too generous. Everything seems to be going on schedule, but more time and…” Angela thought of a good word to use to camouflage the part that Katy hated the most of her treatment, “more additions will be needed before we can take the bandages off.”

“Oh… do you mean I need to get more shots?”

“Yes…” she sighed, “yes, I am afraid.”

The girl gave a heavy sigh, and almost as an answer to her fears, Dr. Ziegler began to fill the small syringe with the clear liquid.

Nanites were first used in medical science as an answer to cure Leukemia in bone marrow. Angela’s father had been a part of the team designing and testing the procedure to finally find a safer and more effective way to cleanse diseases affecting the bloodstream. At the time, the procedure had been done by injecting the synthetic micro sized machines into deep tissue. From there they would search out the cancerous cells, removing them, and like all foreign bodies within the subject, be ejected through natural means. The same strategy had been adopted later to rid the bloodstream of other unwanted subjects, such as poisons, venom, and other toxins. His time working on the project had inspired her father; while others had taken their success and moved on, he remained, wanting to see the extent that medicine could advance by using machines to boost the functions of the human body.
“Alright dear, I am going to give you your shots now,” Angela said, first preparing an alcohol swab to sterilize a spot high on Katy’s neck.

“I hate the shots,” she pouted.

“Oh, I know sweetie, but it has to be done.” Angela marveled at how a person who couldn’t see had somehow learned to fear needles. The doctor then leaned in close to her patient’s ear and whispered, “I have something for you when we’re done.”

“Really? What is it?”

“Oh!” she interrupted, standing up and speaking normal, “it’s a surprise. I’ll show you as soon as we’re done today.”

She then readied the clear solution, a cocktail of sedatives and numbing agent and injected it into the girl’s neck near her brain stem. Katrina winced as the picker penetrated her neck, but relaxed as the cocktail took effect. Angela then cleaned the injection port and fastened it with a band aid.

Angela had not been the first to try to apply hers and her father’s work to Opticology. During her time with Overwatch, Nanobiotics had been used to cure colorblindness. It was effective, but only a temporary solution. The doctors in that project ran into the same problem that her father had become obsessed with. At their core, Nanites were machines, able to do wonders within the human body, but a stranger nonetheless. The original project used the body’s natural expulsion of the machines to its advantage by ejecting the nanites along with whatever their target was. But in Angela’s case, she wished to make the solution more permanent rather than have her patients come back for supplemental treatment constantly.

Angela kept an eye on her new watch, small and more feminine, but still a fine piece of craftsmanship, and waited until she was certain that the agent was in full effect. She then returned to her case and filled a much larger syringe with glowing yellow liquid from the larger jar.

What her father had intended to do was to build upon the idea of using nanites in the human body to mend its maladies by creating organic machines, nanites that could adjust and become part of the human host rather than be destroy and expelled when their time was done. The method of doing so was to create nanites out of carbon, iron and hydrogen in the shape of proteins to enter the body and repair and replace flesh, to fix broken bones and seal them back together.
Here, Angela considered Katrina’s blindness was a blessing and not a curse, for if anyone else had seen the needle and syringe that was about to be placed inside of them, she would have had to have them secured to the table. “Alright Katrina, you’re doing fine my dear. Keep it up.”

Angela discovered that she could rapidly deploy the Nanobiotics by vaporizing the yellow fluids into a gas and projecting them into her desired target. But still, the liquid form that her father originally developed, was superior, when not being deployed in a firefight.

If the body was a house, then the Nanites were tools and the biotic energies would be the manpower. The problem arose when her father couldn’t specialize the nanites to bond with the specified target. A saw can’t hammer nails, a hammer can’t screw bolts, and a screwdriver can’t mend a hole. Proteins can be folded in a near infinite amount of ways, finding the one that allows the protein to enter a specific cell in a specific organ, cause it to divide, and then mend what was wrong was tantamount to madness. Madness that her father had created an obsession over.

The last drops of the Nanobiotic solution entered into Katy’s neck, and Angela pulled the long needle out of the little girl. Quickly, she raised a small version of a Nanobiotic mister and activated it. Pylons began turning and a yellow fog began to spread around her hand. It entered into the girl’s neck and mended the injection ports together, causing the swelling to subside.

Following in her father’s footsteps, Angela was able to map out the protein combinations that linked within the body. She got the hammers to hammer the nails, the saws to cut the boards, and the screwdrivers to drive the screws. But the system had limitations. As she had learned in Afghanistan the year prior, her nanobiotics were useless in improving someone if they were already in a good condition and she could not revitalize flesh that had been inactive for too long or bring dead flesh back to life. Not with normal Nanobiotics as they were. The revive Protocol had been created to do that, but that was for another time.

Done, Angela returned to her tablet and activated the device, selecting the application that monitored the injection as its payload activated. The key to fixing Katy’s defect, as the doctor had hypothesized, was to fix as much damage as she could and replace what she couldn’t. The Injections into her lower brainstem were aimed to revitalize the optical nerves in her eye and bridge her iris to her brain, completing the circuit with prosthetics that she had inserted during surgery months beforehand.

“So… Dr. Z, I’ve been reading a bit about you,” the girl said, the numbing agent causing the side of her lip to hang open and words to slightly slur.

“Oh really now? What have you learned?” Although not present today, Katrina often carried braille books and audio readers with her. It seemed that listening to the lives of others was her only way to
pretend that she was a normal child.

“I read that you became a doctor when you were a teenager. Is that true?”

“Yes, I was sixteen when finished my schooling.”

“Wow, do you think that if I can see, I can become a doctor, too?”

Angela grimaced, but said, “With enough hard work and dedication, I think you can be whatever you want to be. Sight or not.” The doctor didn’t like lying to the girl, but the truth wasn’t very kind. Angela had not been the first person to attempt, or even achieve a remedy for blindness. Although Katrina was a very drastic case, doctors in the 20th century had been able to allow the blind to see, but with mixed results.

Katy was young, so she had that going for her, but in the past, depending on the severity of the defect, the cure had questionable outcomes for the patients. While their eyesight was not up to par with normal sight, those who had become cured had issues adjusting to life with an extra sense. While researching previous cases, Angela had come across stories of the cured still having to rely of braille to read, becoming afraid of their own shadows, and some not being able to descend staircases due to their depth perception not being in synch.

“Good, because someday I hope I can be like you and help someone out like… this.”

Angela turned to the girl and ran her hand down the back of her head, feeling the scar she had made when she started the procedure to cure Katy. “Oh, you’re such a sweet girl.”

Although Angela doubted that Katy could become a physician, even if the procedure was a success, she had no doubt that the little girl could help the world. If she could see the new world when the bandages came off, Angela knew that Katy would become a prime test subject in the understanding of the human condition in regards to how sight and the lack thereof related to each other. The girl would be an intellectual goldmine not only for nanobiotics, but for psychology and cognitive science as well. Little Katy held the keys to a whole new world of understanding and exploring of the human brain, and Dr. Ziegler hoped that would be enough for the little orphan.

“But… there’s one thing I don’t really understand.”
“What is that, dear?” she asked, still watching the relayed reports of the Nanites in the bloodstream taking to the nerves and brain.

“In some of the articles I found… They keep calling you an angel. I guess I’m missing something being, well, blind and all, but do you know what they mean or why they keep calling you that?”

Angela smiled once more and suppressed a chuckle. “Well, it’s simple Katy. It’s because I am one.”

“No way!”

“Yes.”

“With the wings and everything?”

“When we take the bandages off, I’ll show you my halo.” When designing the H.ealth A.nd L.ifesign O.bserver (or H.A.L.O.) device, she had a few better ideas on how to implement her Heads up Display device with the Valkyrie Suit, but she felt the halo was more aesthetically pleasing.

Katrina was silent for the next few minutes. Everything seemed to be looking fine and the doctor scheduled another checkup to observe the healing process in another two weeks. In the meantime, though, Angela spent the time waiting for the sedatives to wear off by returning her equipment to its case. When finished, she turned and watched her patient as she tapped against the side of her neck and jaw, feeling where the numbing had worn off and tracing the area as it retreated. Although Invisible to the young girl, Angela’s smile had changed. Before it had been fake, just an exercise to make her delivery more potent and pleasant in doing her work. Now, it was a genuine light smile, one of a memory from long ago, of a simpler time that had gone by far too soon.

When enough time had passed Angela approached Katy one more time, but now bringing a wheeled stool close behind her. She sat down, becoming leveled eye to bandaged eye with the little girl as she reached into her lab coat’s pocket.

“What I’ve brought you was something that my mother showed me when I was about your age,” she said. She was six years old and was in elementary school, one of the few times she was with children her own age. She couldn’t remember what the diagnosis was, but she was bedridden ill. She was so sick that her mother had stayed with her for the day, allowing the young Angela to sleep in her parent’s bed in pink princess pajamas while she reviewed paperwork at a desk across the room.
“This,” she said, pulling a long rubbery device out of her pocket, “is called a stethoscope, a long time ago doctors used to use this to listen to the insides of their patients.”

The girl, completely oblivious to the earpieces and resonator being that she was blind, felt the device in her hand as the doctor let her touch it and asked, “How did they do that?”

“Like this,” Angela answered, gently pulling the defunct medical equipment out of the girl’s hands and placing the earbuds into Katy’s ears. Confused, Katy felt around her head at the buds and followed the tubes down to where they conjoined and then traced the tube to the circular metal resonator. Angela unbuttoned two more buttons from the top of her blouse, exposing her collarbone and upper chest. Taking the girl’s hand in her own, she corrected her tiny grip and then led her fingers until the cold metal disc met her warm skin.

“Now, try to find my heartbeat.” she said, holding her breath as to make the organ work harder. Angela thought back on that day, the day that she decided that she wanted to be just like her parents and become a doctor, the thrill of searching for her mother’s heart, and finally hearing its strong beats, roaring like thunder within its cage.

The doctor let the girl’s hand clumsily wander around her bosom, letting her find her own way much like Angela had over two decades ago. Katy kept searching, going back and forth just underneath Angela’s right collarbone, waiting with intent ears in search of a response. After a while though, the girl looked scared, in a startled voice she said, “Doctor, I don’t think you have a heart!”

Giggling, Angela took Katy’s hand in her own once more. Hopefully her mother wouldn’t mind if she gave the blind girl just a little bit of help. Slowly, she traced her way from her right all the way to the left of center side of her chest and watched as Katy jumped at what she heard inside.

Some things were just meant to be together, a synergistic effect that even if one was detested, the combination of the two was so good that it was worth tolerating. Ham and cheese, lamb and tuna fish, honey and lemon, tomato soup and grilled cheese, chicken and waffles, biscuits and gravy, steak and lobster. All of those were fine, but nothing on heaven or earth came as close to the divine as the unholy marriage of chocolate and wine.
Growing up in Zurich, it was inevitable that a young Angela would become addicted to chocolate, it was the best in the world after all. Still having family back in the old country meant that she still had a supply of all kinds of chocolate making its way to her every holiday, wherever she happened to go. She loved chocolate, any kind, any flavor, any style, but what was different now was that as an adult, a new avenue of enjoying the candy of kings; red wine.

High above Oasis, Angela stood out on the balcony of her apartment overlooking the evening skyline. Beside her on the long platform, was a small umbrella covered table with chairs and her beloved hot tub, sharing the setting sun with her. She would be using it at the moment if not for the fact that it was far too warm out, being late summer. So instead she stood in sandals and a bathrobe, trying to balance the relaxing fresh air and hot sun with a wine glass in hand and box of exotic brown sweets on the ledge.

Normally, she would be somewhere else in her apartment, be it at a table, or in her new private lab; or at her desk, working on some new invention or pursuing a new idea while absenty reaching for the box at her side, realizing it was empty far too soon into the night. But this new method was better, slower, and best of all, helped her get rid of the god-awful wine that she kept in her apartment.

What she had in her sights on this night was pure, 100% Swiss chocolate, dark as night and as bitter as biting into a bar of soap. But for as bad as that sounded, the wine was worse.

It sat in a small wine rack on top of her refrigerator, near the balcony and its west facing windows, which meant that by the time she was getting home, the drink had been cooking in the sun for hours. On top of that, it was tart and strong. She thought that maybe the gift had just been a bad apple, a cheap brand, but as she kept trying alternatives, she learned the sad truth, she just didn’t like wine.

But with wine and chocolate there was a battle of margins. She took a piece from the box and put it in her mouth, the bitter taste making her want to pucker. Then she took a sip of the wine from her glass, warm and tart. When the bitter and sour met, a synergistic relationship that she simply couldn’t describe with human words occurred. Like some alchemical potion belonging to the ancient tomes of the occult had just taken place on her tongue.

Angela tried to savor the sensation as much as she could, but the truth was that her mind was in turmoil. She had to enjoy her time while she had it, for tomorrow she would be marching straight into the lion’s den. She thought back in time and pondered the struggles she had endured, and considered which one she would rather relive than face tomorrow.

Perform an open heart surgery on a patient having mastered the procedure on a cadaver the night before? Easy.
Scale a mountain in hardlight wings that were freezing up due to the extreme cold to rescue climate scientists being held captive by terrorists? Piece of Cake.

Assist in the rescue of a downed pilot being held by an aboriginal tribe who wished to burn her at the stake for being a pretender to their sky god? Try harder.

Care for a ninja who had been found dead and later claimed that his soul had been razed by the fires of an ancestral dragon? She called that Tuesday.

Insert with a strike team into a sector of London occupied by homicidal omnis who wanted nothing less than to kill humans in the looming shadow of a power plant that was reaching critical levels? Sign her up.

Take her entrance exams to medical school having not slept the night prior due to jaw pain caused by her new braces? Stück Kuchen.

Convince an overzealous hospital head that she had found the missing key to her late father’s research and that Nanobiotics weren’t the insane obsession of a madman? She scoffed at the challenge.

Find out her late mother’s colleagues were to judge her on her Medical School surgery final and that they promised to only test the sixteen year old on metrics that her mother would approve of (the strictest)? Been there, done that.

But stand in front of twelve other undergrads and give a five minute speech about the objective reasons as to why jam was superior to jelly? It wasn’t until someone finally decided to walk up to her and snap their fingers in the twelve year old’s face that she learnt that she had been frozen in shock in front of the room, sweated wet and motionless for twenty minutes.

She could perform almost any job without a problem. Give her a task to do and it didn’t matter if the world watched, she could just dig in, lower her head and get the job done. Allow her expertise or reputation give her leverage and she would be fine. One on one and she would be fine. But make her go out, exposed, to try and convince others to believe in something that she put forth and she may as well have been thrown to the wolves.

But she had to do it. She had to put on a brave smile and bare her teeth for the critics when she revealed to the world that she had made her father’s legacy a reality. She stood strong with Morrison
at her side when she unveiled the Valkyrie suit and informed the rest of Overwatch that she was to follow them into battle. Tomorrow she would have to do the same.

In the year’s time that Captain Amari and Commander Morrison had reentered her life, the Doctor had not yet found any evidence to the existence of a soul or how to harness them. Every route that she followed came back with the same result. There was little else that she could do in secret to assist those two, so she decided to pull away the curtain on it. Tomorrow there was a conference that she had scheduled for any and all to attend, “The Search for the Soul.” Angela aimed to throw the entire scientific community at the issue, to see if their combined might would uncover the soul, to find a metaphorical hay in a stack of needles… or however that idiom went.

Although she had no actual proof or pretend reason as to why this initiative had come to her, she hoped that the footage and notes that she had bribed and prodded away from a dusty vault of the UN, from her days as a member of Overwatch could convince enough people. Hopefully the records of men and women having what looked to be fatal wounds and had lost their lives come back from the dead, rise in shock as the light returned to them because of the Valkyrie Swift Response suit’s Revive Protocol, would hopefully convince the crowd that she was onto something.

She already knew what her critics would say. They would say that madness ran in the family, that just like her father, after she experienced success she too had begun chasing a bizarre pipe dream. The thought upset her stomach, but she needed to do it, Jack was depending on her.

Angela’s mind shoved the vile remarks of imaginary people away and thought back to her time with Overwatch. Back then, Jack always had her back. It didn’t matter how much she had to convince him or how good the reason, if she needed an expensive piece of equipment that blew away their already stressed budget or if the best justification she had was a simple “Trust me.” He did it. When she stepped out of line, made a mistake or went too far, he was always the first to come to her side and take the bullet for her.

Angela began to smile aimlessly out at the setting sun falling down over the desert she could see between two skyscrapers. Her time with Overwatch was great, which made it all sting so much worse.

She had just begun attending private school in Zurich when she had heard of her parents’ murder. In terms of family, she had little to go to, a distant Aunt lived with her family out in the countryside on a dairy farm, and they did the best they could for her. During holidays she would visit them out on the farm and her Aunt did the best she could to teach her the life skills that her mother couldn’t, but for the most part Angela grew up in private dormitories wherever she attended school. The death of her parents existed in her life as a crutch, there to take her weight if she ever needed it, but she rejected the idea. Taking her loss, her pain, and using it embolden her resolve to work harder each day.
To this day, she kept in contact with her family in Switzerland, how else would she survive without genuine Swiss chocolate after all? But for as grateful as she was, it didn’t feel like family, and then she began her service with Overwatch. Somehow, elite military commandos, a talking gorilla from the moon, a cowboy, a cyborg ninja, a grumpy Swedish dwarf, an overenthusiastic Crusader, and a time traveling lesbian had finally filled the hole that two loving parents had left on that fateful day. But sadly it wasn’t meant to last.

Angela took the empty box and was preparing to take it to the trash when she felt something move inside. She pulled the tray out the rest of the way, and to her luck found one left inside. She popped it into her mouth and closed her eyes, and let her tongue lead her to a world pure bliss, where rivers of dark chocolate stretched across the land and fluffy hills of green mints went on for as far as the eye could see. She savored the sensation for as long as she could and then took a sip of wine, repulsing and sticking her tongue out, giving a “Bleh!” to the spoiled grapes. The drink felt as if it could burn her mouth with its sharp texture and biting taste on top of it all being warm. She was tempted to go and get some ice cubes to cool it off and possibly make it drinkable, but as she had learned, the only thing worse than warm wine was watered-down wine.

What made the loss of Overwatch feel so much worse than the one of her parents was that unlike being taken from her, the organization’s dissolution was her doing. As the Commander had ordered before he went into hiding, Angela stood before the UN and let all of their dirty secrets out, confessed to the things that she had done, and threw everyone to the mercy of the bureaucrats.

Some agreed with her, most didn’t. Winston the Gorilla said she did the right thing. To this day he resides as the sole tenant of the last active Overwatch facility off the coast of Gibraltar, living like an animal in a cage. Little Fareeha and her father returned to Egypt for a while to be with the rest of her mother’s family. Tjorborn the Engineer returned home, but kept in contact with Angela. She commissioned him to make custom equipment and weapons and in return she paid him handsomely. But then there was Lena.

Like her at one point, Lena Oxton had joined Overwatch believing that she could make a difference in the world. Angela had kept an eye on Agent Tracer and her time bending abilities to ensure that she was safe in the field, and her carefree and happy attitude began to rub off on Angela when things began to get rough… but that is what made it so much worse for her. The last time she saw Lena she was crying into Dr. Winston’s big hairy arms outside of the UN’s conference room when Angela had said her piece. The two hadn’t spoken once in the decade that had elapsed, and every time Angela’s guilty conscience became too much and wanted to reach out to her, all she received was silence.

Dr. Zielger swore that after losing it all for the second time that she would not allow herself to open up to be hurt again, but after the freak meeting with her old commanders one year ago, she got a feeling that she couldn’t push away. She needed to do this, not to feel like she belonged again, but to somehow make herself feel that she could repair the damages that she caused.
The conference was a diversion, she didn’t care if the scientific community thought of her as a mad doctor Frankenstein. She needed to help Jack and Ana take down Talon one way or another. Having more scientists assist her in searching could help, but what she really needed was something more. She needed a new avenue to create more experiments, to have more opportunities, to have more subjects; more more more until she found what she was looking for or else…

She stopped herself, “Calm down, Angela,” she said, “Now you are starting to sound like Doctor Frankenstein.”

When she had scheduled for the event, she had hoped that it was going to be big enough, and get enough of the right people interested, being that she lived in a scientific utopia, it didn’t seem like it would be too hard, but interest in her talk had spiked a few weeks after the announcement.

According to a few colleagues, “The Internet” had become fans of hers, and someone had found old Overwatch Propaganda from when the unit was searching for members and recognized who she was from a decade ago. Back then, the photographers had taken particular interest in her along with a few of her other colleagues and sought to use the teenaged blonde with a halo and angel’s wings in various lineups of their organization. What that had translated to now, however, were lies spread around that she was simultaneously a fundamentalist zealot and at the same time a radical atheist wishing to use a talk about the existence of a soul to denounce both sides.

In short, not only were thousands going to be watching her, but the crazies were going to be out there watching to see her fail for reasons independent of the truth.

What a lucky girl she was.

Angela gave a sigh and reached to her breast, grabbing a hold of the locket and the cross around her neck. She ran her thumb over the message inscribed on her pendant and opened it up.

Inside was an old family photo, a genuine miniature photograph made of genuine film, not a holo projection. Thinking back on the few memories she had of her parents always seemed to calm her down.

Walther Ziegler was a tall man with a slim build. The two of them didn’t share many traits. Colleagues had complimented her on her successes at such a young age by saying that she must have taken after her father in that regard, but she doubted it. He laid the groundwork of the legacy that she completed. Besides that, the two had long slender fingers, and the one thing that she knew she had inherited from him was her eyes, a bright shining blue, burning with the fires of ambition that roared within them both.
Luckily, Angela knew that she took more from her mother, Heidi. They shared the same slender shape, but Angela knew that she was the reflection, the imitator to the true queen. Her mother had long blonde hair, sharp, albeit beautiful features; but more importantly a strong, warm heart that could melt through the coldest of men with just the slightest nod and tip of her glasses.

And then there was Angela, a little girl stuck between her parents.

She closed the locket and looked at the words inscribed in gold.

“We’ll always watch over you, Angela”

Those words had power. She had no doubt that they would keep their word even from beyond the grave. But she never knew what the commitment meant until she spoke it. A promise she made to all of those who came into her care. Yet, whenever she thought she understood what that commitment meant, the gravity of the promise would prove otherwise.

She would never forget the first person she made the promise to. He was a young man, body broken, pierced and slashed, found by chance and brought to her for immediate medical attention. He had wounds that simply didn’t make sense, flesh that wouldn’t properly heal -even with her advanced medicines- as well as damage to all major organs. It was almost as if the body itself had lost the will to live.

She didn’t have the equipment or the time to save him, and her options were running out, so she had to turn to morally questionable means to keep him alive. She turned to biomedical firms and struck a deal, the equipment and means to save this one life in exchange for her talents and immunity from the ethical backlash from the ordeal and, of course, her expertise on the matter.

Pride may have led her to the point of no return, but at the end of the journey the only reward she had was shame. Uncooperative flesh was amputated, cybernetics were installed without consent, healthy organs were removed and replaced with more efficient machines in order to make enough room to replace the damaged systems. Even when she experienced a breakthrough, her sponsors demanded progress be reworked and other means be found to satisfy their investment.

But a life is worth saving, no matter the cost. After five days and six nights of near constant operation, the patient’s condition began to improve. At the end of it all, she took solace by the mere fact that he had survived the ordeal. She later learned his name was Genji Shimada, and to this day he still wrote letters to her.
She shifted her gaze to the small golden cross that kept her locket company on the chain, and thought of the parting words of its previous owner. Leaving a job incomplete always bothered her, and that was already on top of her already having a tenuous relationship with Commander Reyes. The Lord had preached to turn the other cheek to things such as his rude behavior and brash treatment, but she supposed that drew her desire to serve him as a Doctor more, and earned his ire as well. But regardless, Gabriel, wherever he was, she hoped that he was safe, that somehow somewhere, he had found a means to comfort the pain. That if he knew that heaven was a farce and God was dead, at least he found a purpose to live out his life. As for her Mutter und Vater, wherever they were, she hoped that they were watching over her tomorrow, because she was going to need it.

The sun had finally set along the desert horizon, and Angela took another sip of her wine, repulsing once more at the taste.

“My goodness this is terrible.” She thought. She looked down at the glass and became disgusted by the amount that she had left in it. Giving up, she slowly tipped the glass over and let it rain from her apartment, dissipating into a red mist before it hit the ground below.

Now, with an empty glass, empty box and a head full of bother, she turned around and walked back into her apartment, knowing that she may as well try to get some rest while she still could.

When asked why the Spear of Lugh was invented, the inventor simply replied, “Why not?”

To call it a rifle would be an understatement. The weapon platform stood two meters high and occupied a square meter of space. It was designed around the 12.7 millimeter round and its magazine, barrel and action was secured safely within the system’s cradle to dampen recoil and maintain accuracy in the event of subsequent shots, and make precise and microscopic adjustment for the targets within its eight kilometer effective range. Likewise part of the weapon’s chassis was a miniature computer hooked up with an antenna to public weather satellites, taking weather information such as humidity, wind, precipitation and pressure into consideration with other ambient motion such as the rotation of the earth and computing it all together to formulate the trajectory and time of travel, and adjusting the weapon in kind to ensure the target was met. Finally, the last part of the system was a mobile high definition camera on a pivot, connected to a computer, which allowed the operator to view the image and crosshairs of the weapon and allow the gun to adjust accordingly.

With high performance Match-grade ammunition, this was the most accurate weapon in the world.
Having only been recorded to miss a bullseye by eight centimeters when its range had been extended to ten kilometers. It’s current target was only three kilometers away, wind was still and weather hot and dry, optimal conditions to shoot. And on the monitor was Doctor Angela Ziegler, sitting out on her balcony, watching the sun.

But this was not to be the end of the Doctor. The weapon, calculation made and ready to fire, was empty, magazine removed and sitting on a table next to three massive bullets in the event that things changed.

A wire led from the visual output from the Spear of Lugh’s onboard computer, to a table on the other side of the room, where it showed the target to a figure reclined in a chair. Boots up on the table and watching the young woman.

He sat there, considering loading up a round into the chamber and hitting the red “FIRE” button, feeling the anticipation of watching in real time as the bullet travel meter dove down to zero, the hype of watching the good doctor’s blood splatter against the spider web cracks of the sliding glass window. But doing so would rob him the satisfaction of her knowing what hit her. In the four months he had been observing her, he had found more than a dozen ways of ending her, but each one didn’t come with the satisfaction that he was looking for.

He knew her schedule. He could easily leave an explosive attached to the muffler of her car and wait in the shadows with a detonator. He could have poisoned the doughnuts from the shop she goes to once every three weeks to buy the lab techs breakfast. He could tie a grenade to the underside of that stupid treadmill that she uses to pretend that she is exercising. He could add some extra compounds to that hot tub that she uses so much, she’d be as good as dead as soon as she touched the water. Or he could just kick the door down and shoot her just like that.

But those weren’t good enough. He wanted to truly make her suffer, for her to see what she cared for be destroyed, and then he would consider ending her life.

Another window opened on the monitor, a secured call coming in for him. The ID read, “Talon Actual”.

He accepted the call and the window in the monitor came to life, showing the silhouette of a man sitting in a chair, completely covered in darkness. The only visible features it showed were a pair of white gloved hands placed on the desk before him. The only other alias existing for Talon Actual was in the UN’s militant database regarding the terror organization known as Talon; The Ace of Spades.
“Good to finally get in touch, Reaper. Its been a while.”

“Has it now?” replied The Reaper.

“You’re a hard man to track. So believe me my interest was piqued when you came out of the shadow first. Tell me, what is it that you would like to share?”

“I have an open opportunity on Priority: Animus. All I am requesting is an exfiltration.”

“Really now? Show me.”

The Reaper leaned forward, hitting a button on his computer and sharing the rifle’s view with The Ace of Spades.

“Well… Pretty.” he commented, “What is it you wish to do?”

The Reaper hit another button, sending multiple pieces of data over to Talon Actual, blueprints, supplies, lists of names, floorplans, everything. “The plan is set, everything is in place and Operative is ready. Mission starts at 10:00 hours. The only thing I need is a unit on standby for extraction.”

One of the gloved hands disappeared from view, rubbing a shadowy chin as The Ace of Spades sifted through the information. “Even with her unexpected change of interest, Priority: Animus is still a valuable asset operating without our coercion. Even for us, this is far too public of an operation. Your request is denied.”

The Ace of Spades hit a button on his computer, ending the comm link. Far away in the dark room, Talon Actual sat back in his chair and began to ponder. How badly did The Reaper want this one woman?

Alone once more, The Reaper clenched his claw-like fist, rage beginning to overcome him, but then quickly subsiding. In the end, it may have been better this way.

He flipped the screen back over to the weapon, just in time to see its target pouring out a glass of wine over the edge. “What a spoiled little Princess,” he thought, but then something caught his eye.
Hitting a few keys, he zoomed in on her breast, inspecting something that shined with the last few gleams of sunlight. He stopped when he had a full view of the chain that hung over her cleavage, between the two sides of her bathrobe. He saw a cross, far too familiar to be a coincidence, and for some reason, it made him laugh.

She turned, walking into her apartment and out of view until the words “TARGET LOST” blinked on the monitor.

Done laughing, the reaper pulled a red vial with a needle on one end out from the inside pocket of his jacket. “Keep it,” he said, injecting the serum into his leg. “God can’t help you once I’m through with you.” he finished, feeling the numbness spread through his body from the tip of the needle, until he fell into slumber.

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Years ago...

Gabriel Reyes sat on a stool alone in the infirmary, head down looking at the blood staining his hands. The blood of a friend, sifting through his fingers, trying to cling on to him with the very last of its being.

He needed to be alone, to heal, to cope with what had happened. But the longer he sat there the worse the conclusion he came to. It was all his fault.

“Ahem.” Someone was in the room, he hadn’t even noticed them. He looked up from his blood soaked hands to see something that made his own blood run cold.

It was the doctor, standing at the door with her arms across her chest wearing combat pants and a standard issue Overwatch tank top, showing the units symbol on the chest. She had noticed his displeasure, and from the way she was looking down at him, she was pleased by it. A deep disgusted frown cut across her face, scaring her youthful appearance, but what truly showed her hate were those eyes. Blood red irises stared daggers into him, cutting through flesh and bone and piercing into his soul, leaving him at her mercy.

“What were you thinking, Gabriel.”
“It wasn’t my fault,” he replied, keeping cool and barely breaking a whisper.

“Yes. It. Is.” She barked. “Because of you, Fareeha is never going to see her mother again.”

“I did the best I could.”

“But that wasn’t good enough. Was it!” she shouted, shaking medical instruments standing up in their jars. She took a long breath through her nose, calming down. “You did the best YOU could do. You’re right. But that’s the problem. You. You don’t belong here. You never did. Whoever gave you this chance chose wrong.”

“Stop it,” he ordered.

“You think you can change the world? Save everyone and make the world a better place to make yourself feel better? It’s time to face reality, Princess. What you do gets people killed. Do me a favor and stay out of my way.”

It took Gabriel all of his strength to not launch himself from his seat and punch the Swiss doctor in the face; to grab her by her blonde hair and gouge those red eyes out with his bare hands. But she was right. He was so weak that he kept sitting in his chair as she lectured him like he was some disobedient dog.

She turned around to leave, but before she did, she turned to look at him one more time and said, “Don’t worry. I’ll go tell Fareeha.”

He stood up, hand outstretched to stop her before she could leave. “No! wait, let me-”

“Are you serious?” she asked, shaking her head. “You’ll only make things worse.”

Commander Reyes sat back down, and curled back up into a slump, rolling his bloody fingers into patchy red fists.
Then he heard something, something odd. Sobbing, but it wasn’t Fareeha. He knew the sounds. It was Angela, but why? That didn’t make sense.

He tried to look up, but then he felt his skin burn. The pain was intense. He looked at his hand and the dried blood staining them began to evaporate away, drying up into crispy flakes and then floating away, exposing the dead man beneath.

He tried to blink, but he had no eyelids. Like a man made of sand, he tried to look up, but felt more of himself chip away with each movement. Once his eyes focused again, he saw Angela once more. This time standing on the opposite side of a glass wall, looking down on him with those greedy red eyes, like the ones of a predator eyeing a defenseless kill.

“Why are you doing this?” he choked, tongue forming and disintegrating as he spoke each syllable.

The doctor smiled, crossing her arms over her lab coat. “Because you’re weak Gabriel, and I can make you strong.”
Neo Prometheus

Chapter Summary

A wise frog once said that it wasn’t easy being green. Winston agreed with that sentiment, but felt that it should have been expanded to “It ain’t easy being a blue, 800 pound gorilla, or green.”

Being born to a sect of genetically enhanced, hyper-intelligent gorillas on the moon didn’t necessarily make things easier, either. But as his mentor and human father had once told him, “Never accept the world as it appears to be, but dare to see it for what it could be.” Sure, not many assumed that a gigantic gorilla could receive a doctorate in astrophysics, or would expect to see the ape being the driving force behind his many inventions, but all things considered, Winston had it pretty good.

Wearing his favorite custom bodysuit, Winston walked to the break room just outside his lab, humming a custom made tune of generic background music as each knuckle and toe led the way to the refrigerator. He reached his arm out and opened the cabinet, fishing out a large bowl and spoon from the compartments within. With his other massive mitt, he grabbed the handle and opened the icebox.

Winston T. Gorilla was a rather solitary beast. Being the sole resident of Overwatch’s final Watchpoint off the coast of Gibraltar, he didn’t have much in the way of the world reminding him of how different he was; but then again, that should have been something he was used to. Even since he was a small primate, he was separated from the other Gorillas when he managed to figure out how doors and latches worked. The scientists at the Horizon Lunar Colony thought that his early escape attempts were carelessness on the part of the wranglers, but it wasn’t long before they caught on. Abandoning the rest of his kind on the Moon when they slaughtered the humans was an almost instinctive choice. He held no solidarity with beasts like that, but that didn’t prepare him for entering human society.

Of course, after some reasonable suspicion as to the fates of the astronauts above, and having to argue his emancipation to become a recognized Homo-sapien, Winston finally felt the impact of his new reality, he was a stranger in a very strange land now. Yet, that wasn’t the case. Although he lived in isolation now, he was never truly alone. It was once said that, “Behind every good man there is a better woman.” Well, while Winston may not have technically been a man, he knew that he
had two incredible women at his side.

Winston opened up the freezer and pulled out a large plastic tub of frozen goodness. Popping the top off and plowing the virgin fields of white, he rolled out three gorilla-sized balls of vanilla ice cream, beautifully freckled with black vanilla beans.

*Lena*… When the two laid eyes on each other, Winston could tell there was something different. He was used to the immediate shock of those who thought themselves at the top of the food chain meeting a walking, talking, behemoth in a Monkey-suit looking to shake their hands without crushing them. But when Winston met the English pilot, he saw a look in her eyes not of amazement and shock, but curiosity and wonder; as if he was a new addition to a classroom being marched out to meet the other students. As the two went on a UN sponsored trip around the world, allowing Winston to see the wonders of the Earth that he had heard so much about, Lena was there to make sure that they dotted every “i”, crossed every “t”, left no stone unturned, and no sweets un-sampled.

Winston took his Vanilla ice cream and opened up the larger compartment, pulling out a parade of condiments to add to his concoction. Adding in two chilled bananas, caramel sauce, and a very healthy dose of peanut butter. Winston stood with his last ingredient in his primate hand, something he had held on to in his fridge for a very special occasion. Held between his finger and thumb was a bar of authentic handmade Swiss chocolate, pure and sweet, but dark and mysterious as night. The antique tin and paper wrapping had an additional bow on top of it, wrapped with a small tag that he always read in his mind with a Dutch accent.

“Remember not to upset your tummy.

- Angela.”

Winston must have become too used to human society, for when he first met Dr. Ziegler, he thought that the seventeen year old was meant to be a new nurse, or lab technician. Luckily, Winston wasn’t the only one used to being judged by his cover. What happened soon after though, was an interest into his well-being that Winston hadn’t experienced since he reached escape velocity from the Moon.

Of course, a medical doctor of her expertise would have more than a healthy interest in checking and maintaining the vitals of his genetic therapy, but what really caught the doctor off guard was the life behind the ape. He hadn’t known about it at the time, but it turned out that he wasn’t the only orphan in the science department after all.

And so, that was the life of Winston, Lena would show him how to live, and Angela would teach him how to survive.
Lena would teach him how to shop, Angela would show him how to budget.

Lena would allow him to have fun, and Angela would confront those who made fun of him with a Blitzkrieg of very angry German.

Lena would have him go all in, Angela would, inevitably, bail him out.

Lena would allow him to indulge himself, Angela would force him to learn to cook.

Lena would help him get fitted for lederhosen to celebrate Oktoberfest, and Angela would hold his fur back as he heaved into the toilet.

Winston smiled at the note on the chocolate bar, carefully pulling the bow apart, sliding the tin wrapped treat out of the paper, unfolding the foil and then crushing the candy in his hand, letting it fall into his sundae as small bits of goodness. Too much sugar had ruined his first Halloween, but luckily Angela had thought to take more than enough pictures for him to view afterwards.

“Winston,” came a calm synthetic voice though the facility loudspeakers, “the coverage of the conference is about to begin.”

“Thanks, Athena,” he called back to the Base AI. Treat in hand, he closed the refrigerator and lumbered his way back to his lab.

Taking a shortcut atop a table, through his tireswing, swinging to a rail, and then swaying through the door—all the while keeping his ice cream level- Winston reached his seat- made from a truck tire -and planted himself in front of his computer. With a few taps on his keyboard, a live broadcast from Oasis began streaming on his desktop.

He leaned back and cracked his toes, settling in for a long relaxing watch.

It had been a while since they had to part ways. Winston knew that he would never truly belong in Human society, so for now he was content with solitude and the occasional visitor. Even if she had placed the nails for the UN to strike into Overwatch’s coffin, Winston still wished for nothing but the best for Dr. Ziegler.
Next to his monitor screen was a VIP invitation to the young Doctor’s talk. Winston was happy that she had thought of him, but he felt that him being there would be much more of a distraction on her mind than it was worth, and he knew first hand of the Swiss doctor’s stage fright.

But, like before when she would fall asleep in the lab late at night, either waiting for the coffee maker or the results from one of their many examination machines, Winston would do the best he could to support her, be it carrying her off to a vacant cot or just letting her know that he would be watching her from somewhere around the world.

A thought occurred to Winston and he activated the workstation’s phone. Knowing Angela, she was probably still at home, freaking out over something that she thought she had forgotten. Maybe a friendly phone call would put her mind at ease for a bit.

He placed the call and waited, watching as news broadcasters in Oasis panned over the crowds and talked about the gathering there today, all trying to waste time until the conference would begin.

Mid spoonful of chocolatey goodness and peanut butter mixed with a tiny piece of icecream, Winston froze, spoon mid transit to his large white teeth.

Setting the bowl down so hard that it chipped, he quickly ended the call and paused the live stream.

“Athena,” he called out, “rewind and zoom into the highlighted grid.”

“What’s wrong, Winston?” the AI asked, doing as instructed.

“I thought I saw…” The pixelated image cleared, focusing in and becoming visible. Winston took his glasses off and cleaned them, looking at the screen without them and then placing them back on to make sure he wasn’t hallucinating. “…Shit!”

“Language, Winston!”

“Not now, Athena!” he hollered, dialing Dr. Ziegler once more while he kept his eyes on the screen. “Get ahold of the authorities in Oasis, tell them they have an eminent terrorist attack at the conference.”
A cheerful voice on the other end of the phone answered, “Hello, Winston. I’m so glad to see you’ve called!”

Dropping everything, Winston took the handset off of speaker and put it to his ear, “Angela, you need to -”

“Oh, sorry to interrupt but it looks like something’s going on, I’ll call you back, -I promise!” she said, an equally hurried tone in her voice before the line went dead.

“NO!” he shouted, left holding his phone to his ear as he stared at his computer screen.

Without another second to waste, Winston stood and barged out of his office, gearing up and talking to his computer counterpart as he equipped his rocketboosters and tesla cannon. “Athena, prep a dropship loaded with medical supplies and make a flightplan to Oasis. We’re leaving, ASAP.”

“Winston, please,” Athena asked, “what’s wrong?”

Priming the electrical circuits in the canon, Winston responded in a cold, direct answer. “Reaper.”

Midway up the Medical center building, Angela sat in her office chair behind her desk, eyes closed in a meditative pose with her hands cupped over her mouth.

Somehow, after trying to find any means to ruin the day before it began, Dr. Ziegler was ready. Wearing a teal shirt and slacks, and what she recalled was her father’s lucky white and blue barbershop stripe pattern tie. All she had to do now was wait.

She knew she would sleep in, so she set the alarm clock early. She knew that she wouldn’t be able to focus and get dressed, so she set her outfit out in advance. She knew that she would panic and skip breakfast if she was running a second behind schedule, so her colleagues had breakfast catered that morning. Everything had been accounted for, and after the sound check was completed, all she had to do now was take a seat as guests arrived and not touch anything.
She had gone over her material many times before. She knew it all by heart, but if she were to review it now she may start doubting herself and begin to make unnecessary changes. So all she needed to do right then was to be a good doctor and keep her hands to herself.

For as much as she wasn’t looking forward to it, she knew it was time to be done with it. In a way, she compared her unrest to how her married colleagues spoke of childbirth, a tremendous and monumental ordeal, but after nine months of caring and having to endure the waiting, the day had arrived and it was time to be done with it. But, for as much as she wanted the day to end, she couldn’t deny that there was a voice in the back of her head hoping that something would happen that would cancel the entire thing.

A buzzing came from the desk before her. Angela woke from concentration and looked at her possessions, namely the cellphone that began to rumble on its own and the name on the screen, “Winston”.

A smile spread across her face, she was hoping that the good doctor would call. Calls and flower deliveries had been coming in all morning for her, from both her own colleagues and her late parents, but what truly made Winston different was that he would –and had actually- taken a bullet for her.

Smiling, Angela took a wireless earpiece and hooked it into her ear, once comfortably in place, she answered the phone and said, “Hello, Winston. I’m so glad to see you’ve called!”

At ground level of the Asclepius Medical Center, crowds had begun gathering around the entrance to the conference hall and gridlocked the entrance to the building. Although the remainder of the facility was still operational for the day, extra security personnel had been stationed in the conjoining segments to dissuade anyone from trying to sneak into the conference by taking another way in.

Adding to all active security personnel being on duty today, an extra detachment of Oasis Peace Officers were on alert to make sure things went smoothly. With that many police and private security there, it looked to be a very easy day to pick up a fat paycheck.

In an offshoot room behind the front desk to the conference center, two security monitors were gathered around a small folding table, one sitting and using a phone while the other leaned on a countertop next to a coffee machine and condiment station. To say they were guards would be an overstatement, on most days they were supplemental custodial staff, walking rounds in their designated patrol paths and keeping an eye out for anything out of place, standing by in the event that Central directed them to assist in a task elsewhere.
“So,” the one standing said, “I don’t really see why having a trans-locator is really necessary on her kit.”

The one sitting, texting intently to persons unknown while listening to his counterpart responded, “Actually, it’s pretty powerful. Sure, you can use it to get some verticality, but timing the rhythm right to take out an enemy returning from spawn and zipping out of sight afterwards is a game changer.”

“I get that, but I mean I don’t really think its necessary. The trans-location.”

“What’s not to get? You throw it, tap a button and appear there.”

The standing monitor shrugged his shoulder, “I mean, I’m just saying, I think Trannies are easy enough to find. I don’t think you need a locator for them.”

The man who was sitting froze mid button tap, almost as if he had spontaneously suffered from an aneurysm. He didn’t need to look up to know his coworker had a stupid grin splattered across his face. Rubbing his eyes, he asked his counterpart, “Why do I hang out with you again?”

“Probably because if I was left alone I’d go insane and go on a rampage.” he answered, but then stopped as his portable radio buzzed to life.

“Attention any units available at the main lobby, looks like we may have a 10-66 at main door.”

The standing guard raised an eyebrow to his counterpart, “Hmmm, suspicious person? Wonder what that could be?” He then activated the receiver on his walkie talkie, “10-4, on the way.”

Although news vans, protesters, and mobile broadcasting and amplifiers had long since taken position outside of the medical center, general admittance had not yet started. This early in the day, VIP and advanced ticketholders were still entering the hall to participate in pre event mixing, and find their seats before the general public were allowed in. Although a few attendees were present, the main people in the hall were members of the catering staff, directing their valued guests to social halls and getting appetizers and concessions ready, while security kept a watch on the crowd.
By the time the guard was halfway to the entrance, he could see what the alarm was referring to.

He stood out like an inkblot against the hot sunny day, he seemed to be wearing a Halloween costume, complete with a heavy, black trenchcoat, armored gloves, thick boots, and a steel metallic mask. At first, the guard first thought that he was a crazy who had jumped the fence and thought nobody would stop him, but another guard who had been keeping watch over the front entrance was standing off to the guest’s side, shrugging his shoulders at his reinforcement while holding the VIP ticket that had been produced.

This was a waste of time, but there was no use being the one to cause a scene and get fired. The guard from the break room stood by the metal detector and let the individual come through, unsurprisingly setting off the alarm.

Taking a breath, he stood before the hooded figure and said, “Sir, do you have any loose change, keys, jewelry, or other metal possessions on your person?”

The guest chuckled, lifting his arm to unpin the inside of his coat, opening it up.

The security monitor half expected him to be a flasher, looking to get 2 seconds of fame. What he didn’t expect was rows upon rows of guns, grenades, and ammunition all pinned up as if the heavy coat was a gunsafe.

Scanning from the ground up with wide eyes full of shock, the monitor mouthed the words, “Jesus Christ”, up until he reached eye level and found himself looking down the barrel of a shotgun.

Like a premonition, Angela heard a distant siren outside her door. Within a few seconds, the sound crescendo-ed down the hall until the speakers near her began blaring the alarm throughout the entire floor.

Winston was trying to say something, but regrettably Angela was ignoring him. Putting her finger on the END command, she interrupted, “Oh, sorry to interrupt but it looks like something’s going on, I’ll call you back. -I promise!” Before hanging up the phone and pocketing it.
Rising from her desk, Dr. Ziegler approached her door and stuck her head out, looking down the hall at all the other doctors who happened to be doing the same thing. Two security personnel began running down the hall, hands on the equipment attached to their belts making sure it didn’t fly free mid stride.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

One turned around, backpedaling as he spoke, “Stay in your office, Doctor.” Before moving on.

A frown across her face, Angela exited her office and began to march down the hall, arriving at the same destination as the two men from earlier, the Security office. She entered and asked, “What’s happening?”

A guard turned, weapon unbuckled in his holster and an armored vest over his uniform. He held out his hand for her to halt and approached, requesting her to return to her office while the situation was handled.

Dr. Ziegler refused, reporting her history as a combat medic for Overwatch, and remained where she stood. Before the man could protest again, he was ordered to stand down. Entering the room, armored as well, was a large black man, the Chief of the medical center’s security. He waved Angela over as he passed, approaching the main security monitor as dispatchers at workstations coordinated units in the area.

His special treatment of the doctor, as well as other privileges such as her office’s proximity to the security hub, was one of the many benefits that resulted from being on the good Doctor’s Christmas card list.

“Sorry Dr.” he said, flipping through camera feeds as he spoke, “Looks like your talk may be canceled.”

“That’s fine,” she replied, “What seems to be the issue?”

“Active shooter, just murdered a few of the sentries in the main entrance to the conference center. We’re working on containing the situation now.”
“Who would do such a thing?” She asked, watching the monitors as the feeds were flipped. As if to answer her question, the main feed changed to the entrance of the conference hall, and Angela’s eyes opened wide at who was still standing in the hall. The Reaper.

Frozen in her spot, she watched as he passed by the front desk, stepping over the bodies of security personnel littering the floor. In the direction of his travel, Angela spied a little child, hiding behind a small potted plant. He was sobbing as he cupped his ears from the gunfire. Where his guardian was, either fled, dead or hiding she didn’t know, but it made Angela’s blood run cold.

“Don’t you do it…” she mentally threatened the killer.

The Reaper heard the timid sobs and slowly turned his head.

“Don’t do it…”

He kept walking, moving towards the next door and the child’s hiding place, causing the boy to back himself further into the wall.

“Don’t…”

Standing adjacent to the child, Reaper raised one of his arms, bringing the shotgun up.

“Don’t…”

Finger still on the trigger, his clawed gloves opened up, flexing all fingers beside his thumb and pointer, dropping something onto the floor.

Everyone in the office was quiet, all intently watching the camera feed. The operator, remembering they were in control, activated the zoom and focused on the floor.

Sitting at The Reaper’s feet was a jumbo-sized sucker.

“That’s… oddly familiar.” Angela thought.
The mercenary nodded at the boy and continued walking. The boy stood and ran to the entrance, slipping under the automated security gate as it closed.

Returning to her senses, Angela turned and left the control room. Running in her heels, she returned to her office, slipping her father’s tie off and leaving it on her desk as she returned to her computer. Activating the monitor from its sleep mode, Angela kicked off her heels and slipped on some spare tennis shoes stashed underneath the desk. The computer was back online by the time she had tied her laces up.

On her desktop, she clicked the application labeled, “VALKYRIE”. A popup box appeared on screen, and she selected the lone input line.

“Primum non nocere”

She looked up. Across her office was a painting, a recreation of Enlightenment era medical students in surgery observing the dissection of a cadaver’s arm. Upon completion of the code, the portrait slid open, revealing a glass display case. The hidden compartment as well as the secret sliding portrait door, both of which were stricken from the blueprints of her office amid construction, were also the result of Angela’s Christmas Card list.

Taking a pair of scissors from her desk, Angela stuffed the shears down the nape of her shirt, and winced as she cut through one hundred dollars’ worth of silk and exposing her upper-back.

Now standing before the case, Angela reviewed the contents. Secured either against the opposite wall or on top of shelves were the various core components of what the casual eye would think was the Valkyrie Swift Response suit. Although close, that was not necessarily correct. She opened the glass case to the vault and began to assemble the gear.

Acting as the prototype successor to the Swift Response Unit, this set contained smaller, silver wings featuring cobalt hardlight feathers. Lacking the armor and support, this skeleton of the precursor Valkyrie suit featured the core functions of the unit, exposed and needing to be secured directly into the user. Displayed in the case was the new Valkyrie Rapid Response suit, the mobile model of the old suit. Not exactly portable or compact, but definitely easier to store and quicker to equip.

Angela slipped the control gloves on and then pulled the wings out. She snaked the core unit support down the slit she cut into her shirt until it followed the length of her spine, while the wing assembly sat comfortably across her shoulders, and an in-house nanobiotic generator rested at her lumbar.
Thankful that she wore slacks rather than a skirt, she took the booster assembly and secured the
device to her waist, clicking it all together and securing the support straps around her thighs and
pelvis.

She closed her eyes, taking a relaxing breath and baring her teeth as she quickly clenched her hands
into fists, activating all of the controls lining her palms. Immediately, the main housing of the
Valkyrie unit activated, driving needles down the length of her back and shoulders. The bridges
drove into her skeleton, grounding the unit to her, marrying the machine to the woman, both
becoming one.

She gave a quick yipe, arching her back at the immense pain of the force entry to her nervous
system, wings likewise spreading to their full span in response to the bond. Finally, the unit’s
Operator Monitor kicked into action, reliving the pain and returning Angela to normalcy on a
cocktail of healing juices.

Returning to the safe, she removed a small container of liquid holding two clear contact lenses. With
practiced precision, she dabbed two fingers onto the lenses and placed them into each of her wide
eyes in mere seconds, only blinking twice to adjust to the new addition.

Next, she pulled out a thick nylon belt that held a white holster. She wrapped it around her hips and
pulled the remaining strap back through, becoming taught and moved the holster to her right side.
Then came the blaster. The white and chrome pistol was cool to the touch, and as she checked the
internals, the engraving atop the barrel caught her eyes.

“Keep your eyes open this time. - Torb”

Good advice to live by. Angela holstered the pistol and pulled out her Caduceus Staff, leaning from
dge to edge in the compartment. A few test fires and the emission of blue sparks and yellow mist
showed that it was functioning properly.

Lastly, the only thing remaining was her halo. She took the silver half circle and placed the base at
the sides of her temple. It was a close fit, but not good enough. She held it in place and an automatic
air cushion activated, pushing a soft spacer out and securing the halo to her head until it was
comfortably firm.

Ready, she tapped the inside of her palms once more, lighting up the diodes lining the inside of the
halo and shooting light into her eyes, creating the Heads Up Display on her glass contacts.
A strange sense of nostalgia began to fill Angela. She was in the midst of a crisis, it wasn’t time to play dress up, but at the same time she felt comfortable, like she was back at home.

For no other reason besides it being pure habit, she set the length of the staff down and flexed her wings, firmly stating with a tint of pride in her voice, “Mercy, on call.”

Placing both hands on the staff and pointing the projection end forward, Mercy returned to the central control room, now better equipped to deal with the situation. She returned her view to the central monitor. Operators and officers were communicating with their units in whispered voices or intently watching the switching camera feed, tracing the Reaper as he walked through the halls.

“How so? Do we know what he’s after?”

When the Security Chief turned to her, his eyes opened up in shock at her new wardrobe, but then hastily returned to the situation. “He’s making his way straight towards the auditorium. Unless he does something crazy, we’ve got him right where we want him.”
“What he wants, I can’t tell you for sure; not yet at least. As for us, we’ve dropped the shutters behind him wherever he goes. We’re leading him to the auditorium where the OPD and Hospital security is going to be waiting.”

Mercy nodded. Hopefully he was right, but she had a sinking feeling about all of it. The Chief felt confident that the intruder was falling into his trap, but she wasn’t so certain about that. The way The Reaper walked, guns akimbo and leaving bodies in his wake, heading towards the conference hall where she would have been speaking mere minutes later? Angela remembered what Jack had told her when they had met back in Afghanistan, that leaked information said that Talon was targeting someone in Oasis. Was it her? It had to be. This was far too deliberate to be a coincidence. Hopefully he was a fool, thinking that she was in the hall, ignorant to his rampage, open and vulnerable for whatever he and his Talon masters intended for her and that the gates closing behind him were his good luck and not hand-holding directions on where they wanted him to go.

The room became quiet once more, everyone in central control watching the central monitor, observing the front entrance to the auditorium, which seemed to be empty. From their view, they could see an officer crouched on the floor, taking cover behind a trashcan.

The Reaper entered the hall, walking with one of his hand held shotguns resting up against his shoulder as he walked. Mercy held her breath. He walked towards the center of the hall, stopping in the center of the intersection where a design on the blue carpet came together to create a compass rose. He stood, slowly turning his head to the left, and then slowly to the right, almost as if he knew he was being stalked.

Suddenly, out of every possibly nook and cranny that a man could fit, policemen appeared, weapons drawn and light bodyarmor vest on their chest. Men, women, humanoid- omnics all shouted orders as they got out and took aim.

Angela continued to have a very bad feeling about this, almost as if she had seen all of it before.

From a complete stand still, The Reaper flashed into action, reaching out with his shotguns in outstretched arms, waiting to reach full mast to pull the triggers.

He didn’t even get close to firing, though. Like corn kernels cooking on a fire, the audio feed filled with pops as pistol caliber rounds flew through the air. The first few rounds hit the armor and stopped in their tracks, but that didn’t stop the following rounds which pierced through his defenses and embedded themselves in his insides.

He was like a man made of sand. Angela watched as he was pierced with holes, and powdery bits of black cloth and smoky punctured flesh flew out, fanning out and falling to the floor as if he was being blown away by the wind.
Angela was upset, not for the violence she was watching, but because she had seen men die and had worked to bring them back from the brink countless times. Not once had she seen flesh acting like that on a battlefield. The traits of the terrorist being executed by Oasis’ finest was far too uncanny for her. Seeing a man who looked to be breaking down at a cellular level was making her mind wander to places she would rather not think of outside the solitary security of her laboratory.

The shooting stopped. The Reaper was down. Officers lowered their weapons and began reporting in on their radios to their respective handlers. The Control room became alive again when the calls from them came. Operators answered their calls and gave the order to stand by. Angela kept watching, what was supposed to be relief from the pacification of the hostile, was lost on her.

Her mind wandered to the first time she had laid eyes on the Reaper. To the security video taken on an old camera somewhere in Hong Kong, where he slaughtered a warehouse full of men in a few short moves. She kept watching his form on the floor, watching as the dust settled, but never truly did. She watched, and slowly noticed how it all began to congregate into thicker, blacker smoke, rising from the center of the carpet.

Mercy’s eyes darted down onto the keypad of the control center console before her. She skinned across its expanse and saw an adjustable headset connected to the console and the bright red button with the word “BROADCAST” written on it. She quickly took the headset and put the microphone up to her mouth, slammed down the button and shouted, “Everyone, get out of there!”

Across the complex, her voice came out from every loudspeaker. The security officers all looked up at the voice coming from above. Behind them, the smoke shot up as an explosive growth, forming into the shape of a man holding guns in his hands.

They all started to turn, but the explosive shot loads began flying before they could react.

Like the center pistil of a deathly blossom, the carpet bloomed with streaks of blood as death was delivered in all 360 degrees. Blood and oil flew as bodies began to litter the floor, all until The Reaper stood alone in the center, arms stretched out with his guns pointed to the walls. After it was done, he dropped them to the floor empty and as dead as his victims were.

Mercy watched, suddenly realizing that she had cupped her hands over her mouth with the shock of what she had seen. She, like everyone else in the control room, watched the macabre scene on baited breath, watching as The Reaper stood as if he had just received a new lease on life. Slowly, he tilted his head up, looking at the corner of the ceiling, off in the direction of a security camera.
He stared, and for a moment, Angela felt as if the screen she was watching wasn’t actually a screen, but a window, allowing him to look into her eyes over what he had just done. He showed no expressions behind his mask, but somehow Angela knew what he was saying, some sort of mental “look” that beamed words straight into her subconscious, “You’re next.”

The Reaper raised his right hand up to his neck, stuck a clawed thumb out and dragged it over his throat, slowly dipping as he filled the expanse of the trachea and pulling the thumb-blade free as it passed over the jugular.

Dr. Ziegler stood at the side of the cot of an elderly man, while she had to admit that she was there to take him away, the angel made sure to explain that the old man’s time had not come yet. She, a nurse, another doctor, and an armed police officer, stood at the ready. All holding onto the rolling bed and standing at the rear vehicle garage of the general care center of the medical facility.

Lining the hall behind them were more armed officers, all closing in as they slowly retreated down the hall towards the garage with them. From the open door they were positioned there was a ramp and a small stretch of open area until a large canvas canopy was opened around heavy cement barriers. Quickly, an ambulance rolled into position, backing into the canopy. An EMT opened the doors from the back and lowered the lift-gate down to the ground.

Standing beside the ambulance was another policeman, looking up for any open windows with a rifle at the ready. Giving a quick look around, he waved at the group around the cot and summoned them over.

Like she had done numerous times today, Mercy and her party grabbed a piece of the railing and ran, pulling the elderly patient along with them down the ramp, across the pavement and into the lift-gate on the ambulance. The EMT raised the gate up, slid the man in, and folded the gate, jumping in the back as the vehicle drove away.

The Ambulance left the police perimeter around the Asclepius Medical Center, the building was now completely evacuated, all patients accounted for.

Angela walked through the menagerie of people who had gathered around the center. There had already been a crowd around the facility due to the festivities today, then add in even more police, reporters and gawkers who wished to see how the events of the night would unfold, it was amazing
that it all hadn’t turned into a zoo.

Dodging around squad cars and armored police vans, Angela approached a white tent near the entrance to the Conference Center, pulling the white plastic tapestry aside. Here was the brains of the Police operation. Specialty Counter-Terrorism units were reviewing copies of the security tapes that Angela had watched earlier. Normal officers were spreading out blueprints of the building and circling areas of interest, marking them to update the map. All the while, four coffee machines were in constant use, being emptied as soon as the caffeinated nectar stopped dripping into the pots.

Minding her wings, and the questionable glances at the pistol on her hip, Angela walked her way to the far side of the tent, where the Commander of the Oasis Police stood beside the Medical Center’s Security chief. The latter of which acting as the building’s liaison for the duration of the incident.

Angela approached the two and said, “All patients have been evacuated.”

“Good,” they both said, not looking away from the man sitting at a computer between the two of them.

Angela leaned over and looked at what had held their attention that much. Sitting between the two Chiefs was a portly middle aged man with a comb over to hide his bald spot. After recognizing him as the contractor who headed their IT department, Angela payed attention to his fingers blazing across the keys, almost making her think that he was faking it all and just putting on a show. On his screen were lines of code, scrolling down as fast as he typed as if he were in competition with someone.

“So… What are they after?”

“The real question,” the hacker corrected, “is ‘what are they doing?’ What I’m trying to do is lock our network down because it looks like they’re trying to get a broadcast ready.”

“That… doesn’t sound too difficult, is it?”

“Well, it’s not as easy as unplugging a modem. The hospital’s dedicated servers can’t necessarily be shut off remotely, but all the extra newstreams broadcasting right now are shooting all sorts of extra holes into the network.”
Mercy piped up, “Broadcast? What are they trying to share? Medical records from the patient servers?”

“That’s what I thought, but I keep checking and the medical data hasn’t been accessed yet. I thought they found a backdoor somehow, but it was the first thing I checked and the firewall hasn’t been breached. They’re trying to broadcast something else.”

“Is there any way to quarantine the hospital’s network?”

“I’m trying, but this has Sombra’s name all over it.”

“Who?”

“Sombra. Infamous hacker; think Harold Houdini but with a keyboard. I can do my best but this is going to be a losing battle.”

“Well, do what you can. If they’re trying to send something out, it’s for the best that we try to keep him isolated for as long as possible.”

The tech gave a chuckle, “Go toe to toe with Sombra? This shit’s going on my Resume.”

Angela took a step back, and for some odd reason checked her watch. An odd coincidence it seemed, but right then was precisely the time she was supposed to come on stage. In some ironic twist of fate, it seemed like someone had been listening to her plea to have the conference cancelled.

“SHIT!” the geek shouted.

“What’s wrong?” all three said in unison.

“I was focusing too much on trying to cut her off of the net access and forgot about the dedicated terminals in the building. Whatever it is, they’re about to broadcast it throughout the TV’s and Jumbotrons in the building.”
“Paging Dr. Ziegler…” echoed an eerie voice from outside the building.

Angela jumped, the hair on her neck stood up and her wings shot out, knocking over a hot pot of coffee and shattering it on the asphalt below. Angela hurriedly turned, exited the tent, and stood next to the onlookers watching a large television placed above the entrance to the Conference Center, intended to be broadcasting her as she spoke throughout the evening. What it showed now was an empty podium, standing next to said podium was The Reaper, standing next to it with what Angela recognized was a military high-frequency detonation device in his hand.

The masked maniac looked at the camera, possibly giving it a minute for his phantom audience to focus on him. He continued, “I don’t want you to miss your time in the spotlight, Princess.” He raised his free hand, holding a slide clicker and pressed it, changing the screen behind him from blank nothingness to a live feed. “It’s time to come and check on your patients, they’re due for a visit.”

Someone shrieked, Angela stood dumbfounded until her brain fully registered the image before her.

It was a view from a security camera of sorts into a dark, dank room. Pipes and machinery surrounded the installation, but in the center of the overhead view was a small girl, bound to a chair with a gag and a blindfold. It was Katy, poor little blind Katrina Bate. Angela stood with her mouth open as she realized the little girl was surrounded by blue chemical drums with detonator devices strapped to their tops.

The feed went black once more, and the crowd outside burst into a riot, news reporters reporting the situation while bystanders began talking to one another.

The Tech exited the tent, stating, “I managed to cut off the dedicated terminals, but I think now at best I got a half hour before Sombra finds a new way in… did I miss something?”

Angela turned around, seeing both the Chief of Police and the Chief of Security standing behind her, having watched the message as well.

The Security Chief raised his hand ever so slightly, “Doctor, Remain. Calm.”
Fareeha Amari, Captain of Helix Securities, Anubis branch, kept three things in the bottom most desk drawer in her office. The first was a bit cliché, a bottle of stout whiskey, contraband, but fitting. Next, a holo disc picture of her family from when they went on vacation when she was but a little girl; one of the few times her mother, father and herself were happy. The last, and most curious, was a small, plastic card with a magnetic strip for an international chain of ice cream shops.

An odd token for a respected officer in Helix’s armed forces to keep. But in reality, it was a good luck charm, one that had come to her from the strangest of places.

Ever since she could remember, Fareeha wanted to be a soldier. Her mother was a hero to the Egyptian people during the Omnic crisis, and she began her life standing at the knees of the larger than life heroes of Overwatch.

Those were good times. Her father was a computer wiz, so he was more often than not in a dark room typing away at a desk, leaving her to find companionship in her mother, Uncle Jack and Uncle Gabe. Mother taught her how to fight, Jack filled her with stories of heroes, but Uncle Gabe was something else. He was the bad guy, dark and brooding, always plotting with her on the mischief they could do around the Swiss base. It was always so much fun, Fareeha couldn’t think of a better time in her life.

But then she came.

She was named as an angel, but she was more of a devil. Angela came, and things changed around the base. The men didn’t joke like they used to. People got all serious and weary when she was around. Mother and father began fighting at night, and mother wanted her to go to school and get smart like her.

She hated it, but luckily Uncle Gabe still had her back through it all. They developed their own code system, and dubbed the young doctor “Snow White”.

But then came the fateful day when Mom left on a mission and never came back. That was the end of her happy times. Both her and her father moved back to Egypt to be with the remainder of her mother’s relatives for a while. Fareeha lost contact with her old family in Overwatch, and didn’t know what happened to them until the news of the explosion at the Swiss headquarters and soon after that, the UN hearing where she watched as Snow White took to the stand and executed what was left of Overwatch.
When she came of age, Fareeha dropped out of school, and in the span of one day, had the eye of Horus tattooed over her left eye, in honor of her late mother, and then joined the Egyptian Military. Mother always wanted her to take a different path, but Fareeha was determined to make her proud in her own way, wherever she was.

But soon after her enrollment, her commitment turned into disappointment. It was no wonder that Captain Ana Amari was the pride of the Egyptian people, a pregnant woman with a rifle was more capable of fighting off mechanical invaders than half of the joke that was the Egyptian Army. That was when Fareeha learned the folly of her ways. The true defenders of the land, the people who were actually committed to make a difference rather than be the place that turn delinquents into tolerable members of society, were Helix Security Services.

But no matter how hard she tried, or how well she performed in their trials, Fareeha could not get in. Helix was supposed to be the successor to Overwatch, rising from the ashes of corruption that plagued the previous organization. Having someone with ties to Overwatch was a bad omen that nobody wanted to deal with.

On Fareeha’s twenty third birthday, she found herself sitting in a dark, back alley parlor, one of the few places in all of the Arab Spring not afraid to do both, serve alcohol, and to a woman. Discharged, unemployed, uneducated and with not a lot of options left, she sat there at the bar, early in the morning, looking at the reflection of her eye-tattoo in her glass trying to enjoy her birthday pity party.

Holding her head up with her hand, she sat and wondered what she was going to do with her life. She pondered the choices she made, the opportunities she wish she had, and the thing that burned the worst; that mother was right.

Fareeha knew that if she were here she would be berating her for her foolishness, telling her that she had made her choices and had to deal with the consequences. They would probably be fighting over it, and would probably not speak to each other for a week afterwards. But at the same time, she still wished she was there. Maybe a firm kick in the ass was what Fareeha needed right then to break her funk.

Fareeha’s phone began to ring. Sighing, she pulled it out of her pocket and answered it. She had anticipated a happy birthday call from her father, and prepared her mental checklist of diversions and excuses that she had thought up to dodge around moving away with him and starting a new civilian life somewhere else. She didn’t want to fight over it today, all she wanted to do was get drunk, forget who she was, and spend a day to sulk.

Fareeha wondered if there was anything else besides rejecting the good intentions of her father that could ruin her mood any further.
“Hello, Fareeha. My name is Angela Ziegler, I don’t know if you remember, but I used to be a colleague of your mother’s.”

No. Way.

Putting on her best faux-cheerful voice, Fareeha answered in a way that made it sound as if they were long lost sisters. “Oh, Angela! Its been too long! How are you? How did you get my number?”

“Oh, I’m doing well. I just happened to be moving myself to Oasis. I was trying to settle in when I just happened to see if I knew anyone in the city and decided to give your father a call.”

“Of course.” Fareeha thought.

“It just so happened that he mentioned it was your birthday, and I was just getting settled in and I had an idea to have a girl’s weekend for us to explore the city. How’s that sound?”

The idea that her father went so low as to reveal that to the Doctor made Fareeha’s skin crawl. “I don’t know if I can make it. I’m all the way in Anubis, Egypt.” She answered.

“Oh, don’t worry. I can get a plane ticket and pick you up at the airport.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. It’s nothing!”

“Well,” Fareeha answered, “that sounds great. I’ll be waiting to hear from you again.”

“Zuper!” Angela said, “I’ll get a digital pass to you right away. Oh, and happy birthday!”

Fareeha watched the phone as the call ended. For as much as she wanted to slam her head into the bar, she realized that this was a good opportunity. Maybe a change of scenery would be good, it
would it be easier to disappear for a few days in a bigger city like Oasis after all. Plus, assuming that her father asked Angela to do something for her, maybe going away for a few days would get him off her case for a while.

Fareeha took her glass and drained it down her throat. As the cheap liquor burned all the way down, she took the number in her most recent calls, saved it as a contact, and typed the words “Snow White” as the ID.

Touching down in Oasis, Fareeha’s expectations of being the good doctor’s secondary priorities were confirmed upon walking out of the plane. Although promised to be met at the airport, the young Amari had predicted that a driver would be waiting for her at the changeover holding a sign with her name on it.

She used her indignation to keep stewing on the matter while in the back of the car. She just imagined what Angela had been thinking when she had the grand idea to put this all together. She was new in the town, so what better way to go introduce herself to the indigenous population than by having an ugly brown girl tag along with her, play badminton, or hold her bags as they went shopping, or just make herself look better by association. As she sat in the air cushioned leather seats of her chauffeur’s new model of luxury Sedan, the self-applied salt to her wounded ego made her already sour mood get more and more tart. But all of her angst was a ruse, a means to distract herself from the inevitable thing that she was having a harder and harder time denying would happen.

Eventually the car pulled up to a street corner, and the driver informed her that they had reached their destination. She exited, and was confused at what she saw. Standing on the sidewalk, she saw what appeared to be an International Chain of Ice cream shops. The clear windows with decals of frozen treats allowed her to look inside to see the long winding display cases and employees hand scooping ice cream inside. On one extreme end, children stood with their faces pressed to the glass, looking in at brightly colored ice cream with rich sweet flavors, some filled with candy and other additives. On the other end their adult chaperones stood picking out more bold, stronger choices, more often than not having them ground up and added to caffeinated beverages.

“Fareeha, over here!”

She followed the voice and immediately recognized her. For as much animosity as she held for Angela, Fareeha was in a slight sense of awe at the way she looked. It was almost as if she hadn’t changed since the last time she had seen the doctor, she still had the thin slender frame that she remembered, which made it seem almost as if she had been frozen in time for the last seven years.
Without saying a word, it had made Fareeha even more self-conscious of her trained body, her toned muscles and tall stature making her feel incredibly awkward on the street corner.

She shook her head, clearing the thoughts from her mind. It wasn’t the time for that.

Angela had been sitting at an open mesh table. The table and its surrounding benches were grounded into the concrete, their open nature allowing any potential spilled treats to fall to the ground so cleanup would be much easier. Looking up from the phone she had been studying intently, Angela beckoned her over and set the device down. Fareeha chuckled, it looked like the Middle Eastern sun had not agreed with the doctor’s pale skin, or delicate blue eyes, for as she sat there, sipping on a coffee-brown drink, she was wearing a pair of brown sunglasses and a bright yellow cloth visor. Fareeha chalked how dumb she looked wearing the partial hat and sunglasses as a point in her own favor.

Fareeha approached and Angela stood. Fareeha anticipated an incoming hug, so she cut off the intention by sticking out her hand to be shaken. A bit surprised, Angela took it, and handed Fareeha a prepaid card for the ice cream shop, apologizing for not meeting her at the airport and confessing to being on a tight schedule.

Fareeha took being sidelined on her supposed vacation as a respite from Snow White’s hospitality. A little grief on her host’s part helped brighten her mood ever so slightly. Fareeha entered the store and ordered herself a small cone of Rocky Road, not because she knew the flavor, but because she felt the name was quite fitting. She paid with the card and took the receipt.

She saw the error of her ways when she returned outside. While she was distracted inside, Angela had produced a binder and laid it out on the table opposite to her. Fareeha’s heart pounded in her chest. Her mind began burning with rage, so much so that she couldn’t organize her mental list of excuses to decline things.

She knew since the first time she answered the phone that this was going to happen, but accepting the inevitable didn’t make it any better. She felt the rage burn within her as she imagined her father, begging on his hands and knees at the feet of Snow White, pleading for the doctor’s help. What laid on the table must have been the result of the conversation her father had with Angela. A Job Application.

She didn’t need the doctor’s help and she didn’t want it either. She would rather spend the rest of her life grinding on a vertical pole in a nurse outfit and stockings before she ever slipped on scrubs to go work under the same roof as Snow White.
Operating on autopilot, she sat down at the bench, ignoring the sticky cold sensation slipping through the cracked cone in her fingers. It took Fareeha all her strength not to plant the ice cream cone right on Dr. Ziegler’s nose. But as she sat down, something caught her eye. There was something about the binder that didn’t make sense. It had a design on the front, but it definitely wasn’t the logo from a hospital, or any medical motif either. It was a view of the globe from the North Pole down. Fareeha recognized it from her childhood, an icon that she related to mother and her work. The Seal of the United Nations.

Angela began to speak as Fareeha sat. She started talking about people from their past, asking if she recognized names, then explaining who they were when Fareeha denied knowing them. Angela’s phone would periodically begin to buzz, but each time she tapped a button on the screen and kept speaking.

Angela kept talking, talking of people, places, and connections, spinning a web for Fareeha to follow along as she began to mentally connect the people around her. Finally, Angela mentioned a name that rang deep in Fareeha’s mind. Petras, the man made famous for ending Overwatch, the same man behind the creation of Helix Securities.

Silencing her phone once more, Angela reached out and opened the binder, revealing a recruitment offer addressed to Fareeha Amari, and signed at the bottom by Director Petras himself.

Under the hot Iraqi sun, Fareeha was frozen in her spot. Now that she thought about it, the way that Angela wore her sunglasses and visor was actually kind of cute.

After a few seconds, Angela’s phone began to ring once more. The doctor stood, apologizing for having to leave again, but mentioned that she was needed back at the hospital. Before she left, she set down a note with her address, a spare set of keys, and a little bit of money if her guest needed it for a cab. She walked away, standing at the street and hailing for a cab.

Fareeha, still trying to comprehend how all the stars had just aligned themselves for her, dropped her melted ice cream and ignored the sticky sensation as she dug into her pockets and pulled out her phone. With hands that moved at the speed of light, she opened her contacts and searched under “Snow”. Finding one result, she selected it and erased the name, typing “Angela” into the blank spot.

Done, she dropped her phone and began to rub her eyes, trying to make sure that this was real life and she had not been dreaming. In her non-sticky hand, she noticed that she had been holding the doctor’s prepaid card the entire time. She quickly stood and looked around, seeing Angela slip into the back seat of a cab and close the door. Running and waving the plastic card in her hand. she approached the window and said, “I… uh… Thank you. You… forgot this.”

Angela rolled down her window, the phone emitting a dial tone as she held it to her ear, “Don’t
mention it,” She said, “oh, and you can keep it. There isn’t much left. Call it a gift.” Seeing an opening in the busy street, the cab sped away, accelerating to keep up with the traffic.

Fareeha stood on the sidewalk and watched as the cab disappeared. Slowly, she pocketed the card and looked at the remaining balance on the receipt.

“$342.83”

Since that fateful day forward, at the moment she received her acceptance letter from Helix Securities, then watching sports games that she gambled money on, or on her first combat operation to her Officer Evaluations, Fareeha had always kept that ice-cream card close for good luck. Whenever things looked grim or she needed fate to change its course, she held onto the plastic talisman worth $342.83, rubbing it with her thumb to stoke up its magic.

Now, watching the news report outlining the terror attack that had just occurred in Oasis, Fareeha’s ice-cream card was in her hands, the plastic tab bent in half, face beginning to fade away due to the excessive rubbing from her thumb.

Across the Middle East, all Helix Securities bases had gone on high alert, each one standing by for subsequent attacks to follow in the wake of what was happening at the hospital. Fareeha and a platoon of soldiers were standing by in the Ready Room of their base, armed with heavy weapons and flight capable power armor while watching the TV.

The terrorist demands had just been picked up by a cameraman. One of the international news firms on location had been summarizing the events from earlier in the day to a news anchor when the broadcast began and attention was diverted to one of the many jumbo screens outside the hospital.

The news anchors began speaking once more, refreshing the audience on the events of the day again, but now updating that it no longer was just a crazed gunman on the lunatic fringe, now a hostage was involved and he had one demand: The presence of the woman of the hour; Angela Ziegler.

Fareeha Amari waited with baited breath, raking her thumb back and forth on card, stressing the crease ever more with each pass.
Thanking the reporter on the ground, the feed returned to the station where the two main anchors talked in circles to each other on how they had little knowledge on what the exact situation was.

Suddenly, they both stopped, one began to speak once more but then the feed cut away, back to the man on the ground in Oasis who had just been speaking seconds prior.

“I’ve just received reports that a woman has just jumped the police perimeter. No word on who it is yet but- wait. It sounds like- Yes, people here are saying that Dr. Ziegler has just broken through the police line and reentered the building!”

After years in the service of Fareeha’s fortune, the ice cream card broke in half.

Jumping in front of the TV, Captain Amari shouted to her troops, “Get a transport ready and load it with as many medical supplies as you can. We’re going to Oasis.”
Atonement

An ancient temple stood high in the Himalayas. Men had come and gone, their beliefs left behind as tokens of gratitude to the ancient structure to archive those who had stayed. Currently, a sect of the Shambali, pacifist omnis who took their freedom from the shackles of their programming and decided to flee up into the mountains and find a means to seek harmony in their new world rather than kill the humans that had made them.

In a small shack within the grounds of the temple, pieced together with boards, large stones, and mud, was the Shambali’s “Game Room” as they called it. There, one could find an ancient videogame console, a cartridge so old that only the words “Super Ma-” were present on its label, a ping pong table, and an even older rabbit-ears television. On this day, one of the Temple’s elder Monks- an Omnic by the name of Zenyatta- and the temple’s only human -well, mostly human that is- were attending to the television.

The Cybernetic Ninja, Genji, stood in the center of the hut, a hand on the chin of his helmet’s visor as he observed the object that he had spent all of the morning attempting to fix. Hanging loosely on his frame was the ugliest abomination of a sweater known to man, sewn together with old ripped flags and any loose fabric and thread that could be found around the temple. Genji tilted his head sideways and watched the static erupting from the television. After making enough of an observation, he said, “Ok sensei, try to raise your left arm up a bit.”

Standing atop the television with the base of the rabbit ears on his head, his left leg on the television, right leg pointed off to the right, right arm straight up, and left arm at his side, the Elder Omnic Monk Zenyatta did as requested and slowly raised his left arm higher. “How is that, my pupil?” he asked.

The condition on the TV hadn’t changed. Genji shook his head, “Still the same I am afraid. You would have thought we would be able to get some signal after I cut down all those trees.”

“How, for when there is will, there is a way.” Zenyatta moved his right leg from his side and slowly pointed it in front of him, checking for any frequency picked up by his movement.
Genji gave a huff and reached into the confines of his sweater’s center pocket, pulling out an invitation that he had received in the mail. “I suppose I should have known that old Chinese radio tower wouldn’t be able to broadcast all the way up here.”

The elder monk replied, “I am sure the doctor understands your predicament.”

He wiped his finger across the VIP ticket to Dr. Ziegler’s conference, specifically covering his name signed in her handwriting. He wasn’t ready to leave the temple, but he knew he should have been there. He was too cowardly to go out in public like… this. The man who he was, the man who his brother killed, and the man who he was trying to become were all very different people, mostly similar in appearance, but Genji wasn’t comfortable with himself yet. Deep down, one of the few things that he truly knew was that he should have been there for her, because she had never given up on him.

Genji slipped the card back into his sweater with a frown, looking up to see Zenyatta now with one hand on the television while his free arm and both legs were pointing in every which direction, using the search for a signal to perform his morning yoga.

“Thank you, Master, but I think that’s enough for today.”

“My condolences, my student.” Zenyatta lifted himself off the television, curled his legs together and joined his hands in prayer, floating off the earth at his student’s side while the two exited the Game-room.

“It’s not your fault, you did your best. It was a fool’s errand to think that we could reach a signal all the way up here on that old TV.”

The door to the hut shut behind them both, Genji’s metallic feet crunching the light snow while Zenyatta floated beside him. “I’ll go see if any of the others need anything while we go to town.” said Genji.

Zenyatta nodded in agreement, but stopped as Genji halted mid stride and looked up into the sky.

“What seems to be the issue, my student?”
“I’m… getting a call?” he said, curiously. “I thought I disabled all of my external network devices? Wait, this is an emergency frequency… satellite. Who in the world would have access to an old Overwatch signal?” Genji slowly put a hand up to his ear, not sure as to what exactly was happening.

Zenyatta waited while the ninja listened to the surprise hail. Suddenly, he shot his hand down and looked around the courtyard. Going from zero to sixty, he dashed across the open ground towards some old flags that sat folded up in a basket. Grabbing one, he tucked it under his arm and began sprinting to the cliff edge. Looking back at Zenyatta, he shouted, “Rally the Shambali. We need to get to Oasis!” and then jumped off the cliff.

He spread his arms out, the wind catching his makeshift wings as he accelerated down the 20,000 foot-drop. He opened up the sheet that he held within his arms and expanded it, grabbing both sides as he cleared the mountain’s shadow and caught the wind that raced between the gap within the mountain range. The powerful gust of air took to the makeshift parachute and shot him away.

Zenyatta, still floating in the spot before his student made his grand exit, popped his head up and exclaimed, “Splendid. It’s been so long since my brothers and sisters had a pilgrimage. I’ll go get my best hat!”

Mercy walked slowly, weapon drawn, but pointed carefully at the ground with a tight double grip on the handle. All of the gates directly between the Conference center entrance and the main lecture hall had been opened; undoubtedly by the host that desired her presence with deathly intent. Although her weapon was at the ready, for some odd reason she felt safe inside the halls. Bullet holes had ripped the wallpaper and explosive buckshot scarred the floor on her journey, but it didn’t frighten her. She knew the terrorist or an accomplice could pop out at any minute from one of the many side rooms on her journey and put a bullet in her, yet she just knew that wasn’t going to happen. Such an abrupt and sudden confrontation seemed… anticlimactic? She didn’t really know how to properly describe it.

Through one last set of security gates, she reach the final barrier to the main hall and the welcoming party that awaited her.

The bodies of the security and police officers, the ones who she had watched attempt to thwart The Reaper, were still discarded throughout the hall. Rigor Mortis had begun to set in, their bodies looked stiff, and their blood had begun to dry and clot on the floor.
If she were her younger, more naïve self, she would have tried to do something for them, to bring them all back to life or attempt to save them, but now was not the time. The Revive protocol was not ready, and she had a date with destiny.

Through her years of combat medicine, she had come to terms with what she was. Sure, she intended to use the halo and wings to complete the angel motif, but the truth was that as a doctor, she was more of a Valkyrie. She surveyed the battlefield and was the sole bearer of who lived and who died. It was her duty, and it was one that she accepted and carried day after day. When the time comes that she must stand before St. Peter’s gate and answer for all that she had done, she will accept the responsibility for every last person that she couldn’t save.

Corpses of human and omnic alike littered the floor. She bowed her head in prayer. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to help them, but the lives of the living took precedent over those of the dead.

She approached the large double door to the conference hall and put her back to the wall beside the door. She looked down at her pistol and closed her eyes to think. She opened them and began to prep her sidearm. First she pulled back the upper loop, exposing the internals and allowing a glowing internal conductor to spin, attempting to generate hardlight bullets for an already full magazine. Next, she wrapped both hands around the grip, cradling it firmly within her fingers with a double-thumb forward grip. Then she pressed a built in button in the handle, lighting up the red laser of the built in Aim-Assist.

“The laser is only zeroed in to 7 meters, Angela,” she said to remind herself of how much she could rely on its assistance.

She turned the laser off, focusing down the length of the barrel and lining up the iron sights with the ground in front of her. Finally, she flicked her thumb on the slide and deactivated the safety. It had taken two weeks in hell training with Helix Securities, cashing in a favor to do so, but she finally was proficient in using her pistol. Her Caduceus Staff was on her back, strap slung from her shoulder to her waist. Although not necessarily something to fight with, it could be useful.

With only one thing left, she reached into her shirt and grabbed ahold of her locket, rubbing her thumb against the engraved words of her parents before attending to the door.

Using her left hand, she pressed down on the door’s handle and slowly began to open it. The air piston made a whisper as gas was released, but otherwise, it was silent.

Before she entered, she realized something.
There was no knot in her stomach, no bother on her mind, no worry of failure, no tremble in her knees or shaking in her hands. She could open this door and be looking down the barrel of his shotgun, and for as much as she cared, it would be easier than speaking to a crowded hall of her peers.

She entered the hall, and the door silently closed behind her.

The hall was built like a double decker theatre, two flights of spectator seats all angled towards the center stage, and in the center of it all was The Reaper. His back was turned, watching the projector screen as he stood beside the podium. On said screen was what looked to be a live feed of little Katy, tied up to her chair.

Angela approached, silently, watching the terrorist as she slowly took each step down the slanting seats towards the stage. The hardlight feathers of her wings illuminated the area behind her with a cool blue light.

Standing in the front row, center stage, the only thing that stood between them was the elevation of the stage, a metal barricade, and a few tables of computers and sound equipment. Angela raised her gun, lining up the front blade with the rear post and eclipsing the sights with the back of his head.

Her index finger wrapped around the trigger, it was in single-action mode, all it would need would be three tiny pounds of pressure and she could end it all right there. It would be so simple, so easy.

“No. Not like this, Angela.” she whispered to herself. In a clear and strong voice, she said one word, “Turn.”

Almost like a machine coming to life, metallic gear, straps, and bandoliers clinked together as The Reaper slowly turned his head and then took a step, moving to face the doctor. A spot light -possibly an automated system to highlight speakers from the audience- lit her up, highlighting the two in the mostly dark room.

“Well, well, well; you’ve finally showed up, Princess.”

Well, he hadn’t shot her immediately, so that seemed to be a good sign. He also didn’t see the fact that she was currently the one holding a gun on him as an issue either. She decided to test her luck again, and test a hunch that had been eating at her for almost a year now. She had a nagging feeling bothering her in the background of her thoughts; sure, there was the possibility of being wrong, but
then again there was only one suspect in her mind, one man in her entire life that called her Princess.

“Enough with the games,” she shouted, “I know who you are…Gabriel Reyes.”

The air was still, the tension was so great that it could stop an oncoming freight train. She looked at him and he stared down at her. Finally, the silence was broken as the two shotguns were dropped to the floor; the microphone picked up the crash and amplified it throughout the hall. He brought his hands up and began to slowly clap. “Well done. You figured it all out on your own.”

“I’ve done what you wanted. Now let the girl go!”

Gabriel Reyes pulled two shotguns from within the confines of his coat, “Not just yet. I’ve been waiting for this moment for far too long.”

“Gabriel, I don’t care what you have in store for me. Kill me if you must, just let Katrina go.”

“Kill you?” From behind his skull mask, The Reaper began to chuckle, “I have something much worse in mind. You don’t have my permission to die just yet.”

The Doctor’s grip tightened around her pistol. Angela’s Halo beeped a warning, an EKG was present on her HUD warning of her increasing heartbeat. Her grip tightened around the pistol as her vision began to grow red. All she could see in the world was the posts of her iron sights, Gabriel, and the illumination of Katy against the projector screen. She felt as if a fire was burning up within her, her blood bubbling and boiling over.

Although she shouldn’t have, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath to calm herself. “Be that as it may, what you want is between you and me. Let her go or else I’ll … I’ll”

“Or! Else! What!” Gabriel Shouted.

As if channeling her ancient German ancestors, rage took control over the doctor. Like an Germanic Nomad springing forth from a bush with the intent of ending a Roman Centurion, Angela let out an ear piercing cry. Using vocal tunes not used since leaving Europe, she shrieked with the pitch of a diving Reichsadler and with the heart of a man in the midst of a bayonet charge. If Lt. Reinhardt were here, he would have been proud.
Mercy let loose a bullet, then quickly let loose another. Both glowing orange projectiles shot through the air and hit both kneecaps, which sang a song that only armored plates could make.

Having both legs kicked out from underneath him, Gabriel fell to his knees and cursed so loud that the microphone caught it and blasted it throughout the room.

Angela yanked up the tab on the top of her pistol, allowing the turbine to charge two more rounds into her magazine before she smashed the automated system back into place. Aiming once more, she shouted, “Next one’s going in between your frontal lobes!”

From supporting himself with three limbs on the ground, Gabriel stood back up onto his knees. “Have it your way,” he snarled, pulling a hand from behind his back. Angela shrieked, for what she found in his hand was a military grade frequency detonation device. His spiked thumb gauntlet flicked the cover aside and pressed down on the shiny red button on the radio emitter.

“No!” Angela ran a few paces forward with her hand out, shouting as the ambient light on the device turned from green to red. In pure horror to what she had caused, she could do nothing else but hastily turn to watch the screen.

There was a moment of silence, and then the metallic bindings on Katy turned green, and the device tying her to a chair fell to the ground. The girl shook her hands free, pulling the gag out of her mouth and then stood up. Her eyes were still bound in gauze from her treatments, and she stumbled around with her hands in front of her, reaching out to touch anything in the world around her. She stumbled forward, directly into one of the blue plastic chemical barrels and unintentionally knocked it over; the lid popping off to reveal its emptiness.

“What?” Dr. Ziegler asked herself.

“Unlike you, not even I would put a kid in danger to get what I want.” Mercy changed her focus back to Reaper standing on the stage, now aiming his shotgun down at her. “Believe it or not, I’m not actually a monster. I just kill people.”

As strange as if felt, Angela gave a sigh of relief. Katy was safe, the thing that she had come here to do was accomplished; and like she had stated, her life was in Gabriel’s bidding. Now it was time to face the consequences of her bravery.
“So…” she began, her pistol still present in her hands, but the willingness to use it long since gone. “What is it that you want, Gabriel.”

“hmph, me?” the Reaper shrugged, “I just want to have a chat; and I have a lot of things to talk about. After all, this is your little press conference.” Angela was confused, but nonetheless on her guard. There was a pause, then Gabriel pulled out a slide clicker and said, “Tell me, Doc. Why was it that you never told anyone about me? Surely you knew what happened at the base.” The slide on the screen flipped, showing a charred corpse on a table.

Angela recognized the picture, she had taken it after all, and after Gabriel had fled all those years ago, she had thought it was destroyed. “I… I wanted to help you.” She answered.

“Sure you did. No one would go looking for a dead man after all. What a great excuse to use all that experimental tech if I was a dead man walking.”

“You were in pain, Gabriel. It was the only way.”

“Sure it was.” The Reaper snarled. He clicked the slide, changing it once more to what looked to be the inside chassis of a robot. “Now, what about that Shimada boy that you fawned over for all those months. You saved him, right?”

Angela’s mind turned to Genji, the troubled ninja, her pen pal, the young man that she saved when all others had given up. She took a minute to consider what Reaper was after, but couldn’t predict what he wanted. “Why?” she finally said. “You already know the answer.”

“Princess. Just answer the damn question.” he growled.

“Yes.”

“So tell me.” The slides switched, showing an overview of Genji and all of the enhancements hidden within his body. A mixture of real photographs of him on the operating table and all of the mechanical gears hidden within. Artificial systems put in place and performing at acceptable levels and then removed to experiment with alternative options. “Was it necessary to pull out his eyes, amputate his legs, or the other 80% of him that’s machine now?”

“H-he… I mean, I did.”
“That’s right. All you needed was a good pat on the head and a few Atta-boys to slice more and more of him away. Oh, and speaking of which, what was it that he said when he finally woke up?”

Angela lowered her weapon, guilt long since suppressed beginning to weigh heavy on her. A memory of being at the young man’s bedside looking over her handiwork came to mind. It was just a normal checkup of a comatose patient, nothing of note until the EKG began to increase in tempo. He had returned to life, and her excitement over the accomplishment, taking a man thought to be dead by all conventional means and finally, after a year of work, seeing a monumental breakthrough in his condition. It wasn’t until he requested a mirror that she realized what she had done.

She took a deep breath and mumbled.

“I’m sorry, doc. I didn’t catch that.”

She raised her gun once more and in a clear voice quoted the first words Genji had spoken to her, “I want to die.”

“That’s right. One more of your patients left off worse than before. But then again, its in your nature.”

“‘In my nature?’” she quoted, “What are you getting at, Gabriel?”

“Don’t act like you don’t know. I’m just trying to paint a picture here, let the audience know who you are and show them the monster you’re hiding. You’re just a scared little girl trying to impress your dead mommy and daddy. I know the one thing you care about, and I know what unravels the entire lie you built around it.”

“Just get on with it, Gabriel!”

“You’re father’s legacy; the thing you worked so hard to scrape back together. There’s more truth to Nanobiotics than you’re sharing. You’re not the Mad Doctor here, making monsters to haunt you later, you are the monster.”

The hairs on Angela’s neck stood up. She felt a cold air wrap around her body and cover it with
“Turns out daddy wasn’t as good of a man as you want people to believe.” He mocked, “Walther Ziegler didn’t map the Human Genome, he made you. The protein-based organic nanites in the staff you have slung across your back were designed from the synthetic nanites that are inside of you right now.” He clicked the slide away, beginning to show a cascade of documents flashing across the screen: Research notes, files, and secret information Angela thought she had secured on her server. Reaper finished by saying, “Feel free to stop me if I get anything wrong.”

Mercy was silent, a frown stretching across her face, but she didn’t dare interrupt. Why would she? It was true. Every conventional way of studying nanobiotics was backwards, attempting to start at the effect and work backwards to the cause. It lead to infinite possibilities and potentially deadly results if incorrect. As Angela discovered, the secret to Walther Ziegler’s success was thinking outside the box, starting from zero and studying where the experiment had gone. In this case, instead of choosing an organ, malady, or function and designing a solution for it, he started with the creation of a healthy individual, from a healthy human zygote, and then studied the growth and maintenance of functioning bodies.

When a cell divides, everything is copied until the single cell splits into two. That is how viruses and mitochondria reproduce within a cellular organism. When studying her father’s lifework, Angela learned that she was grown with an extra entity within the confines of her cellular structure. Nanites, adapting and coexisting as neutral bodies within each part of her, all specialized naturally for each different part of her body. It was the key to Nanobiotics, and Walther Ziegler had crossed a very dangerous line to discover it.

Even before she discovered the true secrets to her heredity, Angela always had a feeling that there was something different about her from the other children in her younger years. The unfortunate passing of her parents and rigorous schoolwork was more than enough to keep her mind focused, but every now and then when she had the opportunity to stop or ponder the world around her, she would notice things that seemed off. One of the more stranger incidents was when the seasons would change and diseases would be going around, more often than not she would luckily be able to avoid the flu or only suffer for a few days. Or once when she burned herself on an oven, or tripped and bruised herself, the pain would last for only an hour and the mark would be gone by the next morning. There was no way for the little orphan girl to know what was hidden at the molecular level within her, but she knew that it was definitely something.

“Your ambitions, your goal, your ‘love of humanity’ its all a lie. Me, that girl, your patients. We’re all just means to an end to you. You’re just a vessel for dear old dad to prove that he wasn’t crazy. Everything you do is just to stick it to the world that daddy was right all along.”

“What do you want?” She said, a low growl amongst the empty chairs of the auditorium.
Out of all the malcontent and sarcasm that The Reaper had spewed forth in their conversation, he now spoke with pure and honest candor, content with knowing that the doctor and he were on level terms with the severity of his threats. “I told you once that ‘God was dead’, and you went ahead and took his spot. Now you have to pay the price for your power. I want to hurt you the best way I know how, I could torture you or kill you, but I know you’ll just keep coming back. I want to ruin the one thing that you value most in this world. I want you to understand the consequences of playing god, using people, and the mistake you made by bringing me back to life. The conversation we’re having is being recorded and prepped for a broadcast as we speak. I’m going to ruin everything that you stand for, and let the world feel like junkies on a fix every time someone even mentions what your family’s done. You have no friends, no hobbies, no life, all you know to do is sweep your old man’s dirty secrets under the rug. Its time for the truth to come out.”

Angela lowered her gun. A tear rolled down her cheek. The words Gabriel spoke were mean, evil, but undoubtedly true. But now wasn’t the time to morally grandstand over unethical behavior, and she wasn’t prepared to be lectured to by a madman, either. With a new conviction she raised her voice and spoke, “You’re right Gabriel. I have used people and made too many mistakes in the past. So go ahead and blame me all you want, you can even hate me if you have to.” Although she was angry, she couldn’t help but feel her voice tremble as she said her remaining words,” But you’re wrong. Saving a life is never a mistake. ”

The Reaper threw the slide clicker across the stage. He used the edges of his armor to pull off the spiked gauntlet and shouted. “You… have the GALL to say that to my face!” Gabriel’s charred and scorched black hand peeled and dissipated like sand in the wind as it was exposed to even the barest of breezes.

At that moment, Angela felt a vibration in the pocket of her slacks. Her… phone? Someone was trying to call her now of all times? She ignored it and kept her eyes locked with the previous Blackwatch Commander as the call ended, but then went to Voicemail.

Her earpiece, still in since she had been called from Winston in her office this morning, reported the new message and a man’s voice began speaking to her.

“Dr. Ziegler, this is Captain Khali of the Oasis Counterterrorism Team. I see you have an earpiece on you. If you can hear me, find cover and hide, we will be breaching the door shortly.”

End Message.

An idea began forming in her head, a dumb one, but Gabriel Reyes in his insane homicidal state was too dangerous. Those men didn’t know what they were getting into. She had served with him for
long enough to know how this would end.

Angela stuffed her pistol back into its holster and then stretched her hands out to her side, “Enough of this. If you really think I need to be stopped, then fine;” She tapped the insides of her palms, closing her hardlight wings, allowing the darkness to approach, “Take your best shot, Gabriel,” She spat.

Glove back on his hand, Reaper adjusted his grip on the shotgun. “You know…” he mused, “I was planning on letting you go to see how long it took for you to kill yourself out of shame. But since you’re so eager to die, I might just oblige you. After all, why should I give you the opportunity to weasel your way out of this situation?” As he spoke, Angela focused on him, the HUD in her contacts locked onto The Reaper. The Guardian Angel system toggled from “Standby” to “Ready”.

“Any last words?” Gabriel Taunted, aiming the gun down at the doctor.

A backstage door was kicked down. Men began to come in, shouting and The Reaper turned to his ghost form, reforming and firing at the SWAT team before turning back to the doctor. Seeing her opportunity, Angela readied for a sprint, tapping the insides of her palms as she took strides forward and her wings opened, taking flight and flashing the room with her great cobalt feathers’ blinding blue light. The Reaper shielded his eyes with his shoulder, but left himself wide open as she collided with him mid-flight.

She crashed with her shoulder into his midsection, attempting to topple him over, but she couldn’t. He was just too big. Growling at the attempted tackle, Gabriel back handed her with the shotgun. Several bullets collided with his exposed back. The blow knocked her, but didn’t loosen her grip. The Reaper turned to fire at the intruders once more, but upon seeing the threat, Angela lunged at the shotgun, biting down on Gabriel’s wrist right through his coat, precisely were the armored plates were absent.

Like an alpha predator being gnawed by a much smaller nuisance, Gabriel attempted to shake the doctor away. The exposure and constriction left him exposed as more carefully aimed bullets collided with his back, one finally penetrating through. Angela used all her strength, from her legs, to her waist, her arms, neck and even her teeth, and threw all of her weight behind her, pulling Gabriel down as she dove for the floor. Trying to fight two battles, Gabriel slipped and went with the doctor, landing beneath the stage in the tech pit below.

Landing on top, Angela scrambled to one knee and sat with her weight on The Reaper’s chest. Now a mere ten inches away, Angela rapidly drew her sidearm once more, its laser assist forming a red dot between the eyeholes on his mask. Heavy boots charged across the stage, and weapon mounted lights shined down on the two as Angela held Gabriel at gunpoint.
“It’s over Gabriel,” Angela stated triumphantly.

“Over?” The Reaper coughed, “I’m just getting started.”

Angela looked down into The Reaper’s hand to see another electronic signal device, safety off and button pressed. Suddenly, a robotic chirping began echoing throughout the lecture hall. Angela looked around trying to see what was going on, but soon felt as if the entire room was filled with singing crickets.

Shocked, she looked down at Gabriel and said, “I thought you said the bom-”

Like every other day of his thirty years of service, the driver of double decker bus #122 chauffeured his load of tourists around London, keeping his eyes on the road and looking to maintain the company’s integrity of showing the city, while still keeping his record of zero accidents or incidents. He watched in his many mirrors for motorists and kept his eye out for pedestrians while his partner, a young woman of much less experience, recited the names of buildings and trivia about the town.

He rolled up to an intersection and set the bus to idle as the opposing traffic rolled through. He sat back and listened, he had been doing this for so many years, having so many partners telling so many different versions of the same piece of information—all slightly off from each other—that he himself had forgotten what the correct information was in regards to the tomes of irrelevant trivia she was reciting.

He watched the traffic, fellow motorists, and pedestrians as he waited; looking to see that no one had tripped, nobody had moved into an unsafe spot around him to try to squeeze a head start into the intersection, and to ensure that children were being assisted by their chaperones. After a while, the opposing traffic slowed to a stop, and then the lights began to change. He shifted the bus into gear, but took another moment to check the cross walk once more as the red behemoth began to churn to life. Clear, the bus driver released the brake and began to cross the intersection.

No sooner had the front wheels met the painted line of the crosswalk, a blue blur shot into view. Streaking like a comet in the sky, a bright blue trail followed from around a corner, down the sidewalk and into the intersection, where a young woman with large wide eyes met with the gaze of
She shrieked.

The bus driver, acting on instinct, slammed the brakes. The Bus halted immediately, but had not disturbed any of the passengers, for their small momentum had only partially jostled the tourists.

Another flash of blue shot the woman to the other side of the intersection. She stood there, in yellow athletic spandex pants, an old bomber jacket recut to fit a slim woman, and one piece goggles, waving at the bus driver and shouting, “Sorry, Luv!”

More flabbergasted by the woman carelessly appearing and disappearing in front of him, the bus driver stood in his seat and shook his fist, shouting at the woman in a perversion of the English language known as Cockney.

The woman ran off, dashing away in another streak of blue. She ran, dodging around people at speeds that could only be properly described in the smallest units of time. She brought her arm up, inspecting the watch on her wrists and its multiple assortments of analog clocks ticking away at different speeds and intervals.

She ran to another intersection, stopping at the corner and looking around at all the other intersections before spotting who she was looking for. At the very opposite end of the crossing was another young woman, this one sitting at a small white table of an outdoor café, looking down at a menu while a hot cup of coffee steamed in front of her.

Coffee… that was never a good sign.

She who had nearly been roadkill checked her watch once more, and sure enough she was late… again. Fitting, that a woman who was a singularity in time, having the ability to manipulate her own ebb and flow through the space time continuum through the mobile nuclear reactor that was affixed to her chest and possessing the most complex timepiece in the world on her wrist… was late.

Tracer, the time traveling adventurer, took a deep breath and mentally prepared herself to confront her date. To salvage the day, it looked like she was going to have to crank up the jovial factor all the way up to ten. She smacked herself on each side of the face, trying to make her cheeks just a little bit rosier before she had to stare down a firing squad.

She darted across the street, dashing through the empty intersection and taking a seat at the opposite
side of the table. She blurted out, “Sorry I’m late, Luv. My, you look lovely to—”

“You’re late, Lena.” The moment she felt the displaced air move the hairs on her neck she had set the menu down, catching Tracer as she was placing her posterior into the chair.

“Not looking good…” Lena thought. “I’m sorry, Emile. I was just running some errands and the line at the store was ludacris—”

“Oh no,” Emile snapped, crossing her arms across her chest, “Not for lunch. You were late to see my parents off like we agreed on, remember?”

Lena grimaced, things were much worse than she had thought. “Oh, rubbish. I’m sorry, I slept through it all this morning. It just completely slipped my mind,” she said, tapping the side of her head as if to demonstrate the lack of grey matter within.

“Oh, trust me. I know. You were up all night watching wrestling again and were in an internet fight with some fifteen year old from Canada.” Lena brought her hands to her face, covering her eyes as Emile dissected her flaws. “I took screencaps on my celly if you need a reminder of if the Backstreet Bulldog took more talent than the twenty knuckle shuffle.”

Lena Oxton bowed her head in defeat and repeated a dejected monotone salvo of “I’m sorry”’s as Emile continued ranting about Tracer’s carelessness, her lack of ambition, Emile’s parents already strained relationship with their daughter’s life decisions, their future, and so on and so forth.

Lena’s eyes wandered, trying to find something to help her weather the storm until Emile calmed down and noticed something. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a word that consumed her interest whole.

“Terrorist.”

She looked up. On the opposite corner of the street, the one that she had arrived to the square on, was a multilevel department store. At the corner was its main entrance and a jumbo Television that caught the eye of all who happened to pass by. Although no sound was being emitted, Lena watched at what looked to be aerial coverage of a large hospital, crowds of people gathered around the outside while sirens and lights began to light up the darkening land.
“Oi, what’s going on there?”

Emile gave a heavy sigh, “Lena, have you been paying attention to anything? There was a terror attack somewhere in the Middle East. I think it was that doctor you knew from a stretch back. You know, the one whose face you have mounted on the dartboard at your flat?”

“Angela…” Tracer thought. She tried to get as far away from the witch as she could, but some Good Samaritan –probably Winston, bless his soul- kept trying to connect the two of them. Her calls were blocked, and online accounts were private. Somewhere, at the bottom of her rubbish piles in her apartment, a VIP invitation to go see the doctor’s talk was ripped in half, Lena practically shouting at the humble letter to “Sod off!” when she saw the return address.

But a terrorist attack? What was going on? Lena gently bit her bottom lip, eyes twitching around her environment and the live news feed, looking for a hint of what to do.

Seeing Lena act like a poorly trained dog wanting to chase after a small woodland creature in the distance, Emile snapped, “Don’t you try to change the subject. We aren’t done talking yet!” Emile was right, but it didn’t solve Lena’s conundrum. Her feet wanted to run, but her mind held them still. She kept crossing and uncrossing her legs, getting traction on the pavement, but then coming to her senses and trying to refocus on the table. She began to nervously tap on the table, trying to cue in an imaginary offscreen helper to talk her through what to do. Emile continued, sipping from her black coffee, “and besides, it’s not like you could do anything. She’s on the other side of the bloody world, anyway!”

A saturated yellow mass filled the screen, shaking the helicopter and distorting the camera resolution. When the image returned, the building had exploded, Glass windows were shattered, the roof had collapsed, and flames were beginning to peek out from the many openings in the facility’s wounded structure.

Emile looked at Lena, who’s expression held nothing but regret, and within less of a second, she was gone, leaving the chair pushed in and a blue blur leading down the street.

“LENA!” Emile shouted, spitting out hot coffee at the date who had left her alone for the second time in one day.

Suddenly, she was back, napkin in hand and cleaning off the hot coffee that covered Emile’s front and said, “By the way, did I mention that you look lovely this morning?” she gave her a peck on the cheek and disappeared once more in another trail of blue.
About An Angel Earns its Wings

Chapter Notes

If you don’t mind, please let me know how long or how many breaks you had to take before completing the chapter.

Also, the formatting from my document is wrong, I will attempt to fix it, but there may be issues. If it persists I will delete and repost the chapter.

An Angel Earns its Wings

Years ago…

All of the cots in the mobile infirmary were empty. Dr. Ziegler had asked the nurse for a moment to “check up on her patients”, and even if she hadn’t understood the hint, she would have taken the sight of the young doctor as enough of a reason to give her some privacy.

Curled over in a chair, Angela quietly sobbed into her hands. She thought a minute to be alone would suffice, to uncork the emotions that she had bottled up and get back to work. But the longer she sat there, the worse it felt. It was strange, the mere act of being alive filled her with a guilt so heavy, that she felt that it was crushing her. The audacity of living was so disrespectful that she simply wanted to cease to exist.

Her hands held a tribute of tears. The only thing that she could muster forth, the only thing that she could give to show remorse for what had happened, but it wasn’t enough. Nothing was. It was all her fault, and she knew it.

“Ahem.”

Angela jumped in her seat. She looked up to see the last person that she wanted to be there, standing at the doorway, leaning against the frame with his arms crossed on his chest and a glare that she swore could kill a man.

“C-Commander!” she stammered, standing up and wiping her eyes. She looked around, trying to
find any excuse to cover the fact that she was hiding. Finding the Valkyrie Suite and armored breastplate on the empty bed where she had discarded it. “I was just on my way to the Armory when-”

“What were you thinking?” Commander Reyes demanded.

She should have known better than to lie. She dropped the charade and tried to fortify her foundation. “I-It wasn’t my fault… I was-

“Yes. It. Is.” he growled, hate dripping off every word. “Because of you, Fareeha is never going to see her mother again.”

The truth burned like salt in her eyes. Angela felt the tears coming back up and she was failing to hold them back, “I… I did my best… I was just trying to-

“But that wasn’t good enough. Was it!” His voice was so loud that it shook the medical instruments in their containers. He paused for a moment, looking back down the hall to make sure nobody else heard him and calmed his temper. “You’re right, you did the best that YOU could do. But that’s the problem. You. You don’t belong here and you never will. You shouldn’t have enlisted.”

Angela felt like her face was about to pop. The pressure of the verbal assault on one side and the mounting tears on another, it was too much. The foundation was compromised. “Hör auf.” she demanded, the German slipping through her mouth without thinking.

“You think you can change the world? Save everyone and make the world a better place to make yourself feel good? Its time to face reality, Princess. What you do gets people killed. Do me a favor and stay out of my way.” The Blackwatch Commander stepped towards an open cabinet and took a fistful of cellophane wrapped lollipops. He turned to leave, stepping through the door but then stopped. “Don’t worry. I’ll tell Fareeha.”

In that moment, Angela realized who the real victim in Ana’s unfortunate demise was, and that overpowered her own emotions. With little foundation to work with, she stepped forward and pleaded, “Wait… please, Let me. I… I know what it feels like.”

“Are you serious?” he spat, shaking his head. “You’ll only make things worse.”
With that, Commander Reyes left. Angela stood for a moment before slowly descending back down to her chair, but she missed, falling to the floor and burying her head in her knees, not leaving until the very late hours of the night.

Everything hurt.

Angela opened her eyes, and was sure she woke up in hell. It was dark, and everything was burning. Jagged stones and twisted metal was everywhere. The cloth on the seats was on fire, almost as if the entire conference center had been ripped from the earth and dragged straight into the inferno.

Sitting against a pile of chunked concrete, Angela looked up and around, the pain in her neck going away slowly as the Nanobiotics did their job. The air was thick and full of smoke, but there must have been a hole in the roof, for it looked to be flowing upwards. A comfortable numb feeling began to overtake her as cocktails of morphine and vaporized yellow gases began calming her nerves and filling the holes in her body.

She looked down, and saw a stake of rebar stabbed into her left hip, just below the kidney. She took a deep breath and slowly wrapped her hands around the metal. Merely touching the pike hurt, but she knew what she had to do. Angela pulled and gave out a cry. Like the teeth of a serrated blade, each tug caused a convulsion of pain and a small burst of blood as more ground meat came out with each rung of the bar. With each pull she could feel the metal burrowed within her becoming less and less of a presence. Her suit healed and replaced what had been pulverized by the foreign invasion, helping to force the rebar out.

With one last pull, she was finally free of the metal incursion into her torso.

The doctor took many breaths of relief, the bloodstains and rips in her dress slacks causing more grief than the intrusion that she had just removed. Shaking her head to clear it, Angela put her hands behind her and attempted to stand, but she was stuck. She looked behind herself and saw that her wings had been pinned beneath the wall of rubble. She drew her pistol, Hardlight turbine cracked and parts of the frame missing, and reached behind her until she felt it touch the hard metal of her angel wing.

With one pull of the trigger, half of her body was free.
Now on her feet, she stood and pulled. Like a lizard escaping a hawk’s grasp, she pulled and pulled, finally ripping the wiring and gears free of the trapped wing and separating her from the rubble. When she stood, she pulled the staff that she had slung across her back, but seeing it mangled and bent, she discarded it on the floor and began to walk forward. If there were survivors here, anyone, she had to help them.

She stumbled through the dark pit, looking up at the mixture of concrete still intact, as well as the destroyed architecture. She remembered hearing that during the construction, the conference hall was built with a situation like this in mind. If the hall were to be sabotaged to blow up, hidden supports and bombproofing measures had been taken to keep the structure from falling apart. Thinking back on Gabriel’s reputation for overcompensating with explosives, it was a miracle that she was still alive.

It was dark, but sporadic flashes of electricity from her broken wings lit her way. She walked through the smoke until she saw a light. Thinking it was a way out, she made her way towards it, walking through the smoke with a hand outstretched in front of her.

As she approached it, she learned that the supposed exit was something else entirely. The light was not coming from a gap in the wall, or sunlight penetrating through the destruction, but instead a computer screen. The workstation was largely intact, but the equipment it was hooked too was crushed. On the screen the words “UPLOAD INTERRUPTED: SYSTEM ERROR” were listed. Besides the video screen there was a multitude of files that were being prepared to upload to the internet.

Angela raised her gun and began putting bullets into the computer, not stopping until it was nothing more than a dead mass of smoking plastic.

She gave a heavy sigh of relief. She holstered the pistol and put her hand below her shirt to wrap her fingers around the golden locket chained to her neck. “You’re safe, father,” she said. Although a heavy weight felt as if it had been taken off her chest, it didn’t get her out of the rubble.

There was movement, like rocks shifting amid the wreckage. Mercy hurriedly looked around and saw a figure slumped over against a pile of rubble. She approached carefully and then saw The Reaper, hunched over on the rocks with a big metal pipe impaled through his chest.

“Oh no!” she said, running over to his side. His clawed gauntlets held the metal in place, but were too weak to fight. A thick fluid spilled out from where he had been punctured. “Hold on!” she told him, grabbing the metal. His flesh was already fragile to the elements and his skin burned away like smoke where the hot metal penetrated him.
The pipe was very hot. It burned through the gloves that controlled her dead wings and caused her hands to blister, but the nanites in her blood did as they were supposed to and reabsorbed the irritated flesh as fast as they could.

She pulled, having a much easier time with her patient than trying to operate on herself, and finally freed the metal pipe.

No longer pinned against the rocks, The Reaper rolled over onto his front and began to wretch onto the scarred floor, his dire condition granting emergency strength to his drained muscles. A dark, syrupy solution—far too thick to be blood—drained onto the floor from the holes in his mask until he had let it all out of his system.

Once his airway was clear, he rolled back over onto his back with his head against the rocks.

Angela crouched down at his side, assessing the injuries. “Gabriel,” she asked, “can you hear me?”

From the wheezing, the Reaper gave a “yeah”. Slowly, Angela reached up for his mask, but as she neared it he gave a weak, “Don’t.”

She started pulling her hands away, but stopped. The Reaper, the man with the mask, that wasn’t who she was going to deal with. That wasn’t the man she remembered. That wasn’t going to be the last she ever saw of Gabriel. She brought her hands back and slowly wrapped her fingers around the mask. He tried to turn away, but he was too weak. It snapped off of the armored plates, and she set it down on his chest.

It wasn’t the same man that had been kept in the sterile room of her basement all those years ago. For however long it had been, Gabriel looked to have recovered to some degree. No longer was he a man made of ash. His nose had reformed, and although it wasn’t a healthy human color, a thin layer of skin had covered his face and eyes.

The mask was white, stoic, unfeeling, but the man beneath was something different. Gabriel looked at her like a child hiding under his sheets from the monster in the closet, like a baby rabbit looking up at a very curious yet house-broken family dog. Although he looked to have improved over time, his eyes were unchanged, red as blood. But they were not full of hate, but of pain and rejoice. It was the look of a man on his deathbed, awaiting the end of his suffering.

“What happened to you, Gabriel?” she asked, ignoring the carnage that had transpired throughout the
“Talon… Talon happened. They said they could help. But before I knew it they had their claws deep in me,” he answered, each word labored and painful as he heaved each one out of his chest.

“I could have helped you Gabriel. That was all I wanted. But I can’t blame you for wanting to leave.”

“I was… Afraid. Didn’t want to be stuck on the teat. ” He gave a hard swallow, trying to breathe through the remnants of what he had vomited earlier. “But I couldn’t deal with the pain. They said they could make it go away. The… serum, it helped deal with the pain, but it changed things. Made me feel rage… changed my memories, *heh*” He chuckled, “sorry for… crashing your party, Princess.”

“Apology accepted,” she answered. Off in the distance, the rocks shifted, causing a portion of the ceiling to fall and crush the computer and its servers. Angela then let out a sigh and said, “I suppose this is all my fault. I should have been more careful, but I needed to know that you wanted to stay.”

“What do you mean? I broke out of your lab, remember?”

Dr. Ziegler gave a sheepish grin and answered, “I never locked the door.”

Gabriel coughed, “But… you-”

“I had to seal the chamber each time to not risk an infection, but you were always free to go. I left it ajar that one morning after breakfast to test if you were willing to stay or not. Did you think I just kept money, codeine, and men’s clothes on my kitchen table for fun?” Keeping with the brief levity of the moment, Angela added, “by the way, you didn’t have to rip my purse when you rummaged through it. You owe me a new one now.”

Gabriel stopped talking, shook his head and began to slowly laugh. With each repercussion through his chest, the wound opened more, causing him an equal amount of pain along with the world’s best medicine. “It only hurts when I laugh,” he added. The two paused, Gabriel waited on baited breath, the wound on his chest taking form and weighing him down with each passing moment. With what time he had left, he waited for a stern excoriation from the doctor, ripping his actions and self apart and immolating him with a string of curses, like the flames of a Viking’s grave as they were no longer a part of this world.
But the flames of hate didn’t come. Angela waited with patience and bedside manners learned from her long career as a medical practitioner. Gabriel soon learned that silence was far more miserable than any word that could be spoken.

“Listen… doc, what I said... about you, your dad, that was some vile shit. Whatever you do, don’t take it personal. It’s alright to hate me.”

Mercy slowly shook her head, “I don’t hate you, Gabriel. Please, just save your strength. As vitriolic as it was, you are right. I’m a prodigy, I’ve been encouraged all my life to keep moving forward, to make the world a better place through medicine and, in some way, make my parents proud. But when you push the limits aside, you see patients as subjects, and not as people. It seems I had been working so hard and for so long that I forgot the first rule of being a physician; Primum non nocere. ‘First, Do no Harm’. I’ve been trying to fulfill my father’s ambition for so long that I’ve forgotten to consider the wellbeing of my patients. Sometimes it takes cruel honesty to make a point. So… thank you.” She slowly began to smile ever so slightly. “But there is one thing I did find reprehensible in your critique. I may not have much of a life outside my office, but I do have quite the wicked badminton serve. So, I do demand an apology.”

Even as she spoke the words, she knew that it was a forlorn hope. She could swear off it, sell her equipment, move out to an isolated farm and quit medical science completely. Yet, she knew that there was no use. She, like her father, had opened Pandora’s Box, dabbled in the madness within, and seen the potential that it held. She’d come back, either by her own accord or kicking and screaming against the agonizing cries of those afflicted by a new ailment. One way or another it was going to be done, with her gift she may as well have it done right.

Angela smiled, but it slowly faded as guilt crept back into her mind, “Still, I wish it hadn’t come to… this. I wish I could have helped you.”

Gabriel coughed, more gobs of the thick red fluid coming out as he cleared his throat. “I can’t be changed, doc. This is who I am.”

Angela shook her head. “You’re wrong, Gabriel. You are a wicked man, but no-one deserves what happened to you. I remember the better times, like when you were with Fareeha as a little girl. I know that somewhere in there, there is still a man worth saving.”

Even in his wounded state, Gabriel still managed to growl, “Why? Why are you trying to save me? It’s too late- It’s always been too late for me.”
Angela shook her head once more. “You’re a catholic, Gabriel. You should know the story of the Penitent Thief, the one Jesus saved on the Cross.”

Gabriel laughed. “So you think you can just absolve me? Tell me to ‘go and sin no more’?”

“It’s not like that, Gabriel. Yes, I am a doctor, and I must help those in need; but it’s not my duty as a Catholic to save you, it’s to give you every opportunity to save yourself.” The man attempted to protest, but she continued, “I read your profile long ago, I understand where you came from.”

“Stop.”

“You had no family life. Father was locked away for life and you were about to be as well until you agreed to conscription to commute the sentence.”

“Stop it.”

“You were expendable, so you became a prime candidate for the Soldier Enhancement Program, but you were too reckless for the Army. The discharge based on your… preferences was just a cover-up because they didn’t want the liability anymore. But then Overwatch-“

“I said STOP!” he shouted, but doubled over in pain from the exerted effort. Angela did as requested and bowed her head. “What’s the point?” he coughed.

“All others may have turned their backs on you, but I’ll never give up, Gabriel. I want to make sure you know that.”

The terrorist balled his hand into a fist and looked away, digging the spiked gauntlet into his palm. Swallowing down his emotions and in a raspy breath, Gabriel replied, “Well, it’s too bad… there’s not much you can do without that staff of yours.”

There was a moment of shared silence, and then Angela answered, “Well, there is one thing…”

Gabriel looked up to see the doctor’s sidearm, held in both hands like she was considering how it could be used. He knew what to do immediately. Her fingers fidgeted as she took ahold of the gun,
her mind still visibly torn on what she was about to do. If he had possessed the strength, Gabriel would have helped her, putting it in her hands, pressing it against his temple and using his thumb to pull the trigger.

But, for as much as he was waiting for the end of the agony the last ten years had been, there was one thing, one last mystery in his mind. Even after Talon had poisoned his thoughts, there was still one thing that he wanted answered.

“Doc… The base… all those years ago… You knew it was me. Didn’t you?”

“I had my doubts, but yes.”

“Tell me… you never asked me why I did it. Why?”

A smile crept across her face, and in a voice that Gabriel somehow knew was genuine, she replied, “Did you want me to?”

Gabriel attempted to laugh, but lacked the strength. Instead he just reeled his head back and hit it against the rubble. He was too weak to care. Instead, he just closed his eyes and awaited the sweet release of death. In his last moments on earth, Gabriel wondered if it was fitting or ironic, that the person he treated the worst, Mercy, was going to Mercy-kill him.

But, before she released him from his suffering, she spoke once more. “Gabriel, may I ask you something?”

“Shoot.” He said.

“One thing I… never understood was, well, why was it that you hated me?”

Gabriel sat silently for a moment, thinking, searching through his past or conjuring up a story for the doctor, but after a while had to answer with the most honest thing he had ever told her. “Because I could.”

Angela was silent, “I see.”
Gabriel shook his head, moaning, “I’ll see you in hell, Princess,” as the pistol was brought to battery. Everything was numb. He was going to be fine, he just wanted it all to be over when he was in the happy euphoric middle ground.

Maybe he would hear the shot that would kill him if he tried to focus on it.

He listened, but heard something else entirely.

“You’re wrong.”

A shot went out, but Gabriel didn’t die. He heard Angela cry, and opened his eyes to find her lying on top of him, with a self-inflicted gunshot wound on her chest and the pistol smoking in her hand.

“No…”

With glossy blue eyes, she looked up at him and smiled, with her last breath she whispered, “Helden sterben nie.” She looked to the ground, Gabriel followed her eyes, and saw a broken golden chain lying in the ash. On the necklace was a golden heart-shaped locket, and a Catholic Cross, his cross from long ago. Her hand reached for the treasure, but fell to the ground dead on top of them.

“No!”

Angela was dead, and rising from her corpse was the thing that made the pain go away, the thing that kept all things linked together, the first thing that Gabriel saw when he opened his eyes to his new life, a soul.

The red orb drifted from the corpse, the black essence of life oozing from its core. Gabriel shook his head, attempting to crawl away from it, shouting at it as it approached. But for as much as he protested, he couldn’t help it, the essence entered his chest, powering up the machines within him, and finally caused the W-A Ziegler patented nanite generator to return to full operation. The shelter among the destroyed auditorium came alive as Gabriel roared in denial of what had happened, countless ghostly black particles swirling like a tornado in the spot where the two lay until Gabriel reformed standing on his own two feet, holding the doctor in his arms, the burn of life returned to him.
He looked down upon Angela’s corpse and found himself asking a question he had seen too many times, the question he had been asked for decades on the eyes of dead men, simply “Why?”

He tried to replay what had happened in his mind, but it didn’t make sense? Why would she do that? Why for him of all people? Just… why? It didn’t change the outcome, though. She had made her choice and Gabriel couldn’t change that. He started lowering her corpse to the ground, leaving her to eternal rest here in this hellish hole.

Suddenly, he heard a clap. Then he heard it again. Like a shark lurking in dark murky water, someone was out there, stalking the two of them, applauding what had happened.

He couldn’t believe his eyes, but forming from the smoke was her, Angela. But it was a different version, younger, shorter, and not fully developed. A ghost from his past taking form. She wore the dress and leggings of the Valkyrie suit, and a tank top with the Overwatch logo on her chest; like all those years ago when the team would return to base after a day’s work. Everything was perfectly preserved from over a decade ago except her eyes. Instead of bright blue pupils, the gateway to her soul was blood red, full of malice, hate, and snide condescension.

“Congratulations, Gabriel. You finally did it. After years of pissing and whining about it and nearly fucking it up yourself, you did it. You killed a single woman. Granted, she had to finish the job herself because you were too much of a weakling to do it, but what’s done is done. Bravo.”

“What are you?” he asked coldly.

“Me?” she mused, “that’s easy. I’m the thing you hate the most, the thing you ran away from, the thing you can’t deny, and the thing that makes you hate yourself to the point that you wish that you stayed dead in that hole in Switzerland. I’m reality, Gabriel. Its good we’ve finally met.” She went silent, studying the corpse in front of him. She pulled some hair away from Angela’s face, giving it a look over, “Hmm, it’s a shame that such a pretty face was wasted on you.”

“What are you getting at?”

“Time to run along,” she said, crossing her arms on her chest, “I’m sure your Talon masters are waiting for you. I suppose you could try to bring her corpse back if you think that’ll desiccate her morals some more; or you could just leave it here if you need a shred of dignity to live with yourself. Either way, I’m sure Talon wants to get their favorite pet back on its leash.” The entity looked at the back of its hand, almost as if it was impressed with the beauty it had manifested as. “You know, you can blame Talon, Jack, her, or me all you want, but deep down you know the truth. You despised that girl from the moment you met her. She was everything you weren’t, and you hated it. She lost
her parents, but she still was able to make something of herself. You? You’re just the stray dog, looking for someone else to kick you to the curb or whisper sweet nothings into your ear. She should have never let you out of that cage.”

“She made her decision. I couldn’t stop her.”

“You’re right, she did. And she wasted it on you. It makes me wonder, though. Why would she save you again? Oh well. I guess she’ll have to die a martyr.” She smirked. “Think about it; first Jack Morrison, now her, that’s two people you hate that’ll have big golden statues now! Great job Gabriel, now go along and waste the life she gave so you could disappoint her again.”

No. This wasn’t how it was meant to be. She didn’t save him, she returned him to the agonizing land of the living in order for him to save himself. Here, in the pit, he was at an impasse, continue the self-destructive way things were or do something about it.

He adjusted the weight of Angela cradled in his arms. She wasn’t alive anymore, but she wasn’t gone yet. There had to be something, anything that could be done to save her. He didn’t choose to believe otherwise.

The rocks shifted, and smoke began to flow through a new opening. The hole was illuminated with what looked to be white light cutting into the thick smoke. Gabe ran towards the exit, leaving the crater just as the pocket began to lose its foundation and crumble.

Although the largest terrorist attack in the city’s history had just occurred, the air terminal on the outskirts of Oasis was still in operation. All outbound flights had been grounded, but the runway was still clear for inbound planes to land.

One such plane, a business class 747 inbound from China, was on its final approach to the airport.

Genji Shimada stood with his toes fastening him to the airplane’s hull. High above the world, he surveyed the approaching city. The ongoing fire made the medical facility stand out easily amongst the rest of the lit city.

When ready, he crossed his arms on his chest and released his toes, the wind jettisoned him from the
plane and he started gliding into the city.

As the life drained from Angela, a warm, light sensation began to fill in where her feeling was absent. The senses in her toes, her fingers, her arms, it all faded away and then became one with an ethereal tranquility. The chains that tethered her to this world broke, and her spirit felt free; but she didn’t care. She was too tired, drained, exhausted. She was floating away like driftwood on the open sea.

Finally, she felt something, a warm embrace, like those in distant memories from her childhood; like one of the distant times her father - or more recently, a gigantic blue gorilla - carried her off to bed. The relieving feeling became normal, filling what was lost and returning control to her senses.

She was tired, but her curiosity was too strong, too tantalizing to ignore.

Although it was only a squint, she opened her eyes as wide as she could muster and looked up.

Like she thought, she was in the arms of an angel, carrying her up into the great beyond, far above the toils of man and into the peace of eternity. It was the archangel Gabriel, God’s messenger.

She let her eyes close again, rubbing against his chest as they soared into the sky.

Carrying her body in his arms, Gabriel ran through what remained of the halls of the conference center. Each hall ending in a fallen ceiling or a mound of rubble. Not breaking his stride, he ran through burning drywall and flaming furniture, going any way that his legs took him, any place there was a chance that a broken down door or hole in the wall would be the key to getting out of the burning rubble.

The only thing he couldn’t do was stop, for he knew whatever time she had left, it was short.

Angela awoke in the place where the clouds met the sky.

She stirred, and used her hand to support her side as she looked around. All around her were floating puffs of white, but nothing else.
“Shhh, she’s awake.”

She looked around. She knew she heard someone. Then she stood, taking careful steps in the cloud to make sure she wouldn’t trip.

“I think she heard us.”

She definitely heard someone, but nobody was around. She felt around her person, checking the phone in her pocket -now dead- and the rest of her equipment. Besides the fact that her wounds were all healed, most everything else was the same since the explosion. Her shirt was bloody and ripped, slacks covered in dust of pulverized concrete, and Valkyrie suit in complete disarray.

There was something odd about the voices, something familiar that she should have known naturally, but just evaded her.

“Do you think she’ll recognize us?” said the voice, now noticeable as female.

Angela realized what she was missing. The voices, the interlopers spying on her just out of sight, they weren’t speaking in English, it was German, her native tongue.

“Well, let’s find out.” replied a male voice.

Out of intuition, Mercy turned around, just in time to see the clouds separate. Standing out of their concealment were a man and a woman. He was wearing a dress shirt and sweater-vest while she wore a pink sweater and a white shirt beneath.

The three stared at each other, the man and woman holding hands while Angela was still taking in all of the new information of the afterlife.

Although he was whispering, Angela could hear the man say, “She looks like you when we first met.”
The woman replied, “No, no, she’s even better; she doesn’t have my grandfather’s nose!”

Angela kept staring, not knowing what was going on. Trying to puzzle who those two people were confused her, but then it brought tears to her eyes as all the dots connected and she realized who they were.

Walther and Heidi Ziegler smiled as tears welled up in Angela’s eyes. Angela ran towards them, her mother wiped away tears from her own cheeks as she neared. The doctor slid to a halt when she was right before her parents. She was dead of course, so she didn’t expect things to make rational sense, but how could she be sure who these people were? Wiping the hot, dusty tears from her eyes, Angela tried to collect herself as her emotions ran wild. The two angels waited patiently as their daughter looked them over. The two looked at each other, and with an approving nod from his wife, Walther stuck out his hand with the palm out.

Angela studied the gesture, not sure if he intended her to stop, but then she realized what he meant.

Slowly, she put her own hand forward with its palm facing out. Their long, slender fingers touched and matched each other. Although Angela’s were a bit scarred from the events leading up to her demise, each digit was a perfect match of her father’s long fingers.

Her mother was exactly as she remembered, but now, seeing her again after all this time, it was more like she was looking into a mirror. All except for Heidi being shorter, hair longer, and her emerald bespectacled eyes in place of Angela’s blue.

Angela looked for something, anything that she knew that only her mother would have, and in response to the search, Heidi took a quick breath and held it. Like with her father, Angela considered what it meant and then realized what the woman had invited her to. She stepped closer and leaned her head in, putting her dirty hair and ear on her mother’s breast.

As if it had harnessed the power of thunder, her mother’s heartbeat like a drum so powerful that it could shatter stone.

She grabbed the woman by her side and pulled away. It really was them. In that moment, Angela wasn’t a gifted physician, a fearless combat medic, or a brilliant medical scientist, she was but a little girl, standing in a hallway outside of class while the headmistress of her boarding school spoke the words that would change her life forever.
She wrapped her arms around her mother and squeezed, never wanting to let go again. The woman caressed her hair and held her close. Another hand patted her on the back as she cried for both heaven and earth to hear.

Like a tactical missile being guided to its target, Genji flew through the air, slight movements of his arms and legs being all he needed to adjust his rapid descent towards the earth. The light of the fire engulfing the conference center guided his descent as he fell closer and closer towards the concrete.

Passing by the top of skyscrapers, he tucked his arms in to his chest. In his right hand, he queued up three shuriken from the internal magazine in his forearm. Like it was natural, the automated system in his arm lifted the blades from his wrist and set them in-between his fingers.

His target came into view, a skylight in the roof. The glass window was surprisingly unbroken from the explosion that had destroyed most of the structure. Now only a few stories from the ground, Genji whipped his arm forward, launching the three shuriken stars forth, each one breaking the glass and creating a spiderweb across its surface.

All within the same second, he tucked his head down, breaking through the weakened glass and rolling in midair. He landed on solid ground and his momentum from the great descent projected him across the room, towards a closed set of double doors.

Still airborne, the ninja opened up to a standing position, unsheathing his katana from his back.

“Ryūjin no ken wo kūrae!” he cried forth, summoning the great ancestral dragon resting within the remains of his still human heart. The green spirit possessed the young man and emboldened his blade with the power of the Great Serpent. In one slice he cut the door down, opening his path as he landed on his feet and began sprinting through the falling building, then returning his blade to his sheathe and almighty dragon to rest.

All three Zieglers sat facing each other in a triangle shape. Both of Angela’s parents had great wings protruding from their backs, both full of pure white feathers, one for each of the lives that they had touched.

“I wish you could have been there, father, to see your legacy; all of your life’s hard work, finally become a reality,” Angela said.
Walther shook his head. “No, Angela. It wasn’t meant to be that way. Besides, why should I be proud of that? You are my Legacy. I’ve seen the things you’ve done, the lengths you’ve gone to help those in need and couldn’t be any more proud to be your father.” The words warmed the younger doctor’s heart. The words she had wanted to hear for so very long. It was worth the wait. She felt her eyes burn once more, but she quickly wiped away the tears before they fell. He continued, “You’ve done so much more than I could have even if I tried; just think of all that you’ve done and then see what the truth is.” He offered his hand forward, insisting she look over her shoulder. Angela complied, and was surprised to not only see that the remains of the Valkyrie suit had fallen away, but that in their spot was a great wingspan full of pure white feathers, larger than both of her parents’ combined.

Dr. Heidi Ziegler turned to her husband and clicked her tongue, lowering her nose and looking at him from over her glasses, the same way Angela remembered when she would tease him, “Ahem, ‘your Legacy’? I don’t remember you being in labor for 36 hours. Besides, whose idea was it to insert stem Nanites into a zygote again? Hmmm?”

Angela laughed, covering up her mouth with her hand to stifle the giggles. Although she doubted them before, people always said that Angela’s creative side came from her mother.

All of the paths on the ground floor were blocked off. Trapping Gabriel in the enclosing burrow like a fox being smoked out of its den.

Through the smoke, he saw a red sign near what used to be the ceiling. Although most electricity had been cut off after the explosion, the lights on the emergency staircase were still running off their batteries. He ran to the door and gave it a lunging kick, breaking it open. He raced up the staircase to the next floor and slammed shoulder first through the door. He kept running straight ahead until the floor ended with a dead drop back to where he had come from.

Angela, the dark apparition of his mind, was standing on the opposite side of the gap, leaning against a burning wall with her arms crossed “Do you really think you can save her?”

He began to turn to find another way but a thought occurred to him. From where he was standing now, he must have been on the opposite side of the wreckage that blocked his way before.

Not risking wasting anymore time, Gabriel jumped down, returning to the first floor and continued on unhindered. If he recalled correctly, this was the way back to where he had come in, through the front door. The telltale signs of the battle that had occurred earlier were covered up by the wanton destruction his explosives had caused.
He had to dodge around the fallen infrastructure, but he was right. Sounds of sirens and the long fog horn of firetrucks became louder as the emergency teams attempted to navigate their vehicles towards the burning complex. They were almost out.

He was beginning to smile –or whatever his cold dead heart could muster that would resemble something akin to a smile– until he ran into another dead end. This time, fate felt the need to tease him, the security gate blocking the way had fallen over with the floor’s integrity. It acted as a grid, holding up chunks of concrete and rock that blocked their way out of the hall and towards the front doors. Through the grid and exposed concrete, he could see white spotlights, trying to light the billowing smoke.

“God Damnit!” he shouted. He couldn’t turn around and hope for another way out. This was the only way to save her and he was going to dig his way out even if he had to do it with his cold dead hands.

He approached the gate and bent down, setting the deceased doctor down on the exposed concrete. As he stood, he saw the dark doppelganger standing beside them, judging him as he attempted his futile escape. “Even if you do make it out, what is it going to change? Do you actually think that they won’t shoot you down the moment they see you run out of the building with her body? Do you think they’re just going to believe that she shot herself? Or let you go after all the people you killed? I mean, you don’t honestly think that you’ve changed at all, right?”

Gabriel pulled two of his shotguns from his coat and fired at the blocked exit. The Explosive buckshot shredded the metal gate fencing and blew chunks away from the fallen rock. When he ran out of ammunition, he ran forward and grabbed any leverage he could get on the pile and began pulling it away.

So Angela didn’t need to pretend anymore. She didn’t need to strap on the wings, or wear the halo; she really was an angel now. But that meant that she was dead. Still sitting with her parents, she began to look down at the clouds, slowly pecking away at the fluffy white to get a look down at the earth below.

“What’s wrong, dear?” asked her mother.

“It’s nothing... “

“You’ve been through quite a lot. Tell us what’s on your mind.” said Walther.
Angela gave a sigh. “I was always so active, so busy. I think you’d both understand, always looking for new ways to assist those who need us. Well, now all that is over, I first thought that it was a relief that all of those worries were just out of my hands now. But... sitting here now I’m just regretting what I could’ve done.”

Both nodded in unison, knowing the feeling all too well. “You’re a fighter, darling.” answered Heidi, “we’ve watched you go far beyond the call to save lost souls and do what’s right, but one of the hardest things you must accept is when it’s time to let go.” Angela’s parents then looked at each other, and smiled, they stood and Heidi continued, “but now isn’t one of those times.”

For all of his advanced technology aiding his already sharpened ninja senses, Genji was lost within the burning structure. The map, downloaded automatically from the building’s blueprints, was worthless after the explosion had destroyed the floors. Enhanced hearing was for not, the microphone was only picking up the sound of ambient fire burning away the carpet. Echo vision was ineffective, it helped him see clearer, but could not penetrate too far into the smoke.

But he wouldn’t give up. He had to save her. He didn’t care if he had to search every room of every floor, he would die before he gave up.

A high pitched hissing began. Whatever it was, he didn’t like it. Genji threw caution to the wind and began to sprint. Ahead of him he saw a window, muddy and covered in soot. He readied another trio of shuriken and broke the glass, diving through it just as a natural gas line broke and exploded, shaking the already wounded structure.

Like a cat, Genji landed on his feet. Now, he was in a largely empty room, staircases that would have lead into the building were crushed, and on the opposite side of the room was a wall of windows and a door to the outside, where the flashing lights of emergency service providers were waiting on bated breath. He wasn’t sure where he was, but he did notice something. Someone was calling for help.

“What are you saying? I- I don’t understand!”

“The Lord isn’t ready for you yet. We can see why, there’s far much more that you can do down
there. The world of man is going to need an Angel of Mercy now more than ever.”

Angela’s eyes began to burn once more. She wanted to protest but didn’t knowing what to say. “But... I don’t understand. What do you mean!?”

“You will,” Walther answered, “just give it some time.”

Heidi tugged on her husband’s arm, pulling his attention away. “But dear, can’t we just leave her with a hint?” Walther thought on it for a second, then looked at his wife and nodded.

Angela watched as both doctors put a hand on their chest as it began to glow. Slowly, they both presented a bright yellow flame burning within their palms. Angela recoiled a bit as the flames began to move, floating away from their owners and becoming one, and then floating towards her.

“We’ll always watch over you, Angela,” Heidi stated.

“Always,” repeated Walther.

She watched, not sure what to do, but ready to jump out of the way if something was wrong. The ball of flame continued towards her and entered her chest, right into the cavity where her self-inflicted heart wound was.

Then, everything began to hurt.

His handiwork was sloppy and quick, but Gabriel was sure that he had made a hole big enough for him to crouch through. He stood, discarding one last large chunk of concrete and returned to Angela’s side.

No sooner had he returned to the deceased doctor did he find himself face to face with her doppelganger again. Unlike before, he hands were clenched into tight fists, planted firmly against her hips while her brow was furrow and eyes firm. Through gritted teeth, she growled, “This. Changes. Nothing. NOTHING! Just do what you always do and give up already. This is pointless. You’re wasting your time, she’s dead!”
The red eyed monster may have been right, but Gabriel ignored the scolding as he returned to the real Angela. No sooner had he bent over and put his arms around her knees and neck, a large explosion rocked the building.

He let go, staggering to keep balance, but jumped when the ceiling began to shift and fall. The floor above them was collapsing, and he didn’t have time to get out! The walls on opposite sides of the hall fell, colliding with each other and slowing their descent to the floor. Gabriel ran towards it and turned, buckling his knees as the walls fell to act as their capstone.

He picked up his head and looked at the hole he made, still intact, but there was no way he could pick up Angela and get through there in time. Worse yet, the wings of her suit, broken and sparking, finally died down. Gabriel took it as a reminder that if he was going to do something, he had to do it fast.

The energy from the sparkling wings must have been sent to another location, for other parts of Angela’s suit began to glow, and then a loud pulse was heard, and her body reacted with a violent jolt. Then, there was defibrillating pound, and another spasm occurred. It stopped, and what looked to be an attempt at breathing was made.

“Holy shit, she’s alive.”

Gabe didn’t come all this way trying to save her just to get crushed and burned in this hallway.

Although he didn’t think he could do it, Gabriel closed his eyes, gathered his strength and screamed something that he didn’t even know was in his vocabulary. “Help! We need help!”

Angela’s skin began to burn and twitch uncontrollably. She shrieked in terror as the flesh began to decay right before her eyes. The organic flesh began to burn, peeling away to show what looked to be a robotic set of armor beneath the surface.

She spontaneously felt the urge to gag, and amid the pain she was in, collapsed onto her hands and knees, filling her mouth with the iron-rich taste of blood. She wretched, ejecting blood like she had just been shot or stabbed. As she did so, she felt the feathers on her wings die, feathers falling bones melting to reveal metal underneath them.

As her flesh burned away to become the monstrosities of her former patients, she reached out to her
parents who stood by waving. “We love you!” they called.

The clouds broke and Angela shrieked as she was rejected from the heavens.

With one last glimpse, she looked up, seeing her mother and father standing over the hole she made in the clouds. The last thing she heard was her mother, shouting, “Und sieh bloß zu, dass ich schon Großmutter bin, wenn wir einander das nächste Mal treffen!”

The cry for help had taken away too much strength from his hold. The mounting weight on his shoulders was too much. Gabriel tried as hard as he could, but wouldn’t last much longer.

Debris began to fall all around him, rocks slipped down and began to mount up around the hole he had dug.

“No! No! No! No! No! No! No!” he cried, but was powerless to do anything.

He started to think, trying to preplan his steps and guess on how long he had to run, grab Angela, and dive through the hole before they were both dead, but then began to realize that it was impossible as more and more weight was added to his shoulders.

Something fell in front of the hole, blocking the light from the other side. Gabriel began to swear aloud until he heard a voice on the other side and then he saw a green blur. The debris that blocked their way crumbled to the ground in pieces as a man stood on the other side, holding a sword in both hands.

He looked around, but jumped when he saw the body on the floor right in front on him. He put away the weapon and then picked her up, lifting her over his shoulders in a fireman’s carry.

He gave one look back, scanning the hall, but must not have seen Gabriel through the smoke. He ran away, carrying Angela off to safety.

The sight was a relief, but more crushing weight on his back caused Gabriel to drop to one knee. The pile of debris must have been the last thing supporting this section of the hall. More stones fell and began to fill in the pile that had dispersed for Angela’s rescue.
With one last look up, Gabriel gazed into the light, seeing the way slowly grow darker as more and more debris filled the opening. Angela’s dark ghostly twin walked away, into the center of the hall and through the opening unhindered. She looked back at him, wings of white opening from her back as her evil smirk faded. The light washed away the red of her eyes, cleansing the hate that she held for him and fading into the light.

Like a mother’s soothing words to a newborn, she whispered, “For what it’s worth Gabriel, I’m proud of you.” She stepped back into bright hereafter, fading away as her spirit passed on. The pathway to salvation closed behind her, and Gabriel breathed a sigh of relief.

Gabriel didn’t feel the weight across his shoulders any more, and the fear he had felt over the way out closing bothered him no longer. He found peace and rejoiced as the gateway to the living closed and hell swallowed him back up for the second time.

Years ago...

Hood up, head down, Gabriel walked along the sidewalk of the Swiss streets, walking past the identical housing units, their occupants all asleep in late hours of the night. The city was quiet now, but it didn’t help him from feeling out of place, like a fat kid eating a hotdog at a Vegan convention.

He wore one of his many hoodies and a simple pair of dark blue jeans, but something about it simply didn’t seem right. He felt like he could have just skipped changing altogether and just began walking through the city in his armored vest and cargo pants and not felt any different.

In the end, he assumed this must have been how snakes felt. Before Overwatch, before Commander Reyes, before all of this; he was just a nobody, another face in the crowd, some no name person walking through life; just another viper in the snake pit.

But now things had changed. Like a viper, he changed his look like he was changing camouflage, blending in to not be noticed by the sheep in this world.

Each home had a metal wire fence around it with a latch-and-post gate that lead from the street. From there, a cement walkway lead straight up to three cement steps and finally to the front door and a small covered porch. Although the lights were off on all of the houses, there was one that was still
had some activity at it.

At Gabriel’s destination’s porch, there was a figure hidden in darkness, as a faint red glow gave away their position. Without asking permission, Gabriel Reyes opened the gate and latched it behind him. He walked up to the porch and found a man sitting on a wicker chair, resting one arm on the metal table. In his fingers was a lit cigarette, adding to the already strong odor of smoke in the air.

Gabriel walked to the open chair across from the homeowner and sat down, sharing the view of the empty European streets, and only giving his host an even and curt acknowledgement, “John.”

John gave an equally short and deadpan reply, “Gabe.” The porch was silent, the two sat in the nothingness as the trail of smoke from the lit flame drafted upwards into the sky. Eventually, the cigarette reached the end of its duration, smoldering in the man’s hand, which he promptly raised it and shoved it head first in the massive mound of dust in the ashtray and let it be, like a tombstone in the dirt with its fellow cigarettes.

Reflexively, he pulled the next one from the box, lit it with a lighter, and after one pull, held it in his fingers like the last one.

Gabriel waited until he exhaled, and then said, “You tell her yet?”

“Youp.” John answered, still watching the dark streets before him. A car passed by. It was red. “You know, Ana wasn’t an easy woman to live with. I don’t know what she was like with you all, but now that she’s gone... I just don’t really know how to feel.”

“Its not easy. That’s for sure.” “To be honest, I wish she was here right now so she could call me a ‘Tech support zombie’ one more time.”

“Hmm,” Gabriel lied, “never heard her use that one before.”

John gave a shallow chuckle. “I just wish I knew what to do. I suppose I was lucky in some ways. I never really had to deal with something like this till now.”

“Yeah,” Gabriel exhaled, “Life comes at you fast.” He stood up, pushing the chair back into its spot and approaching the door. “Is she in her usual spot?” “Yep.”
Gabriel left the man on his porch as he entered into the dark house. Instinctively, he reached by the side of the door and activated the lights. From there, he walked through the house into the back rooms and stopped at one of the doors. He took a moment to breathe, pulled his hood down, and then entered.

Like the house before his entry, the room was dark and quiet. He recognized the outlines of the objects in the shadows, a television, a desk, stuffed animals, and a 10-pump BB gun resting atop a mantle on one of the walls.

To the casual eye, the room looked to be devoid of life, but Gabriel knew better. He walked in, still leaving the lights off, and approached the bed. When at its side, he crouched, turned around, and sat down beside it. He reached into his pockets and pulled out two cellophane wrapped lollipops and unwrapped one, filling the room with the sound of the plastic being pulled and unfolded. He put it in his mouth, the dark had hidden its flavor until the taste of sweet electric cherry shocked his tongue. He pocketed his wrapper and then set his hand down on the ground near the bed, the unopened candy in his fingers.

He waited, like a mousetrap set outside of a rat’s hole. Quiet shuffling movement began underneath the bed. Soon after, he felt the paper handle slip out of his fingers.

“I heard you had a pretty rough day.” Gabriel said to the monster hiding beneath the bed. He waited for a moment, and then added, “If you ever need to talk to someone, you know I’ll be there for you.”

“What happens next?” the monster asked.

Gabriel gave a sigh, “Next few days, there’s going to be a lot of people looking to talk to you and your dad, there’s going to be a service, a funeral, and after that; life goes on.”

“Are you going to be there?”

“Yeah.”

“Is… Snow White going to be there?”
“Yeah.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t know, honey,” Gabriel lied. “I wasn’t there.” He then changed the subject, “why don’t you come out here and sit with me for a minute?”

There was a rustling underneath the bed, and after a moment, the mattress skirt lifted as Fareeha Amari snuck out from the dark recesses of the mattress. She stood, her eyes level with Gabriel, sucker in her mouth much like his. In the dark of the room, she stared at him, watching him closely, her eyes piercing as deep as they could into him as if she had the ability to peer into his soul. Gabriel looked back, waiting to see what her next move was.

“Was it… her fault?”

Yes.

Gabriel shook his head and said, “No.”

He had lied, stole and killed for so long that at this point it was simply second nature. It was indeed the easy way out, and in that situation, being honest would have been much better for him in the long run, but that wasn’t his true motive. He saw the place that Fareeha was in, the cycle that was about to begin for her, and would do nothing but cause pain and suffering. With one simple word, he had stopped her from becoming the kid that was against the whole world. If nothing else, then he hoped that his crowning achievement in this life would be to prevent another Gabriel Reyes from being created.

The girl stood there for a moment, thinking about what she had been told. She began to look around, blinking, as she tried to organize her jumbled thoughts. “It’s just…” she began, but then changed to, “I guess…” but then retried with another sentence, breathing heavier and rapidly losing her composure until she began to sob, only repeating the words, “It’s not fair!”

Gabriel wrapped his arms around the girl and held her close, squeezing her head into his shoulder as she cried over the loss of her mother.

He consoled her as she needed, patting her on the back as she balled her hands up and began to
pound them against his chest. But all he could do was look straight ahead, gazing at the walls of her room and the Overwatch posters pinned up on the walls. He saw himself, Jack, her mother, Reinhardt, all of the brave men and women of the organization, and all of the people that had died.

Something had to be done. For as much as the Organization tried to change the world, it just stayed the same. When he became fed up with it, he tried to use his Blackwatch unit to make a difference, but to no avail. So, in that moment, Gabriel Reyes swore that if he wanted to end the cycle, he would need to do something; Not Overwatch, not Blackwatch, not the Bureaucrats, not Jack Morrison, just him.

He didn’t know when, he didn’t know how, all he did know is that it was going to happen, one way or another.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3LKD-XQjEHs
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3LKD-XQjEHs

German: “Und sieh bloß zu, dass ich schon Großmutter bin, wenn wir einander das nächste Mal treffen!”

English: Oh, and see to it that I'm a grandmother before we meet one other on the next occasion!
Switzerland, years ago

Angela stood at the door, her tongue was pushed up to the front of her mouth, tracing the wire and stations of her braces as they led from one side of her mouth to the other. She wore scrubs with a white lab coat on top of them, and had a clipboard with a file folder pushed tight against her chest. She tried to pass the time, ignore what was happening on the other side of the door: but even through a thick sheet of oak, she couldn’t ignore the tension. The rest of the hospital staff walked down the hall and scurried by as fast as they could, trying to ignore what was going on at that doorway.

She felt like a victim of a schoolyard fight, waiting outside of the Principal’s office, listening to her parents and faculty leader conspire together as judge, jury and executioner of her actions and punishment. But that simply wasn’t the case. She was not at fault, nor involved in what was happening within, but she was about to insert herself into the situation, and her unease was a very light price for her part in the tragedy.

The door opened, and Angela stood at attention as a surgeon exited the room and closed the door behind him. He was, likewise, in his work attire, and seeing her at the door caused a very foul look on his face.

“You’re really going to do it, aren’t you?” he asked.

Angela nodded, admitting, “Yes, I feel that it must be done.”

The doctor shook his head and sighed. “Fine, but don’t make them any promises. Don’t say I didn’t warn you, and remember, they just lost their father.”

“The Candle that burns twice as bright lasts half as long.”

-Tyrell, Bladerunner
“I can relate,” she replied. She let the doctor pass and walk down the hall. Angela took a deep breath to prepare herself, reached a hand below her shirt and felt the golden locket hanging around her neck.

When ready, she knocked and then opened the door.

Like she had heard outside, there was uncontrollable sobbing in the room. A middle aged woman was in a chair, sobbing into her hands while two teenagers held her, fighting back their own emotions.

When they saw her, the three tried to compose themselves and see what she wanted. Angela stood by the door with her papers between her hands. Even now, she felt like it was improper to interrupt them, but it had to be done.

“I… that the death certificate?” the teenaged girl asked.

Realizing that she was being addressed, Angela snapped back to life and said, “No… sorry, no. My name is Doctor Angela Ziegler.” All three looked at each other in shock. Even in her state, the mother of the two could hardly believe that a girl that looked no older than her own children was already a doctor. Angela didn’t blame them. Even she was struggling with the fact that the two children were her age as well.

She took a deep breath and continued, “I’ve come to…” she thought fast, “express my condolences. I know how you are feeling at the moment. I lost my parents a very long time ago. I’m sure your father was a very good man.”

The compliment was returned with a salvo of tears and hidden faces. Dr. Ziegler kicked herself for being so upfront.

After a moment, the young man asked, “So, what do you need from us, doctor?”

“I-um… I’ve been working on an experimental form of medicine. I can’t necessarily go into detail on it all, but…” She couldn’t think of a more subtle way of putting it, so she tried the direct approach. “I would like you to release your father’s body so I may use it in testing the treatment.”

The room was silent for a moment. After a while, the young woman asked, “May we… talk it over
“I would like to grant you that courtesy,” Angela answered, “but with murders involving active policemen, protocol dictates that an autopsy should be performed to confirm the cause of death. I’m sorry, but the window of opportunity for me is quite small and we haven’t much time.”

The two children looked at each other, trying to search for words in each other’s eyes, but then their mother sat up and extend her hand, demanding the ledger. Somewhat shocked, Angela offered it forward and watched as she took ahold of the pen and prepared to sign.

Speaking for the first time, the woman looked at the young doctor with tears in her eyes and demanded, “Promise me… Promise me that if I sign this, that you’ll make sure that what happened to me, my family, to Johann… Just promise me Johann’s death won’t be in vain.”

Angela stood in silence struggling to find the right answer, “I can’t promise that,” she admitted. “but with what I’ve been working on, I will promise that I will do my best to make sure that your wishes come true.”

With that, Ms. Miller signed her name on the dotted line and handed the ledger back to Dr. Ziegler. Angela felt the urge to smile, but crushed the temptation. She was about to leave, but felt herself anchored to her spot, treasure in hand but obligated to leave something in return.

After a moment, she finally stated, “Thank you.” But then, with the urge to speak from her heart, she continued, “as I said, I am sure your husband was a great man and father, but I wouldn’t say that Johann is dead. Officer Miller was a hero, and heroes never die.”

It felt powerful, poetic, right, and incredibly stupid all at the same time. Angela closed her eyes in embarrassment for what she had just blurted out, but then was surprised when she found herself wrapped in the arms of the Miller family.

Oasis, Present…

“NIEN!”
Angela reached up into the sky, palm outstretched trying to halt her freefall, but she wasn’t falling anymore. The sun and heavens were now a ceiling and a light bulb. The sensation of falling was gone, gravity now secured her to what felt like a bed, and the only sounds she heard were from her erratic breathing.

She let her arm fall back down to the cot, and then the pain returned. Her eyes were scorched and raw, skin cut and marred, and body felt as if she had been severely beaten; but nothing compared to the pain in her chest. With every beat, her heart felt as if it were about to break in half, the muscle tearing itself apart trying to create circulation in her body. There was a bandage on the wound, but the skin on her chest was raw and burned, and somehow it still felt as if she still had a hole through her.

She groaned, blinking her eyes, and then realized that her HUD was still functioning, words flashing into her vision.

> SYSTEM MALFUNCTION

> USER DEATH IMMINENT

> DIVERTING POWER TO LIFE SUPPORT SYSTEM

> SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL ATTENTION

Although it hurt, she gave a sigh. It seemed that she survived another near-death experience… but was it near death? That dream? Was it real? Real or not, she wasn’t sure which answer scared her the most.

She scraped her hands and feet against the cot, attempting to prop herself up. Almost dying was no excuse to rest, if what she remembered surviving had actually happened, then there was no doubt that her services were needed. Her mind wandered over to Katrina, the poor little girl must have been so scared. Taken by a strange man, bound to a chair in some dark place, stumbling around crying for help but not able to find anyone. She didn’t want to think about what the girl had endured.

She waited, attempting to clear her head and regain her motor skills before standing. While lying on the cot she began to notice something, something that she hadn’t seen before. Floating in the air, unsupported by any wire or device, was a small yellow flame, ethereal in nature and existing on its own accord. She reached up to it and attempted to touch it, but each time her fingers passed through unaffected.

“What are you doing?”
Angela looked around, attempting to locate the voice she heard. It wasn’t until she saw the slight glow of the green shuriken embedded in one of the ceiling lights that she was able to locate her guest.

Genji sat in the dark corner of the room, perched on a chair much like an owl. A hooded sweatshirt covering his torso and head, blocking out the ambient lights of the armor she had attached to him. He blended into the darkness, almost invisible to the inattentive.

“Genji? You… How did you get here? I thought you were in Nepal?” she asked, her voice hoarse and needing a moment to warm up.

“I came as fast as I could when I heard you were in trouble, but it seems I may have not been quick enough.”

“It’s not your fault, Genji.” she replied, wincing in pain as she tried to sit up and had to use the pillows for support.

“I brought you here to the mobile hospital camp that they established after the attack occurred. They said that it was no use, that you were a lost cause. But I wouldn’t let them take you away.” He turned away for a moment and then added disgustedly, “They didn’t even try.”

“Thank you,” she said. Her eyes wandered, looking down at his metallic legs balled up into his chest. Pangs of regret joined the sharp pains in her heavy heart. “Genji, I want to know something.”

“Yes?”

“Please, be honest with me. When you returned to life, after you saw what had happened to you, and that it was… me. Tell me, did you hate me?”

“That’s unimportant. Our pasts can’t be changed, so there’s no use dwelling on it. Save your strength, doctor.” He looked out the window, the green diodes in his eyes tracing the way as he refused to look at her.

“Please Genji, I need to know.”
The ninja looked down at the floor before reluctantly raising his head back up to look into Angela’s eyes. “Not as much as I hated myself. I was a different man back then, a man I don’t want to remember. It’s only after we lose what we value most that we learn who we really are and what truly matters.”

“Thank you, Genji.”

“No. Thank you, Angela.”

The Doctor raised her throbbing hands up to her face, tracing her burning eyes with her fingertips and pulling dust and debris away from them. Feeling as if she was about to pass out from exhaustion, Angela asked, “How… how long was I…” She thought of the correct way to describe her near-death, “Incapacitated?”

Genji thought on it for a moment, finally answering, “I am not sure. Possibly… four hours. I thought you were gone at first, but your breathing became stronger over time. About a half an hour ago you began mumbling to yourself and sobbing.”

“Sobbing?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“What was I saying?”

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t understand it.”

“Was it all a dream?” Angela thought to herself. She tried to think harder, to remember her last experience, but her head hurt and mind felt as if it were about to somehow break in two. After she gave up on pondering her out-of-body experience, she returned to her patient and thanked him, but then added, “If you happen to remember anything, please tell me.” He nodded in acknowledgement, but after another moment, Angela requested, “And… can I trust that you won’t tell anyone that I was… crying.”

Almost automatically, Genji said, “Did you ever tell anyone about the nightmares of my brother?”
The doctor chuckled, coughing on flem and dust in her throat, but smiled and replied, “What nightmares?”

The two sat in silence, the clock ticking the time away. Angela slowly tested her senses, not sure as to the extent of her injuries, but wanting to do something to help rather than be helped. Eventually, her gaze returned to the floating flame in the room, her mind sticking to its image with great curiosity. She had seen it before, she wanted to understand it but in this circumstance she lacked the equipment and ability to properly test it.

Then she had an idea, a memory from something either cooked up in the depths of madness, or simply too bizarre to be made up.

“Dr. Ziegler, I need to ask you something.”

“I’m sorry, Genji, but may I ask you something first?” she replied, not letting her eyes off the yellow flame.

“By all means.”

“Was there someone in here before you brought me?” she asked.

“Yes. They had been pulling bodies from the rubble all night. Everyone is accounted for now, but when I brought you here they had just declared a man dead and were taking him away to their makeshift morgue.”

“Oh my god.” she thought, “This is it, the human soul…”

“Now tell me, doctor. They told me that The Reaper summoned you to the auditorium, but when I found you, you were almost dead near the main hall. I found you because I heard someone call for help.” The doctor looked down at Genji, seeing his visor on and a glowing green shuriken in his hand. “How did you get there, and who hurt you?”

Angela’s mouth was open, mind unable to think of anything except closing her eyes and putting her blaster up to her chest. She couldn’t tell him the truth, and no simple lie would satisfy him on the
means of her death other than the identity of The Reaper.

Three hearty knocks were heard from the door. “Hello, coming through!”

The door opened, and a big blue mass of fur filled the doorway, ever so slowly expanding into the room, until finally it toppled over, revealing Dr. Winston T. Gorilla on his back. He picked himself up and said, “Oh, goodness, Angela. I came as fast as I could. I’m so glad to see that you’re OK.” The giant space gorilla turned, noticing Genji in the room, sitting on the chair. “Oh, Mr. Shimada, I’m glad to see you got my transmission… wow, how’d you get here so fast?”

Suddenly, three violent knocks shook the room, followed by someone shouting, “Open this damn door or I’ll kick it down!”

Hastily, Winston moved out of the way, and as soon as he cleared its path a hearty kick blew the door opened. Fareeha Amari, wearing a Helix officer uniform jumped in and slammed the door behind her. “Oh dear god, I came as fast as I could. Angela, are you OK?” The Egyptian woman looked around the room, seeing the ninja and the astronaut standing beside her. “Genji? Winston? What are you doing here?”

Before anyone could answer, a blue flash appeared in the hall and then in the room, revealing Lena Oxton standing before them. The English woman was doubled over, panting with her hands on her knees. She attempted to speak through her labored breaths, but then held up a finger asking for a moment. She disappeared, and then reappeared once more, downing a can of cola –finger still up to hold their reaction- and then disappearing once more only to reappear again.

“Sorry I’m late, I came as fast as I could. I-” Tracer looked at Mercy on the bed, wings broken, clothes in tatters, blood covering a dark red spot where her heart was. The normally happy-go-lucky woman froze, pulled off her goggles as her eyes watered and her lips began to tremble. Immediately, she broke out into an uncontrollable sob as she finally got a look at what had happened to the woman that she had spent years despising so much.

The crying stopped and Tracer’s face grew red as she put her goggles back on and demanded, “Who did this to you? I swear to god when I get my hand on ’em I’ll…I’ll…” She proceeded to throw Queensbury style jabs and hooks, not stopping until one connected with the gorilla standing next to her.

“Ouch.” The huge gorilla said.
“Oh, Hi love, didn’t even notice you there!”

Angela cleared her throat, moving to the side of the bed. “Everyone, we don’t have much time.”

“Tracer… how’d you get here?” Winston asked

The doctor tried to interrupt again, “Winston, did you bring-”

“Nothing a good pair of legs and a few time powers provided by everyone’s favorite ape can’t fix!” Answered Lena with a smirk.

“Everyone! Quiet down-”

“But Lena… I thought you were in the UK? You ran the entire way to Iraq?” Fareeha said.

“Please, everyon-”

“You bet! Wait, Fareeha? Is that really you? You’re all grown up-”

“SCHWEIGEN!”

Everyone stopped, slowly turning to see Angela standing beside the cot. “I appreciate your concern, but I have lives to save. Either help me or get out of my way.” Everyone went silent, stepping aside to give her a clear path to the door. “Good. Now someone, bring me my staff.”

Winston piped up “I brought the Mk. I with me from Gibraltar, in case you needed it.”

“Good. Bring it to me.”

Lena zipped out of the room, only to reappear again a moment later, the Mk I Caduceus staff in hand. “This one?” Lena stood with the old white and blue staff. It was a little dusty, but its paint and
condition were still fine. Angela reached forward and grabbed it, wrapping her hand around the
attached wrist loop to test it. The HUD notified her that it had detected a linked device, and although
several generation’s newer, the prototype unit synchronized with the aged equipment. With her
thumb, she primed the tumbler and the head began spinning. Three pylons at the forward point of the
device began spinning, ready to apply the medicine to a target. Inside, the large vial of nanobiotic
juice -now upgraded to a vaporizer on current models- began bubbling. The cocktail of healing
remedies and nanites was fresh and ready inside the unused ampules.

Satisfied with the condition her compatriot had kept her old tools, Angela took a step forward and
winced. She brought the back end of the staff down to the ground and caught herself before she
could collapse. Her friends all jumped to help, but she halted them with a sign from her free hand.
She looked down, feeling the sharp pain from her side where she had removed the rebarb from her
hip. She could feel the blood dripping down her leg, and clinging to the ruined dress slacks and her
skin. She could have definitely used a self-applied blast from the staff, but she couldn’t waste a single
drop, and time was growing short.

Baring her teeth, she set her foot down and fought through the pain. She stood on her own, defying
her body’s demands to quit. Her four guests stood around her, none of them dared to say a word, but
their eyes and the way they looked at her said more than enough. They could stare all they wanted,
but she wouldn’t stop.

“Take me to the morgue.” she demanded.

Their motley crew of a half deceased cybernetic ninja, time traveling Englishwoman, Egyptian
soldier, and Moon-born gorilla, walked down the street made between tents and mobile compartment
trailers. Survivors and staff from the Hospital evacuation stopped what they were doing and stepped
aside in awe. All had heard the regretful news of Doctor Ziegler’s untimely demise, but were now
seeing the woman standing on her own.

Angela ignored the whispers as she limped by with her four escorts. She instead talked to the air,
accessing the suit’s diagnostics.

“Valkyrie; Status: Revive Protocols” she asked, and waited for the words to show up in front of her
vision.
REVIVE PROTOCOL
STATUS: CHARGED (100%)
That was good news for a change. She read on.
WARNING: USER CONDITION: CRITICAL
SYSTEM MALFUNCTION
SEEK MEDICAL ATTENTION IMMEDIATELY
She growled and ignored the warning. “Valkyrie; Simulate: Revive Protocol ”
REVIVE PROTOCOL: TESTING
STANDBY
TEST COMPLETE: SYSTEM MALFUNCTION
CATALYST INOPERABLE
INSUFFICIENT POWER
HUMAN GENOME DATA COPY CORRUPT
EXECUTION FAILED
That wasn’t good. It looked like she was going to have to do this the hard way. More text popped up.
WARNING: USER CONDITION CRITICAL
SYSTEM MALFUNCTION
VITALS: ALARMING
USER DEATH IMMINENT
SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL ATTENTION
She ignored the warning, saying, “Valkyrie; Override: disable user monitoring. Divert Life-support to Revive Protocol.”
OVERRIDE ACKNOWLEDGED
DISABLING USER HEALTH MONITOR
DIVERTING LIFE SUPPORT TO REVIVE PROTOCOL
STATUS: COMPLETE

Immediately, Angela fell to the floor, the wound to her hip being much worse than she had imagined. She landed on her hands and knees, but did not release her staff. The heavy iron rich taste of her blood stained her tongue, and she felt it drip from her open mouth and land on the asphalt. There
wasn’t much time left. She could feel her compatriots dive to save her, but she preemptively dashed away their concerns. Although the others recoiled at her demands, Winston stood steadfast, placing his arm around her wounded back.

She felt it and said, “Nien! I’m fine.”

“I know,” the big ape insisted, “just let me help you up.”

She relented, and the gorilla wrapped his arm around her, allowing her to take the weight off the wounded hip, and lean on him. He kept walking on one of his knuckles with her in his other arm.

________________________________________________________

Switzerland, years ago…

Within the hour, Angela had assembled all of her late father’s custom built equipment into a private examination room. The specialized one-of-a-kind equipment was stationed around a table while a body rest underneath a bright surgical lamp. Multiple cameras were placed around the room, and Dr. Angela Ziegler was ready at the helm of the operation. The door was locked to give her some privacy for her special experiment.

She stood at the dead man’s side, leaning her weight on the table, eyes closed and silent. When a loved one passes, most people find that harvesting their corpse or using the body for research is sacrilegious and disgraceful. Angela could empathize with them and understand why; But there was something about service personnel that was different. Firefighters, Policemen, soldiers, there was something different about them and their loved ones that made parting with the remains of their family easier. Maybe it was a conversation they had beforehand that allowed them to know that this was what they wanted when their time came, or simply working in close proximity with death eased their minds on the inevitability of their passing.

In the case of this subject, the prospect of protecting or preventing the loss of further men and women in the line of duty was what inspired their family to release their loved one into Angela’s care. And so, Angela closed her eyes as she stood at the side of the dead man. She wasn’t meditating, deep in thought, or preparing herself. She was praying. Thanking him for his sacrifice, and blessing him for safe passage into the afterlife.
When ready, she opened her eyes and addressed the camera, “Subject name is Officer Johann Miller. Declared deceased, today, May 28th 2066 at approximately 1355. Cause of death was determined to be trauma due to multiple gunshot wounds to the abdomen and chest, which lead to hypovolemic shock and puncture to the lungs and sternum. Bullets and remaining shrapnel was removed during surgery in the attempt to save his life.”

She traced the wounds on his body. Officer Miller had his shirt and armor removed during the procedure. At this point the blood had stopped flowing and his skin was slowly turning white. Angela activated her equipment, bubbling a golden fluid in an I.V. bag which was connected to a drip and inserted into the corpse.

Like the equipment, the procedure that had been passed down to her was once the idea of her late father. Although it had taken some time, and retracing her father’s progress, Dr. Ziegler had finally realized her father’s work and began to make it a reality. But the problem she had come in the form of finding a good test subject. When it was in a form that could be used in broad spectrum testing, she only had limited success using research cadavers. At its current stage, it seemed that using flesh that was long since dead wouldn’t be useful before she knew the procedure would work on the living. Likewise, animals were too different from humans to be reliably experiment on. That only left her with one other option; herself.

Being that the first experimental strands were based specifically on her, from the gift that she had inherited at birth, it came to her mind that if Nanobiotics would ever succeed, then she would be the most proactive and symbiotic habitat for the healing machines to work on. With her own augmented healing and metabolism based on her own specific nanites in her cells, the manufactured unbiased samples should reasonably work and assist in keeping her in good health.

After several nights of cutting herself on her extremities, intentionally burning herself on cookware, and smashing her fingers with a hammer, her hypothesis came true; but that was only the first step.

Although her micro sized machine medicine seemed to work correctly in theory, the hard part was experimenting on someone that the procedure wasn’t directly based on. And as it wasn’t, she couldn’t reasonably ask for volunteers or experiment on the living, for fear of what a flesh targeting microscopic agent could do to an unfortunate patient. Although tragic, Officer Miller’s sacrifice was something that she had been waiting for patiently, and fighting for diligently, for quite a long time.

With a lifetime and a half of work and careful implementation, she envisioned a world where what had once been the panicked affair of saving a life and months of rehabilitation, could be reduced to seconds of healing on the spot; be it in an ambulance or in the midst of a warzone. And with the gracious donation of the Millers, this was going to be much less painful than breaking her own fingers.
Although the man was dead, his body and functions had not expired yet. Angela watched as the punctured area had the color return to it as the flesh revitalized. While writing down notes and narrating what was happening, Angela prepared another machine. This one held a large vial of the yellow nanobiotics that lead down a nozzle to a vaporizer. At the vaporizer was a catalyst, a tesla coil of yellow electricity, and a tumbler that activated the vaporized gasses and the medical machines within, preparing them for their purpose of healing. Once it had been freed of its liquid state, it traveled down another hose and out of a nozzle and fan.

Lighting a crucible being fueled by a small propane tank and beginning a gentle ebb of juices to the vaporizer, she took the hose and led it to the open wounds on the man’s chest, and watched as the yellow mist entered and spread around the hole. She waited patiently, not noticing any changes to the hole, until she saw the precipice around the opening begin to bubble as the ripped flesh began to heal. She grabbed a camera and zoomed in closer, excitedly narrating what was happening as the flesh was healed and replicated, filling up the opening.

She was overjoyed, excited, only wishing that her parents were here to share the experience with her. Unfortunately, her excitement left her too focused on the wound and blind to the world around her.

Angela was an exceptional example of how far education alone could take someone, but there are some things that can only be experienced rather than taught, one of which is Rigor Mortis. Rigor Mortis, “The Stiffness of Death” occurs after a body dies, the last thrashes of life as they leave the body, nerve endings tightening as they fight against the release of death.

At that moment, Angela was leaned over the body, excitedly experimenting on the extent that her work could go, and using another hand to support herself against the table. She didn’t notice her wrist in the grasp of the dead man’s hand as it tightened and grabbed ahold of her.

Feeling a vice unexpectedly locked against her hand, the teenage doctor jumped at the sensation. She slipped onto the floor, knocking her homemade vaporizer and mister down. The open flame set a nearby sanitary curtain on fire, and soon after, smoke began to fill the room.

Panic overtook Angela, and she ran to try and save her research and gear as the fire alarms signaled for the evacuation of the hospital. “NO!” she shouted, “No No No!” She tried to pull the open flame away, but dropped the stand and shattered the vial of nanobiotic fluid against the floor, vaporizing all of the volatile medicine into the air. She jumped away, only succeeding in also knocking over her cameras and IV bags.

Still panicking, she ran for a nearby fire extinguisher and grabbed ahold of it. She held it in her hands and ran towards the propane flame, but tripped as a cord was wrapped around her foot. She watched in slow motion as the big red extinguisher flew through the air and landed bottom first on the experimental equipment, and as the hard metal bottom met and crushed the catalyst that programmed the vaporized medicine into a hundred pieces.
There was a flash, and Angela shrieked because she thought she was about to die. But whatever happened, it didn’t feel like death. There was a bright yellow light, and the spontaneous activation of all of the Nanobiotic fluid in the air and on the floor filled her vision. In that moment, she felt euphoric, invincible almost. The sleeves of her labcoat were burning, but she couldn’t feel it. The skin on her hands, that she used to shield her face were glowing; she could see it on the exposed sleeves and through her blue silicone gloves. It felt foreign, but natural, amazing and frightening all at the same time.

However, it ended as fast as it started, and Angela was still trapped in a burning examination room with her legs caught in wires. But before she could panic again, a shirtless man ran to her side, picked up the fire extinguisher and pulled the pin, smothering the fire and covering the room in ABC particles.

Crisis averted, Angela untangled herself and stood up, checking her wrist for embers of the flame or any burn marks.

“Are you alright, Miss?”

“Yes,” she answered, “thank you.” Her wrists were covered with first and second degree burns. She wrapped her fingers around the tender areas and squeezed as the pain went away, making them disappear as if it didn’t happen. Hopefully, she could keep them hidden from prying eyes before any of her colleagues became suspicious of her recovery.

She surveyed the carnage, trying to deduce what could be salvaged and what she would have to replace, disappointed at the chaos that had ruined such a wonderful breakthrough. Her gaze shifted around the room, until her eyes drifted to the door. It was in that moment that she remembered that she had locked herself in, and if what she was seeing was correct, the door was still locked.

If the door was locked, and she was the only person in there, then why exactly was there a shirtless man running around in the room?

She slowly turned, mind racing, as she timidly looked to see who was standing behind her.

“ZOMBIE!”
Present…

The morgue had been set up nearby. The explosion had made finding and recovering the deceased difficult, but after hours of searching all were accounted for. The bodies of the SWAT team, Medical Center staff, and Oasis Police had been pulled from the rubble and set aside as fast as possible, in the search for survivors trapped within. The Ziegler Botanical Gardens were nearby to the site of the attack and had been unscathed, the departed had been piled up within until a better idea could be produced for them.

The squad of Overwatch Alums proceeded through the shanty of temporary hospital shelters and entered through the brick archway into the gardens.

The gardens, paid for during the Medical Center’s construction by a benevolent sponsor and dedicated by a loving daughter, were a place of Zen. Great trees and vibrant flowers contrasted the grandiose and neo-cosmopolitan architecture of Oasis, to allow a quiet, down to earth return to nature. Attached to the rehabilitation and recovery wings, the gardens were to be a pristine place for the ill and injured to escape the confines of their rooms and enjoy the fresh air.

Now, the gardens were a graveyard. Pots had been knocked aside and beds of flowers were trampled. Filled bodybags were laid out on the ground, their occupants awaiting transport to a more appropriate location. Ice trucks had been ordered into the park, their refrigerators holding occupants who still had salvageable organs. An ambulance had been positioned near an exit, intended to transport any survivors to safety, but like the rest of the night, the EMT’s stood outside smoking and standing guard over the deceased.

The doctor couldn’t explain it, but she could see them as she approached. Like dying flames flickering in the night, the candlelight vigil of souls burned away on dying wisps, slowly preparing to depart the world for eternity. Angela knew, it had to be now or never.

Mercy asked Winston to let her down and he complied. The rest of the group stood aside. Angela walked along the body bags and stopped at the center of the makeshift tombs.

Her body demanded her to stop, to rest from the ordeal, but her mind refused. She could rest later, because she knew that she couldn’t live with herself if she failed. “You can do this, Angela,” she reassured herself.
She lowered her staff and adjusted the head, setting it to maximum flow, and then set the stream to automatic. Like a baton, she began to twirl the staff, starting in front of her, then switching to her side, and then to the other. Like burning incense, the heavy vapors lingered in the air and began to create a mist. Her audience watched the display, confused at first. They lost sight of the doctor as the smoke grew thicker and became a yellow fog. Within the yellow gas, all they could see was her shadow performing in the dark, and the light of the Caduceus staff dancing like a fairy in the night sky.

The heft and momentum of her equipment changing the weight on her injured side was excruciating, each twirl made her leg want to give away and clutch her side, but she couldn’t submit. An entire canister of Nanobiotics was being dispersed around her, but it was all blank, misguided, waiting in standby for instructions. All she could do was bare her teeth, close her eyes, and think of what she would do afterwards. Maybe a retreat in Vienna? Maybe a little rehab in Venice? Or maybe just a nice warm beach somewhere on the coast of Mexico? At this point, getting a chocolate milkshake sounded rewarding enough for finishing the ordeal.

“I’ve never seen this method before,” observed Winston, adjusting his glasses and stepping back as the yellow cloud’s expanding mass approached.

Angela kept twirling, faster, harder, spinning it over her head to push every last particle that she could. Diverting life support to Nanobiotic generation was a fleeting hope to compensate for the damage to the system. The ever thickening cloud was a good sign, but that wasn’t enough. She only had one chance, so she had to use as much as she could. When lives were on the line, there was no cutting corners. She recalled her meeting; someone, be it father or God, had demanded she return to the living for there was more work for her to do. But they would have to wait. Whatever it was that they needed her to do, she would be more than willing to oblige, but on her time and when she was ready.

The blood began oozing from her injuries again. Now, she could feel the damp stickiness of the plasma coming out from her chest wound with each rotation of her staff. There was no need to fret over the damage to the genome map. After all, why use a copy when she was the original? Gabriel may have been right about her intuition and dedication, using people to test the extent to what she could do and protecting her father’s image, but he was wrong about one thing. Walther Ziegler didn’t create a monster, she was a gift. She had accepted what she was and understood that it was done out of love, not just for her, but for all of humanity. She was handed the keys to unlock the most sacred of knowledges, and she felt obligated to use it.

She halted her tribute to the dead, standing upright, the head of the staff facing down with both hands on the shaft. Almost done; almost there. She smiled. A beach? A Clinic? A Resort? Relaxing? Unwinding? Disconnecting? Here, among the deceased was where she belonged. Everything else was a lie. She would have been bored after a day anyway.
She reared the staff back and brought it down, falling to one knee as her wounded hip ruptured and reopened.

A crowd had gathered to see what was happening and recoiled as the gentle yellow nanobiotic cloud ignited like a blinding sun. What they then saw was the Angel of Mercy, kneeling before the deceased and blessing them for their sacrifices.

As the Nanobiotic catalyst broke, Angela felt the euphoria of spontaneous relief. Within each of her cells, all of the organic nanites awoke, reacting and glowing with the spark of life that woke them from their dormant state. Great golden wings formed from the destroyed remnants of the Valkyrie’s prosthetics, and like an army of angels, her mass of trillions of microscopic blessings stood at attention.

She looked forward into the bright abyss, unflinching, staring defiantly against the blinding light as she challenged the darkness of despair, the wrath of hatred, the evils of man, and the gluttonous force that stole away the lives of God’s children before their time had come. She addressed her disciples with one command, “Heroes never die.”

The nanites swarmed with only one objective; to consume. They scoured the wreckage for any organic material: from shattered bone fragments, drops of blood, ruptured organs, anything. They sought out the dead like vultures, congregating within the deceased and rejuvenating any salvageable materials that they could find; using the damaged tissue to reproduce, replicating DNA to fill in holes and becoming the missing pieces of the cadavers, if need be.

Light began to expand from the insides of the trucks. The body bags glowed with the activity within. And when it was all said and done, Angela looked up at her work and smiled, finally letting go.

Fareeha turned to look at the heroes that she grew up with, checking to see that they were as amazed as she was. “I had heard stories about Angela’s ability to resurrect the dead…” she said, “but that… I never thought I’d ever see it myself.” The light began to fade from the garden as the mist dissipated.

Lena added, “I’d never seen her try one this big before.” she began biting on her nails and looked up at Winston for reassurance “Did it work?”

The gorilla was silent, studying the scene intently.

The light faded, and the miracle was over. The crowd waited on baited breath, not knowing what to
expect. Doubt began to set in, the night returned its stillness.

Slowly, a bodybag began rumbling, then shaking like an insect in a cocoon until a hand exploded out from inside the plastic, ripping the stretched material. Two hands reached through the hole and burst open, allowing a man in a ripped police uniform to sit up and touch the spot on his chest where a life ending cavity once was.

One by one, the dead rose. A humanoid omnic unzipped his bag from within and flexed the fingers to a hand that he thought was lost. Another bag rolled around violently, until a knife punctured the fabric from within, allowing a SWAT officer to breathe freely again. The EMTs looked at each other, a cigarette falling from one’s mouth. A loud banging came from within one of the ice trucks, and the two began opening doors, releasing the captives from their icy crypts.

It was a beautiful sight to behold. Most were speechless, some began to applaud. The quick witted among the audience ran forward to support the confused surviving victims. It wasn’t until Genji noticed who was missing from the scene that they discovered Angela collapsed lifelessly in the grass, suit depleted. Looking as content as a woman could be at the moment of her death.

The Past…

The Millers were crying once more; but instead mourning the death of their father, they instead cried tears of joy over reuniting with him when all had seemed lost.

The man, in a cot now, sat up and held his wife, son and daughter close, EKGs and an IV made sure his surprising return to life stayed that way.

On the opposite side of the observation window were two doctors, the one that had declared him dead and the other that declared him alive. The more senior of the two turned to his much younger compatriot and said, “Never in all my years of practice have I been happier to have to correct a death certificate.”

“I can only imagine how they feel right now,” Angela replied, but couldn’t pull her eyes from the happy scene in the room before her.

While still wanting to compliment the young doctor on her work, the man felt that he needed to speak the obvious to the novice beside him. “What you’ve done today is nothing short of a miracle;
but you must not let it grow into an ego. You won’t always be that fortunate.”

“Oh, believe me, I understand,” She answered, “to be honest, I still haven’t the slightest clue what happened myself. Hopefully my equipment captured enough information for me to determine how this happened and study it further.”

“Well, after we give them some time, I think that more than a few people would like to have a word with Officer Miller and yourself. So, I would get prepared to become quite popular for the next few days.”

Angela shook her head, “Just the thing to help with my stage-fright.”

“You’ll do fine. Get some rest and come back when your head is clear.” The older doctor turned to leave, but stopped, adding, “By the way, I talked to the widow earlier before… it all happened. She told me that you said something that caught my attention. Do you happen to remember what it was?”

Angela felt herself become slightly flushed at the reminder of the line that she had made up. She shook her head once more and said, “It’s nothing. Something I just thought up at the spur of the moment.” She turned, following her coworker to leave the Millers to themselves. “It’ll never catch on.”

The doctor disagreed, “You never know. After a while, it may grow on you.”

“Whoever saves one life saves the world entire.”

-Talmud
The lights in the room were kept very low, barely allowing the shape of objects to be visible to the casual eye. A rack of small habitat chambers stood against a wall, atop one of the countertops. It held sixteen chambers, arranged in a four by four configuration that could be pulled out when needed, and had enough space to comfortably house a small animal. The resident of the bottom left cell was an albino lab rat with a pink collar labeled “Marie”. She was a solitary rat. She had a green dish for her daily seeds, a fluffy bunch of cloth to sleep on, a shiny copper bell to play with, and a small water bottle and dropper to drink from when she was thirsty.

It had been a long day of being a rat, it took a surprisingly large amount of energy to squeak the secret song of rats, or chime her bell to herself, or simply rummage and re-fluff her bed until it was perfect. She was tired, so she didn’t see it coming until it was too late.

The compartment was opened and a hand reached inside. Marie was sound asleep, dreaming of munching down on chopped carrots and cherry tomatoes. It wasn’t until a tight wrap of silicone grabbed her by her plump body when she awoke and began squirming, trying to run on her short stubby legs, but she had no traction. She squeaked, crying out to fellow rats to wake, but no answer came in response.

She knew what that meant, and she didn’t like it.

Marie was set on a slab and secured to the spot with a tight leather belt over her side. She tried to squeeze herself out, but it was no use. The strap was too tight. Soon after she was secured, she felt the hands again. The strange texture of plastic gloves pinched down on her skin and pulled its rolling mass up into the air, exposing the fatty area by her shoulder for a sharp point to puncture through, and then leave a moment later.

Marie began to panic, she wanted to break free, run, escape. Her panting breaths increased and her heart beat so fast, it could have jumped out of her body.

Then the hands came back, but it was different this time. This time they reached down where the hurt was and gently squeezed it, causing the pain to go away. It felt… good. The thumb began scratching the top of her head, tracing around the base of her ear and getting that one spot that she never could
get on her own. “This isn’t so bad…” she thought. The loving scratches increased, calming her little nerves down. She eased up, exposing more of her neck and turning her head aside, and as she wished, the thumb followed the rolls down her neck to her jawline.

Something about this was familiar. She remembered this… but she didn’t. She tried to think about why it felt like this had already happened once, but she was too tired. As the thumb massaged her neck, and the hand comforted the pain in her back, Marie slowly closed her red eyes and drifted back off to a deep sleep she would never wake up from.

The hand kept rubbing, gently caressing the rat as its heart rate became slower and slower until finally it was nothing at all. After it perished, the hand released its captive. Slowly, Dr. Angela Ziegler leaned back on her stool, pulled her blue silicone gloves off and set them aside. Without looking, she reached a hand to the side of the workspace into a bowl of yellow potato chips coated in Mediterranean sea salt and half covered in chocolate that was as dark as the longest night of December, and then put it into her mouth. She licked the leftover fragments of goodness from her fingers, as she munched on the crispy chip. She was wearing her full Valkyrie suit and Halo at the moment, wings folded to keep them from bumping into other equipment in the lab.

The Doctor sat and waited, watching the clock tick away on the Rolex watch on her wrist until the next development happened. Not before too long, a yellow corporeal energy began to drift up from Marie’s corpse.

Angela flipped through the windows on her personal computer, checking to see that the recording programs were functioning. She flipped her mother’s glasses up, making sure she was seeing things right, and then walked over to the hardware set up around her workstation, double checking that they were all set to their finest settings. Everything was checking out fine, but the results weren’t there.

Angela waited and waited, reading the results as they came through, but felt a dissatisfied frown sag across her face. She could see it, the soul was there. But nothing, ranging from her Halo’s HUD to her numerous machines recording all measurable variances in the observable world, could record it. She took her glasses off and gave a sigh, rubbing the corners of her eyelids with a finger. She reached for her bowl once more, feeling for the hardened smooth sensation of the chocolate, or the roughness of a thin, weightless crispy potato chip, but as she tapped around the insides of the bowl, all she felt was the hard porcelain.

Angela looked over and saw the bowl was empty. She checked her watch again, this time inspecting the hours and minutes, and was shocked to see what the time it actually was. If she hadn’t pulled her head up from her work, she would have completely forgotten the time and missed her other engagement.

On August 19, 2074, at approximately 1730 local time, Doctor Angela Ziegler was pronounced dead.
on scene by a colleague in the Citystate of Oasis. Upon hearing of this revelation, a priest was summoned to deliver Last Rites. It seems the reports of her death were slightly exaggerated, but nothing compared to the stories of what would happen next. To the surprise of all, Dr. Ziegler was next seen walking through the makeshift relief camp outside of the destroyed Conference center. The miracle of her survival spread like wildfire, but that paled in comparison to what happened next. The onlookers, intrigued by her sudden resurrection, watched as the doctor made her way to where the deceased were being kept, and did what was thought to have been impossible. The fact, only surely known by survivors from her blessing and official records hidden behind the vaults of the UN’s bureaucracy; she raised the dead. At the end of the day, The Asclepius Medical Center Terrorist Attack resulted in the mobilization of 100 peacekeepers, the evacuation of 89 patients, the destruction of over 6 million dollars’ worth of property, and resulted in zero fatalities.

Soon after, Angela died again, but this time the excess of available medical staff and equipment allowed for her prognosis to not be as hastily decided.

She stood up from her stool, saved her work on mobile drives, deactivated the machines, and was about to head towards the exit when one last thing stopped her.

Marie, lying belted to the slab, dead. It was a shame, another dead rat, another failure; her life lost just for Angela to find other means that didn’t work. It was a shame that such a good lab rat had to be wasted.

Well… not yet at least.

Angela slipped silicone gloves over her suit’s built in covers and unstrapped Marie from the observation suite. She carried her over to the sink and turned both the warm and cold dials till the water was a gentle lukewarm. She gave the albino rat a quick rinse and then pumped the nozzle on a bottle of animal soap nearby, lathering it in her hands, then rubbing the suds into Marie’s white coat. After lathering and rinsing once more, Angela dried her victim off in a small towel and brought her back to the habitats. There, she took a small wire brush and began combing Marie’s fur, starting with her head and making long strokes back across her frame to her tail.

Her eyes wandered over to a nearby photograph by her work station. The framed picture featured a bearded man sitting on a stool, a colleague from Oasis who took over her responsibilities while she went on leave. Sitting next to him, on an examination table, was Katrina, her pupils glowing yellow with the robotic medicine within as she gazed with wide eyes at the bright new world around her. Angela wished she could have been there to cut the bandages herself, but the videoconference would suffice. The little girl’s reaction to seeing what an angel really looked like was more than enough for Angela.

The Doctor’s gaze drifted even more, looking at another, older picture keeping her recent addition
company. At first glance -even by her own admission- it looked to be her, lying on a gurney, and wearing a hospital gown and appearing absolutely exhausted, but at the same time, filled with a sense of joy that she couldn’t describe with normal words. In “her” arms was a little newborn baby, wrapped up in a sheet and taking in the new world around her. It was obvious was the picture was, but something about it caused her pause and to ponder what she didn’t immediately see about the framed photo, and it wasn’t until days later that she realized that this would be the last thing her father would see before leaving his lab for the night that she realized what had eluded her mind.

When all was done, she slipped Marie back into the bottom left most compartment of the habitats and stepped back.


The suit complied, unfolding the wings and lighting the room once more. She raised her hand and balled it into a fist, gradually opening it as more yellow energies began manifesting within her palm until it overflowed from her fingers. She raised it up, presenting it for anyone to see, and then released the energy. It split into sixteen smaller flames that found their way into each of the compartments in the racks.

Slowly, the apartment of rats began to come back to life, little twitches of noses and lungs that were filled with oxygen again. Small groans and shorts squeaks began to be heard, testing dormant vocal cords as they all came back to life.

Satisfied that the new Revive Protocol was still performing with flying colors, Angela closed her wings. She gave each rat a thin slice of apple, for all being good test subjects before leaving for the night.

She exited the lab and locked the door behind her. She ascended the stairs and entered into the kitchen. Although she was fully dressed and wearing shoes, she couldn’t shake the feeling of how cold it was in the dark kitchen. She had been gone from home for so long that she had forgotten how cold the winters were.

Home…

Here, the city mansion in Zurich, was her first home. When she thought of it, she really hadn’t spent much time here, only her childhood years and the beginning of her schooling before being sent off to boarding school and her parents’ untimely death. She had come back a few times, with her Aunt’s family when they would use it to vacation in the city every now and then, and she had returned after obtaining her Medical Degree and to finish what her father had started, but to be honest she didn’t
really recognize the place.

The first time she returned home after graduating, it took her a day of exploring to find that her father had turned the wine cellar into his laboratory, and she kind of recalled where her childhood bedroom was. But beyond that, going through the old mansion was like exploring a deserted island. Each room was like exploring the relics of inhabitants long gone.

Angela walked to the counter and approached a small, plastic crate. Inside were two large paper bags, wrapped up and secured with staples. She shook one to make sure that the contents within were still there. She picked up the bags and carried them with her down the halls.

She could have moved anywhere, but decided to return to Zurich. It would require the least amount of energy. She still had rights to the mansion, the lab was already operational, and she wouldn’t have to bother with landlords or house hunting before settling in. It was also nice to be back in a familiar city and have her extended family less than a day’s drive away. She had lived in many places before, but this was the only place that felt like home. Sadly the people who made it that way were gone, but now, at least she wasn’t alone.

Lights were coming into the hall from one of the side rooms. Angela stopped at the door and set her packages on the ground. She entered the room –what she recalled to be a sort of sitting room for entertaining guests- and found it to be dark, except for the TV that showed a man shouting into a microphone at the top of his lungs.

With silent steps, she approached the couch that had been dragged in front of the TV. She discerned that the show being played was of professional wrestling, with banging and clanging coming from men throwing themselves at each other and impacting with the wrestling mat, while a commentator seemed to have lost his mind narrating what was going on.

Angela stood by the couch and peeked down, seeing her “caretaker” sprawled out on the couch. Lena Oxton was lying on her chest, the Chronoal Accelerator over a white T shirt while otherwise only wearing a pair of blue underwear with the image on the Union Jack across the butt.

“Goodness, girl, have some class!” Angela thought. The doctor walked around the room, found a blanket, and brought it over to cover her guest’s sleeping form.

After the incident, Angela’s friends had stayed for a while to make sure she was safe and recovering properly, but gradually they had to return to their previous commitments. All except for Lena. When talking about what she was going to do next, Angela suggested that she may go back to her old childhood home to recuperate, and Lena said she would “Meet her there.” It wasn’t until a few hours
later that Angela got a call from a strange phone number asking for the address of said home.

Angela turned the TV off and returned to her sleeping guest. Lena had appointed herself to the duty of taking care of Angela. Granted, she was messy, loud, couldn’t cook, clean, speak nor read German, was too unfocused to wash the laundry, shop, and was clumsy. But it was nice to know that in some way, the two of them were back to normal after all these years. Angela had to admit as well, that it was nice to have someone else around in the house.

Looking at the sleeping Lena, Angela began to think. Winston was a genius for creating the Chronoal Accelerator to cure Lena’s condition, but he had done so in a rather crude manner. Angela had heard of the side effects and shortcomings that the device had, and being both male and a gorilla, Winston lacked the… *finesse* that a woman would need. Angela began to ponder, tapping a finger on her lip as she kept thinking, taking advantage of having Lena here could allow her to—

“Stop,” she thought, “not now.”

She left her guest to slumber and exited from the room. Picking up her packages she continued down the hall. It was late, the automatic lights had already turned themselves off at this hour, but the darkness didn’t stop her. She entered the main foyer and approached the front door. She set her packages at a nearby table by the entryway and opened up the coat closet. Although only a few people would be out at this time, it would still be alarming for the average civilian to see her in the angelic military suit, so to remedy the suspicion of any passersby thinking she was a lunatic who thought it was Halloween, she needed to cover up. She first grabbed a pair of snow pants and slipped them on, tucking the long loincloth in before buttoning them up. Then, she slipped on a white trench coat, her father’s if she wasn’t mistaken, to compensate for the rest of the suit. Next, she wrapped an orange and amber scarf around her neck and let it hang in front of her. To complete her disguise, she slipped her Halo into the spacious pockets of the coat and placed a white beret on her head.

Incognito, she returned to the table, reached into the bowl that held her keys and pocketed them. Finally, she grabbed both packages, exited her home and locked the door behind her.

It was going to be a mild winter, the abandoned night streets still required heavy clothing, but it was mid-November and the ground itself had yet to freeze. Still though, the night was as black as ink, and the new moon hid itself away from the world. The old Zurich streets, lined by antique streetlamps retrofitted with modern lighting equipment, lead the doctor’s way to her destination.

She arrived at some open wrought iron gates and entered. It was a public park, likewise unoccupied, and had similar lampposts to guide her down the paths. It was currently snowing, small gentle flakes fell through the air and melted on her skin, and although the ground wasn’t cold enough, the flakes had begun to take their first hold on the grass.
After she entered the park, she began counting the garbage receptacles as she walked and stopped at the fifth one. She approached and looked up, out into the dark beyond the light of the lamps. Off in the darkness, like a candle piercing through the night, was a lit cigarette standing out defiantly against the surrounding darkness and cold. She couldn’t see it, but she knew that the cigarette was connected to a man, and that man was standing against an old oak tree. Without giving the silent spectator any indication, she set one of her packages down on the lid of the fifth container and then continued on.

She walked until she was deep within the heart of the park, stopping when she was at a bench beneath a lamppost.

She sat, setting her package beside her, and checked the watch on her wrist once more. It wasn’t much longer after that when another figure formed out of the dark walking in from the opposite direction sat down beside her.

An old woman wearing a headscarf sighed as she lowered herself down to the bench. After listening to the darkness for a moment, the stranger said, “I must say the glasses suit you, Doctor Ziegler.”

Angela brought her hand up and felt her face, she had completely forgotten she was wearing them. She took them off and tucked them away. “Thank you. They’re actually my mother’s. I had an… interesting opportunity to see how they looked and decided to try them on. It turns out that she really only used them to deal with glares from her computer.”

Ana Amari grunted in approval, “I’m glad to see you managed to piece together our little rendezvous plan.”

Angela nodded in agreement, having to chuckle as well. “The thought occurred to me when my cousin mentioned that one of the cleaning ladies happened to be wearing an eyepatch, but…” She lifted her wrist, admiring the masculine timepiece on it., “It is good to have father’s watch back.”

“I’ll be sure to thank Jack for you,” the old Egyptian replied, “he was extra careful to make sure it was safe.” The two old colleagues sat in silence for a moment, sharing the cool night air, until Ana continued, “Jack and I both agreed that we want you off of your previous assignment. It’d be best for you to just lie low and recover from your ordeal. We’re close if something happens, but we had no idea you would be in this much danger.”

“Always business” Angela thought. “I’d like to thank you for your consideration, but canceling the project is unnecessary.”
“What do you mean?”

Angela smiled. “I can’t prove it, per se. But to answer your prior conundrum, yes, there is a human soul, so your informant was right all along.”

“How do you know?”

“It was my run in with our mutual friend,” She said. “I was actually about to…” she took a moment to think of the correct idiom, “throw the towel in the laundry, but he showed me the truth. It’s a rather long story, but I know it exists. My problem now is trying to prove it.”

“It’s alright doctor. We’ll handle it from here.”

Angela shook her head. “That’s not going to be necessary.”

“The R- he is still out there. We both know he didn’t die back there in Oasis. We need to stop him before it’s too late. Don’t let your compassion blind you.”

“He is still dangerous, but you don’t have to worry about him as much as before. I think he’s going to be setting his sights on some people who thought they could take advantage of him before you know it.”

“And how do you know that?”

“We had a nice chat.”

Ana groaned. “Alright then. Speaking of you and your ‘chats’, what happened back in August? What did he want with you? I swear, when he heard the news, Jack was about to drop everything and high-tail it to Oasis to rescue you.”

Angela laughed. “I don’t doubt it!” she replied, imagining the two added to the list of people crowding her hospital room. Once the image subsided from her mind, Angela calmed down and
answered, “You and Jack were right. I was the target in Oasis. Officially, I was dealing with a psychopathic copycat who conjured up a fantasy about a shared past between us both. But the real goal was to get me into a vulnerable position, where they would destroy my reputation. They had some very damning information about me and my past that was going to be broadcasted to the whole world. After that, Talon was planning to take me when I had no one else to turn to.”

“My god, what was it?”

Angela sighed. “Can I trust you?”

Ana reached across the bench and put her hand on Angela’s. “Of course dear.”

“Even from the Commander?”

“Yes.”

“Okay… It was about me… and my father. The means that we both took to complete his work on Nanobiotics. He used me in experiments to obtain the missing keys to his work, and laid the groundwork for me to complete when I was able to.”

Ana nodded before adding, “And how does that make you feel?”

Without hesitating, Angela answered, “I am directly responsible for easing the pain of thousands of people every day, how do you think I feel?”

“Touché.” Ana waited, and then asked, “I see the broadcast failed, but are you still vulnerable? They could try again.”

“I hired the best computer rippers in the world to secure the backdoor and took extra precautions to protect my information once more. As for what they already had I, -with some assistance- laid a trap for them. A hacktivist made some fake data entries containing a… oh what’s it called? Spartan? Greek? Roman?”

“Trojan Horse?”
“Yes,” she answered, “a Trojan virus that allowed him to create his own back door and corrupt all their data. Anything they had on me now is as valid as any other conspiracy theory in the deep internet. I kept my good name, and he was able to leak some important information on Talon.”

“Its good to hear that your reputation is safe, but what about you? How are you feeling?”

Angela put her hand up to her heart, feeling around the area. “I’m recovering. The wound to my heart was severe. The Valkyrie suit is what kept me alive, but I may have overexerted myself.” The resurrection that she had performed had used all of the prototype’s power. The surge of Nanites flowing through the compromised system had been so much that the nanites within her body had even short circuited. “I’m taking this slow, and Lena is helping me around my home.”

“Have you considered receiving a transplant? Or a pacemaker?”

“No. Pacemakers can be exploited and I’d rather not take someone else’s heart if I have the choice. Plus…” She tapped the area of her chest. “Why replace it when I can make my own?”

“Wait, what are you saying?”

“The Suit is the only thing keeping me alive right now. It’s monitoring and correcting all circulatory functions while the damage to my system is repaired. Until my heart can function properly on its own, it will have to stay on constantly.”

“Is it safe to assume that you have a plan B, if things go wrong?”

“Yes,” she answered, “don’t worry about it.”

Ana gave a sigh of relief. “That’s good to hear. All things considered, if I had heard you were going toe to toe with The Reaper, I would have expected things to be much worse. Even with everything he did to you, you’re lucky to be alive.”

Angela took a deep breath, the strain and some tugging within her chest causing discomfort until the regulatory shocks zapped everything back into place and made the pain go away. “He didn’t shoot me. I did.”
Ana reached her hand up and began digging in her ear with a finger, “Would you mind repeating that, dear? I think my hearing may be going bad. Did you just say that you shot yourself?”

“Yes.”

Ana opened her mouth and then closed it. She opened it once more and began to form a word but stopped, staring off into the distance to collect her thoughts. Finally, she settled on saying, “Why exactly?”

“I had my reasons. I didn’t think I would be able to escape the chamber after the explosion, so I didn’t have many other options. I had a hypothesis that he would recuperate his strength if he took a soul, so I took a leap of faith. I can’t say I planned it all out exactly, but I harmed myself with the hope that at best the wound would be survivable, or at worst I could save him.”

“And also that rescue crews would pull you out in time?”

“No. That deep down Gabriel Reyes was still in there somewhere.”

Ana looked at the doctor with a sideways glance. “Gabriel Reyes is dead. What are you on about?”

“Ana, he’s about as dead as you are.”

“But… you were at his funeral… Jack- I- Wait, that means… Oh my god.”

“When I tried to save him all those years ago, I used an experimental strain of nanites that would constantly divide to compensate for his continually burning flesh. When he was strong enough to regain consciousness, I began bringing him food. At the time, I thought the fruit I brought him was rotten, but after you two showed me that footage in Afghanistan, I had the thought stuck in the back of my mind. When I figured out who The Reaper was, I went on a hunch and put those few things together.”

“But why did you trust that he would save you? Why hadn’t you told us –anyone- sooner? Just… why?”
“Sometimes I wake up at night and think about that myself, but to be honest, the only reason I had was faith. I knew who Gabriel was. The Reaper is him just showing his true nature; but I refused to believe that he couldn’t be changed. Everyone in his life had used him, so I decided to let him make a choice. He was mortally wounded, I was trapped, we were both going to die otherwise… so I decided to shoot myself in a place that could be stabilized to see if my hypothesis was correct. I didn’t tell anyone that he was alive because it was just another burden for me to bear, but I can’t do it any longer. You may tell the Commander if you please, I’m done hiding it. I dream that one day we can all forgive each other, and we won’t be burdened by the truth any longer.”

Ana shook her head and gave a laugh. “John 8:32 ‘For you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free…’ fitting.”

Now it was Angela’s turn to be surprised. “I didn’t know you’ve read the bible.”

“Jack keeps one on him. It helps pass the time.”

The two sat for a moment in the still night. Ana was thinking of anything else she had to share, while Angela weighed another secret that was heavy on her mind. She considered how she would purpose it, and contemplated beginning the conversation, for if she started, there was no turning back. Finally, she went ahead and asked, “Ana, I have something… private that I’d like to talk about. It’s been on my mind, and I need someone to listen.”

“Well, I may only have one eye, but both of my ears still work, so go ahead.”

Angela looked down, focusing on her cupped hands and gloved fingers in her lap like they were the last thing in the world. “When I… Died, I well, I went to Heaven. There I- I know it sounds crazy, but it felt so real- I met my parents again. I was so happy, and for a moment everything was perfect.”

“Then you woke up.”

“Yes. They told me that God wasn’t ready for me yet and waved goodbye again. I tried to protest, to stay, but I fell from grace and woke up. Now, I’ve had near death experiences before, and almost passed again that same night, but that was the only time it happened. I- well… I’m scared.”

“It’s alright, dear. You’ve been through a lot.” The old woman wrapped her heavy mitten hand around Angela’s hand. “My husband used to say, ‘It’s not that you’ve been knocked down, it’s that
you’ve gotten back up is what counts.”

“Well… I’m not really sure what scares me more: That I died and went to heaven, wanted to stay and know that I can’t get back in until I find out what I’m supposed to do with my life, or that I was so pathetic that I dreamed it all up in my mind, and that there is nothing afterwards, that my parents aren’t in a better place like I pray they are.”

Ana waited, taking a moment to think and answering with, “well Sweetheart, I may not know the answer, but let me tell you this: you will have to search within you. But there are two ways to find it yourself. One: Which of those two realities motivates you to work more, the one where there is no heaven, that once we’re dead that’s it? Does that make you want to work your hardest to give as much back and do as much good as you can for the world before your time is up? Or is it that there is a higher power depending on you to do his bidding? That he has a purpose for you and until he’s satisfied you have to work hard to find it?”

Angela thought on the dichotomy and nodded in agreement with the new perspective on it all. Then she asked, “And the second?”

“When you met your mother, did she want grandchildren?”

Angela couldn’t help but bring a hand up to her mouth to quell the fit of giggles that she had found herself in. She thanked her, and finally put the bother to rest. She reflexively stuck her hand down the neck of her coat, feeling for the heart shaped locket hanging around her neck that had held her family photo, but then frowned when she remembered that it was lost. Angela leaned back, stretching the lumbar supports and spinal column of her life support unit. Ana smiled back from beneath the confines of her scarf. It seemed that having a normal conversation brought out the human side of the old soldier, as she was now in the mood to share.

“I remember back when I was your age. Back before all this happened. I’ve never told anyone this, but getting pregnant was probably one of the worst things to ever happen to me.”

“Why, did your mother not want grandchildren?”

“Watch your tongue,” the old woman hissed. Immediately Angela felt something poke her in the side, “Unlike last time, there aren’t any handsome SEALs here for you to cuddle up with.” Angela stopped, but was more than satisfied with the quip. Ana continued, “Back then we thought the Omnis weren’t a threat. I was having a fling with a contractor on the side and living the good life; then things went out of control and straight to shit. The Crisis happened, and before I knew it, I was with child and everything went to hell. We got married, I became a mother, Overwatch happened,
my marriage was falling apart, and then I ‘died’ and was able to walk away from it all. Looking back, the only advice I can give you and my daughter would be to find yourselves good men and decide what matters to you in this world.”

Angela shook her head and smiled. “I had a good man once, but I let him get away. He must have already been taken by someone else.”

Ana thought about it for a moment and then nodded in understanding. She remembered all those years ago, when Jack was sent to meet with a young Angela and was kicking himself over blowing the interview, only to be dumbfounded when she called a day later.

Dr. Ziegler brought her wrist up to her face and checked the time on the old family watch. Seeing the hour, she stood, stretching herself and saying, “It’s been far too late for me, and I must rest.” She nodded at the package left on the bench. “I brought some money and meal cards for you two, as well as some lotion for The Commander’s scar, pain medication, a trauma kit, supplements, some drops to keep your vision sharp, and some arthritis medication to help with your hip.”

Ana took the bag and bowed her head. “Take good care of yourself, doctor. We’ll be in touch.”

Angela waved goodbye and the two walked in separate directions. Alone in the park, Angela retraced her way back to the gate, mulling over the advice that Ana had given her and considered what it all meant. In the end, it was no different from the first time she had attempted to resume progress on her Father’s research. It didn’t matter if she was made out of benevolence and compassion, or greed and the posterity of being right. She knew what she was and accepted it. Creator or not, she was the one who decided to share her gifts –be it the nanobots in her cellular structure or her intelligence- with the world.

In the distance, she could see the drop off point from her first rendezvous in the park. As agreed, a package was waiting for her to pick up, but something was different this time. As she approached, she realized that the usual brown bag containing various biological samples wasn’t the only thing there. Next to it, there was a giftwrapped box.

She shook the brown bag, hearing the familiar clink of glass vials. Satisfied, she turned to the strange gift and unwrapped it, revealing a fine white box with a silky smooth texture. There was gold lettering in the design, but it was too dark to read. She opened it up, reached inside and pulled out a fine white leather purse. The leather was tough and had a crisp texture to it, soft to the touch, but strong enough to carry its owner’s belongings and still retain its shape. It even still had that freshly treated leather scent to it. The multiple zippers of the compartments, as well as the chains, were all made of a bright shining gold. It reminded her of a purse she had some time ago, but not nearly of this fine quality.
She felt something jostling within, so she unzipped the main compartment. Inside, there was another, much smaller package. This time, a white box with a black ribbon on the corners. There was a tag hanging off the side, and as she squint her eyes to read it, she could swear that it read the word “Princess.”

Angela pulled the ribbon, allowing the paper box to fall open and its package to return to the innards of the purse. Angela cursed herself and reached in. It was dark, but she wouldn’t survive waiting to get home to see what was inside. She reached in, fumbling around until she felt something hard. Between her fingers she felt a chain, but when she secured her grip around it, she could swear that it felt familiar, far too familiar.

Slowly, she pulled the chain out, lifting the strand of gold from the darkness of the new purse. When she saw what it held, she had to cover her mouth.

Hanging in the dark and shining brightly against the light of the streetlamps with refinshed gold, was the heart shaped locket that her mother and father had bought for her when she began boarding school; the one that she held close to her heart while growing up, the one she held when the loneliness became too much, and the one that she thought was lost forever under a pile of rubble in Oasis.

She rubbed her thumb across its face, feeling the indented words of her parents promising to always watch over her, the same words she promised to all of those who came into her care.

She unhooked the chain and wrapped it around her neck, letting it fall down and lay against the outside of her Valkyrie suit. Now, with her heart returned to her, she was complete. A deep pain began throbbing within her chest as the organ began to beat on its own accord once more, but electronic shocks subdued the beast again.

Angela smiled and wiped a tear from her eye. She grabbed the bag of samples, slipped them into her new purse and began to walk again, but this time with joy and a song in her heart.

Ever since Lena had been staying with her, the English girl had taken it upon herself to explore every nook and cranny of the old mansion. After exploring the basement, she brought Angela a box of old lost family photos, and the doctor did her best to connect names and memories to the old family tree. Looking in the attic, she had found old Christmas gifts lost from generations past. Taking a minute to sit in the living room, Lena studied a large family portrait and realized that Heidi and Walther Ziegler owned a Dachshund when Angela was born, and declared that they should have one too. But there was one day in particular that stood out more than the rest. As she tromped around the old house, she discovered an old study on the second floor filled with an even older collection of books. Before she
turned away and locked the doors forever, the English girl saw out of the corner of her eye a phonogram that was over a century old and dusty vinyl records with it.

From that day forward, she would spend each morning filling the house with music, and one such tune was on Angela’s mind as she walked home with her gifts.

Slowly, only to herself, she began to sing aloud, “We’ll meet again, don’t know where, don’t know when. But I know we’ll meet again some sunny day…”

Smiling, with the new purse slung over her shoulder, Angela walked down the sidewalk that lead back home. All was quiet, besides the occasional car passing by on the street. It wasn’t until she passed by an inconspicuous alleyway that she heard something.

It sounded like a moan, like a person in distress exerting whatever energy they could spare to let the world know that they were there. She stopped, looking down into the dark expanse between two streetlamps, and listened to see if the abyss called out to her again.

Sure enough, it did.

Angela entered the gap between the buildings and called back, “Hello?” she asked in German, “Is someone there?”

“Ja,” answered someone. Angela turned, now seeing a figure cloaked in darkness standing in the alleyway, blocking her escape. She couldn’t fully see him, having not adjusted to the darkness of the alleyway, but he could see her. He had been waiting in the dark for a very long time, casting a lure out to an isolated victim to wander into his lair, and now he had one. He pulled something out of the pocket of his coat and held it in his palm. “That’s a nice purse. It’d be a shame if something happened to it…”

The two stared each other down for a moment, the man masking emotions in the shroud of darkness, while she looked much more annoyed than frightened. But after a few seconds she began to show alarm, almost as if the reality of what was going on finally sunk in.
“Here, just…” she began searching the pockets of her coat, patting around for a wallet “Take my money!” she said, speaking in English for some reason. “There- There’s no need to cause a scene! I don’t need it, really. There’s no need to hurt him!”

Like a gallant thief, the mugger put his hands up, saying, “Lady, I just want your money, that’s all.”

She covered her mouth and began to back away. The thief began to feel a pang of guilt, but then he had a sinking feeling that she wasn’t really speaking to him. Then he felt a tap on his shoulder, instinctively, he began to turn around, only to come face to face with the head of a skeleton. The shock would have made him jump, but a haymaker was already on its way and connected firmly between his eyes, knocking him off his feet and leaving him discombobulated on the ground.

The woman sighed. “Was that really necessary?” she asked.

“You tell me, Princess,” came another voice.

The mugger laid on the floor with his eyes rolling around independent of each other and seeing nothing but stars. Like he was paralyzed, he didn’t recognize the feeling of his head being lifted up, nor the folded up coat that was slid in to support his head and neck. It took several minutes for him to clear up the world around him enough to notice the approaching sound of sirens in the distance, and the face of the woman that he had tried to steal from, kneeling next to him with large mechanical wings on her back.

When she noticed his normal cognition had returned, she leaned forward and asked, “On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate your pain?”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oos8zjHCT4A

Chapter End Notes

The End.
I have one bonus chapter in mind, but I'm not going to write it unless anyone is interested in it, so let me know.
For as mild as the beginning of winter had been, it seemed that it was saving itself for one hell of an ending. Although most of March had passed, snow still piled up outside in the Swiss streets. The day before had left a significant layer of snow on the ground, and judging by the howling wind and frozen crystals hitting against the windows, it seemed that there would be even more by tomorrow.

Meanwhile, inside of the house, Dr. Angela Ziegler entered into one of the dark guest rooms and turned the lights on. The room was sparsely decorated, not having been changed much since the untimely demise of its rightful owners almost thirty years ago. Besides an old bed and a vanity, a new changing screen and a full sized head and torso mannequin were in the corner of the room near the dresser. Also, medical devices were seen lying on countertops near the bed, screen and dresser.

Closing the door behind her, Dr. Ziegler walked across the room to the bed and sat down, unbuckling the metal locks of her boots and then pulling her feet free. Then, with boots in hand, she walked over to the changing screen and set them down in their worn spot on the carpet. Tapping the controls in her hands, she extinguished the glowing feathers of her wings and then folded the remaining metal mechanics of the assembly in, becoming much smaller on her back.

From there, she reached both hands around her back, one going up from her back while the other went down from over her shoulders, both reaching down from the central axis between the wings and the back assembly of the Valkyrie suit where the hub of the unit’s onboard computer was. She held her hands on the box for a moment and closed her eyes, taking a long breath. Like jumping into cold water or the final plea that a parachute actually works before jumping from an airplane, a series of doubts and fears set into her mind in anticipation of what happened next.

She waited, and when ready, she pulled the housing out and gave it a twist, deactivating the Valkyrie Suit. Angela stood there for a moment, silent, motionless, listening and feeling to see if anything alarmed her or if she needed to reactivate the suit. But after a minute had passed and no pain or convulsions erupted from her chest, she deemed that her condition was stable.

With that ordeal over with, she unsealed the choker on the neck of the bodyarmor, unsealing the airtight hazmat measure of the suit and placed the neckpiece on the mannequin. Next, she unzipped the front of the suit, separating the armored layers from one another until she finally took the jacket, armor, wing assembly and all others, off. She then slipped it all over the mannequin.
Free of all the extra weight, she gave her back a stretch and twisted her core, easing the sore muscles and cracking her joints for supporting all of the extra weight.

She unrolled her leggings and then threw both of the stockings over the edge of the screen. From there, she unzipped the front of the black null layer of the bodysuit, releasing the tight seal around her frame and feeling as if her skin took a deep breath of the cold air. Although much more involved, one thing she always appreciated about the full Valkyrie Suit was that there was no need for direct injection ports. With the null layer the way that it was, the entire garment supplied a host of microscopic channels into its user, so it acted as an excellent medium for the Valkyrie Suit’s nanobiotics.

One change of underwear later and Angela was completely undressed. Turning to the closet, Angela pulled out a powder blue knee-length nighty and slipped it over her head.

She exited the concealment of the screen and sat at the vanity beside it. On the far corner of the wooden furniture was a metallic medical instrument shaped like a gun, holstered into a housing unit. When seated, the doctor grabbed the device by the grip, pulling out a vial of glowing yellow substances connected to a hypodermic needle that had been bathing in antiseptic.

Using her free hand to lather her neck with an alcohol swab and then pull her hair out of the way, the doctor placed the gun up to her neck, and when ready, plunged the needle into her neck. Familiar with the spot, Dr. Ziegler waited until it was fully submerged into her vein to pull the trigger, activating the piston to force the entire concoction into its subject.

She pulled the injector out, not even worrying to cover the port as the medicine in both her cellular structure and her booster shot healed the wound as soon as the needle was free. After that, she discarded the needle in a biohazard was disposal basket and then returned the gun to its housing, arming itself with a new needle and filling the vial with concoction once more.

Although mostly unnecessary, the extra booster was a welcome layer of security to the doctor. Although her heart had been repaired, it was still not fully healed, and while it would have been safer to keep the suit on, she felt that it was more beneficial to step outside of her comfort zone to test how things truly were.

Angela looked up into the mirror and inspected herself, realizing that something was missing, but for the life of her not being able to pick out what was wrong. Giving up, she reached up into her hair and grabbed her hair tie, pulling it out and letting her high ponytail fall. She took her fingers and scruffed up her hair and free the follicles from the stiff position they had taken all day, and it was at that moment that she realized what she missed.
She looked up again, and saw that her halo was still on her head. She gave a laugh at her own carelessness before reaching up and grabbing the golden half disc. The air cushion released and the device went free. Angela set it down on the surface and then removed her clear contacts, returning them to the liquid solution within their container.

This had not been the first time she had taken off the Valkyrie suit, and she did wrack herself with worry when doing so, but luckily things had worked out for her. Coming to and having to fight off the justified concern of her friends and coworkers was not an easy task. On the contrary, it was heartwarming to know that so many people were trying to look out for her best interests. But she had a secret to keep, and as she insisted, the Valkyrie suit was the only way to survive while keeping people away from what she was hiding within. So, with no other options, she had her old combat suit brought to the hospital, where she disconnected from the wires and machines that restrained her from the bed and donned the medical instrument that would become her new straightjacket.

Time would pass, she would go and heal from her ordeal and try to return to her old life. She had already been used to wearing the suit for extended periods of time, but somehow the threat that it could not be removed made the thought of wearing it heavier on her mind, and the inconveniences of its protection more present. Sleep was unpleasant, albeit doable, but it wasn’t until Lena had tried her hand at washing Angela’s hair in the sink that the doctor decided it was time to move on.

After virtual test diagnostics, ultrasounds of the organ, and testing her heart’s strength with the unit in standby mode, Angela took the suit off and took a shower for the first time in five months. Granted, she had gone through even more redundancies and safety precautions in the event that there was a critical failure somewhere, but progress was still progress.

The doctor grabbed the brush on the countertop and began brushing her hair. It felt good to pull and straighten her hair, if only to redo and organize it back into her favorite hairstyle the next morning. It must have been how farmer’s felt at the beginning of a new year plowing their fields, ripping out the progress of old to start anew.

The pain from her injection was nearly gone by now, and brushing her hair as she was now brought back some old memories. If she closed her eyes, her mind could drift back to a time decades ago, sitting in a chair much like this while her mother made sure she was ready for church. Sometimes sitting off to the side and watching her mother comb and brush her own hair, Angela’s thoughts of how perfect she looked, seeing her, wanting to be her.

Angela opened her eyes. There was no use in delving into the past like that. There was nothing worth finding in trying to dig up those thoughts.
Hair done, Angela turned off the lights in the room and made her way to the bed. On the nightstand beside the queen sized bed was another medical device, it was an old humidifier mask that had been modified to feed concentrated Nanites through the airstream. If she awoke and felt in danger, she could breathe into the mask to start a consistent stream of medicine into her body if necessary. If something woke her in the night, and it wasn’t the immediate need of microscopic medicine, then her pistol was holstered on the side of the nightstand by the mattress.

With one last thing to do, Angela got down on her knees at the bedside and brought her hands together in prayer. When complete, she climbed into the cold sheets and closed her eyes, marveling at the sensation of the flannel on her toes.

After her adventure in taking a shower, the next thing step she wanted to do was to try to rest without the suit on. Taking all of the precautions that she could, Angela had “slept” for the first time without the suit on about a month ago. Her mannequin was nearby with the automated unit ready for her. She had left her null layer on when going to bed, and to be honest, she hadn’t slept at all that night and would catch up on the couch the next morning while fully dressed. But it proved that she could go for an extended period of time without having to use the suit, and that was a massive step forward for her self-confidence.

For the record, this was actually the third time she was going to sleep without her suit on, and after the second trial was relatively successful, her goal was to go the entire night without waking up in fear that she was about to die.

As the sheets became warmer, eyelids became heavier, and thoughts grew more and more distant, Angela finally began to drift off to a deep sleep.

And that was precisely when the door opened.

It would be a lie to say that she didn’t see the blue light glowing from underneath the door, but she didn’t welcome the intrusion. Regardless, she waited patiently as Lena opened and closed the door as quietly as she could and tiptoed over to the bed.

The light from the smaller Coronal Accelerator was like a lamp, guiding her through the room and lighting the two women up. Like every time before, Lena was wearing a white T shirt underneath and device and a blue pair of underwear below it. After waiting for a moment, the doctor made the first move.

“Yes, Lena.”
“It’s freezing tonight.”

Angela rubbed her eyes, the light almost blinding her in the dark. “Have you tried using an extra blanket?”

“Yeah… it didn’t work.” She answered.

Angela looked down, seeing the English girl’s bare legs at her bedside. “Have you tried wearing a sweater… or maybe some pajamas?”

“Sorry, I get… well… constricted in ‘em.” Angela was silent, staring up at Lena as she nervously glanced from side to side. If she wanted to get what she was after, she was going to have to say it. Finally, after standing there in the cold while pushing her index fingers into each other, Lena finally mustered the courage to ask, “Can I… well, we… share the bed for the night?”

Angela frowned. She knew what she was doing. Lena may have been a friend, but she still had her urges and desires. After all, the chance of Lena trying to sneak her way into her bed was the reason why the Swiss doctor made sure to wear underwear on this little experiment. Angela trusted Lena to behave herself like how she would trust an alcoholic to be responsible with the key to her liquor cabinet, or a ravenous dog with a juicy cooked steak. Yet, at the same time, Lena had been there for her for the last half of a year. She didn’t trust her intentions, but it wasn’t right to not give her a chance.

“Fine.” The doctor said, “get in.”

Using the smaller accelerator’s single boost, Lena turned to a blur of blue light and immediately appeared in bed next to Angela. Without provocation, Lena was on her, hands wrapped around her waist, head on her shoulder and legs intertwined.

Less like fighting off an assault on her person and more like disciplining a disobedient pet, Angela barked, “Nien!” and like a skydiver tangled in his own parachute, had to untie herself from her friend and move before flipping onto her side facing away from her.

“Aww, come on!” Lena confessed, “Just trying to have a spot of fun!” the English pilot scooched her foot back over, the heavy wool sock making contact with Angela’s foot, and was surprised at what she felt. “Hold on a second, why are you not wearing your getup? What’s going on here?”
Wool working was a hobby and skill that Angela and picked up in her pursuits of medical excellence. Memories of how Lena would always complain about shoddy socks had given the doctor an idea to knit and send a pair as a peace offering one Christmas, but she never received a response about them. She expected them to be in a trash can somewhere, but was surprised to see her old friend wearing them one morning. When asked, Lena said that they had been a gift from her girlfriend. While the clever nature of Emilee could be explored later, now was not the time. “It’s nothing to be alarmed about,” Angela insisted. “I was just planning to do a little experiment on myself tonight.”

There was six shared seconds of awkward silence in the room until Lena finally broke the peace. A cold hand crept through the darkness, finally perching itself on Angela’s hip. “Oh...Need a hand?”

The room filled with uproarious laughter as Angela Ziegler, red in the face, insisted that she meant something else entirely. Finally, after her heart rate went through the roof and Lena calmed down, Angela ended her backpedaling with, “and besides. Don’t you have a lover waiting for you at home, anyway?”

Lena gave her a playful shove and laughed, calling her a prude and then made a joke about not being with the one she loves, so she loves the one she’s with. Having had her fun tormenting her charge, Lena finally settled down and finally said, “I’m just teasin’, Luv. Don’t you worry about me. If you just want to be as it is then that’s fine. But if you want a cuddle or a casual shag or two, just say the word.”

Lena laid off the advances, but it was fun to watch the doctor squirm. Lena knew of her upbringing and views on matters such as that, but it was fun to poke at the hornet’s nest from time to time. Angela was a moral woman, and coupling that with the fact that there was no ring wrapped around her finger said a lot about her bedroom activities. Regardless, Lena wasn’t actually anticipating an answer to her proposal, but was surprised to receive one anyway.

“No, Lena. Just... I’m not into that.”

Everything in Lena’s mind told her to stop and just let it be lest she drive Angela to leave the room, but she just couldn’t help herself.

“Oh, come on, luv! You had to have had done a sloppy one once before! Don’t tell me you haven’t.”

Cheeks hot with embarrassment again, Angela quickly shot back. “yes... well, no. I- Its complicated,
okay!”

Lena honed in on the drama like a great white to blood in the water. “Oh come on! What happened? Tell me.”

“No.” Angela turned over once more, closing her eyes and trying to block out the intruder in her bed, “It’s not for you to kno-”

“Did you queef? You know, its what happen when you fart but instead of commin’ out your bum it comes out -”

“Yes I know what… that is. It’s not like that. Just stop it.” Angela slammed her head underneath the pillow and cupped her hands over where her ears were. Her heart was racing, and if she wasn’t so mad at the moment she would have been reaching for the emergency respirator.

A few minutes passed by, Lena let Angela cool off before creeping closer again, slowly putting a hand on the shoulder of the fuming doctor in bed with her. Her hands were cold, so she wasn’t sure if it was an instinctual shove to the shocking connection or the adrenaline from her anger that hadn’t worn off yet. But, doing her best to sound genuine and soothing, Lena said, “Look, I’m sorry. It happens to the best of us.” There was a murmur from below the sheets, and Lena had to ask for her to clarify what she said.

Emerging with her back on the bed, Angela took a breath and repeated, “I said, ‘it’s not like that’.”

“Well… what is it like, then?”

“No.”

“Come on,” Lena insisted “you can’t just leave a girl hangin’ like that?”

“No, Lena. I’d rather not.”

Lena Oxton eyed her old friend for a moment and then made a proposal, “well, if you tell me what it is, I’ll give you one back. Dirt for dirt, and I’ll never bring it up again. I promise.”
Out of the corner of her eye, Angela glared at her guest, a sour look across her lips as she mulled the deal over. For as much as she didn’t like it, she eventually answered with, “fine.”

Internally, Lena cheered.

After taking a deep breath, Angela flipped herself back over to face away from her caretaker and pulled the sheets up over her shoulder. Lena waited with giddy excitement at the tale that was about to be told, but her emotions changed as soon as she heard the first few words.

“I was only eight years old when I lost both of my parents.”

“uh oh…” the English woman thought.

Angela was monotone, slow, almost as if she was reading a eulogy. “They had volunteered as Good Samaritans at a refugee camp, to help victims of the Omnic crisis in Africa. Their station wasn’t as secure as they were led to believe, and when they were attacked the guards that were supposed to be there fled.

“What did the Omnics do?”

“No, it wasn’t the Omnics. It was a warlord. My parents were in surgery. My father was trying to get my mother to evacuate, but she refused to leave her patient. Her patient would die if she wasn’t there. Sure enough, they were found. Father tried to protect my mother, but they executed him with his face in the dirt.”

“Oh, god!”

The autopsy said mother was strangled before… before…” It wasn’t until Lena heard her labored breathing through her nose that she realized she was sobbing. Through trembling lips, Angela finally choked out the words, “they raped her corpse.”

Lena moved closer, wrapped her arms around Angela, crossing her hands over her chest. Lena looked over Angela’s shoulder and saw she was holding her golden locket in her hand. “Hey, it’s alright, luv. I understand if you don’t feel comfortable with men.”
Angela wiped her eyes clean. In that brief moment, Lena had to wonder how many times she had to do that on her own, how many times she needed to compose herself because there was no one else to do it for her. When better, she said, “It’s not like that Lena. It was the men in my life that made me who I am today, my father, the ones who encouraged me to keep moving forward, Commander Morrison, it was even a boy who covered my mother’s body with a sheet and waited by my parent’s side until they could be recovered. It’s not them; it’s me. At that time, I didn’t understand what had happened, but somehow I was able to cope with it all. But, I always wanted to impress them, so in my mind, I suppose that was how I managed to move past it. So, all my life I did everything that I thought they would be proud of, and as I grew into a woman and decided to become a doctor, all I would hear was how I was becoming just like my mother.”

Lena had to agree with that statement. She had seen the family photos and the old portrait in the foyer, whoever made Angela’s mother used the same mold on her daughter.

“That’s when I learned what happened. I was disgusted with myself, all of the compliments I had received before, all of the coping I had done, It just made me feel… unclean. She was the purest person I have ever known and she was treated like an animal. When I think I’ve gotten over it and try to grow close to someone, I can’t help but think of my mother, the emotions I feel and how scared she must have been. The pleasure giving into fear and what she must have been thinking in those final moments. I just… I can’t do it.” The doctor gave a chuckle, a laugh of self-pity before admitting, “You must think I’m weird.”

Lena was speechless. In all of the years she had worked with Dr. Ziegler, she had known that she had lost her parents at one point, but the burden she carried, Lena would have never known what she was hiding underneath her perfect façade. Her poking and prodding and teasing, she felt like all of her little playful jabs were reversed and stabbed right back into her. It both amazed and made Lena feel guilty over all the times that Dr. Ziegler had let the advances and jokes roll and bounce right off her. How many times had Angela just shaken her head and pretended that Lena was just a kooky lesbian when on the inside she felt a knife twist?

Before she started this wager, Lena was just going to let it spill that her real name was actually ‘Angelina’, but a deal was a deal. Angela had shown, and now Lena had to tell.

With one of her deepest secrets out, Angela was silent, exhausted. This bed, this night, it had all been tainted by this dirty little truth. From being dead tired, she felt restless, almost as if she should just get up and put her suit back on and go for a walk or get back downstairs and use some of this stress-
energy. She was about to grab a blanket and sleep on a couch in another room – safety precautions be damned- when Lena began speaking.

With her head firmly against Angela’s back, Lena began to talk, but unlike almost any other time she had known her, her tone was soft, docile, and lacking in any sort of charm that she normally would have. ”You know, I never used to be like this. I know we’ve had our differences before, but back in the day I used to really be a self-righteous, sanctimonious twat. The type that would do just about anythin’ to bring worry to me mum’s soul.”

Angela let go of her golden heart shaped locket and turned her head, trying to get a view of Lena but couldn’t. “I never was an angel, but one day I met a fella who really made me wild. Davis was his name, he was a bassist in a band, the real rowdy ‘sex, drums and rock n’ roll’ type. I stopped goin’ to school, and he promised to show me the world one gig at a time. He told me everything I wanted to hear, women’s lib, free love, fightin’ the power and overthrowing oppression. Life was good.”

Lena paused, Angela waited a moment before asking, “What happened to him?”

“Mum and I… we had a really bad fight one day, she told me that he was a bad influence and I was… well… bein’ me, and I left the house and slammed the door behind me. Davis and his band had just gotten their big break and were traveling ‘round the kingdom and I went with ‘em. Well, one day I wasn’t feelin’ too well, and after it went on for a spell, I got a checkup and learned I was pregnant.”

“Lena…”

“I was so happy. I could hardly contain myself, at one point I was runnin’ in circles telling everyone I met the good news. I waited one morning after Davis and I were done cuddling in the hotel room when I finally told him.”

Angela felt a knot well up in her throat, she wanted to cover her ears and not hear the end of the story, but she had to listen. She grabbed ahold of Lena’s arms and held her closer, tightening the grip like a stuffed animal wanting to comfort her owner.

“He was ecstatic, just like me. He called down to room service to get breakfast up to celebrate. We waited, and they didn’t come. He said he was going to go down there and see what was going on…” Lena paused, almost as if she was looking for something to hit herself over the head with, “I should have saw what was coming when he grabbed his damned car keys. He said he’d be right back up, but he never did. Housekeeping came up later that day and told me that the room had already been checked out, so I had to get dressed and waited in the hall. I waited for a whole bloody day before
the staff kicked me out.”

Angela, patting her on the arm wrapped around her, interjected, “Lena… you don’t need to-

“I tried asking around, I called his mates and the other members of the band, but he… he just… disappeared. It took me three days of walkin’ and hitchin’ rides before I made it back to King’s Row. At the end of it all, I made it back to me mum’s flat and I told the last person about my ‘good news’.”

“What happened next?”

“It was a Tuesday night. I remember that because mum would always go grocery shopping on Wednesday morning and that meant we had no food in the place. I woke her up at midnight and we talked for hours about what happened. After walking for three days I was just exhausted, but mum rummaged through the kitchen and got me somethin’ to eat.” Lena took a long breath before continuing, “I started changing my life around, started going back to school, started working in the evenings, stopped dying my hair, and one happy morning, mum and I loaded up in a happy little bus, went to a happy little clinic, met a happy little doctor and then…” there was a quick breath, then another, and then another, before Lena began sobbing, crying, “Lena had herself a happy little abortion.”

Angela flipped herself around and cradled Lena’s head as she sobbed into her breast. Angela knew how this story ended. After being the head doctor for Overwatch for years, she knew what happened next like a person who reads the last page before starting a book. But she dared not speak, for Lena had to say this herself.

“I couldn’t go through with it. I wasn’t ready to be a mum yet. I was just some useless slob that couldn’t do anythin’. How was I supposed to raise a baby? I’m happy now. I have my life in order, I’ve got Emilee for me, and I became a pilot, and I’m just happy because a little baby doesn’t have to pay for having me as their mum.”

“Don’t say that, Lena.” Angela cooed, holding her friend close to her wounded heart. The doctor waited until Lena had composed herself, and when she was ready, Lena pulled herself away and laid back on the pillow facing up at the ceiling.

Lena Oxton took a deep breath and stared up at the ceiling like she was gazing out at the stars above. When ready, she continued, “Sometimes I wonder if I really made the right choice back then. I used to think it was right and that I can just start over again someday, but then the accident happened and… well…” she tapped the portable nuclear generator on her chest with her knuckles, and then added, “You know the rest.”
No matter how fast Angela, Dr. Winston and either of their departments worked to save Lena after she became a singularity in time, there was almost nothing they could do to repair the damage that had already been done. With the amount of radiation that young Lena had been exposed to, becoming sterile was the least of the doctors’ worries. Angela, being a woman as well, thought that she could empathize with her patient at the time, but it seemed that was not the case, after all.

“It’s true what they say,” Lena added, “You don’t know what you got ‘till it’s gone. Every day I find myself thinking of it again and again, and I realized I screwed up more than I ever thought I did. I think that if it was a little lad, I would’ve named him George, and if it was a lass, then Martha after me mum.”

“There, there, Lena,” Angela said, bringing her in for another embrace and letting Lena rest her head on her shoulder. She held her for a moment, and a thought from earlier in the winter that she had banished from her mind came back, and as she considered it more, thought that it may be worth using her resources to help a single person instead of all of Humanity for once. “You know, Lena. It has been a while since I reviewed your anatomy. If you would like, I promise I could look into it again and see if there is anything else I can do in regards to your…condition.”

Lena wiped her eyes dry and smiled, saying, “thank you, Doctor Ziegler. That’s very kind. But don’t waste your time on me, I’m sure there’s people who deserve your help more than me.”

“Well…” Angela began to protest, “Just sleep on it and talk to me in the morning, Ja?”

“Oh, luv.” The two let go, and Angela prepared to finally go to sleep, but not soon after, she felt Lena grab ahold of her hand and squeeze. She began speaking softly once more. Slowly, like she was trying to wrangle her accent to make sure that the doctor understood what she was saying, “Angela… I just wanted to let you know that… well, I may not be into the lads that much anymore, my taste in men is much better. I… I know a few fellas that can help you. Good men, from my days in the RAF. I don’t want you- no, I’m sorry- I just want you to know that you don’t have to be guilty or afraid of your own body. You can trust me that you’d be in good hands.” Chancing a smile, Lena tried to bring some of her signature levity to the heart-to-heart conversation that had just taken place, “and… If that’s not what you’re looking for, I’ll be there for you.”

Amazed how Lena was able to turn the entire night around into one great circle, Angela laughed and gave a smile, reaching over to her old friend and giving her a kiss on the forehead.

With that, both women rolled over and finally decided enough was enough and prepared to go to sleep. But once again, just on the precipice of unconsciousness, Angela felt herself wide-eyed awake once more and said, “Lena?”
“Yes, luv?”

“May I ask you something?”

“Anything.” Lena answered.

Without any delay, Dr. Ziegler said, “Did you really have my face on a dartboard at your old apartment?”

Sweating bullets in the tear soaked bed, Lena was powerless to say anything but eek out the sound, “Eeeeh…”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zhjNm20XbXw

Chapter End Notes

Never trust a bass guitarist....

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