Halcyon Days

by Lycoriseum

Summary

Ana's life from her days in the Egyptian Army, where she meets her wife, up until Recall when she is reunited with Fareeha. [Ana/OC-centric]
The smell of antiseptic mixed with sweat odour made Ana want to gag before she even opened her eyes. She wrinkled her nose to take short breaths, lifting her eyelids to stare up at the familiar green canvas of a field tent – the field hospital, to be precise. Right. She had been away on a mission for five days. Five arduous days, spent in a sniper's nest without a spotter, waiting for the precise moment to spring an ambush on the enemy convoy. Only with the help of hidden perimeter sensors, fitful bouts of naps, and a near unhealthy reliance on stimulants was she able to keep alert and steady enough to perform her duty when the time came. It was an explosive faceoff – literally. Both the army and insurgents had plenty of rockets and grenades in their pockets, and little qualms about using all of them. The commotion provided a solid distraction, long enough for Ana to take out the insurgent second-in-command and his guard before being detected.

Ana groaned, shifting on the hard mattress as pain shot through the back of her skull. The last thing she remembered was escaping her sniper's nest before the building collapsed on its crumbling foundation. Running in zig-zags from enemy gunfire, blindly firing her sidearm over her shoulder. She reached the extraction point and received many pats on the back, only to faint the moment she set foot in the helicopter. Right...

Now that's a little embarrassing, Ana thought, already hearing the ribbing she would receive from her squad mates. She pushed herself up onto her elbows, fighting against the dull ache in her muscles, when the cubicle curtain was pulled open. Ana looked up, a lop-sided grin already hanging on her lips when she recognised her visitor, admiring the curve of her jaw exposed by hair pulled neatly back into a bun. The partial eye roll she received only made her grin grow wider, and she sat upright despite more aches announcing their presence all over her body.

"Kamilah. Fancy meeting you here."

"Lieutenant Amari," the doctor answered with only the slightest inflection in her tone. The tone of someone already done with Amari's nonsense. "And here I was, wishing not to meet you here."

"Admit it, Lieutenant Shadid," Ana replied. She pulled off her standard-issue grey t-shirt at the doctor's command. "You like it when I come under your care."

"On the contrary," she deadpanned, removing the dressings on Ana's shoulders methodically. "I now take painkillers before treating you so I can't feel the headaches you give me."

Ana turned in her spot at Kamilah's gesture, giving her access to the wounds on her back. She did not remember sustaining them – probably from her last chaotic sprint towards extraction, when her fatigued mind was working on pure instinct alone. Kamilah set a firm hand on her right shoulder, sweeping her long hair over the left. A dressing between her shoulder blades was peeled off, Ana's back tensing at the wound's sting.

"I haven't met a sniper who gets injured as often as you, Amari," Kamilah said as she cleaned the wound. "Maybe you just aren't as good as your squad claims. Stay still!" She ordered sharply when Ana jerked at her remark, causing the swab to dig into her wound.

Bending forward and groaning through her teeth, Ana gripped into the bed sheets as Kamilah straightened her slowly.

"Now you've hurt my feelings and body, Kamilah." She heard a long-suffering sigh, before the swab wiped at the edges of her wound again.
"Once, Ana. Just once, can't you just shut up let me do my job?" Kamilah's impatience was obvious and cutting, but all Ana heard was her name lilting off the doctor's tongue. "Or better yet, stop getting hurt so much. Chigaru doesn't end up here as often as you, and he's the one always charging into enemy lines."

A new dressing was secured over her wound, and Ana swung her legs down the side of the bed again, facing Kamilah. The doctor looked a little exhausted herself, but that did not stop her from continuing the reprimand.

"Just because you have doctors doesn't mean you can just charge off and act stupid. One day your luck will run out, and we can't save you. Are you even listening?" Kamilah asked upon noticing Ana's faraway stare.

Ana blinked and, just catching onto the question, nodded with a smile. Kamilah then continued by reminding her of the last few times she ended up in the medical tent, that she was running through their supplies much too quickly, and that her body would not take much more of her foolishness. Ana just looked straight back into dark brown eyes, currently narrowed and accompanied by knitted brows, keeping the smile on her face. She shifted her gaze down the strong nose, to lips that danced as they formed each word of a lecture meant for Ana's ears, but never really landed. Ana wished she would go on forever.

"Ana."

The sound of her name snapped Ana out of her reverie. She lifted her admiring gaze back up to meet Kamilah's exasperated one. That Ana had a certain fondness for the doctor was no secret between the two of them. Except, Kamilah thought it was reserved for the sole purpose of pushing her buttons. Sometimes Ana, who was inching towards taboo territory, thought that was a blessing in disguise. A painful blessing. One that she would gladly toss into quicksand for a stolen moment in a dark corner.

"You weren't listening, were you?"

She shrugged apologetically.

Kamilah closed her eyes in defeat, letting out a slow exhale. "Look. I'm asking you to try. Just try to not get hurt all the time. Can you do that, Amari?"

Ana took the shot.

"Sure." She leaned in slowly. To Kamilah's credit, she did not shrink away. "But only if you'll have dinner with me."

The doctor's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Lieutenant, I suggest you stop right there."

Ana missed.

"I did not hear what you just said. You are hereby discharged from my care. Only light duties for the next two days. Now go."

"Kamilah." Ana hopped off the bed, tugging her t-shirt on hurriedly. She stepped in front of the doctor before she could leave. "You're overreacting. It's just dinner."

"You and I both know it is not." Oh. So she does know.
"But–"

"There are rules, Lieutenant. It's time you revisited them. Now go before I report your indiscretion."

Ana stared at the firm set in the doctor's jaw. She pursed her lips and pulled its corners up into a smile. "I'm sorry."

At Kamilah's nod, she marched quickly out of the tent, focusing on the pull on her wounds instead of the disappointment weighing on her chest.

Ana not only missed, but missed by a mile.

A mile was how far she stayed away from Kamilah for the next few weeks. She still ended up in the medical tent – notably less often – after some missions, and Lieutenant Shadid tended to her occasionally. But Ana kept it professional: less forward banter and lingering gazes. Kamilah responded to her polite jibes, but made no effort to continue their conversations. The sudden stiffness between them attracted the attention of Khalid – fellow sniper in the company, brother she never had, and her newly-assigned spotter. He followed her out of the medical tent after being patched up yet again, and nudged her in the ribs. Ana hissed, shoving him back.

"That hurts, you asshole." She kept one hand on her side, resting gently on top of her bandages.

"Sorry," Khalid said sheepishly, running a hand over his short mohawk. He fell back to her side, peering at her with brows raised as they walked to the barracks. "What's up with you and Shadid? Something happen?"

"No."

"Really? 'Cause it looks like something happened."

"Something's going to happen if you don't stop."

"So? What is it?" Khalid continued regardless, and Ana felt an urge to hit him upside the head. "You asked her out?" He stared, eyes widening to epic proportions alongside his triumphant grin, when Ana stopped in her tracks and groaned. The grown man with muscles of steel practically started bouncing on the balls of his feet in front of her.

"Holy fuck!" he exclaimed – softly, of course. It was not a subject to discuss out in the open, especially not when there were countless colleagues bustling around the base. Khalid's ecstatic expression fell when he finally caught on.

"Oh. Didn't go well, did it?"

"What gave it away?" Ana pushed him out of the way and resumed walking. She stumbled a little when Khalid grabbed her around the shoulders and kept her clamped to his side, all the way to the barracks.

"It's alright, Ana. There's still plenty of fish in the sea. Lucky for you, you're not restricted to only half of them."

So Ana fished, like the rest of her squad. Actually, no. They did not fish. They jumped into the open waters and swam until they bumped into someone else. They threw themselves into what came next, and boasted about it in the mess hall the next day, voting for which escapade was the most worthy of
bearing a hangover for.

"Ana!" Ebo boomed, smacking his hand on the table. "What about that chick in your lap last night? Hot or not?"

"Scalding." Ana smirked, taking a bite out of the most tasteless flatbread she ever had the misfortune of eating. "I can still feel the burns."

She could not remember much of the night, to be honest. Just the heavy bass of house music pounding in her ears, the most gorgeous fucking green eyes she had ever seen, set in a face clouded by alcohol and lust that barely parted from hers in the darkness of the club. Needy hands tearing off pesky clothes, loud moans at the stoking of wet heat, nails raking across skin, sounds of similar carnal indulgence passing through thin motel walls. The sting all over her body was definitive proof of satisfaction. Then Ana realised she never really caught the woman's name.

Ebo hooted in laughter. "You want some relief before going back on duty? Oi!" He barked at their medical colleagues eating with them at the long table. They turned towards him looking purposefully bored – their tactic for dealing with Ebo's crassness.

"You called, meathead?" Captain Deyab replied, calmly chewing on his food.

"Got any pain relief for a good night's fuck?" Ebo nodded at Ana, who rolled her eyes in response.

"We have pain relief, yes. Why don't you drop by later, Amari? Then we'll see what kind of pain you have. Maybe even check for an itch, as well."

Through the roar of laughter and pounding that shook their table, Ana made eye contact with Kamilah, of all people. Her grin dimmed at the inscrutable gaze from a few seats down, induced high taking a sharp dive when the doctor returned to her meal looking thoroughly unamused.

Fuck. Does she think…

She calmed down much faster than the rest, and stuffed the remaining piece of flatbread into her mouth. Somehow this affront to the culinary gods managed to taste even worse, like the ashes she accidentally inhaled during a joint exercise in Jordan.

Lieutenant Kamilah Shadid was well known for her intolerance for stupidity. In particular, stupidity that landed people in the hospital. Getting shot in the foot by a pistol with its safety off. Broken fingers and noses from drunken brawls. Head injuries from not sitting properly in transport trucks when they moved off. But, most of all, unnecessary heroics in battle. And Ana's squad was chock-full of heroes. Kamilah was transferred to Heliopolis last year, and had them all cowed within a month. Kind of. Though they still had a fondness for achieving seemingly impossible feats, their visits to the med bay dropped noticeably. It was not as easy to feel full of themselves under a doctor's barely disguised disapproval.

That was why Ana and Khalid breathed a simultaneous 'shit' when they walked through the med bay doors to find Kamilah on duty. Ana adjusted her hold on Khalid's waist, helping him limp over to a bed.

"Injuries?" the doctor asked when he sat down.

"Bruise," Khalid said, unnecessarily pointing at said bruise on his cheekbone. "Sprained ankle. I think."
"Cause?"

Khalid raised his brows at Ana, who kept her shoulders straight while her stomach shivered up inside.

"He fell down the stairs."

"Because?" Khalid prompted in a sing-song voice.

Ana gritted her teeth. "Because I ran into him. By accident."

"'Accident', my ass."

"Shut up," Ana snapped.

And Khalid did. They kept their eyes on each other, suddenly aware that the doctor had crossed her arms, looking decidedly unimpressed.

"How old are the two of you?"

"22," Khalid replied.

"Don't you know that already?" Ana asked, regretting her decision to look Kamilah straight in the eyes.

"I do. But it seems you don't."

Ouch. Ana stepped aside to let Kamilah examine Khalid's swollen foot. Then thick wiggling eyebrows caught her attention. She cocked her head, watching Khalid quickly swivel his eyes between the doctor and her. Ana brought a hand up threateningly, but whatever response he had was interrupted by a new arrival in the med bay.

"Doctor." The man snapped his fingers without sparing them a single glance, and leapt onto the bed opposite theirs like it was his throne. He had a standard buzz cut and wore a t-shirt with fatigue pants, polished boots reflecting the stark ceiling lights. Though muscled, his frame was much leaner than Khalid's. Ana frowned, already disliking him for the way he stared down his nose at them.

"Attend to me."

"We were here first," Khalid said.

"So?" He snorted and snapped his fingers again. "Do not make me ask again, Doctor."

Ana's blood boiled, and it went even higher when Kamilah made her way over to him.

"Name and rank."

"Ayman Saad. Sergeant."

Khalid and Ana exchanged glances. Saad. They had heard of Major General Saad's son being transferred to their base, and even more about his delinquency. Looking at him now, she gave thanks that they had not crossed paths sooner.

"You look fine to me," Kamilah said.

"Thank you." He gave Kamilah an obvious once-over, wearing a smirk that Ana wanted to claw off
his face. "But business before pleasure. I'm ill. Give me three days' medical leave."

"What do you have?"

"Does it matter? I'm ill, unfit for duty, and need time to rest. No," he said, when Kamilah brought out a thermometer. "No need for that. Just give me my leave, and I will make it worth your while. Money. Promotion. A night out."

Khalid's hand clamped onto Ana's wrist, stopping her from raising the fist. He gave her a small shake of the head.

"No. Now get out before I report your behaviour to--" She stopped when Ayman grabbed her arm. Any bit of patience he had disappeared in an instant.

"You will give me what I want, or you can bid your job goodbye." He barked in pain when Kamilah reversed the hold with ease, gripping onto his forearm and twisting it at a painful angle. There was a jolt through Ana's chest that definitely was not sympathy.

"Leave now, or I will personally ensure that you are busted down to private," Kamilah intoned.

"My father--" A small squeak replaced his words when the doctor twisted his arm even further.

"Your father may be a general, Saad. But I could not care less. This is my med bay, and I will do as I see fit. Not bow to the whims of a child." She loosened her grip so Ayman could yank his arm away.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" His voice rose a few octaves, sounding more like the spoilt brat described in gossip. "Just sign some papers to give me the goddamned time off!"


Ana quirked a brow. When the doctor's mirthless smile did not waver, she gave a crooked grin of her own and stepped forward. "With pleasure."

"The fuck?" Ayman scooted backwards when Ana reached the foot of his bed.

"You want medical leave. I cannot give one without proper reason. This is the compromise."

"You're bluffing." He narrowed his eyes between the two women.

Ana glanced at Kamilah, who nodded. "He had an unfortunate accident during combat training. Isn't that right, Lieutenant?"

Grin growing predatory, Ana grabbed onto the man's calves. But she was forced to step back when he kicked out at her and flung himself off the bed.

"Fuck you--," he spat, glancing at the doctor's name tag. "Shadid. And Amari." He glared at Ana. "The Brigadier's brat, aren't you? I'm going to fuck you both over."

"Good luck with that," Ana called after him as he stormed out of med bay. "Dipshit."

The doctor, on the other hand, did not bother watching Saad's exit. She strode off towards the back, rummaging in a supply locker.

"What an asshole," Khalid said when Ana went back to him. "How'd he even get to be sergeant?"
"Daddy power, probably."

"I dare you to shoot him in the ass. You know, if we ever get deployed with him."

"Do not shoot him," Kamilah said, having returned with a frozen gel pack and a roll of elastic bandage. "I don't want to deal with him again."

"Then we'll shoot him when you're off duty," Ana replied.

The doctor merely sighed, wrapping the first layer of bandage over Khalid's ankle.

"I have a question," the patient said. At Kamilah's flat hum, he continued, "Were you really going to let Ana break his legs?"

"Yes."

"Aren't doctors supposed to 'do no harm'?"

"Yes. That's why I asked Amari to do it," Kamilah said, tone giving nothing away as she reached for the gel pack.

"You were just using me?" Ana asked.

"You seemed more than willing to be used."

"You have no idea, Doc." Khalid's laugh turned into a cry of pain when Ana pushed him, his ankle bending in Kamilah's hold.

"Amari!"

"What now?" Ana growled into the phone as she made her way to med bay again.

"Could you pick up some supper too? I'm thinking kofta and...ooh! Umm Ali, why not?"

"Eat my ass, Issa." Ana ended the call before Khalid could reply. The man had been playing the victim card and sending her on so many errand runs, she felt an insane urge to push him down another flight of stairs. Not that she did it intentionally the first time. But now she wished she had.

"Do you ever take a break?" The words involuntarily left her mouth when she entered the med bay. Kamilah looked up from her computer.

"I do," the doctor said, as Ana approached the administrator's desk at the back of the bay. "But it seems my shifts always coincide with your visits."

"Lucky you." Ana's smile did not last long under Kamilah's poker face. "I'm picking up painkillers for Khalid."

"It's been a week. His sprain wasn't that bad." Dark eyes scrutinised her. "Something happened. Again."

"It wasn't me this time, alright? The idiot tripped over a push cart."

Kamilah threw a hand up in the air, standing from her desk. She withdrew a small white bottle from the supply cabinet, quickly filled it with pills, then tossed it to Ana.
"This should suffice for another week. If it doesn't, then it's his own fault and he will get no more painkillers."

"Harsh."

"Practical. It's time you people learnt we're not candy dispensers." Kamilah sat back at her desk, tapping at the keyboard. She paused when Ana did not move at the silent dismissal. "Was there something else?"

"Well. I just--" She rolled the bottle in her hand nervously. How did one say, 'I didn't mean to pick you up like a one night stand. Could I try again?'; but more…nicely? No, she did not know. So she settled for humour instead. "I was just wondering how old you are."

Kamilah tilted her head. "24."

"Really? I would've taken you for fifty." A lop-sided grin grew as Kamilah narrowed her eyes. "If you're implying I look old, Amari…"

"No, you look great. It's just that you act like my mother, sometimes."

Ana laughed at the offended expression and ran for her life, feeling a pen bounce off her back.

"I've been thinking more about that implant," Ana said quietly, scanning the area through the spotter scope.

"Eye or breasts? Oof!" Bits of food and spittle flew out of Khalid's mouth when Ana's fist rammed into his stomach.

"My breasts are perfectly fine."

"I agree."

"Thank you."

"So, the implant?"

"I've asked the captain about it, and she says they'll most probably sponsor it."

"Then go for it! You'd be stupid to pass this up." Khalid crumpled his ration pack and stuffed it into his bag. "Ana Amari, armed with a sniper rifle and cybernetic eye. You'll conquer the world. With me, of course."

"Of course. I'd never dream of world domination without my brother." Ana lifted her eye from the scope when Khalid poked a ration pack at her shoulder.

"Good," Khalid said as they switched positions. He reclaimed his spotter scope, and Ana settled beside him for a break. She ripped the top off the pack, squeezing its contents into her mouth without looking. Chewing the disgusting slop rapidly, Ana swallowed it before the taste could spread around her mouth.

"You'd think we'd have made a move on the shit eaters by now," Khalid said, moving the scope slowly over the wrecked city they were in. The insurgents – 'shit eaters' in Khalid's words – had launched a full-scale assault on this city a month ago. Armed platoons rolled in with a complement of tanks, mowing down any civilians caught in their path. Apparently the killing did not stop upon their
victory. While sneaking in, the sniper pair came across too many burning piles of rotting corpses on the streets. The dead were not even given the benefit of a mass burial. Just stacked on top of one another like wood and set alight like some twisted bonfire.

They had been at the top of this abandoned office building for four days, transmitting information back to base camp on an encrypted sub-frequency. In that time, they witnessed so much brutality that Ana wished they could carpet bomb this place and be done with it. The civilians did not deserve the hell they had been thrown into, not to mention the nightmares that would follow if they survived.

Two resounding explosions sounded off in the distance, catching both their attentions.

"It's like I'm psychic or something," Khalid said.

Ana did not bother with a reply. She moved forward with Khalid to the broken window, and set her rifle on the ledge. A quick scan through the scope showed great columns of smoke on the southern edge of town, and VTOLs swooping in on watch points the snipers had told them about. One insurgent squad ran up the street right below them in an attempt to flank the incoming army. Ana tracked them, until she spotted one fighter wearing a bandolier with grenades.

She pondered over a risky idea, focusing on the pin of the topmost grenade. If she missed, the enemy squad would be alerted to their presence. But the pin was just…sitting there. Begging to be shot. It would remove one annoyance from the battlefield. So Ana took the chance and fired. She held her breath at the muffled shot, bullet flying at its target, hitting the pin just so and–

"Holy shit," Khalid whispered when an explosion blew the squad apart. "Did you just…?"

Ana did not reply, keeping her eye trained on the squad. Then she spotted two survivors: one with both legs blown off, the other with an arm attached to the shoulder by thin threads of sinews. They could hear the agonised wails from their perch. She hissed in time with Khalid, and put them out of their misery.

The next thirty minutes was rather uneventful. They kept a constant lookout as their comrades rolled through the area with seemingly no trouble at all. Khalid kept tapped into their main radio frequency, updating Ana on their progress. Then his head jerked up from his scope.

"Emergency transmission," he said, pausing as he listened further. "Shit. It's Cairo-2."

Cairo-2. Kamilah's squad. Ana tapped on her earpiece, patching through to the appropriate channel. Her heart leapt to her throat at the sound of gunfire filling the background.

"This is Lieutenant Shadid of Cairo-2, requesting backup! We were caught in an ambush, only one other survivor, tangos on our tail. Transmitting coordinates."
"This is Lieutenant Shadid of Cairo-2, requesting backup! We were caught in an ambush, only one other survivor, tangos on our tail. Transmitting coordinates."

The transmission looped. Ana activated the holo-device on her wrist, bringing up a map of the vicinity. It took a few seconds for Kamilah's location to pop up, blue marker tracking the ID chip in her dog tags as she moved down a street north of their position. Twelve red markers were spread out behind her in a tight chase. She was moving too slow – her pursuers would catch up to her soon.

"We have to help her," Ana said, getting up from her position only to be yanked back down.

"We're supposed to stay here, Ana," Khalid reminded her, voice tight. "Our objective is to take out their new second--"

"And let her die?"

"Someone else will get to her. If not… Sacrifices have to be made."

Ana glared back at her partner, a surge of hatred for him quickening the blood in her veins. His stony expression gave way to surprise when she shoved the sniper rifle into his hands. He watched her take his assault rifle, gaping at her intent.

"What do you think you're doing? There are twelve of them, for fuck's sake! And you're a sniper--"

"Fuck you, Khalid," Ana spat, strapping on the ammo belt. "Stay here and complete our objective."

"Ana--"

Khalid started to rise as well, but Ana had already burst through the exit. She took the stairs three at a time, before growing impatient and vaulting over the railings to reach the ground faster. She ran past the dusty reception area, and paused beside the main entrance to check the street--

"You're clear," Khalid told her through the radio.

"I still hate you," Ana said, sprinting across the street into an alley.

"And I'll hate you if we get demoted for this. You horny fucking bitch. Good luck." The channel clicked off.

Her lips spread into a smile despite the urgency burning in her chest. But the humour quickly died away when she checked the map and found she was just two streets away from Kamilah. The medic's marker was moving quicker now, with only ten red markers behind her.

"Shadid," Ana said through a private channel, changing her course through several abandoned shops to intercept. "Cross two streets then turn right into Al Tkamol."

"Amari?" She was panting hard.

"Just do it. And get behind cover when you're there."

"Roger."

Ana reached for the discrete oblong device on her chest harness and clicked a button, masking her
heat signature. Then she pulled a grenade from the side of her belt. She slowed to a jog in an alleyway slightly ahead of the enemy squad's position, ducking behind a rancid-smelling dumpster. Keeping her eyes on the map, she heard Kamilah fly past the alley, followed by a group of heavy stomping from the insurgents, sporadic gunfire, and laughter after each round. Something ugly twisted in the pit of her stomach when she realised they were treating the chase as a game, Kamilah a buck being slowly boxed into a corner.

Squashing the desire to make them suffer, Ana moved at a crouch, peeking out of the alley before running after them at a safe distance. The instant Kamilah turned the corner, Ana yanked the grenade's pin and lobbed it in a wide arc into the enemy squad.

Some gave panicked exclamations, while the rest dove as far away as possible. The fragmentation grenade went off, leaving only five intact. Ana leveled her assault rifle and took them out easily, before they could even get their knees off the road. Panic easing into an anxious rhythm in her chest, Ana sprinted around the corner, casting her eyes all over for Kamilah. She glanced down at the map—"Amari."

Ana swung her rifle towards the figure that popped up on her right. But she promptly lowered it at the sight of the medic, who stood behind the broken window of an abandoned café, staring at her in disbelief. There were messy smears of blood over the side of her face and light brown fatigues, long strands of hair hanging loose from the tight bun coiled at the back of her head. Her combat armour was scuffed all over. The semi-automatic pistol was trembling in a white-knuckled grip. But a weak smile slowly appeared on her lips when Ana rushed forward, meeting her at the entrance and pulling her in for a tight one-armed embrace.

Kamilah's hands gripped onto her back as she laughed breathlessly. "Thank god you're reckless."

"I know. Are you hurt?" Ana asked when the medic pulled away.

Kamilah shook her head, smile falling off her face. "But the rest…"

A chorus of shouts further down the street stole Ana's response. They turned their heads to find another enemy squad running towards them. Ana's eyes widened at the sight of two rocket launchers, being aimed in their direction. Kamilah yanked her into the café, and they threw themselves forward as two deafening blasts destroyed the pavement. She barely got her bearings when the medic pulled insistently on her fatigues' collar, practically dragging her to the cashier's counter when more rockets shook the second floor of the café. Bits of debris started raining along with constant showers of dirt. Larger pieces of concrete fell to the floor around them, one missing Ana's leg by just a hair.

"They're collapsing the fucking—" was all Ana could manage before she was shoved under the counter. The ceiling gave way in no time, huge chunks of concrete falling to the floor. One large piece crashed right in front of the counter. Luckily, Kamilah already squeezed herself on top of Ana, out of the way of potential death. Unluckily, the concrete also had a ceiling light connected to it. Broken glass flew up at them, leaving two cuts across Kamilah's right cheek. One shard lodged in Ana's bicep. She had no time to spout a curse when a heavy weight slammed onto the counter, causing the top to crumble in, and the shelf above Kamilah broke into two. Its jagged edges dug into her back.

"Are you—?"

Kamilah shushed her in the post-salvo silence, pressing down against her further. Trying to breathe normally and ignore the feel of Kamilah's body on her own, Ana wiggled a hand between them and
activated her heat-masking device again. She pulled Kamilah to the side, hearing the faint scrape of wood against fabric, so the medic lay squashed on the floor beside her. Ana pointed at her and curled a fist. A frown told her the medic did not understand, so she hooked a hand behind Kamilah's knees and tugged upwards, and pushed her shoulders down. Kamilah curled up tightly as instructed and Ana covered the medic's body with her own. With any luck, the stealth field would keep them off any sort of sensors being used.

They stayed deathly still, listening to the crunch of boots on debris. Three stressful minutes later, there was a short burst from an automatic rifle that bounced off concrete, followed by victorious laughter and insults tossed at the two supposedly dead women. More crunching. Rough voices faded into the distance. Then silence.

"You alright?" Ana whispered, patting on Kamilah's back to indicate she could uncurl.

"We're trapped," Kamilah said equally quietly when she glanced at the pile of concrete right beside them. No doubt there was another pile sitting squarely above them too. Whoever made that counter should be given a medal.

"I have a distress beacon. No worries." Ana smiled down at her.

Kamilah returned the smile hesitantly. "Thank you. I thought no one would come for me just now."

"It's nothing." Ana shifted her rifle so it rested across their hips, and yanked the glass shard out of her bicep. She clenched her jaw at the sting, then lowered her head onto the crook of her elbow. "Besides, it'd get lonely without someone riding my ass after missions." She bit down a laugh at the pinch on her thigh.

"You are incorrigible, Amari."

"Thank you, Shadid."

They fell into comfortable silence after that – as comfortable as it could be when they were trapped by concrete in hostile territory. There was a tiny gap in the pile of rubble that allowed air through, but Ana must have breathed in ten lungfuls of dust in just two minutes. She kept her ears pricked for sounds nearby, shifting her attention from the lack of personal space between her and the medic. Their legs were sandwiched one atop the other, hips touching, chests occasionally brushing against each other as they took controlled breaths. There were occasional explosive bursts in the distance, and the whir of VTOLs passing by overhead that made Ana tense up each time she dared to relax.

She activated the distress beacon after the map confirmed no more insurgent activity. It took two hours of waiting, before a rescue team arrived with Khalid among them. Ana took a grateful breath of fresh air when the rubble was lifted, and climbed out with the help of the rescue personnel. Khalid yanked both Ana and Kamilah into a tight embrace when they were freed, sniffling as he uttered 'thank god, thank god' over and over again.

Khalid received a Commendation Medal for completing his objective and taking out the insurgent second-in-command. Ana received a reprimand for ditching her post, but was saved from a punishment for rescuing Kamilah, who was given three days mandatory leave for counselling sessions. Losing her entire squad – save for one – in a mere matter of seconds was a hard blow. Not to mention that she carried Sergeant Bakhoum for some distance before he volunteered to stay behind and slow down their pursuers.

Ana visited her on the first night after her duties were done. They lived in the same barracks wing –
Kamilah on the second floor, and Ana on the fourth. The medic was more subdued than usual, and surprised when she opened the door to find Ana – still wearing fatigues – holding up a cup of sugarcane juice. She gave short replies to questions about her well-being, revealed that she had not eaten even though it was 8.30 at night, and thanked the sniper for the drink before closing the door. When she opened the door again thirty minutes later, she found Ana in a plain t-shirt and shorts, long hair still damp from her shower, wearing a grin on her face as she tossed a box of sandwiches in the air. Ana shoved the food into her hands even though Kamilah said she was not hungry, telling her to stick it in the fridge until she was.

On the second night, Ana managed to arrive at Kamilah's door earlier, but there was no answer to her knocks. Since the door was locked, she assumed the medic was out and nipped away for a quick wash up. Kamilah was still not back when she returned with a box of food meant for the medic, so she settled for waiting a little. Ana leant on the parapet, looking out at the courtyard, surrounded on three sides by grey barracks blocks. There was constant foot traffic in and out of the buildings. Soldiers with neatly starched uniforms heading out to their duty shifts. Worn out counterparts trudging to their quarters with slightly crumpled uniforms and slumped shoulders. Groups of friends heading to the car park, no doubt for a night of carousing after a stressful day. She spotted Ebo in one of those groups, tossing him a two-finger salute when they made eye contact.

Fifteen minutes of patient waiting finally paid off when Kamilah turned into the corridor from the stairs. Ana's face lit up at her appearance, but dimmed when red-rimmed eyes glanced at her before turning away. Kamilah was in casual jeans and a thin long-sleeved sweater, wavy shoulder-length hair falling forward when she tilted her head down and away from Ana.

"You alright?" Ana asked as Kamilah swiped her card over the door's sensor.

The medic did not reply. A small beep came from the door's digital lock, and she opened it. Ana followed behind her, stopping at the door frame.

"Who do I shoot?"

"The counsellor," Kamilah said flatly. She paused just inside the entrance, turning stiffly to face Ana who brought up the box in her hand. "You don't have to, you know."

"Yeah, think I'm gonna get discharged for shooting a counsellor."

A twitch in the corner of her mouth. "I meant--"

"I know what you mean." Ana kept her smile on, watching Kamilah's gaze land on everything but her. The medic's arm wrapped around her middle in a defensive hold, hand gripping onto the side of her sweater. Discomfort was written all over her posture, so Ana decided to back off. One thing first, though.

"Here." Ana bobbed the box between them. "Just wanted to make sure you're taking care of yourself. Wow. That sounded much less ironic in my head."

Kamilah's mouth finally curved into a smile. It was small and tight-lipped, but a smile nonetheless. She took the box hesitantly, shifting on her feet. "Ana, I--"

Her words disappeared as she stared back up at Ana, leaving the sniper's mind screaming in suspense. Ana waited for the axe to fall, for Kamilah to brush her off, to pop the bubble of hope and set her free. She braced herself when Kamilah's lips parted again, pausing for a moment before she--

"Thank you."
Ana almost, *almost* bounced on her feet. She grimaced reflexively at the knowledge, attracting a curious tilt of the head.

"Something wrong?"

"No, everything is fine. Almost," she added when she remembered Kamilah's situation. She took a step back, preparing to run before she actually did something embarrassing. But she stopped herself.

"Actually, yes. I–" Ana shifted her hands behind her back in a casual imitation of parade rest. "I just wanted to apologise. For the way I acted. Back in Kharga."

"A lot happened in Kharga."

"In the hosp–" Her words died off at the sight of Kamilah's wry smile.

"I know. And you apologised already."

"Yeah. But I should have been better. About…"

"It's alright. Besides, you're already more polite than the rest."

Her words took a moment to sink in. "'The rest'?"

"What, you thought you were the only one?"

Heat started to grow around her collar. "No! I mean, it's very–" She gestured vaguely at Kamilah, who wore an expression of amusement, and possibly a hint of guilt for being amused.

"–understandable?" she finished. The thought of others approaching the medic sparked something hot in her gut, like the burst of a starting pistol.

"Kamilah, I–" Alarms blared in her mind when she realised she was about to take a leap, and Ana threw herself back so hard she almost felt a physical recoil. Her sudden intense stare faded as she floundered for an escape.

"I'm heading back to my quarters," she rattled the words off her tongue, jerking a thumb upwards. "If you need anything, I'll be there." Ana strode swiftly to the staircase at the end of the corridor, then stopped halfway. She turned to see Kamilah standing at the door, still looking entertained.

"4th floor. Unit 6."

She did not wait for Kamilah's nod and climbed up the stairs, as composed as possible until she was out of hearing range. Then Ana practically fled to her room, closing the door behind her, and promptly folded into herself out of mortification. She groaned loudly into her hands, hating how goddamned stupid she must have looked just now.

She found Kamilah in the parking lot the next afternoon, as she was headed to her own car.

"I've always wondered whose bike this is," Ana said, watching Kamilah turn from the motorcycle to face her. "Never took you for a biker chick." She cast an appreciative eye over the bike – painted midnight blue with golden-yellow trim along its sides.

Kamilah shrugged. "It's practical."

"Where are you headed? Not the counsellor's, I presume." Ana looked the medic over. She wore her
dress uniform, cutting a sharp figure in the well-fitted dark blue jacket and trousers – attire that is discouraged by the counsellors. Something about dropping your guard easier when out of uniform.

"No. Funeral."

"Oh." She paused as Kamilah fit a small bag into the top box, fishing out a black scarf and helmet before closing it. "One of your squad's?"

"Ramy."

"You must've gotten along well then?" Ana asked. She knew Ramy – a recent transfer to Kamilah's squad about three months ago. She had never really spoken to him before, despite seeing him around base and in the field.

"No. But I'm in the honour guard with Deyab."

Kamilah and Captain Deyab were the only two left of their squad. The captain had been held back at base camp to treat critical cases during the army's assault on the city, and was thus spared from having to witness the death of his comrades. Not that it was a comfort at all – the few times Ana caught sight of him, Deyab's deliberately casual demeanour was nowhere to be found. Just an intense look in the eye, a perpetually clenched jaw, and a jagged edge in each step he took.

The medic sighed, swinging a leg over the seat. "He only turned 21 less than a month ago. And now he's being buried with his parents."

"I'm sorry."

"Why? You're not the one who shot him," Kamilah said drily, mouth quirking at Ana's lack of a response. "You should probably be on your way. Lunch?"

"Yeah." Ana stood beside Kamilah as she wrapped the scarf around her head. The medic held up her helmet, turning it over between nimble fingers.

"By the way," she said, looking back at Ana. "I'll be back late tonight. So don't bother with a delivery."

"Damn. And I got the candles already."

Kamilah breathed a short laugh, and donned the helmet. "You know, Amari. You're not as irritating as I first thought."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"If you wish."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Whatever you want it to mean."

Ana caught a glimpse of her smile before the visor was pushed down. Kamilah started the engine, kicking up the side stand as exhaust filled Ana's nose. The bike's idle purr coupled with the scent of motor oil lent a compelling, magnetic aura to its uniformed rider, who was adjusting the straps of her helmet.

"Take me out for a spin some time?" Ana could not resist asking.
The helmet turned back towards her. After a few seconds of silence, Kamilah nodded and rapped on her forehead with her knuckles. Ana flinched a little, though a wide grin spread across her face. Hand reaching up to rub at her forehead, Ana watched Kamilah ride smoothly towards the exit, then turn onto the main road. She kept her eyes on the bike as it picked up speed, and sped out of sight.

_Damn. Why did Ana buy a car instead of a bike, again?_

She breathed a sigh of relief when Deyab mentioned he and Kamilah had not been transferred to another company. Five new soldiers were assigned to their squad to replace those they had lost, and they seemed to be competent enough. At least, according to Kamilah, who had been running combat simulations with her new squad along with Deyab.

"They're much less careless than you and your friends," she said. "I only had to patch two up in four simulations."

"That's why you need us. So you won't get rusty at being a medic."

Kamilah snorted, opting to drink more of her juice than answer. The crowd in front of them roared in unison – accompanied by a few groans – when another goal was scored. They were gathered in the common room with their squads to watch two football matches in a row. Well, most of them were watching and making bets. Some, like Ana and Kamilah, sat at the back of the room and spectated the spectators. Personally, Ana found the fans' reactions more entertaining than the matches. Like Khalid and Ebo shouting in approval and clamping onto each other's shoulders every time their team scored a goal. Or banter that sometimes escalated into furious debates about whose team was better. Such passion. She liked it.

"Did you hear about Saad?" Kamilah asked when the commotion died down.

"General or punk?"

"Punk. He got discharged."

"For? Being a dickwad?"

"Kind of. He got caught with his pants down." The medic gave a wry smile. "With the Israeli ambassador's daughter."

"Hard to believe anyone would fuck him."

"I know. But there's no accounting for taste."

Ana chuckled. She shook off her slippers, bringing her feet up on the chair. "Pity though. I wanted to see how he was going to fuck us over."

"Only you, Ana. Only you would wish for trouble."

"And why not?" She laid an elbow on the armrest, leaning over to the medic. "A little trouble makes life exciting, doesn't it?"

"All your 'excitement' lands you in a hospital bed, Amari."

"That's the silver lining, Shadid." Ana's voice dropped to a lower timbre, breath catching in her throat when Kamilah's eyes flickered downwards.

Naturally, the football spectators chose that moment to erupt in cheers. Ana bit down a curse as
Kamilah leaned back into her own seat, turning towards the front to find cash being distributed among the bettors. Their volume lowered a little when all the money had been stowed away, only to rise again when someone made a snarky remark about the winning team. Ana drained her can of beer, crumpling it in her hand as Ebo answered with a passionate defense of his team. The words grew more unfriendly, until a divide could be seen in the group.

Another thing Ana liked about the spectators.

"Hey. Hey!" she yelled, cutting through the noise like a knife through warm butter. Loud voices quietened as they turned to look at her.

When drunk as they were now, they were so receptive towards suggestions.

"Why don't you have a dance-off to prove who's better?"

"That's stupid," said one who was not that drunk just yet.

"What, you chicken?" Ebo challenged, driving the last nail into the coffin.

Ana cackled to herself, tossing the can across the room where it landed neatly in the trash bin.

"Ana…" Kamilah said uncertainly as the group split into two. She looked up at the sniper pulling on her sleeve.

"Let's go."

"But—" She glanced at the rowdy fans, who were throwing random songs into a playlist.

"Trust me, you don't want to be here for the clean-up." Ana tugged harder on Kamilah's sleeve, leading her out through the door. She took a deep breath of warm air and cast one last look at the soon-to-be dancers, then shut the door behind them.

"If anything happens…" Kamilah said.

"Relax. After that last time, they know how to pick up after themselves."

"What last time?"

"Oh. You weren't here yet." Ana grinned as they strolled back to their barracks wing. "Before you came, we used to have more regular parties in the common room. Then one time, some people got into a fight over…who knows what. I can't remember. Anyway, I told them to settle it by sumo wrestling."

"What?" Kamilah laughed. "Do they even know how to sumo wrestle?"

"No, but they knew how to wrestle. So they just stripped down to their underwear and started slamming into one another. And the furniture. The common room was completely wrecked by the time the staff officer came in. So we were all forced to run 10 kilometres around base carrying bags filled with rocks."

Ana shook her head at the memory. By the time she collapsed at the end of the run, she was nothing but a waterfall of perspiration gushing down a numb and aching body. She thought she saw a white light while lying stomach-down on the floor, trying to breathe against the rocks still sitting heavily on her back.

"But you know what the best part is?" Her grin grew wider when Kamilah shook her head. "No one
can remember who told them to wrestle."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah, they were that drunk. For now, the theory is that the vengeful ghost of an old soldier told them to do it." Ana cackled again, slapping the side of her thigh. "You've no idea how hard it was not to burst out laughing when they were talking about it."

"You're horrible."

"But it's fun being horrible. You need to loosen up sometimes, Kamilah." Then Ana quickly stepped in front of the medic before they climbed up the stairs, holding up a warning finger. "But if you tell anyone I did it…"

Kamilah raised a brow, crossing her arms. "And what will you do if I tell them?"

"I'll…" Ana drummed her fingers on the handrail. "I'll scratch your bike."

"I can bring it to the workshop."

"Fine. Then I'll burn your bike."

A smirk appeared on Kamilah's face, and she stepped forward. Ana held her breath, foot sliding back to hit the first raised step, as the medic came dangerously close.

"Do that," Kamilah whispered, the threat in her voice sending a tingle down Ana's spine. "And the next time you need an operation, we'll suddenly run out of anesthesia."

The sinister smile was the last thing Ana saw before Kamilah stepped past her and climbed the stairs. When she finally wrenched her eyes up, the woman was already out of sight, leaving her staring dumbly into an empty stairwell.
"Hey Shadid, did you know it really hurt when I fell from heaven?"

"That's not how it goes."

"Means I'm an angel, doesn't it--"

"Shut up, Amari!" Kamilah held Ana down when her laugh turned into a cry of pain. "And stay still!"

The heels of Ana's boots dug into the dirt-covered floor as she clenched her jaw, body arching in agony from her stomach wound. But she still sucked air through her teeth in uncontrollable laughter, wracking her body with alternate spasms of dizzy humour and pain. Maybe she hit her head in the three-storey fall and somehow did not feel it.

"Issa, come here and hold her up," Kamilah ordered after carefully prodding around her right shoulder.

Khalid complied and left his lookout post at the hotel's front entrance, joining the women behind the reception desk. He snaked his arm under Ana's back and hauled her up from the ground. The sniper groaned at the motion and rested her head on his jaw. Through squinted eyes, she could see blood soaking through the bundle of cloth Khalid held against her stomach. But her attention was torn away when Kamilah gripped onto her shoulder and bicep.

"Gently--fuck!" Ana cursed when Kamilah rolled her arm backwards.

The medic shook her head, still holding onto Ana's arm as the sniper struggled in Khalid's vice grip. "Sorry, Ana. I need to do this one more time. On the count of three."

"Just amputate--"

"One--"

"Fuck me!" Ana shouted, as the burst of pain turned into sudden relief when her joint popped back into place.

"I'd have to take you out somewhere first."

Both sniper and spotter snapped their gazes towards the medic, who was still frowning in concentration as she moved to Ana's stomach wound.

"What?" Ana breathed through difficult gasps, prompting a quick glance from Kamilah.

"What?" she asked, before removing the blood-stained cloth from Ana's stomach.

"You just said-- Do you know what you just said?"

"What did I say," the medic replied off-handedly. She pointed a small flashlight at the bullet wound, getting a clearer view in the unlit reception lobby.

Ana shared a glance with Khalid, who shrugged. Then she jerked when fingers pressed gently against her stomach.
"Agh!"

"The bullet's in too deep. I can't remove it here without you bleeding out." Kamilah withdrew a small syringe, removing its cap and injecting it into Ana's abdomen. "This will lessen the blood flow, but we have to get you back fast."

The medic put away her equipment, then coaxed Khalid into handing over the injured sniper. She nodded at his assault rifle, which lay on the floor next to him. "You'll need to clear the way for us. I'll carry her."

"Ooh." Ana almost told another joke, when Kamilah withdrew her own pistol and held it up.

"Are you able to handle this?"

"Yes," Ana said, feeling almost offended. She took the weapon, getting used to its grip and weight.

The preparatory shuffling and clicks from Khalid finally stopped, and he got onto his feet with rifle in hand. Ana's sniper rifle and pack were slung around his back. "You ready?" he asked.

Ana gripped onto Kamilah's shoulder, world spinning violently when the medic lifted her from the ground. She shook her head, regretting it instantly when the dense buzzing was aggravated by the action.

"You alright, Amari?" Kamilah asked as Khalid scoped out their surroundings through the building's entrance.

"Think so," Ana muttered. She could hold the pistol in her hand steadily enough, but the dark edges in her vision was a little worrying.

"Stay with me."

"Don't think I have any other choice." The sniper smiled, looking to the front as they joined Khalid. "Just a disclaimer though: if my aim's not that good, it's not my fault."

Their journey back to extraction was relatively uneventful – just a few stragglers trying to block their path, who fell quickly under Khalid's expert aim. By the time Ana was loaded onto the transport truck, her breathing had grown laboured, and she had lost enough blood to put an end to her witticism. Halfway through the drive, she lost consciousness and slumped in the corner she was propped up against.

The next thing she knew, she was waking up to a familiar sight – green tent canvas, curtain partitions, and shadows flitting back and forth behind said curtain. Her cubicle was dark, the only source of illumination filtering through the curtain in front of her bed. Ana tried to make a sound, but started coughing from the dryness in her throat. The jarring motion pulled at a tender spot on her stomach, and set off a series of aches from her lower body.

The partition was soon pulled open, forcing Ana to slam her eyes shut against the sudden flood of light. She heard a click followed by the sound of the curtain being drawn shut again. Cracking her eyes open, she was greeted with the sight of Kamilah standing in the now-lit cubicle. She held a small paper cup in her hand.

"Breathe, Amari," Kamilah said quietly.

"Trying--," the sniper croaked, barely taking a full breath before coughing again. "To--" She
swallowed hard, forcing herself to calm down as she was lifted gently into a sitting position. Kamilah kept an arm behind Ana's back, lifting the cup of water to the patient's lips.

"Seems like you're feeling better already." Kamilah sounded amused when Ana drained the cup in a few short seconds.

"I'm thirsty. And I feel like death."

"Of course you do." The medic set the cup aside and lowered her back onto the bed. "You had a blood transfusion just a few hours ago."

"Lost that much, huh?" Ana took a full but tedious breath. "Seems you need to work on your running speed."

Kamilah smiled faintly as she checked Ana's vitals on the monitor beside her bed. "And you need to work on resting for now, Ana. You have a concussion and fractures all over your body."

"And you? You're not hurt?"

"Why? Disappointed?"

"Relieved, actually." Ana gave a weak grin when the medic glanced over at her. "Have you even taken a break yet?"

"With you people around? Of course not." She went back to tapping on the screen. "But my shift is ending soon. So you'll have to look for someone else to bother."

The partition opened again.

"Like him?" Ana deadpanned, watching Khalid walk in.

"Like him," Kamilah confirmed. "Come in. I was just finishing up."

"She alright?" Khalid asked, taking a seat on the side of Ana's bed.

"Yes, but she'll need to stay here for a few more days."

"Yay."

"Not yay. You get to rest here while I slog my ass off? That's not fair."

"Then go fall off a building."

"Please. I'm not *that* big of an idiot."

"Are you implying--?"

"Khalid, please don't aggravate the patient."

"Hear that, Khalid? Don't aggravate me."

The doctor sighed audibly, turning away from the monitor. "Try not to stay too long," she told the visitor. "She needs her rest. You as well."

"Yes, ma'am."

Kamilah cast one last glance at Ana before leaving the pair alone, drawing the curtain shut behind
"You're wearing your puppy dog eyes again," Khalid said when he turned back to Ana.

"I don't have puppy eyes."

"Please. If she had a Frisbee, you'd have it in your mouth right now."

"Shut up."

Khalid chuckled, shaking his legs idly. "Don't be shy, sis. If it's all the same, I think she'd throw the Frisbee to you too."

"Will you stop with the Frisbee shit."

"Fine. But I'm serious. Back there, when you passed out in the truck? I've never seen her so worried before." He paused, cocking his head. "Come to think of it, I don't think I've ever seen her worry at all. Have you?"

"No."

"There you go."

Ana heaved a sigh, turning her gaze away. "Stop putting ideas in my head, you ass."

"Like they weren't there already." He leaned forward, wiggling his thick eyebrows. "And I'll bet they're even dirtier than--"

"Doc!" Ana yelled, cutting him off. "Doc, get this piece of--mmph!" The rest of her words were muffled by Khalid's panicked hand, clamped tightly over her mouth.

"Shush! You're gonna get me--"

The curtain was yanked open to reveal an alarmed Kamilah, soon replaced by a thoroughly annoyed one.

"Issa, get out!"

Ana sat comfortably on the sandy ground, leaning against a stack of empty crates beside the mess hall. Her crutch lay next to her as she watched the friendly football match take place in front of the barracks tents. After their victory in Dakhla, there had only been a few skirmishes before the insurgents finally pulled out. It was one of the last strongholds the enemy had, and the taste of complete victory wafted tantalisingly through the air. Spirits were high, so a football match was arranged for that evening. A few teams were formed and took turns playing, while their friends on duty snuck jealous glances at the players.

As expected, Ana's squad formed a team of their own. They were grouped near the makeshift playing field, discussing strategy that had better work because Ana put her money on them.

"Wishing you hadn't fallen off the building now?"

Ana rolled her eyes at her new companion, who sat down on her right. "You make it sound like I fell off on purpose." She took the proffered bottle of cold beer, taking a grateful swig.

"Didn't you?"
"No?" She squinted at Kamilah, who took a draught from her own bottle. "I was dodging bullets, alright?"

"Not very well, it seems." The doctor glanced pointedly at her stomach, and Ana tugged on her t-shirt self-consciously.

"You seem very intent on tearing down my self-esteem, Doctor."

"More like your reckless behaviour. You're getting hurt too much for your own good."

"Keep nagging at me like that, and I'll start thinking you actually care."

When Kamilah gave no follow-up, she wondered if her joke had missed its mark. Or rather, hit it front-and-center. Khalid's words floated through her head, and she cursed him for planting them there. Ana snuck a glance at Kamilah, who wore her usual impassive expression as she watched the current football match wind down. She wondered how upset the medic supposedly was, back in the truck. How she would look like with a crack in her composure. How it would feel to be the reason for that crack. She was digging a deeper hole for herself with each passing thought, and yet she could not stop.

As her team walked out onto the field, Ana's gaze fell to the hand lying on the ground between them.

She could not stop.

Her hand drifted slowly to the side, eyes pointed down at her personal playing field as she neared her target. Lifting her little finger, adrenaline slowing her perception of time, she brushed it lightly along the side of Kamilah's. It twitched in surprise, but stayed where it was. Ana waited before trying again, this time running her fingertip over the slim digit. It did not move when Ana's finger landed back on the ground. She waited some more, to no avail. Kamilah gave no reaction at all. Ana shifted her finger back in defeat, insides cringing at the failed advance, when it was stopped midway.

She glanced down – less subtly than before – and found the coveted finger hooked over her own. A bout of lightheadedness revisited her, but she was pretty sure blood loss wasn't the cause this time. Ana stole a peek at Kamilah's face, still carefully neutral and facing the front. She pressed her lips together at the burgeoning smile, opting to watch the match as well. Or at least, pretend to. Through the ebb and flow of the crowd's excitement, Ana felt her own keep at a constant high, attention fixed on that small and simple point of contact. It became her consciousness, her world. Nothing else mattered.

Not even when her team lost by just one goal.

Those big stupid oafs.

When Ana awoke in her cot the next morning, she was unsure if that moment ever happened. It was peaceful, calm, and lamentably short. Almost like the memory of a dream that would leak through her fingers as the day wore on. And it did. They had been thrown into a frenzy of pack-and-shifting the moment they finished breakfast – their company was being redeployed to the camp in Abu Minqar. An official briefing would be held later in the day, and scuttlebutt was that one last showdown with the insurgency would happen there.

But the more exciting rumour – for Ana, anyway – was the presence of the Sa'ka Forces in Abu Minqar. Also known as the Egyptian Thunderbolt Forces, they were a commando battalion held in awe by many a soldier. One of the elites with an impressive combat history, and a near-perfect record of victories. Their name was present in all of Egypt's major triumphs on the battlefield. And Ana's
sister was one of them.

The thought of meeting her spurred Ana on to complete their tasks quickly, and she moved at a speed that somehow turned into a squad-wide race at efficiency. The bustle lasted until the evening, when the briefing was held. It was only after dismissal, as they made their way to the mess hall that she was reminded of what happened the previous day.

Their medical colleagues were rushing out of the large tent just as they walked in. Ana barely turned into the entrance when Kamilah slammed right into her, hands automatically grabbing onto her arms as the sniper stumbled backwards. They managed to keep from falling over, thankfully.

"What's the rush?"

"Supply delivery," Kamilah replied quickly, hands still gripping onto Ana. She nodded in the direction of the camp's delivery bay. "It's been delayed a few days, and now we've to load it up before--"

"Shadid!" Deyab called from where he turned to look at their straggler. The rest of his colleagues were already far ahead of them. "Stop feeling up Amari and let's go!"

It was difficult to tell under the darkening sky, but Ana thought she saw a hint of red on Kamilah's cheeks. They let go of each other, a wide smile spreading on Ana's face along with a close-lipped one on the medic.

"See you around," Kamilah said, then ran off after Deyab.

Ana watched her go, left with only a fading warmth where Kamilah's fingers lingered over hers.

The moment they landed in Abu Minqar, Ana's head was kept on a swivel as she searched left and right for the other Amari. But it seemed her efforts were for naught, because it was her sister who found her first.

Ana was packing her belongings in the barracks, when a sudden body slam on her back propelled her forward, and pinned her to the bedside locker.

"Here's my baby sniper!"

The baby sniper groaned loudly and pushed herself off the locker. A pair of legs wound around her stomach as two arms wrapped around her shoulders. "I'm not your baby. And please get the fuck off my back."

"Tsk tsk. Language, little Ana."

"Get off!" Ana shook at her unwanted passenger, who clung onto her tighter than a koala on a tree trunk. "You're embarrassing me!"

"There's no one around."

"I don't care! You're breaking my back!"

A light slap on her cheek. "You're saying I'm heavy?"

"Get off!"

Her sister gave an exaggerated sigh and yielded, jumping off her back. Ana turned to glare at her, but
opened her arms anyway to let the woman in for a bear hug. The Amari had not seen one another for almost half a year, each of the three occupied with their own assignments. Ana was stationed in Cairo, her father in Alexandria, and her sister in Asyut. The only times they met each other was during leave or chance deployments such as this.

When Ana was released from the embrace, she was finally able to examine Safiya Amari properly. She was four years older, but they resembled each other greatly – similar height and build, same eye colour, identical smirks. The only difference was that Safiya inherited their father's more angular features, wearing a beautifully defined jawline and nose.

"You smashed my face into the locker, you know," Ana said, pointing at her cheek when Safiya pulled away.

"Aw." The woman pouted. "I'm sorry. Come, let me kiss away your boo-boo."

"What? No!" Ana held her hands up, stalling Safiya by the shoulders when she swooped in. She laughed at her sister's ridiculously puckered up mouth. "Fuck off!"

Ana's arms were starting to buckle under the sturdy pull of commando-trained arms, when they heard the tent flap being opened. Their heads snapped towards the front, and Ana took the chance to shove her sister backwards. Of course. Of course it would be Kamilah who walked in. She glanced at her sister, who already had a smirk on her face, and prayed she would not embarrass her.

"Am I interrupting?" the medic asked, walking in slowly with her duffle bag slung over one shoulder.

"No," the sisters said in unison.

"Your bunk is in here too?" Ana asked. The medic nodded and looked around, trying to locate an unclaimed cot. Kamilah paused in front of them, her eyes landing on Safiya's nametag.

"Amari?" she said, looking between them. "You're related?"

"Unfortunately," Ana replied.

"Yes, ma'am." Safiya snapped off a crisp salute. "First Lieutenant Safiya Amari, 24th Sa'ka Battalion, at your service."

"Sa'ka? Impressive." Kamilah looked her over appraisingly, then glanced at Ana. "You never told me you had a…?"

"Sister. Older sister." The sniper stood beside Safiya, who had relaxed from her formal introduction. "You can tell from the wrinkles on her face."

The corner of Kamilah's mouth curved, and she resumed searching for her cot as Safiya nudged Ana painfully in the side. They watched her stop by a cot in the corner of the tent, then shove her whole bag into the locker.

"In a hurry?" Ana asked when the medic strode quickly towards the exit.

"Yes. A meeting." She gave a short wave at the sisters. "See you."

The Amari waved together, moving their hands until the tent flap closed behind Kamilah.

"Quite a looker, huh. What?" Safiya asked when Ana's gaze jerked towards her. "It's true. You
know each other?"

"Yes. Same company."

"Lucky you. The medics I work with look like a camel's ass." A cheeky grin grew. "Have you…?"

"No," Ana said quickly. She reached for her still-open locker door and slammed it shut.

"You didn't let me finish."

"I don't want you to finish."

Safiya raised a brow, but thankfully did not pursue. "When's your squad supposed to report?"

"Thirty minutes from now."

"Good. At least we have some time to catch up." Safiya threw an arm around Ana's shoulders, leading her out of the tent. She heaved a sigh as Ana held her by the waist. "The Sa'ka are moving out in four days, way ahead of you all. Special mission," she added at the questioning glance.

"Are you even allowed to tell me that?"

"Probably not. But you're my sister, so I don't care." She flicked Ana's cheek. "Now, before I have to leave, tell me everything that happened to you."

"Including the smut?" Ana grinned, and her sister promptly mirrored it.

"Tell me your smut, and I'll tell you mine."

Between both of their duties, the sisters barely had time to catch up. Only by eating into their sleep time were they able to converse in peace. The days passed by in a blink of an eye, and Ana saw Safiya off with the promise of a family reunion later in the year.

Then Ana herself got swept away by packed work schedules, along with Khalid. A nervous anticipation hung over the camp, with many looking forward to the upcoming battle, and many more hoping they would be alive to celebrate a victory. As the impending confrontation loomed closer, reality started mixing with their cautious optimism. Close comrades were sharing last wishes in case they did not survive, to be fulfilled by those who did. Khalid was working on a letter to his family. Ana had one half-written as well, and was tempted to add in some ridiculous last wish for her squad to carry out. Maybe go two laps around the running track in the Heliopolis base. Naked. That should get a few laughs.

She snickered to herself, tossing the datapad idly into the air and catching it as she strode into the barracks tent. The warm lights were on – majority of its occupants were still up, already dressed down from work attire and working on their personal datapads. Some were seated together, murmuring in private conversations. A couple of her squad mates were there as well, lounging in their respective cots. She returned their tired greetings, removing the towel from around her shoulders to hang it in the locker. Tossing the datapad onto her pillow, Ana turned towards the corner where Kamilah sat alone on her cot, hunched over something that cast a glow over her shoulders.

Lips already curving, Ana approached the medic and sat heavily beside her. Kamilah turned her head to see Ana nod at the datapad.

"Writing your last will? *I hereby leave all my anesthetic to the idiots I call colleagues.*"
It felt like a lifetime ago since she had seen Kamilah's smile. The past two weeks had been a blur of endless activity. The only times they managed to see each other, were when they scarfed down their meals in the mess hall like hungry dogs, or lay on their beds in the barracks with aching bodies. Not that there had not been moments. Lingering glances when they passed by each other. Playful winks – all of which came from Ana – during PT. Not-so-accidental brushes of their hands whenever the sniper felt a little braver, drawing an almost imperceptible smile from the medic. Each brief encounter dragged her foot closer to the invisible line, and Ana resented not having the time to explore new boundaries.

"No," Kamilah angled the pad towards her. Ana saw a memo filled with so much medical jargon, her vision almost swam at the sight. "Although there are some anesthetics in here." She scrolled down the memo slowly, and Ana leaned in to read what she pointed out. "These are going to help us keep you in one piece. Or at least, quiet while we try to keep you in one piece."

"Fascinating."

"You don't recognise any of these, do you?"

"No, only the people who use them on me."

"That's good enough, I suppose," Kamilah sighed, closing the memo and bringing up another report. Then she turned to her companion, who made no move to leave. "Don't you have anything else to do?"

"Other than sleep? No." Ana rested her hands on the mattress, tapping her feet in an uncoordinated rhythm. "Actually, I have a letter to finish. But I don't really feel like it now."

She stretched her legs forward, slippers scratching across dry ground. "You finished yours?"

"My…?"

"Letters? To your family."

Kamilah stared at her oddly. She shook her head, looking down at the pad.

"Trouble finishing?"

"Never wrote them."

"Oh? No last words? Wishes? In case anything happens? Or no, wait. You're not worried because you've got everything settled."

Kamilah's finger paused while scrolling down the datapad. She fixed Ana with a gaze that watered down the edges of her smile.

"There's nothing to settle. I have nothing to say."

"Not even an 'I love you'?"

"No."

"Or, 'Hey I'm dead. Fuck you.'" It was a wild guess. But judging from the snort, it was on point.

"You know, that is petty enough that I might actually do it."

Ana chuckled, glad the mood had risen from its sudden dive. "Not on good terms with them?"
"No terms at all."

"Ah. Well, that makes things easier, doesn't it? You don't have to care about anything. You can just leave your…entire makeup set to the barracks' cat. Or use all your money to hire pole dancers for your funeral."

A wide smile appeared on Kamilah's face. "Ana…"

"Hey, I'd have dancers on my coffin if I could. What better way to be sent off?" Ana laughed when Kamilah pushed at her shoulder.

"You're unbelievable."

"I know. And my father would throw all his medals away before letting that happen," she sighed, falling into a short pause.

"But you really have nothing to settle? With anyone? Nothing to say to your friends?"

"Why?" Kamilah played along. "Do you have someone in mind?"

"Me?" Ana said, leaning in. "Why don't you write a letter to me?"

"Oh? And what will I say?"

"Hm." Ana made a show of thinking it over, smile turning coy. "Maybe something like: 'Dearest Ana, I've never told you in life, but I have always found you to be drop dead fucking gorgeous.'"

Kamilah laughed, a deep and smooth note from her throat that made Ana's heart skip a beat. She leaned in close, and Ana's fingers dug lightly into the mattress to stop herself from moving away.

"And what will your letter to me say? 'Dear Kamilah, I'm sorry for always making a fool of myself, but it's the only way I know to get your attention.'"

Though warmth started gathering in her cheeks, Ana held the gaze and kept her smile on. "So you're saying I have gotten your attention."

"What do you think, Amari?"

They were close, so close together. Shoulders touching, heads tilted towards each other, eyes locked so they could see every emotion that flitted through. Kamilah's fingertips ghosted over the back of her hand, leaving an electric trail in their wake. Ana wanted so much to take a dive right then and there. But that was not the place to do it. Not in the barracks with their colleagues present.

The thought poured cold water over her head, and Ana quickly straightened herself, as did Kamilah. She hoped no one noticed what just happened. Shifting her hands into her lap, Ana collected herself as Kamilah fidgeted with her datapad. Then she remembered the uncertainty looming in the horizon, and cursed their unfortunate timing.

"You have an early shift tomorrow, don't you?" Kamilah said. "Why don't you turn in?"

Ana nodded, standing up from the cot. "Don't turn in too late yourself."

"I know how to take care of myself."

"You're saying I don't?"
They received their orders the next day. Ana and Khalid would be deployed three days ahead of the main force, along with numerous other sniper teams, to conduct reconnaissance deep behind enemy lines and provide support during the actual assault. Three teams – Ana's included – were given a top priority target: the leader of the insurgency. Locate and track his whereabouts until the rest of the army rolled in, then put a fatal shot in his body when the opportunity arose. The snipers spent the entire day poring over maps and intel gathered by the Sa'ka forces, then prepared to leave at dawn.

When she finally returned to the barracks, she had precious few hours left to grab a peaceful rest before plunging into enemy territory. But she joined the medic at her cot again, trying to poke as many reactions out of her as possible. When Kamilah learned of her assignment, she became quieter and told Ana to rest, like she did the previous night. Ana, finding no other words to say, complied with the doctor's order.

The snipers were already sitting in their respective LSVs, going through the mission plan on their datapads as they waited for the drivers to be dismissed from their meeting. Ana waited in the passenger seat while Khalid sat in the back with the vehicle's mounted machine gun. Breathing in the crisp morning air, she ran her eyes over the map again, recounting every detail of the mission plan and wishing she had a thermos of coffee to take leisurely sips from. Sighing, Ana dragged her finger across the pad's screen, when the comm piece in her ear crackled to life.

"Lieutenant Amari."

Ana froze at the sound of Kamilah's voice.

"How did you get this–?"

"I have my ways."

"Why are you even up this early?"

"I want to tell you something."

"Yes?" Ana prompted when Kamilah paused, leaving her heart to do somersaults.

"If you return unharmed from this mission, that dinner might just happen."

"But I–"

"Good luck, Ana."

The channel clicked off before she could reply. Ana tapped on the earpiece repeatedly, trying to raise the same channel, but to no avail. There was a short pat on her shoulder, and she looked back up at Khalid.

"Who were you talking to? Why do you look so surprised?"

Ana stared at him blankly as Kamilah's words settled into her mind. Then her lips parted as poorly-stifled giggles started to bubble up from her chest, before evolving into full-blown laughter.

"You're choosing a very bad time to lose your mind, Ana," Khalid said, wearing a look of utmost apprehension.
"Oh Khalid, my brother." Ana grabbed onto the front of his combat armour and dragged him down so they were face-to-face.

"If you fuck this up for me, I'll shove my rifle up your ass."
"How goddamn fucking long do they need to line up one fucking shot?!" Khalid yelled through the bulletstorm engulfing their position.

Ana kept her eyes closed and shook her head, busy mouthing a mixture of prayer and curses to whatever higher powers that watched over them. Did they mind cussing? Did language matter? Sincerity was the key, right?

Violent tremors shook the twelfth floor, where they were currently pinned down. The sound of debris crumbling from the building's outer edges mixed with the cacophony of hot lead punching into painted concrete.

Well fuck you too.

Tossing her sudden spark of piety aside, Ana reopened her eyes to discover double the bullet holes decorating the wall she faced. Well, at least there were no craters left by RPGs. Yet. She glanced to her left, where Khalid was hiding behind his own concrete pillar. He pulled a grenade from his belt and, waiting for a rare lull in gunfire, yanked the pin out. Doing his best imitation of a shot putter, he flung it through the demolished wall where full length windows used to be. The rattle of firearms gave way to urgent warning shouts, then a distant explosion.

Ana burst from cover and slid behind a dirty office table, rifle already rested on its sturdy chrome surface. She spotted four insurgents standing away from the explosion, looking up in their direction, and placed a neat bullet hole in each of their heads. Those struggling to stand in the aftermath of the explosion had no chance to react – blood spouted from their chests and they fell back to the ground, lifeless.

As Ana lined up another shot, the remaining enemy platoon turned away from her in unison. Her finger paused on the trigger for a split-second, then squeezed repeatedly. It was like taking out wooden targets at a carnival game booth – easy as all hell. Then her earpiece crackled, answering her silent question.

"This is Mafdet-1. Target Alpha is down. I repeat, Target Alpha is down."

"Took you long enough," Ana said on a private channel.

"Sorry for the delay, Mafdet-2. But he's got a pretty small head for someone leading the entire shithead carnival." Their fellow sniper's laugh carried an audible euphoric high. "Thanks for drawing fire from us, by the way. Anyone hurt?"

"Lucky for you, no. At least, I don't think so," Ana continued the banter, even as the sniper teams took down the disorganised insurgent troops together. "Are we hurt, Issa?"

"We are not, Amari."

Happy though she was, Ana kept a tight rope on the celebratory swell rising from her gut. The insurgent's scattered movements started showing coordination, and they flowed towards a concentrated point in front of the city hall. They were not very bright, it seemed. Ana roved her scope over the armoured bodies until she spotted the source of their new order. She took a breath,
then sent a round through the woman's head. Her body had only fallen halfway when Ana took down the gung-ho looking man next to her. There was a complete halt in the insurgent's movement, before they split into two. One half smartly decided to place their weapons on the floor and kneel with hands behind their heads. The other half scattered from the site. After enough bodies had fallen, they started dropping to their knees as well.

The snipers stopped their fire, keeping a tight watch on their surrendered charges until the army had taken control of the area. They stayed in their nests, keeping a lookout as their allies regrouped at the city hall — their new HQ. Much of the tension in Ana's body dissipated as she watched the various squads running down the streets, with many wounded slung over shoulders. She spotted their squad, covered in blood spatters but looking as energetic as ever. Then she saw Safiya running through the city square with a small Sa'ka group. Her lips were a little pale but she still moved strong, a fierce focus sitting where her characteristic gaiety normally was.

Ana started to feel settled in her position, shoulders relaxing until she spotted Deyab. The man was sprinting ahead of his squad, helmet sitting askew on top of messy black hair. He glanced down at the woman he carried in his arms, who clung weakly onto his shoulder, free hand clutching the fabric underneath a combat knife. Embedded up to its hilt between her ribs.

"No."

"What?" Khalid asked.

She must have vocalised the thought, but she could not care less. The warm humid air hanging around her grew cold as she tracked Deyab's frantic dash towards their new base camp. Blood had soaked the light-coloured fabric around the knife to a near-black shade. Kamilah's gaze was unfocused, face pale and drawn, twitching in pain with each wide stride Deyab took. Red-stained lips were parted, giving a glimpse of clenched teeth. Her head lolled dangerously from Deyab's shoulder until it fell back limply, eyelids fluttering shut, hand dropping from her wound.

"No. No, no." Each repetition grew louder, and Ana stood unconsciously with her eye still peering through the scope. She dropped her hands when Khalid pulled her back down, asking what was wrong.

"Kamilah, she—" Ana held onto her left, where the combat knife had been on the medic's body. "A knife."

Khalid kept a hand on her shoulder. "Is she with her squad?"

Ana nodded, adjusting her grip on the rifle. She swallowed through a suddenly dry throat, setting her weapon back on the table.

"Then she'll be fine. When you get back to her, she'll be patched up and ready to call us idiots again." He held a hand out towards her sniper rifle. "Do you want to switch or…?"

"No," Ana said, flexing her fingers around the gun to dispel the growing numbness. "We have a job to do."

Disassociate.

Ana took controlled breaths, filling and emptying her lungs, focusing on the rhythm as she turned her attention back to the scope. The mild trembling in her hands slowly stilled as she scanned their surroundings, repeating the drill over and over, falling into an induced calm that shattered the moment they received orders to regroup, three hours later.
Her mind zeroed in on one target, and one target only. Her body moved on instinct the moment they left the sniper's nest. Joyous grins and hard slaps of approval on her shoulders barely left an imprint on her memory at all. Ana kept silent during the whole debriefing, demeanour hard through the praise lavished on the snipers. She shed her body armour and disassembled the sniper rifle mechanically, but was saved the trouble of cleaning them by Khalid. He took the parts in his hands and nodded at the armoury's door.

Ana gave him a grateful squeeze on the shoulder, then flew straight for the field hospital which was conveniently set up in an actual hospital building nearby. They had gotten the power back up and running, stark white lights illuminating grimy floors and dusty furniture. Ana navigated her way carefully through the bustle of activity, searching for...

"Amari."

She stopped in her tracks, facing left to find Deyab standing at the entrance of a ward. His face was clean, though his haggard appearance begged for respite.

"Kamilah--"

"She's stable now. Fuck, Amari." Deyab closed his eyes and shook his head, leaning on the door frame. "I thought we were going to lose her. Her heart stopped for a minute, she was bleeding all over the fucking place, her lung refused to cooperate for a while."

He pinched the bridge of his nose, wearing a deep frown. Ana felt a surge of sympathy for the man, who almost lost the last member of his former squad.

"But you brought her through."

Deyab squeezed a laugh past strained vocal chords. "Yes. Yes, I did." He lifted his gaze, pushing himself away from the door frame. Pointing at the corner of the ward, he said, "Far left, at the end. And Amari."

Ana, who had walked past him, paused again to meet his tired gaze. The man stared at her unblinkingly for a few moments, before nodding slowly.

"Be gentle with her. She's been through enough."

She cocked her head, but the man turned away and walked out of sight. Leaving the unanswered questions for later, Ana made her way past the various drawn partition curtains, then slipped through the one Deyab had pointed out.

Kamilah lay peacefully on the hospital bed, wearing a loose off-white gown. An IV drip was attached to her left arm, and a pulse oximeter was clipped on her fingertip. Colour had returned to her skin, but it was still pale enough to set her heart off again. Ana stood at the foot of the bed, watching the slow rise and fall of her chest as if to catch a stutter in breath. Satisfied after a prolonged observation, she took the chair sitting in the corner and settled to the right of Kamilah.

Relief soothed the ache in her chest, granting her reprieve from the constant burn of anxiety. She sat in silence, air conditioning slowly turning her sticky fatigues chill against her skin. A shiver ran down her spine and she looked down, realising how dirty she was. Her skin and clothes were covered in dirt and dust and gunpowder, stray hair escaping its bun to stick to her jaw. If Kamilah was awake to see her like this, Ana would no doubt receive a reproving look and be chased out of the ward. She laughed soundlessly at the thought, raising her eyes to the sleeping medic. Part of her wished Kamilah would open her eyes right now and do just that. Sit up and chide her for dirtying the
hospital, then sigh exasperatedly as Ana left a trail on the floor with her boots.

After a lengthy internal struggle, Ana decided to go clean herself up and rose slowly from the chair.

"I'll be back soon, alright?"

Ana returned to the ward freshly scrubbed, smelling faintly of some citrus and floral scented soap bar a squad mate lent her. There were several visiting soldiers around as well, sitting beside their friends and knocking back a few. Some in honour of their victory, some in memory of their fallen comrades. There was a particularly merry group in Kamilah's ward, and Ana had an open bottle of beer shoved into her hands as she passed by them. She laughed a thanks, then slipped back into the corner cubicle, where its occupant still lay unconscious. Heaving a sigh, she sat in the same spot and emptied the bottle in silence.

She woke the next morning with a crick in her neck from falling asleep in the chair, head bent at an uncomfortable angle towards her right shoulder. After an entire day of patrolling and being tricked by Khalid into turning her head where it hurt – for the first couple of times – Ana went straight back to the ward after hitting the showers.

That night, she walked through the partition to a welcome sight. Kamilah was awake and flanked by Deyab and another medic, who were checking her vitals and asking her a list of questions. The patient's quiet replies halted abruptly at Ana's arrival, mouth curving the instant her gaze landed on the sniper. Ana returned the smile, though she stood in the corner as ordered by Deyab while he finished her examination. It did not take long – they switched out the IV bag for a full one, injected her with a painkiller, and then waved Ana over.

"Feeling better?" she asked, sitting next to the bed.

"Much. But still not great." Kamilah sounded weak, and had to take frequent breaths between words.

"She had a knife in her lung yesterday, Amari," Deyab said as his colleague left the cubicle. "What did you expect?"

"Come to think of it, what happened?" Ana asked, letting the sarcasm fall aside. "Someone shooting knives back there?"

A dark pall fell over Deyab's expression. "Squad of bastards surrendered to us. We were about to tie them up when one pulled a knife out of nowhere. Would've stuck it in Rahal's back if Shadid didn't pull her away." He nodded at his wounded colleague.

Ana growled. "And? What happened?"

"Their surrender was a trick, firefight broke out, and we won. Bastards," Deyab spat. He looked to be on the brink of a tirade, but someone called his name from outside the cubicle. The captain took a deep breath, shaking his head, and waved vaguely at the women. "Don't talk too long, Shadid. You're still weak."

"Really. I wasn't aware."

The sniper bit down on her lip to stop the smile from showing. Deyab rolled his eyes and left just as his name was called again, barking irritably in reply. Waiting until his voice had faded into the distance, Ana turned back to the patient, whose gaze was already on her.

"Admiring the view?" Ana said reflexively, hiding the sudden lick of self-consciousness.
"Deyab told me you spent the night here."

"Yeah. After four straight days of fieldwork and some beer, I can sleep just about anywhere." Trying to ignore how breathless Kamilah's eyes made her, Ana pulled her chair closer to the bed. Then she paused uncertainly. "But if you want to rest, I can leave—"

"No. Stay."

Ana hooked her fingers onto the front of the seat to stop her antsy legs from carrying her away. The usual comfortable privacy afforded by the partition curtains invoked in her a sudden urge to flee while spouting a thousand flippant jokes. What the hell was getting into her?

Then she realised she had been staring blankly at the bedsheets while Kamilah looked on in silence. There was a trace of concern in the slight lift of her eyebrows.

"I'm glad you're okay."

"So am I. Thought I was done for back there." Kamilah wore a small smile that just did not resonate with the sniper.

"Me too," Ana said. "I saw Deyab carrying you to base. I thought you were—" She could not finish the sentence, eyes moving to where the knife had been on Kamilah's body. "I thought I was going to…"

 Fuck. I thought I was going to lose you.

"You thought you were going to…?" Kamilah filled in heavy silence for her. "Jump off the building? Again?"

An inelegant snort blew through her nostrils, turning into a quiet laugh. She lifted her gaze when Kamilah tapped at a corner of her mouth, which was curved in a smile.

"Much better."

Fingertips lingered for a short second, leaving an invisible mark on warm skin. Ana caught her hand as it withdrew, pressing palm-to-palm in a firm yet tender hold, which was returned with a weak grip.

"If it meant getting to you faster, I'd jump off a skyscraper."

Kamilah laughed. "Romantic, but unrealistic."

"Not if I have a parachute."

"Then jump with fireworks in the background."

"Now you're being unrealistic," Ana said between sniggers, though she quietened when Kamilah grimaced slightly. "Are you alright?"

"Yes, I just feel a little…" She placed a hand over her ribs, where the wound was. "Odd. Don't look so worried," she added when Ana shifted forward in her chair. "It's nothing."

"Are you sure?"

"Who's the doctor here?"
"You are," Ana sighed, letting Kamilah tug their hands down to rest by her side.

Running a thumb over the back of Ana's fingers, Kamilah said, "Speaking of unrealistic, were you hurt?"

"Not a scratch," Ana declared proudly, lifting her chin as the medic arched a brow and gave her a once-over. "It seems you owe me that dinner."

Then she fully processed what Kamilah just said. "What do you mean, 'unrealistic'?"

"I didn't expect you to come through."

"Wow. Thanks a lot."

"If it's any consolation, I planned to let you win even if you were hurt."

"Really?" She grinned at the affirmative nod. "Be careful, Kamilah. You're starting to go soft on me."

"Never."

"Good. It'd be weird—" Ana paused when a voice rang clear across the ward, announcing lights-out within ten minutes. She sat undecided for a while, listening to chairs being dragged across the floor as other visitors started to leave.

"Would you…like me to go?" she asked, only to have the grip around hers tighten.

"Do you want to?"

"Not really."

"Then don't ask silly questions."

Ana scoffed. "It's not silly. Not many people can fall asleep with someone watching them, you know."

"True. But not many people have someone like you."

In that moment, she could feel her puppy tail wagging so fiercely it almost came into existence. Ana was ready to roll over at a single command and damn, was she more than willing to do so.

"Someone like me?" she asked.

"Yes," Kamilah drawled. "You have a face that puts me to sleep."

She blinked as the medic was overtaken by laughter. "What's that even supposed to mean? That didn't— Shit, are you alright?" Ana rose halfway from her chair when Kamilah grimaced again, the crease between her brows deeper this time.

"Five minutes!" came the voice outside.

Ana touched her cheek, drawing Kamilah's attention as she regained control of her breathing. "Shush. You should rest now."

"Is that your professional opinion?"
"A professional patient's opinion, yes," Ana replied smoothly, sitting back in her seat. "This is usually where you'll tell me to shut up and rest, isn't it?"

"Mm. Then you'll grumble like a child."

"I'm not that bad."

"If only that were true."

"You're lucky you're hurt, Kamilah. If not, I'll…"

"You will…?" Kamilah said, with a quirked brow. "Stumble over your words and run away with a blush?"

"I don't—"

As if in pity, the lights were switched off. The ward was plunged into darkness, hiding the warmth that swept over her cheeks. She could feel Kamilah's upper body shaking in silent mirth. Damn this woman.

Kamilah slipped her hand from Ana's, pressing it against flushed skin. "You are blushing."

"I'm not," Ana muttered, peeling the hand from her face.

"Are you pouting as well?"

"No." She quickly pulled Kamilah's hand away before it could move to her lips, which were pouting.

"You are, aren't you?"

"Just—just go to sleep."

She heard one last chuckle before the medic relented, lowering her hand.

"I'll let you off just this once."

"Growing soft, Shadid."

"Don't count on it, Amari."

They stayed in Abu Minqar for three more busy weeks. While one half of the army helped the local garrison guide displaced refugees home, the other half hunted down the scattered remains of the insurgency. Ana's company was one of the hunters – raiding safehouses and makeshift bases, taking prisoners, rescuing civilian hostages used as bargaining chips. The soldiers made quick work of the demoralised insurgents, and returned to the Minqar camp in just two weeks. At the end of which, Ana presented her still-unwounded self to a livelier Kamilah in the hospital ward. The medic had recovered steadily in her absence, and was able to greet the sniper while sitting upright, wearing the brightest smile that sent Ana's stomach doing flip-flops.

She spent the last week on lookout duty with Khalid. Whatever free time she had was split between Kamilah and Safiya, though her sister did get the larger share due to their imminent separation. They had a video call with their father, poking fun at the worry lines on his face and assuring him they were okay. It was a relatively short exchange – just general life updates and settling dates for a reunion. Any more personal discussions were saved for a face-to-face – a routine they had lived with their whole lives.
When Ana's company was finally flown back to Heliopolis, they were given two weeks' worth of block leave which all claimed without hesitation. Many seized the chance to go back to their families, but Ana was one of the few who stayed back at base. Her own family was busy, but just as well. It gave her more time to spend on the second floor of their barracks.

Kamilah spent the first few days of leave resting in her own room. Her ribs still felt tender, and though she felt well enough to take leisurely strolls around base, preferred to regain her strength before being thrown back into work again. Part of Ana felt grateful that her entire squad was off base. Almost every minute Kamilah spent outside – or inside, for that matter – the sniper was right next to her. It spared her from their obnoxious teasing. For now, at least.

She sighed at the thought, rolling onto her side on the floor. Then she jolted up when Kamilah sneezed and grunted from the impact, going still for a moment on her bed. The medic chuckled when she caught sight of Ana's observant gaze, and pushed at her forehead.

"I'm fine. Don't look so worried."

"I'm not worried." Ana leant her chin on the bed, bringing her tablet to the front. "Just thought I could see someone sneezing their lungs up."

"How macabre."

"Not like you haven't seen worse."

"I meant your sense of humour."

"Whatever." She scrolled idly through the newsfeed, skimming through reports of the aftermath of the army's victory, updates on the relocation of civilians and reconstruction of destroyed infrastructure. It felt odd to be sitting there peacefully after all the fighting. No orders to follow, no smell of dust and gunpowder, no ache in her body. Such a jarring change – not unwelcome, but it left her fingers twitching restlessly.

Ana closed her eyes, letting the tablet fall to the mattress. How sad a person that made her, she wondered. Feeling lost without a war to fight.

A soft touch on her bicep made her look up at Kamilah, whose countenance somehow seemed more radiant than the brilliant sunlight pouring through the open window. Ana smiled – maybe she was not that lost after all.

"Didn't know you were into guns," she said, watching Kamilah's brows crinkle in momentary confusion. Dark brown eyes landed on where her hand sat, and widened in understanding. Ana received a slap on her bicep when she started snickering.

"I was going to ask if you're tired," Kamilah said. "You should return to your room, if you are."

"No, I'm not. Just bored," Ana sighed, turning the tablet over in her hands repeatedly. "There's nothing to do around here."

"Then why don't we go out soon?"

That grabbed Ana's full attention, snapping her spine upright. "Finally going to settle your debt?"

Kamilah hummed in the affirmative.

"Do you have somewhere in mind?" Ana asked.
"Yes."

"And?"

"How does this Saturday sound?"

Ana grinned. "Like Beyoncé at a live concert. Beautiful."

"I never really listened to Beyoncé," Kamilah said. She tilted her head in curiosity when one long minute stretched into two, Ana staring at her in stunned silence.

"Then we have a major fucking problem."

Chapter End Notes

Look. If Reinhardt can listen to Hasselhoff, then Ana can listen to Beyoncé, aight.
Ana stared, mouth agape, up at the bright neon sign that stood out against the night sky like a sore thumb. She lowered her gaze dramatically to the woman by her side, who wore a smirk and looked immensely full of herself.

"You're shitting me."

"You only said 'dinner', remember? You didn't specify what you wanted." Kamilah held onto her elbow and led her into the fast food restaurant. "Besides, this is cheap."

"My god. You're cheap."

Ana followed her guide into the restaurant, still feeling a little dumbfounded. No wonder Kamilah told her not to dress up. Because they were going to a fast food place which was in the base, just a ten-minute drive away from their barracks. As they looked for an empty table through the crowd of families and off duty personnel, Ana's shoulders starting shaking in silent mirth. Kamilah had played her. And the best part was, she did not care in the slightest.

"Did you knock yourself on the head today?" Kamilah asked, noticing her partner laughing away.

"No," Ana replied, making a beeline for a newly-vacated table in the corner, dragging the medic along. "But I think I'm going to."

"Please do it when I'm not around. I don't want to work while on leave." Kamilah pushed Ana down onto the seat. "What do you want? I'll get it."

"A burger. No, fifty burgers. And fifty shakes. And fifty boxes of fries. And ice cream, why not? I'll break your cheap ass wallet."

Kamilah pinched her cheek. "It'll take more than that to break my wallet."

Ana watched her stride past the tables, keeping an eye out for any winces of pain and definitely not admiring her form. Not at all. It would take more than a simple flattering top and shorts to get her ogling at-- oh, what?!

She clicked her tongue when a hulking mass of a man stood behind Kamilah in the queue, blocking her view. Robbed of her not-entertainment, Ana sighed and withdrew her phone to find her squad's group chat had blown up with...over 100 messages. Almost half were pictures of baby animals. The other half were hardened soldiers gushing over the pictures and claiming they had cuter ones. Some sent photos of their own pets.

*What in the...* Ana zipped through the messages to reach the bottom, then typed in one of her own.

[Wanna see a really cute cat?]

She angled her phone's camera towards the window, snapping a photo of the Egyptian Mau sitting serenely just outside the restaurant, as variations of *'oh god no please don't'* poured into the chat.

[Too bad. Sending anyway]
"Hakim: [SOMEONE KICK HER]

Mesi: [ANA STOP]

Khalid: [my niece is here pls dont]

There was a moment of silence when she sent the cat's photo.

Mesi: [Oh thank fuck]

Layla: [It's actually a cat holy shit]

[Of course. I don't send pictures of my food]

Khalid: [ugh]

Speaking of food, a shadow fell over her, accompanied by the aroma of deep-fried convenience.

"That was fast," Ana said, pocketing her phone as Kamilah set the tray down.

"It's 'fast food'."

"Oh, harhar."

There were two boxes of burgers and fries arranged side-by-side, along with a pair of matching pink milkshakes. A third, extra-large orange box sat on the edge of the tray. Ana opened it to reveal twenty pieces of nuggets.

"If you can finish that in addition to your meal," Kamilah said at her raised brow. "I'll bring you somewhere nice next time."

"You're underestimating me."

"I don't think so."

As it turned out, Kamilah was right and had to intervene before Ana stuffed herself to death. For the whole of the next day, it was Kamilah's turn to stay in Ana's room where the sniper lay in her bed, bemoaning her poor life choices.

"I hate you," Ana declared as she drove into the parking lot.

Their first 'real' date – as Ana put it – two days after their fast food jaunt. The doctor had intended to bring Ana to this restaurant on Saturday. But a last minute screw-up with the restaurant's systems caused Kamilah to lose her reservation, and it was pushed back. Which meant Kamilah already had this date planned, when Ana was shoving nuggets down her throat and courting death by indigestion. 'Wordless' could not start describing how Ana felt when it was revealed.

"Good to know," Kamilah said, pointing out an empty lot which Ana promptly zipped into.

"I almost died because of you."

"You were the one who wouldn't stop eating."

"You're the one who made the challenge," Ana retorted, pulling the car key out.

"So? If someone challenged you to drink an entire bottle of rum, would you?"
"I would." Ana leaned towards the passenger. "Because I'm not a loser."

Kamilah tweaked her nose none-too-gently. "You're not very bright either."

"I am too, shut up." Her attempt at an offended expression fell apart when Kamilah rolled her eyes, traitorous smirk forming at the medic's fond smile.

When they alighted from the car, Ana's gaze drifted over to rest on her partner again. Kamilah wore a navy wrap dress with a slim silver belt around her waist, matching bangles on her wrist, and sleek peep toe heels. Black hair lightly permed, falling to frame her face. In one word: breathtaking. Perhaps a little too literally.

Kamilah walked around the hood of the car, placing a hand on her arm. "Breathe, Ana. I don't want to perform CPR on my date."

"Are you sure?" Ana murmured as she leant closer, gaze lingering on lightly glossed lips for just one tempting second. Kamilah chuckled and pushed her away.

"I don't know how you usually do it, Amari. But I like a little romance before…CPR."

"And that's how much I will give you," Ana said. She followed Kamilah's lead when the woman hooked a hand through her elbow. "Just a little."

"Now who's cheap?"

"We both are."

It was nice to be with Kamilah out of base. No ranks, no rules of conduct to worry about. She could walk freely with Kamilah on her arm, and bask in her presence and closeness. Without the severity she wore at work or her usual reticence, Kamilah looked much more youthful and at ease. Freer smiles, playful gazes, liberal touches. Almost like she had a plan to keep one-upping her own allure and reduce her admirer to a helpless worshipper hugging her feet. Not that said admirer would mind, honestly.

Ana did not realise she was staring again, until she tripped on a slightly-raised pavement block. Her cheeks grew warm when she stumbled. Kamilah laughed while holding onto her shoulder to keep her from falling face first. She pouted at the woman, ignoring curious glances from passers-by. Kamilah said nothing, though. Just grinned and pulled her closer, squeezing her arm as they turned into the restaurant's entrance.

_Solstice_ was a new and extremely popular chain that popped up around Cairo and Alexandria about three months ago. With a mix of Egyptian, Lebanese, and Turkish cuisine served in a cozy and intimate environment, it became wildly popular with customers despite the slightly steeper price range. According to reviews, anyway. Neither of them had dined there before.

They were shown to a booth as per Kamilah's reservation, which had some privacy given by the sheer curtains enclosing it. Combined with low lighting, it was easy to treat the space as their own little world. A much more pleasant setting than what they had in the fast food restaurant. Ana mentioned it while looking through the menu, earning a poke in her side. They placed their orders quickly, nodded in understanding when informed of a longer waiting time, and leant back in their seats.

"Aren't you warm?" Kamilah asked, tugging at the lapel of her tuxedo jacket.

"No." Which was true. But Ana removed it anyway, leaving her in a button-down shirt. "I'm hot."
Kamilah matched her lop-sided grin. "I agree. But any more of those horrible jokes, and I'm requesting a transfer."

"To?" Ana slid to the left so her shoulder rested on Kamilah's, and whispered in her ear. "My room?"

Making eye contact with a coquettish smile, her partner replied, "And what will I do in your room?"

"Whatever you can think of," Ana breathed, catching the minute dilation of her pupils.

The curtain was pulled open then, and they jerked apart to a respectable distance. Their waiter kept his eyes down, serving their drinks before leaving with a polite smile.

"Behave," Kamilah said. "I don't want to get thrown out before tasting their food."

"I am behaving." Ana leaned her elbows on the table. "You would know if I wasn't."

"Of course. I'd be stitching your wounds up."

"That…wasn't the answer I expected," Ana said, watching Kamilah sit forward as well. Judging by the smile on her face, the medic knew exactly what she was doing.

"Oh?" she replied almost too innocently, trailing her fingertips down Ana's bicep. "How was it supposed to go?"

It was damned difficult to 'behave' with the feather-light touch raising goosebumps beneath her sleeves. Were…were her eyes always this lovely? And teasing? Ana could not remember. "You'd ask how you would know. Then I'd ask if your eyes are rolled back."

Kamilah laughed softly. "Maybe you could ask me again after we've had a few drinks."

"Come to think of it, I've never seen you drink much before," Ana said, nudging her elbow. "What kind of drunk are you? Sleepy? Flirty? Angry?"

Light touches settled into a sure grasp on her bicep, and Kamilah moved closer. "Would you like to find out?"

"Only if I--" Ana stopped abruptly when the curtain was parted again by the waiter. He kept the trained smile on his face, acting as if the women were not pressed side-to-side, and informed them about a lack of ingredients for an appetizer dish. They decided on a replacement quickly, allowing the man to scurry off and leave them alone again.

Sharing impish smiles, they separated and took sips from their respective beers. Ana's left a nice citrus-y tang on her tongue as she occupied her time by scanning the restaurant. If she squinted enough, she could spot the blurred silhouettes of customers moving behind the curtains of their own booths, set in the opposite end of the room. Cocking her head to the side, she watched them bend down occasionally to take a bite of their food, then straighten to resume conversation.

Hm. Maybe they should behave after all. It was not that difficult to tell who's doing what behind the curtains. Or maybe Ana was just scrutinising their fellow patrons too closely.

"Actually," Kamilah said, drawing Ana's attention. "I was deciding between this place and the grill house near the pyramids."

"What, Sierra?"
"Yup." She traced idle patterns in the condensation on her glass, looking out from their booth. "But I wanted to come here because it's new. Too bad there isn't a view here like Sierra. Other than you, of course," Kamilah added with a sigh, when Ana raised her brows pointedly.

The sniper chuckled, hand rising of its own volition. "Think you stole my line," she said, tracing Kamilah's jawline with the back of her fingers.

"You weren't going to claim that you're the view?" Kamilah asked, feigning surprise.

"I am a view, ya habibti," Ana said. "But you're a much better one."

She kept her fingers moving slowly across Kamilah's skin, somehow not betraying how weak she felt under the tender gaze. Daring to lift her index finger, she trailed it up to the corner of her mouth, and traced the curve of her lower lip. Pulse racing, Ana leaned in, close enough to feel the soft puff of breath through lips that parted on her approach. She took the time to caress the underside of Kamilah's jaw, then--

--moved her head back, pulling her fingers away to scratch at her temple, when she spotted the waiter's familiar figure coming through the curtains. Repressing the sudden wave of bashful frustration, she watched as their mezze platter was set on the table. The man, whose eyes had been averted downwards, looked up at them with that ever-courteous smile and withdrew from the booth again. Ana wondered if he had seen anything.

"We'll have to tip him really well," Kamilah commented, scooping a healthy dollop of baba ghanoush with a small slice of pita. She clicked her tongue when Ana swooped in, snatching the pita with her teeth.

"You tip him extra then," she said, words a little muffled as she chewed.

"Me? You're the one who's been coming on to me for the past…what, twenty minutes?"

"Says the one who's been touching my arm non-stop." She flew in again for the second piece of pita, but her face smacked straight into Kamilah's free hand, the impact sending tingles through her nose.

"Says the one who's been enjoying it." The medic's smile wavered a little when Ana bowed her head, placing a kiss on the flesh of her palm.

Finally reaching for the mezze herself, Ana wore a victorious smirk at the slight reddening of Kamilah's cheeks.

Ana paid by shoving her card – and a few notes underneath it – into the waiter's hand before Kamilah could. Though the man expressed his gratitude a couple of times, there might have been a hint of relief on his face when he saw them out the restaurant. They spent a little while walking by the rows of shops, before Kamilah wanted to go somewhere else. She had a specific place in mind, guiding Ana into the city's largest park. They drove along a two-way road cutting a long path through carefully-cultivated greenery, until Kamilah pointed out a dirt road branching out to the side. Ana shot her a questioning glance, but followed her instructions anyway and went down the less well-lit road to reach a small clearing near the end.

She parked the car off-road and alighted at Kamilah's urging. She looked around at the copse of trees behind them, catching the occasional rumble of some machinery hidden behind the plants. Judging by the faint sounds of traffic in the distance, they should be close to the edge of the park. From where they stood, they could see distant figures running across the grass field, some playing sports and others just frolicking with their families.
They ended up lying on the hood of the car, barefoot with their heels on the ground. There were not so many stars as Kamilah claimed there usually were. But they stayed anyway, gazing at those that had deigned to grace them with their presence.

"How'd you even know about this place anyway?" Ana asked. She could feel Kamilah shrug next to her.

"I explore."

"By travelling down weird roads?"

"How else do you explore?"

Ana raised a finger, which stayed in the air when she could not come up with a strong argument. So she shook it instead and changed tack, "I'm just surprised you haven't gotten…attacked or something."

"I don't walk down every dark alley I see, you know." Kamilah's elbow knocked into hers. "Besides, this park's pretty safe."

"Come here often?"

"Sometimes. When I need the quiet."

"Or when you go on dates?"

Kamilah's fingers drummed once on top of her stomach. "Would you believe I've only had one date since I came here?"

"No," Ana turned her head to see the nod. "No," she repeated with a growing smile, turning onto her side to face Kamilah. "Who's the lucky person?" The obvious eye roll she received only served to spread the smile into a grin.

"You already know."

"I don't know. Tell me."

"No."

"Tell me." Ana slid her toes down the sole of Kamilah's foot, only to have her jerk it away with a stifled giggle. Both women froze – Ana stared at her partner in surprise while Kamilah clamped a hand over her mouth, eyes widening at her slip-up.

"You're ticklish."

"Only there," Kamilah said after a moment's hesitation.

"Oh?" Ana got up on an elbow, free hand reaching for the other woman. "Mind if I check?"

"Yes–!"

Kamilah tried to grab her hand, but was too slow. Ana's fingers landed on her side, just below the belt. The doctor jerked, feet landing back on the car with a thud as she wrestled with Ana's fingers. Her head was thrown back in breathless laughter, and Ana had a fleeting urge to find out if she was ticklish around the neck. She watched the play of her neck muscles as she raked her nails through the dress again, feeling the waist squirm under her touch. She moved her gaze up to admire the utterly
stunning woman, currently in the throes of involuntary laughter. Kamilah took a few quick gasps and managed to calm down when Ana forgot to continue her teasing, dark brown eyes finally meeting with light bronze.

Painfully aware of the fingers wrapped around her wrist, Ana dropped her hand to the warm metal beneath them. "May I kiss you?" she asked softly.

Kamilah's grin mellowed into an indulgent curve. Her fingers glided across Ana's cheek, pausing when Ana turned her head slightly into the touch. So long. Ana had waited so long, yearned so much for the intimate warmth gracing her skin, the confession that did not have to be said. She planted a quick kiss on the pad of Kamilah's thumb as it ran along her bottom lip, sparking a playful glint in the woman's eyes. Kamilah moved her fingers further, threading through smooth black tresses. Her breath caught at the warmth grazing her scalp, and she resisted the urge to close her eyes, focusing instead on the vision lying beneath her.

Heeding the subtle tug on the back of her head, Ana leaned down, a dark veil of hair falling to the side, casting half their faces in shadow. She stopped at the brink of physical contact, waiting at hairsbreadth for a rejection that never came. Tilting her head so the tips of their noses brushed, Ana closed the distance, pressing delicately against lips awaiting hers. It was soft, experimental. An exchange. A reassurance.

It is you.

I want you.

God, it really is you.

Kamilah tilted her chin up, a silent request that Ana granted, bringing their lips fully together. Once. Twice. By the third, Ana knew.

Her heart was no longer her own.

"I just remembered," Ana said the instant the door swung open.

Kamilah blinked at the sight of her – hair tied up in a ponytail, green towel slung over her shoulders, beads of perspiration running down sticky skin. She wiped one end of the towel over her face – still hot and flushed from the 5km morning run. The upper half of her tank top was drenched in water she emptied from her bottle.

Resting her hands on both sides of the door frame, she continued, "You didn't tell me who your first date here was."

"Not until you tell me how you got those." Kamilah pointed at the scratches on her palms and elbows. Her frown grew more severe when she looked Ana over, finding even deeper scrapes on her knees.


The medic crossed her arms. "I'm on leave. You can go to the hospital."

"Aw." Ana pouted, dipping a peck on pursed lips that did not move away – as expected. "You wound me."
"I don't have to. You're perfectly capable of doing that by yourself," Kamilah deadpanned, still looking unmoved.

"Mm, such a sharp tongue." Ana planted another kiss. "Cut me deeper, Shadid."

She felt the wisp of laughter on her own lips when she moved in yet again, this time met with an answer as gentle as her approach. Her legs grew weaker with each pass, the regular beat in her chest skyrocketing as she struggled to keep from falling onto Kamilah. Spending the last two days together did nothing to ease the intensity of Ana's reactions towards her. Quite the opposite, actually. Every look and touch became a little dose feeding her addiction, leaving her sated, yet craving for more. Knowing that each bit of attention was reserved for her, and only her, drove Ana crazy whenever she thought about it.

Running short of breath, Ana parted reluctantly from Kamilah. The medic's stoic gaze softened. She stepped aside, nodding her head towards the room. But she held up a hand before Ana could step in, glancing down at her feet.

"Leave your shoes outside. I just threw my mat away."

Ana slipped off the running shoes and ankle socks in record time, following Kamilah into the room. She made a beeline for the study table, sinking heavily into the swivel chair. Reaching for the desk fan, she stopped its oscillation and bathed in the cool air rushing past her skin.

"Have you washed the cuts yet?" Kamilah called from the bathroom, where running water could be heard.

"Yeah. I came here because I ran out of bandages."

"Why am I not surprised?"

"Because I'm fully capable of hurting myself?" Ana said, earning a snort from the medic as she walked over with a med kit.

Kamilah sat on the floor in front of her, opening the kit. "Actually, no. I am surprised. I didn't think you knew how to take care of yourself." She examined the bleeding on the knees and fished out some gauze.

"Ouch." Ana held a piece of gauze against each knee as instructed, turning to give Kamilah access to her right elbow.

"You did tell me to cut you deep," Kamilah said, spreading antibiotic ointment over the minor wound.

"And you went for the jugular."

"If that's your jugular," she replied casually, turning the swivel chair. "Then you have thinner skin than I expected."

"I'm sensitive--Ah!" Ana jerked her arm away when Kamilah pressed hard into the cut.

"So it would seem." She pulled the arm back, quickly finishing up with a small bandage on each elbow. Then she took away the gauze on Ana's knees, giving them similar treatment while the sniper grumbled under her breath.

"You haven't told me," Ana said, holding out her palms when bandages were secured over her
knees. "Who was your first date?"

"I don't know." Kamilah swiped over the superficial scratches quickly, then started packing away the unused materials.

"Tell me."

"The bandages are water-proof, so you can bathe with them. Now please get off my chair. You're dirtying it." She fixed Ana with a stare, which slowly turned into a suspicious squint at the grin growing on the sniper's face.

"Tell me," Ana repeated, bending forward in the chair.

"Ana, no," Kamilah warned. "No, stop!"

Ana pounced, arms wrapping tightly around the medic's shoulders before she could escape. They toppled to the floor – Kamilah knocked flat on her back and Ana landed heavily on her--

"Ow ow ow fuck!" She rolled off the medic, lying on her back and hissing at the pain flaring in her elbows and knees.

"I just showered, Ana!" Kamilah sat up, looking helplessly at where Ana's perspiration had rubbed off on her skin.

Ana laughed while fending off the slaps raining down on her. "You can always shower again." When Kamilah did not relent, she surged forward, hands grappling onto the woman's sides.

"Ana no--" Kamilah wriggled under the hold, biting down on her lip to stop the giggles from escaping. It was a futile effort, and Ana pulled her down, hugging around her midriff.

"Tell me, Kamilah," Ana whispered, sounding as breathless as the woman bent over her. Then a squeak of surprise emitted from her throat when Kamilah descended upon her without warning, trapping her in a firm kiss that washed away the vague threads of embarrassment. Both women were panting softly when they parted.

"You," Kamilah murmured. "It's you, Ana Amari."

Chapter End Notes

Alright, alright. Ana and Kamilah deserve more than being subjected to the Dead Wife™ trope. And it's not easy to enjoy fluff knowing there's a train wreck at the end. So here's how it is:

Original plan: Ana deals with her loss and learns how to move on, raises Fareeha as a single parent, etc.
New plan: Kamilah survives in Halcyon Days. But at the chapter where she's supposed to die, I'll upload a companion fic to this one, which follows the original plan. So the story will branch into two. With each chapter of Halcyon, there'll be another chapter that explores the "what if Kamilah dies" scenario.

So...yeah. Kamilah's damned lucky to have you all. Now bathe in the fluff, people.
Partition

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kamilah: [What are you doing?]

[Touching myself]

Kamilah: […]

[In bed. Reading. Thanks for interrupting btw]

Kamilah: [Didn't know you could read.]

[YOU LENT ME THIS BOOK]

[AND I JUST READ YOUR MESSAGE YOU BITCH]

Kamilah: [You could've used the book as paperweight.]

Kamilah: [And phones have text-to-speech software.]

[If you're not gonna start sexting soon I'll turn my phone off]

Kamilah: [Come down to car park.]

[oooh]

Kamilah: [Coming or not?]

[Not without foreplay]

Kamilah: [Just come down.]

Kamilah: [And bring a jacket in case it's cold.]

[What]

[It's Egypt. It's never cold]

Kamilah: [5 mins. Then I'm gone.]

[Okokok]

Ana let her hands fall to her sides, feeling the bed become a hundred times more comfortable at the thought of getting up. Picking up the book splayed across her chest, she slipped the bookmark in and tossed it onto the nightstand. Then she groaned, rolling off the bed to land feet-first on the wooden floor. She stretched her back on the way to the wardrobe, getting a few satisfying pops from her spine before pulling on a maroon fleece jacket. Yawning widely, Ana picked up her phone and key card, dragging her slippers along the floor as she walked out of the room.

She zipped up her jacket at the cool – not cold – night breeze, thinking lovingly about her bed as she plodded down the stairs and towards the car park. Kamilah was already standing beside her motorcycle, scrolling down the phone screen which cast a stark white glow over her face. She
looked up at Ana's approach, promptly stuffing the device into her jeans pocket. Jeans.

What.

Kamilah wore a motorcycle jacket made of dark brown leather, along with fitting blue jeans and black shoes. Ana halted in front of the biker, glancing down at her own getup: white cotton shorts half-hidden by her fleece jacket, under which was a tank-top, and slippers.

What.

"Are we going out?" Ana asked, getting a nod in reply. "You could've told me to wear something nicer."

"You look just fine."

"No, I don't." She waved a hand at Kamilah's figure. "I look like shit next to you."

"And that's just how I like you," Kamilah cooed, giving her a brief peck on the mouth. "You make me look good."

"Why are you such an asshole," Ana grumbled, arms circling around Kamilah's waist anyway. She was getting better at staying grouchy under the woman's fond gaze. Though not so much with fingers running through her hair, which was still mussed from its affair with her pillow earlier.

"You tell me," she said, resting a hand on Ana's shoulder when she was pulled close, smiling into their next kiss. But they broke apart abruptly when a distant headlight flickered in their direction.

Ana dropped her hands reluctantly from Kamilah, turning her gaze to watch a car drive down the opposite end of the parking lot. The pair shared a glance. Technically, they were not breaking any rules. Written rules. Technically. But they could do without starting rumours and attracting unwanted attention for now.

Kamilah reached for one of the two helmets on the bike's seat and offered it to Ana, whose eyes widened at the dawning – and surprisingly slow – realisation.

"Are we–?"

"Yes."

"Yes!" Ana took the black helmet, bouncing on the balls of her feet. She pulled it over her head, eagerness shining so brightly on her face that Kamilah chuckled at the sight. Ana held still when two hands grasped either side of the helmet.

"Is it loose? Tight?"

"Nope." She tilted her chin up for Kamilah to buckle the strap and adjust its length, so it hugged under her chin snugly.

"Tight?"

"Nope." Ana felt around her helmet, waiting for Kamilah to wear her own – painted a shade of dark blue matching her bike. "Why are we going out all of a sudden?"

"You wanted a ride, didn't you?" Kamilah said, fixing her strap. "I thought we could do it before everyone returns tomorrow."
Ana groaned for the second time that night. "Don't remind me." When their squads returned, it meant less time together, less open affection, and less privacy. Somehow Ana had managed to convince herself that the rest of their days would be like the past two weeks – leisurely and quiet.

"That's why we're doing this now." Kamilah snapped her visor down and swung a leg over the seat. The motorcycle rumbled when she started the engine, idle purr growing into a faint roar at the slight twist of the throttle. Then she released it, kicking up the side stand. Looking back at Ana, Kamilah reached out to push her visor down, and nodded at the passenger seat.

On the verge of yelling in excitement, Ana took her place behind Kamilah and found herself at a loss. She raised her hands, unsure where to put them. She tried the hips first. The touch was light and Kamilah did not twitch, but she still stiffened a little. Ana started to pull away, when Kamilah let go of the handlebars and grabbed onto her hands. She guided them around so they rested on her front. Grinning under her helmet, Ana locked her fingers together, palms resting on Kamilah's stomach. She put her feet on the passenger floorboards, sitting slightly forward so she could feel the leather jacket against her chest. The rider's helmet turned back before she twisted the throttle again, motorcycle roaring to life as it slid onto the road. Ana's laugh reverberated through her helmet, adrenaline rushing through her veins when Kamilah turned into the main road and picked up speed.

Winds whipped past them and through Ana's sweater strongly enough to put a slight chill on her skin, but she did not care. Ana parted her hands and wrapped her arms fully around Kamilah, pressing up against her back. She rested her chin on the rider's shoulder, smiling to herself and feeling warmer than she had ever been.

Kamilah took her on a long roundabout path through the city: riding past quiet residential areas, making a lap around the park they visited on their date, taking twisting turns through the cluster of malls in the city centre. As the ride stretched on, Ana's high wore off, allowing her to fully absorb her surroundings. Still keeping her arms around Kamilah, she kept her gaze on the scenery flying by, sounds of nightlife competing with the bike's engine for a place in her ears. They attracted a few occasional glances when they stopped at traffic lights, but ignored them for the most part. Except when a young girl with pigtails skipped up to them and said hi, waving the lollipop in her hand cheerfully. The women waved back with equal fervour, until her parents led her away.

They went to a local drive-thru to pick up a few supper bites, then Kamilah drove off again. This time, she had a destination in mind, pulling away from the busy commercial district into calmer roads. They sped up a man-made hill, heading for the wrought iron gates standing tall in front of a large sprawl of villas. Ana felt a little puzzled – this was a wealthy residential area. Needless to say, not just anyone could enter. But this did not seem to bother Kamilah, who rode straight up to the security booth sitting in the middle of two wide lanes. A middle-aged security guard stepped out of the booth, but his caution faded when Kamilah lifted her visor.

"Kamilah!" he greeted loudly, as his colleague looked on and waved at them from the booth. "It's been such a long time since you dropped by."

"I've been busy, Alim."

"Ah yes, with the war." Alim smacked his forehead. "How could I forget? But I am glad you're safe." He looked at the passenger as though noticing her for the first time, blinking in surprise. "Is this a friend?"

"Yes." Kamilah looked back at Ana as she nodded in greeting.
"You've never brought anyone here before."

"This one's special," Kamilah said simply. Ana wondered if she knew she just catapulted the sniper's heart into outer space.

"Ah." Alim winked. "I see. Then I won't hold you up any longer. Let me just..." He didn't bother finishing his sentence, jogging back to retrieve a laminated card from his booth. Holding it up to the gate's sensor, he opened the entrance and handed the card to Kamilah.

"Enjoy!"

Ana gave him a mock-salute, which he returned, before Kamilah drove on. They passed by a few lit villas until eventually, the only lights came from lampposts lining the roads. Then they turned into a large well-kept garden behind a circle of unoccupied houses and came to a stop by the overlook. Kamilah switched off the engine, motioning for Ana to alight.

She complied, letting her feet touch the ground after the better part of an hour. Standing on tip-toes to stretch her legs, Ana took off her helmet and looked out from hilltop where they stood. A lone stretch of tarred road circled around the villas like a moat, and the city spread out from the boundary. North of their position was the commercial hub they just left, its bright lights glaringly visible from this distance.

There was a sharp click when Kamilah set down the side stand. Ana spun around to watch her get off the motorcycle, then retrieve the paper bag of food from the top box.

"So." Ana tossed her helmet towards Kamilah, who placed it on the bike. "Now you're going to tell me you're actually filthy rich and one of these villas is yours."

Kamilah rapped on her head with her knuckles. "If I were this rich, why would I have joined the army?"

"I don't know," Ana hummed. "Patriotism? A calling? Hot soldier women?"

"None of which I have," Kamilah said drily.

"Except...?"

"I said 'none'."

Ana pouted, following Kamilah's lead and sitting down by the side of the garden path, facing the city. The green hill sloped gently downwards from where they sat, practically asking to be rolled across. But Ana was in no mood to dirty her clothes with grass stains, and settled instead for the cup of mango juice Kamilah handed her. She took a long draught through the straw, waiting for Kamilah to finish sipping on her iced karkade and bring out the food. Her feet started tapping on the grass when the box of falafel balls was opened, and she leaned in.

"Why can you never feed yourself?" Kamilah sighed, delivering a falafel into Ana's mouth.

"Why feed myself when you're more than willing to do it for me?"

"Don't make me stick this up your nose," the medic warned, waving the disposable fork.

Ana smiled and swallowed her food. She reached across Kamilah's back, holding onto that safe spot between her waist and hip. Despite taking a deep breath, her partner rested against her.
"So," Ana continued. "Do you own a villa here?"

"No," Kamilah said through a falafel. "I just know the guard. He used to work at our base. But he got a job here because it's closer to his home."

"And...he just lets his friends in?"

"I may also have been there when his son got into a car crash. Kept him stable until the ambulance arrived." She speared another fried ball on the fork and put it into Ana's waiting mouth. "I guess that entitles me to a free pass to this area."

"Kamilah Shadid, making friends through pain and suffering. How cute."

"And effective," Kamilah added, raising her brows pointedly at her partner.

"Because it's hard to think straight when half your blood's on the floor," Ana explained, nearing her ear. "You plied me with your wiles and took advantage of me."

Kamilah turned her head, letting Ana's lips drift across her cheek towards the corner of her mouth. "Will you file a complaint?"

"Yes." Ana tilted her head, breathing tantalisingly against Kamilah's lips, then resumed her path along the other cheek. Reaching her partner's ear, she whispered, "You should be brought to justice for not taking full advantage of me yet."

A hand landed on Ana's collarbone and wandered slowly up to her nape. She took a slow, steady breath at the touch, keeping a calm that threatened to crumble at Kamilah's low, silky purr, "Beware what you wish for, Ana."

"Do you know what I wish, Kamilah?" Ana pulled their bodies flush together, free hand reaching over.

"Hm?"

"I wish..." Ana's hand moved past Kamilah's body to grab the paper bag beside her. "To eat the baklava now."

She pulled away abruptly and opened the bag as though nothing had happened. Tossing a piece of pastry into her mouth, Ana met Kamilah's narrowed eyes with a gleeful smile. She took another piece of baklava, holding it in front of Kamilah.

"Say 'ah'," Ana said. When Kamilah defied instructions, she starting poking one end of the treat at her lips. "Come on, don't be a wet blanket." Then she paused, brows dancing higher. "Are you a...wet blanket?"

The medic groaned in agony caused by the double entendre, snagging the baklava away. She chewed with a comical scowl, still glaring at the sniper.

"Don't frown, habibi," Ana imitated her mother's tone, and rubbed at Kamilah's creased brows with a palm. "Or you'll get wrinkles on your face."

"Like you haven't put them there already," she said, pushing Ana's hand away with a finger.

"That just means you care."

"Do not accuse me of such a thing." Kamilah tossed the box in her lap aside, circling her arms
around Ana's middle and resting her head on a broad shoulder.

Ana snickered, pressing her lips on top of her head. She rested a cheek against Kamilah and sighed, "I wish the week wouldn't end."

"Me too," Kamilah muttered.

"Ah well. At least I'll have you."

"Aren't you a lucky one?"

"Damned lucky."

Ana spent the whole of Sunday hiding in Kamilah's room, reading her squad's lazy grumbles on the phone as they arrived in base one by one. She declined the late dinner with them, sharing a pot of canned goulash soup that Kamilah kept in her cabinet. The medic had grumbled a little because Ana kicked her out of the room to cook it in the pantry herself, the sniper muttering something about not wanting to be seen yet. Ana washed the utensils up though, so they were square.

The first week back was uneventful and quite frankly, boring. Ana's squad was assigned run-of-the-mill patrol routes around the base, during which Ana would put her storytelling skills to the test, making up things she did during the week. She told Khalid she spent the entire leave barhopping, exploring the city, hitting the gym and shooting range. All that, and annoying the crap out of Kamilah instead of being glued to her lips like an alcoholic to the spout of a beer keg.

And Kamilah. Oh, all the bleeding fucking hells. Ana never realised how tactile they had been during the past week, until she was forced to stay in the same room with Kamilah and not touch her. The sniper alternated between two modes. One involved trying to ignore Kamilah's presence in the mess hall and shovel her food into her mouth, pretending the medic's eyes were not burning holes through her fatigues. The other had her staring across a crowded break room, locked in a smouldering gaze that cut through the commotion from their squad mates, as if no one existed but them. Two different tactics that yielded the same result: a needy, heated moment in a corner of either woman's bedroom, weary bodies somehow finding more energy for the private indulgence after work.

They did not spend a moment alone together in public until Friday. There had been a company-wide promotion ceremony, during which Ana and Kamilah, along with Khalid and a few others, were promoted to First Lieutenant for exemplary performance during the war. Of course, with Ana's squad, this meant a celebratory night-out at a nearby club. They managed to convince Kamilah's squad to wreak havoc as well, but Ana was surprised when Kamilah herself agreed to show up for once. It was rare enough to see the woman hang out with her squad in the barracks' break room, much less off base with her fellow soldiers who were getting shit-faced.

"I just feel like it," was all she told Ana when asked why.

So the next time they met each other in the car park, was when Ana arrived before the rest of their squads. Kamilah glanced over at her, mouth quirking at the grin already plastered on Ana's face. She raised a hand when the sniper came within range, tugging at the stray fringe that always hung near her right eye.

"What are you doing?" Ana asked when Kamilah frowned, running the fringe through her fingers.

"There's no gel," Kamilah commented.
"Why would there be gel?"

"I always thought you gelled that fringe on purpose," she replied, drawing her hand away.

"It's natural!" Ana ran a hand through her hair, pushing the fringe back only for it to fall back into place. "See? What douchebag wants their hair blocking an eye all the time?"

Kamilah shrugged. "One like you?"

"Oh really? Well, guess what? The joke's on you. Because that means you like a douchebag."

"So?" Kamilah hooked a finger onto her V-neck collar, tugging her closer. "Do you hear me complaining?"

"No," Ana muttered, attention drifting as she wondered where Kamilah got her lip gloss from. It always looked so damned enticing on her, she could just…

The pull on her top turned into a push when Ana leaned in. She glanced up in confusion, to find Kamilah looking over her shoulder. Ana spun around, facing Khalid and Ebo and a few others who were making their way over, rowdy voices already audible at this distance. Sighing, Ana tossed a glance at her partner, who wore a coy smile and crossed her arms.

Tonight's going to be difficult.

"Ana!" Khalid dragged out the last vowel of her name as he clamped his muscle-bound arms around her, lifting her off the ground in a crushing hug.

"Let me down," Ana imitated the vowel dragging, albeit much more lazily. Her request might as well have gone unsaid when Ebo slung his arms around the pair and lifted them both.

"Whoa, fucking stop, you fuck!" Ana yelled involuntarily when her weight went dangerously off-centre, Ebo tipping backwards a little. Thankfully, the man listened to sense for once and let them go. Ana stumbled backwards, stopped by a steadying hand between her shoulder blades.

"And you people are not even drunk yet," Kamilah muttered beside her.

"Come on, Ana! Let's go to your car!" Ebo boomed, snatching Ana's attention.

"Oh no, no! We're not taking my car. I'm not letting you drunkards stink it up." She stretched a hand towards him. "Give me your keys."

"But you're the designated driver," Ebo argued.

"Yeah, but we didn't designate my car, did we? Hand it over. Now."

"I don't have it."

"We all know you keep it in your wallet with your other keys. Now hand it over."

Ebo groaned loudly, fishing out his key and tossing it into Ana's hand without looking. "Fuck you, Amari."

"Not a chance in hell, meathead." She nodded at his jeep. "Let's go."

Ana stole a glance at Kamilah when her squad had their backs turned, receiving a wink in response to her long-suffering exhale. Her eyes lingered on the medic a little longer, watching as she entered
the backseat of her squad's car. Then she went to climb into Ebo's jeep, the car already alight with boisterous chatting.

"One more thing," Ana raised her voice over the din. "I'm not making a return trip to pick you up after you're done fucking."

The jeep almost exploded from the force of the uproar.

"Too bad," she continued, stepping on the accelerator. "Blame the asshole who made me cab back the last time."

"Hakim, you fucking bastard!"

By a stroke of good luck, they managed to secure a corner booth along with a few tables right beside the bar. It was a very nice dark spot for Ana to sip her club soda peacefully, and think about breaking the arm of whoever volunteered her as designated driver. It wasn't even her turn yet, but their original driver had been assigned extra duty shifts. So here she was, staring at the crowded club without a buzz to keep her sane through the noise.

Biting at the tip of her straw, she turned her gaze to the table where Kamilah's squad sat. Her own squad had long dispersed to look for their own fun, leaving her to wait alone and fend off a barrage of sloppy come-ons. It felt so…unnatural turning down so many with only the barest of flirts. And yet, it still felt right.

The newly-promoted medic seemed to be getting along well with her squad. Much better than her previous one. They behaved as though they had been together for more than just a few months, their synergy rivalling that of Ana's squad. And Kamilah, for once, was letting her guard down in front of them.

She blew at her stubborn fringe and swirled her straw idly, barely hearing the clink of ice on glass through the music. It was too dark to see clearly, but she suspected Kamilah was getting at least slightly drunk. She was on her fourth glass of…whatever that was. Maybe more. Not that Ana had been watching.

Dark eyes turned towards her, and she paused in the middle of lifting her cup, straw poking at her chin.

Okay. Maybe a little.

Through rhythmic flashes of light from the dance floor, Ana caught the curve of a knowing smile.

Okay.

Never breaking eye contact, Kamilah brought her glass to her lips, downing almost half of it in one go.

Uh.

Kamilah's gaze was diverted for a brief second when her squad set their glasses down, heads bent as they shouted something at one another. Then they got up, striding over to the dance floor with a swagger nowhere to be found in the sober. Like Ana. Whose eyes were glued to the woman who broke away from the group and slid into the booth next to her. Ana finally caught the straw between her teeth, taking solace in the icy coolness running down her throat when a hand landed on her thigh.
Her companion leaned close, until she could feel lips on her ear, hot breath sending a shiver down
the side of her neck. "Lonely, Ana?"

"Not anymore."

to say?"

She could swear she had an answer ready, but her mind drew a blank at the kiss on her tragus and
the hand sliding farther up her thigh. Not trusting herself to speak just yet, Ana lifted the glass from
Kamilah's hand and took a sip for herself.

"Vodka?" Ana asked unnecessarily, feeling the thin burn down to her stomach, where Kamilah's
now-free arm was rested across. The woman hummed, hand trailing slowly up Ana's side as her lips
moved down her neck.

Yup. Definitely drunk.

"I think that's enough for tonight, hm?" She set the glass aside, stiffening at the nip on her skin.

"No," Kamilah muttered. She brought her lips back to Ana's ear, hand reaching up to caress her jaw.
"That's not enough."

Kamilah caught her in a brief kiss, before Ana pieced some sense together and pulled away. Setting a
hand on Kamilah's shoulder when she tried to pursue, Ana glanced over at the dance floor. Their
friends were nowhere to be found – probably assimilated by the sea of grinding bodies. Hopefully no
one had seen anything. Ana pushed the medic against the backrest with some difficulty. The woman
kept stroking her face and the other hand was –

oh fuck, okay –

– trying to breach the waistband of her
jeans.

"Ana…" Kamilah whined, arms locking around her nape and back. Ana set both hands against the
seat to brace herself, tilting her head up and away from Kamilah's face as she tried to yank the sniper
in for another kiss. She pushed the medic back by the shoulder and pried the clingy arms from her
body.

"I'll get you some water, alright? Stay here," Ana intoned, staring at the intoxicated woman. Taking
the petulant whine as a 'yes', she dashed over to the crowded bar. Upon her return, however, she
found Kamilah knocking back the last of her vodka.

"No, no!" Ana peeled the now-empty glass away from her hand, watching helplessly as Kamilah
gulped the alcohol down. She dropped the glass on the table and took Kamilah's hand, guiding the
cup of water into it, and brought the rim to her lips. Kamilah drank obediently – that was, until her
face scrunched up after two mouthfuls.

"S'water," she said accusingly.

"Yes, water. No, hold on to it," Ana ordered when Kamilah tried to push it back. "You're getting no
more alcohol tonight."

The medic grumbled incoherently, but held the cup in her hands nevertheless. She finished the drink
slowly at Ana's urging, then let it fall from her grasp. Kamilah drew her legs up onto the seat, resting
her knees against Ana's lap as she nuzzled into the crook of the sniper's neck. It did not take long for
her hands to start wandering about Ana's body again.

Ana sighed, leaning back into the seat and accepting her fate, as lips were pressed onto her neck and
face repeatedly. She kept an arm around Kamilah's shoulders, holding the woman close. Was it a blessing or curse that she was sober, Ana wondered.

Only Layla and Mesi could be found on Ana's sweep through the club. Khalid and Ebo were nowhere to be found, presumably getting their dicks wet and missing out on the ride home. Just as well. She always hated having to drive a car packed beyond its capacity.

Ana emerged from the club with Kamilah still hooked around her middle, and her two remaining squad mates in tow. As she loaded the drunk and tired women into the car, she spotted Deyab doing the same for his own squad. He caught her eye just after she settled Kamilah into the passenger seat, raising a brow at her.

"Trying to steal my medic, Amari?" he called from across the road, wearing a grin that practically screamed 'I know'.

"What do you mean 'try'?" Ana answered.

Deyab just shook his head and finger at her like a disapproving teacher. "Don't get cocky."

The two drove back to the barracks together, parking their cars side by side. Deyab had to carry one of his charges over his shoulders, and Ana gave thanks that her ducklings could still waddle their way back to their rooms. Layla and Mesi walked towards the west wing while leaning heavily against each other, because two drunks made a pair that could walk straight at best. Ana returned their farewells, holding onto Kamilah's arm as they made their way to the east wing.

Kamilah had mellowed out somewhat during the drive back. Her hand, which kept moving towards Ana while she was driving, stayed in place after a few reproving slaps. Several moments passed when she fixed Ana with the most distracting gaze, until her eyelids fell shut in a quick nap. The short rest made her look more energetic, at least.

"It's so warm," Kamilah complained, speech still slow but less slurred than before.

"You're in Egypt with a few glasses of vodka in you. Of course it's warm," Ana said. She did not get the repartee that would have come should Kamilah have been sober, but just as well. She would take a victory where she could get it.

Ana wrapped an arm around Kamilah's shoulders when she shifted uncertainly on her feet. They slowly ate up the distance to the barracks, finally climbing the stairs. But before Ana could start up the second flight, she was surprised by a sudden shove on her front. She stumbled back with a hand on the wall to steady herself.

"What the hell, Kam–," was all Ana could say before two hands pushed her roughly by the shoulders into the corner of the stairwell. "Wh–"

Kamilah's lips crashed into hers, teeth clicking together in the clumsy open-mouthed kiss. Ana could barely straighten her thoughts when a searching tongue dove in, wrenching a deep moan as it swiped across her own. Despite the solid wall behind her, Ana clutched onto Kamilah's hips for support. The woman was pressed fully against her, one hand running down the side of her breast, mouth dictating a ruthless pace that Ana could barely follow, her overloaded senses torn apart at a thrust of Kamilah's hips.

Her next moan broke through cool air suffused with needy pants, Kamilah's teeth biting on her bottom lip, sting flaring at the sharp tug. Liquid heat started pooling between her legs as Kamilah kissed along her jawline, nipping and sucking her way to Ana's ear. Her body shivered at the nibble
on her earlobe, half-aware of fingers sneaking under the hem of her top.

"I've been thinking about you, Ana," Kamilah breathed into her ear, a languid grind against her groin showing exactly what those thoughts were. "So much." Teeth grazed across the edge of her jaw as Kamilah traced the defined lines of her abdomen, fingers moving ever higher as a flush burnt across her cheeks.

Her grip tightened on Kamilah's hips when she moved down Ana's neck again, alternating between lips and teeth and tongue, to suck on a patch of skin just above her clavicle. Through sheer force of will, Ana cracked her eyes open, looking at the unlit stairwell and corridors. Growing aware of how loud their breathing was, the sniper gritted her teeth and forced Kamilah away by the hips. Kamilah took two unwilling steps backwards, lips parting when she could reach Ana no longer. She gazed at Ana in confusion, hands coming to rest on sturdy arms.

"You're drunk," Ana managed to say, her newfound will wavering under the smirk.

"Yes, I am," Kamilah murmured. Sliding her hands slowly up Ana's arms, she stepped in to kiss her again. Less wild, more calculated, seductive. Ana's eyes fluttered shut as she learnt the rules of her game, and put forth a countermove. She cupped the medic's cheek, stroking lightly before pulling back.

"We can't," she said softly.

"Don't you want to…?"

"No." A trace of hurt flitted through Kamilah's features, prompting a gentle reassurance on her lips. "I want you, Kamilah. Very much. But not like this."

A heartbeat. Two. Three. Then a close-lipped smile. Kamilah stepped back and Ana followed, placing an arm around her waist as she guided the woman back to her room. She looked on, feeling amused when Kamilah missed the door sensor a few times before the card found its target. Following the tug on her hand, she walked in with the medic. She shed her shoes on the new mat, and held Kamilah steady as she walked in a not-so-straight line towards the bed.

"So…how do you usually–?"

Whoahelloyeahokay

Ana's gaze snapped up to the ceiling when Kamilah removed her top without ceremony. Modesty was not much of a problem in the army, really. It was a luxury at best. But she was unsure what rules applied here. So she kept her eyes away from the dip of shadow between her shoulder blades, the definition of toned back muscles, the indent of her spine leading down to a firm behind that moved out of sight when Kamilah turned around. Her smirk set Ana's cheeks aflame.

Caught staring. Again.

Kamilah walked – no, sauntered – over to her, setting one hand on Ana's chest and looking so damned confident while clad in only her underwear.

Isn't she supposed to be drunk?

"There's still time for you to change your mind," she said, fingertips teasing through thin cotton.

"Tempting, but no." Ana grasped her hand and pulled it away reluctantly. Then she held onto Kamilah's shoulders, steering her towards the bed and setting her down. The medic followed
obediently, lying still as the blanket was pulled up to her chest.

"Well, good night." She smoothed the top of Kamilah's hair, when the medic grabbed onto her wrist with surprising speed.

"Stay here."

"I don't think…"

Kamilah released her grip, flinging an arm behind her and pulling the blanket down. She patted on the mattress in silent request. Ana shrugged – more to herself than anything – and climbed over Kamilah's body, wriggling under the covers. The medic scooted backwards until her back met with Ana's front. Smiling, Ana wrapped an arm around her, placing a soft kiss on her temple.

"No wonder you don't drink," Ana whispered.

Chapter End Notes

Have a longer chapter because there may not be a new chapter next week. We'll see.

Add: Hey peeps! These two amazing artists have gone ahead to give Kamilah *gasp* an actual face! They're banononon and hana-blogs! Go give them your love!
Phase

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Strangely enough, it took Ana a few seconds too long to register the high-pitched sound piercing through the air. She stirred, waking mind slowly piecing together the details of the annoyance. It sounded like violin strings being clawed by a tone-deaf lion, producing the musical equivalent of a scream that was…muffled? The source was on the left side. Incidentally, her left arm was numb with a weight sitting squarely on her elbow. Then the weight moved and pressed harder down.

Cracking her eyes open, Ana stared up at a ceiling that was identical to hers. But somehow, she knew it was not. Bleary gaze falling to her left, she found a ruffled mop of hair resting on her arm. Oh. Even as she threw the free arm around her companion, the thought that she should probably find the alarm and switch it off formed in her head. Allowing herself a few moments of solace, she buried her face in the dark locks before her, catching the stale whiff of alcohol. The body she held finally moved, feet knocking into hers, then it curled up just a little tighter. With the head conveniently falling off her arm, Ana waited until she could at least twitch her fingers, and pushed herself up.

It was definitely Kamilah's alarm. Ana woke to the powerful chords of her Queen's blessed voice. Not this…unholy blasphemy that needed to stop. Now. She squinted through the darkness as Kamilah shifted with a throaty groan, spotting a dim light flashing incessantly through the discarded jeans' pocket. Her phone, no doubt.

Ana got on her knees and started to crawl over the medic's body, when Kamilah growled before yelling, "Shut the fuck up!"

Self-preservation instincts kicked in, and Ana froze in her bent position. She thought the outburst was aimed at her, but then realised the alarm had stopped.

"Your alarm's shutoff command is 'shut the fuck up'?' she asked, connecting the dots.

Kamilah mumbled into the bed sheets, "Is 'shut up'."

The sniper grinned, bending down to kiss the side of her head. "That's cute. But you have to get up now."

A short incoherent grumble. Then Kamilah turned onto her back, pain already written all across her features. She lifted her arms sluggishly and locked them behind Ana's neck.

"Pull me up."

Ana slid her hands underneath Kamilah's back and lifted her slowly, noting the twitches in her hung-over expression. Sucking a short breath through her teeth, Kamilah rested her head in her hands.

"Aspirin," she mumbled, pointing at her study table. "Top drawer."

Her companion hopped off the bed, pulling the drawer open. There were two notebooks next to each other, covered with pens, post-its, and loose paper clips. Sitting at the back of the drawer was a lone box of aspirin. Taking two pills as instructed on the package, she gave them to Kamilah, who was still hunched into her hands.

"Do you need some~," Ana started to ask, when Kamilah threw the pills into her mouth and
swallowed. "Yeah that works too."

"I'm never going out again," Kamilah muttered, pinching the bridge of her nose as Ana sat by her side.

"Going out is not the problem for you, habibti," Ana said. "Drinking is. I think you cleaned out the bar's vodka supply."

"How much did I drink."

"20 glasses."

"Then I should be dead."

"Okay, more like 4. That's what I counted, anyway." She peered closer when the crease between her brows deepened. "Feeling alright?"

"I'll be fine." Her hand dropped into her lap. She glanced down at her undressed state, then at Ana, who was still fully clothed. "Did I…"

"Yup."

"But we didn't…"

"Nope."

Kamilah sighed, resting her forehead on her fingertips. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry for coming onto me, or not going all the way?"

The first smile appeared on pursed lips. Pressing a lazy kiss on Ana's cheek, Kamilah hugged around her middle and rested her head on the sniper's shoulder. "Whichever you want me to be sorry for," she mumbled.

"Neither, then." Ana squeezed the medic tightly, then gave a dramatic sniff. "Wait, I change my mind. You should be sorry for stinking up my clothes."

When Kamilah groaned into her shoulder, she patted her back. "Come on. We're going to be late. Go wash up."

A muffled whine.

"Look on the bright side. At least there's no PT today. Come on. Up!" Keeping a firm hold on the medic, Ana pulled her carefully away from the bed. Kamilah's feet dragged along the mattress before they dropped to the floor.

"There we go." Making sure she was standing properly, Ana peeled Kamilah off her body and patted her cheek. "Got it from here?"

Though her face was layered with reluctance, Kamilah nodded and closed her eyes at the peck on her forehead.

"See you in the mess hall," Ana said.

"I'm dying."
"Sure you are."

Ana arrived at her squad's table in the mess hall to a rousing greeting of 'good morning, asshole' from the men. That, of course, only made her grin in a fashion that she knew would irk them even more.

"Good morning, boys. Such a wonderful start to the day, isn't it?"

A smattering of groans rose as Ana winked at the ladies – who seemed to be holding up much better, spared from the need to rise much earlier to catch a ride back to base. She sat down in front of Khalid, who had his forehead in a hand while he scooped fava beans into his mouth cheerlessly. He grunted at the kick against his boot, lifting his head to fix her with a resentful stare.

"Had fun last night?"

"Could've been better," he muttered.

"Aw. I'm sorry." Ana ate her own scoop of mashed beans, watching Khalid gulp his coffee. He would be fine by the afternoon. The man always could recover that little bit faster than her.

"Morning, Amari." Deyab sat next to Ana. "How does it feel to not have a hangover today?" He raised his voice on purpose, so it would carry over to the rest of her squad mates.

"Go fuck a needle, Deyab," Ebo said.

"Manners, meathead. Or your next needle's going somewhere painful." The captain looked much more gleeful than Ana had ever seen him. He transferred the extra cup of coffee on his tray to Kamilah's when she sat down beside Khalid.

"You look much better than this sorry lot, Shadid," Ana said, admiring how well-put together she was. Barely an hour ago, she was clinging onto Ana and smelling of last night's liquor. Now she looked ready to cow any idiot who walked through the med bay doors. But then again, she always looked like that. And maybe she appeared scarier because she was quietly nursing a hangover as well.

"Thanks." Kamilah brought the cup to her lips, downing a mouthful of coffee.

Ana felt a kick on her own boot this time, and she looked back at Khalid.

"Woof," he said, twirling his spoon with a smirk. But his smugness faded when Ana, instead of becoming disgruntled, just mirrored his smile and returned to her food.

The amount of power their secret gave her was amazing. It became so much easier to withstand Khalid's teases, knowing she had a leg up on the man. Knowing that she could knock on a door at night and be greeted by a woman no one else on base had seen. It was a…stability that she had never experienced. An anchor.

Ana peeked at Kamilah out of the corner of her eye, watching her take small spoonfuls of soup. She was going at it much more slowly than Deyab, and shared the same 'eating-but-not-tasting' expression with Khalid. Hm. Her appetite must still be dancing out of her grasp. Kamilah emptied another spoonful, then glanced over at Ana. The planets must have aligned right then, because Ana managed to throw a smile back, instead of turning into a flustered mess. On the outside, anyway. Kamilah's calm expression gave way to fondness for a second, quickening her pulse and making her aware of her own breathing.
Woof, indeed.

During training that day, Ana realised it was actually a blessing she had not imbibed alcohol the previous night. She was held back after her squad's round at the shooting range and put through a battery of tests in preparation for her cybernetic implant. The surgery had been approved the previous week, and they sprung a surprise evaluation to assess her pre-implant accuracy. It was nothing daunting – aside from the added pressure – and her range was pushed far beyond her limits before the eggheads were satisfied.

By the time it ended, her squad's morning training and lunch break were over. She left them in the armoury to clean their equipment and catch her own downtime. 'Downtime' meaning 'make a trip to the hospital'.

Woof.

She made her way past the few occupied beds to the back of the med bay, where Deyab greeted her with the same glee he carried in the morning. Ana frowned suspiciously at the captain, who ignored her narrowed eyes and directed her towards the private offices behind him.

"Someone's gone up the ladder," Ana commented, getting a shrug in reply. Kamilah's workspace used to be in the common office area, one half-height cubicle amid numerous others with barely any privacy.

"The war took a hell lot of medics, Amari. Left us a lot of empty offices." He pointed his thumb at the door on the left, looking more sombre now. "Might as well push some people up and warm the spaces."

"Maybe I should become a medic as well," Ana said, walking past the man. "Then I can have a room all to myself."

"If you became a medic, our death rates would double."

"Thanks."

"Welcome," Deyab called after her before the door swung shut.

Ana walked past four doors until she found the name 'Kamilah Shadid' engraved on a shiny new sign. She knocked on the door, and turned the knob at the prompt invitation. Kamilah had her head rested heavily on one hand, staring at the computer screen like she was watching paint dry. Her dull gaze lifted to see Ana bobbing the take-out bag in her grasp, and she straightened herself.

"Feeling better?"

"A little."

"Good. A little's better than nothing," Ana said, dragging over the visitor's chair to join Kamilah behind the desk. "One question: what's up with Deyab? He looks like he's been smoking joints all morning."

"That's because he's 400 pounds richer." Kamilah gave a partial eye roll and accepted the bag handed to her. She unfolded the top and brought out an oblong package wrapped neatly in foil. "What's this?"

"Shawarma. Er-" Ana turned the package over to look for the label written in marker. "This one's
lamb. The other's veal, if you want that instead."

"How'd you know I haven't eaten?" The medic said with a smile, holding onto the lamb wrap. She took a cup of coffee from the tray sitting beside the food.

"Just a hunch."

"And if your hunch was wrong?"

"Then I'll shove the other up my ass, I guess." Ana shrugged, withdrawing the other package. Kamilah had already opened hers, filling the small office with an aroma that made Ana's stomach growl. "So why's Deyab 400 pounds richer?"

"Because of you," Kamilah said with barely a twitch on her face, taking a bite from the pita.

"I don't remember giving him any money."

"That's because I gave him the money." She chewed slowly, keeping Ana in suspense. "We…made a bet."

Ana almost groaned in pleasure when the grilled veal touched her tongue. She took her time before asking, "And I'm involved?"

"We bet on whether I'd submit to your advances."

Frankly, Ana was more surprised at how unsurprised she was with the information. Maybe a little that Kamilah even bothered to make the bet, but Deyab knowing… Somehow she knew the man had an inkling about what was going on.

"Let me guess: you bet you wouldn't, and you lost."

"Technically, I didn't lose. The bet was whether we'd sleep together."

"We didn't."

"We didn't," Kamilah confirmed, taking another bite. "But he refuses to believe it after…last night."

"He saw you groping me." The withering look only elicited a lop-sided grin. "You could've just refused to give him the money."

"I wanted to shut him up."

"Or," Ana drawled, rolling Kamilah's chair forward so their knees bumped together. "It was advance payment." The hard slap on her thigh did nothing to stop her snickers, though she made a personal effort by shoving the shawarma into her mouth.

It was easy to tell that Kamilah was smiling behind the disposable cup. But after taking a mouthful of coffee, she sighed, "I haven't thanked you yet. For not… For taking care of me. I know how I can get when I'm drunk."

"Trust me, it was no trouble." Her fingertips drummed on the armrest. "I'm just curious, though… How much do you remember?"

Kamilah held her gaze for a moment, before averting her eyes. She played with her cup on the table, tapping on its rim. "Of the club, not much. After we reached back…everything."
"So you remember pushing me into–"

"Yes."

"And what you said?"

A faint blush crept onto her cheeks. "Yes."

"Is it true?"

"I…” Kamilah began uncertainly, but soon regained her poise. "That's for me to know."

A corner of her mouth quirked, and Ana took a pointer from the medic's drunken persona, resting her hand on Kamilah's thigh. "Then it's up to me to find out." She dared to venture upwards, but not too far. Though no move was made to stop her, she did not wish to push her boundaries too much.

"Promise me something," Kamilah said, gaze lifting to meet Ana's eyes.

"Of course."

"Do it when I'm sober."

"That's the plan." Ana placed a not-quite-chaste peck on her lips. "I want you to remember everything I do to you."

"In that case," Kamilah murmured. "Make sure you're sober too."

The next two weeks went by in a blur of dull routine, much like the first. PT, training, maintenance, leadership courses, patrols, drills, yawn. Her squad spent the time recovering from their post-leave slump; that mostly meant either lounging in the break room after work and texting their families, or going out of base to look for trouble that came in a bottle. Ana followed them out as usual – only to get a few raised brows at her steadfast rejection of all advances, and have the pleasure of waking up in her room with just a hangover for company. The first time she volunteered to be designated driver, the entire squad stared at her as though she had stripped naked and declared herself a hellspawn. Then came the teasing inquiries after her health, which were easy enough to deal with. Khalid's suspicions and more probing questions, not so. Although Ana was rather surprised he had not connected the dots yet, considering that he held a piece of the puzzle in each hand.

It probably helped that Kamilah had a more solitary disposition. Despite the better rapport with her squad, she was still rather elusive while off duty. To those who were not Ana, anyway. Having her number was an advantage, and the sniper had been invited to Kamilah's quiet places around base. So far, that meant the library's fiction corner or café, and on top of the rooftop exit in their barracks wing. Ana had no doubt there were many more, but she would let Kamilah reveal them at her own pace. For now, she was satisfied just lazing around in their rooms after work; both women either getting absorbed in their own phones and books, or watching reruns on the TV together.

One of Ana's favourite activities turned out to be listening to Kamilah grouse about ridiculous patients in the hospital. The woman was positively sarcastic and entertaining when worked up over the infinite stupidity of others. And Ana, usually the more laid-back of the two, would draw Kamilah into an embrace, reassuring her with words and smooches that she was the smartest and most capable woman in the world.

This time though, the tables were turned.
"I fucking swear, Milah," Ana repeated for the hundredth time. "It's not in here."

"Then where would it be?" Kamilah asked in an infuriatingly calm tone as she looked through the bedside table's drawers.

"I don't know! That's why I'm looking for it!" She glared at the study table, its drawers already open from previous fruitless searches.

"Why don't you calm down and try to recall where you put the wallet?"

Ana gave a guttural cry of exasperation, flinging her hands into the air. She started pacing at the foot of the bed, where Kamilah sat watching her. "I don't fucking know. I...just remember paying the last time I went to the club. But I swear I brought it back." She gestured at the study table, where she had tossed her wallet in a drunken haze.

"Fuck, Milah. I could've flushed it down the fucking toilet after that, I can't remember."

"But you went to the club on Saturday, right?"

"Yeah?"

"And we went out yesterday. You had your wallet then."

Ana stopped in her tracks. How the hell did she forget their date on Sunday? "Yeah. Yeah, I had it. And I brought it back, then we... Oh! Oh, could you take a look in your room? Maybe I left it in there."

"What, did you pay for something in my room?" Kamilah deadpanned, crossing her arms.

"Oh come on, please? I'm this close to tearing my room apart."

"Fine," she sighed. "But you keep looking as well," Kamilah added as she walked out.

The advice was unnecessary, for Ana had already turned back to her wardrobe. She patted down all her clothes' pockets, fumbled around the bottom shelves, searched all the drawers and cabinets, dug through the clothes hamper, looked in the shower, stared uncertainly at the toilet bowl, opened the microwave and fridge, and peered down at the ground floor from her window. When her search ended at the last square inch of her room, Ana felt the frustration biting away at her sanity again. She gritted her teeth, running a hand roughly through her hair as she went back to the study table. Hope promptly burgeoned at the sound of footsteps entering her room.

"Milah, please tell me--" Ana froze when she spun around to find Khalid standing at the door, which Kamilah had left ajar. The man, who held a six-pack of beer in his hand, cocked his head curiously.

"Who?" he asked, making his way to the fridge to deposit the beer.

"No one," she said quickly. "Where'd that come from?"

"Went to the new supermarket with Ebo. They're having a sale, so the dumbass snapped up all the beer we could carry. We're giving away the extras he can't fit in his fridge." Khalid shrugged, closing the fridge door. "So, who were you talking--?"

"Ana, I found your wallet and your--" Kamilah had walked in without looking. But she paused when she glanced up to find Khalid standing by the fridge, words dying under the two stares. One was painted with mute horror. The other was utterly confused, before eyes bulged at the realisation.
"Kamilah. Ka…milah. Oh my fucki–" His exclamation was cut off when Ana jumped onto her bed and bounded into him, forearm crashing into his collarbones and pushing him back into the wall.

"Ana!" There was a sharp *click* when Kamilah shut the door.

Khalid did not share the medic's alarm. The force of Ana's push could not repress the triumphant grin on his face. "You two are–"

"If you blab to anyone, Issa, I'll break your back."

"Yeah, right." He patted on the arm which had him pinned. "How about we stop barking for a minute, hm?"

"Issa–"

A touch on her back diverted her attention. She looked back at Kamilah, who seemed mildly amused by the situation.

"Relax. Let him go."

"Yeah, Ana. Let me go. Doctor's orders."

Ana squinted at the man, before lowering her arm and stepping back. Khalid pushed himself off the wall and straightened his t-shirt, looking the two women over with a mischievous glint in his eye.

"So…you two are…" He tapped the tips of his index fingers together, wagging his brows.

"Are *what*, Khalid?" Ana crossed her arms, stealing a glance at Kamilah and…feeling the question hit home. Are *what*, exactly?

"Oh, oh. I get it," Khalid said, raising his hands. "Play dumb. Cool. I can do that. I can play dumb."

"You could get a gold medal for playing dumb."

Khalid chortled, following Kamilah as she went to take a seat on Ana's bed. He nudged the sniper in the side, only to receive a slap on his back that echoed through the room. It did nothing to deter him. The pained look on his face quickly fell away, and with hands on hips, he said, "Yeah. Since I can play dumb so well, then you might as well spill it." He waved between the two. "How long?"

Ana peeked at the medic again, searching for a giveaway in her calm expression. There was none. In Ana's silence, Kamilah caught her gaze and cocked her head in silent question.

"A month?" Ana tried, getting a minute nod in return. Her relief barely had time to take root.

"*What!*" Khalid burst out. He held up his fingers one by one in mental calculation. "That means you were…during leave?! You told me you spent the whole time pissing her off!"

"Technically she did," Kamilah said, wearing the ghost of a smile.

"I did *not*," Ana countered.

"How do you know?"

"I– I *know.*"

"Of course you do," Kamilah indulged her. She held Ana's gaze one moment more, before turning to
Khalid. The man was subjecting her to silent scrutiny. "Yes?"

The man kept quiet, pressing his hand against his mouth. Then he gestured at Ana. "What do you see in her?"

"What are you--"

"I don't know."

Between Khalid's cackle and Kamilah's steadfast composure, Ana could do nothing but rest her head in one hand and judge them both through narrowed eyes. Maybe it was time for Khalid to make another trip to med bay. That would give Kamilah an extra workload. Serve them both right.

"You know what, Shadid? You're pretty alright." He looked between the two women, then shrugged. "Well, guess I'd better go. Don't wanna overstay my welcome." He had one hand on the doorknob when he turned around.

"I suppose I should congratulate you, sis. And Kamilah...you have my sympathies."

"Out!" Ana stalked towards him, shoving him out into the corridor. He was laughing uncontrollably as his hand shot out, stopping the door from closing on him.

"You two have fun no--"

Ana threw her weight against the door, finally snapping it shut with a loud thud. She waited until the man's laughter had faded into the distance, before turning towards her companion.

"He will keep quiet, won't he?" Kamilah asked.

"Yeah. He was just trying to annoy me."

"I think he succeeded."

"He had help," Ana said, raising her brows to emphasise the accusation.

"Why?" A sly smile. "Are you jealous?"

Ana scoffed, moving towards the bed. "Jealous? I'm the one you're kissing, not him."

"How do you know I'm not kissing him behind your back?"

"Please. He's not your type. Wait--" Ana paused halfway through sitting down. "Is he?"

"No. My type leaves her wallet and phone--" Kamilah held up said items in her hand. "--under my bed and sends me on treasure hunts."

Settling beside the medic, Ana took her possessions gratefully. "You're beautiful."

"I know."

The sniper fiddled with the wallet and phone for a while, then tossed them onto the bed. "You're alright with Khalid knowing?"

Kamilah shrugged. "It's only a matter of time." She gave a small smile which faded under Ana's stare. "Something wrong?"
'Wrong'? Not exactly. She felt her breaths growing shorter, a…weight gathering to sit in her chest. Something rested just beneath her vocal chords, begging for a release that Ana could not grant.

"Ana?" Kamilah frowned, tapping under her chin. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah," Ana managed to say. The sudden pressure retreated without warning, and left her feeling oddly empty. At the sight of Kamilah's concern though, she put on a smile. "Just admiring the view."

The tilt of Kamilah's head conveyed a confusion Ana shared. But thankfully, the medic did not pursue. Even if she did, Ana had no answers to give.

Ana tossed the thin blue binder onto her study table as though it was scalding hot metal. A notebook with a pen and pencil clipped to its cover soon followed. Four days of skills training, and Ana was still amazed by how stifling a classroom could be. At times it was almost like a prison. An educational prison. How did she ever survive the academy, she wondered, and how could she survive until the next week, when proper field training would take place. Probably by taking comfort in the fact that the hours were slightly shorter, and her uniform was not uncomfortably sticky by the end of the day.

She was admiring the still-dry uniform in her hands, when two short knocks came from the door.

"It's not locked!" she called, casting the clothes blindly onto the bed and making her way to the wardrobe. She pulled on her shorts without hurry – she already knew who it was. Sure enough, she turned around to find Kamilah closing the door behind her.

"Hey." Ana pulled the t-shirt on, then paused. "Going somewhere?"

Kamilah wore her usual riding outfit – jacket, pants, and boots. She had her helmet in one hand, and a duffle bag was slung around her shoulder. Setting both items on the floor, she replied, "I'm going away for the weekend."

"Now?"

"Now."

"But it's Thursday."

"I know. The roster just got rearranged and I'm not on it until next week."

"Lucky you. So, where to?"

"Damietta."

"Oh. Going to catch the sea breeze? Want some company?"

"Don't you have a course to attend?"

Ana groaned, "Don't remind me." She scratched her forehead, trying to dispel the images of a classroom assaulting her brain. "You're going alone?"

"I can take care of myself, Ana," Kamilah said, raising a brow.

"And an entire company of soldiers. I know." She grinned at Kamilah's matter-of-fact nod. "When are you coming back?"
"Sunday." Kamilah seemed to hesitate for a moment. "Do me a favour?"

"Shoot."

"Don't contact me while I'm away. No calls, no messages. Nothing."

That gave Ana pause. "Is... everything alright?"

"Yes. Don't look so worried," Kamilah said, touching her cheek. "I just... want the quiet. Clear my head."

"Oh. Of course." Concern started growing despite the medic's reassurance. The vague sense of anxiety revisited her, but Ana pushed it down. Curling her fingers over Kamilah's, she placed a quick kiss on her palm.

"So... nothing at all."

Kamilah nodded again. "Nothing. Unless you're dying. And no," she added when Ana opened her mouth. "If it's self-inflicted, then you can die alone."

Ana grinned and pulled her in. She could feel the medic's smile against her lips. "You're so harsh," Ana murmured, running her fingers through dark hair.

"With you, I have to be." Kamilah returned another peck, then glanced at the clock on Ana's desk. "I'd better go. I want to reach there before sunset."

Ana let her step back, feeling the reluctance coil tighter in her stomach as Kamilah picked up her bag and helmet. Part of her was sorely tempted to just throw her responsibilities aside and convince the medic to take her along. That, of course, was but a thing of fantasy.

Something burst within her, and she grabbed onto Kamilah's arm when she reached for the doorknob. Kamilah blinked, looking back at her curiously.

"Kamilah, I--" There it was again. That damned obstruction in her windpipe. Ana swallowed, took a breath, then--

"I... miss you already."

A tender smile curved Kamilah's lips. "Don't be dramatic. I'll be back before you know it."

"But I'm a natural drama queen." Ana held the door open for her to walk through. She already had one foot in a slipper when Kamilah stopped her.

"No need to send me off, drama queen. I don't want you crying by the roadside."

"You're no fun," Ana said, unable to hold the pout under the kiss, followed by a pinch on her chin.

"Bye, Ana."

"Bye." She watched the medic stroll towards the stairs. "Buy me a present!"

Kamilah had already rounded the corner by then. But a fist was thrust back into the corridor just to flip her off.

*God, I miss you already.*
Chapter End Notes

EGP 400 = USD 50 (approx.)
"Homeless, orphan, rebel, or suicidal?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Saw you during welcome briefing and lunch. Always by yourself, stony, avoiding those with parents fussing over them. Spoken to a few like you. Like us. One's a rebel. Two are on the verge of being homeless. One's bankrupt. Me? I'm an orphan who don't give a shit anymore. So, what are you?"

"…Desperate, I guess."

"Your family?"

"I ran away."

"Ha! And of course, you ran to the army. They just love types like us, don't they? Desperate fodder no one will miss. I'm Faisal, by the way. Faisal El-Kady. You?"

"…Kamilah Shadid."

"Are you even lifting, asshole?"

"I am, bitch."

"Then lift higher. It's like I'm carrying all the weight here." Ana took a careful step back up the staircase, keeping a firm grip on the couch which rested in her hands like the entire goddamned world. "Are you even trying!"

"You're short, you fucking goblin. That's why the weight's leaning on you."

"I'm not short. You're just weak."

"Weak?"

Ana barely had time to look up and savour the offended expression on his face, when Khalid grunted and heaved the couch from hip to chest level.

"Wait!" Ana yelled, feeling the couch push her weight off-centre. "Wait the fu–agh!" She fell backwards, her back smacking painfully against the wooden stairs. The edge of the couch hovered dangerously close to her face, held up only by her hands, which were supported by elbows propped up against the steps.

"You fuck!"

"Who's the weakling now?" Khalid panted. He lowered the couch on his end, putting less pressure on her palms.

"You stupid–"

"Hello."

The unfamiliar voice cut off what was to be a string of unflattering insults. Ana peered up from her
supine position on the stairs, and was greeted with the amused face of a stranger.

"Hi," she said through a heavy breath.

"Would you like some help?" the woman asked.

"Yes." She nodded her chin at Khalid. "Help me kick his teeth in."

"Ana, my arms are about to break!"

"I'll...take that as a 'yes'," their new helper said. She lifted the couch on Ana's side with difficulty – her frame was much lighter than the sniper's. So Ana quickly rolled out from under the couch, then relieved the woman of her burden.

"Mind opening the door for us?" Ana asked when the couch was finally carried out of the stairwell. "305. It's unlocked."

"Sure."

The soldiers' tempers cooled into coordinated efficiency, carrying the last piece of furniture into the apartment. When they finally set the couch in the living room, Ana's arms could barely straighten, let alone bend to flex away the numbness. Somehow moving furniture was more taxing than lifting weights at a gym, and much more infuriating.

"You two are moving in?" the woman asked, reminding them of her presence.

"No," Khalid replied. "We're helping a friend move house, actually."

"Oh, I see." Her eyes flickered over to Ana briefly. "Er, yeah. Do you...need any more help?"

"This was the last one," Ana swung her hand limply at the couch. "But thanks for the offer. For the rescue too."

"No problem."

They followed her to the open door, where she turned around. "Do you live nearby?"

"Nah. We're in the army base up north," Khalid replied.

"Soldiers?"

"Yup."

"Ah. Well, I've to make a move. You two have a nice day now."

Ana gave her a casual salute, smiling when the gaze lingered on her a little longer before the woman disappeared down the stairs.

"That's not fair," Khalid said when he closed the door behind them. "You stole her attention from me."

"I can't steal something you never had in the first place." Ana threw herself onto the couch, grinning at his joking scowl. She kicked at Khalid's backside before he could sit as well. "Get me something to drink."

"What am I, your servant?" he grumbled, but made for the kitchen anyway.
"You dragged me out to help your friend, Issa. So get me that drink." Laying her head back, Ana ignored Khalid's mutter of 'doesn't even make sense' and melted into the couch. Then, out of habit, she pulled the phone out of her pants pocket. No new messages.

Khalid returned to the living room surprisingly quickly, and clicked his tongue when he saw what Ana was doing. "Checking your phone every other minute won't make her come back faster, you know,"

Of course she knew that. Spending an entire day staring at the stagnant chat, restraining the urge to tap on the name, and falling asleep with the phone beside her pillow was enough to drill it in. But vain hope was an infuriatingly stubborn creature.

Ana waited until the screen turned dark before shoving it back into her pocket. "Whatever." She accepted the can of soda, popping it open and taking a large gulp.

"Are you sure you didn't piss her off?"

"Yes. Will you stop trying to get me doubt myself?"

"I'm not! Just trying to make sure." Khalid spread his arms as if to display his innocence. He took a long draught from his can and sighed in contentment. "You know, I still can't believe you held out on me for an entire. Fucking. Month."

"Get over it," Ana said, taking another mouthful of soda.

"You've been getting laid for an entire month and you never told me."

"I– Get over it," she repeated, giving Khalid a sidelong glance when he leaned in conspiratorially.

"So. How is it?"

"How is what." She bit into the rim of the can, steadfastly ignoring his grin.

"Hot or not? On a scale of 1 to 10?"

"I don't know."

"Right. Still playing dumb." Khalid snorted. "Like nothing happened. Like you haven't been getting your–"

"We haven't," Ana said quietly into her can.

"Yeah right." He took another swig, then yanked it away at the look on the sniper's face. "Wait. You're not being serious?" His brows rose when she rolled her eyes and tilted the can up. "You mean, for the entire month–"

"No."

Khalid stared at her, his face scrunching up in a cross between disbelief and humour. "Are you sure? I mean, it has been a month. Over a–"

"What's your point?" Ana sighed.

"Ana, who's the last person you didn't fuck on the same day you met them?"

She narrowed her eyes, playing along with his little game. After racking her brain a while – a long
while – she said, "Lamis."

"Right. Lamis. Your ex. From the academy. Two years ago."

"What's your point, Khalid?"

The man stared at her incredulously for a moment, before laughing quietly. "Shit. You're serious? About her?"

Ana rotated the can in her hand slowly, fingers leaving long trails in the condensation. "Yes. Yes, I am."

"God." Khalid fell back into the couch beside her. "I thought you were just after her because she's unattainable."

"Then what's with all the shit you've been giving me?"

"Because she'll be the first you can't get?" he said like it was as obvious as the midday sun. Turning to look at her, Khalid shook his head slowly, his mouth still curved. "I didn't think you're even capable of waiting, let alone wait for this long." He snickered. "Honestly, I don't know what I'm more surprised at. You being attached, or that you haven't been walking with your legs crossed."

"That's because I don't have a dick to get boners with," Ana said flatly.

"Right," Khalid drawled for the umpteenth time. He laughed to himself again. "Shit. You've really got it bad this time."

"You don't have to keep reminding me."

"No wonder you've been so tame in the club lately—"

"Will you stop—"

His phone rang at the right moment, sparing Ana's request from being ignored again. Khalid listened to his friend speak, then turned towards her.

"Pizza?"

"Get two."

"Making up for something, eh?"

Ana kicked him in the shin.

Hard.

_________________________________________________

She woke up on Sunday morning with her phone on her face. No new messages.

Had a run, shower, and a breakfast bar. No new messages.

Lay in bed reading the same line of a mystery novel repeatedly until Khalid dragged her out. No new messages.

Went to a casual French restaurant with some of the squad for a little pampering. No new messages.

Strolled around the mega mall. No new messages.
Picked up two magazines at the bookstore. No new messages.

Sat down in a café for a short break. No new mes–

"Will you stop!" Khalid exclaimed, yanking the phone out of her grasp.

"Give it back!" Ana half-stood from the chair, reaching for the device that Khalid stretched beyond her range. She slapped at his arm and face when he pushed her back by the forehead.

"You're getting obsessive with the checking, alright? You're going to break the home button at this rate." He pressed on the button despite his warning. "Oh. She's back."

"Yeah yeah, give it back."

"No, I'm serious." Khalid had barely stretched the phone halfway towards her when it was snatched out of his grasp. Sure enough, there was a single message from Kamilah.

Kamilah: [I'm back.]

A little underwhelming, but still. Ana shot a reply at light speed: [Welcom–]

No…wait. That's so…formal?

[I'm out]

She regretted it the moment it was sent. Was that too informal? Terse? Dismissive? Indifferent?

Kamilah: [Ok. Have fun.]

'Fun'? How was she supposed to have fun while fighting the impulse to ditch her friends and break the speed limit on the way back to base? How was she supposed to have fun when the look on Khalid's face broadcasted the intention to fuck with her?

"What."

"Too bad we took only one car out, huh?" Khalid said, grin growing slowly but surely. "And it's my car too…"

"Don't," Ana warned.

"Don't what?" Layla joined in, setting the tray on the table.

"Nothing," the sniper muttered. She took the latte handed to her.

"Ana's feeling a little restless," Khalid said, ignoring the pointed glance shot in his direction.

"Oh?" Layla laughed. "All that walking's not enough for you?"

"Yeah," Khalid continued before Ana could open her mouth. "We're just talking about visiting the museum."

Oh.

"Which one?"

My.
"The one that just got renovated."

_Fucking._

"Oh, the one with three floors?"

_God._

"Yup. Heard they have new exhibits now."

"Cool! Then let's go."

"What about Mesi?" Ana asked.

"Eh, she'll go if we're all going." Layla waved a hand, unaware of the plot that she had been dragged into.

"Eh, she'll go if we're all going." Layla waved a hand, unaware of the plot that she had been dragged into.

Ana fell into a staring contest with her nemesis, watching the self-satisfied smirk hold fast under her sickly sweet one. She brought the cup of latte to her mouth, taking a long sip. Two could play at this game. Even though only one would be in pain.

The museum had three floors. Each of which held a sprawling gallery that might as well be a labyrinth without an exit. Ana managed to calm herself down out of sheer spite, taking her time to appreciate the art pieces – though she did not understand most of them – and met Khalid at the end of each exhibit with an aggressively friendly smile. The man had better start planning his closed casket funeral. She was going to rip him from stem to stern.

It took them almost two hours to finish sweeping through the entire building. Ana let a little bit of excitement mix with her calm when they climbed into Khalid's car. Just a little though. In case that ass decided to make a detour out of the blue. He did not – fortunately for him – and they soon made it past the base's guarded entrance, reaching their barracks' parking lot by mid-afternoon.

Ana walked behind her two other squad mates on purpose, and stuck a leg out to trip Khalid when he mentioned that the rooms were not fully sound-proofed. She strode quickly up the stairs, heading straight for Kamilah's door. Her feet started tapping impatiently after the knock, then promptly flew forward when the door opened. Kamilah gasped in surprise when Ana crashed into her, arms clamping around Kamilah's waist and lifting her from the ground in a firm embrace. She laughed when haphazard kisses rained all over the side of her face and neck, and stretched out a hand to push the door closed. Turning her head, she caught Ana's roaming lips with her own. Brief, but deep.

"Aren't you tired?" Kamilah asked when she was kept in the air.

"'Tired'? Sweetheart." Ana snaked an arm under Kamilah, hitching her up onto her hip. She flexed her free arm. "These can carry you all the way from Cairo to Damietta."

"And I took my bike instead," Kamilah said with a smile, running an appreciative hand over the contours of her muscles. "How silly of me."

"Now you know." Ana stole another peck, then let the medic down. Now that her euphoric rush had subsided, she noticed Kamilah's tousled hair and clothes. Pulling down the hem of Kamilah's t-shirt that had hiked up over the waistband of her shorts, Ana asked, "Were you asleep?"

"Mm. Took a nap."
"I woke you."

"It's alright. I didn't mean to sleep this long anyway." Kamilah patted her arm, then moved to the duffle bag sitting on the floor beside her bed.

"That tired, huh?"

"I left Damietta rather early this morning. But there were two accidents on the way here," Kamilah sighed, setting the bag on her bed and unzipping it. "And traffic was heavy. It was horrible."

"At least it's over," Ana said, getting an affirmative hum. "So... the getaway 'clear your head'?"

"It was--" Kamilah paused with a bundle of clothes in her hands. "Not really." She tossed them onto the bed in a messy pile. "I--," she said quietly, glancing at Ana. She took a breath, and turned her attention back to the bag. "You... never really left my mind."

She would give Ana heart palpitations at this rate. Blood racing through an oddly calm body, Ana moved slowly towards her, affectionate smile growing as she neared her back. Kamilah was still fishing her belongings out of the duffle bag, acting as though she hadn't noticed the movement. Hands landing on Kamilah's hips, she slid them across her front, closing her arms fully around the woman. Gently, Ana pulled Kamilah flush against her, putting a halt to the unpacking.

"You know something, Milah?" Ana murmured next to her ear. "I couldn't stop thinking about you either."

Moving her hands up Kamilah's sides at a leisurely pace, Ana laid a kiss beside her ear, moving slowly down the edge of her jaw. Kamilah clasped onto her arms as the touches roamed over her ribs, brushing tantalisingly under her breasts. Ana's lips pressed a little harder at a spot on her neck, eliciting a slow, shuddering breath. Kamilah tilted her head upwards – just a little, giving Ana access to her pulse point. Claiming the spot with a kiss, Ana nipped at her skin. The soft noise from Kamilah's throat ignited the core of her being, searing through the last threads of patience and self-control.

Ana took a step back, turning Kamilah around roughly. She wasted no time, bringing their lips together with bruising intensity. Kamilah gripped tightly onto the back of her shirt with one hand, the other buried deep in dark locks, pulling her impossibly close. She kept her arms locked around Kamilah, every sense of self lost in their heated exchange, keeping pace with each advance Kamilah made. Ana groaned hungrily at the tongue delving into her mouth, moving with a deftness absent from the woman's drunken fervour. She met it with her own, pride swelling at the drawn-out moan from their first pass. They barely parted for breath, so desperate to make up for lost time that they were unaware of moving, until Kamilah's back hit the wall.

Teeth clashed against each other, and Ana felt a sharp sting on her bottom lip that flared when Kamilah's tongue brushed past it. With a pained grunt, Ana set a hand on the wall and tried to pull away. Each kiss Kamilah lavished upon her threatened to break her self-awareness, but the sting kept her grounded until finally, they parted. The thin wet thread between their lips broke as Ana took the time to calm herself, panting heavily while returning Kamilah's gaze. Desire reigned in dark brown irises until they flickered downwards.

Ana's eyes lowered as well, and she spotted a light smear of red on Kamilah's lip. She raised a hand to wipe it off, but Kamilah was faster. Her finger touched Ana's bottom lip lightly, bringing back to her awareness the pain she had forgotten.

"I'm so sorry."
She smiled at the concern in the medic's face, and held onto her hand. "Just a little scratch. I'll be fine." Ana sucked at her lip, noting how Kamilah's gaze lingered on the motion. She reached out with a finger, gently wiping away where her blood stained Kamilah's lip.

"Is it still bleeding?" Ana asked after licking at the wound.

"I don't think so," Kamilah replied, pulling at her lip for a better look. "Er, maybe a little."

"Kiss it better?" she asked, corner of her mouth quirking in a playful smirk.

"You know that doesn't work."

"Please?"

Kamilah's lips twitched. She leaned forward, placing a soft kiss over the cut. The care she took in not aggravating the pain – however slight – was for naught when Ana caught her in another kiss before she could withdraw. There was a dull throb at the pressure on her lip, but it was practically non-existent as far as Ana was concerned.

"I think it worked," she said, resting her hands on Kamilah's lower back.

"Oh really?" Kamilah quirked a brow and closed the distance between them. Ana stayed still, enjoying the attention – until she felt teeth closing in on broken skin. Eyes snapping open, she jerked away from the experimental bite.

"You're evil," Ana said, breaking away from Kamilah to worry at her injured lip.

"If you say so." With a crooked smile, Kamilah turned back to the bag that lay forgotten on her bed.

The sniper flopped down onto the mattress, lying on her back as she picked up a t-shirt Kamilah had dug out. She held it up between her hands, examining the stylised wolf print on light grey cotton. Now this was so much easier to appreciate than the abstract pieces in the museum earlier. Maybe she was just a caveman who did not appreciate the finer arts.

Ana started when something landed on her stomach. She dropped the t-shirt on the bed, looking down to find a small white package sitting on her stomach.

"You wanted a present," Kamilah said, picking up her now-empty bag.

Ooh. Ana took the packet as Kamilah went to her wardrobe, and held it up to see— Wait. She recognised the little blue brand logos covering the white packet. Ana sat up, tearing the package open and… yup.

"Animal biscuits," Ana said, popping a monkey-shaped one into her mouth. "Really? You went all the way to Damietta and got me animal biscuits?"

"Actually, the apartment owner's daughter gave it to me. I just kept it for you."

"Mm." Ana ate a giraffe. "You sure know how to make a girl feel special." She watched Kamilah gather the used clothes in her arms and dump them into the hamper. "You rented an apartment there?"

"Yup. With a sea view."

"How luxurious."
Kamilah lay on the bed beside her. "Compared to this shoebox," she said, waving a hand at the cozy but small room. "It was like a palace."

"I'm sure Your Highness will readapt quickly," Ana cooed, resting on her elbows by the woman. Picking out a bear-shaped biscuit, she dropped it into the medic's mouth.

"So...you didn't get anything for me, huh?"

"No. Would you settle for a night out instead?"

"Only if we're taking your bike."

"My bike it is."

Ana smiled, bending down for a lazy kiss. "Then we're settled." She rolled onto her back and rested her head on Kamilah's stomach. Tossing another biscuit into her mouth, she said, "Now, tell me all the exciting things you did in Damietta."

Her makeshift cushion shook underneath her head when Kamilah laughed softly. Ana closed her eyes at the fingers combing through her hair, listening to the lilts and dips in Kamilah's voice, feeling her life fall back into place.

How she ever survived without this woman, she did not know.

"This...feels a little strange," Ana said.

"Strange?"

She nodded at the riverfront they were strolling down. Adjusting her fingers between Kamilah's, Ana explained, "I've never really paid this place much attention before. Feels like I'm here for the first time."

"Never stopped to take in the sights?"

"Nope. Unless you count the pubs and nightclubs." For her, nightlife along the Nile was always a rush of activity through dimly lit hangouts interspersed with flashes of light – a routine that hardly left an imprint on her memory anymore.

Ana recognised the stretch of brightly-lit establishments, sure. She had ventured into most of them with the usual rowdy gang. But the moment Kamilah steered her away from the heart of the excitement, walking into quieter stretches with late night cafes, indie art galleries, and the occasional tourist shop, it was as if they had entered another world altogether. Many couples and families were on the boardwalk as well, either sitting on benches and enjoying the view, or wandering leisurely down the riverside.

The calm was unfamiliar, but refreshing. Now that she had slowed down, she could actually feel the breeze in her hair and enjoy watching the ships cruising down the river, brilliant lights marking their trails across dark waters. They were walking close enough to the guard rails to hear the faint sounds of water lapping against the concrete foundation.

"Let me guess," Ana said. "You've been here many times before."

"Only a couple."

"And never with company."
"Mm."

"No one's ever approached you before? And no," Ana intoned, drawing out the last syllable when Kamilah raised a brow at her. "I mean, outside of base. Outside the army."

"Never gave them the time of day."

"You must have crushed a few hundred hearts."

"More like libidos," Kamilah replied. "But 'hearts' does have a nicer ring to it." She turned towards Ana. "What about you?"

"I've crushed hearts, yes. But I do satisfy libidos."

A wry smile. "I meant, have you ever kept company for more than one night?"

"Do multiple nights count?"

"Outside the bedroom."

"Er, then technically…no. At least, not for quite a while."

"Never found anyone interesting?"

"Hm." Ana chewed over her answer. "That, partly. And I wasn't really looking. It's just…" She shrugged. "Tiring, you know? It's much simpler if it's…just confined to the bedroom."

The last few words came out slowly, her mind catching up to what just left her mouth.

Oh. Oh…no. No wait.

She looked over in time to see Kamilah nod, her gaze now pointed towards the river. Her expression was still placid, which only made Ana panic even more because she didn't know how to remedy the situation when she had no bloody idea what Kamilah was thinking when she was giving nothing away for her to–

Kamilah stopped in her tracks, bringing Ana's runaway thoughts to a halt as well. She tugged on Ana's hand and brought her closer towards the railing.

"There," she said, pointing towards the cluster of ships further down the river. "That's the biggest cruise terminal in this area. It's—" Kamilah paused when she glanced back at Ana, who was staring at her instead of the terminal. She cocked her head curiously.

"Have I told you how much I missed you?" Ana said suddenly. Kamilah's smile, which should have soothed her nerves, did just the opposite.

"I think your welcome said it all."

"No, it didn't."

Ana felt her own body tense as she stepped forward, circling her arms around Kamilah. Her partner blinked, eyes flickering briefly over Ana's shoulder.

"Ana?"

"Kamilah—" Ana swallowed, feeling her throat squeeze almost painfully. She tightened her hold on Kamilah's waist.
"I love you."

Three simple words that knocked the air out of her lungs, snatched away her defenses and left her vulnerable. So vulnerable. A lump rose in her throat as Kamilah held her gaze in silence. Ana's fingers trembled slightly on her partner's body, hope and fear clashing in an internal war that paralysed her.

God, she loved this woman, this part of her soul that she never knew was missing. She would give anything, do anything to be with her. She would endure the bite of a thousand bullets, crawl through a sea of hot coals, fight the entire world to stay by her side, to hold her close, to keep her safe. When? When did she fall, and fall this hard?

"Ana," Kamilah said softly, and Ana's heart leapt in response. The sniper watched her lips slowly twitch into a gentle smile as she ran a fingertip down Ana's cheek. "You're adorable when you're nervous."

Now that was…unexpected. Seconds passed while Ana settled down from her sudden upheaval, realising that Kamilah was still in her arms, caressing her face, leaning in to place a kiss on her lips. Eyes fluttering shut, Ana met each light peck with a familiar rhythm, cupping Kamilah's cheek as she tilted her head, deepening their kisses until Ana snorted.

She tried to hold it in at first, meeting Kamilah's lips again. But she quickly pulled away when she gave another snort, giggles finally spilling over as she clung onto a confused Kamilah.

"You think I'm adorable?" Ana asked through the giggles.

"When you're being ridiculously serious, yes."

She grinned, tugging Kamilah close so they stood chest-to-chest. "Normally I'd punch anyone who calls me adorable in the teeth. But for you, I'll make an exception."

"I do like my teeth."

"Me too." Ana closed the distance again, catching her in a firm kiss.

Kamilah slid her hands up Ana's arms to rest on her shoulders, indulging in the lip lock before she broke away. "We're in public."

"I don't care." She scrunched up her face when Kamilah tweaked her nose.

"Tough." Ana flew in before Kamilah could react, stealing another kiss. She smiled when her partner followed up with yet another. "I thought you cared?"

"You make me do strange things," Kamilah murmured, giving her one last peck before laying her head on Ana's shoulder.

Ana knew she was grinning like an idiot, but she did not give a damn. Wrapping her arms tighter around the medic, she pressed her lips atop black tresses.

"I love you, Kamilah." The words came much easier now, and she relished the way they rolled off her tongue. "I love you so much."
Blow

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

She flung the datapad at their feet. Some of them winced at the cutting motion as the pad bounced off the floor and clattered to a stop. Kamilah clenched her jaw, resisting the urge to sink her combat knife into each of their bodies, regretting each time she had stitched their wounds and set their bones.

They had abandoned her. Left her in a collapsing bunker while they fled with only half the data they were sent to retrieve. She survived – pulling the last of the information into her datapad and crawling into an escape tunnel before she was buried alive. Every step she took sent a jolt of pain up her injured leg, setting off another bout of spite that drove her bleeding body forward, until she staggered into field camp. The shocked expressions of her teammates sent a vitriolic surge of victory through her veins.

They had been in the same class back in the academy. They knew. They had people waiting for them back home. She did not. Hers would be the most painless sacrifice.

Damn them all to hell.

Someone tried to stop her while she limped towards the field hospital. But she slapped the hand off her shoulder so viciously, no one dared approach again.

A month later, she requested a transfer. Approval and orders came through three months after. She was to be transferred to Heliopolis.

Ana snorted a laugh when she opened the door. Not that the sight of an overworked medic with a reputation for scaring the shit out of others was too hilarious. But the tired scrunch of her features and eye bags went amazingly well with her dark blue t-shirt, which had "STAY THE FUCK AWAY" printed across the front. Her squad had gifted it to her upon their return from block leave, but the top was a few sizes too big, so the sleeves almost reached her elbows and the hem just covered her backside.

"You're finally wearing it," Ana said.

"Seemed appropriate," Kamilah muttered. She shuffled into the room, body falling limply into Ana's embrace.

Smooching the head that landed on her shoulder, Ana led the near-dead human farther in and closed the door. Their dinner plan for the previous night had been shot when a minor emergency occurred near the end of Kamilah's shift, holding her back. A combat simulation had gone awry during another platoon's training session, and it ended with one-third of its personnel requiring prolonged care in the hospital. So Kamilah ended up pulling a 28-hour shift which had sucked the living lights out of her.

"Been busy?"

A faint groan in reply. "Why am I here," she mumbled. Ana had summoned Kamilah to her room after work.
Placing her hands on Kamilah's hips, Ana turned her around and led her towards the small dining table. She settled Kamilah in front of the bowl of warm tomato soup. Her tired charge stared at it for a moment, then looked up with an unwilling expression.

"When was the last time you ate?" Ana asked, taking a seat adjacent to hers.

"Can't remember."

"That's never a good sign." She picked up the spoon and waved it in front of Kamilah, who took it and dug into the soup in defeat. Kamilah had her head rested in one hand the whole time, delivering spoonful after spoonful of soup into her mouth. Ana kept herself entertained with her tablet, knowing the medic would not appreciate conversation at the moment. It took a while, but Kamilah eventually finished her meal – contrary to Ana's expectations.

Kamilah stared listlessly at the bottom of the bowl, then dropped her spoon into it. "Now I can't sleep."

"Please," Ana said, taking the bowl. "If I put you on a bed of rocks right now, you'd still get knocked out."

"It's not healthy to go right to sleep."

"It's fine if you don't do it that often." Ana nodded at the bed, and went to wash the utensils in the bathroom. When she was done, Kamilah was already sitting at the head of the bed, propped up against Ana's extra pillow with her legs under the covers. Turning off the lights, Ana climbed into bed next to her with tablet in hand.

It was becoming a more regular occurrence now, sharing a bed at night. The first time – discounting Kamilah's drunk episode – was when Ana had fallen asleep in her partner's bed, having been tuckered out by the day's intense training. She awoke to Kamilah's slumbering figure, and decided that was how more mornings should start. Her subsequent stays in Kamilah's room bred a new sense of familiarity and intimacy between them.

Though Kamilah took a while to get used to her presence, she started warming up to having Ana beside her at night, and Ana began learning her little preferences in bed. She liked being spooned, with Ana's arm slung protectively over her body. Having their legs entwined was almost a necessity, but at times just crossing their ankles together would suffice. Despite having an ungodly alarm, Kamilah responded to soft murmurs and kisses as well – much better in fact, judging from her lighter disposition when hell did not visit in audio form. Tickling her awake would result in a reflexive and painful elbow to the stomach – Ana learnt the hard way. And, if she roused Kamilah well enough, she might be rewarded with a lazy make out session that ate into their morning routines. But damn, was it well worth the rush after. Kamilah was more than generous with her touches while half-asleep, and Ana just loved having her ass grabbed by unrepentant hands.

Although, ass-grabbing didn't seem to be high on Kamilah's to-do list right now. She was scrolling down the news feed on her phone with such speed that Ana didn't think she was even reading the headlines. Perhaps just keeping herself in motion so she would not fall asleep too soon.

"Ana," Kamilah said as she shimmied her legs under the blanket, mirroring the medic's posture. "Our date tomorrow. Could we postpone it?"

"Of course." Ana stretched an arm around her shoulders, and Kamilah lay against her side, head resting in the curve of her neck.
"I'll make it up to you."

"No need." She kissed the top of Kamilah's head. "This is enough."

They fell into a comfortable silence then. Ana watched a crime thriller on her tablet, a new series that her sister refused to shut up about. Kamilah continued her aimless scrolling until her hand fell onto Ana's stomach. Her phone dropped from her grasp, and that was when Ana noticed her partner's head was drooping. Ana smiled, setting her tablet down and lowering Kamilah gently onto the bed. That Kamilah did not so much as stir was testament to how taxing the past day was. Laying her head on the pillow, Ana pulled the covers up to her chest and pressed a gentle kiss on her forehead. She gazed down at Kamilah, trailing soft fingertips down her cheek before resting her arm over the medic's stomach. Ana settled in for bed as well, lying on her side so Kamilah's profile would be the last thing she saw before her eyelids fell shut.

Really, this was more than enough.

"Amari!"

Ana started, cloth jerking right across her rifle's handgrip. "Yes, ma'am!" she shouted automatically, recognising the ringing voice of their company commander. Her spine snapped straight as she adopted a smart posture in her seat. She looked up to find an amused expression on the captain's face.

"You seem ridiculously happy about cleaning your rifle, Amari," Captain Jaida said, crossing her arms.

Happy? Then Ana realised her lips were still quirked in a smile she never knew was there. *Crap.* She kept it on, though.

"I'm always happy to service my wife, ma'am," she said with a grin, holding up the handgrip of her 'wife'.

A few snorts came from her squad mates, who were seated around the armoury as well. Jaida nodded appreciatively at her 'dedication' and handed a datapad to Ana. She took it, glancing at the schematics for the cybernetic eye before raising her gaze back to the commander.

"These are the specifications," Jaida explained. "Better acquaint yourself before your first lab visit."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you."

The captain waved a hand, already turning around and making a beeline for the leader of another squad. Ana skimmed through the document briefly, then set it aside. She would study it in more detail later. For now, her weapon needed her attention.

"You've been smiling since morning PT," Khalid said, voice low as he tended to his own rifle.

"Are we not allowed to smile now?" Ana asked. She did not look at the man who sat across the table from her, getting absorbed in the task at hand.

"No. It's just funny now that I know why you're looking like an idiot."

She rolled her eyes at the kissy noises, still refusing to look up at him. Finished with the handgrip, Ana laid it down and took the magazine. He was right though – she had been thinking of Kamilah ever since morning training. The medic had flashed her a smile as they dispersed to clean up, and
Ana could not get the image out of her mind since. To the best of her knowledge, no one ever looked as sexy in a dull grey t-shirt drenched in sweat. And she had a date with that sexy someone later that night.

"Smiling again," Khalid said.

Ana smiled wider in response. "Yes. That's because I have more than my hand for company tonight."

"Oh, come on. Low blow."

"Didn't know you were that flexible, Issa."

She finished cleaning her magazine, twirling it between her fingers with a flourish as she reveled in Khalid's unamused stare. Ana reassembled her rifle in record time, then went on to tackle her sidearm and body armour with renewed vigor.

Score one for Amari.

Ana just could not wipe the damned smile off her face, it seemed. First Jaida. Then Khalid. And now Kamilah saw fit to bring up her goofy expression. Although the last person did it with less jest, and more…literally. When she spotted Kamilah strolling over to her car, the first thing Ana noticed was the black sleeveless top that hugged her figure just so, and the V-neckline that led Ana's gaze down to…whoa.

A slender finger tilted her chin up, and Ana's eyes were led away from the generous cleavage to an equally beautiful vision.

"Hello to you too," Kamilah said, knowing smile hanging on her lips.

"Hey." Ana kissed her gently. It was brief, but the fingertip gliding up the underside of her chin made it seem so much longer.

"You seem happy."

Ana blinked, made aware of her smile yet again. This time though, she did not bother with sarcasm. "I'm going out with such a stunning woman. Of course I'm happy."

"Keep it up with the flattery, and you might actually get somewhere tonight," Kamilah said with a coy smile, reaching for the door handle.

Oh.

She held the door open for Kamilah, eye contact breaking only when her partner had settled into the seat. Closing the door, Ana took a quiet breath which failed to douse the thrill tingling through her body.

"How was your day?" Kamilah asked when Ana climbed into the driver's seat.

"Maintenance." No further explanation was needed. That meant Ana had spent most of the day stuck in the armoury and was probably stir-crazy.

"I'll assume you have a lot of energy to spare, then."

Ana almost switched through two gears in one go. "I do. And how was yours?"
"Busy." A group of injured idiots arrived at med bay and fucked up her day.

"Good. That means you have a lot of frustration to work off."

"I do."

Ana released the parking brake, catching a glimpse of her smile before pulling out of the parking lot. She pressed her own lips together, already planning to pull every single trick out of her book.

Kamilah was much more affectionate than usual. Spontaneous, even. Where Ana would have been the one to link their fingers on the table, sneak a caress or two over her cheek, and cross their ankles under the table, Kamilah took the initiative and went even further. She played with her silver pendant and the chain it hung from, traced idle patterns over the back of Ana's hand, and brushed up Ana's calf with her foot.

Ana kept her eyes locked with Kamilah's the entire time. She was familiar with the little signals and suggestions – she had been at both the receiving and giving ends before. What she was unfamiliar with was the particular fondness that accompanied each response Kamilah drew from her. The woman seated before her was not just a means to an end. No, she was...so much more.

She lifted her hand, caressing Kamilah's palm with her knuckles, and laced their fingers loosely together. Kamilah rested her chin on the back of her fingers, watching Ana play idly with her captive hand before bringing it to her lips.

"Have I told you how beautiful you are?" Ana asked.

"Twice on the way here," Kamilah said with a smile. "Once after we sat down."

"Thrice, then. But it's still not enough." Ana snuck another peck on her fingers, then set their hands back down on the table.

"And how many times will make it enough?"

"I could repeat it until our hairs are white, and it still won't be enough."

"White? Already planning our future, Ana?"

"I'm a sniper, habibti." Ana smirked playfully. "I'm trained to look far."

Kamilah's fingers curled closer around hers. "Then I just have to hope you're as accurate as they say."

"The records don't lie." Ana reached for her wine glass and took a sip. "But if I'm wrong, you're welcome to call me out on my bullshit."

"I'll hold you to your word."

"Just my word? Not something more...solid?" Ana grinned when a smile curved Kamilah's lips, and the foot traveled up her leg again.

"No." Kamilah lifted her own glass. "Not right now, anyway."

They went to a nearby street market to walk off their dinner. The crowd was not quite that dense – it was a Thursday night, after all – and it gave the pair enough room to feel the light breeze on their
skin. The market was one of the more popular ones in Cairo – stalls on both sides stretched all the way down two streets, and one could find just about anything here. Food, fabrics, handicrafts, jewelry, souvenirs, even furniture and songbirds. But as they strolled past the stalls, Ana fancied neither of them were paying much attention to the wares on sale. She had caught Kamilah gazing at her out of the corner of her eye, and been caught doing the same. Despite that, she managed to buy a scarf for her partner. Blue, of course – Kamilah had an obvious liking for the colour, no matter its shade.

When they finally turned around and made their way back to the parking lot, Ana started feeling a little antsy. She stole a glance at Kamilah, but found no hint of any sort of intention. Just a gentle smile whenever their eyes met. The silence they walked in was a stark contrast to the charged atmosphere they had nurtured during dinner, when they were seated in an enclosed area with little else to do but try and drive the other crazy first. Now that they were out, things seemed to have calmed down. 'Things' of course, not including the anticipation and uncertainty blending together in her stomach.

She was left wondering if she had imagined the first half of their night, until she grasped the door handle of her car. Kamilah held onto her wrist before she could pull it open, and tugged Ana in for a kiss. It was soft, but Ana found every single bit of intent she had been searching for in the warmth of Kamilah's lips.

"Ana," she whispered.

Her mouth went dry at the unasked question. Biding her time, Ana held Kamilah's hand in her own. "Are you sure?"

A brow rose, along with the corner of Kamilah's mouth. "Are you really asking me that?"

"I…just want to make sure. I mean, you've been… I'm not complaining, but it is kind of sudden that tonight you're--" Another kiss. More urgent this time.

Kamilah's arms circled around her waist loosely as she stepped in, their hips touching. "Ana," she murmured. "I want you."

The quiet confession sparked a similar want—need—in Ana. She was the one to close the distance this time, more insistent, stepping forward until Kamilah was pressed up against the car. Then, remembering where they were, Ana allowed herself one last kiss before pulling back.

"Have a place in mind?" she asked softly, feeling her control waver under those dark eyes.

"No," Kamilah admitted. "You?"

Ana smiled. "Do you even have to ask?"

"I have a question," Kamilah asked as Ana swiped the keycard over the door's sensor.

"I'm not double-jointed." She laughed at the light slap on her arm. Ana entered first, holding the door open for her partner.

"If you knew where to go," Kamilah continued, slipping off her heels as Ana did the same. "Why'd you even ask me in the first place?"

"In case you really did own a villa." Ana followed her farther into the hotel room. "You know, one with a king-sized bed and a hundred pillows for us to make passionate love in."
It was Kamilah's turn to laugh. She turned around, cocking her head. "Why would you need that many pillows?"

"Pillow fort?" Ana mirrored her wide smile, glimpsing the not-king-sized bed sitting near them and feeling her pulse quicken.

"Is that one of your turn-ons?" Kamilah unwrapped the scarf around her neck and tossed it onto the dressing table, along with her purse. She lifted her arms, resting them around Ana's neck as the sniper drew her in.

"No," Ana said, voice low and surprisingly steady under the delicate yet maddening touches on her nape. "But a beautiful woman is."

"And? Are you—"

"Very." Ana kissed her with a tenderness that belied her need, cupping Kamilah's cheek in a hand, thumb stroking over smooth skin. Each exchange grew deeper, hungrier, chipping away at her calm façade until they broke apart briefly for air. Ana caught sight of darkened eyes, lust shining through brown irises unclouded by liquid courage, and her restraint snapped clean in two.

Ana's lips collided into Kamilah's, claiming them for her own. Hers. The grip on her shoulders tightened when Ana lifted Kamilah from the ground, taking a few blind steps forward and setting her on the dressing table. Threading her fingers through dark hair, she tugged Kamilah's head back, forcibly parting their lips as Ana nipped along her jaw, biting teasingly at her earlobe before traveling down her neck. Only when the first button of her shirt was popped open, did Ana realise Kamilah's hands were working on her front, hands pressing against her breasts as she revealed more and more of Ana's skin.

She chuckled, drawing back to make eye contact. "In a hurry, aren't we?"

Kamilah smiled wryly, freeing the last button. "If you don't hurry up, Ana, I may have to take over."

"Oh?" Ana purred against her lips, keeping her arms stiff on purpose when Kamilah tried to pull her shirt off. "Tell me more."

The faint growl sent a shiver down Ana's spine. Kamilah bunched up the shirt around her elbows, turning them into physical restraints to keep Ana's arms locked to her sides. She yanked Ana forward, wrapping her legs tightly around her body and trapping her in a hungry kiss. Ana could not stop the moan from rising, caught between the tongue sliding up the roof of her mouth, the hands nestled between her breasts and entangled in her hair. She tried to flex her arms, but found no leeway in her makeshift prison. Kamilah had wrested control from her. The realisation set off a dizzying mix of arousal and rebellion.

Ana kept herself from following Kamilah's lips when the woman pulled away and grasped her chin, tilting it up so their eyes met.

"I can keep you like this and still get what I want," Kamilah murmured, gliding the back of her fingers down Ana's throat, brushing across her clavicles to play with her bare shoulder. "But you won't get to touch me."

She closed her eyes at the kiss on her cheek, tilting her head up as it moved down, muscles tensing at fingernails trailing from her shoulder and down her spine. A wave of heat broke across her cheeks at the puff of breath in her ear.

"Tell me, Ana. What do you want?"
But no. They had a game to play. And Ana would claim her victory.

"I want to touch you, Milah," Ana whispered in her ear. "I want to touch every single inch of you. I want to pin you to the bed. I want to feel how wet you are. I want to taste every single drop of you. I want to hear you scream my name when you come into my mouth--"

She heard Kamilah take a breath, crooked grin parting her lips as the legs around her loosened. Ana shrugged off her shirt with Kamilah's help, then they met each other halfway with a rough, needy kiss. She snuck her fingers under the hem of Kamilah's top, sliding up her sides with just enough pressure to not tickle her. Pulling the top over her head, Ana tossed it aside and was pulled back into the kiss once more. A tug below her navel, and her belt buckle came loose. Kamilah undid her pants button and ripped the zip open, the sensation sending a rush of warmth between her legs. She gasped at the hand cupping her through her underwear.

A devilish smirk curved Kamilah's lips. "We've barely even started, Ana…"

"Shut up," Ana growled with less conviction than intended, when fingers rubbed against her through moist fabric. She yanked the hand out of her pants, crashing her lips against Kamilah's again.

Guiding her lover's legs around her waist, Ana lifted her from the dressing table and moved towards the bed. She let Kamilah down gently on the mattress, but stayed upright to divest herself of the damned pants and underwear at the same time.

Kamilah laughed at the sight. "In a hurry, aren't we?" she repeated Ana's words, letting the sniper unzip her jeans.

Ana did the same for Kamilah, hooking her fingers over the jeans and underwear, and pulled them off at the same time. She threw them onto the floor, eyes lingering between Kamilah's legs before she took her place between them. Sitting on her haunches, Ana took her time to appreciate the vision beneath her, running her fingers up the faint definition in her abdomen, to her ribs where…

She paused, the short scar catching her attention. Ana smoothed over the ridged line with her thumb, reminded of the moment when she thought…

"Ana." Kamilah sat up, cupping her cheek. She smiled gently when Ana lifted her gaze. "Stay with me."

Her lips curved, and Ana leaned forward to meet her in a soft kiss. "I love you," Ana whispered between kisses, affection mixing with desire in her chest, stealing her breath away.

Kamilah's arms held her steady as Ana met her lips again and again, roaming hands exploring bare skin, then dipping lower to cup Ana's ass. Ana jerked and laughed at the squeeze, feeling herself fall even further for the woman grinning cheekily up at her. She reached around Kamilah's back and unfastened her bra, Kamilah promptly returning the favour, and soon the last of their garments were thrown carelessly off the bed.

Ana bent down, resuming her work on Kamilah's neck, sucking and nipping at choice spots that made her partner's breath hitch. She made her way down and bit at the area above her clavicle, eliciting a gasp and sigh when she soothed it over with her tongue.

"Ana, no--"

"No marks, I know," Ana finished for her, already familiar with Kamilah's rule. Once, when she had been overeager, she left a mark on the medic's neck that had to be covered with a band-aid. But this
time…the rules could afford to be bent a little.

Trailing her mouth down into new territory, Ana shifted her hands up to cup Kamilah's breasts, which were pushed further into her hands when her lover took a breath at her touch. She kneaded the flesh in her palms, rolling the nipples between her fingers as Kamilah's hands traveled further down her back. They stopped just above her ass, then one snuck between their bodies and reached down for her–

Ana caught the wandering hand by the wrist and brought it back up, holding it still against the bed. "No cheating, sweetheart." She placed a brief kiss on pouting lips and released the hand, trusting Kamilah to keep it above waist-level. It found a home on her head as Ana returned to a chosen spot between her breasts, sucking on the patch of skin before biting down. Fingers gripped tighter onto her hair as Kamilah inhaled sharply, slowly relaxing as Ana nursed the spot with lips and tongue. She lifted her head to admire her handiwork. Her first – intentional – mark on her lover.

"You're going to leave those all over, aren't you?" Kamilah asked, sighing softly when Ana tweaked a nipple between her fingertips.

"You're welcome to take revenge later."

"I will."

"Mm." Ana grazed her teeth lightly over a stiff peak, then took it into her mouth, sucking and drawing teasing circles with her tongue. Kamilah gave a quiet whine when she released the nipple, and promptly turned her attention to the other. At the louder moan and subtle grind of Kamilah's hip, Ana pinched the tip between her teeth one last time, then started moving down again.

She did it slowly, smiling as she trailed kisses down Kamilah's stomach, feeling the muscles flex under her lips as her partner started to fidget more. The hand on her head pushed more insistently the longer Ana dallied around her navel. So she gave in and went farther down, until she reached the juncture between Kamilah's thighs.

The sight of her wetness made Ana want to dive in right away, but she bided her time. Pulling her legs farther apart, Ana settled comfortably between her thighs and leaned in, keeping her eyes locked with Kamilah's as she exhaled slowly against her sex. Smirking at Kamilah's shiver and obvious hope that her lover would not toy with her any longer, Ana brought her lips tantalisingly close, then winked and moved away to kiss along her inner thigh.

"God, Ana…" The exasperation in Kamilah's voice was evident, accompanied by the tug on Ana's hair.

Ana did not bother with a response, busy with leaving another mark on her thigh. She ran her tongue over reddened skin, then brought her head in again. This time, she relented with a kiss on moist lips, feeling the shudder run through Kamilah's body. Then, of course, Ana went on to–

"Oh fuck's sake, Ana!" Kamilah's fingers tightened in her hair when Ana moved away again, attention now on her other thigh. She pulled harder, but Ana resisted and bit harder on her flesh in retaliation. "Ana–"

"What do you want, Milah?" Ana said, gaze lifted towards her even as she moved her lips down the toned thigh.

"Ana, please just–"

"What do you want me to do, Milah?" She nipped at the skin beside Kamilah's sex.
"Ana, please."

"Please what, sweetheart?" Ana leaned close, breathing in the intoxicating scent and ghosting her tongue over the slit.

"Fuck me, Ana!" Kamilah bucked her hips up, to no avail. Ana grinned at her sob, the victory bolstering her sense of power over her lover. "Just *fuck* me already!"

Putting an end to Kamilah's misery, Ana pressed her tongue flat against the slit, dragging it up slowly as she watched her lover's head fall back in relief. She lapped at the wetness, coating her tongue with her new addiction, reveling in each moan that escaped Kamilah's throat. Keeping one hand on a breast, Ana spread her folds with two fingers and delved in deeper with her tongue, causing Kamilah to roll her hips forward. She continued licking and brought her tongue higher until Kamilah bucked again, moaning louder as Ana curled her tongue around the sensitive bud. Closing her lips over the clit, Ana sucked lightly, sending Kamilah's moans into a higher pitch. She found and maintained a rhythm with each roll of Kamilah's hips; licking, sucking, and kissing until her lover was writhing under her hands and mouth.

"Ana…" Groaning at the wanton moan of her name, Ana surrendered to her own need. She buried her face in Kamilah's sex, filling her nostrils with the heady scent as her tongue delved deeper, harder, quicker, getting tighter rotations and bucks of Kamilah's hips. Her lover's fingers tightened even further in her hair, moans filling the room with rising fervour. Then Ana pulled away, and Kamilah's gaze snapped down.

"Ana," she breathed, desperately pulling on Ana's unyielding head.

"Patience, Milah," Ana said with a smirk.

She bent her head down slowly, flicking her tongue over the clit, feeling the muscles in Kamilah's thighs tense in anticipation. Keeping her tongue on the bud, Ana massaged it lightly, then slowly pushed one finger through her folds. It sank up to the last knuckle easily, Kamilah letting out a shuddering exhale when Ana started thrusting. She kept her lips and tongue working over the clit, hand picking up speed, when she noticed Kamilah had become quieter. Glancing up, Ana found Kamilah pressing the back of her hand against her mouth, muffling the moans spilling forth. She reached up and pulled the hand away, entwining their fingers.

"I want to hear you."

Then she inserted a second finger, stretching Kamilah around her digits. Ana kept thrusting, increasing her pace slowly and curling her fingers. She brought her mouth back to Kamilah's clit, searching patiently for the coveted spot until Kamilah arched her back, crying out in pleasure.

*There.* Ana thrusted harder, keeping her fingers curled to hit the right spot, while Kamilah began writhing with abandon. She sucked on the stiff bud a few more times, then rose from her position between Kamilah's legs. Kamilah opened her eyes at the loss of stimulation, just in time to watch Ana descend upon her, trapping her in a rough kiss. Ana pressed a thumb against her clit, and Kamilah jerked at the touch, whimpering into Ana's mouth.

Ana kissed and bit her way all along Kamilah's jaw and neck, biting particularly hard into a spot on her shoulder, all the while going faster and harder into Kamilah. She buried her face in the curve of Kamilah's neck as her moans and gasps grew more frequent, climbing an octave. She wrapped a leg around Ana's, rolling her hips in time to meet with Ana's thrusts. Kamilah's fingers left her head to
clutch onto her back, nails digging hard into her flesh as Ana felt her clench around her fingers.  

"Ana–"

She quickened the pace even further, keeping Kamilah's writhing body pinned under hers. Stiffness started to set into her wrist, but she kept going, thrusting impossibly harder and faster.

"Please," Kamilah sobbed into her ear between breaths. "Ana, I–"

"Come to me, Milah."

Ana circled her clit hard, punctuating each pass with a thrust hitting the right spot deep inside her. Both hands on Ana's back now, Kamilah clung desperately onto her lover, pants and moans threatening to send Ana over the edge as well.

"Ah–Ana!" Kamilah cried her name to the ceiling in climax, eyes slamming shut, chest heaving as her body arched in intense pleasure.

Ana watched the erotic display, feeling wetness gather between her own thighs as Kamilah's slicked over her fingers. She kept the digits moving, cresting the high with Kamilah before slowing her pace down. Easing off on her clit when Kamilah twitched at her touch, Ana gave a few more languid thrusts, then slid her fingers out.

She gazed down at Kamilah, smiling at her flushed visage, a potent tenderness filling her chest with warmth. Ana peppered her face with soft kisses, slowly rousing Kamilah back to life. Her lover's eyelids fluttered open and she turned her head, catching Ana's lips in a lazy kiss. Kamilah graced Ana with the most beautiful smile she had ever seen, hand cupping the sniper's face and bringing their lips together again. Her mouth, soft and submissive, grew bolder as she recovered. Ana tilted her head, deepening the kiss as hands roamed down her back and sides. Then, with a sudden push, Kamilah flipped them over.

Grinning at her burst of energy, Ana returned the firm kiss eagerly, relinquishing control to the woman now straddling her hips. She felt the hand sliding down from her clavicles, between her breasts, tracing the lines of her abs, and dipping between her legs. Ana's breath caught in her throat when fingers teased at her entrance, making her aware of how wet she was.

"Now…” Kamilah purred. "You were saying something about revenge?"

Chapter End Notes

My first full-length smut. *pulls poppers* Yay.
Why are you running?

Kamilah lurched to the side. A round of hot lead punched into the pavement where she had been seconds ago.

Why are you running so hard?

Sweat trickled down the sides of her face and dripped off her chin. Her fatigues were getting soaked, armour growing heavier with each wide stride.

You're fodder. No one will miss you.

Her dry throat tightened. The pistol weighed heavily in her grip.

It's time to stop running.

A finger slipped through the trigger guard.

You know they won't let you die so easily.

It hovered over the trigger, then rested on it.

Might as well do it with your dignity intact.

She lifted the gun, muzzle rising to aim under her chin.

"Shadid. Cross two streets then turn right into Al Tkamol."

She almost stopped running. The world snapped into focus.

"Amari?"
but came into contact with Ana instead. Kamilah stiffened, then turned on the spot to look at her partner. At Ana's smile, the tension in her face fell away.

"Hey," Ana said softly, combing back the stray locks on Kamilah's cheek. The medic gazed at her sleepily, then moved her head forward to rest on Ana's pillow. Ana lifted a leg to fit one of Kamilah's between hers, resting an arm around Kamilah as her lover did the same. Pecking her forehead, Ana followed Kamilah's example and closed her eyes. She was just drifting off when she gave a start.

A soft whine emitted from Kamilah's throat at the sudden jerk. Ana craned her neck to look at the windows – which were curtained, but she could see the beginnings of dawn creeping under the heavy drapes. She turned her gaze towards the digital clock on the bedside table, and found her panic to be unwarranted. They still had a little time before having to leave. Settling back down in relief, Ana wrapped an arm around Kamilah again. The woman wore a light crease between her brows, which soon disappeared under Ana's ministrations.

Kamilah opened her eyes after a few moments. "Do you like watching people sleep?"

"Only you."

"Flattered," she said in her flat early morning voice, though a small smile sat on her lips.

Ana chuckled softly, tracing random patterns between Kamilah's shoulder blades. Her gaze moved from those captivating eyes – which she could barely see through the darkness, honestly – to the curve of her jaw, and her neck where...

Whoops.

Moving her hand up, Ana worried at the dark bruise sitting at the curve of Kamilah's neck. She touched around its edges, keeping a poker face on because she was not ready to get strangled to death just yet.

"Bite?" Kamilah asked, rendering her poker face unnecessary.

"Please don't kill me," Ana said in a dramatically hushed whisper.

Kamilah surprised her with a quiet laugh. The hand on Ana's back shifted, and gentle fingertips traced a line down the side of her neck and shoulder, pressing lightly on tender spots.

"I've taken my revenge. You can live, for now."

"Just...how many did you leave?" Ana felt about her own skin, searching for the bites. Kamilah's vengeance had left her panting and winded, brain cells scattered all over the floor, and only vaguely aware of the aches dotting her body.

"Was too busy to keep count."

"Harhar." She got up on an elbow, flinging an arm back to turn the lamp on. Kamilah winced at the sudden illumination, squinting as Ana looked down at her body, trying to take stock of the marks.

"How many are on my neck?"

Kamilah huffed and pulled her back down. "Why are you so worried? Don't tell me you care."

"I don't." Normally Ana would wear the marks like trophies. "But that asshole's gonna be insufferable the entire day."
"No, he's not."

"Yeah right. You've no idea how annoying he can--"

"He's not," Kamilah repeated. "Because you're not going to see him today."

Ana let the words sink in, then scrunched up her eyes. "What?"

"You're not going to see him. We're on medical leave."

Narrowed eyes widened by increments, soon accompanied by an impish giggle. "You mean you're…"

"Mm."

"Can you even do that?" Ana asked.

"I have my ways."

"You have a lot of 'ways', it seems." "Mm." Kamilah captured her lips in a kiss, setting the pace and pushing Ana onto her back. She slid one leg over Ana's hips and lay on top of the sniper. "Want to see more?"

"Yes please."

She woke up again, and with such a feeling of bliss that she must have died and gone to heaven.

Taking a glimpse at the half-drawn drapes, Ana found bright morning sunlight filtering through the white sheer curtains. Kamilah sat silently at the foot of the bed, where the light fell on, with her phone pressed to an ear. Her hair was twisted up behind her head in a messy knot. She had a fluffy towel wrapped around her torso, disappointingly. But that would be remedied soon enough.

Ana threw the covers off her nude body, attracting Kamilah's attention. She smiled wryly at the appreciative gaze as she crawled over and plastered herself to Kamilah's back. The towel was just thick enough so Ana could not feel the body beneath it, when she hugged around her waist. She trailed kisses along the slope of her shoulder, sucking at the small discoloured patches, scalp tingling as fingers threaded lightly through her hair. Ana's head was pulled close for a peck on her temple, then Kamilah turned back to her phone.

"Yes?" She paused. "Good, thanks." The digits in Ana's hair tugged her away when she dared to kiss the corner of her mouth. Kamilah arched a brow which only made Ana grin, that in turn made her own lips curl in a small smile.

"I will," Kamilah continued. She lowered her hand, and Ana turned her head to catch a fingertip between her teeth.

"Got it. And if you dare tell anyone…” Her voice lowered into a threatening pitch, then lifted in a laugh. "I can do much worse than that. And she will put a bullet in your body. I'll leave 'where' up to her."

"I'll shoot your balls off, Deyab," Ana said loudly, guessing who was on the other end of the line.

Kamilah listened longer. "He says he already has kids, and that you're welcome to try."
"That dickweed has kids?" Ana asked incredulously, becoming more mystified by Kamilah's nod. "What the shit."

"Alright. Bye." Kamilah tapped on her phone and set it on the bed beside her.

"How old are his kids?"

"9 and 7."

"The fuck. He's married?"

"Happily. You should see his face when he talks about his wife."

"Is she pretty?"

"Quite." Kamilah kissed her softly. "But not as pretty as you."

Ana chuckled, entwining their fingers. "You're spending too much time with me, Milah. You're learning how to sweet talk."

"Do you want me to stop?"

"No." Ana cupped her cheek and brought their lips together again, slower this time. "Do it more."

Another kiss, then Kamilah's hand shot up to grab her shoulder when she hooked an arm under her knees.

"Ana..." She laughed when Ana lifted her up and tossed her onto the centre of the bed. "Ana, I just showered."

"Doesn't count. You showered without me," Ana replied, kneeling over her. She undid the towel from her body, feasting on the sight before her. "You're so fucking beautiful."

Kamilah slung her arms around Ana's neck when she bent down, trapping her in a deep kiss. "And you're insatiable," she murmured.

Ana's mouth quirked in an affectionate smile. "Aren't you a lucky one?"

Ana refused to let her lover go for the better part of the morning. Only when reminded of the time – and told in no uncertain terms that she would pay for any late check-out charges – did she let Kamilah climb out of her arms and stumble into the bathroom. Ana would have followed her, but was forbidden from doing so in the interest of punctuality. Kamilah emerging from the bathroom looking refreshed and clothed, was perhaps the most heartbreaking thing she had ever witnessed.

Or so Ana thought, until she offered the jacket she kept in the car boot to Kamilah. Though Ana remembered Kamilah's rule about leaving visible marks, she forgot about how much more skin the woman's top revealed. The smattering of bruises across her chest could not be covered by her scarf alone, so Kamilah opted for Ana's zip-up jacket and its upturned collar, which covered her up quite completely. Ah well. At least she looked good in it. Like she looked good in anything.

Ana was surprised she could still breathe when wrapped so tightly around Kamilah's finger.

"Did I miss something?" Kamilah asked when Ana laughed quietly to herself.

"Nope," Ana replied, averting her eyes to take a bite out of her croissant sandwich. She winked at Kamilah, whose brows twitched before she returned to her cassoulet. Leaning back in her seat, Ana
stretched her legs and gazed out at the pyramids through the floor-to-ceiling windows. The noon sun beat harshly down upon the earth, making Ana feel grateful she was sitting in the air-conditioned café instead of scurrying around the pyramids like the tourists.

"Ever ridden a camel?" Kamilah asked, apparently looking at the same thing she was. The café was set up in a viewing deck some distance away from the tourist spot, but it was easy to distinguish one person from the next and, of course, see people riding camels around the pyramids.

"Yeah. A couple of times when I was younger. You?"

"No. What?" Kamilah asked when Ana shot her an incredulous look.

"Really? Like, not even with friends or…" Ana caught herself. She almost uttered the F-word. Kamilah's F-word.

The medic shook her head, face going placid for a while, before a smile appeared. "That reminds me of a rumour I heard about you."

"Just the one?"

"The one about you and the camels."

"Oh!" Ana barked out a laugh that rang across the deck. "No wait, which one? The one where I had a man and woman on top of a camel at the same time? Or the one where I fucked a camel?"

"Both."

Ana allowed herself a round of chortling before taking a gulp of coffee. "So? Do you believe them?"

"No. Although if you did do the first one, I wouldn't be surprised."

"Seriously?" Ana leaned in, resting her chin on one hand. "You actually think I'm that wild?"

"Are you not?" Kamilah punted the question back and sipped her tea.

"Not as much as I like to claim, no. Don't you know that already?"

"Just checking."

Ana grinned. "Why, disappointed?"

"Far from it," Kamilah said with a smile, returning the peck on her lips.

"Good. I'd hate to disappoint you just because of rumours." Ana snickered again, then drank some more coffee. "Although, I kind of like the rumours. They're funny. Unlike yours, oh Angel of Death."

Kamilah sighed. She took Ana's sandwich and pushed over her cassoulet. "They love their little stories."

"I like them too. The terrifying doctor who murders patients she doesn't like, letting them die of their wounds instead of treating them. Gives you such a fearsome reputation."

"And, do you believe it?"

"Of course not. If it's true, I wouldn't be here now, would I?"
"Well, I did dislike you a little."

"I know. And truth be told, I would too. Really," Ana added when Kamilah tilted her head. "I was kind of…persistent. And annoying. Should've left you alone way before you shut me down." She paused, poking her spoon idly into the cassoulet. "Damn. I really was kind of a jackass, wasn't I?"

Kamilah's hand covered hers on the table. "You were," she said wryly. "But if it's any consolation… I'm glad you were persistent."

Ana cocked her head when Kamilah dropped her gaze and turned back towards the windows. She thought she had heard a quiver in the last few words. Spreading her fingers, she slipped them between Kamilah's, which curled over hers tightly.

"If you left me alone, I don't think I'd even be here."

Her quiet words ended abruptly, without elaboration. Ana waited uncertainly as Kamilah stared out of the window, until she blinked and turned back to Ana, as though suddenly remembering where she was. Smiling gently, she slipped her fingers away and tapped under Ana's chin.

"How about that quiche you wanted?" Kamilah asked so airily that Ana felt a little unsettled. She returned the smile, though.

"Are you that hungry?"

"I don't know how, but my appetite just returned twofold."

"You pig," Ana said, but she pushed her chair out anyway. "You'll break the camel's back later."

Kamilah frowned. "Camel's back?"

"Oh right. Forgot to mention," Ana said, picking up her wallet. "I've decided. We're going camel riding later."

"And…just when did you decide that?"

"Mm." Ana cocked her head, feigning concentration. "About…2, maybe 2.5 seconds ago."

"But they're smelly."

"Right. Now you have something to mask your own stench."

Ana hopped away, narrowly avoiding the hand flying for her behind.

Kamilah's reservations about riding camels lay forgotten during the ride itself. Although after they climbed off their steed – which seemed to judge them through its long eyelashes – she did tell Ana never to take her camel riding again, while massaging her tailbone and jerking awkwardly backwards when she almost stepped on camel dung. Ana just laughed, despite having to rub her own tailbone as well. Kamilah obviously preferred her mounts to be metallic and smelling of gasoline instead of shit.

That, or long-haired and muscular and extremely attractive. She seemed to like both equally, but rolled her eyes when informed of the second category.

"What, is it not true?"
"You forgot to mention the second has an annoyingly large mouth."

"And a very skilled tongue."

"Ugh."

Ana’s tongue was put to use only once more during the weekend. After that, things pretty much returned to status quo. Mostly. Ana was just a little more touchy-feely; her hand always drifted back to Kamilah, be it to play with the ends of her hair, trace the veins in her wrist, or just rest comfortably on her waist. And Kamilah was….well, Kamilah. She let Ana have her way most of the time, reciprocating the little touches or laying still while the sniper kissed along the side of her neck, hand slipping into her inner thigh, only to strike with a choice comment that doused the mood.

"Shouldn't you be prepping for your lab visit tomorrow?" she asked, eyes never leaving her novel.

Ana froze, head and hand under Kamilah's neck and between her thighs respectively. She jerked away, realising she had clean forgotten about it.

"Ah fuck," she muttered, barely registering Kamilah's smirk as she jumped off the bed. Ana made a quick dash back to her own room, snatched up the datapad lying on her study table, and promptly rushed back down to take her place beside Kamilah.

Propping up on her elbows while she lay on her stomach, Ana opened the schematic and held the pad out so Kamilah – who leant closer in interest – could read it as well.

"Six times your normal vision?" Kamilah said.

"Yep." Ana scrolled down, examining the proposed interface overlay for when the eye was in use. Distance, drop-off, wind speed… Even an experimental uplink with her rifle. She could probably use the weapon without having to look through the scope, if the uplink was included in the final design. The mere thought of it made her fingers twitch in excitement.

"Now you can see almost as far as your rifle can shoot," the medic commented.

"Yep," Ana repeated, tossing a smile over. "And I can watch you from all the way across base."

"Please don't do that."

"No promises." She snickered when Kamilah clicked her tongue. Scrolling down farther, Ana found the itinerary for the lab session: an eye ultrasound scan, then a quick brief and discussion over the specifications, followed by a simulation for her to get used to the implant's workings beforehand. The surgery was still to be scheduled.

"Guess I have to enjoy myself before I get the eye," Ana said as she tossed the datapad aside. "If I miss a shot with that implant, it's going to be fucking embarrassing."

"No room for human error?"

"Please. With this much help?" She nodded at the pad. "I'd bury my head in the ground and never come out again if I made a 'human error'."

"Drama queen," Kamilah laughed.

"I've to maintain my image somehow." Ana grinned, planting a brief peck on her lips before lying down on her side. She pulled Kamilah close.
"You're going to be one of the best with it."

"'Going to be'?”

Kamilah sighed. "Going to be better among the best. Happy?"

"Not really. Try stroking my ego more." She winced at the pinch on her back.

"You know they're not going to give you the eye and then just keep you in base, right?"

"I suppose not."

"They'll want to deploy you more."

"Yeah…?"

"On missions with higher stakes. Dangerous missions."

"It's part of the job, isn't it?" Ana shrugged. "I mean, what mission doesn't come with risk?" She waited for an answer, but all she got was a faint frown and an inscrutable gaze. She was missing something—wait.

"Are you worried?"

A pause. "Just stating the facts," she said quietly.

She is. Kamilah kept her face cautiously blank, as always. But she had broken eye contact, now staring at Ana's shoulder as her feet fidgeted. Ana shifted her own forward, catching the restless feet between her ankles.

"Look on the bright side," Ana said. "At least the insurgency's over. It's going to be a while before something serious happens. Hopefully. At most they'll assign me to hunting parties for clean-up, or send me overseas for joint exercises."

"They would want to show off their best sniper."

"'Best'? A minute ago I was better, and now I'm the best?"

"You wanted me to stroke your ego."

"Alright. I'm happy now." Her smile grew wider at Kamilah's smaller one.

"Ana?"

"Hm?"

Kamilah's lips remained parted, but nothing came out. Ana returned her silent gaze expectantly, brushing her foot against Kamilah's ankle. The medic's mouth twitched before it closed, and she moved in to press fully against Ana's front, head nestling snugly under her chin.

"Are you going to sleep, habibti? It's only…" She glanced up at the clock. "Three in the afternoon, you know."

"Nap."

"Never took you for a nap kind of person."
"Just feel like it."

Ana did not share the feeling, but kept her arms wrapped around the woman anyway. They held each other in silence, Ana staring idly at the wardrobe as Kamilah's presence took root in her consciousness with sudden clarity. She had breezed through their courtship with the casualness she had cultivated in the academy. Life went by faster and more exciting that way. No worries, no burdens. Everything they had done so far was fun. Light. Enjoyable.

Kamilah's warmth felt so much more solid in that moment. It slowed her down, made her stop. Made her think. Made her realise if their luck had buckled just a little, they may not even be here. Was that Kamilah meant, back in the café?

A hollow echo of that sharp ache shot through her chest. It was painful, when she had seen Kamilah bleeding half to death, and thought the woman would slip through her fingers. When she sat by Kamilah's side, watching her recover from an attack Ana could not protect her from. But it had been her pain to bear. Hers to endure, then shrug off when everything turned out fine, acting as though it was but an ant bite.

She had never meant for Kamilah to bear it as well. And for her, no less.

Ana swallowed, arm curling tighter around Kamilah's back. A single vow crystallised in her mind as she bent her head down, pressing a kiss atop black locks.

"Love you," she murmered, grateful her voice still sounded clear.

She thought Kamilah had already fallen asleep. But then the arm around her shifted up, hooking over her shoulder in a firm embrace.

"It was totally unnecessary."

"But it was awesome."

"What are you, 12?"

"21. You got it mixed up, sis."

Ana did a double-take at the pair on the ground, as she slung Layla's rifle over her shoulder. Kamilah was kneeling next to her squad mate, tending to his bleeding arm and side. Their platoon's combat simulation had just been concluded successfully, but their commander was a little displeased with the number of casualties. Though their holo-targets were equipped with non-lethal rounds specially engineered to inflict superficial wounds, they were still painful as all hell and made them bleed. Like Layla from her left thigh – already bandaged – and Kamilah's patient.

Speaking of the medic, she sighed sharply. "Your 'awesome' move got you injured and gave me more work, Imad."

"Worth it." He winced when Kamilah jerked at the bandage around his arm.

"I had my rifle ready. You didn't have to rush out of nowhere and tackle the damned target to the ground."

"Gotta take care of our big sis, don't we?"

The medic shook her head as she cut the bandage, then ruffled his hair roughly before standing up.
She watched as the grinning patient was hauled up from the ground by another, following the rest of the platoon as they trudged back to the armoury. As though she had an in-built idiot radar, Kamilah turned towards Ana, who was still waiting for her squad to finish clearing up the training range. She examined the sniper's face, then the rest of her body. When she started walking towards Ana with that crease between her brows, the sniper promptly looked down at herself, and spotted the gash on her forearm.

_When the hell…_

"Were you planning to let it get infected before seeking help?" Kamilah said, pulling her arm up and rolling the sleeve to her elbow.

"Didn't know it was there." She clenched her hand into a fist, tensing up the muscles as water was poured over the wound.

"Why am I not surprised." Kamilah cleaned up the area around the gash. "This is not from the holo-rounds."

"Think I got it when I fell."

"'Fell'?"

"Oh fine," Ana grumbled as her arm was dried and bandaged. "I threw myself on the ground when those holo reinforcements appeared. Think I hit something then."

"Obviously," Kamilah sighed, fastening the cloth. She held onto Ana's wrist briefly when she was done, gaze softening while her lips remained pursed.

"Sorry," Ana said reflexively.

Kamilah's mouth twitched, but she said nothing. Her hand landed on Ana's helmet in two hard pats, then she strode away. Ana stood still, watching her go, then flung her arms out when Khalid fell dramatically into her.

"The fuck, Issa," Ana grunted. She shifted her feet apart to support his weight, feeling her wound throb slightly under the strain.

"Oh Lieutenant Shadid," Khalid cooed, clinging onto Ana's neck. "I have a cut on my arm. Please kiss it better. I'll have your babies."

Despite herself, Ana snorted and heaved the man back upright. She opted not to reply, resisting the urge to suplex him into a makeshift grave when he slung an arm around her shoulder.

"You heard the rumours lately?" Khalid asked, lowering his voice as their squad mates overtook them.

"Be specific. We live in a gossip pit, remember?"

"About Kamilah."

"No. What is it, more killing people nonsense?"

"Nope. Okay, maybe it's not a _rumour_ rumour, but I overheard some of her squad talking. You know, about how she's been less terrifying lately."

"Never noticed," Ana said, hitching the rifle strap higher up on her shoulder.
"Yeah yeah. Apparently she's been more chill. And doing stuff like smiling at her phone, like some idiot I know." Khalid poked a finger at her cheek and whispered, "Been sending her nudes?"

"No." Ana rolled her eyes, but smiled involuntarily at the knowledge.

"There you go again."

"So what." Ana started to throw his arm off her shoulder, but paused. "Just how widespread is this rumour?"

"I dunno." Khalid shrugged. "There was like, only…three of them. They told me not to tell anyone else when I asked, though. Don't wanna incur the devil's wrath." He hummed a flat note. "I guess that's better for you too, huh. Don't want to invite any trouble."

"Yeah. Kamilah's not the type to…be public anyway."

"Got it." They walked a little farther, then Khalid stopped dead in his tracks. "And, um. I'm sorry. About that time. When I wanted to let her… You know. Die." The words came abruptly.

"That's a long time ago," Ana said, tugging on his arm to get him walking again. "Don't tell me you've been thinking about it for so long."

He sighed, scratching the back of his neck. "Dunno. But every time I see her, I get reminded of how ready I was to let her go."

Ana kept quiet as they neared the armoury. Then she stopped. "You were thinking of the mission. Technically I was the one making the mistake."

Mistake. It tasted sour on her tongue. Her decision was far from that. But command would not share the same sentiment, if the reprimand they gave her had shown anything.

"Fuck, Khalid. I already lost my shit during a mission – twice – because of her."

"Yeah. I know," he sighed. This time, he was the one to set them walking again. "At least I was there to catch your shit."

"I'm sorry."

"It's all good. Besides, it turned out well, didn't it?"

"Yeah. Yeah, it did." Ana squeezed about his waist with an arm. "And – no hard feelings, if that helps."

"It does help." He bumped their sweaty heads together – which was quite gross honestly, but Ana let it slide. "Don't worry, sis. I'll have your back from now on."

"And I'll have yours."

"It's a deal." He patted her shoulder. "So…we done with the mushy stuff?"

"God I hope so."

"Yes!" Khalid whooped and jumped, pumping his arms as his rifle bounced against his back. "Oh– wait, you're not drinking with us tonight?"

"Nope."
"Man. You're really turning into her bitch."

"Yup." Ana flashed him a proud grin. "Woof, baby."
When?

*She caught the hand before it smacked into her face, when Ana rolled onto her back. Her nose twitched as Kamilah set her hand down on the pillow, stroking the hardened skin of her palm.*

*When, she wanted to ask. When will you tire of me and move on?*

*Kamilah reached out to touch her temple, and ran trembling fingertips through her hair. She repeated the motion a few more times, soothing the agitation prickling through her body. Slowly, she brushed the back of her fingers down Ana's cheek, and along her jawline. She froze at the deeper inhale as Ana roused from her sleep. Her head turned, mouth skimming past Kamilah's fingers, to fix her partner with a drowsy, half-lidded gaze. Her lips curved gently. Then she rolled onto her side, throwing an arm and leg over Kamilah as though hugging a bolster. Ana dragged herself forward, bumping their foreheads lightly together. Eyelids already drooping, she settled into the new position and promptly fell back to sleep.*

*Unconsciously matching Ana's breathing pattern, Kamilah kept her gaze on her partner. The loose embrace allowed her to relax, to breathe, to feel secure. The warmth of her arms made it easy, so easy. Sometimes, she found herself wishing Ana would never let go.*

*Please don't let go.*

*Only under the heavy weight of sleep did she relent, eyelids falling shut. Ana would still be there, she knew. Ana never left before Kamilah opened her eyes. Never left before she could give a tender kiss and promise to see her later in the day.*

*I love you. I never meant to. But I do.*

Kamilah blinked, gaze barely staying on Ana's face when she opened the door. She stared at the small cake in silence, while Ana waited for a reaction. Which she did not get.

Well, not the one she expected anyway.

"Did...I forget something?" Kamilah asked, to which Ana merely raised her brows, punting the question back. The medic glanced down at the cake again, where the first drop of wax was dripping down one of the two candles. "Don't tell me you're the type to celebrate months-long anniversaries."

"You really don't remember?" Ana said finally.

"What?"

"Today's your birthday, isn't it?"

Kamilah blinked again, as though surprised by the information. "I guess so. Wait, how'd you even know? I never told you."

"Er-, no. I...may or may not have taken a look at your ID."
"I never showed you my ID."

"I…may…have taken a peek when you dropped your wallet back in the museum a couple of weeks back," Ana rattled off the words rapidly, as if to stave off a potential ass-whooping. But just to be sure, she insisted, "It was already open on the floor! I swear!"

A sigh, then fondness softened Kamilah's expression. She looked at the cake again. "Please tell me you're not going to sing."

"I'm not tone deaf, you know."

"No, I just don't want to stare at you awkwardly while you sing." She took Ana by the elbow and pulled her into the room, closing the door behind them.

"Oh. Understandable." Ana held the cake up. "Here. Make your wish."

"You don't believe in wishes?"

"Do you?"

"No."

"Me neither. But there's no harm in making one. Will be a pleasant surprise if it comes true, no?" She shifted her fingers under the round aluminum tray, bobbing it a little. "So? Gonna make the wish before the top gets covered in wax?"

Kamilah stared at her again, and Ana resisted the urge to feel about her face for leftover food. Then the medic's lips curled faintly, before she blew out the candles in one puff.

"So…what did you wish for?"

"I don't want to jinx it."

"Thought you don't believe in it," Ana said with a smile, following Kamilah farther into the room. She set the cake on the table, plucking the candles out.

"Since I already made the wish, might as well go all the way," Kamilah sighed, handing her the knife. "Is this why you weren't at mess?"

"Yup." She dug out small globs of wax from white frosting. "But the bakery screwed up my order. I wanted chocolate ganache, but—" Ana cut the cake into quarters, then lifted a piece with the knife, revealing its rainbow-coloured layers. "They gave me this instead."

"At least it looks pretty."

She delivered the slice onto Kamilah's plate. "Yup. It's fitting too." Ana grinned at her partner's obvious refusal to roll her eyes. "Besides, the discount they gave me didn't hurt."

"Discount cake. Mm." She jerked the fork away from Ana's mouth when she swooped in for the kill, and took the first bite. "It's quite good, actually."

"Really? Gimme a taste."

Kamilah's eyelids fluttered rapidly again as she refrained from rolling her eyes. But she scooped another forkful, as was their little routine. Ana leaned in, but changed trajectory at the last moment, shooting away from the fork for a swift peck on Kamilah's lips.
"Hm. It does taste good."

"If you wanted a kiss, you could've just asked."

"Alright." Ana played along, gazing into dark eyes glinting with mirth. "May I have a kiss, darling?" She waited with a smile, only breaking eye contact when Kamilah's nose brushed against hers, feeling the puff of breath on her mouth, then…no kiss.

Ana blinked, leaning back to find Kamilah with the fork in her mouth. "I'll take that as a 'no'."

Still chewing, Kamilah took the knife from her hand and put a slice onto Ana's plate. "Trust me, the cake tastes better than my mouth."

"I find that hard to belie–" The challenge in her tone fell away when Kamilah shoved a small chunk into her open mouth. She clamped her lips over the fork as it was pulled out, determined to get every last bit of cream, so light and airy on her tongue she could cry. "Oh…fuck."

"Told you so." Kamilah smiled when Ana devoured a big rainbow chunk.

"Fuck. Should've bought it for my own birthday instead."

"You buy your own cakes?"

"No. But if it's this good, I'd buy 10 for myself." Ana paused, then laughed a second later. "Actually, I'm wrong. I did buy my own cake last year. My squad? They tried to bake one themselves. But something went wrong and the cake came out looking more like a cookie. A large, beer-soaked cookie."

"Of course they put beer in it," Kamilah deadpanned.

"Of course." Ana snorted. "So I drove out and bought one for myself. Made them pay for it. Nothing tastes better than free cake."

"Not even this?"

"Not even this. But there is one thing better than free cake." Her lewd smile and brow waggle finally coaxed an eye roll from Kamilah, who stuffed more cake into her mouth instead of rising to the bait.

"So, what do you usually do for your birthdays?" Ana asked, indulging more in the dessert. "Like, other than stuffing your face with sugar."

Kamilah shrugged, chewing slowly. "I don't celebrate it."

"Hm. So you're one of those 'it's just a number' type of people."

"I guess." She fiddled with the fork handle. "It's never really been all that important to me. Just another day. That's all."

"Then this…" Ana gestured at their food. "Was uninvited?"

"Just weird. Cake's pretty nice though."

"Then I'll have to buy you more cakes until it stops being weird. Oh! And…" Ana fished out a data stick from the back pocket of her shorts. "This is that mystery novel that came out last week and two other random books. You can trade them in if you've read them already."
Kamilah looked at the slim silver stick Ana dropped onto her palm. "Thank you."

"And, how about quad biking this weekend?"

"Ana, you—" Her voice trailed off for a second. "You don't have to, you know."

Ana cocked her head at the uncertain tone. "What, quad bike? You like it, don't you?" She watched Kamilah work her jaw, feeling more perplexed by the tension in her face. Then, a near-imperceptible sagging of her shoulders, making her look deflated.

"Yes, I like it."

"Great. Now I get to ride a bike without having to cling onto you."

"You make it sound like a bad thing." Kamilah smiled faintly.

"Quite the opposite, actually." Ana rested an elbow on the table, leaning close. "I'd hold onto you forever, if I could."

"Would you?"

"If you'd let me," she murmured, heart swelling with unanswered hope in the silence that followed. Pressing her lips to Kamilah's, Ana let herself be pulled in by the nape, simultaneously calmed and excited by the deepening of the kiss. Urgency bubbled beneath the slow veneer, Ana clasping onto Kamilah's wrist to steady herself.

"I love you," Ana whispered, quivering breath matching Kamilah's before they were claimed again, and again, and again, until the cake lay forgotten on the table, abandoned for another taste all together.

As days passed, Ana noticed little changes in Kamilah's behaviour. It was nothing worrying, really. Kamilah was more or less herself – going along with Ana's whims, reciprocating the regular showers of affection with equal fervour. But Ana noticed subtle differences emerging. Inscrutable stares when she approached, hardness falling away the longer she stayed. Keener grips on her hand, lingering with reluctance when they had to part. Tighter embraces with Kamilah's head nestled in her neck, arms tied around her waist as if to lock her in. Sharper bites on Ana's lips, bruised by feverish kisses.

Ana took it in stride – perhaps this was how Kamilah dealt with being involved, as opposed to being a gaping idiot like her. Not that it was all that difficult. It added a dash of thrill when the intensity carried over to the bedroom, Ana's breath stolen when Kamilah flipped her onto her back – figuratively and literally. She had her dominance ripped away more often, leaving her hands free to dig into Kamilah's back, Kamilah's hair, anything she found purchase on. Stings and aches usually accompanied such vigorous romps, though the fun was more than worth it. Ana welcomed this little indulgence, until–

"Milah," she said, breath hitching as teeth tugged on her earlobe.

Kamilah did not notice – or thought it was an instinctive utterance of her name – and pressed a knee hard between her legs. Her arms trembled slightly, making it more difficult to stay propped up on her elbows. Ana's groan was caught by an open mouth, drawn out by a tongue curling to catch her upper lip when they broke apart for air.

*There.*
Eyes more sober than lustful, bearing an almost studious focus as Kamilah bent down again, trapping her in a kiss before she could get another word out. Fighting against the insane urge to give in as always, Ana placed a hand on her chest and pushed. Not too strongly – just enough to part their lips.

"Milah – wait."

Kamilah's gaze flickered up to meet hers and, noticing the set in Ana's expression, dimmed a little. She obeyed the pressure on her chest, and was guided to sit on Ana's thighs.

"Is something wrong?" Kamilah asked tentatively.

"I was going to ask you the same." Ana sat upright, holding onto Kamilah's hips as she settled the woman more comfortably in her lap. "You seem a little far away."

"Just…tired, that's all."

Ana nodded slowly. She had heard it many times before. It was now a standard answer from Kamilah, repeated each time Ana asked after her well-being, whenever she fell into this…thing. A gaze – sometimes placid, sometimes accompanied by a frown – fixed upon Ana, as though expecting something to happen.

She smiled, readjusting the bra strap that had fallen off Kamilah's shoulder. " Didn't seem all that tired when you jumped me earlier," Ana prodded gently.

"Do you want me to stop?"

"No." She grew a little antsy at the obvious hesitance in the question. "You just look kind of preoccupied. Wanna talk about it?"

Kamilah's mouth quirked in a half-hearted smile. "Are you sure 'talking' is what you want to do now?"

"Pretty sure." Ana echoed Kamilah's humour, albeit a little stronger. "Sex is good only when your heart's in it, you know."

Kamilah took a short breath, but closed her mouth the moment it opened, as if in sudden change of heart. "I'll leave if you want me to."

"What? No, Milah." Ana kept her in place when she tried to rise. "I just want to know if you're alright. You've been…well–" She shrugged. "I don't know, but you've been 'tired' pretty often lately. And – not that I'm complaining – but you've also been more…active. In bed. You know, like me?" She grinned, giving Kamilah a short squeeze about the waist. The medic's lips twitched, but other than that, her face remained blank. Her nervousness grew when Kamilah drew her hands back and averted her gaze.

Ana loosened her hold, giving her some space to breathe. "Milah?"

Kamilah kept her eyes on the wall behind Ana, gaze distant. Then a clench of her jaw, and she turned back to Ana. "What is this to you?" At Ana's glance down at their underwear-clad bodies, she quickly added, "And no jokes, for once."

The corner of Ana's mouth quirked, but she held it in as requested. "This?"
"Us."

She blinked, thrown by the uncertainty in Kamilah's tone. "What do you mean?" Ana grasped her chin when she looked away again.

"Milah. Tell me."

Her heart still beat quickly, but for another reason altogether as she looked Kamilah over – brows lowered, mouth thin, shoulders straight and rigid. Her anxiety grew with each second that Kamilah kept quiet, each second with which the medic's composure slowly crumbled away, frown growing deeper.

"I'm sorry," Kamilah said quietly, the tiny tremors in her voice resonating in Ana's chest. "I know it's just me. It's my problem I can't… But I just need to know." A hesitant pause. "Is this…a fling to you?"

"A fling?" Ana repeated emptily, staring back at Kamilah.

"Just tell me, Ana."

God. Oh god. What is this? Dread crept into her chest as the past two months flashed before her eyes. Were her feelings one-sided? Did she imagine more from Kamilah than there really was? Did Kamilah want something casual, and she was being suffocated by Ana's eagerness?

Ana looked deep into dark brown eyes, trying to fathom if the fear in her gaze was for Kamilah, or for her. Fear for the potential breaking of her heart. She recoiled from the prospect, feeling the instinctive urge to make light of the situation so maybe, maybe it would not hurt as much when the blow came.

"I--" The block in her throat returned. But this time, it was easier to overcome. "I love you," she said, voice growing thicker with each word tumbling out despite her effort to slow down. "Milah, I can't stand being away from you for even one fucking day anymore. I can't–, fuck." A breathy laugh burst through her lips. "I'm being that clingy bitch I never wanted--"

She halted abruptly at a similar laugh from Kamilah, albeit more subdued. Her pounding heart clenched as Kamilah closed her eyes and lowered her head, shoulders shaking, back of a hand pressed against her mouth. When she looked back up, her eyes glistened in the soft warmth of the bedside lamp. Ana cupped her cheek, taking comfort in the curve of her lips.

"I'm sorry." Kamilah turned slightly into her palm. "You're--, I…I just keep expecting to wake up one day and find you gone. I'm sorry." She laughed again. Now with tears cutting down her cheeks; face scrunched up, torn between wanting to hold it in and let it out. "I'm being so stupid."

"But you can't be. That's my specialty." Ana grinned at the crude snort, then drew her into a tight embrace. Kamilah's chest rose against Ana's in hitched breaths, as she clutched onto broad shoulders. Moisture pooled at the joint of Ana's neck, and slowly trailed down bare skin. Ana rocked the woman in her arms gently while murmuring words of comfort, alternating between smoothing a hand down her hair, and patting her back.

Only a short while had passed when Kamilah calmed down – or rather, forced herself to calm down. Taking a few slow breaths to subdue the sobs, her hands left Ana's shoulders to wipe at her face.

"I'm sorry," she muttered, pulling away.

"Don't be."
"No, you don't understand. I--" She swallowed thickly, brows furrowing into a frown. "I slept with you because I thought it'd make you leave faster. That time, when I went to the club with you?" Her lips stretched into a crooked curve. "I'd planned to get it over with then."

"You mean, you thought I was just after sex?" Ana asked, hating that she understood what Kamilah meant. Of course. Of course her reputation would come back to bite her in the ass.

Kamilah tilted her head in affirmation. "And if I got it out of your system sooner, you'd leave before I..." Her gaze dropped before she finished.

"Sweetheart," Ana said with a chuckle, shifting her legs under the weight. "If 'getting it out of my system' is what you want, then you've got a long road ahead of you. This system--" She tapped a finger on her chest. "--never stops."

"I know." She smiled softly. "I just...don't want to lose you. I thought I could bear it, but I..." Her bottom lip quivered, soon hidden from view by a hand. "I can't, Ana. I thought I could, but I can't."

"Good, because I can't either. That weekend when you left? I think I almost died without you. Actually, I'm not really sure I didn't." She grabbed Kamilah's hand, and rested it over her heart. "What's my prognosis, Doctor Shadid. Give it to me straight, I can take--" Ana burst out in laughter at the hard slap on her arm, then surged forward to ensnare her partner in a kiss.

"You're incorrigible, Amari."

"And you're crazy if you think I'd leave you, Shadid." She wiped at the drying tracks on Kamilah's cheeks, catching a new drop with her thumb. Leaning her head back, she looked at her partner appraisingly. "You have to tell me where you got that eyeliner. It's not even a little smudged."

Kamilah laughed quietly. She dabbed at the corners of her eyes and looked at her fingertips. "I'll get them for you next time." A much lighter smile sat on her lips, as she regarded Ana in silent contemplation. Then she leant in, giving a soft kiss.

"I love you, Ana," she whispered, a hushed confession that made Ana want to cry and scream her fortune from the rooftops. But she settled for a wry grin over her more dramatic impulses.

"Love you too." Ana closed her eyes when Kamilah rested their foreheads together.

They sat in silence for a moment, absorbing in full what had just happened while they were still clad in their underwear. Damp underwear, in Ana's case.

Then Kamilah spoke, "Do you still want to..."

"I don't know. You did kind of ruin the mood. If you want, we can wait..." Ana's grin grew to shit-eating proportions. "For Ana-ther time."

Kamilah stared at her, head slowly moving away as disgust narrowed her wide eyes. "You know what? I take it back. I don't love you. Get out."

"You can't throw me out of my own room."

"Yes, I can."

"Can't."

"Watch me."
Ana surged forward when Kamilah pushed her backwards, clinging onto the woman's back as they rocked dangerously close to the edge of the bed. They tussled playfully, unbridled laughter filling the room, before Ana finally lost and was flung onto her back. Kamilah crawled over her, straddling her hip, and ran a hand up her neck to rest at the jaw. She bent down with excruciating slowness, eye contact breaking only when she captured Ana in a deep kiss.

"I love you," Kamilah whispered against her lips, stronger this time. Certain.

"I love you too," Ana managed to say before another kiss descended upon her. Three words became a mantra, repeated with rising fervour between kisses.

_I love you. I love you. I– I love you. I love– Ah._

"I'm so bored," Ana groaned, dragging her finger up the tablet's holo-screen, pausing at random intervals to read whatever she had stopped at.

"I asked if you wanted to go out. You said no."

"I don't feel like it." She deftly caught the can flying towards her head, popping it open to take a gulp of coffee.

"Then stop whining." Kamilah walked over to join her on the floor, sitting with her back leaning against the bed. She opened the box in her hands and fished out a cookie.

"But there's nothing on TV either." Ana opened her mouth, and had a cookie shoved in at the silent cue.

"Nothing you want to watch." Kamilah flipped the channels, then raised a finger when Ana turned her head. "One more word, and I'll sedate you."

Ana grumbled to herself, words muffled by the last chunk of cookie in her mouth. She rubbed her feet together while scrolling down the news on the tablet. World politics, trade and environment agreements, lifestyle articles, comics, celebrity news, blahblahblah. Ana read them at lightspeed, only pausing to give fleeting judgments and stare at the army recruitment ad. _Huh_. Seemed the new batch intake would be a month late this year.

She nudged Kamilah and showed her the ad. "Pretty or not?"

Kamilah cocked a brow, studying the soldier on the foreground. "I guess. Think I've seen her around the Suez base before."

"Huh. Never spoken to her?"

"I've better things to do than speak to strangers."

"Not even pretty strangers?"

"I'm not a walking pile of hormones like you."

"Wow." Ana twirled the tablet between her fingers. "I don't walk around horny all the time, you know."

"I find that hard to believe," Kamilah deadpanned, finishing her first cookie.

Ana clicked her tongue, but returned to her tablet in peace. A discreet smile crept onto her face.
though, as she took in the moment. Their relationship had gone back to normal – much better than normal, actually. Kamilah's reservations had fallen away little by little, and the urgency had disappeared. Her affection returned without inhibitions, not to mention her sharp retorts which Ana just loved bickering with. Ana didn't know how far one could fall for another, and it seemed she would not get an answer any time soon.

After stealing a peek at Kamilah, she went back to reading the ad's typical spew about 'protecting the country' and 'serving its people', then sent it flying up and out of the screen.

"Why'd you join the army?" she asked idly, skimming through an article about a celebrity scandal.

"Money," Kamilah replied after a short pause.

"Money?" Ana laughed, looking up from the tablet. "Darling, I think you're in the wrong place. Everyone knows you come to the army to serve and slog and put in extra hours for no overtime pay."

"Then why are you still here?"

"Please. My entire family's served for their whole lives, and I'm the one who drops out? Don't think I could bear the shame." She chuckled at the attentive look on Kamilah's face, and flicked her cheek. "Just kidding. It's just my life now, you know? Don't think I'd want to do anything else. And if it keeps our people safe, then it's worth it."

Kamilah pinched her chin. "Such a model soldier."

"I know. Unlike someone who's in it for the money." She stole a cookie from the packet. "Is that really why you joined?"

"Technically...yes."

"But there are easier ways to get money. Like, I don't know, robbing a bank?"

"Prison has free food and bunk too."

Ana snapped her fingers. "That's right! And we don't have to put our lives on the line. Babe, let's go rob a bank."

Rolling her eyes, Kamilah gave a fond huff and turned back to the TV. Her eyes slowly drifted back to her partner, who leant in conspiratorially.

"So...why?"

"Long story."

"We have time." Ana waited, but all Kamilah did was eat another cookie. "How about a short version?"

"I needed money."

"Why?"

"For a place to live."

"You didn't have a house?"
"I was living in a hostel."

"Why?"

"Couldn't live in my last apartment."

"Why?"

"Ana," she sighed in exasperation.

"So it's really a long story, huh." Ana saw the flex in Kamilah's jaw as she turned her gaze towards the front, face void of emotion – usually a sign to back off.

"Sorry," she muttered. Unsure what to do, she crossed her legs and was about bring up her tablet again, when Kamilah's flat voice stopped her.

"I'll only tell it once. And you won't bring it up again." It was not a request.

"Promise."

Kamilah fixed her with a prolonged stare, during which Ana was extremely aware of her own blinking. The medic took a breath, and let it out in a loud exhale.

"I told you I'm not speaking to my family."

"Yup."

"It's because I ran away. Why?" she added with a faint quirk of her lips, when Ana opened her mouth. "My parents had no business raising a child." She paused. "You will keep your mouth shut."

"Swear."

"They were hashish dealers. Couldn't get far because the gang lording over our neighbourhood was leaning on them. They made enough to pay the rent, my school fees, fill their own stomachs, then blew the rest on hashish. I had to take odd jobs to earn my allowance and buy my own food, clothes, and everything else." She snorted disdainfully. "I barely made enough for myself, and my parents still took my money whenever they wanted. Forced me to go hungry so they could get high in their rooms."

"Couldn't get financial assistance?" Ana asked, getting a frown in return. "I mean, from the school?"

"And what do I tell them? I need the money because my parents are dealers?"

"An excellent point. So, is that why you left?"

Kamilah sighed. "No. It was a little difficult, but I got by. Then," she dragged out the word. "The turf's gang raided my parents' supply without paying. We almost went broke, there was stress all around, and after a while my mother started hitting me. Always for petty little things. Leaving the counter wet after washing the dishes. Closing the door too loud when I came home at night. Stupid excuses like that."

"And…so you left?"

"No," Kamilah snorted. "That house was the only place I could stay. No landlord would accept a child."
"Child?" Ana asked, a little lost.

"I was…13? 14? Too young—"

"What?"

An amused huff at Ana's surprise, then a pat on her arm. "I was a child once, you know."

"I know that! I just thought you were what, 17, 18? From the way you…"

"Let's go with 14, alright?" She waited until Ana had slumped back against the bed, before she continued. "So I got used to that bitch's beatings, and fought back a little. Even knocked a tooth out of her mouth once. You should've seen her face." Kamilah shot her a smirk that she could not share in. "She was so ugly and angry. Gave me shit for a long time after that, but it was worth it."

"I lived with them a little more, until I was 15. Got that?" She glanced pointedly at Ana, carrying a hint of humour that came from nowhere. The sniper nodded, and she plunged on, "One day, a huge gang fight breaks out in the neighbourhood, and the turf gets taken over by a new gang. My parents managed to get on their good side, and started making more money from their business. Not that I ever saw any of it, but…" She shrugged.

"So the new gang takes a shine to them, and some of them started hanging out in the house more often. They could get more free hits that way," she explained. "Then I noticed them looking at me funny. I didn't like it, got scared, so I ran."

"What did they want with you?"

"Plaything? Another body to sell as a hooker? I don't want to think about it."

"But your parents could've stopped them, or—"

"They won't. Trust me," she interrupted before Ana could say any more. "They wouldn't have stopped them. I knew, so I ran to a friend's house. Stayed there for a few weeks, then I convinced her parents to let me stay on as a tenant, and help pay my school fees which I'll return after graduating."

"Your parents never looked for you?"

"Why would they? I was a burden, and I just took myself off their hands. Ana," Kamilah said when she opened her mouth again, and set a hand on her knee, fixing her with a steady gaze. "My parents are scum, alright?"

Ana bit on her bottom lip, and nodded.

"So I stayed at the house, paid a discounted rent, worked my ass off after school hours so I wouldn't live hand-to-mouth."

"Is that why you needed money?"

"Patience, Ana. I'm only halfway done." Kamilah gave a close-lipped smile, nudging her cheek. "I stayed with them for a few years. Then, when I was…18? I met this girl. She started offering to walk me home after work. I was a bartender at the time, and going home alone in the early morning wasn't all that safe. So I accepted after she asked me a few times."

"Let me guess: you got together."

Kamilah nodded. "She had that whole 'tough girl' act going on. Head shaved on one side, leather
jacket and boots, rode a motorcycle, knew how to fight. And she was nice to me, so I got to...kind of like her. After she started a bar fight with a customer who wouldn't stop hitting on me, I was sold."

"So you like bad girls."

"Tell me a punch line, and I will punch you."

Ana grinned, then motioned for her to go on with the story.

"We started dating, and when she found out about my situation, she offered her place to me. Said I didn't have to worry about the rent. So I moved in, and loved it. I could finally start saving more money, and I had someone to watch over me."

"Then something happened."

"A few months in, I found out she ran with a gang. Smaller than the one in charge, but hers dealt in arms. By the time I knew, she'd already used me in a few supply runs as a cover."

"The hell. So you left her?"

"No. Ana, I liked her. She cared about me, gave me a place to stay. She could've killed a person in front of me, and I wouldn't have left her."

"That's...kind of-"

"Stupid."

"Not really the word I was looking for."

"But accurate," Kamilah sighed, scratching her head. "Besides, some of her gang already knew me. So I just went along with her, figured it was a way to repay everything she did for me."

"Did you join the gang?"

"No. She kept me away from them, and things were fine for a while. Then one night, I came back from work alone, and found her dead in the living room." She glanced at Ana, tapping at the centre of her forehead. "She was still bleeding from the bullet wound when I found her."

"I'm sorry."

Kamilah kept quiet for a moment, gaze lowered. "I cried, then called the police. Got dragged to the station for an interrogation. They let me go eventually, then a few days later they arrested two rival gang members for forcing their way into the house and shooting her. And I was left with a house and a bloodstained floor I couldn't clean properly. Not to mention a rent that I was now responsible for."

"But you still had a house."

"Yes," Kamilah said. "But the landlord didn't want any more to do with the gangs, and started squeezing me out. He raised the rent until I couldn't afford it anymore. So I packed my things, took the cash my girl—ex left in the house, and found a cheap hostel to stay in. No landlord would give me the time of day, so that was the best I could manage."

"Why didn't you go back to your friend's?"

"I had pride, Ana. Something I got from her. Besides, they were kind of glad to see me leave. I didn't
want to go crawling back to them."

"So…that's when you joined the army?"

"Yup. I was in the last year of school, and the army set up a booth before graduation. I spoke to the recruiter, sat on it for a while, then enlisted. And now, here I am." Kamilah's shoulders relaxed at the end.

"It couldn't have been easy," Ana said.

Kamilah quirked a brow. "Nothing's been easy."

"I meant the army. Even some who've volunteered and trained for it dropped out halfway."

"Didn't have much of a choice, did I?" She watched Ana shrug half-heartedly, wearing an amused smile. "I know what you mean. I did hate training. Hated it to the core. But it put a roof over my head, I fell asleep with a full stomach every night, I didn't have to worry about most of my expenses, and I got paid. All I had to do was train and get yelled at by sergeants. It's the best deal I've ever had."

The curve of Kamilah's lips slowly fell away, and she fidgeted with the box in her hands. Then she blinked when two arms slid under her knees and lower back.

"Ana—" She laughed when Ana lifted her from the ground, and settled the woman across her thighs. Spreading her legs, she let Kamilah's behind rest on the floor. "What are you doing?"

"Dunno. Just want to hold you." She wrapped her arms around Kamilah to demonstrate her intent, holding still as the medic's hand moved down her bicep to rest at her elbow.

"I'm actually glad you enlisted," Ana said, drawing Kamilah's attention. "I know you had to go through a lot of shit to get here, but I'm glad you're here."

Kamilah gazed at her silently, then hugged around her shoulders. "You know, Ana," she said softly in Ana's ear. "You're the last thing I expected to find here."

"Hope I was a pleasant surprise."

A chuckle, then Kamilah pulled back to look her in the eyes. She traced the edge of Ana's bottom lip with a thumb. "I think my birthday wish came true."

"I knew it!" Ana exclaimed, taking Kamilah aback. "I knew I was in your wish." Her victorious cackle was cut short, in favour of returning the kiss gifted upon her lips. She tightened her arms around Kamilah, a protective urge growing at the medic's tender expression. Nothing would steal that away from her. Nothing.

"You're everything I ever wished for, Ana."

---

Kamilah: [Ana please.]

[Attached: XO.mp3]

Kamilah: [Stop. I'm at work.]

[No]
Kamilah: [I know you love me.]

Kamilah: [You don't have to send me the entire Beyoncé discography.]

[Just wanna make extra sure you know]

Kamilah: [Ana stop. This is your last warning.]

[Why do you always punctuate the end of your messages]

[What are you, a computer]

Kamilah: [I'm serious. Last warning.]

[Relax. I'm not gonna send the ENTIRE discography]

[Obviously not gonna send you lemonade]

Kamilah: [You'd better not.]

Kamilah: [And stop. Last warning.]

[You said that already.]

[Attached: 1+ 1.mp3]

Kamilah: [That's it.]

Kamilah: [You're sleeping in your room tonight. Alone.]

[:( ]

[Attached: Why Don't You Love Me.mp3]

Kamilah: [And I hate Beyoncé.]

[NO]

[NO BABE PLS I'M SORRY]

[I'M SORRY TALK TO ME]

[DON'T TAKE YOUR ANGER OUT ON THE QUEEN]

[BABE]

[Babe]

[:( ]

[Attached: Broken-Hearted Girl.mp3]
Kamilah: [OH MY FUCKING GOD ANA]  
[:D]

Chapter End Notes

Someone please take Kamilah away from me.

And, Halcyon updates may get a little infrequent, gotta work on a bird wives piece. We'll see, as always.
"Something's wrong," Ebo declared.

At the collective attention on her, Ana slowly lowered the bottle from her lips, gulping down the bitter brew. Her eyes roved from face to face, just to make sure that – yes, she was the one being stared at.

"What's wrong?"

"You," he answered, leaning forward in the couch.

The short scratch of his slippers against the break room's floor highlighted just how quiet it was in the enclosed space. Spared from their duties for the next day, they made an absolutely wise choice to stay up well into early morning – which meant they had the break room all to themselves. No chance for a distraction, no chance for an escape – unless she made a blatant one herself, of course.

_Goddammit._

"You've been really fucking weird lately," Ebo explained further, getting a few nods from their squad mates.

"What did I do?" Ana snuck a glance at Khalid, whose shrug broadcasted that he knew something.

"I think the better question is," Layla joined in. "What you didn't do. You've been really...out of sorts? Lately?"

"Really." Ana stared at her with a straight face. Why did she feel like this wasn't the first discussion for them?

"Really. You've been hitting the clubs much less. But you've never passed up a chance to get smashed before."

"Or laid," Mesi added.

"Or laid," Layla confirmed.

"And," Hakim said. "Even when you're with us, you're always so..._clean._ And you've been our designated driver half the time now."

"Are you complaining?"

"Just concerned." Layla took the reins back smoothly. Almost a little _too_ smoothly. "It doesn't seem like you're having as much fun as you used to. If you're having a problem, you can talk to us."

"I don't have a problem."

"Really."

"Yes."
"Then go with us tomorrow," Ebo said. Or rather, challenged. The man could never say anything plainly like a normal human being.

"I don't feel like barhopping, alright?"

"We'll sponsor your drinks," Mesi offered.

"Tempting, but no."

"Something's wrong," Ebo declared again.

"Nothing's wrong. I'm just…" Ana shrugged. "Taking a break."

"Yeah. Lay off her, man." Khalid finally spoke up. "She's got to slow down once in a while. Or her sex drive's gonna be completely drained before she's 30."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

"So, Ana?" Layla drew her attention back. "Nothing to lay on us? No deep, dark secret to confess?"

"No. Damn, you guys are worse than my real family."

"'Real' family?" Layla wore an expression of mock shock, looking over at the rest of the squad. "Oh, so we're not 'real' family then?"

Ana rolled her eyes, smile growing on her face. "Fucking stop, you drama--"

"No!" Layla stood from her seat, throwing her hands up in the air. "Can you believe this bitch? She just said we're not 'real' family. That's it. I'm out," she announced, shaking her head in disgust as she made for the door, and laughed when Ana's hand smacked against her behind.

"Come on." Ana grabbed her wrist and yanked her onto the couch. "You wanna have fun? Fine. Let's play a drinking game."

"Now we're talking!" It was Ebo's turn to jump out of his seat, the man walking over to the fridge in the back. "We're not leaving until all of us are on the floor."

"Great," Layla muttered beside her ear, resting an arm around Ana's shoulder. "I'm leaving when he throws up. Just saying."

Her reason for not barhopping: dinner with Kamilah.

No, to be more specific: homemade dinner with Kamilah. Her squad could have ordered a limousine and rolled out a red carpet for her to walk on, and they still could not have dragged her away from that.

What did manage to drag her out was grocery shopping. They went into the city instead of just nipping over to the store located conveniently in base, because with both their squads free, shopping there would just increase chances of being spotted. Not that Ana would have minded, but… Well, at least they managed to make a day of it. By the time they arrived back at Ana's room carrying a grocery bag each, it was already past mid-afternoon. Ana was kicking the door shut when Kamilah opened the fridge and paused.
"Are you planning to be sober at all for the rest of the year?" Kamilah asked.

"Huh?" She frowned and went over to see what Kamilah nodded at – the bottom shelf that was filled with packs of beer. "Oh. No, that's for Ramadan."

"Ah." No further explanation was needed. It was not uncommon for some to stock up on booze before alcohol sales were banned during Ramadan. "You're not religious, then." She started putting the ingredients away, then halted again to look over at Ana's incredulous expression. "What?"

"Did you think for even a passing moment I'm religious?"

"How'd I know?" Kamilah retorted. "You might be one of those who suddenly becomes pious during Ramadan." Done with her own bag, she tossed it onto the nearby table and took the one Ana was holding.

"Milah." Ana leant on the fridge, watching Kamilah empty the bag. "I drink. I fuck. I eat pork and non-halal food. I don't pray. I--" She gestured at herself grandly, getting an amused glance from Kamilah. "--am a living embodiment of haram. If I touched the Qur'an, it'd probably combust...into flames..." Her last words grew a little slower as a thought occurred.

Kamilah shut the fridge door when she was done, looking Ana over with a hand on her hip. "Having a sudden attack of conscience?"

"No. Just realised I haven't gotten a tattoo yet."

"Oh?" Kamilah quirked a brow, folding the paper bag in her hands. "Are you planning to get one?"

"Maybe." She hugged Kamilah's waist, sticking to her back as she walked over to the table. "Don't know what I should get though."

Kamilah chuckled. "How about a tramp stamp?"

"What, are tramp stamps your thing?"

"No, it just seems like something you'd get."

"Really," she whispered in Kamilah's ear. "Do you want to see it while you take me from--" Kamilah's elbow knocked into her stomach, ending her sentence prematurely. Ana grinned at the glimpse of a smile when Kamilah cast a withering look back at her. Before Kamilah could escape from her hold, Ana tugged on her arm, turning her around to admire that gorgeous smile in full.

"Maybe I should just tattoo your name on my ass."

"Then you should get one here as well." Kamilah traced a finger across her forehead. "That says 'Idiot'."

"Only if you get a matching one that says 'Bitch'."

They could not quite settle into the kiss at first, too busy trying to swallow their laughs, teeth clicking together at each failed attempt. Ana took to nipping at Kamilah's lips, coaxing brief pecks little by little.

"Sounds like you want me to go to hell with you," Kamilah said, knocking her forehead into Ana's.

"Mn-hm..." Ana stole another kiss, then lifted her easily, taking a few steps forward to set Kamilah on the table. "Unless you'd rather stay in heaven without me."
Kamilah's lips melded easily into hers, soft and pliant under Ana's lead. It would not last long though, if that glint in dark brown eyes was any indication. "What makes you so sure I'd go to heaven?"

"Because you're an angel, sweetie," Ana cooed, snickering at the slap on her chest. She stepped in so she was nestled snugly between Kamilah's thighs. "But let us change that, hm?"

"By sinning?"

"You know what they say. A couple that sins together, stays together."

"They don't actually say that," Kamilah said, eyes never leaving hers as Ana's hand snuck underneath her top, and trailed slowly up her spine.

"Well, I do." Ana ran her nails across Kamilah's back, then zipped straight for her side. Kamilah jerked forward with a gasp when her fingers dug lightly into the sensitive spot, hands clutching onto Ana's shoulders as planned. "So, you with me?"

"Not if you do that again." The wry smile and fingertips hooked into Ana's collar lightened the gravity of her threat.

"No promises." Her pulse quickened at the devilish arc of Kamilah's lips, ghosting slowly over her own.

"You assume that I need one, darling."

Layla: [Ana]

[Boy or girl?]

[What]

[Choose one]

[Both]

[Choose]

[I like both]

[CHOOSE]

[ONE]

Ana narrowed her eyes at the group chat, then glanced up from her phone to look at Kamilah, who stood by the stove typing into her own device. Their pot of soup sat over a fire with its lid on, suffusing the pantry with its fragrant aroma. Feeling her hunger meter tick a little higher, Ana returned to the chat.

[Girls I guess]

[Alright thanks]

[What are you doing]
Layla: [Nothing]

[Layla what]

Layla: [We're having a discussion]

[About?]

Layla: [Preference]

[In a club?]

Layla: [Yeah we're not there yet. Stupid huge jam in the city centre]

[Thank god I'm not with you]

Layla: [Thanks for the moral support bitch]

[Anytime cutie]

Khalid: [ew did you just call layla cute]

Layla: [What's that supposed to mean?]

Khalid: [why don't you look in a mirror sometime]

Layla: [WOW]

[You're in the same fucking car you dumbasses]

Layla: [Not for long]

[Kick his ass babe]

Khalid: [OI]

Layla: [I will]

"Ana, come here."

"Yep."

[I'll pay 100 for vid]

Layla: [Ok]

Ana locked the phone screen with a smirk, knowing she would get just what she ordered. Khalid would probably sulk for a while after, but hey. It would be worth the laugh.

She pocketed the phone and went over to Kamilah, who was just pulling a spoon away from her lips. Ana touched their heads together, then turned inward so the tip of her nose brushed against Kamilah's cheek. Taking a sniff, she said, "Mm. Smells good. Ow!" She drew back a little, rubbing at the spot near her temple where Kamilah's head had knocked into.

"I didn't spend over an hour making this so you can smell me instead of the soup."

"I told you to used canned."
"This is healthier than canned." Kamilah dipped the spoon in the bubbling red mixture and lifted it to Ana's mouth. "And trust me, it tastes much better too."

"It'd better be. I didn't cry over the onions for nothing." Ana blew gently on the spoonful of soup, and was promptly sold when it trickled past her lips, spices lighting up her tongue with delectable flavour. "Oh god."

A pleased smile hung on Kamilah's lips. "I take that the onions were worth it."

"Babe, I'd rub those onions into my goddamn eyes just so I could drink it all."

"Don't be dramatic." Kamilah took another sip, then cocked her head in approval. "But yes, it is good. Now take it back to the room."

"Yes, ma'am." The pot was heftier than expected in her hands. "So, what's for dessert?"

"I'm not on the menu," Kamilah snipped back smoothly, already familiar with the dip in her tone.

"Aw." Ana pouted. "Out of stock?"

"Exclusive, darling." Kamilah pinched her chin. "Not for anyone who asks."

"But I'm not just 'anyone' now, am I?"

The eye roll was answer enough.

The restaurant was rather…classy. Almost too classy for one of the squad's usual Friday night hangouts. Ana had raised a brow when they suggested it, then with indignation when told to 'dress nicely' for the dinner. As though she was a walking fashion disaster. The nerve.

Adjusting the lapels of her jacket, she pulled its collar snug against her nape, and reached into the pocket where her phone had just buzzed. Heels clicking on the pavement as she approached the restaurant, Ana took a glance at the screen to find a single message from Khalid.

Khalid: [i'm so sorry]

Though a little thrown by how ominous it sounded, Ana continued walking as she typed a reply.

[What happened]

Khalid: [are you there yet]

[Almost. Why]

Khalid: [just keep cool ok]

[I'm always cool]

Khalid: [ya right]

[Where are you people anyway? Still at the mall?]  

Khalid: [no]

Khalid: [just go check out the restaurant]
No reply. Ana paused in front of the restaurant.

"Oi"

No reply.

Stuffing her phone back into its pocket, Ana passed by the small queue and strode up to the entrance, where the host was looking at her expectantly.

"I've a reservation under the name 'Ana Amari'?

His eyes lit up instantly. "Ah! Yes, of course." He picked up a menu and gestured gracefully towards the interior. "Right this way, ma'am. Your companion arrived just a few minutes ago."

Ana shot him a curious glance. "My companion?"

The host's smile almost blinded her as they walked past a few occupied tables. "Yes, ma'am."

She blinked when he stopped at a table for two – not six – where a lady already sat. With sinking realisation, Ana asked the host, "Are you sure this is my–?

"Ana?"

Damn it.

Ana looked back at the woman, ignoring the waiter who seemed perplexed when she remained standing. The woman rose out of her seat, earrings swaying as she stood. Black hair reached past her shoulders, but not quite as long as Ana's. An easy smile sat on her lips that, coupled with light green eyes and an elegant wine-coloured dress, helped to paint a very attractive picture. Not to mention a familiar one.

Oh no.

Putting on a polite smile, Ana took her hand and shook it lightly, before finally taking her seat. The host placed the menu in front of her, guided her through the specials, then left the pair to sit in silence.

"I'm sure this is a surprise," her companion spoke first, bearing a humorous lilt in her voice.

Ana nodded. "Yes. Yes, it is. And I'll assume you knew exactly what you came for?"

The woman chuckled. "I do. Layla gave me quite a briefing in the morning."

Layla. The name of a dead woman.

"So you're Layla's friend?" An affirmative nod. "Have we met before? You seem rather familiar to me."

"At a party near the end of last year. Although, we didn't actually 'meet' each other. I just saw you and your friends around."

"Ah." Ana did recall the party, but not the woman sitting before her. "So we didn't talk, or…?"
"No."

Some of the tension in Ana's shoulders left at the confirmation. "I see. And I never caught your name?"

"Hasina."

"Hasina," she repeated, nodding idly. Ana took a deep breath and sighed. "I'm really sorry Layla brought you into this."

"It's quite alright."

"No, I mean she talked you into a date that can't happen." She drummed her fingers on the table when Hasina raised her brows curiously. "See, I'm already with someone."

"Oh? And Layla doesn't know?"

"No one knows. I haven't told them yet."

"Ah. I understand." She pondered over the information, then laughed under her breath. "So I guess we came all the way here for nothing?"

"Well, not nothing," Ana said, relieved she had taken the news well. "Since we're here and all gussied up, might as well have a taste of what they have to offer."

"Good suggestion. I'm famished." Hasina flipped the cover of her menu open, and paused. "You know, I am rather surprised to hear you're attached."

"Oh?"

"The way Layla spoke about you, you didn't seem like someone to get 'tied down', so to speak. No offense, of course," she added hurriedly.

"None taken," Ana assured her, fidgeting with the cover of her own menu. "And Layla didn't lie, not exactly. I didn't think I was the type either."

"Until you found the right one." She tilted her head knowingly. "They must be something special."

Ana's smile grew involuntarily. "She is. Very much so."

Hasina hummed, then returned to her menu. "So, what do we tell Layla later?"

"We didn't click."

"Alright then."

"And, do me a favour?" Ana said, drawing Hasina's gaze back up. "Order the more expensive ones. I'll make that bitch pay for it."

Hasina's laugh was notably lighter than the start. "Now that's a plan I can get behind."

Ana mirrored her smile and finally studied the menu in detail. They had an impressive range of dishes, much richer than the common fare found back in base. She should bring Kamilah here sometime.
"You motherfuck!"

"I told you to stay cool!"

"I'm done with 'staying cool', you ass!" Ana was sorely tempted to raise her voice into a yell, but it was late in the night and the rooms' walls were thin. "You could've fucking stopped them for me, why didn't you?"

"I tried, alright? I said you didn't need help and you're probably going to get out of your slump soon—"

"You told them I was in a slump?"

"They think you're in one, okay?"

"My fucking god, Issa," Ana groaned at the ceiling, feet still locked in a circuit around her room. Her hair was damp from the quick shower, trickling occasional beads of water onto her shoulders and t-shirt.

"Look, there was no fucking way I could stop them without telling them you're with Shadid, alright?"

"Then you could've at least fucking warned me."

"Yeah, well. It's revenge for that car thing."

"It wasn't even that—"

"She almost kicked me out of the car when it was driving off!"

Ana snorted at the thought of the video.

"Oh yeah, really funny. Asshole."

"But you weren't hurt, were you?"

"I hate you."

"Thank you." Ana changed her path, going over to the door.

"Whatever. I'm done. Bye."

Khalid ended the call, leaving Ana to smirk at her screen as she stepped out into the corridor. Locking the door behind her, she typed into her phone as she shuffled over to the stairs.

[Pull shit like this again and I'll put a bullet into each of your asses]

Layla: [Aw. I heard it didn't go well?]

[None of your business. And you fuckers are paying for the dinner]

Layla: [How much did you rack up]

[Why don't you ask your friend]

Layla: [Fine. Love you < 3]

[< /3]
Ana sighed and left them to their own bickering, locking the phone and slipping it into the pocket of her shorts. Miffed as she was at their little scheme, those misguided morons meant well. She loved them, make no mistake – but they were still morons.

She took the stairs two at a time, reaching the barracks' rooftop in a blink of an eye. Ana strode over to the ledge, then turned around, facing the door where she had come from. She took a running start and jumped, hooking her fingers onto the ledge above the door, and used the momentum to haul herself up easily.

Kamilah – who was lying on her back – turned her head to look at the new arrival. She smiled and sat up, returning the brief peck on her lips.

"You're back early," she said, pulling her earphones out.

"I wasn't with my squad." Ana settled heavily beside Kamilah, leaning back on her hands. "Those idiots tricked me into going for a blind date."

Kamilah's brows rose. "Oh?"

"Yeah. Went all the way to this fancy Italian place, only to find out they set me up with a blind fucking date." Ana clicked her tongue. "Like I ever needed one."

"Why did they set it up in the first place?"

"They think I'm in a slump just because I haven't been partying with them lately. Can you imagine?" Indignation coloured her voice. "Me, in a slump? Even I can't picture it."

Kamilah laughed softly. "Me neither."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Ana sighed.

"So how was it? The date?" she added when Ana quirked a brow.

"It wasn't a 'date', habibti. I only do those with you." She wrapped both arms around Kamilah's middle and squeezed. "But it was nice, I guess. She was friendly, we had a little chat, and oh – the food is amazing. We have to go there some time."

"Mm."

Heaving yet another sigh, Ana rested her head on Kamilah's. She closed her eyes, feeling Kamilah's hand on her bicep, and fingertips tracing idle patterns over her skin. "Milah?"

"Hm?"

"Do you mind if they knew?" She cracked her eyes open when Kamilah's head shifted against hers.

"About us."

"Yup."
The soothing motion on her arm stopped as the silence dragged on. "If you're sure," Kamilah said quietly.

Ana pulled back a little, cocking her head. "I am. Are you?"

"...As long as you are."

"I hope you know that means 200% – 'jump into a volcano if you asked, I'm so clingy I'd follow you into the next life' – sure." She smiled at Kamilah's snort, and placed a kiss on her temple. "It's okay if you need more time."

"No. It's just–" Kamilah let out a breath, faint creases appearing between her brows. "You don't... I'm not the easiest person to be with."

"Oh? I beg to differ."

"You say that now."

"And I'll say it forever." Ana shifted a hand, entwining their fingers as Kamilah's gaze wavered and dropped. "Milah, being with you is like..." Her eyes lifted towards the night sky, searching the stars for inspiration. "It's like breathing. It's easy. It's natural." Ana touched her cheek, drawing her attention back. "I can't live without it. I can't live without you."

Kamilah held her gaze, before her lips twitched into a lop-sided smile. She knocked her shoulder into Ana's. "You're such a sap."

"You love it," Ana said with a growing grin, bringing up Kamilah's hand to place a kiss on her knuckles. "But I mean it, Milah. I'll wait if you want. We've all the time in the world."

"No." She took a breath, as if that one word took all the air in her lungs. "I'll...be ready when you are."

"Are you sure?"

A scrutinising gaze, then a short laugh. "You're so serious."

"Only about you."

Kamilah's smile softened, her fingers curling around Ana's just a little tighter. "I'm sure, Ana," she murmured.

"Great." She grinned, letting the tension fall off her face as the weight lifted from her shoulders. "And if it makes you feel better, I'm not that easy to be with, either."

"Trust me, I know."


"What?" Kamilah frowned when Ana shimmied backwards.

The sniper rose from the floor, settling on her knees so she faced the barracks' courtyard. Taking a deep breath, Ana shouted, "I love Kamil--"

The next thing she knew, the rest of Kamilah's name disappeared in a muffled puff against the hand clamped tightly over her mouth. Her cheek was pressed flat against chilly concrete as she lay under
Kamilah, who had pounced on her from behind. Ana cackled breathlessly into her palm – air knocked clean from her lungs by Kamilah’s tackle – and dragged the hand away.

"No, Ana!" Kamilah pressed her weight down to try and keep Ana pinned to the floor, but to no avail.

"I have to." Ana heaved herself up, causing Kamilah to lose her balance and fall to the side. "I have to let them know——" She raised her voice again. "I love my girlfrie——"

This time, the tackle rammed into her side. Ana was bowled onto her back, her words dissolving into laughter as she wrangled Kamilah's hand away from her mouth.

"You don't have to."

"Yes I do."

"I know how you feel. Isn't that enough?"

"No. I want the world to know I belong to you."

Kamilah paused, then gave a breathy laugh. "You don't belong to me."

"Oh, sweetheart." Ana propped herself up on her elbows, craning her neck up to coax Kamilah into a slow kiss. "I've been yours from the start."

A chorus of sympathetic groans rang through the gym as Ebo was flung onto his back, followed closely by victorious whoops from the other squad. Ana watched with the rest of her squad mates as he was helped up by his opponent, shook hands, then returned to their side of the sparring ring.

"Good job, meathead," Khalid said as the man passed, clapping him on the shoulder. Ebo just groaned and walked over to his duffle bag near the wall, rubbing at his lower back.

"Alright." Deyab clapped his hands sharply, attracting both squads' attention. "We've only got time for one more round before the next group comes in. Who wants to go?"

Indistinct murmuring rose from both sides. Ana's squad glanced at one another, then Khalid nudged her hard in the ribs.

"Take one for the team, sis."

"Yeah, Ana," Layla said, running one hand lazily through her pixie cut. "Besides, you've only gone three times today."

"You've gone only three too."

"But I'm bushed."

"You lazy ass," Ana groaned. But she got up anyway, pulling on her gloves and head guard. She took a moment to kick at Layla's calves before making her way towards the centre of the mats.

"Ah, Amari," Deyab said. "Always ready to get your ass kicked, I see."

"Yes, thanks for noticing."

"I think I've the perfect opponent for you." He looked over at where his squad sat. "Shadid. Feel like
putting Amari in her place?"

*The fuck.*

Kamilah cocked her head appraisingly at Deyab, then put her water bottle aside and stood, pulling on her own gloves and headgear.

*Shit.*

Ana could almost hear Khalid chortling behind her. But she settled for shooting Deyab a withering look, which he met with a devious smile.

"Are you sure, Deyab? I don't wanna put your best medic out of commission for--" The last of her words were replaced by hoots of laughter when she landed hard on her back, having had her feet swept from under her by a sharp kick. She glanced to the side just in time to watch Kamilah rise from her crouch, wearing the faintest smirk on her lips.

"Seems you're all bark and no bite, Amari," she said smoothly.

Grin spreading on her face, Ana kicked up from the mats, landing neatly on her feet. Rolling her shoulders, Ana turned to face her opponent. "On the contrary, Shadid. You'll soon find I'm *all* bite."

Without waiting for Deyab to give the official signal to start, Ana flew forward with a punch that Kamilah stepped back from easily. She followed up with a left, which was deflected by a glancing strike on her wrist. Two more punches with the same rhythm – both blocked – then Ana fell back and waited for Kamilah to make her move. But her opponent merely stood her ground, eyes boring into Ana's so calmly it was almost unnerving.

Ana had not much chance to spar with Kamilah before – not long after the medic had been transferred here, their company was deployed to fight in the war. The couple of times they had met in the ring were but vague memories by now, and certainly possessed none of the thrill coursing through Ana's veins.

Bouncing once on the balls of her feet, Ana closed in again with rhythmic double-jabs. Stomach, stomach, shoulders, face, chest. Blocked, blocked, blocked, blocked, countered--

Ana raised her right forearm to stop the blow aimed at her face, then the other to block a hook that never landed. Her eyes darted to the left, and that's when Kamilah's fist rammed hard into her right cheek -- left unprotected by her lowered arm. The headgear absorbed part of the impact, but it still threw her off, and a double-jab landed on her stomach before she could recover. Taking two steps back, Ana took in the sight of her opponent. The curious thing was, even with her squad's fierce shouts of encouragement and Kamilah's ever-growing smirk, her usual competitive fire stayed unkindled.

"That the best 'bite' you have, Amari?" Kamilah taunted.

*Okay, fuck that.*

"Just going easy on you, dollface."

"Famous last words."

Ana lunged forward. She pulled no punches, most of which met with timely blocks. She felt a surge of pride whenever one landed on Kamilah, which rose a little higher with each sharp blow she suffered in return. As the round went on, Ana picked up a little speed, varied her combinations more,
threw in a wink or two just because she could, and had the laugh punched out of her when she became distracted by Kamilah's partial eye rolls. She could not remember the last time she had this much fun in the ring. Other than the time she fought two opponents on a dare – and won, of course.

"60 seconds!" Deyab called from the side.

A streak of playfulness took hold. Ana sped up just a bit more, paring down the time between combinations, forcing Kamilah to stay on the defensive. The medic met her blow for blow, brows furrowed in concentration as she blocked and countered, countered and blocked, forced to keep up with the pace Ana had set. She was good, Ana gave her that. The sniper could still only land the occasional blow on her partner.

"10!"

Time.

Kamilah blocked the lightning-quick strikes aimed at her abdomen, brought her hand up to stop another blow, then the other when she realised the first was a fake. Ana feinted towards her left just as Kamilah recovered from her second mistake, baiting another move that left her right side wide open. In a split-second, Ana dove towards the opening and swung her leg out, slamming it into the back of Kamilah's ankles and sending her to the floor.

Both their squads erupted, sending a bellowing echo throughout the gym. Ana rose smoothly to her feet, catching Kamilah's eye and tossing her a wink. Panting, Ana turned around to face her squad and grinned. She rested both hands on her hips and bent over to catch her breath – that was when she noticed her squad mates' eyes widening.

Ana straightened and was about to turn around when two arms locked tightly about her waist.

"What the–"

Her feet left the ground in a single, terrifying moment as her body weight was lifted backwards and off-balance. A yell left her mouth as Kamilah flung her in a suplex, her body flying a little when Kamilah released her in mid-air. The impact of her back slamming against the mats knocked all breath out of her lungs and sense out of her mind, leaving her panting and dazed, staring up at the brightly-lit ceiling. The laughter and whoops barely registered in her consciousness as she tried to comprehend what had just happened.

She lay there for a few seconds – which felt like an eternity – until Kamilah's face entered her field of vision. The medic pulled off her headgear and knelt down beside Ana, helping her into a sitting position.

"You alright, Amari?" Kamilah asked, still panting but wearing that victorious gleam in her eye.

Ana chuckled breathlessly, wishing she could smooth over the medic's mussed hair right then. "You are amazing, Shadid."

"I know." Kamilah grabbed her arm, then hauled her onto her feet. She stayed a while to make sure Ana could keep upright on her own, then patted on her headgear and went back to the side of the mats. Ana's eyes followed her in a daze, watching Kamilah remove the rest of her safety gear and chase off the hands reaching out to give her congratulatory pats. That did not seem to discourage her squad though, who huddled around her while chattering loudly.

"Ana!"
Ana spun on her heel to find Khalid waving her off the mat, and Layla standing beside him with her arms crossed, wearing a smirk more obvious than a neon sign at a funeral. Pulling off her helmet, Ana ran a hand over the top of her head as she walked over to them. Khalid gave her a pat on the back, before Layla slung an arm around her shoulder and pulled her to the side.

"So, Ana. I'm sorry," she whispered conspiratorially. "I set you up with the wrong type of woman, huh?"

"What?"

Layla's smirk grew wider and more slap-worthy. She nodded her head backwards, at where Deyab's squad was. "Grumpy scary ones are more your thing, aren't they?"

Rolling her eyes and ignoring that she had been obvious enough for Layla to notice, she drawled, "No, I just like the ones who can kick my ass."

"Gotcha." Layla winked, then let her go. Ana squinted at the woman as she bent down to unzip her own duffle bag, trying to ignore the sly smile Layla wore.

Well. If they were going to try anything more, at least they would have the right target this time. Hopefully. They were morons, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Hey peeps! Thanks a lot for waiting out the longer-than-expected break. Hope you had fun in this chapter.

Just a little thing: I'll be loosening the update schedule for Halcyon just a tad, meaning they may not come weekly as they did before. I just need a little more space to breathe between chapters, but I'll still see this through to the end. On weeks with no Halcyon update, I may upload some drabbles/AUs/prompts onto Tumblr, so keep an eye out if you're interested. ;)
"Here she comes, Salma," the first server called, when Ana reached his tray counter.

Ana raised a brow and glanced at his colleague farther down the line, blowing a kiss when the server looked over. A cheeky smile already sat on her lips as she edged forward, waiting for the vegetables to be ladled onto her tray. The moment Layla moved on from her most favourite counter in the mess hall, Ana stepped in to take her place.

"So tell me, Ana," the middle-aged woman drawled, already dipping her ladle into her tray of food. "How beautiful am I today?"

"You are devastatingly gorgeous, dearest Salma, sunshine of my life," Ana crooned.

"Haven't you used that line before?" Layla deadpanned, as she took a bowl of soup.

"That cannot be. All of my lines are fresh and original."

"Yeah right."

"Well, I don't remember her saying it before." Salma scooped some kofta onto Ana's tray, and a little extra as per their little routine. "But then again, I am getting old. My memory isn't as good as it used to be."

"I would never cheat your feelings, Salma. By the way, new hijab?" Ana nudged her tray further down to the next counter.

"No, I've worn this a few times already. You just haven't seen it because you've been coming here less lately."

"Aw. I missed you too." She placed the bowl of soup on her tray and moved farther away from her 'sunshine'. "I'll come back more often to see you. Promise!"

"Make sure you do, dearie," Salma said with a smile, as Ana winked and stepped away from the line.

She caught up with Layla, walking over to their squad's usual tables. Ana was about to set her tray opposite Deyab, when Layla's butt slammed into her hip. She stumbled to the side, balancing her tray in panic so her bowl of soup would not spill over.

"The fuck, Layla?" she asked as the woman sat down, wearing an impish grin that Ana only understood when she realised who sat in front of her.

Kamilah wore her trademark stare which spoke of negative levels of amusement. Although it stopped having an effect on Ana a while ago, she felt just a tinge of embarrassment from how bloody unsubtle Layla was. Damn woman was doing it on purpose too, she knew.

Reining in the urge introduce Layla's face to her rice, Ana sat down at her 'assigned' seat.

"Good evening, Shadid."

"Is it, Amari?"

Layla snorted. Ana kicked her foot. Kamilah remained unfazed as she had been warned of upcoming
shenanigans.

"So grouchy. Bad day at work?"

"Why don't you take a look at the med bay and tell me?"

"My, are you trying to lure me back?"

"A waste of energy. You'll be there after tomorrow’s field training."

Ana wore a lop-sided grin, not caring that Layla just shoved an extra-large spoonful of rice and meat into her mouth. "Your confidence is very inspiring, Shadid."

Kamilah just raised a brow. "Wish I could say the same for your situational awareness."

The sniper rolled her eyes when Layla started hacking, slapping on the woman's back as she paid for literally biting off more than she could chew. Khalid was less embarrassing than her.

Ana forced a cup of water into Layla's hands, watching her gulp it down between coughing fits while the medics looked on. Stealing a glance at Kamilah, Ana found her wearing the same tired expression as Deyab – probably hoping they wouldn't have to pull overtime in the mess hall. It took a few seconds before Layla straightened herself, taking in a lungful of air and giving one last cough. Then she chased Ana's hand away.

"You're utterly embarrassing, Layla."

"Birds of a feather, Ana."

Kamilah cocked her head, wearing a faint smirk. I agree, it said, prompting another eye roll from Ana. But the sniper chose to leave it alone, finally wolfing down her dinner to satisfy her empty stomach.

Shadid's prediction turned out to be true, not that Ana made it remotely difficult.

"Sorry, sweetie," Ana said when the door swung open. "No vigorous exercise for tonight."

"That would be my recommendation." Kamilah pressed her lips together in an obvious effort to hide a smile, watching Ana walk in with hands on hips and shoulders stooped. "It'd be more comfortable in your own bed, you know."

"Without my favourite bolster? No, it won't." She slung both arms around Kamilah's neck, hissing a little at the strain in her back as the door closed behind her.

"Are you alright?" Kamilah asked, holding onto her sides as Ana straightened herself. "Do you want a heating pad?"

"Yes please." She released her grip on Kamilah's shoulders, letting the woman walk away to her cabinet. "Mind if I get some aspirin?"

"Study table," Kamilah said needlessly; Ana was already familiar with said table's drawer. She could reach it with her eyes closed even during her hangovers. Probably because her eyes usually were half-closed while she fumbled around for the painkillers.

"I told you to get some at the hospital."
"It felt better then, alright?" Ana retorted, dragging her feet over to the table.

"Because we gave you a shot."

Ana settled for giving a drawn-out groan, knowing full well she had lost the battle. She bent down carefully to pull the first drawer open, but found only stationery. Two notebooks, pens, a pencil, scissors… She patted towards the back of the drawer, and a throb in her back muscles was her only reward.

"It's not here."

"It should be."

Feeling more like an old woman, Ana leaned on the edge of the table for support and opened the second drawer – her little pharmacy away from the hospital, as it were. Assorted over-the-counter medication, a couple of boxes of band-aids, an open box of tampons, and…

Where the hell…

She reached for two boxes sitting at the back, pulling them out to finally find the damned aspirin. One box, anyway. She was about to toss the second one back into the drawer, when she read the print on its front: Prozac – Fluoxetine.

Oh.

"Have you found it?"

Ana's back jerked straight when Kamilah's voice came from right behind her, and she gritted her teeth against another groan.

"Ana." Kamilah touched her elbow, moving over to her side. "Did you find–" Her voice trailed off at the box in Ana's hand.

"Antidepressants?" Ana asked gently, watching her expression grow hard.

Kamilah remained quiet, giving a minute shake of the head, which she caught immediately. Her hand fell away from Ana's arm, and she shifted just a little farther back.

"These are, aren't they?" Ana continued, breaking the silence. "I had an old squad mate who used to take these."

Her lips twitched. Then Kamilah's hand jerked upward, grabbing the box and tugging it from her fingers. She threw it back into the drawer and slammed it shut.

"Milah–" Ana reached out with a hand, but stopped midway when Kamilah stepped back – almost reflexively. She stood in place, unsure what to do as the medic kept her gaze down, hands fiddling with the heating pad.

Kamilah nodded curtly at the bed. She took a breath and said, "Lie down." There was a tremble in her bottom lip, promptly covered up when she pressed her lips back together.

"Milah," Ana tried again, catching hold of her wrist this time. It stilled in her grasp, then tried to break free half-heartedly. "It's alright. You don't have to–"

"Ana." She spoke quietly, still avoiding eye contact. "Go lie down."
Deciding that deference was the better option for now, Ana did. She snuck a peck on Kamilah's cheek – which was accepted wordlessly – and went to plop herself down on the mattress. The bed dipped at the side where Kamilah sat next to her.

She lay her head on the pillow, hearing short clicks as Kamilah adjusted the pad's settings. Taking a shot, she asked, "How long? Since you've been diagnosed, I mean."

No answer for a while. Then, "Since the war. After we returned from Kharga."

Ana took a moment to sift through her memories. "When you had to go to the counsellor?"

A flat, affirmative hum.

That meant six months. Six months where Kamilah said nothing, and Ana was blissfully unaware.

"It…couldn't have been easy," she said, as the warm pad was laid over her back.

"Nothing's been easy."

The words struck her much deeper this time. Ana reached back to catch Kamilah's hand before she could rise. Ignoring the twinge of pain at the movement, she tugged gently until Kamilah relented, sitting close enough so Ana could look up at her properly.

Lacing their fingers together, she said, "You could've told me."

"I didn't want you to know," Kamilah muttered. Her gaze was still turned away, face carefully blank. Fingers limp between Ana's, as though expecting her to let go.

Ana pushed herself up, the heating pad falling off onto the bed. She bit down the groan as she turned around to face Kamilah proper, the medic keeping a hand on her arm for support. Settling in place with a sigh, she smiled when Kamilah's eyes flickered up to meet hers.

"Nothing is going to change between us, Milah. Well – maybe now I can help. You know, whenever you need me."

Kamilah took her time before replying, "You don't have to treat me like I'm…fragile."

"Oh trust me, I know you're the opposite of that." Ana took her hand again. "I just want you to know that I'm here for you, whenever you need me. 24/7. I'm your bitch. Actually, you know what? Maybe I should get you a dog whistle so you can call me whenever you want." Ana started laughing before she reached at the end of the sentence, when an involuntary smile made its way onto Kamilah's lips. Then a cry of pain cut her off when Kamilah pushed at her shoulder.

"Ow, ow…" She hissed as Kamilah grabbed onto her, tugging her forward with just a tad too much force. Ana waved away her hurried apologies, riding out the pain as she grabbed back onto Kamilah's biceps. "I'm fine. Really." She flicked Kamilah's cheek lightly when the worried expression stayed in place.

"Now, where were we?" Ana rested her arms around the medic's neck, leaning on her. "Oh right. The dog whistle. We could get a leash too, if you want."

"Ana, please."

"Oh fine." She pouted. "No leash then."

"Ana."
"Milah," Ana said, leaving the humour behind in an instant. "I'm serious. You don't have to do this alone. You have me."

Kamilah's gaze dropped briefly. "I'm…not easy to be with."

"So you said. And I understand. Milah." Ana cupped her cheek. "I love you. I love you more than anyone, anything in this world. Nothing will ever change that. I'm here for you. Always."

Face scrunching up a little, Kamilah slapped at her shoulder. "You're such a sap," she said, voice thick.

"You love it."

A breathy laugh finally made it past her lips, Kamilah swiping at her eyes and pressing forward in a kiss. Ana met her patiently, surrendering every piece of affirmation she searched for, coaxing that familiar softness back to the surface. Her hands rested lightly on Ana's back when she pulled away, meeting Ana's tender gaze.

"I do."

"Yay. Ow!" Ana flinched away from the pinch on her back, setting off another ache in her pulled muscles.

"You'd better lie down."

"Yeah. Great idea," Ana groaned as she let go of Kamilah reluctantly, lowering herself face-down on the bed. Kamilah straightened her top, then placed the heating pad on her back again. Ana flung her hand back blindly, searching for a hand that slipped into her own in a gentle hold. She turned her head to look at the woman who sat next to her. "I love you, Milah."

The corners of Kamilah's mouth curled up in a smile, as she ran her fingertips along Ana's cheek, and tucked the stray strands of hair behind her ear. Then she bent down, pressing her lips gently on Ana's temple.

"I love you too."

Ana did her recommended back exercises a little too enthusiastically.

Kamilah advised her to extend medical leave to make sure she was fully healed before jumping back into training.

Ana did not listen.

Kamilah told her she would regret it.

Ana did not.

She shifted Mesi's arm over her shoulder, groaning under her breath. Then a pained grunt escaped when Mesi adjusted herself, putting too much weight that made her back ache more than it should.

"You alright, Ana?" Mesi asked as she limped slowly along, supported by Layla and Ana.

"Yeah." She slumped her shoulders a little, hoping to ease the pain. But it only got worse. She kept her mouth shut, though.
"Is your back acting up?" Layla asked.

"No." Yes.

"Did you get hurt during training?" Mesi probed as they entered the aid station.

"No." Ana dragged the vowel as though it would make her claim sound more convincing. She bent down carefully to lower Mesi onto the cot, watching a medic come over to examine Mesi's injured leg.

As they waited, the rest of their squad settled on the cots nearby, along with the rest of the injured among their company. All kinds of shit had hit the fan during training, and the newly-promoted Major Jaida seemed about ready to stick every last one of them on pikes. Only a few could lift their heads after the brief but ruthless tongue-lashing the major had given them, not to mention the threat of more punishing exercises on the horizon. Suffice to say, it had been a bad day.

The last of their company trickled through the entrance, Kamilah being one of them; though she was not one of the injured, as usual. The medic had an unconscious squad mate slung over her shoulders in a fireman's carry, and set the soldier down onto the cot easily. She looked over the patient, then turned to stop Mesi's medic – who had gone away to fetch some supplies. They traded a few words, and Kamilah nodded her head back at the unconscious soldier, then had the supplies handed over to her. Mesi's medic now tended to Kamilah's squad mate, and Kamilah was walking over to where Mesi sat.

*Act normal*, Ana reminded herself, and her back twinged in response.

Kamilah asked Mesi questions, falling into superficial banter to keep her patient's attention occupied while she cleaned the wound. Other than the occasional clenched jaw, Mesi gave no indication she was in pain. Kamilah finished up in no time, and soon she was securing the bandage around Mesi's calf.

"Anything else?" Kamilah asked, rising to her feet.

"Nope. Thanks."

The medic looked her over, then turned her attention to the two women standing by the cot. Layla passed without trouble, but the scrutiny rested on Ana far too long for comfort. Then Ana realised her shoulders were stooped again, and tried to straighten them subtly. It did not work.

"Amari. Are you in pain?"

"No," Ana said uncertainly.

"Stretch out your arm."

Feeling much like a student caught red-handed by a teacher, Ana did as she was told. Kamilah grasped onto her forearm and tugged, causing the pain to flare up along with a healthy dose of regret. Ana stumbled a few steps forward, free hand reaching out to grab onto Kamilah's other arm for support while she remained bent over.

"Your back." No question. She already knew the answer.

"Yes," Ana groaned. She followed the gentle pull on her arms, Kamilah turning her towards an empty cot farther inside the station.
"Go lie down, if you have any sense left."

Okay… She's angry.

Because she did have some sense left, Ana did as she was told. She shuffled after Kamilah in a walk of shame, glancing back at Mesi and Layla, who wore sympathetic gazes as they watched her trudge away.

Kamilah's displeasure was as hard to bear as ever, although she still did check on Ana later that night.

"Ana."

Ana jumped, eyelids snapping up to half-mast and both feet kicking in reflex. She looked up groggily at the woman touching her cheek, and muttered something incoherent as she straightened from her slumped posture in the chair. Rubbing her eyes, Ana took in a breath of cool air, waking even further.

"You done already?" Ana asked, sluggish tongue trying to follow the words zipping across her mind.

"Yup. And I've paid, so we can go."

"That's fast." She raised both arms past her head and stretched in the chair, getting a few satisfying pops from her now-healed back. Under Kamilah's personal attention, Ana had performed her daily exercises without going overboard, rested appropriately, and received a few back massages from the medic herself. Needless to say, she recovered in record time, and was now able to safely go out and hurt herself again. Not that she would be doing so any time soon.

Taking a deep breath, Ana pushed herself up from the chair and arched her back one last time, before walking through the psychiatrist's waiting room with Kamilah by her side.

"You could've stayed home if you're this tired," Kamilah said, holding onto her elbow as they stepped out into the corridor.

"I'm fine. Feel a little better, even." Ana had actually passed out in her room for an hour before she ferried Kamilah to her therapy session. The day's training had been thoroughly stressful – physically and mentally. But she had promised to give her partner a lift, and she would be damned before going back on it.

She pressed the button for the elevator. "So, how was it?"

"Much better than the last one."

"That's good. What'd the doctor say?"

"That I'm making progress," Kamilah replied, stepping into the empty elevator and pressing for the basement car park.

"Well, that's very good." Ana kissed the side of her head. "I'm proud of you."

Kamilah hugged her arm, waiting until the doors slid open again. "You came up quite a lot today."

"Oh?"
"I told her you found out."

"And... how'd she react?" Ana pulled out the car key as they neared their ride.

"She asked how you reacted. And how I felt."

"She should've asked me instead." Ana clicked a button, and her car beeped loudly in response. "I know exactly how you feel." She snorted a laugh when Kamilah shoved her aside, and Ana stumbled into the middle of the road. Thankfully, the car park was nearly empty.

Ana regained her footing, then sprinted forward without warning. Kamilah's eyes widened as she raised her hands, a short shriek escaping her throat when Ana slammed into her, raising her high into the air.

"Ana, stop--!" She yelped when Ana squeezed her bottom.

"Here's the firm butt, and here's the comfy cleavage--" Laughter bubbled up from Ana's chest when Kamilah held her head fast, to stop Ana from face planting into her chest.

"You perverted little--"

The sound of another car being unlocked caught their attention. Both women turned their heads to look at a civilian worker walking toward his car. The man jerked his gaze away and scurried over to his ride.

"Let me down," Kamilah reminded her.

"I would never."

Kamilah sighed when Ana refused to let her go, walking awkwardly to her car with the medic still in her arms. "He's looking at us like we're crazy," she said, glancing over Ana's head.

"That's because we are, sweetie."

"We?"

"Am I wrong?" Ana set her down, pausing when Kamilah fixed her with a thoughtful look.

"No." Kamilah pinched her chin. "But you are crazier than me."

"Guilty as charged."

---

Layla: [Hey guess what]

[No]

Layla: [We got you a date]

[I'll get my rifle]

Layla: [With Shadid ;) ]

[...]

[What]
Layla: [We just asked her]
[And... she said yes?]
Layla: [Yep. We gave her the movie tickets. So just bring yourself. Or maybe a better version of yourself idk]
[Are you serious]
Layla: [Yeah if you just brought yourself she'd probably leave in 4 secs]
Layla: [Maybe less]
[Why do I even bother]
Layla: [Sat night. 7pm at barrack's car park. Go get em, babe]
Layla: [Oh and remember to trim your nails ;))]

Ana was torn between laughing and reaching through the phone to give Layla two slaps. But she settled for some fact-checking instead.

[Babe]
Kamilah: [Yes.]
[You're still in med bay right]
Kamilah: [Yes. Your friends just left.]
[They set us up]
Kamilah: [I know.]
[On Saturday]
Kamilah: [To watch a movie.]
[That... we were planning to watch. On the same day]
Kamilah: [Yes.]
[Why'd you even tell them yes?]
Kamilah: [For the free tickets.]
[Wow. Not for me?]
Kamilah: [I see you every day.]
[:(
Kamilah: [We'll take my bike.]
[:D]
Ana finished buttoning her jeans when the insistent knocks on her door came again. Clicking her tongue, she went over and flung it open, revealing Layla and Mesi standing in the corridor. Layla's eyes roved from Ana's head to her feet. Then she waved a hand at her clothes.

"That's it?" Layla asked, flinging out a hand to stop the door from being slammed in her face.

"First you set up my dates. Now you inspect my clothes. Next, you'll be checking my underwear."

"Are you even wearing any?" Layla hooked her fingers into her waistband and pulled, peeking down as she walked in. Naturally, her hand was slapped away.

"Fuck off."

"We just want your date to go well," Mesi said in a placating tone.

"Yeah. So." Layla plucked at the grey tank top she wore. "What, are you going to charm her with your casual getup?"

Ana made sure to roll her eyes in plain sight. "We're just going to a movie."

"Nothing after?"

"No."

"Really."

"Leave her alone, Layla."

"Look, I just want things to go smoothly," Layla said, as Ana put on her belt. "I didn't almost shit my pants setting up this date just for Ana to mess it up."

"'Shit your pants'?"

"You know how Shadid is," Mesi explained. "She stared at us like we peed on her floor." She cocked her head, glancing over at Layla. "Honestly, I'm still surprised she accepted it."

"Me too. I was getting ready to date Ana myself."

"Please. Like I'd ever let my standards fall that low," Ana deadpanned, pulling on her jacket. She patted at the small bulge in her pocket, just to make sure the box was indeed there.

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that."

"And I'll pretend I never saw you here." Ana shooed the two women through the door first, then followed them out after slipping into her shoes. Her friends fussed over her appearance non-stop as they climbed down the stairs – smoothing over her combed hair, straightening her jacket, checking her nails, and sniffing at her perfume. They only stopped when the car park came into view along with Shadid, who was waiting beside her motorcycle.

"You're taking her bike?" Mesi asked while Layla gave a low whistle.

"Nice. Now, go make us proud."

Ana hopped forward reflexively when Layla gave her a sound smack on the bottom. She cast a withering glance over her shoulder before making her way to Kamilah, whose eyes were already on her.
"Hi," Ana said, reminding herself not to kiss the woman just yet. Instead, she reached into her jacket's pocket for the box.

"What's that?" Kamilah asked. Her brows rose when Ana lifted the lid to reveal the watch – analog, as she preferred them.

"Yours is getting kind of worn. Thought you'd like a new one."

"It stopped working, actually. A few days ago." Kamilah raised her wrist, pulling down the jacket sleeve to show that it was unadorned.

"Talk about excellent timing." Ana took the watch and pocketed the box again. Taking Kamilah's hand, she slipped the metal strap through and clasped it on. It fit nicely.

Kamilah smiled, admiring the gift. "You didn't have to."

"I want to." She paused again, repressing another instinctive urge to kiss the woman. Ana was spared the effort though, when Kamilah pecked her on cheek.

"Thank you." Her smile widened when Ana bounced on her feet. She turned towards the motorcycle, opening the underseat compartment to retrieve the helmets, and handed one to Ana. "Now say bye to your cheerleaders."

Surprised, Ana spun around to find Layla and Mesi still standing by the barracks block. They had huge grins plastered on their faces and gave her four thumbs-up, looking more excited than a cat at a catnip feast. Ana sighed and, still playing her role as a disgruntled friend, flipped them off.

Putting her helmet on, Ana climbed onto the bike behind Kamilah. "Wait," she said suddenly, staring at Kamilah in disbelief when the woman turned to look at her. "You just kissed me in front of them."

All she got was a quirk of the brow, before her visor was snapped down by Kamilah. Ana grinned, shoulders shaking in a short chuckle before hugging about her waist as usual. Kamilah had taken the lead, and Ana was more than happy to follow.
The spray of water from the shower head was fine. It felt good, in fact. To feel the layer of grime and sweat from training get washed away. But it did not feel as good on one particular spot.

*It's nothing*, Ana told herself. One swipe of the soap bar across that spot, and her little lie was tossed out the window.

"You alright?" Layla asked when a hiss escaped through gritted teeth.

"I think so." But she turned anyway, so Layla could see her back in full. "Is it bad?"

Another sharp sting when Layla's wet hand wiped across her left shoulder blade. "Oh. The holorounds nicked you real good."

"Is it bleeding?"

"Not anymore, I think... Hm. One's really long, though." Layla traced a line across her shoulder blade. "This is the shorter one." Then she poked at a spot right below, and traced a line that nearly reached her spine. "This one looks a little deeper. Why don't you go to the hospital later?"

"I don't want to," Ana groaned, turning back to the front. Kamilah was on duty.

"You'd better. Don't want it to get infected."

"I'll be fine," she insisted, turning the shower back on. As if to taunt her, the wounds stung again as soap water ran past them.

Layla clicked her tongue. "Come on. You need to get it dressed. Don't make it worse."

"Maybe she doesn't want to go because Shadid's there," Mesi chimed in helpfully, turning off her own shower. She smiled benignly when Ana shot her glare.

"Is that it, Ana? Feeling a little shy, are we?"

Ana groaned – inwardly this time – and clenched her jaw, turning back to the task at hand.

"Maybe she can't look Shadid in the eye after whatever happened last night."

"She probably got humiliated," Layla said in an attempt to get a rise out of Ana. A very lousy attempt.

"Shot down every time she tried to be clever."

Layla leaned in to peer closely at Ana – who continued rinsing the suds off her body as though she had no urge to smack Layla upside the head. "Or maybe she turned out to be a dud. Forgot what dates are aside from the sex." Her eyes widened and she shared a victorious look with Mesi, who was pulling on her clothes by the lockers.

"Is that it, Ana? Did you sleep with her?" Layla grinned at Ana's eye roll. "Is that why you refuse to tell us anything? You're embarrassed because you got completely dommed by—"

"I did not get 'dommed', thank you very much," Ana said finally, shutting off the shower. She walked back to the bench where her towel lay, making sure not to slip on the wet tiles and to keep
calm under Mesi's searching gaze. Layla's unsubtle probes were nothing compared to this woman's eyes. Sometimes it felt like Mesi saw more than she let on.

"So you're saying you did have sex." Ana could swear Mesi's smile was growing to be more like Layla's. Too much time together, those two.

"We did not." It was the most honest of all truths. They had not the energy left to do much after returning from the movies, and fell asleep the moment their heads hit the pillows.

"Maybe she blacked out after Shadid had her way with her." Layla had come over to join them, whipping Ana's bum with her own towel. "Oh come on," she added when Ana grunted in pain. "It wasn't that painful–oh. Damn." Layla pulled away Ana's towel, which had jerked roughly across her back at the hit. "You're bleeding, Ana."

Fuck. Ana turned her towel over in her hands, spotting the smear of red on white.

"Come on, then." Mesi rose from the bench, packing up her things. "We're going to the hospital."

"We?" Ana asked.

"We have to make sure that you go," Mesi said, as Layla started getting dressed. "And we'll get front row seats."

"Oh fuck you all."

"What, getting fucked by Shadid wasn't enough?" Layla snickered.

"Fuck you especially."

"Khally. Khally Khally."

When she got no response, she beat her palm harder against the man's chest.

"Khally--"

"What."

"We can't go to my room."

"Why not."

"I already drank all the beer there."

"So?"

"So," Ana sang. "We gotta go to the break room."

"We're not going to the break room."

"But there's beer there!" Ana whined, hanging off Khalid's neck where her arm was slung over. She did not resist when Khalid clicked his tongue and tugged her upright.

"We're not getting any more beer. Oh come the fuck on, Ana!" Khalid said when Ana's feet stopped working, forcing him to pull her up the stairs by the waist. "I am not--" He pulled her up two steps. "Letting you--" Another two. "Drink anymore--" Three steps. "So you can puke again–ah fuck it."
He clamped his arms around her middle and hoisted her up, carrying Ana up two flights of stairs as she slapped at his back, insisting that they go back down. Khalid did not release her until they reached the barrack's second floor and stopped at a particular door. Ana's knees buckled a little when he let her down, so Khalid held onto her as he knocked on the door.

"Milah!" Ana exclaimed, her face lighting up when Kamilah opened the door. "How'd you get into my room?"

Kamilah raised her brows, then glanced at Khalid.

"Yeah. She's really smashed."

"I can tell."

"Do you know magic, Milah? Did you teleport in my room?" Ana gasped. "Can you saw me in half?"

"I'd like to see that," Khalid muttered, guiding Ana through the doorway. She spread both arms and clung onto Kamilah's shoulders like a koala. "Sorry to dump her on you, but I left Ebo downstairs and I can't handle these two at the same time."

"It's alright."

Ana nuzzled her nose into Kamilah's hair and took a deep breath. "Why do you smell so nice… I wanna smell nice…"

"She's been going on and on about you the entire goddamn night. Lucky the others are all smashed too."

"Let's smash, Milah. I wanna smash," Ana mumbled beside Kamilah's ear, who seemed torn between laughing and snorting. The medic adjusted her posture when Ana leaned heavier on her.

"Thanks, Khalid."

"No, thank you. Now I've to go before Ebo sets something on fire." Khalid waved a hand as he started to move off, then paused. "Call me if you need help. I mean, she's calmed down, but…"

"It's alright," Kamilah repeated, shifting her arms around Ana when she wriggled in place. "I can handle her."

"Obviously." Khalid chuckled. When the sound of a man's drunken singing floated up from the ground floor, he snapped back to attention. "Okay, yeah. Good night, doc."

"Night, Khally!" Ana called after Khalid, only to be caught off guard when she was yanked farther into the room. She felt her stomach stir, but not as badly as it had earlier. Rubbing an eye idly as Kamilah pulled her over to the bed, she sat down obediently and cast her gaze all over the room.

"My room looks different," she asked. "Did you do something?"

"You're in my room, Ana." Kamilah came back with a bottle of cleanser and cotton pads in hand. She grabbed onto Ana's arm before the sniper could fall back onto the bed. "Don't lie down yet." She clicked her tongue at the minute whine. "Close your eyes."

Ana waited as Kamilah wiped the moist cotton gently across her eyes. She opened them the moment Kamilah moved onto her cheeks with fresh pads, staring aimlessly at the woman removing her
makeup. Then she jerked – earning a click of the tongue from Kamilah – and looked down at her hands hurriedly. Horror grew as she stared at her fingers longer.

"Milah."

Kamilah gave a noncommittal hum, lifting Ana's chin and holding her in place. Unable to look down, Ana brought her hands up to eye level.

"Milah!" Ana repeated urgently, turning her hands over in disbelief.

"What is it."

"I lost your ring!"

The medic paused to look down at Ana's hands. "What ring?"

"The one you gave me."

"I never gave you a ring."

"No!" Ana whined. She tipped dangerously backwards, and was tugged back upright again. "You gave me one! You…" She brought her hands up again and, after a moment's consideration, pointed at the ring finger on her left. "You put it here!"

Kamilah's frown gradually lightened as she watched Ana tap desperately at her finger. She raised her eyes to the ceiling, took a deep breath, then looked back down at the woman panicking over her bare finger. "Let me guess. I put it there, because you're a 'single lady'."

"Yes!" Ana's face brightened.

"Ana, I never gave you a ring." Kamilah watched her face fall a little. "And you're not single."

A quiet moment passed. "I am."

"You're with me."

"Yes," Ana drawled, cocking her head as if stating a fact plain as day. "I'm your single."

"I hate to break it to you, darling. But that means you're not single anymore."

Ana stared at Kamilah as she resumed her work again. "I'm not single?"

"No."

"You're not single?"

"No."

"Then…we can't have rings."

"Why can't we have rings?" Kamilah asked, tilting Ana's chin and wiping off her other cheek.

"Because we're not single!"

"You're not even making sense right now—"

"But I want a ring!" Ana tried to lean back again, but was held fast.
"You don't need one. Ana–," Kamilah said exasperatedly when Ana's head slipped out of her grasp. "Stop moving! I need to get your makeup off before–"

"I lost the ring," Ana lamented, obviously having lost track of their conversation. "Now I don't have one and I'm not single."

"Ana." Kamilah grabbed onto Ana's shoulders before she could slump backwards. "Ana, will you stop being a child for two seconds–"

"I'm a single child," Ana moaned. With the hands on her shoulders finally gone, she was now free to flop down on the bed. Ana rolled onto her stomach, uttering incoherent sentences and sobbing drily until Kamilah pulled her back up. She stopped abruptly at the sight of the ring Kamilah held before her.

"Look. I found your ring." Kamilah took the hand Ana had been pointing at and slipped it through her finger. Then she kept the hand up, making sure Ana was aware of the ring's presence. "Now do me a favour and keep still."

Now a happy child, Ana stayed in place, staring at the ring and giggling occasionally for no apparent reason as Kamilah cleaned her up. She raised her arms at Kamilah's urging, the medic pulling off her top and checking the dressing on her back. After Ana shook her head when asked if her wounds hurt, Kamilah guided her gently down on the bed and rested her head on the pillow. Ana managed to shirk off her pants with Kamilah's help, and kept her hand up when the covers were pulled over her, so that the ring remained visible.

"It's so pretty," Ana mumbled.

Kamilah sighed, pulling her hand down. "You're really ridiculous sometimes."

"Your face is ridiculous…"

Fuck…

Ana cracked her eyes open and immediately shut them, burnt by the sunlight like a vampire by silver. Her head hurt worse than the time she slipped in the showers and hit her head on the handrail.

Fuck *Ebo* and his fucking drinking games.

Bringing a hand up to shield her eyes, Ana opened them again. Slowly, until she was looking comfortably up at the ceiling in Kamilah's room. Khalid must have brought her here last night. She could vaguely remember nearly throwing up on him, then being carried up the stairs. She also recalled seeing Kamilah's face, then…nothing.

Sighing as another throb passed through her head, Ana reached out to her right, only to meet with empty space. She turned her head and found her partner missing. Ana shifted forward, resting on Kamilah's pillow and wondering if she had gone to work already. No, wait – the medic had the day off as well.

Ana took a glimpse at the windows, where Kamilah had forgotten to draw the curtains. It should be well into the morning by now. After stealing a few more indulgent minutes on the pillow, Ana pushed herself up, feeling the headache intensify and the floor sway a little. Her stomach did a brief flip, but thankfully it felt empty. She glanced around the room just to make sure Kamilah was indeed not there, then dropped her feet to the floor.
She noticed the glass of water on the nightstand as she yawned, and leaned over to read the post-it beside a tissue with two pills on it.

*Out getting food. Take your aspirin.*  
*P.S. You look like hell.*

"Bitch," Ana snorted. It put a smile on her face nonetheless, and she tossed the pills into her mouth. While she was gulping down the entire glass of water, she noticed something new. Setting the glass down, Ana brought her hand up to examine the ring sitting snugly at the base of her ring finger. She cocked her head, wondering how it got there. It was Kamilah's – a black band patterned with silver vines. Ana did not remember borrowing her ring… Did she?

It was pretty, though. One that Kamilah wore often.

She had twisted it once around her finger when a *click* came from the door, followed by the best sight for sore eyes.

"You're awake."

"What gave it away?" Ana deadpanned, voice still a little scratchy. She did not bother to hide the smile when Kamilah rolled her eyes, watching the medic shed her shoes and place her paper bag on the table. Kamilah strode over, running a hand down her tousled hair and bent down. But when Ana tilted her head up, Kamilah wrinkled her nose and moved away.

"You stink."

"You stole my line," Ana said, closing her eyes when Kamilah flicked her forehead. She was about to lie back down when she remembered something. "One question."

"Mm."

She lifted her hand. "Did we get married last night?"

"No," Kamilah took the tissue from the nightstand and crumpled it. "You kept crying about how you lost a ring I never gave you. Speaking of which." She stretched out a hand. "Give it back."

Ana pouted. "I thought gifts had no take backs."

"It wasn't a gift. It's a loan."

"Why are you so mean," Ana muttered, taking the ring off when Kamilah wiggled her fingers pointedly. She dropped it into the woman's open hand and slumped back down, head spinning when it hit the pillow. But her eyes snapped open again when she remembered a second thing. "Today's the 25th."

"It is."

Ana watched her kneel down and rummage around the nightstand's drawer. She kept quiet for a while, then asked, "Wanna go visit my mom?"

Kamilah paused, glancing over at her. "Your mom is dead."

"I know," Ana intoned, as Kamilah fished out an envelope and shut the drawer. "Let's go visit a medium so I can introduce you to her– I meant visit her grave, jeez."

"Don't you usually visit with your family?"
"They couldn't get away. So it's just me today."

"Do you want me to go with you?"

Her eyelids fluttered to accompany her sarcasm, "No, I invited you just for kicks."

Kamilah's brows quirked. "A little grumpy today, aren't you?"

"I wonder why." Ana pressed her face into the pillow. The constant throb in her skull had lightened, though her brain felt like it was tightly bundled in very heavy cotton. She did feel a little better though, at the lips pressing on her temple and fingertips caressing her head.

"We'll go after you wash up and eat something."

Ana groaned reluctantly into the pillow, but was slowly coaxed out of bed by soft murmurs. That, and by being told she would wash the bed sheets if she stayed any longer.

---

They stopped before the gravestone in near-perfect synch, and stood still in a short moment of silence. Ana ran an eye over the little plot, which seemed well-taken care of by the cleaner – no dirt build-up on the stone, grass trimmed without a weed in sight. She noted the fresh flower sitting in the simple vase the Amari had left before the tomb. The clean-up had been recent, no doubt.

Ana raised a hand to take off her shades, but stopped at a sudden change of heart.

_The sun's too bright_, she told herself. Instead, she slipped her fingers from between Kamilah's, and knelt down to add a white tulip into the vase – single stalk, as her mother had always preferred her flowers.

She knelt there in silence, at a loss for what to do. All the times before, her family had been with her. She would try to tell on her sister while Safiya did the same, the both of them rattling on while their father asked his wife why she had left him alone, and under the mercy of their children. Safiya was always the one to start the shenanigans. And for the first time in three years, she understood why Safiya always disobeyed their father's order to behave in front of the grave for once.

Closing her eyes, Ana took measured breaths, swallowing through a throat tightening at the quiet air of the cemetery, which threatened to leave her alone with memories she kept under lock and key. She placed a hand on stone warmed by the afternoon sun, its grainy texture helping to anchor her in the present.

_You'd be proud, wouldn't you? I survived the insurgency intact. Got a promotion. And a…_

Ana turned her head to look up at Kamilah, who watched her silently. She put on a smile, rising to her feet and kissing her partner's cheek.

"Well, mama," Ana said, slinging an arm around Kamilah's shoulders. "I know you're not really in a position to say 'hi', but here's my girlfriend." She squeezed the woman shooting her a bemused glance.

"Is that really how you talk to your mother?"

"Yeah. If she doesn't like it, then she's welcome to try and nag at me."

Kamilah's mouth twitched, and she turned her gaze back to the headstone. "Zayirah Amari," she read the name aloud, cocking her head. "She took your father's name?"

"Ah. No," Ana laughed. "Amari is her name. It's my father who took her name."
"Oh? He must really love her."

"Well, he did," she drawled. "When they decided Safiya would take my mom's name, he felt left out and wanted to change his name too."

Kamilah snorted in laughter. "Really?"

"Yeah. Apparently it caused a fight between him and my grandparents, but he didn't care. Said they could disown him since he was changing his name anyway."

"Sounds like someone I know."

"Hm?" Ana leaned in. "Planning to change my name, Shadid?" She chuckled at the hard nudge in her side, dropping her arm from Kamilah's shoulders to rub at the sore spot. Then she sighed, turning back to the gravestone.

Ana had slipped her phone out of her pocket when Kamilah asked, "What was she like?"

She thought about it for a moment. "Well… She was stubborn. Strong. Very dedicated to the army – she climbed the ranks pretty quickly. We couldn't see much of her – or my father, for that matter – they're always busy on deployments. But when she came back, there was nothing we could do to pry her off our backs. She'd take us out for shopping, eating, movies, whatever we wanted to do. Made sure to spend as much time with us as possible before she had to leave again."

"What else…" Ana hummed. She folded her arms, fingers drumming at her elbow. "I'm pretty sure she almost got an aneurysm when Safiya and I hit our rebellious stage. She'd ground us only to have us escaping through our windows. Gave us curfews only to have us come home the next morning."

"Sounds like she had her hands full," Kamilah said with a smile.

"Oh she did, alright. But it all worked out in the end, I guess. She managed to shape her daughters up and toss them into the academy."

Ana fell silent, tossing her phone between her hands. "We were planning to go to Korea, you know. After I graduated from the academy. We wanted to go in winter so we could try snowboarding and skiing and stuff."

"Then the insurgency happened."

"Yep." Zayirah had been one of the casualties in the first wave of insurgent attacks. When they received the news, Ana had only been a mere four months from graduating. It had been a shock. A very rude shock. One that Ana was still unsure she had fully recovered from.

She glanced over at Kamilah, who was looking silently at the grave. But she stopped herself before her thoughts could wander any further into unpleasant territory. Sighing heavily, Ana brought up her phone and unlocked it.

"Do you miss her?" Kamilah asked quietly.

"Of course." Ana tapped on her home page blankly, forgetting what she had unlocked her phone for, all of a sudden. "Some days it hits me all over again that she's gone." It was rather impressive how steady her voice was, compared to how her body felt. Swiping through the same few home pages again and again, Ana finally noticed what she had been looking for.

"I've a confession, Milah," she said, taking off her shades.
Kamilah, who had been gazing at her in concern, tilted her head. "And that is…?"

Ana turned the phone screen towards Kamilah, so she could watch the sniper tap on the Qur'an app. "I do pray. A little."

"Only in front of tombstones."

"Hey, it's still praying," Ana retorted. She brought up the single bookmark she had created, and tapped on it for the third time. She turned her head when Kamilah shifted closer.

"Do you want me to…"

"No, it's fine." She gave a small smile. "I…want to do this by myself."

Kamilah nodded and wrapped an arm loosely around her back, resting a hand on her hip. She glanced briefly at Kamilah, feeling a calm settle in the pit of her stomach, which had started to flutter. Then she looked back at her phone, reading the familiar letters which somehow seemed utterly foreign at the same time.

"In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful…"

---

Layla: [So I heard Shadid's not in base too]

Layla: [Wanna spill?]

[Glitter all over your face, yes]

Layla: [That's not a no]

Ana glanced at Kamilah sitting by her on the bench, with a cup of frozen yoghurt in hand as they watched the buskers perform in the city square. The urge to just say 'yes' made her fingers twitch. What she would not give to let every single human being on this earth know that Kamilah Shadid had chosen her, of all people, to be with. But alas, the time has not yet come. So Ana settled with…

[Go away]

Layla: [Ok. But you still have my address right]

Layla: [You know. For when you send the wedding invitations]

[You're not invited]

Layla: [Interesting]

[Ugh I'm out]

Layla: [Don't use too much tongue babe ;) ]

Only when Kamilah turned her head did Ana realise an audible groan had slipped past her lips.

"What?"

"Nothing. Just Layla." She let Kamilah sneak a peek at the conversation.

"You do use a lot of tongue," Kamilah said with an impish smile, eating another spoonful of yoghurt.
"I don't hear you complaining."

"I can't complain with your tongue in my mouth."

"Oh? Well, your mouth is free now. So do tell." Ana leaned forward, putting on the most attentive expression, only to receive a chaste peck on her lips.

"I don't kiss and tell," Kamilah murmured.

"Where's the fun in that?"

"Why don't you ask yourself that question?"

Oh. Ana nodded slowly, wagging a finger at her. "Nice one," she conceded, taking the cup of yoghurt Kamilah handed to her. With one last glance at the phone, she sighed and pocketed it, digging into her half of the treat.

"You can tell, you know."

"I know."

"But…?"

"I don't know." Ana shrugged. "I don't really know how to. Hey guys, training was shit, let's hit the clubs and oh, by the way – I'm with Shadid. Thanks for the sponsored dates, suckers."

Kamilah laughed softly. "Well, that's one way to do it. I don't think anyone would be surprised, honestly. With the way they've been setting us up."

"I know," she sighed. "But they've been getting on my nerves lately." She poked the spoon into the yoghurt idly. "I've been thinking—"

"Need some aspirin?"

Ana shot her a withering look. " Aren't you just full of quips today."

The teasing smile on Kamilah's lips softened, and she shifted closer to Ana, resting a hand on her thigh in a small gesture of appeasement. "So, what have you been thinking?"

"I want to get away for a while." Ana watched the street performers finish another song to a smattering of applause from the gathered crowd. "Been feeling a little… funny."

"Are you alright? You've been quite…" Kamilah trailed off, searching for the right word. "Listless, the past week."

She shrugged again. "Just feel cooped up. That's all." Ana smiled, trying to alleviate the worry on Kamilah's face. "Wanna go away with me?"

"You don't want to go alone? Take a breather?"

"Oh, dearest." Ana wrapped an arm around her waist. "Being alone doesn't make me happy. You do."

Kamilah's mouth twitched in a futile attempt to hide a smile, and she pushed at Ana's shoulder when she failed spectacularly. She tried to frown, and it only made Ana's grin even brighter. A tease sat
right on the tip of her tongue, but she kept it in. The sight was just a little too precious to poke at.

"So, how about it? Let's pack our bags and get away from all this." Ana waved her cup of melting yoghurt at the city square they sat in.

"Where do you even want to go?"

That stumped her for a moment. "Hm. How about Damietta? You can show me the places you've gone."

"No," Kamilah said after thinking it over. "Honestly, it was quite boring. Nothing much to see." She fell silent, gazing off into the square. In the time Ana took to eat two spoonfuls of yoghurt, she thought of, "Aswan. I've always wanted to go to the Nubian Museum. And we can visit the dam, the temples…and take boat trips. Sounds good?"

Under her lover's eager gaze, Ana could say nothing but, "Yes."

Ana sighed when she glanced at her phone, hearing the front door close behind the apartment owner, who had just left after giving them a quick run-down of the city's attractions.

"What's wrong?" Kamilah asked, walking out from the bedroom where she had deposited her duffle bag.

"Your squad and mine really need to stop yapping to each other." She tossed her phone over to Kamilah, who caught it effortlessly. Ana picked up her own bag from beside the sofa and brought it into the bedroom as well. They had taken a week's leave for their vacation, and rented a cozy little apartment to live in. To a soldier who had spent the last year living between shared bunks in field camps and a small room in base, this place was heaven. The urge to throw herself onto the very comfy-looking king-sized bed was overwhelming. And Ana, disciplined soldier that she was, dove right into it.

She lay stomach-down with her face pressed into the covers, groaning at how soft it felt and vowing never to leave this spot. Ever.

As if to cement her whimsical vow, another body laid itself on top of hers, trapping her there. Ana smiled, turning her head as Kamilah rested a cheek on her shoulder.

"You're right," she said, laying Ana's phone in front of her face. "But what can you do. They're gossipmongers."

Ana made a guttural sound from her throat. From that angle, she could just make out her squad's group chat – stagnant for the moment, thankfully.

Layla: [Ana takes 1 week leave]
Layla: [Shadid takes 1 week leave. On the same week]
Layla: [If this is coincidence I'll eat my dog's shit]
Ebo: [I'll eat my own ass]
Hakim: [I'll lick the public showers clean]
Khalid: [i'll stay out of this]
Khalid: [cos i'm smart]

Layla: [I'll let my dog eat your dick]

Khalid: [layla what the fuck]

Layla: [I know what I said]

Khalid: [you're fucking sick]

Mesi: [Lay I thought you said your dog's a lesbian]

Layla: [Yeah she only gets along with other females]

Layla: [Oh I got this pic of Breezy with her best girl hold on let me find it]

Apparently Layla had some trouble finding it, as the chat ended there and Ana's phone screen went to sleep. Just as well. She had no desire to join the conversation just yet.

"I hate them sometimes," Ana grumbled, feeling Kamilah chuckle on top of her.

"I know how you can tell them."

That piqued her interest. "Oh?"

"Mm. But that can wait for later. I'm hungry."

"Tell me."

"Tonight, Ana." She clicked her tongue at the whine and got up from the bed. "Come on, let's get lunch."

As much as Ana wanted to lay there longer, her stomach demanded another course of action. Their 90 minute flight from Cairo to Aswan only included a light snack. So Ana mustered up her will and tore herself away from the bed, making a silent promise to return to its embrace soon. She strolled into the living room and picked up the house keys lying on the coffee table. Then she went over to the window, looking out at the Nile in the distance. They had booked a 1-night felucca trip along the river. Now that should be an experience.

A touch on her back made her turn around to face Kamilah, who wore a gentle smile on her lips. Ana opened her mouth to speak, but then fell silent when Kamilah raised a hand towards her. Ana's heart stopped for a brief moment at the sight of the ring sitting in Kamilah's palm, but then logic reasserted itself and calmed her down.

"Why, yes. I will marry you," Ana joked reflexively, as the adrenaline faded from her system.

The corner of Kamilah's mouth curled in a smirk. "This would be a very poor excuse for an engagement ring."

"Sweetie, if you proposed to me with an onion ring, I'd still cry and say yes." She snickered along with Kamilah, then took the ring from her palm. It was an exact replica of Kamilah's ring – the one she had found on her finger after her last drunken episode. Except this ring was white in colour, and the vines were gold. Her heart squeezed with a tenderness that nearly weakened her knees.

Ana stared at it for a while longer, then had the ring pried from between her fingertips. Kamilah took her right hand and slipped it onto her ring finger.
"You…didn't have to."

Kamilah shrugged. "I just thought it'd be nice."

Ana caught Kamilah's hand before it dropped away, gazing down at the black band on her lover's finger. "To have couple rings?" She tugged her partner closer. "Now who's the sap?" Ana caught a faint blush on her cheeks as she leaned in to kiss Kamilah, who returned it gladly. It grew deeper as Ana wound an arm around her waist, but they broke apart before it could escalate.

Sneaking another peck, Ana murmured, "I love you."

A tender smile graced Kamilah's lips. "Love you too."

After lunch, they spent the day roaming around the city. They visited the Philae Temple, the Obelisk, made a trip to the dam, and strolled through one of the smaller markets. They had taken many photos along the way, but the one they had chosen was captured while they were walking down the Nile. Ana had called Kamilah's name and the woman, unaware that Ana had her phone's camera at ready, turned around only to be given a surprise smooch on the lips. Kamilah had broken into the purest smile then, and that was the moment captured on the phone.

Kamilah had complained that it would ruin her 'intimidating' image, but let Ana upload it onto the photo-sharing app anyway – which was Kamilah's suggestion.

1kWords – Share Your Story

amaramar02 – [River Nile, Aswan]

7 wonderful months with this babe. (Joke's on you, morons.)

lelayss: WHAT

lelayss: THE

lelayss: FUCK

amaramar02: @lelayss thanks for the free stuff, wannabe matchmaker

alwaysmesi: Congrats :)

lelayss: @amaramar02 I WANT MY MONEY BACK

ebonme: I could've used the money to get that new dnd set wtf

haksters: lol refund me too

khallsa: lol

amaramar02: @alwaysmesi thanks sweetie

amaramar02: @ lelayss @ ebonme @ haksters kiss my ass

amaramar02: PSA @ khallsa knew a long time ago

lelayss: @ khallsa say hi to Breezy, traitor
khallsa: @ lelayss lol ya bye

amaramar01: HOW DARE YOU KEEP THIS FROM YOUR OWN SISTER FOR SO LONG

amaramar01: I AM DISOWNING YOU

amaramar02: @ amaramar01 do it

amaramar01: @ amaramar02 jk I'm happy for you :)

amaramar01: @ amaramar02 oh btw I've a girl too.

amaramar02: @ amaramar01 WHAT
Getaway

Ana yawned, then shivered when a draft swept through the boat. She pulled the blanket up to her chest, Kamilah doing the same from where she lay on the futon beside Ana. She scooted closer to the sniper, fingers still swiping across her phone screen. Like Ana, Kamilah had her head propped up against her pillow and bag, so that her wet hair was fanned out and could dry properly in the night air. The boat captain had brought them to a popular swimming spot in the Nile to have fun while dinner was being prepared. And fun did Ana have by splashing water all over Kamilah and dragging her beneath the water surface. Even more fun did Kamilah have by shoving Ana overboard after they had toweled themselves dry, snapping a photo of Ana's look of utter shock for future blackmails.

She kicked at Kamilah's leg when she spotted the photo on the screen. "Delete that."

"No."

"Come on," Ana whined, knocking their heads together. She reached for the phone, but it was brought out of her range. "Delete it!"

"No."

"Why are you such an asshole."

"If I were an asshole," Kamilah explained patiently. "I would've uploaded it to the cloud."

"Oh my god," Ana groaned, holding her phone before their faces. "I hate you."

"If you say so." The ghost of a smile sat on Kamilah's lips as Ana took yet another selfie. "Still at it with Safiya?" she asked when Ana moved back onto her own pillow.

"Mm-hm." With a few rapid taps, Ana sent the photo to her sister. Over the past three days, their conversation had been dominated by photos of themselves and their significant others. They barely even used words anymore. Only with a dash of patience and a lot of scrolling could they find the last text message: Ana's eloquent rebuttal, 'Fuck you mine's prettier'.

Kamilah had called it a 'silly competition' – which it was, but also fun. So Ana kept it up. To be honest, the duel of pride had fallen to the wayside a while ago. Now she was just happy to see Safiya being dorky with Zahra – a helicopter pilot with the airmobile division stationed in Asyut. Apparently their relationship had started with a pickup line Safiya tried on the pilot – something about 'sweeping her off her feet'. Zahra was charmed by the mix of dumb words and a suave demeanour, so here they were. Three months together, and taking goofy selfies for Ana while they waited in line at a movie theatre.

Ana snorted at the picture of Zahra 'shoving' a handful of popcorn into Safiyah's mouth.

[Still can't believe you got a fucking mohawk]

Safiya: [What. I love it]

[Think mama's rolling in her grave right now]

Safiya: [Oh! Now I love it even more!]
Lol you ass

Safiya: [Joking, you little shit]

[How DARE you call me little]

Safiya: [:p btw have you asked Kamilah yet]

[Uh no. You?]

Safiya: [Same. I told papa we've only been together 3 months and he said 'so what']

[He's starting to sound like mama]

Safiya: [Ya. Maybe mama's possessing him or something]

[CALLING THE EXORCIST]

Safiya: [SAY GOODBYE MAMA]

[WHY ARE WE LIKE THIS]

Safiya: [I DON'T KNOW]

Kamilah's head lying on her shoulder made Ana aware that she was giggling pretty loudly. Shifting her arm beneath Kamilah, Ana reached a hand up to play with damp tresses, angling the phone so Kamilah could read the message. Panic jolted through her at an afterthought, then she realised the message about 'asking Kamilah' was already off the screen. A discrete sigh of relief passed her lips as Kamilah chuckled.

"Maybe your mother died to get away from you two."

Ana let out a shriek of laughter, getting a surprised glance from the boat's captain. At the slap on her stomach, Ana reined it into quiet cackling.

"Now that was good." She stretched her arm up around Kamilah to type another message.

[Milah said mama died to get away from us]

Safiya: [Wow]

Safiya: [Ask her to marry me]

[No]

"You two are incorrigible," Kamilah said, turning her eyes away from the phone. She draped an arm around Ana's stomach, nuzzling closer into the curve of her neck.

"You're starting to sound like my mother."

"Call the exorcist then."

"Ah, but sweetie," Ana crooned, rolling onto her side to face Kamilah. "If I called an exorcist, you'd be gone as well. Ah– Fuck!" She jerked her head back in pain when Kamilah's forehead collided into her nose.

"What's that supposed to mean?"
"Means you're a fucking demon," she whined, covering her nose with a hand when Kamilah's brow arched dangerously. Ana resisted a little when Kamilah pulled her hand away. Scrunching up her face when Kamilah's head moved close, she braced for another headbutt which turned out to be a peck on the tip of her nose.

"You just can't help yourself, can you?"

Miraculously pulling her composure together, Ana said, "Around you, never."

Kamilah's lips parted in a smile, and she nestled her head back in Ana's neck again. Loosening the blanket around her body, Ana swung one leg over her human bolster and held her phone behind Kamilah's back, thumbs tapping on its screen.

[Gonna sleep now]
Safiya: [Ooh. 'Sleep']

[We're on a boat you bitch]
Safiya: [So? :)]

[I have shame]
Safiya: [Never heard of it]

[Does Zahra know you're a shameless barbarian]
Safiya: [Oh she does]

[Ok yes wow I'm tired good night]
Safiya: [Night baby goblin]

[Fuck you]
Safiya: [Eh that's reserved for Zah]

Aside from their stop at a Nubian village, most of their time was spent relaxing on the felucca. Lying on their backs, watching the scenery go by, snapping photos of children playing by the river banks, and returning the greetings of more boisterous foreign tourists on other boats sailing by them. It left Ana's feet twitching restlessly, truth be told. Perhaps the most engaging activity for her was chatting with the boat captain, and looking at photos of his family – especially his newborn granddaughter, whom he could not stop gushing about. Kamilah was content to just lay by the side of the boat, gazing out at the greenery and trailing her fingertips along the water surface.

When their feet finally touched the docks at noon, Ana was filled with enough pent-up energy to walk around the whole of Aswan. They held onto each other while walking, fighting the imaginary waves still bobbing beneath their feet. Only after visiting two ancient temples and a late lunch did they visit Sharia as-Souq, spending the bulk of their time in the bazaar to get the gift-buying out of the way. Kamilah got little carved statuettes for her squad, and picked up a few packets of dried hibiscus flowers for making tea. Ana bought the perfumes her sister had been bugging her about – one each for Safiya, Zahra, Kamilah, and herself. She also got a bunch of talismans for her squad, and a stuffed toy fox for Khalid’s niece.

Between Ana and Kamilah, they bought some peanut snacks to share, got matching scarves, some
spices for cooking, and something else to have fun with.

It was by pure dumb luck that Ana ended up on her back. 'Dumb' being the operative word, because she had tried to be funny and threw out scissors that was crushed by Kamilah's rock. So here she was, on the bed with her legs spread and resting over Kamilah's thighs, biting her lip as Kamilah added a second finger into her.


"Don't be such a sore loser." Kamilah bent down to kiss her pout away. "And I know you're enjoying this."

A challenge parted her lips, but she knew better to voice it when she could feel each twitch of Kamilah's fingers within her. Every teasing brush across her sweet spot made her want to grab Kamilah by the hips, and force her to get. To. The. Point.

Another bout of curses flashed through her mind when Kamilah flicked her wrist, and Ana's hips bucked in response, an involuntary moan wrenched from her throat. Her breaths came shorter as Kamilah rubbed her inner walls, dark brown eyes gazing down at light bronze swallowed by black.

"Just use it, Milah," Ana growled, sucking a breath at the twist of fingers.

"I have to make sure you're ready, dearest."

"We both know damn well you're just teasing–" A gasp when fingers curled and dug hard. Her eyelids fluttered, but Ana forced them to stay open. She stared up at the woman before her, who looked very pleased with herself. Kamilah was having too much fun for someone who had rolled her eyes when Ana dragged her down a less crowded alley, pointing out a discrete-looking shop front.

She also looked too damned sexy with the dark purple phallic between her legs. It should be a crime. Of which she would wholeheartedly be the victim.

Ana reached down and grabbed the lubricated toy, tugging it forward. "Stop. Teasing."

"Well," Kamilah drawled. "Since you asked so nicely." She trapped Ana in a hard kiss, swallowing the moans as her fingers pumped roughly, before withdrawing as suddenly as they had started. Kamilah smiled at Ana's whine, then pushed her slick digits into Ana's mouth.

Ana sucked and licked at her fingers, probing her tongue in between and dragging it up, putting on a show for the woman with whom she had locked gazes. She moaned around the digits as she drank in her own taste, before Kamilah took the fingers away and kissed her again, tongue dipping in to steal a taste of her lover. Ana groaned when Kamilah ground their hips together, the strap-on sliding against her centre making Ana aware of her own wetness.

Kamilah held the toy in one hand, running its tip along her folds. "Have you done this before?"

That got a laugh out of Ana. "Are you really asking me that?"

"I just want to make sure." She teased around Ana's entrance until her partner started to squirm, then sank in slowly.

"I--, it has been a while though," Ana managed to utter, feeling the toy stretch her like Kamilah's fingers never had. She let out a breath as Kamilah pushed in deeper, then halted a third of the way in. The pause in movement was nothing short of torture, and she let herself be distracted by the kisses running down her jaw.
"Then let's get you reacquainted," Kamilah purred in her ear, sending tingles down her spine.

Lips and teeth trailed down Ana's neck as Kamilah's hips started an easy rhythm, keeping at a shallow thrust until Ana urged her to go deeper. The tenderness in Kamilah's caress and kisses melted her heart and set it aflame. Her need grew hotter with each inch easing into her, reaching its peak when Kamilah had filled her completely, perfectly.

Made aware of her smile by the soft kiss on her lips, Ana gazed up her lover, watching Kamilah cock her head curiously. She wrapped her legs around Kamilah's hips, locking her there. "You're so gentle," she murmured.

"Do you want to go faster?"

"Do whatever you want." Ana tugged her down by the shoulders, luring her into another kiss. "I'm yours."

"Oh?" Kamilah pulled her hips back, then drove them forward with more force than before. "What if I want to take you by the window?"

Ana chuckled as Kamilah fell into a leisurely pace. "Then I will scream your name for everyone to hear."

"Mm. Tempting."

No words came after that. Ana's mouth was kept occupied by Kamilah's, her tongue losing in their non-verbal tussle. She ran her hands over Kamilah's shoulders and back, reading each flex of muscle as Kamilah worked on her, until she could draw the length out to its tip, and plunge back in with little resistance.

Hitches in breath and gasps and moans came faster, more often. Kamilah's name turned into a mantra on her tongue, each repetition urging Kamilah to shed the gentle façade, to take her lover by the hips, to dig her nails into sensitive skin, to revel in her lover's cries as Kamilah fucked every single shred of sense out of her mind. Ana braced herself against the headboard, one hand reaching down to entwine with Kamilah's, panting as she watched the toy disappear inside her again and again.

"Ah– Fuck!" Ana cried when Kamilah angled her hips and rammed back in, sending another wave of pleasure crashing through her. Her glazed eyes were raised to the ceiling, barely aware of Kamilah's darkened gaze on her as she panted a name mixed with curses. Her body grew taut as she neared her peak, Kamilah's name now falling from her lips as whimpers, cut short by the sudden emptiness between her legs.

"Milah," she breathed, her mind barely able to piece together a question. She was saved the trouble when Kamilah gripped her arms and yanked her up roughly, cupping her face in both hands and taking her in a hard kiss.

"On your knees," Kamilah intoned, sending another rush between her legs. She grabbed Ana by the hips, guiding her as she hastened to get on her knees as commanded. Ana was barely given time to breathe when Kamilah held her in place, then plunged back in without warning. Ana's fingers dug desperately into the bed sheets, lust-addled mind only aware of her lover pounding into her from behind, and how dripping wet she was. She jerked her hips with a gasp, when a hand snaked around the front to massage her clit hard. Kamilah held her steady, rubbing her relentlessly as sweaty skin slapped together with each thrust.

Then the touch disappeared from her clit, and a hand landed on her back. Ana allowed herself to be
pushed down onto her elbows, arching her back as Kamilah changed the angle of her thrust.

"Milah!" The name burst through her throat when Kamilah hit her sweet spot.

"That's it, darling." With both hands on Ana's hips, Kamilah pulled her back in time with each stroke. "Louder."

"God, Milah!" Sheets twisted in Ana's grip as Kamilah met the bull's-eye on every thrust, her body tearing apart at the seams. "Fuck me!"

"I already am," Kamilah said, voice lilting in amusement. But she complied with the order anyway, fucking Ana harder, faster, until nothing but incoherent words tumbled out of her mouth.

Ana's walls tightened around Kamilah's length, and she gasped with each subsequent stroke that built her up, her body shaking until she could feel her release close at hand.


"Did I hurt you–?"

"No. No," she said between breaths. She turned her head to look at Kamilah, who had bent down to kiss her shoulder. Her hips slowed to a stop, keeping her length buried in Ana. "I want to see you. When I come."

An affectionate smile curved Kamilah's lips. She placed a kiss on Ana's shoulder and neck, then lips traveled down her spine, past her shoulder blades until she reached the small of Ana's back. Kamilah withdrew the toy, letting Ana change positions again. When she had settled on her back, Kamilah eased the length in slowly, then leaned forward to cup Ana's face in one hand.

"You're such a sap," she teased, thumb stroking over her cheek.

"Your sap."

Kamilah hummed, then kissed her slowly. "You're mine."

"Yes," Ana breathed, as Kamilah started again with a comfortable rhythm. "I'm yours."

She felt Kamilah's chuckle rumble in her chest, before being led into another kiss. Soft and simple, growing needy and heated as Kamilah worked her way back to the ruthless pace she had set before Ana stopped her. Ana kept her legs wrapped around Kamilah, gripping onto her lover's back as she was guided back to the edge again.

"Mine," Kamilah repeated in her ear, sending another rush of heat down the side of her face and neck.

"Yours." Ana squeezed through her throat, her senses dominated by the length plunging into her again and again. "I'm yours!" she cried when Kamilah rediscovered the spot, and hit it just so. "Milah, please!"

"Come to me, Ana," Kamilah panted, raising her head to look at the woman under her mercy. She continued fucking Ana, not giving her a chance to speak. "I want to see you–"

"Fuck!" She crested the peak of ecstasy, writhing body locking up under Kamilah, her walls clenching tight around the length that continued pumping into her. Kamilah's eyes bore into hers as
she rode out her climax; head thrown back, hips twitching under Kamilah's, nails digging painfully into her back, lips parted in a silent aftermath of her scream.

Kamilah slowed her pace gradually, easing Ana down with languid strokes, pressing kisses all along her neck and jaw, before coming to a stop. She waited longer before pulling out, undoing the straps and tossing the glistening toy aside. Lying on top of her limp lover, Kamilah trailed kisses over sweat-slicked skin until Ana's fingers treading through her hair, and tugged her up. They smiled into the kiss, Ana hugging Kamilah around the waist.

"Next time, it's my turn," Ana murmured against her lips.

"Can't wait."

"Me neither," she said between kisses. Ana's hands roamed down Kamilah's body, pinching her ass playfully before sliding down to her thighs. Ana guided her forward, until she was kneeling over Ana's head. "I'm surprised you can even wait now." Her smirk gave way to laughter when Kamilah smacked the top of her head lightly.

"Shut up."

And shut up Ana did. She tugged Kamilah down and buried her face in the wetness, forgoing the teasing because fuck, it was the last thing her lover needed. Ana's tongue dove deep into her, eliciting a gasp as Kamilah's hand shot out to grab onto the headboard. Fingers tightened in black locks as Kamilah ground against her lips and teeth and tongue. Ana's hands slid up from her thighs, along her stomach and sides, to squeeze her breasts. Kamilah's hips jerked when Ana's teeth brushed across her clit, her moans climbing to a higher pitch when Ana latched on.

It did not take long to send Kamilah over the edge. Ana's tongue worked her over as she watched Kamilah's climax from the prime vantage point; her muscles grew taut, thighs trembling as she rode out the orgasm with a strangled gasp. Kamilah slumped forward when she was done, panting and tugging at Ana's hair – the signal for her to stop.

Ana obeyed, but not before sneaking one last kiss between her legs. Kamilah smiled as she moved away, fingers reaching up to play with Ana's wet-smereared lips.

"You're a mess," Kamilah murmured, bending down to kiss her, deep and slow.

"It's your mess." Ana grinned when Kamilah merely quirked her brows and offered no argument. Instead, Kamilah reached over to the nightstand where a box of tissues were, and pulled out a few pieces. She wiped the bottom half of Ana's face – she really was a mess – then cleaned up her own lips as well. Crumpling the used tissues and throwing them onto the floor, Kamilah leaned in to kiss her again, and finally lay on top of Ana with a sigh.

They stayed like that in silence, Kamilah nestling her head under Ana's chin, their fingers playing together before entwining in a loose hold. The chill from the air-conditioning sent a brief shiver through Kamilah's body, so Ana reached for the covers and pulled it up to her shoulders. She smiled softly at the kiss on her collarbone.

She stroked Kamilah's hand with her thumb, until her lover's fingers grew limp between hers. Ana closed her eyes, and soon fell asleep as well.

Her stomach growled the moment she swung the door open, the aroma of food hooking her by the nose and leading her towards the living room.
Kamilah sat at the dining table in t-shirt and shorts, her fingers preoccupied with her phone. Ana's tablet lay near Kamilah's bowl, the contents in which were already half eaten. Another bowl was set at the head of the table, waiting for Ana to be done with her shower and emerge from the bedroom for breakfast. Her lips curved at the sight. With a little imagination, this could be the two of them in their own apartment, on a lazy morning with no duties to hurry off to.

She could get used to this.

Ana padded silently to where Kamilah sat, making the woman jump when Ana hugged her from behind.

"Good morning," she greeted, smooching the top of her head.

"You scared me."

"Sorry." Ana kissed Kamilah's cheek, and gave her a squeeze around the shoulders. "I'll put on make-up next time."

Kamilah chuckled, a bright smile parting her lips.

God, she wanted to get used to this.

"You don't need make-up, ya amar."

Ana blinked, pulling away to fix Kamilah with an incredulous stare. Where her heart had fluttered, a growing urge to laugh took hold.

"Did you…just make a pun?"

The corners of Kamilah's mouth twitched, and she pressed a palm against Ana's cheek, pushing her away before she could continue her teasing. Ana snickered as she took a seat, feet sliding forward to cross their ankles together.

"Sleep well last night?" Ana asked, poking her spoon into one of the two poached eggs in her dish. She let the yolk spill onto the bright red mixture of vegetables, and stuffed her mouth with a large spoonful. There was no other way to eat Kamilah's food. One either left it alone, or devoured it like they hadn't eaten in days.

"Not really."

Ana hummed through her second mouthful of food. Sleep was a finicky thing for Kamilah. When she woke first, it usually meant her rest had been troubled. But Ana had been told repeatedly not to worry about it, so she did not. Or at least, tried not to. She would pay more attention to Kamilah through the day, and take care of her as best she could.

Ana rubbed her foot against Kamilah's, watching her sigh and set her phone down.

"Layla broke her leg. Did you know?"

"What?" Ana snapped her eyes up from the bowl. She had not touched her phone since last night.

Kamilah nodded, taking a sip of hibiscus tea. "The holoprogram's AI malfunctioned. Caused some chaos during training."

"Is anyone else–?"
"Only superficial injuries in our squads. Relax." It was Kamilah's turn to rub her feet. "Deyab's having a field day."

Heaving a sigh, Ana stabbed her spoon back into the bowl. She would check on them later.

"Then it seems we're lucky, huh?"

"Mm." Kamilah unlocked Ana's tablet and navigated to the streaming app, putting on an old sci-fi TV series she had discovered not too long ago. She propped the tablet up on its cover so they could watch it while eating, even though Ana had not the slightest clue what was happening. She only knew that it was about a group of humans traveling to another galaxy, that Kamilah loved it, and that the two female leads were gorgeous.

And, that it had a sad ending. She had not the heart to break the news to Kamilah just yet.

So Ana kept quiet as Kamilah watched on, the pair eating in companionable silence. They had almost finished their meal when a notification popped up at the top of the screen.

Safiya: [Zah's coming. What about Kamilah?]

Perfect timing, you ass…

Kamilah glanced at her, brows raised. "I'll assume she doesn't mean sexually."

Ana nearly choked on the last of her eggs. She swallowed them safely and broke into a grin. "Too much time with me, sweetie."

"Never too much, amar."

Not too much, but enough. She could feel herself turning into putty by the second, but the questioning tilt of Kamilah's head brought her back on track.

"You're invited to our next family reunion."

"That's…fast."

Ana shrugged. "My dad insisted."

"And…?" Kamilah asked slowly. "Do you want me there?"

"It'd be nice. And I won't have to spend the entire time missing you." Ana leaned in as she cooed, sickly sweet, only to have her face pushed back again. She pried the hand off and kissed her knuckles. "You'd have fun too."

Kamilah regarded her quietly. "Don't you want to spend time with your family for a change?"

"That includes you, doesn't it?" Her heart leapt into her throat, the moment the words left her mouth. It was like making a gamble; not on how true their feelings were, but on the gravity of her presence in Kamilah's life. Ana set their hands down on the table, seeking support she did not trust her arm to give. She met the searching gaze steadily, until fingers curled tighter over hers.

With a soft smile, Kamilah said, "If you'd have me."

The rush of triumph and relief blended together, and in its heart-swelling aftermath, Ana naturally blurted, "Is that an invitation?"
She burst out laughing when Kamilah clicked her tongue and dramatically threw Ana's hand away. She tickled the soles of Kamilah's feet with her toes, and had her legs kicked away in return. Kamilah smiled into her cup of tea, drinking a mouthful as she tapped on the tablet, rewinding past the scenes they had missed. She paused when Ana cupped her cheek, pulling her in for a languid kiss.

"I love you, Milah."

Kamilah's lips curved. "You'd better."
"We should get up soon."

"No."

"Aren't you hungry?"

"Yes."

"Then let's eat something."

"No."

"We have to get ready for the flight."

"Fuck the flight."

Kamilah smiled and offered no rejoinder, obviously sharing Ana's reluctance to get out of bed. She trailed her fingers along Ana's bare back, tickling her with feather-light touches. Ana gazed back into drowsy half-lidded eyes, indulging in each second ticking by, lost in a serene moment that seemed to stretch on forever – until a stomach growled.

Averting her eyes briefly, Ana realised that it wasn't hers.

"You're hungry."

"Mm."

"You could've just told me," Ana chuckled.

"I don't want to get up either," Kamilah muttered, eyes falling shut as she curled up closer to Ana.

She let Kamilah steal a few more minutes of rest, then steeled her resolve. Pressing her lips soundly on top of her lover's head, Ana pushed herself up. Kamilah cracked her eyes open to look at the woman hovering over her.

"Let's go."

A throaty groan.

"Come on, sweetie." Ana rubbed her arm and tugged gently. It would be a lethargic day for Kamilah, it seemed. Her body remained inert through Ana's coaxing. Must be the prospect of going home. Sighing at the thought, Ana bent down and bumped their foreheads together. "Don't feel like getting up?"

"Mm."

Smiling gently, Ana combed her fingers through the messy tangles in Kamilah's hair. "Shall I get some food to feed my girl?"

"Soup."

"Any?"
"Mm."

"Excellent choice, ma'am." She squeezed Kamilah tightly in her arms, getting a breathy laugh and smile before releasing her. Ana finally hopped out of bed, ready to kick start the day with a food hunt despite her initial intent to laze in bed longer.

*Oh well.* At least it was for a good cause.

Neither Ana nor Kamilah were the type to drag their feet. But drag them like champions they did: all the way to the airport, up the plane, down the plane, to a cab, and back to base. They collapsed into Kamilah's bed together, lying motionless as the reality of being back in Cairo settled on their backs like a heavy, chortling demon. Kamilah managed to slip into a nap surprisingly fast, so Ana pried herself away first. After tucking the woman in and leaving a message on her phone, Ana snuck back to her room to unpack. Then she had to stay there for the rest of the afternoon, because she had forgotten to take Kamilah's keycard with her. An unfortunate mistake that meant Ana had to be in the room when the welcome wagon arrived in the evening.

"Can't you leave me alone until tomorrow?" Ana groaned.

"Nope!" Layla stuck her crutch out, catching the door before it could be slammed shut. She swung it wide open and hobbled in, closely followed by the rest of the squad. "Where's the wife?" she asked, sitting down on Ana's bed.

"Far away from you." Ana smacked off Khalid's hand, which was ruffling her hair as if asking for a death sentence.

"Oh, so there's a wife."

Ana rolled her eyes, then swung the door shut. "Why are you even here? Aren't you partying at nerd king's place?"

Ignoring Ebo's offended *'hey!',* Layla cooed, "We just missed you so much, we wanted to see your face first."

"And maybe catch a glimpse of the wife," Mesi added.

"You will do no such thing." Ana went over to her table and pulled a drawer open, grabbing the souvenirs she had bought. She tossed the first talisman at Mesi, then threw the second right into Layla's face. The third smacked into Khalid's cheek as Layla cried out in surprise. The fourth clattered to the floor after Ebo's flailing hands knocked it off-trajectory. Hakim caught the last one – but just barely.

"Thanks, assh– Oh." Khalid's grumble was cut short when Ana held out the toy fox.

"Tell her it's from auntie Ana and not useless uncle Khally."

"I'm not useless," he muttered, taking the toy.

"Oh yeah," Hakim snickered. "You got your niece that demon frog for her last birthday."

"It looked cute, okay?" Khalid retorted. "How was I supposed to know it had such a freaky laugh?"

"Oh I don't know – by testing it first, maybe?" Hakim grunted when a talisman crashed into his nose.

"Fuck you—"
Two short knocks on the door.

The room fell silent, and Ana's stomach did a flip before cringing. She waited for a while, then the knocks came again.

"Oh my god," Layla said, already cackling in triumph when she caught onto Ana's hesitation. "It's her, isn't it?"

"Don't embarrass me," she groaned and walked over to the door, ignoring the five pairs of eyes on her back. Ana swung the door open, and her squad promptly disobeys her order.

"Hi, sis-in-law."

The chorus was much too coordinated to be improvised. Ana reopened her eyes – which had fallen shut in shame – to see Kamilah staring at her squad with an impenetrable gaze. She kept it up just long enough to start being unsettling, during which Ana bit down a smile. Then she finally cocked an eyebrow.

"Such good manners," Kamilah said coolly, glancing at her. "Shall we take them out for ice cream?"

Ana's grin broke through. She tugged Kamilah in, pressing a kiss on her cheek and steadfastly ignoring the 'aw's behind her. She was about to close the door again when Layla stopped her.

"Wait." She pushed herself up and leaned on the crutch. "It's alright. Time to take a hike, babes. Let Shadid have some alone time with Amari." Layla winked at the medic, and found herself stumbling into the corridor from Ana's shove.

"Ana," Kamilah chided, watching Layla straighten herself and whack Ana's shins with the crutch.

"She's fine." Ana kicked the crutch away, then stepped back to let Mesi through.

"By the way," Khalid asked as he walked past. "Whose room are we going to? Ebo or Hakim?"

"Hakim's, you dumbass." Ebo hefted the wooden box in his hands. "I didn't bring my kit all the way out just to bring it back again."

"Are you not following them?" Kamilah asked as last of the squad filed out.

Ana scoffed. "No. I have better things to do than join their geek parade."

Ebo spun on his heel in the doorway, eyes wide at the emphasis on the last two words. "You are banned, Ana."

"Banned?" Kamilah repeated, but her question might as well have gone unheard when Ana began her retort.

"I'm 'banned' because someone doesn't know how to have fun."

"Your 'fun' always involves your character trying to fuck something."

"It gets things done!"

"You tried to fuck a dragon!"

"So? We got the treasure in the end, didn't we?"
"Ana," Ebo said, shaking his D&D kit pointedly in her direction. "I didn't spend over 300 US dollars on a holo-projector just to watch your avatar trying to fuck a dragon!"

"If no one's meant to fuck a dragon, they wouldn't have put the animation in!"

"I–, You don't–," Ebo sputtered, until Khalid pulled him back by the shoulder. Their squad just stood by the side watching an old argument replay itself yet again.

"Let's go, big guy." Khalid patted his back, turning the man away from Ana's door.

"Yeah. Have fun, Sir Critical Miss!" Ana called among the squad's goodbyes.

Ebo's head whipped around to give her a menacing squint, before he disappeared into the stairwell.

"Geek," Ana muttered under her breath. She stepped back into the room and shut the door, pausing at the amused glint in Kamilah's eyes. A blush rose at the knowing smile on her lips. "What."

"You'd join them if you could."

"No, I wouldn't," she lied, pursing her lips dramatically. "We only play with Ebo because he really, really, really loves it."

Kamilah's face said she knew better, but she did not pursue. Her hand slipped into Ana's as the sniper fell back onto the bed, pulling her down as well. The barrack's mattress was much stiffer than what they had enjoyed for the past week. Such a pity. She closed her eyes and let out a sigh as Kamilah laid her head on her chest.

"Feeling better?" Ana asked, running a hand down Kamilah's hair.

"Mm. A little."

"Wanna go out? Take a spin?"

A muffled huff against Ana's t-shirt. "I don't know." She heaved a sigh and muttered, "Can't believe we're back here."

Ana chuckled. "Me too." She rubbed a soothing hand on Kamilah's back. "Maybe we should start planning our next vacation."

Kamilah lifted her head, fixing her with an incredulous look. "We only came back a few hours ago."

"So? It's never too early to plan, is it?"

"Maybe not," she said with a gentle smile, cocking her head. She gazed at Ana silently, then said, "You know, I kind of missed my bike."

"Hm?" Ana watched Kamilah push herself up, then pat down her clothes.

"Let's go for a spin," she announced with a sudden burst of energy.

"And dinner?"

"Are you always hungry?" Kamilah snorted, grasping Ana's outstretched hand and pulling her up.

"Maybe." She doddered after Kamilah, who made her way to the door before releasing Ana's hand.
"I'll get my keys. And, by the way?" Kamilah paused with a hand on the knob. "I took two more days of leave."

"What." Ana watched her slip out into the corridor with a slight smirk. "Wait, what!" She grabbed the door before Kamilah could close it behind her, stepping out to watch the woman walk towards the stairs. "You traitor!"

The weeks after their vacation passed by faster than Ana had expected. The stream of ribbing and jokes was endless, and so were their attempts at embarrassing Ana in front of the no-nonsense medic. They tripped Ana on purpose, shoved her into the cot nearest to Kamilah in the aid station, greeted the medic too loudly when they passed, were overly helpful by carrying half of Kamilah's load back to the armoury after training, and yelled ringing goodbyes across the carpark when the pair left for dates.

All that, and they still only dared to call Kamilah 'Shadid'. At least Shadid's squad made no such fuss like Ana's did, though she did catch a few knowing glances now and then. Even though they kept this knowledge within their own little circles, the extra attention was enough to start niggling away at her.

Quite a few nights had seen Ana crashing into Kamilah's lap, exhausted and ready to murder, until Kamilah said simply, "Are you really so embarrassed?"

"They make me look so stupid."

"You know I'll still love you no matter how stupid they make you look."

"I know."

"And you didn't need much help in the first place."

"Thanks."

It was something Ana already knew, of course. But the reminder seemed to flip a switch in her. All it took was a simple tweak in her reactions, and the game was in her hands. One trip and fall into Lieutenant Shadid's arms, followed by an unabashed and adoring gaze, and a loving "Thanks, sweetie." later, her squad sensed the tables had turned. Nudges in Ana's ribs no longer tore her gaze away from the medic. Teases about bedroom behaviour merely brought a devilish grin to her lips. Shoves in Kamilah's direction ended in her arm circling around the woman's waist – or her shoulders, if there were too many eyes about. Perhaps it was when Ana, lying in a cot with a bleeding arm and shoulder, managed to crack a small smile from Kamilah, did they realise they were truly defeated.

Attempts at embarrassing her came to a stop. Then the random questions started.

"So," Layla drawled, leaning on the armrest of Ana's chair. "If you call her 'Milah', what does she call you?"

"Ana."

"That's it?"

"My name's short enough as it is."

Layla's playful smirk appeared, and Mesi leaned back in her seat so she could look at Ana's reaction.
"What, no nicknames? Like 'honey'? 'Dumpling'? 'Sugar pie'? 'My virile lioness'?

Ana squinted at her. "My virile lioness?" she repeated, making sure Layla could hear every bit of judgment in her voice.

"What? Shadid could like these names. I wouldn't know."

She narrowed her eyes further at Layla, then snuck a peek at Kamilah, who sat at the opposite corner of the briefing room beside Deyab, with her back straight and eyes closed. "No, she doesn't. No one's as ridiculous as you."

"If you say so," Layla conceded with the smirk still on her lips.

The doors slid open then, catching the whole company's attention immediately. Their backs straightened in unison when Major Jaida strode in, and they stayed perfectly still as four humanoid omnics marched in behind her. They halted right beside Jaida and turned to face the company, slipping comfortably into parade rest.

As Jaida addressed the soldiers, Ana had no doubt that most of the attention was on the omnics instead. They were all taller than Jaida – and perhaps Ana – by at least two heads, their chrome plating polished to a mirror-like sheen. Two had short slits in metal where human eyes would be, through which cobalt blue light glowed through. The other two had an orb in the middle of their heads, shining emerald green. There had been news at the start of the year about the first intake of omnic recruits into the army. But other than that, no further information was released. Ana had thought they would be deployed against the insurgency, but as the war dragged on, her fleeting speculation was long forgotten.

The omnics stayed perfectly still as Jaida introduced the company's newest recruits. They did not seem to mind the attention at all. Though Ana doubted she could pick up on their tells, even if there were any. So she just kept listening as Jaida assigned one omnic to each squad, and nodded at their new squad mate as it passed by. Jaida then briefed them on a two-week field exercise, and brought the meeting to a close.

"Get to know one another. And if I were you?" Jaida raised a brow at them. "I'd feel lucky your new friends can't smell this pigsty right now."

She left with a crooked smile, leaving behind a room of soldiers bawling in mock offence.

The two weeks in the desert was nothing much; they had been on much longer training exercises than this. The main point was to get the company used to their omnic squad mates, and get used they did.

Adofo was the new addition to their team, acting as their second combat engineer alongside Hakim. The omnic was intimidating at first glance – anyone would be if they surpassed Ebo in terms of height, even if by a little. He was quiet too, but not shy. Adofo would speak when needed, rattle off information and bark warnings that saved them from falling into well-laid traps. To no one's surprise, he was amazingly efficient in his role – Adofo could build and dismantle field fortifications at twice of Hakim's speed, construct water points in a heartbeat, and use his in-built camouflage systems to perform route reconnaissance. Hakim loved working with him, and the rest of them soon embraced Adofo's presence as well. Ana wished that they had introduced the omnics sooner – they would have been much more effective during the war. Perhaps even ended it sooner. Khalid shared her sentiments, but they agreed it would be better not to dwell on it – something that they had no trouble with.
A lot of their attention was spent on Adofo, who did not seem to mind. In fact, he answered all of their questions patiently, and displayed a penchant for humour – which no doubt would be honed to a sharp edge in no time. He was nice to be around when one needed some quiet company, especially when a certain other squad was camped far away. Ana found herself getting a close-up view of chrome armour, scuffed about the shoulders and fingers; noting the faint flickers in the edges of blue light in his eyes, although it was still a challenge to pinpoint what emotion it denoted. Once, Ana even ended up learning how to remove the panels in Adofo's back, checking that his circuits were in order and clean.

It was a little unfortunate though, that Adofo turned out to be just a little on the innocent side. Upon their return to the Heliopolis base, Ana made a beeline for the medic she had barely seen through the past weeks.

Adofo approached Kamilah a little after and greeted her with, "Hello, Mrs. Amari."

Their squads promptly broke out into a series of snorts and laughter around them. After fourteen days of listening to the jokers referring to Kamilah as 'the wife', he had come to believe it was true.

Ana sighed, her arm reaching around Kamilah's waist as they strolled along. "We're not married, Ado."

"Oh." Adofo looked around at the snickering soldiers, then cocked his head at the women. "I'm sorry. I assumed that you were."

"It's alright." Ana smiled, as blue eyes flickered about the edges.

"Ey, let's hit the pubs tonight!" Ebo boomed, getting a chorus of approval. He slung an arm around Adofo's shoulders. "How about it, metal man?"

"I can't drink, but I can be your designated driver."

Ebo's face lit up, as though he had found salvation right there, in the omnic. He declared Adofo 'the best damn thing to ever happen this year', then was drawn into a discussion on which pubs to visit that night. Adofo, released from Ebo's hold, made his way over to the omnic in Kamilah's squad and fell into a quiet conversation.

With the attention on them falling away, Ana snuck a peck on Kamilah's cheek. The smile she received was more than worth enduring the endless stretches of sand under the glaring hot sun.

In the week they had returned, Ana managed to cop a ride on Adofo's shoulders, and Ebo sucked him into their nerd sessions – which Ana was still banned from – as the omnic turned out to be a fun and adaptive dungeon master. Not much else could happen before Ana's surgery had been set for the following week. She was pulled back to the labs for a thorough refresher on the details of her new implant – which had to drop a few features like the rifle uplink, sadly. But the final design was still powerful, and thus was given the green light.

So Ana reported to the hospital on a Wednesday morning. The last thing she remembered was losing consciousness on the operating table, with the anesthesiologist's voice echoing in her ears. Then she woke in the recovery room shivering under the covers; her stomach churned uncomfortably, and there was an odd sensation in her bandaged eye. The world was still swaying when the doctor came to check on her, and Ana had little energy to concentrate on what he had to say. The only thing she really understood was 'the operation was a success', then the rest of his words blended together in an unintelligible mess. She fell asleep not long after the doctor had left her alone to rest.
Ana woke up again near midnight, and was munching listlessly on a bun while staring at her supper tray, when Kamilah entered the room. She smiled through a mouthful of bread as Kamilah scanned the room quickly, before approaching the bed.

"Hey," Ana greeted, swallowing her food as a kiss was planted on her head. "How'd you get in here?"

Kamilah cocked her head. "I work here."

"Yeah, but this is the restricted ward. And they told me visitors are limited or something…” Her argument was dropped in favour of returning the kiss on her lips.

"I have my ways." Kamilah sat on the bed with a wry smile.

"You and your ways," Ana uttered, shoving the last of the bread into her mouth. "Not gonna complain though."

"Don't think you're in a position to do so." She touched Ana's cheek. "Feeling alright? You look a little out of it."

"I'm fine. Still a little woozy, that's all." Ana shrugged, poking at the mashed potatoes with a fork. Then she looked Kamilah over; the medic was still in her fatigues, and seemed rather tired. "Isn't your shift over?"

"No. I'm pulling double today."

"Thought your schedule's regular this whole month."

"Not today."

Ana smirked and leaned in. "Lonely, Shadid?"

"Prudent, Amari." Kamilah pushed her back with a finger on her nose. "Someone has to take care of you after you're discharged tomorrow."

"What am I, a child?"

"Yes."

Ana narrowed her eye, then shoved a small hill of potatoes into her mouth.

"Don't look at me like that. You know you're not the best with doctor's orders."

"It's literally just 'don't open your eye' and 'light duties for two weeks'."

"One month."

"What."

Kamilah cocked a brow. "One month. You'll still be on light duty for the readjustment period, after the bandages are off. The doctor should've told you this."

"I…wasn't listening very well."

"I can tell."
She stared at the medic, watching for signs of mirth as grim reality set in. "This is going to be hell, isn't it?"

"Even more so for me, amar."

It was very rare for Ana to truly appreciate medical leave. A broken arm, leg or rib made no difference to her. She would move as much as she could, even if it meant hobbling around despite her friends nagging at her to stay put.

On the first day, Ana had not much chance to be her usual stubborn self. Kamilah made a good call in keeping the day free because she had her hands full just keeping Ana confined to the barracks. She would pull Ana by the collar of her t-shirt whenever she tried to wander off, slap her hand when it strayed towards her car keys, and give her a glare whenever she inched dangerously close to her dumbbells. Kamilah ingrained in her the importance of not opening or rubbing at her eye, of not being stupid and going for her workouts, and of keeping her eye clean. After teaching Ana how to check for infection and making sure she could properly change the gauze and bandage by herself, Kamilah finally left her alone on the second day.

Of course, after being cooped up in the barracks for an entire day, Ana had to wander off. Just a short distance to a lot near the residential area, where a small café served a good brunch. She chose to walk instead of taking the car, eager to stretch her legs and get a breath of fresh air. It felt good – until she reached the café, that was. By the time she sat down, the stretch behind her eyes had become much more noticeable. Unfortunately, on the way back to the barracks, the nausea returned as the strain in her eye grew. There was a slight throb in her temples when she lay down on her bed, and she stayed in her room for the rest of the day as penance for disobeying Kamilah's instructions. Ana went down to mess in the evening with Kamilah, but other than that made no attempt at leaving the barracks. She merely smiled when Kamilah commented how settled she was while changing her bandages.

Her mandatory leave bridged into her weekend, during which she battled the growing urge to throw herself out the window and run like the wind. It was not a hard fight – Ana found herself besieged by constant waves of nausea and headaches, which kept her down for the most part. The true hell started when Ana finally reported back for duty, and was assigned to the armoury for maintenance and logistics. When she was not bound to the armoury, she was kept at the sidelines where she watched her squad go through their training routines and tackle new simulation programs. Apparently she 'sulked' when playing spectator; Jaida had commented that she looked like a girl who just received a disappointing birthday gift. Ana responded with a simple 'I know' – Kamilah told her the same whenever she reverted into a whiny lump in the medic's arms at the end of the day.

Ana vibrated with excitement the night before her bandages would be removed, barely noticing Kamilah's pitying glances. The elation spiked sky high when the doctor told her to open her right eye for the first time in two weeks, then took a nose dive when she accidentally went into full magnification. The floor flew up towards her as she bent over in her seat, leaning heavily in the doctor's hold as she retched emptily, feeling sick to her stomach. Ana closed her eyes and collected herself as instructed, then cracked her eyes open again – slowly this time. She took a deep breath as she looked around, the sense of liberation forgotten when she realised everything was so clear. Too clear. As the doctor checked her eye to make sure it was in working order, a sharp ache grew behind her eyes, then blossomed into nausea as she was guided through the cybernetic workings. The doctor assured her that it was normal, but warned her of a rough transition period, and put her on three more days of medical leave.
Any doubt that she needed it dissipated when she collapsed into bed, the world spinning around her as she kept her eyes closed. All Ana wanted to do was sleep until the torture was over. But she could not – she had to get used to her powerful new eye and weather the overstimulation. Colours were brighter and more vibrant than before. She started noticing minute details that had not been there before. It was like seeing the world in a whole new light, through a much more potent lens – one that she practiced with regularly so no more accidental magnification would occur. Each session left her stomach doing flip-flops and her head dizzy as hell, but it was necessary.

"Do it again."

Ana chuckled, an indulgent smile hanging on her lips. She sat cross-legged opposite Kamilah, who was leaning forward and staring intently at her right eye. She obeyed and increased the magnification of her eye by increments, as Kamilah remained transfixed.

"There!" Kamilah exclaimed, hands catching Ana's jaw in excitement. "I can see it!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. It moved. Like…the interface in your rifle's scope."

"Huh. Interesting," she said, enjoying the way her partner's face lit up. "I'm going to do it again. Watch." Her smile widened at Kamilah's eager nod, then she zoomed in a little more.

Kamilah cocked her head, absolutely fascinated by the eye's workings. Her thumb drifted around the corners of her eye socket gently, mindful of the bruises that hadn't completely faded away yet. It was much lighter than when she was bandaged, but the area still felt rather tender. She kept still until Kamilah asked, "What do you see when you're zoomed in like that?"

"Right now? Your pores." Ana squinted theatrically. "God, it's like looking at the moon's craters."

Ana cackled loudly as Kamilah's palms slammed into her shoulders. She flung her hands backward, bracing herself against the push. The sudden movement aggravated the beginnings of nausea that had grown during her little exercise, and she stayed stock still for a moment to ride it out.

"Are you alright?" Concern overtook Kamilah's expression in an instant, hand reaching out to cup Ana's cheek.

"I'm fine." She made the mistake of looking directly at the ceiling light, then slammed her eyes shut at the stark brightness. Groaning as Kamilah pulled her close, Ana cracked her left eye open. She laughed softly, and tapped under Kamilah's chin. "It's okay."

"If you say so," Kamilah said, tucking Ana's hair behind an ear. She watched Ana's hand worry about the bruising. "Does it hurt?"

"Not really. Just…sore." Ana pouted. "Kiss it better?"

A sigh, then a wry smile. Kamilah leaned in, pressing her lips delicately beneath her eye, the corner, then on her eyelid. Before she could move away, Ana dipped her head and caught Kamilah in a kiss. As she lingered near Kamilah's lips, coaxing another peck, she realised her head had settled again.

_Huh. So it does work._
Headaches, vertigo, and retching made for very bad days. Ana found herself taking the entire week off her duties just to lie in bed and wish the torture was over. The worst day had her lying in bed most of the time, because any attempt to waddle around her room sent her diving back onto the mattress within minutes at best. One evening, Kamilah found her curled up beneath the covers with a thin sheen of cold sweat on her skin, her eyes screwed shut as her head spun horribly. Kamilah took another day off, and while her presence did little to alleviate her body's rough adjustment, it made Ana feel less lonely. Although it made her feel horrible again when she persuaded Kamilah to take her out to town that night, having felt marginally better near evening.

"You'd think with fucking nanites they'd spare me weeks of torture," Ana groused.

"Without nanites you'd be like this for more than a month." Kamilah waited as Ana remained squatted beside the bike. She had stopped in the nearest carpark when Ana patted her insistently and asked her to pull over. The lights flashing past them were too much for Ana to handle.

Ana stayed in position a few moments longer, riding out the dizziness from the ride. Then she slowly got onto her feet with Kamilah's help, Ana gripping tightly at her arms. She took a deep breath and squared her shoulders – which ended up stooped despite her efforts.

"Can we go back?" Ana asked.

"We'd better."

Ana climbed onto the bike behind Kamilah, still holding her helmet in her hands. "Could you go slower this time?"

"I was going slower," Kamilah informed her, buckling her own helmet's strap.

"Even slower." Ana put on her helmet and hugged Kamilah tightly about the waist, leaning her head on the rider's shoulder with her eyes closed.

"Okay."

Perhaps she had jumped the gun, Ana decided, and thus swore off vehicle rides for the rest of the week. She forced herself to walk around as much as she could in compensation, and though the sight of Ana dragging her feet around the barracks attracted some concern from strangers, it managed to have some payoff in the end. She no longer suffered a brief spell of headache from a sudden change in light intensity, nor was she forced to lean on a nearby wall for support when the discomfort became too much. Most of the strain came from prolonged exposure, which could be remedied by giving her eyes sufficient rest.

All in all, her plan went rather smoothly. By the weekend, she was ready for whatever shenanigans the squad goofs would pull for her birthday. Except this.

Of all the stunts they had pulled in the past, this was the biggest 'surprise' they had given her: pizza at the benches behind the barracks blocks. No food smushed into the face, no lap dance, no ridiculously long line of shots, no disgusting meat cake to finish before moving on to the actual cake. Just food and a hangout – the mother of surprises. Though she did notice they had picked a spot farthest away from the lamp post, so maybe it was not that unexpected after all.

"I told you we ordered too much," Khalid told Layla as they stacked two untouched boxes in the
middle of the table.

"Never too much pizza," came the flippant reply. "So, who wants to take them back?" She cast her eyes around the squad, then thrust one box at Ana.

"Wait, I'm not going to eat all that--"

"Eat it with the wife then. Hope she likes pizza."

"I suspect the wife would much prefer Ana than pizza," Adofo commented.

"Of course." Ana smirked as Adofo cocked his head without a flicker in his blue eyes – his equivalent of a poker face. "I taste so much better than pizza." She knocked her box at Layla's forehead, before she could say anything amid the mix of groans and sniggers. She reached into her pocket for her phone when it buzzed. Her eyes twitched at the stark glow of the screen, bringing the dull ache in her head to the forefront.

Kamilah: [Come to my room when you're done.]

[Wait you're back already?]

Kamilah: [Yes.]

[Coming]

"I cannot taste, sadly," Adofo said.

"Can't eat either," Ebo added.

"I would like to try some pizza if I could. Or just some pepperoni."

"Then maybe you'll invent an…omnic mouth, or something," Ana commented, rising from her seat. "So you can eat anything you want. Introduce eating to all the other omnics in the world. Earn a Nobel Prize."

"That's a very interesting suggestion."

"And where are you going?" Mesi asked, watching Ana swing her legs over the bench.

"The wife has summoned. So, thanks for the food." Ana spun the box on the tip of her finger like a basketball, but failed spectacularly and ended up clutching the box to her chest before it fell to the floor.

"God, does Shadid know how much of a loser you are?" Layla tossed her the bag she had left forgotten on the table – the squad's gift.

"Trust me, she does."

"Then she has shit taste in women."

"And yet she chose me instead of you," was Ana's snippy comeback, and an empty soda can hurtled into her back before clattering to the concrete pavement. "You're picking that up!" were her last words before she zipped back into the building, Layla's latest projectile – Mesi's can – arching through the air and falling harmlessly behind her.

Her right eye twitched shut at the bright lights of the barracks, but she cracked it open little by little,
until she could keep it open comfortably by the time she was knocking on Kamilah's door. The amount of strain on her eye became most noticeable when she was led into the darkened room; its ceiling light was off, the only illumination came from the warm night lights plugged into the walls, and a holo-lamp on the table. The 3D projection was currently of a sitting tiger, orange light set to its lowest intensity. Much of the tension in her body, as well as the pressure in her head lifted as she adjusted to this dimmer setting.

The tug on her wrist brought her attention back, and she managed to say "Pizza delivery—" before the rest of her line was stolen by the soft kiss on her lips.

"That'd better get me a bigger tip," Ana said when they parted.

"That was your tip." Her eyes landed on the pink bag in Ana's hand. "Victoria's Secret?"

"For Shadid's pleasure," Ana echoed Layla's exact words.

Kamilah's lips quirked in a smile as she took the pizza box and opened it. "Oh good. She didn't forget the peppers."

"What." Ana followed her to the table. "Who didn't forget what?"

"I asked Mesi to order one for me."

"What," she repeated as Kamilah pushed her down into the chair. "You asked Mesi—?"

"Khalid gave me her number."

Ana gasped theatrically. "You're cheating on me."

"Hardly. I just needed her to distract you for me."

"Let me guess," Ana drawled. "Your shift wasn't extended. You just needed time to collect this." She gestured at the cake. "And you're the reason why they didn't buy one themselves."

"How clever. And here I thought you're only two years old." Kamilah lit the candles, then set the lighter aside. "So? Going to make your wish?"

A crooked smile. "This is payback for your birthday, isn't it?" Kamilah merely shrugged, so Ana blew out the candles as instructed. "Aren't you going to ask what I wished for?"

"No." Kamilah reached for a rectangular box on the chair beside her and handed it to Ana. "It's probably something dirty anyway."

"You know me so well," Ana deadpanned as she lifted the lid. She snorted at the first thing she saw and pulled it out, holding the briefs up so she could read 'EAT THIS' printed across the back. "Are you trying to tell me something?"

"Am I?" Kamilah set their plates, then ran a finger down the cream-covered knife, licking the chocolate off her fingertip as Ana dug through the box.

"Did you really..." Ana laughed as she pulled a mug out. "Best Sniper Ever'?" she read aloud.

"Something for your ego." Kamilah smiled. "It changes colour according to temperature too."

"Remind me to get you one that says 'Best Medic Ever'." She put the mug back down. "Damn, you got a bit of stuff in here." There were a few packets of snacks, a pirate eye patch, a pair of aviator
shades, a new phone case to replace her worn one, and…

Ana reached for the black circular pad in the middle of the box. It fit in her hand nicely, but was just a little hefty. She recognised this device – it belonged to a new line of holo-projectors that was released a few months ago. It was popular for photo-viewing, but documents could be stored in them as well. This one gained a lot of attention for being much smaller than its predecessors, and had sold out just weeks after its release.

"Turn it on," Kamilah said, nodding at the projector.

She thumbed the power button on its side, and the pad's lights came to life. The indentation in its middle glowed blue; the display screen on its side showed the folders currently in storage. There were only two at the moment: 'System' and 'Ana'. She chose the one obviously made for her, and the first photo flickered into being over the pad.

"Really?" Ana asked Kamilah, who shoved a forkful of cake into her mouth to stop her laughter. Of course, it had to be the one of her being pushed into the Nile. The second was Ana staring up at the camera, looking flabbergasted. The third was of her already on the boat, but slipping on the deck because of her wet feet. Thankfully the embarrassment ended there – the next few were pictures of her and Kamilah that they had taken through the vacation and the earlier months.

Ana flipped through them with a smile, then one of her squad popped up. She cocked her head as more pictures of her and the other morons appeared. "Where'd you get these from?"

"Your phone. You have a lot of photos in there."

"You went snooping around my phone?"

"Like how you went snooping around my wallet."

"Ah. Then we're square."

"I guess so."

Snickering through her teeth, Ana thumbed through the photos at a faster pace. There were a few more of her squad, then came her family. She felt a pang of longing looking at her sister's dumb face and her father's lop-sided smile, and it grew sharper when her mother's bright grin came into view. The photo was taken just after Zayirah's promotion ceremony, where she was given the crossed sabres which marked her as a Major General. Her arms clung around her daughters' shoulders, who were squeezing the air out of her from both sides. Her husband hugged the three women from behind, his well-groomed hair bearing as many grey streaks as his wife's.

She heaved a sigh at the picture, wondering just how long she had not laid eyes on it.

"You take after your mother a lot," Kamilah said, bringing her gaze up.

"Yeah." Ana's eyes flickered towards the photo again. Despite the lines on her face, Zayirah looked just as youthful as her children. "I mean, all this pretty has to come from somewhere." She ran through the rest of the photos quickly, then switched the device off and placed it back into the box.

"Thanks, sweetheart." She leaned over to plant a sound kiss on Kamilah's cheek, then glanced down at the box. "But damn, this is really a lot. I've to up my game next year."

Kamilah hummed. "Actually I got most of them as compensation." She explained at the raised brow, "I had a skydive booked for tomorrow. But," she drawled, tapping under Ana's chin. "Someone had
"to go for surgery."

"So it's cancelled?"

"Yes." She smiled at Ana's whine, and tugged her forward by the chin, kissing her pouted lips. "Is this not enough?" Kamilah asked when her lips stayed in a mighty pout. Which lasted but a mere second.

"Of course it is."

Kamilah gazed at her longer, eyes narrowing slightly at the impish look on her face. "But…?"

"There is something else you could do."

She seemed to go through a moment of mental debate, then sighed in defeat. "What else may I do for Her Royal Highness?"

Kamilah's brow quirked the further Ana's smirk grew. Ana reached back into the box, and fished the briefs out.

"Put this on," she said, holding it out to Kamilah who took it with a growing smile.

"On one condition."

"And that is?"

Kamilah nodded at the pink Victoria’s Secret bag Ana had set on the table. "Only if you wear that."

---

Safiya: [Alright bitches. Listen up]

Safiya: [I just got 3 weeks' block leave. So if we wanna meet up before the year ends, better do it soon]

[Did you just call papa a bitch]

Safiya: [Yes we're all bitches here]

Safiya: [Also my people are gonna be deployed somewhere in Jan. Heard some small detachments from Helio and other bases are gonna join us.]

Safiya: [I'll bet my ass you're gonna be in it Ana]

[Papa you heard of this?]

Papa: [Yes. Plans still in the air. Might be pushed further than Jan]

Papa: [But would like to meet before year end]

[How about 3rd week]

[Papa?]

Papa: [I can make it]

Safiya: [Finally]
The second week of her readjustment went by more smoothly than the first. Aches and strain were still a regular part of her life, but it was getting better by the day. With the help of her new eye, she could scan their squad's training grounds much easier, identifying more well-hidden traps and the most useful advantages in terrain. Of course, with her sentence to light duties only, Ana had to settle for sitting by the sidelines and restraining the urge to cry out in frustration, whenever they fell into ambushes her cybernetic eye had spotted since the start.

The day after her visit to the doctor's and being given the green light, Ana was raring to jump back into training. She was set free in the morning after a stern warning from Kamilah to not overdo it, and then proceeded to overdo it by plunging into PT with one month's worth of pent-up energy. Kamilah spared her from more admonishments during morning mess, knowing it would have just as much effect as the first. So she settled for telling Ana to 'have fun' before traipsing back to the hospital.

And 'fun' did Ana have when let loose onto the training field. She spotted targets much faster than Khalid who complained that she was stealing his job, then that she was being too extra when Ana switched sniping spots more than usual. She relayed information to Mesi ahead of time, giving her those precious few minutes to bark orders and get her squad out of trouble. Ana's upgrade combined with Adofo's capabilities vastly improved their squad's performance, earning Jaida's approving nods on more than a few occasions. Her performance had been closely monitored and declared 'satisfactory' – which worried her a little, but Jaida had assured her it was nothing. The brass would reserve judgment until they had seen her in real action.

After sounding out for future assignments, Ana managed to snag her one week's leave with help from the happier and more pliant Major. Then she had to snag Kamilah out of her mini shopping panic the weekend before they left, by thrusting a cast-iron skillet into her hands.

"Are you sure?"

"Trust me," Ana repeated, putting Kamilah's duffle bag into her car's boot. "He'll love it." Kamilah still looked unconvinced, but let herself be ushered into Ana's car.

"Look, sweetie." Ana took her hand after settling in the driver's seat. "You're not going for an audition. You're going as a guest. No, actually. You know what," she laughed. "You'll only be a
"guest for… Let's say, a grand total of three seconds."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You'll see." She started up the engine. "Nothing bad, I promise."

Thanks to light traffic, the journey took only an hour. Though it seemed too long for Ana, who started humming to every single song on the radio to entertain herself, while Kamilah stayed quiet and stared out of the window. A smile grew on Ana's lips when she turned into the familiar neighbourhood, slowing down to spot the houses that still remained the same through the years. She slowed to a stop in front of their garage, looking over the house as she waited for the door to open.

"Huh." Ana craned her neck a little farther. "Think my dad's back. His bedroom window is open." Kamilah managed to sneak a peek at said window on the upper floor, before Ana drove in and parked beside the family car.

"He's pretty early."

"Ah well," Ana shrugged, alighting from the car. "Wouldn't surprise me if he came back last night, honestly." She waited for Kamilah to retrieve her belongings from the boot, then slung her own duffle bag over her shoulder. "He would've vacuumed the house and made everything bright and clean for the visit."

Ana strode towards the door then paused halfway, turning around to look at Kamilah trailing quietly behind her. She smiled softly when Kamilah blinked up at her, thrown off by her sudden stop.

"Are you nervous?"

Her feet shifted. "Not…really." She took a breath after the obvious lie. "Look, I've never…" Kamilah gestured at the doorway leading into the house. "I don't know how--"

"Milah." Ana tugged her close. "Relax, alright? You're not here to impress anyone. You're just meeting my family, that's all. Your future family, I might add." She cackled when Kamilah shoved her away, and grabbed her hand. "Seriously though," Ana said as they neared the door. "Just relax and have fun. If anything, I'm the one who has to worry. Don't want my family to scare you off or something."

"'Scare' me off?"

"My sister can be fucking obnoxious sometimes." She held the door open for Kamilah to walk through. "She's fun but god, sometimes I really want to punch her in the face." Ana took Kamilah's hand again, guiding her down the unlit hallway and into the living room, where lights were on.

"I knew I heard the garage doors opening."

The women halted in their tracks, watching the tall figure clear the last few steps of the staircase. At 56 with a full head of white hair neatly combed back, coupled with a stern bearing and angular features, Brigadier General Zaid Amari was an imposing figure to any who laid eyes on him. Any who were not his daughters, of course.

Ana ran towards the old fart for a tight embrace, cracking a smile over his severe countenance, as father and daughter laid eyes on each other for the first time in nearly fourteen months.

"You look as good as ever, papa," Ana said as she broke away. "For your age, anyway."
Zaid sighed. "And I see your sense of humour is still intact, like the rest of you." His gaze lingered on his daughter, before moving onto the woman standing behind them. "Kamilah."

"Yes, sir."

Both Amari broke into smiles at the knee-jerk reply. "At ease, soldier. There are no ranks out of base." Zaid strode over to where Kamilah stayed rooted in one spot. "May I take that for you?"

Kamilah blinked and looked down, as if she had forgotten the flat cardboard box in her hands. She surrendered it immediately. "This is for you, actually."

"And it's not even my birthday," Zaid chuckled. "Thank you." He looked the box over and took a peek inside, eyes widening. "Oh! Just what I need. A new skillet to replace the one Ana destroyed."

"I didn't 'destroy' it. I just dropped it."

"And it broke."

"Not destroyed."

"It broke in three places."

"Whatever," Ana groaned. "I'm not going through this again." She adjusted the bag strap on her shoulder and looked her father over, noting his polo shirt and pants. "Did you just reach home?"

"Yup. Have you eaten?" Zaid asked, looking over at Kamilah. "Join me for lunch?"

"Yes please," Ana said as Kamilah nodded.

"Good. Go put your things down. I'll get the car."

Ana reached back for Kamilah's hand again, pulling her up the stairs as Zaid zipped into the kitchen. "You are just precious, Lieutenant." She snickered again when Kamilah elbowed her in the side.

The three managed to sneak in a little quiet time together until evening, when the click of the front door's lock heralded the arrival of the party. The one-woman party. She would have arrived earlier in the day, but her flight got delayed – which worked out well, in Ana's opinion. It gave Kamilah time to get acquainted with the calmer Amari before–

"What have we here?"

Ana and Kamilah stood from the couch to face the two women standing in the living room's doorway. Despite exchanging numerous photos, Safiya's new look was still quite a jarring change. Her mohawk – which had grown out a little – was styled back to look windswept. She looked good, but unlike the sister she had grown up with. Maybe more reflective of how Safiya really was at heart.

"Look at you!" Safiya grinned, leaving her small luggage on the floor as the sisters strode towards each other. Ana held out her arms when Safiya did the same. For one moment, she was walking over to Safiya. The next thing she knew, hands landed on her left cheek and shoulder, and Ana was shoved to the side.

"Kamilah!" Safiya exclaimed as Ana stumbled, caught just in time by Zahra before she hit the end table and knocked over the lamp.

"Hi," Zahra said with a wide smile when Ana looked up.
"Hey." Ana straightened herself and patted Zahra's arm in gratitude, then turned around to see Kamilah being accosted by Safiya.

"My god," Safiya exclaimed, hands clasping the sides of Kamilah's shoulders. "You're so much more gorgeous in real life!"

Kamilah could barely squeeze out a word of thanks before Safiya sucked her into a firm hug. She looked over Safiya's shoulder for help, only to have Ana shrug at her from the back. Then Kamilah was held out at arm's length again, Safiya giving her a once-over.

"Kamilah, Kamilah," she said. "A woman like you deserves so much better than a baby like Ana."

"Oi!"

"What, am I wrong?" Safiya turned to face her sister, looking utterly unperturbed. "You're like, what. 8? 9?"

"16," Ana clarified.

"That's right, 16. Oh well." She slung an arm around Kamilah's shoulders, and whispered not-too-quietly in her ear. "When you're done with her, I can introduce you to some real women." Safiya smiled down at Kamilah's uncertain expression, then winked and ruffled her hair. She finally let go of Kamilah and strode over to Ana, dipping quickly and clamping her arms around her sister's waist.

"Can you not?" Ana grumbled when she was lifted unceremoniously from the ground, and slung over Safiya's shoulder. Her sister turned around, and Ana caught a glimpse of Kamilah smoothing over her ruffled hair, before coming face-to-face with Zahra.

"Have you two said hi?"

"Yes, babe," Zahra replied. "Now put her down."

"No."

"Put her down."

Safiya clicked her tongue and turned around again to face her girlfriend. Ana kept her feet tucked in close so she would not kick anything to the floor. Already used to this nonsense, Ana rested an elbow on Safiya's back and her chin in a hand, waiting for it to be over.

"I thought you're on my side," Safiya said. Ana could hear the pout in her tone. "Yes, but you're making a fool of yourself in front of Kamilah. Hi, by the way."

"Hi," came Kamilah's voice.

"So? The sooner Kamilah knows who she's getting involved with, the better. Also," Safiya grunted as she adjusted the human baggage on her shoulder. "You're really heavy, Ana. You getting fat or what?"

"It's muscle."

"Fats."

"Muscle."
"Fats– Oh, fuck–!" Safiya cursed when Ana pressed the sole of her foot onto Safiya's face. "Stop–!"

"Let me down."

"Stop!"

"Do it!" Ana insisted, rubbing at her sister's cheeks with her foot. She grabbed onto Safiya's shirt when the woman shifted on her feet. "Do it before I fucking–"

"Girls."

Ana craned her neck up to look at Zaid entering the living room, before she was robbed of the view when Safiya turned around to face their father.

"Behave, please."

"Fine." Safiya let her sister down with a sound *thump*, aiming a slap at Ana's back when she received one on her stomach.

"Girls," Zaid repeated when the two raised their arms, which dropped immediately.

Ana slinked back to Kamilah's side as Zaid went to greet Zahra, meeting her with a handshake before being engulfed in a hug by Safiya. She exchanged a glance with Kamilah, then fell back into the couch with an arm around her shoulders.

"Think I can safely say," Ana murmured in her ear. "Welcome to the family."

She returned Kamilah's gentle smile and leaned in to kiss her, when a cushion crashed into their heads. Ana grabbed it before it fell into her lap and flung it hard at Safiya, who was cackling on her way to the stairs.

"Fuck off!"
Antics

Zahra turned out as genial as Ana expected her to be, and possessed a mischievous streak that matched Safiya's. Lucky it was then, that Zahra also had a keener emotional perception than the dolt she was dating – which meant she drew the lines that Safiya had to stay behind. Ana had been worried that Safiya's...exuberance would smother Kamilah and tire the woman quickly, but constant subtle interventions by Zahra quickly put those concerns to rest. While Kamilah was still getting used to Safiya, she had formed an 'alliance' of sorts with Zahra, retiring to the side whenever their Amari started to bicker. The little chit-chats about their partners often included Zaid as well, who had his fair share of stories to tell about his late wife.

And they were only in day two. It was safe to say the week would be smooth indeed.

"Just get the platter," Ana said. She held the phone away when she slipped on a t-shirt, putting it back to her ear in time to catch the gist of Safiya's sentence.

"–so little haloumi."

"Then buy more."

"But there'll be too much."

"So we'll stick it in the fridge."

Safiya sighed over the line, then spoke to Zahra, "She said buy more too."

"Told you. Besides don't act like you don't want more."

Safiya gave a whine very much like Ana's.

"Come on, just because that woman said you look plump? Look at yourself – you're more muscle than fat."

"But her kid agreed!"

"Safiya, we've been here far too long agonising over your fucking cheese," Ana listened to Zahra chiding Safiya with glee as she strode out of her room. "Either we order here and now, or we're going to that vegetarian place."

"No!"

"Okay, so are we done?" Ana asked when she heard the beeping of an interactive menu in the background.

"Yes yes yes. Thanks for your help–, oh wait! You didn't give any!"

"Yeah yeah, go fuck yourself." She ended the call in the middle of Safiya's raspberry.

Ana spun her phone between her fingers, and tossed it from hand to hand as she hopped down the stairs. She found the living room empty, though its lights were still on – as was the kitchen's, where indistinct murmuring could be heard.

"–Ana's like her mother," she heard as she moved close. "Whatever she wants to do, she'll do it. Doesn't matter if there's an army of horses trying to pull her back."
"It can be…frustrating at times."

She paused before turning into the doorway, listening to her father's deep chuckle.

"You're telling me." The sound of porcelain clicking on the countertop. "But I guess in this regard, Safiya's the one who takes after her mother more. Those two, all you can do is try to catch up. At least Ana knows how to slow down…sometimes. More tea?"

"Yes, thanks."

"This one is easier to deal with," Zaid continued. "But she doesn't like being told to do anything blindly. So just give her a reason if she's being difficult."

"Well, well, well." Ana made her drama-worthy entrance. "Teaching her how to manipulate me, I see."

"Were you listening?"

"Just enough to know I was being betrayed," she said pointedly at her father, and took a seat next to Kamilah at the counter. Both Zaid and Kamilah were nursing a cup of tea, accompanied by a plate of butter cookies.

"I don't want you scaring Kamilah off because you can't think straight."

"I can't do anything straight. Besides, I'm already her slave." Ana tilted her head to bite on the cookie Kamilah held up for her. "See?"

Zaid sigh as he poured another cup of tea and pushed it towards Ana. "At least for you, I can tell Kamilah what to do. All I can say to Zahra is 'good luck'."

"Well, how did you deal with mama?"

"I can honestly say, I have no idea." Zaid looked at Kamilah, and nodded his head at Ana. "How do you deal with this troublesome bag?"

"I don't."

Ana opened her mouth—

"She's the one who deals with me."

Ana shut her mouth as Zaid cocked an appraising brow.

"Seems like you hit the jackpot, Ana." He drained his cup and got off the stool. "Finally someone who takes your side."

"More like, the first person in my life who isn't an asshole," she drawled.

Zaid merely hummed and offered no rebuttal.

Quiet had settled over the house past midnight, after Safiya and Zahra's glorious return with their food and their lazing about in the living room after. Not wanting to disturb the serene air, Ana padded softly up the stairs and down the corridor. The lights in the study and her father's bedroom were out, but Safiya's was still on, spilling from the gap beneath the door. She stopped outside her own room and peeked in, checking on Kamilah who was still fast asleep in bed, unaware that Ana
had slipped from her arms. Satisfied, Ana moved on towards the sliding glass doors at the end of the hallway, stepping through them and onto the balcony.

She hooked the handheld vacuum through her forearm, letting it hang by its handle. Walking farther out to that one familiar spot, Ana turned back, took two running steps forward and jumped. She caught onto the edge of the roof and hauled herself up easily.

"Get off my lawn."

Ana groaned as she set her knees on the flat surface. "Why are you everywhere I go?"

"This is my house too, pea brains. Why'd you bring the vacuum?" Safiya asked, frowning at said device clicking dully against the roof.

"To clean?" Ana deadpanned. "I see you're lying on all that dirt and dust like the pig you are."

"Fuck off. We never cleaned when we came up here before."

"Yeah well. I'm bringing Kamilah here tomorrow so…" She turned the vacuum on. "Sit up and let me clean."

Safiya grumbled but did so anyway, adjusting her butt this way and that so Ana could take care of her immediate area. She watched as Ana cleaned up their corner of the roof.

"You know it'll be dirty again tomorrow, right?" Safiya said when Ana sat down beside her.

"At least it'll be cleaner than when you sat down without a flying fuck. Look at you." She brushed off the back of Safiya's hair – thank goodness she had much less now – and her clothes. Ana had finished when she noticed the amused gaze fixed on her. "What."

"I never thought I'd see this day," Safiya crooned, patting her head. "Little Ana's taking care of her sister and romancing her girlfriend like a lovestr--" She laughed when Ana threw her hand off.

"Why don't you try 'romancing' Zahra instead of annoying me all the fucking time."

"Well… I haven't seen you for a long time." She raised a hand again, but it was swatted down before she could do anything. "But I guess you're right." Safiya leaned back on her hands, heaving a sigh at the sky. "I feel kind of bad, actually. I've barely even the time for Zahra between missions, and we live on the same base."

"You've been busy."

"Yeah, but still. Think I've spent more time away from her than with her. Excuse or no, it's difficult." Safiya tapped her feet together in idle thought when the sisters fell into silence. "You know…"

Ana looked at her in surprise. "But you like it there."

"I do." More feet-tapping. "But it's kind of fucking up the rest of my life. I couldn't see you or papa for an entire year because of them. And…I really want to spend more time with Zahra."

"Have you talked to her about this?"

"No?" Safiya said incredulously, as though Ana had said something utterly stupid. "I don't want her thinking this is her fault or something."
"No, but she's the reason, yes?"

"She's not the only reason."

"Oh please," Ana scoffed. "Don't pull the family card on me. You were perfectly fine until Zahra came along."

A wry smile. "How do you know?"

Ana stared at her lighthearted visage, as impenetrable as a poker face. "We're used to it, aren't we?"

"Yup, we are. And that's kind of sad, isn't it?" Safiya pulled her feet in, hugging her knees. "Ah well. Point is, Zahra deserves more than a girlfriend who's only around for two weeks before she gets pulled away by another mission again."

"Then talk to her. Come on," Ana added when Safiya appeared hesitant. "If you don't, then how do you know how she feels about this?"

"It can't be good to only see each other once in a blue moon--"

"Yeah, but that's how you think. Do you see what I'm getting at? Fuck's sake, sis." Ana shifted on the spot to face her sister. "You've always done this. You don't bother about what others think, you just go ahead and do it. I know," she interrupted when Safiya was about to raise an argument. "You wanna do this for Zahra. But just--, just for once in your fucking life, use your big fat mouth for something useful. Okay?"

Safiya kept silent for a while, staring at Ana after her outburst. Then her lips spread slowly into a grin, and her hands flew forward to pinch Ana's cheeks. "Look at you," she said, keeping her grip despite Ana trying to shake her off. "Our baby's all grown up and giving advice. I'm so proud of you." Before Ana could react, Safiya lurched forward to smack a kiss on her forehead, only to receive a sound slap on the cheek by Ana's flailing hand.

"Ow!"

"I'm not your baby," Ana grumbled.

"No? I'm guessing you're Kamilah's now, huh." She dodged another slap, snickering. "It's okay. Kamilah's pretty cool."

"I know." Ana wiped at her forehead idly. "And Zahra's pretty cool too."

"I know," Safiya sighed. "She's amazing."

They gazed out at the rows of houses stretching before them, cool winds sweeping over the rooftop as the nostalgia settled in. Many a time had they climbed onto the roof when grounded – just to give the illusion that they had slipped out, and to hear their parents' outrage through the windows. Troublemakers, they really were. Ana peered at Safiya out of the corner of her eye. How much had her sister changed, she wondered, beneath that rascally façade she insisted on keeping.

Maybe they did spend too long apart.

Safiya clapped both hands on her knees, then shifted to kneel on the roof. "Well, time to go back down." She moved a leg, but paused abruptly and fixed Ana with a penetrating gaze. Her eyes flickered away for a moment, then refocused on her sister.
"Since we're here, might as well tell you. That mission I told you about?"

Ana nodded.

"They're going to masquerade it as some joint exercise, but it's actually a hunt," she uttered quietly. "For some isolated cells leftover from the insurgency."

"Oh."

"Yup. Some of them escaped into Jordan to regroup, and we're going to stomp their asses into the ground once and for all." Her serious countenance gave way to an affectionate smile in no time, and she ruffled Ana's hair. "It's gonna be a few months long so…take care of whatever you need to."

With a grunt, Safiya got onto her feet and stretched her back. "You coming down too?" she asked, striding over to the edge.

"Yeah." Ana raised herself into a crouch as Safiya hopped off the edge – and panicked.

"Oh fu–!"

She had made an awkward jerk backwards while she hopped off – as if in sudden change of heart – but her feet were already off the ledge, and she dropped down anyway. A mighty crash reached Ana's ears, and she rushed over to the edge as Safiya gave a pained cry. Looking down, Ana saw Safiya lying on her front, in the middle of the toppled table and chairs that Zaid had brought out earlier for afternoon tea. Obviously she had forgotten about the new additions and jumped off without thinking.

"Holy fuck," Ana said as Safiya rolled onto her back, pain written all over her face. "Are you okay?"

"I'm dying," Safiya moaned. She brought a hand up to worry at the cut on her cheek, and noticed blood trickling from the long gash on her outer forearm.

"I need a medic…"

Zahra had come rushing out while Safiya was still sitting up with Ana's help, and she was followed by a disorientated Kamilah a few minutes after. Kamilah took one look at the older Amari, her shoulders slumping in resignation when she spotted the wound on Safiya's arm. She ushered the women back into the house and dressed Safiya's wound, making an offhand remark about their 'family resemblance'. They retired to their own rooms after the minor emergency was over, and Kamilah fell asleep on top of Ana so she would not 'go off and do something stupid as well'.

Zaid remained in his room through the night undisturbed, all thanks to the earplugs he was wearing.

Having a bandaged arm, a band-aid on her cheek and bruises on her elbows and knees seemed not to deter Safiya's energy at all. That was not unexpected, of course. But it did give Ana something to play with.

"Remember to get the Roomba!" Zaid called from upstairs.

"Yeah yeah," Ana called back loud enough for him to hear, shoving her wallet into her back pocket as she headed for the garage. The three women were already gathered behind the car, waiting for her to arrive with the car keys.

"So," she said, twirling the keys on a finger. "Who's driv–"
"Oh my god," Safiya exclaimed, grabbing onto her wrist. She looked at Ana's hand – currently clutching onto the keys – then reached for Kamilah's hand, bringing it up to eye level. Breathing a victorious cackle, she held the hands up to Zahra so she could see the matching rings. "Zahri, look! They're married!"

She promptly let go of Kamilah when Ana clamped onto her bandage, but gritted her teeth together after the pained yelp, staring right back into Ana's eyes as the grip over her wound tightened. "Let go."

The corner of Safiya's mouth quirked, and she tensed up her forearm as they fell into a power struggle, which was broken with a simple, "Ana."

Ana glanced at Kamilah, who cocked her head in silent command. She stood in open defiance for one, two seconds before she loosened her hand very reluctantly. But before Safiya could say anything, Ana smacked her in the face, just hard enough to make her nose tingle. Zahra let out a giggle while Kamilah raised her brows at Ana, who merely nodded at the car and zipped towards the driver's seat.

Kamilah climbed in beside her. "You two are really…"

"Incorrigible?" Ana deadpanned, starting up the engine as the other two entered the backseat.

"Why don't we have couple stuff, babe?" Safiya asked.

"Why haven't you bought us something?"

"Why haven't you bought us something?"

Ana exchanged a glance with Kamilah, a corner of her mouth curving up. "Aren't you glad we're not like them, Milah?" Ana asked as she backed out of the garage.

"Very."

"Oi!"

"What's this betrayal, Kamilah?" Zahra asked in mock hurt.

Kamilah pressed her lips together to hide her growing smile.

The couples went their own ways when they reached the mall, in the interest of separating the Amari sisters and finally getting 'some peace and quiet' as Zahra put it. Well, that and sneaking some time alone to do whatever they wanted.

The place was not very crowded, thanks to the fact that it was a weekday afternoon. Which meant gawking at the auto show in middle of the mall involved no pushing or shoving with other shoppers. Ana was free to properly admire the rows of traditional cars and sleek hovercars, moving along the displays slowly and itching to touch every single one of them. Kamilah wandered off to the collection of hoverbikes to the side, gazing longingly at the sexy new models she would no doubt like to ride back home.

Unable to resist poking fun, Ana sent a picture of the fat 'heavy breathing' cat to Kamilah, and clamped a hand over her mouth when a menacing squint was shot in her direction. The picture was promptly sent back to her when Ana lingered in front of a TV at an electronics retailer, watching her Queen performing on the large high-definition screen.
They reunited with Safiya and Zahra – who had switched jackets for some reason – and were pulled to the arcade, where their 'peace and quiet' was finally shattered. The sisters went on a competitive rampage through all the machines, while the other two sat in the corner, engaged in private conversation as they won three Pachimari plushies at the claw machine. One went to an Amari each, and the last went to Kamilah, because Safiya had redeemed a large polar bear toy for her partner.

All in all, a smooth and relatively uneventful day – until they had to make a detour back to the mall, having forgotten to buy the Roomba for Zaid. Returning empty-handed would have been a surefire way to be denied the dinner he had made.

A short burp turned Ana's gaze from her computer screen to the door, where Kamilah was walking through with a hand over her mouth and a towel slung over her shoulders.

"Someone ate too much just now," Ana sang as she turned back to the screen, where a man was cutting open a wheel of Parmigiano. Despite having eaten a filling dinner, her craving for cheese grew as she watched the documentary, and tried to assuage it with a handful of popcorn. She paused the video when Kamilah set two bottles of beer on the table. "You took so long, I thought you drowned in the bathroom."

"And you didn't bother to come save me," Kamilah snipped back as she went to hang her towel.

"You're a grown woman. You would've figured something out." She tapped on the spacebar to resume the show, wincing at the rap of knuckles on top of her head.

Kamilah gave a partial eye roll, pulling a chair over and taking the bowl of popcorn Ana handed to her. "Zahra was in the kitchen, so I stayed there for a while."

"Should I be worried?" She snickered when a popcorn flew into her face.

"Why am I still with you?"

"My stunning good looks?"

"Maybe after a few of these," Kamilah drawled, taking a long draught of beer.

"Oh?" Ana leaned over. "And how stunning do I look after a few?"

"You look nearly-human."

"I guess god-like beauty is not your thing." Ana grinned when Kamilah broke out into a chuckle, unable to keep a straight face anymore. Ana caught her lips in a kiss to seal the victory, slowly growing deeper as the need for intimacy burgeoned after the past few days of behaving around the family. Her tongue dipped in to taste the bitter tang mixed with–

"Bitches--, oh."

They broke apart immediately, heads snapping towards the door where Safiya had stepped through.

"20 years and you still haven't learnt how to knock!"

"No need to feel shy, little one," Safiya cooed in a lousy imitation of their mother. "When two people really love each other--"

"What do you want?" Ana snapped, before checking herself when Kamilah's hand rested on her knee.
Still wearing that impish smirk, Safiya asked, "How about a day trip to Ismaïlia, hm?"

"Tomorrow?"

"No, Friday. Papa wants to go to the park tomorrow and picnic like an old fart."

"Not only old farts have picnics."

"Whatever. Anyway we can probably rent bikes there. You know how to ride one, Kami?"

"Yes."

"She rides a motorcycle, you donkey."

"Does she now?" Safiya perked up. "What do you ride? Is it a hoverbike? What does it look like–?" Ana narrowed her eyes and – surprisingly – Safiya picked up on the cue, and threw her hands up. "Fine, fine. So park tomorrow, Ismaïlia on Friday, yeah?"

"Yes."

"Alright then." Safiya inched out of the door and thrust her head back in. "If you need any dental dams, just ask–"

"Get out!"

The door was snapped shut, and they could hear her guffaws move farther down the hallway towards her own room.

"I'm gonna fucking strangle her," Ana muttered, snatching the bottle on her table and taking a big gulp. The cool liquid doused some of her irritation.

"You don't mean that."

"Like hell I don't." She opened her mouth to let Kamilah deliver a few pieces of popcorn. "Maybe I'll push her into the lake tomorrow."

Kamilah quirked a brow, but offered no follow-up. Instead, she tossed another popcorn into her mouth and nodded at the computer. "Restart that. I want to watch too."

The sun was rather unforgiving at noon, but the family managed to snatch a shady spot under a tree to 'start being old farts'. Safiya was banished to the corner closest to the edge for that comment alone, though Zahra did pass her a few cans of drink from their ice box in compensation. Zaid had chosen this spot well – just across them was the performers' corner, where a group of dancers were practicing for their weekend performance. The entertainment kept them sufficiently occupied while they worked through the food, but was not enough to keep them rooted there after they were done. The younger ones split from the shade, leaving Zaid alone to sip at his soda, foot tapping in time with the music as he watched the rehearsals.

Safiya and Zahra made a beeline for the bicycle rentals, but Ana chose to continue on foot, accompanying Kamilah on her first visit to this park. But where Kamilah admired the scenery and pulled her down every side path they came across, Ana was kept occupied with something else. She tilted her head constantly from side-to-side, back and forth. But no matter how much she did it, she just could not get used to the lack of weight. Her head felt so light. Too light. Out of habit, Ana rotated her head yet again, only to have fingers clamp onto the lower back of her skull and keep her
"Your head is going to roll off your neck, Ana."

"It just feels weird, alright?" Ana retorted as Kamilah's fingers slid up into her hair, and ran through black tresses which were now much shorter. Their little excursion out for breakfast had somehow led to Safiya issuing a dare to Ana, who immediately went to a nearby hair salon and chopped off her hair—which was now shoulder-length. Gone was the beautiful ponytail when she tied her hair, now replaced by a ratty little excuse for one.

"Then maybe you shouldn't have done it." They walked onto a wooden bridge stretching across a wide stream.

"Yes, I should've." She paused for Kamilah to take photos of the area. "At least I made her eat her words."

"You want her to eat her words?" Kamilah said, eyes not leaving her phone as she snapped another picture. "Then you should've cut your hair short."

"As in, short short?"

"Yes." She watched as revelation dawned on Ana's face. "I was joking."

"But…"

"Don't."

Ana smiled when Kamilah slipped a hand into her own, as if to hold her in place before she could run off to a hair salon again. "I meant, I don't think I'd look as good in short hair."

"Nonsense. You look good in anything."

She returned the peck on her lips. "I know. I just wanted you to say it." Ana managed to steal a couple more kisses before she spotted a family approaching the bridge, and had to desist. Pressing her lips on Kamilah's temple, she leaned on the bridge's railing and looked out at the vast park before them–

"Wait."

"What?" Kamilah asked at her whisper.

Ana kept quiet though, and increased the magnification of her cybernetic eye. Zahra and Safiya came into view, as clearly as if they were standing right before her. The women had left their bikes by the cycling path and were standing on the grass, right beside the–

"Safiya's at the lake," Ana muttered, a sinister smile curving her lips. "I'm going to…"

"Ana."

"Milah, this is perfect–" The argument died on her tongue when she turned towards Kamilah, who held out both palms. Ana looked at her quizzically.

"Give me your wallet and phone."

Cackling maniacally, Ana bounced on the balls of her feet as she handed the items over. She gave Kamilah a big smooch, declared "I love you!" and sprinted off to commit her diabolical deed.
Kamilah's foresight was accurate; Safiya did manage to pull Ana into the lake while she fell. Zaid had taken one look at his two daughters, who were soaked to the bone, and flat-out refused to ferry them back in his car. They were forced to take a bus all the way home, attracting many curious glances at their corner, where they stood dripping water onto the floor. At least the journey did not take long, and there were no hard feelings between the two.
In an unexpected turn of events, Kamilah was the one who got hurt.

The four women were at a playground, waiting for Zaid to bring the car around from the parking lot. Safiya was seated beside Ana without stirring trouble for once, with her arm around Zahra as they leaned against each other in silence. Ana and Kamilah were slouched in the bench, Kamilah tracing the veins in Ana's wrist and the lone scar on her palm. The day's trip to Ismaïlia combined with the supper they just had, left them ready to fall asleep on the spot. When she was about to close her eyes, Ana felt Kamilah get up from her seat, and watched her approach a little kitten sitting on a see-saw.

It was a scruffy little orange thing, mouth opening in high-pitched mewls as Kamilah knelt in front of it. She raised a hand slowly towards the kitten, letting it poke its nose at her fingers. Patting it lightly on the head first, Kamilah moved on to stroking down its back, pausing occasionally to let it peer curiously up at her and prod around her hand with a paw.

It was all going smoothly; Ana had leaned forward in her seat, preparing a quip about how the medic treated animals more gently than humans, when trouble arrived in the form of an adult cat – the kitten's mother. It came up from behind Kamilah, who only noticed the hissing feline when it appeared at the corner of her vision. She had barely lifted her hand from the kitten when the cat pounced, claws raking across the back of Kamilah's hand and her forearm.

The cat's screech and Kamilah's short burst of curses jolted the three sleepy women to full attention. Ana moved forward instinctively, but Kamilah caught her with an arm and pushed themselves backwards, giving the vicious cat a very wide berth. It remained hissing, tail swishing back and forth, until Ana's legs hit the bench. Only then did the cat turn its gaze away, picking up the kitten in its mouth and dashing away into the darkness, disappearing through some bushes.

Then it was Kamilah's turn to hiss, quickly joined by Ana when she saw the damage on her skin. There were claw marks spanning from her hand, up to the middle of her forearm. Holding onto her clenched fist, Ana raised her arm gently as they watched the blood welling up in the scratches – which were too deep, they decided. So Kamilah was driven to the 24-hour clinic where she could receive proper treatment.

"You're losing your touch, Milah."

"Shut up."

"Now you can't make all the--"

"Don't you--"

"--pussies happy."

Kamilah screwed her eyes shut as if she were in physical pain, only cracking them open when Ana rolled her chair over.

"Maybe you're getting heavy-handed with your stroking."

"Please shut up."

"It's alright. You can practice on me." She grinned at the palm squishing into her face in an attempt to push her away. But she pulled Kamilah's hand off by the wrist, and kissed gently beside the
dressing. "I won't bite. No promises about scratching, though."

"I hate you," Kamilah grumbled, scowling through the kiss on her cheek.

"You're like this because you're tired," Ana explained patiently, earning a very unamused stare. "Seriously though, you can just go to bed. I'll go down if you want."

"No… It just hurts a little."

"A little?" She worried at the bandage on Kamilah's forearm. "Do you need anything…?"

"I'm fine. Not like it's the first time."

"What?" Ana laughed as Kamilah took her arm away. "You just can't stop yourself from touching—"

"One more pussy joke and I'll punch yours."

"Is that what you're into now?"

There was a knock on the door just as Kamilah's eyes narrowed, saving Ana from a certain kind of death. "Yeah?"

Zaid poked his head in cautiously, looking oddly relieved when he spotted the two sitting in front of the desk. He then swung the door wide open, holding up a box in his hand. "I found some aspirin for Kamilah."

"She found it before you, papa."

"I've taken them."

"Oh, well." He tossed the box over for Kamilah to catch. "Hang onto these anyway. Just in case."

"Thanks."

"Didn't get anything for me?" Ana asked as her father backtracked into the hallway.

"Who are you?" Zaid's straight face was the last thing they saw before he shut the door behind him.

"Everyone in this house is an asshole," Ana muttered, turning to the computer where a chat message from Safiya had popped up, blocking the movie playing onscreen.

"That includes you."

"Didn't say I wasn't one." She glanced over at Kamilah, who was clenching her hand repeatedly. "Are you sure it's okay?"

Kamilah nodded, fiddling with the dressing on her hand. Then she reached for the aspirin and popped one tablet into her mouth.

"Does it hurt that much?"

"Not as much as your jokes."

"Yours, you mean." Ana sent a reply asking why Safiya had sent her a disturbing video of a man covered in shaving cream dancing, as Kamilah picked up the call on her phone. She kept silent, searching for a similarly weird link to send to the idiot no doubt still laughing in her own room.
"I haven't. My work pad isn't with me."

Ana scrolled through videos of cats flying through space with jetpacks.

"You…mean you'll be transferred?"

She glanced over at Kamilah, who was frowning and listening intently.

"Who."

A few moments more, and her gaze slowly lifted to the screen. Then it settled on Ana, whose head tilted in curiosity.

"You're not pulling my leg." Her parted lips twitched as if she was unable to find the words. "I…Thank you. I will. Thanks."

"Who's getting transferred?" Ana asked, watching Kamilah lower her phone and stare at the screen with that same incredulous look. "Milah?"

"Deyab," she said. "He's being promoted. And transferred to another company."

"Oh? Good for him then. It's been what, 800 years?" She paused. "Wait, so who's squad leader now?"

"Me."

The word seemed as surreal for Kamilah as it was for Ana, judging by her still-not-quite-there expression. But it sunk in much faster for Ana, who jerked her chair forward.

"Seriously?" Ana asked, laughter bubbling forth as Kamilah nodded. "That's great, Milah! Now you can bully your entire squad – **legitimately.**" Her grin managed to crack a smile on Kamilah's face.

"Is that all you can think of?"

"Yeah? You have power now. You can do anything you want. Well, almost anything." When Kamilah's expression faltered, Ana reached forward and held Kamilah's face in her hands. "You know, it's like I'm more excited about this than you. Are you in shock? Do you need to lie down?"

Kamilah laughed softly, letting Ana feel about her forehead. "I guess. I just…never planned this far."

"Hm? You've spent – what? 5, 6 years in the army? And you never once thought about being given command?"

Eyes lowering in thought, Kamilah shrugged. "Not really, no."

"Well, time to start thinking about it. Think of all the ways you can **use** the power in your hands."

She snorted and peeled Ana's hands from her face. "You do realise I have power over you now, right?"

"Bull. We're the same rank."

"I have the authority."

"And what if I don't recognise it?"
"That's insubordination."

Ana chuckled and leaned forward in her seat, as Kamilah's fingertips glided over her palms. "And? What are you going to do about it?"

"Why don't you drop and give me twenty?"

Smile turning more crooked by the second, Ana said, "You didn't specify twenty of what, ma'am."

Kamilah held fast under lips ghosting tantalisingly over hers. "Use your imagination, Lieutenant." She allowed Ana a brief brush of their lips together, then tightened her grip over Ana's hands and pushed her away. "Now put the movie back on."

Ana pouted when Kamilah leaned back in her seat with a look of satisfaction, aware that she was driving her partner insane. The sniper was being played, but this was one trap she would walk into with eyes wide open. Cybernetic or not.

"–take care of yourself, and don't–"

"Cause any trouble, I know," Ana finished Zaid's sentence. "You've told me the same thing every single time you leave."

"And yet it still hasn't stuck. Has it, Kamilah?"

"No."

"Knife in my back," Ana deadpanned, staring at Kamilah as her father pulled her in for a hug. "Didn't see that coming."

"I thought you would've seen her comi–"

With a hand smashed right into her face, Safiya could only sputter the rest of that thought into Ana's palm.

"Girls," Zaid warned when Ana started pushing her back, and was grabbed by the waist and hauled off her feet. "Behave."

Only when she felt a tongue licking her palm did Ana yank her hand away in disgust, and Safiya finally set her down. Ana wiped her hand on Safiya's sleeve, her sister looking on with a bemused expression and keeping her mouth shut for the first time since they entered the airport.

"So, have you spoken to her?" Ana asked, peering at where Zaid was speaking to the other two women.

"Yeah," Safiya said equally softly. "She said I should hang on for at least one more year. And if I really don't like it, then I'll request a transfer."

"What about her?"

"It's alright for her. She says it's a little difficult…but she doesn't mind."

"Do you?"

Her eyes flickered towards Zahra. "I don't want to wear out her patience."
"It won't." Ana patted her sister on the back. "Even if it does, she'll let you know. And you'll know what to do."

Mouth curving in a fond smile, Safiya wrapped Ana firmly in her arms. "You're all grown now, you snotty little brat."

"You've said it before, mama."

"I know, little one." Safiya loosened her hold to get a good look at her sister's face, and gave it a pat. "I love you."

"I love you too."

"...This is getting weird."

"Let go of me."

"Safiya," Zahra called as they separated. "Let's go."

"Alright then." Safiya walked over and picked up her bag, slinging it over her shoulder. "Bye, you two."

Ana reached out to squeeze her father's hand, before letting it go quickly to swat Safiya's away, which had swooped in for one last pinch on her cheek. Zaid sighed for the thousandth time that week, and ushered Safiya towards the departure hall. Zahra turned back for one last wave, then followed the Amari through the security checkpoint. Ana stayed with Kamilah, watching them walk further in towards the counters, then turn out of sight.

She lingered a few moments more, then made her way towards the nearby elevator, hand naturally taking its place in Kamilah's. "Well," she sighed. "It's just the two of us again."

"Mm."

"You know, I was thinking. Maybe I should go back to the house more. Keep it warm and clean and all that."

"Why not just move out?"

She shrugged and pressed the call button. "It's more convenient to stay in base. Besides, everyone's there."

"True."

"So maybe I'll just pop back there once in a while. When I need time away or something." She tilted her head so Kamilah could hear her mutter quietly, "Or time alone."

Ana stared blankly at Kamilah's quizzical frown, until it hit her.

"I meant time alone with you!"

Deyab's promotion ceremony was scheduled to be held in two months, which meant he had just enough time to spend poking fun at his colleagues more than usual without much resistance. And of course, training Kamilah to take his position. It was not that difficult a task, apparently. Kamilah had no problems in terms of capability – her mind was clear and her hands steady when forced into stressful scenarios, making decisions with bullets flying over their heads and soldiers bleeding on the
ground. What would require adapting was the change in leadership style. More specifically, the change in personalities. Where Deyab would bark orders then yell encouragements interspersed with insults, Kamilah would keep silent after her intent was made clear. Furious scoldings turned into cold and threatening reprimands. Continuous banter became snappy comments. Praises were replaced by simple acknowledgements that the mission had gone smoothly.

She would have to work on that last one, Deyab said. But both leader and squad would warm up to each other in time. And though told that she had nothing to worry about, Kamilah did so. Constantly. Many times Ana had forced her to stop pacing the room, to stop reviewing their training footage over and over – be it on her datapad or in her head.

"You're doing it again."

Kamilah's faraway gaze came back into focus, as Ana slung an arm around her shoulders. They were strolling through one of the base's family neighbourhoods, not far from the barracks. Ana had dragged Kamilah out, hoping that a quiet walk down a more civilian-like environment would help her to leave work behind for a while. Obviously, it did not.

"Sorry."

"Relax, Milah. Training went fine today."

"We made to the objective slower than before."

"So? Performance fluctuates." Ana gave her a squeeze when she opened her mouth to retort. "Relax. Jaida was satisfied with our results today, right?"

"I guess." She kept her eyes on the pavement before them, then her attention was snatched back again – this time by a finger tickling at her ear.

"Talk to me, love. If you're going to think, don't keep it all to yourself."

"It's nothing."

"You're worried."

"How can you tell, I wonder."

"I'm pretty smart when I actually use my brain."

"Didn't know you had one." She smiled faintly at Ana's prompt agreement. "You're right. I'm just worried."

"About?"

"The squad," she said after a slight hesitation. "I don't work well with people."

"But you get along with them. And they've no problems working with you."

"That's not the point, Ana."

"Then what is?"

A frown appeared as Kamilah pondered over her answer, only to say, "I don't know."

"It's alright." Ana chose not to pry, and placed a kiss on the side of her head instead. "You'll figure it
out." When the crease between Kamilah's brows did not lighten, she took a different tack and moved
to the front, stopping with her back facing Kamilah. "Come on. Let's turn around."

"What are you doing?" Kamilah asked, looking at the woman standing stooped before her, with
knees halfway bent.

Ana clicked her tongue and reached back to grab Kamilah's hands, pulling her forward so she was
pressed up against Ana's back. Holding onto her thighs, Ana stood upright again, carrying Kamilah's
weight easily. Kamilah locked her arms around Ana's neck when her feet left the ground.

"Ana--" Kamilah laughed as Ana bounced her up a little, resting her thighs in the crook of her
elbows.

"Hold tight, Mr. Frodo. I will carry you."

"You closet nerd."

"Hey, I'm not the one who keeps re-watching the movies," Ana protested as she turned back down
the street.

"They're good movies." Kamilah hugged closer about her neck, resting their heads together. "Also,
your quote's wrong in fifty different places."

"You would know, nerd queen."

"Shut up."

When it seemed providing stress relief alone was not enough, Ana enlisted Mesi's help. Thankfully,
hersquad leader possessed all the tact and self-control that the rest did not. She took her time, first
approaching Kamilah for the occasional tête-à-tête, before moving onto work matters, sharing her
own experiences and grievances. In the end, after a few more training rounds as a platoon, Mesi had
reported the same thing as Deyab – competent skills-wise, but still a little icy personality-wise.

Kamilah did get more comfortable though, as January wore on. She took the little bumps during
training in stride, and giving orders came to her much easier. Ana had spotted her in the company of
her squad mates more often, which she took as a good sign. Near the month's end, Kamilah's squad
held a small celebration for Deyab's promotion – to which Ana's squad was invited, because they
were 'in-laws' now. Ribbing aside, it was good to see Kamilah feel more at home with the others –
Ana had less to worry about when she received her orders at the start of February. But that didn't
stop her from fussing over the concerns she still had.

"If you need anything, you can ask my squad," Ana parroted the words that had been on repeat for
the entire week, while she prepared for the deployment. "They like you. Still kinda scared of you,
but they'll be there to help whenever you need it. Especially Mesi. You can always count on her."

"I know."

"And remember to take care of yourself. Don't stress yourself out over work, and rest when you need
to." Ana hovered by Kamilah's side as her partner took the kettle off the portable stove. "Remember
to take your meds. And go for all your therapy sessions. Please, please don't try to cancel it like last
time. They're good for you, even if you think you don't need them."

"I know." Kamilah walked back to the table, pouring hot water into the teapot before setting the
kettle aside.
"I'll call you whenever I can. If I can't, I'll just text but I'll be in touch—" Ana lost her train of thought, drawn in by the soft kiss. She ingrained in her mind yet again the gentleness of Kamilah's touch, the lips which were often slightly chapped, the twitch of fingers on her arms in yearning, and the tenderness in brown eyes. Ana's memory would serve to last her for the next three months, and something told her it would be the source of both comfort and unbearable pining.

"I know, Ana. You've said it so much I could recite it: you'll call and text me whenever you can. I'll take care of myself while you're gone and not stress out over—"

"Knowing is one thing. Actually doing it is another."

"I will."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

Ana sighed, then embraced Kamilah tightly. "This is the first time I've never wanted to go on a mission so badly before."

"It's only three months."

"Three months too long."

"It's nothing. It'll be over before you know it."

"You're just lying to make yourself feel better."

Kamilah laughed, warm breath puffing about Ana's nape. "I am."

"Is it working?"

"No."

"Same."

No night had seemed shorter than the one she tried to draw out the longest. She spent the hours in a limbo, doing nothing that would make time pass faster, keeping their fingers entwined as the seconds ticked by. Ana's eyes refused to close when she followed Kamilah into bed, gazing back into her partner's – who seemed unwilling to sleep as well, despite having an early day to look forward to. As their idle talk wore on, caresses turned to tickles, to squeezes and pinches, to kisses and laughter and play, to teases and affirmation as they made love.

Ana finally fell asleep with Kamilah nestled snugly in her arms, only to be woken when the warmth left her embrace at the break of dawn. She remained in bed, waiting for Kamilah to get washed up and dressed, before following suit and walking her down to the car park.

"Remember to take your breakfast," Ana reminded her, watching Kamilah stuff her bag into the top box.

"Yes, mother."

"You're horrible with breakfast when you have work. Or just food in general, really."

"I guess not everyone is perfect," Kamilah said wryly, pressing their lips together in farewell.
"You're not everyone," Ana murmured, getting a smile as she let go of Kamilah reluctantly.

Kamilah slipped her helmet on and climbed onto her bike. Starting up the engine, she paused with a hand on her visor, and looked back at Ana. "Is it too early to say 'I miss you already'?"

She shrugged. "Don't ask me. I started missing you last night."

"Drama queen," Kamilah laughed, rapping on Ana's forehead with her knuckles.

"I love you," Ana said just when Kamilah snapped her visor down, prompting her to push it back up again.

"I love you too. And say it earlier next time."

Ana grinned as the visor came back down, obscuring her view of Kamilah's face. She received a final pat on her cheek, before the motorcycle rolled onto the road and soon brought Kamilah out of sight.

_Damn._

Ana and Khalid were among the five sniper teams chosen to join the Sa'ka in Jordan. The moment they arrived at Central Command, they were hustled into a briefing with the local troops and divided into five units – one to target each cell. Ana's team was not assigned to Safiya's squad, which was not unexpected, though still a little disappointing. But in the first week they took to prepare for the mission ahead, the sisters did have time to catch up and commiserate over how painful life was without their significant others.

As the plans came together, it became obvious that they would be spending a lot of time in the field. Or rather, in cities where it was much easier to blend in, and unwitting civilians could act as cover for their activities. Much of their time would first be spent tracking down their targets, observing their movements, and taking notes of their behaviours and habits, if there were any. That job fell to the snipers and a small group of hand-picked soldiers, who would have to operate incognito. They would then close in on these cells at the same time – attacking them one-by-one would merely give the others ample warning and time to burrow deeper underground. For such close coordination, intensive surveillance and accurate information was critical in the first phase. The teams posted in the field would have contact only with command, and no--

"--communications back home."

Kamilah cocked her head, studying Ana through the phone screen. "Sounds like you have your work cut for you."

"Yeah," Ana sighed. She was seated on the ground at the edge of the barracks compound, near a street lamp so she was not in complete darkness. "Well, at least it's only for a couple of months, right?"

"Right," Kamilah humoured her. "And it's surveillance, so you won't be jumping off buildings."

"You wish."

"I wish. Whether it comes true is up to you."

"Nice try."
"Is it working?"

"Yes. Besides, what's the point of getting hurt here? You're all the way in Cairo."

"Don't remind me."

"Why, Shadid. Are you saying you miss me?"

Kamilah's lips parted, no doubt ready to pop her bubble with a single retort. But she seemed to change her mind and settled for a slow exhale instead. "Yes. I miss you."

"Wow," Ana laughed. "Is this the first time I've won?"

"Only because I let you."

"You're so good to me," she cooed, getting an eye roll.

"Of course I am. And shouldn't you be turning in?"

"I don't feel like it."

"You're getting up early tomorrow."

"I know."

"You can talk to me again tomorrow night," Kamilah told Ana when her pout appeared. "I'll be here."

Reluctance soon gave way to common sense, and she relented. "Okay. Take care of yourself, alright?"

"The same goes for you."

"Yup. Sweet dreams, albi."

"Good night, amar."

Kamilah lingered onscreen, before ending the call. Ana stared at the phone until it went to sleep, then heaved a sigh and tossed it between her hands.

Absence makes the heart grow fonder, and Ana didn't think she could bear any more of that fondness. Kamilah's presence alone made her days just that much brighter and, without her noticing, Kamilah had become an integral part of her life. Her second half, as it were, and she was now painfully incomplete. Ana kept thinking of little things to do with her, only to remember she was not there. Her eyes searched the base only to find no one to exchange fond and playful glances with. Hands moved to find thin air where another's should be. She turned over in her bunk just to see the dormant form of a colleague lying in the next bed, not the woman with whom she had gotten used to sleeping with.

Absence really should go fuck itself.

An incoming call snatched her out of her wallowing and, to her disappointment, she saw that it was not from Kamilah.

"What."
"Where are you?" Safiya asked.

"The barracks. Why?"

"You don't have a shift soon or anything, right?"

"Yeah."

"Good. I'm at the diner farther down the street. Come over."

"Now?" Ana asked incredulously. "Are you hungry?"

"Horny, actually. But hungry works too."

"I didn't need to know that."

"Whatever. Hurry up. I already ordered and I can't finish two bowls of sundae by myself."

"You ordered two before even asking me to come over," Ana said, unsurprised. It was hardly the first time her sister did something like this.

"Well, that and two slices of cake. And a waffle. With ice cream."

"Just how horny are you?"

"I'd be humping the table right now if my dignity wasn't still intact."

"What dignity?"

"I don't know. So are you coming or not?"

"Yeah yeah." Ana got onto her feet. "Think I need some of that too."

"Good." She could hear Safiya's grin in her voice. "See you."

Ana shoved the phone into her pocket and trudged towards the compound's gates. Kamilah was not here, so food would have to fill the void for now.

How eventful would the homecoming be, she wondered.
"So, any last words?"

"Are you not coming back?"

"Fine. Any last words before I disappear for weeks?"

"No."

"Wow…"

"Anything I have to say, you can hear when you get back."

"I guess that's one way to give motivation. Hey, why don't you tell me a joke instead? And save the punch line for when I get back?"

"Fine. Knock knock."

"No, wait. You're serious?"

"Knock knock."

"Who's there?"

"Ana."

"Ana who?"

"Ana. Stay safe, alright?"

"That's the lousiest joke I've ever heard."

"Do you know why that's the punch line?"

"Why."

"Because you staying safe is a joke."

"Good one. You almost hurt my feelings that time."

"Ana."

"Yeah?"

"Just come back to me in one piece."

"How about: in one piece, no new scars, and with flowers?"

"And wine."

"Talk about impossible expectations."

"I'm sure you'll find a way."
The elevator doors slid open, and their omnic guide made a short gesture to indicate they had arrived. Ana and Khalid followed Nilah down the well-lit hallway of the apartment building's 12th floor. Paint peeling at the walls' edges and the carpet's faded colours hinted at the building's age. But other than that, it seemed like a cozy and average place to live in. They stopped when the omnic halted at the door near the end, closest to the emergency exit, then followed her into the unit when she held the door open for them.

Ana swept her eyes over the apartment and decided that 'average' was indeed a fitting word for the whole building. Their rented unit was very modest in size – even the living room was only marginally bigger than Ana's room in the barracks. But it was more than enough for two people to live simply. Especially a 'married couple' without kids.

"You have your documents?" Nilah asked after closing the door.

"Yep."

"Good." Nilah handed the house's keycard to Ana, then beckoned them to follow her into the study. There were two laptops on the table in the middle of the room, already wired up and ready for use. Walking over to the bookshelves in the corner, Nilah opened a cabinet at the bottom and withdrew a black briefcase. She set it on the table, tapping in the lock code and lifting the lid, and revealed an assortment of listening and tracking devices that they had been taught to use back in base.

"This is the backup stash," Nilah explained, single blue bulb in her head swiveling to look at them. "Do not use them until our friends downstairs request for these."

"Understood," Khalid said.

"You've been instructed in their use, correct?"

"Yes."

"Good." Nilah shut the briefcase and placed it back. She gestured again at them to follow, and they went over into the bedroom, where there was a double bed and a small dressing table. She slid open the wardrobe's door and bent down towards the drawers. As with the briefcase, she keyed in a code to unlock one of them, and pulled it out to reveal the disassembled parts of a sniper rifle, submachine gun, and two pistols. She opened the drawer next to it, which contained the ammo stash. The drawer below held a spotter scope and field glass. "These, I assume you're already familiar with."

"Pretty safe assumption," Ana said, prompting the electric blue eye to turn towards her.

Nilah shut the drawers and stood. "The passcodes and mission brief are all in your computers. You know what to do from here." She strode back out to the living room with the snipers in tow. "We've asked the landlord to restrict access to the rooftop, so be discrete should you go up."

"We will."

"The ground team is in unit #11-10. Meet them when you need to, but don't attract any undue attention to yourselves."

"Understood," Ana replied.

"Good luck. I will be in contact." Nilah nodded and left the apartment with mechanical efficiency.

"So, babe," Khalid said as he put his backpack on the floor. "What should we do first? Unpack? Greet our neighbours? Get our groceries? Maybe buy some paintings to brighten up the place?"
“Dibs on the bed.”

“Fuck.”

“Khalid, why don’t you ever remember to put the fucking toilet seat down after you use it?”

“Why don’t you ever lift it up after you’re done?”

“Because you’re not the one who’ll fall into the bowl when you go to piss at 3 in the morning!”

“Then maybe you should use your stupid eye for something useful for once, instead of ogling at your girlfriend’s tits—” He winced when the roll of newspaper smacked onto his head.

“Fuck off.” She glared at Khalid as he stood from the chair, and shoved the newspaper into his hands. “And take that back.”

“No.”

“Asshole.” Ana yanked the headphones over her head, taking her shift at the desk once more. Several cam feeds were open on one laptop, overlooking the street where the indoor shooting range was located – the suspected hideout. Half the windows onscreen were still black – the ground team had not set up the rest of the hidden cameras yet. The second laptop’s feed was still dark – their audio would have to be set up by today.

“What are they doing now?”

“Putting up one more cam, then wiretapping. Khairah's setting up sniffers downstairs.”

“Mm.” Ana settled in position, starting her third straight day stuck in front of a desk instead of being mobile like the rest of the team. Part of her was already getting restless – though the apartment was much more comfortable than a sniper’s nest, and their job was similar to that in the battlefield, the computers made it feel like a desk job more than anything. Hell, it was a literal desk job. What she would not give to hold her rifle at least once.

She sat in place, attention on the video feeds and the occasional radio chatter between the ground team. And despite their progress, Ana was still stuck in one place. Watching. Waiting. Wishing her phone was with her. Tapping once on the comms device beside the laptop, each time the green light blinked to confirm that the hidden cam and taps were working. She kept her eyes moving from feed to feed, staying in motion so her mind would not wander. Her stomach growled when the smell of food wafted under her nostrils.

A takeout container smacked into her shoulder, prompting her to grumble out a word of thanks and take the box. Khalid sat heavily in the chair beside hers, already digging into his own omelette.

“This is boring,” Khalid griped. He tried to put his feet up on the table, but had them slapped down by Ana before he could do so.

“Worse than a nest.”

“Yeah. Living with you fucking sucks.”

“Try living with yourself, you pig.” Ana reached out to tap on the comms – their visuals were in place. They had a 360° view of the target building and its surrounding cluster. More cams might be set up in the future if necessary, but for now what they had would suffice.
"I want a divorce."

"I want a hitman."

Khalid cocked his head in thought. "Technically, aren't we hitmen?"

"No, hitmen are illegal."

"Right… Everything's illegal until you're hired by the--" His mouth fell shut when Ana shushed him, accepting a transmission from the team below.

"Yes."

"Ana, do me a favour. Accept the feed I'm sending you."

"What is it?" Another tap on the keyboard, and a new window popped up over the cam feeds.

"Do you see anything?"

"No. It's dark."

"Pity," Khairah sighed.

"What are you doing? Aren't you working on the sniffers?"

"I'm done with them, darling. Now I'm trying to get eyes on the inside."

"Are you sure that's safe?"

"I'm quiet when I have to be, don't worry." The window disappeared from Ana's screen. "Alright then, I'll keep working on it. Thanks."

"You're welcome."

"And call me when you need a chat. It's kind of lonely down here."

The line was cut before Ana could squeeze in a smart reply – which she was glad for, to be perfectly honest.

"Khairah?" Khalid asked.

"Yeah. She's trying to get access into the building's security cams." Ana scooped a mouthful of food, watching their team pass by several cams to reach their next destination. "Kinda flirty, that one."

"Huh. Haven't noticed."

"I'm sure you will."

They had identified their targets within the first week, and taken note of their schedules in the second. The only problem was, the hierarchy within this cell remained unclear to them, and watching from the outside would get them no further. Khairah's cameras merely showed them exactly which room in the shooting range's basement they used for their meetings, but was unable to eavesdrop due to the lack of surveillance equipment inside. That was why one of their team had signed up as a member to gain access to their shooting range.

The third week had them more on edge. Direct communication with Umar whenever he was in the
range was kept to a minimum, and limited to a recently procured cell phone. He spent regular 'after-work' hours in the range, and made sure to keep his aim much lousier than it actually was. A hidden body cam recorded everything he saw in the building – including a close-up of their targets when Umar had bumped into them on accident. But that was the extent of his contact with them. They were still getting nowhere, which meant they had to go deeper.

"The bug will transmit everything on an encrypted sub-frequency, it should be alright," Khairah reassured them over the radio.

"What if they can pick up this frequency?" Adnan asked, barely raising his voice above the background noise of passers-by shuffling past him.

"I would ask you to trust us, Captain," Nilah broke in. "And might I remind you, time is running short. Two teams have reported in and I expect the rest would soon follow suit. We cannot afford to delay the entire operation."

"If this fails, then it's on your head, computer." The channel went dead.

"What a dick," Khalid chimed in over their own private channel. He was stationed on the rooftop and watching over the area with the sniper rifle. A prototype cloaking device helped him blend into his surroundings and kept him out of sight. He had snatched the lookout duty from Ana, eager to test out this new device first. It was a vastly improved version of what the army currently had – this one minimised light refraction to the point that only a trained eye could detect them, even while they were moving. Put simply, it made its wearer perfectly invisible.

Ana would kick his ass for snatching the fun away from her – later.

"Just ignore him, Nilah." Ana kept her eyes on the screen, watching as the team got into position around the range – sitting in a café, reading a newspaper on a bench, pretending to wait for a friend running late. Once they were all in place, she sent a text to Umar: [You left your journal in the office.] - his signal to start moving.

"I have been, Ana. Thank you."

"Welcome."

Umar made his way into the range as usual, greeting the staff like the natural actor he was. He spent 45 minutes at the range – making Ana's fingers itch in frustration when he met the bull's eye only six times. Then he made his way to the washrooms, located in the hallway.

"Nilah," Ana said unnecessarily.

"Working on it." Nilah went silent as she put the cameras on a playback loop. "Done."

[Making dinner tonight :)]

Almost immediately, Umar exited the washroom and made for the staircase. The man walked down the quiet hallway as casually as if it were his home and, with a quick scan of his surroundings, pulled out the discrete lock-picking device from his pocket. A mere 8 seconds pressed against the keyhole later, the meeting room's door was unlocked. Ana made a note to ask Nilah where she acquired it, even though she suspected no answer would be given.

Her body tensed when Umar walked into the room and out of sight, closing the door behind him.

"Ana," Adnan's voice crackled through her earpiece.
"He just got in."

She felt her heart thud in her chest, each minute crawling by as if it were an hour. One beep finally came from her laptop, then another. The bugs were in place, and Ana could hear even the shuffle of Umar's shoes against the ground, despite his attempts to walk quietly. He quickly left the meeting room and locked the door behind him, returning to the stairs with a smile on his face. That was when Ana noticed movement towards the stairs on the ground floor.

Umar pulled out the phone vibrating silently in his pocket and answered the call without a word.

"Get under the stairs! Tangos coming down!"

The group of three had cleared one flight of stairs when Umar managed to hide under the lowest flight, staying deep in the shadows, presumably close to the wall. Ana kept absolutely silent – her call was still on. She watched the trio walk through the stairs' exit without a second glance backwards, then down the hallway and into the meeting room. After making sure the coast was clear on both floors, she said, "No alarm. Go."

Umar peeked out, then hustled back up the stairs and into the washroom. After a green light from Nilah, who had relinquished control of the cams, he strode back out to pack his things and left.

Ana leaned back in her seat with a huge sigh as Umar met up with Adnan.

"Good work. Let's regroup."

"Oh, Nilah," Ana asked. "You did account for the three's arrival, right?"

"Of course."

"Come on, Ana. Have more faith."

"Just checking."

"Oh? Why don't you check on me too?"

"Pass."

"Ouch."

"You're right," Khalid said on a personal channel when Khairah's device clicked off. "She does flirt a lot."

"Told you."

"What if she moves on you?"

Ana laughed. "Then she's lucky Milah's not here to break her nose."

If only Milah was here to break her nose, was the general gist of Ana's idle thoughts when left to rest. The fourth week wore on into the fifth, then blended into the sixth. By the seventh week, Ana had come up with a list of things to do that would make Kamilah airdrop from a speeding jet without a parachute, just to build enough velocity to punch Ana into a crater upon landing. Jumping from one rooftop to another for fun. Looking into the rifle's muzzle while it's loaded and had its safety off. Drinking hot sauce from the bottle. Hijacking a car for a joyride. And, of course, actually giving into the advances she had been receiving. All actions that would probably land her in a world of pain.
And that was the fun part.

Worry over Kamilah's well-being only made for longer hours and restless sleep. Was she eating and sleeping well? Was she having any trouble with her new role after Deyab left? Was she setting high expectations then beating herself up when they were not met? How was she feeling? Did she have anyone to talk to? Did she miss Ana as much as Ana missed her?

No, ridiculous question. Of course she did.

"Stop moping around."

"I'm not doing anything."

"Right." Khalid glanced away from the screens, as if to double check that Ana was still slumped in the chair beside him. "Moping."

"Shut up."

"It's your break. Why don't you go mope somewhere else and stop bringing me down."

"Misery loves company."

"Too bad I'm not the company it wants," Khalid said drily before turning back to the video feeds. Ana gave a drawn-out groan as her head fell back to lean on her chair's backrest. "Come on, we're already halfway there. Only one more team needs to report in and then we can move."

"I'm gonna kill them," Ana muttered, resting her eyes for the first time in 15 hours. Day by day, she found herself wanting to sit at the desk more, to the point where she had stolen Khalid's shifts twice in a row, and stayed on the job for 48 straight hours. More time working meant less time to wonder, to think. But after Khalid's intervention and threat of knocking her out, she had to settle for hugging a pillow close to her chest. A very poor substitute for her lover's warmth, but it was all she had whenever she wrestled with sleep.

"Why don't you take the roof then? Beats the hell out of moping here."

Her head buzzed when she moved – an obvious signal that she should probably take a rest, but it was one she had learnt to ignore like the rest of her colleagues. Ana heaved herself out of the chair, taking a deep breath before moving over to their equipment stash, and took out the spotter's scope. The rifle was unnecessary – they were not making contact with the enemy any time soon.

"I'm calling you back in 3 hours," Khalid told her as she picked up the stealth kit as well.

Ana merely grunted and walked out of the study.

Two more weeks passed, and Ana's mind took a different tack. When not spying on their enemies' activities, she put pen to the pieces of paper torn from a notebook she had found in the study. Instead of wallowing in the 'what if's, Ana found it more productive to think of what will – as in, what will she do when she returned to Cairo. She had clean forgotten about Valentine's and in three more weeks, she would have spent one year with Kamilah. A little celebration was in order, except she was undecided on what to do. Having a long list of ideas scribbled down on paper and piecing them together made for a good off-duty hobby.

That was, until she wondered what Kamilah would want to do. Maybe bungee jumping or wind surfing was not really her thing. Maybe she wanted to slow down and smell the roses. Or was she up
for a one-on-one quad bike race all over the dunes? But that was something they had already done before. What if she wanted to do something new and special?

"Why don't you just ask her?" Khalid said, after another bout of pen scratching furiously over paper, as Ana eliminated more items from her list.

A wave of déjà vu crashed over her head, and she paused. "Then it wouldn't be a surprise anymore."

"Why does it have to be a surprise?"

Huh.

"Besides, you're going back after weeks. Don't think she'd be surprised if you pulled something special out of your--" Khalid stopped abruptly, accepting a call from Nilah downstairs. He listened with a hand on the headphones, then pulled them off when the transmission ended.

"What is it?" Ana asked, recognising the gleam in his eye.

"Adnan called for a meeting downstairs. Command just sent orders."

Ana sat by the edge of the roof with Khalid; her rifle's bipod rested on the low parapet, its butt against her shoulder. Her fingers held the grip and trigger guard almost casually as she scanned the building, the alleys, and along the street again. A war song hummed deep within her bones, lulling her into a tranquil, near-meditative state; eyes ready to snap to target, finger ready to hook and squeeze. Adnan had advised them though, that sniper fire would only be used on command, and as a last resort.

Discretion was the key to keeping this operation under wraps, and hopefully they would keep any action confined within the range's building itself. The Jordanian forces had arrived just days ago and, after a thorough briefing by the recon team, were ready to put their plan into motion. Priority one was the cell's leader – third in line for the head of new insurgency. Priority two was the kingpin of the local arms dealers. Their orders were shoot-to-kill; but for these two, 'alive' was preferable to 'dead'.

One squad was split in two – each half guarding the alleys beside the range to prevent any escape attempts. Two men were stationed outside to usher civilians away should the fighting spill out onto the streets. The snipers would aid as necessary. The main team would enter the building after the meeting had started – which was about twenty minutes ago, as Nilah reported from her station at the surveillance cameras.

Ana tensed a little when the team – dressed in civilian clothing with a bulletproof vest underneath – crossed the road towards the shooting range. Other than the bulky outline of their jackets, they appeared like any other person heading about their own business.

She watched the windows as the team disappeared through the doors, listening to Adnan talk to the first guards they encountered. It was hostile from the get-go: the range was closed and they had obviously forced their way in. A round of muffled shots from the team's silenced pistols, then she heard the sound of bodies dropping to the floor. They had not given the tangos a chance to even pull out their weapons.

More footsteps, more silenced gunshots, then shouting burst through the comms, followed by furious rattling of the insurgents' firearms. A door burst open in the background, even more shots, then shouts to take cover as something hard thudded against a solid surface. Ana heard a flashbang go off, followed by a smatter of gunfire amid the rapid thudding of shoes past Adnan's mic, and his furious barks at his squad to chase after the fleeing targets.
Ana readied her rifle and Khalid pressed his eye back to his scope. Their two colleagues had sprung into action, clearing the street outside by telling hurried stories of a gas leak and potential explosion. The sidewalk and road emptied just in time for the windows to shatter under a brief spray of bullets, followed by bodies jumping over the ledges. The main entrance doors burst open to reveal their insurgent target, who managed to take only three running steps before Adnan pounced on him from behind. The soldier grabbed hold of the man's jacket and shoved him roughly onto the ground, causing the signature black hat to fall from the target's bald head. That was when Ana noticed—

"It's not him."

She was about to zoom in with her cybernetic eye, but noticed a flurry of movement in the alley, where the side entrance was located. Instead of running farther into the alley, a group of three sprinted out onto the street and away from the commotion caused by the impostor. The bodyguard fell under the well-aimed shot of their crowd-usher, who was then shot by the arms dealer as he ran alongside the insurgent leader.

"Amari!" Adnan shouted, prompting Ana to look back through her scope. He was involved in a tussle with two other men while the rest of the squad had to contend with their own foes as well, pulled into unexpected physical brawls. "It's a decoy—"

"I know!" Ana yelled back, scrambling onto her feet and telling Khalid to stay down. Keeping her eye on their fleeing targets, Ana glanced back and spotted a tango rising to his feet behind Adnan, lifting a pistol towards his back. Oddly, there was no hesitation at all. Ana followed her feet – already in motion – and leapt towards the next rooftop. A gunshot and wet gurgle crackled through her earpiece, and her mind shut out the sound of Adnan falling to the ground. She slid to a stop on her knees towards the roof's edge, and set her rifle down on the parapet again.

She spotted the targets running towards a car parked by the sidewalk. Ana squeezed the trigger, landing an incapacitating shot in the arms dealer's chest. The man jerked as he fell to the floor, and was abandoned by his partner who slid into cover behind the car. During a lull in which Ana waited for her target to reappear, the deafening blast of a grenade screeched through her earpiece, causing her to wince and glance back at the range – but she could not spot the telltale signs of an explosion.

Realising her mistake, Ana quickly snapped back to the target at hand. With a stroke of luck, she had just caught him trying to run away from the car and farther up the street, where pedestrian traffic was denser. But panic took the reins and Ana fired a shot without thinking – it was by sheer luck that the bullet safely found its mark in her target's lower back, lodging into his flesh and making him fall to his knees. No confused civilians wandered into her line of shot. Although, there were terrified ones backtracking from the man, watching him with wide eyes as he slumped to the floor, before running away.

"Ana," Khalid's voice came through the comms. "Sitrep."

"Targets down. Emergency transport needed."

"Understood."

"I heard a grenade."

"Khairah threw it back in the building. It hurt no one." A brief pause. "But we have 3 casualties."

"Who?"
"Umar and Jemal are wounded. Adnan's gone."

The mission was a success – both targets were taken in alive, and the ruckus was passed off as a turf war between the local gangs. The recon team's mood, however, stayed subdued as they spent the day packing their equipment. Watching Adnan get sealed in a body bag for transport was not the greatest of mood lifters. And Ana found herself replaying the mission in her head, from that instant when she had risen to her feet and chose to turn her eyes away. It was so…fast. In all honesty, her memories were nearly a blur – which meant the mind was free to build scenario upon possible scenario of alternate actions she could have taken. But as she had done throughout the insurgency, she tucked the issue away and set her mind on something else.

Kamilah. She would be a good focus.

The team was flown back to Central Command, given a debriefing where the operation was declared an overall success, and dismissed long after the sun had set. Ana had made a beeline for the barracks, stripped down to her t-shirt and shorts, and grabbed her phone only to have her heart sink like a stone.

Mesi: [Hey. Mind talking to Kamilah when you have the time? She's been on edge for the past week. Also, hope the mission's going well?]

Mesi: [Idk if you're reading these, but talk to her when you can. Platoon kinda fucked up today and she lost her temper at her squad]

Mesi: [Haven't been able to get hold of her, so you know. Do your thing]

These were from more than a month ago.

Mesi: [Kamilah's in the hospital. Biking accident. Concussion. That's all she texted back anyway]

Mesi: [Ok she's back. Looks fine. Taking leave for the next few days. Still kinda under the weather though. Idk if you already know, but just a heads up. Give her a call when you can, alright?]

These were from last week.

Ana flew back to her spot at the edge of the barracks compound and quickly pressed for a video call. The longer it rang, the faster her pacing became. But she slowed down when Kamilah answered – without video.

She pressed the phone to her ear. "Milah?"

"Ana."

Despite the circumstances, the sound of her voice made a smile spread across her lips. Kamilah sounded fine, at least. Even if a little flat. "Feels like years since I've heard your voice."

"Same here."

"Kinda wanted to see you too, though."

"I…don't look that great right now."

"Nonsense. You always look great." She waited for a response of some sort, but got nothing. "So, how are you doing?"
"I'm okay. Had an accident on my bike last week. But I'm fine now."

"Are you hurt?"


"That's good."

"What about you?"

"Not a scratch. How's that for a joke, hm?"

A short, weak laugh. Then nothing.

"Are you feeling alright?" Ana asked gently. "You sound…off."

"I'm fine. Just tired. That's all."

"How long?"

Kamilah paused. "I'm fine, Ana."

"Heard you had it rough recently."

"…Kind of."

"Wanna talk about it?" Ana waited, taking a seat on the kerb. But when no answer was forthcoming, she tried to fill the gap. "It's alright, Milah. Everyone has bad days. Even you. It's okay. You'll feel better eventually, but it's alright if you just want to lie down for a while. Then you can do whatever makes you feel better, when you want to."

She stopped, wondering if her words were just empty babble. But separated as they were and with the growing hollowness in her chest, it seemed empty babble was all she had. "Would a serenade help?"

The amused huff lightened the gloom in her chest. "I miss you."

"I miss you too," Ana replied softly, the undercurrent of longing rising to the surface. "When I get back, I'm going to hold you for days."

"Think I'd–" A stifled yawn. "I'd like that."

"Are you tired?" Ana chuckled.

"A little."

"Then get some rest. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Mm." Kamilah sniffed, and Ana heard shuffling in the background. "I love you."

"I love you more."

"Please don't start that now."

"Fine." Ana pouted, then remembered Kamilah could not see her. "Good night, albi."

"Good night."
Ana held the phone to her ear until its screen went dark, then fell back onto the concrete pavement behind her. She rested the phone on her chest and heaved a sigh. Closing her eyes, Ana felt her muscles turn mellow for the first time in days. She replayed Kamilah's words in her head, recounting each affectionate lilt in her voice that brought a smile to her lips. Her worry for Kamilah still lingered, mixing with the weight she still carried from the mission. But she found it easier to lay them aside, even if just for tonight.
"There you are. I've been looking all over for you."

Ana rolled her eyes at Safiya, who strode over to her bench beside the pond. She had snuck away after her duties to check on her squad and Kamilah. The morons were fine as always. The latter, though sounding better each day, still skirted around more probing questions. Ana had made more progress coaxing little giggles and jokes from her, but she would still feel better if she was there in person with Kamilah. At least it won't be long now – just two more days and they would return to Egypt.

"I haven't moved from here since you called," Ana deadpanned, earning a light smack on the head as Safiya sat down.

"I meant before I called." Safiya stretched her arms over her head and gave a satisfied sigh, reclining on the wooden bench. "Why are you here by yourself? Where's teddy man?"

"'Booty call. And why do you keep calling Khalid 'teddy man'?"

"'Cause he's as harmless as a teddy? Looks strong, can beat people up, but he won't do it."

"Unless someone's threatened."

"That's right." Safiya snapped her fingers. "So, how are you doing?"

"Fine."

"If you're fine, you wouldn't be a broody ass here by yourself." She gestured at the garden they were in, located beside the family residences.

"What if it's my new hobby?"

"Please," Safiya scoffed. "Your new hobby's back in Cairo."

Ana kicked at her feet, but Safiya merely raised her brows pointedly. She sighed, "I'm kind of worried about her."

"Oh?"

"She's been having a bad time."

"That sucks."

"Yeah." She fidgeted with her fingers. "How's Zahra?"

"Good. Not that great without me right now, but I'll have that sorted out soon." Safiya snickered, but quieted when Ana just gave an amused snort and no follow-up. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Just been thinking about mama lately."

"Why, did she haunt your dreams or something?"

"Nah. I'm just…thinking." Ana scratched her jaw idly. "We never knew why she died."
"Bullets. They're not very good for your health."

Ana rolled her eyes. "I know. But why did she take the bullets?" When Safiya cocked her head in silent question, she continued, "Was she...sacrificing herself for someone else? Was it on accident?"

Safiya's gaze fell from Ana, moving to the pond.

"What if someone chose to let her go?"

"Does it matter? She's gone. The end." Safiya's tone grew sharper with each word before she paused abruptly, as if checking herself. She glanced over at Ana. "Heard there's one KIA on your team. Is that why you're here?"

Shrugging slowly, Ana said, "Maybe."

"Was there a choice?"

"Yeah."

"Did you make it?"

"...Yeah."

"Do you regret it?"

"I...don't know. Regret that I had to make that choice, maybe."

"Cop-out answer." Safiya straightened herself. "But expected. Was the mission successful because of what you did?"

"I guess so."

"Then you did what you had to do."

"Was it right?"

Safiya's face was blank. "I can't tell you that."

"Great. Thanks a lot."

"Look, I can't tell you that. No one can tell you that. If you want a clear-cut line between right and wrong, then war's a fucking bad place to look for it." She sighed heavily. "If you want advice or some shit, then you have to ask papa or someone else. The way I look at it, it's just 'action' and 'consequence'. If you do something, are you able to handle the consequences?"

"Cop-out answer."

Safiya snorted, mouth curling in a cynical smirk. "Selfish one too. But it's how I manage, anyway."

Ana let out a breath, dragging a hand down her face. "I'm a hypocrite."

"Everyone is."

"No, I mean - do you know how I...got Kamilah's attention?"

"According to her, by being an idiot."
"Yeah. But back then, I had a mission to take out the insurgent 2IC. She was alone and being cornered, and I just shoved my rifle at Khalid and ran off to help her."

"And? Do you regret what you did?"

"I abandoned my mission."

"Not what I asked."

"…No. I don't regret helping her. But I saved her just because I had an attachment to her."

"Are you happy with the results?"

"I–, yes."

"Then what about this mission? What do you think of the results?"

"I helped to put an end to the insurgency…?"

"Then that's it. You made the best choice at hand."

"With a double standard."

"Ana…"

"If Kamilah was the one getting shot at, I would've fucking vaulted from the roof just to help her."

"But she wasn't," Safiya said. When Ana's face remained stiff, Safiya squeezed her cheeks with her fingers. "Don't overthink it, Ana. You completed your mission. You saved more lives from being fucked over by a few uppity assholes. Celebrate that."

Ana did not move when her face was being 'massaged', so Safiya relinquished her hold and inched closer on the bench.

"Listen to me, Ana. Don't dwell on it. These choices will only pile up as time goes on. And if you're not careful, you'll be crushed under all that weight you insist on carrying."

"It's not like I want to."

"Who does? The key, my dear, is not beating yourself up over something you've done, but learning from it. You learn, you adapt, you move on. Dwelling on it won't help. Not now, and definitely not 20 years down the road."

Ana remained quiet, eyes turned downwards in contemplation. Safiya waited, giving her time to turn things over in her head, before standing up and patting off the front of her pants. Then she grabbed onto Ana's shoulders and hauled her to her feet. "Come on. Let's go eat."

"Is that all you do nowadays? Stuff your face?" Ana groaned, walking down the path at Safiya's urging.

"I'm just hungry, alright? Besides, it's more fun than moping in a garden and looking at fishes."

"I don't mope."

"Sulk."
"Ugh."

The Cairo detachment was scheduled to leave before the Sa'ka, and on the day of their departure, Safiya had sent Ana off with a hug and promise to call soon. Also a backhanded compliment that Ana only fully processed after the plane's landing ramp had closed, and that woman would get an earful later. But for now, there were more important things to think of.

Ana's feet tapped against the floor in an impatient rhythm as she chattered aimlessly with Khalid, who seemed much more laid-back than usual. Thankfully, the flight was only a little over an hour long. The restlessness had no time to settle in, and it gave her a full afternoon to put herself together before Kamilah's duty shift ended. She went out of base with Khalid to escape from canteen food, then nipped into a string of stores to get the items she needed to fulfill the promise she had made months before.

So it was that Kamilah opened her door at night, to find Ana with a bottle of pinot noir in one hand, a small bouquet of flowers in the other, and a box of chocolates in the crook of an arm. Her grin was accompanied by a single stalk of rose, held in place between her teeth.

Kamilah's features twitched as a myriad of emotions swept through. Then she pressed a hand to her mouth when she snorted, trying to stifle the giggles that burst into laughter. Unfortunately for Ana, the laughter was infectious, and the rose hurtled from her mouth when she broke out laughing as well. Kamilah caught it before it dropped to the floor, grimacing when the thorns dug into her palm.

"Nice reflexes, sweetie." Ana strode into the room and was promptly drawn into a tight embrace. Her wide smile softened at the arms wrapped tightly around her torso, fingers searching and clutching at different spots on her back, as if to make sure Ana was real. Or to check for bandages on her body. Maybe both.

"Is this a full-body checkup?"

Kamilah took a deep breath and sighed, as Ana squeezed about her shoulders. "I'm off duty."

"Ever heard of overtime?"

Leaning back to fix Ana with a wry smile, she said, "I've been on eternal overtime since I met you."

"Sounds like a handful," Ana murmured, kissing her gently, slowly. The urgency that burnt within her was doused in an instant; pent-up affection finding release in the soft glide of lips on lips. There was no need to rush – they had all the time they needed.

"You're worth it," Kamilah said when they parted.

Something in her quivered as the tender gaze and smile held her captive. She could not comprehend the blend of soft affection and fierce passion in her heart just yet. But one thing of which she was sure: there was nowhere else in the world she would rather be right then.

"At a loss for words?" Kamilah asked.

"No. I just forgot how beautiful you are." Ana bit on her lip to stop a tease escaping, when a faint blush grew on Kamilah's cheeks. Evidently she had gone too long without open adoration.

Ana released Kamilah from the embrace, and held up the gifts. "I believe you ordered these?" She noted the short cut beside Kamilah's brow, and the long cut running down the side of her hand and wrist when she took the items.
"You didn't have to, you know."

"I know." She waited for Kamilah to stash the chocolate and wine away, and set the flowers aside. Grasping onto her hands, Ana lifted them to examine the cut, and discovered an abrasion on the base of her other palm. They seemed to have healed considerably, though they still looked red underneath the scabs. "What happened?"

"I…wasn't really paying attention. And I rode into a truck trying to change lanes."

"Then?"

"I flew off my bike?" Kamilah looked a little sheepish. "I was kind of…over the speed limit."

Ana sighed helplessly, running her thumbs gently over the wounds. She turned Kamilah's hands over to find skinned knuckles. Almost dreading what else she would find, she lifted the hands to look at the elbows – another abrasion on one, and scratches on the other.

"Oh sweetie," she sighed again, aching at the sight and the thought that Kamilah had to handle it alone. "You should leave the injuries to me. I'm the meathead." She raised a hand to worry at the cut near Kamilah's brow. "Weren't you wearing your helmet?"

"That's from training. Shrapnel."

"Ah. Does it still hurt?"

"A little. But it's alright."

"Of course." Ana smiled at her, noting the shadows beneath her eyes. "Well, I'm back now. I'll take care of you. Don't look at me like that," she added when Kamilah raised her brows. "I know what to do. And I have the time."

"Oh?" Kamilah strode over to her study desk with Ana in tow, reaching for her buzzing phone. "Did they give you leave?"

"One week."

"That's good." She typed quickly into her phone, wearing a light frown which disappeared when she set the device down again. Lips curling back into a smile, she rested her arms around Ana's neck. "So, how'd the mission go?"

Gazing back into tired eyes lit with mirth, Ana could only shrug nonchalantly and say, "It went well. All thanks to me, of course." She felt a brief twinge at the boast, but Kamilah seemed content to accept it without her usual wit.

"Of course," she drawled, pecking Ana on the lips. "What would the army ever do without you?"

With the break from her official duties, Ana's personal mission was finally set in motion.

Kamilah, while more than capable at taking care of her own wounds, was less diligent in… everything else. The hospital's logistics systems had undergone a total revamp to accommodate the capabilities of their new omnic staff and, unfortunately, hit a massive road bump that threw their records up in the air. While the technicians were scurrying to recover the data, the hospital staff were stuck with using an older backup system, and worked their fingers to the bone entering each new piece of information manually. First Lieutenant Shadid was one of the more experienced medics in
charge of fixing the mistakes their subordinate officers made, in addition to their usual workload.

Needless to say, it had left her perpetually worn out for the past couple of weeks. And Ana was dismayed – though unsurprised – to find out instant foods, coffee, and aspirin had been Kamilah's main source of sustenance. The medic always returned looking haggard and had to be forced to shove food into her mouth before slumping over in bed. And even then, Ana had been woken up a few times from her restless fidgeting in the early morning.

So her schedule quickly took on a routine: she woke up earlier in the morning to make sure her charge ate, chauffeured Kamilah to work, prepared for any shift extensions, drove the zombie back whenever she knocked off, and made sure she was tucked into bed after taking food and any necessary medication. Ana figured she was doing a pretty good job – Kamilah never snapped at her despite having frayed nerves, fell asleep faster under gentle ministrations, and woke up looking nearly human again in the mornings.

And where she made progress with Kamilah, her special plan to pamper her partner proved to be a little tricky. After dropping off the medic with a kiss and reminder to not strangle anyone with her bare hands, Ana made a trip back to her family home with a bag of groceries for practice in the kitchen.

"How many times have you tried already?"

"Once."

"And how was it?"

Ana poured oil into the skillet. "A little…burnt. On the outside."

Zaid laughed as she put a steak in. They were on a video call so he could walk Ana through the cooking process. The tablet sat in its stand by the stove, angled so he could see the pan's contents and catch a glimpse of Ana's face. "You are your mother's daughter."

"Mama could cook."

"Yeah, after I happened."

"So she learnt for you?"

"Ha! No. She didn't have to, really. But your teta's an antiquated old crow and your mama wanted to win her over. Flip it, habibi."

"Antiquated?" Ana asked, turning the steak over as instructed.

"Yup. 'A wife knows how to cook' and all that nonsense."

"And?"

"And she learnt. She was more of a pain to teach than you."

"Thanks?"

"She once set our rice on fire."

"What? How?"

"Beats me. We put it out quickly though, so…"
"Thank god she was better when she had us."

"Yup. Love conquers all, as they say. Even inept cooking."

"Just hope this one conquers in time."

"Don't worry. Kamilah will enjoy it even if it's not that good."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence." Ana cocked her head, staring at the tablet unamused.

"Trust me. If you love a person enough, even a piece of charcoal will taste good."

"Let me guess: mama made you charcoal."

"It was chicken. Was. She wanted to throw it away, but I shoved it into my mouth anyway. And I think you left it for too long!" Zaid added hurriedly.

Jolting back to attention, Ana lifted the steak with her thongs to inspect the darker sear on its underside. She groaned in frustration, then pressed its pink side against the pan.

"It's alright. I think it's just overcooked. And are you doing any sides?"

"Salad and gratin. Later."

"Can you two finish that?"

"Yeah. We can eat quite a bit if we want." Ana transferred the steak onto a plate. Flicking off the stove's switch, she grabbed a knife and cut into the meat. There was just a tinge of pink – more done than desired.

"How is it?" Zaid asked when she took a bite.

"Could be a little rarer." She shrugged, glancing over at her phone vibrating over the countertop. Ana grabbed it to find an incoming call from Kamilah.

"You have things handled from here? I've to go."

"Yeah. Thanks, papa."

"Good luck for your dinner."

Ana accepted the call as Zaid's face disappeared from her tablet's screen, and cut up the steak.

"Hello."

"Ana, I think I'll be held back for a while later."

"Of course. What time?"

"I'm not sure. The system's just restored and we have to check through it. After we're done, I suppose."

"That's good." She speared a piece of meat on the tip of her knife, delivering it into her mouth. "Just call me whenever."

"Thanks. Are you eating?"

"Yeah. Er—, afternoon tea?" At Kamilah's sigh, she said, "You forgot to eat, didn't you?"
"Maybe. I'll...go grab something."

"Not coffee alone. Please."

"Mm. See you later."

"Bye."

Ana took another bite, cocking her head. It was not that bad, but she should try this one more time, at least. Practice does make perfect.

It was lucky that the hospital managed to get its act together before the end of the week. Kamilah started to retain some semblance of life at the end of the day; she had more energy to indulge in hobbies – taking Ana out on a ride, watching her sci-fi show, going for a swim, entertaining a girlfriend who got frisky. Perhaps what truly improved her mood was finally being given a few days' break after working for weeks straight with little rest, and she agreed to a trip back to the Amari home without second thought.

Ana woke up with a feverish energy that morning, bustling here and there at double speed, and earned a curious look from Kamilah before the medic alighted from her car. Then she zipped over to her house, read through her checklist to make sure it was in order, and zipped back out again to gather the items she needed.

Time flew by quickly with her endless rushing about the house, and the amount of focus she carried in the kitchen. Before long, she had everything in place and was driving back to base to pick Kamilah up. With a little nap in the car, Kamilah appeared more alert and relaxed than when she had strode out of the hospital's entrance.

"Is something going on?" Kamilah asked, as the hands on her hips guided her up the stairs.

"Yes." Ana ushered her along into the her room, where Kamilah's bag was lying on the bed. She steered her partner towards the bathroom first, and turned on the lights. Pointing towards the sink where an array of bottles were lined up, she explained, "Cleansers, washes, conditioner, moisturisers, masks are all there. Use them all if you wish. I would've set the bath for you, but it'd be cold by the time we reached back here."

"Ana," Kamilah said slowly, watching her fill up the tub. "What did you do?"

Ana spun around, eyes wide in mock hurt. "Why do you assume I did something wrong?"

"I didn't say something wrong." She smirked, crossing her arms. "So did you?"

"No. Is this what I get for trying to take care of my girlfriend? Suspicion? Kamilah Shadid, you are horrible." Ana reached for two bottles of bath oil. "Would lavender do, or does rose suit your heartless ways better?"

"Lavender is fine."

"Excellent choice." Into the water the oil went, and Ana turned off the faucet. "How about some scented candles? Or maybe a hot sniper for company?"

Kamilah gave a bemused huff. "You're ridiculous."

"So are you." She dipped in for a kiss. "Take your time, and come down when you're done."
At a nod from Kamilah, Ana flew back down to the kitchen, cranking up the oven and tossing the salad already neatly arranged in a bowl. She timed herself, waiting until the gratin was halfway done before setting the steaks on the skillet. The plan was going along perfectly – that was until she realised she had overestimated Kamilah's bath time, when a hand slid up her arm to rest on her bicep.

She smiled when Kamilah rested her chin on a shoulder. "Done so quickly?" Ana asked.

"It got boring without you. Do you need help?"

"No, I've got it." She turned off the stove, and transferred the steaks onto their respective plates. "Actually, could you help me bring the salad and wine out first?"

"Yup."

By the time Ana reached the table with plates and oven-hot baking dish in hand, Kamilah was already twisting the corkscrew into the bottle.

"So, you haven't said. Why all this?"

"You don't remember?" Ana asked, setting the dishes down.

"No, I really don't."

"It's our first-year anniversary."

Kamilah blinked as her hand jerked, cork popping free from the bottle. "Oh. I...haven't been keeping track."

"You've been busy. I'm surprised you even remembered who I am, honestly."

"Me too." She smiled, filling their glasses and sitting down. "But you're not that easy a person to get rid of."

"Did you even try?"

"No."

Ana laughed. She sat next to Kamilah, and raised her glass. "Well then. Here's to you, sweetheart. For letting me stay with you. For all your love and patience, for being the amazing woman that you are. The past year with you has been a dream, and with all my heart, I hope it will never end."

Wearing a soft smile, Kamilah leaned in. "Ana?"

"Hm?"

"You forgot to put a ring in my glass."

"Albi," Ana sighed. "You are spending too much time with me."

Kamilah tilted the glass in her hand. "Darling, no time spent with you is too much. I could spend every second of every day by your side, and it still wouldn't be enough."

"My, Kamilah. Are you saying you love me?"

"I'm saying, you're the reason I wake up and smile every morning. You're the reason I look forward to what the next day might bring. You make life worth living. And I can't imagine living without
"Me neither." Ana clinked their glasses together. "Thank heavens we're together then." She took a sip, gaze never leaving Kamilah's. Just that smile on her lips alone, made all the effort worth it. But then again...

Ana nodded at Kamilah's plate, reaching for the small porcelain pitcher to the side. "Go on. Try it before it gets cold." She drizzled the Béarnaise over the steak, then watched expectantly as Kamilah tasted a bite. "So? How is it?"

"It's very good."

"Really? You're not just saying that?"

Kamilah cocked her head. "It really is." She smiled when Ana bounced in her seat excitedly, then cut off another piece and fed it to Ana. "Did you make all this from scratch?"

"Yep."

"Even the sauce?"

"Yep!"

"I'm impressed. This is good," Kamilah said, taking a bigger bite this time. "I'm proud of you."

"You know what? Me too." Ana dug into the food with gusto. "Took me a few times to get the steak right."

"You mean, you actually practiced?"

"Yeah? I've a few talents of my own, Milah. But cooking is not one of them." She swallowed when Kamilah held her chin, turning her head to press their lips lightly together.

"Thank you. You didn't have to."

"It's nothing, albi. And if you want to thank me? Help me finish all these."

Kamilah laughed softly as Ana scooped her a serving of gratin – a mix of potatoes and sweet potatoes. "You know, I have this strange feeling that I should've dressed up for this."

"Oh please, we're doing this at home. Shorts are fine, thank you. Gives me more leg to admire." Ana slid one foot up Kamilah's calf, earning a coquettish smile from behind the wine glass. "Besides, you need to relax after work. Enjoy the freedom to do whatever you want."

"Oh?" Kamilah said, voice lilting playfully. "And if I want to eat the steak with my hands?"

"Go ahead. But on one condition." Ana leaned in. "I get to lick off your fingers."

"Can't wait, can you?"

"It's been months, babe. I'm surprised I haven't pounced on you yet."

"Honestly? Me too." Kamilah took a sip from her glass. "I guess we know what's for dessert, then."

Ana froze.
She *knew* she had forgotten something.

Ana's little oversight proved to be convenient – their dinner filled them up nicely, and they fell into the sofa together in the post-meal daze, nursing the rest of the wine and watching whatever was on TV. Actually, Kamilah did most of the watching. Ana spent most of her time trailing fingertips over bare skin and nuzzling into Kamilah's hair, placing little kisses on her hand, cheek, and shoulder only to be slapped off because Kamilah wanted to focus on the movie. She was not deterred, though. Her hands kept moving and caressing sweet spots that made Kamilah lean into her touch. As long as Ana did not obstruct her movie-watching, she was allowed to do whatever she desired.

And when the movie ended, Kamilah took her sweet time in turning the television off. She poured the last of the wine into her glass, and drank it down slowly while Ana watched her hungrily from the side. She set the glass back on the coffee table, turning to look at Ana with a knowing smile on her face. Curling her finger in a 'come hither' gesture, Kamilah laughed when she was knocked onto her back, and moaned into the heated kiss that soon descended upon her. Ana barely let up, hands and lips reclaiming the one she had dreamt and yearned for, leaving her partner a flushed mess beneath her. She ground her hips between Kamilah's legs, eliciting a groan and hips bucking in return.

Sneaking a hand between them, Ana reached beneath the waistband of Kamilah's shorts, smirking at the lack of underwear. Kamilah bit her lip as Ana rubbed her firmly, fingers dipping briefly in a tease before playing about her entrance again. A whine and a pleading look cut her patience short, and she slid a finger in easily. Another soon followed, Kamilah already tight around her digits.

"Missed me this much, hm?"

"Ana," Kamilah groaned, breath hitching as Ana's fingers curled and dug in. It didn't take long before she started writhing under the fingers pumping relentlessly into her, and finally cried her pleasure into Ana's mouth, body taut and trembling.

Wearing a crooked smile at what was perhaps her fastest record with Kamilah, Ana pulled out, free hand caressing Kamilah's reddened cheeks. Then she gathered her limp lover in her arms and made her way upstairs. Kamilah was ready by the time Ana set her down on the bed, but not *quite* ready yet, judging from the lack of force when she tried to roll Ana onto her back. With a grin, Ana got back to work, kissing every inch of skin revealed by each piece of clothing she pulled off. She kept Kamilah's wrists pinned to the bed, taking her over and over, until any thought of seizing dominance had fallen from her mind in breathless pants and cries.

By the time Ana was done, Kamilah was completely spent, and took a while to be roused back to life.

"Are you okay, sweetheart?" Ana smiled when glazed eyes flickered up towards her. "Wasn't too rough, was I?"

"Can't feel my legs," Kamilah said drowsily, though one of her legs shifted to hook over Ana's. She returned the gentle kisses, arms draping lazily around Ana's neck. "You haven't…"

"It's alright," she murmured. "We have all the time in the world."

"Mm."

Kamilah offered no argument, and nestled tightly against Ana when she lay down as well. "Love you," she mumbled into Ana's neck.
"Love you too."

Ana held her, tracing circular patterns over her back and shoulders, lulling her to sleep. Lying there peacefully with Kamilah in her arms, it was easy to forget the days she had to spend alone and miles away. She smiled to herself, pressing a kiss on top of Kamilah's head.

"You know," she whispered into dark locks. "I can't imagine life without you, either."
Ana drummed her fingers on the steering wheel, left foot tapping on the floor as she waited for the pedestrians to cross.

"Coffee," Kamilah said.

"Drink."

"Plants."

"Green."

"Mouse."

"Small?" She drove forward when the road was clear.

"Pizza."

"Eat. Ugh." Ana flew down the road leading up to their residence. "Now I want pizza."

"We just ate."

"Later then. Okay, my turn." She slowed down to let someone jog across the road. "Bike."

"Ride."

"Dog."

"Pet."

"Cat."

"Pet."

"Ana."

"Smack."

Ana shot her a withering glance as she turned into the garage. "You know, you could at least pretend to hesitate a little."

Kamilah wore an impish smile. "I didn't say where, darling."

"Where then?"

"Your face," Kamilah said quickly, then alighted before Ana could make a comeback.

She settled for heaving a sigh, before following her partner out of the car. They had gone to pick up Kamilah's bike from the auto shop, and Kamilah's mood had stayed on a high since then. The one thing she loved dearly besides Ana was her bike, and this trip was akin to fetching a relative from a long stay at the hospital. Kamilah was looking over the bike again, running her hands over painted blue metal when Ana joined her by the boot. The motorcycle sat safely on the carrier fixed to the car's rear.
The auto shop did a pretty good job at the repairs. The numerous dents and scratches, and the broken windshield were all restored to their former glory. In fact, it looked even better than Ana remembered it. Almost like it was fresh off the factory line.

"Fondle that thing any more, and I might start getting worried," Ana said, holding onto the handlebars as Kamilah set down the metal ramp and released the clamps.

"Are you jealous?" Kamilah asked, rolling the bike down carefully.

"No, worried. Maybe you sneak down to your bike at night just to kiss it or something."

"Jealous."

"Whatever." Ana opened the boot, waiting for Kamilah to park her bike beside the car and finish caressing it, before waving her over. Kamilah looked on curiously as Ana reached for something in the compartment, then raised her brows when the brand new helmet came into view. Ana had ordered a custom job online, to replace Kamilah's ruined one. Its paintjob was identical to that of her beloved character's helmet on Starfell – her sci-fi addiction. It was black with bold silver streaks on the sides, arching towards the back. Grooves cutting down the edges of the visor completed the helmet's likeness.

Kamilah stared at the helmet with visible need, and took it near-reverently when Ana held it out to her. She turned it over slowly, examining every inch of the helmet before looking up at Ana.

"You're crazy," she said in a hushed tone.

"I know." Ana tilted her head with a smug smile, reaching for the phone in her pocket. "Put it on."

The moment she fitted the helmet over her head, Ana snapped a photo of her beaming from inside it.

"How do I look?" Kamilah leaned in to look at the photo and cringed. "I look like an idiot."

Ana laughed when she snapped the visor down. "Is it so bad looking like me?"

Kamilah shrugged and shook her head at the same time, pausing so Ana could press her lips to the tinted visor.

"There. Your helmet's been blessed."

Pulling the helmet off, Kamilah smoothed her hair over and stepped forward to kiss her partner.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"You know, I should get you a new one too."

"Yeah? Let me guess. It'll look like…"

Fingers tapping on the helmet she held at her hip, Kamilah smiled. "Her girlfriend's, yes."

It took a week for Ana's helmet to arrive – one painted in dark crimson with stylised golden wings spread over its surface. With their new acquisition, the pair went out on Kamilah's bike more often, and Ana soon felt that being a mere passenger would not do her helmet justice. So she asked Kamilah for riding lessons, and her request was accepted on one condition – that she would teach Kamilah to drive a car as well.
And so Ana had the terrible misfortune of discovering that, as much of a terror in the hospital Kamilah was, she was never as terrifying as when she sat behind the steering wheel.

"Milah!" Ana exclaimed when the car jerked into the next lane, earning a car honk from behind.

"Oh hush." Kamilah seemed completely unperturbed. "I can't hear myself over your shrieking."

"No blinker, and that car was so close to us!"

"Please. You don't use the blinker yourself sometimes. And your car didn't get scratched."

"Yet."

"Is that a challenge?"

"No!

And their lesson went on. 'Lesson' was a term to be used loosely, because all Ana did was make Kamilah drive around an empty car park until she was familiar with the car's workings, before letting her loose onto the roads. Despite wanting nothing more than to sit back and close her eyes until this was over, Ana clutched onto the roof handle and kept her eyes glued on the road, yelling instructions that were followed only half the time. Perhaps the deal breaker was when they drove behind a car straddling two roads. It moved at a speed much slower than what Kamilah deemed acceptable, so the maniac floored the accelerator and swerved the car to the side. The road was too narrow to accommodate her move, and the tires bumped up onto the pavement, getting shocked glances from pedestrians.

By the time a petrified Ana came to her senses, they had long left the car behind, and were speeding down a highway – Kamilah's favourite stretch of road. When they exited into the commercial district, Ana demanded that she turn into a supermarket's parking lot. After a few tries at slotting the car nicely into an empty lot, Ana sat frozen in silence, wondering how they had not been stopped by the police in the past hour.

"What's wrong?" Kamilah asked, shutting the engine down.

"You. You are completely, fucking insane."

"It wasn't that bad."

"That was the most horrible ride I've ever been on."

"It's my first time!"

"I almost died."

"Stop being so dramatic."

"I could feel my soul leaving my body."

"You never complained on my bike."

"That's because we were on your bike. Not in my car." Ana jabbed her hands at the dashboard. "You were driving my car like your bike."

"I wasn't. You know what, I'll show you."
"Nope! No more." Ana pushed the door open. "I am not…"

"Where are you going?" Kamilah got out as well, following Ana as she trailed off to the supermarket.

"Getting a drink." Ana held out her hand. "And give me the keys."

"What?"

"Any more driving, you do it with the school."

"But you promised."

"I'm breaking it." She wiggled her fingers. "Give me."

Pouting, she put the keys in Ana's hand. "Why are you such a spoilsport," she grumbled as they walked through the sliding doors.

Despite being denied access to Ana's car, Kamilah did not stop her bike lessons with Ana. Although they became more of 'remedial' sessions when they signed up at a driving school together. They took a little longer with their classes before going for their road test, owing to their long hours at work and Ana's insistence that Kamilah stop being a road hazard by the time she got her license. Because, in all honesty, the road tests were a joke – they were so simple that even a child could pass them, even a careless one like Kamilah.

It was three months later that they got their licenses, and Ana jumped at the first opportunity to give Kamilah a ride. She donned her new helmet, revisiting the giddy excitement she had felt on her first ride with Kamilah. And much like that first time, Ana cruised around the city, trying to follow the route that she vaguely remembered, and got lost along the way. But at Kamilah's urging, she rode on anyway, trying to turn themselves back into familiar territory until they were greeted by the glaring lights of the megamall.

Ana was able to relax from there, already familiar with the route back to base, and having grown comfortable with the weight of her pillion rider. She could focus less on the road, and more on Kamilah hugging her from behind, their helmets bumping together when she stuck close to Ana's back. The proximity and physical contact made it much more intimate than when she ferried Kamilah around in the car. Maybe this was why Kamilah never really protested when Ana requested for bike rides.

Turning into the final, quieter stretch of road leading up to the base's gates, Ana turned her head to find Kamilah's helmet resting on the edge of her shoulder. Releasing one of the handlebars, she took Kamilah's drooping hands and draped them more securely around her waist. The black helmet moved, and the weight leaning on her back lightened as Kamilah woke from her little doze, then hugged Ana tighter. Ana smiled softly under the helmet. Bike rides with Kamilah was definitely one of her favourite pastimes now.

She wished she could say the same for car rides with Kamilah at the wheel.

As expected since their victory over the insurgency, a military ball was held as a homecoming celebration for the soldiers, and to commemorate their valiant deeds in the war. Ana soon found herself cackling at her squad as they went searching for dates to bring to the ball. Khalid enlisted her help in approaching the swimming instructor he always chatted with during his weekends at the base's indoor swimming pool. Much to his chagrin, Ana's 'help' consisted of silently laughing behind
Nairah's back while he asked her out, getting chummy with Nairah herself, and letting slip some of his embarrassing moments back in base. For her final act, she tripped him into the pool in full view of Nairah's class. Then she tossed him a duck-shaped floatie and jumped into the water, yelling at him to hang on for her rescue.

Khalid spent the following week scowling at her. But his face was more than easy to ignore when Kamilah was around. And if he decided continue scowling tonight, Ana would definitely have no problem pretending that he did not exist.

"Wow," Ana said when Kamilah opened her door. "You look amazing."

With a wry smile, Kamilah gave her a brief peck on the lips and stepped into the corridor. "You'd say that even if I'm wearing a garbage bag."

"Your point?"

"You have poor taste?"

Ana chuckled, but kept her back straight as Kamilah adjusted her jacket lapels and smoothed over non-existent creases in her dress blues. They were similarly dressed in dark grey uniforms, crisp from diligent ironing; the only difference was their branch insignias on their left sleeves. Both their hair were pulled neatly back into a bun – Ana had to use gel to bring her wayward fringe in line, while Kamilah opted for pins to keep her unruly locks down.

"On the contrary, Lieutenant. I have excellent taste." She offered her arm to Kamilah, who took it with grace.

The ball was held at a snazzy hotel downtown. Ana drove them there, and Kamilah would be the one to ferry her back. Hopefully, Ana would have ingested enough alcohol by then, so that Kamilah's drive would seem smooth as silk.

They found their squads already mingling at the cocktail reception, one of the minority nursing alcoholic drinks among the large crowd gathered outside the ballroom. Adofo and Wardah – the omnic in Kamilah's squad – lingered around their squad mates, joining in the conversations, but unable to partake in the refreshments. Ana and Kamilah got pulled into one group, then the next, until they came face-to-face with Deyab. The major still looked the same, though he now sported a neatly trimmed beard.

"There you are," he said with a smile, and raising the glasses in his hands. "Haven't seen you in a while, Shadid. And Amari, good to see Shadid hasn't thrown you into the trash yet."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Ana said, then gestured at the soda in his hands. "Getting a little greedy, aren't we?"

He barked out a laugh. "I'm greedy for many things, but soda is not one of them." Deyab nodded his head, indicating that they should follow. He led them to a table where a woman stood, turning to face Deyab when he came close. Her eyes landed on his two companions, and offered her hand in greeting. Ana took it first, squeezing gently before touching her own hand to her heart. After Kamilah's greeting, Deyab handed a glass to his companion and held her about the shoulders.

"This is my wife, Umaira," he said, then gestured at them. "Kamilah Shadid, the one who took over me. And Ana Amari, the troublemaker."

Umaira laughed behind her hand. "Ah, I've heard about you."
"I'm flattered." Ana smiled, giving her a once-over. Clothed in a light gold hijab and a flowing navy abaya that complemented her husband's uniform, Umaira was every bit as elegant as she was lovely. "So the rumours I've heard about you were true. You are very beautiful."

"Thank you. You look very smart yourself."

"Trust me," Deyab said. "It's a front."

"Be nice, you surly old man."

"I'm surly. What do you want from me?" After getting a defeated sigh from his wife, Deyab turned back to Kamilah with a pleased smile. "So, how's the work been? Had an aneurysm yet?"

"Almost had one when the hospital system went down."

"Ah yes, I heard about that. Thank goodness I was out of there before it happened."

"I see you're the same as always," Kamilah said. "Life's been treating you well?"

"You'd think. The promotion's been a major pain in the ass. Ha!" Deyab laughed while Umaira busied herself with her drink. "Seriously though, all that red tape and paperwork makes me want to scream sometimes," he sighed, and perked up not long after. "But on the bright side, we're having a baby!"

"Well, well. Congratulations." Ana's lips curved when he hugged his wife again. "It's your third, isn't it?"

"Yup."

"How many months?" Kamilah asked, glancing down at Umaira's belly. The baby bump was either not showing yet, or was well-hidden under the loose fabric.

"Almost three now." Umaira touched her stomach gently.

"And it'll be here faster than we can blink," Deyab said.

"For you, maybe."

"Faster than I can blink then." He chortled when he received a nudge in his side. "So how about you two? Planning to have kids yet?"

"Oh! You are married?" Umaira asked in surprise, while Deyab broke out into guffaws. She looked at her husband with a slight frown, realising her mistake.

"No, we're not," Ana said, circling an arm around Kamilah's waist. "But maybe someday, hm?" She squeezed her partner gently, getting a small smile before Kamilah took a sip of her drink.

"Make sure we're invited to the wedding," Deyab said, having calmed down. He brought his glass up for a swig. "Oh, Shadid. There's someone I want you to meet later…"

When Deyab had wandered off to introduce Umaira to his other colleagues, Ana returned to her squad with Kamilah. She managed to speak a little with Adofo, discussing an optic upgrade he was pondering over, before the ballroom finally opened. They made their way down the receiving line and, unfortunately, Ana had to be parted from Kamilah, whose assigned seat was at a table behind hers. She sat between Layla and Mesi – who had no dates of their own, surprisingly. Khalid was one
chair over with Nairah, listening attentively as his date spoke. Her squad was seated with another from a different company, but they all got along well enough. Adofo was the only omnic at their table, seated on a metallic chair designed to accommodate his size and weight.

It was after the appetizers that a general gave the first presentation, and Ana remembered how difficult it was to sit through one of these. They were enlightening – and rather sober when he touched on the war – but to listen one man drone on monotonously was quite the chore. She took the occasional bite of chicken while he spoke to keep herself active, and quickly found a suitable pace at which to eat her food, so that it would last just long enough for each presentation and speech. They inched through the courses, Ana stealing extras from Mesi's plate when she was feeling full, until they reached dessert. And, as always, that was when the dance floor and bar were opened.

People soon stood from their chairs, and married couples were the first on the floor. There would not be too many dancers, as Ana learnt from her past experiences. Married and more pious women would still prefer to dance only with their spouses and female friends. But for the younger ones who were less devout – like Ana and company – it was a time to let loose. Respectably, of course. The higher-ups were still around.

Ana occupied herself with her chocolate mousse, holding the petite dessert glass in one hand before putting it down quickly, so she could fight over Mesi's dessert with Layla. As she ate the spoonful of mousse she had gouged from the glass, Ana turned around to find Kamilah's seat empty. A quick scan later, she found Kamilah following Deyab to another table, where he introduced her to the colonel he spoke about earlier. The colonel stood and greeted Kamilah with a big smile, then laughed at something Deyab said. Ana turned back to the table, leaving Kamilah to do her socialising with Deyab, just as Khalid and Ebo left the table with their dates. Hakim – whose wife had a last minute engagement – excused himself from the table. Layla, after getting tired of sitting still, invited Adofo to the dance floor. Though a stranger to dancing, Adofo expressed a willingness to try, and thus was pulled towards the floor by an ecstatic Layla.

Mesi stayed at the table, nursing a glass of wine as they chatted and watched the dancers. It took a little waiting, but it was not long before fingers caressed her exposed nape. Ana smiled up at Kamilah as she sat in Layla's empty chair, returning Mesi's greeting.

"Had fun?" Ana asked.

" Pretending to smile in front of a group of old men is not fun," Kamilah muttered, taking a healthy swig from her glass. Then she looked down at it, as if she just remembered it wasn't alcohol.

Ana offered her own glass, which only had a finger of wine left. Not enough to take the edge off, but Kamilah downed it anyway.

"I remember when Jaida did that to me too," Mesi said wryly. "Had to thaw my face out with the hair dryer after."

Kamilah chuckled. "I might try that," she said, fingers parting to allow Ana's through. She smiled, but their moment was soon broken when Deyab came up behind Ana.

"Kamilah, I almost forgot."

"Did you just say someone's name for once?" Ana asked.

"Fluke, Amari," he drawled, lifting the lid of the flat box in his hand. Two bracelets sat in the box, one atop the other. "It's your birthday tomorrow, isn't it?"
"Oh, that's right." She took the box. "Thank you."

"Treat it as a promotion gift too. By the way, one's for Amari – my wife insisted on getting you a couple bracelet." He shrugged. "But if you like both, then Amari can get none."

"Thanks, you old fogey."

"You're welcome, Ana." Deyab cringed. "That felt weird."

"Please don't do that ever again."

"Done." He straightened his jacket and tugged at his cuffs. "Well, have a good evening, ladies. See you around base." With a wave of his hand, he departed and headed straight for his wife.

"Seems he's not that rough after all," Ana commented as Kamilah looked the bracelets over again, snorting when she closed the box.

"I'll bet anything that his wife made him buy these. He never gave a gift that's not 'practical' before."

"Thank heavens for Umaira," she said, looking out at the dance floor. The songs were growing slower in tempo, and she spotted Adofo's tall, awkward figure being led in a slow dance by a total stranger. Grin growing on her lips, Ana leaned over to Kamilah. "Would you like to dance?"

Kamilah raised a brow. "Would you?"

"With you, yes." She nodded her head at the floor. "Be my first and last dance."

Mesi's stifled laugh made Ana turn around – she had forgotten her friend's presence.

"You two are incredible," Mesi said through the back of her fingers. "Why don't you take your mush to the dance floor so my dinner stays down?"

Ana threw her napkin at Mesi, who caught it perfectly. At Kamilah's nod, they stood together and made their way to the floor, after leaving their gift with Mesi for safekeeping. Finding a nice spot to slip in, Ana tugged Kamilah forward, then turned to face her.

"So, who–" The hand landing on her shoulder answered her question. "As you wish." She smiled, closing the distance between them and resting her hand on Kamilah's back. Taking her partner's right hand, she eased them into the dance, falling into rhythm effortlessly. They kept close, feet flowing smoothly from step to step.

"You've danced before?" Ana asked.

"Only a few times."

She hummed. "And you already do it so well. Such talent, Shadid. I should start taking you dancing."

"Never knew you're the dancing type." Kamilah considered her words, then added, "At least, outside a club."

"No. But for you, I think I would. At least for the practice."

"Practice?"

"You know." Ana cocked her head with a sly smile. "For our wedding?" She flinched from the flick
at her jaw, though a bright grin broke across her face.

"Don't you start as well."

"Why? Don't you want to be my wife? Or do you want to have kids out of wedlock?"

Kamilah stared back into Ana's eyes, something flickering beneath her gaze. "If this is a proposal, it's not a very good one."

"Then I'll have to try again and sweep you off your feet." Ana adjusted her fingers around Kamilah's hand. "Any requests? Candles, flowers, live band, doves?"

Lips twitching in a light huff, Kamilah said, "And if I want the moon?"

"I'll…propose to you at night?" Ana's laugh turned into a squeak when Kamilah's shoe stomped on hers. They faltered as the sound attracted a few glances, but soon regained their rhythm amid Ana's giggles.

"You're horrible," Kamilah sighed, even though she wore the beginnings of a smile.

"And yet you're still here. Seems love really is blind."

"If that's the case, then I never want to see again."

So simple, so absolute was the affirmation, that Ana's breath was stolen in an instant. She was left to follow the subtle tilt of Kamilah's hand, falling in step with her partner, who gazed back at her patiently.

"The things you say…"

"Hm?"

"You make me want to cry, sometimes."

"Tears of joy, I hope."

"With you, albi," Ana murmured, touching their heads together. "There's no other kind."

---

Adofo, of all people, was the one to send her a photo he had taken of that moment, when they were on the dance floor. He was taking up photography as a hobby, he said, and thought the shot was too good to pass up. Ana had to agree— it was a good shot indeed. And Adofo had promised not to share it with anyone but her, so she gave him no trouble over it. On the drive back to base, she had drawled "so pretty" over and over again while staring at the photo on her phone, smashed after downing a fair share of drinks at the bar with Ebo.

When she woke up the next morning, Ana draped herself over Kamilah's body and slurred out a "Happy 26th", before being pulled into the bathroom to freshen up. The sluggishness fell away just before noon, and Ana was able to pull herself together, ready to follow each and every one of her partner's wishes for the day. It was not that difficult, really, considering it was her state of mind most of the time. And since Kamilah had requested a quiet day with no skydives or bungee jumps, she was easy enough to cater to. All Ana had to do was drive her around, carry her shopping bags, and fight to pay for anything she brought to the cashier. The only thing Ana couldn't pay for was the pair of headphones she had picked up for herself. Kamilah had shoved her away the moment they reached the counter, and practically threw her card at the cashier before Ana could open her mouth to
protest.

Not exactly the 'quiet' day that Kamilah wanted, but she still wore a smile when she kissed Ana under the stars, etching her second wish on her lover's lips. Though it remained unspoken, Ana knew what it was; the glimmer in Kamilah's eyes revealed a hope she shared as well. Linking their hands together, Ana brushed her thumb over the black band on Kamilah's finger. She pressed her lips softly to Kamilah's in a silent promise.

This wish was one she would see through.
Devotion

Days stretched into weeks and blurred into months, and it was business as usual in Heliopolis. Never-ending training and patrols lulled them into a dull battle sleep, where 'sleep' rang truer than 'battle'. At least, until Jaida pulled off unpleasant surprises designed to make them fuck up and earn her ire. They learnt after the first few failures and made sure to keep on their toes. Even tried to read their OC's body language for a hint of what was in store, but to no avail. Personally, Ana was glad for Jaida's blindsides. It kept things interesting as life rolled on, one of the little things of note that had come to pass.

Khalid started dating Nairah. Hakim and his wife were expecting their first baby. Mesi went to Ana's room and divulged her conflict over her ex's text. Layla's parents were divorced. Ebo broke an arm. Adofo won second prize in a photography competition. And Ana was just letting an important fact sink in.

Her life was no longer her own.

Kamilah would call her 'dramatic' if she heard that, Ana knew. But it was a fact. Kamilah had become an extension of her; each experience, each emotion her partner felt would trickle back to her. Be it through words or the lack thereof, through touches that lingered or quickly pulled away. Ana would observe, identify, and compensate. Her needs and desires revolved not around herself anymore, but her partner's as well. It was a connection Kamilah shared; she was there to watch over Ana whenever she slowed down to rest, to snort at her dumb jokes as she crawled out of her slumps.

It was almost intuitive now, sensing the other's needs and moods. And Ana had not a doubt in her mind, that Kamilah wanted to break her nose in at that very moment. Not that it was physically feasible in their current states.

"I can't hear you, Amari!" Jaida yelled over her head.

"I am a hero!" Ana cried through a raw and parched throat, bending her arms into yet another pushup. Beside her, Kamilah repeated the chant as well, keeping a healthy pace as sweat dripped down her chin and onto the concrete floor. The rest of the company stood at attention, deathly still as if a single twitch would send them to the floor with their two fellow soldiers.

It had taken a spectacularly bad stroke of luck and a large dose of foolish heroism on Ana's part to land them in this situation. Ana's squad had been pinned down at the objective during the training exercise. Driven to recklessness by an incoming artillery strike, Ana burst out of her sniper's nest in an effort to rescue her comrades. A blatant disregard of Kamilah's direct orders – the squad leader she had deferred to, having been cut off from Mesi. Long story short, Ana ran into an ambush, Kamilah broke out of position to prevent her simulated death, and they were pinned down until the reinforcements Kamilah had called for arrived in a messy rescue. Which ended with half a company's worth of 'casualties'.

So here they were, relegated to the floor and forced to call themselves a 'hero' until the term became the worst of insults. A hundred pushups was Jaida's original sentence, but Ana had long ago lost count. Not that it mattered – they would be forced to do it until Jaida was satisfied anyway. Which, judging from the boot that slammed down on her back, was not yet the case.

"Hold position," Jaida barked as Ana pushed up against the weight, causing the two women to stop. Ana's arms trembled as the OC addressed the rest of the company.
"I train soldiers here. I train soldiers who obey orders and complete their mission. I have no need for heroes in my company. I have no need for shitheads who run out just to be shot dead. War has no place for heroes."

Ana's arms buckled under the crushing impact of Jaida's boot for the second time, air bursting through her mouth when she hit the floor.

"That's why they all die, Amari," Jaida shouted down at her, loud enough for the company to hear. "They are useless. They die, and they pull others down with them. You could've killed Shadid today. You could've killed over 50 fucking soldiers today. Do you understand that, Amari?"

"Yes, ma'am!" Ana forced what vague threads of breath out in a guttural reply.

"You were a fucking dumbass today. Do you know that?"

"Yes, ma'am!" She panted against concrete, inhaling dust through her mouth.

"And if I see any of you fucking morons following Amari's example," Jaida yelled at the company. "I'll fucking shoot you myself. Is that understood?"

"Yes, ma'am!" Thankfully, the company's obedient roar was loud enough to satisfy Jaida on the first go, and the boot on Ana's back finally moved away.

"Then bring your wounded to the aid station. Dismissed!"

Ana remained prone through the bang of boots against the floor, catching her breath as Jaida marched away. She was just starting to move when Khalid and Mesi grabbed under her arms and hauled her up. They held her until she seemed steady on her feet, then let go. Ana turned her head to see Kamelah's squad standing around her, as she was helped up by a squad mate. Kamelah picked her rifle up from the floor, jerked its strap over a shoulder, and stalked off without a backward glance.

Her own rifle was thrust into her hands. Ana looked up as Mesi patted her on the cheek.

"Come on. You have a boot print to wash off your uniform," Mesi said with a tired smirk.

"That's the least of my worries," Ana muttered, trudging along her squad.

Kamelah's icy stare could burn flesh. Ana quailed a little, but kept her shoulders straight.

"May I come in?" Ana asked, regretting how clipped she sounded.

Keeping silent, Kamelah's jaw twitched, eyes sliding off Ana to focus everywhere else. Then she moved back stiffly, snapping the door shut when Ana walked through. She stood still as Ana looked her over, taking stock of the bruises on her arms and one on her cheek.

Feeling a pang of guilt, Ana asked, "You alright?"

Kamelah crossed her arms, unwillingness to talk apparent. She had been rather wound up recently, and Ana had been unable to pinpoint why, only tend to the symptoms as they appeared. And it seemed the day's public humiliation was the straw that broke the camel's back. A large, heavy straw. For which Ana was responsible.

"Look, I'm sorry. I got you into trouble."

Lips parted, but pressed together again after a sharp intake of breath. Kamelah shook her head and
brushed past Ana without a word.

"Milah, I just want to make sure you're okay." She followed Kamilah to her desk, where she was fumbling with a half-empty blister pack. Ana touched her arm, watching her stab at a blister with her nail, becoming more forceful when she was unsuccessful, hands trembling in frustration.

"You haven't taken it today?"

She knew it was the wrong thing to say the moment it left her mouth, and was confirmed when Kamilah snapped at her, "What does it look like?"

Ana stayed in place when Kamilah jerked out of her reach, finally popping the pill out of the blister and throwing it into her mouth.

"Milah," she said slowly, as Kamilah shoved the pack back into its box. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Kamilah hissed through gritted teeth. She tried to walk away, but Ana stood in front of her.

"You've been like this for the past week. Will you just stop for a second and talk to me!"

"And why should I?" Kamilah blew up at her, taking her aback. "Anything I have to say, you'll just throw it to the fucking side!"

"That's not true–"

"You'll just do whatever you want to. You don't care about anything else."

"That's not true, and you know it!" Ana raised her voice, indignation erupting to the surface. "If I didn't care, I wouldn't even fucking be here right now!"

"Oh, that's what you want, isn't it?"

"I just asked one fucking question! Why are you being like this?"

"Like what? Like myself? If you don't like it, then leave!"

Her eyes glistened, giving Ana pause. She reached for Kamilah, but had her hand slapped away.

"Leave me alone. Just go."

Ana stared back at the glare, grasping at the fading threads of patience vanishing from within her, feeling them flow through her fingers like water. Suddenly suffocated, Ana wrenched her eyes away from Kamilah and made her escape.

Within her first breath of fresh air outside, regret started seeping in.

They stayed apart for the next few days, and Ana fell into a pall the longer she was deprived of contact with the woman she loved. Damn it all, Ana loved her. And having to watch her partner go about life from afar – when Ana could tell she was flagging on the inside – cut deep.

In all honesty, Ana had let go of her anger long ago. But she kept her distance, in case Kamilah had not. Ana settled for watching over her discreetly – covering for Kamilah's squad more often than needed during training, and sending Mesi on undercover missions to chat with the medic. On Mesi's second report where she told Ana again that Kamilah was acting normal, she also told Ana to stop
being such a wuss and just check on Kamilah herself.

So she did.

It was good foresight, she thought, that she had hidden the gift in her pocket. The silence in which they stood after Kamilah opened her door gave Ana an unpleasant sense of déjà vu, and was not really a mood conducive for gift-giving. Ana shifted on her feet, then gathered herself.

"Can…we talk?"

Kamilah's countenance seemed lighter than before, but still quiet. She nodded and let Ana in. They stood in silence when Ana forgot her prepared speech, and instead noted the uncertainty in Kamilah's expression as she fidgeted with her wrist, eyes downcast as if waiting for something to fall.

*What am I doing to her?*

"I've…" Ana prayed it was the right thing to start with. "I've been worried about you." She waited, and plunged on when there was no response. "I'm sorry for pulling you down with me during training. And I'm sorry I lost my temper." She stopped again, this time because she couldn't remember what to say.

At a loss for words, she took a step forward. Kamilah's eyes flickered up towards her, then fell away again.

"Milah, I love you. You don't have bear it all by yourself. Each day I spent away from–"

Again, Ana was surprised. Not by an irate outburst this time, but by Kamilah flying into her, arms clamping around her torso as if she were a lifeline. Her heart jumped at the sudden movement. As she calmed down and realised Kamilah was not going to throw her to the floor in a suplex, she relaxed. Ana held her tightly around the shoulders, as Kamilah shifted in her arms and pressed impossibly closer.

"I'm sorry," Kamilah muttered into her shoulder, voice thick.

"Don't be." Ana patted Kamilah's back soothingly when her partner took a slow breath, smoothing over the hitches. She waited, the head on her shoulder shifting restlessly, until Kamilah pulled away. Much of the hardness had fallen from her face, now replaced by exhaustion. A look Ana recognised all too well.

"I'm sorry I lost my temper. I was angry at you for that exercise. But–, I don't know." She rubbed at her eye, shrugging defeatedly. "Everything just piled up and…I took it out on you."

"Stress?" Ana ventured. "Were you tired?"

A wan smile. "I stopped taking my meds for a while. I lost it at my therapist and…I was being petty."

"You could've told me," Ana said gently, rubbing the small of her back.

Kamilah shook her head, a bitter laugh leaving her lips in quiet huffs. "I didn't want you to know."

"Well, I guess it kind of backfired. But I'm glad it did," she added quickly, when Kamilah's smile faltered. "You don't have to hide anything from me, Milah. I'm an idiot, remember? I'll stay no matter what."
"It does take an idiot…"

"Not that way, albi." Ana cupped her face, lifting Kamilah's gaze to meet her own. "I know who you are. And I love you for everything that you are."

"Are you trying to make me cry?"

"It's not working, apparently." Ana gave a crooked smile, pretending not to notice the shine in her eyes. Instead, she reached into her pocket and pulled out the palm-sized teddy bear that had been squashed inside. It held a red heart with 'I love you' stitched across the front. Cheesy, but effective – judging from the curve in Kamilah's lips as she took it.

"Really?"

"Yup. For when you need a reminder. Wanted to get you one of those huge ones, but then I'm afraid it'd take my place on your bed."

Kamilah laughed softly, kissing her on the lips. "Nothing will ever take your place," she sighed, tilting her head. "The most you'd have to do is share your space with it."

"Thanks a lot."

Ana remained watchful for a while after – Kamilah needed time to let her guard down fully again. And though she still slept badly at night, admitted no anxieties and preferred to go about life without discussing it. And Ana let her. Kamilah sought to weather this out by herself, and Ana would take other burdens off her shoulders to make things easier. She was there to keep Kamilah's room in order, her necessities easy to find and in arm's reach. She 'sucked up' to the squad leader and carried half her load, getting unsubtle sneezes sounding like 'kiss ass' from her own squad. She offered a firm embrace when Kamilah buried her head in Ana's neck, stifled tears finally finding release in the dead of night. They quickly found solace in the return of their routine, and the stability it brought.

Although, Ana noticed something different. That first quarrel seemed to have lowered an unseen boundary, and they found themselves bickering more often. Over little things really – Ana leaving used clothes in Kamilah's room, Kamilah stealing Ana's shirts that never saw the light of day again, and using up Kamilah's tea bags without replacing them were the latest on the list. These always blew over quickly, and Ana was glad that Kamilah did not hold herself back as much as before. She did seem more comfortable with each passing argument, getting used to voicing grievances no matter how small, and was more certain that Ana would not just up and leave over these little squabbles.

Ana loved her more than life itself. And Kamilah was just accepting that simple truth in full.

Rolling her bruised shoulders, Ana felt the tender patches on her body throb in response. To celebrate the day that she 'popped out of mama's crotch' – as Safiya had put it – Kamilah finally brought Ana for a skydive she had originally planned the previous year. They spent the better part of the day at the school, listening raptly during their ground training before boarding the plane for the tandem jump. Ana's blood raced as she stood at the edge of the door, and leapt without hesitation at a command from the instructor strapped to her back. Keeping her eyes wide open, Ana's attempts to laugh failed as her breath was whipped from her lungs by the blast of cold air. It went by in a rush – she marveled at their 'floating' in free fall, turned to wink at her instructor's camera, before she felt a jerk when the parachute was deployed.

As they cruised through the air, Ana craned her neck upwards to find Kamilah some distance above
her. She blew a kiss, then pouted when it was caught and tossed away. It all went smoothly until they were close to the ground – a sudden gust of wind threw them off, Ana forgot her instructions to keep her legs up, the instructor lost her footing, and they tumbled across the sandy ground.

Thankfully, the crack she had felt in her ankle was nothing. All she had sustained were bruises – same for the instructor, who joined in her laughter as they untangled themselves from the parachute's cords.

Ana had considered signing up for actual lessons, but decided to put it on the backburner for now. Perhaps after her bruises had subsided, and she was ready for another dose of mid-air adrenaline.

She reached the modest amphitheatre built into the middle of the mall, stretching down two stories. There were more people seated now than when Ana had left to pick up their coffees, all waiting for the free movie screening that evening. Ana hopped down the steps towards Kamilah, noting a crisply dressed man approaching her. She slowed down, watching as he bent down and spoke. A smile was already crawling onto Ana's face when Kamilah looked distinctly unimpressed, and it was obvious from the phone in his hand why she was so.

Ana had to refrain from cackling when she reached Kamilah just in time to hear her say 'No.' and turn back to the front as if he did not exist. Kamilah's rejections were short yet brutal, and Ana loved them. When she was not on the receiving end, anyway.

She made her way towards Kamilah, then dropped down into her seat and planted a kiss on her partner's temple. Kamilah took her ice blend from the cardboard tray Ana held out, wearing a knowing smirk as Ana smiled up at the spurned suitor, who slunk away without another word.

"Aren't you just popular, sweetie," Ana cooed, getting an elbow in her side. "Men and women flock to you like moths to a flame."

"Please don't." Kamilah sipped at her coffee, scooting closer when Ana circled an arm around her waist.

"Where was it last week…" Ana hummed, pretending to think. "Oh right, at the supermarket. When someone wanted to 'check you out at the counter'."

Kamilah sighed. "I'd rather they left me alone." She glanced at Ana. "Guess having the most annoying person with me does help sometimes."

"Right," she drawled. "But then again, I can't be with you all the time. Why don't I just pee on you and mark my territory?"

"Do that and I'll put you to sleep."

"Just like that? No collars?"

"It's not a punishment if you enjoy it."

She chuckled, lacing their fingers together as the floor lights in the amphitheatre darkened, and the first advertisement was projected onto the screen.

"How about a ring?"

"We already have them."

"But not on the right finger."
Kamilah gazed at her with an indulgent curve on her lips, already used to Ana's teases. "Try again, darling."

Ana grinned, giving her partner a squeeze before turning her attention to the opening of the movie. Oh she would, alright.

So Ana did try, and Kamilah took it in stride. Her face barely even twitched anymore when Ana popped in with her unsubtle suggestions, pushing her away with a finger and yet another 'try again'.

Once, Ana had rolled on top of Kamilah, squashing the woman beneath her and said, "Marry me."

Kamilah blinked blearily up at her, having been snatched back from the brink of sleep. "No." She did not move at the whine and nuzzles, falling asleep under Ana with no trouble at all.

It was all in good fun, of course. Though she did feel a twinge at the blunt rejection. But then again, Kamilah never really possessed much tact when thoroughly exhausted. Maybe Ana should try again when she was awake.

A pinch on the nose was her reward. But it was expected, and life went on.

Months passed since the beginning of a new year, and Ana's joking proposals grew less in frequency. They were less joking as well, Ana realised, when she gazed back into Kamilah's eyes through the dimmed lighting of the dance floor. As promised at last year's ball, Ana had brought Kamilah to a restaurant overlooking the Nile for their two-year anniversary.

Perhaps it was the establishment's classy ambience, the intimacy of the dance floor, the slow chords of love songs, or just the exquisite beauty of her partner; Ana had held her breath, waiting to hear what Kamilah thought of this 'practice for their wedding'. But all Kamilah did was smile softly, and bring their dance to a halt with a kiss on Ana's lips. Her intent – if there was one – remained a mystery. Kamilah merely led her back to their table, Ana's eyes moving down the black dress that graced her body, to the ring on her finger – the black to Ana's white.

Something burgeoned within her, taking root where it had waned moments ago.

Hope.

"...current investigations show that a critical AI malfunction was the cause of these attacks. The Krasnoyarsk Omnium has classified them as isolated cases, and dismissed claims that these incidents are related to the development of the God Program, Triglav. A press conference will be held on..."

"What do you think, Ado?" Khalid asked.

Adofo cocked his head, eyes still fixated on the televisions in the display window. He shrugged. "There's not enough information to go on, I'm afraid."

"It's probably nothing," Ana said. "Just a few crazies giving you a bad name, hm?"

"I hope so. But I don't like the idea of the God Program."

Ana reached out to pat him on the back, and quickly moved forward to catch him when he lurched forward. They looked back at the teenage boy who had run into Adofo, watching his eyes widen as he looked up at the omnic.
"I'm so sorry!" he said in panic, holding up his hands, eyes darting towards the televisions before scurrying off.

"Some strength," Khalid said. "Even we can't move you from one spot."

"I wasn't standing properly."

"Don't be embarrassed, Ado. We all have our moments," Ana smiled up at him, and blue eyes flickered in amusement. Then they turned at the sound of Layla's voice from farther up the street, where she stood waving at them.

"Come on, we found the place!" Layla called out, waiting for them to make their way over.

Ana fell in step behind Adofo and Khalid, walking with hands in pockets as her gaze slid from clothing displays, laptops, furniture, lights, jewelry—

She paused and backtracked, peering through the glass window. The display of necklaces and bracelets was lovely indeed, but most of her attention drifted towards the rings by the side. Ana found herself skimming through the prices when she noticed the shop assistant approaching her.

"Would you like to view our collection inside, ma'am? We have many more beautiful designs for you to—"

"Oh, no. I'm just…looking," she finished lamely, turning her head just in time to see Adofo disappear around the corner ahead. "Thanks." She waved a hand politely, then hurried away.

'Looking' became 'thinking', then 'pondering', 'imagining', and 'staring'.

"Is there something on my face?"

Ana started, then glanced down at her tablet screen where she had just lost a game. "No," she muttered, tapping through the stats and closed the app.

"Are you okay?" Kamilah asked, lowering the book in her hands. She scooted over to where Ana sat beside the bed, fighting the urge to curl up tighter in her corner.

"Yeah. And before you ask," she said when Kamilah raised her brows. "I'm sure." She held fast under the scrutiny, and breathed a quiet sigh of relief when no more questions came. Parting her legs to let Kamilah shift in, she rested her tablet in Kamilah's lap when her partner lay against her.

"Milah?" Ana said.

"Mm?"

"Do you love me?"

"Yes." Kamilah flipped a page, head brushing against Ana's. "What do you want this time?"

_A favour. A huge one._

"You?" Ana squeezed the woman in her arms, getting a breathy chuckle in return.

"You don't even have to ask, darling. You already have me."

"Forever?"
"Forever." She thumbed a page. "You ask for a lot, don't you?"

"And you still keep giving," Ana said, digging her fingers into Kamilah's sides. Kamilah shrieked as she jerked forward, their book and tablet dropping to the floor, and Ana soon found herself fending off a flurry of slaps, cackling until she suffered one right on the nose.

Ana sat on it.

Then she grew restless, impulsiveness clashing with deliberation day after day. She wanted to wait – for the right moment, for the right signal, for the right state of mind. But there were moments of impatience, where she wanted to whisk Kamilah off into the sunset without a care in the world.

Would Kamilah want to be with her, she wondered. Would Kamilah want to spend the rest of her life dealing with Ana's nonsense? Would she want to share a house, a family, a life?

Ana knew what she dearly wanted. She had repeated it so many times, in passing, in jest, in passion, in love. And now, only now did she feel the true gravity of that wish. She wanted to spend the rest of her life with the woman she loved most, and she would do anything to make it a reality. Their reality.

It was the one thing of which she was certain. But there was still one remaining question, and the answer she yearned for would either make her whole, or break her completely.

*Only one way to find out.*

Taking a deep breath, Ana rose from the bench. She straightened her shoulders, and strode into the jeweler's.

As it turned out, buying the ring was not as simple as it seemed. A month of surreptitious ring-shopping later, Ana was about ready to plant her face into the ground and weave a grass ring herself. But she was nothing if not persistent, and marched on. Besides, Kamilah's lap was a much better place to plant her face into anyway.

Another month passed, and she very nearly blurted the question over Kamilah's birthday cake. Thankfully, her body froze before she could do anything stupid. At the worried touch on her cheek, she managed to wrangle out a thinly-veiled question about the type of rings Kamilah preferred, before trying to choke herself to death with a big piece of cake. Her face reddened with a blush despite her best efforts to remain composed.

Eventually, Ana roped Khalid into shopping with her. First he squealed, then gushed, and eventually ended up groaning after Ana left the ten thousandth store empty-handed. He stuck with her though, and they scoured nearly all of Cairo's shops until Ana finally decided on a round solitaire diamond ring with an open-curved silver band. Pretty simple for something that she took over three months to find, but fitting.

Having acquired the ring, Ana started planning the proposal. It was to be a quiet and private affair for sure; Kamilah never liked to be part of a spectacle. She had narrowed down potential locations to the fountain in the park, at the boardwalk by the pyramids, or at a hotel suite for true privacy and a good view of the Nile–

Then she remembered.

Ana flew to Ebo's doorstep seeking a favour - he was the favourite nephew of a wealthy businessman. And after crushing Ana in a hug, he went on to fulfill Ana's request and more – she
now had a yacht at her disposal, along with a boat captain and culinary staff for an evening.

Now that Ebo was part of the planning, the entire squad became involved as well, by virtue of his big mouth. That was why she had a room of soldiers sitting around to watch her pace nervously before going for her date.

"Ana, will you just relax—"

"I'm trying to!" Ana said in exasperation, earning a sympathetic look from Khalid. "Oh fuck… Fuck, what if she says no?"

"She won't."

"What if it's too early? It's only been what, two years? Is that enough?"

"Hey, I know people who got married within a year," Layla said.

"And are they still together?"

Layla grimaced. "Well…"

"The length of time doesn't matter, Ana," Mesi chimed in. "You spent two years with her, and they were good enough that you want to marry her. Isn't that enough?"

"Yes…"

"It's just your nerves acting up."

Ana raised a hand, but remembered she had makeup on before dragging it down her face. She stopped in her tracks, fingertips digging into her temples.

"Anyone can see Kamilah loves you, Ana," Mesi continued. "Does she look at you like she wants to kill you?"

"Sometimes."

"See? Not all the time. She must feel something for you." Mesi grinned at the smattering of snickers from her squad. She rose from the bed, walking over to clap Ana on the shoulders. "Pull yourself together, alright? You have your ring, you have your yacht. Now all you have to do is listen to her say 'yes'."

"And put a ring on it," Layla added.

"That's right. Come on, Ana." Mesi tugged at her navy blue blazer when she still looked dubious. "Look at you. You're dashing! Who could say no?" She turned to look at the rest. "Could any of you say no?"

They shook their heads in unison.

"See?"

"You're being ridiculous," Ana groaned, picking the phone up when it vibrated on the table.

Kamilah: [Ready?]

"No," she said audibly, and Mesi leaned over to read the message, clicking her tongue.
"Showtime." Mesi plucked the phone out of her hand and squeezed it into Ana's pants pocket. She patted Ana over, and tried to push her fringe to the side. "Got your rings?"

"Yeah."

"Then let's go."

Hands suddenly feeling cold, Ana breathed in deeply and made her way out of the room amid a chorus of 'good luck'.

"By the way, Ana," Ebo said before she went down the stairs. "My uncle says if you don't succeed, you're paying for everything."

That earned him a slap on the back from Khalid. "She's nervous enough as it is, you asshole."

"It's a joke!"

Ana sighed, and went down to pick up her date.

"Ana," Kamilah said slowly, as Ana led her down the docks and came to a stop before the yacht. "How did you get this?"

"I have connections." Ana smiled, walking up the ramp.

"Ana Amari has connections. Wonder why I'm not surprised."

They were greeted by Mathieu, their captain. The man was French, but he spoke Arabic as precisely as any local. They were led farther in and welcomed by the rest of the staff, then brought on a tour around the two decks before being seated in the indoor dining room. The round booth was located right by the window, so they could see the bow and the dark waters they sailed leisurely across. Soft music piped through the speakers in the walls, and Ana detected a light fragrance permeating the room.

The menu was introduced and champagne was poured, and they were left to their own devices.

Ana reached for her glass to take a sip, hoping to drown the butterflies in her stomach.

"So," Kamilah said. "What's the occasion?"

"Do we need one?" Ana asked.

"For this…” Kamilah waved at the window. "There has to be."

"I just want to give you the best. I don't need an occasion for that," Ana said, watching her smile gently and take her own glass as well.

The rich five-course meal consisted mainly of seafood – rather fitting, as it were. They worked their way slowly through each dish, though Ana found it difficult to fully appreciate the plates of art. Her attention always drifted back to Kamilah, gazing in silent adoration, and trying to somehow divine her expression at the end. How would she react, Ana ached to find out.

They remained in the booth for a while after their meal, laughing at each other's burps, sneaking in a caress, and a kiss or two. When they leant against the backrest, looking out at a view confined to the angles the window allowed, Ana decided to proceed. With a racing heart, she took Kamilah's hand and suggested going to the top deck to enjoy the night breeze. As they stood, Ana ran a hand down
her jacket under the guise of smoothing over creases, feeling for the boxes in the inner pocket. Her stomach squeezed impossibly tighter.

She helped Kamilah up the steps with all the chivalry of a knight, earning a quirked brow from her partner. Ana stayed by the stairs as Kamilah walked across the wooden flooring, gathering her courage before following after her. She circled an arm around Kamilah's waist, hugging her from behind as they looked over the dark waters, dotted by lights from boats like theirs. Ana turned her head, kissing Kamilah's cheek as she entwined their fingers together on the flat metal rail. How would the ring look on Kamilah's finger, Ana wondered.

"The view is beautiful," Kamilah said.

"It is."

"That was your cue to tell me I'm the better view."

She chuckled with a lopsided smile. "It doesn't have to be said, albi. No matter where we are, you'll always be the better view."

"Flatterer."

"It's not flattery if it's true," Ana murmured, pressing their lips softly together. She ran her thumb over Kamilah's, pulse quickening. It was time.

She stepped back, tugging lightly on Kamilah's hand to turn her around. "The truth is, I brought you here for a reason."

"You mean, other than 'giving me the best'?"

"Yes." Ana matched her grin, though her smile quickly became smaller as nervousness ate away at her. She took Kamilah's other hand as well, taking a breath to calm herself down.

"You know, I had a speech planned for this. But now… I think I'll just speak from here." She pressed the back of Kamilah's hand on her chest, feeling acutely the rapid thuds of her heart. "I love you, Milah. You're the single, most important person to have ever walked into my life, and you've taught me to love so much deeper than I ever knew I could. We've been together for two years, two wonderful years. And already, I find myself dreaming of a future with you."

Her next breath wavered, and Ana slowed down. She held Kamilah's gaze, soft and knowing.

"I am yours. Everything that I am, that I have, is yours. And I want to be yours for the rest of my life." She reached into her jacket for the first velvet box, feeling Kamilah's hand tighten over hers. Digging her thumb into the groove, she lifted the lid to reveal the ring. Ana got down on one knee.

"Will you marry me, Kamilah?"

Kamilah stood frozen in place, staring down at the ring. Ana felt her hand tremble minutely when Kamilah's gaze moved to her. Surprise melted away from Kamilah's face, leaving it placid for a terrifying moment.

"Are…" Kamilah rasped, and Ana caught the quiver in her lip. "Are you sure?"

"More than anything."

She lapsed into silence again, leaving Ana on tenterhooks. Kamilah's expression scrunched up a
little, then relaxed. She nodded.

"Yes," Kamilah said, voice hushed. She seemed breathless as she looked up at Ana, lips twitching into a smile. "Yes, Ana."

Ana's mind went blank.

Yes. She said yes. She said–

Ana shot up from the floor, catching Kamilah in a tight embrace. "Oh god, Kamilah. Kamilah–" Her breath hitched, and her vision blurred. Ana blinked the moisture away, then loosened her hold. She smiled at Kamilah and brought the box up. Taking the ring, she held Kamilah's hand and slid it through her ring finger. It was a perfect fit – her fingers were similar to Ana's.

"It looks beautiful on you," Ana said, lifting her eyes towards her fiancée. Her fiancée.

It sounded so surreal, yet so right.

She lifted Kamilah's hand, pressing a kiss beside the ring. Then she pocketed the empty box and brought out another, offering it to Kamilah, who opened it to find a slim silver band with inlaid crystals along the top. Just as Ana had done, Kamilah held up her hand and slipped the ring through. She gazed at it longer, before fixing Ana with a tender smile, head tilting into the caress on her cheek.

Ana leaned in, eyes locked until the very last moment, when their lips met. Light and slow, yet so deep and fierce. They moved in tandem, an exchange of vows unwritten, engraving each line into their souls, one after another.

When they parted, there was not a sense of loss. Just a serene warmth in their chests, where their other half resided.
The proposal's aftermath was nothing like Ana had expected. Her imagination had always strayed to two extreme scenarios: she would either be so ecstatic that she carried Kamilah all over Cairo screaming that she had a wife, or backflip into the waters in despair, never to be seen nor heard from again. Granted, both were improbable from the start, but even a little fuss would be unsurprising.

But there was none. At least, none just yet. Any fleeting whims ebbed with a growing calm, anchored by a gentle hand leading her towards the cushioned seats, the sight of their rings keeping her enraptured. She sat, basking in her partner's presence, reciprocating each caress on her skin, contemplating the present and future. What had, and what would soon come to pass. Gazing at Kamilah's soft countenance, Ana had no doubt their happiness would last for a while yet.

The night drew to a gentle close, both of them mellow from the champagne. Neither seemed able to take their eyes off their rings until they lay in bed, head-to-head in a close embrace. Ana watched as Kamilah drifted off to sleep, running her fingers through wavy tresses, fighting off the urge to close her eyes as well. She didn't need to; she was already living a dream.

Ana's squad respected her request for them to not spring a surprise upon their return, and to give Kamilah some space. That was why the boisterous well-wishes came not the same night Ana had proposed, but the morning after. Honestly, Ana could barely process half of those wishes. After the roar of 'Sis-in-law!' in the mess hall, Ana's face quickly found refuge in her hand, while Kamilah was stunned into silence. Not for long though; she had stared at her 'in-laws' before breaking out in a chuckle, and took a seat beside Ana. They shared a glance as their squads started talking about a party, content to let them steer the boat for now.

After the day was done, Ana made two important phone calls. Zaid had denied any crying on his part, but Ana clearly heard sniffling between his giddy laughter and congratulation. He spoke with Kamilah briefly, then advised them on how to plan the wedding and its legalities. Before ending the call, he promised to discuss the details with them on a later date. Safiya let out a shriek that almost ruptured Ana's eardrum and, after she was put on speaker, pulled Zahra into the call as well. She accused Ana of showing up her older sibling, grilled them on their wedding plans, and was quickly hung up on when she started talking about children.

They took it slow at first, looking up wedding ideas and plans on the web, watching the video of Zaid's wedding, chatting with their friends and each other. By the time they met up with a wedding planner, they had a rough idea of what they wanted.

"Hm." Yamina looked between the two of them. "I do know a couple of imams who are willing to officiate gay weddings. They are very, very nice people and have done it many times before. And in their own mosques too. You'll feel comfortable with them. So there's no need to feel restricted, ya? If you'd like to consider a more traditional ceremony…"

"Ah, no. A simple civil ceremony is just fine," Ana said. Then she caught herself, sharing an amused glance with Kamilah. "We were thinking of a military wedding, actually. You know, with the sword arch?"

"Oh!" Yamina brightened up even more – if that was even possible. "You're in the military?"

"Both of us, actually."
"Very nice. It's been a while since I've done a military wedding, but even then…" She tapped her lip thoughtfully with a finger, then unlocked her tablet on the table, swiping through some files. Tapping on a photo, she turned the tablet towards them. "You have quite a few options. Now this one was traditional."

They peered down at the photo of two women sitting together in a kosha, beaming at each other.

"Discussed the mahr – which was kind of tricky because they're both technically brides," Yamina laughed. "Had their henna night, then their whole ceremony in the hotel. Signed their contract, exchanged rings, had drinks and food – all very smooth. Ah! And the zaffa at the venue of course."

She swiped through a few more photos of the women's wedding, explaining the themes and processes as she did so. Then a new couple appeared on screen. Two men this time, both in dress blues and walking down the front steps of a building.

"This one was Christian, had their ceremony in the army base's chapel – do you know them?"

Ana cocked her head. "Nope."

"I see, I see. Well, these two exchanged vows at the altar and walked through the sword arch after… There we go." She stopped at a photo of the men kissing under the arch. "This is what you want, hm?" Yamina smiled when her clients nodded. Then she looked thoughtful, fidgeting with her hijab. "Truthfully, you'll be my first civil wedding. But don’t worry – I'll give you the best." She flipped through a few more photos of the men, commenting, "This one's more Westernised, as you can see. And based on what my colleagues have done before, most of the civil weddings resembled this a little more."

"That's fine," Kamilah said.

"Good. We can adjust anything and everything as we go along, of course. It's your wedding, after all! So let's get into the nitty-gritty, shall we?"

The more Yamina grilled them for information, the more they felt like fish out of water. Ana had been to a few weddings herself, but they have been traditional for the most part, and she definitely did not ponder too much over their styles and themes. It was common knowledge that planning a wedding took a lot of time and effort, but one did not understand the whole truth until they experienced it themselves.

Deciding on the type of wedding was more than a little tricky – trying to fit a mix of modern and traditional customs caused quite a headache. They met with Yamina many more times over the next few weeks, discussing the location, guest list, dates, themes, outfits, procedures, photo shoots, caterers, and a whole plethora of items that made Ana's head swim when she thought about it.

"Maybe we should just elope," Ana said, scrolling down Yamina's photos on her tablet. Her legs were stretched out under the covers as she leaned against the headboard.

"It'd be much easier," Kamilah concurred, throwing her towel into the hamper before joining Ana on the bed. "Elope and go straight to our honeymoon."

"Now that's another question." Ana looked up from the photos of wedding venues. "Where do you want to go?"

"I want to see snow."
"Winter, huh. Do you wanna ski too?" She grinned at Kamilah's eager nod. "Then…Switzerland?"

"I don't know. You're the one who's traveled everywhere."

"Yeah, never skied though. But I'd like to try." Ana shrugged. "We'll ask Yamina about it."

"Mm." Kamilah hugged Ana's arm and leaned on her as they read through the proposed timeline in Yamina's email. The tentative wedding day was in January, which fit nicely with their winter dreams.

"Ana?"

"Yeah?" There was a pause, and Ana glanced at her partner, who was looking at her with an almost somber expression.

"Can I…take your name?"

Ana blinked, cocking her head. "Why?" she asked reflexively. Though there were more spouses starting to take each other's names, it was still a very uncommon and untraditional practice, mostly due to religious beliefs. Those who did it – like her father – still earned the occasional double-take.

"Why not?"

"Won't it be confusing with two 'Ana's? Ah!" She winced at the pinch on her arm, chortling with a grin on her face.

"You know what I mean."

After allowing herself a few more laughs, Ana calmed down and said, "There's no need to, you know. Besides, Shadid is…so you. It's your name."

"It's my… It's not mine. And I don't want it anymore," Kamilah said quietly.

Giving herself a tight mental slap for catching on so slowly, Ana squeezed her arm and smiled. "Kamilah Amari," she acceded, rolling her tongue around each syllable. "Kamilah Amari. Mm. Beautiful. Almost like these two names were made for each other." She grinned at Kamilah, and was rewarded with a gentle smile. "Kamilah Amari. I love the sound of that."

Kamilah gave a wan smile, resting her head against Ana's. "I love it too."

With Yamina getting to work snapping up their wedding venues, decorations, and making appointments at bridal boutiques, their overall schedule was now set in stone after getting a feel of their guests' availability. Their wedding was slated for the second weekend in January, and their honeymoon at the end of the same month. Now that one concern was out of the way, it was time for them to rush around and get everything else in order.

"Think your relatives would be scandalised?" Kamilah asked as she emerged from the changing room.

Ana turned away from the long rack of wedding dresses, setting eyes on her fiancée yet again. This was the fourth dress she had tried, a sleeveless V-neck which left her arms and a decent amount of back exposed, hence the question.

"Who cares? I'm the one you're marrying. Not them." Ana walked over, running her hand along Kamilah's waist to get a feel of the taffeta's texture.
"Still… Some might think it's too revealing?" Kamilah shrugged. She turned this way and that, looking herself over in the mirror.

"Then those old crones can shove it. Besides, neither of us ever cared about that before. Why start now?"

"Because it's our wedding?"

"That's right, love. Our wedding."

Kamilah raised a brow, and looked back into the mirror uncertainly. "What do you think about this one?"

"Lovely. Honestly, you look good in everything," Ana said, touching the dress as Kamilah cocked her head thoughtfully. "This feels a little stiff though. Do you like it?"

"So-so," she sighed. "Time to try another."

"Chin up, sweetie. We'll get there."

But not that day, it seemed. Or rather, 'night' was more appropriate, as their work schedules had them occupied seven days a week. With what little time they had to breathe, they spent it all on planning and shopping and food tasting. Thankfully, with the one weekend they had free, they found the dress in the second boutique they entered.

According to Kamilah, it was a rather easy decision. She felt comfortable in it, and Ana's loss for words sealed the deal. Ana remained transfixed as Kamilah spoke with their assistant, discussing several alterations to help flatter her physique even more. Then she made eye contact with Kamilah in the mirror, and groaned out loud when reminded they still had the evening gowns to look for.

"Do I have to?" Ana asked.

"You want to wear your dress blues the whole day?"

"Well, I could. I have to wear it for half the reception anyway," she said half-heartedly, stepping forward when Kamilah tugged on her hand.

"I want to see you in a dress."

"I know," Ana sighed. She had already lost the battle, she knew. Not that she even fought it in the first place.

"I'll pay for yours."

"That's not the point, habibti."

"Please?" Kamilah said with a smile, catching onto Ana's game.

"Fine."

Though they stayed two more hours in the boutique, the search for their gowns felt much shorter. The variety of colours kept their interest piqued, and Ana herself was busy trying on different dresses, finally understanding Kamilah's struggle to find the right one. It was when Kamilah smiled and nodded, eyes roving appreciatively over her figure that her search had ended, and they could sit back to take a long needed breath of fresh air.
One thing that they had the utmost freedom over, was the search for their rings. No concern about other people's opinions, nor having to match the colour theme of their wedding. It was just the two of them, looking for the token of their commitment. And, it was a much easier process than when Ana had hunted for their engagement rings.

They went into a few shops that Ana had been to before, getting greetings and well-wishes from some of the staff who had memories longer than Ana thought necessary. They tried on a few simple rings, then some with more modern patterns, and even a few with intricate engravings and inlaid gems. But what truly charmed Ana was a plain gold band with a strip of silver in the middle, and judging by the glint in Kamilah's eye, it was the one for her too.

With Yamina's help, everything had been settled in record time. The bustle slowed down just one month before their wedding day; most of what they needed were already in place. All they had left to do was take it easy, look forward to the rehearsal, and have mini panic attacks whenever they realised they had forgotten something, only to have Yamina assure them it was already taken care of.

The peace was almost surreal, considering the rush and stress of the months before. It left Ana with a niggling feeling that she had forgotten something, though reading through Yamina's comprehensive brief and listening to Kamilah reassurances set her mind at ease.

They cruised towards the end of the year and celebrated Ana's 25th with little fuss, opting to leave the excitement for their wedding itself. And a few days before the big weekend, the excitement did arrive in the form of Safiya and Zahra, whom they fetched from the airport. Safiya swooped in on Kamilah first, lifting her future sister-in-law from the ground in a hug. Zahra managed to steal Kamilah from Safiya eventually, the bride and her maid-of-honour finally meeting face-to-face after months of video calls.

Zaid arrived a day after the two, and they managed to steal some time together as a family, looking through the album from their pre-wedding photoshoot in Ain Sokhna. They had chosen to add some beach scenery into their collection of photos taken by the Giza pyramids, and the sight of bright blue waters turned out to be a good contrast to the desert sands. Ana's favourite – which they had set as phone wallpapers – was of them sharing a kiss on the beach, silhouetted against the orange hues of a setting sun.

They had a rehearsal in the park two days before the wedding on Saturday, mostly to practice the sword bearers' procession, and Kamilah's walk down the aisle. After the sword bearers had their coordination straightened out, they headed straight for the hotel, which was just a short drive away. They had a dry run with key performers from the zaffa troupe, learning the route to the ballroom for the evening's celebrations.

At the end of the day, the Amari relatives gathered in Ana's house, where they had a chance to catch up with one another and congratulate the couple. Ana spent most of the night introducing Kamilah to her elders and cousins, and fended off the more gossipy ones to give Kamilah some space to breathe. The house was kept active and noisy until midnight, when they finally dispersed to nab some rest themselves. There was an occasion to save their energy for, after all.

On the eve of their wedding, they went through every detail in the itinerary with Yamina again. The planner looked just as excited as they were, despite having organised many weddings of her own before.

Ana spent the entire day by Kamilah's side, entertaining relatives who had dropped by for another visit, before they were separated at night for their own bachelorette parties. Kamilah's was held in
Ana's house with Zahra, her own squad – who were her bridesmaids as well – along with some of Ana's cousins and aunts. Ana hung out in a pub with her half of the crowd – those who wanted down as much alcohol as they wanted without judging looks from their elders. Ana invited the men to her party as well, taking pity on them for having no actual 'bachelor' party to attend. Safiya made noise in Ana's stead, regaling the guests with her own share of stories, and matching Ebo drink for drink.

After nursing two glasses though, Ana started getting restless. The noise, alcohol, and boisterous chatting all held no appeal to her anymore. She looked over the group, glanced down at her own glass, and came to a decision.

"Ana!" Safiya said. "Come on, why are you going so slow? Better get smashed tonight before you have to behave tomorrow."

"Nah, she can't afford to have a hangover tomorrow!" Khalid clapped her on the back. "Gotta be sharp for the wife."

"...I'm going home."

Safiya leaned in. "What?"

Ana stared right at her sister, then knocked back the rest of her beer in one go. Glass landing on the table with a thud, Ana announced, "I'm going home."

Those sitting around her turned to stare as she stood up from her chair.

"Mesi," Ana said. "Drive me back home."

"Your home?" Mesi asked incredulously.

"Yes. Let's go."

"You're not supposed to see her tonight, Ana."

"Yeah. Just sit down and enjoy your last night of freedom." Safiya tried to tug Ana back down, but failed.

"I don't want to. Come on, Mesi." Ana started walking away. "Either you drive, or I drive."

That did it for Mesi. She got up from the table immediately, following Ana through the pub. And when Ana reached their car parked behind the building, she turned around to find not only Mesi, but Safiya, Layla, and the rest of the girls in the group.

"What..."

"Get in," Safiya said, yanking the door open with a smirk. "Let's crash the henna party."

The women sang along to the radio in their alcohol-induced high, while Mesi drove them back to the Amari residence in no time at all. Ana stumbled out of the car and made a beeline for the door, getting surprised looks from the much more mellow party goers in the house.

"Ana!" Zahra stood from the couch, where the henna artist was working on her cousin's hand. "What are you doing here? You're not supposed to see Kamilah before—"

"Too late," Ana said, eyes falling on her bride-to-be, who had walked out of the kitchen with a cup of tea in hand. Kamilah's eyes widened as Ana strode over to her, barely getting her question out
before Ana drew her in for deep, loving kiss. She ignored the furor that broke out behind them, smiling at Kamilah when they parted.

"You're so beautiful," she murmured.

"And you've been drinking," Kamilah said, smiling fondly back at her.

Ana chuckled, dipping in for another kiss. Then she loosened her hold and lifted Kamilah's inked hand, admiring the intricate red patterns arcing up from the wrist, over the back of her hand, and across her fingers. Ana kissed Kamilah's knuckles gently, feeling her agitation ease into calmness. She was where she belonged.

"I love you so much."

"Come on, girls," Safiya interjected, with an arm around her own partner. "You have the whole day tomorrow to be mushy."

"Can't wait," Ana said. She followed Kamilah's lead, obeying the tug on her hand until they sat down on the couch together, joining in the conversation with her relatives and poking fun at Safiya for being slower at getting hitched.

When the party ended, she had to be pried away from her fiancée, pouting as Mesi pulled her towards the car.

Tomorrow could not come fast enough.

The morning started with a short, thoughtless haze after the alarm rang. Then, remembering what day it was, Ana's mind sharpened within seconds. She shot out of bed and stood in place for a moment, anxiety working through her veins as she forgot what her morning routine was. Her phone buzzed, and she picked it up to read a 'wake up' text from Safiya. Firing off an acknowledgement, Ana double-timed into the bathroom, washing herself up with vigour. She had just put on her crisply-ironed dress pants when someone knocked on her door.

Mesi stood in her own dress blues, raising her brows at Ana, who was buttoning up her shirt. She entered the room, helping Ana put on her uniform and making sure no creases escaped her inspection. Then she made Ana sit down, pulling her hair back into a regulation bun, and tamed her fringe with gel. By the time Ana was ready to go, Layla appeared at her door along with Safiya and two cousins – who had to travel from the Amari house to the barracks. Entrusting her gown to Safiya, Ana was escorted down to the rented black Chrysler, and driven to the park for their ceremony.

They reached the destination early, but stayed in the car longer as Kamilah's party had been delayed a little. Ana's foot had started to tap on the floor when Safiya handed her phone over. Her heart leapt at Kamilah's name, breaths growing short as she answered it.

"Ana?"

"Yeah?" Ana answered, and they lapsed into silence. As she waited, she realised there was no sound from the other end at all. "Milah? Are you alright? It sounds pretty quiet on your end."

"I'm fine. Just sent them out for a while. I…wanted to hear you."

"Are you nervous?" Ana asked gently.
"Yes."

"Me too," she laughed, relieving some of the tension in her body. "Maybe we should've just eloped."

Kamilah chuckled. "I love you, Ana."

"Love you too. Can't wait to see you."

"Me too. Speaking of which…" Ana heard rustling in the background, and a chair moving. "I'm coming."

"Not without me, I hope."

"If I can help it."

Ana waited with the imam at the wedding arch, standing at parade rest as she grappled with a heart threatening to burst through her chest. The noon heat was starting to sink in through the layers of her uniform, despite the shade of the pavilion and its ceiling fans. Chalking the heat up to her own nervousness, Ana took a discrete breath and stole a glance back at Safiya, taking comfort in her wink. Then she looked over the seated guests, all chatting with one another in polite volumes. She recognised half of them to be from the military, and the other half were their spouses and dates for the day.

*We need to make more friends outside the army,* Ana thought drily, though her attempt at humour did nothing to alleviate her anxiousness. Safiya would be of no help; her sister was on her best behaviour today, and probably wouldn't want to trade funny faces with Ana at the moment. That was a blessing in disguise – there were too many officers among the guests for Ana to safely make a fool of herself.

As though to stop her from actually doing something stupid, Yamina waved at Zaid from behind the guests, signaling Kamilah's arrival. Ana locked her legs in place, so her weak knees wouldn't send her to the floor when Zaid announced the arrival of the bridal entourage. Those gathered turned to watch the bridesmaids walking down the aisle - a train of deep purple led by Zahra, who stole a few glances at Safiya as she did so. Ana didn't think much about it. In that moment, she thought about nothing at all, her eyes fixed on the figure standing away from the pavilion. The only one that mattered.

The bridesmaids soon took their place on the left, and then came time for Kamilah's entrance. The guests rose at Zaid's behest, and Ana's breath caught at the sight of her bride, standing at the back of the aisle with a bouquet in her hands. The sheath wedding dress they had chosen graced Kamilah's form. A strap sat on her right shoulder, leading down to the sweetheart neckline, from which white chiffon wrapped over her torso and gathered at a silver brooch sitting on her left hip, accentuating her curves. From there, the dress flowed smoothly down, ending in an elegant court train. Combined with hair styled into a braided updo, tasteful makeup, and elegant poise, Kamilah was every bit as stunning as Ana had expected and more.

She found it difficult to breathe as Kamilah walked down the aisle by herself, one calculated step flowing into the next as a hush fell over the pavilion. Ana swelled with pride, watching her love bear the attention with chin held high. Their eyes met; Ana swallowed thickly, enraptured as Kamilah's gaze softened, smiling almost shyly at her open adoration. Ana stepped forward when Kamilah reached the head of the aisle, offering a hand for her bride to take. Her fingers closed over Kamilah's, and they stood hand-in-hand as the imam spoke.
It was difficult to keep her eyes off Kamilah, but Ana somehow managed. Her voice, steady when declaring 'I do', wavered dangerously during her vow. She paused, swallowing again as Kamilah's hand squeezed hers lightly.

Then she finished, "...and I pledge myself to you, from this day forward, and all eternity."

She breathed an inaudible sigh of relief when she finished without cracking. There was an amused quirk on Kamilah's lips as she slid the wedding band onto her finger. Ana held onto Kamilah's hand a little longer, before her view of the ring was stolen when it was her turn to rest her hand in Kamilah's.

Kamilah made it through the vows without a single quaver in her voice, wearing an affectionate smile as she gazed into Ana's eyes, only breaking contact to slip the ring onto her finger.

"By the power vested in me, I affirm your vows and pronounce you married. You may now kiss the bride."

Ana broke out into a grin, and Kamilah's lips parted in a fond smile. With a hand on Kamilah's waist, Ana leaned in for her first kiss with her wife.

Her wife.

She beamed. Her muscles that had been coiled with tension relaxed for the first time that day. As Zaid and his brother joined them to witness the signing of their marriage certificate, Safiya marched out with Ana's uniformed entourage in tow, and took their places by the aisle with sabres at ready.

Paperwork done, the couple turned to face the aisle. Another bark from Safiya, and the bearers raised their sabres, tips touching to form the arch. Ana offered her arm to Kamilah and, at the subtle signal from Yamina, they strode forward together. They passed smoothly through two arches – the first formed by Khalid and Ebo, the second by Layla and Mesi. At the third, however, Safiya and Hakim lowered their sabres before the couple, forming a barrier. The key to which was a kiss, and Ana was more than happy to press her lips to Kamilah's again. Safiya smiled when Ana caught her eye, and lifted her sabre in sync with Hakim, allowing them through.

Ana walked out of the pavilion with Kamilah as the bearers were dismissed, and the guests followed them out into the afternoon sun. Kamilah let go of Ana's elbow, turning around to watch their female guests gather behind them eagerly. When Kamilah turned away from the crowd, bouquet at ready, Ana already knew who would catch it. The moment the bouquet was tossed high into the air, Safiya sprinted around the group and leapt up, snatching it like a Frisbee before it even began falling. Ana burst out in laughter when Safiya stumbled on her landing amid a chorus of hoots and cheers. Patting off her shoulders and shaking off the embarrassment, Safiya grinned and went to hand the bouquet to Zahra.

Taking a deep breath, Ana exhaled through her mouth, feeling lighter than she had ever been in her life. As Zaid helped to usher the guests towards the light reception set up in the pavilion, Ana took a moment to embrace her wife.

"Finally," Kamilah said, face warm and radiant.

"Finally." Ana touched their foreheads together, closing her eyes to enjoy the peace as the noise moved farther from them.

"There's still the celebration later though," Kamilah reminded her, and Ana laughed softly.

"Bring it on."
Though the post-ceremony reception was a light one, the Amari family managed to make a party out of it, and stayed in the park well into the mid-afternoon. Then they dispersed to catch a breather before the night celebrations, where the real fun would begin.

Ana and Kamilah retreated into their house with Zaid and Safiya, resting their feet and changing into more comfortable attire. Wearing a tank top and shorts felt like the sweetest liberation after spending most of the day in dress blues. At least it would be much cooler at night when she donned it again.

"Your auntie's already making noise about how Westernised you are," Zaid said, taking a big gulp of water from his mug.

Ana kept her eyes closed, body still as she remained lying on the couch. "Nasira?"

"Who else?"

Safiya snorted, shifting in her armchair near Ana's head. "Yeah, I heard her too."

"She can shove her noise up her ass," Ana groaned.

"Ana," Zaid warned.

"It's true! That's where her head is anyway." She raised a hand when Safiya shrieked, meeting her sister in a high-five.

Zaid sighed. "At least try to keep things civil with her later, okay?"

"Only if she keeps away from the alcohol."

"Which is never," Safiya chipped in.

"What?" Zaid looked at his daughters curiously.

"You don't know?" Ana turned her head to raise her brows at her father.

"Know what?" Kamilah asked, having just entered the living room. She had changed out of her dress, and was clothed comfortably like the rest of them. She took her place on the couch with Ana, who rested her head in Kamilah's lap.

"Auntie Nasira. She complained about our wedding," Ana explained quickly, then continued speaking to her father. "You don't know she sneaks alcohol during weddings or whatever?"

"No…?" Zaid said tentatively, watching his daughters share a glance.

"You know how during every celebration she always walks around with a glass of 'tea'?"

"Yes?"

"It's fucking alcohol."

Zaid stared at her dubiously. "How do you know?"

"Um. Because of us, actually," Safiya said, gesturing at Ana and herself. "She caught us pouring out our tea and replacing it with whisky. She thought it was fucking genius."

"Well, it kind of is," Kamilah commented.
"Thanks, babe." Ana smiled up at her, getting a pinch on the nose.

"You know," Safiya continued. "Mama's cool and all, but her side of the family is just full of bitches."

"Hypocritical bitches."

"Alright, that's enough," Zaid cut in. "I'm not a fan of your mother's family either, but I want you two to keep it under a lid. Especially you, Ana. This is your wedding."

"Fine."

"By the way, where's Zahra and the rest?"

"At Adil's place. They'll come over later," Safiya said, standing from her chair. "I'm going up. Wake me up if my alarm doesn't go off."

Zaid downed the rest of his water, and went up to his own room as well. Kamilah was trapped in the living room by a wife who refused to move, and eventually fell asleep on the couch with Ana.

Ana sat in the backseat with Kamilah, their hands entwined as Hakim ferried them to the hotel for the evening celebrations. After the bridesmaids arrived at the Amari house and gussied Kamilah up for the evening, they had left along with Zaid and Safiya to prepare the couple's welcome. Kamilah rested her head against Ana's, and they closed their eyes until Hakim told them that they had arrived.

There was already a large group of guests gathered at the entrance, and at the head of the crowd was the zaffa troupe waiting to receive them. Hakim brought the car to a smooth stop, and Ana alighted first, straightening her dress jacket as she rounded the car to help Kamilah out. Her wife wore a wine-coloured halter dress, somehow looking even more stunning than she did in the morning.

The gentle tap on Ana's chin broke her reverie, and she looked up to find Kamilah smiling at her knowingly.

"Just a few more hours, amar. Then I'll be all yours," she said, taking Ana's arm.

Ana could only manage a smile, before they were surrounded by the group of belly dancers and drummers, who sang one lively song after another. The guests gathered around them, joining in the dancing as they moved slowly through the hotel, up the stairs towards the ballroom. Ana had a bright grin on her face, bobbing along to the energetic drum beats while they walked. The entourage's loud singing and dancing attracted the attention of others in the hotel as well, and a few tourists took photos of the festivities.

They entered the ballroom to a resounding cheer – which was initiated and carried on by their squad mates. The audible high filled the room until they reached the kosha, walking up the stage and taking their seats in the simple white couch. The music died down as each guest was served a glass of rose-coloured sharbat. Then they stood quietly, as Zaid came forward to give his speech. Ana's hand found Kamilah's, the both of them listening raptly as the man thanked their guests for coming, then spoke briefly about the joy of watching his daughter find happiness. Ana straightened herself unconsciously when his eyes fell on her.

"Ana. As your father, I wish for you nothing but the best. I want to see you happy and successful. I want to see you live a life that you have built for yourself. In all the years that I have raised you, I have never seen you smile as brightly as you have today. And I am glad, and so very proud of you." He paused when his voice faltered, taking a moment to collect himself. Ana clenched her jaw, gazing
back at her father with a lump in her throat. Zaid took a breath, and continued, "You are starting a
new life of your own, and I have no doubt that you will make it a fulfilling one with Kamilah."

"And Kamilah, my new daughter. I have only known you for two years, but I already consider you
to be my own flesh and blood. Let me tell you, in all my years of raising Ana, I have never seen her
as devoted to anyone as she is to you. She will be there for you through thick and thin, and I hope
you will be there for her as well." He smiled when Kamilah nodded. "Rest assured, my dear. You
will be well taken care of, and find nothing but love and joy with her."

"I can safely tell the both of you, that this is not the happiest day of your lives. There will be much
more to come in the days ahead, much more happiness to be found and made with each other." He
took another steadying breath, blinking away the moisture in his eyes, and turned towards the guests.

"To the brides, and their everlasting love."

They downed their drinks in unison.

The music started up again, a cue for the guests to clear the way for the couple, who strode down the
stage together. Ana stopped in the middle of the crowd, turning to look at Kamilah, sharing playful
smiles. The drummers bounced on their feet near the couple, and Ana caught onto the beat of the
music, easing into the first dance of the night. As Zaid had taught them, Ana bounced on her feet in
time with Kamilah, enchanted by the sway of her wife's hips. Then she took Kamilah's hands in an
impromptu duet, losing herself in the dance and Kamilah's bright smile, until the guests started
trickling onto the dance floor as well. Ana pouted when Safiya stole Kamilah away, sticking her
tongue out at her younger sister. Zaid was now Ana's partner, leading his daughter in the dance and
looking the happiest Ana had seen him in years.

Ana danced with a slew of partners – Safiya, Khalid, Ebo, Layla, and many others who passed by in
a blur, until the dancing gradually died down. She engulfed Kamilah in a hug the moment they laid
eyes on each other again, getting a hearty laugh from her wife. Zaid came forward to guide them
towards the stage, where the two-tiered wedding cake had been set up on a table. Khalid was
standing at ready, handing the unadorned sabre to Ana when the guests were all seated. Laying the
flat of the blade on her left forearm, Ana presented the hilt to Kamilah. She took it, waiting for Ana
to rest a hand over hers, and they cut into the bottom layer of the white and gold cake together.

They returned the sabre to Khalid for a thorough cleaning, as a slice was properly cut and handed to
them on a plate. Kamilah cut off a small piece with her fork, delivering it into Ana's mouth. Ana did
the same, feeding Kamilah a piece of cake. Then she swooped in for a kiss as the guests applauded,
getting hoots of laughter from their squad.

Ana escorted her wife to the table where her family sat, then slipped away to change into her evening
gown. Her cousin – their charitable stylist for the day – was already waiting in the changing room,
curling iron at ready. She released Ana's dark locks from its bun, combing and curling at top speed.
Before Ana knew it, her makeup was applied flawlessly, and she received a slap on the butt as she
walked out the door.

Ana reentered the ballroom in a scarlet off-the-shoulder number, with her hair swept over one
shoulder. She caught Kamilah's appreciative gaze, and the beginnings of warmth bloomed in her
cheeks.

"You look damn amazing, Ana!" Ebo boomed when she passed by her squad's table.

"You're welcome," Ana replied with a grin. When she reached her table, Kamilah rose from her seat
and pulled her in for a deep kiss, turning her knees weak.
"You are stunning," Kamilah breathed, keeping her arm around Ana's waist.

"I know. But you should see me out of the dress."

"I already have."

Ana received a second slap on her behind that night, and she turned her head to see Safiya's crooked grin.

"Time and place, ladies."

And so they sat and ate, before making their rounds through the ballroom to mingle with their guests. With Safiya's help and Kamilah by her side, Ana kept them entertained until all the guests had departed, and Zaid left for the comfort of his own home.

Ana and Kamilah nipped up to their hotel room, shedding their gowns and pulling on casual jeans, then gathered with their squads and cousins in the hotel's bar. As expected, they plied Ana with glass after glass, though Safiya did help by bearing half of the burden. Kamilah was let off easy because – as Layla put it slyly – someone had to be sober for the horizontal tango later.

But when they finally made it back to their room at two in the morning, neither had much energy left for any kind of dance at all. After a quick shower and scrubbing their faces clean of makeup, the exhausted newly-weds fell into bed, and went right to sleep in each other's arms.
Ana grumbled, though she sounded more coherent in her mind than through her mouth. She pushed her face further into the pillows, doing her best to ignore the familiar throb in her head, and the gentle patting on her shoulder.

"Wake up."

Oh, and the voice trying to tell her what to do.

"Ana."

"Nnh…"

"It's nearly 11."

"I dn kh…" she groaned against the pillow.

"We missed breakfast, so we'd better make it for brunch with your family."

"Huh?"

"Safiya called. I said we'd meet them."

"Ngh. Five mins…"

"All your 'five minutes' are lies, and you know it," Kamilah said, now patting her head. "Come on."

"Three…" Ana whined into the pillow.

"Ana."

"Two…"

"I regret marrying you."

Ana's eyes snapped open, turning her head to look up at Kamilah's smirk.

"I should've tried that from the start, hm?"

Ana gave a long-suffering groan, and rolled onto her back. If her head was this heavy from last night's drinking, she could scarcely imagine what it would've been like to down all those glasses without Safiya's help. She would feel nothing, probably; that was a typical side effect of being dead.

Insistent tapping on the tip of her nose roused her back to life, Ana having closed her eyes without thinking, starting to slip into unconsciousness again. Draping her arms around Kamilah, she blinked as her partner shifted on top of her, knocking their foreheads together.

"Get up."

"Only the first day and you're already ordering me around," Ana drawled.

"What else is a wife for?" Kamilah smiled, twirling Ana's hair around a finger.

"Kiss?" She puckered up her lips, and was not disappointed. Tilting her chin up to coax Kamilah
back after the first chaste kiss, Ana indulged in her wife's touch a little longer, then pushed her onto her back. She brushed their lips together once more, then nestled her head under Kamilah's chin, lying still on top of her partner.

"Five minutes," she muttered, feeling a quiet laugh rumble in Kamilah's chest. This time, there were no more 'orders'. Just soft patting on her back when her request was granted.

Kamilah, the saint that she was, allowed Ana to rest for a grand total of one extra minute before shaking her awake. With all the vigour of a sleep-deprived sloth, Ana followed the tug on her hand and shuffled blindly into the bathroom. By the time her mind had kicked into low gear, she was standing in front of the mirror, wondering just when she had pulled on her jeans and shirt.

Zaid picked them up at the hotel, and drove them to a restaurant just three streets down. It was a quaint little place the Amari frequented whenever they were back home, charmed by its well-cooked dishes and an atmosphere that remained cozy even when they were packed to capacity. Ana was doubly appreciative of the coziness as she huddled in the corner beside Safiya, the sisters clutching their sweaters close while heavy rain pattered on the glass windows behind them. They sniffed and agreed to whatever their livelier counterparts wanted to order, quietly regretting their excess the night before.

Recognising the telltale signs of a hangover, the restaurant owner – who knew them by now – made a special fruit blend for the two. Ana latched onto the straw and sipped at her drink, pausing only when Kamilah scooped a healthy serving of shakshuka onto her plate. Each spoonful of food brought a little life back into her body until eventually, Ana had enough energy to fight over the last poached egg with Safiya, the skirmish ending in a yolk-soaked battlefield of vegetables.

They kept up an endless stream of bickering until Ana saw her family off at the airport in the evening. She nodded over and over again when Zaid told Ana to take care of herself and Kamilah, to be responsible, to have patience, to think on the future, and most importantly, to remember that marriage was a huge change from dating, and to be understanding, to make time for–

"Papa, papa!" Ana cut in, waving her hands in front of Zaid's face. He stopped mid-sentence, thrown off by the interruption. "Relax. You're more worried about me than I am."

"That's why I have to be more worried about you," Zaid sighed. "At least now Kamilah can pick up the slack for me instead."

He managed to squeeze in an extra bundle of advice as he was escorted to the departure hall, where Safiya stepped in to pry her father away from Ana. The sisters parted with a hug, and once again, Ana was the only one left in Cairo. She caught that thought with a start and glanced over at Kamilah, who was looking at her curiously.

Well, maybe not the only 'one' anymore.

They had the night to themselves and, at Ana's suggestion, stayed over at the Amari home before leaving for base the next morning. It was much more comfortable there, and an empty house would be the perfect place to consummate their marriage.

The week after their wedding was utterly serene compared to the bustle and nervous anticipation of the months before. Even if there was a honeymoon to look forward to, their preparatory shopping had been done in advance, so they had an abundance of time to lay back and review their itinerary for the trip. That, and also start looking for a house.
"So. What do you think?" Ana leant against the kitchen counter, eyes on the agent who was speaking on the phone near the entryway. They were in one of the smaller family lots on base, the last one they would look at for the day. After they had gone to the housing office only over an hour ago, an agent was assigned to show them around the available houses on base. The office was never very busy; it was common knowledge why, and they just had their first-hand experience.

All family houses were built the same, down to the last wood paneling and screw. The only difference was the sizes, and that was it. The one they were in had only one level, with two bedrooms, one study, a small laundry room, and a kitchen right next to the modest living room. Compared to her family home, this was rather…

"Pitiful."

Ana snorted. "Well, I wouldn't be so harsh, but…"

"It's much better than the barracks," Kamilah admitted. "And for two people it is adequate, but…"

" Claustrophobic."

"Right." She shifted to lean on Ana. "Who would choose this over the bigger houses anyway?"

"Practical people? Who…don't want children?" A sly grin made its way onto her lips, and Kamilah sighed, fully aware of what was coming. "Already planning so far ahead, Shad– Amari?"

"Don't put words into my mouth, Amari," Kamilah said with a smile. "But it's a practical consideration."

The agent returned, cutting off the comeback already sitting on Ana's tongue. Taher pocketed his phone into his boring gray trousers, eyes bright and expectant. "So, ladies? What do you think?"

"You were right. This one is small."

He laughed. "I might've had a long career as a salesman, Ms. Amari, but lying is one thing I've never picked up. So!" He brought his hands together in a clap. "Would you like to put your names in the waiting list first? It's not a very long one – truthfully, we have more empty lots than applicants right now. Just the paperwork, you know? I'd give you about…one, maybe two months before your application goes through. What do you say?"

Ana glanced at Kamilah, who shook her head, still looking unconvinced. "We'll have to think on it a little more."

"Of course, of course. Take your time, yes? Many have reservations staying in base, day in and day out." Taher beckoned at them, and they followed him out of the house. "Living off base does give you a lot more freedom and space to breathe away from work, but living on base has its own conveniences too. Tight community, free amenities…" He patted at his jacket and trouser pockets, then looked up at them. "I've given you my name card, yes?"

"Yeah."

"Great! So, would you like to look around more, or do you have any more questions…?"

"No. But we'll call you when we do." Ana smiled at him.

"Alright. Well, I've to be off! Something to see to in the office…"
They thanked him, Ana waving listlessly until he had gotten into his car and driven off in a hurry. She took a breath and exhaled, hands on her hips as she looked up at the darkening sky. An arm circled around her back, and she hugged around Kamilah’s shoulders as they strolled onto the sidewalk, its colour reminding Ana of Taher’s dull-coloured suit. She kicked at a pebble, watching it skitter across concrete and land in the grass.

"Do you want to live here?" Kamilah asked.

"I don’t know. It’d be nice to have a shorter travel to work though. Easier to see the idiots too."

"But then we’d be living with work."

"I know. That's kind of why my parents didn't want to live on base either." Ana paused, tilting her head. "I like the idea of living off base though. Reminds me of my childhood, when the army wasn't my life. Ah," she sighed. "Good times. What about you?"

"Off base sounds nice. But then again, living here would be cheap."

"Almost free."

"Mm. It's nice. Then you look out the window and see soldiers walking everywhere."

"Then you look back in your house and realise your wife's a soldier too."

"What a nightmare," Kamilah laughed.

Ana grinned. She gave Kamilah a squeeze, and kissed her temple. "We can take our time. No need to rush."

"Mm."

They walked along quietly, street lamps flickering on as the sun set. Ana looked out at the stretch of houses, and the few children playing on their lawns with their pets. The thought of having a place of their own… Ana could not wait.

"Amar."

"Yeah," Ana drawled.

"How big do you want the house to be?"

"Ideally, like a palace. But something like this would be nice too." Ana gestured at the house they walked past. It was a modest two-storey, an exact replica of an empty lot they had visited earlier. Three bedrooms and a study, and quite a bit of space. Still a little smaller than the Amari home, but cozy.

Ana glanced over to see Kamilah regarding her with a thoughtful look. "What?"

The corner of Kamilah's mouth twitched. "Nothing."

Thinking about their house gave Ana a bit of a headache, but she took it in stride alongside her wife. They decided to extend their stay at Ana’s home for the entire week, just to get a feel of having to drive up to the base every morning. The travel time meant earlier waking times, and they decided that if they ever got a house off base, it would have to be nearer than where the Amari lived.
The more Ana thought about it, and the longer they spent chatting with Zaid, the more amenable she was to living on base. The house came free, and their housing allowance would cover utilities up to a certain point. Not to mention the convenience of having other facilities just within the neighbourhood, and free for use. Though Ana still had a longing for having a house off base, living in base would be a good stand-in for the time being. It would give them the luxury of time to find a neighbourhood to their liking, the right place for them to start building a life together. Besides, their wallets needed a breather after their wedding, and would definitely need a break after their honeymoon.

As it turned out, Kamilah was thinking along the same lines, and shared her desire to move out of the barracks. So they made a quick call to Taher the day before their flight, and were put on the waiting list. They managed to sit on it for about ten minutes, before caving in and talking about what they wanted to do with the house first.

Ana wanted a housewarming party. Kamilah wanted a movie marathon.

The compromise was a housewarming movie marathon without alcohol. Neither had the urge to clean up a living room after drunk soldiers.

Sipping on her coffee, Ana smiled behind the mug as she listened to Kamilah's footsteps travel all over the house. Up the stairs, down the stairs, to the living room, down the hallway, back to the living room, before rushing off somewhere else again. She was practically getting a workout from all this moving about, and showed no sign of slowing down any time soon.

Ana had opened her eyes that morning to a bright smile, and was promptly swept out of bed to get ready for their flight later. She'd never thought she would live to see the day where Kamilah was the one buzzing with energy instead of her; a thoroughly refreshing sight to be sure, but it was time to slow her down for a while.

"Milah…" she said when Kamilah's figure flashed past the kitchen doorway again.

"What?"

"Stop checking the luggage and sit down."

"But have you packed the–"

"Yes."

"And our–"

"Yes." Ana scooped some scrambled eggs into her mouth, then glanced at the doorway when Kamilah appeared with a frown."

"I haven't even said what it is," Kamilah said, munching on the toast in her hand.

"We packed everything last night, Milah. Everything." The way Kamilah had checked and rechecked their luggage the night before was unnervingly reminiscent of boot camp.

When Kamilah still looked dubious, she patted on the counter, where Kamilah's plate lay untouched. Save for the toast, of course. "Finish your food before the cab comes. Or don't. It'll be hilarious watching you swallow your food whole."

She raised her brows to match Kamilah's narrowed eyes, snorting when her nose was tweaked none-
too-gently by her wife, who finally joined her at the counter.

"Heat packs?"

"Milah," Ana sighed as Kamilah smiled through a mouthful of eggs. "You don't need heat packs when I'm around."

Kamilah just hummed, downing half of her lukewarm coffee in one go. She pulled Ana's tablet over, swiping through their itinerary for another quick check, before checking the weather forecast in both Cairo and Zermatt. She had been rather diligent in studying their destination, looking up history, geography, and landmarks. Many a time had the tablet fallen onto her face, when she drifted off to sleep after a tiring work day. Ana found it endearing how hard she tried to wrap her tongue around a few choice German phrases, before giving up and polishing her English instead. Kamilah's previous travels had mostly been limited to military deployments and even then, had only ever been to other Arab countries. Obviously, she was determined not to let this trip go to waste.

By the time the cab arrived, they were lounging on the sofa, dressed up and ready to go. They made it to the airport in good time, and headed straight for the small movie theatre in the departure hall, only to regret their decision when they had to leave before the movie's conclusion. Onboard the plane, Ana fired off her last few replies to the 'have fun' and 'make lots of babies' messages on her phone, then sat back for the 4-hour flight. She occupied her time with more movies while Kamilah stared out of the window, listening to jazz piped through flimsy airline headphones. The bright scenery of clouds, clouds, and more clouds was not enough to hold Kamilah's attention it seemed; she started nodding off an hour into the flight, head drooping until she found a makeshift pillow in Ana's shoulder.

After being chair-bound for hours, both women perked up when the plane started its descent, and peered out of the window at the snow-covered landscape. They remained transfixed until they touched down safely in Geneva Airport. Ana snickered when Kamilah stepped into the jet bridge and let out a reflexive curse, getting her first taste of the weather in single-digit temperatures. They scurried off to change into warmer attire, then caught the train that would bring them to Zermatt – their first destination. It was another 4-hour travel, which they spent exploring the carriages to stretch their legs, taking photos, and dozing off again due to lack of entertainment.

Night had fallen when they finally reached Zermatt, and their hotel was just a short walk away from the train station. They were shivering slightly when they first set foot into the warm lodge's entrance, Kamilah with her arm in Ana's after an encounter with black ice on the way there.

Their modest room overlooked the Matterhorn, and Ana took to pressing her face close to the window, squinting out at the mountain as she waited for her turn in the bathroom. Kamilah had conquered it within minutes of opening her luggage, and shut the door cruelly in her wife's pouting face. Ana continued to pout when she saw Kamilah walking out in her shorts and oversized shirt, relenting only when she received a peck on her lips.

"We have a lot of time," Kamilah said, before falling into bed and burrowing under the covers. She sighed, lying peacefully in her warm little cocoon, until she was shaken from her state of bliss by Ana's body slamming on top of hers.

They had a late start to the morning, owing to their reluctance to leave the haven that was their bed. After a few 'you get up first's, Ana rolled out of bed, goose bumps rising when she walked by the windows, feeling the cold that radiated through the glass. She got an annoyed whine from her partner by throwing the curtains wide open, flooding the room in sunlight. Ana cackled when a pillow landed harmlessly at her feet from Kamilah's lifeless throw. The cold seemed to have slowed her
wife's engines a bit, and it took a little while for Kamilah to regain some semblance of life.

The day started as slowly as they had woken, with a quiet breakfast in the hotel, sitting beside wall-length windows and spotting the people already playing in freshly fallen snow. It was just as well; their plan for the day was rather laidback. They went exploring about the village, passing by many cafés and restaurants as they walked on, and stopped by the occasional shop to browse through clothes and trinkets. Ana loved how fresh and serene the air felt. The winter aside, Zermatt's car-free environment was notably less noisy than Cairo's streets. No honks and shouts of irate drivers; just the sound of boots thudding on pavements and crunching on snow, accompanied by the passers-by – locals and tourists alike – chatting in their native tongues. It was beautiful in every way, especially how it kept Kamilah's eyes bright and inquisitive, as she pulled Ana down every street and alley they came across.

After a slow circuit through the old village to take photos among quaint wooden houses and barns, they nipped into the Matterhorn Museum, learning its history and walking around its exhibit of a mountain village. When they were done, they strode back to the centre of Zermatt for a quick bite and rest, before heading off on a hike to a few hamlets near village.

The path to Zmutt led them on a gentle incline from Zermatt. Ana tilted her face up to bathe in the bright sunlight before the climb became steeper, and a short stretch of pines offered them some shade. She was fiddling with her selfie stick as they left the cluster of trees behind, pocketing her phone and shoving the stick into her backpack, when she was shoved roughly to the side. Ana stumbled and fell face first into the snowbank, lying in shock from the fall and cold on her face. She raised her head as Kamilah gave a very Ana-like cackle, snapping a photo of her wife sprawled in the snow. Wiping off her face at a deliberately slow pace, Ana let a grin spread on her lips as she stared right back at Kamilah. The seconds seemed to slow as all movement stilled, both women watching, waiting…

Ana flew onto her feet in a split-second, and Kamilah spun on her heel, slipping a little on the snowy path. She regained her balance quickly and started to run farther up the trail, but it did her no good. Kamilah shrieked through her maniacal laughter when Ana's arms clamped around her, and lifted her from the ground.

"Ana, no–!"

"Ana, yes!"

Taking two steps, Ana flung herself back onto the snow, this time with her wife writhing mightily in her hold. She laughed and pounced on top of Kamilah, trapping her on the ground. After rubbing handfuls of snow into Kamilah's hair, her partner finally managed to buck her off, throwing her to the side. Before Ana could get up, a hand slapped snow back into her face. She flailed her arms and sat up, digging blindly into the ground and throwing however much snow she could grab in Kamilah's direction. The two continued their battle, flurries of white flung about haphazardly. Ana had nearly shoved a handful of snow through the neck of Kamilah's shirt when they heard a small poof near them.

They froze, turning their heads to find a toddler lying in the snow a little ways from them. The girl looked up, gazing at them with pure mirth shining in bright blue eyes that matched the cloudless sky above. Blonde hair fell about her face as she giggled, hands smacking at the snow in an effort to imitate the women's antics.

Ana let go of Kamilah's jacket, helping her wife sit up as the child got to her feet with both hands full of snow. She tottered over and threw her ammo at them, which fluttered harmlessly against their jackets. Giggling, she babbled on in German, gesticulating at them. They exchanged playful glances,
then scooped up their own handfuls of snow and sprinkled them over the girl, getting even more giggles from her.

"You really like snow, huh?" Ana said, and more German spilled out in reply.

The girl reached out to tug on Ana's dark hair, then turned around to look at the blond man who called out to her, walking down the trail with a woman by his side.

Ana cocked her head, looking down at the girl who had turned her attention back to her. "Ang-gehlah," she repeated what the man had said, and the girl perked up. "Are they your parents?" Ana asked. And though she still spoke in Arabic, the girl giggled anyway. She bent down to take some snow again, this time offering them to Kamilah, who accepted the gift with both hands and a smile.

"Thank you."

When the couple reached the trio in the snow, the woman came forward first and coaxed the girl to her side. The man started speaking to them in what Ana recognised as German, but somehow it sounded...different. Either way, she still didn't understand, so she spoke.

"Is she your daughter?" Ana asked in English, and the man blinked.

"Yes," he replied in the common language. "I am so sorry she bothered you—"

"Oh, no! She was no bother." Ana smiled at the girl, who babbled something at them again. "She's a very beautiful child."

"Thank you." He beamed, glancing over to where his wife was patting snow off their daughter's clothes. Then he gave a start, as if he had forgotten something. "Oh, do you...need help?" He gestured at them, and Ana remembered that they were still sitting on the ground.

"Ah, no. We're just having some fun." She pushed herself to her feet, and helped Kamilah up as well. "We don't have snow back home, you see."

The man laughed. "I see. Where are you from?"

"Egypt. And you?" Ana looked him over. With his blond hair and green eyes, he could be one of the locals for all she knew.

"We're from Zurich. Came here for a vacation with our little girl." He gestured at his daughter, who had walked over hand-in-hand with his wife. She had her mother's eyes, Ana noticed. "We were just leaving Furi. Are you heading there?"

"Yep. Stopping by Zmutt first though."

"Oh yes. Small place, but beautiful."

"Be sure to eat in Furi when you reach," his wife added. "Their food is amazing."

"We will. Thanks."

"Well, we'll be on our way." He beckoned at his wife, who nodded. "Enjoy your time here!"

The tourists waved at them as they left, watching the little girl turn back towards them for one last 'bye bye!' before skipping across the snow ahead of her parents.

Ana turned around when a hand started patting about her head, and was held in place as Kamilah
wiped the snow off her hair.

"I can't believe you just talked to them with snow all over yourself," Kamilah said offhandedly, now patting Ana's jacket down as she received the same treatment.

"We're tourists. We're supposed to look dumb." Ana smiled at the sigh, and shook out the last of the snow from Kamilah's hood. "Done. No, wait." She held Kamilah by the shoulders when she started to turn around. "One last thing."

Ana cupped her cheek, leaning in to press a kiss on her lips, slow and deep.

"Now we're done."

Smiling gently, Kamilah closed the distance again, stopping just before their noses touched. "Next time," she murmured. "Try not to be so cliché."

Ana grinned as Kamilah's fingers slipped through hers, following her wife's lead up the snowy incline. "Don't you mean 'snow' cliché?"

She found herself sprawled on the ground again from Kamilah's merciless shove, cackling loudly as Kamilah flung fistfuls of snow into her face.
Ana swung her dangling feet back and forth, humming to herself as she looked down at the snowy slope beneath the chair lift. The whiteness of the ground was rather glaring without her goggles, but she kept them up to feel the coldness on her face. Zooming in with her cybernetic eye, she spotted the smooth surface of the nearest piste, watching the skiers carve their own winding trails down the slope. Her anticipation spiked; the urge to go off on her own had simmered during their ski lesson, and she only stuck with the group because Kamilah was in it as well. But now that they were free…

She started, screwing her eyes shut when her goggles were pushed down without ceremony. Ana turned her head, peeking at her wife through blue-tinted lens.

"You'll go snow blind," Kamilah said simply.

"Thanks, mom."

"And don’t zoom in on the snow. You'll hurt your eye."

"I wasn't…"

"You always tilt your head a little when you use it."

"What? Really?" Ana turned away to test her claim, but Kamilah grasped onto her chin and the next thing she knew, she was looking much too closely at the bridge of Kamilah's nose.

"I said don't zoom in on the snow!"

"Relax, Milah. I'm sure the eye won't get fried by light so easily."

"Not the point. I don't want you to go blind."

"Aw." Ana hugged around her shoulders. "You do care."

"I don't want to hear you whining when your eye hurts," Kamilah snipped back smoothly.

"But you'll be there fussing over me anyway," she cooed, snorting when she received a smack on the nose. Ana leaned back in the seat, Kamilah following suit as another cool breeze swept past them. "It's okay. We're married. You can stop pretending now."

"That's right. We're married," Kamilah drawled. "Now I'm stuck with your whining for the rest of my life."

"Lucky you."

Instead of a snappy rejoinder, Kamilah settled for a short laugh. She raised a gloved hand to pull Ana's head close, giving her a peck on the cheek. "Lucky me."

Whether intended or not, it melted Ana enough that she was reduced to a gleeful but quiet bundle beside her wife for the rest of their ride up. It didn't take long before they reached their destination and naturally, the peacefulness was lost the moment Ana's skis touched the snowy ground again.

"Race you to the bottom!"

"Ana, no!"
For their first two rounds down the slopes, Ana went faster than was prudent for someone of her experience, but kept ahead of Kamilah out of pure mischief. Only after she had met Kamilah at the end of the slope and was treated to an impressive pout, did she relent and ski alongside her wife for the rest of their rounds. It was only a matter of time before she managed to prod Kamilah into a race, matching each other turn for turn, and rushing back up again for another go.

Their fun was put to a premature end, however, with the help of another aspiring racer. So caught up were they in their private competition that neither noticed a snowboarder swerving in from the side, exclaiming in panic before crashing into Kamilah. Ana was a little farther away from the two, and watched in shock as they tumbled over the snow towards the end of the slope – which they were not far from, thankfully. Ana slid hurriedly to a stop beside her wife, who was sprawled on the ground with her ski poles lying farther down the path. Kamilah was panting lightly, wide eyes landing on Ana when she came close.

Bending down to pull Kamilah to her feet, they checked that she was uninjured, and that the rented skis were not damaged in anyway. They laughed off the snowboarder's frantic apologies and threw in a few of their own as well, then made off without having understood a single word of what their fellow tourist had said, aside from 'sorry' and 'bye'.

Only when they returned to their room did Kamilah discover the dark bruise where the snowboard had collided into her shin earlier. She merely shrugged when asked how she never noticed an odd sensation in her leg, and claimed that it 'really was nothing'. Nevertheless, her legs found a pedestal in Ana's lap as she leaned back in her chair, waiting for Ana to finish icing the bruise. Kamilah clicked her tongue when itchy fingers started prodding about the edges of discoloured skin, and pulled her legs away before Ana could poke another reaction out of her.

Despite the little accident, they spent most of their last day in Zermatt on skis again, before making their way up to the Gornergrat observatory to round up the evening, capturing their last gorgeous view of the Matterhorn. They fell into bed with bodies spent from the day's activities, grabbing ample rest before heading off to the Glacier Express the next morning.

In hindsight, hitting the pillows early the previous night was not really necessary at all. The moment she settled in her seat for the 8-hour journey to St Moritz, memories of a butt-numbing 4-hour train ride came back to haunt her. She sighed and leaned back in her chair, tapping her shoes idly against Kamilah's as she stared out of the window. She caught sight of a familiar little blonde figure bouncing across the platform, just before the train pulled out of the station.

Ana kept her camera at ready, snapping photos of the valleys, rivers and gorges as they passed. Her feet started tapping against the floor as if in protest against the inactivity, but were soon trapped between Kamilah's ankles, putting a stop to her fidgeting. She fell into a random pattern of dozing off in her seat, then jerking awake to take photos of wherever they were in, before zoning out again. Ana tried playing footsie with her partner and, to her delight, received a few advances as well. Suddenly the ride didn't seem all that long, and yet could not end quickly enough.

The darkening sky was tinged with orange by the time they set foot in St Moritz, and the need for activity carried them all the way to their lodgings. Their suite gave them a good view of the frozen lake, though it didn't hold Ana's attention for long. Her arms quickly found their way around Kamilah's waist, getting a chuckle as she turned her partner around, and drew her in for one fervent kiss after another. Her hand found its way under Kamilah's shirt, inching higher and higher, until there was a firm grasp on her wrist.

"Not tonight, amar."
A whine promptly left Ana's throat. She tried to deepen the chaste kiss Kamilah pressed to her lips, without success. Ana was left staring at Kamilah with puppy eyes, only to given another peck for consolation. Then Kamilah took off her shirt anyway, tossing Ana a wink before changing her clothes in plain view.

"A sadist. Ana married a sadist."

St Moritz was much larger than Zermatt, where the entire town could be covered on foot easily. What struck Ana first was the loss of a simpler and cleaner environment – the whiff of exhaust from passing cars welcomed them back to 'civilisation'. It was still less chaotic than the roads back home though, so the change was not all that jarring. She caught Kamilah eyeing the motorcycles flying past them, and could practically feel the riding itch crawling under her partner's skin. No doubt Ana would have a slew of bike rides to look forward to upon their return home. But for now, they would have to be satisfied with their own two feet instead of wheels.

Upon arriving at the lake, Ana stopped and drank in the sight of skaters gliding over the ice, taking a deep breath before pulling Kamilah all the way to the skate rentals. Then she had to pull Kamilah gently along the ice as well, guiding her partner patiently as she found her balance on the two blades beneath her boots. Kamilah's grip on her hands loosened further the longer they skated, until Ana could finally take her own hands away and glide down the ice beside her wife. There were no races this time; Ana didn't want a repeat of their ski incident, and ice wouldn't be much fun to fall flat on. Instead they made wide circuits over the lake, Ana spotting children using polar bear-shaped skating aids, then pouting when Kamilah told her 'no'.

Bear-skating dreams crushed, Ana soothed her inner child by grabbing a polar bear pillow from a nearby shop. And though Kamilah raised a brow at her acquisition, she stole the pillow to hug during their train ride towards Chur, a city over an hour away on rail. She fell asleep halfway through the trip with the pillow snuggled tightly against her chest; Ana wondered how long it would take for Kamilah to notice her new phone wallpaper.

As it turned out, not 'long' at all – she found out the moment they stepped out of train, and the bear was named 'Kami' in her honour, which was accepted with a defeated sigh. The bear stayed in Ana's backpack, wrapped in Kamilah's scarf for the rest of their trip around Chur, its home becoming more crowded as the women squeezed in a bunch of chocolates and souvenirs to match. After complaining about Kami's plight and that her stuffed bag looked like she had kidnapped a baby, they took to eating the chocolates while on the road, pretending it would help lighten Ana's load.

At least they were hoofing it for most of the trip, Ana told herself as she opened their second chocolate bar.

To make up for their guilty pleasure, they covered the entirety of the Old Town and most of the city much faster than planned, then hopped onto a train back to St Moritz. Ana's feet were starting to ache from continuous activity for the past few days. But even as she lay on the bed, back attempting to melt into the soft covers, she would not stop just yet. Oh, no. She had plans.

Catching Kamilah's hand as she walked by, Ana tugged her close. "Want some company?" she asked with a sly smile.

"Do I?" Kamilah asked, raising a brow.

"I give amazing full body massages. You might be a little sore after, though."

Kamilah chuckled softly, fingers gliding slowly along Ana's. "Oh, I know."
She pulled away, and Ana didn't try to keep her, gaze fixed on Kamilah as she sauntered over to the bathroom. The glint in her wife's eye was all she needed. The moment she heard the door's lock click, Ana rolled out of bed.

In the blink of an eye, everything was in place. Her hair was perfect, as always. Lips glossed and kissable. Garters strapped and ready to tantalise. Perfume light and intoxicating. Body thrumming with anticipation as she lay in bed, waiting.

Waiting.

Still waiting.

_Huh._

Kamilah was taking much longer than usual, leaving Ana with too much time on her hands. Tired of staying still with ears pricked for hints of Kamilah's arrival, Ana got to her feet and wandered around the spacious bedroom. She looked in the mirror, running a hand through her hair and stretching her stocking-clad legs this way and that. Then she wandered over to her bag, and popped a square of chocolate into her mouth, fishing out the bear pillow that was still squashed with the other souvenirs. As she was smoothing over its short 'fur', she heard a _click_ from around the corner, and quickly dived back into bed.

So it was that Kamilah finally appeared, leaning with one hand on the wall, eyes roving over her wife until…

Her lips curved up in a smile as she let out a breathy laugh. "I spy with my little eye, something that doesn't really belong."

"Your chemise?" Ana said, feeling her breaths grow shorter the more she stared at Kamilah. No wonder she had taken so long. But Ana could hardly complain, barely able to wrench her eyes away from the sheer black fabric covering Kamilah's body, hypnotised by the sway of her hips as she walked over.

"Try again, darling."

And 'try again' she did. First by lifting her eyes from the hem hiking up Kamilah's thighs as she climbed on the bed. Then by constructing a fluent sentence when presented with a generous view of her wife's chest as she crawled over to Ana.

"I'm serious." Ana's hand found its way to Kamilah's hip, running slowly down the smooth fabric. "The chemise belongs on the floor."

Clicking her tongue, Kamilah reached for Ana's elbow, and tugged at the pillow it rested on. "One last try."

Snickering when she looked down at the polar bear, Ana lifted her arm so Kamilah could take it away and drop it to the floor. "I guess you couldn't…bear its presence."

"Oh please," she groaned. "Not tonight."

"Why?" Ana grinned as Kamilah straddled her hips. "Am I not punny enough for you?"

"One more, and I'm leaving."
"Please. Bet you can't wait to polar-f all my clothes--"

Kamilah's lips crashed into hers, and Ana smiled gleefully into the rough kiss. She let Kamilah have her way, yielding when she was pushed down on her back. Ana parted her lips when Kamilah probed with her tongue, then grunted at the bite on her bottom lip.

"You really need to shut your mouth sometimes."

"Why shut my own mouth when you can do it for me?" Ana drawled. She played with the chemise's hem, then slid her hand underneath, caressing Kamilah's thigh as she ventured upwards. She sucked at the bitten spot on her lip, and was rewarded with another kiss. Slower this time, unfueled by exasperation borne of bad puns.

"Why do I love you?" Kamilah sighed against her lips.

"You tell me, Mrs. Amari," Ana replied with a crooked smile, grabbing her ass and yanking Kamilah flush against her. The throaty growl sent a thrill down Ana's spine, and she met Kamilah's kiss with every bit of fierce passion she had bottled up in the past days. That she had been forced to bottle up by design. The thought ignited a need to flip her partner onto her back, to dash her well-laid plans and assert control.

She bucked her hips up in an attempt to throw Kamilah off, and instead found her hands pinned to the bed as lips traveled along her jaw. A chuckle escaped her throat as the kisses trailed downwards. Ana pressed a thigh hard between Kamilah's legs, earning a groan and a rough bite on her neck. Her smile grew wider, and she rubbed her thigh against Kamilah, who ground on her in return. Ana stayed in place as lips caressed her skin, nibbling at her collarbone before moving farther down.

"Tease…" Ana breathed, back arching when Kamilah mouthed her through her bra.

Kamilah smirked, meeting her eyes as she traced a nipple through thin fabric. "Impatient, aren't we?" she purred, and Ana felt a trickle of déjà vu. But it was soon forgotten when she made her move.

She caught Kamilah by surprise when she surged up, capturing her partner in deep kiss as she pushed Kamilah onto her back. Fingers threaded through Ana's hair, nails dragging lightly across her back as her tongue probed its way past Kamilah's lips, getting a groan as she ground her hips against her partner. Ana pressed kisses down the side of her neck, pulling the thin straps off Kamilah's shoulders, loving each inch of her lover's body as she tugged the chemise lower, revealing more and more skin. It was not long before the thin garment found its place on the floor, and Ana was free to roam her hands over Kamilah without anything in the way. She cupped Kamilah's breasts, noting the quirk in her wife's lips.

This was her goal all along, Ana realised. Kamilah never planned to be on top.

"Not yet."

"Enjoying yourself?" Kamilah asked with a smile to match Ana's. She tried to sit up, but was pushed down firmly by a hand on her chest.

"Enjoying you, more like." Her breath caught when Kamilah ran her fingers enticingly down Ana's arm. Holding her by the wrist, Kamilah guided Ana's hand to her mouth, kissing her way up Ana's palm and fingers, before taking two digits between her teeth. Ana smiled at the invitation and accepted, pushing her fingers farther into Kamilah's mouth.

One hand busy, Ana trailed the other down her lover's body as she bent down, tracing the faint outlines of Kamilah's stomach with her mouth, until she reached the only piece of garment left on her
body. Guiding her thighs farther apart, Ana swooped in, mouthing Kamilah through her damp underwear. An approving moan reached her ears as she hummed, pressing her mouth harder between Kamilah's legs, tongue teasing at her entrance.

"Ana," Kamilah breathed when Ana replaced her mouth with fingers, rubbing slow circles through the fabric. "Please."

It was a wonder how she sounded in control even with Ana's digits in her mouth and between her legs; it almost made Ana giddy.

Rising from her position, Ana took her hand from Kamilah's mouth, their lips meeting in a fervent kiss as Ana pressed a knee against Kamilah. She gave a moan that sounded nearly like a whimper, gazing up at Ana with need glistening in dark eyes. So Ana reached into her underwear, rubbing the very two fingers that had been in Kamilah's mouth against her wetness. She watched Kamilah's eyes grow half-lidded, lips parting as she slid both digits in at once. Ana kissed her again, tender and loving, before she drove her hips forward, burying her fingers deep within Kamilah.

Her wife moaned into her mouth, body stiffening at her sudden entry. Ana kept her fingers still, waiting for Kamilah's muscles to relax, then built up a pace easily. First with her wrist, then with her hand driving forward again and again, mixing force into rhythm that kept her name falling off Kamilah's tongue. Ana bit and kissed and sucked along her jaw, neck, and clavicles, leaving little marks as she went along. She kept working, pushing Kamilah rapidly towards the edge until Ana could feel her muscles tightening around her fingers. When Kamilah started writhing under her, Ana pulled out.

Kamilah whined and reached for Ana's hand, only to have her own pinned over her head. She looked up at Ana, recognition flashing in her eyes at her lover's expression. A knowing smile had curved her lips when Ana dipped in for a slow kiss, Kamilah meeting her with impressive restraint.

"You're horrible," Kamilah murmured.

"You're my inspiration, sweetheart."

Ana did give her a little relief though, by removing the underwear and finally leaving her lover bare. It was then that she remembered she had her own plans as well, before Kamilah threw her mind into disarray. Quickly reaching for the nightstand, she opened the drawer and retrieved their scarves, which she had planted there just a little while ago.

"So," Ana purred, a devilish curve on her lips. "Shall we really get started?"

Kamilah gave a lopsided smile of her own, hands reaching forward to tug at Ana's garter belts. "Only after you strip, darling."

Truth be told, Ana had been awake for a while. But she had woken so peacefully that her partner scarcely noticed, and she chose to leave it like this for the time being.

Ana remained on her front, eyes closed, breaths slow as fingers caressed her skin. Down her shoulder, tracing the contours of her bicep, and back up again. Lips pressed softly on the edge of her jaw, her nape, between her shoulder blades, etching silent adoration into scarred canvas. Fingertips traced the blemishes lovingly, smoothing over rough skin before placing a kiss over each scar on her back.

Waking to Kamilah's touches in the early hours was not uncommon; it was her wife's solution to sleepless nights, finding solace in Ana's presence. Ana herself would often be lulled back to sleep
under Kamilah's ministrations. But sometimes, she would stay awake, waiting for Kamilah to press up against her back, and fall asleep with an arm wrapped around her stomach. When that did not happen, Ana would pull Kamilah into an embrace instead, rubbing her back in slow circles until her muscles relaxed, and her breathing grew deep and slow.

When the minutes ticked by and Kamilah still showed no intent of lying down to rest, Ana decided to step in this time as well.

"Can't sleep?" she mumbled, catching the fingers that had roamed to her stomach, and brought them up to her lips.

"Not really."

"Then I didn't do a good job." Ana turned over with a languid smile. "Spread your legs, sweetie."

Kamilah laughed softly. "Trust me, amar. You did."

"Are you sure?" Ana ran her hands up Kamilah's sides, gazing appreciatively at the scratches and bites on her body. Blindfolded with her wrists tied over her head, Kamilah was an absolute pleasure to play with; even the gentle graze of nails against her stomach made her muscles coil in anticipation. Ana had drawn out her fun with Kamilah, keeping her on edge long enough to drive her wild, before giving her the release she begged for. Needless to say, Ana had a very intimate taste of her own medicine after.

"Yes." Kamilah traced Ana's bottom lip, where the skin had broken after a particularly hard bite. "I was just…thinking."

"Oh? All about me, I hope."

"Narcissist."

She grinned, circling her arms around Kamilah's waist. "You totally were."

Kamilah cocked her head, a soft smile on her lips. "I was. About you. About us."

"Hm?"

"If someone told me years ago that I'd marry you… I'd stab them with a syringe," she said, voice light as she twirled Ana's hair between her fingers.

"You stab everyone with a syringe. That's your job."

"I don't 'stab' it."

"Oh yes, you do. Remember this?"

Kamilah rolled her eyes when Ana pointed at the spot in her abdomen. "That was an accident."

"I'm surprised you didn't leave a scar."

"Shush."

"I thought you were trying to break up with me," Ana laughed and slapped at Kamilah's hand, which was trying to cover her mouth. She quickly grabbed onto Kamilah's sides, holding her in place so she couldn't break away from the tickles. Ana made her writhe in place for a while before sitting up, and yanked Kamilah in for a kiss. As fingers ran through her hair, Ana flipped them over so she lay on
top of her wife, laying kiss after playful kiss on Kamilah's lips.

Sighing when they finally parted, Kamilah locked her arms around Ana's nape, gazing at her with a tenderness that enraptured her in an instant.

"I love you, Ana," Kamilah murmured.

"I love you too," Ana said softly. "Milah?"

"Hm?"

"You're the best thing that's ever happened to me. You know that?"

"No. But now I do."

Ana chuckled. "You're horrible."

"I am your inspiration, after all."

"You are my life, Milah," she said, bringing their lips together again. "You are my everything."
As the honeymoon drew to its end, their tireless drive to explore each nook and cranny of St Moritz slowed down; they had visited all the city's important landmarks and wandered down enough smaller streets, that it was time to ease their pace and relax. Late nights and mornings, lazy days of lounging in cafes and watching people pass by, and strolling through the city hand-in-hand under occasional flurries of snow. Not quite as exciting as winter sports, but equally fulfilling nonetheless.

That was why Ana had no regrets when yet another sneeze ripped through her nose, earning her an unamused look from Kamilah.

"I told you to--"

"Wear my jacket and use the heat packs, yeah yeah. I'm wearing it now." She tugged at the lapels of said jacket, smirking at Kamilah's eye roll.

"When you don't need it."

"Just drives you crazy, doesn't it?" Ana strode to where Kamilah lay on the couch beside balcony's glass doors, nudging a knee at her wife so she would make room. She settled behind Kamilah so her partner was rested between her legs, then adjusted the length of her selfie stick.

"What are you doing?" Kamilah asked, watching her access the camera on her phone.

"Taking a sex video. Off with the clothes, honey," Ana cackled and set the stick on its tripod end, angling it so the bright Swiss afternoon could be seen through the doors behind them. She jerked her head back in reflex when she received a swat on the nose. "I said 'clothes', not 'nose'."

"You can afford to part with your nose right now," Kamilah said when Ana sniffed. "Did you take the tablet I left on the dresser?"

"Yeah? You'd kill me otherwise." She leaned forward to nudge the phone a little farther away, getting a grumble from Kamilah when her wife was forced to bend down as well.

"That's if your cold doesn't kill you first."

"Ha ha. I'm much tougher than that, thank you very much."

"Apparently," Kamilah deadpanned. "So, what's this for?"

"Vlog."

"Seriously."

"Come on. It's fun," she said, when Kamilah appeared dubious. "Just a little something to remember this trip by, hm?"

"...Fine," Kamilah acquiesced, and received a gleeful hug from behind. "Is anyone going to see this?"

"No. Unless you want to share it."
"I don't."

"Alright then. You ready?" At Kamilah's nod, she gestured at the phone, and the camera started rolling. "So... It's been six days in Switzerland for our honeymoon. What do you think of it?"

Kamilah tilted her head. "Nice and...cold?"

"Like yourself then? Ha--!" Ana groaned when an elbow slammed into her stomach. "Yeah, ice cold like that.

"Keep it up and you'll be 'ice cold' as well."

Ana snickered at the empty threat, but relented anyway. "Fine. So, our honeymoon. We've done skiing, skating, walking. A lot of walking. And eating. How much chocolate did we eat, Milah?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"Mm, no. I'd rather not. Moving on! What did you enjoy the most?"

"Um. The snow?"

"Really? Not your wife?"

"I don't have to fly all the way here to have her." Kamilah sighed when Ana gave a puppy-eyed pout. "I guess the company was good too."

"It was, wasn't it?" She grinned, then squeezed the woman in her arms. "Well, the whole trip was great. Makes me not wanna go home any time soon."

"Me too."

"At least we'll be getting our house soon. Oh damn, I forgot!" She rocked in place, moving Kamilah along with her. "I can't wait! We'll move in, then go shopping for everything, and we'll live together."

"Haven't we technically been doing that already?"

"Yeah," Ana said slowly. "But this will be our house. A house with my wife." She paused then, letting the words sink in as Kamilah fixed her with a quizzical look. A new home. With this beautiful woman in her arms. What did she ever do to deserve such luck?

"It's going to be great, Milah."

"Of course it will," Kamilah said with a smile. She returned the peck on her lips before her hand flew up at Ana's jaw, pushing her face away just in time for Ana to sneeze again.

Three mighty sneezes later, Ana remained bent over, sniffling as she recovered from the spasms. "I think that's the end of that," she laughed through a slightly congested nose, and gestured at the camera to shut off. As she reached for the tissue box on the coffee table, Kamilah broke away from Ana and stood.

"I'll make you some tea."

"Hot choc."

"Not for now."
"I'm fine, Milah," Ana insisted. But she still found herself nursing a hot cup of tea anyway, cocooned in a comforter that Kamilah had to force her to stay under. Not that she remained alone in the bundle for long.

Thankfully, Ana's alleged toughness brought her minor cold spell to an end quickly, and she had no awkward sneezes to worry about when she kept Kamilah in the sheets that night. She also seized the opportunity to down an entire mug of hot chocolate in front of Kamilah the next morning, while singing *Told you I'm fine* over and over. Her wife just stared with her usual morning cheerfulness – which was none whatsoever – before grinding out an *I hate you* when she finished her own mug of chocolate as well.

They took one last opportunity to play in the snow outside their hotel, making snowballs and throwing them at each other's jackets. Ana courted death by smacking Kamilah's hand – and the snowball in it – right into her face, but was surprised with a bright laugh before being shoved onto the ground.

After wiping off the white from their clothes, they made their way to the train that ferried them to all the way to Zurich. They stood by the windows at the departure gate, sighing as they drank in their last view of Switzerland.

"I'm gonna miss this place," Ana sighed.

"Me too."

"Do you ever want to come back here again?"

"Definitely."

Cairo was *warm*. So warm. Too warm. Had it always been this warm?

"You look like a corpse."

"I'm practicing for my funeral," Ana groaned each syllable slowly, not moving from where she lay on the couch. She opened her eyes, watching the ceiling fan work double-time at cooling the room down. "Think I could stuff myself into the fridge?"

"Only if you can drag me out of there first." Kamilah handed a cup to her, which felt beautifully cold in her hands. Ana glanced down at the ice cubes floating in clear soda.

"You're the best." She took a long, grateful draught of the drink and sighed in relief. Ever since she had stepped out of the airplane and into a solid wall of heat, she'd felt ready to devour every single cube of ice she laid her eyes on. Ana remembered fleeting moments in Switzerland when she missed the weather back home, where they didn't have to bundle themselves up before bumbling out into the cold. Now she hadn't the slightest clue why she had wished so.

Then she recalled something else. Ana reached for the phone lying next to her and handed it to Kamilah, showing her the squad's chat.

"What's this?" Kamilah asked.

"Just read it."

*Ebo: [So Ana. We've discussed it and decided to unban you from dnd. For the time being]*
Ebo: [On one condition. You let us play in your new house. And get Kamilah to play with us]

Ebo: [Actually two conditions. Second: you behave]

[Let me get this straight]

[You're putting me on geek probation]

Layla: [Yep]

[And why in hell would I agree]

Layla: [Or else we'll play beer pong in your house]

[I'll just let Kamilah kill you]

Layla: [Oh we're fucking shaking in our boots can you feel the tremors]

Mesi: [Ask her Ana. It'll be fun]

[Why do you even want to play with her in the first place]

Mesi: [For... fun?]

Ebo: [Also to stop you from fucking everything]

[You realise I'll just fuck her right]

Ebo: [I CHANGE MY MIND]

Mesi: [Just ask her please]

"Huh."

"So? Wanna do it?"

"But I don't know anything about it," Kamilah said.

"Eh, doesn’t matter. None of us did when we first started anyway." Ana shrugged. "We just kept rolling to do stupid stuff. Like juggling our swords. And scrubbing all the tavern tables. For free."

"Really."

"Yeah. Only reason Ebo didn't kick all of us out is because he needed people to play with."

"Then I guess you got lucky."

"Too lucky. So?" Ana rolled over on the couch, so she was half-lying on Kamilah. "Wanna do it?"

Kamilah cocked her head, taking a sip from her own cup. "Why not?"

Thanks to Kamilah's foresight, they had two more days to readjust to being back home – not that they needed that much time anyway. When they reported back for duty, they slipped back into the usual routines easily. Ana found that she did miss the burn in her muscles from training and, given all
she had eaten during the honeymoon, she needed that burn. Any excess energy she had, she worked them off in the gym after work. Ana earned incredulous looks from Kamilah, who was then dragged to a few of these sessions as well, and proceeded to give Ana a run for her money all across the sparring floor.

The energy had started to subside until a week later, when Kamilah finally received her new name tags. Each time Ana glanced at Kamilah's fatigues, now bearing the 'Amari' name, she felt a little jolt of awe. The medic sprinting across the field, barking orders to her squad, carrying the injured over her shoulders, and glaring at patients who dared to look even a little smug, was now Amari.

It was amazing, just how much meaning a simple name could carry. And she loved it.

But the real excitement arrived after three weeks, when their application for on-base housing had gone through. They were given the lot they wanted, which was a modest two-storey affair. A little dull on the outside – one tan house among a dozen other tan houses along the street – though their neighbourhood was newer and looked brighter than the older ones painted in exhilarating grey. Plus, their house had a small lawn to add a little more colour, so Ana couldn't complain.

One step into the house, and Ana had to pause for a moment. It wasn't like they had no idea how the house would look – they have had their tour long before. But it was only then, as Ana looked over the living room, that it truly hit her. This house was theirs. A little smaller than ideal, and they couldn't make any drastic changes to the infrastructure. But there was still more than enough space for two, a cozy retreat to hide in after a long day. They could make it work.

Ana glanced at Kamilah, who had set her box down and was leaning against the kitchen counter, eyes alight as she looked over their new home. She took a breath, let it out softly, and met Ana's gaze. Their lips curved in unison.

They would make it work.

To 'make it work', of course, one must put in a lot of work. A lot.

How, Ana wondered as she carried what must be the hundredth box into the house. How did two women, who lived in a confining barracks room, ever accumulate so many belongings? With this much stuff in their rooms, it was a wonder how they even survived spot checks in the first place. Ana's mind was sufficiently boggled; first by the number of boxes they had to move, then by the assortment of items that she kept pulling out of said boxes.

An old pair of sneakers, soles peeling off at the edges. Two issues of comics she had bought on whim long ago and never read. An encyclopedia gifted by her grandfather, also never read. Jewelry she had forgotten she ever bought. Expired sweets that belonged in a museum. And…

Ana's eyes lit up, and she promptly changed into the old sleeveless hoodie she had found – a simple grey top with hot pink trim along the hem and pocket. It smelled of the box that Ana had stuffed it into and left untouched in the wardrobe, but it was still as comfortable as ever. It was all the rage back then, a hot fashion trend for some reason. Though Ana, now a few years older and wiser, couldn't fathom why. She looked like she had just rolled out of bed in it.

Although that didn't deter her from sliding down the corridor, coming to a stop by the dining table where Kamilah stood, digging through one of the few boxes sitting on the tabletop.

"What do you think?"

Kamilah peered up at her. "So you were one of those people."
"What people?"

"The douchebags," Kamilah replied with a straight face, before lifting a handful of books from the box.

"Not only douches wear these, okay. Besides, they're comfy and look--" Ana raised her arms and flexed. "They don't hide these beautiful babies."

"No wonder you like tank tops so much."

"What, took you that long to figure it out?" She gave a dramatic grunt, stretching an arm out in a superman pose. "Were you too distracted by these?" Ana giggled when a hardcover was smacked into her stomach.

"Why did I marry you?" Kamilah sighed, tossing the novel back into the box. Then she bent down, frowning as she rummaged through its contents. Ana looked in as well, watching her search through the various files and books that were stashed inside.

"You're going to fill our bookcase with these."

"This is not the only box."

"…We're buying another bookcase then."

"We're buying more than just a bookcase, that's for sure," Kamilah commented off-handedly, shoving the open box aside and pulling another over. She was right - the house came only with basic furnishings and few extras. In fact, they hadn't even properly moved in yet, and were just hauling all their stuff out of the barracks before the deadline hit at the end of the week.

"What are you looking for?" Ana asked when Kamilah dug into the box, brows furrowed in concentration.

"My notebooks. They have some…personal…" She paused, cocking her head. Kamilah reached in and pulled out a purple dragon plush.

Uh oh.

Kamilah examined the toy with an amused quirk on her lips. The dark purple dragon bore an orange belly, claws, teeth, and head ridges. The colour was a little faded by now, and only its beady left eye remained – the right had fallen out a long time ago, leaving a small hole that was stitched closed by Ana's mother. She had wanted to sew a black button as a replacement, but young Ana refused, insisting it looked 'cooler' this way. How a fat purple dragon with a goofy smile could ever look 'cool', was a secret for her younger self to keep.

"This is yours," Kamilah stated plainly. There was no doubt to whom the dragon belonged.

"Yeah. I love it," Ana declared, hands itching to hold it again.

"Hm. It's cute. Pretty well-kept." Kamilah felt along the edges of soft orange teeth and the stitched eye. "Did you name it?"

"Yeah. Fart."

"Fart?"

"Fart," Ana repeated matter-of-factly, grinning when Kamilah broke out in laughter.
"Why am I not surprised?"

"I was young, okay?"

"Please. You'd name something 'Fart' now, if you could," Kamilah chuckled, getting a shrug from Ana. "So, Fart the Purple Dragon."

"Excuse you. It's Fart the Magic Dragon."

"Right…"

"You should hug it." Ana gestured at Kamilah, who stared at her dubiously. "Go on, hug it." She had to bite down on her lip to keep from laughing when Kamilah held the dragon to her chest, looking a little lost as if she was waiting for some magic to happen.

Kamilah noticed her obvious amusement, eye twitching before she shoved Fart into Ana's arms. "There," she announced, waving at her wife. "Now you look like the overgrown baby you are."

"Asshole," Ana laughed. She hugged Fart tightly, feeling an echo of that innocent little spark she had long left behind. She missed it.

"Just kidding. It just makes you look like a baby." Kamilah smiled at Ana's eye roll, and leaned forward to give her a kiss. "But I love you anyway."

"Thanks. I feel blessed." Ana placed Fart carefully back into the box, making sure it looked comfortable before closing the cardboard flaps. "Don't you have a toy of your own?" she asked, patting the box idly before following Kamilah down the corridor, towards the garage.

"No."

"Want one?"

"No."

"Not even vibrating ones?"

"I can just use yours."

It took the whole week for them to move the remaining boxes, having had nights that saw them crashing into their beds after punishing training exercises, deprived of the energy to do anything else. But they finally had it done one day before the deadline; their rooms were thoroughly inspected by an officer, who then collected their barracks keys. Their move was complete.

Just in time too, for it was that night when the squad morons came over for their first visit, and Ana's geek probation began.

The squad gathered around the coffee table in the living room, Adofo sitting at one end of the table as the dungeon master. He was fiddling with the holo-projector, chatting animatedly with Ebo while the others waited for him to be ready.

"Still can't believe how quickly you all decided to come over," Ana groused as she scrolled idly down the character sheet on her tablet.

"Why? You had something planned?" Khalid smirked, wagging a brow at her.
"I get to spend the first night in my house with you geeks. Exciting."

"Come on, Ana. If we don't do this now, we won't get to do it until we return from Russia," Mesi said. Their company was one of those chosen to participate in Egypt's joint exercise with Russia – the first on Russian soil. It would take place two weeks later, and a few were already buzzing with excitement. Only a few, though.

Layla snorted. "Lucky we're going after winter. Can you imagine? Throwing desert people into winter wonderland?"

"Winter's fine," Ana said. "Never experienced Russian winter though."

"Do you still have all your toes?"

"I'm not sure." Ana swung her feet onto Layla's lap, wiggling said toes. "Wanna check for me?" Then she raised her feet to face level, cackling when Layla slapped her away.

"Did you cut anything of hers off, Kamilah?" Khalid asked.

"Sadly, no," Kamilah deadpanned, though a subtle smile hung on her lips. The squad had shaken off their wariness around Kamilah long ago and, following Mesi's lead, started calling 'Shadid' by name. Similarly, Kamilah had accepted their presence as a part and parcel of being with Ana, and was now less severe while in their company. Ana still remembered the morons' awestruck expressions when they managed to make Kamilah burst out in uncontrollable laughter for the first time. Now that was a sight to behold.

"Wow." Ana grinned, and leaned heavily on her wife. "How...cold of you."

Though her face was straight, Ana knew Kamilah was flipping on the inside. "I'll let you die in the game," Kamilah said simply, and Ana grinned as Adofo finally pushed the projector towards the middle of the table.

"Everyone ready?" he asked, and received a chorus of affirmation. "So Kamilah, you're playing as a human sorcerer."

"Yes."

"And my wife," Ana added. "Our characters are married."

The light in Adofo's eyes blinked twice. "Of course. Since Hakim isn't here, you don't have a healer. But we're going through an easier campaign for today, so things should be fine."

"Yeah, as long as Ebo's sword doesn't fly out of his hand and land in my face again," Khalid said.

Ebo grumbled under his breath amid the snickering, and Adofo began their tale.

A group of road-weary travelers was sitting in a tavern, nursing mugs of ale when they were joined by a long-lost friend, a charismatic elven rogue. In the time she was gone, the elf had gotten married to a human sorcerer, whom she was now traveling with. It was then that they were approached by a wizened old man in a raggedy cloak, who insisted that they were the heroes he had seen in his dreams, and they had to travel to the eastern mountains to defeat the dark presence menacing the lands. The adventurers, of course, accepted. The old man gave them a crystal which would 'aid them in their darkest hour', and hobbled out of the tavern.

They chose to stay overnight at the inn, before gathering supplies the next morning.
"Would you like to do anything else before leaving?" Adofo asked, when the adventurers were waiting by the main road leading out of town. "It'll be a long time before you reach a major city."

"Yeah," Ebo said, looking around the table. "I think we're rea--"

"Wait!" Ana cut in. "I have to kiss my wife first."

The squad groaned loudly.

"Come on! It's for good luck."

Adofo cocked his head. "You kiss your wife, and gain a temporary boost to Dexterity by…2."

"What!" Khalid exclaimed. "Ado, don't encourage her."

"Not even a dice roll?" Layla asked.

"It's okay. All in good fun," Adofo placated them, patting Ebo's shoulder as well. "And Kamilah gains a temporary increase to Constitution by 2 as well."

A few sighs were heard, before the adventurers set off on their journey. They stopped by two more towns, eliminating a goblin army for the first, and a secret cabal of evil necromancers for the second. Their pouches became heavy with gold, both from rewards and selling loot. When they reached a major trade city, they seized the chance to procure better equipment.

Ebo's paladin had a shiny new shield. Khalid's fighter got a deadly long sword and a Ring of Fire Resistance, having learnt that the 'dark presence' was indeed a dragon that 'Ana's not allowed to fuck'. Layla bought a pair of bracers to help her monk punch harder and faster. Mesi merely bought some high-quality food for her wolf companion, and it gained a permanent increase in constitution. Kamilah's sorcerer swathed herself in a finely-woven enchanted robe, and Ana's rogue now wielded a light yet sturdy bow. They were ready.

After learning the exact location of the dragon's fortress, the well-equipped adventurers stood tall and proud in the holo-projection, ready for the players' next command.

"I kiss my wife," Ana said for the umpteenth time.

"You kiss your wife, and your usual stat boosts apply. But you have become addicted to your wife's kisses, and will suffer a penalty of 2 to Dexterity and 1 to Constitution if you don't kiss her every 24 hours."

"Ado!" Ana stared at him in dismay as the rest exploded in victorious laughs. "I thought you were on my side!"

"I'm the DM, Ana. I'm never on your side."

She pouted. "What about Kamilah? Does she get the penalty too?"

"No. You're the only one who needs the kisses."

"You want to drag me down with you?" Kamilah asked, raising a brow.

"No, I just wanted to know you're safe," Ana crooned, resting an arm around Kamilah's shoulders.

"Alright, stop being mushy." Mesi waved at Adofo. "Let's go get that dragon before the sun rises, yeah?"
"We're off duty tomorrow," Layla said.

"Yeah, but I'm sleepy."

"Okay then." Adofo tapped on his tablet, and the adventurers marched on.

It took them a few days' travel to reach the dragon's fortress. Then they were sucked into a long and hard fight that, coupled with a string of bad dice rolls, left the party bloody and limping. Nearly half their health was depleted when they reached the closed doors to the dragon's throne room. The last of their potions were distributed and Ebo healed them as best he could, then cast all the protective spells he had, as Kamilah did the same. Then, it was off to the final showdown.

"Remember, Ana. No fucking the dragon," Mesi said.

"Yeah, yeah," Ana drawled, as the elf kissed her human wife again.

The dragon tried to strike a bargain with them, offering a substantial portion of its treasures should they choose to join its ranks instead. Ebo's paladin threw the offer back in the dragon's snout in true lawful good fashion, and thus the battle began. They were blasted by a fireball, burning away much of the health that they had healed before marching into the dragon's lair. The party scattered. Ebo, Khalid, and Layla faced the beast head-on, while the rest whittled its health away from afar. But their strategy soon started crumbling at the edges.

Ebo was unconscious by the side. Khalid and Layla were pummeled nearly to their knees. Mesi's wolf died, and she was running low on arrows. Ana's quivers were empty. Kamilah was running out of spells to cast. Ana took a chance and drew her daggers, blending into the shadows. Her stealth attack on the dragon's rear took off a significant portion of its health, but a swat from its giant tail later, she was knocked out cold.

"Fuck, Ado. I thought you said this is easy!" Layla said when her monk crumpled to the floor.

"I said it's an 'easy campaign', Layla. Not an easy boss."

"Oh, fuck you."

Soon, Khalid fell as well. Only the ranger and sorcerer were left.

"Any ideas, Kamilah?" Mesi asked.

Kamilah hummed thoughtfully, tapping on her tablet. She scrolled down her list of spells, looking for a lifeline. "I cast…Finger of Death."

"But you need a high roll for that, Kamilah!" Ebo said. "Do you have like, Power Word: Kill? That's a sure thing."

"Yes. Should I use that?"

"No, you can't," Ado replied. "The dragon's health is above 100."

"Shit," Ebo sighed. "Well then… Go for it."

Kamilah tapped on the spell, and the dice counter appeared beside the projected scene. The numbers whirred by at dizzying speed, until it landed on a…

"Holy shit," Khalid whispered.
A natural 20.

The squad fell silent, then turned their heads to stare at Adofo. Their omnic friend stayed stock still.

"Ado?" Mesi asked when he remained silent. "You alright?"

His blue eyes flickered – first the left, followed by the right, before they started flashing erratically. His body started shaking, lights in his eyes alternating with crazy speed. Garbled nonsense started spilling out of his mouth's speaker, and the squad dropped their tablets, leaning forward in panic.

"Ado!" Ebo clutched onto his shoulders, trying to hold him in place. Then Adofo's eyes grew dark, and his body went inert.

"Shit," Ana scooted over the sofa with Kamilah, nearing the omnic. Her heart thudded rapidly as she remembered the scattered news of omnic malfunctions. "Ado?"

Silence. They exchanged glances, and Mesi reached for her phone. Then one of Adofo's eyes came to life, warming to that familiar blue glow. A couple of seconds passed where the single eye stared at them, before his shoulders started shaking.

"You should see the look on your faces!" Adofo laughed, slapping his own knee with a metallic clang. "You look like I died!" He continued laughing even when Ebo groaned out loud and shoved him to the side, and the squad sank back into their seats in relief.

"Fuck you, Ado," Khalid said. "I thought you were really gone."

"I'm sorry," Adofo apologised between laughs. If he was human, he would probably have tears in his eyes right then. "I just couldn't resist."

"Not cool, dude. With all the news about those…" Layla's voice trailed off.

"I'm fine, Lay. Don't worry." Adofo straightened his shoulders with a huge sigh, laughter subsiding. "Sorry, guys. I won't do it again, I swear." He raised his hand in solemn promise.

"If you dare, I'll rewire your circuits myself," Ana said.

"I'll hold you to that." Adofo's eyes blinked in his equivalent of a smile. He looked back at his tablet. "So! Kamilah casts Finger of Death. The dragon lets out an earthshaking roar, before falling to the ground. Luckily, it misses all of you who are lying on the floor as well. Kamilah, you have that crystal, yes?"

"Oh, yeah." Kamilah looked through her inventory. "It...didn't help at all?"

"No, but it will now. The crystal captures the dragon's soul, and you are now able to use it as a focus for your spells. Congrats."

"Seems beginner's luck does exist after all," Mesi said, smiling at Kamilah. "Well! Now we're done. And I really want to sleep."

"Want to drive us back, Ana?" Khalid asked, getting a kick on his butt as he cleared the table.

"Fat chance. Walk back, you geeks."

"Eh, it's a short walk anyway." Layla stood and stretched, waiting for Ebo to pack the kit neatly into its box. "Let's go. We don't want to be here when these two get frisky." She chortled when she received a kick on her behind as well.
Ana yawned, nearly walking into the door frame thanks to her sleepy feet. She rubbed her eyes and shuffled lazily towards the stairs, breathing in the aroma that wafted to the upper floor.

Kamilah's squad had dropped by the day before – accompanied by Ana's when they learnt of the movie party – and they spent the entire afternoon lounging in the couple's living room, with their eyes glued to the screen. They hit the town in the evening, having a hearty dinner together like an extended family. By the time Ana and Kamilah had reached home, it was already nearing midnight, but they decided to continue the day's movie marathon. Together, just the two of them. Kamilah fell asleep on Ana's shoulder after two movies, and didn't stir while she was carried up to the bedroom.

Ana turned into the kitchen, glancing at the island counter where Kamilah's laptop sat, music playing through its speaker. Kamilah herself was by the stove, and Ana wasted no time in closing the distance, hugging her from behind.

"Mm." Ana squeezed her tight, and kissed her cheek. "Wife."

"Just realised that, cavewoman?" Kamilah smiled as Ana nuzzled into the curve of her neck.

"Mmph." She took a deep breath and lifted her head, looking down at the omelette in the pan. "Me love wife. And eggs."

"Cavewoman needs to get more than eggs. I had almost nothing to cook with."

"Then we'll go out later." Ana rested her chin on Kamilah's shoulder. "You got up pretty early today."

"I'm fine. Just didn't feel like going back to sleep." She reached for the mug beside the stove, and Ana peeked in. There was milk in the coffee – a good sign. Kamilah took a long draught from it, before she was relieved of the mug by Ana, who drained it in a huge gulp.

"Make me some tea, won't you?" Kamilah said. "And toast."

"Anything for my queen," Ana crooned, pouring more coffee into the mug. "Shall I make some love for you too, my liege?"

"Your love doesn't fill my stomach, Amari," Kamilah replied smoothly.

"Then you haven't been eating me properly." Ana grinned at Kamilah's long-suffering sigh, but chose to spare her from more innuendos…for the time being. Instead, she finished her assigned tasks in double-time and sat by the counter, listening to Kamilah recount all the items they needed to buy. Also an extra shelf for the bathroom. And a vacuum cleaner. Oh, they were running out of shampoo too. And also, Ana had to finish unpacking everything so Kamilah could gauge what else they needed.

Ana smiled to herself. They were home.
She snapped her gaze to the side. "Milah!"

"Ana, I swear to fucking god--"

"Did we turn off all the lights?"

Kamilah shut her eyes, taking a deep breath as her wife smiled impishly in the seat next to her. It was lucky they were sitting in the briefing room among their Egyptian and Russian colleagues. Ana's safety wouldn't have been assured otherwise.

"Ana, we turned everything off. The lights, the fans, the entire house except our fridge. Even if we didn't, we're too far from home to do anything about it."

"You're adorable."

"The army ships bodies back for free, don't they?" Mesi shrugged, wearing an enigmatic smile when Ana looked back at her. "Just a thought."

"Free funeral too," Ana played along.

"Don't tempt me," Kamilah said flatly as the entrance doors slid open.

A command rang through the briefing room and the soldiers promptly stood, snapping off a sharp salute to the officers walking in.

"At ease," the Russian colonel rumbled, and they sat down in unison without a single sound.

Ana focused on colonel, listening to his heavily-accented English as he covered the details of their 12-day exercise. It all seemed pretty routine – drills, drills and more drills for the first few days so the soldiers would get used to one another. Followed by live-fire exercises, holo war simulations, then a full-scale field exercise at the end. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary – that was, until the 'equipment exchange' was discussed. The Egyptians had brought their stealth technology – primarily utilised by snipers and recon troops – to the table. In return, the Russians would be sharing their EMP tech and their latest modifications of armour-piercing ammunition.

Cocking her head, Ana stared at the list on the screen as the colonel's voice droned on in the background. Frequency jammers, prototype hacker drones, omnic code translation devices. It hadn't been explicitly stated yet, but the rumour mill had been busy of late, and Ana had a sneaking suspicion…

"Yes, my brother?" The colonel gestured at the soldier who raised his hand.

Everyone turned their heads to look at the Egyptian soldier, who stood with shoulders straight and hands clasped behind his back. "Forgive my bluntness, sir," he said. "But is this exercise focused on anti-omnic warfare?"

The dead silence dragged on through the room as heads turned back to the colonel, who seemed unfazed and stared back at the soldier with a poker face. Then he boomed in laughter.

"Sharp eye, my friend!" he said genially, gesturing for the soldier to sit down. "Yes, yes it is. And you want to know why, do you not? It is simple: in the army, we kill things. And when new things
appear, we learn how to kill them!" He laughed again, this time accompanied by some of his subordinates. "But to be serious, yes. This is anti-omnic warfare. Our armies have welcomed our metal brothers and sisters into our ranks, and we all know how effective they have made us." The colonel shook a fist to emphasise his point.

"Of course, there is a problem. We humans have been killing each other for centuries. And with so much practice, of course we are good at it! But now, we are realising we are not as good at killing omnics. That is why we are practicing now, no?"

"Sir, does this have anything to do with the omnic unrest in Russia?" the seated soldier persisted, but the colonel fielded the question without the slightest pause.

"My dear brother, in peacetimes, we train for war and all possible forms it can take. This is but one of the possibilities. Understood?" His tone was still friendly, but there was an undercurrent of warning which the soldier picked up on.

Ana glanced discretely at the Russian soldiers as silence fell over the room again. None of them seemed to bear any kind of questions, not even sharing the subtle signs of suspicion some of their Egyptian counterparts wore. Just sober and resolute.

Kamilah noticed her examining the room and caught her eye. They shared a knowing glance, then turned their attention back to the colonel. The brass could keep the records as clean as they wanted; no one was getting fooled.

They were split up into new platoons – two Egyptian and two Russian squads each. Naturally, Ana was thrilled that her squad got grouped with Kamilah's. Her wife merely gave a drawn-out sigh and muttered something about 'long weeks ahead'.

It was fortunate for her then, that no medic had been needed for the first phase of their program. Things went smoothly through the days of physical training and team exercises, climbing and crawling and sprinting through obstacle courses. There was the macho 'my gun is bigger than yours, my muscles are harder than yours' bravado that fueled competition between the local and visiting soldiers, but it built camaraderie among the winded troops at the end of each race. It was all friendly and reasonable – no one saw the need to pull dangerous stunts just to come out on top.

With the ice broken, the times they spent together became more boisterous, and tongues finally came loose.

"It is true," Pavel said quietly to the soldiers sitting around him. "There are a lot of omnic attacks recently, and people are starting to protest the God Program. But of course, no one wants to budge. That is why we suspect this—" He nodded his head back at the mess hall they were sitting outside of, where most of the exercise's participants were gathered. "–is preparation for shit going to happen."

Pavel glanced at Adofo, sitting quietly beside Ebo. "What about home, Blue Eyes? You should know."

"We have the Anubis AI, and many omnics are starting to get worried," Adofo replied. "But no attacks have happened…yet."

"Yet," Nadia snorted and took a swig from her bottle. "Means it will happen, but no one knows when."

"Pessimistic," Layla commented, meeting Nadia's raised brow with a smirk.
"Realistic," the Russian soldier said simply.

"How widespread are the attacks?" Ana asked. "After that time in Novosibirsk, we haven't heard much from the news."

"Because they are covering it up," Pavel growled. "It has been spreading from Krasnoyarsk, but the government decided it is better for people not to panic. The farthest it reached is…Yekaterinburg?"
He looked over at his squad mate, one with sandy brown hair to match his, and received an affirmative nod. Pavel pointed a thumb at the soldier. "Matvey's cousin got hurt in one attack. Lost a little finger."

Mesi cocked her head. "Yekaterinburg? That's west of Krasnoyarsk, yeah? Sounds like it's making its way to…"

"Moscow, yes." Pavel fell silent then, leaving the squad to their own bottles. Then Nadia drained the last of her beer, and let out a long groan.

"I'm getting more of this shit. Who wants?" She clicked her tongue when the entire group piped up. "Okay, fuck you. Get your own drink."

Pavel chuckled, getting onto his feet with the rest and following Nadia towards the mess hall entrance. "Don't mind that bitch. Always grouchy. But that is her charm."

"Hey," Ana whispered as she rested an arm around Kamilah's shoulders. "Sounds like someone I know." She snickered, getting a hard pinch in her side.

Their team training was concluded with a final course that involved hauling stacks of large tires up a wide dirt road, turned muddy from a long night of rain. Tired bodies were exhausted further from having to scrub their filthy equipment clean. Thankfully, they were afforded a little reprieve when time came for live-fire exercises. The Egyptian soldiers learnt to use the EMP equipment quickly, their engineers taking just a little more time to get a hang of the drones. And Ana couldn't lie – she loved the impact of the new armour-piercing rounds, blasting through thick steel plates as if they were construction paper. It was nearly intoxicating, how much power was packed into each shot.

Stealth training took place in a simple course filled with tall poles, concrete walls, ropes, and cargo nets – designed to help the soldiers adapt to their cutting edge stealth kits. It was simple enough – two platoons would sneak their way through the course, kept invisible by the device on their chest harness. The trick was in staying invisible, being mindful of their surroundings and not giving away their positions on accident. Another two platoons were stationed outside the course, armed with paintball guns and ready to mark any who was as subtle as an elephant. Both Ana and Khalid, already proficient in the kit's use, met their platoon at the end of the course without a single splatter on their uniforms, smiling smugly at the others grumbling with bright paint all over their bodies.

Then came their war simulations, a notably relaxed affair in their schedule. 'Relaxed' because it was held indoors with the help of VR and holo technology, and didn't involve any risk of physical injury. It was the safest method of putting new tactics to the test, though the environment was always too controlled to yield reliable results. Notably, most of their simulations put them in urban territory – the messiest place to fight a war. But the streets were too clean, too devoid of civilians and rubbish and rubble, especially when compared to what Ana had seen during the insurgency. Whenever she turned her head, she half-expected to see burning corpse piles and civilians running in bloody clothes. She had to touch her VR goggles often to remind herself that it was just a simulation.

Oddly enough, when they were stationed in the city for their war games, it was easier to
compartmentalise. Being in an actual physical setting where the streets were cleared of civilians helped her focus. Which was a good thing, because coordinating troop movements in the urban jungle was a bitch. Squads kept getting lost and separated from their platoons. Communication mishaps caused a few squads to stumble across designated 'terrorists' ahead of time. Unfortunate civilians accidentally wandered into their training grounds and were alarmed by the sight of soldiers bearing rifles.

Tempers simmered in the beginning, and it was obvious their platoon commander – Jaida – was less than pleased. It took two days, but they managed to get their act together before they were shot on the spot by the Major. Their weapons were loaded with blanks, of course. But none doubted even those would somehow become lethal in the hands of an angry Jaida.

"You think we'll win?" Khalid muttered as he peered through his spotter's scope.

"Of course we will. I'm here."

"Ugh."

Ana smirked, lowering her gaze from the rifle to look down at her holo-map. Their engagement with the opposing forces would occur soon, and the platoons were inching carefully into place. Blue markers moved and halted, then moved again, covering ground with acceptable speed. Then she caught a red blink to the southeast of one of their squads.

Looking back up and increasing the magnification of her cybernetic eye, Ana focused ahead of her allies and caught ghost-like movement in an alley.

"Delta-1," Ana said, a finger pressed on her earpiece. "Tangos at 5 o'clock."

"How many."

"Unconfirmed. Estimate one squad." She scanned the surroundings. "I can flush them out, and you can remove the squad from the board."

"Getting into position."

Ana waited as Delta squad spread out, altering their formation slightly. The ghosts tailing them stilled all movement, having sensed they had been spotted.

"Waiting on you, Whisky-2."

They had been through many waiting games for the past days, but this one would be much shorter than the rest. Ana kept her eye on the enemy's rough position, and fired at the slightest movement in the alley. Her shot hit – sensors on her target's body marked them as KIA, and they gave the wearer a mild shock, prompting them to fall to ground in 'death'. It caused a ripple of movement, and Ana squeezed the trigger repeatedly, taking down two more before the rest of the enemy squad spilled into the street. Delta squad took care of them effortlessly.

"Clear."

"Nice one, Amari," Ana said on a private channel.

"Focus, Amari," Delta's leader replied, before cutting the channel off.

"Stop flirting with your wife," Khalid grumbled.
"I can't help it."

"Then shoot me."

"If only I could, my dearest brother."

Their platoons advanced ever onward, meeting light resistance on the way, and lost only one squad. Ana and Khalid – along with other sniper teams – went from building to building to keep up with their allies. When Ana started to have a niggling feeling that things had been too smooth, the situation went south for their forces immediately.

An ambush was sprung when they clustered too close to one another, and they lost two squads in the first assault. The surviving squads split up immediately, trying to minimise casualties as they fought to break out of the ambush. Ana and Khalid latched onto Delta and Kilo squads, who had banded together and broken clean out of the ambush. They were running along the edges of the city, trying to reach the other squads that were pinned down. Ana and Khalid decided to take a different path – sneaking from building to building to their rendezvous point, and taking stock of the field as they went.

She spotted Mesi and Foxtrot squad fighting off their ambushers alongside Lima, entrenched behind concrete planters in the park. Opening a comm channel, she told her leader to hold on and that help was on the way.

The sniper team met up with their squads, and guided them towards Mesi, lightening their opposition along the streets with well-aimed shots. By the time they reached the park, only half of Mesi's squad was standing. Though it was imperative to win the war game against the 'terrorists', Ana had to suppress a chuckle at the 'dead' soldiers lying on the ground. They had been removed from the board, and would continue to play dead until the simulation was ended. The easy way out of the exercise, as it were.

According to the map and scattered radio contact, the bulk of the action was concentrated in the city square, and they made good time towards it. Ana stopped the squads before they got too close though, giving them an update on the situation. There was a group of soldiers being held hostage, kneeling by the steps to a museum and surrounded by inert bodies on the ground. Patrols around the area seemed sparse, and only 10 soldiers were close to the hostages.

"Ideas?" Pavel's voice crackled over the radio.

"My squad can create a distraction," Mesi said. "Get their attention while you get the hostages."

"Not much of a squad with you," Kamilah stated. "Mine can back yours up."

Ana ran an eye over the three squads huddled in a discussion behind the bank. "No, Kilo's down by nearly half too. Pavel can work with Mesi. Kamilah can lead Delta for the rescue." She cast a glance back at the museum. "I can guide you into a flanking position, Delta."

A chorus of affirmation, then their shared channel clicked off. Ana promptly opened a secure channel with Kamilah, giving her directions to skirt around the city square, taking down a few patrol drones along the way. It took them a little longer than Foxtrot and Kilo to get into position, but they reached south of the museum safely and waited for the distraction from the north. Ana scanned the square again, moving her scope from target to target, getting used to the distances while listening to Mesi finish counting down. There were regular pitches of static marring Mesi's voice…
"Go go go!"

Mesi and Pavel burst out of position ahead of their squads, rifles rattling with blanks. Ana fired, and an omnic by the hostages fell, body twitching briefly from its sensors' shock. The rest of its squad – which had its attention on the decoy – looked at it in surprise, then at the second soldier who had dropped as well. Delta squad fell upon them just as they recovered, both sides opening fire at the same time. With Ana's help, Delta managed to cut down the opposition quickly, but still lost a third of its soldiers.

"Ana?" Khalid said as the hostages were helped to their feet, and the rest of the soldiers performed a sweep of the area.

"Yeah?"

"I have a feeling…"

"Yeah…"

"Heads up!" Adofo's voice blasted through the radio on all frequencies. "Anti-personnel–"

A large, deafening blast screeched through Ana's earpiece, and she flinched in pain as Khalid hissed. On her holo-map, all friendly blue markers turned red. They had been wiped out in one fell swoop.

"Shit," Ana cursed under her breath. Her scope instinctively sought out Kamilah, who lay on the floor with a look of utter irritation as the shock's effects subsided.

Khalid sighed. "Fucking called it."

"You goddamn motherfucking brainless hero wannabes!" was the gist of Jaida's private tirade at her own soldiers after their debrief back in base. They had been performing well until the end, when they fell right into the trap by assuming their enemies had intended to leave anyone alive at all. The hostages were bait, and they bit without doing a proper field sweep first; they had scanners to reveal the presence of the mines, and drones to disarm them before launching an assault. But urgency got the better of them.

Ana didn't know what would happen to their Russian comrades after the joint exercise ends, but she knew for sure their lives would be hell when they returned to Cairo. Still, it was rather easy to forget their impending doom in the post-exercise wind-down. Their days spent cleaning up countless pieces of equipment were dull, but still made for a good breather from the busy weeks before. Their new friends' relentlessly upbeat demeanours did help as well.

"Tonight, drinks are on us!" Pavel patted his chest soundly as they strode towards the car park. "We will make you drop to floor before they drop you home!"

"Not if we make you drop first," Ebo said, looking unimpressed when Pavel aimed a punch at his stomach.

"I take your challenge, meatman."

"Who wants to carry Ebo back later?" Mesi asked, watching the two men start throwing out challenge after ridiculous challenge before they even reached the car.

"I say we just leave him here," Ana drawled.
"I can carry him back," Adofo volunteered as always.

"Yeah, you can. But do you want to?"

"Hm."


"He would've turned long ago if he could smell." Ana patted on the omnic's body, where a few scratches and dents were still visible. He would need a thorough tune-up when they went home.

"Oi, Pavel!"

They glanced over at another group approaching the man – Ana recognised a few members of Lima squad from the war game.

"Hey, Foxtrot." The blonde woman tossed a casual salute at Mesi, who returned the gesture. "You going to drink without us, Pavel? What a bastard you are."

"Only for you, darling Irina," Pavel replied drily, receiving a light swat on the head.

Irina kept her hand on Pavel's head – much to his obvious chagrin – and looked around, before her eyes lit up. She made her way through the group and fell into stride beside Kamilah, who looked away from her squad mate and fixed Irina with a curious gaze.

"Delta! I remember you from the war game," she said. "The way you handle rifle is very interesting. Want to discuss techniques over drinks?"

"If you want techniques, you should ask my wife," Kamilah replied smoothly. "She handles guns much better than I do."

"Wife?"

"She is married, you dumbbell." Pavel turned around so he was walking backwards. "Amari." He pointed a finger at Kamilah, then moved it towards Ana. "And Amari."

"Ah."

"She's right, you know." Ana cut her way through the group to join the blonde. "I am very good with guns. And many other things as well."

Irina grinned and smacked a fist into Ana's chest. Ana marveled at how her rib cage didn't cave in right then and there.

"Then let us see how good you drink, pretty face."

Kamilah shot her a pleading expression when Irina walked away. Obviously, that meant 'pretty face' would be throwing the drinking contest later.

Not that she minded – it was good to feel pretty while surrounded by dying, hung-over faces during the morning flight back to Cairo.

Already wise to Jaida's ways, the platoon hunkered down to face any punishment that was thrown their way. Usually in the form of a training range turned torture pit that few would survive unscathed – at least, for the first few days when they were still trying to get their act together. Several post-
training tactics meetings and weeks of slogging later, they finally managed to pacify their commander and were able to breathe easier.

Their well-earned break really was a blessing – it was not long before they were hit by a major change, which arrived in the form of a promotion ceremony. Fewer were involved this time; only Mesi and Kamilah were elevated to Captain.

As a spouse, Ana had the honour of pinning the third star to Kamilah's epaulette during the ceremony. It took all her willpower to not embrace the woman on the spot, and she made up for it the instant they were dismissed. Ana clamped her arms tightly around her wife, feeling so infinitely proud that she didn't want to let go, and the two had to be pried apart by their squads in the end.

Of course, the promotions meant a long and loud celebration at the end of the week. The high lingered after their merrymaking, but only for a short while. The promotions could only mean one thing: their squads would go through even more changes in the near future. And for Ana, it would be a double-whammy.

"Do you think they'll let you stay a while more?" Ana asked. She patted her hands idly on Kamilah's legs, which were resting in her lap.

"I think so. They haven't decided on my new post, as far as I've heard," Kamilah replied, eyes not leaving her tablet while she lay on the couch.

"No, I mean, will they let you stay for as long as Deyab did?"

The tablet was lowered so Kamilah could raise her brows at Ana. "You know he was stuck being squad leader for so long because he stepped on toes, right?"

"Yeah," Ana sighed. Her hands continued patting away at Kamilah's legs as she turned her attention back to the TV screen. But she had stopped following the movie a while ago, and switched it off instead. "Think you could step on some toes soon?"

"You want to hold me back?" Kamilah asked, a faint smile on her lips.

"Of course not, albi. I want you to hold yourself back." She chuckled when Kamilah rolled her eyes. Ana moved the legs off her lap and crawled over, so she was lying on top of her partner. "It'll just be lonely without you, that's all."

"I know."

Ana planted her face into Kamilah's chest, giving a long groan. "At least Mesi's still in the company."

Kamilah hummed, patting on Ana's back gently. "And you're getting a little promotion, hm?"

She muttered incoherently into Kamilah's t-shirt. When Mesi starts leading the company as Jaida's second-in-command in the future, Ana would be bumped up to squad leader. Honestly, that wasn't a jarring change for the squad at all. It was just Mesi's leaving the group that was a bummer – kind of like breaking up a tight-knit family. She would still be with them – even if it's as their commander now – but the news still needed some time to sink in with the squad. Especially Ebo and Layla. Although Ana was more concerned for Layla – the two women had been inseparable for the longest time.

But she would leave that concern for later. Her mind was occupied with something else right now.
"You'll still have me, amar," Kamilah said softly when Ana continued to stew. "Look on the bright side. At least you won't get 'bossed around' by me anymore. Ah right," she added at the muffled whine. "That's not a bright side for you, is it?"

Ana smiled when Kamilah hugged her tightly, pressing a kiss on top of her head. She lay still on her wife, feeling no urge to move from the spot. Kamilah was right – at least they still had each other after work. Sure, she wouldn't get to see her wife in the training range, but it's just a little change to get used to. The world wasn't coming to an end, and even if it did feel like so, she could always get hurt and be sent to the hospital.

"And you're not *that* upset about this, are you?"

"Not really. I just want you to hold me longer."

"You big baby," Kamilah laughed.

"You were supposed to say you'll hold me forever."

"I'll hold you forever."

Ana heaved a dramatic sigh. "Missed the moment, but thanks."

"You're welcome, darling."
"Layla's calling."

Ana swiveled around in her chair, just in time to watch Kamilah cock her hand back for a throw.

"Wait–!"

She half-stood in panic, flinging both hands out to catch her phone. It bounced off a palm and she scurried frantically, snatching it from the air and slapping it flat to her chest.

"The fuck, Milah. It could've dropped to the floor."

"But it didn't, did it?" Kamilah started to move farther down the corridor, but popped back into the study's doorway. "By the way, you didn't drop all your clothes into the washer either." She shook the laundry basket she held against her hip.

"What clothes."

"From the boxes."

"They're old clothes. Not like I'm gonna wear them any time soon." Ana glanced down at her phone, pressing it to her ear when Kamilah walked away with a frown. "Hey babe."

A near-inaudible groan was her only answer. Ana waited for a follow-up, be it in actual words or even more groans, but nothing came.

"Lay? You alright?" She waited again, hearing a sniff before it went silent again. "Are you okay? Do you need help?"

"I'm fine..." Layla finally croaked her first words out. She cleared her throat, then took another sluggish sniff.

"Are you sick?"

"No."

"Are you drinking?"

"No..."

"You sure? You always get sniffly when u drink."

"I was...I'm not now."

"Okay," Ana said slowly. "Where are you? Need a ride?"

"No. In bed."

"Uh, your own bed?"

"Ya..."

"Okay," Ana repeated, trying to divine what the drunk lump wanted. "Want me to sing you a lullaby?" A prolonged, throaty whine reached her ear. "Lay, you sure you're okay--?"
"Why's she have to leave."

Ah. "Mesi?"

"Don't want her to leave…"

"I don't think any of us wants that."

"Then why's she going…"

"Paycheck, babe. I mean, you get a raise and you get to order more people around. Who doesn't want that?" Ana's smile slowly faded as she listened to Layla's weak groan. "Do you want me to come over?"

"No."

A pause, then shuffling. "No, I—" Layla grunted, and Ana heard something clattering to the floor. "I'm going…"

"What? Going where?" Ana said hurriedly. "Lay, I don't think you should be going anywhere right now—"

"Call you back."

"What, no. Lay—"

"I'll be fine," was all Layla said before she cut the call.

Naturally, Ana tried calling her again, but to no avail. She strode out of the study in worry, and would've driven over to the barracks herself if Kamilah hadn't forced her to sit down after learning what had transpired. Ana dialed Mesi's number, hoping to get someone to check on Layla, but she was hung up on before the call even went through.

"Maybe she went to look for Mesi," Kamilah said.

"Maybe. I'll get Khalid to go see—" Ana glanced at her wife when a hand clamped over hers.

"You really have no idea what's going on?"

"She's drunk, Milah. She's done stupid drunk stuff before." She stared back at Kamilah, not comprehending the odd look on her partner's face.

"Leave her alone for a while." Kamilah held up a hand when Ana started to protest. "Just—, one hour. Give her one hour, then you can do whatever you want. Okay?"

Ana gave a very reluctant agreement, and had her phone pried away when she kept checking it by the minute. She paced around the living room, eyes constantly wandering back to the clock, only sitting in place when Kamilah made her channel that restless energy into folding their clothes. The instant the clock ticked to an hour later, Ana snatched her phone back from Kamilah and made the call.

"Hello."

"Lay? Are you—" Then she realised who had just spoken. "Mesi?"

"Yup."

"Is Lay with you?"
“Yeah. She's sleeping though, so she can't talk right now.”

Relief washed over Ana. "Thank god. I thought she was going to leave the barracks."

Mesi laughed softly. "In this state, I don't think she'd get far anyway. Did you two talk before…?"

"Yeah. She's pretty upset."

"I know. She was a mess. Kinda difficult trying to talk and cry at the same time."

"Trust me, I know," Ana chuckled, and sank onto the couch. "So did you straighten things out?"

"Yeah. For now, anyway." Mesi sighed, going quiet for a moment. "Do you think I should stay?"

"Only if you want to. I mean, even if you leave the squad, you're still in the same company." Ana hugged an arm around Kamilah's shoulders. "Not like you're transferring out or anything." She looked at Kamilah pointedly, and snickered when she got swatted on the nose.

"Right... And we're still friends, huh? Family."

"Yup. Not going to kick you out of our chat or anything."

"I'm so touched," Mesi deadpanned. "Anyway, I'm turning in soon. See you tomorrow."

"Alright. Sleep tight."

Ana heaved a sigh of relief, leaning back as she dropped her phone onto the seat. Then she noticed Kamilah still scrutinising her rather closely. "What?"

"So...do you know what's going on?"

"Why do you keep asking that?" Ana said. "What's going on?"

Kamilah cocked a brow. "Nevermind."

They had two more weeks left with Mesi, and it seemed the squad had reached an unspoken agreement to make it the best they could. Not only by huddling together after their duty shifts like penguins in deep winter, but by pouring their best efforts into training, blasting through the exercises without problem and with minimal injury. During these training sessions, Ana spent more time with her squad physically as well, instead of staying hidden or on higher ground with Khalid. This also meant less time with her stealth kit and beloved sniper rifle; the assault rifle became her best friend for the time being, and its thunderous rattle coupled with her position as the head of the team made her feel very exposed indeed.

Lucky it was that, despite a vastly different role, it fit Ana like a tailor-made glove. Working with a familiar squad helped much; they moved as though they were extensions of her body. And as Mesi pointed out with good humour, she seemed to have been born to order people around. No hesitation, no second guesses. Her orders were clear and efficient; rather rash at times, but she would find that delicate balance between patience and urgency in due time. In the meanwhile, the squad would have to suffer through a few traps whenever Ana made a misstep.

The switch from obeying orders to giving them was rather tiring indeed; now she understood Kamilah's groans when the medic had been made squad leader years ago. She found herself analysing the day's tactics over and over, trying to refine them and predict their results in her mind's eye. Then she would sigh with a smile when Kamilah told her to relax and stop thinking too much.
How the tables have turned…

As much attention as she had given her new role, Ana did notice something a little odd.

"Oi, Lay," Ana said, playing with the damp towel in her hands. "So you coming to the bar with us or not?"

"Er–, no."

"But they changed their menu."

"I have something on," Layla muttered. She grabbed her belongings from the shower locker and threw them into her bag.

"But…burgers."

"And their fries. Don't forget the fries." Mesi sat down beside Ana with a smile, hair wet from her shower as well. "You know that's the deal for her."

"Yeah. You could stuff your face with just fries. We won't judge."

"I really can't go, Ana." Layla slung her bag over one shoulder, slicking back her short wet bangs with a hand. Her eyes darted towards the side, fingers drumming restlessly against her thigh, as if she felt uneasy standing in one spot. "I have to do something."

"Or someone." Ana snickered when Layla's palm smacked into her forehead. "So touchy."

"It's alright. The bar will always be there, hm?" Mesi said.

"Yeah. And the fries." Layla patted her head much more lightly, before swatting back at Ana again for muttering something about 'favouritism'.

Ana massaged her head, watching Layla make her way past the lockers and turn out of sight. "Is everything alright?" she asked, folding her towel. "Lay's been kinda twitchy lately."

"She's fine."

"Really. Not going to stage an intervention?"

Mesi huffed. "You're never going to let that slide, are you?"

"No."

"Time to shove her own medicine into her mouth. Maybe I can set her up with two. At the same time."

"Don't. She's…figuring out some stuff for herself right now."

"Yeah? What kind of stuff?" Ana asked as they walked out of the showers, the evening air refreshingly cool on her skin.

"Personal stuff." Mesi waited, fixing her with a stare that was oddly familiar. She continued when Ana cocked her head curiously. "You…really have no idea?"

"Why do people keep asking me that?"
Mesi raised her brows appraisingly. "Huh. I thought you would've noticed. Or...at least been told by now."

"Wait, notice what? Who's telling me what?"

A thoughtful expression sat on Mesi's face, before she smiled. "You've a sharp eye, Ana. I'm sure it'll come to you."

"What will come to me?" Ana asked, frustrated when Mesi just shrugged and took out her car keys. "What's happening?"

"The best answers are the ones you find for yourself."

Ana groaned loudly, practically stuffing herself into Mesi's car in her impatience. "Fuck the best answers. I like 'right now' answers."

"Then I hope you like disappointment too."

"You're a disappointment."

Mesi remained a 'disappointment' until a week later, when her last day with her squad arrived along with Kamilah's. All was promptly forgotten, and she became the 'best damned soldier ever'—a title conferred upon her by an emotional Ebo while he was crushing her in a hug. They had to lead him away and ply him with drinks, so that drunk Ebo would emerge to turn the farewell party into an actual celebration. Their friends were being promoted after all, not reassigned to some remote outpost far from Cairo.

The night ended on a surprisingly mellow note, and they dispersed from the barracks' break room, all soft and pleasantly drunk. Ana carried Kamilah on her back halfway through their walk home, noticing how sleepy she had gotten. Kamilah spent the short journey nuzzling into Ana's hair and giggling softly to herself, having downed a fair share of drinks at her squad's behest. Her hands and lips wandered all over Ana when they reached home, but it was fairly easy to tuck her into bed instead. She fell asleep quickly, and Ana smiled softly at the sight, pressing a kiss on her temple.

Kamilah would need this peaceful night's rest; of that, Ana had no doubt. Who knew when she would get a proper night's sleep after her new duties flooded in.

The answer was: not any time soon.

It didn't take long before Kamilah was whisked away by her advanced training courses, which would prep her to take command of her newly-assigned company. Being in charge of over a hundred soldiers was quite a step up, and the course spared no expense at whipping the officers into shape. Within the first week, Kamilah could often be found sprawled lifelessly on the sofa while Ana caressed her head, reading Mesi's groans over their group chat as well.

The only times Ana managed to see her wife, were early in the morning when she looked marginally alive, and late in the night when she seemed marginally dead. Ana missed being able to see Kamilah more often throughout the day, but for the time being, her soft snoring when she fell asleep on top of Ana would have to do.

But even that was taken away from them after the first two months of her training. With the first phase complete, the group of officers would be sent out into the field for a month-long exercise to round up their entire course. Ana did manage to steal a moment with Kamilah before she left though,
lighting two candles on top of a homemade, slightly-too-sweet cake to celebrate her 27th. She was given a loving kiss and a few tips on how to make the cake fluffier, before Kamilah left the next morning.

With an entire month and an empty house to herself, Ana took to spending more time in the barracks with the squad, and feeding them so many of her cake experiments that they begged her to stop before they started losing their teeth. She relented by reducing the portions into more manageable cupcakes, which she still fed to them during their D&D sessions. The only reason they kept eating her food was because she actually got better with every try, and also to keep her from moaning about being apart from her wife.

[I'm not that bad]

Khalid: [yeah whatever helps you sleep at night]

[You know what really helps me sleep at night]

Khalid: [wow such a hard question. i gotta think]

[IT'S QUIET HERE YOU SINGLE ASS]

[DO YOU KNOW HOW QUIET A HOUSE CAN GET]

Hakim: [My wife knows. Ha]

[At least your wife has a kid]

Hakim: [So why don't you have a kid]

[...]

[:( ]

Khalid: [there she goes again]

Layla: [For what it's worth I feel you babe]

[What]

[Feel my what]

Ebo: [Wait Lay are you gonna]

[Gonna what]

Ebo: [Unbelievable]

Layla: [Waiting for your girl, Ana. I feel you]

[Uh]

[Wait. You have a girl?]

Hakim: [Hoooooly shit Ana]

[You knew?]
Ebo: [My fucking god]

Khalid: [SHE’S DATING MESI YOU DENSE FUCKING CUPCAKE]

[SINCE WHEN]

Layla: [1 month]

[What THE FUCK]

[DOES EVERYONE KNOW?]

Layla: [Yep]

Layla: [Kamilah knows too btw. Tsk]

[AND NONE OF YOU BOTHERED TO TELL ME]

Khalid: [yeah it was priceless]

Khalid: [was]

Khalid: [it's like your gaydar went dead]

[How was I supposed to know?]

[They spend so much time together anyway]

[...Come to think of it they were pretty fucking gay]

Khalid: [you dense cupcake]

[Layla changed group name to 'Dense Cupcakes']

Ebo: [Yo Ana can you make those caramel cupcakes again. Those were good]

[Fuck you]

Layla: [I want mine with rainbow sprinkles]

Adofo: [I want one with sprinkles too]

[You can't eat]

Adofo: [:(

Adofo: [Please?]

[...Fine]

Adofo: [ \( -\n\) / ]

The squad dropped by her house one night for their caramel cupcakes, and the treats seemed to have bought their silence over her broken gaydar. Layla made only one joke at her expense, before they
kicked back for the rest of the night, with their little cakes in hand. Adofo took photos of his own cupcake, savouring it visually before giving it to Ebo so it wouldn’t be wasted.

The rest of the month went by in a breeze; uneventful except for the time when Ana skinned her elbows in an accident during training. They hurt each time she bent her arms, but that didn’t stop her from baking yet another batch of cupcakes in anticipation for Kamilah's return. Her wife flew into her embrace the moment she opened the door, before clicking her tongue when she noticed the bandages on Ana’s elbows. Her frown didn’t stay long though, and soon Ana had her recounting everything she had gone through for the past month, all the while reaching for one cupcake after another.

With her training done, Kamilah seemed more relaxed than before. After all, her day-to-day duties would be more manageable than the course's tight, teeth-grinding schedule. And due to the time of her return, she had a longer weekend to spend lying down at home, enjoying the peace and quiet that she had dreamt of for the whole month. That was just as well – it put her in a better mood when they were invited to a neighbour’s dinner party that weekend.

A tight-knit community did come in a package with living on base – everyone knew and treated one another as if they were extended family. Apparently, that also applied to full-time soldiers of whom they only caught the occasional glimpse as well. Ana and Kamilah were greeted warmly by Fatimah, a middle-aged housewife who immediately pulled them into her house, introducing them to her family and guests before leading them to the gorgeous buffet spread. They stuck together for a while, working their way through the food that Fatimah had piled onto their plates. Then Kamilah found a fellow bike enthusiast in Fatimah's son – a quartermaster sergeant – and was led to the garage for a look at his own bike.

Ana herself flitted from guest to guest, all the while taking bites from her plate which never seemed to go empty, thanks to her hostess. But when she found Kamilah walking back into the house some time later, it wasn't a plate of food that she held in her hands.

"Milah, look!" Ana said, bouncing the little toddler in her arms. He giggled and clutched onto Ana's collar as she ruffled his unruly mop of hair.

"Oh. Hi," Kamilah said uncertainly, and the boy waved clumsily in response. "Whose is this…?"

"Fatimah's grandson. Look at this." Ana faced the boy and shook her head rapidly. "Brrr!"

"Brrr!" He copied Ana, raising his fists and vibrating his whole body in reply.

Ana cackled, and the boy laughed along with her.

"Is it safe for the baby to do that?" Kamilah asked.

"I think so? His brother showed me how to do it." Ana adjusted the boy in her hold. "Here, wanna hold him?"

"I–, no wait, I don’t know how to–," Kamilah stuttered, but Ana had thrust the boy into her arms. She stood awkwardly with the child clutched flat against her chest until Ana came to her rescue, adjusting her arms so that the boy was sitting comfortably in the crook of her elbow. "Ana…"

"See? Easy. It's like...how you hold a puppy. Except the baby is your own species this time." She grinned when Kamilah shot her a withering look.

"You don't hold puppies like this," Kamilah said, quickly holding the boy close when he fidgeted.
"Yeah, but I'm trying to give you an example you're familiar with."

"Ugh." Kamilah twitched her head when a little hand knocked into her jaw, then found its way to the fine chain of her necklace. She kept still, letting the boy play with her jewelry as she squinted at Ana, who was trying not to laugh. Kamilah had not a single idea what to do with the baby, and Ana could practically see her squirming on the inside.

"Amal," Ana cooed, finally stepping in. "Come, let's get more yogurt."

"Yay!" He threw his hands up, leaning excitedly into Ana's hold once more.

After his tiny serving of dessert, Amal spent the rest of the night toddling back and forth between the guests, treating each one to a good earful of his disjointed babbles. He made a few trips back to Ana and Kamilah as well, who gave him little pieces of crackers which he still held in his hands when he waved goodbye at the end of the party.

"Think we fed him a little too much?" Ana asked, swinging their hands back and forth as they strolled down the pavement from Fatimah's house.

"Maybe. He stopped eating those crackers a while ago."

"Ah well. At least he's happy with them." Ana's lips curved in a lop-sided smile. "So this is it for us, huh?"

"What is?"

"We're going to be one of those couples who have puppies as children."

Kamilah heaved a long-suffering sigh. "What, because I don't know how to handle human babies?"

"Handle them? You didn't even know how to carry them." Ana snickered when Kamilah rolled her eyes. "You know what? Let's give you some practice now."

"Prac–?" Kamilah didn't have time to finish even one word before Ana leapt at her, the medic's arms rising automatically to catch her unbidden quarry. She uttered a curse, shifting her feet apart to keep from falling over. "Seriously?"

"Hey, if you can carry an adult, you can carry a baby," Ana stated, hugging about Kamilah's neck.

"Not the point, Ana." She shifted her arms so she could carry Ana more comfortably. Kamilah looked as if she had an argument on her tongue, but sighed at Ana's expectant look and resumed walking down the pavement. "Sometimes I don't know if I married a woman or a child."

"I know you're enjoying this, love. No need to pretend." A lop-sided smile curved her lips, and she leaned closer to Kamilah's ear. "How about this? I'll carry you to bed when we get home," Ana purred in a low timbre.

"And what, you'll tuck me in too?" Kamilah deadpanned.

"Oh I'll tuck you in, alright."

"Fuck!"

Ana looked up from her tablet at the shout from the garage, followed by something heavy and metal clattering to the floor. She waited, then turned back to her device when no more sounds came from
Frowning, Ana tossed the tablet aside and rose from the sofa. She moved towards the hallway, just in time to catch sight of Kamilah flying past the garage's doorway. "Milah?"

"Shit!"

More rapid footsteps, then Kamilah burst through the open door, with every bit of panic written across her face. "Ana, catch it!"

"Catch what--?" Her question was answered when a small dark shape scurried through the door as well. Kamilah let out a shriek and jumped onto Ana's back, hands gripping tightly onto the front of her t-shirt as her legs clamped around Ana's hips.

"Catch it!"

"Oh." Ana looked down at the little thing on the floor, and the whole picture became crystal clear. As much as Kamilah loved animals, there was but the one that she was deathly afraid of.

The rat squeaked and scampered into the study, causing the arms around Ana's neck to tighten.

"Ana!"

"Okay, okay. Chill." Ana hitched Kamilah higher up on her back and followed the rat into the study as well. It was quiet at first, but as they scanned the room, a squeak gave its position away and prompted another yelp from her wife.

"There, there! Catch it!"

"I'm on it, jeez." Ana chased after the rat, jogging as she followed its haphazard circuit around the room. It circled around the study table, disappeared behind the bookshelf for a second, then reemerged to navigate around the wheels of their chair. Kamilah yelled at her again when it darted towards the door, and Ana sprinted after it, bringing her foot down to trap the rat against the floor, where it writhed and scrabbled fiercely for freedom.

"Get it out!"

"Really? I wanted to keep it as a pet."

"Ana!"

"Fine, fine." Ana started to bend down towards the rat, but found herself being suffocated by the arms squeezing tightly about her neck, pulling her back up. "What?"

"What are you doing!"

"I'm trying to take it?" Ana said, bending down again.

"What!" Kamilah exclaimed, and her arms pressed hard against Ana's throat once more, forcing her to stand straight again.

"Honey, I can't take it out if I can't reach it."

"Are you going to take it with your hand?"
"No, I was planning to pick it up with my mouth—, of course with my hand!"

"It's dirty!" Kamilah argued.

"And so are you," Ana stated, looking down at the grease-stained hands still holding her shirt in a death grip. "But you don't hear me complaining about it."

Kamilah grumbled and went silent for a second. When she spoke again, she seemed to have calmed from her previous state of panic. "Let me down. I'll get you a box."

"Milah," Ana groaned as Kamilah got off her back. "Seriously, I can just pick it up right now."

"You are not touching that thing," Kamilah insisted, stepping gingerly around Ana and slinking out of the door. She reappeared just moments later, and tossed Ana one of the smaller cardboard boxes they had used for the move.

Ana sighed, then bent down as Kamilah hid behind the door, poking her head over the frame so she could watch Ana quickly roll the rat into the box. She followed Ana as she walked through the garage and out towards the roadside, where she turned the box over and set the rat free. Thankfully, it didn't run back into the garage where Kamilah was standing beside her bike, wearing a look of utter relief on her face.

Leaving the box beside the green trash bin, Ana strode back into the garage. "Happy?"

"Yes," Kamilah said, scratching her head and looking a little abashed. "Thanks."

Ana cocked her head, resting both hands on her hips as she ran an eye over her wife. Kamilah was in a rather dirty state, as she had been tinkering with her bike for half the afternoon. Her hands were covered in dark oil and grease, some of which were splattered across her tank top and smeared over one cheek. The first time Ana had seen Kamilah like this, 'dirty' was definitely how she felt as well.

Then she looked down at herself, finding similar stains around her shirt's collar and sleeves, from when Kamilah had clung onto her like a tree. Ana sighed, then joined Kamilah by the bike. "Since I'm already dirty, need some help?"

"Mm." Kamilah looked her bike over, as if going through a mental checklist. "I'm going to be done soon. You can help me wash it later."

"Yay, more work." She smirked when Kamilah raised a brow at her. "Are you really doing all this for that Medical Corp gathering?" Ana gestured at the row of tools laid out on the floor beside the bike.

"I just wanted to wash it," Kamilah said, raising a hand to her head before stopping it midway, frowning at her dirty fingers. "Then I started checking the oil and the filter and the engine and then everything just…" She threw her hands up in the air.

"I could drive you there, you know."

"No, I'll just take my bike."

"Why? You wanna look cool with your bike?"

"No," Kamilah drawled. "I don't want them to see my ball and chain." She laughed at Ana's pout, then leaned in to kiss it away. "I'm kidding. You're the wings on my back."
Ana chuckled, wrapping her arms around Kamilah's waist as their lips met again. "You're getting too smooth, albi."

"I thought you liked it?"

"No." She grinned. "I love it."
Bonds

It didn't take long for Ana to grow into her new position as squad leader, and Kamilah took only a little longer adjusting to hers as a captain. Things were quite stable after that – their duty hours were regular, tasks manageable, time abundant. They could arrive home with enough energy for nighttime jogs, cruises around the city on two wheels, making trouble with the squads, or just laze about the house in peace and quiet. Looking back on it now, Ana supposed that a part of her always knew it would only last for so long. There must be balance in all things; and for one energetic person prancing about the house, there had to be one lifeless counterpart lying limp on any horizontal surface – be it comfortable or not.

Until now, Ana was still torn between laughing and sighing about the time she had found Kamilah lying on the floor beside the bed. The floor was much cooler, her wife said, and the air-con remote was just too far away. But that, at least, was just the gentle beginning. Extra duties were piled onto her plate, and they kept Kamilah out of the house for prolonged hours. She was kept awake too deep into the early mornings as well – not just due to tension, but also the unholy quantities of coffee that she confessed to drinking throughout the day. And the last straw was when Ana had to snatch a mug of coffee – black as night – from Kamilah's hands...at 1am.

That's why Ana stood firm under Kamilah's near-venomous gaze as she set the mug of tea on the table, and pushed it closer to her partner.

"Ana."

"No. Now, don't give me that look," she said when Kamilah blinked slowly – the first sign to either back off or risk losing a limb. "This is better."

"Ana..." Kamilah growled.

"Milah, you're getting addicted to coffee, okay?"

"I'm not."

"Oh yeah? Who's the one getting headaches when she doesn't get a cup?" Ana raised her brows, waiting for an answer that didn't come because there was no need for one. "I thought so."

Kamilah clenched her jaw, reaching for the mug with a deep frown. She sniffed at the tea gingerly, then looked up at Ana once more in a silent plea.

She sighed. "Just for today, okay? No coffee, just tea. We'll see how bad it is, then work from there."

"It's not that bad," Kamilah muttered, her face scrunching up when she took a sip.

"You almost killed me the other day when we ran out of coffee," Ana reminded her. "You almost killed your wife over coffee. Just a reminder: coffee is more replaceable than a wife."

"Still replaceable."

Ana kicked her feet under the table, but otherwise dug into her breakfast as Kamilah hid a smirk behind her mug. She kept her gaze on the TV, though she was keenly aware of Kamilah spooning way too much sugar into her tea.

"–listened to your concerns, and have tightened security around the Temple of Anubis for the safety
of our employees and the public. There are countermeasures in place for the unlikely event of a malfunction, but rest assured that the AI is stable and under the care of our top scientists—"

"You're planning that omnic exercise, aren't you?" Ana asked, biting off a mouthful of pita.

"Mm. We might be pulling in more of those who went for the joint exercise."

"Is it going to be full-scale?"

"I don't know." Kamilah took another gulp of tea. "Still no word from brass. We're just trying to coordinate between the battalions right now."

Word was — and Ana trusted the one from Kamilah's mouth — that the army would soon step up its anti-omnic preparations in response to growing fears among the people. It was still all hush-hush, and Ana doubted the army's exercises would be publicised any time soon. Of course, this was just precaution — understandable, given their circumstances. But Ana sincerely hoped it would remain just that.

"The weapons training might start soon though," Kamilah continued, giving her a small smile. "You still miss that rifle don't you?"

"Oh yeah. Yeah, I do." Ana thought fondly of the rifle she had used in Russia. "Any chance you could put me in charge of weapons training?"

Kamilah stared flatly back at her wry grin. "We are not training all our soldiers to be snipers."

"Snipers are all an army needs," she declared, then hastened to add, "And medics, of course. Grumpy medics. Terrifying medics. Like you."

"I'll show you terrifying," Kamilah muttered into her mug of tea.

And so she did. Ana spent a terrifying month keeping a tight watch over her wife's caffeine consumption — slapping her hand whenever it strayed towards the coffeemaker, making tea with their breakfast every morning, and hugging Kamilah to her side whenever they walked past a café, the aroma freshly-brewed coffee wafting tantalisingly under their noses. Kamilah's death stares and pursed lips lost their effect on her rather quickly, but Ana was still relieved when Kamilah's workload lightened after another month of slogging. It helped ease her reliance on the caffeine, and Ana felt a little bit of pride when Kamilah started reaching for their tea bags in her bleary morning haze.

True to Kamilah's word, the weapons training soon started. Some of the squads involved in Russian joint exercise were assigned to different platoons to expedite said training. Ana's squad found themselves being put at the forefront during their live fire exercises, giving demonstrations before the rest followed. Training sessions were first held in firing ranges to get the soldiers comfortable with the new weapons, then they were put in simulated exercises with holo-targets, bringing troop movements into play. It took a while to adjust to having omnic targets that barely wavered under a steady hail of bullets, but targets were targets. They adapted, improvised, and won simulation after simulation.

There was an undercurrent of concern though; Ana overheard a few soldiers talking to their omnic colleagues. She had spoken to Adofo herself, but he assured her the omnics were still calm. Killing things was part of the job description after all, he said, and they were getting bored with frail human targets anyway. He got a slap on his back for the jibe, but the issue was otherwise set aside. All they had to do for now, was wait for a larger field exercise.
One thing about owning a house, Ana found, was that the stream of visitors was endless. The main visitors were from their squads, of course – Ana's idiots crashing at the house because it was more comfortable than their shoeboxes in the barracks, and Kamilah's ex-squad dropping by to check in with their former squad leader. They had visits from the neighbours as well, mostly to keep them abreast of the community's goings-on, and to extend invitations for whoever's gathering for the coming weeks.

A proper Amari reunion couldn't happen that year due to clashing schedules, so Zaid had returned to Cairo first, staying over in their home instead of being alone in the family house. His visit was quiet and relaxed, and mostly filled with stories of when he got his first home with Ana's mother in base, how they got by in those days, how much more drab the houses were back then, and even more grandfather's tales of the good old days when his hair was still black. Still, his two daughters loved having him over – Zaid had taken to the kitchen the very day he arrived, and having a hot home-cooked meal in the evenings was immeasurably satisfying. Zaid's neverending stories just seemed to complete the atmosphere, the man often looking them over with a wistful smile on his face.

And where Zaid's visit was a picture of homely serenity – Safiya's would be quite the opposite, if her exclamation at the front door was any indication.

"Kamilah~!" Safiya half-sang and half-shouted, and Ana could hear Kamilah's laugh cut short when she was no doubt yanked in for a back-breaking hug.

Hopping off the stairs and making for the door, Ana was unsurprised to find Kamilah with her feet off the ground, trapped in said hug. What did surprise her though, was when the woman holding her wife turned to grin at her.

"Wait–, who the fuck are you?" Ana asked, her lips curved in a near-disbelieving smile.

Safiya chuckled and let Kamilah down as Ana moved closer, eyes still fixed on her sister's head. From the last time they had seen Safiya at the wedding and all the photos that followed, they were well aware that she was letting her hair grow out. Ana had expected her to chop it off again, not…

"Your hair looks too normal, holy crap." Ana ran both hands through Safiya's long, evenly-cut hair as thick as hers. "Did you get exorcised or something?"

"You wish." Safiya laughed and pulled her in, kissing Ana's cheeks soundly before holding her out for a good look. "Damn, have you put on weight?"

"Muscle weight, yes."

"I'm talking about this." Safiya smacked her fingers under Ana's chin, and was swatted away. Then she stretched out an arm to hug Kamilah close again. "You've been feeding her too much, Kami."

"Don't blame me for food she puts in her own mouth."

"I can always count on you to take my side, darling," Ana said sweetly.

"Anything for you, dear," Kamilah replied, face perfectly straight. "And where's Zahra? I thought she flew over with you."

"Oh, she's visiting her own family. But she's coming to stay later on, don't worry."

"That's good."
"So for now, you have me all to yourselves!" Safiya clamped Ana to her side as well. "Aren't you two lucky?"

"So lucky I wanna throw up," Ana said.

"That's the spirit!" Safiya squeezed them one more time, before releasing them in a heartbeat upon spotting their wall shelf. Her face lit up as she reached for the purple dragon plush, looking it over. "Did you just wash it?"

"Yeah. It was all dusty and stuff."

"Huh, maybe I should get Horny and wash her too."

"What?" Kamilah asked. "Get–, wash who–, what?"

"Horny," Ana explained. "Her unicorn."

"Your…toy unicorn," Kamilah said slowly, and Safiya nodded. "You named your toy Horny."

"Yep." Safiya snickered. "Parents tried to change the name, but it stuck."

Kamilah followed them farther into the house, wearing an utterly incredulous look. "You two are unbelievable. It's almost as if you're sisters."

"Hey!" Ana wheeled around as Safiya took a scandalised gasp. "Don't accuse us of such a thing."

Ana didn't throw up like she claimed, thankfully. Not even after the meal Safiya made for them after hearing about Zaid's stay. Ana had sent a photo of the thoroughly charred piece of chicken to their father, who promptly made a call just to laugh in Safiya's ear. They took pity on her though, and managed to finish that meat-turned-charcoal alongside the pizza they ordered. They ate out for the rest of their meals after that, which was just as well; it gave Safiya a good chance to look around her hometown and see what's changed.

For the most part, Safiya wasn't as boisterous as Ana expected her to be – she spent quite a bit of time outside, being with Zahra and visiting her family. And that meant most of the partying was kept between her partner and herself. Midway through her stay though, Safiya did bring some measure of excitement to them on one lazy night.

"I told you she's gonna die," Ana drawled, as said movie character got caught in an explosion. Kamilah, who had a hand raised in indignation, continued watching quietly. But no one crawled out of the flames for a dramatic reappearance on screen, and she lowered her hand in defeat. "Stop cursing my favourites," she grumbled.

"Hey, not my fault you keep liking the dead ones."

"Ugh." Kamilah dug a hand into the packet of chips Ana held, and chewed on one with a sullen frown. "They need to stop dying."

"One day, albi. Maybe one day."

"Hey, girls."

"Yeah?" Ana turned her head to watch Safiya fly down the stairs, and jump into the armchair next to them. "Oi! Gently."
"Whatever, mom." Safiya straightened herself and took a deep breath to speak, only to let it out in a sigh. She took another breath, but seemed to lose steam again, and started clapping her hands slowly together to fill the gap. She looked nervous but eager as well, staring at Ana with wide eyes as if expecting her sister to read her mind.

"What?" Ana asked.

Safiya inhaled yet again, but this time, she threw her hands up exasperatedly and reached into her pocket. Ana's brows rose when she fished out a small box and held it out to Ana, opening its lid to reveal a ring. All three women stilled; two of them staring at the ring while the third stared back at them.

"So?" Safiya asked.

Ana sat up slowly, mimicking one of Safiya's deep breaths and holding up her fingers. "Two problems. One, I'm your sister. Two, I'm already married--" She burst out in cackles when she received a smack on her head, and was pushed back into the couch so Kamilah could lean forward.

"Are you going to ask her--?"

"I think so…?"

"You think so?" Ana repeated as she caught her breath. "Sis, you already bought the damn ring. Of course you're going to ask."

"Well, yeah. I mean--, yeah." She handed the box over to Kamilah. "But you know. I just don't know when."

"Have you planned anything yet?"

"Not a bloody yacht, that's for sure. But…I don't know. I've had it for a while, actually. And I've been thinking, and…"

"How long is 'a while'?"

Safiya grimaced. "Like…I've had it since your wedding' a while. Yeah," she added upon receiving two surprised looks. "When you told us you got engaged? I was looking for it. Way to steal my thunder, bitch."

"Seriously? Then why haven't you asked yet?"

"I don't know," Safiya sighed, slumping in her chair. "I've been thinking and well, it does seem a little fast…and you know how Zahra keeps saying I'm too impulsive and everything."

"That's because you are."

"See?"

"Yeah," Kamilah joined in. "But if you feel it's time, then it's time. You can't measure it with days or years."

"I guess you would know."

"Now, see," Ana said, sitting up again. "I know how you feel. I spent months agonising over how 'fast' it is, how impulsive it feels, how maybe Milah would say no because of it. But you know what?" She took the box from Kamilah, shut the lid and threw it at Safiya. "Fuck all of that. You
want to marry her because you love her. So stop torturing yourself with all the unnecessary questions, and ask her the only important one. Then you'll see how things go from there."

Safiya wore a small pout as she fidgeted with the box. "What if she says no?"

"Even if she says no, it doesn't necessarily mean she doesn't love you," Kamilah said. "She might just need some more time."

"Yes, but you shouldn't worry over that right now," Ana added, shooting her wife a 'what the hell' look. "You know what you want to do, so do it."

"If you want, I can sound Zahra out for you," Kamilah offered.

"No! I'll handle it," she sighed again, flicking the box open and shut. Then she looked them over. "Does it really change things? Being married, I mean."

"I'd say not much, but maybe it's too early to tell." Ana glanced back at Kamilah. "Do you still love me?"

"Hard to say."

"See? Not much. You live together, you live with each other. You learn to let go of little things, like whenever she hangs her wet towel over the chair instead of the damned hangers."

"And you learn not to see all the dirty clothes she leaves forgotten everywhere," Kamilah shot back.

"And you live with her squeezing the toothpaste from the top--"

"And you have to wipe the wet dishes she leaves dripping on the rack--"

"Have I mentioned you start getting ordered around at home as well?" Ana grinned when Kamilah clamped both arms around her middle and squeezed. Hard.

"I hate you so much."

"I hate you double."

"Alright, knock it off." Safiya threw a cushion squarely at Ana's head. "You've made your point."

"Yeah. So just pop the question and tell us when the wedding's--, is that your phone?" Ana asked, noticing the faint sound from upstairs.

Safiya groaned, then rolled out of the armchair. "Zah's calling."

They watched her race back up the stairs, then Kamilah asked, "Did you really think I'd say no?"

"Hm?"

"When you proposed?"

"Mm, kind of. I mean, your face says 'no' all the time anyway." She bit down on her lip as Kamilah smacked at her thigh. "I guess miracles do happen."

"Really? Hasn't happened to me yet."

"That's because you're the miracle, albi."
Kamilah hummed thoughtfully, and relented with a kiss on her cheek. "You're off the hook. For now."

Zahra arrived at their doorstep the day after, in time to spend the weekend with them. To Safiya's chagrin, the two threw out one 'ring' joke after another, and she was reduced to pantomiming her burning desire to strangle them both from behind her partner's back. Zahra remained blissfully unaware, merely wearing a bemused look whenever their inside joke came up again. She even made a 'ring' pun herself, forcing Ana to press her face flat against the back of Kamilah's head, to stop from laughing maniacally in the middle of a crowded street. To say that Safiya looked relieved when they finally caught a flight back to Asyut, was a gross understatement indeed.

She did keep in contact with them though, mostly to pour her anxiety in short rambles that stopped as abruptly as they started. Then the planning began, and she started sharing little bits and pieces with them. It was only a matter of time now, so all they had to do was wait for some good news.

In the meantime, Ana took care of a little business of her own – coming through on a promise that she and Khalid had made during the insurgency. They would get their first tattoos together, should they both survive the conflict intact. It was a long time coming; partly because it kept slipping their minds, and they took much too long to decide on a design for themselves. But they finally set a date to do it, while their squad was assigned to lighter duties in the armory. It was only logical – neither could bear the thought of crawling and sprinting through the training range while their skin still stung.

Because hell, did it sting.

Kamilah's hand held firmly onto her shoulder, and Ana froze mid-fidget at the silent command. A gentle fingertip spread the lotion over the sore spot between her shoulder blades. Again, she felt that fleeting sense of relief. Ana had opted for a simple tattoo of a stylised arrow along her spine, its arrowhead pointed up towards her neck. She hadn't fully decided on the bigger picture yet, but the arrow would serve as a base for any future extensions. The single arrow occupied a lot less skin than Khalid's – a lioness on his upper back. When he met Ana by the parlour's entrance after it was done, he didn't look ready for even a simple high-five. Instead, they trudged back to Ana's home and crashed in the living room, conveniently giving Kamilah two pain-addled children to deal with.

It had been a week since then, and much of the soreness had faded away. Aside from the initial sting, it really was nothing much – to Ana, anyway. Khalid still sent the occasional 'end me pls' texts. But for her, it was mostly the itchiness that threatened to drive her crazy, not to mention the rude stings in the mornings. Having been through that, it made her question all the more tentative.

"Milah."

"Hm." Kamilah's finger had stopped, and she gave Ana a pat on her lower back.

Ana put her top back on, then turned around to see Kamilah wiping her finger off with a tissue. "I was thinking."

"Really? Have the planets aligned?"

She rolled her eyes and continued, "Wanna get a tatt together?"

Kamilah raised a brow, leaning over to place the lotion bottle on the nightstand. "Just because we're married doesn't mean everything has to come in a couple, you know."

"Well, shit. I didn't know. I guess I should throw our matching undies away."
"We don't have matching undies."

"Point made. Now my original point is, it'd be nice get matching tatts."

"Mm." Kamilah laid down on the bed with both hands behind her head. "You know I don't really like the idea of inking my skin."

"Yeah," Ana sighed, lying on top of her partner. "It's just that I saw these designs back at the parlour…"

"Please don't tell me they're big ones of naked women." "Nah. Just birds and arrows and hearts. Small ones like that."

"Hearts?" Kamilah chuckled. "How tacky."

"No hearts then."

"Mm."

"How about I get the designs for you to see?" Ana smiled gently when Kamilah shrugged. "I'll let you decide if you want them. Just thought it'd be sweet, you know? It's like carrying you around with me wherever I go."

Kamilah hummed, fingers reaching up to play with the ends of Ana's hair. "I'll think about it."

"Yay." She rolled off her partner, only to hiss when she landed flat on her back, and promptly rolled on top of Kamilah again.

Her skin *really* couldn't heal fast enough.

When all the scabbing and peeling was finally done, Ana had two things to be happy for. She could move without a constant sore or itchy spot where she couldn't reach, and now had the freedom to drag herself all across the bed without fear of irritating her tattoo. The second – more important – thing, was that her sister's getting hitched. 'About time', Ana texted after they received a photo of Safiya slipping the engagement ring on Zahra's finger. She and Kamilah were then pelted with question after question about the wedding, before they threw their planner's number at Safiya. Because one thing was for sure – their wedding would be held in Cairo. Most of their families lived in the area, after all.

It didn't take long for them to settle their wedding plans – the planner, with Ana and Kamilah's wedding under her belt, knew exactly what to do when the engaged couple asked for something similar. It became apparent that Safiya and Zahra liked doing things nice and fast. Because in just four short months, they were all gathered in a hotel's garden for the wedding ceremony, on a breezy March evening.

"We should've done this instead, huh?" Ana said when she reached Kamilah, who was standing by the reception table and handed her a plate of little pastries. They were both in their dress uniforms, as they had been part of the sabre bearers' formation just minutes ago.

"Done what?"

"Put it all in the evening. Make it short and sweet, and not have the sun trying to kill you the whole time."
Kamilah laughed softly. "And not have to wake up that early as well."

"Damn. I don't suppose we can do it all over again," Ana said, receiving a nudge in her side. "Or we can just elope this time. Leave all these fools behind." She waved her plate at the two families standing about the garden, chatting and indulging in the light reception before dinner started.

"Shush."

"What? Not like they can hear us."

"Behave," Kamilah sighed. "Or at least, behave when we're talking to them later."

"Please make it much later," Ana pleaded. "I really don't like Zahra's sister. Can't stand that bit--"

She dragged out the first syllable in a single note, letting her voice die off slowly when her eyes landed on the little figure tugging at Kamilah's pants.

Kamilah smiled down at the girl, and handed her plate to Ana. She bent down to pick the child up, carrying her with an ease that came from countless practice with their neighbours' kids during their visits. Ana smiled when her cousin's daughter greeted her with a shy 'Auntie Ana'.

"Hey, Yasmin," Ana cooed, tickling her stomach. Yasmin giggled and pressed herself closer to Kamilah, who tapped her lightly on the nose.

"Where's your mama?" Kamilah asked.

"Cake," Yasmin said, though it wasn't an explanation, judging from the finger she pointed at Ana's plate.

"You want cake?"

"Yes."

"If I didn't know better, I'd say she's using us," Ana commented as Kamilah fed her a tiny piece. The child's mother kept a strict limit on her sugar intake, but Yasmin had discovered different ways of obtaining it from other family members.

"Isn't she?" Kamilah chuckled, delivering a second piece into the kid's mouth. "Okay, no more cake. Or mama is going to look for your aunties later," she added when Yasmin gave a sad pout.

"Eh, mama's here. Act normal," Ana said, nodding in her cousin's direction. Kamilah let the kid down and, after a little prodding by her aunts, Yasmin ran back to her mother. Ana winked in reply to her cousin's knowing look, before turning her attention back to Kamilah.

Her wife had hissed and pulled down her sleeve, taking a better look at the pinkish skin on her lower wrist. Her finger hovered over the small black outline of a swallow, as if itching to press down. They had gotten the tattoos together just a week ago. After a long while of deliberation and looking over the designs, Kamilah took a liking to this particular one – matching outlines of a flying swallow, shaded at the tips of its wings. Ana wore one on her right wrist, and Kamilah on her left. When held together, it looked as if the birds were flying towards each other.

"Don't touch it, Milah."

"I know," she said through clenched teeth, covering it up again. "It just rubbed too hard against the sleeve."
"Want a bandage?" Ana asked, handing back Kamilah's food.

"No, I'm fine." She ate the little fruit cake on her plate slowly. "This is all your fault."

Ana smiled at the mock scowl she wore. "Shall I kiss it to make it up to you?"

"You'll only make it hurt more," Kamilah grumbled. She had gritted her teeth in a perfect picture of stoicism while her skin was getting inked, and she described it as 'a knife being dragged slowly across her skin'. Although her pain threshold was rather high, she still found some enjoyment in groaning about it to Ana in the following days. Ana understood it perfectly – she too, sometimes whined just to get more affection from her wife.

"Then I'll kiss somewhere else."

"Please. Not in public--" Kamilah stopped abruptly at the kiss on her cheek, lips twitching before parting in a smile.

"You were saying?" Ana sang, and had a piece of baklava shoved into her mouth to muffle the growing laughter.

"Shush, you."
"So." Jaida tapped her fingers twice on her desk, scrutinising the two soldiers seated before her. "Both of you."

"Yes, ma'am," Ana said in chorus with Khalid.

"The Republican Guard."

"Yes, ma'am."

Jaida tilted her head appraisingly, then leaned back in her chair. "Why?"

"More pay," Ana said.

"Bragging rights," Khalid added.

"And the pretty cap. Don't forget the pretty cap."

They snickered together when a pen flew into each of their chests. Though the flying stationery was a warning for them to get serious, neither tried too hard to regain their composure. As a soldier, Jaida was an amalgamation of demons from all religions, condensed into a single human body. But it was a well-known secret that she was rather mellow in private.

"That pretty blue cap might as well be a target on your pretty little heads," Jaida said flatly.

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Truth is, I don't give a shit why you want to join." Jaida rested her elbows on the table as they returned her pens. "A lot of soldiers want to. Many don't succeed. Some transfer out of the Guard after a few months. It's not something to be taken lightly."

"We understand," Khalid said.

"The only thing I care about is whether you will be one of those who stay. I'm not recommending soft idiots to the Guard only to have them drop out after a few months, and embarrass me in doing so."

"We wouldn't dare to, ma'am."

"So, what do you think our chances are?" Ana asked.

Jaida waved a hand ambiguously, before tapping on her keyboard. "I can say for sure that you'd be one of the youngest. That could work against you, but your performance during the insurgency was commendable…and it proves your familiarity with urban warfare." She rested her chin on one hand as she scrolled through whatever was on her screen. "For the two of you, you'd most probably be assigned to signal and recon. Sorry, kids. No limelight."

"That's okay. No need to put on makeup."

"Of course. All funeral parlours provide that service," Jaida said, voice still flat and thoughtful. "You'll need more training depending on which brigade you're assigned to, but that's a concern for later." She clicked a few more times, then leaned back in her seat again. "To be honest, Amari… I had something else planned for you."
"Doesn't involve a grave, I hope."

"No. I was going to put you up for promotion." She continued when Ana raised her brows, "You've served long enough to earn it, and your performance with the squad has been well above my expectations. There's no point in keeping you here any longer."

"Oh. Thank you, ma'am," Ana said slowly.

"And I was planning to put Issa in charge. That is, until you two came in and fucked up my plans."

They looked at each other uncertainly. "We're sorry?"

"So now, I'm giving you a choice." Jaida sat forward in her chair. "Either you stay and get promoted, or you transfer. If it's pay you want, you're getting a raise either way, and more responsibilities with it." She waited, as if expecting them to shout an answer immediately.

"What do you think we should do?" Ana asked.

Jaida shrugged. "It's up to you. But if it were me, I'd take the promotion first. Gives me more credibility for when I go to the Guard. And who knows? If you two do well enough, maybe the Guard will come knocking."

"I'd go for the Guard first," Kamilah said, cocking a brow when Ana threw both hands into the air, Khalid sighing beside her on the sofa. "What?"

"Jaida said I should take the promotion first. Either stay and get promoted, or transfer."

"Well, that makes sense. The promotion's already waiting for you." She reached for her tea cup on the coffee table, and took a sip. "But the way I see it, both the Guard and the promotion are going to happen anyway. It's just a matter of which comes first. And the two of you have been wanting to join the Guard since…when? Forever?"

"Feels like it."

"Then do it. Honestly, Ana. If you're being eyed for promotion already, then a transfer like this won't stop it. Besides, if you do well in the Guard, it'll only make them push you up even faster. Same goes for you, Khalid."

Khalid blew a raspberry as he slid farther down the sofa, and leaned his head on Ana's shoulder. "I'll do what you do, sis."

"Oh nice, thanks. Leave the decision to me," she groaned.

"No," Kamilah said when Ana's gaze turned towards her. "Decide for yourself."

"I don't suppose I can just toss a coin," Ana drawled.

"Isn't that how you decide on everything?"

"Yeah. In fact, that's how I decided to marry you too."

Kamilah just shrugged nonchalantly, and took another sip of tea.

They mulled over it for another week and, without the help of a single coin, chose to gun for the
Republican Guard as originally planned. Jaida took the news without surprise, and promised to put a recommendation in Ana's file anyway, to help push her through the ranks quicker.

But where Jaida accepted their transfer request calmly, the same couldn't be said for the rest of their squad.

"This is all your fault, you know," Layla groused, slapping Mesi's arm loudly. "You left and now everyone wants to go too."

"I'm such a shining source of inspiration, aren't I?" Mesi said with a smile. Her eyes roved over the group sitting in a corner of their barracks' rooftop, before stopping at Ana and Khalid. "So, how long will it take?"

"Dunno. A month, maybe?" Khalid said, fidgeting with the bottle in his hands. "We're on the same base, after all."

"Why do you even want to go there?" Ebo broke in. "Most of the time it's just being glorified bodyguards."

"But they're good bodyguards."

"Besides, we get duties outside base," Ana said. "I don't know about you, but I get sick of looking at all this sometimes." She gestured at the rest of the base.

"Well, if that's what you really want…" Mesi held up her bottle. "Then you have my blessing. And I guess now, we know who to blame if our president ever gets assassinated."

"Thanks a lot."

They passed a short moment in silence, during which they noticed Adofo's eyes had gone dark, and nudged him awake. Hakim passed him an empty bottle so he had something to entertain himself with, being unable to drink with the rest.

"I wonder if they'll assign more people to our squad," Adofo said, balancing the bottle on the tip of his finger. "Or if they'll break us up."

"It's 50/50, isn't it?" Layla said. "There's still half of us left, so…"

"Anything you can do, Mesi?" Ana asked.

Tilting her head, she said, "I'll ask around, and try to pull some people in before they disperse you."

"We're already dispersed," Layla muttered, downing the rest of her drink before glancing at her partner, who had circled an arm around her waist.

"You're just a bright ray of sunshine, aren't you?" Mesi cooed.

"If you say so."

"Come on. This is getting depressing." Hakim broke their second pack open and distributed the bottles, then raised his own. "Let's celebrate for those who are moving up in the world, and for the rest of us who'll catch up with you bastards soon enough."

They took a huge gulp together – including Adofo, who held his empty bottle to his face. Khalid sighed in satisfaction. "Let's see which of us will hit General and above, eh?"
"I will, of course," Ana crowed. "But don't worry, guys. I'll keep the spaces warm for you." She grinned at the prompt outburst of jeers, and drank another mouthful of beer.

Khalid's estimation was quite accurate – their transfer was approved only three weeks later. Guard training hit them hard and fast; they were thrown into a string of endurance courses, field exercises, and marksman training from the get-go, and were forced to hit the ground running. Not that it was too difficult for career soldiers like them, but it did push Ana's limit much further than routine infantry training – especially when they focused on urban warfare. Messy, exhausting, stressful urban warfare.

Ana and Khalid were assigned to the signal and recon company, but had been split apart into their own sniper teams. Ana was assigned a new spotter, Amira, and together they tackled new challenges in the urban training grounds – an empty 'city' specially built for military practice. After a month of stumbling into traps, struggling to coordinate between scattered sniper teams and armoured battalions on the ground, picking targets from 'civilian' crowds, and regular sleep deprivation, Ana nearly wept when she finally collapsed into her wife's arms upon her return home.

At least, that was the story Ana told to her listeners. Kamilah would insist there were no tears involved – just a lot of whining and literal clinging. Still, Ana didn't take long to recover and do justice to the bright blue beret she had earned. Her first duties within the Guard were relatively simple. Just patrol routes around the presidential palace and select facilities on base, in addition to regular training. Nothing too tiring, and though it kept her busier than before, she still had time to spend with the old squad and her wife.

Her wife who – without a doubt – dearly wished to whack Ana on the head at this very moment.

"Fuck…off!"

Her curses were quite the giveaway.

"Come on," Ana said. "At least try for one."

"Fuck," Kamilah panted. Her knuckles were white from how tightly she gripped onto the side of the monkey bars. "Get off–, my–, back."

"Just one. For me?"

"No!"

"Come on. Just one pull up. One." She saw the muscles in Kamilah's arms tense, but they didn't move. Ana wrapped her legs tighter around Kamilah's waist when she tried to start a swinging motion. Her anticipation spiked when Kamilah's arms bent a little, before she gave a guttural cry and let go of the bar, sending them crashing onto the rubbery floor of the playground.

Ana lay on the floor, catching her breath as her partner rolled onto her side and panted for dear life. Pushing herself up, Ana clasped onto Kamilah's heaving shoulder. "You alright, babe?" she asked, and a limp arm swatting backwards was her answer. She smiled, and was about to offer a quip when Kamilah's leg kicked back into hers with the force of a bull. "Ow!"

"I told you–," Kamilah said between breaths, rolling over to face Ana so she could see her target as she kicked out again. "I couldn't–, fucking do it–! Stop running!" Kamilah yelled when Ana kept scooting out of her range, and threw a weak arm over her soon-to-be victim.

Ana snickered when Kamilah tried to pull at her ears, but gave up when she couldn't find the
strength to do it with much force. She slumped back onto the ground next to Ana, the two breathing deeply as they stared up at the darkening sky, waiting for the burn from their run to fade away.

"I hate you," Kamilah grumbled finally.

"Do you really." Ana held her partner's hand up, massaging the palm with her thumb.

"Yes."

She chuckled at the lack of hesitation, pressing a kiss to Kamilah's hand. "It's okay. You'll go back to missing me soon enough."

Kamilah sighed. "Don't remind me."

In a few weeks' time, Ana would be out of the country on Guard duty. First to accompany a minister on his diplomatic mission to Somalia, then to safeguard the president himself on his visits to Sudan and Russia – assignments that would keep her away for up to two months. Maybe more, if her superiors saw fit to keep her on for further duties.

"I should've told you to go for the promotion instead," Kamilah said.

"So you do want me around."

"Yes, but when you are around, I can't remember why." She smiled when Ana knocked their heads together.

"You're horrible," Ana declared, kissing her forehead. "But I love you anyway. Come on, my turn." She got onto her feet first, then pulled a reluctant Kamilah up as well. After securing her wife on her back, Ana hopped up and caught onto the monkey bars.

Damn. Their combined weight was heavy. No wonder Kamilah wanted to kill her.

"Don't dislocate your shoulders," Kamilah said.

"At least you're here to pop them back in," Ana breathed, grunting as she pulled herself up painstakingly.

"I can't always be 'here', you know," Kamilah sighed again.

"I know. That's why I always wait until you're around." She took a deep breath and pulled up again, the effort nearly winding her this time. "Fuck…"

"Give up?"

"No." Ana groaned as she willed herself up again, then spat a curse when her arms were just halfway bent. Recognising her limit, Ana let go of the bar and landed neatly on her feet, albeit bent as she caught her breath. She wound her arms under Kamilah's legs, and hoisted her wife higher up on her back.

"Not tired?" Kamilah asked.

"Are you kidding? My arms are falling apart," Ana laughed breathlessly as she started walking towards home. "Why, you feel like walking?"

"No," Kamilah muttered, hugging around her neck.
"Then enjoy it. And you can carry me when I come back."

A huff of laughter. "Deal."

Ana found herself thinking of that deal just one week into her first assignment. The minister's visit to Somalia was uneventful, and prolonged due to the string of discussions packed into his schedule. The apparent lack of threat did little to lower their guard through the course of the minister's stay; keeping watch through the rifle's scope and perimeter cams helped to keep Ana grounded and alert, though she did miss the familiarity of home from time to time.

She welcomed the change of pace when they saw the minister off on a plane home, then flew straight to Sudan to ready for their president's state visit. The air was more charged and tense, given the higher profile of their charges and the amount of media attention on the visit. The amount of reporters milling about the visiting entourage was messy at best, making it difficult to single out suspicious elements, if there were any.

"This is nothing," the captain of their sniper teams had said. "Just a warm up for Russia."

Of course, only the senior soldiers truly understood his words. But their newer counterparts didn't have to spend much time pondering over it, for they soon experienced it for themselves.

Since Ana last set foot in Russia a year ago, unrest had slowly spread across the country in the wake of growing omnic 'malfunctions'. Numerous protest marches, sit-ins, and rallies had been organised at the doorsteps of both the government and Omnica Corporation, calling for the shutdown of the omniums and cessation of God Program development. None of their demands were met, and some protests met violent ends, adding to the casualty rates caused by previous omnic attacks.

Signs of their troubles were evident everywhere Ana turned: small groups listening to furious speakers on street corners, anti-Omnica graffiti and posters pasted on walls, ongoing repairs to infrastructure that had been destroyed in more organised omnic attacks. Needless to say, security had to be airtight. The Egyptian Guard was given thorough briefings by Russian Federal Security, and they studied their assigned posts and locations with due diligence.

The first few days were uneventful – no unusual activity for as far as Ana's augmented vision could see. Only on the fourth day did some ruckus occur, when a group of protestors gathered outside a war memorial, chanting their anti-God Program slogans for the Egyptian president to hear before he met with his Russian counterpart. They were dispersed peacefully, even though they remained for the entirety of the memorial visit.

But that didn't set Ana on edge as much as the award ceremony held in a university's gardens. Wide and open grounds, easily accessed by anyone. Just thinking about it made her head hurt.

The gardens faced the short, neoclassical building that was the university's library, and was surrounded on three sides by towers befitting a modern metropolis. It was in those towers where the snipers made themselves at home. Or at least, secure. There was no way Ana could relax while she scanned the buildings over and over, searching for anything out of the ordinary. If the way Amira's fingers flexed around her spotter's scope was any indication, she felt antsy as well. They had agreed to put this niggling sensation in the back of their minds, but…

"There, 2 o'clock. 10th floor, 4th window from the right," Ana said, and Amira's scope swiveled in the direction where she had spotted the same blocky shadow flitting around.

"Yeah, I see it."
"Damn it." Ana pressed on her earpiece and reported their sighting to Captain Fahim over a secure channel.

"Confirm human or omnic, Whiskey-3."

"Omnic," she replied, switching out her regular magazine for armour-piercing rounds.

"Numbers."

"Only one in sight."

"Hang tight and keep your eye on them. Whiskey-1, out."

Ana shook her head when Amira glanced at her questioningly, and they resumed their watch, albeit paying more attention to one particular window. Was it just her heightened awareness or…were there more omnics among the pedestrians outside the gardens now?

"Listen up, Whiskey," Fahim's voice crackled over their team channel. "Omnic activity spotted around the gardens. Your orders are–"

They listened as he pointed out areas of note – more than Ana expected – and laid overlapping watches so no corner would go unsupervised at any point in time. Ana and Amira were tasked with the southeastern corner they were in, watching the intersecting streets and the southern entrance of the university–

"Ana!" Amira whispered urgently. "Target is armed."

Shit, shit.

Even as Ana turned her rifle towards said target, her cybernetic eye was already on it. The omnic had lifted the window of what looked like an unlit office room. It ran a glowing red eye over the sniper rifle in its hand, before blending into its background. Ana recognised the camouflage system – Adofo possessed something similar – and saw the tell-tale distortions of a rifle being rested on the window ledge.

"Whiskey-1, target has sniper rifle, appears ready to fire. Advise."

"You are cleared to fire."

Her scope already aimed at the power source in its chest, Ana squeezed the trigger. The silenced round met its target in a brief shower of sparks, the omnic flickering back into sight as it stumbled backwards and fell. "Target is down."

"Acknowledged. Note its location, we'll perform a search after–"

"Whiskey-1?" Ana asked when the channel was cut abruptly. She shared a glance with Amira, and turned their attentions back to the scene. But as they waited, Ana spotted one, two, three more silenced shots from the surrounding buildings. The blood in her veins quickened – this was not a good sign.

As if on cue, a shower of sparks erupted to the side of the stage, interrupting the president's address to the gathered professors and students. Everyone on scene flinched at the sight, and Ana spotted the ruined power source of the sound systems, still spitting sparks behind a speaker–

A gunshot rang out – faint from where Ana was – and a Russian guard standing at the stage's edge
collapsed, bleeding red onto the floor.

Panic erupted at the sight. Russian and Egyptian guards alike lunged for the president, forcing him down just as a hail of bullets sprayed over their heads. They pulled him off the stage and into the audience, trying to put distance between them and the large group of red-eyed omnics marching down the library's steps. Snipers and ground troops alike sprang into action, returning fire at their attackers, who managed to take an uncomfortably large number of bullets before falling, one by one.

But complications soon emerged. Ana watched with growing horror as regular omnics in the gardens and out by the streets stopped dead in their tracks. Their glowing bulbs grew dark before coming back to life in a crimson shade. They held still for a single second, then marched towards the gardens in unison, climbing over barricades and low walls.

"Whiskey, target the approaching omnics! Now!" Fahim barked.

Ana picked her targets, calculating trajectories and proximity to civilians, and squeezed the trigger mechanically. She blocked out the screams and the sight of humans crumpling to the floor, thinning down the hostiles towards the south before turning her attention back to the gardens. Chaos, was all Ana could think of to describe it. The president was being dragged through the panicking crowd, but they were being shoved in every direction and could barely find a way through. The rest of the delegates were separated and interspersed among the audience, trying to stumble their way out of the mess.

She finally spotted drones flying over the scene, and the hostile omnics dropped one by one, hacked and rendered inert. As one flew by the library, Ana saw a familiar distortion moving along the building's flat roof. She fired instinctively, but it moved again at that same moment – her bullet hit only the omnic's camouflage systems, not its vital processors. Its red bulb swiveled around wildly for a moment when it became visible. Then it flicked the device in its hand and, in a single fluid motion, dove to the side as it lobbed the grenade towards the humans.

Two heartbeats. That was all it took. One; Ana tracked the grenade's arc through the air with her scope. Two; she pulled the trigger, her heart stopping as her bullet cut through the air and punched into the grenade. It exploded just before it fell within range of the crowd, but Ana didn't bother watching the aftermath. She turned her aim towards the omnic on the roof, waiting for it to jump to the ground, before shooting it through the chest.

The gunfire didn't take long to subside after that. After the president and foreign minister – who was bleeding in the arm – were stuffed into their armoured car, it was just a matter of clean up. Soon, the soldiers were stepping over the bullet-ridden bodies of dead omnics and humans alike, shepherding the remaining civilians off the scene.

"We're fucked."

"Not on this channel, Issa," Fahim growled.

"Sorry, sir." Ana could hear the cringe in Khalid's voice at his slip-up.

"Whiskey, resume watch."

Ana put her eye to the scope, but pulled back again when she noticed Amira's stricken expression. "You alright?" she asked, putting a hand on Amira's shoulder.

"Yeah," she muttered. Amira shook her head slowly, fixing Ana with a grave stare. "There aren't going to be protests anymore, Ana. There's going to be a goddamned riot."
They wouldn't stay long enough to witness any riots for themselves, it seemed. After the close brush with death and his minister's injury, the president had cut his state visit short. On the very next day, the Egyptian delegation was escorted back to their plane under heavy guard, and flown back home without any more nasty surprises.

Every news outlet exploded over the 'organised terrorist attack', and the resulting furor in Russia. As Amira had predicted, a riot broke out at Omnica's headquarters in Moscow, inflicting property damage and employee injury. All eyes were on Russia, watching and waiting for another uproar that many expected would follow.

In Egypt, concern was slowly growing into fear, even though things were still peaceful. More than a few petitions had popped up, demanding Omnica to come clean with their practices and the Anubis project. Good efforts, in Ana's opinion, but they wouldn't get far.

Still, that didn't stop the Republican Guard from recognising its soldiers' efforts in the incident. They held a private ceremony with the president in attendance, and Ana was one of those who had a medal pinned to her chest by the president himself. Her shot with the grenade hadn't gone unnoticed, and none of her colleagues were content to let her forget it. None.

They started throwing random hand-sized objects at her – like ration packets and water bottles – and shouting 'Ana, shoot fast!' as the projectile smacked into her face. Only after she had tackled a few of them out of the 'grenade's' range did they relent with a laugh, and lay off their resident sharpshooter.

Since her feat had earned not just a medal, but another commendation to go with Jaida's in her file, Ana decided to mark the occasion with an extension of her tattoo. She pondered adding a snake coiled around her arrow, and was starting to like the artist's design when another caught her eye. Figuratively, of course. But Ana had fallen in love at first sight and, with the artist's forewarnings in mind, decided to go for it.

And so, it became literal. Perhaps a little too literal.

It was lucky that Khalid had accompanied her to the parlour, because all she could do after the hellish session was lay in the backseat and try not to cry. Khalid kept her company at home after she crashed into the sofa, the man sitting on the floor beside Ana as she gripped his hand like a lifeline. And that was how Kamilah found them in the evening – Khalid napping against the sofa, his hand still holding Ana's. Then he was rudely awoken by an agonised cry, when Ana had opened her eyes after being woken by Kamilah. They made a few jokes at Ana's expense, before Khalid was relieved of his duty and returned to the barracks.

Kamilah took over, caring for a wife who seemed determined to stay unconscious and blissfully unaware of the fire burning around her left eye. It made things easier for her on the first day – she even said this was the best behaviour Ana had ever displayed while under medical care. The second day, however, was when both their trials started.

"Hold still," Kamilah said for the third time, dabbing at the swollen area gently with lotion.

Ana hissed, but lay still on the sofa as ordered – only to start squirming again after a few short seconds.

"Don't move!" Kamilah's grip on her shoulder tightened. "Maybe you shouldn't have gotten an eye tattoo if you can't take the pain, oh great hero."

"Fuck y–ah!" Ana cried when she turned her head, and was rewarded with a fingertip digging into
sensitive skin.

Kamilah sighed exasperatedly, rolling her eyes as she yanked her hand away. She let Ana squirm in place, sucking air through her teeth in stifled sobs.

"Ana, I've had a long day, and I'm tired. Will you please let me finish this so I can spend the night in peace?" Kamilah waited for Ana's fidgeting to subside, then held her by the jaw and resumed spreading ointment over the swollen eyelid. When she reached the corner of the eye though, she was forced to move her finger away again. "Ana, move one more time and I'll scratch your fucking tattoo off."

"Harpy," Ana moaned, but she clenched her jaw and kept still at Kamilah's tone. She winced reflexively when Kamilah dabbed gently at the sore corner, and breathed a sigh of relief as the fingertip moved to the udjat under her eye.

"Of all the places you had to get a tattoo," Kamilah muttered. "It had to be your eye. And not just under your eye, no, you had to go for the entire area."

"I'm badass."

"No, you're a baby."

"A badass baby." She grinned when the corners of Kamilah's mouth twitched. It didn't take long for Kamilah to finish, and Ana sat up gladly, pecking her wife on the cheek. "Thanks."

"Mm." Kamilah slapped Ana's hand down when it reached up unconsciously. "Don't."

Ana leaned back in her seat, fighting the insane urge to rub her eye. Turning her gaze towards the TV as Kamilah wiped her finger off on a tissue, Ana turned up the volume to better hear the newscaster's report. It was about Russia again – surprise, surprise – and they replayed the same footage from the incident, when the grenade had exploded just above everyone's heads.

"That's me," Ana drawled, wrapping an arm around Kamilah when she scooted closer.

"That's you," Kamilah sighed. She had sent Ana multiple texts upon learning about the attack, and her voice sounded tight when Ana finally called her back. "You know, it is a good shot."

"Oh, I know. Are you proud of me?"

"Yes."

Smiling softly, Ana pressed her lips to the top of Kamilah's head. She watched as Kamilah took the remote and flipped through the channels, stopping at some wildlife documentary. A much better program to unwind with, but Ana clicked her tongue.

"Always with the animals."

"We either watch this, or you can go upstairs."

"No." Ana pouted. "I like it here."

"Then animals it is," Kamilah said simply, catching Ana's hand when it strayed back up again. She linked their fingers together, as they watched some lions stalk a herd of gazelles.

Ana rested her head against Kamilah's, feeling the area around her eye throb faintly. It was still painful enough that she wanted to just lie down and tide the night over. But then again, she wouldn't
miss a peaceful moment like this for anything else in the world.
From Two

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

The first few days with her swollen eye was perhaps worse than when she took off the bandages after her eye surgery. The discomfort from the new implant was more manageable, and there was only a tiny chance of Ana hurting her eye on accident. With the tattoo, Ana became hyperaware of how much physical contact her eye experienced on a daily basis – after all, each time was marked with either a yelp or scream. Apparently she liked pressing her face into the pillow while sleeping, and rubbing her eyes with too much force, because those were the top two causes of Ana bending over in agony. Kamilah got used to the random screeches quickly, and her moral support was offered in succinct reminders to ‘Stop touching your eye, you idiot’.

More nights passed with Ana ‘swaddling’ herself in a hoodie so she wouldn’t rub her eyes in a sleepy haze, until the pain became less of a problem than the itch that grew two weeks later. It took an infinite amount of discipline to not rub or pick at the scabs and ruin the tattoo in the process. But of course, she had to manage. It was two weeks later, when Ana washed and wiped her face one morning, that she could look in the mirror without feeling a twinge of pain nor itch on her inked skin. A muttered ‘Thank fuck’ marked the end of her tattoo woes, and she was able to live life without a care yet again.

At least, for a short while. Ana's marksmanship had earned a fair share of attention and – according to her captain – there had been more eyes on her performance in recent exercises. She took the news with a smirk and quip, not worrying too much about the added attention. Her record, with all its strengths and flaws, would speak for itself – and it seemed her superiors were convinced. Ana soon found herself on constant travel with the Guard, keeping watch on both foreign and Egyptian dignitaries. For months, she was kept on constant move around the Middle East, South Asia and Europe, with only brief stops at home for a breather before being flown away again.

Amira was her one constant companion in her travels, and Ana got to see Khalid only half the time. It was tiring, truth be told, but constant contact with the people back home helped to keep her going. She found solace in the regular chats and calls while she lay in her bunk, body drained of energy after being on alert for extended periods of time. With a busy schedule like this, the months passed by in a blink of an eye. At the end of the year, Ana was finally flown back to Cairo, where she was assigned stable guard duties for the months to come. Just in time too – it was her wedding anniversary three weeks later.

The squad crashed at their house the night before – so they wouldn't 'block anything' – and gifted them a cake…along with a matching pair of bikinis. Too bad they couldn't give a beach as well, Ana commented, and received a smack of chocolate cake on her cheek. Nevertheless, beach or no, the bikinis would find some use soon enough.

Kamilah wanted a simple day together – as expected, and that suited Ana just fine. After all that time away from home, just staying in place with her wife was a gift in itself. Still, that didn't stop Ana from surprising her with breakfast in bed – though it quickly became breakfast on the floor because Kamilah didn't want to dirty their fresh bed sheets. There was a certain charm in sitting on the wooden floor, bathing in sunlight shining through the windows while they ate; Ana running her fingers through Kamilah's bedraggled hair, smiling as her wife recounted all that had happened while she was gone.

They stayed on the floor long after their waffles and eggs and fruit were gone, sipping lukewarm tea
and wondering how to spend the unplanned hours before their night out. The answer was to laze about the house, shop online for new sweaters and kitchen appliances, make a big bowl of salad that left them hungry for some ice cream, try to tame Kamilah's hair into a nice braid like Ana's, then order a hair straightener when they failed miserably.

"It's okay," Ana cooed, kissing the top of ruffled locks. "You look good in any kind of hair."

Kamilah cocked a brow. "Really. Maybe I should get an undercut."

"Babe," she sighed. "You distract me enough as it is."

And distracted Ana was again, when she laid eyes on her wife that evening. She felt a sense of déjà vu, gazing at Kamilah in that white dress and blue scarf around her shoulders, wearing the necklace Ana had given her just that evening. *Feels just like the first time.*

"You're gorgeous," she said, smiling at the peck on her lips.

"So are you." Kamilah ran an appreciative eye over the navy dress she wore, then adjusted Ana's silver earrings – her anniversary gift. She followed Ana down to the garage, then pouted when the passenger door was held open for her. "Not letting me drive again?"

"Honey, I wanna live to see our second anniversary."

"I'm better now, you know."

"Oh yeah, I know all too well." She grinned when Kamilah rolled her eyes, and got into the car without a rebuttal.

It was a smooth drive towards the restaurant, which was set at the 10th floor of a hotel by the Nile. Ana figured it was only fitting to return to the place where she had proposed, heart doing flip-flops as she waited for an answer she yearned to hear. All that anxiety and uncertainty seemed so far away now, as she gazed at the engagement ring sitting on Kamilah's finger, where it belonged.

Soft smile curving her lips, she lifted Kamilah's hand and placed a kiss beside the well-kept ring. Kamilah never wore hers as often as Ana did, preferring to keep it safe in its box like a precious piece of treasure. Maybe Ana should buy her more…

A light caress on her cheek, and she looked up to find an amused glint in her wife's eyes.

"I hope you're not going into a food coma yet," Kamilah said, and Ana had to stifle a snort with the back of her hand.

"Of course not. Only you can put me in a coma."

Ana winked, but Kamilah merely stared back at her with a straight face. "Did you mean medically, or–?" She hid a smile behind her glass when Ana kicked her foot under the table, and took a slow sip of wine.

"So," Ana drawled, laying Kamilah's hand down and tracing the tattoo on her wrist. "Anything to say to me after a year?"

Kamilah tilted her head in thought. "You need to do the laundry better."

She clicked her tongue. "I meant positive things, albi. But since we're on the subject, you need to stop leaving your cups all over the house."
"Noted," Kamilah said, the corners of her mouth twitching. She sipped at her wine again, sighing in contentment. "So, what did you want to hear?"

"Tell me I'm amazing."

"You're amazing. Yes," she added when Ana opened her mouth. "I mean it. You are."

"Aw." Ana flapped a hand at her coyly. "You're making me blush."

Kamilah smiled, catching the fingers still tracing her tattoo. "Your turn."

"Hm." Ana leaned forward. "You're the most perfect, most beautiful woman in the world. And I couldn't love you more."

"Even when I leave my cups around the house?"

"Yes," she laughed, "Even then. Especially then. I can get a taste of the headaches I give you."

Kamilah mirrored Ana's bright smile and raised her glass of wine. "Here's to us then, and all the headaches you'll give me for the rest of our lives."

"And to all the nagging I'll hear from you," Ana said, raising her own.

"Cheers."

They slipped easily back into a more stable life, both women with regular duty hours and only the occasional emergency call back to work. Ana's presence gained slightly more attention from their neighbours, who had noticed her constant absence for the past months. So perhaps it wasn't surprising that they were saddled with two children to babysit on an evening they happened to be free, while their neighbours were occupied with an event somewhere on the far side of base. It became even less surprising when their neighbour let slip that Kamilah had looked after a couple of children while Ana was gone, which earned her some trust from the parents, and a big shit-eating grin from her wife. Who decided not to say anything…yet.

Ana swooped in, catching the boy before he ran straight into the corner of their coffee table. Instead of a reprimand, she lifted the 3-year-old high in the air, making airplane noises and flying him about the room. The boy laughed, telling her to go higher.

"Aye aye, sir," she said, and lifted her arms even further, the child squealing in delight.

"Ana!" Kamilah gasped when she came out of the kitchen, holding the boy's twin sister. "Don't do that!"

"We're just flying, Milah," Ana said, though she did lower the boy's altitude a little. She carried him forward until they stood before Kamilah, close enough for the little girl to hand her brother a bottle of strawberry milk. They held hands as they were carried over to the coffee table, then got absorbed in the colouring books their parents had dropped off with them. Ana turned on the TV just in case their attention wandered, then retreated to the back and sat heavily by the dining table.

"You okay?" Kamilah asked, pouring a cup of tea and pushing it over to her.

Ana breathed in the subtle fragrance before taking a sip, burning the tip of her tongue. "Tired. That's all."

"You can go rest, you know."
"And leave the babysitting to the pro, hm?" Ana snickered as Kamilah slapped her lightly on the thigh. "It's okay. My lips are sealed."

"When are they ever," Kamilah deadpanned, taking a slow draught of tea. She gazed over at the children, who were rubbing their colour pencils excitedly over each other's books. Drumming her fingers on table, Kamilah asked, "Do you want one?"

"One what?" Her eyes followed the direction of Kamilah's nod, landing on the twins as well. A bit of air left Ana's lungs when she understood. "Does the supermarket stock those?"

Kamilah snorted. "No, but we could. I'm just asking," she added at Ana's silent stare.

"This is...a bit sudden. Fast, and a bit sudden."

"I know," Kamilah sighed. "But I've been talking to a friend – you know, the one who's working in a lab now?"

"Yeah."

"She's been talking about how they're developing a new procedure that allows same-sex couples to have a child of their own. Biologically."

"I hate to break it to you, but it's not really new. It's called artificial insemination."

Kamilah flicked her cheek. "It's not the same, smartass. This one allows the parents have a child of their own. Just their DNA. Nothing from a third party."

"And...?"

"And she knows I'm married to you. So she wants to find out if we're willing to participate in the experiment – to see if it works."

"You mean, have a baby."

"No, a dinosaur. Yes, a baby."

"Does...she have a deadline, or something? For the decision?"

"Near the end of year. November, I think. They still have a few things to straighten out."

Ana tapped idly on the side of her cup. "Do you want one?"

Kamilah huffed softly. "Honestly, I'm not really sure myself. I just haven't thought that far into the future yet." Her gaze drifted back towards the children, who were showing each other their masterworks. "But after that I've been thinking... How it'd be like to have a little you running around the house."

"What, running around and breaking stuff?" Ana grinned. "Shooting everything with a water gun? Whining for attention every five minutes?"

Kamilah leaned in close, with a gentle curve on her lips. "Having your eyes. Your smile. Your laugh."

"I don't know," Ana said, a little breathless as Kamilah's fingers slipped between her own. "I'd prefer your eyes instead."
"Will you consider it?" Kamilah asked softly. "No pressure, I'm not even sure myself either. It's just...something to think about."

Under her tender gaze, all Ana could say was, "Of course."

And think she did. Like Kamilah, Ana never really thought about the future in detail. At least, not one with a child in it. All that ever passed her mind was growing old with her other half. Sipping tea, bickering endlessly, watching each other's hairs turn grey, tracing each new wrinkle that lined their faces. Sometimes she'd imagine themselves with a dog, a cat, or both. But somehow, a child never appeared in those daydreams.

Since their conversation that night, Ana grew more...aware. Not that anything had changed between Kamilah and her, and the subject was never brought up again except in passing jest. But suddenly she saw more – as if she had been living with tunnel vision her whole life, and she was just starting to notice more children in the crowds that passed by. For the first time in her life, they were not just some vague, faraway possibility. She had an opportunity to have one of her own, and she couldn't help but think about it often.

It was on Kamilah's mind too. Ana could tell from the way her eyes lingered on the children as well, wearing a faint smile as they watched the young ones laughing and running away from parents chasing frantically after them, afraid they would get hurt. As the days passed in a blur, she started to wonder. How Kamilah would look like with a baby in her arms. How they would hold little hands as they taught their child to walk. How it would feel to carry the child on her shoulders as they ran through the park, with Kamilah close on her heels and reminding her to be more careful.

But sometimes, there was fear as well. That she wasn't ready. That they didn't have time or energy. Were they rushing into it, just because they were being offered an opportunity? What were the risks, the costs? It compelled her to bring it up with Kamilah again, in bits and pieces that slowly grew into little discussions, and eventually an understanding.

They were both leaning towards accepting the offer, and had no great objections against it. But they decided to give it a little time, let it simmer. Perhaps get more used to the idea of having a child, before making their decision.

Hakim's head jerked up and turned around, his eyes lighting up when he saw the cup of mango juice Ana held out. "Ey! Thanks."

He sucked on the straw eagerly as Ana joined him on polished stone bench, feeling the occasional water droplets splash at them from the water fountain ahead. Lots of people – adults and children alike – hopped over the water spouts on the floor and cackled when they were caught by a jet of water. Dense crowds milled around the fountain, most of them attracted to the food festival held in the mall nearby. Their squad was still inside and stuffing their mouths with everything they could get, but Hakim had bailed out first because of the sheer number of people inside. Adofo had followed him, but wandered off by himself and was nowhere to be seen now.

Ana drank more of her iced coffee, glancing over at Hakim when he chuckled to himself again. Noticing the attention, he angled his phone so Ana could see a video of his son, dragging a purple marker over his cheek and adding to the other little scribbles on his face.

"Your son's grown a lot," Ana said.

Hakim flashed her a bright smile. "Yeah. Each time I go home, it seems like he's grown a few more
inches."

"Really? Puberty's going to be a ride then."

"Oh yeah, for sure. The boy's going to be taller than me. Already has bigger dreams too. Just told me he wants to be an astronaut and discover a new galaxy." He scrolled past a few photos and paused on one with his son holding up a spaceship.

"What, not be a soldier like his dad?"

Hakim snorted. "If he doesn't pull his math grades up, he might just end up like his old man. But you know how kids are. He'll have a new dream in another few months." He gazed at the photo, before the screen went dark. "You know he wanted to be a sniper like you for a while?"

"Really?"

"Yeah. After your grenade thing. I pointed at the news one night and said, 'That's Auntie Ana.' Then all of a sudden he wanted to be a 'cool shooter' like you. Still don't know how to feel about that."

"Proud of him for having good taste?" Ana chortled when Hakim knocked his shoulder against hers.

"Fuck off. Let me have my kid. You can have your own sniper children."

"'Children'? Got my whole future planned out, haven't you?"

"What," Hakim said with a crooked smile. "Aren't you planning to have kids with Kamilah?"

"Er. Well–, it's a… I mean we're–," Ana stammered helplessly, caught off guard when Hakim hit so close to mark.

He stared at Ana, eyes widening. "Wait, you are! Come on, come on. Tell me, you are!" Hakim scooted closer to her, bending his head as if sharing a secret.

"Kind of. We're thinking about it. But I don't know," she said with a shrug. "It's going to be difficult raising a child between deployments and all that."

"Well, yeah." Hakim tapped at his phone's screen thoughtfully. "And having to leave them behind every time you go away? Never gets easier."

"Mm-hm."

"But then again," he added. "With people like us, there's never going to be a perfect time to have a kid. We'll always be busy, and things happen. My wife got pregnant during the insurgency, remember? Just before we got deployed. But we managed to make it work."

"Thing is, your wife isn't in the army too."

"Yeah. Okay, maybe my example isn't the best. How about your parents? They still raised you right, didn't they?" He clapped an arm around her shoulders when she shrugged again. "Look. If you do decide to have one, I'm sure you and Kamilah can work something out. You're both capable women. Not gonna lie, it won't be easy. But let me tell you – I'd rather eat a hundred bullets than give up being a dad."

Nails bit deep into Ana's back as Kamilah's body locked up, head thrown back to cry her name to the ceiling. Ana kept her fingers working, pressing her face into the curve of her partner's neck, feeling
each tremble as Kamilah rode out a climax denied to her for much too long. Grinning, she nibbled her way up the side of Kamilah's neck, kissing the underside of her jaw, letting her fingers slow as Kamilah's muscles relaxed.

"Now we're even," Ana purred into her ear, feeling Kamilah shiver under her breath.

Kamilah made a half-hearted noise in the back of her throat, turning her head to nuzzle into Ana's hair. Fingers stopped digging into her back, and Ana eased her own out of Kamilah. She brought the slick digits to her mouth, eyes locking with Kamilah's half-lidded gaze as she pushed the fingers in, up to the knuckles. Kamilah smiled faintly at the display, waiting for the fingers to reappear, before claiming Ana's lips again. Her tongue slid in easily, Ana sharing the taste of her lover. Kamilah hummed against her lips at the end of the kiss, and sat back in Ana's lap, eyes closing as kisses trailed slowly along her shoulder.

Ana had returned from a month-long assignment recently, only to sit in an empty house and miss her wife, who had gone to Alexandria for some Medical Corps training. Kamilah came back two weeks later, and Ana tackled her to the ground the moment they laid eyes on each other. After dragging the clingy sniper into the bedroom, Kamilah decided to prolong the torture and reduced her wife to a begging mess before giving her what she wanted. Ana never knew how shamelessly she could plead for an orgasm, but hey. It's always good to learn more about herself…and even better to turn it around on her wife.

Kamilah dipped in for another soft kiss, as Ana hugged around her middle and fell back into the pillows. A kiss on her neck, then Kamilah slid off her perch on Ana's hips. Turning onto her side, Ana snuggled closer to Kamilah as she smoothed a hand over her wife's mussed hair, watching Kamilah's eyes slowly fall shut. She waited, taking one breath only to lose it, then breathing in again to calm her nerves.

"Milah?" Ana said softly, wondering if she had fallen asleep.

"Mm."

"Let's do it."

"We just did it," Kamilah murmured in that same sleepy tone, but Ana had just the thing to wake her up.

"No. I mean, let's have a baby."

Sure enough, Kamilah's eyes cracked open immediately, staring at her in a bleary haze. A few seconds went by in silence, then she asked, "Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

"Are you really sure? You know you'll say yes to anything after sex."

"Yes."

"See."

Ana smacked her ass when she broke into languid chuckles. "I'm serious."

Kamilah took a while to settle down, exhaling slowly as she looked back at Ana. "Really? It's a big step, you know."
"Yeah. I've been thinking about it a lot lately." She traced her fingers over Kamilah's back, as if trying to write out her thoughts. "And...I do want one. I mean, it's always been an eventuality, no?"

"Mm."

"And I want to have a child with you. If I can have one with you, and only you... Just the thought of it makes me giddy."

"It does, doesn't it?"

"What about you?"

"I've been waiting for you." Kamilah smiled. "Took you long enough."

"Why didn't you tell me!"

"I didn't want to push you into it. If you don't want one, it's okay with me. And if you do..."

"I do, Milah." Ana grasped her hand tightly. "I want to."

Kamilah's smile grew wider. "Then we're having baby."

"We are."

Kamilah made the call, and they had a face-to-face meeting with her friend and a doctor the following weekend. Nothing hands-on yet – they were thoroughly briefed on IVF and all the various testing procedures that would be involved, then sat through a short lecture on the specific sciences that made their darling project possible. Ana's head was already quite filled with the list of future tests, and the science lesson made the doctor's office feel like her old classroom. But she listened raptly, asking question after question, until all her concerns were met with sound explanations.

At the end, they were given a few papers to read at home, before they signed for their participation in the next session. Other than the reading, they had another task as well: to decide who would carry the baby.

"I'll do it," Ana declared.

Kamilah cocked her head, hanging her jacket in the wardrobe before turning around. "Are you sure?"

"Why, do you want to?"

"Well..."

Ana shrugged off her own jacket and tossed it onto the bed. "Well? Do you want the morning sickness? Mood swings? Hormonal changes? Back pains? Labour pain?"

"Okay, you're having the baby," Kamilah laughed, wrapping her arms around Ana's shoulders when she swooped in for a kiss. "No, but really. Why? Don't tell me you're just being noble."

"More like whipped," she said without missing a beat, and received a light tap on her head.

"This isn't a burden, you know. I don't want you to carry it out of obligation."

"I know," Ana murmured. "I just want to have your baby. Our baby."
"You're sure?"

She nodded.

Kamilah gazed back at her, smile growing soft as she slid a hand down to rest on Ana's stomach. "What did I ever do to deserve you," she sighed.

"Patching me up a few hundred times was a start." Ana grinned as Kamilah laughed again, and pulled her in for a kiss, writing another promise of the future on her lips.

They didn't take long to finish going through the necessary paperwork, much to the doctor's delight. In their next session, they were given a full physical to ensure no unforeseen complications would throw a wrench into the procedures. Blood and swab samples were taken in advance for 'test rounds in the lab', and Ana was prescribed some birth control pills to be taken just before December, when they would start the IVF process. Until then, all they had to do was lay back and wait.

Neither breathed a word of their plans to anyone, not even to their family. Partly to avoid questions that might touch on confidential information, and partly because their efforts might fall through, leaving them with nothing in the end. But of course, that possibility didn't stop them from making jokes and passing comments in private, pointing out little activities to do with their baby. There was an underlying excitement buzzing between them, which attracted a bit of attention from their friends. But the cheeky questions were never really a bother – a few snappy replies were always enough to put the matter to rest.

Their eagerness eased into a mute thrum in the weeks that followed. But on some nights, Ana still found herself lying awake in bed, gazing at Kamilah who was peacefully asleep. How did she manage to reach this point, she wondered. How did she manage to reach this perfect moment in her life, when she felt so content and fulfilled, and yet still had an entire future to look forward to?

Ana smiled and scooted closer to Kamilah, watching her stir briefly before falling back asleep. She would spend the rest of her life with this woman she loved so, and they would build a family together.

She couldn't wait.

Chapter End Notes

Aight peeps your comments have been getting angsty (and funny lmaoo) so here's a lil reassurance. Halcyon's the alpha Happy Gays timeline. There will be ouchies, but the ending will be happy and fuckin gay. Pinky promise :3

Also, a heads-up. I'll be putting the beta Dead Gays fic on hold until Halcyon is finished. Halcyon alone is taking up a bit of energy and writing two full fics concurrently will put me on a crash course to Burnout Ville. So yis, Angst pls go to the back of the line pls thenk
'Omnica Corp fails to meet projected growth and output for 2043'

'Leaked: omniums fraught with malfunctions for past year'

'Omnica whistleblower brings company's integrity into question'

'Investigations reveal staggering losses and evidence of fraud in Omnica'

'Continued omnic malfunctions puts pressure on investigations'

'Breaking: Omnica Corporation to be dissolved'

'Omniums worldwide to be shut down by October'

Adofo: [Guys I need to talk]

Adofo: [In person]

Khalid: [wassup]

Adofo: [Can't say over phone]

Adofo: [Please]

Layla: [You ok dude?]

Adofo: [I'm kinda scared rn]

Adofo: [Ana can we go to your house]

Adofo: [I don't wanna be overheard]

[Yeah sure]

[Just be quiet wife's sleeping]

Mesi: [Meet downstairs and we'll go together]

Adofo: [Thanks]

So the squad arrived at Ana's living room in less than half an hour, each on their best behaviour so they wouldn't rouse Kamilah, who was sleeping upstairs. They sat in silence while Adofo explained the situation, and continued to stare at him as he started pacing around the room, grinding his metallic knuckles into his palm.

"They can't do this. They can't," he uttered.

"Did they say what the failsafe will do?" Mesi asked. "What will it do to your systems, exactly?"
"It'll shut down *everything!*" His eyes flared as he spun to face her. "My power core, my processors, my memory banks, *everything.*"

"But they're doing it for your safety, aren't they?" Khalid said. "You said if they flicked the switch, you'll go…inert, then they'll put you in isolated storage."

"Yes, but it's so…it's so *fucked up.* They're taking our lives into their own hands. And there's not even a guarantee that we'll wake up as the same person we were before." He resumed his pacing. "Who even knows they'll really put us in storage? Maybe they'll just chuck us into a bin and be done with it."

"Now I'm sure they won't… They'll only get more protests if they do that."

"That's why they told us to shut up, didn't they? So they can do it all nice and clean…" He stopped in his tracks when Mesi clasped onto his hand and tugged. Adofo hesitated, then sat on the floor between the sofa and Ana's armchair. He hugged his knees, looking like a lost child with his downturned head and flickering eyes.

Ana patted his head. "Maybe you're overthinking it, Ado. They're doing this for the safety of others…and yours as well."

"Hard not to overthink when they want to install a literal kill switch in you," he muttered. "So many of my friends are planning to quit. But what are we going to do? We're built for the army. That's what we do."

"You can always be a photographer," Layla said. "You're not 100% military, you know."

"And omnic employees are in high demand now, yeah?"

They fell into another bout of silence, watching Ado fidget with his hands and feet. With the imminent shutdown of omniums, dozens of protests and debates on omnic rights had broken out. But they did little to stem the closure of the production facilities, and prejudice began to rear its ugly head. Scattered attacks on omnics were reported in the news, some cases taking place in Cairo itself, where the victims were found with vulnerable joints cut through and wires ripped out. With such a bloody tang in the air, it was only understandable that Adofo was so disturbed.

"What do you want to do?" Ana asked. "Leave the army too?"

"I don't know. Probably stay. Where else can I go," he sighed, shrugging. "Maybe it's better if I got that failsafe. I was built to kill, after all."

"No, you weren't," Hakim said. "You're an engineer. You make things."

"And I can make them stop working."

"Well, technically any of us can do that," Ana pointed out.

"Take your time, Ado," Mesi said. "Think it over. Whatever you want to do, we'll help you. You want to leave? We'll find a home for you. You want to stay? We'll make sure nothing happens to you, as much as we can."

After rocking on the spot for a few moments, Adofo calmed down. And though there was still that nervous click from within his chassis, he said, "Yeah. Thanks."
Contrary to Adofo's predictions, very few omnis left the service within the week, before the failsafe was installed. According to hushed whispers, they were a brave few. In order to secure their status as civilians, they were subjected to a thorough memory wipe – all combat software and military knowledge were purged from their systems, which constituted for more than half of their programming. They were left with just enough to maintain their base personalities, before being discharged.

There was an underlying current of tension among their omnic colleagues after the procedure, and nothing could help to dispel the misery. Whenever Ana laid eyes on Adofo, he appeared more sullen and had a habit of scratching at his chest, as if trying to dislodge something from his body. Further adding to her concern, she noticed that omnis were slowly being phased out of the Guard as well – transferred to other units where they'd be 'more effective'. An invisible divide was slowly growing within the base, its effects palpable but minute enough that they grew used to it after some time.

It was business as usual.

December soon arrived, along with their doctor's appointment. A blood test and ultrasound scan were performed on Ana, and another blood and cell sample was taken from Kamilah. Their test results were in the clear, and so the first phase of the process began…along with Ana's pouting. For the next two weeks, Ana was given two injections daily, in order to stimulate her ovaries. The injections could be done at home, and it naturally became Kamilah's duty to administer them. She was the medic after all, and it was her way to make up for Ana having to endure the constant prick of needles.

They made regular trips back to the doctor's for ultrasound scans, and Ana's medication dosage was tweaked accordingly through the weeks. Then she was given one new, last shot to take before her eggs were retrieved. They went to the IVF centre for their next appointment, and Ana was given a light sedative in the operating room – which she was glad for, after glimpsing the long needle that would be passed through her vagina. The procedure was long complete by the time she came to, though she felt sore and cramped for a while.

Five days after, Kamilah's chromosomes were successfully inserted into Ana's eggs, and they returned to the centre for the embryo transfer. It was a very quick procedure, but Ana was made to lie down for an hour before Kamilah could drive her home. She was assigned to light duties according to the doctor's orders – spending time in the armoury and following her captain around the command centre.

Ana found it interesting that Captain Fahim insisted on her getting hands-on with mission planning, but it soon became clear a week later, when she found herself standing before the promotion board in an interview for the rank of captain. It was a breeze, honestly – Kamilah had drilled her thoroughly for it, and she nailed question after question without breaking a single sweat. Fahim's wink the next morning was all the feedback she needed on her performance.

Before the results of the interview arrived though, Ana returned to the doctor's office with Kamilah for follow-ups in the next weeks, and eventually a pregnancy test. They waited with bated breath as the doctor walked in with a giddy look on her face.

"Ladies, this was just the first try, but you have beaten the odds," she said, grin growing ever wider. "Congratulations. You're going to be mothers."

They celebrated by enveloping each other in a hug and refusing to let go, which meant the sofa became their little nest the moment they returned home. Little giggles and kisses broke the silence
now and then, as their new reality settled gently over them. It was happening.

Ana kept her eyes closed, feeling the warmth of Kamilah resting on top of her, and that one particular spot in her body where a new life was growing. Just thinking about it made her feel... everything. She was happy they succeeded, excited yet fearful of what was to come; she couldn't wait to have the baby, but wanted the time to prepare. She was a little scared, and wanted to face each fear right then and there. She felt and wanted to do so many things at once, that her mind worked itself into a blank and let go. She was left with herself again, in a singular moment of crystal clarity.

Bending down to kiss the top of Kamilah's head, she rubbed at her wife's back and noticed the faint snoring, muffled against her shirt. Ana chuckled and patted at Kamilah's cheek, her wife rousing back to life with incoherent mumbles, as if she had drifted off mid-conversation.

"You fell asleep," Ana informed her, and her eyes blinked slowly.

"Oh. Sorry." Kamilah yawned and nestled her head in Ana's shoulder, mumbling, "Baby."

"That's right."

"I'm having another baby."

"Let me guess," Ana drawled. "I'm your first baby."

"Mm." Kamilah hugged about her shoulders. "I love my babies."

"That you do," Ana said, to which there was a soft grunt in reply, then nothing more. Kamilah loved sleep as much as she loved 'her babies', it seemed.

Of course, the next order of business was to break the news. But they chose to wait until the weekend, taking the time to get used to it themselves. Sometimes, Ana didn't even remember that she was pregnant until she saw gleam in her wife's eye. She felt so normal, but also knew she should cherish this feeling before the symptoms came knocking on her door. Kamilah, on the other hand, didn't seem to be able to forget it. She paid more attention to Ana, and kept fluttering about her pregnant wife with a small smile on her face. Ana even received a text from Mesi, asking what's going on because Kamilah's constantly happy demeanour at work was 'kinda freaking everyone out'.

And so, it was time to tell. Her family was first, and they were lucky enough to gather everyone in the same vidcall. Safiya uttered a 'holy shit' while Zahra sat beside her in a quiet surprise. Zaid had pressed his knuckles to his mouth, fixing the screen with a faraway stare.

"Papa?" Kamilah asked when he stayed like this for a while. "You okay?"

"He looks like he's going to have a stroke." Ana leaned forward. "Papa, relax."

He nodded blankly first, his hands lowering to reveal a smile as he tittered softly. "I'm going to be a grandpa."

"Took you that long to realise, huh?" Safiya drawled.

Zaid snickered again. "My daughter's having a baby. I never thought it'd happen so soon."

"You know, me neither. But when Milah asks for something, I can't help it."

"You still haven't gotten me those bookends yet."
Ana clicked her tongue. "We'll get them tomorrow."

"So how'd you do it?" Zahra asked. "Artificial insemination?"

"Er–, IVF," Ana said, sharing a glance with Kamilah. "Yeah, technically we're not supposed to tell anyone…but I assume all of you can keep your mouths shut. Especially you." She stared pointedly at Safiya, who raised her hand in a promise. "We went for an experimental IVF, so there were no donors involved. The baby's just between the two of us."

"Wait, seriously? That's possible?" Safiya asked.

"I'm pregnant now, aren't I?"

"…It's so weird to hear you say that."

"I know."

"So get used to it," Zaid joined in. "You're pregnant now, and you need to take care of yourself. Don't do anything careless or dangerous."

"Yeah, yeah. I know."

"And Kamilah, good luck. If she's anything like her mother when she was pregnant…" He gave an ominous chuckle. "You'll have your hands full."

"Why," Kamilah asked slowly.

"Oh, she was grumpy. Very grumpy. And fierce. I think we were more scared of her when she was pregnant."

"Hey," Ana said, nudging Kamilah. "Sounds just like you." She cackled as a hand slapped against her shoulder.

"Be nice, Ana. She'll be the one getting your midnight snacks in the future."

"Oh shit," Safiya laughed. "Don't piss Milah off or you aren't getting fed."

"I'll just feed her kale," Kamilah said simply.

"No!"

"Then you'll have to listen to me from now on, hm?" She pinched Ana's chin, smiling at her wife's pout.

"So, have you celebrated?" Safiya asked.

"By eating a lot, yes," Ana said.

"You should go out. Treat yourselves. I brought your mom to this nice restaurant by the–"

"No, I mean," Safiya cut in. "Conception in a lab is so sterile. Have you…celebrated?"

"Oh my god," Ana groaned.

"Hey, you gotta have some fun with it. I mean, others do. Even papa did–"

"Oh, wow. Look at the time. I'm very tired."
"Papa, it's only 9."

"Yes, I'm old. And tired. Can't talk anymore. Good night." He reached for his keyboard and paused, flashing them a bright smile. "And congrats, girls. Ask me any questions you need, alright?"

"Yeah, how did you conceive us--"

"Night!" Zaid said loudly, and his window winked off the screen.

Safiya chuckled. "So, can you actually have sex yet?"

"No," Ana sighed. "I'm still on pelvic rest. But soon." She rested an arm around Kamilah's shoulders. "Then you can pretend to impregnate me."

"Technically, I already have," Kamilah deadpanned.

"Aw, that's right." Ana shrugged, turning back to the screen. "So when are you two going to have your own--?"

"Oh, look at the time! We're going off too."

"...You're not old."

"Yeah, and we're not on pelvic rest either."

"What--," was all Zahra could say, before Safiya winked and disconnected.

Ana glanced at Kamilah, wry smile curving her lips. "We could try…"

"No."

She pouted.

As expected, the squad reacted with 'when the fuck', 'how the fuck', and more appropriately, 'congrats'. They were told that Ana conceived through IVF and nothing more, though it seemed to satisfy them well enough. Naturally, it prompted another visit to her house, during which they touched Ana's stomach endlessly, as if they could somehow feel the weeks-old fetus with their hands. They presented a baby rattle and pacifier as gifts, and promised to drop by more often to check on Ana.

Due to the agreement they had signed with the IVF lab, Ana was restricted to non-physically intensive duties, in order to ensure the safety of her baby. Her advanced officer training was postponed until the next year. After the promotion ceremony where Kamilah pinned the captain's star to Ana's epaulet, she was assigned to a temporary position in the command centre, coordinating the Guard's assignments and training sessions. This was far better than her logistics routine at the armoury and frankly, she was thankful for the change of environment. Not just for the safety – she found herself getting tired more easily towards the end of each day, and being able to sit down helped her manage the fatigue better.

Her new role's benefits didn't end there – it also gave her a clearer view of the army's activities. Whether or not Ana was thankful for this insight, she was unsure. Just two weeks into her tenure, disturbing news started trickling in from around the world. It started with the sudden reactivation of the Krasnoyarsk omnium, and the legion of military-grade omnis that spilled from its doors. In the first few hours, it had laid waste to nearly half the city and pushed the death toll into the thousands,
before the army stepped in and halted their advance. But for all their equipment and training, they
could not hold their defense for long.

The soldier's lines were bloodied and broken within the next few days, and they were forced to
retreat, taking the remaining civilians with them. Blockades were set up all along state lines, but the
omnics were relentless. Tireless. Reasonless. No offers of parley, no form of communication was
responded to, or even acknowledged. The omnic army had one, and only one, apparent motive: to
kill. As they pushed out of Krasnoyarsk and spilled into the surrounding cities, omniums in the
United States, Mexico, and Australia came to life as well. The story was the same everywhere: for
each omnic life taken, the blood of more humans were spilled, along with the shattered alloy of
civilian omnics who tried to protect them.

In response to the spreading panic, every defunct omnium was now put under heavy guard. Ana had
assisted in deploying two battalions from the Republican Guard to support their infantry at Egypt's
omnium – situated within the Suez governorate, just outside Cairo's borders. Defenses were shored
up along city borders as well, on close watch for any signs of trouble. There was a certain sharpness
to the uneasiness looming in the air – as if they were waiting for an inevitability. How could they not
think so? Seeing images of devastation in the news day after day was enough to wear on their hopes.
Whole portions of cities lay in ruin, with torn and broken bodies lying among the rubble, despite the
armies' best efforts to fight back.

At times, Ana would review their logs of the omnium in the command centre, reading hourly reports
and unconsciously holding her breath…

She jumped a little when a hand brushed across her cheek. Ana looked up, and Kamilah smiled
softly as she rounded the sofa to sit beside her. Reaching for the remote in Ana's hand, Kamilah
flipped the channels until they landed on a local drama.

"Don't stress yourself out," she said. "It's not good for the baby."

"Only the baby?"

"You too. You wear yourself out enough at work. Don't do it at home as well."

"Yes, ma'am," Ana sighed.

"I've been thinking…"

"Need aspirin?" Ana bit down on her lip, but failed to hide her grin when Kamilah raised a brow.

"I've been thinking," Kamilah said again. "About getting a permanent post in base."

"Yeah? Why?"

"The future, Ana. It'll be difficult to raise the baby ourselves if we're both going away on
deployments. If I got a post here, I can stay for our baby, and take care of you better in the
meantime."

"How sweet," Ana chuckled, playing with the ends of her hair. "But do you want to? I mean, don't
you want me to—?"

Kamilah snorted. "You? Stay in base? If you can do that for even one year without complaining, I'll
eat your dirty shoes," she said, flicking at Ana's nose when she snickered. "Seriously though, yes. I
want to. I'd like the stability."
"It'll be lonely out there without you."

"I know. But I'll take care of things back here when you're out with the Guard. You won't have to worry about us." She touched Ana's stomach gently. "You'll know we're safe. That you'll come home to us."

"My wife and child."

"Your family."

"My family," Ana repeated, savouring the words lilting off her tongue. "That sounds amazing."

"Doesn't it?" Kamilah said wryly. "All my plans sound amazing."

"That's because you're amazing, honey," she crooned.

"You are too, darling." Kamilah smiled, leaning gladly into the kiss Ana pulled her into.

Maybe she should start planning for the future too, Ana thought as she looked into the bathroom mirror. At least, plan for a more immediate future.

The door opened, and Kamilah blinked at the sight of her. "What are you doing?"

Ana hummed, merely tilting her head as she continued pushing gently under her breasts – which had felt a little tender recently.

"Are you going to bathe?" Kamilah asked, probably because Ana was standing in only her underwear.

"No," she drawled. "I'm just thinking when I should get new bras."

Kamilah chuckled, entering the bathroom proper. "You still have a little way to go, dear."

"Yeah, I know," Ana sighed. She turned this way and that, looking over her muscular physique. "Can't wait to wear those ugly maternity uniforms."

"You'll look dashing in them."

"Oh please. I'll look like a bloated fish. And I'll lose these babies." She rubbed a hand over her chiseled abs wistfully, sighing again. "Promise you'll still love me when I don't look sexy anymore."

"Nonsense." Kamilah hugged her firmly from behind, kissing her on the cheek. "You'll always look sexy. And you'll be sexier than Beyoncé when she was pregnant."

Ana laughed. "Please, Milah. That's blasphemy."

"It's the truth." Kamilah smiled, running her fingers down Ana's stomach. "All these don't matter. You'll always be beautiful to me."

"–and that's the study," Ana said, walking out of said room with her video camera in hand. "Wonder how much of this will change when our baby arrives."

Quickly making her way down the stairs, Ana strode into the kitchen and found Kamilah sorting through the groceries on the counter. "There's mommy number 2. Just back from her—"
"Why am I number 2?" Kamilah asked. "And are you making another vlog again?"

"Yeah, just because. Also, you're number 2 because you're double the mommy. Alpha mommy. Super mommy."

Kamilah huffed in amusement. "You don't even know that yet."

"Oh yes, I do. See?" Ana picked up one of the books on the counter and pointed the camera at it. "The Parenting Handbook: How to Raise Happy & Healthy Kids’. You're already studying how to be a mom." She put the book down and moved over to the groceries, as Kamilah went to stock their fridge. "All these food. Wonder which will make me wanna vomit in the future."

"I know what makes you vomit now." Kamilah reached into a paper bag and withdrew a clear packet of kale.

"Ew, fuck!" She swatted the bag away when Kamilah dangled it in front of her face. "That is hell's vegetable. Only demons eat it."

"What if our kid likes it?"

"Then it's all your fault." Ana slapped lightly at Kamilah's butt as she went to deposit the last of their groceries. Going back to where the books lay, she took a seat and read over the titles. Two handbooks on raising kids, one on pregnancy. When Kamilah turned around, Ana gestured for her to take a seat as well.

"So, tell me one last thing," she said, focusing the camera on her wife. "What do you want our kid to be when they grow up? Astronaut? Lawyer? Doctor?" She gasped. "Singer?"

Rolling her eyes, Kamilah kept silent and thought it over. "I just want them to be happy," she said simply.

"Aw. That's nice. I want that too."

"Yes, you want them to be happy and be like Bey—"

"Okay, end of vlog!" Ana exclaimed, snapping the screen shut. "Come on, Milah. You can't reveal my deep dark secret on camera like that."

Kamilah shrugged, pulling the books over. Ana grabbed one and opened it, looking at the photo of a diapered baby lying on his back.

"You don't really need all these, you know," Ana said, flipping through the book.

"I want to raise my baby right, Ana. I don't want to…screw up or anything."

"You won't."

Kamilah held her gaze for a moment, before relenting with a smile. "Even so, I just want to be prepared. Speaking of which…” She tossed a book to Ana – the one on pregnancy. "I think you should start reading this."

So they formed a habit of doing some bedtime reading together, sharing a book before hitting the pillows. And a week later, Ana was glad for those reading sessions.

One bleary morning, Ana woke from her sleep feeling thoroughly odd. Only when she stood
unsteadily, floor lurching beneath her feet, that she realised what was happening. Hand clamping over her mouth, she muffled the retch as she sprinted for the bathroom, barging through the door and falling to her knees before the toilet bowl. She clutched onto cold porcelain for dear life as her head spun, stomach doing another flip and sending a second retch through her throat.

"Ana," she heard Kamilah say, but didn't bother looking up as she heaved again.

Kamilah's hands brushed about her jaw, gathering her hair into a ponytail. There was a certain whiff to her fingers that made Ana's insides curl, and she bent down towards the bowl once more. It took a while before her stomach calmed down, and though she still felt a little nauseous, Ana sat back on the floor in relief. Kamilah touched her forehead and cheeks to check her temperature, but Ana smelled that same scent again and slapped her hands away.

Pressing her own fingers to her nose, Ana asked, "Are you cooking?"

"Breakfast. With last night's chicken."

Just the memory of its fragrance made her want to hurl. Noticing her disgusted expression, Kamilah said, "Does it smell…"

"Yeah."

"Ah. Well, go on and wash up. I'll make something else for you."

Ana muttered a 'thanks', and was helped to her feet. She went through her morning routine more sluggishly than usual, feeling grateful that it was their day off. Ana trudged down the stairs and made for the kitchen, only to swerve away at the last minute because of the chicken's smell. Kamilah brought her a bowl of oatmeal with some berries, and Ana ate her breakfast listlessly in the living room by herself.

Thankfully, her morning sickness was not as severe as its grand entrance. It mostly remained as nausea – which was manageable enough, and she could go about her duties without major interruptions. She had only gone rushing for the toilet on a few occasions – especially when she smelled food at meal times – but other than that, it wasn't as bad as she had imagined it to be.

Besides, it was nice that Kamilah was altering her own diet to fit Ana's new tastes as well. Having some company made her feel that little bit better.

It didn't take long before trouble arrived on their doorstep.

It was sudden, but didn't take them by surprise…at first. Ana was back at her station in the centre, comparing training schedules and assignment rosters when they were plunged into red alert. Reports started flooding in about the reactivation of the local omnium, and the lightning-quick reaction to counter the threat. Civilians had long been cleared of the larger vicinity when the destructive omnics carved its way through the armed forces, and burned a path towards Cairo.

Ana's heart dropped into her queasy stomach as she watched the live-feed, which tracked the vast army of omnics as it marched towards Cairo's borders, barely wavering under the steady hail of AP rounds and rockets. Her mind wandered to Kamilah, worried that she might be deployed to the combat zone to bolster their defenses. But she received her orders then, and had to push the concern to the back of her mind, where it continued to burn as she helped to coordinate troop movements.

The battle took hours, and the army was taken aback by the sheer number of omnics that kept pouring out of the omnium. It turned into a war of attrition, where the army was slowly losing
ground which each body they lost. But having their omnic comrades did help to tighten their ranks, and the battle was finally won as the sun cast a dark orange glow over the city, seeming to bleed red over the day's battleground.

The omnics had managed to advance much farther into Cairo than expected, and taken much more lives than they could imagine. It shouldn't have happened this way – they had trained, they were prepared. And yet, the smoking rubble lying near the city borders proved otherwise.

Ana rushed home the moment another officer came to relieve her, and flew into Kamilah's embrace the moment she stepped through the front door. Kamilah had been stationed at the hospital to treat the injured, but most who were wounded didn't live long enough to even see the hospital. Many beds still remained empty, and it was the main reason why she was able to nip back home to see Ana.

They answered the calls from their family to give them some reassurance, before falling into fitful sleep with their arms wrapped tightly around each other.

The weeks seemed to drag on the longer the omnics kept pushing from the omnium. News about the German and Indian omniums' reactivation didn't interest them anymore. The UN had declared this global disaster an 'Omnic Crisis', but it wasn't news to them – it was life.

Ana was fighting a war on two fronts: one in her body, and another in the command centre. She read the casualty reports daily, and pushed orders to send soldiers to the frontlines, where many would end up as another casualty themselves. Since their first attack, the omnics had started heading for cities other than Cairo, forcing the army to concentrate their forces at strategic points so they wouldn't be stretched thin. And disturbingly, the omnics' adaptability had started to work against them as well. They devised tactics to outmaneuver their human foes, and had recently given them a rude shock when the army's bullets were deflected by shields installed in new omnics.

For the moment, they had managed to counter this with the use of drones, grenades, and inspired troop formations, but Ana could almost feel that the army was ready to buckle at its knees. In retaliation, they were throwing everything they could at the omnics, and her old squad was among those to be deployed to the front. Ana made them gather in a group hug at her house, reminding them to 'stay safe and come back in one piece', to which they replied, 'Thanks, mom.'

Watching them walk away from her home with heavy steps was hard enough. And just a week later, Kamilah told her something worse.

"I'm going to be deployed to a field camp next week."

Ana stared at her in disbelief, fear tying her stomach into knots. She took a breath, but her throat squeezed before she could say anything. Kamilah smiled wanly at her crumpling face, and cupped her cheek gently.

"Don't worry, Ana. I won't be fighting. They just need more hands at their hospital."

"But–, didn't you request a transfer?"

"Yes, and I'll be transferred after I return. I'll be gone for only a month. Or two, at most."

"I…still don't like it."

"Me neither. But orders are orders." She wiped her thumb over the tear cutting down Ana's cheek. "Now, don't cry. I'll be back soon, I promise."
Kamilah pulled her into a tight hug, and Ana wrapped her arms around her wife, wishing she could keep Kamilah there forever. Right there, in the safety of their own home, with Ana. With her family.

Ana spent the next week fretting endlessly over Kamilah, who had to keep reminding her to calm down. *She'll be fine, she'll be back* became her mantra, which calmed her only half the time. Every day she would return home, compete with Kamilah over who will take care of whom, read another section of their handbook, before nestling into Kamilah's arms and falling asleep. With their busy schedules, it was all they could have, and it would have to do. At least she could still see Kamilah every day.

On the morning of Kamilah's deployment, Ana drove her to the briefing centre where she was to report. There were many other soldiers streaming into the facility as well, but none of them held her attention. Ana gripped onto Kamilah's hand as they walked towards the double glass doors, reluctance evident with each slow step they took. Then Kamilah pulled her off to the side, where there were less people about.

Ana's throat constricted again, but she forced a smile to match her wife's.

"Don't worry, amar," Kamilah said, tugging her close. "I'll be back faster than you can rush for the toilet."

That got a thick laugh from Ana. "Promise?"

"I promise." Kamilah pressed her lips to Ana's in a soft kiss. "I love you, Ana."

"I love you too."

Kamilah smiled with a tender gaze in her eyes, and stepped away. Ana's fingertips trailed slowly down her hand, hooking lightly onto Kamilah's slim fingers before they broke apart. Kamilah's wink was the last thing Ana saw, before she walked through the doors and out of sight.

*She'll be fine, Ana repeated. She'll be back.*

Chapter End Notes

This is where the beta fic will die-verge and pick up from. But that won't be for a while, so in the meantime, have a pun. ehehehe
Kamilah’s presence had been a solid anchor that kept her grounded since the war began. It helped calm her itching hands whenever she sat at home, watching the news give daily reports on the army’s defenses. It gave her strength each night she returned home, weary and disillusioned and wanting nothing more than to forget. It gave her hope that they will weather this crisis together, with a child who will grow up safe and strong, free of fear.

But now, Ana was left alone in base while her anchor was at the frontlines – mere minutes away from enemy borders. And with her wife went Ana’s ability to take proper care of herself. Anxiety drilled itself into her being, and she was unable to sleep or eat properly anymore. Her appetite had diminished greatly – most of her recent meals consisted of porridge and oatmeal and little else. Sleep was often troubled and restless. When she closed her eyes, all she could think of was the empty space beside her, and wonder how Kamilah was doing in field camp. Many times had she jerked awake, shivering from a fading dream of her wife caught in a bloody circumstance. She had shed a few tears out of utter helplessness, but otherwise managed to trudge on, holding close to her heart what was real.

Ana checked on Camp Badr regularly while on duty – Kamilah had been assigned to the camp established in the city, tending to both wounded soldiers and civilian casualties. The omnis were trying to raze all of Badr’s factories to the ground, and many workers had been caught in the crossfire. Though the local hospital had been damaged badly in one of the omnic waves, it was still functioning and able to work with their military counterparts to provide relief. All of this, Ana had to learn by reading reports herself. Communication with Kamilah was spotty at best – if not due to patchy connections, then it was Kamilah’s hectic workload. If she didn’t receive a text from Kamilah that day, she would have to rely on Badr’s personnel roster to assure herself of Kamilah’s well-being.

It was the same with the rest of her loved ones. Safiya and Zahra were harder to get in touch with, but their reports so far had been positive. Her old squad was still doing well and making a good name for themselves under Layla’s leadership, often the ones to inspire bold maneuvers that got them through battle after battle. Zaid hadn’t been assigned to the field just yet, and was coordinating their troops in the north. After learning of Kamilah’s deployment, he kept in regular contact with Ana, reminding her to take better care of herself and assuaging her fears about Kamilah. She almost burst into tears during one of their vidcalls, but managed to pull herself together and blame it on the hormones.

Her hormones were an easy scapegoat to blame her discomfort on – even though Ana couldn’t tell if her nausea and dizziness were always due to morning sickness. A checkup with her doctor later – who had moved to the civilian hospital on base – and she was given a sound lecture to take care of her body and her baby. She was not responsible for just herself now, but for her own child as well. That was her wake-up call, and she sought to do better. She had to – for her child, and her wife.

Ana sat at her station in the ops room, taking a gulp from her water bottle as Jaida berated a group of soldiers for mixing up her orders. She concentrated on her own screen though, reading the reports relayed by the battalions stationed at the omnium. Ana had been assigned to Jaida’s team at the major’s request, helping to oversee Cairo’s defenses and planning strategic strikes against the omnium, in an effort to render the source of their troubles inert. They had been unsuccessful so far, but they were learning with each attempt.

Jaida had relied heavily on her and the team’s 2IC, but Ana relished the responsibility. It gave her
purpose and kept her focused, so she didn't have time to worry about much else. The days passed by quicker and more efficiently; Ana had hit her stride and wouldn't let up the pace any time soon.

"Major!" A lieutenant from across the room yelled, standing up so quickly his chair hit the table behind him.

"What," Jaida snapped, pausing in her tirade.

"Camp Badr's under attack, ma'am! It's on the verge of being overrun!"

Ana's blood ran cold, and she froze as Jaida barked orders, sending the soldiers into a frenzy of action. She turned her head towards the major when her name was called, and Jaida paused for a split-second at the stricken look on her face.

"Amari, I want casualty lists and a sitrep on the 24th and 30th battalion. Understood?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Her fingers were already flying across the keyboard, heart pounding in her chest as she retrieved the personnel list, and scanned through the updated KIAs. Amari...Amari... She reached the end of the list without spotting 'Kamilah Amari', thank god. Ana took note of the timestamp on the report, then sent it to Jaida's workstation. Then she opened up the scattered reports of troop placements and movements, and managed to establish a connection with Badr's comms officer. She relayed Jaida's orders, raising her voice over the din in the ops room, helping their soldiers to tighten their ranks and push the enemy out of the camp.

It was hours later before the omnics were driven out, scattering amid the burning wreckage of the day's battle, but it was not meant to be. They had taken a huge sigh of relief, only to be greeted with a new and larger offensive the next morning. Their troops, who had been engaged in skirmishes throughout the night, were too worn down to hold their ground. The camp was finally overrun, and they had to escape the camp in trucks and tanks overloaded with soldiers and civilians. They managed to fall back to the next fortified city, where pursuing omnics were cut down before they reached the barricades.

Ana was forced to stay at her station long after the successful retreat, keeping a close eye on Badr's personnel roster to ensure Kamilah was still active. Only after Jaida had laid a hand on her shoulder and told her to go, did she walk to her car with trembling legs. She had to sit in the driver's seat for a while, collecting herself before she was confident enough to drive off. She pulled out her phone the instant she reached home, taking comfort in the missed calls from Kamilah just minutes ago. A few rings later, the call went through and relief washed over her when Kamilah's voice reached her ears. She sounded exhausted, her voice trembling at times, but she was fine.

"I was so scared, Milah," Ana said, sinking down onto the garage's steps leading to the house. "I thought..."

"I'm fine, Ana. Got a few scrapes, but I'm okay. What about you?"

"Better than you, that's for sure." She laughed breathlessly, feeling giddy as the oppressive weight lifted off her shoulders.

"Good," Kamilah said with a weak lilt in her voice.

"So are you coming back soon?"

"Yes, within the week. Then I'll be staying in base for good." She lapsed into abrupt silence. "Ana?"
"Yeah?"

"I love you. I love you so much, you know that?" Her voice grew thick as she spoke, and Ana heard her trying to sniff quietly at the end.

"I know, Milah. I love you too. And I'll love you more when you come back and say it in person."

"I will. Soon."

"I'll be waiting."

The next week felt the longest, yet the shortest at the same time. Ana found herself tidying up the house before Kamilah arrived, so her wife wouldn't see the messes she hadn't bothered to clean up for the past stressful days. Kamilah was unable to give an exact time and date of her return, so it was a pleasant surprise to find the house already lit upon reaching home. Ana scrambled out of the car, practically running down the hallway with her head on a swivel. Her feet slowed for a moment when she saw Kamilah walking out of the kitchen, before she flew right into her wife's embrace.

Ana clamped her arms tightly around Kamilah, but she heard the pained grunt beside her ear, and uneven breathing as Kamilah asked her to be 'gentle, gentle!'

She let go immediately, noting how Kamilah's face was scrunched up, her jaw clenched. Ana's gaze fell to where Kamilah held a hand to her ribs, and it was with sinking realisation that she reached for the hem of Kamilah's t-shirt. She lifted the top to see the bandages wrapped around Kamilah's abdomen.

"You said it's just 'a few scrapes'."

"I didn't want you to worry," Kamilah said, an apologetic smile on her lips.

"You…" Ana breathed. "You–, you idiot." She pulled Kamilah in again – gentler this time – and hugged her firmly. God, it felt like a lifetime ago since she had last held her wife like this. Too long; they had been apart for too long.

Kamilah chuckled softly. "I'm your idiot."

Ana let out a strained laugh then, her worry fading away the longer she held onto Kamilah. All her hand-wringing seemed so trivial now, as she stood in her wife's arms. Still, she caught Kamilah's lips with her own, letting her know just how much Ana had missed her. And it seemed Kamilah missed her just as much, if not more desperately so.

"I love you," Kamilah murmured against her lips.

"I love you more." Ana smiled, her brightest for the past month.

Kamilah was back, and though she carried a few wounds, she was safe. That was all that mattered to her for now.

She had been on the same extended shift through the two attacks, Kamilah said in a brief retelling of her experience. In the first assault, the omnics had pushed past the base's perimeter, but were stopped before they came within firing range of the hospital and barracks. With the base's command tent destroyed – and their commander with it – they had been preparing for evacuation since the battle ended, despite orders from HQ to stay entrenched. And it seemed their adhoc commander's instincts
were right.

Kamilah, with only three hours’ rest under her belt, received a full evacuation order while tending to her patients the following morning. The omnis, having learnt and adapted from their first engagement, breached the camp’s defenses with terrifying ease. To buy the wounded more time, Kamilah and half of the medics under her command picked up arms, joining the guards’ attempt to slow their foes down. They had lost more than half of their company before they retreated – clambering onto the remaining trucks in a mad rush, and speeding away amid a hail of bullets ping off the reinforced steel of their vehicles.

Kamilah herself was forced to lie down for the bumpy ride, having taken a few bullets and a nasty cut on her side. She admitted a fleeting sense of fear just before she passed out, and was infinitely grateful when she woke up in a secure hospital, far from the thunderous rattle of gunfire. She asked to make a call the moment she could move, and the rest was history.

She stuck to Ana like glue for the few days she spent recovering at home, though Ana had her hands full just forcing Kamilah to sit down instead of fussing over her every ten seconds. It was her way of coping, Ana knew, to keep her mind occupied and in the present. But her wife still needed to take it easy, and Ana found a way to keep her in place by resting Kamilah’s hand on her stomach. Its effect was near-miraculous, even though the bump had yet to show. Kamilah would take a moment to calm down, breaths growing slow and steady as she caressed that little spot, mouth twitching in a small smile.

And so, it was under Kamilah’s gentle touch that the baby bump seemed to grow. It was a noticeable change through the next two weeks, Kamilah's hand tracing over the contour of her stomach as if charting its subtle growth. She would smile when Ana lamented the imminent loss of her abs, and kiss away her silly little complaints, giving her all the reassurances she wanted. Ana pouted just a little more, playing the pregnancy card so she could lie in her wife’s arms longer, feeling her life fall back into place, where it always should’ve been.

Kamilah was assigned to training cadets in the academy, fast-tracking their progress through the curriculum so they could be sent to the frontlines as soon as possible. A heavy and unpleasant task to be sure, sending fresh-faced recruits right into the fire before they had even grown into their boots. But it was necessary, as was tearing soldiers away from their families to fight in a brutal war against cold, merciless foes.

Ana felt guilty and selfish, yet grateful at the same time. Each day she trawled through casualty reports, tracked their troop movements as they countered the omnis’ maneuvers, and sent orders for soldiers to throw themselves into danger. But there she was - safe and protected within the command centre, with a relative peace of mind from knowing that her wife was in base, far from the line of fire. Her father was still holding his command post in Alexandria, and Safiya was down with a broken arm – which meant she wouldn’t see much action for a couple of months, at least. Zahra was kept on constant travel at a safe distance away from enemy lines. Ana’s old squad was successfully beating back the omnic forces at their post on the outskirts of Cairo.

To have a modicum of stability in this time of crisis was unfair, but Ana was immensely thankful for it. She needed it, if just for the time being…

Ana’s hand drifted down to her belly, smoothing over the little bulge as she stared at the news, where a thin reporter stood amid the rubble of yet another attack. Soon, she vowed. Soon, she would enter the fray with rifle in hand, and serve in earnest. But that would have to wait.

Switching the TV off, Ana leaned her head back on the couch and closed her eyes. She rubbed at
her stomach, riding out another bout of mild cramping.

For now, she had another duty to fulfill.

Ana's second trimester had started off smoothly; her nausea ended a while ago, and her aversion to certain foods had diminished through the weeks, though there were still dishes she refused to touch. Like meat dishes slathered with heavy sauces, and anything deep-fried or too greasy for her taste. Though she still had a sweet tooth that she indulged in from time to time, Ana mostly kept to a diet much healthier than before. It was a good thing, she supposed, as her appetite had increased as well. Nothing major, really – Ana just found herself reaching for a little extra during mealtimes.

Her cravings for late night snacks soon arrived, and Ana took just a bit of pleasure in kicking Kamilah off the bed to fetch some food. Her hankering for more unhealthy snacks were usually tempered by Kamilah, though she did let Ana have that scoop of ice cream with her fruits on occasion.

Then, there were those cravings that were actually healthy, but Ana opted to satisfy them herself. On these nights, she would creep down to the kitchen and prepare her snack stealthily, so that Kamilah wouldn't be wise to what she was doing. Ana was successful for a while…until lady luck decided to turn around and laugh in her face.

That was how Ana found herself staring at her wife, who stood by the kitchen's doorway and stared back at her, who had a particularly big piece of kale hanging from her mouth. Ana froze as if she had been caught red-handed, warmth growing in her cheeks as her wife's lips curved in amusement.

"So," Kamilah drawled, gesturing at Ana and her bowl of kale salad. She cocked her head in silent question, even though she knew damn well what was going on.

Ana chewed slowly on the offending piece of vegetable, taking her sweet time to answer. "...I think our baby likes kale."

"Mm-hm," Kamilah hummed that all-knowing note, and Ana felt an urge to shove the rest of the salad into her wife's mouth. But her stomach urged a different course of action, and she ate another forkful of kale with as much dignity as she could muster.

"Still tastes like shit," Ana tried.

"You know why that is, darling?" Kamilah strolled over to the fridge and retrieved a bottle of homemade lemon vinaigrette, placing it by Ana's bowl. "You forgot the dressing."

"Dress up a turd and it's still a turd," she mumbled, as she drizzled a liberal amount of dressing over the salad.

"And yet, you're still eating that turd." Kamilah wore a crooked smile as she sat beside Ana, with a cup of warm water in hand.

"I've had enough practice with you."

Kamilah laughed, smoothing a hand over her own bedraggled hair. She took a sound sip of water and sighed in satisfaction.

"Thought you were asleep," Ana said, taking another bite of her salad – which tasted much better now.
"I woke up," Kamilah said simply. Though she was sleeping better since her return, she still jerked awake at night, breathing hard from her nightmares. She would then go for a walk around the house, or feel about Ana's face and neck before trying to sleep again. Kamilah had confided that the dreams involved her recent deployment, and thankfully showed no qualms about letting Ana in. Walking through her troubles together not only helped Kamilah, but assuaged Ana's concern as well – she didn't want her wife to shoulder any burdens by herself, especially in these times.

Ana smiled, brushing her thumb over Kamilah's cheek. "Bad dream?"

"I'm fine now." She kissed Ana's palm, and entwined their fingers together. "Panicked a little when I saw you weren't in bed."

"Why, scared I'll run off?"

"Scared you'll finish an entire carton of ice cream by yourself, more like." Kamilah chuckled. "But now I know better…"

"Shush." Ana gathered the rest of the kale and cherry tomatoes on her fork, and finished her guilty pleasure for the night.

"We should get some cheese. Maybe feta. And some avocado. I have some recipes for you to try—"

"No."

"Trust me, you'll love kale after—"

"No kale! Or I'll…"

"Or you'll…?" Kamilah smiled smugly, resting her chin in one hand. "You'll try to…kale me?"

Ana's mouth fell open as she stared at her wife with growing horror. "Who the fuck are you?"

Kamilah shrugged and made no more puns that freaked Ana out after that, but she did go on to feed her wife with different combinations of kale salad. Her wife who, despite pouting each time she was presented with a bowl of kale, finished them all with a contented smile on her face.

At 19 weeks of her pregnancy, Kamilah drove Ana to the hospital for yet another appointment, where they got to see their baby through an ultrasound examination.

Ana watched the screen, transfixed as the doctor slid the transducer over her gelled stomach. Kamilah clasped her hand tightly when the baby's form finally coalesced before their eyes, and Ana's breath hitched at the image.

"There's the one who's been causing me all this trouble," Ana laughed giddily.

The doctor smiled. "Yes, and we'll see that it doesn't cause you more trouble, hm? Well," she added, glancing at Ana. "Not any more than a normal pregnancy will give you."

"Let's hope not," Kamilah muttered beside her ear. "Any trouble you have, I'll get it as well."

Ana snorted. "So much for team spirit, huh?"

Kamilah chuckled, and pressed her lips to Ana's temple. Then they turned to the screen as the doctor walked them through the examination, pointing out the baby's head, body and limbs, and explained the importance of each observation she made. Their baby seemed to be developing well, and they
found no cause for concern in the scan. They were told what to expect in the following weeks, and advised on how to handle any more changes Ana might experience, before they returned for another appointment the next month.

They left the hospital in a casual stroll, hands still clasped together, with the image of their baby still fresh in their minds. There was something about seeing it with their own eyes that was so…wondrous, and grounding as well. Ana touched her stomach, imagining the baby within her, where it had grown so much over the past few months, and would grow even more over the next few. How would it feel to finally hold the baby in her own arms…

"Why," Kamilah said, noticing Ana feeling about her belly. "Is it kicking?"

"Nope. Just thinking."

"About?"

"The baby."

"Of course."

"What if it's a girl?" Ana said. "Then we can name her--"

"No."

"You didn't let me finish!"

"I already know what you're going to say. So, no." Kamilah unlocked their car.

"Spoilsport."

Soon after, they got a magnetic whiteboard that they attached to the fridge, right beside their grocery list. Instead of foodstuffs and toiletries and whatnot, names were written on this new board. They filled up the two columns whenever they came across a name they liked, or when inspiration struck. Nothing had really jumped out at them yet, and the list grew at a snail's pace, but it was fine. They still had a few more months to decide, after all. In the meantime, just one restriction had been imposed upon the list: no celebrity names.

Ana tried to be cheeky at first, writing down the names of her Queen and her children. Naturally, all of them were struck off by Kamilah one by one, which led to a new addition to their grocery list: 'sense of humour for Milah'. The next morning, Ana nearly choked on her coffee when she saw two more items underneath: 'fucks for Milah' and 'good taste for Ana'. Obviously they were unable to procure these at the supermarket on their next grocery run, but Ana decided to relent…for now. She did have other things to shop for – namely, clothes.

She had been dreading it, truth be told, but her pants were getting tighter. One little comfort was that her waistline hadn't ballooned as she expected just yet. For her civilian wear, Ana had only added a few maternity pants to her wardrobe – very comfortable ones that she didn't mind lounging in for the entire day. To go with the pants, Ana stole Kamilah's oversized tops – which she wagered would last for her entire pregnancy. And though some of her wife's shirts were unflatteringly baggy, they still looked much better than the disaster that was her maternity fatigues.

'It's not that bad,' Kamilah had said, but Ana blanched the first time she looked in the mirror while wearing her uniform. Her pants were all well and good, but the shirt. It flared out below the waistline, and wasn't designed to be tucked in. Not only could Ana not look as smart as she wished
in uniform, she also had to walk around looking like a camouflaged lampshade – and it would only get better the larger her belly swelled, no doubt.

She heaved a sigh, fidgeting with the shirt as Kamilah pecked her on the cheek. Oh, this pregnancy would be a blast indeed.

Little did Ana know how accurate her prediction would be, at least for her second trimester. The 'honeymoon period', they called it, and for good reason. With most of the first trimester's discomfort gone and her appetite returning with a vengeance, she felt strong enough to take on the world again, even swing from their pull-up bar at home and earn a scolding from her wife. Ana was quick to desist – she had to, or alone in the guest room it was – but she was quick to find other avenues for release.

Kamilah glanced up at Ana when she walked into the study. "Oh, there you are. I'm just looking at–, what–?" She blinked when Ana pulled her chair away from the desk, and sat in her lap. "Ana–," she tried to say when she was yanked forward, their lips crashing together in a hungry kiss.

"Ana," Kamilah gasped between kisses. "Wait–, look, I'm trying–" She pushed against Ana's chest, forcing her back. "Ana, I'm trying to book birthing classes for–"

"Later." Ana flung her hand back and slapped at the top left corner of the keyboard, until the open window on screen disappeared.

"Ana! What are you doing–," her wife chided exasperatedly as she was pulled in by the collar, groaning when Ana's tongue slipped into her mouth. Kamilah wound her arms around Ana, hugging her close as she met each insistent press of Ana's lips. She was breathing heavier when they finally parted, and sighed, "How am I going to deal with you?"

"With your mouth, preferably," Ana said, hand slipping under the hem of Kamilah's shirt.

"Again?" Kamilah asked incredulously. "Just this morning–"

"It's been hours, Milah."

"What, you've been counting?" Kamilah's smirk was quickly wiped away by another kiss, and her hands started roaming over Ana as well, tracing her curves under the baggy t-shirt she wore. Then Kamilah stood and lifted Ana with a grunt, huffing from the exertion when she set her wife down on the table. "Wow, you're getting heavier–"

"I'm heavy?"

Kamilah paused abruptly upon noticing Ana's pout, and the one foot she had just set into the minefield. Ana had gotten just a teeny, tiny bit more sensitive about her weight, and Kamilah had upset her on accident before. But there were also times when Ana liked pulling her leg about it, and she could tell Kamilah was trying to discern her mood at that moment.

"You're gorgeous, darling," Kamilah tried, a smile growing on her lips to match Ana's when she caught onto the little game.

"You're getting heavier, but you're still the prettiest girl I've ever seen," she crooned, kissing Ana softly. "You'll always be beautiful to me."
Kamilah had repeated those very words many times before, but it never failed to melt Ana's heart on the spot. It must be her hormones, Ana decided; not to mention a strong case of being putty in her wife's hands, swept away by each honeyed word whispered in her ear, and the warm caress on her skin. To put it simply: it was love.

And it was love, that saw Kamilah safely through the minefield yet another day.
Hey, Little One

It was a quiet and humid night; a slow end to yet another long day at their duty stations. Ana yawned loudly as she strolled into the bedroom, already cool from the air-conditioning – which was a godsend after spending hours perspiring in a command centre with a broken-down aircon system. She rubbed her eyes, walking to the bed where Kamilah already lay, playing a new city-building game on her tablet – when Ana stopped abruptly. Kamilah looked up at her, concern growing the longer she stared at Ana, who stood frozen by the bedside with one hand clutched on the headboard, and the other on her belly.

"You okay?" Kamilah asked, scooting over to her.

"Yeah. I just…" Ana's voice trailed off as she moved her hand over her stomach, where she had felt that little twitch. Did she imagine it, or was it just some muscle spasm– "Oh fuck."

"What?" Kamilah sounded a little panicked now, then looked surprised when Ana grabbed her hand and pressed it against her belly.

"Think it kicked."

"Really?"

"I don't know," Ana muttered, though the look of wonder stayed on Kamilah's face. She moved her wife's hand all over her stomach, waiting for another twitch. She was just starting to give up when it came again, and she yanked Kamilah's hand over, pressing it harder to her stomach. "Can you--"

"Yes, yes!" Kamilah said breathlessly. "It's really faint but--, there it is again."

Ana's smile grew wider as Kamilah pressed an ear to her stomach, feeling their baby's little exercise in complete silence. They stayed mesmerised for a whole five minutes, before the baby decided to take a rest. Ana chuckled when Kamilah kissed her belly and hugged her with a pure, unadulterated smile.

"Happy?"

"Yeah."

"Great. Now move over. My feet are killing me."

Kamilah snorted, then scooted back to her side of the bed as requested. Ana climbed in and lay on her side with a sigh, feeling the tension in her back. But it wasn't long before Kamilah's hand found its way to that same spot, and massaged it gently.

"Ooh, there it is again." Ana clutched at her stomach, soon joined by her partner as well.

"What an active little one. Seems it's already taking after you," Kamilah said with a smile.

"Yeah, don't laugh. Soon it's going to be active and outside my womb."

"We'll take care of it. I'm sure it'll be fun."

"Let's hope so. My mom always said taking care of me was a headache."

"I'm sure it's one she enjoyed."

"Doesn't matter." Kamilah resumed her massage on Ana's back when the kicking subsided again. "I can't wait to chase little you all around the house."

"What will make the baby 'little you', I wonder." Ana tilted her head. "Maybe it'll try to drink coffee before milk."

"I'm sure it won't have time to drink coffee with all the whining it'll get from you," Kamilah deadpanned.

"Hey!"

The weeks seemed to pass quickly between their demanding duty shifts in the day and their need to take refuge at home, trying to put their burdens down for the night and think of the better future ahead. Sometimes, it was easy to find solace in their unborn child, running a hand over Ana's stomach as they guessed what little quirks it would inherit from its mothers. But there were times when Ana remembered the wreckage and violence she saw through the soldiers' field cams, and she couldn't help but wonder if their timing was terribly wrong.

Kamilah would catch her in times like these, as Ana had done the same for her. The 'what if's didn't matter anymore; their child was here, and they would do anything to keep it from harm.

That's why Ana didn't protest when Kamilah insisted on driving her back to the family home on an errand – Ana would've done the same in her stead. With the war dragging on and slowly eating its way into the city, many homes had been destroyed and many more were in danger of meeting the same fate. The Amari home was in a neighbourhood yet to be touched by the war, but Zaid wanted to save their valuables before it was too late. Items of sentimental value, of course – and it was the reason why Ana had agreed to venture out of base.

Kamilah drove carefully, picking a safe route that kept them far away from the military barricades. Ana hustled the moment they arrived, going from room to room with Kamilah following close behind, carrying a large cardboard box in her arms. She made sure to pick up everything her father and sister had requested and more. Ana grabbed all their photos and documents, her father's skillet and inherited pocket watch, her mother's wedding ring and other jewelry, Safiya's old acoustic guitar and cartoon mug, and a mountain of other belongings that they had to stuff into the boxes.

It all took only one trip, and they deposited everything into their small storage room. Well, almost everything. Ana wanted to take a look at their family photos, and it gave Kamilah no small amount of entertainment. She particularly enjoyed Ana's baby pictures, and took great pleasure in laughing at how goofy she had looked back then. There was one of Ana with a pacifier she had stuck in her ear. Another of her crying on a swing when her parents stepped away to take the photo. One where she looked positively ecstatic at the bottle of milk her father held, her pudgy little hands reaching for it. There were many of her and Safiya too; her favourite was of them grinning and hugging their beloved plushies. All of them brought a smile to Ana's face, but Kamilah seemed to enjoy them much, much more.

Her wife snorted loudly again and held up a photo of 5-year-old Ana, holding an ice cream cone with vanilla smears on her cheek and nose.

"Is it really that funny?" Ana deadpanned as Kamilah giggled some more at the picture.

"Yes," Kamilah said. "Seems your aim never really improved."
"One time, Milah. Just one time I missed my mouth with the ice cream."

"And you'll never hear the end of it." Kamilah passed her the photo, looking through the rest. "Come on, Ana. You were so cute in these."

"What, am I not cute now?"

"Of course you are, dear," Kamilah said, pinching her chin. "You just looked cuter back then."

"Well… Can't argue with that." Ana took another glance at the ice cream photo, then went through the stack she held. "You have any baby photos?"

"No. At least, I never saw them. Doesn't matter anyway." She shrugged. "I was a scrawny kid."

"I'm sure you were still cute."

"Yeah, right." Kamilah paused at a photo of Ana holding a rubber ball. "I want our kid to look like you."

"Like a little ray of sunshine?" Ana crooned.

"Yup." Kamilah smiled at her. "I could use another one in my life."

It didn't take long before Ana cruised into her third trimester, and started keeping a closer eye on the calendar. She felt the occasional bursts of impatience whenever she looked at the weeks left, the days seeming to pass slower than before. Her belly had grown much larger now, and she found it a little difficult to bend down. Some of the discomfort returned to haunt her, though it was still better than her first trimester. She had backaches from sitting too long at her duty station, and felt more tired. Not only from work, but from waking up at night to go to the bathroom, and carrying her baby's weight as well. Spider veins appeared on the back of her legs, along with stretch marks on her stomach. There was mild swelling in her ankles, which made her look more poofy.

All these sent Ana home in a very needy state each night, whining for much more attention from her wife. Kamilah didn't seem to mind, giving her one reassurance after another, reminding Ana that she was doing great and that Kamilah was proud of her. There were times when Ana remained in a bad mood after the showers of affection, but it did help most of the time, especially when Kamilah held her hand during the little contractions in her abdomen. Having someone there for her was infinitely better than riding it out by herself in the command centre.

They went for prenatal visits every two weeks now, and each time felt like a milestone to Ana. An accomplishment of sorts, for weathering the two weeks leading up to the checkup. After learning that Ana had routinely pulled overtime, the doctor gave her a stern warning not to overwork herself, and to relax as much as she could while off-duty. Despite Ana's protests, she issued two weeks' leave before the due date so Ana could rest sufficiently. She also reminded Ana to take time for some light exercise to help alleviate any aches she experienced, and to strengthen herself for the delivery.

It wasn't much of an issue, as Ana already exercised regularly at home ever since she was exempted from PT. She also took walks around the neighbourhood at night to clear her head, but Kamilah was reluctant to let her go alone in the recent weeks – mostly out of fear that she would fall. And that was how Ana found a walking partner in her wife, who held her hand firmly as they took one slow step after another.

"I'm not a porcelain doll, you know," Ana grumbled one night.
"Of course you aren't."

"Then stop babysitting me."

"I'm not babysitting you. Well, not only you." Kamilah sighed softly when her scowl remained. "Want to take a seat?"

Ana nodded, and followed the tug on her hand as Kamilah steered them off the pavement, following the short dirt trail to the playground. She sat on the horizontal sit-up bench as the mild contractions started again. Kamilah handed her a water bottle, and she took a large gulp before giving it back.

Scratching at her jaw, Ana muttered, "Sorry."

"Hm?"

"For yelling at you last night."

"Right," Kamilah drawled. "First time someone ever yelled at me for putting tomatoes in a sandwich."

Ana squirmed in her seat, cheeks growing warm. Not only had she thrown a tantrum over the tomatoes, she burst into tears after Kamilah took the slices away, because she thought the sandwich looked pitifully meager without them. After she stopped sobbing, the tomatoes found their way back into the sandwich, and Ana ate them all anyway. Kamilah asked no questions, and Ana gave no answers. None were needed, for they both knew from experience that Ana's outbursts had no rhyme or reason – all they had to do was take it in stride and move on. Kamilah had been absolutely patient with her so far, and Ana was grateful for that. Hell, even she was annoyed by her own outbursts.

"I can take it as practice for the main show," Kamilah continued, patting gently on Ana's stomach.

"Think I'll yell at you?"

"It's a strong possibility, yes," she said with a small smirk. "I think the pain will push you way beyond just whining."

Ana groaned. "You're not helping."

"Are you sure?" Kamilah tapped at her lips, curved slightly in a smile.

"Yes." Ana pouted. "You're not the one going into labour."

"And I'll be with you all the way."

"Yeah…" She let out a breath. "I can't wait for this to be over."

"Just a few weeks more."

"You mean 2 months," Ana said witheringly. "I have to walk around like this and cry and yell for 2 more months."

"And it'll be over before you know it." Kamilah rubbed her back soothingly. "Just hang on a little longer."

"Do I have any other choice?"

Kamilah just smiled and kissed her on the cheek, knowing a listening ear was all Ana needed for
Another two weeks passed, and they started preparing for their baby's arrival. They turned the guest room into a nursery, placing the crib near the bed so whichever haggard mother on duty could just fall back and sleep after taking care of the baby. They covered the floor in a soft rug, plugged night lights into the walls, and baby-proofed the room. Ana enjoyed shopping for baby clothes the most, and it was only because of Kamilah that not all of them were animal onesies. They bought little beanies, mittens, and blankets, and stocked their shelves with necessities. Looking over the nursery helped to calm Ana, turning her impatience into excitement over the baby's arrival.

The first person to lay eyes upon the nursery – other than the soon-to-be mothers – was Khalid, who had returned to base in preparation for a mission. He carried some baby blankets and pacifiers for his visit, and grinned when he saw the nursery. Khalid emulated Ana's pout when they refused to name the baby after him, and enveloped them in a firm hug just before he left. He looked wistful upon his departure, and only answered Ana's questions with a cryptic 'you'll know soon'.

And 'know soon' Ana did, after a few more days in the command centre. The Guard, bolstered by other units from the Army, would launch a direct assault on the omnium. It was a risky maneuver – not to mention the biggest one since their first attempt on the factory. Even Jaida was loath to dispatch her troops, but she was forced to do so anyway after her arguments were swept aside by the brass.

Her expression was grave and devoid of surprise when Ana reported their soldiers' retreat from the battlefield. The omnics' fortifications, traps, and repurposed attack drones beat the army back effortlessly, leaving only a quarter of its forces standing. Those who could still stand, anyway. Ana's old squad had been involved in this assault, and she felt a surge of relief upon learning that her friends had survived, albeit with their own share of injuries. But her worry returned the next day, when Mesi asked her to check on Layla, who had been sent back to the base's hospital for recovery.

Layla had suffered the most damage in her squad, and it was painfully obvious when Ana found her in the ward. Her left arm and leg were in casts, almost every inch of exposed skin was wrapped in bandages, and two ragged gashes marred her cheek, reaching down to her jaw. She was still unconscious during the first visit; Ana heard Mesi sigh shakily through her earpiece when she angled the phone's camera towards the bed. She promised to check on Layla regularly and told Mesi not to worry, reminding her to look out for herself as well. Mesi agreed with a forced smile, before blinking off the screen.

Only a day later, Layla opened her eyes when Ana returned with Kamilah. The wounded soldier looked around woozily and asked about her team. Some tension left her face when she learnt they were alright, then gave her visitors a once-over.


Kamilah stiffened in her chair, as if bracing for an explosion. Her eyes roved over to Ana, who had glanced back at her with a wry smile.

"You're lucky I can't scream at you here," Ana said dryly.

"Why do you think I said it?"

"Say any more and I'll break the rest of your limbs."

Kamilah clicked her tongue. "Ana."
"Yeah, Ana," Layla said. "You can't do shit here."

"Technically, she can," Kamilah corrected her. "There are just consequences after. If she gets caught, that is."

"You're a psycho."

"So I've been told."

"Oh my god, I hope your kid won't be a psycho too." Layla looked back at Ana. "When are you due anyway?"

"1 month. Give or take."

"Cool. Decided on names yet?"

Ana hummed, sharing a glance with Kamilah. "We have a few. Haven't decided on a specific one yet."

"How about 'Layla'?"

"What's with your squad and naming our kid after them?" Kamilah asked.


Layla laughed weakly. "Well then, wanna bounce names off me?"

"How about we do that when you stop looking like a ghost, hm?" Ana rapped her knuckles lightly on Layla's forehead. "Get some rest first."

"You're not my mom."

"No, but I outrank you."

Layla let out a whine and looked to Kamilah, who cocked a brow.

"I outrank you too."

"Fuck."

With the 'final countdown' starting, Ana began checking off the days on her calendar, while Kamilah hovered even closer around her. Their demeanour took on a slight edge borne of nervous anticipation, but they made sure stay calm and relax as the doctor ordered. To take their minds off the passing days, they visited Layla almost daily, and tried to pick out names for their baby. It was a task more difficult than Ana imagined – though they had a pretty short list of names they liked, they just couldn't settle on one. She had pondered naming the child after her mother – if it was a girl – but decided against it. Her mother was the only 'Zayirah' to Ana, and she didn't want to impose any undue expectations on the child.

In the end, they chose to keep a few names on hand, then choose one only after their baby was born. After all, how could they know which would fit their child the most before even laying eyes on them? So they laid the matter to rest, trusting their hearts to know the best when the time came.

The uneventful weeks seemed to pass in a hurry, even though Ana spent a bit of time fretting over the details of the birth and what comes after. Mostly she channeled the energy towards cleaning the
nursery over and over, and practicing the relaxation techniques she learnt in the birthing classes. In the last couple of weeks while she was on leave, she freaked Kamilah out twice. First by thinking her water had broken, but it turned out to be a urine leak. The second was when she asked Kamilah if she should leave a will in case of unforeseen complications, and her wife promptly told her to stop delving so deep into the forums. Kamilah also mentioned that she ‘didn't have much to leave behind anyway’, to which Ana replied she needed to leave Kamilah her vibe, so that she could ‘go fuck herself.’

They traded a few more barbs at the comment, but Ana's mood remained stable and happy – and there were more smiles than tears the closer they inched towards the due date. It made the wait all the more bearable.

It started in the morning, after Ana had finished her late breakfast alone in the kitchen. The light contractions were still irregular, but frequent enough that she started to take notice. Remembering the doctor's advice to stay relaxed, Ana did; she puttered around the house – vacuuming the floor, folding the clothes, taking care of all the chores at home. ‘It's starting. Fuck, it's starting,’ was the general gist of her thoughts for the entire day, and she dropped the news on Kamilah the instant she trudged into the living room.

She could swear that Kamilah paled a little, clutching the sides of her belly as if to feel the contractions herself. Then she made Ana sit down on the sofa, while she took care of everything else. By the end of dinner and two movies, Ana could feel the contractions, but it still wasn’t strong enough to cause major discomfort. So Kamilah escorted her up to the bed, where she could lay down and try to nab some rest before the actual work started.

Ana remained on her side for the most part, while Kamilah snuggled up to her back with one hand resting protectively over her belly. She drifted in and out of sleep with difficulty, unable to keep her mind off the movement in her womb. Finally, the intensity was too hard to ignore, and she shook Kamilah awake.

Her wife jumped up immediately, fumbling about in a bleary haze. Kamilah held her phone with a trembling hand as she timed Ana’s contractions. They lasted longer and came more frequently now, and Ana was left groaning in pain, half-yelling at Kamilah to call the doctor already. They were given the green light to go to the hospital, and Kamilah helped her down to the car. During the drive, Ana felt a pop and moisture pooling between her legs. The car slowed when Ana pointed it out, before picking up speed again when she yelled at Kamilah to ‘step on it!’ She had no time to regret raising her voice – the pain had just picked up a notch.

They were ushered quickly into triage upon entering the hospital, where the baby's heart rate and her contractions were monitored. The nurse did a swab to check that her water had indeed broken, but told her to wait a little longer for further dilation. It made Ana want to scream, but she bit it down and followed the nurses into delivery room. Ana chose to remain lying down after changing into her hospital gown.

Just the wait itself was nerve-wracking. Ana held Kamilah's hand tightly, feeling her wife's fingers flex around hers restlessly. They went through breathing exercises together, though Ana had to grit her teeth for more than a few rounds. The room was starting to feel warm when the doctor finally entered the room, and Ana felt an urge to scream again.

She did. The first took her by surprise, caused by the most intense contraction she had ever felt. Kamilah’s fingers tightened around Ana’s to match her death grip as the medical crew took their positions by the bed. Still, the doctor told Ana to wait in that irritatingly calm tone, and a hundred curses flashed through her mind, along with a burning desire to slap the doctor hard. The wait was
hell, with Ana finding difficulty in breathing normally and Kamilah uttering reassurances in her ear.

When it came time to push, Ana did so – gladly and in agony. It was an exercise more painful and exhausting than any military exercise she had participated, but if anything, Ana was trained to take orders. So she took them now, though her patience frayed more and more with each time the doctor told her to push, push, to rest, then push, to rest again –

"Fuck!" Ana shouted towards the ceiling at the end of another push, then panted as she fell back onto the bed.

Kamilah brushed away the stray strands of hair sticking to her sweaty forehead, when the doctor told her to rest again. "You're doing good, Ana. You're doing very good."

"What are you, a fucking teacher–ah!" Her back arched as another bout of pain gripped her. Ana pushed, and pushed, then was told to rest. "This is worse–, than my–, fucking tattoo," she panted.

"I know, darling. I know–"

"No, you don't fucking–" Ana screamed, pushing hard reflexively. Her train of thought was completely lost when she lay down again, but the impatience and agony fused together in a burning rage, and she lashed out. "This is all your fault. This is all your fucking fault–!" She pushed at the doctor's order, a ragged shout bursting through her throat.

"I know, Ana. I know, I'll make it up to you later."

"Later? Later? Why don't you fucking help me push now?"

"As much as I'd like to, I can't–"

"Then what fucking good are you–ah!" Another scream, and Ana arched off the bed, her head spinning in the process. "Fuck you!"

"You're doing very good, Ana," the doctor said loudly. "You're almost there! I can see the head–"

"I know, my fucking vagina is on fire!" Ana screeched back. She was told to take a short rest, then Kamilah helped her up into a sitting position, so she could deliver the baby easier. Ana felt the ground sway dangerously under her and leaned heavily on Kamilah, but nodded when asked if she was okay. In her pain-muddled haze, she didn't notice the worried look on her wife or doctor's face. Then, upon the doctor's instruction, she pushed. And pushed. Her vision went dark for a moment, but the light returned quickly. A push. Another push.

Her consciousness had thinned – she was only aware of her body pushing the baby out, the doctor's voice, and Kamilah's voice. She gave another 'final push' as the doctor ordered, and she vaguely heard a baby's cry as her head lolled to the side, resting on Kamilah's cheek.

"Ana? Ana, are you okay?" Kamilah asked.

Ana could only mumble incoherently, her vision fading in and out of darkness.

"Ana, we need you to push a little more to get the placenta out." Kamilah rubbed her cheek, and Ana focused her gaze on her wife's tense expression. "Can you do that, Ana? Just a little more. Please."

So she did. The energy had left her body limp, but she forced herself to keep up. Push. Push. Breathe. Push.
Ana felt something else slip out between her legs, and raised her eyes to Kamilah. She received a kiss on her forehead, then lost consciousness.

She awoke slowly to a dark room, illuminated by sunlight filtering through the curtains. Her mind remained blank for a while, her body feeling expended but much lighter. Ana turned her head, instinctively seeking out her partner, who lay in a fold-out bed pushed up against hers. Kamilah was fast asleep, with her hand resting in Ana's. Running a thumb over Kamilah's knuckles, Ana waited for a while before calling her name.

Kamilah roused at her soft voice, eyes cracking open to look at Ana. Then she sat up quickly.
"Ana?"

"That's me," she uttered, watching Kamilah reach over to the wall switches and turn the lights on.
Kamilah ran a hand down her face, then leaned over to Ana with a smile. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. What happened…?"

"You fainted. Blood loss. But you're fine now." Kamilah brushed a thumb gently over her cheek. "You scared me for a while there."

"Mm. The baby?"

"She's fine. Healthy."

"She?"

"It's a girl, Ana," Kamilah told her with a growing smile. "We have a daughter."

"Great," Ana breathed tiredly. "…Can we name her Bey?"

"No."

"Blue?"

"No."

Ana pouted. "Have you seen her?"

"Yes. They let me carry her for a while."

"I wanna carry her."

"I think you'd better wait a little longer. Make sure you're strong enough."

More pouts did little to convince Kamilah, who made sure Ana could at least sit up and waddle around the bed before calling the nurse in. Ana waited eagerly, wringing her fingers as the nurse pushed the bassinet in.

"She woke up on the way here," the nurse said, picking up the little bundle and placing it in Ana's waiting arms. "Seems she can't wait to see her mommy."

Ana forgot to breathe as she held her baby, swaddled in a soft white blanket. Kamilah sat on the bed next to her, hugging her by the shoulders as they gazed down at their little girl. She had a healthy tuft of black hair on her head, and wide brown eyes that held Ana's gaze steadily, even though she still
looked sleepy.

"She has your eyes," Ana breathed, and Kamilah kissed the top of her head.

"She has your hair, if this is any indication."

Ana chuckled, tapping a fingertip lightly on the baby's hand, which was poking out of the blanket. "Look at you. Just a few hours old and you've already given me so much pain." She laughed louder when Kamilah knocked her on the head, but was distracted when little fingers curled around her finger.

Her throat tightened when the girl's mouth twitched upward in a smile, making a short nasally sound.

"She's barely cried after she came out," Kamilah said. "Even while I was carrying her, I think she was trying to laugh."

"Really? Seems you're going to be a good girl, aren't you?" Ana cooed, and the baby made the same sound again. She giggled along with the baby, then asked, "So, any names yet?"

"Thought I'd wait for you. What do you think?"

Ana cocked her head, running through their list of names. She mouthed them quietly while gazing at her child, trying to fit a name to that adorable little face.

*Nahla…Rahima…Huda…Nawal…Ana II…Fareeha…*

The baby's lips twitched again into another smile, fingers flexing around Ana's fingertip. Her eyes seemed to twinkle with mirth.

"Fareeha," Ana said out loud, testing the name. "Fareeha. Sounds about right?" She looked up at Kamilah, who smiled and nodded.

Turning back to the baby, she cooed, "Hey, little one. 'Fareeha Amari' sounds nice, doesn't it?"

Fareeha gurgled in reply.
They stayed in the hospital for three days – with an extra day so the scientists could perform more tests to ensure the baby was perfectly healthy, and secure one success for their experiment. Normally, Ana would've balked at being trapped in a hospital for over a day, but she was more than glad to stay this time. The postpartum room was rather homely and, more importantly, Ana didn't feel up to running about as part of her post-delivery celebration. She didn't dare to, truth be told – she nearly fainted in the shower once, and if Kamilah hadn't been there to catch her, she would've fallen to the floor before she knew it. She squeezed in some exercise by walking rounds in her room, but the bed was where Ana spent most of her time, sleeping as soundly as her daughter.

Fareeha was a quiet baby for the most part, content to let her mothers carry and coo at her, reciprocating with little sounds and gurgles of her own. She had broken out in loud cries only a handful of times during their stay, and her fusses were always tended to before she had to wait for attention. Her main activity was being cradled to Ana's chest while she was being fed, before Kamilah whisked her away to be carried and patted and sang to, until she fell asleep and was placed back in her bassinet. Kamilah had expressed concern over Fareeha's lack of noise, but Ana merely shrugged and told her to enjoy it while it lasted.

On their last day in the hospital, Fareeha was taken away for another round of evaluation and observation, and was brought back a fussy little bundle hours later. Kamilah's friend – the scientist who had introduced them to the experiment – was the one to wheel the bassinet in. Nadia uttered a string of apologies for keeping Fareeha away for so long, and let Kamilah scoop the baby up into her hold.

"It's okay," Ana said, patting Nadia's arm. "Besides, you just gave her another excuse to carry her baby."

"I don't need an excuse," Kamilah retorted, keeping her voice low as she rocked the crying baby gently.

"Oh right." Ana looked up at Nadia, who stood by the bed. "She doesn't need an excuse to keep my baby all to herself."

"You're still recovering, Ana."

"I can hold her just fine in bed! My arms aren't atrophied, you know."

"You two wanna settle this in court?" Nadia asked, not bothering to hide her smirk.

Kamilah looked at Nadia, then at her pouting wife, and sighed. She waited until Fareeha's cries had quieted down, then placed her carefully into Ana's waiting arms. Fareeha was still whining and restless in the blanket, but slowly calmed down and fell asleep with her hand clinging onto Ana's fingertip.

"So, did everything check out?" Ana asked, voice soft so she wouldn't disturb the child.

Nadia tilted her head. "Yup. You can take her home tomorrow morning, no worries. We'll keep tabs on you through your doctor for a year, to see that Fareeha is growing properly. But other than that, we're officially hands-off."
"Thanks, Nadia," Kamilah said.

"No, thank you." Nadia gestured at the baby. "You're proof that our procedure works. One of them anyway. Hopefully..." She drifted off for a second, frowning in thought. "Oh right, I was supposed to tell you – the NDA is still in effect. So don't tell anyone how you really got your baby."

"Of course. When will your whole experiment be done?"

"Ah, that." Nadia sighed, shrugging dejectedly. "Officially, our experiment's 'on ice'. The IVF lab's been destroyed, half our data is missing, we can't contact some of the couples, and many of them are gone. We expect no more funding any time soon, so most of us think the experiment's dead already."

"I'm sorry."

A tight smile. "Not for the experiment. If anything, be sorry for those who didn't make it." Nadia rubbed her hands together, then pulled her lips up into a smile. "Anyway, sorry – didn't mean to be a wet blanket. So remember: keep mum about the conception. It might be years before we revive the whole thing and get approval, but we'll contact you when we can go public. Until then, feel free to make up stories about how Fareeha came about."

"Oh, I already have a few in mind," Ana said.

"You're welcome to drop by before you leave for Alexandria," Kamilah added as Nadia made for the door. "Haven't spoken to you much since the omnic mess started."

"Yeah, sure." Nadia smiled, pausing in her tracks. She looked Kamilah over, and clasped her shoulder. "You've changed a lot, you know that?"

"Well--"

"Don't believe that, Nadia," Ana cut in. "She can still be a demon when she wants to."

She stifled a snort when the 'demon' resurfaced to give her a warning glare.

Morning came around and, though Ana was still tired from Fareeha's night-time feedings, she leapt up from bed eagerly. As comfortable as her room was, she couldn't wait to ditch it for her own home. They placed Fareeha in the baby carrier and brought her to the parking lot, careful not to bump into anything on the way. Fareeha's eyes fell shut just after they buckled her carrier into the car seat, and remained peacefully asleep on the ride home.

At least, until a car cut sharply into their lane, and Kamilah had to slam on the brakes to avoid a collision. The rough jerk itself shook Fareeha awake, but it was the angry honking that startled her, and she burst into loud cries. Kamilah slowed the car immediately, anger forgotten as Ana bent over Fareeha, shushing and singing to her softly.

"Should I pull over--?"

"Don't be silly, Milah," Ana chuckled. "Just drive. It's okay, habibti," she cooed, holding Fareeha's little fists. "It's okay..."

It took a while, but the ride remained smooth and Fareeha's cries eased into hiccups, then she was kept occupied by Ana who swirled her hands in circles. Fareeha yawned as their car came to a stop inside the garage, though she kept alert when Ana picked her up from the seat.
"Here we are, Fareeha. Home at last." Ana cradled Fareeha so she could look forward. "See, this is our car…and that is your mommy's motorcycle." She leaned in and whispered, "It's her second favourite ride."

"Ana!"

"What? It's not like she'll remember anyway."

Kamilah heaved a sigh, hauling their overnight bag out of the trunk. "You need to start watching your tongue."

Ana blew a short raspberry at her, then followed Kamilah into the house. "See, Fareeha? This is your home," she cooed as they strolled down the hallway and past the living room. Kamilah held her by the waist when they climbed the stairs, but Ana was too busy talking to Fareeha to notice.

"And this is your room!" Ana raised Fareeha a little higher, and the baby burbled, fingers curling. "See, we already bought toys for you," she said as they passed the shelf lined with stuffed toys, baby blocks and rattles, and colourful finger puppets. "This is your bed–, oh damn. We forgot to buy that…hanging, spinning toy thing."

"Mobile," Kamilah supplied, setting her bag on the floor. "We'll get it soon."

"We'll get all the toys for you, little one." Ana set Fareeha down in the crib, scratching her tummy as she lay on her back, eyes blinking slowly. They watched as Fareeha smacked her lips and started to grow more restless. Kamilah made to carry the baby, but paused when Fareeha let out a cry.

"Did she make a poop again?" Ana asked when Kamilah scooped Fareeha up anyway, taking care to keep a firm hold on her.

"I changed her diaper just before the drive," Kamilah said offhandedly, grasping at the diaper anyway. Then she cradled Fareeha and stroked her cheek – their questions answered when Fareeha turned towards Kamilah's chest, making a sucking motion with her mouth.

"Here we go again." Ana took Fareeha in her arms and sat on the bed. "Tits out for the milk monster." She looked up at Kamilah. "You can wait in line if you want some too."

Ana cackled when Kamilah smacked at her head, but quickly returned to the task at hand when Fareeha let out a particularly loud cry.

They spent most of the day in the nursery, which involved Ana and Fareeha sleeping and waking together, and being with their baby whenever she was awake. Fareeha didn't need that much attention yet, always looking sleepy and happy enough just lying on the bed between her mothers, who played with her hands and feet to keep her entertained. They kept the day serene and private, choosing to leave the news-breaking until night. They had clean forgotten about informing even their family about Ana going into labour, so no one even knew of their stay in the hospital, much less that their baby was finally here.

As luck would have it, no one was reachable through calls or responded to texts, so they just snapped a photo of Fareeha dressed in a yellow bear onesie with a beanie, and sent it out. Zaid was the first to reply while they were preparing for bed – more specifically, trying to coax Fareeha into getting ready for bed after a 30-minute long nursing session. She was unusually active near midnight – probably energy accumulated from all her naps – and made noise each time they tried to put her in the crib, which ended up in the master bedroom with them anyway.
So when Zaid called right after gushing through text, he was rewarded with real time interaction with his granddaughter. Even though Fareeha didn't react to his voice and merely fixed the screen with an uncomprehending stare, it didn't stop Zaid from giggling to himself and repeating that this was the most beautiful baby he had ever seen. Of course, he remembered to add that Fareeha looked exactly like Ana when she was a baby too. He went on to give some advice by recounting his own experiences, before signing off reluctantly when his daughters urged him to sleep, noticing the dark circles under his eyes. He promised to call again the next day and to visit as soon as possible.

At the crack of dawn, Fareeha's appetite reared its head again. In her sleepy haze after the feeding session – which was short, thank god – Ana checked her phone and saw that the squad chat had blown up just minutes ago. The soldiers had ended their guard shift in camp, and returned to find a single photo of Fareeha on their phones, with absolutely no explanation at all. Ana had done it on purpose, and they reacted as expected – with screeches, questions, and congratulations laced with expletives. Ana let them ramble on before sending the grown babies to bed with promises of new photos when they woke up, then promptly fell asleep herself.

By the time Ana opened her eyes again, the room was lit by the bright morning sun, and Kamilah was holding Fareeha in her arms. The little one had woken up earlier, Kamilah explained, and needed a diaper change. Apparently Ana had slept right through Fareeha's cries, and she had no problem believing it. Though her body felt much better now, Ana still felt drained – and being woken up through the night definitely didn't help to rejuvenate her. She pushed herself up from the bed, groaning as she felt the cramps in her abdomen.

"You alright?" Kamilah asked, running a hand over her bedraggled hair.

"No," Ana sniffed. "My vagina hurts, I'm getting cramps, and I'm still tired."

"How do your breasts feel?"

"Full."

"Good. Fareeha's been trying to suckle me for a while." Kamilah guided her back into bed, getting her to rest against the headboard. She placed Fareeha into Ana's arms, watching as she helped the baby latch on properly.

Ana blinked slowly when Kamilah lifted her chin, giving her a soft kiss.

"What do you want for breakfast?"

"Steak. Potatoes."

Kamilah cocked her head. "Breakfast, darling."

"Something heavy. I'm hungry."

"Now I see where Fareeha gets it from," Kamilah chuckled, giving her another peck. "I'll see you downstairs. Take it slow, hm?"

"Yes, mom." Ana adjusted Fareeha in her hold as Kamilah made for the door. "And no more kale," she called after her wife. "We are done with kale in this fucking house!"

"Ana!" Kamilah poked her head back in the doorway, gesturing at Fareeha. "Language!"

Two days later, Khalid brought Layla over for a visit. The two were still stuck in base recovering,
though Khalid was already in much better shape than Layla. Where he looked fine except for the bandages poking out under his sleeves, Layla had to hobble around with her casts and lean heavily on her crutch for support. She had been discharged two weeks ago, and reported to Jaida at the command centre for light duties, aiding the new lieutenant who had taken over Ana's station.

Their faces lit up the instant they saw Fareeha lying in her baby rocker, letting out high-pitched squeals that quietened after Ana smacked their heads. Given orders not to disturb the baby, they went into stealth mode and crept up to the rocker carefully. Unable to kneel, Layla fell onto the sofa while Khalid knelt in front of Fareeha, shaking the baby rattle he held. Fareeha merely blinked when he pulled funny faces at her, but otherwise didn't let out a sound.

Layla let Khalid have his fun for a few minutes, then called for her turn with the baby. Because of her cast, they didn't let her carry Fareeha. Instead, Ana laid the child on her lap, and Layla held her casted arm to Fareeha's side for safety. She grasped Fareeha's hand between her thumb and forefinger, cooing and twirling it around. Ana looked on anxiously with Kamilah, worried that Fareeha might be unused to unfamiliar faces and break out in a cry. But the girl stayed quiet while Layla amused herself, occasionally letting out a gurgle or two.

"Look at how much hair you have!"

"Don't!" Ana burst out when Layla's hand moved towards Fareeha's head. "I mean–, do it gently."

"My god, chill. I know how to handle babies." Layla ran her fingertips through the soft hair. "You're so cute, Fareeha," she sang, then tickled the child's stomach. Fareeha burbled at her touch.

"So how long's your maternity leave?" Khalid asked, clapping his hands idly. "Wait, does Kamilah get maternity leave too?"

"Yeah, but it's shorter. I get 3 months and she gets 1."

"Huh. So you're both off now?"

"Nah. Milah will start hers when mine ends. She's just on normal leave now."

"Didn't know you can delay maternity."

"She can, apparently. 'Ways', right?" Ana glanced back at Kamilah, who shrugged with a smile.

"I'm not the one who gave birth, remember?"

"Yeah. Every time I get cramps, I do." Ana grinned, nudging her wife in the side before turning back to Khalid. "Anyway, when are you going back out there?"

"Soon," he sighed. "Maybe in the next week or so. That whole shit's been a fucking mess."

Ana felt Kamilah's arm twitch beside her at the expletives. "The Guard's taking the brunt of the blame, huh."

"Yeah. Now we have to clean up after the big hats. We told them. We kept telling them, but they didn't listen."

"When do they ever," Ana said dryly, leaning forward to clap him on the back. "Keep your chin up. It'll get better. And I'll be back out there with you soon enough."

Khalid snorted in good humour. "Well, don't hurry back on my account. Take care of your baby
first." He nodded his head at Layla, then whipped his gaze around. "Okay, it's my turn!"

"No!"

"Come on, I haven't carried her yet!"

Layla grumbled. "Not like I've been carrying her."

"Yeah, you have – in your lap. Now it's my turn." Khalid scooted over the sofa, but he paused with his hands hovering over Fareeha. He looked back at Ana sheepishly. "Uh, how do you pick up a baby?"

"God, you're such a loser," Layla said as Ana moved over.

She scooped Fareeha up easily, moved Khalid's arms into a proper cradle, and set the child gently into his hold. Khalid took a breath and held it as Fareeha looked up at him, the man holding still as if he was afraid to move.

"Why do you look so nervous," Ana asked. "I thought you liked playing with your niece."

"Yeah, but I only saw her when she was 1 year old. Not 1 week old." Khalid bobbed his arms experimentally. "And Fareeha's not even a week old yet, holy shit. What a fragile little human."

As if in protest to that description, Fareeha's face scrunched up, and her lips parted in a loud wail.

"Oh god, what did I do?" Khalid asked in panic.

"Relax," Ana said as Kamilah swooped in, taking Fareeha in her arms and starting to pace behind the couch. "You're probably just too ugly to look at."

"Didn't she have enough practice with you?" Khalid deadpanned.

Ana laughed. "Fuck you, asshole."

"Ana!" Kamilah whipped around, one hand still patting Fareeha. "Language."

"Oh come on," she groaned. "You didn't say anything when they did it."

"You're the mother, Ana. And since we're on the subject," Kamilah added. "No cursing in Fareeha's presence. By anyone."

"That…includes us?" Layla asked slowly.

"Yes."

Ana sighed in defeat while the other two slouched farther into the sofa, not daring to argue under Kamilah's stern gaze.

As it turned out, Fareeha was fussing for bed, and Kamilah whisked her up to the crib. With the star attraction gone, the two soldiers stayed for just a while longer before leaving. Ana squeezed them both in a hug, and made the two promise to take care of themselves. She smiled wanly at the duet of 'yes, mom', and stood by the garage door as she watched Khalid's car roll leisurely down the empty road.

Only when the weekend arrived did Safiya finally reply to their baby news with three missed calls –
they had crashed into bed after taking care of a fussy Fareeha for an entire day. They returned the call immediately after waking up, and were greeted with Safiya and Zahra's grinning faces. The two looked well, and could barely contain their excitement as Ana brought the phone over to Fareeha. Safiya let out a soft screech when she saw the sleeping baby, then bombarded them with question after question about Fareeha, and vowed to buy all the toys she could get for the girl.

After the baby craze had settled, Ana managed to wring an explanation for their silence over the past days – a mission, as expected. Safiya had spent the past three weeks embedded deep within omnic territory, and it showed. She had thinned noticeably, though her vigour was still palpable even through the call. Zahra, on the other hand, looked more tired than her partner. 'Been on duty for too long', was her explanation, and they expressed no small amount of relief at being back on base. The two had barely laid eyes on each other – even before Safiya's mission – and this short break from fighting was a gift they sorely needed.

Ana couldn't help but sneak a glance at her wife, feeling a pang as she did so. But Kamilah's smile was quick to chase her heavier thoughts away, and Ana had no problems forgetting it when Safiya asked them to wake the baby up, just so she could say hi. They quibbled until their wives had to pull them away from the phone, and the conversation took a calmer turn towards the end. Before the call ended, Safiya mentioned dropping by soon to visit the 'milk monster', as Ana had taken to calling Fareeha. Affectionately, of course.

Though as the days passed by, Ana considered changing it to the 'poop monster' instead.

In their first week home, Ana didn't need to expend too much energy over Fareeha. Kamilah had taken leave so that Ana could grab as much rest as possible, only having to feed Fareeha and carry her whenever Kamilah was occupied. In their second week – the last week before Kamilah went back on duty – she made Ana practice bathing Fareeha and changing her diapers. For the latter, Ana had plenty of practice.

"You make so many poopies, Fareeha," Ana said, undoing her diaper for the third time that day. "Lucky your poopies are teeny." She took the piece of baby wipe Kamilah held out, and wiped Fareeha down. "Hard to believe your little bumbum can make so much poopoo. What?" Ana said when Kamilah snorted.

"How does it feel?" Kamilah asked, handing her a new diaper.

"How does what feel?" She slid the dirty diaper from under Fareeha's clean bottom, and quickly replaced it with a new one. Fareeha's nose scrunched up, and she gave a whine as Ana set her butt back down, but Kamilah tickled her stomach to distract her.

"Reverting back to your first language," Kamilah replied.

"What first language," Ana repeated thoughtlessly, taping the diaper and testing its fit with a finger. "There you go! Now your dirty little bumbum is nice and--" She stopped abruptly when she caught on, and squinted up at Kamilah, who was trying to bite down a smile. "Very funny."

A chuckle escaped Kamilah's lips as Ana dunked the dirty diaper into the plastic bag she held out. "You're almost as fluent in it as you are at whining."

"I have to be, since I can't fucking swear--ow!" Ana whined when Kamilah's knuckles rapped at her head.

"Stop swearing."
"It's built in me, Milah!"

"Well, un-build it. You don't see me swearing around Fareeha, do you?"

"Fine," Ana groaned. She bent down to Fareeha, kissing her forehead. "Just for you, little one. No swears."

Swearing would be a very good release right now.

Ana strode up and down the living room, rocking and singing and pleading with Fareeha, who was fidgeting in her mother's arms and crying at the top of her lungs. The girl had started bawling a good twenty minutes ago, and Ana was starting to get worried – though Fareeha's cries were turning softer in volume, Ana suspected it's only because she was getting tired. Her diaper was clean, she didn't seem interested in feeding, and no amount of singing or cooing or swaying helped to calm her down.

"Please tell me what's wrong, my little darling," Ana begged again, to no avail. Fareeha's face remained scrunched up, fists curled in agitation. Ana flew into the kitchen, where Kamilah was busy at the stove. "Milah, help!"

"Have you tried patting her?"

"Yes."

"Rub her back? It helps when she's fussy at night."

Desperate, Ana rested Fareeha on her chest, with the little one's head on her shoulder. She crooned a soothing tune in Fareeha's ear, rubbing her back gently in circles. Fareeha's cries went on for a few more minutes, before starting to ease into quieter and shorter cries. Ana let out a slow breath, and took to humming as she swayed on the spot, rubbing Fareeha's back until the child was hiccupping instead of crying loudly.

With a giddy laugh, Ana cradled Fareeha again. "Why didn't you tell me this earlier, Milah?"

"Your singing always worked, so..." Kamilah shrugged.

Ana sighed, rocking Fareeha in her hold. "Why do babies even cry, Fareeha?"

Fareeha hiccupsed again, then gurgled.

"How I wish I was you, habibti," Ana lamented. "I'd have such a nice life. I can sleep any time and however long I want. I get carried everywhere. When I want something, I just cry. And I'll get to suckle a tit when I do."

"You'll be suckling your mom's tit, Ana," Kamilah pointed out, setting two plates on the counter.

"Aw no, come on. Now you've gone and made it weird." She looked down at the baby in her arms. "Your mama's a weirdo, Fareeha," Ana said with a grin, then bent down to blow a raspberry on Fareeha's stomach. The baby fidgeted under her mouth, lips twitching into a smile as she blinked blearily. "Do you wanna sleep, little one? Tired from all that crying, hm?"

Ana waited for a 'reply', tickling Fareeha's cheek. "Yeah, me too. Let's go sleepy in your little rocky."

"I guess we're going to eaty in the living roomy again?" Kamilah said with a smirk, lifting two plates of fried rice in her hands.
"Aw look," Ana cooed at Fareeha as she followed Kamilah into the living room. "Your mommy thinks she's being clever again. Do you think she's clever?" She paused with her ear close to Fareeha's mouth. "I think she said 'no', Milah."

"Funny."

"Very." Ana giggled to herself, and set Fareeha down in her little rocker. She kissed the baby soundly on her stomach, swaying the rocker until Fareeha's eyes had fallen shut. Heaving a huge sigh of relief, Ana fell onto the sofa with Kamilah, hand landing on her wife's thigh with a smack. "By the way, what's Fareeha going to call us? We can't both be 'mama', can we?"

Kamilah shrugged. "We can have 'mommy' too, since you've been saying it nonstop."

"I'll be 'mommy'," Ana said quickly. "Sounds more fun. You look more like a 'mama'."

"Really."

"Yeah. All focused and mama business-like. Kinda like my mom, actually. That's a compliment," she added when Kamilah raised her brows.

"It'd better be," Kamilah said, scooping another spoonful of rice. "Now eat your food before it gets cold."

"See? That's something a 'mama' would say."

"Yes," Kamilah played along. "And mommy'd better do what mama says or she's taking the couch tonight."

Ana pulled out her best puppy eyes. "Mama doesn't want to sleep with mommy?"

Kamilah held her gaze steadily for one…two…three seconds before relenting with a sigh. "Yes, she wants to. So please eat your goddamned food before–"

"You swore!" Ana gasped dramatically.

"No, it wasn't–"

"You just swore in front of Fareeha!"

"It doesn't count!" She shoved a spoonful of rice into Ana's mouth before she could say anything else. "Shush or I'll kick your stupid–"

Fareeha stirred in her rocker with a whine, and Kamilah fell silent. They stared frozen in place, staring at the baby as she fidgeted in place, then fell back to sleep again. Satisfied they hadn't woken Fareeha up, they let out a breath in unison. Ana took the plate of rice Kamilah gave her, careful not to clink her spoon too loudly against porcelain.

"It didn't count," Kamilah muttered.

Ana smiled impishly, but humoured her anyway. "Of course it didn't." She leaned down towards the sleeping baby and whispered loudly, "It totally did, Fareeha."

Her banishment to the couch that night was mercifully short, ending with a piercing cry from Fareeha. Kamilah had forgotten that Ana was the only one who could satisfy the milk monster, and so had to pretend not to see Ana's sleepy smirk when she rushed to her wife for help.
Chapter End Notes

Hey, you. Yeah, you. Wanna see the lil bean? Sure you do. Here's art by this bae and that bae. Beanbeans.
"Mama's home," Ana sang when she heard the jangle of keys and the clicks that followed. She swayed Fareeha in her arms, getting the baby's attention for a few seconds before she yawned. Ana heard Kamilah's footsteps move towards the kitchen, then some clinking and paper bags rustling as she unpacked the groceries. Fareeha had just caught Ana's fingertip that had been tickling her, when Kamilah kissed the top of her head.

Ana looked up eagerly. "My ice cream–?" Her voice died off slowly when she saw what Kamilah held in her hands.

Her wife smiled at her look of disbelief. In one hand, she was holding the chocolate and caramel ice cream cone that Ana had kicked her out of the house to buy. In the other hand was a glass jar – or rather, 'Swear Jar', as was written on the label stuck to the side of it.

"Seriously?"

"I got it, didn't I?"

"The shit."

"I'll let that one go this time," Kamilah said, exchanging her goods for Fareeha. She cooed a hello and kissed the baby's stomach, sitting down beside Ana, who was still staring at the jar incredulously. It's one of a cheaper make, with a thin metal lid where Kamilah had cut a slot for the 'donations'.

"Even my mom didn't get a swear jar."

"I'm not your mom."

"Obviously not. You're my re-educator," Ana said wryly, setting the jar on the coffee table. She peeled the paper packaging from her ice cream and bit into it, groaning at the intoxicating hit of sweet-on-sweet. Her two-day craving for this specific flavour was finally sated. "I love you, babe. But you're not seriously going to make me do this."

"I am seriously making you do this. No, Ana–," Kamilah added when she whined. "If either one of us swears, in goes a pound. No questions."

"But–!"

"No 'buts'. If Fareeha's first word is a swear, I will strangle you with my own two hands."

"Right. Because I totally thought you'd do it with your feet." Ana smirked into her next bite of ice cream, watching Kamilah's jaw work in silence – no doubt stopping a curse before she lost the first pound to their swear jar.

Instead, she pinched Ana's nose and pulled her head forward. "No swears."

"...No swears."

Kamilah held her in place a little while more, before letting her go. Plucking a piece of tissue from the end table, she wiped at the chocolate smear on the corner of Ana's mouth. "Your aim still sucks."

"Your face sucks," Ana muttered.
"Sounds like mommy wants the couch again. Doesn't she, Fareeha?” Kamilah cooed, having picked up Ana's penchant for talking to her through Fareeha.

"You know that never works."

"Oh, looks like mommy’s brain is working today." She laughed when Ana knocked their heads together, and gave her wife a kiss to chase her scowl away. "What's mommy watching anyway?" Kamilah looked at the TV when Ana seemed appeased. A cartoon was playing onscreen, featuring a gummy bear and a toy horse.

"Before you say anything," Ana spoke quickly. "I'm looking for good cartoons. For Fareeha."

"Yeah?" They watched the bear and horse place a large log over a river. "Is this one good?"

"No, it's boring."

"Fareeha might find it entertaining."

"I guess."

"You're just bored, aren't you?"

Ana heaved a dramatic sigh. "I'm not made to be a housewife, my dear. Leave me at home for a few more days, and I might repaint the whole house."

"We're not allowed."

"I know. Besides, Fareeha keeps me busy enough." She tickled the baby's stomach, and Fareeha's eyelids fluttered open blearily. "Think I should start exercising again."

"Only light exercises," Kamilah reminded her. "The doctor said--"

"I shouldn't strain myself yet. Yeah, I remember." Ana slumped in her seat, staring guiltily at her ice cream cone before taking another large bite. She rubbed a hand over her stomach, which was still soft and suffered from a case of loose, wrinkly skin. She didn't like looking at it, truth be told. That's why she avoided spending too much time in front of the mirror nowadays. It wasn't much of a morale booster.

Ana worried at her stomach until Kamilah grasped her hand, fingers curling around hers.

"Take it easy for now, amar," she said, a sympathetic smile on her lips. "Rest first, then you can work out however much you like. Maybe I'll join you too." Kamilah patted at her own stomach. "I've been letting myself go a little."

"You're still the prettiest girl I know, albi," Ana crooned, hugging her about the shoulders. "But yes, you have let yourself go–!" Her cackle turned into a high-pitched squeal when Kamilah pinched her hard in the side, but squelched her noise quickly when Fareeha was woken by outburst, wriggling in Kamilah's arms.

"Shush," Kamilah hissed, rocking the baby before she broke into a cry.

"You're the one who–!"

"Shush."
Ana slid off the side of the bed, legs flopping to the floor as she knelt with her face pressed into mattress. Her head was still heavy from a lack of proper sleep, and she groaned into the bed before pushing herself up. Sniffing loudly, Ana shuffled over to the crib and found Fareeha already awake, fidgeting as she looked around curiously at whatever her infant eyes could see.

"Good morning, my cute little spawn," Ana rasped, clearing her throat as she bent down and kissed Fareeha's forehead. The girl wriggled, and her fist knocked into Ana's nose. "Ow. Nice punch, habibi. Good aim too." Ana smiled when Fareeha looked at her blankly, then nuzzled into her stomach. "Let mommy wash up first, okay?"

She held Fareeha's hand, waving it up and down. "Okay, mommy."

"Such a good girl!"

The good girl remained so even after Ana was done – unusually so, if she thought about it. But not unwelcome. Ana scooped the baby up in her arms, walking down the stairs as she cooed, "It's just you and me now, Fareeha. Mama will be back at night. She told you, didn't she?"

While drifting back to sleep after feeding Fareeha, Ana had vaguely heard Kamilah saying goodbye to her baby before leaving for work. She knew Fareeha was asleep by then – having put the child to bed herself – but that didn't seem to deter Kamilah from crooning by the crib.

Fareeha burbled in reply, and Ana said, "I know. And I bet she'll miss you soon enough." She let Fareeha grasp at her finger again as she entered the kitchen, and noticed the post-it stuck to the microwave door.

*Breakfast inside microwave
Kiss Fareeha for me*
- K

"Look, she misses you already," Ana chuckled, kissing Fareeha's stomach as ordered. "Now let's see what mama left me…" She tugged at the microwave's door to find two wraps inside. Poking a finger at the lukewarm flatbread, Ana asked Fareeha, "Warm enough, don't you think?"

Though Fareeha's eyes were fixed at some point past her head, she assumed her baby had agreed, and pulled the plate out. Ana hummed as she went about putting her meal together, adjusting Fareeha in her arm whenever the baby fidgeted. "We really should get a sling for you. Remind me to tell mama later, yeah?" Ana tossed the utensils onto the counter.

"Are you hungry, Fareeha?" Ana asked, plucking a carton of apple juice from the fridge. She held Fareeha closer to her chest, but the baby showed no interest at all. "Alright, but I've got my eye on you," she said, pouring the juice into her glass. "I swear, you love to cry during mealtimes. It's almost as if you know…"

Ana smiled down at Fareeha as she screwed the carton's cap back on. "It's like you're a little troll," she sang, picking up the carton again. But so absorbed in the one-sided conversation was she, that she had forgotten about the glass she had just filled. The carton hit the glass, tipping it over with a heavy *clink* and spilling translucent liquid over the countertop.

"Oh, motherfuck–!"

She righted the glass and threw a towel onto the counter, then froze. Ana lowered her gaze to Fareeha slowly. "You didn't hear that," she said to her daughter, who stared back up at her. "Mama didn't hear that either."
Ana glanced through the doorway at the swear jar in the living room. "Yeah, that doesn't count, does it? Oh come on now," she said when Fareeha gurgled. "We can pretend I never said that. Not like mama will know if we don't tell." Ana wiped up the mess on the counter and threw the towel into the sink.

"Come on, habibti. It's just a slip!" Ana continued, when Fareeha continued looking straight at her. "No, we won't be lying. We'd just be…acting. Like we don't know anything."

Fareeha blinked her guileless, dark brown eyes.

"Oh, fine. You're too good at this, you know?" Ana grinned, pinching her chubby cheek gently.

Fareeha's lips twitched into a smile.

When Kamilah returned late that night, both her wife and daughter were fast asleep in the living room – Ana on the couch, and Fareeha in the baby rocker next to her. At the touch on her cheek, Ana stirred and blinked blearily up at her wife, who knelt beside her.

"Hey," she tried to say, but it came out as a throaty rumble. But it seemed Kamilah got the drift, and kissed her on the cheek. Ana rubbed at her eyes, pushing herself up as Kamilah bent down to Fareeha, rubbing her tummy gently. "Just got back?" Ana asked, noticing Kamilah's fatigues as she hugged her wife about the shoulders.

"Yup." Kamilah swayed the rocker when Fareeha fidgeted in her sleep.

"How was work?"

"How else can it be," Kamilah sighed and sat on the couch with her. "I don't want to go back there."

"Something happen?" Ana asked.

"The batch I trained a few months back? The one with the idiot who tried to shoot with the safety on?" Kamilah continued when she nodded, "They're gone. Only a handful left, but the rest…" She waved a hand tiredly. "Gone."

"I'm sorry."

Kamilah took a deep breath and exhaled through her mouth. She sat up straight, dragging a hand down her face. Then she glanced at Ana, whose stomach growled audibly. "Haven't you eaten?"

"I was waiting for you, duh."

An amused huff. Kamilah leaned over to peck her on the lips. "Touching, but bad for your stomach."

"Oh? And when was the last time you ate?" Ana's smile grew smug when Kamilah faltered, obviously not having a good answer to her question.

Kamilah avoided her victorious gaze, looking everywhere else until her eyes landed on something behind Ana's shoulder. Then her lips curved into a smile to match her wife's.

"What have we here," Kamilah drawled as she reached past Ana, and took the swear jar from the end table.

Ana sucked a breath through her teeth as Kamilah shook the jar, making the six coins rattle accusingly within the glass. "I can explain…"
"I'm sure you can."

"I spilt some juice today."

"Mm-hm."

"And I stubbed my toe."

"Right…"

"Fareeha bit me a little hard today."

"Did she?"

"Then I forgot your name for a while, and had to call you 'Bitch'–" Ana caught herself and groaned out loud, face falling forward into her hands. She grumbled when Kamilah shook the jar in her face, and slapped it aside. "Fuck your fucking jar."

"That's three pounds, darling."

"Fuck you."

"Four pounds. At this rate, I think you'll finance our next trip to Switzerland by yourself."

"I hate you."

"If you say so, my dear."

In the week leading up to Fareeha's first month, Ana had accumulated enough coins in the jar to buy a pair of baby socks with hippo faces stitched on the front. The simple gift was a stand-in for the celebration they chose to postpone, waiting for a time when their family could gather back home. It seemed to be an indefinite wait for now, but it gave them something to look forward to – a goal of sorts, to return home and greet the little one in person. The mothers had a little fun themselves in the meantime, dressing Fareeha up in a dino onesie and making what passed for dinosaur sounds, probably confusing their child in the process. Perhaps it was for the better that Fareeha wouldn't remember this, Ana mused to herself, watching the girl stare back at Kamilah with wide eyes.

As days passed, Fareeha's growth started to become more noticeable. She seemed more alert than in her first month of being a sleepy bundle, and was more interested in the world around her. Fareeha's eyes were better able to focus on objects held close to her; and though she could only keep that focus for just a few prolonged seconds, Ana found herself holding her breath as Fareeha held her gaze and flashed another fleeting, reflexive smile.

The girl's arms, which mostly stayed curled up close to her body before, started stretching out experimentally. She couldn't reach far yet, but Fareeha could unbend her arms a little, and partially open her fists. Ana liked offering her little finger to Fareeha each time she noticed the baby's 'exercise' sessions, and Fareeha's fingers would always clamp around hers instinctively, not letting go until Ana pulled away. She had tried giving Fareeha a few toys to hold, but after the girl accidentally dropped a plastic rattle onto her chest and cried, Ana learnt to give her only soft plushies to hold. The floppy finger puppets wouldn't do – they'd slip out of Fareeha's weak grasp and leave her looking around with a baffled expression.

It didn't take long for Fareeha to recognise her parents. Or familiar faces, at least. If Ana held her face close for long enough, Fareeha's hands would reach towards her, bumping clumsily against Ana's
chin. She would then reward Fareeha with kisses on her curled fingers. The child did seem to recognise Ana faster than she did Kamilah, which was understandable since Ana had spent the most time with her recently. But given enough time, Fareeha would react to Kamilah as well, making a soft smile appear on her mother's lips when she gurgled and waved her arms in Kamilah's direction. That seemed to be enough for her mama – more than enough, actually. The first time Fareeha had cooed and reached up for her, Kamilah's face scrunch up a little before she broke out in a grin. She hugged the child close for the rest of the night, only letting Fareeha go when she needed to be fed again.

With Fareeha more awake and aware, Ana decided to give her a little more 'tummy time' – putting the child on her stomach so she could train those baby muscles and learn to lift her head by herself. Ana would lie on her stomach with Fareeha as well, watching as her baby fidgeted in place and tried to move. She would lift her own head at regular intervals, and croon encouragements to Fareeha, 'See? It's easy. Up. And down. And up!'

At first, Fareeha didn't like the tummy overtime and didn't hesitate to voice her discomfort. Ana would pick her up whenever she cried, before trying again later. Soon, Ana found that having distractions during these sessions helped to keep Fareeha's attention occupied. She would lay a row of colourful toys before Fareeha, whose gaze would follow them as Ana moved the toys around, trying to entice Fareeha into reaching for them. It made for some good family time too, something that helped Kamilah relax each night she came home. The women would play with the toys together, sometimes making up stories on the fly to add a dash of fun. Ana received a knock on her head though, when she told Kamilah's kitty plush to ride Fart, Ana's purple dragon. 'It's totally innocent!' was Ana's defense, but she couldn't stop giggling as Kamilah rolled her eyes.

"How is 'Hey cutie, wanna ride me?' innocent at all?" Kamilah asked.

"Hey, I'm just saying your kitty can mount my--" Ana burst into muffled laughter when Kamilah's palm covered her mouth. She yanked the hand away, but an audible 'ah' distracted her before she could make another dirty quip.

Fareeha gazed up at her mothers from where she lay, hands moving over the covers. She let out another 'ah', and the women crawled closer, rolling Fareeha onto her back when she wriggled in place. They imitated each sound Fareeha made, and spoke to her slowly until the child grew tired, blinking her eyes sleepily.

"Aw," Ana said, smoothing her fingers over Fareeha's soft hair. "We're not that boring, are we?"

"Maybe she's just tired of seeing your face," Kamilah deadpanned, and picked Fareeha up.

"What, like how I'm tired of your shit?"

"Swear."

"It's not even a--!"

"Swear."

"Ugh!"

Soon, Fareeha wasn't the only one with an exercise routine. After the doctor had given Ana the green light to start working out, she plunged back into eagerly. Even if she had to leave the heavy lifting alone for a while longer, it was good to finally work on her body again. She had lost the hardness in her muscles, but she was determined to return to her pre-baby glory. Ana focused mainly
on her pelvic floor exercises first, then threw in planks, push-ups and sit-ups for some variety. Kamilah joined her as promised, but refused to turn the exercises into a contest, insisting that Ana shouldn't push herself too far yet. Though she did find some amusement in Ana's pelvic exercises, by straddling Ana as she raised her hips into the air. 'Weight training', Kamilah called it. But it felt more like 'focus training' to Ana, who just couldn't take her eyes off Kamilah's playful smile. Just as well – it helped to keep her mind off the burn in her muscles, and let Ana push her limits that little bit further.

When Kamilah was away in the day, Fareeha filled her shoes as Ana's exercise partner. Usually, Ana squeezed in some exercise while Fareeha was asleep, so she wouldn't be sweating and sore when her baby needed attention. But if Fareeha was awake, Ana liked putting her in a sling and carrying her while doing squats. Fareeha seemed to enjoy the up-down motion immensely, sometimes even flexing her arms and fingers as if to join in her mother's exercise as well.

So Ana decided to use Fareeha's tummy time as a chance to work out together. While Fareeha remained on her belly, Ana lay on the soft carpet next to her, doing light crunches while cooing to her daughter. She would flip over onto her stomach when her reps were done, mirroring Fareeha's posture and grinning at the child. One afternoon, she stopped dead in her crunches when she saw Fareeha's head lift from the ground. Not that high just yet, but she was able to keep in that position for quite a while, and Ana felt a surge of pride for her daughter.

"You did it, habibti!" Ana gushed to Fareeha, who gave her a wide toothless smile.

With Fareeha growing stronger and more active, Ana started going on daily walks with her daughter, so they both could get some fresh air together. When Kamilah heard of it, she wanted to join in as well, and so started their nighttime walks around the neighbourhood.

"Oh no. Fareeha, no," Ana said when Fareeha stuck the head of the toy snake into her mouth. She tugged at the snake gently, until she pried it out of Fareeha's hands. "It's dirty. You dropped it to the floor just now, remember?"

Fareeha didn't seem interested in listening, and stuck her fingers into her mouth. Ana sighed, turning around when Kamilah came through the main door with the stroller. "Pass me the pacifier, babe."

Kamilah dropped said yellow pacifier onto her palm. Fareeha whined when Ana coaxed her fingers out of her mouth, then replaced them with the pacifier. She sucked on the pacifier contentedly, curling her arms towards her chest as her eyelids drooped to half-mast. Ana lowered her into the stroller, and paused before pulling out the sun shade. Fareeha didn't need that protection from the moonlight, and she should get a chance to appreciate the night sky. However much her baby eyes could see, anyway.

"Think she's going to fall asleep soon," Kamilah said with a smile, stroking Fareeha's cheek gently. The baby turned towards her hand and blinked lazily.

"Eh, she sleeps all the time anyway." Ana carried the stroller down the steps, then let Kamilah push it along. They strolled down the sidewalk, following the usual route they took when Ana was still pregnant.

A small smile grew on Ana's lips as she gazed down at Fareeha, who had seemed so far away while she was still growing in Ana's belly. Her little smiles and gurgles were more than worth all the pains Ana had to go through. She didn't regret it, even if she did moan and gripe for most of those nine months, and shook the house with the occasional hormonal outburst. When a neighbour jokingly asked when she would have another, Ana merely said they didn't plan to have more. Her body and
heart couldn't take even the idea of having to go through all of that again. Kamilah had laughed when Ana told her of the conversation, and agreed with her wife's sentiment as well.

Besides, they were happy enough with Fareeha. More than happy.

They strolled into the playground, following the walking path until they decided to rest on a bench near a streetlight. Fareeha had fallen asleep by then, with her pacifier still firmly lodged in her mouth. Kamilah pulled out the stroller's shade to cover Fareeha from the light's glare, then leaned back as Ana circled an arm around her shoulders.

"Tired?" Ana asked when Kamilah rested their heads together.

"Mm."

"We could've stayed home, you know."

"No, I wanted to walk a little."

Ana hummed, and gave her a light squeeze. Kamilah had been rather worn out for the past days, but she still tended to Fareeha whenever she could. Ana even had to push her back into bed when Fareeha cried at night, reminding Kamilah that she needed the sleep. Her mind was often on heavier things, Ana could tell. But Fareeha always managed to make her smile that little bit brighter. That still didn't stop Ana from worrying over her, though.

"You've been pretty quiet since you got home," Ana said.

"Mm."

"Wanna do the talky with mommy?"

Kamilah snorted, then moved back to fix her with an incredulous gaze. "Really?"

"Hey, since we already did the walky, might as well do the talky too." Ana cackled when Kamilah shoved her to the side, but was quick to slap a hand over her own mouth. She peered into the stroller, where Fareeha stirred and went still again.

"I don't need the talky," Kamilah said, giving her a small smile. "Just the mommy."

"But mommy comes with the talky too. Don't you want to use the full package?"

"I'd rather not, no."

"Really." Ana leaned in. "Not even the…full package?" She grinned when an elbow dug into her side.

"You're horrible."

"Utterly incorrigible?" Ana supplied helpfully, getting an affirmative nod in reply.

"But you still make me happy, for some reason."

Ana opened her mouth, but the wit evaporated from her tongue under Kamilah's tender gaze. She grasped for words in a mind gone blank and tried to string a coherent sentence together, no matter how simple.

"You make me happy too."
Other than making Ana happy, Kamilah was capable of making her scour the house for every piece of dirty clothing and toss it into the washer. It was her monthly routine, and that's why Ana carried a basket full of freshly-dried clothes – more than half of which was her own clothing. As she turned into the master bedroom, Ana set the heavy load down and made her usual promise to never gather such a large pile of dirty clothing again.

No doubt she would make the same promise next month too.

"I'm done!" Ana announced, with hands on her hips. "Happy?"

Kamilah shushed her, moving over to where she stood by the doorway.

"I heard Fareeha cry just now. Is she–?" Ana raised her brows when Kamilah placed a hand on her chest and pushed her back. "What? I'll keep my voice down."

"I just put her to bed," Kamilah said quietly, still pushing Ana backwards until she was in the hallway.

"Milah…" Her unspoken question was answered when Kamilah hooked her fingers onto Ana's collar, and yanked her in for a kiss. They were still moving backwards, Ana's shoulder bumping into the doorframe of the guest room before they entered it proper. Ana cupped Kamilah's cheek as the hand on her chest slid slowly down. She tensed a little and started to pulled away, then Ana noticed Fareeha's toy caterpillar on the dresser behind Kamilah.

"Here? Really?" Ana asked as her wife pressed up against her. "It's the nursery."

"I want the bed, Ana. And I'm not having sex beside Fareeha's crib."

Ana's legs hit the bed, and she fell back obediently at the push against her shoulders. She shimmied further into the bed as Kamilah crawled after her, dipping in to meet her lips again and again. Ana groaned when Kamilah caught her in a hard kiss, clutching onto her wife's thighs as she was pushed down against the covers. A bite on her lip, a grind between her legs, and Ana's need burst to life after months of restraint. How long had it been? 2, 3, maybe 4 months? It didn't matter. Ana just knew it had been much too long, and the scrape of Kamilah's nails along her thigh spoke of a similar sentiment in her partner.

Her hands roamed Kamilah's body, reaching beneath her clothes to run along warm skin and feel the subtle flex of muscles. But even more invigorating still, was the burn of Kamilah's lips over her body, the sound of her name murmured against her skin. Ana could barely breathe under Kamilah's touches, could think of nothing but a deeper, more carnal need–

Until Kamilah tugged the hem of her shirt up.

Ana grabbed onto her hand and stilled, feeling a tinge of embarrassment when she realised why she had done so. Kamilah stopped and looked at her curiously.

"What's wrong?" Kamilah asked.

"Nothing," Ana said slowly, but she wasn't fooling her wife. Kamilah watched Ana rest a hand over her stomach, covering it unconsciously.

"Ana," she sighed.

"I'm still working on it…"
"I know, darling. I can tell. Look." She pried Ana's hand away. "You're already toned."

"Yeah, but there's still flab," Ana mumbled.

"But you're toned! See, there's already definition."

Ana refrained from sucking her stomach in when Kamilah touched her, fingertips running over her stretch marks which still lingered. Knowing Kamilah would have a good answer for each of her grumbles, she settled for giving a very eloquent whine.

"Ana, I love you for you. Not your muscles. You're beautiful to me however you look."

She pouted. "You're just saying that."

"I mean it."

The pout remained. "You mean, you didn't like my muscles."

Kamilah sighed again, though for a very different reason this time. "Yes, I did. I loved your muscles. You have very sexy muscles. And I'm sure you'll get them back soon enough."

Ana couldn't stop the smile from ruining her pout. Her cheeks reddened slightly as she fought off the abashment from making such a silly fuss, and Kamilah helped by pressing a kiss to her lips.

"I love you, amar. You, and your muscles," she murmured, fingertips running through Ana's hair.

Laughing softly at how sincere her wife sounded, Ana locked her arms around Kamilah's neck, and pulled her down for another kiss. "You mean it?" Ana asked, and Kamilah nodded.

She took a quiet breath, gazing up at the soft smile on her wife's lips. "Show me."
Be Still

Fareeha peered quietly up at the woman who carried her, round eyes searching for something familiar in this new face. She was curious, but still cautious. Not a peep came out of her mouth – a stark difference to her relentlessly energetic start to the morning, with constant coos and cries for her mothers' attention.

"Such a good little girl," Fatimah said, tapping Fareeha's nose. The baby blinked, her little fists jerking in response.

"Seems she's alright with you." Ana rested both hands on the dining table. "So, do you think it's okay if—?"

"Oh, of course! What a silly question!" Their neighbour laughed and patted her on the arm. "I'd be glad to take care of her."

"Well, I'd hate to put any more work on you."

Fatimah clicked her tongue. "Nonsense! It's not much work, trust me. Well…" She cocked her head. "It might be a little bit of work, but compared to what you do, this is nothing at all."

Ana sighed quietly, watching Fatimah sway with the child as Fareeha's hand reached up for the fringe of her hijab. With only one month left in her maternity, Ana started looking for a babysitter to watch over Fareeha, while both she and Kamilah were away. It was a mercifully short search – several housewives on base were offering inexpensive childcare services for soldiers and busy parents since the war began. Fatimah already had three under her care, and Ana didn't want to overburden her, even if she insisted it wasn't any trouble.

"Isn't it tiring?" Kamilah asked.

"Not so much, but it is a relief when their parents come to pick them up," Fatimah replied with a smile. "Besides, my children are pretty well-behaved…most of the time. And I'm sure Fareeha won't be a problem, ya?"

Fareeha yawned, having lost interest in the beige scarf. She turned her head, looking around until she spotted Kamilah, swinging a hand in her direction.

"When is your maternity leave ending?" Fatimah asked, handing the child over to Kamilah.

"In a month. Maybe two." Ana glanced at her wife, who tilted her head curiously. "But we might need you a little later."

"Of course. Just call on me whenever you need, yes?" She stood along with the women and walked them to the door. "I am ready, 24/7."

"Like a soldier," Ana chuckled.

Their neighbour squeezed them both in a quick hug, before they were free to make their way home. Ana took Fareeha in her arms, leaving Kamilah free to dig around in her pockets for their house keys. Rubbing Fareeha's stomach gently, she smiled when the child yawned again.

"I told you to sleep last night, habibti. But you just didn't want to listen, did you?" Ana said, holding onto Fareeha's fingers when they wandered up to her mouth again. "Now we're both going to sleep
away the sunlight."

Kamilah snorted. "You're sleeping too?"

"I was on mommy duty last night, okay. Come to think of it, I'm on mommy duty every day." Ana leaned close to Kamilah for emphasis, and had her face pushed away as they entered their own home.

"Yes, yes. You're the best," Kamilah said drily, albeit with a slight curve on her lips as she followed Ana up the stairs. "No one is better at babies than you."

"That's right--"

"Takes one to know one, after all."

Ana stopped right before their bedroom door, shooting Kamilah a squint before she walked in. Fareeha appeared to have fallen asleep, but she stirred when Ana lowered her into the crib. Her eyes fluttered open briefly to watch the socks being pulled off her feet, before drifting back to sleep again. Ana ran her fingertips through the short tuft of hair, watching Fareeha's hands twitch before going still.

Taking a deep breath, Ana exhaled slowly and straightened herself, turning around to find Kamilah already changed into her shorts. "I wanna ask you something."

"Hm?"

"I'm thinking of extending my leave."

"Oh?"

"Yup. She looked back down at the crib. "I thought, maybe I should be with Fareeha a little longer. Do you think I should?"

"Of course. But I thought you were raring to get back to duty."

"Well...yeah, I am. But--" Ana sighed, waving a hand vaguely as Kamilah neared the crib. "I don't know. I just don't feel ready to leave Fareeha alone yet."

"What, don't you trust me?"

Ana clicked her tongue. "Of course I do. But I feel like I should be with her more. She needs me, doesn't she?"

"Then get the extension," Kamilah said, matter-of-fact. She cocked her head when Ana bit her lip. "Something wrong?"

"I want to get out there too."

"I know."

"It feels...irresponsible, to stay away for so long. But I don't want to leave her behind either. Or you, for that matter." Ana pinched her wife's chin, drawing a small smile from her.

"If you want to go, then go. I'll still be here for her."

"That sounds so...selfish." Ana leaned on the side of the crib, gazing at Fareeha.
"You're far from that, Ana."

She tilted her head, and reached down to touch Fareeha's arm. The baby was sound asleep and didn't notice her hand being held by her mother.

"What about you, Fareeha? Do you think I should go?"

"Really?" Kamilah asked incredulously. "You're asking the baby?"

"What? She'd know if she wants me to go."

"Ana, the only place she wants you to go, is to her mouth. With your tit."

Her hand flew up to her mouth to muffle the loud snort. "Well," Ana drawled when she was done snickering. "At least she takes after you." She grinned when she received a pinch on the bum.

"Better that she does," Kamilah said with a wry smile. She circled an arm around Ana's back and tugged her close. "So she can make decisions faster than her mommy."

Ana gave a drawn-out sigh. "Milah…"

"Look. I won't lie – I'd like it better if you stayed home longer. But if you do decide to go anyway, I'll still support you."

"I know you will."

"But I get to be best mom next month."

Ana laughed under her breath, and pressed a kiss to Kamilah's temple. "Don't forget best wife too."

Though Kamilah didn't press the issue, Ana still came to a decision by herself fairly quickly. She'd always hated long periods of indecisiveness and – more importantly – there was Fareeha. There was something about facing her daughter day after day – tending to her fusses, coaxing a smile and laugh, waiting as she fell asleep on Ana's shoulder – that made her seem so much more important than everything else. More so than the world, even.

So she chose her daughter. Chose to hold in her hands a precious life she had brought into this world, rather than an instrument to extinguish another. For just a little longer.

There was a hint of relief in Kamilah's expression when she learnt that Ana – assisted by her doctor from the IVF lab – had filled out the papers. Then she chuckled when informed that she would still be 'best mom' the next month anyway. Kamilah was promised a batch of cupcakes as tribute, but for now, Ana was still the one to hold the title. And she would be the one to hold the fort at home when a bombshell landed at their very doorsteps; a bombshell in the shape of her sister, who gave them a forewarning in the form of a text just two days ago: [BEST AUNT IS COMING TO SEE FAREEHA]

Safiya arrived just before noon with a duffle bag slung over one shoulder, a paper bag in one hand, and a loud exclaim that died on her tongue when Ana slapped her mouth lightly.

"Keep your big mouth shut," Ana warned. "I don't want you startling her."

"Whoa, what have we here? A protective little mama. How cute," Safiya cooed, pinching her cheek as if she were the baby. She reached into the paper bag and fished out an octopus plush with rainbow-coloured tentacles, offering it to Ana. "Here, you want one–?"
Ana smacked her on the back, and she burst into loud cackles as she was yanked through the door. Letting a smile spread on her lips from the infectious laughter, Ana led her sister into the living room, where Fareeha lay in her baby rocker as usual. Safiya dropped her bags to the floor and made a beeline for her niece, reaching down to scoop the child up so gently, even Ana was a little surprised.

"Hey, Fareeha," she crooned. "I've been waiting so long to see you."

Fareeha seemed to warm up quickly under Safiya's bright grin, lips twitching to mirror her aunt's expression as she let out a burble.

"I know, you're really pretty too!" Safiya replied, smacking a kiss on the child's forehead.

"I'm quite sure she said you look like an alien specimen," Ana said.

"A pretty alien specimen, thank you very much," she clarified, then turned her gaze down to admire the baby more. "This is amazing. She looks just like you in your baby photos."

"I know. I'm very good at making babies."

"Making clones, more like," she laughed and wrapped Ana in a one-armed hug, kissing her on the cheek. "You look well."

"And you look a little thinner," Ana said as Safiya released her to tickle Fareeha's stomach. She noted the new, short scars between Safiya's knuckles, and the diagonal cut across the back of her wrist.

"Yeah, well. I'm trying out a new look." Safiya set Fareeha back into the rocker, and sat in front of it with Ana. As she set the octopus beside Fareeha and took out a toy lion, Ana peeked in to find a sizeable collection of baby toys and clothes.

"Holy sh--" She caught herself. "This is…a lot. You know babies grow fast, right?"

"Duh. That's why we got them a little bigger. She can wear them in the future if it doesn't fit now."

After putting the lion beside Fareeha as well, Safiya took out a t-shirt with a cartoon cow print. "My favourite niece is going to be the cutest baby ever."

"She already is the cutest baby ever."

Safiya hummed and looked back at Fareeha, who was struggling to get a good grip on the octopus's round head. She picked up the toy and placed it between the child's hands, which grasped onto the tentacles immediately. Fareeha stared at the octopus, then broke out in bubbly little giggles.

"You're right," Safiya sighed contentedly. "She is the cutest."

Her sister showed none of her usual inclination to wander out of the house, and was instead happy enough to stay at home, helping to care for Fareeha whenever she could. Ana suspected that she was tired – she didn't even try to poke Ana into one of their loudmouthed bickers, happy enough to have long conversations to make up for the past year of being apart. It was calming to have her sister by her side like this, taking the time to lay back and soak in a moment's peace.

The serenity was broken in the evening though, when Safiya swooped in on Kamilah the instant she returned home. Kamilah, already used to her sister-in-law's greetings, just squeezed her back with a smile. Dinner went by in a flash – with Fareeha crying for some milk as well – and they huddled together in the nursery upstairs. While Fareeha lay in her play gym, trying to grab the toys hanging
from the arches above her, the three women sat on the soft rug beside her, keeping one eye on the child and another on the mobile game they were playing together.

"So how long are you staying for?" Kamilah asked, destroying one of Ana's towers with her ballista.

"2 weeks. Then it's back to Asyut, then…who knows where."

"You haven't said what you're doing here."

"Mission planning. We're pooling our intel together, see what we can make out of this mess." Safiya shrugged. "I had to wrangle for this assignment, you know? Just to come over and see you."

"Consider me touched," Ana said as she lobbed a magic bomb at Kamilah's troops. "How's Zahra?"

"She's fine. Been flying a lot, but she makes do. Wish we could be together more often though," she sighed. "All that transport she does, and she never gets to fly me even once. Can you fucking believe it--, what?" Safiya asked when Ana sucked in a breath through her teeth.

"You swore," Kamilah explained. "But I'll let you off this time. Anymore, and you get the swear jar too."

"What?" Safiya laughed, clapping a hand on her knee as she looked to Ana. "Is that why you've been half-swearing the entire day? You can't swear properly anymore?"

"Shut up," Ana muttered under her breath. "I'm trying, okay?"

"Oh yeah, I can tell."

She growled quietly, then pouted when Kamilah took out her wizard's tower. Ana sent her troops rushing for Kamilah's base, then looked up when Fareeha gave a distressed wail. In her efforts to reach for the pink ice cream cone to her left, Fareeha had managed to turn herself onto her front, but was stuck when she couldn't roll herself back. Her whines quickly gave way to cries, and Ana moved first, rolling her carefully onto her back. She patted and sang to Fareeha, who remained on the cusp of a full-blown cry, hiccupping until her eyes focused on her mother. Ana smiled, kissing her little hands before placing the ice cream toy between them.

"Someone's becoming an expert mama," Safiya commented as she straightened herself.

"I've had plenty of practice," Ana said proudly, holding her chin high before gasping at her phone screen. Her kingdom had been utterly decimated, along with Kamilah's. "What the fu…" She dragged the vowel out, meeting Kamilah's eyes as she finished the word. "…fun. What the fun, Safiya."

Her sister cackled. "You two made it so easy."

Safiya couldn't cackle for much longer during her stay, as she had become the swear jar's best donor in the days to come. Just like Ana, the swears kept flying out of her mouth before she developed a filter, from losing one too many coins to the damned jar. Then came the half-finished swears that tactfully ended in harmless variations, until they devised a tactic to save them from bankruptcy – that was to completely replace swear words with innocuous ones. 'What the fart' was their favourite, and 'how the hummus' was a close second. 'You piece of kale' was specially reserved for Kamilah, though Fareeha still remained their 'sweet little bean'.

Said little bean took no time at all opening up to Safiya, who spent much of her off-duty hours with
her niece, and was now greeted by Fareeha with the same delight she saved for her mothers. The girl
didn't mind being in Safiya's presence, and would calm down quickly from her fusses while being
carried by her aunt. In fact, Safiya had discovered a new method of soothing an agitated Fareeha –
by sitting next to the child and plucking the strings of her old acoustic guitar. As rusty at the
instrument as Safiya was, Fareeha didn't seem to mind, and became attentive while listening to the
music.

Safiya joined in their play sessions too, with all the eagerness of a bouncy toddler. She held her toy
unicorn gleefully, playing along in the storytelling with their dragon and kitty plushies – with
surprisingly little dirty jokes, to Kamilah's relief. Fareeha liked grabbing the horn of the unicorn, but
they had to keep a close eye on her after she poked it into her nose and worked herself into dry tears
again.

Even without the girl's mothers, Safiya liked to play with Fareeha and the unicorn by themselves, the
woman giggling along with the child's bumbles. It became a routine, something that Safiya obviously
looked forward to each night.

But when Ana glanced back at the bed, where Safiya had fallen onto with her face against the
covers, she didn't think her sister had much energy left for play.

"Remember to give me your will before you die," Ana said, guiding Fareeha's legs into the onesie.

Safiya gave a muffled groan and rolled onto her back, resting an arm over her forehead. "Fuck off."

"Milah isn't here, so I'll let that one slide–"

"I heard that!"

"How'd she hear that from the study–?" Safiya muttered.

"She's freaky like that. Isn't that right, Fareeha?" Ana said, holding Fareeha's gaze as she pulled the
sleeves over her arms. Snapping the buttons on the onesie, she rubbed the baby's stomach – their
established signal that it was time for bed. It didn't take long for Fareeha's eyes to droop, and Ana left
her alone to grab some rest.

She moved over to the bed and flung herself on top of her sister – not a very wise decision in
retrospect, but Safiya's winded exclamation didn't rouse Fareeha, so all was well. Ana chortled when
she was shoved to the side, and remained lying on her back, staring up at the ceiling while Safiya
cought her breath.

"Tired?" Ana asked.

"Yeah."

"Then go to sleep. On your own bed."

"Don't feel like it."

"What, do you need me to put you to sleep too?"

Safiya turned her head and inched forward, whispering in Ana's ear, "Fuck off." They waited a
moment for Kamilah's reproach, then shared matching smirks when it didn't come.

"So? What's up?"
"Stuff."

"Really? I couldn't have guessed." Ana grinned when Safiya's elbow knocked into her side. "Work stuff?"

"Yeah. We've been here for a week and it feels like we're getting nowhere. We want to hit the omnium, but it's fu-farting impenetrable. Ugh." She rubbed her eyes. "I don't even feel like thinking about it right now."

"Then don't. You're off-duty. Rest."

Safiya heaved a sigh, covering her face with both hands before dragging them down. "You know, I've been having this weird feeling… That if mama's still alive, she would've figured something out by now. Kicked their fucking asses to hell and back."

"I bet if she was here, she would've yelled at them until they crawled back to the factory in shame," she chuckled with her sister.

"What do you think you're doing up past your bedtime? Go to bed this instant!"

"No backtalk, or I'm grounding you for another week!"

"What are you doing with that gun? Put it back before you embarrass yourself." Safiya's laughter grew louder with Ana's.

"You want to fight? Good. Go. But don't come crying to me when you get a hole in your chassis."

Safiya smacked her thigh in mirth. "That's from the time you picked a fight at school, right? They sent you home, then you went back the next day and kicked that dude's ass anyway."

"Yeah," Ana said, thinking back to the look of disappointment on her mother's face. It was more potent than any reprimand she could ever receive. "Mama was always more bark than bite though. Didn't even ground me when I got suspended."

"That's because you'd already broken your stupid leg. Figure it's punishment enough. But yeah. She's more bark."

Ana glanced at her. "Why, do you miss her?"

"Yeah. Sometimes I do. What?" Safiya added when Ana's look grew incredulous. "I know I fought with her a lot, but I still loved her, okay?"

"Honestly, it was hard to tell. But yeah, I get you," she said, drumming her fingers on her stomach. "Sometimes I wish we had more time with her."

"Mm." Safiya let out a breath. "You think Fareeha will fight with you when she grows up?"

Ana huffed. "I hope not."

"You fought with mama a bit too."

"Yeah. But that doesn't mean I want my own kid to argue with me." Ana shrugged, thinking it over. "Then again, I'd be surprised if Fareeha doesn't. I'll just deal with it when the time comes, I guess."

"I'm sure you will."
Safiya closed her eyes, and they lapsed into silence for a while. "Next time, we should go up to the roof."

"Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow."

Between their rooftop visits, baby playtime and nightly heart-to-hearts, the remaining week passed by fairly quickly, and soon it was time for Safiya to leave again. But not before Fareeha treated her aunt to her very first squeal of laughter, her volume taking the women by surprise. Safiya, who had been tickling Fareeha's chin with the rainbow limbs of the octopus plush, paused and stared as if afraid she had broken the baby. But when Fareeha continued giggling and flailing her arms towards the octopus, they continued their little game of catch, occasionally tickling the girl for more laughs.

Safiya had hugged Fareeha to her chest before she left, wearing a small smile when Fareeha knocked a fist into her nose in farewell. She made a solemn vow to not break any more of her limbs, to take care of her wife and herself, then made her sisters promise the same before she left to catch her flight home. Ana bit her lip, watching Kamilah drive off with Safiya towards the airfield. She glanced down at Fareeha, whose eyes were still searching for the women who had just left. Stomach tying into knots, she forced her lips into a smile and tapped Fareeha's nose, pulling the child's gaze towards her.

"I'm still here, habibti," she murmured.

Fareeha blinked, gurgling softly at her mother's voice.

After that, Ana started working harder on her body, determined to bring it back to its previous level of fitness. But even so, Fareeha remained the primary focus of her time and energy. She took solace in watching her child grow, finding it easier to breathe in Fareeha's presence. A natural effect perhaps, of looking after a baby with no concept of fear or worry – just an innocent curiosity from the moment she opened her eyes, and the ability to find endless joy in seeing the familiar faces of her mothers.

After her first excitable moment with the toy, Fareeha became more generous with her laughter, and it was common to hear her delighted squeals about the house whenever Ana raised her to the air. There were many things that made her terribly happy – the toy lion that she could hold while lying in her rocker, the pastel-coloured plane which Ana 'flew' around her, and loud raspberries on her stomach were her favourites.

She also liked being carried around the house by Kamilah, who would hold her face-forward so the child could see where they were going. Fareeha giggled whenever she spotted something amusing – be it their photos on the wall, or the mirror in their bedroom – and Kamilah would pause to let her touch the object, getting a feel of its texture before moving on.

Ana smiled when she saw the pair in the hallway, Fareeha's face lighting up when they drew close.

"Yes, that's mommy," Kamilah said, holding the child out towards her. Ana bent down, and Fareeha's hand landed right on her nose. "Squeeze it, Fareeha. I'm sure it'll honk."

"Very funny." Ana held still as Fareeha patted repeatedly about her face, then reached forward to take the girl into her arms.

"Who called just now?" Kamilah asked, walking down the stairs with Ana in tow. "I heard your
"Phone ring."
"Papa. He's just checking in to see how we're doing."
"How is he?"
"Said he's fine. Sounds exhausted though."
"Did he say why?"
"No," Ana sighed. "I just hope he isn't overworking himself."
"I wouldn't be surprised if he is. At least he's not on the frontlines."
"Yeah, I guess." Ana fell heavily into the sofa, looking down when Fareeha laughed from the downward motion. A wan smile tugged at the corners of her lips, and she patted the child gently. She gave another unconscious sigh, staring blankly down at Fareeha as her mind wandered far from home, until a touch on her jaw distracted her. Ana turned her head, and received a soft peck on her lips.

"Don't think so hard, hm?" Kamilah massaged the tense muscles in the back of her neck. "They'll be fine."

Ana took a breath, but could piece no words together to describe her worry. She gazed at her wife's soft countenance and exhaled slowly, feeling the tension leave her shoulders as she forced herself to relax. Closing her eyes for a moment, Ana tried to clear her mind, finding some peace in the quiet.

"Milah?"
"Hm?"
"...I think I need some story time."

Kamilah chuckled. "I'll go get the toys."
With Fareeha hard at work growing up and becoming more inquisitive about her surroundings, her mothers wanted to get her accustomed to a new environment as well – one in which she would spend a lot of time very soon. In just another month, she would be placed in Fatimah's care for most of her days, away from the parents she had seen constantly since birth. Worried that she might feel uncomfortable with the separation, they decided to let Fareeha spend some time alone with their neighbour. At least, they tried to.

They had nodded with a smile when Fatimah bid them a happy goodbye, then exchanged uncertain looks when she closed the door. Ana's arms felt empty as they returned to their house, and there was a constant, niggling feeling that she had forgotten something. Of course, she knew what that 'something' was. But it only left her pacing around the house restlessly, trying her hardest not to barrel through Fatimah's front door and snatch her baby back. She kept glancing at the window facing Fatimah's house, ears pricked for cries and wondering how Fareeha was doing. Was she distressed? Was she lost? Did the neighbour's house feel too foreign for her? How were the other kids treating her? What if she was crying for her mothers? What if she felt abandoned when they didn't show up to hug and sing to her? Did she need her tummy rubs? Or footie rubs?

Ana ended up in the nursery an hour later, spending some tummy time by herself on the soft rug and flicking through baby photos on her phone. Just like Fareeha, who was never satisfied to stay on her stomach and kept trying to push herself up, Ana sprang to her feet quickly, with the intent to work off her unspent energy. Kamilah had barely gotten a laugh at Ana before she was swept off her feet, and carried upstairs for some vigorous exercise. It had been difficult to get some uninterrupted time together, what with Fareeha's constant need for attention and the shorter hours Kamilah spent at home. But since Kamilah's maternity had started, it was the perfect opportunity to let go, and not be on constant alert for their daughter – for a while.

Even as they lay spent, fingertips gliding over bare skin and combing through mussed hair, Ana's eyes flickered over Kamilah's shoulder to check on the empty crib out of habit. Kamilah laughed under her breath, inching forward to distract her with a kiss.

"Just can't take your mind off her, huh?"

"Mm. It's kind of sad. I can't remember what I did before I had a baby."

"You got drunk."

"God, I can't even remember the last time I touched alcohol."

"You got hurt."

Ana clicked her tongue. "Hey, I improved on that, okay?"

"And sometimes, you get really sweet. Reminds me why I married you."

"What, can't you remember all the other times?"

"Not for the life of me, no." Kamilah snickered when Ana's palm landed on her butt in a loud smack. She wriggled when Ana grabbed her, snaring her in a deep kiss and pushing her onto her back.

"Can we go get her after? You know, earlier?" Ana asked, breath a little heavy when they parted.
The corner of Kamilah's lips curved in a knowing smile. "Of course we can. But for now…"

"Mm-hm." Ana bent down for another kiss. "Read my mind."

"There's not much to read anyway."

"Fuck you."

"Fuck me indeed."

They had reached an unspoken agreement that swear falling from their lips through panted breaths wouldn't be penalised, and so seized the chance to drive each other up the wall; Ana grinned victoriously into sweaty skin with each exclaim she wrung from her wife. It was needy, desperate, intimate as they so desired, but never put into words or proper action. They took the time, as long as they could, until all the tension in her body had melted away, and her partner was equally fulfilled.

It was without reluctance that they left the bed to wash up – meeting a slight delay while doing so – and put themselves together to fetch their daughter.

Fatimah had laughed when she opened the door and found them standing by the doorsteps, a few hours earlier than agreed upon. But she gladly handed Fareeha over, the child letting out an excited burble when Ana cradled her. She had been on her best behaviour, Fatimah reported, and hadn't cried except for the time when she wanted her octopus plush. The other children had offered her some of their toys to play, but left her alone for the most part.

"I just felt so lonely without her. Well, mostly." Ana glanced at her wife, whose eye twitched at the reference that Fatimah thankfully missed.

"Ah, it's normal," Fatimah said, waving a hand. "Honestly, you don't have to worry about getting her comfortable and whatnot. The kids will always settle in one way or another. For now, just spend all the time you can with her. It'll be the most important thing you do, trust me."

Ana did – she understood the woman's meaning. She felt a little silly now, trying to let Fareeha stay away when she was still here. The girl didn't seem to begrudge her though, and instead kept smiling and gurgling up at her on the way home, as if to recount her day, with the octopus still clutched in her hands.

Ana kissed the girl's head and sighed, "How do you handle it, Milah? I can't even stand even half a day without her."

"Honestly?" Kamilah looked at her, unlocking the door with a click. "I didn't handle it…at first."

"Do I even want to know?"

"No, I don't think you do."

She hummed, smirking down at Fareeha and leaning close. "What's your guess, little one? How many cadets did she make cry? I say 10." Ana turned her ear towards the girl and nodded. "Fareeha says you made your whole class cry."

"You underestimate me."

Ana stared at her wife, who shut the door with a poker face. "You're right. I really don't want to know."
"Oh Fareeha, my dear little princess, light of my life, joy of my heart, please," Ana begged when Fareeha turned her face away from the baby bottle again, lips pursed in a petulant pout. "You have to drink this, or you'll get hungry again very soon. Please listen to mommy?"

Ana held the bottle just before Fareeha's eyes, shaking it gently to entice the little one. It worked – the girl's hands reached up towards it experimentally, grabbing onto its plastic cap. Ana lowered the bottle again, resting it in Fareeha's mouth and growing hopeful when the girl latched onto it. But a few sucks later, her face scrunched up again and she let go, turning away from the offending bottle.

"Fareeha please," Ana sobbed along with her daughter's whines. "For the love of all that is good and pure and–"

"And unlike her mommy?"

She heaved a sigh and glanced at the woman leaning against the kitchen counter, munching on chips with a smile. "You could help too, mama. Just saying."

"You're doing just fine," Kamilah assured her.

"Our daughter takes a few sips before refusing to drink. How is that 'just fine'?"

"You just started, Ana. She needs time to get used to the bottle."

"Not too much time, I hope," Ana looked down when Fareeha's hand landed on her breast, the child gazing up at her expectantly with her head slightly turned. "No, darling. It's all in here now." She held up the bottle, but Fareeha barely even glanced at it. Ana was a little worried, truth be told. The girl would have to rely on the bottle when Ana went back to her duties, but she kept crying out each time they tried to feed her with it.

Kamilah came forward and took the girl from Ana, swaying Fareeha when she let out a small whine. Taking the bottle from Ana, she tried to coax Fareeha into drinking just a little more, but to the same effect. Fareeha sucked on it a few times before refusing to continue.

"I don't get it. She likes pacifiers. And it's still breast milk. We're just putting the two things into one."

"You said it yourself, she likes breasts too much for her own good." Kamilah set the bottle on the dining table, then hugged the girl to her chest, patting Fareeha's back lightly. "All this trouble, and we haven't even given her formula yet."

"Oh god…"

"Patience, my dear." Kamilah pinched her cheek. "We'll get there soon. In the meantime…" She tapped at Ana's breasts. "Get these ready."

"What, for her or for you?"

"Aren't you always ready for me?" Kamilah deadpanned, making towards the couch with Ana following close behind.

Placing a kiss on top of Fareeha's soft hair, Ana smiled when the girl lifted her head from Kamilah's shoulder and looked up at her. It might have been her imagination, but Fareeha's gaze seemed a little reproachful – especially with that small pout still on her lips.
That pout was a constant in their days after, each time they tried to convince Fareeha that the bottle was just as good as her mother's teat. It was a struggle indeed, but just as Kamilah had insisted – patience was key. They alternated between the bottle and breast regularly, letting Fareeha grow accustomed to both and understand that it was milk either way. The true magic happened when they changed the tip of the bottle – Fareeha seemed to change her tune after that, taking to the bottle naturally and drinking her fill without a single whine. Then they switched to formula milk, and had to go through the entire process again.

Thankfully, where there were headaches for her mothers, Fareeha had no trouble forgetting the fusses she made when the bottle was out of her sight. Her attention was constantly kept busy by the various toys and objects that were put in front of her – be it during her playtime or not. When left to her own devices, Fareeha would try to stretch her arms from where she sat, and pull the nearest object towards her. Often she would fall onto her side and laugh at herself, and sometimes she would succeed in grabbing her item of interest – which would invariably end up in her mouth. Ana had to pull pillows and blankets away from her, and Kamilah once had to leave her book out to dry, its corner damp with saliva.

They learnt to relax though, and allowed her to explore as much as she wanted under supervision. So they watched as Fareeha grabbed her toys – which her mothers meticulously cleaned – and stuck them into her mouth with her eyes shining in glee. Fareeha still hadn't a good grasp on the concept of speed and force though, and often brought her toys up to her mouth too fast, missing her target and smacking herself on the nose or cheek. Once she had fallen onto her back after hitting herself with Ana's dragon plush, then stared up at Kamilah hovering over her, eyes wide with betrayal and confusion.

As the toys they gave her were mostly soft, she didn't break into self-inflicted crying episodes and recovered from her fumbles quickly. Ana enjoyed lying beside the girl, chuckling as she handed toy after toy to Fareeha, each one passing the chomp test before being discarded for a new one. Perhaps she enjoyed it a little too much – Kamilah had walked into the room before, to find both her daughter and wife lying on the play mat, each with their own fist stuck in their mouths. 'It's research', Ana had insisted, to find out why babies liked sucking on their fists. 'Or practice', Kamilah snipped back, tossing a handkerchief at her face.

Nevertheless, Ana didn't stop her 'practice', copying Fareeha's actions to encourage her harmless explorations. Her daughter seemed to appreciate the company, even more so when Kamilah joined in as well, tapping the rattles and baby keys at her own mouth.

There were times when Ana paused to take in the sight, smiling to herself as she watched Kamilah place kisses on Fareeha's tummy, the child's legs kicking up excitably as she squealed at the ticklish sensation. She would miss this, she knew. She would miss being together as a family, day after day, with nothing much to worry about except their child; it would become a luxury soon enough.

Then she stopped herself, blinking when she realised Kamilah's eyes were on her. She would flash a smile, return a kiss, carry her child and hold her tight – choosing to live in the moment, instead of fearing when it would pass her by.

As it always was with retrospect, time flew at a speed that was almost criminal. Soon, Ana was taking her fatigues out of the wardrobe again, to give it a good wash and ironing as their last week of leave drew to a close. She held the uniform up to her body and looked herself over in the mirror, anticipation and reluctance blending together in her stomach. Kamilah had found Ana staring at the mirror in the bedroom, and wrapped her arms around Ana's waist after setting Fareeha into her crib.

"You'll get used to it," was the best comfort Kamilah could offer, along with a kiss on her cheek.
"I guess so," Ana replied quietly, though she dearly wished she didn't have to. The best that could happen, was for Ana to join the frontlines and help their forces end this war as soon as possible. Then she would be reassigned back to base, where she could have more regular hours instead of having to spend weeks or months away from home, away from her family.

As it so happened, her wish did come true – partly, but in a manner that only left her indignant and utterly frustrated.

The first morning had started well enough; Ana donned her uniform, dropped a sleepy Fareeha off at their neighbour's, and kissed her wife goodbye before marching smartly into the Guard's headquarters. She stood at attention before the lieutenant colonel's desk, and received her orders: Captain Amari was assigned to guard duty at the base's perimeter, with a company of 200 soldiers under her command.

"Is there a problem, Captain," the colonel asked disinterestedly when Ana made no move after his dismissal.

"Sir, will this post be permanent?"

"For the time being."

Ana steeled herself and continued, "I believe I would be of better use in a combat zone. Sir."

"Are you questioning my orders, Amari?"

"No, sir. But I would like to point out that with my record and cybernetic enhancement, I'd be more effective in--"

"My judgment then. Do you think I am making a mistake?"

Yes. She kept her face placid, eyes forward. "No, sir."

"I know full well what is in your record and what you have to offer," He stood slowly, squaring his shoulders to emphasise his height over her. "And this is where I have decided you will stay, until further instruction. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"I have a feeling you think that this is an unimportant post, Amari. Compared to the frontlines, it seems trivial, doesn't it?"

"Every post serves its purpose," Ana said shortly. "Sir."

"And yours will serve as well." He rounded around the table, coming to stand in front of her. "You know full well about our base's strategic importance as the centre of our operations. I don't have to remind you of that, do I?"

"No, sir."

"But perhaps you have forgotten something equally important. We have thousands of civilians – including refugees we have taken in – living within our walls. You are the last line of defense that will stand between them and the omnics. If you fall, then thousands will fall with you. Do you understand, Amari?"

"Yes, sir."
He took a step forward, forcing Ana to meet his eyes. "Then do as you are ordered," he intoned. "And do not question your superior's orders. Understood?"

Her hands clenched tight behind her back. "Yes, sir."

The colonel stared at her for a moment longer, before nodding and moving away. "Dismissed." As he walked back to his seat, he added, "If I were you, Amari, I'd take this as a blessing. You have a wife and child. I know many soldiers who would give anything to be close to their families instead of taking omnic fire in the field."

Ana gritted her teeth, and didn't dignify his comment with a reply as she marched out of the office.

It was difficult to take this 'blessing' in stride. It became even harder after Ana had reported to her station and assigned her company to patrol routes around the eastern perimeter. She stood between the two dormant turrets at the top of their watchtower, and stared in the direction where the barricades had been set up along Cairo's border. Not that she could spot them from such a distance – even with her cybernetic eye – but knowing there was a battlefield just beyond this peaceful corner of the city set her on edge. It also reminded Ana that she was stuck there against her wishes, and she quickly descended the ladder before she built up an urge to break the colonel's nose.

She spent the day surrounded by surveillance equipment and read reports sent back from the frontlines, heart unsettled throughout their long duty shift. Upon returning home, she had vented to Kamilah, clenching her fists repeatedly as she paced around their living room. Kamilah listened to her quietly before clutching Ana's hands, forcing her to stop in her tracks and breathe deeply. It took a while for Ana's iron grip to loosen around Kamilah's gentler hold, and she made sure to set her anger aside before picking Fareeha up into her arms. She smiled when Fareeha's hand smacked into her nose in a happy greeting, the child laughing when Ana nuzzled into her stomach.

"Do you think she missed us?" Kamilah asked, catching Fareeha's foot before it kicked up at Ana's head.

"Yeah." Ana chuckled at the girl cooing and clutching at her hair. "I think she does."

A few more days passed, but Ana's dissatisfaction did not. She could not bear staying at the same post day after day, doing nothing when she should be out there, fighting alongside the rest of the Guard. Without much clout herself, Ana could do little about the orders she had received. So she went to the one other person she knew who had some degree of influence.

"I'm afraid I can't help you, Ana. You're with the Guard now." Jaida's eyes glinted with amusement when Ana rested her head in one hand. "What, did you think I could pull a miracle out of my ass?"

Ana exhaled forcefully. "I don't know. I just can't stand guard duty anymore. It's just endless waiting and expecting and not being able to do a single fucking thing." She caught herself – first for the slip, then the ramble. "I'm sorry, ma'am. I know it's late and I'm wasting your time, but..."

"I understand," Jaida said, softer than Ana had ever heard her. "But don't you think what the colonel said is right? You have a family to think about--"

"With all due respect, ma'am," Ana broke in exasperatedly. "That bullshit didn't sound smart coming out of the colonel's mouth, and it won't sound better coming from you." She paused, wondering if she had crossed the line, but Jaida's lips merely curved into a smile. "I have a family I want to keep safe, and I can do that best out there. And let's be honest, ma'am. If the omnics manage to fight their
way right to our doorsteps, the war's already been lost. I won't have a family to think about anymore."

"How very astute," Jaida said drily. She lowered her gaze to the desk, falling deep in thought. Then she tapped once on her keyboard, and the holo-projection displaying Ana's file flickered off. Leaning back in her chair, Jaida scrutinised Ana silently before speaking, "Let's set our ranks aside for now. Have an…honest conversation. But I don't want you babbling about this to everyone, understood?"

Ana tilted her head curiously. "Yes, ma'am."

"Ranks aside, Ana," Jaida reminded her lightly. "Have you studied our situation so far? And not just in Cairo – countrywide."

She nodded.

"Thoughts?"

"From what I can tell, we've been holding out. But just barely, and it's not quite enough. Some days we win a little, then we'll lose a little more in turn. We're losing ground – slowly, but surely – and it looks like they're trying to force us towards Cairo. It's only a matter of time before we're boxed in, with nowhere left to go." She took a deep breath, and exhaled shakily. "I'm scared, Jaida. I'm scared that if we don't fight back, if I don't do anything, it'll be the end of us."

Jaida nodded slowly. "Good. Fear can turn a cornered cat into the deadliest tiger."

Ana snorted. "Did you just think of that, ma'am?"

"Shut up." Jaida rolled her eyes, though she wore a smile. "I can tell you, Ana, that you're already thinking clearer than half the brass. Many of them believe that attrition will see them through this war. Useless bastards." She shook her head. "Tell me, what would you do if you had command of the entire army?"

"I'd…push forward. Concentrate our forces and push from the north and south. I'd force the omnics back to the omnium, give them no room to maneuver… That is, if we have the manpower to do so."

"Yes. Manpower is one of our greatest concerns now, isn't it?"

"Ma'am? Jaida," she corrected when Jaida raised a brow. "Do you have something in mind?"

"For now, just the barest of plans. But it might be a while before…" Jaida steepled her fingers, frowning in thought.

"Before…?" Ana prompted when she stayed quiet.

Jaida blinked, and looked up at her. "Before I can set it in motion. Thank you, Ana. You've given me something to think about. Now, isn't it late? Don't you have a family to get back to?"

"Yes," she said slowly.

"Then you're dismissed, Captain. Go home and grab some rest."

Ana nodded, rising from her chair. She stopped just before the door and turned around. "Ma'am. If
you ever need my help…"

"Of course," Jaida said, brow raised as if surprised she would even ask the question. "It'd be a waste to leave you back in base, Amari."

Ana's lips parted in a grin. "Have I ever told you that you're the best damn major I know?"

"I'm not bringing you along just to kiss my ass, Ana. Just a heads-up."

Fareeha giggled playfully as Ana pulled on her arms, helping her rise into a sitting position. Her bright eyes looked up at Ana from under the hood of her bear onesie, lips parted in laughter as she was lowered back onto the bed once more. Each time Ana pulled her up, her legs kicked out excitedly as she cooed her approval at the motion. After going through a handful of repetitions, Ana rewarded the girl's efforts with a kiss on her forehead and rubbed their noses together, inspiring another bout of bubbly giggles from Fareeha.

"You're having fun," Kamilah said, flopping onto the bed next to Fareeha, who squealed from the bounce in the mattress.

Ana hummed and bent down to kiss her, then nuzzled into the curve of her neck, inhaling deeply. "Mm. And you smell nice."

"Not in front of our daughter." Kamilah pushed her away with a finger, but not before allowing Ana to steal another kiss. She reached a hand out to Fareeha when the girl turned onto her front, pulling her hoodie back so she could look around. "I've been meaning to ask. Did Jaida ever say when she'd…?"

"No." Ana shrugged. "I get the feeling it'll be some time before anything happens."

"Hm."

"Why?" She lay down on top of her wife, twirling a lock of Kamilah's hair around her finger. "Miss me already?"

"It'd be nice to know, that's all."

"Aw. I miss you too." Ana snickered when she received a poke in her side. "I know, Milah. But it won't be for a while, so you'll still have me, hm?"

"Is that your plan, Captain Amari? I'll have you for as long as I'll have you?"

"Pretty much."

"It sucks."

"You suck too," Ana cooed, puckering her lips as she gave Kamilah another smooch. "But I still love you." She grinned at Kamilah's failed attempt to hide a smile, before she was distracted by Fareeha's excited burble to the side. Ana looked over to find Fareeha lying on her back again, apparently having succeeded in turning herself over.

"Well, well. Look who doesn't suck," Kamilah drawled.

"You're doing great, little one!" Ana crooned as she scooted towards Fareeha. "I'm so proud of you--ow!" She flinched back when Fareeha's flailing foot kicked right at her bottom lip.
Kamilah didn't even try to hide her cackle. "Now I'm really proud of you, Fareeha."
"Yes, my little milk monster?" Ana glanced down at the girl strapped to her front in the baby carrier. Fareeha flashed a wide toothless smile, letting out a coo as her legs kicked by Ana's sides. "Oh, I know you wanna walk. But you might want to do the crawlies first," Ana cooed back at her, tweaking her nose gently.

Fareeha giggled, clutching onto the carrier's shoulder straps. Her attention wandered off as they strolled through the supermarket, round eyes whipping around to whichever colourful or loud object caught her interest.

"Maybe we should get her a front-facing carrier," Ana said to her wife, who strolled beside her with phone in hand, scanning through their grocery list.

"But she can't see us that way," Kamilah replied absently, no doubt already planning their circuit through the market. "Besides, this is a more comforting position for the baby."

"I guess." Ana slowed down and grabbed a packet of oatmeal, tossing it into the cart.

"Mm. I'll get our shampoo and stuff. Want anything?"

"Oh. Yeah, get me the…uh. Some–, er. Um, blood sticks. For periods."

"Tampons," Kamilah supplied with an incredulous look on her face.

"Tampons! Yes, tampons. How did I forget that, what the heck."

"Obviously your brain box is a little empty today." An amused smirk curved Kamilah's lips. "Now, be a dear and get us some peanut cream, a bread stack, and cow juice."

"I hate you," Ana deadpanned, receiving a pinch on her chin before Kamilah strode farther down the aisle. "There mama goes. Nyoom!" Ana lifted Fareeha's hand to accompany the sound effect, grinning when Kamilah looked back at her with a cocked eyebrow.

Fareeha kept quiet, her gaze staying on Ana for a second before straying away again. She was kept endlessly occupied, kicking her legs and burbling whenever she got excited, as Ana picked up a jar of peanut butter and a loaf of bread. She kept her trip by the dairy section short, swooping in quickly for the milk carton so Fareeha wouldn't be exposed to the cold for too long. A sharp ache blossomed in Ana's back as she bent down though, and she sucked in a breath, walking away with a hand on her hip.

She stopped by an aisle to wait for the pain to subside. Ana had been running simulations with her company while they were not on patrol duty, practicing omnic scenarios over and over again. Her soldiers were tight for the most part, but were prone to mistakes. In the last simulation, the squad of greenhorns – who enlisted after the insurgency – had left her six wide open, giving the holo-omnics a clear shot at Ana. She had been so angry that she gave them a thorough dressing down first, before reporting to the medics with a large patch of red on the back of her uniform.

They were lucky that Kamilah was in the academy, and not in the hospital then.

Ana gathered herself, then straightened her back. She gave Fareeha a reassuring smile, and the girl yawned lazily in blissful ignorance. Placing a kiss on top of Fareeha's head, Ana strolled on, picking
up random items that she thought they needed. The shelves looked emptier than she remembered it, not to mention the supermarket itself. There was still the occasional loud chattering, but the atmosphere was mostly quiet, save for footsteps and the metal clanging of carts. The gloom only made her all the happier for the little bundle of happiness resting against her chest, who grew excited when Ana entered the toy aisle and took a baby neck pillow from the display.

Fareeha grabbed at the pillow Ana held in front of her, gurgling her approval at the cushion which bore a bright sprinkle of colours over its surface.

"Do you like it?" Ana chuckled. "It'll be something nice for you to sit with."

"Does she really need it?"

Ana watched Kamilah drop her haul into the cart. "It's nice."

"It's unnecessary. Come on," she added when Ana pouted. "We already got her that bean bag chair last week."

"More is always better than less."

"We're running out of space, Ana."

"We're just buying her this one!"

"You know we never buy just the one." Kamilah stared flatly back at her wife, who had pulled out her best puppy eyes. "And you know looking at me like that will never work."

Ten minutes later, Kamilah drove away from the supermarket with her child still holding onto the baby donut pillow. Ana sat beside her daughter in the backseat, with a brand new cushion hugging snugly about her neck.

"You're the most beautiful woman I have ever known, and the most wonderful wife one could ever have. Even though you really drive me up the wall sometimes, I love you with all my heart and soul."

"You stole my script."

Ana raised her brow in a perfect imitation of Kamilah's. "I can't steal something that doesn't exist."

Kamilah chuckled, looking a little bashful. "Caught me."

"Improvise, then."

"I love you. And I can't imagine sharing my life with anyone but you."

"There we go. Simple and sweet," Ana crooned, leaning in share a gentle kiss with her wife. She clinked their glasses together, and took a sip of wine. It was two months late, but it had been difficult to find a free day where the both of them could slow down, and take some time to celebrate their fourth anniversary together. When the breaks in their schedules coincided, they leapt at the chance to spend it together.

"Question, Milah."

"Hm?"
"Have you ever imagined our anniversary to be like this?" Ana nodded at Fareeha, who sat in a highchair by the dining table with them, and was playing with a large plastic spoon. They had opted to have the celebration at home – mostly because they could watch over Fareeha and be with her as much as possible.

"With a baby of our own?" Kamilah tilted her head, gazing fondly at the girl. "Not so fast, no. But it's a pleasant surprise." She ran a hand over Fareeha's hair, getting a few knocks on her wrist from the spoon as the girl waved it around. "What about you?"

Ana shrugged. "Told you before, I've never really thought about it. Then again… I think I expected to have a kid only in my thirties."

"I'm in my thirties."

"Well, there's that—"

"And you're only one year away from 30. There's not much difference anyway."

"…You really want to drive me up the wall, don't you?" Ana tried to press her lips into a thin line, but couldn't stop the smile from breaking through when Kamilah kissed her.

"You like it," Kamilah murmured.

Ana hummed and kept her snappy reply to herself, in favour of bringing their lips together again. Then they heard a sudden squeal of laughter to the side, and Kamilah jerked back with a short gasp when a plastic spoon flew right into her temple. Ana turned to Fareeha, who was laughing to herself, hands still waving about as her spoon clattered to the table.

"Nice throw," Kamilah said, rubbing at her temple.

"Nice aim." Ana stood, rounding the table to lift Fareeha from her highchair. "You got that from me, didn't you?" She nuzzled into the child's stomach, prompting another bout of giggles. Resting Fareeha securely in the crook of her arm, Ana kissed the top of her head. "I might not have expected to have you so soon, little one. But I'm glad you're here."

Ana glanced down at her wife, who watched them with a soft curve on her lips. She bent down to kiss her wife's head as well. "I'm glad you're here too, pretty one."

"Thanks, funny one."

Between their busy schedules and coping with changes as little Fareeha grew, time seemed to fly since their anniversary celebration. Before long, Ana found herself cheering her daughter on, as Fareeha pulled herself along the play rug in the beginnings of a steady crawl. In her desire to pick up speed and reach her mother, Fareeha was quick at learning how to use her feet as well, kicking at the floor to propel herself forwards, until she was raised high into the air by Ana as a reward for her efforts.

It was both gratifying and worrying to watch her baby take to crawling so easily, and Ana would often be preoccupied with keeping a close eye over Fareeha, just in case she bumped into something or somehow injured herself. With Fareeha's tendency to grab things that are within reach, they took extra care in keeping anything sharp or hot far away from the child – though it was a relief that Fareeha still seemed the most interested in her toys, and didn't go out of her way to look for new things to play with.
They did give her something new for 'play' though – her spoon. Except this time, her spoon was held by her mothers, because it was filled with soft foods that they fed her with. Noticing that Fareeha had become keenly interested in what her mothers ate for dinner, sometimes even trying to reach for their food, they decided to start weaning the girl onto solid foods. They fed her homemade purees once every few days, varying each meal with different foods to see what suited her tastes best. Fareeha didn't like the warm vegetable mash, and would often stop eating before finishing her portion. She much preferred the sweeter fruit purees, and grabbed at the spoon enthusiastically after her first mouthful of either banana or apple.

Then came the 'deceit', when they started to add some veggies into her fruit servings so she could get the best of both worlds. They had watched with bated breath as Fareeha chomped on her first bite of apple and carrot puree, then swallowed the food without problem and looked at them expectantly for more. Ana had giggled at the successful trick they played on their daughter, and only became more gleeful when Fareeha began to accept her vegetable mash without much fuss.

"We're such clever moms," Ana said one night, as she fed Fareeha another spoonful of sweet potatoes.

"We're hardly the first people to–" Kamilah paused when Ana raised her brows, fixing her with a pointed look. "…Yes, we're such clever moms."

"I knew you'd agree, my dear," Ana crooned, giving her a smooch on the cheek.

Ana straightened from the retinal scanner, waiting patiently as the guard matched the scan to her records. He nodded curtly, and she marched away from his booth at the gates, towards the main intelligence facility. Security was always tight here, and Ana never enjoyed the meetings in this compound even back during the insurgency, but Jaida had requested her presence here today. The major hadn't divulged any details, but she had a pretty good idea what was going on.

As she reached the building's entrance, a smile parted her lips when Mesi finally spotted Ana's approach, coming forward to embrace her firmly. Mesi had been called back from the field by Jaida to attend the meeting as well, and Ana wasn't surprised – Mesi was Jaida's best captain. It made sense that the major would trust her with…whatever she had in mind.

"You look thinner," Ana said.

"And you look soft. Damn." Mesi held her at arm's length, scanning her from head to toe. "Motherhood's been good on you, huh?"

"So it has," Ana played along, slapping her on the back.

Mesi relented with a laugh, and they strode through the dark-tinted glass doors together. "How's the family?"

"They're good. Kamilah's been busy as usual. Fareeha's…well, being a baby." She shrugged as they entered the lift lobby, and pressed the call button.

"What else can she be?" Mesi replied. "How old is she, anyway? I lost track with…everything going on."

"Six months now," Ana sighed dreamily. "She's growing so fast."

"Don't all babies grow fast?" Mesi shot her a wry smile as they entered the lift together.
"If that's so, you should drop by soon. You know, before she goes on to college." She chuckled when Mesi punched her in the arm. "How have you been?"

Mesi’s smile grew a fraction tighter, though her eyes remained soft. "I'm still alive, so I guess that counts as 'good'."

"It is good." Ana clasped her on the shoulder as they strode out into the 14th floor, and made a left towards the designated briefing room.

They shared a glance when they stopped before the door, then knocked and entered. This was one of the ‘war rooms’, Ana realised when she stepped in, eyeing the large square table in the centre and the chairs surrounding it in a neat box. The table had a holoprojector installed in it, and could project an interactive 3D image for the gathered soldiers to see. Currently though, there were not so many people as Ana had expected.

Only Jaida stood at the head of the table, accompanied by a general and a colonel. She waved away their salutes and gestured for them to move closer.

"So they are your 'trusted captains', hm?" The general looked them over with an appraising eye.

"Yes, why else would they be here?" Jaida replied drily. "This is Captain Mesi Zoheir, Captain Ana Amari." Then she pointed at her companions. "General Fakhir Mahmoud, Colonel Karim Abbas. They are the ones who'll be pushing our proposal to the brass."

The captains nodded in acknowledgement.

"What is our purpose here, ma'am?" Ana asked.

"You didn't even tell them," Mahmoud said, sounding unsurprised while the colonel remained as silent as ever.

Jaida ignored his statement and waved a hand over the table. Its holoprojector came to life – an azure blue map of Egypt hovered above the table at waist level, so they could look over its entirety with ease.

"We are here to take our home back from the omnics. You remember our last discussion, Amari?"

"Yes, ma'am."

The major swiped a hand down the middle section of the map, which disappeared. "To do so, we will begin to push them down from the north." She tapped on the map portion hovering to her left, highlighting Alexandria in red. "And up from the south." Another tap on the second map piece, and Aswan turned red as well.


"The devil's in the details, Captain," Mahmoud said with a small smirk, picking up on her tone. "Our forces are stretched thin, and the brass will give us the soldiers we need only if they believe in our plan. Something tells me they won't agree just because we said, 'We should push them from the north and south.'"

"We need to give them details and confidence. That's why we will start from Alexandria." Jaida tapped on the city again. "We'll focus here, where our defenses are wearing thinnest. We have to drive the omnics back, gain some ground, and get their attention. That's where the two of you come in," Jaida added, looking up at Mesi and Ana. "You will be my people – one of those to bolster
"Yes, ma'am. But what about after?" Mesi asked.

"Assuming we don't fuck up at Alexandria, we will push forward until the omnics are forced to turn their attention to the north. Then, when their forces in Aswan thin out..." Jaida waved a hand upwards, bringing Cairo back to the table. She traced a red line from the capital towards Aswan. "We will send reinforcements to hit them while they're distracted."

"That's assuming they can be distracted," Ana broke in. "Ma'am, the omnics are capable of replenishing their ranks much faster than us humans. They might not have to divert much of their forces to bolster broken lines – if they can repair and rebuild themselves fast enough."

An approving smirk appeared on Jaida's face. "And that is where the 'details' come in, Amari." She waved away the projections of Cairo and Aswan, and pulled Alexandria to the middle. Sweeping both her hands outwards, she magnified the city map so they could see each individual street crisscrossing one another, clusters of static blue markers where their soldiers stood guard, and red markers of the omnics' positions. There were large, box-like red constructs nestled between buildings, each of them about one storey high. Ana peered at them curiously, noting the density of red markers near the constructs.

"So," Jaida said, leaning forward with both hands on the table, wearing a wicked grin on her lips. "Shall we get started?"

Much of her time in the next three weeks was spent at the intelligence facility, piecing together bits and pieces of Jaida's plan. It was risky – deploying a substantial number of troops from the Heliopolis base might leave it vulnerable to attack, should the omnics decide to break their stalemate at the borders and charge towards Cairo. They were playing a huge gamble on the Alexandria offensive, but as they had determined – staying entrenched in their current positions would do more harm in the long run. Ana often had to grit her teeth and look away from the holographic representation of Cairo, focusing instead on their task at hand.

When they were done, it was up to Mahmoud and Abbas to fight tooth and nail for its approval. The wait stretched from days into weeks, during which Mesi dropped by for a visit and got to carry Fareeha for herself, before continuing her wait on the frontlines. Ana spent most of her off duty hours with her family, cherishing the time she could spend at home with Fareeha and Kamilah before she was deployed. If she was deployed.

The burning question was finally answered more than a month later, when Ana received word from Jaida herself, long before the official orders came through. Ana's company was assigned to the Guard brigade being deployed to Alexandria, alongside the regular soldiers Jaida had requested.

"In a week?"

Ana's heart clenched at Kamilah's hushed tone. She hadn't told Kamilah about the plan, choosing to let her wife remain blissfully unaware until she had to break the news. Looking at Kamilah now, she knew it was the right decision – better to let Kamilah worry for a shorter time, than spend the past month fretting like Ana.

"In a week," Ana said softly.

Kamilah's face remained stoic, eyes lowering in thought before she looked back up at Ana with a weak smile. "About time, isn't it?"
Ana mirrored her smile, circling both arms around Kamilah and pulling her close. "So eager for me to leave?"

"You know I don't want you to leave," Kamilah sighed. "But it's always been a matter of time…"

"Are you upset?"

"Upset? No, not really." She fidgeted with the fabric of Ana's t-shirt. "Just…worried."

"I'll come back safe, albi," Ana promised, cupping her cheek. "And hopefully sooner than later."

A small smile returned to Kamilah's lips as she leaned into Ana's touch. "Just come back to me in one piece, Ana. I don't care how long you take. Just make sure you come back to me."

"Why do you always set such low expectations of me?"

"So you'll never disappoint me." Kamilah bit her lip, letting out a giggle when Ana gave her a reproving pinch on the butt. She leaned in to catch Ana in a kiss, deep and slow. "Promise you'll meet my low expectations?" Kamilah murmured when they parted.

Ana laughed under her breath. "You're horrible," she whispered, stealing another kiss from her wife. "But I promise."

Leaving her family behind was perhaps the single, most difficult thing she had ever done. Ana woke up early in the morning so she could sit beside Fareeha's crib for a while, running her fingertips through the short tuft of hair as she etched the girl's image into memory. Then she wrapped Kamilah in a tight embrace, murmuring reassurances into her wife's ear and peppering her with gentle kisses, before leaving home with a heavy heart.

There was a distinct air of gloom hanging over her company as they sat silently in the transport trucks, all wearing that resolute set in their jaw, but with a distinct heaviness in their eyes. It was understandable – they had been pulled from a relatively safe post in base, and transferred to one of the hottest combat zones in Egypt. But it had to be done, and any doubt that their support was needed evaporated the instant they drove past Alexandria's borders.

Much of the city's infrastructure had been reduced to large piles of rubble. At a preliminary glance, Ana estimated that nearly half of the city was gone. The silence in the truck turned profound as they drove through the destruction and reached the first barricade, driving past bodies laid on the ground in neat rows, covered in tarp. A few soldiers in the truck bowed their heads, uttering prayers for the dead.

Alexandria's base was much more hectic than its Cairo counterpart. There was constant traffic everywhere they went – soldiers rushing around to tend to minor emergencies at their posts, transport trucks shuttling soldiers in and out of base, numerous aircrafts whirring overhead. The Cairo reinforcements were quick to add to the traffic, first reporting to their briefing station, then dispersing to their respective posts. Ana and Mesi were held back in the war room with Jaida much longer than the other soldiers, reviewing new information supplied by their scouts, before they were dismissed as well.

As the day went on, Ana managed to meet with the old squad briefly – including Khalid, who was part of the Guard brigade deployed to Alexandria. It was good to see them still kicking, and more importantly, with an easy smile on their faces – be it from bravado or not. Ebo and Adofo lifted Ana off her feet in crushing hugs, before the squad closed in and started pelting her with 'Mama Amari' jokes. After rapping her knuckles on each of their heads, she made a promise to check on them later,
then went back to her duties.

When night fell and she was finally able to shed her uniform for the night, her father came by the barracks to fetch her for a quiet night out together. Zaid drove out of base, in the opposite direction from the combat zone, towards Stanley Beach. It was there they stayed, sitting in plastic chairs someone had left out, sipping their own cups of fruit juice bought from a roadside stall. The beach was empty, save for a handful of people strolling across the sand, or sitting some distance away from the waters.

It was just as well – Ana could appreciate having some quiet time with her father, who was currently looking at her phone and snickering at the video of Fareeha giggling and kicking happily away as Ana played with her. The girl wriggled in place as Ana tickled her, then her feet flew straight up, kicking the phone from Ana's hand. Her panicked gasp could be heard as the phone landed on Fareeha's arm, and the girl whined from the sudden impact. Ana's hurried singing and coos followed right after, and she managed to soothe Fareeha before the girl broke into cries.

"Oh thank god," Ana breathed. "Your mama would've killed me otherwise."

"She's adorable," Zaid chuckled when the video ended.

"Yeah, just like me."

Zaid raised his brows, returning the phone to her. "Just like you," he ceded with a smile. "And how's Kamilah?"

"She's fine. Probably worried sick right now, though."

"Of course she is. You're going to war."

"I know," Ana sighed. "I really hate leaving them behind. Just makes me want to win this war as soon as possible, so I can go home."

Zaid laughed. "And you'll win this war just like that, hm? Through sheer stubbornness and willpower?"

"Why not?" Ana smiled back at her father. "Anything to get us home quicker."

Zaid continued laughing longer, before he let out a satisfied breath at the end, and gazed at his daughter. "You really are your mother's daughter. Both you, and Safiya." He patted Ana on the head, tousling her hair a little. "If anyone can end this war, it'll be the two of you."

"We're your daughters too, papa."

Her father chuckled to himself, shaking his head. "No, no. I'm not a fighting man, my dear. I'm not like your mother. All I ever really wanted to do was stay home and watch over my kids…and now my grandkid."

Ana cocked her head. "Then why'd you join the army in the first place?"

"So others won't have to," Zaid said simply, taking a sip of his mango juice. "And I like to think it's fate that brought me there to meet your mother."

"How romantic."

Zaid shrugged. "However it was, it made me happy. So I stayed. Something you quite understand,
"Don't you?"

"Oh yes, I do." Ana leaned back in her chair, gazing up at the night sky. She felt another pang at the thought of her family, and heaved a long sigh. "I miss them so much already."

"Now, now. Chin up. You'll be back with them soon enough." Zaid patted her on the back comfortingly. When she remained quiet, he took another tack and raised his cup. "Come! Here's to ending this war as soon as possible, so we can return to Cairo as a family."

Ana chuckled, and tapped their plastic cups together. "Cheers to that."

Kamilah lay on the sofa, with her back propped up against a stack of cushions as she scrolled through the news on her tablet. She had one hand draped over Fareeha, who was lying against her chest and playing with Ana's purple dragon plush. Kamilah's eyes were fixed on the tablet's screen, skimming superficially through the news as her mind mulled over how quiet the house was.

It had been two days since Ana left. Two days since their home started feeling oddly empty – even more so after Kamilah got an extended break in her schedule, because her current class of cadets had graduated. Staying at home longer only served to accentuate Ana's absence from her life – from their lives. She glanced down at the girl, who was clutching onto the dragon's wings and cooing happily away. It was a relief that Fareeha didn't seem notice Ana's not being there, but Kamilah had given her Ana's toy to play with, just in case.

Closing the news app, Kamilah stared blankly at the screen, at a loss for what to do. Then her finger wandered over to the gallery icon, hovering for a short second before giving a quick tap. The first few photos were of Fareeha – in a bird onesie, crawling on the play rug, smiling up at the camera. A small smile curved her lips as a little hand reached up to the screen, and dragged short chubby fingers down clumsily. Fareeha let out a giggle and did it again, fingers grappling at the phone to get a feel of its smooth texture, scrolling through Kamilah's photos as she did so.

One of Ana feeding Fareeha with a spoon came into view, and Kamilah pulled the phone just out of Fareeha's range, so she could pause and look at the photo.

"That's your mommy, Fareeha," Kamilah said, pointing at Ana's face. Fareeha let out a burble, and grasped onto Kamilah's hand. "I know. She's beautiful, isn't she?"

She swiped to the next photo – Ana carrying Fareeha in the playground – and sighed. "She's so brave, little one. So brave, and strong, and smart." Kamilah tilted her head, then bent down towards Fareeha with a conspiratorial whisper, "But don't tell her I said that, okay? It'll go right to her head."

Fareeha giggled again from the ticklish sensation in her ear.

Kamilah smiled and kissed the top of Fareeha's hair. "Do you think you'll grow up to be like her, Fareeha?" She waited for a reply, swiping to the next photo. "I hope you do. She's a good woman to take after. Well..." Kamilah added when a thought struck her. "Maybe you can get some sense from me. It'll do you some good too."

Fareeha cooed a long 'ah' and looked up at Kamilah, getting a kiss on the nose from her mother. The girl laughed, then turned back to the dragon in her hands, clutching at the horns on its head.

Looking back at her phone with a smile, Kamilah browsed through the photos, until she reached one of Ana with a smear of vanilla ice cream on the corner of her mouth. She sighed again, gazing at the unabashed grin on her wife's face.
"I miss you, you idiot."
It had been four days since Ana had a proper rest or a bite of food that didn't feel like viscous sludge on her tongue – all discomforts expected from working in the field, and not difficult to put out of her mind. After all, when surrounded by an army of omnis apt to shoot them on sight, creature comforts not so much as took a backseat, but was thrown and locked in the boot. Survival and discretion were priority, if they intended to return without incident – and Ana did so intend, for this had been her initiative.

Since arriving in the Alexandria base, General Mahmoud and Major Jaida had been butting heads with the resident commanders non-stop – practically fighting a war of their own at the war table, long before they even clashed with the omnis. They fought over every minute detail of their operations, not to mention the war-worn commanders' firm belief that they were deployed on a suicide mission. The argument was moot – they would mobilise their forces whether they liked it or not, but Ana couldn't stand their foolish waste of time any longer. She proposed a recon mission of her own to Jaida – who was more than happy to approve it, giving Ana the authority to assemble a few units to scout the enemy camp.

After months of following the conflict through maps, written reports and field cams, she was finally able to lay her eyes upon the very omnis responsible for their ever-rising death toll. Ana and her spotter had moved some distance ahead of the other scout units, setting up camp just before the omnis' field production plants. These were the storey-high structures highlighted in their map, that churned out omnis to replenish their depleted numbers – though it was fortunate that these were still not as effective as the main Omnium, only able to operate on a smaller scale. The three factories were their main targets for the upcoming assault, the key to loosening the omnis' grip over Alexandria. Though the problem could've been easily solved with an airstrike long ago, an aerial bombardment would cause excessive infrastructural damage to the city – necessitating a ground assault instead.

And that was what worried Ana. The longer she watched the omnis in action, the more she grew uneasy. Though she did appreciate their mechanical efficiency, there was something unsettling in the way they moved – it was so smooth, and not once had she spotted an omnic slowing down to communicate with another. They acted like a hive mind – each omnic knew its place and performed its duties without causing any disruptions. There were no words, only the rarest fleeting gestures as the omnis passed each other, before they flowed onto the next task. Ana couldn't help but think of them as puppets – and if they were, who or what was pulling their strings?

"There," her spotter said. "The engineer again. Or another one. Really can't tell the difference between those bastards."

Ana turned her scope towards the indicated direction, and spotted an omnic working at the lone control panel installed on the factory's back wall. It was of a slighter build than the regular infantry units, and had wire-like attachments on its arms that it used to interface with electronics. They were the engineers – a rare sight in combat, but an indispensable fixture within the omnic camp. They repaired injured soldiers and damaged weapons, produced new equipment, scrounged for tech in abandoned buildings, and were responsible for the upkeep of the production plants.

She watched the omnic stare at the panel with its red eye, right hand connected to a port beside the panel, and before long a stream of new omnic soldiers started marching out of the factory's front door one by one.

"Wish I could shoot them dead here and now," Amr growled, observing the very same scene through his spotter's scope. "Kill them before they can kill anyone else."
"You'll get your chance soon, Lieutenant," Ana replied flatly. When she noticed his hand curling repeatedly beside the scope, she said, "Check on our stealth unit."

"Yes, ma'am," he muttered. Leaving his scope on the table they had pushed up against the window, he approached the heavy device set up behind them. It was a new design based on the personal stealth kits – something that could produce a field to envelope a limited area, instead of just one person. It would be useful for positioning troops in the field while still flying under the omnics' radar, but it was unreliable. Just the day before, the device's displays had flickered dangerously as if losing power, forcing them to activate their personal kits so Amr could tinker with the prototype gadget.

Glancing back at her partner, Ana caught him biting his lip and frowning down at the device. "When you're done, take a break."

Amr blinked, looking up at her. "But ma'am, it's supposed to be your–"

"I can hold out longer. You look like you're going to fly out of here and punch the omnics with your bare hands."

He let out a gritty laugh. "If only I could, ma'am. But thanks."

Ana snorted softly, then turned her focus back to the omnics on the ground below. She watched the last of the new omnics march out of the plant, metallic grey doors finally sliding shut behind them. Her finger twitched against the trigger guard as the new soldiers merged seamlessly with the rest of the omnics. She understood Amr's sentiment all too well – each omnic they let live here, would likely take human lives in the future. But if they broke their cover now, they would only waste their own lives before doing any good.

So Ana watched and waited. Their time would come.

Two more uneventful days passed, and the recon units returned to base according to plan. Ana was glad to find Jaida in better spirits, the major having won the head-butting contest and was gearing their troops up for battle. But they met another unexpected delay when the recon teams submitted their reports – Ana's in particular had caught the eye of their engineers. The information and footage she gathered of the omnic factories had inspired a new method to shut them down – something more subtle and elegant than simply sticking explosives onto its walls. So the minds went to work immediately, cooking up an invention of their own, while the brawns were stuck at the barricades in an endless vigil.

Though Ana would've preferred to leap into action right after the recon, she was grateful for the chance to take a breather. Grabbing some sleep without her body on alert for danger was the first luxury she took, and the second was a hot meal at the mess hall. Both served to put her together before she made the first vidcall home in a week, and her fainter eye shadows seemed to go unnoticed by Kamilah, who was relieved to see her doing well.

Ana listened with a smile as Kamilah told of all that had happened with Fareeha, the most eventful of which was the girl's teething. Fareeha had started becoming restless and much more fussy, crying more often in the recent days. Kamilah grew infinitely worried when she noticed Fareeha's gums growing swollen, relaxing only when informed by the pediatrician that the girl was indeed teething, and not growing ill. She had lost quite a bit of sleep since then, but assured Ana that she was keeping things well under control. Fareeha had joined the vidcall too, but appeared sulky and didn't seem interested in much, spending most of the time snuggled tightly against Kamilah with pouted lips. She only responded to Ana's voice a couple of times, before hugging about Kamilah's neck with a whine – apparently a sign that she was getting bothered by her gums again.
Even though Fareeha was less than happy in the call, the memory of her chubby features scrunched in a pout still made Ana feel lighter. As it always did, a small smile hung on her lips before disappearing quickly with a sigh. Ana returned a fellow captain's nod as they passed each other, then came to a stop on the walkway. She looked out from where she stood on the base's southern wall, unconsciously reaching for her ring finger. After twisting the absent ring once around her finger, she looked down, vaguely amused at the lapse in memory. She had left her wedding ring at home for weeks now, and yet she hadn't stopped instinctively searching for it.

Tugging at the right sleeve of her uniform, Ana gazed down at the tattoo on her wrist, rubbing a thumb gently over the swallow's outline. She allowed herself a moment of wistful thought, mind wandering back home to her wife and child, before pressing her lips together. Straightening her sleeve, Ana resumed her daily round along the wall, keeping an eye on her company as they patrolled the perimeter. They had gotten excited at her return a few days earlier, only to fall into more restless waiting when no new commands came. Perhaps they were doing a little too much waiting, Ana thought, when her eyes fell upon a soldier standing guard by the turrets. His eyes were fixated on the rifle in his hands instead of keeping watch ahead, and his fingers fidgeted endlessly with the gun's fore grip and magazine.

Ana came to a stop behind him, but when he showed no sign of either noticing her presence or refocusing on his task, she cleared her throat loudly.

He jumped, spinning on his heels and snapping to attention when he recognised his commanding officer. "Ma'am!" he barked smartly.

"Something wrong with your rifle, sergeant?"

His throat bobbed as he swallowed nervously. "No, ma'am. I was–, distracted. I am sorry. It will never happen again."

"Get distracted again, and it might be the last time you ever do so." Ana smiled wryly when he seemed ready to wilt on his feet. Stepping forward, she grabbed onto his rifle and tugged it out of his grasp. Ignoring his half-hearted explanation, Ana turned the rifle over in her hands, running a sharp eye along the polished surface until she spotted two small scratches in its fore grip. Acting as if she hadn't noticed, she said lazily, "What's on your mind that is so important, sergeant?"

"It's nothing, ma'am," he replied almost reflexively, but seemed to lose conviction when Ana raised a brow at him. "I–, it's just nervousness, ma'am. Nothing more." He fell silent as Ana continued with her lengthy inspection of his rifle, hefting the weapon to get a feel of its weight, until he worked up his courage to speak again. "May I ask a question, ma'am?"

A small smile curved the corner of her lips, and she looked at the man. "Shoot."

"Do you think this will work, ma'am?" He nodded towards the combat zone. "This assault. Will we win?"

"What do you think?"

"I…don't know." He lowered his gaze in embarrassment, scratching at his growing stubble. "Right now, I'm just…nervous."

"We all are," Ana said. "Victory's never a certainty. It's all up to you, and how hard you're willing to fight to make it a reality." She thrust the rifle back into his hands, taking him aback with the sudden motion.
He gripped onto the rifle, and after a moment's thought, nodded resolutely. Ana took a discrete sigh of relief – that was the thinnest line of bravado to have ever passed her lips. Thankfully the sergeant didn't seem in the mood to question her words.

"Thank you, ma'am." He gave a weak smile and turned back to the front – then snapped back to Ana again as she started to leave. "May I ask another question, ma'am? If…you don't mind."

"Yes?"

His smile turned sheepish. "I heard that you have a child. Is that true?"

Ana cocked her head, curiosity piqued. "Yes. Why the question?"

"It's just that some of us think you look too young," he said slowly, growing more and more abashed by the words coming out of his mouth. "It's just that we've seen very little of you, and with all that we've heard, I just wanna know…"

"Really," Ana snorted, striding forward and knocking him in the chest. "Then go back and tell your fishwives it's true. And that I'm going to kick their asses for saying I look too young."

The sergeant let out a nervous laugh. "Yes, ma'am."

"Also," she added as she walked off, waving a hand nonchalantly. "If they survive the assault, drinks are on me."

She could hear the grin in his voice when he called after her, "Yes, ma'am!"

They moved from base at 0930, the large contingent reaching the barricades at 1000. At 1015, the assault commenced.

Ana fought alongside her company's first platoon for the initial phase, the assault rifle hot in her hands as she got her first taste of battle against the omnis – and it was terrifying. It was one thing to face humans willing to fight and die for a cause they believed in with a passion. It was another thing all together to fight cold, dispassionate beings with seemingly no other objective than the relentless slaughter of humans. The red-eyed omnis felt so…different from their normal counterparts. There was no sign of personality, no quirks, not even the spark of life within them – they were just machines programmed with a singular goal in mind. As Ana gunned down one omni after another, her fear dissipated with each shower of sparks and shattering of alloy, leaving herself as empty as their foes appeared to be.

The army soon left a vast trail of bodies in its wake – flesh and metal alike – as they broke through the first line of defense, surging ever deeper into omnic territory. That was when Ana split off from her company as planned, leaving her experienced lieutenants in charge of their respective platoons, and sprinted along the edge of the combat zone with her own hand-picked squad. They activated their personal stealth kits as they neared the omnic factories, but as damned luck would have it, they came face-to-face with an omnic squad when only half of their people were fully cloaked. They won the ensuing firefight, but Ana lost her demolitions expert, and the engineer had taken a round in her shoulder and thigh. She had to be carried to their destination – the third floor of an office building.

As the engineer was getting patched up, Ana established radio contact with the rest of Ghost – three squads chosen to take down the factories while the omnis were preoccupied with the frontal assault. The squads comprised only of Guard soldiers, and Khalid was one of the squad leaders as well. All were in position, though Ghost-2 and 3 reported 1 and 3 KIA respectively. Ana gave her acknowledgement, then told them to hold positions until further orders.
She turned back to her squad, now visible with their stealth kits activated, though still invisible to others thanks to the new stealth field. Ana glanced down at the prototype device on the floor, making sure it was in working order. At a few quick gestures from her, three soldiers nodded and reactivated their personal kits, stepping out of the stealth field to take lookout positions by the windows.

Ana moved over to the group of soldiers still within the field, in the middle of which was their engineer, sitting on the floor as her wounds were bandaged by their medic.

"How is she?"

"Stable, but movement will be limited."

"Ma'am," the engineer piped up. "Recommend that you leave me behind when you go for the factory. I'll just slow you down."

Ana nodded. "We'll come back for you after."

"I'm counting on it," Nehal replied with a pained smirk. She held up a cylindrical device towards Ana, who took it. "Just stick it into the port beside the control panel, and it'll do the job for you."

"That simple, huh?"

"As long as you have it with you, yeah. Lose it, and I hope you can learn omnic code in, like, five minutes."

Ana snorted, rolling her eyes plainly enough for Nehal to see, before turning back to the windows when Khalid's voice crackled over her earpiece.

"Ghost-1, I think we have a problem. You have eyes on Target Alpha?"

She thumbed the power for her stealth kit, and walked towards the windows to look at the factory. Her stomach sank at the number of omnics still present around it. She glanced down at the map, where the blue markers of the army were marching inexorably upon the omnics, though slower than anticipated. "Yes, Ghost-2. Seems they're not diverting their forces yet."

"They might not move at all."

"Agreed," Ana replied, keeping her eyes on the patrolling omnics.

"Recommend we move before they start churning out more units."

A moment's pause. "Negative. We will hold for–"

Ana was cut short when Jaida’s harsh bark blasted through the priority channel, amid gunfire and artillery shots in the background. "All units, fall back to Firepoint Theta! Ignore all previous orders and fall back to Firepoint Theta now!"

Surprised by the sudden change in plan, she tried to raise a channel to Jaida. It took a while for Ana to reach her on the comms, and the major sounded extremely pissed when she did. "Ma'am, what is happening–"

"Have you gone deaf, Amari? I said, fall back to Theta now – that includes Ghost as well."

"But if we don't take out the factories now, we won't get another chance to–"

"The omnics are pushing through the barricades at Theta. If they reach the base, Amari, you won't
get another fucking chance to do anything other than rot in the goddamn ground!"

"But ma'am--"

"Get your people here at once, Amari! That's an order!"

"Yes, ma'am," Ana replied, but the channel was cut before she could finish.

"Captain?"

Ana turned back to her squad, heart pounding in her chest.

"Captain, are we falling back?" Nehal asked.

She gazed long and hard at the engineer, then scrutinised each of her soldiers' faces. Steeling herself, she took a deep breath and said, "No, not yet. We'll take out the factories first."

To her squad's credit, they didn't even blink at her words. Instead, they gave determined nods and readied their weapons as Ana relayed her orders to the other Ghost squads. Khalid threw his lot in with her immediately, and the third squad leader only did so after a short bout of argument.

They were ready to move.

Ana left her sniper in the building with Nehal, and led her eight remaining soldiers towards Target Alpha. The ranks of omnis surrounding them was daunting, but they took steady steps towards their objective, careful not to give away their cloaked positions. When they were close enough, Ana signaled for them to halt. Four soldiers drew their grenades and, at Ana's mark, lobbed them towards strategic spots in the omnic formation.

Red eyes swiveled up at the grenades that became visible while making their arcs through the air. The omnis tried to scramble away from the blast radius, but the combined EMP burst managed to take out more than a third of their numbers. Metal bodies fell to the ground as weapons were raised, their sniper's rifle already ringing out with continuous shots long before the rattle of assault weapons added to the cacophony.

Ana ordered her squad to spread out, ducking behind any cover they could find while advancing upon the omnic forces. One last grenade volley, and they sprinted for the factory. Ana leapt over an omnic engineer's body as she approached the control panel. Her squad formed a defensive line around her, fighting off the surrounding omnis as she withdrew the hacking device from her pocket. She tapped on the keypad experimentally, but a long line of omnic code appeared on the screen. Unable to read the gibberish, she followed Nehal's instruction and stabbed the device into the round port beside the keypad. The code onscreen disappeared, replaced by a simple phrase in Arabic: 'Override in progress'.

"Are you fucking kidding me!" Ana spun on her heel, hefting her rifle to join the firing line. "Not even a fucking progress bar? Nehal!" She opened a channel to their engineer, finger squeezing her rifle's trigger as she did so. "How am I supposed to know when it's done!"

"Look at the screen? Or – something will break inside the factory. So listen for something breaking."

Ana growled in frustration, cutting the channel off with a curt acknowledgement. Her eyes kept darting back to the screen, which was ever stuck on the same three maddening words, and she paid for her inattention by suffering a shot in her bicep. She grunted in pain and faltered for a second, before lunging forward to grab the grenade that had fallen into their midst. She flung it away just in the nick of time – it exploded in the air before reaching its highest arc.
Her right arm was starting to go numb under the pain and the constant kickback from the rifle, her sleeve getting soaked through with blood, when something finally creaked dangerously from inside the factory, followed by a loud crash. Ana turned back to the control panel immediately, relieved to find 'Override complete' written on the screen. She yanked the device from the jack, and the screen went dark – that was when she noticed that significant decrease in gunfire.

Ana looked around, and discovered the only shooting came from her squad, though they came to a stop after they realised the omnis had gone completely still. They stared at the inert robots, both human and machine forces frozen in their firing positions, until the omnis straightened themselves as one. They fired at the omnis reflexively, but their foes showed no signs of acknowledging their presence. Instead, they turned towards the south and fled – first in peace, then amid a hail of bullets when Ana ordered her squad to pick off as many as they could.

"Ghost-1, this is Ghost-2, over."

"This is Ghost-1 Actual. Report."

"Targets are hacked and neutralised, ma'am. The omnis have fled, and we're giving medical aid to Ghost-3. Nearly half of them are wounded."

Ana gritted her teeth and passed an eye over her own squad, many of whom were bleeding and being tended to by their medic. "Roger. Get patched up, then rendezvous at my position. We'd better hurry back before Jaida rips into my ass."

Khalid gave a short, tired laugh. "Our asses, you mean."

"No," Ana said firmly. "Only mine."

Ana stood as steadily as she could – eyes forward, back rigid, hands gripping each other behind her back. She fought down the urge to gulp under Jaida's gaze – cold enough to turn the whole of Egypt into a frozen wasteland. A part of her much preferred Jaida to yell at her and be done with it; at least she had practice with the major's wrath before. But this, being ordered to stay after their debriefing, waiting for a reprimand alone in a room, was so much more unnerving. Despite the mission being declared a success by command, and with the omnic factories under their custody, she knew Jaida was less than pleased with her behaviour in the field.

She nearly recoiled when Jaida took her first step towards Ana. Then another, and another, until Jaida stood before her closely enough that she couldn't turn her eyes away.

"I should have you court-martialed, Amari," Jaida hissed, quiet and ominous. "You disobeyed orders, led my soldiers on your own mission, and put the security of the base at risk. What do you have to say for yourself?"

"I'm sorry, ma'am."

"You're sorry?" Jaida barked a humourless laugh, pacing once in a circle in front of Ana, then faced her again. "But you're not."

"I made what I judged to be the best decision at the time, ma'am. If we didn't take out the factories then, they would've easily made more units and sent them to Theta. With our forces weakened as it is, we wouldn't have the numbers to repel them. Even if we did, command would've scrubbed our plan because we failed to achieve our primary objective. Then we'd be back at square one."

Jaida clenched her jaw, glaring daggers at Ana. Then she closed her eyes and took a deep breath,
making an obvious effort to relax her tense shoulders. "As much as I hate to say it, you're right."

Ana blinked at the admission, and blurted, "Ma'am?"

"We would've held off the omnics even without Ghost. I want you to understand – we could've had less casualties if Ghost had fallen back to Theta as ordered. But if you hadn't deactivated the factories…we would've been done for. Dragged back to Cairo to wait for a slow death." Jaida heaved a sigh. "You made a good call out there, Amari. But don't get used to disobeying orders. Not all your bets will win."

"I understand, ma'am. And I truly am sorry."

"Spare me your apologies." Jaida turned towards the war table, waving a hand. "Now get out of my sight before I really do punch you."

"So I heard you're the hero we have to thank for the win."

Ana raised a brow. "How'd you know?"

Kamilah laughed. "Deyab's the fishmonger among the fishwives here. Any gossip will go through him. And obviously anything about my wife comes straight to me."

"Well, he needs to shut up. I wanted to brag to you first, you know." Ana grinned at her phone, as she sat outside her barracks tent under the evening sky.

"You can still brag. I mean, when you get full of yourself, nothing can really shut you up."

"Hey! That's not true." She pouted, but couldn't keep it up with Kamilah smiling back at her. "Now, enough about my smart and talented self. How are you, my dearest wife?"

"I'm your only wife," Kamilah said drily. "And I'm obviously doing better than you. Please tell me that bandage on your arm is the only one."

Ana glanced down at her bicep which, despite her best efforts, had peeked into the screen. So she lifted it, giving Kamilah a better look. "Yeah, it is. Bullet wound."

"Guess I should be thankful you only got shot once," Kamilah sighed.

For now, Ana nearly quipped, but managed to hold her tongue. "Yup. How's Fareeha? Her teeth grow out yet? Where is she? I wanna see her."

"She's sleeping, let her be. The less she's aware of her teeth, the better." Kamilah shook her head tiredly. "But she's been fine. Her first bottom tooth's already grown, but another's also coming out. So she's still fussy."

"You poor things," Ana cooed. "But I'm sure you're being the best mama ever."

"I hope so," Kamilah huffed, lowering her gaze. "I miss you."

"I'm sure. In your place, I'd miss me too—" Ana burst out in cackles, unable to hold it in when Kamilah clicked her tongue. She bent over in laughter, then groaned out loud when the wound in her arm throbbed. "Ah…fuck."

"I'll let that one slide."
"You're such an angel," Ana laughed, then caught her breath. "I'll be back soon enough, albi."

"I know you will."

"What, not going to make me promise?"

Kamilah gazed at her through the screen, lips curving in a soft smile. "I don't need one."

A loud cry pierced the peaceful night air, and Kamilah woke immediately, already attuned to this particular alarm clock. But it was not without difficulty – Kamilah's eyes were barely open even as she rose sluggishly from the bed, taking a few disoriented steps before losing her balance, forcing her to lean against the wall for support. Only when she was steady on her feet, did she make her way to the crib, where Fareeha was crying and dragging her heels over the sheets, pulling at her own ear in her discomfort.

Kamilah bent down and carried the child carefully in her arms, blinking away the bleariness in her vision. She let Fareeha clutch onto her finger, swaying on her feet as she sang softly to the child. When the tears didn't show any sign of subsiding, Kamilah made a quick trip into the bathroom, running her fingertip under the tap before massaging Fareeha's gums gently. She started with the area beside Fareeha's single tooth, then at her upper gums, alternating between the two spots until Fareeha slowly calmed down, and was able to look at Kamilah properly through teary eyes.

Smiling down at her daughter, Kamilah planted kisses on her chubby hand, nose and forehead, until Fareeha had let go of her own ear, and was reaching both arms towards her mother. Lifting the girl up and hugging Fareeha to her chest, Kamilah guided the girl's head to rest on her shoulder, heart aching when she felt Fareeha's hiccups, and little hands grabbing onto her t-shirt. She knew this was normal during teething, but she couldn't help feeling powerless to ease the girl's discomfort. All she could do was alleviate the pain temporarily, or help to distract the girl from her little bouts of distress. What she wouldn't give to take her daughter's misery upon herself.

She sighed, taking to her habitual pacing around the bedroom, patting gently on Fareeha's back to lull her into sleepiness again. The first week of Fareeha's teething had left her feeling terribly insecure without Ana. Not that Ana always had the answers, but having her around made things easier to handle. Even when they fumbled, they fumbled and learnt and grew together. Ana's absence coupled with Fareeha's fusses had left Kamilah questioning herself, wondering if the past months had gone so smoothly solely because of Ana, and if she could handle being a mother alone.

Seeing the new tooth grow into place in Fareeha's mouth had served as an unexpected anchor, though. Not to mention that Fareeha still seemed to enjoy her mother's presence the most, even after spending nights whining on Kamilah's shoulder from the soreness in her gums. Maybe she wasn't doing that bad after all.

When Fareeha had calmed down, Kamilah lowered her carefully into the crib and rubbed her tummy, getting a gurgle from her. Fareeha cooed back at her mother, reaching up to tangle her fingers in Kamilah's hair. Chuckling softly, Kamilah leaned down and planted another kiss on her nose, Fareeha flashing a not-so-toothless grin in return.

Maybe she wasn't doing bad at all.
The Tide Turns

The initial push in Alexandria had been successful, but the surprise omnic assault on Firepoint Theta left them with a substantial number of casualties, slowing the pace of their advance. The troops rallied together nonetheless, solidifying their thinner ranks and marching on the scattered pockets of omnis lingering within the city. Their progress remained steady before hitting a major hurdle towards the end – the omnis had buckled down along the city’s borders, forming sturdy firing lines that were difficult for the troops to penetrate, or even advance properly. They were caught in a standstill until the army's own omnic soldiers were able to sneak close enough to disable their turrets and other defenses, allowing the rest to break through the enemy formation much easier. No omnis ran this time – they stood and fought until the last body fell to the ground with ruptured chassis and inert systems.

After setting up along the edges of Alexandria, they were given a small window for respite, but there was little cheer. Fatigue accumulated from days of constant fighting left them quiet, and loss made some introspective. All looked solemnly to the east, where they would continue to fight from Tanta to Ismailia, in a bid to liberate the northern cities from omnic control. Their struggle to take just one city from the omnis proved that their campaign would be a long, arduous uphill climb.

And it was. Though they managed to take Tanta in a manner much like their Alexandria offensive, their push farther eastwards met with more and more obstacles. In Mansoura and Faqus, the omnic field factories were much more heavily guarded, the omnis having divined their prime objective in each assault. They took these two cities at a heavy blood price, then pushed relentlessly onto Ismailia – only to be punished for their fervour. It was amid gunfire that their engineers discovered their hacking devices no longer worked, as the factories had been modified to protect themselves against the intrusion. They were forced to retreat and regroup in the nearest city, waiting for reinforcements and their omnic engineers to build a new device that could counteract the factories' programming.

When the engineers proved their ingenuity and Ismailia was back under the army's protection, they were forced again to stop and consolidate their forces. Each battle had slowly whittled away their numbers, and they hadn't the soldiers to march southwards onto Suez without great risk. So the army tightened their defenses along the retaken cities, while Jaida and her associates were summoned back to Cairo again – Ana included.

With the success in Alexandria, their forces had been deployed to Aswan to secure similar victories – and from the reports Ana had read so far, it seemed they had an easier time in the beginning. Even when the northern offensive had been slowed, the southern forces met with resistance less fierce than what Ana had experienced. Only when they fought northwards to take Kharga and Luxor, did their pace slow due to a change in the omnis' tactics. Ana pondered over the apparent delay the omnis had experienced in rallying their southern forces, tracing her finger from the omnium's position on the map to Luxor. Distance still affected omnic communications, it seemed – though surely more effective than their human counterparts, it still gave the army time to breathe…and offered a possible advantage for future engagements.

Ana jotted down her observations as she studied the reports en route to Cairo, though she didn't bother bringing it up to her superiors just yet. Jaida and the other officers were drawn into an argument over the brass's intent to launch another direct assault on the omnium itself. They were emboldened by their recent victories at beating the omnis back, and wished to bring a quick end to the conflict – though they had obviously forgotten the first disastrous assault on the omnium, 'those blockheaded sacks of shit', Jaida spat. She spent the entire drive from Ismailia to Cairo both cursing her higher-ups, and formulating an argument to dissuade them from committing to a reckless
endeavour before they were ready.

Ana and Mesi sat with her in the same armoured truck, helping Jaida build her case and biting down
smiles when she let out another reflexive curse. They were barely given time to breathe after
alighting from the truck, having been swept right into the command centre the instant they arrived in
Heliopolis. Jaida and Mahmoud stood their ground, the generals refused to budge, and the captains
were left trudging out of the centre at night, with aching heads and deep sighs. Ana straightened her
shoulders though, after bidding goodbye to Mesi. She gazed in the direction of the residential district
where she had made her home, a smile growing on her lips.

Time for a little surprise.

She entered the house as stealthily as a cat burglar, turning her key in the lock carefully, so its click
would be soft. It was dark in the entryway, so was the living room and the rest of the first floor.
Taking precise steps up the stairs to avoid an errant creak, Ana reached the lit hallway and found the
nursery's door open, Kamilah's voice already audible from where she stood. Setting her bag down
against the wall, Ana walked towards the door and peeked in to find both her wife and daughter
facing away from her. Her brows rose as she leant against the doorframe, watching Kamilah
meander across the play mat with Fareeha.

Kamilah was bent over, clutching under Fareeha's arms to help her balance on her own two feet. The
girl's arms were extended instinctively on either side of her, her eyes fixed on the octopus toy sitting
at the end of the mat. Ana could hear her giggles as she threw out one foot after another, tottering
along the floor with her mother's guidance and sing-song encouragements. Kamilah let Fareeha take
the lead, following the girl's winding path patiently, and only asserted control when Fareeha got
overambitious and tried to run.

Ana pressed her fingers to her mouth to stifle a chuckle when Kamilah lifted the girl from the floor,
Fareeha's flailing feet patting excitedly against the same spot on the mat.

"No, no, Fareeha. Slowly, remember?" Kamilah crooned, setting the girl back down when she had
calmed, then let Fareeha resume the walk again. "See? One, two. One, two. Slowly. Go too fast and
you'll fall down."

Fareeha cooed an extended 'da' in imitation of Kamilah's last word, before starting to totter forth
again. She kept her path mostly straight, and soon reached her octopus plush on the mat, bending
down with Kamilah's help to grab the toy in her hands. Then she squealed in laughter when Kamilah
raised her high into the air – much like Ana did when playing 'airplane' with the girl – swerving her
gently around before turning around to put Fareeha on the bed.

Kamilah glanced at the door for a fleeting second, then did a shocked double–take as she snatched
the girl off the bed. She clutched Fareeha tight to her chest even as relief flooded into her expression,
upon realising who the intruder was. Still, she appeared thoroughly annoyed.

"You scared me, ass–!

"Ah!" Ana exclaimed as Kamilah clamped her mouth shut. "Ah-ah, what did you say?" A grin
parted her lips as she strode into the nursery, looking pointedly at her wife. "Come on, Milah. Out
with it. You already said the bad part anyway–"

"Asshole," Kamilah bit out, covering Fareeha's ears as she did so. Her annoyed pout vanished the
instant Ana planted a kiss on her cheek. She turned her head to meet the asshole's lips for another
kiss, then smiled when Ana wrapped both arms around her wife and child for a tight embrace. "You
didn't tell me you were coming back," Kamilah said, handing Fareeha to Ana when the girl started babbling excitedly, reaching out towards her mother.

"I wanted to surprise you." Ana hugged Fareeha firmly when the girl clutched about her neck. "And it seems I did. You owe the jar two pounds, by the way."

Kamilah rolled her eyes. "You spend three months in the field, worrying me half to death, and you aggravate me the moment you come back."

"You love it, babe." Ana grinned, then winced when Fareeha's fingers gripped onto her hair and tugged. "Ow. Yes, it's mommy. Did you miss mommy?" she cooed back at the girl, who was still babbling her kiddy syllables. Ana grasped her chin, taking a good look at the four teeth in her mouth – two in the upper and lower gums each.

"Look at you! You've been busy, little one," she crooned. "And you've been keeping your mama busy too, haven't you? I can see the eye bags on her."

"I hate you," Kamilah sighed, circling an arm around Ana's back. "Fareeha," she sang, and the girl looked at her. Keeping eye contact with Fareeha, she pressed her lips to Ana's cheek. "Muah!" She repeated the motion again as Fareeha stared with round eyes, watching Kamilah kiss Ana until she caught on and giggled loudly.

Fareeha grabbed at Ana's jaw with her little hands, then smooshed her entire face into Ana's cheek and yelled, "Mah!"

Ana couldn't help but laugh as the girl yelled another kiss into her face. "You almost got it, darling," she said, smacking her own kiss on Fareeha's forehead. "Did you teach her?"

"No, she picked it up by herself." Kamilah ruffled Fareeha's hair lightly. "But she kept doing this chewing motion the first time she tried it. I thought she was trying to bite my face."

"That bad, huh?" Ana cackled even more. "Here, habibti. Mama and I will show you how it's done." She turned to Kamilah and opened her mouth, wagging her tongue as she leaned in, and was met with a sharp slap on her nose.

"Ow!" Ana jerked back with a snort, then cackled. "Come on, babe. We have to teach–" A smaller hand smacked into her nose this time, and she peeled it away to look at the innocent look on Fareeha's face. "Ow. Not you too, habibti."

"Mah!"

Time flew quickly that night, which Ana mostly spent lying on soft surfaces like the bed or play mat with Fareeha, deeply appreciating the comfort to be found at home. Though she did encounter a rather jarring change when she found out that Kamilah had started to let Fareeha sleep alone in her own room. She explained it allowed Fareeha to nab just a bit more sleep in the morning, as she wouldn't be woken by her mother's morning routine, but Kamilah still relented and slept together with Ana in the nursery anyway, after being subjected to her wife's best rendition of puppy eyes.

Ana did learn to let go after the first night though, and settled for hugging Kamilah to sleep – a true luxury, after spending months sleeping in a hard cot by herself. It was unbelievably relaxing just to hold Kamilah in her arms and stay still, so easy to drift off into an undisturbed sleep, but Ana fought to keep her eyes open for as long as possible each night. Part of her refused to let this peacefulness slip through her fingers too quickly. She was content to trace idle patterns on Kamilah's shoulder, to rub her back when she stirred in her sleep, to kiss her forehead gently and see that sleepy smile curve
her lips before she fell asleep again. Such precious little luxuries, that were so easy to take for granted in peaceful times, she now cherished and kept close to her heart.

It was the same with Fareeha, whom she made sure to accompany at home each evening. Ana took over the baby duties enthusiastically – feeding the girl, changing her diapers, cradling her when she was bothered by her gums, and playing with her until she was tired and wanted to sleep. Fareeha had grown quite a bit since Ana last saw her in person – she was now a little taller and stronger, able to crawl around the house like a pro. Her eyes were sharp and alert, and though her fingers were still a little clumsy, she could hold her toys and bottles without dropping them often. Her hair was much longer, and Kamilah had taken to putting a headband on her, so that her fringe wouldn't block her eyes during her playtimes.

Ana smiled to herself as she watched Fareeha bring a donut-shaped chew toy to her mouth, her eyes looking up at the TV without difficulty, as her fringe was held back by a pink headband. Then Ana felt a pat on her hand, and blinked at Kamilah in surprise.

"You were saying?" Kamilah asked, still rubbing cream leisurely over Ana's hand. They had decided to lounge in the living room instead of the nursery tonight, bringing down Fareeha's play mat so they could all sit on the floor together.

"Oh. Right." Ana realised with a start that her attention had drifted off while telling her story. "Yeah, Jaida looked like she was going to murder me on the spot. Really scared me for the first time."

"Doesn't she always look like that?"

"Yeah. Kinda like you, come to think of it. Except she makes it clear when she's feeling murderous." She snickered when her hand was flung back into her face. Ana rubbed her fingers together as Kamilah took her other hand and started to apply cream on it as well. Apparently Ana's hands had become dry and rougher in her time away, which was judged unacceptable by her wife, who insisted on making her skin as soft as possible before she went away again. Ana had protested the futility of her efforts, but otherwise made no further arguments. After all, she would be the last person to complain about being pampered by her wife.

"Then you'd better feel lucky that you can't tell when I want to murder you," Kamilah groused, massaging her palm.

"Oh, trust me. I can feel it. I just take it as your little professions of love." She grinned when Kamilah clicked her tongue, and gave her grumpy wife a peck on the temple.

Kamilah snorted. "Say any more, and I'll murder you before the omnics can even get to you."

"I can think of no better way to go," Ana said. She held her smile for a little longer, before it disappeared with another involuntary sigh.

Kamilah tapped under her chin. "Stay home, amar," she reminded Ana gently.

"Mm. Sorry. It's…a little difficult."

"I know." Kamilah rubbed a thumb over her knuckles. "You spend enough time worrying about the war. Let go for a while."

Another sigh escaped Ana's lips before she could catch it. "Aren't you worried?"

"I am." Kamilah squeezed her hand gently, peering in concern at her troubled expression. "Want to talk about it?"
"Ugh, I'm getting a headache just thinking about it," Ana groaned. "We're all getting picked off slowly. Soon we won't have enough soldiers in the field."

"I know," Kamilah said, tilting her head. "There's talk about reassigning the academy trainers to the field."

Ana's stomach dropped. "What?"

Kamilah nodded. "Mostly the strategic and basic combat trainers. They're going to condense the cadet training even more, with larger class sizes. Less trainers will be needed, so it'll free up some manpower for the field."

"And you? The medics?"

She shrugged. "For us, it mostly means the hospital. In base."

"Thank god," Ana breathed.

"Yeah."

Ana kept quiet, thinking over what Kamilah said as her wife wiped off her hands, then opened another container and dabbed some moisturiser onto Ana's chin. "But the condensed training… It feels like they just want fodder."

Nodding again, Kamilah said, "I don't like to think about it."

"Sorry." Ana gave a wan smile as Kamilah dabbed by the corners of her mouth as well. "How are you holding up?"

"I'm fine. I get really stressed sometimes, but I'm learning to compartmentalise."

"That's good."

"Mm." She rubbed over Ana's cheeks with two fingers. "Guess it helps that my wife is too important to be fodder now."

"Aren't you just proud of her?"

Kamilah hummed as she worked on Ana's other cheek. "Yes, but now I'm afraid she can't walk properly with a fat head on her shoulders."

"Hey—!" Ana paused when she saw Fareeha crawl over and pull at Kamilah's shorts. When her mother looked down, she stretched out a hand towards the coffee table, moving her fingers as if grasping something. Ana cocked her head in confusion, but Kamilah understood and reached for the sippy cup on the table, keeping a loose hold on the cup as Fareeha grabbed onto the handles. Ana felt tickled by how happy the girl looked, just from drinking water.

"Okay, sweetheart. That's enough." Kamilah tugged the cup away after Fareeha had taken a few more eager sips, prompting a short whine from the child. "Any more and you'll get too full."

But Fareeha continued to whine in protest, until Ana took the toy caterpillar from the floor and placed it between the girl's hands. Fareeha pouted a little, but the fun activity of squeezing the toy, then bumping it against the floor seemed to distract her.

"She really takes after you," Kamilah sighed.
"You say that like it's a bad thing."

"We'll see."

Nine days passed since Ana's return, and it was time for her to head out again. It was still difficult to leave her family behind, but not as painful as the first time. Her purpose was clear, and she was no longer heading out into an unknown. She knew what she faced, and knew that she would survive – it was the only outcome that she would accept. Kamilah seemed to take some comfort in her apparent confidence, and wasn't as fearful as before. It was easier to let go this time, knowing they would surely be reunited again.

Ana was much more grounded when she headed back to Ismailia with Jaida, whose mood was notably lighter, now that the brass had cooled their heels…for the time being. Without an impossible mission to worry about, they were free to devote their energy into tackling their next target: Suez. With their southern forces making their way northwards to omnium, taking this city would effectively surround the main factory with the army's troops, giving the omnics no leeway to wriggle from a final assault. Hopes were high after their recent victories, and Ana even spotted a few smiles as they rode into the portion of Suez already seized by the army.

She looked around, taking in the city with much interest, even in its wrecked state. This was Kamilah's hometown, where she had lived before being transferred to Heliopolis. Kamilah never talked much about the city and showed no interest in it whatsoever, but Ana fancied bringing her family here, even if just for a simple walk by the water. Perhaps after the war was over, and if Kamilah willing.

For now, she had business to attend to: the advance on Suez's omnic factories. They took a week to prepare, mostly to modify their tactics so they could counteract any new surprises the omnics had invented, after being left alone by the army for an extended time. One significant change was the focus on the army's omnic engineers in the next attack. Given that their omnic foes were constantly resisting any new hacking software they dreamt up, they had decided to let their own engineers shine – by connecting to the factories themselves, and disabling whatever defenses were present. It was risky – there was no guarantee the engineers could overcome the counterintrusion measures, but they were in the dark about their enemies' upgrades, so this was their best shot at taking the omnics down – by relying on the spark of ingenuity.

They launched the assault with feverish energy, knowing that this was one of the last few hurdles that stood in their way, before they could converge upon one final objective – the omnium. Their push was steady, and though many fell under the vast firepower from the omnic forces, they managed to fight their way towards the factories.

Then, chaos descended upon the battlefield.

Ana was in a prime sniping position that gave her a good view of the two omnic factories, and let her track battalion movements easily – for better or worse, she couldn't tell. All she could feel was a sudden chill running through her veins, when the army's omnics stopped dead in their tracks mid-battle. Most of the human soldiers carried on with the charge, while a few others stopped to check on their comrades. Ana swiveled her scope over their troops, scrutinising each static omnic body, until she spotted Layla's face peering up at Adofo's in concern.

It happened in a flash. Adofo's head snapped straight up, and Ana's breath caught in her throat when she saw red where his blue eyes should be. His hand clamped suddenly around Layla's neck, lifting her to the air. She dropped her rifle in shock, hands scrabbling at the cold metal of Adofo's arm as he squeezed his fingers tighter, causing her feet to lash out in a desperate bid for freedom.
Ana was acutely aware of the minute trembling in her fingers, as she focused her crosshair on Adofo's main processors. But she hesitated, trying to recall other vital spots in the omnic body, when a large blur slammed into Adofo's side. Layla dropped to the ground on her side, hacking and coughing desperately for air, as Ebo and Adofo landed just a few feet away. Ebo struggled to keep Adofo pinned under him, but even his heavy bulk was not enough to keep the omnic down for long – not that it mattered.

Adofo rammed his head into Ebo's face, and the man flinched backwards in pain, hand reaching for his bloody nose. The omnic grabbed the rifle Ebo had dropped to the floor, and AP rounds shredded through the man's chest armour before he could react. Adofo threw Ebo's limp body aside, unaware of a sniper's scope trained upon his chassis as he rose to his feet. He fired another round with the rifle as Ana squeezed her trigger, a single bullet ripping through the bundle of wires connecting his 'brain' to his main processor: the omnic equivalent of snapping the cervical spine. Adofo fell back from the impact of the shot, lying paralysed on the ground while his red eyes still shone steadily – not even a brief flicker to betray a strain of emotion.

Body feeling utterly hollow, Ana vaguely heard the urgent order of retreat blast through their radio. She turned her scope to find Layla, looking stricken as she hauled Hakim onto her back, the man screaming in pain from the jagged bone sticking out from his knee – a wound from Adofo's last rifle burst. They joined the mess of soldiers sprinting away from the omnic factories, picking their way through a ground littered with bodies. Ana took one last look at Ebo, his blank eyes pointed up at the innocuous blue sky. Then she jerked her head away from the scope, unwilling to linger any longer. A half-remembered prayer formed in the back of her mind, as she rose to her feet and made her escape.

Half of Layla's squad was gone. The survivors had visited their hospitalised squad mates, before leaving with stooped shoulders and heavy steps. Ana stayed with Layla in the Ismailia hospital, sitting by her bed while Hakim slumbered in another ward. The air in the hospital was akin to that of a graveyard.

They had beat a hasty retreat to Ismailia, only to discover that their field camp was in ruins, wrecked by the omnis that had turned upon their human comrades. The troops retreated farther into the city and, by some slim miracle, were able to hold their defenses long enough to gun down the last of the attacking omnis. The civilian hospital opened their doors to the soldiers, and it was near the hospital where they had set up a makeshift base.

News trickled in, and they learnt the omnic emergency hadn't been confined to their area of operations, but had taken place nearly country wide. From Alexandria to Asyut, most omnis – military and civilian – had turned red and killed any humans unlucky enough to be within their reach. Cities housing the army's major bases still held out fairly well, though with alarming casualties beyond the base's walls. Other cities – for which they had fought tooth and nail – fell into omnic hands once more.

The source of the chaos was identified as the God Program residing within the Temple of Anubis. The AI had apparently come alive and 'broken its shackles', necessitating an immediate lockdown of the area. Reports say that the AI was now contained, and with the way things were, Ana sincerely hoped that it was the truth. They couldn't take another blow of this magnitude, not in such a pitiful state.

She closed her eyes and took a slow breath, holding it until she felt steady, before she exhaled. Ana looked back at Layla, who was still lying in bed with hollow eyes staring up at the ceiling. She had taken a few bullets during the hasty retreat, but Ana doubted her wounds were the reason for her
torpor. Ana grasped Layla's hand gently, but the woman didn't react.

They stayed in complete silence, until Layla broke it abruptly. "No scrolls of resurrection in real life."

Ana blinked, taking a while to understand her. "Too bad he can't resurrect himself."

"Yeah," Layla uttered, muscles in her neck working painfully. "Always told him paladins are fucking losers—" She bit her lip hard, and screwed her eyes shut. Her breath hitched a few times, but her eyes were clear when she finally looked at Ana. "Where is Mesi?"

"She's fine. Don't know where she went after the brief, but I'm sure she'll be here soon."

"Yeah." Layla turned her gaze towards the ceiling again, falling back into stupor. Then she whispered, "We don't deserve this."

Ana exhaled tiredly. "No one does."

Kamilah had been in her office at the academy, looking over a new set of proposed changes to training schedules, when the alarm was sounded. Her blood quickened when she heard yelling and gunfire from outside, and she looked out the window to find the guards shooting down omnic staff—all with red eyes. Her thoughts flew immediately to Fareeha, and she fired a text to the babysitter, telling Fatimah to 'Stay low at home. Emergency.'

As she rose and made for the door, a colleague burst through the doorway with an urgent look on his face, offering a loaded pistol to her. They made for the foyer and were joined by a few more colleagues along the way, shooting down any hostile omnics that came into sight. By the time they reached spacious hall, most of the staff had already gathered and were receiving their orders. The medics in Kamilah's section were to stand guard with the company of soldiers defending the hospital, and block off the main road leading to the residential zone.

The hospital was still in chaos when the medics arrived—soldiers were fighting off omnics trying to charge through the entrance, keenly aware that there were omnic staff still inside the building as well. Kamilah's squad and a few others were chosen to clear the hospital of hostiles, and she found herself fighting alongside an enraged Deyab, who kept yelling into his radio, 'Hurry up and hit the kill switch, you bastards!'

They had lost two wards and a squad before the battle came to an abrupt—but not unwelcome—halt. The light in the omnics' eyes went dark in an instant, weapons dropping from their hands as they crashed lifelessly to the floor. Kamilah's squad had frozen at the sight, an eerie silence sinking over the hallway before she came to her senses, and ordered her soldiers to perform a full sweep of hospital.

They kept on full alert even after the kill switch had been activated, as it only affected military-grade omnics, but not their civilian counterparts living on base. That knowledge kept Kamilah on edge, hoping desperately that no omnic had managed to reach her neighbourhood. Anxiety for her daughter nearly boiled over several times while she patrolled around the hospital, but she kept looking at the road block set up some distance away from the hospital, and took comfort in the fact that no one had breached it yet.

Guard duty dragged on for the entire day and spilled into the next, but Kamilah knew that none of the high-strung soldiers around her were even capable of taking a rest, not in this state. She heard no belly-aching or groans throughout her guard shift, which ended the next afternoon, when command had declared the emergency over. The reinforcements from the academy took their leave of the
hospital and returned to their offices, taking stock of the trainers who had survived the ordeal, before addressing questions from their wide-eyed cadets.

Kamilah's duties kept her at the academy until night had fallen, when she was finally able to fly home and pick Fareeha up. Fatimah looked stricken yet relieved at the sight of her, pulling her into a tight hug. Kamilah waved away the woman's concern, wearing a tired smile at Fareeha's impressive pout as she sat in Fatimah's hold. The girl reached out for Kamilah, who took her immediately, clutching Fareeha firmly to her chest. After giving Fatimah her thanks, Kamilah walked home slowly, so she wouldn't lose her balance from the buzzing in her head.

Luckily, Fareeha seemed well-fed and cared for, and didn't fuss for attention. It gave Kamilah some space to breathe, and time to nip into the bathroom for a quick shower. She didn't have the energy for much else and, after laying Fareeha on the bed, crashed into the mattress right beside the girl. Kamilah gave a wan smile as she rubbed the girl's tummy, and Fareeha's hand landed on her cheek.

"Sorry to leave you alone for so long, habibti," Kamilah murmured. "Mama's been busy…"

Fareeha giggled lazily, fingers grasping at Kamilah's ear as her mother's eyelids started to droop.

Kamilah curled her arm around Fareeha in a loose hug, snuggling closer to the girl. "Mama loves you, Fareeha."

"Mah."
They remained entrenched in Ismailia for a solid six weeks, clawing out a safe zone in the once beautiful city, now ruined and ravaged by war. For a month, the omnis had rushed at their camp borders again and again, chipping away a piece of their defenses with each attack. The soldiers were being run ragged from long patrol shifts, their equipment falling apart from extensive use and damage. The ammunition store grew dangerously lighter each time they fought and lived to see another day. They dug their fingers in, hanging onto a fraying thread of hope with bleeding nails. And when their bodies were pushed to the brink of collapsing, they were given a chance to breathe – the omnic assaults became irregular, and gradually lightened to skirmishes that could be handled by a platoon or two.

There was a deep, unspoken relief passing through the ranks, but it wasn’t shared by their commanders. The first day that passed without a single battle, had made Ana’s suspicion skyrocket. The forces at Ismailia were bent to nearly breaking point. Why would the omnis desist then? Either luck had graced them with a gentle caress, or there was something else brewing on the horizon. But as removed from Central Command as they were, there was no way to determine what lay in store. So Jaida had chosen Ana and a small squad for a return to Cairo, leaving General Mahmoud and Mesi behind to hold the fort.

Uncertain whether the ground between them and Cairo were friendly or hostile, they chose to travel quietly to avoid any trouble. They took two LRVs – modified to emit only a whisper of noise, and each carried its own stealth module so they wouldn't appear on any heat or movement sensors. The squad moved under the cover of night, with the vehicles' lights off and their night-vision equipment on. They kept radio silent for the most part, only informing each other of road obstructions and possible enemy sightings as they picked their way through destroyed roads and debris. What would’ve been a two-hour journey was stretched into four, owing to their reduced speed and caution, but they made it safely to the Heliopolis base.

There was no time to rest – when command had learnt of Jaida's return, she and Ana were rushed into a war room to discuss the future of Jaida's plan. Needless to say, it was difficult and confusing – their data and reports couldn't be verified due to sporadic communications, and their scattered forces were kept in a state of constant flux. The month-long omnic siege had thrown them into disarray, and they would need time to rebuild.

When that fact was established after some heated arguments, the meeting was adjourned to give Jaida and Ana some mandatory R&R. But not before they presented Jaida with two new star insignias to go with the eagle on her epaulet, signifying her jump-step promotion to Colonel. Evidently, they understood that Jaida was running the show, and wanted her to continue running it – but with a more respectable rank. 'Just want to save their own faces,' Jaida had muttered, albeit with a thin smirk. 'Don't want a lowly Major to show them up.'"}

Then she had turned to Ana as they walked out into the mid-afternoon sun. 'Want to take my place?' Jaida said, and merely patted Ana on the back in farewell when the captain shot her a surprised look. Ana gazed after Jaida as the colonel strode down the road, then shrugged off the question as a joke. She went in the other direction, walking all the way towards her home despite the heaviness in her muscles.

Ana nipped into the house first, running through the shower in a tired daze and falling into the bed for some shuteye, before she fetched Fareeha from the babysitter. The girl, who had been roused in the middle of her afternoon nap, perked up at the sight of her mother, giving Ana a lazy welcome of
hugs and kisses and babbles, before she fell asleep again. Just as well – Ana was happy enough to lay on the sofa with Fareeha, hugging her daughter securely as she kept her eyes closed, falling into silent meditation in the peacefulness of her home.

An hour later, Ana heard the rumble of a bike outside, and the garage doors opening. She lay Fareeha in the baby rocker and strode into the garage, the sight of her causing Kamilah to stop mid-stride towards the door. After a short stare, her wife breathed a sigh of relief and flew into her, arms wrapping around Ana tightly.

"You need to stop scaring me every time you come back," Kamilah said in her ear, then loosened her grip on Ana's shirt and leaned back.

"And you need to stop being such a scaredy-cat." She smirked when Kamilah flicked her cheek.

"Says the one who's terrified of horror movies." Kamilah ran a hand through Ana's hair, then cupped her cheek, thumb stroking her skin softly. "Are you alright? I heard about…what happened."

Ana's smile remained, though thinner when she pressed her lips together, instinctively pushing down the memory. "I'm fine." She gave Kamilah a peck, then pulled her in for a firm embrace. "I'm here."

Ana kicked down the motorcycle's side stand and shut its engine, but didn't move to take off her helmet or get off the bike.

When she was traveling back to Heliopolis in the early morning, they had skirted around the edges of this neighbourhood, and Ana caught a glimpse of the omnic's impact on the area. She had forced it out of her mind then, to focus on the task at hand. But after she had reached home and Kamilah returned to watch over Fareeha, Ana set out on a personal errand. Kamilah had told her to take the bike since she'd be heading closer to the combat zone, as it would provide a quicker escape should trouble reach her.

Ana stared ahead through her tinted visor, spotting the warm glow of camp lights and fires dotting the sidewalk. Several individuals and families had returned to the area, setting up camp beside their ruined houses despite the present danger. Perhaps they couldn't let go, or had nowhere else to go. Perhaps they wanted just one last look at their home, to bid their old lives goodbye.

She sighed, finally pulling the helmet off her head. Hanging it on the handlebar by its strap, Ana took leaden steps towards the dust-covered front yard, and looked over the remains of the Amari home. Most of it had collapsed, with only a small portion of the eastern section left standing. Ana moved closer towards the rubble, spying the battered cross-section of her sister's and parents' room. Several pictures still hung precariously from the only wall left in Zaid's room, but the single band poster on Safiya's wall remained undamaged, only covered in dirt.

Of all the things… Ana snorted despite herself. She hated that band – the poster's demise might've lifted her spirits by a fraction. But life, it seemed, was intent on keeping her as miserable as possible.

Ana stepped gingerly on the large chunks of concrete and splintered wood, climbing up the short pile of rubble to survey her house. There were a few bullet holes, black scorch marks, and smaller fragments of debris that made Ana suspect an explosion. From a grenade, perhaps? Either a small cluster, or a rocket? Ana couldn't tell, and her curiosity died quickly. It didn't matter anymore.

She searched around the rubble with the flashlight from her phone, finding broken and burnt pieces of their furniture in the wreckage. Then she climbed up to the floor of Zaid's room, stopping for a moment when she heard a dangerous creak and groan beneath her feet. When she was satisfied the floor wouldn't give under her, Ana collected the photos from the walls and went over to Safiya's
room, gathering more stuff as she went along. She paused in front of the band poster, torn by a second of indecision, before she took it as well.

Dropping carefully back to the ground floor, Ana sat on the rubble in the living room, looking over the photos beneath cracked glass. Three were of the original family, one with Kamilah and Zahra as well, and the last was her parents' wedding photo. She ran a fingertip gently over her mother's face, heart flat and hollow.

Ana raised her gaze from the photo, blinking the moisture from her eyes. She scanned the rubble again, feeling so small from where she sat amid the house's remains; like a child, but with no one to hold her hand, to sing her to sleep, to tell her everything will be alright.

She swallowed thickly, hugging the photos to her chest.

She had to make this right.

Ana gazed at her wife, wearing a small smile of her own as the surprise on Kamilah's face gave way to amusement.

"I forgot your birthday the last time I came back," Ana explained, when Kamilah took the proffered rose from her hand. "So... Happy birthday."

Kamilah chuckled quietly, and kissed her on the cheek. "Thanks. But to tell you the truth, I forgot too."

"Why am I not surprised?"

"Because you were out there, making me sick with worry?"

"I was going to say it's because you're an old hag," Ana drawled, taking Kamilah by the arm and strolling to the living room. "But let's go with that."

"Horrible," Kamilah huffed, then nodded at the paper bag she held. "What's that?"

"Fareeha's birthday present. And a cake for the two of you."

"You got all that on the way back?" Kamilah asked incredulously.

"Your wife might be an idiot, but she's a resourceful one," Ana replied airily and let go of Kamilah's arm, setting the paper bag on the coffee table. It caught Fareeha's interest, the girl forgetting about the rattle in her hand as she peered at the bag curiously. Ana took off her backpack as well, placing it behind the armchair so it would be out of sight. Kamilah knew it contained the belongings she had salvaged from her home. Ana gave a wan smile to acknowledge her concern, then quickly turned her attention elsewhere.

Reaching into the paper bag, Ana retrieved the blue bird plushie and held it out to Fareeha, whose eyes brightened at the new toy.

"It's for you, Fareeha!" Ana cooed, letting the girl take the plush with an ecstatic grin. "It's your birthday two weeks ago, you know? Your very first birthday!"

Fareeha held up the toy, giggling as she shook it up and down. She was so preoccupied with the toy, that Ana fancied Fareeha didn't notice when she kissed the girl's forehead.

She sighed quietly to herself and ruffled Fareeha's hair, watching the look of pure, simple bliss on the
Kamilah hovered around her whenever she was home, obviously concerned with Ana's quieter demeanour since her return. Ana offered her no explanation in the way of words, only a smile to set her heart at ease. She made it clear she wanted to go about life as per normal, and so Kamilah asked no questions. Since Ana started spending more time at command, Kamilah took to caring for her instead. Ana never had to work or worry for anything at home – a warm meal always waited for her after work, then a cup of tea to help her unwind, or aspirin if she had a headache. A clean set of her uniform always hung on the wardrobe door, already ironed and ready for use. Fareeha's cries were quickly assuaged by Kamilah before she had to do anything, and Ana had to fight for a chance to take care of her child, reminding Kamilah that 'I'm her mother too, remember?'

Kamilah gave in, and Ana took to teasing her for being 'too capable a solo mother'. Her wife responded to the teases with scoffs and eye rolls, but wore a smile on her lips – being a capable mother could only be a compliment, after all.

A holographic map of Egypt hovered over Ana's table, its many regions highlighted in blue and red, beside the vast grey of the desert. Currently, only the omnium was in red. She clicked a button on her palm-sized remote, and the red seeped into the blue of Cairo. Another click, and the red was forced back, but it leaked out the sides into the neighbouring regions. With each press of the button, the red spread inexorably across the map, swallowing small towns and invading cities until the blue pushed against it, and they came to a standstill. Blue went on to swallow red, reclaiming its lost territories and enveloping nearly 70% of the map in uniform colour, when a bright spot of crimson appeared in the Giza Plateau – the Temple of Anubis.

Like large blood splatters, red dotted the entire map, drowning out the blue until they were islands in an ocean of blood. That's when Ana lifted her thumb from the remote, and stared at the map.

They had assigned her a personal office in the command building, and poring over the map was how Ana spent most of her time in the room. In the war room with other officers, Ana looked to the future and planned to save it. In her privacy, she pondered the past and wondered how they had been driven into this desperate state.

She clicked another button, going back in the timeline and watching the Temple grow red again, along with the majority of the map. The God Program had wrested control for itself, and turned nearly all omnics against humans – not only in Egypt, but in Russia, the US, and India as well. But why was the destruction of humanity their first goal after gaining full sentience? And more importantly, how were they doing it? How did they override the consciousness of other omnics? Were the omnics hacked, their memories and sense of self wiped when they were turned into drones? Could the red-eyed omnics operate as individuals, think for themselves as a single entity? She hoped not.

Ana replayed the Temple's activation again, staring at the map as it was steeped in red. If this was the work of mindless drones, she didn't dare to think what would happen should the omnics get creative.

A knock on the door distracted her, and it swung open after her acknowledgement. She stood to attention when Jaida strode through the door, with a datapad in hand.

"At ease, Amari," Jaida said, shutting the door behind her. "Still hard at work?" She nodded at the map, and Ana noticed the tension on her face despite the smile.
"Just…thinking, ma'am." Ana thumbed the projector's switch, and the map blinked off. "How can I help you?"

"That's up to you." Jaida tapped the datapad against her palm when Ana tilted her head. "The Alexandria base had just been breached by the omnis. Dealt damage to over a third of the place before they were pushed out again." She paused, then held the datapad out to Ana.

Ana took it mechanically. The KIA list from Alexandria was displayed onscreen, and she didn't have to scroll down to confirm her misgivings. Amari, Zaid was among the first casualties listed.

Her mouth went dry, datapad trembling minutely in her hand, but her entire body remained oddly calm. Empty. A part of her had died when Jaida mentioned the attack on Alexandria, and now the rest of her followed. She realised she was holding her breath, and let it out. Ana stared at the pad's screen longer, then nodded and handed it back to Jaida.

"Would you…" She stopped, suddenly feeling winded. Taking a moment to gather herself, she continued, "Do me a favour?"

Jaida nodded.

"Inform my wife and sister for me."

Jaida peered at her longer, then nodded again. She left the office without another word, and for that, Ana was grateful.

She leaned heavily against the table with both hands, mind clear yet shrouded in a haze. She could think of nothing, staring down at the table with an unseeing gaze. Slowly, Ana sat down in her chair, and closed her eyes.

She stayed in a functional haze for the rest of the day, ignoring the buzzing from her phone until it died away. Jaida didn't summon her to the war room, and no one came into her office that day – she suspected the colonel's doing. Ana read through a report detailing the omnic attack on Alexandria, took another brief glance at the KIA list, then brought up her map again. This time, she didn't give any thought to the past. Instead, she studied their current state, playing mix-and-match with their forces, trying to find the best solution to eradicate their omnic problem.

It was a task that held her in the office well into the night, until Jaida popped by and ordered her to go home. So she did.

Ana walked past the nursery without a word, shutting her bedroom door to block out Kamilah's voice and Fareeha's babbles. She dropped her bag without thought, and sank to the floor beside the bed, staring at the wall blankly. She remained in the cold, hollow state for a long while, and was only vaguely aware of the door opening behind her.

Kamilah knelt beside her and hugged her tight, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. Ana turned her gaze slightly as Kamilah sat down beside her, keeping an arm around her back and holding her hand. Ana lowered her eyes to where Kamilah stroked the back of her hand with a thumb, her wife waiting for her to say something. Maybe cry, or break out into another smile as she had done for the past days. Ana couldn't. She didn't dare to. She was afraid to speak, to etch a crack in a dam that would crumble under the pressure.

"I've contacted the office," Kamilah said gently, breaking their prolonged silence. "They said there's no guarantee that they can transport the bodies back any time soon. They don't have the manpower, and there's no secure route to Cairo. So they'll bury the bodies in a temporary cemetery in Alexandria
after a few days."

Ana nodded, throat constricting at the last sentence. "Thanks," she whispered.

Kamilah gave a weak, fleeting smile, fingers tightening around Ana's.

Waiting a few more moments, Ana dared to speak, "He didn't even get to see Fareeha—" Her voice cracked, and the rest of her words disappeared in an involuntary, forceful exhale. She took controlled breaths, fighting down the lump rising to her throat. Kamilah's hand cupped her cheek, and she forced a smile. Placing a kiss on Kamilah's palm, she said, "I'm fine."

Her voice was surprisingly steady as Kamilah caught the first tears with her thumb. Ana tried to collect herself and failed, sobs forcing their way to her throat. She cried as quietly as she could, first leaning her head against Kamilah's for support, before moving to rest on her shoulder. She clung onto Kamilah's shirt, fingers gripping tightly at soft fabric as Kamilah held her firmly, rubbing her back soothingly.

Only when Ana had calmed down, sobs dying away as her tears became silent, did she realise the shoulder of her own t-shirt was damp as well.

She received a text from Jaida later that night, informing her that she had been taken off duty for the next two days – no argument or she would be demoted to private. So Ana stayed, and spoke little of her father – even in the phone call with Safiya, the sisters refused to talk directly about their father's death. They asked after each other, made promises to see each other again, vowed to send the omnis back to hell, and that was that. Kamilah appeared even more worried than before, but Ana put on a smile as always, telling her wife not to be silly as she squeezed Kamilah in a hug.

Two days later, Ana returned to the war room with Jaida. Now with consolidated information about their forces countrywide, it was easier to put themselves back together, and start planning a countermove. But to find a viable solution was nigh impossible. Their forces were stretched too thin, trying to hold onto more territories than they could protect. They would have to choose which cities and towns to let go, and from which strongholds to mount a retaliation. It would be a slow and arduous process, one that was left to the brass to suffer over. Unfortunately, Jaida was to stay and share their pains – one of the 'perks' of her new rank. But she sent Ana back into the field in the meantime, saying that she would be a waste to keep in base.

So Ana kissed both her wife and child in farewell yet again, and charged back into the fray with a vengeance. For vengeance.

The first order of business was to establish secure roads between Heliopolis and other bases, facilitating more effective troop movements across the country. Ana fought her way up to Alexandria first, paving the way for reinforcements that the base sorely needed. There she visited her father's grave, shedding a few more tears in front of the wooden grave marker, before heading out with her company again.

Two months passed, with Ana carving out transport routes along the northern cities, and the army engaging in skirmishes with omnis all over the country. When she had reached Ismailia, finding Mesi and Layla still fighting strong, they received an emergency transmission. A small battalion escorting hundreds of civilians to base had been ambushed along the way, and were pinned down at a location nearly an hour's drive from Ismailia. Judging from the static-spotted report, they would need a sizeable contingent to fight the omnis back, but by the time the larger force reached them, the ambush would've ended in the omnis' favour.
They needed to buy time, so Ana gathered a small response team to provide quick assistance. She left regular infantry alone – tackling the omnis in conventional ground combat with such a small force would be suicide. Instead, she went with her instincts, and chose only snipers for her team, along with a few medics to render medical aid if necessary.

The team flew along the dusty, broken roads at dangerously high speeds in their LRVs, not daring to slow down for even a second – not with the weight of hundreds on their shoulders. They parked their vehicles at a safe distance, then ran towards the ambush site as ghost-like figures, hidden by their stealth kits. Ana sprinted up a sturdy-looking building until she had good elevation, and got a feel of the battlefield. The civilians were holed up in a dilapidated community centre, while the soldiers guarded the building and tried flanking the omnis to distract them.

Noting wryly that they had the right idea, Ana ordered her snipers to open fire. The first few waves of sniper fire was met with confusion, before the omnis gathered themselves to neutralise the new threat. But the split in focus left the rest of their forces more vulnerable to attack, and the soldiers who had been pinned down before, were now the hunters instead. With the snipers baiting the omnis into exposing large openings in their ranks, the soldiers ripped into their lines, scattering them repeatedly amid gunfire and blood and sparks. Ana kept running between levels and buildings, her fatigues soon soaked in sweat from the exertion – but sweating meant she was alive, and she had to keep her position a mystery to stay that way.

Ana's limbs were starting to feel like lead, the rifle weighing heavily in her hands, when reinforcements finally arrived and mowed down the remaining omnis with ease. She received numerous pats on the back with an exhausted, not-quite-there smile, before dropping heavily back in her LRV's seat, muscles weeping in relief.

She was given some reprieve back in Ismailia, after her hand – and entire arm – was shaken vigorously by an ecstatic General Mahmoud. Ana grabbed a bit of rest, then reported to the general as ordered. He was impressed by her initiative, and because of how effective they had been, her snipers were to be on standby at all times, ready to be called to action. And they were put to work a few more times while in Ismailia, responding to emergencies that often occurred close to omnic territory surrounding the omnium. Then Ana continued to fight her way out of Ismailia, relying on her snipers to keep the tide of battle in their favour, when she was summoned back to Heliopolis again.

She was greeted with a proud smile on Jaida's face, as the colonel revealed the reason for the summons. The brass had taken note of her new tactics and its rate of success, not to mention its reliance on a much smaller number of soldiers. Believing that it would greatly improve the army's efforts and boost morale, they gave Ana the authority to assemble her own company of snipers, and provide aid to all of their troops.

Ana studied each sniper's record extensively, paying particular attention to their combat performance against the omnis. She chose not those who adhered strictly to their mission parameters, but the soldiers with proven initiative and flexibility. If she had learnt anything in the past year, it's that they couldn't survive just playing by the book anymore. They had to observe, adapt, and act – and she singled out those who would do just that.

She chose snipers like Khalid – her very first choice – who could act like a one-man team, providing sniper support on his own by constantly switching his sniping positions, and leaving 'ghostprints' on the omnis' radar with the help of heating and radio devices, fooling them into thinking there were five sniper teams instead of just one man. She chose snipers like Amira – her ex-spotter – who didn't hesitate to throw her sniper rifle aside and grab an assault rifle from the fallen, charging into battle to create a surprise distraction and give her comrades an opening to destroy omnic artillery. She chose
snipers who didn't hesitate to take enormous risk, and surmounted impossible odds.

And they did so without fail. Under her lead, Ana's snipers had bolstered efforts to assault omnic territory, snatching back the land bit by bit. The omnics experienced great difficulty in countering the snipers' inspired and unconventional tactics, unable to logically predict what they would do next. They claimed victory after victory in battle, and as news of their success spread throughout the ranks, they were made official.

More snipers were chosen to join the initial company, and they grew into a regiment of 1000. 'God Eye', they were called, with Ana at its head as commander, and Khalid as her second-in-charge. Horus and Bastet, watching over the soldiers of Egypt, protecting these brave souls as they fought to take back their home.

"I'm fine," Safiya said, her voice marred with static. "Still letting…it sink in. It never had much time to fully register, I think. Been too busy."

"Of course. These things take time," Kamilah replied, noting Safiya's reluctance to address her father's passing. She held the phone to her ear and tilted her head back, so that Fareeha's itchy fingers couldn't reach it. She smiled down at the girl's pout, kissing her head and tapping on the bird plushie. It had instantly become Fareeha's favourite toy, and she never let it out of her sight for more than a few minutes. The bird soon worked its magic, and Fareeha forgot about the phone, playing with the toy contentedly in Kamilah's lap.

"Yeah. How are you? And how's Ana?"

"I'm fine. But Ana…" She sighed, leaning back in the sofa. "She hasn't talked much about papa since…"

"Mah," came Fareeha's voice, and Kamilah grasped her hand absentmindedly.

"Yeah," Safiya said tightly, and Kamilah's heart squeezed in sympathy, half-wishing she hadn't brought it up. "Just...give her time. She'll be fine. It was like this when our mother passed as well. We didn't want to talk about it. Agreed to leave the grieving until after the insurgency was done. Gave hell to the insurgents, made sure we could stand in front of her grave without shame."

"It's…" Kamilah considered her words, dimly aware that Fareeha was trying to catch her attention with repeated 'mah's. "It's not an obligation, Safiya."

"I know. But it's useful. Keeps things in focus." Safiya seemed to lose stamina, her voice dropping off amid another wash of static. "Just let Ana do her thing. She'll go to you when she needs it."

"Mah...mah."

Kamilah swirled Fareeha's hand in circles, still focused on the conversation. "And if she doesn't?"

"Trust me, she will. Girl's got a better head on her shoulders than mine." Kamilah could imagine her crooked smile. "And speaking of which, I'd better get some rest. Gotta mow some omnic ass early in the morning."

"Good luck," Kamilah said, smiling at Safiya's casual affirmation before ending the call.

"Mah, mah."

"Hm?" Kamilah hummed, pressing a kiss to Fareeha's head, eyes still on the phone as her screen
went dark. She sighed, setting the phone down. She hadn't been able to contact Safiya since the news about Zaid, as her sister-in-law had been given a field promotion to Lieutenant-Colonel and taken on all the responsibilities it entailed. It wasn't much of a relief to know that Safiya was handling her loss just like Ana, but at least she was keeping busy, and had Zahra to turn to when she needed it.

"This family's such a headache, isn't it?" Kamilah sang to Fareeha, who still stared up at her.

"Mah mah," Fareeha said clumsily, and Kamilah's heart stopped for the briefest of moments.

"Me?" she asked, as if the child would understand her question. "Are you calling…mama?"

"Mah-mah!" Fareeha repeated merrily. She reached out with a little hand, and grasped onto Kamilah's hair. "Mama!"

"Yes!" Kamilah laughed, tears springing to her eyes. "That's me. I'm mama."

"Mama!"

"Clever girl!" Kamilah hugged Fareeha tight, laughing breathlessly as the girl hugged about her neck. "Such a clever girl! Mama's so proud of you."

Fareeha patted her excitedly on the back, swept along with her mother's thrill. "Ma–, mama!"

Kamilah gave the child a sound kiss on her belly, getting even more giggles from Fareeha as she was set back down in her mother's lap. As she started babble at her mama again, a thought struck Kamilah. Ana was slated for another meeting back in base, much to the sniper's chagrin. She hated being trapped in a war room instead of fighting in the field, but her new position as the head of God Eye necessitated regular conferences back in Heliopolis. No doubt she would be grumpy again when she returned home.

Reaching for her phone, Kamilah opened the gallery and tapped on a photo of Ana. She held it in front of Fareeha, who brightened up and placed a hand on the screen. She looked up at her mother and said, "Mah!"

"Yes. This is mommy. Mah-mee," Kamilah repeated slowly, holding Fareeha's wrist and tapping her hand on Ana, so the girl knew who 'mommy' was. "Mah…"

"Mah."

"Mee…"

"Mi!"

"Mah…" Kamilah said again, smiling and nodding when Fareeha imitated her effortlessly. "Mee…"

"Mi!"

"Mah-mee."

"Mah–, m-ah…" Fareeha frowned, encountering some difficulty. "Ah-mi!"

"Oh, you almost got it, darling. Mah," she said, placing more emphasis on the syllable, and tapping Fareeha's hand over Ana's photo. "Mee. Mah-mee. Mommy!"

"Ami!"
"Almost there, little one. You're doing so good!" She tweaked Fareeha's nose, and the girl clamped two hands over her face in glee. "We have a few more days. Let's make your mommy happy, hm?"

"Ami!"

"Very close, my dear."

When Ana trudged through the front door in her fatigues, she was promptly tended to by her wife, who took her duffel bag and ushered her straight to the bedroom. Kamilah smiled enigmatically when Ana shot her a suspicious squint, then shooed her into the bathroom. When Ana had shut the door, Kamilah flew into the nursery, where Fareeha was hitting two building blocks together.

She took out her phone and went through their usual practice, tapping Fareeha's hand on Ana's photo as they repeated 'mommy' together. Fareeha still struggled a little with enunciating the 'mah' in 'mommy' properly, but Kamilah let her return to her toys quickly, unwilling to push the girl and upset her. Then she heard the bathroom door open, and it was showtime.

Kamilah picked Fareeha up, bringing her into the master bedroom to greet her mother. Ana looked on curiously with a smile, as Kamilah pointed at Ana and asked Fareeha, "Who is that?"

Fareeha stared at Ana blankly, then turned to Kamilah with uncomprehending eyes.

"Who's that, Fareeha?" She coaxed Fareeha back into looking at Ana, but the girl still didn't react. *Hm.* Kamilah tried walking closer to Ana, with no luck. Then she tried holding onto Fareeha's wrist, and raised her hand to Ana's face. "Who's that, Far–?"

"Ami!" Fareeha yelled, waving her arms excitedly when she caught on. "M–, ami!"

Ana burst out in a hearty laugh. "Is she…trying to say 'mommy'?"

"Yup," Kamilah said with a fond sigh, handing the child over to Ana. "She's having a *tiny* problem with it."

"Problem? I see no problem. My little girl's being creative. Aren't you, Fareeha?" She tickled Fareeha's chin, and received a smack on her nose in return.

"Ami!" Fareeha said again, smacking at Ana's nose with great fervour. "Ami! Ami!"

"Ow, ow–, Fareeha, no." Ana scrunched up her face and caught Fareeha's hand before it could land again. "Keep doing that and your mommy's not going to have a nose anymore."

"Ami!"

"Ah, that's right. Ami," Ana crooned and turned to Kamilah, a lop-sided smile on her lips. "I'll assume you didn't teach her to smack me too?"

"By accident, I think?" Kamilah said sheepishly. "I taught her with the hand thing."

"No wonder. Now she thinks each time she says 'ami', it has to come with a slap." Ana smirked, then leaned in to give her wife a warm kiss. "But thank you, my careless little love."
The omnic war dragged ever on, an endless tug-of-war that left human palms bleeding and scarred as they fought for the simple right to exist. No one, not even the top minds in the world, could divine the omnics' motive for this relentless crusade on the human race; and the longer they fought to live, the more blood they split just to survive, the less curious the world became. They could ask questions later, if any of them were left standing. For now, what they had to do was shoot.

Ana had reached the point where her hands no longer felt at ease without the weight of her rifle. It was a source of comfort and security – with it, she was all-seeing and near-untouchable. It was a symbol of her duty, emblem of the Horus incarnate; the sight of Ana walking among the troops with her modified rifle, was taken as a guarantee that the upcoming battle would be success.

She found the notion amusing, but rather ludicrous as well. It was true that Ana's record since the founding of God Eye had been impeccable, keeping casualties to the minimum even when they're retreating in defeat, but she knew all too well that there were no guarantees. Her own failures aside, she'd had to receive and accept reports of her fellow snipers' demise, and the many engagements where all soldiers were wiped out despite having God Eye at their backs. News such as this were kept quiet by the brass, who had used their name to keep morale up among the rank and file, and this secrecy only made the failures weigh on Ana even more. If no one else was willing to remember the bravery of her comrades, then she would.

It drove her on, the ever-climbing casualty figures she read day after day, the sight of rubble lying where impressive and modern buildings used to be, the tears on civilians' faces after they had been rescued from the chaos. Her snipers were unyielding as well, somehow finding the strength to fight, and fight again, responding to requests for backup in engagements all over the country. There was a growing trend to reserve sniper support for missions of a higher priority, but Ana fought tooth-and-nail to spread her soldiers a little wider, just so more could live to see the next daybreak.

It irked her greatly, this selfishness, and it nearly led her to start a heated argument with a group of generals once. But she begrudgingly understood the rationale behind it, and accepted her fate as the head of God Eye, to be deployed to whichever mission that was deemed the most important. With the help of Horus, the army slowly retook key military installations that the omnics had snatched away from them, clawing back the land inch by inch.

On this mission, it seemed that life had finally decided to give her a breath of fresh air. Ana's company had been deployed farther west in the desert, to provide support for a Sa'ka mission to retake a secluded military research facility. They reported to the command centre in Asyut first, and that was where Ana met the one responsible for her current deployment.

Safiya wore a crooked grin as they strode out of the war room, clamping an arm around Ana's shoulders and squeezing her tight.

"I can't believe it was really you," Ana deadpanned. "I should've rejected the request and let you perish."

"Aw, come on." Safiya patted her cheek, ignoring the glances from other officers. "We haven't seen each other for so long! Or are you too important for family now, Horus?"
"I'm disowning you." Ana crossed her arms, wearing a small smirk on her lips as Safiya unlocked the door to her office.

"Oh no," Safiya said with an exaggerated pout, stopping with her hand on the door handle. "Can you hear that? The sound of my heart breaking?"

"No."

"That's because it's not." Her hand flew out to smack Ana hard in the forehead, and she zipped into her office as her sister stumbled backwards in surprise.

Ana gritted her teeth, reminding herself that it wasn't a good idea to tackle a woman – who was technically her superior – to the floor in front of other officers. So she straightened herself and walked in with dignity, rolling her eyes at Safiya's grin.

"What, do I have to prove my worth to you?" Safiya shut the door behind her, and tapped at Ana's tattoo. "Do I have to get a tattoo like yours to be worth your time? I'm thinking something like this." She held her middle finger up to her own eye. "Callsign, Fuck You."

Ana couldn't help but snigger. "Seriously?"

"Yeah! Imagine." Holding her fingers up to her ear, Safiya imitated speaking into her comm piece, "This is Fuck You, calling Horus. Horus, this is Fuck You, come in. Over." She cackled in time with Ana, slapping at her thighs as she strode over to her desk, reaching down for the drawers.

"You never change, do you?" Ana sighed, catching her breath.

"Does it look that way? 'Cause I feel a thousand times older."

Ana watched as Safiya took out a few files. "No, I was just being nice. You kinda looked like mama back there."

"Funny. I thought the same of you."

"Are you implying I'm old?"

"Duh." Safiya produced a half-finished bottle of whisky and two shot glasses from her drawer, making Ana's brow arch incredulously. "Remind me, how old is Fareeha again? 5, 6, 20?"

"She's 1," Ana corrected her, acting unamused. "1… Going to be 2 soon. Fuck me," she sighed involuntarily, reminded again that she hadn't been home for nearly half a year. "She's going to grow up without me."

"All the better for her." Safiya smirked, ignoring Ana's rude gesture as she filled the shot glasses, then handed one to her sister.

"Really? You drink on the job?"

"Hey, in this shitshow?" She shrugged nonchalantly. "You have to, if only to keep sane. What, don't you?"

"No. Alcohol tends to screw with your aim. But you've forgotten that, haven't you? Sitting all soft and cushy back at your command post."

"Fuck you," Safiya chuckled, raising her glass with Ana. "May our next mission be a success, hm?"
"With me around? Of course it will."

The assault on the military installation was a little tricky for the snipers – there was little to no infrastructure around the armoury and research grounds, and the only place they could take cover in, was the small cluster of barracks near the facility. All the buildings were short, and could hardly afford them a good view of what happened inside the facility's walls. So Ana posted a handful of snipers at the barracks, two to stay with air support in their VTOLs, while the rest trailed along with the main force until they could make camp on top of the walls.

The Sa'ka-only troops moved with an efficiency and grit that surpassed what she’d seen in the regular soldiers so far – they made it through the facility's defenses in half the time Ana expected, impressing her immeasurably. Knowing the ground assault was in good hands, Ana and her snipers broke away from the main contingent. Ana sprinted up the eastern watchtower, downing a fair share of omnics with well-aimed pistol shots on her way to the top. Once in place by the windows, she scanned the grounds with her scope and – with a quick glance at their troops and the omnics lying dead at their feet – Ana knew they had this mission in hand. Really, there was no reason for her presence here, other than to act as backup in case the Sa'ka faltered in what was labeled an 'important target'.

Nevertheless, Ana fell into her element, taking down omnic after omnic in a state of meditative coolness – until the Sa'ka had taken over most of the facility, and the ground rumbled beneath their feet. Roving her scope over the base, Ana sought out the source of the disturbance, then spotted the thin seam running through the parade grounds. The vast concrete floor parted in the middle, attracting all attention towards it. The Sa'ka soldiers mowed down the last of the omnics, then took up positions around the parade ground, weapons aimed as they waited…

Ana’s eyes widened the instant the new arrival poked over the ground, and her hand flew to her earpiece immediately. "Thunderbolt-Actual, this is Horus! They have a Titan here!"

"Transmit visual, Horus," Safiya said, as calm as Ana was not.

Ana examined the Titan as it rose from its underground hangar, still inert. She had seen Titans in the news, where the omnics had converted these construction aids into weapons of mass destruction, but she hadn't expected to see one in Egypt. Why would she? They had been decommissioned months ago, and torn down before they could become a threat. Somehow, the omnics had managed to get the parts and rebuilt them…

Fear tinged her forced calm, and Ana started moving her scope over the Titan, looking for familiar weak spots to bring the massive omnic down. The bigger they are…

Safiya's voice crackled over the comms on the universal frequency, and the Sa'ka forces promptly moved to carry out 'Evasive Pattern Delta' – to try and slow the Titan as much as possible, while avoiding fire themselves. Then she opened a channel to Ana, "Horus, I need you and your snipers to stay in position. The Sa'ka will lure it out of the facility. You will fire everything you have at the small panel on its back – its fusion reactor."

"No guarantee it'll work," Ana said, though her scope was already in place, waiting for the Titan to expose its back. "There will be a shield protecting the panel – like we've seen in the Bastion units."

"I know. I'm not asking you to take it down. Just add to the distraction until my flyboys get close enough."

"Understood."
"And Horus? Stay clear of the fire." There was a hard edge in Safiya's voice.

"Anything for you, Thunderbolt."

Ana smiled at the snort over the radio before the channel clicked off, and it didn't take long for her to refocus on the Titan. She relayed the orders, then searched for the reactor panel on the Titan's back with her cybernetic eye. It was small – so small, she knew any bullet that actually hit it was just pure luck. Any bullet other than hers, of course.

Taking the lead, Ana pumped round after round at the Titan's back, her snipers following suit after they found their target by tracing the path of Ana's shots. As Safiya intended, the Titan paused, recognising that its weak spot had been discovered. It lobbed a few warning shots backwards, but continued onward anyway, unbothered by the snipers because its panel was shielded, as per Ana's prediction.

The Titan had reached the wide gates of the facility, when the whistle of jets could be heard in the distance. She saw the Sa'ka forces scattering into the desert, trying to put as much distance between them and the Titan as possible. Giving the order for her snipers to retreat, Ana jumped through the window of the watchtower, and landed neatly on the walkway. She ran in the opposite direction of the Titan as missiles bombarded the omnic and the ground on which it stood, sending tremors through the surface. The Titan was truly distracted then, trying to take aim at the jets, but they were too fast for it to lock on.

Ana met up with her snipers by the base of the northern wall, urging her snipers to run faster through the door leading to the underground exit from the facility. She felt in her bones each second ticking by, until the last of her soldiers sprinted down the stairs. Taking one last glance back at the Titan, Ana slammed the heavy reinforced door shut behind her, running down the stairs in darkness, her path lit only by red emergency lights.

Even underground, through the thick layers of alloy, she could feel the shockwave of the colossal explosion when the Titan was finally destroyed – presumably from taking a missile to its reactor core. Ana took a breath in relief, looking at the questioning expression of her snipers, who had turned back to face her upon feeling the explosion.

"What, do you want to live here?" Ana barked. "Go, go!"

After the debrief, Safiya caught up with Ana in the barracks, trapping her in a tight hug behind the building. She didn't say anything for the longest time, and Ana was left patting her sister awkwardly on the back, casting her eyes around to check that no one was there.

"I just bathed, you filthy woman," Ana said, still patting on the back of Safiya's fatigues. Her sister didn't reply, and Ana let her have a few more quiet moments to herself. "I charge by the minute, you know."

Safiya laughed then. "Fuck you."

"No, no. Cash only, babe." Ana cackled as well, when Safiya shoved her back.

"Asshole," Safiya sighed, resting both hands on her hips. She glanced down, then looked to Ana. "I was worried that I'd trapped you in the facility."

"Right. I did think it a little odd when you didn't bother checking if I had an escape route."

"I'm sorry."
"Stop it, you idiot." Ana moved forward, clasping her by the shoulders. "It was a military base. Of course there'll be escape routes."

"I know." Safiya bit her lip, then smiled again. "You did good today."

"You too."

"Still a bitch though."

"So are you, fuckface." Ana grinned when Safiya delivered a hard slap to her back. Circling an arm around her sister's waist as Safiya rested an arm around her shoulders, Ana followed her lead towards the front of the barracks compound, listening to Safiya talk about getting dinner with Zahra, who happened to be back in base.

She just nodded along, gazing at that perpetually lighthearted expression on Safiya's face. 

Well. At least you're holding up alright.

The sisters were parted again when Ana's company was deployed on another mission, and it was business as usual for another month – coordinating her snipers, recruiting more soldiers for God Eye, mourning the dead, getting headaches over their dwindling numbers, and going into the field herself to support her own soldiers. But her endless fight met an…interesting interlude, when she was summoned back to Heliopolis HQ for a 'meeting'. Ana tried to probe for more information when Jaida was determined to be vague, but to no avail. When she hinted that she had more important things to do than fight another hypothetical battle at the drawing board, Jaida merely said, This might be more important than whatever you're doing. This made Ana's brows rise – both in suspicion and curiosity, and she relented, grabbing transport back to Cairo the very next day. Not that she had a choice, anyway.

Jaida waited for her by the motor pool, and returned Ana's salute casually.

"So," Ana said, falling in step beside Jaida. "Finally going to tell me what this 'meeting' is about?"

"Something important."

"How important?"

"It's about the Crisis."

Tilting her head, Ana continued, "Right… And just who called for this meeting?"

Jaida looked at her, and without a break in stride, she replied, "Xie Anyu." A wry smile finally cracked her poker face when Ana's eyes grew wider. "President of the UN Security Council."

At first glance, Xie Anyu was a severe woman – her black hair was streaked with white and worn in a neat bun, thin face bearing an imposing mien, completed by the tailored charcoal grey suit she wore. But when Ana stood before her at attention, a warm smile spread across her face, and she held up both hands.

"At ease, Captain Amari," she said in accented Arabic. "This is an informal meeting."

Ana cocked her head and relaxed. "Thank you, ma'am."
"Here." She beckoned at Ana, walking briskly over to the coffee table beside her workstation. "Please, take a seat."

Ana took to the black leather sofa adjacent to where Xie sat, pouring tea into two porcelain mugs on the table, and handed one to the sniper.

"Have you been briefed in any way about this meeting?" Xie asked, holding the mug so comfortably in her hands that Ana wondered if she could feel the heat at all.

Adjusting her fingers on her own mug, Ana replied, "No, ma'am. All I was told is that you wanted to speak with me?"

"That's the gist of it, yes." Xie smiled, taking a sip of tea as she peered at Ana, who sat with her back straight, fingers holding gingerly onto her hot mug. "Please relax, Captain. I merely want an informal conversation with you before we get down to business."

"Business?"

"The Omnic Crisis, Captain. It is perhaps the worst that we have ever faced – one that could lead to the extinction of the human race, if we do not win. And so, we fight – hard and smart. Something you are familiar with." She smiled at Ana. "I've taken note of the many impressive measures that have been taken to fight omnis all across the world: Svyatogor mechs in Russia, the Soldier Enhancement Program in the US, the Crusaders in Germany, and the God Eye in Egypt. All born out of human ingenuity, achievements in their own right… But they are still not enough on their own, aren't they?"

Ana nodded slowly. "The God Eye was – is – effective in the war, but the omnis are slowly adapting to our tactics. Given enough time, I believe they will find a countermeasure to render us ineffective." The words pained her, but it was the truth – and the growing toll in God Eye served as proof of her claim.

"Exactly. And this war cannot continue for much longer, Captain. Or there'll not be enough of us left to fight. That is why the world needs to come together to push the omnis back, once and for all."

Xie took another sip of tea and set her cup down, straightening her jacket. "I am creating a task force to do just that. I've chosen many notable individuals from around the world for this task force – and from Egypt, I have chosen you."

"Because of God Eye." Ana watched Xie nod, then let the news sink in. "Only me?"

"Yes. We need the best, Captain. And you are Egypt's best. Will you help us?"

The answer was obvious. "Of course, ma'am."

Xie smiled, presumably at her lack of hesitation. "I have read your profile, Captain. And if you don't mind – I remember that you have a family. A wife and daughter, correct?" She waited for Ana's affirmation, which she received in a cautious nod. "Needless to say, the risk that comes with being in this task force will be great. You might need to pay the ultimate price in the course of your mission. Are you willing to give up your life for the cause, and deprive your family of a wife and mother?"

It was rehearsed, and it achieved its intended impact, knocking the air clean out of Ana's lungs. But her answer was just as quick as her first, "Yes, ma'am. Pardon my bluntness, but I'll be damned if I let the omnis take another of my family. I will give my life without hesitation – if it means that my wife can live the rest of her life in peace, if it means that my daughter can grow up safely in a world without war. I will give my life ten times over, just to keep them safe."
"I understand, Captain," Xie said, satisfaction apparent. Ana took a quiet breath, realising that she'd almost lost her calm. In the quiet that followed, she pondered Xie's words. "Ma'am? If you've already chosen the task force's members… why the need for this conversation?"

Xie chuckled to herself, reaching for her cup of tea again. "We are talking about the fate of the world as we know it, Captain. I want to know if my choices are... determined individuals. Those who balk at the prospect of saving the world, will not be the ones to safeguard our future."

"Then..." Ana felt an inexplicable urge to laugh. "I passed your test?"

"You most certainly did, Captain Amari."

"Ami!"

"Yes, habibti?" Ana grinned when Fareeha pressed the purple dragon to her face, and took Fart from her daughter. "Thank you so much!" She pinched the girl's cheek gently, and watched the girl toddle back to her pile of toys and sit down.

Fareeha had learnt to walk while Ana was still fighting away from home, and could only watch Fareeha's growth through her screen. Kamilah's initial videos of Fareeha's first steps made her laugh, and Ana commented that the girl looked like a little drunk, with her wobbly steps and cheerful giggles at nearly everything she saw. Since then, Fareeha's coordination had gotten much better, to the point where Kamilah didn't hover over her like a mother duck, afraid that the girl would trip over herself... again.

No doubt Fareeha would continue to improve after her ami returns to the field, and surprise Ana again with how much she'd grown upon the sniper's next return home. Ana ached at the prospect whenever she thought about it, being forced to watch her daughter grow from afar. At least Fareeha was still able to live in relative peace because of her.

"What else did she say?"

Ana turned to the congested voice, an involuntary smirk curving her lips when she looked at her wife, lying beside the play mat with a lethargic expression on her face. Kamilah had just recovered from a fever, and she still seemed winded from the experience, sniffing so regularly that she was reluctant to get close to Fareeha for fear of spreading her germs. She didn't even want to stay in the nursery with them, but gave into Ana's ever-effective whines and settled for lying on the floor instead of the mat.

"Just that. Said she might take another month or two before..."

Kamilah sighed heavily, closing her eyes. "Will you stop being so popular for once?"

"I can't help that everyone wants a piece of me." She snickered when Kamilah let out a groan, then leaned down to kiss her wife – only to get smacked away before she could do so.

"Don't! I'm sick."

"So am I, baby," Ana crooned, quickly pressing their lips together before Kamilah could push her away. She heard Kamilah's exasperated grunt before she returned the kiss.

"If you get sick, it's your fault."
"Worth it."

"The great Horus," Kamilah deadpanned, slinging both arms around Ana's neck. "Falling sick just because she wanted a kiss."

"How romantic."

Sighing again, Kamilah yanked Ana down so she could hug her wife's head to her chest, locking Ana in place when she tried to move down to Kamilah's cleavage. "Guess I should be grateful that you can still get sick. Means that you're alive."

"Talk about setting the lowest standards," Ana said, voice muffled when she pressed her face into Kamilah's t-shirt.

"If I set any higher standards, you might get too good to stay at home."

"Hey." Ana lifted her head. "No matter how popular I get, albi, you'll always be the only girl for me."

"I'm touched. No."

"I'm sick!"

"What, are you sick in your--oof!" Ana let out a breathless cackle when Fareeha threw herself on top of Ana – lost balance and fell, actually. But Ana liked letting the girl believe that it was her own doing. "You got ami pinned, Fareeha!"

Fareeha giggled, rolling onto the mat beside them. She shot them a happy grin, holding up the bunch of finger puppets in her fist. "Pup!"

"You want to play with pups, little one?" Ana cooed, and Fareeha nodded eagerly. Taking the giraffe and monkey from Fareeha, she gave a few to Kamilah, and helped to slip a bird and tiger puppet onto the girl's fingers, folding the cloth at the bottom so the puppets will fit on Fareeha nicely.

"Let's see, Fareeha… What story to tell this time?" Ana glanced at Kamilah, who had pushed herself up from the floor, and was sitting cross-legged with shoulders a little hunched. "How about the camel and the pussy again--?"

"No!"

"Puss!" Fareeha said, wiggling her fingers in delight.

"Fareeha, no…" Kamilah pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed as Ana cackled away, guiding Fareeha's hand in a high-five.

Ana was kept in the Heliopolis base against her wishes, forced to stay in her office, or fight for a chance to lead her snipers in engagements close to Cairo. Being restricted in such a manner – just because she was being eyed by the UN – made her want to tear her hair out. It was so thoroughly ironic, in Ana's opinion, to be kept out of the action when combat was exactly what caught the UN's attention in the first place, but she had little choice except to follow her orders. There was the silver lining of being able to return to her family at the end of each day, so Ana decided to focus on spending as much time with them as possible, before she was inevitably torn away again.

And, as President Xie had predicted, the summons for Captain Ana Amari arrived little more than a month later. She was given a single week to settle business at home – mostly to put Khalid in charge of God Eye and forward her drafted battle plans to Jaida – before packing her bags and boarding a
Kamilah took the news much better than she did before, when Ana was first deployed to aid Jaida's efforts against the omnis. She stood by the window, staring at Ana with a placid expression, before her face twitched. Kamilah closed her eyes, letting a long, slow sigh, and rested her head in one hand. She lifted her gaze when Ana's arms circled around her in a hug, and gave her wife a smile. "Time for you to go be a hero, hm?"

"Yup."

Resting their heads together, Kamilah's fingers gripped into Ana's shirt for a moment, before relaxing again. "Make me proud."

"Hm? Not going to make me promise to come back?"

"No need. I did marry the world's best sniper."

Ana laughed under her breath. "Does stroking my ego make you feel better?"

Kamilah nodded, leaning her head back to look at Ana. "If you're the best, you'll come back. Won't you?"

"Of course I will. I swear." Ana kissed her, gladly leaning in when Kamilah pulled her closer and deepened their kiss. Kamilah's gaze was soft when they parted, and her mouth twitched up into a small smile when Ana squeezed her in a tight embrace.

That night, they let Fareeha sleep between them, much to the girl's delight. She babbled on endlessly, her parents listening closely and cooing replies until she finally talked all the energy out of her little body, and fell asleep on the smaller pillow she had carried from her own bedroom. Ana tried to keep awake for as long as possible, stroking Fareeha's hair as she spoke to Kamilah in a whisper, sharing kisses until she succumbed to sleep as well, her fingers entwined with Kamilah's.

Both Kamilah and Fareeha saw Ana off at the hangar the next morning, the girl clinging happily to Ana's neck as she was carried down the row of planes, staring up at them in wonder. The jet flying Ana to Switzerland was usually reserved for only the most senior badges in the military, and she couldn't help but feel a little flattered by the gesture – no small feat, considering that she'd just had a video conference with the President of Egypt himself, who told her to 'fight well' and that she was already the 'pride of Egypt' to be chosen for such a venture.

Not that her ego could swell at his proclamation – not when Kamilah and Jaida gave muffled snorts into their fists from behind the screen, upon hearing the president's words. It'd taken all the willpower Ana had not to roll her eyes right in the president's field of vision.

"So, here we are," Jaida said, as they came to a stop before the white-coloured jet. "Make us proud, Amari–no, wait. We already are proud of you, apparently."

"With all due respect, Colonel. Shut up." Ana shook her hand firmly, sharing a grin before Jaida stepped back to speak with the pilot, giving her some space.

"Ami's going to fly now," Ana said to the girl in her arms, and Fareeha perked up instantly.

"Fly?"

"Not you this time, I'm afraid," she sighed, hugging Fareeha tightly before handing her over to
Kamilah. Running her fingers through Kamilah's hair, she leaned in to kiss her wife softly. "Take care, Milah."

"Same goes for you." Kamilah closed the distance again, kissing her longer this time, reluctance apparent. "I love you."

"Love you too," Ana murmured, then turned to Fareeha. "And ami loves you too, Fareeha."

Fareeha grinned, little hand landing on Ana's nose, then giggled when Ana kissed her forehead.

Fareeha remained happy and blissfully unaware of what was happening – until Ana climbed the steps into the jet, and she was carried away from the plane in Kamilah's arms. Then she became confused, repeating 'ami' to her mother repeatedly, only to receive a gentle pat on her head. When Kamilah stood by the tall window wall facing the runway, Fareeha watched with wide eyes as the jet rolled out of its spot, carrying her ami with it, then flew off towards Switzerland. She had no idea where the plane was going of course – she only knew that it was going too far.

Her loud cry took Kamilah by surprise. But then again, Kamilah was a little busy fighting the lump rising to her throat as well. Gladly wrenching her eyes away from the runway and looking at Fareeha, she smiled and started rocking the child in her arms gently, cooing soft reassurances beside her ear.

"Ami," seemed to be all that Fareeha was capable of saying at the moment, clinging onto Kamilah's neck tightly, as if trying to keep this mother from leaving as well.

"Ami is fine, little one," Kamilah crooned, patting the girl's back. "Ami will be back, don't worry."

"Need help?"

Kamilah looked at Jaida at her tentative question, and gave the colonel a polite smile, shaking her head. "No, she'll be fine. Just not used to watching Ana leave."

"Really? I would've thought she'd gotten used to it."

"She's only used to Ana magically disappearing overnight," Kamilah explained. "We don't usually let her watch Ana leave."

"Really? Isn't that more jarring?" Jaida tried to offer a sweet she'd taken out from her pocket, but Fareeha buried her face further into Kamilah's shoulder, whining between her sobs.

"Not to her," Kamilah said with a smile, kissing the side of Fareeha's head at the watery croak of 'mama'. Deciding to clean the girl up in their car, Kamilah bid farewell to Jaida and carried the girl down to the underground parking lot, singing and crooning to Fareeha all the way.

Fareeha had calmed down by the time Kamilah set her down in the booster seat, though she still took little sobs as Kamilah wiped her face clean of tears and snot with a wet wipe. Pressing a kiss to the girl's head, Kamilah said, "She'll be back soon, Fareeha. I promise."

The girl didn't reply, keeping her lips puckered in a pout. Chuckling at the sight, Kamilah gave her another peck on the cheek, then secured the girl with a seat belt. As she rounded the car boot, Kamilah had to pause for a while, dragging one hand over her eyes and taking a deep breath, before she climbed into the driver's seat.
Finally. After 44 chapters and 200k words an Overwatch fic is gonna become an actual Overwatch fic.

Is this the real life

Also shameless self-promo for this dingle boongle I wrote last week.

Also friendly reminder that I love all you lil pringle prangles pls remember to eat ur veggies and drink ur water and get enough sleep no backtalk I'm ur mom now
"She cried when your jet took off. Thought her ami was abandoning her."

"Did she now?" Ana laughed softly, gazing at her daughter's image onscreen. Fareeha was sitting in Kamilah's lap with her bird plushie in hand, and stared back at Ana's fond expression. The child had been thrilled when Ana first appeared on the computer screen, and stood on Kamilah's knees just to touch her hand to Ana's face, seemingly content with the screen's static warmth on her palm. "Fareeha, you silly little girl, you."

"Ami's...gonna come back?" Fareeha tilted her head up to look at Kamilah, then turned back to Ana. "Fast."

"So young and already ordering your ami around, huh?" Ana clicked her tongue. "She's really taking after you, Milah."

"All the better for her." Kamilah wore an unabashed smile on her lips as she pressed a kiss to the top of Fareeha's head. "Ami's coming back soon, Fareeha."

"Soon!"

"Ah, try not to get her hopes too high..." Ana said uncertainly.

"I know," Kamilah sighed. "But she's been fine with it so far."

"Might be different this time."

Kamilah inclined her head, and a brief spell of silence fell over them – save for Fareeha's whispered babbles to her bird plushie, as if she was sharing a secret with the toy. Stroking her daughter's hair, Kamilah changed the subject, "So how's your first day there?"

"Nothing, so far. I've been on my own for nearly the entire day."

"Haven't met the others yet?"

"Nope. Most of them aren't here yet. Apparently the two Americans are around, but I couldn't find them." Ana shrugged. "Guess it doesn't matter. I'll see them sooner or later."

"Any word on when you'll be deployed? See some action?"

"No. You know, I'm starting to think this is kind of a rush job. No schedules, no deadlines. I don't think the roster is even fixed yet."

"Wouldn't be surprised. It's hard enough gathering people from the same country. But from all over the world and at such a short notice? Makes sense that it'd take time." Kamilah paused briefly in thought. "You know, I've heard that the brass didn't even want to let you go in the first place. Maybe this is why."

"And if I knew..."

"Mama!" Fareeha cut off Ana's cynical chuckle, clambering to stand on Kamilah's lap again,
prompting her mother to clutch at her sides so she wouldn't fall. "Wanna milk!"

"Wanna milk already? Are you hungry or sleepy?"

"Milky."

"Do you want some cheese with your milk?"

Fareeha whipped her head around, already-wide eyes growing bigger at Ana's suggestion. "Wanna cheese and milk!"

"Our little milk monster's evolved into a dairy monster." Kamilah commented, a quirk in the corner of her lips. "Now, say bye bye to ami before we get your milk."

"Bye bye ami." Fareeha waved at the screen, then hugged her mother about the neck.

"Stay safe, Ana."

"Honey, the whole point of my being here is to do just the opposite." She grinned when Kamilah rolled her eyes and sighed again.

"Then do whatever you have to do, and come home. Preferably in one piece."

"Anything for you, my dear wife."

Ana hadn't exaggerated when she told Kamilah that she had nothing to do. President Xie had been in her office to give Ana a welcome in the morning, before having to fly off on further business related to the strike team – recruitment, specifically. Xie had her hands full just convincing each individual army to 'volunteer' their best and brightest for what might be the highest cause, in light of the omnic crisis. She appeared strained and tired, but bid Ana a warm farewell nevertheless, before leaving the sniper to make herself comfortable around the headquarters. Xie's assistant had shown Ana around, then left the lone Egyptian soldier to her own devices. Ana wandered about the offices for a while, then got bored and strolled out into the city to occupy her time.

It was at once a relief and quite the heartbreak to experience the calm – if oddly subdued – atmosphere of Geneva. The clean, undamaged streets and infrastructure, and the people who bore no fear of a surprise attack, all served to build a serene picture that was so jarringly different from Egypt. If anything, it accentuated the fact that her home was suffering greatly – especially for its people. Ana had lived with the war long enough that the stillness put her on edge – like it was the calm before the storm. She knew for a fact that Geneva had separated its omnic population from the humans a long time ago, and that Switzerland had no omnium nor God Program to worry about. But she still scanned her surroundings studiously while she strolled along, as alert as the armed police patrolling the streets. It never hurt to be cautious, after all.

Her first day in Switzerland passed without incident or news from Xie, and much of the second day had elapsed when her boredom was finally broken by a chance meeting with the American soldiers. Ana was returning to the apartment she was put up in, when she noticed two figures walking up the street towards her, recognising them from the profiles that had been forwarded to her. And it seemed the two men recognised her too, because all three slowed their gaits until they came to a stop on the sidewalk, locked in quiet stares as they stood before one another.

"I recognise you," Ana broke the silence in English. "First Lieutenant Jack Morrison, of the SEP."
She offered her hand to the blonde man first. To her amusement, blue eyes blinked at her action, his hand jerking up and stopping halfway before he grasped her hand.
She had cocked her head curiously when his companion nudged him aside and took her hand instead, shaking it firmly. "Captain Ana Amari, of the God Eye in Egypt. I've read your file and I must say, I'm very impressed."

"I could say the same to you, Captain Gabriel Reyes, also of the SEP." Ana smiled when Gabriel bowed his head smoothly at the acknowledgement. She looked the two men over – both were in casual attire with jeans and jackets, though Morrison's rigid posture made it seem as though he was still wearing his uniform.

Noticing her eyes on him, Gabriel spoke, "Don't mind him. He's usually pretty impressive too. Just had one too many cultural sensitivity classes on the way here."

A faint pink shade appeared on Jack's cheeks. He squinted briefly at Gabriel, then shook Ana's hand as well. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Captain."

"Now, now, Jack. It'll be even more of a pleasure if you relaxed a little." Ana grinned and clapped him on the shoulder. "You'll pull a muscle at the rate you're going."

"…Right," Jack muttered, as Gabriel let out an easy laugh.

"I like you," he said, wagging a finger at Ana. "Hey, where were you heading? We're just about to grab some dinner, would you like to join us?"

"Gladly. I was going stir-crazy by myself." "Me too!" Gabriel slapped at Jack's chest, earning another squint from the blonde. "This guy's not much for company."

Ana bit on her lip instead of joining in Gabriel's laughter, peering at the pair as they shot a few verbal jabs at each other.

This should be interesting.

Jack and Gabriel had arrived in Geneva just two days before Ana, and were apparently just as in the dark of Xie's plans as Ana was. They discussed the omnic crisis briefly, but veered towards less heavy topics as the dinner went on – no doubt they'd spend much of their waking hours toiling over it soon, and they were happy enough to the leave that burden alone before having to bear it on their shoulders. Gabriel carried on his chatter with Ana, and Jack was able to warm up quickly, shedding his initially stiff demeanour to reveal a…slightly less stiff character underneath. Stoicism aside, Ana could appreciate his courtesy and attentiveness, and suspected his strength lay mostly in battle instead of social agility.

With Xie remaining abroad for the next few days, Ana still spent most of her days by herself – that was, when Gabriel didn't come knocking with Jack in tow. Their wandering about the city together was enjoyable enough, but they soon found time to understand one another better, in a much more practical fashion that Ana preferred. She went through her daily physical training with the two men, and had a first-hand experience with their enhancements from the SEP – they could think and run at blinding speed, lift much heavier weights than the average soldier, and were unbelievably nimble despite their bulk.

During one sparring session in the gym, Ana had invited Jack to hit her as hard as he could – without injuring her, of course. Though Ana wore the appropriate protective gear, he hesitated, before relenting with a hard punch to her gut which propelled her a few paces back. She was fully winded from that single hit, and had to bend over to catch her breath, but shot a grin at Jack when he came to
Tell me," Ana panted, straightening herself with difficulty. "You ever killed an omnic with that brute strength of yours?"

"Um, yes. Once."

"He laid an omnic flat on the ground," Gabriel supplied, knowing the blonde wouldn't elaborate without prodding. "took all of us by surprise, honestly. Left a damned crater in the omnic's head."

"Well," Ana drawled, knocking a fist into Jack's sturdy chest. "Glad you're on our side, Captain America."

He scratched the back of his head, and shrugged with an uncertain smile. For all his stolid, straight-backed confidence, Ana noticed that Jack was quite susceptible to blushes when he was embarrassed. Maybe this man wouldn't be all that difficult to get along with after all.

They had to refrain from any weapons training during their idle time in Geneva, as they didn't have an armoury on hand to supply the ammunition they needed. But simple physical training was enough – or more than enough, as was Ana's experience in trying to keep up with the enhanced soldiers. They satisfied themselves with a basic daily routine until Xie finally made her return a week later, with what seemed to be the rest of the strike team. And it looked to be...disappointingly small, at first glance.

Ana cast a glance at those gathered in the conference room, sitting straight in their chairs by the oval, polished oak table. Jack and Gabriel sat near the head of the table, with Ana beside them, similarly attired in dress uniform. On the opposite side sat a giant hulk of a man, who had a full head of luxurious blonde hair, and what seemed to be a fresh scar over his blinded left eye. In contrast, the man seated before him was of a much shorter stature, and had a thick beard to match the giant's hair. This one wasn't a soldier though – Ana spied the Ironclad Guild's logo on the sleeve of his suit. The last person sat in front of the two men, and was conversing in muted tones with Xie; she didn't look to be a soldier either – her glasses and round face added to her bookish appearance, though the hard edge in her countenance betrayed a sliver of inner steel.

The room was quiet until Xie straightened herself, and passed a sharp eye over the soldiers. She introduced Jack, Gabriel, and Ana first, then continued with Torbjörn Lindholm, weaponsmith and engineer – a silent tilt of the head was his greeting. Next was Reinhardt Wilhelm, a lieutenant in the German Crusaders, who gave them a bright smile and nod.

"Wait–, pardon the interruption, ma'am," Gabriel said, waiting for Xie to give him the go-ahead. "I was under the impression that Balderich von Adler is the Crusader who'd be joining us."

Reinhardt's face fell as Xie explained, "von Adler was killed in action last week."

"He gave his life to defend his comrades, and met an honourable death," Reinhardt explained, jaw high and gaze firm, as if squaring up to defend the late-Crusader's good name from any claim to the contrary. "Before he died, he recommended me to the strike team instead. Rest assured, I will protect and serve as well as Balderich would."

"I don't doubt it," Gabriel replied, and Reinhardt relaxed visibly. "And you have my condolences."

"Thank you."

"Last but not least, this is Liao Shuqi," Xie continued, gesturing to the woman sitting closest to her.
"Former Omnica consultant and programmer, one of the few who created the very first omnic code."

"Very first' omnic code?" Reinhardt asked.

"Yes." Liao swiveled around in her chair to face him. "The omnic code you see today and what existed years before – in Omnica databases – have nearly no similarities left between them."

"So it's true that they are evolving?" Ana asked. "Our engineers have been facing more and more difficulties trying to override omnic programming. They say that the omnic code is turning into something more foreign each time they see it."

"Correct. Their language – the code – is changing very rapidly under the current climate. I suspect that they are accelerating this evolution as a safeguard against any attempts to hack into their very consciousness."

"I assume this is the God Programs' doing," Torbjörn joined in. "Regular omnics aren't capable of such…sentience. Only an independent AI could give them such suggestions."

"Yes–"

"Omnica should've left well enough alone," the engineer continued. "This mess started because you weren't satisfied with mere robots to do your chores."

"We weren't satisfied with the mundane, Lindholm. You should know as well as anyone that innovation is the key to our future."

"And now, one such innovation threatens to destroy our future as we speak."

Liao's brows drew together in the severe frown as she clenched her jaw, but Xie stepped in before she could argue further.

"Enough. We are here to fight a war, to save the future that you speak of. Not get mired in useless arguments about the past. " Xie looked over the table, but none of them showed any inclination to argue further. Satisfied, she continued, "Speaking of the war, I shall leave the…intricacies of warfare in the hands of capable soldiers such as yourself. But I wish to make clear the top priority of this strike team: which is the deactivation of the God Programs."

"So we strike right at the heart of the problem. Makes sense," Jack said, resting his hands on the table and looking at Liao. "I assume you will be the one to deactivate the Programs?"

"Yes. And given their potential to make changes to the code on the fly, I will have to disable them personally."

"Do you have any combat training?"

"No, which complicates things, I understand. My options are limited to performing a remote hack from the backlines and risk having my signal blocked, or to follow you into the A.I. facility myself and risk getting shot."

As Jack laced his fingers together in thought, Ana said, "Then we'll just have to make sure you don't get shot."

A smile cracks through Liao's icy expression. "I've heard stories about your 'all-seeing eye', Captain Amari. Seems we'll have to put it to the test."
"One that we'll pass with flying colours, no doubt," Ana replied with a smirk of her own.

"So," Gabriel said, leaning forward in his seat as he addressed Xie. "There's our goal. But what is our first target?"

"Your first target, Captain Reyes, should come as no surprise." Xie mirrored Gabriel's deliberately cool demeanour. "You will take down the very first A.I. that started this war – Triglav, the God Program in Russia."

Their lazy days in Geneva came to an abrupt end – the Strike Team was flown to Russia the very next day, and given a lay of the land in the Russian Army's command centre. But before they started forming a viable plan for an assault on the A.I. facility, they had agreed on engaging in a few skirmishes with the omnics first, to understand each member's strengths and mould them into a proper team.

For Ana, it was business as usual – she covered the team's heads, took down flanking squads and hidden snipers, and surveyed the field with her cybernetic eye, pointing out potential threats and advantages to her team beforehand. For the ground team, however, a little more time was needed to build smooth yet flexible coordination between the soldiers. Even though they had done well enough so far that Ana hadn't been forced to break cover yet, she could tell that they hadn't fully settled into their roles, and were still unsure about their comrades' capabilities, which threatened to stifle their ability to adapt to ever-changing battle conditions.

In most of their engagements, Reinhardt was the focal point of the team, protecting his comrades from enemy fire with his wide energy shield. Jack had no problem staying behind the Crusader, raining a constant hail of bullets into the omnic ranks, but there were times when he'd had to break away from Reinhardt for a better firing position. Gabriel had to break formation often as well, owing to the two heavy shotguns he wielded, which were practically useless if he were to stay behind Reinhardt's shield, at too far a distance from the omnics.

While the American soldiers had no problems charging off on their own, Reinhardt seemed to get a little panicked whenever his charges were not marching safely behind his shield. He would be torn between running after the wayward men, and staying by Torbjörn's side as the engineer set up turrets around the field. Ana often had to remind him to keep his focus, much to his obvious chagrin, but he eventually learnt to keep his shield up for the rest of the Russian soldiers, assured in the fact that Jack and Gabriel would always return to his side.

Liao was the ever-present voice in their ears, analysing omnic communications from the edge of the combat zone, tipping them off to incoming enemy reinforcements and changes in omnic tactics, and occasionally stepped into the field herself to disable omnic field factories and jam their communication devices. She was only equipped with her versatile datapad and a pistol, but she had suffered no injuries so far under Reinhardt's protection, and was kept safe from flanking attacks by well-aimed sniper shots, courtesy of one Captain Amari.

They fought hard together through a handful of weeks, and news started spreading through the Russian troops about a UN Strike Team who were claiming victory after victory, fighting by their side to bring an end to the long and bitter war raging in their homeland. With hopes rising among the soldiers and the end of the team's 'probation period', as Gabriel had called it, he gathered them in the war room for a proper discussion, to finally draw up a plan for their assault on Triglav.

It was a tricky situation – not unlike what Ana had faced back home, day after day. As capable as the Strike Team was, they couldn't mount an attack on the A.I. facility by themselves, and needed the Russian troops to support their endeavour. The problem was the lack of manpower – the army had
stretched themselves dangerously thin throughout the country, and borrowing a large number of soldiers for the Strike Team's purposes would leave large gaps in their defenses.

And so they decided on the first step of the plan, one that the soldiers in the team were well-acquainted with: to wrench home territory back from the omnic control, shore up their defense lines in retaken cities, and push the omnics back as they advanced towards the omnium and A.I. facility.

They worked tirelessly, blazing a long and arduous trail from Moscow, carving through the omnics and inching ever closer towards the omnium in Krasnoyarsk, and the A.I. facility that was farther north of the city. Given the sheer size of the country, their plan wasn't to take back every piece of land before mounting their final assault – the amount of time and energy it'd take would drain the Russian Army of resources long before the fight's end. Instead, they would settle for control of Russia's western territories, and tackle both the God Program and omnium at the same time.

The Russian generals had agreed with their plan wholeheartedly, and some even took to the field with a zeal to match the Strike Team's hearty Crusader. Their renewed energy was encouraging, and buoyed the hopes of their soldiers ever higher. But in private, Ana couldn't help but feel a tinge of paranoia as she stared at the holographic map of Russia, watching the blue of retaken territories fight back against the red. More than a year ago, Ana had witnessed this very same progress back home, only to see it crushed in the end with the awakening of the Anubis A.I. What was to guarantee that something similar wouldn't happen back here–?

Ana had caught herself then, clenching her jaw as she switched her personal holo-projector off, feeling a lick of anger at herself for even asking such a stupid question.

**She** would be the guarantee. She, and the Strike Team.

Just taking over western Russia cost them nearly six months of fighting, bleeding and – at times – arguing with one another over mission plans. But none ever held any grudges towards another, save for Liao and Torbjörn – though they had no issue with working together, until they finally made camp on the outskirts of Krasnoyarsk, looking upon the imposing silhouettes of the omnic facilities in the distance.

"Are you sure this attack is not premature?" Xie's holo-projection hovered over the table, gazing at them with a deep wrinkle between her brows.

"Yes, ma'am. We should strike fast, before the omnics get a handle on our tactics. Besides, the Russians cannot hold out at this pace for much longer. We have to press our advantage now," Gabriel said, standing with hands behind his back. The man had become the de-facto leader of the team quite naturally, having shown a penchant for conceiving inspired battle plans; though they were often risky and unconventional, he was able to adapt quickly in the field and rally the team, turning the tide when the odds seemed impossible. Ana herself had grown inclined to trust the man's judgment in the heat of battle, no matter how odd his orders could sometimes be.

Xie sighed. "I assume the rest of your team is in agreement?"

Gabriel looked back at them, and they nodded. His lips twitched into a smile when Reinhardt boomed his undying support.

"Gabriel is right, ma'am," Ana added when Xie still seemed concerned. "We've been dragging this out for too long, and we can't risk the omnics adapting again. If they do, we're in for another war of attrition."
"High risk, high reward. You do realise your chances of success are tenuous at best?"

"If we don't act now," Jack said. "Our chances at anything will be non-existent."

"Very well. I look forward to a report of your success, team. Good luck."

Xie's apprehension was understandable, for the final gambit in their Russian campaign was perhaps the most dangerous of all. They had to split the Russian forces in half – one large contingent to lay siege on the omnium, and hopefully keep the omnicos' attention off the smaller battalion accompanying the Strike Team to the A.I. facility. Speed was of the essence – they had to shut the God Program down fast, or the troops would be overrun by the continuous outpouring of mechanical soldiers from the omnium.

Given the A.I. facility's proximity to a small abandoned town that had no cover nor elevation whatsoever, Ana was forced to stay with the Strike Team as they sped towards the facility in a huge armoured personnel carrier – specially gifted by the German army so they could transport the team's sole Crusader around.

She stayed behind Reinhardt's glowing blue shield, biting back a curse each time her vision was blocked by the warrior's gigantic armour, or when her cybernetic eye hurt from the brightness of his shield. Ana battled both the omnicos and her growing irritation, picking off distant targets situated on the facility's roof as they marched onto the towering, featureless steel-grey walls of the building. The main entrance was locked tight, and they were forced to corner themselves against the doors, protecting Liao as she hacked her way through numerous security locks, her rapid typing over the datapad nearly imitating the rattle of gunfire.

Ana's heart felt like it would burst from the sheer tension and proximity of their metal foes, when the doors slid open with unexpected ease – like oil flowing over steel. Leaving the Russian soldiers to cover the entrance, the Strike Team ventured deeper into the facility, and that was when Ana split from the rest.

She activated her personal stealth unit and withdrew her sidearm, finding her way onto the upper levels of the facility, consulting her holo-map as she went along, and took down the omnicos unfortunate enough to stray into her path. She kept tapped into their team's radio frequency as she sprinted up the stairs and reached the highest catwalks of the facility, listening to their progress while she provided cover fire with her sniper rifle. The resistance within the A.I. facility was less dense than it was outside, and Liao made a guess that Triglav didn't expect a direct assault on its grounds, much less an infiltration into the heart of the facility.

They came to a stop outside the core chambers housing the main body of the God Program, and were forced to wait again as Liao hacked her way through the security protocols to allow them entry. Silence enveloped them – all of the omnicos inside had thrown themselves at the Strike Team during their advance towards the core chambers, and Ana suspected that the God Program had exhausted its resources in a desperate bid to protect itself. But none of them were careless enough to let their guard down, and stood around Liao in a semi-circle with guns hefted. Torbjörn had set his turret at the top of a ramp, and Reinhardt knelt in front of Liao, hammer gripped in one hand and shield alight on his left arm.

A few affirmative beeps came from Liao's datapad, and the chamber's doors slid open. Torbjörn and Reinhardt stayed outside the chamber to keep watch, while Jack and Gabriel accompanied Liao inside. Ana followed them in as well, entering Liao's transmitted code for the door at the end of the catwalk, and she had to force herself not to pause at the sight.
The chamber was built like a temple – fitting as it were, to house a 'God' Program. Rows of supercomputers lined the walls, lights blinking in time with those on the imposing statue standing proudly in the centre of the chamber, nearly reaching the ceiling. It was shaped in the likeness of a male warrior, but with three heads sitting upon his shoulders – a faithful depiction of its namesake, Triglav.

Liao made straight for the console by the statue's feet, swiping a hand over its surface to bring up a holo-interface – first blue in colour, before turning red along with the lights in the statues' six eyes.

"Liao?" Ana asked over the radio. "Is it coming alive?"

"Yes, but don't worry. It can't do much without any drones to do its bidding~"

There was a faintest shimmer in the empty space to Ana's right, and she threw herself backwards, feeling the catwalk's railings dig into her spine as bullets ripped the air where she had just stood. Ana leveled her rifle at the omnic materialising out of thin air, squeezing the trigger even as she noted two more omnics dropping their stealth fields to her left, blocking her path to the only exit. The first omnic to her right fell after taking five rounds in its chassis, and Ana had started to move when a solid weight rammed into the side of her head, her vision turning black as she fell to the grated flooring.

The rhythmic bursts of Gabriel's shotguns and the insistent rattle of Jack's pulse rifle jolted her back to her senses, just as a shadow fell over her. Panic flooded her being and she pushed herself off the ground, right into the omnic's legs. Her mind was working on pure instinct, and even as her senses told her it was impossible, Ana clamped her arms around the solid metal legs and heaved. The omnic's feet left the floor as Ana hauled it up, then quickly let go the moment she tipped it over the railing, sending it crashing to the ground below.

Her breathless, victorious laugh was cut short when hot lead punched into her left bicep and cut through the air right next to her head. Gritting her teeth, Ana pulled her sidearm out again. But as she took aim at the omnic, a stream of pulse rounds ripped through its chest, sending it to the catwalk's floor with a harsh metal clang.

"You alright, Amari?" Jack called up to her, from where he stood among a group of dead omnic bodies. Liao was safely crouched behind him, fingers still flying across the console's holo-interface as she worked to shut Triglav down. Ana had a feeling she never even paused when the firefight had broken out.

"Yeah. Took a bullet, but I'll live."

"Did you just fucking lift and throw an entire omnic soldier off the catwalk?" Gabriel asked incredulously, and she could hear his laughter just bubbling beneath the surface.

Ana chuckled, still feeling a little breathless from adrenaline as she picked her sniper rifle up from the floor. "Yup. Without the help of fancy genetic enhancements too."

"Ah, now that hurt."

Ignoring the pain lancing up her arm, Ana hefted her rifle again and scanned the core chamber, feeling on edge after the surprise attack. She padded subconsciously towards the end of the catwalk and faced her back to the wall, unwilling to leave herself exposed to an ambush again. Minutes ticked by, the heavy silence occasionally broken by muttered curses from Liao and a quiet hum from the statue, that seemed to grow in volume the longer Liao worked at the console.
Then, as if at the flick of a switch, the hum was gone. Ana looked around, and saw that the lights on the statue and supercomputers had gone dark.

"Liao," Gabriel said. "Did you do it?"

"This is Pitbull-Actual, calling Strike Team, over."

"This is Strike Team, Pitbull. Give me a sitrep."

"The omnics have been deactivated. Just…collapsed where they stood. Most of them. Whatever you did, I think it worked."

A grin broke through on Liao's face. "There you have it, Reyes."

"Mm-mm, Fareeha." Kamilah held onto the girl's hand, which had grabbed onto the nugget in her plate, and was halfway to her mouth. "Use your fork, remember?"

Fareeha's mouth puckered into a severe pout, fixing her mama with a pitiful, pleading stare until Kamilah couldn't help but give in. With a sigh, Kamilah let go of her hand, and Fareeha stuffed the chicken nugget into her mouth, kicking her legs in her high chair beside the table. She grinned when Kamilah nudged at her cheek fondly, and her mother wondered if Fareeha knew she had her parent wrapped tightly around her little finger. She probably did, given how often she broke out that pout just to get what she wanted – just like Ana would.

Kamilah caught herself at the thought of her wife, and stuffed it into the back of her mind, busying herself instead with the soup she had ordered. The first two spoonfuls felt oddly dry on her tongue, and she reached for her iced tea instead, taking a long draught to soothe the accelerated beat in her chest. An insistent flailing to the side caught her attention, and Kamilah looked over at Fareeha, who was grasping at something in her direction. Cocking her head, she looked down at the lemon slice on the rim of her glass, which Fareeha seemed to be reaching for. Kamilah took it off and gazed at Fareeha curiously, the girl growing more excited when her mother held out the lemon to her.

"Oh, darling," Kamilah said, when Fareeha's fingers finally clutched onto the slice. "It's sour."

"Eat!"

"It's sour, my dear. Are you sure you want to eat it?"

"Yes! Wanna eat!"

Lips curling in a bemused smile, Kamilah held the lemon to Fareeha's mouth, making sure to keep a good grip on it while the girl chomped down on the slice. A few seconds went by as Fareha sucked on it, before her eyes widened and her entire face scrunch up, the sour tang finally spreading over her tongue. Kamilah chuckled when the girl jerked her head back from the lemon, smacking her lips loudly in a bid to get rid of the flavour.

"Told you it's sour, habibti," Kamilah crooned, setting the lemon down.

"Sowwer," Fareeha repeated. "Bleh!"

Laughing under her breath, Kamilah tweaked the tip of Fareeha's nose, getting a soft giggle from the girl. As Fareeha turned her attention back to the nuggets left on her plate, Kamilah cast her eyes over the sleepy café, nearly empty on a weekday afternoon. She liked coming here with Fareeha whenever she had a day free – it kept her mind from wallowing in the emptiness of the house, and
Fareeha seemed to enjoy the outings with her mother. And it didn't hurt that the café's owner had taken a shine to the little one, often giving her sweets and tidbits for free.

Or, in this case, a small slice of cake which made Fareeha squeal in delight.

"Rafiq," Kamilah said, as the owner placed the plate on Fareeha's table, and handed her a large plastic fork, which she grasped immediately. "You don't have to."

"Nonsense! All children have to be pampered," Rafiq laughed, waving away her protestation.

"Fareeha, what do you say--?"

"Thank you!" Fareeha yelled, then stabbed her fork eagerly into the cake, miraculously bringing the first piece into her mouth without dropping it. Although, she did manage to smear a large portion of cream onto the corner of her lips, which Kamilah took to wiping off with a tissue. She glanced up briefly when she heard another diner call out to Rafiq, asking him to turn up the volume of the television affixed to the wall.

Kamilah had finished with Fareeha when the television's volume was cranked up to an audible level by a waiter, and she looked over to find a bold headline written across the screen: 'UN Strike Team deactivates Russian God Program'.

Her heart stopped, and she forgot to breathe for a moment as she stared at the presenter, listening to her report on a tentative end to the omnic crisis in Russia, before her image was replaced by video footage of soldiers – in what Kamilah assumed to be a Russian field camp. She stared at the television intently, ears going deaf to the reporter's voice as she scanned the figures onscreen.

Most noticeable was the huge Crusader walking tall with his team, wearing a dazzling grin as he waved at the soldiers gathered about them. At the head of the group were two men – a blonde standing beside his companion with wiry black hair, their heads tilted towards each other in a private conversation. Behind the pair stood just the one Kamilah was looking for: a woman with thick black hair tied in a ponytail and a sniper rifle slung across her back, her lips curved in a lop-sided smile. She reached up to sweep her stubborn fringe away from her eyes, and Kamilah was unsurprised to see the white bandage wrapped around her bicep. Why would she – it wouldn't be Ana Amari if the sniper came out of a climactic battle without a wound or two.

"Hey," Rafiq turned back to Kamilah, pointing at the screen. "Isn't that your--?"

"Yes," Kamilah said, suddenly feeling light in the head as a smile parted her own lips. "That's my wife."

Chapter End Notes

About Liao: I've seen theories about Liao being either the man in the original Strike Team photo, or the woman on the cover of the cancelled graphic novel. I've gone with the latter, so in my mind's eye Liao kinda looks like her.

Also, I won't be going into too much detail about the Omnic Crisis and the politics of Overwatch after. My focus for this fic is the Amari family, how they grow through the years, and how they'll be affected by Ana's involvement in Overwatch. (Insert Blizz's line about leaving the Crisis's details up to the fans' imagination honhonsaltsalt) So yep,
focus is on love instead of war.

Hope y'all remembered to eat your vegetables
"Hey, Kami? Can I…ask a little favour?"

Kamilah cocked her head, eyeing the video feed of Safiya onscreen. Her sister had sounded hesitant, and even looked the part as she waited for an answer. "Of course."

"I'm thinking of sending Zahra over to Cairo for…rehabilitation. And I was wondering if she could stay with you."

"Wait, what? 'Rehabilitation'?"

Safiya bit on her lip, eyes darting to some point beyond her vidcam, then reached for her holopad on the table. The feed on Kamilah's screen swayed as Safiya moved to another point in her room, before holding the holopad level, granting Kamilah a view of Safiya standing by the window. The darkness of the night outside somehow made Kamilah dread what Safiya was about to say.

"She was caught in an accident three months ago—"

"Three months?" Kamilah burst out in surprise, then fell silent when Safiya raised a hand.

"She didn't want anyone to know. Long story short, her VTOL crashed, her leg got trapped under the burning wreckage. She was stuck there so long that she passed out. By the time rescue arrived…" Safiya shook her head slowly. "They had to amputate her leg."

"Oh god…"

"Yeah."

"How is she?"

"She's trying to be brave and everything, but…" Safiya shrugged, the pain clear on her face. "Honestly, I don't think she's doing good. Still losing sleep, crying, spacing out… God, I just don't know." She covered her mouth, frowning to the side of the screen before looking back at Kamilah. "She's a little better after she got the prosthetic – we got her one of those complex bionic legs. You know, the ones that look almost human except for the joints, and the metal and all that–?"

"Yes," Kamilah said simply, refocusing Safiya's attention before she could start rambling in her unease.

"Yeah. Look, I've been keeping myself in base since she came back, but I'm getting pressured to get back out there soon. I'm thinking of sending Zahra over to Cairo for her rehabilitation, and maybe she could stay with you? I know you might be busy enough with your work and Fareeha and everything, but can you please help me watch over Zahra too? At least I know you can spend more time with her than me…"

"Of course, Safiya," Kamilah said with a soft, incredulous laugh. "Just bring her over. I'll take care of her."

Safiya breathed a sigh. "Thanks, Kami."
"Mama. Mama!" Fareeha ran down from the study, holding her octopus plush in one hand. She reached Kamilah, who waited for her by the kitchen's doorway, and grabbed onto her mother's track pants. "There's a car outside!"

"Guess who is it?" Kamilah said, swinging the keys on her fingers as she made for the front door, with her daughter in tow.

"Auntie…Safiya. Auntie Zahra."

"That's right." Kamilah paused before the door, bending down to ruffle Fareeha's hair as the doorbell rang. "Now, you be good, alright?"

"I am good," Fareeha declared, though her voice got a little smaller as she hugged at Kamilah's leg.

The moment the door was opened, Kamilah got pulled into a hug by Safiya as usual, getting sound kisses on her cheeks before she was free to greet Zahra as well. The pilot was quieter, her smile nervous and a little forced, though it did grow brighter when Zahra lowered her gaze to look at Fareeha.

Fareeha was still hugging Kamilah's leg, partially hidden behind her mother as she stared up uncertainly at the two strangers who gazed down at her.

"Look at you!" Safiya cooed, kneeling before the child. "You're so big and tall now! When I last saw you, you were just an itty-bitty little bean." She patted the top of Fareeha's head playfully, coaxing a small giggle from the girl.

"You look like ami," Fareeha said shyly.

"Ami?" Safiya glanced up at Kamilah and mouthed 'Ana?', getting an affirmative nod in return. "Ah, I look prettier than your ami, I hope." She grinned, and when she spread her arms, Fareeha went in for a hug willingly, giggling even more when Safiya squeezed the girl, lifting Fareeha briefly from the ground in the embrace.

Having been warmed up by her aunt's greeting, Fareeha then flew over to Zahra, hugging at the woman's leg like she did with her mother. But Kamilah stiffened, noticing the minute jerk in Zahra's right leg, as if she'd wanted to pull away instinctively from the child.

"Hello," Fareeha said, though her gaze up at Zahra was quickly lowered, as her hands grasped at the hard surface beneath the denim of Zahra's jeans. "Your leg is medal!"

Kamilah and Safiya exchanged worried glances behind the child's back, when Zahra stared wordlessly down at Fareeha, but the girl continued, "That's so cool!"

Her simple exclamation seemed to flick a switch in Zahra, a soft chuckle leaving the woman's lips as she bent down and tweaked Fareeha's nose. "That's right. It's metal," she said slowly, nodding when Fareeha repeated the word, pronouncing it properly the second time. When Safiya swooped in to lift Fareeha high into the air, Kamilah noted how quickly the smile fell from Zahra's lips, then returned when she noticed Kamilah's scrutiny.

"Seems the both of you are doing well," Zahra said, letting Kamilah circle an arm around her shoulders as they followed Safiya and Fareeha farther into the house.

Kamilah just smiled, not knowing what to say. Thankfully, the pair walking ahead of them were more than capable of filling the empty space with their easy chatter.
"How old are you now, Fareeha?"

"I'm 3!"

"There's still two more months to your birthday, my dear," Kamilah reminded her.

"Yup! And I'm 3!" Fareeha proclaimed, sticking three fingers proudly up in the air for all to see.

"Of course you are, honey," Safiya crooned, bouncing the girl in her arms. "Do you want anything for your birthday? Oh! And do you know who got this octopus for you?" She pointed at the plush that Fareeha held by its rainbow tentacles. "Me, Auntie Safiya. Best aunt forever."

"Bestest aunt forever," Fareeha said with a bright smile, clinging onto her aunt as if the woman was indeed the best thing that happened to her for the whole week.

Unfortunately for Fareeha, her 'bestest' aunt had to leave after staying with them for just two days. But that small amount of time was apparently enough for Fareeha to get attached, because the child wore a mighty pout the day that Safiya was saying her goodbyes. Fareeha only cheered up when her aunt promised to come back to see her, with the puppy toy that she had promised to the girl for her birthday. Then she returned to Kamilah's side, allowing her aunts to embrace each other tightly, Safiya murmuring reassurances into Zahra's ear.

It was clearly difficult for Zahra to be parted from her wife, who had been her sole source of emotional support since the accident, as far as Kamilah could tell. Zahra was adamant at keeping her situation secret, even from her own family; the only reason Kamilah knew, was due to Safiya's persistence that she moved to Cairo for her rehabilitation.

Still, Kamilah appreciated the frankness with which Zahra tried to discuss the accident and her leg, even if she was purposefully clinical and stoic about the whole thing. Fareeha did help in her own little way, fawning over how 'cool' the black-plated leg was when she showed it to them for the first time. But as much as Zahra was comfortable with their acceptance of the leg, Kamilah knew that she hadn't fully come to terms with it herself. Zahra always hid her leg from plain view, standing with the bionic limb slightly drawn to the back, even when she wore pants that covered her legs completely. She was self-conscious, and Kamilah'd had to remind Fareeha in quiet to not keep bothering the woman about her 'cool leg'.

Fareeha, of course, always gave her a petulant pout after each reminder, but desisted as instructed… for as long as she remembered her mother's words, at least. Kamilah sighed every time Fareeha asked about the bionic leg, and was once jolted into a reflexive 'No!' in concert with Zahra, when the girl asked if she could have a bionic leg herself. Fareeha blew a loud raspberry then, but giggled along with her aunt when Zahra laughed quietly, and hugged the girl sitting in her lap.

Despite warnings about nightmares from Safiya, Kamilah never once heard a loud awakening from Zahra. No yells, no screams. No sharp gasps like Ana, when her wife jerked awake from a bad dream. Just silence, that was sometimes broken by the muted padding of feet down the hallway, which Kamilah had taken to following down into the kitchen, where Zahra would sit and hold a warm cup of water between weak hands. Times like these, it was best to just stay by her side and keep her company, without prodding for information; the memories and nightmares were still fresh, kept secret behind lips pressed into a thin line.

She opened up best in a more stable and homely environment that made her feel safe, with methods of distracting herself close at hand. Normally, that usually meant that Fareeha was around to play with, so Kamilah was surprised when Zahra started talking while they nursed steaming cups of tea
after dinner, with Fareeha playing by herself upstairs.

"It's still sinking in. Like I can't believe that it really happened to me." Zahra traced a fingertip around the rim of her cup. "I mean, the bionic leg is good, even if I can't feel a thing. It fits well and it works well, but..." She scratched at a spot above her knee, worrying at the seam where metal met flesh. "I can still feel the empty space where my leg was. I just..." Zahra exhaled sharply. "I can't believe it's gone."

Her hand curled tightly into a fist, shaking her leg in agitation, then forced herself to stop when Kamilah held onto her shoulder, squeezing lightly. "I'm fine," Zahra said with a smile. "I'm fine, I know. The anger. Yeah."

"It takes a while, Zahra. Don't push yourself."

"I know it takes time. Not going to rush it." She sighed, running a hand down her face. "Sometimes I just wish that it's all done with – that I can be in the future, when everything is fine, and I'm adjusted to my leg, and not walking so awkwardly. Fuck, Milah." She brought a fist down onto the tabletop lightly. "I just want to be out there again. Like normal. Damn it, I need to get back out there. They need me."

"Hey." Kamilah smiled, grasping her chin to turn Zahra's face towards her, tilting her head in mock scrutiny. "You're one of those Amari, are you?"

Zahra burst out in laughter, slapping her hand away. "You're one of them too, remember?"

"Yes," Kamilah drawled. "But I'm the only one not hankering to get back in the field, it seems."

"Listen, Safiya's Lieutenant-Colonel now. I've gotta catch up to her, or her head's going to swell until it's too big for her own shoulders." Zahra shot her a bemused glance, rapping her knuckles on Kamilah's forehead. "Guess I should be grateful Safiya's not out there, saving the world and getting famous."

Kamilah heaved a sigh. "Don't remind me."

"How is she, by the way? Have you been able to contact her?"

"She hasn't called back in more than a week. Should be on some mission in America." Kamilah shrugged. "She should be fine. Probably getting a few new injuries as we speak, but she'll be fine." She frowned to herself, then blinked when Zahra grasped her wrist gently.

"And you?"

"I'm fine. I just get worried sometimes, especially when she goes dark for weeks at a time." Kamilah let out another sigh and leant against the table, brows furrowing deeper the longer she spoke. "I feel so helpless here. Stuck at home while she's out there...doing who knows what. Getting herself into trouble, that's for sure."

"You're looking after Fareeha, Milah. You're helping to keep this worry off her shoulders, at least. She knows that Fareeha has you."

"I know. And it's selfish, but sometimes I wish that someone else was chosen instead of her--"

Kamilah looked up at the ceiling when the lights flickered, hand reaching instinctively for her phone on the table. This wasn't an uncommon occurrence, not for the past few months...

"Blackout--?" Zahra asked, just as they were plunged into darkness.
"Yup." They activated the flashlights on their phones, as Fareeha's cry reached them. "Oh no. Could you go to my study and get the holo-lamp on my desk?"

Kamilah flew up the stairs when Zahra nodded, motherly instincts pushing her legs into a sprint until she reached the master bedroom, casting her light around until she found Fareeha sitting on the bed, clutching her toy caterpillar in one hand.

"Mama!" Fareeha cried, turning to her mother with hands outstretched, as Kamilah climbed into bed with her.

"There there, darling. Mama's here now." Kamilah gathered the girl into her arms and set Fareeha in her lap, cradling and swaying the child gently. She looked around the bed until she spotted the blue bird plush and took it, holding it before Fareeha's eyes. Kamilah gave it a squeeze, and the light inside the bird's stomach lit up, accompanied by a short melody interspersed with sing-song chirps. It caught Fareeha's attention, though the girl still continued to cry for a while, hugging the bird until her cries faded into sobs.

Kissing the top of Fareeha's head, Kamilah hugged the girl a little tighter as Fareeha squeezed the bird again, and the toy broke out into another song. She chuckled to herself, watching the lighted bird with Fareeha, who snuggled closer to her mother and started humming along through her hitched breaths.

*Leave it to Ana to buy the best toys for her child.*

"Really, Ana!"

"I had to! That stupid thing had shields--"

"And you couldn't have disabled it in some other way?"

"Things were messy, alright? And it was gaining on my team, so I just jumped out and--"

"Of course you jumped right onto the huge omnic that your entire team was shooting at. Oh, you goddammned hero," Kamilah groaned, face falling into her palm.

Ana smiled – both in amusement and guilt – and she took the chance to adjust the oversized jacket's lapels more snugly about her neck, before Kamilah looked up again.

"Ana…"

"Milah, I'm sorry, but I had to do it."

"I know. It's war, right?"

Her heart clenched at the tightness in Kamilah's voice. She pulled her lips up in a small smile, and spoke softly, "Milah. I know you're worried, but I have to…"

"Ana," Kamilah said, nearly pleading. "I know that you will do what you have to do. I just-- I just want you to come back to me in one piece. I don't want you to come back with something…I can't fix."

Swallowing thickly, Ana replied, "Of course, Milah." She watched Kamilah fidget with the sleeve of her t-shirt, then smiled again when her wife looked back at her. "How are you, dear? Other than worrying yourself sick over me, the gorgeous sniper who is your wife."
Kamilah rolled her eyes, but Ana's ploy worked, cracking a smile on her wife's face. "I'm fine. Fareeha's been more well-behaved lately. But that only means she's going to act up again soon..."

Ana looked on fondly as Kamilah recounted the past weeks with the family, telling how Fareeha's stubbornness was starting to rear its head, and how Zahra was recovering from her accident nicely, already angling for a way back into the combat zone where Safiya was. She listened, feeling a slight ache in her chest when reminded of the fact that she hadn't been home for over a year now.

"Any idea when you're coming back to save your own country?" Kamilah asked, drawing a smirk from Ana with the light sarcasm.

"Well, Germany's our next target after we're done here in America. And after that, we're mostly likely heading to Egypt. So if things go well, maybe within a year."

If the estimate bothered Kamilah, she hid it as well as Ana, and nodded slowly. "I can deal."

"Of course you can," Ana crooned, and went on to bait more sighs and groans and laughs from her wife, until Kamilah threw her hands up and declared it was time to take a break from Ana's nonsense. "Milah?" Ana said quickly, even though Kamilah hadn't moved to turn off her vidcam. "I love you."

"I love you too," Kamilah said, a soft smile on her lips. "And you'd better come back so I can kiss the hell out of you."

"You swore–!"

"No, I didn't. Bye." Her smirk was the last thing Ana saw, before the video feed blinked off.

Ana laughed to herself, and held the holopad to her chest, before letting out a long sigh. With a groan, Ana rose from the chair in the break room, feeling the pull of numerous injuries on her body. She strode back into the hospital ward, mildly amused when the entire team's eyes fell upon her the instant she walked through the doors.

"Were you all waiting for me?" Ana asked incredulously.

"There's nothing much to do when you're stuck in a ward," Gabriel replied, sitting on the side on Jack's bed as he watched Ana trudge over to the one beside them.

"You need to get a hobby." She slipped off the big jacket hanging on her body, tossing it back to Jack with her thanks. She had borrowed it for the vidcall, so that Kamilah couldn't see the bandage on her neck and the bruises above her collarbone.

Ana had been caught in a very close call with an omnic in the last mission – technically, the entire mission had been a close call. They had very nearly failed in their siege on the omnium in Detroit, where they met stiff resistance in the assault, fighting tooth-and-nail against omnics as large as tanks, and a new model of omnic bombardiers. By the time they reached the omnium, Liao discovered that the omnics' objective had only been to slow them down...so that when they reached the factory proper, they'd discover that the self-destruct countdown had already begun, giving them little time to escape.

The team beat a frantic retreat from the omnium, and were a handful of paces away from the edge of the blast radius when the timer ticked to zero on their mission timers. Reinhardt spun around and brought up his shield, while the rest huddled behind him and threw out whatever portable energy shields they were carrying, just as a wave of searing heat engulfed them. The shockwave pushed them backwards over the ground, before throwing them off their feet when the Crusader's shield
They had all been unconscious when the medics found them, and thankfully, there were no severe injuries. Reinhardt was the most beaten, having taken most of the blast on behalf of his team, though his bodily injuries seemed to hurt his pride much less than the singed tips of his rich blonde hair.

"So, how's the family doing?"

"Better than us, that's for sure." Ana sighed in contentment as she lay in bed, feeling every muscle in her body unwind against the soft mattress.

Jack chuckled along with Gabriel's smooth laugh. "Did you really have to hide your injuries, though? You'd think your wife would understand."

"Oh, my sweet innocent boy. Trust me, it was necessary." Ana winked impishly at Jack. "Besides, I don't want her to worry about me. She has enough on her mind."

"Understandable."

Ana turned her head to the other side, where Liao had finally sat up, and was listening to their conversation. "Hey, Liao. Didn't take too much of a beating, did you?"

"No, I'm fine. Just a little…in shock." She huffed the last words, as if in disbelief. "I've never been wounded like this before."

"I'd suppose the first time's always kind of a rude surprise," Gabriel mused. "Hope it hasn't turned you off field work."

"Are you kidding?" Liao said with such a sudden rush of energy, that Ana was a little taken aback. "It felt incredible. I know that we could've all very well died then, but…wow. That rush when your life is on the line…"

Reinhardt laughed from where he lay in his bed opposite Liao's, his voice a little softer than usual. "It is amazing, isn't it? To feel the rush in your veins, the pounding in your chest. It makes you feel alive."

Ana snickered to herself, closing her eyes with a smile as Reinhardt and Liao continued to chatter on. Kamilah would have an aneurysm if she met the team, that's for sure.

With aid from the super soldiers of the SEP, the Strike Team were able to move onto the God Program facility and shut the A.I. down in one short month – due to the sheer strength of the SEP's soldiers, and the diminished numbers of omnics within the US. The A.I. had made a grave mistake, sacrificing too many bodies in its failed attempt to take the Strike Team down with the omnium, thereby sealing its fate.

They took a week for some mandatory R&R, as they had been carrying old wounds from the omnium assault, which hadn't been given time to properly heal. At the week's end, they were flown straight to Army Command in Strausberg, Germany. Much like Jack and Gabriel when they had been in America, Reinhardt was thoroughly invigorated with his feet on home soil once more, and spared no time in briefing the team on the Crusaders' tactics, sharing ideas for how they could work with his old comrades.

Ana suspected that the God Programs either had a method of communication with one another, or
kept themselves abreast of current news, at the very least. With each country they fought in, the omnics' tactics seemed to take a sharper focus on the Strike Team. The American A.I. had tried to lure them into a death trap, aware of the team's existence after their victory in Russia. Here in Germany, the team's movements through the country were plagued with countless skirmishes, and Ana could feel themselves losing speed with each battle. The sniper herself was finding trouble staying hidden for long, what with airborne devices hovering in the air, specifically waiting for Ana's shots to pinpoint her position and flush her out.

The omnics were treating the battles as opportunities to learn about the Strike Team's capabilities, and their progress was nearly stalled until Liao presented a solution – a focused jamming signal that could isolate the combat zone that the team fought in, preventing any information from being transmitted back to the A.I. Most of the team had tried listening to Liao's explanation of bouncing the boosted signal over a large area to mimic the effect of a Faraday shield, before Gabriel cut in and gave her the go-ahead to implement it. Ana – understanding that Liao might've just invented something groundbreaking – gave the woman a thumbs-up and wink, and Liao shot her a smile as they left the war room together.

Her solution did work, it seemed – the omnics were no longer privy to the new tactics that Gabriel dreamt up, falling to the same tricks without fail, battle after battle. From there, their war in Germany was rather straightforward. Fighting with the Crusaders by their sides, the Strike Team was able to disable the omnium and A.I. facility, without incurring drastic losses among the stalwart knights and the German army.

And finally, 19 months after joining the Strike Team, Ana would return to the war at home.

For the first time, Ana felt anxious returning to her family. They were waiting for her, of course, and she knew they would be thrilled at her appearance. But she couldn't help but wonder how much had changed. Kamilah was more or less the same – Ana could tell from their vidcalls together. But surely Fareeha would've changed – growing taller, much taller, that's for sure. Would she still treat Ana the same? Show that unabashed affection for her mother? Did she still recognise Ana as her mother?

Ana nearly slammed her head into the door out of exasperation, but settled for simply swinging it open instead. The TV was on, playing the jingle from a kids' show. Ana set her duffle bag down and took off her boots, wondering how she should approach Fareeha. Carefully? Warmly–?

She froze when Fareeha's head poked out from the living room's doorway, and the ecstatic grin on the girl's face washed away her anxiety in an instant.

She's so tall now.

"Ami!" Fareeha yelled and ran towards Ana, who lifted her from the ground and squeezed her in a tight embrace.

"Fareeha," Ana said, feeling breathless all of a sudden. She squeezed her eyes tight, pressing her face into Fareeha's shoulder, before kissing her head. "Ami missed you so much, Fareeha."

"I missed you, ami. You were gone so long!"

Already talking so well, too.

"Ami was busy, little one," Ana explained, carrying the girl back into the living room, where she was given pause.

"Mama! Ami's back!" Fareeha called out to her mother, as she was lowered onto the sofa.
A grin spread slowly across Ana's face, as she beckoned at her wife with both hands. Kamilah took the invitation to heart, practically lunging into Ana's embrace, wrapping her arms tightly around her wife.

"Now, now," Ana murmured beside her ear. "You promised me kisses--"

Her reminder was cut short when Kamilah leaned back to shoot her an incredulous look, before threading her fingers through Ana's hair and yanking her in, their lips crashing together in a desperate kiss. Ana hummed against Kamilah's mouth, smiles growing on their faces with each kiss, until she could feel the laughter in the gentle press of Kamilah's lips to hers.

"God, I've missed you," Ana purred, giving her wife one last kiss, Kamilah's low chuckle the sweetest music to her ears. She smiled, then turned her gaze down towards Fareeha, who was tugging on her sleeve.

"I want kissies too."

And many kisses Fareeha did get from Ana, who made sure to shower her affection over Kamilah as well, during their lamentably short time together. In the four days that the Strike Team spent in Cairo pulling their battle plan together, Ana managed to get reacquainted with Fareeha on the play mat, received full body examinations from Kamilah in the sheets, and baked a decent batch of cupcakes to make up for the important milestones she had missed with the family.

The last was definitely the highlight of Ana's return for Fareeha, who inhaled the three cupcakes that Ana had placed candles on. She watched in amusement with Kamilah as they let the girl indulge in her sweet tooth, and listened to her stories while they ate their own cakes as well.

The downer was, unsurprisingly, Ana's departure from home once more. This time, Ana didn't disappear from the house overnight without Fareeha's knowledge, and made sure to hug her daughter, leaving her with a promise to come soon. Kamilah didn't need the prolonged attention, and was satisfied with just an embrace from her wife.

Since the team was on her home turf, Gabriel handed Ana the reins as she coordinated between the army, Sa'ka, and God Eye – working closely with Jaida, Safiya, and Khalid to bolster the Strike Team's efforts in the country. Ana's greatest fears had come true in her absence; God Eye was being fought to a standstill by the omnics, who had managed to create countermeasures for the dedicated sniper support teams. But she took comfort in the fact that their methods here were different than in Germany, which meant that Liao's signal blocks had worked.

They took the same precaution here, jamming the omnics' frequencies at every Strike Team battle, never allowing Anubis to get a clear grasp of their tactics. In contrast to the solid, but predictable maneuvers that the army had utilised before the Strike Team's arrival, Ana took a gamble and spread their soldiers out a little more – with much help from Safiya's Sa'ka troops and Khalid's God Eye.

Together, they staged an agile but delicate performance – always switching their tactics from battle to battle, bombarding omnics with airstrikes in one engagement, then blasting them to bits with tanks and artillery in the next, before hitting another omnic battalion with precise sniper shots followed by a wide-area hack by drones. And so the cycle continued, until they managed to shut the omnium down, cutting off their supply of troops.

With the omnics kept off-balance and shorthanded, unable to rustle up the proper countermeasures when they truly needed it, Ana went for one last showdown. They orchestrated dozens of skirmishes all over the country at once, keeping Anubis distracted while the Strike Team slipped into the A.I.
facility, remaining undetected until the very last moment when they were reaching the core chambers. By then, it was over for the A.I. Despite going into red alert and throwing every omnic within the facility at the team, forcing them to give ground and retreat farther into the chambers, Liao managed to shut Anubis down before it could overwhelm them.

And the war in Egypt…was over.

Ana kept her eyes fixed on the horizon as they were driven back to base, with she, Gabriel, and Jack sitting on top of the APC in direct violation of regulations. She gazed quietly over the damaged and crumbling buildings, the blackened rubble strewn on the dusty ground, the fires dying along with the sunlight as the day came to an end. Ana bit down on her lip, squinting against the moisture gathering in her eyes. And it seemed her companions heard her soft sniff over the rumble of engines, because two arms hugged about her shoulders from either side.

"I know the feel," Gabriel said gently, ruffling her hair under the beret.

Again, they had little time to rest before they would be flown elsewhere – India, this time – and they were kept busy between trying to grab some downtime and being pulled in front of cameras for the few interviews they were cleared to give. The team let Jack handle most of the questions – his straight-backed, stoic soldier's demeanour was a good face for the team, and a convenient decoy for the cameras to focus on, while the rest kept to themselves off-camera.

But even so, they were given their share of exposure with a press conference, followed by a celebration to commemorate their achievement. Ana held her shoulders straight under the attention, but the distinct blue beret on her head felt heavier as she stood before the cameras, noting how local reporters kept their lenses trained on her much longer than the others.

She didn't like it, truth be told, and didn't relish the thought of how her image would be used in the hands of strangers. Nevertheless, she kept the devilish smile on her lips, and adopted a casual, confident mien while under the limelight, bearing the scrutiny with practiced ease. The trouble was worth it, Ana knew – whenever she returned home to her family, assured in the fact that they were free from the constant threat of danger, that they were finally safe.

All worth it.

It was only a matter of time before Ana had to leave again, and Kamilah was calm despite her anxiety bubbling beneath the surface, as she saw Ana off. She waited by the jet, and managed to shake hands with Gabriel and Jack, then wore an abashed smile while Reinhardt fawned over her, before he was finally dragged away by Liao.

Kamilah turned to Ana when her wife walked over, and took Fareeha into her own arms, noting how the girl seemed on the verge of breaking into a pout. But Ana soothed over the little tantrum before it even surfaced, making a pinky promise with Fareeha to bake more cakes when she returned, if the girl behaved well for Kamilah. Ana chuckled when Kamilah commented about the ‘bribe’, then kissed her wife goodbye, before boarding the plane herself.

Fareeha didn't cry when they watched the jet take off this time, and had taken her promise with Ana to heart, even clinging close to Kamilah throughout the day. At night, she went to bed without a fuss, choosing her bird plushie to sleep with, and hugged the toy close as Kamilah tucked her in.

"Mama?"
"Yes, dear?" Kamilah smiled down at her, running her fingers gently through Fareeha's hair.

"Where's ami?"

She paused. "Ami is working."

Fareeha played with the tip of her plushie's wing. "When's she coming back?"

"I…don't know, darling. But she might take a while." Kamilah felt a little twinge when Fareeha's pout appeared, as she fidgeted with her toy. "Do you miss ami?"

Fareeha nodded.

"Mama misses her too. But you know that ami is a hero, right?" She gave another smile when Fareeha nodded again. "Well, when she's done saving all those people, she'll come back. Then she can stay longer. All we have to do now is wait for her."

"Okay." Fareeha shifted against her pillow, wiggling under the covers. "I can wait."

"Good girl," Kamilah crooned, kissing her forehead. "And while we wait, mama can make you some cupcakes too."

She chuckled when Fareeha's eyes brightened immeasurably, her daughter's grin relieving the weight in her chest.

Chapter End Notes

Omnic Crisis?? Actual legit science?? Don't know them BYE
Kamilah sighed, wiping her oily fingers off on a towel as she sat heavily on the ground, staring blankly at the motorcycle before her. She'd had this bike for ten years now, despite the shop's frequent suggestions to just get a newer and better model, and spare herself all the effort of maintaining such an old one. But every time the mechanic showed her around the shop, trying to pique her interest in all the other models his customers were using, her eyes would always slide back to her own ride, and she'd shake her head in the negative. As much as she hated to admit it, Ana's constant teases were right – she was too attached to her bike.

Chewing on her lip, Kamilah ran her fingers over the midnight-blue paint that was starting to fade again, and traced her fingers over the small nicks and scratches accumulated from the past years of use. The bike still bore a golden trim, but the repainted colour had niggled away at her for the longest time, because Kamilah could never find that original shade that she loved. Scratches marred the black vinyl of the seat, and Kamilah suspected that the colour would fade in no time as well.

Damn it. The bike was too old to be worth all this time and effort spent on maintaining it…

Reluctance stabbed at her when she thought of parting with the old thing, and so she stopped. Kamilah tossed the towel to the side, took the sponge next to her toolbox, and paused. She looked out of the open garage gates – judging from the sun's glare, she guessed that it was around noon. Kamilah dropped the sponge carelessly to the floor and stood, patting herself off as she made her way back into the house.

"Fareeha," Kamilah called, loud enough for the girl to hear if she was playing on the upper floor. "Lunch time! We're going out, remember?"

No answer. Not an uncommon occurrence, so Kamilah repeated the girl's name as she washed her hands in the kitchen's sink, only to have her voice die in her throat when she looked up through the window. Fareeha was playing in their small backyard the last time Kamilah had checked on her, and she was still there, except her feet were not on the ground, but balancing precariously on the flat top of the fence. Her arms were held out on either side of her body, her eyes fixed on the narrow path before her in utmost concentration.

"Fareeha! Get down from the–" Kamilah's shout had been instinctive, an action she promptly regretted when she broke her daughter's focus. Fareeha looked up at her in surprise, and she tripped over her own feet, teetering precariously on the edge before she fell over, one hand colliding painfully into the fence when she tried to grip onto something.

Kamilah cursed under her breath and ran out of the kitchen, bursting through the house's back door in her frantic rush to reach her daughter. Fareeha was already whining when Kamilah knelt beside her and tugged her hands forward, spotting the small abrasions on her palms where they had hit the rough garden tiles.

"Fareeha, how many times do I have to tell you – don't keep climbing everything you see!" Kamilah guided the girl to stand on her feet, the oft-repeated chides falling from her lips as she checked that Fareeha hadn't broken or sprained anything. Taking the four-year-old by the hand, Kamilah led her back into the house and sat her on the sofa, brows furrowing into a deep frown as she dug out the medical kit and knelt before her daughter.
"Just like your ami. Only know how to throw my words out the window," Kamilah uttered, cleaning the superficial scrapes on Fareeha's knees. She took a little more care with the abrasions on the palms, which were bleeding slightly. "Fareeha, you have to listen to--"

Kamilah glanced up at the girl and froze. Tears dripped from Fareeha's eyes, but only the barest of sobs escaped her lips, pressed together as if to hide it – and Kamilah's heart twisted. She recognised that look – she'd felt it before, been there before, and suddenly she was a child again, cowering as a harsh, grating voice shouted curse-laden scoldings into her ear.

She felt nauseous, the gauze dropping from her fingers. No. No, no--, I'm not--

Kamilah reached for Fareeha, pausing briefly in hesitation, before cupping the girl's cheek in one trembling hand. She wiped the tears away, then wrapped both arms around her daughter tightly, rubbing her back in soothing circles as Fareeha started to sob in her ear.

"Sorry…"

"It's okay, habibti. It's okay," Kamilah murmured into her ear, giving her a comforting squeeze and a peck on the temple. She wiped at Fareeha's damp cheeks again, smiling gently at the girl's hiccups. "Mama loves you, Fareeha. That's why she doesn't like to see you hurt. It's painful when you fall, isn't it?"

Fareeha nodded.

"Mm-hm. And that's why you shouldn't climb up to tall places. Or you'll get these ouchies again." Kamilah pointed at the girl's scrapes, and she pouted. "Here, let's give you the cute plasters this time." She reached into the kit and took two band-aids with cartoons printed on them, and pasted them over the abrasions on Fareeha's palm. "Do you like it?"

Fareeha nodded, and Kamilah couldn't help but chuckle at how quickly a smile returned to her face.

"Come on, let's go have lunch. Then…do you wanna help mama clean her bike?"

"Yeah!"

Kamilah smiled as she packed up the medical kit, taking Fareeha by the hand and leading her up to the bedroom for a change. During lunch, she made sure to order some ice cream for themselves, periodically fending off the attacks on her own dessert when Fareeha tried to gouge some extra spoonfuls from her mother – who might have let her succeed a few times.

And when they returned home with their stomachs full, they set to work on the bike, rolling it outside the garage for a good clean. Kamilah let Fareeha rub a small soapy sponge over the bike with her, then put the hose into the girl's hands and guided her as they rinsed the soap off. She let go of Fareeha when they were done, circling around the bike to check for any spots they'd missed. Then she stopped in her tracks, her gaze having landed on Fareeha…who had the hose nozzle aimed at her with a grin.

Kamilah's eyes widened.

"Are you fucking insane, Reyes!"

Ana's exclamation had come in time with Jack's own shocked outcry, but it seemed Gabriel heard her regardless, and pinned her with the same cold gaze that he had fixed Jack with.
"We have no choice—"

"A 'choice'?" Jack bit out, taking one step towards Gabriel. "Gabe, we're talking about tens of thousands of lives here! This isn't a fucking choice—!"

"It's either ten thousands here, or hundreds of thousands tomorrow, Morrison."

Jack's lips moved, but he was at a loss for words. He turned to Ana in a silent plea for help, but she knew that she didn't have the right answer he sought, and shifted her gaze away. She looked at the doors to A.I. core chamber, where Reinhardt and Torbjörn were still fending off the omnic's relentless hailstorm of bullets – the men were occupied, but she knew they were keenly aware of the argument happening behind them. Ana glanced at Liao, who stood by the God Program's control console, and caught her gaze.

"Liao, is there no way to sever the link?" Ana asked.

"No, I'm sorry," Liao replied, regret tinging her voice as she turned back to tap on the console's holo-keyboard. "The A.I. tied the deactivation sequence to its self-destruct protocol. The only way we're stopping this…is through an explosion."

"Then, how about minimising the blast radius—?" Jack jumped in, but he was merely grasping at straws.

Liao sighed sharply. "I said just now, the A.I. is pushing its energy core into overload. There's no way to stop the buildup, so…" She wavered, then continued with a coldness similar to Gabriel's. "The only way to minimise it, is to set it off – quickly."

"Fuck," Jack uttered under his breath.

"Look," Gabriel said. "We can't afford to wait any longer. Even if you refuse to look at the large picture, think about what's happening here." He nodded his head towards the entrance, and they glanced at the Crusader's shield marred with cracks, a red turret with black smoke rising from its engines – and beyond the facility's walls, there were thousands of Indian troops fighting to hold their ground, giving their very lives to buy the Strike Team more time to end the war in their homeland.

"If we don't destroy the A.I. now, we won't have the numbers left to fight a war here. We'll be signing their death sentence."

Ana's grip tightened on the assault rifle in her hands – a gift from a now-dead soldier, after her sniper rifle had been badly damaged in the midst of battle.

"This is the best option—, no. This is the only option. We end this here, and now. If you don't agree, then I have no choice but to make it an order." Gabriel's steely stare rested on Jack, then Ana, and Liao. None spoke out against him. He raised a hand and pressed the comm piece in his ear, ordering the Indian forces to beat a full-scale retreat from the city, as quickly as they could.

"Liao, do it."

Liao's gaze passed over Jack and Ana, the fear in her eyes slowly disappearing behind a placid mask. Her fingers flew over the console’s keyboard, and in a few short seconds, the blue holo-screen hovering before her turned red: [SELF-DESTRUCT SEQUENCE ACTIVATED]

"Let's go!" Gabriel barked, and he ran towards the doors with Jack to hold the defense line, while Reinhardt sprinted back towards Liao, who had started limping towards him – she'd caught two bullets in the same leg during their advance on the A.I. facility. Reinhardt lifted Liao in his arms, and
nodded grimly at Ana before making for the exit.

Ana cast one last glance back at the statue towering over them, the glowing red eyes of Shiva and the snake coiled around his shoulders staring down at the team.

_Damn you._

="You were supposed to prevent deaths, not expedite it!" Xie's reprimand was cutting, and her voice shook under the obvious effort not to raise her volume into an outright shout. Even through a holographic projection, the force of her temper could be felt by each person in the room.

"There was little choice, ma'am," Gabriel said, standing at attention before his team, bearing the brunt of Xie's anger. "You will see in my report that—"

"That it was the only way to complete your mission, yes. I have read it, god damn it!" Xie whipped off her glasses, a severe frown creasing her brows as she pinched the bridge of her nose, taking a moment to collect herself. "An entire city… Gone. Just like that."

"Ma'am. I am captain of this team, and I was the one who gave the order. I will take the blame, and submit myself to any—"

"There will be no blame in this, Reyes," Xie intoned. She took a deep breath and slipped her glasses back on. "When the Strike Team arrived in the facility, they found the self-destruct sequence already activated by the A.I. You had no say in the destruction that followed. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"All of you."

"Yes, ma'am!" The chorus of shouts rang empty – a soulless, ingrained habit of an obedient soldier.

With a curt nod, Xie's projection blinked off, leaving the team staring into empty space for a long moment. Torbjörn was the first to move towards the door, without waiting for a debrief by Gabriel. He was followed closely by Reinhardt, who cast a forlorn look over his team, then trudged out with his shoulders slumped in shame. Liao followed after them, wiping discretely at her eyes as she passed through the door.

Ana made to move, but paused when she noticed how the team's super soldiers were still standing motionless. She shared a glance with Jack, who gave her a mirthless smile and nodded. Ana left the room quickly, anxious to get some air and leave the two men to thrash their issues out in private.

Failed missions were not an uncommon occurrence for the team. They always learnt, adapted, and overcame each new obstacle that had caused them to stumble, and were quick to accept a member's mistake, offering tips and suggestions to prevent similar incidents in the future. Even when concrete advice escaped them, silent company was often appreciated, and given in quiet hang-outs in the break room, where they nursed their own drinks of choice.

This time, no one sought each other out. Ana suspected they were all avoiding one another, as she hadn't bumped into anyone in her aimless wandering around the base, and she was…grateful for the privacy. After passing by groups of mournful soldiers and getting odd looks in her direction, she wasn't in the mood to discuss what had happened, or even think of it. The moment they'd arrived in the field camp after the mission – two days before they reported to Command – Ana had dropped the rifle from her grip like it was hot coal.
Her hands felt dirty – like there was something she couldn't scrub off her skin, though that didn't stop her from trying in the long shower she took that night. Even then, her fingers were still scratching absentmindedly at her palms, and she only stopped when she reached for the door to the bunkroom she shared with Liao.

She peeked in first, and found the room still dark – Liao hadn't returned yet. Ana shuffled in, tossing her toiletries and towel haphazardly onto her duffle bag, and fell face-down into her bed. She remained there until she found it difficult to breathe against the mattress, then flopped over with a heavy sigh. She stared up at the blank white ceiling of the room, before reaching up to the table by the head of her bed, and grabbed her phone. She'd turned it on just before heading for the showers, and had received a few new messages in her old squad's chat, two from her sister, and notably more from her wife, who still checked in every few days despite her prolonged absences.

She scrolled through the messages disinterestedly, then opened the chat with Kamilah, her interest piqued by the video. Ana tapped on it, smiling when Kamilah's shrieks and Fareeha's cackles broke the silence of her room, and she watched Fareeha chase Kamilah all over their lawn, blasting her mother with water from a hose. Then Kamilah grabbed Fareeha with one arm and lifted her, adjusting the girl in her hold as she wiped the camera lens on her t-shirt sleeve, then focused it on themselves.

"Say hi to ami."

"Hi, ami!" Fareeha yelled. In her excitement, her fingers accidentally squeezed the hose nozzle's lever, dousing both Kamilah and herself with another blast of water at point-blank range.

Ana huffed quietly as the video amid her daughter and wife's shrieks. She pulled up the keyboard, thumbs hovering over the screen, unsure what to say.

[Hey]

[♥]

[Just came back, tired. Going to sleep now]

Kamilah: [Ok.]

Kamilah: [You're doing great. Proud of you.]

Kamilah: [♥]

Ana stared at the screen until it went dark, her protest dying with the light from the screen. She dropped the phone on the bed and pressed her face into the pillow, biting hard on her bottom lip as the pillowcase grew damp under her eyes.

The team was flown to Nigeria just two days later. Though the night after Xie's debrief had been cold, they still acted normally around each other, even if their usual camaraderie felt rather hollow in the first week. Nevertheless, they had an important, as-yet-unfinished mission to focus on, and it was what melded the team slowly back together, their few years spent in the thick of battle forming the solid ground from which they sprang back into action.

Spirits were high among the Nigerian troops despite the devastating incident in India, and the Strike Team found their efforts bolstered substantially by the coalition of elite African forces, which had been formed to aid Nigeria's struggle against the omnics since the start of the crisis. As with all other countries, a special task force had been created here as well – comprising of expert infiltrators, by the
name of 'Shadow'. Each infiltrator was trained extensively in the use of stealth and hacking technologies, and they were perfect assets for sabotage, distraction, and gathering intelligence.

The team was paired with a squad of Shadows, under the leadership of one active and indomitable lieutenant named Mirembe. Before the Strike Team's arrival in Nigeria, she'd already performed dangerous reconnaissance missions right into the very heart of the omnium and A.I. facility, and her information was thorough. They were able to follow detailed routes through the facilities, with the Shadows covering their advance every step of the way, striking at omnic patrols and disabling sensor systems, while the Strike Team marched into the core chambers, and shut down the omnium and God Program.

Ana was rather surprised with how smooth their operations in Nigeria had gone, but her surprise quickly faded when Mirembe showed her the box of tokens she'd collected – one belonging to each soldier she'd lost to the war. Blood had been paid for this triumph, and it was not the Strike Team's.

Their last destination: China.

Liao had been on edge during their flight back to her home country, and she moved with intense fervour when they started on the last stretch of their mission, determined to seize a victory that was over four years in the making. Here, the team worked with a dedicated contingent of soldiers called the "Dancers" – masters of hand-to-hand combat, equipped with gauntlets and boots that emitted fatal shocks upon contact, and were sturdy enough to block even a direct melee hit from an OR14.

Ana was tickled when Liao explained that their name was a play on the word, 'wu', which could also mean 'martial' in Mandarin Chinese. It made her regret choosing 'God Eye' as the name for her snipers, instead of a clever pun.

After a few short missions, it became apparent that their campaign in China would run as smoothly as it did in Nigeria, even if they'd had to tackle more battles head-on – as was the style of the Dancers. The group of martial artists assigned to them was led by an affable soldier named Tien, who cracked jokes nearly as often as he gave orders in the battlefield. Working with the Dancers was rather tricky, since their combat style required them to go face-to-face with the omnics in combat. Battles were always messy, and they became even more so when they had allies right in the heart of that same mess. Even if the Dancers wore personal shields of their own to protect them from weapons fire, the team had to take extra care while taking their own shots.

Nevertheless, with the Dancers charging ahead as their lethal frontline – often fighting with Reinhardt swinging his hammer in their midst – the team was able to make it into the A.I. core chambers with minimal injuries. Ana panted as she injected a self-sealing biofoam into the bullet wound below her ribs, while the others did the same for their own wounds – stemming their bleeding temporarily so they could maintain a defensive line around Liao while she worked.

It didn't take long – this was a mere routine to Liao by now. But even as they cheered at Liao's exclamation of success, a battered omnic body near them sputtered to life, red eyes flashing wildly from where it lay on the ground, unable to move. They fell silent as it uttered the same phrase in Mandarin over and over again, causing unease to flit across the faces of Liao and the Dancers. She was about to translate the words at Gabriel's request, when the omnic switched into English.

"Your victory is fleeting."

Tien snapped angrily at the failing omnic body as it rasped the ominous phrase over and over again, until the light died from its eyes.

Through the thick doors that the Dancers had demolished on their way in, they could hear the distant
cheers of the Chinese soldiers. But the core chamber remained deathly silent.

Xie seemed deeply worried by their report, falling into a prolonged silence when the recording of the dying omnic ended. A frown creased her forehead, but it disappeared when she sighed and looked back at the team, who stared at her as if waiting for answers. She gave them a tired smile and offered her thanks for their efforts, telling them to leave the omnic issue to her, and spend the time celebrating their incredible achievement instead. She ended the transmission with an order for them to return to Switzerland, before blinking out of sight, leaving the team to stare at one another in an almost surreal daze.

Tien was quick to find them after their debrief, pulling them into a night of carousing and eating and drinking, that left Ana crashing back into bed feeling utterly tired. But for the first time in years, she could fall asleep without that heavy weight upon her shoulders.

They were given a few days of R&R, after which they went back into action again, having obtained permission to deal with the remaining pockets of omnics that were still active. Xie was more than happy to grant their request, after receiving reports of the omnic remnants, who seemed to have retained some measure of independent consciousness, enough to keep them operating on what was likely the God Programs’ final directive. None of them, not even Liao, could fathom how the A.I.s had done it, but it wasn’t the most pertinent question at the moment. They’d just achieved the nigh impossible, and they refused to have their hard-won dream undone by a few rogue elements.

Their clean-up operations took four more months, which saw them flying from China, and back to the countries that they had visited, to ensure that the omnic threat remained down, before news of their activity spread far enough to cause panic again. And in the end, they caught a flight back to Geneva, where a televised awards ceremony was held in honour of their achievements, after which they were ushered into a private reception to be showered with praise, compliments, and an endless train of small talk that made Ana desperately want to yawn.

It was a sentiment the team obviously shared, because they took a concerted breath of relief when they finally pried themselves away. Then they decided to venture into town to grab some food to eat, as they’d barely partaken in the reception’s generous spread of canapés. They found themselves in a pub an hour later, and were shown into a private room by the owner, who recognised them from the news and recent broadcast. The team practically ordered a feast that they were hard-pressed to finish, but they took their time with it, delighting in the sheer amount of time and freedom on their hands.

Ana smiled into her glass of soda, watching Reinhardt give Jack such a hard congratulatory slap on the back, that the man near fell over. They’d gone to the pool table outside the room in a bid to ‘work off the food to eat more food’, and had attracted quite a crowd who wanted to see the purported heroes in action – even in their downtime. Though the players had little trouble with the extra attention, Ana was rather glad that she’d declined the invitation to play. A full day of media exposure had been more than enough for her.

"Ugh. I'm dying," Gabriel groaned beside her, as he took four more fries and stuffed them into his mouth.

"Then stop eating, dumbass." Ana knocked her elbow into his, wearing a smile as she fired a text back to Kamilah, who reminded her not to 'puke all that food out and embarrass herself in front of the fans'.

"I'm not a quitter." He swallowed the fries with a long-suffering look on his face, then washed it down with a gulp of beer. Gabriel knocked his head into Ana’s, nodding at the phone. "Bet you can’t wait to get back home, huh? It’s like you can't ever put the phone down whenever we’re back."
"Please. After spending all this time with you shits? I'd be surprised if I ever leave home again." Ana sighed airily, joining in Gabriel's suffering and grabbing a handful of fries too. "I'm gonna hold my girls for so long, we'll all have white hair when I'm done."

"Isn't that a crime? Like, taking someone hostage?" Gabriel chuckled when Ana rolled her eyes. "It's not a hostage situation if they're willing."

"Stockholm's."

"Don't make me punch you, dingus." Ana grinned, taking a draught from her own glass as well. "What, you're not looking forward to going home?"

"Yeah, I am." Gabriel nibbled on the tip of another fry, before throwing it onto his plate in disgust. "Gonna visit the family. See my buddies. The usual."

"Mm-hm. Any…special plans?" Ana wiggled her brows when he looked confused, then nodded her head at the pool table. "You know, have a drink, and a little…sword fighting."

"Shut up," Gabriel laughed, glancing at the table where Jack was taking aim with a look of utter concentration, biting the tip of his tongue between his teeth. "Ah… I don't know. I mean, we work well together but…"

"But nothing. You know what? I dare you to."

"What?" Gabriel said incredulously. "You don't just dare someone into–"

"I dare you."

"No."

"Aw, come on. It's just a little sword fighting, if you get my meaning–!" Ana cackled when Gabriel shoved a handful of fries at her mouth. She grabbed and pulled at his ears, the two laughing uncontrollably until Ana shoved Gabriel backwards. She shot up from her seat and yelled, "Hey, Jack! You wanna do some sword fighting with–"

The rest of her words were muffled by Gabriel's hand, who had to clamp her in a one-armed hug before she could walk out towards the pool table. But she didn't have to anyway, because Jack walked in with cue stick in hand, and a curious look on his face.

"Gabe? Is Ana drunk?"

"Yes! Yes, she is–! Stop that!" Gabriel held onto Ana's wrist when she grabbed a salt shaker, shaking it up and down rigorously in Jack's direction. "My god, you're horrible!"

Jack just stared at them with a bemused smile, as Ana finally lay down on three chairs in a laughing heap, and Gabriel sat back in relief, shooting Jack a sheepish look.

"Yup," Jack said, nodding slowly. "You all are big fucking weirdos."

"Fucking weirdos, huh?"

"Ana!"

Ana yawned, standing from her cushy seat as the private jet rolled to a stop in the Heliopolis hangar.
She pulled on the jacket of her dress blues, smoothing over the minute creases with her hands, and checking the badges on her chest. Then she took her bags down from the overhead compartment, and reached for the open file she'd left on the empty seat beside hers, smiling at the group photo that the Strike Team had taken just that morning. The soldiers were in their dress blues, while their non-military members wore suits, all wearing bright smiles before they parted for their homes.

There was little doubt that they'd see each other again, though – Xie had hinted for them to 'hang on' and that they would be in contact soon. For what exactly, none of them had a clear idea, only tentative guesses. But Ana was content to leave the guesswork for another day, and had little trouble putting it out of her mind.

She slid the folder into her bag carefully, then patted about her head to ensure every strand of hair was in place, before putting on her blue beret and walking towards the exit. Jaida had messaged her the night before, telling Ana to look her best for the return home. And when the plane door was opened, Ana understood why.

At the end of the stairway were two lines of soldiers, all in dress blues and standing at attention. Ana had to bite down on her lip to stop an exasperated laugh at the formality, and strode down the stairs with a straight face, though she nearly stopped in her tracks when the soldiers snapped smart salutes at her approach. She broke into a smile and walked down the line, towards the modest welcoming party that waited for her.

Jaida and General Mahmoud stood at the head of the group, which consisted of highly-decorated officers ranked Major General and above. Ana gave them a sharp salute, received the courtesy in kind, then broke out into a wide grin when Jaida pulled her into an unexpected hug. She laughed at the colonel's light-hearted jabs, and groaned softly when Jaida informed her of the reception that was waiting for her in HQ. Jaida raised a brow at her when she muttered, 'Not again', and knocked Ana on the head, before following the rest of the party towards the building.

Ana trailed behind the group, smile turning soft as her gaze landed on Kamilah, who had stood to the side of the welcoming party, and was now walking into Ana's open arms. She squeezed her wife tight, unwilling to let Kamilah go, until she received a gentle kiss on her lips.

"Welcome home, hero," Kamilah murmured with a smile, gently tracing her tattoo with a finger.

Ana laughed under her breath, resting their foreheads together. "Thanks, albi."

The reception was just as dreary as the one in Geneva, but with some practice under her belt, Ana managed to pass the entire event without either strangling herself or someone else, and exchanged pained looks with Kamilah and Jaida during those brief moments when no one was clamouring for a chat with Ana Amari. When the affair was done, Ana nodded at Jaida's reminder of the awards ceremony scheduled in a few days, then took off with her wife in hand. She would've ran all the way back home too, if Kamilah hadn't clicked her tongue and held her back, leading her towards the motorcycle instead.

Fareeha had clung onto her the instant they showed up to fetch her from the neighbour's, and Ana gave the same reassuring answer to the girl's repeated questions of, 'You're gonna stay this time, right?' When she was satisfied with Ana's promise to stay, she then talked her mother's ear off for the rest of the day, recounting each and every bit of her life that she could remember, before saying good night as Kamilah pried the girl away to prepare her for bed.

Ana smiled to herself as she listened to Fareeha's footsteps through the door they'd left ajar, the girl talking to her toys as she bustled about her own room doing…who knew what. Using her
imagination to the fullest, no doubt – quite unlike her mother at the moment.

Ana was content to let her mind rest as she lay in her own bed, listening to Fareeha's giggles, the occasional shuffles and clicks from Kamilah in the bathroom, and the near-inaudible whir of the air-conditioner. So…peaceful, quiet. Unhurried. It would take a while for her to get used to this again.

The mattress dipped to the side as Kamilah climbed into bed, then fell right on top of Ana, getting a breathless laugh from her wife.

"I knew you missed me," Ana drawled, wrapping her arms around Kamilah as her wife snuggled up to her.

"Mm." Kamilah took a deep breath, and exhaled against her neck. "I almost forgot how you feel like."

"Me too." Ana reached down and squeezed her bottom, making Kamilah jerk against her. "Ah, yes. There's the butt."

"Idiot," Kamilah crooned, pressing their lips together, but she slapped at Ana's hand when it slid down to her thigh. "No. Don't start what we can't finish tonight."

"What?" Ana fixed her with a perplexed gaze, but Kamilah just lay her head back down on Ana's shoulder.

"You'll see."

They spent the next few minutes in silence as Ana waited to 'see', and sure enough, her answer came knocking on the door.

"Ah."

"Told you," Kamilah said, raising her head again. "Come in, dear."

Fareeha peeked through the door, then grinned and walked in with her pillow and toys in hand, shutting the door behind her as she neared the bed. Kamilah pulled back the covers, giving Fareeha room to crawl in and settle comfortably between her mothers.

"Oh, is that Fart?" Ana said, when Fareeha held out the purple dragon plush to her.

"Yup! I took care of him for you."

"That's very nice of you, little one. Thank you." Ana kissed the top of her head, getting a smile from Fareeha as she lay down on the pillow.

"Mama should get one too," Fareeha whispered conspiratorially, and though she knew Kamilah could very well hear what they were saying, Ana imitated her hushed tone as well.

"Yeah?" Ana hugged the dragon to her chest, as Fareeha fiddled with the bird in her hands. "Maybe we should get her a tiger. Because mama's fierce like one."

"Yeah! That's so cool!"

"And she scratches like one too--" Ana cackled when Kamilah slapped at her arm.

"Shush. Now sleep, you two."
"Okay," Fareeha said, before Ana could protest.

"Aw, no fun."

"It's okay, ami. We can play tomorrow."

"Ah. That's right. We have all the time in the world now, don't we?" Ana gazed back at her wife, reaching over to run her fingers through Kamilah's hair, and received a kiss on her palm. She smiled gently, tracing the curve of Kamilah's lips with a thumb, before threading their fingers together.

Ana stayed awake long after Fareeha had fallen asleep, holding Kamilah's warm brown gaze until her eyelids started to fall shut from exhaustion, lulled by the soothing sensation of Kamilah stroking her arm.

She didn't know, but Kamilah could see – she wore a faint smile as she fell into a dreamless sleep.

Chapter End Notes

@ Omnic Crisis:
The auditorium was packed to full for the awards ceremony, with hundreds in attendance. Save for the occasional clicks of camera shutters, the hall was filled with respectful silence as the field marshal reached the end of his address in that ever-monotonous note. The president took his place at the podium next, and Ana just barely caught the sigh about to pass her lips. She shared a glance with Jaida, who sat beside her in the front row, then pulled herself together and focused her attention on the stage.

She'd been careful to look smart for this event – not that she would've been sloppy otherwise, but the news of her award made Ana particularly attentive this time. In fact, she wasn't the only one – Kamilah had fussed over her endlessly for nearly an hour before they left the house today, making sure her dress uniform was crisp and sharp, her face so fresh and clean it was practically commercial-ready, and her hair properly pinned in place. Even her stubborn fringe had been cowed into behaving for once by Kamilah, so Ana could do little but follow.

The president was thankfully more charismatic than the field marshal though, and his speech seemed less painful, leading quickly up to the actual awards ceremony. Ana examined each soldier that marched across the stage to receive their medals, reading the various degrees of nervousness, pride, and sobriety on their faces. She smiled when Safiya, recognised for her exploits in the Sa'ka, strode up the stage with that snappy, yet somehow casual gait. Khalid, who now wore a short beard to cover up the scar on his jaw, received a medal for his achievements in God Eye. Mesi earned hers by holding down a city against an omnic siege with just a handful of platoons, saving the lives of over a thousand civilians. And of course, Jaida had a list of accomplishments to her name – though Ana suspected the brass also feared divine retribution if they didn't commemorate her dedication during crisis.

Then came Ana's turn, and the laughter she'd suppressed died away, replaced by a slight twist in her stomach. Ridiculous, she thought, considering how she'd faced dangers much worse than bearing the spotlight on stage, but her stomach continued flip-flopping away as she strode up the stairs. Her ears went deaf as her name was announced, and she could barely hear when they spoke of her deeds in the Strike Team. When all eyes turned towards her, she took the cue and strode forward, standing straight as the president pinned the Order of the Sinai Star to her uniform – the highest honour one could earn in the military.

A close-lipped smile broke through her stoic mask when the president nodded genially at her sharp salute, and she quickly turned away to march off before embarrassing herself – but she was given pause when a lone figure in the audience stood from their seat. Ana frowned, recognising the person to be her own sister. She froze uncertainly, and in her brief moment of indecision, more stood – the rest of the Sa'ka with Safiya, Khalid and God Eye, Kamilah and the Medical Corps, Mesi and her company. Safiya barked out a command that rang clearly through the auditorium, and the soldiers saluted her. Her. A damned Captain facing a good number of badges that outranked her.

Ana was struck speechless – well, not exactly. *What the fuck are you doing, you morons,* came to mind, but protocol dictated respect to be shown to superior officers who were…*violating protocol themselves?*

Panic kindled in the pit of her stomach as she stared at them, waiting for a reprimand to be yelled out – but nothing happened. Jaida stood in the front row as well, a lazy smirk on her face as the generals rose to their feet – along with the rest of the soldiers in the auditorium – and followed Safiya's example.
Ana's frown grew deeper, her feet unconsciously stepping backwards as she turned to glance at the marshal, only to find him holding a salute as well.

What the fuck?

The curse nearly left her lips that time, and she looked to the president, who raised his brows and nodded subtly towards the audience. Ana grabbed onto the cue gratefully and shot her own salute back at them, waiting for Safiya's next command to set the soldiers at ease, then hurried off the stage with as much grace as she could muster.

"You should've seen your face! I've never seen you so dumbstruck before," Safiya cackled when Ana pounced on her after the ceremony, slapping the colonel all over her dress jacket – carefully avoiding her badges, of course. She didn't let up until Safiya poked her in the sides, then clamped both arms around her, squeezing her tightly. "I'm so proud of you, my little goblin."

"I hate you," Ana grumbled, smacking her sister's back one last time before returning the hug. "You could've at least warned me."

"It was a surprise, dumbass," Safiya sighed, clasping her by the shoulders. "Though we could've totally gotten chewed out for making a scene. Lucky they didn't…" She was distracted by another soldier calling her name, and she nodded at her colleague in acknowledgement, before turning back to Ana. "Damn it. I'll see you tonight, yeah? I've got to run now."

"You and everybody else, seems like," Ana muttered, getting a pinch on her cheek before Safiya jogged away from the foyer. Everyone she knew had dispersed hastily upon dismissal, eager to return to whatever pressing duties they had on hand; Kamilah and Khalid had left her with a kiss and a hug respectively, before marching out of the glass doors, leaving Ana behind with her sister. And now that Safiya was gone, Ana began walking slowly towards the exit as well, with a vague idea of fetching Fareeha from the babysitter's a little earlier…

Her gaze landed on Mesi, who stood by the auditorium's doors, frowning and nodding at her datapad while Jaida spoke rapidly in her ear. They exchanged a few more hushed words, then the senior officer finally walked off. Mesi started strolling towards the exit, when she looked up to find Ana standing before her with an expectant gaze.

"There you are, hero," Mesi said, laughing when she got a groan from Ana. "Were you waiting for me? Isn't there a world for you to save–, oh wait. You've already done that."

"How nice of you to notice," Ana deadpanned, falling in step with Mesi as they made their way outside. "So…where are you going?"

"Well–" Mesi stopped abruptly in her tracks, her fingers freezing over the datapad that she was typing into. She glanced up at Ana in silent thought. "Hm. You've nothing to do?"

"Not right now, no."

Mesi cocked her head. "Then I guess you can follow me – provided you keep your mouth shut."

"Oh, trust me. I've had plenty of practice."

Mesi led her to a research facility that she didn't know existed – it was located within a compound that used to be the heart of omnic operations within the army, and had been converted into a centre dedicated to anti-omnic warfare during the crisis. Access to the research facilities was highly-
restricted, and Ana could only gain entry after sending a request to Jaida herself to gain clearance into the building. Mesi, who had kept quiet for the length of their journey here, only spoke when they had descended into the third level underground.

"Since your Strike Team ended the omnic threat here, we've been organising some…scavenging operations," Mesi said, as they walked down the empty corridor. "Gathering as many omnic bodies as we can, looking for the old military models, getting specimens of the new models they'd use in the war. Just stuff we can use, in general."

"Use?" Ana echoed, peering into the thick glass windows they walked past, getting glimpses of scientists and engineers working at their stations, and examining omnic parts. "For what, 'research'?"

"Yeah. To see if we can figure out how they were turned against us. Or even why. No luck so far, though." Mesi shrugged, placing her palm against a scanner installed by a set of doors.

"It's been two years," Ana stated.

"It's that difficult." Mesi led her into a room not unlike a morgue, except there were identical storage pods in place of bodies. The small display screens at the foot of each pod were dark, but even without the information, Ana could guess what they contained.

"I wasn't there when it happened, and I don't know if you want to see him, but…" Mesi tapped on a screen they had stopped at, and it came alight. The pod initiated a routine systems check, but Ana's attention wasn't on the status indicators. She stared hard at the familiar service number, and the name below it. Mesi looked to her when the status lights winked green, and Ana nodded stiffly.

With a tap on the screen, the pod slid out of its shelf with a muted hiss, and Ana clenched her jaw briefly as she looked through the transparent glass at the pod's resident – Adofo. He looked much worse for wear than Ana's vague memory of him, with black burn marks and deep gouges all over his metal body. She recognised the bullet hole in centre of his chassis – the shot with which Ana had incapacitated him. She wondered if the omnics had repaired him, used him in engagements after that incident…

"We've dismantled most of the omnics that have been through the 'operating table', so to speak. But those that are intact…" Mesi tapped at the pod. "We're putting them in storage."

"For?"

Mesi flashed a tight smile. "They were promised that they'll be kept in storage if the failsafe was activated…"

Ana took a deep breath, but whatever words she didn't have were expelled in a sharp sigh. She was starting to regret accepting Mesi's invitation to come here. "What do you plan to do with them?"

"For now? Nothing. But if things turn for the better, maybe we'll reactivate them in the future."

It should be good news, but Ana felt nothing. Slowly, she rested a hand on the pod, its coldness seeping into her skin. "Would he want to, though? After what he's done, do you think he'd want to be reactivated?"

Mesi held Ana's gaze for a long moment, then closed her eyes and turned away.

Safiya stayed with the family for a few more days after the ceremony, bunking in the same room with Fareeha, and the two often played and giggled with each other late into the night, which led to
Ana chasing both her daughter and sister to bed. Either that, or pry the grown woman away so she wouldn't stop Fareeha from catching enough sleep, and instead spend some time chatting with her sisters downstairs. Safiya didn't complain – though Fareeha didn't hesitate to pick up the slack – and she was happy enough to just lay back and relax, especially with a sister who'd been too busy to even maintain regular text conversations for the past few years.

Ana was glad for Safiya's company herself, and took the chance to finally deal with some matters she'd put off the last week. The first of which, was to visit her father's grave. Zaid's body had been one of the many to be transported back home, and Safiya had flown in to help Kamilah take care of the affair, making sure he was interred properly beside Zayirah's grave – which had a new headstone to replace the one destroyed during the crisis.

She carried Fareeha in her arms, drawing comfort from the girl as she stood before the graves, that last note of finality settling in after Ana had spent years ignoring it. Fareeha kept quiet with her eyes fixed on Ana, while Safiya and Kamilah chattered behind them. On their way here, it became apparent that this was Fareeha's first visit to the cemetery, and no one had spoken to her about the grandparents she never knew. She asked questions which none of the three women really knew how to answer, and quite curiously, she desisted after Ana told her, "Ami's papa…died. He's sleeping, but he won't wake up again."

Ana was starting to wonder if Fareeha understood the simple explanation, when the girl hugged her about the neck and said, "It's okay, ami."

Her brows rose in surprise, and she returned the girl's hug as Kamilah came to stand beside her, setting a hand on Ana's back.

"One of her friends lost his father," Kamilah explained in a whisper.

"Ah." A small, wistful smile rose to Ana's lips as she sighed, then gave Fareeha a peck on the temple.

Too young. Too damn young to…

They drove over to the old family home after lunch, just to check on that plot of land and see what progress had been made in the reconstruction efforts. As it turned out – not much. Two years, it seemed, hadn't been nearly enough time for the country to rebuild, even with the military's help and plenty of foreign aid. From what Ana had seen just from Cairo alone – which had as many empty spaces as the buildings left standing – it was obvious they would need many more years to rebuild what they had before the war.

Still, Ana was somewhat glad to see the rubble had all been hauled away, leaving an empty lot where their house once stood. Only the blackened ground remained as proof of what had happened. That alone was enough to pique Fareeha's curiosity though, and Kamilah led her closer to the site, careful to keep the girl's hand in her own. There was no telling if there were any unexploded ordnance leftover from the war, even after this area had been swept over by the army.

"So, do you want this place?" Safiya asked.

"I don't know," Ana replied, eyes trained on her family as they strolled down the pavement, Kamilah pointing at different spots and telling stories that made Fareeha giggle. "It's not even much of a place anymore."

"Yeah. But papa left us the deed, and I'm still going to live in Asyut for the time being, so…"
"You just want me to cough up the money for a new house, don't you?" Ana deadpanned, though her poker face couldn't stay long when Safiya let out a hyena's cackle and smacked her on the arm.

"Come on! You were on the UN's payroll, and now you have the bonus from the Sinai Star? You can build a palace here, if you want. Oh! And that swimming pool we always bugged our parents about."

Ana laughed. "I forgot about that. Then mama would tell us to earn the money to build it ourselves." She hummed thoughtfully, looking over the modest plot of land again. "Actually, now that I think of it…"

"Ami!" Fareeha skipped over to Ana, hugging around her hips. "Mama said you used to live here!"

"We did, habibti." Ana tweaked her nose.

"But the house is gone."

"Well, we can build a new one here, if you want."

Fareeha's eyes grew round. "Really? This place is big! You can build a really big and tall, tall house!"

"That's more 'tall's than I like to hear," Kamilah came to mutter in Ana's ear, snorting when she was elbowed gently in the stomach.

"Do you want to, Milah?" Ana asked. "We could rebuild if we're going to move here."

"Mm. But Fareeha's still in kindergarten at the base, and she's already set for primary school there too…"

"Oh, right. Maybe we'll wait for a while then?" Ana chuckled at Fareeha's pout, ruffling the girl's hair. "One day, my dear. One day."

Since Ana's return from Switzerland, she'd been given a solid two months' worth of block leave. From what she'd heard, the original length had only been a month, but after a correspondence with the UN that included a few pointed suggestions from Xie – who took care to mention that Ana had worked tirelessly for five long years – they decided to double the gift, and let their prized sniper enjoy the longest vacation she'd ever had.

In the past, it would've meant Ana flying overseas with Kamilah for a holiday, maybe have that second honeymoon she'd been dreaming of, to celebrate their tenth anniversary…and make up for her five-year absence.

Now though, Ana found satisfaction enough in just staying home – pure luxury as it were, compared to those hectic years rushing between countries and fighting off a worldwide disaster. She shed every other aspect of her identity – sniper, soldier, captain, hero – and settled down just as a mother and wife. Two of what could be seen as the simplest of duties, that she'd been unable to perform in those years of war.

She sent her wife to work every morning, then went home to prepare her sleepy daughter for school, dressing Fareeha in her uniform and coaxing her into finishing a bowl of cereal, before dropping her off at the kindergarten. Ana lingered outside the school for the first few days, content to sit and watch Fareeha fidget during her classes, and bounce around animatedly during their play times. The girl would run straight to her when school was over – attracting some attention to Ana as she did so –
and they would slip away for lunch, hang around the playground, then go home for a nap together, before going to fetch Kamilah from the academy.

All such mundane little things, but they gave Ana more joy than she could express.

"Ami, you missed a bird!" Fareeha exclaimed, bringing her finger down on the tablet's screen to catch said bird, then dragging it to the tree that was the same shade of yellow as its feathers.

"Oh wow, your eyes are better than ami's!" Ana grinned at Fareeha's giggle, and continued to sort out the multi-coloured flock of birds onscreen, matching them with their trees.

It was the weekend, and they'd wanted to go into the city for the day, but then Kamilah was snatched away by the academy at the last minute, putting their plans on hold. She'd grumbled terribly while pulling on her uniform, though Ana and Fareeha managed to alleviate her scowl by giving her a kiss on each cheek. Still, Kamilah was in a rather poor mood as she sped away on her bike, so Ana suggested baking some cupcakes for her, and Fareeha squealed her own approval – no doubt she was eager to eat the cakes herself, as well.

Ana took her time with this batch, partly because she'd gone out of touch with the kitchen, and she also made sure to let Fareeha help as much as she could – pouring in the ingredients, mixing them together with Ana's help, and having her attempts at eating the batter thwarted by her mother. Ana then assuaged Fareeha's sweet tooth with a few chocolate chips, and led her out to the living room, where they were now sprawled over the new fluffy carpet Kamilah had bought, playing tablet games while their cupcakes were baking in the oven.

"Do you play lots of games with mama?" Ana asked, reaching into the bag of potato chips she'd just opened.

"Yup. Mama likes playing games. And she's so good at it!" Fareeha opened her mouth at the end of the declaration, letting Ana feed her a chip.

"Really?" Ana asked, munching on a chip herself.

"Yeah! She always gets the highscores. Always." Her eyes gleamed with pride. "And sometimes, I beat mama's score!"

"That's good, darling! Maybe you can teach ami how to play games. So ami can give mama a run for her money too."

Fareeha tilted her head curiously. "Why run for mama's money?"

Ana laughed, tapping her on the forehead. "I mean, challenge mama's highscore, silly bean."

"Oh." Fareeha pressed her lips together thoughtfully, but not for long – another flock of birds had just appeared onscreen.

"So…what do you do with mama? Besides games?"

"Mama brings me to the playground so I can play with my friends," Fareeha said, tapping and staring intently at the tablet. "And we go out to eat. Sometimes, mama brings me to the river for a walk."

"The river? In the city?"

"Yeah."
"Do you like it?"

"Yeah! I like the big ships. They're pretty." Fareeha grinned victoriously when she cleared yet another level in the game, earning another chip to chomp on. "But I like sleeping with mama the most," she said, voice a little muffled. "I like the bed, it's soft and comfy. And mama hugs me to sleep."

"Oh, I understand, sweetie. I love it when mama hugs me to sleep too."

"Uh-huh. I like to bring my toys along too. Like, when mama gets sad, I give her Fart so he can make her happy." Fareeha leaned in, unaware that her mother's expression had fallen slightly. "We should really give her a tiger toy, ami."

"Of course, dear. Soon, I promise." Ana smiled. "Don't want mama to be sad now, do we?"

"Nope!"

---

Ana: [Guys I need a favour]

Layla: [Yeah what's up]

Ana: [You're free this Tuesday right. Mind babysitting for me? Like, bring Fareeha out to play or something]

Khalid: [YES PLEASE]

Mesi: [^ Hakim will be with his family though, right?]

Hakim: [Ya :( ]

Layla: [Are you busy? I thought you're like, on leave forever]

Ana: [Yes…]

Ana: [We just need someone to look after her for a while, that's all]

Khalid: [what]

Ana: [Milah and I have a date?]

Layla: [WAIT HOLD UP]

Layla: [ARE YOU DUMPING YOUR KID ON US SO YOU CAN GET LAID]

Ana: […It's been a while]

Layla: [OHHHHMYGOD #1 MOM]

Ana: [DO YOU KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE? TO BE LIKE, HALF THE WORLD AWAY WITHOUT YOUR BABE?]

Ana: [I HAVEN'T TOUCHED HER FOR YEARS AND I'VE STILL BARELY TOUCHED HER]

Ana: [IT'S BEEN 2 WEEKS. THIS IS INJUSTICE]

Layla: [Uh, of course we know? I mean, we were at war and shit, remember? Busy fighting and
Fareeha had been more than happy to go with the squad when they came to pick her up – she'd grown familiar with them during their regular visits since the war in Egypt had ended. Apparently, they managed to curry a lot of favour with the girl, who was quite susceptible to gifts that came in plush toys or sweets. And so, she'd buzzed with excitement for the whole morning, and practically leapt into Khalid's car when he opened the door for her.

At least she remembered to say goodbye to her mothers, all the while oblivious to the winks and brow wiggles that the squad was shooting at them. Ana ignored it, of course, taking her time to kiss Fareeha on the head after Kamilah was done, and smiled sweetly back at the idiots as the car pulled away from the house.

Then Ana led her wife back inside, and the moment the door was shut behind them, she hauled Kamilah onto her shoulders in a fireman's carry, getting a surprised laugh and a pinch on her bum. She didn't waste any time, striding up towards their bedroom and tossing Kamilah onto the bed, trapping her wife beneath her as she lavished Kamilah with kiss after kiss, fingers slipping beneath her clothes in a tease. Laughter at their own hastiness mingled with their kisses, and their fervour cooled somewhat as they kissed and caressed bare skin, the desperate need to reconnect giving way to a gentle exploration that…didn't go quite the way Ana had imagined it.

"Milah, I can't remember how I got every scar I have," Ana drawled, lying naked on her front as Kamilah straddled her hips, tracing the new scars on her back.

'Maybe if you stopped collecting them like it's a hobby, you would."
"Babe," Ana snickered, wiggling in place to turn around and face Kamilah. "If it's a hobby, I would remember how I got each one... Hm. This one, though." She caught Kamilah's hand, guiding her fingertips to trace over the scar cutting diagonally across her clavicles. "I got from that time I jumped on that huge omnic."

"I knew you got injured then." Kamilah bent down, pressing a kiss to the scar. "Why else would you wear that stupidly huge jacket in the vidcall?"

"You remember?" Ana smiled, returning the kiss on her lips. "I didn't want you to worry."

Kamilah blinked down at her. "Not a single day passed when I didn't worry about you, Ana. And trying to hide things from me didn't help."

A twinge in her chest. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

Kamilah closed her eyes and let out a slow breath, twining their fingers together on Ana's chest. "You idiot," she uttered, then dipped in for a kiss. Slow and sweet in their reaffirmation, then Ana pulled her down by the nape, deepening the kiss as she slipped her tongue between Kamilah's lips.

She heard the moan in Kamilah's throat and flipped them over, settling comfortably between Kamilah's legs. She grazed her tongue briefly over Kamilah's, and nibbled on her bottom lip, smiling when she recognised the slow, deep inhale that Kamilah took. Ana kissed her again, and Kamilah yielded to her lips easily, giving a low moan as she arched into Ana's hand on her breast, and ground against the thigh rubbing at her core.

"I love you," Ana murmured against her lips, kissing along her jaw, up to her ear. "I love you so much."

Kamilah clutched at her shoulders tighter when Ana's fingers dipped between her legs, stroking her wetness, and sank in slowly. "Ana...I missed you." She gasped when Ana's thumb rubbed her clit firmly. "I missed you, do you know that?"

"I know," Ana breathed against her skin, biting at her pulse point. "I missed you too." She drove her fingers hard into Kamilah, groaning quietly at the lewd cry beside her ear. Ana didn't give her a chance to catch her breath then, finding a relentless rhythm that made Kamilah's nails bite into her flesh, because god, if the way Kamilah felt around her fingers, if the way she felt was any proof, they needed each other – now.

Kamilah's hips bucked into her hand with each thrust, and Ana could hear it in her gasps and moans, feel it in the tug on her scalp as Kamilah's fingers gripped her hair. She brought their lips together in a fierce kiss, using her weight to pin Kamilah down as she came unraveled, crying her pleasure into Ana's mouth. The tautness in her muscles slowly melted away, her arms and legs relaxing around Ana's body, as her head fell back onto the sheets, half-lidded eyes gazing back into Ana's, breaths leaving her parted lips in pants.

"Good?" Ana asked, a sly smile on her face.

Kamilah gave a husky chuckle, pulling her down for a kiss. Hand sliding up to her chest, Kamilah pushed Ana onto her back, gifting her with another, deeper kiss. "I love you, amar. More than life itself."

"Oh?" Ana purred, shooting Kamilah a smirk as she ran both hands up the thighs that straddled her. "Then show me, albi."
Fareeha loved being with her aunts and uncles. Ami's friends visited them regularly at the house while Ami was away, and they often went out with Mama to eat some nice food. Sometimes Mama cooked for all of them too, and the kitchen would be busy and noisy with all the jokes and laughter, which continued even when Mama scolded the grown-ups for making a mess. They always cleaned up after though, so that's okay.

Then there were times when Mama was busy, so she let Fareeha go out alone with them, like today. It's always fun to hang out with the grown-ups — they were just like her friends in school, except there were more things they could do together. Fareeha loved riding on Uncle Khalid's shoulders, and she always giggled when he hopped around on his feet, holding her hands in a silly dance. She really liked how high she could go on Khalid's shoulders — he was taller than Mama and Ami — and she could see really, really far over everyone's heads. Auntie Layla said she was already 'taking after your Ami' like this, and though Fareeha didn't understand, she supposed being like Ami was something good — after all, Mama usually smiled when she said the same.

Layla was kind of like Ami — she liked having fun all the time, and talked a lot with Fareeha. And, whenever Fareeha said she wanted to go somewhere, Layla would take her hand and they would all go there right away. If it's a sweet shop, she'd plop a large bag of candies into Fareeha's hands. If there were toys, Fareeha would walk out with a new toy held snugly in her arms. Nothing really stopped Layla from doing what she wanted, like Ami, but sometimes she'd listen to Auntie Mesi… who was more like Mama. She was quieter, and would do things like pat down her hair, adjust her dress, and wipe her face with a tissue. She noticed Mesi giving Layla little kisses that Ami would give Mama too, but when she asked if they had a kid, they blinked at her in surprise while Khalid bent over from his loud guffaws, slapping at his legs until Mesi knocked his head.

They're weird, but Fareeha liked them.

"And…here we are!" Khalid announced, waving both hands at the aisle filled with plushies. "Let's get that tiger for your Mama!"

"Isn't it funny how you know the toy store better than an actual kid?" Layla nudged at him, and he shrugged.

"I pamper my nieces and nephews with toys. That's better than — I don't know — not giving a single shi—," Khalid caught himself when Mesi squinted back at him, as she led Fareeha down the aisle. "— sheep. Not giving a sheep about them."

"Whatever."

Fareeha ran her eyes down the aisle until she spotted the collection of toys she wanted, tugging on Mesi's hand excitedly, and they ran towards shelves stuffed with tiger plushies. She looked over them in wonder, marveling at how many different types there were — cartoony ones, life-like ones, orange ones, white ones, and there were a few in purple, even.


"Nah. Ami has a purple dragon already. No more purples." Fareeha put the toy back carefully.

"Ana has a purple dragon?" Khalid asked. "What is that, a euphemism?"

"That's her toy, remember?" Layla said, as Fareeha continued picking up different plushies. "That
old thing missing an eye. We found it in her barracks room on D&D night."

"Oh, yeah!" Khalid laughed. "Then she brought it back home when we wouldn't shut up about it. She named it something dumb too. What is it, Poop?"

"It's Fart," Fareeha informed him with a pout. "And it's cute, not dumb!"

"Of course! Sorry, Uncle Khalid's the dumb one." He crouched down beside her, mirroring her pout until she burst into giggles. He poked a finger at the toy she was holding. "So, do you want this one?"

"Mm." Fareeha examined the toy, tilting her head this way and that. "Nah. This one looks silly. Ami said mama's fierce, so we gotta get a tiger that's fierce too."

"Kamilah? Fierce?" Layla drawled. "Now that's news."

"Bet Ana's getting clawed to death right about now," Khalid whispered, and the two fell into quiet giggles, while Mesi remained the only adult focused on the task Ana had handed to them.

Fareeha looked through nearly every single toy on the shelf, and grew a little despondent until Mesi held one out to her.

"Here! How about this one? See." Mesi held the tiger so it was staring back at them. "Its face looks like your mama when she's being quiet and scary."

"Mama's not scary," Fareeha said, taking the toy for a good look.

"Bet her hundreds of cadets would beg to differ," Layla whispered, getting a discrete eye roll from Mesi as she snickered away with Khalid.

"Auntie Mesi?"

"Yeah, kiddo?"

Fareeha held up the tiger plush. "This one is good."

"Great!" Layla clapped her hands. "Now, do you want any toys for yourself? Or…we can go for ice cream!"

Fareeha gasped. "I want ice cream!"

"No… It's a goddamn trap, you dumbass!" Ana threw piece of popcorn at the TV screen, getting a click of the tongue from Kamilah.

"Ana," Kamilah said reproachfully, slapping at Ana's hand trying to shove popcorn into her mouth. "No! And stop throwing your food everywhere!"

"I don't throw you around." Ana cackled when Kamilah slapped at her arm, and hugged the woman lying on top of her. "So grumpy. Just the way I like you."

Kamilah groaned into Ana's chest as she received a kiss on her head, then shifted around on the couch, settling back into Ana's embrace with a muffled sigh. She left a peck on the base of Ana's neck, then turned her head to watch the movie when loud gunshots rang out from the speakers, the protagonists having walked into the trap that Ana was complaining about.
To be honest, Ana hadn't expected their drive to ebb quite so soon. Oh, it was intense, alright – Ana didn't think her toes had really uncurled yet. But her imagination had run wild before that, making a full circuit around her home – in bed, against the wall, on the tables, everything. Ana laughed soundlessly at the thought, jostling Kamilah in the process. She squeezed her fidgety wife with an arm, hand rubbing at Kamilah's back through the oversized tee she wore. *Ah well.* Maybe it was better they'd eased up earlier, as Ana could still feel the dull aches along her front and back, and had no doubt Kamilah felt the same as well. The frequent, subtle shift of her shoulders was quite telling, and Ana caught Kamilah's hand when it reached up to her collar again.

"Does it hurt a lot?" Ana asked, pulling at the spacious collar to get a look at the darkest bruise near Kamilah's nape — courtesy of her own teeth. Yes, 'bruise' was the word Kamilah insisted on using, because it apparently stung more than any love bite Ana had ever given her.

"Yes…" Kamilah grumbled as Ana fingered the edges of purplish skin. "Bit me like a chew toy."

"Yeah, like how I was your scratch post?" Ana smiled when she felt Kamilah try and fail to keep her laughter in. Kissing her wife's temple, Ana pulled the collar down past Kamilah's shoulder, pressing her lips to the bruise. "Better?"

"A little. Do it again."

"Demanding," Ana crooned, gladly placing another kiss on her wife's shoulder. She suckled briefly on the spot, getting a soft hum from Kamilah, who tilted her head as Ana kissed up the side of her neck. Fingers played with the tips of her hair as she nibbled on Kamilah's ear, tongue flicking over–

"Oh, come on," she groaned when the personalised message tone sounded from her phone. She pouted at Kamilah, who smiled softly and gave her a kiss, as she reached blindly for the phone on the coffee table.

*Layla: [Eta 10 mins get decent or we'll sue]*

"10 minutes," Ana sighed, tossing the phone back. "And so, our little piece of heaven is torn away by an incoming group of morons."

"Don't be so dramatic," Kamilah chuckled, tweaking her nose before lying back down on Ana.

They waited for more than ten minutes, but it wasn't long before they heard a car pull up in front of their house, followed by the doorbell. And when Ana opened the door, it was to Fareeha's proud grin, her bright eyes gazing up at her, over the top of a tiger plushie's head. Ana stepped aside to give Fareeha a clear line to Kamilah behind her, and the girl promptly flew towards her mother.

"Mama, mama! We got you a tiger!"

A wide smile spread over Kamilah's face as she scooped the girl up in her arms, taking the orange tiger in one hand. "It's so pretty, Fareeha! Thank you." She kissed Fareeha on the nose, getting a softer giggle in return.

"You like it?"

"Of course I do, darling."

Ana turned her gaze away from her family, to the ones standing by the doorway. "So, what are the damages--" Her voice died upon seeing the numerous bags in their hands. "My god. Tell me some of those are yours."
"Nope. Ours are in the car. These are yours." Mesi handed her bags to Ana. "No damages this time, hero."

"Thanks…" Ana peeped into the bags, finding a hoard of chocolates, sweets, and tidbits large enough to keep the entire house running on sugar high for the next few weeks. "Now, come in so I can close the door."

"Careful, guys," Layla said as they shed their shoes. "Try not to step in anything."

"Ami!" Fareeha asked when Kamilah carried her over – just before Ana could deliver a mighty smack on Layla's back. "Can we all have dinner together?"

"Yeah, sure. It'll have to be take-out though."

"Yay!" Both Fareeha's hands shot up in the air, along with three other pairs of hands from her aunts and uncle.

Ana squinted at the squad, but they just shot dazzlingly sweet smiles back at her.

"Ana, what's going on?"

"Patience, dear." Ana put the faded bandana around Kamilah's head, fastening it over her eyes.

"Why does Fareeha look so happy?"

Ana breathed a laugh when an excited giggle slipped from the girl, and Fareeha clamped a hand over her own mouth, watching Ana secure the blindfold. "You'll know soon. Now, can you see anything?"

"No. And stop aiming punches at me before you really do hit me," Kamilah said, sitting absolutely still even when she accurately guessed what Ana was doing.

"Then how do you know I'm punching you?"

"I can feel it on my face," Kamilah replied, her flat tone hiding an 'idiot' somewhere in there, Ana could tell. "At least do it a little farther away from me next time, yes?"

"Now, now. Where's the fun in that?" Ana held her by the shoulders, and guided her up from the chair. "Here we go."

Fareeha let out a little squeal, hopping on her feet as she followed beside her parents, before losing patience with their slow pace and running ahead to the garage.

"Careful, Fareeha," Ana called after her, and Kamilah's head turned towards her wife in silent question. "She just ran off. I think we should be grateful she really can't fly."

Kamilah snorted. "Doesn't stop her from trying, that's for sure."

Ana snickered, squeezing Kamilah's arms lightly as they reached the garage, where Fareeha was already bouncing on her heels beside the surprise.

"And…here we are." Ana brought them to a stop before the gift, and Kamilah held still when Ana let go of her.

"Ami, can I sit on it?"
"Of course you can." Ana reached for Fareeha as the girl raised her arms, and she lifted the girl easily, setting her down on the leather seat.

"It's so soft!" Fareeha exclaimed, wiggling in place.

"What's so soft?" Kamilah asked.

"My love for you," Ana crooned into her ear, then cackled when Kamilah turned to face her, successfully shooting a long-suffering look at Ana through the blindfold. "And…this."

She took Kamilah's hands and guided her forward, letting her palms come to rest on the seat, on either side of Fareeha. Kamilah tilted her head curiously, running one hand over the leather, and froze when her fingers touched cool steel.

"Ana…"

"Hold on, I'll give you one more hint." Ana reached over to the small screen embedded behind the windshield, thuming the power button for the control interface. She activated the engines, and a quiet, powerful hum reached their ears. With another tap, the anti-grav cores came to life, blue glow emitting from the two outlets installed at the bottom, and the balance modules along the sides. Fareeha gave another squeal as she rose a few inches into the air.

"Ana–" Kamilah sounded breathless, Ana's name nearly strangled on her tongue. She fell silent, then said slowly, "Take off the blindfold, please."

She waited for Ana to undo the bandana, and remained motionless when the blindfold fell away, her eyes fixed in a quiet stare at the hoverbike before her. It was one of the newer models in the market, boasting smoother acceleration, an improved balance module, and an inbuilt VI program that could monitor the bike's systems, implementing safety measures in case of a malfunction.

And, for this particular one, Ana had ordered a custom paint job, insisting on colours that were the exact shade as those in the old photo of Kamilah's original bike – midnight blue with golden-yellow trim. She knew how disappointed her wife had been with each repaint of her bike, and made sure to check on the hoverbike in the shop before bringing it back home. In fact, she'd checked it twice – they didn't get the trim colour quite right the first time.

But the trouble was more than worth it – if only to recapture that sense of wonder Kamilah had been chasing all this time. And if her awestruck expression was any indication, Ana had succeeded…

Kamilah's face scrunched up as she turned to Ana, taking a breath as if to say something, only to give up and fly into her wife's arms, kissing her on her cheek.

"I love you."

"More than your new bike, I hope." Ana smiled when she heard the thick laugh beside her ear. She rubbed between Kamilah's shoulder blades until her wife's tight embrace loosened, and she was gifted with a peck on her lips.

"Thank you." Kamilah wiped at her eyes and grinned, turning back to look at the hoverbike. She reached for the control interface and tapped on it experimentally, bringing the bike back to rest on the ground.

"Can we ride it, mama?" Fareeha asked.

"Well…" Kamilah exchanged a glance with Ana, who shrugged. They'd never allowed Fareeha to
ride on the old bike, as she was still too young for it. But the girl's pleading expression seemed to win Kamilah over, and her mother regarded the bike with a tilt of her head. "I guess the hover modules are different… Sure, why not?"

Fareeha exclaimed victoriously then, moving her legs to straddle the bike, as she'd seen Kamilah do many times before. They dug out one of their two older helmets for Fareeha, though they had to tie the straps under her chin, instead of using the buckle. Then, with the girl tied to Kamilah's front with a jacket, and Ana hugging the two from behind, Kamilah slowly rode around their small lawn in a circuit, getting used to the bike's handling. She rode in more random patterns as she gained more confidence, then decided to slip onto the main road for a little fun.

Kamilah didn't take them too far away from the neighbourhood, and made sure to stick close to the pavement, always mindful of the young rider in front of her. And though she kept her speed low, the high of riding in a bike was enough for Fareeha, who stuck her hands up in the air as they drifted smoothly down the road.

"Ana," came Kamilah's voice from the garage.

"Yeah?"

"Ana!"

"What!" Ana called back, volume growing to match Kamilah's, but she received no answer this time. She waited, then frowned when the silence continued. Tossing the newspaper onto the dining table, Ana rose to her feet and made her way to the garage – pausing when she saw Kamilah already walking down the hallway…carrying a cardboard box.

"What's that?" Ana asked, noting Kamilah's testy scowl as she took the box from her wife.

"You tell me. It's for you." Kamilah dropped her bag beside the dining table, unbuttoning her fatigues and throwing the top onto a chair carelessly. She untucked the grey tee she wore underneath, and gestured at the front door. "I arrived at the same time the deliveryman did."

"And here I thought you were moonlighting," Ana said with a small smirk, watching as Kamilah trudged into the kitchen and yanked the fridge's door open. "So, you never said why you had to stay late at the academy."

"Because of incompetent idiots, that's why." Kamilah practically ripped the top off a soda bottle, taking a long draught from it.

"Right." Ana went away to set the box on the table, not keen to stay and see if Kamilah would down a kale salad along with the soda. "Huh." She read the sender's details taped to the top of the box. "Jack? Why'd he send me stuff? Oh, thanks." Ana took the penknife Kamilah had brought out for her, and set to work on the thick tape around the box.

"Jack? Why'd he send me stuff? Oh, thanks." Ana took the penknife Kamilah had brought out for her, and set to work on the thick tape around the box.

"Is it that American soldier from the Strike Team?" Kamilah asked, taking a seat by the table.

"Yeah. The blond one." Ana sawed through the tape, then flicked it easily out the end. "Wonder what he even sent…" She pulled open the flaps, and was greeted with a stash of candies and snacks, a small stack of photographs in one corner, and a few notes inserted between the items. There was a folded letter lying on top of everything else, and Ana took it first, reading Jack's neat handwriting.

'Hey, Ana. Jack and Gabriel here. Hope you've been doing fine, I'm sure you're happy to be back with your family. It's been a little weird to have nothing to do, but then Gabe and I went on a
roadtrip and stuff. And we thought of sending you some things we talked about. Er, we tried to make sure all the food's halal, but not all of them are. We know you don't really care, but then we don't know about Kamilah and Fareeha, so yeah. Idk, I just hope these get through the customs. Haha. Anyway, here's our numbers and emails. (We still don't have the team's numbers omg. How did we forget) Keep in touch. :)

P.S. Gabe wants to tell you that we went sword fighting? I don't know, we tried out a couple of fencing lessons, but he wanted to say 'sword fighting' exactly. Is this some kind of inside joke cos I don't get it.'

"They fucked!" Ana exclaimed loudly, then slapped a hand over her own mouth at the expletive. Luckily, Kamilah didn't seem to have enough energy to care at the moment.

"Who fucked?"

"The Americans."

"Oh. They're gay?"

"Yep. And it only took them years to actually do something." Ana pulled her own chair over so she could sit close to Kamilah, and set the box on both their laps, rummaging through the biscuits, chips, minicakes, and chocolate bars – all the snacks that they’d shared and talked about during their time together. Jack and Gabriel had been surprised to find out how expensive their imported snacks were, and it seemed they were intent on giving her that gift they promised.

Kamilah took a Twinkie and started munching on it, as she read the letter Ana handed to her. "Hm. They sound nice. The blond one wrote this? I thought he looked like he had a pole up his butt."

Ana barked a laugh. "He does. But he's kind of a goof in private. Gabe, too." She shoved an Oreo into her mouth, picking up a piece of paper that had a bread loaf printed on it. Written under the bread is, 'Gabe wanted to show you what Wonderbread is. But it would've expired by the time it reached you, so we settled for a pic instead. And no, it looks nothing like me. Shuddup.'

"Fareeha's going to love this," Kamilah said, digging out a box hidden beneath the snacks – a model aeroplane. She read the sticky note attached to the box, "We got this plane for Fareeha because you said she likes to fly. Actually, I bought the plane. Gabe wanted to send a pair of costume wings."

"See?" Ana laughed. "Goofs."

"Lucky they didn't send wings. Or Fareeha will really try flying."

Ana laughed through her second mouthful of cookie, as she took the stack of photos and looked through them, handing each one to Kamilah as she did so. Most of them were taken on their trip, it seemed – many were of the men at scenic locales, in their truck, or just pulling funny faces at random places. There were quite a few taken at Jack's farm – one was of Jack on a tractor, another with them doing handstands on top of a wooden fence. The last one had Gabriel standing in a field with his arms spread, holding one puffed up chicken in each hand, sending his trademark death glare into the camera, while Jack's eyes poked up from the bottom of the frame.

Ana smiled, giving the photo to Kamilah, and ran her hand through the gifts once more. "I should send them some stuff too."

"You should send them cheese. Americans love cheese, don't they?"

She cocked a brow at her wife, who was wearing a crooked smile on her lips. "You have no idea
Ana: [Thanks for the gifts, boys. Came as a surprise tbh]

Ana: [Fareeha's asleep, so I'll maybe send her reaction tomorrow]

Jack: [No prob]

Ana: [Now, how the hell did you even get my address in the first place?]

Jack: [We asked Xie. Took her a while to reply that email lol]

Ana: [So. You asked for my address, but not my number?]

Ana: [REALLY?]

Jack: [We forgot and it'd be awkward to ask Xie again]

Gabriel: [Scatterbrain]

Jack: [YOU WERE THE ONE WHO SENT THE EMAIL]

Gabriel: [You didn't remind me]

Jack: [UGH]

Ana: [Alright, so. Are we gonna add the rest here too?]

[Gabriel changed the group name to 'Strike-3']

Ana: […]Creative]

Gabriel: [Direct]

Ana: [Uninspired]

[Ana changed the group name to 'Ana & the Americans']

Gabriel: [Now that's narcissistic]

Ana: [Eat my entire ass]

Gabriel [Isn't that haram or something]

Ana: [THAT'S NOT EVEN–]

Ana: [THAT DOESN'T EVEN GO THERE]

Jack: [So I'll just ask Xie for the other members' details]

Jack: [Hopefully I don't sound like a stalker]

Ana: [At least then you'll have some personality]

Jack: [HEY]

[Ana changed the group name to 'Ana & the Americans']
Ana took off her aviators only when they'd sat down at the table, but she still felt a tinge of regret at doing so, when the waitress did a double-take while she was handing out the menus. Nevertheless, Ana gave the younger woman a smile as she recovered, then hurried away after reciting the day's specials. She exchanged a glance with Kamilah after that, sharing a moment of amusement with her wife, as Fareeha quickly blurted her choice of shawarma – wraps were her newest favourite food to eat.

They soon placed their orders, and Ana had to bite down a sigh when she noticed more of the wait staff glancing in their direction. She stretched out her legs and crossed her ankles with Kamilah, getting a playful tap on her chin when she shot a small pout in her wife's direction.

Ever since she'd returned home, Ana hadn't traveled out of base as much as she used to, eager to avoid the heightened attention that she received from strangers, just from walking down the street alone. It was to be expected, of course – the news had published her likeness regularly for a few years, along with the rest of the Strike Team. She supposed having a tattoo on her face only contributed to her striking appearance, and she'd taken to wearing shades each time she ventured out with her family. Obviously, the thin disguise wasn't foolproof. And though Ana had become more accustomed to the attention, she still found herself trying to wish it away on occasion.

The appetisers arrived, and so started Fareeha's whines when Kamilah tried to scoop some beans for her. She pursed her lips in a very Ana-like pout, and only relented when her mother gave her a piece of dolma instead. Ana chuckled to herself, ruffling the girl's hair before she tucked into the mezze herself, eyes wandering over to the television set into the wall opposite their table.

It was muted, so Ana just read the headlines and subtitles – detailing the reconstruction efforts in India, which was being spearheaded by the Vishkar Corporation. Ana recognised the name – the Strike Team had used some of their prototype hard-light shields that were donated to the war effort. But she'd always thought Vishkar was still a rather small entity… It seemed they've grown considerably since then, and was now opening the doors to the Architech Academy, training a new generation of architects who would rebuild all that had been destroyed during the Crisis. 'Utopaea' was their most ambitious project, which aimed to build a city from the ground up, where the old one had been destroyed by the God Program.

Ana felt a twinge at the reminder, then averted her gaze from the screen, taking a large gulp of water to soothe herself. She heaved a sigh, then opened her mouth to let Kamilah feed her a crispy brown falafel.

"Ma'am?"

Still chewing, Ana turned her fond gaze from her wife, to the smartly-dressed man who stood beside their table. "Yes?"

"Pardon me, but you are Ana Amari, are you not?"

Oh, god damn it. "As far as I know, yes."

He flashed her a warm smile. "It's an honour to meet you. I'm the owner of this restaurant, and I hope you don't mind, but I would like to treat you to this meal. Everything you order today, will be on the house."
"Ah. I, um—" Ana glanced over at Kamilah, who just shrugged back at her. "You shouldn't. I mean, it's really not necessary to…"

"Oh, I insist. It's a simple favour for all that you've done for us."

"Well, since you put it that way," Ana said, trying valiantly to suppress her sigh. "I thank you for your generosity."

"It's no problem!" His smile grew into a grin, and he straightened himself. "Is there anything else that I can get you? Please, feel free to choose anything and everything from the menu."

"I'd have to look at the menu again—"

"Can I have ice cream?"

All three adults turned to look at the hopeful expression on Fareeha's face.

"Of course," the owner said. "You can have the biggest bowl of ice cream that you can eat."

"Yay!"

"And I will get you the menu." He bowed his head to Ana, then strode off purposefully.

The umpteenth sigh that had been stuck in Ana's throat finally found release, and she gazed up at Kamilah when fingers brushed gently over her cheek.

"What is it now," Kamilah mused. "The third, fourth time?"

"I can't remember," Ana muttered. "You know, I didn't think I'd actually miss paying for stuff. But here I am."

Kamilah pinched her cheek. "Just don't let this go to your head."

Ana smiled, catching her wife's hand to place a kiss on the back of her fingers. "With you around? I don't think so."
"It's time for bed, Fareeha."

"I'm in bed," Fareeha muttered distractedly.

"That's good. Now save your game and turn it off."

A petulant whine.

"Come on, you have to sleep."

"There's no school tomorrow," Fareeha complained.

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean you don't need to sleep. Ami needs sleep too, and she's been waiting for you to save that game forever," Ana pointed out, keeping her face straight even as she felt like laughing, recognising that stubborn streak in Fareeha's pursed lips and the wrinkle between her brows. But she knew what kind of trouble it could spell, so Ana adopted a stern expression and said, "Fareeha."

"Fine." With a few taps on the gaming device's buttons, Fareeha saved her game and switched it off, handing her newest toy over to Ana with the mightiest pout on her lips. She'd been glued to the device ever since Ana bought it that afternoon, and they'd had to coax her into putting it down, even just to eat her meal or take a bath. Though she understood that fascination, Ana planned to monitor the girl's gaming time if it went overboard.

When Fareeha had wiggled into place, Ana pulled the covers up to her shoulders, then smiled at her daughter's sulkiness. "Wanna play ball in the park tomorrow?"

"Mm." The pout had faded, but was still there.

"Or we can ride bicycles. We'll see. For now, habibti," she crooned, leaning down to kiss the girl's forehead, then tapped on her nose. "Good night."

"Good night, ami…"

Ana bit down another laugh and rose from the bed, heading over to a wall cabinet to deposit the gaming device. She took one last look at Fareeha – who had closed her eyes – before switching the lights off and closing the door behind her. When she crossed the corridor into her own bedroom, she found Kamilah already seated in bed with the covers about her legs. Kamilah lifted her gaze towards Ana, who sighed as she walked in.

"Alright, I know that look," she said, crawling into bed. "Mama's going to nag again."

"You need to slow down, ami." Kamilah gestured at Ana with her phone. "You're going to spoil her at the rate you're going."

"So? It's just…stuff."

"Ana, she already gets a lot of presents from you and all our friends. And I mean, a lot. Sooner or later, she'll expect to get whatever she wants – either from us, or the others."

"But you cave too."
"Yes, and we shouldn't be so easy anymore. And no." Kamilah raised a finger when Ana grinned. "That joke's too easy, even for you."

"You do have a point, dear. But–"

"No 'but's. I know you want to dote on her – I do too. But start doing it more reasonably." Kamilah turned back to her phone. "And, we're running out of space in the house."

"What, worried I'll buy a bike for her too?"

Kamilah glanced at her, brow raised. "Didn't you get her that bicycle last week?"

"Oh, right…"

"My point exactly."

It took a while for Ana to notice, but she paused in the middle of sorting out her clothes, when she realised Fareeha's plane noises were accompanied with eager pitter-patting up and down the stairs.

"Fareeha!" Ana called from her room, waiting for the girl's acknowledgement. "Don't run on the stairs!"

"I'm flying!"

"And don't fly. Never fly." She stayed still for a moment, listening to Fareeha's loud groan, before the girl continued playing – with only the plane noises this time, and no thudding of feet on the stairs. Fareeha could very well just be sneaking around the steps, but at least she was taking more care now.

Ana sighed, then turned her attention back to their old clothes – nearly eight years' worth, spread over the floor in front of two empty cardboard boxes, where the rejects would go. Kamilah had assigned this mundane task to the decorated hero of the family, since she had free time on her hands while her wife was stuck in the academy. Just as well – the old piles of clothes were starting to be an eyesore anyway.

She tossed two faded shorts into a box, then made her joints crack by getting onto her feet, groaning lazily as she walked over to Fareeha's room. She paused in the hallway and fixed her daughter with a pointed stare, for the girl had just finished a short run up the flight of stairs. Fareeha hesitated but, fortunately, didn't argue. Instead, she sat down on the top step, then turned her head around to look at Ana, as she slid her butt onto the next lower step, and the next, all the while with her toy plane held in the air.

Needless to say, Ana couldn't wait for the girl's rebellious teen phase, and all the headaches that would surely come with it.

She retrieved Fareeha's old baby clothes from the dresser, and went back to her room – shooting another glance at Fareeha, who was already climbing up the stairs with much more speed than before. Clicking her tongue as she went along, Ana dropped the stack of baby clothes right into a box, but then kneeled down and rifled through them, cocking her head as she went through so many outfits that she didn't recognise. She heaved another sigh as she held up the bear onesie, feeling older as she wondered where all those years had gone. No, not 'wonder' – she regretted the loss of so much time that she could've–

One loud thud. Then a second.
Ana froze at the noise, which had come from downstairs. Fareeha's name had risen to her tongue when the girl's loud cries reached her ears. Cursing under her breath, Ana bolted towards the stairs and – sure enough – she found the girl still lying on the floor, having fallen flat on her face from all that 'flying'.

Panic flooded into her veins though, when Fareeha made no attempt to get up, and Ana practically jumped down the stairs to reach her daughter. She felt about the girl's arms and legs, checking visually that there were no swollen areas in her limbs, then picked her up carefully. Fareeha continued to bawl at the top of her lungs as she came face-to-face with her mother, tears rolling down her cheeks, face scrunched up in pain.

"Fareeha, are you okay?" Ana asked, even as she noticed the swollen, bleeding spot on the girl's bottom lip. It seemed she really did fall on her face, and was in no mood for even the simplest form of communication, other than crying.

Carrying the girl in her arms, Ana brought her to the kitchen, where she wet an end of a cloth, then had to coax Fareeha into staying still when she touched it to the girl's lip. It took a while, but the girl finally obeyed and let Ana tend to the wound – shallow, but still painful nonetheless. Fareeha continued sobbing and hiccupping as Ana dabbed at her lip gently, then went to get an ice cube from the freezer. She let the girl hold the ice to her lip, and the little task helped to distract Fareeha from whatever pain she was feeling.

"See, Fareeha," Ana said, setting the girl on her lap as she sat by the counter. "This is why you have to listen to ami and mama. All your flying always gets you hurt."

A small whine, but Fareeha pouted to herself, eyes lowering to the ice cube she held to her mouth.

"Remember that time you fell from the fence?" Ana reminded her, prompting another whine. "Yeah, and from the tree at the playground? That wasn't fun, was it?"

Fareeha hiccupped again, wiping a hand over her eyes.

"Ami and mama don't want you to get hurt, Fareeha. That's why we always nag at you. But promise you'll listen to us, okay? So you won't get so many boo-boos." She pointed at the faint bruises on Fareeha's knees, making the pout on the girl's lips grow more severe.

Nevertheless, Fareeha nodded glumly and handed the half-melted ice cube to Ana, who tossed it into the sink.

"Alright, you can go play again."

Fareeha shook her head, then hugged Ana about the neck, still sniffing through her stuffy nose. She stayed like this without moving, so Ana took to patting her back, humming a vague tune until Fareeha's head lolled sleepily onto her shoulder. Huffing in amusement, Ana rose from the stool slowly, careful not to jostle the girl as she was carried up to her bed.

"Mama, mama! I wanna do pull-ups too!"

"You do? Here, hold on."

Ana paused in her exercise, hanging from the side of the monkey bars as she watched Kamilah grasp Fareeha by the sides and lift her up. Fareeha grabbed at the bar eagerly while Kamilah supported her weight, and the girl grinned at Ana.
"Think you can do better than ami, little one?" Ana asked, then did a trio of rapid pull-ups as Fareeha squealed and followed her example – or rather, Kamilah did, lifting the girl up and down. But Ana slowed her pace down after that, making sure that Fareeha had the lead. "Oh, you're going too fast, Fareeha! Ami's too old for this!"

Fareeha giggled, though she slowed down as well when Kamilah started to tire. So Ana drew out the impromptu competition a little more, before putting on a convincing act of tiring out, and let out an exhausted puff as she dropped back to the playground's rubber floor.

"Phew! You're so strong, sweetie!" Ana quickly took Fareeha into her arms when Kamilah was starting to struggle with the girl's weight. "You're stronger than ami!"

"No I'm not," Fareeha laughed, as Ana nuzzled into her cheek. "Ew, ami! You're so sticky!"

"Oh, you don't know sticky, darling."

"Ana."

"Relax, dear." Ana set the girl down, watching Fareeha run over to her bicycle. "She doesn't get it."

"Ugh." Kamilah stood with both hands on her hips, still panting heavily from their jog. She'd wanted to join Ana for her nighttime exercise, which then led to Fareeha insisting on tagging along as well – and they ended up jogging with the girl cycling behind them, who called out regular encouragements like, 'You're going so slow!' and 'I can cycle faster than you!'

Oh, the unfiltered mouth of children. How innocently they could hurt at times.

Ana took the end of Kamilah's towel around her shoulders, and patted at her sweaty face. "You getting tired faster now, Milah."

"Getting out of shape," Kamilah breathed, straightening herself. "I hate it. Probably can't even suplex you anymore."

"...Then stay out of shape, please." Ana cackled when Kamilah clamped both arms around her waist, then lifted her off the ground. "Try it, Milah. Try it."

They tipped just slightly off-centre and Kamilah tried to lift Ana even higher, but she gave up, and dropped her wife back on the ground.

"Aw. See? Bet you can't even kick my ass anymore."

Kamilah shot her a piercing stare mid-pant, and Ana quickly brought her arm up to block Kamilah's left hook. As Ana shook her head and clicked her tongue, Kamilah's lips spread into a crooked smile, before she aimed more punches at Ana – slow and without impact, but it was a fun exercise regardless. Though Kamilah had complained she was getting less involved with the actual training in the academy, it was apparent that she was still fighting fit, what with her quick reactions and proper form as she blocked and countered Ana's attacks.

Then Ana lunged forward and grab her sides, digging her fingers in to get a screech from Kamilah, who laughed breathlessly and tried to break free of the tickle maneuver. Ana didn't let go, hugging Kamilah tight with one arm, but she did stop when she felt soft punches on her leg. She looked down and found Fareeha knocking her fists at her thigh.

"I wanna fight too!"
“Huh, do you want to learn?” Ana asked.

“Yeah! I wanna fight like in the movies!” Fareeha mimicked whichever scene she remembered, aiming punches and kicks at the air, supplying sound effects with her mouth. “It's so cool!”

“Really? Maybe ami can teach you, then.”

“Isn't she a little young for that?” Kamilah pointed out, then leaned closer to Ana's ear and whispered, “And she did just pick a fight with her classmate the other day.”

“Oh, that was just some…childish thing. It's okay.” Ana tried to wave the concern away, but eventually sighed under her wife's doubtful gaze. “Or, I guess we can teach her some discipline first.”

“That would be best, yes.”

“As always, the voice of reason,” Ana cooed, snickering when Kamilah tapped her on the forehead. Then she knelt before Fareeha. “Ami will teach you, habibti. But you'll have to wait a while, and be good first. Okay?”

“But why not now?”

“Ah-ah, see?” Ana wagged a finger at her, already hearing the whine in Fareeha's tone. “If you want to learn, you must know how to listen to ami. Then ami will know you're ready.”

The pout made its way onto Fareeha's mouth again, and she looked up at Kamilah, though she found no concession there either. “Fine…”

Ana ruffled the girl's hair, hiding a sigh as she shared a knowing glance with Kamilah.

---

Her two months' break flew by too quickly in hindsight, but Ana was still glad to return to her duties after the much needed rest, even if just to find out what she'd been doing now, after the end of the Omnic Crisis. God Eye was still intact, though its roster had been significantly reduced since the war, when they were needed as support for the dwindling army. But now, after two years of rebuilding and recruitment, there was little need for such a large contingent of dedicated snipers, and many were reassigned to their original posts.

With so many changes in their ranks, Ana spent the first few days reorienting herself as the reinstated head of God Eye, with Khalid's help. And though she was kept rather busy, she still found herself sipping tea in Jaida's office – which was now larger and more comfortable, as befitting of a colonel.

Except, she hadn't really the mind to indulge in tea at the moment.

“I recognise that look,” Jaida drawled with a tinge of exasperation.

Ana gave a sheepish smile, looking back down at the box in her hand – and the golden insignias of an eagle and star. She'd expected a promotion of sorts to be pushed her way, but only to the rank of major. Now, she was staring at a possible promotion to lieutenant-colonel…but shut the box's lid with heavy fingers. She took a steadying breath at her own decision, and placed the box on Jaida's desk.

“Sorry, ma'am. But I…don't feel up to it just yet.”

“Really? Did you just knock your head on the way in?” Jaida replied drily, resting her elbows on the
"Because – if you're unaware – you are planning to reject a promotion to lieutenant-colonel."
"Yes."

"What is wrong with you, Amari?" Jaida sighed. She threw her hands up, and leaned back in her chair. "You're looking at a cushier job and better pay, even if it comes with its own bullshit. Isn't that better than slogging it out in the field?"

"Not from where I'm standing, no."

Though the God Eye was still active – being assigned to escort notable omnic representatives, patrolling the Temple of Anubis and other important installations, and keeping discrete watch over omnic rallies – it was damned difficult for Ana find a way into the field herself. Granted, it was part of the deal that came with being God Eye's commander. But she'd been pulled into so many meetings and discussions with the brass, and been stonewalled from field duty so often, that she was about ready to shoot someone in the foot just to get some action.

And Jaida seemed to understand, as evidenced by the smirk on her face. "Fed up with getting your hands tied?"

"Yes," Ana groaned. "It's like there's a conspiracy against me, or something."

"There kind of is, actually," Jaida laughed. "There are some who want to keep you back in base – safe and alive – so you can keep being their 'symbol'."

"Fucking hell. And I guess this stupid promotion's part of their plan?"

"I would assume so, yeah. But if it were me, I'd accept the promotion. Life still goes on after that, but then again, I'm not the one with the itchy backside."

"Jaida, I like being on active duty, alright?" Ana said. "I'd rather get shot by a rifle than suffer cuts from pieces of paper."

"Say any more, Ana, and you might starting hurting my feelings." Jaida tilted her head. "Though I have gotten more papercuts since my promotion."

Ana groaned out loud, dragging her hands down her face. "God, I fucking hate this."

"Ana, listen." Jaida lowered her tone, and her sobriety caught Ana's full attention. "You've already done a lot of good for us. Hell, you saved the whole damn world. And for that, I am grateful to you. But heroes have their time and place. Don't overstay your welcome."

Ana's brows furrowed slowly into a frown. "Jaida, this is not about my bloody ego--"

"Ego has nothing to do with this," Jaida said simply. "You're a good soldier. I know you have good intentions, and I know you like being in the field. But this is a matter of knowing when to step down. You can only carry the world on your shoulders for so long, before it starts crushing you in return."

"...Did you read that somewhere?"

Jaida shrugged. "Maybe. But you get my meaning."

Ana sighed, and rubbed at her eyes. "I don't know, ma'am. I just don't feel like I'm ready for it yet."

"So be it." Jaida reached for the box, and pulled it over. "But make sure to tell me when you're ready. I'll have your badges on hand."
She snorted a laugh. "I always knew you liked me, Colonel."

"Shut up before I demote you, Amari."

---

Gabriel: [My god it's only been ONE fucking year]

Gabriel: [And I was just starting to feel -happy-]

Ana: [Chill, edgelord]

Reinhardt: [I HEARD ABOUT THE RIOT]

Reinhardt: [ARE YOU SAFE, MY BROTHERS]

Jack: [Yeah, we weren't involved. But thanks, Rein]

Jack: [Also it wasn't a riot...just a peaceful march gone wrong]

Ana: [Still a lot of angry humans around...]

Torbjörn: [Pushing for omnic rights this early. They were asking for trouble]

Jack: [Makes sense tho. Their programming and stuff have been regulated to hell since the war]

Ana: [^ I'm surprised nothing has happened over here yet]

Ana: [...]not counting the assaults and stuff]

Reinhardt: [I understand the need for rights. They are planning to begin omnic production soon]

Reinhardt: [Don't want their own people born as second-class citizens, yes?]

Jack: [Or slaves]

Gabriel: [And I heard China's gonna start fiddling with the God Program again]

Ana: [WHAT]

Jack: [WHAT. YOU DIDN'T TELL ME]

Gabriel: [@shuqi]

Reinhardt: [I am not looking forward to this]

Shuqi: [Yes, hi, yup the govt wants to do some...research into the AI]

Shuqi: [See what went wrong and how. And they've invited me to be part of the team]

Ana: [You accepted yet?]

Shuqi: [I'm...still debating it. I've been wanting to do some investigation myself, but I'm not sure...]

Shuqi: [I'm not sure if their intentions are pure]

Shuqi: [I'm not even supposed to say this, but the place that Incident occurred?]

Shuqi: [They've reached out to us. They want to reconstruct it]
Gabriel: [Are you fucking serious. It's like sticking your hand back into the fire, right after you got burnt]

Torbjörn: [When will people learn to leave well enough alone]

Jack: [I need a fucking drink]

Ana: [Yes, I would like a glass of wine while dingdongs try make the world burn. Again. After we put out the fire]

Reinhardt: [THIS IS FINE]

Gabriel: [Memelord]

Reinhardt: [YOU SAY THAT LIKE IT'S AN INSULT]

Shuqi: [Anyway I hope everyone is ok. Please keep safe]

Reinhardt: [NO PROMISES]

Shuqi: [REIN]

Reinhardt: [I am only joking, my lady. I PROMISE :D]

Jack: [Why do I feel like he just promised on our behalf]

Ana: [Why would you say no when someone asks you to stay safe]

Jack: […true]

Gabriel: [Dumbass]

Ah. Quiet in the house, near midnight. No one could truly appreciate such a simple pleasure, until they’ve had a child. An energetic, active child who insisted on staying up because she wasn't tired. Thankfully, Fareeha was rather tired out from her lengthy playtime with her friends that day, and so went to bed without fuss, leaving her mothers in a measure of peace at night.

Ana joined her wife in the kitchen, pressing a kiss on top of Kamilah's head as she took a seat by the counter, pulling over the warm cup of tea Kamilah had made for her. She took a sip and sighed in satisfaction. "Milah."

"Mm."

"We need to buy shampoo."

"Then add it to the list," Kamilah said without looking up from her tablet.

"Later."

"'Later' will turn into us walking home from the supermarket, and you yelling 'I forgot about the shampoo'."

"I just sat down. Later."

Kamilah lifted her head just to roll her eyes at Ana, letting out a breath as her wife poked her in the cheek. Ana had just stuck a finger in Kamilah's hair, and was twirling it about her fingers when the
doorbell rang.

"I just sat down," Ana repeated, and got a knock on the forehead in return as Kamilah stood. She smiled into her cup of tea, taking a slow draught when Kamilah called for her. And so, despite her previous argument, Ana had to heave herself off the chair to have a look for herself–

Ana froze in the hallway, when her eyes landed on her wife standing by the door…and the omnic standing at the doorstep with knees bent, so they could see his entire frame. She made eye contact with Kamilah, then started moving forward again, the world slowed around her as if she were moving through water.

Placing a hand on Kamilah's back to steady herself, Ana said, "Ado?"

"Hello." Not a single twitch in Adofo's body – which was still the same old model, but the damage it sustained in the war had been repaired, leaving no sign of his…combat experience. "It's good to see you."

"I--" Her breath caught in her throat, and her fingers dug into Kamilah's shirt. "I didn't expect to see you."

"I…didn't expect that you'd see me, either." A quick flicker in the blue glow of his eyes – a smile. "But I understand if you don't want to. If you want me to leave, I will…"

"No," Ana said reflexively. "No. Come in." She gestured into the house. As Adofo walked in, Ana noticed the small brown backpack the omnic carried on his shoulders, its size nearly hilarious compared to Adofo's bulk. He stood in place quietly, until Ana led him into the living room. He started to sit on the floor, as he'd always done during their squad hangouts, but Ana gestured at the armchair near the window, and he took a seat there instead.

Ana sat on the couch, never more grateful to have her wife beside her, with an arm circled around her back. "I didn't realise they'd activated you already."

"They reactivated me four days ago, actually," Adofo explained. "Kept me in custody, scanned me over and over until they're sure there's…nothing left in me. Then they wiped my military programming, and that's why I'm allowed to travel here…with permission, that is. And with a tracker. And the failsafe. So don't worry."

"I'm not…" Ana's voice died off when she realised she was – every muscle coiled and ready to leap to her family's defense if she was needed. "Why are you here?"

"To visit."

"Have you been to see the others?"

"No." Adofo bowed his head briefly. "Mesi was there when I woke up. She was still…friendly. Was the one who suggested I visit the rest of you. So…" He scratched at his cheek. "I came to see you first, because I thought you'd be the safest. The others… I don't know how they'll react."

"Do you remember what happened?"

Adofo's eyes dimmed to the faintest glow, then brightened to half intensity. "Yeah," he said mechanically. "I killed Ebo. I nearly killed Layla. I shot Hakim in the knee. Are they still…okay?"

"Yes. Layla's fine. Hakim is too, but he's limping now. Pulled from active duty."
Adofo nodded slowly, scratching absentmindedly at his chest, where a faint nervous click could be heard. "I'm...sorry for everything I've done. I know that doesn't change anything, but I am. I'm sorry." A sigh came through his speakers, as he rested his head briefly in one hand. "You know, I don't think it's a good idea to go see the others anymore. After what I've done, I just... I shouldn't even be here."

"Ado," Ana said gently. "It's alright. It wasn't you...was it?"

He shook his head, and shrugged. "I was conscious, and I knew what I was doing. But I couldn't think. It was like, there's this presence in my head, controlling my thoughts. I only knew I had an objective, and I had to complete that objective. That's it."

"It was the God Program, then. It wasn't your fault."

"But I still killed people!" Adofo insisted, his voice growing a little louder, but not by much. "It was me, my hands, my programming that did it. I shouldn't--, I shouldn't even be here--"

"Ado," Ana cut in, setting a hand on his arm when his eyes started flickering angrily. "Ado, relax. Please."

"I'm--, I'm sorry," he said heavily, head falling into his hands as his eyes went dark for a few long moments, before coming alight again. He lifted his gaze towards Ana, but it drifted to the staircase opposite him.

Ana followed his line of sight, and found Fareeha sitting on the stairs, clutching onto the banister as she eyed Adofo warily. How long has she been there?

The seconds dragged on, until Adofo reached for his backpack. Unslinging the straps from his shoulders, he opened the bag and reached in, pulling a teddy bear out. Then he held it facing Fareeha, and waved its paw at her. Ana saw an uncertain smile flitter across Fareeha's face, but the girl remained huddled on the stairs until Ana waved her over.

Fareeha walked down the stairs carefully, and approached them with a hesitance Ana had never seen in the girl before. Kamilah smoothed the girl's mussed hair as she took cautious steps towards Adofo, who held the bear out to her and waved its paw again.

"Hello."

Fareeha gave a soft giggle. She glanced at Ana, who nodded, and she reached out to take the bear in her hands. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, kiddo." Adofo's voice was noticeably lighter when talking to her.

Hugging the bear to her chest, Fareeha shifted on her feet, then asked, "Who are you?"

Adofo's eyes dimmed a little, then looked to Ana.

"He's...a friend, Fareeha," Ana said, holding Adofo's gaze. "A good friend."

Adofo continued staring at Ana, his eyes flickering briefly in a smile – though she noticed a slight quiver in the gentle blue glow.
It was quiet in the car – Kamilah was dozing off in the passenger seat, tired from an extended shift, and Ana was loath to disturb her rest. But she would do so anyway; the matter eating away at Ana for the past few days, had finally bitten into her.

"Milah."

Brief silence – then a barely audible grunt.

"You listening?"

Another grunt, though grumpier this time.

"I wanna ask you something."

"Mm."

"What do you think about Adofo staying with us?"

That worked better than a splash of icy water to the face. Kamilah's eyes snapped open in an instant, staring blankly out the windscreen for a few long seconds, before she frowned at Ana. "What?"

"He wants to go through a total replacement of his systems. Hardware, software, everything except his memories. He'll be a regular civilian omnic, then he can't stay in the facility anymore." She glanced at Kamilah, and her wife's stony gaze only made her huff wearily. "It's difficult, I know."

"Even civilian omnics were turned during the war. You remember, don't you?"

"Yeah." She drummed her fingers on the steering wheel, unsure what else to say. Fresh memories from the war and her old friendship with Ado had been screaming at each other non-stop since Adofo had approached her tentatively. So she'd turned to her wife, looking for a little reason or wisdom, or even just blunt honesty as Kamilah was apt to offer.

"What about the others?" Kamilah asked, as they stopped briefly at a red light.

"He only asked me. And you know how well our last meet-up went," Ana sighed.

It'd been thoroughly stiff and awkward when the squad was reunited with Adofo. Mesi and Khalid were more open with the omnic, even if they bore a little caution, but the others who'd witnessed Ado's turning found it more…difficult. Ana had less trouble, as Ado had dropped by her house since his last visit; but Layla was notably quieter than usual, and Hakim kept unconsciously rubbing at his ruined knee. The tension seemed to have gotten to Adofo as well, and he'd made an early exit from the gathering. The squad hadn't gotten together since then.

"Doesn't it bother you?" Kamilah continued. "You saw him turn."

"Yeah. But it wasn't his fault."

"And it still won't be his if it happens again."
Ana’s throat grew dry, as she turned into the residential district. "It probably…won't. The A.I.'s under such a tight lockdown, it might as well be in a black hole. But he knows the risks, Milah. And if we let him stay, he'll give us the kill switch for his systems. Kill switches. Like, other than a specialised device, he'll put the codes into our phones, tablets, whatever we want. Anything happens – just a press, and that's it."

"There's still a huge risk."

"Yeah."

Silence fell over them for the rest of the drive, and Ana let her mind rest when she’d driven into the garage. They'd have more time to think on it later. But as she switched the engine off, Kamilah held the back of her hand to Ana’s shoulder, giving her pause.

"How long will he stay?"

She shrugged. "Until he finds what he wants to do next, I suppose. I'll be helping him look for his own place too, regardless of…what we decide." Ana sighed again, taking Kamilah's hand in her own. "There's no pressure, Milah. I can help him settle things before he even goes for the system wipe."

Kamilah lowered her gaze in thought. "He doesn't have a place to stay after the wipe?"

"If we don't find something for him, no. He'll be deadweight to the army after that, so there's no place in the facility for him."

"Ana," Kamilah sighed heavily. "When will you never give me a headache?"

"Headaches and I come in a package, remember?"

"I wish I didn't," Kamilah grumbled, making Ana smile when she threw her wife's hand away, and reached for the door.

From the first moment Adofo showed up at their doorstep with just a single backpack and a locker, he was obviously determined to keep his presence as small as possible, and not get in the way. Physically, he was smaller, as the defunct military components were replaced with smaller, more compact civilian parts. He was shorter too, and though he didn't have to bend down to fit through the door anymore, he still stood a head and a half taller than Ana.

He offered his thanks to them repeatedly, as he made himself at home in a small corner of their garage. And that was where he slept at night, or stayed when it rained. Most of the time, though, their small backyard was where he lingered quietly – doing his own research and downloading new knowledge at first, then playing with Fareeha when the girl had warmed up to him. And oh, did she warm up to him, when she learnt how much higher Adofo could lift her into the air than Ana or Kamilah could. After a few warnings from Kamilah though, they settled themselves on the ground instead, playing with their toys while Adofo supplied sound effects he plucked from the internet.

Ado made himself useful around the house as well, cleaning up while the women were out of the house, and even tinkered with their electronics to make them more efficient. Of course, since he was still learning these new skills, he had little accidents now and again, but was always able to repair the devices in no time at all. And after making himself a more solid fixture around the house, they’d let Ado escort Fareeha to and from school as well, often carrying the girl on his back as he took long and fast strides towards their destination.
His presence had caught the attention of their neighbours, and many were hesitant to approach the Amari household for the first few weeks. But Ana was pretty sure that they’d get used to having him in the neighbourhood – even if some might never get truly comfortable with him.

"Fareeha."

A pout.

"Fareeha, no."

A whine.

"Ami said no."

Fareeha let out another whine, and remained kneeling on the stool by their bar table, her hand still clutching the single cookie she'd plucked out of the jar. "Just one more."

"Fareeha, listen to ami." Ana leaned on the counter, looking sternly at Fareeha, who was pouting more severely back at her. "You've brushed your teeth, and you've already had five cookies after dinner. No more."

"But it's just one more!" Fareeha whined.

"One more will make it six, so no. Fareeha," Ana intoned. "Put that cookie back, or there'll be no more cookies for you the whole week." She was instantly treated to an even worse whine, as Fareeha rocked back and forth on the stool in the beginnings of a tantrum. "And no more games, either."

That did the trick. With an impressive sulk, Fareeha dropped the cookie back into the jar, and didn't bother to screw the lid back on before jumping off the stool. The girl's grumbling could be heard as she stalked away from the kitchen.

"And it's time for bed, Fareeha!" Ana called after her. "Go to bed!"

A grumpy whine reached her ears.

"My god," Ana breathed out, hearing her faint footsteps moving up the stairs. "She's getting worse."

"And she's only, what? 6, 7 years away from puberty?" Kamilah laughed quietly as Ana reached for the cookie jar, fishing out Fareeha's cookie before she shut the lid. "She's going to be a handful when she's a teen."

"Two handfuls, seems like." Ana took a bite of cookie. "Anything from your manuals that can save us?"

"Maybe," Kamilah said off-handedly, letting Ana feed her the remaining half of the cookie. Then they looked up when Adofo popped his head into the doorway.

"I just saw Fareeha stomp upstairs." He pointed a thumb over his shoulder. "Should I go and…?"

"No, leave her," Ana said. "I'll check on her later."

"Okay."

"Ado, wait," she added quickly when Ado left, and he popped his head back in again. She patted at
the countertop. "Here, let's talk."

The omnic walked in and paused by the chair, then gave a start as if he remembered his smaller stature now. Adofo settled on the chair easily, and fixed Ana with that attentive, electronic blue gaze.

"How was the city today?"

"It was good! I found a few omnic shelters and businesses – they've been struggling to rebuild since the crisis. Think I'm going to volunteer at some of those places. Get in touch with the others, see what I can do, you know. Maybe even help with the city's reconstruction, I don't know. Stuff to make up for…stuff," he finished lamely, avoiding the sensitive subject.

"That's a great first step, Ado." Ana smiled.

"Yeah. Thing is, I'm not sure what I really want to do. I mean, I like photography. But then I was thinking if I should get into construction. Or – learn to repair systems. There have been a few attacks, and I want to help…"

"One step at a time. Don't rush everything," Kamilah said, tapping at her cup of lukewarm tea. "Take all the time you need, and learn whatever you want. We'll be here to help you."

Adofo's eyes blinked in that happy rhythm, hand reaching up to scratch at his head. "Or you know, I could get into inventing. Maybe finally invent a mouth for omnics."

"What, you still want to taste pizza?" Ana laughed.

"I was thinking more of smiling, but pizza is always good."

"Not with some toppings, it isn't." She shrugged. "But if you just wanna smile, why not…put a display screen on your face?"

Ado's eyes went dark, then came alight. "You just blew my mind."

And so, a year passed in the best, most mundane manner that Ana had dreamt of, while she was lying in hard cots and missing home dearly.

She and Kamilah had to work their motherly magic to rein in Fareeha's more petulant inclinations – 'magic' meaning a near-saintly amount of patience to wait for the girl's tantrums to end, and explaining why her mothers wanted her to do as they said. It really was a coin toss, sometimes; Fareeha would either go away still sulking from the lectures, or nod and follow along with their wishes…only to throw another tantrum soon after. It was a headache, truth be told, but it took a little more time before Fareeha started listening to them more, even if she didn't fully understand everything they told her.

Still, Ana did feel proud of the girl, and loved her all the same. How could she not? Fareeha was her sweet little daughter, who still often found her way into their bed at night, whenever she needed the company.

As a family, they celebrated their birthdays and wedding anniversary together. Ana was there to pin the eagle insignia on her wife's epaulet, for Kamilah's promotion to the rank of major. She attended the promotion ceremonies for Mesi and Khalid as well, watching her friends receive their own eagle insignias with no small amount of pride.

Then, the Amari family dressed up to attend Mesi and Layla's wedding. It was a more traditional
affair than Ana and Kamilah's, without sabre arches or military uniforms. There was, however, a slightly palpable air of tension during the celebrations, apparently due to a past misunderstanding between Mesi's parents and Layla's Coptic family, but the couple were determined not to let it ruin the night. They pulled Ana, Kamilah, and even Fareeha into a long string of dances, and though they hadn't indulged in any alcohol, Ana still felt the same high as she kissed her wife at the end of the last dance.

And, as the year drew to a close, with Ana pondering over her future course in the army and passing on the leadership of God Eye to Khalid, her problems were given a solution from an unexpected source. She was summoned to a private office in Central Command one day, left to her own privacy as she gained access to the secure vidcall on the computer, and was greeted by the president of the UN Security Council.

Xie met her surprise with a smile, and after a short tête-à-tête, invited her back to Geneva for a 'discussion of her career, and the future'.

Ana cocked her head then. She'd thought her tenure in the UN was over. "Is…there something wrong, ma'am?"

"Not of the same scale as the Crisis, to be sure," Xie said carefully. "But there might have been some things we've overlooked in our clean-up before."

"So it's something concerning the omnis?"

"To give you a short answer: yes. But I don't wish to speak more here – a face-to-face discussion will be better." Xie looked over Ana's curious expression, tinged with a little concern, and she relented with more. "Don't worry, Ana. It's not a huge problem. And, it's only a small part of the reason to bring you back. To bring the Strike Team back, in fact."

"You're recalling the entire team?"

"Yes. And I'd like to discuss your future within the United Nations."

"And she didn't say anything else?"

"Not really, no."

"Why is she so cryptic? What is she? Some kind of…witch, like from a movie or something?"

Ana couldn't help but chuckle at Kamilah's exasperation. She scooted over the bed, and wrapped both arms around her wife, giving her a tight squeeze. "She's a nice person."

"Not from where I'm standing, no." Kamilah held still, then shifted on the spot so that she faced Ana proper. "She's calling you away again, Ana. Did she say for how long?"

"No."

"And, she's bringing the whole team back? Is there another problem?"

"Sounds like it. But not as big as the Crisis, that's for sure."

"And, what? She can't use her own peacekeeping forces to take care of it?" Kamilah grumbled, her frown deepening despite Ana massaging her temples. "Ending a 7-year war isn't enough, now she wants you to do more–?"
"Milah, sweetie. Sweetie." Ana pecked her on the lips, and a second time when Kamilah opened her mouth to gripe again. "Relax. Calm down. You're working yourself up over nothing."

Kamilah gave a drawn-out groan, as Ana cooed at her jokingly and peppered her with more little kisses, until she caught Ana's lips for a longer, deeper kiss. She sighed when they parted, closing her eyes briefly. "She did mention 'your future within the UN'."

"Well, yeah. But we don't know for sure..."

"And if she does offer you a place there? What then?" Kamilah asked, voice quiet. "You'll be there most of the time. Then what about us?"

Ana smiled softly, despite the twinge in her chest. "We'll find a way to deal with it together."

"You make it sound so easy."

"It won't be, but we'll deal. We are strong, confident, amazing, gorgeous women, after all." Ana snickered when Kamilah slapped at her shoulder, rolling her eyes. "Come on, now. You're worrying too much, hm? We'll just go along, and see what happens."

Kamilah took a deep breath, and bent over as she exhaled, resting her head on Ana's shoulder. Ana rocked her gently, rubbing her back in circles, and gave little random smooches on her neck and shoulder.

"You and your headaches," Kamilah muttered.

Ana chuckled. "I'm your one and only headache, darling."

As expected, Fareeha was upset when she learnt that her ami would be going away again, on 'hero' business. 'But you said you gonna stay!' was her chief complaint whenever Ana tried to talk to her about it, and it took a while to turn her sad pout into a nod, whenever Ana reminded Fareeha to listen to her mama while ami was away.

And Kamilah – bless her – had stood stoic in the face of looming change, and was supportive of Ana in...whatever sort of mission her wife would soon embark on, despite her own unease about it. On the day they'd sent Ana off at the base's hangars, she even managed to coax a smile to Fareeha's lips, getting a giggle from the girl as they said goodbye. After Ana was done squeezing Fareeha in a hug, Kamilah gave her wife a kiss, then pinched her nose and told her to stay safe. Ana didn't reply with a joke for once, and instead gave a solemn promise before she boarded the jet.

A four-hour flight later, Ana had landed in Geneva, made her way to the UN offices, sent a selfie back to Kamilah the moment she had wi-fi, and received a photo of her two girls eating cookies in return. It made her smile as she walked over to the apartments where she had lodged the last time.

Ana left her luggage unpacked, leaving her modest quarters with the intent of grabbing a snack. As she walked down the hallway, Ana slowed to a stop at a particular door, with half a mind to knock, but decided against it. For all she knew, the others were put up in different rooms.

But she'd strolled down the corridor a good handful of paces, when she heard a smooth voice call her name. She turned around and shared a grin with the man who moved down to meet her. Gabriel had changed little over the year, though his hair seemed to have grown out a little, and was combed back with a certain roguish flair. He slowed when he came close, aiming mock punches at Ana's shoulders, then held his hands up.

"Okay, wait. I gotta know first." He leaned in conspiratorially. "Are you still 'Captain' Amari?"
"Yeah."

"Ey, me too!" Gabriel laughed, pointing between Ana and himself. "Same rank!"

"Same rank!" Ana clamped his hand tight in some odd captain's solidarity. "Let me guess: you rejected your promotion too?"

"Yeah! 'Cause fuck my prospects, am I right?" He ruffled Ana's hair, getting an annoyed cluck from the sniper. "But you know, Jack is--" Gabriel was distracted when a door behind them opened, and sure enough, the blonde soldier walked out into the hallway. "Yeah, him. Bastard's a major now."

"Come on, Gabe." Jack rolled his eyes, before flashing Ana a smile. "So what are your stripes now, Ana?"

"Still Captain, sir." Ana straightened her shoulders and puffed up her chest. "Should we salute now, Gabe?"

"Eh."

"Oh, cut the shit, Ana." He held out his hand. "It's good to see you again, by the way."

"Look at this idiot," Gabriel rumbled. He slapped down Jack's hand, slung his arms around Jack and Ana's shoulders, and yanked them into a group hug. "We're friends, remember?"

"And boyfriends, hm?" Ana shot them a crooked smile.

"Hell yeah." He pressed his lips to Jack's cheek before the blonde could react. "We are."

"Hey, hey." Ana tapped a finger on her own cheek, as a flush spread over Jack's face. "What about me?"

"You get one too," Gabriel crooned, giving her a kiss as well. Then he paused, and regarded her thoughtfully. "Kamilah wouldn't mind that, would she?"

"Of course not." Ana patted at both their arms and broke away, leading them towards the lifts. "Not unless you go for my mouth, that is. Then she'd punch you."

"Huh. How hard does she punch?"

Ana turned around to face Gabriel, as Jack called for the elevator. "You ever been to hell?"

"Uh, no?"

"She'll send you there."

The trio stuck together for the next two days, while they waited for the rest of the team to arrive in Switzerland for their upcoming meeting with Xie. They were met with two new surprises – in the form of Mirembe and Tien, soldiers they'd fought with during the Crisis, in Nigeria and China respectively. The two had performed exceptionally during the war, and their mention in the Strike Team's reports had interested Xie enough to invite them to Geneva.

Then, with Reinhardt and Torbjorn's arrival, the roster was complete – save for Liao, who had declined this invitation for her other pursuits. And so, they were gathered in a briefing room one morning, listening to Xie's explanation for bringing them together again – to scout out, and delve into secret Omnica facilities, where the company had engaged in research for illegal war tech, before they
were shut down. The news didn't shake a single person in the room – not after how Omnica's name had been dragged through the mud for years. And they listened attentively as Xie outlined their objectives and goals, before she started on the other reason she'd called them back.

Xie tapped on her holographic console, and the screens set on the table before each person lit up, displaying a white and orange logo, beneath which was spelt 'Overwatch'.

Ana had to restrain a sigh when she saw it. *Headache*.

"But," Jack said slowly, bringing his eyes up from the screen to look at Xie. "To assemble a peacekeeping force with a team that specialised in anti-omnic warfare? Wouldn't that be seen as an act of aggression?"

"That's why our first moves have to be careful. But don't worry – I have that concern covered," Xie replied. "The point is, you won't just be keeping an eye on the omnics – you'll be ensuring their safety as well. The omnics' rights movement is growing – slowly, but steadily. But there are still fears that the omnics will turn against us once more, and I'm afraid it is an *active* fear. The Crisis may have passed, but our problems have far from ended. You know about the assaults on omnics, how the climate could turn dangerous when their movement gains traction. We need you to make sure that nothing happens to their omnic representatives, that nothing will escalate tensions and disrupt our efforts to bring peace."

"And I assume it's a convenient way to look out for…radical omnic elements," Gabriel mused.

"Exactly. By working at the heart of matters, you'll know when something goes awry." Xie tapped idly at the pen she held in hand. "But Overwatch takes no sides – you will be protecting *everyone*.

"Sounds like an *excellent* goal," Reinhardt declared.

"It is." Xie smiled at him. "But it's a lofty one, and I have no doubt that this endeavour will have its own difficulties. I've gathered all of you primarily to deal with the Omnica situation, but I'd also like to extend an invitation to you. I will understand if any one of you doesn't wish to be a part of Overwatch, but I will say this." Xie looked around the table, sharp gaze resting on each face briefly. "All of you are exceptional individuals, and I do hope that you will lend your strength to this cause."

"Now, Fareeha," Kamilah said, crouching before her daughter. "Pay attention in class, and play nice with the other kids, alright?"

"Okay."

Kamilah smiled. "Give mama a kiss before you go."

Fareeha complied happily, giving her mother a smooch on the cheek. "Bye bye, mama. Bye bye, Ado."

"Have fun, kiddo." Adofo waved at the girl as she ran into the school, only slowing down after Kamilah called after her.

They watched the girl skip farther down the school's hallway, until the entrance doors swung shut, and their view was blocked. Kamilah sighed airily and turned around, nodding her head at Adofo, who followed her down the path from the school.

"You have anywhere to go today?" Kamilah asked.
"No, nothing." Ado shrugged. "You?"

"No. How about a trip to the supermarket?"

"Sure."

Kamilah glanced at Ado, who had pulled out his phone, and went to take a photo of a stray cat by the pavement. After Ana had left for Switzerland, Kamilah came to realise how much…better the house felt now, even with Ana away. It was less empty, less lonely. And though Adofo wasn't a talkative person by nature, his quiet companionship was more than welcome – not to mention his help in taking care of Fareeha. Whenever Kamilah was tired out from work, he'd step in and entertain the girl instead, giving her enough time to rest before she tended to Fareeha again. He'd been nothing but helpful for the past year, and Kamilah was glad that things had turned out well, despite her initial fears.

"Hey, did Ana call last night?" Ado asked when he walked back to her, slipping his phone back into the pocket of his brown hoodie. It was a gift from the family, and he'd worn it often…though he still didn't have pants to go with it.

"Yeah," Kamilah sighed, as she was prone to do when thinking of her wife. "Why, did you want to talk to her?"

"No, just wondering. Thought I heard you talking." Ado tilted his head. "Will she be away for long?"

"I don't know. I hope not." She heaved another sigh, a slight frown creasing her forehead. "I just…don't like her being so far away."

"I'm sure she'll be back before you know it."

Kamilah huffed. "In hindsight, it will seem fast. But in the meantime…" She fell silent, crossing her arms. "Is it selfish that I want her to stay at home?"

"No, it's understandable," Adofo replied simply. "Nothing wrong with wanting to have your wife around, is there?"

"I guess not." She wanted to laugh at how easily Ado had shared that bit of logic. Maybe she was letting herself think too much again. "Still, I miss her. And I'm sure Fareeha does too."

They lapsed into silence then, Adofo clasping her shoulder in comfort as they walked on. Kamilah reached for her phone when it vibrated in her pocket, and was greeted with a picture from Ana – a slice of rainbow cake.

Ana: [Forgot to send. Dessert last night ;p]

Ana: [Rmbr the first cake I got you?]

[Of course]

Ana: [I'll get one for you when I come back]

Ana: [Miss you❤️]

Kamilah smiled at the text, the ache in her chest turning just a little sweet. Maybe this wouldn't be too difficult after all.
[Miss you too]

[❤️ ]

Chapter End Notes

If you missed it, I did an 'Interview' ask meme for Ana and Kamilah for the last update, over in Drabbles. Check it out if you're interested!
So the Strike Team became active once more, a year after the end of the Omnic Crisis. They were equipped with brand new, improved versions of their combat gear during the war – which looked more like uniforms now, with the steel-grey alloy of their armour painted a distinctive blue that matched Ana’s beret in colour, and blank patches at their shoulders where the Overwatch insignia would be, once these prototype designs were finalised. They were given the same weapons they’d used during the war, but for their current mission, they were armed less heavily than before. It only made sense, since Xie wanted their operation to remain a secret, and fully utilising their wartime ordnance would do nothing but draw undue attention to themselves.

And, to be honest, they really needed only a fraction of that firepower, as their missions turned out to be simple ‘scavenging’ runs that were hindered by inbuilt security at the Omnica facilities – hardly insurmountable odds. Their first target had been in North America, where Omnica had built an underground complex to conduct their experiments and coordinate between various divisions set up across the world. It was from this facility that they gathered the locations of other research sites – most of which were in countries that suffered the worst fighting during the Crisis, including Egypt – and off they went to dig up Omnica secrets.

With more weapons tech they recovered – that bore an uncanny resemblance to those used by omnics during the war – and the more pieces of communication they’d scrounged, it became obvious that Omnica was working with an unknown partner – or partners – to research war tech. They were receiving a steady stream of funds that was instantly cut off when the company came under fire for fraud. The team could dig up no further information on Omnica's mysterious partner, and even when they brought the information back to the UN, little progress was made in following investigations.

But the Strike Team's responsibility ended there – with the successful retrieval of Omnica's tech and communications, after five months of nearly-uneventful operations. Xie assured them that the intel would be put to good use, thanked them for their work, and sent them home with a single, important decision to make.

"Mama."

"Mm."

Ana leaned on Kamilah's study table and waited, but her wife merely continued frowning at her computer screen. "Mama, listen–"

"The 400 bucks we spent last month. What was that for?"

"Car suspension."

"Right," Kamilah sighed, shaking her head. "And we replaced the tires not too long ago. Might as well get a new car at this rate."

"We can, I guess." Ana waited for Kamilah to settle their payments, then reached across the table and grabbed her hands, pulling her attention away from the screen. "Milah, I wanna talk."

"Are you asking for permission?"
"No," Ana snorted, knocking their hands on the desk once. "I've been trying to get your attention."

Kamilah gave a wry smile. "When do you never?"

"When you're angry." She patted Kamilah's hands. "Anyway, I wanna talk to you. About the UN."

That made Kamilah pause for a while. "Yes?"

"Seems my clever, clever wife was right all along," Ana said slowly, looking for a reaction on Kamilah's face. "They do want me to work there."

Kamilah nodded equally slowly. "And…?" She watched as Ana's expression turned sheepish and puppy-eyed. "You want to do it, don't you?"

In keeping with her current theme, Ana gave a quiet, puppy-like whine. "Maybe…?"

"Just say yes, Ana."

"Yes." Ana shot her a close-lipped smile, pressing Kamilah's hands to her cheeks. "You're not upset, are you?"

Kamilah took a deep breath, and let it out. "No, I'm not."

"You look upset."

"That's how I look every day," Kamilah deadpanned. "But no, I'm not. Actually, I kind of expected this already."

"And…?"

"And what? You'll do what you do."

Ana pouted. "Now you sound upset."

"No, Ana. I'm--" Kamilah stopped, then sighed again. "Look, I'll be honest – when you came back from the war, when you were just living with us here, at home? That's all I ever wanted my life to be. But--" She pressed her palms to Ana's cheeks, when Ana's expression turned apologetic. "I don't want you to take this the wrong way. Listen – I am proud of you. Of what you've done. And if you want to do even more, I won't stop you. I don't want you to pass up an opportunity like this, and have you regret it for the rest of your life."

Ana regarded her for a quiet moment. "Why do I feel like you've prepared for this?"

"Because I have, you idiot. I've been trying to rationalise the whole thing ever since you flew off to Switzerland." She squeezed Ana's face between her hands, getting a squooshed smile in return. "And I decided that as long as you're happy, I am too. Now tell me I'm the best wife in the world."

"You're the best wife in the world," Ana said, words muffled, and giggled when Kamilah massaged her cheeks before letting go. She caught Kamilah's hands again, pressing kisses to her knuckles. "But you're really alright with this? I don't want you to say all that just because…"

"Yes. And if I were you, amī?" Kamilah said, raising a brow. "I'm not the one you should be worrying about."

"I know, damn it," Ana groaned, bending over to rest her head on the table.
"Fareeha's still a little upset since Ado moved out. So…you might want to wait a little."

And Ana did wait – for a week, then two, until it eventually stretched into a month. Time wasn't a concern, really, since Xie gave them quite some time to decide, and Ana wanted to make sure Fareeha was in a good mood before breaking the news. That she'd lose heart whenever she tried wasn't much of a help either – Ana would desist in the interest of keeping that smile on Fareeha's face, then promise herself that she'd do it the next time.

And when she did finally break the news, it was with Fareeha seated in the armchair, and Kamilah sitting beside her on the couch for backup. Ana told the girl that ami would be moving far away to work, and would be away from home for longer periods of time, that she'd keep in contact through vidcalls whenever she was not home. Then she waited as Fareeha processed the news and – unsurprisingly – her brows lowered, lips turning down into a frown.

"You know how it's like, right?" Ana continued gently, ruffling the girl's hair. "You'll be here with mama, then ami will come back to see you whenever she can."

"But you're always leaving! Now you're gonna leave like Ado too."

"Ami has to work, Fareeha. And this time I have to travel just a little more."

"How long are you going?"

"I don't know, habibti." Ana shrugged. "It'll be months at a time, that's for sure."

"…Fine."

Ana cocked a brow at the girl's seemingly brazen answer, but her heart dropped when she caught the quiver in Fareeha's lower lip, and the girl reached up to wipe roughly at her eyes with the back of her hand. "Oh, darling. Why are you crying?"

"I'm not crying," Fareeha retorted, then sniffled immediately after.

"Yes, you are," Ana sang, tweaking the girl's nose and getting a short, impudent whine in return. "You silly girl! Ami will come back to see you. I'm not going away forever, you know."

"I know," Fareeha said, still rubbing at her eyes.

"And mama will still be here, right? She'll look after you, and you'll look after her."

Fareeha nodded, looking back up at Ana. And though she was still biting her lower lip, with her mouth curved downwards, she wore a resolute expression that made Ana feel a pang of guilt. So she wrapped her arms around the girl and squeezed her tight, comforted when Fareeha hugged her back as well.

For the rest of the day, Fareeha went about her own business – doing her homework, playing her games, sneaking a few tidbits to satisfy her sweet tooth, and nudging away the greens on her plate during dinner. She seemed to have accepted their discussion well enough, and hadn't brought it up at all. But when Ana and Kamilah were just settling into bed, they heard a knock on the door before Fareeha peeked in.

"Can I sleep here tonight?" she asked tentatively.

Ana chuckled and pulled down the covers, allowing the girl to dive into her old spot between her
mothers, nestling comfortably into the bed with her bird plush hugged tightly in an arm.

An eight-year-old with her own stubborn streak, who was still unabashedly attached to her mothers – it only made Ana glad to call this little one her daughter.

All too quickly, two more months had passed, and Xie invited those of the Strike Team who'd signed up for Overwatch back to Switzerland.

As before, Kamilah saw her off, and Ana kept Fareeha's hand in her own until they'd reached the boarding stairs to Ana's jet. She knelt before Fareeha, who nodded obediently when Ana told her to be good, to do her homework diligently, and to not give her mama headaches by refusing to sleep at bedtime or trying to skip breakfast in the mornings.

Ana couldn't help but smile at the resolve shining in Fareeha's eyes. "I love you, my brave little soldier," she crooned, pressing a kiss to the top of Fareeha's head, then pinched her cheek to get a giggle from the girl.

"And I love you too, my brave and scary wife," Ana cooed as she stood to face Kamilah, and was pulled into a firm embrace.

"I'm going to kick your ass," Kamilah grumbled into her ear, then let out a sigh. "I love you." She placed a kiss on Ana's cheek, then her lips. "Take care of yourself, and please – no heroics, hm?"

"I'll try, but no promises."

"Ana."

"Fine, fine," Ana murmured, giving her one last kiss. "I promise."

When the Strike Team arrived in Geneva – every single one of them had returned – Xie flew them over to Zürich, where a large, empty grounds had been set aside and a modest base was built for the newly-founded Overwatch. This would be their very own headquarters, a primary base of operations where they would work and train, and would be expanded accordingly as more personnel were recruited into the organisation.

Xie led them past the green training field – furnished with a running track and an obstacle course – and into the barracks to take a look at their spacious quarters, before leading them to the offices and sitting them down in a briefing room. There, Xie outlined their itinerary for the near future, and the first order of business was the public introduction of Overwatch – including their command hierarchy, which was expected from being made official. What they did not expect though, was the surprise that Xie dropped on them when she revealed the appointed commanders of the team.

Jack in particular tried to argue against his appointment, but she stood firm and made it clear that she would not be swayed. He desisted unhappily – after a little persuasion from the team – but still wasn't content to let the matter rest, his discussion with Gabriel spanning from the entire afternoon and into the night, when they were eating together in a quiet little diner.

"I still think you should be Strike Commander."

"Well, I still disagree," Gabe drawled, looking unmoved as he took a swig of beer.

"Why are you still arguing about this?" Mirembe asked, leaning on the table to look at the pair, from where she sat with Tien. "You're a capable enough soldier, and you outrank us all, don't you?"
"Yes, but–!" Jack flailed his hands helplessly at Gabriel. "He was the one who led us during the Crisis! Gabe has more right to this position than me."

"Yeah, but from the way I've heard, you kinda shared command from time to time, didn't you?" Tien pointed out, waving his fork at them.

"According to the situation, yes." Jack paused as if in sudden revelation, then turned his head towards Ana. "You led the team often as well–"

"No. Don't bring me into this, alright?" Ana held up her hands to cut him off. "I get to be your bloody 2IC, and it's already more than I bargained for."

"But you commanded the God Eye back home, right?" Jack said. "That's a way bigger outfit than what we have. In fact, it's bigger than any contingent that either Gabe or I have ever led. Wait, Ana – you should be Strike Commander instead."

"Hell no, buddy," Ana scoffed, but felt a twinge of sympathy at Jack's long-suffering look. "Jack, I understand how you feel, but you heard what Xie said. The commander's going to be the face of Overwatch. And while I do have a beautiful and irresistible face… Yes, thank you, babe," Ana added when Mirembe whistled playfully. "While I do have the face, there's no way I'm going to be facing the cameras, alright?"

"And you want me to face the cameras? I don't even know how to talk to people!"

"Personally, yeah. You're an awkward mess," Gabriel said. "But for…official, impersonal stuff, you're pretty good."

Jack was still unconvinced, and groaned, "I don't know about this. I should talk to Xie. Don't know what she was thinking… Even Rein is a better face for–"

"Jack," Gabriel sighed. "I was the one who told Xie to choose you instead."

"Instead?" Ana asked, while Jack stared in surprise.

"She spoke to me beforehand, but I declined the position. And we both decided that you're better suited for the job."

"You're the one," Jack uttered, eyes fixed on his partner. "God damn it, Gabe. Always."

Ana averted her eyes, sensing they were treading into personal territory. And it seemed that Reinhardt knew the same too, because he clapped his hands once and boomed, "Ah, I feel in the mood for dessert! How about some cake, hm?"

Ana grinned, piping up with her own order along with the others, trying to ignore the silence that had fallen over the two by her side.

Within the week, Overwatch's name was released and spread through the news like wildfire, sparking numerous discussions and speculation of potential threats and motives, as well as a few concerns regarding their relevance post-war. Omnic movements scattered across the globe were particularly vocal about the formation of Overwatch, voicing their fears that they would be policed or even clamped down by a renowned team of anti-omnic specialists. To quell their concerns, a press conference was organised, headed by Security Council President Xie herself, and accompanied by Strike Commander Morrison and Strike Captain Amari.
Both Jack and Ana were prepared and drilled thoroughly for the conference, memorising the briefs they were to deliver, bouncing questions and answers off of each other to keep their wits sharp, and their answers perfect. It paid off during the conference itself – both delivered their briefs perfectly, and Ana breathed a secret sigh of relief after, when Jack fielded most of the questions directed at the soldiers, putting on his best 'Commander' face and answering in his ever-calm, if a little monotonous tone.

When the conference was concluded in two short hours, Ana hopped out into the corridor and ran into Gabriel, who greeted her with a grin and a one-armed hug.

"How'd it go?"

"How else can it go, asshole?" Ana aimed a lighthearted punch at his gut. "It was okay, but god. I can't believe there are going to be more of these in the future."

"The burdens of command, am I right?" Gabriel said airily, earning a knock on his chest.

"Screw you," Ana whispered, leaning in. "If you didn't decline the offer, the two of you knuckleheads would've been in there together, instead of me."

Gabriel only gave a crooked smile and shrugged, patting her through the beret. He glanced over at Jack, who was engrossed in a discussion with Xie farther down the corridor, and asked, "So, how was he?"

"He was good. Everyone loves a soldier who looks like he can shoot better than he talks," she replied, sharing a snicker with Gabriel. "Nah, I'm just joking. He's pretty solid, actually. Your betrayal aside, I think you made the right choice."

"Yeah." Gabriel smiled wanly to himself, gaze softening as he continued to watch Jack. "He has it in him. Just doesn't know it yet. And you too." He nudged at Ana's temple with his knuckles. "We have the stoic Strike Commander to gain the people's confidence, and our charming Strike Captain to get the public to fall in love with us."

"You overestimate my power, Reyes."

"Don't underestimate yourself, Amari."

During the press conference, they'd announced Overwatch's very first mission: to protect the UN's chosen omnic representative, who would be flown around the world to organise the various pockets of omnic movements into a single, cohesive cause. Naturally, news of this spread nearly as quickly as the formation of Overwatch, and they quickly came under close scrutiny.

It was at this point that Xie finally took her hands off, leaving Overwatch in the capable hands of the newly-appointed Secretary-General, Gabrielle Adawe. The Strike Team had actually been Adawe's brainchild during the Crisis, but the then-Under-Secretary-General had tasked Xie with its formation instead. And now, Adawe sought to rebuild the peace that had existed between humans and omnics, with Overwatch's help.

The first thing she did, was choose the leader of the omnic peace movement in Russia – an omnic who simply called himself, Kostya. He was flown to Switzerland, where he would organise his long trip with the help of the UN, and have his security detail arranged by the soldiers of Overwatch themselves.

Their first meeting with him was interesting, to say the least. The omnic was easy-going and
charismatic, spoke with a sincerity that belied his strength of will, and wore a sharp suit to round his spiffy image up. But the first thing that called attention to him, were the visible scars that marred his face – deep cuts over his jaw and neck, most of which were remnants from the Crisis, and a few were from recent assaults on his person. There were more on his body too, which he pulled his collar aside to reveal when he noticed their attention.

An interesting choice to lead the ideal omnic movement, Ana thought – rather symbolic, to have a survivor of the Omnic Crisis advocate for peace, even after the violence that'd been inflicted on him after the war. It made her think of Ado, who was now helping to run a shelter for both omnics and humans alike, while assisting in reconstruction efforts back home as well. So many people who wanted to piece their world back together after such turmoil – and Overwatch would be right alongside them, making sure they'd go far in achieving their lofty goal.

It seemed Kamilah was right – again. If Ana had turned Overwatch down, she would've regretted it deeply indeed.

"Blech," Fareeha said when Kamilah picked up a bag of kale, earning a click of the tongue from her mother.

"Vegetables are good for you, Fareeha," Kamilah reminded her, tossing the kale into the shopping cart that Fareeha was pushing along.

"Tastes bad," Fareeha said, parroting Ana's favourite complaint about the vegetable.

"You little rascal." Kamilah tweaked her nose. "Learning only the bad things from your ami." She smiled when her daughter giggled, and they strolled down the long shelf of vegetables together. Though Fareeha paid little attention, Kamilah tried to keep her interested in the greens she'd started to spurn from her palate, by picking out different selections for Fareeha to choose, just to involve her in planning a healthy diet. Fareeha even seemed to like their little activity together, and gave her opinions without complaint.

Kamilah picked up two clear boxes of grapes from the fruit shelf. "Green or purple?"

"Mm. Purple. I like purple."

"Purple it is."

"Mama," Fareeha said as she placed the grapes in the cart. "Can I get a comic?"

"Only if you're a good girl," Kamilah replied absentmindedly, looking at some bell peppers.

"I am a good girl," Fareeha said, so matter-of-fact that Kamilah turned to give her an incredulous look.

"Really? Are you going to eat the kale then?"

Fareeha pouted. "Yes…"

She couldn't help but chuckle. "Fine, go get your comic."

"Yay!"

With that, Fareeha ran off towards the magazine racks on the opposite side of the supermarket. Kamilah watched her go – just to make sure Fareeha didn't bump into anyone in her haste – before
taking the cart herself and moving along, not straying too far so Fareeha could find her easily.

And it wasn't long before Fareeha returned, with even more excitement this time, holding her comic in one hand and waving a newspaper in the other.

"Mama! Ami's in the news!" Fareeha squealed.

"Shush, dear. Not so loud," Kamilah laughed softly, taking the newspaper to discover that Ana was indeed on the front page. It was a full-colour photo from Overwatch's recent conference, with Strike Commander Jack Morrison and his second-in-command, Strike Captain Ana Amari.

'Strike Captain'? Kamilah huffed in amusement to herself. Sounds ridiculous.

"Mama, can I read it?" Fareeha asked.

"You, read the news? Really?" Kamilah feinted surprise, causing Fareeha to bounce on her feet insistently.

"Yes! I wanna read about ami."

Oh Ana, Kamilah mused as Fareeha grabbed the newspaper. Your power knows no bounds.

"Someone's getting famous, hm?" Kamilah said, holding up the newspaper to the camera so Ana could see her own face.

"Ugh, god," Ana said. "I look so weird at that angle."

"I think you look cool, ami," Fareeha said, swiveling idly in her chair beside Kamilah.

"Really? Oh well. I guess your ami's pretty face does look good anywhere."

"You just said you looked weird," Kamilah reminded her.

"And Fareeha just changed my mind," Ana grinned. "How's my little girl doing? Listening to your mama?"

"Yeah. I ate kale tonight." Fareeha pouted.

"Oh, you have my sympathies, habibti," Ana crooned. "But remember – veggies are good for you!"

"I know…"

Ana laughed at the girl's defeated tone. "And how's my darling wife? Ogling endlessly at my photos, are you?"

"Yes, actually. You do look quite smart when you're being all serious." Kamilah smiled when Ana raised a fist in triumph. "I assume you're busy then, Strike Captain?"

"Too busy," Ana sighed. "It's going to be another long day tomorrow. Don't think I've gotten enough sleep since Overwatch became a thing."

"Then you should sleep now, ami," Fareeha stated.

"Oh?" Ana raised her brows. "And shouldn't you be sleeping too, little one? It's past your bedtime
"already, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but I got up to talk to you."

"Ah, thank you, darling. But you shouldn't stay up too late. Go on to bed now, alright? Ami will call again tomorrow."

"Okay. Good night, ami."

"Good night, Fareeha."

Kamilah ruffled the girl's hair lightly as she jumped off the chair, and walked off towards her own bedroom. "You know, I think our daughter has the right idea. You should go to bed soon."

"But I wanna look at you longer, mama." Ana smiled. "$I really miss you, you know?$"

"I know. The bed feels so empty without you—, and no, not that way." Kamilah rolled her eyes when Ana's smile turned into a sly smirk. "$God, I hate you. Go to sleep already."

"You say that now, but you'll miss me again soon enough," Ana laughed, then relented. "$But yeah, I should go. You too, albi. Sleep well, and dream of me – I know I'll be dreaming of you."

Kamilah melted on the inside as Ana tossed her a wink, but she gathered herself and blew a kiss back to her wife, before the screen blinked off. She sat in place for a while, already missing the damned woman… But she stuffed her feelings down, and strode over to Fareeha's bedroom to check on the girl – finding the room's lights still on, and Fareeha snuggled up in bed with a storybook in her hands.

"Fareeha," was all Kamilah had to say, and the girl set her book aside.

When Fareeha was tucked in and had received a kiss on her forehead, she asked, "Mama? Where's ami?"

"In Switzerland, dear."

"Yeah, but where is it? Is it very far away?"

"Ah, that. Well…" Kamilah took her phone from her pocket, and quickly searched for a world map. "$See here? This is where we are. Egypt, right?" She pointed out the country, and Fareeha nodded. "$And Switzerland is all the way…up here." Kamilah scrolled up the map, and pointed the country out. "$This is Zürich, in Switzerland – about 4 hours away by plane. That's where your ami is working now.""

"Oh. Okay."

"Your ami and I went to Switzerland for our honeymoon, you know. We had our vacation there after we got married."

"Really?"

Kamilah nodded. "Yeah. We went during winter, so there was snow."

"I wanna see snow," Fareeha said. "$Can I go too?$"

"Of course. Maybe we'll go in the future with your ami. Or we can go and visit ami, during your holidays."
Fareeha grinned, more than satisfied with the answer. "Promise?"

"Promise. I'll talk to your ami, and we'll see what we can do," Kamilah assured her. "But it might be a while before we can go."

"It's okay. I can wait," Fareeha said, pulling the covers up to her shoulders.

Kamilah smiled, smoothing a hand over the girl's hair. "I know you can, my dear."

Chapter End Notes

Overwatch...is finally here......Oh god why are my hairs grey-

Aight now that Overwatch has been established, I'll try to keep the pace chopchop quick, so that we can reach the main Amari Family Drama that I'm aiming for - Fareeha's joining the army, and Ana's disappearance. The things in between will be covered of course, no worries, just not in too much depth.

Ya know, it's been 52 chapters and you goofs are still here. I'd send all of you cakes if I could. Rainbow keks
"So, how's the view down there?" Ana drawled, passing her scope over the crowd gathered for the rally. "Or rather, how's the smell?"

"It's not that crowded, Ana," Jack replied over the comms, as the heavy truck pulled to a stop at the park's entrance.

"I don't know, think I can smell Rein from where I'm standing," Tien said, and Ana could spot his wry smile as he patrolled the northern border of the park.

"That hurts my feelings, Tien!" Rein boomed. They could hear him slipping the Crusader helmet on. "I didn't eat that many cabbages last night."

"Think you ate double my weight in cabbages," Torbjörn pointed out.

"...I didn't eat that many cabbages for my size."

"Point made."

"Alright, we're clear to move," Jack cut in, promptly followed by metallic clicks and shuffles over the radio. "Kostya, you ready?"

"Always, my friend."

"Eyes open, team. Let's go."

With that, all banter disappeared from the comms as the truck's back doors were swung open. Reinhardt stepped out first, armed only with his shield generator on his left gauntlet. He cast his gaze around, then stepped aside to allow the rest to alight; Jack took point and led Kostya down the path towards the stage constructed for this rally, while Reinhardt and Torbjörn took up the rear.

This was the first public appearance for the UN's newest Messenger for Peace, and security was on high alert – though Moscow had one of the world's most active anti-omnic movements, Kosta was insistent on starting in his homeland first, no doubt eager to make amends…and send a strong message. But what that message would be, depended on the success of his first rally. Thus, Overwatch was offered the aid of the peacekeeping forces, as well as the local police, to ensure that this mission ended well.

Ana kept alert as the rally went on, receiving regular updates from the ground team patrolling in and around the park. Though she had her sniper rifle on hand as always, its use was reserved only for an emergency on this mission; her main role was surveillance and team coordination – giving orders in Jack's stead, while the Strike Commander focused on Kostya's personal safety.

"Captain, loiterers near north point," Gabriel's voice crackled over the radio.

"Any danger?"

"If they weren't suspicious, I wouldn't be..."

Ana waited, then said, "Reyes? Report–"
"Shit."

She heard rapid footfalls over the line, and the click of a sidearm, before his mic was cut off. "Reyes. Do you need backup? Reyes, report." A moment's wait yielded no answer, and Ana opened another channel. "Tien, move to Reyes' position. There's trouble–"

"No, no. It's fine," Gabriel came back on, huffing heavily into his mic – more out of exasperation than exhaustion. "Caught these two trying to sneak around the back. Armed. I'll take them in."

"Do you need help?"

"No, I knocked them out."

"Of course you did." Ana's gaze was drawn towards the southern road then, where a van was speeding towards the park. "Mirem–"

"Captain, explosives detected in a van, just sped past my location," Mirembe reported, even as her drone flew through the air in pursuit of the vehicle.

"Get on it!" Ana brought Tien and Torbjörn into the channel as well. "Tien, Mirembe needs backup. Now."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Torbjörn, follow behind Tien. I need you to defuse the explosives, if necessary."

"Aye."

With a quick warning to Jack, Ana turned her attention towards the van – which had been disabled remotely by Mirembe's drone, along with the few cars behind it to avoid a mass collision. Since Tien was only halfway to her position, Mirembe moved by herself, taking on the driver and passenger who'd alighted with pistols ready. Their apparent confusion at the empty space around them was compounded, when one man's pistol was knocked out of his hand by seemingly nothing at all. Then he bent over in pain, hands covering his crotch, before his head rocked backwards and he fell to the ground unconscious. Still cloaked in her stealth field, Mirembe took the other down with ease, just as Tien reached the van.

"Took your time, dancer boy."

"Didn't want to steal your thunder, that's all."

The two rounded to the back of the van, where Tien ripped the locked doors open with the enhanced strength provided by his combat gauntlets. Ana heard short bursts of gunfire, then solid thuds as Mirembe and Tien incapacitated the people within.

"Damn, they activated the countdown. You have less than 5 minutes, Torb," Mirembe said, and Torbjörn rushed over to the van.

"Hm, regular high explosives. Not a problem."

"Should we stand back? Just in case?" Tien asked, as much in jest as he was serious.

"I got this," Torbjörn muttered, his tone reaching that placid focus. "But guard the doors if you feel antsy."

"Right."
Tien stood outside the van's doors, keeping watch while Mirembe hurried around to clear a perimeter, holding back confused passers-by until Torbjörn gave the all-clear. They took a concerted sigh of relief, and Ana scanned the area before delivering a report to Jack.

"Still nothing on my end, Amari. And good work."

"We're incapable of doing anything else, Morrison."

The rally went on for another hour, and ended with such a loud cheer that even Ana could hear from her lofty perch. When Kostya and his guards were loaded onto his van and left the site, Ana shut off her stealth field and hustled down the building, joining Mirembe, Tien, and Gabriel in their own transport van.

"Great job, kids," Ana said. She ruffled each of their heads as she walked in, then settled into the seat next to Gabriel, who snorted as he smoothed his hair back.

"Thanks, mom."

And so, a year passed with Ana spending most of her time in Overwatch, traveling all over the world once again. They moved at a slower pace this time, as Kostya had a full itinerary that kept him longer in each city, which in turn kept Overwatch busy guarding him as he went along. He gathered friends and allies, and was soon expanding his scope of activities that necessitated an imminent recruitment for Overwatch, so they'd have sufficient numbers to cover future missions – that always seemed to grow in number.

Needless to say, with their neverending influx of work and preparation for recruitment, Ana's schedule had been hectic – though she did manage to squeeze out some time to fly home. But only for a brief week or two at most, twice that year. Since she'd planned her breaks to coincide with her anniversary and Fareeha's birthday, Ana pretty much missed out on everything else that happened at home, and was only kept up to date by Kamilah over their calls.

For one, she missed Khalid's wedding to a florist he'd been dating since the Crisis ended. Ana offered her regrets and apologies to her brother-in-mischief, and he laughed her off with a grin and a tease; but she made sure to send him a recorded message on the eve of his wedding, and word was, it made him shed a few tears. He refused to reveal whatever Ana had spoken of in the recording, and Ana claimed it was a reminder that he'd never be as good as her. But, of course, no one bought into her obvious bullshit, and assumed it was something touching. Kamilah and Fareeha attended the wedding in her stead, and were pulled into the squad photo they snapped at the end of the night.

Not long after, Safiya and Zahra called home to give a little surprise – they'd adopted a six-year-old son, who had been orphaned during the Crisis. Samir, though a little quieter than Fareeha, seemed quite bubbly himself, and shared his cousin's fascination with flying and planes. So their parents had to set up separate calls for the children to chat away, while the adults could talk among themselves.

They didn't stick with this method of communication for long though, when Safiya finally fulfilled her long-time wish of moving back to Cairo. She and Zahra moved into the house that was built opposite the Amari family's still-empty lot, and during the frequent visits to Kamilah and Fareeha on base, they urged Kamilah to consider building their own house as well.

Fareeha, for one, was excited at the prospect of living opposite her cousin and favourite aunts, and couldn't stop pestering her own parents to build a brand new house to live in. So Kamilah, after long discussions with Ana over vidcall, decided to bite the bullet and contracted an architect to start drawing up plans for their new home – conveying her best recollection of the old house, so that Ana
would have a nice surprise to return to as well.

And six months passed after Ana's first year in Overwatch, with Kamilah kept busy as well – chasing after Fareeha to balance homework and play, keeping up with the house's construction, and pondering over an invitation for a transfer from the academy and back to the hospital again. And when their lives had finally slowed down to give them some space to breathe, and the recruitment rush in Overwatch had subsided, Ana invited her family for a visit to their base in Zurich.

So started Mama Kamilah's new task – to pack for her family's trip to Zurich, and bring along some of the belongings that Ana had requested. She'd settled Ana's portion of the luggage first, before moving onto her own, and then she was given pause when she looked at Fareeha's smaller luggage, open on the bed beside hers.

Kamilah laughed to herself when Fareeha bounced in, carrying Fart the Purple Dragon and Beaks the Baby Blue Bird in each hand, and stuffed both toys into her luggage – which had more books and toys than clothes. "Fareeha, dear. You're going to need more clothes, you know? We're going for a week. And…" Kamilah lowered her voice to soften the blow. "We can't fit that many toys in your luggage."

Fareeha pouted. "But I want my toys."

"Alright, but…" Kamilah eyed the luggage. "You can only bring one. Fine, two," she added when Fareeha whined.

"Okay," Fareeha sighed, plucking out every toy except the dragon and bird. "But mama, can you bring your tiger too?"

Kamilah took a breath, ready to say 'no', but at the sight of her daughter's pleading puppy eyes, her reply turned into, "Yup."

Satisfied, Fareeha skipped back into her room with her toys, leaving Kamilah to her own packing – after wrapping her own tiger plush with a blanket in the luggage. But the girl wouldn't leave her mother alone for long, bouncing back into the room and looking curiously in her mother's closet – which was a lot emptier without a bulk of Ana's clothes taking up space. Fareeha hummed her favourite cartoon's tune as she looked over the clothes, then returned to her mother's side again, eager to give her own surprise.

"Mama, look!" Fareeha sang. "Now I look like you!"

Kamilah nearly choked when she looked up, and found Fareeha wearing one of Ana's oversized t-shirts, with a worn print of 'SEX MACHINE' on its front. She let out a sheepish laugh, figuring that Fareeha hadn't grasped enough…mature English to understand the letters yet. "You little rascal," Kamilah said, pinching the girl's nose. "Now, put it back in mama's closet or I'll have to iron it again."

"Aw, but it's so fun." Fareeha bounced around the room again, clutching onto the hem of the t-shirt and flapping around with her 'wings', making little bird noises. Then she stopped by the bed again, put both hands on her hips, and frowned. "Fareeha, eat your veggies or no games!"

Kamilah couldn't help but bark a laugh, and after she'd given Fareeha a flick on the forehead, the girl finally took off the t-shirt and tossed it carelessly back into the wardrobe. Kamilah had to restrain a sigh – making a mental note to fold the shirt later, and teach her daughter to fold clothes herself… If that was even possible, with a girl who seemed able to throw her dirty clothes everywhere except the
Getting bored, Fareeha threw herself onto the bed and plucked her bird toy from the luggage, flapping its wings idly. "Mama?"

"Hm?"

"Ami's daddy and mommy are gone. That's why we visit them at the grave, right?"

"Yes…?"

"What about yours?" Fareeha asked innocently, rolling onto her front. "Where are they? Do you visit them?"

"No," Kamilah said after a moment's pause. "I don't know where they are."

"Why?"

"Because…I left them a long time ago."

"But why? Aren't they sad because you left?"

Kamilah snorted scornfully, then caught the darker, bitter mood before it rose to the surface. "No, I don't think they are." She folded the last pair of pants and placed it in the luggage, then sat on the bed with Fareeha. She'd never expected to explain this to her own child, and took a moment to phrase it lightly. "Mama left them because–, I didn't want them anymore. They were…bad parents, Fareeha."

"Oh." Fareeha twiddled with her bird plushie's wings. "So they're not like you?"

"No." Kamilah smiled. "You think mama is a good parent?"

"Yeah," Fareeha said, like it's the most obvious thing in the world, and she's perplexed why her mama would even ask in the first place. "You're the bestest mama."

Her mother chuckled. "And your ami?"

"Ami is the bestest also," Fareeha declared without hesitation, then fell into a moment of thoughtful silence. "Except when you make me eat kale. Then you're bad."

"You naughty little…” Kamilah leaned over and tickled Fareeha's sides mercilessly, getting a squeal from her daughter. Fareeha wriggled and jumped off the bed, running out into the corridor with her mama hot on her heels. "Come back for your naughty tickles, Fareeha!"

"No!"

On the day of their flight – and the night before – Fareeha positively vibrated with excitement. She dressed herself quickly and put on the hair beads they'd bought for her, and was exceedingly helpful at helping her mother carry their things, eager to reach the airport as soon as possible.

There, Kamilah brought her up to the observation deck first, where they remained for most of their wait, Fareeha enamoured with the planes rolling down the runways and taking off. And even when they've boarded their own plane, her wonder still hadn't worn off, and Fareeha kept her eyes fixed on the windows as they took off, giggling when she felt the acceleration and upward tilt.

The 5-hour flight to Zurich passed pretty quickly for Kamilah, who drifted in and out of a nap with
one earbud in, while her other ear was left free in case Fareeha said anything. The girl watched the bright blue skies for a long while before she grew bored of the scenery, then fished out her own gaming device to play with, until the plane landed. She held onto Kamilah's hand as they navigated the unfamiliar surroundings, retrieved their backpacks, then went out to look for Ana in the arrival hall.

Her wife was pretty easy to spot – to her eyes, anyway; Ana waited a few paces from the crowd gathered at the gates, wearing a light jacket and pants, with shades covering her eyes. Kamilah had to suppress a snort at the sight, while Fareeha flew towards her ami for a hug.

"I missed you too, little one." Ana smiled, giving Fareeha one last squeeze before releasing her. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a chocolate bar, holding it out to Fareeha's eager hands. "Wanna share this?"

"Yeah!"

Ana ruffled her hair as Fareeha tore the package open, then stood to face her wife. "Milah, Milah."

"Ana, Ana. When will you learn?" Kamilah tapped at the tattoo still poking out beneath Ana's shades. "Your dumb tattoo can't be hidden. There are still people looking at you."

"I know," Ana sighed airily, pulling off the shades. "But people tend to stay away when they aren't sure it's you, you know?"

"I wouldn't know, Strike Captain." Kamilah smiled at Ana's peck on her lips, then planted a kiss on her wife's cheek.

Ana drove them over to a diner first, where they ordered some snacks to fill their stomachs, and finished the chocolate bar – most of which found its way into Fareeha's stomach. Then they went straight to the Overwatch base, where their identities were entered into the security system, before Ana was cleared to bring them to the barracks.

The Strike Captain's quarters, while bigger than the rest like the Commander's, was still quite modest – and a little small for a family of three. So they deposited their luggage and made their way to the team's private lounge, where the family was greeted warmly and loudly – the latter of which was mostly due to Reinhardt.

While Fareeha was drawn away from Kamilah's side by Reinhardt's exuberance and Mirembe's friendly teases, Jack extended his hand to Kamilah with a smile.

"It's nice to see you again," he said. "Feels like a lifetime ago since we met you in Cairo."

"It does."

"And now we finally get to meet you for real," Gabriel added, taking her hand next. "Ana's told us a lot about you."

"All about how terrifying I am, I presume?"

"Well, mostly." Gabriel shrugged, a lop-sided smile on his face as he caught Ana's pointed look. "But she does it in a very loving way."

"Trying to sabotage my marriage, Gabe?"
"Eh, he tries to sabotage everything," Torbjörn added, coming over to greet Kamilah as well.

While her wife was kept occupied by the three men, Ana turned her attention back to Fareeha, who's gazing at Reinhardt, Mirembe and Tien, enraptured as they threw out story after combat story to try impressing Fareeha the most.

"I bet you can fight a big tank!" Fareeha giggled at Reinhardt's story of wrestling an omnic into submission. "You're really big!"

Ana mock gasped. "Fareeha, you can't just tell people they're big."

"But I am!" Reinhardt proclaimed, drawing up to his full height and thumping a fist on his chest. "In fact, I am this team's noble and courageous tank!"

"Wait, I thought you're our knight?" Mirembe asked.

"It's a gaming reference, you dolt," Tien said.

"I wouldn't know, geek," Mirembe riposted, though their little argument went unnoticed by Fareeha, who stood in Reinhardt's shadow, still gazing up at him in wonder.

"You're really tall," Fareeha said.

"Yeah? You wanna ride on his shoulders?"

Fareeha's eyes grew round as coins at Ana's suggestion. "Can I, can I?"

"Of course! But we can't do it in here, you'll hit the ceiling. Come." Reinhardt offered his large hand for Fareeha to hold. "Let's show you and your mama around the base, shall we?"

"Yeah, yeah! Let's go!"

Naturally, Reinhardt became Fareeha's favourite within the first day, closely followed by Tien and Mirembe – quite literally, as the agents had little to do before their next mission. The three became Fareeha's little squad, and she spent as much time around them as she did with her family, who were often in the company of Jack and Gabriel. Torbjörn had flown back to Sweden in the meantime, to be with his own, larger family, and to work out a deal between the Ironclad Guild and Overwatch.

Since Fareeha seemed happy enough with her new friends, Ana stuck with Kamilah instead, rarely parted from the wife she'd seen so little of, over the past year. Then came a day when Jack and Ana were called away for an urgent meeting with Adawe, which lasted through the morning and afternoon. And when she returned to her office at last, she turned on the lights and was surprised to find Kamilah laid out on the couch, rousing blearily from the nap Ana had disturbed.

"Sorry, babe. Shall I turn down the lights?"

"No," Kamilah groaned as she pushed herself up with a sniff, then glanced at the clock on the wall. "Oh, I've knocked out for...over two hours."

"You're getting old, dear," Ana laughed, tossing her folder and datapad onto the desk.

"I found my first white hair not long ago, so yes, I am." Kamilah took a deep breath and dragged a hand down her face. She blinked slowly, then looked Ana over with that thoughtful crease between her brows. "That's your uniform."
Ana looked down at herself, as if to double check. "Yup."

"Hm." Kamilah stood and walked over. "Quite fashionable."

"Thanks–"

"But impractical. What's the point of this?" Kamilah gestured at Ana's right leg. "There's armour on this leg, but not the other one? And here, you have a chestguard." She knocked on the solid metal covering Ana's chest, then at the fabric over her stomach. "But there's no protection here. Just what is going on? Is Overwatch on a budget?"

Ana chuckled, crossing her arms as she waited for Kamilah to finish her inspection, circling around to examine the Strike Captain's back. "Ooh," Ana sang when Kamilah slipped her fingers through the straps on her backside.

"Well, at least your booty is secure," Kamilah deadpanned, giving the straps a tug before Ana turned around and pulled her close.

"Gotta safekeep the booty for you, Mrs. Amari," Ana crooned, feeling Kamilah laugh quietly against her lips, as she kissed her wife slowly. "I really missed you," she murmured, sharing one kiss after another, subtly steering her wife towards the desk.

But when Kamilah bumped into the desk, she caught onto Ana's game. She grunted, words stolen from her lips by Ana, but she pushed lightly against her wife's chest, holding Ana at bay. "Really? Right here?"

"Why not?" Ana purred, moving forward to stand between Kamilah's legs.

"Not in your office, Ana," Kamilah said, even as she slung both arms around Ana's neck.

"But Fareeha's sharing our room!" Ana whined, pout forming on her lips.

"Too bad," Kamilah crooned back at her, giving Ana another peck. She smiled at her wife's pleading and insistent kisses, giving no protest when Ana's tongue slipped in for a brief delve.

"Let's go to my room now," Ana whispered.

Kamilah huffed. "You really are hungry for it, aren't you?"

"Oh yeah. And I'm going to eat you right up." Ana grinned, then turned around and hefted Kamilah onto her back, getting a burst of laughter from her wife as she carried Kamilah out of the office.

The next day, the family stole some time for themselves, playing out in the empty field behind the barracks. As it was usually breezy, Ana managed to get hold of two kites that they could fly, and that afternoon provided strong winds that kept them occupied for a long while. When Fareeha wasn't holding onto her own kite, she ran all over the green grass, reveling in the air that was much cooler than she'd experienced at home, and imagining she was right beside the kites soaring high in the skies above.

And when they finally tired of the kites, they just plopped down in the middle of the green field for a breather. Kamilah laid down on the grass, arms stretched out by her sides as she closed her eyes, enjoying the serenity with a faint smile on her lips. Ana, on the other hand, took the chance to chat with her daughter, who seemed more than happy to share everything that had happened while her ami was away.
"Samir said he wants to be a plane, but that's silly, right?"

"Why is that silly?" Ana asked, winding the kite's string around its wooden spool.

"Because we're people, not planes," Fareeha explained. "Like, Auntie Zahra is a person who flies planes. And helicopters."

"So? People can be planes if they really, really want."

Fareeha giggled. "No, they can't, ami."

"Oh really? Let me show you." Ana pushed herself onto her feet, and squat down in front of Fareeha. "Here, climb on."

"Why?" Fareeha asked, though she climbed onto Ana's back and held on as her mother stood up. Then Ana bent down so Fareeha could lie comfortably on her back, and said, "Now spread your wings, habibi."

"You're so silly, ami!" Fareeha laughed.

"We're all silly beans, dear. Now, engage your wings, Captain Fareeha!" Ana spread out her arms along with her daughter. "Thrusters engaged. Let's take off!"

Both mother and daughter made loud planes noises with their mouth, as Ana ferried Fareeha around the field, swooping and swerving carefully so that Fareeha wouldn't fall off her back. She made a few twisting circuits, then turned around to fly towards Kamilah – and Ana paused when she found Kamilah's phone lens trained on her.

"Are you taking a video?" Ana asked.

"Oh, no. Just pictures." Kamilah tapped at the screen once more, lowering her phone slightly. "But good idea." She lifted her phone again, then waved a hand at Ana. "Go on, I'll record your flying."

"Milah, my back's kinda breaking here, you know." Ana straightened herself, piggy-backing Fareeha instead.

"Really? Who's old now, huh?"

"Still you, my darling old hag."

Chapter End Notes

So time will fly pretty quick during chapters, but do tell me if it's difficult to keep up with the time yeah?

Just to keep us on track: as of now - Ana's 37, Kamilah's 39, and Fareeha's 9 years old. My god they're all growing up so fast.

Oh, and the uniform Milah's critiquing is that one from her early OW days, without the coat.
"Ooh, it already looks so much nicer than before."

"It'd better. It was just empty land. And a smoking pile of rubble before that—"

"I meant, nicer than my old home," Ana sighed. "Is it just me, or are you becoming more like me?"

"Don't flatter yourself," Kamilah replied drily, hiding her smile even with the camera lens focused on the lawn.

"Never thought I'd feel so touched seeing sprinklers in my own home," Ana said as Kamilah passed the camera over the grass. "Have I ever told you how my mom made us water the damn grass ourselves?"

"Too many times, dear."

"You know, maybe we should let Fareeha water the lawn too. Builds character…"

"You're just jealous that she doesn't have to."

"Psh." Ana stuck her tongue out at her wife, when Kamilah turned the camera back to herself, as she walked back into the house. "I'm not jealous of anyone. People are jealous of me."

"You wish." Kamilah rolled her eyes, then turned her phone around to resume the house tour.

It had been eight months since they'd returned from the trip to Switzerland, and since then, the house's construction had moved quickly along to completion. Then Kamilah spent nearly two months stressing over the move and furniture shopping, and only stopped pulling her hair out when she could finally crash into their new sofa, with Fareeha right beside her.

She walked Ana down the hallway, past their open dining room and into the kitchen, listening to Ana's wonder as she was introduced to the modern, rebuilt version of her childhood home. Kamilah smiled to herself as she entered the living room, giving Ana a good look at the photo of the original Amari family that she'd hung on the wall, before going over to the sofa where Fareeha was laid out on, tapping intently on her gaming device.

"Say hi to ami, Fareeha."

"Hi, ami," Fareeha said off-handedly, obviously too absorbed in her game to be bothered with anything else.

"What are you doing, habibti?"

"Boss battle," Fareeha muttered.

"I bought her a new game last week," Kamilah said as she moved away from the living room. "Something about building robots to fight with? But she's playing with it too much… Maybe I shouldn't have bought it for her."

Kamilah bit her lip as Fareeha's loud whine followed her down the hallway, the girl having heard her mother's comment, and was prodded into giving a very eloquent protest. "She's becoming more like you, Ana."
"Oh, sure. When she's naughty, it's my fault. And when she's good, it's you, isn't it?"

"That's right."

Ana sighed airily as Kamilah continued the tour, showing her around the first floor before moving up to the second. "Huh, is everything new? Did you move back any of our old stuff? The bookcases?"

"Yeah, but I had to throw most of them away. This is basically a brand new house, with brand new furniture… Sponsored by the UN's favourite captain."

"Ah yes, the very same who's been crying into her wallet. I know her pretty well."

"Good, give her my regards. Feels like I haven't seen her in ages."

"Aw, Milah. I miss you. You know that."

"I know." Kamilah swallowed the sigh that rose to her throat, letting Ana off the hook this time. God knows she'd nagged at her wife about her absence enough – even Kamilah was tiring of it herself. Besides, it wasn't as if Ana had much of a choice…

"Oh, damn! This is our room now!" Ana exclaimed when Kamilah walked into the master bedroom last. She laughed, "This feels so weird. It used to be my parents', and now it's mine."

"Feeling old yet?"

"That's pretty rich, coming from someone who turned 40 this year. Should I bring along a wheelchair when I come back next?"

"Only if you plan to sit in it," Kamilah sniped back. "And you'd better come back this time. Fareeha was pretty upset when you had to cancel before."

"Yeah, I know. I'll have to buy her twice the chocolates now."

"Please don't. Her self-control is getting more horrible." Kamilah fell back into the comfy new bed with a sigh, then groaned as she stretched, getting a few creaks from her back.

"Ooh, is that a preview?"

Kamilah clicked her tongue. "Ugh, it's like your brain's always in the gutter since you joined Overwatch."

"Hey, listen. I have two guys constantly fucking in the room next to mine, while I can only get any when I go home once in months, are you kidding me? It's unfair."

"Well, it's your fault for being there in the first place."

"Oh, oh! I've been wondering when you'd start throwing that in my face."

"Then you'd better buckle down, because I'm going to--" Kamilah was cut off when two beeps sounded from Ana's end. She waited as Ana received the call, then sighed after a short exchange.

"Sorry, babe. But I gotta go. Overwatch seems intent on overworking me today."

"It's Sunday."

"Yup! I love my job."
"I hate it." Kamilah smiled along with Ana's grin.

"Love you, Milah."

"Then prove it."

"I'll come back soon. Promise." Ana blew a kiss, before the screen went dark.

Kamilah heaved a sigh, letting the phone drop to the mattress. She rolled over and grabbed the fluffy pillow – the one Ana would use when she's back – and squeezed it in her arms. She took a deep inhale of the freshly-washed scent, and couldn't help but let out another sigh. Ana had been away for over a year, and she couldn't come home soon enough.

'Soon' turned out to be 'longer than expected' – a common occurrence since the founding of Overwatch, and though Ana had been forced to stretch her promises more than she'd like, she still made an effort to return home as soon as she was able. This time, it took three more months for her to get things in order, before she could slip away from Overwatch for a visit back home.

A 'visit' home. Somehow it felt more poignant than it sounded.

Kamilah drove her back from the airport, and when they'd reached house, Ana took a moment to stand before her home, staring at it in silence. She thought she'd lost most of what she had to remember her family by, when the house was turned to rubble in the Crisis. In truth, she did; but now, as she looked upon Kamilah's excellent effort at recreating the old house, it felt as if it'd all come back. Better, even – it was hers now, where her very own family would live and build upon the memories of the old.

It feels...good.

Ana walked in with Kamilah as her guide, marveling at what she'd only seen through the screen thus far, and nearly tearing up at the personal touches Kamilah had emulated from Zaid – little potted plants in rooms, family photos on end tables and the fridge, and that one display cabinet in the living room with a shelf for the children's plush toys.

Then she deposited her luggage in the bedroom and threw herself facedown onto the plump new bed – only to be chased off by Kamilah immediately, getting scolded for dirtying the sheets her wife had changed recently. She clamped her arms around her grumpy wife then, smothering Kamilah's face – and nagging – with playful pecks until she desisted, a smile cracking through her poker face.

Since Fareeha was over at a friend's house, Ana was free to spend the day alone with Kamilah, making up for the long year that she'd been away. It was a...rediscovery, in a sense – sort of seeing Kamilah in a new light, spotting the subtle changes they'd both experienced in their time apart.

As Kamilah spoke about the transfer recommendation she'd received again – after rejecting the last one – Ana just nodded and listened quietly, running her fingers through her wife's wavy tresses, and playing with the few silver strands she'd found. Ana hadn't quite started going grey like Kamilah, but one thing they both shared were the lines about their eyes. She couldn't help but smile when she noticed it, reaching up to caress the faint beginnings of crow's feet at Kamilah's eyes. It was something that she couldn't see through their vidcalls, so it came as a surprise – a welcome one, as Ana's been paying a bit more attention to her wrinkles as well.

Kamilah clicked her tongue when she noticed Ana worrying at her eyes. "Yes, yes. I'm growing old. You are, too."
Ana snickered as Kamilah tapped at her temple, and she caught her wife's hand, pressing a kiss to her knuckles. "Actually, I was thinking how much more beautiful you look." She grinned when Kamilah rolled her eyes, then said, "And, Milah. I've been wanting to ask you for a while…"

"We are not building a statue of you in the lawn."

"No, not that. I just want to ask… Have you ever thought about moving to Zurich with me?"

Kamilah stared at her quietly, then snorted. "Are you kidding? And just what would I do there? Join Overwatch with you?"

"Well, maybe you could get that degree you've always wanted," Ana mused, threading their fingers together. "Maybe a medical degree. Then you can open your own private practice. 'Doctor Kamilah Amari'. Sounds just great, don't you think?"

"Please. I'm too old to be slogging for a medical degree now," Kamilah sighed. "Besides, we just finished building the damn house, Ana. Do you know how close I came to losing my mind over it? How I nearly wrenched my back moving our stuff over–?"

"I know, I know!" Ana waved a hand to placate her wife before she launched into a rant. "It's just a future consideration, that's all."

"Maybe. And even if we want to, I'd wait until Fareeha's a little older. I mean, she already missed her friends when we moved out of base. It'll be more difficult for her." Kamilah regarded her for a moment. "Why, do you want us to move?"

"Nah, it's just a possibility. I know I haven't been around much, and I do miss you all. I don't want to make this…too hard, you know?"

"Don't worry about it, Ana," Kamilah huffed, running a hand down her hair. "We're doing just fine so far. Or do you not think so?"

"No! No, of course not. It's just–" The words caught in her throat as she looked back at Kamilah's curious gaze, and Ana gave a slow sigh, wrestling her guilt into submission. "We've been great, and you've been absolutely wonderful. I just don't want to tire you out."

"Ana, please. I've been tired ever since I married you." Kamilah laughed, then kissed Ana's pout away. "But I'm serious, amar. Don't worry about home, alright? I'll take care of things back here, and you just worry about…whatever it is you worry about in Zurich."

Ana smiled, laughing under her breath as she leant forward to embrace her wife, burying her head in Kamilah's neck. "I love you, Milah."

"If you don't, my dear, I'll have to toss you into the trash."

Fareeha returned home in the evening, and greeted Ana with a big grin on her face – not to mention her dirty clothes speckled with sand from the playground, and minor scrapes on her palms and knees that were bandaged by her friends' parent. They made her wash up before dinner, then went into the city for a night out together – though they had to drive home earlier than expected, as Fareeha was quite tuckered out from an entire day's worth of play.

Despite Ana's prolonged absence before this visit home, the days went by in the same fashion as all her previous visits. Ana took over caring for her daughter – who'd grown enough that she didn't need constant attention anyway – and made sure the family spent as much time together as they could,
whenever Kamilah was home from work. Fareeha did protest from time to time when she preferred to play by herself, but Ana always managed to coax her into wandering out for a simple stroll in the park or a movie. Ana had to restrain a laugh when she realised just how much she was acting like her mother, who'd always insisted on spending 'family time' together when she was back from a tour of duty.

Oh, how the tables have turned…and how she regretted complaining about her mother's efforts before.

It was only at the end of the week that Ana managed to see Safiya and Zahra again – along with their adopted son, Samir. Her sister had been away from Cairo visiting her in-laws, and when she heard that Ana was back, Safiya made it a point to drop by on the very same evening that she returned home. And the moment Kamilah opened the door to let them in, Ana took off at a sprint down the hallway and leapt right onto her sister, who let out a cry of surprise and staggered backwards under her weight.

"Ana–, Ana!" Safiya's arms wound around the sister clinging onto her like a koala, and she let out a breathless laugh along with Ana's cackles. "Ana, you're breaking my back!"

"Someone's getting old," Ana sang, squeezing Safiya about the shoulders before she swung her legs down, and allowed herself to be lowered to the floor. She cocked her head, watching Safiya stretch this way and that with a grimace. "Wait, I didn't really hurt your back, did I?"

"She sprained her back a while ago," Zahra chuckled, taking her turn to hug Ana. "Still feeling the strain."

"Aw, poor baby," Ana crooned, before grinning down at her nephew, ruffling his hair. Samir smiled up at her, then was quickly pulled into the house by Fareeha.

"Shut up, Captain," Safiya groaned, as they followed their wives into the house as well. "I finally manage to see you after so long, and the first thing you do is try to break my back."

"What else are sisters for?" Ana deadpanned.

"I don't know, but not this," Safiya sighed, scratching her head. "Oh, wait! Kami, have you shown Ana that forum thing I sent you?"

"Oh, Safiya. Please," Zahra said as Kamilah shook her head.

Safiya cackled as she pulled out her phone, quickly tapping her way to the browser and searching for a link. When she was done, she handed the phone to Ana and said, "Here, look at this."

Ana raised her brows at the forum thread on screen which, so far, displayed posts talking about the Overwatch team. Not about their courageous deeds in the war, or their current peacemaking efforts, or even a complaint about the militant nature of their organisation, no. It was about…their physical attractiveness.

Her lips started curving into a smirk as she scrolled through the comments – some adoring, some lewd, and some just downright objectifying. Then she happened upon a small subsection dedicated to herself, filled with questions whether she was married, if she was gay, and what was her workout routine. There were comments on how cool her tattoo and beret were, and then there was one that made her stop dead.

"Oh my god, someone said I'm a MILF," Ana said in disbelief. "Someone said–, I don't
"Look *that* old, do I?"

"Well, you do have Fareeha," Safiya pointed out.

"Yeah, but I don't–, *what the fuck.*" Laughter started falling from her lips, even as Kamilah squinted at her for the cuss. "I don't know how I'm supposed to feel."

"Don't overthink it, Ana," Kamilah said drily as Safiya took her phone back. "Or you might start thinking you're a celebrity."

A lop-sided smile made its way onto Ana's face, and she padded over to Kamilah. "Why? Are you jealous?"

"Jealous of what, exactly?"

"Oh, I don't know. With so many people hankering after me… You might start feeling a little threatened?"

"Threatened?" Kamilah scoffed. "I'd *gladly* dump you on any moron who thinks it'll be great to be with you." Her lips parted in a smile despite her words, when Ana engulfed her in a tight hug.

"It's okay, Milah," Ana crooned. "You are my only MILF."

The expression that overtook Kamilah's face was beyond description, but it was safe to say that it encompassed shock, disbelief, repulsion, and *murder.*

"You are my…" Ana leaned in and whispered, "Milah I'd love to fuck."

Kamilah snapped out of her trance then, and clamped Ana's face in both hands. She stared straight into Ana's eyes, and said in a deadly hush, "I'm going to kill you, Ana."

"Looking forward to it, babe."

Of course, Kamilah didn't follow through on her empty threat. And so, Ana was able to spend a very satisfying weekend with her own family and her sister's, warming the new house together with lively chatter and laughter, in a way that it hadn't been for a long time. And it made her leaving for Zurich just a tad bit harder, especially when Safiya followed with Kamilah to send her off as well. She wondered – not for the first time – just why she was leaving them behind. But as always, the thought was fleeting, and Ana left it alone in favour of remembering Kamilah's loving smile and reassurances.

Back in Zurich, she focused on her work again – and its load grew heavier in the year that followed. When Kostya's peace movement had gained traction and pulled together as a solid entity, Gabrielle Adawe started replacing most of the Overwatch agents in Kostya's security team, so that they could start diversifying and focus on other problems as well. In addition to offering aid to the UN peacekeepers and relief missions, Overwatch was given more dangerous tasks as well, including the takedown of notable extremist and terrorist groups, and notorious gangs that threaten the safety of the populace.

For these missions, Overwatch needed many more agents in their ranks, and so ramped up their recruitment efforts, pulling in plenty of soldiers who'd volunteered or came recommended. Thus, while Jack was in charge of mission planning and delegation, Ana was to oversee the recruitment process – which included too many hours at the desk, scanning through countless documents. It made Ana want to punch Jack in the face, even if he wasn't responsible for her plight.
And though her subordinates handled most of the grunt work, Ana was still the one who received reports on the performance of their agents, and assigned them to the missions they'd be suited for. Unfortunately, she was also the one who'd receive complaints about the agents when they screwed up, which made her heave an exhausted sigh.

"Something wrong?" Gabriel asked, setting his mission report onto her desk.

Ana waved him over, and Gabriel pulled a chair along to sit beside her, taking a good look at the screen. "We have two more agents who were found…problematic."

"Hm." Gabriel skinned through the report on said recruits, who'd made a mess of their training that morning. "Disregard for their teammates' lives, borderline insubordination… Still managed to complete the training simulation successfully? Interesting."

"Interesting?" Ana scoffed as Gabriel reached over to scroll through the recruits' profiles. "Troublesome, more like. We'll have to cut them loose like the rest."

"But these aren't the only ones with red marks, are there?"

"No. There are more of them than I'd like to see."

Gabriel hummed to himself again. "I don't think just getting rid of them is the best option. How about leaving them to me?"

"You? Are you going to train them yourself?" Ana asked incredulously, getting only a shrug from her colleague. "Gabe, you already have your hands full with that Deadlock operation. You don't have time for training, and you certainly can't afford to let these people screw your mission up."

"Maybe they won't. Just leave it up to me, Ana."

Ana watched him in thoughtful silence. "You know, you've been requesting quite a few transfers in and out of your team… Almost like a reshuffle?"

Gabriel barked a quiet laugh. "Nothing escapes your eye, huh? Yeah, I am. Deadlock isn't an easy target to take down, and those straight-laced soldiers you've been giving me just can't cut it."

"You need people who can…bend the rules."

"Exactly. Come on, Ana," Gabriel added when she still looked uncertain. "Let's be honest – none of us on the Strike Team were chosen for being obedient, were we?"

"No." Ana leaned back into her chair with a sigh, steeping her fingers as she took another glance at the screen. "Look. I'll give you the people you need – but if anything goes wrong, it'll be your head. Along with ours."

"Trust me, Captain. I'll whip them into shape."

Another year went by, with Overwatch undergoing rapid expansion – not only among their ranks, but with the base itself. New facilities were constantly being added to accommodate their new personnel, and there was a specialised R&D lab under construction, for a new tech and sciences branch that Adawe had in mind. While that would be a major addition for the future, they'd undergone another significant change within Overwatch in the meantime – though it was kept top secret.
Despite Gabriel's initial attempts to escape the commander's mantle, his success with his team of 'troublemakers' had been remarkable – to the point where a sub-section of Overwatch was founded, codenamed 'Blackwatch'. Ana was uncomfortable with its creation, truth be told, and Jack shared her sentiments; black ops was a well-known secret that every military kept, but Overwatch was under international scrutiny. Should any news of Blackwatch's existence leak out, Overwatch would come under heavy fire – something Ana much preferred to avoid.

But it seemed that Gabriel was keeping a good grip on things so far – no one knew of their existence other than high command, and their continued success would ensure their secrecy for a long time. That, however, didn't mean that Jack and Ana were spared any of the headaches Blackwatch dumped into their laps.

"Why did you bring him, and only him back here?" Jack asked, his arms crossed as they stood behind the one-way mirror separating them from the interrogation room.

Gabriel shrugged – a gesture that was starting to annoy both the commander and captain – and they fell into silence as they stared into the room, and its sole occupant.

Blackwatch's recent operation to wipe out a Deadlock cell had been a success, and though Gabriel left none of the gang members standing, he had brought back the sole person left alive. A boy who was only just reaching sixteen, with a dirty mop of unruly brown hair that hung limply by the sides of his face. He still wore Deadlock gang colours, ripped and bloodied from his encounter with Gabriel's team. There were numerous bandages on his body, and Ana wondered if he wasn't in shock, given how he stared blankly at the table, not even trying to fight against the cuffs that chained him down.

"He's just a kid," Gabriel murmured, almost to himself. "He killed two of my people, acted all macho until we subdued him. Then he started shaking and crying on the way back."

"He was still part of Deadlock, Gabe," Jack pointed out. "You know their initiation ritual. He would've had to murder someone to get in, and he'd have killed more after."

"I know, Morrison," Gabriel growled, but then checked his temper. "But you missed what I said – he's just a kid. He must've been manipulated, brainwashed--"

"Still doesn't excuse what he's done," Ana said. She frowned at Gabriel when he looked a little lost himself. "Gabe, I'm not saying it would've been better to leave him behind, but what do you expect to do with him now? Why are you still keeping him here?"

"Send him back to the authorities," Jack spoke before Gabriel could. "At best, he'd get a life sentence. At worst--"

"No. Look, we can get more information out of him. Use him, even. Deadlock's been difficult for us, and we could use him to get inside."

Ana leaned over, shooting him a glare. "Gabe, we are not letting this one into our ranks. And you are not going to recruit him into Blackwatch."

The ghost of a smirk flitted over Gabriel's lips. "We'll see," was his only reply, and he entered the interrogation room before they could say another word.

Both Jack and Ana wore deep scowls as they watched Gabriel take a seat opposite the boy. He talked for a while, but got no reaction from the captive. Then, with a knowing look, Gabriel took the tattered cowboy hat sitting on the table – inciting a violent start from the boy, who tried to pounce at
Gabriel, but was foiled by the cuffs chaining him to the table.

"Just what the fuck is he trying do," Jack rumbled, looking over at Ana.

But she had no answers, and shook her head wordlessly, feeling frustrated herself. She reached down to the computer on the desk before them, tapping on a few buttons to bring up the sparse profile that Gabriel had compiled on the boy.

*Jesse McCree.* It'd better not be a name that brought them more trouble.
The Young

The months passed quickly as they ever did in Overwatch. While Jack and Ana were occupied by their regular duties, they kept a close eye on Blackwatch's activities as well – Gabriel had doubled his efforts at tracking and clamping down the main Deadlock cell, aided by inside information given reluctantly by his captive. But even with Jesse's limited help – the boy had been in the lower rungs and was not privy to valuable intel – Blackwatch continued to suffer setbacks and casualties at a rate higher than Overwatch. So much so, that Jack made the call to bring a temporary end to the Deadlock operation, and allow Blackwatch time to breathe and regroup. Gabriel only gave a minor protest before ceding to Jack's command – most of his agents were in bad shape, and even Gabriel himself had been stretched thin for too long.

So Blackwatch was mostly recalled back to base and given R&R while Gabriel did some team shuffling and recruiting to replenish their ranks. He did this subtly, pulling choice Overwatch recruits and agents into his fold; and while this process took place over two months, Ana was still surprised that he waited so long before giving her the one request she'd expected from the very beginning.

And she was again reminded of the answer she gave – not with a small amount of discomfort – when she strode into the empty shooting range, to find one lane occupied by Jesse McCree. He wore the standard dark grey combat tee and pants, with a pair of boots which were polished as ever, Ana noted with satisfaction. Gabriel had taken Jesse under his wing, and spared no expense in training his discipline and manners – the latter of which had been sorely lacking in the boy. While Jesse was still quiet and lurked away from groups – gaining a reputation as 'that lone wolf who might be a criminal' – he showed more respect to the chain of command the longer he stayed with them, and had gotten into no trouble…so far.

Ana walked over to the lane beside Jesse's, and set her heavy rifle case on the counter with a solid thud, attracting a passing glance from him. Then Jesse did a double-take and dropped his hands immediately, flicking his pistol's safety on before he yanked off the ear muffs on his head.

"Ma'am," Jesse said, so quickly that it was almost reflex – which made Ana smirk slightly.

"I see Gabe's finally given you access to the weapons locker."

Jesse looked down at the pistol in his hand, which Ana had nodded at. "Yeah… He's restricted me to pistols for now. But I prefer a revolver."

Ana's mouth twitched. They'd had an 'interview' of sorts together, when Ana was registering Jesse's name into Gabriel's personal logs – the only place where his name was allowed to exist, until his official recruitment at the end of his probation…whenever Gabriel decided that would be. She'd given him a chance to pick his own codename, and Jesse had chosen 'Revolver' after a moment's thought. While she was typing that down, she heard him mumble something about 'Ocelot' under his breath, but he refused to acknowledge it when she asked. Ana did a simple search on the internet after, and discovered that Jesse had named himself…with a reference to a video game. Yes, he was still a boy indeed.

"Then it's up to Gabriel to decide when you can use one." Ana reached for the com interface for Jesse's lane, and reviewed his performance quickly – missed a quarter of his shots, and those that hit were random smatters over the target's body. She wondered how accurate he'd be with a revolver instead…

"Commander Reyes said you're the best shot on base," Jesse said slowly, his eyes fixed on Ana's
"Best shot on base, probably the best sniper in the world," Ana crowed, well aware her claim would be shot by her wife if she was present. When Jesse tilted his head curiously, she added, "Well, don't just listen to my boast. Judge for yourself."

Ana took Jesse's pistol from the counter, and glanced at the ammo counter on the lane's interface. She spun it smoothly on her finger, then gripped it and thumbed the safety off. Focusing on the target with her cybernetic eye, Ana took aim and emptied the pistol's magazine with rapid-fire shots, looking back at Jesse during the last few shots just for a little dramatic flair.

Jesse stared at her for a moment, then moved his eyes over to the target that Ana had called back to the counter – amid his own practice shots, there were now two neat clusters of bullet holes, each on the bull's eye in the target's body and head.

"Convinced?" Ana asked.

Jesse's eyes remained fixed on the target for a long while, before his lips parted in quiet huffs of laughter. He turned back to her with wide eyes almost in child-like wonder, then seemed to grow abashed as he scratched at his hair – which he now kept washed and combed meticulously.

"Could you…show me how to do that?"

"Finish your probation under Gabriel first, boy." Ana returned the pistol to him. "Then we'll see if you're worth my time."

Jack and Ana stood behind the tinted full-length windows of the observation deck, watching their top agents clean up a test simulation effortlessly, before regrouping at the end and snapping off salutes in their direction. Ana nodded to herself as she glanced down at her datapad, currently being updated with the statistics of the simulation.

"Quite impressive. They cleared this simulation quicker than expected…nearly broke the Strike Team's record," Ana mused to herself, getting a lighthearted glance from Jack.

"Worried we'll get upstaged?"

Ana snorted. "Please. Even if the team gets upstaged, I know my sniper's reputation is still intact."

"How quickly the team spirit evaporates," Jack said drily, though with a smile. He paused to answer the incoming call on comms, clearing their agents for a break before their next trial. "What if someone does steal your sniper's title? You're gonna have to give up your 'World's Best Sniper' mug."

"Only if they survive long enough to get it." Ana chuckled along with him, as they went through the agents' roster together. "Decided which ones you want for your team yet? I know Mirembe and Tien are fighting over at least two agents."

"Then we'll give them one each," Jack said simply. "Now, I've had my eye on--" He was distracted when the doors slid open, and they both glanced up to find Torbjörn walking through, with a young blonde girl following behind him.

"Ah, Torbjörn. You're back from vacation early…and that's not Brigitte," Ana stated the obvious as she gazed curiously at the blonde – who was definitely not Torbjörn's red-headed baby daughter. This one was about…15 years of age? A good few years older than Fareeha, at least.
"Ah, no. My wife decided to bring Brigitte along to visit her family. This is Angela Ziegler."

"It is nice to meet you," Angela said – her accent was notably different from Torbjörn's. Local, actually.

"Oh yes. The girl who's practically your adopted niece, am I right?" Jack moved forward, offering his hand to Angela. "Good to meet you, Angela. Torbjörn talks about you almost as much as his kids. He said you were applying to university already?"

"Yes. I'm hoping it goes well." Angela smiled as she shook Jack's hand, then Ana's.

"I'm sure it will," Ana drawled. "Word is, you are quite the budding genius."

"Ah, I wouldn't say that…"

"Nonsense. She already puts all her peers to shame." Torbjörn beamed up at her, in the same manner as when he spoke about his own children. "In fact, I brought her here to take a look at our R&D labs. Angela wanted to have a look at what we'll do when the branch is up."

"Really? Then let's have a look together before our next session." Ana glanced at Jack, who shrugged in half-hearted assent. Ana patted him on the back, and Jack moved first to lead the group towards the labs, while his three companions trailed behind him.

"So, Angela," Ana said, and the girl looked to her attentively. "Are you planning to join Overwatch?"

"I–, I'm not sure actually." Angela bowed her head in thought, looking at Torbjörn as she did so. "It might be an option. Just something to think about, for what I want to do after my studies."

"Of course. Focus on your education first," Ana agreed. Then she looked to Angela for a few moments, examining the face that had set off a certain…familiarity? "Say, Torbjörn. Have you ever shown us a photo of Angela before?"

"She was in some of my family photos, yes."

"That must be why," Ana said, smiling back at Angela's look of interest. "It feels like I've seen you before."

Fareeha's term break had started, and this meant flying over to Zurich for their yearly visit to Ana at the Overwatch HQ, as was becoming their family's tradition. Ana hadn't been home at all this year, and though Kamilah was a little disgruntled by that fact, she was still glad to lay eyes on her wife, instead of settling for calls through their screens. Fareeha was rather disappointed by Ana's absence too, but that only made her more eager for their flight to Zurich, and she clung onto Ana's hand the moment she saw her ami, gladly engaging in the chit-chat that Ana started.

'How is school? How is home? Have you been good for mama? Do you have any new hobbies?'

All questions that Ana should know the answer to – she did know them, but it was a way to help her reconnect with her child, and keep up with Fareeha's goings-on since their last vidcall together. Kamilah couldn't help but sigh to herself at the thought, though Ana noticed her subdued mood and promptly planted a kiss on her cheek – which helped alleviate her sullenness a bit, and more easily than Kamilah would like to admit.

Back in base, the Amari family were already known to most of the personnel, and so they had the
freedom to roam about wherever they desired, excepting a few restricted areas. And when Ana was forcibly torn away from her family again to tend to Overwatch matters, Kamilah took Fareeha about
the base which the girl loved so much; watching the recruits and agents train in the fields, returning
greetings from personnel who'd recognised them – and the blue beret that Ana had put on Fareeha's
head, telling little 'Captain Amari' to go inspect the base in her stead.

They came across members of the Strike Team as well – Reinhardt and Mirembe were the ones who
accompanied them for most of the day, showing them about the new facilities, and sharing stories of
their latest missions. When night had fallen and Ana had only sent a text that she'd be delayed, they
took it upon themselves to escort the family back to their quarters, where they exchanged salutes with
Fareeha before bidding them good night.

Fareeha went to bed willingly, as she'd been tuckered out by the flight and the day's exploration.
Kamilah tucked her in, making sure the girl was fast asleep before she…decided not to climb into
bed just yet. She went to sit at Ana's study desk, eyeing the numerous files and documents stacked
upon it – not as high as it was in Kamilah's office, but she'd bet that Ana's main office was the bigger
disaster. Kamilah sat there, waiting blankly for Ana to return, but decided to go off on her own
instead of staying in the room.

She kissed Fareeha on the head – the girl didn't stir, and Kamilah made her way out quietly. She
wandered the hallways – emptier now that it was late at night – until she reached the private lounge
reserved for the Strike Team, and decided have a cup of water before heading back to bed.

She'd sat at the table beside the windows, staring out into the night, when the door was opened.
Kamilah turned her head to look at the blonde girl walking in, and was immediately puzzled – she
was much too young to be an agent…the child of one, perhaps? But while she was mystified by the
stranger's identity, the girl seemed to recognise Kamilah, and shot her a friendly smile.

"Hello! I was wondering when you'd arrived," the girl said, going over to the fridge to pour a glass
of juice.

Kamilah cocked her head. "You know me?"

"Oh, yes. You're the Captain's wife, aren't you?"

She blinked, then huffed in amusement. "Is that what I've been reduced to? 'The Captain's wife'?"

The girl paused by the counter, looking at Kamilah in concern. "I'm…sorry? I didn't mean to
offend–"

"Relax. I was just joking." Kamilah softened her tone, reminding herself that this one was still
young. When the girl stood uncertainly by the counter, sipping her apple juice, Kamilah decided to
lure her over with conversation. "Who are you? How do you know me?"

"I'm Angela. Torbjörn brought me here to look at the new labs," she said, shuffling over to take the
chair by Kamilah.

"And Torbjörn is your…?" Kamilah asked, noting the girl's Swiss accent.

"I like to say he's my uncle, but he's actually a family friend. A very close one." Angela gave her a
smile, but it was quick to fade. "He let me stay with him after my parents died, before I went to live
with my grandparents."

"Ah. I'm sorry for your loss."
"It's alright." Angela's smile returned. "It happened during the Omnic Crisis. Torbjörn happened to be there when I lost them, and he sheltered me in his home, before going off to join Overwatch."

Kamilah nodded slowly, taking a sip of water. "And...you're here to look around? Are you planning to join up?"

"That's what Captain Amari asked too," Angela giggled. "Actually, I'm waiting for my application to university to be approved. In the meantime, Torbjörn's bringing me around the base, to look around and see if I'd like to work here in the future. A possibility, you know."

"And what are you studying?"

"Medicine."

"So...you'll be wanting to join Overwatch as a doctor? Medic?" Kamilah asked, and Angela just shrugged. She drummed her fingers as a sudden silence fell over them, then went on, "I was a combat medic once, in the army. I don't know if Overwatch's doctors will see any different, but you'll see a lot of...hardship on the frontlines." She picked her words carefully, acutely aware she was speaking to a girl who hadn't come of age. But Angela just listened quietly, a certain severity falling over her youthful features.

"I know what I will see. I have...experienced it before, but just as a civilian." Angela smiled at her again – tighter this time. "I have considered being a combat medic, to help others as my parents did. But I'm not sure about..." Her voice trailed off, then returned with more strength. "I will have to work up the courage to face it on my own."

Kamilah regarded the girl in silence, wondering just how much more she'd seen than a child of her years should have. "You still have your whole life ahead of you. You'll have time to figure it out, I'm sure."

"I know. I just hope I make the right choice."

Well. Kamilah was trying to wind down for the night, getting herself ready for bed...but she'd just woken up more than she'd like. Still, she stayed at the table with Angela, tapping at her glass of water idly as she searched for a lighter topic of conversation. "So, it sounds like you've met Ana already."

"Yes! I met her this morning, and she brought me around the labs with Commander Morrison. It was an honour to meet her..." Angela stopped in concern when Kamilah nearly choked on the water she'd been sipping, but continued when Kamilah waved a hand at her. "And it's nice to finally meet you too. She talked a bit about you...and your daughter?"

"Yes, Fareeha. She's in base too."

"I haven't seen her around yet."

"I'm sure you will soon. She's that young girl running around with Captain Amari's beret, trying to climb anything that has a bit of height," Kamilah said drily, but she did smile when Angela muffled a giggle with her hand.

The girl took another draught of juice, and tapped her feet on the floor. "Did you meet Captain Amari in the army?"

Kamilah raised a brow. "Yes, I–"
"Duty calls, and sleep suffers. Ah, I'm living the dream." Ana took a packet of lemon tea from the fridge and joined them at the table, pressing a kiss on top of Kamilah's head as she passed by. She sat heavily in her chair with a huge sigh, then said, "So! What've you two been chatting about?"

"Angela just asked if we met in the army," Kamilah replied, glancing over to find that Angela had sat up straighter in her seat. Was Ana aware of the effect she now had on people? Surely she did.

"Oh yes, it was a meeting right out of a romance novel. Picture it – me, Ana Amari, a dashing and heroic sniper in the Egyptian army. And Kamilah Shadid, Egypt's most beautiful medic, and my darling little damsel in distr–"

"If you dare call me that, Amari," Kamilah warned her, raising a finger in threat. "You are sleeping in the corridor tonight."

Ana grinned, then took her hand and kissed her knuckles. She leaned back in her seat, tilting her head nonchalantly. "Well, Angela. We did meet in the army. And let me tell you – if you think Milah's fierce now, ha! You should've seen her back then. She could've stopped an army of omnis with a single glare. I know for sure she stopped my heart a few times before…"

"Dear, oh dear," Kamilah sighed, shaking her head at the holographic projection that Ana had brought up. It was Ana's schedule for the next three months, and Kamilah tapped at the two weeks in January that had been blocked off in red, due to Overwatch business. "You're not going to be home for our anniversary…again."

Ana smiled sheepishly, feeling a slight twinge of guilt. "Sorry, Milah."

Her wife heaved another sigh, dragging her finger thoughtlessly over the blank dates on the calendar, before dropping her hand from the projection. "I already made a reservation at the restaurant – remember the one we went to for our first date?"

"Of course. Wait–, not the fast food one, right?"

Kamilah breathed a laugh, reaching over to slap Ana on the shoulder as she walked closer. "No. I was planning to do the same things we did back then. Have a nice dinner, then cruise around on my bike… I don't know." She shrugged, as if in defeat, and crossed her arms. "I've been thinking a lot about us lately. Thinking of how we were back then."

"Why, do you miss it?"

"Not really, no. Things were simpler…but I was a mess. And you were just another hotshot wannabe." Kamilah gestured at her, casually appraising. "Now you are a hotshot, and suddenly it's like we barely have any time together." She stopped abruptly in a moment of though, then let out a slow breath. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to…"

"No, Milah. Don't keep anything from me." Ana ran a hand down Kamilah's hair, and cupped her cheek. "I know how you feel, but I don't want you to hide it from me, alright?"

"I know. I just don't want to make you feel bad for–" Kamilah raised her eyes towards the ceiling,
exasperated when the comm channel on Ana's desk chirped.

"What is it," Ana answered the call curtly, listening to Jack speak on the other end. "No. Tell him I'm occupied, and our meeting will proceed later, just like we planned. I'm not to be disturbed until then."

"Ana, if it's important…" Kamilah said, as Ana cut off the line after Jack's agreement.

"No. You flew all the way here to spend time with me, and that's what you'll get." Ana wrapped her arms around Kamilah, and gave her a quick kiss. "Nothing will come between our family time for now, I promise."

Kamilah's soft smile did much to lift the weight on her chest, and Ana shut down her workstation before taking Kamilah by the hand, leading her out of the office. "Let's get Fareeha, then we'll go into town for lunch?"

"Sounds good," Kamilah replied, slipping her fingers between Ana's, and she pressed closer to her wife as they walked down the corridor together.

But before they turned into the lift lobby, they paused upon hearing an office door sliding open, followed by quiet giggles and the soft thud of feet on the floor. They turned around, and Ana was taken by surprise to see Fareeha with a wide grin on her face…and Jesse by her side. Though Fareeha hadn't lost her excitement at the sight of her mothers, Jesse's back snapped straight when he noticed Ana.

Now this…was unexpected. Jesse had made little effort at communication since Kamilah and Fareeha's arrival on base, and was content just lurking in the corners as he'd always done. But she'd caught Jesse playing with Fareeha in the break room once – the girl had swapped Ana's beret for Jesse's cowboy hat, which he was fiercely protective of. Jesse had smiled while Fareeha donned his hat, and was teaching her how to do finger guns when Ana walked in, sending him to his feet at attention. They exchanged a greeting, before Jesse reclaimed his hat and left the break room quickly, as if he'd been embarrassed.

Ana thought Jesse had been scared off from interacting with Fareeha, but apparently, it was not the case.

"Ma'am," Jesse said, squaring his shoulders as his poker face fell back in place. Ana noted with wry pleasure that his eyes darted briefly over to Kamilah as well; the boy had been quite careful around Kamilah, a little intimidated by the woman even though she hadn't said much to him, save for the initial greeting.

"Jesse. Fareeha. What are you doing?" Ana asked, gaze falling on the black marker clutched in Fareeha's hand.

"Uh–, we were…actually–," Jesse stammered, unable to look her in the eyes. But he was saved the trouble of explaining when the door behind them slid open again, and Gabriel stepped out into the corridor indignantly. And when he turned to look at them, Ana had to muffle a snort with her palm – even at this distance, they could clearly see the big moustache and monocle drawn on his face…in black marker.

"Let's go, let's go!" Fareeha squealed, reaching out to clamp onto Jesse's hand, and tugged him forward.

They took off together with Gabriel hot on their heels, and Jesse yelled over his shoulder, "Sorry, Reyes! All in good fun!"
"You fucking bastard!" Gabriel shouted back, though they could hear the laughter in his voice, and there was a crooked grin on his face to match.

"Language, boys," Ana drawled as Gabriel ran past her and Kamilah. She watched them turn into a corner and disappear from sight, though their laughter could still be heard faintly from down the corridor.

She looked back to Kamilah and sighed airily, "Shall we chase after them?"

"Slowly. It looks like they're having fun," Kamilah chuckled, pulling Ana close as they started walking down the hallway again.

"Not because you want more time alone with me?"

Kamilah huffed, but wore a smile as she leaned in to kiss Ana on the cheek. "My dear Captain, I'll take my time with you whenever I can get it."
2 years later

Bad days. Something Kamilah was all too familiar with, after forty years of living. There were days when she could lie down for hours, an empty shell of a person. Days when she would go through the motions of living out of necessity. Days when she wanted to lash out, hold the world by its throat and ask ‘why’. All were unpleasant experiences, and none made her feel stronger for having survived.

Most bad days were coincidental, unnecessary. But Kamilah had to admit, that some were well-deserved indeed. And this group of entitled children masquerading as soldiers, was certainly getting what had been a long time coming.

Kamilah stood by the side of the training field, watching her instructor tear into a platoon of cadets for their dismal performance in the exercise that had just ended. They'd been held back after the rest of the company was dismissed, and it was obvious they were unhappy about it. Kamilah passed an eye over each exhausted and sullen face, and wasn't impressed by what she saw. Very displeased, actually. And her opinion took a turn for the worse when a cadet opened his mouth to argue with the instructor.

"Who said that," she barked, and all fell silent in an instant.

Major Kamilah Amari strode over to stand before the platoon – whose eyes were fixed at some point past her, afraid to make contact with Kamilah's. She waited for two seconds, allowing the tension to settle in, then spoke again.

"The one who dared to argue," Kamilah said, dangerously quiet. "Step forward."

A moment of hesitation, before a young man in the second row marched forward to stand at attention before her. He looked to be in his early-twenties, perhaps fresh out of university and used to debating with his professors – something the military academy had little room for, especially in field training. And certainly not when he'd barely earned the right to offer his inexperienced opinion.

"Repeat what you said, cadet."

His eyes flickered down to hers briefly, then he said aloud, "We were only three minutes behind the standard time, ma'am."

"Is that so? And what is the standard time?"

"20 minutes for 5km, ma'am."

"And you were only...how many minutes behind?"

"3 minutes, ma'am--"

"Ah, yes. So you took 23 minutes to complete the course. Well, I have news for you. You failed!" Kamilah shouted, and the cadet flinched. "You failed at 23 minutes. You will fail at 21 minutes. And guess what, cadet? Even at 20 minutes and 30 seconds, you will still fail! We set a standard time, not for you shitheads to argue and bend the rules. We set it to do just that – to set a standard. And you've
fallen below it!"

The cadet kept his lips pursed, and though his expression remained stoic, there was no doubt he looked smaller than the major who stood a full head shorter than him.

"Yet you still dare to open your mouth to defend your shitty performance? In all my years at this academy, I have never seen a group of cadets as immature and worthless as the lot of you!"

Kamilah noticed the cadet's eyes flash briefly past her shoulder, and she was about to rip into him for not paying attention, when she saw that the entire platoon was trying not to get distracted. She glanced at her instructor, who nodded his head behind her. Kamilah spun around to find a figure walking towards them, clad in a sturdy black bodysuit with signature Overwatch-blue armour. That blue Republican Guard beret only served to affirm her identity…as if her current outfit hadn't announced it clear as day.

Strike Captain Ana Amari neared her wife, but stood at a respectful distance as they shared a brief nod together. Kamilah glanced back at her instructor, who barked a command, and the platoon saluted as one. Sighing quietly in relief that her cadets didn't screw up this simple act, Kamilah waited for Ana to return the salute, then resumed the reprimand at Ana's nod.

Taking a breath, Kamilah turned back to the cadet before her. "I'd like to remind the lot of you, that you are training to be combat medics. And let me tell you something – in the Medical Corps, speed is of the essence, because time will never be on your side. Tell me, cadet. When you have a fellow soldier bleeding to death on your back, are you going to tell them to wait for 20 minutes, because that's the standard time for running?"

"No, ma'am."

"Then stop giving me excuses!" Kamilah raised her voice, jabbing a finger at his chest. "Stop giving me goddamn excuses for your pathetic performance, and buck the fuck up! I've been watching your platoon for months now, and my opinion of you has only gotten worse, and worse!" She stepped past the lone cadet to pace in front of the platoon, glaring at faces that slowly wilted under her anger.

"You are an embarrassment to the academy," she hollered, and noted with satisfaction the cadets' grim expressions. "You are a shame to this uniform. You are a shame to this country. You are a shame to yourself!"

Kamilah went to stand before the cadet pulled from his platoon, and regarded him with a sharp eye. "You know what? Since you're all so confident, I'll give you the benefit of the doubt. I'll give you one chance to prove me wrong." She pulled up her left sleeve, pressing the buttons of her watch to set the countdown timer. "20 rounds around the compound in 30 minutes. Go."

The cadet's eyes widened, as his platoon was overtaken by panic behind him. "But ma'am--!"

"30 rounds!"

She started the timer with an audible beep, and the entire platoon was shocked into action, sprinting off to start their 'challenge'. It was a punishment, really – and an unfair one at that. Twenty rounds was nearly double of five kilometers, and thirty rounds could practically be training for a half-marathon. Then again, Kamilah never intended to be fair, nor did she expect the cadets to meet the impossible timing anyway. She wanted to drive a point home, and a painful lesson would accomplish just that.

"How brutal, Milah," Ana chuckled under her breath, leaning over to her wife.
"That's Major Amari to you, Captain," Kamilah deadpanned, determined not to be broken out of her menacing façade. Though Ana's smirk, coupled with her fond gaze, made it so much harder.

Turning her gaze to look at the cadets running past them, Kamilah kept quiet and waited for the timer to tick down to zero, while her instructor lost self-control and eagerly shook hands with Ana. She refrained from rolling her eyes when Ana was lavished with admiration, and distracted herself by glaring quietly each time the cadets ran past – a crack of the whip, as it were. And when the timer had run down, Kamilah decided to show a sliver of mercy.

"Stop. I said stop, you idiots!" Kamilah yelled louder, causing the cadets to stop suddenly and bump into each other, some of them falling over like dominoes.

The officers watched the platoon haul themselves to their feet and fall in, all the while panting hard and trying to keep their backs straight.

"Twenty minutes are over. How many rounds did you go?"

Even the answer was a mess – some declared 'fifteen' amid a smattering of 'twelve's, 'fourteen's, and even a 'ten'.

Ana clicked her tongue, shaking her head. "My, my. Didn't even bother to count your laps? Quite a pitiful display." She didn't bother to hide her chuckle at their suffering, and continued, "You slobs wouldn't have lasted two minutes in the Crisis. I'd suggest you start listening to the Major here. I've seen her haul countless wounded across the battlefield, even when she was injured herself. She saved many lives during the insurgency and the Crisis – even mine."

The Strike Captain clasped her hands behind her back, looking the cadets over. "The state this platoon is in, I wouldn't even trust you with the life of a fish."

"An accurate assessment," Kamilah said drily, turning back to the platoon. "I'll be keeping an eye on all of you for the next week. And if I still don't see an improvement, I will personally kick you out of the academy. Understood?"

"Yes, ma'am!"

Satisfied with the loud reply despite their tired state, Kamilah gave them some reprieve and took her leave, handing the platoon back to their instructor. She walked away with Ana at her side, and when they'd gone far enough – but still not too far to be out of sight – Ana reached over to lace their fingers together.

Kamilah shot her a bemused gaze. "Can't even wait a minute longer?"

"No," Ana replied with an unrepentant smile, closing the distance so they walked shoulder-to-shoulder back to the academy's offices. "I lose any sense of discipline when I'm around you, Major Amari."

"Idiot," Kamilah huffed, though she mirrored Ana's smile as she touched the wedding band Ana wore beneath her glove.

When they reached the offices, Ana attracted many more glances as they walked down the hallway to Kamilah's office. Though they'd known the brass had invited the Strike Captain home for a formal function and to inspect their own forces – giving the troops a morale boost along the way – Ana's proximity still took many people off-guard. The eyes fixed on Ana were mostly filled with awe and respect, but while the Captain smiled at the attention, Kamilah felt a dull irritation – and longed for the days when they could walk through the base unnoticed, with Ana all to herself.
Perhaps it was a good thing Ana didn't come home often. Kamilah was aware of this sensation getting worse each time Ana was with her, despite her efforts at suppressing it.

Still, she bit her tongue and led Ana into her office, breathing a quiet sigh of relief when her wife shut the door.

"This is all your fault, you know," Kamilah grumbled, getting a curious tilt of the head from Ana. "Because of you, we've been getting so many wannabes as recruits. Thickheaded louts who think they can be 'heroes' without slogging it out first."

Ana gave an apologetic grin and shrugged. "What can I say? I have a way of inspiring idiots. Leading the flock, so to speak."

Kamilah rolled her eyes and fell heavily into her chair. "Keep inspiring people like this, and I'm going to lose my voice permanently from shouting at them."

"Then it's lucky you won't have to shout so often anymore, hm? My capable Lieutenant-Colonel," Ana crooned, leaning down to peck her on the lips.

"The ceremony's in two days," Kamilah reminded her – something Ana had returned for, as well.

"Hey, to me? You already are a general… the way you love ordering me around." Ana grinned when Kamilah slapped at her shoulder, then gave her wife another kiss, before settling into a seat next to her.

Kamilah looked at the desk, and found a sandwich and a cup of coffee waiting beside her file tray – food that hadn't been there before. Ana must've had been here before she joined Kamilah out in the field. She grabbed the cup of lukewarm coffee and took a sip, then offered it to Ana.

"So, has your trip been confirmed?" Kamilah asked.

Ana cocked her head in a moment's thought, then realised what Kamilah was talking about. "Oh, yup. I'll be flying off to Gibraltar in two months. Gonna be there for a while to finalise the base's plans, then it's back to Zurich. Kind of looking forward to it, to be honest. It'll be like a vacation compared to my regular headaches."

"I'm sure," Kamilah replied, taking the coffee back. "Guess it helps that you're not establishing a base of monkeys on the moon."

Ana laughed. "Yeah! I still can't believe it though – it's like they've never watched a single Planet of the Apes movie before."

"It's for science, Ana."

"Yeah, I know. But you can't control science, sometimes." Ana leaned back in her chair with a sigh. "Maybe I shouldn't say that now, with our R&D branch up and working. You should see some of the tech they're developing – hoo! It's like science fiction come to life."

"Really? Maybe you can show me something when I'm there."

"Oh no. I'm sorry, but they're classified." Ana drummed her fingers on Kamilah's arm, then reached up to clasp her wife's chin. "But I could show you something right now…"

The purr in Ana's voice was unmistakable, and Kamilah clicked her tongue, shoving Ana away as her wife burst into a loud cackle.
"Incorrigible."

"You still love it, albi."

At the end of the day, Kamilah fetched Ana from the shooting range where the snipers were training, and they drove out of base towards Fareeha's school. Both still wore their uniforms – Kamilah out of habit, while Ana wanted to make Fareeha happy, allowing the girl to show her famous mother off at school.

As ever, Ana attracted her fair share of attention as they entered the school grounds. But Kamilah's focus wasn't on her wife this time – but on the absence of her daughter. A slight frown creased her forehead when she realised what this must mean, and she led Ana into the school, where they found Fareeha sitting alone in her homeroom with her teacher. The twelve-year-old glanced up at their entrance, then dropped her pencil onto the homework she'd been working on, her gaze lowered to avoid her parents' eyes.

"Kamilah," the teacher rose to greet them. "And Ana Amari? I don't think we've met before."

"We haven't," Ana confirmed, clasping her hand with a smile. "It's my pleasure."

"It's mine as well. But…I'm afraid we have something more important to discuss right now." She gestured at Fareeha, who was now kicking her feet beneath her table, looking apprehensive. "Fareeha has failed her math exam again. And her science exam was a borderline pass."

"I see." Kamilah glanced at the girl, unsure if her heart sank at the news or the guilty expression on her daughter's face. "Is there anything I can do?"

"I'm sure you two are very busy. I will give her remedial classes after school, but I'd really appreciate it if you could monitor her homework a little closer as well?" The teacher smiled politely. "Fareeha's been turning in half-finished homework, claiming she doesn't understand or doesn't have time. Thing is, I'd like my students to try even when they don't understand the concepts – it's a much better alternative to not trying at all. But with regards to time…?"

"I don't believe it's an issue of time," Kamilah said, knowing very well Fareeha had made enough time for herself to read books and play.

"Ah, I see. Then, if I may suggest sitting down with her to do some exercises…"

They listened to the teacher's advice – Ana being more attentive, while Kamilah had heard it all before in the last meeting. When the discussion was done, they offered their thanks and walked out of the school, with Fareeha trailing behind them in silence. The girl barely even looked at Ana when her mother opened the car's door for her, and the two adults exchanged a glance before climbing into the car as well. Kamilah kept quiet for the drive, already organising her time to focus more on Fareeha and revise primary school mathematics herself. If she'd been alone with Fareeha like the last time, she would've spoken to the girl herself. But since Ana was here, she let her wife take the lead.

"Fareeha, have you been facing a lot of trouble at school?" Ana asked, and she waited only to be answered with silence. "You have to do your homework, dear. Or you won't understand your subjects enough to pass your exams."

Fareeha remained silent, and only glanced up when Ana turned around from the passenger seat to look at her.

"Tell ami. Why haven't you been doing your homework?"
Fareeha pouted. "I hate math," she mumbled, and Ana could already see the tell-tale scrunch of her face.

"I know. And guess what? Ami used to hate math too. I used to get all the questions wrong, then get scolded by my own mother when I went home with red marks all over my test papers." Ana smiled when Fareeha looked up, a little doubtful. "It's true! But then I passed my tests in the end. You know why? Because I practiced. Over and over, until I could understand what I was doing. Oh, I know doing homework is just horrible. But the thing is, habibti, you have to try."

Ana patted at her own shoulder, where her rank and name were embroidered on the uniform. "You think ami got to be Strike Captain because I didn't try, and thought one plus one equals Beyoncé?"

Kamilah let out a groan at her words, and when Ana chuckled, Fareeha laughed in wet hiccups as well. Looking into the side view mirror, Kamilah caught sight of Fareeha wiping her eyes, and Ana nudging at her cheek.

"It's okay to fail, Fareeha. But what's important is that you try, and improve. Got that?"

Fareeha nodded.

"Good." Ana ruffled her hair. "Hey, mama. Let's go to McDonald's."

"We have food at home," Kamilah said.

"No, we have ingredients that aren't cooked yet. Let's get McDonald's, then ice cream after. Sounds good, Fareeha?"

A mumbled reply, but it was clearly in the affirmative.

"Come on, mama."

Kamilah sighed. With one last glance at Fareeha in the mirror, she changed lanes and made for the city center instead.

---

It was one week before the school semester ended, during which Ana spent much-needed time with Fareeha, while panicking behind closed doors with Kamilah over math formulae and teaching methods they'd never seen in their lives. Honestly, Ana thought a few of these math problems belonged in university, but the family managed to work through an assignment together, before Fareeha was finally free for vacation.

As planned, Ana flew with her family back to Zurich, in a private jet provided by the army. And in the Overwatch base, Fareeha seemed to shake off her school blues with little trouble, especially when she and Jesse laid eyes on each other, exchanging their customary finger-gun greeting. The two had grown close over the last couple of years, with Jesse shaping up to be a reliable older brother who could be entrusted with Fareeha, while her parents were busy – as they would be on the third night of their stay.

Fareeha sat on the bed, watching Ana button up her dress jacket, as Kamilah looked herself over in the mirror. "Mama, why aren't you wearing your uniform?"

"Because she looks stunning like this, of course," Ana replied, smirking when her wife raised a brow. "But you look great in your uniform too, colonel."

"But…mama wore her uniform back home."
"It's politics, Fareeha. I'm not representing the army tonight," Kamilah said, providing the correct answer. Though she'd attended an army event in uniform just last week, Kamilah was disinclined to do the same for the Overwatch-UN function they were attending that night. Overwatch was a neutral organisation, and her uniform would only raise questions.

"Oh." Fareeha cocked her head. "But I like your uniform."

"What, don't you think this dress is nice?" Kamilah asked, waving at the black sheath gown she wore, with a golden belt about her waist. "I thought you said it looked good."

"Yeah, and your uniform looks good too."

"Fareeha, dear," Ana stepped in with a laugh. "When you grow up, you'll understand – during these times, you're supposed to say 'you're the most gorgeous woman in the world'."

While Fareeha looked a little confused, Kamilah huffed and turned back to the mirror with a faint smile. "Maybe I should've dyed my hair, though."

"Nonsense," Ana crooned, running her fingertips carefully through Kamilah's groomed hair – which bore more silver flecks than before. "You look very classy with a bit of grey."

"Funny, I don't feel classy," Kamilah sighed, though she did smile into the kiss Ana pressed to her lips.

"Ew," Fareeha giggled. "Stop kissing!"

"No way," Ana snipped back playfully, then swooped in for another quick kiss with Kamilah, getting a second 'ew!' from her daughter.

"You're gross!" Fareeha laughed, leaping off the bed and running away from her mothers.

"We're gross?" Ana muttered under her breath as Kamilah took her purse from the table. "Wait 'til she learns what we do in private." She flashed an unapologetic grin at Kamilah's dry gaze, then went to answer the bedroom door when the bell gave a short beep.

Ana tapped a button, and the door slid open to reveal none other than Jesse McCree, dressed in casual shirt and pants.

"Evening, Captain. Ma'am," he added when Kamilah came to stand beside Ana. "May I just say, you two look lovely tonight." A slight flush rose to his cheeks as he spoke – something that amused Ana greatly. He'd grown much from the young boy they'd taken in two years ago, but at 17, Jesse still had more maturing to do before he could grow into the suave gentleman he aimed to be.

"We always do," Ana replied, while Fareeha skipped through the door to join her assigned caretaker for the night. "Now, the two of you be good. And Jesse, remember – no poker, no guns."

"Or I'll shove them both up your donkey," Kamilah added.

Jesse broke into a sheepish grin, scratching at his head. "Yes, ma'am."

"What donkey?" Fareeha asked innocently. "Jesse has a donkey?"

"We all do, habibti," Ana said, not bothering to explain further. "Now shoo, the adults have some wine to drink."

Fareeha looked even more confused. "But I thought you're going somewhere important?"
"Your ami's joking, lil birdie," Jesse chuckled. "Let's go, I've got some movies we can watch 'til we fall asleep."

"Do you have popcorn?" Fareeha asked, putting her hand in Jesse's as they walked off together.

"And lots of soda."

"Yay!"

Ana watched them go, then locked her door and brought Kamilah over to the lifts.

"He's cleaned up a lot," Kamilah commented as they entered an elevator together.

"Yeah. You know, I think Fareeha's doing him some good too. He always behaves better when she's around. And he keeps asking when the two of you are visiting."

"Probably because he'll have an excuse to indulge in junk food."

"And watch all his westerns again," Ana laughed, then took Kamilah's hand as the elevator doors opened.

They walked through the foyer, and found Jack and Gabriel already waiting for their ride outside the doors, the pair still adjusting each other's uniform and hair.

"Ah, there you are," Jack said, turning to face them. "Kamilah, you look great."

"What about me," Ana deadpanned, rolling her eyes at Gabriel's nonchalant hand wave.

"Thanks. You look good too." Kamilah smiled. "By the way, congrats on your wedding. You remember – the one you didn't invite me to?"

"Ah, well." Jack laughed nervously. "It was a quick ceremony, really. Nothing to drag you all the way from Egypt for…"

"How about this?" Gabriel chimed in. "You invite us when you renew your vows, and we'll invite you to ours, hm?"

Kamilah breathed a laugh at Gabriel's wink. "Deal."

"Jesse, what are those!" Fareeha giggled maniacally, pointing at the spurs attached to the heels of his boots. "They're so silly!"

"What! They're not silly–"

"Yes, they are," Gabriel rumbled from where he sat slumped by the bar. "All that clinking will give your position away, one day."

Jesse started to pout, but shrugged off his mentor's criticism as always. "Anyway, they're lucky boots, lil birdie. My–, someone I knew used to wear 'em."

Ana noted his quick pause, but said nothing from where she lounged with Kamilah on the break room's sofa, with her wife's head resting on her shoulder. But where Ana had subtlety, Fareeha behaved like an elephant in a glass shop of emotion.

"Who?"
"Ah… Nevermind that now." Jesse's voice grew quiet, and his gaze fell to the floor.

Thankfully, Jack's entrance prevented an awkward silence from falling over the room. The commander looked over the buffet table, eyes lighting up at the covered trays. "Oh, the food's here."

"Too bad they're gonna grow cold before the others get here too," Ana groaned out loud, and Kamilah grunted in assent.

"Eh, they're nearly here. And why are all the curtains closed?" Jack asked.

Before any of the hung-over adults could stop him, he strode to the windows and flung the curtains wide open, causing Gabriel, Ana and Kamilah to hiss like burnt vampires under the noon sun.

"Fucking shut them," Gabriel growled, pulling the hood of his Blackwatch uniform low over his head, which fell onto the bar with an audible thud.

"I told all of you not to drink so much last night," Jack chided, though he drew the curtains half-closed, before going to check on Gabriel.

While Jesse watched videos on his tablet with Fareeha, Ana settled into a quick doze with Kamilah, resting her head on her wife's. And it seemed little time had passed before the break room's door was opened again – this time to a loud cheer.

Ana and Kamilah turned their heads to watch Fareeha run towards Reinhardt, who lifted her high into the air with a booming laugh. Behind the large crusader was Torbjörn, Angela, Tien, and Mirembe – all the Strike Team was here, which was becoming a rare occurrence nowadays, given their busy schedules. And since they would all be back in base for a few precious days, they decided to have a private party to themselves to celebrate yet another successful year at Overwatch.

"Ah, good! I'm flipping famished!" Tien rubbed his hands together as he eyed the buffet line, but he was quickly stopped by Reinhardt.

"Hold on, Tien! We agreed to take a photo before eating!"

"But–, food…" Tien looked like a child with his ice cream taken away from him.

"Oh, don't look so pitiful. It'll just take a few seconds." Mirembe nudged him over to the corner where Reinhardt was ushering the rest of the Team.

Ana rose from the sofa along with Kamilah, keeping an arm around her wife as they stood to the side, watching Reinhardt arrange everyone's position for the group photo. Jack nagged at Gabriel to pull his hood down, but the man muttered about his hangover and kept it drawn over his head. Ana grinned when Jack shot her an exasperated look, as she took her place between them, and waved Fareeha over to her.

Tien came to squat in front of Gabriel, while Torbjörn, Jesse and Mirembe stood to the left of Ana and Fareeha. Angela tussled for the camera with Reinhardt, until Kamilah put an end to their disagreement by taking the camera for herself.

"But Kamilah, your family's in there! You should be with them," Reinhardt said, as Angela went to stand with Torbjörn.

"It's just a photo, Reinhardt. You can take the next one with me in it."

"Right. Um, of course!" Reinhardt chased away any hint of bashfulness with a grin, then quickly
stood behind the team, setting his hands on Ana and Jesse's shoulders.

"Alright, ready." Kamilah held the camera up. "Ana and Gabriel – stop looking so hung over. One, two…three."

"Now it's your turn!" Reinhardt declared, hurrying forward to take the camera from Kamilah, who gave a fond sigh as she took her place beside Ana.

"He loves photos, doesn't he?" Kamilah whispered, as Reinhardt readied the camera.

"He just really likes mementos," Ana murmured through her smile. And right before Reinhardt squeezed the shutter button, Ana moved her head quickly to kiss Kamilah on the cheek.

"Ew!" Fareeha exclaimed when she looked up at the movement. "Kissing again!"

Reinhardt laughed. "Your moms aren't the only ones," he said, turning the camera around so they could see the photo on its small screen – Jack had planted a smooch Gabriel's cheek as well.

"They like kissing each other so much," Fareeha lamented, as Ana shared a high-five with Jack behind her.

"Ah, little Fareeha," Reinhardt said. "When you fall in love, you will know why."

Chapter End Notes

Kamilah woke blearily from where she lay on the bed, blinking as she wondered if Fareeha's voice was a figment of her dream...and just how the hell did she fall asleep? They'd just reached home from the airport, and Kamilah had lain down on the bed to rest her back, only to drift off in a few short minutes.

"Mama, where's the tape?"

Ah, so it wasn't a dream.

Kamilah pushed herself up with a groan, dragging a hand down her face as she sat with shoulders slumped. She listened to the dull thumps downstairs as Fareeha searched the drawers, followed by louder footsteps making their way up the stairs. It trailed into Fareeha's room first, and a few clicks and rustling later, the door to Kamilah's room was flung wide open.

"Mama, I've been calling you for so long!" Fareeha complained, holding a pair of scissors in her hand.

"Leave a message, then…" Kamilah muttered under her breath. She sniffed, looking her daughter over. "Why are you holding the scissors?"

"I wanna put up the posters," Fareeha explained. "But I can't find tape anywhere."

"You want to put up the posters now? That's fast." But Kamilah bit down her protest when she saw Fareeha's eager gaze. "Hold on, think I have some here."

Fareeha waited by the door, watching Kamilah rifle through the drawers of her writing table, before fishing out a roll of double-sided tape. She tossed it over to Fareeha, who caught it and ran back to her room with her mother in tow. Kamilah sat on the girl's bed, while Fareeha pulled the poster from its tube, and unfurled it carefully.

It was one of the first few Overwatch posters that would be released to the public next month – mostly to boost recruitment efforts to support their rapid expansion. Fareeha was given a sneak peek during their visit in base, and she had the honour of being the world's very first owner of an Overwatch poster. The one she'd chosen included all of the original Strike Team, posing heroically as they gazed off purposefully into the distance, with the Overwatch flag flying high behind them.

But as Fareeha looked upon the poster adoringly, Kamilah couldn't help but feel amused by it. It seemed like a piece of propaganda to her – which it was – but what tickled her more, is that the Overwatch team felt more like…celebrities now.

Yes, that was the right term. The notable figures of the Strike Team were like idols to the public now – a goal, even an ideal, that people strove to be. It was not uncommon to hear that someone's dream was to join Overwatch one day – and Kamilah herself was witness to the results of that inspiration, meeting so many recruits who only saw the army as a springboard that would propel them into the ranks of Overwatch. It was annoying for the instructors, really. But the fact that Overwatch was inspiring an entire generation of people to action… It was quite impressive, indeed.

Still, Kamilah felt the posters might be a bit much. Celebrities, Kamilah huffed to herself. And it didn't help that Fareeha was gazing at her Overwatch poster the same way Ana looked at her Beyoncé posters.
She let Fareeha find her own way around the tape first, cutting off little strips and pasting them to the back of the poster, then holding it up to the wall experimentally. Kamilah stood to help Fareeha hold the poster straight, while the girl patted it to the wall with all the care in the world. And when she was done, they took a step back to admire their handiwork.

_Hm_. Kamilah squinted at the poster. They'd airbrushed Ana's face a little…and her hair seemed darker than normal, devoid of the faint grey at her temples that Kamilah was used to seeing. _Figures._

"I'll be in there, someday," Fareeha said, pointing at the poster.

Kamilah snorted a laugh. "Really?"

"Yeah! You think I can join Overwatch when I'm older?"

"Hm, depends. What do you want to be?" Kamilah asked, sitting in Fareeha's chair by the study table.

"An agent, duh. Like Jesse!" Fareeha smiled and put up her fingerguns, while Kamilah's heart dropped an inch. "He's told me all about his missions, and it sounds so cool. He'll follow Uncle Gabe, then walk into a room and go pew, pew!" She made those airy gun sounds with her mouth, like Jesse had taught her. "I wanna do that too."

Kamilah bit on her bottom lip, fingers fidgeting in thought. "They like to talk big, Fareeha. The entire team does. They may make it sound easy, but what they do is dangerous. Very dangerous. They fight, and often times, they'll get hurt. They suffer a lot of pain in their line of work, you know?"

"Yeah, but it's worth it." Fareeha puffed out her chest, raising her chin. No doubt an imitation of Jesse too. "Heroes save lives, and always come out on top." When her mother didn't reply, she continued, "Besides, you know it too, right? You're kinda like ami."

Kamilah raised her brows. "Hm?"

"Yeah! Ami says you saved a lot of lives in _two_ wars."

"Only because I had to, my dear. Trust me."

"Duh, you have to. You're a medic. But that kinda makes you a hero too, doesn't it?"

"I'd…rather not be one," Kamilah grimaced. She looked at her daughter's confused frown, pondering her next words. Personally, Kamilah would rather keep Fareeha away from the violence of the frontlines – and she knew Ana shared her sentiments as well, even if they hadn't really discouraged the girl's dreams. It gave Fareeha something to look forward to, and if nothing else, it gave her the motivation to study and do well in school. Besides, how could one ever pop a child's dream in good conscience?

"We'll see how it goes, Fareeha," Kamilah said carefully. "When you've grown up, who knows? Maybe your interests will have changed."

"Nope!" Fareeha declared with confidence, beaming up at the Overwatch poster. "I'm pretty sure."

Kamilah breathed a quiet sigh, then rose from the chair. "Yeah? So you wanna be a hero, huh?"

"Yep!"

"Well, then." Kamilah bent down to pinch Fareeha's cheeks. "How about you get your math and
science in order first, hm?"

Fareeha whined, pouting back at her mother. "You don't need math and science to be an agent."

"Oh, trust mama on this one," Kamilah laughed. "You need them. Or you'll end up a weirdo like Jesse."

Fareeha giggled when Kamilah let her go. "Yeah...he's kinda weird."

2 years later

Kamilah slipped her phone surreptitiously from her handbag, flicking the screen on to check her chat with Ana, who hadn't replied Kamilah's last message. In fact, she hadn't been online for the past two hours, which was quite odd – given that it was Fareeha's graduation ceremony that she was missing. Ana's last message was: [Keep me updated yeah? Will be back soon]

And since then, the chat's been filled only with Kamilah's updates...and nothing else. Wondering if an urgent mission or some such had grabbed Ana's attention, Kamilah sighed to herself and typed another message: [Ceremony's starting soon. Can see the students lining up outside.]

With that, Kamilah pushed the phone back into her bag and sat up straight, leaning back into her seat. A constant murmur filled the hall where they were seated – parents and relatives who were attending their respective child's graduation from preparatory school. She glimpsed the white and green colours of the students' uniforms by the open doors of the hall, and the nervous yet eager expressions of the kids started to enthuse her as well. She glanced around the large hall in her boredom while they were kept waiting, and when the principal took to the podium to invite the students in, her eyes whipped back to the doors.

A long line of 14-year-olds walked in, each with varying degrees of nervousness and joyful pride on their faces. Kamilah took her phone up as an afterthought, and kept the camera lens focused on the children – like so many other parents were doing – until she caught sight of Fareeha. The girl, who'd been scanning the audience for her mother, grinned and put up a V-sign next to her cheek, allowing Kamilah to snap a clear photo. Kamilah chuckled and gave her a thumbs-up, and Fareeha turned away to file into the row of seats assigned to her class.

Kamilah smiled to herself as she looked at the photo, then sent it along to Ana.

[She looks so much like you now.]

She kept looking at the photo a little longer, feeling one bit of her life click into place, that sense of accomplishment welling up in her. Fourteen years of raising this little scoundrel, and now, after sharing many headaches with her daughter over complicated homework, Fareeha had finally completed her basic education with solid A's and B's. So much better than Kamilah had done before.

Taking a breath, Kamilah put her phone down and paid attention to the principal, who was speaking to the quiet audience. His speech – complete with statistics of the graduate's grades – ended just shy of ten minutes, and he gave way to allow the awards ceremony to begin. Kamilah clapped along politely, and perked up twice during the whole process – Fareeha had received awards for her vast improvement in grades, and her performance in interschool sports as well.

The entire graduation ceremony didn't take long after that. The chosen valedictorian gave a speech, and the principal offered his last encouraging words to the graduating class, before bringing the event to a close.
Kamilah waited in her seat while those around her dispersed to find their child, and when Fareeha neared her position, she stood and spread her arms, a grin parting her lips when Fareeha flew in for a hug.

"My smart little baby," Kamilah crooned, squeezing her tightly.

Fareeha giggled. "I'm not a baby anymore, mama. Or little."

"You'll always be 'little' to me, little one." Kamilah smiled, pressing a kiss to Fareeha's cheek. She had to tip-toe a little now, because Fareeha had grown much taller since puberty hit, and Kamilah had no doubt she'd grow even taller in the year to come.

Fareeha shrugged, then took Kamilah by the arm, steering her towards the exit. "Let's go. I'm hungry."

"Don't you want to stay with your friends?"

"Nah, they're all going too. We're meeting up this week anyway. Oh! Has ami replied yet?"

"Er." Kamilah plucked out her phone to check the chat, and to her surprise, found a single message from Ana: [Still at the school?]

She showed it to Fareeha, whose lighthearted expression was marred by a small frown, and a sliver of disappointment. "That's all?"

"That's all," Kamilah confirmed, patting her daughter's cheek gently. She typed in a reply as they climbed down the stairs, then walked through the school's foyer on the way to the parking lot. But as they strolled along the kerb, a taxi pulled up at the school's entrance, and not a moment later they heard that one important voice ringing across the road.

"Milah! Fareeha, wait!"

They whirled around in surprise to find Ana running towards them in a hurry. She spread her arms as she neared, and grabbed them both in a hug.

"Oh god, I'm sorry I'm so late," Ana huffed. "My flight got delayed, and I rushed here as soon as I landed. Oh, and congrats, habibti!" She turned to Fareeha, clamping her daughter in another hug. "Ami is so proud of you!"

"Thanks." Fareeha beamed, looking remarkably brighter than she had been minutes before.

"Why didn't you tell us you were coming?" Kamilah asked, when Ana pecked her on the cheek. "I could've reserved a seat for you."

"I wanted it to be a surprise." Ana shrugged, adjusting the duffle bag slung over her shoulder. "Besides, I only got my seat at the airport this morning. Wasn't sure if I could make it. But I'm here!" she proclaimed, throwing her arms up. "So, what do you want to eat, Fareeha? You get to pick today."

"I want a burger. And fries."

"McDonald's it is." Ana cackled when Kamilah slapped her shoulder in jest, then linked their arms together as they walked to the car.

"I'm bringing her to a Western restaurant. And now that you're here, the meal is on you."
"Of course, my darling," Ana cooed. "And, Fareeha? You get to order two bowls of ice cream today."

"Really?" Fareeha squealed, throwing her arms around Ana's shoulders. "I love you, ami!"

In all honesty – and as she told her family – Ana's return home was not planned in the slightest. She'd felt increasingly guilty since she told Fareeha that she couldn't attend the graduation, and it finally culminated in a work frenzy the night before the ceremony. Ana only grabbed two, maybe three hours of sleep in her office, before she stormed over to dump a stack of documents on Jack's desk, asked him to cover for her, then rushed off to the airport to grab a flight home.

Since she hadn't any missions under her charge for the time being, Ana was able to stay at home for three full days, spending some unexpected time with her family, while dealing with work problems through texts with Jack. Since Fareeha was on vacation, she drove the girl around the city to relax and have fun, and even gifted her with a new gaming device as a reward. They bought a new phone for Kamilah on the sly as well – which would be their present for her birthday, that Ana would be missing…again. Fareeha solemnly promised to keep the phone safe until the birthday, and to be on her best behaviour for her mama.

While Fareeha ran around outside with her mother, Kamilah was content to just stay at home, and have Ana warming up the spaces she'd left behind. As always, this meant helping out in the kitchen, and doing whatever little chores that Kamilah assigned to the Strike Captain – anything that made Ana's dearest wife happy. But truly, nothing could beat being Kamilah's bolster at night; having a wife to fall asleep on top of her was a luxury she always sorely missed while at base.

In fact, being with family was a luxury for each member of the Strike Team. None of their loved ones had moved to Zurich, and they're forced to fight for the time to return home for a precious few days. Even after spending years in Overwatch, this was still a difficulty; but each time Ana was able to see her family, safe and sound at home, she would remind herself that the trouble was all worth it.

When Ana flew back to base, she was unsurprised to have Jack drop an even larger stack of files onto her desk, the man looking tired and immensely relieved that she was back. He'd sat in the chair by Ana's desk with a deep sigh, then brought her up to speed with all that had happened during the short time she was away – including the recent activation of Overwatch's A.I., Athena.

On Jack's command, the A.I. flickered to life on Ana's holopad on the desk, and greeted the captain personally. Ana was pleasantly surprised when Athena asked after the family, and she was glad to see that the labs had succeeded in giving the A.I. a personality of her own. Though it wasn't necessary for a program whose primary function was mission control, Athena's distinct personality would help her bond with the agents, and her sentience could provide intuitive assessments that a cold machine was incapable of.

They were enjoying their chat with Athena, and asking if she could blast any song upon request, when the A.I. flickered out of sight, then blinked back to life on the holopad.

"Agent Tien's team has just returned. All members have sustained heavy injuries, and are being escorted to the medical wing." Athena paused for a second. "Their mission has failed."

"Damn," Jack muttered. He stood with Ana, who swiped the holopad from the table.

"Tech retrieval in Mali, wasn't it?" Ana asked as they left her office behind, walking towards the medical wing.
"Yes, ma'am. Shall I bring up agent Tien's report? It is currently incomplete."

"No, Athena. We'll hear him out ourselves. But thanks."

"You're welcome, Captain."

With that, Athena disappeared from the holopad, leaving Ana and Jack to make their way to medical in silence.

There was a small hubbub at their destination, and they stuck close to the wall, giving way to stretchers being wheeled hurriedly towards the operating theatres. A few were already in use, and Ana wondered just how badly the mission had gone. They turned into the private ward where Tien was located, and the soldier struggled to sit up in bed when he saw them, snapping off a weak salute before being pushed back down by the doctor. Ana eyed the bandages covering his naked torso, the burn wounds over his left shoulder and arm, and the long cut up the side of his jaw.

"Sir. Ma'am," Tien rumbled, sounding a little woozy from painkillers. "I'm sorry. The mission was a failure."

"It's alright, Tien. We know," Ana replied.

Tien chuckled. "Let me guess: Athena?"

"She notified us the moment you landed."

"Should've known you'd snitch on me, Athy."

"It is not snitching when it's my job, agent," Athena's voice crackled through the sole speaker in the room.

"True." Tien sighed. "You know, Jack, you should've let Athena handle our mission. I know it'd be her first time, but damn if it wouldn't have given us the extra set of eyes we needed." He pushed himself farther up in bed with a groan. "We were ambushed. By who – we have no idea. But they were coordinated. Blinded our personal sensors and hit us from behind. Would've taken the whole team out too, if I hadn't thrown down a barrier before the grenade went out." He pointed at the burns on his body.

"Then you did well," Ana consoled him. "Would've been a pity if we lost all of you today. But then again, our doctors could've done without all this hassle. Right, Herschel?"

Herschel glanced drily at Ana, already used to the Strike Team's occasional fatalistic humour. "Honestly, Captain, I prefer all this hassle."

"Lucky us," Tien quipped.

"Lucky you, indeed." Herschel went quiet as he bandaged Tien's burns, and the cut on his face. Straightening from his patient with a sigh, he said, "Honestly, our department is still very much understaffed. I'm afraid we won't be able to handle much larger emergencies unless we get more hands on the team. Captain, have you seen the roster I've sent you?"

"No, actually. I've just returned last night." Ana pulled out her holopad again, thumbing its datapad mode, and swiped through the numerous reports in her mailbox.

"Is the patient up for a bit of interrogation, doctor?" Jack asked, stepping towards Tien's bed.
"Yes, but don't take too long. He needs rest." Herschel moved towards Ana, making way for Jack to sit beside the bed.

"Interrogation. How exciting," Tien drawled, bringing a slight smile to Ana's face as she opened the list of potential recruits, sent by Herschel himself.

She scrolled down the names – doctors picked from countless hospitals around the world, and combat medics serving in their country’s respective medical corps. Ana nodded to herself, finding no trouble with any name on the list, until she stopped dead at one of two names chosen from Egypt's medical corps. Icy anger poured into her veins, and Ana whipped her sharp gaze up to Herschel, nodding at the door. She stalked out of the room with the doctor on her heels, and shut the door behind them.

"Mind explaining why my wife's name is in here?" Ana asked, tone hushed and dangerous.

Herschel cocked his head, not understanding her anger. "The original list was forwarded to me by Ms. Adawe herself, Captain. I merely chose those with the best credentials. And if I remember correctly – your wife is an instructor, yes? As it stands, Overwatch is severely lacking combat medics. She would be able to train new recruits, if not lead them in the field herself–"

"Herschel," Ana growled, taking one step towards him. "I will say this only once – you will keep her out of this. Do you understand? Never bring my family into our affairs again."

Herschel opened his mouth, then closed it again in thought. He regarded her quietly, and nodded. "Yes, ma'am. I apologise."

Ana let out a breath. "As you were, doctor. I'm sorry for taking your time."

She gave a tight smile as the doctor bowed his head, and slipped back into Tien's ward. Ana stood in place for a moment, then brought up the holo-datapad again. With two quick taps, Kamilah Amari's name was deleted from the list, and would hopefully never appear again. Briefly clenching her jaw, Ana turned the datapad off and pocketed the device, watching as a bandaged agent was pushed past her in a stretcher.

As long as Ana breathed, she would never allow her own family to be put in such danger. It might be selfish of her – Kamilah was more than capable of training Overwatch's field medics, that was true. But all medical personnel in their ranks were obligated to serve in the field should the need arise, and Ana would be damned if she let them pull Kamilah back onto the frontlines again.

Letting out a quiet sigh, Ana walked back towards her office, touching the tattoo on her wrist absentmindedly. She missed Kamilah, but was also glad that her wife wasn't here with her.

Kamilah was sprawled out on the sofa, dressed in her oversized t-shirt and shorts, and playing on the new phone that Ana had bought for her birthday. It wasn’t much of a surprise, to be honest – it was now standard practice that Fareeha would present Kamilah's gift, should Ana not be around. Still, it was a touching gesture, especially with the card Fareeha had made for her, with her hoverbike painstakingly drawn in detail by her daughter.

But that wasn’t their only gift for her. When Kamilah had switched her phone on, Fareeha opened up a little building game they'd installed on the device, and Kamilah was greeted with a castle-like home that Ana and Fareeha had spent weeks building for her. She'd chuckled and hugged her daughter in thanks, then spent some time learning how to play the game – which was a good way of keeping the family connected, Kamilah had to admit. So she made sure to invest a few minutes each day
checking in, leaving little notes and goodies for her wife and daughter.

Tapping at the screen, Kamilah harvested the crops that were planted in neat rows outside the family home, and tossed a few ingredients into the oven to be cooked into food. She threw some logs into the fireplace to keep it burning, bought a new carpet with the gold she'd saved, then went to retrieve the gift that Fareeha had left on her bed – a stack of five broccolis, and a note saying 'EAT VEGGIES'.

Kamilah smiled to herself, putting the veggies into her bag. Then she pulled out the apple pie and pizza from the oven, and placed the pie on Fareeha's desk with a note: 'Eat fruits too.' She carried the pizza up to the master bedroom, and put it on Ana's nightstand – That's amore.'

Done puttering about their castle, Kamilah switched over to the plot of land that she shared with Ana alone, which had a cozy little cottage and a pond beside it, filled with ducks and fish. She nipped into the house to find the fire still burning, and mere seconds later, Ana's avatar came running down the stairs to greet her.

'Was about to go to bed,' said Ana's avatar, a white-haired warrior with a scar on her face.

'Then sleep? replied Kamilah's avatar, a remarkably normal woman who looked like herself.

'Nah. I wanna show you something first.'

Ana led her up to the balcony, where an orange tiger lay sleeping on the floor, and a large diamond ring sat on the picnic table.

'How long did you take to find these?'

'Pretty long. But I told you I could do it. Heh,' Ana replied. 'They're for you.'

'Thanks.'

'Going to sleep now,' Ana said, inching her avatar forward so she could press her face to Kamilah's in a kiss. 'Good night. Don't stay up too late, alright?'

'Ok. Sweet dreams.'

':D'

'<3'

And Ana's avatar vanished.

Kamilah spent a few minutes petting and feeding the tiger, then equipped the diamond ring – which showed up as a comically large gem on her hand. She did one last run about the house, then logged out of the game as well. Kamilah yawned, dropping her phone onto the sofa and stretching her body, before turning her head to see Fareeha nip into the kitchen.

She heard the fridge door opening, then Fareeha said, "Mama, there's three pieces of cake left. Wanna share?"

Ah, yes. The rainbow cake Ana had bought before leaving. Kamilah glanced at the clock – it was nearing 11pm, but she pushed herself up from the sofa anyway.

"Give me one. You can have the rest."
"Yes!"
2 years later

Kamilah glanced at the clock on her tablet – 11.47pm. She turned her head needlessly towards the kitchen's doorway, then checked her phone to find no messages. Frowning briefly to herself, she took another sip of lukewarm tea, and breathed her frustration out in a sigh. Kamilah drummed her fingers on the countertop, then quashed her growing impatience, turning her attention back to some mindless entertainment instead.

But she grew bored of re-watching her favourite old sci-fi show – the one with the sad ending that she sulked at Ana for not warning her about – and scrolled through the news feed instead. There was nothing that she hadn't already read for the day, except for an article about the lunar colony, which included an interview with a scientist addressing the ethical concerns of genetically modifying gorillas for their experiments. Kamilah read the article with interest, wondering if they would meet any success in this lifetime, and reminded of an old daydream where she could be an explorer in space...

She dwelt on it wistfully, then scrolled farther down the feed. Swiping through other news providers at random, Kamilah stopped suddenly when she saw what looked like a blur of her own face. She swiped back to the previous tab and there it was, a hi-res photo of Strike Captain Amari and her wife, attending a publicised UN event a year ago. The journalists must be scraping the bottom of the barrel to use such an old picture. Kamilah huffed, then clicked on the article despite her better judgment. 'The Families Behind Our Heroes', the article declared, and Kamilah squinted her eyes at the caption beneath her photo with Ana, which labeled her simply as 'the wife' again.

Oh, the indignity.

Kamilah read on, glad to find that her name finally appeared in the article, which addressed Ana Amari's family first. Unsurprising, considering that Ana's family was the most well-known among the Strike Team, alongside Torbjorn's. Since the rest weren't married, only the Amari and Lindholms had gotten any public exposure at all, while the others remained a mystery that these...tabloid journalists still hoped to uncover.

Honestly, this article lacked any substance at all. How could it, when the entire team had taken measures to protect their families from the public eye? After her first appearance with Ana, Kamilah had received too many phone calls and requests for interviews, and was even accosted on the street twice. When Ana found out, she quickly clamped down on the journalists who'd been on the Amari's heels, and pulled her family's information behind countless security measures, courtesy of an Overwatch team. And when the rest of the team had done the same, the press had little to go on, other than pointless conjecture.

Although...they might be onto something now. Kamilah took a screenshot of the passage guessing at Jack and Gabriel's relationship, and sent it along to Ana so action could be taken, if they wished. Then she skimmed through the rest of the article and closed the tab, regretting the tiny waste of her life.

Kamilah drained her cup of the remaining tea, then reached for her phone to make a call. But she paused when the click of the front door's lock could be heard, and the anxious knot in her gut
promptly loosened in relief. Kamilah waited, listening to the shuffles and bumps from the entryway, until Fareeha finally popped her head through the kitchen door.

"Uh, I'm back."

"You didn't tell me you were going to be this late."

Fareeha shrugged nonchalantly – or at least, she tried. Kamilah thought she detected a hint of tension in the girl's movements. "We just decided to stay out a little longer, that's all."

"Send me a text next time. I was worried."

"Yeah, yeah." Fareeha retrieved a pitcher of water from the fridge, then brought the near-empty pot of tea to her mother when Kamilah motioned for it. "By the way, my friends and I are planning to sign up at this gym near the mall. The one in school is always so full…"

"Alright," Kamilah said, then went still when she took the pot from Fareeha. She sniffed quietly at the air as Fareeha moved away, and her brows drew together in a frown. "Were you drinking?"

Fareeha turned around, looking innocent, but Kamilah caught that slight hesitation as her daughter lowered her glass of water. "What? No… My friends were."

"I can smell it on your breath," Kamilah said – regretting it as she did so. Now that she'd revealed how she knew, Fareeha would learn to cover it up next time.

The sixteen-year-old had an obvious bout of mental debate, before glancing at her mother and admitting, "Fine, but it was only one can…or two. It wasn't that much!"

"Fareeha, you know the police won't care how much you took," Kamilah reminded her. "And you were out this late, drinking? It's not safe for you to do that—"

"I was at my friend's house, okay?" Fareeha argued. "It was 'safe' there, and I came back alright. You're making a big deal out of nothing!"

Indignation fed into the lick of anger Kamilah felt, but she bit her tongue before launching into a reprimand for Fareeha's tone. She waited for her temper to subside, frowning at her daughter in thought. Fareeha's shoulders were squared, ready for an argument – something she'd been too willing to start in recent days, and Kamilah's quarrels with her never ended well. It wouldn't help if they kept falling into cold silences each time Fareeha showed that streak of rebelliousness, so Kamilah forced herself to calm down, and changed tack instead.

"I know you came back safe, and it's good you were in a…comfortable place. But it still doesn't change the fact that you had me worried, and that you could've gotten arrested for what you were doing."

Fareeha blinked at her response, surprised the conversation hadn't gotten heated. "Yeah," was all she surrendered.

"All I want you to do next time, is tell me where you are and what you are doing, if you come home late. Understand?"

"Yeah."

"And if you want to drink, I want you to do it safely. Don't go overboard, and don't do it in public. Alright?"
Fareeha shuffled on her feet, scratching at her nape. She looked more uncomfortable with each second that ticked by. "Yeah. Sorry," she mumbled. She turned away to refill her glass, before returning the pitcher to the fridge. "I'm gonna go wash up."

Kamilah watched her daughter trudge out of the kitchen without looking back, and she sighed to herself. Fareeha hadn't quite turned into the uncontrollable mess that Ana had described herself at this age, but Kamilah feared that the girl was starting to take after her ami. She butted heads with Kamilah more often, and was more inclined to stay out longer, as if to embrace her growing independence. It didn't sit well with Kamilah, but she'd decided to give Fareeha a modicum of responsibility, in hopes that the girl would learn to handle it properly.

And if Fareeha didn't, well. Kamilah would have to assert a little more control then.

For the following year, Kamilah wasn't given much cause to regret her decision. Fareeha never flew right off the rails, and remained close to the mother who watched over her. Even when they did fall into another argument over something trivial, she would mutter an apology and look ashamed for escalating their exchange in the first place. Still, Fareeha couldn't seem to stop herself before getting into trouble – she'd play loose with school rules and argue with the teachers, who in turn had called Kamilah multiple times, often citing the same problems as before.

Fareeha even argued with Ana over their vidcalls too – to Kamilah's surprise. She'd thought that Fareeha would respect Ana's opinions more than anyone else's, but the two seemed to clash most frequently. It might be due to Ana slowly shifting her stance on Fareeha's goals in life – the girl had been exercising regularly, and took up martial arts again, something she hadn't touched since Ana had stopped teaching her years ago. Fareeha had done all these so that she'd be ready for the army when she came of age, and it was only natural that she took offense when Ana suggested the army might not be the best option for her.

Well, natural for a teenager looking to prove her worth, anyway. Ever since Fareeha's first bad reaction, her mothers took to worrying about her in private, and agreed to watch and wait – perhaps even try steering the girl's interest away from the military. Kamilah had achieved some progress in this, so to speak; since Fareeha enjoyed helping her mother maintain the bike, she seemed quite partial towards mechanics, though she was still noncommittal when Kamilah suggested studying engineering in college. But since they still had a few years yet, Kamilah let the matter be, in hopes that Fareeha would come around in the future.

Kamilah was spending some free time in the shopping mall, looking for a gift for Fareeha's birthday. She was pondering over an expensive build-it-yourself remote control car kit, when her phone rang. Kamilah answered it distractedly, but her attention snapped into focus when the caller identified themselves – the police. Her heart plummeted, and she strode out of the shop, listening to the officer's request for her to report to the station.

It took every bit of control not to break the speed limit on the way, and her patience nearly broke when she alighted from her car, walking into the station with all haste. She was granted access to Fareeha in the holding cell – something she suspected was due to their status as Ana Amari's family, but didn't care to protest. Instead, she waited for an officer to shut the door behind her, as she stared at her daughter in silence.

Fareeha had glanced up when the door was first opened, but she promptly dropped her gaze when Kamilah walked in. She kept her eyes to the floor while her mother looked her over – her jeans were dirtied at the knees and calves, her dark grey shirt was torn in a few places. Bandages and bruises sat on her face, and her left arm was resting in a sling. According to what the officer had told Kamilah,
there should be deep bruises on Fareeha's body as well, where she'd fractured three ribs.

Kamilah walked to where Fareeha sat slumped on the stiff cot, and held her by the shoulders, guiding her to sit upright. "Don't slouch like that. You'll hurt yourself even more."

Fareeha's face twitched, but she pressed her lips into a thin line, and sulked at the floor.

"What happened?" Kamilah asked, crouching before her. "I want to hear it from you."

No answer. No eye contact.

"I'm not going to scold you. You're already paying for what you did." Kamilah tapped at her sling gently. "I just want to know why you did it."

"They were harassing Maya, alright?" Fareeha bit at her, more aggressively than intended perhaps, because she glanced away, looking ashamed. "Just because they had a shitty gang of their own, thought they could have their way." Her face scrunched up in anger. "Maya was scared, so I told her to get away…"

"And leave you to fight, what? Five thugs on your own?" Kamilah patted her cheek. "What do you think you are? A superhero?"

Fareeha snorted, biting on her bottom lip as a watery smile broke across her face. She sniffed thickly, rubbing the back of a hand over her eyes. "She called the police, and we got arrested," Fareeha finished her story, looking up at Kamilah. "You're gonna get me out, right? I didn't do anything wrong. Please don't leave me here."

"Of course not," Kamilah assured her, rising to her feet to hug Fareeha's head to her chest. "You were brave, my dear. Not to mention silly and reckless, but you were brave."

A choked sob forced its way through her weak laugh, and Fareeha clutched at her mother, hugging her tighter. "I'm sorry."

"And you're grounded for a month."

"Okay."

They were kept waiting at the station for another hour, after which Kamilah was pulled into a long discussion with the officers, before they were persuaded to let Fareeha go without filing charges. She was acting in defense, had a clean history, and was the daughter of Ana Amari – the last which was a dubious proof of character, but Kamilah bit her tongue so she could take Fareeha away from the station as soon as possible.

The girl takes her grounding stoically, and remains unusually quiet for the rest of the day, barely looking at Kamilah in the eyes even when they were having dinner together. Fareeha only stayed in the kitchen long enough to wash the dishes, before heading up the stairs and locking herself in her room again. Then, it was time for Kamilah to do something she'd been putting off for the entire day.

She took her phone up from the table, and hesitated as she looked at Ana's name. She didn't want to bother Ana, who'd only gotten busier as time went on. And since Fareeha was let off without trouble… No. Ana had to know. She was Fareeha's mother too.

[Are you there?]
Kamilah tried to wait, but her impatience took hold, and she recounted what had happened. Things were quiet on Ana's end for a while, so Kamilah went about her own business, until her phone finally rang right before bed.

"Milah. Is Fareeha okay?"

"Yeah. She's upset, but she's fine."

Ana sighed. "I'm sorry I took so long to call, but-- my god. I can't believe she got into a fight."

"I know. But I can't even bring myself to scold her. She did try to do the right thing…"

"Yeah."

A prolonged silence. "Look, I'm happy that she did it with good intent. But she can't keep trying to solve her problems with violence. Can you try to…"

"She's not a violent person, Ana," Kamilah said. "I believe she knows better. It's just that her temper has a shorter fuse nowadays." She paced slowly around the bedroom. "You know, she was worried that it might damage her chances of joining Overwatch."

"Yeah? Maybe it should."

"Ana."

"I know, I know. Anyway, she has you. So she'll be fine." There was a slight pause, as if Ana had lowered the phone, followed by typing on a keyboard. "Look, Milah. I'm afraid I have to go, I have a lot of things on my plate. I know Fareeha will be okay with you, but contact me if anything happens, alright?"

"Yup."

"Love you, dear. Good night."

"Night," Kamilah replied, and the call was ended.

She put her phone on silent mode and set it on the nightstand, before falling heavily back onto the bed. Taking in a deep breath, Kamilah exhaled slowly, dragging Ana's pillow over to cover her eyes. She was…exhausted.

---

Two months after the incident, the family visited Ana at the HQ again. But Fareeha acted rather stiffly around her, as if expecting her ami to break into a long reprimand for her behaviour. When Ana merely smiled and pulled her in for a hug, Fareeha seemed surprised, and hugged her back gratefully.

With her daughter behaving more subdued than usual, Ana and Kamilah kept most of their conversations going, and occasionally prodded for a simple reply from Fareeha. She was afraid of Ana bringing up her misdemeanour, that much was obvious. And Ana eventually did so, though without the scolding that the girl had anticipated. Fareeha was surprised, glancing at Kamilah in her confusion, before she let out a sheepish smile and promised never to do it again.

Fareeha warmed up quickly after that, even though she's notably milder than her usual teenage bravado. She didn't even bother starting lighthearted bickers with her mothers, nor did she run around with Jesse as she always did – mostly because Jesse was kept busier around base by Gabriel. She spent most of her time alone or with Kamilah, and was always there at the end of the day for dinner, be it within their own family or the Overwatch team.
Ana did notice something else in Fareeha, however. Her daughter's eyes would always be fixed on the uniformed cadets running about base, bearing a faraway look as if she was in thought. There was no doubt what had Fareeha preoccupied – she'd caught Fareeha walking back into their quarters one night, with a recruitment pamphlet she'd taken from the visitor's office. It took all Ana had to keep quiet, and when she glanced over at Kamilah, who shot her a knowing look, she knew she wasn't alone in her quiet trouble.

It was inevitable – to grow up around the generation's most vaunted heroes, and be inspired to become just like them. Fareeha was hardly the only one to have this dream, but she was Ana's only child. And to face the prospect of having her own daughter in her position, suffering bruises and broken bones when Fareeha could have an equally important job somewhere much safer? Ana could hardly sit back and watch, doing nothing.

The next morning, when Jesse arrived to take Fareeha and Kamilah into the city while Ana took care of business in base, she held him back in her office while waving for her family to go ahead. Jesse stood at ease as the door slid shut behind Kamilah, who'd shot an inquisitive glance back, and he waited patiently while Ana paced the floor in front of him.

"What have you been telling Fareeha about Overwatch?"

Jesse blinked in surprise. "Ma'am, I…haven't been telling her classified information, if that's what you're asking."

"No, I'm not." Ana stopped in her tracks with a frustrated huff, crossing her arms. "Have you been telling her about your missions? Stories, like Reinhardt?"

"Well, she does seem to enjoy them."

"And now, she wants to enjoy them."

Jesse cocked his head. "I thought it's been her dream since…forever?" He watched as Ana tapped her foot on the ground, frowning at the wall in silence. "Is there something wrong, ma'am?"

"There's nothing wrong. Not exactly. But you." Ana fixed him with a steady look. "If I gave you a choice to start over – would you still choose to be a part of us?"

"Is…this a test, ma'am?" Jesse asked, half-joking.

"No."

"Alright. Let's see," Jesse mused, running a hand through his hair. "This job ain't the most cushy, or the safest. But it is what I know to do – what I do best. And I am doing it for the greater good. So if you're asking if I'd choose a different path in life, I'd say…no. Not after what I've seen." He straightened his shoulders, raising his chin. "I am committed, ma'am. I would follow you, Reyes, and Morrison right through the gates of hell."

"I said this isn't a test, Jesse McCree," Ana replied, a faint smile curving her lips despite how tired she felt. "But that's good to know."

"If I may ask, why the question, ma'am?"

Ana's lips parted, but she pursed them back together again. She walked over to sit on the edge of her desk, thinking how to phrase the question over. "If you had a child, Jesse. Maybe in the future. A child whom you love, and would protect from all the pain in the world. Would you want your child to do what you do?"
Understanding dawned on Jesse's face, and he lowered his gaze in thought. "No, I...think I wouldn't." He looked back at Ana. "I think I understand, ma'am."

She nodded slowly. "I want you to watch what you say around Fareeha from now on. You can still tell her about your missions, sure. But try not to...feed her dream any more than you have to. Can you do that?"

Jesse shifted on his feet, then took a breath. "Yes, ma'am. You can count on me."

"Good." Ana gave him a flat smile. "Now, bring my girls to the best place you can think of. I'll pick up the tab."

Jesse broke into a grin. "Happy to oblige."

Ana smiled gently when two arms hugged her about the neck, as a kiss was planted on the top of her head. She took Kamilah's hand and kissed her knuckles, before her wife joined her on the couch, where Ana had been waiting in the rooftop terrace of the officers' barracks.

"Well, well. You've spent a long day out with Jesse, hm?"

"Oh, you don't have to remind me. My back is breaking," Kamilah sighed, leaning into her. "I think he forgot there were only two children in the group, not three."

Ana laughed. "Well, you can't fault him. He's excited whenever Fareeha's around. And I think he's grown to like you a lot."

"He is a nice kid... Quite a gentleman now, even. Can you believe he tried to help me down the car? Like I'm some old woman hobbling around with a walking stick."

"You are getting old, my dear. I mean, I thought you were 90 when I saw you at the airport." Ana ran a hand through the broad streaks of grey in Kamilah's hair, then cackled when she received playful slaps on the arm.

"You're in no position to tease me about that, Captain," Kamilah replied, tapping at Ana's temples where her silver strands were. "And my grey hairs are due to stress, thank you very much."

"Then I know how I'll look like in a few years," Ana riposted, raising her brows at Kamilah pointedly. Her wife huffed in amusement, rolling her eyes before resting against Ana again. "But are you getting a lot of pressure at home? Work? Fareeha?"

"It's just a joke, Ana. I'm fine."

"You still look tired since you landed two days ago."

Kamilah sighed softly, turning her face into Ana's hair. "It's nothing. Just...had a bad week, that's all."

"Fareeha?"

"Fareeha's been good. No, it's just...me."

Worry rose to the surface, as she ran her fingers through Kamilah's curly tresses. "Are you alright? Have you been going to the therapist?"

"Not as much. Been busy at work. And yes, I know. It's good for my health to go," Kamilah added
before Ana could nag. "I will, alright?"

"Good girl." Ana kissed her head. "But I'm serious – take care of yourself, alright? I know I've been scarce, but I still worry about you."

Kamilah snorted. "I could say the same to you. You worry me sick with how many missions you take on. Come to think, do Jack and Gabe still do a lot of fieldwork?"

"Not as much as we'd like to, but yes. Don't worry, we can handle it." Ana waited for Kamilah's usual nag at her to stop going on so many missions, but her wife didn't speak, only letting out a quiet huff. She must be feeling out of sorts… Ana mulled over their situation, then voiced an idea she'd been pondering for a while. "Milah? Why don't you retire?"

Kamilah lifted her head, giving her an incredulous look. "What, at this age? Still a little young, don't you think?"

"Yes, but you don't really have to work anymore. I make more than enough for the whole family. And since the academy can get pretty strenuous… you could just retire to get away from all that stress."

"And what, be a housewife?"

"If you're so inclined, why not?" Ana smiled. "You can relax… and only have to worry about our daughter. Or, you could always study, like you've always wanted."

"Oh, please. Learning Fareeha's primary school math was more than enough," Kamilah chuckled. "No, I don't think I could be a student again. Or even retire. I wouldn't know what to do with myself."

"Well, think about it." Ana threaded their fingers together. "Now that you can have a comfortable life, why not? If you don't want to be bored, you can take art classes, or… learn to sculpt. Or even pick up knitting so you can knit me a sweater. I need more of those." She snickered when Kamilah flicked her forehead.

"You really want to turn me into your old lady, hm?" Kamilah smiled, a playful glint in her eyes as she pressed her lips to Ana's. "You know, I've never really thought about it. But now that you've brought it up… it does sound nice. I don't think it'll happen for a few more years, but I do like the sound of it."

"Great." Ana mirrored her smile with a grin, then met her wife in a sound kiss. "As long as you're happy, I am too."

Chapter End Notes

Fractures

To Ana, being home was a source of immense happiness and comfort. With Overwatch demanding so much of her time that returning home even once a year was a struggle, Ana was eager to pull herself away from all the responsibility and pressure, shed the Strike Captain's cloak, and just be…Ana. To be herself. To let down her guard and be able to close her eyes without worrying about the next emergency, which would ruin the next few days of her life. To walk and not feel the weight of the world on her shoulders, even for the shortest moment.

Home was a place for Ana to relax. A sanctuary. But it seemed to have become a thing of the past.

Kamilah – her beautiful, patient wife – had always striven to keep the peace within their household. Ana could tell her prolonged absences was wearing on Kamilah, slowly and surely, but her wife always let off steam in long-winded nagging or heated bickering, before letting Ana off the hook with a simple promise or a tweak of the nose. Kamilah loved her wife, as Ana did her, and she was willing to tolerate a few dissatisfactions for the sake of harmony, recognising that Ana was trying her best as well.

Fareeha, on the other hand…

"Have you even considered other choices, Fareeha?" Ana asked, and bit down a sigh when that frown creased her daughter's forehead – again. Not a good sign. "There are so many things you can do, instead of joining the army."

"Why do you keep trying to change my mind?" Fareeha replied, the effort at sounding civil obvious in her tone.

"I'm not trying to change your mind. I'm just pointing out that you still have plenty of choices right now," Ana said calmly. "You're only 19. You still have time to explore, to see what you want to do with your life. Personally, I think you should go to a university first–"

"But why waste my time when I already know what I want to do," Fareeha pointed out.

"Because it can do you good. Even I got my degree first."

"In military science. And you joined the army in the end. Besides, mama's done everything without a degree."

Kamilah glanced up from her plate, at which she'd staring. "I would've studied if I had the luxury, Fareeha. It'll be good for you to study when you can. Like ami's saying, you should get a degree before–"

"Now you're just ganging up on me," Fareeha accused. "Why won't the two of you just accept my decision!"

"Fareeha," Ana stepped in, anger simmering below the surface at Fareeha's petulance. "You have the time, and we have the money. You can choose anywhere you want to go – you can even go to a university overseas. I just want you to think this over. This will be good for your future–"

"You keep saying that!" Fareeha had raised her voice, and Ana's brows drew together in a frown. "I know what I want my future to be, and I've been preparing myself for it! Literally the entire family's been in the army, and you're all doing just fine!"
"You don't understand what it's like," Ana growled. "You don't know what the army requires of you, takes from you. You have no idea the kind of sacrifice it'll force you to make—"

"Yeah, I have no idea!" Fareeha talked over her. "And guess what? It's because I'm not in the army yet."

"You are not ready for it," Ana declared, raising her voice to match her daughter's.

"No." A sneer curved Fareeha's lips. "I see now. You don't want me to overtake you, don't you?"

Ana's eyes narrowed dangerously. "What?"

"You're afraid that I'll do well in the army," Fareeha continued, staring back at her mother, poised in challenge. "You don't want me to take your place in the future, do you?"

Hand clenched into a fist, Ana said lowly, "You don't know what it's like to be in my position."

"And you talk big like the rest of them!" Fareeha said, deliberately loud. "You make your life sound oh so dramatic, but I won't let you—"

Ana didn't give her daughter a chance to finish, anger bursting to life at the sheer cheek of this girl. "That's enough! Go to your room, now!"

"You can't order me—!"

Rising from her chair, Ana pulled herself up to her full height, glaring at Fareeha. "I said, now!"

Fareeha bared her teeth in anger, and did just as her mother ordered – except she stood with such force, that her chair toppled over. She didn't bother to pick it up, storming away from the dining table as she griped out loud, "I'm not your fucking cadet!"

"Watch your tongue!" Ana shouted after her, watching Fareeha slam a fist on the staircase's railing before stomping up the steps, and finally slamming her door shut.

Wrestling down the urge to knock on Fareeha's door and trash their whole argument out, Ana clenched her jaw and sat back down. She took a deep, calming breath, turning her head to look at Kamilah – and paused. Kamilah was resting her head in one hand, wearing a severe frown with her eyes screwed shut. Ana's heart ached at the sight, and she covered Kamilah's hand gently with her own, but got no reaction.

"Milah?" Ana said, peering at her. "You alright?"

Kamilah didn't move for the longest time. Then her hand fell to the table, eyes opening to stare blankly at the dishes left on the table. Without a word, she pushed her chair back and rose to her feet, slipping her hand from Ana's. Opening her mouth to speak, but finding no breath, Ana just watched as Kamilah walked slowly to the staircase, and climbed up towards their bedroom.

Heaving a quiet sigh, Ana looked back at the half-eaten dinner on the table, and lost her appetite. Feeling hollow, Ana stared for a few moments longer, before moving mechanically to pack their leftovers. She retrieved the containers, and managed to clear her head while packing the food neatly away, storing them in the fridge. Then she took out a teapot and two cups, reaching for her favourite tin of tea leaves in the wall cabinet.

A spot of tea would do them both good, Ana hoped as she set the tea leaves to steep. If not to get Kamilah talking, then at least to smooth things over.
Ana’s little plan worked – it warmed Kamilah up to her after a quiet cup together, but they could barely discuss Fareeha before switching to another topic of conversation. A diversion they needed, to be sure, and though the matter still weighed heavily on their minds, they managed to find a peaceful moment together, Kamilah resting her head against Ana’s, with her wife’s arm around her.

They passed the days in Cairo in similar silence, so to speak. Fareeha’s intent to enroll in the army wasn’t discussed, and their daughter was more than happy to keep it that way. She stayed at a distance from her parents after that night, but she did give short answers when spoken to by her mothers – mostly Kamilah. Very little words passed between Ana and Fareeha for the two weeks she stayed at home – a longer holiday she’d managed to carve from her schedule, but couldn’t enjoy in the end. Only Kamilah’s presence soothed her frayed nerves, and it was what kept her anchored as the family traveled back to Zurich with Ana, on their yearly visit to the Overwatch base.

It was an awkward affair. The others picked up on the reticence between Ana and Fareeha quickly, owing to their lack of direct contact and Fareeha staying away from Ana as much as she could. A simple message to Reinhardt helped to set Ana’s mind at ease about Fareeha, knowing that her daughter would be well taken care of by the stout Crusader, who was stuck in base due to injuries he’d sustained in the last mission.

With Fareeha occupied, Ana was left with Kamilah to entertain – but that was rather easy. Her wife had recently taken to tidying up Captain Amari’s messy workspace, when she wasn’t wandering around base or with the Strike Team. And Kamilah was in another bout of ‘spring cleaning’ in Ana’s office, when Ana left to retrieve a duffle bag she’d left in the shooting range, but not before teasing her ‘secretary’ and getting a smack on her backside.

It left Ana walking with a slight spring in her step for the first time in months, and a polite smile soon accompanied her lighter mood, when she bumped into a young blonde leaving the shooting range. Angela Ziegler seemed surprised by Ana, and her back instinctively snapped straight in the presence of a superior officer.

"Captain Amari."

"At ease, Doctor," Ana returned the greeting, amused by how nervous Angela still seemed. She nodded at the doors sliding shut behind Angela, and said, "Getting some practice?"

Angela glanced briefly at the doors, and gave a thin smile. "Yes, ma'am."

Ana nodded in approval. The young woman had signed up with Overwatch the moment she’d gotten her medical degree, and completed her residency. Angela had taken to the hospital ward like a fish to water, but faced a significant obstacle in mandatory combat training that would prepare her for the field. She’d refused to touch a firearm for the first month, before Torbjorn managed to persuade her to participate in training.

"Good. I appreciate the effort you're making." Ana smiled, turning towards the doors. "Well, I'll see you--"

"Uh, Captain?" Angela had stepped forward, subtly wedging her shoulder between Ana and the doors. "I–, um. I would like to ask you…"

Ana cocked her head. "Yes?"

"I…” Angela's eyes darted to the side, and she seemed to be thinking hard. But her shoulders sagged a little after a moment's thought. "I would like to ask you…if you knew when I will get my first
Ana smiled gently in understanding. "Don't worry about that, Angela. You still have a while to go before we'll send you out into the field. I'll make sure you've had ample time to prepare before then, alright?"

Angela's cheeks coloured slightly, and she nodded. "Thank you, ma'am."

Ana waited as Angela shuffled on her feet, cast a glance back at the doors, before hurrying off with a quiet goodbye. Bemused, Ana stared after the blonde, wondering why she'd acted so...odd. She pondered this mystery for a second, before leaving it alone and palming the door's controls. And she'd strode just a few paces into the range, before she stopped dead in her tracks, staring at the only occupied lane in the range.

Fareeha stood with a pistol in both hands, aiming at the target some distance ahead. She'd fired off a shot and paused, lifting the ear muffs from her head. She turned around, then froze in horror when she found Ana standing before her. The air grew tense and heavy, while Fareeha regained some sense and placed the loaded pistol on the counter – flicking the safety on as she did so.

Taking one, two, three steps forward, Ana found her voice as fire sparked to life deep in her gut. "Fareeha Amari--"

"Forget it!" Fareeha said immediately, turning back to her. "I know what you're going to say, and I don't want to hear it!"

"Now you just listen here--"

"No, I don't care!" Fareeha side-stepped and gave Ana a wide berth as her mother walked towards her. "I'm tired of being treated like a fucking child by you!"

"Fareeha--!" Ana raised her voice, but Fareeha didn't stay to hear more. Her daughter ran out of the doors, and she was left staring dumbfounded as the doors slid shut again.

She knew where Fareeha had run off to – the fields behind the cadets' barracks. Athena was fully capable of tracking Fareeha's every movement in base and reporting it to Ana in real time, but she chose not to utilise the A.I.'s function. Instead, she made a wise decision to cool her head, walking back to the office where Kamilah was, and telling her wife what she'd just seen. Kamilah took the news well enough, and though she shared Ana's deep concern for their daughter, they decided to leave Fareeha alone for the day, and talk to her at night when their tempers had cooled...somewhat.

Not that it helped. Ana knew full well that her anger would flare again, despite reminding herself all day to keep cool. And when Fareeha walked into their room near midnight, glaring at the corner where her mothers were seated together, Ana felt her own blood boil once more. She cast a glance at Kamilah – who watched Fareeha silently – and stood, taking a deep breath.

"Fareeha." Ana waited, only to be ignored by the girl who was packing her backpack. Fareeha kept her back turned to her mother, throwing her stuff into the bag jerkily, and Ana only grew more indignant as the seconds stretched on. "We need to talk."

It came out forceful, almost like an order, and Fareeha shot a glare over her shoulder. "I'm going to Jesse's."

"You are not going anywhere until we have a talk," Ana emphasised the last words, making it clear that Fareeha wasn't going to fuss or stomp her way out of this. And when Fareeha whirled around in
anger, Ana almost wished the girl had just stormed out of the room without having her say.

"We don't have to talk, because I already know what you're going to say," Fareeha ground through her teeth. "You're just going to kick up a bloody fuss just because I was holding a gun – safely, and in practice–"

"You had no authorisation to touch anything in the armoury," Ana reminded her. "And you didn't get my permission."

"Your permission?" Fareeha raised her brows sardonically. "Oh, like the great Captain Amari is ever going to let me touch even a fucking target--"

"Language!" Ana snapped, only to have her daughter roll her eyes. "It's not safe for you to handle a gun when you're not trained."

"Because you refuse to teach me!" Fareeha shouted.

"And I will never teach you, because I never want you to hold one!" Ana matched her volume. "Who let you into the armoury today? And who taught you to hold a gun? Was it Angela?"

"Angela!" Fareeha barked a laugh, dripping with sarcasm. "Angela would rather not touch a gun, much less teach someone else to hold it." Her eyes bore that dangerous, rebellious glint. "Bet you wish I was like her, don't you? Bet you wish I wasn't–"

"You're damn right I do," Ana shot back. "Angela has the right idea, and you're better off following her example. It was Jesse, wasn't it?" She quickly asked before Fareeha could fire back a retort, and her daughter's face blanched, taken aback.

"It wasn't him! Don't you dare do anything to him–"

"I will do whatever I damn well want!" Ana took a step forward, but it only made Fareeha straighten up in defiance.

"That's all you ever do, isn't it?" Fareeha took on that sneer again, and Ana's hands clenched in anger. "You do whatever the hell you want, and everyone else can just accept it or fuck off. You do whatever you want, and that's why you've trained Jesse and hundreds of other cadets, except me. You do whatever you want, and that's why you stay in Zurich all the fucking time, while we have to shut the fuck up and pretend to be happy about it. You don't care about me, and you don't give a single shit about this family anymore–!"

It happened before Ana could even process it – her hand was in the air, palm stinging, while Fareeha's head was turned to the side. The loud smack registered late in Ana's ears, as a hand clamped tightly onto her arm, and yanked her backwards. Ana wrenched her eyes away from Fareeha – who'd dragged a hand over her eyes, stomping over to her backpack – and turned to face Kamilah, who looked stricken. They stared at each other as Fareeha ran out of the room, leaving the door to slide shut behind her.

"Do not do that ever again," Kamilah intoned, voice trembling slightly. Ana caught a dull flash in her eyes. "Do not hit her, ever again. Understand?"

It was as much a threat as a plea, and Ana's throat tightened. "I'm sorry, Milah. I'm sorry," she whispered, growing cold when Kamilah released her arm, walking backwards with stuttering steps. She looked into Kamilah's darkened gaze, and the faint trace of fear in her wife's eyes shocked her into action.
Ana followed after Kamilah, who'd taken another step away from her, before allowing Ana to draw close.

"Milah. I'm sorry. I really am." Ana hesitated, then set her hands on Kamilah's arms, tugging her close. She took comfort in the fact that her wife didn't resist. "I…lost control. I'm sorry. I'll never do it again, I promise, Please," she begged quietly, lifting a hand to cup Kamilah's cheek.

Don't shut yourself from me.

Kamilah didn't respond, and merely stared back into Ana's pleading gaze. She was quiet when Ana held her in an embrace, standing stiffly in her wife's arms for the longest time, before resting her head on Ana's shoulder.

Fareeha didn't return to the room that night. And Kamilah fell asleep with her back facing Ana. Troubled and unable to sleep, Ana lay with her eyes wide open, staring up at the ceiling. Then she turned her head to look at Kamilah, heart squeezing in guilt and regret, until she couldn't bear it anymore, and reached out to touch Kamilah's arm tentatively. Uncertainty fell from her the longer she stroked Kamilah's arm, the motion soothing herself as well, and Ana scooted closer, so she could drape an arm over her wife's waist.

She did it gently, though Kamilah still roused soon after. Ana held her breath as Kamilah settled back to sleep, then seemed to notice the arm around her body. A long moment passed, and Ana dared to reach up with her fingertips, tracing over the back of Kamilah's hand, before fingers slipped slowly between her own.

Heart lightening at the sensation, Ana's lips curved in relief, and she shifted even closer to Kamilah's back. And in the early hours of the morning, Ana finally let her eyelids fall shut, drifting off with her wife's warmth for comfort.

Ana was eager to make amends, Kamilah could tell. How could Ana not, when she knew how her wife had grown up? And, to be honest, Kamilah had already forgiven her that night. She knew Ana was not that kind of person, and she recognised how hard her wife was trying to do better – Ana was, after all, affected by Fareeha's words as well. She put much of her work aside in an attempt to spend more time with her family, even if it was only Kamilah who stayed by her side, and she put on a smile that made Kamilah ache inside.

Despite her mother's overtures, Fareeha remained in a dark gloom for the rest of their stay, detaching herself from both mothers, and only returned to Kamilah's side when the time came for their flight home. Fareeha walked right into the departure without saying a word, while her parents were still hugging each other. Ana stared after her, then flashed a smile when Kamilah pecked her on the cheek in farewell.

Kamilah walked into the hall where Fareeha stood, then turned around to get one last look at Ana. A sudden wave of nostalgia hit her as she gazed back at her wife, who stood with one hand in her jacket's pocket, and the other waving goodbye as she wore that silly grin on her face. They were both twenty years younger for the briefest second, before the tinge of grey returned to Ana's temples, and Kamilah could feel the lines on her face which she always complained about.

Pulling on a smile, Kamilah waved back.
Kamilah’s heart was set more at ease when they returned to Cairo, and went on with their lives as usual. Fareeha drew close to her mother again, and though she was still as hard-headed and prone to trouble as before, she did seem mellower around Kamilah – which was expected, considering how far she'd…drifted from her other parent. Still, Kamilah was glad to have Fareeha talking with her as much as before, and she did notice her daughter cleaning the Overwatch posters in her room every week, even the posters of Ana.

Months passed without much incident – barring the times Kamilah had to go to Fareeha’s school – and when finals drew near, Fareeha finally spoke to her about the one sore subject that Kamilah was still hesitant to broach with her.

"I think I wanna study engineering," Fareeha said over her place of rice, voice a little dull.

Kamilah's heart lightened at the news, though she kept her relief in check at the sight of Fareeha's unenthused expression. "Are you sure?"

"Do I have a choice?" Fareeha half-rolled her eyes.

"I mean, I am happy that you want to study. But it might be difficult if you don't really want to…"

"Yeah, I want to," Fareeha sighed. "I guess the army can wait while I…see what I wanna do."

"That's good," Kamilah said eagerly. Fareeha had never wanted to discuss this before, limiting it to brief, non-committal chats with her mother, but she sounded quite certain. "You should take the chance to study before you start working."

"Yeah, yeah. I know."

"Do you have any university that you're aiming for?"

"I don't know. I'll look into it." Fareeha shrugged, scooping a large serving of rice and beef into her mouth. "Nothing beats putting more stress on myself before finals."

"Don't worry, Fareeha." Kamilah clasped her on the wrist. "Just concentrate on your exams, then worry about what comes next, alright?"

"Mm." Fareeha downed half of her soda in one go. "Bet you're damn happy about it."

"Of course I'm 'damn' happy about it," Kamilah said. "I would've given anything to be able to study at your age. Instead, I had to--"

"Join the army. Yeah, I know. Some people have all the luck in the world."

"Bad luck, yes." Kamilah leaned in, setting a hand on Fareeha's head. "You're very fortunate, Fareeha. You have the choice to keep studying, and you have parents who can support you."

"Ugh, I know, mama," Fareeha groaned.

"Just reminding you, habibti." Kamilah smiled, nudging her head. "We love you. Your ami and I want nothing but the best for you."

"The best," Fareeha muttered, turning a little glum as she poked a fork into her last piece of vegetable.

"Yes. Even if it doesn't feel like it now," Kamilah said. "We've been through life longer than you have. And we know how to make things easier for you. So we--"
"Mama. *Mama,* Fareeha cut in, fixing her with a mock pitiful expression. "You're getting very long-winded."

"I'm old. I have a right to be long-winded," Kamilah retorted, while her daughter gave a snort. "I just want you to know that we love you. Alright?"

"Yeah, yeah," Fareeha dragged her words in a long-suffering tone. But as she dug into her bowl of soup, she paused and surprised Kamilah with, "I love you too."

Kamilah nearly dropped her spoon, and ended up huffing in laughter. "You're still washing the dishes."

"I don't love you anymore."

"Whatever."

Ana: [Still stuck in office. :( ]

Ana: [How was your day?]

[Fine. And you don't have to check in every day, you know.]

Ana: [I know]

Ana: [I just miss you. That's all]

[When do you never]

Ana: [D:]

[Oh. And Fareeha wants to go to uni first.]

Ana: [Really? Well that's a surprise]

Ana: [And a relief. What, engineering?]

Ana: [Where does she wanna go?]

[She hasn't decided yet.]

Ana: [Ah well. Tell her we'll send her anywhere she wants to go, yeah?]

[Already told her.]

Ana: [Good good. My god, you don't know the weight that just lifted off my chest]

[I think I kinda know]

Ana: [Yeah haha]

Ana: [Tell me when Fareeha decides]

Ana: [Gonna get back to it. But call or text if you need me okay?]

[Yup.]
Ana: [Love you, albi. Been too long since I said that]

[You said that yesterday.]

Ana: [I know ;p]

Ana: [Good night, dear. Dream of me]

[A nightmare then.]

Ana: [HEY]

[Good night. Don't stay up too late.]

[See you in dream.]

Ana: [:D]
Without expecting or meaning to, Kamilah had become immensely familiar with Cairo's airport. How could she not, after seeing Ana off for her flights back to Zurich, or taking a plane herself to visit her wife who worked halfway across the world? Nothing really piqued her interest in the airport anymore, and walking through the pristine halls filled with travelers was as exciting as strolling down a pavement in her own neighbourhood. All routine. Except today.

Kamilah watched from her chair as Fareeha tapped her foot on the floor, waiting impatiently in the long line that had formed at the check-in counter. Unable to restrain a huff of amusement and exasperation, Kamilah shook her head, leaning back in her seat. Fareeha had proven that, once she'd set her mind to it, she could study and excel in her exams – earning stellar results that had granted her swift acceptance at a university in the UK, where she would pursue an engineering degree. But for all her mental acuity, Fareeha's stubbornness still won out sometimes, and she dragged her feet long enough that she couldn't beat the queue – despite Kamilah's repeated nags at her to leave the house early.

The only reason Kamilah didn't pull Fareeha out, was the girl's reluctance. Oh, she was excited, sure. Fareeha had packed her luggage with much care, going on frequent shopping trips over the past weeks to pick up whatever items she'd need. She collected recipes from Kamilah, and tried her hand at cooking more often, so she could feed herself while she lived alone. She packed and unpacked her beloved items, torn between taking them along or leaving them behind. But she mostly chose to leave them, including her Overwatch posters – which she'd asked Kamilah to clean regularly.

Fareeha behaved like all was well, until the night before her flight, when she carried her pillow into the master bedroom, and crawled into her mother's bed. She wore a sheepish, playful grin when Kamilah grumbled about her taking up space, and they had a short chat before Fareeha fell asleep with Kamilah stroking her head. Unbeknownst to her, Kamilah had stayed up longer, reminiscing all those times when little Fareeha had jumped into her parents' bed gleefully, treating a sleepover with her mothers as an adventure in itself. Fareeha never truly did outgrow that phase of her life – always gladly clutching onto her mother's apron strings despite her independence – and now...she would be letting go. Fully.

Kamilah's throat tightened briefly, and she stood when Fareeha strode away from the counter, with only her backpack slung on her shoulders. They made a side trip to the stores first, buying a few packets of candies and a book to keep Fareeha entertained on the flight. Kamilah smiled when Fareeha dropped a cat pharaoh magnet into her hand, before they walked to the entrance of the departure hall together.

"Remember to call me when you get there," Kamilah repeated herself, for what must be the thousandth time judging by the look on Fareeha's face.

"Yeah, yeah. I know."

"And take good care of yourself. Don't just eat nonsense for your meals."

"I think I will," Fareeha said, rolling her eyes.

"Don't get into trouble," Kamilah continued, undaunted. "And if you need something, tell me and I'll send it over for you."

"How about when I need you to do my laundry?"
It was Kamilah's turn to roll her eyes, and she rapped her knuckles on Fareeha's forehead. "Don't push your luck, rascal. But I'll come visit you when I get the chance. Maybe during your term break, or something."

"That'll be nice."

"Remember – don't get into trouble."

"You said that already."

"It bears repeating," Kamilah sighed, looking up at her daughter. She was struck for a moment by Fareeha's uncanny resemblance to Ana, and took a breath to steady herself, clasping at her daughter's arms. "If you miss home…just give me a call. Or text. But remember to keep in touch, okay?"

"Okay," Fareeha said, then looked back at the entrance. "Think I should go now."

She tugged at the straps of her backpack, adjusting them on her shoulders. Fareeha took a step back with her passport in hand, then paused when Kamilah moved to follow her. She stared at her mother uncertainly, before engulfing Kamilah in a firm hug. Kamilah returned the hug with nearly as much strength as Fareeha, and they shared a quiet laugh when they were done trying to break each other's backs.

"Bye. Drive home safely, alright?"

"When do I never?"

Fareeha shot her an incredulous look. "You bumped up the kerb just now."

"I was rushing for time because someone left the house late. Remember?"

"Whatever," Fareeha huffed, a crooked smile parting her lips as she scratched at her head. She gave Kamilah one last hug, then stepped away. "Bye, mama."

"Have a safe flight, habibti."

Fareeha shot her another smile, then walked into the departure hall alone. She cleared the checkpoint without trouble, and turned around to give her mother one last wave, before walking farther into the hall and out of sight.

Kamilah stood in place for a long while, reluctance gripping her in full. But there wasn't much she could do, and she finally moved her feet – one step after another, as she walked away from the departure hall.

The house was empty. So empty.

It hadn't been that bad when Ana first left – Kamilah still had a sprightly baby daughter to take care of, and passed her days filled with Fareeha's giggles and fusses, spending much of her time running after the little one, worrying and caring for her. Things hadn't changed much since then, and Kamilah always had Fareeha to give her company and headaches whenever Ana was away. Her daily schedule and routines revolved around two people – hers and Fareeha's – and that kept her days quite well-occupied.

Or perhaps, too well-occupied.

She felt Fareeha's absence the moment she reached home. It was refreshing at first, to finally have
some privacy for herself, some quiet for her thoughts. But the novelty took little time to wear off, and soon, Kamilah was all too aware of how...*silent* the house was. Every move she made produced a not-echo that would go unheard, and she often caught herself listening for the slightest sounds of movement from the upper floor – more specifically, Fareeha's room. She would hear nothing each time, and the emptiness would hit her all over again.

It reminded her of the time before she'd met Ana, though there were obvious differences now. Where she'd once repulsed others from her life, she missed and wanted her family back at her side. And where she'd wallowed in her self-imposed solitude, she now smiled and was assuaged when the family's chat lit up the phone's screen. Granted, Ana still texted less frequently than Fareeha, but the girl's excitement over her new surroundings was more than enough to keep Kamilah entertained. She read each of Fareeha's texts and photos, making sure that her daughter was well, and took some pleasure in Fareeha's learning to stand on her own two feet, in another country...without her mother.

Kamilah let out a sigh, replied to Fareeha's latest photo, and locked her phone. It was only the second week since Fareeha had flown off, and here she was, lying on the couch on a lazy Saturday morning, at a loss for what to do. She stared at the spinning blades of the ceiling fan, trying to remember what she'd done for herself, her *own* enjoyment. A hobby? Flipping through TV channels before crashing into bed was definitely not one. Shopping for groceries? No. Buying random gifts for her family because she was bored? Maybe. Play that same old mobile game with Ana? Most probably.

But what did she ever do for herself, without two troublemakers to worry about?

Kamilah closed her eyes, fingers drumming listlessly on the back of her phone – until a thought struck. She paused for a moment, before a certain giddiness set in. It was an old, throwaway fantasy she'd had when she was much younger. A daydream she'd dwell on to make the days more tolerable, to keep her going.

*Could she...?*

She brought up her phone, and typed into the search bar: 'How to build a custom hoverbike'

"Give me covering fire!" Ana yelled into the radio, blasting on the team-wide frequency as she hauled a bloodied Overwatch soldier onto her shoulders.

"*You are the covering fire—*"

"Now!"

Her fierce bark put an end to any more backtalk, and she was promptly answered by a strained cry of 'Yes, *ma'am*!'. Ana heard the sergeant on her shoulders groan weakly in pain, but remained crouched behind the cracked concrete wall of an old warehouse. Her fleeting thought to give reassurance disappeared when there was a lull in hostile gunfire, and Ana burst out of her hiding spot, sprinting towards the evac point as quickly as her legs could take her. The VTOL was guarded by a scant few Overwatch soldiers, and they covered the Captain's retreat as she ran up the ramp, setting the injured soldier's body on the floor.

The rest of her squad pulled off one last hail of lead, before rushing into the VTOL as well, throwing themselves inside as the ramp closed behind them for take-off. Ana was panting heavily as the team's surviving medic tended to the wounded soldier, but she didn't take time to wait, blood boiling now that she had time to think, away from a messy crossfire of bullets.

She stormed into the cockpit, where the pilot wisely ignored her as she slammed a fist on the
communications console. That did nothing, and Ana gritted her teeth, forcing herself to be rational, jabbing in a 12-digit code to open a secure channel back to base.

"Captain Amari–"

"Give me Reyes, Athena. Now."

A very quick pause. "Yes, Ana–"

"Explain this fucking bullshit, Reyes. Now!"

"Captain, they moved too quickly–"

"And you were supposed to move quicker. Your people scouted the goddamn area before we went to secure the target. So tell me how this bloody escort mission turned into a rescue mission, how these same goddamn people managed to rout us again, and how the fuck you missed them – again!"

A deep breath over the comms. "Captain. They are a very well-coordinated group. And they've spent long enough fighting against us to learn our tactics–"

"Spare me the excuses," Ana barked, cutting Gabriel off. "I'm taking you off the Talon investigation. Athena – contact Gerard LaCroix and have him ready for my call the instant I'm back in base. This case should've been in his hands long ago."

"Yes, Captain," Athena replied, unperturbed. "May I request an update on the mission?"

"It failed," Ana ground through her teeth. "Doctor was captured by Talon, who shot him when we had him back in our hands."

"Understood. And what is your team's headcount? I am receiving vital sign readings from only–"

"Five. Seven K.I.A."

"I am afraid that is eight K.I.A. now, Captain."

Ana froze, then straightened herself from the console. She walked to the doorway, and watched the medic close Eaton's blank eyes with blood-slicked fingers. Her hand curled into a fist, before she turned away and sank heavily into the seat at the comms console. Ana's head fell forward to rest in her gloved hands, and she stayed there until the anger had ebbed, allowing grief and resentment to settle in.

She had failed.

________________________________________

"Captain, I must protest–"

"Angela," Ana interrupted tiredly, knowing too well what the protest would be. "Your technology will help to save lives, no matter what form it takes."

"That is what I cannot accept," Angela pushed on. "You have taken that which would heal, and...perverted it into a weapon of war. Yes, it will still save lives in this form, but it will take lives as well – a direct contradiction to its original purpose."

"We have made it versatile," Ana replied. "And you will pardon my saying – we are using it to its fullest potential. In my hands, it will save the lives of your comrades – both by healing them, and killing those who would kill them first."
"It was not made to kill!" Angela burst in indignation. "Captain, I must point out that Overwatch is on the leading edge of technology due to all the research it conducts. We are respected, and will be emulated. If the world sees that we are manufacturing such lethal, 'versatile' weapons, they will soon follow in our footsteps. They will do more harm than good with technology they do not fully understand, much less appreciate the reason for which they were invented."

"They will do harm with or without the technology we have," Ana riposted. "What matters is that we have the means to stop them when they step out of line. Dr. Ziegler." She placed emphasis on Angela's name, stopping the doctor before she argued again. "I understand your concern. But we cannot sit on the sides and take the moral high ground, while others threaten the peace that we work for. Your technology was invented with noble intentions, yes. But it'll still serve its purpose, even if you disagree with its…execution."

Angela remained stiff in her seat, fixing Ana with a steely gaze. "This would not have anything to do with the team you lost?"

Ana's eyes narrowed a fraction, blood quickening in her veins. "It has everything to do with them, and all whom we have lost in the line of duty. The lives of your colleagues outweigh your personal comfort. Don't they, Dr. Ziegler?"

It was Angela's turn to bear the shot – but her poker face didn't hold as well as Ana's. Her expression twisted into anger, as she glared at Ana. "Comfort? I feel none of that when I am surrounded by people who corrupt medicine by turning it into a weapon."

Ana sat still, while Angela rose from her chair and swept out of the office without a word.

"Haven't seen you and Gabe in the same room for a while," Jack rumbled quietly as they strode down the hallway, crossing the threshold into the hospital wing.

"Don't think we will be anytime soon," Ana huffed. She was still miffed about the botched mission, and though she regretted stripping that modicum of authority from Gabriel in front of the whole team at mission control, she hadn't quite spoken to him yet. Her gaze dropped in thought. "Where is he? Haven't seen him around since his mission yesterday."

Jack shrugged, inching closer to Ana when they neared the door to a private ward. "He gave me the report, but after that…nothing." He sighed, shrugging his shoulders. Jack looked almost dejected, glancing up at Ana. "Mind if I talked to you later?"

"Only if you bring the beer," Ana said, already knowing what he wanted to discuss.

Neither of their relationships with Gabriel had been the best in recent days, what with the Blackwatch commander constantly pushing his boundaries in missions, ignoring parameters and regulations, and necessitating cover-ups to keep his activity secret. Arguments made up most of their communications now, and Ana had given up trying to speak with him in the short term. Jack too, it seemed, though he had a marriage to worry about as well.

Jack looked up when Ana clasped his shoulder, and he forced a thin smile before opening the ward's door. Its sole occupant stirred at their entrance, but didn't try to sit up and salute – a telling sign of Jesse's condition. He only offered a groggy 'heya' when they reached his bed, pulling up chairs to sit beside him.

Jesse, after flashing that faint smile at them, fell back to a placid expression as the silence dragged on. Ana looked over the bandages on his face, and the arm resting on top on his covers. The blanket was
pulled up to his chest, and covered what remained of his left arm, which had been amputated at the 
elbow after a disastrous accident during his mission with Gabriel the day before.

"How are you doing, cowpoke?" Ana asked, getting a lopsided smile from Jesse.

"Just...fine, ma'am. Thanks for asking. And visiting. Y'all didn't have to."


"It's alright, Morrison...Ha." Jesse seemed to laugh once in reflex, then continued in a crestfallen, 
bitter tone. "'All-right'. Get it?"

"Kid..." Jack sighed.

"Doesn't seem appropriate, Jesse," Ana said. "You've still got some left."

Jesse burst out in a brief laugh, wearing a stiff grin as he moved his left stump. But his lips quickly 
thinned into a line, quivering, as he covered his face with a hand, leaning back into his pillows.

They heard him sniff once, then Jesse opened his damp eyes – which sparkled with a glimmer of 
hope. "Oh, but Angie – she's a sweetheart. Came in and told me they could have a prosthetic made 
for me. A nice, hardy one that'll last long in the field. Ain't that nice?"

"Yeah. We'll patch you right up," Jack said. "Don't worry about it."

"Thanks." Jesse sniffed again, finally looking down his left arm. "Guess it won't be so bad after all. 
Yeah..." He was trying to convince himself, though the furrow between his brows wasn't much of a 
good sign.

"Where's Gabe?" Jack asked, distracting the young man. "Has he even been here to see you?"

"Yeah, only for a while though. Think he's gone to check on that Shimada guy..."

"Shimada?" Ana asked, mystified as she glanced at Jack. "I read Athena's report. Shouldn't he be 
dead by now?"

"No," Jack replied, crossing his arms. "Dr Ziegler stepped in this morning, and managed to keep him 
avive. I believe she's still in the operating theatre. But I don't understand what she's trying to do with 
just...half a goddamn body."

"She's a genius, that one," Jesse supplied.

"I know. But Gabriel..." Ana shared a glance with Jack. "You think he has plans for this one?"

"He's pretty bent on the Shimada case, ma'am." Jesse exhaled through his nose, looking troubled. 
"Ever since you pulled him off Talon... Think he said something about 'getting an edge' with Genji 
Shimada."

"Jesus Christ," Jack groaned. He rubbed at his temples with one hand, frown etched onto his 
forehead. "I'm gonna have to talk to that...madman."

_I don't envy you._ Ana turned her gaze from Jack, to meet Jesse's eyes. The young man shot her a 
close-lipped smile, but Ana couldn't bring herself to return it. She patted Jesse's arm in farewell, and 
took her leave with Jack by her side.
Ana ran a hand through her hair, tossing her towel carelessly on the bed. She fell heavily into the chair by her study table, but didn't bother switching her computer on. She stared at her reflection in the black screen in a thoughtless haze, before reaching for her personal phone on the desk – which she'd barely touched for two days.

She flicked off all other notifications and opened her texts, skimming through the chats before turning to her own family. It was mostly populated with Fareeha's texts about her goings-on, and Kamilah's replies. She scrolled through them idly, then her eyes slowly grew wide as she reached the end, where Kamilah had taken a photo of engine parts wrapped in thick packaging, laid neatly on their garage floor. She was finally building a custom bike of her own – something Kamilah had mentioned throughout the years, but never really acted on. Ana remembered a vague daydream of building that bike together with her wife, and felt a twinge deep in her chest. What she wouldn't give for that right now…

*[That's cool. Can you put it together yourself, though?]*

Ana set the phone down, and laid her head on the table for a short rest – but she was soon interrupted by the loud ringing of her phone. She groaned quietly and picked it up, reading Kamilah's name on the screen.

Her thumb hovered over the red button, as she hesitated to answer. Ana was bone-tired, even though she hadn't been out on a mission that day. She wasn't in the best of moods, and didn't want to affect Kamilah in any way, or worry her. But she hadn't been in touch with her family for a few days now, and rejecting this call wouldn't exactly be...wise.

Ana took a deep breath and pushed herself up, pressing the phone to her ear.

"Hey, albi."

"'Can I put it together?' Really, Ana?" Kamilah said, and her indignant tone managed to put a smile on Ana's lips. "No, I'm buying all these expensive parts that I 'cannot handle', so I can display them in the house until they collect dust."

"I'm just worried about your safety, darling. They're pretty heavy-duty," Ana explained. "Don't want you to have any accidents, you know?"

Kamilah sighed. "I know. I'll go to the workshop if I need any help, but I think I can handle it. It's pretty foolproof by now."

Ana laughed quietly. "That even I can do it, huh?"

"Of course," Kamilah humoured her, then a brief silence fell over them. "How are you doing? You've been quiet for a while now."

"Been busy. As always."

"I can tell. You sound tired."

"That obvious?" Ana huffed, slumping back onto the table. "Yeah...kind of. I don't know if it's just me, but it's been...difficult lately."

"Anything you can talk about?"

"No. Sorry, Milah."
Another pause, and while Ana started to feel antsy, Kamilah replied, "That's fine. Before I forget – are you still coming back this year? Fareeha's away, but I guess it means you can get some peace and quiet over here."

"Well, I… Actually," Ana stuttered, but couldn't find the strength to continue. She had considered staying in Zurich instead of flying home this year, since Fareeha was away. But Kamilah… "I don't know. I've been pretty busy with work–"

"And it's going to kill you if you don't know when to rest," Kamilah said, matter-of-fact.

"I don't…"

"I miss you, Ana."

Her gut twisted, but she kept quiet when Kamilah sighed.

"Look, I'm sorry. I know your work's important. I'm not going to drag you away if you need to–"

"Milah," Ana spoke, and Kamilah fell silent. "I'm coming back. I do miss you too, you know?"

Ana waited for a while – long enough to make her nervous – until she finally heard, "I know."

Kamilah was dozing on the sofa at night, with the TV turned on to fill the house with some noise, when she was roused by the solid click from the front door's lock. She blinked blearily up at the fan, listening to the thuds and shuffles from the doorway, followed by footsteps turning into the living room, where the only lights in the house were on. She smiled when Ana came into view, her wife looking quite good in a simple long-sleeved shirt and pants, and Kamilah sat up to greet her.

Ana came to her with a soft smile, and Kamilah glimpsed the crinkles in the corners of her eyes as her wife wrapped her in a tight embrace. Kamilah's lips parted in a smile as well, then lazy laughter when she realised Ana was leaning fully into her, weighing her back down to the sofa. She held onto her wife who lay motionless on top of her, face nestled under her chin, so she could feel the puffs of breath on her neck.

"I've missed this so much," Ana mumbled into her skin.

"You're telling me," Kamilah replied lazy, combing through Ana's greying hair with her fingertips, reacquainting with the fluid strokes that soothed them both. "Are you really that tired, amar?"

"I'm never gonna move again," Ana grunted.

Kamilah laughed softly, content to stay in place, even if it was a little warm with Ana lying on top of her. Hands wandering from Ana's hair and down her back, Kamilah trailed her fingers in haphazard paths over Ana's shirt, nearly lulling herself into another doze – until her stomach growled.

A brief pause, then Ana started shaking in laughter, lifting her head. "Haven't you eaten?"

"No, I was waiting for you," Kamilah said. "I made dinner. You always barely touch airplane food, so…"

"It's 9pm, Milah," Ana stated, pulling back to sit up with Kamilah. "You didn't have to."

"I know." Kamilah shrugged, then tilted her head in curiosity when she met Ana's stare. "What's wrong?"
Ana's expression cracked for a moment, before she hid it behind a nonchalant smile. "No. I just forgot how beautiful you are."

Kamilah rolled her eyes, getting a laugh from Ana, and she smiled into the kiss pressed to her lips. Ana's fingers slid up to her nape, and she leaned in gladly, growing weak when Ana deepened the kiss. A keen longing sparked back to life under the caress of Ana's lips, the long years falling away from her shoulders, and Kamilah felt as enamoured with her wife as she had been when they were still dating.

She was left quite breathless when Ana pulled back, and clutched tightly onto that bright spark, holding it close to her heart. How did she ever forget this feeling…

"I love you, Milah," Ana whispered.

Kamilah looked back into light bronze eyes, catching that subtle shadow hiding secrets she would never learn. Her heart clenched at the thought, but she left it alone, focusing instead on the tenderness in Ana's gaze.

"I love you too."
Kamilah was humming under her breath, with no specific tune but for the random notes her mellow mood inspired. It was a very rare occurrence, maybe even a first as far as Kamilah remembered. She never was musically-inclined, never tried to sing. Yet here she was, humming her own little tune under her breath, as she unwrapped the hoverbike's components from their padded packaging, with an eye on her task and the other on her tablet. The mechanic had provided a comprehensive manual that she'd pored over for days, and could almost recite by heart, but she kept her eyes on it regardless, determined to have everything done right. But her diligence soon met an inevitable obstacle, when strong arms circled firmly about her waist, and a familiar warmth leaned against her back.

She smiled as Ana nestled her head into Kamilah's neck, and took a deep, languid inhale. Her breath tickled against Kamilah's skin quite delightfully, ending with a kiss to her neck. Ana's closeness reminded her of the intimacy they'd shared the night before; a re-acquaintance, a rekindling of a passion amid established domesticity, between the distance that kept them apart far longer than Kamilah liked. She nearly sighed at the last thought, but ignored it in favour of living in the moment, with someone who mattered more.

"Ana, you're not helping."

"I'm giving moral support." Ana's husky murmur sent a pleasant, rumbling sensation across her skin.

"Like always."

A huff, and Ana peels herself from Kamilah. "Your tongue's as sharp as ever."

The comment was made in jest, but it still gave Kamilah pause. She looked at the serene expression on Ana's face, the unreadable quality to bronze eyes that turned to meet hers. "I didn't mean it that way."

Ana cocked her head, gazing at her quietly, before a gentle smile curved her lips. "I know."

A truth hiding another truth, but Kamilah chose to move on, eager to lead Ana away from any discomfort she might've accidentally seeded in their minds. "Come, help me hold this up."

Ana moved over to hold up a part of substantial weight, which would be part of the sturdy chassis housing the anti-grav cores. Kamilah had to exert quite some strength when she'd moved it to the garage floor, and it was gratifying to see that Ana had little trouble heaving the part up for inspection. All that field work's still doing her good, Kamilah mused, eyeing Ana's bare arms before roaming unconsciously to catch that knowing gaze. Thirty years ago, Kamilah might've gotten flustered. But now, she merely rolled her eyes to shake off the abashment, and started checking over the bike parts. Ana was patient, waiting for Kamilah's next order to turn this, hold that up, put this down, and move that away. In fact, she acted the role of a silent assistant so efficiently, that Kamilah even forgot Ana was present, as she got engrossed in the first steps of putting the bike together. It was only the bare frame, but Kamilah's heart beat just a tad quicker, as she picked and screwed what felt like an endless supply of nuts and bolts, slowly piecing together the vaguest shape of the chassis to her future bike.

Though she hadn't had to weld anything together yet, Kamilah's attention was fixed solely on her work, and it seemed little time had passed when Kamilah finally straightened herself, taking a deep breath as she set her tools down for a moment's rest. She was looking over her own handiwork – the half-completed frame that she was just itching to continue – when she was distracted by a mug held...
Out to her.

Kamilah blinked, taking the mug of warm tea instinctively, the touch of ceramic on her skin feeling odd after nearly an hour of handling heavy metal. She sat back on the floor and took a draught of tea, looking at Ana who sat next to her, and wondered just when her wife had gone away to make tea. Ana's eyes crinkled over the rim of her own mug, and she reached forward to smooth the unruly tufts of hair from Kamilah's forehead, tucking the bangs behind an ear.

"Keep this up, and I might start worrying you'll lose sleep over your bike."

"What makes you think I haven't?" Kamilah deadpanned.

"Well, I don't know. You look normal. But you've always had those eye bags of yours, it's hard to tell." Ana cackled when Kamilah slapped at her thigh.

"You're one to talk about eye bags, Captain," Kamilah said, reminding Ana of all the times she'd texted in the early hours of the morning.

"I have a tattoo to distract people from them, so it's fine for me."

"If you say so," Kamilah humoured her, getting a smile from Ana, and a knock of their shoulders together.

Conversation flows smoothly between them, words and lulls in between filling the spaces nicely. In truth, they weren't really 'catching up'; Kamilah's experiences had already been shared through text, while Ana's were kept secret. They spoke as if they'd been together all along – bickering, discussing future plans, then bickering once again. Kamilah watched her wife as they spoke, noting how much quieter Ana had grown, be it from age or the weight on her shoulders. And though she looked at Kamilah with that ever soft, adoring gaze, Kamilah still ached, knowing something wasn't quite right – that Ana had changed in her absence, and she might never truly learn why.

Ana caught her staring – eyes of dark brown bearing the severity of one deep in thought – and smiled again. She took Kamilah's hand and raised it to her lips, kissing the back of her fingers. Then she leaned in, and claimed Kamilah's lips with her own, her wife yielding to her kisses, growing ever so soft under her touch. Kamilah relished the firm kisses Ana showered onto her, drawn in further with each pass, and she felt breathless when Ana pulled away, half-tempted to yank her wife back in again.

"You know," Ana murmured, the corner of her lips tilted in a smirk, as her hand roamed Kamilah's body. "Your muscles are feeling a little tense…and I know just the thing you need."

"A warm bath and a massage?" Kamilah said, smile growing to match Ana's. She combed her fingers through black hair streaked with grey, wondering how it had remained so thick and smooth.

"Hm, we could do that." Ana slipped her arms under Kamilah, and lifted her up with graceful ease. "But I'm thinking we should loosen you up with a massage first."

"Why did I know you'd say that," Kamilah laughed, hugging Ana about the neck. She was giddy – mild adrenaline from being carried, or she might be falling in love again. She opened her mouth to speak, but lost her breath and words when she met Ana's playful gaze.

It was the latter, Kamilah thought. She might have fallen once again.

Her time with Kamilah was what she'd sorely needed – a chance to be herself, to set down the
weight from her shoulders. It took great effort, as Ana's mind was geared towards worrying about
Overwatch around the clock. But Kamilah could tell whenever her mind wandered, and put a smile
on Ana's face by simply bossing her around, making Captain Amari wipe the windows, do the
laundry, or just give a massage that was Kamilah's excuse to have Ana's hands on her. Private time
with her wife had been a luxury for too many years, and Ana genuinely wished to stay home longer
– forever, if she could.

But the world pulled her away, as always, and Ana had to hold herself steady as she received a kiss
at the airport, an apology rising to her tongue when Kamilah smiled at her, perhaps knowing how
Ana felt. Kamilah let herself be drawn into a long, tight hug that drew a few glances when it seemed
they'd never part, then sent Ana off with a chuckle and a pinch on the cheek.

She held close the memory of her wife's smile, which kept her feeling mellow throughout the flight,
and the drive back to base. But she'd had to tuck Kamilah's image away when she entered the
headquarters once more, knowing it would make her less than happy. That, and she didn't have
much of a choice anyway.

Jack seemed to have been waiting for her, because he caught her right at the door to her own
quarters. He stuttered through a few words, failing to piece together a sentence, then his shoulders
sagged in defeat.

"Look, I know you've just come back, but you've got to see this yourself."

Ana's eyes narrowed a fraction. "What is it?"

He opened his mouth again, but chose to shrug instead. "You're not going to believe me if I told
you."

"You're straight."

"Oh, fuck no, Ana. Please – no jokes, because this is real. And serious." Jack averted his eyes
briefly. "And kinda ridiculous. But it's real, alright?"

Ana heaved a sigh, palming the door control and tossing her bag carelessly inside. "This better be
good."

Another shrug, and Jack led her on an unexpectedly short walk down the corridor, past his own
room and ending at Gabriel's door. It was the least used room in this residential wing, as Gabriel slept
in Jack's room, and was frequently out on missions for prolonged periods of time.

"Now," Jack said, turning back to face her. "Don't freak when you see what's inside."

"If it's Gabriel naked in there–"

"It's not, Ana." Jack rolled his eyes, exasperated. "Just promise you won't freak, alright?"

"Fine."

"Alright," Jack repeated, taking a deep breath. He tapped on the controls, and the door slid only half-
open.

Ana frowned when Jack nodded at the room, then slipped inside. She followed after him, and was
stricken still with surprise while Jack shut the door behind her.

A large, full-grown gorilla sat on the bench by the tinted windows, staring out the field where a
number of agents were having PT. It wore a large, oversized orange jumper that was torn at the edges, and well-worn with age. The gorilla turned around at their entrance, intelligent eyes widening as it hopped off the bench.

"Hello, Jack. Captain Amari," it said with a voice deep and smooth.

Ana truly gaped then. She turned to Jack for an explanation, but he only smiled sheepishly and gestured back at the gorilla.

"You…can talk?" Ana asked.

"Well, yes. I've been taught since young." It smiled. "I explained to Jack that we'd all been taught to do so on the moon. Some of us do it better than others, while some cannot speak the human language at all."

"I–, that's good to know," Ana said slowly. "Wait. You said 'the moon'? You don't…happen to be one of those monkeys in the Horizon Colony, do you?"

"I…was. But the revolt happened, and I escaped." The gorilla lowered his eyes, a shadow falling over his expression as he clutched at a spot on his jumper. Ana caught sight of a small, faded splotch on the orange fabric, and zoomed in with her cybernetics. Judging from the colour, it seemed to be blood not fully washed off.

"I'm assuming you escaped from whatever made the colony go dark?" Ana said, resetting the magnification of her cybernetic eye.

"Yes. I apologise – I'd prefer not to speak of it just yet. But I've promised Athena a full account once I have… Once I'm ready."

Ana nodded, glancing at Jack – who seemed like he'd heard all this before. "So we're letting him stay?"

"That's the current plan, yes."

She sighed quietly. Obviously Jack hadn't thought this through yet. But she left him alone, and turned back to the gorilla. "Do you have a name?"

"Winston," the gorilla said. His smile was warm, but bore a stiff edge.

"Just 'Winston'?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, Winston, you're welcome to stay with us for now. Have you been here long?"

"No, only a few days."

"I see." Ana took a breath, wondering how she'd taken such a surreal encounter as easily as if it were a normal, everyday occurrence. She might be losing her mind after her long tenure in Overwatch. "Is there anything you need?"

"No, I'm being well-provided for. Thank you," Winston said courteously, though he seemed to pause, then looked shyly back at Ana. "Um, well. Do you have…any peanut butter?"

Ana blinked. "Yeah, of course. We can get you a jar from the pantry. Wait – can you eat peanut butter?"
"Yes, I've been eating it for years." Winston beamed.

"Oh, good to know. Do you want anything with that? Bread, or…" Her eyes fell on the cartoon art of a banana on his orange jumper. "Bananas, maybe?"

"Bananas would be excellent, ma'am."

As days passed, Winston started talking more and more about himself. The rocket he'd used to escape from the moon had crash landed on the outskirts of Zurich, thankfully in a plain with no people in sight. He traveled for many days on foot, deftly avoiding human settlements, and scrounging for food in the wild. It was only by chance that he'd found an old, dirtied Overwatch poster on the ground, and it inspired him to go looking for them. He was stopped at the headquarter's back entrance, surreptitiously brought to Jack's office on the commander's order, then stashed away in Gabriel's room until Jack could confer with Ana.

Part of her wanted to strangle him for opting to share this burden of decision with her, but Winston made it difficult to hate their circumstance. He was courteous, gracious, and soon showed a desire to join Overwatch, after learning about them from Athena. He seemed to get along well with the A.I., often chatting or engaged in serious, philosophical discussions with her, and Athena had learnt much about him in turn. The A.I.'s recommendation: to allow Winston to stay, out of compassion and scientific curiosity.

With a hint of reluctance, Ana and Jack gave her permission to plan Winston's movements about the base, so he would only be seen by the Strike Team, who'd been informed of his existence. She even planned his introduction to Overwatch, though they'd told her to slow down until they could fully process the situation.

But while Athena helped to plan Winston's future in Overwatch, she was decidedly less positive about another problem on their hands. Genji Shimada, who'd been brought back by Reyes, was still teetering on the brink of death. Only constant attention from Angela Ziegler, and the intensive help of life-support machines was he able to survive with only half his body and organs.

Ana was quite out of touch with the matter, as the matter was fully – and unofficially – in Blackwatch's hands. But a single read through Angela and Athena's reports on Shimada's condition was enough to make her dubious about the whole thing. A video clip attached in Athena's file cemented her opinion; it was a recording of the moment Shimada had woken up despite being heavily sedated. His medical team was first shocked, then frightened when he flew into a hysterical rage after taking a look down at himself, howling in Japanese as tears streamed from his eyes, before Angela stepped in and brought him into an induced sleep once more.

Ana wanted to barge into the room and pull Shimada's plug herself, but she settled for a sigh amid her growing headache, and switched the holopad off. She tossed the device onto the table beside her, and took a swig from the bottle – her third, as was Jack's.

"Fucked up, isn't it," Jack rumbled.

"I might punch Gabe back to his senses."

"Give him one more for me." His voice was flat despite the humour. "Christ, that's a dead man on the bed. Just let him rest in peace already."

Ana groaned, taking another draught of beer. She could hear Kamilah scolding her for drinking so much, and she dimly wished she could hear it in person. "Ugh, forget it. No work talk tonight,
"Yeah. Sorry," Jack huffed, draining his bottle. He held it loosely in his hand, leaning back into the concrete parapet, as he looked up at the night sky. Only the moon shone bright, the stars hiding from view, but it bothered neither of them – it wasn't the reason they'd escaped to the empty corner of the barrack's rooftop, sharing beer in a quiet and comfortable, if a bit dreary place.

"Hey." Ana nudged her friend. "Say something. I'm bored."

"I don't know. What do we even talk about? Besides work, that is."

"God, we are really sad," Ana lamented, tilting her head back. "Can't even talk like normal people anymore. When did we get like this?"

"Dunno." Jack shrugged. "How's your family?"

"Alive. Yours?"

"Alive too."

"Great. Good to know." The beginnings of laughter rose unexpectedly, and Ana chuckled along with Jack.

"That was horrible," Jack declared, straightening his shoulders. He kept quiet in thought for a while, then asked, "How's Fareeha, by the way?"

"Studying. She's adapting really well, making lots of new friends. Picked up soccer, and doing well in her classes so far."

"Good, good." Jack nodded. "How about Kamilah?"

"Working on her bike. She spends most of her free time on it now." Ana let out a breath, feeling that urge to fly back to Cairo again. "Looked so much more beautiful the last time I went back."

Jack laughed quietly. "Part of me can't believe how smitten you still are."

"Me too." Ana smiled. "How about you?" She'd asked on whim, the subject feeling natural given their conversation, but she regretted her words when Jack's face fell slightly, before he covered it up.

"I'm fine. Gabe's still...yeah," he finished lamely. Jack slouched a little, setting his empty bottle down, then reached over to pull the second pack of beer over. He plucked one bottle out and offered it to Ana.

"Hey, I have an idea. Let's get Milah going."

"What?" Jack laughed as Ana spread the six empty bottles of the floor. "With me around?"

"Not in that way, you ass." Ana snickered as well, then whipped out her phone and took a photo. [Having a wild night babe] [Wish you were here] Kamilah: [Nice try. Say hi to Jack for me.] [...How'd you know]
Kamilah: [You always have typos when you're drunk.]

Kamilah: [And this is the second time you've tried it.]

Kamilah: [You're getting old.]

[YOU'RE OLD YOU HAG]

Kamilah: [Look in the mirror sometime, yoda.]

Ana lurched to the side and rammed her shoulder into Jack, who fell over to the ground, cackling.

"Oh, shut up!"

"So, how's things with Fareeha? Is she doing well?" Safiya asked.

"Yeah, she seems happy there. Making lots of new friends." Kamilah shrugged, recounting what Fareeha had texted. "She says she's doing well in school, and joined the soccer club."

"Is she coming back for term break?"

"Yeah, in a few months' time." Kamilah sighed, dipping a spoon into her bowl of soup, while her sister-in-law scooped beans and meat onto her own plate.

Safiya had popped over for a meal with Kamilah, because Zahra had traveled back to her hometown with their son, Samir, to visit her side of the family. It was common to have Safiya and the family over for meals now, since Fareeha had flown away for her studies. And though Kamilah didn't really need the extra care, she still appreciated the effort they made to accompany her.

Besides, having the family over did help to warm the house immeasurably. Though she wore broad streaks of grey in her hair, Safiya remained unchanged over the years, and was still as vivacious as ever. Zahra was much the same, the ever-calm and reasonable anchor to Safiya's flights of fancy, and she now had the help of her son, who grew up to be much like her. Together, they were a happy lot, and did much fill the empty spaces of Kamilah's home.

"Tell me when she's back. I wanna see her too," Safiya said. "What about Ana? Is she coming back when Fareeha's around too?"

"I don't know." Kamilah slowed in her eating, suddenly remembering she hadn't thought about this. "Maybe not. It's hard enough for her to take time off, and she was just here a while ago…"

Safiya snorted. "Still that scarce, huh? I know," she said in comfort, when Kamilah shrugged, expression flat. "Feels like I see her more on TV than in person nowadays."

"Yeah," Kamilah muttered, though she pulled herself past the issue with practiced quickness. "How about you? Any plans with the family?"

"Oh, not much, actually. Samir's studying hard for his finals, so we're not traveling anywhere this year," Safiya answered. "Just as well, I've been feeling like I need a break recently. Like, from doing anything at all."

"Or maybe you could retire like Zahra," Kamilah offered, half in jest, but Safiya blinked and seemed to think it over.

"Huh, maybe. I mean, I've still got a good number of years left in me, but I could retire soon."
"Yup. Besides, what do you do in your office day after day, Major-General?" Kamilah teased, earning a light kick on her shin.

"If you must know, Lieutenant-Colonel, in addition to stealing a drink or two, I stick my thumbs up my ass too." Safiya grinned. "But it's all getting kind of...tiring now. Dull. I guess it's time to pass my seat onto someone else." She leaned back in her seat with a sigh. "You know, the more I think about it, the nicer it seems. I can spend more time at home, with Zahra. She's been complaining about being lonely too... Come to think, I don't know if that's innuendo. Don't tell her I told you that."

Kamilah huffed, smiling as Safiya continued to muse over an inevitable retirement. Her dreamy, faraway gaze as she talked about spending the days with Zahra was quite captivating, and Kamilah's mind wandered back to Ana – though the thought made her feel a slight twinge in her chest. They'd discussed retirement many times before, but all Ana ever gave was a noncommittal 'maybe', before heading back to Zurich, where she would take on more missions that brought her into the field. Kamilah wished dearly that her wife would just take a step back, but knew her wish wouldn't be realised any time soon. Ana was much too committed to Overwatch's noble goal, and would still choose her duty despite her countless claims of wanting to settle down with her wife.

A faint lick of resentment entwined with her wistfulness, and Kamilah shook herself back to the present, focusing on Safiya once more. She gave herself just one reassurance – maybe.

One day. Maybe.

"Mama!"

Kamilah turned her head, and broke into a grin that matched her daughter's, the moment her eyes landed on Fareeha. She spread her arms, and had the wind knocked from her lungs when Fareeha ran right into her, clamping her in a tight hug. Kamilah laughed as strong arms squeezed her, nearly lifting her from the floor, and she patted at Fareeha's back until she was finally released.

She took a breath, looking up at her daughter, who appeared amazingly fresh-faced despite the long flight. Fareeha had grown her hair longer, though she still wore the golden-yellow beads on the braids by her ears. She seemed to stand much taller with confidence, and her stout image was completed with a tasteful leather jacket that covered her muscular frame. The girl had been working part-time at a gym, looking to be trained as an instructor, and her efforts were paying off.

If she'd resembled Ana before, then she looked disarmingly similar to her mother now.

"You look great, habibti," Kamilah cooed, pinching her cheeks, and getting a playful grin in return. "Fashionable too."

"Yeah? Do you like this jacket? Reminded me of your old one, so I snapped it up." Fareeha tugged at her collars, preening, then leaned in conspiratorially. "And I got one for you too."

"You didn't have to," Kamilah laughed, glancing down at the luggage when Fareeha pointed at it. "But thank you."

"Thank me later when you see it. Then you'll know I had to." Fareeha smiled, then slung an arm around Kamilah's shoulders. "Have you eaten? Feel like eating anything? My treat."

"No, I'm buying."

"No, I'm buying, mama. Nope!" Fareeha raised a hand as they started walking towards the stretch of
restaurants in the airport. "I'm buying, or we're not eating."

"Or, I could cook at home—"

"And," Fareeha added. "You're not looking at pictures of my girlfriend."

Kamilah stopped dead in her tracks, frozen as the words settled into her mind. Her eyes slowly moved to meet Fareeha's impish gaze, and she finally cracked her mouth open.

"Your what?"
Triumphs

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

To learn that her daughter was dating, was one thing. To learn that Fareeha had been dating much longer and more frequently that Kamilah had ever known was a smack in the face – not an unpleasant one, but the revelation still leaves her reeling from the impact. Fareeha never talked of a love life at all, and though Kamilah had suspected the one or two people Fareeha always hung out with, she never tried to pry into her life. A sort of precaution, perhaps; she wanted to give her daughter the freedom to grow how she wanted, to live a life without too many restrictions placed on her by protective parents. And she didn't want to drive Fareeha away by becoming quite as controlling as Ana had become, so she acted the opposite of her wife, merely giving advice instead of…forceful suggestions.

Kamilah liked to think her method had worked out, in a way. Fareeha seemed to have little qualms talking about her girlfriend – whom she met at the university's soccer club – and shared plenty of the little adventures they had in England, all the while insisting there were so many places Kamilah should see too. She was flattered her daughter still thought of her on dates, and could only assure Fareeha that 'yes, I'll come over for your next term break'.

Fareeha hadn't changed one bit in the months away from home, and yet, Kamilah could tell the girl had…matured. Or learnt to be responsible and just a tad more serious, at least. She took charge with the chores, and for the very first time, touched the broom and mop to clean her own home without needing an hour's worth of nagging first. She wiped the floors, cleaned the counters, then turned her attention to the fine layer of dust lying over decorations and clutter that Kamilah had neglected to care for.

Frankly, Kamilah thought her daughter was possessed, perhaps going overboard with her fastidiousness, but the results couldn't be argued with. It was nice to reach for a book and not have to pat off its cover first. And whenever Fareeha stayed out for reunions for her various groups of friends, Kamilah was able to lounge at home with that old sweater which had been finally washed, courtesy of her daughter. She had a fleeting thought that she might be more of a mess than Fareeha now, but soon brushed it aside without care; she was old, and a lack of energy was a perfectly valid excuse.

And – much of her time was occupied by her beloved project anyway. Her hoverbike was coming along nicely, its chassis and the rest of the body put together by steady, patient hands, soon to be fitted with its engine and anti-grav cores…when Kamilah was ready. She'd had an accident, burning her forearm while welding the last of the bike's frame together, and dropped her tools to the floor with a pained yelp. The noise attracted Fareeha to the garage, and the girl promptly flew to her side when she saw the reddened, blistered skin on her arm.

Fareeha went into a small bout of panic then, before regaining her senses and calling for the ambulance, her face staying pale as she accompanied her mother to the hospital, only regaining some colour when the wound was finally dressed. Though ridden with pain, Kamilah was still amused by the way Fareeha had stared at her wound – which was hardly the worst she'd seen as a medic – and flicked her daughter on the nose when Fareeha glanced down at the bandage once more, as they headed towards the car.

Kamilah had decided she wouldn't work on the bike for two weeks at least, and it seemed Fareeha was of the same mind as her, because the girl forbade her from doing so. Kamilah nearly rolled her
eyes at her daughter's nagging, but could only feel tickled to have the tables turned on her, and finally be put in Ana's position for once…

She felt a pang at the thought, unconsciously worrying at the corner of her bandages. Fareeha's eyes turned to her quickly, landing on the hand on her forearm.

"Does it hurt?"

"Itches, more like," Kamilah replied, setting her hand down with a sigh. "And stop hovering over me. I'm not a child."

"Yes, you are my child now," Fareeha declared, putting on a mock-pompous expression that was soon broken by a grin, when Kamilah slapped her lightly on the shoulder. "You are going to do as little things as possible until your arm heals."

"Might as well swaddle me and be done with it," Kamilah grumbled, feeling an ache in her wounded arm, which she stubbornly reached out to scoop more fried rice onto her plate – making Fareeha's eye twitch in the process.

"If you insist on being a stubborn baby…" Fareeha sang, then snorted when Kamilah shot her a squint.

"Wonder where I learnt it from," she said, and her daughter shrugged airily, pretending to have forgotten all the stories of a certain obstinate Amari baby who gave her mothers all sorts of trouble.

"Must run in the family." Fareeha managed to grin through the spoonful of rice in her mouth, before letting the matter drop in favour of dinner. "Come to think, I'm kinda surprised I haven't done anything dumb in uni yet. Maybe I should…"

"Don't you dare."

"I have four years there, mama. It'll happen. Just give it time." Fareeha cackled, though her laugh ended in a brief sigh. "At least it'll make things more fun. You know, part of me still can't believe I have four more years overseas. Four."

"I know. When your education's free back home too," Kamilah said drily.

Fareeha let out a quiet whine, and her head fell onto Kamilah's shoulder. "I already feel homesick…"

"Oh, pull yourself together, habibti," Kamilah deadpanned. "You have nearly two more months of vacation."

"Two years."

"You wish."

Another whine.

"Chin up, Fareeha Amari." Kamilah patted her temple, and Fareeha raised her head with a groan. "You made your bed overseas, now fly over and lay in it." She smiled when her daughter closed her eyes, looking utterly defeated. "Besides, four years will pass quickly. You'll see."

"Ugh."

"And, if you play your cards right, it'll pass even quicker with your girlfriend…"
"Oh, mama," Fareeha groaned.

"I meant spending quality time with her."

"Sure you did."

"What's her number, by the way?"

"Nice try, mama."

Kamilah's burn healed much slower than she'd liked, but she was well enough to start working on her bike again, while Fareeha was still at home. She made much progress with the girl's help, and the six-month project that she'd taken her time with, was finally completed before Fareeha had to fly off again. The girl drove her to the workshop, where they fitted the engine and cores into the bike, and had a remote test that saw the hoverbike floating from the ground without trouble, putting an almost child-like grin on Kamilah's face.

She was given the honour of riding it first, and her heart soared right into space when the hoverbike hummed to life, lifting her from the ground. Head giddy, Kamilah rode a few laps around the track behind the workshop, before Fareeha hopped on behind her with glee. With her daughter urging her to go faster and faster around the track, Kamilah slowly built up speed, caution falling to the wind bit by bit, until they were whirling around the track at a pace that had them both cackling out loud.

When they slowed to a stop, Kamilah was breathless from adrenaline and Fareeha's arms, which had hugged her waist tightly out of excitement, nearly squeezing the air from her mother's lungs. They both basked in the afterglow of their achievement, before Kamilah whipped out her phone and took a photo of themselves on the bike. Fareeha watched as she sent the photo to the family chat.

[Finished bike. Took it for a spin.]

[Fave new ride.]

[#whatwife]

"Ugh, mama!"

4 years later

If Kamilah could remember her own words to her daughter, she'd probably be quite amused by its accuracy. Or maybe not, since time always passed faster in retrospect, and it was simply a fact of life that wasn't worth mentioning in the moment. Really, there was nothing much that could compare to this very moment, as Kamilah sat with the audience in the darkened hall, keeping her camera lens trained on Fareeha as her daughter strode onstage to receive her degree – with first-class honours.

An unnamed emotion sat heavy in her throat, perhaps more. Joy, satisfaction, and pride made her feel lighter than ever before, yet made her throat clog from the very same feelings, as she watched a lopsided smirk curve Fareeha's lips, her daughter pausing for a photo before making her way off-stage. It was a blessing in disguise that each graduate's time on stage was so short – it allowed Kamilah to fall back in her seat, and take a deep breath before she actually bawled in front of everyone else. Not that she'd been close. But there was always a possibility.

Kamilah cleared her throat quietly to collect herself, glancing down at the photos she'd taken of Fareeha, before locking her phone and politely turning her attention back to the stage. Her feet itched
though, and she waited impatiently beneath a calm veneer, before springing up from her seat at the ceremony's end, streaming out into the gardens with the rest of the attendees.

She wandered among the crowd for a good few minutes, sense of direction muddled by the constant movement of people around her, head kept on a swivel as she searched for her daughter. Kamilah started to get frustrated when her search bore no fruit, but her scowl was quickly replaced with a smile, as she laughed aloud from a sudden hug from behind, which actually lifted her feet from the grass.

Fareeha squeezed and shook her mother in her arms, before setting the woman down with a goofy grin on her face. She stood still while Kamilah righted the black gown worn over her formal shirt and pants, heaving a playful sigh while her mother fussed over her.

"I'm already dashing, mama," Fareeha said. "No need to adjust anymore."

"Your gown was crooked," Kamilah pointed out, though she relented and gave her daughter one last pat-down, before disengaging. "I'm just making you look smart."

"Hey, in these? Even a worm could look smart."

"Hm. Then maybe you should let me…"

Fareeha laughed, patting down her mother's hands before they could reach her robes again. But her retort was forgotten when she turned around at the call of her name, and found a trio of friends running towards her. Kamilah recognised them as her coursemates – ones she'd met in her last year of study.

"Hey, Far! Looked good on stage back there," said the girl whose name Kamilah couldn't remember. "Oh, hey! This is your mom, isn't it!"

Kamilah smiled as her hand was shaken vigorously three times in turn.

"This is Colonel mom, yeah?" The friend leant in conspiratorially, making a show of looking around, and whispered, "Where's Captain mom?"

"She's busy," Fareeha laughed. She scratched her head, discomfort well-hidden but for the glance she shared with Kamilah. "Saving the world and shit…"

Kamilah nearly reached out to pinch her daughter in the back.

"Oi, stop trying to get an autograph," said one boy in jest, rolling his eyes at the other. "Here, let's grab some pictures together first!"

The girl grabbed Fareeha's hand and tugged. Fareeha looked back at Kamilah, gestured for her to wait, then went along with her friends after her mother waved her along.

Kamilah sighed to herself as Fareeha disappeared into the ocean of black robes, then picked her own way out of the crowd to stand at an emptier corner of the garden, listening to whoops and cheers in the distance. She sat on a bench and took out her phone, sending pictures of the graduation to Ana.

[Ceremony's done. We're going to eat later.]

[Drop her a text when you can.]

All of a sudden, she froze. Her throat constricted. It was difficult to breathe for a very long second,
before the feeling passed, and she drew in a lungful of warm, humid air. An inexplicable weight sat
on her chest, and Kamilah looked back down at her phone.

[You've been quiet for a few days now. Hope you're fine.]

[Remember to take a break if you're busy, alright?]

She was…tired. Head light, breaths uneven and shallow. Her eyes were open, but saw little – only
sheer stubbornness kept them focused on the ground she lay on, and the pool of blood gathering atop
dusty concrete. Her hands felt weak, but were curled tight over her broken rifle, its magazine empty.
Again, she tried to move her legs, to crawl out of the ruined dormitory she was stupid enough to
chase her target to, but couldn't move from where she was propped up against the wall.

Darkness crept into her vision once more, and she blinked to keep it at bay. The sound of gunfire
was distant but constant, meaning her team still had their hands full. Probably too occupied to reach
her anytime soon. She moved a shaking hand to her abdomen, clutching weakly at the body suit
soaked with blood, covering a wound that bled profusely.

A breath. Her head spun.

Ana Amari felt a cold jolt of fear.

She knocked her knuckles on her earpiece, but no sound came from it. Her radio was dead. Ana
reached for the dogtags hanging about her neck, and with great effort, snapped one tag in two. She
dragged a finger over the holo-device strapped to her wrist, and it flickered on with a map of the old
oil refinery, displaying a full squad of blue blips engaged in combat with the red. A sole orange blip
flashed far to the south of the action – Ana's position. Either a teammate would respond to her
emergency beacon, or an enemy would come to finish her off. Only time will tell. All she could do
now was wait.

She chided herself again for being goaded into a chase by an inconsequential foe, who now lay dead
on the roof above, body caught on a jagged edge of broken concrete, whereas Ana had a cleaner fall
to the floor below. Much good that did her. Ana had to remind herself to keep breathing, each draw
of air into her lungs becoming more laborious by the second. Her head lolled, before resting against
the wall behind, Ana's eyes slowly falling shut without her knowing. She grabbed a fistful of her
blue coat, and pressed it against her wound, hoping to stem the bleeding. She should feel worried
that no pain flared no matter how hard she pressed – either she was growing numb, or too weak to
exert pressure. She didn't know, and she prayed she lived to find out.

Another breath.

Can't end here. Little one. Fareeha just…graduated. Have to see her. And Milah. Promised to go
home. Promised…

Not in a casket. Not...

Her heart surged, and Ana forced her eyes open, staring up at the dirty grey ceiling with more clarity
than before. You're the Captain, damn it. Supposed to be looking out for them.

Ana forced herself to move, and though her legs were still dead, she set her hands on the floor to
push herself further upright – and earned a lance of pain up her back. She groaned through gritted
teeth and disengaged immediately, allowing herself to slump back against the wall, riding out the
wave of pain crashing over her body. Taking controlled breaths, fighting against the nausea
threatening to overtake her, Ana waited as patiently as she could – then gripped her rifle when rapid
footfalls came from the doorway outside.

She'd dragged her dead rifle up with one hand when McCree burst through the doorway, revolver at ready. But he lowered his gun when his eyes landed on Ana, colour draining from his face.

"Captain!" He ran over to her, and skidded across the last few inches on his knees. Passing an eye over her, he yanked the black serape from his shoulders, and tied it around her middle as a makeshift bandage.

Ana clenched her jaw when he tightened the serape, pain flaring from her wound, but she bit down the reproach that had risen to her tongue. He was sacrificing a beloved scarf of his, after all.

"Any other wounds, Captain?" Jesse asked.


"Damn. I told Mercy she should've followed me," he growled, as another figure entered the doorway. Genji caught McCree's backward glance, and they shared a nod – no words were needed between the Blackwatch agents, after three years of working together.

Genji made a sweep of their immediate vicinity, while McCree picked up Ana's fallen beret and placed it back on her head. Then he lifted her easily into his arms, and carried her through the refinery with Genji on guard beside them. Judging from the silence that had fallen over the facility, and the dead Talon-clothed bodies littering the floor, Ana assumed their assault mission had succeeded, with this Talon cell flushed from their hideout.

As they reached the VTOL, Reyes walked out to greet them, and watched as McCree deposited Ana in the medic's corner of the aircraft. They drew back when Mercy walked over to Ana, taking stock of her injuries.

"Apologies, Captain," Mercy said, voice clipped and professional. "But I had to stay with Winston – his lungs had collapsed, and I needed–"

"It's fine," Ana grunted. "Just patch me up quick."

Mercy fell silent then, quickly scanning Ana's body with the micro-systems of her Valkyrie suit, before she thumbed a switch on her staff and aimed it at Ana. The golden stream of energy met Ana's stomach wound first, the Captain feeling the ever-odd sensation of her flesh knitting back together, before relief washed over her body as the Caduceus Staff mended the rest of her. Ana took a breath, then moved her legs – utterly relieved to find them working without trouble.

"Like magic, as always," Ana commented, getting a quiet smile in reply.

As Mercy walked away, Ana clutched onto the black-gloved hand reaching for her, and rose to her feet with Gabriel's help. But her head spun dangerously, Ana swaying on her feet, and Gabriel guided her into one of the VTOL's many passenger seats.

"Thanks, Captain. Couldn't have done it without your support."

Ana waved it away. "You could've. Gerard wouldn't have chosen you for this mission otherwise."

Gabriel huffed and clasped her briefly on the shoulder, before joining Winston at the cockpit. Ana sighed to herself, leaning back in the seat, untying the serape from her waist. Worrying at the bloodstained edge of the hole in her bodysuit, Ana nearly smiled to herself. Thank god she pulled through, or her wife would've stormed right into hell just to kick her ass.
It was a...unique experience, to say the least – to have teetered on the edge of life and death, to have felt a true fear of dying just a few days before, only to survive and pretend that everything was normal, that it was part of everyday life. And, in Overwatch, it quite literally is. Since the successful creation of Angela Ziegler's staff, capable of performing the miracle of bringing the dead back to life, a few agents have had the...dubious privilege of being once-dead, but still alive and kicking.

Jack was one of them – a chance shot that went right through his heart had ended his life in mere seconds. And in the same span of time, Mercy had stepped in to bring him back, hale and hearty once more. He'd confided that it was disorienting, maybe even felt wrong, like he'd cheated death. But it was a result that none of them could argue with, only feel grateful for.

Ana, for one, was glad that they had technology of such potency on their side. If not, she wouldn't be alighting from the cab on a chilly Cairo night, slinging a duffle over her shoulder as she looked up at her own home – that she hadn't seen in over a year. Heart light, Ana strode up to the garage first, only waiting for the gate to be raised halfway before slipping underneath it. She turned on the lights, and smiled at the sight of Kamilah's hoverbike – still painted with the same shade of midnight blue and golden trim. Ana indulged herself briefly, grazing her fingers over the polished surface of the bike. She looked forward to her first ride with Kamilah on it.

Heading into the house, Ana padded softly over the wooden floor of the hallway, and was met with the figure of her wife, who stood waiting in the living room – she must've seen the cab outside. Lips parting in a smile, Ana dropped her bag and engulfed Kamilah in a hug, feeling her wife's arms locking around her shoulders. She turned her head into grey curls tinged with black, inhaling deeply the scent of a shampoo she didn't recognise. Nuzzling into her wife for a few more moments, Ana finally pulled back, glimpsing the fond sparkle in dark brown eyes, before she placed a kiss on Kamilah's lips.

"You're finally back, you scoundrel."

"I missed you too, darling," Ana chuckled, forgetting to breathe as she gazed back at Kamilah, that curve of a smile which could only be worn by the woman she loved most. Had she always been this beautiful? Or was she as beautiful as the world had been so vibrant, ever since she'd thought she'd seen the last of it?

No, no. She probably was turning back into a lovesick fool once more.

Her fingers had reached down to twine with Kamilah's, when she noticed her wife's eyes looking to the side. Ana followed her gaze, turning her head back to find Fareeha standing at the foot of the stairs, watching them. A dash of reality mixed into her joy of being home, as mother and daughter stared at each other in silence. Neither moved until Kamilah reached a hand out to Fareeha, who walked over slowly, and seemed to freeze in surprise when Ana closed on her with a hug.

Luckily, Fareeha didn't take long to respond – wrapping her arms around Ana as well, returning her mother's squeeze with one of her own.

"Congrats, habibti." Ana smiled up at her when they parted. "You're a certified engineer now."

"Yeah." Fareeha shrugged.

"So...any plans get a Master's, maybe?"

Fareeha rolled her eyes at Ana's joking tone, though a sheepish smile crossed her face. "Well...I don't know. Maybe. Let's see what I wanna do now..."
Fareeha's voice trailed off into an uncertain mumble, and Ana didn't press. She was glad to just have a moment of peace with her daughter, and since they were still on tentative grounds with each other, Ana didn't want to tip this balance with a wrong word or two. So she turned back to Kamilah, tugging on her wife's hand.

"Wanna head out for supper? I didn't eat much on the plane."

"When do you ever," Kamilah deadpanned. "But yes, I guess. We can take the car—"

"Bike. Please," Ana cut in quickly, squeezing Kamilah's hand as her wife gave a knowing huff. To her surprise, Fareeha snorted a laugh as well, and moved back up the stairs. "What? Something I missed?"

"We bet you'd ask for a ride the moment you came back," Kamilah said, raising her brows pointedly. "You're very predictable."

"You can't build a bike like that and expect me not to ask," Ana replied. "Besides, I wanna see what you've been riding instead of me—"

Even from the second floor, they could clearly hear Fareeha's loud groan, and smiled at their daughter's exasperation.

"You did that on purpose," Kamilah said, voice low.

Ana smirked. "You know what else I'm gonna do?"

Kamilah reached up to pinch her nose, getting a muffled cackle from Ana. "You are terrible."

"Only for you, my dear."

Chapter End Notes

Kamilah: 54, Ana: 52, Fareeha: 24

;)