The Doctor and the Guard

by Bonbonbourbon

Summary

Fareeha leads an HSI security team. They escort, they protect, and they do it well. After the fall of Overwatch, Angela now works for Green Stripe Medics, an organization similar to Doctors without Borders. Their paths cross due to sheer coincidence and this is the story of that and what happens after.
“Think fast!”

Her instincts kicked in at her subordinate's words. Her hand automatically whipped out towards the oncoming blur, and she overextended herself backwards in the attempt to make a grab for it. Her hands fumbled to attain a good grasp of the object, and in her eagerness she almost stumbled off to land embarrassingly on her back.

She succeeded however, catching the item with the very tips of her fingers, and shot an exasperated stare at her subordinate once she regained her balance.

Saleh simply laughed at her disgruntled expression, throwing more of whatever he had at the rest of the crew who responded in an expected fashion. Annoyed, shocked or laughing right along with him, his shrieking laughter infectious in nature. How the man had such vigor in the sweltering heat of an Egyptian summer was beyond her; Fareeha herself wanted nothing more than to stay seated right where she was. Turning her hand over, she saw that he had thrown a chocolate bar at her, drizzled in caramel and topped with crushed peanuts if the picture on the packaging was any indication. With a small shrug she ripped open the wrapping and broke off a small chunk, popping it in her mouth. Her face scrunched immediately from the artificial sweetness of the chocolate and the cloying caramel that accompanied it.

Whatever this was, it definitely was not local (and most probably imported from America, Fareeha guessed).

“Dull day huh?”

Fareeha tilted her head up and was greeted with her vice-captain’s grinning face hovering over her.

“Dull days are the best days, Hassan. It means nothing is going wrong.”

He chuckled and took a seat next to her, feet swaying right along hers over the ledge. “Always so serious,” he bumped his shoulder against hers, "But c’mon Captain, just standing around idly all day is kind of boring.” Hassan’s voice rumbled out as he smoothened out his beard with one hand. He tilted his head at her, cheeky grin on his face, waggling his eyebrows, “Where’s the action, where’s the thrill?” he leaned in, voice dropping down to a dramatic hush, “The death defying feats that we need to get those pretty ladies in bars to fall for us?”

She stared at him blankly, before raising an eyebrow up, “And who’s to say they’ll actually believe you Hassan? You reek of…” She gestured at him up and down his hulking muscular frame, pretending to scrutinize him as he looked on at her puzzled. She leaned close, adopting an unimpressed look. “…Mediocrity.”

Though her stoic façade was near perfect, she couldn’t help the teasing twinkle in her eyes nor the small quirk of her mouth when Hassan went into a roaring laughter and flexed.

“Please captain. I know for a fact no one can resist these bad boys.”

She snorted before holding out the rest of her candy bar to him. “Take it. It’s too sweet for me.”
“Don’t mind if I do.” He sung out as he twiddled his fingers and pulled out the rest of the candy bar, leaving her with the wrapper. She shook her head at the faux-innocent expression on his face, as if he did not understand what could possibly be wrong with simply taking the candy bar and leaving her with the wrapper, and resisted the urge to throw it in his face. It was a little windy, they were on a balcony right now, and the flimsiness of paper had a tendency to fly off and away and Fareeha was not one for littering.

It was also a little unbecoming her, as captain, to be so trivial. She therefore sought to mindlessly fiddle with the wrapper as she turned to gaze at the city, watching civilians go about their day. For the last month they had been stationed at a high-tech facility that had a nice vantage point that overlooked the seaport city Suez. They were lucky enough to also have a proper roof over their heads at night along with decent beds and for the most part, working showers. A far better deal than when they were stationed at more remote areas.

Or when it was their turn to guard the Temple of Anubis.

She closed her eyes and breathed deeply to rid herself of the flashing images that rushed in her head of that day. She had learnt many things on that night, things that made her a better soldier. A better person. Fareeha had spent her days in the military training to be the best, to become a soldier so strong that she would never fail to dispense justice. She worked day and night, diligently training to be able to serve and protect. She grew strong, an embodiment of peak physical capability and shrewdness on the battlefield. Yet, for all her physical gains and military prowess, for all her desire to protect and be able to dole out justice, she had failed to understand the importance of the lives of her fellow soldiers. For her the mission always took precedent over the lives of any soldier, herself included. Her ideology was enforced by the nature of her line of work. Soldiers died all the time. Soldiers died all the time to finish their mission and stopped a lot more lives from being lost by doing so. The mission always took precedent. Always. If efficiency of completing the mission meant losing a few lives, so be it.

And Fareeha believed in this rhetoric. For a long time. Until that incident at the Temple of Anubis. Despite that, Fareeha would have given the world to have learnt her lessons without all the casualties.

Even now, Fareeha finds herself praying that her fallen comrades rest in peace and thanks Allah everyday that she learned her lessons fast enough to have saved Tariq's life.

“Boss?”

Fareeha opened her eyes and saw Hassan concerned face, eyes focused down. She followed his gaze to see that her hands were clenched so tightly they were tremoring, the wrapper crinkling audibly from the pressure. She unclenched her hands and forced a little nonchalant half-smile on her lips.

“Just thinking.” she said as she swatted him with the wrapper, his face scrunching as she nicked his face with it. She then angled her body towards the trashcan, scrunching up the wrapper into a crude ball and prepared to toss it as one would with a basketball. "Watch this Hassan." she said and purposely made a large show of her toss to distract her vice-captain and stop a potential onslaught of voiced concern that she saw start to form on his lips. She didn't feel like rehashing the events of that day anymore today. Hassan snorted as she missed and she gave him a smack on the back of his head when she stood up to properly put the wrapper away.

“Captain Amari.”

Fareeha cocked her head at the title and saw the newest addition to her crew beaming back at her. Menna was a sweet and bubbly and though Fareeha usually enjoyed speaking with her, right now
she couldn’t help but grimace, recognizing the light blue tinge and familiar template of the note the woman was offering her.

“I have this for you.”

Fareeha thanked Menna before walking off a little bit to the side, away from the merriment of her soldiers to inspect their new orders. Fareeha’s eyes skimmed the note quickly, cataloging the sparse details given by their latest client, a normal occurrence that she had noticed in Type III missions. Always classified, always need to know. Always a little aggravating.

Ensuring security was always a little harder when she did not even know what she was protecting and therefore who’d go to lengths and exactly what lengths to steal it.

Fareeha sighed and rolled her shoulders as she read through the orders a third time. On the surface it seemed like a routine escort mission, yet Fareeha couldn’t shake off a feeling of trepidation. Something was bothering her about the mission’s details though she couldn’t pinpoint exactly what it was. Perhaps it was the destination, the amount of cargo and the trucks chosen to transport it, the specific request for an S-class security team. Or perhaps it was all those factors combined, and yet, Fareeha knew that this type of overly covert sort of demands was not anything to get up in arms about. HSI had clients that came from time to time wanting such secrecy and security for even things that were honestly trivial. The list of demands and details really felt like any other high tier order. After failing to pick up any valid reason after a fifth read-through she tried to shake off the feeling, all the troubling information she was receiving lately must be affecting her judgment.

As of late there had been an influx of Talon activity detected, floods of articles on the latest Talon heists and sightings, on top of the ever-escalating tensions between humans and omnis and the embarrassing reports that just a few months ago HSI itself had failed to apprehend the elusive “Soldier: 76”. The assailant had broken in to Watchpoint: Grand Mesa and stole a few Overwatch items, tarnishing HSI’s record.

An arm draped across her, jolting her out of her thoughts.

“Captaaaaaaiiin,” Saleh drawled right into her ear as he held her close, “What ya got there?”

She looked over him and quirked an eyebrow spotting the rest of the group trying to not so subtly eavesdrop. Sometimes Fareeha felt she led a team of gossip-mongers rather than a team of capable former military personnel. “Our next orders. Type III, Class A escort mission to Deil al Hagar in the Dakhla Oasis in a week’s time. Client wants it delivered in ideally two days.”

Her lips drew into a small line as groans and wails of discontent resounded in her group, and she waited for them to cease their disgruntlement. She herself could understand their aggravation at the news. Travelling so far, clients usually gave them four to five days, so they could take a few breaks. Furthermore, a class-A mission meant using their Raptora suits and as much as Fareeha loved to soar in the sky, the suits still needed a lot of work. Putting it on took a good half hour from all the straps and pieces and once turned on they ran hot quickly. Hot clunky suits and the heat of an Egyptian summer was a combination even Fareeha could not lie about detesting.

She felt a familiar buzz from her wristwatch. Her crew hadn’t stop complaining. She sighed. “Alright, that’s enough. Break’s over. Clean up and get back to your positions.” She picked up her combat vest, quickly strapping it in place and put her beret back on her head. While she examined her firearms and double-checked that her safety was still on, her ears did not fail to still pick up residual grumblings from her team.

“Soldiers.”
Her crew stood clamped their mouths immediately, graduating from the snail’s pace they were moving at to clean up the area and themselves at the hard edge of her tone. Despite the professionalism they now exuded, she still saw the dissatisfaction in their eyes at the news and felt a little tug on her heartstrings.

Fareeha wondered when she got so soft as she uttered her next few words.

“You know what?”

They stopped in their tracks to look at her.

She licked her lips and hoped this decision wouldn't come back to haunt her. She sighed and scratched her cheek, pointedly looking away, suddenly feeling shy. “Let’s… Let’s go out tonight. My treat.”

Her eyes moved back to look at her crew at the sound of excited gasps, and she grinned at just how much her subordinate perked up at the notion. Fareeha couldn’t help the laugh that escaped as they whooped and cheered at her words. “Captain, you’re the best!”

Fareeha couldn’t suppress a groan of appreciation when the clock finally hit 8pm. Perhaps Hassan was right and the drollness of inaction may be more insufferable than their more action-packed days.

Walking the halls of their Giza base, she passed Captain Ilham and his crew. She nodded at him, a confused look crossing her face at the lopsided smirk he flashed her before schooling her features once more and raising an acknowledging hand at the salutes of his men who trailed behind him.

She was stopped her in her tracks when she turned the next corridor, her beeline to the showers blocked by one of the suits that worked for her higher-ups. Irritation crawled up in her, wishing she had walked a little faster. The showers were just a few meters away, but considering he was one of the messengers for her higher-ups, she wouldn’t be able to just brush by him.

She clicked her tongue, attempting to recall the man’s name. He was always slinking in the background and for all his height, Fareeha never had met a man with as little presence as him. A victorious smile graced her lips as she remembered his name.

“Khaled. What can I do for you?”

Khaled widened his eyes, an astounded look in his eyes and a twinkle so happy in his eyes that Fareeha felt the initial irritation dwindle away, replaced with a feeling of sympathy.

“Mr. Henedi would like to speak with you,” he paused, “ah, just for bit. If you have time?”

She resisted the urge to raise an eyebrow, there wasn’t a choice really, “Of course. Is it urgent though or may I shower first?”

“No, no… Not too urgent. I will tell him you’ll see him in… 30 minutes?”

She nodded once more and thanked him, pausing a little before repeating her thanks but with the addition of his name right at the end of it. He smiled appreciatively at her gesture, before hurrying off to relay the news to his boss.

Though given half an hour, Fareeha was at the front of the office’s door with ten minutes to spare. She pushed the buzzer on the door and announced her arrival. The light above the door turned green
in a matter of moments and the door slid open.

“Captain Amari!”

Emirhan Henedi smiled at her from his position near his windowsill, a cup of peppermint tea in his hand. Dressed in one of his many suits tailored to fit him exactly, all in all, he would have seemed like a well-to-do middle-class man. However, underneath the pristine suit were the tell-tale scars of a soldier. An individual who had been on the battlefield and understood what it was like out on the field rather than crunching analytics and strategies from behind a desk, credits lying in a diploma from prestigious universities rather than accolades from serving and protecting.

She saluted him and he saluted her right back, before gesturing at a seat.

“What do you think about this?” He said as he picked up a document that laid on his desk, waving it in the air before tossing it in front of her. She realized it was a copy of the orders she received.

He was staring at her as he stirred his tea, a familiar expectant expression on his face. The face he made when he gave her orders that were clearly against guidelines as a test of her character, wanting to see what she would do. The same look on his face when he had set up a meeting with her and a client who had given poorly altered documents, lying about the nature of the job. Simply put, this was yet another instance in which he was waiting for her to do something. Fareeha grimaced as she was hit with the realization that her strange feelings of trepidation were perhaps not so far off the mark.

“Honestly sir? There’s something about this mission that doesn’t sit right with me.”

He chuckled and nodded, satisfied with her answer. “I knew you’d feel it too.” He murmured, exasperation suddenly crossing his features. “Unlike the other suits I work with. Never been on the field a day in their life. Idiots.”

She sat silently, not voicing out her agreement. Sometimes the other higher-ups could be a little… trying. Talking about things that weren’t easy as if they were and not understanding the difficulties her and her men experienced from the lack of first-hand knowledge they had. She didn’t blame them, they were necessary personnel for the company to function, but it didn’t change the fact that Fareeha found them difficult to deal with.

“It isn’t just the orders. Something’s been up lately, I'm sure you've felt it too. I can't tell exactly, confidentiality and what-not, but let's just say that stuff have been happening. Big stuff...” he trailed off, tapping the side of his mug, his eyes glazing a bit as if his mind went elsewhere. "...stuff..."

Fareeha pursed her lips as the silence stretched uncomfortably so.

“Sir?”

Emirhan’s eyes snapped back to hers, coughing into his hand to clear his throat. “Sorry about that. Anyways, I do think they just want us to escort it… But I can’t shake the feeling that something is up.” He paced around, looking at the window before turning back to her. “Fareeha, the goods are going to an underground facility in Deil al Hagar.” He took another long sip of his tea, “This means that for sure the cargo is dangerous… Perhaps as dangerous or at least as important as the stuff we suppress in the Temple of Anubis.”

Her Horus tattoo seemed to burn underneath her eye as Emirhan’s words sank in. She wrung her hands together, suddenly glad they were using their raptor suits at this news. She pursed her lips and cracked her neck, before locking onto his eyes with a piercing gaze, gaze betraying not a shred of
doubt or fear.

“It doesn’t matter. We will be ready.”

Emirhan nodded at her statement, a proud glint in his eye that Fareeha liked to believe stemmed from the resolve in her eyes and firmness of her tone. Then he sent a mischievous grin her way and Fareeha felt a whole other sort of apprehension enter her.

She tightened her jaw, placing a stoic mask on her face. Perhaps if she showed no reaction to his cheeky little grin he would cease and desist with whatever little scheme he had.

“So… I heard that you’re going out with your crew for a little fun night out?”

Fareeha’s eyebrow twitched and she cursed the fact that he caught it as his obnoxious grin seemed to stretch impossibly wider. Where on earth is he going with this?

“Captain Ilham suddenly requested to take the morning shift tomorrow. He has been doing such a great job that I agreed. Reward good behavior right?”

There was silence. Fareeha didn’t understand how this affe-

Oh.

Oh no.

No, no, no-

She gaped at him, “Emirhan, why would you…” she started before recalling his words, “Ilham?? Wha-How… When? What?”

“How did Ilham hear about your night out in town you ask? A little birdie from your group told him. And…”

He paused, enjoying her reaction like a cat who just found its next prey. She huffed and steeled herself for what was to come. Of course he was going to say it. What kind of soldier, even an ex-soldier, doesn’t enjoy the occasional ribbing?

“And you’re treating them… right? Drinks and food on you?” he slurped his tea loudly, intent to annoy Fareeha further (it worked, her eye twitched again). “How much you going to bet that they’ll go crazy now that they don’t have the morning shift? How much money are you going to have left by the end of the night?”

Fareeha stood up abruptly, mechanically saying goodbye and walked away. She didn’t care that it was a little bit unprofessional to do so, the conversation had clearly veered from professionalism anyways. She couldn’t believe Ilham and her boss both decided to gang up on her like this. The tips of her ears burned at hearing his raucous laughter bounce through the halls and the resound ‘good luck’ from her boss before the doors to his office automatically shut themselves completely.

Fareeha walked with purpose, determined to kill whoever was the “little birdie” that was going to be the end of her wallet.

She just had to figure out who it was.

Chapter End Notes
I haven't written fiction since high school (that's like five years ago for me), but I have been inspired by this couple. So I hope you enjoy reading this as much as I am writing this.

The bad news is that Angela doesn’t really show up until the fourth chapter. The good news is that I’ve written up to the fifth chapter already. I just have to take some time to edit and re-write before I upload them (no beta-reader so all writing problems are on me).

You can rest assured that the second chapter is coming out in a few days.
At Night

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The first time Fareeha had tasted alcohol was when she was eleven years old. Her mother had swung by to visit her after a mission, Gabriel Reyes and Jack Morrison in tow, and all three crashed at the Amari household for the night before they had to rush off to their next assignment in the morning. She was nestled next to Gabriel as they sat outside on the steps of her patio, listening to his stories of triumph and giggling at his impersonations of his enemies and comrades alike. Her mother had popped out of the house at one point to hand them both glasses of ice chocolate. She remembers her offhand comment that his ice chocolate seemed to have gotten rancid as it ‘smelled strange’ and the ugly shoulder-shaking laugh Gabriel emitted at her words. A reaction that did nothing but make her frown, not understanding what could be so funny about stopping him from swallowing expired milk.

“Kid, this ain’t rotten.” Gabriel said before he swiveled his head to look through the window, grinning that roguish grin of his when he spotted that her mother and Jack were engrossed in deep conversation with her grandparents. He offered her his glass. “Try some Fari.”

She took it tentatively, looking at him with a little bit of skepticism as she tilted the cup back to take a small sip. The flavors of coffee and warm milk were enhanced by what Fareeha could only describe as a sharp taste. The liquid seemed to burn her throat on the way down and made her feel warmer despite the coldness of the drink. But it was sweet, and there was something about it that made Fareeha smile. She licked her lips and determined that she liked it. A lot.

Gabriel looked absolutely tickled as she took two more generous gulps. “Told you kid. It’s called a White Russian.” He breathed out between chuckles, before taking the glass back and holding out a pinky finger, voice dropping to hush whisper. “But you gotta keep this between us okay? Your mom would be pissed if she found out.”

She had nodded and linked her pinky finger to his.

“Sure thing Gabe.”

The rest of that evening, Fareeha felt warm and happy and a little bit light-headed. Despite holding true to her promise, she vaguely recalls her mother pulling Gabriel to one side near the end of the night, arms crossed and face in an all too familiar expression. The one she had whenever she caught Fareeha doing anything remotely bad and laid down the law. In any case, she remembers that she had gotten lucky and drunk just enough to feel a nice buzz and woke up the next morning without so much as a headache, making her first memory of alcohol a very pleasant one.

Unlike what the aftermath of this latest night out drinking was proving itself to be.

Fareeha felt as if her head was being split open the moment she woke up. Her eyes felt bleary, mouth dry, throat parched and a waves of nausea washed over her. Instinctively, she buried her head into her pillow to shield herself from the sunlight that blasted through the windows and cursed her rash actions as the rapidness of the movement somehow enhanced her headache.

She grumbled as she adjusted her body once more (today, resting on her stomach with her arms tucked under her pillow seemed the most comfortable) desperately wanting a few minutes more of
rest and hoped she could sleep the hangover away. Her eyes started to droop after a few minutes and as she was on the cusp of falling back asleep, she heard the familiar buzz of her phone. She huffed and shot an arm out to grope aimlessly at her bedside table to locate her phone as her head stayed buried comfortably on her pillow.

…She couldn’t find it.

She groaned and propped herself up on one arm, blinking rapidly a few times to focus her eyes.

It wasn’t on the desk.

Fareeha huffed again, cracked her neck and hauled herself to the edge of the bed with her hands, acutely aware now that her prosthetic legs were in fact not attached to her right now. Peering down the side of the bed she spotted her phone lying next to her abandoned prosthetics and sighed in relief, at spying her phone and both prosthetics in an arm’s reach (one time after a night out, one of her prosthetics was on top of the fridge of all places).

There was a message from Youssef.

*Morning Captain. Me and some others are going to eat at Tabriz Café at 11:30, join us?*

Her fingers moved with practiced ease as she shot back a quick text that she’d be there as she took a swig of water with her free hand to soothe the bad case of cotton mouth she was experiencing, before she laid back on the back.

A grumble escaped her as she closed her eyes and recalled the previous night. All her subordinates had somehow banded together and decided to all not fall for the prisoner’s dilemma. Not a single one of them squealed as to who told Ilham of her stupid idea to treat them all. She felt her irritation rise, remembering how much food and drinks they all had ordered. Still, Fareeha could not stop the warm feelings that fluttered through her as well. The whole crew was laughing, sharing jokes, jostling one another and simply having fun like a group of teenagers who snuck out for a night in town.

Eleven soldiers just mucking about in the city.

Menna and Hassan had gone to town when they took the stage of one of the bars they hopped to for an impromptu karaoke session, Summey made quiet Bilal come out of his shell more than usual, Youssef had a dopey grin on his face the whole time and Saleh… Fareeha couldn’t help but chuckle remembering how Saleh kept stumbling from drinking a little too quickly. He fell into a ditch at some point if her memory served her right, though her memory was a little fuzzy.

Her phone buzzed again.

*Alright, see you for lunch then captain!*

Her attention now centered back on her phone, Fareeha started to mindlessly browse her news feed to catch up on the latest events. There was the usual topics, a robbery here, a criminal caught there, a flood happening somewhere, and the rest of the usual slew of generally depressing stories. The old adage that no news is good news seemed to still hold true. One headline in particular though caught her eye.

*“OVERWATCH WEAPONRY NO LONGER ON DISPLAY DUE TO TALON”*

Her mind wandered back to when she was young. Seeing her mother on television, strong and powerful, holding the Overwatch flag proudly next to a then fresh-faced Commander Jack Morrison, a dashing Gabriel Reyes and the rest of the Overwatch members. The ecstatic feelings she felt when
she was allowed to visit her mother at wherever she was stationed at, no matter how brief. All the Overwatch bases seemed larger than life to her, with its pristine walls and the jaw-dropping facilities within them. She always dreamed of being right there next to her mother, working amongst all the brilliant people who were fighting for a better world, and right when it almost became a reality…

Her grip on her phone tightened.

She remembered mourning her mother and getting her Horus tattoo one night, when her emotions were high and everything hurt just a little too much.

She also remembers laughing.

Going into hysterical laughter when she found a dusty letter when she visited home one day and had a strange inclination to spend her time off doing some spring cleaning. Amongst the random mailed advertisements, she had spotted a letter written by her supposedly deceased mother. Turns out she wasn’t actually dead.

Fareeha clicked the link and started to read through the article.

“What is Talon honing its claws for?

In a string of robberies, mostly targeting the procurement of weaponry and technology associated from the now defunct Overwatch, Talon has become one of the hottest topics of discussion among world leaders.

The latest item they attempted to acquire was Doomfist’s gauntlets. The gauntlets were almost stolen by a member of the Talon group, whom people seem to be calling ‘Widowmaker’, also believed to be a prime suspect in the assassination of famous preacher Tekharta Mondatta. She was allegedly accompanied by a man whose description matches that of the shadowy figure known as “Reaper”. Though police failed to get to the crime scene on time, the plans of the terrorist group Talon were foiled due to a group of masked vigilantes according to two eyewitnesses.

The two witnesses, who have chosen to remain anonymous, were unable to identify any key characteristics of these heroes. Both boys claimed they wore very nondescript clothing, that they “just used black stuff” and “ski masks”. The surveillance cameras were also shut down at the time of the attack and therefore the police are unable to verify the accounts that were said to have happened.

Chief Harding gave out this statement in the press conference last night.”

Fareeha stopped reading. There was no real information really in the article and she scoffed at the incompetence of the police. She scrolled through more of her newsfeed to see if any other noteworthy stories would catch her attention. After thumbing through a couple more minutes and finding nothing, she set her phone aside, bent down to grab her prosthetic legs from the floor, and started to get ready for the day.

________________

She grimaced as she neared the café. She had expected a fresh-faced Nisa and Tariq, both of them devout and drank not one drop of alcohol, and for Summeye to look no worse for wear. Fareeha was sure that the woman had an immunity to all the negative effects of alcohol. In all her years of knowing Summeye, not once had she ever witnessed the woman feel even a small headache from a crazy night out. However, a cursory glance at her other teammates showed that, on the whole, they too all looked fine. A petty part of her was hoping to have see at least one of them look as terrible as
she felt.

But no, her whole crew appeared to be disgustingly happy and somehow devoid of hangovers. It seemed Allah had decided to punish only her.

Or at least she thought so, until she spotted the bleary mess that was her vice-captain. For once Fareeha failed to notice the giant of a man first as he sat hunkered forwards, devoid of his usual energy as his eyes gazed into the distance. As she strolled closer, she realized that Saleh was right there next to him, initially concealed by Hassan's massive frame, looking equally disheveled.

Despite her own splitting headache, a grin made its way on her face at the sight.

The day of their new assignment seemed to come up quickly. It was now Thursday night and Fareeha was overseeing her crew examine all the cargo, scanning the barcodes and ensuring that they were missing not a single piece.

Fareeha clicked her tongue as she looked at the cargo.

The boxes varied from sizes, most reaching at maximum her shoulder. She guessed that the lot of them were weaponry of some sort, considering the packaging of the items in steel cases were in all too familiar width and shapes. The transport of weapons was always a little troubling and Fareeha knew instantly that they would probably run into some criminal group along the way. However, what worried Fareeha most however were the three towering boxes. She had certainly not expected them to be so tall. She guessed that each of the boxes were around three meters high and almost two meters wide. All three wrapped in steel chains secured with a padlock along with having its own dial lock and a keyhole next both of its door handles. She banged on the side of one of them with her armored fist and heard only a muted thump.

Thick high grade metal. These weren’t so much cargo boxes as huge safes.

She could hear the hushed whispers of Yousseff and Kadir as they took worried glances at the four boxes and Nisa readjusting her hijab for the fifth time from nervousness. Even the usually stoic Mahmoud was showing signs of duress at the sight of the cargo. Fareeha understood their waves of apprehension far too well, feeling it herself. The cargo all sealed up with multiple security defenses and the transport for them was using their Z51 Armored Trucks. Top of the line and the best that HSI could offer its clients. Not to mention that they were asked specifically to transport the cargo at night and this sort of discretion meant an even higher fee.

She schooled her features despite the roiling in her gut. It would do no good for her team if they saw their captain express weakness. She flashed them all reassuring smiles for good measure, hoping to alleviate some of their worry.

Once all the cargo was loaded onto the three armored trucks, she motioned for her team to finish suiting up. She herself moved towards the armor racks to pick up her helmet from the rack. She wiped the visor with her gloves, shaking her head at the design of the helmet.

She always thought the shape of the helmet looked a little funky, like an alien’s head.

Placing the helmet securely on her head, she turned on the Raptora system. The system booted up with a small whir, and she could see her vitals and the suit’s vitals projected near the right of her left eye. Once she saw that all her subordinates had donned their Raptora suits, she pushed a button right behind the shell of her right ear to activate the intercom and tested the intercom channel, asking each
and every member if they were experiencing any technical issues.

No issues reported.

Fareeha took a deep breath and readjusted the keffiyeh around her neck.

“All systems engaged. Let’s roll out.”

As they followed the trucks out of the city, the desert night proved to be quite pleasant.

There was something about traversing the large expanse of sand in the dead of night, path lighted only by the light of the full moon as they had shut off the beamers of the trucks for added covertness. The almost ethereal stillness of the desert was only broken by the rumbling of engines, the murmurs of her teammates as they chattered idly to pass the time and the little soft whispers of the wind as it shifted the sand below them. The mission was going smoothly. Not another soul in sight on the off-beaten path they decided upon and not a hint of danger could be detected as Fareeha’s ever vigilant eyes swept over their surroundings.

They powered on, hour after hour. By the fifth hour her and her crew became a little antsy from boredom and had begun to play around, for lack of a better word. They were testing the jump jet and other abilities of the suits, save for actual rocket launching and concussive blasts. Fareeha felt a rush of power every time she soared into the sky and successfully did an aerial trick.

Normally she would never indulge in her whims like this nor let her crew mess around to this extent, but under the darkness of night and the lack of trouble they had faced, it seemed alright to do.

Or at least, it felt like they wouldn’t get caught.

Spotting Tariq sitting on top of one the trucks, she glided down and took a seat next to him.

“Everything okay?”

Amongst her crew, Tariq was one of the people that enjoyed flying in the Raptora suits most, enamored with the feeling of soaring the skies. To seem him not join in on the action seemed a little strange to Fareeha, worryingly so.

“I’m good, I just…” he paused, “Nights like these remind me of my childhood.” He gestured all around, “I lived in a small village, where we were surrounded by sand like this. No delivery trucks, no technology, no merchants coming in to try and scam us. Nothing. Maybe just an occasional lost soul who wanted to go somewhere else and accidentally wounded up there.”

Tariq let out a small sigh and looked up at the sky.

“I always wanted to go to the big cities when I was younger. Live an adventurous life… This adventurous life,” he played with his hands, “But now I sometimes think the peaceful dull life ain’t so bad. At least nothing bad happens in places like my village. Too small to be significant and this,” he gestured at the back of the truck, “Seems significant. And not in a good way.”

Fareeha pretended not to hear the way fear crept into his voice and the small crack at the end of his sentence. The burning red on his cheeks, clear even in the low light of the moon and the darkness of his skin indicated that he heard it too.

“Tariq.”

He looked at her and Fareeha was instantly reminded of how young the boy was, a fact that she often
forgot from how brilliant he was. He had handled himself well after the incident at the Temple of Anubis and worked diligently on all the assignments after. Yet, times like this reminded her that Tariq was so very young. He turned twenty-two just a month ago. She squeezed his shoulder and sent a silent prayer to Allah to protect him and send him strength when he falls down.

“We will be fine.”

She stayed with Tariq for a couple minutes more, only leaving once the man had calmed down and only to check on the rest of her crew. For as many perks a peaceful night brings, it also had a tendency to make people ponder in the worst of ways.

Time seemed to become almost irrelevant as they pushed on forward, seeing nothing but sand dune after sand dune. Nearing the nine-hour mark, Fareeha could barely stifle a yawn. Dawn was approaching and Fareeha wondered if they needed to pick up the pace in order to get to their pit stop at the village of Mut on time.

However, as the sun rose in the horizon, Fareeha saw the outline of a city and a large expanse of water.

The streets of Mut were empty, save for a few early risers. They hurried along, knowing that the sight of armored vehicles the size of theirs and their own gear would raise questions and most likely panic from the people.

The moment they passed the gates to the warehouse, everyone in her crew breathed a sigh of relief.

“Job well done crew.” Fareeha said before ordering them to take off their suits and get at least a few hours’ rest before they once again had to hustle to reach Deil Al Hagar. They were fortunate enough that HSI had decided to place warehouse workers this early to catalogue the items for them instead of doing it all themselves.

As her crew started to take off their suits and head to bed or a quick breakfast and then bed, Fareeha walked over to the supervisor. Her arms were crossed behind her back as she relayed the details of the mission in the normal clipped and professional manner, verifying that they had experienced no problems on the travel here. The supervisor, Taban, nodded and typed up her report, sending a copy to both the clients and Emirhan.

“Good job Captain Amari. Before you set off once more, we will catalogue all the items a second time. The goods will be placed in our customized Z51 trucks,” he gestured at what looked like a regular convoy trucks, “just to avoid causing panic.”

She nodded.

“And tell your men that you will be leaving by 10am sharp. Any questions?”

“No sir.”

He nodded, satisfied at her answer. “You are dismissed.”

She saluted him and walked off to the rack, taking off her armor systematically as her head was filled with nothing but the thought of a quick warm meal and a soft place to rest her head.

Chapter End Notes
Pharah is using the Security Chief skin.

Fareeha’s squad has 11 people, including herself.
Here are their names (in case anyone’s interested):
Hassan, Mahmoud, Summeye, Menna, Bilal, Saleh, Youssef, Kadir, Tariq, Nisa
All precautions were taken on the last stretch to get to Deil al Hagar.

The Z51 trucks were disguised as regular vehicles and her and her crew were shuffled into two convoy vehicles, only exiting them once the city became nothing more than a small sliver on the horizon. Five miles away from the city, they were joined by the five multi-purpose, combat-ready armored jeeps and two support vehicles HSI had on standby to follow them for this part of the journey. They were now an intimidating sight to say the least, one that would undoubtedly make possible enemies think twice before attacking. Still, Fareeha knew from experience that all the planning in the world couldn’t prevent mishaps from happening.

And the first mishap happened three and a half hours in.

One of the trucks popped a tire, running over a sand-covered jagged steel remnant that Fareeha guessed used to belong to a plane. It looked like part of a wing of those old fighter jet used in the first Omnic crisis.

Fareeha and her team stood idly at the sidelines as the support crew took over and inspected the tire. Apparently the damage was quite extensive and it would take a good half hour to patch it up. She felt a twinge of pity for the driver of the truck, seeing him peer out his window ashamed as one of the men fixing the tire berated him. It had been an honest mistake and incidents like this happened all the time, especially in this area. The zone they were in currently had been one of the most heated battlegrounds from the crisis and many pieces of debris from the war had simply been left here to be covered by sand or disintegrate with the passage of time. Occasionally, a part re-surfaced and did exactly this.

Damage an unsuspecting vehicle’s tires.

She cracked her neck and wiped the sweat that rolled down her chin. Unlike the trip to Mut, they were travelling in the daytime now and scorching heat of an Egyptian summer was relentless. The combination of being strapped into constricting thick metal panels of the Raptora suits, the heavy thrusters attached to her back that ran blisteringly hot and the harsh intensity of the afternoon sun was something that Fareeha could have happily lived her whole life without knowing about. Plus, the straps near her crotch had shifted uncomfortably so and she was forced to not-so-subtly readjust it. She felt her cheeks warm from the obnoxious chuckle from Hassan as she did so.

She made a mental note to make Hassan do the report write-ups for the next month.

A cheer grabbed her attention. The support crew were now finishing up, placing the repaired tire back on and screwing the bolts in place once more. Fareeha turned around to signal to the drivers of the two other Z51 trucks to restart their engines. They could go back on the road now that the first mishap had been fixed.

The second mishap was believing the first mishap was a mishap at all.

If she had inspected the area surrounding the remnant that caused the flat tire she would have noticed the shocking amount of half-buried remnants strangely lined up, coincidentally with the jagged serrated edge of every single one pointed upwards. If she had even just inspected that sole unearthed
remnant that damaged the tire personally she would have recognized the tell-tale signs of the edges purposely sharpened, curves too smooth to be natural.

But she didn’t and the very first instance of her warning bells ringing was seeing the driver seat of one of the Z51 trucks completely enveloped in black smoke.

...What the hell?

She activated her thrusters, bursting forward and landed inches away from the door of the truck. A gloved hand jolted her as it banged on the door, desperately pounding twice before slipping down abruptly. Panic rose in her and she acted quickly, pulling the door handle furiously. When it failed to budge she broke the truck’s window with her elbow and reached in.

“Zaheer?!” she yelled as she groped blindly into the truck, intent on pulling him out of truck through the window and away from the toxic looking fumes. A hand found its way around her wrist and just as she was about to pull, the hand tugged her.

Hard.

Her other hand shot out instinctively and pushed against the door of the car for extra momentum as she wrenched her hand free, staggering a couple steps back. Her eyebrows knit in confusion, while dread rose in her. She had felt a hardened armored hand. She took another step back. HSI protocol ordered drivers to wear only leather gloves.

There was someone else in there.

“Who’s there?! Come out now and surrender.” She growled out, raising her gun up.

At her words, the oddest thing occurred. The black smoke, thick and opaque and volatile, seemed to shrink. Not dissipate or diffuse into the air. Shrink. And then it shifted in place, twisting and roiling like it was alive. Fareeha blinked a couple times.

Was the heat of the desert finally getting to her?

Steadily and then suddenly all at once the smoke disappeared and out from the ashes appeared a man in a deathly white mask.

Fareeha’s eyes widened.

Impossible.

She had heard about the tales said about him from the news. A bringer of death clad in black, rumors afoot that he hailed from perhaps another world. A monster that traveled in and out of crisis in wisps of smoke, causing destruction and chaos wherever he wandered. She had thought it the exaggerations of newspapers and their need to sensationalize every story. She never thought the Reaper could actually become a literal shadow.

She thought wrong apparently.

She held her breath as she heard the audible click of the door unlocking. The truck’s door opened slowly, creaking from its crooked hinges. He sauntered out, his feet planting onto the sand in a deliberate fashion. Fareeha felt uncomfortable as she drank in the sight of him, decked out in black attire, little tendrils of smoke churning around and out of him. Her uneasiness spiked when his shoulders started to slowly rise and fall rhythmically in tandem with his laughter. It was low, guttural and haunting and Fareeha had to resist the urge to shudder at the sound. His face might be hidden
behind a mask, but Fareeha could imagine the wicked grin plastered on his face.

As his laughter tapered off, he raised a hand and jutted his thumb out behind him. Fareeha took a quick look, wary of taking her eyes off the man for too long. Zaheer was slumped over, clutching his stomach as tears ran down his face. Locking onto Fareeha’s eyes, he opened his mouth as if to speak.

Blood gurgled out instead.

“Captain wait!” a voice behind her shrieked as she lunged forward in anger, activating her thrusters to propel herself at a blinding speed towards the Reaper. Her hand pulled back, ready to whip back out and bash him with her rocket launcher. Millimeters away from his face, she connected not with flesh but air as the Reaper became formless once again. The strength of her punch sent her reeling towards the truck head first and she flipped quickly to slam her feet onto the truck. Pushing off the truck she thrusted herself high into the air to scope out the area, desperate to spot where the Reaper had vanished too.

*Where did he go? Where, where, whe-*

She saw a lone shadowy figure in the distance.

*There.*

She clicked the intercom link. “Enemy spotted. Eastbound. Team Alpha, standby until my signal. Team Beta, get into the vehicles and start your engines.”

Her subordinates flew up next to her as the additional HSI crew following them quickly shuffled back into their respective vehicles. A little wave of relief washed over her at seeing Zaheer being carried into one of the support vehicles by the medics.

They hadn’t left him. It means Zaheer was still alive and had the possibility of making it.

“No way… The rumors about him are true?” Tariq’s trembling voice cracked out.

“Show no fear Tariq.” Fareeha said, she loaded her rocket launcher with a quick pump. “We are in this together.”

Her crew nodded in agreement at her sentiment, weapons drawn and eyes trained on the Reaper. He was standing a good distance away on the top of a sand-dune. He stood with his body weight shifted to one leg, chin jutted upwards and arms crossed in an arrogant fashion. The Reaper exuded an air of a man who had all the time in the world and not a care either, appearing completely unruffled about the many rocket launchers directed straight at him. Gradually he straightened up, brought his hand up to his neck, thumb sticking out and made the cutthroat gesture.

“Motherfucker.” Hassan snarled out next to her, rage in his eyes at the man’s audacity.

She stuck her arm out in front of him as he lurched forward. “Wait Hassan.”

She herself bristled, her grip on her rocket launcher tightening as she witnessed the slow rise and fall of his shoulders. Again, he was laughing that haunting and guttural laughter of his. She exhaled slowly, cracking her neck.

As supernatural as his abilities were, Fareeha highly doubted he was omnipotent. He had dodged her attack after all instead of taking it head on. She also believed his ability to phase must also have limits. If the cargo was the target, why not just phase into the trucks, grab the item and phase out with it? Her apprehension grew though despite her rationalizations and she sucked in a deep breath.
through clenched teeth. There was something about his gestures, his bravado that rubbed Fareeha in all the wrong ways and caused her gut to roil uncomfortably. They were in the desert, miles of nothing but sand. Nowhere to hide and nowhere to easily go.

So why was he so confident?

As the Reaper raised his fingers and snapped them, Fareeha scowled seeing the origin of his confidence. The monster wasn’t acting alone. Mercenaries on dirt bikes and dune buggies came up from behind him, over the sand dune and past him, zeroing in on them. Fareeha recognized their red and black uniform. Talon. And it was floods of them.

Panic implanted itself into Fareeha.

There were outnumbered and outgunned judging from the battalion of vehicles charging at them.

She now found her initial thoughts that HSI may have gone a little overboard with the additional units they sent to travel with them to be silly. Compared to what practically looked like a small army, she knew she and HSI itself had grossly miscalculated how many people to assign for this mission. Her mind raced as she thought of what to do.

*We could run.*

*We can get to the final checkpoint if we hurry. Backup can quickly rendezvous there.*

*Could? No, that’s wrong. We need to run.*

“Team beta. Hurry to the checkpoint, go! Go! GO!” she roared into the intercom. The Z51 trucks, support vehicles and combat-ready armored jeeps started to move. Her team stayed high in the skies, flying backwards to face the onslaught of Talon agents, for once not needing to turn their heads to check in front of them. There were no buildings or obstructions in the vast expanse of sand. Her team abused their high vantage point, launching rocket after rocket to start picking off at least some of the Talon operatives, whether by termination or capsizing the vehicles they were riding through direct hits or splash damage.

She connected a call to Emirhan.

“Emirhan. Talon is attacking our units.” she pivoted in the air to avoid a rocket and launched a revenge shot back. Right on target. A dune buggy capsized and a nearby Talon operative flew off his dirt bike. “Rushing towards the final checkpoint. 26 miles away. ETA: 40 minutes.” She dove downwards, flying low to the sand as she trailed after another Talon mercenary on a dirt bike who had raced forward and edged close to a wheel of one of the Z51 trucks. The Talon agent riding at the back was prepping to puncture the wheel with a spear. “Have back-up ready to assist.” She caught up and threw him off, snarling as she whacked the driver as well and took control of the dirt bike.

“Right away Captain Amari.”

Fareeha maneuvered the dirt bike back, away from the trucks and towards the rushing Talon agents in pursuit. She drove fast towards one of the armored Talon vehicles. Four meters away, she gripped the handles and pulled upwards, lifting the front of the dirt bike off the ground before jumping off and shooting a concussive blast near the bottom of the bike. The dirt bike flew from the impact, landing straight on the armored vehicle.

Fareeha aimed a rocket at the gas tank of the dirt bike.

The rocket landed dead center and the fuel in the dirt bike acted as an accelerator as she had hoped.
The resulting explosion was strong enough that the armored jeep was decimated, blackened to a crisp, and the four dune buggies around it scorched. Fareeha herself flew a couple meters back from the force blast, righting herself only by activating her thrusters.

She winced as she realized she realized a piece of shrapnel from the explosion had embedded itself on her shoulder.

The chaos continued as they raced on forward, rushing towards the final checkpoint. Talon was trailing behind them, incessantly attacking, throwing projectiles well in front of the trucks which caused clouds of dust to form and hamper visibility. Fareeha coughed as burnt ashes and sand filled her lungs, eyes watering as it crept under and through the small cracks on her visor, stinging them as she plowed on forward. Her teammates were rushing around as well, now picking off armored jeep after armored jeep with coordinated rocket fire, while the multi-purpose support vehicles focused their attention on the dirt bikes, their mounted rifles more suited to locking on to small quick targets and destroying them efficiently.

“Shit!”

She whipped her head at the familiar voice. Her heart leapt to her throat as she saw Youssef flying haphazardly, one thruster gone as he struggled against Reaper who had a firm grip on his throat.

A roar ripped out of her as she rushsed over with her thrusters to tackle him. Again the monster disappeared right before Fareeha made contact. She slammed into Youssef and they both hurdled off to the side and into a sand dune. She sputtered, spitting out blood and sand as she picked herself up. She swiveled her head, trying to locate the Reaper again. A cry of pain made her look back at her comrade, crumpled on the sand.

“Youssef!”

She almost couldn’t stop her wince seeing the condition of his arm, bent in an odd angle and the swelling on his right leg.

“Put me on one of the combat jeep’s mounted artillery. I can still-”

He stopped seeing her steely expression. “Stop. You’re running on adrenaline. You’ll bleed to death if we don’t get you help.” she growled out as she unlatched his remaining thruster and hoisted him over her shoulder. She boosted herself quickly to one of their own support vehicles, ripping the door open.

Guns were raised to her face for a second before dropping in recognition. She handed Youssef over to the medic in this jeep wordlessly before she rushed back out into the fray.

By the time final checkpoint was in the horizon, her breath was ragged, shoulders heaving up and down from exhaustion. The bombardment by Talon was endless and relentless. Her own voice sounded far away, ears ringing from all the explosions and gunfire. All she could taste was the metallic tang of blood and the saltiness of her sweat as it poured profusely down her face. Everything hurt. Her muscles were strained, the shrapnel in her shoulder dug further with every movement and the little cuts and gashes on her body stung. The rocket launcher in her hand was also starting to feel like a concrete block and she was beginning to have trouble keeping her rocket launcher firm, the recoil feeling harder and harder as her strength sapped away.

There was also the issue of the Reaper.

Throughout the battle Fareeha would see him flit and and out. Everytime Fareeha cornered the man,
got a few good hits with her armored fists (she had abandoned using her rockets, they were too slow to reach him and he would always, always, turn back into wisp of smoke before it hit him) he would somehow find his way out just in time. Blocking her lethal shots and countering her with a few good hits of his own. It made Fareeha seethe with rage when he parried her hits and he did so many times (she parried his shots many times as well, but that was beside the point).

For some reason their fighting styles in hand-to-hand combat were similar.

Hassan was thundering near her, roaring as he annihilated enemy after enemy. Her back felt searing hot, the tips of the thrusters singed her armor as she put her them on overdrive to accompany him on his rampage, abandoning her pursuit of the Reaper. She'd deal with him later. She and Hassan taking turns to fire and reload their weapons, allowing a continuous barrage of rockets rain down. A well-placed concussive blast by Hassan sent two dune-buggies to tip over and left surrounding Talon operatives too disorientated to avoid the rockets Fareeha launched their way.

Fareeha heard the intercom channel come alive again.

“Arriving at checkpoint in 5 minutes. Friendly units coming in hot!” Summeye yelled into the channel. Fareeha looked ahead and saw not one, but two platoons of flying comrades coming along with a small gang of support vehicles that charged in on ground. A small grin made its way on her face.

Emirhan was always an over-achieving son of a gun.

“Captain Amari, we are here to help.”

She opened her mouth to respond when she heard a distinctive rumble behind her and in a split second aimed and shot a concussive blast beneath her feet, the force pushing her body upwards just in time for her to dodge the rocked that sailed past her, the heat of the rocket’s emissions scorching the tips of her armored feet. She gasped to regain her breath that was knocked out of her from the force of the blast.

“Good.” She uttered once she regained both her breath and her balance. “Let’s finish this then.”

Chapter End Notes

JUSTICE.

Anyways, actions scenes are hard. I felt like dying writing this, much less editing (I didn't realize how difficult action scene are??? Like?? WOW.). If you got lost just imagine like a Mad Max car chase, but with more chaos.

In more anticipated news, Angela is coming in the next chapter.
“Keep still.”

Fareeha sucked in a breath as the doctor pressed and prodded the whole length of her body with her fingertips. She gripped the ice bag to her nose a little tighter, attempting to keep her focus on the numbing coldness instead. In spite of her efforts, she was still quite aware of the doctor’s prodding and grunted as her fingers ran across a particularly sensitive spot. The doctor disregarded her discomfort and continued on with her inspection. After a few more minutes, she pulled back and walked away to retrieve a variety of bandages, creams and medicinal sprays. Fareeha’s eyes followed the woman’s movements in boredom. The woman seemed… Tense? Angry? Fareeha noted the decidedly cool expression on her face as she came back arms full of the items needed to treat the large array of wounds on her body. She moved quickly, first disinfecting and treating the slew of little cuts and gashes, before proceeding to take out the haphazardly done stitches her crew had done and place her own neat sutures.

Aggravated sighs escaped the woman’s lips as she worked.

Fareeha raised an eyebrow at the sound, cocking her head. The woman ignored her questioning gaze.

“Arms up.” She said tersely and Fareeha obeyed automatically, not wanting to fuel the sour mood the woman was apparently in. She raised them high, giving the attendant unobstructed access to her upper body. “Three fractured ribs, a broken nose and a million cuts to fix for me to deal with.” The attendant groused as she worked, bandaging up her midriff rather abrasively. The words were said faintly, almost inaudibly, but Fareeha was no ordinary soldier and her ears picked them up clear as day. Once the doctor was finished, she gave a small pat at her handiwork and stood up. She took the ice pack from Fareeha’s grasp and took a step closer, cupping Fareeha’s face upwards at her. In any other situation, and by any other beautiful woman, having her face held so intimately with such an intense gaze would be much appreciated. However, this was not any other situation, nor with any other woman, so Fareeha kept her features schooled. The woman (Patricia? Paloma?) clicked her tongue and shook her head in exasperation.

“I need to reset it.” She said as she placed her fingers on the sides of Fareeha’s nose firmly.

“Give me the countdo-“ Fareeha let out an undignified yelp as Paloma (she was sure it was Paloma, not Patricia) moved unexpectedly, resetting her nose before she finished talking. A retort almost flew out of her mouth when Paloma repositioned her hands on her nose once again. She drew her head back away on instinct.

Paloma flashed an unimpressed face at her recoil. “It’s badly broken.”

That she knew, she had taken an elbow to the face. Lovingly given by the Reaper.

(The sickening crunch on impact and the searing pain that accompanied it still vivid in her head.)

“I need to reset it again, maybe two more times. Unless a crooked nose is what you want for the rest of your life.” Paloma explained. At Fareeha’s skeptical look, she rolled her eyes. “I haven’t got all day.”
Fareeha grumbled and leaned forward, gritting her teeth as Paloma reset her nose one more time. And then a third time. She swore the woman had a satisfied glint in her eye from her obvious displeasure at the act. At least she didn’t give her the satisfaction of seeing her wince though. Paloma pulled back and turned Fareeha’s head to the left then right, up and then down.

“All good.” She said as she placed a bandage of her nose.

Fareeha frowned. She was no stranger to bandages, and had bandages from broken noses before, but none that stretched wide enough to cover up almost all of her Horus tattoo in an almost ridiculous manner. She probably looked like she was halfway into the process of becoming a mummy with this new addition, considering the bandage next to her brow and another that rang along the side of her left cheek.

Paloma shoved a piece of paper in her face. She took it, squinting as she struggled to discern what Paloma wrote. To her, it looked like nothing more than ineligible scrawls.

“It’s a list of painkillers to get from your nearest pharmacy, you buffoon.”

“…Not going to give me some yourself?” she said offhandedly, ignoring the insult and gesturing at the slew of medication in the cabinets with a tilt of her head.

Paloma straightened at that, crossing her arms. “No. I’ve already given you one. Enough to tide you over until you get to a pharmacy.” Her eyes narrowed and her nostrils flared at Fareeha’s small frown. “Listen here, I didn’t come to work at GSM to treat soldiers. I came to help the good people in the world who were unfortunate enough to have been born in less than preferable conditions or are in dire need of help. Whether from natural disasters, after-effects of wars or anything in-between. That’s what GSM does. You lot-” She stopped and sucked in a deep breath in a poor attempt to calm herself.

Fareeha stayed silent, regret hitting her in droves at her careless remark.

“You lot… came flooding in from whatever fucking battle you came from and disrupted the work we were doing here. They say you were doing important work, I’ve even heard about how even governments employ you guys. The ‘famous Helix Security International’.” She made air quotation marks with one of her hands before scoffing. “Whatever. At the end of the day though, you’re still a private security company. In the end, you work for whoever has the biggest pockets.”

Fareeha’s lips drew into a thin line at her assessment.

She worked hard to protect the innocent and HSI have done much good for the sake of the world.

However, Fareeha couldn’t deny that there wasn’t a level of truth to her words. She herself had been assigned to celebrities and the high echelons of society as a glorified bodyguard. Protecting people only because of their deep pockets, not for matters of national or international security. Mostly when she first began, before she climbed the ranks. After a few moments more of uncomfortable silence, she patted her knees and slid off the medical table, putting her shirt on wordlessly. She smoothened it once before facing the steely woman, bowing slightly.

“Thank you for your help, Dr. Paloma.”

It would be a lie to say Fareeha did not hope her expression of gratitude would help chip away at the tension a little bit. Instead the woman seemed to flare up further at her words.

“…Right. My mistake. Goodbye, Dr. Patricia.” Fareeha said mechanically, before briskly walking to escape what was sure to be another tirade. Turning hurriedly round a corner, she barreled straight into another person. The speed of their impact, and the difference in their size left Fareeha standing while the other person bowled over. Fareeha immediately knelt in front of the fallen woman, concern in her eyes. “Are you alright miss?”

The woman, GSM personnel as well judging from her clothes, was rubbing her forehead. Fareeha deduced that must’ve been what her chin had collided sharply into. As she waited for the woman to respond, Fareeha mentally prepared herself to receive a dark look from yet another GSM worker. Instead, the woman laughed and waved a dismissive hand out in front of her.

“I’m fine, really. It just felt like running into a wall.” She then looked around, while re-adjusting her glasses. “Mind helping me pick up all these papers?”

“Not at all.” She said automatically and started to help collect the papers that had scattered. She dusted off the collection of documents, bounced them on her knee to realign them, before standing up. She then bent slightly to offer a hand down to the woman.

The woman accepted her outstretched hand and Fareeha gently pulled her up. Fareeha waited for the GSM medic to readjust her clothing, before handing her the papers. The woman took it with a grateful smile.

“You have my thanks.” The woman said cheerily, squeezing the side of her arm before she walked away.

Fareeha gazed at the woman’s back, relief washing over her.

At least one GSM worker didn’t look at her as if she was scum of the earth.

(Granted, the only other person from GSM she has had the pleasure to meet has been Dr. Patricia)

The video call with her superiors ran long. They had questions about every single detail and by the fifth repetition about the events, Fareeha felt drained. She may have been patched up, but she was still bruised, and not to mention experiencing muscle ache and fatigue from the day’s events. She felt her time wasted standing in front of a small monitor, hands crossed behind her back, standing stock still, as her superiors bickered about incessantly about unimportant details. After another thirty minutes of basically watching her superiors bicker amongst themselves, the call finally ended.

She sat down with an appreciative groan, picking up her now cooled cup of jasmine tea and took a sip.

Another call rang through.

Emirhan Henedi

Unlike the official call just seconds ago, where Emirhan was grim, grave and hard, she was greeted with the sight of her superior slouching on his chair, his finger pulling at his tie to loosen it and a familiar, casual smirk on his face.

“That was a waste of time wasn’t it? They asked all about the details, but nothing about your insight.”

She rolled her eyes, “Well, what else is new? Most of those suits believe in number-crunching and
strategies they conjure up rather than the words of their subordinates, despite not having been on the field a day of their lives.”

“I hear you.” He chuckled out, though Fareeha could see the aggravation in his eyes at the truth of the statement. “Anyways, what do you think? Give me your insight and I’ll relay it. They’ll be more amicable to suggestions if I say them.”

A smirk tugged on her lips. “You trying to take credit for my work Emirhan?”

“You know it.”

She snorted and shook her head. She was not one for that sort of glory. At least, not since her early twenties, back when she was young and desperate to prove herself. Besides, further promotion up the HSI ranks was not something Fareeha looked forward too. She probably would go mental being behind a desk instead of out on the field.

“Dealing with Talon wasn’t anything new.” She started. “The battalion of operatives were trained, but ours are better. We don’t need more rigorous training in that sense. They did however, make up the lack of skill with preplanning and numbers.” She drummed her fingers on the desk. “Talon’s strength is not its on-field operatives, but off-field and strategy planning. They do their due-diligence. We had taken an off-route path and still they managed to trap us. Lying in wait in huge numbers. The next time a mission like this happens, send a drone or scout team ahead to ensure the areas clear. That no slew of Talon operatives is prepared and ready to attack by the dozen behind a sand-dune.”

Emirhan nodded, writing down her observations. “And what about the Reaper?”

She frowned, rubbing her chin. He was an excellent fighter with good intuition. That much she knew from the almost dance-like battle they had on field. They parried off each other, predicting the other’s moves and quickly adapting when one or the other changed tactics. She felt a slight pool of disappointment that a man so capable was on the wrong side of the law. He had an incredible sense of the battlefield, combat prowess, and a ferocity to win that Fareeha hadn’t seen in a very long time.

“Fareeha?” Emirhan said softly, breaking her away from her musings.

She ran a hand through her hair as she collected her thoughts. “He cannot be stopped with our rocket launchers, they are far too slow. He sees most of them coming and those that he sees too late, he can simply phase away from. Issue an order for every Raptora team to have a conventional firearm, or find a way to integrate a quick-shot into the suit. Low damage is fine. Speed is key.” She paused as Emirhan jotted down notes. “The maneuverability of the Raptora suit is adequate, got me to the locations he would phase back in quick enough to get a few hard knocks on him before he would disappear once more. “

“Anything else?”

"And…” she hesitated for split-second. “I’m not completely sure yet, but I believe that the Reaper’s can only phase to places he can see and he can only hurt people when he is solid. If he can hit you, you can hit him. If you can’t hit him, he shouldn’t be able to hit you.” She pursed her lips, pausing. “I think. It’s still a working theory.”

“Well, working theory or not, this is more than what our outside sources have provided in order to counter this bastard. Good job.” He remarked, capping his pen and putting away his little notebook. He then looked at her, a gleeful expression taking over his face. “Look at you Fareeha. That living embodiment of death really put you through the ringer, eh?”
She huffed, knowing exactly how much of mess she looked.

“Did Green Stripe Medics do a good job patching you up? Are they as good as they say?”

“…The stories of GSM being able to set-up highly advanced medical stations quickly when they swoop in is true. The inner layout and equipment in the tents are better than some hospitals I’ve been in.”

He raised his eyebrow. “But?”

“But nothing.” He looked at her pointedly. She drummed her fingers again, looking away from the monitor. Her voice became a small mumble. “I was just unlucky Emirhan. Got chewed out by the doctor that attended me, just by virtue of working as the muscle of a private security company. She took pleasure in resetting my nose. Thrice, might I add. Between you and me, I have a feeling she could’ve done it in two.”

“Hah!” he barked out, an infuriating grin on his face. “First a date with death and then a doctor that hates you on principle. Just your luck eh?”

“Yea, just my luck.” She sighed and cracked her neck. “Let’s hope it gets better.”

As it turns out, it did not get better.

She was eating dinner with her crew when a friendly jostle between Saleh and Hassan caused an elbow to hit her square on the ribs. She flinched, swallowing a piece of chicken prematurely and started to choke. Saleh swore and rushed to perform the Heimlich maneuver on her in a panic, each thrust bruising various injuries further. She tore out of his grasp in a hurry once the piece of chicken dislodged itself.

“I’m good! That’s enough. I’m fine. I’m…” She trailed off, feeling a wetness on her shirt and a throbbing at the side of her abdomen. One of her more serious wounds had reopened. She placed a hand above the lesion on instinct. At that moment she noticed the sutures on her arm had pulled apart as well. She grimaced, not looking forward to another appointment with a GSM medic. And by GSM medic, she meant Paloma. Fareeha’s eyes quickly widened. Patricia. Not Paloma. Patricia.

“Sorry, boss.” Hassan said sheepishly, hand rubbing the back of his neck. “If it’s any consolation, you should go see if you can get Dr. Veronica Mueller to check on that. She works in last medical tent on the east side.”

…Who?

“She treated Youssef’s injuries, Captain.” Bilal remarked from where he sat. “Looking at Youssef right now, you’d never believe how horrible the extent of his wounds were.”

That, Fareeha had to agree. Just a couple of hours ago his face was completely contorted with pain and his body a mangled mess. Now he was sitting upright, able to eat dinner without a hitch.

“She’s also super hot.” Saleh commented out and Fareeha let out tired breath, because of course that was what Saleh noticed. “I’m serious, captain.” Saleh quipped out, misinterpreting her reaction as disbelief. He nudged Youssef. “Back me up here, bro!”

He nodded shyly. “She is an attractive woman and kind. She was very gentle as she dressed my wounds.”
“You all do realize I can’t go demanding this Dr. Mueller to attend to my wounds. No matter how ‘hot’ she is.” She stated dryly, shooting a judgmental look at Saleh. “GSM is helping us as a favor. They are not working for us. For all we know, she is on break.”

“She’s not.” Youssef said abruptly and Fareeha raised an eyebrow at that. He shirked at her reaction, becoming a little red. “I mean… She is, but she’s still in her medical tent finishing papers. I’m sure she’d treat you if you came.”

“Hold the fuck up.” Summeye said, raising a hand up. “How do you know that?”

Youssef flushed further. “Well, I…” he looked down and fidgeted. “I uh… I may have asked her to join me for dinner.”

Her team looked flabbergasted at his response. A little curiosity bloomed in Fareeha. This Dr. Mueller must be something for shy little Youssef to be so forward. She held back a laugh when she spotted the Saleh’s slack jawed expression and the exaggerated scandalized look on Summeye.


“You cheater! When did you ask that? I was going to ask that!” Saleh sputtered out.

The rest of her subordinates soon got their bearings and all at once directed a bombardment of questions at Youssef and Saleh about this mysterious Dr. Mueller. Fareeha took this opportunity to walk off and travel to the medical tents. She dropped her arm and feigned normalcy when she passed the second medical tent, seeing Dr. Patricia on-duty as well. Though she knew the logical thing to do would be to suck up her pride and walk in –Dr. Mueller’s medical tent was the farthest out- she decided she’d rather not face Dr. Patricia’s wrath again. Besides, between choosing a doctor who hated her guts and a doctor that had treated her comrades well, and by extrapolation, most probably her too, the answer was quite obvious.

She entered the medical tent tentatively. “Dr. Mueller?”

She looked around. There was no one in the medical tent. Did she get the number wrong? Would she have to double-back into the other medical tents? The other tents were empty except…

A rueful look crossed her face. Would she really have to double-back and see Dr. Patricia?

“Dr. Mueller?” she said again, a little louder.

“Please wait a moment!” a muffled voice from the back, garbled by the running water. “It’s not serious is it?”

“It’s not doctor. Take your time.” Fareeha responded, a hand still clutching her opened stitches as she walked around the room, mindlessly inspecting the books and medical equipment lying around. One particular book caught her eye, and she picked it up. “Short stories and tales for little girls and boys,” Fareeha muttered to herself, an amused smile on her lips and started to flip through the pages with her free hand. Caught up in the book, Fareeha almost jumped as she heard the bathroom door swing open.

“I’m sorry for the delay. I’m Dr. Veronica Mueller. Please just call me Dr. Veronica. What can I do for you today?”

Fareeha turned around. “Well-”

“Oh it’s you.” Dr. Veronica said, cutting her off with a half-smile on her face.
Fareeha furrowed her brows, searching her memories. Had they met before?

The smile on Dr. Veronica’s face slowly dropped and she readjusted her glasses shyly. “Or am I mistaking you for another gruff woman with excessive bandages covering the majority of her face that sent me toppling down a few hours ago?”

Fareeha stared at her blankly for a few seconds before her eyes widened in recognition.

The smile came back on her face at her response. “Right person then? Anyways, I see you’ve pulled your stitches, soldier. Come sit.” Dr. Veronica said kindly as she patted the medical examination table.

Fareeha nodded and hoisted herself up onto the table, lifting up her shirt to give the doctor better access to the reopened wound on her abdomen. Between the reopened wound on her stomach or her arm, she assumed the one on her stomach probably took precedence. As the woman worked, Fareeha peered down to take a better look at the doctor. She didn’t realize it a few hours ago when she sent the doctor reeling to the ground, her thoughts occupied with ensuring the woman was alright, but now that she was calm… She would be a fool not to see that the doctor was beautiful. Absolutely gorgeous. Arched well-defined eyebrows, smooth, unblemished skin and a touch of light make-up that brought the whole look together. Her black hair had a healthy sheen to it, tied back neatly except for stray stand that dangled free. Fareeha felt it was on purpose. It framed her petite face far too well to be mere coincidence.

“There. All done.” Dr. Veronica dusted her hands off. “Now pull down your shirt and let me look at your arm.”

In a matter of moments, her arms was all fixed up as well. Fareeha took a few moments to gaze at Dr. Veronica’s handiwork, admiring it.

“Impressed? I’ll send you my consultation fee.” She said teasingly.

Fareeha lips quirked at the light jest of the doctor. She hopped off and bowed slightly. “I am impressed. Thank you doctor.”

“No problem. It was a small patch up anyways.” Dr. Veronica quipped as she took off her glasses to clean them with the fabric of her shirt.

Fareeha went rigid. She stared, brows furrowed, as the woman focused her attention to cleaning her lenses. Something was... different. The woman was different suddenly. It felt like a fog had cleared up from her mind. She felt a thought claw forward from the far edges of her mind. It almost reached her conscious mind, a hairs breath away, but then the doctor had placed on her glasses again and the thought vanished. It slipped through the cracks again and Fareeha felt the fog swarm back in, the barrier had been erected up once more. Or more accurately, as if there was a sort of interference occurring, prohibiting her from surfacing the thought she had. She felt her body move on its own accord and before she realized what she had done, she had swiped the glasses of the doctor’s face.

Dr. Veronica first looked shocked, before confused seeing the similarly shocked expression on Fareeha’s face at her own actions. Her eyes then narrowed in concern.

“What’s wrong, soldier? You seem disorientated.”

Fareeha looked at her dumbly. Her words seemed muted as her eyes roamed over Dr. Veronica’s face and frame. Her instincts were screaming at her. Look at the doctor Fareeha. Look. Look. Look. Look. Can’t you see it?
Can’t you see it, Fareeha?

A frown made its way on the doctor’s face at her lack of response. “Perhaps your injuries go beyond reopened wounds. Tell me, exactly what happened to open them again?” She said as she plucked her glasses out of Fareeha’s hand.

Fareeha stayed silent, still looking intensely at the doctor. She knew at this point she probably looked like she was in some sort of catatonic state, but the thought was so close. She only needed a little bit more time. She leaned forward a bit, hovering inches away from Dr. Veronica.

If the doctor didn’t look perturbed before, she certainly did now.

“I’m definitely going to take another look at you.” She said as she took a step back and raised her glasses in the air, checking for smudges. A little spike of panic hit Fareeha. If she didn’t retrieve the thought before the frames were back on her face, it would be lost forever her guts told her. And as ludicrous as the idea seemed to her rational mind, a part of Fareeha believed her gut instincts to be true. She squinted harder at the doctor and seconds before the doctor properly perched on the glasses back on her nose once more, the thought slipped into her conscious mind. Just in time.

Fareeha’s eyes widened and she stiffened immediately, realization hitting her like a freight train.

She knew Dr. Veronica.

She had met her before, before even earlier today. More than once. She was a woman that she had admired greatly from a distance, far too shy to ever approach and actually speak more than a few words at. But she remembers Veronica Mueller by a different name, as a different woman. A woman with light blond hair, blue eyes and a smile that made young Fareeha’s little heart flutter.

“Dr. Ziegler?” Fareeha whispered out.

Chapter End Notes

I’d like to start by saying I do not hate anyone called Patricia.

Second of all, A) I’m going with the whole English as an international language and B) Overwatch being different enough from the real world (along with happening in the future) that most people can speak both English and their native language. So when in doubt, people talk English to foreigner. (To give context, Fareeha has been speaking Arabic until this chapter, switching to english whenever she conversed with Patricia and Angela).

Angela looks the way she does in her devil skin. (Minus the strange black markings above her brows).

Shout out to Thortron for that conventional side-arm comment (because yes). I put that in and I hope you saw it my dude. I’d also like to give a big thank you to the rest of y’all who’ve commented (I see you chesirethecat and Teyhy) and/or gave kudos. It’s really encouraging to me. Till next time.
She had been careless. She should have realized something was amiss the instant the woman started to act strangely, looking at her, then her glasses, then at her, then back at her glasses. She had been stupid. The moment her name had fallen from the woman’s lips she had frozen, the smile on her face dropped, replaced with a look of shock. It was undeniable that the accusation hit a nerve, and she had recovered from her mistake far too slowly.

Her eyes were wide with curiosity and disbelief as she gawked at her. Angela stared back, frozen in fear, a cold sweat running through her. The woman was imposing to say the least. She had a good couple inches on her, with rippling muscles and faded scars that told of many skirmishes of the physical kind. Angela may be experienced in battle, but it was clear that this woman was forged by it and a fight between them would leave Angela crippled.

Or dead.

Luckily the woman seemed to be more awe-struck at finding out her real identity than anything else. But it could be a farce, a small part of her rattled out. Remember what happened in Bavaria?

How could she forget? She could never forget. She was Helena Ornstein at the time, a Hungarian doctor who sported a long braid of light auburn hair. Her first false identity. Things had been going well until a couple months after the caretaker in the little dilapidated apartment she nestled herself in recognized her. He promised to keep it a secret and Angela believed him and his awe-struck eyes, a choice that proved to be a grave mistake. Later that night she found her apartment ransacked with all her research taken and personal effects gone. While she stared at the destruction, the fretful conspiracy theorist who lived two doors down peeked out of his apartment and whispered furiously to her that uniformed men in black and red had come and tore the place up, and that he overheard them say that they had plans to come back later. Probably to get her, he stuttered out before slamming his door. She left soon after. Confused, afraid and in a flurry. She would later learn that the caretaker had sold her out for 500 euros. Bile rose to her throat at the thought. That was the price of her life apparently.

The woman reached out to touch Angela. She drew away in reflex, taking a couple steps back, almost falling over as the small of her back collided into a table. She blindly groped behind her, trying to find some sort of item as a makeshift weapon. Her groping becoming more frantic as the woman closed in on Angela. In her blind grab, she recognized the familiar curvature of a scalpel and curled her fingers around it. She waited for the woman to step even closer, close enough for Angela to reach, and then brandished her weapon out in front of her. The woman stilled and then hardened as she registered the press of cold steel on her jugular.

“That’s enough. Don’t move any closer.” Angela’s voice was firm, eyes narrowed in what she hoped appeared like a steely resolve.

Please don’t make me hurt you.

She pursed her lips, staring intensely at Angela. The woman was sizing her up and Angela had to resist the urge to squirm under her unflinching gaze. After what felt like a few excruciating moments, she then slowly raised her hands in a show of surrender.
Angela loosened the pressure slightly at the display.

“Why?”

Angela felt drained by the simple question. Why indeed? Was it all worth it? She hated violence and the fact that her initial reaction was to resort to it, even as an act of self-preservation, did not lessen the guilt. A sigh escaped her lips, “I know it may seem extreme of me to hold you hostage like this, but-”

“No.” The woman said, her voice flat as she cut her off. “I meant why are you hiding your identity? What happened to you?”

Angela stilled for a moment, not quite believing her ears. Angela had a scalpel to her jugular (all it would take would be a quick flick of her wrist to slice the vein and the woman would die in seconds, blood spurting out far too quickly to mend without the help of expert hands), so why was she hardly fazed? How did she have the gall to question Angela as if she was the one with the upper hand? She increased the pressure of the scalpel again.

The woman didn’t bat an eye at her threatening gesture and Angela’s hand shook slightly at the revelation. Angela held her breath as the woman’s eyes darted down at her tremoring hand and then back to her face, an unreadable look on her face.

“Dr. Ziegler, I mean you no harm. It’s me, Fareeha.”

…Who? Angela racked her brain for a Fareeha. It was rare for her to forget a face, especially one that seemed to know her well enough to see through her disguise. Not to mention, how many towering Egyptian women could she know?

A wry smile crossed the woman’s face. “You don’t remember…” she muttered and Angela swore she could detect a hint of hurt in her otherwise flat tone. “I’m Fareeha Am…” she trailed off, eyes travelled to the side. “Dr. Ziegler. Put the knife down.” She held a finger up when Angela opened her mouth to explain that she really was in no position to be making demands. “Two of my comrades are coming. Judging from their distance,” She then closed her eyes as she cocked her head to the right, precariously pressing further into the scalpel. “Roughly thirty seconds away.” She then opened her eyes and looked down at Angela’s hand, still holding the scalpel, still pressing it into her neck. “Unless you want a commotion. Drop. The. Knife.”

The pleading edge of her otherwise hard tone and the serious glint in her eye made Angela take a quick glance at the entrance to the tent and strain her ears.

Nothing. She heard nothing. She must be bluffing.

She told ‘Fareeha’ as much. Her shoulders slumped at Angela’s accusation and a grimace found its way onto her features. After a pause she let out an aggravated sigh and grumbled. Angela barely had time to register that the small grumble was a pre-emptive apology when the woman’s hands darted out and twisted the scalpel right out of her hand and swept her other arm across the top of the table next to them, toppling down the surgical trays, books and other apparatus that were strewn on top. She then dropped down to the floor, as if she taken a tumble down, crashing right in the midst of the fallen objects.

Angela could only watch in shock, both from the strange sight and the terrifying realization that she was never actually in control of the situation. Fareeha could have easily swiped the scalpel much earlier and delivered a final blow before Angela took two breaths.
“Woah, what happened here?”

Angela’s head whipped towards the entrance.

“Are you alright captain?” Youssef said as he hobbled over towards the ‘fallen’ woman, holding a hand out. The woman grabbed it and pulled herself up, dusting herself off.

Angela simply stared at the interaction.

“I’m fine Youssef. Just a little disorientated, the painkiller Dr. Veronica gave me must be working faster than I thought.” She said calmly before turning to look at Angela. “I’m sorry about the mess, doctor.”

She nodded dumbly, "That's okay."

“You’re such a lightweight captain. Getting a little woozy from a tiny painkiller.” Saleh quipped as he knelt down to collect the fallen materials and place them back on the desk. He turned to look at Angela when he finished, a cheeky grin on his face. “Anyways, now that this is all done. How are you doctor? You free anytime soon?”

Angela looked at Saleh blankly, before shifting her focus on Youssef before finally landing on the woman who apparently was the captain of the HSI squad. She raised an eyebrow at Angela, looking at her meaningfully as she tilted her head in Saleh’s direction a couple times. Her actions effectively snapped Angela from her reverie.

She turned back to Saleh, feigning normalcy by placing on a pleasant smile and forcibly relaxing her shoulders. “Unfortunately, I’m rather busy at the moment. Perhaps another time?”

“You sure you can’t spend a little bit of time?” Saleh pouted.

She shook her head politely, “I really do apologize, but I have far too much work. I’ve already delayed my duties by a considerable amount of time by treating your captain and I cannot afford to delay them any longer.”

“See Saleh? Told you she was busy, she told me as much just a couple hours ago.” Youssef muttered out.

“Did you both come just to bother the doctor?” The woman said, staring at her subordinates with a disapproving look, arms crossed.

“What?” Youssef’s voice was an octave higher. “Of course not, w-we were-”

Saleh’s arm slung over Youssef, holding him tightly with a smile too large to be genuine. “We were checking on you, captain! Very worried that it was taking so long.” Youssef smiled and nodded rapidly in agreement. The woman’s face was skeptical to say the least at the poor explanation. Saleh quickly turned to look at Angela, changing the topic. “Anyways! Is our captain back in tip-top shape?”

“Yes.” She took a quick glance at the woman to see a pointed stare back. “She’s good to go.”

“Alright, then see you later doc.” Saleh sounded out as he walked out with Youssef in tow, who waved at her shyly. The woman followed after, stilling at the entrance for a few seconds to take a backwards glance at the doctor.

“See you later doctor.” She uttered softly. To any passerby it would be a normal farewell, but Angela
saw the serious glint in her eye. Angela understood the underlying message.

*We will talk later.*

Rather than thinking about it, Angela did what she did best. Bury herself in her work.

________________

Angela pinched the bridge of her nose. Her plan was failing. Her mind would not register the words on the reports she was reading and after the seventh read-through of a line, she set the paper aside. She leaned back in her chair and swung her legs up to prop them up on the desk. She then crossed her arms and closed her eyes.

Just a quick five minute break.

“Veronica? You’re still up? How are you not done?”

Or not.

She cracked an eye open and saw her colleague Patricia next to her glancing at her pile of unfinished reports. “I was distracted. The captain of that HSI squad had pulled her stitches and needed it to be fixed up.”

“What? I just treated her!” Patricia shrieked and Angela held a hand to her ear at the shrill cry. “How the… I hate soldiers. I hate them. I hate them all. They must have been some machismo rough-housing or something just as ridiculous. Wasting our resources, that lot.”

Angela attempted to quell the spike of anger in her colleague. Patricia was a good doctor and Angela actually agreed with her on many points medically and in her mistrust in PMC’s. She too failed to understand how people had such a sincere belief that violence or the threat of it can pave the way to long-term peace. However, as much as she agreed with Patricia, she had to admit the woman may be a little overbearing and overzealous in her vocalizations of her stance and err on the side of extreme in her prejudice. Soldiers were people too and many of them felt they were doing good work. She glanced at the stack of papers that Patricia was waving around in her tirade.

“You’re going to crease your reports Patricia.” Angela said softly, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder.

Patricia huffed and nodded, smoothing out the edges of the report where her grip was. After she recollected herself she looked at Angela apologetically. “Right. I’m sorry about that Veronica. You know how I get about private military and security companies… You said you treated the captain right?” Patricia said rhetorically as she thumbed through her stack and pulled out a document. “You have to update this report then on the woman.”

Angela took it eagerly, she barely knew a thing about the woman and attaining some background data would always help. Angela’s eyes widened at reading the name.

“Fareeha... Amari?” she whispered.

“Hmm?” Patricia said as she unlocked the cabinet to put in the rest of her reports. “Oh yes. Apparently she’s the daughter of *that* Ana Amari. None of her mother’s famed charm though.”

Patricia kept talking, but Angela could barely hear her words as she stared at the document. Specifically, staring at the accompanying photo attached to it. Unlike in the present, Fareeha had no bandages obscuring her face and Angela felt like a fool for not recognizing her. She may have not
known Fareeha intimately (she could barely recall exchanging more than a few brief words, before the girl would scurry off elsewhere), but she had seen Ana’s photos of Fareeha and heard the proud mother boast about her daughter over a million times during Overwatch’s golden days. That Fareeha was brave. That Fareeha was strong. That Fareeha was compassionate. That Fareeha was a good kid.

(Suddenly meeting up with the woman didn’t seem as alarming anymore.)

Angela twiddled her fingers and checked the clock. Only three minutes before the time that Angela had requested for Fareeha to meet with her (slip of paper with time and date passed from her fingers to hers when they passed each other in the afternoon). Angela sucked in a deep breath and readied herself as she heard the familiar firm thuds of a soldier coming closer to the tent.

“Good evening.” Fareeha said as she entered the tent. Angela waved and responded in kind, gesturing at the seat adjacent to her. She offered Fareeha a cup of tea, pouring slowly when Fareeha held out an empty cup in front of her.

They sat drinking their respective cups of tea in silence. There was a slight tension in the room, the kind that exists when two people are put in a position that is needed, but not necessarily wanted. Slightly heavy and uncomfortable, but with the distinct lack of hostility that usually accompanied these sorts of meetups.

It was Fareeha who broke the silence.

“Dr. Ziegler, you’re far calmer this time.”

Her mouth quirked upwards. “I am. It took me awhile to recognize you. I believe the last time I saw you was two decades ago.” She looked up and down Fareeha’s large frame. Flattery might ease the mood. “You’ve grown so much and done so well. Captain of an elite HSI squadron and a highly decorated military officer, if your long list of accolades and achievements in your military records are anything to go by.”

“You’re very kind doctor.” Fareeha said with a stiff nod. Despite the clipped tone, Angela could see the slight tug of her lips and the proud gleam in her eye from the acknowledgment.

Angela smiled at the sight before sighing. “I suppose you have many questions.”

Fareeha nodded. "Yes."

“Where to start? The beginning, I suppose.” She focused on the warmth of the hot cup of tea cradled in her hands. “The beginning of the end, I mean. Let’s start with the aftermath of the explosion of Overwatch HQ. I fell into a little depression immediately after. As problematic as Overwatch became in the later years, I still had great fondness for it. And of course…” She paused and let out a shuddered breath. “Of course there is also the fact that we lost many people that day. Like Jack. And Gabriel.”

Fareeha’s throat bobbed at the mention of his name. That’s right, Angela recalled, Gabriel and Fareeha were quite close. Anytime the girl visited Gabriel would somehow find a way to spend some time with her. She’d see them lounging about together laughing and giggling. A part of her wanted to comfort her, but there was something about her posture that made Angela refrain from doing so. She had a feeling it would not be appreciated.

(Or perhaps Angela was imposing her own experiences where the flood of condolences she received
after the explosion felt empty. It wasn’t as if words would bring them back. Either way, she decided to trust her intuition.)

“At any rate,” She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “After a few months, I got back to my feet and realized the world didn’t need Angela Ziegler – at least, not at the moment. My face is associated with my callsign, with Overwatch, with an era that has passed and ended on a sour note. Plus, I myself found my identity troubling.” She took a sip of her tea. “Everywhere I went people wanted me to join their prestigious research lab. Meet their ambassadors. Attend their medical summits.” Medical summits that were often just a rehash of old research and ideas with no new breakthroughs, Angela thought bitterly. “Be their poster girl. It was tiring and not what I wanted to do.” Her glasses had slipped downwards slightly and she paused to readjust them, “I wanted to help out on the field and deliver medical help where it was needed most. A clean break was needed for me to do that, so I took up the helm of Dr. Helena Ornstein. One of the many identities I created far before my days in Overwatch as a failsafe.”

“But you’re not Helena Ornstein now.” Fareeha remarked, hands clasped in front of her, forearms resting on her thighs as she leaned forward. “And your reaction to me recognizing you was a little… much.” She finished lamely.

Angela smiled at her attempts at tact; ‘a little much’ was a nice way off putting it.

“That’s true, I’m no longer Helena Ornstein and for good reason. My identity was found out by the worst possible party. Talon.” She ignored the little bristle in Fareeha and continued on. “They wanted me and had went through great lengths trying to find my whereabouts. I cannot say with full confidence why they want me, making an educated guess however,” Angela tapped at her temple twice. “For my brains, if nothing else… After that incident, I became Veronica Mueller from Germany and placed more emphasis in making her seem like a real person. More false documents, a more in-depth backstory I memorized to the core and changed my appearance far more drastically than when I was Helena Ornstein. I also sought to do good as far from that region as possible to throw Talon off my scent, which is how I landed in the Middle East and then, Egypt. And finally here,” Angela then gestured at Fareeha. “Sitting in front of you.”

“I see.” Fareeha said. She reached out to grab the kettle to top of her empty cup. “There’s still something that’s bothering me though.” Fareeha said as she set the kettle back down. She took a sip before looking off to the side, rubbing her jaw. “It might sound stupid but…”

Angela cocked her head. “Yes?”

“Is there something up with your glasses? Like… strange with them?” she mumbled out, scratching her cheek.

Oh.

“It’s not stupid.” Angela said kindly, she took them off and handed them to Fareeha. The woman took it tentatively. “These are special glasses. It’s a little more complicated than what I’m about to say, but it sends out a sort of frequency that affects the region of the brain where you connect a face to an identity, thereby making it difficult for the brain to make that connection. Difficult, but not impossible. I mean, you recognized me right?” Fareeha nodded at that. Angela gestured along the sides of the glasses. “The sensors and all the other technological pieces are embedded in the frames and the lenses slightly distort the shape of my eyes which also helps the technology work its magic so to speak.”

Fareeha nodded again at Angela’s words as she looked downwards at the spectacles. Her gaze was intense as she turned and inspected the glasses, feeling it in her hands and squinting at them.
“Incredible, do spies wear this? Bet they do.” she muttered before standing up and walking towards a full-length mirror at the side of the room. Fareeha placed on the glasses and stared at herself in wonder, making expressions at her own reflection.

Angela bit the inside of her cheek at watching her antics.

“I don’t think I look any different…” Fareeha muttered with a pout and the little giggle she was suppressing escaped her. Fareeha’s head whipped back at Angela at the sound, the expression on her face similar to a child who got caught stealing a cookie. Angela held a hand to her mouth as she struggled to stifle down a full blown laugh. The sight of the stalwart woman flustered was oddly endearing sight.

Fareeha walked back promptly, practically shoving the spectacles back at Angela. “Here you go doctor.” Angela shook her head, smiling. Fareeha may have recovered from her little childish display, voice strong and clipped once more, but Angela could see that the tips of her ears were still red. “Where’d you get them anyways?”

“I’ve always had a prototype since the Overwatch days as one of the many pet projects of mine, however I created this version only a year ago. This is the fourth version of it and… what?”

“You’re telling me you made this?” she croaked out.

Angela nodded slowly, unsure where Fareeha’s disbelief was coming from. She was a medical prodigy who had a most avid interest with nanobiology and nanotechnology. Thus by extension, she also developed a keen understanding mechanics. Plus, Overwatch had a plethora of agents with cybernetic limbs or additions and it unfortunately laid on her to fix wiring issues. Furthermore, she may not be a scientist by trade like Winston, or a mechanical genius like Torbjorn, but she did work with both of them and picked up a few tricks along the way.

“Tell me.” Fareeha said abruptly. “Tell me about the other stuff you’ve done.”

Angela played with the hem of her shirt. “You wouldn’t find it interesting, the spectacles are really my only interesting project for anyone not in the field. All my other research tends to be quite dull for other people to hear about.”

Jack and Gabriel often gave her blank looks when she droned on about the finer details of her work, a better deal than when people would downright stop her in her tracks with a pained look. Of all her comrades, the only ones she truly spoke about her research with (that wasn’t working directly under her) was Winston and Reinhardt. Winston, being a scientist and holed up in close working quarters with Angela on a regular basis, had quite the ability to grasp and appreciate her work. Reinhardt was a strange case, as kind as the man was, science and medicine was not his strong suit. He never seemed to fully comprehend what she was saying after the third minute, but always enthusiastically encourage her to keep talking never-the-less.

“Tell me.”

Angela eyes snapped back up at Fareeha. Fareeha looked undeterred and Angela sighed.

“Alright, but feel free to stop me at anytime.”

Fareeha nodded and Angela began. Angela began slowly, more invested in watching Fareeha’s expressions than the words coming out of her own mouth. She waited for Fareeha to adopt that glazed look she saw often or to ask her to skip the minute details and “tell it to her straight” (code for: please just give me the cliff-notes version). A cynical part of her was even waiting for her to simply
bluntly stop her or conjure some poor excuse to leave. Yet as she continued on she saw that Fareeha sat in rapt attention, only interrupting her with clarifying questions or summarizing it herself to ensure she wasn’t getting the wrong idea. The moment Angela realized the woman actually enjoyed learning about her research, the metaphorical dam broke. Her reservations flew out the window and Angela started to really talk about her work. Half-way through explaining alternatives to skin-grafts that she was developing, a sob escaped her, surprising both herself and Fareeha.

“Dr. Ziegler?” Fareeha said, concern in her eyes.

“Huh?” Angela wiped the corners of her eyes and felt wetness. "I-I’m fine.” She stuttered out. “This is just... It’s been so long and... It's been too long.”

Another sob escaped her. That was what it was, it just had been too long. Though as Veronica Mueller she was able to do what she loved, it was also very lonely. No one to be completely genuine or authentic with, no one to talk about the research she has done and always living life as a slightly different person to who she really was. Talking with Fareeha, she could finally be herself at least for a little while.

She laughed at that. Who knew such a stiff woman would be the one to give her the release she needed?

She wiped at her tears again. “I’m really glad you recognized me Fareeha. I’m glad we had this talk.” she picked back up her tea and took a large gulp. “Have you been in contact with Mccree? You were rather fond of him when you were younger, at least much fonder of him than you were with me. I had to admit I must have seemed like a very boring teenager.” Angela chuckled out, though a little resentment rose in her. It would be a lie to say she was not a little envious of Mccree. When Ana had announced her daughter was coming to visit, Angela had been confident the girl would want to hang out with her. Yet time would show that Fareeha would spend her brief visits to the base horsing around with Mccree or Gabriel and spare only a few short words for Angela before finding an excuse to leave her presence.

“I didn’t find you boring.” Fareeha protested softly with a small frown on her face.

Angela looked at Fareeha with a good-natured smile. “You never wanted to hang out with me, no matter how many times I offered. It’s okay, Fareeha. Mccree is a lot more fun with his antics and such. Especially to a young teenager. And besides, what is it then, if it wasn’t that you found me boring that you always found a way to scamper away quickly?”

Fareeha looked away and Angela saw that the tips of her ears had reddened once again. She opened her mouth and closed it a few times, face scrunched up. After a few more pauses she sucked in a breath and looked straight into Angela’s eyes. “…Intimidated.”

Angela raised an eyebrow. “Intimidated. You really expect me to believe that? That you were intimidated by me?” she crossed her arms as she saw Fareeha sweat at the blatant lie. “Especially when you hanged out with Mccree? Former member of Deadlock, Mccree?”

“Mccree is an idiot.” She said with a roll of her eyes. “I’m not going to be intimidated by a man who dresses like a cowboy, wears a buckle belt with BAMF engraved into it and says ‘I’m your huckleberry’ all the time. What does huckleberry even mean?”

…Angela had to concede to that.

“I…” she rubbed her neck. “You became a doctor before you could vote, head of your own hospital
before you could drink and asked to assist Overwatch. Not applied, but personally asked for. You were, in short, a brilliant woman. Plus kind, compassionate and intelligent. The whole package. You seemed to shine so bright, like a star and I was just a dumb kid who barely reached your nose. So yea, I was intimidated.” she rushed out, before muttering, "Who'd want to look like a fool in front of a girl like you..."

Angela bit her lip as a smile threatened to take over her face at the admission. “You thought that much of me?”

"I still do." Fareeha answered, a lopsided smile on her face.

And Angela believed her.

Chapter End Notes

Guess who went flying off and forgot to tell you guys? This motherfucker (and I'm still out abroad lmao).

Sorry about that, but man, flying off to another country put a wrench in my plans (having fun + underestimating jetlag is a deadly combination in hampering writing). And did y’all notice the big lie Fareeha told Angela? Really girl, you know the reason you couldn’t say more than two words to her is cuz of your big damn crush on her. Intimidated my ass.

Anyways, I’m surprised by the overwhelming amount of comments suddenly last chapter. Glad so many of you guys are enjoying this. :)}
Sometimes being Veronica Mueller was aggravating.

Today her coworker, Sheila –lovely woman with three daughters and a devoted house husband- had broached the topic of nanotechnology. A topic not out of line with the train of conversation topics that she and the other medics were idly discussing to pass the time. From the very moment the first words escaped Sheila, Angela felt an itch run down, a familiar itch that tingled all the way to the tips of her fingers. As she drove deeper into topic it took everything in Angela to hold her tongue, at one point noticeably squirming in her seat. She couldn’t even chime in with her own little two cents as Angela had a niggling feeling that if she started she wouldn’t be able to stop. Words would have flown out of her faster and would keep tumbling out, fueled by her passion and expertise in the field. An action that simply wouldn’t do.

Veronica Mueller was supposed to know very little about nanotechnology, her medical proficiency laying elsewhere amongst other things. While Angela’s favorite flower were roses -red, as cliché as it was- Veronica’s favorite flower were orchids. She preferred sandy beaches to grassy parks, grew up in Hungary, not Switzerland, and her parents were not dead, though she was estranged to them.

Angela did everything to make Veronica different enough to be real and delving into this conversation head first would invoke suspicion.

Still, no amount of internal justification and logical reasoning that her ability to maintain her ruse was crucial to both her safety from Talon and her ability to work on-the-field unhindered, could stop Angela from balling her fists as outdated information started to pour forth from Sheila’s lips.

After a few minutes more of listening to old information be recycled with no intervention by any of her peers that the information that recent advancements had rendered some of that information obsolete (did none of them keep up with Nanotech Times? That medical journal was free and accessible in 28 different languages.) Angela resigned herself to stuffing her hand in her pocket and rubbing a worry stone with her thumb. A gag gift from Torbjorn.

*Here you go Angela! A worry stone is perfect for a worrywart like you! Ha-HA!*

Angela had quickly and sharply reminded him that it was he and the rest of the Overwatch members that were the primary cause of all her stress, bounding off quickly to wherever and coming back with excessive injuries more often than not. He had simply laughed at her livid look and shrugged his shoulders unapologetically.

*Eh, you’ll forgive me, lass. I’m your favorite guy.*

She had muttered something along the lines that that might soon change, but her voice had lost all its bite. Torbjorn was a man who became something close to an uncle to her and she loved him, he truly was her favorite man, faults and all. Like his intense hatred for Omnis, though she would never stop trying to show him that his prejudice against them.

(As understandable as it was given his origins, his prejudice was really something he needed to let go if they wanted to secure a better world in the future)
So the worry stone was given as a joke, but Angela had used it far more times than she would ever admit to him if they ever crossed paths again. She focused on the smooth texture of the stone and drowned out the conversation, her mind slowly departing. At some point she must have adopted a glazed look that was misinterpreted as exhaustion by her fellow colleagues. When Patricia asked if she wanted to go and get some rest, she readily agreed.

Sleep sounded much better than the torture of having to sit for one more second listening to obsolete information.

Angela got ready for bed quickly and slipped under her sheets. She pulled up the thin blanket up to her chin, ignoring the mildly stifling warmth. She had grown up sleeping under thick blankets and it felt rather strange to her to not sleep without being all draped up in sheets, so she wouldn’t stop her habit now.

In the silence of the sleeping quarters, disturbed only by the faint whirring of a portable fan, Angela’s mind wandered not for the first time towards thoughts of Fareeha. She had spoken to her privately only another three times, the last being when she snagged her the night before Fareeha and her crew went traversing off to a nearby city. A training camp of some sort that Fareeha had explained. Her superiors wanted her to help lead a combat seminar to counter a certain ‘high profile enemy’ that had been running into as of late, a thorn in HSI’s side so to speak. No other details mentioned due to ‘confidentiality’, Fareeha had explained with that blank slate look she had whenever Angela saw her out with her crew, working with them to recuperate and doing drills in a distance. All stiff muscles, stony gazes and rigid posture.

She much preferred when they talked in private. Fareeha shoulders would relax and her hard, impassive demeanor would morph into something softer, and though reserved, she was always attentive. Now that Angela thought about it, it was less of a conversation and more of Fareeha listening as Angela practically unloaded on her. She would sit and just listen to Angela talk about anything and everything. Anything at all.

Anything Angela wanted to.

That’s why as stiff as the girl was, with her brief comments, crooked shy grins and little tugs of a smile, felt like a godsend to Angela. For the life of her, she couldn’t understand why she never bothered to ask for her contact information. Or even taken Saleh’s when he offered, anything to somehow stay in touch with the woman.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

“Hello?”

Angela turned her head at the sound, expecting a colleague. Instead she saw a young man peeking through her door, a smaller boy next to him clutching his arm. Probably a sprain she guessed from the slight bruising and the way he held his arm.

"Sorry for the intrusion, but my little brother needs help and um... Oh, is this not the medical tent?"

Angela got out of bed, waving off the man's worries and shelving her inner thoughts. She’d figure it out later.

Right now there was a patient.

Lady luck smiled on Angela.
GSM had notified all personnel in Egypt if there were any volunteers to go on a series of missions to help give vaccinations and treatments in more rural parts of Egypt in about three months’ time.

They needed four twenty-person groups and all would be accompanied by an HSI team. As Angela’s eyes flitted over the message she saw that one of the teams would be accompanied by an HSI team led by a certain Captain Fareeha Amari.

Needless to say, Angela volunteered, hand shooting up so fast that Patricia had been startled. Angela didn't even bat an eye at her little yelp. She needed to be chosen first so she could ensure she was in the team on Fareeha's watch.

---------

Fareeha licked her lips and made a small note to buy some chapstick later when her tongue raked over the little flakes of dead and dry skin hanging off her lips. And what should she grab for dinner? Maybe some grilled fish? With pepper or seasoned with a blend of spices? Or perhaps lamb skewers? Her mouth watered at the thought, the image she conjured in her head so vivid that she could practically smell the distinct charred fragrance of grilled lamb. Definitely a glass of sobia though, she hadn’t had that in a while.

So you’re the one who faced the Reaper? Heard he got away though.

Those were the first words she heard when she entered the training grounds. She had rarely went off so far east for work, and this training seminar was by far the longest she had been in the area to work. To top it off she was also tasked to deal with HSI personnel other than her own team. Or rather, command them around. Needless-to-say, it had started poorly, with people half-listening or unmotivated to listen to Fareeha, a random captain from up north that they knew nothing about.

When Captain Kirabo stepped into the training grounds Fareeha held back a growl of frustration. He had been polite with his words, greeting her respectfully and shaking Fareeha’s extended hand almost immediately upon entering. It was all false pleasanty though, Fareeha could feel the disinterested air pouring from him and the skepticism in his eyes at listening to her words. And she wasn’t the only one, considering the mood seemed to sour further from his actions, his indifferent demeanor causing a chain reaction of the worst kind. The other HSI members of the east division somehow became even less open to any of her suggestions. She would learn later that Kirabo had come into the region just two years back, transferring from Ganda, but at that moment all Fareeha could see was that he was ‘the man’ around this area and they were all following his lead. After repeating her orders for a third time and seeing yet again half-assed attempts at the fighting strategies she was attempting to teach she knew exactly what to do.

She challenged Kirabo loudly to a friendly spar in front of the class.

She was going to beat his ass.

After a grueling fifteen minutes Fareeha held a shaky hand up in triumph as the other laid on her thigh to help keep her from falling. Her hair was flattened and breathing hurt, but nothing could stop the victorious grin on her face. When Kirabo, after catching his own breath and releasing a string of curses at the mistake he made at the last twenty seconds that cost him, looked up at her and asked what she as the victor would want, she smirked, still riding high on her win.

Nothing. I already got what I wanted.

He had wheezed out a laugh before coughing and clutching the side of his stomach. When he recovered, he pushed up to a sitting position. He looked at her as if she had taken a few too much
hard knocks to the head.

*Oh yea? And what is it you got?*

She offered a hand to him, pulling him up with a grunt, before gesturing around at the cheering crowd.

*Respect.*

The training seminar went much more smoothly after that and a strange light-hearted rivalry blossomed between her and Kirabo, Hassan and Saleh joining in for the fun of it. They would race to the dining hall, spar a couple dozen more times and would compete in silly competitions. Arm wrestling, track times, push up contest to something as absurd as who could finish a crossword puzzle faster. He would also become her strongest support during the program, helping her to keep the focus of the group that these were specific Reaper counter-measures they were learning, and invigorating spirits when they were low. By the end of the two months, there was a pang in her heart as she waved goodbye to all that had gathered at the camp and promised Kirabo she’d stay with him and his family if she ever swung by the region again.

It was back to reality after, flying back to the capital and taking on a completely unrelated job the very next day. In a matter of weeks, all thoughts of the Reaper had been shafted when Emirhan called her into his office.

*We got called to help guard the cargo we transported to Deir Al Hagar.*

Fareeha could still hear Emirhan’s voice in her head as she readjusted her loosened hand wraps, re-bandaging her hands. She worked instinctually, having done them a million times, pulling the bandage tight through her fingers and around her wrists before ensuring it was clipped on properly. She flexed her hand and grinned. There was something about the firm and tight binds of hand wraps that Fareeha received a warm comfort in.

*They would like it if you wouldn’t mind being re-stationed there.*

She worked the punching bag. Left hook, right hook, a cross jab, a straight punch. Her footwork became sharper and she focused on controlling her breathing. In and out. In and out. In when retracting, out when slamming her fist out onto the body bag. She could feel her heart beat, the quick thuds pulsing straight to her temple that rose in tandem to her quickening pace. She felt energized with every clean pop of her fist striking the bag when she hit it just right.

*They were impressed by your work. Especially on y’know... The Reaper situation.*

She remembers glowing at his words, glad to be acknowledged. Just because she wasn’t in it for the glory didn’t mean it didn’t feel damn good for her work to be recognized.

She was also grateful that her crew got out safe and was impressed with their work. Sure their Raptora suits were damaged and there were some serious injuries like broken bones and torn ligaments, but they had succeeded. Not one piece of cargo missing. She did a succession of small combinations on the bag, her shadowboxing taken up a notch as she started to also practice more complex evasions and counter jabs.

*If you sign up they’ll tell you what exactly they’re hiding. You do have to sign a confidential agreement though.*

She picked up her pace, placing varied combinations on the bag, this time adding some low and high kicks to the mix. She did want to know. Especially those large four crates in particular. What was in
there? Even now, two months after, her thoughts still flit to an image of those crates from time to
time. They were daunting. They were dangerous. Talon had sent an alarmingly large squad to
attempt to haul them away. And if nothing else, it was always better to know more. To be in the
loop.

But they just want you.

She punched and punched and punched the bag. Her arms were screaming as she landed a rapid
barrage on the bag, then just as she was about to gas out, she dropped her guard and swiveled her
body to land a hard round house kick. The bag went swinging and Fareeha thrust her arms out to
still it, grasping the bag with unsteady hands, before dropping and shaking her arms and leg. She
could feel the very tips of herself trembling from exhaustion. She staggered towards her water bottle
and downed the liquid in seconds, a little hum of appreciation escaping her. Water always tasted so
good after a work-out, no matter what Hassan said. He may swear to the benefits of energy drinks,
but to Fareeha they never failed to feel cloying and far too sweet in her mouth after a proper
workout.

You’ll be captain of the new squad. They agreed.

Fareeha huffed and gritted her teeth. She didn’t want a new squad, she loved her crew. She enjoyed
hearing snarky remarks by Summeye, the dry one-liners from Bilal, lame jokes Hassan cracked on
the daily and even witnessing the “will they or won’t they” dance Neisa and Tariq had. She was still
sure that they’d be together before the end of November.

Just think about it.

---------

Angela was chatting amicably with all her new peers, eager to break the ice and exchange medical
knowledge. She was at first heavily invested in the conversation, learning about medical
breakthroughs and advances she hadn’t come across on (and Angela hoped that this time no outdated
information was being spread). However, just as Calvin had been in the midst of explaining a major
breakthrough in treating spinal cord injuries, two convoy vehicles with Helix International logos
plastered on the side arrived.

As the security personnel exited the vehicle, Angela scanned the crowd, hoping to see a certain
captain in the mix. At her distance though, it was difficult to tell who was who.

“-a bit overkill, but I guess. Don’t you think Dr. Mueller?”

Angela whipped her head back and saw Calvin looking at her, “Hmm?”

He pointed at the Helix Security members holding rifles and dressed in tactical gear. “Them. That’s a
little much don’t you think? We’re not going to war for goodness sake.”

At least they’re not wearing their Raptora suit, Angela mused remembering what devastating
monstrosities those suits looked like. They were a sight to see and Angela was sure the only
pauldrons to ever rival the ones on the Raptora suits were those of Reinhardt's. They were also a pain
to dismantle, each plate of armor groaning as they pulled it off, and some parts were dented to the
point where they had to be forcibly wrenched off with tools. They were also heavy, with even the
slimmest plates being astonishingly hefty despite its thin appearance.

“Bet they wish we’d run into trouble.” Calvin muttered under his breath, crossing his arms.

Angela frowned at that remark. As much as she didn’t like needing armed bodyguards either they
were an unfortunate necessity at times and it would do no good to have conflict right from the get-go.

“Be nice. We may not be going to war, but we will be traversing through more conflict-prone areas. Plus, we don’t need tensions running high, focus on our job which is helping people.”

Calvin stared at her defiantly for a few seconds, before grumbling and nodding as a murmur of consensus of her words rang through her other colleagues. Personal vendettas and biases had no place in their line of work.

Still, Angela understood Calvin’s wariness.

“I’ve run into this squad before back in the Dakhla Oasis. They seem like good people.” She said, hoping to assuage her new colleague. She turned towards Patricia. “Isn’t that right Patricia?”

Patricia looked at her affronted, as if Angela had just told her that she would be leading a group of terrorists to rain hell upon innocent women and children. Angela stared at her pointedly.

“…Yes. They’re… alright.” The words dragged out of her slowly, face contorted to something close to agony, as if the admission had physically pained her. Angela rolled her eyes at how dramatic Patricia could be before turning back to look at the unconvinced Calvin. Well, she certainly could not blame him after that sort of tortured admission.

“If nothing else,” Angela stressed, "Everyone deserves a chance right? That’s GSM’s slogan anyways.”

He seemed to relent at those words and uncrossed his arms, sighing. “That’s true, and besides, I’ve heard good things about you from Aarush Khatri. You worked with him about seven months ago in Ethiopia right?”

She remembered him. Dr. Khatri was an older man with a bushy beard and a fiery temper who had no patience for political games. Once he had practically thrown out a councilman who had come by for chat, furiously spouting that the man was wasting his time. That had landed them into hot water when he returned threatening to kick them all out of the country. Luckily the man’s anger had cooled before he had actually done anything other than throw words at them.

“He sang praises about you, or at least as close to singing praises as such an irritable man would, so I’ll trust your word for now and be civil.”

She nodded at his words before excusing herself and moved herself to where the security members were hanging around. They were huddled around one of the GSM supervisors who was pointing at a map, showing them where their group needed to go. From where she was standing, she could only see the faces of some of the members and recognized Hassan, Youssef, and Bilal. Hassan’s head turned suddenly and met her gaze.

He let out a bellowing laugh, “If it isn’t Dr. Veronica! I didn’t know we were going to protect you.”

All the security members whipped around to look at her.

“Dr. Veronica!” Saleh yelled as he bounded over her, coming in close. “How’ve you been?”

“I’ve been well Saleh.” She replied before leaning to one side to see past him, “And it seems your leg healed quite nicely, hasn’t it Youssef?”

Youssef grinned from where he stood and started to hop towards her on his formerly broken leg. “Yes ma’am. It’s all thanks to you. See?” he said as he landed in front of her and slapped it twice for
“Good. As. New.”

Saleh came back in front of her line of vision shoving Youssef with his back. “Aaanyways, look here Dr. Veronica. Check it.” He said, smug smile on his face as stuck a thumb to his chest, gesturing at a badge.

She cocked her head, confused, wasn’t that?

“I am the captain now.” He said in a decent Somali accent. “Impressive huh?”

Oh.

Angela’s stomach dropped.

Seeing Saleh’s excited face though, Angela remembered to tack on a smile and congratulated Saleh who positively beamed at her words. She couldn’t let him know she was disappointed. Right now she was Dr. Veronica Mueller who had come by just to say hi. Not Angela Ziegler who had come by hoping to see Fareeha Amari for more personal reasons.

“What happened to Captain Amari?” she asked, a little tinge of sadness in her voice.

A shadow loomed over her. “She’s right here.”

Angela jolted and whipped around to look at Fareeha. Fareeha who had already moved from behind her to beside her, allowing her to see her face, that currently looked thoroughly unamused.

“I’ve been trying to find that for the last ten minutes, Saleh.”

He stuck out his tongue at her. “Whatever, like I just told Dr. Veronica, I am the captain now, because youuu,” He drawled as he pointed at her sassily, waving his finger around dramatically, “are an almost-leaver, almost-betrayer, and basically an almost-abandoner.”

Mock serious nods came from the rest of her group. A sharp look from Fareeha stopped their antics. Her gaze trained back on Saleh. She extended her hand out.

“Saleh. Badge.” She said in a low warning tone.

He huffed, unclipped the badge and held it out for her. She grabbed it and pinned it onto her own combat vest swiftly. Fareeha then tilted her head to her left, at where another supervisor was standing.

“You guys need to go and get debriefed.” She quickly continued when they opened their mouths to protest. “Not about our route, about conduct and other important details.”

A collective groan came out from her squad as they trudged to where the supervisor was. Once they all were out of earshot, Fareeha turned to look at her.

“Dr. Ziegler.” She said with a slight nod of her head.

“Fareeha,” Angela winced internally at the high register of her voice and the blatant excitement in it. In hindsight it was laughable for her to even believe that Saleh would have taken over even if Fareeha had left the squad. It would more likely be Hassan or one of the more senior and mature members in her group, which goes to show just how blinded by excitement and the consequent dejection she felt from hearing the ‘news’. Slight concern seeped into Angela as she noticed a subtle tightness in Fareeha’s jaw and a disgruntled look that seemed excessive if it was brought on due to
Saleh’s childish actions. She reached out and squeezed Fareeha's upper arm tentatively. "Is everything okay?"

Fareeha stared at Angela, an unreadable expression on her face. She opened her mouth as if to speak, before shutting it. Fareeha worked her jaw for a moment, before opening it again to speak. "...Nothing you should worry about." She finally said, looking at Angela in the eye. "I will be fine Dr. Ziegler."

Angela nodded, not quite believing her words, but knowing well enough that she shouldn't pry. Angela redirected the conversation. "So... What was that about you being almost betraying your team?"

Fareeha rubbed the back of her neck, looking off to the side as exasperation replaced the conflicted look she wore just seconds ago.

“It's stupid. I got an offer to leave them for a new squad, protecting the goods I was escorting the last time I saw you and I didn't tell them.” A long suffering sigh escaped her, "But Hassan found out about the offer by accident, told the group and now they’ve been ‘punishing’ me in childish ways for the last month for never consulting them about it.”

Angela laced her hands behind her back. “So they’re punishing you just for not telling?"

Fareeha shrugged. “Whatever was in there must be important or at least very dangerous if Talon wanted to get their hands on it. My attachment to my team is secondary to that of the safety of the world.”

And now Angela was perplexed, if that was how Fareeha felt then...

“What changed your mind?”

"It... it just felt right to stay... but perhaps that wasn't the right choice.” she said, voice trailing off near the end. Her expression had become grim and troubled in a way that Angela saw too often in many of her peers when duty and desire were not in sync and they felt like they were never doing quite enough. Fareeha clenched and unclenched her hands repeatedly as she went further down her negative rabbit hole.

Angela frowned. Enough was enough. She bopped Fareeha on her nose.

The woman flinched from the action, jolted out of her musings, eyes wide in disbelief as she turned to look at Angela once more, seemingly unable to comprehend what Angela had done. Angela simply tutted, "Don't look as if it's so bad to do what you want time to time. I for one am really happy you're here."

"You are? And why is that doctor?” Fareeha said, voice tinged with confusion and curiosity.

Angela winked at Fareeha, who became a few shades darker at that. Angela felt giddy at both the innocent reaction and the fact that she was effectively distracting Fareeha. The conflicted expression
had completely vanished from her face. "Now I got a friend who I can gossip with and talk to on boring nights."

"Gossip?" Fareeha said incredulously with a half-smile. "And just how many boring nights will there be on this trip doctor?"

"None." she said, giving Fareeha another bop to the nose. "If you swing by during off hours and hang out with me. There's no secret motive here, like..." her voice became a soft whisper, "Being able to talk as Angela Ziegler or anything."

Fareeha shook her head chuckling, then nodding a couple times.

"Alright. Alright." Fareeha said in a mock defeated tone. "Anything you need doctor, but..." a glint entered her eye, "I have one request back for you."

Angela raised a brow, wondering what Fareeha would want back in return. She moved forward in front of her, extending a gloved hand in front of her.

Angela stared at the hand and then back at Fareeha, whose gaze had turned serious, the faint smile that was playing on her lips gone. Instead her mouth had formed a thin line that drew down slightly at the corners.

"Well, Dr. Ziegler?" she said, her voice clipped and flat. Angela looked at her in confusion, waiting for Fareeha to continue. She didn't and just raised an eyebrow, shaking her extended hand expectantly, twiddling her fingers for good measure. Angela stared back, not quite wanting to believe the logical leap her mind was making as to what Fareeha was hinting at. After what seemed like a long stretch of time, but was probably no more than a few seconds Fareeha continued once more.

"Dr. Ziegler," She rumbled out, "Must I spell it out for you?"

Angela swallowed audibly.

"Will. You." Fareeha continued slowly, punctuating every word. Angela worried her bottom lip as she waited for the rest of the demand. "...place your security in my hands?"

The stoic façade Fareeha had adopted was instantly broken by the mirth in her eyes when she finished her sentence. Angela looked dumbly at Fareeha, the words taking a few moments to sink in before she shoved her lightly on her shoulder.

"Mein Gott, Fareeha! I was worried for a second you were asking for hush money." she sputtered as Fareeha chuckled, now sporting a wild grin, "And that's not a real request, you're already our security detail!"

"Doesn't mean that you'll actually trust me, so don't dodge the question." Fareeha retorted, grin still intact. She twiddled the fingers of her still outstretched hand once more. "Will you? Will you place your security in my hands?"

Angela huffed and shook her head good naturedly at the silly joke and even sillier request, before placing her hand in Fareeha's still outstretched one.

"Of course."
I’m back home now!

Not the happiest with this chapter, but it’s essentially a transition chapter I needed to get out to move us finally to where it makes sense that they see each other often (and I haven't updated in two weeks like shiiit)

Next chapter will be out in a couple days, less than a week if nothing else. And Teyhy, you're so right. Put in a rush inclusion here, but if I ever do other flashbacks expect to see old Torb in them.
The convoy vehicle jostled as it powered through the broken roads towards the first village. Despite the constant bumps, the medics were talking with one another happily, faces relaxed, words broken by bits of laughter and the usual pauses that occurred when people were just acquainted. A few of them huddled around one medic, all peering to look at a square piece of paper – a photograph Fareeha assumes from the familiar shape and gleam of photo paper. Wife, daughter, significant other, Fareeha wasn’t sure, but his obvious glee and proud tone rang clear the importance of whoever was pictured there.

Fareeha leaned forward and pushed the flap open to peer out, eyes lazily dragging across the large expanse of sand and the sight of the other convoy vehicles trailing behind them. She nodded once to herself and settled back down, satisfied that nothing seemed to be amiss. Fareeha started to drum her fingers on her rifle to pass the time as her ears picked up the trail-ends of one of the many conversations going on amongst the medics. Her fingers stilled when she heard a familiar buzz from her radio and she clicked the speaker mic on her vest strap.

“This is Captain Amari.”

Menna’s voice crackled out, “I’m up front with GSM supervisor Dr. Tahia Sadat. She says we will be at the village in roughly half an hour.”

“Copy that. Amari out.” Fareeha said, clicking off the mic and turned her head, feeling someone’s stare on her. It was one of the doctors, face drawn up into a pensive look that was mixed in with a glint of something other. She couldn’t discern exactly what, though. When he kept staring and Fareeha realized he would not start speaking anytime soon, she wet her lips and opened her mouth instead, deciding to start the conversation herself.

“Is something wrong, doctor?”

The man fumbled, finally registering that he was being rude with his blatant staring. Fareeha watched as he looked down, wringing his hands, mumbled apologies coming out of him. Fareeha resisted the urge to raise a brow and kept her face schooled as she waited for him to regain his composure and finally say whatever he wanted to say.

“Doctor?” she said softly, hoping to coax it out of the man when his incessant apologies seemed to have no end. Her gentle inquiry made him stop and meet her gaze once again.

“Captain Amari, are you…” his eyes danced once more with what Fareeha finally discerned was restrained excitement, “Are you Ana Amari’s daughter?”

Fareeha stilled at his words, tensing up a fraction before catching herself. She gave a polite nod. “Yes. I’m the daughter of -that- Ana Amari.”

Murmurs started to emerge from the rest of the doctors from her admission. The few faces that had first looked at her with weariness and trepidation had changed to excitement and enthrallment. The transformation of their demeanor made her feel as if she had been cursed beast from fairy tales whose spell had just been broken and now appeared in front of them as a long-gone hero from myths and legends.
And perhaps she was. To them at least.

A second coming of the great Ana Amari.

*I'm so sorry for your loss. Your mother seemed like a wonderful person.*

*I remember how charming she was whenever I saw her on television!*

*The resemblance is uncanny, but I thought no way as you're a little different... N-not that I mean anything by it though!!*

*Ignore him, that's incredible. Got any good stories about your mother?*

She nodded mechanically and regaled some stories of her mother, the same ones she’s told people time and time again. Stories perfected with time; not too bloody, not too grim, but still intriguing enough to satiate. She had found that 3-4 stories were a sweet spot, any less or any more and people tended to hound her for more. The hard edge in her voice when she delivered the stories helped too.

Most would understand from her tone that it was a touchy subject. Most also assumed it was because her mother was presumably dead and here they are dredging up old wounds from the supposed loss.

She never bothered to correct them.

“My colleague,” she said abruptly, when for some reason this time around the questions would just not stop. She ignored the little jump the medics did at her loud register. “My colleague just informed me that we will be arriving at the first village in fifteen minutes.” She pointed at the small window slit that peered into the front of the vehicle where the driver sat and beyond. “You can see a little sliver of it already.”

The doctors started to take turns looking at through the slot and their eased conversations turned to discussions of plans of action. They began rifling through their bags, handing pamphlets and notes to one another, thoughts of Ana Amari long forgotten.

And Fareeha breathed a sigh of relief.

________________

There was little for them to do in the first village. They had been expecting a slew of diseased people who needed urgent and constant care from what the description of the mission entailed that they might possibly face. The moment they arrived they quickly set up their medical facilities as supervisors Dr. Sadat and Dr. Hisham conversed with the village chief that had greeted them. Angela and the others were prepared for the worst, but all that came were people in need of the basic annual shots to prevent the most common infectious diseases in the area, or a simple routine checkup.

It was an unexpected and wonderful surprise.

At the rate that they were working through the lines that formed outside their tents, they would be out of this village in three more days. Angela should have been over the moon with how things were coming together.

And she was. Mostly.

Though she could not find fault in the speed that they were working, nor the good fortune of the village for having not been plagued by an outbreak of a virus, she was having an issue with how things were somehow not coming together in their teams. Or specifically, between some of her
And not the kind that Angela had anticipated, or from who specifically. In a surprising turn of events, it was not her more jaded, anti-war colleagues that were the issue. Rather, the problem lied with those that obviously have never worked in the field, or at least in areas that were potentially high-risk enough to warrant a security personnel with rifles slung on their backs and a myriad of firearms and weaponry attached to their belts. She saw the way that one fellow doctor –Carrine, transferring from Seychelles of all places- in her little five-man team was not working optimally. Angela heard the shakiness of her voice when she talked -or rather squeaked out- in response to other people’s questions, the tenseness in her shoulders and the way her eyes would flit constantly to the HSI personnel with fear in her eyes.

Angela paid no mind at first, believing she would adjust soon. Perhaps in two or three days’ time. However, when that time frame went by and she still exhibited the same unease, Angela grew worried. Carrine was greener than she had realized and after observing her other colleagues at dinner, she recognized that Carrine was not the only one who was having trouble adjusting to being under the watchful eyes of heavily armed men and women.

This would be a problem. Not now in this quiet village where things were running smoothly, and maybe not the next village they hit. Perhaps not for some time. Maybe they’ll somehow even hit a lucky streak of villages where trouble was nowhere to be found. Where the majority of citizens were in relatively good health. Where all citizens needed from them were some basic shots. Where the growing tension would be a non-issue.

But that was most improbable.

The more likely scenario was that they would run into trouble soon, and major trouble considering that was exactly what they had signed up for. To help a village hit by disaster or an outbreak of some sort, where it was of the essence that they were all working optimally.

Angela sighed not for the first time today.

It was a difficult problem to fix as neither party had done anything wrong per say.

Her colleagues couldn’t help how they felt and Fareeha and her team were acting as any normal security company would in these kind of situations. Polite, yet taciturn. Respectful, but imposing. Projecting an unapproachable air to keep the GSM medics safe as a pre-emptive measure to stop any civilians in line from entertaining the mere thought of becoming hostile from impatience or desperation.

Although perhaps to an unnecessary degree.

Given the situation, Angela felt that Fareeha was a little too tightly wounded up. There was tenseness that was practically rolling off her shoulders that seemed at odds with the status at this village. There was no discernable danger present that warranted such intimidating diligence.

In fact, Angela could not smell a whiff of danger.

And Angela could sense danger. Overwatch made sure of that.

So why did Fareeha and her crew remind her of a pack of guard dogs that belonged to the boss of a criminal empire, silently waiting for the cue to bite? Why did they seem so on edge?

Angela discretely tugged at Fareeha’s sleeve.
If Fareeha had felt it, she made no gesture to show it.

Angela tugged at her sleeve once again. This time with more force.

This time Fareeha reacted, tilting her head a little to stare at Angela through her shades with one eyebrow raised.

“Loosen up.” she whispered as she took out another syringe from a box, keeping her focus in front of her. A professional smile still on her face to disguise to her colleagues that anything was wrong. When she snuck a glance at Fareeha she was met with a startlingly dead gaze.

Angela brows raised up. This was new. Granted she hadn’t talked to Fareeha since the first day, pulled away by her new colleagues for ‘team-bonding’ at every free hour, but she had expected at least the usual hint of warmth in her eyes that she had seen the other times she had conversed with the woman. A part of Angela was unsettled by the expression. The other part irritated, remembering how well conversations with Jack had gone whenever he adopted a similar look.

“I cannot. My job is your security.” Fareeha’s tone was flat.

Angela breathed deeply through her nose to control the urge to smack the stoic girl in her face. “At least put the rifle down.” She said through clenched teeth. There was no need for Fareeha to have it poised and ready to shoot.

The woman made no move to remove her hands from her rifle.

“Fareeha, get your hands off your rifle.” She hissed as her eyes darted at her colleagues, hoping they wouldn’t hear her demands. It was unlike Veronica Mueller to be so domineering.

Again, Fareeha made no move, staring blankly into the distance, hands still gripping her rifle.

“Fareeha.”

“My job is your security.” She repeated mechanically.

“But-”

Fareeha cut her off, eyes blazing. “But nothing. The rifle stays. My job is your security. You said you’d trust me. We shook on it. Remember?”

Fareeha looked away once more when she finished, eyes scanning the area once more.

Her eyes narrowed at the hard edge Fareeha’s words carried and Angela had to reign in a flash of anger that spiked in her from it. Veronica wasn’t a fighter and Angela wasn’t a seventeen-year-old girl anymore. She was a mature adult that had dallied with politicians countless times, able to stay polite amongst even the worst of individuals. And Fareeha was not among the worst, though she was being… difficult right now.

She sent a well-practiced smile at her teammates who had looked up at the slight commotion and proceeded to begin working again, feigning normalcy. Once the embers of her spike of white hot rage at the dismissiveness Fareeha displayed died and her colleagues’ attentions were rooted back at their jobs, Angela pursed her lips. They had been laughing when they shook hands and Angela had erroneously believed Fareeha’s request to have been nothing more than a silly joke.

Clearly she was mistaken.
Fareeha sighed as she took another bite of her meatball sandwich. She could feel how Angela was practically boring holes into the back of her head.

It seems the good doctor was not happy with her.

She stood up slowly, shaking the almost empty jug of water at her teammates.

“I’ll get this refilled.”

She shot a look at Angela, silently expressing to her to follow suit to the water cooler. When she arrived at the water station she knelt down to fill the jug. When the jug was half-way filled, she heard soft steps behind her and a lean shadow stooped over her crouched frame. Fareeha kept her hand pressed on the button of the water cooler, not bothering to turn around.

“Doctor.”

“Captain.” Angela’s voice was tight and clipped. She turned her body slightly to cock her head up at the doctor, whose steely blue eyes betrayed her otherwise serene look. Evidently her assessment that she was not in the doctor's good graces was correct.

“We need to talk. Please meet me at medical bay on the west end at half past nine.”

Her voice was polite, but Fareeha wasn’t a fool and could hear the underlying firmness that this wasn’t so much a request as a demand.

“Of course doctor.” Fareeha calmly replied back. She extended her hand out. “Let me refill that for you as well.”

Angela handed her the jug, her face now schooled to a neutral look, keeping her hands out in front of her to take back the jug once it had been filled. Fareeha simply stood up, jug still in tow and walked past the doctor.

“I’ll carry it to your table doctor.”

Fareeha ignored the doctor’s whispered protests as she continued forward to Angela’s table, jug of water in hand. Nearing her table, Fareeha was met with similar looks of apprehension she witnessed in the convoy vehicle couple days prior. She set the jug down gently, overlooking the way the medics avoided her gaze and stared blankly at those that held hers defiantly.

“Thank you Captain.” Angela’s voice shattered the growing silence. A mumble of what seemed to be forced appreciation sounded out of the other medics. She nodded and walked back.

Definitely something wrong.

Finishing up her rounds, Fareeha walked briskly towards the medical bay. She was running a little late and was intent in shortening her tardiness to the least number of minutes as possible without attracting attention.

It was in her best interests to not agitate the irate doctor any more than she already was.

Pushing the entrance flap open she saw Angela already comfortable, a cup of tea in her hand looking none too pleased. She opened her mouth to apologize, but shut it when Angela raised a hand to
silence her and then gesture to the seat adjacent to her. She obeyed and made a beeline to the chair, adjusting it slightly before promptly sitting down.

“Good evening, Dr. Ziegler.”

The doctor did not respond and simply stared at Fareeha contemplatively. Fareeha stared back. After a minute Fareeha started clenching and unclenching her toes. Steel toed boots did wonders to hide her nervous tick, though it was a little less satisfying now with prosthetic feet and she felt the inclination to drum her fingers instead.

“Dr. Ziegler?” Fareeha repeated. This time she garnered a response.

“You’re too scary Fareeha, I need you to tone it down a notch. And by a notch, I mean a couple of notches.” Angela elaborated, “Maybe in your past jobs your tactics worked well, but not here. Not this time.”

“I’ve protected people before.” Fareeha replied, believing that Angela was insinuating that she had only guarded cargo before.

“No, I know Fareeha. I know.” She pursed her lips for a moment then continued on, “I’m not saying you have actually done anything wrong, but for the sake of the success of this mission I… No, the GSM medics as a whole, need you to tone it down.”

“No.”

A tired smile crossed Angela’s face. “Fareeha, I’m not asking you to throw caution out the wind and suggest you go without the rifles or any sort of weaponry. I’m asking you to be a less frosty and-”

“I understand what you're saying.” Her voice gruff as she cut her off. She wasn't a child. "You want me to change my demeanor. I will not. It's my job.”

The smile dropped off Angela’s face, and instead peered at her with confusion written all over her face. “Fareeha, I’m asking for a just a little bit of give…” Concern entered her eyes, “What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing.” She said simply, jaw set. She downed the rest of her drink and rose up. “If that is all, I will go now. Goodnight, Dr. Ziegler.”

“Fareeha? Wait!”

Fareeha ignored her and started to walk towards the entrance of the medical tent.

“Come back here, Fareeha.”

She kept walking, hand outstretched to pull the entrance drape to the side.

“Captain Amari.”

Fareeha halted at the use of her title and the coolness of the tone. She turned around to meet Angela’s gaze.

A mistake.

She felt rooted to the spot as Angela rose and sauntered to Fareeha slowly.

Fareeha had been in the military. She had encountered her fair share of angered superiors, mostly
during her earlier years, when she was brash and petulant. Not once did she feel terrified, but Angela’s expression shot through to her heart. It wasn’t the usual fare of heated glares and snarls. It was far more insidious to Fareeha, that certain mix of disapproval and disappointment that made Fareeha feel like she was in school all over again being reprimanded by a teacher who actually cared and she actually liked. Fareeha would have preferred the roiling anger she experienced in the military than this. Anger she handled well, disappointment sent a rush of shame into her gut.

As Angela closed the distance she stopped. They stared at each other, tension palpable.

“Why?” Angela asked, so softly that Fareeha barely heard it even in the silence. The sincere concern in her voice made Fareeha buckle and relent.

“…I cannot ‘loosen up’ Angela. Not when it’s a matter of security.” She answered back quietly.

Angela looked at her, pensive look on her face once more.

“Again, I did not ask you to remove your rifles or reduce the amount of people on duty. I know better than to ask that. All I asked was that you be tiny bit more welcoming. Intimidation is important, but even you can see that the lengths you are going to goes too far for this job. Perhaps if you were protecting a president or prime minister, but not doctors on a medical mission. You must know that.” Angela licked her lips before continuing. “Is there something going on that’s stopping you from listening to reason?”

Fareeha had nothing to say to that.

“Does it…” Angela hesitated, “Does it have something to do with why you looked so out of sorts when I first saw you for this mission? Right after your meeting with supervisor Hisham?”

She stiffened.

“…Yes.” She admitted quietly, knowing she had just given herself up.

She stood there, resisting the urge to squirm as Angela stared at her expectantly, clearly waiting for her to divulge more information. She ran her tongue across her teeth. If she could avoid it, she’d prefer not to express exactly what the issue was between her and the supervisor. Hoping that Angela would understand be kind enough to drop it, she shook her head.

“Are you sure you don’t want to elaborate more?” Angela asked in a measured tone.

She nodded. "Yes. It was just a spat, Dr. Ziegler."

The next thing she knew, Angela had grabbed the collar of her shirt and pulled her until she was inches away from her face. Fareeha widened a fraction from the sudden movement and the unexpected ferocity in Angela’s expression.

“Are you telling me,” her voice was icy, sending chills down Fareeha, “the reason for your crabby attitude is all from nothing more than a little spat with Hisham?”

Admittedly, that was a poor choice of words that made Fareeha's unspoken reasons seem trivial at best.

“A lot of our own staff are medics who’ve never been in the field. They’re not used to soldiers and are having a bit of trouble performing optimally with you and your men hovering so close and seeming so dangerous. Is changing your behavior just a fraction for the sake of the mission not more important than your pride?”
Fareeha closed her eyes, the udjat under her eye burned in shame as she comprehended the damage her behavior has caused.

What kind of protector scared the very people they swore to help?

What kind of protector impeded good work?

And from her strong desire to prove Hisham wrong, that she was more than qualified to protect his and Dr. Sadat’s little group of medics, she had accidentally proven his assumptions correct. She was hindering their progress by being overly enthusiastic about her job in all the wrong ways.

It was time to fix this.

“You’re right.” She pursed her lips, face contorting with shame as the ramifications of her actions truly sunk in. “You’re right Dr. Ziegler. I’ve been stupid and I need to fix it.”

She kept her eyes on Angela’s and watched as the doctor’s harsh gaze die out slowly from her admission. Slowly, with trembling hands, the doctor released her shirt.

“I’m sorry.” Fareeha added, her sincerity ringing clear in her voice.

The last of Angela’s will to fight extinguished at that and the doctor seemed to deflate.

“I’m sorry too.” she murmured, smoothing out the wrinkles she made from her grasp. An exasperated sigh escaped from her lips. “You’re lucky I’m a pacifist.”

Fareeha nodded dumbly, unsure what to say, biting back the desire to comment on the fact that the doctor had just forcefully pulled her closer by the collar of her shirt just seconds ago.

“I’m sorry.” Fareeha repeated again, before she went rigid as Angela’s hand found its way to hers and squeezed it. She looked down at that before flitting back up to be greeted with the sight of a tired, but supportive smile.

She liked that look much more on Angela.

“Don’t look so grim now, you’re going to make things better right?”

Fareeha nodded. “Of course. I will try – no, I will be – less intimidating.” Angela’s smile turned more sincere at her response, looking at her with an appreciative look that made Fareeha go stupid and raise the stakes. “Maybe I can make this problem go away in a day.”

“Fareeha, that’s near impossible. It would take at least three days.” She said with a roll of her eyes.

“Three days? What if I could fix it in three days?” Fareeha rushed out. “Wouldn’t that be something?”

“Well, yes. Yes it would.”

“And you’d like that?” Fareeha questioned, determination now burning in her.

Her smile had turned amused. “Yes, I would.”

“Then I’ll fix it in three days.”

Angela shook her head, giggling. “You’re being silly again... But you know, for some reason, a part of me believes you Fareeha.” The corners of her lips twitched up. “So don’t let me down?”
Fareeha squeezed Angela's hand back. “You have my word.”

And Fareeha turned away after that, untangling their hands, unable to take the delightful smile the doctor sent her way.

________________

Despite her big words, Fareeha actually didn’t have a clue where to start.

Fareeha had thought about it for a few hours and nothing. She had been unable to conjure any effective nor viable plan. Fareeha threw off her covers and put on her boots to go walking outside. Perhaps some fresh air would do the trick.

Or perhaps a certain someone could help.

Fareeha went over to where Hassan was standing, guarding the supply truck and dragged him off to the side. She held him firmly, ignoring the way he struggled ferociously under her grip.


She felt the full force of his incredulous stare drilling the side of her head. “I’m sorry, what?” he choked out. He went to stand in front of her, gaping a little. “Could you repeat that captain?”

He raised a finger up. “Alright, first of all, by not doing that.” He paused dramatically, finger hanging in the air, “Second of all, what’s this all about?”

Well, crap. Hassan had that face he had when he wouldn’t let an issue go. Now she had to tell him or he’d relentlessly ask her for hours on end until finally she would relent. Fareeha counted to ten in her mind as a shit-eating grin graced itself onto Hassan’s face when she explained the situation, shoulders shaking as he laughed unabashedly.

“Man, oh man. Is that all? That’s what got you all worked up?” He wheezed out as his chortle faded. He wiped a tear from his eye, before slinging an arm around her. He flashed her a sincere smile. “Don’t worry, I got just the plan.” He clicked his speaker mic with his other hand. “Goooood morning my little ones. Wakey wakey if you were asleepy. This is your handsome vice-captain speaking, please rendezvous at the supply trucks.”

“It’s one in the morning.” Tariq groaned out.

Bilal’s voice crackled through. “Hassan. You know captain doesn’t like it when you use the channel
for stupid shit.”

“And why you bothering all of us?” Kadir’s voice rang out quickly after, heavy with sleep. “Only bother people on shift at least. The rest of us need to sleep.”

“Agreed. Fuck the right off Hass.” Neisa radioed in and Fareeha snorted at the usually polite girl’s profanity.

“Oi, we don’t want to be bothered either. How you became vice-captain is unbelievable.” Summeye muttered out grumpily. Murmurs of agreement followed.

Fareeha smirked at Hassan’s disgruntled expression.

“The disrespect of the people on this team.” He muttered as looked at her. “Help me out here captain.”

“Listen to your vice-captain for once. Come group up at the supply trucks as soon as possible.”

Her eye twitched. “That’s a stupid plan.”

Hassan crossed his arms, “It’s the only way cap. Take it from those of us who have a thriving social life in this group.” He jabbed his thumb at Saleh, Summeye, Kadir and Menna who all nodded in agreement, looking absolutely tickled at the turn of events. He sauntered over to where she and her other more reserved teammates sat, leaning his face close to hers. “You know in your hearts of hearts this would work. And it’s oh so feasible as well, considering how we lucked out with the ‘resources’ in this village.” He drawled out.

“There has to be another way.” She said plaintively, crossing her arms and jutting her chin up in defiance.

“But this is the fastest way. And you’re all about efficiency right?”

She looked back and forth between her grinning teammates and the hopeful looks of her teammates who shared her apprehension and distaste of the plan. Her mind flashed to the events of the last few days, the trepidation the medics and civilians looked at them with, along with the brash claim she had said to Angela just a couple hours prior.

Fareeha felt hands cup her face and turn her back to look at Hassan. Hassan who was towering in front of her, grin grown impossibly larger as he leered at her.

“Is our captain going to let something as silly as pride get in the way of her duty?”

It was a bait and she knew it. All of her teammates on her side knew it. Tariq had even grasped her shoulder to try and help her collect herself. She swatted the hand away though, already flaring from Hassan’s accusation. She rose up to her full stature, standing toe to toe, a snarl on her face. She heard Mahmoud utter a small gasp of horror and ignored the way that Nisa pulled her hijab over her eyes in the corner of her eye and groaned.

She mentally apologized to them before uttering her next words.

“Fine. Let’s do it.”
What kind of stupid plan has Hassan cooked up? Find out on the next episode!

(On a side note I try to get all my chapters in between 3-5k. Idk how this one went from being closer to 3k to closer to 5k lmao.)
At an hour that most residents were still in their beds sound asleep, Angela was bumbling through the streets with her colleagues. A large yawn ripped out of her, practically unhinging her jaw, as they continued their walk to the main medical station for a general meeting. She didn't bother to cover her mouth, far too groggy to spare a single thought to her appearance. Angela was not a morning person and never has been. As a child she remembers the incessant shaking her parents had to conduct every morning to get her to wake and once she hit puberty, she would only turn into her sunny self after at least 2 cups of strong coffee. Her attachment to caffeine only grew with her age, fueled by endless nights hunched over books, performing surgeries that lasted hours on end, and pushing her body to the limits in pursuit of knowledge. Now in her late thirties, ambition to save lives still burning as hard as it did when she was a prepubescent child who had just lost her parents, the substance had essentially became her life blood and she drank copious amounts of it to battle fatigue and give her that extra shot of energy to work.

As they neared the station they found that the other medics had gathered in a crowd in front of them. That in itself was not too strange -they all had to attend the general meetings- but the ruckus they were making was. Audible clicks of shutters going off and spurts of laughter were not the norm for these meetings.

“What in the world?” Angela heard Patricia mutter next to her, bobbing her head left and right trying to catch a glimpse of whatever had caught the attention of their peers. She then turned to look at Angela. “Did we miss something on the agenda Veronica?”

Angela shook her head, just as perplexed. “Not to my knowledge Patricia.”

She turned to look at the other members that had walked with them and saw equally puzzled looks. As another chorus of laughter sprung out, curiosity got the better of her. She started to make her way towards the crowd, intent to get to the bottom of this. Her colleagues followed suit behind her, just as eager. She tapped the shoulder of another medic who was at the edge of the crowd. He turned around and laughed at the confusion on her and her group’s faces. Angela opened her mouth to ask for clarification when she felt a hand curl around her fingers. She peered down and was treated to the sight of one of the young girls she had treated the day before.

“You have to see this.” The girl whispered excitedly as she led Angela by the hand through the crowd. Angela allowed herself to be dragged, apologies tumbling her mouth as she bumped into many other people along the way. The apologies were half-hearted however as Angela was more focused on the fact that the girl was awake so early. Perhaps she was usually awake at such an early hour, but the more rational side of her reasoned that she was awakened by all the noise, and if that was the case they should really quiet down. It was far too early to be disturbing the whole village. Angela also hoped her parents were close by - a girl so young shouldn't be out and about alone - but even if they weren't she’d walk the girl back to her home once whatever all this was done. The other members of her little group trailed behind her, Mostafa using his larger stature to help funnel them quickly through.

When she finally reached the front, laughter bubbled out of Angela.

Oh dear.
The HSI crew were all donning equally ridiculously printed golf pants and crazy printed shirts or matching polos. Bright blues, oranges and other hues. Zebra prints, swirls and checkers all around. And that's only what Angela picked up on a quick scan of the scene before her. All in all, it was an assault to the retina. The only reprise from the mismatch colors and wild prints were the tactical vests which thankfully retained its black color.

A few members of the security team were owning it, posing for all the pictures in various stances. Like Hassan who was cackling as he flexed in his leopard print shirt and bedazzled white pants, looking smug. Or Summey who wore a neon bright polo shirt and matching pants, emulating the signature victory stance of famous Olympian from years ago, Usain Bolt. The other more reserved members of the security team simply stood there, waving or standing stock still, a few shades darker than usual from embarrassment. Except Tariq, who had been swept up by Kadir, whose smile looked a far too innocent to be genuine, and was currently being forced to do duo poses with him.

And in the middle of it all, right up front and center, stood Fareeha - esteemed security chief of an elite HSI squadron.

She had her arms crossed and a grouchy look plastered on her face that was comical considering her outfit. It seemed that the only part of Fareeha that had remained the same was her tactical vest, the captain badge pinned to it and the red beret on her head. Her black tee had been replaced with a shimmering gold polo shirt that shone bright against the darkness of the tactical vest over it. Neatly tucked into her combat boots were not the standard issue navy blue cargo pants, but checked brown golf pants that looked like they belonged on a man from the 1970’s.

Angela held a hand to her mouth to stifle her laughter as Fareeha noticed her and somehow looked grumpier than she already did. Yet, try as she might, she could not halt the shaking of her shoulders nor stop her giggling as she continued to look at the fashion disaster that was currently Fareeha.

She wished she had brought her camera with her.

“Dr. Veronica!”

At her alias, Angela finally ripped her eyes away from Fareeha. Saleh was bounding over to her quickly in a checker patterned blue and white golf pants and matching polo shirt.

“We’re all decked out. You like?” he said gleefully as he tipped his white beret at her.

Angela nodded quickly, because she supposed she did. It made her laugh, in any case. She took a quick glance downwards and saw that all his weaponry had also been customized into blue and white to match the rest of him. She looked behind him and saw that they all had colored their weapons to match their outfits. Talk about commitment, Angela thought to herself merrily with a silly grin. If not for the black tactical vest, they would all look like extras in a strange parody of those golfing ads in old lifestyle magazines. Magazine ads that Angela was familiar with only from seeing Jack’s collection of vintage golfing memorabilia.

How he loved golf so much was beyond Angela, she found the sport to be as dull as watching paint dry.

“What’s with all the commo- Oh, wow. Like... Wow.”

Angela turned to see that the two supervisors have barreled their way through the crowd.

Fareeha saluted them, “Good morning Dr. Sadat. Good morning Dr. Hisham.”

To Dr. Sadat’s credit, she only sputtered for a few seconds before responding.
"Good morning to you too?" she shook her head. "I mean-" Dr. Sadat straightened herself, coughing into a closed fist once before placing her hands on her hips. Somewhat stern expression on her face. "Captain Amari. Will you enlighten us as to why you are all dressed like that?"

Dr. Hisham still had a shell-shocked look on his face and was probably wondering if someone had slipped LSD or some other kind of hallucinogenic into his morning coffee.

Fareeha nodded dutifully.

"Of course Dr. Sadat. Our presence was scaring some of the GSM staff and perhaps some civilians as well. This is an issue as it goes directly against the objective of GSM’s mission. As we are supposed to help GSM complete its mission rather than hinder it, we needed to rectify the growing tension and situation and this," She gestured up and down herself, "seemed like the most optimal way to do it… Though I do understand that our tactic is rather," Fareeha paused, eyes flitting to the side in the manner that she did when she was trying to find the right words to say. Her eyes flitted back. "… Unconventional."

"Unconventional? That’s one way to put it." Calvin guffawed from next to her. "Hey Captain!" he shouted.

Fareeha turned her body to look at him directly, as straight-faced as ever. "Dr. Lee."

His smile widened further. "How can you stay looking so serious when you look like that! You’re a riot Captain Amari!" Calvin chortled out. "I don’t suppose I can tempt you to sing some songs from the 70's huh?"

She stared blankly at him and Angela swore she saw her eye twitch.

"...No."

"But I will if you want," Hassan sang from his position. "And so will these jokers. Say hi guys." Summeye waved exuberantly as Saleh back flipped away from Angela and back into position beside Bilal, while Menna made finger gun gestures at the crowd of medics. The more reserved members of Fareeha’s group waved politely once more.

"Scary HSI is gone. Now it’s going to be fun HSI, which is essentially us during after-hours. We haven’t forgotten our job though. It’s just that now we’re gonna keep you safe while keepin the smile on your face." Hassan drawled as he slung an arm around Fareeha, leaning in close. "Ain’t that right captain? We have your blessings right?"

Fareeha huffed. "...Yes."

The medics broke out into laughter at her pained admission.

Angela herself snickered from the clear agony in her eyes.

"Okay, that's enough of that now." Dr. Hisham said, finally recovering from the shock. "Put away those cameras and hurry into the medical tent so we can actually get the general meeting started." he then looked at Fareeha. "And Captain Amari?"

"Sir?"

"You and your crew stay at the back. You're too much of a distraction if you guys sit in front."

Fareeha nodded and saluted him. "Sir, yes sir."
Angela softly muttered words of encouragement and praise as she swabbed the injection point on a little boy’s arm. She took her time, working slowly and gently as she felt the little scared tremors of the boy had yet to subside. She waved off the small apologies from his mother at her son’s behavior, children could not help but be honest with their feelings, and shook the mother’s extended hand before they left the medical stand.

She flashed a kind smile and twiddled her fingers in goodbye as the kid took a small glance back before he moved out of view, mouth open in what Angela assumed was a small thank you.

In and out civilians came and though it was drudge work, Angela couldn’t help but feel invigorated. A few decades ago, the breakthrough in the vaccinations they were administering today occurred. With the injections, the chances of contracting the diseases they combated were decreased to such abysmal levels that Angela had no doubts that the work they did would actually have a long-lasting effect. And for that Angela was grateful, even if she would have preferred to be placed in one of the medical tents to help treat grave injuries 24/7. Her age may be catching up to her, but she was still Dr. Ziegler - a woman with nanites flowing through her veins, bestowing her stamina beyond normal human capabilities. Continual shifts at that station would be a walk in the park for her.

But she kept her mouth shut and did not utter a word of protest. She was Veronica Mueller right now. A sigh escaped Angela as she was once again bitterly reminded of the restrictions of taking on an identity of an average woman with no nanites in her.

Her body moved with practiced grace as she injected one civilian after another, professional attitude only breaking when the occasional child wandered in for vaccinations.

As she finished up with an elderly man a water bottle came into her view.

“Doctor, you need to stay hydrated.”

Fareeha was staring down at her blankly, lips drawn in a thin line. Despite the nonchalance she exuded, the bottle was cold to the touch as she took it. None of the coolers they had stored beverages in them, which meant Fareeha must have come here for her shift with either a bottle of water she bought herself or came one straight from a cooler that HSI personnel must have brought themselves. A kind gesture that betrayed her aloofness either way.

She placed the bottle beside her and thanked Fareeha.

“Of course doctor.” Fareeha’s voice a rich timbre, strong and clear, and Angela picked up on the notes of warmth in it. The brisk woman walked a few paces to the left of Angela, greeting all the others as well and handing them all fresh water. Some of them greeted her still rather coolly, but she saw that many had warmed up quite a fair share. She watched as Fareeha automatically bumped a fist Elijah held up for her with her own, reciprocate a head nod back by Fatuma and a hold a brief conversation spoken in rapid Egyptian-Arabic with Mostafa. At the sight of that Angela felt a small burst of regret for not brushing up more on her Arabic. She could listen and understand most basic conversations, but the speed in which those two were speaking was far too quick for Angela to even dream of comprehending with her skills.

And she wanted to comprehend, especially as Fareeha cracked that small shy smile she had.

Before she could find a way to embed herself in the conversation casually, Fareeha had walked off to her position, eyes now focused on observing the surroundings and one hand resting on her rifle (now
peppered with large white polka-dots) as her other motioned for the next patient to come in.

Angela giggled at the clash of her uptight demeanor with her new apparel. She had expected the subtle efforts of Fareeha. The change from a harsh gaze to a softer blanker look and the newfound pleasantries instead of mechanical nods. Give an inch and become more like after-hours Fareeha, a more agreeable Fareeha, that sort of thing. However, what she did not expect the degree of freedom she allowed her subordinates to stray from the usual professional attitude of private security companies nor the drastic - not too mention, embarrassing - change in clothing to quickly change the negative perception.

Fareeha had surprised her.

It was baffling.

It was absolutely baffling how well the plan was actually working.

Hassan may actually be genius.

(Not that she would ever tell him that. His head was already big enough as it is.)

She peered out to observe the waiting area, waving at a couple of the civilians who made eye contact with her who waved back enthusiastically. A stark difference to yesterday which was peculiar to Fareeha. Her rifle may be dressed in polka-dots now, but it was still the same rifle from yesterday. She spotted Menna out there in the crowd and nodded approvingly. From her gestures and the rapt attention of the crowd, Fareeha assumed she was telling a story of sorts. Regardless of what she was doing, the civilians were relaxed, which in turn rubbed off on the medics when they came wandering in during their turn not looking skittish.

No doubt the other socialites of her group was making the same breakthroughs at their respective stations.

She shook her head at her biased thoughts. No, what they all were doing was working. She would never discount the efforts of her more reserved teammates.

Bilal had gone beyond her expectations and seemed to be actively conversing with patients that were being tended to close by. The man was the only to beat her in stoicism in the group and his activism to turn the tides did wonders. The medics who witnessed his interactions appreciated his valiant effort, recognizing that for him small-talk was an experience equivalent to pulling teeth.

Nisa was standing at the other side of the tent, somehow rocking light pink pants and mint green shirt, smiling shyly at everyone who was coming through. Fareeha believed she looked a little lovelier than usual today, her usually navy blue hijab replaced with one adorned with dainty little patterns and brighter colors that complimented her well. A sentiment she was sure others agreed with, if the blush on Nisa’s face was anything to go by as people pointed at her hijab and undoubtedly paid compliments to it and the girl wearing it.

Fareeha smirked, speculating how Tariq would react to hearing about the many flirtatious advances Nisa was receiving today.

Maybe he’d finally grow a backbone and ask the woman out.

“Whatcha smilin’ about?”
Fareeha turned her head and looked at Dr. Calvin Lee, grinning back at her. Her eyes flicked at Nisa’s frame and back at him. “She’s turning heads.”

Calvin glanced at Nisa and smiled. “Well, she’s gorgeous.”

“And taken.” Fareeha bit out reflexively before correcting herself. “Well, sort of. She’s smitten.”

So practically taken.

Calvin raised a brow. “Really? And who’s the lucky guy?”

“Not my place to say, Dr. Lee.” Fareeha answered casually.

“Calvin is fine. Veronica was right, you ain’t half bad. A little grouchy, but well meaning.”

Fareeha looked at him amused. He was one of the coldest towards her and her crew in the beginning (Patricia being the most and still frosty, but hey, she couldn’t win them all. She could only dream the woman would be alright with her presence by the end of the trip). Now here he was, telling her that she could call him by his first name.

She nodded. “Alright then. Not my place to say, Dr. Calvin.”

Calvin rolled his eyes, “Such a stiff you are. I didn’t say you had to tack on ‘doctor’ in front of my name. Anyways, back to the topic. It doesn’t matter if you don’t tell me.” Calvin said with a shrug, “I already know who the lucky guy is.”

Fareeha looked at him curiously. Tariq and Nisa haven’t been on the same shift if she recalled. Did one pass by when the other was on shift and some obvious pining gazes were had?

Calvin grinned cheekily at her. “Well, sort of.” He said, mirroring her words back. “I know he’s someone who’s not going to be lucky for long.” He said cryptically as he pointed at Nisa. “Check it. Doesn’t it seem like that station is getting a lot more traffic in the form of young, dashing, and most probably available, men?”

Fareeha’s brows raised up high. It did seem like that. The line for that station was now primarily made of young men. And they all seem to be avidly interested in speaking to Nisa.

... She could not wait to see Tariq’s face during dinner when she will ‘casually’ bring this tidbit of information up.

Fareeha hummed to herself as she knelt to fill her water jug. An old tune that she found herself going back to since her school days, though she could no longer remember the words. It was some foreign artist and a song that sounded far too old to have come up on the radio. She guessed she probably heard it in a movie as they do have penchant of utilizing songs from ages ago as background music.

“Hi there.”

Fareeha cocked her head to look behind her. Angela stood with crinkled eyes and a small smile.

A genuine smile.

Good.

“Hello doctor. What can I do for you?” Fareeha said softly before she turned her head back around
to look at her filling jug of water. She didn’t want it to overflow. As the jug was almost completely filled Fareeha heard Angela shift and felt her lean down so, her face now hovering near Fareeha’s, her breath tickling her ear. She was close, close enough that all Fareeha could smell was antiseptic and flowers. Her hand came into her view and with it an empty jug of water as well.

“Would you mind refilling my water jug too?”

Fareeha nodded and placed her now filled jug on the table as she proceeded to fill Angela’s.

“Where’d you get the clothes from?” Angela sounded out from behind her.

Fareeha shrugged, “Some stores in this village. It’s nearing Halloween and seeing how that holiday has somehow become as big as Valentine’s globally, the festivities are celebrated even here. Hassan had found a store that was selling costumes for Halloween and that’s where we got this junk from. Paid a little extra for waking the store owners in the middle of the night to put this plan into effect as quickly as possible. Spray cans to decorate our weaponry were sold there too.”

Spray painting their weapons was probably the most painful ordeal of this plan to Fareeha. She had stared at her weaponry for longer than one should, taking a long, long look at the fine polish of her arsenal.

She was diligent in taking care of her items, cleaning them daily and she liked to think it showed. And in a matter of moments she played a hand in flushing years of upkeep down the drain. A willing hand, to boot (she was not ashamed to admit though that she had let out a small whimper when the first spray of cheap paint touched her rifle). And in an instant, years of diligence was ruined by wide spray of paint from an aerosol can. The paintjob was working though, people were reacting positively to it, and that in itself made the atrocious act worth it.

Somewhat. She still felt a twinge in her heart when she gazed at her now polka-dotted weapons too long.

Fareeha had a fleeting thought as to if that was why that famous Korean gamer turned combatant was decked out in pink. If it was all a ruse to make her more relatable and less intimidating, rather than a simple personal choice. If it was, good on her. Menna had mentioned that the girl was making millions from her fanbase. Though Fareeha would never dream of livestreaming her missions. Or could ever grasp how her fans found pleasure in watching the horrors of war and combat.

The world was a little strange if Fareeha thought too long about it.

Angela’s voice brought her back to reality. “Really? Seems pretty tame for Halloween gear…”

“You sound disappointed.” Fareeha said offhandedly. “Would you rather my crew and I wear animal costumes, fake fangs or the like doctor? Have my crew look like a group of ghouls or painted to look like the possessed undead?” A quick glance at Angela’s flushed face was all the confirmation Fareeha needed. She chuckled and shook her head. “The more interesting costumes are not functional and would get in the way of our ability to work, so those sorts of ideas were shelved. I put my foot down on that.”

An aggravated sigh escaped her as she recalled the chaos of choosing costumes. Many of her exuberant peers wanted to wear costumes that were impractical simply because they liked the look and would not stop pestering her to wear her down. She almost throttled Saleh when he incessantly whined about not being able to be a sexy soda can.

"What even is a sexy soda can? How can soda be sexy?” Fareeha muttered before standing up and
handing Angela back her now filled jug of water.

“I guess you’ll never know now.” Angela said mirthfully before a softer smile made it’s way on her face. “Being completely serious here... Thank you Fareeha, I know it must have pushed you out of your comfort zone to do such a thing. Or a little mortifying in any case. So I truly appreciate your effort.”

“I aim to please. Though I’m not sure how filling a jug full of water is mortifying or out of my comfort zone. I’ve filled many water jugs in my lifetime.” She uttered with a dry tone, a little chuckle emitting from her throat as Angela lightly swatted the side of her arm.

“You know I’m not talking about filling the water jug, but thank you for that too.”

“Right.” She grabbed her own jug before turning to face the doctor once more, extending her free hand out. “May I carry your jug back to your table as an apology doctor?”

Angela giggled and nodded, handing Fareeha back her jug and moved with a light skip in her step as she guided Fareeha back to her table.

Fareeha raised an eyebrow at that.

“You know they say you’re a miracle worker.” she said, filling in the silence. Angela turned to look at her. Fareeha flashed a cheeky grin. “But I think I should get that title. You told me it would take at least three days... It’s only been a day, y’know.”

Angela scoffed good-naturedly. “Don’t flatter yourself too much captain, Calvin may have changed his tune the moment he laid eyes on you and your horrendous outfit, but Carrine is still a little wary of you. Trust me, it’s going to take two more days for you to get through to her. Which means three days in total.”

“Is that right?” Fareeha challenged.

Angela nodded. “Glad to know that your hearing is not impaired.”

Fareeha barked a small laugh at the snide remark. She rolled her shoulders, now feeling pumped to prove the good doctor wrong. She was never one for backing down a good old challenge and she was not one for losing. Besides, she saw how much more progress was done now that most of the medics were comfortable in their presence. Winning this bet was like killing two birds with one stone. Not only could she rub it in Angela’s face, but she could picture just the speed of progress if all the medics were working at maximum efficiency.

She’d get through to Carrine and the rest of the still wary medics by tomorrow.

Yes she would.

Chapter End Notes

Shout out to golfer Ian Poulter for inspiration for Fareeha’s gold golf top. He did wear a gold polo once. And if any of y’all have never searched up crazy golf wear, like do it. These old men be wild with their style lmao.

And of course I had to take it up to eleven by mixing crazy golf wear with the fashion
from the 1970’s.
You rock that leopard print and bedazzled white pants Hassan. Rock them babe.
Fareeha cracked her neck.

She loved her country. From the spiced foods and bustling streets to the sweltering heat and endless oceans of sand.

She did.

Truly.

It was just sometimes the latter...

The latter could prove to be tiresome on the road, where after the third hour the never changing view of sand dune after sand dune proved to be wholly mind-numbing view. A view so dull that a cry of happiness almost erupted from her as she glanced at the GPS and it read back that they would arrive in the next village in an ETA of 25 minutes.

“Civilization, here we come.” Fareeha said with a small fist pump, grinning at the supervisor next to her riding shotgun. Dr. Hisham rolled his eyes and continued his reading. The smile slipped off Fareeha’s face and she snapped her eyes back to the road.

Right, she had yet to fall into Dr. Hisham’s good graces.

Fareeha frowned. She didn’t understand how it was possible. She wasn’t saying that she had become the world’s friendliest woman, but she had succeeded in building a sort of amicable relationship with even Patricia now. Patricia’s glib remarks at her had transformed to snarky quips with no real bite, and on one occasion she had gotten Patricia to genuinely laugh at a joke she made. So yes, Patricia and her were on okay terms now.

Fareeha thought long and hard, racking her brain for a way to rectify the situation. Perhaps her and her crew should go back to donning their crazy costumes once more. They had changed back into their normal attire of black shirts and brown cargo pants after one month, when all the medics were most certainly fine with them and had joked about being sick of having their retinas burnt each time they gazed at Fareeha and her crew.

She refused to respray her weaponry though. It was a painful enough ordeal the first time.

Or maybe she should scrap the whole idea. There was something about Dr. Hisham that had rubbed her wrong the whole trip. She just couldn’t like the guy, so perhaps it was fair that he didn’t like her either.

Her radio buzzed and broke her out of her thoughts. Out from the radio came Youssef’s voice, who relayed that the convoy vehicle he was in was experiencing trouble. Apparently one of their tires had started to rattle after hitting a particularly deep pothole. He told her they would stop to see the damage, though he believed it was probably just a loose bolt.

“Should we stay as well just in case Youssef?”

“We’re good captain, there’s a spare tire anyways.” His words were said so blasé that Fareeha could
imagine the shrug Youssef gave. “Worse comes to worst we can just change the whole tire.”

As Fareeha opened her mouth to respond, she felt herself jerked hard to the right. Dr. Hisham had pulled on her vest to talk directly into the speaker mic, completely ignorant that his sudden actions could have caused Fareeha to swerve from the tug and crash into the other convoy vehicle adjacent to them. Fareeha pursed her mouth and breathed deeply, quelling the urge to wrench herself free and snarl at the supervisor for his thoughtless action.

“How long will it takes if it comes to that?” he said, voice aggravated.

“Is this supervisor Dr. Hisham? Um, around half an hour sir. These tires are heavy duty ones with lots of bolts.” Youssef said matter-of-factly. If Youssef was jarred by his dismissive tone, he did not show it.

Dr. Hisham’s frustration became more prevalent at that response, releasing a string of curses as he pulled up what looked like a schedule on his tablet. His fingers tapped loudly on the screen as he made rapid changes. “Honestly, we’re already behind schedule by four days and have re-supplied only twice when we had predicted we needed to resupply only twice for this stretch.”

“Calm yourself. You can’t help that.” Fareeha remarked. “You cannot predict how much medical supplies you need nor the conditions of each village that accurately for this region.”

“Perhaps if the places we have traversed to were dealing with a crisis heavier than we had analyzed, I’d be calmer.” he said patronizingly. “However, the villages we have went to were always experiencing the expected amount of trouble and so we have been wasteful in utilizing our resources. We have a degree of excellence to maintain and this is ruining it.”

Fareeha considered his words. It was true that she had witnessed on more than one occasion a doctor securing a bandage on a patient with an extra wrap, or use an overly generous dab of numbing cream, but still…

“Sounds like your people want to be safe than sorry.” she voiced aloud.

He huffed at her words. “Just drive, Captain.”

“Sir, yes sir.” Fareeha said dryly, fed up with his attitude. The rest of the trip was silent after that, save for the faint tunes coming out of the vehicle’s radio. As they neared the village, Fareeha scowled.

“Dr. Hisham,” He made no move to look away from the tablet that laid on his lap. “Dr. Hisham.” Fareeha growled out. He looked up at her this time. She jutted her chin forward. “Look.”

Dr. Hisham let out another round of expletives as he spotted what Fareeha was looking at. From their distance it was obvious that the next village on their list was in bad condition. The village was situated alongside a huge rock formation and chunks of the cliff had fallen right along the edges of the village on the east side. There was not a shred of doubt in Fareeha that many were injured, seeing the damage the rubble had caused to some of the houses and the mass of people near the site.

She clicked on her mic. “Village up ahead in bad condition. Many injured means many desperate folk. Be ready to serve and protect. Relay message to all medics to be prepared. I repeat, relay to all medics to be prepared.”

“Fuck! Shit! Fuck…” Fareeha snuck a quick glance at Dr. Hisham and saw that he had shut his eyes and steepled his fingers in front of his mouth, “Calm down. Calm down, I mean think positively. At least now I can relay back to GSM headquarters that it’s a good thing we resupplied a third time just
before we travelled here. Hell, I might be able to get away with saying I had a feeling this might happen and get a promotion. Haha.”

Her fingers twitched at that comment and she gripped the wheel harder. Fareeha sucked in deep breath through clenched teeth and counted to ten. Perhaps Dr. Hisham was a person who dealt with crisis by making callous remarks, she reasoned. She rationalized. She justified.

(Else she might give in to the temptation to bash his head into the dashboard)

Cries of agony, hurried shouting of doctors, clinking of metals and heavy thudding of feet moving to and fro areas bounced off the walls. The level of sound would be an assault to anyone with ears.

Yet Angela heard none of it.

All she could see, all she could hear, all she could focus on, was the young man in front of her.

She guessed he was in early twenties at best. He sported a chiseled jaw, an athletic frame and a beautiful tattoo that consisted of storks and hyacinth flowers running down the length of his right arm. A colored tattoo that must have been a painstaking process to fill in, countless hours on a chair experiencing only the pinpricks of a buzzing needle. She guessed that under normal circumstances, with that tattoo and that face and that body, the boy attracted more than his fair share of interested glances.

Right now he would be lucky to attract the attention of the most desperate of people.

The first thing Angela had noticed was that he reeked, an odor so pungent emanating from him that Angela had to resist the urge to gag when his father helped him up the examination table. His curly brown locks were matted and knotted, his face contorted in pain. He had arrived caked from head to toe with blood, both dried and still bleeding fresh from the numerous cuts and gashes on his body. Patching up even the smallest of wounds was an arduous task, both for Angela and the young man.

By the time Angela had dressed most of his wounds, he was barely awake. She wished she could tell him that the worst was over. That he had done well and he could hobble away now to recuperate at home.

But there was still one more thing for her to do.

Angela tilted his head and forced him to look at her in the eye. “This next part is going to hurt. A lot. As painful as it is, I need you to try to stay still alright?”

He swallowed audibly and then nodded his head weakly, eyes filled with bravado.

“I’m ready, doctor.”

At his words she strapped his calf down onto the table, ignoring the way he flinched. Her eyes flitted back up to him and she nodded encouragingly, attempting to alleviate some of the apprehension that had begun to creep into his eyes from the action. She watched and waited for him to gather his bearings and regain that strong look in his eye.

“Deep breaths young man. Remember to take deep breaths” she said as she practically shoved a piece of cloth into his mouth.

He looked at her confused for a fraction of a second until she actually begun. Immediately he bit onto
the cloth as she worked systematically to remove the piece of rebar embedded in his calf and ignored his pained cries. He struggled, his calf chaffing against the restraints as he involuntarily tried to wrench his calf away from her vicinity. He arched on the medical stand, biting harder and harder onto the cloth wrap Angela gave him, eyes squinted shut as he tried his best to muffle his yelps.

“You’re doing good.” She cooed and let out a sigh of relief as she finally extracted the whole piece out. She quickly set it aside and started to hurriedly move to disinfect the area and patch up the gaping wound. The young man was now lying still on the table, cloth wrap now discarded as his hands clenched the sides of the bed, taking heavy and labored breaths.

Once Angela finished dressing the wound, the man’s father helped him hobble out of the tent, his vacated space quickly replaced by another injured civilian. Angela hastily replaced her latex gloves, cursing softly when she fumbled with placing them on. She was out of practice, she would never have fumbled in her Overwatch days. She had been far too pampered by the lull that had occurred for the past few months, where all the villages they had passed were blessed with the good fortune of not being the target of a natural crisis.

The biggest problem they had run into was an outbreak of influenza and with today’s medicinal breakthroughs, it was an issue easily fixed. All they did was have the civilians of that village pop a few pills.

Everything they had experienced had been till now had been a walk in the park. This in turn felt like they had taken a wrong left turn and was now going through a valley of death. Patients were flooding in a stressful pace with a variety of injuries. A man who had pushed another out of the way from the falling debris and got his leg crushed in the process. A daughter who was pulled out of the wreckage, cuts and gashes riddling her whole body. A seller who had chosen to put up his vegetable stand on the wrong side of town that day. The list of civilians to treat was endless. In they came in droves, the tent overflowing with people who needed urgent care.

A boy, a wife, a peddler… A something.

A someone.

Angela worked diligently on patient after patient, mind moving to autopilot to work without hesitation nor delay. A second means the world, means the difference between life and death. And waste not one second she did.

Egypt may be hot and dry, but at the beat that Angela was marching to, she could almost believe that she had been transported to the tropics. She was drenched in sweat, pit stains clearly defined and her hair clung to her face and neck in the most uncomfortable of ways.

“Dr. Mueller! I need your help with this patient. It’s a two-man job!”

The words seemed muted. It was too hot to think. Why was it so hot?

“Dr. Mueller?!”

She turned her head to look at Dr. Shay who was looking at her incredulously.

“Give me a sec.” she hissed out, hair tie in now between her lips as she moved to retie her hair in a bun. Her hair had grown out now and kept sticking to the back of her neck uncomfortably so. She struggled as she attempted to get her hair in a haphazard bun. A resounding victory cry sounded out from her when she succeeded and felt cool air hit the back of her neck.
There. Much better.

She snapped on another pair of latex gloves and moved to where Dr. Shay was already prepped. She cursed under her breath when she saw the extent of the mangled work the patient had. The stitches were excessive, poorly done, and the ‘treated wounds’ were almost all infected from mishandling. Parts of his body had already rotted and turned a disgusting shade of green and blue.

“His brother here says his friend patched him up.” The brother had tears in his eyes, wringing his hands as he spoke rapidly in Arabic to his brother who lay on the medical table, barely conscious.

She grimaced at the horrid work. This was why basic medical training should be part of every curriculum, she thought to herself, and then directed her attention to the teary-eyed man.

“Sir, I need you to step back.”

The man ignored her, now holding his brother’s hand tightly as he whispered words of love and encouragement to him. She moved forwards and gripped his wrist, pulling it towards her to force him to look at her.

“Sir, if you want your brother to be saved I need you to please step back.” She said tersely in broken Arabic, relief flooding her when he followed her orders. If they didn’t act quickly the man would soon become an amputee. Or worse. Dead.

She turned to look at Dr. Shay. “Dr. Shay, we need-”

“All already materials prepped. Let’s get going.”

Angela glanced at the array of tools, topical creams and items laid out already and nodded.

“Right. Let’s get to work.”

Fareeha knows war.

She was thrust into her first battle in 2049, just shy of her 17th birthday. She had just completed basic training and was immediately sent off to fight in the frontlines of the conflict in Asyut against rebel forces. She had puked not three minutes in when the head of a fellow soldier next to her was blasted clean off by gunfire.

She somehow recovered and kept fighting.

After that she went off to squash other violent uprisings, eliminate high profile enemies of the state, and occasionally escorted civilians out of warzones. By the time she turned thirty, she was more decorated than many of her military peers two decades older.

Fareeha knows death.

The moment her military career started, Fareeha grew an intimate understanding of death. Death was everywhere she went, sticking by her as closely as her own shadow. She had held many dying comrades in her arms, seen civilians caught in the fray meet their untimely demise, and had been the cause of many herself. A bullet to the brain of a terrorist or a missile fired at an enemy convoy.

Her own flirtations with death had resulted in near crippling injuries and many sleepless nights where she would wake up in a sweat, reliving moments that could have been her last. The closest call she
had was at a routine round one evening when an IED planted near the route she was taking exploded. It left her bleeding on the ground and Fareeha had thought that that was really it.

It wasn’t.

She was saved by a Good Samaritan who had witnessed the explosion.

The first burst of emotion she felt when she awoke in the hospital from a three-day coma was confusion. The next was anguish when she attempted to get out of bed only to topple down to the floor. She looked at where her legs should have been and only saw stumps that ended right above where her knees would have been.

The doctors said she was lucky.

She hadn’t felt lucky.

But for all the things Fareeha knew, of the toils of war and pain and destruction, Fareeha did not know this.

For all her experiences in the military and in HSI as a security chief, this was a situation she had never encountered and would have been glad to not have encountered.

Ever.

Her jobs in the military and HSI when it came to civilians who looked like this had always been to escort them to safety and ideally to the medical facilities that would treat them. In all her years, she had somehow been blessed with the luck to not be assigned as security personnel for the doctors in said situation.

It was an experience unlike anything Fareeha had handled before.

It was an experience harder than anything Fareeha had handled before.

This wasn’t so much as physically exhausting as it was mentally draining. She had been standing hours on end trying to keep the peace and order of civilians jostling around with unrest and impatience to get into the medical tent next to be treated. And though she did it well, it didn’t seem altogether right. It was difficult to look at people in the eye who were ready to burst in tears, damaged, bruised and bleeding and tell them to wait. It hurt to use the threat of violence when things got hairy and intimidate people who were acting out simply from desperation. And it hurt most when she noticed that most of the offenders were doing so only for the sake of a loved one instead of injuries pertaining themselves.

She did not like the fact that on more than one instance she actually had already used violence on some civilians who had become too unruly.

She did not like it.

Not one bit.

A shriek caught her attention. She swiveled around to see a man screaming at a doctor, pointing at a civilian on the medical table. He started to pace towards the medic with clenched fists, nostrils flaring.

But it was necessary.
She moved from position and made a beeline to intercept the man and save the medic. She hoped this time the rage was not from the unfortunate reality that sometimes, no matter what the doctor does, it was already far too late. She really, truly, hoped the patient on the table had not passed away.

That sort of rage was the hardest to quell.

________________

*Dr. Mueller, we need another med-pack.*

The wound on the boy’s abdomen was deep and discoloration and infection was obvious even to the untrained eye. Angela whispered a small apology to the boy as she pulled on her gloves. When she was finished, the boy would still be in pain for weeks after. She could imagine him crying, wondering why the worst was not over.

People often underestimated the pain of recovery.

*How many stitches do you think we need Dr. Mueller?*

The boys morphed into an image of a man. A loving husband who had a wife with pretty hazel eyes and two wonderful children who all watched worriedly as Angela worked. He had excessive incisions on his body, and far too many scars that he could have avoided if he had treated the wounds properly. Life in the army, he said, the doctor did his best.

The doctor didn’t do enough.

*We need an extra pair of hands! Dr. Mueller, are you good to go?!*

The man changed to an elderly lady with graying hair and a broken jaw, a little boy with a gap tooth and a bruise on his chin, a girl donning a floral patterned hijab and a twisted ankle. The faces kept changing and morphing in a rapid pace.

A thousand hands grabbed her tightly.

*Dr. Mueller? Dr. Mueller! Dr. Mu-

“Dr. Mueller?”

She jerked up, scattering a few papers and toppling a few stationary items.

“Hey, hey,” Fareeha whispered, voice a little panicked. Her hand tightened its firm grip on Angela’s arm to stop her fall. “Easy now, it’s just me Dr. Mueller.”

“Fa-Captain Amari.” Angela wasn’t sure how she had caught on to Fareeha calling her Mueller in her daze. She looked to her side and spotted Dr. Kravitz at the corner, finishing up some paperwork. One of Fareeha’s colleagues also standing there, drinking some milky beverage.

A brown paper bag came into her line of vision. “You need to eat doctor.”

Fareeha carefully took out the boxes of food in the bag, meticulously opening them and laying it out on the desk in front of Angela. When she was done, she gestured Angela to dig in before kneeling down to gather the fallen items that Angela had scattered.

“I can help Captain Amari.” Angela said as she made a move to rise up, before promptly being pushed back down by Fareeha who shook her head.
“I can do it. Go eat doctor.” Fareeha said, mimicking the tone of a mother speaking to her child.

Angela huffed and shoveled some of the stew Fareeha had got into her mouth. The instant the first mouthful of stew travelled down her throat, Angela was hit with just exactly how hungry she was. She started slurping spoonful after spoonful between bites of the lamb sandwich. Completely focused on inhaling her food, Angela didn’t notice that Fareeha had finished tidying up her work area and had reclined on an adjacent chair.

At least until she heard a chuckle.

“Shut up.” Angela mumbled out, undeterred by the spot of embarrassment that blossomed in her at allowing Fareeha to see her eat in quite the vulgar manner. She was too hungry to care. The last meal she had was a quick breakfast sandwich more than twelve hours ago. She had opted out of lunch sneakily and inserted herself into extra shifts undetected, filling her stomach with a quick caffeine fix to get her through the rest of the day instead. Now, finally receiving proper food, she felt her body jumpstart the hunger pangs to urge her to eat quicker and she would do so.

Fortunately, god (which was Fareeha in this case), decided to take pity on her and keep her quips to herself about her current eating habits.

“Captain Amari!” Fareeha and Angela both turned to look at Dr. Kravitz. “You make sure that Dr. Mueller goes to sleep right after she finishes eating alright? That woman has been working too hard, even skipped lunch and snuck in an extra shift. So make sure she goes right to bed after alright?”

“Yes sir.” Fareeha said with a salute. She then directed her attention to Tariq. “Tariq. Make sure Dr. Kravitz gets to his room safely alright?”

Tariq saluted her and bid Angela goodbye before he and Dr. Kravitz walked off into the night.

After their footsteps faded into the distance and all the sound left was only that off the ticking clocks and low hums of the lightbulbs above them did Fareeha turn around. Her brows furrowed and her lips drawn into a thin line.

“…Extra shifts?”

Angela pointedly avoided Fareeha’s gaze and shrugged. “Well, it’s not like it would kill me. At the end of the day I am Angela Ziegler.”

Fareeha turned to gaze at the wall, her brows furrowed further and mouth becoming impossibly thinner. Angela took this time to finish the last remnants of stew, tilting the bowl in an angle and hunching down slightly to meet the spoon halfway.

Fareeha tapped the table with her fingers, a habit that Angela had picked up on, one that she did when she was truly thinking of what to say next. It was rhythmic, always starting with a tap by her pinky, then ring, then middle and lastly index and done in quick succession between sets. It was also a habit Angela somehow grew fond of, unlike what she felt was too come.

This was not the first time Angela had pushed herself to far.

Time and time again Fareeha had reprimanded her on doing so. That it jeopardized the mission. That it demonstrated a lack of trust in her own team. And that by doing so, she reveals that Veronica Mueller is not all that she seems when the woman suddenly pull miracles far beyond the capabilities seen on her resume.

When her fingers stilled Angela looked up, waiting for Fareeha to start speaking. She downed the
rest of her sandwich, washed it down with brown tea and prepared herself for the lecture that was to come.

Only it never came.

Fareeha gave her a once over, nodded and started to pick up the empty cartons of food. She worked efficiently, gathering the items, shoving them into a plastic bag and walked to the entrance of the med tent to dispose it in the large trashcan that was situated right outside. She then came back in, looked at Angela and cocked her head.

“Is something wrong?”

Yes, there was.

“You’re not going to remind me not to steal shifts again?”

“No,” She walked back towards her and offered a hand. “You seem very tired doctor, let’s get you to bed.”

Angela reached out to take Fareeha’s hand, almost curling around it when the images from her dreams flashed through her mind. Going back to dreamland so soon did not seem too appealing right now. She withdrew it and smiled morosely at Fareeha’s confusion.

“Not yet Fareeha. Just not… yet.”

After a pause Fareeha dropped her hand and sat back down in front of her.

“May I ask why?”

“Bad dreams.”

"...I see."

They sat in relative silence once more, Fareeha resuming her tapping and Angela wringing her hands as she attempted to push away the intrusive thoughts circling around her head. Though the majority of faces that had sprung into her mind had been of old patients, there were a few from the last few days. Of patients that she had failed just a few hours prior instead of years ago. She could not save everyone, she had known that since she became a doctor, swearing the Hippocratic Oath that had explicit lines pertaining to the fact that one might and probably would fail some patients.

Logically speaking, she understood that.

Yet, it didn’t make it hurt any less nor stop the idea that Angela had simply not done enough, and she could have saved them if she had tried a little harder, to creep into her mind.

“When I was a little girl, I was interested in folklore.”

Angela’s eyes darted from her hands to Fareeha.

“Living in Egypt and being Egyptian, the first dip into folklore beyond the stories my mother would regale was that of the Egyptian Gods. Osiris and the like.”

Angela knit her brows. Well, this was unexpected. Fareeha had never lead any of their private conversations, much less start them.

“Do you know anything about them?”
She thought about the question. Only bits and pieces.

Angela shook her head.

Fareeha rolled her neck, “Would you like to hear about them?”

Angela nodded. It couldn’t hurt.

Fareeha smiled toothily.

“Alright then. Where to start…” Fareeha mumbled out as she looked to the side, now drumming her fingers on her thighs. She snapped her fingers. “I know. Let’s start with Atum, considered by most to be the first god. He was known as the ‘Complete One’.”

As Fareeha started to speak about the Egyptian Gods, Angela was transfixed by the change in demeanor in Fareeha. She could be a silly girl, with the corniest of puns and driest wry humor, but there was something about the excited manner in which she recounted her knowledge of past gods that made her seem younger and almost innocent.

Maybe it was the topic, the awkward pauses, the backtracking the girl did as she fumbled to ensure that the stories were told ‘accurately’… Or perhaps it was the obvious childish delight in the usually stoic girl’s face.

Whatever it was, Angela found it endearing.

Even adorable.

(Not that she’d ever tell the proud ex-soldier that).

________________

It was only after she woke up the next day, feeling fresh, rested and ready take on the new day that she realized that Fareeha had told her all about Egyptian gods to distract her from her troubled thoughts and filled her head with fantastical stories in an attempt to ensure her a good night’s rest.

Angela hid a smile behind her hand as she stole a few moments to savor the sweet thought.

Chapter End Notes

The later half of October rekt me work-wise. -_-
Anyhoo, I hope y’all had a good Halloween though.
A Feeling of Déjà vu

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Fareeha tipped her head at civilians as she strolled along, taking refuge from the beating sun by cutting through the shaded back-alleyways. Turning a left and popping back onto a main street, the supervisor’s tent came into sight. She started to fiddle with her shemagh absent-mindedly, hoping it would not be Dr. Hisham greeting her on the other side.

“This is Captain Amari, reporting for the weekly checkup.” Fareeha announced as she entered the medical tent.

Fareeha held back a pleased noise upon seeing Dr. Sadat in front of her. Her brows then raised at the unexpected sight of Patricia right by her. She saluted Patricia as well, an action thoroughly disregarded by the engrossed woman. Patricia’s full attention laid on the numerous documents splayed out on the desk in front of her and Dr. Sadat.

“Captain Amari. Could you please wait for a moment?”

Fareeha nodded and ambled towards an empty chair at the corner of the room. She stretched out, slouching and tracked their movements, hands busying themselves with removing equipment from her body in preparation for her checkup. The alarmingly hurried movements of Dr. Sadat, who was flitting across the room, pulling out various files from cabinets and comparing them haphazardly, sent a small shiver of unease to go through her. Her hands stilled in the process of unclipping her holster as she sat up and leaned forward.

In hindsight, she should’ve opted to sit in the chair closer in proximity to them.

It was difficult to hear them from where she sat, the two doctors speaking to each other in softer tones and rushed sentences. She leaned forward a little more. After struggling for a few minutes, her ears had picked up enough for her to understand that despite the fretful disposition of Dr. Sadat and the pure look of concentration on Patricia as she looked over the various documents, all the two were discussing were past endeavors and research, along with how some papers were not correctly filled in or were poorly filled out.

Fareeha slumped on her chair and relaxed, holster finally slipping through her fingers and landing with a small thud to the ground below. There was nothing for her to worry about. The most troubling thing they were discussing were errors in documentation. If they had instead been discussing a shift in their current mission plans, Fareeha would have politely, but firmly, request (though not truly a request) to be part of the conversation. It is, and always had been and always will be, imperative for Fareeha to know any changes to their course (especially so near the Siwa Oasis which seemed to be on another precipice of conflict). She would be ill-prepared to ensure their safety otherwise.

Fareeha took a quick glance at her watch. She had been waiting for a little over half an hour and if she waited any longer, she might miss the scheduled video call she had with Emirhan. At a lull in their conversation, she cleared her throat purposefully.

Neither doctor heard her.

Fareeha cleared her throat once again. Loudly. Loud enough that Dr. Sadat jumped at the sound. Patricia on the other hand, barely bat an eye and looked more disgruntled than anything else at the
“Oh right… You’re here.” Patricia said dryly.

“Yes.” Fareeha responded back just as blankly. “For the checkup.”

It was then that Dr. Sadat found her voice.

“Right! I do apologize Captain Amari. Um,” She looked at Patricia. “Dr. Patricia, would you mind doing the checkup? I really do need to finish this and head over to Dr. Hisham to do final checks.”

“Certainly ma’am.” Patricia said, rising up from the desk and started to make her way to the examination room. Patricia gave her a sidelong glance. “Follow me Captain. And don’t dawdle.”

Fareeha slid off her chair and trailed closely after Patricia, hoisting herself with ease onto the examination table. Once situated, Patricia began the checkup. She worked efficiently, asking similar routine questions that Dr. Sadat or Dr. Hisham would ask. Questions pertaining her health or any physical injuries. Whether she felt ill, any unusual soreness, pain or aches. And Fareeha would answer back truthfully. There was nothing worse than a combatant who hid injuries.

“Alright, hurry up and take off your shirt.”

“Take off my… shirt?”

Patricia looked at her with narrowed eyes. “I know you know medical protocol. So what are you up to?”

Fareeha looked off to the side, rubbing her neck and purposely placing an embarrassed face.

“…Nothing… Just feel like that’s an awfully forward thing to ask.” She dared a quick glance at Patricia who appeared decidedly aggravated. The side of her mouth twitched upwards and Fareeha forced it back down, schooling her face once more.

“Don’t you dare start Amari.” Patricia rumbled out.

She shrugged. “I’m just saying… I mean, you haven’t even bought me dinner yet.”

“Captain Amari.”

“Dr. Patricia.” Fareeha sounded out in the same tone.

Patricia shook her head, pinched the bridge of her nose and breathed deeply. If Fareeha had to guess, Patricia was probably praying to her gods to give her strength not to maim her. Fareeha swung her legs, biting back a smile, keeping her face schooled to that dumb look that riled Patricia so.

“You stop right now.”

“Stop what?”

Patricia postured, rising up to her full height. “Two can play at this game.” She inspected her nails with fake interest. Fareeha swung her legs in eager anticipation. “Let's see... Remember how well your last checkup with me went when your very presence pissed me off? How gentle I was resetting your nose three times?” she looked up from her nails, an almost cruel smirk on her face. “Well, you’re on your way to landing back on my shit list and reliving that checkup.”

An impressed grin broke out of her at the threat. It was a good threat. She remembers that checkup.
well and vividly recalls how… unpleasant of an experience it was for her, to put it lightly. A fact that Patricia clearly hadn’t forgotten either. After, when Saleh collided in her and pulled her stitches in the process, Fareeha recalls the distinct agony she felt all the way to her very soul, believing that the action had marked her for another session with Patricia.

“Easy with the threats. There are better ways to get a girl to take off her shirt.”

The smirk on Patricia’s face was wiped clean off at her comeback. After a few moments she recovered, rolling her eyes and shaking her head. Yet Fareeha detected the hint of a smile and the little bit of mirth in her voice when she spoke once more. “You’re really doing this, huh?”

Fareeha shrugged. “Got nothing to lose ma’am. It’s not like you can reset a nose that’s not broken.”

“Keep this up and it will be.” Patricia said with an air so casual that one might mistake her for saying an offhanded comment about the weather rather than threatening violence on another. Fareeha laughed a shoulder-shaking laugh at that and raised her hands up in defeat. Patricia smirked at her apparent victory before clearing her throat.

“Anyways, I haven’t got all day Captain. So hurry up and strip.”

“Be gentle.” Fareeha quipped, unable to resist getting the last word in. Her actions earned her a well-deserved smack upside the back of her head. She chuckled once more and removed her shirt in one fell swoop, letting Patricia inspect her whole body without resistance and without further comment. As fun as it was to tease Patricia, there was only so much teasing she could take before she actually got angry. Which was decidedly not as fun to experience she theorized (Hassan certainly looked like he went through the proverbial ringer after joshing her around too much one afternoon).

“No problem with your… legs, right?” Patricia said as she finished up, handing Fareeha back her shirt.

“None.” Fareeha responded as she pulled her shirt over her head

Patricia bit her lip. “Alright, good. Prosthetics as advanced as yours are sadly not my expertise…”

Fareeha nodded mechanically, remembering the pained look that crossed both of the supervisors faces during her first check-up. They had no clue how to maintain combat-ready prosthetics and neither did anyone on their team -supposedly at least, they didn’t know Dr. Ziegler was on board- as such, they had been so close to calling for another HSI team to be dispatched. It was only after Fareeha convinced them that she indeed knew how to take care of her prosthetics and promised it would not hinder the mission did the doctors relent.

It was respectable response, but feelings are a folly thing and Fareeha remembers clearly the familiar twinge of anger from how close she was to dismissal from the mission based on her lack of organic legs. It was not the first time and certainly would not be the last time her legs would come up as a point of issue from clients. Still, she had to appreciate it didn’t come from blatant hatred of Omnics and ‘Omnic-like’ technology this time and rather from the surprising turn of events that her prosthetics were simply too advanced.

“Alright then. If there’s nothing else, you’re free to go now Captain.”

Fareeha gave a salute and hopped off the examination table. She followed Patricia back into the main room, retrieving the items she had placed nearby the chair. She clipped her tactical vest back, slung her rifles around her shoulder and clipped her other weaponry back in place. Only when all her items were securely placed back on her body did she looked in the mirror and place her beret back on,
taking time to ensure that it was correctly set.

She walked towards the entrance of the tent, pulling the curtain to the side, taking one step out before stilling. She turned her head back to look at Patricia, a smile far too wide on her face.

“What?”

“Thanks for the help Doctor…” she trailed off, a playful glint in entering her eye, “Paloma.”

She then rushed out, glee rushing through her at the indignant yelp Patricia made. She weaved straight into the back-alleys of the village in an effort to lose Patricia if she did give chase. At a sharp right turn she collided straight into another person. Her arm whipped out instinctively to stop herself from toppling on top of them, gripping a nearby lamppost, while the other wrapping around the other person’s waist to stop them from falling. A flurry of apologies escaped her as she found her footing, both for crashing into them and then from holding them tightly against her. Just as Fareeha was about to pull away and apologize once more, this time in a respectful distance away, they curled their arms around her neck and pulled her closer, laughing.

Fareeha’s eyes widened and she stiffened.

Angela.

“Fareeha.” Angela giggled out as she drew her head back, hands travelling up from around her neck to cup her face. Fareeha swallowed audibly, turning a few shades darker at the close proximity of Angela’s face to her own. Angela’s stupidly beautiful face (no one had any business looking that gorgeous). “Where were you going in such a rush?”

“Away. From Patricia.” Fareeha was surprised at her ability to respond when her fingertips felt so warm on her face, her face so close and the feel of her hips-

Wait.

Her right arm was still wrapped around Angela. Angela’s waist. Fareeha looked down.

A mistake.

Hovering inches above Angela, Angela who she just crashed into and had yet to fix her disheveled shirt, she was gifted with the sight of Angela’s ample bosom peeking out. At her distance she could even detect two small moles just above her breasts.

Oh god.

She was ogling.

Her eyes snapped back up and saw Angela’s pleasant smile had turned into a knowing smirk.

Oh god.

Angela had noticed.

Fareeha jumped back, startling Angela with her sudden motion. She crossed her arms behind her back and bowed deeply. “That was rude of me!” Fareeha shrilled out, voice register higher than normal. “I’m very sorry about that Dr. Ziegler.” She rose back up, forcing herself to stare at Angela despite her instincts telling her to run away and never come back. “It won’t happen again.”

Angela readjusted her glasses. “It’s okay Fareeha…”
Fareeha frowned. It really wasn’t okay. In fact it could be borderline harassment.

“I didn’t really mind.” She said in a low tone and a seductive wink, before bursting into giggles.

Fareeha’s brain short-circuited.

“Fareeha?”

“Hey ugly, was starting to think you forgot about this little vid call. Why were you late?”

Fareeha smiled. She had been sending him weekly reports on the status of their mission and ongoing events through emails as procedure dictated, but due to circumstances had not actually called the man up to talk to him for the last three months, let alone a vid call where she could see his face. The area they were traversing in was surprisingly low-tech and satellite signals were hairyst at best. Even now, Emirhan’s visage crackled and buffered some. Still, it was working and Fareeha was hit with just how much she had missed his face.

“Just got distracted.” Fareeha said vaguely, gripping the fabric of her pants tightly, praying that Emirhan would not hound her for the exact reason. As if she would ever tell the man that she had been struck by the sight of a pair of boobs like a teenage boy just entering puberty, and then proceed to become brain-dead when she took an offhand and playful comment the wrong way.

“Mmm, I see.” He said, nodding.

Fareeha unclenched her hands and pumped them discreetly in victory under the table.

“Were you taking time to dispose of those trash clothes you had on?”

She furrowed her brows, “Trash clothes?” she softly muttered. Emirhan whistled a tune far too jolly as he moved his mouse and with a click of a button, a link popped up in the chat. She clicked on it and waited for the video to load. She rapped her fingers rhythmically as she waited, trepidation creeping into her at the coy smile Emirhan had when he had found something he found delightful.

(Specifically, when he found something delightful that was completely not delightful to another)

When the video had loaded enough, Fareeha clicked the play button, anxious to see what exactly had Emirhan smiling like that. She watched open-mouthed with mortification in her eyes as she witnessed the scene in front of her. Emirhan’s laughter sounded muted as she was consumed by the content of the video.

(Immediately, she took back all she said about the villages being low-tech and having barely any Wi-Fi access)

Someone in one of the villages they had helped make a high quality video (her eyes dashed towards the video quality button and saw that yes, it was at 4k) of them doing training drills in the horrendous outfits they had found in that Halloween store and uploaded it onto the internet. It had over 10 million views. Furthermore, it wasn’t just a video of them standing around, but one where they were performing one of their training drills in which they had removed their tactical vests.

There was nothing to obscure the retina-burning shirts they wore.

Nothing.
Fareeha watched in horror as she saw a close up of her face (she thanked Allah that she at least was wearing shades) in that gold polo shirt matched with checkered black and white pants, looking like a buffoon doing essentially leapfrogs and flying falls with her teammates to the music of some 80’s song the uploader had plastered over the video.

She paused the video, unable to take any more of it when it started to remix.

“Where did you get that?” Fareeha muttered darkly.

“Well, you know, it’s viral so it’s not that hard to find,” Blood drained from Fareeha’s face and a second wave of embarrassment flooded her system. She groaned and covered her face. “But actually I didn’t just happen to come across it. I was given a link to it from a Captain Kirabo. The one who worked with you at the Reaper seminar you led a few months back.”

...She was going to dropkick Kirabo in the face the next time she saw him.

She propped her head up on her hands. “Is this why you called me? Just to humiliate me like this?”

He gasped dramatically, holding a hand to his heart. “Of course not Fareeha! How could you say such a thing to me? I think of you like a daughter!”

She crossed her arms and let out another groan, tilting her head back.

Emirhan cackled.

She snapped her head back and glared, before her eyes widened and panic set in. She slammed her arms on the table and leaned forward, nose inches away from the monitor.

“Emirhan! Did any of the other supervisors see this vid?”

She gripped the table tightly and squirmed as she waited for Emirhan to respond. She could be fired for the level of unprofessionalism caught on this tape. She could practically hear her termination papers being printed by those uptight bastards at HQ.

Emirhan however, seemed to share none of her panic, waving a hand dismissively.

“Don’t worry about it Fareeha, nothing in this vid associates you with HSI, and even if it did, we can spin it around to be a fun promotional bit by HSI.”

“But-”

“I’ve already talked to the higher-ups at HQ about this leak. They’re okay with it Fareeha. Really. It took some convincing with some of the higher-ups, but everyone important is on board. Your job is safe.”

A relieved sigh escaped Fareeha and she nodded, thanking the stars that Emirhan was her direct superior and always had her back.

“Thanks Emirhan. Anyways, why did you set up this meeting? We’re going to see each other in a couple weeks.” She raised brow, “I know we were just joking about it, but don’t tell me you really did set this whole meeting up just to mortify me with that vid.”

Emirhan grinned roguishly, “I mean, maybe.” He chuckled again.

Seriously? Fareeha was about to make some scathing quip about him going through a mid-life crisis with the way he was acting like a child, but then she noticed the way his smile slipped off to a
grimace when his laughter tapered off, the way his eyes flitted to the side and his hand tugged at his collar one to many times.

She raised her brow and he smiled a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. She frowned.

“…You didn’t call me just for the video did you?”

He shook his head, scratching his nose. “I didn’t, but god do I wish that were the case.” His hand moved once more and another link popped up in the chat.

This time encrypted.

She input the key that he signed at her and opened the file. It was an incident report. Her eyes flitted through the documents and she gritted her teeth as she realized what exactly had been described. She looked at him intensely, demanding answers.

“The description of the assailant who had attacked Hakim’s compound, one of the points we guard, perfectly matches Reaper right? Son of a bitch took out four of our men.” Emirhan paused, taking a deep breath to calm himself. Fareeha did the same. “That’s why we’re planning to have another seminar in two weeks. This time inviting all the high-ranking HSI captains of every region in Egypt and I want you to lead it with Kirabo.” He flashed a wry smile. “This is the reason why I got in touch with Kirabo in the first place. Not just to get that video.”

Fareeha grunted, ignoring the playful remark as more pressing questions were in the forefront of her mind. “Emirhan, why are there no pictures? We have surveillance cameras installed everywhere at Hakim’s compound.”

Emirhan sighed, face adopting an even darker look. “That’s what’s most troubling… Right before the incident, all the cameras suddenly jammed up. Whoever he’s working with is an exceptional hacker, considering how advanced our firewalls and security systems are, and…”

Another link popped up. This time an image file. The image was grainy, and the two individuals were running away, but Fareeha would be a fool to not recognize the red, white and blue uniform and the clothes and distinct helmet of the unnamed outlaw with over 70 million dollars tied to their capture.

“This was snapped by one of our other men who came a moment too late. The good news is that he swears he saw Soldier:76 and the unnamed outlaw fighting against Reaper. Which means they are not friends and working together. The bad news is that Soldier:76 was there to get into a fight with Reaper, which means that once again he’s trying to steal the very stuff we protect. And this time…” he trailed off.

“This time he’s got a friend.” Fareeha growled out, finishing his sentence.

Emirhan rubbed his chin and sighed. “We should change the agenda of the seminar to also discuss plans to subdue Soldier:76 and the unnamed sniper huh?”

Fareeha nodded in response and a glum silence settled in. As the silence stretched on Fareeha could only twiddle her thumbs and think to herself that this was certainly not how she had imagined this video call to go. Eventually Emirhan spoke once more and so did Fareeha, but a sourness lingered in the air and after a few more minutes of straining to gain normalcy they both signed off.

Fareeha stood up, straightened her clothes and walked back out to help guard one of the med-tents. She ignored the questioning remarks of her colleagues that she still had a half hour until her shift started.
She could do with the distraction.

Hours later and still the tremor of frustration of the news Emirhan dropped on her had yet to recede. It hummed low in her, a constant little ebb of anger that made her restless. She breathed deeply, locked the supplies in one fluid motion, straightened up and started to do some training drills to get her excess energy out.

The night was cool and everyone else had traveled to the restaurant avenue for dinner or drinks, which was on the other side of town. Fareeha could exercise at peace, alone. As she went through drill after drill, she felt the stirrings fade a little. Enough that at least she finally noticed - finally appreciated - that tonight there was not a cloud in sight and the crescent moon was bathing her surroundings in soft light that made everything seem just a tad better.

She sat down and sighed, removing her shoes and digging her toes into the sand. A childish habit from her younger years that never ceased to calm her somewhat. Though she could no longer feel the texture of sand any longer, nor could accurately recall the feeling of individual grains of sand sliding between her toes, she still hummed in appreciation at the nice pressure of sand enveloping her cybernetic feet.

A rustle behind her caught her attention. Her eyes flicked downwards and saw the shadow of a familiar silhouette approaching her. It seems her day was going to get better.

“Good evening Dr. Ziegler.”

The shadow stilled. Fareeha tilted her head to look backwards to see a pouting Angela.

“I didn’t even make a noise.” She grumbled out as she took a seat next to Fareeha. She looked at Fareeha questioningly with squinted eyes. “Did I?”

Fareeha smiled and ducked down so she was eyelevel with the shorter woman, voice becoming a hush whisper. “Fun fact. I went through the Montu Program, Egyptian’s very own super soldier program so your clothes rustling aren’t so faint to me.” She then straightened up once more. “And I saw your shadow.”

Angela huffed. “It was just a rustle and who looks at the ground at shadows?”

“Dr. Ziegler, just what kind of security personnel would I be if any old doctor could sneak up on me?”

Angela crinkled her nose, “I’m not any old doctor. Or old, for that matter.”

Fareeha barked a laugh at that and ducked down so she was eyelevel with the short woman, an apologetic smile on her lips.

“You’re right.”

Angela quickly looked away from the taller woman, a rosy hue on her cheeks.

“Dr. Ziegler, are you alright?” Fareeha asked, amused by the reaction.

“Y-Yes.” Angela squeaked out, before recovering. “Do you have time to talk? Would you like to talk?”
Fareeha’s eyes crinkled. She’d love to talk to Angela. She’d just talked to her for what was probably only less than five minutes and her heart already felt lighter, anger and frustration banished by the very presence of the woman.

She put her boots back on, pulled herself up and offered a hand out to Angela.

“Shall we?”

That was mildly embarrassing.

Just hours ago she was the one making Fareeha blush and now here she was, a red-faced mess from having Fareeha look at her and say: “You’re right.” In that earnest way of hers with that kind-hearted smile and that soft look in her eyes.

It just wasn’t fair.

They walked in silence and Angela took the time to sneak a peek at the taller woman.

It really wasn’t fair. It wasn’t her fault. Fareeha was dashing.

Every movement by the woman seemed deliberate and imbued with a sense of purpose and Angela was sure in another lifetime, Fareeha must have been a champion of the people of some sort. She also wondered how the woman could be so oblivious to how charming she could be. She may not have the natural charisma her mother did, who turned heads the instant she walked in the room, but Angela had deduced quite quickly that she much preferred Fareeha’s quiet sort of charm. Unlike her mother who, despite her allure, always seemed to have a glint in her eye and secrets in her smile, Fareeha was (to put it simply) honest. There was no hidden agenda to Fareeha’s kindness, no cunning ploy to ever be worried about, and one could be assured that her sweetest actions were done whole-heartedly. She was sincere down to her very bones and possessed a desire to protect so strong and pure, it surely made people’s breath get caught in their throats.

Angela’s certainly did.

A little well of guilt rose at comparing the two women. Angela had noticed quickly the tightness of Fareeha’s jaw when people asked about her mother, the way she’d be a little morose, a little more stoic, eyes a little bit more hard.

She also remembered the way she seemed to deflate at Angela’s own words that her mother would have been proud of her.

*You think so? …Then you didn’t really know my mother that well then doc.*

She felt a hand on her shoulder and looked up at concerned eyes. “Dr. Ziegler?”

Angela smiled. “I’m fine. Just got lost in my thoughts.”

Fareeha stared at her for a while longer before nodding, accepting her answer. They entered one of the medical tents and Angela pulled out one of the medical cases, opening it up as Fareeha sat in the chair for patients.

“If anyone comes, you came about migraines and a little bit of pain in your abdomen from overexertion.” Angela chirped out.
She pushed her glasses up and wondered if she should talk about her research. Angela didn’t see herself as a boastful person, but she was human and couldn’t help but revel in the awe and fascination Fareeha would display as she gushed about the latest breakthrough. And time was limited, considering that the mission was drawing near its end.

She really needed to make sure to get her contact information soon.

“So doctor, you were in the midst of describing your time in Myanmar last time we spoke. Explaining about what your colleague Jin Young had figured out in helping the small crisis the city of Minbu was experiencing.”

Angela bit her lip and looked down, feeling a sudden surge of happiness, thoughts of her research gone. She didn’t think Fareeha would remember the story so clearly.

“Or perhaps you have something else on your mind?”

Angela’s eyes snapped back up at her words, shaking her head quickly. If the girl was invested in her story, she would continue it.

Fareeha’s eyes trained on hers as she opened her mouth to continue her story, encouraging her with nods and little clarifying questions. At some point, the arm she had propped on the desk that rested languidly in front of her made its way in front of her, elbows resting on her thighs, hands clenched together as she leaned in closer in rapt attention.

A small smile made its way to Fareeha’s face as Angela neared the end of her adventure at Burma, brightening her features in a way that reinforced Angela’s intense desire to only relay stories with happy endings from now on to Fareeha like this one. A desire that popped up a few weeks into the mission and had yet to burn out.

As Angela was halfway through another story, the little alarm that Angela set up as a sleep reminder rang. Angela huffed a little, wondering why time seemed to pass so quickly.

“You’re pouting doctor.”

Angela’s cheeks burned at the comment and burned further at the full-blown smile Fareeha had on her face.

She really needed to be able to control her face.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter didn’t actually take long to write, but that election just killed my motivation for a bit. :/
Next chapter up by the end of the weekend. (and lots of fluff) :)
Kabaddi

Chapter Notes

You might want to look up Kabaddi up before reading this chapter. But essentially, it's a sport where there is a halfway line, and two baulk lines (one on each end of court). A team chooses a person (called a raider) to go into the other team's half. To score a point, the raider must take a breath, touch at least one person (as every person you touch is a point) or hit the baulk line for bonus points and successfully get back before you take another breath. To ensure no cheating, the raider will rapidly chant "kabaddi" to show they are not taking another breath. Every failed raider attempt sends the raider into the sidelines. Every score lets a team bring someone back from the sidelines. (There's more to it, but this is a brief intro in case you don't want to read up on it)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Fareeha jumped.

A member of the opposing team slammed into her side, knocking the breath out of her and sending them both reeling to the ground. His teammates came toppling down after, trying to get a good hold of her. She retaliated, twisting and turning, trying to wrench free and crawl to safety. Her lungs were squeezing painfully as she continued her chant. Somehow in the scuffle, she managed to get a leg free. Fareeha dug her heel into the ground, forcefully lurching forward against the mass of people. She may have elbowed an opponent as she extended, desperately heaving her body inch by inch across the halfway line.

She was so close.

And then she felt someone grab her by her free ankle and pull. Hard. She promptly slipped and groaned, both from the impact and from the barrage of arms now pinning her securely.

She had to take another breath.

“Sorry captain. No points.” The referee said as he jutted his thumb out. “Back into the bullpen.”

Fareeha grimaced and picked herself up, shoving the hand a smug Saleh offered to her away, trudging to the sidelines. Her mood soured hearing Hassan’s booming cry to his team that they got the game in the bag, obnoxiously pointing at the scoreboard and the remaining time. “TEAM BEST RULES!”

Fareeha grinded her teeth, sat down cross-legged and drummed away on the ground with her hands anxiously as she waited for her team to score a point and get her back into the fray. She was going to wipe that cocksure look on Hassan’s face and ‘accidentally’ rub Saleh’s ugly mug straight into the ground. He had been infuriatingly annoying this round.

“Hi there.”

Fareeha craned her head upwards to see Angela peering down at her.

“Hey.” She croaked out.
Angela smiled and shuffled to take a seat down next to her, ignoring Fareeha’s half-hearted attempts to dissuade her and sit where the audience was (where there were actual seats instead of down here on the ground in the confines of a crudely drawn bullpen made by chalk). Angela offered her a bottle of water.

She took it gratefully and drank a few sips. Angela beamed then turned to greet the others who were also huddled in the makeshift bullpen, engaging in a little small talk with them.

Though Fareeha wasn’t interested in all the pleasantries being exchanged, she nevertheless leaned closer to pick up more of the conversation. There was just something about the way Angela spoke that she found rather charming. The way words rolled of Angela’s tongue, thickened by her accent and lilting with a gentle cadence that reminded Fareeha of the birds her uncle’s neighbor used to own. She had spent many summer nights on his porch, laying down with her eyes closed to simply listen to the tunes sung by those little yellow canaries. They made her feel at ease and Angela’s voice had a similar effect.

A loud holler grabbed Fareeha’s attention. She witnessed Summeye pumping her fists in victory.

Her team had scored a point.

She sat up straight, ready for her teammates to choose her.

They didn’t.

Bilal had the decency to look mildly sympathetic when he jogged away to rejoin the game. Fareeha watched intensely. They scored again. And again, they didn’t choose her. She sucked in a deep breath to calmed herself. Logically, she knew it was fair. She was the most recent addition to the bullpen and all the others who were in it should be chosen first. They had plenty more time to rest and were probably rearing to go just as much her, so really, she shouldn’t whine about it. Logically, she knew that. Logically. However, her heart did not seem to have received the memo. She had all, but glared at Tariq (who was smart enough to not look at her general direction) as he was chosen.

“Get a point Tariq.” She called out gruffly, unspoken message clear.

*Get me back out there.*

Now.

He gave her a thumbs up and Fareeha was about to nod satisfactorily when she witnessed him, only a second later, become thoroughly sidetracked by Nisa. Nisa, who was currently on the other team, and therefore currently their *enemy*.

Unbelievable.

They were worse now, now that they actually got together.

And then after, he says nothing when Dr. Calvin Lee volunteers himself to be the raider. At first she had faith in the man, stocky in physique, but that faith was quickly snuffed out. Calvin, as brilliant as he was performing surgeries, possessed a shockingly low degree of coordination out of the medical tents. She had to force herself to keep her eyes open as she saw the inevitable happen.

Calvin tackled down. Another point lost.

She grumbled, frustration only mitigated by the ringing laughter of a tickled Angela beside her.
“Don’t be so frowny Fareeha.” Angela bopped her on the nose, “This game is just for fun and besides, we’re celebrating our mission finally being done.”

Fareeha pursed her lips, scrunching her face. She wanted to win though.

Optimism rose in her when she saw that Khaled had volunteered to be the raider this time. He was one of the locals that were participating in the game with them. One of the locals strong enough to play with them. A couple of the smaller boys and girls had asked to play as well, hearts brave and arrogant from the ignorance that comes with youth, believing themselves to be far sturdier than they were. Or perhaps believing in the tales of David and Goliath or other fables of the small guys coming out on top.

It wasn’t that it didn’t happen.

It was just…

It wasn’t often.

The more likely scenario is that if they participated, they would come out with more than split lips and dark bruises. Especially as Hassan, Saleh and Kadir were joining in as well and past experiences proved that they were far too competitive and graver injuries were sure to happen.

Fareeha drank another sip of water to hide the amused smile upon noticing that Angela cringed and clasped her hands in front of her mouth with each brutal tackle. If she didn’t know a thing about Angela, she would have penned her for a woman who would faint at the sight of blood with the way she was acting about a little roughhousing. They watched as Hassan charged at Kadir, who had just finessed his way around three other people. Fareeha bit back a curse when Kadir was taken down. She raised a hand for him to fist-bump when he joined her in the bullpen.

It had been a good attempt.

“When I heard that you and some other people in your team had decided to play a game with us doctors and some of the locals… I certainly did not expect this…” Angela voiced out, a disapproving frown on her face. “Why are rough sport so popular?”

“It gets your blood pumping.” Fareeha remarked, running a hand through her hair. “And I mean, Kabaddi doesn’t need a lot of equipment, just some markers and two teams of at least 7 players each right?” She took a sidelong glance at Angela. Angela who nodded and made a noise of agreement, but had a glazed look in her eye.

A teasing glint entered Fareeha’s eyes. “…What’s this? Does the good doctor have no idea what she’s watching?”

Angela flushed red, suddenly finding her hands to be of great interest. Fareeha smirked.

Right on the money.


Fareeha rested her head on one hand and stared at Angela, unconvinced. “Do you even know where Kabaddi comes from?” she started.

“In…dia? India.”

“That’s right.” Fareeha admitted. Angela beamed. “But I think that was a lucky guess.”
Angela’s smile dropped.

“Explain the game to me… unless you can’t.” she challenged.

Angela narrowed her eyes at her, bristling. She then whipped to look at the field, squinting. “Let me find my words… Well, you see…” Angela trailed off, hand raising up to her chin and cleared her throat. “I’ll have you know that what is going on here is—”

“That you have no idea what’s going on.” Fareeha finished, a wicked grin on her face, before laughing unabashedly when Angela shoved her on the shoulder.

Angela huffed and turned away. Fareeha shook her head, still chuckling. She had never seen a woman who got more riled up with not knowing things or having their intellect challenged as much as Angela. It was difficult to detect, the measure of pride Angela carried hidden well behind all the genuine pleasant mannerisms that Angela possessed. Through time though, Fareeha could see that Angela was quite the prideful person.

She knew exactly how good she was and it showed in the way she performed her work. Not a shred of hesitation and a sure-fire confidence in her abilities.

“Oh hush, if you’re such an expert why don’t you explain it to me then.” Angela’s voice more petulant then Fareeha had ever heard.

She smiled and resisted the urge to make a point of it, instead shooting Angela a playful two-finger salute.

“Yes ma’am.” She uttered and then proceeded to explain the game in greater detail, using the plays of both her team and the other as a visual guide for her words. The more she talked, the closer Angela seemed to hover. Fareeha steeled herself and ignored the desire to both lean in closer and pull away from the distracting woman. By the time she ended her explanation, Angela was close enough that stray strands of Angela’s hair tickled the side of her face. Her stomach roiled as Angela placed a hand on her back, gripping the fabric ever so slightly, fingernails lightly raking her back, pointing at what the players were doing with her other hand, looking at Fareeha for confirmation of what she believed was happening. Fareeha nodded dumbly at all of Angela’s words, correcting her only with stunted words and sentences, distracted by the warmth of her hand and the slight press of Angela’s breasts on the side of her shoulder.

Clear your mind Fareeha.

Clear. It.

A finger poked into her cheek and snapped back to reality, turning to look at Angela with a raised eyebrow. Angela withdrew her hand and pointed at the field.

“They’re calling you champ. Go get them.” And Angela pushed her forward with the hand that had rested on her back.

Fareeha nodded and jogged back onto the court.

Finally.

“Captain Amari, we’re down by a lot. Can you get us back in the game?” one of the locals asked, sweat beading down his face, shoulders rising and falling rapidly as he tried to catch his breath.

She nodded and turned to see who would be the raider this time for the other team.
…Saleh.

He was primping. Saleh was making a large show, rolling his shoulders, cocky grin now a permanent fixture, bravado on full blast. He had faced the audience, now a massive crowd of locals, non-participating medics and fellow comrades, raising his right index finger high into the sky.

“Everyone who bet on Team Best did best. We winning tonight!”

A roar came erupted out of the crowd. Fareeha’s eyes twitched at the notion that there was a betting pool and flitted rapidly across the sidelines, narrowing when she finally locked onto the small chalkboard with tallies on it. There was a far greater amount of tallies under the column named “Team Best” than on Team…Oh Captain, my Captain?

She turned to look at her team, zeroing in on Summeye who looked far too innocent, judgment in her eyes.

“Really?” she said dryly. “Summeye-"

“Captain.” Summeye began, cutting her off, looking unperturbed at Fareeha’s disapproving look. “What’s important is that the odds are 3-1. And we’re the underdogs.” her faux-innocent look turned more sugary, “You really going to let that disrespect fly?”

She took a sidelong glance back at the tally board. The odds were indeed 3-1. She grunted. That was… irritating to say the least.

“Dr. Veronica!” Saleh bellowed out, catching Fareeha’s attention. He did a back flip into a one-handed handstand, other hand pointing straight at Angela. “Watch me destroy the captain.” He righted himself back up, flexing both arms. “And then go on a date with me!”

Fareeha felt her stomach lurch uncomfortably at Angela’s noncommittal giggles at his antics, blood pressure rising as she saw Angela twiddle her fingers at Saleh. Something ugly rose in her. She grit her teeth.

She was suddenly overcome with the desire to beat his ass.

“Saleh!” she growled out, beckoning him with a finger. “Quit stalling.”

He smirked at her with crossed arms, “Hah. No one’s stalling captain.” Then he crouched low, inching closer towards them. Her teammates immediately made a half circle around him the moment he stepped over the halfway marker, prepared to hold him down the moment he touches any of them or the line. However, they were too wary of getting too close and too aware of how necessary the next few points were to have any shot of winning. Her teammates’ anxiousness to even the scoreboard was going against them. To his credit, Saleh noticed and made erratic motions as he feigned swipes at them or the line. A small growl emitted from her, his movements were as off-putting and dizzying as ever, like a weasel that dances around its prey.

*Ignore it.*

Her eyes flitted towards his mouth, focusing only on his voice and the way the word ‘kabaddi’ was intonated. Time slowed and the sounds of the crowd vanished as she watched and waited, the world disappearing until only Saleh remained, his voice ringing clearly in her head.

And between the false starts, she saw it. The tightening of his throat, the tensing of his jaw. Between the false starts, she heard it. The faintly higher and rougher register of the repeated chant.
He was about to strike.

His hand whipped out at her (of course he’d try to touch her). Fully expecting the attack, she caught him with ease, pulling him as she swiveled around so her back would hit him square in the chest. She slammed her back into his chest hard, digging her heels into the ground to propel them both downward. He toppled easily by the sudden shift of balance and the additional weight of her body on top of his. Fareeha took advantage of his shock to re-adjust her position to secure him properly. A wicked grin sprang on her face as still a few moments later, the confusion had yet to disappear from his eyes.

“Who wrecked who, Saleh?” His cheeks burned. Fareeha leaned it close to whisper in his ear, “Team best is about to become team wrecked.”

Victory tasted sweet. Or perhaps that was just the alcohol talking.

Fareeha felt giddy as she took another swig of the local beer and watched the playback that Summeye had recorded on her phone of the losing team’s punishment game.

She would send the video to Emirhan later.

Fareeha sighed happily and re-adjusted herself on her seat, kicking her legs up to prop it on the table. An incredulous smile graced her lips as she drank in the scene before her. Villages were strange to Fareeha. She was used to the hustle and bustle of cities, the permanent fixture of artificial lights and the perpetual smell of smog. In villages, the moment the clock hit nine, everything seemed to shut down for the night and not a soul was outside their home. Even at this time of celebration, where midnight had yet to strike, the number of locals had shrunk to a dismal amount and what remained were really only themselves and the doctors they had accompanied.

Fareeha sucked in a deep breath. She was on her third beer now and starting to feel it, her body had become unseasonably warm and her face tingled some. She pulled her shemagh off and tucked it into her waistband and placed her beret down on the table, tugging at her collar to get some air in. Her eyes dragged lazily across the celebrative scene before her once more. The chatter of her teammates around her became muted as her vision trained on a certain doctor.

Angela Ziegler.

Doctor Angela Ziegler.

The woman had been on her mind lately. They had become close to say the least, a friendship that blossomed by virtue of Fareeha actually knowing who she truly was.

But it was more than that.

She had noticed herself flashing little smiles when she passed by the doctor during her rounds and her ears would even perk up every time someone mentioned her name. More than a few times, when Fareeha was stationed at the same medical tent, she couldn’t help but stare at the doctor as she worked. Fareeha never saw someone so charming and disarming and somehow relaxing while still holding a pointed object, moving her hands with such deft precision as she sliced and stitched a person all back up.

(She took a moment to thank her past-self for not forgetting to bring shades or she would’ve been caught by now for her level of blatant staring)
The point is, the woman was affecting her, to the point where she was picking up on things that really shouldn’t matter. Like how Angela would tuck loose strands of hair behind her ear when she was nervous, the lift in her voice when she was teasing and the slight crinkle of her nose when Fareeha teases her right back. She even noticed her tendency to rock on her heels just so when she was excited.

Fareeha groaned, rubbing a hand on her face. Yes, Angela was attractive. And yes, her eyes would sometimes flit over to her lips, follow the beads of sweat that would roll off Angela’s face and land in her blouse, but again… It was more than that. To say that her observances could be attributed merely to the fact that Angela was a pretty girl, and pretty girls often had a way of making Fareeha stop and stare and notice, would be a lie.

Fareeha knew it to more than that, because of the warmth she felt under her collar whenever Angela leaned in close that didn’t derive from lust and because of the slight skip of her heart whenever she successfully got the girl to smile or giggle or get that twinkle in her eye.

She knew exactly what this was. And tomorrow they’d be going their separate ways.

Fareeha groaned once more.

Consumed in her thoughts, and perhaps a little more drunk than she imagined, she had absent-mindedly tilted the bottle and sort of forgot to take a drink. The beer went straight through the wrong pipe and Fareeha sputtered, cursing her negligence as she coughed the liquid out.

“I see you captain.” Kadir chirped out, “Ogling that gorgeous doctor.”

She glared at Kadir as she wiped the beer that had dribbled down her chin with the back of her hand.

“Is that so?” She turned to see a sly smirk was etched on Summeye’s face. “Why don’t you go to the doctor and ask for some ‘medical attention’? I’ve heard that too much liquid in your lungs can kill a person.”

“Quiet.” Fareeha hissed out, shooting a glance at Angela, hoping she didn’t hear. At their distance it was improbable, but Fareeha would not take any chances.

“She can inspect me any day.” Youssef chimed in suddenly, a dopey grin on his face.

“No shit, I heard you saying you had considered purposely breaking your other leg if it meant she’d put her hand on you again.” Bilal remarked dryly. “And in the bathroom last week you even said tha-” Youssef turned a brighter red that was most definitely not alcohol-induced and lunged to clamp Bilal’s mouth.

A sea of laughter erupted from her teammates.

“Please guys, if anything.” Saleh began, tapping Mahmoud on the shoulder to tear his gaze away from his phone, “If anything.” Saleh reiterated, looking around to ensure he had everyone’s attention. He then jutted his thumb at himself. “It would be me she likes. I mean, did you see the way she giggled at my antics?” he shrugged noncommittally, hands up in a blase manner, ”What can I say? Ladies love me.”

If Fareeha wasn't slightly bothered by the slim possibility that Angela's giggle was a sign of attraction, she would have laughed at the stupified and judgmental looks her team were directing at Saleh.

“You wish boy,” Hassan roared out, huge grin on his face, “A girl like that is just being polite when
it comes to little boys like you flirting with them.”

The crew broke out in laughter once again when Saleh started to battle it out with Hassan and insist that he was every bit of a lady-killer as he believed. Fareeha shook her head and cracked open another bottle of beer.

Idiots. The lot of them.

“Shit!” Fareeha cried out as she slipped and tumbled down a sand-dune. Angela laughed. She slid down the sand-dune after Fareeha, who had yet to get up and had re-adjusted herself to be sprawled on her back.

“You okay?” she cooed out when she got to her.

Fareeha stared at her for a few moments, wide-eyed and a bit of nervousness entered Angela.

Was she going into some sort of alcohol-induced shock?

Her worries eased when Fareeha flashed a gigantic grin at her, “Just fine Dr. Ziegler.” She slurred out and started to move her arms and legs, making the desert variant of snow angels. “The sand just feels good. Real good.”

Nope. Nothing to worry about. She was just drunk.

Angela sniggered, not quite believing the sight of the esteemed security chief rolling around in the sand, making sand angels, giggling like a child. A far cry from how she looked a few hours prior when she was playing Kabaddi.

Playing Kabaddi, Fareeha had radiated power.

Everytime Fareeha raided, she’d enter the opposition’s side calmly, muttering the chant with a determined look in her eyes. A strange stillness would overcome the field seconds prior to Fareeha going on the attack, an unnerving sort of calm. Probably the same kind that floods an area before a giant storm. Then Fareeha would strike, quick and decisive. She was also far more cunning than Angela had presumed, at times feinting a touch at a player with her arm as her foot extended to touch the bonus line, or purposely glancing left when she wanted to go right, twisting and turning over and through players to get back to safety.

She was fierce, intense and practically superhuman. Angela swore the woman somehow discovered to fly when she leapt high above the opposition at one point to dive back to safety.

Angela still felt the sport to be barbaric, but she couldn’t find herself to hate the sport when it allowed her to see Fareeha like that.

She had been absolutely mesmerizing to watch. Angela had been awestruck.

(She could also imagine what a terrifying force Fareeha must be when the stakes were real. If instead of a playing field, she was on the battlefield and a spot of pity entered Angela for all those who had the unfortunate pleasure of meeting Fareeha in such a circumstance)

She shook her head and sank down beside Fareeha, laying too on her back. An ache entered her heart as she looked up. Far out from the cities and smog, the millions of stars that peppered the night sky was visible, reminding her of the view back from her childhood. Switzerland was crisp air and
beautiful nights and right now, with the cool and dry desert winds and the same beautiful view from back home, Angela was hit with a wave of nostalgia.

She missed home. Missed the food, the traditions, and the décor.

Snow.

She closed her eyes and made some sand angels too, pretending the grains of sand she moved were the powdered white snow that often blanketed her hometown. She heard Fareeha shift next to her and she cracked an eye open. Fareeha had curled up on her side and was just staring at her. Her mouth quirked.

“What is it?”

Fareeha looked at her with curiosity in her eyes and raised her hand towards her, stilling a few inches away. She saw her hand tremble and watched silently as Fareeha moved it forward, then pulled it back, and moved it forward, then hesitate once more. Angela rolled to her side to face Fareeha and rolled her eyes when the moments stretched longer and she realized that Fareeha was stuck in a stasis of what to do. She gently curled her hand around Fareeha’s and laid it on her cheek.

“There we go.” Angela mumbled and closed her eyes. Fareeha’s hand rough and dry, yet gentle and so very warm. She hummed in appreciation, holding Fareeha’s hand in place. She still felt Fareeha’s stare. She opened her eyes again and was met with the sight of Fareeha’s own wonder-filled ones looking straight back at her. “What is it Fareeha?” she reiterated once more, trying to coax the woman into speaking. And this time Fareeha did.

“Not even warm… Didn’t you drink?”

Angela grinned, “I did. I’m just not a light-weight.”

Fareeha scoffed, “I’m not a lightweight… Least not anymore since I underwent the super soldier program. I think. It’s a little hard to think right now.” Fareeha admitted, crinkling her nose.

“Well I never was. Even before I had injected myself with nanites that helped increase my tolerance further.” She boasted. It was true. She could outdrink the burliest men in bars since she was fifteen. Though she preferred to sip wine rather than chug a beer.

Fareeha relinquished her hold on Angela’s cheek and sat up. Angela resisted the urge to frown at the loss of contact. She sat cross-legged as she peered down at Angela.

“How do your nanites work anyways? Do they make you enhance you?”

Angela smiled good-naturedly, ignoring the way Fareeha had tripped up her words. She sat up, hugging her knees and rested her head on them. She shrugged. “My nanites help me heal in an accelerated rate and takes care of my body against diseases or illnesses. They can also detox me from poisons rather quickly, which is why it’s harder for me to get drunk now. Or at least the ill-effects, like the hangover the next morning.”

“So they work like forever working med-packs already in your body?”

“Never heard that one before, but it works I guess.” Angela licked her lips, “I don’t know much about the Montu program, but if it’s anything like the super soldier program Jack and Gabe had went through, then my nanites accomplished for me what your program accomplished for you. I too, am physically enhanced. My stamina, my strength, my eyesight and smell and touch are beyond normal
for someone of my size and age. However they have enhanced these abilities of mine to a lesser
degree than your program. Except my ears. I programmed my nanites specifically not to enhance my
hearing.”

Fareeha cocked her head. “Why?”

“As a doctor, I’m trained to hear irregular sounds and at times make critical calls based on such
approximate knowledge. If my training tells me, for example ‘if a sound of a heart is faint, do x’ then
I should do ‘x’ if the sound is faint… If my hearing is enhanced, a faint sound doesn’t sound so faint
anymore right?”

Angela waited for her words to sink in, drawing idly on the sand with her fingertip. Fareeha was
silent, mulling over her words. A difficult task probably, considering she was drunk. Angela bit back
a smile. She should have waited to explain this to her (preferably a time when the woman was
sober).

“A lot.” Fareeha remarked. Angela raised a brow. Fareeha clarified. “There’s still a lot I don’t know
about you.” She scrunched her face. “And tomorrow it’s already goodbye...”

Angela pursed her lips and looked away. “…Yes, that’s right.” Tomorrow morning, she'd be off
with the GSM medics to do more or less this and Fareeha would be off to do more or less what she
did. Protect. But not them. Not her. No more Fareeha in her life. She hugged her knees tighter.

"Mmmm," Fareeha grumbled beside her, crossing her arms with a serious look on her face, "Well
that won’t do..." She paused and closed her eyes before opened them and snapped her fingers, "Oh!
I know." Angela furrowed her brows. Fareeha crossed her arms once more, all serious as she spoke
her next words. "Give me your number."

“Huh?”

"Your number. So we can keep talking."

Angela stared at her. She had been worrying about how to go about asking for Fareeha's contact
information and here was Fareeha offering it herself. No persuasion necessary on her part.

“Oh?” Fareeha deflated, deciphering her reaction as rejection, and rubbed the back of her neck.
“No?”

“No!” Angela yelled, causing both her and Fareeha to flinch. She clasped her hands around her
mouth and twisted to look if anyone from camp had heard her and started to rush over. Nobody. “I
mean, yes.” she whispered, "Yes. Let’s change numbers."

She took the phone that Fareeha brought out and punched in her number for her, not risking the
woman getting it wrong (a large possibility from her current level of drunkenness), reading over her
contact details four, five times to ensure it was correct. Angela bit a smile as Fareeha leaned on
Angela’s shoulder as she watched Angela call herself with Fareeha’s phone and then proceed to save
her number. She moved to hand Fareeha back her phone when a wave of affection filled her from
seeing Fareeha look up at her, cheek still mushed on her shoulder.

She looked adorable.

She smiled. Fareeha smiled back dumbly. Her smile became a full blown grin.

Absolutely adorable.
Where had the tough security chief gone?

“Let me take a picture of you.” she blurted out. Fareeha withdrew from her shoulder and cocked her head. “As a profile pic for when you call me.” She clarified. She was met with silence. “I’d really like it.”

“Yeah?” Fareeha shrugged, “Then sure.”

Relief washed over Angela that things did not get weird and she raised her phone. “Say cheese.”

“Cheese~” Fareeha sung, dopey look on her face. Angela snorted.

Perfect.

Angela quickly saved it, then looked up timidly at Fareeha, “You might regret this picture later Fareeha. Telling you so you can’t say I did not warn you.”

“Dr. Ziegler.” Fareeha's lips curled into a beautiful smile. “If it makes you happy, it’s worth it.”

And there it was again. That honest charm Fareeha had.

During the party, Angela almost tripped over her own feet when she had teasingly flirted with Fareeha.

They were having a private conversation and in the midst of Fareeha talking, Angela’s eyes had wandered. Out of the usual bulky tactical vest and mass arsenal not clipped on her for once, Angela was finally able to drink in the sight of the muscular woman in all her glory.

And she wasn’t subtle. Fareeha had caught her in her daze.

“Lost you for a second. What were you thinking of?”

“You.” Angela tacked on a flirtatious smile, “Is there a problem with that?”

She had expected Fareeha to react the usual way. With stuttered responses and a blush that flushed her whole face, reddening even the tips of her ears. Instead Fareeha had smiled that certain lovely smile of hers that made her seem particularly dashing and shook her head.

“Not at all. After all, I’m all yours right now.”

Angela had flushed red from head to toe. She had not banked on the fact that alcohol caused Fareeha to lose all her bashfulness and allow her charm to be dialed up to the maximum.

“Anything else?”

Angela broke out of her thoughts and worried her bottom lip. There was one other thing.

“… Angela. Not Dr. Ziegler. Call me Angela.”


Angela smiled fondly at her antics and shook her head. She then stood up and offered a hand to Fareeha. “Come on sleepy head. Time to go to bed.”

“But-”
“No buts.” Angela put a finger to her lips and winked, “Doctor’s orders.”

Fareeha wanted to die.

Her throat burned, her head throbbed and the only reprieve she received was that her trusty sunglasses were shielding her currently sensitive eyes from the bright light of the desert sun. She felt a tap on her shoulder and turned around. Even Angela’s happy visage was too much for her right now.

“Morning grumpy.”

Fareeha grunted. Angela laughed and Fareeha squinted at her. She wondered if she could persuade Angela to inject her with some of those nanites. She had said they stop hangovers from happening right?

“Veronica!” Patricia hollered, a few meters away, near the buses. “Our ride’s here. We got to go!”

Angela cupped her hands around her mouth. “Just a second!” she then grabbed Fareeha’s hand and dropped a few pills in it. “This will make you feel better.”

Fareeha nodded gratefully, inspecting the little blue pills. Patricia shrieked once more.

“Oh, it seems I really got to go.” Angela squeezed her arm and started to walk backwards towards the bus to keep facing her, “Remember to call?” a hint of nervousness inflected in her voice.

Fareeha nodded, “Of course.”

Chapter End Notes

This is the first time I did not post a new chapter in the timeframe I had written that I would in the note section. So first of all, I’d like to say sorry for anyone who was really looking forward to this chapter coming out in the weekend (as I had said) and it just… didn’t come out. :/ (I don’t even have a good reason, just overestimated my self control, falsely believing i could stay true to my goal of watching only 4 episodes of a show I had heard good things about… And then I watched the whole season and wasted my whole weekend).

Anyways, this arc is finally done and I hope you guys had enjoyed it. :)}
She tapped the brush on the side of the table to get rid of excess powder, before applying a few strokes of the shimmery eyeshadow on top of her base colors. She always got a few more compliments with this extra step. People always said it brought out her eyes. Drawing her head back to inspect her work, her nose crinkled as she deduced that the eyeshadow above her left eye wasn’t blended quite enough. She raised the brush back to her eye and gently blended the colors in. When she finished, she looked at herself once more and nodded.

There.

Angela placed her brush back into her makeup kit and fished out her liquid eyeliner, shaking the bottle a few pumps before uncapping. Angela instinctively stuck her tongue out in concentration as she started to make wingtips, adjusting herself in front of the mirror to ensure that it would come out just right. She sucked in a deep breath before taking out her pencil eyeliner to do her waterline, exhaling in relief when she was done, blinking her eyes rapidly in succession.

Angela hated doing her waterline.

No matter how many times she’s done it nor how frequently, the discomfort of the practice never lessened. It always left Angela near the brink of letting loose a few stray tears she had to quickly blink back or face the consequence of smudging her eyeliner and redoing the process again. On more than one occasion, it left Angela with stinging eyes as she invariably poked herself.

Though admittedly the end result was nice, it usually wasn’t worth the hassle and potential pain. Usually.

Her phone buzzed and her hand shot out with lightning speed. When her screen came to life and she saw a little envelope icon, her shoulders slumped. She had been banking on a telephone icon and a certain caller ID and profile picture to show up. Nonetheless, she unlocked her phone and clicked on the message, curious as to who had messaged her.


A silly grin broke out of Angela, reading over the message twice to make sure her eyes weren’t fooling her. Fareeha was almost home.

Fareeha was rushing home.

(Angela’s toes curled at the thought)

Fareeha had delivered on her promise to stay in touch. She texted, called and everything in-between. A few recorded messages here and there, when she was on the road or otherwise far too preoccupied to text or have a lengthy phone call, links to viral videos and on rare occasions received pictures from Fareeha. Where she went, where she ate, some piece of landscape she liked. Once, Fareeha had sent a picture of new armor by HSI then proceeded to quickly ring Angela up to say ‘um, could you delete that’ because it was a classified prototype apparently.

Silly girl, Angela thought fondly as she settled on a light gloss for her lips.
On even rarer occasions she received pictures of Fareeha herself.

Now those.

Those were a treat.

Fareeha was a woman clearly unaccustomed to taking selfies. The presentation of the majority of her selfies were slightly awkward and poorly shot. Either too close or too far, angled strangely or focused incorrectly, looking like they belonged in the mausoleum of bad photos if there was such a thing. And yet, there was something that Angela found endearing about each and every one of them and could not bring herself to delete not one of them. Her favorite selfie from the woman was a picture of her flashing a thumbs up, smiling ear to ear proudly that she had snagged a picture of herself with a camel that looked like it was grinning too. The childish visage on Fareeha’s face next to a camel while in full Raptora armor without the head gear proved too much for Angela, as terribly shot as the picture was.

(The shot was tilted for no apparent reason, a chunk of Fareeha’s face was out of frame, she had a bad case of helmet hair and the camel was honestly a little blurry as it was moving)

(But that smile)

Angela’s heart squeezed in all the right ways thinking about that grin and happy glint in her eye. Angela rested her head on her hand, gripping her phone with the other and on a whim brought out said picture. Her thumb mindlessly rubbed over Fareeha's visage. Angela jolted as her phone buzzed and came to life, showing Fareeha’s drunk and grinning face she took all those months ago, and her caller ID.

She squealed and quickly connected the call, hooking on her earphones. As the video calls loading icon swirled about she took one last look in the mirror and fixed her hair, smoothing out those deliberate single strands of hair that fell onto her face.

“Hello?”

Her head whipped back onto the screen, smile widening impossibly further when she saw that the call had fully connected and Fareeha’s face greeted her, a similar ear-splitting smile plastered on her face.

“Fareehali~” She sang out, twiddling her fingers in greeting.

Fareeha ducked her head down shyly, looking at Angela through her thick lashes, a faint smile tugging the corner of her lips. “Fareehali? That’s new.”

“Is there a problem?” she responded light-heartedly, “Would you prefer I only call you Reeha?”

Fareeha looked to the side, furrowing her brows, rubbing her chin. Angela waited anxiously for Fareeha to come back from wherever far-off world her mind was taking her, but as the silence stretched on, it proved too much for Angela.

“Or just Fareeha?” Angela could not keep the nervous edge out of her tone this time.

Fareeha glanced back, “Huh? Oh no, it's cool.” she readjusted herself to face her fully once more, scratching her nose. “I actually don’t mind. Fareehali or Reeha is fine.” She paused, pursing her lips and drummed her fingers. Angela noticed that her hair had become a little longer now, “Though if we’re ever in a formal setting together, maybe only Reeha or Fareeha. Sounds more mature and~” Fareeha stopped, tilting her head slightly an amused half-smile on her face, “Angela, why you
grinning like that?” she chuckled, eyes crinkling further, mirth filling her voice.

Angela blinked, barely registering the question. “Huh?”

“Why do you look so happy?”

"Nothing, it's just," Angela bit her lip, tracing circles idly with her forefinger on the table and shrugged, “I know we’ve talked and exchanged pictures, but we’ve never video called before and it’s different in a good way and it feels… nice.” She ended lamely with another shrug. “Is it… is that a problem?”

“No.” Fareeha’s voice was warm and gentle, and her teasing grin had transformed into a soft smile. “I feel the same way.”

Angela giggled nervously, tucking a hair behind her ear. “Oh?” Angela winced at her high pitch, “Good. Um,” she needed a distraction. “Want to hear about what’s been happening with me lately?”

Fareeha’s nod was all she needed.

________________

It had been a rough day.

Scratch that.

A rough quarter filled with hectic days and chaotic schedules. A platoon of highly trained escorts needed here, a group of intimidating extra muscle needed there, and a whole slew of category III missions. She felt pity to all the HSI engineers who’ve been working overtime repairing the Raptora suits, only to be greeted with them again in bad shape in usually less than 48 hours. The world seemed to be on edge and Egypt was no different. There was a brewing unease that was settling all around the world that stemmed mostly from the sudden rise of vigilantes, rogue operatives and the reality that there was no Overwatch anymore to go toe-to-toe in suppressing terrorist groups like Talon.

Anyone that had money wanted protection. And everything that needed to be protected, needed high level protection 24/7 now. Which meant more work for Fareeha. That wasn’t an issue. She knew exactly what she signed up for and she born to protect if nothing else. She would never dream of quitting.

…She just wished that the world didn’t need so much protection and right now it looked like it was just going to get worse.

(There goes any chance of her getting a good night’s rest for the next couple months)

It could be the nostalgia kicking in and doing what it does, letting people look back on past times with rose-tinted glasses, but Fareeha swore the world was in a better place when she was a young teenager and sometimes she wished to go back to those times. When the world felt brighter and simpler, where Fareeha's biggest problem was whether she wanted to play outside or sit by her grandmother and hear tales about old kings and their conquests.

But this was not one of those times though.

Not with Angela’s animated face illuminating her computer screen talking directly to her. Fareeha felt her cheeks hurt from her perpetual grin at looking at Angela, but she couldn’t seem to drop it no matter how much she tried. Angela made her smile and she resigned herself to the reality that she
would probably keep smiling for the rest of the call.

Especially when Angela looked so pretty today.

Fareeha didn’t know what it was, but Angela was more stunning than usual. Her eyes were more pronounced, her lips seemed suppler today and though her glasses framed her face well, it was refreshing to see Angela ditch them for once and let Fareeha see her face unobstructed. Whatever it was, Angela truly looked particularly lovely today and Fareeha felt the urge to say so.

And so she did.

“Angela.” She started, and Angela stopped abruptly, regarding her questioningly. It was rare for her to interrupt the woman. “You’re really pretty today.” Angela positively beamed at the words and Fareeha’s smile widened.

“Only today?”

“Well...” Fareeha paused as her mind raced to conjure something witty to say. She was blanking out and internally cursed herself. Now she looked like an idiot who had forgotten what she wanted to say.

"Well?" Angela mimicked

She settled with honesty. “Course not. You’re always gorgeous… it’s just that you’re really, like really, pretty today.”

“Maybe I’ve just become prettier.”

“Perhaps.” She conceded sincerely and watched with delight as Angela glowed at the remark.

Honesty truly was the best policy it seems.

Her smile slipped when a notification popped up, obscuring her view of Angela’s face.

Battery at 5%

She grunted and rose up to lean over and grab the cable from the floor, before stooping over her laptop to put in the charger. She fumbled for a few minutes, trying to get the cable jack into her computer and once inserted she stared at the power icon, waiting for the little lightning symbol to pop up to verify that the laptop was indeed charging.

When the little icon blipped into existence she sat down only to be greeted with the sight of a highly-amused Angela staring back at her.

“For those Reinhardt boxers you’re wearing?”

Fareeha blinked and looked down. She felt herself go warm and her mouth go dry. She groaned and covered her face with her hands, face becoming warmer as she heard the tinkling laughter of Angela’s voice carry through the speakers. She ignored Angela’s breathless urges for her to show herself once more as she tried to figure out how to get out of this. Of all the sleeping shorts she could have thrown on today she had to have accidentally chosen the one with Reinhardt’s helmet printed all over it…

“There you are, Fareehali.” she cooed out when Fareeha finally peeked between her fingers to look at Angela. “Don’t be so shy.”
“My idol.” She mumbled out, feeling a need to explain herself. “Reinhardt was my idol growing up. I even,” she hesitated, knowing she would probably be digging a bigger hole for herself by confessing this little tidbit about her. It was too late though, Angela had that eager look in her eye that told her that the woman would be relentless in whittling her down to make her talk. And she would succeed. It was hard to deny the woman anything. “I even had a Reinhardt poster when I was young.”

Angela laughed loudly at her confession, the kind of laughter that was in your face and had a couple of snorts too.

“I idolized everyone else too!” she added quickly, suddenly feeling defensive.

“But did you have a poster of everyone else too?” she giggled out, before a soft elicit gasp escaped her and her eyes lit up in a way that made Fareeha apprehensive. “Did you- Did you have a poster of me?”

“N-no!” she stammered out, wincing at her poor delivery. “…Yes.”

Angela covering her mouth with her hands to stifle her gleeful shriek, eyes crinkling in a manner that showed Fareeha just how much she reveled in the admission. “Fareeha Amari!” She gushed out behind her fingers. "Oh you're so cute."

Fareeha grunted and crossed her arms, “I’m not cute.”

“You are.”

She grunted again. “I’m not. I’m big and strong.”


“Angela.” She groaned out, “Quit teasing.”

Angela smiled sweetly, “I’m not teasing, I just want to know. Is it?”

She grunted. “…Yes. Happy? Can we move on?”

“Wait, what’s the reason for my poster?”

“We are moving on.” She said tersely, ignoring the whine that came from Angela.

As if she could tell Angela the reasons for little Fareeha acquiring a poster of her that wasn’t really a poster. That was a blown-up picture of one of the shots her mother had taken of Angela and Torbjorn during a Halloween event.

She'd rather be executed by firing squad.

“Veronica, you’re creeping me out.”

Angela abruptly stopped, spoon inches away from her mouth. “I’m just… eating?” Angela made a point to wave her spoon of soup at Patricia. “Is there something wrong with the way I’m eating?”

Patricia said nothing back and instead reached out a hand, whisking off Angela’s spectacles and shined a light straight into Angela’s eyes with the other. “Hmm, your pupils are clear… and they’re
not dilated,” Patricia clicked off her penlight and pocketed it once more. She grabbed Angela’s free hand by the wrist and checked her pulse. “Pulse seems fine and,” she inspected Angela’s hand closer. “No discernable tremors.”

Angela pulled her hand away once she gathered her wits. “Patricia, what is—what are you doing?”

“Checking to see if you had taken any illicit drugs.” Patricia said flatly. Angela sputtered at the accusation. “It doesn’t appear that you have.”

“Of course I haven’t! Why would you even think that?”

“Ever since I hauled you out of your room, you’ve had your head in the clouds and a dopey look on your face. I thought that maybe you had taken something.” She raised a perfectly trimmed brow at her, “Anyways, out with it. What were you doing in there?” she pursed her lips and shuddered, “On second thought, I don’t want to know. The fact that you locked the room for once should’ve been enough of a hint for me.”

Angela’s face flushed as Patricia’s implication of what she was doing in her room by herself hit her like a freight train. “It wasn’t anything like that! I was having a video call.”


“You can be so rude, I do have friends beside you.” She muttered, “And I’ll have you know it was Fareeha.”

Recognition and understanding lit up in Patricia. “Amari? Oh, no wonder you’re acting so disgustingly. You’re dating that fool now aren’t you?”

“D-dating?” she squeaked out. “What?”

Patricia’s eyebrows went straight to her hairline, “You’re not? Funny, from the way you gush about her and show off her pictures or little tidbits about her life… Are you really not dating her?”

Angela shoved another spoonful of soup into her mouth, the spices and hint of lime in the fragrant soup barely registering on her tongue, tasting bland and as tasteless as gruel as Patricia’s words sank in. She hadn’t realized how blatant she had been with her attraction for Fareeha. And it must have been obvious, the level of affection tinging her words when she spoke of Fareeha for Patricia to catch on.

(Patricia who had a habit of tuning out the instant Fareeha’s name was mentioned)

“…I’m not dating her Patricia,” she said slowly. “What we have right now is fun and I will admit a certain level of attraction, but from the way we live and the way she does… Anything more might be asking for a little too much.”

Patricia mixed her drink with her straw, “Why? It’s obvious you both like each other. That idiot practically had a glowing sign above her head since day one that she liked you.”

“Don’t call her an idiot.” She admonished Patricia who sucked loudly through her straw.

“It’s true though.”

Indeed, Fareeha had not been as subtle as she probably imagined with her glances and Angela was the doctor. She had spotted each and every single bodily response Fareeha had to her presence that
indicated her attraction. Attraction that Angela most certainly welcomed, and in the privacy of her own thoughts, admitted to reciprocating strongly. It was difficult to deny that the Ms. tall, dark and Egyptian had wormed her way into her heart.

“In any case, like I said, we’re two very busy people and right now this is good. This is enough.” She added at the end. To convince herself or Patricia she was not sure.

“What’s she doing right now anyways?”

“She’s on some sort of retrieval mission, extracting certain technologies from the Siwa Oasis that needs to be picked up and secured lest they fall into the wrong hands.” Angela giggled, “She looked so proud you know? So proud of doing something that will help keep the world safe.” Angela bit her lip, “And you should’ve seen how dashing she looked. She was so-”

Patricia raised her hand in front of her, “Alright I’m going to stop you right there before I vomit from hearing your love-struck speech any longer.” Angela pouted and then hissed as Patricia flicked her on the forehead. “I think you’re stupid by the way. As much as I might regret saying this, you should do something.”

“Patricia I already sai-”

“I know what you said.” She took a bite out of her samosa. “But you know this can’t last forever. Sooner or later she’s going to move on.”

Angela’s grip on her spoon tightened. Fareeha was as warm and as dazzling as the sun and Angela felt bile rise to her throat at the possibility of her brilliant smiles she reserved just for her to be directed at another. And the thought of Fareeha doing more than just flashing tender smiles for another?

The plastic spoon in her hand snapped in two.

________________

She felt a smack to her head.

“Hurry up Amari.” Kirabo cackled out, “We got some shit to retrieve, kiddo.”

“Kiddo?” she questioned dryly, “I’m leading this mission Kirabo. You’re not a captain right now, you’re a scrub who works under me and you will address me as Captain. Got it, kiddo?”

“Asshole.” He shoved her again and she cursed as an armor plating fell to the ground. He chuckled as she flicked him off and picked up the piece. “You were just lucky calling heads on the coin toss on who’d be the official leader of this secret mission.”

She rose up and punched him on the shoulder, smirking at the little wince he did from the impact. “Luck or not I’m leading Kirabo, so suck it up and follow my lead. Don’t make me dropkick you in the face again.”

“Fuck you for that.”

She looked at his red face and patted him sympathetically. In hindsight, perhaps running up on an unaware Kirabo and drop kicking him square in the chest in front of all the other highly ranked captains who had come in attendance of the seminar regarding Reaper, Soldier: 76 and the unnamed sniper was too much. He had bowed over unceremoniously in a rather undignified manner.
Then again, he did send that embarrassing video of her to Emirhan.

And the raucous laughter from the other captains had served as a good ice breaker. Or maybe Fareeha was being an ass.

Well, it was too late now.

“Is your crew ready to go Kirabo?” she asked.

“Yes, unlike you. Hurry up and put the rest of the assault armor on, kiddo.”

She rolled her eyes and obeyed. Fastening her gauntlets with a grunt and sat down on the bench to put on the leg guards. Fareeha tried to keep her tone even and casual, “So I take it that Adaora and Chidindu have had their augmentations placed in huh?” She took a furtive glance at where the Omnic members of Kirabo’s team were situated, talking amongst Hassan and Menna.

“Fareeha.” She looked at Kirabo, “I heard what happened with your comrade. It won’t happen here. We’ve shielded our guys up to not be able be hacked so easily. No transmissions straight to their core and a layer of protection around their sensory systems so they receive information as passively as we do.”

She gritted her teeth as her mind raced through images of Okoro.

*Captain? There is a problem. Anubis… Taking control of my systems…*

*My apologies… run.*

And just like that he was gone. Forced his gun away from being inches away from Fareeha’s face with the last bit of his willpower to shoot himself in the face.

If something like that happened again…

“Have faith Fareeha, I would not send my men to die. The safeguards will work.”

She drew a long breath and nodded. “Alright Kirabo.” She placed on her helmet, stood up and turned to look him in the eye. “I’ll trust you.”

Fareeha walked to the end of the room, Kirabo trailing right after and stood to face the rest of the room.

“Soldiers!” she cried out. The room became silent and each and every head from her crew and Kirabo’s turned to look at them as they rose from their positions to make a neat line in front of her. “The mission today is simple. We come for the data we specifically were asked to retrieve and then we fall back. Get in, get out. No dawdling, no dissent. The Siwa Oasis was just in the midst of conflict and the area where the lab was situated is highly toxic with radiation levels. Staying in there too long is not advisable. Do not take off your masks or suits off under any circumstance, they will protect you from radiation. Speaking of which, is everyone’s suits functioning optimally?”

“Sir, yes sir!”

“Adaora and Chidindu? Your augmentations?”

“Our augmentations are working as they should Captain Amari.” Adaora said. Chidindu nodded and saluted in agreement.

“Good. Kirabo, any final words?”
Kirabo nodded, “This is a straight order from HSI headquarters and a code black mission. In case any of you forgot, that means it deals with the security of the world. We can’t fail. We won’t fail. Of all the teams, we’re chosen because we’re the best of the best and we will deliver. And one final word to my team. Right now Captain Amari is the leader of this mission. Her words are law and I do not want to hear any of you disrespecting her orders, got it?”

“Sir, yes sir.”

Kirabo nodded proudly and glanced at Fareeha, “Nothing further captain.”

“Okay. Then let’s get this show on the road.”

The city was dead and barren and silent. Not a bird in the sky and not a critter heard from below, the only sound in the city were broken car alarms still blaring weakly and the thumps from their boots hitting the cracked grounds in the dead of night.

And the howling of the wind.

The wind coursed through the streets with rage, blowing debris and dust up in the air, obscuring their vision as they made their way to the location of the abandoned compound. When things started to go south in the region, HSI had quickly extracted the men and women who worked in its walls. Unfortunately, the conflict had blown up before they could properly go back to retrieve all the data. Fearing it would be too dangerous to transport the valuable data during the height of the violence, they placed the compound on lockdown. It was weighed as the best option considering the compound was already under the radar, obscured from the public both by confidentiality and location. The compound was underground, which by virtue of location also leads HSI to believe the goods inside was undamaged when the nuclear plant nearby exploded and left the whole place toxic.

Menna’s voice rang in the intercom, “Captain Amari. I think I’ve found the entrance.”

“Roger that. Hold position.” She commanded and made her way over to where Menna and a few others had already gathered. A small noise of disapproval came out of her when she saw the state of the concealed door. She glared at Menna. “Menna, I told you to hold position. Never told you to open the door.”

“With all due respect Captain,” Menna’s voice trembled with each word, “It was open when I got here.”

There was no way any random civilian could have opened this door.

Murmurs rang out in the group and Fareeha quickly held up a hand to silence them. She bent down to inspect the cracked door. It was damaged and chipped, but the hinges seemed fine… “Chidindu, you’re good with electronics, right?” she muttered as she grazed a gloved hand over the door. “Check the electronic scanner for me, would you? It doesn’t look like someone wrenched this door open.”

“Yes Ma’am.” Chidindu replied, plugged in a jack that extended from her robotic limb. “The door’s system was overridden. It looks to be from an external port. Wait,” Chidindu stooped down, quite a long distance considering how tall the Omnic was, and pointed below the scanner. “Look Captain.”

Fareeha shuffled over and saw the little USB like plug.

“Permission to extract and inspect Captain?”
“Permission granted, but don’t plug it straight into your system Chidindu, work on it like you’re a human. Can’t risk you getting infected with something that had the ability to hack into HSI’s security systems.”

“Yes, Captain.” Chidindu replied and began her analysis on the device. Fareeha cracked her knuckles in anticipation. Finally, after a few minutes Chidindu spoke once more. “Captain, the device was used to connect an outside user to be able to directly hack the system. Alone it is meaningless, and do not worry, I have deactivated its ability to connect to any Wi-Fi or external beacon so it has been rendered completely useless. I did however find some troubling information, specifically a signature left by the creator on this device. A series of ASCII code that forms the image of a sugar skull.”

A sugar... skull?

“That’s the signature of the hacker that was helping Reaper right?” Fareeha heard Kirabo growl out beside her. “Fucking hell. The fuck did they know about this place…”

Fareeha’s hands balled into fists and she felt her shoulders tighten. She sucked in a deep breath through her teeth and counted to ten. Once the tension from her shoulders eased up a notch she clicked the intercom. “Everyone calm down. We don’t know if Reaper is in there, for all we know he already left, or maybe his friend was working alone. Regardless, if we do meet any hostiles in there, remember that this is not an extermination mission. Extraction of key data is first priority. Only engage with hostiles if necessary. Now let’s open this door. Chidindu?”

“Yes ma’am.” She replied and manually opened the door. It hissed as it opened and they were greeted with the sight of bleak and inky darkness, broken only by dim and blinking lights.

“Follow my lead.”

And into the darkness they went.

Chapter End Notes

Hoo boy, I sure hope nothing happens down there. ( ಌ°_°ʌ )
Also, their assault armor kind of looks like Cerberus Ajax Armor from Mass Effect.
Underground

Chapter Notes

There's some stuff in another language (only like two really short lines). Like don't worry about it. Not important to know meaning.

As a reminder, Fareeha and her team are wearing assault armor that look like Cerberus Ajax armor from Mass Effect.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Her boot crunched on broken glass.

It was hard to imagine the swarms of brilliant minds that roamed these halls only months prior, slipping in and out of rooms with a swipe of a keycard. People teeming with ideas, their faces fraught with exhaustion as they drank cold cups of coffee that nestled themselves amongst stacks of papers. Long days and longer nights researching, cataloguing and experimenting. Overworking themselves due to the possibility that the next breakthrough may very well be only one analysis away, a thought that kept their hearts filled with optimism and determination.

Treading through the same area, Fareeha felt none of the same vigor.

The paint on the walls had dulled and chipped away, revealing solid grey concrete that matched the drab atmosphere the facility had adopted, its halls now abandoned and empty. Chairs positioned in strange locations. In the hall, near a refrigerator, beside a fire exit. All rolled away from their proper places in the chaos of evacuating people. The highly-prized pieces of expensive equipment were covered in grime, slowly rusting away, never to be given the care they deserved ever again. Shards of glass from broken windows littered the floor among scattered papers, fallen stationary and coffee spills, a mess created by the tremors that shook the area when the nearby nuclear plant had exploded. She shook her head as she prodded her rifle in front of her, a futile attempt to move the faint dust particles that hanged in stasis in front of her.

“Creepy. This place is damn creepy.” She heard Kirabo mutter beside her.

Fareeha agreed.

Other than their measured breaths and the steady thuds of their boots on the cold hard ground, the silence was broken only by static from cracked monitors displaying blue screens and the flickering of the light fixtures above them. It made it feel like they were the only souls in a hundred-mile radius. Though nothing new when one lived in a country with miles of dry desert, the situation felt a little different when they were more than two stories under the surface of the earth and the only viable exit had a chance of collapsing in on itself.

“How’s everyone’s suits working out?” she questioned as she checked the status of her own suit, mostly to distract herself from her increasingly depressing thoughts.

The monitor within her visor showed her filtration system was working without a hitch and her suit has not been compromised in any way. Radiation levels were also low, if the indication of the meter in her suit was to be trusted. So low that they probably didn’t need their masks, but she wasn’t stupid enough to take any chances.
She let out a satisfied grunt when nobody else reported any issues.

Fareeha pumped herself up as they finally approached the barricaded door of the fifth floor, cracking her neck and rolling her shoulders. She signaled Bilal to work on the security system.

Her team had been lucky so far, able to locate the secret compartments that held the essential data drives and found them all to be untouched, judging from the layer of undisturbed powder on the boxes. It meant that even if the hacker had accessed the non-essential data stored in the mainframes of each floor, they still failed to obtain the essential data that made the most secretive of work make sense. She was impressed that the owners of this facility were smart enough to have planned that in the event of a crisis, all extremely sensitive materials be removed and put on lock down into special compartments along with encryption keys to read that data in another compartment.

However, those were for the first four floors.

The fifth floor and beyond held things other than core information saved in disk drives. Things like weaponry and items that couldn’t be stored away in a little concealed box and were properly dangerous.

(Shes really hoped that the hacker hadn’t been able to bypass the security system here)

The door released a noticeable hiss. Fareeha cringed as the rusted door wailed and screeched as it dragged across the metal flooring, producing a grating high-pitch whine, akin to fingernails on a chalkboard. When the door fully opened she groped the side of the room to find the lights, only to realize it was broken with a few clicks. She swore under her breath and clicked on her shoulder light. Her subordinates followed suit. They trudged the narrow hall together, Fareeha lifting a hand up to halt everyone’s movements as they bypassed a door labeled CONTROL ROOM.

“Chidindu, Menna, Ahmed and Bilal. Get in there and disable any security systems that may still be triggered.” She paused, “And keep an eye out for us if you can. Hoping there’s working CCTV or something down here. There might not be considering the classified nature of the rooms below.”

“Roger that.” Chidindu responded with a salute and lead the tech savvy members of their force to move into the room and get situated, stooping low to enter the room.

Fareeha shook her head, an incredulous sigh escaping her. The omnic personnel that worked for HSI were always so tall. Perhaps too tall. Chidindu and Adaora had been stooping the whole while they had been rummaging through this facility. They were good soldiers, not one word of complain emitting from either of their voice boxes about their predicament, but she vaguely wondered if omnics could modify their bodies to better suit missions beyond additional armored plating and augmentations against hacks. Life would be easier for them if they didn’t have to stoop all the time in closed quarters. She swore when Okoro was still with them, he had tried- what did he call it? Headcessories? Surely if an omnic could modify their head, they could easily modify their height.

(Okoro's choice in headcessories was not his finest moment. He looked like a unicorn for a while before he got back to his senses and removed it.)

She motioned the rest to continue following her, investigating the other two rooms that lined the hallways. There were no signs of trouble or any indication of any issues. No warning bells rang in Fareeha, but the uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach still grew.

It was still a fact that the sugar skull hacker had gotten into the facility.

Two doors laid at the end of the corridor.
She turned to Kirabo, “Appointing you to squad leader. We’re splitting up into two teams to cover more ground faster, plus I don’t think the rooms will have enough cover for our two teams combined. In this case, smaller troops may be better. Take your men through the left door, I’ll take mine to the right.”

“Roger that.” Kirabo responded, before clicking his receiver. “Chidindu, open this damn door. Chidindu?” he repeated, tapping the side of his helmet again.

The television hanging at the corner of the room crackled to life, a clear image of Chidindu and the rest of the people at the control room displayed on its screen. Chidindu voice boomed out the intercom. “Will do, but watch your language Kirabo.”

“That’s Captain Kirabo to you, I got ranked back up.”

“I’m afraid that’s not true. Captain Amari only elevated you back to a squad leader if I’m not mistaken.” Chidindu coolly replied. Fareeha watched with a smirk as Kirabo grumbled and snorted when Menna clapped Chidindu on the back for the remark, only to wince and nurse her hand.

It was never a good idea to clap an Omnic on the back as hard as one does with human counterparts, armored glove on or not. Steel was much harder than flesh after all.

“Captain Amari… There is a problem.”

“Don’t worry Chidindu, take your time.”

“I wish the problem was just that Captain.” Ahmed intervened and Fareeha frowned at the slight wobble of his tone. Ahmed was nervous. “We checked the security cameras to see if it caught any video footage of the sugar skull hacker or Reaper. Whoever the hacker is, they’re smart, shut off any of the CCTV that was still functioning, but um…”

“Out with it Ahmed.” Her tone harsher than intended.

“We got one of the CCTV’s up and running and it’s dark as crap, but something looks very wrong captain. I don’t know, it just- it doesn’t look safe.”

She pursed her lips, taking off the safety of her weaponry. “Duly noted Ahmed. We’ll be careful.” She could feel the eyes of all her subordinates on her, waiting for her next command. She met their apprehensive gazes with determined eyes, “Regardless, we still have a job to do right?” They all nodded in agreement. She looked back at the monitor. “Open the doors.”

“Yes captain.” The crew in the control room responded in unison with a salute, before the monitor shut off. A few seconds later both doors started to simultaneously unwind and slid open with a heavy groan.

She turned to Kirabo. “Be careful Kirabo.”

“Aye-aye Captain.” He murmured with a salute, while his gaze was kept trained at the opening doors.

When the doors fully opened, revealing the wreckage that was the lower levels, she let out a low whistle, shaking her head.

Doesn’t look safe was putting it mildly.

Hassan clapped her on the back. “Cheer up cap. The worst that could happen is that we die.”
“Joy.” She muttered dryly.

Fareeha had been a wild child, spurned further into recklessness by the legends that surrounded her mother and her closest comrades. They were regaled as heroes, strong and righteous, beloved by people of every social status for her feats of greatness and Fareeha felt a burning desire to be seen just the same.

Her ambition, coupled with a healthy dose of courageousness, caused her mother more than her fair share of migraines. At age seven she climbed the tallest tree in her neighborhood simply to prove she could and by nine years old was regularly chasing purse-snatchers at Cairo's open air markets. At the young age of eleven, she experienced her first dislocated jaw, delivered lovingly from a boy five years a senior when she interrupted his bullying session on a classmate of hers. Her mother had stormed into the hospital where she was checked in, tears in her eyes and kissed Fareeha in relief that nothing worse had happened. Her mother had fussied over her, Gabriel and Jack in the background, demanding that Fareeha never pick a fight ever again, no matter how good the cause.

Fareeha had laughed.

You should see the other guy, mom. He’s in the room two doors down.

The prideful comment was the most reckless action Fareeha made that day.

Her mother’s worried gaze became a ferocious glare and Fareeha knew she just landed herself in hot water. Ana had scolded Fareeha up and down and by the end Fareeha, who never wavered from her belief in dispensing justice and doing good, felt for once regret. By the end of her mother’s spiel, she felt dejected. Dejection only mitigated by Gabriel, who had sidled up next to her in the car and whispered encouragingly in her ear.

I checked out the other guy. You messed him up good. Nice work, you fearless little shit.

The compliment rang in her head for weeks after.

She was a brave girl, unafraid of anything, or perhaps too stupid to be intimidated. Now, in her early thirties, she felt trepidation as she walked these darkened halls.

Then again, it was a little different.

Down here in all likelihood she wouldn’t be clashing against a quick-tempered sixteen year old bully, but rather the large possibility of the sugar skull hacker and the literal incarnation of death itself in tow. With the array of deadly weaponry stored in these lower levels, it wasn’t difficult to imagine them deciding to pick up a few of them here and there and decide to test them on Fareeha if she ran across them.

She focused on her breathing to calm her quickening heartbeat. Nothing good would come out of going down the rabbit hole of negative what-if’s and stressing her heart before any real danger reared its head. She breathed in deeply, picturing her diaphragm contracting, air sucked into her lungs naturally to fill in the vacuum created. She exhaled, relaxing her diaphragm, which pushed air back out as it dilated and returned to its larger size. Deep controlled breaths. Her heart rate monitor slowed down to normal levels once more.

“Damn Captain,” she heard Kadir mutter as he touched a screen still switched on, blaring static out from its speakers. “I know the upper levels were a mess, but it looks like a fucking throw down occurred on this level. No wonder Ahmed thought some spooky shit’s going down here.”
“Just keep your eyes peeled.” She muttered into the commlink as she nudged a piece of broken and upturned furniture. Kadir was right, level five was a profound mess. The dust had been disturbed and broken and smashed pieces of equipment laid everywhere. Parts of the ceiling was falling apart, exposing the internal piping, walls were punctured and some rooms caved completely in.

Saleh’s voice rang loud as he rummaged through a broken file cabinet, feeling for a secret compartment, “Maybe some people weren’t evacuated, like you know, left behind and went crazy and fought each other.”

“Wasn’t everyone accounted for though, during the evacuation? Isn’t that what the report said?” Nisa questioned as she searched one of the few still-working computers.

“They were. This is probably from the nuclear plant explosion, probably rocked these bottom floors more. And there was that earthquake a few months back too.” Bilal voice boomed through the intercom, and Fareeha could envision the roll of his eyes as he clicked away at the keyboard from the control room. “Video feeds are still disabled or broken. Working to bring back the ones that are still half-way decent back up.”

“Thanks for the update Bilal. Why aren’t you using the commlink?” She said into the intercom as she shone her light at a chair at the edge of the room. “Is it not working?”

“Bingo. At the range you guys are from me in the control room, the commlink keeps breaking up, probably because signal is killed at these depths. If you need to send a message to Kirabo, tell us and we’ll relay the information to him.”

Fareeha hummed at his words, any sentence she might’ve formed dead before it even began as her eyes narrowed in on a broken chair. There was something odd about it, and not in a good way as she felt her stomach roil uncomfortably. She walked towards it and knelt down to inspect it closely. The chair was split right in the middle far too cleanly, a dent in the middle indicating a specific point of heavy impact.

Like it was hit with a front kick or a straight.

She turned around, her headlight shining brightly and something refract from within the walls. She approached carefully, almost jolting as her feet brushed on an object. It clinked as it rolled away. She stooped forward and caught the item before it rolled under a desk, holding up close to her face as she examined it.

“-well, I guess that makes sense.” She heard Nisa say faintly, “This facility is quite close to the nuclear plant. Maybe lower floors did get rocked more.”

Shell casings.

She looked back at the wall, eyebrows knitting and shoulders tensing. She reached in and dug into the wall to extract the glinting object buried within. She was pretty sure she knew what it was, but she wanted to be absolutely sure. With a grunt she finally picked it off, weariness filling her at the all-too familiar shape in her line of work.

Shells.

Shotgun shells.

And she recognized them.

“No, you’re wrong.” Fareeha said lowly, tilting her hand so the casings and shells dropped down to
the ground, clinking as it hit the ground. “There was a fight here. I found shotgun shells... The kind that Reaper uses.” She raised her rifle up, “Stay alert, they might still be here.” She uttered before stepping over to the intercom system. “Did you hear that Bilal?”

“Yes captain. I will inform Kirabo right away.”

The quick pace in which they were inspecting rooms had become a slow crawl in light of this new information. They silently maneuvered into the various rooms with rifles raised in case of danger, tumbling in and out of any sort of cover as a precaution. A nearby chair, an overturned table, a fallen cabinet. The hairs on the back of Fareeha’s neck raised as they dove in deeper into the labyrinth that was the lower levels. The signs of a struggle was prominent the lower they got, bullet-ridden furniture, shell casings strewn across the floor and even blackened or melted walls.

She didn’t even want to start guessing what kind of weapon did that.

Nisa whispered words flooded the intercom. “Wait, did you guys hear that?”

Fareeha strained her ears, cocking her head the same way Nisa was. Beyond the static of the monitors and the erratic sparks of the light fixtures above them, she heard it. A faint whirring of machines and rhythmic clatter of metal on the cold hard ground. A door swung open.

Security droids. The one in the forefront beeped and a purple light emitted out of it.

“Initializing scan.”

Fareeha held her rifle steady as the blaze of purple light scanned them head to toe. If they were calibrated correctly, they would detect that Fareeha and the others were authorized personnel, the signatures of their HSI assault armor were marked for approval in any of these high tech facilities.

The security droid’s purple head light blinked twice after the scan, processing their information.

Fareeha kept her grip on her rifle steady.

“Identified as HSI security personnel.” The droids said in unison. Oh thank god- They raised their guns. “Matar.”

“Fuck!” Fareeha pulled her trigger, the corners of her vision lighting up from the gunshots from her subordinates as she wrestled against the recoils of her rapid fire. Their gung-ho attempt to mow down the rows of security droids was failing. Her team and her ducked into cover, Fareeha side-stepping behind the turned desk as they continued their assault. They shot the droids in succession, taking the opportunity to reload when the droids were firing at them in the safety of their makeshift covers, sneaking a few return fires. The brunt of the damage they dealt occurred every time the droids reloaded their weapons, firing at the momentarily useless droids. The droids were able taking a few steps more than Fareeha had predicted before falling down, incapacitated by all the bullets they were raining upon them.

They were sturdy, she would give them that. But they fell none-the-less.

“Keep it up team.” Fareeha muttered as she exchanged her rifle for a shotgun as the last remaining droids closed the distance. She raised her shotgun and pulled the trigger. The shell hit a droid dead-center on its headlight, the robot dropping down to the floor in one fell swoop. She grinned in satisfaction. She didn’t even have to aim, it had walked straight into her line of fire. It was the one good thing about security droids. Droids were not true omnis, not actually sentient. As a result were walking targets that never bothered to take cover and protect themselves. Each and every one of them stayed in the line of fire and had not one iota of intellect to think of self-preservation or a more
effective strategy in closing the distance and eliminating them.

“Like fish in a barrel huh Captain?” Saleh yelled out as he blew off a head of a security droid. “Boom! Headshot.”

She grunted, forgetting to chide Saleh for acting childish on a mission when her mind was swirling over the words the droid said before they started to fire. They had realized they were HSI personnel. Why did they shoot? Did the facility delete their clearance for these deeper levels? There was nothing in the file that said these security droids had been altered or given new standard commands. And what was the word it said at the end? Murte? Mator? She was unfamiliar with that code word or protocol name. She winced as Saleh fired a round near the shell of her ear. A reprimand was at the tip of her tongue, sharp words almost formed into existence when she heard an audible thump dropped beside her. She turned to see that one of the droids lying only a few inches away.

“Thanks Saleh.” She whispered out gratefully.

“Anytime Cap-”

“Faction down to 10%. Sending SOS signal.” One of the droids buzzed out and reacted instantly, tearing bullets into it, desperate to kill the machine before it finished sending a call for backup. “SOS signal completed.” It crackled out before a bullet went through its core and the droid dropped down dead on the ground.

She cursed and raced to the corner of the room to clicked the intercom, fingers practically smashing the button on the panel. “Bilal. Menna. Whoever. The droids sent an SOS signal. Can you stop it?”

“Negative captain. The droids are not linked to the main server. We have no control of them or their actions. We can verify that there is a movement nearing your location from the west end. Best to get ready captain.”

She grumbled under her breath, bashing the wall with her fist in frustration. “Right. Right… How bout Kirabo? Think you can get him to get his ass here?”

“I could, but Kirabo is also experiencing some difficulty. Besides, there is not enough time. Perhaps we should retreat?”

“Fuck no!” Saleh yelled out. Fareeha glared at him and he looked back indignantly, “We’re fucking professionals, captain. We can handle it. We were sent because of who we are. We’re not seriously going to turn tail and run? We’ve handled worse shit.”

She cracked her neck and nodded, looking at her teammates in the eyes. “Saleh’s right. We’re not going to run like dogs, we were chosen specifically to handle situations like this.” She gave Saleh a meaningful look. "but watch your language next time, Saleh.” Saleh nodded, murmuring a quick apology. Fareeha nodded once more. “Now come on. Hurry up and get ready for whatever’s coming next.”

“Yes captain!” they yelled out in unison, before hurrying to create some new cover and surround the ports of entry in the halls from the western side. She quickly reloaded her rifle, stumbling when the ground shook. Rhythmic tremors that became louder as time passed. She quickly hid behind a desk, motioning her teammates to quickly do the same.

The sound of heavy metal thumped closer to them and Fareeha’s eyes widened as monster sized security droids came trudging in. They were fat and large, carrying heavy guns and armored to an inch of its life. Four in total, trudging in and flanked by monster-esque droids. These droids were
slimmer, with bowed legs, and tall. She garnered that they were over two meters tall if their curved spines were straightened up, gangly with sharp claws that dripped a viscous liquid onto the ground. She shuddered a breath when she noticed the drips would sizzle as they hit the floor.

Acid.

Fareeha sucked a breath between clenched teeth as a piece of the ceiling structure fell and clattered not a meter away from her. The droids stopped and turned at the sound, Fareeha’s heart beating against her ribs as one of the gangly droids leaped its way over, its gait unnatural and unnerving. It bent down, picking up the piping and inspected it, before crushing it easily in its claw, the remnants left in its claw slowly dripping out of its hand onto the floor to form a pile of melted plastic.

The acid was strong. It would probably burn clean through their armored suits.

*Walk away.*

It took a step towards its group before stilling. Fareeha gripped her shotgun harder, shoulders tensing as she waited with baited breath for the droid’s next action.

*Please. Just walk away.*

It swiveled to turn to look at Fareeha, cocking its way in a way that seemed almost sentient. Electrical sounds emitted from its sound box and its purple headlights flashed.

“*Boop. ¿Qué onda?*”

Fareeha leapt up to strike first, blasting a shotgun round onto the robotic creature’s face. The blowback from the shotgun pushed her back and the instant her back touched the ground she back rolled into a crouch, cursing when she realized she failed to hit the robot dead-on. She exchanged her shotgun for her rifle in the time that the robot was struggling to correct its visual calibrations which had been rocked by the shotgun bullet shaving the side of its head. “*Scatter and survive!*” she yelled before firing her rifle at the robot as it lunged at her, backpedaling to keep her distance as she mowed down the robot successfully, disfiguring it with her bullets. Expertly timed shots to hit its ligaments and weaker joints to slow it down, and body shots to destroy its core drives. A crunch next to her caught her attention and in a split-second Fareeha guarded herself with her rifle as another droid slammed into her. She flew across the room, crashing straight into a desk, splitting it in half. Her head was reeling, but her armored suit saved her from broken bones and splinters from the wooden sections of the desk. She was graced with a moment to gather her wits as her team members rose to action, tackling on the droid that hit her. She took a quick glance at the monitor beside her eye. The little icon of her suit. Most of her suit was still colored in green.

Good.

Fareeha hoisted herself up with a groan, quickly shooting two shots to the back of the distracted droid’s knees. It stumbled, grasping a nearby table to keep itself from falling down. She snuck up behind the droid and shot a round at close-range straight to the back of its head. It slumped, yet somehow retained the ability to stay alive and used up its last moment to turn its head around. She collided her fist straight into its head. Her fist tore straight through the glass and down into the core, crunching the mainframe. With an animalistic growl she pulled the droid’s hard drive out for good measure, crushing it in her hand.

Hassan’s voice ricochet of the walls. “*Get to cover!*”

She dove on the command. From her little space she witnessed the larger droids finish calibrating.
their heavy pieces of artillery and glimpsed the beginnings of their assault. She ducked completely in her cover as the whole place lit up. Energy beams pierced through furniture like paper and blackened everything it touched.

Shit.

She darted amongst cover after cover, struggling to keep out of the way. Ironically, between firing rounds back and destroying the flanking droids that irritatingly chased them around in the chaos, screaming profanities and goading insults in what she finally discerned was Spanish, she was saved by one of those same droids. She had made a miscalculated leap to get herself behind metal cabinet, when one of the droids lashed out and tugged her back by her elbow and accidentally pulled her away from a beam of energy that would’ve inevitably ended her. Its claws had dug painfully into the crook of her elbow, acid burning her skin as it melted through the suit, but it was better than being completely engulfed in scorching heat that might’ve eradicated a huge chunk of her body from existence.

She didn’t return the accidentally kind gesture.

Fareeha instead shoved her rifle deep into its core, fired and used its body as a makeshift shield to traverse the precarious open spaces as she shot heavy shotgun rounds into one of the two remaining behemoth droids. One of its arms was gone and Fareeha was sure a few more hits would incapacitate it fully. She pumped her gun and shot another round. It whirred weakly, its gears tinkering in an unsteady fashion. She walked closer, legs feeling like lead and too exhausted to run towards it. Her helmet’s visor was fogging up from all the ugly gasps she was taking, muddying her vision so. The only clear thing she could see was the large droid in front of her, its large frame impossible to miss. She fired another round, confidence growing as the droid was too frail to pick up its weapon anymore. The remaining arm was now hanging on by a thread. She closed the distance and held her gun to its head, pumping her gun one final time.

It was time to put the droid out of its misery.

Her finger was half-way squeezing the trigger when her breath got knocked out of her as one of the stray limber droids zeroed in on her and whipped her by the leg. The screams of her team sounded faint as she was thrown like a ragdoll, crashing straight through glass into one of the many meeting rooms. She coughed, spurts of blood covering the inside of her helmet. She fell to the ground with a groan, the inside of her helmet flashing warning signs.

The little icon of her suit was colored red.

She blinked rapidly, trying to refocus her eyes. Once her vision cleared all she saw was a clawed hand inches away from her face. Fareeha swiveled just in time, arms raised in front of her as a form of final protection. The droid’s hand missed her and swiped at the ground, its claws tearing part of the ground easily and Fareeha knew in that moment that if it had connected her head would have been wiped clean off. She kicked hard against the legs of the droid to sweep it off its feet. Harder than she should have. The receptors placed in her cybernetic legs fired off painfully into her neuron receptors and Fareeha screamed as pain tore through her. She blinked away stray tears and roared, adrenaline pumping in her as the droid began to attempt to right itself once more. She pushed off the ground with her arms and crawled, clawing her way to the droid which was struggling to rise as her kick had damaged its ankle joint. She let out a war cry she grappled its neck successfully, retrieving her side arm from her holster and dug it into its neck and fired rapidly.

She ignored the spasms of the droid, the way its head would bash repeatedly on the side of Fareeha’s helmet.
She ignored the hot sparks of electricity of cables that licked her skin through the tears of her suit.

She ignored any pain she felt, focused solely on destroying the robot in front of her.

In the struggle it found a way to rise up, ramming Fareeha to the wall in a final attempt to save its internal hardware. Pain seared through Fareeha with each hit, but she held on, never relenting her attack and tightening her grip around the robot’s neck in retaliation. She cried out one final time as she rammed the gun further through the hole she was obliterating in the robot, straining her hand as it wedged deep within its metallic body, firing straight into its core. It thrashed and fell and Fareeha sighed, slumping to the ground next to it, gasping for breath as she twisted her hand back out from its corpse.

Suddenly she was wrenched to the side, Hassan dragging her to cover as the last large Omnic started to fire once more. “Captain, can’t just stop!” Another hatch opened and a flood of new droids arrived. “Fuck.”

Fareeha nodded dumbly.

Right. She searched her body for her rifle. Where did it go- Hassan handed her back her rifle.

“I got you buddy.”

She nodded. “Thanks.”

“Hassan! Kadir! Cover me!” Tariq roared as he struggled to open another med-pack.

Fareeha was a few meters behind them with Nisa, who had wrenched off Summeye’s helmet and was cradling her head, whispering words of encouragement that sounded weak as a tremor bled into her tone.

“Stay with me buddy, Tariq almost got the med-pack open. You promised me we’d go to the spa our next free day off. A day with just us girls. Who else will I go with if not you Summeye?”

Summeye opened her mouth to speak, the corner of her lips twitching upwards in the way it did when she was about to make a salacious comment, but only blood gurgled out. She coughed and leant her head to the side and anguish overtook Nisa’s face as she gently rubbed Summeye’s back. Summeye brought a hand up to squeeze Nisa’s arm gently.

“Menna and captain are girls too y’know.” She rasped out between coughs, a mischievous glint in her eye.

"Don't say that." Nisa choked out. "You're going to be just fine."

The weak, but cheeky grin Summeye had slipped off as she realized the implication of her words. “Sorry. I didn't mean it like-“ she gasped, “like that.” She finally bit out, "I'm sticking around at least until you and Tariq get married... I'm going to be okay. Ain't that right captain?”

Fareeha nodded firmly, betraying none of the fear that was quickly stealing in her heart. Summeye sounded so weak. She looked so frail. In all her years working with the woman, she never seemed so feeble despite her short stature. The sounds of the gunfire faded away as Fareeha pressed on her bleeding wound on her stomach, heart racing as the bleeding wouldn’t stop. Blood seeped through her fingers and Fareeha cursed as she felt panic start to rise in her. She needed to be strong.
“Captain move.” Tariq shoved her out of the way. He started to treat Summeye’s wounds with the med-pack as Nisa continued to speak to Summeye to keep her awake. Fareeha took the opportunity to scramble and find more med-packs. There was no way that would be enough. She needed to find more.

“What the fuck?” She heard Hassan rumble out and she stilled her movement to see what had caused Hassan to seize his fire. Saleh had suddenly grabbed his neck, like he was stung, and crumpled straight to the ground. An uncharacteristic roar came out of Mahmoud as he lunged forward towards the large droid. “Mahmoud, stop- Don’t be stupid.” The large droid slumped forwards and dropped and Fareeha was confused for a second before her eyes registered the familiar silhouette and even more familiar mask that had been obscured by the droid’s hulking frame for where she stood. Mahmoud whipped his hand out to swing at his face. The man was faster and gained reach by swinging with his gun, the butt of his weapon hitting Mahmoud right on his chin, before closing the distance and punching him straight in his gut. Spittle flew from Mahmoud mouth as he fell down.

Her heart dropped to her stomach. She couldn’t deal with this right now. Her suit was a mess, weaponry practically spent and now her team-

Chills ran down her spine as she heard Summeye whimper faintly behind her. She took a quick glance back, worry overtaking her as it was clear as day that Summeye was on her last leg.

“Captain watch out!” she whipped her head back only to see an object inches away from her face. It brushed past her and straight to her team. Time seemed to slow as Fareeha registered what occurred and her legs pushed hard and she lunged to grab the item. She wasn’t fast enough, her fingers barely grazing the canister. It dropped and bounced straight next to where Summeye and Nisa were.

The canister clicked once and set off, enveloping Summeye and Nisa in a bright light.

She was too late.

She whipped back to face him with a roar, rage ripping through her, an ugly snarl on her face. “You fucki-” she winced as she felt an object impale itself onto her shoulder, halting her mad dash towards him. She gripped her shoulder, wrenching the object -a dart, she discovered- out. She turned her head, trying to figure out from what trajectory it came from when a searing hot pain shot through her, running down the length of her body quickly. It was crippling and she fell to her knees from it, forced to have one hand on the ground to keep her from bowling over completely. The screams of her teammates became muted as her vision clouded and hazed, and blood rushed to her ears. She could only hear the pumping of her blood and the incessant warning sirens in her helmet about the condition of her suit. She grit her teeth. The pain was getting worse and a huge wave of nausea had suddenly hit her. Her elbow buckled and her head hit the ground, saved from bruising only by the helmet she wore. She laid on the ground hunched, shuddering from chills that started to run down her body. Similar to the kind she felt when she ran a high fever. She was now heavily disorientated, yet in the back of her mind she still had the ability to form one coherent thought.

The dart had come from a different trajectory. The dart had come from a different trajectory. The dart had come from a different trajectory-

So who shot the dart?

She forced her head up to look around, and in the midst of her darkening vision she saw in the shadows another person step out. The person strolled over casually, dropping to a squat in front of her with their head cocked in an arrogant fashion. Fareeha used the last bit of her strength to keep her eyes trained on them as her head gave in and slumped back onto the ground. The last thing she saw before her vision faded to black was the condescending image of them leaning in real close, putting a
finger up in front of their helmet where their lips would be.

“Shhhhh.”

Chapter End Notes

After gone for so long, this was probably a disappointing update (from the lack of pharmercy, like same fam. I was so ugghhh, when I realized there was no good way to insert some pharmercy goodness), but it’s a chapter that is necessary to further the story (and to get back to that good shit). Anyways, happy holidays fam. May all y’all get that Widowmaker’s mistletoe (mistlefoe) intro. Like holy shit, am I right?

Action scenes are still hard for me. Is it better this time around? At least more followable? I know it probably still needs a lot of work, so let me know what I can improve so the next time it’ll be better (but like, don’t be really mean in the way you say it pls)

I should get another update before the year ends. (like 90% sure, unless some fuckery goes down)
Poison Blue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She was warm.

Gentle waves of pleasant heat coursed through her veins, eating away at the pain that racked her body. The roiling in her stomach ebbed away into a subtle discomfort before dissipating completely, and the shrill headache that assualted her temples disappeared just the same. She felt light, almost weightless, as if bobbing gently on the surface of a pool of warm, warm water. Water that healed at the touch, soothing her bones and healing her aching wounds. If her eyes were open she would see the nicks and gashes on her body close themselves up, healed by the bright yellow light that encased her. Her brain, no longer barraged by nauseating sensory overload, finally became aware that she was lying down on solid ground, cradled by warm hands and resting on padded thighs.

She stole a few more moments of peace, disregarding the distant calls of her teammates.

“I’m awake.” She croaked out when their calls grew too loud to ignore. She sat up, pushing gently against Mahmoud’s hands. “Don’t worry. I’m good.” She whispered as she removed his hands from her shoulders. “Thanks for letting me rest up on you.”

“A-anytime cap.” He stuttered out, relief clear as day on his face. He pointed at the patches connected to her that were wired up to a device beside him that beeped rhythmically. “But um, don’t take those off just yet, we’re still monitoring your levels.”

She gave a noncommittal grunt as she swiveled to look around her. If the facility was in ruins before, it was now in complete shambles. All around her was splintered wood, dented metal, caved in walls and bloodied floors. The corpses of the security droids and spent ammunition littered the area in a manner that made it undeniable that conflict had taken place. Her teammates were dispersed, either treating their wounds or pacing around the area, upturning furniture like they were on some sort of excavation mission. Eventually, her gaze came back to the weathered and beaten faces of the teammates crowded around her, varying levels of relief and worry as they clutched opened med-packs, gauzes or other medical items in jittering hands. She picked up her helmet that laid next to her, wiping the visor with her elbow and looked at herself in the reflection.

“You still look good captain.” Hassan chuckled out as he took a seat next to her. Despite the overbearing grin he had on, Fareeha could still spot the tension in his jaw and the slight tremble in his voice. “Your helmet saved your money-maker from any real damage. We had to take it off though just in case to inspect the damage. You did take a couple of hard knocks.”

She nodded dumbly, still staring at her reflection. She looked just as haggard as everyone else. Grime, dirt and dried blood was caked over her torn suit, the plates of armor dented and dirtied and her hair clung to her face haphazardly. As her brain finally recalled what happened the few moments before the world became dark, she took another look around.

She grit her teeth. There was no sight of them.

“They got away huh.” She muttered out, a hush whisper laced with ire. Her grip on her helmet grew tighter. She held it up and rested her forehead onto the visor, closing her eyes once more to focus on the coolness of the visor. The pleasant coolness of it helped ease the frustration that started to build up within her.
She heard Hassan shuffle awkwardly beside her.

“They did, captain.” He admitted softly, nervousness bleeding into the edges of his tone. “They came
out of nowhere, seized the opportunity to get the jump on us after a grueling fight against the
reprogrammed security droids. Most of us barely understood what was happening before they got the
slip on us.”

She nodded, head still resting on her visor, eyes still closed. “They working together?”

“You mean the hacker and these rogues? No, we don’t think so. The droids hit them too. Chidindu
just went through some of the security tapes that were still available. Looked like they were hiding
and trying to sneak their way back out around them.” She heard Hassan shift again and holler away
from her, “Ain’t that right Chidindu?”

“Could you repeat that Hassan?”

“Hacker and the rogues are not working together right?” Hassan reiterated as Chidindu walked over
closer.

“Affirmative. I found security footage prior to when the hacker hacked the system of the fifth floor
and below. It shows that they came after, and it looks like they came in pursuit of the hacker and the
entity known as ‘Reaper’. They showed signs of two people going on a hunt, rather than entering
this facility for a break-in like Reaper and the hacker did.”

A long suffering sigh escaped Fareeha as she digested the newfound information. She straightened
up and cradled the helmet in her arms, opening her eyes and looked at her teammates tiredly. She
shook her head in disbelief. “Again. We couldn’t stop them. Again.”

Hassan frowned, “Reaper and the hacker were long gone before we came captain. And that
Soldier:76 and the sniper had leverage-”

“Leverage? So what?” Fareeha bit out, frustration was clear in her tone. She gripped the helmet
tighter. “You mean the bots? We’re supposed to be able to handle anything. So what if there were
security droids we had to mow down before we faced them?”

Her mind raced through the events that occurred prior to her blackout. All the careless errors she
made, every bullet she wasted, every unnecessary action she took. She needed to be better. She had
to be better. How many more times could she fail? Flashes of past failures and incidents bubbled up.
From her first days in the barracks to the last few years here at Helix Security International. Recalling
failures when she became captain cut painfully deep. She shuddered as she remembered the last
dying breaths of her previous captain, the ugly rasps of Reaper when they fought in the hot deserts
near Dakhla, and the incorrigible picture seared into her mind of the sniper.

Sshhhhhhh.

“-didn’t.” she heard Hassan say. She turned to look at him. “I said, we didn’t fail captain. We didn’t
fail at the Temple of Anubis, the AI was stopped. We didn’t fail at the Dakhla mission. We got the
goods there. And we didn’t fail here. Our mission was to retrieve the essential data, and we have
found all, but one and,” he gestured around at the team that was rummaging through the chaos,
“we’re looking for that final piece.”

She scoffed, “Hassan… Many died at the Temple of Anubis, we had to ask for backup for the
Dakhla mission and in this mission, who knows how much information those rogue agents have
pocketed… Have we truly succeeded? Can we really say that?” she punched the ground and ran a
hand through her hair.

Hassan opened his mouth to retort, nostrils flaring, before he clamped it shut and shook his head, swearing under his breath. He rose up. “I’m going to help find that final box. Sit tight captain and cool off.”

She scoffed again and waved him off.

She should have realized that Soldier:76 was not working alone.

She should not have let her anger get the best of her and rush without thinking.

She should have-

She straightened up, her sudden movement caused her teammates around her to flinch. She swiveled her head to look around and quickly rose up when she spotted her target, ripping off the patches connected to her and ignoring Mahmoud’s protests against her quick movements.

She staggered forward.

“Summeye?”

Summeye turned, a brilliant smile on her face, despite the battered state she and her suit were in. She caught Fareeha in her arms when she stumbled at the last few meters. “Woah, careful there captain.” Summeye moved to situate her on a nearby chair, before sitting down herself on an adjacent chair.

“You’re alive.” Fareeha breathed out. “Is-”

“I’m here captain.” She heard a shuffle next to her and turned to see Nisa kneeling beside her, a hand on her knee. “I’m alive as well.”

Fareeha nodded dumbly. So she was.

But how?

“The canister-” It exploded. She saw the light. They should have died. “How?”

“It wasn’t a grenade.” Nisa explained, a bittersweet smile on her face, “Rather it was a bargaining chip of sorts. The canister is a biotic emitter that lets out a biotic field that heals – that was the bright yellow light you saw. They claimed they could flip a switch and make it pump out poison instead. It worked so well at healing Summeye’s stomach wound, I just- I just believed them. I had to.”

“But it doesn’t, does it?” she sighed out.

Nisa shook her head, regret clear as day in her eyes, “Adaora inspected it afterwards. It only sends out healing streams.”

Fareeha furrowed her brows. Something didn’t add up. She craned her head to the side and motioned Bilal over. “Bilal, did you know about this exchange?” she enquired as he neared. "About the ruse about changing the canister from a healing stream to a poison one?"

“Yes, captain.”

“…Then why did they get away?”

“Captain?”
She ignored Nisa’s questioning plea and honed in on Bilal, keeping him in place with a steady gaze. “You of all people should have realized even if that bluff was true, by the time they traversed near the fifth floor doors they would have been out of range.” He became rigid, rolling his shoulders at her accusatory tone, “If our communication links don’t function at that range, there’s no feasible way they could flip a switch and trigger a change in makeup in the canister at that range either. In fact a weapon like that would have a more limited range. You would’ve known that.” Bilal twitched, almost imperceptibly and a flash of fear crossed his features. She snarled. “You knew.”

She rose up, ready to clock him, only held back by Summeye and Nisa.

“Stop, Captain! Your wounds!” Summeye cried out. Fareeha elbowed her. “My wounds!”

“You traitor! You could’ve taken them out!” she roared out. Bilal took a step back, arms up in surrender as Kirabo and the others rushed over to see the commotion.

“He’s not a traitor cap! He’s not!” Kadir yelled as he came forward in front of her, blocking her view. She tilted her head and struggled against Summeye and Nisa to irritatingly witness Bilal talking calmly to Kirabo.

Kirabo walked towards her, moving Kadir out the way gently and took his place in front of her. “Fareeha… calm down.”

“Calm down? What do you mean calm down? We could’ve taken them out… How much damage did you take from your area?”

Kirabo said nothing.

She shook her head in disbelief and trained her sight on Chidindu. “Chidindu. Could Kirabo and his team effectively take down the two rogues?” Chidindu looked forward and back between her and Kirabo, who shook his head subtly. “Don’t listen to him.” She hissed, “Speak. This is an order from the acting captain of this mission.”

“…Affirmative, captain. Kirabo and his team had approximately an 80-85% chance of taking them down if they intervened.”

“…If?” she muttered, training her gaze back on Kirabo. “…You mean you guys didn’t?”

The accompanying silence after was all the confirmation Fareeha needed.

Her rage grew, her nostrils flared. “Why didn’t you do anything? Who knows what they could have taken? Have you all lost your mind?”

Kirabo lurched forward, held back by Kadir who quickly rose to action. “Don’t undermine us! We’re not stupid, Fareeha! Of course we knew the risk of letting them leave!”

“Then why did you?? Why? WHY-”

“To save you!” Saleh yelled.

She stilled. “What?”

“You were a twitching mess captain.” Saleh choked out, a few tears in his eyes, “Your veins were popping out and you were convulsing, even after Kadir dragged you into the biotic field.” He shuddered as he wiped his tears with his forearm, “You were bending backwards, cap. Fingers curling in strange angles and we just- just… The sniper held out a syringe filled with gold liquid and
said it’d heal you. Said they’d give it to us in exchange for free passage."

“…And you took it?” Fareeha breathed out, “Between saving me and apprehending two dangerous people that may be carrying highly sensitive information…”

Saleh’s little shudders stopped and he looked at her incredulously, almost affronted, “What? Are you saying that it would’ve been better to leave you to die captain?”

She pursed her lips, letting a heavy silence fill in the blanks.

“Captain, what the fuck—”

A bang sounded out from the corner. Menna had just hit a metal cabinet with a broken pipe. “Alright, this conversation is going nowhere. Differences aside, we live with the results now. Does that sound fair, captain?”

She stared at Menna’s challenging gaze defiantly for a few seconds before dropping her head. “…Fine. Let’s find that last compartment and the remnants of any of the devices used by the rogues. The biotic emitter, shell casings, darts, bullets, just whatever any of them left behind. Also, we should get all the security footage and run through the security systems, maybe we can get a feel for what was taken or what the objective was for them.” She looked around at the damage, “I mean, maybe.” She placed back on her helmet, “Come on team, let’s go.” Nobody moved. “I said, let’s go.”

“Yes, captain.” Everyone sounded out, more morose than usual.

The rest of the mission after that was uncomfortable to say the least. As time passed, Fareeha had come to learn that the team was divided. Though the majority had agreed with the plan to let the rogues leave in return for her life, there were a few that agreed with her or believed they could have gotten the slip and taken them down, while leaving the vials of healing liquid undamaged to save her. A two birds with one stone kind of thing.

(Where they didn’t have to choose the man or the mission)

Now the air was thick as everyone was disinclined to speak in fear of another argument erupting. Fareeha herself, busied her time with fiddling with the poison dart that had been embedded in her right shoulder as the tech-savvy members of the group were working to download the last archives of data onto drives to bring back to base to be analyzed. She turned the dart around in her hands, watching the last remnants of poisonous purple liquid slosh around. She snuck a quick peek at Saleh who sat next to her, staunchly ignoring her.

“Hey.” She said lowly, awkwardly, knowing the man was still angry with her.

He didn’t respond.

She sighed and nudged him with her shoulder. He stiffened and turned his head away. Her lips drew into a thin line and against better judgment, continued her efforts to talk to him. “…I’m glad you were only hit with a tranquilizer.”

“You are?” She raised her brow, surprised at the condescending tone in his remark. “That’s rich, coming from you.”

She pursed her lips. “What? What do you mean by that Saleh?”

He didn’t respond and Fareeha sighed.
“Captain?” Fareeha craned her head upwards to look at Menna, who too, look nonplussed with her. “We finally downloaded the last of the archives. Plus, Ahmed already called EVAC to come. With our suits in the state they’re in,” she gestured at the numerous tatters in her own assault armor, “Probably best we get picked up, then go through the radiated fields above us to get to the original rendezvous point, right?”

Fareeha gave a thumbs up as she rose up. She held a hand for a Saleh, who pointedly ignored it and got up by himself. She sighed again and then turned her attention to the rest of the team.

“Come on. Let’s head to the entrance, don’t want to keep them waiting in case they get here early.”

And with that they started to shuffle back up to the surface.

It turns out that the rescue vehicles did arrive earlier than scheduled, and Fareeha was grateful to see the slew of medical professionals that accompanied it. Their presence gave Fareeha an out from dealing with the thick tensions that still permeated within the squad as she abided their commands when they inspected her and her teammates. By the time they finished, they had arrived back on base and off Kirabo and Fareeha were to go have debriefing with their superior officers about the events that occurred within this mission. Just as within the team for this mission, their superior officers also conflicted over what was the proper call to make within this mission, for much of the same reasons as within their team.

Ultimately, no agreement was reached and their superior officers said they would revisit the matter later on and ended the meeting with a short, congratulatory remark to both her and Kirabo for at least succeeding to retrieve the essential data back.

It was the most insincere praise Fareeha had heard in a long while.

Fareeha pursed her lips as she changed back into her civilian wear. The locker room felt colder than usual, with her and Kirabo being only two souls in the room, and Kirabo refusing to chatter in any sort of small talk. She picked up her phone and swiped it open to see if she had any new messages.

3 Messages from Veronica Mueller

She clicked it open.

Good luck Fareehali~

I hope I’m not sending this too late.

P.S One of my patients owns ducklings! They are very soft <3

A grin took over her face. Attached right after was a photo of Angela holding a yellow duckling, a giddy smile plastered wide on her face. The good doctor seemed so young and vibrant, like a child who was told they could eat not one, but two slices of cake for dessert.

“Who’s that?” She flinched, almost dropping the phone. She turned to look at Kirabo. “Someone special?”

“You could say that… Yes.” She admitted, though she was still unsure of what they were, she knew what her feelings on the matter were.

He sighed and turned, eyes weary. “You important to this person?”

Fareeha thought back to all their little interactions, the pet names Angela gave her and how private
their communications seemed. She looked back up at Kirabo, “I… Yes. I’d like to think so.”

Kirabo glared at her, slamming his locker shut. “Is. That. So?”

“Kirabo?” She questioned, wondering why the third degree she was receiving amplified so suddenly. She heard him mutter under his breath as he started to take long strides out of the locker room. She slung her bag over her shoulder quickly, grabbing her jacket off the rack in a rush to follow the man.

“Kirabo, wait.” She grabbed his arm. “What’d I do this time?”

“What’d you do this time?” he said wide-eyed, as if he couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

She nodded meekly.

He crouched down suddenly, burying his head in his arms, groaning. Fareeha crouched right down next to him, hands resting on her bent knees as she waited for him to speak once more. Eventually he rose his head, looking more drained than ever.

“You’re unbelievable, you know that?” he groaned out and she stared back dumbly.

“...I’ll admit, I still don’t understand,” she said tentatively, “But I do get that you’re angry. We don’t see eye to eye this time, but I’m leaving tomorrow and I don’t want to leave without ending on a good note.”

“Is that right?” She nodded earnestly. He shook his head, “But you still think I took the wrong call.”

“Kirabo, you know they’re dangerous-” She started, before pausing and dropping it. There was no need to start this argument a third time. “…What’s done is done. So thank you, Kirabo.”

He sighed, sounding older and wearier than she had ever heard. “No problem, Fareeha.” He scratched his head, “Just... Practice what you preach Fareeha. Stop putting yourself on a different pedestal than your team. You’re just as valuable.”

“Kirabo-”

He held his hand up. “Just think about my words okay… And maybe call up that special someone… maybe then you’ll understand.”

The look on his face gave no room for protest.

“…Okay.”

Angela ticked off another item on her checklist. All essential toiletries was all packed. A yawn escaped her as she folded her clothes. They were finally moving on from the village that they were helping and were scheduled to be picked up early the next morning at the crack of dawn. They would be brought back to base to pick their new missions or be assigned to critical ones if they had the right credentials.

She wondered where she’d be dropped off next.

She stretched her arms as she finished packing and finally checked her phone. A brilliant smile made its way to her lips as she saw Fareeha’s response.

You responded! Are you all done now?
She made a motion to set her phone down when it buzzed once more.

*Yes. Staying the night at Kirabo’s house. Going home tomorrow.*

*I’ve been put under a two-week leave. :(/

She frowned and clicked the call button. It rang three times before Fareeha picked up.

“Two-week leave? Are you hurt, Reeha?” Angela voiced out, concern obvious in her tone. “Are you okay?”

There was no response from Fareeha and Angela would have been inclined to believe that she had accidentally picked up if not for the faint sigh she heard from the other end.

“…Yea, I’m good.”

Her frown deepened, Fareeha’s tone certainly did not inspire confidence.

“I got hit by some biotic weaponry and the medics over here at HSI said all the poison’s been flushed out, but just in case they want me to take it easy. Call them if I notice any side-effects or anything.”

Biotic weaponry?

Wait… did she say *poison*?

“Fareeha—”

She cut her off, “Listen, I don’t—” Angela heard another long-suffering sigh from Fareeha’s end. “I don’t really want to talk about it. Can we talk about something else?”

Angela pursed her lips and nodded, “Of course.”

And Angela spoke, trying to lighten the mood with fun little stories or small interesting facts she heard from her various patients and colleagues. Fareeha responded accordingly, as polite as ever, but she was disconnected. Fareeha seemed distracted, like her mind was off somewhere else as she talked to Angela. The worst was that at times, she sounded downright gloomy, voice tight and flat at the same time. She sounded down and it worried Angela, especially when she said that she hadn’t actually failed the mission, though there were some ‘extraneous circumstances’.

It must be something big if it caused Fareeha, who sounded so proud of taking part in the mission beforehand, sound so depressed about the results after.

Especially if she didn’t actually fail. Or so she claimed.

Angela frowned, heart aching a fraction with every sullen exhale Fareeha committed throughout their conversation.

_________________

Fareeha felt restless.

It had only been three days since she was put under house arrest and she was already itching to go back. With nothing to do and her head swimming with her recent loss, she dived into learning more about them.

Preparing herself in the event of another showdown.
Fareeha was situated right now in her home office, scrounging up every bit of information on them from every corner of the internet. Video tapes of Soldier:76 came easily enough and she ran through them over and over again, a notepad in her hand as she jot down notes on his combat style and preferences. The sniper and Reaper proved to be more elusive, with blurred pictures or sights of them only from a far distance.

Well… there was one irritating, high quality picture of the sniper. They were twiddling their fingers at the camera and Fareeha could feel the arrogant smirk that laid behind that darkened visor.

The most interesting of information she had come across though was that of the hacker. With the information she relayed to her superiors about hearing the reprogrammed droids speak Spanish, and the confirmation of outside sources of whose signature had that specific ASCII code of a sugar skull, HSI determined that the hacker helping Reaper was none other than the hacker collective known as SOMBRA.

It was surprising in the most terrifying of ways.

Not much was known about them, but there was a consensus of sorts between intelligence agencies that they were nothing more than a collective of individuals who dabbled in airing out dirty secrets of high profile companies. Their latest hit was on LumeriCo and it involved leaking the private affairs and illegal misconducts of their CEO Guillermo Potero, ranging from bribery to kickbacks. Though the methods they use to extract the information is illegal, they have always defended their actions to be justified as they were only acting in the public interest. In light of this new information, that there may be ties between SOMBRA and Reaper, and therefore Talon, the actions of the hacker collective may not be as altruistically driven as originally thought.

(And that was a chilling thought. Who knows what dangerous secrets they may have unearthed for Talon.)

Fareeha clicked her pen, rapidly as she sat hunched over, reading through all the materials she gathered. She was going through everything with a fine-toothed comb, cautiously moving forward at a snail’s pace in fear of missing any piece of vital information.

She couldn’t afford to lose next time. Next time, she’d get them. Next time-

Her head whipped around as she registered the sound of her doorbell ringing. She glanced at the clock. It was a little over eleven and she was sure she was still in the proverbial doghouse with her teammates.

So who could it be at this late hour?

She grabbed a metal bat from the closet and snuck slowly towards her front door and peered through the peephole. Her eyes widened and she dropped the metal bat. Standing in front of her door was none other than Angela, a little suitcase in hand. She quickly pulled the door open.

Angela perked up, “Ah, so you are home.”

She blinked a couple times rapidly in succession. She couldn’t believe it, Angela really was in front of her. Fareeha cleared her throat as she gathered her wits.

“What are you doing here?” she finally croaked out. Her eyebrows knit together, “Is everything okay?”

Angela flashed her a disarming smile, “Everything’s fine. I simply took a few days off and felt like spending it with you.”
"With me?"

Angela nodded, reaching out to squeeze her forearm gently. "With you."

Fareeha looked down at where Angela touched her. Her forearm tingled pleasantly from the touch.

“I already brought my bags and it’s quite late already so… please don’t say no?”

She whipped her eyes back onto Angela’s, “Of course. Please.” She said, nodding rapidly before sidestepping out the way. “Come in.”

Angela’s lips curled into a brilliant smile once more. “Perfect.”

She felt rooted at the spot as she watched Angela take off her shoes and hang up her jacket.

“Did you just get back home?”

“Been home for a few days.” She mumbled out.

Angela’s movements halted. Her eyes narrowed as she looked up and down her figure appraisingly. Fareeha turned away, feeling self-conscious as she recalled that she hadn’t taken the time to take care of herself. She could barely remember the last time she ate, let alone changed, so consumed in her research that even her most basic needs were pushed to the backburner. Shame crawled up in her when Angela cupped her face and turned it so she could properly look at her, a wistfully sad look on her face.

“Oh, Fareeha…” Angela said softly, before pulling her into a hug. “You need to take care of yourself better.”

“...I know.” She said resignedly. Everyone she knew had been telling her that as of late in one shape or another. She hugged Angela back, squeezing tightly, resting her head on Angela’s head. “I know.”

Chapter End Notes

Said I would get this chapter up before the year ends. *Looks at time* WOW DID I CUT IT CLOSE LMAO
“Fareeha, that really isn’t necessary.” Angela chided for the fifth time as the woman raced around the room in a hurried attempt to spruce the place up. For the fifth time Fareeha ignored her, mumbling incoherent words under her breath. Currently, Fareeha was engrossed in gathering fallen pillow cushions that rightfully belonged on the sofa. Angela watched as nimble fingers failed for once and witnessed the cushion fall, get picked up, and then fall again.

She frowned and made a motion to stand up from the well-worn club chair when it slipped through Fareeha’s fingers a third time.

Enough was enough.

The steps of her feet muted by the thin carpet below and Angela moved as silently as a shadow. Not that it really mattered at this point how she approached Fareeha, a charging bull could bust through the wall and wreak havoc on the premises and Fareeha, so focused on her job and so out of it from lack of sleep, would have noticed the destruction it caused only hours later.

“Fareeha.” The woman failed to respond, barely registering her presence as she fluffed the pillows up. Angela’s eyes narrowed and she knelt down, now eye-level with her. She repeated herself, firmness overlaying her worried tone. “Fareeha.”

Again, Fareeha ignored her, now laying out a thick blanket on top of the twin-sized bedsheets she had fastened onto the couch.

“Fareeha.” She said as she reached out, intent to stop her in her tracks. She recoiled when Fareeha whipped her hand back in surprise the instant she made contact, a frazzled look on her face. She saw shock, panic and the tiniest hint of fear in her wide-eyed stare that made her heart ache. When recognition entered into Fareeha’s eyes, Angela reached out once again, cautiously halting just shy of touching her hands. Waiting for permission.

And when Fareeha finally nodded, so delicately that Angela almost missed it, she immediately took both of Fareeha’s hands in her own. She drew circles with the pads of her thumb on her trembling hands as she held on to them tightly in a small gesture of comfort.

“Fareehali.” She crooned, making her voice as soothing as possible, “Thank you.”

She had expected her expression of gratitude to relax the woman. Instead Angela was greeted with furrowed brows and a slight cock of the head.

“For what?” Fareeha uttered, voice still cracked from days of disuse.

“For making my bed.” She clarified, giving her hands a comforting squeeze.

Fareeha stared at her dumbly, blinking owlishly before they widened in understanding. She ripped her hands out of Angela’s grasp and waved them in front of her.

“No- I- You- That’s not…” she slumped forwards and took Angela’s hands back, fiddling with them as she stared at Angela dead on. “This is my bed. You can sleep in my bedroom.”
Angela’s eyes narrowed and her response immediate.

“No.”

How could Fareeha ever think she would take her bed? This was her house and she was the guest. If anyone would be sleeping on the couch, it would her.

“Fareeha. I will not take your bed.”

“Angela, it’s okay really. I’m used to sleeping on the couch.” Angela opened her mouth to protest, but Fareeha continued on, rambling forward, “Are you afraid my bed is dirty? It’s not. I haven’t slept there for ages. Been holed up in my study room, usually fall asleep face first on the desk there and-”

“Researching yourself to exhaustion?” Fareeha flinched at the low tone and the steel that Angela was sure was seeping into her gaze. “Do tell me how that’s conducive to your recovery.”

“It’s for an important… cause….” she trailed of lamely as Angela’s eyes bored into hers disapprovingly. She shriveled under Angela's admonishing gaze.

Angela breathed deeply through her nose and worked the tension out of her jaw, letting her frustration melt away before speaking.

“You silly, silly girl.” She finally whispered out and reached out to cup Fareeha’s face.

She brushed her left thumb over Fareeha’s udjat, tracing over its lines. Fareeha sighed at the contact, leaning into her touch as Angela continued her ministrations. Under normal circumstances, the way Fareeha melted underneath her touch would have sent a rush of butterflies straight to her gut. However right now, all Angela could notice were the bags underneath Fareeha’s eyes. They were heavy and dark to the point that her udjat seemed to sag underneath its weight. Still, they were nothing compared to the near-suffocating despondency that she saw so clearly reflected in the normally vibrant brown eyes.

“You were placed on two week leave to recuperate and look at you. You’re hurting yourself more. When was the last time you had a proper night’s sleep? The last time you showered and got yourself clean? Had a proper meal?”

She stifled a whimper that threatened to rise from the back of her throat when Fareeha’s eyes flitted away in shame and she hunched down and hugged herself in a measly effort to hide from Angela’s eyes. Her body instinctively moved and she swept Fareeha up in a hug. She held her tightly, whispering sweet assurances and rubbed soothing circles to console the woman on things she did not even know, holding her tighter still when the faint trembling would not stop.

She waited to feel the tension leave her shoulders, for the faint protests to fade away to small agreeing nods, and for her breathing to have relaxed. Only then did Angela pull back and cup Fareeha’s face once more to look at her. “You’re all tuckered out ‘Reeha. I think it’s time you go take a shower and get ready for bed?”

“Angela, there’s still things I need to do.”

“Fareeha.”

“Angela.” Fareeha whined.

Angela looked at her unimpressed. “I am invoking my right as a doctor.”
“But you’re not my doctor.”

“Fareeha.”

“And this is my house.”

“Fareeha.”

Fareeha looked at her defiantly. Angela crossed her arms and raised a brow.

“…Fine, but only if I sleep here and you take my bed.”

"That's not happening."

"Well then no deal."

Angela scrunched her face. At this rate daybreak would hit before the end of the argument was in sight. She gritted her teeth and grumbled at how difficult it was proving to make Fareeha keel and just go and sleep on her own damn bed. She wished the woman wasn’t so stubborn sometimes, as endearing as it was in other situations.

Time for Plan B.

“Okay. I'll take the bed.”

Fareeha's eyes widened in shock. "Huh? Did you say okay? You'll take the bed?"

Angela leaned in and pressed her forehead to Fareeha’s, “Yes, I'll take the bed. Now go take a shower okay?”

Fareeha nodded, rose up and wandered off to what Angela presumed was her bedroom. She had turned to look at Angela a few times, hesitant in leaving despite agreeing on her own volition. Angela quickly shooed her off with her hands and a teasing remark.

“The shower is more for me than you, y’know. You really stink, stinky.”

Fareeha rolled her eyes and stuck out her tongue, before she went out of view and the door went shut.

The instant Fareeha was out of sight and Angela’s ears picked up the faint sounds of running water she slumped forward, letting her face slip into a somber look.

She had known something was wrong the instant Fareeha had opened the door for her.

Fareeha’s eyes were alert, wide-eyed in a way that made Angela’s heart lurch to her throat. The woman seemed skittish and her gaze was filled with pure disbelief and worry. She had blinked rapidly and Angela could hear the cogs turning in her head whether Angela was a mirage her nutrient-deprived body conjured up or if she was actually there in front of her. Angela had feigned normalcy, sliding in a small touch to her forearm to help Fareeha along, to show her that she really, truly, was there in the flesh. She flashed what she hoped was an optimistic smile, though she felt the corners slip when Fareeha nodded stupidly, some sort of desperation leaking into her eyes as she trailed Angela’s frame when she went to take off her jacket. And when Fareeha admitted she had been home for a few days, all forms of false pleasantry halted. She had stilled and turned, drinking in the sight of a Fareeha who had been home for a ‘few days’.

Fareeha who was supposed to be at home resting, recovering, and recuperating looked so worn, so
thin, so small. She never thought she’d see the day where Fareeha would feel small and now she wished it had never come.

But she would never wish she didn’t come.

Angela shook herself out of her spiraling thoughts and slapped her cheeks, grimacing at the light sting it left. She needed to compose herself, as hard of a task at was when Fareeha looked like that.

But she had to. For her.

Angela picked herself up and walked to the kitchen, intent on fixing Fareeha a quick meal. When she opened the fridge door, Angela scrunched her face and held back a retch at the stench. She had been expecting at least a dozen eggs or some cold cuts, but the only items in the fridge was half-eaten takeout in poorly reclosed paper boxes, expired butter and a half-full glass bottle of milk. She checked the label on the milk. Two days from expiring.

Angela shook her head in disbelief.

This was no way to live.

She quickly scoured through the cupboards to find the garbage bags and hurriedly shoved the takeout boxes into it, holding her breath the whole while. She quickly fastened it and set it aside, relieved that the smell was now contained.

Angela strided over to her carry-on, quickly unzipping the bag open and rummaged inside. Thank god she came somewhat prepared and pulled out a block of chocolate and a few biscuits she bought on the way over.

_____________________________________________________

She appraised Fareeha as she got out of the bathroom.

The woman looked fresher.

Her hair was no longer matted, greasy, and clinging to her face miserably. Her body was clothed with fresh clothes, instead of grimy sweat-stained shirt and joggers. Moreover, though exhaustion still permeated around her, it was to a lesser degree and she seemed far more relax than thirty minutes ago. Even a little shine of life glimmered in her previously dead-looking eyes. A hot shower may not fix everything, but it was a start, and a good one at that.

“Hello. Fancy meeting you here.” Angela chirped out, before slurping her hot chocolate loudly, wiggling her toes under the sheets and did a little shoulder shake. Her eyes crinkled as Fareeha breathed out a laugh from her antics. There was so much she wanted to ask, but she suspected Fareeha had been in a morose mood since the moment she got back and so she’d rather have her focus on happier things for now. Have a little moment of ease and get her back on track. She beckoned Fareeha closer with a wave of her hand. “Come, come. Let’s have a chat, stranger.”

Fareeha grinned as she walked forwards, head cocked slightly, “Didn’t anyone ever tell you not to talk to strangers?”

“Mmmm, people certainly have.” Angela said sagely with a nod, before shrugging, “But I think they’ll understand why I just had to try my luck this time around.”

“And why’s that?” Fareeha questioned raised the sheets up to slip in.
Angela gazed at Fareeha, lips slowly curling into a lazy smile, “Well, it’s not every day a stranger as pretty as you walks by.”

She saw Fareeha go rigid, turn red and look down shyly, pursing her lips in a poor attempt to smother the flattered smile that was peeking out. When she looked up back at Angela, undoubtedly seeing her somewhat smug grin, she shook her head good-naturedly.

“Please, if you’re going to sweet-talk me at least make it realistic. I’m not exactly looking my best right now.”

“Don’t hate,” a mischievous glint entered her eye, “I said the first thing that popped into my brain to get you into bed.”

Fareeha turned redder at that. “W-what?” she croaked out.

Angela tacked on a faux-innocent look. “What? I just want to talk to you for a while,” she patted the space on the bed next to her, “So get up on here.”

Fareeha shook her head again and nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

She settled in quickly before turning her attention to the bedside table. She pointed at the mug of hot chocolate and plate of biscuits next to it, with a questioning raise of the brow. Angela raised one back.

“Of course it’s for you. Any other pretty strangers around?” She bumped Fareeha’s shoulder lightly with her own. “Go on. Try it.”

“Alright, alright you eager beaver, I was just checking.” She chuckled out before picking up the mug and taking a sip. Angela watched proudly as Fareeha closed her eyes and groaned in satisfaction. “Oh, that is good.”

“Of course it is. I am Swiss.” She said, only half-jokingly.

“I didn’t even know I had chocolate.”

“You didn’t, I bought some on the way over.”

“I see.” Fareeha said and took another sip. They sat side-by-side in silence, drinking sips of hot chocolate. Angela played oblivious to the stealthy, stolen looks at her by Fareeha. She would wait for Fareeha to speak her mind. A few minutes strolled on by before Fareeha cleared her throat.

“Angela.” She turned to look at Fareeha who looked down at her mug of hot chocolate, swirling the contents absent-mindedly, “…You haven’t asked me what happened this whole time.”

She made an agreeing hum.

Fareeha pursed her lips and nodded once as she found the courage to straighten up and look Angela square in the eyes to say what she actually wanted to say. “You’re not going to ask me what’s going on?”

“Would you talk even if I asked?” she fired back gently. The sheepish look on Fareeha’s face was all the answer she needed. “I thought so.”

Angela chewed her bottom lip, wondering if she should continue. She appraised Fareeha, who seemed willing to open up if her relaxed posture was anything to go by. She cautiously moved
forward.

“… But if I had to guess, it probably has to do with whatever is in your study room.”

Fareeha winced next to her, "That obvious huh?"

"May I ask why?" she carefully prodded.

"...Ever heard of Soldier:76, Reaper, SOMBRA and the sniper some call the ‘Shrike’?" Fareeha swirled her drink as she spoke.

Angela took a sip of her hot chocolate. She had, they were all infamous outlaws. She hadn’t met any of them per say, but she had heard the rumors and seen the wanted posters.

"Well, guess who had the 'lucky' chance to meet them all?" A harsh chuckle came out of Fareeha, dark and ugly, “Me. And nothing to show for it. All of them got away.”

“Oh Fareeha.” Angela put a hand on Fareeha's shoulder, squeezing it comfortingly. She took a cursory glance at Fareeha’s frame. “I’m sure you and your team did everything you guys could have possibly done.”

Fareeha worked her jaw.

“Did we?” she muttered under her breath, words spoken so lowly that Angela almost didn’t hear her. Her eyebrows knit. “What do you mean by that?”

Fareeha pursed her lips and looked at her with an unreadable face. She sighed and shook her head.

“Nothing. I’m just tired.” She cracked her neck. “We’ll get them next time. That’s why I’ve been researching. That’s why-” she halted, stiffening, her next words choppy and stilted. “When I was in the bathroom... Did you-... Did you look? In my study room?”

There was an undercurrent of fear in her tone and saw a growing panic rise in Fareeha.

Angela looked affronted. “No. I’d never break your trust like that. Never.”

Fareeha exhaled in relief, the tension leaving her shoulders as Angela’s words sank in.

“Right.” she scratched her head, "Sorry. That was a mean accusation. I'm still a little checked out I guess from lack of sleep."

“It was.” Angela conceded, regretting her admission when Fareeha winced. She had been hurt by the accusation, but she could understand it considering Fareeha's addled state. "So why don't you make it up to me, the gracious lady who has decided to forgive your stab at her character.” she said in an exaggeratedly haughty voice, hoping to lighten the mood. She took another purposely loud sip, this time far longer and far more obnoxious. "I'm waiting."

When Fareeha flashed a lopsided smile and mimicked her tone, she knew her gamble had worked. “Right, right. I'm terribly sorry for my rudeness, miss. What can I do to repay you?”

“I'm glad you asked.” Angela set her cup of hot chocolate aside, turned so her stomach was on the bed and wiggled backwards to go deeper into the covers. She motioned Fareeha to do the same. Fareeha abided to her request and wiggled into the covers the way she did, mirroring her position. They were now both huddling pillow under themselves as they laid on their stomachs, heads turned so they could look at one another.
“Well?” Fareeha enquired, "This cannot be the request."

Angela smiled, propping her head on her elbow and ran her other hand through Fareeha’s hair, “No. The request is for you to entertain me.”

"And how should I go about doing that?"

"Partake in the most time-honored traditions of sleepovers. Gossipping."

“Like a bunch of teenagers?” Fareeha deadpanned out.

“Like a bunch of teenagers. You in?”

Fareeha’s mouth quirked, "I'm in."

Fareeha stirred, awoken by echoing notes of the call to prayer sang from the nearby Mosque. She hugged the pillow she held in her arms tighter, curling into it as she listened to the words sung by the muezzin. She wasn’t a religious person by any means, or at least practicing, but Fareeha could not deny that she gathered a sort of strength from hearing the call to prayer. Throughout her entire existence, there was not a moment that she was not awoken by the stretched notes and without fail, the dragged notes imbued her with a sense of vigor.

There was also the fact that it was one of the most powerful links she still had to her mother.

Of all the memories she had of her mother, her strongest would be witnessing her mother pray the rare times she’d come back home. Fareeha would silently watch her mother stand, kneel, and prostrate as she prayed and recited phrases and verses all in the name of Allah. And there was something about seeing her mother, the most powerful woman she knew, who seemed larger than life at times, submit that made Fareeha believe that there may very well be a higher power.

…She hoped she was doing okay. After that one letter telling her that ‘hey, guess what? I’m not actually dead’ she had received no other proof of life. No more letters or secret visits or hints of her whereabouts or what sort of injustice she was combating against. The thought was troubling. Who on earth was her mother chasing that she couldn’t spare the time to see her even once?

Or worse, maybe her mother couldn’t afford to contact her.

Fareeha mumbled a quick prayer for her mother's safety, before lifting her head and extending her arm to grab the nearby mug to quench her dry throat. She blanched as the liquid touched her tongue. She had expected cool water, and instead was greeted with something sweet, thick and… chocolatey? She looked into the mug, swishing the brown liquid around, eyebrows knitting in confusion. She blinked a couple times, before yesterday’s events came back to her.

Angela.

Heat rushed to her face and she quickly stumbled out of the bed. Chocolate sloshed onto her shirt, but Fareeha was far too preoccupied to notice. She peered over at the other side of the bed shyly.

Empty.

She reached over and touched the covers, pressing it into the bed. Definitely empty, unless Angela has found a way to transform her body to become paper thin. She looked under the covers.
Nope.

She looked around the room and peeked into the bathroom, even pulling back the shower curtain.

No sign of the woman.

She tapped her finger to her chin, before her eyes lit up and she snapped her fingers. Fareeha set the mug aside and tiptoed out, through her hall. Her movements became a slow crawl as she approached the couch, adopting a snail’s pace when she heard the distinct sound of deep breaths and light snoring. She peered slowly over the couch and found her target.

There was Angela, sleeping soundly on the couch, covers half-on her as she laid dead to the world.

Fareeha rapped on the couch lightly with her fingers in annoyance. She distinctly recalled winning the argument as to who would sleep on her lumpy, old couch. Yet, there Angela was on the couch. She looked around the room, a sneaking suspicion growing in her. Her eyes narrowed as she spotted Angela’s bag.

…She definitely didn’t recall Angela’s bag ever being in her bedroom.

Her eyes narrowed further and stared at Angela's sleeping form, an accusatory look on her face. This sneaky woman was never going to sleep on her bed. She had this whole thing all planned from the start. She should have known something was up when Angela relented so easily in the argument, and she should have known better than to trust that beguiling smile and the lure of sweet, delicious, Swiss-made hot chocolate that sealed the deal and got Fareeha back slide into her own bed.

She peered at the devious, underhanded woman, attempting to glare daggers, cursing her and her ability to speak like she was singing lullabies and the little soothing strokes of her fingers through her hair that caused Fareeha’s eyelids to grow heavy. The longer she stared though, the more her frown disappeared, until it was finally replaced with a dopey half-smile.

Fareeha held back a chuckle as she carefully moved stray hair that had been caught at the side of Angela’s mouth. She breathed hard through her nose at seeing the famous doctor, known for her beauty and grace on the field, sleep with her hair flying all over her face, snoring admittedly quite loudly and causing a puddle of drool to pool next to her face. Spotting a chance for a small revenge, Fareeha quickly disappeared back into her room, retrieved her phone and came back. She checked her settings, ensuring everything was on mute and flash was indeed off, before tiptoeing as slowly as possible next to her and grinning wildly as she took a selfie of them both.

She stared at the photo with a silly grin, knowing how pissed off Angela might be with her capturing her in such a disheveled state.

It was probably too much to make it her profile pic.

Fareeha propped her head on her hand as she looked at Angela, disbelief bursting within her.

It was ridiculous.

Angela was here.

Angela was really here.

Fareeha pinched herself. Angela didn’t disappear. This wasn’t some sort of fevered dream.

The woman was really here.
Wow.

She held her breath as Angela grumbled and nuzzled further into her pillow. She exhaled as Angela stopped moving and rubbed her face, hit with the realization that she was being a literal creep, watching a woman sleep and even took a picture of her.

Perhaps she should delete that photo.

…But only after she showed Angela.

Fareeha rose up as Angela murmured once more, and as she did so her eyes landed on her study room. She had been close to uncovering another location in mapping out Soldier:76’s movements throughout the past year. She pursed her lips as she looked back at Angela.

She was still asleep.

Fareeha rocked back and forth on her heels, strumming her fingers on the side of her thigh.

…It would only be a few minutes.

She walked to the door, turned the knob and entered the study room.

_________________

Angela crossed her arms.

She’d woken up pleased, despite the small ache of her back from sleeping on a stiff couch. She had risen up eagerly, her steps had a little light skip as she pranced off to peer into Fareeha’s bedroom, expecting to see an exhausted woman sprawled on the bed. The wide smile she had slipped when she saw nothing but air on top or in-between the sheets. She furrowed her brows and padded along to the bathroom. The door was wide open and gave her a perfect view of the mirror which showed that there was not a soul in there either.

Her good mood quickly soured as she realized there was only one room she had not checked.

So now here she was, glaring at the closed door of the study room.

She knocked, loudly and waited, tapping her feet in agitation as the seconds ticked by. She heard the doorknob rattle and took a step back as the door slowly swung open, an owlish looking Fareeha popping out from the doorframe and into view.

“You’re really not going to take it easy are you?” Angela said grumpily, hands on her hips.

“I, uh, slept last night?” Fareeha sounded off as she exited the room completely and closed the door behind her. “Besides, you were asleep and I have to do something. I hate being unproductive.”

Angela stepped in closer, eyes vicious, “And ruining your body is productive?”

“I slept really well last night,” Fareeha protested, “Just studying.”
“Fareeha. Studying and researching takes a toll on the body.” Angela said, frustration building to the point where she stomped her foot on the ground in exasperation with a huff. She glared when Fareeha snorted at her actions.

Fareeha shrugged sheepishly, "Sorry. It was kind of cute."

"Do not undermine me right now. And don't think switch the subject." Angela added after a pause.

Fareeha rolled her eyes, “I wasn't-Oh come on Angela, it was only for a little while. I'm fine.”

Angela looked at her unimpressed and wholly unconvinced. The wild look that Fareeha had last night was starting to come back and when Angela glanced down, seeing her shirt stained with hot chocolate, she pursed her lips disapprovingly. Fareeha's eyes trailed downwards, following Angela's line of sight. She had the decency to look mildly embarrassed as she fiddled with her shirt.

"In my defense this happened before I went into the study room."

Angela sauntered closer, like a predator hunting its prey.

“Did it now?” she said, enunciating each word dangerously as she pressed onto Fareeha. She felt Fareeha try to backpedal, pressing herself to the wall like she wanted to melt into it, trying to create as much space between her and Angela. "And you're all fine now? In fact, brimming with energy?"

“Y-yes.” She squeaked out as Angela gripped her hips to keep her in place.

Angela lifted one hand, gently caressing Fareeha's cheek on the way up. Heat blossomed in Fareeha and her eyes tracked her hands movement in anticipation, then confusion, then scrunched shut as she flicked Fareeha on her forehead. Fareeha hissed and rubbed the wound.

“Then how about we use all that pent up energy to go out instead? We should get some breakfast and then some groceries after since you have no food in this whole apartment.” She groused out before raising her brow at Fareeha biting her cheek, suppressing a smile. “What?"

“Nothing it's just…” Fareeha scratched the side of her cheek, “It kind of just looks like your reaction is being fueled by hunger... I can't believe you're just hangry.”

Angela looked at Fareeha incredulously. It was like she had a death wish right now. Every word she said did nothing but make Angela's blood pressure rise further.

Hangry? Fareeha thought she was hangry?

Angela looked at her flatly.

“No, my dear. I am not 'hangry'.” She gripped Fareeha’s chin and pulled her down closer, cool expression on her face. “I simply haven’t had my coffee yet. So I implore you not to test me right now.”

"Yes ma'am."

The first thing Fareeha put on her grocery list as Angela showered and got herself ready was to buy a whole sack of coffee beans.

Chapter End Notes
Aye, what up. I'm back.
Next chapter up in a week.
“Just a little farther. I promise.” Fareeha reassured as they walked through yet another narrow alleyway, evading oncoming traffic and slews of pedestrians moving to and from places. Though Fareeha was thankful the day was cooler than usual, this was Cairo and even when it was cool, it was never that cool. To Angela’s credit, despite plodding along for some time without any sort of explanation as to where Fareeha was bringing her, face already turning slightly pink from the blistering glare of the sun, she continued to trail behind her without a single quip and a pleasant smile on her face.

The large coffeepot filled with homebrewed coffee that Fareeha ordered specifically for only Angela’s consumption during breakfast probably helped as well.

In any case, Angela was in a far more amicable mood now and Fareeha was intent to bolster it by showing her the sights and sound of Cairo that she had yet to see. During breakfast, Fareeha almost choked on her food when Angela confessed that in all the time she had spent in Egypt, Angela had done nothing but work or sleep. Not once did she visit any of the incredible offerings Cairo had, nor did she seem to exhibit any inclination too.

Fareeha was both shocked and affronted on the two latter points.

(And now was determined to fix that glaring error in Angela’s judgment)

Her face brightened as her destination came into view and the familiar sounds and smells that accompanied it. She stopped and jutted a thumb eagerly in its direction, peering down expectantly at Angela, who had finally sidled up next to her. She tried to keep the eagerness out of her voice, a difficult task considering her excitement was brimming.

“Well?”

“…You brought me to a bazaar, Reeha?” Angela asked, bemusement in her tone, “I may be a foreigner, but this is a little too touristy even for me.”

Fareeha blinked as the words sunk in, smile wiped clean off.

Did Angela really think she would make her trek over thirty minutes, under the hot Egyptian sun, just to arrive at some gimmicky bazaar targeted towards tourists and chumps?

That that was the best that she, Fareeha Amari, proud citizen of Cairo, could do?

Bring her to a tourist trap?

She studied Angela who stared back at her unimpressed, a small pout now featuring itself on her lips. Perhaps she did.

A grin broke out of her and Fareeha had to laugh at the incredulity of it all, smothering her laughs with the back of her hand when Angela squinted up at her petulantly at her reaction. A gentle smile crossed her lips as her laughter tapered out.
“You insult me, Angela” Fareeha murmured, dropping her hand down to tuck a stray strand of Angela’s hair behind her ear. Her smile turned into a half smirk as Angela reddened in a way that was most definitely not caused by the sun. “This is not any bazaar… This,” she gazed back at the bustling entrance, “is Khan el-Khalili.”

“Khan al-Khalili?” Angela sounded out and Fareeha bit back a grin.

“Khan el-Khalili.” Fareeha corrected gently, “It is one of the, if not the, oldest souk markets still in existence in Egypt. Cairenes and travelling traders have bartered in these grounds since centuries ago.”

Angela frowned, still not convinced, “Looks like a tourist trap to me. The building is wonderful, I admit, but the people piling in and out look more-or-less like myself. Decidedly not Egyptian.”

Fareeha turned to look at the multitudes of people Angela was staring at, decked in khaki shorts and polo shirts, snapping photos incessantly and gawking at cheap trinkets. Fareeha grimaced as she witnessed the store owner talk to them. He was friendly, charming and fairly good looking. A most dangerous combination.

Fareeha watched as he spoke, no doubt in her mind that he was spinning wonderful fables over his merchandise, rehearsed to sound like the most beautiful of prose and delivered enough times to sound natural. She winced internally as she saw a familiar glimmer in the eyes of the tourists. They had been charmed and she had a sinking feeling that they would be spending a far more dollars than they had expected themselves too.

“Story of my life.” She muttered to herself, knowing all too well how many times she had been conned by them as a young child. Her old house had a basement filled with nonsensical items that she never touched after bringing them back home.

Angela held a curious look in her eye, “Hmmm?”

Fareeha jutted her chin at the direction of the tourists, already exchanging money for a few little trinkets.

“That. I’ve tried my hand a couple times in this market and let me tell you, only very recently did I finally stop ending up being a bit of a sucker.”

“So you thought it wise to bring me here?” Angela quipped, mirth in her eyes, “A market where you, a native, got conned until only very recently?”

The edges of her lips lifted upwards at the jibe.

“Just trying to help my local economy by getting you to spend your hard-earned cash, Angela.”

Angela rolled her eyes, “Please, as if. This market isn’t going to get one cent from me.”

Fareeha simply looked at Angela, concealing her skepticism at Angela's confidence with an understanding smile. The truth on the matter is that Angela didn’t know -couldn’t know- better, and for that Fareeha couldn’t blame her. On the outside, Khan el-Khalili did indeed look like one large tourist trap. The main streets were filled with an inordinate amount of junk and poorly crafted items, a place to purchase nonsensical items for coworkers back home.

But Fareeha knew better and other citizens of Cairo knew better.
There was so much more when one dived deeper.

In the little nooks and crannies, in the smallest of alleyways of the old souk, was where the jewels of the markets were. Finely crafted rarities that not even the good doctor could possibly keep away from.

“Famous last words.” Fareeha whispered under her breath, earning her a light smack to the shoulder as Angela’s ears somehow picked up her hushed words. She peered down at Angela, an eyebrow raised up challengingly. “What? I’m just saying.”

Angela bumped Fareeha’s shoulder with her own, “…Let’s say you’re right and I’ll be conned out of all my savings… What makes you think that I’ll go then?”

“Because I’m taking you.” She said breezily.

“…Shut up.” Angela mumbled as she turned away slightly, arms crossed.

A warm feeling pooled in her gut at the fact that Angela did not deny her claim. She tapped Angela on the shoulder, waiting for her to turn back once more before offering her arm out to her.

“Are you ready to get lost in Khan el-Khalili together?”

“Get lost?” Angela questioned as she hooked her arm around Fareeha’s. “How big is Khan el-Khalili?”

Fareeha chuckled at the question, not truly having an answer.

Even she had yet to explore all Khan el-Khalili had to offer.

Angela recanted all her earlier reservations about this place.

When Fareeha spoke of the greatness of this old souk, she had believed her to be exaggerating. When they took their first steps into the bazaar, and Angela was assaulted by the masses of bodies, cacophonies of men, women and omnics bartering cheap goods that glittered shamelessly, she thought Fareeha was definitely exaggerating. Either that, or she was blinded by the fondness she had for the market from her frequent visitations that began since she was a young child.

But then Fareeha took her through one cramped alleyway after another and pulled her along into seemingly innocuous stores that lined up these quieter streets and Angela realized that she owed Fareeha an apology.

The handiwork of these little shops, hidden away from the public eye, was impeccable. She had touched the softest of rugs, inlaid with elaborate designs that were stained with rare dyes, appreciated carved murals, with shimmering paints that made the art seem to dance in the light, and everything else in-between. She rubbed her thumb over the engravings of a brass pyramid she currently held in her hands, impressed with the smoothness of the curves and delicate complexity of the details before carefully placing it back down where she found it, keenly aware of the watchful eyes of the shopkeeper.

“I can give you a discount.” He said suddenly, in a seemingly offhanded fashion. A ruse, Angela deduced, noting the wily smile on his lips and the twinkle in his eye.

Angela cocked her head, a polite smile on her face. “That’s very kind, but I’m simply perusing right
“But you like?” he pressed and Angela could practically hear him formulate a plan to trap her.

“Yes, but the problem is that I seem to be liking a lot of things in this bazaar.”

“Oh?” he said breezily, “Then I suppose you should be careful.”

“I will, and I’ll start with being careful around you.”

His eyes widened for a fraction, before they crinkled in a genuine manner as a few chuckles escaped him. “Smart woman.” He breathed out, slapping his thigh, “Maybe I’ll actually give you a discount if you do decide to buy anything.”

Angela laughed and nodded, before turning away to look for Fareeha. A fond smile crossed her lips when she found her across the store, helping pick up items that had fallen from another person’s stand. By the time she neared the two, Fareeha had finished helping the man and he was off wheeling his cart to another section.

“You never take a break, do you?” she remarked nonchalantly when she sidled up next to her, “Always helping people.”

Fareeha stooped down so they were eyelevel, a grin that was far too charming on her face. Angela thanked god it was hot and she could blame the redness of her cheeks on the blistering heat.

“Is that a problem?”

Angela swallowed hard. “N-no.”

“Good.” Fareeha straightened up, gesturing around them with a finger. “You want to keep looking around?”

Angela nodded, afraid to speak lest her words failed her again. Fareeha grinned and guided Angela through the throngs of people and through more twisting alleyways. Soon, they found themselves at another section of the bazaar, this time an area filled with rows upon rows of perfume stores. Every conceivable scent hung in the air and their clothes as they walked through. From the fresh scents of citrus and mint to the spicier notes of cinnamon and aniseed. The brightly colored stores enticed potential consumers with their uniquely designed bottles and jars. The sellers in the area were dressed well, mirroring the lavishness of their products, and Angela had to wonder if that was by mere coincidence or by sheer design.

Yet not even the sweetest of perfumes could sway Angela to leave her current position, which was being pressed close to Fareeha as they roamed the market. Fareeha had slung around her after she had bumped into a person for the third time, a protective gesture to keep Angela safe and avoid any more collisions.

Angela had not breathed one word of protest, content on enjoying the sudden proximity.

And unsurprisingly, Fareeha’s plan did work. The woman did possess a purposeful gait and naturally imposing presence that caused crowds to unconsciously part for her. Now that it was clear that Angela was not only with her, but important to her, the sea of people made way for her as well.

Angela never knew it was possible to actually have breathing space in such a busy place until now.

She also would never reveal that the reason she was bumping into so many people in the first place
was because she had been thoroughly distracted by Fareeha. That she had been inattentive to the ongoing traffic around her as her eyes tracked the movements of Fareeha’s lips as she made casual remarks about the shops they bypassed.

“-gela?”

Angela’s eyes flitted up to Fareeha’s eyes, confusion blooming as she saw concern by the furrow of her brows and the slight downward curvature of her mouth. Her confusion grew as Fareeha swiftly maneuvered them to a small corner of the market, removed her arm and held her there with a steady gaze.

“I’ll come back. Wait here.” She said and then walked briskly off.

Angela blinked, not comprehending what just happened and by the time she decided to protest, Fareeha was long gone and nowhere to be seen. With nothing to do, Angela rocked on the heels of her feet and observed random people in boredom.

She shifted and checked the watch on her wrist when the minutes stretched on and Fareeha had yet to return. Worry started to creep in. Perhaps Fareeha was finding difficulty in returning. Fareeha had said that Khan el-Khalili was large and even she was prone to becoming lost.

Angela hoped that wasn’t the case.

She hadn’t been paying attention to where they were going and if Fareeha texted her to meet her somewhere they had been, she surely wouldn’t be able to navigate herself there without taking more than a few wrong turns at best. At worst, she would become utterly lost and they would have to regroup outside the market.

She scanned the crowd once more, desperate to locate her amongst the crowd of shoppers.

Relief flooded her when she saw Fareeha in the distance. She was about to wave and holler when she noticed something peculiar. Fareeha was simply standing, staring at a wall plastered with faded brown fliers. She wondered which of the numerous fliers had side-tracked her. A small frown made its way on her face when she noted that Fareeha’s expression seemed somewhat somber as she bored holes into a particular poster near the bottom. At the distance she was at it was difficult to discern exactly what were the contents of the poster, but judging from the familiar format, she made an educated guess it was a wanted poster.

Angela bit inside the side of her cheek.

This was supposed to be a fun day away from reality.

Angela was about to take a step forward, prepared to make her way to the distracted woman when Fareeha got out of her reverie and turned to walk back to her. She waved at Fareeha, whose stride became faster as she noticed Angela beckoning her.

When Fareeha finally stepped in front of her, Angela’s eyes flitted downwards to the items she held in her hands. Fareeha lightly tapped the water bottle onto Angela’s forehead, and all complaints about the action disappeared from her tongue as she relished the feeling of an ice-cold bottle on her head. She hadn't realized how hot she was until now, suddenly painfully aware of the sweat that was dripping down her brow. She took the water bottle from Fareeha and uncapped it eagerly, taking large gulps, enjoying the sensation of cold water rushing down to her stomach.

“Feeling better?”
Angela looked at Fareeha curiously. “Yes, but I don’t understand why you shoved me to a small corner of the market. I could’ve went with you.”

Fareeha leant on the wall next to them as she answered, concern still obvious in her tone. “You were turning pretty red, especially in the last half hour or so. I was getting worried you might be dehydrated or were feeling the beginnings of a heatstroke, so I thought it was better to make you stay here in the shade while I went to get the water.”

The last half hour?

Oh, when Fareeha started to wrap her arm around her.

Angela flushed harder, wondering how she could get out of this predicament. On one hand, lying and agreeing would put her in the clear, but on the other it would do nothing but make Fareeha worry more.

“I’m fine, I’m simply really pale, so…” Angela cleared her throat, “It just looks… bad.” She finished lamely.

"Riiight."

The next thing she knew, there was a shawl shoved in front of her face. She took it from Fareeha’s hands and turned it over in her hands. The first thing she noticed was that it was soft, made of thin, light cloth and stained with striking shades of red. Upon closer inspection, she saw the fine details woven into it, little speckles of intricacies.

“It’s gorgeous.” Angela breathed out.

“And it’s yours.”

Angela looked at Fareeha inquisitively, “Mine?”

Fareeha nodded as she took the shawl out of her hands and started to gently wrap it around Angela. “Yours,” she reiterated as she worked, “You need protection from the sun.”

Guilt seeped into her heart despite the butterflies in her stomach at the sweet gesture. “This is too much, Fareeha. You could have bought a cheaper shawl. It must have cost more than a few bucks. Let me pay you back at least?”

Fareeha looked up at her after she finished smoothing out the bottom of the shawl, readjusting the loose headscarf for her with a smile.

“No. This is a gift.” Fareeha brushed her hair away from her face. “There. Red really is your color.”

The tips of Angela’s ears burned at the honest remark, the breathless way Fareeha murmured her opinion, and Angela had no choice but to raise the bottom of the scarf up to smother the giggles that bubbled out from within her.

“Thank you, Fareehali.” She murmured out sincerely, before threading her arm around Fareeha’s. Fareeha puffed up at her appreciation in a way that made it seem like it was she who gifted Fareeha with a present, and not the other way around. “Where should we go next?”

“Hmmmm,” Fareeha checked the time on her watch. “How does afternoon tea sound?”

“Is there also coffee?”
“The best coffee around these par-”

“I’m in.”

Fareeha had almost stumbled as Angela pulled them forward. The instant she pointed at their destination, a little café on the east side of the bazaar, Angela had lunged forward, no doubt with a pot of delicious coffee in her mind.

A theory that Fareeha had been led to by a series of mutually supporting facts.

The first was that the gentle pace they were walking at had steamrolled into a quick, brisk walk when Fareeha alluded to the awards the café received for its coffee.

The second was the squeal she emitted when Fareeha revealed she knew the owner, so no matter how crowded, they were sure to get a spot and a pot of coffee.

(The squeal came after the latter bit of information was divested)

And the third was now, upon entering the café, Angela took a deep breath and sighed dreamily at a passing waiter who held a pot of the prized coffee in question.

It was mind-boggling to her.

She enjoyed a good cup of coffee now and then, but Angela took coffee drinking to new heights.

“Mervat!” Fareeha hollered, the instant she entered the premises.

Mervat turned, halting her conversation with her employees, a sweet smile gracing her lips as she spotted Fareeha. She walked over and Fareeha smiled toothily.

“Little Faree, always glad when you visit.” She crooned as she tiptoed to pinch her cheeks. “Are you feeling alright? You have dreadful bags under your eyes. Have you not been sleeping well the last couple of nights?”

Fareeha scrunched her face, tilting her head up to get away from the older woman’s grasp, going as far as to go on the tips of her toes in a small effort to get out of reach. Mervat simply went up on her toes as well, unwilling to relinquish her hold on her cheeks. At the sound of poorly concealed snickers beside her, her face went warm.

That’s right, Angela was here. And now witnessing everything.

“Mervat, stop. I’m not a kid anymore.” She groused out.

“Well, you certainly whine like one every time you come.” She fired back smoothly, before releasing her grip on her cheeks. Fareeha rubbed her stinging cheeks as Mervat turned to look at Angela, a sly grin on her face. “And who is this?”

“My friend.” Fareeha deadpanned, not liking the sly look on Mervat's face one bit.

Angela held out her hand. “Hello, I am Veronica Mueller. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Mervat took her hand and shook it.

“What good manners you have. It’s a pleasure to meet you as well.” She said kindly before guiding
them to a table in the back, handing them menus. “One of my employees, her name is Arwa, will stop by here soon to take your order. Any last questions before I leave you guys to it?”

“Um, could you direct me to the bathroom?”

Mervat’s eyes crinkled, “Certainly, it’s through that hallway. Second door to the right.”

When Angela disappeared out of view, Mervat cleared her throat loudly as she patted Fareeha’s shoulder.

Fareeha sighed, “What?”

“Your ‘friend’ eh?”

“I’m not doing this right now.” Fareeha said quietly.

After all, Angela could come back any minute.

Unfortunately, Mervat did not get the hint and Fareeha heard the chair across from her scrape as she pulled it out to sit on it.

“I thought you had things to take care of.”

Mervat shrugged, giddy smile on her lips that made her look younger than her years. “This is far more interesting. So spill, who is she really?”

Angela Ziegler, famous doctor who worked as the lead doctor in Overwatch, Fareeha thought in her head.

(Not that she’d ever tell her that and betray Angela like that.)

But that wasn’t what Mervat was asking.

“Someone I like.” Fareeha admitted, running a hand through her hair, “A lot.”

Mervat’s smile turned less teasing. “I see. That’s wonderful Fareeha.”

Fareeha smiled in agreement.

It was.

Mervat then rose up and clapped Fareeha on the shoulder, “Well as fun as it is to grill you, I spot Veronica coming back. I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

Fareeha nodded, knowing that it wasn’t really a choice and resigned herself to the fate that Mervat was sure to hound her about Angela later. She always did whenever Fareeha indicated even the slightest of interest in a woman. How Mervat even knew about the women she never even brought to this place was still a mystery to her.

________________

Blue Bastet Café was wonderful.

An almost sinful moan escaped her as she drank the signature coffee. It was rich, dark and creamy all at the same time, roasted to perfection in ways that Angela had not had in a very long time. One of the biggest faults of working with GSM was that the coffee was always burnt.
She sat languidly, sipping on the hot cup of strong coffee as the café was filled with the relaxing melodies of the quartet up on a small stage, strumming their ouds and singing with practiced ease. In the corner of her eye she saw Fareeha standing, elbows propped on the counter to the kitchen as she spoke with Mervat.

It was cute to see Fareeha interact with the older woman. Fareeha seemed more petulant and childish and Angela would have to be blind to not notice the familial-like relationship they had.

It was to the point that Angela had to bluntly ask if they were related.

Fareeha simply laughed.

Mervat? No, no… She’s like the crazy aunt I never had.

That comment earned her a smack to the head as coincidentally, the older woman just so happened to pass by. She stifled a snicker when Fareeha stared her dead in the eye and told her seriously that it was no ‘coincidence’ and the woman had some ‘weird sixth sense going on’.

“Sorry about this Veronica, but she’s joining us.”

Angela glanced up to see Fareeha back in her seat, a small pout on her lips as Mervat grabbed a nearby chair and sat down.

“Do you mind?”

Angela shook her head, “Not at all. I’d love for you to join us.”

Mervat poked Fareeha on the cheek. “See, I told you she wouldn’t mind. She’s a good girl. Nice and polite.” She propped her head on her hands, “As a reward, want to know some embarrassing stories about this ‘tough guy’ right here?”

Fareeha sputtered.

Angela smirked, leaning forward.

“I’d love too.”

Angela wished she snapped a photo of Fareeha’s horrified face.

“Mervat, why? Now she’ll never date me.”

Mervat chortled, causing Fareeha to seethe further from the embarrassing ordeal she had to face. She focused her attention on Angela’s frame instead, busy at the shop ran by the café right next to it that sold bags of their famous coffee and other merchandise.

“Fareeha, I fear that you may be growing cataracts. There is no doubt in my mind that Veronica loves you back. The fondness in her eyes as I told even the most humiliating of tales about you never disappeared.”

Fareeha pursed her lips, shifting her weight from one foot to the other.
Well, if that was true, good. But still…

“You’re still really mean.”

“Real mature response there, Faree.” She teased and Fareeha turned her head away in a huff.

Her brows furrowed and her shoulder -the part where the dart had embedded itself in- tingled as she saw a familiar looking silhouette. She lurched forward quickly, before faltering and relaxing when they turned and she realized she had mistaken them.

Again. Shit. She did it again.

She felt a hand on her shoulder and the pressing gaze of Mervat, before she actually turned and saw it.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

“…Ever heard of the shrike?”

“Yes, what of them?”

Fareeha shrugged, “Thought I saw them.”

She thought she had been seeing them quite a lot today. As wonderful of a distraction as Angela was, and what a delight she was, there was times during their date-

Outing, she corrected herself. Outing.

Anyways.

There were times her mind had played tricks on her, with her on more than one occasion feeling like she had gotten a glimpse of the Shrike. Going around a corner, in the midst of the crowd and always just a little out of reach. Of course, it was never them. Upon closer inspection, she would realize it was always a woman wearing more traditional garb instead.

She sighed, “I’m paranoid, I know-”

“Why would the shrike make you tense?”

Fareeha knit her brows in confusion at the honest way the question was phrased. “Because they’re an outlaw who has hurt people? Assault? Theft? All that bad stuff?”

“Fareeha.” Mervat said flatly, "The Shrike may have hurt people, but if you look deeper into it, they only have gone after people who have somehow worked the system and evaded the law.”

She frowned, clenching her fists. Her voice came out tight and terse, “Mervat… No one should take the law into their own hands like that. And let’s not forget the Shrike has stolen from proper, honest and good institutions.”

“But for the greater good Fareeha.” Mervat rebutted, and then shrugged, "Besides, the shrike only broke into those institutions to steal the gear they utilize to incapacitate their targets right? What’s the big deal? Sometimes the government can’t work fast enough. You know this to be true Fareeha.”

Fareeha’s eyes flashed and she was surprised by how measured her tone came out to be when she spoke once more, “Mervat… You do realize you’re -defending- a criminal?”
“Do not talk to me like I'm a child Fareeha.” Mervat said lowly, "The fact of the matter is that - whether anyone want to admit it or not- the Shrike has done a lot of good for the Egyptian community.” Mervat’s eyes flashed as she spoke once more, “For example, I was saved by the Shrike once.”

…What?

“You were in trouble before Mervat?” Fareeha croaked out, “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn't want to worry you, there was nothing you could do about it anyways. Long story short, it was a sudden attack. I was here closing the shop alone when a bunch of thugs came and cornered me. Suddenly they all dropped down, one after another. Tranquilized. The Shrike then came down and asked if I was alright.”

“And then they left? The Shrike, I mean.”

“No, they were bleeding from the leg and I treated them. Also let them stay the night.”

Fareeha’s nostrils flared. Mervat was being fooled. The Shrike was no Robin Hood, no hero simply acting outside the law. The Shrike was injured and simply needed a place to crash and recuperate. Saving Mervat was just a means to that end. Just like all those leaders in criminal organizations that ‘give back’ to the poor communities to garner their loyalty.

“Why are you so against them, Faree? Have you heard otherwise?”

Yes, Fareeha wanted to say. She didn’t simply know otherwise, she had experienced otherwise. A painful shot of poison that nearly crippled her and sent her to an early grave. The antidote used as a bargaining chip for their freedom. If her subordinates didn’t choose to abide by their demands and let them go, she would be dead.

Fareeha Amari would be no more and her chapter in life would be done.

But these were all things she could not say, lips sealed under confidential agreements. So Fareeha held her tongue and conceded in the argument, directing the conversation elsewhere. Relief flooded in her when Angela came over, purchased jar of coffee blend hugged tightly by her arms.

"You ready to go?"

Angela nodded, holding up the jar of coffee blend in pride.

Chapter End Notes

Edit: Ana's not a bad person. Y'all know she wouldve dropped a canister 'accidentally' if they didnt comply. Fareeha dont know that tho lol.

(Ps. I know last time I said a week's time and I'm technically late, but I got went out on Friday (so that day gone) and couldn't think on Saturday cuz I was smashed from Friday lmao. So Sunday update for you guys >.>
Day In

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was only half past six.

Seven at best.

Angela could be lounging on Fareeha’s bed, curling up under soft covers and ruminate in the glory of clean cotton sheets and a mattress that wasn’t hard and lumpy in strange areas – a nice departure from the cramped cots provided by GSM. She could be right there, resting on a proper, queen-sized, orthopedic mattress until about nine or so. No one could tell her off.

She was on leave after all.

Yet here she was, sitting on top of Fareeha’s kitchen counter, legs swinging as she watched the aforementioned woman prepare breakfast. Her eyes travelled down Fareeha’s frame as she bobbed to the beat of a song blaring from her speakers, drinking in the way her muscles would ripple with every twist and turn. Muscles that were on display thanks to the generous sway of the loose cutoff muscle tank she wore. Angela lifted her coffee up to her lips in an effort to conceal her appreciative smile at the sight. Her eyes crinkled in delight as she noted the way Fareeha would half-hum, half-sing lyrics under her breath as she did a little jig in place, while she began chopping up an assortment of vegetables.

“You sure you don’t want some?” Fareeha asked idly, misinterpreting Angela’s blatant leering as a sign of her zeroing in on the food she was preparing. “Breakfast is the most important meal of the day.”

Angela smiled good-naturedly, “True. I suppose I should have some.”

“Great, because I think I made a little too much.” Fareeha admitted, a sheepish grin on her face as she picked up the cutting board and started to slide the knife on it to push the array of chopped vegetables into respective bowls. Angela snorted at the admission, though otherwise kept silent, content to simply observe the woman when Fareeha spoke up again.

“I’m sorry I left the bedroom door ajar.” She started, as she checked the status of the stewing fava beans with a spoon, prodding it gently. “What good is it for you to move from sleeping on the couch to my room if you’re going to wake up anyways when I start cooking?”

"You mind sleeping with me, Fareeha?” she teased.

Fareeha looked at her petulantly. "That's not the point. I just don't see why I can't just sleep in the living room. That way I can't leave any door accidentally ajar, because I would have never had to open any door to get to the kitchen."

"No. This is your apartment Fareeha." she said flatly, before her lips were drawn back into a pleasant smile, "Besides, sleeping in the same bed makes it feel like an extended sleepover."

Or that they were married, but it would be a premature of her to make that kind of quip.

"Yeah, yeah. I still feel bad for waking you up with my cooking though." Fareeha mumbled out.
Fondness filled Angela’s heart by how apologetic Fareeha sounded. It’s true that she was roused by sleep by the growling of her stomach, hunger awakened by the smell of baking bread wafting through from the kitchen and through the opened bedroom door. But if getting up so early allowed Angela to see Fareeha clad in nothing but a cutoff muscle tank and running shorts? If getting up early meant Angela would have freshly brewed coffee prepared lovingly by Fareeha? If getting up early meant learning that Fareeha would do a jig and sing lightly to her favorite tunes as she made breakfast?

“Fareeha, I really don’t mind.”

Fareeha paused, turning to raise an eyebrow at her. “You? Don’t mind?... I know you’re not a morning person.” Disbelief coloring her tone as she ran a hand through Angela’s hair. An affectionate gesture she picked up from Angela herself. “It’s alright to just take the apology.”

“But I don’t mind.” she repeated earnestly. “Believe me.”

Waking up early meant spending more time with Fareeha and she would never mind that.

“…Okay.” Fareeha resigned politely, and then pointed at her cup. “Want a refill?”

Angela looked down at her cup. The only thing left was a mound of wet coffee grinds, looking akin to muddy sediment that would rest at the floor of rivers and paddy fields. Angela scrunched her nose, wondering how something decidedly so disgusting looking could be so delicious.

“Angela?”

Her eyes flitted back to Fareeha’s face. She nodded. “Yes, please.”

Fareeha smiled as she turned on the stove again, reheating the pan filled with sand she had prepared from before. It wasn’t the first-time Angela had Turkish coffee, but it was the first time she had it prepared with it being heated by sand. Apparently heating the coffee in sand allowed the heat to be distributed evenly and made the coffee taste better. Angela was inclined to agree from the results the first cup produced. Fareeha reached around her to grab the bag of Blue Bastet coffee, taking out a cup full of medium-roasted coffee beans, grinding them up finely. She then poured water into an espresso cup, before dumping it out from there into the ornamented ibrik she had at hand, before proceeding to meticulously scoop a measured cup of the fine, powder-like coffee grinds and adding it in.

“One teaspoon or two?” Fareeha asked, as she held a bag of brown sugar.

“One please.”

Fareeha nodded and sprinkled one teaspoon of sugar into the mix. Glee filled her heart as she watched Fareeha watch the coffee as it heated with a pure look of concentration. Fareeha had told her that the trick to perfect Turkish coffee was to let it heat and froth without letting it boil. Thus, ‘pure concentration was imperative’ -her words, not Angela’s- as she needed to time taking it off and putting it back on the hot sand at precise times to let the coffee curdle and heat and bring out the maximum flavor of the coffee without burning it.

“-dance. Got a Henessy in one hand. One more time ‘fore I go.” She heard Fareeha sing softly as she stared at the coffee.

Angela snorted.

Apparently pure concentration didn’t forbid a little bit of singing though.
“What, Angela? The coffee needs my eyes, not my ears. Nor my ability to speak.” Fareeha quipped, as if reading her judgmental thoughts, while she poured the finished brewing coffee into the small espresso cup. “And it’s Drake, Angela. Drake.”

Angela’s laughter bounced through the kitchen as she reached out for the offered cup, a teasing glint in her eye. “And what’s so great about Drake?”

Fareeha’s hand lifted up suddenly, taking the espresso cup right along with it out of Angela’s outreaching hands. Angela fought back a smile at Fareeha’s scandalized face. “You take that back. How dare you disrespect Drake like that. To me.” She raised her pinky on her other hand in front of her face, the gold ring glinting as it caught the light. “A Canadian.”

“W-what?” Angela wheezed as she pulled Fareeha’s other arm back down by the elbow and pried the espresso cup from her hand. “You’re not Canadian. And what does waving your pinky at me help prove your point?”

“This.” Fareeha she said as she wiggled her pinky. “Is an iron ring. It’s given in a closed ceremony to engineering graduates in Canada called ‘The Ritual of the Calling of an Engineer’.”

Angela blinked, setting down the espresso cup and taking Fareeha’s other hand in hers, fingers tracing over the gold ring. “You studied in Canada? Engineering?”

She saw Fareeha nod in the corner of her eye. “Of sorts. It was mandatory if someone wants to helm the Raptora suits, just in the event something goes wrong on field, the user won’t be rendered completely useless as they have an understanding of the suit’s mechanics.”

She looked up at Fareeha inquisitorially. “Why Canada?”

“Because I’m Canadian. Duh.” Fareeha said simply, an impish smile on her face. She laughed unabashedly when Angela squinted at her, exasperation clear in her eyes, still not quite believing the sentiment. “My dad lives there and HSI has presence there too, so I took the opportunity to finish my studies somewhere where my dad lived. Spend some time with him.” She finally admitted, as she gently pulled out of Angela’s hold to check on the pot of stewing beans. “It’s done. Finally.” She muttered, before locking her eyes on Angela’s for a quick moment, “And for the record? He didn’t move to Canada, he is Canadian, so I am too.” She shrugged, “Half, anyways.”

“I see.” Angela hummed out, unsure as to what to say. She had always assumed that Fareeha didn’t have any semblance of a relationship with her father. As such, she never bothered to ask about him. “I always thought Ana raised you by herself.”

“Hmmm? Well, you’re not wrong. She did. Practically.” She said airily, waving the wooden spoon around as she talked, “And when she was too busy to come home, my mother’s side of the family would be the ones to help out. Egypt has always been my home.” Fareeha elaborated further as she ladled cooked beans into two bowls. Angela’s stomach growled at the sight. “My father was more of a someone I visited from time to time on vacation. Mostly in the summer.”

“What does he do?” Angela asked, mostly out of politeness, though her mind was elsewhere. Specifically, on the steaming bowl of stewed fava beans that Fareeha was currently decorating with diced tomatoes, thinly sliced red onions and the other vegetables she had chopped before.

“He’s a forest ranger. Not a bad job. Would help him out as a temporary when I visited.”

The image of Fareeha wearing a campaign hat, and a well-fitted park ranger uniform sparked into her mind and made her swallow thickly. “I see.” She squeaked out and took a generous sip of her coffee,
wincing at it burned the roof of her mouth.

“Anyways,” Fareeha continued, oblivious to Angela’s little predicament, setting down the two bowls on the kitchen island next to a large plate filled with freshly baked baladi bread. She hoisted herself onto one of the high chairs and gestured for Angela to come down from the kitchen counter and join her. “Let’s go eat.”

“The ful looks wonderful Fareeha.”

“Thanks, and believe me when I say… This stuff? It will really,” Fareeha waggled her eyebrows, a hint of a grin on her lips, “ful you up.”

Angela rolled her eyes.

Fareeha laughed.

Angela was on the couch, sliding up to a better sitting position when her lower back started to ache. Her eyes flitted across the screen of her tablet, reading the latest article on cybernetic implants by Nanotech Times. She was in the midst of reading the section about the research methods employed by Dr. Brown of Ridgeford University when her ears perked at the light rap of a fist on the front door.

Someone was knocking on the door.

Angela walked towards the door and raised up to the tips of her toes, hands resting gently on the old wood of the door, peering out to see who had come. There, standing on the other side of the door, was Bilal, a strangely noticeable look of pensiveness etched on his normally stoic features.

Angela opened the door quickly in worry.

“Captai-” he halted, eyes widening only a fraction before returning back to his dead gaze. Angela was impressed by his ability to recover so quickly from an unexpected sight. He tipped his head at her politely. “Dr. Veronica. I did not expect to see you. How are you?”

“I’m fine Bilal. I’m here because I took a leave and decided to visit Fareeha-”

“Oh?”

Angela’s face burned at his tone. “Um,” she opened the door wider, and gestured inside, “Please come in. Fareeha is in the shower right now.”

Bilal thanked her and followed her into the living room, graciously accepting the glass of water she offered. He sat neatly on the armchair, eyes dragging across the room as he took a few sips. Angela resisted the urge to squirm as a slightly awkward tension filled the air. The man was as unreadable as ever to her. Out of all of Fareeha’s teammates, Bilal was the most standoffish, providing smiles and delivering dry one liners only to other members of Fareeha’s squadron. He was never impolite to those who weren’t in his inner circle, but he treated people with the same sort of disaffected pleasantness that made it so he usually was left alone to his own devices. And he probably liked it that way. Which is why Angela found it so hard to bring up any sort of small talk.

She would try though, never-the-less.

“You seem to be doing good Bilal.” Bilal just stared at her. She tucked a hair behind her nervously.
“Healthy. You look healthy… Did you trim your hair recently?”

“No.”

Angela nodded dumbly, unsure how to proceed after that flat response.

Bilal sighed at her response, rubbing the back of his neck. “It’s… It’s gelled a little differently today. And you… you look nice too Dr. Veronica. With your hair down and glasses off.”

In spite of the stilted delivery of his words, Angela smiled at the sincere effort the man took to make the mood better.

“Thank you, Bilal. I’m surprised you came. Not once has any other HSI member swung by since I arrived.” She expressed honestly, a little chill ran down her spine at how Bilal’s face darkened at her words. “Bilal?”

The man stared at her, adjusting his posture to lean forward, elbows resting on his thighs as he clasped his hands together. He breathed in deeply, chest rising as he inhaled and shoulders dropping as he exhaled.

“Dr. Veronica.”

“Yes? What is it Bilal?”

He chewed his bottom lip, weighing his options. Angela stared back, hoping her sincerity would shine through her eyes. After a while, he nodded. “How is the captain? Is she doing better?”

A small laugh escaped her, sounding more like a rush of air escaping her. She had felt trepidation at what would pour out of Bilal’s mouth next, and to hear that all he wanted to ask was the condition of Fareeha shattered all the apprehension that had been building in her. She also felt a warmth, a deep like of the man in front of her forming, due to his honest concern and care about Fareeha’s wellbeing.

“Yes, don’t worry. She has been eating properly, going out—” Mostly taking her out and bringing her on outings that were really dates in disguise, but that was information he did not need to be privy to, “—and getting a good night’s rest. Always back in bed before midnight.”

He shifted in his seat, adopting a more relaxed position as he nodded, taking in the information. “I see. Well, perhaps it is difficult to keep studying if someone is occupying the guest room.”

“Guest room?”

His lips curled downwards into a small frown as his eyebrows knit in confusion. “…The guest room she altered into a study room… Where have you been sleeping if not there?” he looked at the couch she sat on, “No covers there.”

She looked down, “I… um…” she groaned. There was no getting out of this. “In her room. I always wait up for her to be done studying. And then we talk until one of us falls asleep.”

Which was always Fareeha. The woman would be knocked out like a light usually thirty minutes’ flat, and Angela would join her in an hour or two after reading a scientific journal or two. She definitely the night owl between the two of them.

She had expected a teasing grin to grace his face, a couple of jibes or at least a one-liner. Instead, Bilal’s face remained stern, lips still drawn into a frown.
“I see.” His voice rumbled out, displeasure mixing in with understanding, “So what you’re saying is the captain is still studying. Fucking shit.”

Angela flinched at the crass language.

Bilal held a hand up in apology. “Pardon my language, doctor.”

“Um, she only studies for about three or four hours a day. It’s not an issue, she’s not overworking herself, and more importantly, she’s doing it for the greater good.” Angela said, more words spilling out of her than she intended, feeling defensive for Fareeha.

Bilal simply stared at her, taking another swig of his water. “Dr. Veronica,” he said as he placed the glass back down on the coaster. “How is the captain when she speaks of the outlaws. Angry? Calm? Vengeful?”

She looked at him pensively, wondering what his angle was with his interrogation-like line of questioning. Fareeha was passionate to say the least, worried about what they would do, even admitting later after their fun outing at the bazaar that she had at some point unconsciously looked for the shrike (that little tidbit of information put a little damper on Angela’s memory of the otherwise wonderful trip), but she wasn’t vengeful. She wanted to simply stop them.

She told Bilal as much. The tension is his shoulder disappeared a fraction.

“How about the mission? I’m not trying to get my captain in trouble, do not worry. But please, did she say anything about the mission?”

“She told me nothing of the mission details, but there was…”

“Was?” he repeated, trying to spur her forward.

Angela chose her words carefully. “I feel like she regrets the mission. I feel that she thinks that the outlaws could have been stopped. However, this is simply my own conjecture.”

She had not asked Fareeha directly about the mission at all, and she was sure Fareeha would not leak out those confidential details to her even if she did, but the manner in which Fareeha strived to learn about the outlaws and all their movements reminded her too much of the way Jack and the rest of the Overwatch members would research enemies that slipped through their fingers. When a high profile target evaded their capture and they believed they could have definitely captured them if the right calls were made.

(Whether that was true or not was an entirely different issue)

In any case, Fareeha seemed to work with that sort of intensity fueling her.

She heard Bilal swear under his breath, a flurry of Arabic that sounded harsh and ugly. He then pointed at her, jabbing his finger forwards a couple of times. “Dr. Veronica… You got the captain out of the house, eating properly, sleeping properly and,” he waved in the direction of Fareeha’s bedroom, “bathing regularly again. You’re not just sleeping with her right?”

Angela squeaked, “W-we’re not sleeping together. I mean- it’s just sleep.”

At that moment, she swore she spotted a teasing glint in his eye that clearly said that he, in no way, believed the words coming out of her mouth. Angela on her part could do nothing but groan, embarrassment crawling up to her throat. Even to her own ears, and she knew she had spoken the truth, it sounded like most poorly worded out lie.
“...I see. But you like her, yes?”

Angela nodded.

“Good, then you will definitely help me. First and foremost, I used to be a lawyer. I know laws, and I know how to work around our confidentiality agreement.”

Angela cocked her head. Where was he going with this?

“I’m going to tell you what happened at the end of our mission with the outlaws.”

Angela held up a hand, “Wait. I’m not sure what’s going on, but I do know it’s serious if you are risking your job. So why are you telling me?”

He paused for a moment, “Because you can get through to her.”

---------------------

“Bilal?”

Bilal halted, hand hovering over the doorknob. He turned.

“Captain.” He said curtly, tipping his head in acknowledgement.

Fareeha took a step forward, scratching her cheek with her thumb in nervousness. Her teammates had still been frosty, and of all the members of her squadron to come by to visit, she most certainly did not expect Bilal. Yet here he was, and though his voice was flat, his eyes contained no discernable rage.

Surely that was a good sign.

“Do you want some tea?” she asked tentatively.

He shook his head, “No. I was just leaving.” He turned the knob and exited, “Goodbye.”

And then the door clicked shut.

Fareeha stared at the front door, her mind trying to process exactly what happened.

“Fareeha.”

She turned, craning her head to face Angela who was sitting on the couch. Her confusion grew as her brows creased in worry at the solemn look on Angela’s face.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” she asked as rushed over, taking a seat next to Angela. Angela stayed silent, looking down at her hands as her fingers traced over the smooth, gray surface of carved stone. Her movements were languid, slow and purposeful. The peacefulness was betrayed only by the fact that she was fiddling with the worry stone Torbjorn had gifted her. An item she only pulled out when her mind was fraught with negative thoughts. Fareeha chewed her bottom lip, concern amplifying as the clearly troubled woman stayed silent. “Angela?”

“I heard about what happened.”

Angela’s voice was hushed, a near silent whisper that if Fareeha was not at the distant she was, not observing her as intensely as she was, she would have failed to hear her. Again, her confusion grew from Angela’s actions and she wracked her brain about what exactly she heard.
Luckily for her, Angela continued forward.

“About the tough decision at the end of your mission.” Angela turned to finally look at Fareeha, unshed tears in her eyes, “How could you ever think it would have been better for you to have been sacrificed?”

Fareeha swallowed thickly. Her heart ached at hearing the raw hurt in Angela’s voice and the pain in her eyes, an ache that doubled with the understanding that she had been the cause of it. Yet as much as Fareeha wanted to draw Angela close and tell her she was sorry, she didn’t mean it, she wouldn’t even dream of it, say everything and anything that would make Angela smile again and they could move on from this uncomfortable discussion painlessly…

It would be a lie.

And she will not have their relationship be based on lies.

“Angela, I am a protector. My job is literally to serve and protect. Keep the world safe... Those guys…” She said, trying to reason with Angela, Angela who was staring at her sadly. “It would’ve been a sacrifice for the greater good.”

Angela scoffed, squeezing her eyes shut as she shook her head in frustration at her words.

“Angela-”

Angela held up a hand, eyes snapping back open. “No, Fareeha. It wouldn’t have been.” Disappointment and irritation was rolling out of her in waves as she hissed out the words. She jabbed Fareeha on the chest painfully. “Because I know you and you wouldn’t have –ever– sacrificed Summeyee. You only think that because it was just you on the line, because Summeyee was already in the clear the moment they threw that damn canister.” Angela wiped the corner of her eyes with her sleeves, “Because it was only you that was still on the line.” Angela repeated feebly, “A-and somehow- somehow that makes it okay.”

Fareeha worked her jaw as Angela’s words seeped in.

“It’s different.”

“Oh? Do tell.” She said coolly, eyes narrowing as she cocked her head and glared at Fareeha.

“I-” Fareeha jabbed a thumb at herself. “I swore to protect my team, to be the leader that they would want to follow. They are my members and I. Will. Protect. Them. But me? Angela, I’m the leader. I need to be bigger, greater, and fearless in the face possible death for them. Do the most difficult things, do the most sacrifices. Do the most.” Fareeha realized her voice was becoming increasingly loud in register, but she was on a roll and the words kept on coming before she could stop herself. “And if the sacrifice of my life is necessary for the greater good, then why not? Why. Not. I was willing to take that risk.” She paused, “I still am.”

Her words did nothing but kindle Angela’s anger.

“Protect your team? Protect?” Angela seethed out, “No, Fareeha. All you did was place them in a difficult spot. That’s all you ‘achieved’. ” She took a deep breath, pinching the bridge of her nose as she sought to calm herself down. Her words were controlled when she spoke again. “They would have carried the burden of sacrificing their team leader for the rest of their lives, because they chose to sacrifice you to capture the outlaws.”

Fareeha looked at her confused, “They wouldn't be burdened. There was no guilt to be burdened
with. I would have been fine with it.”

Angela looked at her sharply. “But they don’t know that. You were unconscious. It would have been on them to make that decision.” Angela’s nostrils flared, “Do you understand?”

Fareeha flinched. That wasn’t her intention at all, but she could not find a fault in Angela’s reasoning. A queasy feeling entered her stomach at the thought of her subordinates being weighed down by guilt. To have to carry the knowledge that they sacrificed their captain to eliminate hardened criminals for the rest of their lives. Scratch that. They sacrificed her for only a possible chance that they could have eliminated the criminals.

(There was no actual guarantee that they would have succeeded.)

The nauseous feeling roiling in her stomach intensified.

“And why is it that you are so hell bent in self-sacrifice? Why is it that you can’t simply be thankful to your team for saving you and move on? Fight the battle another day now that you have the chance?” Angela’s voice cracked, “Why do I feel that you seem to be under the assumption that it would have been better that you were dead?”

“Angela- That’s not-” she sighed, running both hands through her hair- “That’s not it.”

“Then what is it?” she whispered.

Fareeha stared into Angela’s eyes, tired and exhausted.

That was the million-dollar question.

What was it, indeed?

Fareeha knew, somewhere in the recesses of her mind, that she was being irrational and that she should have accepted the fact that she could fight another day with gratitude. And perhaps in the very depths of those recesses she had also understood the anger that simmered in her teammates about her need excessive self-sacrifice mindset. Especially as she would never –ever – expect such a thing from her teammates. She was a changed woman after the incident at Anubis after all, the first time she ever put the man before the mission. Choosing to save Saleh from imminent doom instead of simply focusing on the job. So it was hypocritical of her to ask such a thing from her team.

“Fareeha.” Angela said, trying to coax her out of her thoughts, squeezing her trembling hands comfortably.

When did they start shaking?

She closed her eyes, breathing in deeply as she gathered her thoughts.

“I think in some ways I thought it was the only way I could prove myself.”

Once the words came out, the truth within them was undeniable to Fareeha.

“What do you mean?”

At Angela’s innocent enquiry, words started to pour out of her mouth. That her and her mother may have had their differences, and though their last interaction was decidedly not a good one, she loved her mother and her mother loved her. That because of that, there was always a twinge of shame in her at joining the military and then a private security company. A part of her always feeling like an
ungrateful daughter for doing so. All her mother wanted was for her to have a better life, working hard so she could, and Fareeha felt like she simply spat in the face of all that goodwill. Threw it all away for a life her mother never wanted for her.

So to mitigate that, she sought to prove herself—to her mother—that the path she chose for herself was the correct choice, and her mind decided that it could only be done by doing something large and heroic and with no thought to her own personal safety. Something that would have made the world safer on a global scale and proved to her mother that this was what she was meant to do.

That she was a protector and she would do anything to protect the world.

Even if that meant forfeiting her own life.

She gazed down, fiddling with the drawstring of her sweatpants, taking in harsh intakes of breath to calm herself as her vision clouded and blurred with tears. She was only vaguely aware of Angela shifting, not truly registering warm hands on her shoulders until they pushed firmly. She let herself be guided so she was sitting facing Angela directly, confusion blooming as Angela came forward and straddled her, guiding her hands to her hips. She gripped the fabric of Angela’s shirt.

Angela lifted her chin slowly to look her in the eye, an unreadable expression on her face. Or perhaps, with her own feelings running high, she simply wasn’t able to comprehend the emotion on her face.

“Oh Fareeha. How could you possibly think that you're not good enough?”

Angela said her words so simply, so easily, that Fareeha felt inclined to believe her.

“Wonderful. I think you’re wonderful.” She continued, stroking Fareeha’s cheeks gently. “You speak as if you’ve done so little, but Fareeha, I know better. You’ve done so much good, protected so many people, and brought smiles to so many faces. You’re a good protector, you’re a good person and you’re more than good enough. You are not failing your mother’s legacy. You are as good of an Amari as your mother was. Your mother would proud of you.”

“You don’t know that.” She whispered, despite the clarity and surety in Angela’s words. Despite the almost overflowing desire in her to believe the words that came out of her mouth. That her mother would look at what she is now and grin, amazement and pride ringing clear in her eyes.

But she couldn’t.

Not when the vivid images of disappointment and disapproval by her mother when she announced she was going to the army still burned in her memory. The exchanging of harsh words and the clipped words her mother had for her as she left. A memory from more than a decade ago that she still reeled from as if it happened just yesterday. A memory she wished she wouldn't recall with shocking clarity.

“She wouldn’t be Angela.”

Angela stared at her for a couple moments, before leaning in to press a feather light kiss on her lips. A ghost of kiss that ended as quickly as it started.

When she retreated she spoke in the fondest of tones.

“Well I am. In fact, you shine so bright to me that I had no choice but to fall for you. You’ve made me happier than I’d been in a long time and leave me breathless more often that I’d like to admit. Can you at least believe that?”
Fareeha nodded dumbly, not trusting herself with words, lips still tingling from the kiss.

“And Fareeha?”

Fareeha made a noise of acknowledgement, wondering what else Angela could add. Wondering what else Angela could do to make her heart feel warmer than it already did.

Make her feel more valued than she already did.

“You are so much more than your last name.”

Chapter End Notes

There's a reason why I've been putting off writing angsty + serious + heart to heart stuff. That last section was hard as shit. If anyone got some constructive criticism of how I handled it, feel free to tell me, cuz I know these kinds of scenes are not my strong point. (but pls, don't be mean in how you write your helpful hints) Last note, I know Canadian Fareeha has not been verified nor is it canon lore, but adding that shit in cuz its one of my fav speculations.
She was halfway done with a crossword puzzle when the dryer finished, sounds of tumbling fabrics and whirs of the steel machine ceasing abruptly, filling the laundry room with a sudden silence. Instead of moving immediately to take out the clothes, Angela stayed perched upon the top of the washing machine right next to the dryer, tapping her pencil to her chin.

She was stuck.

Compared to her usual prowess at these sorts of brain games, the weathered crossword book in Fareeha’s library was proving itself to be quite the challenger (though Angela gave herself a pass, considering she had –at best – a basic grasp of the Arabic language). When another minute passed and still she was nowhere closer, her mind failing to conjure any words that would fit both the hint and the number of spaces allotted, Angela put down crossword book with a sigh. She slipped off the washing machine with ease, and side-stepped to the dryer, stooping to open the door in one swift motion. She pulled the garments out all at once, burying her face in the bundle of clothes and took one deep breath of the fresh and satisfyingly warm heap in her arms. She then dropped them on top of the dryer, before picking them up individually to fold them. She placed the folded clothes on top of the washing machine, separating them into two piles.

One hers. The other, Fareeha’s.

“You don’t have to do that y’know.” She glanced to the entryway of the laundry room. Fareeha was there, leaning on the side of the door with her arms crossed, head cocked slightly, a meaningful look on her face. “You’re the guest, ya amar.”

“I know.” She said as she continued to fold the clothes.

She heard the disgruntled noise that inevitably came out of Fareeha and saw her walk towards her in the corner of her eye. Fareeha sidled up next to her, elbow resting on the washing machine as she watched Angela work.

“That was the part where you should’ve just handed off the work to me, y’know.”

“Well, the thing is schatz,” she said as she proceeded to fold the last of the clothes, giving her a slightly smug look, “I’m afraid you’re too late.”

The corners of Fareeha’s lips twitched upwards at the sass.

“So I am.” She conceded after a pause, then snaked an arm around Angela’s waist, hugging her from the side, wrapping her other arm around her shoulders securely. Today Fareeha smelt of warm notes, brown sugar and oatmeal, and just hint of citrus. It must be the new soap and shampoo she bought (Angela decided she quite liked it). She bit her bottom lip, fighting back a grin when the taller woman buried her nose into her hair, gave her a quick kiss on the top of her head. She worried her bottom lip harder when Fareeha didn’t bother to pull back after the kiss, murmuring straight into her hair when she spoke her next words, the hum of her voice tickling Angela slightly. “You’re a little cheeky, Angela. Did anyone ever tell you that?”

She could feel the smile playing on Fareeha’s lips and opened her mouth, ready to respond, her quick wit already forming a witty comeback, when Fareeha dipped her head lower to give her another kiss,
this time onto her temple. A happy sigh escaped her instead at the contact.

“In all seriousness, thank you, ya amar.” Fareeha’s voice was rich and earnest, and Fareeha then withdrew her head, letting Angela see her eyes, she saw the raw sincerity that shone from within them. “That was very thoughtful of you.”

Angela craned her head up and gave Fareeha a gentle kiss on her lips.

“My pleasure.”

Fareeha grinned crookedly, before disentangling herself from Angela to place the clothes into the hamper. “But, I’ll carry it back to the room.”

“Oh?” Angela remarked, a teasing glint in her eye, “Well, it seems we make a great team.”

Fareeha snorted. “All we’re doing is completing laundry together. What are we? Team domestic?”

“Team domestic?” Angela repeated, feeling the words on her tongue, the implications swirling in her head. “I really like the sound of that.”

A longing look found its way into Fareeha’s eyes.

“Me too... maybe one day?”

Angela’s face sobered up at the question. As wonderful as their little simulation of domestic life had been, it was coming to an end. The two weeks had passed by in a flurry and now it was already Sunday and she had a one-way bus ticket to one of the GSM bases that was leaving tonight.

“One day.”

Fareeha smiled at her response, a warm smile touched with affection and Angela just had to smile back.

As the two of them made their way to the bedroom, she took a furtive glance at Fareeha. On a whim she tiptoed to give her a quick kiss right on her cut jawline. Fareeha simply glanced down, an eyebrow quirked up and a questioning smile hanging from her lips. Angela simply winked, giving nothing else in lieu of an explanation as she looked straight ahead once more. Fareeha bumped her shoulders against her playfully in retaliation. A smile split Angela’s face.

It was nice. This, was nice. Very nice.

In all honesty, she hadn’t meant to confess to Fareeha that day, amidst her little breakdown. All she really intended to do was to show Fareeha just how much she touched her…

But perhaps that was the same thing really.

In the aftermath of that whole situation, they had immediately gone from that awkward not-quite-lovers-but-definitely-not-just-friends state, to a full-on, official relationship. In many ways, things did not change (and Angela was forced to face the embarrassing truth that they truly had not been—at all—subtle with the way they treated each other, and so of course Patricia was shocked nothing had actually occurred yet), but in other ways, things had changed a lot.

Well, two things in particular.

She now got to kiss Fareeha. And Fareeha would kiss her.
(She wasn’t sure which of these two facts she liked more)

“Wait, you’re packing already ya amar?”

Angela snapped back to reality, and saw Fareeha staring at her open suitcase that laid on the bed, toiletries and other essentials already in the bag.

She nodded.

“Yes, that’s part of the reason I did the laundry already.” She said as she pulled out her pile of clothes from the hamper and started to place it neatly into her suitcase. “I wanted to get this part over now.”

“But it’s so early. Isn’t your bus ticket for the eight at night? It’s still morning, ya amar. It’s only-” Fareeha craned her head to check her clock. “It’s only half past nine right now.”

“Yes, but,” Angela started as she locked the suitcase, “I wanted to enjoy the rest of the day without thinking about packing.”

Fareeha crouched next to her, resting on the balls of her feet as she looked at Angela.

“Okay, so where do you want to go?”

Angela shrugged. “Surprise me, ‘Reeha.”

Fareeha grinned.

“Alright.”

________________

Fareeha stared at Angela whose eyes were glued to the view surrounding them, slack-jawed. There was a sparkle in her wide eyes, akin to that of a person’s first visit to a show by a travelling circus. Fareeha chuckled, arms crossed and chest puffed up in pride at causing Angela to look so utterly dumbfounded and awed at the same time, a rare display considering her vast knowledge on well, everything. In the back of her mind, a spark of regret popped up at not thinking about doing this sooner. Two or three days would’ve been far more ideal, but no, Fareeha thought shaking her head in an effort to rid herself of the intrusive thought, there was no point in thinking about what-if’s. Besides, she reasoned, at least they got to go today.

“Bet you never thought Egypt had a sight like this, huh?”

Angela shook her head minutely, still staring at the scene before her. Fareeha’s pride swelled further.

“I… Wow. Are we really still in Egypt?” Angela said, squinting at her eyes at the scene before her, as if she was seeing a mirage and was attempting to squint through an illusion. She then whipped her head back, turning her body in the process to look at her, eyebrows knitting as she stared at her.

“Where did you bring me? Is this outside of Egypt?”

Fareeha laughed a full-bellied laugh at the accusation.

“No, we’re still in Egypt. See that there? That’s called the Nile, the lifeblood of Egypt.” She talked to Angela in an exaggerated tone, feigning ignorance in the fact that she was jokingly speaking to Angela as if she was a buffoon. She felt the smug grin on her face somehow turn cockier as an idea formed in her head. “And here.” She said, poking Angela on the cheek. “We have denial, which is
currently running in your veins.”

Angela stared at her blankly.

“Denial? The Nile?” Fareeha flashed a lopsided smile, “Get it?”

Angela’s eyes widened and Fareeha could see the moment her joke registered and savored the comically horrified look that entered her eyes. Angela groaned, rubbing her face with her hand.

“Schatzeli, that joke should have never passed your internal quality control.”

Fareeha shrugged, smiling giddily.

“Whatever, ya amar. I thought it was great.”

Angela rolled her eyes as she fixed the scarf she had wrapped around her shoulders. The one Fareeha bought.

“Anyways, in all seriousness. Where… are we?” Angela enquired, eyes squinting as she looked at the distance once more, as if still trying to see past an illusion.

Taking pity on the woman, she answered.

“Aswan.”

“Aswan?” Angela repeated.

“Aswan.” Fareeha affirmed as they stood there side by side, looking over the Nile river from the east bank. “Geographically, Aswan lies in the south of Egypt. In Egypt’s ancient empire, it was the southernmost town, nesting comfortably near the cataracts of the Nile. Being situated near the point where the mouth of the Nile widens,” She gestured at the sight in front of them, where sailboats and other water vehicles languidly cruised the gentle waters, “It makes for a great place to wind down, the Nile almost becoming large enough to feel like a lake. Romantics would go so far as to call this place right here ‘The Jewel of the Nile’.”

And Fareeha agreed wholeheartedly.

Unlike Cairo and most of Egypt, the land here was far from barren. It was fertile and filled with vegetation, and though the lush greenery predominantly lined the sides of the Nile river it also expanded more than few meters beyond it. The area felt like a breathtaking Oasis in the midst of miles of dry desert and in late February the weather was still cool, staying at a pleasant average 18°C, rising to usually at most 25°C during midday. The small islands that had formed in the middle of the Nile were lush with vibrant greenery and peppered with ancient, historical buildings still preserved to this day. Heritage sites still preserved to this day due to the aggressive push the revitalization of traditions, the preservation of history and to help encourage more tourism, which the people of Aswan primarily lived off. Thus, Aswan was a wonderful mix of architecture, new and old, from the classic Nubian architecture to the towering, modern monsters that were the luxury hotels situated right by the river.

Angela clicked her tongue, “It’s almost unbelievable that a place like this could exist in the same country that Cairo belongs too.”

“Well, to be fair, Aswan is quite far off from Cairo. Maybe…” Fareeha shifted on her feet, swaying side to side as she narrowed her eyes in concentration, “Maybe four or five hundred miles from Cairo?”
“…Fareehali, we got here in an hour and a half.” Angela deadpanned. “There is no way its four or five hundred miles away.”

Fareeha looked at Angela, an incredulous smile on her lips. “What do you want me to say, ya amar? ‘Haha, yea, I’m just pulling your leg’?” Angela nodded almost immediately. “Okay, I admit I was being sort of a brat a couple moments ago, ribbing you a bit, but this really is Aswan and it really is five or six hundred miles away. Our bullet trains really are that fast.”

“Really, now?” She said as she shook her head sagely, wagging a finger. “No, no. You are bluffing. You must be. Not even Germany has a train that fast.”

Fareeha smirked, fishing out her phone. She was almost completely sure she wasn’t wrong. She clicked the map application on her phone, determined to show that she was right, tapping her foot in impatience as the loading icon swirled. Once her map popped up typed in ‘Cairo’ and ‘Aswan’ and practically shoved the phone in Angela’s face to show her the screen.

“See, the distance from Cairo to Aswan is 430 miles by bullet train. The same bullet train we took. And it says right there, takes one and a half hours. Like we did. And wait, there’s more.” She said as Angela opened her mouth, no doubt to protest the validity of the map on her phone. “Look,” She clicked on the pin of ‘my location’. It flashed on top of the words ‘Aswan’. “Satellite tells no lies. We’re right here, in Aswan and we both can agree that that,” she stressed, pointing at Cairo, “Is where Cairo is…” She flashed a leering grin. “What you got to say to that?”

Angela blinked, taking the phone out of her hands to look at the map on her phone, before pulling out her own phone. “I need to check this myself.”

“Ya amar!” Fareeha wheezed out, snatching Angela’s phone away from her. “You want to spend our last day together arguing over distance, or do you want to go spend your last few ours relaxing on a felucca? Just me, you, and,” She jutted her chin at the rows of stands selling an assortment of items. “A nice picnic basket filled with delicious food to enjoy on the waters.”

“A felucca?” Angela enquired. “What is that?”

Fareeha smiled, pointing at one of the many sailboats on the water. “That. A felucca is a type of sailboat that Egyptians have been using since centuries ago.”

“And you can sail one?”

“Ya amar,” Fareeha said, quirking an eyebrow up, reaching out to run one of her hand through Angela’s hair. A sign of affection to soften her next words. To ensure Angela knew she was not truly offended. “You hurt me with those words.”

Angela giggled, “My mistake. Why don’t I buy the food and beverages then as compensation?”

Fareeha smiled breezily, “Alright. And I shall rent a boat. Meet you back here in 20 minutes?”

Angela nodded, swiveling on her heel and walked into the direction of the small market. Fareeha stood there, watching Angela’s silhouette for a moment, then turned and walked over to the line of boat rental stores. She skipped over the first two, filled with tourists and Egyptians who undoubtedly were taking their first trip to Aswan waters. She passed the next three, uninterested in their lavish boats, and complete packages of food and wine. She passed another two. The boats were not allowed to be rented without one of their employees sailing it.

It wouldn’t do.
She wanted to be alone with Angela.

She stopped as a small boat rental shop caught her eye. The sailboats were simple and minimalistic, smaller flat-bottomed wooden boats with no outward designs. The construction was sturdy, planks all in place and the sails well-cared for. It also had a spacious bow in the front, large enough to comfortably rest on.

Perfect.

All she needed to purchase was a nice picnic blanket to cover the front.

Fareeha was flopped over onto her back, splayed out on the bow of the boat, now covered with a blue and white checkered picnic blanket, fastened hastily to the sides of the boat. Her shirt had rode up, displaying a sliver of skin from her movements. Angela, sitting on her side, next to Fareeha, took the opportunity to rest her fingers on Fareeha's midsection as she continued to chatter, hands flying in animation. She was laughing, practically wheezing as she attempted to string words together about something Saleh did at a couple months back. It was difficult to understand what Fareeha was trying to say, the humor in it lost due to the way her words were broken from her laughter. Still, giggles bubbled up out of her as Fareeha delivered the punchline.

Her roaring laughter at the end was far too infectious to do anything otherwise.

“Did you buy any fruit, ya amar?” Fareeha asked after she caught her breath, propping herself up with an elbow. Angela gestured at the brown paper beside them. Fareeha stretched to reach it without moving, shirt hiking further as she struggled. With a huff and a little kick of her legs she reached it, crumpling the top of the paper bag in her hand as she pulled it towards her.

She peeked inside and then pulled out a fig, turning over to sit back up straight. She picked up a knife and made a little cut, popping the piece into her mouth. A noise of approval came out of her mouth as she chewed. She looked at Angela, holding the fruit up with a questioning look.

She shook her head.

“I’m good. Thank you, schatz.”

Fareeha shrugged and resumed to cut pieces for herself.

Angela smiled and looked out to the view.

Sailboats, motorboats and fishing boats, large and small were cruising through the river. Everywhere she looked, as far as her eye could see, she saw other people like her, like Fareeha. People simply capitalizing on a leisurely Sunday afternoon. In these waters, a businessman was simply a father taking his family out for a quaint little fishing trip, a group of hardened construction workers were nothing more than a group of people lounging in a cramped motorboat, exchanging stories as they sipped cold beers from a cooler. She waved as another sailboat cruised past them, the man at the helm pulling and maneuvering the boat quickly upstream, catching the winds efficiently to the cheers of the passengers in front. Yet, despite his concentration he had noticed her wave and waved enthusiastically back. At the corner of her eye she spotted a hammock strung up between two trees, a figure laying there peacefully, a straw hat obscuring their face as they slept soundly near the river bank.

It felt like no one was in a rush was in a rush around these parts.
That time had slowed.

A place where people seemed to forget their troubles for the moment, and simply...

And simply be.

And Angela could understand the sentiment.

It was hard to be buttoned up when the boat rocked them gently, almost tenderly, the way a mother rocks her child to sleep. When the sunlight warmed her skin satisfyingly as the February winds offset any possibility of the heat becoming sweltering. When not one cloud was in the vast blue sky above them, shockingly blue from the lack of pollution in these parts. When the light of the dazzling sun caused the exceptionally calm waters of the Nile to shimmer almost ethereally, glitters of light refracted from its gentle waves the way precious metals did.

Life on the Nile was serene and she could understand how people were drawn to retire and spend the rest of their lives living off the bountiful river. Fishing, snorkeling or lazing the rest of their days away.

She lifted the wine glass to her lips. As the liquid touched her tongue, she closed her eyes in satisfaction. In all honesty she had been skeptical when she perused a local wine store. All the brands in the store were foreign to her and considering her foray into wine, she had felt a strong inclination to walk out and grab a tried and tested, good old-fashioned beer instead. On her way out though, her eyes caught a wine labelled ‘Omar Khayyam’. She remembered Fareeha had told her a few nights ago, when they were talking idly about nothing and everything, that Omar Khayyam was known to be good wine around these parts. She had raised a perfectly arched brow, informing her that Omar Khayyam was a famous mathematician, not a wine-maker, to which Fareeha shrugged.

Well, guess he liked it, because we got a wine named after him.

And so remembering that conversation, Angela purchased the wine. She decided to place stock in Fareeha’s offhand comment despite her reservations.

She was right to take that leap of faith.

Omar Khayyam was a proper dry red wine with deep flavors and a pleasant mouthfeel.

(It also went incredibly well with the kushari and beef kebabs she had also bought)

“This is nice, huh?”

Angela glanced at Fareeha, who was licking the tips of her fingers, stained pink from the flesh of the figs. Angela ignored the blush that was surely rising up her face, instead picking up a napkin and handing it over to a grateful Fareeha.

“It is nice. You come here often?”

Fareeha shrugged as dropped the used napkin into their trashbag, which was really just a plastic bag. “I still come by from time to time. Not as frequently as before though. Not as much time anymore, unfortunately.”

“Who did you go with?”

Fareeha smirked, waggling her brows as her next words drawled out of her.
“Wouldn’t you like to know? Maybe a girl or two.”

Angela pouted and took a generous gulp of her wine.

“Oh? And were they beautiful?” Angela muttered, not even caring at the way her words were dripped with venom.

“Gorgeous.” Fareeha replied easily.

“Wow. What a romantic admission by you, Fareeha. This is exactly what I wanted to hear on our last day together.” She said sarcastically as she flipped her off and downed the rest of her drink. Her ears burned as Fareeha tinkling laughter bounced off the waves. She turned away, crossing her arms, a little harrumph escaping her.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry. Just joshing you around.” Fareeha chuckled out.

Angela refused to turn around despite the apology. Instead, she focused her sights on the family of four in the green and white motorboat.

“Ya amar, don’t be mad.” Fareeha whined, "Have I taken other women here? Yes. And were they pretty? Well... yes, actually." Angela's lips drew thin. If this was Fareeha's tactic to get on her good side, she was doing a poor job. "But you need to understand this, I..." A sigh escaped Fareeha.

Angela felt a tug on her crossed arms. "Look at me, ya amar. Please?"

She sighed softly and turned back to look at Fareeha, a well-defined brow arched. She stared at Fareeha meaningfully.

I'm listening.

“Angela... The prettiest women on earth could all come flocking to me, professing their love, paying attention to me and only me-” Fareeha reached for her hands, turning her own hands upwards so Angela's own hands could languidly rested on them- "In all the ways I like, and the only thing I’d do is reject them all instantly. I’m yours, ya amar. Yours, Angela. You got me all wrapped up around your little finger and..." She paused to chuckle and shake her head, a slightly incredulous smile flashing briefly on her lips before it turned all sweet, "And there’s nowhere else I’d rather be. That's the raw truth.”

When Fareeha finished speaking, she stared at Angela in that earnest and tender way she had and Angela had no choice but to believe her. Fareeha’s smile widened as she saw the way Angela softened. She raised Angela's hands up to place a kiss her on the ridge of her knuckles and any fight left in Angela immediately vanished. Internally, she cursed herself for melting so quickly.

“...I think I’m completely smitten with you too, Fareehali,” She admitted softly, before a shy smile played on her lips. “So… I guess this means this is the best trip you ever took to Aswan?”

Fareeha's eyes darkened, smoldering as she leaned into Angela.

“Do you even have to ask?” Fareeha said against Angela's lips before fully closing the distance and capturing her lips.

A simple solid press of her lips against Angela’s.

The kind of kiss a person would give to say hello, goodbye or just because. The kind of kiss that screamed of affection and simply wanting to show affection. A purely innocent kiss. But above the calm waters of the Nile, the beautiful backdrop and the way Fareeha seemed more charming than
usual, with her crooked smiles and kind eyes, Angela felt butterflies burst in her stomach at the touch and surged forward when Fareeha withdrew. Fareeha's eyes widened for a fraction of a second, before she reacted, pulling her closer, asking for permission to deepen it with a tight grip on her hips and the small sound of need from the back of her throat. Angela gave it almost instantaneously. The kiss was gentle, slow and steady, and at times their teeth clashed from inexperience, from the newness of it all. Those instances made them both giggle. Still, when they parted, she was a little breathless, swallowing thickly to get her bearings.

“Oh, you are good.”

Angela’s eyes widened as she registered her words, face steaming from embarrassment. She scrunched her eyes, pulling her scarf upwards to cover her face as her mind replayed her embarrassing admission over and over again. When she finally gathered the nerve to peek a look, she saw that Fareeha was sitting there, lips quirked, eyes crinkled in tickled delight.

Yet kind enough to withhold any teasing comment, for which Angela was grateful.

Angela sighed as she leaned onto Fareeha. In a few hours they would have to leave the Nile’s majestic waters and take the bullet train back to Cairo, where they would go their separate ways. She would be taking a bus to a GSM base and Fareeha would go back home, still under house arrest for two more days. In a few hours it would be back to reality.

But for now, Angela would sit here and enjoy the view with the woman she loved.

Chapter End Notes

Another arc done. (but not the end of this part 1, just clarifying because there was some confusion last time lol)
Alternative title of this chapter: How many kisses can I shove in one chapter?
(are the amount of kisses borderline excessive? Perhaps, I'll admit to that. But I've had to wait 18 fucking chapters to be able to smush their faces together the way I want and I think I'm entitled to make them that gross couple from time to time)
The fluorescent lights of the bus glowed feebly, flickering as it dimmed and brightened in random intervals. The bus groaned as it pushed forward, creaky and jaunty from rusted suspension, and once it went past the city limit, the bus practically struggled with every inch traversed. The uneven roads had worsened immediately, pot holes and deep cracks a staple for every meter travelled now, instead of few and far between. The uncared roads only added to the disjointed rhythm the bus already bobbed along at. Angela bounced from the rickety motion of the bus, the chair beneath her – upholstered with cheap and faded brown leather- squeaking faintly with every movement. She pressed a hand to the window glass as she peered into the darkness that surrounded the bus. As when she first took this bus (well, perhaps not the very same bus, but a similar one, and on the same route at least) the world around her was too dark to see anything once the illuminating lights of the city became nothing more than a blip in the horizon.

Not even the moon could help light up the large expanses of sand, currently in its crescent stage and casting nothing more than a sliver of light. A slim ray not bright enough to penetrate through the all-encompassing darkness.

It should've been a lonely and silent ride, just like when she had went into the city two weeks back. Back then she had settled into the worn seats as best she could and closed her eyes, taking refuge in the solace of sleep to pass the time. It had worked like a dream and before she knew it her stop had arrived. She had planned to do just that this time around as well, and if things had fallen the way she had assumed they would, she most definitely would have.

But there was one difference she did not account for, and it made all the difference.

“Wow. The base is quite far off, huh?”

The question was phrased nonchalantly, but Angela picked up the teasing undertones beneath, the little spot of mirth that bloomed from within. Angela turned her head away from the windowpane and towards the seat next to her, exhaling a chuckle at being greeted with Fareeha’s toothy grin. Her teeth blindingly white despite the sickly, dim light of the bus.

Fareeha joining the bus ride was beyond her wildest dreams.

They had rushed from Aswan to grab her luggage, Fareeha swinging it over her shoulder and carrying it for her to the bus stop. They had said their goodbyes, a hug, a kiss, and a promise that they would make time to see each other again. Angela had then hopped into the bus and settled into
her seat, waving Fareeha goodbye from the window when suddenly, Fareeha walked and entered the bus.

“I can’t believe you paid for a bus ticket as well.” She breathed out, feigning exasperation, her lips pursed in an attempt to appear stern. When Fareeha’s grin turned wider, she shook her head good-naturedly, knowing she had failed to portray herself as genuinely disapproving. “You’re impossible.”

“I’m not loaded, but I can afford a bus fare or two. HSI isn’t that stingy when it comes to compensation.”

Angela huffed, lips quirking at her jest.

“You know what I meant, Fareehali. You could be in bed, sleeping on a comfy queen-sized bed, dreaming the night away in soft, handspun cotton bliss. Instead you are here, traversing to a rural GSM base in the middle of the desert in the dead of night—” The bus sputtered and they bounced harshly, “—in a stuffy, old bus that might break our backs by the time we reach the base. And then you have to take this bus all the way back tomorrow morning, because I’m leaving for my next mission then. Unless you’re joining us or GSM, which I know you aren’t. And furthermore, there is also…” she trailed off, the rest of her sentence dying when she realized Fareeha was staring at her with raised eyebrows. “…What?”

“You’re rambling.” She stated, then reached over and took hold of one of her hands, rubbing her thumb soothingly over her skin. “What are you really trying to say, ya amar?”

Angela shrugged, playing with her necklace idly with her free hand.

“I guess what I’m trying to say is that I think that maybe you’re wasting your time.”

Fareeha’s brow creased and thumb stilled. A small noise escaped from the back of her throat when Fareeha ducked her head to face her at eyelevel, her dark eyes intense and tender at the same time.

“Ya amar, don’t you know?” Fareeha murmured, as her free hand curled against the back of her neck, pulling her in.

Anticipating Fareeha’s lips to press on her own, Angela’s eyes closed and her lips puckered. When she felt a warm cheek glide against hers, her eyes fluttered back open, perplexed when things didn’t fall the way she assumed they would. Specifically, Fareeha’s lips on hers. Her mouth parted, ready to voice her puzzlement when Fareeha dipped down a fraction to deliver a kiss that was both behind and below her ear, at the junction where her jaw connected with her neck. She bit her lip as shivers ran down her spine from the unexpected contact, the area where Fareeha’s lips made contact tingling even after the woman lifted her head back up to meet her eyes. She felt warm. Warmer still when Fareeha spoke once more, affection clear in her words.

“Time I spend with you could never be time wasted.”

“O-oh.” She squeaked out, nodding dumbly as she got her bearings. “Alright then… I suppose there’s no issue.”

“None.” Fareeha affirmed.

Angela shifted closer to rest her head on Fareeha’s shoulder, hand turning upwards to interlace with Fareeha’s hand that been laying on top of hers. In all honesty she still had issue with Fareeha blowing money to spend a few more hours with her, but it would be a lie to say a small (and by that, she meant a large) part of her did not thoroughly enjoy the gesture.
She would of course, pay Fareeha’s fare back home.

It was only fair.

Her eyes fluttered downwards down to look at their interlaced hands, before slowly drifting up and settling on Fareeha’s taut forearm. Fareeha’s forearm was littered with faint scars, varied in shape, size and depth. Light discolorations that belied many grim stories, stories Angela had yet to ask about. Her other hand moved across to trace against a particularly long, and vivid scar. Her pointer finger trailing over it idly, a gentle caress to and fro the length of the scar that brought out an appreciative sigh out of Fareeha.

A now familiar warmth bloomed in her at once at the sound and she nestled further in as they settled into a comfortable silence. A silence that continued, broken only by hush murmurs and whispered conversations until jarring howls of laughter bounced through the bus.

Laughter so raucous that she instinctively honed in on the group of men huddled near the front who were the source of it. She noted that they were playing poker or some other gambling game and by the looks of it, one man must have been having a terrible night. The dejection was clear on his face as he practically threw crumpled dollars from his pockets at his friends. Friends who were jovially laughing at his misery, almost doubling over as they waved other wads of bills in front of his face.

Angela presumed they used to be in his possession.

Fareeha whistled sympathetically. “Tough night for that guy.”

“It does seem that way.” Angela agreed. She pursed her lips when another round of laughter and shouted words rang out from them. “It’s rather late at night to be so loud on a bus. It’s a little inconsiderate.”

She felt Fareeha shrug, her head bobbing up and downwards to the motion of her shoulder.

“Well, what’s inconsiderate on a bus where even the bus driver doesn’t follow their own rules?”

Angela followed Fareeha’s line of sight, directing her attention too at the large ‘no smoking’ sign plastered up front in big, bold letters. She then stared at the driver, a frown marring her face when she caught a glimpse of the cigarette that burned between his lips when he went to adjust the rearview mirror.

“Honestly.” She muttered, nose crinkling reflexively at the sight of thin wisps of grey smoke trailing out of the butt. Though the fumes never reached Angela, instead sucked out into the open air from his rolled down window, she could imagine the smell, all too familiar with it against her own will. It was unfortunately commonplace for her to encounter as a GSM worker. Poorer demographics seemed to have a propensity for the toxic stuff.

Not that it was any better back in Overwatch.

The combat divisions always came back with the smell of nicotine staining their clothes as strong as the gun residue on their fingertips.

“I take it you’re not a fan.”

“No. I certainly am not.”

“Well,” she felt Fareeha shift, “That is a bit of a problem then.”
Angela recoiled from Fareeha’s shoulder.

“You do?”

It was an innocent question, only sounding somewhat accusatory in delivery due to the genuine shock she felt. Throughout the time that Angela had stayed with Fareeha, she had not noticed the woman smoke a single cigarette. And wouldn’t she? Considering the tumultuous inner struggle she faced the last couple of days about her most recent mission? How on earth did Angela not catch even a whiff of cigarettes?

No one who smoked cigarettes could resist their nicotine calls in times of great stress.

“I did. Used to.” Fareeha clarified.

Angela bit her lip, her brow creasing as she tried to picture Fareeha smoking, and found that she couldn’t. The woman seemed to be the embodiment of fitness and did not seem the type to waste her potential, waste her lung capacity, waste her capabilities, for a few herbs rolled up in paper that tasted like nothing but tar and ash.

“Can’t picture it?” she guessed accurately. Angela nodded.

Fareeha laughed, gentle and easy.

“I smoked when I was in the army.” She divulged, scratching her nose as she looked up at the ceiling, an almost bashful look on her face. “Like almost every other army on Earth, a pack of cigarettes were one of the rations they gave. At first I always gave’em to my comrades, but after being stuck in a trench for five weeks…” She crossed her arms and sank into her seat, her gaze trained on the back of the seat in front of them as she continued with a shrug. “Sometimes there’s nothing you can do to relieve your stress, and at least smoking was something to do.”

Angela didn’t agree, but she understood.

Fareeha tilted her head, a nervous grin appearing.

“Don’t frown, ya amar. Think of it this way, whether or not I smoke didn’t matter, my lungs were already shot from all the people around me who smoked and all the worse fumes that linger on the battlefield.”

Her frown deepened. She was not consoled by that logic.

It was flawed.

“There’s no reason to make things worse for yourself though,” she admonished softly, voicing out her objection. “That’s like saying it doesn’t matter if I add more fuel to an already large fire…”

Fareeha’s smile dimmed, “Right… I see you’re quite upset about this.”

“I’m a doctor, Fareeha. Of course, I’m upset.” She sighed out, before pressing a quick kiss to the corner of Fareeha’s mouth when the woman somehow sank further in her seat. Satisfaction entered her when the woman perked up from the gesture. “But that doesn’t mean I would have loved you any less… I would just simply try to stop you, of course.”

“Of course.” Fareeha repeated sagely, nodding her head. “I would’ve expected nothing less.”

Angela smiled back, before worrying her bottom lip. “…So you really don’t smoke anymore?”
“Nope. Never really cared for it, honestly. It was really something to do to pass the time when I was in the army. Stopped immediately when I got out. Cold turkey.” She bobbed her head side to side, scrunching her face, “Buuut, I do go do shisha once in a while for team bonding.”

“…I suppose once in a while is okay. For the sake of team bonding.”

“Really dialing back the judgment there, ya amar.”

She huffed, “I can’t help it. I really don’t like it.”

From Jesse, to Gabriel, to even her own mother. She thought it was a stupid habit. It killed one’s lungs, one’s wallet and the second-hand smoke killed people nearby, stripping them of the choice of whether or not they felt like inching nearer to death.

She felt a kiss on her temple. “Thank you for trying, ya amar.”

“But I won’t kiss you on the lips if you just smoked though. Smokers taste like ashtrays.”

“Is that so? Huh.” Fareeha commented, squinting her eyes at her. She tapped her chin, jutting out her lips as she feigned to go into deep, introspective thought. She glanced at Angela, eyes dancing with mirth as the corners of her lips twitched upwards, destroying any notion of seriousness. “Well, that certainly would be a problem. I guess I should stop altogether, huh?”

“…Charmer.”

“Only for you.” She stated breezily, a rumbling chuckle emitting out of her when Angela buried her head into the crook of her neck in a futile effort to hide her happiness and her blush. Twice. Fareeha had succeeded in making her swoon twice in the span of ten minutes. Fareeha slung an arm around her and rubbed her shoulder soothingly.

“Should I stop, ya amar?”

She shook her head, smiling against her collarbone as Fareeha laughed once more, her chest rising and dipping in a staccato fashion at her response.

“So, being serious here…” Fareeha drawled, a tinge of curiosity in her tone that made Angela lift her head up. “Where you going this time around?”

“We’re going to help some refugees who had fled the conflict at the Siwa Oasis and are now residing at a small village about a couple hundred kilometers from south of it.” She felt Fareeha go rigid and Angela rubbed her arm soothingly, “We’ve got security with us, of course. So don’t worry.”

“Oh?” If Fareeha was going for a casual tone with her remark, she had failed. The word was strained and Angela could practically feel the worry that emanated in waves from Fareeha. “Who are they?”

“The company is called Farafra Red.”

“Oh. Good.” Angela brightened in the change in inflection, and the calmness that settled on Fareeha. “They are very well established. Not an international security company, but when it comes to private military companies, they are still high on the list. Also, they know the terrain there like no other, so you really are in good hands.”

“You were quite worried there, schatz.” She teased, “Worried I can’t handle myself?”

Fareeha snorted. “No. I know you can handle yourself, Ms. ‘Veronica Mueller’. There is more to
you than meets the eye… or rather your resume, in this case.” She scratched her head. “Your colleagues on the other hand… I was just worried for them as well.”

Angela eyes crinkled in delight.

“You’re a softie, Fareehali.”

Fareeha grinned, showcasing all her pearly whites. “Don’t tell nobody.”

Fareeha swung Angela’s luggage over her shoulder, wide and large movements, a purposeful sway. The bag went over her shoulder easily, appearing like it weighed nothing more than a single sheet of paper. The effortlessness she exuded was partly naturally and partly by design. She could feel Angela watching her as she did so, and knew the way her eyes would roam over her muscles as they strained from being exercised. The woman really wasn’t all that subtle with her leering and Fareeha was more than glad to give her a little bit of a show.

She cocked her head back at Angela, a crooked grin etched on her face, feigning obliviousness to her wandering eyes.

“Let’s go, ya amar.”

Angela nodded, finally pulling out her eyeglasses from her pocket and placing them back on her face. As they walked to the base, Angela started to tie her hair up once more, back into the simple short ponytail that ‘Veronica Mueller’ always had her hair in. It was strange to see the woman with her hair up, now accustomed to her black tresses out and framing her face. It nailed the final coffin in for Fareeha that Angela really was going back to work, hair already done up once more to free her face and not get in the way of her duties as a doctor. A true, blue, GSM worker ready to dive back into the action.

Speaking of which.

“Is Patricia going to be there?”

“Why? Are you going to tease her again?” Angela said coolly, “And by tease, I mean flirt?”

Fareeha stiffened, “Wha-No! I only did it to annoy her- Never serious! I swear.”

Angela cool visage fell apart when she burst into a small fit of giggles, “I’m not mad, ‘Reeha. You can still tease her if you want. I know it’s in jest.”

Fareeha looked at Angela, gauging the sincerity in her words and when she found that Angela seemed to be a hundred percent serious, she looked up thoughtfully. She pursed her lips and creased her brow as she thought, picking up Orion’s belt in the sky as she did so, before turning her attention back to Angela.

“…Nah, I really don’t feel like it.” She reached over and tucked a stray strand of hair that Angela had missed behind her ear. “Don’t really feel like flirting with anybody, but you.”

She hadn’t thought about adding that little tidbit at the end. Once the words had carried themselves into the wind however, and Fareeha had realized what she had just confessed, she felt her whole face burn. She kept her eyes in front of her as she walked, cursing the silence of the night and the way she could not backtrack and convince Angela she had misheard her terribly embarrassing admission. It wasn’t the cheesiest thing she had ever stated, but she hadn’t meant to say it out loud and that
somehow made it more mortifying than anything else she had ever said. She grumbled, scolding herself under her breath before gathering her courage and dared a peek to Angela. Her mortification eased when she saw a blush coloring the woman’s cheeks as well and a delighted smile on her lips.

“What are you doing here?”

She snapped her attention back in front. Patricia was there, a mixture of disbelief and annoyance in her face as her eyes travelled up and down Fareeha’s frame.

She had no inclination to flirt with anyone, but Angela now.

Teasing on the other hand…

“Good to see you too, Patty Patt.” She said bluntly, a purposefully awkward smile on her lips that looked more like she was baring her teeth at her. Internally, she relished the twitch of Patricia’s eye at the nickname she conjured up in two seconds.

“Go. Away.”

“Sorry, but,” she jutted a thumb behind her, knowing the bus was well on its way into the distance, “The next ride is tomorrow morning, seems I got to crash here-”

“There are no more beds.” She interrupted flatly.

“There’s patient cots, aren’t they?”

“Yes. Patient cots.” She bit out. “Cots for people who are patients.”

“Then I’ll get myself injured right away.”

“…You fucking cow.” Patricia turned to Angela. “I regret ever telling you to go for it. Is she going to be here, with me, forever now?”

Angela looked sheepish, holding her hands up in apology.

“Just one night, Patricia.”

Fareeha cleared her throat to get back their attention.

“What was that about you telling ya amar here about going for it?”

Patricia simply turned on her heels, raising her middle finger up in the air clear for Fareeha to see as she walked off briskly back to camp first.

__________________

It was a little cramped in Angela’s cot. It was only made for one, but here they were huddled together and honestly there was nowhere Fareeha would rather be. Hand spun cotton bliss of her own bed be damned.

“Goodnight, ya amar.” She whispered into Angela’s hair.

Angela shifted in her arms, burying her head further into her as a leg hooked itself over her ankle. She felt the cool metal of her prosthetic legs warm up from the heat of Angela’s bare legs.

“Goodnight, Fareehali.” Angela mumbled out drowsily, breath tickling Fareeha’s collarbone as she
spoke almost directly into her skin.

A fond smile graced her lips when she heard soft tell-tale snores come out of Angela, and the way her chest rose and fell at a steady pace. She pressed a kiss to the crown of her head before craning her head to look over to the cot beside them.

“Goodnight, Patricia.”

Patricia peeked out of her covers, squinting.

“…Goodnight.” An accusatory finger pointed at her. “No funny business. Remember that I’m in the room.”

Fareeha gave a two finger salute.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Strong arms encircled her waist from behind, pulling her slightly back and away from the exit of the tent. She leaned into the touch, stifling a smile when she felt a weight on the top of her head.

“Don’t go, ya amar.” Fareeha tightened her hold on her, her throat bobbing as she whined. “Why do you have to leave?”

Angela giggled under her breath at hearing the Fareeha moan like a child. Her demure giggles becoming full-on laughter as Fareeha leaned unceremoniously forward, putting her full weight onto Angela.

“Don’t laugh, ya amar. I’m bein’ serious.”

Angela could practically hear the smile on her face as she said those words.

“Fareeha!” she wheezed out as Fareeha started to push down, causing Angela to stumble forwards and start to buckle closer to the ground. She tried to push back and realized quite quickly it was a futile attempt, being relatively smaller and weaker by quite a large margin, to the younger woman. Laughter also hampered her struggle, escaping out of her again as Fareeha rested her head on the crook where her shoulder met her neck and hummed, the vibrations tickling her further. She wriggled against the woman’s strong grip, somehow finding a way to shimmy herself to face Fareeha, though not before the woman could sneak in a kiss, sending a pleasant rush through her.

“Well, hello there.” Fareeha drawled, cutting her off any words she had wanted to say, a cheeky grin on her face. She helped Angela back up to a proper standing position, before her hands travelled to rest languidly on Angela’s wide hips. “You’re looking a little ruffled there. Is there a problem?”

Angela rolled her eyes good-naturedly at the jibe, before tiptoeing to give a kiss.

“Fareehali, she sighed, wrapping her arms around the woman’s waist. “As much as I don’t want to leave, I can hear Patricia yelling already from outside the tent. I have to go.”

Fareeha’s eyes were large and comically sorrowful as she looked at Angela with the most doleful look she had seen in a while. Angela tried to be polite, attempting to conceal her smile as best as she could, pressing her lips into a thin line. Yet she still felt the corners lift up despite her best efforts. She tiptoed again to give her another kiss.
“Don’t look so sour, Fareehali.” Fareeha scrunched her face at her chiding words. The smile Angela tried to contain escaped at the sight. “Besides, your break is over as well soon right?”

“In two days.” She mumbled out, almost incoherently.

“And you’ve got a bus to catch in…” she fished out her phone to check the time. “Exactly twenty two minutes."

Fareeha’s face crinkled further before she cracked her neck, resignation clear in the sag of her shoulders.

“…Fine. I hate being logical sometimes.” She muttered under her breath. She then squeezed her hand. “Let me walk you to your convoy vehicle?”

“Of course.”

They walked together to the convoy vehicle, an appreciative smile coming out of her when Fareeha helped her up, before picking up her luggage and placing it in the vehicle as well. She waved and waved once the convoy vehicle started to go off, watching Fareeha’s figure until it was no more than a speck in the distance.

“Geez, what happened to not making it official?” Patricia quipped next to her, “To the ‘we’re two people who have too much on their plate to ever become anything more and things are good the way it is now’ spiel? What happened to that, Veronica?”

Angela pulled off her glasses to clean it with the fabric of her shirt.

“It became silly, Patricia. I was afraid, in case of making it real because if anything happened to her, I thought it would hurt far too much.” Fareeha was a security chief. Being in the throes of danger was practically her job description. She held her glasses up into the air, into the light to verify she had cleared away all the smudges. “Or worse. That I’d fall for her so hard and one day she’d get up and leave, because it’s hard to be with someone who’s always gone to help the world in some remote place.” she rubbed harder, trying to rid her spectacles of a particularly resistant smudge, "All my doubts, my reasons for never going for it, laid in the premise that I still had a chance to close myself off in anything bad happened.”

“…And that is a false premise?”

She placed her glasses back on her face, a shy smile overtaking her features.

“Yes. It’s already far, far, too late.”

Patricia smiled back. “…I know I give Fareeha a lot of shit, but I’m glad.” She inspected her nails idly, “She’s not a bad person. In fact, she’s actually… she’s actually pretty great.” Patricia admitted then paused, eyes flashing as she looked at Angela seriously, “Do not tell her I said that.”

Angela simply nodded and gave a thumbs up. She sighed as she bent down to unzip her suitcase, hands rifling through the bag to pull out her tablet and a bag of dried banana chips. She munched on the chips as she pulled out the mission details on her tablet, scanning through it quickly. Her lips drawing into a grim line when she reached the information gathered about the people who had gathered at the village awaiting treatment.

It was going to be a little more hectic than she initially thought.

“We’re treating soldiers as well?” she muttered to herself, brows creasing. She swore the file had said...
refugees only before. She glanced at Patricia, saw her deeply invested in a discussion with another medic and decided to hold off her question. She instead clicked on the appendix, hoping there would be a paragraph shedding light for the recent development there. She went through pages of appendix with blinding speed, until she reached the one with an extension on the status of the soldiers and the ailments that hit them. It must be something serious if they wanted medical expertise beyond their own field medics.

*Hit with… chemical weapon?*

She scanned the effects of the soldiers who were hit, her brow creasing as she read the symptoms. Her lips parted and jaw trembled, a sickly feeling bubbling up in her stomach as she went further, the effects uncomfortably familiar to her. Her finger was shaky as it swiped leftwards to get to the next page.

*Potential attackers*

Amongst the various pictures, was a picture of the Shrike, but it was not the helmet or the clothes or the arrogant stance of the rogue that caught Angela’s eye. It was that this was the first time she had seen a full body shot and slung around their shoulders was something that Angela was very, *very*, familiar with.

She couldn’t believe it at first, what her eyes were seeing.

Because it was something that shouldn’t be.

The worry stone in her pocket suddenly felt like lead.

Chapter End Notes

You thought this was going to be an only fluff-filled interim chapter? Too bad. It was there all along! PLOT.
Next chapter is probably coming out in less than a week. Motivation for this next chapter be hitting me like a truck.
PS. Don’t smoke kids. Don’t be like me. Listen to Angela and ignore Fareeha’s ambivalence that had come about due to her past experiences.
Some of those medicines are not real. Also, I'm not really sure how medical treatments work.
Thus, my readers with keen medical knowledge, forgive me for all mistakes in how medical stuff works, lmao.

She rested a palm on the railing of the medical bed, while her eyes bored into the particular patient in front of her. One of many all lined up in beds adjacent to one another. The neutrality of her expression was marred only by the faint downward tug at the corner of her lips. An almost untraceable scowl resting on an otherwise impassive visage. Her finger twitched and began to tap on the railing, a light pitter patter with no discerning pattern onto the coarse white plastic.

It had been far too close.

She had jittered the whole car ride to the village, leg bouncing up and down in a fevered fashion. Time was of the essence and they weren’t going fast enough. A festering seedling of dread had implanted itself in her the moment she read the report on the soldiers. Either they treated them soon, or every single one of them would drop dead. The instant the village was in sight, Angela rose to action, scrambling to shove as many supplies as she could into her bag, scrambling faster when she heard the frantic and panicked calls from the people at the village who crowded near recently erected tents. Before the truck skidded to a complete stop, Angela had lunged out, practically vaulting out of the back of the convoy vehicle and nearly tripping as her feet hit the soft sand. When she got her bearings, she furiously sprinted straight ahead towards the army’s medical tent, only vaguely aware of the two Farafra Red guards trailing behind her, commanding her to halt and wait for them. She barreled through the tent’s opening, or tried to, before a strong arm yanked her to the side as she was halfway in. Her eyes darted to her attacker. Strongly built man in fatigues and a hardened face.

Authorized personnel only.

He had growled out the words at her, spittle flying out of his mouth. The severity of his glare would have deterred most, but for Angela, it simply spurred a spark of fury.

I’m here to save your men, you dolt.

The fighting words were fired back mentally. As in a rush as she was to save the soldiers, she still had half a mind to notice the hand he rested on the glock in his holster. A hand that was slowly curling around the gun. The escalating situation was quickly neutralized by the two Farafra Red guards who had given chase had caught up right at this moment, shouting wildly in Arabic that they were here to help and that Angela was of no danger to their injured men and women. She didn’t bother to stand around as they explained the situation, instead twisting her arm free and haphazardly throwing the ID badge around her neck at the military personnel guarding the tent, before swooping straight in once more.

Her eyes flitted left and right wildly, analyzing the situation and mentally cataloguing the patients into classes based on the severity of their wounds and ailments. Dread lurched to her throat though as
she spotted them.

The unfortunate souls struck by the unknown toxin.

She moved automatically, unzipping her bag and dumping all the med-packs she stuffed into it onto a nearby table. The field medics quickly rushed over, their eyes flashing with renewed hope at the bounty of medical supplies Angela had brought in. Their fingers ripped the med-packs open hastily to apply them to their critically ill patients. They had been doing their best to stabilize their conditions until now, applying med-pack after med-pack and injecting them with general serums in a desperate attempt to flush out the toxin. They had worked to the point where all their resources were almost completely depleted, working valiantly to sustain the lives of the soldiers. However, without proper medical equipment, all they were doing were holding off the inevitable.

And the inevitable seemed soon.

Some of the soldiers were starting to froth at the mouth.

So when Angela heard the squeaky rolling of heavy machinery and was greeted with the sight of a slew of GSM’s technologies being carted in, she remembered a shuddered exhale of gratitude flood through her.

Thank god, they had come when they did.

Thank god, they had a chance.

Thank god.

They might just be able to save these soldiers, so many of them far too young to have their lives extinguished.

*It’s a toxic nerve agent, we should inject them with atropine.*

*The medics here have blasted them with enough autoinjectors with the stuff. Anymore and they’ll die!*

…*How bout 2-PAM chloride? Or have we lost too much time?*

*Do we have any prophylactic countermeasures? Let’s use that-*

*Now, hold on one second. We don’t even know if it’s an organophosphate nerve agent, now do we?*

While her colleagues bickered, she stared at the Koplr Machine as it whirred, struggling to identify the compounds of the toxin, a sample available from a dart with a splash of liquid. When the machine beeped and printed out the results, Angela quickly snatched it.

She had never seen this particular makeup.

The toxin contained characteristics and effects she was unacquainted with.

However, the toxin in its bare essence was something she was highly familiar with and remembers distinctly shutting down any dissenting opinion for its production. She had created it solely to show the prowess of the caduceus staff. Not to unleash hell on the world.

Her muscles tensed and she quivered in silent rage.

*The results are out! What do they say, Dr. Mueller?!!*
She smothered her burgeoning anger.

I’ve seen this. I worked with a man called Akshay Singh a while back. He was an expert with toxins.

Dr. Singh was an incredible man. A resolute man who had spent his days researching antidotes and serums to combat all sorts of toxins.

He had told me all about this particular toxin and luckily… Luckily, I remember how to make it.

That was a lie. A lie that was heavy on her tongue. The man was dead, succumbed to cancer a few months back, and here she was using him as a front to save her own ass.

With the materials at hand and following Angela’s directions, they improvised with injecting 140 milligrams of iratrobl, 80 milligrams of seratropine, 22 milligrams of decarium, multiple muscle relaxants and a numbing agent. They also hooked each patient up to IV’s and flushed their blood regularly with clean blood as an extra precaution. Through the sheer luck that the toxin was a G-series class rather than V-series, and that it had not strayed too far from the toxin that Angela intimately knew in terms of makeup, the combination of antidotes and serums they utilized had worked in stabilizing their conditions. Her team had rejoiced, thanking the stars or whatever god they believed in that they come in time, slapping her on the back and congratulating her for ‘saving the day’.

Angela had stayed silent during the celebrations, grinding her teeth. She found herself unable to savor the moment, unable to partake in even a moment of reprieve or the slightest drip of happiness. Her mind elsewhere, wondering how the toxin she had banned -the blueprint for this toxin strain ever made its way into the world. She had deleted all archived research of the toxin. Which meant someone else must have had a physical copy of the toxin's makeup which meant...

Against her own will, her mind conjured up a few faces.

The only faces that made sense. The only other people who knew about the toxin.

And she turned sick as she realized there was only one face in that mix she could confront. The only one still alive and well.

Her fingers stilled, stopping mid-tap and curled tightly around the railing of the medical bed, hand gripping the plastic with enough force to turn her knuckles white.

Angela clicked her tongue, as her eyes roamed over the features of the soldier in the bed, wandering over the expanses of skin that laid uncovered by the hospital gown they had changed him into. His skin, painted a sickly black blue when Angela had first come in, had almost returned to normal, though a bluish hue still persisted. Despite the tubes that ran down his throat, the IV attached to his arm, and the catheter attached to his urethra to collect his urine in the clear bag that hanged beside his bed, he seemed almost serene as he slept, drugged and placed into a medically induced coma that he would wake up from in hopefully less than a day’s time.

Her lips pressed into a thin, thin line.

The toxin was an ingeniously devised toxic nerve agent, if achievements in chemical warfare were ever be described as a good thing. To Angela, it was the most horrific of pursuits. She was vehemently against the recent acceptance in reintroducing some of them back into war tactics and recalls an uncharacteristic outburst of physical violence on her part when Jack had entertained the thought of using chemical agents in certain Overwatch operations.

...Perhaps entertained was too light of a word. The facts now directed her to believe that perhaps
Overwatch did use some chemical weapons.

The heart rate monitor beeped in the background, a steady rhythmic beat that grated on Angela’s ears.

The toxin was odorless and tasteless in all its forms, and considering the temperatures needed for it to be in its solid or gaseous state, most likely retained by combatants in its liquid form. And combatants probably enjoyed this fact immensely, able to fill cartridges of sniper darts with the concentrated stuff and fire it straight into someone’s body. Injecting them with a deep purple liquid, thick and opaque, looking as noxious as it actually was, straight into their nervous system.

Her skin felt tight. The veins near her temple throbbed.

The growing discomfort that had been swelling ever since she set her sight on the patients rippled through her. She clenched her teeth, trying to squelch the feeling that was clawing up.

Nerve agents are deceptively simple in their mechanism. At its core, all strains of this sort of agent simply inhibits the enzyme acetylcholinesterase, responsible for the breakdown of acetylcholine. Acetylcholine acts as the neurotransmitter that signals muscles to contract, therefore if not broken down, muscles are prevented from relaxing and will keep contracting. This one was no different at its heart, however, the agent was imbued with some additional characteristics.

A Frankenstein mixture that should have never been formed into existence.

In small doses the toxin caused slight disorientation, shortness of breath, constriction of the pupils, and a numbness in the fingertips, toes and face. In large doses or prolonged exposure, it was fatal or near fatal. The symptoms evolved into extreme salivation, nausea, gastrointestinal pain, vomiting and a tumultuous progression of losing control of their bodily functions. They will buckle over, their bodies spastically jerking as their muscles continually contract, and a burning sensation will hit their lungs. If victims did not die from the pain, they were sure to die from respiratory failure if left untreated. Their lungs would slowly collapse in on itself and the victims would be left gurgling and frothing at the mouth as they struggled in a futile attempt to draw a proper breath.

The IV for patient no. 11 started to beep.

Angela ran a tongue across her teeth as she went to work, drawing out another IV, filling it with the proper fluids, swiftly replacing the old IV. Her stomach turned and twisted as she stared at the soldier in front of her.

The worst had come to pass, but only time would tell if any of them lived or died. If their bodies were strong enough to recover, or if they would pass away peacefully in their sleep. Whether they would wake up no worse for wear, or if the toxin had already dredged itself too far into them and did irreparable damage. Paralysis, impaired vision, hearing loss.

The list of permanent after-effects was endless.

And worst of all…

Angela swallowed thickly, scrunching her eyes to force back tears that glistened in her eyes.

And worst of all, whether they with their minds intact or that the toxin had succeeded in eating away at the neurons and synapses in their brain, turning them into nothing more vacant living husks. Living husks destined to waste away in some hospital bed, visited once or twice a year by relatives who hold onto the hope that one day there will be clarity in their despondent eyes once more.
People who were no longer living, only existing.

She prayed they would make it.

Her shoved her hands in her pockets. Her left hand curled around her worry stone. The stone, with all its smooth curves and pleasant coolness, suddenly felt foreign to her. It felt clunky and uncomfortable as she twisted it within her hand, and she felt a spike of disdain form. Her fingers brushed over a rounded edge and she grinded her teeth. Where once the action brought her a moment’s reprieve, it now did nothing but bolster her increasingly grim mood. The stone was no longer a source of comfort. Rather, it felt like a physical manifestation of her problems, all coiled up into one solid chunk of smooth rock. She gripped the stone, and with its size too small even for her slim hands, her nails dug into the flesh of her own palm.

“Veronica?”

Angela heaved a sigh, unclenching her balled hands. She turned slowly to face Patricia.

The indentations her nails made stung.

Patricia shifted in place, a perturbed expression on her face. Her voice uncharacteristically hesitant and demure as she spoke once more, devoid of its usual sharpness.

“Are you alright? You seem…” she paused and licked her lips, “You seem very tired. Troubled, actually.”

Angela stared blankly at Patricia. Troubled did not describe half of what was stirring inside Angela.

“Is it that obvious?” she asked rhetorically, forcing a smile. A smile that felt wrong, the lift of her cheeks and the baring of her teeth all felt unnatural. Her cheeks hurt from her strain. And when she considered Patricia’s reaction, the slight scrunch of her face and pooling worry in her eyes, she knew it to appear as unnatural as it felt. She dropped it and rolled her shoulders.

“You know Veronica, the field medics around here have been told what to do.” Patricia gestured around them at the army medics that were dispersed around the room, “They can handle the situation here.”

“I know.”

“They are capable of doing all the required duties-”

“I know.”

“-like monitoring, changing fluids, checking vitals-”

“I know.”

Patricia stopped, frowning deeply now. “…I’m trying to say that you don’t have to be here. You can rest up if you want.”

“…I know.” She answered quietly, but made no move to head to the break room.

An uncomfortable silence passed between them. Angela sighed and ran a hand through her hair, before taking two steps closer to Patricia. She rested a hand on Patricia’s shoulder and squeezed it reassuringly. The irony that she was the one doing the comforting was not lost on her and a wry smile found its way onto her face.
“Thanks for looking out for me, Patricia.” She breathed out sincerely. She gave her shoulder another comforting squeeze. “I do appreciate it.”

Patricia said nothing back, eyeing her curiously. The unsaid question behind her silence was as clear as day to Angela.

*Are you going to take a break?*

She shook her head once, cutting Patricia off when a retort started to form on her lips.

“There is still work to be done, Patricia.” She stated matter-of-factly. “And my shift is not over.”

She side-stepped Patricia and started to walk towards the other medical tents. She did not wait for Patricia to catch up, keeping her quick pace. She saluted a guard as he held the flap of another medical tent open for her.

“Are you going to be okay?” Patricia asked when she finally matched her brisk strides.

*Did it matter?*

“Yes. I’ll be just fine.” Angela replied smoothly.

When they reached the main medical tent, Angela clicked her tongue again. The sheer number of people who still needed to be treated was mind-boggling. She snapped on a pair of latex gloves and shelved any little tendrils of grim thoughts that bubbled near the surface of her consciousness. She walked over to her station stiffly. She held out a hand for the man who sat there, anxiously waiting to be treated.

“Hello. I am Dr. Veronica Mueller. I will be your doctor today.” She said, a practiced lightness in her tenor that betrayed none of her exhaustion and inner turmoil.

“Hello Dr. Mueller…” the man said pensively, then pursed his lips. “…Is it bad? Can you fix it?”

He had multiple lacerations on his body and Angela noted the sickly green mold that grew on his fingers and toes.

It was not going to be easy.

Her eyes flickered back up to his face, and her lips curled into a professional smile.

“Don’t worry. You’re going to be just fine.”

She collapsed onto her ass, kicked off her sandals to the side and sunk her aching feet into the sand. She pulled her hair tie out of her hair roughly, not caring that she was breaking her tresses with her callous action, wincing once or twice as it snagged on a knot or two. Once her hair tie snapped off she threaded it around a wrist and shook her hair free, running a smoothing hand through it.

She had locked up her feelings and became the good doctor for the past couple days. Shelving her memories and repressed her emotions for a false veneer of serenity and calm. A feat that sapped her strength, and now she was tired. So very tired, and wanted nothing more than to be left alone.

To stew all on her own in silence.

It had taken a bit of time, and more than a few words of convincing, but she finally was granted
permission to wander from the grounds to do just that. She had immediately wandered off into the night and took refuge in the solace of a sand dune a couple meters away from all the merriment and idle chatter. From the celebrations of her comrades at a job well done. She sighed and gripped the edges of the red shawl wrapped around her shoulders as she exhaled a long and tired breath out into the open sky above her. It was a cloudy night, all the lights in the sky, from the half-moon to the twinkling stars, smothered from sight.

Yet, Angela tilted her chin upwards to stare at the vast and black sky, drowning in the nothingness.

Eyes glazed as she looked listlessly at the view.

Her hands gripping the soft fabric a little too tightly, fingers quivering a fraction as she pulled to hug it tighter around her body. A small breath shuddered out of her.

“To heal is the highest calling.” She mumbled to herself. "To heal... is the highest calling."

The army had thanked them for their effort and her effort and watchful eyes in particular. A hard worker, they had said. Always coming in to check in on their fallen comrades, they said. If not for her constant observations, things would have been far worst, they said.

Only one person didn’t make it, after all, they said.

She gripped the shawl harder, hunching down on herself.

One person didn’t make it.

She felt tears prickle and slumped forward further, almost curling into a ball as she buried her face in her hands. He was weathered and only a few years older than Angela, with greying hair. But what Angela remembered most of all, was that he was loved. Though the man's direct superior who had come a few days ago seemed unaffected by the white blanket that covered his deceased body, only expressing a stoic sort of sadness, she had witnessed the anguished looks on his fellow comrades who had woken up already.

And as many times as she had witnessed such a scene, it didn’t leave her any less stricken.

Her breathing had become uneven, and she shuddered once more, sucking deeply through her nostrils as she felt mucous build up.

Oh this was bad.

She rubbed at her nose, wiping the snot that had leaked out with the back of one hand, while the other wiped off stray tears that had dropped down her face.

This was really bad.

She had been an automaton of healing and mending for the past few days, mind busied with the onslaught of patients who needed treatment. Now that there was nothing to distract her anymore -no wound to be stitched, no painkiller to give- the flood gates were opening once more.

Her hand, not for the first time, instinctively dug into her front pocket. And like clockwork, the second her fingertips started to curl around the smooth rock and her brain caught up to her actions, she whipped her hand out, acting as if the stone had seared her hand. She grit her teeth and steeled herself. She rummaged in her pocket once more, this time pulling out the worry stone. She thumbed over the curved stone, memories of a man she adored flitting through her mind.
Memories that have turned sour from the current events unfolding.

She did not want to believe her instincts to be true.

(But her mind could not scrounge for any alternative that did not sound hollow and false and based solely on her desire for what she did not want to be true, to not be true)

She grinded her teeth and made a motion to throw the damn thing, hand already reeling back. Yet, as she was about to release it into the wind, let the stone sail through the sky and land on the sand dune across her, she faltered. She clenched the stone in her fist, gripping it with unnecessary amount of strength in front of her, as if attempting to shatter it in her hand. A useless caveat. She was not that strong and it would be a pointless endeavor.

She drew her hand back and dropped the stone in her pocket.

It wasn’t its destruction that she needed.

It was answers.

She just needed answers.

Now.

She fished out her phone from her other pocket. Her eyes squinted as the phone screen lit up, the brightness blinding in the dead of night. She quickly pulled up the brightness setting and set it to the lowest possible.

Guilt seeped down to her bones when her eyes readjusted and she noticed her notifications flashing.

Fareehali: 5 unread messages

The last message she sent to the woman was a week ago. She had texted the woman that she would probably be quite busy for the next few days in a succinct fashion. Clinical even. A simple message that she would not be able to message her for a while.

It wasn’t a lie.

(But it wasn’t the whole truth either)

Things were going so well. Their romance had blossomed and now this happened and Angela was afraid it would shatter and break and fall. That Angela was about to shatter and break and fall.

She sniffled and clicked the messages.

Good luck, ya amar. You can do it. – Fareeha, 7 days ago

Good morning, ya amar. You got this. – Fareeha, 5 days ago

Just dropping in to say that I hope you’re doing well. – Fareeha, 3 days ago

Is everything okay? At least respond so I know you are there. Just worried. – Fareeha, 2 days ago

Ya amar. Please give me some sort of proof of life :( – Fareeha, 5 hours ago

Angela felt her heart constrict at seeing the increasing level of concern by Fareeha with each passing day. Her fingers hovered over the virtual keyboard and she willed herself to type something.
Anything.

*I'm sorry for worrying you. Still busy.*

She stared at her stilted words, the clipped tone of her comment and the lie she tacked on right at the end of it. She shook her head in disgust and backtracked, deleting the whole comment altogether.

*I'm sorry for worrying you, Fareehali. I am alive and well. Listen, I know it's a little selfish of me, but I need a bit of time before I can properly talk to you. I need to sort something out.*

She paused and typed another message.

*Nothing to do with you, though. I promise to get back in touch with you soon.*

She just had to address the issue that was eating at her first. An issue that came in the form of a noxious purple liquid and a suspicion as to the origins of the leak that allowed it to come to be. She needed to know.

(But she really did not want to be right. She really hoped the truth was something she had simply not considered yet)

Angela pressed her home button, closing the messages and navigating through the pages quickly to clicked on an application she never thought she would use again. An app hidden deep in her settings folder, disguised as an innocuous button labelled ‘metrics’. Her screen turned a bright blue, a blue so bright it bathed her whole face in its light. The minutes seemed to draw out as she stared at the blank screen and then it happened. A small ping and she was connected. A voice she had not heard in years relayed out. Feminine and robotic all at once.

“*Welcome, agent. ID?*”

“S7N9421-X.”

“Processing…” the mechanical voice stated. “It has been awhile since you logged in. There are extra verification tests in place. Will you proceed?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, then. Please click the button below to initialize facial recognition.”

She removed her glasses, tucking them into her shirt and clicked the start button, making sure not to move as bright beam crossed over her entire face.

“Processing…” the application beeped. “Thank you. Identity verified. Welcome back, Dr. Angela Ziegler. It has been a long time.”

“It has, Athena.” She agreed quietly.

“What is the purpose of this call? Have you decided to-”

“No.” she said, cutting her off tersely. She was not in the mood to have a dispute about that other issue. “Torbjorn. Torbjorn Lindholm.”

“I do not understand.”

“Do you happen to have his contact information?”
“Please wait, retrieving contact information.” Athena beeped. “Contact information retrieved. Last updated 10 months ago.”

Angela saved the information in her phone swiftly, everything exactly as stated except deleting his home address and altering his name.

“What would you like me to do next?”

“Nothing. Thank you Athena, and goodbye.”

“Goodbye, Dr. Ziegler.”

The program switched off and Angela pulled up his information and called the handphone number. She hoped Lindholm had not switched phones. She fidgeted as the phone rang and rang and then a familiar voice rung out and Angela tasted both dread and victory at the call connecting. She was about to speak when she registered that it was an automated message.

“Sorry, can’t pick up right now. Leave a message after the beep if it’s important!”

She worked her jaw. She did not want to wait.

The phone beeped.

“Lindholm. It’s me… We need to talk. Text me when you’re free.”

Chapter End Notes

It's been a long time since we've had a whole chapter in Angela's POV only, huh?

Also, my asks on tumblr have been enabled (deadass, I didn't know I disabled them) so if anyone wants to leave a comment that they don't feel belongs here, but you still want say it to me, feel free to leave it there :)


There was nothing better than a hot shower after a long day.

The bathroom felt like a sauna, covered in a thick layer of white mist as Fareeha upped the water pressure and twisted the shower dial further to the left, increasing the temperature. Her muscles groaned with appreciation as the water thundered down on her aching body with streams of heated water. The tension between her shoulders eased and the stress of the day seemed to melt off her skin, as if carried off by the water that cascaded down her body, accompanying it on its journey down the drain and away from her. She squirted a dollop of conditioner into her fingers and closed her eyes as she massaged the conditioner deep into tresses, relishing the stimulation of her fingers kneading into her scalp and smoothing away any stray knots that still persisted in her hair. The smell of citrus and aniseed filled her nostrils.

A small grunt escaped her, born mostly out of irritation rather than actual pain, when her shoulder cinched from her movements, though not unexpectedly. She was after all, fatigued and bruised, having overextended herself on a mission that took an unexpected turn and became far more difficult than it should have been.

She had been fooled by her last client, with his primly suit, nasally voice and mousy features. A soft-spoken man who seemed adamant to shrink himself further from his very posture, walking slightly hunched, in muted steps, his gaze firmly rooted on the ground below at all times.

A wallflower, she had thought immediately, easy. The best kind of client to escort. “Easy my foot.” She grumbled under her breath.

Beneath the reserved appearance was a man that belied a strikingly rebellious soul, doing what he wanted in an almost spastic manner. She grunted again as a sharp pain ran through her arm as she went to pick up her soap. If he had just listened to her, she was sure the amount of danger they got in and the injuries she sustained today could be reduced by half. Yet, he was what he was, behind his demure appearance and now Fareeha was left with aches and pains. Not surmounting, but never-the-less there, making itself known with every little movement she did.

Then again, perhaps she was being unfair.

It was had been a difficult week, so to speak. Any lingering hope she had that maybe she was the center of the world had been crushed. When she had come back, there was an absurd amount of shit ready at the door for her. Every day she would arrive at home and have no energy to do anything except crumple right onto her bed.

Even worse, there was the radio silence from Angela.

She pursed her lips, withholding a wistful sigh that threatened to escape her, though her shoulders did sag in a downtrodden fashion. She didn’t know what was going on, and the last response she received from the woman vague and disconcerting. Lines that rattled in her head and she had memorized now from constantly opening up her chat with Angela, hoping new messages would magically appear, only to stare at the same stale old message.

*I’m sorry for worrying you, Fareehali. I am alive and well. Listen, I know it’s a little selfish of me,*
but I need a bit of time, before I can properly talk to you. I need to sort something out.

Nothing to do with you, though. I promise to get back in touch with you soon.

Angela had sent that message three days ago, and despite her reassurance Fareeha could not help the slight dread that settled in the pit of her stomach from those words. If she had said it was a busy week, she would have relaxed and the uncomfortable knot would have vanished in an instant, knowing that the lack of response from Angela was from nothing more work. She had known from the beginning that Angela was a busy woman –they both were, that was just the nature of their jobs- and had accepted that to be a facet of their relationship. They both went into the relationship with the understanding that sometimes there would be days where they would not be able to talk, and Fareeha was honestly fine with that. It was worth it to her.

But the problem was that it wasn’t work related.

Or at least, it didn’t seem to be.

The obscurity of her words, the ambiguity of it all worried Fareeha. She could deduce it wasn’t life threatening -she did say she was alive and well and she believed Angela to not lie to her about something as serious as that- but it must be something big.

Fareeha worked her jaw, wondering what on earth could have happened.

She was in the boondocks of Egypt, what could she have possibly run into there?

What would have unearthed itself so urgent and so personal that it consumed Angela and made her unable to even spare a few words to her?

Whatever the case was, it appears that Angela was adamant about dealing with it alone, and she would give her that time. Or at least, a couple more days, because if there was one thing Fareeha understood well, is that no force in the world can convince someone to accept help unless they wanted it or had cooled enough to be more open to it.

A couple more days. She could do that.

She could give that.

Fareeha breathed sharply through her nose as she pushed the less than pleasant thought to the back of her mind. She ran her fingers through her hair, feeling the way they glided over her now silky tresses while she stayed under the shower, now rinsing off all traces of conditioner from her scalp. She stayed under the water for a while longer than necessary, indulging in the heat of the water that thundered down on her for a few moments more, before shutting the water off in one smooth motion.

As she exited the shower, her eyes were drawn to the sink. Or more accurately, the phone that rested on the sink and the little flickering light at the top right corner of it. She meandered over, grabbing her towel from the rack with one hand on the way there. She lazily unlocked her phone as she wiped herself down with her other arm.

Don’t be late, captain! Menna says she can only stay until 11. – Saleh 7:41pm

What a nerd. – Saleh 7:42pm

She snorted.

Unbelievable.
She bent down to dry off her prosthetic legs, water droplets still clinging to the surface of the polished metal.

It was unbelievable that they wanted to go out.

She would never understand extroverts and where they would find the strength to go out after a hard day at work. She wanted nothing more than to eat a quick fix and then tuck herself in her cozy sheets and sleep. Yet, here she was, towel discarded to her hamper as she combed through damp locks and dabbed cologne on her wrists and the area right below her ear. As luck would have it though, not only were extroverts in her team were becoming restless and antsy from all the chaos as of late. She could see that the more reserved members of her squadron needed to blow off steam with people they could actually talk about their issues with, without fearing they would break their confidential agreements. She predicted they would hit a breaking point soon and she cared for them all too deeply to let that happened to them.

So tonight, Fareeha would go out with her crew, and together they would relieve their stress and drink to their heart’s content. Tomorrow she was sure to have a hangover, but it was a small price to pay considering how wounded up everyone was.

She heard incessant banging on her front door and familiar chatter emanating from the other side.

She rolled her eyes and haphazardly threw on her grey shirt and pulled up her jeans, stuffing her wallet and phone into her pockets and trudged over to her front door, swinging the door wide open and stared unimpressed at her crew members, all huddled up in an obnoxious manner in front of her doorway.

“Captain!” Hassan boomed out, the close-fisted hand he had poised in mid-air for another knock unfurling to give a jolly wave. “Ready to go?”

“Quit it. Stop being so loud, you’ll disturb the neighbors.” She took a furtive glance at the hallway, thankful not to see any angry faces pop out from any of the other doors that lined the corridors. “And if I recall correctly, I said I’d meet you guys there.”

“Yea, about that…” Kadir drawled out, hands stuffed in his jacket pockets as he shifted his weight from one foot to another, “We didn’t trust you, haha.”

“…And why not?”

Kadir smile turned sly as he exchanged looks with other members of her team and immediately Fareeha regretted asking the question.

“Oh, we don’t know~” Kadir sang out. The man had a beautiful singing voice, but right now it was like fingernails on a chalkboard. Wholly irritating and she would pay good money to have him stop.

“Maybe it’s because we thought you might bail on us, because you want to talk to your girlfrieeeend~.”

He stopped, an expectant look on his face and Fareeha sighed a long suffering sigh, before humoring the man.

“Out with it, Kadir. When ‘in fact’ what?”

“We thought you might bail on us, because you want to talk to your girlfrieeeeeend~.”

She glared at Bilal, who was smart enough to pointedly look the other way. She cursed him under her breath. For someone so silent, he for sure did not have the tightest lips. The instant she had come back from her extended break, her team had bombarded her with a slew of questions about how the
whole ‘thing with her and Dr. V’ happened. It felt like an interrogation and she didn’t know what was worse; the disbelieving and over-the-top anguished displays by Saleh and Yousseff that Veronica was ‘stolen’ from them by the captain (‘she could’ve been mine, captain!’) or the ribbing and teasing from her other teammates – anytime she got any notification, they would waggle their eyebrows or adopt the slyest of smirks.

The same tickled looks she saw them exchange with one another right now.

Children.

She led a bunch of children.

Furthermore, it was annoying, because so far, she hadn’t really gotten any messages from Angela. Still, they did not know that and she felt disinclined to speak about her current relationship woes to clarify the situation for them.

“Enough.” she growled out, feeling the tips of her ears burn. She threw on her jacket. “Let’s go.”

Cheers erupted from her group.

“It’s time to party!!”

Fareeha sent a small prayer to Allah that she would be able to stand properly the next morning.

Angela checked the door to her shared room with Patricia once more, pushing and pulling the door handle a few times, rattling it and the door frame slightly from both her speed and force.

Locked. It was locked. It was definitely locked.

(It had been the third time she checked it, paranoia higher than usual from her current anxiety)

She then walked back towards her desk, sat down and took off her spectacles. She wrapped them neatly with a cleaning cloth and placed them into her glasses case, before setting it aside onto the table, right beside her cup of coffee. She adjusted the tablet in front of her, propped up by a metal stand and stared at her reflection on the black glass as she sipped the now lukewarm cup of coffee.

Three minutes.

Three minutes until Torbjorn was supposed to call her. She hoped he would not be late, Patricia only gave her an hour of privacy. She had freaked when she had explained she needed the room for herself to talk to her ‘estranged parents’. Patricia had lashed out, saying that there was no reason – and she quotes- ‘for you to talk to those abandoning pieces of shits’. Her white lie had accidentally backfired, and it took her more than a few minutes to convince Patricia of giving her at least an hour to talk to ‘Julian’ and ‘Mia’.

Two minutes.

Angela set coffee back down and glanced at the thumb stone she had set on the table as well. It was good that he had not picked up last time, she had yet to have time to process her thoughts and was a sentient hurricane of emotions. Time would have turned back and she would have confronted Torbjorn the way she did when she was a young woman. Unstoppable rage and unbridled ferocity in the way she slammed her words, making it far more personal than she ever intended. It would have inevitably have devolved into a screaming fest and the whole village would have heard her, revealing
her secret identity.

Now she was calm, her rage quelled to only simmer under a veneer of peace. A veneer that would be cracked no matter which way this conversation went, though she hoped it would not venture down the path she knew it would if her suspicions were correct.

And for once in her life, Angela did not want to be right.

The tablet crackled to life.

*Call incoming from user ‘LTjorn212’*

She took a deep breath, hooked on her earphones and swiped to accept the video call. She sees herself on the corner of her screen and straightens up, assuming a more powerful stance. She resets her shoulders, controls her face and folds her hands neatly in her lap as she waits for the call to fully connect and see his visage pop up on the big screen.

And when the call connects and Angela feels her heart constrict painfully so at seeing a face she had not seen is so long. She had assumed her simmering rage would have spilled a little at seeing Torbjorn, yet she was utterly wrong. The first thing she felt was fondness and the realization of how much she missed him.

“Angela, is that you?” He rumbled out the moment the call connected and he registered her face, his accent as pronounced as ever. “You changed your hair and everything! Are you one of your failsafe identities right now?”

“That is correct.” She smiled a tight-lipped smile. “I go by Veronica Mueller right now.”

His eyes crinkled as he looked at her, pointing at her shirt. “GSM, eh? I guess you’re doing good things. I’m so proud of you, always doing the most to do the right thing.”

She nodded, not trusting her words, swallowing thickly. She clasped her hands tighter, almost digging them into her thighs as she struggled to maintain an appearance of composure on the screen. She had been so sure of herself before the call connected, her resolve at its peak at getting answers. However now, face to face with the man who had helped her in the worst of times, a guiding light when she was young, she was finding it to be difficult to confront him.

It might change everything.

No.

It would change everything.

“Oh, I’ve missed you, lass.” He said in that gravelly tone of his, like pebbles falling down a brick road laid on a hill, continuing on without a care to Angela’s inner turmoil, unable to perceive it from the pixelated picture of her that was likely projecting onto his monitor. “And for the record, I like your new look. I think you look wonderful.”

“Thank you, Torbjorn.” She answered politely, a tight-lipped smile on her face.

He readjusted, and took a generous drink of his honey mead, wiping the excess liquid that spilled over onto his beard with the back of his hand.

“So, Angela, why did you call me out of the blue? Did you need me to tinker something for you? Want extra insight on something you designed? A gigantic cannon maybe? A flying car?”
He laughed at his on jest, a throaty rumble that came right from his belly. Angela emitted a few strained chuckles on her part, though her muted smile had already slipped into a small grimace.

“Extra insight on something I designed, huh…” she whispered out and looked down as her fingers traced the edges of the thumb stone.

Certainly throughout the years when she had been in Overwatch she had consulted both him and Winston on her projects and prototypes. A scientist, an engineer and a doctor with profound knowledge on cybernetics and augmentations. They were a dream team. Late nights in the workshop as all three of them would try and power through obstacles that rendered her technologies useless or try to find ways to make them more efficient. Better, basically. Better for the world.

Technologies that would further Overwatch’s ultimate goal to create a better place.

So much for that, an encroaching voice in the back of her mind whispered in cruel tones.

“Angela.” She heard Torbjorn croak out, pulling her out of her thoughts. “I can hear you thinking. What is it?”

She stilled her finger and folded her hand back in her lap and looked straight into the monitor, any smidgen of humor gone from her face. Though he failed to pick up any cues that was something was amiss before, he certainly caught them now. He set aside his mug, the liquid inside sloshing as he set it on the table with a heavy thud that jarred the screen a little upon impact. His bushy beard may have covered the frown on his face, but it was more than made up for by the downward furrow of his thick eyebrows and worried gleam in his eye.

“How many?” she whispered.

He leaned in, tilting his ear to the monitor and holding a hand to the shell of his ear.

“Fucking connection.” He grumbled, “I need you to repeat that for me.”

Angela worried her bottom lip and breathed in.

“Torbjorn, you were always there for me.” She started, deciding to take a different approach, not wanting the man to shut down from a serious allegation thrown so quickly, so early upon their digital reunion. She needed to needle him down first. “Are you still there for me now?”

“Of course, Angela. You’re practically one of my own. You’re always welcome in my house, because you’re practically family by this point.”

A muted, but genuine smile crossed her lips. She had met Torbjorn the first time by accident, attending a technology conference and collided straight into him, too busy looking at the map trying to figure out where the augmentation speech by Dr. Thorne was located to look in front of her. He had cackled with glee at seeing someone so young, just shy of thirteen, invited to a prestigious conference and personally led her to where the talk was going to occur. They had made good conversation and she had puffed up at seeing him treat her like an equal, amazement in his eyes when she proudly boasted that she was already a premed student. When they saw each other off, they exchanged business cards and not a week later she received an invite from him to join him at his house for a Sunday dinner with his family.

It was there that they discussed technologies further and he realized that she was an orphan who lived with a not so doting aunt, who left her to her own devices and was rarely home. From then on, she visited their home more than a couple times and he and his family became the loving relatives she never had. She had many fond memories in his home and with his large and boisterous family.
“Angela?” he said, breaking her out of her thoughts, “Talk to me. What is it?”

Her lip trembled from his worried tone. Surely he wouldn’t lie to her.

“I need to know something, Torbjorn.” Her voice cracked a little, and she cursed her display of weakness. “And I need to know the truth. Don’t lie to me.”

He nodded firmly, “I don’t know what this is about, but I won’t. I promise.”

“How many, Torbjorn?”

He blinked, confusion evident on his face. “…Angela, I’m going to need you to be a bit clearer. I don’t really understand what you’re asking. How many what?”

“How much of my technology did you build behind my back?”

He recoiled and stared at the screen, nostrils flaring. “What are you saying? I never-”

“The biotic rifle prototype, Torbjorn. The one the Shrike has…” she raised her brow as she looked at him in a cool fashion, voice even-tempered, revealing none of the flickerings of emotion in her. “Are you telling me it was by mere coincidence that they have a biotic rifle that looks like the one I designed? They just so happen to have been struck with the idea of producing a design identical to mine?”

It was unclear if his response was delayed from him processing her accusation, or if the transmission had buffered, but it had taken a few seconds. The moment the words sunk in though, Angela’s own nostrils flared at seeing the stricken look on his face. She had known Torbjorn for a very long time and could discern all his tells, and his posture and facial expressions right now oozed with palpable guilt.

That and the irritatingly rueful look on his face reignited the anger that had rescinded away and tear away any lingering kernel of doubt she had about possible betrayal.

She knew she had been betrayed.

Betrayed by a man she trusted and believed to be as closest thing she had to a proper relative.

She grabbed the thumb stone and clenched it tight in her fist, grinding her teeth as she heard his excuses. Excuses and explanations that fell on deaf ears. His words were muted by the haze of anger that enveloped her and the thrumming of her blood in her ears. However, though the words came at her garbled, she did register that his tone was consoling and fraught with anguish. It reminded her of all those years ago, during one evening in late November. But unlike then, where her hands reached out for him and she grappled onto him for dear life, sobbing about the loss of her parents at an age where her biggest loss should have been a tummy ache, she felt none of the same reassurance from his mumbled words. Instead an insidious spurt of hatred and bitterness showed up.

“Stop it.” She said quietly, “I don’t want to hear your excuses. I don’t believe you played me for a fool. Were you all in this together?”

Torbjorn shook his head fiercely. “No, I promise. It was just me and An-” He faltered and she glared at him icily. He cleared his throat- “Ana... Ana wanted me to create it as a favor and I know it’s messed up, but I agreed. She never took it out on the field as far as I know, whoever got their hands on it, must've taken it from storage.”

She didn’t understand why he included that last bit in. As if she cared about that miniscule detail.
“You betrayed me.” She whispered out softly, face crumpling as she shook her head in distraught. 
"You betrayed me, Torbjorn."

He swallowed thickly, his face fraught with anguish. “I know… I’m sorry, Angela. And not just because I got caught.” His gaze wandered around as he racked his brain for what to say next. "It's not much, but I swear that was the only one was created. And please believe me when I say, I didn’t know that it would fall into the wrong hands and be bastardized this way.”

“All technology gets bastardized if it can be weaponized, Torbjorn.” She stated flatly, a spiteful sort of satisfaction rising in her at him visibly wince at her words. “Just look at dynamite. Made to make the jobs of demolitionists and miners easier and now look at it - used for terroristic attacks of the worst kind.”

“I’m sorry.”

She grinded her teeth, “I don’t care how sorry you are, I just need you to answer the question. How many, Torbjorn? How much of my technology have you created behind my back?”

“I swear, Angela, it was only this,” He squirmed in his seat, “Well… technically only this I hid behind your back, though there was one other thing you created that we made behind your back. The, um-” he waved his hand around, “The poison you made to show the abilities of your caduceus… staff… but… judging from your face... you knew that already, didn’t you?”

“Yes. I. did.” she snarled out. "And I remember that I specifically recall banning its creation from mass production.” The words flew out of her like venom as her eyes bored daggers his way, “I guess you all decided my opinion was not worth a grain of salt. That my integrity and reputation and values mean zilch to you all.”

“Angela, I wouldn’t put it like that, and that isn’t the case - you must know that's not the case.” he said feebly, before sighing in defeat, "Though I guess it does seem that way.” He took another swig of his mead. "In my defense though... the production of the poison was on Morrison's orders. I did fight against it.”

“Yet you still didn’t divulge any of this information to me. Instead I was in the dark, looking like a fool.” She ran her hand through her hair as she looked down onto the furnished wood of the table, avoiding his gaze. “I just… how could you, Torbjorn? How could you?”

“I’m sorry…” he said and though her eyes were trained on the wooden surface, she could imagine his remorseful look he had on. “It was stupid. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Angela.”

Angela shuddered, her voice shaky as she spoke, “Are you?”

“I am, Angela. It hurts to admit it, but I was like Morrison -like Ana- thinking that sometimes you and Winston and the others could be too idealistic, believing you could make the world a better place through only peace. Sometimes violence or force is necessary, that’s what I believed, which is why I could… I could betray you like that.” He paused, an ugly chuckle emitting out of him, “Stupid, right? That I of all people thought like that. I made those damn Titans and look what happened. Whole cities destroyed. I should’ve know better. I’m so sorry.”

Angela sighed, rubbing her chin as she looked at Torbjorn.

“Enough.” She said softly, “Goodbye, Torbjorn.”

His eyes turned frantic. “Angela, please, I know I may not deserve it, and I know nothing I can do can fix this, but please give me a second chance-"
She cut him off.

“I don’t know if I can.”

He deflated at her words, spirit broken by the dead look in her eye. She couldn't help it though. It hurt to look at Torbjorn. It felt like she was gazing at a stranger. A man who had been one of her closest confidants was now someone she failed to recognize.

Or maybe she never knew him at all.

“...Regardless, I’m here for you. Anytime. Don’t hesitate to call me and-”

“Beep boop beep!”

“-Get out of here, you rust bucket! I’m in the middle of a serious conversation! And take your damn bird with you as well!”

Angela straightened up and furrowed her brows, before her eyes widened as she saw a sight she never thought she would see. Was that… a bastion? She felt like she was pulled into the twilight zone, an alternate reality where things beyond her wildest dreams came through. She watched Torbjorn call the poster child of Omnic Crisis names in an affectionate manner, bonking him on the head and shooing him away the way he did with his own children. In that grumpy fashion that was tinged with fondness.

“Torbjorn… was that a Bastion?”

Torbjorn stopped trying to make the Bastion leave and turned to her.

“This one’s different. It isn’t a killer like the rest of them, but the whole world looks at them all like they’re killers so I’m-” he grunted and looked to the side shyly as he scratched his nose, “I’m taking him under my wing, so to speak.”

Angela’s breath hitched at the admission.

“I see.” She breathed out, her voice quivering from thick emotions. “That’s great.”

The display that he just demonstrated showed to Angela that behind the mistakes, Torbjorn was still the man she cared for. A man who tries his hardest and despite all his faults, a man who wants to do well and protect the ones who need it most. Yes he tripped along the way and sometimes aggravate situations, his logic sometimes cold and failing to account for the feelings of others, but never-the-less spurred by a conviction that it was for a greater good. Here he was pushing aside his own prejudices to help a Bastion - an omnic unit that Torbjorn detested to a fault and never failed to rage about since she had known him. A part of her wants to forgive him and his mistakes, a feeling that surged forward from both the fondness she still held for him and the fact that it was a mistake and she knew he would do his best to make up for it. Throughout his career in Overwatch, she had watched him try to make up for creating the so-called monsters that fueled the Omnic crisis.

He leaned forward, face up and front in the camera. “Anyways, Angela. Again, anytime. Anytime you need me. Call me. I’ll be there.”

Yet a larger part of her clung onto the idea that he didn’t deserve forgiveness. At least not yet, so she clamped her mouth shut to stop any forgiving words that could have slipped from her tongue.

“…Goodbye, Torbjorn”
And she ended the call, her heart heavy with conflicting emotions, mind reeling from all her suspicions confirmed.

In the midst of her processing all the information bombarded at her, she heard her phone vibrate and saw the screen light up for a split second.

*Message from Fareeha*

She went to pick up the phone, to read the message the woman sent her when fear seized her spine. She felt dizzy and bile lurch to her throat. She clamped her mouth as she dry hacked, coughing and coughing, like she had eaten something to wretch out.

Oh god.

Oh god, oh god, oh god-

It was her fault. It was all her fault.

Fareeha had been hit by a poison that she created, with a technology she designed. All her suffering had started with *her*.

(How did it slip her mind that Fareeha had been hit by her stolen technologies?)

If only she didn’t design that damn thing in the first place. If only she wasn’t stupid enough to design such a poison. Why couldn’t she have just chosen to test out the abilities on a poison that already existed? Why did she have to be so arrogant to showcase that the staff could heal even the most deadly of poisons?

They could have found out the wonders of her staff on the field.

Her breathing became slightly erratic.

She could imagine it, the way the cartridge filled with that sickly poison easily slid into the biotic rifle and ejected itself silently, efficiently and with ease. The way Fareeha would have inevitably buckled down only seconds after impact, twitching as her body went through spasms. The way her organs would start to fail one by one and the searing burning sensation that must have enveloped her as her muscles rapidly contracted and rendered her immobile.

And she also remembers.

She remembers the ferocity in Fareeha’s eyes when she spoke about the vigilantes and their weapons, the way her words came out of her in a harsh and ugly way that left her trembling as she thought about it being directed to her. Tears prickled her eyes at the thought that instead of affectionate smiles and kind words, gentle touches and affectionate kisses, she was instead greeted with a sight which the very thought of sent her stomach turning. Fareeha’s arms, instead of enveloping her, pushing her away roughly. Her strong jaw, often softened with a gentle smile, set square in a scowl. Her teeth bared as she looked at Angela with a blazing fury and disgust.

She fumbled to unlock her phone, wiping stray tears with her other hand.

She needed to explain. Fareeha needed to know. And she needed to know from her. She needed to explain herself. She quickly thumbed through her contacts and called Fareeha.
Fareeha walked with a slightly drunken swagger as she made her way home. Fate had laid a hand in ending the party at 11, because if it ran any longer, she was sure she would have woken up in that bar rather than her bed. Right now though, the only thing that was troubling was that she wasn’t back at home yet. It was going to be a good night’s rest if nothing else. Her head was muddy in all the right ways from the alcohol she drank, enough to get her buzzed and light-headed, but not enough that she was to be hit by karma the next day with a killer headache and a bad case of cotton-mouth.

She furrowed her brows as her jeans lit up and vibrated.

“This better not be Saleh needing a ride home or something.” She muttered as she leaned on a lamppost for support as she fished out her phone.

*Veronica Mueller calling…*

Her eyes widened, elation filled her chest and she immediately clicked accept.

“Ya amar! You called me, how are you-” The rest of her words died as she heard the distinct sound of a sob carry out from the other side. Any fuzzy feelings she had from the alcohol she drank instantly vanished, replaced by pure concern. “Ya amar. What’s going on?”

“I’m sorry. I-it’s all my fault.” She cried out, voice hitched. “I-I’m s-so sorry, Fareeha.”

Fareeha stayed silent, trying to discern Angela’s words as she rambled forward, her words garbled and slurring from held back tears and stray hiccups. To add to that, she was still a little too tipsy. She needed a bit more time to sober up.

She cut Angela’s tirade off.

“Ya amar, listen, I’m out right now, still a little drunk. Need a bit more time to sober up.” She started to do a brisk walk to get back to her apartment. “Plus I don’t want anyone listening in to our conversation. Let me go home first, okay?”

“You’re out?” she squeaked between hiccups, “D-did I bother you?”

“No!” she yelled, before wincing at her loud register and the startled gasp on the other end. “I mean, never, ya amar. I was on my way home anyways. So stay with me okay?”

There was silence, and if it wasn’t for the faint sniffles she still heard, Fareeha could believe the line had been cut off.

“Ya amar?”

“…Okay. I’ll stay.” She conceded softly. “I’ll stay on the line.”

_________________

She jolted as a couple of solid raps hit the bedroom door, her phone almost slipping through her fingers.

“Veronica? It’s been an hour already.” Patricia’s voice hollered out from beyond the thin wood. “They don’t deserve anymore of your time, open up.”

Angela rose out of her seat, the chair pushed away by the back of her knees, scraping the floor as it slid. She hurriedly moved, one hand still clutching the phone tight to her ear as she turned to unlock
She opened the door a fraction and peeped out apologetically at Patricia’s unamused face.

“You’re still on the phone?” She made a move to grab her phone and Angela recoiled. Patricia huffed. “Look at you, Veronica. Do not think for one second I do not see those tear marks. Hang up, or I will.”

“Wait, wait-” she exclaimed as she placed a stopping hand in front of her, treading a few paces back to distance herself from Patricia who had wiggled through the door and was stomping towards her. She even turned her body for good measure to obscure the phone completely from Patricia’s outstretched hand- "You don’t understand, this isn’t my parents. It’s Fareeha.”

Patricia halted in her steps, though her hand stayed in front of her. A perfectly lined eyebrow raised up as her eyes narrowed. “Don’t lie. As if that woman would make you look so sad.” Her hand turned to over to become an open palm. She wiggled her fingers. "Hand over the phone. Quit talking to your parents.”

“It’s true! I called her after I talked to my parents. Needed to talk to her.” She explained with a huff. When Patricia's hand drooped slightly and her body posture softened, when she seemed more amicable to Angela's story, she walked back over slowly, cautiously handing the phone to Patricia. “She’s a little drunk, but she’s sobering up and wants to talk to me later.” she iterated, before nudging her hand slightly, "Go on, say something. You'll see I'm telling the truth.”

Patricia pursed her lips, looking down at the phone and back at Angela before clicking the speaker mode on. She cleared her throat loudly.

“Amari? Is this you? Answer me.”

A sound of sirens whizzing past blared through the phone before a voice crackled out.

“Patricia?” she said between pants, as if she was speaking in a middle of a jog, “Patty Pat?”

Patricia lifted her head and stared at her with aggravation, clicking the speaker off and handing it back to her.

“Okay. I was wrong. That is definitely her.”

Angela cradled the phone in her hands, nodding. “I told you so...” she muttered petulantly, before squirming. "So... do you want to rest up? I know it's late. I can go out.”

Patricia scratched her temple with her thumb as her eyes flitted to the side, a conflicted expression on her face. “I am exhausted, but you really seem to need to do this. I-Fuck.” She scrunched her eyes while her thumb was replaced by her fingers, now rubbing circles on her temples as she struggled to find a solution. Suddenly, her fingers stilled and her eyes snapped back open. She looked at Angela meaningfully. “Those doctor twins from Kenya was just relocated to another team a few hours ago. If I’m not mistaken there room hasn’t been reassigned yet.”

She watched as Patricia bolted into action and started to gather some of her basic essentials.

“Patricia, you don’t have to, I can... I can talk to her another time.” she paused. "Or I can go to the room.”

Patricia kept picking up her items, only giving her a side-glance. “It's fine. And I'll go, I already have all my stuff now anyways. I'll be in their room if you need me.”
Patricia rose up, belongings for the night gathered in her arms and Angela moved to hold the door open for her.

“Thank you, Patricia.” She said softly as Patricia passed her. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Veronica.” Patricia responded back, and Angela watched her walk away and disappear at a turn before closing the door once more and swiftly locking it.

She patted over to her bed and slipped into the sheets, laying on her side. She rested her head on left side of her pillow as she rested her phone on the right, turning the phone on speaker Angela. She heard the stray honks of cars, feet plodding on the ground and faint gasps of air. For a long while these were the only sounds she heard. Besides, the occasional hum. Finally though, she picked up the distinct sound of an elevator dinging, a key rattling on a door and the telltale sounds of a zipper being undone. Of clothes being discarded.

“You changing?” she asked softly. “You back home?”

There was a muffled sound and a creaking of a mattress, as if a heavy weight was just dropped on it. She imagined that Fareeha had just flopped onto the bed.

“I was changing and I am back home.” Fareeha mumbled out, “Now I’m tucked in my sheets, so come on. Say what you were saying before again, ya amar.”

And she did, slowly and easily, mind conjuring the facial expressions that crossed Fareeha’s face at hearing this information as it truly sank in, her mind no longer addled and muddy from alcohol and spirits, sobered up completely from the stretch of time and the seriousness of her words. She heard Fareeha shuffle and imagined her with her head propped up on one hand.

She waited with baited breath for Fareeha's response.

"Not your fault.” She stated easily. “You didn’t want the poison or the biotic rifle to be produced. Not your fault.”

“But if I didn’t create them, they could never be used on people. On innocents.”

*On you,* Angela thought.

“…Maybe, but someone would make something just as devastating. Bad guys always find a way.”

“You don’t get it Fareeha. That’s not the point… The point is I should’ve known better.” She combatted, feeling as if Fareeha forgave her far too easily, and disregarded her involvement in the pain she caused her, taking it as nothing more than an unfortunate happenstance. She needed to be rightly punished for this.

Fareeha snorted, “You were seventeen.”

“I was saving lives at seventeen.” Angela fired back. She was already one of the top doctors in her hospital by then, and if she already shouldered the responsibility of having people’s fate in her hands, she was by all means a person who needed to understand the consequences of her actions better than most people at that age.

“Yes, but you were also growing up.” Fareeha paused, “And you trusted everyone around you to do what’s right.”

“So, what you’re saying is that I was just naïve.”
“No. Not naïve, you believed in your comrades and how could you not? You were accepted into Overwatch at its peak, in terms of power and moral conduct. You had no reason not to believe that they would do something as underhanded as that.” She heard Fareeha shuffle once more, “I’ll say it again. Not your fault.”

Angela chewed her bottom lip as she mulled over her words.

“…And if it was?” she played with the edge of her shirt. “What if I did think it was the right thing to do and unleashed those things to the world myself? How would you…” she trailed off, her voice a near whisper as she continued on, “How would you react?”

A silence stretched on from the other side of the call, and Angela worried her bottom lip harder.

“If you’re asking if I’d stay with you, I would. I know that good intentions sometimes leads to bad outcomes. Trust me, I know, I’ve had a fair share of things I did with the purest of motives that turned out to be the worst calls.” And Fareeha divested some horrible decisions she made in the army, in helix security, in her life in general, little tidbits of bad choices that even Angela cringed at. “Now that I’ve told you all this, are you going to leave me?”

Angela frowned, “Of course not.”

“Really? Of course not?” she questioned, mirth in her voice that made Angela’s heart feel lighter at the sudden playfulness.

“Of course.”

Fareeha laughed, a rumbling chuckle that tickled her ears. “Well there you go, it’s as simple as that for me as well. Of course not, ya amar.” Her voice turned a little more serious as she moved forward. “There’s no way you’re not going to lose me. Not over this and certainly not like this.”

Angela smiled, fingers still playing with the frayed edges of her shirt, “…Okay.”

She heard Fareeha yawn, and heard a small click, as if her jaw had unhinged.

“I think you’re a little sleepy.” Angela teased. When there was no response from Fareeha, she furrowed her brows. “Fareeha? Did you really fall asleep?”

“Huh? Oh no, I, um... I nodded my head.” She admitted sheepishly and Angela breathed hard through her nostrils at the admission. “Shut up, I am just a bit sleepy. Serious conversations after a world of drinking can do that, y’know?”

Angela giggled, “Right. I’ll let you go then?”

“No, I-” another yawn ripped out of her, “I want to keep talking to you. I haven’t heard you in forever. Missed you.”

Angela’s heart swelled at the muffled confession and she felt a pleasant warmth spread through her.

“I missed you too.” She softly admitted. Her warmth, her arms, her smile, her jokes, her everything.

“So does this mean you’ll stay on the line?”

It was posed as a question, but Angela heard the cheeky undertone that tinged it that signaled to her that Fareeha knew Angela would keel. Clearly the woman wasn’t as drunk as she thought herself to be.
“Yes.” She said, because honestly that was the truth.

She’d stay on the line forever if she could.

Chapter End Notes

This ran frickin long.

Edit: i need to clarify. I make Angela and Torbjorn have a close relationship because they take a lot pics together and with lots of familiarity (halloween, that group photo Angela visiting overwatch in her university years) and Torbjorn with his bajillion kids must be quite parental haha. (I know hes swedish, not swiss but work with me. Overwatch hq is at switzerland... maybe his family relocated??? Idk)
The Cairo headquarters was a magnificent engineering feat... despite not actually being situated in Cairo.

In truth, it actually sat comfortably a few kilometers off the city, but that was just semantics. For all intents and purposes, it was the headquarters for Cairo and named so.

The base was constructed by HSI’s very own architects to be an impenetrable force. Though on the offset the design of the place was simple – created solely of solid beige structures colored only a touch darker than the surrounding oceans of sand, and detailed with minimal stylistic features – like that of the buildings in the Ottoman Empire, it made up for the lack of grace and beauty with its raw size to achieve a level of grandeur. The place exuded of power and prestige with its tall ceilings, daunting walls, armed guards and seemingly endless rows of facilities, above and below ground.

The structure was gifted the nickname ‘The Concrete Slab’ by their personnel.

A nickname given only half-jokingly.

In line with its external walls and courtyards, everything inside was designed with function at the forefront of the designer's mind. Resources were meticulously allocated to ensure their place at the top of their field and the security of the base. Expenses on luxuries to spaces were only for the quarters of top-level management, and the public areas that clients had access to as they did have an image they had to exude, after all. As cost-saving as they were.

And while Fareeha could appreciate that HSI did not mindlessly waste their revenue on unnecessary frills, designating their resources to only endeavors that strengthened HSI and its abilities, this same mindset also led to her current predicament.

They had just come back from a grueling three-day Type III mission. Which, she noted bitterly, had become a regular occurrence as of late. At the end of the mission, their Raptora suits were cracked and dented, and their bodies bruised and bloodied (her cheek still stung from when she crashed into a wall and she hoped there were no hairline fractures, though a familiar faint prickling in her cheek indicated otherwise). And in the privacy of her own thoughts, she admitted to herself that she had been so exhausted by the end of it that she was sure that if her legs weren’t bionic she would have crumpled on the spot the moment they had entered back into the helicopter that brought them home.

To make matters worse, her right prosthetic was acting up. A collision of some sort must have messed up the internal wiring or rattled some crucial component. She guessed it was when a powered steel hammer swung right into the center calf. That was where a crater of a dent was situated.

Thus, right now she wanted nothing more than to hobble back to a workshop to get her leg fixed.

However, HSI protocol mandated that in the event of them using their Raptora suits –which they did- and were not critically injured –which they weren’t- they had to go down to the engineering team and personally hand back the suits for repair. The protocol was both to ensure no piece of equipment went missing, and allow the opportunity for them to give engineers feedback on how they could potentially improve the armor.
Two birds with one stone, the higher ups had proudly stated while reclining in their plush leather seats and clasping their soft, smooth hands together. Hands that never worked a day in the field, unmarred by the toils and troubles of battle.

She let out a huff, blowing a few stray hairs out of her face.

She didn’t understand why they didn’t think having the engineers come up and meet them instead would’ve been a better idea.

It wasn’t like their muscles were strained, screaming and aching at the end of every mission.

Yet, as irritating as that was to her, that wasn’t where the main source of her frustration came from – at least, not this time. It wasn’t even from her faulty leg that currently needed attention. No, her main gripe about this whole situation was that they always used the cargo elevator.

Sure, she understood the reasons behind it; the cargo elevator was fast, wouldn’t stop every couple of floors like the passenger elevators and far more spacious to accommodate them.

But still.

Just imagine.

A dozen people in bulky armor equipped with two jet thrusters protruding from each of their backs, all trying to shove into one cargo elevator?

Well, let’s just say that it made for a very tight squeeze.

Case in point, Nisa had struggled for a good thirty seconds trying to press the button for the basement floor where the engineers were located, unable to actually physically lift her arm up to press said button from the lack of movement space. In the end, she resorted to doing a little hop to bring her hand to the correct height to press the button. This action led to one of her jet thrusters knocking Bilal square on the chin. To his credit, despite the solid thump that sounded like it cracked his chin, he had only grunted and accepted Nisa’s stammered apologies without complaint.

So now, here they were, in a cargo elevator that was the bare bones of what an elevator could be. Sweltering as HSI gave no thought to including proper air-conditioning, the lack of air nearly suffocating, and dimly lit.

It was supposed to be for cargo, after all.

Well, they certainly weren’t cargo, yet here they were.

She let out another small grumble.

“Motherfuck!” Saleh cried out, “Mahmoud, your wing is hitting my face!”

“For the last time Saleh, it’s not me…” Mahmoud groused, a rare tinge of aggravation coloring his tone, for once not letting Saleh’s words roll of his back. “The wing is malfunctioning. It’s doing that on its own.”

Fareeha heard a blitz, a crackle, and then a thwack.

“Mahmoud! You ass-” another thwack. Saleh hissed. “Quit it!”

“I told you, it’s not me!”
Fareeha felt her blood pressure rise as they continued to bicker. Though their childish banter sometimes made her crack a grin, today was not one of those days. And certainly not in this situation, with the smell of blood, burnt sand, and body odor swirling around in the uncirculated air. The smell was pungent in these closed quarters, practically singeing her nose hairs.

And then it got worse. Her nose had decided that now would be a good time to itch.

Fareeha scrunched her face repeatedly, wishing the itch would vanish from her rapid movements. There was no conceivable way she could lift her hand right now to scratch it. Just like Nisa, she was literally incapable of lifting her hand up, unless she wanted to elbow someone in the face. The itch had started to tingle badly and for the last minute or two, she had honestly debated whether she should let go of her pride and lean forward to nuzzle the steel elevator doors to relieve the itch.

It was so itchy.

Fuck.

The only reprieve she currently felt from the hell that was using the cargo elevator was that HSI had the decency to still keep the display for which floor they were on.

They were close.

Only three more floors.

…She could wait. She could keep her pride.

When the elevator dinged and hissed open, Fareeha almost fell as her teammates pushed forward from behind, cheering incoherently in happiness (though she picked up a distinct ‘I am FREE!’ bellowed by Hassan) at finally being released from the hellhole that was the confines of the cargo elevator. She rubbed at her nose furiously amongst the chaos.

“Thank you, Allah!” Tariq yelled as he pulled off his helmet and pressed his face onto a cool, steel beam. He emitted a groan as he slumped down, leaving a trail of sweat on the steel beam as his face glided downwards on the frame. “Oh, it feels so good.”

Fareeha herself took off her helmet, letting the cool air hit her face, a small hum emitting from her at how pleasant it felt. She ran her a hand through her hair, using the sweat that she had accumulated to slick back her hair as she gave her subordinates a few moments pause, before signaling them to start walking again. Technically, they hadn’t actually reached their destination. They were at the floor where the engineers worked, but the ones who worked on HSI power suits and armor were down the hallway. They trudged forward, twelve men and women plodding along in a somewhat unprofessional manner down the halls, far too tired to keep their backs straight and their formation tight.

As captain, Fareeha tried her best to keep her stride even and her gait purposeful. It was a difficult image to exude as her right prosthetic was currently misfiring signals, causing her leg to twitch and her to buckle at random intervals. To balance it out, she squared her shoulders, placed on a stoic face and more than made up for the way she would stumble with purposeful stares at any passing employee who looked like they had something unkind to say. She held back a smug smile that threatened to break out on her face whenever she saw some random employee shirk or glance away really quickly when she made eye-contact.

Most of the employees on this floor would be working on technology that could suppress, neutralize or even eliminate threats greater than she, as one woman, could ever be. Yet one stony look from her
sent most of them scurrying.

It was kind of funny to her.

She grimaced as she noticed an all too familiar silhouette.

“Mr. Samir.”

Samir twisted his torso to get a good look at whoever had called his name, one hand still hovering near the keypad. A few asterisks on the display detailed that he had been in the middle of punching in the code.

“Captain Amari and her esteemed squad.” He stated flatly in his mechanical tenor, yet the sarcasm in his words ringed clear as day.

Samir’s hand punched in the rest of the code as he continued to stare down at her, his metallic digits pressing the plastic buttons with ease, the layout of the keypad already ingrained in him. She worked her jaw, trying her best to ignore the way he was obviously turning up his nose at her, despite not actually having a nose. She huffed. People often said it can be difficult to discern the feelings of an Omnic, considering their inability to move their facial features, but Samir’s arrogance and snobbery somehow never failed to shine through.

“Never on time as always. I had ran late coming by from a meeting that went far longer than it should have, and I still beat you all to the lab.”

The door hissed at it slid open, and Samir gestured inside with a flourishing hand and a mocking bow.

“After you, esteemed chief.”

She withheld the urge to roll her eyes at the omnic and his pretentious delivery. As much as he could grind her gears, she was keenly aware that the engineers and technicians inside the room had noticed their presence. It would do no good to discredit their direct superior in front of them, even in jest, considering she spotted a few new faces in the crowd – she wasn’t sure if they would understand that her dismissal of him was something they were not allowed to emulate. She and Samir were equal in rank, though they held different positions. Snarky remarks between them were at worst, coworker friction and rivalry, not insubordination.

She nodded, saluted the omnic graciously and proceeded into the lab.

The personnel inside the lab immediately rose to help them out of their suits and analyze the damage. Her mouth curved upwards in a cruel smirk as one of the new engineers accidentally yanked the straps near Hassan’s crotch and he let out a spectacular yelp.

“Captain Amari.”

“Mr. Samir.” She paused as she helped a technician unlock one of her pauldrons. “Here to ask about problems with the suits-” she grunted as her shoulder was finally freed- “as usual?”

“There is nothing wrong with the suits.” He stated hotly, eyes flashing red for a millisecond before returning back to an iridescent blue, “I’m here to ask about how the suits fared with the way you and your crew… ‘do your thing’, as you like to say.”

“But what if it’s really a problem with the suit?” she jibed, throwing her words out airily, “What if they weren’t… ‘up to par’, as you like to say.”
He stared at her, his mechanical voice somehow sounding tight. “Then I will find whoever failed at their job and they will learn.”

“…Foreboding words, Samir.” She stated, slightly worried for the personnel who worked under him.

She did not mean to get them into trouble. She had just been joshing him a bit.

“I’m not threatening violence, if that’s what you think I’m implying. I’m not a heathen, Captain. Nor am I about to throw around threats of firing whoever had been incompetent, if they were incompetent.” He smoothed his lab coat and tie. “All I would do would be a stern talking to that will get my point across. I did hire talent, after all. No buffoons in my team.”

Samir started to fix the rest of his clothes. Re-tucking his shirt and checking his cuffs and collar.

(If Samir was human, Fareeha had not a single shred of doubt in her mind that he would have walked straight to a mirror to fix his hair and the neatly trimmed mustache and beard combo he would have inevitably have had)

“Anyways, enough of this conjecture, hypothetical bullshit. Answer my question. Were the suits up to par or not?”

She grit her teeth as she wrenched off her chest piece, a feat slightly difficult from the awkward dent in the plating. “It held up just fine. Same old, same old.” The corners of her lip twitched upwards. “Ventilation could use some work though.”

“You say that every time. And the answer is still no. It’s not necessary. The ventilation is adequate.”

“These suits don’t mix well with the Egyptian heat, Samir.” She half-whined.

“…So safe to say, no real issues to report.”

She shook her head. “Nothing else. They worked just like they’re supposed to.”

He made a disapproving noise; that click and hiss he had that sounded like air had leaked out of an exhaust pipe.

“Well, clearly ‘as they’re supposed to’ has failed. Your legs look terrible.”

As if on cue, a few blue sparks flew out of her right prosthetic.

“Well, that’s the trade-off isn’t it Samir?” she said with a shrug, pulling off the last of her armor and handing it to one of the attending technicians by her. “Any heavier, any additional plating, and this suit wouldn’t be able to fly. You and your team put as much armor as you guys could already to protect us while still letting us take flight, so don’t worry about it.”

He sighed dramatically, tutting at her words in an arrogant fashion, “This is why I am the head engineer and you are not. Do you truly believe that these suits—as wonderful as they are, I must admit— is the best that I can do? That this would be the last generation of Raptora suits I would build?”

She frowned, “Well, no, but I mean…”

She trailed off, eyes narrowing in confusion as the air around Samir changed. The omnic was hiding something. A shiver of excitement ran down her spine as a certain thought bubbled up. She rose up and grabbed his shoulders, wide-eyed in anticipation.
“No way… Are the new models ready?” she said, her voice a near whisper.

The cocky air around him seemed to intensify as he pried of her hands off his shoulders and strolled to one of the control boards with a swagger. He clicked a few buttons, pressing the last one with a flourish, a dramatic flick of his wrist. One the large monitors turned on immediately and on it was a sight that left Fareeha star-struck. She walked a few paces forward to get a closer look at the design that was just unveiled.

“Whoa… Is that the new Raptora suits?” Nisa gasped out from behind her. “That looks incredible.”

“Doesn’t it?” Samir remarked, pride oozing in his tone. ”Unfortunately, it's not a reality yet and still only a prototype. However, that already puts it leaps and bounds from the other concepts that we unfortunately had to scrap. A damn shame too. I liked a lot of them.” Samir muttered as Fareeha kept staring at the screen. “Perhaps I can still convince the higher-ups to utilize some of those other models for our omnic personnel.”

Well, if the other concepts were as cool as this one, she was certain no omnic would object.

Unlike their current Raptora suits, this new version was all gilded armor and Fareeha marveled at the sleek design. Gone was the crotch straps and strange alien helmets, replaced by a bronze plating and a helmet with a clean, sharp visor.

They would look like falcons soaring the sky with this new design.

“Here.” Samir said, as he shoved something in her hands. “We only have the helmet ready right now, and haven’t decided on a color scheme yet, as you can tell.”

She turned over the helmet in her hands as he spoke, feeling the material and inspecting every inch of detail. It was lighter than it looked, and yet sturdier than she imagined. Samir may have had a personality that needed some work, but he was also a fucking genius.

“What’s wrong with it now?” she heard herself mumble out, “I think it looks good in gold.”

“I'll have you know that it's actually bronze. Not everything that glitters is gold, Captain.”

She nodded, not caring about the snide delivery of his words, far too occupied with the helmet and the implications of it.

“I take it from your reaction, you’re excited.”

She stared at her own reflection grinning back at her on the opaque bronze visor.

Excited was an understatement.

She couldn’t wait.

___________________

It was quiet in the workshop. She was the only soul in the room currently and other than the sounds of her own tinkering, the ticking of the clock hung up on a wall, and air flowing in and out of the room –that even she only heard if she strained her ears – the room was dead silent.

Just the way she liked it.

A personal workspace was the perfect environment to work on her prosthetics. It meant no interruptions, no pleasantries to throw around, no nothing. Just her and her alone to use all the tools
in the workshop as she saw fit, when she saw fit.

She sat on a wooden chair with uneven legs that she temporarily fixed with a makeshift rubber stopper to fit onto the bottom of the leg that was just short of being the correct height. The workbench in front of her was spacious and the tools she needed within an arm’s length, propped up or hung on the wall beside her.

The new components to replace her damaged ones all lined up neatly on one side of the spacious desk.

She had been in the workshop for a little over two hours.

It had taken a while to pry off the panels and prod through the internal components of her prosthetic, a flashlight held up between her teeth as she examined the damage. From her inspection, Fareeha luckily determined that most of the damage had been external. The armored plating and a few fractures to the steel frame. Damage to the internal components were, for the most part, only wires that had disconnected or components that had been shaken loose. There were a few bits that were fried, melted or in dire need of replacement, but nothing to horrible.

Nothing that she couldn’t fix, anyway.

She took a moment to wipe the sweat of her brow with the back of her hand.

While most replacement parts were already in stock at the base, she had forgotten to resupply certain external components. As a result, she tied her hair in a rough ponytail, strapped on the respirator, welding goggles and ear muffs and got to work building those components herself. A sort of calmness had entered her as she turned on the tool and cut thick metals and alloys into the proper shape, sparks crackling as she worked. Warm, orange, sparks that splattered onto the table and onto her gloved hands. A few stray sparks flew far enough to hit her apron, and she could imagine the sizzle of the cotton as it was singed by the flames. A sizzle she could not hear as her ears were nestled in plush ear muffs, designed to block out the screeches that the metal emanated as her tool cut through. The only sound she heard was that of her own breathing, slightly labored from the heavy duty work she was doing.

When she was done, she pulled off her respirator and earmuffs, letting them rest around her neck and shoulders, along with her gloves, shoving them in her back pocket as she proudly stared at her handiwork. She then prepped up the workbench where she was currently working at to finally get down to fixing her prosthetics, rather than making the components she needed to repair her prosthetics.

Her engineering ring, glinted brilliantly under the lamp light she finally figured out how to turn on.

She worked diligently, rewiring and replacing components with a delicate hand. Her fingers nimble as they reconnected wires, screwed an internal chip back in place, and replaced fried or otherwise damaged bits. She had done repairs on her prosthetics countless times and by now, it was more procedural than anything she had to really put her mind to. Still, she let her concentration waver not one bit, knowing one careless slip of her hand could wrench out a few parts out of its place and set her back a half hour or two.

Besides, she thought idly, wiggling the toes of the temporary prosthetics she had latched on, the ruddy substitute prosthetics always felt so strange and off. Not enough tactile feedback.

It felt like two pegs bolted onto her lower body that she had minute control of.
Her phone buzzed and she leaned over to look over the message that she just received.

*What are you up to? :) – Veronica Mueller*

She smiled and propped the phone up, before pressing the video call icon and clicking on the speaker setting as it rang. She picked up her tools and resumed to work as she waited for the distinct click of the call being picked up.

“Hi.” She heard a soft voice say adoringly, almost breathlessly.

_________________

“Hello to you too, ya amar. You look gorgeous. Got a hot date?”

Angela giggled, both from the jest and the compliment. “Of course not, I only have hot dates with you now. GSM is simply hosting a few formal events to get sponsors or donations from the rich and Patricia wanted to go and roped me along.”

“And you didn’t invite me?”

She rolled her eyes. “It’s all the way in Luxor, and I know you just had a mission. Besides, you’ve already wasted all your days off for this quarter.”

“Visiting you is hardly ‘wasting my time’, ya amar.”

“Charmer.”

The corners of her lips lifted slightly at the remark.

“Only for you.” She said with a wink, before readjusted on her seat and picked up another tool. “Anyways, I see that you’re back in your hotel room. I also see that though there is another bed behind you, you’re not wearing your earphones… So where is Patricia?”

Her eyes crinkled, “Swept away for the night by some dashing man who had come for the event from *Numbani*.”

“How scandalous.” Fareeha remarked in an exaggerated tone as she adopted an equally exaggerated wide-eyed expression.

“Isn’t it just?”

They shared a giggle.

“And where are you, Fareehali?” Angela questioned, unfamiliar with the room and the items in the background. She also had not failed in noticing that Fareeha’s hair was tied up - a good look for her, Angela noted - nor missed the goggles strapped onto her face and the earmuffs and respirator hanging around her neck. “And what were you fixing?”

“I’m at one of HSI’s workshops, and currently fixing –” she raised the soldering iron she gripped in one hand up for display while the other gripped the phone and tilted it slightly downwards so she could see the table as well, and as such giving her ample view of the prosthetic lying on top of it- “my prosthetics.”

“You needed a respirator and earmuffs? Doesn’t sound like you were doing routine maintenance.”

She shrugged, “Well, I had a few items I forgot to reorder and had to make them myself. That took a
“I see... And you say you’re in one of HSI’s workshops? Will you get in trouble for letting me take a look inside?”

Fareeha paused again, and turned to the phone, eyes crinkling as she shrugged.

“Nah. This one is rarely used and all the confidential stuff has been stored away already. HSI is organized like that. Right now there’s just me and my prosthetic in here. Other than that, the most advance piece of technology in here are these very tools I’m using. Pretty much found at any hardware store.” She finished with a small chuckle, and Angela’s eyes crinkled at the sound.

She loved it when Fareeha laughed, even when it was muted.

It always warmed her heart.

“I see.” She said simply, before a teasing smile graced her lips. “None of the engineers in HSI can help? Or did they offer and you were afraid that ring on your finger would become nothing but for show?”

“Don’t sass me, ya amar.” She reprimanded in jest, then shrugged. “It’s...” she worked her jaw as she readied an answer. “It’s not anything like that. I just like to know what’s going on, y’know? It’s not to this degree for the power armor I wear, but even then I like to know. This though, is a little personal because—”

“Because it’s essentially part of you, right?” Angela finished.

“Yea.”

"Mmm."

And then a comfortable silence settled in as Fareeha resumed working and Angela simply watched. Watched as the woman soldered circuit boards and screwed back steel rods, joints and components with efficiency and a noticeable glimmer of contentment in her eyes. And when Fareeha finished and smiled proudly and fondly at the work she accomplished, Angela knew that in another lifetime, one where the world wasn’t in such dire straits and Fareeha did not possess such a large sense of justice, that Fareeha could have lived her days simply tinkering and would have been happy.

“Is that a new paintjob?” she asked, somewhat rhetorically. She knew it was, but she also knew that Fareeha enjoyed when Angela would implore her about little details.

As expected, and to Angela’s joy, Fareeha’s eyes lit up.

“Yea, it is!” she raised the prosthetic up close to the camera. “The color is called graphite blue metallic... I have to admit that it was a bit of an expense to get HSI to keep this color in stock for me, quite a bit of pocket money, but I think it looks nice.” She looked at Angela nervously, “Don’t you?”

Angela smiled fondly. She found it ludicrous how Fareeha seemed a little uncomfortable as she divulged that tidbit of information, as if it was wrong for her to request such a frivolous thing, even when she paid for it with her own money. Angela was always of the mind that people were allowed to spend their money on little things that made them happy. Especially people who worked tirelessly for the sake of others. Not only did they deserve small bastions of reprieve, but doing so also helped them remember exactly what kind of world they were fighting so hard for.

“I think it looks lovely.” She affirmed. It was a beautiful shade of blue, somehow appearing almost
like it had yet to dry, attaining a glossy wet look. It also contrasted nicely to the carbon fiber sections of the prosthetics. “It suits you.” She winked, "A gorgeous color for a gorgeous woman.”

A beguiling smile crossed Angela's lips when Fareeha ducked her head at the compliment, the tips of her ears turning a red that not even her dark complexion could hide. And when Fareeha feigned normalcy by making a show that she simply ducked to unlatch the temporary prosthetics to hook up her usual ones back on, Angela humored the woman and the way she tried to redirect the conversation.

“A-anyways, a formal event, huh?” she squeaked before clearing her throat and starting again. “GSM in that much of a need for extra funding?”

Angela sighed, “Unfortunately, yes. It’s troubling times right now and GSM is saving up for a huge crisis that is sure to hit soon from the looks of it.”

Russia was already in a midst of an Omnic crisis on a national level, terrorist groups like Talon have somehow become rampant and gaining in numbers and the level of discontent around the world seemed to be growing, with every group pointing fingers at every other group. The divide among people was stronger than ever in recent years and she knew in her heart it would be soon that the metaphorical bubble would burst. The casualties would be devastating and GSM wanted to be prepared to decrease it as much as possible. An idea she was on board with, which is why even if Patricia had not invited her, she would have attended the formal event anyways to help secure donations.

“Yea.” Fareeha sighed out morosely, agreeing with her assessment. “If only Overwatch was still active, huh?”

Angela grimaced at seeing Fareeha’s eyes glaze with fondness, like Overwatch had been the sun and the stars.

“Overwatch was shut down for a reason.” She said quietly, remembering how ugly things got near the end. Remembers the way they had been inhibited time and time again by bureaucratic red tape and the in-fighting that caused, especially between Overwatch and Blackwatch. Remembers the times that they took one step forward, only to take two steps back. The ire of the masses and the futility of their actions as the gloss of their golden era faded away. “Maybe it’s best it stay that way.”

Fareeha had finished securing her prosthetics and raised back up to give Angela her full attention once more, her lips pursed and brow furrowed. Her fingers began rapping on the table, the way it always did when she was gathering her thoughts and finding the right words to say to get her point across. Rhythmic raps on the hard lacquered wood.

Her fingers stilled.

“I don’t believe that. I know there were mistakes, I’m not a fool. I saw how long it took for Overwatch to come to aid Egypt when it needed it most…” Angela swallowed uncomfortably. By her calculations Fareeha must have still been in the army back then, and she knew that Fareeha must have endured horrors for far longer than she should have been forced to. She should have fought harder to get Overwatch the ability to intervene faster. "But I don’t think the concept of Overwatch is a bad thing. It would be good for an organization like Overwatch –the Overwatch that was meant to be – to come to be, don’t you think?”

Angela sighed wistfully.

The dream was something that she still cherished and secretly hoped for. Though it was useless to
dredge up the memories and think of what could be, deep in her heart she remembers always believing that Overwatch could have been saved and turned around.

She sighed again.

“It would be wonderful, Reeha, but it’s not happening. There’s the PETRAS Act in place and it doesn’t seem to be going away anytime soon.”

“True, but I’ll say this: If another Overwatch happens, I will gladly join and serve and do everything in my power to help. The potential of the ideal Overwatch would allow me to protect the world better than I ever could even right now, with HSI. And they’re the leading private security firm.”

Angela grimaced once more at seeing the resolve in Fareeha’s warm, brown eyes.

“And how can you be sure that the same bad things wouldn’t happen again if another organization like Overwatch resurfaced? That history would not repeat itself?”

Fareeha looked up and chewed her lip for a moment, fingers resuming their rhythmic taps as she digested her words.

“I can’t.” she answered honestly, her fingers stilling once more as she spoke. Her eyes flitted back towards the screen, dark eyes determined and sure. “But Angela, ya amar, can you imagine if it did? If the ideal Overwatch was formed? How much more secure and safe the people and omnics of the world could feel? Could be?”

She nodded after a few seconds. “Yes, it would be something.”

The very dream of what Overwatch could accomplish was what had caused her to join in the first place.

“Well don’t lose hope just yet. Some dreams are meant to be realized, ya amar. Some dreams are worth fighting for. And helping pave a way to a better future is something I will always be on board for, and I know you are too. So if one day, if another opportunity comes by to make a proper Overwatch, shouldn’t we seize it?”

“Maybe…” she muttered, unable to agree as the wounds from the failures of Overwatch still stung like an old bruise that never went away. Yet, even with that dull ache, something in her heart stirred as she looked at Fareeha. Fareeha with her strength, her unfaltering morals, and unwavering conviction to do the right thing. Fareeha who never failed to act when it was needed most and apologize, take responsibility and correct her mistakes when she made them.

She found herself wondering if things would have turned out differently if Fareeha had joined.

“…I wish you had joined Overwatch.”

Someone like Fareeha perhaps might have made all the difference.

Fareeha made a sound between a snort and chuckle, shaking her head in amusement.

“You know I actually did apply for Overwatch, but it got disbanded before I ever heard back,” Fareeha divulged softly as she readjusted in her seat once more, “And not to toot my horn, but with my record, I think I would’ve definitely got in... which ironically would’ve been a terrible, terrible idea.” Fareeha breathed out, scrunching her face at her own admission. Angela frowned. That certainly was a response she had not been expecting. Fareeha smiled at her reaction and shrugged sheepishly. “I’ll be honest, ya amar, I wasn’t in the best frame of mind in my twenties. Too much to
prove and far too volatile. If anything, I'd think I would have simply added fuel to the fire of troubles that swarmed Overwatch.” She paused, a small smile on her face. “But thanks for that vote of confidence. You flatter me.”

“Well... in light of this new information, you're right, it wouldn’t have been such a good idea. But you now? The you that you are now?” Another wistful sigh escaped her, "Fareehali, I might just join another organization like Overwatch if someone like you were in the midst of it all.”

It was a heavy conversation she had to admit, but Angela could not deny that she savored the royal smile that Fareeha sent her way as she uttered those words.

Chapter End Notes

Well, it’s probably obvious what’s gonna happen in the next chapter, lol. On that note, next chapter probably up in 7-8 days. (I'm so glad lady luck loves me and gifted me with the latest Overwatch comic before I posted this. Originally I was pulling shit out of my ass about what went wrong with Overwatch and praying canon didn't fuck me over too much, lol)
She stood tall, her jaw set, arms locked behind her back. The neutrality on her face consistent with all the other personnel in the same position as her. All standing silently in the background, solid stone statues standing guard behind their respective bosses who had the luxury of sitting in the spaces designated for them at the round meeting table.

It was rare for these meetings to happen.

And almost unheard of like this.

Whenever the Egyptian government wanted to conduct business of any sort with private firms, whether simple exchange of information or procurement of services, they tended to do it under the radar – sending a discreet lower-ranked representative. Governments were prideful and as such it was always was seen as a… sign of weakness for them to ‘resort’ to requesting for aid from the private sectors.

Doubly so when the private firms in question were security firms.

Well to be fair, in that facet, there was also the shining fact that the military branch saw the employment of private security firms to be a direct attack on them. Take the time in which HSI won the rights to guard the Anubis facility, for example. Anytime the military found themselves face to face with HSI, they never let them forget that it was under the protection of HSI that the God AI had reawakened and caused havoc. The insinuation under their thorny words being that such an event would have never have happened under their watch. Which was why she had failed to conceal her surprise when she first stepped into the room with Emirhan and Hassan, greeted by the sight of the heads of the main three military branches of Egypt. It was surreal how almost amicable they were to HSI and the other four representatives of the most reputable private security firms in Egypt who had also been called in to attend this meeting.

Jarring. That was the word for it. It was jarring to her.

Though of course, every side still kept doing that whole pompous flex of power, she thought dryly to herself, acutely aware of how unnecessary her presence was. How unnecessary she and the other personnel who were roped in like her were to this meeting. That all they were doing was lining up the walls of the room, puffing up their chests in a silent showcase of power of their respective firm or military division. This she was sure of, considering that they were all decked out in high-level signature gear of whatever firm or military division they were from when there certainly was no need for it.

She herself and Hassan were both dressed to the nines in ostentatious full body armor – thankfully, minus the helmets.

“The PETRAS Act is stupid, any time we go off doing anything remotely altruistic, its considered ‘Overwatch-like’ activity.” Commander Taleb of the Egyptian Ground Forces groused, running his scarred hands through his hair. His eyes raged with the frustration that had built up in him at political red tape. “Have they seen what’s been happening lately? I mean look at fucking Russia. A fucking Second Omnic Crisis!”
“Cool yourself. Yes, the PETRAS Act, can be… trying, but let’s not overstep our boundaries.” Spoke General Afash of Egypt’s Air Defense. “Doing stuff in our own nation is well and good, but for us to dip our fingers into the affairs of other nations is a little… We might cause unnecessary friction.”

“Is he being rash?” Madam Shadia, head of Masr Strong intervened. “The world is connected, what happens elsewhere affects us here as well.”

“You are biased.” General Afash intercepted, staring her straight flatly before glancing around and directing eye-contact at every other head of each private security firm in the room. “You all are, since your business relies heavily as well on clients on an international level. And money is important for you –as it should be- considering you all are leading or representing private corporations.”

Madam Shadia’s eyes narrowed ever-so-slightly at the small slight and the borderline patronizing tone.

And Fareeha was not surprised.

Anyone who knew anything about private security firms in Egypt knew of Masr Strong. Despite their position as a private security firm, they were also the pride and joy of Egypt. The very first private security firm from Egypt to make a foothold internationally and be ranked in the top ten on the global scale. Furthermore, they were famous for their extreme screening process in the jobs they took, specifically in Egypt itself, to ensure it never negatively impacted the common people. It was no wonder that they were always ranked number one by local media and why the personnel who worked there did not do well with thinly veiled criticisms –especially false ones – about the way they operated, much less about their character.

“I think what Madam Shadia is getting at is that how we act on things that happen to our international neighbors reflect on the reputation of Egypt.” The head of the Farafra Red’s suddenly quipped up – for the first time since the meeting started. Until then, he had been content to simply listen and observe, absorbing the information silently, his poker face revealing no insights he may have gleaned. If she remembered correctly his name was El-Sherif. “And what would happen, say, if the trouble starts to spread around here again? Would anyone come to aid us if we do nothing for them?”

“Overwatch did nothing until the very end, if I recall last time correctly.” General Afash fired back in a sardonic tone.

“That’s wrong, Afash.” Commander Taleb interjected, ignoring the way General Afash’s directed warning look at him dropping his title in front of an audience. Commander Taleb’s voice was haggard, sounding more worn than someone his age should sound like. He looked resigned. No, he looked tired. Tired at Afash’s trivial and continued dismissiveness of the opinions of the others on the table. Or maybe he was tired of the world in general. It was probably a bit of both. “Overwatch wasn’t allowed to help until the very end.” He took downed the cup of water provided to him and wiped the excess liquid that dribbled onto his beard with the back of his hand carelessly. “So unless we want a repeat of last time, maybe it’s time we pull our heads out of our asses and smell the roses.”

To General Afash’s credit, he had only pursed his lips and settled back into his seat, feigning indifference to the fact that someone from the military, one of ‘his own’ had opposed him in front of an audience. And for that, Fareeha was impressed. She expected at least a small outburst.

Out of the corner of her eye though, she did notice Emirhan trembling, a small quiver of his shoulders, and resisted the urge to shake her head. Her superior officer was sitting right there, in the middle of an important meeting, silently chuckling at the interactions in front of him, enough that his
shoulders shook slightly so. She could practically hear him guffawing on the inside at the drama that was unfolding.

Well, at least someone was getting a kick out of this tedious meeting. She was still as bored as ever. And so was Hassan, who looked like he was about ready to fall asleep, eyes half-lidded and struggling to stay open.

One of the government officials in attendance banged on the table.

“All right, alright. That’s enough. Settle down now. Let’s dial down the hostility, okay?” he said, “There’s no need for that.”

El-Sherif raised his hand slowly. “If I may speak, I think the idle talk is getting everyone on edge, especially because we all know its not the reason you called us here.” His brow raised ever so slightly. “And I’ll be honest. Personally, I do not like my time wasted. So let’s dive into it, or I will leave right now.”

A silence filled the room at his accusation.

An accusation that everyone had been thinking, but had not said. El-Sherif was right. Even someone who knew nothing about politicking or anything about suppression of vigilantes and threats to Egypt would have a feeling that the discussions that had taken place were superficial, only scratching the surface of the real meat of the conversation. Whatever that may be.

“You’re right.” One of the government officials admitted. “Alright, let’s bring them in.”

The door then clicked and in came a slew of lawyers, each with a handful of papers and their own locked metal suitcase. Specifically, five neatly dressed lawyers. Conveniently the same number of lawyers needed to have each one address each of the five representatives from each private security firm in attendance personally. It was at this time that the air shifted and three truths became clear to her. The first, that everything before had been subterfuge and dull pleasantries in attempt to ease things up first. The second, that whatever was going to happen, was going to be of great importance. And the third was that she was not going to be part of it, and neither were any of the people like her who were milling about in the background as glorified escorts.

As she was ushered out, she glanced at Emirhan, who waved her and Hassan off with a small salute. His eyes though, were fixated at the lawyer’s briefcases. In that small second in which she glanced at Emirhan, she saw the beginnings of that certain grin that found itself from time to time on Emirhan’s face.

That certain grin he had that bore tempered excitement for the unknown.

“‘They really don’t like you, huh?’” Hassan chuckled out, his deep baritone making his muttered sentences seem louder than they were. He seemed far more chipper now, able to stretch out and relax instead of standing stock still with a stony gaze as they listened to the superiors who got to sit on ‘the round table’ drone on and on facetiously.

She followed his gaze at the huddled group of military officials who talked amongst each other in murmured tones, occasionally side-eyeing them, noses metaphorically upturned.

“They don’t like any of us.”

It was true. The military personnel who had accompanied their respective bosses were on one side of
the waiting room as the ones from the private security firms were all relaxing on the other side.

“Yeah, but I saw the way some of them looked at you in particular.”

A soft sigh escaped her and she side-eyed him. “You know why. I’m an Amari, remember?”

Her name had always brought her equal parts pride as it did bane.

The Amari family has served with distinguish in the military for generations. She knows this to be true, remembers the nights she spent lying on her stomach, head propped up on her hands as she listened to her grandfather tell stories of his achievements and all the other Amari’s who had done well in the army. And like many before her, she had felt the same need to protect and serve thrum in her very own veins. With her family possessing such a long and illustrious history in the military, it was fair for the military to expect her to continue tradition and serve in the army until the end of her days the moment she enlisted. Her early retirement needless to say, had been a shock and met with mild disapproval. Her subsequent enrollment into a private security firm, seen as a betrayal of sorts and her personal name became forever tarnished due to her digression from the expected ‘Amari path and values’.

Which was stupid.

She wasn’t actually the first Amari to not devote their life to the military, and if they were being technical, she was still serving, but simply in another way. And she had not let go of her moral code in the slightest. In fact, she would even say that it has improved. Now she knew the importance of her comrades as well, which was a far step forward from her mindset when she was in the army. However, they wouldn’t know that of course, nor would they care. And considering the last Amari had been her mother, a towering figure even in the whole of Egypt’s military history, it wasn’t hard to imagine why her personal departure from the usual path was met with particular ire.

“Anyways,” she said as she stared at the door, tapping the side of her thigh with her finger in boredom. “You think they’ll get out soon?”

“Probably,” Hassan guessed, checking his watch. “It’s almost been two hours since we left the room and the meeting was supposed to last about three hours. It should be done about now.”

And as Hassan finished his sentence the door opened and out came Emirhan and the rest.

She had expected Emirhan to look tired. He often did when these sort of meetings ran too long, even when it may have a secret that may be a little fun for him. Speaking of meetings, it was a little peculiar she had to admit, that he had insisted on attending this very one. In general, he tended to relegate these sort of official visits to those suits who enjoyed these kind of things. Never did he really want to do it himself, much less fight for it like he did with this particular one. They tended to be tedious in nature, after all. Yet, when she gazed at his face, as grim as he tried to make it to be, still in front of other people, she spotted that certain glimmer in his eye.

Emirhan was excited. Hell, he was enthused.

“Uh… That’s interesting.” Hassan said dumbly.

She could only nod in response, unable to answer as Emirhan called to both of them to follow him out. She could feel an itch form in the back of her throat to make a remark, but she held her tongue as they were still in front of others. Once they were safely in the car though, she could hold back her urge to make a comment no more.

“Emirhan.” His eyes, which had previously been gazing out the window in an almost romantic
fashion, flicked towards them. “You look… happy.”

Hassan made a sound of agreement. “Yea, boss. What’s going on? You look too happy for someone who just had a three hour confidential discussion with the Egyptian government and the heads of the various military divisions and private security firms.”

“Do I? Because I am.” He said, a large grin overtaking his face. “I’m so, so happy. Ecstatic, even.”

“Uhhhh… okay?” Hassan sounded out, raising a brow. “Becaaause?”

Emirhan raised a finger to his lips. “It’s a secret, but you’ll see in time.”

And then he looked back out the window, revealing nothing more, giving them smiles as noncommittal as his non-answer whenever he noticed the weirded out looks Hassan and her exchanged with each other and directed at him for the rest of the car ride back to base.

This was really strange.

She hoped 'in time' would be soon.

_________________

’In time’ apparently meant a month and a half later.

She had been feeling great at the time, endorphins rushing through her veins, a wild grin on her face despite how her chest heaved and the sweat pouring down her face. They had just gone through the quarterly PFT and she had done stellar. She broke multiple personal bests and dominated most of her competition in the circuit round. In the high of her achievements and with the passage of time and other duties, the strange meeting had been shelved into the recesses of her mind. Completely forgotten until after the test, when she noticed Emirhan—who had been observing her along with the other superiors and a few audience members primarily made of the non-combat divisions who found these tests interesting to watch – leaning on the wall, speaking in whispered tones with a man in a black suit.

A man who had been in attendance of that meeting. One of the three government representatives.

She furrowed her brows at the sight, before they raised when Emirhan motioned her over. She walked naturally, and then briskly, squaring her shoulders when she saw the way the government official looked at her. It felt like he was studying her, though at the same time his scrutiny was mixed in with an expression that made her feel like he was underestimating her and her abilities.

“-don’t know. They seem to like… Fareeha, was it? But it’s better to look at every candidate. Someone could probably do better. I mean, might do better. Be better. For the team, I mean-”

“Hello.” She said, cutting off the conversation, extending her hand and curling it around the one he offered firmly. “My name is Fareeha Amari. We met before, if you recall. I was there in the room for that... Meeting.”

She made a point to lean in as she spoke, just slightly to make the man feel a little off-kilter, but nothing too obvious that it was impolite. He fumbled, stuttering for a split second at her intimidatingly blank stare before he collected himself, scratching the side of his jaw in a small, discreet display of nervousness.

She waited two seconds, simply staring at him before nodding and finally letting go of his hand. He smiled nervously, wiping the excess sweat off his clammy hands on the side of his pants.

“Nice to meet you. I did not spot you before. Did you just arrive?” She asked offhandedly, satisfied that the glimmer of doubt she saw in his eyes when he had previously looked at her had disappeared. It was now replaced by a dose of wariness, and she could feel Emirhan’s bemused stare at her somewhat childish actions, but she couldn’t find it in her heart to care. It had left a sour taste on her tongue that someone had doubted her right after she had essentially dominated practically everyone else in this latest PFT, putting a damper on what had been a good mood.

“Yes, I came right when I got a… call. Wanted to see for myself, but it seems that I missed the PFT and couldn’t observe your abilities first hand.”

“Huh. Is that so?” She turned to Emirhan. “Are the results not uploaded yet?”

“They weren’t, but now they are. Here you go sir, along with Fareeha’s credentials.” He said and handed Mr. Fakhri the tablet, who immediately started to scan through it. A spot of pride entered her when she saw an impressed look cross his features.

“Damn…” he whispered. His eyes flicked up to Emirhan. “Forget what I said before, no wonder they want her.”

She raised her brow, cocking her head. “Pardon? Who wants me?”

“Come with us, Fareeha.”

This was… unexpected.

She wasn’t sure exactly what to expect when she followed Emirhan and Fakhri to… wherever (despite working for HSI for almost seven years, there were still areas of the base that she had yet to become familiar with). Still, she had imagined them to bring her to a meeting room filled with other people from the other security firms, maybe even from some military divisions, to work on some joint mission. What she truly did not expect, was to be led to one of the old unused bunkers in the south side that had yet to be refurbished into something else, and for the surprise to come in the form of a young brown-haired Caucasian girl who was sitting on top of a crate, swinging her legs as she listened to some tunes blaring out of the radio beside her.

“Aw yea, you’re finally here!” the girl – no, young woman she deduced as the woman hopped off the crate and skipped to her, probably no older than her late twenties – said as she held out her hand and grabbing Fareeha’s into a rapid handshake. “Hi there! Nice to finally meet you!”

Fareeha blinked and licked her lips.

“What’s wrong? Cat got your tongue?” she asked, voice shrill and chipper. And yet-

Familiar. Strangely familiar.

She squinted as she appraised the woman before her. She was short, or more accurately, quite average in height, reaching only Fareeha's chin at best. She was understated, looking like every other twenty-some year old in her baggy blue hoodie, black leggings, aviators and baseball cap. The woman said something else, but her words had sounded far away as she turned to look at Emirhan questioningly.
Emirhan simply chortled, which did nothing to alleviate her confusion. The thought crossed her mind that this was nothing more than yet another elaborate joke he was pulling for no good reason. It wouldn’t be the first time. But… it would be the first time a government official ever joined along with his pranks. Which was very unlikely, so as strange as this whole thing was, this wasn’t a joke, and this woman really was the surprise and the client that ‘wanted her’, so to speak.

“Hello?”

Finally remembering her manners, she quickly turned attention back at the woman and saluted her.

“Hello, apologies for my rudeness. I am Fareeha Amari. Captain of Elite HSI Squadron KL4.”

“Yea, I know! I asked for you.”

Fareeha furrowed her brows. “Mmm, so I have heard. I will be honest, I do not know the details of why you need my help, but I will certainly do my best. It is a pleasure to meet you, Miss…?”

The woman laughed, taking off her shades and cap, which revealed a shock of brown hair and vibrant eyes.

“Lena Oxton. But you probably know me as Tracer and-” her eyes widened. “One sec.”

She then zipped off to one of the planes in the bunker, a brilliant shade of blue behind her as she ran.

“Winston! Winston! She’s here, come say hi!”

Fareeha heard rummaging and the bumbling deep tones before a gorilla exited the plane, pushing up his glasses and smiling at Fareeha somewhat nervously.

“Ah, Amari’s daughter. It’s good to finally meet you.” He rushed out, before stuttering once more, “I apologize for not coming out sooner, I did not expect you to arrive just yet. Heard you had a physical test- um, how did it go?”

Fareeha blinked, surprised at how even her tone was when she responded, as stilted as it was.

“Good. It went… good.”

“Great!” a crackle came from the plane. Winston scratched his head. “I, uh… I was doing an experiment. Um, I have to go fix it, real quick. Be back soon. I promise!”

He said then bounded off to fix whatever was short-circuiting in the plane. She watched him go off in awe, mind still reeling. She couldn’t believe it. There in front of her, in flesh and blood was Tracer, and for a brief moment, Winston. Tracer and Winston from Overwatch. On-the-poster Tracer. Slip-stream, girl who fell through time, Tracer. And Winston, intelligent ape from the moon colony, Winston. She found herself stepping forward to get closer to Lena, brightening when she flashed yet another smile at her.

The words spilled out of her before she could stop herself.

“You’re so lucky, Tracer. Ever since I was a little girl, I dreamed of joining Overwatch.”

A cheeky grin split Lena’s face at her admission.

“Maybe you’ll still get your chance. Who knows what the future holds.”
“Yea?” she whispered back, almost shyly, scratching her nose at the implied vote of confidence by the woman.

“Yea, like how ‘bout right now? Overwatch is back and we’re recruiting.”

She blinked. “…What?”

“You heard her right, Fareeha.” She heard Emirhan say from behind her. She turned to face him. “And it’s all legal too. Or semi-legal, anyways. Eh, semantics.” he said with a shrug, eyes flicking back at Fakrhi. “Ain’t that right Mr. El-Rifai?”

“That’s right.” He affirmed.

Fareeha stared at Fakhri, then Emirhan, then Lena, before looking back at Emirhan.

“Explain.” She asked in a tempered voice, keeping her enthusiasm at minimum, not allowing it to overflow until she was sure this was not all a ruse of some sort. She would love to join Overwatch, but not if the whole world would be against them. Her time and energy would be spent far more efficiently, more productively sticking with HSI and protecting people the way she has for the last couple years.

And explain he did.

Apparently that meeting had been in the making for about a month prior to when it actually happened and was triggered by the illegal border crossing of Winston and Lena into Egyptian airspace. Unlike the other countries they visited, Egypt had miles of dry desert which made it easy for them to track them given a few hours even after they had abandoned their aircraft. After detaining them, instead of applying PETRAS protocol along with their own laws about illegal border-crossing and vigilantism, the Egyptian government decided that perhaps a bending of the rules was necessary considering the current state of affairs.

The Egyptian government felt like the world was primed for another Overwatch.

And they were not alone in this sentiment. Over the last year and a half, a few other countries have confided in secret about their interest in building another Overwatch or at least accepting those sorts of activities. With the accidental capture of Tracer and Winston, and after revealing these sentiments to them, they learned that Overwatch had already began acting in secret. That a recall occurred almost two years ago. With this new information, the few governments that were open to a new Overwatch started their agenda to find a way to collectively pull out the PETRAS Act, so Overwatch activity in their respective countries would be allowed.

“It’s going to take a while before that happens, but though the PETRAS Act may technically still be in full-effect, Egypt and certain other countries have colluded to, starting right now, conveniently… ignore it.” Fakrhi explained matter-of-factly. “Of course, not publicly. Never publicly.” He stressed. “But let’s just say that from here on out, all attempts to hinder their progress would be half-hearted to say the least by those specific countries.”

“Which is great news for us!” Tracer exclaimed happily, “At least we won’t have to shirk through the streets as much as we did before in those countries. Give us the list later, yea?”

Fakhri nodded politely. “Of course.”

“…As a government official, wouldn’t the fact that you’re working with Overwatch be a huge scandal?” Fareeha interjected, befuddled by how far the Egypt government was willing to break – sorry, bend - rules for once. “Considering that technically Egypt hasn’t pulled out of the treaty in a
“The government can’t be helping outlaws, certainly. But HSI can. You are from a private security firm. You guys are a loophole we have. I mean, why do you think we invited you all to those meetings in the first place? If it becomes known that a member of a security firm joins Overwatch it cannot hurt any government body – much less ours. Those ‘pesky private corporations, of course one of their own would succumb to such acts’, right? No fault on our part.”

That was shady, but it was a scheme that she couldn’t say she was surprised to hear. She was surprised though, that HSI was willing to go with such a scheme. She turned to Emirhan.

“HSI is okay with this sort of thing if it blows south?”

“Bah. We’ve never shied away from doing good. We had even stuck to the very end with Overwatch last time, still believing it could be saved. Besides, this’ll just be another Tuesday for our PR department.” Emirhan shrugged. “Do you know how many times we, even as the top security firm, are accused of doing ‘any job, for whoever as long as they can pay’? Let’s use that excuse for once.”

“…Overwatch is going to pay us?” She said dryly, skepticism dripping through her words. She doubted they had the funds.

“No. But we’ll make those fake transaction reports.” The way he waved off a totally illegal, and also morally wrong act in such a blasé fashion made Fareeha’s eye twitch, despite the good intentions behind it. “The best part of being a private company is that the public can cross-reference our numbers and the IRS won’t hit us, because the government is with us for once. Hah.”

“...Right. And how do I tie into all this?” she questioned.

“I can answer that.” Tracer announced loudly, bringing Fareeha’s attention back to her. “Here’s the thing, a lot of people moved on after Overwatch disbanded, and the ones that filtered back in don’t want or can’t be moving around the world to fight for what’s right anymore.”

“Furthermore, they can’t bring a whole platoon or red flags will appear, and we’ll unfortunately have to act.” Added Fakhri meaningfully, “We may be on your side, but we can’t publicly ignore a miniature army crossing into our region without admitting collusion after all. Our reputation would be tarnished.”

Lena nodded. “Right. That too. So we’re right now in the process of making a small strike team. We actually came here for a specific person, but plans changed. We got caught, got this opportunity to handpick some agents from various private security firms in Egypt and we saw your name. Then we saw you in action and wow, are we convinced.” She said with a wink then chewed her lip nervously. “So what do you say, love? You in?”

Her eyes crinkled and the corners of her mouth twitched in delight. It was funny that Lena had a slightly nervous inflection in her tone, because the truth was that she didn’t even need to ask.

“Lena, it would be my honor to serve alongside you and Winston to make a better world.”

Lena beamed and tackled her into a hug. Fareeha half-returned it, awkwardly patting Lena on the back before disengaging herself from the woman.

“I finished fixing the issue with my little test at the right moment. Glad to have you on board, Fareeha.” Winston chimed in, finally hobbling out of the plane. He extended her hand to shake hers, smiling all the while. She smiled politely back.
Fakhri made a noise, "Okay good. This wrapped up just on time, because I do have another meeting scheduled. I will report this to my superiors later. It was nice meeting all of you." He held a stopping hand out when Emirhan attempted to follow him. "No need to guide me back, the elevator is just down the hall and to the left, yes?"

"Correct. You won't need a keycard to click for the lobby. Just click the touchscreen and press "1"." He held up a thumbs up as he walked away. Now, there were only four of them in the room.

"Hmmm, now all we need to do is find Angela." Winston muttered, holding a finger to his chin, an introspective look crossing his face. "It’s going to take some time considering that we only got a blip on her coordinates here about a couple months ago when she turned on her app for a split second to contact Athena. Maybe she has already left this region, I hope not though, but even if she has maybe some local will remember her. Oh, but what if she doesn’t look the same, god I hope she didn’t change her look and—"

“I know where she is.”

Winston and Lena looked at her with wide eyes.

“Y-you do?” Winston stammered as he readjusted his glasses. “Wow, that makes things far easier. Might I ask how you know?”

She shrugged. “Well, she’s my girlfriend.”

Lena let out a shrill excited gasp.

“Wait. What the fuck. You have two girlfriends?” Emirhan said, scandalized. "Are you two-timing?"

Lena let out a mortified gasp.

“Wha- No!” she sputtered, sending a furious look at Emirhan. "What the hell, Emirhan? I would never. What gave you that idea?"

Where did that accusation come from? Of course she wasn’t cheating on Angela. Of course she didn’t have two girlfriends... Not that there was anything inherently wrong with having multiple partners, but it certainly was in their relationship, where they had never agreed on such a thing. And she was pretty sure she and Angela were a one significant other kind of women. The very thought of Angela cheating on her made her heart lurch, and her chest tightened at imagining Angela hurting her that way, betraying her trust that way, her expectations that way... Her, in that way.

And more so when she thought of herself doing that to Angela.

“You did. Like, right now. You’re also dating a woman called Veronica, if you recall and I’m sure you do.”

Oh... Right.

Right.

Sometimes it slipped her mind that Angela was still living as Veronica.

She had become so accustomed to calling Angela ‘ya amar’ that she didn’t have to really actively think of her false identity anymore, thinking of it more as an alternative name than an alternative identity.
“Emirhan. Veronica is Angela. They’re the same person.”

“What.” Emirhan stated flatly. "Is that her middle name or something?"

“Oooh, does Angela have an alternate ego?” Tracer said with a waggle of her brows. “What does ‘Veronica’ do? Does she only come out at night?”

Winston grumbled. “Hmmm, I feel like I’m missing a piece of the puzzle here. Could you elaborate please?”

“Alter egos, Winston. What’s there to get?”

“Um, I hardly think that’s what Fareeha meant, Lena. Or is it? If that's the case, that's a bit personal. I'm a scientist, but I'd rather not go into the private details of a healthy human relationship. That's one area of study I have no desire to invest myself in.”

Fareeha rubbed her face, which now felt unseasonably warm.

This was going to take a while.

Chapter End Notes

I don’t think I’m allowed to put guestimations anymore for awhile here in the notes for when the following chapter will come out cuz I can’t seem to fucking follow it no more recently.

Um, hope you guys liked the chapter. I kept… I kept re-writing it huge sections again and again as part of the editing process cuz I wanted to love what came out but… even now I don’t love it. I just… like it, yknow what I mean? Just seems so convo/explanatory but I couldn’t figure out a different way. Ah whatever, excuses, excuses lol.

Lastly, I did think long and hard before that last scene. But it was just Lena and Winston (who both won't push Angela) and Emirhan (who always has Fareeha's back) left in the room, and Angela and Fareeha had that Overwatch heart to heart last chapter. So I thought okay, its fine for Fareeha to have loose lips.
Exhaustion was proving once again to be an excellent barrier against progress.

The clock had not struck ten yet and sleep was already beckoning her, sagging her shoulders with the promise of a good night’s rest. Her eyelids started to droop and her vision blurred at the edges. The words on the paper before her seemed to sway and double. Angela tapped the pen on the table top repeatedly, a gnawing irritation swelling in her from her lack of motivation to continue.

It was only a few more reports.

Just four more to comb through and do final edits and amendments.

She gripped her pen tighter and straightened up, rolling her neck to get rid of the kinks that had formed. Angela then scooted closer to the table, up until her stomach pressed up on the edge. She nodded to herself.

She could do this. She could do this.

And she did, working in some sort of sudden groove… for a measly two minutes before her eyes drooped again. The sandman called at her once more, sprinkling the golden sand of pleasant dreams into her eyes. She groaned, reclining in her chair in defeat into an unceremonious slouch. This was impossible. Her brain was spent, her mind was already far too drowsy. She could barely comprehend anything written on the report, to the point where she had been re-reading the same damn line for the last minute or two.

A line of words she wrote.

…Her brain was having trouble understanding sentences she wrote *herself*.

Unbelievable.

Her frustration bubbled over and she let out a small growl as she threw the pen onto the table in a careless fashion. The pen skittered and rolled on the table, stopping precariously right on the edge. She threw her hands up to rub at her tired face, fingers pushing her spectacles up near her hairline as she did so. A small creak made her peek through her fingers and Angela’s lips pressed into a thin line as she witnessed the pen teeter-totter on the ledge. Her eyes narrowed ever-so-slightly as it started to tip over.

*Literally, do not.*

It fell, hitting the ground in an angle that caused it to fling off to the side and skitter under a nearby row of metal cabinets. She stared blankly at the dark crevice where the pen rolled under, at that pitch black space between the floor and the slightly raised cabinets. An unreasonable sort of disappointment flowed through her as she continued to stare into the darkness – disappointment wholly directed at the inanimate object. She withdrew her hands from her face and rested it on the table. She shook her head minutely, her small action causing her spectacles to drop back into place. Her gaze was still trained at the space. Her eye twitched.

*How dare it fall and then have the gall to roll under the desk?*
If she did have some sort of latent telekinetic powers, this was really the time for it to show itself.

She waited two breaths for the pen to somehow float out from the crevice, willed to do so by the power of her frustrated mind.

As expected, it did not.

She pushed out of her chair with a huff, the chair legs screeching as it scraped the floor, and stomped over to the cabinets. She bent down, dropping to her knees, placing the weight of her upper body on one forearm as her other arm stretched to blindly grope in the darkness for her pen, her face contorting with disgust as her fingers ran through dirt, dust and a few cobwebs.

In all honesty, she could have just took a pen from one of her colleagues (the closest one was only two tents away), but retrieving this pen was more a matter of principal than necessity. It was hers and she wanted it… Her determination was not fueled in any way by some sort of petty pride. Or from the fact that by the time that idea crossed her mind, she was already on her hands and knees and rummaging.

Of course not.

She wasn’t that petty.

Her? Petty? That petty?

Never.

As invested as she was in her endeavor, whole arm now thrusted under the space, flailing in search of a cheap gel pen, she did not miss the sound of someone entering the premises. Nor did she miss or mistake the distinct bitter notes of freshly brewed coffee that accompanied said intruder.

“Patricia, thanks for bringing my coffee.” She said, not bothering to turn around as she continued her search for her last pen. “Just put it on the table, I’m just trying to- Got it!” she exclaimed as her fingers finally curled over familiar thin black plastic. She pulled it out, holding it up in front of her proudly with one hand as the other still lay on the ground to support her still bent over frame. “There we go. I found you, you little wretch.”

A strong laugh came from behind her, rich and warm, right from the belly. It reverberated around the room like tidal waves at midday.

Angela’s breath hitched.

“Wow. A pen? Thought you were finding hidden treasure or something.”

She straightened up.

That wasn’t Patricia. That sounded like-

“Reeha?” she breathed out as she swiveled her head to look behind her.

And there Fareeha was. The woman was crouched behind her, sitting on her haunches, forearms resting on her thighs. Her eyes filled with equal parts amusement and affection. She grinned toothily.

“Ya amar.”
Angela blinked twice, not moving and just staring. Fareeha’s grin widened and she held her arms out, beckoning Angela closer. Angela’s brain kicked into gear at the action and a happy gasp escaped her. She scrambled to turn around and immediately leapt, her tackle of a hug causing Fareeha to lose balance and fall backwards onto her ass. Butterflies burst in her as she felt Fareeha’s rumbling laughter at her actions once she got over her initial shock.

“I missed you too, ya amar.” She breathed out, wrapping her arms around Angela’s frame to return the hug. She felt a small kiss on the crown of her head. “I missed you too.”

Angela withdrew her head slightly to look up at Fareeha in bewilderment, her head shaking left and right slightly.

“I… I can’t believe it.”

Fareeha’s brows furrowed at her expression, her grin transforming into a lopsided smile tinged with puzzlement.

“What do you mean?”

“You… I just…” she trailed off, raising a hand to smoothen Fareeha’s hair, threading them through her black tresses gently to comb it back and away from her face. “…You’re here.”

She thought Fareeha didn’t have any more time off. At least not this quarter.

“I’m here.” Fareeha grinned out, then lurched over Angela to snake her arms under Angela’s thighs. Angela yelped as Fareeha suddenly moved, a quick pull to hoist her fully onto her lap. Her arms instinctively grabbed Fareeha’s shoulders to keep herself from toppling over Fareeha and potentially sending them both reeling. One day she would love to be hovering over Fareeha as she laid below her, preferably with less clothes, but certainly not today.

Their first time would not be at the floor of a GSM tent if she could help it.

Once they were steady, Fareeha’s hands quickly slipped out from under her thighs to wrap loosely around Angela’s waist. Lax enough to seem carefree, but secure enough so the desire that Fareeha would really appreciate it if Angela stayed right where she was, was clear. A chuckle escaped Angela at the thought. As if she would ever move, she was all too glad with this new position.

She reached up to cup Fareeha’s face, her thumb tracing her udjat idly as she caressed the woman’s cheeks. Fareeha had incredible skin for someone who was always out in the sun and getting battered, bloodied and bruised on the daily. A small part of Angela was envious. Forget to wash her face one day and she’d inevitably break out in a few zits, at least near her hairline.

A relaxing silence took over as they both simply sat and stared at each other, studying each other’s faces, drinking in the little details. It had been a while since they had seen each other face to face and as nice as pictures and video calls were, they were nothing compared to seeing each other in the flesh. Angela’s eyes travelled all over, to gaze at the curve of Fareeha’s cut jaw to her plump, almost pouting lips and the faint little nick she had on the right side of her nose, probably caused by a stray bullet clipping the soft cartilage. Her eyes finally settled back on Fareeha’s eyes, warm and inviting, adorned by thick lashes.

The longer she stared at Fareeha, the more certain she was of one thing.

Fareeha was beautiful.
“Hi.” She breathed out, almost reverently as she leaned down to press a small kiss to Fareeha’s lips, smiling into it when she felt the happy hum Fareeha elicited at the contact.

“Hey.” Fareeha responded as they parted, a darling smile etched on her face.

Angela giggled, toes curling in delight. She felt so alive right now, so awake, and maybe a little lightheaded from happiness. The tendrils of fatigue that had clung to her had vanished, completely out of sight and out of mind. She felt refreshed, even invigorated and ready to tackle anything that the day might bring.

“When did you get here, Reeha?” she asked, then jutted her chin to the table in lieu of a gesture. “And how did you know I wanted a refill of coffee?”

“I got here just a few minutes before, and I didn’t know you needed a refill. Bumped into Patricia, who took one look at me and just shoved the coffee into my hands and said ‘tent no. 4. East side.’, then left to who knows where.”

Angela hummed in amusement.

That sounded like Patricia, alright.

Her hands trailed downwards from Fareeha’s face to her arms, eyes following suit. How distracting, Fareeha had become more muscular. Her hands gave her bicep a quick squeeze. Definitely beefed up. Not so much in size, though she certainly did bulk up considering the ample definition she saw even through a somewhat loose grey tee, but in terms of tautness. The woman felt more rock solid than she had a couple months ago.

“Ya amar, are you feeling me up?” Fareeha enquired, voice dripping with bemusement.

“Maybe~” she drawled out, voice husky as she continued to stare at Fareeha’s arms with heated appreciation. Her hands trailed up and down her taut bicep, fingernails lightly raking the clothed muscle. A devilish smirk formed on her lips when she not so much heard as felt the way Fareeha’s breath hitched from her actions. She readjusted in Fareeha’s lap, grinding in slightly against her as she did so. Fareeha stiffened accordingly. Her eyes flipped over to Fareeha’s face, smirk widening as she saw the flush of her girlfriend’s cheeks and the way she subtly licked her lips. “Is something the matter?”

Fareeha visibly swallowed and shook her head twice firmly.

“No. Of course not.” She rasped out. “I just-um…”

“You’re looking a little flushed,” she breathed out, tilting her chin up with the crook of her finger. She leaned in to press her forehead on Fareeha’s, relishing how discombobulated the woman seemed. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

“Yea, I’m just peachy.” She said, voice thick, jaw tight, warmth clearly emanating from her cheeks.

Angela pulled back, feigning confusion for a few more seconds before making a show of a moment of realization. She looped her hands languidly around Fareeha’s neck, fingernails lightly scratching the base of her neck. She felt goosebumps form and smirked. Her eyes flashed almost dangerously as she delivered Fareeha a sultry look.

“Oh my Fareehali. Were you thinking of something…” her voice dropped on octave. “Naughty?”

“I… uh-um… N-no?” Fareeha stammered and then quickly looked away, “I mean, um-”
Angela smiled, savoring the sight of a visibly flustered Fareeha trying to pull an excuse out of the air. She had the upper hand when it came to these things for the longest times, and then suddenly when they got together the tides shifted and Angela was always the one left blushing. It felt good to be the one causing the blushing once more.

Still, the game had run long enough.

As nice as it was to see a blush on the Fareeha’s cheeks and see her stutter, the fact that her eyes were trained away from Angela was not something she enjoyed. She much preferred Fareeha to look at her.

“Fareehali, I was just teasing.” She said softly. “It’s okay if you were. I’m sorry if I went too far. Please look at me.”

Fareeha’s eyes flickered back to her, face still flushed, ears burning red. Her voice came out mumbled, still tinged with trail ends of embarrassment. “You didn’t go too far… It’s just- It’s been a while.”

“Since I’ve teased?”

Fareeha scrunched her face, head bopping left and right the way it did when she wanted to amend a statement someone said that wasn’t so completely wrong that she could outright refute it, but not entirely correct either.

Angela waited patiently.

“Sort of… It was more of the combination of your teasing couple with the fact that I haven’t seen you in so long, haven’t…” she cleared her throat, pushing forward against her embarrassment, “… Haven’t felt you in so long and that just… that got me and urgh-” She hugged Angela’s waist tighter and nuzzled her head into the crook of her neck. Angela could feel the heat radiate from her cheeks. “I know…” she mumbled into her collar bone, “It sounds dumb.”

Angela licked her lips, happiness surging in her. It wasn’t dumb. It wasn’t dumb at all.

It was sweet.

“I wish I had a way with words.” She said as she lifted her head off Angela’s shoulder to look at her straight in the eye, a sheepish grin tacked on. “But they didn’t have a crash course on that subject in the military. A pity huh? Well, then again, I may have still not taken such a course even if there was one like that, heh.”

Angela smiled fondly. Fareeha didn’t need to be a poet. Not when she said the sweetest things in such an honest fashion, said in earnest and always from the heart. She’d take her genuine stilted words any day over slaved over poetic prose, reworked and revised to perfection.

She gave Fareeha a reassuring kiss.

“Lucky for you, there is more to you than your words.”

“You mean lucky for you.” Fareeha teased, and Angela swatted her good-naturedly.

“And there I was, thinking you needed comfort.” She said then rose up, against Fareeha’s wishes who tried to pull her to stay seated in her lap. “Fareeha, I’d love to stay and sit on the ground with you all night, but I have four more reports to revise before they are ready to hand in. I’ll be all yours after.”
“But I—”

“What? You have a big bombshell to drop on me?” she teased as she walked back to her seat, picking up the mug of fresh coffee and taking a sip. “Because if that’s a case, then really wait. If you drop it now, I’ll never finish these reports.” She sang out, looking back to give Fareeha a playful wink, then turned back to finishing her reports.

“…Okay.” Fareeha croaked out, and Angela, consumed in finishing her work quickly so she could get back to spending time with Fareeha, missed the tightness in the way she doled out her response.

Fareeha sat adjacent to Angela, sitting backwards on a plastic chair. She watched as Angela worked, mind filtering through the ways to drop the news she bore in the gentlest way possible. It was not as easy as she had initially thought. She had mistakenly believed that she would have formulated the best plan of attack by the end of her long bus ride to this base. Yet when she stepped off she found herself no better off than when she first boarded the rickety old bus.

She sighed and chewed on her bottom lip. She was running out of time. Angela was already doing the final touches on her fourth report. She had at best, four minutes to form a plan of attack.

“Fareeha.”

She raised a questioning brow at Angela, who had not looked up from her paper, still reading through and amending sections when necessary.

“I can feel you staring.”

The corners of her lips twitched. “Can’t help it. You have a nice face.”

Angela pursed her lips, trying to contain a smile. It was too late though, it had already reached her eyes and Fareeha could practically feel her happiness at the offhand comment emanate from her very being.

“Sap.” She muttered out, then picked up her report. “Aaand—” Angela flipped through and do one last read-through. “Done.”

She tucked the reports away in a folder and filed them in the cabinet below, twisting the lock shut with two resound clicks and pocketed the key away in her jacket. Angela then leaned on the table, resting her head on crossed arms as she looked up at Fareeha sweetly.

“So… what should we do now?” she said, voice lilting, almost teasing. “You know, you technically never answered how you were able to come swing by. I distinctly remember you moaning about how you didn’t have any more days off this quarter.” She lifted her head, cocking her head. “What happened Reeha? Are you… playing hooky?”

Angela then laughed at her own jest, and despite Fareeha’s turmoil at what she was about to reveal she couldn’t help the smile that formed on her face.

Hooky? As if.

She was one of those nerds that never skipped class, even the ones she found to be extremely boring.

Far too dutiful for her own good, her more rebellious friends would say.
Her nostalgic smile slipped as she realized she had run out of time. Angela was done with her paperwork and it was time for her to grow a backbone and tell her outright the reason she could even come today. Also, the reason she had come in the first place.

Crap.

Guess she would have to go with her gut, maybe just throw everything out there. She mentally steeled herself.

*Like ripping a band aid, Fareeha.*

*The quicker the better.*

“Angela.” She said softly, feeling her confidence immediately dwindle as Angela caught the change of atmosphere immediately. She withered under Angela’s sincere concern. “I, um…” she shifted slightly, curling and uncurling her prosthetic toes in nervousness. “There’s a lot I need to say, but I think I should start with saying that I did… I did a little goof.”

“A… goof?” she repeated, a puzzled frown on her face.

Fareeha ran her tongue across her teeth and nodded.

“Yea, a… goof.” She reached over to interlace her fingers with Angela’s. She looked Angela straight in her eyes meaningfully. “You might get angry at what I’m about to say- about a lot of things I’m going to say maybe, but wait until I finish before you say anything, okay?” she gave Angela’s fingers a squeeze. “Please?”

Angela stared at her, furrowed brows and frowning softly.

“I don’t like the sound of that.” Angela admitted, grimacing lightly in anticipation of her next words. “But continue.”

Fareeha licked her lips and gathered her courage. She opened her mouth and the words rushed out.

“Three people know who you really are.”

Fareeha cringed.

Oh that was a bad way to phrase it.

Really, brain?

“But it’s okay!” she assured, gripping Angela’s hands harder, trying to soothe the fear that entered her eyes. “It’s just Emirhan and Winston. Tracer.”

Angela’s look of fear was replaced with confusion. Angela now just looked perplexed.


Fareeha scratched her head, a long sigh escaping her.

“Let me… Let me start from the top?”

Angela nodded.
It was quiet.

Patricia was sleeping. Fareeha was sleeping. Everyone was sleeping.

Except her. She was not.

Angela was lying on her back, one arm slung around Fareeha’s frame as they cramped in the little cot of hers. Her fingers threaded idly through Fareeha’s hair as the woman slept. She was all curled up around Angela, head resting just above her right breast, arm draped over her stomach, metal legs hooked around her own organic ones. A withering sigh escaped her as she stared straight up at the white ceiling above.

Fareeha had joined Overwatch and had come here to extend an invitation to her.

*Nobody’s forcing you to join, of course.*

She’s known that for a long time. When her phone flashed a brilliant blue two years ago, with bold black letters spelling RECALL smack dab in the middle, she had done nothing. She ignored the call, fully believing Overwatch had no longer had a place in the world and no force in the world could change her mind about that.

At least, not back then.

She glanced down at Fareeha’s sleeping frame.

Now, she wasn’t so sure.

*Yes the PETRAS Act is still in place, but certain governments are willing to turn the other way—at least in secret. That means something, says something, don’t you think?*

That was surprising information and certainly bore some weight. Angela sucked at her cheeks, breathing in and out harshly through her nostrils. If governments were going to allow Overwatch to work relatively unchecked, many reservations she had about the re-establishment of Overwatch were certainly thrown out the window. A large reason why she vehemently refused to honor the call two years ago was that she thought it would have been a useless endeavor, with her and the Overwatch team spending more time lurking in the shadows than doing any sort of good.

Still, she was not without reservations and if she was being quite frank, slightly angry.

Not at Fareeha.

*I’m sorry I accidentally revealed your identity.*

*They won’t tell and if they do, I’ll do something about it.*

It was cute that Fareeha thought that was the issue. It wasn’t. Not by far. Winston and Lena would never out her in some ploy to force her to come back to Overwatch (not that it would’ve work anyways if they had), and though she didn’t know much about Emirhan, if Fareeha trusted him, that was good enough.

*Oh... So what’s the problem?*
Oh, that? I’m fine with it. It’s a sacrifice I’m willing to make.

Well she was fine with it, but Angela certainly wasn’t. She was bothered by it. Very.

Fareeha shifted, momentarily breaking her thoughts. She watched as Fareeha nestled herself further into her side, mumbling incoherently as she did so. When she finally stopped moving, Angela released a breath she didn’t know she was holding. A wistful sigh escaped her as she peered down at Fareeha.

This was her dream.

To join Overwatch was everything Fareeha had dreamt of since she was a little girl.

This much she knows.

Angela would be stupid to not know this.

Yet, while a part of her surged with second-hand happiness that Fareeha’s dreams were coming true, another part of her wanted to stop her. These governments may turn a blind eye, but they certainly weren’t going to help either. Publicly, they still endorsed the PETRAS Act, and if public opinion swayed too far in disagreement with their allowances of Overwatch agents running around…

Only for a little while, Angela. The coalition of governments in support of Overwatch is in the process of pulling out of the PETRAS Act. It just takes a few months, because of penalties.

Sure that was all well and good, but Fareeha was joining now, and she was going to be a central figure – part of the new strike team. HSI and other PMC’s were willing to lend a hand, but as added support and infantry men under the guise of being hired via ‘contracts’. Fareeha, being chosen to be part of the strike team, could potentially land in a lot of hot water if things went south. Whoever was in charge of risk calculations in HSI had deemed it far too risky for HSI’s reputation if one of their own was an integral part of Overwatch while still in their employment. As such, the ‘brilliant plan’ HSI came up with was to conjure some false story that somebody had stolen prototype blueprints of the Raptora suits and essentially created their own Raptora suit.

…That made Fareeha a scapegoat if anything went wrong.

She didn’t like that.

Fareeha on the other hand, seemed to see no issue with that.

It’s worth it, ya amar. Trust me.

Ideal Overwatch, remember?

Angela groaned softly. She recalls what she had said all those weeks ago on the video call with Fareeha, but now that it was reality, she was racked with turmoil as to what she should do. If she was to join the strike team, her face would inevitably be captured on some camera or feed. There was no way anyone would not recognize her suit and connect the dots as to who she was quickly, even in disguise.

She shuffled to turn onto her side, drawing Fareeha closer as she drew the blanket up higher.

She wasn’t sure if she was prepared to be Angela Ziegler once more.
Fareeha held Angela’s hands, ignoring the incessant threats by the bus driver that he was prepared to go and leave her behind. She rubbed soothing circles with her thumbs on her palms.

“Don’t frown, ya amar.” She said lightly, smiling kindly as Angela’s frown deepened.

“I can’t stop you?” Angela questioned and Fareeha’s heart clenched at how vulnerable she sounded.

She squeezed her hands.

“Ya amar… I’m going to join. That much is set.” Fareeha ran her tongue across her teeth. “And I know you’re on the fence about it, so just know there’s still a month before we go. Feel free to change your mind anytime. Right now would be excellent.” She half-joked, grinning wide.

“Fareeha…” Angela mumbled out, gazing at Fareeha with conflicted eyes. She pursed her lips and shook her head. “It’s not that simple.”

Fareeha’s silly grin turned gentle. “I know. You do good work out here and you’re not sure that joining you-know-what will be better. I get it. No pressure. I just- I just want you to think about it, okay? I really think it’s worth it.”

“…Okay.” Angela finally conceded after a long pause. Her gaze turned slightly sharp. “But no promises.”

Fareeha beamed and nodded, still ignoring the impatient bus driver who was now adding honks to the repertoire of strategies to get Fareeha’s ass moving.

“And of course, that’s all I’m asking.” She said with twinkling eyes. Her gaze then turned serious, her smile levelled with understanding. "And know this ya amar, in the event that you don't join, know that I will always make time to visit you. I promise."

And then she bent down to capture Angela’s lips in a parting kiss.

Today was a good day.

The Raptora suit for her was finally ready, all shiny and new and fitted snug on Fareeha’s frame. It also had proper ventilation system, she made sure of that. She couldn’t wait to test it outside and test its limits in uncontrolled areas. Her blood thrummed at the thought.

Badgering her teammate’s to sign the confidential agreements proved to be a good idea – signing them was the only way she could break it to them what she was truly doing, after all, instead of that sham of a lie that she was ‘retiring’. Which of course, none of them bought. Reactions from them of her departure became far more pleasant once they learned the truth. Rather than judgment and disapproval, their reactions transformed to excitement and cheers. Things even went a little crazy when Tracer and Winston suddenly popped into the meeting room. She was sure Saleh would’ve fainted then and there if he hadn’t chugged an energy drink thirty minutes before.

She also learned that her team wanted to do her right and do a ‘proper send off’, which meant a farewell party for her that her team was organizing. It would take two days to organize apparently, but ‘well worth the wait, dude, cuz it's gonna bang so much’ (those were Hassan's exact words). Twenty-some year old Fareeha would be shocked by this level of camaraderie and slightly affronted by the level of unprofessionalism displayed. Current Fareeha was just happy and touched.

And she had her first training session with Tracer and Winston to top it off. She couldn’t help the
grin that split her face when they found their footing working together for a few moments. The moment lasted only seconds, but she had felt the foundations of good synergy and her heart soared with excitement.

It was a good day today.

And then her phone rang and through the speakers she heard words that propelled her good day into a great day.

“I'm in, Fareehali... I'm in.”

Chapter End Notes

I enjoyed writing this chapter a lot. Heh. (probably because it was so gay)
PS. I don’t know what this says about when I’ll update the next chapter, but I’ve written a rough draft of 1.5k words for it already, so take that as you will.
Farewell Party

Maybe she shouldn’t follow through.

Angela’s fingers tapped on the suitcase that laid flat on her lap. Her fingers dragged a few millimeters on the textured surface before it lifted up into the air, only to drop once more. Over and over. In succession. The bus was taking its time to get here and the waiting period was causing her to get antsy. Her leg started to bounce. To start to second-guess herself. She felt her heart rate quicken. To start letting the fear of the possibility of a repeat of history to dig its claws into her, threatening to tear at old wounds that never truly closed up.

What if this was a mistake?

What if this was the wrong choice?

What if-

“I can’t believe you’ve roped me into coming with you.”

Patricia’s voice, as sharp and acerbic as ever, pierced straight through Angela, jarring her from her thoughts. Her eyes flickered to look at the grumpy woman sitting by her. Patricia had one hand raised to shield her squinting eyes from the glare of the midmorning sun, while the other pulled at her shirt repeatedly in a shoddy attempt at cooling herself. Her mouth was bared into an uncomfortable grimace as she shifted on the bench.

“Where the fuck is that bus?”

A small smile broke out of Angela. “Language, Patricia.”

“Oh shut up. You’re wearing a head scarf, you don’t know my pain.” She fired back, releasing her tight grip on her shirt to wipe the beads of sweat rolling down her chin. She swore and shook her head in annoyance, “God. Whoever decided to build a bus stop in sweltering, sunny Egypt devoid of a cover is a buffoon. My shirt’s sticky, my makeup’s running, and at this rate I’m going to get sun…” her words trailed off and her eyes narrowed dangerously. Angela watched with curiosity as the cogs in Patricia’s head worked, ”...burnt… I’ll be sunburnt. Dear god.”

Angela felt amusement rise in her at the half-ways horrified as affronted look on Patricia’s face.

Patricia let out a snarl.

“Like hell am I going to meet Fareeha looking like a cooked lobster – I can already see her dumb face.” Patricia sat up straight, eyes bulging as she scanned the horizon. “Where the fuck is that bus?!”

Angela pulled at her shawl, raising it up all the way to her nose, pressing the fabric to her lips to smother her giggles. She watched as the vexed woman bent down to rummage through her suitcase, muttering how ‘desperate times calls for desperate measures’ all the while. After a few seconds, she finally pulled out an item - a map - and draped it over the head as a makeshift cover. Patricia clicked her tongue twice.

“You would think I could reflect the sun with how pale I am. Apparently fucking not.”
Angela spat a little as a laugh burst through pursed lips. She bumped her shoulder against Patricia’s.

“You’re so dramatic.” Angela’s lips quirked at the flat look Patricia sent her way. “With that kind of attitude, you could be a movie star.”

Patricia scoffed and rolled her eyes. “Please, if anyone could be in a movie it’d be you, Veronica.” Her lips curled into a coy smile. “Or should I say… Dr. Angela Ziegler?”

Angela smiled, flashing a wink back with a shrug.

She had told Patricia the truth a week before in the privacy of their shared quarters. She was an exceptional colleague and more importantly, a close friend and a treasured confidant. She deserved not to learn the truth from a news outlet or some other impersonal means. So Angela gathered her courage and revealed all that she was hiding, hoping it would not blow up in her face.

It didn’t.

(And seeing Patricia almost have a pseudo heart attack at the revelation was rather hilarious if she was being perfectly honest)

“…and you wouldn’t even star in a movie, though you’ve certainly shown you have acting chops, your life would be the movie.” Patricia let out a small laugh, “I can just see the pitch: Famous hero goes into hiding when everything goes wrong. One day she learns that she must pick up her mantle once more and does…” Her voice turns into an amused whisper. “Hell, you even have a love interest realized by your side and she’s the driving force for you to do it all over again.”

“And what is your role? Are you coming for the ride?” Angela teased, “Going to be my darling sidekick?”

“Please. You know I’m just coming for the night just to get all that booze at Fareeha’s farewell party, before I get relocated to Algeria.” She said dismissively. Her eyes tracking the road once more. “Now where is that bus?”

Despite the projected aloofness and ambivalence, Angela noticed the way her words cracked, the way Patricia refused to look in her direction anymore, and the way she had abruptly veered the conversation into another direction. She gave Patricia a small squeeze on the shoulder.

“I’m going to miss you too, my dear friend.”

________________

Her finger had barely moved away from the doorbell when the door swung open and a slightly disheveled Fareeha came into view.

“Hi.” Fareeha breathed out, grinning wildly in a loose tee and sweatpants. “You’re here.”

“I’m here.” Angela confirmed, smiling back just as brightly. “I missed you.”

“Yea?”

“Yes.”

Fareeha’s grin turned impossibly wider. “I missed you too.”

And Fareeha moved forward to sweep Angela into her arms. Or at least tried to. Her advance was halted by a flat palm landing right above her left breast, stopping her right in her tracks.
“Hello to you too, Fareeha.” Patricia said dryly, then removed her hand. “You’re so rude. I was standing right next to Angela and you failed to notice me.” Fareeha opened her mouth and Patricia simply raised her hand up. “Not interested in your apologies. Just show me where my room is. I’d really rather not be here as you guys do more of your love sick shtick.”

“If anyone is rude, it’s you. I open the door and the first thing you do is touch my boob.”

“You know damn well that wasn’t what happened. Furthermore I touched the place right above the breast and you know it.”

“Whatever you say, Patty Pat.”

“…You’ll never let that go will you?” Fareeha shook her head and Patricia groaned, though Angela caught the spot of fondness that still sparkled in her eyes. Angela smiled at the sight of it. “Anyways, room?”

“Down the hall, the second door to the right.”

Patricia said a small thank you and walked past them, intent to go settle in her room. Angela’s brows furrowed as she noticed the way Fareeha turned to watch Patricia as she meandered towards her room, lips pursed in a poor attempt to hide a gleeful smile.

“What did you do, Reeha?”

Fareeha grinned at her, waggling her brows. “Wait and see.”

“Fareeha, what on Earth did you do? She’s going to get angry.”

“Shhh, just watch.”

She shook her head and turned to look at Patricia as well, paying careful attention to the woman’s face as she pushed the door to the second bedroom turned study room turned back to second bedroom. Patricia stilled, and for a good few seconds there was nothing. Patricia was simply staring into the room. Then she blinked. Once. Twice. And then a third time, mouth agape all the while. Then from moving none at all, she moved all at once, whipping back to glare at Fareeha, lips bared into a raging snarl.

“AMARI, I SWEAR TO GOD! YOU BETTER FIX THIS!”

Looking at Patricia, Angela knew that this would be the time for Fareeha to do the proper thing and apologize. For her to fix whatever stupid thing she did to the second bedroom. For her to stop poking the bear. Instead, Angela witnessed her girlfriend decide to tempt fate.

She poked the bear.

“How ’bout no?”

Patricia was in the wrong profession. The strength she had hidden away in her spindly arms would be far more beneficial in combat. If Patricia ever had the desire to switch up her lifestyle, maybe even join HSI, Fareeha would undoubtedly vouch for her.

Fareeha rotated her shoulder, hissing softly at the little residual pain that still throbbed.

Now she’d never admit the small burst of shock and fear she felt when Patricia’s blindingly fast arms...
latched themselves onto her shoulder and dug in, nor the small squeak she made when she caught a
glimpse of Patricia’s sadistic up-close smile as she twisted her arm... But that was what exactly
happened.

Goes to show that one should never underestimate their opponent.

“She didn’t have to go so far as to dislocate my shoulder though.” She muttered to herself, massaging
her still tender shoulder.

“Well maybe you should’ve thought twice before pulling that prank on her.” Angela countered from
the bed. Her bed. Where she laid sprawled on her side on top of the covers, her head laying on a
pillow, hair splayed out. “Tell me Fareehali, was it worth it?”

A thrilled grin appeared on Fareeha’s face at the inquiry. She went over to the bed and took a seat on
the edge. The bed dipped from her weight, causing Angela to slide pleasantly closer by a few inches.
She brushed a few hairs gently away from Angela’s face with her forefinger.

“Of course.” Her hand glided down to pinch Angela’s cheek lightly. “And I know you found it
pretty funny as well. I saw the way you cackled when you took a look in the room.”

Angela’s eyes crinkled. “True. I still can’t believe you ordered custom bedspreads and pillow covers
with highly unflattering pictures of Patricia plastered all over them. And the rose petals strewn across
the room along with the lighted cinnamon scented candles were a nice touch to make the whole
scene more irritating for her.”

“Irritating? Angela, I only had good intentions when I prepared Patricia’s room.” Fareeha said in a
serious tone with a serious face in a serious manner. “I wanted only the best for her. Can’t believe
you would say such a thing. I only wanted to make Patricia happy.”

“Sure, and I’m the queen of England.”

The grin she tried so hard to conceal came out completely and unabashedly at the unexpected
sarcasm, practically splitting her face in half.

“Anyways, we have a couple hours before the party,” Fareeha said as she scratched her nose and
licked her lips. “You want to do anything before then?”

Angela sat up, a small groan escaping her as she stretched out her neck and shoulders.

She hummed thoughtfully.

“I do have something to do,” She said after a pause. She cocked her head in Fareeha’s direction. “I
think it’s time for Angela Ziegler to truly make an appearance.”

“What does that mean?”

Angela simply smiled at her cryptically.

“You’ll see.”

Hassan was being more obnoxious than usual.

Completely smug and acting like he was God’s gift to the world.
“-gotta say. The badge looks good on me.” He nudged Patricia with his elbow a few times as his other hand gestured between the badge and his face repeatedly. “Don’t you think? Hm? Hm?”

Patricia took a long sip of her drink, slurping purposely loud to show her indifference.

“…Oh, you got a badge. Wow.” Patricia said flatly, swirling her drink. “You want a gold star or something? You’re a little old for that kind of stuff, but I can print you a sticker if you want.”

Raucous laughter erupted from her teammates and Emirhan, who also took the time to jut his thumb out in Patricia’s direction while looking at her with open-mouthed glee. Nothing Emirhan liked more than a person who exceeded his expectations or pleasantly surprised him, and Patricia had done both with her sharp tongue and even sharper wit. When Emirhan had put two and two together (‘this was the woman who reset your nose all those months ago? The one that disliked combatants? Fareeha, I didn’t think she was this much of a firecracker – I fucking love it’), able to whip out a quick retort back in seconds, he had been tickled to bits.

“Or you know what? You could call your mother if you really want some superficial praise about receiving a little boy-scout badge.”

“Woo! Go Patricia! Roast Hassan, it’s what he deserves!” Saleh cheered, hands raised up high, pumping up and down, dodging the way Hassan tried to make a grab for him, face flaming red from embarrassment.

Bilal standing next to Saleh with his arms crossed, nodded sagely. “I agree. Saleh is right for once.”

Saleh held out a hand up for Bilal, “Woohoo! Hi-five Bilal, hell yea I’m- wait what? Did you say for once?”

Bilal ignored him and continued on. “He’s not even officially captain until our real captain officially leaves us and he’s already acting like he’s king of the world.”

“Okay, you can’t just ignore me. What do you mean by ‘for once’?”

Fareeha spotted Summeye burying her face into Nisa’s shoulder, trying in vain to smother her laughter.

“Don’t ask questions to things you already know the answer too.”

A pseudo fight, more in line with a rough-housing started to occur between the two from those fighting words. She watched in amusement as they wrestled on the carpeted section of the floor, her colleagues cheering them on. She also saw a few bets being taken.

...She’ll let it slide for once.

Fareeha took a glance at the clock. It was nearly eight and Angela hadn’t arrived yet.

Neither had Lena or Winston.

Troubling.

At this rate, the night would be wasted away before it had even begun. They weren’t even at the venue of her own farewell party yet. Just a meeting point, because her crew decided to go all out and wanted to go to the venue ‘in style’. Which meant in a limo, but they weren’t that rich so they could only afford one limo. Which meant everyone had to be here first before they could actually go.
Where were those three?

“Hey Fareeha.”

Fareeha glanced down to see an inquisitive looking Patricia.

“What is it, Patricia?”

She pointed at the rest of her crew. “I was talking to them all and just the most peculiar thing. They don’t seem to know that Veronica is Angela Ziegler. Or vice-versa… You didn’t tell them?”

Oh.

“It slipped my mind.” She replied honestly. “Angela hadn’t confirmed to me that she wanted to join Overwatch when I told them all about what I was going to do, so I didn’t think it was right for me to tell them her true identity. And when she did say yes, I just sort of forgot to inform them of that fact.”

“Oh?” Patricia sounded out, a catlike smile forming on her lips. “How fun.”

Fareeha’s brows furrowed, a probing question on the tip of her tongue about what exactly she meant by that, when the sound of the door sliding open distracted her. Lena, Winston and Angela came through the door, with Angela coming in last. The instant she appeared through those doors, the excited greetings stopped and a hush silence permeated the room. Angela stood there with her hair dyed back blonde, a faint blush prickling her cheeks, worrying her bottom lip. She looked somewhat out of place, as if unused to the attention, or rather unused to being her.

Unused to being Angela Ziegler.

The strange silence continued, even as Fareeha strolled over to Angela, boots clunking once it hit the hard wood flooring. She kept walking until she was standing right in front of Angela. Close enough that all she had to do was stoop down to kiss her.

“What do you think?” Angela whispered shyly, tucking a strand of her loose hair behind her ear as she looked up at Fareeha. Fareeha frowned at the question. At the way she could pick up notes of insecurity in her tone.

What could Angela be insecure about?

“You look like you.” She said simply. Honestly. Genuinely. She cupped Angela’s face and her voice dropped to a breathless murmur. “Hair’s all different, but you’re still gorgeous and pretty, all at the same time.” She flashed a lopsided smile. “Still you. Still the woman I fell for.”

Angela’s face brightened at that and Fareeha felt her heart swell at the beautiful smile. She bent down to give Angela a kiss when suddenly she was pulled by the fabric of her shirt away. She whipped around to see who had interrupted her when she felt a strong grip on her jaw and a none-too-happy Kadir staring at her wide-eyed with murder in his eyes.

“Captain,” Kadir started, voice chillingly low, face unnervingly blank. It was strange not to see Kadir without at least a hint of grin. It was strange not to see Kadir without at least a hint of grin. “You do remember you have that you have a certain someone in your life called Veronica, right?”

Fareeha immediately blanched. It was like Déjà vu. She held her hands up in surrender, a flurry of words descending from her mouth to explain the whole situation before Kadir’s outdated chivalrous tendencies kicked in; she was not in the mood to get a fist to her face from Kadir, the kind of man who would literally fight for a woman’s sake. It had taken a while for his grip on her jaw to loosen
and for his closed fist to unclench, but it did. And when he finally comprehended that Veronica and Angela were indeed the same person, he sent a sheepish smile her way. She waved off his worries.

She deserved to be punched if she actually did Angela dirty like that.

“That was a bit scary. Good to know that was all resolved before things went hairy.” Lena joked, rocking on her heels. “Anyways, can we go to the party venue now? As fun as it is to look at how your teammates are all going gaga over Angela…” she said, observing the way her colleagues all crowded around Angela, wide-eyed and talking rapidly at someone they apparently only half-knew. “It actually isn’t fun. Hassan!” Lena yelled, catching Hassan’s attention. “Can we go to the party venue now?”

“On one condition,” He bellowed out, pointing straight at her. Fareeha raised a brow. “You can’t be a little bitch and actually let loose for once. Deal?”

Fareeha sighed as she scanned the crowd, at the mix of hopeful and excited looks on her teammates.

She couldn’t let them down.

Not tonight.

This was the last night they’d be able to have fun together in probably a long time, after all.

“Deal.”

What could they possibly have in store for her anyways?

Fareeha was no stranger to ice luges.

But if someone told her there would be a moment in her life where she’d come face to face with an ice luge formed in the shape of a voluptuous woman, where the exit points of the two channels carved within for the alcohol to flow down from ended at pronounced ice nipples-

Her eyes flickered up at Kadir and Menna, hands at the ready to pour down whatever alcoholic concoction was in the frosted shakers they held in their hands down the carved channels.

-she would have laughed and flicked them off.

Never in a million years.

Yet there she was prepping herself up to drink whatever was about to run down the channel and into her awaiting mouth from the ice sculpture’s left tit. A meaningless boozy race against Angela that she was almost completely sure she would regret.

And lose.

Unlike her, Angela was rearing to go. She was cracking her neck, bouncing lightly on her feet, vision trained on the sculpture’s right breast; there was a fire in her eyes that screamed that she was in it to win it. Fareeha jutted her lips in annoyance. She knew for a fact that the woman already had a pretty hefty amount of drinks already, but despite that she looked as fresh as ever. Her face only flushed a very, very, light pink.

“Alright! First one to finish the drink funneled down wins.” Summeye loudly announced, using a rolled up paper as a makeshift microphone as she pranced on top of the table. She looked down at
Fareeha and Angela expectantly. “Ready?”

“Yes.” Both she and Angela answered simultaneously. Angela with more vigor than her (unsurprising considering she was already woozy).

Her body was already feeling off-kilter from the myriad of other drinking games.

“On the count of three send those drinks running down, okay?” Summeye said to Kadir and Menna, who both nodded, tipping their shakers slightly downwards in anticipation. Summeye grinned and raised three fingers up high. “Three!”

“You ready to lose, schatz?” Angela quipped airily.

Fareeha bristled. Despite the drunken yells and cheers around them and the blasting music that ricocheted of the small walls of this private bar, the ingraining arrogance that dripped from Angela’s words seemed to ring clear as day.

“Two!”

She narrowed her eyes at Angela who responded by grinning back salaciously. Challengingly.

“No, but you better be.”

She bit her tongue as she spoke, causing her to stutter out the words. Heat crossed the bridge of her nose, coloring her cheeks marvelously and intensifying as Angela’s eyes sparkled in delight and amusement at the poorly delivered comeback.

“Fareehali~” Angela cooed sympathetically (Fareeha blushed harder), before placing back on her game face just in time for Summeye to reach the bottom of the countdown.

“One! Pour the drinks!”

Around her the cheering somehow became louder, thundering, as Fareeha latched onto the cold ice nipple. Her face scrunched as burning liquid, cool to the touch, but stinging at the throat, entered her mouth from the opening. She tasted bitters, mint leaves and maybe a splash of lime. All flavors she enjoyed, but flooding into her mouth at such a fast pace Fareeha felt like she was in hell. Like she was drowning in a boozy and bitter hell.

This was a mistake. This was a mistake-

“You can do it, Captain!” Tariq screamed from beside her.

Ah fuck, I want to win.

She squelched her urge to gag and continued to suckle and drink from the left tit of this headless, big breasted ice sculpture. She was so close, the liquid had decreased in volume, flowing at a more manageable rate.

Only a little more-

“And we have a winner folks!” She heard Summeye say as she drank the last drops of her drink. Fareeha sputtered as she coughed, hunched down with her hands resting on her knees to support her up.

 Fucking shit.
Fucking.

Shit.

She rose up, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand then her hand on the side of her pants. She sighed, staring grimly at a victorious Angela who was bouncing up and down, arms raised high like she had won the lottery. She watched Angela hi-five Lena and Winston and Summeye while she herself was busy swatting away the jeering jabs to her shoulder from Hassan and Emirhan. Both unabashedly guffawing in her face.

“You’re such a lightweight.”

“Shut up, Emirhan.”

Angela swiveled on her heels to turn to Fareeha and glided her way over, looking just about as smug as the Cheshire cat.

“Told you I’d win.” She gloated as she finally neared, cupping Fareeha’s face to press a kiss on the corner of her mouth. Angela licked her lips as she withdrew, face scrunching up slightly. “What is that? Mint julep? It’s- ugh. Kind of disgusting.”

“Like hell if I know, thought it was a Frankenstein mixture Menna created just to mess with me.” She responded sourly, still a little sore from losing. “The freshness of the drink made it difficult to swallow.”

Angela laughed again and pressed another kiss, this time to her mouth.

Angela tasted like citrus and the sharp bite of vodka.

“Excuses, excuses. Fareehali, you can be such a sore loser.” She said with that gentle cadence of hers when she pulled back. That familiar gentle lilt in her voice that rounded the edges of her words, eliminating any traces of malice that could be conjured up as attached to them. She sounded loving and endeared and Fareeha broke out into a lopsided smile at the tone.

She tugged at Angela eagerly, suddenly feeling spontaneous.

“Come, let’s dance.”

Angela seemed to sparkle at the notion and enthusiastically followed Fareeha to the dance floor. Fareeha wasn’t usually much of a dancer. Stiff muscles and overly conscious of herself most of the time. She was diligent, studious and stony. The perfect soldier. Embodying traits that didn’t translate well into dance, where it was all about fluidity, creativity and the ability to simply let go. She had a hard time letting go of control. However the music was loud, the company wonderful, and Fareeha was drunk. Drunk enough to not care and love struck enough to push through any embarrassment she felt about her two left feet if it made Angela smile. And dancing made Angela smile. So there Fareeha was, stumbling and stopping at random intervals, bumping into friends, and laughing all the while as she twirled and danced around with Angela. Angela who she knew could dance like a dream, but instead was here goofing off with her, dancing in ways that didn’t make sense with the songs.

“Fareehali, we’re doing a waltz in the middle of a rap song?”

“Rules were meant to be broken.”

Angela laughed, eyes filled with disbelief. “I thought I’d never see the day I’d hear you say that.”
“There’s a first time for everything.” She said and spun her around once more.

They danced and danced and danced and in the middle of a remix of an old classic, head muddied with booze, Fareeha felt particularly adventurous and hoisted Angela up in the air by her waist. Angela shrieked as she twirled and twirled her around. Lost in her actions, lost in the music, lost in Angela, Fareeha did not pay attention to where she was going and stumbled on a pile of the hard candies still on the ground from when they bashed the piñata Mahmoud brought. In the struggle to keep upright the back of her knee hit the sidearm of a sofa and they both went toppling down. Angela on top of Fareeha on a red leather sofa that creaked softly with every movement.

“Fareehali, are you okay?” Angela crooned, pepperings kisses on her face, not bothering to get off her. “You’re so warm, sweetheart. I can feel the heat radiating from your cheeks. I think you’ve had enough to drink.”

Fareeha nodded in agreeance. “Maybe, the world was spinning a bit.”

“Was it now? Well to be fair, you were spinning us around quite a bit as well my wannabe ballet dancer.” She teased, “Though you should take a breather now and rest up.” She said as she sat up and got off Fareeha. “You’re breathing quite hard, schatz.”

Fareeha snorted.

“Hard? Nonsense, I’m a super soldier. I never get tired.” She flexed her arms for good measure, pouting at the way Angela rolled her eyes. “You’re supposed to say ‘a most impressive display’.” Fareeha muttered, in a poor imitation of Angela’s accent.

Angela ran a hand through Fareeha’s hair, untangling any knots she came across.

“Yes. Yes. A most impressive display indeed.” Angela conceded to placate her bruised ego, “But sometimes even super soldiers need to go on time out. So rest up here for a bit, okay?”

Fareeha cocked her head, “Wait, you’re not resting as well?”

Angela gestured at a table where some of their colleagues were preparing to play flip cup. Where Patricia was beckoning them wildly with her hand. Fareeha started to rise when she felt Angela push her back down gently, tutting softly.

“Take a break, schätzli. Stay here and sober up. Besides,” Angela flashed a wink, “Between us two, I’m pretty sure Patricia wants me. She wants to win after all.”

And after saying that, she left a stunned Fareeha to join the game.

Fareeha crossed her arms and grumbled when she finally gathered her wits. On one hand she wanted to stomp over there and force herself into the game to redeem her pride, but on the other hand the couch felt so good. Maybe she should sit and just sober up for a while. Her hand stretched out to grab a water bottle from the table, fumbling a little to reach it as she was too lazy to get up. Once she got it, she uncapped it at once and tilted the bottle to drink. Unfortunately, her state of inebriation in addition to attempting to drink a sip while supine on a sofa led her to spill the water all over her shirt. She cursed softly as she wiped at the wet stain with her hand.

“Damn, do you need a sippy cup?” She tilted her head to look behind her and saw Mahmoud joining her on the arm chair. “Hey captain.”

“Hey Mahmoud.” She turned to her side so she wouldn’t have to crane her head to look at him. “What are you doing here? Why aren’t you joining yet another drinking game that’s going on?”
“Can’t drink anymore. Have to chill a little first.” Mahmoud took a sip of her water and then sighed. “Wish I could drink more.” He moaned. “Why couldn’t I be like Summeye or Bilal? Those guys are tanks.”

“Don’t think like that. You don’t need to drink to have fun. Just look at Nisa and Tariq.”

Nisa was currently finessing Winston and Kadir out of money in billiard. As usual, considering that she was playing completely sober, Tariq was relegated onto her team as handicap, since he was shit at billiard. No one cared that he too was also completely sober as he abstained from alcohol, because he really was that bad.

Fareeha grunted as she felt a weight on her legs.

“What up, cap.” Saleh said as he got comfortable on her legs, bouncing on them for good measure just to irritate her. His childish tendencies always did crank up to eleven when he was drunk. “I’ve been forced into the kiddie corner as well.”

“You know what we should do?” Youseff suddenly said and Fareeha furrowed her brows. When did Youseff get here? “We should play some video games. There’s a screen and an old console here. I talked to the bartenders, said they still had a couple games we could play.”

“Why does a private bar have video games?” Fareeha voiced out.

“Who cares-” Saleh lurched as he threw up a bit in his mouth and then proceeded to swallow it back down. Fareeha scrunched her face in disgust- “We shouldn’t complain. Let’s play.” He hiccupped. “We got nothing better to do anyways, since we’ve all been banished into the kiddie corner.”

“Player 4 has arrived.” Hassan cackled as he took a controller and plugged it in as well, joining the racing game. “And I’m going to beat your asses. I’m a super trooper.”

“Yea, well I’m a koopa troopa.” Saleh yelled as his character threw a bomb at Hassan’s character.

“Go home Saleh, you’re drunk.” Youseff quipped as he caught up and overtook Hassan to get into third place. “That made no sense. You’re playing toad.”

“Fuck off. We’re all drunk.” Saleh scoffed and stuck his tongue out.

Fareeha felt arms drape across her and a warm breath on her ear.

“Hey,” Angela said as she buried her head into the crook of her neck. “How are you faring?”

Her eye twitched as her character got stuck in a trap and then swerved off the road from her struggles to get out of it. Her nostrils flared as she exhaled sharply through her nose.

“Badly. I’m losing so bad.” She admitted with a groan. She shook her head. “I’m way too drunk for this.”

Angela laughed and took the controller from her.

“It’s your lucky day then, for support has arrived.”

Fareeha stifled the urge to hiss at how bright the hallway was compared to the relative pitch black
darkness of her room. Angela was still asleep and she didn't want to wake the woman up. Her eyes felt incredibly sensitive and she should have groped for her sunglasses in her bedside drawer before sneaking out to get a glass of water for her cottonmouth and parched throat. She furrowed her brows as she heard faint clinking from her kitchen. Rounding the corner, her brows raised up at the sight of Patricia ambling about in the kitchen. Or a shell of a woman that was named Patricia. With the way she was moving she could be mistaken for a zombie, or maybe had actually become a zombie.

“G’morning.” Fareeha croaked out when Patricia noticed her.

Patricia grunted as she stirred her coffee. “Morning. Can’t sleep?”

“Can’t sleep.” Fareeha affirmed, rubbing her still sensitive eyes. “I hate how drinking does that. Rather sleep the hangover away, but my body doesn’t let me.”

“I hear you. The human body is an incredible thing, yet it has a weakness as stupid as that.” Patricia muttered darkly, before lifting the coffee pot up at Fareeha. “Coffee?”

Fareeha shook her head. “No, I just want water and an aspirin.”

“Suit yourself.” Patricia said as she poured another cup of coffee for herself. Fareeha dragged her feet as she trudged over to her medicinal cabinet, rifling through to find the bottle of aspirin. She pulled out one and then decided to go for another as another singe of pain went through her temples. She popped them into her mouth as she filled a cup with water. When she finally took a drink, washing down the two aspirins down her throat without a hitch and tasted that first mouthful of clean fresh water, a groan escaped her.

Nothing like good, old-fashioned water to help ease the throat and a bad case of cottonmouth.

If only the aspirin worked just as fast to get rid of her throbbing headache.

Maybe if she’s lucky it will work its magic in a few minutes.

“It’s going to take at least a half hour before it helps your headache.” Patricia said, as if reading her mind and needing to be that voice of reason that shatters her hopes and dreams. “Just saying.” She added when she saw the tired look Fareeha sent her way. “You’re not the only one that is fucking by the way. I have a bus to catch in two hours and I’m certain I’m going to throw up along the way. I hope my new colleagues will be fine with that sort of first impression of me.”

Fareeha’s lips quirked at that. “Right, you’re relocating to Algeria, right? Good luck and stay safe Patricia. I mean it.”

“Thanks.” She said before sitting upright on the stool at the kitchen isle, staring at Fareeha with a serious expression. Fareeha straightened up at that and turned fully face Patricia. “Fareeha.”

“Yea?”

Patricia huffed as her finger tapped on the mug she cradled in her hands, lips drawn tightly. “You take care of Angela, okay?”

Fareeha smiled. “Of course-”

“No, you don’t get it.” She said quickly, cutting Fareeha off. “Or you do. I just- ugh. I mean it. Like really mean it. Don’t let her regret her decision. Don’t make it so she does regret her decision. This wasn't an easy choice for her.”
The smile slipped of Fareeha's face at that and her lips pressed into a thin line. She walked over to take a seat on the stool on the opposite side of the kitchen isle, resting her arms on the cold flat top as she hunched down slightly to put her at eye-level with Patricia. She looked at her meaningfully, all traces of amusement gone from her expression, replaced with the kind of gravity that Patricia wanted. The kind of commitment and seriousness in her eye that Patricia needed to see Fareeha had when it came to Angela.

"Of course."

Chapter End Notes

Apparently writing 1.5k early on means jack squat if you get stuck lmao (and busy, like wtf life, can you like chill pls). Spent an exorbitant amount of time on whether I should have Angela dye her hair back or not (kept flipping to and fro and re-writing) and had too many ideas about silly shenanigans and wasn’t sure which ones I wanted to include (read: good enough/made enough sense/wasn't too silly). Hope the ones I ended up choosing were cool and got some giggles out.

By the way, have you guys ever drank from the tit of an ice sculpture? It is an experience.
Fareeha leant by her shoulder on a lamp post a little ways off from where Angela and Patricia stood. She shifted slightly, scuffing her shoes on the dirt-laden pavement beneath them as she crossed her arms in front of her. She inhaled and exhaled deeply once as she gazed at the two women in front of her.

The Montu program was an excellent super soldier program. Her senses were heightened to the point where her ears could now pick up the scurry of a mouse a foot away in the dead of night. Even so, against the ruckus of pedestrians and cars and motorcycles passing by, her sensitive ears could not discern the words Angela and Patricia said to one another. Not that it mattered anyways, she didn’t need to know the drowned out words they exchanged to understand what was happening. The slight glisten in their eyes as they spoke with trembling jaws, holding each other’s hands with sure grips as they faced one another with expressions tinged with both sadness and affection said more than any words could ever convey.

Patricia was Angela’s dear friend.

The only one Angela bothered to tell of her true identity.

Perhaps the only true friend she had for a long while under the guise of Veronica Mueller.

So Fareeha would give them these last few precious moments to themselves. For now she would wait here, arms crossed as she leaned on a lamp post that was surely going to leave a few dirty smudges on the short sleeves of her yellow cotton button up, drinking in the bittersweet sight of a last farewell among close friends.

Something she would have to do as well in a few hours’ time.

She ran a tongue across her teeth at the thought. Her hand gripped her bicep, digging her fingers both into her skin and the sleeve of her shirt, crumpling it slightly. An ironic smile crossed her lips. Barring her mother anytime she left for work when she was young, farewells were a non-issue for her in the thirty-four years she had been alive. Goodbyes simply meant new beginnings as she was usually the one leaving, which imbued in her a sense of excitement rather than melancholy. She had missed her high school graduation willingly to enter the military the moment she hit enlistment age and would’ve done an Irish goodbye out of the military as well to join HSI if her superiors had let her. She had made only acquaintances in her time in barracks and military outposts, after all. Every single farewell she was forced to commit was sheer formality, enacted only to be polite.

Things were different now.

She chuckled, once.

Perhaps that wasn’t a bad thing.

It was only when the bus rolled in, complete with chipping paint and rusty brakes that groaned and hissed as it pulled into a full stop, did she move forward and intrude on the special moment between Angela and Patricia. If it was up to her she would’ve given them all the time in the world, but unfortunately time goes on and waits for no one and the buses of Egypt loved to follow this cardinal rule as well.
“Until we meet again, Patricia.” She heard Angela say as she approached them. She saw Angela take a shuddering breath and then pull Patricia into a tight hug, clutching with no regard for the sweltering heat around them that was surely making it uncomfortable. “I’m going to miss you so much.”

“I’m going to miss you too.” Patricia replied with a rawness in her voice that Fareeha had never heard before, reciprocating Angela’s hug with just as much ferocity. When she pulled back, her hands drew up to hold Angela’s face, her thumbs tucking Angela’s hair behind her ears as she made sure Angela looked her square in the eye. “And remember, if you ever need to talk, you have my contact information. I’m here for you.”

Angela nodded slowly.

“I will.” She said almost meekly.

Patricia released her hold on Angela’s face at the affirmation, then turned and closed the distance between herself and Fareeha. She craned her head up at Fareeha, her intelligent eyes glimmering with introspection and deep regard.

“Fareeha.”

“Patricia.” Fareeha said back just as bluntly, a lopsided smile adorning her lips. “It’s probably going to be a long while until we see each other again, but trust me, those custom sheets will always be there for you. Whenever you visit, I’ll whip them out.”

Patricia licked her lips then pursed it. A cheap attempt at smothering a smile.

“Always with the jokes.” She muttered, briefly looking down as she shook her head, a small smile finally breaking out and playing on her lips. Her slight movements caused her dangling earrings to jingle and glint as it caught sunlight. “I used to think you were some generic stick-in-the-mud of a soldier. Now I see that you’re just a goof who’s really good at pretending to be professional.”

Fareeha grinned, dazzling and wide, showcasing all her pearly whites. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“I’m sure you will.”

“Jokes aside, have a safe trip Patricia.” Fareeha said, smile now less playful. She held out her hand, “Really. Take care, my friend. Be safe. Stay safe.”

Patricia reached out for Fareeha’s, her slim hand curling easily around Fareeha’s larger one. Fareeha was prepared to give Patricia’s hands two solid pumps when she felt herself pulled closer by a strong tug of Patricia’s arm as the woman simultaneously moved forward. In one smooth motion Patricia released her hand to encircle her arms around Fareeha into a brief hug.

“I know I told you to take care of Angela and I still mean that,” Patricia mumbled into her ear as her sharp chin dug into her shoulder. Fareeha made a dumb noise of acknowledgement, her mind distracted by the fact that Patricia was hugging her, “but remember to take care of yourself as well, okay?”

And then with two small pats to her back, Patricia released her and stepped away. Fareeha blinked owlishly, body still stiff as stone from the unexpected contact, the sweet scent of Patricia’s strong perfume swirling in her head as the woman exchanged a few more parting words with Angela then got onto the bus.

Patricia waved one last time at them from the window and Fareeha, finally catching her bearings at
the action, waved back with a clunky hand. Back at a woman who she once thought she would have never gotten along with. At a woman who had a kind and well-meaning heart beneath a venomous exterior. At a woman who gave surprisingly nice hugs despite her thin and bony frame.

At a remarkable woman Fareeha was now proud to call a friend.

“I will Patricia.” She mumbled to herself. A small promise of sorts that she intended to keep.

“__________________________________________”

“What are these? New shades?” Kadir jovially said as he swiped the sunglasses that hanged around Fareeha’s collar and inspected it. “Large and round, with thin metal rims… mirrored to boot?” He arched a brow and gave Fareeha a quick once-over. “First the clothes, now the new rims – Are you really leaving the squad to be a secret Overwatch agent, or are you just taking a paid vacation to the Caribbean or something?”

“Haha. Very funny.” Fareeha said robotically, taking the shades back and hanging them in her collar once more.

Angela hid a smile behind her palm. Fareeha did look like she was going on vacation with her cuban style light yellow shirt, loose brown slacks and easy-going shades. All she needed to complete the look was to simply untuck her shirt and maybe place a panama hat on top of her pretty head.

“You thought about your codename yet?” Summeye remarked airily from where she sat, appearing as coy as ever with that smirk she had that seemed to be perpetually stuck on her face. “I hope not, because I got the perfect one.” She flashed a wink and stretched out her hand. “Just hand me your papers and I’ll make it official. It’ll be the surprise of your life.”

“Is it a good surprise?” Fareeha asked rhetorically, her tired face showing she already knew the answer.

Summeye ran a hand through her locks, eyes flickering up for a few moments as if she was actually deliberating the question, going as far as to tap a finger to her chin.

“I think so?” she finally said with a doe-eyed look that immediately broke when Nisa swatted her on the shoulder with an all-too familiar expression on her face. The one Angela saw so often on mother’s reprimanding their children in public or when they were being difficult when she had to examine them. “Okay, probably not.”

“What was the codename you thought of, Summie?” Mahmoud asked, genuine curiosity in his voice as he scratched the side of his cheek with his finger, grazing at the still patchy beard he was trying to grow out.

“Blue Falcon.” Summeye said bluntly, before waggling her brows. “Bet you didn’t think your color scheme through, did ya?”

Laughter broke out amongst Fareeha’s teammates as the words sank in and Bilal, who had been in the middle of taking a sip from his water bottle, immediately spat. Summeye cackled.

“Nice.” Bilal said, holding up a fist for Summeye who gladly bumped it.

“Oh my god, you would literally be a blue falcon!” Menna wheezed, wiping a stray tear that fell from her eye from laughing too much, a hand on Angela’s shoulder as support as she physically doubled over. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I know it’s not that funny,” she said when she cleared her eyes enough to see the look Fareeha gave her. “But I’m getting a really hilarious picture in my head. It’s
not my fault.”

Fareeha opened her mouth as if to say something, a retort probably, before her lips pressed into a thin, thin line. She frowned, brow creasing and pressed a fist to her mouth as she mulled over Summeye’s jibe. Angela watched utterly delighted as Fareeha started to pace, musing to herself as her brain pieced together that glaring error of judgment on her part, chiding herself for not seeing the unfortunate implications of what she had thought to be an excellent color scheme at first.

“It was the Overwatch colors. A simple homage to the old Overwatch… I didn’t… Blue falc- Fuck.”

Fareeha groaned, pressing her hands to her face which did nothing but further the stray giggles and tickled smiles still tacked on her subordinate’s faces.

“Damn it. I have to change it.”

Angela bit her lip to contain her own giggles. What a silly thing to get worked up over.

“Change it to yellow with stripes of black.” Hassan said, “And add a little heart in the middle. Then you can call yourself ‘bumblebae’.”

Fareeha stopped pacing, the fist pressed to her lips drooping as she stared blankly at Hassan with judgment in her eyes.

“…That’s somehow worse than Blue Falcon.”

“I live to exceed all expectations, boss.”

Angela shook her head.

For the last half-hour, Angela had observed Fareeha’s subordinates essentially make harmless jokes at her expense, sitting on pieces of equipment or standing on the concrete ground with a laidback air that seemed more fitting in a lounge setting, than in an airplane bunker filled only with fighter jets and other planes designed for combat. It was nice and relaxing, except for the faint undercurrent of tension that Angela felt if she focused enough. Everyone was slightly anxious behind their lax smiles, a little on edge from not knowing when Fareeha would leave them, but knowing it would be soon. That it was all determined by Lena and Winston, and whenever they were done doing what they needed to do before they could leave. Lena was currently undergoing some final review on how to pilot the aircraft HSI was providing, and Winston who was currently on call with some diplomats to ensure safe travels over their respective airspaces to get to Gibraltar.

“You’re really going, huh?” Tariq suddenly quipped up, his light voice seeming heavy for once as his words were colored with sadness. Nisa went over to her him, rubbing his back soothingly, an equally melancholic smile on her face. “Going to go off to who knows where…”

“Tariq…” Fareeha said softly, reaching out to give the young man a squeeze on his shoulder. A comforting touch that seemed to have the opposite effect. His face seemed to only crumple further.

“You will be fine. You have grown so much.” She said, words dripping with sincerity, “I am lucky to have met you, Tariq. Always so eager to learn and always so quick on his feet. I was lucky to have you have my back.”

“…I haven’t learned everything from you yet, though. You can’t just leave now. It’s not fair-”

“Tariq,” Nisa said, cutting him off as she directed a meaningful warning look at her boyfriend of two years. “That’s enough. This is not an easy thing for her to do either. You know why she joined up, so don’t make it any harder.”
Tariq shirked, shuffling his feet at the reprimand.

“…Right.” He said after a pause, looking back up at Fareeha apologetically. “Sorry, cap. I didn’t mean it that way. I’m just sad.”

“I know. Don’t worry about it.” Fareeha said with a small chuckle, smiling at her youngest subordinate after giving Nisa an appreciative nod. “I will say this though, I don’t think there’s any more that I need to teach you. You’ve grown into a fine young man, just like Nisa here has become a finer woman. You’ll both find your way. You’re both going to be just fine.” She directed her attention to all her other subordinates, “You’re all going to be just fine.”

“I can help.” Saleh announced out of the blue, his chest puffed and hands balled, determination in his eyes. “You know I can help. Just say the word and I’ll come with.”

“I know you can,” Fareeha said with a lopsided smile on her face, “but I have to turn down your offer Saleh. The strike team needs to be small.” Fareeha mussed Saleh’s hair, ruffling his curly locks. He should cut his hair soon, Angela noted idly. It was starting to look like a mop. “So for now stay with HSI. You will be able to make more of a difference here, okay?”

Saleh seemed to deflate at those words and after a half minute, begrudgingly nodded.

“Dr. Ziegler!”

Angela whipped around at her title, tearing her eyes away from the tender scene. Emirhan was beckoning her from near the ramp to go up one of aircrafts in the bunker – the one they would use when they were ready to take off. Angela busted into a small jog to get to Emirhan, taking only a small glance back to witness Fareeha start to deliver what she assumed were personalized consoling words to each and every member of her team. Something prickled in Angela’s heart, in a good way, as she caught the glimmer in Fareeha’s eyes as she spoke, equal parts affection and pride ringing clear in those gentle and dark irises of hers.

“I need you to check that this data is correct.” He said as she neared, handing her the data pad. She nodded and started to thumb through it, scanning through to find any faults with the report he had handed her. The way HSI formatted their documents made it quite pleasing to the eye. She wondered if she could get a template and send it to Patricia for reference for future GSM reports.

“Not going to join in on the festivities?” she asked idly as she scrolled through another page, her ears picking up another bout of laughter booming from Fareeha and her teammates.

“No need.” Emirhan said as he played with his wristwatch, “I’m going to be Overwatch’s contact if they need anything from HSI and my relationship with Fareeha is usually through a screen of some sort. She’s always gallivanting off for missions, while I’m stuck behind a desk as the person she reports too. If only I was a wee bit younger,” He chuckled, the crinkle in his eyes making the faint scars on his face slide up, “Her moving to Overwatch barely makes a ripple in the nature of our relationship. Won’t see her as often, but that’s pretty normal.”

“I see.” Angela sounded out as she finished scanning through the report, handing back the datapad to Emirhan. “Everything looks like it’s in order.”

“Excellent. Thank you Dr. Ziegler.” He said, a smile peeking out from under his graying mustache. “Anyways, I’m being called to take a group photo.” He continued, gesturing at Fareeha and her team, who all were lining up. He pulled out a camera from his bag and held it out for her. “And actually, would you be a dear and take the photo for us? I forgot to bring a tripod.”
Angela nodded, taking the camera from him. “Of course.”

It was time to go.

“Make me proud, Hassan.” Fareeha said, punching Hassan square on the chest with her fist, leaving it there after impact to rest on the fabric of his jacket. Her knuckles just so happen to press straight onto the captain’s badge now clipped to the lapel of his jacket and a strange sort of melancholy passed through her. That badge was clipped onto her just a few days ago and now it was on Hassan. Just like it used to be clipped onto Khalil and then her.

“Of course, Captain.”

Fareeha shook her head. “No, Hassan. You’re captain now. I’m leaving.”

“Whatever you say ‘Leaving’, but you’ll always be my boss.” he said with a watery chuckle, smoothing his course and thick beard with a large hand to hide a trembling lip, “So what should we call you now then? Fareeha? Or can we get to call you a nickname? I never got around to giving you one before you became captain. You were a little too prickly at that time.”

Prickly?

Understatement of the century.

“Just call me Far, because I’ll be far away.”

Hassan chuckled again, lighter this time, a grin that reached his eyes cracking on his lips. “Wow. That was lame, you’ve come so far from being a living stone wall. Like I mean, seriously. That was seriously bad, capt-”

Fareeha cleared her throat and gazed at him warningly.

“I mean- Far. Good one, Fareeha. Far.” Hassan said and Fareeha nodded approvingly. His grin widened before pursed them and took a shuddering breath. Once he was confident his voice was steady once more, he boomed out his next words. “Soldiers! Gather round! Let’s give our girl a proper goodbye!”

Fareeha’s team whooped and all lined up beside him in front of Fareeha with perfect posture; arms crossed behind their backs, uniforms buttoned up, berets perfectly perched on their heads and professionalism exuding out of their frames.

“Thank you for your service Captain Fareeha Amari, fifth captain of Elite HSI squadron KL-4.” They all said in unison before bowing. When they came out of the bow, their left hands stayed behind their rigid backs as their right hands shot up into a firm salute. “It was a pleasure to have served under you.”

Fareeha swallowed thickly as she gazed at their faces, a torrent of emotions welling inside her from the genuine appreciation she felt coming off waves from that standard farewell. She saluted them back just as strongly, utterly proud to have had such a wonderful and capable cast of people under her.

“The pleasure was all mine.”
“You should get some shut-eye doc. It’s a ten-hour flight.” Lena said, staring out the cockpit as her hands fiddled with a few switches on the dashboard, a chipper smile on her lips that betrayed none of the fatigue that she must be experiencing. “I have it all under control.”

Angela smiled serenely.

“I know you do.” She said, fingers playing with the hem of her shirt idly as she took note of the circles under Lena’s eyes and the slight rasp in her tone. Telltale signs of exhaustion that would have alarmed her if not for the fact that they did party hard the night before. “You were a pilot before you were an agent and a good one at that. Still are Ms. Lena Oxton.”

Lena preened under the compliment, the grin on her face widening, her shoulders doing a brief shimmy.

“Geez Angie, you still know how to flatter a girl. You know I’m taken, right?”

“I know. Just as I am taken as well. It was only a simple compliment.” She replied, just as quickly, taking a furtive glance behind her to look at Fareeha. The woman had her knees on the couch lining the side of the plane as she looked out the window, both her hands pressed up to the reinforced window glass. Her brow was furrowed and her mouth was set straight in a firm line. A stranger might have thought she looked introspective, but Angela could spot the fascination and palpable excitement under the calm veneer.

Angela smiled.

The woman was no stranger to the skies, practically ruling over the air whenever she donned her Raptora suit, yet there she was peering out into the open sky around them like it was her first time 10,000 feet in the air. Elation clear as day to Angela. She guessed the excitement of actually travelling to an Overwatch watchpoint got to Fareeha.

Or perhaps travelling in general.

Fareeha didn’t travel much outside of hot and dry Egypt as her work in HSI never called her to do so, and other than to visit her father in Canada she never did take a vacation outside of Egypt, always spending it with her instead. So it must be refreshing to finally leave the sandy quarters of her home for something shiny and knew. Angela wondered when she herself lost her exuberance for things like that—

A somewhat bitter smile crossed her lips.

– probably ever since she joined Overwatch.

The organization had spared no time in rushing her out onto the field once they accepted her into the fold. She spent so much time hopping from one destination to another, chasing terrorists and squashing dangerous situations. Rather than looking forward to the next call, Angela quickly became disheartened. Every plane ticket meant only another danger and every notification meant she would have to put her research on hold. By the end of her first year, she had travelled so much that staying at home was far nicer than the prospect of lying on any sandy beach or by any shimmering lakesides whenever she did catch a break.

“Just a compliment? Pffft.” Lena said, bringing Angela’s attention back to her. “Please, don’t tell me it’s never crossed your mind that I was cute and you wanted to… You know.” Lena shrugged suggestively, “Do something.”

Angela rolled her eyes and pinched Lena’s cheek. “That’s enough out of you, anymore and I’ll start
telling your girlfriend all the embarrassing accidents you’ve had. And stop trying to change history. I distinctly recall that you were the one who made eyes at me, not the other way around.”

“Hey now, you were the one who called me adorable.” She laughed out, rubbing the skin of her cheek where Angela had pinched her. “Who was making eyes at who, hmm?”

“I did call you adorable.” Angela said, quickly continuing when Lena inhaled sharply to start speaking once more. “The way an exuberant nineteen year old is to a woman going onto thirty.”

Lena pouted dramatically, pretending to be hurt by her words. “Boo.”

Lena was adorable, and still is. She’s bubbly and energetic, with a life to her that simultaneously made Angela smile and get a migraine at times. Hyperactive and reckless, yet sweet and far more intuitive than people realized. She was indeed charming with her cheery attitude and messy brown hair, but the first thing Angela noticed when she first saw the girl was that she was young.

So, so young.

She had bounced into the room like she had been in Overwatch from the get-go, a large pair of aviators on her face and an even larger than life sort of attitude. Angela had shaken her exuberant hand pleasantly as Lena, just shy of nineteen, proudly announced that she was to be the test pilot for the prototype Slipstream jetfighters. It was supposed to be a momentous day and it did start that way. With clear blue skies, green lights across the board and a dazzling snapped photo of young pilot Lena Oxton posing with a two-finger salute from the cockpit of the test to commemorate the occasion.

And then it all went wrong.

Angela’s eyes moved downwards to rest on the chronal accelerator strapped to Lena’s chest, its blue light an uneasy reminder of the unintended consequences of even good intentions. Angela had many low points in her lifetime, but one of her lowest was seeing Lena come back from the dead only to keep blipping from their plane of existence. In and out. In and out. Sometimes for a few seconds, sometimes for a few weeks. She had grit her teeth and dug her nails into her palm until they bled as she slowly witnessed the light in Lena’s eyes die each time she flickered back into the world.

She had felt powerless. As powerless as when her parents had died. Completely and utterly useless.

Thank god for Winston.

If not for him…

“What’s on your mind, Ange?”

Angela forced a smile. “Nothing. Just thinking. I think I am a little tired.”

She never asked the specifics as to what happened to Lena when she’d disappear, that was between her and the psychiatrists she had after the incident, but she knew it definitely wasn’t as kind as simply blacking out. Lena’s eyes always glazed and years always seemed to display itself on the young woman’s normally exuberant face whenever someone as much as hinted to being curious about where she goes when she vanishes. She’d swallow thickly, tack on a far too wide smile and instinctively touch her chronal accelerator, making sure her tether to this world was still there on her body.

“I think so too, doc. I really think you should get some sleep.” Lena said with concern in her eyes, “We still got five hours left… Even I’m going to take a break soon and put this baby on auto-pilot.”
Angela nodded and stood up. “I’ll talk to you later, Lena.”

“Later.”

Angela stretched her arms as she walked over to Fareeha, taking a seat next to the woman. Fareeha smiled, swiveling on the seat to sit next to her properly. Fareeha bumped Angela’s shoulder with her own.

“Hey.”

Angela cocked her head up, eyes crinkling at the darling grin on Fareeha’s face. Her hand lifted to play with the white borg collar of Fareeha’s jacket, marveling at the cotton ball-like softness of the thick wool.

“This is new. I don’t remember you having such a jacket.” Her eyes glanced up and down Fareeha’s frame. “I think it looks great on you.”

Fareeha beamed, “Yeah? My team got it for me as a gift. Said I’d look good in it.”

“It does.” Angela said. And what a sweet gift, she thought to herself, eyes crinkling further as she saw the subtle stitched black emblem on the breast of the jacket. A small rocket and the words ‘Rocket Queen’ stitched right under it. Words that would’ve been undiscernible from a distance considering the jacket was a dark navy blue. Her fingers traced over the emblem. “Is this a custom jacket?”

“Ah, you spotted that?” Fareeha said with a sheepish grin on her face. She scratched her nose. “Yea, it’s custom. They thought it would be funny or something. It was nice of them, I guess.”

Angela took a moment to study Fareeha’s face as her words sunk in, noting the way Fareeha held her jaw tight as she thumbed the fabric of the jacket, smoothing it and adjusting it with a purposeful air of disinterest that was at odds with the carefulness of her fingers. A soft laugh bubbled out of her.

“Try and feign it all you want, Fareehali, but I can tell you really like it.” She cooed, running a hand through Fareeha’s hair and combing it back.

Fareeha grumbled at her statement, a blush streaking clear on her face from having the happiness she tried so desperately to smother being found out so easily. She scratched her nose again and stared at Angela with a bashful smile.

“You got me. Yea, I do. I really love it.” She sighed almost dreamily, “I had the best team in the world.”

Fareeha bounced her leg as her right fingers fidgeted with the metal ring wrapped around her left finger. Turning it over and over again, focusing on the feel of the metal sliding around her pinky and the texture of the dented and chipped metal on her digits as it moved the ring around. She took a glance at Angela, sleeping beside her sprawled on the couch, arm tucked beneath her head, blonde hair splayed, clothes ruffled. She shrugged off her jacket and laid it on the sleeping woman carefully, heart squeezing as Angela mumbled in her sleep and grabbed onto the jacket, rumpling it in her hands as she moved it to slide the wool collar under her head to use as a makeshift pillow.

Fareeha half-smiled then leant down to give press a soft kiss on Angela’s temple, before sitting back up straight to look out the window once more, gazing at the setting sun and taking in the way the sky was dyed pink and purple as the sun continued its descent to dip below the horizon.
It was mesmerizing.

But there was more to come. She glanced at her wristwatch and felt a familiar thrumming of excitement that reached down to the marrow of her bones. Her leg started to bounce once more in anticipation.

In a few hours, they would be at the watchpoint.

In a few hours, a new chapter of her life would start.

She couldn’t wait.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is brought to you by Fillers R Us.
Alternatively: Just me wanting to write my OC’s one last time before I let them go.
Lastly, I just realized that other than saying that Patricia is thin and pale, I don’t really give descriptors as to how she looks like. I’d love to know how you all imagined her – or any of my OC’s (if you’d like ofc)
Edit: And Blue Falcon is an idea I dropped before on tumblr in case anyone is like ‘... I feel like i’ve seen that observation before.’ :)
She couldn’t sleep.

Fareeha tilted her head to stare at the glowing numbers of the bedside clock.

A little over five.

Fareeha sighed. No wonder she was restless. She’s been getting up before the crack of dawn since she was sixteen years old and like clockwork her body was ready to start the day.

Habits are a hard thing to break.

Fareeha carefully drew the blanket off her and rose from the bed. The socks around her cybernetic feet muted her steps to a quiet thump as she waded through the darkness to get to the window. Two fingers extended to push down on the flimsy blinds. She peered out. The beginnings of a sunrise displayed itself on the horizon line; a flat streak of white light that glowed brightly above still darkened seas. It painted the skies near it a beautiful orange hue and the skies farther a purpling gradient still murky enough to let the small lights of the stars shine and show its glory.

She sucked the side of her left cheek.

Sunrises were ephemeral sights that usually made her shudder a breath, but today the view made her feel peculiar. Like something was… missing. Her mouth drew into a thin line as she struggled to discern the reason for the strangeness she felt, when it all clicked as she became aware that her ears were straggling for sounds that were surely not going to come. To pick up a small morsel of a muezzin calling all who followed her faith to rise and conduct their morning prayers.


She was in Gibraltar.

She was no longer in Egypt.

She knew this logically, but as hard as habit were to break, expectations of routine were even harder and she resigned herself to feeling a little out of sorts from not hearing the usual sounds of the morning adhan carrying through the air.

As the sun rose higher she relinquished her hold on the shutters to plunge the room back into darkness out of consideration of the other occupant in the room. She frowned as slivers of light found a way to leak in through the slightly crooked blinds. It seems relative darkness was the best she could do.

Fareeha made a mental note to properly fix them later on.

Scrounging around the room to find some sort of cover to throw over the blinds as a temporary fix, she finally settled on a towel to do the job. As she struggled to jam the towel on the curtain bar to let it hang over the window, her right elbow accidentally dug into the blinds, causing it to rustle against each other and clang, loudly, against the window pane.
She cursed then stilled as a groan came from the bed.

Fareeha held her breath and craned her neck to look behind her, looking and hoping she hadn’t accidentally awoken Angela. Angela turned in her sleep lethargically until her face, or what she could see of it, now faced her. A pale arm reached out of the covers to fumble and grope Fareeha’s side of the bed, going up and down the length of it in a slow and haphazard fashion. Angela’s brows furrowed as her hand passed through thin air and touched nothing but wrinkled sheets time and time again in her lazy search.

“Fareehali?”

A half-smile formed on Fareeha at the disorientation lacing the sluggish inquiry.

“Good morning to you too, ya amar.” She crooned, voice barely above a whisper. She shuffled back to the bed, holding the bedframe as support as she bent down to kiss Angela on the crown, before sliding right back in next to the sleepy woman. She propped her head up with one hand as she pulled the covers back up her body half way with the other. “You ready to seize the day?”

Angela scrunched her eyes, taking a deep breath as she stretched in spot by arching her back. When she relaxed, her eyes fluttered open into a tired half-squint. She semi-glared at Fareeha with furrowed brows, rubbing the crust away from her eyes with her fingers. A muffled groan escaped her.

“Fareehali-“ Angela yawned, a loosely fisted hand raising to cover her mouth as she did so- “What… What time is it?”

“It’s five.” Her eyes flickered over Angela to the digital clock. “Well, a little over five actually.”

Angela groaned again, turning further into her pillow while shimmying lower down into the blanket.

“It’s too early. We only have to meet with Winston at eight.” She groused out in a half-whine. The lower half of her face was now under the covers, but Fareeha could imagine the frown marring Angela’s face. “Go back to sleep.”

“But I’m awake.”

“Well, I’m not.” Angela grunted out. “So I’m going back to sleep. It is my right.”

Fareeha chuckled softly. Angela was such a grouch in the morning. She reached out to brush away stray strands of hair from Angela’s cheeks with her free hand, before settling the flat of her palm on top of Angela’s right cheek. After a pause, Angela nuzzled into her hand.

“Your hand’s so warm. It feels good.” Angela mumbled, her lips grazing the side of her palm as she spoke. Fareeha’s thumb raised a little ways up and started to stroke the length of Angela’s left brow slowly, following the bone of her brow. Angela hummed appreciatively. “Oh. And that feels good. Don’t stop.”

Fareeha grinned. “Yes, ma’am.”

She continued her ministrations, keeping a heavy hand on Angela’s cheek as the pad of her thumb brushed Angela’s left brow. More light spilled into the room through the cracks – she never did get the towel to stay on just right to block what sunlight the blinds failed to stop – and Fareeha was glad that she chose to sleep on the right side of the bed.

Currently the only thing keeping the light at bay from Angela was her.
Her body was literally the only thing in the way of the streams of light filtering through.

And Fareeha laid there, stayed there, for a long while, protecting Angela from mother earth’s natural wakeup call with her frame as she soothed her brow with a calloused thumb. Letting the light stain only the wall, the furniture, the fixtures of the room, and her broad back, slowly warmed from the heat spilling from the morning light. She laid there, stayed there, transfixed by the tide of her lover’s breathing and smoothing her brow, only catching back up with reality when the hand propping her head started to cramp. She flexed her cramping wrist as she sank her head down to rest on the pillow, taking the time to remove the hand that was caressing Angela’s face as well, giving her an unobstructed view of her face. And as Fareeha stared with open eyes, she felt something stir in her.

“You’re really something, Angela Ziegler.” Fareeha whispered, a soft admission to herself. “Really something special.”

“I know.” Angela mumbles out with eyes still closed, a sleepy grin on her face. Fareeha’s own eyes widen, her brows shooting up to her hairline. She had thought Angela to have fallen back asleep. Her cheeks slightly warmed from her small confession being heard. “I am a miracle worker.”

“Har-har. So modest.” Fareeha harps with no real malice, no true aggravation staining her words. They are spoken lightly. Playfully. Tinged with affection. “Do you think you can charm people with that sort of attitude?”

“Yes. I charmed you, didn’t I?” She replies easily. Impishly. “In fact, since you were in the sixth grade and barely reaching my nose.”

Fareeha jutted her lips and narrowed her eyes. In hindsight, she should have never divulged the real reason of her avoidance of Angela in the past. The woman now lorded the fact that little her had a crush on Angela anytime she saw the chance too.

“Am I wrong?” Angela says, cheeky smile widening, still not bothering to open her eyes.

Fareeha pauses. Angela opens her eyes, the tiniest of fractions to stare at Fareeha. Pupils shining with mirth and Fareeha cannot help the small chuckle that escapes her as she relents under her gaze and lets Angela hear what she wants to hear.

“Well, no. You’re not, but-”

Angela interrupts her with an obnoxious hum of victory and shuffles towards Fareeha to snuggle. She doesn’t move fast enough however and Fareeha catches the way her smile turned positively smug before it dipped out of sight to nestle in the crook of her neck. Angela’s breath is hot against her collar bone as she presses her whole length flush against Fareeha’s own, one arm encircling Fareeha’s waist to keep her locked in place. Any words lodged in Fareeha’s throat dies as she is struck by the feeling of Angela all around her. She automatically slings her own arm, the one not tucked under her pillow, around Angela’s shoulder. Fareeha holds her back just as tightly. Just as lovingly.

Her heart feels light.

It was a chilly day.

The wind prickled the skin of her cheeks and the bite of the cold draft slid its way under the cuffs of her jacket. She burred and scrunched her neck like a turtle into the wool collar of her jacket as she stuffed fisted hands into its satin-lined pockets.
The meeting with Winston had been dull and drab.

She had expected to be thrust immediately into the throes of danger. For Winston to instantly place her on some mission to squash some Talon scum, but all she was met with in the meeting was the sight of a relaxed Winston eating slices of banana with a generous dollop of peanut-butter going on a regulatory spiel on the innerworkings and regulations of post-recall Overwatch.

Apparently, missions came and went in a sporadic fashion, and this was one of the times where anything there was left to do was already being done by other agents. Which left them with currently nothing to do except to prepare for whenever the next mission was to arrive.

She had grimaced. It seems the closest she’d be to being on the field today was him talking about it.

Once the meeting was over, Winston and Angela left to discuss some private matters and she was left to her own devices. With nothing to do, she decided to explore the quite empty halls, peeking into different rooms and checking out the facilities. And when she got bored of that -turns out that watch point: Gibraltar was pretty sparse, with a lot of areas still in-repair, unused or cordoned off- she landed up here, on one of the many roofs on the watch point.

Her feet scuffed the large ‘H’ of the helipad station as she trudged over to one edge of the rooftop.

She sucked in a deep breath through clenched teeth when she reached the edge then exhaled, long and slow, mouth puckered almost so she could have whistled the breath out if she so wished it. She watched her languid breath of white dissipate into the air before resting her elbows on the ledge as she looked over the rocks of Gibraltar.

Ever since a freak tsunami incident and reclamation project a couple decades back, Gibraltar had become a deserted island with no man-made infrastructure in sight – except Overwatch, somehow approved for construction.

It was a nice location.

Beautiful.

Birds chirped above and around her, hiding in the trees and the sounds of the lapping waves calming. The air was crisp, mixed with both the smell of the forest green and salt of the sea.

A grin cracked on her face.

She had never set foot on Gibraltar, yet the scene felt so familiar. It felt like that of her father’s home. Untouched yet teeming with life, like the mountains and lakes of the Pacific Northwest. She wondered how he was doing. The last she had spoke to him was roughly a month ago and he had been livid at the time, raging about some foreign corporation conducting an illegal logging operation in a protected section of one of Canada’s many forests, caught by one of his many colleagues. Lucky them, she had thought, for if her father was the one to have accidentally stumbled into their little operation...

She should give him a call soon to catch up.

The tranquility of the scene before her is broken when she notices a black blot in the distance when her eyes were following a flock of cawing seagulls crossing the ocean. She squinted and blinked, eyes watering as she tried to keep them trained on at the growing black dot. It was inconveniently hovering too close to the sun. She fished out her shades from her inner jacket pocket, placed them on her face, and finally discerned that the figure staining the sky was a chopper. She feels herself tense up and takes a quick look at one of the bases alert systems, tacked on the side of the rooftop. It lights
up green in a tempered fashion and her guard relaxes.

Whoever was coming was a friend if the alarms didn’t fire.

She tracks the movements of the chopper as it makes it way to one of the other rooftops. Her brows raise at it stops its descent to turn and makes a beeline towards the rooftop she was on. She leant on the railing as her hair billowed all over from the force of the chopper’s wings as it lands on the helipad a few meters away. She coughed as dust rises up from the blowback straight into her mouth, but otherwise shows no weakness. In a matter of moments the occupants inside start pouring out.

One in particular made her breath catch.

She takes a step forward and pulls off her shades to get a better look.

“Well, I’ll be. It really is you.”

His voice was deep and grainy and huskier than she remembered, but the slow twang in his words was unmistakable. Like the lines on his face, the pockmarks he tries to hide with his overgrown beard, and the dimple of his right cheek as he grins at her. His red serape blows wildly in the wind as he approaches her, eyes flashing with elation.

“It’s been far too long, sunshine.”

Angela reclined in her office chair and expelled a long-drawn out sigh. She started to swivel aimlessly side to side in the chair, knuckles turning white from the almost claw-like grip she had on the plastic arm rests. Her vision slowly dotted as she stared on and on without cause at the light fixtures hanging above.

“I’m surprised I have to tell you that’s not a good idea, Angela.”

Her eyes flickered down and towards Winston who looked mildly disapproving, despite the lax smile on his face. She thinks at least, his visage was partially covered by a bright spot currently invading her vision and it was difficult to tell exactly what expression he wore. She exhaled sharply through her nose and pushed off the ground with her legs to propel the chair towards the window of her office – the one that stared out into the medical lab. She gestured out with a tilt of her head.

“I know, Winston. I’m just having a little bit of trouble getting used to all this again.”

Outside of the quiet of her old office, a team of medics and medical researchers (and more often than not, individuals with degrees in both fields and more) were working hard. They moved and examined and tested in a flurry, yet precise and careful all at the same time. It was a rush she hadn’t experienced in a long while and found herself rather shocked by it all when she first stepped foot into the lab. The shock that she felt sent a revelation down her spine. She hadn’t realized how much she had… forestalled her advancements in the scientific community in lieu of helping people with the technology and medical developed at current, until now.

She never thought she would ever feel unaccustomed to research and discovery.

But she clearly was.

The energy in the room just one glass away was almost nauseating to her and the knowledge that it felt that way to her sent her chuckling. She distinctly recalls the days where she was just like so many of the faces before her, thriving and excelling in such an environment. The memories stirred the
slumbering hunger she herself had for discovery and progress. The one that compelled her to burn the midnight oil until daybreak again and again in pursuit of another breakthrough when she was a younger woman.

“Ah, that maybe so.” Winston rumbles out and adjusted his glasses. A grin still smeared on his face. “But from where I’m standing, it looks like you’re pretty ready to jump right back in.”

Angela’s lips twitch at the observance and her hands squeezed at the plastic armrests again and again. Winston was always so keen and perceptive when it came to things like this. It must be the scientist in him that grants him such an ability to deduce people’s feelings from their subtle ticks and gestures. Either that, or…

Angela stares down at her hands and smiles ruefully.

Or it could simply be from the telltale signs of her excitement being so inherently obvious. The way her fingers jittered just so, the increased dilation of her pupils, her slight lean towards the glass – or more specifically, at the room beyond the window pane. And there was of course, signs that Winston would not be able to perceive, but she did and made her enthralment and anticipation all the more obvious at least to her. The way her heart thudded, the sound of it filling her ears, and the rush of adrenaline and dopamine coursing through her veins.

She pats the armrests twice then rises.

“Perhaps I am interested in jumping right back in.” She pauses and swallows audibly. She decides to be a little more truthful. “Perhaps maybe more than just interested.”

Winston grins, eyes bright.

“O-oh?” He adjusts his glasses again despite not needing to, a habitual tick it seems he hasn’t grown out of even after all this time. “Great. Then just walk back on out. They’re ready for you to start giving them direction and aid.”

Her smile slips into a grimace.

“Kind offer, but I know you want me to take care of… this, first.” Her eyes shift to the side and zero in on the costume that hangs on the wall. Her voice is dry as she continues. “You want me in the field as well, right? That’s why you specifically tried to track me down, right? The only one able to pilot a Valkyrie suit.”

The only one with nanites rushing in their veins to allow proper control the wings and all the other systems of the suit. Therefore the only one able to take on the mantle of call sign: Mercy, the guardian angel.

And also, the one who had made the suit in the first place.

Winston smiles falters and he has the decency to appear a little nervous.

“I mean… you don’t have too, but…” his voice becomes a stuttering murmur, “But- yeah, that’s why we tracked you down.”

She sighs and scratches the back of her neck. She grimaces as she looks at the costume she donned all those years ago. At the time it had seemed like a good idea, but staring it now just made her cringe. It was all so gaudy, with the unnecessary flash of purposeless syringes on the wings and the white mushroom beret. The suit was also a little out-of-date if nothing else.
There was no way she was going to use this on the field.

She needed to go back to the drawing board.

_____________________

McCree, where did you learn to shoot like that? Was it Jack? Gabriel?

She was only twelve years old at the time when she first met Jesse and remembers jumping up and down around the young man, enthralled by his marksman’s skills even if the cowboy outfit he had seemed a little funny to her.

Always was a good shot

Jesse had drawled out, twirling his gun nonchalantly for good measure to seem smooth.

But I got a few pointers from the best.

He looked at her meaningfully and if he had done that to her now she would’ve connected the dots. At the young age of twelve though, and admittedly terrible at reading between the lines, she was just befuddled by the look. He had grimaced when he realized that she had no idea who he was hinting at.

...That’d be your mother.

A small squeal of excitement had escaped her tiny lungs at the admission. When she was younger she had a staunch belief that her mother was the best and Jesse had just been further proof that her mother was indeed, the best. Little her couldn’t wait to also become a hero. Just like her mother. Just like Jesse. She had told him as much and recalls the panic she felt as Jesse’s eyes filled with an emotion that she couldn’t discern. Something thick and heavy that got him misty-eyed and made her heart drop to her stomach thinking she had said something wrong.

She understood now that the look she had seen on Jesse’s face all those years ago was the look of someone finally being seen as something – a someone. To see that finally they were a somebody in someone’s eyes. Viewed as precious and worthy of respect, instead of as nothing but a piece of trash to be scraped from under their shoes.

A hero, huh?

She will never forget the sheer happiness in his face as he rocked on his heels and repeated her words to himself, with thumbs looped around his belt as he stood there and simply basked in the compliment Fareeha had handed out without thought.

Fareeha thinks that image will be forever seared into her mind.

You know what? You just made my day, darling. You’re just a ball of sunshine.

... Feel like learning how to be a straight-shooter like me? I’ll teach ya.

She had nodded quickly, fearing that he might change his mind at any second. Fast-forward three or four training sessions later, a couple of lunches and pranks on each other, the two of them became as thick as thieves. She might have only seen Jesse a couple times every year, but he became the brother she never had and she relished their correspondences before they lost contact with all her heart. Now that he was back in her life, she expected things to fall back in line exactly how they used to be.
But they didn’t.
Something felt off. Somehow. There was something about Jesse.

The man she thought like a brother felt both like a long lost friend and a complete stranger at the same time.

“Looks like I win again, sunshine.”
Fareeha grumbled. Some things hadn’t changed. Infuriatingly, Jesse still had better accuracy than her. His shots were all lined up perfectly dead center on each and every target, while Fareeha’s own bullets would stray slightly to the left or right at least on one or two of the targets.

“Guess the student still hasn’t beat the master.” He teased, then took a long inhale of the cigar that he had clenched between his lips. He titled his head a little ways up and slowly blew out a thick trail of smoke that smelled of earth and ash and aged spice. “How long are you going to stay my little side-kick?”

She flicked him off and he flicked her off right back. They both grinned at the juvenileness of their actions.

For one small second, it all felt just like it did back then.

“I’m nobody’s side-kick.” She said and stared up into the open sky. “I’m a protector now, and I’ll be watching over you and everybody else from the friendly skies.”

“…Pardon?”

Angela groaned and pinched the bridge of her nose.

Designing a new suit was a little harder than she had imagined. Her skills of visualization were rusty and her motivation was at an all-time low as her fingers twitched to dive back into medical research instead. A grumble escaped her as she tapped a pen to the table, resisting the urge to twitch her eye at the sad sight of her first attempts at a new design. She faintly wonders where the girl who devised such a salacious yet somehow tasteful Halloween costume went. Every design she had churned out so far seemed just as gaudy as the very costume it was trying to replace.

Angela gnashed her teeth, frustrated up to her throat.
She huffs and stands up, unable to sit still any longer. She paces briskly back and forth, her levelled stare boring holes in the very designs she created, all splayed out for her to see on the long table before her.

Wrong. Wrong. Wrong.

She shook her head minutely. Perhaps she was going at this incorrectly. Function is far more important than form. She should look into this from a functional sort of standpoint. With a new goal in mind, Angela briskly walks to a nearby computer, cracks her fingers and accesses the Overwatch database, intent to sift through all technological advancements when her hands stilled.

She had no clue.
She didn’t even know where to begin.

She growled and pulled at her hair tie. It snapped off in one fluid motion. Angela shakes her now freed hair and runs a smoothing hand through. Her fingers massage at her scalp in cyclical motions and Angela hums as she feels the built-up tension ebb away. She had tied her hair a little too tightly today and her head throbbed infinitely less now that the pressure was gone and the skin of her face wasn’t being pulled by her tied hair no longer.

This is good. She might be able to figure out an idea if her head isn’t hurting.

Her fingers continue to work, kneading into her scalp and a happy sigh escapes her.

“Lass?”

The headache came rearing back full force. Her eye twitches. A grumble escapes her.

Angela resists the urge to curse.

“You’re here.” She says and it is not a question, just a simple statement of fact. The two words are said dryly and with enough acid that the devil himself would be proud.

“Answered the call.” Torbjorn breathes out and tentatively takes a step forward. “Just like you.”

She does not turn to look in his direction, not until the heavy thump of metal on the tiled floors. Heavy enough to make the ground below shake just a fraction. Her head whips immediately and she is greeted with the sight of a Bastion milling about behind Torbjorn. The Bastion beeped and whirred as it peered and meandered around the room like a curious child. His clunky robotic hands moved in a jaunty fashion to prod and touch any items that sparked its fancy. Angela studied the omnic with innocent curiosity. She did not get a good look at the Bastion in the video call all those months ago, the video feed far too grainy and the appearance of the omnic to brief, but now that she did, she found him to look…

Absolutely harmless.

And was that a bird’s nest and a literally live bird on its shoulder?

“Ganymede.”

Angela shifts her gaze to look at Torbjorn. “Ganymede? That’s the name of the Bastion?”

Torbjorn shakes his head. “No, I mean the bird. The bird’s name is Ganymede. At least that’s what Bastion says.” Torbjorn nudges the omnic with an elbow, making it swivel to regard him. His head is cocked. “Isn’t that right, you rust-bucket?”

The Bastion beeps and whirs and boops and Angela simply has to assume that he is agreeing with Torbjorn’s assessment. She wouldn’t know. She was unfamiliar with omnic-speak. She had tried a hand in learning it a few years back, but it turned out to be a rather difficult language to grasp and she had given up her attempts to spend that time instead in more fruitful pursuits. Now that a Bastion was joining their ranks though, perhaps it was time to hit the books again.

Speaking of Bastion.

“Overwatch is still technically illegal… How are we going to possibly get the organization back to legal status if we have a Bastion in our midst, helping us along? We will get the trust of no one.”
“I know that.” Torbjorn groused out, arms crossing in front of him. “That’s why this one doesn’t go on the field. He just follows me from base to base and hangs out there. It’s better for the organization and for the both of us in general. Travelling with him in tow is a bit of a… bother, let’s say.”

Ah.

“Have you had stones thrown at you, Torbjorn?”

“I wish it was just stones.” He mutters darkly before taking a tentative step towards her. His eyes dart between her schematics and her. “Anyways, do you, uh… Do you need help? I’m an engineer remember, so…”

She narrows her eyes at him and makes him sweat, staring at him blankly for a minute or two. He shifts under her withering gaze and right when his shoulders sag and he was about to make himself scarce, she relents. Angela nods and beckons him over. His eyes flash with renewed hope and Angela feels something stab her in the heart.

“Don’t think that this means I’ve forgiven you though.” She says quickly.

Because she didn’t.

Her wounds still stung and it would be a long time still before they healed.

But it was a start.

“I know, and you don’t need too. I don’t deserve it.” He says softly. Quietly. Choosing his words carefully for once. Angela gathered it was from fear of causing a sudden eruption. Of spurring a torrent of rage like she had shown all those months ago by making one wrong step and saying the wrong thing. He wouldn’t be wrong. “But thank you for giving me a second chance.”

Angela’s throat bobs and after a pause, she nods.

Fareeha felt pride bursting in her at the seams as Jesse circled around her gear wide-eyed, inspecting every inch of her Raptora suit as it stood proudly in all its shining glory. The cigar that always rested between his lips was left forgotten for once on a bench near them.

Jesse whistles lowly, a long whistle full of unbridled amazement.

“Damn, never in my wildest dreams…” He breathes out as he marveled at the wings of the suit, checking them out from every conceivable angle. He clicked his tongue and shook his head. “Like a jetfighter strapped on a suit of armor, you weren’t kidding when you said you’d keep us safe from the skies.” He glances at her, a question in his eyes. “How far can this baby go?”

“Who knows?” She says honestly with a shrug. “Maybe straight up into the stratosphere.”

It was a joke.

“Stratosphere?” He repeats with wonder in his eyes and Fareeha bit the inside of her cheek. He regards her expression with a frown, not understanding the reason behind the tickled look on her face, before a wild grins stretches across his face. She practically hears the lightbulb turning on above his head. “Oh, was that a joke?”

She laughs and nods. “Yeah. Glad you realized it.”
“My bad, got a little too excited there.” Jesse says sheepishly and she waves him off. She couldn’t exactly blame him. She was just as excited when she first saw the final product as well. He stares at the suit again. There’s an incredulous smile on his face. “I can’t believe it, Fareeha.” He turns to lock eyes with her, that incredulous smile still on his face. “You became a fucking rocketeer.”

She blinks and takes a moment to digest his words, shifting her weight to one foot. She then grins.

Rocketeer, huh?

She liked the sound of that.

Chapter End Notes

Buzz Lightyear and Woody are finally reunited. <3
Her heels clicked on the polished floors as she maneuvered through the med-bay, a folder stuffed with reports clutched in her hands. It was a rather busy day. At first she had wondered, irritation bubbling from the thought, that perhaps a few agents stuck at base had tried to fill their boredom by engaging in some reckless fun of the physical kind.

Former soldiers did have a knack at finding trouble when there wasn’t any.

She was spared from a migraine however when a colleague kindly informed her that a few local Overwatch teams have come back to base. A team had landed earlier on in the late morning, another in the afternoon and this latest batch just a few minutes ago, which was why there was agents filtering throughout the day to get themselves checked. At learning the truth, any fledgling amount of misdirected irritation in her vanished, quickly replaced by alleviation.

All the missions must have went smoothly.

She had seen not one person carted into an ER on a gurney nor had been called for any large operation.

"Yer name's Delaney? What a pretty name. Fitting for such a pretty girl."

Angela's ears twitched at the familiar drawl. She turned to her left and as her eyes found her mark, she smiled. At the left corner of the room was Mccree, leaning on a chair by his arm, his cowboy hat pressed to his chest with the other as he spoke to Dr. Brooks with a roguish grin on his face.

"Mccree." She breathed out as she made her way towards him. Mccree's head lifted at his name, twisting his body in her direction. Recognition dawned on his face when his scanning eyes finally settled on her, a sweeter lopsided smile overtaking his face. As she closed the distance, she set aside her folder right beside him on the medical table, thoughts of bringing the documents into storage momentarily forgotten. "How have you been?"

"I've been doin' alright." He said with a lackadaisical shrug. "Better since Ms. Delaney's been assigned to me. She's just the sweetest thing." His eyes flickered back to Dr. Brooks and Mccree puts on his most charming grin, slightly crooked, right cheek dimpling adorably, "Say, what time do you get off?"

Dr. Brooks stared at him, trying to withhold a smile with a purse of her lips. Her gaze shifted, locking eyes with Angela, silently begging for help.

Angela sighed.

"Don't worry, I got it Dr. Brooks. I'll do his checkup."

"Thank you, Dr. Ziegler. Cowboy here is trying to get my license revoked by getting me to do something with him and the trouble is..." She looked at him up and down appreciatively, before looking back at her, having enough decency to seem mildly ashamed, "He might just be able to if I stay here any longer." She started to walk away, turning back to give a small wave. "See you Angela, and goodbye, Mccree."
Once Dr. Brooks was out of earshot, Angela tugged Mccree by the ear. Hard.

"What were you thinking?” she hissed at him, an unrelenting grip on his ear. Mccree whined as he tried to get her fingers of the soft cartilage. “She's a doctor, your doctor, for goodness sake."

"I was thinking,“ He gritted out as he finally removed her fingers from his ear and rubbed at the tender spot gently with his own, “I could get lucky. It's been some time and a man gots needs. I even waited to do the checkup until now even though I got here in the mornin' cuz I heard a new pretty face had come." He scratched as his beard as he continued to grumble, "And what's the big deal anyways? It's just a bit of fun."

She rubbed her temples. "Do you know how many rules she’d be breaking? It’s illegal, Mccree."

Mccree rolled his eyes as he blew air upwards by his mouth, a few of his bangs lifting from the gust.

"News flash, darling. This whole operation-" He moved his finger in a cyclical motion in front of him with a raised brow- "Is hardly legal."

"...Just take of your shirt Mccree. I'm doing your checkup and that's final."

"If you're doing my checkup and being my personal doctor, then there shouldn't be a problem. I can still go after her then right-"

"Mccree.” He faltered at her low tone. She leaned in, eyes cold as flint despite the serene smile she put on for show for her colleagues around her. She played with the hem of his collar, nails suddenly akin to sharpened blades dancing near his jugular. "I'm the head of Overwatch medical, even in this newly formed one... Do you understand what that means?"

She felt his pulse quicken underneath her fingertips as she grazed the line of his jugular up to a pressure point that she knew would hurt like a pick axe driven straight to the spine if pushed correctly.

And she knew exactly how to.

"...Got it. Your house, your rules."

She released him, the smile on her face finally turning genuine. She patted him twice on the face, giggling as he swatted her hand away and then crossed his arms as he hunkered down on the medical table like a child stewing in silence.

"Good. Now take off your shirt so we can begin the checkup."

He sighed, then straightened up while nodding, promptly taking off his shirt. She could still hear him grumbling under his breath, probably at how 'unfair' she was being. She asked him routine questions about his health, the mission, any discernable aches or pains he felt, scolding him or rolling her eyes when he gave sarcastic answers and outright smacking him once when he made a bold-faced lie that he had indeed quit smoking.

"Ow! Why don't you believe me?"

She stared at him blankly. The smell of his cheap cigar clung to him the way the smell of antiseptic clung to her. She would have to be born without a nose to fail to detect the scent of ash and burnt tobacco on him, hanging on like a second skin.

As she dabbed a generous portion of nanite cream on a bruise on his abdomen he made a noise. Her
hand stilled and her eyes flickered up with worry.

"What is it, Mccree?"

She's treated wounds far worse than this one for him and the man never made a sound.

She pressed on the wound and a little harder around it, assessing for any internal damage she may have not realized existed the first time around. It didn't seem to be anything more than a superficial wound, but-

"It's nothin'. The wound I mean. Just reminded me of somethin', that's all." He paused, his lips curling into a devious smile and Angela felt herself steel up for whatever garbage was about to spew out of his mouth. Mccree always found a way of saying the wrong thing the right way to push a person’s buttons. A skill he took particular delight in - a hobby probably encouraged from his days in the Deadlock Rebels and the reason it had taken a while for her to warm up to him, amongst other things. "Was just thinkin' that it's awfully hypocritical of you to be so righteous 'bout fraternization."

She blinked as she processed his words, before comprehension settled in her gut.

"…You've heard about me and Fareeha."

“Straight from the source itself,” He said with a leery grin.

Angela did not return it, lips drawn into thin line, voice clinical and clipped.

"Then you must know Fareeha was never my patient. Yes, we did get close when she worked as security personnel for when I was working at GSM, however our friendship and subsequent romance really only bloomed from talks we had in private, never from her protecting me and me developing some sort of transference."

Even here in Overwatch, Angela made it explicitly clear that someone else would be the physician for Fareeha. It was far too dangerous for her to be Angela's patient and in her care. Too many lines crossed and being in Overwatch with its illegal status was enough lines crossed as it is.

"And in regards to fraternization, well, perhaps it is slightly unprofessional for us to be on the same strike team considering we are romantically engaged, but Winston had offered us the job knowing fully well the status of our relationship." She paused. "And I can guarantee it will not affect our work on field. Fareeha and I are professionals and-"

He cut her off with unabashed laughter, his shoulders rising up and down in a staccato fashion as he wheezed. As his laugh receded, Mccree clapped her on the shoulder with his hand, giving it a squeeze and shaking her slightly back and forth.

"Shucks doc, no need to be so defensive. I was just playing." He let released her and scratched at the side of his beard with his fingers, still grinning wide. "Damn, even Far took me a little too seriously today. See this wound?" He points at his abdomen – at the ugly purple bruise she just applied cream too. "That's not from a mission. That's Fareeha."

She stared at it. It was a fairly large bruise. She then stared at Mccree, waiting for him to further elaborate.

"Saw her –what was it? Rapture- No, that can't be it… Rep- Raptora suit?" He wrinkled his nose then shrugged, “Eh, doesn’t matter. Anyways, after I was done fawning over how cool it was I realized the funniest thing; the color scheme makes it a blue falcon.”
Angela's quirked her lips and arched a brow.

"You really expect me to believe Fareehali damaged you because you made fun of her a bit? You liar. She would never hurt you, or anyone else for the matter, for simple name-calling, especially made in good fun."

After all, all she did was pout and look mortified herself for not realizing it when her HSI teammates had called her out on that exact thing just two days ago.

Mccree's grin only enlarged.

"You didn't let me finish, doll. She did just go 'ha-ha' at that, but then she made the mistake of telling me about the two of you." He took a pause for dramatic effect and then waggled his brows. "Turns out she really is a blue falcon after all, just not in the way the name is supposed to be used. And the same applies to you, doc."

She furrowed her brow and pondered over his words, unclear as to what he was hinting at.

Blue Falcon meant someone who betrayed their teammates, right? A buddy fucker.

A buddy fuck-...er.

Buddy fucker.

Buddy.

Fucker.

Oh.

She felt a flush crawl up from her neck as she registered the implication all at once. Her mouth hung open as she gaped at him, words failing her in a sadistic act of betrayal. Gone when she needed them most. She needed to say something. Anything. Anything to wipe that smarmy victorious look of Mccree’s face. Instead she continued to gape like a fish.

Flailing and panicking, her fight or flight response activated. And in this case, the fight response.

She smacked him.

“Oof! Hah. Hit me all you want, but you know I ain’t wrong.” He said with a knowing smirk. His eyebrows pumped upwards twice. “Bet you thinking of doing it with her right now, aren’t ya?”

She wasn’t, but after he said those words she could imagine Fareeha naked above her, a heated look across her face that darkened her cheeks as she stared at her with desire. Eyes sharp and deadly and glazed with lust. The way her body would land on hers, roughened hands gripping her own, keeping her still as she descended, exploring her body with her mouth and her hands and oh god, she was daydreaming-

“Sh-shut up!” She shrieked and smacked him again, this time harder. “That’s none of your business!”

Angela fumbled for the folder of documents that had rested beside Mccree, preparing to walk away.

That’s right, what was she doing fixing him up? She still had to upload these very important documents into Athena’s server for a digitized copy of it to be distributed everywhere. Sure she was helping Delaney, but she should have assigned someone else to fix Mccree up. He was also a good friend, it was more professional this way after all, for him to be treated by somebody else-
“Now where do you think you’re going, doc? My checkup’s not done.”

“Ask someone else to do it!” She yelled as she headed straight for the doors. She winced internally at the shrillness of her voice, the way it squeaked out feebly. Her mind was still racing with dirty thoughts of her girlfriend. She clutched the documents harder to her chest as she continued trying to will the images away. She forced herself to think about her work. The importance of her work, how much she had accomplished so far and what she would do next-

Her ears burned caught the trail ends of Mccree guffaw even as she entered the hallway.

She moved briskly towards the research lab, side-stepping personnel at the halls with ease and waving away their worries that she looked a little under the weather and should really be walking in the other direction, back into the med bay. It was only when the doors to the private research lab opened and she walked into a still darkened room, only when the doors slid shut once more and she was alone with only her thoughts and her labored breathing, only then did Angela fully calm down. Only then did the blush on her face receded and the thudding of her embarrassed heart slowed.

She sighed and rested her back onto the closed doors, satisfyingly cold steel doors that pierced straight through her lab coat and satin blouse, cooling her warm back pleasantly.

Her throat bobbed.

Mccree was wrong. They weren't... 'Buddy fuckers'.

At least, not yet.

They hadn’t ever actually done it, but she couldn’t very well say that to refute him. She didn’t want nor would ever want him to be that privy to the personal matters of their relationship. He had no business to be burying his nose in it in any way, shape or form.

She shook her head.

Stupid Mccree, putting silly thoughts in her head. Simple bad timing, she reasoned to herself for her overreaction. She and Fareeha had been dating for almost a year by now and still they haven't went farther than innocent touches and only slightly intimate frisks before something got in the way. Exhaustion. An unintended work emergency. Dinner plans to an expensive restaurant...

Not that she was complaining about that night.

That was a lovely, lovely night.

Fareeha had looked so dashing with a fitting white dress shirt and navy blue slacks. The sleeves rolled up to her elbows, allowing taut forearms to be display, and not two but three buttons on top undone. Her engineering ring and the simple gold necklace around her neck a nice finishing touch to the whole ensemble. Angela had unabashedly swooned.

And dinner had been wonderful.

Perfect.

Angela could admit that sometimes she found high-end restaurants a little too stuffy, reminding her too much of dinner parties with smarmy politicians and associates with less-than-altruistic personal agendas, but with Fareeha across from her at the table she finally saw the appeal.

And after dinner... Well, she was sure something would surely happen after. Surely.
All the signs seemed to be there.

The flirty touches during dinner, the way Fareeha’s normally soft eyes would smolder whenever Angela pushed the envelope. Like when she slid her leg up her calf under the table, or stare at her with half-lidded eyes as she drank her wine. Or later after that, when they were on the way back to Fareeha's apartment, pressing the swell of her breasts on Fareeha's arm purposely as she raked her fingers up and down her exposed forearm, whispering breathy sweet-nothings into her ear...

The guttural groan that escaped Fareeha as she said something particularly salacious.

This was it, she had thought. When they got back home...

But then fireworks. Beautiful, beautiful fireworks that utterly distracted them and made them sit their bums on a nearby bench to watch it all unfold. After that they sat there for a long while, simply indulging in each other's presence, a warmth in their bellies not only caused from the wine they drank earlier on. By the time they got home, they had both fallen asleep before anything happened, too tired to do anything else but as the alcohol and fatigue of the day seeped in, cutting the night short. The next day, she already had to go back to GSM.

There just never seemed to be a good time.

She sighed.

Did lady luck have something against her?

Angela looked down at the documents in her hand.

In any case, she had a job to do right now. Enough with these intrusive thoughts for now.

Angela switched on the lights, grimacing as her eyes took a few seconds to adjust to the newfound brightness of the room before walking over to the scanning machine. She pulled out the tray and dropped the stack of documents neatly on top of it after removing the staples and metal clips that bound the research together. In this day and age, her method of pen and paper for her research was slightly archaic, but she always found inspiration faster when she worked by hand, somehow spurred by the feeling of ink leaving her pen and the grain of textured paper. She sat on a nearby rolling chair and waited as the scanner pulled the papers into it from the tray at a blinding speed, passing each one through the white light screen that allowed the contents to be digitized. In a matter of moments, the scanner had finished, a light next to it flashing green.

She pulled out the tray and placed the files back neatly into the folder. Overwatch may want the records in digital copy only, but she always made sure to keep a physical copy of some kind to be kept at her office just in case. At least with her own work.

The doors to the research lab hissed as it opened. She turned around.

"Angela, it really is you! I heard you had come back. It's so nice to see a friendly face."

She laughed incredulously as Mei bounced over to her and grabbed both of her hands. A good-natured smile formed on her lips as she looked Mei up and down.

"Mei, you haven’t aged a day. What's your secret?"

It was meant to be a playful tease, but when Mei flinched her smile immediately slipped. She backtracked.
"Oh I didn't mean anything by it..." She grasped for straws as Mei seemed to sag further. "Did you come back with McCree? Are you a combatant now?"

Mei visibly relaxed at the change in topic and Angela felt relief flood in her. She liked Mei, but she certainly was never that close to the woman so it would do no good to rub her the wrong way so soon after reconnecting. Doubly so as friends were hard to come by when everyone at base seemed to look at her with stars in their eyes because she was the Angela Ziegler. Mei would be different, she too was a seasoned Overwatch agent and was equal in rank as her during the golden days of the organization.

"No, no. I came with the afternoon team, we were doing some groundwork, checking out changes in our climate and everything. Still a lover, not a fighter." She paused, pushing up her glasses and flashing a smile. "The closest I get to the action is explaining to the combat troops how to use the geography to their advantage in their missions."

Angela smiled warmly. "That's wonderful news to hear. Overwatch was made to make the world into a better place and it's reassuring to know that this newly-reformed Overwatch will still keep up the non-fighting divisions that do their part to do so."

"Couldn't agree more." Mei said in a bubbly tone, the remnants of the uneasiness she displayed gone like it was never there. "How about you, Dr. Ziegler? Have you decided to just stick with research? I heard that you were going to be part of the strike team that goes on international missions across borders, but I wasn't sure if that was true."

Angela grimaced. That reminded her, she still needed to fix up her suit. Torbjorn had been wonderful help, explaining to her new bits of technology that was surely going to make whatever suit she designed excel and work at a higher performance rate than her previous one, but the problem at the end of the day design. They had went over design and design and as good of a mechanic as Torbjorn was, his aesthetic style was far too bulky, blocky or simply didn't click with her. Just short of the vision she had, whatever that was.

It still hadn't come to her.

"That's true, I am going back into the field. The problem is that I'd rather not use the old suit because it's a little defunct and tacky, but I haven't been able to figure out how I exactly want it to look like. Only how I don't want it to look like."

"Perhaps I can help? Design-wise I mean." Mei offered, bright-eyed and smiling.

Angela smiled back. "I'd love that. Come over here, I'll show you my scrapped designs and maybe we can work from there."

What did she have to lose anyways from accepting her help?

It was nice to have Mei as a second opinion.

Perhaps a feminine touch from someone other than herself was just what she needed.

Having Mei around helping her was nice. As a fellow scientist, her approach to the schematics of the suit was logical and orderly and she helped Angela get far, far closer to what she wanted her suit to have. They had yet to come up with a solid design, but they had made an itemized list of certain traits
that she wanted, which ones she would be alright with sacrificing, and which that she absolutely would not relent on. So far they had shortened the list to streamline, light-weight and the agreeance to sacrifice defense for maneuverability.

"Cryostasis."

The statement had come in a lull in their conversation, spoken so quietly she had almost missed it as it was almost drowned by the sound of her scratching her pencil on paper, jotting down another idea.

"But I'm not sure if I'd recommend it."

Angela furrowed her brows, not understanding what Mei was referring to.

Mei smiled weakly, an even feebler chuckle escaping her, sounding like air coming out of tires than any real laugh. Angela's heart constricted.

"The secret to my youthful appearance." she elaborated slowly, her voice wobbling just as much as plucked guitar strings. "The mission I had in Antartica went wrong, and the team from the rescue division just didn't show up. Everyone was put into cryostasis so we wouldn't starve, or die by the cold..." She paused and took a deep breath, but still her voice came out warbled and choked as she spoke her next words. "I was the only one to come out of it."

Angela could only watch as Mei set aside her glasses to wipe the corners of her eyes before placing them back on. She stayed silent for a while, digesting the words, feeling anguish for her colleague. She didn't think the other divisions in Overwatch suffered the way the combat divisions did, but apparently she was wrong.

"I'm so sorry."

Angela placed a comforting hand on Mei's shoulder in solidarity, wishing there were actually words that could soothe someone after a loss. When these words were parroted at her one after another at her parent's funeral she felt them hollow. Mei probably feels the same way right now. Still, there were no other words that felt appropriate.

"Mei... I'm so, so sorry."

"Don't be sorry Angela. You weren't part of the rescue division in charge of helping us. It wasn't your fault." Mei then shrugged. "Besides, things will be different this time around right?"

"...Yes. Yes, of course."

She hoped so. She wished so. She would do all that she could so it would be so.

But as she stared at the woman beside her, she saw yet another living image of what would happen if it didn’t and it scared her straight to the core. She smiled weakly as Mei looked at her enquiringly, as if sensing the churning dread in her gut that curdled the bile resting within it, and prayed that Mei didn’t see the shaking of her hand as she picked up the pencil to draw another schematic.

-------------------

Fareeha’s eyes lit up as she spotted a figure going down the hall.

The height, the build, the swish of a blonde ponytail and the irritated swipe at the bound hair when the tip brushed and tickled her pale neck were all things she knew intimately well. Fareeha's languid pace turned into a small trot.
"Angela!" Fareeha yelled as she caught up with her, smiling lopsidedly at the woman she now walked in time with. "You done with work for today, habibti?"

Angela craned her neck up, eyes drooping, pensive frown on her face.

Angela looked worn. Tired- No.

Troubled.

"Angela?" Fareeha said quietly, worry lacing her tone. "What happened?"

Angela's lips grew into an even thinner line. She scrunched her face as she chewed over her thoughts, then shook her head at Fareeha, once.

"It's nothing."

Fareeha frowned and Angela heaved in frustration. She waved her off.

"Don't worry, Fareeha. It's really nothing. God it's just- just-" Angela took a sharp intake of breath, nostrils flaring as she did so. She opened her mouth then made a sound that sounded almost like a scoff as she pinched the bridge of her nose, scrunching her eyes. "Just... Just drop it, Fareeha. Please."

"I didn't say anything."

"But I know you want to, but please... Not now."

Fareeha’s frown deepened and she reached out for her. "Alright, but you can't blame me for being worried-"

"I said it's nothing." Angela hissed as she slapped Fareeha’s hand away, the anger and frustration in her eyes quickly turning into shock and remorse as she realized her actions. "Fareeha I'm- I'm so sorry, I just..."

Fareeha stared at her slapped hand then back at Angela, then at the small squeak at the end of the hall.

Great.

One of the new recruits had decided to come to the wrong place at the wrong time.

Fareeha approached him with purposeful steps, keeping him captive with a sharp gaze. She landed a heavy hand on his shoulder, clapping him just shy of being painful. She leaned in close and though shorter by a good inch or two she could practically smell the fear from him as she stared at him dead in the eye with an unnervingly blank face that was tempered with steel.

"It's been a rough day for Dr. Ziegler." She said lowly, giving his shoulder a firm squeeze. "I would rather appreciate it if you don't go around telling people what you just saw."

He gulped, but otherwise did nothing. She raised a questioning brow. He kicked into gear at that, nodding profusely before saluting her – accidentally with his left hand first, before he promptly corrected himself, nervously sweating.

"Y-yes ma'am." he stuttered out. "I'll tell nobody." She jutted her chin past him. He nodded. "And I'll make myself scarce right now."
True to his word, he then swiveled quickly on his heel and went off the other direction, away from the two of them. Fareeha took a deep breath and then went back over to Angela. Angela was occupying herself with a staring contest with the ground as her hands were occupied by a black thumb stone she had bought as a replacement for the one Torbjorn gave.

"...Habibti." She said gently, speaking like Angela was made of frail glass. "Let's get out here, okay? Somewhere where there'd be no more prying eyes at least."

Angela momentarily stopped playing with the thumb stone as she digested her words.

After a significant pause, she nodded, still chewing her bottom lip to oblivion.

With pursed lips, Fareeha tentatively placed her hand on the small of Angela's back, breathing a small sigh of relief when Angela did not fight the contact, and started to guide her with a careful hand away to somewhere more private.

Angela stared at the mountains of boxes crammed to the end of the storage room, some half-opened, showing the contents inside. Mostly replacement parts for generators and other power equipment.

"What happened out there, Angela?"

Angela's left hand started to play with the thumb stone stuffed in her pocket once more. A fleeting thought passed her mind that she should buy another so both her hands could play with them in times of duress.

"Angela."

Angela sighed. Fareeha was patient and kind, but she was not one to be walked all over. Considering that Angela had lashed out at her for seemingly no apparent reason, it was fair she wanted an explanation. She took a deep breath, gathered her wits, gave a particularly long stroke of her thumb on the smooth stone and faced Fareeha. Fareeha was leaning on the door, a tactical move to block the only exit and entry of this storage room and force Angela to speak, unless she could miraculously find a way to shrink herself small enough to crawl through the bolted grates of the air ducts above. Angela wasn't sure if this was a conscious decision or not.

She smiled wryly.

Well, it didn't matter anyways, did it? She was stuck either way.

"Mei." She mumbled out almost stiltedly. The first word was always the most difficult to get out. Fareeha cocked her head. "I met Mei. She was a researcher that worked for Overwatch as a climateologist..."

Angela continued to speak. Mei’s story had struck a chord in her and Angela felt herself drowning once more in her fears as she was sucked into a whirlpool of terrible possible outcomes for the newly reformed Overwatch. It should have been impossible for Mei’s team not to have been rescued before they supplies ran out. There was no reason that they should have been in cryostasis as long as they were. Someone should've come. Someone should've been alerted. The only possible explanation for these things not happening...

It could only mean one thing, and the thought caused bile to rise to her throat.

Whoever was overseeing their project had deemed them not a priority. The lives of their own men
and women, not even on the battlefield, discarded so easily. Non-essential.

And when Overwatch disbanded?

Forgotten.

Fareeha pushed off the door and uncrossed her arms. She walked over to Angela, stopping just short of their toes touching. Her expression was grave and resolute.

"That won't happen this time. Winston is in charge and he would never. You know that, habibti."

Angela dropped her head, resting her forehead a little above Fareeha's chest. Her hands found Fareeha's hips and fisted the fabric of her shirt. She inhaled a strangled breath, still submerged in her doubts. She was in deep, deep water with no light to tell her which way was up.

"I know that." She finally croaked out, nuzzling further into Fareeha. A sliver of relief sparked in her as Fareeha placed a warm hand on her back, a lifeline of sorts. A small pocket of air in the dark depths she was in. "But it made me think of other things and I just-

"I've said it once, I've said it again, and I will continue to say it. Overwatch will be different. I will do all I can to make it so. I will never give up the fight to forge a path to a better future."

Angela whimpered, clutching the fabric of Fareeha's shirt harder, balling it up in her fists.

"That's what I'm afraid of." she whispered out. Fareeha stiffened. In a moment of courage, she dared to pull up from the safety of Fareeha's chest to look Fareeha in the eye. "What if you never give up and it all just goes wrong again? I can't..."

"You can't?" Fareeha prodded gently.

"...I can't lose you, Fareeha."

Not her as well.

She couldn't lose another person to this organization.

Overwatch had taken far too many good people. The explosion at the Swiss quarters was the culmination of all the problems, but the cracks showed long before that. At some point, Overwatch had strayed from its original path. At some point, Overwatch had its teeth pulled out as it tried its best not to step on the toes of anybody. And through it all, each faction of Overwatch was doing its best to save the dying organization, sacrificing their lives for it, fighting for a dream that no longer existed.

She stared at Fareeha's udjat. Her eyes prickled.

And Fareeha was a fighter who gave it as good as they got.

"You're strong, resolute, and you're capable of so much Fareeha, but..." She took a haggard breath, "But sometimes things can't be saved. Sometimes things fail and you, as much as I adore how driven you are, might not be able to see that and let go if things start to fall to the point of no return in this newly reformed Overwatch." Her face crumpled. "That you'd stay even stay when the best option is to go, blinded by the dream and the belief that you can change things around."

She knew she sounded like a broken record by now with her doubts. The same thing over and over again, but she couldn't help it. She just couldn't banish that niggling worry buried deep in her heart.

"I can." Fareeha grunted out firmly. "I can leave, I mean. If things go south. To the point of no
Angela licked her lips and offered a sad smile with a shake of her head.

"...I don't believe you." She said brokenly, then dropped her head back down.

Giving up did not seem to be part of Fareeha’s vocabulary.

She had seen how it almost ruined her when she pursued the Shrike in an obsessive manner first hand.

Angela buried her head in Fareeha's chest, pulling her impossibly closer with her hands, now grasping on Fareeha's shirt with grips so tight, it was sure to leave wrinkles and creases when she did release her hold on Fareeha's shirt. Fareeha wrapped her arms around Angela's frame tightly, squeezing back before her hands moving up and down her back, strong digits pressing into her in soothing ministrations.

"Angela..." Fareeha murmured into the top of her hair after a minute. Or maybe two. Or more. Angela didn’t know, nor was she counting. "Have you ever thought about why I left the army?"

It seemed to be grossly out of topic.

"I mean, I was on the path to becoming someone big. Notable." Fareeha continued on. "Yet I threw it all away to become a security guard at a PMC. Worked all the way from the bottom once more."

Angela frowned. She had indeed, never thought about it.

Why did Fareeha leave the army? When she did indeed have such a promising future?

She raised her head again, craning upwards to lock eyes with Fareeha in rapt attention.

It was rather curious.

"The answer is simple." She tapped at her right cheek twice, on the ink of her udjat. "I'm a protector."

Angela frowned and Fareeha smiled toothily.

"A soldier's duty is to protect and serve..." Fareeha then grimaced, "But unfortunately it sometimes deals more with the 'serving' than 'protecting' part." She huffed, softly swearing in Arabic. "I can't count how many times I was in wars and battles that had less to do with helping civilians and more with politicking and the greed of war profiteers that had sway in the Egyptian government." She muttered with a bitter smile. Her eyes then shone with fire. "I wanted to do more. Be more. I wanted to do what I was all meant to do."

"...Protect." Angela finished.

Fareeha nodded.

"Protect." She affirmed. "HSI beat the military by a whole lot there. Sure, I've had my fair share of jobs that have nothing to do with the peace of the world, or even just Egypt for the matter, but at least I could say at the end of the day with a hundred percent confidence that I did, protect. I wasn't a part
of any meaningless war or battle over assets, or land, or something just as trivial."

Fareeha's hands rested on Angela's hips and they felt like anchors tethering her back to land.

"Nothing, and I mean nothing, has changed now. I joined Overwatch to better fulfill my goal - to protect. Ideally, now I can do it on a global scale and not have to waste at least a few days babysitting some rich man’s child every couple months. That's all I'm here for. To protect the innocent. If Overwatch fails to become the organization it was supposed to be and devolves into something unsalvageable, I will leave. I will leave."

"...It's not that easy to leave once you're attached." Angela muttered.

She knew that far too well.

"Well, that's why I'm so lucky to have you." Fareeha said quietly, her smile turning bashful. She rested her forehead against Angela's, staring straight into Angela's irisis with love and a promise. "We are in this together and if I ever go on the deep end, reel me back, habibt. As I will for you."

Angela blinked. Fareeha's smile broadened. She flashed a wink.

Angela laughed, heart feeling light at the silly gesture that came out of the blue. She was a drowning woman no more, pulled back to the surface by the simple truth within Fareeha's words. She made it sound so easy. Angela reached up and cupped her face, stroked her udjat with her thumb and drank in the seriousness in her gaze. But it was so terribly easy to believe that it really was that simple when the words came from Fareeha’s mouth herself.

The woman was not a liar and always meant what she said.

"I will." Angela breathed out, a promise of her own of sorts. "I will always reel you back."

Just as Fareeha would with her.

___________________

She had stepped outside with Torbjorn for a break. To take a small breath of fresh air and stretch their backs. By some stroke of luck, they had come out just in time to see Fareeha land from the sky above, the ground shaking from her grand entry. Her gilded armor glinted in the afternoon sun and Angela's breath caught in her throat as Fareeha sent a dazzling smile her way.

Her hand reached out instinctively to tap at Torbjorn's shoulder, eyes still trained forward.

"I got it, Torbjorn. The vision for my suit."

Fareeha took of her helmet, shaking her locks free as she talked freely with an ecstatic Mccree, who was witness to the whole thing she guessed. It must have been a wonder to see her jet off high in the sky in that new suit of hers.

(She can't seem to stop staring, Fareeha looked so damn heroic)

"Well? Out with it, lass. We haven’t got all day."

The idea was right in her face all along. She pointed at Fareeha. The words she had spoken the day before ringing in her ear.

_We are in this together._
She needed to be able to watch Fareeha’s back. Just as she with her.

“Her. It needs to match with Fareeha.”

Chapter End Notes

Angela gon be her guardian angel.
(Only one more chapter left for this Part 1, my dudes. Hella)
A New Beginning

Chapter Notes

Everyone look at this piece of fanart I got (Patrick voice: LOOK AT IT. LOOK AT IT). It is amazing.
^Give'em a like, reblog or just a nice comment in the replies if you got a tumblr and time ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was a reason that Fareeha didn't like bets.

"Oh man, oh man. Just look at her go." Jesse said aloud with a low whistle that ran for far longer than necessary. She ignored him the best she could, knowing his statements were made less in glowing appreciation of Lena and more as goading remarks at her. "Girl's as quick as the wild hares that ran around the outskirts of my hometown."

She clicked her tongue twice, a small tell of her building frustration, as she found herself unable to deny the truth in Jesse's words. Lena was certainly fast. She seemed to weave seamlessly through the circuit, speed not breaking once as she ran in pursuit of the finish line; an icy blue trail marking where she had been like a visual testament to her prowess, documenting each successive turn and twist.

And she did it all with a bounce in her step.

(even as one projectile got harrowing close to shaving the side of her head)

Fareeha smiled, briefly, at that.

That was something she could relate too. Gaining an exhilarating rush when placed in hazardous situations and excelling where others would falter or shirk from the degree of danger. It wasn't that she was careless or reckless, she was a good soldier and took her job seriously (too seriously some of her colleagues might say), but she could not deny that thrill that bubbles in her gut and the excitement that rushes through her veins when the odds are stacked spectacularly against her and the danger is at an all-time high.

That was what she had in common with Lena – not that she had expected any different. Lena was formerly a fighter pilot after all, and of all the military divisions, the men and women in the Airforce always seem to have the biggest set of stones. One clip to the wing could bring them to instant death and anyone willing to chance that risk to fly the skies had to be at least a bit of a daredevil.

Same logic applied to anyone who flew a Raptora suit.

"She's just incredible. Just... Wow." Her eye twitched, remembering the fact that Lena was demolishing the course was not a good thing for her wallet. Jesse chuckled, the gravel in his tenor pronounced. "You're going to lose this bet by a landslide, but hey, don't you worry your pretty head. I'll spend your money wisely."
He paused. A puff of smoke entered the corner of Fareeha's vision.

"Maybe on a good whiskey?"

Fareeha resisted the urge to turn her head or so much as glance at Jesse, not caring to witness the chesire grin he was undoubtedly directing at her. She could practically hear the gears in his head turn as he dreamed of what brand he would buy with her hard-earned money. Fareeha grumbled and tilted her head a little to the left as she continued to observe Lena, tapping her own bicep with two fingers as she watched, arms still crossed. Her eyes flickered to the next obstacle, one that Lena was surely to hit in less than fifteen seconds if she continued with her blinding pace. And then the few ones after that one with the same calculating eyes.

"No." She finally said with a shake of the head. "You're wrong."

Lena’s not going to beat her.

"And how do you know that, King Tut?"

"Quit calling me King Tut."

Taking off her shirt and leaving it on her head did not make her look like arguably the most famous pharaoh in Egyptian history. It was just coincidence that her shirt was striped in the colors of the Khat headress, her shorts were white and yeah perhaps, if one squinted it looked like the world's cheapest cosplay of a pharaoh, but that was only if one squinted.

"No. Anyways, again: how are you so sure, King Tut?"

Or in this case, was just an ass.

"Just watch, Jesse."

If the course was all about agility, Lena would have won and won by a mile. Unfortunately for her and luckily for Fareeha, the key to the circuit also involved some heavy lifting and sheer explosive power. The sort of strength that Lena just didn't have enough of, as quick on her feet as she was. The corner of her lips twitched when Lena fumbled and then started to struggle with the ropes. By the end of completing that particular course, Fareeha herself had been left a little winded, arms feeling like they had waded through wet sand. Tired, aching and perhaps slightly shaking, though she would rather lick a dirt road clean before revealing that to anyone on this earth. She glanced at Jesse, a ghost of a smile on her lips when his eyes narrowed and a distinct scowl came onto his features as Lena slowed, a slow inkling entering his dark eyes.

"Don't look so sour." Jesse tilted his hat to get a better look at her from where he sat. She grinned at him, all teeth and no compassion. "She might not beat me, but she'll still beat you."

She then looked away, focusing her attention back on Lena, only relishing Jesse's further mood through the sound of the distinct breath of air he exhaled. Long, drawn out, and tinged with gravelly aggravation. She heard a jingle, the rustle of coins hitting each other as Jesse rummaged his pockets for them. Historic trinkets he was allowed to bring home from his last mission. The next thing she knew, Jesse had rammed his fist into her side, digging it into her hip painfully. Fareeha could only smile at the childish action and uncrossed her own arms to grab his hand. Her eyes still tracked Lena's progress as she unfurled (or rather, pried) his clenched fist open to take her winnings.

The gold had a nice weight to it. It was hefty in her hands.

And felt better still in the pockets of her shorts.
"Lena's not done yet, y'know." She said, after dropping all of them in her pockets.

"That might be the case, but I know as well as you do, she ain’t beating you at this rate," Jesse readjusted his hat to cover his eyes from her sight, shoulders sagging in resignation. “I know when I’ve lost.”

Fareeha chuckled and patted her pocket twice, making the coins rattle once more against each other. Jesse huffed and jabbed his elbow at her. This time she dodged with a quick step back.

“You’re a sore loser, Jesse.”

"And you’re a boastful winner, bargain brand King Tut."

Her hand itched, wanting to rise and yank off her shirt off her head to stop all these jabs about her being the deceased pharaoh, when she relaxed her hand, deciding better of it. Doing so would just mean handing Jesse a small victory; that he had gotten under her skin in some way, despite his apparent loss. She shoved her hands in her pockets and indulged in the feeling of the golden coins to placate her. His little spoil from the last mission he received was hers now anyways, and boy did it feel good in her hands.

"At least she isn't playing dress up 365 days of the year, Mccree."

Fareeha smiled and turned to face the intruder, resulting in giving Jesse nothing more than the view of her backside. She ignored the way he grumbled.

"Angela."

Angela's eyes crinkled, a soft smile playing on her lips.

"Fareehali."

Fareeha folded her arms and subtly flexed, puffing her chest a fraction as she peered down at Angela. She smirked as Angela unconsciously licked her lips as she drank in Fareeha's frame, eyes suddenly finding everything under Fareeha's neck to be fascinating. And when Angela paid particular attention to her exposed arms and abdomen, Fareeha suddenly felt like a king.

And it wasn't because of the shirt on her head.

"Like what you see?"

Angela righted herself in a stuttering fashion at her inquiry, realizing she was staring and caught in her staring. Her mumbles soon turned to resigned laughter alongside a good-natured shake of her head.

"I certainly do." She admitted softly, raking her eyes one last time over Fareeha’s naked torso before glancing up to look at Fareeha through her lashes. "You should be like this more often."

Fareeha raised a brow, a lopsided smile appearing on her face. She uncrossed her arms and placed her hands in her pockets casually.

"What? Half-naked and sweaty in front of you?"

"Yes, well..." Angela licked her lips, a coy smile crossing her pink lips. "No, not really. Only if I'm the cause of it."

Fareeha chuckled, another quip on the tip of her tongue when Angela chewed her bottom lip and
shifted slightly in place. Fareeha also picked up an almost imperceptible tightness of Angela’s shoulders. Her brow creased at the micro-gestures. Angela was nervous, but of what or what for, Fareeha was not sure. She didn’t think it was over something bad though, not with that glimmer of anticipation hiding beneath the uncertainty washing over Angela’s blue eyes.

"Angela?" She asked. Warmer this time. Less teasing.

Hearing her name seemed to spur Angela to speak once more, though her eyes still flashed with nervous delight.

"I have something I want to show you. Are you free later on?"

Fareeha mouth quirked at the corners.

"I am now."

Angela’s tickled laughter at her on-the-fly cheesiness felt better than Fareeha had thought it would.

"Wow." Jesse said, his voice filtering through the background, "You really forgot I’m right here, huh? Wow, King Tut, forgot about dear old little me-"

Without turning around, Fareeha yanked off her damp shirt off her head with her left hand and whipped it fast over her right shoulder.

She hoped it would smack Jesse on the face.

Angela let out a gasp, hands flying to half cover her mouth as she laughed madly at the damage Fareeha had done, taking turns between looking past her and at her, glee radiating off her in waves.

Fareeha grinned wildly.

Angela’s reaction and the muffled grossed out shriek she heard behind her told her all she needed to know.

It most definitely had.

It has already been two weeks since she first used her new Raptora suit, but still the excited jitters entered her stomach whenever she clicked the systems on, heard the whirring of the technology in her ear and saw the dashboard at the side of her visor come to life.

‘RAPTORA SYSTEMS: ONLINE’ it always read before showing her vitals and other relevant information.

Fareeha rolled her shoulders, reveling in the shifting of the metal plates on her torso as she did so, sliding in perfect unison and at ease with her movements. The suit was certainly heavier than the old one, yet in some ways it felt lighter - weight more evenly distributed throughout her body rather than bunched up at certain areas. Particularly the wings, where instead of cylindrical monstrosities they were replaced with four clean blade-like thrusters that acted as counterweights to each other.

She flexed once more.

Not even the cold drafts that whipped at her exposed jaw could sour her good mood right now.

Fareeha scanned the area around her, tinted yellow by her visor. From her vantage point, high above
at the tallest cliff where even the Gibraltar monkeys found difficulty reaching, she noted that not many agents milled about outside the walls of the watch point. Granted, there was not much too see, considering they were the only inhabitants on this small island, but Fareeha had expected a larger turnout to be relaxing on a rooftop or outside.

The air was crisp and cool, and the sun was still out to warm the skin.

Yet all she saw though was only a handful of agents stationed on guard at various rooftops and a few people out on a smoke break. The former would have been disconcerting to her if she did not remember that they technically weren't supposed to be in operation.

(it would be strange if some passing ship saw many people keeping guard of a supposedly abandoned base for a supposedly defunct organization)

It had been twenty minutes past the time that Angela wished for a meeting and she was frankly, bored. Fareeha drummed her fingers idly on the side of her leg, wishing she had brought out her rocket launcher out to play as well. She shouldn't have hesitated to take it with her, despite Angela only specifying her to use her Raptora suit. Instead of being stuck occupying her mind with nothing but her thoughts, she could have wasted it away executing a few flair tricks she was taught in HSI for commemorations and celebration events. Arguably more fun, with the added benefit of keeping her hand-eye coordination up as well.

Just when she felt like indulging in a spontaneous urge to drop off the side cliff and kick on the thrusters last minute and jet back up, she heard steps behind her. A clacking of heels and a certain footfall she had unconsciously learned to recognize.

Fareeha turned, eyes catching the sight of blonde hair before anything else.

"Ange-"

The rest of her words die as she fully turns. She stares and stares and stares, wordlessly drinking in her girlfriend, unable to rip her eyes off her. Fareeha had known that Angela was creating a new suit, had went as far as to venture in her mind that the reason for this meeting was because she wanted to show her new suit.

And she wasn't wrong. Angela was clearly donning a new suit.

But what she had not accounted for, was how different it would be from the old one.

She had expected a simple calibration of the old Overwatch blue she wore. The one with needles and utility belt and the cute little mushroom beret, though Angela would get flustered and blustered at her saying such a thing (she still stood by her stance though; the beret really was cute). The suit Angela was currently wearing in front her was new in all kinds of ways. Fareeha couldn't recall seeing anything remotely similar to this one in any official picture nor any unofficial pictures Jesse (or her mother, or Gabe or whoever) would send. It was predominantly white, with bits of orange and black and yellows, and far more streamline than her old one.

"What do you think?" Angela asked after doing a quick twirl, lifting off lightly with a hover of her beating wings, gently landing back on earth with a soft step. There was a shaky, but expectant, smile on her face. “Fareeha?”

Fareeha said nothing. Instead she took a step forward. And then another. And then one more.

She kept going until she was right in front of Angela, peering down at her. Fareeha cocked her head when she noticed that Angela was somewhat hunching, brow creasing as she tried to discern the
reason for her strange behavior, before she realized that Angela was trying to lock eyes with her from beneath the visor. She smiled and brought her hands up to the sides of her helmet, clicking the switches on either side to let her lift the visor up so Angela could see her eyes unobstructed and without semi-crouching.

"Better?"

Angela nods, appreciation washing over her face. Fareeha glances down to Angela's hips. She didn't have a utility belt anymore. Strange. Where was Angela keeping all her extra tools? Her eyes moved to look at her new caduceus staff, lips drawing into a thin line as she looked across its length, attempting to spot hidden compartments.

She could not see any.

Then again, maybe she just didn't know where to look and they did exist.

Fareeha's musings were brought to a halt by Angela clearing her throat.

Her eyes snapped back up.

"So… Can I take your ogling as a testament to you liking it?" Angela said in a tone meant to be teasing.

Fareeha though, hears the way the corners of her words are tinged with a slight apprehension.

"I think you look incredible." She murmured with honesty, hiding none of her awe. Her hand lifted to trail along the curve of the top of Angela's left wing, while her eyes drifted all over both wings as she moved behind Angela to gain better access to them. Her mouth quirked as Angela's wings became lively; twitching and moving in time with her touches. When she traced a finger along near a particular ridge of Angela's spine where the wing connected, the wings fluttered accordingly. Fareeha chuckled, thoroughly amused. "Is that you, ya amar?"

She hears Angela make a small noise, and Fareeha did not need to see her face to know she is embarrassed.

"Yes. The wings react quickly to my desires. That includes emotions."

Fareeha stopped feeling the wings out and took a step back. She grins as she catches the subtle ostentatious flair Angela incorporated; the caduceus design that went up her back and was finished off with her wings.

"I also can feel when people touch them – a somewhat tenuous link created between me and the wings is formed. It won't hurt if someone pulls them out, but it will tingle unpleasantly. Like when one hits their funny bone."

Fareeha steps around to face Angela's front.

"I won't let that happen." she states firmly to Angela’s face, and frowns when Angela laughs at her.

A retort is on the tip of her tongue when she is all but stopped by the warmth of Angela's palm on her cheek as she cups her face with a gloved left hand, though she does frown further when Angela just keeps smiling beguilingly at her.

Fareeha huffs. She really was being serious.
"I know, schatz." Angela cooed (and Fareeha wonders if she was also responding to her unspoken statement). Tenderly, Angela stroked her udjat with her thumb briefly before pushing the skin of her cheek lightly upwards. "Now stop frowning and smile, okay?"

"Fine." Fareeha grumbled, then bared her teeth extra-wide in a sham of a smile. "Happy?"

Angela pats her cheek twice.

"Good enough." she grinned out cheekily and a genuine smile formed on Fareeha's face against her will at the tone and the happy glimmer in her eye.

"Anyways... A halo, huh?" She brings up, diverting the conversation away. She keeps Angela's eyes leveled on hers. "Cute."

As expected, Angela went red again. "I'll have you know it's functional and-

"More like extra."

A scandalized gasp escaped Angela at her remark and Fareeha quickly turned her torso to dodge a swipe from her. She catches Angela's hand as regained her balance, holding it up between them with a crooked grin plastered on her face.

"Careful, you might hurt yourself." She lets go of Angela's hand and bumped her own fist on her own chest plate twice. "I'm rock solid right now, habibti."

"I'm not extra." Angela mumbled hotly, crossing her arms.

Fareeha grinned madly.

"Really? Your old suit had needles on the wings, and I'm pretty sure they were simply decorative, unless you actually were-" Fareeha juts left repeatedly, leading with her shoulder- "Stabbing your teammates heals with your shoulder."

"Fareeha you stop it right now." Angela hissed, fully red now, trying to whack Fareeha once more.

(With her staff this time. Angela was learning.)

In one of her attempted blows, Fareeha grabs hold of her staff.

"Or this." She spouts, shaking the staff between them. "Used to be one gigantic needle right, ya amar?"

"I might change it back if you continue this," She said tersely as she wrenches the staff out of Fareeha's grasp and bonks the side of her head with it. "Just to stab you in the ass with that needle point."

They stare at each other with narrowed eyes, Fareeha nursing the spot where Angela whacked her and Angela holding her staff out threatening. And then they broke. Grinning and laughing at the sheer childishness they were displaying.

"I'm sorry, Reeha. Did it hurt?"

"Nah. It was nothing, I know you didn't put any real power into your hit." She stated reassuringly, before her smile turned sweet. "In all seriousness though, I actually do like it. A lot."

Angela laughed again, and this time her wings raise - she looked like she is practically glowing from
her declaration. Fareeha bit her lip at the dazzling sight.

"Anyways," Fareeha said slowly, hating to ruin the mood, but knowing that they should get to business before sundown. "You called me up here not just to see your suit, but so we can try a test-run together right?"

Angela nodded.

Fareeha pulled her visor back down. She looked over the cliff's edge and frowned. The ocean was volatile today, and the way the waves crashed violently against the cliff side was rather intimidating.

Also, they had never flown together. It would be far too risky.

"....Maybe not this way."

Angela looked over the cliff edge as well.

"Agreed." Angela turned and clicked a switch near her halo. A barrier comes out of it, sliding in front to cover the upper half of Angela's face, appearing to be made of the same technology as Reinhardt's shield. Angela points at one of the rocky pathways to get up to this cliff. "How about an easy downhill?"

Fareeha simply blinked, gawking at her. Angela rolled her eyes.

"Don't look so surprised. I did say the halo was functional. And by the way? This new screen for one is really made for you. If I follow you without some sort of eye protection, I'll get a bad case of dry-eye, since you're always high in the skies."

Before she could respond, Angela pulls her by the hand in front of her, then gives her another push so she stumbles forward a few more inches.

"Enough talking for now." Angela exclaimed from behind her, voice oozing with anticipation and pent up energy. "Let's do our first test-run."

And hearing the eagerness in Angela's tone, Fareeha got out of her funk and readily complied. She turned on her thrusters and suppressed a noise of surprise as she was enveloped in blue. She turned her hands over and felt awestruck at the feeling surging all the way to her fingertips.

"That's my damage boosting stream." Angela quipped and Fareeha could only nod mutely.

Of course it was.

"Blue's really my color." She murmured before taking her first leap forward.

Angela easily trailed after her.

Despite that, progress is slow at first, with Fareeha hesitant to go more than a few meters and in relatively easy paths, gauging the abilities of Angela's Valkyrie suit. Then as time went by and she saw well Angela was doing with the admittedly easy maneuvers, Fareeha grew bolder. She weaved and jump-jetted almost erratically to discern the extent of the capabilities of both her suit and Angela's with more complex fare. Angela's offhand comments all-the-while, ranging from professional and clipped to teasing and mirthful, were helpful as she could see things Fareeha could not.

"I think we're ready." Fareeha finally said, after they found their footing. They had been flying only
a couple meters up in the air so far, but when the time came, she knew she would never be so low to
the ground. She pointed upwards. "Let's go into the skies, shall we?"

"I was beginning to think you'd never ask." Angela said wryly, before flashing an encouraging smile
as Fareeha turned her head to look at her. "Go on. Fly high Fareeha."

And at the sound of Angela's permission, Fareeha turned back around and took off, keeping the
fluttering of Angela's wings behind her in mind as she shot up straight into the sky.

Three more days pass (three more training sessions under their belt), before they are called for a
meeting about the inevitable.

Their first mission.

Strike team was to be deployed to destroy a Talon base situated in the Andes of all places. Details
would be explained further in the aircraft.

“Wheels up in 40.” Winston said while adjusting his glasses. “Um, dismissed.”

Angela packed quickly.

Winston was wiping his glasses with a cleaning cloth.

"Angela, you've already read the file over at least thrice. I know your reading speed."

"Mmm," Angela hummed non-committedly, eyes skimming the mission details once more. Talon
had certainly upped their game, considering how subtle the location of this recently discovered base
was, it was surprising that local authorities had even spotted it. Yet, after months of surveillance, the
amount of operations coming out of this presumably small hidey hole was far more entangled and
extensive than Angela could have imagined.

Why couldn’t terrorist organizations be good and just regress rather than progress?

"Angela." Winston repeated, disapproval in his tone. “You’re fretting.”

She sighs and tears her eyes away from the report and hands the tablet back to him.

"I'm not fretting. I’m just... mapping, Winston." She avoids his eyes as she spoke, focusing instead
on her hands. She was fretting. "I want to get it right. I want it all to go... right."

"You need to believe, Angela." Winston said with a sigh, and she knows he isn't talking just about
the abilities of the team. "Local Overwatch operatives have double-checked the data. This is a true
danger, we aren't chasing mice."

Angela breathes in a heavy sigh and nods. She gets up and stretches and starts to walk away, halting
for a moment to smile appreciatively at Winston.

"Thanks Winston, I'm going to go and talk to Fareeha, okay? Maybe she can help take my mind off
things."

Winston smiled back. "That seems like a wonderful idea."
Angela waved him goodbye and made her way to the small corner of the aircraft where Fareeha lounged, arms crossed, eyes closed, and only the leg armor of the Raptora suit donned. She plopped down unceremoniously beside her. Fareeha barely twitched at her action, eyes still fully shut. She almost would have believed that Fareeha was actually asleep, if not for the small lift in the corner of her mouth.

"You're rather blasé about this." Angela starts off simply. "Not even wearing your whole suit yet, despite the fact that ETA is in 30 minutes."

Fareeha shrugged, eyes still closed.

"Can't sit if I'm wearing my suit. The wings get in the way." She opens one eye to look at Angela. "Not everyone has lightweight wings that fold up neatly."

Angela leaned forward and let her wings splay out a little. She tilted her head down a notch and smiled coquettishly.

"Well then, maybe somebody's suit needs an upgrade."

Fareeha snorted then shook her head. "You're a mean one, Angela Ziegler. You know this suit is new..." A wicked grin enters her face. "...Angel."

Angela pouted and covered her face with her hands. "I thought you said you liked it."

She felt the couch shift and the strong hand on her shoulder and doesn't resist as the Fareeha pulls her into a side-hug. Fareeha places her chin on the top of her head as her hands wrap securely around Angela's shoulders.

"I do like it." She says, but Angela can hear the silly smile on her face. "But you really do look like an angel."

"And you're a blue falcon." She mumbles back pettily.

Fareeha laughs at that, and Angela feels the way her throat vibrates from her laughter. She pulls her head away to look at Fareeha and she finds the woman grinning crookedly. And only somewhat sheepishly.

"That is true." Fareeha said once her laugh tapered out. She released Angela and propped her head up by her hand, elbow resting on the cushions of the sofa as she sat turned towards Angela. "We got terrible taste, huh? The blue falcon and the angel. Weirdest couple."

Angela purses her lips to suppress her own laughter. She shrugs. "Maybe we can twist it around."

"How?"

She tilted her head side to side as she thought. Well, not really thought. Pretended to think.

When she had made the suit, she had thought it to also match Fareeha, but not solely in functionality. Not solely to be able to keep up with the way Fareeha would soar in the air.

"I don't know," She swallowed and inspected her cuticles. "I think we rather look like a falcon and a dove..."

"Huh." Fareeha tilted her head, eyes flickering up as she pondered over her words. She then nodded. "I like that. I like that a lot." She stared at Angela in the eye. "Me and you. Falcon and dove. I like
"You don't think it's corny?"

"Oh it is." Fareeha said immediately, and Angela frowns. "But I'm a pretty punny woman, so who am I to judge?"

It took Angela a second.

"...That was bad, Pharah."

Fareeha suddenly sat up straight. "What?"

"I said that was bad, and if you're trying to refute that, you can't. Like honestly Fareehali-"

Fareeha cut her off with a wave of her hand.

"No. Not that. The other thing." Angela creased her brow. Fareeha snapped her fingers as she tried to find her words. "Pha... Pharah?"

"...Yes. Pharah." Angela started slowly. "Your call sign."

Fareeha creased her brows and shook her head. "No it isn't."

"Um, yes it is. It's in the file." Angela reaches over to grab a spare tablet, booting it up and opening the particular details on the subject labelled Agent: Fareeha Amari. She points to the box labelled call sign. "See?"

"Impossible." Fareeha breathes out, staring at the line. She then looks at Angela. "Did Winston choose this?"

Angela frowned and shook her head. "I don't think so. No."

Winston wouldn't have just assigned Fareeha an official codename. If Fareeha hadn't made one yet, he would've done the standard thing which would be to give a temporary codename, but not insert it into the official database, because it was far more difficult to change once it was in the official records. Once it was on official record after all, it was distributed to all active Overwatch operatives and not everyone had the time or capability to update their servers all the time, so it was a rather difficult process to change a name already locked in.

The couch dipped beside Angela.

"It wasn't Winston. It was me."

Fareeha narrowed her eyes. "Of course it was.... Jesse, why Pharah?"

"Uh, what the hell is a Pharah?"

"It's the codename you gave me." Fareeha said flatly.


Fareeha shoved the tablet into Mccree's hands and pointed at the alias.

"Oh shit. My bad." Mccree said, sounding not sorry at all. Fareeha looked nonplussed. "On the bright side, it adds character."
"Change it back."

"Too late." McCree chirped happily as he got up and started to walk away backwards. "Agents on the ground have already received your codename and it would be a bitch to change it now, it'll just get everyone confused."

Fareeha turned towards her. "Angela, is that true?"

"Unfortunately he's right, Fareeha." Angela bit her lip. "If it's any consolation, I think it's rather charming actually."

"Well..." Fareeha scratched the side of her cheek with her thumb. She glanced at Jesse’s retreating form, now already far ways off as he tapped at Lena’s shoulder and started to converse with their resident pilot. "Between you and me, I think it's a pretty cool codename as well actually. Not that I'm going to tell him that. In fact I'm going to kick his leg with my leg."

"Fareeha-"

"I know, my cybernetic ones might give serious damage to his organic legs, so I'll be sure to do it only after the mission."

That wasn't what she was going to say, but she stayed quiet and let Fareeha vent and chuckle at her own fantasy. At this point she was just playing the idea in her head just for kicks. It was one of those thoughts after all, that were pretty funny in theory and to entertain, but not to actually practice.

Well, she hoped, anyways.

"A reminder for agents Pharah and Mercy: please be ready in fifteen minutes." Athena's voice boomed out through the intercom. "You are both set to fly and scout the area first in twenty minutes."

Fareeha stood up and stretched her arms, before walking away to where the rest of the Raptora suit hung.

"Well, catch you in twenty."

Angela nodded and stood up herself, preparing to do some final inspections on her gear.

‘Alright.’ Lena shouts from the cockpit. ‘We're up about 10,000 feet in the air, are you sure your suits can take these high altitudes?’

‘Yes.’ She says herself, clicking on her personal commlink with Fareeha and turning on the screen of her halo. ‘Can you hear me, Fareeha- Pharah?’

‘Affirmative.’ Fareeha says from beside her, but her voice boomed in her ears. She lowered the volume a couple of notches. ‘I hear you loud and clear Mercy, and Tracer? We’re ready.’

Lena shrugs.

‘Alright, if you guys are sure.’ She said then flipped a switch.

They stood in front of the back door, waiting for it to open. It groaned as it slowly opened, revealing the snow-covered tops of the Andes.

‘Keep the skies clear for me?’ Angela murmured, mostly to pass the time as they wait for the door to
fully open.

Her eyes darted to Fareeha. Fareeha took a side-step closer to her, cocking her head in an angle that let Angela catch her eyes from beneath the visor. Fareeha’s udjat creases as her warm eyes crinkle and she flashes a grin at Angela.

“Let’s keep the skies clear… Together.”

The doors then fully open and Fareeha jumps out, twisting to turn to face Angela fully, beckoning her to follow with an inviting hand before dropping out of view. Angela immediately leaps after, free falling for a few seconds before clicking on the switch on her staff, connecting a blue stream to Fareeha and feels herself subsequently pulled quickly towards her. Her wings immediately splay out.

There is a moment of quiet as they make their descent towards the Talon base, like the world ceased to exist and there was only her and Fareeha.

And it is in that moment, 10,000 feet in the air and feeling both the blizzard winds and the waves of heat coming from the thrusters of the Raptora suit in front of her that Angela finds herself believing once more.

This time around, things just might work out just the way they were supposed too.

Chapter End Notes

And this story is finally done. :D

Thank you all for your support. I gotta be honest, this story became more popular than I had imagined. It's got a lot of oc's, slow and slice of lifey and Angela didn't appear until the what? 4th chapter? I really thought I would get only a handful of readers, so like wow. Thanks for the unexpected flood of support. I really do appreciate it. Really.

Thank you all who gave me encouragement in the forms of kudos, bookmarks or comments (especially comments, like so many of y'all are too good for me tbh. So sweet or kind or plain funny haha :P)

Also, this is a two-parter so I guess some of you may be thinking when part 2 coming out. Well, I'm going to take a little break, but latest the first chapter will be released is August 20th (pacific standard time).

Please [drop by the archive and comment](http://example.com) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!