A Spy Like Me

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A Spy Like Me

by colormeblue

Summary

After the Battle of New York, Grant Ward decides that he no longer wants Hydra to win its war with SHIELD and becomes a triple agent. Nick Fury gives him orders to work with Coulson's team in order to get valuable intelligence on Hydra but Grant finds his triple status and working with a team quite difficult.
The Black Shadow

Present Day

Grant Ward sat motionless on the plane with his head bowed. He didn’t look at the bodies of Agent Victoria Hand or the two guards. He also ignored the sounds of John Garrett telling his buddies stories (most likely lies and exaggerations) about his past exploits. One of the reasons Grant was looking down was so that no one could see him roll his eyes. Would the man never shut up? He’d always known that this day would come but it had arrived much sooner than he was prepared for. Or maybe he never would have been prepared. But, regardless of his wishes, Hydra had come out into the open and now he had to play his part and play it well.

A lot was riding on Grant’s ability to execute espionage as flawlessly as Agent Natasha Romanoff, otherwise known as the Black Widow, and he intended to live up to his promise. As he continued to ignore Garrett’s war stories, he idly wondered what his descriptive name should be. All the Avengers had one. He sneered at a few of their alter-ego names (Ironman sounded too cold, Captain America too cheesy) and Grant knew he could never pull off God of Thunder or the Hulk. However, a few of their names, like Hawkeye and the Black Widow, were pretty cool.

Of course, Grant was no superhero, but he still wanted a moniker. The Black Whisper might be appropriate – a scary voice, a frightening rumor, but one that was never truly there. That was a possibility but it made Grant uncomfortable. He didn’t like the idea of not existing; it was too close to the truth. Maybe the Black Shadow, someone who was lurking around the corner, always mysterious but not fully known. Yeah, that could work.

As Garrett’s voice droned on, Grant’s thoughts turned to the mission that lay ahead. He dreaded what he was going to have to do once they reached the Icebox and then the Fridge. Garrett expected that they would release the prisoners at the Icebox and then, later, lay waste to the Fridge facility, taking all the toys that were there and releasing all the inmates back into society. The mission parameters stated that they would merely incapacitate the guards who were loyal to SHIELD (which made sense as they could possibly turn some of them) but, knowing Garrett, there would be a body count. Grant was no stranger to killing – no specialist was – but he liked to avoid it whenever possible and today he would really like to keep from killing anyone if he could. But he couldn’t back down now. Too much was at stake.

When their pilot, Agent Simpon, notified them that they were almost to the Icebox, he set the plane on autopilot and met up with everyone else in the conference area where Garrett was going over last minute details. When there was a break in the conversation, Simpson asked, “What am I supposed to do with the bodies?” He gestured to where Victoria Hand and the two agents Grant had shot were lying off to the side.

Garrett sneered dismissively, “Dump them into the ocean.” “Sir?” Grant spoke up. “What if we use those bodies to send a message? Simpson could drop them off at the Hub and, just when SHIELD thinks they have another plane at their disposal, he could take off again. It sends the message that no one, not even a high level operative like Hand, is untouchable and that Hydra is not afraid of SHIELD, not when we’re willing to drop into the middle of their power base and then take off again.”

Garrett took a moment to consider and then a slow smile spread across his face. “Damn, you’re bad! I like the way you think, son!” He threw an arm around Grant’s shoulder. “Of course, you
Grant nodded and smiled coldly at the assembled agents. Their faces reflected envy, awe and some even managed professional blankness. Grant was grateful for his ability to quickly memorize all of their faces and names (which he had done automatically when everyone first boarded the plane) because now that they had noted Garrett’s preference, he would have to be wary of them. Hydra agents were all about power and how to get more of it for themselves.

Garrett faced Simpson directly. “You can do that, can’t you?” he asked in a genial tone.

Simpson swallowed hard. “Of course sir. Nothing to it!” Grant knew there was no way the guy would ever admit that he couldn’t do it even if such a maneuver was beyond his abilities. Hydra did not accept weakness.

Once at the Icebox, Grant was tasked with releasing Raina, or Flowers as Garrett insisted upon calling her. Grant entered her cell and had to admit that he got a small kick out of the way she backed up, clearly scared of him. After what she had done to Mike Peterson, that Scorch guy and Coulson, she deserved to be frightened. At first, he could see why Garrett got off on the power trip but then Grant’s usual disgust with the use of fear as a means of control took over. He’d experienced too much of being scared as a child to like doing that to others. So, he gave Raina her gift, collected her, and together they made their way to the barber shop in Cuba.

Although they talked little along the journey, Grant realized from their minimal conversation that Raina wasn’t a true believer in Hydra. It was obvious that she was searching for a higher purpose for herself and that Hydra – really just the Clairvoyant – was only a waystation for her. She waxed poetic about the Clairvoyant’s abilities, that he was gifted and could help with the evolution of the human race. Grant knew that the Clairvoyant’s identity was Garrett’s secret to tell, so he kept quiet during her words of praise, but he wondered just how Raina would react. He imagined that she wouldn’t be overjoyed but, like him, she would be stuck.

Grant would have liked to be the one to tell her what was truly going on – he thought he would relish watching her be disappointed – but John absolutely put his foot down. Grant could tell her nothing and that was infuriating to him. Garrett always had to be in control, always had to micro-manage things. He never trusted that others were competent. Grant admitted that this could be a reason that Garrett was still alive but he, Grant, had more than proven himself. Surely, after everything he had accomplished and all they had been through together, Garrett could trust him. Except that he couldn’t. Not anymore.
Flashback

For Grant, everything changed after the Battle of New York. Like everyone else on Earth, he was pleased and grateful that the alien invasion failed and the human race was, for now, left in peace. Grant had been in New York during the fight, so he saw first-hand what the Avengers had been up against and what, against all odds, they had achieved. He was proud of them and, for the first time since he was 15 years old, he wanted something for himself beyond completing the missions that both SHIELD and Garrett gave him. He too wanted to be a hero. He naively thought everyone in both organizations would want that as well.

However, in the days and weeks following the Battle, Grant realized that he was severely mistaken, at least about one of them. While SHIELD focused on the containment of alien technology, gifted individuals and damaging groups – thereby saving people and giving rise to opportunities for heroics – Hydra sneered at such work. Their leadership, including Garrett, made it quite clear that, in direct contrast to SHIELD, chaos was the order of the day.

Everything and everyone SHIELD attempted to contain, Hydra tried to use. They weren’t interested in helping the human race; they were interested in controlling it. After being around so many Hydra agents Grant considered stupid and self-serving, he began wondering if having them in a position of real power was wise. He started noticing that some good SHIELD agents, people he had known at the Academy and had worked with on missions, were dying in ways they shouldn’t be. It wasn’t often and it was subtle, probably undetectable to anyone else, but Grant knew it was because they were dangerous to Hydra. He even heard rumors about Hydra agents going after some of the Avengers, the very people who had saved the planet!

And if Hydra shouldn’t be in power, then Grant couldn’t obey John’s every command. At first, that line of thinking made him so uncomfortable that he immediately dismissed it. At least he thought he did. But the thought that perhaps John wasn’t correct in his desire to see Hydra succeed festered and Grant started getting irritated with John. It was little things at first, like John’s constant storytelling (with him always the star), his minimizing of Grant’s ability to think for himself, and his incessant touching. John’s touch was never sexual or inappropriate – usually it was a hand shake, back slap or an arm around his shoulder – but it didn’t feel affectionate or warm, more like a show of dominance. Grant recalled that his brother Christian used to touch him in the same way and it rankled just as much now as it did then.

Grant was careful not to let any of this irritation surface when John was around but it started eating at him and, eventually, he started questioning his loyalty to Garrett. Grant’s examination of John’s supremacy wasn’t big or very deep but there started to be cracks in the foundation of their relationship. Instead of blind obedience, Grant started asking himself questions. Maybe John wasn’t always right. How much did Grant actually owe him? He still believed in John, cared for him like a good son and was desperate to keep him alive but maybe there was another way besides letting Hydra win.

This went on for months until it all came to a head after Grant spent some of his SHIELD vacation time working with and helping train Hydra agents. The new agents were sent on a training mission where a few things went wrong. The mistakes weren’t anything serious and no one actually died but a few innocent people did get hurt. Grant was in the control room observing the mission and was less than pleased with the leadership’s assessment of the mission. They didn’t seem to care at all that people had gotten hurt. After the debriefing, Grant discovered that the new recruits didn’t
care either. In fact, many of them either joked about it or were annoyed that the people had gotten in their way. That night, he came to the realization that if Hydra agents were the ones who would be taking over SHIELD, he didn’t think he could stand it. So, after some serious deliberation and soul-searching, Grant went directly to Maria Hill and turned himself in.

Maria Hill had the reputation of being a no-nonsense, by-the-books agent, so Grant expected that she would imprison him and then subject him to numerous interrogations about Hydra. He was ready for that. However, things didn’t go as planned right from the beginning. Not only did Maria calmly listen to his story, but not once did she seem surprised or outraged. Grant had prepared himself for disbelief or even anger but not for her placid expression. In the face of such a lack of emotion, he started stumbling over his well-rehearsed speech, so much so that when he ended with a weak, “And that’s why I came to you,” instead of the planned crescendo of “I’m not a good man but I’m not evil enough to want Hydra to succeed,” there was complete silence.

Maria didn’t leap to her feet to summon the guards to deliver Grant to the Fridge or wherever else SHIELD was keeping prisoners these days while also screaming at him about morals and betrayal like he expected. Instead, she just looked at him steadily, scooted back her chair, stood up, and said, “I need to make a phone call. Stay there. I’ll be back in a minute.” She then left the room.

Grant was completely flummoxed and remained still in his chair, almost like he was paralyzed. He didn’t look around or move a muscle. None of this was going the way he thought it would. He was ready for the furious contempt and physical abuse he believed such a confession would elicit but he wasn’t prepared for Hill’s matter-of-fact approach and then being left alone. Grant almost felt let down.

As the seconds and minutes ticked by following Maria’s absence, he began getting worried. He initially figured that the guards would be showing up any moment, that her calm demeanor was a ruse meant to disarm him. If so, he was incredibly impressed with Maria’s skills because he doubted that even he could have maintained a straight face throughout his story. But as he kept sitting there and no guards came, Grant got increasingly wary. What is going on? Has Hydra somehow gotten to Hill? Instead of being locked up, was he going to be murdered and the delay was just the planning time for how best to do it? He even considered leaving but realized that he had nowhere else to go. So, it came as a distinct shock when Director Nick Fury himself came in with Hill and secured the room.

Although most people probably never have any, Grant considered that he’d had two life-changing conversations. The first was with John Garrett and took place in a juvenile facility when he was a teenager. That conversation removed him from his family permanently and set Ward on the path to become the Hydra agent that he was today. The second conversation was with Nick Fury. This time though, Grant was no longer a teenager and he had enough life experience to know at least some of what he wanted. And Nick Fury was no John Garrett. After all, Fury created the Avenger Initiative and was responsible for directing their first mission together. He saved people. And, miracle of all miracles, he wanted Grant to help him do it.

After they heard Grant’s story, Fury and Hill admitted to knowing about Hydra. Well, perhaps not Hydra specifically, but they had known that something was wrong within SHIELD. As such, they both had been hard at work making contingencies and trying to figure out what was going on, so Grant’s confession was a gift. As Fury explained, it both increased their intel and provided them with an invaluable asset if Grant was willing to become a triple agent.

Since he had no other plans, Grant could see the usefulness of such a strategy and he agreed. As any good specialist would, he shrugged off the danger involved and focused instead on the details. The three of them spent hours over the next few days going over dead drops, communication
protocols, mission parameters and future opportunities. They all agreed that Grant needed to continue to look as if he were following Garrett’s orders, so he would be assigned to Coulson’s mobile operations unit in several months. All of it was pretty routine except there was one thing that Fury absolutely insisted upon that surprised Grant.

“We need you in DC until you start your next assignment, so we will arrange for you to look as though you were injured on a minor mission and do your recovery here. During that time, I want you to complete an extensive therapy program with one of our psychologists who specializes in brainwashing,” Fury said with his typical direct stare.

Grant looked confused. “Brainwashing? But….”

“This is not up for discussion,” Fury interrupted. “If we’re going to be able to trust you, we need you to be physically and mentally prepared. If you don’t agree to this, then Agent Hill is prepared to take you into custody right now. So make your choice.”

Grant snorted a bit at the thought of therapy (specialists mostly considered psychological evaluations and counseling to be a bit of a joke) but he wasn’t about to mess this up by refusing to agree to it. Undergoing hours of talking about his feelings would be annoying but that still would be better than sitting in a cell not being able to help anyone.

That was how Grant ended up spending hours with Fury’s psychologist and discovering things about himself that he never knew. He was shocked to realize that he had indeed been brainwashed by John Garrett and that much of the trials and tribulations Garrett subjected him to – his isolation in the woods, the “near zero contact” policy, the beatings, and the killing of Buddy – were considered abusive. He also learned about just how much he had missed with regard to interpersonal relationships. Grant’s therapy had just started to explore the difference between Agent Ward the weapon and Grant the man when he got word that Agent Coulson’s mobile operations unit was ready to go and that, for the first time ever, he would be part of a team.
Quarterback Aspirations

Sure enough, Raina’s reaction to Garrett’s reveal of the Clairvoyant as a fake was just what Grant had expected. Before the big reveal, Raina appeared to be in the throes of some type of hero worship as she told Garrett, “It was your gift that showed me the way,” when he complimented her work with the Centipede program. Grant could tell that John loved that his deception had been so successful. He also knew that he was expected to join in on the joke when John looked his way after she mentioned his gift. So, he smirked a bit at John as he waited for the other shoe to drop.

Garrett tried to look serious as he told Raina, “Sorry, Flowers. I hate to disappoint you. I never had any gifts, at least not the kind you believed in. Just a very high level SHIELD security clearance and persuasive personality.”

*Wasn’t that the truth,* Grant thought as he continued to play his role as loyal acolyte and smirked again. He wondered where he would be right now if he hadn’t bought into John’s gift of persuasion. For sure, he wouldn’t be in some rundown barber shop in Havana listening to Garrett expound on his attributes. Grant guessed that Raina too would have to deal with her being sold a bill of goods not to her liking but he didn’t feel at all sorry for her. Raina had done some terrible things in her search for people with gifts. People had gotten hurt and some had even died. Now she was reaping the rewards. In watching her struggle to come to terms with her new situation, Grant’s smirk got a little more genuine.

However, Raina surprised him a bit when she chose to confront Garrett’s deception head on. “So you’re a liar. A fraud,” she said accusingly. Grant looked up at this and started to say something, to warn her that Garrett was not someone you made angry. He’d seen the results of his displeasure – felt the results himself – too many times not to want to avoid it. Yet John didn’t seem offended and Grant felt some respect for Raina, for her willingness to speak her mind. She would bear watching; if properly persuaded, maybe she could even be a kind of an ally.

When she answered, “To change the world” to Garrett’s question of what they set out to do, Grant heard the earnestness in her voice. Well, he too wanted to change the world, just not in the same way they did. And this is where the rubber met the road for him. Some ways of changing the world were good. Other ways should never see the light of day. That was why he was risking his life, to prevent things that never should be.

It took a while but they all eventually went below the barber shop to the underground Hydra lair. Grant was busy helping Garrett plan out their next round of attacks when his phone rang. He looked at the display and told Garrett, “It’s Coulson.” When John indicated that he should take the call, Grant took a second to put himself back into his Ward role, and then answered. He was a bit concerned that the call might get tricky, so he was both surprised and pleased to hear Skye’s voice. “I just wanted to let you know that Grant Ward no longer exists,” she informed him.

Grant experienced a weird moment of wondering, *Did I ever?* before sternly redirecting himself back onto task. Garrett was listening closely (he could almost feel his attention even though Grant had his back to him) and he could not screw this up! He and Skye exchanged information (his was mostly made up) while he reveled in the sound of her voice. What a warm, rich tone she used when talking with him. Perhaps he was fooling himself but he loved the fact that she cared about him enough to call and tell him what was going on. He wished he could be with Skye right now, talking to her in person rather than on the phone but that wasn’t his job at the moment.

“Wow! You took that surprisingly well. Did you hear the part about you no longer existing?” she asked.
“It’s not the first time my identity has been compromised,” he replied with a smile. If only she could know what an understatement that was! His identity had been compromised so much that Grant wasn’t sure if even he knew who he was anymore. They talked a little more and he found himself once again focusing on her voice. It softened when she told him that she would keep him posted and he would have bet a lot of money that she currently wearing a flirty grin.

“And when I see you next, who are you going to be? You’ve got a clean slate. You can be anyone you want,” Skye told him.

Grant was enjoying the interplay with Skye and he smiled when he heard her question but it still stung. If only he could be anyone he wanted, he would choose differently. He would be someone uncomplicated, someone who was beloved and looked upon as a hero. He would be someone who could love anyone he wanted (Skye!) and not be forced to betray those who loved him. If he could truly choose, he would be someone who was his own man, not someone who was lying to the girl he loved while his controller listened. With that thought, Grant once again recalled himself back to the task at hand.

“I don’t know,” he said lightly while frantically thinking of an answer that would satisfy both Skye and Garrett but for different reasons. “Maybe…Tom Brady. I’ve always wanted to play quarterback,” he said. Yes, he did always want to play quarterback because it would mean that Grant would be the one calling the plays. He could lead the team instead of having to run strategies devised by other people. He could be in control of his own destiny. Right now he was just a pawn and the thought of that hurt more than he could allow.

Skye totally believed his ruse and called him out about wanting to date supermodels. If only he could tell her that she was the only one he wanted; Grant couldn’t care less about supermodels. Sure, they might be nice to look at but he wanted someone who was smart, funny, kind and warm. The type of woman who could beat you at Battleship while teasing you about smiling, a woman who could understand who he wanted to be. But for right now, if her believing that he wanted to date supermodels was what it took for her to believe in him, then so be it. Grant smiled again because the rest of the call would be smooth sailing but he also wanted to give her at least some truth about himself while it was still safe to do so.

“No,” he replied carefully, “I mean the guy seems to have things pretty worked out.” How he wished he could say the same!

“Be careful,” Skye said in a serious tone.

Grant’s tone softened as he wished with everything he had that he could be there with her keeping her safe. “You too,” was all that he could manage with Garrett practically breathing down his neck. He hung up the phone, wiped the smile off of his face, turned and walked back towards Garrett. Grant took a seat in the corner and faced John.

“Tom Brady?” Garrett questioned with a snarky smile. “You hate the Patriots.”

Yes, he did. He hated anything that reminded him of where he grew up but apparently both Skye and Garrett bought into his answer in the ways that he needed them to. Grant was grateful for this but Garrett’s tone grated on him. Misrepresentations to Garrett were necessary but he hated having to lie to Skye.

“The Agent Grant Ward she knows doesn’t,” he replied in an irritated tone.

Garrett just laughed. “Yeah, that straight version of you is something else. I don’t even think Romanoff could pull that one.”
Grant felt torn. One part of him relished the idea of John’s praise (You have no idea what I can really do) but he also remained irritated. Garrett couldn’t conceive of what Grant had gone through, the trouble his machinations had caused the team. He was going to just let it go but somehow he just couldn’t. Grant didn’t want to make John angry but this was as good of a time as any to bring his feelings up and Raina’s brave confrontation was still fresh in his memory. He decided to ease into what he really wanted to say, “Well it wasn’t without its complications,” he said with an edge to his tone. Grant avoided eye contact for a moment and then stared directly at John.

“Oh, come on,” Garrett scoffed as he got up from his chair and distanced himself by walking away from where Grant was sitting in the corner. “You’re not still upset about that.”

That. That was how he was referring to Skye almost dying? Grant could barely contain his rage. “Shooting Skye was not part of the plan.” Grant’s voice was sharp and somewhat louder than it had been previously. He wanted John to know how he felt but he couldn’t risk seriously alienating him. He would have to keep this under control.

“Near zero contact,” Garrett replied as he whipped around to face Grant with an angry look on his face. “That was the deal going in,” he said in a hard tone. Then it softened, “Though your tip about the cellist came in handy.”

Grant briefly closed his eyes as he was reminded of his betrayal of Coulson. Would the team ever forgive him? He felt a pang when he remembered how Coulson had opened up about his love in Portland. It had been a bonding moment between the two men and Grant felt badly about using the tidbit to help Garrett.

“If you had a thing for the girl, you should have contacted me.” Garrett turned away from Grant again. “I would have asked for your blessing,” he said in a mocking tone.

Blessing. As if I would ever have agreed to Skye getting hurt! Does John really think this is funny? Skye almost died! Grant got up and strode angrily toward Garrett. “Don’t play your games with me! This isn’t a joke,” he said, surprising himself by his willingness to show John his anger.

“You don’t have to tell me,” Garrett replied warningly. “Your little Candy Crush was on Centipede’s tail long before she was recruited by SHIELD. Seemed like a good person to eliminate. My bad,” he finished in a sing-song tone.

Grant snorted with anger but he was conflicted. He couldn’t afford to aggravate Garrett much more than he already had. Even Raina had only gotten away with calling him a few names that he just brushed off. If he pushed it too far, Garrett would start getting ugly and that would endanger the mission. Grant needed for John to believe that he was still his right hand man but he couldn’t just let it go. Skye almost died!

“Listen, if the job was easy,” Garrett said in a placating tone but Grant interrupted him.

“Yeah, the job was to blend in. Gather intel on Coulson’s revival, that’s it. You said yourself you didn’t want any bloodshed.”

“That was before I found out Coulson didn’t know squat!” Garrett said angrily. “You know, you would have had an easier time if I had given the kill order on Week 1!”

“Yeah,” Grant said shortly. “But you didn’t.” He enunciated clearly so that John would hear how angry he was.

“The girl I get,” Garrett replied. “She’s cute! But don’t forget what the assignment was. Don’t
forget who gave it to you. And don’t forget why,” he said shortly with a little jab at Grant to emphasize his point.

With that, Grant knew that he had pushed Garrett as far as he could go. It was time to give up and move on. He had tried to reason with John’s humanity but apparently that wasn’t going to work. Not for the first time, Grant felt a twinge of satisfaction that he was working for Fury. Garrett was so certain that he could control everything but he couldn’t control Grant. That felt good.

“And cheer up! We’re close, closer than ever!” John said as he shook Grant in a jovial fashion. Grant just stood there and allowed it. He wouldn’t share John’s glee but neither could he continue the argument. So, in a last ditch effort to show his displeasure, he just shut down. Garrett didn’t appear to notice as he physically turned Grant around and put his arm around him as he led him away. Grant knew that Garrett had already forgotten their argument and was now focused on other mission parameters.
Flashback

Grant had never done well with other people. As Maria Hill had so inelegantly tried to tell Coulson, he was prickly. He didn’t like the idea of having to depend upon others, mostly because he couldn’t (what if they found out what he was really doing?) but also because he didn’t trust others to have his back. Most agents were not as skilled as he was and trusting them could get him killed. Garrett had also drilled into him the idea that caring for others was weak and, again, could get him killed. As the consummate survivor, Grant could not afford this. While the hours of therapy helped Grant begin to realize that caring was perhaps a strength, he was still in the early stages. That was one reason why he was not thrilled to be part of Coulson’s team. How on earth was he going to pull this off?

If working with the original team wasn’t bad enough, Coulson made it even more difficult by adding Skye, the girl they’d picked up during their first mission. Grant had been extremely irritated with how her original interrogation with him went and now Coulson was suggesting that she actually live and work on the same plane with them! Grant decided that he couldn’t keep quiet about it, so he confronted Coulson as the plane was loading up to take off.

“Skye? The girl’s not qualified to be a SHIELD agent,” he said impatiently as he, May and Coulson walked into Mission Control (where the holo-table resided) together. Grant wasn’t sure but he thought that May agreed with him.

“Agreed. That’s why I’ve invited her on as a consultant,” Coulson said casually as he operated the screen controls.

May let out a gasp and looked at Coulson disbelievingly. Coulson didn’t seem to be phased in the least by May’s apparent disapproval. “SHIELD does it all the time. Technically Stark’s a consultant.”

“And technically,” Grant replied and signaled his increasing irritation by over-enunciating, “Skye’s a member of the Rising Tide. She hacked our RSS implementation.”

“Twice. From a laptop.” Coulson turned back around to face Grant and May. He looked sort of excited by the thought of Skye’s computer skills. “Imagine what she’ll do with our resources.”

If looks could kill, May just ensured that Coulson would be dead. While appreciating her nonverbal support, Grant’s irritation extended to May’s silence. Since she clearly wasn’t going to speak up, he would have to continue the argument.

“I am. That’s exactly what I’m imagining during this frown,” he said. Coulson looked up with a slight grin at hearing that. Grant took a small moment to feel proud and a little bit daring about his use of humor. Garrett would not have been amused but Coulson was made of different material. Grant knew he would have to try different strategies to get his point across. “You brought me on for risk assessment? She’s a risk.” He leaned forward on the table and softened his voice, going in for the main crux of his argument. “She doesn’t think like us.”

He thought that this argument would seal the deal against Skye’s involvement with the team. Hydra never would allow someone who thought differently from them to be included. People with divergent ideas were too dangerous. That’s one reason why Grant was always careful to toe the party line. If you wanted to live, you stayed within the Hydra box.
However, Coulson surprised him when he smiled again and said, “Exactly.”

Grant was so taken aback by this (Appreciating humor and encouraging different ideas? Who is this guy?) that he wasn’t sure what else to say. Then May finally spoke up. “We have two kids on this Bus who aren’t cleared for combat; you’re adding a third.”

Grant quickly refocused himself and seized on her point which was a good one. It was going to be difficult to protect two team members who had no idea of what to do in stressful situations. Adding another would make what was already hard even more challenging. Maybe Coulson would hear this, especially since the point originated with the Cavalry. “At least FitzSimmons are trained SHIELD scientists but Skye?” Grant shook his head. “You said this was a select team, assembled to work new cases, to protect people. I don’t see how allowing a hacker to tag along…”

“I’m looking for an objection I haven’t already anticipated,” Coulson interrupted, looking impatiently at May. She in turn looked at Grant, her lips pursed. Grant would love to know the history between the two of them. Clearly, they had some sort of non-verbal language, of the kind he shared with John. That only came from experience. “I’m calling this,” Coulson continued. “But your frown will be on record,” he told Grant.

“We’ve been called in to investigate an 0-8-4. We all know what that means,” Grant reported.

“Yes we do,” Coulson replied shortly. “It means….we don’t know what that means.” He handed the tablet of the mission parameters to May and Grant realized that the discussion was over. Skye would be staying and he would be tasked with handling her and protecting three people who wouldn’t know the first thing about how to fight. It was all he could do not to sigh.

Grant grabbed a safety pamphlet about the Bus and headed towards Skye’s bunk. She had just dropped her stuff on the bed when he knocked briefly and somewhat sarcastically. He still couldn’t believe he would be saddled with this extra burden. Fury was really going to owe him for this.

Skye turned and saw him. “Hey!” she said in a perky voice. “I know we didn’t really…”

Grant didn’t want to hear it. Does she think I care about getting to know her? He just wanted to let her know that he was still irritated, so he handed her the pamphlet and said, “You might want to read that. This isn’t like other planes,” and continued walking down the hall.

Grant’s first inkling that maybe being part of a team could be helpful was after the team had retrieved the alien artifact in Peru. At first, the actual mission just reinforced his initial irritation at having to work with people who didn’t know what they were doing. He was grateful for May’s presence but she didn’t respond well to his amateurish attempts at bonding when they were checking the Peruvian campsite. He’d originally thought that they could have a nice discussion on weapons to break the ice but then he noticed that she didn’t have one.

“Where’s your side arm?” he asked as he walked up to her.

“If I need a gun, I’ll take one,” she replied shortly coming down the steps to meet him and look around.

Well. She certainly thinks highly of her skills. Grant felt a little like he was being put in his place, so he said sarcastically, “Right. Forgot I was working with the Cavalry.”

He knew immediately that this was a mistake when he suddenly found himself directly on the firing line of May’s Look of Death. “Don’t ever call me that,” she said in a low, hostile voice.

What is her problem with being called The Cavalry anyway? Grant would have been pleased to
have been so admired and beloved (not to mention having his own moniker) but May was acting like it was something shameful. Whatever her reasons were, being on the wrong side of the Cavalry could impede his mission, so he needed to do something to get back in her good graces. Fast.

“Apologies,” he said lightly, throwing in an apologetic gesture for good measure. Grant saw a slight movement in the bushes and decided to kill two birds with one stone. He would provide a distraction while also trying to get information from May. He would love to know what the actual story behind her moniker was. There were all sorts of rumors but none sounded believable.

“I’ve heard the stories. What went down in Bahrain. About you in action.” He waited for May’s response but quickly realized that none would be forthcoming. Damn! Maybe he could needle her a bit, let her know that he wasn’t some rube who had fallen off the turnip truck. “You know, it was smart of Coulson to pull you out of retirement. It’s nice to have a trusted friend who has your back,” Grant said as he reached into the brush and pulled out an enemy soldier.

The fight was brief as it became clear that he and May were outnumbered. But then, of all things, it turned out that Coulson knew the head honcho in charge, Camilla Reyes. And, from the look of things, it seemed like he knew her well. Very well. Grant gave May a quick smirk before heading into the cave to get Skye and FitzSimmons.

“We’ve got company. National police,” Grant told FitzSimmons as he headed toward the 0-8-4 embedded in the cave wall, ignoring Skye as he walked right past her. Typical. She’s just standing around.

“What?” Simmons cried while Fitz simultaneously asked, “Why are they here?” in an aggrieved tone.

“They heard about the object. They’re probably here to protect it. This area has lots of rebel uprisings,” Grant answered as he examined the object.

“Yeah. People are fighting back against the government’s mining policies. It’s pretty kick-ass,” Skye said with an impressed look.

At this, Grant whipped his head around to look at her. Is she kidding? “Yeah. It’s kick-ass. All the violence,” he said disgustedly.

“That’s not what I’m saying,” Skye said quietly, looking straight at Grant.

Here we go. Typical idealistic bullshit. She has no idea about anything, yet she stirs up trouble, and is nowhere around when things get bad. “No, it’s what you’re typing. Alone. In your van. Where it’s safe.” Skye looked as though she’d been slapped though she was still staring steadily at him. Grant directed his attention to FitzSimmons, “How much longer?”

“Oh, what’s the hurry?” asked Simmons agitatedly while Fitz simultaneously asked, “Are we in danger?”

Do those two always answer at the same time? “Not if everyone does their job,” he said blandly. Then he said to Skye, “What is yours exactly?” He felt a small measure of satisfaction when she looked down.

All of a sudden, there was the sound of gunfire and a huge explosion shook the cavern. “Sounds like they’re engaging with the rebels,” Grant told the group as he made his way toward the entrance, his gun drawn. “Let’s go!”
FitzSimmons seemed frozen in place. “They’re coming for it. Let’s move!” Grant said, raising his voice and hoping that they would respond. He was pleased to see that they did. Skye even came over to help them pack up the equipment. However, FitzSimmons wouldn’t let her help, evidently preferring to do things their own way despite the urgency to hurry.

“We need a containment case for the 0-8-4,” Simmons told Grant.

He gave her a look to indicate that she was insane. “There’s no time,” he said impatiently. Fitz tried to explain why they needed the case and Grant realized that talking to them would only waste time they didn’t have. “Sorry,” he told them as he walked directly to the alien artifact. “Science class is over.” Why can’t they just listen to me?

He pulled the 0-8-4 from the wall with his bare hands, doing his best to ignore the dire warnings Fitz was giving. He then pushed the object into a backpack and helped Fitz put it on. “Stay close,” he told the group as he headed out of the cave.

Grant exchanged gunfire with the rebels and determined that the group was going to be at risk if they continued moving forward. “Get back!” he yelled and the three non-combatants obligingly withdrew back into the cave. A brief look showed Coulson trapped behind a table with Reyes while May was nowhere in sight. Grant withdrew a lightning rod from his jacket, gave Coulson a quick meaningful look and then leapt off the cave steps, rolled and slammed the rod as hard as he could against the ground. He then ducked. The lightning mechanism disengaged from the rod, hovered in the air for a moment and sent a shockwave of energy into the rebel soldiers. Grant was satisfied to see that all of the ones surrounding the cave were blasted off their feet and he gestured to the team to move forward.

They started running when he noticed that a rebel soldier had taken direct aim at them. The soldier fired and, miracle of all miracles, May chose that moment to drive up to them and the truck took the gunfire. There were several tense moments as they left the campsite and got to the Bus with everyone intact (he and May had to tell Skye and FitzSimmons to be quiet several times) but soon they were safe in the air.

Despite the positive outcome, Grant was still almost beside himself. In the cave, Fitz had neglected to clarify how unstable and dangerous the alien artifact was, only choosing to mention it once they were back on the Bus. This was exactly the kind of miscalculation and risk that accompanied the lack of combat experience and he had no idea of how to explain this to Fitz, who was inclined to be defensive.

“Are you mental? I did explain, in great detail, exactly what I meant using the Queen’s bloody English!” Fitz said as he and Grant angrily strode into the lab.

Why do they put science geeks in the field? Don’t they understand how to talk like normal people? “I use normal English, words like ‘duck’ and ‘run’ and ‘might blow us to pieces.’”

“Oh wow. Wow! Congratulations, Agent Ward. You managed to string three words together in a sentence,” Fitz said sarcastically as he worked with the object.

Is he freaking kidding? What do I have to do to make him understand combat and what is necessary to get out alive? Grant felt a twinge of guilt because he knew his therapist would not be pleased but he couldn’t help thinking, This is exactly why Garrett usually insists on working alone. He and Fitz kept yelling at each other until Coulson interrupted.

“Do we have a problem in here,” he asked mildly, looking directly at Grant.
Grant automatically calmed down because he understood that Coulson was expecting him to demonstrate leadership. It would never do to show a superior officer that he had lost his temper, especially to someone who clearly valued teamwork. “No sir. Just working on our communication. Not everyone,” he said as he looked directly at Fitz and Simmons, “was prepared for a firefight.”

Coulson pointed out that everyone had made it out safely when Skye chose to ask about her role in the team. She started by insulting Grant’s people skills (“I get the feeling that Ward doesn’t know which one’s Simmons and which one’s Fitz”) – Grant narrowed his eyes at her – and then finished by implying that the team didn’t know what they were doing since it seemed like this was their first mission together. When Simmons mentioned it was actually their second mission together, Skye immediately grasped that she had been their first. “That’s sweet,” she said sarcastically.

“You’re amused?” Grant asked her incredulously. Does she take anything seriously?

Skye admitted that she was terrified, once again mentioned their incompetence and then ended by telling Coulson that they didn’t like each other much. Again with my people skills? Clearly she doesn’t understand what it is that I do.

“This isn’t about that,” he said to Coulson. “I’m a specialist. Today I could have eliminated the enemy threat myself if I was working alone but I had non-combat-ready agents…”

FitzSimmons started arguing about their valuable contributions until Coulson again interrupted. He listed off their accomplishments (if Grant hadn’t been so irritated, he would have been offended that Coulson thought that speaking six languages was his most impressive skill) and then told them to work it out. Grant sighed after Coulson left. He’s right. The mission is to blend in and arguing with these knuckleheads isn’t getting the job done.

He returned to his bunk and mulled over the problem a bit. Quite frankly, he had to admit that his lack of people skills were a hindrance at the moment because he didn’t have the least idea of how to fit in better with the team. Nor did he see any reason (other than the mission of course) for why he should. Grant couldn’t see that the team offered him anything that he couldn’t do himself.

But then Skye actually made the effort to approach him. Because of Grant’s stand-offish behavior and prickly reputation, people usually left him alone. Of course, his good looks ensured that women would occasionally approach him but normally he just rebuffed them and went on his way. He couldn’t afford any physical entanglements and emotional ones were completely out of the question. So when Skye came to him with the offer of “buying him a drink,” he was a bit suspicious. Was she trying to instigate a physical liaison or attempting to get intel from him? What is her angle?

Skye continued talking, “Usually one person doesn’t have the solution. But a hundred people with one percent of the solution? That’ll get it done. I think that’s beautiful. Pieces solving a puzzle.” Grant had never thought about people working as a team to solve the problem; he’d only ever relied upon himself (and Garrett but that hadn’t worked out too well). What if she was right and instead of being “the whole solution” as he kept telling people, he only had to do his part. What if this group of people truly were trustworthy? That would relieve some of the pressure on him.

But Skye’s bombshells didn’t stop there as she did something even more unusual: she actually cared that he had been shot. Grant was used to other specialists and SHIELD agents only being concerned that he was still able to function. No one made a big deal about injuries as long as you were able to do your job. Who was this girl that she worried about a stranger, one who had been kind of a jerk to her to boot?

Wait, is she actually trying to connect on a friendly level? There had been a few people over the
years who had tried this but they quickly retreated when met with Ward’s stoic isolation and his reputation grew. It had been years since anyone had even tried. But this time was different, not only because Skye refused to be put off, but also because Grant decided that he would be willing to accept her offer of friendship. He may not know how to be a friend but maybe it was worth giving it a try, just to see. His therapist would be proud. Of course Garrett would be furious that it wasn’t the “near zero contact” he was supposed to have but he ignored that directive because damn if it didn’t feel good to have someone care.

The day continued to be full of surprises, mostly because the team thing actually worked in his favor. Having allies turn against SHIELD wasn’t unexpected; in fact, it happened all the time (yet another reason not to trust people). No, he was amazed when he used Skye’s idea of pieces solving a puzzle together to rally the team into finding a solution for retaking the plane. They actually listened to him (the thought that maybe he could use words instead of violence to influence people was an exciting one) and the plan worked. The icing on the cake though was when he was about to be sucked out of the plane and Skye’s quick thinking saved him.

She came over and helped him off of the floor. “I read the safety pamphlet,” she told him in an exhausted voice.

“I think you might be the first,” he replied. Huh. She did something he’d told her to do purely to be a jerk and it paid off in dividends. Skye used her new-found knowledge to save his life by activating the life raft. Just like Coulson predicted, she’d used her different way of thinking for the benefit of the team!

“She could turn into a solid asset,” he later told May as they watched Skye checking out the action on the plane. “With some serious work,” he added as Skye smiled and laughed.

“Well,” she replied. “If she wants to be a field agent, she’ll need a Supervising Officer, someone disciplined, someone good.” May turned her head to look at him, just a hint of a smile on her lips.

Grant was nodding along and then realized that May, the fucking Cavalry, was looking at him! She actually wants me to be Skye’s SO! The two of them exchanged a long look. “All right. I’ll do it.”

Then, for just a moment, Grant experienced a moment of doubt. Did I read her right? I’ve never been a people person. Maybe May didn’t mean that, maybe she doesn’t see me as the SO type.

“Just to clarify, you were talking about me, right?”

May smiled for real this time. “I’ll talk to Coulson,” she told him.

When Coulson called Grant into his office, he thought that he would be told that May’s idea was silly, that of course Skye would need someone else as her SO. After all, Maria Hill thought he was a poop. However, much to his surprise, Coulson agreed with May.

“Ward, May told me that you two discussed you training Skye to be a field agent,” Coulson said briskly as he walked around his office, putting his things back in their places and gluing some of them down.

“Yes sir.”

“I think it’s a great idea as long as you’re up for it.”

Although his expression remained exactly the same, Grant was pleased. Both May and Coulson thought enough of him to want him to become a Supervising Officer! His operational skills had always been legendary (people tended not to forget when you got scores on par with the Black Widow) but Grant’s difficulties with people made the SHIELD leadership reluctant to inflict him
upon some poor recruit. Consequently, he had never been a SO and, in the past, he hadn’t minded. Working closely with someone who wasn’t Garrett would have been too difficult but things had changed. Now Grant wanted this even though the thought that he was now expected to get along with Skye was both exciting and nerve-wracking.

“I am, sir.”

“Good.” Coulson finally stopped walking around and faced Grant directly. “Ward, I know you’re not used to working one-on-one with someone else, so please feel free to come to me any time you need help.”

“I will, sir.”

“Great! I think you should be the one to tell her.”

Grant nodded and left Coulson’s office to go directly to Skye. Coulson was right: they needed to get started immediately. However, now that he and Skye working together was a done deal, he started feeling uncertain about Skye’s response. Maybe she would hate being forced to work with him. With this in mind, Grant decided to wait until after they watched the Slingshot rocket. He thought that she’d still be on an adrenaline high from the mission and watching the 0-8-4 shot into the sun, so that might be the best time to let her know the plan. People were supposed to be more amenable to suggestion when they were in a good mood, right?

He had to admit that he thoroughly enjoyed having a beer and watching the rocket take off with the rest of the team. It felt good to laugh as Fitz fooled around, to finally be able to participate in inside jokes (“Guys, English.”) and to generally feel a part of something larger than himself. Instead of being annoying or dangerous, acting as just one piece of a puzzle, just one part of a solution, was actually pretty great.

So, it was that feeling of contentment that motivated Grant to approach Skye about her training. “Hey,” he started as they walked back from the cargo bay, “I was impressed that you read the safety pamphlet. That showed both an ability to follow orders and initiative in taking what you read and applying it in a field situation.”

Skye smiled up at him. “Yeah? Well, you have to know enough about your living situation in order to use its resources to your advantage. When I was living in my van….”

Grant quickly interrupted her, thinking that if she got off-track (like she frequently did when talking about that stupid van), he might lose the moment. “Coulson thought that since you’ve decided to stay with us, it might be advantageous for you to train to become an agent.”

Skye suddenly stopped walking and looked at him with her mouth open in shock. “Holy no way! Are you serious? I could become a SHIELD agent for real?”

Grant nodded. “Yes, if you agreed to train hard and do what we tell you to do.” He paused and then gave her a direct stare, trying to calm his nerves. “Could you do that?”

Skye nodded with her eyes wide. “Who would be training me? Would it be all of you or….wait! Would I actually have my own SO?” she asked excitedly.

Grant nodded, trying not to worry too much about what her reaction would be when he told her that he was going to be her SO. She probably would be disappointed. After all, May was an option and then Skye would be trained by The Cavalry. Or maybe she would want Coulson to supervise her training; they seemed to have sort of a mentor-trainee dynamic already. He was pretty sure that
Skye wouldn’t be thrilled to hear that he would be in charge of her training. Besides a few moments of good conversation, her reactions to Ward had been either mocking (what was a T-1000 anyway?) or disdainful (although he’d been called a lot of names in his life, he couldn’t ever remember being called a toolbag before).

Grant tried to disguise the trepidation he felt when he replied, “I agreed to be your SO.” Then, without even being aware he was doing it, he held his breath.

Skye’s eyes lit up. She was already sparkling so much at the thought of being a real SHIELD agent that he didn’t even know how that was possible but there was no mistaking the light in her eyes. “Oh. My. God! Agent Ward, are you really willing to take me on? I’m going to be trained by the Robot himself!!” If she hadn’t wanted to look cool, Grant suspected that she might have twirled in glee. He couldn’t believe it. No one had ever looked so happy at the thought of having him around. Breathing was no longer a problem.

Suddenly, Skye stopped smiling and looked up at him uncertainly. “Are you sure that you want to do this? I think we both know that I won’t be the easiest of trainees.”

Grant allowed himself a small smile, “I’m sure.”
Grant and Garrett walked over to Raina who was still in a snit from being fooled into believing the Clairvoyant was real. John appeased her by showing her that Phase 3 – figuring out the serum that brought Coulson back from the dead – was still running. He led her into a room that held not only the liquids they had been trying but several dead bodies. The bodies were covered with boils and lesions. Grant stood looking down at one of the bodies, long after the time when John and Raina started talking.

Who was this person and what did they suffer before dying? I sure wouldn't want to end up like this. The bodies were grotesque and once again firmed his resolve to bring down Hydra. If this was how they treated people, experimenting on them like they were nothing, they didn’t deserve to be in control. The gravity of his situation, everything that was dependent upon him playing his proper role, weighed down on him.

Grant shook off his feelings, refocused on the mission at hand and looked at Raina appraisingly. Would she get over her irritation and start working on a cure? Despite his annoyance with Garrett and his mission of bringing him down, Grant still wanted John to survive. He wanted to see him have the cure he so desperately needed, so he hoped that Raina was as good as John thought she was. And he wondered if she realized what Garrett would do to her if she wasn’t. Raina seemed to be excited enough about the new developments in her research that she would work with Hydra. Pursuant to his instructions, Grant turned over the hard drive. Garrett looked on approvingly and then the two of them left to prepare for the mission to take the Fridge.

Before they left though, Garrett spent some time talking with Kaminsky, one of Hydra’s up and coming agents, about their battle at the Cube. Things hadn’t gone well for Hydra, so Kaminsky was forced to leave with just a chopper. Grant could tell that Garrett wasn’t happy but took the loss in stride. Since he didn’t have anything to do until they left, Grant decided to talk with Raina. She was the only one around who seemed to share his reluctance about working with Hydra. She was staring at Garrett with a blank expression but there was something about her body language that screamed ambivalence.

“You were disappointed that he wasn’t a real clairvoyant,” Grant began. His mission parameters required that he assess her and report back to Fury on whether she could be turned to work with SHIELD and now was the perfect time to do that. Grant also admitted that it was fun rubbing it in that she had been fooled. He hadn’t forgotten that she had Coulson tortured. Her hands were definitely dirty, so if Grant got a little payback while still doing his job, he wouldn’t be sorry.

“There was a question I would have asked,” Raina replied mysteriously in a low tone. What the hell is up with her? What did she think was in her future? Then she seemed to refocus and turned to Grant with an innocent expression, “You’ve known him a long time?”

“Since I was a teenager. He pulled me out of a hell, saved me from myself.” Grant looked down and then decided to tease Raina a bit, see what she did with his information. “So now do you know me?” He gave her a sexy smile and a brief once over look. He hoped that made her uncomfortable. He casually leaned back against the wall. This was going to be fun. “You know how to work me?”

She seemed to respond to his smile. “I’m just curious,” she said with a smile of her own. Was she really flirting with him? “If I wanted to work you, I’d ask you about Coulson and his team and how you managed to gain their trust.”

Grant smirked at her and wanted to laugh out loud. Did she really have such a low opinion of him
that she didn’t believe he could recognize her attempt to pump him for information by telling him that she wasn’t? He decided to play along, to pretend to be the Grant Ward she believed him to be. Yet another incarnation of him: the insecure acolyte, desperate for approval. She thought she was working him but, in reality, he was the one working her.

“I jumped out of a plane. Deep cover tactics 101: perform selfless acts of bravery early on. So I jumped to save the scientist.” He could see that she looked a little disbelieving so he added in a flirty tone, “Oh, I had a parachute.” Grant could understand her disbelief. Even at her most devious, Raina would never be brave on behalf of anyone other than herself and she absolutely would not be selfless. Damn, her expression was great! This was going even better than he’d hoped.

“They never suspected?”

“Agent May was the primary threat. So I let things get intimate.” He looked directly at Raina and continued to be flirty despite her open disbelief. Grant could tell that she was uncomfortable with the idea of having sex with someone for a job. She had the innocent seductress act down cold but he’d bet a lot of money that if she were asked to muster up some actual passion, she wouldn’t be able to do it.

“You don’t seem like her type,” Raina sneered.

Grant smiled and softened his voice, “I’m everyone’s type.” Wasn’t that the truth! He was everyone’s type, just not always in the way Raina thought he meant. Grant could be everything to everybody, depending on his needs and the requirements of the job. He was a chameleon so often that he wondered again if even he knew who he truly was. As always, this thought disturbed him. He had to believe that the people who cared for him knew the real Grant Ward. But in the meantime, he wondered if Raina Cold Fish would respond to him. Yep, sure enough, she gave a little sigh that let him know she wasn’t unaffected by his charm.

“Skye was the unknown variable,” Grant continued. “Being her SO put me in a position to be a sounding board, get an idea what she was thinking.”

“And Coulson?” Raina was so interested in his answer that she actually turned to face him fully. *Huh. She must really like him. She must have wanted the information she thought he had badly if she could torture someone she liked and admired.* “He wasn’t skeptical when you pressured him to join?”

Grant couldn’t help letting out a little laugh. She clearly didn’t know that he was an expert at espionage if she thought he couldn’t fool Coulson and the team. And she didn’t understand Coulson either if she didn’t realize how invested he was in helping people, especially those he worked with. He would have to tell Fury that while Raina was a genius in her field, she was practically an idiot in interpersonal relations. This was the most fun he’d had in a while!

*He pressured me.* You’d be surprised how often you get invited to the party when you don’t want to go.” Grant decided that he’d take the fun a little further by showing her how easily he could get into a role. So, he stepped into her personal space, crossed his arms, put on a serious expression and lowered his voice, “Sir, I was trained from Day 1 as a specialist. I go in alone; I get it done. This team thing? Not my speed.” He was so close to Raina that she had to look up at him. Her expression was one of confusion, so Grant took a little pity on her and decided to explain in more detail. He stepped back, leaned against the wall again and said, “I gave Coulson a person he thought he could help. Plane was full of them.”

“It’s that simple? You really felt nothing for them.” Grant felt the smirk fall from his face as he considered what she was saying. Clearly Raina did know right from wrong and that she had chosen
the Dark Side versus the Right One. That was good to know. If only he could tell her that yes, he felt everything for them and it was practically killing him to lie and betray them like this. But he couldn’t. Raina continued, “I spent time with Coulson, he’s a good man, someone who’d lay down his life for you. Don’t you owe a man like that something?”

“Sure.” Was she kidding? Of course he owed Coulson! Owing Coulson and the team, especially Skye, was half the reason he was doing this. But he couldn’t tell her any of that. He couldn’t let his true feelings shine through. Instead, Grant looked over at Garrett and made sure that he sold Raina on his loyalty, “But I owe Garrett everything,” he said with his voice shaking slightly. The truth was, he did owe John everything he was, both good and bad. On the one hand, Grant was angry with Garrett for his abuse and the things he had made him do but, he also still loved John for saving him and giving him the life that he had. With that thought uppermost in his mind, Grant abruptly left Raina and went to get ready for the mission.

The ride to the Fridge was uneventful and Grant tried to avoid thinking about what he would have to do. Once the plane landed, Garrett turned to the pilot, not Simpson this time. If everything went well, Simpson would be dropping off Hand and her men at the Hub and then getting caught by SHIELD agents when he tried to take off again. “Remember, make it look like we’re in danger of being shot but don’t shoot so close that we risk getting hurt!” The pilot nodded and Grant and Garrett jumped out. Garrett had cuffs on his hands and Grant was dragging him toward the high level facility.

“Make it look believable,” Garrett muttered as the two of them approached the building. Grant nodded briefly, his face a blank mask, but internally he steamed. “It’s 100 floors; the only way in is through the roof,” Garrett continued. Yeah, no kidding, John! We’ve only gone over this a million times and I knew that already from my SHIELD training without you constantly telling me! But he said nothing. Now was not the time.

Grant felt conflicted about arguing with the two guards. On the one hand, he appreciated that they were trying to follow protocol and do their duty and he almost hoped that they wouldn’t let them in. However, he also needed to fulfill his mission for Hydra, so he wished they’d just let them in. Grant also felt a bit of satisfaction when talking about Agent Hand. Unbeknownst to Garrett, Grant had shot Hand and her guards with an ICER and, by insisting that the Hydra pilot take their bodies to the Hub instead of dumping them into the ocean, he’d saved their lives. If Hand ever managed to capture Garrett again, there would be hell to pay.

Unfortunately, one of the guards took mercy on them and let them in. Once they were inside the Fridge, of course Garrett couldn’t resist making a stupid comment about Hydra and Grant was forced to shoot the two guards in the face. He allowed himself to show some irritation (and even made a small joke to cover it) but inside he was seething. He hadn’t been able to keep his ICER, so now the bullets were real. How many people would he be forced to kill today because of Garrett’s arrogance? And would the team ever forgive him for it?
Finding the Moment

Flashback

Joining Coulson’s team was a revelation but Grant didn’t realize that until later. At first, the mission was pretty standard. Grant followed Garrett’s order of near zero contact and it wasn’t that difficult to do. FitzSimmons clearly operated in their own world, the Cavalry kept to herself and Coulson seemed preoccupied. But everything changed when Skye joined the team. She was the unknown variable, the one person whom he had no idea what she was going to do and, subsequently, how he could neutralize her as a threat. As he told Coulson when he invited her onboard the plane, “She doesn’t think like us!”

Initially, this unknown quality of hers – her different way of thinking – really annoyed him. Skye wasn’t like most other SHIELD agents and most certainly was nothing like any Hydra agents. She was just as smart as some of the nerdy agents (like FitzSimmons) but she was socially smooth. Therefore, approaching her purely based on her technical skills wasn’t going to work. Unlike most specialists, Skye was emotional, warm and friendly. Thus, using the just-the-facts method wasn’t something she would respond to either.

The morning training with Skye had been particularly frustrating because first she was late and then she didn’t seem to take things seriously. Her attempts at relative strength training were pitiful. Instead of punching the bag with everything she had like Grant would have, Skye appeared more interested in talking with him. She kept prodding Grant for personal information, wanting to know his reasons for committing to SHIELD. This made him extremely uncomfortable on many levels. He couldn’t share much personal information with her. He certainly couldn’t tell her the truth but, oddly enough, he didn’t really want to lie to her either. And her focus on Grant was interfering with her training. He was almost relieved when Coulson called them all into a meeting to inform them about Dr. Franklin Hall’s kidnapping.

That relief was short-lived though when Skye suggested that she could go undercover in Ian Quinn’s Malta compound. She first brought it up after Fitz had expounded on the virtues of working with a monkey. Enough with the monkey business! What is up with that guy’s obsession with them anyway? Simmons seemed to share his frustration and had just said, “Ah, Fitz!” in an incredibly aggrieved voice when Skye calmly interjected, “I could go in.”

At first, Grant completely ignored her comment. The thought of Skye going in undercover was such a ludicrous one that he didn’t think anyone would seriously consider it. Instead, he began suggesting a longer-term undercover op by himself but the others didn’t think much of the idea. Simmons had just finished saying that any SHIELD agent discovered on Maltese soil could be legally shot when Skye piped up again, “Not me. I could go in.”

Grant looked over at her, just leaning against the wall, playing with her phone and was annoyed. There was no way she could go undercover! Hadn’t she just spent her two morning workouts complaining about having to do any physical exertion? She was clearly just fooling around again. “Skye, this is serious,” he said in an annoyed tone and then returned his gaze back to the holotable.

But, much to everyone’s surprise, Coulson seemed to latch onto the idea. “Wait, what are you saying?” he asked as he walked towards Skye. Grant’s head whipped around to see Coulson looking gravely at her.

“Well, I’m not an Agent of SHIELD, so I could go in without breaking all these stupid rules,” she
replied. Grant was irritated to see that she was still working on her phone. Could the girl not take anything seriously?

“International laws,” Simmons corrected her. If Grant hadn’t been so exasperated, he would have been amused at Simmons’ clear love of rules and precise terminology.

“This isn’t something the Rising Tide can hack, Skye,” Grant retorted. Did she think that the solution to this problem was in her beloved computer? Sometimes she really was the limit!

“Did you hear the deadly lasers part?” Fitz asked. “Without a brave monkey…”

“You said you could go in with a man inside,” Skye quickly interrupted.

“And you want to be that man?” May asked incredulously. Grant breathed a small sigh of relief. May had finally weighed in and, as he had known she would be, she was on his side. She too saw the ludicrous nature of the plan Skye was suggesting. Coulson might be willing to entertain stupid ideas but May was always solid. His only wish was that she would be more direct with her disapproval versus letting it be implied.

“FitzSimmons love the guy and he needs help.” As she said this, FitzSimmons looked upset and Grant could tell that they were being won over on the strength of their desire for Dr. Hall to be safe. Although he was trying to move away from Garrett’s negative perception of relationships, he couldn’t help but think that here was an example of caring for someone fostering weakness. FitzSimmons wanted Hall to be ok, so they were allowing their emotions to supersede their logic. Skye continued, “They could be torturing him. Or worse,” Skye added with a subtle glare at Grant, “making him do strength training.”

If things weren’t careening out of control so quickly, Grant might have rolled his eyes at Skye’s jab at him. But, in sensing the atmosphere in the room shift, Grant felt a moment of panic. FitzSimmons were looking at Skye solemnly, as if they were believing that her suggestion was a good one. Coulson was clearly considering it too. There was no way this was a good idea and he needed to convince her of this. Fast. “But you don’t have the background. Or clearance. Or experience with any of this,” Grant said in an intense tone as he walked toward her.

“I know,” Skye responded casually. Grant almost breathed a sigh of relief until she added cockily, “But I’ve got an invitation.” She rolled her eyes at the team’s combined stares of disbelief. “Well, technically it’s an Evite.”

At that moment, Grant realized that trying to convince Skye of the dangers of her plan was futile. She was obviously high on getting one over on all of them and, he admitted reluctantly, her clear desire to help. If he was going to stop this, he was going to have to appeal to Coulson. But that would have to wait as Coulson went quickly into mission mode. Grant internally sighed and then redirected his focus into mission planning until such time as he could talk with Coulson privately.

After things calmed down, Grant went to Coulson’s office and approached him with his worries about Skye which he could tell from the first weren’t shared.

“I understand your concern,” Coulson said casually as he hunted in his closet for the proper suit, “but we don’t have a lot of options.”

For a moment, Grant was flummoxed by the sheer number of suits Coulson had in his closet. He was used to specialists, people like May and Garrett, who didn’t have a lot of possessions. Yet here was Coulson with his suits (Why does he need so many? They all look the same.) and his nostalgic trinkets. Grant was trying hard to understand and appreciate Coulson but things like this were
making it difficult. Collecting things was something his family did because they tended to value things over people. This thought led him back to his goal with the conversation because Coulson clearly did value Skye. Grant quickly realized that Coulson was proud of Skye’s accomplishment and moxy in getting the Evite, so his stern disapproval would cut no ice with him.

“Hey, I’m impressed” Grant started in a quiet tone. And he was amazed by her computer skills. He had been from the first but there was also an element of danger to someone who could manipulate data and information like she could. However, he decided to keep that to himself for now and concentrate on making Coulson understand the risks to Skye’s safety. That angle had a better chance of working. “She just wrangled an invitation on her phone using insider backchannel voodoo, in minutes. But sending her in with no training, you’re taking a huge risk. I know Director Fury felt he owed after you sacrificed yourself.”

“And my card collection,” Coulson grumbled as he took his chosen suit into the next room. _There he goes about those damn collections again._ Grant tamped down on his irritation. What were cards in the end? And why can’t he look at me instead of making me follow him all over this damn room? He wondered if this was Coulson’s way of asserting dominance. That maneuver was definitely in Garrett’s playbook as well but Grant had nothing but contempt for it. If you were the best, you didn’t need to play games.

But if letting Coulson one-up him got him what he wanted, then Grant would continue to play. So he followed him into the next room still trying to make his case. He knew that it wasn’t going well but he had to make Coulson understand how dangerous this was. “He gave you some autonomy but Skye on a covert op?”

Coulson finally stopped moving and looked directly at Grant. “Are you worried about her safety or her loyalty?”

Once again, Grant called to mind his training to help minimize his irritation. Coulson made him follow him all over his room and when he did choose to grace him with his undivided attention, it was because he believed that Grant was slighting Skye. What happened to being mission-focused? Grant wasn’t sure now what would sway Coulson from this dangerous path, so he decided to go for broke and be honest.

“Both. The Rising Tide is the reason she got an invite.” Coulson started flipping through some formal-looking binder, so Grant thought he would next try the official route. “Who knows how many protocols she violated.”

Immediately he realized that tactic wasn’t going to work because Coulson’s head snapped up. “That’s her job. Ignore protocol. Find connections and backdoors that nobody else can see.” He hesitated and then said, “Something else is bothering you.”

Grant sighed, turned away and began to pace, letting his agitation show. He finally understood that his objections weren’t being heard and that Skye would be going in undercover. And, if he was going to help her be ready, he had to be the best SO he could be. He needed to show her defensive weapons training, something that was extremely important for undercover work. However, Grant realized that he was at an impasse and didn’t know how he was going to train her. Although he didn’t want to admit it to himself (and told himself that these feelings of panic were concerns about her loyalty), he was scared for her. Going undercover was usually reserved for seasoned agents because it was so tough and tricky. Skye just wasn’t ready but the team, including Skye (who clearly had no clue what she was agreeing to), had overridden his objections. Grant wanted to make sure that Skye had as much training as possible but that wasn’t going to happen unless she took it seriously. He decided that he would take Coulson up on his offer to help.
“She’s holding back, sir. She says she wants to be an agent but she won’t commit. She doesn’t listen, makes jokes,” he started. This seemed to get Coulson’s attention again. Almost against his will, Grant felt a bit of jealousy. He was the best agent he knew how to be. He trained constantly, took his job seriously, listened to orders and rarely failed. Yet this seemed to cut no ice with Coulson who instead appeared to be heavily invested in Skye, someone who was almost the opposite of what a good agent should be. In a tiny part of Grant’s mind, he realized that he would give a lot to have someone as invested in his well-being as Coulson was in Skye’s.

“Were you hard on her?” Coulson asked, once again looking directly at him.

“Sure. I tried playing nice too. I need a new strategy.”

“Try no strategy. Stop thinking like an operative, start thinking like a person,” Coulson said as he walked around his desk and sat down facing Grant. “Maybe Skye will let that person help her.”

Grant felt confused and was sure that it registered on his face. “Help her what?”

“Help her think like an operative,” Coulson replied, smirking as he left the desk. Grant understood that the conversation was over. He also had the uncomfortable feeling that Coulson was viewing this as growth for both Skye and himself.

As Grant walked back to his bunk, he felt his irritation mix in with his worry about Skye. How can no one else but me see what a bad idea this is? But he was determined that he would listen to Coulson’s good, if unsettling, advice and that he would approach Skye as Grant, not Agent Ward. This was risky because it opened up potential vulnerabilities and it wasn’t something Grant was skilled at doing. But from the very first time he tried this method of dealing with Skye, it was totally worth it.

The afternoon training wasn’t going well. He was trying to show her how to disarm an opponent – an essential skill for undercover agents – but, once again, she wasn’t being serious about it. Grant had showed her several times what to do, first just demonstrating it himself and then by having him disarm her. Even though she seemed to understand in theory what she was supposed to do, Skye’s first attempt at trying the maneuver was a disaster.

She grabbed his arm and twisted her body into him correctly but then stumbled when her other foot accidentally landed on her pivot foot. Skye’s instability caused her to pull Grant’s arm closer to her body, he tried to overcorrect and they ended up tangled in each other on the floor. When it was evident that they would fall, Grant turned his body to take the brunt of it and Skye suddenly found herself face-down on top of him.

For a moment, it felt like time stopped. She looked up at him and Grant was confused by the complex array of emotions he saw in her eyes. Although SHIELD didn’t consider him a people person, Grant was actually a master at understanding the emotions of others (his own were a different story). In playing his Hydra game throughout the years, he had developed a keen sense of what people expected to see and what they wanted from him. He had to know what people were feeling if he was going to be able to manipulate them. In the moments that Skye looked into his eyes, Grant identified embarrassment, a kind of pleading, and was that desire? He could sympathize with the last emotion because holding her felt really nice. Then Skye looked down and scrambled to her feet.

“I am so sorry,” she gasped without looking at him. Skye kept backing away. “Can we take a restroom break?” she asked and seeing him nod, walked quickly out of the cargo bay. She clearly needed a moment to regroup and, if he was honest with himself, Grant needed some time too.
However, he couldn’t let her know that he was affected, so his voice sounded gruffer than he intended when he called after her, “Just for a minute though. You need to learn this.”

When Skye returned, Grant could tell that her walls were up again. She said with a smile, “So where were we before I made a fool of myself?”

Grant shook his head. “Skye, you can’t think that way. No one gets this right the first time they try. And you were going too fast. Coordinated movements are like a dance; you have to master each part before putting it all together.” He could tell that she wasn’t really buying his explanation (although she did glance up when he talked about dancing) but he let it drop and pressed forward because she really needed to get this down before she went into Malta. Alone. So, he pointed the fake gun at her and said, “Now again. Slowly. What’s first?”

Skye looked at him uncertainly and he could tell she was afraid that she would screw up again. Then she took a deep breath, grabbed his gun hand, flipped her body around until she was nestled against him with her back to his front and then she stopped moving. Grant had to force himself to pay attention to what they were doing because the feeling of her body against his felt too damn good. He liked how they were positioned but she needed to be smooth with this movement or it would never work.

“And then?” he asked.

“Then, things are moving too quickly. I’m a proper Southern girl.” Skye leaned her head back against his shoulder, another move that felt really good. But his irritation with her joking around overrode this feeling, especially when she continued with, “You’ll make me untidy.”

He wanted to yell with frustration. He understood that her first attempt embarrassed her but Skye was headed into a lion’s den and she was still joking around. He grabbed her other hand, placed it on the gun and said, “Twist the thumb, palm the barrel,” while suiting the movement to his words. Grant then yanked the gun away from her a bit more roughly than he intended.

Skye shook her hand and said accusingly, “Ow.”

What will get through to her? She can’t be so worried about screwing up that she refuses to try! He thought about her desire to help and her feelings of loyalty to the team. Maybe that was the direction to take. “You’re going to die and leave us hanging out to dry. You know that?” Grant tucked the fake gun into the waistband of his jeans. He continued on, hoping that a list of the skills she didn’t have would scare her enough to get serious about training. “You’re going in with no self-defense skills…”

But Skye didn’t seem scared in the least. “I have a few tricks up my sleeve.”

“You need muscle memory.” he started. Skye looked down in irritation. Clearly this wasn’t convincing her but he slogged on, “Fundamentals. The tools to turn yourself…”

“Into a whole bag of tools?” Skye asked sarcastically, her hands on her hips broadcasting her irritation.

Does she have a death wish? What do I have to say to get her to understand how important this is? “How did you learn computer science without committing yourself to it?” he asked out of frustration.

“CS comes naturally to me. I’m sorry I’m not naturally whatever you are,” she responded.

Naturally? Naturally whatever I am? For a moment, Grant couldn’t breathe. He wasn’t naturally...
anything. *She has no idea of how hard I’ve worked, of what I suffered to obtain the skills I have,* he thought as he started walking towards her. Of course she doesn’t know. She didn’t live with Christian. And, as his thoughts turned to his brother, Grant’s reason took control over his emotions and he realized that this was his opportunity to show her at least part of Grant Ward the person. He decided to start off by sharing with her bits and pieces of his life with Christian because this detail was already in his file and could do him no harm.

“You think this came naturally?” he asked in a low voice, still walking toward her. “I had a brother who beat the crap out of me,” he began. “Me and my little brother. For nothing.” Grant was now standing in Skye’s personal space and it was all he could do to keep a tight lid on his rage. Even through his anger, he had to admit that he was impressed Skye hadn’t backed up an inch. Not many people would face down Grant Ward, especially when he was clearly angry. But this girl was constantly surprising him. “For eating a piece of his birthday cake. I had to learn to protect us, the way I am trying to protect you.”

She looked up into his eyes with an expression of regret on her face. He quietly continued, “That was my moment. You asked.”

Grant expected Skye to simply nod with understanding and then either brush it off or ask for additional details, so her response took him completely aback. She looked down for a moment, then back up at him, her voice softened and she said, “Sorry. Didn’t mean to push.” Grant rarely had people respond with such warmth and caring towards him and he almost didn’t know what to do. He nodded, accepting her apology and wondered where to go from here. Luckily, Skye then showed him that she had managed to grab his gun (“But I did manage to take this.”) and that put them back into comfortable territory.

Grant yanked the gun out of her hand. “Getting the gun is one thing,” he said. “Pulling the trigger, that is another.” He felt a moment’s relief. Maybe things would be different. He pointed the gun at her and, sure enough, her focus was solely on the gun this time, with not a hint of a smile on her face. “Now. Again. Slowly. What’s first?”

This time, Skye was able to complete the maneuver perfectly. Grant wasn’t sure what exactly had changed but her focus on doing what he asked was evident and he felt satisfied that maybe she was learning something that could help her survive. He had Skye disarm him several more times then, deciding not to push it, let her go for the day.

Since the afternoon training session had been a vast improvement over the morning one, Grant was feeling a bit better but he was still upset that Skye was going undercover. He couldn’t see how this was not going to be a disaster. The sight of Skye standing there getting her instructions was too upsetting, so he busied himself with getting things ready while the team was going over the plan. He listened closely to FitzSimmons explaining how Skye would reboot the system, allowing Grant and Coulson the three seconds they needed to get through security and into the compound. *Those two seem to think this is fun.* He almost lost it while watching them smile and enjoy the technical aspects of the mission but he couldn’t say anything that would shake Skye’s confidence.

“Easy as pie,” Simmons concluded.

Grant couldn’t let that go. *Don’t they know that plans almost never go smoothly?* He couldn’t help himself, saying gruffly, “Or it will be…if you stick to the plan.” He was gratified to see the smiles fall off their faces. There. That was better.

Getting into the compound was a little trickier than Grant had anticipated but he did feel a feeling of pride when the system rebooted because it meant that Skye had succeeded. Now that they were in, he could protect her. He started searching the compound as stealthily as his haste would allow.
He couldn’t fail her! Suddenly, he heard the sounds of running and saw several men holding onto a very wet Skye while others were advancing toward her. Seeing the men surrounding her made him angry which made taking them out a lot easier than usual.

Skye immediately ran to him and leaned into his chest, almost like she wanted a hug. Grant felt a moment of alarm, wondering what they could have done to shake the normally confident Skye so badly. “You hurt?” he asked. Skye hurriedly shook her head and Grant felt a calm descend upon him. She was ok; the rest would be simple. “Just follow my orders. I’ll get us out of here,” he said as he grabbed her hand and led her off to find Coulson.

After the team regained control of the compound, Coulson indicated that Grant and Skye should head back to the Bus, an order Grant could tell that Skye was only too glad to follow. The two of them walked slowly down the beach toward where the Bus had landed. For once, Skye was quiet.

“Hey,” Grant started. “You did well back there,” he said tilting his head to indicate the compound behind them. Grant didn’t hand out praise often but when he did, he meant it. Although he had no intention of admitting this to Skye, he was impressed with her performance on the mission. She had gotten entry into an incredibly secure compound, maintained her cover long enough to lower the perimeter security measures so they could gain access, and then escaped from Quinn’s clutches until Grant could save her. Those were not things many people could do, especially ones with minimal training.

“Are you kidding?” Skye scoffed incredulously. “I got caught, Quinn almost killed me and then you had to swoop in and save me from his goons. I hardly see how that qualifies as doing well.”

Grant was surprised by her reaction. He’d thought that she’d make a joke of everything and pretend that nothing happened she couldn’t handle. He’d been around Skye long enough to figure out what her defense mechanisms were, so he was taken aback when she expressed her insecurities. “You’re being too hard on yourself. Think about what you actually accomplished. You got us into the compound when no one else could have. Then you managed to get away from Quinn once your cover was blown. Because of you, we got the gravitonium before it could become a threat.”

Skye abruptly stopped walking and turned to face him. “When Quinn’s guys had me, I was more terrified than I’ve ever been in my life because I didn’t see how I was going to get out of it. But then you arrived from out of nowhere and took them out. I’ve never seen anyone do something like that before.” She put her hand on Grant’s arm. “I’m grateful, really.”

The thought of How grateful? popped into his mind but he quickly contained it. Where had that come from? Grant shook his head. “You don’t have to be grateful. That’s our job. Saving people is what SHIELD agents do.”

Skye smiled a little. “I know,” she said. She looked down and then back up at him. “I also know that I never want to feel that way ever again.” Then she turned and walked into the plane. What did she mean by that? Coulson wasn’t going to be happy if she wanted to leave.

Grant did his usual end-of-mission routine. He took a long, hot shower, ate a big meal and then did what paperwork he needed to do. The paperwork was a huge drag but he’d found that putting it off didn’t make it better or easier. At least if he did it right away, he could completely relax that night. As a result, he hadn’t seen Skye all evening. Grant figured that she’d just gone to bed. He was about ready to retire for the night himself when he heard the sounds of someone training. He knew that May trained early in the morning and Coulson was still on a secure call, so it had to be Skye.

He’d seen it before, the dedication that a difficult combat experience inspired, yet he was a little stunned that Skye was responding that way. Will this girl ever stop surprising me? Besides their
talk on the way back from the compound, he’d never seen her so serious. His first instinct was to leave her alone but then curiosity got the better of him and Grant slowly made his way down the staircase in order to join her. He decided that he would test the waters and see if she was interested in his company, so he stopped on the last two stairs.

“You and your brothers, where did you grow up?” Skye asked without stopping her workout.

Grant raised his eyebrows. He’d expected her to make a joke or tease him, not ask something about his family. Not for the first time, he wondered what her end-game was. Why would she care about his history? Most people didn’t. But hey, he’d play along and see where this went.

“Massachusetts, mostly,” he answered without much inflection. Ah, Massachusetts, the one place in the world he hated the most. It was where his family gained power and influence, the beautiful area where all the bad things in his life started. Massachusetts was Grant’s personal hell. He hated even thinking about it but he realized that she was going somewhere with this.

“A house?” she asked, still concentrating heavily on hitting the bag.

What kind of question is that? Who asks whether you grew up in a house unless…

“You didn’t?”

This got her attention long enough for her to stop punching. “One house,” she replied looking straight at him. Then she moved away from the bag toward her water. Clearly she planned on continuing the conversation, so Grant felt comfortable enough to walk down the remaining two stairs. But he didn’t want to keep her from talking, so he just leaned against staircase, hoping it would encourage her to talk. He needed to figure out this girl!

Skye had her back to him as she adjusted her tape and drank her water. Grant knew this trick well. You keep your back to someone so you can’t see their face while telling them difficult secrets. That way, you can pretend that it isn’t real or, failing that, not as bad as it sounds. This was also so that you couldn’t see the pity or disgust on their face. “The Brody’s,” she said. “I was nine. Sent me back to St. Agnes after a month. Said I wasn’t a good fit.”

“Foster parents,” Grant said knowingly. He smiled grimly while feeling an unanticipated spark of empathy and caring. He certainly could understand the desire to belong, to be loved, only to be met with rejection. Empathy and caring were not exactly foreign to him (after all, he cared for his younger brother and then John) but he was not used to feeling them, especially of late. All of a sudden, he recalled what his therapist had said about the trauma bond and how good connecting with another person felt. Skye had been hurt, deeply hurt, and Grant quickly put it together. From what she said, it was clear that the foster system hadn’t worked for her, that she likely had experienced multiple foster families. “Your first?”

“My third,” Skye said quietly as she turned around and looked at him.

Grant kept his face carefully without expression. If she saw any emotion she didn’t like, he knew she would shut down and he wanted her to keep talking. He moved slowly toward her, wanting to offer what comfort his presence could bring while simultaneously keeping enough distance so she wouldn’t get spooked. It seemed to work because she continued speaking.

“I’d heard it before but…” she looked down, “this one was different.”

Grant felt that unfamiliar tug on his heart again. He knew this feeling; he knew it well. He could recall the desperation he felt when trying to please his parents and Christian. He remembered that
same feeling of wanting to belong during his early days with John. Hell, he still felt that way around him sometimes. Grant looked at Skye and, in that moment, he would have given anything to erase that look of sorrow from her face. But he couldn’t. All he could do was be there for her, give her some understanding. He smiled without humor again. “Because you wanted them to like you,” he said.

She looked up at him, checking to see if he really understood. When she saw that he did, she nodded, looked down and said in a small voice, “Bad.” She smiled bitterly. “I called her ‘Mom’ once. Tried it out. Guess it wasn’t a good fit.” Skye finished checking her tape, strode back over to the bag and started hitting it.

Grant stood there and watched Skye, all the feelings he’d tried to put behind him for years washing over him. He had called his mother ‘Mom’ too but it hadn’t mattered. She never seemed to like the name and calling her that never got him what he wanted. His family wasn’t a good fit for him either. At least Skye had the advantage of not being biologically related to any of her foster families. He didn’t even have that excuse. The Wards were connected by blood but it hadn’t made them love him. For a moment, Grant felt like he was choking in his feelings of anger and despair but then Skye stopped punching the bag to speak again.

“Hoping for something and losing it hurts more than never hoping for anything,” she said bitterly. She started punching again.

Hearing what Skye had just said (Wasn’t that the truth!) allowed Grant to find his emotional footing again. He leaned forward, grabbed the bag and looked directly into her eyes. “We won’t turn our back,” he said. And he wouldn’t. Grant knew in that moment that, no matter what happened with SHIELD and Hydra, no matter how it all shook out, he would never leave Skye to fend for herself again. Maybe the foster system hadn’t been there for her but he could be. He wouldn’t let her drift alone the way he had before John and sometimes since.


Grant continued looking into her eyes and was about to speak when he saw something shift in her eyes. She was through being vulnerable with him and needed to withdraw into safe territory. He could almost read her mind, so much so that he wasn’t surprised at all when she said, “And I know there’s a truth serum.”

He wanted to continue their conversation but Grant respected Skye enough to let her have the space she needed for the moment. So he said in a jovial tone, “Whatever you say, rookie.”

Skye continued punching the bag until she tired about 15 minutes later. She sat down, drank some water and started to unwrap her hands. Grant sat down next her and, despite the tingling awareness of how much Garrett would disapprove of this interaction, he leaned forward and took Skye’s hands so that he could unwrap them for her. He found that he wanted to touch her however he could (surely she wouldn’t notice when he lingered with his touch every so often) and he wanted to know more about how she made her decision to become a SHIELD agent. “So what was it exactly that made you decide to commit to being a member of this team?” he asked.

Skye momentarily stopped drinking her water and looked at him. Grant merely raised his eyebrows a bit, looking inquiringly at her. “I guess it was Quinn,” she admitted. “He was so smarmy, so sure that he was going to get what he wanted and he didn’t care that people might get hurt. You learned to fight so that you could protect your younger brother. All he wanted was more power,” Skye replied avoiding eye contact with Grant. He even detected a slight blush.

Again, he felt a rush of warmth for her. Not only had she responded sympathetically to his story
about Christian but she had used her feelings about Grant, not Agent Ward, as part of the reason for fully committing to SHIELD. He also couldn’t help noticing how sexy she looked in her workout gear. Her hair was so thick and the braid just emphasized how beautiful it was. The clothes accentuated her curves and the sweat gave her an overall glow. An unbidden memory of Skye rushing toward him dripping wet in her sexy pink dress came into his mind. When it happened, Grant didn’t have time to appreciate the view but now, in the safety of the cargo hold, he was free to go over that moment again and appreciate her beauty. He was grateful for the discipline of his blank expression because he was sure that, without it, he too would have been blushing.

Skye just continued talking, probably because she didn’t expect a response from the T-1000. “And then there was the gravitonium. I mean, I had no idea that something like that even existed and you all deal with this kind of stuff practically every day! There’s so much that most people never get to know.”

“Yep.”

“And I have to admit it was pretty exciting. Besides all the spy stuff, which was fun, it was a great feeling to know that there were people I could count on to help me. When I was living in my van, it always just me. If I got into trouble, no one was coming to my rescue.” Skye grinned impishly and looked around at Grant. “Like, for instance, if I got kidnapped by an evil corporation, there wasn’t anyone besides me who would try to stop them.” Her smile slid off her face. “Or care,” she added softly.

“We care,” Grant said, looking directly into her eyes.

Skye smiled a little. “Why do you think I committed?”
The Hydra agents rushed down the halls of the Fridge, all wearing masks that would protect them from the gas knocking out the SHIELD guards. Later, these guards would be contained and assessed to see if any would be willing to work for Hydra instead. Those who refused would be dealt with appropriately.

Garrett took off his mask, “Air’s clear!” he called. Then he started his usual story-telling. Grant used to find Garrett’s stories interesting, exciting even, but now he dreaded them. They just seemed like a way for Garrett to brag about what he’d done, what a great guy he was. Sometimes they weren’t even true. However, he had to admit that sometimes John had fun anecdotes and he loved the feeling, even now, of being his confidante. “First time I came down here was to lock up Johnny Horton, ever heard of him?” Without even waiting for Grant to respond (which was typical), Garrett continued, “Guy somehow gave himself these lion paws for hands.” He made lion paw motions in the air. “Can you imagine?”

“Everybody’s got their own weird thing I suppose,” Garrett said. Grant smirked a bit as he reflected that, every so often, John would say something incredibly profound. Everybody did have their own weird thing. Coulson’s was his obsession with nostalgic trivia, May had her rigid sense of duty, Skye her computers, Fitz his monkeys, and Jemma….well, he hadn’t uncovered hers yet. And John? His weird thing was his desire to make everyone believe that he was the best. Hence the constant stories. And what was his? The thought that kept cropping up for him so recently, that the real Grant Ward had yet to be determined, came back to him. What was his weird thing? He hoped he lived long enough to find out.

Garrett turned the corner to find a secure door. “Here we go. You know the Sling-Shot Program?” Grant looked a bit puzzled. “Yeah, it’s how SHIELD gets rid of its’ dangerous technology.”

Garrett smirked and placed an explosive device by the door’s controls, “Do they now?” he said in a sing-song voice as both he and Grant put their fingers in their ears. The door controls exploded and the door opened into a room filled with shelves housing what Grant now realized was the technology he’d believed no longer existed. “Welcome to the toy store,” Garrett said as he walked in. “All right. Grab all you can, boys. If it looks dangerous, good. Alien? Even better,” Garrett instructed.

“Everybody’s got their own weird thing I suppose,” Garrett said. Grant smirked a bit as he reflected that, every so often, John would say something incredibly profound. Everybody did have their own weird thing. Coulson’s was his obsession with nostalgic trivia, May had her rigid sense of duty, Skye her computers, Fitz his monkeys, and Jemma….well, he hadn’t uncovered hers yet. And John? His weird thing was his desire to make everyone believe that he was the best. Hence the constant stories. And what was his? The thought that kept cropping up for him so recently, that the real Grant Ward had yet to be determined, came back to him. What was his weird thing? He hoped he lived long enough to find out.

Garrett turned the corner to find a secure door. “Here we go. You know the Sling-Shot Program?”

Grant looked a bit puzzled. “Yeah, it’s how SHIELD gets rid of its’ dangerous technology.”

Garrett smirked and placed an explosive device by the door’s controls, “Do they now?” he said in a sing-song voice as both he and Grant put their fingers in their ears. The door controls exploded and the door opened into a room filled with shelves housing what Grant now realized was the technology he’d believed no longer existed. “Welcome to the toy store,” Garrett said as he walked in. “All right. Grab all you can, boys. If it looks dangerous, good. Alien? Even better,” Garrett instructed.

“Yeah, it’s how SHIELD gets rid of its’ dangerous technology.”

Garrett smirked and placed an explosive device by the door’s controls, “Do they now?” he said in a sing-song voice as both he and Grant put their fingers in their ears. The door controls exploded and the door opened into a room filled with shelves housing what Grant now realized was the technology he’d believed no longer existed. “Welcome to the toy store,” Garrett said as he walked in. “All right. Grab all you can, boys. If it looks dangerous, good. Alien? Even better,” Garrett instructed.

“We shot a lot of empty rockets into space. Yeah, maybe every once in a while they put a monkey in one for kicks.” Fitz would flip if he ever heard that! “You really think Fury would give away all
these goodies? We’re talking about the same guy that messed around with Tesseract technology and sparked an alien invasion,” Garrett pontificated as he walked around the room, clearly looking for something. “There you are,” he said gently as he opened up a case. “Remember this?”

Grant leaned over to look. “Yeah. We found it in Peru,” he said, somewhat grimly. He remembered only too well what it had almost cost to get. So this was his reward? He’d almost lost his life on that mission – would have had Skye’s quick thinking not saved him – all so that it would end up in the hands of Hydra. His conversation with Fury was going to get heated. “It’s a sort of plasma particle beam.”

“Plasma particle beam, my ass,” Garrett said with a smirk at Grant. “I look at it more as a gold card.” He then took it and tried it out on the wall. The beam blasted the wall out into the next room. Garrett smiled with satisfaction, turned on his heel and said, “Time to release the prisoners,” as he walked toward the door.

Grant didn’t follow him. He didn’t see that there was anything he could do to prevent Garrett from freeing all of the dangerous people housed here, so he decided to see what else was stored in this room. Maybe he could hide a few things. Plus, the Specialist in him wanted to look for weapons he could use. Grant walked up and down the row of shelves, looking into boxes and picking up a few items until he came to a container holding something familiar. He took the box off the shelf and sank down onto the floor with it.

Hydra agents continued to carry out boxes of the dangerous “toys” but Grant no longer heard them. He sat holding the Asgardian staff, remembering. The plasma particle beam had been physically arduous to get but the staff had stolen parts of Grant’s soul. It upset his emotional balance, caused him to remember things he wasn’t ready to manage and literally set his teeth on edge. It had taken everything in him not to lash out at his team constantly. The verbal blows he had given were bad enough (he’d never forget Skye’s face when he told her that all she ever did was talk) but they were nothing compared to what he had wanted to say and do.

The staff had taken a lot from him but, as a result of that mission, he’d also gained a lot. Two women had offered parts of themselves to him – one physical, one emotional – in an effort to help him heal from the damage the staff caused. He’d become closer to the team overall and he’d been able to understand on a deeper level who he had become because of his childhood experiences. Grant reboxed the staff, put it back on the shelf and leapt to his feet. He couldn’t stop the process of that healing now. To do so would betray the team even more than he already had to. He started to run.

About half an hour later, Grant could hear John calling him. Grant was standing on what was believed to be the ground floor of the Fridge. He started walking toward the elevators and rounded the corner just as John came towards him, the plasma particle beam still in his hand.

“John! I was just trying to find you. Come on! We’ve gotta roll. The chopper’s almost full,” Grant said trying to herd John toward the elevators.

John ignored Grant and walked toward the middle of the hallway. He stopped at a certain spot, smiled and said, “There it is.” He took out the plasma particle beam.

Grant stepped in front of him, “What the hell are you doing?”

“You mind? You might want to take a step back.” Garrett pointed the plasma particle beam at the floor.

“John, I’m not following. Are you going to blow up the Fridge, floor by floor? We don’t have time
for that.”

Garrett stopped what he was doing and looked over at Grant. “Coulson told me there was a little something hidden down below.”

Grant shook his head. “I hate to tell you but this is the bottom floor. I’ve seen the blueprints with my own eyes.”

Garrett turned and faced Grant fully. “I’m pretty sure something is down there, something we definitely want to have.”

Grant smiled. This was going to be fun. “Care to make it interesting?” John never could resist a bet, especially when he was certain he would win.

“Loser buys dinner.”

“Perfect. I’m so sick of the crap we ate on that plane.” Boy, was that ever the truth. Grant’s culinary needs were fairly minimal. Being a specialist, they had to be. He often had to eat on the run or on chow down on whatever was available based on the mission parameters. However, to only be able to eat the same sandwiches, soups and poorly conceived dinners that the Bus provided was maddening when he knew that better food was just a few miles away. So, if nothing else was going to be good about this mission, at least the food could be.

Garrett smiled, aimed the plasma particle beam and fired. The two men had stepped back when the blast hit but now leaned over into the gaping hole. All that could be seen was darkness. There didn’t seem to be another floor and there certainly wasn’t any technological gadget or marvel to be seen. Grant smiled with satisfaction and turned to John. “Let’s go. I can’t wait to start eating that steak you’re buying me. Do you think a potato will come with it?”

John looked into the hole again, shrugged and started walking away. “Well, I guess you earned it,” he said to Grant.

Since Grant was walking slightly ahead of him, John couldn’t see the smirk on Grant’s face. I damn well did earn it.

Knowing time was short, Grant had run from the Sling-Shot room all the way to the secret basement entrance that Fury had told him about. The basement wasn’t on any blueprint of the building and was so separate from the rest of the Fridge that initially he had been secure in his belief that the guards there probably didn’t even know the facility had been compromised, so he didn’t have to worry about them. However, Garrett’s acquisition of the plasma particle beam was a game-changer, so much so that Grant had to get to the gravitonium room first if he was going to keep it out of Hydra hands.

Once he had gotten through the security measures (it didn’t take as long as he thought it would since the area’s existence was such a tightly-held secret that knowledge of it was its’ own form of verification), he convinced the guards to deploy the use of the security blind. The blind projected the illusion that the walls and floors were solid and, even in the event of an explosion, would still look like the area was empty. Grant then ran all the way back up to the bottom floor and had just been catching his breath when he ran into Garrett.

Shaking his head a bit at the thought, Grant thought to himself that John was sometimes right about his assessment of the job. If it was easy, it wouldn’t be any fun.
There's No Eye in Team

Flashback

Training Skye was both harder and a lot more fun than Grant thought it would be. She was extremely resistant to any kind of physical training but was a whiz on computers and strategy. She also was quite funny and sometimes it was all he could do to keep from laughing at her jokes or her inventive excuses to try and get out of doing boring drills. He didn’t think that smiling and laughing were appropriate behaviors for a Supervising Officer, so he handled her antics by doubling down on being serious. And, since he wanted her to become a good agent, he had to admit that her occasional lack of focus was frustrating.

Take weapons training, for example. Skye seemed to think that shooting a gun was some sort of a lark. Sure, Fitz’s “night night” gun would make the weapon less deadly (and he didn’t care what Fitz said, they were not going to call it by that cutesy name!) but didn’t she realize that learning to shoot could mean the difference between life and death? What did she think would happen if he wasn’t able to be there to protect her and the rest of the team?

Early one morning, Grant thought that he might scream with frustration (also behavior not befitting a good SO). Skye had hit the magazine release instead of the safety release five times in a row. Then, when he decided to change things up and start working on the actual pulling of the trigger, she kept saying, “Bang!” with a big smile on her face. At first he wanted to laugh (her smile was really great) but after several times of him telling her not to do that and her ignoring him, he finally lost his temper.

“Damn it, Skye! What do I have to do to make you take this seriously?”

Skye quit grinning and shrugged. “I’m sorry. I just don’t see myself doing much shooting. You and May are great shots and FitzSimmons and I will mostly just be providing back-up. Besides, I don’t know if I could actually shoot at someone. I mean, what if I hurt them?”

Grant rolled his eyes. “That’s the whole point. What would you do if someone was shooting at you?”

“I’d just do what I did in Peru and Malta: run and count on you to save me,” she said looking up at him innocently. Grant almost groaned. Clearly Skye had figured out that he had a thing about saving people (Hey! Is that my weird thing?) and was trying to use it to get out of weapons training.

“What if I’m not there?” Grant asked in an exasperated tone. Sometimes she could be so naïve. “I know you think I’m a robot but even robots can’t be in two places at once. You need to be able to protect yourself.”

“Look, I get that you’re worried about this but I just don’t think you should stress over it. My skill is CS, so I’m not going to be on the front lines. FitzSimmons aren’t cleared for combat. Why do I need to be?”

“OK, forget about protecting yourself. What about being able to protect others?” he asked in a last-ditch effort to get her to concentrate.

Skye shrugged indifferently again. “I protect others by doing what I do best: computers. I can’t imagine a situation in which I would need to protect others physically. Really. Do you see me
At this, Grant threw up his hands and disgustedly walked away. Sometimes there was just no reasoning with her. He’d try it again tomorrow. He passed Coulson on his way upstairs and noted that he didn’t seem to be as frustrated with Skye as Grant was. Maybe he was making this into too big of a deal. Maybe she would just be tactical support.

Their newest mission in Belarus seemed to support Skye’s belief that she didn’t need to be prepared for combat. Coulson was very reassuring to the rest of the team (sans May who was running things from the Bus) that they were there to provide support only; they wouldn’t even be leaving the van.

As Grant drove for the Short Bus mission (Coulson didn’t love the name but Grant secretly found it hilarious), he listened with amusement at FitzSimmons’ physics-speak and technobabble. Although it could be annoying to listen to them, at times he really enjoyed how the two of them seemed totally on the same wavelength. He wondered if he would ever find someone who would know him as well as Leo and Jemma appeared to know each other. That could be nice. If he ever stopped being a triple spy.

Grant went with Coulson into the village to track down Akela Amador. He was enjoying the time spent with just the two of them; it was rare that they had a chance to talk without being at odds with each other. Grant acknowledged to himself that he wished that Coulson would hold him in the kind of high regard as he did May, Skye and, apparently, Amador. He was doing the best job he knew how to do for Coulson but Grant sensed that it wasn’t working and he didn’t know what else to try. Coulson just didn’t seem to care about him like he did the rest of the team and his eventual reveal as Hydra certainly wasn’t going to help. Grant suddenly realized that the Amador situation was quite similar to his own and he wondered how Coulson viewed it. He decided to test the waters.

“I can only imagine how painful this must be for you, sir. Betrayed by someone you trained and believed in,” Grant began. Will he even care when I seem to turn on him? Will he ever believe that I’m a triple agent or will he throw me to the wolves?

Coulson seemed annoyed by this. “We don’t have all the facts yet,” he replied.

Man, he’d heard that Coulson was a true believer but this was beyond naïve! What would it take for the man to realize there were traitors in his midst? Grant had no idea if Amador was Hydra but, given the situation, it seemed likely. He thought he would gently nudge Coulson in that direction. Forewarned was forearmed and Coulson was going to need it. “True but I have to assume the worst. Amador sold out the other two agents on her mission. I wonder what she got in exchange.”

Maybe she got a father figure who she could sometimes please.

“I don’t know. But until we do, I’m not going to assume anything,” Coulson responded shortly as he walked away. Grant stood looking at him for a minute. As irritated as he was with the way Coulson constantly dismissed him (What am I doing wrong?), he was still impressed. This man was loyal! He nodded to himself. Ultimately, this was what made SHIELD different from Hydra. There were people who believed in the goodness of others and would fight to ensure fair treatment for them. Grant could only hope that, at the end of it all, Coulson would believe in him too.

Grant had been annoyed when Skye called asking about bathroom breaks and snacks. Those three couldn’t take anything seriously! They certainly were not making him feel better about bringing them into the field because, despite several missions under their belts, none of them seemed much closer to being combat ready than they did in Peru. To add insult to injury, he and Coulson were getting nowhere with tracking Amador. They knew she had been there and couldn’t be far but
every lead seemed to go up in smoke.

“Try contacting the team to see if they’re getting anything,” Coulson ordered after about an hour of talking with landlords and shop owners, some of whom had seen Amador (like the woman with the tumor) but none who knew anything about her plans or current whereabouts. “I’m going to talk with one more person,” he said as he walked toward another store.

Grant took out his phone and realized that he hadn’t heard anything from the Three Stooges (as he internally labeled them after the bathroom call) in over an hour. That seemed wrong. The phone rang about 10 times without being answered and Grant felt his anxiety rise. Why aren’t they answering? They know the protocol by heart and it doesn’t include not checking in. As goofy as they were, they would never be unprofessional enough to be away from communications. He quickly called May. “Have you heard from Skye and FitzSimmons?”

“No. Haven’t you?” Typical May, short and sweet.

“No, not for over an hour. Can you try them in the van?” Grant heard the sounds of May checking the communications.

There was a moment of silence. “They’re not answering. I’m going to retask the satellite and see if I can find them,” she said. There was a pause and then, “Found them!” May’s voice took on an edge of grimness. “You and Coulson need to get there now. The van is lying in a ditch!”

Grant felt his heart stop for a moment. He ran across the street to where Coulson had gone and stuck his head in the door. “Sir! Something’s wrong with the team. They need our help.” Without waiting for a reply, Grant took off running in the direction of where they left the van. Something had happened, just like he had been afraid it would, and he wasn’t there to protect them! Combat was fluid; there was rarely any behind the lines nowadays. I should have worked harder to help them learn how to defend themselves!

As he ran down the tree-lined street, he saw the overturned van with a crowd standing around it. To the side, he noticed FitzSimmons sitting on the ground underneath a tree leaning on each other. Then he saw a man helping Skye out of the van. She appeared to be making her rescuer laugh. Grant stopped running and caught his breath. He heard Coulson run up behind him. “Looks like they’re ok, sir,” Grant told him, glad to say the words out loud.

It turned out that the van was still able to be driven once they, with the help of the townspeople, were able to set it right side up. That was humiliating but it was better than trying to find another ride. On the drive back to the Bus, Coulson turned around to Skye and FitzSimmons. “OK. What happened?”

“It was Amador, sir,” Skye began. Grant listened only long enough to hear that about how they’d figured out it was her then he stopped paying attention to their report to Coulson. How dare Amador assault my team! They could have been seriously injured; it was only luck that they weren’t. Coulson may have loyalty to her but, as far as Grant was concerned, any benefit of the doubt was long gone. It was all he could do to contain his anger.

As the group climbed onto the Bus, Grant saw May standing at the railing watching them. He could tell from her cold stare that she shared his feelings of rage. He breathed a bit easier because he knew she would be his ally in the hunt for Amador. Grant thought that Coulson would now be on their side too. How could he not? But Coulson surprised him again by still seeming to not write her off completely. Grant almost lost it.

“Sir, Amador attacked you and your people,” he snarled. He was barely reigning in his temper and
his word choice was precise. He wanted Coulson to realize that the attack had been personal. If Amador was indeed Hydra, then she would be expected to use her personal knowledge of Coulson to do whatever she needed to do take him out. Of course, Coulson didn’t know how Hydra operated (he would learn soon enough), so Grant tried to explain it as best he could. “Whatever regard you hold for her isn’t reciprocated. She just kicked us in the teeth.”

Coulson looked unmoved. Grant couldn’t understand his calm demeanor. If this had happened to Hydra, they would be out for blood. Why isn’t Coulson?

Instead of replying directly, Coulson simply asked, “How’s the team?” He seemed unaffected by either Grant’s frustration or the day’s events.

“Rattled. No broken bones. We’re lucky she just knocked the van over so she could get away. Probably take a while for our folks to refocus,” he replied with certainty.

None of the team had a specialist’s ability to hone in with laser-like intensity. Given the nature of their work, specialists had to be like a dog with a bone in that once they grabbed hold of something, it took a lot to make them let go. But support staff wasn’t like that; they were easily distracted and needed exactly the right environment to get anything done. Grant thought it probably would be a while before they were able to concentrate on their tasks. Amador was undoubtedly long gone.

Wouldn’t you know it though, right at that very moment, Skye proved him wrong. She poked her head into Mission Control and proceeded to tell them just how she was going to find Amador’s feed. Grant was puzzled and a little impressed. Up to this point, Skye’s attention constantly wandered. He knew that she was supposed to be good at technology and he had seen her do a few things but he had yet to see the work that had excited Coulson enough to ask her to join his team. This should be interesting.

An hour later, the team watched the feed as Amador watched herself in a mirror and used tools to adjust her eyeball. Everyone flinched; Fitz even went so far as to close his eyes.

“It’s her eye! She’s the camera,” May said in amazement. Everyone continued to watch in stunned silence as the view from Amador’s eye feed changed from color to black and white.

“It switches to backscatter when she closes her eyes,” Fitz explained.

“You’re a robot. Can you do that?” Skye asked Grant.

Will she ever give that robot thing a rest? It had been a bit funny and flattering at first but now he was starting to question why she kept bringing it up. Does she really think that I don’t have emotions? He felt a bit insulted. When in doubt with Skye, it was best to pretend he hadn’t heard her. Grant closed his eyes (Nope, no backscatter.) and asked Fitz, “Who has tech like this?”

Grant stood silently by as FitzSimmons talked about the possibility of replicating such ingenious technology. He admitted to himself that they were quite impressive once they got going and sometimes it seemed almost as if they shared the same brain. They’re stronger than I thought. Based on what he was seeing, the Wonder Twins apparently shook off the accident like it was nothing and just kept going. Remarkable.

Coulson and May started going back and forth as to whether Amador should be brought in or taken out. Grant desperately wanted to weigh in, to shout that they must retaliate for their own safety, but he knew he had to keep quiet. This was between Coulson and the Cavalry. Besides, May was making his case better than he could.
“She’s a weapon,” she said to Coulson angrily. “You are defending this girl at the expense of the team.” Damn right!

“Because we protect our own,” Coulson replied calmly. Will you? When the time comes and it looks like I’ve betrayed you, will you still protect me? I’ll deserve your protection because I’ll still be SHIELD but Amador isn’t.

“With all due respect sir, she’s not one of our own,” Grant put in. It was a relief to finally be able to say something. Just then Skye pointed out that Amador was asking to be able to sleep and the situation abruptly changed.

“She’s not being watched; she’s being controlled. We have to find her!” Coulson ordered. Just like that, the objections were dropped and they seemed to work seamlessly again. The team decided that all of them would watch the feed, with May volunteering to take the first shift. The rest of them set up a schedule of watching and then went to bed.

However, things soon went wrong. May went off book (I should have seen that coming! I would’ve done it too if I didn’t have other orders.) and Coulson woke Grant quickly to explain the situation and give orders before he left to go after May and Amador. “Be ready for anything!” he told him as he went out the door.

Grant had barely gotten much sleep but he forced himself to become alert by a judicious use of coffee and exercise. He checked in with FitzSimmons to monitor their progress and kept a close eye on Amador’s feed. He got a bit tense watching the fight between May and Amador but Grant had enough faith in May’s ability to come out on top to start making a tactical plan even before the fight was over. After all, May was The Cavalry! Of course she was going to win. Thus, when Coulson called in to talk about the plan, Grant was ready.

He waited as long as he could to give Skye as much rest as possible but, before it was even light out, Grant knocked on her bunk and entered. “Skye, wake up. Coulson has a mission for us,” he began standing awkwardly by her bed. He wished the bunks were bigger. This felt awfully close and intimate.

Skye immediately sat up and gazed up at him. “Do you have to be so tall?” she grumbled. She looked out the window. “And it’s not even morning yet!” she said disgustedly.

Grant tried not to smile. She was pretty cute when she first woke up. “I let you sleep as long as I could but Coulson has a mission for us.”

This got her attention. Even as sleepy as she was, Skye’s eyes lit up. “Us, as in you and me?” she asked excitedly.

“Yes. Coulson found Amador and has her under lockdown. FitzSimmons have been up all night creating a pair of glasses that will allow me to access Amador’s feed and fool them into thinking that I’m her. I have to complete her mission and I need you for backup with the computer feed,” Grant explained quickly. Then he looked seriously at her, “Can you do this?”

Skye actually rolled her eyes at him. “Of course I can. I’m the one who found the feed, remember? You’d think a robot would remember these things. When do we leave?”

Grant almost rolled his eyes back at her but then realized it wouldn’t seem very SO-ish, so he restrained himself. When they got back, he was definitely going to look into this robot thing.

“Right now. You’ll have to finish setting up the monitoring feed for the glasses on the way to the building. Check in with FitzSimmons, get your stuff and meet me in the car outside.”
Neither Grant nor Skye spoke much as he drove to the site of their new mission. Skye was busy working on the monitor while Grant spent his time thinking about what he would have to do and worrying. He wasn’t stressed about his role in the upcoming assignment; he was too experienced of an agent for that. No, he was concerned about Skye being out in the field so soon after being rammed by Amador. He also was uneasy because he knew that he wouldn’t be able to protect her if something were to go wrong.

Grant eased into a space in the parking lot and Skye finally looked up from her computer. “Where are we?” she asked.

“Totteroff Building,” he replied leaning forward to visually examine the building. He internally shook his head at Skye’s inexperience. Where they were wasn’t important. The only thing that mattered was what they were going to do and, for those purposes, official names were hardly a concern. He made a mental note to mention that to her once they were safely back on the Bus.

Grant watched numerous people head into the building. If he didn’t know better, he’d think they were back in the 1950s with the look of people entering a factory. “I think it’s research, not military,” he continued.

“It looks like a prison,” she commented. *She’s right. Damn! That means more security.*

Grant wanted to refocus her attention back on the mission. They didn’t have a lot of time. “We wireless yet?” he asked briskly.

“Yep,” she said just as briskly as she leaned forward. “Ready to detach.” Skye reached forward to unhook the glasses from the monitor and accidentally brushed her fingers against his ear. Grant twisted violently in his seat and almost turned to face her. He wasn’t used to being touched, especially in such a light fashion, so he had no idea that he was ticklish on the skin behind his ears.

“Don’t look at me,” Skye ordered as she physically turned his head back so he was facing the building again. “They need to think you’re her. And oh my god, Super Spy is ticklish!” Skye said teasingly. *She has to be loving this.* Wow! Who knew being ticklish could be so uncomfortable, both physically and emotionally. No wonder it was considered a form of torture. Grant would never admit it but he was embarrassed. Who ever heard of a specialist being ticklish? He’d be willing to bet that May certainly wasn’t.

The two of them waited in silence as Skye continued to monitor the feed to ensure that both she and Grant were seeing the same thing. The location for the next mission flashed across the bottom of the screen.

“It would suck to live like this,” she commented. “Wondering if someone is watching.”

*Isn’t that the truth!* Grant thought back briefly to his time with Garrett. At first, he and Buddy had been left alone to fend for themselves but then came the training. Garrett often would teach him a skill and then give him a few words on a piece of paper. Those words were his mission and, if Grant didn’t succeed, there was hell to pay. Although he rarely saw Garrett during mission performances, Grant never wondered if someone was watching; he knew that they were. Of course, Grant wasn’t killed if he didn’t accomplish his goal but there were other kinds of punishment. It did indeed suck to live like that and Grant felt a moment’s sympathy for Amador. At least he’d had down time and John occasionally gave him rewards. And he’d never had to request permission to go to sleep.

But these thoughts weren’t going to help with the mission and Grant needed to focus. He touched the side of the glasses. “Testing backscatter,” he said.
Skye finished working on the equipment. “Good to go,” she said as she handed him his wireless transmitter.

Grant took it from her hand and felt a shiver as their fingers briefly touched. He really didn’t like leaving her alone like this. “Remember, I can’t look at you, much less help you.”

But Skye didn’t seem at all phased. “Got it. Don’t count on you for help.” But after he got out of the vehicle, he heard her say, “I’ll be watching.” Given her commentary on how being watched would suck, Grant wondered if that was supposed to be comforting or ominous.

As Grant started walking through the various levels of security, he decided that Skye watching him was anything but comforting. He was sure that she was trying to “help” but it felt more like interfering. “Hey! Remember that you have man hands, so don’t look when you scan the card,” she instructed him.

Grant was irritated. Does she think this is my first rodeo? He could handle himself and it irked him that she seemed to think he couldn’t. “I know,” he said in a quiet but irritated tone.

But Skye wouldn’t quit. “Careful, mirror!” she yelped.

Grant bent his head to avoid looking into the reflective surface. “Don’t need your help.”

He finally reached a room in which the instructions said his target was located. Grant hid himself in the wall between two windows so that the security guard in the room couldn’t see him while he waited for his next instructions. Sure enough, TARGET ACQUIRED. STAND BY. flashed across the screen.

“What do they mean target?” Skye wondered.

“It’s never good,” Grant replied briskly. “Especially for the target. Let’s hope it’s a knock-out and not a kill.” He never liked killing but his real concern was that it might be too much for Skye.

Sure enough, she said, “You should get out of there!” She’s too innocent for this work.

“I’ve come this far. I’ll finish,” he reminded her. “Whatever it takes.” Clearly she didn’t understand what it meant to be a specialist. He was a bad-ass, someone who could handle almost any contingency. This may seem like a dangerous mission to her but, to Grant, this was a walk in the park; it was nothing. He peered in at the guard as his next instructions flashed onto the screen: SEDUCE HIM. Uh-oh. “Help,” he whispered.

“I’m sorry. Did you say ‘help’ because a minute ago you said you didn’t want or need my help?”

When they got through with this mission, Grant decided that he was going to kill Skye. He could swear she was trying not to laugh. “That was before they asked me to go all Mata Hari on this guy.” He looked again at the guard and considered the possibilities. He shook his head, “I’m just going to knock him out.”

“Ward, wait! We may need him to get to the next door. Remember, it said to seduce, not kill.”

Grant looked again at the guard. “I don’t think I’m his type,” he insisted. Doesn’t she understand that I’m not good with man people? Now, if the guard were a woman, Grant thought he could hold his own. Women often were fairly easy targets for him and he could be charming when he wanted to be. He’d certainly been forced to be on multiple occasions.

“Let me see,” Skye said while zeroing in on the guard. “Cheap haircut. Five o’clock shadow.
Nope. Odds are you guys play for the same team. You’re going to have to bromance him. Talk sports, vodka, the Victorian Odd Secret catalog. Be friendly, Agent Ward! Can you be friendly?” Skye clearly didn’t think he could because she added, “Please don’t die!”

Grant rolled his eyes before entering the room to talk with the guard who got up from the desk to meet him. There was zero chance that he was going to be killed by this hulking dude, with or without a bromance. Grant did his best – even he was impressed with his attempts – but the guard wasn’t responding to anything. Both men were starting to get irritated. *Come on, buddy. Give me something to work with!* Finally, Grant realized that it was hopeless (the guard seemed a bit dim, perhaps he was even chosen for his poor intellect) and he had no choice but to knock him out. He knew Skye would be disappointed but really, there wasn’t anything else he could do. In fact, he doubted Amador could have gotten any further than he did.

He stepped over the guard and went into the inner-most room. Inside, two men sitting in front of typewriters looked up as Grant walked in. They didn’t say anything and soon resumed their typing. This was weird but as long as the men didn’t interfere with whatever his mission was, Grant didn’t care what they were doing.

“What now? Are you supposed to grab one of these guys?” Skye asked excitedly. Grant almost groaned. She wasn’t supposed to get emotional; she needed to remain cool at all time. To give into emotions on a mission was to court capture or death.

Grant just walked around the small room, staring curiously at the writing, mathematic equations and algorithms on the chalkboards. Finally, on the far side of the room, he glimpsed something completely different. An entire wall was dedicated to geometric figures – circles and interconnecting lines – along with some words in a language he didn’t recognize. *What is all this?* Much to his surprise, the instructions flashed onto his screen: MISSION COMPLETE. GOOD LUCK. Now *that* sounded ominous.

Grant left the room and, to his dismay, noticed a 10 second countdown on the guard’s desk. He wanted to kick himself for not noticing this earlier. “Figured out what I needed the guard for,” he told Skye disgustedly, not even bothering to lower his voice. “His password.”

“Maybe I could talk you through a hack,” Skye said anxiously. “Just give me a minute.”

The countdown on the screen reached 1. Grant just stood there waiting to see what would happen. There was no point in doing anything else. As soon as the countdown reached 0, an alarm started buzzing.

“No more minutes,” he told her grimly. Although, all things considered, the situation could be worse. At least there wasn’t an explosion. He reached down, grabbed the guard’s gun and told Skye, “Meet me on the south side of the building ASAP,” as he started to run from the room.

“GOTCHA. Which way is south?” Upon hearing this, Grant made a decision: he was really going to kill her. Slowly.

Grant made his way carefully through the halls of the building, running when he had to and trying to keep away from people. Fitz bothered him for a bit asking questions about Amador’s prosthetic eye until Grant saw his reflection and knew that the ruse was finished.

“Cut it now! Cut the wires now!” he told Fitz as he kept moving. “Coming your way,” he told Skye as he ran up some stairs.

“I don’t know what that means,” Skye replied.
Grant didn’t even bother responding. She’d either meet him or she wouldn’t; there was nothing he could do about it now. He shot his way out of a huge glass window and ran along the outer building. He jumped down onto a garbage bin and then directly in front of the oncoming car being driven by Skye. She looked startled.

Grant calmly got in the car and – without even a hint of emotion, just like she was picking him up from a regular day of work – said, “Let’s go.”

Skye took off from the parking lot at warp speed.

“Slow down!” Grant told her. “We don’t want them to think we have anything to hide. They’ll be looking for cars speeding off.”

Skye obediently slowed down, looked at Grant, and just started laughing. Grant was confused. What in the world is so funny?

“What?” he asked.

Skye stopped laughing but a smile remained on her face. “Nothing. It’s just that it was so much fun. I mean,” she said quickly after catching a glimpse of his face, “I’m sure it was horrible for you but this mission had it all, just like in the movies: a devilishly handsome Superspy, matching wits with Russians, a secret mission, super cool spy gadgets, and a race against death. If this is the way it is all the time, I can see why you love being a specialist.”

“It’s not like this all of the time,” he answered. “A lot of the time we do paperwork.” Skye looked a bit disbelieving and Grant tried to keep his expression blank as he looked out the window. Does she really think I’m devilishly handsome or is she just teasing?

Later, after Amador left the Bus and everyone was enjoying down time, Grant and Fitz decided to play poker. This was something they’d started doing in the evenings after Grant had told FitzSimmons about a mission in Monte Carlo where he had to win the attention of the target by demonstrating prowess at the tables. Simmons wanted to know the science behind bluffing but Fitz had been fascinated by the game itself and asked Grant if he would teach him how to play. Grant’s first inclination was to say no but he was supposed to blend in and besides, it would be fun. He had to do something to occupy his time; reading and working out only took him so far.

For someone with such a high intellect, Fitz didn’t seem to do well at cards and Grant realized that he was getting frustrated by his constant losses. So, when he noted that Fitz seemed more excited to play than usual, he figured something was up. However, he decided to wait him out. Both Fitz and Simmons were incredibly transparent, so it would only be a matter of time before Fitz let him know the cause of his eagerness.

At first, nothing was out of the ordinary. Sure, watching Fitz purposefully crunch pretzels was weird but, by now, Grant was used to Fitz’s constant eating. He did wonder where he put all the food – the boy never exercised – but if he thought crunching pretzels was going to disturb Grant’s concentration, he was sadly mistaken. Seriously. You’d think they’d never seen a specialist operate before.

Grant tapped his cards slowly while he watched Fitz eat. “I call.” He leaned forward and dropped several chips onto the pile in the middle of the table. “And raise a hundred.”

Fitz smirked and set down the pretzel bowl. “You know how I know I’m going to beat you?”

Grant’s expression didn’t change one bit. “By losing.”
“You have a tell. A psychological tic that lets me know you’re bluffing,” Fitz said.

Grant remained expressionless. *Oh really? This I’ve got to hear!*

“If I watch you carefully….” Fitz seemed a bit agitated and then repeated himself a bit louder, “If I watch you carefully….” Suddenly Fitz’s expression changed and he almost seemed a bit panicked. “I fold. You win,” he said as he abruptly got up and left the table.

Grant swiveled around in his chair to watch Fitz practically run down the hall. *What the hell was that about?* He cleaned up the cards and the poker chips and went to put them in his room. However, he only got as far as the galley before he put everything down quietly and sneaked back towards the poker table from the opposite direction from which he left. Sure enough, there was Skye coming out of her bunk wearing those damn glasses. She was looking down the hall at the way Grant had originally left, so he leaned against the wall.

“Skye.”

He was gratified when she jumped badly upon seeing him. “Ward, you scared me! Are you sure you don’t have feline blood in you?”

“Aren’t those glasses supposed to be kept in the lab?” he asked without expression. *This should be good.*

“Well…yeah. But…uh…Fitz wanted to see if we could do more analysis on the range of the glasses and…” Skye stammered. Grant was enjoying seeing her off-kilter, especially considering just how much she usually threw him off-balance.

“So Fitz was trying to get you to help him cheat at poker,” he interrupted.

Skye grimaced. “Damn, Ward! There’s no getting anything past you, is there?”

“But if that’s what he was doing, why did he leave in such a hurry?” Grant asked, puzzled.

Skye shrugged and started smiling wickedly. *Uh oh.* “I just let him know that if I used the glasses to see your cards, I’d also be able to see him without clothes. I guess he wasn’t too keen on that idea.”

It only took him a second and he’d thought that his expression hadn’t changed but he could tell the moment that Skye realized he knew what that meant. *Damn! Oh well, might as well go for broke.* He raised his eyebrows. “And?”

Skye’s smile widened. “Let’s just say that if this SuperSpy stuff doesn’t work out, you could always have a lucrative career as a stripper.” At that, she winked at him and went back into her bunk.

Grant was speechless.
All the Hydra agents from the Fridge takeover poured into the Hydra base in Havana. Despite losing out on the gravitonium he thought he would find, Garrett seemed to be in a good mood.

Grant couldn’t resist rubbing it in a little though. “I’ve never been so happy to have a man buy me a steak dinner in my life!” he said in a jovial tone. “And just wait until you see the bill!”

Garrett laughed and headed over to talk with Raina. “Why the long face?” he asked her smiling. Grant walked behind him and started putting down his equipment.

Raina’s expression was grim. “There’s a complication with the hard drive,” she said seriously. Garrett quickly lost his smile. “I don’t like complications,” he said in a threatening tone.

“This one involves Skye,” Raina replied as both she and Garrett turned as one to look at Grant. He’d stopped dealing with equipment at the table as soon as the hard drive was mentioned and started paying close attention. Outwardly, his expression was mildly puzzled but inwardly he groaned.

“What has Skye done now?”

“We had three teams try to hack it but she programmed it to erase all data if anyone other than her attempts to access it,” Raina explained.

“Oh shit!” Grant closed his eyes as his brain went into overdrive. On the one hand, he felt a lot of pride in Skye’s abilities since no one in Hydra could work around her security system. But, on the other hand, she was now in grave danger and he had to protect her. Fury or no Fury, mission or no mission, Grant wasn’t going to let anything bad happen to Skye!

“Of course she did,” he said quietly.

“In case it fell into the wrong hands I guess,” Raina responded as both she and Garrett looked at him again. Grant sincerely hoped that Fury would decide that Raina was irrelevant because, in that moment, he really wanted to kill her. As if she wouldn’t do exactly the same thing if she were in Skye’s position!

Garrett turned even further to fully face Grant. “You know what that means, Romeo.”

Grant glowered and then nodded. Indeed he did. Garrett was going to want him to seduce the information out of Skye. If this involved any other woman, Grant would not have a problem with that. Hell, he had seduced plenty of women in his time, more so for Hydra than for SHIELD but both organizations had required him to manipulate the feelings of others, to use his good looks for gain. In fact, he and his therapist had spent many hours discussing how this tendency of intelligence organizations to use sex appeal as a weapon was one reason why Grant had never been able to have, even begin, a real romantic relationship. Both of them had assumed that this would not be an issue for his work with Coulson’s team but then neither of them anticipated Skye. She was a wild card; Grant never saw her coming.

But now he was expected to undermine what he had built with her, to sow seeds of distrust into a field already ripe with them, in order to help SHIELD come out on top. Grant felt sick to his stomach. Of course he realized that the seduction route was infinitely preferable to hurting or killing her but Skye would still end up hurt. And so would he. How on earth was he going to have the strength to do this?
Grant realized that he would have to start thinking like a specialist and piece the operation together, piece by piece. The first step was to get to where the team was. This was easily accomplished with a simple phone call. He let himself feel a sliver of excitement at the thought of talking to Skye again. After all, the last call had gone really well.

“Skye, it’s Ward,” he said when she answered the phone.

“Oh my god, Ward!” she squealed. He smiled, glad that she was pleased to hear from him. “Are you ok? Everyone’s saying that the fight at the Fridge was pretty bad.”

“It was,” he replied shortly. That definitely wasn’t something he wanted to talk about. “Have you all found a base of operations yet?”

“Yeah. It’s all very mind-bendy. It’s like Fury reached out from the grave to give Coulson the coordinates to a secret base.”

Grant tried to process all the information at once. Secret base? Wait, Fury was really dead? What will I do if no one knows that I’m a triple? He sighed and realized that he would have to put his faith in Maria Hill. The latest intel listed her as missing along with the Black Widow and Captain America. However, Grant knew enough about all three agents to doubt that they’d died. He suspected that they were holed up somewhere together, planning their next attack. That’s what he would do. That might be what he would have to do if things went south. With an effort, he dragged his mind back onto task. The Fury information would be good for Garrett, appease him a bit while he waited for Grant to fulfill his mission. And he had to get Skye to give him a way to get to her.

“Secret base?” he asked in disbelief. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Garrett’s head jerk up at the information. “I can’t wait to hear the story. Is Coulson expecting me to rejoin the team at the base?” he asked.

“Of course. We’ve all been worried sick about you…especially me.” Skye said.

Grant closed his eyes, simultaneously thrilled and disturbed at her last statement. As much as he wanted to be with Skye, he was beginning to wonder if it would ever be possible. “Don’t worry about me; I’m fine. What are the coordinates?”

She told him. Then she paused, lowered her voice and said, “This is like one big nightmare. S.H.I.E.L.D’s been compromised, Coulson’s furious with May and even FitzSimmons are arguing. It feels like the team is falling apart, Ward. We really need you.” Another pause, and then she said even more softly, “I need you.”

Grant felt his heart break into two at her words.

Will I ever be able to stop disappointing people? Will I ever be able to protect the ones I love? Although Grant usually kept these feelings locked up tight, it hurt that he couldn’t help his little brother. And at times he was distraught that he couldn’t help John anymore. And now he was going to leave his team, his beloved team, out on a limb. Just like his little brother and John, they were counting on him and he was going to let them down. What kind of person does that?

Grant didn’t know what to say to make Skye feel better. He was going to the base, not to help the team, but to hurt them even further. However, maybe he could be as honest with her as he could be. It wouldn’t make things right but at least it was something. Garrett wouldn’t notice or care; he would figure that it was all part of Grant’s cover.

“I need you too, Skye.” And he did, more than she would ever know. “I’ll take the first transport there that I can.”
“We’ll be waiting.” He hoped that he heard a happier lilt to her voice.

“All right,” he told her as he walked back toward John. “See you soon.”

Garrett had taken off his dirty shirt and was putting on a new one. “Secret base, huh? Sounds just like Fury.”

Grant leaned on a ceiling support beam. “Skye confirmed. Fury’s out of the picture.” I really hope that’s not true!

“Well, that is good news. Gives us one less thing to worry about,” John said as he pulled his shirt over his head. He turned his head slightly in Grant’s direction. “Listen, about the girl…”

“Look, I know how much it means to you,” Grant interrupted. He didn’t want to give John a chance to tell him to do something horrible to Skye. The less he butted heads with Garrett, the better. Grant would complete the mission but he’d do it his way, a way in which Skye wouldn’t get hurt. “I’ll get it done.”

“Hey, we all have our weaknesses,” John replied, turning directly to face Grant and deliberately showing his side in which the tech kept him alive. Grant knew that John wanted to emphasize the stakes involved in what they were doing. John knew him well; he had always known the strong desire Grant had to keep him whole and healthy. Before, this display would’ve steelied Grant’s resolve but now it made him angry. Yes, he still wanted John to survive and he would do it if he could but not at the price he was asking.

“The heart wants what it wants. You can’t control everything,” he said as he walked over to face Grant. “So, if you can do it the easy way without blowing your cover, then by all means.”

“I just need some time alone with her to get the information,” Grant said. Time alone with Skye. Even the thought of that made him feel good. He could almost feel his tactician’s brain start to whirl with strategies for how to make that happen while still doing his job.

“You’ll have it! Coulson will be busy,” Garrett said as he walked a short distance away. He then turned to face Grant again. “I’ll give you 24 hours to get the password and get out. After that, well,” he paused for a significant moment, “cross off the team and bring the girl to me,” he said in an ominous tone.

Grant looked straight at Garrett. Cross off the team? Did he really just say that like it was nothing? It was all Grant could do to maintain his blank expression. Cross off the team, the people who had made him feel like part of a family – a healthy family this time – the kind he always should have had. Kill FitzSimmons, the brilliant scientists whose tender hearts and caring ways made them great substitutes for his lost brother and sister. Kill May, his mirror image and someone who cared enough about his well-being to give as much as she could offer. Kill Coulson, the kind and loyal man who filled up a plane with broken people for the express purpose of helping them. True, Garrett didn’t know – he couldn’t know – how much these people meant to Grant and he would disapprove if he did. To him, caring about others was a weakness. But to Grant, they were a strength and there was no way in hell he would ever cross them off, not if he could help it. Garrett couldn’t read this in his eyes, so he merely glanced down and nodded. Let him think what he wanted.

Garrett came in even closer. “You got your story straight?”

Grant swallowed imperceptibly. He couldn’t risk showing weakness but he hated this part, he always had. There were times when he wondered if Garrett secretly loved it, being able to beat up
a man who, if he really put up a fight, probably could take him down within minutes.

“Yeah,” he said quietly as he put his bag down on the floor and straightened up to face Garrett. Grant walked around the other side, away from the beam so that he wouldn’t get doubly hurt if the momentum pushed him backward. “We just need to make it believable.”

Garrett punched him hard in the face. “Who are you?” he asked.

“Grant Ward, Agent of SHIELD,” he answered lowly, looking straight at Garrett. *If only you knew how true that statement is!*

Garrett punched him on the other side of the face and then twice in the stomach. After the third punch, he yanked Grant up, got right up in his face. “Who? Make me believe,” he said through gritted teeth.

“Grant Ward,” he replied without flinching, breathing hard through the pain and the anger. “Agent of SHIELD.” Garrett punched him several more times and he felt at least two of his ribs break. Then, as his blood dripped onto the floor, he was deemed fit to proceed with the mission.

There were few Hydra pilots to spare. True to Grant’s hopes, Simpson had been captured dropping off the bodies at the Hub and the rest were needed for other missions. As such, Grant was able to take a plane by himself. He had been afraid that Garrett would try to obtain the coordinates before Grant left but apparently he was distracted enough to forget to ask. Nevertheless, Grant guarded his knowledge about the secret coordinates closely. He hadn’t written anything down and he didn’t file a flight path with anyone. Whatever happened with Skye, he wanted the group to have a safe place, one that Hydra couldn’t find and invade. So, even though it hurt, Grant landed the plane some distance from where the base was supposed to be (just in case Hydra came checking and could see the plane) and then made himself walk quite a distance before standing on the coordinates and listening to the robot sentinel say, “Identify yourself.”

It was cold and Grant felt sick to his stomach and in pain. Some of his feelings of illness were related to the beating but the other part was dread about the mission which lay ahead. How in the world was he going to pull this off when all he wanted to do was tell Coulson everything, lay down and just be with Skye? But he answered without inflection, “Grant Ward, Agent of SHIELD.” Grant sighed. He would do well to remember that was truly who he was; it might help in the days to come.

The sentinel responded, “Welcome, Agent Ward. We’ve been expecting you,” and what originally looked like a rock in the side of the hill abruptly slid open. Clever! Grant peered into the hallway beyond the doors and there stood Skye, dressed all in black, looking as beautiful and as wonderful as ever. *Huh. Did she leave her shirt open like that just for me?* If Grant was going to collapse, this would have been the time. He felt almost weak with relief at her well-being as well as trepidation at what he would do (betray her) and what he might have to do. She didn’t deserve any of this.

Skye just stood looking at him, saying nothing, but with a little smile on her face.

Grant strode forward, took off his hat and said, “Thought you might have given me bad directions.”

Skye continued to stand in one place. Grant knew her well enough to know that she had no idea of how to respond to him now. The last time the two of them had been alone, they had kissed and promised to go on a date. She had let down her guard for him and that made her vulnerable. He took it as a good sign that she insisted on meeting him by herself and that she was a little embarrassed. “At least the machine gun didn’t start shooting at you,” she replied.
Grant shrugged. Some days he might have preferred that but today he was just so damn glad to see her. It felt like they had been apart forever.

Suddenly her expression changed and she reached up to touch his face. “You okay?” she asked worriedly.

*Don’t be concerned about me, Skye. I can’t take it! I have a job to do.* “Aw,” he said, shaking his head and trying to deflect her distress. “It’s just a scratch.” Ah, the old stand-by, what he’d always been taught to say when someone noticed that he’d been beaten. Grant felt a bit startled at having to use it again and knew that his therapist would be disappointed in him. He wasn’t supposed to minimize his pain or keep the secrets of what others did to him anymore. But his job as a triple agent took priority over his personal growth and he once again was forced to play someone else’s game. *If I get out of this alive, that ends forever.*

Grant reached up to take off the backpack he was wearing and couldn’t contain the groan of pain the movement caused him. “Oh, maybe a broken rib or two,” he said with a grimace. Agent Ward knew that getting Skye’s sympathy for his injuries was good for the mission but Grant hated her concern for him. If the two of them were ever to have a chance to be together, he wanted it to be real, for them to connect without secrets or letting someone else’s agenda come between them. But he knew he had to let it slide for now, to just place his hope in the idea that once he helped destroy Hydra, things would be different. Maybe she’d even forgive him.

Skye reached up to help him with the backpack. “Come on,” she said. “Simmons should take a look at you.” Grant started looking around at the base, curious about it and not wanting to go worry Simmons, but Skye quick recaptured his attention when she said softly, “Then maybe we can get that drink.” And she smiled.

Grant smiled back, somewhat surprised that she was going there so soon. Maybe she did want to be with him as much as he wanted to be with her. For once, the two parts of him – personal and professional – both felt good about the way things were going. “Deal,” he said, looking at her affectionately. Perhaps he could find a way to accomplish his mission and take her up on it!
You Sank My Expectations!

Flashback

After the Eye Spy mission (yes, they were actually calling it that thanks to Fitz), Skye had taken training a bit more seriously. Sure, she still complained a lot and made up lame excuses to try and get out of workouts but she finally seemed to understand the point of getting into shape and learning how to shoot. At first Grant was puzzled as to why it was the Eye Spy mission rather than the Malta one where she was captured by Bad Guys that spurred her resolve to truly get to work. But then he realized that it was because she saw that being tech support could still go horribly wrong, that any time you’re in the field, you might have to fight for your life or go help someone else who was fighting for theirs.

It probably also helped that Grant had stopped being so inaccessible and started relating some of his mission stories. He was careful to erase any classified details but he could share the type of work he’d done, the problems he’d encountered and how he had solved them. Much to his surprise and gratification, Skye appeared absolutely fascinated by these stories. Sometimes even FitzSimmons would listen and they too seemed spellbound.

Grant didn’t mention it but the evenings when they’d sit around, tell stories and just be together were some of his favorite times. He’d never had a group to relax with and enjoy their company before and it was amazing. Even back in the Academy, Grant didn’t spend time with the other cadets because he was either doing additional training for Garrett or was warned by him not to get too chummy. As a result, everyone in SHIELD just assumed that Grant was a loner and let him be.

So, far from it not being his thing like he’d originally told Coulson, this “team stuff” had become something he treasured.

He was thinking about this during a trip into a local town to get supplies. He wanted to buy something for Skye and FitzSimmons, a symbol of how much he enjoyed being with them. However, this posed a dilemma. Even if he knew what to buy (which he definitely didn’t), he couldn’t get them traditional gifts. That would be too weird and might undermine his authority as Skye’s SO and semi-team captain (after Coulson and May of course). But if he could find something that would promote them spending even more time together, that would be perfect.

*If only I could get Simmons and Skye interested in poker,* Grant thought as he walked across the street to the grocery store (if he didn’t come back with pretzels, there would be hell to pay). He looked into the window of the store right next to it as he passed and was startled to see an old version of the game Battleship. Just like that, he was transported back to when he and his younger brother Thomas would play when they visited their Gram’s house (he’d just told Skye he called her Gramsy to make himself look stupid during his Level 1 Overshare). Christian usually hung out with the kid next door which left Grant and Thomas the freedom to find something else to do without his interference. One day, they’d been hunting around the attic when they found a treasure trove of old games. It was like they’d won the lottery! And, of all the games they found and played (and there were a lot), Battleship was their favorite.

Grant had come to a complete stop outside the store and he went in – was almost drawn in – by the lure of Battleship. He immediately decided to buy it and that he would find some way to make Skye play with him. He also picked up a few other games, ones which included more people, like Scrabble, Body Language, Trivial Pursuit and Pictionary. These were exactly what he was looking for because they clearly were bought for the team without appearing too personal.
Grant was so pleased with his purchases that he was still smiling when he got back to the Bus. FitzSimmons rushed to help him unload the groceries (Grant suspected that Simmons was being helpful while Fitz was just hungry) and they quickly discovered the games.

“Why Agent Ward,” Simmons said smiling at him, “did you get these for us?”

“What did he bring?” Fitz demanded, for once setting down the food. “Ohhh….” he said, looking all of them over closely. Grant felt a moment of worry. What if they thought these games were stupid and childish? What if they hated them? But then Fitz looked at Simmons and said, “Do you remember, Jemma? These were some of the games the other students played on game nights. I saw them once before they put them up for the night.”

“I remember,” Simmons replied to Fitz gently. She turned to Grant and said, “Some of our fellow students were a bit jealous of our abilities, so we didn’t get a lot of invitations to interact with them during down times. I saw them playing Pictionary once. They were dreadful!” She said all of this in a bright tone but Grant detected a note of hurt in her voice and warmed to her. So he wasn’t the only one who had felt excluded.

Just then, Skye skidded around the corner. “You’re back! Why didn’t anyone tell me?” she demanded. Grant waited. “Oh my god, Ward! You bought games?” she said, turning to him with the sparkle in her eyes that he so loved.

He shrugged like it was no big deal. “I saw some of these in a store and thought that they might be helpful with training. Scrabble will improve language skills, Body Language will increase non-verbal communication, Pictionary should sharpen written communication and Trivial Pursuit will help with the kinds of knowledge you can use to pacify a mark. Battleship, of course, will help me analyze your tactical and strategic skills, Skye.”

Grant thought that he’d pulled off being casual until Fitz said, “You are so full of shit, Ward! You just want to play!” Both Simmons and Skye swung around to look at him with accusatory stares and he couldn’t help it, he started laughing.

“You got me. I like to play games,” he said as he started walking back to his bunk. “But Battleship is for real,” he called over his shoulder as he left. “I’ll expect you in the lounge area during our usual morning workout time, Skye. Be ready to show me your strategic skills.”

“Whatever, weirdo!” she called back.

The next morning found Skye and Grant sitting across from each, the Battleship displays in front of them. Although his demeanor was much the same as it always was, Grant felt happy. Playing Battleship brought back so many good memories, of time spent with Thomas and his Grams, that he actually felt a bit playful. Of course, this wasn’t a great idea but he ran with it anyway. He felt too good to do anything else.

Grant looked at Skye intently and said in a serious tone, “Every decision you make from here on out has consequences. So be warned. The kiddie gloves are off.”

Per usual, Skye was completely unaffected and answered, “G7.”

Grant looked down and almost sighed in resignation. “Hit.” He leaned forward to mark the hit on his display.

Skye made a cheering motion as she said, “Yes! Ha!” She leaned forward in her chair to grab some of the pretzels off to the side. “So explain to me again what this has to do with my training.”
Grant had to think hard to remember what he’d told her before. He gestured significantly, hoping that she would be taken in. “It’s important for every SO to evaluate their student’s thought process.” He looked over at her. She wasn’t buying it. “And I like board games,” he said quickly. “B10.”

“Nope. This isn’t thinking, this is stabbing in the dark.” Skye was on to him. “But it’s nice to take a break from the workouts.”

“You deserve a break,” Grant said seriously. He was going to stop there but Skye looked up at him in surprise and pleasure. Her expression clearly telegraphed her desire to hear more praise, so he decided to give it. He loved seeing her look so happy. “I’ve got to give Coulson credit. I never would have pegged an ex-Rising Tide hacker as a good fit but you’re picking things up pretty fast.”

“Did you just give me a compliment?” she asked, smiling.

Uh oh. They were wading into dangerous territory here. Grant had minimal experience with people in authority giving him praise. Garrett rarely did; he was more from the school of hard knocks. Literally. And while there were a few instructors at the Academy who believed that praise was a good incentive, most did not. Grant knew that he tended to work better for people who believed in him versus those who were constantly yelling (when he first realized that about himself, he felt incredibly guilty because that meant he secretly resented John), so he thought he would try praise as a training tool with Skye. But he had very little upon which to model his behavior, so he wasn’t sure how much was too much. He also was uncomfortably aware that his growing attraction to her made his judgement a little more suspect than he would like. So, he decided to try and backtrack a bit.

“I….no, I made a comment,” he replied warily.

But Skye wasn’t going to let him get out of it that easily. “A kind one,” she said as he gestured sort of helplessly in agreement. He wasn’t often accused of being kind. It felt good. “Did it physically hurt to do that?” She leaned forward and said in a low, serious voice, “Do you need an icepack?”

At that moment, Grant knew he was in deep trouble because he absolutely loved how it made him feel to see her so happy and playful. If this was what giving praise felt like, he had no idea why more people didn’t use it as a teaching strategy. But he was also a bit embarrassed because now he had no idea of how to respond. She wasn’t like anyone else he knew! Most specialists were loners and had minimal social skills. They were very serious and, if they had a sense of humor, it usually wasn’t much in evidence. No one ever teased him like she did; no one ever thought he could be more than Agent Ward, Weapon. So, more out of sheer amazement than anything else, his timid smile became a small laugh.

Skye sat back, smiling in delight. “Wow! A compliment and a smile!”

Does she like my smile? He should shut this down before it got too out of hand for him to control. “Comment,” Grant corrected. He still allowed his expression to look pretty light-hearted though. There was no sense of shutting her down hard.

Skye apparently realized that they needed to get back on track so she said, “I don’t want to ruin the moment but I’m going to have to respond with G4.”

Grant looked down at his board and the playful expression slid off of his face. He couldn’t believe that she’d won! Although she was correct that this wasn’t exactly a tactical exercise, whenever he played Battleship, he usually won. Losing didn’t sit so well. Damn! Skye just keeps surprising me in all the right ways. Oh god, now I’m never going to live this down. He closed his eyes, preparing
himself for her gloating.

Skye didn’t disappoint. As she saw his face fall, her grin widened. “Say it, Ward.” Grant let out an irritated sigh. She leaned forward and said in a low voice, her eyes lit up with mirth, “Say it!”

“You sank my battleship,” he said glumly.

“Ha ha ha, yes!” Skye cried as she pumped her fists.

“All right. Best two out of three,” he replied, sitting up and starting to rearrange his display.

“I beat you!” Skye said in a sing-song voice.

“Best two out of three,” Grant said, pausing between every word to make sure she knew that he meant business. Annunciating precisely also helped cover his irritation over losing.

“That I just won out of nothing,” Skye said in an attempt to goad him. Grant had to admit that she could trash talk with the best and he enjoyed their verbal interplay. The two of them started playfully arguing as they set up the new game. However, before they could even get started, a SHIELD alert came in.

Coulson brought the whole team into Mission Control so that he could explain about Chan Ho Yin, a pyro-kinetic gifted who had gone missing. This was Skye’s first introduction to gifted people and the Index, so Grant wasn’t surprised that she was shocked and disapproving. But things got more than a little tense when she started asking questions about how many people were on the list and why SHIELD kept it.

“It’s a short list,” Coulson told her calmly. “Meant to protect them.”

Grant couldn’t let that go unchallenged. It was moments like this when he remembered why he’d only felt minimal guilt about working with Hydra before confessing to Hill. At least Hydra was always honest about who they were; SHIELD also did horrible things but just pretended like they didn’t. The hypocrisy of that had always irked him. So he added, “Though in rare occasions, SHIELD has had to take action.”

“Action against objects or…people?” Skye asked cautiously. There was an awkward silence as the rest of the team looked anywhere but at each other.

Upon reflection, Grant realized that many people accepted some of the shadier things that SHIELD did just because they were so used to it. Few people raised objections about how people on the Index were treated because that was the way it had always been done. Skye’s fresh perspective made them question whether their procedures had as much merit as they’d previously thought. Huh. Maybe Coulson was on to something with adding a team member who doesn’t think the way we do.

The briefing continued with the team talking to Agent Kwan, Mr. Chan’s monitor, until he mentioned that the people who took Mr. Chan were able to do so because of a hack from the Rising Tide. Suddenly, there was another tense silence, but this time it was less embarrassed and more suspicious.

Skye looked around the room, alarmed, as she processed what Agent Kwan had said. Her gaze landed on Grant. He leaned back from the table, straightened, and looked seriously back at her.

Grant honestly didn’t know what to think. His first instinct was to trust Skye. He admitted to himself that he didn’t want for her to have betrayed them. With this thought, Grant could almost
hear Garrett point out that this was yet another reason why caring was weak, why trusting people got you hurt or killed. But her glance at him was so pleading, even trusting, because she clearly was counting on him to back her up. And really, given his triple status, who was he to not at least give her a chance?

“The Rising Tide is a huge organization of hactivists from all around the world. Any of them could have done this. It wasn’t me!” Skye said desperately to Coulson a short while later in his office. Coulson was sitting behind his desk, his expression cold, (At least he’s looking at her and not walking around the room while she tries to talk.) while Grant was facing Skye with his arms folded across his chest. He realized that his body language was threatening but he needed to look as if he was taking this seriously even if he wasn’t sure that he was.

“No one’s saying it was,” Grant replied, almost gently.

“But you’re thinking it! I can see your faces thinking it,” Skye replied, looking back and forth between Grant and Coulson. Grant hated seeing her so upset and desperate but he knew that she had to convince Coulson of her loyalty by herself. The only help he could give her for now was his presence.

“We’re assessing the situation,” Coulson said calmly.

“Then I’m sure you’re taking into account that I have been living on a plane with you this whole time. It would be impossible for me to hack SHIELD,” Skye said. Grant wondered if that was true. He suspected that none of the team had any idea of what Skye could actually do.

“Or easier,” Coulson retorted. Clearly he was of the same mind as Grant about Skye’s abilities. “We’re going to need more than that.”

“Fine. Let me trace the hack and I’ll prove it,” Skye responded hastily. Grant decided that he could legitimately step in now as her SO. After all, he was the one who was supposed to know her best.

“I believe her, sir,” Grant said. “And if she’s telling the truth,” he said as he and Skye exchanged significant looks (“Thank you for believing me” and “You’d better be telling the truth because I am going out on a limb for you”), “we need to track down the person responsible.”

Coulson stood up. “Dig up something and fast,” he told Skye. “The longer Mr. Chan is missing, the more danger he’s in.”

Skye left Coulson’s office quickly and went directly to the holo-table. Although Grant needed to be there in his capacity as her SO, he wasn’t surprised when the rest of the team came to watch as well. He could practically taste their strong desire to believe in Skye. Plus, all of them were pretty impressed with her computer abilities which led her to discover, in an amazingly short amount of time, that infamous (or famous, depending upon how you looked at it) hacker Miles Lydon was the one who was responsible for the hack that led to Mr. Chan’s kidnapping.

Immediately the atmosphere in the room changed from tense to almost jubilant. Fitz even went so far as to say, “Miles Lydon, not Skye. That’s to all of our relief.” Grant internally shook his head. Thanks, Captain Obvious. Yes, they were all thinking it but Fitz really needed to learn not to say everything that is on his mind? He was too naïve by half! Yet he appreciated the sentiment and was gratified that everyone seemed to be on the same page.

The team put together the rest of the mission like the well-oiled machine they had started to be and Grant believed they were back on track from what was a minor bump in the road. Unfortunately, the team working together smoothly to find the leak was the last peace of mind he was going to
have for weeks.

Austin, Texas was an exercise in frustration. Lydon made Grant almost immediately *(How could I be that obvious? Some spy I was right then.)* and Coulson ordered May on some other mission that he wouldn’t share with Grant. All he would say is that it was another lead he was checking out. Then, without telling them why, Coulson ordered Grant to pick up FitzSimmons and meet him at an apartment building.

Once they’d arrived, Coulson told them that he’d ordered May to follow Skye *(How could he not tell me his suspicions about Skye? I’m her SO!)* and that she’d led her straight to Lydon. Grant felt like he’d been kicked in the stomach. First, Coulson purposefully kept him out of the loop and then Skye betrayed him and the rest of the team. And if that wasn’t bad enough, Grant, Mr. Superspy himself, hadn’t realized it. For the first time in his career as a spy, Grant started seriously questioning his skills and competency. How could he of all people not realize a turncoat – someone very close to him – was in their midst?

And then there was Skye’s behavior. Coulson warned them before they entered the apartment that Skye had been intimate with Lydon before May busted her. Grant almost couldn’t stand it. Although he couldn’t exactly put his finger on what was bothering him, he knew that part of it was because he’d been so sure that he knew Skye but, based on this latest development, he clearly didn’t know her at all. He and Skye had bonded over both being alone in the world, kids who’d been abandoned by those they’d desperately wanted to love them. And now she had someone who meant a lot to her, someone for whom she was willing to risk everything, someone who wasn’t Grant. He’d thought that he meant something to her. He’d been wrong.

So, while Skye sat on the couch and begged Coulson to believe that she hadn’t truly done anything wrong, he stayed out of her line of sight and said nothing. He knew he couldn’t put off looking or talking to her for much longer but, as far as he was concerned, the longer the better. After she finished speaking with Coulson, he could feel her looking at him pleadingly but he avoided making eye contact.

He overheard FitzSimmons talking over the situation, with Fitz asking how Skye could do this to them and Simmons defending her. The knowledge that other members of the team were equally as upset about this helped a little but not much. For Grant, it felt almost as bad as the time when Garrett came promising tacos but showing up with a gun. “Hoping for something and losing it hurts more than never hoping for anything,” Skye told him once. *Isn’t that the truth?*

Coulson went in to the bedroom to talk with May and emerged shortly afterward. “Gather all the evidence and secure the prisoners. We got what we were looking for here. We’re going to Hong Kong,” he said as he and May walked out of the door with Lydon in cuffs.

Grant looked down. The moment he had been dreading, having to look at Skye, had arrived. He really didn’t want to do this. He put down the papers he was looking through, turned and sighed as he walked toward Skye.

She tried looking up at him but could barely manage a glance or two before looking down again. “I’m so sorry, Ward. This is not what it looks…”

“Hands,” Grant interrupted quietly, not even looking at her. He could feel her staring at him in disbelief right before she raised her wrists so that he could cuff them. Then she looked down with a defeated expression on her face. “Now get up,” he said in a hoarse voice as he turned and walked away. Skye sighed deeply as she stood up and followed along behind him.

The ride back to the Bus was excruciating. May and Coulson went with Lydon in one car while
Grant, FitzSimmons and Skye rode in another. As they usually did when riding together (this division of the team was the usual one), Skye initially tried to ride in the front with him. But Grant knew that he couldn’t stand sitting next to her, so he insisted that Simmons ride up front leaving Fitz to watch Skye in the back. No one talked.

Once they returned to the Bus, Grant silently removed Skye from the vehicle. She tried to talk to him as she got out saying, “Grant,” and looking up at him but his unyielding expression shut her down. He didn’t know what to say but was afraid of what he would say once he had to talk, so he needed for her to leave him alone. He marched her into the Holding Cell without talking, chained her to the table across from Lydon and left the room.

At first, Skye and Lydon just sat there, facing each other but not talking. Lydon looked angry while Skye slumped dejectedly in her chair. Then, they started arguing about the difference between privacy and security. Grant watched them from a screen in Mission Control and found himself surprised that Skye was defending SHIELD, especially given her repugnance at the Index and what they did to gifteds. Grant was immediately appalled with himself. Skye was not someone to figure out anymore. *When will I learn?*

All of a sudden, it was too much. Grant turned away from the screen, shut it off, and came up behind FitzSimmons who were going through Lydon’s papers. “The guy’s hiding behind platitudes,” he said disgustedly. He crossed his arms in front of him. “He’s dirty. I can feel it.”

“Scrubbed clean actually,” Simmons corrected him and then went on to elucidate Lydon’s gaming habits. Grant had no idea what she was talking about but Fitz seemed to understand and be revolted by the guy’s choices. Of course Lydon would be despicable.

“Keep looking,” he ordered firmly. And they soon found something, just like he knew they would. *That guy is totally crooked!* Coulson ordered Grant to go into the Holding Cell and get them to talk. Right before he entered, he took a deep breath, called to mind his training, and made up his mind that there would be no more shirking his duty. Skye was now a suspect and he needed to treat her as such.

Grant grimly walked into the holding cell, looking just as unfriendly as he had when they’d first captured Skye. But this time, his eyes met Skye’s and she sat up straight, her expression one of attentiveness and pleading, like she was trying to tell him how badly she felt about what had happened. Her attitude could not have been more different than the last time she’d sat in that chair. Grant felt a pang but ruthlessly shut it down. *No more. She played me for a fool.*

He turned and looked at Lydon. “She’s been defending you. Saying you’re a stand-up guy. So I’m going to give you a chance,” he told him. If Grant had his way, he would knock the smug look off the guy’s face first but he knew that wouldn’t win him any points with anyone. *But damn if that wouldn’t feel good.* He threw down a packet of papers on the table. “Do you want to tell her? Or should I?”

Skye looked wary but Lydon replied arrogantly, “I don’t have to listen to you.”

“There goes your chance,” Grant said and briefly glanced at Skye. A nasty part of him was pleased that he was the one who got to deliver the blow. Even as angry as he was with Skye, he still didn’t believe that she did anything as awful as selling out Mr. Chan, so she wouldn’t be happy to know that Lydon had.

“Your boyfriend here,” he said looking back at Lydon, “made a few deposits in the days following the leak.” Boyfriend. The word stung, especially since he’d never been one. To anyone. *Will I ever?* He laid the deposit slips on the table. “All said, about a million dollars.”
“What?” Skye said sharply.

Grant continued his diatribe, “Real stand-up guy,” he said still looking over at Lydon. He hadn’t made eye contact with Skye since he first entered the room.

Skye immediately started arguing with Lydon. Grant realized that he was glad that Skye was upset over this. Not only did it appear that she wasn’t involved in what happened (That’s a relief!) but Lydon was doing a bang up job of disillusioning her about himself. Things got so heated that Grant even risked looking at Skye briefly when she said, “Oh, you are so dead!” after Lydon confessed to selling information for a million dollars.

“It would change my life!” Lydon explained. “Our lives.” Grant angrily looked over at Skye (I thought your life was with us now.) but she was still focused on Lydon. “And that woman was harmless. I looked into it,” Lydon continued. What an idiot! He doesn’t even know what he doesn’t know. You sure picked a good one, Skye.

“No one with good intentions pays that kind of money for information. Did you ever think about that?” Skye asked furiously.

“He never would have done it if I’d thought there was something…”

“Who’s the woman you referred to?” Grant asked calmly, trying to maintain his professionalism.

“A fan of the Rising Tide. Some rich girl in a flowered dress. She knew all about me, said that I had a gift. She thought people like us deserved more,” he answered slyly looking out of the corner of his eye at Grant. You have no idea of what I deserve, buddy. Or what you do.

“Oh, you deserve more,” Skye told Lydon scornfully.

“She pointed me toward a Chinese SHIELD feed, wanted me to crack it,” he continued. Skye looked worriedly up at Grant.

“And you thought that was harmless?” Grant asked quietly. This guy’s a real tool. If Lydon had any idea of the emotional chaos that lay behind Grant’s calm demeanor, he wouldn’t be so blasé about everything; he’d be shaking.

“I checked the data stream. It didn’t seem like anything you and I hadn’t already put out there, Skye.” Grant looked over at Skye to see how she was taking this. Not well if her expression was any indication. “And I traced the account where the money came from to make sure it wasn’t some evil corporation. It was just an eco-research lab.” Skye closed her eyes, hopefully because she was so disgusted by Lydon’s naiveté. “Otherwise, I would never…”

Grant dropped his anger and zeroed in on what Lydon was saying. He leaned on the table and said thoughtfully, “Ecological research.” He looked questioningly at Lydon.

Lydon gazed back at him, clearly startled by Grant’s change of demeanor. “Yeah, insects. Some study with centipedes.” Skye immediately looked up at Grant and he finally looked back at her, but this time in consternation. This was huge news. “What could be more harmless than that?” Lydon continued. They both ignored him, then Grant quickly left to go consult with the team.

Later, Grant was suiting up to go into the Centipede research facility in Hong Kong when Coulson came over to him. “Agent May and I will be handling the field work,” he told him. “You stay and oversee the prisoners.” Coulson then started to walk off.
Grant couldn’t believe it. Was he being punished for failing to realize that Skye had betrayed them? *Well, maybe he’s right. But I have to be able to make up for my mistakes!* “Sir?” he called out. Coulson stopped walking and turned back towards Grant. “I was Skye’s SO. It was my responsibility…”

“It was my call to bring Skye onto the plane,” Coulson interrupted him. “And you warned me against it.” Grant let out a breath he hadn’t known he was holding. Coulson wasn’t blaming him! If anything, he was telling him (backhandedly to be sure) that he was right. “My problem. I fix it,” he continued.

In spite of everything, even through his anger and hurt, Grant felt some hope. Maybe Coulson was actually warming up to him! But right on the heels of that thought came the unwelcome realization that not only was he not going into action but now he would have to babysit Skye and her asshole boyfriend.

Except that it didn’t work out that way. Coulson and May ran into trouble almost immediately. Grant had been monitoring the mission with FitzSimmons but, with the dilemma the team was facing, he knew they needed Sky’s expertise with computers. So he brought both of the prisoners into Mission Control: Skye so she could help and Lydon so that they could keep an eye on him.

“I need to provide Coulson and May with back-up but first I need a way in. Skye, can you help override their systems, find me a back door?” Grant asked her.

“They’ve got the entire facility locked down,” Simmons said miserably as she massaged her head as though she had a headache.

“Are you sure about this,” Fitz asked Grant worriedly.

“No,” Grant replied. He would have liked to offer reassurance but this was no time for lies or half-truths. He needed everyone to bring their A-game and, to do that, they needed to work together and with full disclosure.

He heard Lydon lean over and whisper to Skye, “This is pretty cool.” Grant tried not to roll his eyes but he was pleased that Skye barely acknowledged him and instead focused on her work, her fingers flying over the screen.

“The alarm disconnected the system from all exterior servers,” she told him.

Grant didn’t want to hear about problems; he wanted solutions. “Can you fix it or not?” he asked in an irritated tone as he looked directly at Skye.

“Yes but you’ve got to get me on-site,” she replied.

“Not a chance,” Grant scoffed as Lydon said, “No way” at the same time. The two men looked at each other and Grant could read true concern for Skye’s well-being in Lydon’s gaze. *Maybe this guy isn’t a total asshole.*

“You’re a hacker, Skye,” Lydon warned quietly, “not Seal Team Six.”

“No,” she replied and then turned to look at Grant. “But he is.”

Grant glanced down to look at Skye. Then he looked back at Lydon and smirked. *Damn straight.* He transferred his gaze to Skye and saw that she understood they would be going in together.

As they suited up to go into the building, Grant risked a small discussion with Skye. “Look, this is...
going to be difficult, so please just do what I say without comment. Can you do that?”

She nodded and started to say something.

Grant shook his head and interrupted her. “I’m going to have to take out some of the guards and I need for you to stay out of my way while I do that. I can’t protect you and fight them at the same time.”

“I know. I will,” Skye said soberly. He started to leave but she grabbed hold of his arm. He turned and looked at her reluctantly. “Grant, please. I want you to know that I really am sorry. I didn’t know that Miles would do this or I never would have protected him.” Although he was loathe to admit it, even to himself, Grant was touched that she used his first name and cared enough to make sure he knew how she felt.

“We’ll talk later. We have to focus on the mission right now,” he replied. Skye nodded again and followed him out of the Bus.

Getting into the building was only a little difficult. True to her word, Skye tried to keep out of the way as Grant took out three guards. He then grabbed her arm and yanked her into a control room. Skye immediately found a computer and started punching keys and whizzing through screens. Grant made sure the room was secure, then bent down to look over her shoulder. His experience with tech support was that they usually took a while to accomplish their tasks. He had faith that Skye would be faster than the usual techie but that he still would have to find a way to guard her while she worked. In order to do that, he had to know what to expect.

“How long is this going to take?” he asked her impatiently.

“Done,” Skye replied, standing up and moving away from the computer. Grant was impressed.

The two of them met up with Coulson and May, only to immediately make a run for the outside of the building before Mr. Chan blew himself up. As they watched the fire dissipate in the sky, Grant thought it might be helpful to point out to Coulson that Skye had once again demonstrated her usefulness to the team.

“Skye managed to extract some files from the building’s mainframe,” he told him. “It’s not much but it could get us a fix on Centipede.”

“Maybe,” Coulson responded.

Grant watched Coulson look at the flames in the sky and realized that Coulson was deeply feeling the loss of Agent Kwan and Mr. Chan. “You can’t save someone from themselves, sir.”

“You can if you get to them early enough,” Coulson replied. He briefly glanced at Grant and then looked past him to Skye. Grant looked at her too and felt a sense of relief. It was clear that Coulson wasn’t going to imprison her or kick her off the plane. Anything else he could handle.

When they got back on the plane, May and Grant went directly to the bar while Coulson sent Lydon on his way. Grant hoped they’d never run into the guy again. He was going to have to deal with Skye’s betrayal and it would be a hell of a lot easier if he didn’t have to see the reason for it in front of him. How could I have been so wrong? he wondered for the millionth time.

Grant watched May pour him a stiff drink. “Make it a double,” he requested.

Her lips quirked wryly. “Is there any other kind?”
Grant shook his head as he smirked a bit. He was grateful for May’s quiet presence, especially when he sensed Skye coming up behind them. Neither he nor May turned around even when she began speaking.

“So I’m going to Coulson’s office now,” she told him. Grant looked down at his drink. “I figured you might want to be there, being my SO and all.”

Grant just shook his head slightly. “I’m off the clock,” he said speaking to the wall. He could almost Skye’s her humiliation and distress at his response. He knew that she got his message, that being her SO was his job; it wasn’t personal. *Good. Let her know what it feels like.*

“Right. Ok then,” Skye replied. And then she left.

Grant felt horrible, for Skye, for himself, (*Training’s going to be awkward now.*) and for the rest of the team. How were they ever going to work through this?
The Price

Chapter Notes

So I made a mistake in Chapter 9 in which I had Grant flown into Providence by a Hydra pilot. As it turns out, although I didn't remember it, it's a pretty big plot point that he flew in alone on a plane. So, I went back and redid that paragraph. I hope that clears up any confusion anyone might have.

Skye led Grant to the infirmary where Jemma took one look at him and demanded that he take off his shirt. Grant smiled. He knew that teasing her wasn’t like him at all – after all, robots rarely joked – but after the day he’d had, he felt like he deserved a little break in protocol.

“Why, Dr. Simmons,” he said to her with a straight face, “I thought you’d never ask.”

Jemma looked completely nonplussed at first. Then, as she worked it through, Grant watched her face turn a lovely shade of red. The worried look slipped off of Sky’s face as she immediately broke into laughter. Once she got a look at Jemma’s face, she laughed even harder but then her laughter turned to amazement and she looked at Grant with huge eyes.

“Did the Robot actually make a joke, even kind of a dirty one?” she asked incredulously.

Grant just innocently raised his eyebrows, took his shirt off, and handed it to Jemma with a murmured, “As ordered.”

Skye snorted again. Jemma, still beet red, tried to cover her discomfort by taking his shirt, folding it up and gathering the equipment she needed to examine him. Skye said, “I’ll go tell the others you’re back,” and darted out of the room.

“Sorry about that,” Grant told Jemma, feeling bad about embarrassing her.

“That’s quite all right, Agent Ward,” Jemma returned a bit stiffly as she bent to wrap his ribs. Grant couldn’t quite contain a small smile. He knew the “Agent” part of her sentence was intended as a reprimand.

Skye returned quickly and, in short order, the rest of the team started drifting in. Fitz showed up first and said, “We’re glad you’re back, Ward” with a clap on Grant’s back. Even though the clap didn’t really hurt his ribs, Grant made sure to make a sound of discomfort. He hated it when Fitz did that to him even though he knew it was meant to be affectionate.

“Fitz!” Jemma said sharply. Grant raised his eyebrows at her tone. She usually was much more tolerant of Fitz’s lack of social graces.

“Sorry,” Fitz said to Grant, looking guilty.

Trip followed Fitz in and briefly touched Grant’s arm. “We’ve all been worried, man,” he said as he went to lean on the table by Fitz. Grant could sense May’s arrival behind him but, typically, she said nothing. Coulson then strode into the room.

“Welcome back, Ward. I see you found the base all right,” he said briskly. “Can you tell us what
happened?”

Grant nodded. “Sir, some of the agents Agent Hand chose for the mission turned out to be Hydra and we weren’t too far from the Fridge when they tried to hijack the plane. Agent Hand was shot but we were still able to land at the facility,” he started. He’d been rehearsing his story in his head since he knew he’d be coming back to rejoin the team.

Jemma took that moment to dab at the long gash on his cheek from where Garrett hit him. “I’m afraid this might scar,” she told him.

Skye was standing directly in his line of sight. “Upside, you’ll look badass, dangerous,” she said with a glint in her eyes. *Is she actually turned on?* It was all he could do to not to roll his eyes. He was already badass and dangerous; he didn’t really need to look the part. However, if this was a look that Skye liked, he could definitely work with that.

Fitz leaned forward to peer at his facial wounds. “He’s going to be fine though, right?” Grant was touched by his worry.

“He will if you back up and give me some room,” Jemma snapped. Jemma walked around Grant, making Fitz step away to accommodate her change of position. *The Science Twins at odds? What is that about?* He remembered Skye had said that FitzSimmons were arguing but he hadn’t had time to find out why.

Coulson appeared uninterested in the long-term effects on Grant’s face or in FitzSimmons’ bickering. “So what then?” he asked.

“By the time we got to the Fridge, it was too late. It was overrun. Hydra everywhere.” Unbidden, the image of him shooting the two young guards in the face came back to him. If only he had been packing an ICER, those two boys could have lived. But he hadn’t had one and he had to shoot to kill. It was either the two guards or him and Grant had a mission to complete. However, even the justification for his actions didn’t help ease the sick feeling in his stomach.

“We couldn’t stop them,” he told Coulson. He allowed the feelings of nausea to show on his face. This is where the rubber met the road, where he would have to really start lying to the team. And he hated it, especially since all he wanted to do was tell Coulson everything.

“What were they after?” May asked quietly from behind him. He could hear the sound of uncertainty and worry in her voice.

“Everything,” he replied, glancing back at her. Again, flashes of what happened at the Fridge came back to him. He saw Garrett blowing the door to the room with the things that should have been destroyed. “Weapons, alien artifacts, anything that they could grab.” In his mind’s eye, he saw himself handling the Asgardian staff and remembering how much he owed the team. Surely all of this would be worth it! Surely one day he would be able to rejoin the team, this time as a fully committed member. One who could be honest with them about everything.

“I assume that means the prisoners are no longer prisoners,” Coulson said with disgust.

Grant nodded sadly. If only he could have done something about that, if only he could have put down the worst ones. But there was nothing he could do, not without blowing his cover. For a minute, Grant was furious with Fury and Hill and at the games they were making him play. But then, he imagined Hydra winning, what that would mean to everyone he cared about and he knew he had to continue deceiving them. That didn’t mean he had to like it though. The sick feeling intensified as he saw Coulson’s face fall and look down.
And then Skye made it even worse by saying slowly, “So, Ian Quinn.”

That bastard! Grant would have given a lot not to have seen her face at that moment. He also would have given a lot to have killed Quinn himself. Anyone who hurt Skye didn’t deserve to live. But all he could do was say, “I’m sorry.” And he was. Sorry for so many things, both in the past and for what was to come. “He’s out. They all are.”

For a moment, Grant allowed himself to feel anger for his own situation. Some of the prisoners in the Fridge had been people that he personally had helped put away. The prisoners there were some of the worst ones and the missions in which they’d been captured had been extremely difficult. He had worked hard, suffered even, for the removal of these people to the Fridge and Garrett had just let them go. He had even been gleeful as some of them went on their merry way. Grant hadn’t appreciated until that moment just how angry he was for Garrett for undermining all of his hard work.

“And Garrett?” Fitz asked. “Did he get away?” Coulson looked up at the question.

Grant had known that this question was coming and had prepared for it ahead of time. He visualized what he would have liked to have happened. In his imagination, he had gone with Victoria Hand to take Garrett to the Fridge. They landed and frog-marched Garrett up to the secure entrance only to see it empty, the doors hanging open. Hand and her men immediately set off to help the other SHIELD agents try and control the damage. Meanwhile, Garrett freed himself from his bonds, giving Grant the chance to stand up to Garrett for once and for all. Garrett put up a good fight but this time, for the first time, Grant fought back. He wouldn’t allow John to beat him for the crime of not being perfect or because it fit Garrett’s agenda. No, this time he would be the one beating Garrett. And at the end of what was a short fight, Grant shot him in the head, once for himself and once for Skye, because he ordered her death.

“I couldn’t stop them from taking the Fridge but I wasn’t going to let Garrett walk,” he said, looking at Coulson. In his mind, he saw Garrett’s body on the ground and him standing over him. Then he looked at Skye and said, “Not after what he did.”

“Is he the one who did this to you?” Skye asked with a distressed look on her face.

Grant’s heart warmed at her expression. It felt good to see someone care about him because he could tell that Skye was upset that someone who was supposed to be a mentor and friend could cause such damage. If only she knew the truth, that Garrett had indeed been the one to wound him and that he, Grant, had just stood there and allowed it. If only… But he had to stop thinking like that. This day was going to involve a lot of “if onlys” and he couldn’t indulge in them. If Grant ever wanted to stop this triple madness, he had to take down Hydra and, to do that, the team had to believe. So, he had to start thinking like a triple again.

He nodded and replied, “He was a tough son of a bitch.”

“Was?” May asked. Grant looked back at her. “Past tense?”

“As soon as I had the upper hand, I put two in the back of his head.” Grant looked a little sick. As much as he would have liked for that to have been true, for him not to have gotten beaten up by his father figure for the sake of a misbegotten ideal, he did still care about John. How things would have been different if John had remained a SHIELD agent or if he had never involved Grant in his mess.

There was a short silence as everyone looked at Grant soberly. Then Fitz said, “Good.”
Grant continued, “One from me,” he looked over at Trip, “one from you.” He understood how Trip felt. He could imagine the feelings of betrayal and anger over a dear friend getting killed by someone they had all trusted, someone who was supposed to be in charge of their well-being.

“I would have emptied the mag,” Trip said. Grant nodded back at him. If he were in Trip’s place, he would feel the same way.

“You’re all set,” Jemma said. “Well, I mean, as set as you can be with two cracked ribs and a zygomatic fracture.”

Grant nodded and started to get up.

“For those of you who don’t know what that is, it’s,” Fitz started, looking pleased to know this information, and then he and Trip finished together, “a hairline fracture to the cheekbone.” Fitz stared at Trip in consternation. Trip smirked and Fitz turned his head in disgust.

“Your body needs time to heal,” Jemma told Grant when he stood up and looked at her. “Please, take some time.”

Grant again felt warmed by someone else’s care for him. It was rare that anyone expressed concern about his well-being but, as usual, his team members did. He knew how often Jemma got upset with him because he didn’t seem to care about letting himself heal. And he couldn’t now either but, just to appease her, he responded quietly, “Understood. Thanks.”

“Ah,” Grant said as both Coulson and Skye crowded around in front of him. He held up the hard drive. “One small victory. Hydra didn’t get their hands on this.”

Trip looked confused. “A hard drive?”

“It’s all the research our team’s ever done, downloaded off the plane and encrypted for safe keeping,” Skye explained.

“We should probably back it up now that we’re in a secure facility,” Grant said. He had thought a lot about what he wanted to do with the information the hard drive contained. He couldn’t let Hydra get their hands on the information about the miracle drug that saved both Coulson and Skye but he had to give Garrett something. Grant thought that if he could get Skye to back it up, then he could take the backup, scrub it clean of any information Hydra absolutely couldn’t get their hands on and then give them the rest. After all, if their plan worked and they took down Hydra from the inside, then the information would be right back in SHIELD’s hands. And if he could get that done quickly, then he could spend some time with Skye before he had to leave.

Coulson jumped in. “First Skye, I need you on threat assessment. Pull up a list of all the inmates of the Fridge. I want to know just how bad this is,” he told her. Skye nodded.

Damn! There went his chance to complete his mission and spend some free time with Skye. Grant wished he could change Coulson’s mind, suggest that someone else do the threat assessment, but he couldn’t risk looking suspicious. Grant looked down and then away in disappointment. There went Plan A. Now he would have to come up with something else.

“Ward,” Coulson continued. “The Bus is in the hangar. Agent Koenig will show you where. Why don’t you get a change of clothes and then move your plane into the hangar? After that, join us in the Command Center – we’re working in the cafeteria – and we can go from there.”

Grant merely nodded. Fitz came up to him, “Come on, Ward. I’ll take you to Agent Koenig,” he said as he led him out of the room and down another hallway. Fitz lowered his voice, “Skye and I
think there’s something fishy about that guy. I mean, how long has he been here anyway? And who is always that cheerful?”

A short while later, Grant found himself sitting near the kitchen bar, off to the side while Coulson and May hovered around the table where Skye had set up her computer. “This is really, really bad,” Skye told them. “Ian Quinn is the least scary of the bunch and he shot me. Twice.”

Grant flinched and tried not to remember his anger and desperation when Skye had been shot. That had been one of the worst times in his life and, given his life, that was really saying something. The truth was, when John confided that his plan included releasing the prisoners, Grant realized that meant Ian Quinn would go free. He also knew that Quinn was part of Garrett’s overall plan. But despite that, despite the risk to blowing his cover, Grant had still gone over numerous tactical scenarios in his head, all of which ended with him killing Quinn. In some of the situations (and these were his favorites), he had gotten to do it slowly and make him suffer. But, at the end of the day, he knew those plans were self-indulgent and that there was no way he could kill Quinn and still keep his cover. Regardless of the satisfaction crossing off that guy would bring, Ian Quinn’s death wasn’t worth letting Hydra win.

“Quinn’s more a sociopath. A lot of those inmates are full-blown psychopaths. Violent, impulsive…” Coulson replied.

Grant frowned. *What’s the difference between a sociopath and a psychopath?* His therapist insisted that Garrett was a psychopath and encouraged Grant to do some reading on the condition. He had and reluctantly agreed with her assessment. For a while afterward, he felt extremely guilty that he had let himself be influenced by such a sick person but he eventually worked through that with his therapist and realized that it wasn’t his fault. It still didn’t sit well. And, based on his knowledge, Coulson was wrong in his judgment of Quinn; he fit all the criteria for a psychopath. But sociopath was a new term to Grant. He resolved to research it later.

“And some with super powers,” Skye interrupted. “Lovely.”

A distressed look crossed Coulson’s face. Clearly something had just occurred to him. “Is Marcus Daniels on the list?” he asked. May looked at him in concern. Grant looked curious. Evidently, this Daniels guy was someone important to Coulson.

Skye went through a few computer screens and then looked up at Coulson apprehensively. She silently turned her computer around so he could see Daniels’ profile on the screen.

“That’s him,” Coulson whispered. Grant suddenly remembered Garrett telling him that Coulson would be busy. *Is this what he meant?* “Cross check the list of inmates with crime databases, recent activity. Got a feeling we’ll be seeing a slight uptick,” Coulson said to Skye.

“OK,” Skye replied. “But that will take time and more computing power than my laptop.” She looked thoughtful for a moment. “Agent Koenig probably has some sort of…”

“I’m sure he’ll lend a hand,” Coulson interrupted her. He turned to face Grant, so that all of three of them were now looking at him.

“The plane you flew in on. Is it operational?” Coulson asked Grant.

*Uh-oh.* This was not going to work. Grant needed to stay at the base in order to get the information off of the hard drive. He couldn’t go on other missions. He knew that Coulson would respect Jemma’s directive to take some time to heal, so he thought he would remind him of that.
“Yeah. You need me to pilot?” he asked as he stood up. Grant grimaced, winced loudly and pressed on his ribs. *Too much?* It worked like a charm.

“You heard Simmons. You stay and get better. I’m going to take a splinter team out and start going after inmates on that list, starting with Mr. Daniels. I think I know where he’s going.” He started to leave the room but May began speaking.

“You sure it’s wise to split up the team, leave this base?” she asked. “What if it’s part of Hydra’s plan? A distraction.”

*Leave it to May to be right on target with her tactical assessment.* While a part of Grant couldn’t help being as impressed as he usually was with the Cavalry’s skills, the larger part of him was afraid she was going to ruin everything. He needed the rest of the team to leave so that he could be with Skye and get the information from the hard drive. But Grant couldn’t risk saying anything lest he throw suspicion on himself. He almost had to literally bite his tongue to keep from saying anything or giving anything away with his expression.

“She’s got a point,” Skye put in. “I mean, Fury brought to this base for a reason. We’re safe here.”

“Yeah, we’re safe here,” Coulson replied testily. “But what about everyone else? People who don’t happen to have access to a top-secret underground shelter. What about them?”

Grant nodded. Yes! This was exactly the argument he needed Coulson to make, especially since he could tell that both May and Skye were convinced by it, even ashamed for thinking only of themselves. But it was more than just that. Yes, Agent Ward approved of Coulson leaving with a team because he needed the time, but Grant was pleased by Coulson’s goodness. Once again, his belief in the reasons for him acting as a triple agent was bolstered. Here was yet another reason why SHIELD should prevail over Hydra: because people like Coulson – who could easily stay hidden and only take care of his team – cared enough about others to put themselves in danger. And today of all days, Grant needed the reminder.

“I don’t know if it’s wise,” Coulson continued. “But it’s right. I’m taking a team. And that’s the end of it.”

OK, that was overkill. Coulson was correct about it being the right thing to do but sometimes the sanctimonious way he went about things bugged Grant. Plus, Coulson didn’t know it yet but he was playing right into Hydra’s hands. May was on point with her tactical assessment and he should have at least acknowledged that. But something was not right between May and Coulson. As Coulson turned on his heel and marched out of the room, Grant looked back at her and saw anger and remorse pass across her face. He remembered that May had been in the Holding Cell with him and that Skye had mentioned that she and Coulson were fighting. Knowing their closeness, Grant thought they would have made up by now, especially given what else was going on, but clearly they hadn’t.

May angrily stomped out of the room. Skye waited until she’d left the room and then stood up, walked over to Grant and took his hand. “You really need to rest,” she said. “Come on, I’ll show you a room where you can lay down.”

This boded well. Grant felt rising excitement as Skye, still holding his hand, led him down a series of hallways. Although neither of them said anything, he could feel the sexual tension in the air. But he knew he couldn’t give in to it, not yet, because the team was still around. Grant needed true alone time with Skye – time in which he was certain they would not be interrupted – in order to get what he needed. That didn’t mean he couldn’t enjoy the moment though.
Skye finally turned into a room in which three beds, dressers and comfortable chairs were placed. It looked like a really nice dorm room. The base was huge and Grant wondered how many of these rooms existed. But his thoughts quickly shifted as Skye led him in, let go of his hand, and turned to shut the door. She leaned back against it.

“This is where you, Fitz and Trip will sleep when you’re here. But, for now, since Trip and Fitz are busy, you can have it all to yourself,” she said without looking at Grant. “It’s pretty nice, don’t you think? At least it’s way better than our bunks on the Bus.”

Grant nodded and walked toward a bed along the far wall. He didn’t want Skye to leave but neither did he think that now was the time to pick up where they’d last left off, especially since she seemed so nervous. Plus, he suspected that they wouldn’t have a lot of time together before the team left to go pick up Daniels. So, he would have go slowly.

He lay down on the bed with his arms underneath his head and looked up at Skye. She hadn’t moved from the door. “Hey, why don’t you take one of the chairs and tell me what’s been going on since I left?” he asked.

Skye didn’t move. “Are you sure you wouldn’t rather take a quick nap? You look exhausted.”

Grant smiled at her, hoping to put her at ease. She was clearly tense at the thought of being alone with him. He needed to make her comfortable now so that it would be easier later. “Don’t worry about me; I’m fine. I need to know what’s been going on. Listening to you talk will help me relax. I can always sleep later.”

Skye smiled and finally moved to sit in one of the chairs near the bed where Grant was lying down. She dragged it over to the bed and placed it where she could rest her legs on the dresser and face him. She was so close that Grant could move his hand and touch her if he wanted.

“Since when does listening to me talk help you relax?” she asked. “It usually drives you crazy.”

Grant dropped his smile and looked at her seriously. “Things change,” he said gently. He internally grinned as he watched Skye swallow nervously and run her eyes over his prone body. If he hadn’t thought that she’d freak out, he might have taken off his shirt. Her close attention to his abs when he was shirtless in the infirmary hadn’t escaped his notice.

Skye briefly closed her eyes and when she opened them, Grant’s breath caught in his throat at the look on her face. There were so many emotions there that he couldn’t identify them all but the biggest one was clearly care for him.

“Well, I’m sure you noticed that Coulson and May are still fighting,” Skye started. “I thought that with everything that’s happened, he would cut her some slack but, well, you saw how they were. He was kind of being a jerk. Not that he doesn’t have good reason to be mad.”

Grant started to say something, to defend May for trying to complete her mission, but Skye continued. She clearly needed to talk. “And then FitzSimmons are mad at each other too. I think it’s because Jemma likes Trip but I’m not sure about that. I do know that Jemma and Trip bonded when they were at the Hub. I haven’t gotten the whole story yet but I think the two of them were together when Hydra tried to take over.”

Skye turned her head and Grant’s breath caught in his throat at the look on her face. There were so many emotions there that he couldn’t identify them all but the biggest one was clearly care for him.
Is that love? How will I even know what that looks like? Now it was his turn to swallow nervously.

“I was really worried about you,” she said in a low tone, looking him straight in the eyes.

For the first time in a very, very long time, Grant felt like crying. He couldn’t even remember the last time someone said that to him if they ever had. And he was pretty sure that no one else had ever looked at him the way Skye was looking at him now. And he felt the same way for her. Grant just looked back at her, unable to speak, unable to tell her what was in his heart for fear that this incredibly precious feeling would leave and never return.

He had just raised his hand to gently caress her face when Coulson’s voice came on over the intercom. “I need all team members to report to Room 7B immediately.” Damn!

Skye leapt to her feet. “I guess duty calls,” she said. The two of them left the room and walked down the halls without speaking any further.

Grant followed the rest of the team into a room where a gigantic chair sat facing a control panel. He had a bad feeling about this. His bad feeling intensified as Agent Koenig enthusiastically explained that this was THE lie detector. How in the world am I going to deal with this?

“Fury designed it himself. He wanted a lie detector Romanoff couldn’t beat,” Koenig said gleefully.

“Did she?” Grant asked, his feeling of trepidation almost overpowering him. If Romanoff couldn’t beat it, what hope did he have?

“Like Fury would tell!” Koenig laughed.

Grant couldn’t share his delight. He stared at the floor with one arm covering his cracked ribs while the other hand nervously brushed repeatedly against his lip. Various scenarios went through his head. He couldn’t leave the base without getting what he came here for. Garrett would have no compunction about hurting Skye if Grant failed, so he had to protect her. There was no excuse he could give for not being willing to submit to the lie detector test without looking suspicious, so that was out. He could tell Coulson the truth. Grant’s mind ground to a halt on that scenario. How he would love to do that! That would solve everything! He could let Coulson know about his mission and then he could get help in achieving his objective. Grant would no longer have to work alone and Fury trusted Coulson enough to give him the coordinates to a secret base. Surely he would understand why Grant had to break protocol.

But, as quickly as that idea occurred to him, he discarded it. If Fury had wanted Coulson to know about Grant’s status, he would have told him back when they were putting together the team. Fury’d had ample opportunity to tell Coulson since then but had chosen to leave him in the dark. Plus, there was no guarantee that Coulson would even believe him. Look at what had happened to May whose only crime was to report back to Fury – Coulson’s boss – on his behavior. Even though she and Coulson clearly had a history together, he’d been giving her the cold shoulder since he found out and May’s situation was minor compared to Grant’s. No, as much as he loved the thought of it, he couldn’t risk it.

Grant would have to trust in his ability to lie. He didn’t have the best marks since Romanoff for nothing. And he could use his pain to fool the machine. After all, his ribs really did hurt and he could injure himself in another way to amp the pain level higher. Grant sighed internally. Would he ever be in a situation in which his body wasn’t forfeit for the sake of the mission?

Coulson’s voice broke into his thoughts. “OK, the sooner we get this done, the sooner we can get
to work,” he told the team. “So who wants to go first?”

Grant looked down. Normally, he would be the Boy Scout who volunteered to lead the team but this time he just couldn’t do it. He was going to have to injure himself somehow and then mentally prepare himself for the ordeal. In short, he really needed to go last. That way, if something did go wrong, everyone else would be busy and he might actually have a chance to escape. *Is everything going to go wrong on this mission?*

Unfortunately, the way to injure himself was the easy part. Grant only had to think back to one of his early missions, the first one in which he’d been captured. His captors had been extremely incompetent and he’d been able to escape quickly but Garrett had not been happy. In fact, he’d been livid when he found out about the capture because, if things had gone differently, Grant might have been tortured for information. As a result, Garrett spent the next several weeks torturing Grant himself and showing him how to push back the pain. And if there was one thing Grant was used to, it was pain. One of the methods he’d used was to push needles underneath his fingernails. Grant realized he could easily replicate this himself but, this time, he would need to welcome the pain instead of push it back.

He inserted the needle carefully and then hung out impatiently in the hallway outside the lie detector room to await his turn. He sighed as he wondered if this shitty day would ever come to an end. Skye came out of the door wearing a big smile and he pushed off against the wall so he could meet her.

“Got my back-stage pass,” she told him as she handed her newly-won lanyard to him to examine.

Grant couldn’t help giving her a small smile. “Huh. Piece of cake?” He handed it back to her.

“If you don’t mind talking about yourself. So you’ll hate it,” she said easily as she put it on over her head. “Have fun,” she told him.

Grant smiled again, this time in appreciation of her humor and her knowledge of him. He waited until she’d left the hallway, then he forced himself to walk into the room. *Let’s get this over with!*

He went directly to the chair and sat down.

“What is your name?” Koenig asked.

“My name is Grant Douglas Ward,” he said precisely. It always helped him focus when he over-enunciated.

“Please list your immediate family.”

“Two parents,” *May they rot in hell!* “a sister, two brothers. I don’t have contact with any of them,” he finished and looked away. He hadn’t thought about his family in a while but of course he had to today. It had been a real roller coaster, from bad to good and now bad again. What other bad memories would he be forced to relive?

“Boy, your baseline is getting a lot of spikes. Are you in pain?” Koenig asked, looking concerned.

*Good!* “Yeah, only when I breathe,” Grant said with a grimace of pain. Putting on a show had worked well with Coulson, so it wouldn’t hurt to try it again. He shifted uncomfortably. “Two broken ribs,” he said hoping that Jemma hadn’t told Koenig that they were only cracked.

“OK. Well, try not to move. It may affect the results,” Koenig replied.

Grant nodded like he was taking that direction seriously. “I’ll try my best,” he said grimly.
Koenig turned a page and looked up at Grant. “What is the difference between an egg and a rock?”

“Egg’s a food; rock’s a weapon.” What kind of stupid question is that? How else would you answer?

“What kind of stupid question is that? How else would you answer?”

“Have you ever heard of Project Insight?”

“No.” Grant shook his head slightly and moved his finger just a bit. Of course he’d heard of Insight. It was practically the only thing that Hydra agents had been talking about for months but no one seemed to know many details. He’d told Fury and Hill about it but neither of them had taken his information very seriously, probably because he didn’t know much and they believed the helicarriers were secure. Project Insight was of no interest to Grant; his only concern had been Garrett and finding a way for him to live.

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“Ever made contact with Alexander Pierce?”

“No.” He knew that he was the head of Hydra, or at least he had been until he’d been killed, but no, he’d never met or contacted the man. Are these the best questions S H I E L D could come up with?

“You wash up on a deserted island alone. Sitting on the stand is a box. What’s in that box?”

“It’d depend on the island. Where it is. How big. What’s the terrain. Is it fresh water?”

Koenig held up a restraining hand. “Just say the first thing that comes to your head.”

Skye. In the box would be Skye and we could live all by ourselves. If I could just have her, I wouldn’t need anything else. But of course he couldn’t say that. What would a specialist want? “A pistol,” he answered shortly.

“S H I E L D no longer exists. The agency has been labeled a terrorist organization. So, why are you here?” Koenig asked, putting special emphasis on the word.

Grant decided to go for the simple answer first. “I’m an agent. It’s my duty.”

Koenig looked down. He didn’t seem to like what he was seeing. “I need you to give that to me again,” he said.

“It’s my duty.” Grant said with more emphasis. Why isn’t this working? It’s the truth!

Koenig got out a gun and held it up. “I’m going to ask you a follow-up.” Grant’s eyes widened. “Agent Ward, are you associated with Hydra?”

And here it was: the question that was going to be the hardest to answer. Grant looked down, his brain going a mile a minute. Could he actually deceive the machine or should he risk the truth? He decided to go for broke. “Yes, we all are. They’ve infiltrated at the highest levels of our organization.” That was a pretty good answer.

Apparently it wasn’t good enough because Koenig cocked the gun and pointed it at Grant. “Like you mean it. Are you Hydra?”

“I’m loyal to S H I E L D, to Agent Coulson and to my team.” There. That should do it.

Koenig kept looking down at his screen. “Do you have another agenda here?”

Grant remained silent and Koenig looked up. Grant’s thoughts raced and he pressed the needle into his skin harder. He could hear Fury and Hill talking to him about his mission and Garrett telling
him he had 24 hours to get the hard drive and get out. Of course he had another agenda, several in fact. Koenig might be Level 6 but he was clearly of such limited value that SHIELD could afford for him to be tucked away in a secret base for months. Grant couldn’t risk telling him the truth!

“Agent Ward,” Koenig said precisely. “Why are you really here?”

Grant knew he only had one last card to play. He looked away and then back at Koenig. “Skye,” he answered, looking a bit embarrassed. “Came back for her.” *If only he knew how true that really is!*

He shrugged. “I want to spend time with her,” he continued.

For the first time, Koenig looked a little disbelieving. “Skye,” he said questioningly.

Grant nodded and said nothing. This was it. If Koenig didn’t believe him on this, then he would have to get out of the chair, incapacitate him and leave in a hurry. It took all of his self control just to watch the man process his answer.

After what seemed like an eternity, Koenig uncocked the gun and said, “Cool. Let’s get you a lanyard.”

Grant walked down the hall with his lanyard around his neck. He couldn’t help feeling just a little bit smug. He’d beat THE lie detector, one designed to trip up Romanoff. True, there had been some hairy moments but he’d beaten the damn thing! This was why everyone had such faith in him, why Garrett made him a sleeper and Fury and Hill made him a triple. Just then, his finger throbbed. Grant darted into a dark corner and, with an expression of deep pain, started to remove the needle he’d stuck under his fingernail.

He heard someone walking down the outer hall and hoped that whoever it was wouldn’t see him. Of course, given his luck today, they did. Fitz stopped walking, “Hey! Ward.”

Ward quickly withdrew the rest of the needle, smoothly turned into the main hallway and said with a pleasant tone, “Hey. Got my lanyard,” he said holding it up for Fitz to see.

Fitz smiled at him. “Nice,” he said as he flipped it.

Grant took a deep breath. “So you guys taking off?”

“Yeah. I wish you were coming instead of Trip,” he said with disgust lacing his tone. Fitz shook his head. “He’s insufferable, isn’t he?”

Grant struggled to catch up. “Trip,” he repeated. He shrugged. “I think the guy’s ok.”

Fitz didn’t appear to hear him at all. “I know, he’s terrible. He’s a horrible person.”

*Ah. Skye was right. This is why he and Jemma are fighting.* “You sure this is about him?” he asked. “Not about Simmons?”

Fitz looked both confused and irritated. “What the hell does that mean?”

Grant wondered whether he should say anything. He liked FitzSimmons and wanted them to be happy. *I might not have another chance to help them.* “Everything is falling apart around us,” he said gently. “We don’t know how it will end. If there’s something you want to tell her, don’t wait.”

Fitz looked even more confused. *How can he not understand what I’m telling him?* “Maybe Simmons should check you again for a head injury.” Grant closed his eyes in irritation. Trip wasn’t the one who was insufferable, Fitz was! “Because that’s not the Ward that I know,” Fitz said as he
turned away.

Fine! He’d had enough misery today without Fitz being an oblivious putz. “You know what? Do what you want! I don’t care,” he said as he turned to walk away.

Fitz turned back around with a pleased expression. “Good to have you back,” he said.

Grant turned back around and watched Fitz walk off down the hall. With Fitz’s last statement, he felt his irritation with him vanish. Fitz was like the brother he lost and he hoped that he could regain his friendship when this was all over. Grant turned the corner and saw Skye.

“Come on!” she said upon seeing him. “We’re going to see the rest of the team off.”

He followed her to the hangar. May joined them soon after. The three of them waited in silence, tension thick in the air. Grant was feeling very conflicted. He had a bad feeling about this parting, like this was going to be the last time he would see the team all together, but he was also glad that they were going. He needed to get on with his mission because the clock was ticking. He watched as Coulson, FitzSimmons and Trip rounded the corner with their backpacks and bags. No one spoke.

Jemma and Fitz both turned around to look at Skye, Grant and May. Still no one spoke. Coulson also turned around. Grant kept his gaze on Coulson and was dismayed to see him glare at May. It wasn’t his business but he didn’t like them fighting especially since May was only following orders. *If Coulson is this upset with her, how will he feel when he learns about me?* After the splinter team left, he risked a glance at May who looked both angry and distraught. What on earth was he going to do with her? He had a feeling that she would mess up his mission if he didn’t somehow deal with her but, if he was lucky, he could leave the base without her being the wiser. Maybe he could use her distress over Coulson to his advantage.

Skye turned and looked at the two of them. “I just had an idea!” she said excitedly. “I’m going to go talk with Koenig.” She took off around the corner.

May glanced at Grant. “I need to fix the fuel line on the Bus,” she said as she too left.

Grant decided to see what Skye was doing first and then deal with May. He found Skye in Koenig’s office apparently arguing with him over something. Koenig had just finished saying, “You can’t goad me,” when Grant walked into the room.

Skye quickly turned towards him. “Can you help me convince Steve Rogers here,” she turned back to face Koenig, “to suit up, grab his shield, head into battle?” Grant could barely contain his smirk. Koenig didn’t seem that easy to convince, so it would be amusing to watch Skye try to crack his rigid adherence to the rules.

“OK,” he said lightly. “Who’s he supposed to battle?”

Skye whirled back around to face him. “If we hack NSA satellites, we can get footage from the Fridge breakout, see who was there, where they went.”

Grant thought fast. This was a horrible idea. He absolutely couldn’t risk Skye seeing him leave the Fridge with Garrett; that would ruin everything. On the other hand, it was a brilliant plan and Skye’s SO would obviously think so. It was clear that Koenig didn’t want to do it though and Grant was betting that he’d never go for it. As such, he had nothing to lose by acting as if he thought it was something they should do.

He smiled and told Koenig, “Well, she’s right. It’s worth trying.”
Skye quickly turned back to look at Koenig and Grant enjoyed watching the battle of wills. He figured Skye would lose (there was no way Koenig would violate protocol by hacking into another agency’s satellite feed) but he was curious how long it would take for her to back down.

Suddenly he had a great idea. “I can’t hack the NSA but maybe I can upload the hard drive you gave me. Get the specs on the weapons they might be carrying.” This would be perfect. He could upload the hard drive, erase the data he didn’t want Hydra to get, and then spend a little time with Skye before leaving in the Bus.

“Absolutely we should but we can’t. The encryption is location-based. We’ll have to take a field trip at some point to decrypt it.” Damn! There goes Plan B.

Grant smiled at her but internally he groaned. This ruined everything. Gone was his plan of taking the hard drive and leaving. Now he’d have to take Skye to wherever it was they needed to go to decrypt the drive, return her and get back to Garrett, all within the 24 hour limit he’d imposed. This mission was looking more impossible by the minute! And now he’d definitely need to take care of May.

Koenig looked impressed. “OK,” he said as he got to his feet. “All right. Color me impressed. Now impress me more. Get me that footage.”

Grant couldn’t believe it and turned away slightly. He’d been counting on Koenig refusing Skye’s request but now he was going to allow her to do it. And Grant knew that she could. Now his timeframe for getting her out of here to decrypt the drive was even shorter than he thought. How am I going to do this?

Koenig drew out some keys from his pocket. “These are the keys to the ComSat room. The mainframe is in there. Start the hack and then send the feed to these monitors. Let’s live dangerously.”

“Yeah,” Skye agreed as she started to leave the room.

“How long before you get visuals?” Grant asked her.

Skye stopped walking and turned back around, looking thoughtful. “Ah, NSA satellite, should be tough. Give me an hour,” she said and she left.

“Great,” Grant replied. Just great. This keeps getting better.

Grant decided that he needed to deal with May and get that over with. He hoped that she’d had enough time to fix the fuel leak so that the Bus was ready to go. He grabbed an ICER, put it in his back waistband, pulled his shirt over it and walked purposefully onto the Bus. He tried to ignore the dread in his stomach.

He found May in the lounge off of the living quarters, just staring out of the window with her arms tightly crossed. When he asked, “How’s it coming?” she jumped. That was very unlike May and Grant realized just how truly distraught she was. She turned to face him.

“Is the Bus operational?” he asked. Please say it is!

“Still banged up but she’s ready to fly,” she replied. At last! Something is going in my favor! “The fuel line’s been repaired and the tank’s full.”

Grant thought for a minute. Would he be able to get to Cuba from here? “What’s the range on this thing?”
“Just under 10,000 miles,” May said as she reaching into her bunk area.

Grant readied his ICER but then, to his surprise, May pulled out her duffel and started walking toward the cargo bay. He put the ICER back in his pants.

“Are you leaving?” he asked, crossing his arms, a puzzled expression on his face.

May stopped walking and turned around. “Yeah.” On top of all the other surprises today, it looked like May was going to give him one more. She actually wanted to talk! “I was here for Coulson,” she said. “But he can’t see past me lying to him.”

Grant started feeling nauseous. He hadn’t realized just how much he wanted Coulson to forgive him until now, when it looked quite likely that he might never let his betrayal go. But maybe May would understand. “I get why you did it,” he told her. “When you get orders, you don’t question them. You follow them, no matter the price.” What price am I going to have to pay for following these orders? Can I even stand it?

“Yeah,” May agreed, nodding. “But this price was too high.” She gave a small sigh. “I lost him. Coulson doesn’t want me here. He doesn’t need me.” She turned and started walking away again.

Grant felt like crying for the second time that day. “So what should I tell him?” he asked. Not that he’d get another chance to speak with Coulson for a while but he still wanted to hear May’s answer.

“Whatever you want,” she replied, not even turning around. She continued walking away. “He won’t hear it.”

Grant again found himself with mixed feelings. He was grateful that she was leaving and he didn’t have to deal with her. But he was deeply upset at what she had said. The price he’d paid for following Garrett was already quite high and he just didn’t want to pay anymore. But he couldn’t stop now. He had to finish the mission, whatever it took. He just hadn’t thought that what it would take might include both his soul and his future.
Making Up Is Hard To Do

Flashback

As he had been afraid it would be, training Skye after the Scorch mission was pretty difficult. Grant was still angry and mistrustful and Skye was tentative. He was aware that she was trying hard. She followed every order without complaint, memorized all the training and protocol manuals he gave her and even practiced defense maneuvers during her free time. She also was incredibly respectful to him. Although Grant knew she was trying to get on his good side, her change in attitude made things worse. She wasn’t the same Skye who made jokes and teased him and he actually missed that. That damn bracelet was another ever present reminder of what had happened.

Try as he might, Grant just couldn’t get past her betrayal. He was insightful enough to know that much of his anger was hurt that they didn’t have the close relationship he’d thought they’d had but he didn’t know how to work through it. Grant’s background was littered with conflict but virtually no conflict resolution beyond violence and submission. He actually found himself wishing he could speak to his therapist because he really wanted to know what to do to make things better. But he couldn’t and as a result, training was colder and more stressful than it had ever been.

Their training prior to Scorch had been pretty physical and he’d thought nothing of wrapping her hands, guiding her into place and even an impromptu high five (that one was all Skye). But now he went out of his way to avoid touching her and he knew that she noticed. She too seemed to avoid contact and the downcast looks she gave him made him feel bad (not enough to change his attitude but it still hurt). Thus, the relationship between Skye and Grant was at an all-time low, even worse than when they’d first met.

Alone amongst the group, FitzSimmons seemed to have forgiven Skye and the three of them interacted normally. However, the two scientists were aware of the tension between the other members of the team and tried, in their own geeky ways, to alleviate it. Simmons was relentlessly upbeat and made sure to eat dinner with either Grant or Skye whenever she could. Although he never told her so, Grant appreciated the gesture and grew somewhat fond of her British prattling. She even made him laugh on occasion.

For his part, Fitz worked almost non-stop on new weapons, clearly hoping to appease Grant and get him in a better mood. However, Grant always had some sort of criticism that relegated the new weapon back to the workstation. The two of them still played poker regularly, so Grant was aware of how competitive Fitz was and it amused him to see how Fitz took his feedback. He almost always had some sort of pouty comeback but, in the end, he incorporated Grant’s comments. Grant could tell that Fitz was getting irritated and was impressed that he was not deterred. Clearly, Fitz was much more mission-focused than Grant originally gave him credit for since he appeared determined to find something that would work for the difficult-to-please specialist.

One afternoon, Fitz approached him. “Ward, I have another version of the Night Night Pistol I want you to try. I really think this is the one.”

“That’s what you always say,” Grant grumbled good-naturedly as he followed Fitz into the lab. He grabbed the pistol lying on the table, slammed the mag in, and quickly raised it into shooting position. “Sorry, Fitz,” he told him. “It’s close but it’s just not right.” He put the gun down and looked back at Fitz.

Fitz looked at him in surprise for a moment. “Really?” he asked as he looked down. “Agent Coulson had no problems,” he continued in a petulant tone.
Grant tried not to grin. “It’s an ounce too heavy,” he said gently. He didn’t want Fitz to get discouraged.

“An ounce?” Skye asked incredulously from the computer where she was working. “Seriously?”

It was all Grant could do not to sigh heavily and roll his eyes, things he’d been trying to avoid whenever Skye was around because otherwise he’d be doing them constantly. Instead, he switched to Agent Ward mode. “It’s the difference between success and failure,” he said impatiently. “When you’re on a rooftop with 15 mile an hour wind and your target is 500 yards away,” Grant began pointing in the direction of the hypothetical target.

“Yeah but we do have a rifle,” Fitz interrupted. Clearly, he was taking Grant’s criticism personally.

Grant just looked at him. Did he really think that he would have time to grab a rifle when a correctly weighted pistol was close at hand? Typical tech support. “Lose the ounce,” he told him.

“Yeah, okay. On it,” Fitz replied quietly as Grant left the lab. He knew that as soon as he rounded the corner, Fitz and Skye would make disparaging remarks about him. That was okay. It was immature but they needed to bond and a common “enemy” was a good way to do it. He felt a pang though. Before Scorch, they’d all hung out together.

Grant headed to Coulson’s office to see what was planned for the day. As he walked, he reflected that he was the middle man. There was May and Coulson on one side and FitzSimmons and Skye on the other. Only Grant walked between the two worlds as if he didn’t know where he belonged. Suddenly, he felt a little lonely. He knocked on Coulson’s office door just as the man himself was coming out with May right behind him. She turned toward the cockpit.

“Gather the team,” he told Grant. “We have a new mission.”

Grant nodded and dutifully headed back to the lab. As he got closer, he could hear Simmons talking.

“I’m Agent Grant Ward,” she said in a ridiculous voice. That sounds nothing like me! I’m not 80 years old. “And I could rupture your spleen with my left pinky…blindfolded.”

Grant could hear Skye laughing at the imitation. “That’s dead on!” she said delightedly. He was used to people imitating him – it happened all the time at the Academy – but it didn’t bother him. Excellence usually brought out jealousy and parody, so in a way, he found it flattering. Besides, he accepted that Simmons meant it affectionately; he knew first-hand the difference between joking and malicious behavior. Besides, he couldn’t help but be happy to hear the sound of Skye’s laughter again. Now that he thought about it, he hadn’t heard her laugh since the day they found out about Lydon. He entered the lab and could see Simmons hunched over awkwardly with her hands on her hips, smiling. This is the way she thinks I stand?

Although he would never tell her so, Grant got a huge kick out of Jemma. She was lovely, incredibly intelligent, kind and socially awkward. He especially liked the awkward part of her because it both made her relatable and reminded him of himself. Although he rarely showed it, Grant often felt awkward around other people because he simply didn’t know what to do. He’d found that his blank expression helped because it usually caused people to avoid him. But with Jemma he made the effort to not be so emotionally withdrawn. She reminded him so much of his sister that he decided to informally adopt her. Of course he could never tell her (she would probably think it was weird) but he made the effort to go the extra mile whenever he could.

Which was why he didn’t say anything to her, even in a joking way, when he entered the lab. He
didn’t want her to be embarrassed. However, he couldn’t help but be somewhat pleased when she jerked to attention when he said, “Hey!” as he walked in. “Hustle up and grab your gear,” he told them. “We’re on a mission.”

That didn’t get quite the reaction he was anticipating as the three of them didn’t move but instead smirked at each other. He couldn’t be sure but he thought he heard Skye giggle a little. So he decided to play along. “Something funny?” he asked seriously.

Skye shook her head, a half smile on her face. Jemma looked at the others and clearly decided to rescue them. “Poor silly Fitz,” she said grabbing the Night Night pistol. “He mistakenly left a dummy round in the pistol,” she explained looking straight at Grant with the most unconvincing expression he could imagine. _How can she not know how bad she is at lying? _“Should be proper now,” she continued as she handed the pistol to him.

Grant took it from her, still looking at her. Should he let on that he knew she was lying or should he play along? Since they were about to go on a mission, he decided to let them have their fun. He raised the pistol to shooting position quickly. He could tell that Jemma wanted to laugh. He looked at her again. “Great,” he said putting the gun down. “Thanks,” he said over his shoulder as he left. As expected, he heard them all break into laughter behind him and he smiled.

May landed the Bus in a field. They were close to the site where they were going but they still had a bit of a walk until they reached the campsite. It was clear that the site had recently been abandoned. There were two empty trucks, several tents and the firepit was still smoking showing that it had recently been extinguished. Coulson explained a bit about the anomaly and the team dispersed to look around. FitzSimmons stayed with Coulson discussing theories while May went over to one of the trucks and raised the hood. Grant and Skye started walking around, just observing things.

“The battery blew straight up through the hood!” May said as she gazed at the battery-shaped hole in the metal hood.

Grant spied the battery resting several yards away and bent down to examine it. “Landed over here,” he called out. Skye crouched down beside him. “Hell of a force to create that kind of trajectory,” he said. Skye picked up a stick and started poking the battery. _At least she didn’t touch it with her bare hands. Nothing more to see here._

Grant stood up, turned around and put his hands on his hips trying to pick out all the details he could. He felt rather than saw Skye come up behind him. Although she was supposed to shadow him, he was still annoyed, probably because he felt stifled by her presence these days. Grant couldn’t concentrate the way he needed to with her constantly leaning over his shoulder, smelling as good as she did. He could smell her soap now as she came up behind him, closer than usual. In fact, Skye leaned forward so far that she bumped into him. It was all he could do to keep from flinching. Grant turned to give her an irritated look, especially when he saw that she was mimicking his exact position. _Is she still trying to make fun of me? Enough is enough._

“What are you doing?” he asked in an exasperated tone.

“I’m shadowing my Supervising Officer,” she replied. For the first time in days, her tone was not that of a subservient underling but more of the rebellious Skye he’d come to enjoy. Grant usually hated smart-ass attitudes, especially in agents (probably because it signaled a chip on the shoulder, something he didn’t have time for), but for some reason it seemed to fit Skye like a glove. Although he appreciated the difference in her tone, Grant was still irritated. He needed to be able to do his thing here without worrying about her.
“Shadowing, not smothering,” he told her. He couldn’t see her since he turned and walked away after that but he would have bet a lot of money that Skye was rolling her eyes at him. Focus on the mission. Grant took a hard look at a nearby tree. “There’s scorch marks all over that tree,” he said. “Lucky the whole forest didn’t burn down.”

Grant had some prior experience with fire. Suddenly, he remembered the scorch marks on the tree outside of his parents’ house in Massachusetts, the one he’d tried to burn down. He could almost smell the residual smoke in the air as he was led away in a cop car, his brother Christian hiding his rage and his parents looking on with blank expressions. Those were always the worst because it meant that they were waiting until they were in private to unleash their demons. He’d loved that tree – it had been a great hiding place for him, Thomas and sometimes their sister when his parents or Christian went on rampages – and he was sad that it had gotten hurt. It was never his intention to allow the tree to be a casualty of the war between Grant and his family. He swallowed hard and wrenched his thoughts back to the present.

“I don’t get it,” Skye was saying as she walked by the tree and continued to follow Grant. “Seems to me this electro-shock thingy was some freak lightning strike.” Grant stopped listening to her when he rounded the corner and came into the clearing. The rest of the team was there examining from a distance the hovering body of the Scout leader. FitzSimmons were closest and had all their bells and whistles out. Skye still hadn’t seen the body, so she went on talking. He didn’t stop her, knowing she would figure it out soon enough. “I mean, why call us? What’s the big…” She stopped and then laughed. “Oh. Never mind,” she said as she surged forward with renewed vigor. Was I ever that eager?

Coulson tried to ascertain what could cause the hovering dead body and, after a little prodding, FitzSimmons admitted that they didn’t have a clue. Grant decided to speed things up a bit. He stepped closer to Coulson. “Seems to me we’re either dealing with some freak natural event or a new high tech weapon,” he said looking over at the body. Hydra didn’t have anything like that, at least not as far as he knew. That was a relief because it meant that he didn’t have to do anything extra. He could still function as part of the team without working another angle.

“Oh, Skye said as she stepped closer to May, “could it be someone from your uber-secret Index?” Leave it to Skye to bring up the damn Index at every opportunity.

“There’s no one on the Index with this type of power,” May replied. Coulson agreed and started talking about contacting Agent Blake to be certain when Jemma stepped even closer to the body. She’d clearly noticed something weird about the guy’s forehead and, when she got within touching distance, the body simply fell to the ground. That doesn’t bode well.

The team wrapped up their investigation of the campsite and headed back to the Bus. Coulson asked Skye to do a computer search on Adam Cross, the dead Scout leader. A short while later, he followed Coulson into Mission Control when Skye let them know she was finished. Instead of getting straight to the point, being Skye, she had to waste time complaining about how the bracelet was invasive and irritating. You got off easy. He could only hope that he too would get such mild treatment if they ever found out about him. But unlike Skye, whatever punishment they chose to use on Grant, he would take it without complaint especially because, on some level, he believed he would deserve it.

Skye continued speaking to Coulson but ended her diatribe by looking at Grant. He had been looking down and avoiding eye contact, which is what he did with her most of the time now. Somehow, looking her in the eyes only served to make him angrier. Skye finally seemed to understand that she wasn’t winning any points with either of them and said, “OK, I’m off.”
“The victim,” Grant said shortly, disturbed by both his thoughts and his feelings.

Skye gave a run-down on the victim’s life. While she did this, again talking mostly to Coulson, Grant chanced looking at her. Even as irritated as he was, he appreciated her beauty. Why can’t I get past this? Even Coulson is casually talking to her about strawberry festivals.

Skye concluded her report with a snarky, “This guy makes Captain America look like The Dude,” she said smiling directly at Grant. He returned her glance with a stony expression. The Dude? What is she talking about? Coulson also seemed to be at a loss. Skye picked up on their confusion. “The Big Lebowski?” she explained. “Seriously?”

Yet another thing he didn’t know, yet another difference between them. Skye knew all these pop culture references while Grant had never had the time or the resources to enjoy them. He imagined her watching television with Lydon. It was not a pleasant thought.

“What about a criminal record?” he asked in his trademark irritated tone with his patented stern expression. “Restraining order. Something that might give us a suspect.”

Unbidden, the memory of Lydon’s initial clean record came back to him and he had to fight back the anger. “Everybody looks clean on their first go around.” Grant retorted looking straight at Skye, hoping she would know what he was saying. He was gratified to see her look down, upset. She knew.

“Ward’s right,” Coulson said. “We’re missing something. Dig deeper.” Skye nodded briefly, snuck a look at Grant and left Mission Control without another word. The two men stood in silence for a moment and then Coulson said, “You’ve been pretty tough on her.”

“She lied to us!” he replied. Coulson spends an awful lot of time worrying about Skye. “Contacted the Rising Tide while we were on a mission. If she wants our trust back, she’s got to earn it.”

“The background she ran on Cross is a good start. Put it up on the server. I want May to have a look when she’s done with her interrogation,” he said before he left.

As Grant worked at the holo-table, he considered his conversation with Coulson. Trust was earned, not given. He knew this first-hand, having been told it repeatedly by Garrett throughout the years. Grant earned trust then only by successfully completing missions. He was told it again by Hill and Fury during his time with them in DC. Grant earned trust with them by following orders and giving them intel. He and his therapist also talked about it at length. The two of them earned trust with each other slowly by talking honestly. So, okay. Maybe he needed to concentrate on giving Skye ways to earn his trust back. As Coulson pointed out, she was trying.

The mission soon took an unexpected turn. Fitz was monitoring any large electrostatic events and when he spotted a new one in a barn a short distance away, Grant, Coulson and May responded quickly. They hopped in the SUV with May driving like a bat out of hell to get there as soon as possible. Despite the tension of wondering what was in store for them once they got to the barn, Grant appreciated the chance to work with Coulson and May alone. This was the first time the three of them had been out on their own without the rest of the team and it was kind of fun. He felt a bit special, like he’d gotten to go along with the big kids. This felt especially true as he was stuck in the back seat.

Grant wanted to show Coulson how valuable his skillset was but he didn’t get a chance at the barn.
The three of them walked around the barn, looking for a way in but not finding an easily accessible one.

“The door’s barred from the inside,” Coulson said.

“Hayloft’s open,” Grant replied. *How in the world would I get up there?*

“We could ram it with the truck,” Coulson suggested. Suddenly, May performed an amazing kick that burst open the door. While it was always a treat to watch the Cavalry at work, Grant was a bit dismayed that he hadn’t thought of kicking down the barn door himself. *Damn!*

“Oh…” Coulson said wryly.

Grant just shrugged and was first through the door. That meant that he was the first one to notice yet another dead body hovering in the air. They quickly realized that no one else was around and then Skye discovered that the two victims were both volunteer firefighters at the same station. Grant was pleased with Skye’s performance. She was proving her worth and, perhaps, her trustworthiness. He felt something loosen inside and then redirected his focus back to the mission.

“Two victims. From the same firehouse. Found in the same weird way,” Grant summarized. Coulson ordered the science team, including Skye, to come to the barn while the three senior agents raced to the firestation.

Through some good work by the team, Jemma figured out that there wasn’t a weapon or a psycho killer in play but that it was actually a person – a person infected with an alien virus – who was the source of the electrical disruption. Grant never would have guessed that the bizarre happenings were the result of an alien souvenir and as he ended the evening standing in front of a fire station waiting for a man to die, he reflected on the meaning behind it. During his time with both SHIELD and Hydra, Grant had seen and heard a lot of things. The Chitauri virus was one of the saddest. Here were three guys – good men who routinely put their lives on the line – who had gone to New York to fight the alien invasion and ended up dying because they were bored and touched the wrong thing. Life just wasn’t fair.

Grant was moved by what Coulson had done for Tony Diez, the last of the three firefighters to get infected. Instead of getting out of the firehouse immediately so as not to get fried by the fatal electrical discharge, he stayed with him and tried to comfort him. Grant knew few people who would do that at such great risk to themselves and he was impressed. This was another point for SHIELD because he didn’t know any Hydra agent who would do such a thing. Grant was also impressed by Mr. Diez’s courage in facing his imminent demise. He hoped that, when his time came, he too would have the nerve to look death in the face and welcome it.

He had a brief taste of what that might feel like when he stood stoically while Fitz scanned him for the alien energy signature. Grant knew that the likelihood of him contracting the virus was small but there was just enough time to wonder *what if* before Fitz said, “All clean. No traces of electrostatic energy.” Grant was relieved for himself and for the whole team. Now they could drop off the Chitauri helmet at the Sandbox and put this whole sad affair behind them. However, that was not to be.

The first inkling Grant had that something was wrong was when he heard the alarm go off in the lab. His initial thought was that Fitz had knocked something over again or created another minor explosion. Alarms seemed to go off in the lab almost every other day, so it was hard to take it seriously. But then Coulson’s voice came over the coms, telling everyone to meet in the cargo bay for an urgent briefing. That in itself was unusual. *The cargo bay?*
“Why is Jemma locked in the lab?” Fitz demanded immediately. They could all see her sitting dejectedly on the floor, looking at nothing instead of busily darting about like she usually did.

“I’m sorry to have to tell you all this but we just discovered that Jemma has contracted the Chitauri virus,” Coulson explained.

There was a moment of dismayed silence. Grant felt like someone had punched him in the stomach. May’s lips tightened and Skye burst into tears. However, it was Fitz’s reaction that was the most heart-breaking to watch.

“No. No, no, no, no, no,” he said. Then he ran over and started banging on the lab’s glass door. “Jemma! This has to be a mistake! Tell them that it’s a mistake. You just did a wrong calculation or something! Jemma!”

Jemma slowly got up off the floor. She looked like she was 100 years old. She turned to face Fitz. “No, Fitz. Agent Coulson is right. I have all the symptoms.”

Fitz looked stunned for a moment, then he almost physically shook himself. “Well, that’s it then,” he said to her. “We’re just going to have to fix this. I have some tools in my bunk. I’m going to rig a calibration tool for the vaccine that you’re going to develop. I’ll be right back!” he said as he ran off.

The rest of the team walked slowly over to the lab. Skye stopped crying and put her hand up on the door. “Jemma,” she said in a broken voice. “Jemma, I am so sorry.”

Jemma tried to smile. “It’s ok, Skye. This is the risk you take when working with unknown elements.”

“Jemma,” Grant said. “We’re not going to let you go down without a fight. We’re going to figure out something to do.” It was all he could think of to say. Grant hated feeling helpless and he refused to do that until they’d exhausted all of their options.

“Thank you, Ward,” she replied quietly.

Just then, Fitz raced back into the room and showed her his tools. “See, Jemma! This is what we need to do. I’ll make a delivery device. You just sit there and rest until I’m finished.” Both of them sank down to the floor, sitting back to back with only a large glass door between them.

The rest of the team walked a short distance away and huddled in front of Lola to strategize. Skye and Grant were both standing with their arms crossed, as if protecting themselves, while Coulson and May looked much looser. Coulson estimated that she had two hours at most before the virus would kill her and May pointed out that their flight path over the Atlantic gave them three hours before they could land. Not enough time.

“Sir, correct me if I’m wrong, but if we can’t land in time…” Grant started. *What are we going to do?*

“Simmons will release a pulse that will blow this plane right out of the sky,” Coulson answered calmly.

Skye, however, was more excitable. “We can’t just sit here and watch her die! We have to do something!” she exclaimed.

“There’s only one person on this plane capable of finding a solution for this. And I’m willing to bet my life that she will.” As one, they all turned to look at Jemma, still sitting on the floor.
“She’s just a kid,” May murmured. Just a kid. Yes, she was, but even kids experienced a lot of pain. Grant had first-hand experience with that. He felt sick.

He abruptly left and went upstairs. He thought about telling the others where he was going but, the truth was, he didn’t know yet where he was headed. All he knew was that he couldn’t stay in the cargo hold just waiting any longer. He needed to be alone. The first place he went was his bunk but after 30 seconds in there, he knew it wasn’t the place. Next he tried Mission Control. Grant paced around the table a few times until he finally turned on the camera feed from the lab. Then he leaned on the holo-table, just watching Jemma work. One arm was across his body and he stroked his chin repeatedly with his other hand. He’d recently realized that this gesture was something that was comforting to him. He’d mistakenly believed that he’d eliminated all tells of his emotional state, so that reveal was a surprise to him.

“Why aren’t you down there?” Skye asked him tentatively. She was standing just inside the door to Mission Control looking incredibly sad.

For once, Grant looked startled. He hadn’t seen or heard her come in. I must be really upset if I dropped my guard like that! He shrugged. “They don’t need an audience,” he replied. He sighed and returned to watching the screen.

When Skye turned to leave, Grant realized that he wanted her to stay. It was unbearably lonely watching Jemma fight for her life in the lab and not knowing if he was counting down to success or tragedy. While all of them cared about Jemma, Skye showed her distress the most and Grant found that comforting. He also felt warmed by the fact that she came to find him during her time of need. Maybe the close relationship he’d thought they had before Scorch wasn’t a lie.

“You can stay if you want,” he told her quietly. Grant abruptly stopped rubbing his chin and crossed both arms. He didn’t need for Skye to see him upset. She was counting on him to help her, not the other way around.

Skye turned back around, entered the room and stopped somewhat close to Grant. She too leaned against the holo-table. Neither of them looked at each other. “I hate this!” she said softly. Grant merely nodded. “I just feel so…” Skye continued.

“Helpless,” Grant finished.

Skye turned her head to look at him. “Yeah,” she said surprised. Grant realized that the idea that Agent Grant Ward, Superspy, could feel helpless was a new thought for her. If only she knew the truth! He lived his life going out of his way to avoid feeling helpless but, the truth was, he felt that way much more than he’d like.

Grant shook his head in disgust. “I wanted it to be a person,” he said pushing off from the table and still watching the screen. “Some super-powered psychopath, someone I could hurt, someone I could punish,” he said through his teeth. “That I could do,” he said as Skye watched him in silence. “What I can’t do,” he said and finally turned to look at Skye, “is protect you guys from stuff I can’t even see! Or understand.” He turned back to look at the screen again.

“So what do we do?” she asked with tears in her voice.

He turned to face her. “We wait,” he said sighing and crossing his arms again. “And get ready.”

“Ready for what?” she asked.

“For whatever it is that we’re called upon to do.” The two of them stared at each other until Skye
Grant just hoped that whatever they were called upon to do wouldn’t end up being horrible. Yet he was very afraid that it would be.

“OK. Well, I’m going to go back down there, see if there is anything I can do,” Skye told him.

Grant nodded and let her leave as he returned to watching the screen. A short while later, he saw Fitz dash into the lab. What the hell is going on? He dashed down to the lab, meeting May on the way. Coulson and Skye were already there.

This time, Grant stayed and paced alongside Coulson and May as the Science Twins worked to develop an anti-serum. The tension was almost overwhelming. No one talked. The team gathered at the lab door as Fitz gave the remaining rat the anti-serum.

“I can’t breathe,” Skye said. Grant felt the same way.

At first, everyone thought it had worked but then, right before it looked like FitzSimmons would give each other a celebratory hug, the rat emitted an electrostatic pulse and rose into the air. Grant felt like throwing up but he just calmly met May’s despairing glance when she turned to look at him.

For the second time in two days, Grant was forced to admire the courage of someone with a death sentence hanging over their heads. Jemma calmly approached Coulson, gave him instructions about how to tell her parents, and then, with tears running down her face, she turned and faced the team. “Would you mind if I had a brief moment alone with Fitz?” she asked.

All they could do was return to Mission Control. May went into the other room to answer a summons and then returned quickly. “Agent Blake is on the line,” she told Coulson. “He wants to know what’s going on. If you won’t answer, he asked for Ward.”

“Sir. What are our orders?” Grant asked, looking tense.

Coulson turned around to face everyone. “They’re unchanged,” he said grimly.

Suddenly an alarm went off. “What is that?” Skye asked as May hurriedly scrolled through computer screens on the holo-table to find the source of the alarm. “Someone’s lowered the cargo hold ramp,” she told them.

It took Grant just under five seconds before he realized what was happening. It’s what I would do. He looked briefly at the others and then sprinted out of the room. Once he reached the stairs, he saw Fitz race out of the lab with something in his hand and grab one of the parachutes hanging on the wall. Is he insane? He can’t! Grant jumped over the last few stairs and ran towards Fitz, grabbing the parachute from his hands.

“The anti-serum works!” Fitz yelled as he handed Grant the device holding the calibration unit. “But she jumped!” he screamed as Grant leapt out of the cargo hold with just one arm around the parachute.

It only took a little bit of spinning before Grant was able to right himself, get his arms in the parachute and fasten it. After free falling for a few seconds, he held his arms out in order to slow himself down. It was pointless to keep going unless he knew which direction she went. Suddenly, he saw Jemma’s body falling through the clouds. He placed his arms firmly at his sides as he shot like an arrow toward her. Grant saw the water coming up fast and knew he didn’t have much time before he would have to pull his chute.
Almost there! He positioned his body spread eagled so that he would slow down enough to catch her. Jemma seemed to understand what he was doing because she also tried to position her body to slow down her descent. He grabbed Jemma, administered the anti-serum into her leg and then pulled the chute. Grant hung onto to Jemma as they were both yanked upwards by the parachute. 

Let’s just hope that we have enough time to slow down before we hit the water! As they both took a deep breath, Jemma leaned back slightly and the electrical current almost gently flowed out from her body and then she leaned into Grant again as they floated slowly into the water.

Once they were in the water and Grant had gotten the parachute off, Jemma looked at him with a smile. “Ward, that was an incredibly foolish thing to do. But I’m grateful that you did.”

Grant felt almost giddy. He’d saved her! He smiled, “Well, I couldn’t let the team lose the best doctor we’ve got. What would we do if one of us contracted an alien virus?”

At that, both of them burst into almost hysterical laughter. Once they’d calmed down, Grant said, “Jemma, you’ve got to be exhausted. We’ve got at least an hour before they get us out of here, so why don’t you float on your back? I’ll make sure you’re all right.” Jemma just smiled, nodded and followed his directions.

It was almost two hours before they were loaded onto a boat and even longer than that before they could return to the Bus and change into dry clothes. So, it was almost a relief to stand in Coulson’s office and listen to him rant at them, really just at Jemma, about causing so much trouble. Grant did his best to contain his amusement as Coulson went on and on about what a pain it was to deal with the Moroccan office. Grant had been privy to many such rants, all designed to make sure the errant agent realized the gravity of what had occurred. However, he didn’t think it was making much of an impact on Jemma because she seemed more puzzled than chastised. And then, when Jemma seemed unaware of when Coulson was finished with them, it was all Grant could do not to laugh. Clearly the girl rarely, if ever, got into trouble.

The two of them walked down the stairs together, Grant in the lead. He was still worried about her frame of mind. “So,” he said almost gently, “what did you think of your first time sky-diving?”

“Honestly,” she said exhaustedly. “I’d rather not think about it anymore.”

“I thought what you did was incredibly brave,” Grant said as he turned around to stand in front of her.

Jemma looked dismayed. What’s wrong now? “Oh,” she sighed. “Well, I suppose that now is as good a time as any to tell you that um…I may have misled you earlier,” she said with an embarrassed smile.

Grant merely looked inquisitive. Is she really upset about the Night Night pistol thing? He crossed his arms and looked amused.

“You see, when I gave you back the Night Night pistol, I lied. It’s still an ounce off.” She finished speaking and looked apprehensive. It took all of Grant’s self-discipline not to start laughing. He didn’t think Jemma would respond well if he did.

“I know,” he told her gently.

“You do,” she asked in a surprised tone.

“Of course,” he replied. “After all,” he then switched to his best Clint Eastwood type voice and put his hands on his hips and finished, “I’m Agent Grant Ward. I just jumped out of a plane without a
parachute on and saved your life.” The act was totally worth it because Jemma broke into a smile as big as he’d ever seen on her face.

“Actually, that’s not quite it,” she said still smiling, “It’s a bit more nasally than that.”

Grant snorted and rolled his eyes.

Jemma suddenly looked over his shoulder and he turned around. “Oh. Hello, Skye,” she said. Skye just stood there looking tearful, then she rushed past Grant to give Jemma a big hug. The two girls stood there hugging, both looking extremely happy and thankful to be able to have the chance.

Once they finished hugging, Jemma disengaged herself and said, “Well. I haven’t seen Fitz yet, so I must go and apologize for hitting him over the head.” And off she went.

Skye looked up at Grant. “That was an amazing thing you did. Stupid but amazing,” she said.

He shrugged. “All in a day’s work,” he replied nonchalantly as he turned to go.

Skye put a hand on his arm to stop him. For the first time in a while, he didn’t stiffen when she touched him nor did he feel irritated. If anything, her hand on his arm felt good. He looked inquiringly at her.

Skye took a deep breath. “For a while there after you jumped, I thought we’d lost you both and I almost couldn’t stand it. I am just so grateful that you’re ok.” Grant started to say something but she held up her hand to stop him. “Please, let me finish.” Grant nodded, wondering where she was going with this. “I realize that I hurt you and the team when I screwed up by contacting Miles. I truly am sorry for that and I will do whatever it takes to make up for it. Nothing is more important to me than this team and I wanted you to know that.”

Skye turned to go but this time Grant was the one to put his hand on her arm. She turned around with a surprised expression. It was the first time he’d voluntarily touched her in days. “I know you’re sorry and I’ve seen how hard you’ve been working to try and make it up to us. No promises but I’ll try to ease up a bit, maybe even let you out of the doghouse every once in a while,” he said with a small grin.

Skye looked shocked that he knew about her catchphrase for being in trouble with him. It was all he could do not to laugh. “I’m going to take a hot shower now,” he said.

“You deserve it!” she replied.

As he walked toward his bunk, Grant felt at peace, a rare feeling for him. He’d saved Jemma’s life, proven his worth to the team and started the forgiveness process with Skye. Maybe he could get the hang of this emotional stuff. If so, once this was all over, maybe he could be on the team for real.
Grant made certain that the Bus was ready to leave at a moment’s notice and then headed back to Koenig’s office to check on Skye’s progress. He knew that he was going to have to do something about Koenig soon but he didn’t yet have a plan. Grant rounded the corner to Koenig’s office to see him standing in front of the video feeds. Two of the screens were filled with words while the other three just looked fuzzy. *What is he looking at?*

Grant was puzzled by Agent Koenig. Fury clearly trusted him to maintain a vital resource and assess incoming agents, so he had to have high level security clearance within SHIELD. However, given that he had been stuck in the secret base for months by himself, his skills appeared to have been wasted. So either he was a highly valued operative or he wasn’t. Grant couldn’t figure it out and that made him anxious. He wasn’t used to not knowing things. It didn’t help that there were weird things around the base. For instance, the changing window screens weren’t fooling anyone and, at least in Grant’s opinion, that just made them creepy.

“How’s it going?” Grant asked Koenig as he came into the room.

Koenig whirled around. “Oh, hey. Believe it or not, Skye got us in!” he answered excitedly. “We have access to the NSA’s complete sat-feed history!”

Grant smiled and shook his head with pride (*She really is something!* ) while also experiencing a sinking feeling. His options were getting more limited by the moment. As much as he loved how talented Skye was, why did she have to be so good right now? Why couldn’t this be one of the times she had trouble? *Stupid NSA tech people! Why can’t they keep their system secure?*

“That girl’s good,” Koenig told him. He then changed his tone to a whisper and leaned a bit towards Grant, “I can see why you like her.”

Grant smiled tightly but said nothing. *Damn straight!*

Koenig turned back around to look at the screens again. “Uh, the images are a little patchy but they’re going to clear up any second. I guess living on the edge really pays off sometimes.”

Grant knew that he had very little time before those images would show him leaving the Fridge with Garrett. He had to act now. He still didn’t know what he would do but, whatever it was, it would need to be in private. He went to close the doors and, as he did, he appreciated the irony behind what Koenig had just said. “Yeah, sometimes,” he replied grimly.

When Grant turned back around, Koenig was still facing the screens. “I’ve gotta say. I was skeptical at first with Coulson bringing all of you here but now, I have to admit that it’s been nice. It gets lonely being by yourself for so long.”

“I know,” Grant responded as he took out his ICER and shot him.

Koenig immediately collapsed and Grant put several more bullets in him to keep him down. He couldn’t afford for Koenig to wake up anytime soon. Grant got the ropes he’d left out in the hallway, bound the unconscious agent and then dragged him to the food storage pantry. Skye would be unlikely to go there – especially with what he had planned for her – but the others would once they returned from their mission. That meant that Koenig would be found quickly but only after Grant was gone. *Thank goodness I didn’t have to kill him!* He never liked killing if he could help it.
With Koenig out of the way, Grant returned to Koenig’s office and considered what to do about the NSA sat-feed. Maybe he could keep Skye busy enough that she wouldn’t notice and they could leave without her ever checking the clear pictures. Just then, the resolution of the pictures became crisp and he saw that they were blank. Grant let out a sigh of relief. Finally something goes my way! Now that he could breathe a little easier, he allowed himself to feel a little thrill of anticipation. He’d waited so long to be with Skye and, at least for a little while, he’d have the chance.

Grant left the room to reload the ICER and returned just as Skye ran into Koenig’s office ahead of him. “Eric!” she called out. When did they get to be on a first-name basis? “Eric?” Skye walked further into the room and saw the clear feeds. “You did it,” he said. Skye jumped and looked back at him. Clearly, he’d startled her. Maybe being in a vast semi-empty base was starting to wear on her. It certainly was on him. “Koenig said you managed to hack the NSA.”

“You did it,” he said, Skye jumped and looked back at him. Clearly, he’d startled her. Maybe being in a vast semi-empty base was starting to wear on her. It certainly was on him. “Koenig said you managed to hack the NSA.”

“Yeah,” she said turning back around to look at the feeds, “it looks that way.” She faced Grant again. “Where’d he go?”

“He’s sending everything over to NATO, CIA, Interpol. Guess he hopes that they’ll take it as a sign of good faith from SHIELD,” Grant told her. He actually doubted that Koenig would have done that – he was far too secretive – but it sure sounded good.

“That’s smart,” Skye replied, again turning to look at the feeds, “though…looks like all I got was lots of views of an empty rooftop.” He was sure she was disappointed and he didn’t blame her but he needed to refocus her attention on him.

Grant sat down on the desk behind where Skye was standing. He wanted to emphasize the fact that they were alone. “May’s gone.”

Skye turned to face him again, her attention solely on Grant. Good! He just gave a what the hell kind of gesture and she looked confused. “What do you mean gone? Gone where?”

“She left. I’m sure if I asked where, she wouldn’t have told me.”

“Wow. So no goodbye, no nothing?” Grant immediately felt badly for Skye. Of course, the unwanted orphan would take this as evidence of yet another person abandoning her. “She never felt anything for us, did she?” Grant shook his head, so Skye continued, getting even more worked up. “She just played us so she could keep an eye on Coulson.”

To his surprise, Grant felt a stab of defensiveness for May. The Cavalry was a lot of things but uncaring wasn’t one of them. Of course, Skye hadn’t seen what May did to Ian Quinn after she got shot, so maybe she truly didn’t know the depth of May’s feelings for her. Or maybe she was operating under another emotion regarding the beautiful agent. Huh. Focus! May cared. Grant had no doubt of that. Besides, he needed Skye to understand that sometimes the mission supersedes personal feeling. That was definitely a point he wanted to hammer home.

“That was her mission,” he told her gently.

Skye clearly seemed to recognize his defense of May as such because she stepped closer to him and asked, “Did you feel anything for her?”

Grant almost smiled at Skye’s jealousy. Back in the supply closet at the Hub, he’d wondered if Skye was jealous of his relationship with May and now here was clear proof of it. As far as he
knew, no one had ever been jealous of him before and, even though he knew it was an unhealthy emotion, he reveled in it. But he needed for Skye to believe that only she was in his heart.

“No,” he said dismissively. “The only comfort we took in each other was knowing we didn’t have to.” This wasn’t the truth but he didn’t believe that Skye would understand why he’d begun his relationship with May or what he had gotten from being with her. It was just easier to let Skye think that it was nothing but physical.

“Can’t choose to feel,” she replied.

“Usually I can,” Grant retorted. He could have kept going and said, “Usually I have to,” but he knew that she definitely wouldn’t understand. That Skye was such an emotional person was one of the many things he loved about her but, thus far in his life, Grant couldn’t be. Emotions were what caused bullies to prey upon you and they were what made parents (real and figurative) mad enough to beat you. Emotions did sometimes make you weak because they make it more difficult to do the hard things you sometimes have to do. But Grant could also see the force behind what his therapist told him: emotions can be a strength. He hoped to explore that idea further one day.

He needed once again to redirect the conversation. “It’s different with us,” he told Skye as he got up from the desk and headed to a table across the room. Grant realized that even though they’d been flirting with each other ever since the supply closet, neither of them had taken the plunge and talked about themselves as a couple. Of course, he’d been thinking about almost nothing else since they kissed, but he wanted to see what Skye would do with the idea. He knew more than most about her walls and how guarded she was with people but he suspected that she wanted this as much as he did.

Sure enough, Skye replied, “Us is a strong word,” (There are those walls) but she followed him over to the table where there was a bottle of scotch and some glasses. Once she did that, he knew he had her; it was just a matter of time and conversation.

“I mean,” she continued, “I know I kissed you,” Grant smiled a little both at the memory and at her attempt to backtrack, “but to be fair, I thought there was a 97% chance we were going to die.” Skye was smiling and leaning on the table watching him as he poured them both a drink. “But we didn’t die,” she finished.

“Which is good,” he replied. It took almost all his self-control to go slow, to not just kiss her right then, but he knew that she needed some space and time to get used to the idea of them being together. Grant didn’t think it would take long – Skye was impulsive and besides, he couldn’t afford to wait long – but you just couldn’t rush things like this. And he really didn’t want to.

“Yes, that is very good but there’s still no rush on us being an us,” she said. Grant wanted to laugh. Skye might be an expert with computers but there were still plenty of things she didn’t know, especially when it came to people. If Skye really wanted for them to remain apart, she wouldn’t be standing so close to him, making direct eye contact and wearing a flirty smile. If she truly wanted to take things slow, her body language would be completely different. Grant wanted to jump for joy because it couldn’t be plainer that she wanted to be with him just as much as he wanted to be with her. What he wouldn’t give to just stay with her here, in the secret base where there was no one else but them, and forget about Hydra, SHIELD and the outside world.

“It’s not like it’s a good time to start anything,” Skye continued looking at him tentatively. Grant realized that Skye was feeling the water, trying to determine what his feelings were. Skye, his take-charge, in-control rookie, was scared. That he could handle.

“There’s never a good time,” he replied lightly. “You’ve got to start somewhere,” he said as he
handed her the much thought about and longed for drink.

Skye looked up at him, unsure. Then, whatever she saw in his face must have reassured her because then she smiled. They were really going to do this! Grant gestured toward the seating area and Skye led the way. She sat down in one of the chairs and faced him expectantly. Grant took a seat on the couch. If all went well, she’d be joining him there soon.

He felt a moment’s nervousness because he didn’t really know how to start. This wasn’t his skillset. Usually when he was seducing a woman, she was only interested in his body and the pleasure he could bring her; emotions were the last thing on her mind. But Skye was different. She needed to know how he felt, what was in his heart. On that topic at least, he could finally tell her the truth.

“I’ve wanted to be with you for a while now,” he started hesitantly.

“Really?” Skye’s eyes lit up. “For how long?”

Grant gave an embarrassed smile and looked down. This was much harder than he thought it would be! Why was it that lying about his feelings came so much easier? “I thought I had feelings for you shortly after I became your SO but I knew for certain during the train mission,” he answered. “I’ve never wanted to be with anyone like I’ve wanted to be with you.”

“If that’s how you felt, you had a funny way to show it,” Skye replied. He heard a little irritation behind her tone but it made him feel good. It was an indication that Skye had wanted to be with him much longer than he’d originally anticipated.

But how could he explain this to her? His dislike of people and inability to spend time with them was rooted in so much of his history that he couldn’t share with her right now. But maybe he could tell her what being a spy, and not just a spy but a specialist – THE spy – was like for him. At least she could know that truth.

“Specialists don’t spend much time with a lot of people and the ones we do, we’re all cut from the same cloth,” he explained.

“Black Kevlar,” Skye joked, taking a drink.

“Trained to get the job done, keep emotions in check.” Grant really needed Skye to understand that part of his job. You were given a mission and you couldn’t let emotions get in your way or it would never get done. Emotions and personal connections were for down time. He looked at her and nodded. “But you, you’re different.”

Skye was smiling at him. “Different bad?” she questioned.

“Bad for me,” he nodded. Skye looked surprised. Grant could tell that this revelation was shocking, that she wasn’t expecting total honesty, just light romance. If only she knew! He wished he could give her what she wanted but he needed her to know at least a little of his reality. She had to know some of him now; he vowed to tell her the rest later.

“I didn’t want to think about you. I wanted to stay focused.” He leaned forward. “And then I saw you, after you were shot, fighting to stay alive.”

Skye’s expression became grim and Grant realized that she was trying not to relive that memory. He felt bad that he’d awakened that in her, so he quickly changed the subject. “But you’re right. I’m Kevlar, you’re not.”
This was an unexpected twist in the conversation, one he hadn’t wanted or anticipated. Suddenly Grant felt awful. He was being selfish! He wasn’t cut out to be in a serious relationship. He didn’t know the first thing about how to share his feelings honestly or make someone else feel good. This was a perfect example. Here he was, trying to spend some romantic alone time with Skye and what did he do? Force her to relive what had to be the worst memory of her life. Some Casanova he was! She deserved so much better. Grant was about to think about another way to get the hard drive unlocked – one that didn’t involve trapping Skye in an unhealthy relationship with him – when Skye, as she always did, surprised him.

“You don’t have to be,” she said. Grant looked down. She should run, get away from him as fast as she can. “You don’t have to shut people out,” she continued. This was what his therapist told him too but, quite frankly, he hadn’t believed her either. How could he expect someone as warm and loving as Skye to want to be with someone as cold and calculating as him? Maybe being a spy was all he could ever be.

“Yeah I do,” he blurted out. “There are things about me that you wouldn’t like if you knew.” Boy, if that wasn’t the truth! She wouldn’t like the fact that he betrayed SHIELD for Hydra for years and she would hate that he was currently betraying the team for Fury and Hill. And don’t even get me started on my family!

“You think I don’t have skeletons?” Skye asked incredulously. Grant almost laughed. You have no idea.

“It’s different. You’re…” fabulous, wonderful, everything that I’ve always wanted but can never have, “good.” He knew that sounded childish, as if a spy like him ever thought in such rigid terms as good and evil, but he wanted her to understand the fundamental difference between the two of them. He didn’t believe that he could ever have the kind of light that seemed to illuminate Skye from the inside. Oh, he wanted it, he wanted it badly, but he didn’t ever think he’d get it. My parents took that from me long ago.

Skye looked like he had slapped her in the face. “So are you!” she insisted.

“Not always,” he responded. Even though he wanted to be with her so badly he could taste it, he needed for her to understand who he was and get away. She deserved that. He would find another way to fulfill his mission. In that moment, Grant decided that in order for her to understand just how bad he was, he must unlock some of his demons. Maybe if he told her about his history and he started with the very memory that originally brought them closer together, she would get what he was trying to convey and just go.

“I lied to you,” he started. Skye merely took a deep breath and seemed to prepare herself to hear whatever he had to say. “My older brother, he didn’t beat up on my younger brother. He was crueler than that. He made me do it.”

Grant kept his intense gaze on Skye’s face because he wanted to read in it every bit of disgust that she would feel for him now. He wanted to punish himself by seeing every single negative emotion she was sure to direct his way. But Skye only closed her eyes, as if what he was saying was painful for her to hear.

“And I let him,” Grant continued. Let her hear it all. “I was afraid of him.” He braced himself for Skye’s revulsion but, once again, it didn’t come.

“What about your parents?” she demanded indignantly.

“They were worse. I am not a good man, Skye,” he said with a dangerous expression. Why is she
not screaming or running away? I’m giving her everything that should keep her away from me. But Skye looked sympathetic and moved from her chair to sit next to him on the couch. She gripped one of his hand with both of hers, clearly seeking to offer comfort. If she had done that just 15 minutes before, Grant would have been jubilant. However, now he just felt scared and confused. *This is not the way she should be responding!*

She gently turned his face towards her own. “Yes, you are,” she told him emphatically, looking like she was upset that he didn’t think well of himself.

As Grant saw her gentle expression, it was almost as if something in him broke. He didn’t want to be bad and he certainly didn’t want to be alone. He wanted Skye with all of his heart and, if she was willing to be with him even knowing some of his worst deeds, then he wasn’t going to argue. He needed her too much.

He leaned forward, put his hand on the back of her head and kissed her with everything in him. Skye grabbed the back of his neck and pulled, clearly wanting him closer to her. Her hands went up to cup his face but suddenly she pulled back. Grant felt like he’d been sucker-punched. After all that, was she now going to reject him?

Skye just smiled wickedly, took off her plaid outer shirt and pushed him back on the couch. Grant returned her smile and sank willingly onto some pillows while she straddled him and resumed the kiss. His position of half lying and half sitting up gave him great access and he allowed his hands to go everywhere he’d wanted to touch but hadn’t been able to before. He ran his fingers through her thick hair, rubbed his hands up and down her muscled thighs (*I helped develop these!*), and caressed her breasts. He really liked it when she moaned and took special note of what he was doing to cause those sounds. Grant smiled to himself. He would remember everything that made her feel good for future reference.

Skye was equally as enthusiastic. She rubbed her hands up and down his arms, ground herself down onto him and nibbled on his ears and neck. Since Grant’s sexual interactions were usually business-related or time-sensitive, he wasn’t used to this kind of foreplay. He couldn’t believe how good it felt. *Will everything be better with Skye?* He smiled to himself again and stopped thinking for a few minutes. That was a new experience for him too.

Skye put her hands underneath his shirt and started teasing his nipples (*Who knew that could feel so incredible!?*) when she accidentally leaned too hard on his chest. His cracked ribs throbbed and he sucked in his breath sharply, the pain bringing his situation into high relief. Grant had been enjoying himself so much that he hadn’t been watching the time. He realized that he couldn’t let things go any further because sex with Skye, especially the first time, was not something that he wanted to rush. If they continued, he might not ever want to leave and that would be a disaster. The mission was too crucial to be left hanging and, even more importantly, if Grant didn’t get the hard drive, Garrett would seek revenge and Skye might get hurt. They had to go.

Grant sat up and gently pushed Skye off of him and back onto the couch. He tried to control his breathing but it was difficult, especially when Skye looked so sexy sitting next to him. He glanced over at her and noticed that she looked a bit hurt.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. Grant was pleased to hear that she was equally as breathless as he was. “Did I hurt you?”

“No, no, no. It’s fine. I don’t think my ribs are taped tightly enough. I’m going to see if I can find some more tape in the infirmary,” Grant told her as he quickly got to his feet.

“Let me help you!” Skye insisted.
“No, I can get it. You just relax,” he said as he practically ran out of the room. He knew she was upset but he needed to be alone so that he could cool down and refocus on the mission. He briefly swung by the infirmary just in case Skye checked but then he went to the hangar where he opened the outer door. It wouldn’t be long now.

Grant returned to Koenig’s office shortly afterward but Skye wasn’t there. He searched the kitchen, her bedroom, and the Sat-Com room but he still couldn’t find her. Grant was starting to get a little worried. Was it possible that she’d found Agent Koenig? Grant almost ran to the pantry storeroom. He breathed deeply (Please don’t let her have found him!), opened the door and was incredibly relieved when the penny dropped into his hand. No one had been in there. He was just closing the door when he heard Skye speak from behind him.

“Hey!” She was standing in the hallway smiling at him with her arms crossed. Grant surreptitiously put the penny in his back pocket and shut the door. “Did you think I’d be hiding in a closet?” she asked in a snarky voice.

“I was wondering where you went,” he said as he crossed the hall to get to her. “I went back to the room. You weren’t there. Why’d you leave?”


Now it was Grant’s turn to feel stricken although his expression never wavered. This was it. This was the moment when she would tell him how disgusting he was, how much he deserved all the bad things that had happened to him and how she would never let him touch her ever again. But there was this tiny sliver of hope in him that begged him to hear what she had to say and that maybe it wouldn’t be so bad.

It was that small part of him that pushed him to say, “I’d appreciate it,” in the mildest voice he could muster.

Skye looked down. “You scared me,” she said.

Grant almost panicked. What had he done to scare her? While he was used to people being afraid of him – he was pretty lethal – and he often used that fear to intimidate when necessary, Grant had always taken great pains never to be scary to Skye. What did I do? He couldn’t speak but this time, he allowed his face to look stricken.

Skye seemed to relent at his expression. “Opening up, making out…” she smiled softly and moved a step or two closer to him, “which was very nice, I’ll admit.”

Grant smiled in a pained way, looked down and then glanced pleadingly at Skye. “I didn’t mean to scare you,” he told her.

That wasn’t strictly the truth. In fact, it was an out-and-out lie because, in opening up to her the way he did, he had wanted her to be scared of him. He had wanted her to run away and never look back. But that lasted just until they started making out. Then he never wanted her to be scared of him again and now he was desperately trying to avoid her leaving him.

“I don’t exactly over-analyze. I just act impulsively and then I freak out after the fact,” Skye explained.

Small alarm bells started going off in Grant’s head. Skye was not acting like Skye. He could believe that she got scared and ran away – he knew first-hand how impulsive she was – but once she was done running, her natural tendency when afraid was to be snarky. She didn’t get closer;
she put up her walls. Yet she wasn’t doing that. If he didn’t know better, he’d think that she was
trying to work him. But why would she do that, especially after what we just shared? Grant badly
wanted things to return to where they were before he ran away, so he concentrated on her statement
about freaking out.

“Are you still?” he asked her. Please say no!

Skye simply shook her head and stepped even closer to him. She lifted her face to kiss him and
then, when he obliged (Thank god!), she caressed his face and ran her hands through his hair. After
they finished the kiss – oddly much less passionate than before – she stepped back and smiled up
at him again.

“No, I’m good,” she told him. “I want this,” she told him. More alarm bells were going off. Skye’s
voice didn’t even sound like it usually did but he again ignored the warning signals. Maybe she was
having a hard time processing the idea of them being together. After all, it was a distinct
transformation of their relationship. Plus, Skye had just said that she wanted them to be together!
Grant smiled with longing, relief and genuine affection.

Skye was running her hands along his arms and Grant continued to smile at her. Her touch felt so
good. “And you? What do you want?” she asked seriously. Another change in tone, this time it
almost sounded as if she was angry with him. But the analytical part of Grant’s brain had shut off
and any signals went unheeded. They were finally an us!

“What I want,” he replied in the gentlest voice he’d ever used with a human (he’d used it on Buddy
whenever he was hurt or ill), “is to stay here with you and imagine the world outside doesn’t
exist.” If only we could!

To be with Skye alone without any outside demands on them was Grant’s dearest wish and, for a
fraction of a second, he could see that Skye wanted that badly too. Then, something shifted in her
eyes and he remembered that the clock was ticking. He looked down and realized that their alone
time was done. The mission needed to be completed or Garrett would come looking. The smile
dropped off of his face.

“But the world outside does exist,” he continued in his normal tone of voice. “I just got word from
Fitz. They need our help.” He tilted his head in the direction of the hangar. “The Bus if fueled up,
ready to go.”

Grant started to walk in that direction but stopped when he saw that Skye wasn’t following him.
“We should tell Koenig,” she said.

“I just did. He’s headed outside to open the hangar doors. We’re in a hurry,” he said, pointing his
thumb in the direction of the hangar. Come on, Skye!

“I’ve just got to grab a couple things,” she said urgently as she started to walk off down the hall.

Now that Agent Ward had recalled Grant back onto task, he refused to allow any more delays and
almost felt a moment of panic about the ticking clock. We don’t have time for this! Garrett is
waiting. So, he reached out and grabbed Skye’s arm to prevent her from going in the wrong
direction.

“Hey! We need to go right now,” he told her. More alarm bells. Is that fear on her face? But Grant
didn’t have time to worry about what was wrong and why she acting so strangely. They had to go.

“Of course we do,” Skye said after a few moments of indecision. Then she smiled. “Lead the
Grant nodded and started walking down the hall, Skye following a short distance behind him. He didn’t yet have a plan for how he was going to get her to unlock the drive and return her to the base before his deadline was up but now that things were going smoothly, he had confidence that he’d figure it out. *We are an us!* As they walked down the hall, he realized that he could touch her and it would be ok, so he reached out and took her hand. Grant had never held hands just for the pleasure of touching another person, so it felt incredibly good. He ignored the fact that Skye seemed less pleased.

As they boarded the Bus, Grant kept holding her hand all the way to the cockpit. “Why don’t you sit up here with me?” he suggested. He knew that Skye enjoyed riding in the co-pilot’s seat but May rarely allowed it. Agent Ward might have his own reasons for keeping an eye on Skye but Grant thought that it might make her happy and calm her down. She seemed jumpy.

Skye was especially excited to be allowed in the cockpit during take-off – it was a first for her – but the two of them settled into silence soon after. Grant had his mind on the task ahead, so he didn’t pay attention to how unusual that was for her.

After 20 minutes of silence, Skye smiled and looked around at the blue sky and fluffy clouds. “It’s so beautiful,” she told him. Grant said nothing. He was used to the view from the cockpit and it no longer moved him. “So, are we off to Portland?” she asked.

“Actually, Fitz thinks the 0-8-4 plasma ray we found in Peru might help,” Grant replied. He’d already decided that a requirement for information from their research was the best plan to get her to cooperate. Skye was always so accommodating to the demands of the mission that it made the most sense for her to believe that the team needed her.

Skye looked confused. “Didn’t we jettison that into the sun?”

*If only you knew! Just wait until I talk to Fury!* “Yeah but Fitz has the specs on it,” he told her.

Grant could see when the knowledge kicked in. “On the hard drive,” she said.

He smiled at her and said, “Uh huh.”

Skye turned her head to look out the window. “You need me to decrypt the hard drive,” she said.

Grant couldn’t afford for Skye to believe that he was the one who needed her to decrypt the drive; she had to think that it was coming from Coulson. “The team does,” he corrected her. “And since it’s coupled to specific coordinates, Agent Skye, you’re in charge. Where to next?”

Skye smiled and gave him the coordinates to the diner in LA where she’d met Mike Peterson. Grant busied himself inputting the information into the plane’s system. He felt a distinct sense of relief that the hard drive was almost within his reach yet he knew something was wrong.

In fact, Grant was officially uneasy. The Skye sitting in the co-pilot’s seat was not the Skye from Koenig’s office and he couldn’t figure out what had changed. There was no way that she had found the unconscious Koenig. After all, the penny had dropped showing that she hadn’t been in the pantry. Besides, the Skye he knew would have immediately confronted him about it. No, her weird behavior had to be related to him and how they’d almost had sex.

Grant mentally kicked himself for the awkward way he’d stopped their make-out session. Could he have been any less convincing? Skye probably thought that he didn’t want her when nothing could be further from the truth. Or maybe she’d gotten carried away in the moment and now was worried way.”
about what would happen the next time they kissed. Either way, Grant thought that he could calm her fears. All he needed was time but that was the one thing he no longer had.
Looking After Each Other

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Flashback

Grant had never met Agent Victoria Hand before. Of course, he’d heard many stories about her, both in the Academy and out – Garrett called her Vic and was less than complimentary – so he was interested to see her for himself. He wasn’t disappointed. Hand was somewhat shorter than Grant thought she’d be but, other than that, she was impressive. He found her attractive and was intrigued by the red streaks in her hair. Those seemed oddly whimsical for such a high level agent. Perhaps there were layers to Hand that few people knew. He also appreciated her low voice and no-nonsense attitude.

After a quick introduction to Grant and May, Hand immediately launched into her briefing on the Overkill Device (Grant was pleased that he got the chance to demonstrate his Russian language skills) and its ability to use sonic vibrations to trigger weapons from a great distance. Grant internally shook his head. Was there no end to the kind of weapons people could create? There were times when he wished he was just a civilian and didn’t have to know how dangerous the world actually was.

“So, if we move on them, they could use our own weapons against us,” Coulson summarized.

“Exactly,” Hand replied. She looked at Grant and May. “That’s why I need a two man team to sneak across the disputed border undetected, break into the Separatist stronghold and disable the weapon in the next 24 hours.” Hand turned to look at Coulson. “And you have two people who fit my bill.”

Coulson turned to look at May and Grant. The two of them exchanged a look. Of course they could handle such a mission and were gratified that Hand thought of them. May even looked a bit smug. “Not a problem,” she told Hand confidently.

Grant decided to try and impress her some more. “I was in Georgia during the incursion in ’08,” he told her. “I still have contacts in the South Ossetian border.”

“And you’ll have to use them,” Hand answered without hesitation. “But we don’t have specs on the device, so I need someone on the team who can identify and dismantle it on site.” She looked at the three of them expectantly.

Wait, what? He and May looked at each other in confusion. Coulson also looked perplexed. Grant suddenly had a thought. Dismantle the device? Surely she doesn’t mean… He looked at Hand in barely disguised disgust. “Do you mean…?”

Coulson turned back to look at Hand, “I think she does,” he interrupted.

Hand looked a little puzzled. “I meant Agent Leo Fitz from Sci-Ops. It was my understanding that he is a highly accomplished engineer and a member of your team.”

Coulson nodded. “Both of those things are true.”

“Then what is the problem?” Hand asked impatiently.
Grant was trying to think of a diplomatic way to suggest that Fitz might screw up in the field when May spoke up. “Agent Fitz is an incredibly gifted engineer but he isn’t combat trained. Our fear is that he could be a liability in the field.” Grant raised his eyebrows at May’s response. This was completely unexpected. If he didn’t know better, he’d think that May was worried about him. His affection for the Cavalry increased.

“Agent May is correct. Isn’t there some way that Agent Fitz could talk someone else through the dismantling process?” Coulson asked.

“No. I realize that this will be a difficult mission but it was determined that there wasn’t enough time for anyone other than the engineer to dismantle it on site. It has to be Agent Fitz. Will this be a problem?” she asked Grant.

“Of course not, ma’am. We’ll get it done,” Grant replied. And they would. Grant was known within SHIELD for doing whatever it took to complete the mission and he wasn’t going to stop that now. He just didn’t know how they were going to do that yet.

“Good. You go get prepped for the mission. I’ll send the operation details as soon as they’re ready.” Hand turned back to the large screen and the other three understood that they’d been dismissed.

Seeing how she operated first-hand helped Grant understand why Garrett didn’t like her. She was a strong woman and John seemed to have a problem with that. To him, women were obstacles, allies or playthings; they certainly were not bosses. John never liked being told what to do but when the person giving orders was a woman? It was even worse. Hand also seemed like she didn’t tolerate nonsense and John was a master at it. He used his stories and his charm as ways to ingratiate himself with people and make them want him around. Grant could imagine that John’s good ole boy ways would only irritate Hand and, as such, she would not be enamored of him.

Grant didn’t have the same issues and he was, once again, grateful to his therapist for helping him clearly see John’s. He wanted to learn how to judge people for himself and not rely on John’s opinion to determine his own. Thus, Grant was pleased to discover that he actually liked Hand. Sure, she was abrupt but she was also intelligent, unemotional and got the job done. In fact, she was a lot like May in that regard and he definitely admired the Cavalry. Unlike John, Grant didn’t care about gender. He had spent so many years being judged for his family, his birth order and his looks that he tried to assess people on the attributes they could control rather than those they couldn’t.

May, Coulson and Grant walked out into the hallway where they planned to meet Skye and FitzSimmons. Jemma and Skye were there watching Fitz try to navigate his way out of a secure section. He had gotten his cart loaded with tech stuck in the automatic doors. The five team members just watched silently as Fitz cursed and struggled with the doors. No one stepped forward to help. He finally pushed the cart through but then got stuck behind the doors himself.

Coulson just looked amused as Grant turned to him and said, “Seriously.” Great. Coulson thinks this is funny. This was going to be a disaster.

It wasn’t that Grant didn’t like Fitz. He did, quite a lot in fact. The two of them still regularly played poker by themselves and did game night with the others as well. Grant had fun with him and enjoyed his sense of humor. He also liked Fitz’s obvious care for Jemma, finding it both sweet and admirable. Grant had been very impressed with Fitz’s willingness to put himself in danger for her during the Chitauri virus mission. And Fitz felt like family to him. If Jemma reminded Grant of his sister, then Fitz made him think of his younger brother. Although Fitz and Thomas were nothing alike, it was the feeling of having someone look up to him – someone who depended upon Grant
for their safety – that truly felt like home.

Despite his fondness for Fitz, Grant really didn’t want the responsibility of protecting and guiding him through this mission. The situation in and around Russia was extremely volatile. The last time Grant had been in Georgia, he’d been there working with the South Ossetian separatists dismantling bombs and doing a bit of sniper work when necessary. Although the United States wasn’t supposed to play a role in the Transcaucasian region, it was determined that Georgia was largely unstable and it would be better for U.S. interests if the area became independent or returned to Russian control. As such, Grant and several other SHIELD agents were sent to help the separatists in their quest for division from Georgia. However, things got ugly very quickly and the SHIELD agents found themselves trying to prevent the South Ossetians from engaging in ethnic cleansing and other atrocities. When their efforts proved both futile and increasingly dangerous, SHIELD quickly removed all agents from the area.

If Grant was going back into that unstable melting pot of resentment, political instability, alcohol and violence, he was going to need every bit of his knowledge, training and skill in order to complete the mission successfully. Nowhere in that mix would there be time for Fitz’s constant eating, his naiveté about people, and his lack of weapons training and combat fighting. Grant didn’t want anything bad to happen to Fitz and he would do his best to protect him. However, since he was also a survivor, he didn’t want to be killed while doing it either. But it looked like he would just have to get ready to do whatever needed to be done.

Hand sent the complete mission parameters to the Bus shortly before Grant and Fitz had to catch their plane that would take them to their rendezvous in the Caucasus Mountains. The Russian SHIELD office (which was necessarily small and mobile) was going to provide them with a Jeep. Grant had already talked seriously with Fitz about what they could expect and told him what to pack. Fitz seemed oddly calm and asked only one or two stupid questions instead of his usual twenty. Then he went to pack while Grant met up with May and Coulson in Mission Control to go over last minute details.

May brought up a screen of the region in which they’d be working. “You’ll need to disable the Overkill Device by 0600 tomorrow in order to prevent the Separatist attack,” she told Grant. Coulson, not to be outdone, also brought up a screen showing the location of the signal. “Once you signal SHIELD, the extraction team will get you both out,” he said, looking seriously at Grant. It was all he could do not to sigh because he knew that the concern Coulson displayed was really over Fitz. Everyone knew that he wasn’t combat ready and that his life was in Grant’s hands. Sure enough, Coulson added quietly, “Take care of him.”

Grant looked over at Coulson, trying to see if there was concern for him as well. If there were any indications, he couldn’t see them. What do I have to do to get him to care about me? Of course, sir.” He was a bit insulted that Coulson even thought that needed to be said. When had Grant ever not taken care of the team?

Just then, Fitz, Jemma and Skye all came into the room. The two women were uncharacteristically silent and grim. Fitz was also more subdued than usual but at least he was talking. “More moving, less talking Agent Ward,” he said as he consulted his watch. Grant just looked at him. Fitz was covering it well but he could tell that he was scared stiff. So Grant let him act as if he were in charge without comment. “Time’s not on our side.”

Fitz walked toward the cargo bay but turned to look at Jemma before he left the room. Jemma gave him the best “You’ll do great!” smile that Grant had seen her give but he knew that Fitz wouldn’t be fooled. Jemma looked like she was barely holding it together. Are those tears in her eyes? What he wouldn’t give for someone to look at him that way. Maybe some day. The tension in the room
was so thick that he could’ve cut it with a knife. Coulson gave Grant a significant “You can’t let her down” look while May contented herself with her patented grim stare. Grant gave a small sigh and turned to leave with Fitz.

After a fairly long flight, during which Grant tried to get as much rest as he could, they were dropped at their arranged meeting place. The SHIELD agents in the Russian branch were competent and brusque, so Grant and Fitz were in the jeep and driving through the mountains in no time. They were headed to where Grant’s contact had last been seen. Grant would have preferred that the drive be spent in silence but Fitz had other ideas. Is there no end to his stories? Fitz’s stories were, for the most part, quite boring but Grant found himself envying that. His own life had been too interesting and he would have given a lot to have had the kind of time Fitz had to read, study and hang out with his best friend.

He understood that Fitz was telling the stories both as a way to pass the time and as a method of calming himself but it was putting Grant on edge, especially the closer they got to their destination. They needed to concentrate on the mission ahead and it would be difficult to do with Fitz stuck in the past and Grant wishing for another life. Fitz had just finished telling Grant a story about Simmons sneezing all over a Faraday Cup when they pulled up in front of a rundown building. It was clear that Fitz wanted Grant to laugh with him (Does he know me at all?) but he was done with Fitz’s stories. So, in effort to shut him up, Grant simply took off his sunglasses and looked at him, unamused. It didn’t work.

The two of them walked toward the building with Fitz still talking. “Do you have the beacon?” Grant asked him, hoping he would at least take that hint.

Fitz replied in the affirmative and kept on explaining why the story was so funny. Grant didn’t see the humor. Nerds. He took the beacon disguised as a rock from Fitz and placed it on the ground near the building. The two of them started walking around to the front.

“Listen,” he said, trying to redirect Fitz’s attention back on the mission, “my contact’s Yuri Dubrovsky. We’ll pay him to get us across the border. We go back,” Grant said, giving Fitz a direct stare, “but he doesn’t like new people. So keep your mouth shut and your head down.”

Grant was certain that Fitz had never met anyone like the Georgians. They were a people who had been toughened by continual conflict, cold weather and general difficult living conditions. They had not had easy lives and would not be charmed by someone so innocent and uninformed about their way of life. They could turn violent at the drop of a hat and Grant couldn’t afford for Fitz to be the one who dropped it. So he hoped that Fitz would follow his instructions and just let him do the heavy lifting to get them across the border.

The two of them entered the building. It turned out to be a bar that would be considered a dive in any country. The customers were clearly local toughs who had come in to watch the soccer game on the television. Most of them looked old and battle-hardened. From his time in Georgia, Grant knew that the men probably were much younger than they looked but that booze and hard living had aged them. They should not be underestimated and he worried that Fitz wouldn’t understand that. Grant could schmooze but Fitz had nothing in common with them.

Grant saw the bartender in the middle of the bar cleaning a glass and talking to a middle-aged man with a shot glass in front of him. He walked over to him and leaned confidently against the counter. “Evening,” he said in Russian. “Two vodkas. Neat. One for me. And one for my friend. Yuri.” Languages always came easy to him and he was pleased that his Russian still sounded so good. He hadn’t had much opportunity to practice since joining Coulson’s team.

The two Georgians looked at each other in amazement. What is going on? The middle-aged
customer immediately downed his shot and got up to face Grant while the bartender headed toward
the back rooms. Hopefully he was going to get Yuri. Suddenly Fitz showed up at Grant’s side.
“Can you ask what beers they have on tap?” he requested. *Now? Can he not see that I’m busy?*
Grant ignored him and noticed that they’d attracted the attention of at least one other customer,
probably more.

“Yuri’s your friend?” the middle-aged man asked in English.

“Yeah,” Grant answered. Fitz nodded confidently as well.

“Yuri’s dead,” the man replied. Grant didn’t move a muscle. He was thinking furiously, analyzing
various hypotheticals. So much depended on how Yuri died and who had replaced him. Grant
couldn’t take on the whole bar, especially with Fitz to protect, so he had to play this smart.
Unfortunately, the man brought out a gun and cocked it. The customer behind Fitz also brought out
a gun. “You have no friends here,” the guy continued. *Uh oh.*

Several other men got up from their chairs and helped the first two drag Grant and Fitz into a
storage room in the back. This clearly was not an unusual event as the rest of the customers
continued to watch the game on the television and barely even seemed to notice. However, Grant
was under no illusion that they would continue being as passive should he start something.

The men tied them to two wooden chairs. They then went over to the hallway so that they could
see the television while keeping an eye on their captives. This was good news as it allowed time for
Grant and Fitz to talk and hopefully figure out how to escape. Grant looked around the room,
expecting to find something to use as a weapon. There were a bunch of chairs stacked on an old
wooden table but he spied nothing helpful. *Damn! If I could just find something to cut the rope, the
noise from the soccer match will cover our escape.* No such luck. They were stuck. Their only
hope was to use the element of surprise to attack their captors once the boss got here.

“What’s happening?” Fitz whispered. “Why haven’t they killed us yet? I mean, I’m glad that they
haven’t killed us yet…”

Grant was actually pleasantly surprised that Fitz wasn’t freaking out. Yet. It was probably only a
matter of time. “They’re waiting for their boss,” he explained calmly. “So before he gets here, we
need a plan.”

Grant didn’t really expect Fitz to come up with any ideas. He didn’t have combat skills and Grant
wasn’t going to risk telling him what his plan was, so all they could do was sit here and wait. Since
they weren’t going anywhere any time soon, he decided to play a spy game with Fitz. Specialists
played variations of this game all the time, kind of a macabre Which Would You Rather. It was
designed as a way to focus their attention on the dark humor of the moment so that they could keep
calm. It also was a method of thinking creatively about possibilities.

“How long can you hold your breath under water?” he asked. South Ossetia was land-locked so
while this was a possibility, it was a remote one.

“I don’t know,” Fitz answered regretfully.

“Are you familiar with the term ‘Slam and Cram’?” Grant asked. The slamming part would be easy
(after all, the chairs were made of wood and should fall apart when enough force was applied) but
the rest of the technique would involve cramming themselves through a small hole to either hide or
escape to the outside. Grant hadn’t seen anything larger than a mouse hole.

“No,” Fitz replied and then, apparently thinking more about it, “and I don’t think I want to be.”
Grant did his best not to smile.

“How attached are you to your pinky?” There was actually no reason at all for this to be important in any escape plan they could hatch right now but he really wanted to see Fitz’s face when he asked.

“Very, very attached,” Fitz said testily (*Totally worth it!*), “and before you ask another terrifyingly vague question, let me be clear: any plan…”

Grant looked over and saw someone coming. “Shh,” he warned but Fitz kept going.

“…that involves any one of those scenarios isn’t going to work for me,” Grant nodded and tried desperately to untie his bonds while Fitz continued, “As a matter of fact, I’ve…” he broke off as a large, middle-aged Russian woman walked around the corner and came towards them. The guy who pulled the gun on them was right behind her. She was clearly the boss.

The woman stopped in front of them. “I heard you were looking for your friend, Yuri,” she told Grant in English. “And Yuri was friends with Separatists. Are you Separatists?” It was clear from the way she said the word Separatists just how she felt about them. Given his last interactions with them before he was pulled out and the reason for their current mission, Grant really couldn’t blame her.

“No,” he replied quickly. “We’re here to stop them.”

“We’re definitely here to stop them,” Fitz added. The woman looked uncertain.

“Trust me,” Grant said. “If you could just help us get across the border,” he stopped as he heard the sound of loud cheering in the front of the bar. Clearly something good had happened in the televised game.

The woman looked annoyed and said to her lackey in Russian, “I’m missing the game!” *Damn!* *That stupid game is really getting in my way.* She turned back to Fitz and Grant and said, “You’re wasting my time. So let me be clear: you’ve given me no reason to trust you.” She exchanged a significant look with her guy who again brought out the gun. The goons behind him did the same. “And trust is everything to me,” she said ominously.

This was obviously his moment. Grant was preparing himself to attack when suddenly the lights went out with a hiss. Disappointed voices came from the front of the bar. While they weren’t speaking in English, it was clear that they were very upset at the interruption of their soccer match. Grant was momentarily thrown off by the disruption in the power and was gearing up to attack again when Fitz spoke up.

“It’s too bad that you’re going to completely miss the rest of the game. If only you had someone who could redirect the electrical grid into a localized connection socket so that power is restored,” he said. Grant turned to look at him in amazement. *What is he doing? We’re not here to fix their tech. This power outage is the best thing we’ve got going for us!*

But the woman seemed interested. “You can fix this?” she asked.

“Well, I can’t do anything about it tied to this chair but, if I could have a look at your fuse box, I probably could get the power back on,” Fitz replied.

The woman nodded to the guy with the gun to untie Fitz who, once free, began rubbing the feeling back into his wrists. Grant swallowed his misgivings and hoped like hell that Fitz had a plan. “If you untie me, I could help him,” he started.
But the boss was no fool. “No,” she said decisively looking him up and down. It couldn’t be clearer that she understood how dangerous Grant was. “You have nothing to offer. You stay tied up. But him? If he can actually restore power, him we can use.”

“Fitz,” Fitz said. “My name is Fitz.” He looked expectantly at her.

She smiled. “Marta.” I can’t believe this is working! Usually these people are all about business and violence. Fitz looked over at her assistant. She lifted her eyebrows and shrugged, the smile still on her face. “Vladimir,” she told Fitz. “What do you need to fix this?”

“I need to go to the place where you have your electronic connections,” Fitz explained. Grant was still skeptical this was going to work but he was out of ideas.

Marta put her arm around Fitz, leading him back to the front of the bar. As she passed the men guarding the door, she paused and looked back at Grant. “Bring him but make sure he stays tied up,” she ordered as she continued walking with Fitz. The two men nodded and went back to collect Grant.

By the time, he made it to the front of the bar, hands still bound behind his back, Fitz was already hard at work. Vladimir was holding Fitz’s feet and was lowering him head first into the small area beneath the floor where the fuse box was. Grant heard Fitz yell out, “OK! Enough! A little to the left, Vladimir. Gentle! Gentle! That’s it. OK.” Grant tried to see what was happening but couldn’t manage to peer over the bar in his way.

“I need a little more light down here, Marta!” Fitz called.

“Of course, misha,” she replied motioning to another one of her men to shine a flashlight in Fitz’s direction. He immediately complied.

“Thank you sweetheart,” Fitz responded. Wow! He has them eating out of his hand. How did that happen?

Grant couldn’t stand it anymore. He had to know. “Little bear?” he asked Marta.

Marta looked annoyed at first. “I like watching him work,” she replied. Then she smiled and Grant realized she’d taken a somewhat maternal interest in Fitz. “The little bear,” she said affectionately. Well, whatever works!

“OK,” Fitz said. It sounded like he was screwing something on. He hit something hard and suddenly the lights and, more importantly, the television came back on. Everyone in the bar except Grant started cheering. He allowed himself a small smile as he watched Vladimir set Fitz back on his feet and begin accepting the adulation of the people.

“It’s nothing,” Fitz said as beamed at them. “Really. I’m just a man.” OK, piling it on a bit thick, aren’t you?

Marta looked on in pride. “Get this man a drink,” she said, motioning to Fitz.

“Oh no,” Fitz replied with his hands on his hips. “Here we go.” A shot glass full of milky looking liquid was put in front of him. Fitz clinked the glass with one of Marta’s men and downed it in one swallow. Grant was impressed. He had no idea that Fitz was such a drinker. “Oh,” he said as he put the glass back on the bar. “Salty.”

Fitz finally glanced at Grant who looked over at Marta with purpose. Thankfully, he immediately understood what he was trying to convey. Fitz turned to look directly at Marta. “So, let’s talk
business.”

It turned out that Marta could get them into a convoy truck that was passing over the border. But there was a price, a big one. Marta refused to listen to Grant and would only deal with Fitz. Again, Grant couldn’t blame her because it couldn’t be more obvious that Fitz had no idea of what he was doing. But he waited until they were actually riding along in the back of the truck to talk to Fitz about it.

“Two million rubles,” Grant said to him disgustedly. SHIELD is going to be unhappy. “We need to work on your negotiation skills.”

Fitz didn’t seem the least bit upset. Grant suspected that he still had no idea of just how much this ride had cost. “I thought they were like pesos.” And that makes it better how? “And anyway, you should be thanking me.” Fitz got out a small piece of equipment and showed it to Grant. “I shorted the fuse box with my localized EMP when we were tied up.”

“Really?” Grant was impressed. He didn’t think Fitz had the ability to remain calm under pressure and here he had gotten them across the border. Yes, it had cost a lot of money but both of them were safe and whole. Fitz had used his skills and natural charm to get them what they wanted. Contrary to his original assumption, Fitz had understood what made the Georgians tick and used it to their advantage. Grant never would have believed that something other than violence would have worked in that situation. Maybe he needed to rethink a few things.

“Yes. And my plan worked. Because we’re over the border now, aren’t we?” Grant watched Fitz calmly put on his hat. He suspected that Fitz was having fun. That was all well and good but they had only accomplished the first part – the easiest part – of the mission. The hardest part was yet to come. The truck came to an abrupt stop, halting his thoughts. “We’re stopping. Why are we stopping?” Fitz asked.

Grant felt a moment of alarm. He could hear men shouting at one another from outside of the truck and that didn’t sound good. Their only advantage right now was that anyone approaching the truck wouldn’t know that he and Fitz were in the back. He put a finger to his lips. “Quiet.” He got up and inched toward the back of the truck. “Stay here. I’ll check it out.”

Fitz calmly remained seated, almost like there was nothing to worry about. However, his demeanor changed quickly when the shooting started. Then he gave an almost violent jerk and shrank back as close to the truck as possible. Grant moved back to where Fitz was.

“OK. Maybe we’ll both stay here.” Grant listened hard, trying to figure out what was going on outside the truck. He thought that they were in trouble, that they’d either been sold out or the contents of the truck were wanted by someone else. Either way, they would have to do something quickly.

“Fitz,” he whispered. “I’m going to need your help. As quietly as you can, get one of those barrels over there. Then, when I tell you, push the barrel out the back.” Grant gave him a level stare. “Can you do that? Quietly?”

Fitz just nodded and got to work. Under cover of gun fire, the two of them positioned several liquid-filled barrels by the opening in the back of the truck. Grant waved Fitz to the side and then got as close as he dared to the opening so that he could see what was going on. When he deemed the guards sufficiently in place, he motioned to Fitz and they shoved the barrels out. Grant then used the surprise of the guards against them as he leaned out of the truck and fired at both barrels. The liquid inside exploded, causing several of the guards to fall backwards.
Unfortunately, one of the guards had been too far forward to be caught in the liquid blast and he kept coming. Grant grabbed his machine gun and slammed it into the guard’s head. He could feel Fitz watching him but didn’t have time to tell him to keep back. Once the guard was down, he turned to tell Fitz to get out when he saw another truck rounding the curve in the road. He heard the words “Get them!” in Russian and knew they had to make a run for it.

“More border patrol!” he shouted at Fitz. But he needn’t have bothered. Fitz had already started running.

“I’m already moving! Hurry up!” Fitz yelled to Grant as he crested the hill. Grant did the only thing he could do: he followed him. The two of them ran as hard as they could for as long as they could, then Fitz stopped and bent over, panting. “I can’t run anymore,” he gasped.

Grant also tried to take deep cleansing breaths. He could have run longer but that didn’t matter. He had to protect Fitz. He also needed to see where they were and how long it would take them to get to the Overkill Device. He looked around quickly.

“There!” he said, pointing at a large tree. “Let’s rest behind that trunk. The border patrol hasn’t gotten any dogs out yet, so we have some time.”

“How do you know they don’t have any dogs?” Fitz asked as they approached the tree. Fitz sank down to the ground in relief as Grant got out his map.

“We’d hear them. Now keep quiet, just in case they have some long-range listening devices.” The two were quiet for several minutes, the only sounds were the birds overhead and Fitz’s heavy breathing. Soon even that quieted down. Grant put away his map.

“OK,” he told Fitz. “We’re going in the right direction but we need to put some distance between us and the border patrol. Can you keep going for a while longer? We don’t have to move as fast, we just need to keep a steady pace.”

Fitz nodded and the two of them set off at a brisk walk. They didn’t talk. The sky was getting dark and Grant was desperately looking around for somewhere they could rest for longer than a few minutes. Although Fitz hadn’t complained, Grant knew that he was getting tired and was unlikely to be able to continue for much longer. Suddenly, he saw what he’d been looking for.

“Drainage pipe,” he said, pointing to a large cylinder. “We’ll wait them out over there.”

“Drainage pipe,” he said, pointing to a large cylinder. “We’ll wait them out over there.”

“Oh, we can’t wait too long.” Fitz replied, panting again. A brisk walk for Grant equaled a slow jog for Fitz and he was barely keeping up. “They use the Overkill Device, everyone on the border is in danger.”

“I’m aware,” Grant said shortly. Really?

“And that includes Marta and Vlad.”

“Ah, you’re on a first-name basis now,” Grant said as he reached the pipe. He stood back and waited for Fitz. In the distance, he could hear men yelling and dogs barking.

Fitz slipped but kept going. “Yeah, well, I’m just saying that their lives are on the line too, so let’s not get too comfortable.” He headed further back into the pipe while Grant settled more toward the opening and drew his pistol. Fitz sat down and leaned back against the pipe with a sigh of relief.

The two of them sat in silence for a while as the sounds of pursuit gradually died off. Maybe we will pull this off after all. He hadn’t been sure that they could evade the border patrol but the lack
of well-trained men probably helped. Once he’d thrown off the dogs by having them wade across a small stream, he was pretty certain that the guards wouldn’t have any idea of where to look for them but with the luck they’d been having, he couldn’t count on it. The drainage pipe had truly been a gift. For the first time in hours, he allowed himself to relax a bit and lean on the side. He thought that Fitz had fallen asleep until he spoke up.

“Why do you think SHIELD sent in just the two of us?” he quietly asked Grant.

“I don’t know. They said they needed a guy like you and a guy like me,” he replied. What does it matter? He knew that Fitz was naïve but surely he understood that SHIELD did any number of incomprehensible things. For example, Grant had been pretty disgusted with the South Ossetian Separatists he was sent to help the last time he was in the region. They’d been brutal to people they’d lived next to for years and for what? Grant didn’t think that depending upon people who would easily turn on former allies was wise but SHIELD was clearly invested. He doubted that he would have been pulled out had several agents not almost lost their lives trying to stop the butchery.

Suddenly he noticed that Fitz was pulling something out of his bag, something that Grant hadn’t told him to pack. It looked suspiciously like a sandwich. Sure enough, Fitz opened the plastic bag and sniffed it. I knew it! That kid never stops eating! We’re going to get killed over a stupid sandwich!

“Is that a sandwich,” he drily asked Fitz.

Fitz looked surprised. “Simmons made it,” he replied. “My favorite: prosciutto and buffalo mozzarella with a hint of pesto aioli.” He pulled the sandwich out of the plastic bag and looked at it with satisfaction.

Grant just looked at him in disgust. Is he kidding me with this? While he was genuinely irritated by the stupidity of the sandwich, he also had to admit to a bit of jealousy over the fact that Simmons not only knew what Fitz’s favorite sandwich was but she even made it for him. No one had ever done something like that for Grant. And, come to think of it, he had no idea of what his favorite sandwich would be even if there was someone who would be willing to make it.

Fitz handed the sandwich to Grant and said, “Here, you can have half.”

Grant grabbed the sandwich and threw it into the water outside of the pipe. Fitz’s mouth dropped open and he looked absolutely stunned. If Grant hadn’t been so annoyed with him, he would have found his expression humorous.


“There are dogs tracking us,” Grant said in a low voice, pointing in the direction they’d last heard the dogs. “And you bring a prosciutto sandwich!”

The danger they were in didn’t seem to register with Fitz. His mouth was still open in disbelief. “I don’t believe you just did that,” he whispered, continuing to stare at the lost sandwich.

Grant leaned forward to get his attention. “This is a mission, not a picnic!” he hissed.

“I’m well aware it’s not a picnic, Mr. Save the Day,” Fitz replied angrily.

Grant looked confused. “What’s that supposed to mean?” he asked.

“Oh, come on. You obviously get off on being the guy who always gets to throw the last punch.
Who always swoops in to save the girl.” Ah, this is about Simmons. He’s mad that I jumped instead of him. Grant shook his head. This is not the time! “Now you’ve destroyed the world’s most dangerous sandwich,” he said in a somewhat whiny tone. “Congratulations.” He sat back with a pouty look.

Grant heard the sound of voices and dogs in the distance and he sat up a bit to listen. Fitz, who clearly hadn’t heard anything, continued on, “Well, I’ll tell you something. I don’t need to be rescued by anyone, Grant Ward…” His voice trailed off as Grant put one hand over his mouth and raised a finger to his lips.

At first Fitz seemed to think that Grant was trying to bully him into being quiet and he grabbed his arm, as if to throw it off of him. However, he quickly became aware of the new sounds and stopped struggling. Then, when Grant moved his finger from his lips to point upwards and relaxed his posture a bit, Fitz petulantly shoved his hand off of his face. The two sat in silence for a moment as the barks and voices seemed to fade.

As soon as it got quieter, Fitz leaned forward to continue the argument. “Yeah, and another thing…” he said in a quiet whisper.

“Listen!” Grant hissed as he sat up to meet him. He was tired of this. Fitz slowly sat back, still looking angry. “Before we left, Coulson told me to take care of you.” He pointed his finger and jabbed it at Fitz to emphasize his point. “That is what I am doing. Nothing more, nothing less.” He sat back and aggressively unzipped a jacket pocket. He reached in and yanked out a protein bar. “Here,” he said, handing it to Fitz. “If you’re hungry, eat this.”

Fitz still looked sulky as he yanked it out of Grant’s hand and examined it. “It’s odorless,” Grant told him as he opened the packet. Fitz made a face but he ate it.

They stayed in the drainage pipe for another few hours until Grant decided that, if they were going to meet the truck that would take them to the military compound, then they needed to head out. Fitz wasn’t happy about walking in the dark but he knew that Grant was right.

The two trudged along in silence until, with the beginnings of dawn, they arrived at their destination. Grant wouldn’t let them lie down in the Mag Pouch – the pouch that would disguise them until they could hook onto the underbelly of the truck – until he deemed it close to time. With as tired as they both were, he was afraid they’d fall asleep if they laid there too long. They unrolled the pouch and climbed inside it. The sunlight was now so strong that it was difficult to keep their eyes open.

“Good day to be a rat,” Fitz said. Grant rolled his eyes. He knew where this was going. Fitz had been pouting about the damn sandwich all morning long. “I mean, there you are, minding your own business, spreading filth and disease, scavenging for grub worms or rotten fruit, when lo and behold, you see it. A prosciutto and buffalo mozzarella sandwich.”

“Fitz,” Grant warned. When they got back to the Bus, Grant was going to kill him. Slowly. While eating a prosciutto and buffalo mozzarella sandwich.

“With just a hint of pesto aioli,” Fitz finished.

“Quiet.” The two of them laid in sullen silence for about 30 seconds. Then Grant asked, “Feel that?” Fitz turned his head to look at him. “The truck!” Grant whispered in exasperation. How can he be so dense? “It’s coming. Zip up the Mag Pouch.”

They zipped up and became close to invisible. The truck driver didn’t notice anything and drove
right over them. Grant clipped onto the truck and the two of them rode the rest of the way into the compound. *At least something has finally gone right!* When the truck stopped, Grant and Fitz rolled out from underneath it. They ran and hid beside another huge truck.

Grant looked cautiously around it and saw that the coast was clear. “OK, go! Go! Go!” he whispered urgently to Fitz. The two of them ran to the building that housed the Overkill Device. As Fitz unloaded his equipment, Grant said, “I’ll signal Extraction.”

“OK,” Fitz replied as he took out a long, thin cylinder. “Simmons calls it the magic window,” he explained to Grant. “You’ve probably guessed, ‘Is that X-Ray technology?’” Fitz continued to blather on about tech stuff as Grant used his flashlight to send hand signals to what he assumed would be a waiting team. He sent the signal several times but, after failing to receive an answering signal, he realized that no one was there to extract them. *Damn!* He would have expected this from Hydra but not SHIELD. Well, they would just have to complete their mission and he would worry about how to save Fitz later.

Fitz unrolled the Window and Grant could see that there were only two guards in the building. Without saying anything to Fitz, he quickly went inside and took them out. *Typical untrained men. No problem.* Grant went back to the outside door, opened it, and told Fitz, “Hurry. Inside.”

The two of them walked through a rusty corridor and came upon a wicked looking device that kind of looked like a huge starfish with extra spokes. “This must be it,” Grant said to Fitz. They walked up to it slowly and examined it for a second. Grant looked at Fitz.

“Weird,” Fitz said. *Hmm….not what I expected him to say.* Fitz knocked on a knob and then tried to peer inside of it. “Core must be inside here. That’s what’s important. The piping around it just serves to amplify and direct the sound to trigger munitions from a distance.” Fitz started to unpack some of his equipment.

Grant continued to stare at the device. “It doesn’t look like it could take a jet out of the sky,” he said in disbelief.

“Well, you should know by now Agent Ward that looks can be deceiving,” Fitz replied while using an electric screwdriver to open some of the screws holding the core container.

Grant shook his head. He could have bet money that Fitz was going to say that. He’d probably waited a long time for the right opportunity. But, he was correct. Grant had underestimated Fitz and, if they actually pulled off this mission, it would be largely because of his contributions.

Fitz finished his unscrewing and the two of them lifted the heavy core container off the device and onto the ground. Fitz stared in awe at the core. To Grant, it looked like a miniature replica of the outer device.

“This is going to take a while,” Fitz said.

Grant looked at him in disbelief. “You have 10 minutes,” he told him.

“I thought you’d say five,” Fitz replied as he set the timer on his watch. Then he got to work.

Grant alternated between keeping an eye on the time and listening for guards to show up. He was antsy. He knew that they didn’t have much time and he still didn’t know how he was going to get Fitz out of there safely. After about eight minutes had passed, he spoke up.

“All right,” he told Fitz while staring at the core. “Show me the final steps to disable this thing. I’ll get it done.”
“No. We stick to the extraction plan. I’ll be done in a minute,” Fitz said without even looking at him. He sounded irritated.

Grant closed his eyes and shook his head. Fitz’s naïveté was simply amazing. He didn’t think he’d ever met someone who was so smart yet so clueless. “The extraction plan’s a bust.”

Fitz turned his head to look at Grant in surprise. “What?”

“Ex-fil team didn’t make contact. Once you take that thing apart and I set off the remote beacon, we’re on our own. You should go.” He had to go. There was no way that Grant could get him safely out of there once the Separatists were alerted to their presence. All of this felt so familiar: a no-win situation, a brother who needed his protection, his willingness to do whatever it took even at the cost of his own well-being.

But then Fitz went off-script. He turned back to the core and kept working. “I’m not leaving,” he said stubbornly.

“Fitz,” Grant said as he grabbed his hand to get him to stop working and look at him directly. “There’s no time to argue.”

“Woah, woah.” What is his problem? Grant was confused. He was just doing what he always did for younger brothers, biological and otherwise. He would fight so they didn’t have to, so that they would remain safe. After all, their safety was paramount. Fitz still wasn’t looking at him but Grant continued talking to him as if he was. “You don’t have anything to prove. What you said about me always needing to swoop in, I know you would have jumped out of the plane to save Simmons. And she knows that too.”

Fitz finally turned to look at him. “I’m not trying to prove anything to anyone,” he told him. “Before we left, you’re not the only one that Coulson talked to, okay? He told me to take care of you too. And that’s exactly what I’m going to do. I’m not going anywhere. You understand?” He waited until Grant nodded and then turned back to work on the device.

Grant was speechless. Coulson told him to look after me? And Fitz was determined to do it? He was stunned. No one had ever looked after Grant, not really. Sure, he’d had nannies and other paid professionals who took care of his basic needs but no one had ever protected him, especially at great risk to themselves. No, Grant had always been the protector, the one everyone turned to in crisis. In fact, that’s what the name Grant Ward meant: Great Guard. He could get the job done, never mind the personal cost. And that’s what he’d believed the team expected of him: that he would protect them. Wasn’t that why he was chosen?

Yet Coulson told Fitz to look after Grant. And Fitz wanted to do it. Maybe all his wishing had come true. Maybe they did really care about him. And maybe being part of a team meant that he
didn’t always have to swoop in and get the last punch. Maybe it meant appreciating how everyone’s skills were necessary, that they all were pieces solving the puzzle.

Grant was aware that he continued to look stupidly at Fitz as he put everything together. Fitz noticed but, in typical Fitz fashion, didn’t make a big deal of it. “And I’m bloody starving,” he said. Again with the sandwich! But this time, Grant wasn’t annoyed. He finally understood what Fitz had been trying to say.

But he couldn’t just give up on protecting his little brother. Despite Fitz’s pronouncement, he wanted to get him back to Jemma safely. So, Grant remained silent until the last wire was about to be disconnected. “Ah ah. Last chance, Fitz. Are you sure you don’t want a head start?” Even as he said it, he could tell that his attempt would be futile. A stubborn mule had nothing on Fitz’s expression. But he still had to try. “Because the second you pull that final wire…”

Fitz completely ignored Grant and almost aggressively pulled the final wire. The Overkill Device powered down with a distinct whine. “Your turn,” he told Grant grimly.

Grant pulled out his remote and pushed it, activating the beacon. Fitz turned back to the core. What is he doing? “Ok Fitz, let’s go. We need to slip out of here before they notice the device is powered down.”

Fitz pulled out the center mechanism in the core. His triumphant “Got it!” was drowned out by an alarm going off. Both he and Grant said simultaneously, “We need a new plan.” They looked at each other for a moment, then Fitz handed the Overkill Device core to Grant. “I think I can rewire this so that it can be used as a weapon. If you can just hold this…” he said as he started to realign wires.

“What do you know?” Grant asked him. He doubted it, especially since Fitz hadn’t had a lot of time to really think about it. But if anyone could do it, Fitz could.

“Yes!” Grant actually felt a moment of hope before Fitz continued, “Theoretically.” He then closed his eyes and shook his head. Nerds. If Grant never heard the word ‘theoretically’ ever again, it would be too soon. Fitz sped up his movements as they heard sounds outside. “OK, finished.”

Suddenly, there was an explosion. Fitz crouched down close to the ground and even Grant ducked. Since nothing seemed to be damaged inside the building, Fitz stood back up. “What was that?” he asked.

Grant could hear the Separatists yelling in Russian. “SHIELD. They’ve started their attack which means we don’t have much time before they crush the compound.” He could see several Separatist guards running into the building. They’d figured out that their big weapon was not working and they were all converging on Grant’s position. He could possibly take them all on himself (they were unlikely to be well-trained) but not as long as they had their weapons.

He pointed to a balcony over their heads. “Get up there and take out as many of their weapons as you can with that thing,” he instructed. Fitz climbed and got into position as the Separatists advanced.

Grant looked up. “Fitz!” he yelled in desperation. He was certain that they were seconds away from gunning him down.

Fitz fired his jury-rigged weapon and, as he predicted, their guns short-circuited and grew hot. The guards quickly threw them on the ground. What do you know? Using only a metal pipe, a chain and his fists, Grant took out five men but the sixth one caught him off guard and slammed him into the
metal staircase right below Fitz. Grant had been punched several times when a boot came down on his opponent’s head and the guy fell to the ground, unconscious.

Fitz climbed the rest of the way down the stairs and joined Grant to look in amazement at the man on the ground. *Who knew he had that in him?* “I just did that,” Fitz said in a stunned voice.

“Yeah,” Grant replied after he found his voice.

Fitz tapped him twice on the chest. “OK. Let’s go,” he said breathlessly.

The two of them ran out of the building only to be caught short by an advancing wall of what looked to be 30 men with guns. Jeeps were pulling up, several aircraft were buzzing over and explosions were going off all around them. Grant didn’t see any way out of this.

“They said they needed a guy like you and a guy like me, right?” Fitz asked Grant.

Grant nodded. “Right.” *And they were right because we completed the mission. For all the good that’ll do us.* He looked despairingly at Fitz. *I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you!*

Suddenly, a big cloud descended over them and they both turned around. “It’s the extraction team!” Fitz said hopefully as they watched a large plane come into view.

Grant smiled. “Better,” he told him. “It’s the Cavalry.” They both could see May nodding at them. “Never get tired of seeing that,” Grant said with an even bigger smile.

May turned the plane’s engines full-tilt on the Separatists and they all fell down, unable to stand against the gale-force winds. In the ensuing chaos, the Bus’ ramp came down and Fitz and Grant ran into the plane. May wasted no time in getting out of there and soon the plane was heading back to the United States.

Shortly after they reached cruising altitude, Coulson walked down the stairs and came over to shake Grant’s hand. “Thanks for coming to get us, Sir,” Grant said. *Thanks for caring about me.*

“We take care of our own,” Coulson replied looking directly at him. Grant gave a small smile back. *We sure do.* Then Coulson shook Fitz’s hand and left.

Fitz took off his backpack and dropped it abruptly on the floor of the cargo hold. He went over to meet Jemma who had come out of the lab. Grant frowned at Fitz’s disregard for his equipment and his general messiness. He bent down to take it off of the floor.

“Well done, Fitz,” Jemma said in a calm voice that was fooling no one. “So glad you’re all right.”

As Grant straightened up with Fitz’s backpack, he happened to glance up at the top of the staircase. There was May looking down at him in approval. At least, he took her extremely small smile as evidence of being pleased that they were unharmed. Per usual though, she said nothing and walked away.

“Yep,” Fitz said to Jemma. “Good to see you too.” *Can the two of them be any more awkward?*

Jemma looked like she was struggling to find something to say. “Oh!” she said, a lightbulb clearly going off in her brain. “The sandwich. How was it?” Fitz remained silent and her face fell. “Too much aioli?” she asked tentatively.

Grant held his breath. There would be hell to pay if Fitz told her what really happened but he wasn’t truly worried. He felt like he’d gotten a sense of who Fitz was on this mission. So, he
wasn’t surprised when Fitz looked straight at her and replied, “It was delicious.” Jemma beamed back at him.

He was still watching Fitz and Jemma when Skye walked over to him with a smirky grin on her face. She punched him lightly in the shoulder. Grant glanced down where she had hit him and then back at her with an annoyed expression. But he wasn’t really annoyed. It was only fitting. Everyone else on the team had checked in with their usual expressions of support, so Skye also had to weigh in. If anything, he was shocked that it had taken her this long.

“You know, for a second there, I thought I’d have to find a new Supervising Officer,” she told him, her arms crossed but standing fairly close to him. Of course she’d take the professional route. He knew that her walls were still so strong that she couldn’t let him know that she had been worried about him on a personal level. He hoped that she would get there one day.

“Sorry to disappoint,” he replied with a small smile. “The truth is,” he said as he watched Fitz unpack some things in the lab with Jemma, “I was in good hands.”

Skye smiled at him as he walked away and gave Fitz a manly nod. Fitz happily nodded back. And Grant had been in good hands. In fact, he still was. More than ever, this mission proved to him that regardless of the organization he worked for – SHIELD or Hydra – it was this team that meant the most to him. And he would do anything to protect that.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, this was a mammoth chapter! I didn't mean for it to be this long. In fact, I pretty much thought it would be a throw-away chapter but then I realized the richness of the character development for Grant. Plus, I always liked this episode because it was quite funny. Grant and Fitz together can be comedy gold. So, I hope you enjoy it and your eyes don't get too tired from reading!
After a while, Grant put the plane on autopilot and the two of them went back into the bowels of the Bus. There, he started spray painting the SHIELD emblem off of the SUV while Skye was in the lab doing something with the hard drive. Grant stopped what he was doing for a moment as he looked over at Skye and smiled. He was remembering their make-out session.

Skye saw him watching her and smiled back. Although he didn’t want to admit it, Grant could tell that something was very wrong with her. He internally shrugged. At this point, he needed to focus on getting the data off the hard drive and returning Skye back to the team. He could worry about her feelings and their status as a couple later. There wasn’t much he could do now anyway. Still, her off behavior made him edgy.

Grant looked up as Skye stopped working on the computer and started hunting through one of the cabinets in the lab. What is she looking for? He walked over to where she was and stood close to her. “Fitz keeps the candy under his bunk,” he told her with a smile when she whirled around at the sound of his voice. Why is she so jumpy? “What are you up to?”

“Hey! I’m just looking for the sat phone.” There was that weird smile again. She leaned back against counter, looking incredibly tense despite her pleasant expression. “To call the team. Make sure everyone’s all right. No one’s blown up.” He noted that Skye sounded breathless.

“Oh, I’ve got the phone. I just talked to Coulson a little while ago,” he told her. The lie came easily to him, just like lies always had. Sometimes he hated himself for that and wondered if he ever would be good at telling the truth.

“You did?”

“Yeah, sorry. Should’ve told ya.” This felt strange, off somehow. When they were in Koenig’s office, it was as if they were completely in sync with each other. The atmosphere was one of excitement and sexual tension, not this strain. Now it was like they were saying one thing on the surface while having a whole other conversation underneath. He didn’t like feeling like this with Skye but he shook it off. Focus!

“The sooner we can rendezvous with the team,” Skye finished for him.

Exactly.” Skye left the cabinet and went back to her computer. Grant’s instincts kicked in and he examined the cabinet quickly. She was looking for something and it wasn’t candy or a sat phone. He looked at Skye and saw the telltale bulge of a gun in her waistband. This was not going well. He felt certain that he wasn’t the only one playing a role.

“Seemed like a smart play at the time, geo-locking the drive. Didn’t think it’d backfire on us,” she commented.

That sealed it. She knew. If Skye hadn’t been suspicious of him, if this was just a Bus ride to unlock the drive, she wouldn’t think that something had gone wrong. His mind quickly went back over what could have happened and he realized that he’d underestimated her. She obviously had discovered Koenig’s unconscious body and assumed the worst. She’d been playing him from the moment they left Koenig’s office. Grant felt sick but knew he had to play along, at least until he could figure out what to do from here.
“It hasn’t backfired. The drive’s supposed to be impossible to crack.” Grant looked at her then backed off and leaned on the other table. “Pretty specific coordinates though. You could’ve picked anywhere in the world. Why a random diner in LA?” Is that where you want the team to meet you and take me down?

Skye stopped typing and turned to face him, an easy smile on her face. “It’s already built into my encryption. Never changed it. But it’s fitting. It’s where I met Mike Peterson. It’s where this whole SHIELD roller coaster started. Plus, tactically, what do you look for in a drop site?”

“Public place. Lots of people. Multiple exits.” The answers just rolled off his tongue from years of practice answering Garrett’s numerous questions. He hated that too.

“Yes. Figured if I ever got into trouble, I’d be safe there.” His feelings of nausea intensified as he realized that Skye was scared of him. He had never wanted that. Never. But he still had a role to play, still had goals to achieve if Hydra was going to be destroyed.

“Oh, you’ll be plenty safe,” Grant said as he moved towards her. He didn’t miss Skye’s flash of panic at his approach. He reached behind her to grab the gun in her waistband. “This, however,” he said as he showed her the gun, “is not the answer.” Grant dismantled the gun and Skye’s expression became grim. Grant returned to the table.

“What’s the matter? A girl can’t defend herself?” She crossed her arms, looking a bit defiant. Grant felt a small flicker of panic. He needed her to unlock the hard drive and let him return to Garrett. If she refused, he didn’t know what would happen but he knew that it wouldn’t be good and he might not be able to protect her. He had to keep up the ruse.

“In this situation, the last thing we can afford is to get pinched on a concealed weapons charge,” he told her calmly. Please, think about being a fugitive, something other than me!

“You’re right,” Skye said lightly, completely unlike herself. She smiled that same fake smile. “Again.” Grant hated that she was trying to work him and thought that flattering him was the way to go. I’m not that stereotypical, am I? “Couldn’t find any rounds anyway,” she continued with body language that screamed discomfort.

“Hey. We are going to be OK.” He got up from the table, wanting to see what she’d do with his close proximity and affectionate behavior. “I promise until this thing is over, I’m not going to let you out of my sight,” he said with a direct stare. He hoped that she wasn’t so hostile towards him that she wouldn’t take some measure of comfort from him trying to keep her safe but that hope was quickly dispelled. Skye smiled faintly and when he pulled her in for a hug, he could feel the reluctance in her. She didn’t want to be close to him at all. Damn!

Grant held Skye close and squeezed her just a little before kissing her on the head and backing off. Somehow he knew that he wouldn’t get the chance to touch her affectionately again for a while. He looked at her seriously, trying to communicate everything in that glance but he could tell it wasn’t working. If only he could confide in her, let her know that there were things he had to do to take down Hydra but that he really was working on the side of the angels this time. But he couldn’t, not yet. He also couldn’t leave her alone. Skye was clever and could cause a lot of trouble if left unattended.

The proximity bell rang. “We’re getting close to our destination. Why don’t you come back to the cockpit with me as we land? That way I can be sure that you’re safe,” he told her. He knew that the safety factor would swing things in his favor because she could hardly dispute it.
Just as he expected, Skye gave him that fake smile and said, “Sure! I’ve never been up there for a landing. Might as well cross take-off and landing in the cockpit from my bucket list all at once.”

He laughed and took her hand as they walked back up to the cockpit. The handholding had been nice back in Providence when he’d thought she was enjoying it too. Now it felt like the manipulation it was and he hated it. But he couldn’t let her suspect that he knew how she felt because then a lot of unnecessary unpleasantness could ensue and he didn’t want that. Hell, he didn’t have time for that. They were pushing the limits of Garrett’s patience as it was.

They made idle chitchat about the Bus, flying planes and LA while Grant landed the plane and hailed a taxi. Making meaningless conversation while analyzing strategic variables was second nature to him but all of this came at a cost. He never thought he’d had to play Skye or that he wouldn’t enjoy her company. At the moment, he hated both SHIELD and Hydra with the heat of a thousand suns. *When do I ever get what I want?*

The taxi let them out and they walked around a corner. “I can’t remember the last time I sat in a restaurant,” Skye said as she looked back at Grant.

He was looking around suspiciously. *Is that Mike Peterson in that alley?* His heart sank as he realized it was. He knew that Garrett had tasked Mike with shadowing him ever since – hoping to buy some time – he had sent a message letting him know where they were headed. This didn’t bode well. He had to keep Skye on task and then he’d just send her on her way.

“I know,” he replied, getting his head back in the game. “It’s been tubes, tunnels and plane food.” Wasn’t that the truth?

“Maybe I will get pie for dessert,” Skye said as she continued briskly walking down the street. *What? No! We don’t have time for that!*

“Dessert? I was hoping we’d be done by the time I finished coffee.” Grant looked over at her, wondering if she was stalling. *What’s your plan, Skye?*

“Do you have any idea how long it will take to decrypt this drive?” Skye replied, looking back at him.

“For you? I figured 10 minutes,” he said, hoping that flattery would help speed things up.

“Not even close. The GPS will take a hot second to calibrate but I’m working on a laptop, so even at three cycles per byte, there are still terabytes of data…”

Grant realized that he had no way of determining whether she was indeed stalling. Skye was the computer expert, not him, and she could spin technobabble all day long and he’d never notice the difference. This irritated him, so he snapped, “Spare me the details. Give me the timeframe.”

“An hour would be a miracle,” she replied.

“Coulson needs this yesterday,” he said, thinking that maybe the thought of Coulson would spur her along. But even as he said it, he knew he was grasping at straws. Skye would do what she was going to do. He would just have to figure out her plan before she could implement it. Skye stopped walking and faced him.

“My laptop’s not a time machine, Ward. That’s the science.”

He sighed. “Guess we’re having dessert,” he said as he held open the diner door for her. He just hoped Mike was on radio silence with Garrett and would be patient.
The two of them entered the diner and chose an empty booth right by the window in full view of the exit. Skye immediately got out her computer and began typing. Grant checked out the diner, noting the exits and the customers, memorized their location on the street and what was around them and then began to get bored. He observed Skye at work and began to get fascinated by her absorption and obvious knowledge.

“You’re staring again,” she told him in an irritated tone.

“I’m not allowed to do that?”

“I told you, it’s a complicated hack,” she said as she swung her laptop around for him to examine. Grant bent forward to look even though he knew it would be incomprehensible to him. At this point, he mainly just wanted to humor her. He sighed.

“Um…” he said trying to think of something clever to say. He looked over at her and saw her annoyance. Maybe flattery? “You’ve mistaken my admiration for impatience,” he said with a little smile, one he knew she usually responded to. He would have liked to admit that he was actually feeling both things.

Skye wasn’t buying. “No, it’s impatience,” she retorted as she turned the laptop back around to her side of the booth.

“OK. Sorry. Didn’t mean to stress you out,” he said, trying to keep as close to the truth as possible. Clearly Skye’s bullshit radar was on full blast.

“Maybe you should duck outside. Try again on the sat phone just to make sure,” she replied.

Grant shook his head. “No.” Is this your big plan, Skye? Get rid of me and duck out the back? Didn’t I teach you better than that?

“We stick together. We stick to the plan. The sooner you decrypt this hard drive…”

“The sooner we get to them,” she finished. No, the sooner I can let you go and get back to my mission. And the sooner I finish that, the sooner we can be an us again.

Skye smiled a fake smile. “I heard you twice the first time,” she bit out.

He smiled, amused. Although he hated that they were at odds, Grant had to admit that he found her clear irritation with him much better – even sexier – than her attempt to play the hapless female before. Skye always could hold her own with him and he loved that about her. He’d been around too many women who were intimidated by him not to appreciate one who wasn’t. He watched as Skye tapped at her computer. She glanced over at him, saw that he was watching her, and grew very still, like a trapped animal. It would be a mistake not to acknowledge this.

“Are you all right?” he asked. He reached over and put his hand on top of hers. There was no real reason for this; he just wanted to touch her and knew that the amount of times he could were dwindling. “You look nervous,” he told her, wanting to help. Grant was desperate to tell her that she didn’t need to be afraid of him, that they actually were on the same team, but he couldn’t. He’d done a lot of horrible things during his career as a spy but hiding things from Skye, acting as her enemy, ranked among the worst. His stomach was in knots.

Skye appeared to be getting more belligerent by the minute. “How can you tell, SuperSpy?” she asked, looking at him coldly. At least she didn’t physically remove his hand.

Here was yet another list of answers to roll off of his tongue. “Keeping unnaturally still to keep from fidgeting, maintaining eye contact to give the impression of confidence.” He kept his hand on
hers and gave her a sexy smile, hoping to relax her. “What’s wrong?” This would go so much better if she would just calm down.

Skye stopped working on her computer and looked at Grant. “The last time I was in this booth, I was sitting across from Mike Peterson,” she said intensely. Grant removed his hand from hers. She was going somewhere with this. “A good man,” she continued, “and now he’s a murderer.” Grant started rubbing his lip, a habit he was trying to break because it telegraphed when he was upset. *This is what she thinks of me now, that I’m a murderer.* “And we are FBI’s Most Wanted. It’s just like any moment, something could go horribly wrong,” Skye finished.

“How much longer?” he asked in a low, calm voice meant to soothe. “You’re doing great.”

“Hiding what I’m thinking and feeling,” Skye said as she leaned forward. “It doesn’t come as easy for me as it does for you.” Grant could tell that she was pretending that this was about them being hunted by the FBI but she was really telling him that she hated the pretense between them. If only she knew how much he hated it too. And what he wouldn’t give to be able to live without having to hide. He sat back, annoyed.

“Relax,” he said, his expression grim.

Skye sighed heavily. “Yeah. I guess it does.”

The door opened and Grant looked up to see two uniformed police officers come in. *This can’t be good.* He grabbed one of the menus from their table and pretended to look it over. He waved the waitress over. “We’d like two cups of coffee, please,” he told her. Skye wisely said nothing but smiled sweetly. He was grateful for that at least. Skye returned to her laptop.

Grant was beginning to suspect that she was indeed stalling. Her hour was long past and he couldn’t afford to waste any more time but he didn’t know how to hurry her along. He was at her mercy. The waitress set both cups of coffee on the table and Grant decided Skye nudge her along. Even if it meant that he forced her to spring whatever plan she thought was a good one, at least this interminable waiting would be over. He sighed, wishing for the millionth time that their time together could have been pleasant, one that befitted people who cared for each other.

“How much longer?” he asked Skye.

She didn’t even look up from the computer screen. “Half hour.”

“You said that half an hour ago,” he replied.

Skye picked up her coffee and drank. He sensed one of the police officers looking over at him and glanced his way. “Weren’t you the one who told me to relax?” Skye asked him nonchalantly.

Grant casually put up his hand to hide his face. “Those cops over there keep looking at us.”

Skye just as casually glanced over at them. “They’re just checking out the waitress,” she told Grant with a little smile. “They don’t know you’re pretending to be someone you’re not.”

*You have no idea, Skye. Best espionage scores since Romanoff, remember?* He chuckled a little. “Yeah? All right,” he said lifting his own drink to take a sip. “Who am I pretending to be?”

Skye gave him what, under other circumstances, would have been a flirty grin. “My impatient boyfriend,” she said.

“I like that cover,” Grant said quickly. And he did. He imagined how much fun they could have
going undercover as lovers together. OK, scratch that. How much fun could they have being lovers? He glanced out of the window and was disturbed to see a cop car drive by. This could be Skye’s plan, to have the police apprehend them, but he didn’t see how she could have set it up. And, if this was the plan, it was a bad one. He was disappointed that she seemed to have so little confidence in his skills.

Skye leaned towards him. “What’s the longest you’ve been undercover, like deep undercover?”

“Uh…” Grant looked over at the cops again. Sure enough, they were staring at them but quickly looked away when they saw him looking in their direction. He wanted to sigh. This was going to get ugly quickly and he hoped Mike wouldn’t intervene. “Uh, 16 months,” he answered.

“When was that?” Skye asked in an interested tone. This isn’t a good plan, Skye!

“Mm…about five years outside of the Academy,” he answered distractedly. Then he thought about what she was asking. “I posed as a Russian attaché at the Embassy in Warsaw.”

“That’s got to be so hard, living a double life like that. Getting close to people only to turn on them,” Skye said looking him straight in the eyes.

He knew where she was going with this and it both irritated him and made him nervous. She thought that she was so slick, that he – an incredible undercover agent for not one but two spy agencies – wouldn’t catch on to her, a rookie. Skye thought she was shaming him by talking about how he turned people’s trust of him on their heads. She didn’t know anything. Yes, the assignment in Warsaw had been difficult. He’d had to pretend to get close to people, always on the alert, careful to observe any signs of mistrust. He’d also had to spend many night secretly copying documents, tailing suspects, meeting with informants and making drop sites. It had been extremely stressful because he could never let down his guard, truly confide in anyone or make permanent plans for the future. She had no idea of what it meant to be a spy. She thought that her brilliant plan would get her out of danger when it actually would do the opposite.

She scoffed and said, almost as a throw-away, “I don’t know how Garrett did it.”

Wait, what? The mention of Garrett totally threw him because he didn’t know what she meant. Surely she couldn’t know that he was alive or that he had been the one to recruit and train Grant. He desperately wanted to halt this conversation but he had to know where she was going with this. After all, if things went badly and Skye ended up in Garrett’s hands, any knowledge of him would prove dangerous.

“Garrett?” he asked, trying to play it calm. He knew he sounded tense though.

“Think about all that time he spent as your SO,” she began. Ah. That. He relaxed a bit only to tense up again as she continued. “Getting to know you. Being your mentor. Only to lie to your face. Betray you like that.”

He tried to comfort himself with the thought that she didn’t know what she was talking about. She had no idea the damage Garrett had wrought upon him and no clue what Grant’s agenda was now. But the idea that Skye believed him capable of betraying her still stung. She didn’t realize that he would do anything, anything, to keep her safe. She clearly didn’t know who he truly was and he was beginning to doubt that she ever would. He looked down to hide his distress.

“It was, uh, difficult to accept,” he acknowledged. Was that ever the truth! She had no conception of how difficult it had been for Grant to accept that he had been manipulated, brainwashed and betrayed by John on a daily level for years. She couldn’t know the hours of therapy it had taken
him to overcome the feelings of anger, shame, sadness and fear that his acceptance of this had brought. And she couldn’t even imagine the effort it took for him not to show his anger and disgust to John whenever he was in the same room with him now. “But thankfully, that’s over,” he lied. He so badly wanted it to be over. Would it ever be?

Skye nodded. “Because you took care of him.” Her gaze never wavered from Grant’s face.

Grant hesitated. His desire to let Skye know that he did indeed plan to take care of Garrett, to forever rid the world of John and his cruelty, was almost overwhelming. He even took a breath, intending to tell her, but remembered his mission and what he needed to do. To cover this, he took a quick glance around, hoping she’d believe that he was nervous about the police presence.

“How can we not discuss this right now?” he asked.

But he could tell that he was wasting his breath. Skye was clearly on a mission to make him feel bad. Of course. He should have known. Nothing ever worked out well for him and now he’d have to sit here and take her not-so-subtle abuse before erupting into violence to save both her and SHIELD.

“If you had one more moment before you shot him in the back of the head so heroically. If he was sitting right here and you could say anything you want, what would you say?” Skye almost looked as if she were enjoying taunting him.

Grant reminded himself that she was scared and that what she thought she knew was wrong but it didn’t help all that much. He was barely keeping it together and she was probing at sore spots. What would he say to Garrett? How long did he have? Would he run down the litany of abuses that he’d showered on Grant or would he just inform Garrett that he was no longer his puppet before he killed him? There was still a part of him that wanted to hear that John was proud of him, that he did all of this because he cared, that he never meant to hurt Grant. Would he throw that into the mix? He honestly didn’t know and just thinking about him was making him feel bad. He was really rubbing his lip now. Soon it would be raw. This needed to stop.

“Skye,” he said. But she was on a roll and refused to let him interrupt her.

“Would you say he’s disgusting? Would you tell him he’s a disgusting, backstabbing traitor? Or to rot in hell?”

“What are you doing?” he asked her.

“I’m just trying to have an honest conversation for once,” she replied, bitterness almost oozing out of her pores.

Grant understood that she was hurt but there was nothing he could do for it right now. All he could do is hope like hell that she had decrypted the hard drive, take that and leave her in the diner in safety. She would be fine. If he knew Skye, she would’ve left a message for the team in Providence and they’d soon be on their way to come get her. He heard the police officers asking people to leave the building. Uh oh, show time. He had been hoping to avoid this.

“They’re starting to clear people out. We should go,” he said as he started to get up.

But Skye wouldn’t budge. Clearly she had reached her limit. “No. I think I’m good here,” she told him, not even glancing up from her screen.

He sat back down. He couldn’t leave her like this. “Skye. We’ve been made. Come on.”
She looked at him. “No,” she said turning her laptop around for him to see. There was his picture with a Wanted Fugitive label across the bottom. *So that’s how she did it. Do I really look that desperate?* But there was no time to contemplate the finer points of his appearance; they had to get out of there. “I tipped them off,” she said. *Yeah, no kidding. “Hail Hydra,”* she finished resentfully.

It was too much. He couldn’t let her continue to believe this about him. It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her that he wasn’t Hydra when the police decided to make their move. Several officers poured into the diner at once and the two in the lead pulled their guns out and pointed it at them. “You two! Show me your hands! Now! Get em up! Out of the booth, nice and slow.”

If he’d had time, Grant would’ve sighed. This was going to be so messy and time-consuming. He wished this hadn’t been necessary but Skye had forced his hand. He realized that he was angry at her even though he knew it wasn’t her fault. He watched her put her hands and immediately slide out of the booth to stand in front of the officers. Grant slowly did the same.

“All right! Turn around! Hands on your head!” one of the officers said. Grant almost felt sorry for him. It was clear that he was panicky and had no idea what he was in for. Even multiple officers were no match for Agent Ward. His only obstacle was making sure that Skye didn’t get hurt while he was taking care of them.

Skye did seem to have an understanding of his skills because she said to the officers, “Just be careful. He’s armed.” If it wasn’t so irritating, he would be pleased by that. The two of them turned around to face the window and looked at each other while they did so. Skye looked wary. Grant couldn’t blame her. He knew that his expression was perhaps a bit scary.

The two officers approached Skye and Grant simultaneously to put the cuffs on them. Grant pretended to submit but, just when the cop grabbed his arm, he used his grip to twist him around and punch him. He easily took down two other cops and was struggling with two more when he saw Skye gather her computer and flee the building.

“Skye!” he yelled. She couldn’t leave! What if Mike got her? He didn’t think Mike would hurt her but he didn’t know for sure. Plus, if Mike had her, then she would be on her way to Garrett and he would hurt her. Grant couldn’t allow that. He made short work of the rest of the officers in the diner and ran after her. He didn’t have to go far.

Skye was being cuffed by two police officers who had her bent over the trunk of their car. This couldn’t be allowed to happen either. He would lose the hard drive if she was taken into custody.

“Skye!” he yelled again. He carefully shot each cop in the shoulder. No matter what she thought, he didn’t kill when he could avoid it. Skye ran around the side of the car. “Skye, don’t run!” he said as he held up his hands in the traditional sign of ‘I’m not going to hurt you.’ She was getting in the car, so he raced towards her yelling, “You don’t understand!” She sped off as he continued screaming, “I’m not trying to hurt you!” *Damn!*

This was a disaster. He knew that Mike was going to capture her. He’d done his best to avoid it but it still was going to happen. He watched with his heart in his throat as Mike leapt onto the car and grabbed Skye. Grant felt his throat close up as he watched him order to beat his younger brother. Once again, he was failing to protect someone he loved.

Grant ran up to the car where Mike had pulled it. He’d already given Skye an injection and she was unconscious. Mike pointed to a car that he had parked earlier and the two of them loaded Skye into the backseat and then took off for the airfield. They didn’t talk. Grant was too angry and sick at heart to say anything. Mike appeared numb. It wasn’t until they were back on the Bus that he said anything. He watched Grant pace in front of Skye’s unconscious body.
“You should be thanking me. I saved your ass,” he told him.

Grant was almost shaking with fury. How had this day gone so wrong? He had made out with Skye and was going to easily get the decrypted hard drive and return to his mission. Now Deathlok was involved, Skye was a Hydra prisoner, and he didn’t know how he was going to protect her. He wanted to vent his spleen a bit and Mike seemed like a good target.

“You didn’t save my ass,” he said walking over to him with his hands on his hips. “You turned it into a public spectacle.”

“You let her get one over on you,” Mike told him with an unflinching gaze. “That’s exactly what Garrett was afraid of.” This was bad. If Garrett believed that Grant cared for Skye, he would try and make Grant do horrible things to her, both to get information from her and teach him a lesson. That had to be nipped in the bud, so Grant didn’t even blink at the accusation. He knew Garrett was most likely watching through Mike’s tech.

“And Garrett told you to stay out of sight,” he replied getting in Mike’s face and pushing his finger into his chest.

Mike didn’t take kindly to this. He moved even closer to Grant. “He ordered me to shadow you. He knew you had a soft spot for Skye and she might take advantage of it.”

Grant tried to keep his expression blank. “Well, he was wrong. We have her. And once she gives us a location, we’ll be off.” He moved away from Mike a little. He needed Mike to believe him, so it was best not to antagonize him.

“Yeah, that’s not going to happen,” Skye said as she got up from the floor, rubbing her head. If Mike injected her with what Grant suspected he did, she probably had a wicked headache.

Grant glanced over at Mike. “Take a walk,” he said looking at Skye. “I can handle this.” The last thing he needed was Garrett overhearing his conversation with her.


Mike looked down and then over at Grant. “Garrett says you have five minutes,” he told him.

Grant looked annoyed. Damn you, John! At least give me a chance to get the information from her! He didn’t dare look Mike in the face lest Garrett see his anger and fear. He waited until Mike moved away before turning back to Skye.

“I can explain,” he told her. Well, he couldn’t really explain but he could try to rationalize enough so she would cooperate.

Skye didn’t give him the chance. She darted forward, hitting him as hard as she could. “You lying bastard! Son of a bitch! You lying...!” Grant could have easily sidestepped her assault after the first punch but he let her get in a few. With how badly this had gone, he felt like he deserved a little punishment and she had earned a little retribution. But he couldn’t let it get out of hand.

“Stop! Stop!” he told her as he dragged her over to the staircase. “Calm down. OK. OK? It’s over. You can’t win.”

It was essential that she understood this or she wouldn’t survive the next few hours. If she had only realized that it was over and that she couldn’t win in the diner, she wouldn’t even be here. She’d be safe. Grant needed her to at least trust him enough so that he could figure out a way to protect her from Garrett and it looked like getting her submit was the only way to do that.
“OK?” he asked her again. Skye just looked at him hatefully but instead of giving in, she used her head to hit him in the face. If that hadn’t hurt as much as it did, he would have been impressed.

“Stop,” he told her as he cuffed her to the staircase. He needed her to listen. He went and got a towel in the lab to wipe the blood from his nose and shook his head as he looked at Skye. What am I going to do now?

“All this time. Everything we’ve been through. Why? How could you?” she asked. She looked like she was about to burst into tears.

“I was on a mission. It wasn’t personal,” he lied. Yes, he was on a mission but not the one she thought he was on, not the one anyone thought he was on. And it was so personal that he was almost choking on it.

“‘It wasn’t…’” Skye repeated. “You did not just say that! It wasn’t personal!” she yelled, her voice rising on the last word.

“Skye, listen to me,” Grant said almost in a whisper as he walked closer to her. He had to get her to see sense. Garrett would destroy her without blinking an eye if she didn’t give him what he wanted. And if he thought that Grant cared for her, it would be slow and painful, just to teach him a lesson about betrayal and weakness.

“God, you might actually believe that!” she said. “You…that is…” She seemed to be having trouble speaking, “That is the twisted logic they teach you when you sign up to be a Nazi.”

Oh great, here we go, the Nazi thing again. Yes, Hydra was once affiliated with Nazis but they themselves had little interest in Hitler’s political philosophy. They were after much bigger fish and it was expedient at the time. Once again, Skye’s naïveté was shining through. But he couldn’t allow himself to get sucked into the argument. They were running out of time.

“It’s not like that. I’m a spy and I have a job. Sometimes things aren’t always as they seem.” He was going to say more but Skye interrupted.

“You’ve killed I don’t know how many people. Are you going to kill me now?” she asked angrily. He would’ve been upset with the question had it not been evident that she didn’t really believe she was in danger.

“No,” he said with a serious expression. “I would never hurt you.”

“Once I crack the drive, are you just gonna shoot me like you did with Thomas Nash or are you gonna have someone else do it, like you did with Quinn?”

Grant felt a flash of anger when she mentioned Quinn. He did not want to be blamed for that because even now he was haunted by what had happened. Does she really think I had her shot? “I didn’t know that was gonna happen. That was all Garrett,” he bit out. The unfairness of all this suddenly weighed on him. He wasn’t convincing her.

“Oh, of course it was Garrett’s fault. That was part of the mission, right? You’re just gonna kick back and watch me bleed until it’s your turn to pull the trigger,” she told him. Grant was stunned.

“You think I had a part in that?” he asked in a near-whisper, his voice rising with his distress. How can she believe this about me? “That I would let that happen to you? You know how I feel about you, Skye.” He walked towards her even though she had a dumbfounded look on her face. He couldn’t lose her!

Skye looked down. “Wait,” she told him. She seemed closer to tears than ever. “So even though
you’ve been lying to everyone about everything, you’re saying that your feelings for me…”

“They’re real, Skye.” He kept moving towards her but slowly. He nodded to emphasize his point. He needed her to believe him. “They always have been,” he said as he put his hands around her face and started caressing her. He looked expectantly at her, thinking that she would accept his tenderness as a sign that she could trust him.

Skye inhaled sharply and backed out of his grasp. “I’m going to throw up.” She started to cry.

Grant looked shocked and felt something within him break. All of a sudden, he was furious. Skye’s rejection of him was too much; he couldn’t take any more. He bent down and then straightened back up, determined to tell her the truth.

“Do you...do you think this has been easy for me? Do you have any idea how hard it was?” Skye looked shocked but he didn’t let that stop him. This was too important! “The sacrifices, the decisions I had to make but I made them. Because that’s what I do; I’m a survivor.”

Skye seemed unmoved. “You are a serial killer,” she told him.

“No, I’m not.” He lowered his voice to barely a whisper. He couldn’t risk Garrett overhearing this. “I’m a triple agent. I still work for SHIELD.”

Skye looked at him in disbelief, with tears in her eyes. “Stop lying!”

“I’m not,” he told her. The admission of being a triple agent was the most he could say and even that had been a huge risk. Mike would be back any moment. They didn’t have much time.

“Maybe you don’t even know what the truth is anymore. And you know what? You were right about one thing. I wouldn’t like the real you,” she said spitefully.

Grant couldn’t throw a fit. He’d told her the truth about his feelings and about being a triple agent and she hadn’t believed him. He’d just have to wait until he could prove to her who he really was. “Someday,” he told her. “Someday, you’ll understand.” He fervently hoped that would be true.

“No. I won’t,” she said, shaking her head. But she would. She had to. “And I will never, ever, give you what you want.” She pulled away from him and sat down heavily on the stairs refusing to look at him.

Grant was speechless. He knew that his fear and sorrow were showing on his face but he didn’t care. It was the well all over again. He knew he could save her if he only had permission but right now he didn’t. He had no idea what was going to happen to her, especially if she proved difficult with Garrett. And he had a sinking feeling in his stomach that he had lost her.

Grant needed to calm down and get control of himself before Mike came in. He couldn’t let Garrett see his distress or things definitely would get bad. He slowly walked through the lab on his way to Mission Control. He’d just have to take it one step at a time. He ran into Mike before he got there.

“It’s time for Plan B,” Mike told him. Grant didn’t say anything but just turned and started walking back towards the cargo hold where Skye was. Maybe she’d see sense.

“Time’s up,” he said when he saw her. “You can tell me where to unlock the drive or,” he nodded in Mike’s direction, “you can tell him.”

Skye looked at Grant for a long moment, unsure. Then she turned to Deathlok. “Mike, please.” She shook her head, panic in her eyes. “I know you don’t want to do this.”
Grant looked down and moved away from her. Of course she’d think only good things about Mike. No one ever gives me the benefit of the doubt. He leaned against the door of the lab, crossed his arms and watched Skye plead with Mike not to hurt her. He was a bit surprised to hear Mike’s anger towards her for not taking better care of his son and thought he was being unfair. How could she possibly foresee this happening?

Mike finally seemed to have enough of the back and forth. “No!” he said firmly. “There’s no way out of this, Skye. Tell us how to unlock the drive.” He got right up in Skye’s face and Grant tensed. He didn’t intervene though because he couldn’t see a way to beat Deathlok.

Skye didn’t back down one inch. She looked Mike right in his scary face and said, “No.”

Grant almost flipped. While he was proud of her courage, he was also terrified for her. “Damn it, Skye!” he said, leaving the door and coming over to her. She ignored him.

“You could have shot me back in Italy but you didn’t. They made Quinn do it because there’s still good in you, Mike, and I don’t think you’re going to hurt me,” Skye said desperately.

Mike looked at her for a long second and then inhaled sharply. “You’re right,” he said quietly. “I won’t hurt you.” He suddenly turned to Grant, stuck out his arm, and shot something into him.

Grant fell back against the lab door, his right hand covering a small electrical device that was attached to his heart. It crackled with electricity and Grant made a horrible, pain-filled sound as he sank to the floor.

Skye looked over at him desperately. “What...what did you do to him?” she asked Mike. She sounded on the edge of hysteria.

“Stopped his heart,” Mike answered calmly.

“His heart,” Skye repeated.

“Isn’t beating,” Mike finished, turning away from Grant and looking at Skye. “He’s having a heart attack. I can restart it,” he said, holding up his forearm, “or not. It’s your choice.”

Grant was on the floor in great pain. He could barely keep conscious but he knew he had to plead with Skye for his life. Is this how it ends? Did Garrett hear me say I’m a triple? He could hardly believe that John would do this to him otherwise, not after all they had been through together but then again, John was a psychopath. But Skye wasn’t. Surely she felt something for him. Even though she was hurt and angry, surely she wouldn’t let him die.

“Skye,” he moaned, just managing to get the word out. Through the fog of his pain and anxiety, he could barely see her worried face.

“You think I don’t want to watch him suffer,” she said to Mike although she kept looking at Grant.

“Not suffer. Die,” Mike replied, coming closer to her. “Garrett doesn’t think you’re gonna let that happen.”

Grant blocked out what they were saying. If he was going to die, he didn’t want hateful words to be the last things he heard. He turned his body so he was facing the floor and tried desperately to think of good memories. But nothing would come; the pain was overwhelming everything. He was fading and the last sound he heard was Skye’s voice.

“Now bring him back!” she yelled.
Suddenly he felt the electricity course through him again and his heart started beating again. “Ah,” he moaned as he rolled onto his back. “Oh!” he gasped out as he took some deep breaths. It felt good to have his heart beating again but his whole body hurt. He looked over at Skye to see her face filled with sorrow as Mike unlocked her handcuffs and led her into the lab.

“Put the password in. Start the hack. No tricks,” he heard him tell Skye.

She must have agreed to unlock the encryption to save Grant’s life. He tried to be glad about that but his anger toward Garrett overrode any other emotion. He’d almost died without having anyone know the truth! Mike strode out to Grant and lifted him to his feet.

“You…you son of a bitch,” Grant said hoarsely. He was still extremely weak and couldn’t do much beyond stand on his own steam.

“Get the plane in the air,” Mike told him in a gentler tone than he’d used with Skye. *Does he feel sorry for me? Great, a cyborg thinks his life is better than mine.*

“Can’t,” Grant gasped. “I can barely stand,” he said as he grimaced in pain.

Mike unclenched his fist and the electrical device covering Grant’s heart once again surged, probably with adrenaline because he immediately felt better. Mike patted his face. “That should help,” he told him as he left.

Grant turned to watch Skye work on the computer, letting the rage show on his face. Garrett was going to pay for that if it was the last thing he did. And he was going to talk with Maria Hill just as soon as he could find her. He did not want to die with everyone, including Skye, hating him and believing him a traitor. This wasn’t worth it. He reached up and tore the electrical device off of his shirt and left to go to the cockpit.

Grant got the plane ready to depart and maneuvered it onto the runway. When he looked up, though, he saw another SHIELD plane in his way. *Are they kidding me? He rolled his eyes. Did they really think that dinky plane would stop him?*

But then he heard Maria Hill’s voice over the intercom. “Maria Hill to SHIELD 616. You have 30 seconds to stand down and surrender.”

Grant was overjoyed. Not 10 minutes ago, he’d desperately wanted to find Maria Hill and talk to her and here she was! It was like a gift. However, his joy quickly faded when he saw that someone else was in the cockpit with her. He couldn’t see far enough to recognize the person but the mere fact of the other person’s presence probably meant that they couldn’t speak freely. He sighed, rolled his eyes and put on his headset.

“I repeat,” Maria said, “stand down and surrender.” This was not good. The fact that she repeated her command was code for keeping up his cover. “You gonna answer me Ward or do I have to come over there?”

*Yes! Come over here so we can talk! But clearly she couldn’t, so he would have to be careful. He would have to act cocky but still try to get his message across. He decided to start slowly. “Maria Hill,” he said. “Kind of hoped you went down with the Triskelion.” That should let her know that he was angry with her.*

“And I hoped you weren’t the duplicitous lowlife you turned out to be but here we are.” Grant could almost hear her subtext: *I know you’re angry but you need to stay undercover.*

“Gonna be honest with you, Hill. I’m having a pretty bad day. So if I were you, I’d get the hell out
of my way,” Grant replied. *Honest* was a code word, one that indicated that he was in danger and wanted out as soon as possible. *Hell* meant that there was a time limit he was operating with.

“Mm…give up Skye and we’ll talk about it,” she replied. *So, they know Skye is with me and is a prisoner. Clearly some sort of rescue operation is going on and she’s trying to give them time to implement it. OK, I’ll try to help them.*

“Yeah. That’s not happening,” he said distractedly. The lack of emphasis was his cue to her that he understood her point and agreed.

“You know, I never liked you Ward, not since our first sit-down. But I never figured you for John Garrett’s lapdog.” Several of her words were indications of band frequencies he was to use when next communicating with her. He would do that as soon he returned to Garrett’s base.

“A lot of us lost respect for Fury when he picked you as his second. If he needed eye candy around, he could have at least picked Romanoff,” Grant replied. He knew she would understand that he was concerned about Fury and the Romanoff reference hinted that he may need to fight his way out of a tough situation.

“That’s funny. I’ll tell her you said that,” Maria said with a smile in her voice. *So, Fury is alive and she understood what I’m trying to tell her. “Now hand Skye over or I’ll have a squad of F-16s knock you on your ass.”*

“Even if you had that kind of pull anymore, which you don’t, Coulson would never let you do it.” He hoped she understood that he wanted her to use her influence to let people know he was a triple. It was subtle yes, but Hill didn’t get to be where she was by being stupid. “He would never sacrifice Skye like that but you know Garrett would,” he continued. This was hitting a bit below the belt. Grant knew that Hill would hear that message because it wasn’t subtle at all. He wanted her to know that he felt like a sacrifice and Garrett was coming after him.

“Get me the hell out!”

“This doesn’t have to go down like this, Ward. You don’t owe Garrett anything,” Hill said. It was clear that she understood. *Good! She has my back.*

“You’re wrong,” he told her. That was their code word for when one of them had to leave. By her silence, he knew that she got it and he revved the engines. If the team needed more time, she would have tried to stall but since she didn’t, he needed to go. He didn’t want Garrett to be any angrier than he already was. Grant took off and got the Bus into the air.

He hoped that Coulson brought Trip with him. There was no way he would be a match for Deathlok on his own and May left. Grant decided to stay in the cockpit to monitor the systems and stay out of the way. He didn’t want to get accidentally shot as the team escaped.

Grant didn’t have long to wait. The alarm for the cargo ramp lowering went off. *What the hell are they doing?* Unless they were planning on using the parachutes to leave, there was no way they could get off the Bus. And if they did use parachutes, Mike could follow them or let Garrett know their position. *This isn’t a good plan!* 

Grant knew that Garrett would expect him to help Deathlok, so he put the plane on autopilot and ran to the cargo hold. He rounded the corner at the top of the staircase and ducked to avoid getting hit by the bullets Lola was shooting at Deathlok. *Since when can that car shoot?* He took aim and started shooting all around Lola, careful not to hit anything vital in the car or anywhere close to her human occupants. As Deathlok shot a rocket at them, Coulson rammed the car in reverse and took
Grant almost lost it but remembered that this was Coulson. He almost always had something up his sleeve and he wouldn’t drive his precious car off the Bus unless he knew he could get it safely on the ground. He ran to the edge of the ramp to look out into the beautiful blue abyss. *Since when can that car fly?* He felt relieved but furious with Mike. How dare he shoot a rocket at them! He could have killed them! What if his rocket damaged Lola and they couldn’t land?

He strode angrily toward the cockpit as he put his gun in his waistband. “I’m putting the plane down,” he told Mike who was following him closely. Forget about Garrett. He wanted to help Skye and Coulson if he could. “We need to go after them.”

“No, we don’t,” Mike said shortly. “We stay with the plan.”

“I don’t answer to you,” Grant informed him. *And especially not after you just tried to kill me!* He walked faster and soon was several lengths ahead of Deathlok.

“Coulson and Skye don’t matter anymore,” Mike replied. *Maybe not to you.* Although really, he had a hard time believing that was the case. Mike had always appeared to care for the team but maybe he was different now. “We have the data and Garrett wants us back right now.”

Grant stopped walking and turned back to face Deathlok. “Listen. I’m not just gonna forget what you did to me back there,” he said angrily. He got into Mike’s face. “You try anything like that again,” *If you ever hurt Skye*, “I will kill you.”

He had just turned to go when Mike said, “It wasn’t personal.”

Grant almost lost it. Clearly Mike had been listening when he was talking with Skye. *Did he hear everything?* And now he was using his own words against him, hoping they would sting. Grant swung back to look at Mike.

Mike was absolutely expressionless. “I was just following orders,” he said. Grant continued to glare at him until he walked away. *Well, that answers whether he heard me say I’m a triple. He wouldn’t be so hostile if he had.* He went back to the cockpit to wait. He still had to scrub the hard drive when Mike wasn’t looking.

Grant sighed. When he’d agreed to be a triple agent for SHIELD, he’d never envisioned how difficult it was going to be. He hadn’t had any people he cared about who could get hurt by his actions. He didn’t have anyone specific he had to protect from Hydra. But now things were different. He had a feeling that he was going to run into the team again and that now they would be out for his blood. He realized that he’d never felt so alone in his life and that included his time in the woods. At least then he’d had Buddy.

And as he thought about what Garrett had done to Buddy, his only true friend, he felt sick. His resolve hardened. He would be damned if he let Garrett hurt anyone else he cared about. SHIELD or no SHIELD, he wouldn’t let anyone else get hurt because of him. He at least owed Buddy that much.
Flashback

The return of Thor to Earth after the Battle of New York was kind of a disaster. Sure, he’d saved Jane Foster and prevailed against the Dark Elves but it came at a high price. People were hurt and property was extremely damaged. The aliens had laid utter waste to the area in which they’d fought and then had the bad manners to leave behind their trash. This posed a big problem for SHIELD. They couldn’t let alien technology get into the hands of normal people, so they would have to do the clean-up entirely on their own, every piece of otherworldly material tagged and bagged. Coulson’s team was asked to take part in it (almost all the North American and European teams were expected to help) and they had been dispatched to Greenwich University in London. No one was pleased.

“This is ridiculous. Thor returns to Earth, fights battles on our planet and then leaves us with an enormous mess to clean up!” Jemma complained. She seemed to take the grunt work quite personally. Grant noticed that she’d seemed on edge ever since the Chitauri virus. He couldn’t blame her. That was a lot to handle, especially for someone who wasn’t field-trained. And he, more than most, knew just how traumatizing some experiences could be.

Grant secretly agreed with her feelings about the work. He’d been on the ground immediately after New York and labored in that clean-up effort too. He couldn’t help but be resentful that aliens only seemed to make more work. However, it wouldn’t do for him to comment on it. He had to keep his game face on. So, he dumped a huge barrel of metal pieces in one of the many, many staging areas around the university and cheerfully said, “Don’t say I never gave you anything!” The look on Jemma’s face almost made him laugh.

Fitz ran his tech over the pile and said, “Checking for alien spectrographic signatures, one teeny rock at a time.” Like Jemma, his annoyance could not have been clearer. For some reason, this made Grant feel lighter. This was a prime teasing opportunity for his figurative little brother.

“Necessary precaution. We don’t want anything alien getting in the wrong hands,” Grant replied. He knew that would annoy both Fitz and Jemma because neither needed to be told this. But Jemma ignored him and Fitz didn’t take the bait.

Instead, Fitz said, “Still, this is definitely the type of work a monkey could easily do.” It took a great amount of willpower for Grant not to groan at him. Fitz had monkey on the brain and frankly, he was kind of sick of it, so much so that he’d almost pleaded with Coulson to get him one just so he’d shut up about it.

Grant leaned on the barrel and said affectionately, “You’re our little monkey.” He knew that would irritate Fitz because, as a relatively short person – especially when compared to Grant – he didn’t like being called little.

As he’d hoped, Fitz opened his mouth to reply but before he could say anything, Jemma’s cellphone rang. *Damn! Opportunity wasted.* She got it out of her pocket, looked at the caller id and declined the call. Fitz just stared at her with a slightly disappointed expression on his face. She noticed.
“Don’t give me that look. I’ll talk to them when I talk to them,” Jemma said.

_This sounds interesting._ “Talk to who?” Grant asked as he wheeled the barrel toward the wall.

“Mum and Dad,” Jemma answered. They want explanations and answers for…well, all this,” she said waving her hands to encompass the staging area. “But I don’t have any answers and, more importantly, I haven’t talked to them since I was ill. And if they knew that, they’d be even more terrified. So, you know, why waste any of our time really?” She smiled uncomfortably as she glanced down at her phone and noticed that they’d left a message.

Grant had nothing to say to that. He was completely unfamiliar with parents caring enough about him to worry if he was safe, much less call and inquire about it. Not for the first time, he felt jealous of FitzSimmons’ obviously warm and loving families. Whenever the team made a scheduled stop, there would be a huge care package for Fitz courtesy of his mother. She evidently was familiar with his love of snacks.

Fitz’s spectrographic meter buzzed. Grant hurriedly got an equipment case and put on gloves. He didn’t trust Fitz or Jemma to properly handle it. He’d seen what they could do in a lab. Plus, Jemma looked distinctly nervous.

“Fitz, is that…um,” she asked in a higher than normal voice.

Fitz appeared more thrilled than nervous. Grant smiled to himself, remembering Fitz’s comment of “Weird” in response to the Overkill Device. Fitz stood up with the piece of alien tech in his hand.

“Definitely not from here,” he told Jemma. “Another piece of the ship.” Grant reached over to pluck it out of his hands and sprayed it with a liquid solution. “What are you doing?” Fitz demanded.

“Out of sight,” Grant answered, putting the artifact in a secure case and clicking it shut, “out of mind.” He knew his superior attitude would please Jemma and annoy Fitz. Sure enough, Jemma merely nodded and went back to her work while Fitz looked stunned. But then Grant noticed that Jemma continued to look tense, so he told her, “That’s why we’re here. Keep everything under control.”

The team returned to the Bus shortly after their shift ended, hoping that they could all shower and maybe play a game. But their rest was short-lived when a call came in for Coulson, interrupting Trivial Pursuit. He came out from his office shortly afterwards and the rest of the team could hear the sound of the Bus gearing up for take-off.

“We’re going to Norway,” he told Grant, FitzSimmons and Skye in Mission Control. May was still in the cockpit. “The Trillemarka National Park to be exact.” He put a map up on the screen. “Apparently, a man and a woman cut down one of the trees and took something that was buried within its truck several hours ago. They then attacked the park rangers. SHIELD wants us to investigate because they suspect that the 0-8-4 is alien.”

“Of course it is,” Grant sighed. Once again, aliens were making more work for them. Sure, Thor was handy but he seriously longed for the days when aliens were only in science fiction.

“I don’t care whether it’s alien or not,” Skye interjected. “If it gets us out of janitor duty, then I’m all for it.” _She has a point._

“Jemma, I’m going to need you and Ward on the ground analyzing the tree. Fitz, you back them up in the lab. I’ll talk to the park rangers. Skye, I need you to monitor the internet and see if there’s
any chatter about some weird object out of Norway,” Coulson ordered. Everyone except Jemma nodded.

“Are you certain you need me to examine the tree, Sir?” she asked. “Wouldn’t it be safer to study it from a distance? We could send in Sleepy.”

Coulson started to respond but Grant leaned over to her. “There’s nothing to worry about,” he told her. “I’ll be with you the entire time.”

She hesitated a moment, then nodded and followed Fitz to the lab. Coulson gave Grant a nod of approval and left too. Skye and Grant were the only ones left.

“What’s got Simmons so spooked?” she asked him.

He shrugged. “She’ll be fine. She just needs to get back on the horse. Not everyone enjoys skydiving, especially without a parachute,” he said. He sincerely hoped that he was right because, if he wasn’t, they might take Jemma out of the field. And where she went, Fitz would follow. Grant was just getting used to his family of choice and he didn’t want to lose them now.

Once they reached the Trillemarka National Park, they were taken by truck to the affected zone. Other SHIELD agents were swarming the area but none had even gotten close to the cut tree. Grant followed Jemma to the base of it and just stood there for a moment. The section that had been removed was some feet off of the ground. He glanced at her and noticed that her eyes kept going up in the air and then back down to the ground.

Maybe it’s a fear of heights issue.

“I can climb it if you want,” he told her. “Just talk me through what to do with the doo-dads. Yeah, it’s only about 15 feet.”

“I’ll be fine,” Jemma replied. “I’m… I’m just a bit more wary about the height thing since falling to certain death,” she said casually. Grant wasn’t fooled.

“You’re afraid,” he said in his no-nonsense Agent Ward voice. “Hmm. Shaken up?” He looked at her to see if she would admit her feelings. “It’s normal,” he assured her. He leaned over to help her climb onto the truck. They had already attached a belay cable to catch her if she fell. “But some feelings will take over if you dwell on them. Especially fear.” That was why he long ago implemented a compartmentalization system that worked well for intrusive thoughts. It was best to keep them locked away where they couldn’t hurt you.

Jemma seemed to agree with him as she got on top of the trunk and looked up at where she would have to go. “Now, keep your eyes ahead,” he instructed her. Focus on what you like to do best.”

“Yes,” Jemma breathed out. She stepped carefully from the sawn stump onto the tilted, fallen trunk. “Not falling,” she said with a nervous smile.

“No. Research. You’re a scientist. You like to figure things out,” Grant told her.

“Yes,” Jemma answered while still keeping her eyes straight ahead. “With my doodads.” He was glad she could joke with him. Humor could be helpful when dealing with fear.

“I’m curious,” Grant said as he stroked his lip in the grand tradition of an inquisitive academic. “Whatever was up in these trees had to be there for centuries, right?”

“At least a millennium,” she informed him. She had actually torn her eyes away from the tree and looked down at him. “Radiocarbon-14 dates some of these trees at 9,000 years old.”
“That sounds impossible. Think the tree grew around it?” he asked. *This is working!*

“I’d have to check the dendrochronology first to know for certain,” Jemma replied as she started walking up the trunk. “But I mean, the Norway Spruce is a rather fast-growing coniferous, and I know you’re trying to trick me into going up but I’m going up anyway, so…”

“I’ll catch you if you fall,” Grant promised. *Just like I did before.* He stood on the ground watching her walk up the tree.

Jemma reached her destination and wrapped herself around the trunk as she used her tech to analyze the wood. “Oh, um…” Jemma’s voice sounded tense, “whatever was in them was definitely not from this world. Fitz, you getting this? It’s not Chitauri, is it?”

“No. No. No, don’t worry. This isn’t another viral threat,” Fitz assured her. “Um, hang on. Spectrographic signatures match readings from Thor’s hammer. Simmons, whatever was in that tree is Asgardian.”

“I…I can see an imprint of what was embedded,” Jemma said. She brought out one of her doodads. “Scanning for three dimensional restoration. Tell me when.”

Grant watched Jemma work and listened to the rest of the team’s chatter on his comms unit. Apparently whatever was in that tree was a rod or staff of some sort and it was now being used to ill effect by the two people who had taken it. *Great. More work.*

Coulson walked over to Grant and showed him the picture on his phone. Grant looked at the words spelled out in flames, *We Are Gods* and almost groaned. Nothing good ever came of people believing they were gods.

“Well, I guess we know who they think they are,” Coulson muttered drily. Coulson’s sense of humor, even at a time like this, was one of the things that Grant really liked about him. Garrett’s sense of humor tended to run toward the cruel, so it was nice to be able to laugh at something without feeling bad about it.

A short while later, Grant, Skye and FitzSimmons were all in the lab going over what they knew about the latest terrorist threat. They had pictures of a man and a woman up on the screen. Grant pointed first to the picture of the man and then to the woman. “Jacob Nystrom, 30. Girlfriend, Petra Larsen. Leaders of a Norse paganist hate group,” he told the team as he walked back to the holo-table and stood beside Skye.

“And their numbers are growing, thanks to what happened in Greenwich and thanks to the internet. Yay internet, she said sarcastically,” Skye informed them.

“Norse paganist?” Jemma questioned.

“Obsessed with anything derived from Norse mythology, stories of Asgard,” Skye explained.

“And now a weapon,” Grant said as he picked up Fitz’s 3-D model of the rod found in the tree and held it in his hands. He was a bit professionally intrigued at the thought of a new weapon, one that most people didn’t have. He knew that Hydra definitely would want it but it would be better if SHIELD got their hands on it first.

“The scan only accounted for one side,” Fitz hastened to explain. “Too much damage to the tree for complete reproduction.”

“But see here. It’s clearly broken on both ends,” Jemma pointed out.
“So there are more pieces?” Grant asked. More pieces equaled more time searching for them. This was going to get complicated.

“Yeah,” Fitz said. “Two at least.”

“Which means Sid and Nancy may be looking for a complete set,” Grant theorized. Coulson came in through the door to join the group. May followed him. Grant kept looking at the reproduction. “The markings?”

“Asgardian symbolism,” Coulson answered, coming up to the table. “Hard to translate with our limited knowledge.”

“You should give your buddy the god of thunder a shout,” Skye suggested. “He gets his power from his hammer, right? What if this is his nail to the hammer?” Coulson took the model and started examining it.

“I already did,” Coulson said. “Director Fury told me he’s off the grid. And if he has a cellphone, we don’t have the number.”

“SHIELD investigations are on the trail of Nystrom and his followers,” May told the team.

“We’re charged with identifying the object and finding any other pieces before they do,” Coulson said.

“They seem to have some advantage,” Grant said. Coulson looked up from his examination. How does he not see this? It’s completely obvious that these people know things we don’t. “They found this thing in 150 square kilometers of Norwegian forest.”

“Guys,” Skye broke in, speaking in hushed voice. She was having way too much fun with this. “What if it called to them with magic?”

May looked unimpressed. “Called to them,” she repeated. FitzSimmons also looked unconvinced, just as Grant knew they would be. The Science Twins weren’t going to like any supernatural explanation. He smiled to himself. This should be fun.

“We know it’s Asgardian, so the rules are a little bendy here,” Skye explained.

“Just because we don’t understand something yet doesn’t mean we should regress back to the Dark Ages, talking of magic and fairy tales,” Jemma lectured Skye. Fitz chuckled briefly in agreement.

“Actually, that’s exactly what we’re going to do,” Coulson said.

“Excuse me?” Jemma asked at the same time Skye said, “Really?”

“When we first found the hammer in New Mexico, I consulted one of the world’s leading experts on Norse mythology, Elliot Randolph, a professor at a university in Seville. We’ll leave immediately. Maybe he can tell us more about these markings.”

It turned out that Professor Randolph could indeed tell them about the markings but Grant wasn’t able to hear his information first-hand. He would have liked to have gone with Coulson but those weren’t his orders. There was something about him being prickly, especially when alien tech was involved. Whatever. Instead, he monitored Skye’s progress and waited for orders. He was just going to Mission Control when he caught up with Coulson going in the same direction.

“Did you know that there’s a Mount Thor on Baffin Island?” Coulson asked Grant.
“I did not,” Grant replied. Why would I? I’m not a Thor fan. He’d already overheard Skye gleefully telling Jemma about May agreeing with her assessment of Thor’s dreaminess. Sure, the guy was attractive enough but dreamy? No.

“Do you know what’s not on Mount Thor? Anything Asgardian at all?” Coulson frequently answered his own questions, so Grant had learned to wait. “Our agents on the ground haven’t found a thing,” Coulson continued. “What about you?” he asked Skye.

“Nystrom’s deep-web message boards are just abuzz with psychos,” she replied. “They believe they’re going to ascend to be the gods of destruction and death. People suck, sir,” she said to Coulson.

Really, Skye? “That’s your progress? ‘People suck’?” Grant asked in a mild tone. He would have thought that was obvious. Certainly, most of the people he’d ever been around did.

“These people do,” she retorted. “And there’s also chatter about going underground.”

“Could mean going incognito, or…” Grant theorized to Coulson.

“Or searching for the next piece,” Coulson finished.

“Randolph said to check Viking routes,” Grant told Skye. “Find any others?”

“There’s some sites along the Volga River in Russia, some in Kiev and, weirdly, here,” she answered.

“In Seville, Spain?” Coulson asked.

“It’s a long shot but Vikings sacked Seville twice,” Skye replied.

“We found one promising location with Viking relics,” May interjected as she walked into Mission Control. “El Divino Nino. A church built on the ruins of an 8th century crypt built on Roman ruins from 206 B.C.”

“East of a river,” Grant pointed out.

“And lots of bones,” Coulson said. “Let’s see what we can dig up. See what I did there?” he asked as he turned to leave the room.

Grant caught May’s eye. He could tell that it was all she could do not to roll her eyes at Coulson’s little joke. He grinned slightly. He could appreciate her attempt to focus on the mission and not get sidetracked with humor or irrelevancies. Having another specialist on board – one who seemed to understand him – was very helpful. Not only did she provide physical back-up but her emotional state was similar to his as well.

A short while later, Fitz, Coulson, Skye and Grant were all sitting in a car a short distance away from the church. Fitz had brought along two spectrographic tablets so that they could scan for alien objects.

“OK. The plan is that Ward and I will search through the church ruins. Skye, you and Fitz stay here and monitor our progress. If there’s a problem, Skye can drive back to the Bus where May is standing by,” Coulson began.

“Wait, AC. Are we expecting something to go wrong?” Skye asked with a worried look.
"No, this should be a low-risk mission but I just wanted to be clear about protocol. We’re dealing with Asgardian technology and things can get…challenging…with that stuff," he replied.

"Well, if the mission is low-risk, what if I went into the church with Ward? I mean, I haven’t been on the ground for a mission since…” Skye trailed off but she didn’t have to finish her sentence. Grant knew what she was thinking: the Chitauri virus and, before that, Scorch. No one really wanted to mention either of those missions, so it was probably wise of her to drop it. However, she was right.

"I agree with Skye, sir. Since we aren’t expecting trouble, this seems like a good opportunity for her to get some field experience," Grant told Coulson.

Coulson gave in easily (Grant suspected that he wasn’t all that eager to endure dust, bugs and cobwebs), so Grant and Skye went in together. His initial thought was that the two of them would stay together but, when they encountered several different hallways, it became clear that the two of them needed to separate since time was of the essence. He evaluated the corridors.

"You’re sure you’re ok going solo?” Grant asked her.

"I’ll be fine, Dad,” she replied as she rolled her eyes at him. Maybe he was being a bit too protective but the ruins put him on edge. In his ear, he heard Fitz murmur, “That’s just creepy.”

"Fine. I’ll take the hallway on the right. Make sure you keep your coms unit on,” he said and walked off quickly. They needed to get this done. Grant had gotten through several rooms before he heard anything.

"How you doing, Agent Ward?” Coulson asked.

Grant pushed aside another cobweb in irritation. “Wishing I was shorter,” he replied with annoyance. He held out his flashlight along with one of the doodads to analyze the wall. “Nothing yet,” he reported. “All my readings are normal.”

"What about you, Skye?” Coulson inquired. “Any luck?”

“I’m lucky my SO volunteered to take the super-creepy hallway instead of the slightly less creepy dungeon-room place,” Skye answered. At least she noticed. “I got nothing. Sorry. Nada.”

"Ward, your spectrograph is reading something near you,” Fitz said.

“I don’t see anything,” Grant replied, looking around.


“Visual contact,” Grant confirmed as he saw a body moving away from the room he was in. He started to give chase.

“OK, Ward. Turn left!” Fitz instructed.

Grant caught up with the person and swung him around. It was Professor Randolph, looking surprised to be caught. He was holding what looked like a staff.

“I have a wonderful explanation," Randolph said. They always do.

“I ran into some unexpected com…” Grant said disgustedly as he casually reached out to grab the
staff. The markings on it lit up as his hand grasped the engraved rod and a wave of intense pain brought Grant to his knees.

All of a sudden, he was back at the well with his brother, Thomas, watching him struggle to keep his head above water. There was a feeling of dread about what was going to happen. Grant laid down on the ground, memories washing over him.

“Ward, what’s happening?” Coulson asked. Grant could only dimly hear him.

Then, as if from a great distance, he heard Skye say, “Ward!” and touch him on the shoulder. Her hand felt terrifying in its solidity, as if Christian had reached through the years to once again torment him. Grant yanked himself away from her and fought to get to a defensible position, swinging wildly to keep her away.

“Hey, hey, hey. Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Skye said to him. “Grant, calm down. Calm down, please,” she begged him. He was close to panicking but once he got a good look at her face and heard her say his name, he started to regain control of himself. The please especially brought him some perspective. Christian never said please, at least not to him. Skye wasn’t Christian and this wasn’t the well. Grant’s breathing was hard and fast but he struggled to take deeper breaths and remember where he was. Church ruins. Randolph. The staff.

“The staff,” Grant managed to get out. “He has it.” He looked back toward Randolph’s last known position.

Skye pressed her coms. “Something’s wrong with Ward,” she told Coulson and Fitz. “The staff’s gone. Someone took it.”

“OK. Stay with Ward. Fitz and I are dealing with a few things on our end but we’ll come get you soon,” Coulson responded.

“Copy that,” Skye replied. Then she turned to Grant. His breathing had calmed down considerably. “Well, it looks like it’s just you and me for a while,” she told him cheerfully.

Grant just looked at her, drinking in the sight of her beautiful face. He had to concentrate on her in order to curb his fear and increasing agitation. He could tell that she was worried about him, one good feeling in a sea of bad. Before Coulson’s team, the only one who had ever cared about Grant was Thomas and he….

no, I can’t go there! Focus! Church ruins. Randolph. The staff.

“What the hell just happened to me?” he asked as he tried to stand on shaking legs. His legs almost buckled and he had to lean on Skye for support.

“Are you sure this is a good idea? Maybe you should sit back down. We’re not going anywhere for a while,” Skye said in a soothing voice, putting her hand on his chest to steady him.

He almost agreed but then he started feeling better. It was like an incredibly strong surge of energy coursed through him, making him feel powerful. He removed himself from Skye’s grasp as gently as possible and started pacing. The power was wonderful but the feeling of ants crawling all over him, the rising irritation, was not.

“Randolph,” he almost growled. “Clearly he’s more involved than he told us. He knew exactly where the staff was. The next time I see him…” he trailed off because Skye was looking at him with wide eyes. Grant didn’t want to scare her, so he turned away and willed himself to calm down. It didn’t work, so he resumed his pacing. What is wrong with me? The two of them remained that way in silence – him pacing, her watching him – for several minutes until Coulson told them to
Soon Grant found himself sitting in the lab with his shirt off hooked up to several monitors and a heart-rate cuff while both Fitz and Jemma hovered over him. Skye was looking on in concern. He felt humiliated. He was supposed to be Agent Grant Ward, one of the toughest Specialists SHIELD had, and here he was, brought down by a stupid staff. He didn’t want to explain what happened, the pain he felt or the memories that crashed down onto him. He needed to compartmentalize but somehow, that strategy wasn’t working at the moment. The feeling of humiliation did nothing to ease his temper.

“This is ridiculous,” he bit out.

“It’s anything but,” Skye retorted. “Ward, you passed out and you were acting not right.” He hadn’t passed out, not really, but having her believe that was infinitely better than her knowing the truth: that he was literally brought to his knees by painful memories of a time when he was helpless and afraid.

“Coulson ordered me to give you a full work up,” Jemma told him in her no-nonsense Dr. Simmons’ voice, “and that’s exactly what I’m doing. Um, before you lost consciousness, were you feeling claustrophobic?”

_That sounds like a stupid question. “Why?”_ Grant demanded.

“She’s ruling out a panic attack,” Fitz said absently, not even looking up from his spectrograph.

That was exactly the reason why he didn’t want this. Now they were going to think that he couldn’t handle dark, enclosed spaces. As if anxiety could bring him to his knees. He’d experienced so much worse than a panic attack, it wasn’t even funny. They had no idea.

“I don’t panic,” Grant told them decisively. “Ever.” _Not anymore._

“There we go,” Jemma said soothingly. “Ruled out.”

“Touching the staff caused it, right?” Skye asked.

“Any residual effects? Any you exhibiting any extra strength?” Jemma inquired. _Great. She thinks that stupid thing turned me into the Hulk._

He looked up at the monitor which showed Coulson going into the Interrogation Room to talk with Randolph. He felt a moment’s hatred for the man who had caused all this. _What is that staff? What did it do to me?_ He needed answers. He despised feeling out of control, the way he had at the well. If only he could do that day over. He would have thrown Thomas the rope and then beaten the hell out of Christian. But he wasn’t strong then the way he was now.

“Why don’t I find out on that guy?” he asked in a low, menacing voice.

Skye turned to look at the screen too, then turned back to Grant. “Why don’t we not do that?” she murmured.

Fitz still had his nose buried in his tech. “What’s the last thing you remember before you lost consciousness?” he asked Grant.

Grant hated the feeling of being a lab rat, of people trying to decipher his thoughts and feelings. That could be dangerous and, quite honestly, he’d had enough of that during the hours of therapy he’d undergone. Even then, they hadn’t gotten around to talking about the well. That particular
memory was still there, causing all sorts of trouble. Grant realized that he’d never dealt with it, not really, and that was part of the reason why this was so bad. However, he had no idea of how to even get started, so all he was left with were the horrible feelings associated with it. A wave of fury rolled over him and Grant abruptly stood up and yanked his arm out of the cuff. “This is a waste of time,” he snarled.

“Oh! Uh…” Jemma said, looking down in dismay at the dismantled cuff.

“We need to find the staff!” Grant all but yelled at them. He moved over to one of the tables so he wasn’t so close to the equipment they were using to make him feel like a nothing.

Fitz didn’t appear impressed. “What exactly did you remember?” he asked in a loud voice.

“Something I hadn’t thought about in a long time,” Grant answered, barely keeping his voice level. What is wrong with me? Usually he was so in control, a master of his emotions. But this was too much, too overpowering.

“Why don’t we leave it alone?” Skye asked FitzSimmons quietly. Great. Now Skye thinks I’m weak.

“Well, I mean, he just pulled his arm out of this…” Jemma replied.

Fitz murmured, “We’re not going to finish…”

“Quiet,” Grant snapped, looking angrily at the lot of them. “I want to hear this.” He used his precise words so that they would know he was serious. It worked because they all looked down and stopped speaking. In a dim recess of his brain, Grant knew that they were all trying to help, that they cared about him, but that thought was too far away for it to resonate right now. He punched the volume level button on the remote with a great deal more force than necessary.

“One of my men is hurt,” Coulson was saying. “The staff is gone.” The team watched and listened as Randolph claimed that he just wanted to study the staff. Coulson didn’t look as though he was buying the historian excuse. Good! Grant wanted to rip the guy limb from limb. He even started envisioning what it would feel like, which appendage would go first, when the screen suddenly shut off.

He whipped around to face Jemma. “What are you doing?” he demanded.

“Your heart rate’s rising. Adrenaline’s spiking,” she told him in a quiet tone. “You need to calm down, not get worked up.”

Grant sighed, took some deep breaths and gently set his hands down on the table. She’s right. But still, he couldn’t control the surges of anger that seemed to be battering his psyche. He tried his usual method of compartmentalizing, of putting thoughts and feelings in a box but it wasn’t working. He tried to concentrate harder but out of the corner of his eye, he saw Skye lean towards him confidentially.

“The memory,” she said very quietly. “Was it about your brother?”

He was trying his best to let it go and now she had to bring it up again. How did they expect him to calm down if they wouldn’t stop talking to him? Grant looked at her angrily. “Drop it,” he said warningly.

“Ward, if you need to get it out, I am here,” she replied, looking him straight in the eye.
For a split second, the warm, positive feelings that Skye always seemed to evoke in him came as he felt grateful, intrigued, hopeful, loving, and yes, even turned on. But it was the recognition of his lust that turned the warm feelings into anger. Although he knew that Skye felt the attraction between them, she’d never seemed as affected by the physical connection they shared as he did. She was all talk and he didn’t want to talk. Why can’t she understand that?

“Right. To talk.” He could feel a mean expression coming over his face and damn him, he was enjoying it. “Because that’s what you do: talk. And talk. Don’t you get tired of hearing your own voice?” he asked as he advanced towards her. Skye straightened up, looking scared.

Grant was almost beyond incensed. In his world, talking was dangerous. You either let slip too much information or you paid for it with violence. How many times had young Grant Ward been hit or punished severely for saying the wrong thing? How long did it take for him to learn to provide short, accurate answers to Garrett so he could earn praise or a bit of food he didn’t have to provide for himself? Until he worked with his therapist, no one encouraged Grant to talk about his feelings. They didn’t matter. And although he had gotten better since his counseling, he still had trouble associating talking with something positive.

Yet here was Skye, Ms. Talk-a-Lot herself. She put so much emphasis on emotions that Grant often didn’t know what to do with her. Yes, to be an effective SO, he was starting to incorporate feelings into his lessons in order to get what he wanted from her but he was far from comfortable with it. And sometimes he felt like he was getting too comfortable talking with her. Grant had a lot of secrets to keep and loose lips sank ships. He couldn’t afford that, so he constantly had to be careful with her. And sometimes, he just wished she’d shut up and do what he told her. So yeah, even though he knew he was out of line, it actually felt good to tell at least some of the truth.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. “Ward, stop,” Fitz said. Grant jumped away from his touch. Can’t these people stop touching me from behind?

“Well,” Jemma said in a fake, hearty voice, “this makes more sense. Ward, what you’re experiencing, this feeling – it’s chemistry.”

“Hope so,” Skye said, still looking freaked out.

Grant felt a moment of hope. If Jemma knew what was going on with him, then maybe she could work her magic and solve his problem. After all, she’d found an anti-serum to the Chitauri virus, something no one on Earth had even seen before, in a little under two hours. If she could do that, he had faith that she could do almost anything.

“Yeah. Spikes in his adrenocorticotropin hormone,” Jemma explained. “It’s like those stories you hear when a mother is able to lift a car to save her baby. An adrenaline surge can create a massive…”

Grant took a step towards Jemma. “Stop talking!” he practically yelled while gesticulating wildly. Why can’t they just be quiet? “Just fix it!” I didn’t see her talking this much when it was her life on the line!

“I wish I could,” Jemma said. Grant could feel himself glowering in her direction but he felt helpless to stop. “We can relieve some of the symptoms,” She swallowed hard in the face of his vicious glare. “I’m going to give you 10 cc of benzodiazepine.”

Grant turned his back and walked a few steps away from them in disgust. They weren’t helping.

“Chill pill,” Skye said wryly. Apparently she was no longer scared of him. “Good idea.”
“A sedative? Not gonna happen,” he told Jemma. Didn’t they understand? Specialists had to be ready for anything. They couldn’t rely on drugs to modify their emotions because they impaired the split second timing and clear thinking necessary for mission completion and survival. Every specialist knew that drugs were a death sentence.

“Well, be reasonable,” Fitz said to him. “Look how you’re behaving.”

Grant advanced on him and got right up in his face. “And if I’m sedated and we cross paths with those juiced freaks, the ones who flip cars and smash people up, are you gonna take them on?” he asked, pointing his finger at Fitz for emphasis. “Keep us safe?”

Fitz looked down. In a small part of himself, Grant knew that he was crossing a line. He was purposefully calling out everyone’s flaws, pushing their buttons, just so he could have the pleasure of watching them squirm. By pointing out their shortcomings, he also was taking the attention off of himself and that felt better. Focusing on them kept him from thinking about himself. For Fitz, he knew that he feared that everyone thought he wasn’t good enough, that he couldn’t keep people safe the way that Grant could. It wasn’t true – his way was just different – but he knew Fitz didn’t realize that. Even though that small part was screaming at him to stop, he continued.

“Or am I gonna have to save Simmons’ ass…again?” he asked. He pointed at Fitz once more. Fitz refused to look Grant in the face, to engage with him in any way. Disgusted with himself for being such a bully and angrier than ever at the situation, Grant grabbed his shirt and stomped out of the lab.

He went directly to his bunk, changed into workout clothes, got his iPod and earbuds and headed to the punching bag. He tried to mask out the memory of Thomas calling for him but he couldn’t, no matter how long or how hard he hit the bag.

“Help me!” he heard Thomas’ anguished cry in his ears. His little brother and the well were everywhere now. He could glimpse Thomas’ frightened face and see the lapping of the water as it went over his head. “Please! Help me!” It was almost as if Grant were the one in the well, drowning in something he couldn’t get out of.

And to make it all worse, there were days in which he felt like that. He had dreams about drowning. In Grant’s more insightful moments, he was aware that he was awash with secrets and lies and that the real parts of him couldn’t resurface as much as he would like. Hydra and SHIELD did have him trapped in a well with little hope of getting out. So, the thought of the well that day was affecting him on multiple levels. Grant didn’t know what to do. He couldn’t change the memory; he couldn’t stop the feelings. He was inundated with anger and misery. If only…if only…

At the back of his brain, he heard someone calling his name, someone who wasn’t Thomas. “Ward!” Once again, someone put a hand on his shoulder but this time he was going to do something about it. He wasn’t going to let one more person get the drop on him. He hadn’t defended himself back then but he would be damned if he’d make the same mistake again. So Grant whipped around and punched as hard as he could. Nothing. He punched air because May had wisely stepped out of the way.

He stepped back, looking upset. “You should be more careful,” he told her. What if his punch had actually landed? He had seen first-hand what kind of damage his punches could do and Grant didn’t think he could handle another regret.

“I’m fine,” May told him shortly. “You?” May’s irritation and her refusal to offer him the cloying sympathy of the Lab Trio actually helped him focus. He returned to the punching bag.
“I’m working it out,” he said.

“You’re punching things,” she corrected him, still keeping her distance. “The last thing you need is to punch things,” she said, stepping a little closer.

Grant looked at her, knowing that his fierce expression wasn’t going to scare her like it did the other three. He hung onto the bag to balance himself. “You got a better idea?” he asked. Please!

“Let me help you,” May said. How could she possibly know how to help me?

“The only help I need is to stop those guys before they hurt somebody else,” he retorted. He tried to sound tough but his voice broke a little on the last words. It was his job to protect people and still, the worst memory he had, one of the many times he’d failed his brother, kept slamming into him. All he could do was try to wash away that sin by helping others.

May nodded but gently put her hand on his arm. “When you’re ready, you know where I’ll be,” she said quietly before she walked away.

Grant watched her go and then nodded to himself. She was right. Punching hadn’t helped him feel better. Really, nothing had, and if he was going to be of any use to the team, he needed to pull himself together. He returned to his bunk, showered, changed and headed to Coulson’s office. The two of them hadn’t talked much since they’d returned from the church ruins. A good specialist always provides a superior officer with the situational information needed to make good decisions. Coulson needed to know what was going on.

Grant knocked on Coulson’s door. He knew he was in there, so when Coulson didn’t answer, he risked opening the door a little and peered in. “A moment, sir?”

Coulson was just sitting there, staring at the screen of Randolph sitting quieting in the Containment Area. What is he hoping to see? “Come on in,” he told Grant lightly.

Grant walked in and took a deep breath. He really didn’t want to admit to his weakness but he knew that it was the right thing to do. “I’m concerned that my exposure to that weapon has compromised my ability to do my job,” he said. He stopped and waited for Coulson to say something. The man looked so calm!

“Go on,” Coulson said.

“You’re familiar with my family history. So, for obvious reasons, I don’t think back to childhood. Ever.” Grant was practically choking on this admission. He absolutely despised having to talk about his family and he knew it was dangerous. If too many questions got asked, his weird connection to Garrett could get unmasked and then he’d have to deal with the fallout. So he thought it prudent to provide a little context but not too much.

“There are things I put away a long time ago on lockdown. Because to do this? I have to be focused, tactical. I can’t be distracted. Especially by things that happened a lifetime ago.” Once again, despite his best efforts, Grant’s voice shook on the last part of the sentence. Today those things felt all too real, more like his future instead of his past.

“You’re saying touching the Staff unlocked certain memories,” Coulson clarified.

Grant nodded. “My worst memory,” he whispered. “The first time I felt…” he stopped to gain control over his voice. Why can’t I speak today? “…hate. And it won’t go away. I don’t trust myself. The way I went off at Skye and FitzSimmons in the lab…” He shook his head, embarrassed at his outburst, shamed at the thought that he might have scared them.
“Grant,” Coulson interrupted. That’s the first time he’s ever said my first name! “You telling me this makes me feel I can trust you.”

Despite waiting months to hear those words, to finally feel like Coulson cared about him, the words made him feel awful. Coulson shouldn’t trust him because Grant already was betraying him, for Hydra and for Fury. Yes, he was doing it for a cause that Coulson believed in but there was still the personal betrayal. If he hadn’t already been feeling sick with unfiltered adrenaline, shame, and tension, Grant would have felt worse. He just didn’t have room for anything more at the moment. So, instead of saying anything, of risking blurting everything out, he just nodded.

Coulson stood up and motioned to the screen. “Him, on the other hand. I can’t get the professor to talk.” He looked at Grant. “You’ve got some rage built up. Maybe it’s time to let it out.” Grant smiled grimly. Hell, yeah! He wanted to let it out so badly and on the person who caused it? Count me in!

Grant walked briskly down to the Containment Room and shoved open the door. Randolph was placidly sitting at the table, his cuffed hands in front of him. “You need to start talking,” Grant said in a threatening way.

Randolph appeared unimpressed. “I told Agent Coulson everything I know,” he said in a weary voice.

Grant moved into the room until he was right in front of the table where Randolph sat. “You’re lying,” he told him. “Tell me what that thing did to me and how to fix it,” he said through his teeth. Please help me!

“I swear I don’t know,” Randolph replied.

“OK then,” Grant said fiercely, unsheathing the blade of a knife. He swooped in front of Randolph, bring the blade down to slit his throat. Randolph calmly grabbed the knife and crushed it like a toy in his hand. Grant looked at him just as the door opened and Coulson stepped in.

“You were right,” Grant told him. “He’s Asgardian.”

“Good thing,” Coulson said humorously. “Otherwise, that would have been awfully embarrassing.” Isn’t that the truth? Grant knew that he probably would have regretted killing Randolph if he had turned out to be a mortal literature professor but, at the moment, he didn’t care.

He stood there with his arms crossed, barely listening, while the Asgardian explained his story to them. A few things caught his interest though. Randolph was explaining how the myth of the Asgardian warrior – the myth the crazy people revered – had come to pass.

“I didn’t write it! I didn’t want anyone to know about me!” Randolph said. Grant had more than a passing familiarity with that sentiment. “But then I had to open my big mouth,” Randolph continued ruefully. Ah, the talking thing. Once again, it got people into trouble.

“Were you captured? Tortured?” Grant asked Randolph. Those were the only ways he could think of that he would ever talk. It never occurred to him that other feelings might be equally as effective as pain in making people tell their secrets. No one had ever tried anything else on him, so how would he know?

He was completely taken aback when Randolph just shook his head, looked thoughtful and said, “Horny. I met a French girl in 1546. Ah, she loved stories. So I told her a great one, all about the peaceful Asgardian warrior who stayed.”
Grant narrowed his eyes. Peaceful warrior? How could there be such a thing? Warriors were violent by their very natures. Weren’t they? What would it mean to be a peaceful warrior? He was puzzling over this odd turn of phrase so much that he missed much of the explanation that followed. His attention returned however when Randolph explained that he was originally a mason – broke rocks for a living – until he signed up to fight.

“I think, really, I just wanted to travel,” Randolph said wistfully. Grant couldn’t let that go. What a ridiculous notion! He was lying to them. Peaceful warrior indeed.

“But you had the Staff,” he said.

“I hated that thing,” Randolph said, shaking his head. “Other guys loved all the power that comes with the rage. Nah. I didn’t like it at all.”

Grant totally believed that part. The rage was horrible. Yes, it gave him some power he might not normally have but the misery of the intense fury was too great. It was too high of a price to pay and Grant believed that he’d already paid too much over the course of his life. He was probably going to have to pay even more in the future so this felt like too much. Apparently this was clear because Randolph picked up on his feelings.

“And you don’t either it seems,” he said leaning forward on the table.

Grant looked down. “What did it do to me?” he asked, struggling to keep his voice steady.

“It shines a light into your dark places. It doesn’t matter if you’re human, Asgardian, the effect is the same: unpleasant.”

Grant tried to control his breathing which had started to speed up. He tried not to lose it as he watched the smug Asgardian tell them that the angry youths would calm down and die of old age, that change was the best part of being on Earth. How dare he talk of dying, knowing that he himself would live thousands upon thousands of years! How dare he make light of the threat angry people made to vulnerable people when he himself could never truly be harmed! He had done this to Grant and didn’t even seem to care. So, Grant smiled wickedly when Coulson warned Randolph about the one thing he cared about: his anonymity.

“You may not know Thor,” Coulson said. “But I do.” Grant smiled with satisfaction as he watched the complacent expression fall off of Randolph’s face. They had him.

Once the plane landed in Ireland, the team started getting ready to go to the monastery. Randolph lounged in front of the lab, watching as people passed him by. May walked by and gave him a hard stare. Grant came up to him, opened a box containing all of the possessions, jewelry mostly, that they took from him. He leaned in closer as Randolph started taking things out and putting them on.

“The effects of the Staff. Are they permanent?” he asked. Please say no!

“The strength wears off,” Randolph admitted. “You will feel exhausted afterwards. You’ll need sleep.” Not what I care about!

“What about the other effects?” Grant whispered to him. He didn’t want the other team members to know how badly this was affecting him.

Randolph looked up at him. “Oh, that dark, nasty ache in the pit of your stomach.” He nodded knowingly. “The rage in your chest that makes you feel as if your heart’s about to explode?” Grant nodded, almost grateful that someone else understood what he was feeling. “It’s worse on humans. But give it a few decades and it’ll wear off too,” he said unconcernedly.
“Great,” Grant whispered and then slammed the case shut so hard that Skye jumped. He strode angrily over to the SUV, climbed in the back and slammed the door. *What am I going to do?*

The team walked with Randolph into the deserted monastery. They followed him over to the altar and huddled around the book lying there while Grant and May took up defensive positions around them. They were then forced to listen as Randolph reminisced about his time in ancient Ireland. “They venerated me a bit as a saint,” he concluded immodestly.

“They’re idiots,” Grant bit out. Imagine, thinking that guy was someone special when he was just a two-bit lowlife. Everyone turned to look at him. *Time to get this show on the road.* “Where’s the staff?” he demanded.

“It’s upstairs,” Randolph said and quickly led the way.

Randolph had just opened the box where he believed the last piece of the Staff would be housed when Nystrom, the leader of the Norse paganists, rounded the corner holding it. Clearly he had gotten there before they did. He plunged the Staff into Randolph’s chest saying, “If you want to defeat a god, you must become one!” *Well, that makes no sense. These guys are crazy.*

He watched as Randolph fell to the floor, groaning with pain. Grant realized that only he could stop the juiced freaks, so he knelt beside the Asgardian, took a deep breath and grabbed the Staff sticking out of him. The engravings lit up just like they had the last time he held a piece of it. He felt the wave of power wash over him, saw Thomas in the well, and let out a scream of rage as he yanked it out of Randolph and faced the cultist who had a piece of his own. Grant tackled Nystrom and the two of them flew over the banner onto the first floor.

Nystrom recovered first. He picked Grant up bodily and slammed him down on the floor. Grant heard Skye breathlessly say, “We need to help him!” but he couldn’t think about what that meant. Nystrom threw him against one of the stone pillars. Fueled by the memory of Thomas begging him for help while he was helpless to do anything, Grant stood up to face Nystrom. He was not going to be helpless again! He would not let another bully keep him from protecting the people he loved! Grant punched Nystrom and then kicked him against the solid wooden door with enough force that the cultist remained unmoving.

Grant was busy looking around for other threats when Skye said, “Grant! Drop the Staff!” from behind him.

He whirled around to face her. “Get away from me!” he told her. He was afraid that he would hurt her in his condition.

“Agent Ward!” May said firmly as she ran up to the two of them. She looked tense. But Skye didn’t. Somehow she’d managed to leave her fear behind in the lab because she walked toward him, looking Grant straight in the eyes. “This isn’t you,” she told him. The interior door opened and several big men – clearly cultists coming to help Nystrom – marched through it.

“Get back!” Grant told May and Skye and, miracle of all miracles, they both listened. He bent down and picked up the second piece of the Staff. It lit up and he staggered a bit as the memory of his helplessness at the well, at his inability to be strong enough to defy Christian and help Thomas, rolled over him. That was the moment when he knew that he hated Christian, that one day he would find a way to kill him. Instead, he focused on the cultists as they approached.

There were at least nine men, all yelling and coming at him. Grant beat his way through them, one by one. All throughout the fight, the only thing in his mind was the sound of Thomas, his beloved
younger brother, yelling, “Grant, help me! Please help me!” as he struggled to stay above the water in the deep well. He had gone to get a rope to throw down to him when Christian approached.

“Not yet, Grant,” he told him. Grant had protested. “But he’s going to…” Christian got all the way in his face. “Not. Yet,” he told him. “Throw him the rope and I’ll throw you in there, too.” Down in the well, he could hear Thomas crying hysterically. Grant stood there uselessly, hating himself, hating Christian, until Christian finally left. Then he threw the rope down in the water, watching helplessly as Thomas sank below.

As the memory played itself out, Grant found himself recalled to the present. He was down on his knees, the bodies of all the men he’d fought laying around him. He dropped the pieces of the Staff, numb to the core. He fell over. Grant had repressed that memory the best he could yet it was the one that had driven him to be who he was today. It was the memory of the well – his helplessness and hatred – that helped him survive Garrett’s brutal training program because he knew that one day, he would protect people like Thomas who couldn’t protect themselves. And it was that same horrible memory that had spurred him to take down ten angry cultists. He crawled over to the altar steps and sat there, traumatized. Who would throw him a rope?

Skye rushed over to him. “Oh my god! Are you OK?” she asked breathlessly. He was barely aware of her presence at first but then, as she threw his arm around her shoulders in order to help him up, he was extremely grateful. Unlike his family, his team was here to help him. They cared about his welfare and he no longer had to face things alone. And here was Skye, finally moved to action instead of talk, stepping outside her comfort zone in order to be there for him. “Oh, come here!” she gasped, putting her hand on his head.

But it was not over yet. Grant had just allowed himself to feel a little bit of relief when the door opened and another man and Petra Larson, Jacob Nystrom’s girlfriend, marched through, the third piece of the Staff in her hand. May whirled around sharply.

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me,” Skye said as she clutched Grant’s black leather jacket. He sighed heavily. When will I ever be able to rest? When will I be able to make up for what I didn’t do that day at the well? He took his arm off of Skye’s shoulder and used her knee to help propel himself up. He had just reached for one of the Staff pieces when May grabbed his hand.

“This time,” she said incredibly gently, “let me help.” Grant looked up at her and saw a fierce protectiveness in her eyes. He’d already rejected her offer of help once but he couldn’t do it again. May had thrown him a rope and he grabbed on with everything he had. Grant nodded to her wearily. He’d never heard the Cavalry speak so softly and he was so very tired.

Skye was quick to pick up on his acquiescence and she put his arm around her again and said urgently, “OK, come on!” She pulled him over to the side where the two of them sat and watched May take on both Larson and the man. During her fight with Larson, May actually united all three pieces of the Staff and then easily took out the Norwegian woman.

Grant watched with deep empathy as May, finished with her fight, gently laid down the Staff and stood up, her hands shaking. She looked over at him and he nodded with understanding. She nodded back. Skye got up to meet FitzSimmons at the foot of the stairs. When she did, May staggered over to where Grant was sitting and took Skye’s place next to him. The two never looked at each other but were sitting close enough to offer what comfort they could. FitzSimmons told all of them what had happened with the Asgardian then they moved with Skye over to the side to continue their talk while Grant and May just sat against the wall side-by-side in silence, shell-shocked.
After a while, Grant asked her, “When you held it, did you see anything?” He turned toward her, desperate to hear her answer. Does what I keep seeing make me a monster? May nodded. “Then how? How did you hold all three?” He didn’t think he could have borne the memories and pain that one extra piece would have brought. How did May?

“Because I see it every day,” she answered without looking at him. Then she turned and walked away.

After the whole monastery debacle, Randolph volunteered to treat the entire team to a night at a nice hotel instead of having them return to the Bus. Grant jumped at the chance for some true alone time. He showered, changed his clothes and headed immediately to the bar. However, despite his wish to maybe drink his cares away, he found that he couldn’t. Instead, he sat at the counter with his drink in front of him, just swirling his fingers around the rim over and over, trying to make sense of what had happened in the last few days.

It was there that Skye found him. “Hey,” she said gently. He slowly turned his head to look at her. It was almost more than he could stand. Here was this amazing person, someone who completely overlooked his mean-spirited statements, someone who refused to be scared of him when he needed her the most. Even with how unkind and scary he had been to her, she still came over to talk with him. He could barely manage to live with himself for how he had treated her.

She looked so beautiful. She apparently could sense his mood and, in true Skye fashion, deflected with a joke. “I could get used to turndown service and little mints on my pillow,” she said with a small smile. He could tell that she was inviting him to just have a conversation, to connect again on a superficial level. OK, he could do that.

“Overnights aren’t standard,” he told her with an amused expression on his face. Grant was grateful for her lifeline. He took a sip of his drink.

She watched him. “We deserve a nice night,” she argued. He had to agree with her but he’d never admit it. “You especially,” she finished in a low voice. “How you feeling?”

“Not great,” he responded quickly. He couldn’t believe that she cared enough to ask. Hardly anyone ever did but, in his time on the team, he was finding that some people – his family of choice – actually would check in with him. That touched him more than he could say. She deserved more, so much more, than his awful outburst in the lab. He couldn’t just let that go without letting her know how much he regretted it.

“I’m sorry for before. I’m…” falling in love with you, not a monster, “I’m not that guy.”

“You’re a guy who saves lives. I can overlook a little Hulk rage. No harm, no foul,” Skye replied easily. Once again, she surprised him. He was so used to people making him pay for every unpleasant emotion, every mistake, every careless word. And here was this beautiful woman who not only refused to make him feel bad but actually forgave him for his flaws. Where did she come from?

He shook his head slightly, confused. How could she be this way, especially with her background of foster care and loss? Grant knew something about rejection, the kind where you believe no one loves you. His rage was partly the result of that. But Skye didn’t appear to respond the same way. “Does everything just roll off your back?” he asked.

“No. If it helped, I’d rage all the time but it doesn’t,” she answered. Grant looked thoughtful. She’s right. And maybe she’s right about talking about it. At least she deserves this much truth from me.
“What I saw...” he paused, steeling himself for what he was about to do, “it was about my brother.” Grant had lost count of the number of times his voice trembled within the last few days but here was yet another instance. Maybe he would never be able to talk about the well without feeling weak.

Skye leaned closer. “I figured,” she said quietly. She reached over and put her hand on top of his. “I know you’re not one to talk but, like I said, I’m here,” she said looking at him directly. “My shoulder’s free.”

Her hand on his felt so impossibly good. Just her being there felt wonderful. Grant felt himself weakening. He was no stranger to women and their tells and he knew that with a little effort, he could probably spend the night in Skye’s room. He wanted that so badly that he could almost taste it. But he couldn’t. In the state he was in, he would lose focus and probably tell her everything. Once he started talking, it was likely that he wouldn’t stop and he couldn’t afford that. He had to keep things tightly reined in for now.

Grant glanced down at her hand and she abruptly removed it. He smiled slightly, allowing himself the merest wisp of a fantasy of giving in, talking to Skye and telling her everything, of where that would lead. But he couldn’t. Too many people, including Skye, were counting on him to maintain his cover and bring Hydra down.

So, instead of doing what almost every cell in his body was screaming at him to do, he took a deep breath and said, “I’m beat.” He started to stand up from his lean on the bar. Skye clearly took that as the dismissal it was because she looked away, a disappointed expression on her face. Grant couldn’t leave it at that. He couldn’t let her feel like he didn’t want to talk, that her offer of support wasn’t welcome. “Another time maybe,” he said with an affectionate smile.


Grant smiled back and downed his bourbon. Then he slowly walked away, taking great care not to give into temptation and touch her. If he even brushed up against her, he would be a goner. He went up to his room, put the electronic key in the door and hesitated. He didn’t really want to be alone with his thoughts but frankly, he had no other alternative. There was no one to call and he’d turned away the only person willing to let him talk.

But then he looked down the hall and saw May heading to her room, a bottle of bourbon in her hand. May seemed to sense his attention and she turned her head to look at him. Then she slowly went into her room, deliberately leaving the door open. Grant considered his options. He could go into his room, be alone and possibly be deluged with bad memories. Or he could take May up on her offer to take physical comfort in her presence, unleash some pleasurable tension, and relax. May wouldn’t try to get him to talk nor would she insist that he listen to her. There was no danger that he would break cover or fall in love with her. She was safe; she was his rope. The decision made, he walked down to her room and closed the door.

Chapter End Notes

Yet another gargantuan chapter! I hope you all don't strain your eyes from reading so much. But I have to admit that it was really fun to write and practically wrote itself. And I know that some of you really dislike the MayWard relationship but hopefully it will make sense here.
After Skye and Coulson left the Bus on Lola, Grant concentrated on doing whatever Garrett wanted him to do. He landed the Bus in Cuba, helped bring supplies onboard the plane, and oversaw the allocation of plane resources to the minions Garrett insisted upon bringing along. It was all he could do to not yell at them for messing up the lab or even touching Skye’s bunk. But he had to make Garrett believe that he was 150% with him, so he kept quiet.

The entire time he was doing these things though, he was seething. Skye hated him, Coulson believed him a traitor, Garrett tried to kill him and Maria Hill refused to let him break cover. He had no one in his corner. Again.

The desperation and loneliness was familiar. It reminded him of when he had been in juvenile detention for trying to burn down his family’s house. Before John had shown up and broken him out, Grant had considered just how alone and unloved he truly was. Sure, his younger siblings loved him but they could do nothing to help and he suspected that his parents would make certain he would never see them again. Not even his Grams could help as she had died the previous summer. It was the first time he’d ever seriously contemplated suicide.

That was one reason why he recklessly agreed to John’s proposal. Back then, Grant had been nothing but impulsive and ruled by emotion and anything was better than the slow death his parents and his jailors envisioned for him. If there was a chance that he could escape their clutches and create a different life for himself, then he was going to take it.

Even now, he wasn’t certain he had made the right decision. Grant realized long ago that John was a liar but the tales he spun that day about pressing charges and charging him as an adult sounded exactly like things his vengeful family would do. And he didn’t know what would have happened had he taken his chances with the legal system. He might still be in prison or maybe he would have been out by now. Either way, he wouldn’t have been trained by the best, gone all over the world and protected numerous people. But he also wouldn’t have become the efficient killer and dangerous spy, someone who always ended up alone. So who was to say what the right decision would have been?

Grant could remember in vivid detail John’s visit to him. He’d overlooked Grant’s sullenness and ignored his outright lie that he hadn’t known Christian was in the house. Of course Grant had known; that had been the whole point. John’s flattery had felt amazing and his subtle challenge – that maybe Grant wasn’t up for doing something hard – was a masterful stroke in manipulating the impulsive teenager. And John hadn’t been lying about that. He had been absolutely correct that going with him would be the hardest thing Grant would ever do.

But John had also been wrong in telling Grant that no one would ever screw with him again. How could Grant ever guess that John, his savior and father figure, would be the very one to screw with him when he had Mike stop his heart? Sure, John had told him not to trust anyone – John most of all – but he hadn’t truly meant it. That was just another ploy to gain his trust and it had worked. Grant had fallen for it for years. But not anymore.

So Grant bided his time. He was not foolish enough to confront Garrett in front of the others or drag him away from important work just to complain. But he did plan on having a word or two. In the meantime, he was irritated for yet another reason. Why wasn’t Garrett using him for missions he was well suited to complete? Did he not trust him enough? That wasn’t acceptable.

Once the plane had taken off (Mike just having rejoined them), he decided that he could
reasonably talk with Garrett about his skills. “I could have crossed off that drug lord without getting my picture taken,” he told him as he lounged on the table outside the kitchen. The others were eating and drinking but Grant’s stomach had been too tied in knots to do the same. If Garrett were another kind of person, Grant might have worried that he would notice but, as it was, he felt pretty secure that if Garrett did observe Grant’s refusal of food, he wouldn’t care.

“Single shot, half a mile away,” he said as Garrett upended his drink. He wanted Garrett focused on his skills, not his knowledge or his loyalties. Those were for a more private conversation.

“You’re missing the point. I didn’t want to just cross him off. I wanted to make a spectacle. People are killed by guns every day in Bogota.” Garrett saw Mike walking down the corridor and began walking towards him. “But how often does a monster punch a drug lord’s head clean off?” he asked with a gleeful smile. A monster. That’s what he is now? “Hell, that’s international news,” Garrett crowed.

Grant followed Garrett’s progress down the hall. “Spectacular thing you did there, Mikey,” Garrett told Deathlok. Mike didn’t reply. “If I didn’t know better, I’d swear you’re starting to enjoy your job,” he teased him. Grant tried his hardest to keep his expression blank but he was afraid that a sympathetic look may have crossed his face because Mike looked at him sharply.

“You get the impression that he’s enjoying his job?” Garrett asked Grant. It was always like this. Garrett was like that sad frat boy who always needed the adulation and sycophantic agreement of his brothers. Grant had never been to college but he’d seen the movies and Garrett fit the stereotypical frat boy to a T, even going so far as to be the consummate bully. Grant was sick of it. He knew that he had to keep up the act but it was getting harder by the day.

“Somebody does,” he replied.

Garrett seemed a bit nonplussed. “Well, I’d like to think we all enjoy our work,” he said a bit petulantly. Mike was still stone-faced. “Any why not? These are exciting times full of rewards. Which reminds me…” He pulled a cell phone out of his pocket. What is this about?

“That’s Zeller!” Garrett said in a jovial tone. “Yeah, it’s me. Stream Mike Peterson some video of his son this afternoon,” he said, gesturing at Mike like he was doing him a favor. He had a huge shit-eating grin on his face, secure in the knowledge that he was being not only fair but magnanimous. “Don’t mention it,” he said to Mike as he started walking away. Mike hadn’t said one word during the entire exchange. He had given Grant a questioning look though. That wasn’t good.

Grant closed his eyes. This was becoming intolerable. He knew how much Mike loved his son and to be given just a glimpse of him as a reward for good behavior was disgusting. He could almost hear Skye’s commentary on it and he could add some of his own. Grant’s own father cared nothing for his sons yet here was Mike, a loving father, being tortured by that same love. How did I ever go along with Garrett all these years?

But Grant gritted his teeth and followed Garrett down the hall. Soon. Very soon, he would be able to get out of here and, if all went well, rejoin his team on the off chance that they wouldn’t murder him on sight.

“How about that guy?” Garrett asked Grant, gesturing towards Deathlok. “I’ve turned him into a new man.”

“Is that what he is?” Grant muttered. He knew he was pushing it but he just couldn’t help himself. Garrett noticed his sullenness.

“Are you still sore about what he did to you?” he asked in the silky voice that once made Grant cringe. But he was no longer a scared teenager. If push came to shove, he was pretty sure he could
“No, I’m sore at you for making him do it,” he said. Grant didn’t look at Garrett. He was afraid that he would throw a punch if he did. Fury really needed to get him out of here!

“Look,” Garrett said urgently. “We’re on the verge of completing something I’ve been chasing for 25 years. Can’t you just be happy for me?” he asked as he went into the lab.

Typical Garrett. It was astonishing how he managed to turn Mike’s misery and Grant’s near-death experience into something about him. Why couldn’t I see this before? Grant gave himself an internal shake and told himself to get his head in the game. This wouldn’t work if he couldn’t retain Garrett’s confidence and put him in a position for Fury to capture him. He followed him into the lab where Raina was waiting, smiling. He wanted to throw up at the sight of her polluting FitzSimmons’ lab.

“See?” Garrett said, pointing at Raina. “That’s what I’m talking about! Happy campers.”

“I think you’ll be happy too,” she told him. “We’re close to replicating the drug that healed Skye and brought Coulson back to life.” She turned to Grant. “And the data from Skye’s hard drive, all that research – it’s been a big help.” She and Garrett both looked at Grant to see his reaction. He kept his face immobile. Raina was baiting him and he wasn’t going to give her anything.

She turned back to Garrett. “I’ve uploaded everything to the lab in Cuba. They’ll have initial results by the time we land.”

“You never disappoint, do you Flowers?” Garrett said with a smirk. “Wish everyone on my team had the same success rate.” Grant knew that this was a dig at him but he didn’t care. Garrett had no idea what Grant’s definition of success actually was. If he did, he would flip and Grant got immense satisfaction out of that. He had to take what he could get.

Speaking of…he watched as Garrett went to Coulson’s office. Maybe now he could have the conversation he was dying to have. He marched into the office, closed the door and turned to see Garrett sitting behind Coulson’s desk, examining one of his nostalgic trinkets. The disrespect involved in that gesture – handling another person’s cherished belongings – moved him to fury. So, instead of starting slow like he planned, Grant launched into his attack just like he had against his family all those years ago.

“You were going to let me die!” Grant yelled at him.

“OK, first off, I think we should use our indoor voices,” Garrett said calmly.

“Since the day we met, I have done everything you asked,” Grant said. And paid for it dearly.

Garrett stopped what he was doing and turned to face Grant, “I’m not sure we can say everything,” he said silkily with just enough emphasis on everything to ensure that Grant knew exactly what he meant.

Oh, yeah. This again. He should have expected this since it was such a familiar refrain. Every time Grant made a friend, cared for someone or trusted even the tiniest bit, he was reminded that he was weak. Every time that he didn’t follow mission protocols exactly to the letter – and especially if he refused to kill someone who was merely in the way – he was told how much he had failed John. For years, Grant believed him and since he was desperate to please someone he believed cared about him, he just stopped thinking for himself. But all that had changed and he wasn’t going to let John off the hook so easily.
“You were going to let Deathlok kill me to get that hard drive?” Even as angry as he was with John, as much as he knew about his personality flaws – his therapist called it Antisocial Personality Disorder or, in modern parlance, a psychopath – he still couldn’t believe that it had all been an act, that John had never cared. Grant didn’t want that to be true, for his last 15 years to have all been a lie. But they had been. After all, why would he care? Caring is a weakness.

“Come on,” Garrett said dismissively. “We both know the girl wasn’t going to let you die. You said yourself Skye’s a soft touch, just like you.” Ah, the old taunt.

Grant turned around, frustrated that Garrett couldn’t see that his heart wasn’t a weakness. He strode angrily towards the desk, channeling his anger about one thing into his fake anger about another. “I am not that scared kid anymore,” he informed Garrett.

“Then stop acting like it!” Garrett yelled, getting to his feet. “Stop being weak,” he told Grant as he came out from behind the desk to confront him. “All these years and you’re still playing the victim. Sometimes I ask myself why I ever bothered.”

Grant had to hand it to the man. He was truly a master manipulator. Here he was, legitimately angry over John’s willingness to sacrifice him and he turned it around so that Grant looked like the bad guy. Like his anger was weak instead of righteous. What a field day his therapist would have with this! Grant opened his mouth to get the conversation back on track (it was going nowhere presently) when John groaned, clutched his side and doubled over.

“John?” Grant asked wondering if this was another form of manipulation. But when Garrett crumpled to the ground, Grant realized he wasn’t faking. In spite of himself, in spite of his anger, he felt panicky and yelled, “John!” He ran to the door and saw one of Garrett’s gun fodder guards. “You! Come help me get him to the lab!”

The man ran into the room and bent down to Garrett. The guard and Grant each got an arm underneath John’s and literally dragged him into the lab where Raina was standing. “Everybody out! Now!” Grant roared. He and the guard lifted John onto one of Jemma’s tables. “All right. Here we go. That’s it,” he told him. Raina was still standing around looking curious. “I said, ‘Get the hell out!’” Grant yelled at her.

Raina had been staring at John fascinated but Grant’s shout seemed to get her attention. The guard grabbed her arm and propelled her out of the lab. “You heard the man,” he told her as they walked. She kept looking back even as she was being led away. That woman is creepy! Grant felt a longing for Jemma, for her calm professionalism and soothing personality. And Fitz with his knowledge of electronics would have been just as valuable. But they weren’t here and it was up to Grant to save John, just as it had been the first time it happened.

Grant had known about John’s mechanical life support for a while. John explained the reasons for the device back when Grant was still living in the woods but he hadn’t known how much John depended on it until one of their first missions together. They were in Greece waiting to steal some important financial papers when John tapped his metallic side.

“Just so you know,” he said to Grant casually, “if this ever fails, all I need is a charge.”

“What do you mean if it ever fails? I thought it was keeping you alive!” Grant said in a worried tone. John couldn’t be hurt. He needed him!

“Well, it doesn’t happen often,” John replied with a shrug. “But if it does, I want you to know what to do. I usually keep a charger with me wherever I go. There’s one in the glove compartment,” he told him gesturing to the front of the car’s dashboard.
Grant dutifully looked at the charger and then at John’s device. He relaxed. The process appeared simple enough and John didn’t seem all that worried. It was probably one of those “just in case” type of conversations. But it wasn’t.

Two days later, they were hiding from several Greek counterespionage agents (although they suspected they were actually Italian mafia) when John unexpectedly doubled over in a dark alley. “Grant,” he groaned in a tortured voice.

Grant froze. John hardly ever called him by his first name, so something must be terribly wrong. “What is it, John?” he asked in a whisper. Now was not the time for conversation!

“It’s happening,” he answered quietly and gave a moan of pain. Grant looked where John was holding his side and knew immediately what he meant.

“John, we’re nowhere near the car!” he told him.

“You’re just going to have to improvise, son.” Son. The word made him feel good and it hardened Grant’s resolve. There was no way that he would let anything happen to John. Grant ended up breaking into a car and using it to generate electricity via a spare cell phone charger. It wasn’t easy and the spark was larger than what was needed but it did the trick.

It took John a while to recover but when he did, he looked at Grant proudly and said, “Damn, son. There isn’t much you can’t do! I sure knew what I was doing when I recruited you!” For years, that had been one of Grant’s fondest memories.

When John first collapsed in Coulson’s office, Grant felt just like he had back in Greece. Despite everything, he realized that he still cared for John just like he would a father. But he couldn’t. He had to maintain his tactical brain and keep his eyes on the prize. Grant even took a moment to wonder whether he should let John die. But almost immediately, he dismissed that thought. Even if he could do it, his only value to Fury was in informing on Hydra and he could only accomplish that through Garrett. So he needed to keep him alive, at least for the time being.

That decision made, he went about getting the equipment needed to recharge John. “All right, hang in there. I’ll get you stabilized,” Grant told him as he started hooking up wires and flipping dials. “Biomechanics rebooting. There. That should do it.” He took a deep breath while John looked lost, almost a shadow of his usual confident self. Grant hated seeing him like that.

“You scared me,” he said to John. “It hasn’t happened like that in a while.”

“Yes it has,” John corrected him in a hoarse voice. Grant looked over at him sharply. What is he talking about? John looked down. “Been happening more and more,” he said quietly. “The biomechanics are fine. It’s my organs that are failing.”

“What are you saying, John?” Grant asked.

John finally turned to look at Grant. “I’m dying,” he told him. “Cybertek team gives me a month, two tops.”

Grant looked at him, stricken. Beyond endangering his mission, he just didn’t know how he should feel about that. Grant hated John for all the damage he had done to him but he also felt the pull of wanting to please his father figure. John had given him a new life and he couldn’t forget that. So, Grant decided to do what he usually did with challenging emotions: file them away for later.

“Well,” he told John, “then I guess we have our work cut out for us.” He helped him off the table and they went back to the bunks so John could lie down.
A short while later, the two of them walked into the barber shop in Havana, Cuba. Garrett walked towards the man in the chair who had clearly just gotten a haircut from Ernesto. Grant didn’t realize until he turned around that it was Ian Quinn. He felt a stab of hot, bubbling anger and leaned against a chair across the room in order to give himself support. Grant was aware that Garrett gave the order to shoot Skye (and he was still furious about it, especially since Skye apparently blamed him for it) but Quinn was the one who actually looked her in the eyes and pulled the trigger. Twice. And he couldn’t forget that or forgive it. Quinn had almost taken away the only woman he’d ever loved.

“There it is,” John said genially, going up to Quinn. “The face of our future.” Quinn smiled delightedly as he put on his coat. Grant almost threw up. If he had his way, the ‘face of our future’ would be sporting two black eyes and a broken nose. At least. John turned around to face Grant. “Mr. Quinn’s the poster boy for our new enterprise,” he told him.

Grant’s knuckles itched with his intense desire to hit the man. He looked away uncomfortably, trying desperately to get his head in the game. He couldn’t show his disgust for Quinn right now but he vowed to himself that he’d more than show him later.

“Not sure how that’s supposed to work,” he said aloud. “He’s also an international fugitive, accused of a laundry list of crimes.” SHIELD is going to get you, fool! Just give them time. And when they do, I’ll be there.

“Accused by SHIELD,” Quinn said easily, walking towards him buttoning his coat. He stopped just short of getting in Grant’s face. Clearly, he was enjoying this. Grant maintained an amused expression. “Of whom I’ve been a vocal critic for years. How SHIELD’s gone down in flames, while I rise from the ashes, all charges dismissed and my sterling reputation restored.” He lightly tapped Grant on the arm as he turned back to John. Enjoy it while it lasts, asshole.

“I knew there was a reason I didn’t rip out that silver tongue of yours,” Garrett said playfully to Quinn. “Everything on schedule?” He turned to sit in Ernesto’s chair.

“Your flamboyant display in Bogota got a lot of people’s attention. I’ll be in DC tomorrow capitalizing on it,” he replied.

“Good,” Garrett told him as Quinn left the shop.

Grant’s cellphone beeped. “It’s Raina,” he said to John. He looked thoughtful. “Maybe she has news.” Garrett appeared uninterested, so Grant took off for the basement where Raina was working. He walked through the room, glancing curiously at the equipment and lab technicians.

“Everything OK?” he asked Raina once he found her.

“Everything’s fine,” she told him as she pushed aside some sealing plastic. What is going on?

“You have a problem with the drug?” Grant asked.

“This isn’t about the drug,” she replied. Grant gave her a “So what then?” look. “I thought Agent Garrett shared my interest in special people, in transformation.” What the hell is she talking about? “But now I realize he was just afraid to die. So I’m not sure how interested he’ll be in what I found out about Skye.”

Oh shit! “Skye?” he repeated calmly.

Raina turned away. “I probably shouldn’t be talking to you about this,” she said. She looked back at him. “I should go straight to Garrett,” she said as she started to walk away. Don’t try to work me,
lady. I practically invented this.

Grant grabbed her arm to prevent her from leaving. He would get to the bottom of this, Garrett or no Garrett. “Garrett’s got more important things to worry about,” he told her. Raina was facing away from him but he would have bet money that she was wearing a pleased smile right now. She thinks she is so slick. Amateur! “You can tell me instead,” he said releasing her arm.

She slowly turned back to face him. “I’ve been looking through the files that Skye downloaded from the plane. And in addition to medical records, I found hospital files, adoption agency searches.” Damn! What did I miss?

“Skye’s an orphan. Been looking for her parents for a while. It’s not exactly a secret,” he said.

“But that’s what intrigued me. That and her DNA.” Raina stopped, stepped a bit closer and looked at Grant expectantly. If he hadn’t been an excellent spy, he would have lost it because he was holding everything together by the merest thread. Skye was in danger and he had no idea from what! What does she mean? What’s unique about her DNA? “It appears to be a match for someone I heard about a long time ago,” Raina continued.

Grant crossed his arms, trying to contain his shaking. What does she know? “You know something about Skye’s history?” he asked her.

“I can’t confirm it’s her but I did hear a story about a baby girl. Years ago, a village in the Hunan province in China. It was destroyed, every man, woman and child, torn apart by monsters trying to find that baby,” she replied.

Grant was desperately trying to make sense of it all, to decipher when Raina was telling the truth, and determine how dangerous the knowledge was to Skye all without appearing as if he was doing so. If he didn’t get a break soon, he was going to crack under the strain. But so far, he was holding up. In a steady but quiet voice he asked, “Did the monsters kill the baby’s parents?”

“No. That’s what’s so interesting. The baby’s parents were the monsters,” she replied.

Grant had seen and heard a lot of weird stuff during his tenure with both SHIELD and Hydra but this was something new. Monsters? What kind of monsters? The idea of Skye being a monster was pretty laughable. She was one of the most incredibly human people he’d ever met – full of life, love, laughter and compassion – so he almost dismissed the idea outright but it was clear that Raina was in earnest. He looked at Raina’s intense face and realized that he had to get her off track. He would file this information away for later, for once the mission was over and he could focus on making sense of it, maybe even with Skye’s help.

“Well, that’s very interesting but it’s not what we need to be concentrating on at the moment,” he said dismissively. “Garrett needs for you to keep working on the GH325 formula, so let me know if anything happens with that.” He then walked away, leaving Raina to watch him go. He would have to keep a closer eye on her.

Later, that vow was one reason why he found himself leaning against the wall while he watched Raina dismantle the lab. Grant was trying to focus on what she was doing but he was finding it difficult to fight the memories of this basement, this very wall. This was where he and Skye had their wonderfully flirty conversation about his identity, where he had happily planned to go meet her. This was also where Garrett had beaten him up in preparation for that meeting. It was where he had to make his break with the team permanent. And now it was the place where he realized how much danger Skye was in from Hydra. He observed Raina smiling at Garrett. What the hell is that about?
Garrett didn’t return the smile. “Something about that woman unnerves me,” he told Grant. This was good. He had to keep Garrett’s confidence and not let him get too close or depend upon others. The mission demanded that Garrett need Grant and not anyone else. Raina was definitely a wild card that he had to keep at an arm’s distance.

“It’s those eyes,” he said in a low voice, glaring at her.

“Ah, it’s what’s behind those eyes,” Garrett replied. Damn straight. She’s evil.

What’d she text you about earlier?”

Grant stopped watching Raina and looked at Garrett. Good eye contact was one of the hallmarks of honesty. “She had questions about your decision to pack up the lab and move it to the States,” he said, the lie easily flowing off his tongue.

“We planned to expand operations anyway,” Garrett replied indifferently as he looked down at his tablet. Good! He bought it. “The fact that the Deathlok files were stolen from Cybertek just speeds up my decision.”

Raina came over to them, a vial in her hand. “I heard that you wanted to hang on to this during flight,” she said as she handed it to Garrett.

“You heard right,” he said.

Grant looked startled and straightened up. “You’ve recreated GH-325,” he said to Raina. How did she do that? I changed some of those files! There’s no way she got the team’s information.

“So it’s true,” she replied. “We’ve distilled the genetic components of all the previous samples down to one single vial.” Ah, the other samples. Grant’s discomfort increased. Raina had no idea what she was truly working with, so what in the hell did she create?

“And it will do what we talked about?” Garrett asked in a low voice.

“It should regenerate and heal cells, just like it did in Skye and Coulson,” she said with a little smile. Grant’s unease escalated. His instincts were screaming that Raina had created something that was incredibly dangerous and that she didn’t care. If anything, she was excited to see the transformation, whatever it may be. “So take good care of it. That’s the only one in the world,” she said to Garrett.

Garrett looked at her smugly. With that look, Grant knew that nothing he could say now that would dissuade him from taking it. Raina obviously knew exactly what to say to get him to buy into taking the drug. If he thought that not only would it heal him but it would make him unique? They’d be lucky if he didn’t take it immediately.

He didn’t. Instead, they headed to the Bus to pack it up. While they were stowing things away, one of the guards informed Garrett that two SHIELD agents were spying on them from a small building off of the airfield. One look through a pair of binoculars identified them as Agents Fitz and Simmons. Garrett was thrilled.

“Ah, the scientists!” he said to Grant. “We could use their skills aboard. Go pick them up.”

Grant nodded and left, wondering what he could do. There was no way that an agent of his caliber could fail to kidnap them. Everything could be seen from the Bus (it was an incredibly stupid vantage point), so helping them run for it was out of the question. But they would be in grave danger on the Bus and it would be him against dozens of Hydra agents. His stomach churned. Grant decided to go get them and see what he could do from there. Maybe he could convince
Garrett to let them go once they returned State-side, that the furor their absence would cause was too much trouble. A cost-benefit analysis.

Grant could hear FitzSimmons talking about sending in one of the Dwarves when he approached. He couldn’t help grinning when he heard that. He’d missed them and their conversation was just so typical and brilliant. The smile dropped off his face as he rounded the corner though. The thought of them hating him was almost more than he could take.

When he entered, Jemma was standing at the window and Fitz was approaching the door. He looked shocked to see Grant and immediately started backing up. “Long time no see,” Grant said to them. “You need to come with me.”

“No, Ward. Don’t do this! Just leave us here, tell Garrett you didn’t find us,” Fitz said, wide-eyed. Jemma didn’t say a word.

“I can’t, Fitz. He’d know. You need to come with me and it’ll be easier for everyone if you come along quietly.” Please don’t make me hurt you!

To Grant’s amazement and everlasting relief, they didn’t struggle or even plead any further with him. Jemma still hadn’t said a word but it was clear that she was furious. Fitz looked down and didn’t meet Grant’s eyes as they all three walked towards the Bus. Grant would have given a lot to get them out of harm’s way but he couldn’t without blowing his cover. He was well aware that undercover missions sometimes went awry and he was very afraid that this might be one of those times. Once I’m done with this, no more!

Grant led the way through the Bus, FitzSimmons behind him being pushed forward by a phalanx of guards. “Here they are,” he told Garrett calmly. His tactical brain was already in high gear, looking for exits or ways to hide them should it become necessary. Grant’s one big advantage was that he knew the Bus better than anyone else.

Garrett strode forward to meet FitzSimmons. Grant didn’t know what to expect. What did Garrett think they’d be willing to do for him? No good was going to come of this.

Fitz stepped forward. “This is our plane,” he told Garrett without even blinking. “We want it back.” If Grant hadn’t loved Fitz before, he would have to start now because that was awesome, sheer hubris wrapped in a nerd package.

Garrett was less impressed. “Really,” he shrugged. “Just like that, kid? Coulson probably figured out we’re using the barbershop.” He turned to one of his minions behind him. “Call Kaminsky. He’ll know what to do.” Grant saw Fitz put his hand in his pocket. There was no way this was an innocent gesture. He was up to something. Garrett didn’t notice. He looked at one of the guards behind FitzSimmons. “All right. Let’s close up the ramp and get this bird off the ground.”

Grant kept his eyes on Fitz. He was hoping that Fitz would look at him and, sure enough, he looked over. When he did, Grant gave him his best intense stare and shook his head slightly. Please don’t do anything stupid! But it was Fitz. He totally would.

“Tell the pilot to keep it low in Harrier mode until we’re out over the Gulf,” Garrett finished.

Grant saw Fitz start to move his hand, so he rushed forward and grabbed his arm.

“What’s he got there?” Garrett asked, almost casually. It was clear that he didn’t consider Fitz a threat. He didn’t know him as well as Grant did. Grant yanked Fitz’s hand out of his pocket and looked at the contents.
“One of those prank joy buzzers,” he reported to Garrett with a puzzled expression. This wasn’t like Fitz’s usual junk. Garrett just grinned and turned around to go.

“Yeah, you know me,” Fitz said grimly, staring straight at Grant. “Always kidding around.” Wait. That was almost like he was trying to give me a message. Fitz suddenly hit the button on the buzzer and the electricity crackled, on the wall and in Garrett’s side. He buckled.

No! John couldn’t die just yet! Grant still needed intel and he was so close. Damn it, Fitz! He grabbed the buzzer. “What the hell was that?” he demanded.

Garrett straightened up and turned to face Fitz. “An EMP,” he answered coldly.

Fitz surged forward getting into Garrett’s face. No, Fitz! “Looks like the joke’s on you,” he told him angrily. One of the guards pulled Fitz away from Garrett as Grant raced into the lab. He couldn’t let Garrett die, not yet!

Raina was in the lab. “Garrett’s dying!” he told her as he got the charger out of the cabinet and ran around getting additional supplied. “Not sure this will work. Fitz shorted him out with an EMP.” When he got a minute, he would marvel over Fitz’s ingenuity but right now, he had other things to think about. “Call Cybertek. Let them know what happened. See what they can do.” Raina still hadn’t moved.

Grant jogged back to Garrett. “Get back,” he told everyone. Jemma was looking on in fear but Fitz appeared unremorseful.

“I’m glad that I did it,” he told Garrett. Shut up, Fitz! Don’t make this worse than it already is! You’re endangering everything! “You hear me? You lose, we win.”

Garrett turned to look at Fitz. “You’re dead,” he whispered malevolently.

“No worse than you,” Fitz retorted, completely unafraid. In a small part of Grant’s brain – the part unoccupied with saving Garrett’s life – he was impressed. Fitz is a bad ass! “And you don’t have to take orders from him anymore, Ward.”

Grant stopped what he was doing for a brief moment. Fitz was still trying to take care of him. The thought warmed him but also made his blood run cold. If Fitz wasn’t careful, he was going to end up dead and there wouldn’t be anything Grant could do about it. He tried to ignore Fitz, hoping that things wouldn’t get worse.

But Fitz was on a roll. “Ward! Let him die.” I can’t, Fitz! “He deserves to die,” Fitz argued. Yes, he does, but he can’t right now. And you’re ruining everything!

“Get them out of here!” he yelled at the guards. They pushed FitzSimmons out of the room. This just made Grant angrier. “Clear! Everybody out!”

With everyone but Grant gone, Garrett laid down across the seat cushions and table, his head on a pillow. “The internal battery must have fried. I’m gonna have to open it up, see if there’s a mechanical fix,” Grant told him. Raina was suddenly looking over his shoulder.

“I talked to Cybertek,” she said. “They’re prepping a facility in Miami.”

“Good,” Garrett gasped. Then he raised himself a little and grabbed the front of Grant’s leather jacket. “I need you to do something for me,” he whispered to him.

“Yeah. Anything,” Grant said gently.
“Put down Fitz and Simmons,” Garrett rasped.

“What?” No! Do not ask me to do this, you sick bastard! “No. There’s plenty of time. I won’t leave you.”

“And I’m telling you to cross them off for me,” Garrett insisted.

Typical Garrett. Anyone who ever disagreed with him or made him look less than heroic had to be punished. Grant had seen it too many times to count, had even participated in the process a few times. But he was done being Garrett’s lapdog. That part of his life was over. But what can I do? We’re on a plane!

“That’s not a weakness, is it?” Garrett taunted. With those words, Grant had a feeling of déjà vu, of Garrett telling him that caring about others was a weakness, a good way to get you killed. It was Buddy all over again but this time, the ending would be different. Grant wasn’t going to allow anyone he cared about to get hurt.

But that was going to be tricky. He had to keep his cover or Garrett would never trust him again. Yet he couldn’t kill FitzSimmons; he just wouldn’t do it. Grant was not usually a praying person but, for the first time in a long time, he prayed for someone to help him, to give him a way out of this mess. Too many lives were depending on him. Even Grant’s was up for grabs because if he killed FitzSimmons, he didn’t think he’d ever come back from it.

“No,” Grant replied in a low voice. If he didn’t need Garrett, if he thought he could save FitzSimmons and make it off the plane alive, he’d kill Garrett right now. He was done killing for him, for his ego. Grant wanted the merry-go-round to stop. But he didn’t know how.

“Then take care of them. I’ll take care of me. I’ve cheated death plenty of times,” Garrett said.

“I’ll stay,” Raina said. Grant’s instincts were warring against him leaving. Allowing Raina the Mad Scientist to stay was a bad idea but he didn’t see what else he could do. He nodded shortly and left the room.

Grant took his time trying to find where the minions had taken FitzSimmons. His tactical brain was working overtime, considering and discarding scenario after scenario. They were flying too low for them to jump out with parachutes. He couldn’t hide them because Garrett would demand to see the bodies. Lola the flying car was no longer onboard. He couldn’t take out every Hydra agent himself. He didn’t have access to any ICERs (and even if he did, Garrett knew about that technology and wouldn’t be fooled). The best idea he had was to see if he could get some alone time with FitzSimmons and ask for their input.

Grant had just determined that would be his course of action as he climbed down the ladder onto the medical floor when he saw FitzSimmons racing around the corner. They got away? Once again, he was impressed and their resourcefulness gave him hope. Maybe they can find a solution. But first he would have to catch them and make them listen. That was going to be tough, particularly since they were clearly terrified of him. FitzSimmons ran into the med pod and locked the door.

Yes! They’d done it! They’d given him a way to get them out of here. If only they’d listen. He knocked on the window. “Open the door, Fitz.”

Fitz came up to the door, looking straight at Grant. “Ward, please…” he panted. “I need to understand.”

This seemed to incense Jemma. “You need to accept the truth, Fitz. He doesn’t care about us, about
anything,” she told him. Fitz didn’t even look at her.

“No. I don’t believe that. We’re friends, aren’t we? We’ve been friends. We’ve had laughs together,” he told Grant desperately. “I know that you’re a good person, Ward. And you can choose right now to be good. It’s a choice.”

Grant looked around and saw that they were alone. Now was the moment. “I know it is and I have been choosing to be good,” he told them. “I’ve been working as a triple for Fury and Hill for months but I have to keep my cover for a little while longer. I have my orders and you almost messed everything up!” he told Fitz angrily.

“What?” Fitz asked, looking confused.

Jemma just looked furious. “No, Fitz. Don’t believe him. He told Skye the same thing, remember?” She looked at Grant. “He’s a liar and a traitor. You can’t believe anything he says!”

Grant glanced around again. Still no one. “Look,” he said desperately. “We don’t have much time or a lot of options. Garrett wants you dead and there’s not much I can do about it. Even if I did blow my cover, I’m only one person against dozens.”

“So what do we do?” Fitz asked. Grant almost sagged in relief. He believed him; he trusted him. All of a sudden, he flashbacked to Buddy, looking up at him so trustingly as Grant held a gun to his head. Fitz was his new Buddy and he wasn’t going to let him or Jemma down.

“You’ve already done it. This med pod floats, right?” Grant asked Fitz.

Fitz still looked perplexed. “Right,” he confirmed.

“Then I’m going to drop it from the plane. It will be a bumpy ride at first but once you’re floating, all you need to do is wait for someone to come get you. It shouldn’t take long. I’ll radio Fury and let him know your coordinates,” Grant said. He looked around again. No one had come to get him yet but they would soon.

“We need to do this now. Are you ready?” he asked.

Fitz nodded but Jemma looked hesitantly at Grant. “How do we know we can trust you?” she asked with tears in her eyes.

Grant smiled. “I saved your life once,” he reminded her. “It would be a shame to let all that hard work go to waste.”

He waited for her nod, told them “Good luck,” then turned and released the pod. He raised his hand in farewell as the pod moved away from the plane in preparation for the drop. He could see FitzSimmons frantically preparing for the landing. Grant felt sick as he watched them go. Instead of seeing their faces, he saw Buddy running away to find the kill his gunshot signaled. Then, as the pod dropped, he heard the sound of another gunshot and saw Buddy drop, gone forever, another victim of Grant Ward’s love.

He ran to where Buddy lay in the grass, holding back his tears. He couldn’t dare let John see how upset he was. “I’m so sorry, boy,” he whispered, barely able to get the words out. But it didn’t matter because Buddy was already gone. Grant stood up and saw John looking furiously at him. He grabbed Grant’s arm.

“Why didn’t you put him down?” he demanded, shaking him. “Didn’t I tell you not to get attached? It only gets harder from here!”
Grant nodded miserably and looked down. “I will do better sir,” he told him.

“I hope so,” John said as he shouldered his rifle and started walking to the truck. “Weakness only gets you killed.”

Grant stood for a moment longer, watching as the pod splashed into the ocean. *Maybe weakness will get me killed. But I’d rather that than not have anyone at all.* He quickly turned and used the console to send a message to Fury. Then he walked back to Garrett where, weakness or not, he was still dying.

When he rounded the corner into the lounge, he saw Raina put something back in Garrett’s console and stand up. Grant’s misgivings increased tenfold. What had she done?

Garrett saw Grant and asked, “Is it done?” Grant nodded but said nothing. Garrett obviously could tell that he had not relished the task. “If the job was easy…” he started. Then his body seized and he started gasping and choking.

Raina backed away, a horrified look on her face, as Garrett’s body seized and he vomited a fine liquid mist into the air. Grant was just as horrified although he masked it better than Raina. And as angry as he was at John, he never wanted to see him suffer. Garrett’s body continued shaking and an eerie mechanical light lit up his face and hands, almost like he was turning into a robot from the inside out. *Raina must have given him the formula.* Then it just stopped and Garrett’s body relaxed. He breathed deeply and looked around.

Grant and Raina both edged forward toward Garrett. Grant bent down to him. “What are you feeling?” he asked in an incredibly gentle voice.

Garrett appeared awestruck. He turned away from Grant, looked straight ahead and answered, “The universe!” *What. The. Hell?*
Flashback

The first night Grant spent with May had been surprising. When he slipped into her room, he knew what the invitation was for: sex and nothing else. And, knowing how locked down the Cavalry was, he suspected that the sex would be mechanical but it hadn’t mattered. He badly needed closeness with another person, to feel in concert with another soul, even if it was just on a physical level. However, May startled him with how gentle she was and even somewhat passionate. It was as if May, just like him, had untold depths beneath her severe demeanor.

Since he knew that she was suffering too – hell, he’d seen it first-hand on her face in the church – Grant gladly allowed her to guide the interaction and he smiled a bit when she got on top. It was just like her to want to be in control and he, at least right then, had no desire to direct anything. All he wanted was to stop thinking and start feeling. May gave him that and the time he spent with her – both the sex and afterward – was, of all things, soothing. He knew that she understood much of who he was; she didn’t want to talk or even have any expectations for how he should be. So, the two of them gave and took in equal measure, mostly in silence. They even slept next to each other the entire night. Any nightmares he might have had went unremembered. If Grant had to put a label on the whole experience, he would say it was pleasant.

It was so pleasant that they did it again the following night. Coulson understood that the team needed some down time, so he let them roam the city on their own provided that they go to the Bus for a check-in before returning to the hotel for the night. Grant had spent the day alone, trying to bury himself in the peaceful countryside and slow pace of life. He’d visited pubs and bookstores and had even taken some long walks across the moors. It felt good. It felt even better when, during their brief check-in, May gave him a significant look. He hadn’t thought she would be up for another rendezvous but was thrilled that she was. Like any healthy adult male, Grant liked sex and here it was, offered up to him on a platter, no strings attached. Since Skye was out of the question, he really couldn’t ask for anything better.

So, he jumped at the chance to spend the night with May again and it was just as nice as it had been the first time. He even slept well again. As per his usual routine, Grant woke early and got in the shower. He had no idea what the day would bring and he didn’t want to inflict his presence on May if she didn’t want to linger. Sure enough, when he came out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel, she was already dressed and looking at her phone.

“We have a mission,” she told him in a resigned kind of tone.

For a second, that brought him up short. He’d never considered what it was like to be May, to constantly be so tightly contained and solitary. When he thought about it, he realized that he’d never given a single thought as to whether she enjoyed being on the Bus or liked the missions they completed. He knew she and Coulson were tight and that she was incredibly dependable but, beyond that, he’d never contemplated her situation. For many reasons, that wasn’t good and would have to change, especially if they were going to be sleeping together regularly. Given the enjoyment both of them had over the last two nights, he thought it might be a distinct possibility.

“Any specifics?” Grant asked. He was hoping that the mission would be an easy one. He really didn’t think he could stand anything difficult right now.
“No,” she replied briefly. He waited for more but May wasn’t forthcoming. And he thought he didn’t like talking much!

He walked over to May, giving her a sexy grin. She smiled back as she headed into the living area. Women tended to be easy pickings for him but he never imagined that the Cavalry would fall victim to his charms. *Is it possible that she actually likes having me around?* Grant bent down, his back to the door, and started putting on the clothes he’d tossed to the foot of the bed the night before. He thought he should make sure they were on the same page regarding the others. He sure as hell didn’t want any of them, especially Skye and Coulson, to know that he and May were Colleagues with Benefits.

“Well, we should follow the same plan as before, take separate routes back, stagger our timing…” Grant heard the door close. He stopped what he was doing, looked around and realized that she was gone. He chuckled and shook his head. Leave it to May to be as cold as ice. Grant didn’t think even he could be that detached. Oh, well. That would just make things easier.

He continued getting ready in a leisurely kind of way and even allowed himself the treat of having some coffee. Then he hailed a cab and found himself walking up the ramp into the cargo hold probably about 20 minutes after May must have gotten there. Grant saw FitzSimmons headed into the lab, Coulson and Skye climbing the stairs and the woman herself on the second floor.

“Hey guys,” he said casually.

Fitz waved at him but May clearly didn’t appreciate his laid-back demeanor. “You’re late!” she snapped. Grant looked at her without expression as she glared at him. Then she turned and stalked back to the cockpit. *So that’s the way it’s going to be.*

Grant didn’t let her bad mood faze him though and he strapped down in the lounge next to Skye and Coulson. FitzSimmons must have decided to stay in the lab. “So what’s the mission, sir?” he asked Coulson. “Your message didn’t give a lot of details.”

“It’s the standard Index evaluation and intake. We have a potential telekinetic,” Coulson told him.

Grant looked surprised. “So we’ve finally verified one?” he asked.

“It’s possible,” Coulson admitted. “We suspect this happened as a result of a particle accelerator exploding, so we have to approach the subject with caution. You, May and I will talk with her initially.”

Grant nodded. It seemed like a reasonable plan but Skye was frowning. He raised his eyebrows at her. *What’s wrong?*

“I get to wait in the car,” she said grumpily. “I think I’d be a lot better at the Welcome Wagon than you or May but AC said no.”

Grant looked puzzled. “Welcome Wagon?”

“Yeah, that’s what we’re calling Index evaluation and intake now,” she said airily. “Hadn’t you heard?”

Grant looked questioningly at Coulson who simply shook his head and rolled his eyes. Grant laughed a little (*Typical Skye*) and noticed that she was eyeing him a bit. Oops! He’d have to take better care to act as normally as possible. He rearranged his features into a suitable frown.

“Well, whatever we’re calling it, Coulson’s right. It's too dangerous for you,” he told Skye.
“You’re not ready.”

But Skye was not easily put off. “We’ll see,” she said. Then she changed the subject and started telling him what she and FitzSimmons had done with their time off. Grant was content to listen and not share what he had done. Or who.

After May landed the Bus and they did a quick formal briefing, everyone but FitzSimmons loaded into the truck. May and Coulson were in the front (May was driving of course) with Grant and Skye in the back. They pulled up in front of a neighborhood cul-de-sac with a crowd of people gathered in front of a nice-looking house. Grant marveled that there was actually a white picket fence! But rather than the suburban bliss such a fence implied, it looked like something out of a riot. The crowd was clearly unfriendly. The police were holding them back and a young blonde woman was standing uneasily on the porch, her arms wrapped around her body in a protective gesture. What's she even doing outside?

Grant, May and Coulson pushed their way to the front of the crowd by showing their badges. The crowd parted for them, with some people muttering about what she’d done while others shouted, “Why aren’t you arresting her?” The police let them through easily. Not for the first time, Grant wondered at the access SHIELD enjoyed. He didn’t want to find out what would happen if Hydra ever succeeded in eliminating them. May immediately took up a defensive position as Coulson and Grant mounted the porch.

“What good will that do?” she asked hopelessly in a hoarse voice. Obviously, she had been crying for a while. There were still tear tracks on her face, so maybe she’d just stopped.

Grant felt a pang for her and his protective instinct kicked in. Even if she had powers, there was no reason to treat her like this. Grant had seen plenty of evil people, enough to know what they looked like. Hannah wasn’t one of them and didn’t deserve the malevolence he felt coming from both the crowd and the police. Besides, he knew what it was like for people to be shouting for your blood when you hadn’t done anything.

“To talk,” he clarified gently.

Hannah looked at him for a moment. “Well, what good will that do?” she asked miserably.

Grant was about to respond, to let her know that they were here to help, when someone threw an egg. Hannah flinched away from the spot. The egg hit the door and splattered everywhere. “Get out of here!” the crowd yelled. Coulson whipped around to look at them. “We don’t want you here anymore!” a middle-aged man said angrily.

Grant had had enough. What's the point of having police if they aren't going to do anything? He knew that he had a bad attitude toward general law enforcement, one that he’d developed over decades of interactions with them. When Grant still lived with his family, the police were a
constant presence at his house. The lower levels provided security for his father at official functions while the upper echelons were fixtures at the Ward’s many social functions.

Although his parents were careful not to do anything abusive to their children in front of other people, Grant realized that the police, especially the higher ranking members, knew something was not right. He’d seen too many eyes linger on his bruises for them not to at least wonder but not a single one of them ever asked about his broken bones, frequent limps or odd markings. Their only interactions with him were of the overly hearty and jovial type, as if they didn’t want to give him any opportunity to say something they couldn’t ignore. As a result, he never did and he despised them for their inaction.

Once he joined SHIELD, his interactions with the police didn’t get better. They usually were people to be avoided (so they could accomplish the mission without interference) or controlled. In the worst cases, they were people whose messes needed to be managed by SHIELD and, on rare occasions, by Hydra. So Grant had little regard for the police but he knew that he had to at least pretend to have a good working relationship with them. To not do so would invite questions he couldn’t answer.

“Officers,” he called out in a carefully controlled voice, “get those people back!” He saw Hannah start crying again as people in the crowd began calling her a murderer. He sighed disgustedly. Nothing good ever came of crowds. *This is going to get ugly.*

All of a sudden, an empty police car squealed its tires and started racing toward the crowd. *What the hell? Where did that come from?*

“This is it! Move out of the way! Go!” Grant heard May yell to the assembled group.

Hannah looked on in fear – Grant was standing in her path, keeping her out of harm’s way (he would be damned if she got hurt on his watch) – while Coulson tackled a bystander stupid enough to stand directly in the path of the oncoming police car. It crashed into the white picket fence and stopped behind the house.

“It’s her,” a woman yelled. “That freak just tried to kill us!”

Grant saw Skye get out of the truck (of course she couldn’t sit this one out) and grab the arm of the woman who was shouting. “Hey!” she told her. “Calm down.” If the situation wasn’t careening out of control, Grant would have smiled. Skye had a protective instinct similar to his own and he liked that about her. She wasn’t one to stand idly by when someone needed her help but she still should have stayed in the car per his orders. He had other things to worry about at the moment though. The police officer on the porch, Mr. Free Country, pulled out his gun and pointed it at Hannah.

Grant put out his hand to focus the officer’s attention on him. “Easy, officer.”

They’d taught this calming maneuver at the Academy – speaking in a soothing voice, making eye contact and non-threatening gestures – but Grant hadn’t really needed the lesson. He’d learned to do it years ago with Buddy whenever he was sick or injured or in getting away from wild animals in the woods. As with all of his coursework, Grant made certain that he excelled at the maneuver even though his preference in tense circumstances was just to take down the threat. It was a faster and required a lot less effort. However, in a situation like this, violence – even preemptive violence – would just be a catalyst for something worse. So, Grant started moving slowly towards the officer as Hannah backed away looking panicked.

“Put the gun down,” Grant told him. It was working; the officer began to lower the gun. Now, if nothing else aggressive or unexpected happened, they could get this under control.
Hannah didn’t seem to share Grant’s optimism. “Leave me alone,” she cried as she backed down the stairs.

Grant was starting to get tense because he couldn’t handle Hannah at the same time he was talking the cop down. But then he saw Coulson come up behind her and he relaxed. Coulson was great at talking people into doing things; in fact, it was his specialty. It was one of the reasons why Hydra hated him. She was in good hands.

“Ms. Hutchins, please calm down,” Coulson said.

“It wasn’t me!” she told him. She looked to be on the verge of losing it completely.

Grant couldn’t blame her. He understood how the situation could be scary, especially to a civilian. He had only done a few Index evaluations and assessments (Are we really calling it the Welcome Wagon now?) and they usually were challenging. People either feared their newfound powers (Hannah seemed to land in this category) or they loved them, like Scorch, and didn’t want to be controlled. Regardless of their attitude, powered people often were defensive, uncooperative, impulsive and just plain difficult. That was why Coulson didn’t think Skye was ready. She had no idea how horrible things could get. Comparatively, this wasn’t even that bad.

Coulson turned to face Hannah. “Please calm down,” he repeated. “We’re not going to let anyone hurt you.” One of the things that Grant really liked about Coulson is how he cared about people and meant what he said. If he said no one was going to hurt you, then he was going to do everything in his power to fulfill that promise.

Just then, a shot rang out and Hannah crumpled to the ground. Grant looked around and realized that May had shot her. He looked at her disapprovingly. Yeah, that went well.

“Time to go,” May told the team, her expression a grim mask.

“So much for the welcome wagon,” Coulson said wryly.

Grant bent down to Hannah, preparing to pick her up, all while staring at May. How was it that their time together had put him in a good mood and her in a bad one? The poor girl had been so scared and May had just shot her! The situation wasn’t even that dangerous, so he didn’t understand how she could be so cold.

Nevertheless, what was done was done, so Grant gathered Hannah up to put her in the truck while Coulson told everyone that SHIELD would take care of it. The police seemed relieved to have the situation handled and, satisfied that Hannah was gone, the crowd dispersed. As they drove away, Grant got a glimpse of the broken white picket fence. In his estimation, that was typical. Things were hardly ever what they seemed. That had certainly been true of his family and of his time in SHIELD.

The ride back to the Bus was mostly silent. Hannah was still out cold in the back and no one seemed to have much to say. The air was thick with tension. Skye looked questioningly at Grant but he just shook his head at her and, for once, she was smart enough to take the hint. Maybe she’s getting better at reading the room.

Once they got to the Bus, May immediately took off for the cockpit while Grant and Coulson put Hannah on a mattress in the cage. Coulson had called ahead and had FitzSimmons arrange it. Soon the Bus took off and Grant and Coulson met up in Mission Control, at first just watching Hannah sleep off the effects of the ICER. Grant was unhappy. The mattress didn’t look comfortable and he was still upset that she’d been shot right as Coulson assured her that no one was going to hurt her.
“Just a mattress, sir?” Grant asked. No table, chairs, food or water, reading material or even natural light. So far, Hannah had done nothing to deserve this kind of harsh treatment. This was the way Hydra would have handled her, not SHIELD. They were supposed to be the good guys, the welcome wagon. “It’s a six hour long ride to the Fridge.”

“Fitz added magnetic shielding to the cage after Simmons had her scare. If Ms. Hutchins has this power, then that room should keep it from getting out. But in there, she’ll be just as dangerous,” Coulson explained as he leaned on the Holo-Table. Clearly, he wasn’t happy about the situation either.

Grant felt a little better. If Hannah’s minimal accommodations were purely for safety reasons, then that was acceptable. He still didn’t believe she should have been put down like a dog though. The team had been gaining the upper hand in the situation and would have had it under control quickly. Hannah hadn’t been protesting; she’d seemed willing to come. So, there was no reason to jump the gun, as it were.

May came striding into Mission Control, her expression telegraphing her displeasure. Grant was frustrated that he couldn’t read her. *Is she upset about what happened or is she mad at me for being upset with her?* “How is she?” she asked.

“The dendrotoxin’s wearing off,” Coulson told her, straightening up. “She’ll be awake soon, scared, in a strange room.” Grant thought he sounded a bit angry with May. He expected Coulson to mention something about how she’d royally screwed up. “Our next interaction with her is crucial to gaining her trust, which is why I want you there.”

What? Grant crossed his arms and looked down. He was disappointed in Coulson’s response. Shooting Hannah could have led to the crowd or the police taking that as a sign for a free-for-all and yet she wasn’t getting anything close to the tongue-lashing Grant would’ve gotten had he been the one to use his ICER without provocation.

He sneaked a glance at May. Although her expression never wavered, she seemed just as surprised by Coulson’s calm recitation as Grant. She glanced quickly over at him and then back to Coulson. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?” she asked in a gentle tone.

Grant gazed down at the table, doing his best to keep quiet. Even if Coulson wasn’t, he was still angry at May. But he eventually looked over at Coulson, waiting to hear his rationale for wanting her in the room. Coulson often was full of surprises, especially in situations like this. Perhaps he had a good reason for not yelling at her.

“If Ms. Hutchins is going to believe anything we say,” Coulson told May, “she needs to know we’re not hiding things from her, which means you explaining the situation.” *Ah. That makes sense.* May looked away, as if she was embarrassed by her behavior. *At least she knows she screwed up.*

Grant couldn’t keep quiet any longer but carefully avoided looking at May. “What if that doesn’t calm her down? What if it makes her more agitated?” Having someone explain why they shot him certainly wouldn’t appease him. If anything, that sort of “welcome” would make him want to get back at them.

May appeared to be evading Grant’s gaze as well. She looked steadily at Coulson. “Then he definitely wants me in there,” she said grimly.

“Pretty much,” Coulson confirmed.
Grant wished he knew what was between those two. There clearly was some history there that he couldn’t touch. But, then again, if there was something intimate, why was May sleeping with him and not Coulson? He risked a brief glance at May but she was looking everywhere but at Grant. Either she was embarrassed or she was angry with him and he really didn’t know which it was. Best just to keep out of it. “I’ll observe from out here,” he said with a sigh.

“And I’ll lose the tie,” Coulson said. “If she is telekinetic, I don’t want to have a noose around my neck.” He left, tugging at his tie as he went.

May and Grant were left alone. Grant felt like the tension between them was pretty high but, before he could say anything, May sighed angrily and stomped off. Apparently she felt the tension as well. Well, it wasn’t an acknowledgement that she was wrong but it was something.

Watching Coulson and May talk to Hannah wasn’t fun. The poor girl was convinced that everything bad that happened was her fault and she was being punished for it. Grant could relate. For the first few weeks he spent with Buddy in the woods, he’d thought that he was punished for being weak, for beating up Thomas and not saving his younger siblings from Christian. He even wondered if his abandonment and loneliness, his suffering, was a sign from God that he wasn’t a good person and didn’t deserve to be around others.

One particularly rainy day, after being cold and wet for hours, Grant almost convinced himself to take his own life. What did it matter if he went on living? He was a disappointment to his family and not important enough to Garrett to even return. He sat under a tree, trying to stay out of the rain with Buddy, contemplating how he could end it all. He had just come up with a plan when the rain stopped and he saw a rainbow. Buddy whined and Grant remembered that he was all Buddy had. He couldn’t leave him to fend for himself. Just as he’d decided to stick around for Buddy, he looked at the rainbow and there, at the very tip of it, was smoke. Grant had followed the smoke trail to the cabins and started stealing stuff from them to make his life more bearable.

After that, he concentrated all of his attention on surviving and his belief in his punishment faded. Once Garrett returned and started teaching him things, his life improved even more. He saw a future for himself with SHIELD and, later, Hydra. Grant stopped believing that everything bad was his fault, so much so that when he finally started being a part of Coulson’s team, he was open to the idea of people caring for him.

That was why it hurt so much to see Hannah’s despair and fear on full display during her talk with Coulson and May. Grant could remember what that felt like. It was so awful that he didn’t want to remember and he didn’t want someone else to go through what he did either. For the moment, there was little he could do for Hannah but he vowed that if the opportunity arose, he would do everything he could to help. In the meantime, he had to refocus on the mission.

Coulson requested that everyone meet for a briefing in Mission Control. The team gathered around the table. Hannah’s belief that she was being haunted by demons was all anyone could talk about.

“Delusions of being persecuted aren’t uncommon after trauma,” Simmons explained.

“She’s certainly been through her fair share,” Grant commented sympathetically. He could feel May glance briefly over at him. He remembered that she had too.

“She’s blaming herself. It’s guilt,” Skye said.

“It’s all of it,” Coulson said, shaking his head. “She’s broken.” Grant found that comment to be in poor taste considering the present company. “Pore over the accident site,” Coulson continued. “If that tragedy gave her powers, we need to shut them down. If it wasn’t her fault, even better, but
“until then, she’s a danger to all of us.”

With that, the briefing ended. May and Coulson went to his office, presumably to figure out what to do about Hannah. FitzSimmons went to the lab to figure out what happened at the factory. Only Grant and Skye were left. She kept staring at the onscreen image of Hannah looking miserable.

“Did you watch Coulson and May interrogate Hannah?” Skye asked Grant.

“Yes.” Where is she going with this? “Why?”

“Well, I think they screwed it up!” she said passionately. “We’re supposed to be the Welcome Wagon, not the Everything is Horrible Wagon. What she needs is a friend, someone who will listen and give her a shoulder to cry on. What she doesn’t need is someone who shoots her when she’s down.”

Grant agreed with Skye but he also knew that she didn’t have enough experience with powered individuals to truly know what could happen. As angry as he was that May shot Hannah, he had to admit that it was possible that doing so prevented things from getting out of control. An untrained Skye going in to listen to Hannah might backfire on all of them.

“I realize that Hannah doesn’t seem like much of a threat right now but people can surprise you. She may not even realize that she’s dangerous, she just reacts and then it’s too late. I’d like to help her too but I’m not sure what we can do,” Grant replied.

“Ugh. Not you too! Well, I know what I can do. I can at least ask Coulson to let me go talk with her!” Skye said as she stomped off to Coulson’s office.

Grant knew that she had next to no chance of getting Coulson’s approval to talk with Hannah, so he decided to fix himself a sandwich just for something to do. Besides, he was hungry. Sure enough, Skye came back from Coulson’s office frustrated that they had said no to her request. She was mostly frustrated with May though and Grant wondered why. Sure, she was irritated that she’d shot Hannah but it seemed like it was more than that. His heart stopped for a moment as he considered the idea that Skye might know about his dalliance with May but then he dismissed the thought. We were careful.

Grant listened to her vent as he placed the meat and vegetables just so on his bread. He wasn’t generally picky with his food (all that he asked was that it was healthy) but his concentration allowed him to not overreact to anything Skye said.

“I just don’t understand her at all,” Skye continued from her perch on the counter in the kitchen. “Everything to her is just (she put on a robotic voice) target acquired. Threat eliminated.” Grant wanted to laugh until he realized that maybe Skye saw him the same way. It didn’t seem so funny anymore.

“Well, she’s a Specialist,” he said as he moved around putting together his food.

He knew that Skye didn’t truly understand what being a Specialist meant and this disturbed him on multiple levels. If she wanted to become one herself, she would have to be aware of the sacrifices it required, the parts of your soul you had to give up in order to do the job. May had seen and done things that would make Skye’s hair curl yet Skye still expected her to be warm and fuzzy. He also wanted her to recognize what his job entailed so that Skye would understand who he was. But now was not the time for that conversation.

“In one thing,” Skye argued. “You can catch a lot more flies with honey than with napalm. Just
saying."

Yeah, but napalm allows you to be less emotionally invested. But Grant couldn’t tell Skye that, not yet, so he concentrated on his sandwich. “Hand me the lettuce,” he asked her, holding out his hand for it. Skye grabbed the lettuce bowl and handed it to him.

“And she says I need to stay away,” she told Grant passionately, “but you know what I think?” She walked behind him to lean against the bar counter. Grant started putting pepper on his sandwich. “I think she needs to get laid.”

He stopped grinding the pepper. What does she know? He inhaled sharply and went back to the pepper, maybe even putting too much on. Grant covertly brushed a little off with his fingers. He needed to shut down that line of thought. Now.

“You might want to be less confrontational with Agent May,” he told her firmly. Not only did Grant believe this was in Skye’s best interest but it was in his best interest too. There was no way that he wanted to be in the middle of a war between May and Skye. Nothing good would come of that especially since he knew which side he would choose.

“I’m not scared of her,” Skye replied quickly. “Well, I am but just because the Cavalry shot 100 guys on horseback doesn’t mean she knows how people work.”

What? “Wait. Horseback?” Grant asked incredulously as he turned to face Skye. “Where’d you hear that?” He started wiping pepper off of his hands with a towel.

“FitzSimmons.”

“Were they messing with you?” he asked. Skye’s face was all the answer he needed and he laughed a little.

Grant looked down and his expression turned serious. He remembered the way Garrett told him the story and how his expectations had risen after that. (“If she can do that, then you’ve just been a slacker,” Garrett told him.) It had not been fun. For a long time, he’d been both impressed and resentful of the Cavalry. It wasn’t until they’d both become part of Coulson’s team that he’d gotten to know her, at least a little, and the resentment faded away. Grant was still wary of her – he had to be in order to keep his cover – but she had gained his respect and his empathy. Grant recognized a wounded soul when he saw one.

“The story gets bigger every year. It wasn’t 100 guys, it was 20. Trained assassins. May crossed them off with nothing but a pistol, no support.” He wondered what that had been like, whether she’d been scared or just focused. Maybe shooting Hannah in the face of a crowd hadn’t been because she was cold; maybe she’d just been trying to avoid her past.

“She rescued a bunch of agents?” Skye asked, recalling Grant back to the present.

“Mm-hmm,” Grant nodded, smiling a little. He loved that Skye was so interested in his stories. SHIELD agents liked to tell stories but they weren’t too big on listening to others. And he was amused that she was so gullible. FitzSimmons had absolutely been messing with her. “There definitely wasn’t a horse.” He turned back to his sandwich.

“Well, if it went so well, why’s she so squirrelly about the name?” Skye wondered.

Grant turned back around to Skye. At this rate, he’d never get to eat. “Well, May’s not in it for the glory. She got the job done. End of story.”
That’s the way he wanted to do it too but Grant could tell, even in the short amount of time he’d been with the team, that he was getting attached. He wasn’t in it for the glory per se but he definitely wanted people to know what he’d done. If they didn’t, he’d never be able to go home to his team, his newfound family. And he desperately wanted that.

Skye nodded and finally took off to kick back on one of the couches in the lounge and look at something on her tablet, leaving him alone with his sandwich. At last! But then he couldn’t find the knife he’d been using to spread condiments on the bread. He wanted to divide the sandwich in half so that it wasn’t so messy.

“Now what’d I do with that knife?” Grant wondered aloud. It wasn’t like him to lose things. Oh well. He shrugged and started eating.

Grant was just finishing up his sandwich when he heard Skye call out, “Ward! Come look at this.” He kind of loved that he was her go-to guy. Becoming her SO was a great call!

He came over and looked over her shoulder. “Tobias Ford,” he read out. “Oh, isn’t he one of the technicians who died at the plant?” He sat down on the edge of the couch above Skye. Grant would have liked to sit next to her but he thought that might be pushing things, particularly since they’d just had that emotionally laden conversation in the pub not that long ago. So, he contented himself with hovering above.

“Yeah and he filed three safety complaints in the past month, each one in Hannah’s department,” Skye said.

“She thought he was her friend,” he replied, “but he had it out for her.”

Grant reflected that it was also a commentary on what it was like to be Hydra. Ever since his days at the Academy, he’d been playing a double game. While he didn’t truly have friends, he did have people he worked with, people who depended on him. These were the same people who, if he had remained Hydra, he would have had it out for when the organization emerged from the shadows. That had been difficult, more so for him than for other Hydra agents. Many of them seemed not to care that they would eventually betray and maybe even kill their SHIELD colleagues, in many instances the very people who had kept them safe throughout the years. Grant had always been bothered by this and was relieved that, as a triple agent, he could avoid much of that. But there would be some betrayal and the dread involved in that thought grew worse almost daily.

“Sad part is…he was right,” Skye said.

The two of them were just looking at each other when they heard Jemma scream. Grant leaped to his feet and started running toward the lab when the electricity went out and the Bus started tilting. They were going down. Grant quickly reversed course and ran back to the lounge on his way to the cockpit. Skye got up and ran with him. The two of them met May along the way and the three of them pushed their way into the cockpit.

Grant was impressed with May’s calm resolve and analytical demeanor as they took back control of the plane. She assessed the situation and, despite it being critical, never panicked. Working together, they brought the Bus in for a safe landing. After it was over, they gave each other a meaningful look, one full of relief and understanding that they needed each other’s help to get the job done. Grant also realized that he’d never once doubted that they would survive it because he had that much trust in May’s ability as well as his own. This was significant for him because trusting others was difficult yet, when it mattered the most, it had come naturally.

Grant, May and Skye made their way by flashlight back into the main part of the Bus and ran into
Coulson and Simmons who were coming from the cargo hold. Coulson seemed almost too serene. It was kind of eerie seeing his placid expression in the flickering light.

“Our ear comms are usually relayed through the plane, so here’s some hardware,” he said as he passed out hand-held radios.

“Did the girl do this to us, sir?” Grant asked. Maybe he’d been wrong about her.

“We believe Ms. Hutchins is the victim here,” Coulson informed them. “Our theories about her powers have been disproved.”

“By who?” Grant asked.

“I saw a ghost,” Simmons admitted. “I know how it sounds but a man attacked me and then he disappeared.”

“Did you get a good look at him?” May asked her.

“He dematerialized!” Jemma said in a frustrated tone. Clearly, she was taking it personally that the ghost was violating her beloved laws of physics.

“May, run your systems checks. Is the Cage still shielded?” Coulson asked.

“Most of the power’s dedicated to it,” she told him. What is going on?

“This man, or whatever he is, has been tormenting Ms. Hutchins,” Coulson hypothesized. “The Cage might be the one thing protecting her now. We’ll inform her.”

“Sir!” Skye interjected. “Can it be me to talk with Hannah?” Here we go. Grant rolled his eyes at Skye’s continual interference in addition to her poor grammar. Can she just not let it be? Sometimes she really is the limit. “Her life has been turned upside down and we stuck her in a nightmare box,” she said passionately. “She thinks she’s being punished. Can I please be the one to deliver the good news?”

Good news? “That a non-corporeal madman is hunting her?” Grant asked sarcastically.

Skye ignored him and stared at Coulson as she pled her case. “Again, I think it would be better coming from anyone else, really.”

Coulson looked intrigued. “All right,” he agreed. Then he turned briskly to the rest of them. “I’ll head upstairs, activate the emergency transceiver and radio HQ. Ward, take a firearm. Escort FitzSimmons downstairs, assess the damage, get us up and running.” Grant nodded.

Jemma started to nod but then looked stricken. “Wait!” she said. “Guys, um…where’s Fitz?”

Grant felt a little sheepish that he hadn’t noticed Fitz was missing. He was responsible for all of their safety and he should have done a head check at the very least. He could see that Jemma was feeling equally as guilty, so the two of them immediately set off on a search for the engineer. They were just rounding a corner when they almost ran right into him. Grant was annoyed. Typical Fitz. There he was, perfectly fine, standing there with the knife from the kitchen, raised like he was going to slash them with it. How did he get that knife?

“Thank God!” Simmons almost shouted. “Where have you been?”

Fitz was still holding the knife up high. “I have been locked in a closet, freaking out” he said in
typical Fitz annoyed voice but this time in a whisper, “thanks to you two geniuses.” What?

“That wasn’t us,” Jemma whispered earnestly.

“Well then, who was it?” Fitz asked, puzzled.

Grant was bored with this game of Who Done It. “We found Fitz,” he radioed in a normal voice.

May’s voice came back almost immediately. “Good. We’ll need him. Looks like the main problem is in Avionics Bay Two. But he took out all our systems.”

“Who’s she talking about?” Fitz asked. Grant shushed him so he could hear May’s response.

May apparently was also bored with his questions. “Grab your equipment and get in there,” she told Fitz shortly. “I’m going to power down flight controls to conserve energy and then go defend the cage door in case this ghost comes knocking.”

“Did she just say ‘ghost’?” Fitz wondered.

“He thinks it’s hell but I think it’s an alien world,” Jemma told Fitz as Grant led them to Avionics Bay Two. “Fitz, it was stunning.”

“Well, there were reports in London after the spaceship landed of multiple portals opening, Thor passing between worlds,” Fitz replied.

“You think that’s what they were researching at that lab,” Grant asked curiously. He was continually impressed with the knowledge of the Science Twins. Sometimes he felt like he was auditing a class, just listening in and learning as the professors talked.

“Trying to create another portal, yes,” Jemma responded.

“Failing until a malfunction produced a burst of energy,” Fitz told her.

“This ‘ghost’ is a man trapped between our universe and another,” Jemma theorized. “Perhaps that’s how all ghosts are. It’s a simple explanation really.” Grant tried not to smile. Jemma hated any thought of paranormal or fringe science.

“Simple would be a relative term in this case,” Grant told her. He threw open the door to Avionics Bay Two and shined his flashlight in there. Empty. However, the wires had been ripped out of their sockets. Fitz was not pleased.

“Bloody hell,” he said whispering again.

“Oh, he was thorough,” Jemma said wryly.

There was a clang and all three of them whipped around, Grant pointing his gun in the direction of the sound.

“Oh God!” Fitz and Jemma blurted simultaneously. If the situation hadn’t been so dire, Grant would have grinned. Science Twins in more ways than one.

“Plane’s on uneven ground. Could just be settling,” he told them, hoping to make them feel better. It didn’t work.

“Oh the other thing,” Fitz said.
This irritated Grant. *Can’t they just focus on the job at hand?* He turned halfway around and glared at Fitz. “Get to work,” he told them as he went to check it out. He walked down the tech corridor and saw nothing. “Clear!” he called out. He was headed back their way when he heard them start screaming.

He ran around the corner but still saw nothing. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw another figure. The man swung something heavy at him. Grant ducked, dropped his gun and tried to tackle him. The ghost figure dematerialized and Grant fell into the side of the Bus instead. He heard Jemma yelling, “Ward, help!” *What. The. Hell?*

Grant heard banging further down the hall. FitzSimmons were still yelling. “Quiet,” he whispered to them. He walked down the hallway again. Everything was still until the man appeared behind him again and punched him. Grant fell into the side of the hall but quickly turned around and started punching him back. The man began to choke him but Grant slid out of his grasp, crouched down and picked him up, preparing to throw him down when he disappeared again. *Damn! How can I fight him if he keeps disappearing?*

He heard Simmons scream and he took off running down the hall, picking up his gun from where it had dropped during the first ghost attack. Grant threw open the door of Avionics Bay Two, gun in hand, only to see FitzSimmons huddled together, safe. He never saw the blow coming. The last thing he saw was the stark terror on FitzSimmons’ faces and then there was nothing but blackness.

When Grant came to, he was lying on the floor in Avionics Bay Two, his head in Jemma’s lap. She’d obviously been taking care of him. “There he is,” she said, just like she would to a small child. He had to admit, it was nice to be treated so gently. But he couldn’t enjoy it.

“What happened?” he asked, starting to sit up.

“Well, we lost communication,” Jemma told him as she helped push him to a sitting position. “And you were hit with a very large plumber’s wrench.”

He sat up and looked around at her. “A wrench?” He didn’t think that Jemma realized that her hands were still on his back, holding him up. Grant wasn’t often touched in a comforting, non-sexual way and he really, really liked this. Jemma could be annoying at times but she always came through when it counted.

“Yeah,” she confirmed.

“That guy’s traveling back and forth between alien worlds…with a wrench?” Grant asked. *That doesn’t sound right. Why would someone do that?*

“Must have been in his hand when the blast hit,” Fitz told him. He was crouching down, trying to see if Grant was OK.

Grant thought back to his encounters with the ghost which took a bit of effort since his head was killing him. He reached up and started rubbing his neck where he had been hit. “Not the kind of wrench you would use to loosen a coupling, is it?” He saw Fitz look over at Jemma and knew he was right.

Just then they heard Coulson’s voice fight through some static. “….there? Maybe it doesn’t work after all,” he said.

“Uh yes, yes, we’re here sir,” Grant told him through the radio. “Where’d you go?”

“Nowhere,” Coulson replied. “We were attacked, locked in, then the guy disappeared.”
“Hey, that’s our story,” Fitz said, almost like he was insulted that Coulson had one-upped him.

“Is May with you guys?” Skye’s voice asked over the radio. She sounded worried.

“She isn’t with you?” Jemma asked. She was still behind Grant, helping him sit up. He didn’t need her assistance but he continued to enjoy the attention.

“No,” Coulson replied. “We’ll worry about her in a moment. Fitz! Can you walk me through something that will get us out of here? Then we’ll come get you out.”

Fitz complied and shortly afterward, the five of them were creeping through the plane. Skye was in the lead and was telling everyone that the ghost was actually Tobias Ford, the guy who made the safety complaints. Jemma had just started espousing about theories when Grant, who was bringing up the rear, couldn’t stand it anymore. What does it matter?

“Theories don’t matter,” he told them impatiently. “Only facts and the fact is a bullet will take you out of whatever world you’re in.” May would understand his point and was probably way ahead of them already. “Any idea which direction May could’ve taken her?”

The five of them reached the door where Jemma planned to get the Golden Retrievers to find out where May was. She opened it and a mop with a gas mask for a face was standing there. Coulson jumped while Skye, Jemma and Fitz all screamed. Grant just rolled his eyes.

But the scare turned out to be the impetus Skye needed to figure out Tobias’ motivation for what he had been doing. She started listing all the things he’d done in order to get Hannah to notice him: rigging the safety problems, making complaints to her department, scaring the gas station attendant giving her a hard time, trying to run over Coulson when he was taking her into custody. Grant could understand wanting to be close to someone but having no idea of how to do it appropriately. Against his will, he started feeling sorry for Tobias Ford.

“Yeah, he’s not trying to hurt her,” he told the others.

“He’s trying to protect her,” Coulson finished.

“He liked her,” Skye said as Coulson lowered the cargo ramp and they all ran out into the night.

With the Golden Retrievers leading the way, they ran to a nearby barn. Grant was first in the door, gun at the ready, and he saw Tobias on his knees, holding Hannah’s hand, with May standing over him telling him to let her go. Grant stopped. May had the situation well in hand.

“Let the girl go, Tobias,” she told him. “Let the girl go.”

Tobias looked miserable but he grasped Hannah’s hand, closed his eyes, inhaled and dematerialized. Hannah sighed. Skye rushed forward to hug her and Grant slowly lowered the gun he’d been holding. There was no need for it any longer. He heard Coulson ask May what she told Tobias.

“The same words you said to me in Bahrain,” she replied. And now Grant knew why May couldn’t let herself get emotionally invested, with him or with the others. She was holding on too tightly. She cared too much and didn’t know how to stop. Unlike Tobias, she couldn’t just disappear but had to deal with the constant pain.

Grant looked down and watched as May slowly left the barn, walking as if she was holding a great weight. He understood that she truly was burdened but the only thing he could do for her was allow her to take physical comfort in him whenever she wanted. It had to be her choice; he couldn’t
really go to her. And for now, he was fine with that.

The rest of them led Hannah back to the Bus. FitzSimmons, Coulson and May went to work repairing what they could while Grant and Skye told Hannah what they had learned about Tobias. She was relieved that her ordeal was over but saddened at the damage and loss of life he had incurred trying to get her to notice him. It was clear that she was overwhelmed and exhausted, so Grant encouraged Skye to put her to bed somewhere besides the Cage.

The electricity came back on just as Grant rounded the corner to see Skye pulling shut the door to the bunks. He suspected that Hannah was going to get what was probably the first good night’s sleep she’d had in a while. He remembered what that felt like too and was glad for her.

“She all right?” he asked Skye.

“Much better,” she replied, nodding.

He gestured towards the bunk. “Let me know if she needs anything,” he said.

Later that evening, everyone but Fitz and May decided to play Scrabble to unwind. It had been a tough day and they needed to relax. May was still in the cockpit (she never joined them for games) and Fitz was asleep in his bunk. He claimed that he desperately needed a nap since he had worked so hard on restoring power to the Bus. Everyone rolled their eyes at that. Fitz was well-known for his bragging.

The game had been competitive but fun. Grant and Jemma were neck and neck and Grant thought he had a shot at winning. He had managed to play some excellent words, like Espionage and Zodiac which were totally worth it even though Skye started calling him Superspy and made fun of him for knowing about astrology. She even went so far as to ask what his sign was which prompted Jemma to wax philosophic on the scientific basis of planet alignment and how humans are composed of the same materials as star dust. Grant liked that because it made him feel part of the universe. He wasn’t about to tell Skye his sign.

Coulson and Skye hadn’t played as many good words. Skye’s last word was Tales. She got pretend-huffy when Grant laughed and asked whether the word in front of it should be either tall or fairy. They all made fun of Coulson when the only word he could form was On. Jemma’s last word was Strange (she glanced at their smirks suspiciously), so they weren’t expecting much from her but then she played Aglet.

“Ta da!” she said with satisfaction.

Aglet. What the hell is that? “That isn’t a word in our language,” Grant told her.

“Huh?” Jemma replied inelegantly, looking nonplussed. Her expression almost made him laugh.

“I’ve never heard of it,” Coulson murmured at the same time Skye said firmly, “I’m checking.” She grabbed her tablet and started typing.

But Jemma’s outrage was focused solely on Grant. “Our language?” she demanded. “You mean the English language, first spoken in England?” It took all of his self-control not to grin at her. She was so easy to bother.

Skye looked up from her tablet. “Aglet: a plastic or metal tube covering the end of a shoelace,” she said disgustedly. She started giggling.

“Oh, come on!” Coulson said.
“She used her Britishness against us,” Grant protested.

Jemma sat back, satisfied. “It’s a word.” She stopped talking abruptly when Fitz walked up, shaving cream smeared all over one side of his face. She burst into hearty laughter.

Grant started laughing too, especially at the indignant expression on Fitz’s face. Clearly this was someone’s idea of a prank. *Does Fitz sleep in his button-down and sweater?*

Fitz shook his head. “It’s not funny,” he insisted. “I was sleeping peacefully,” he told them. Now Skye joined in the laughter as well. “Very clever, Simmons.”

“I didn’t…I didn’t do it,” she told him.

Fitz pointed at Grant, peering through the one eye that didn’t have shaving cream on it. “Well, Ward,” he accused. He held up his hand, covered in the white stuff. “I don’t appreciate…”

“Don’t look at me,” Grant said defensively. He only wished he had been the one to do it. But pranking hadn’t ever been part of his life before. The Ward household never held much laughter or exuberance and it was absolutely out of the question with Garrett. But he had to admit that it was a lot of fun.

Fitz’s accusing eye traveled over to Coulson, who was sitting on the couch. Coulson contented himself with a “Not me” kind of gesture. “OK, well Skye,” he said, pointing at her.

Skye laughed and held up her hands, “No.”

“Well who then?” Fitz asked. “Look, the bunks should be off-limits, OK?” Jemma and Skye burst into laughter again. “Don’t laugh! Because I know it was one of you!”

Grant thought it should have been obvious at this point who had done it but he could understand Fitz’s reluctance to accept the truth. This was so unlike May but Grant had heard that pranking had been totally something a pre-Cavalry May would do. He smiled, pleased at the idea that she was healing from her trauma. Maybe, like it had for Grant, being with the team had given her a kind of welcome wagon back to the world of normal.

Chapter End Notes

This wasn't a very fun chapter because I just didn't like the source material. I think the episode was among my least favorites. And I know that many of you don't enjoy MayWard but I maintain that it really made sense for both of them at this point. So, I hope you will give it (the chapter, not their relationship because it's doomed) a chance. As always, thanks for reading and a huge shout out to those who review. You all make my day!
After telling Grant that he could feel the universe (What on earth does that even mean?), John continued to lie on the table for a full minute longer. Then he leapt to his feet – actually leaped! When was the last time he’d seen John move so fluidly? – and looked around delightedly. Grant felt a thrill of fear at this turn of events. Just as he had been afraid she would, Raina had given John the formula, the flawed formula, and now he was something totally different, something never meant to exist. But Raina was clearly pleased and John? John was overjoyed.

He strode over to Grant and put his hands on his shoulders. “I’m back! Can you believe it? I’m better than I ever was!” he crowed.

Grant smiled and looked into John’s eyes but his heart sank. He could tell that there was an element of madness in him that hadn’t been there previously. John had been psychologically damaged before, incredibly damaged, but now his mental state was much more precarious. The part of Grant that still loved John – the part that appreciated how much he had done for him – was bereft. The man he loved seemed to be gone. And Agent Ward was worried. How am I going to complete my mission?

John walked around the plane, a huge smile on his face. He picked up random objects, examined them briefly and then put them down, as if he had absorbed everything he needed to know about them. It was almost like he was a small child learning about his environment for the first time. It was unnerving. It reminded Grant of a quotation he’d once heard: “Those whom the gods wish to destroy, they first make mad.” Nothing good is going to come of this. Yes, he wanted John out of power but he had no wish to see his utter destruction. Grant felt sick yet he continued to follow John on his path throughout the plane, wishing he was anywhere but there.

After John made his way into the cargo hold, one of his minions approached. “Sir? There’s a call for you from Cybertek,” he said as he handed him the phone.

Grant and Mike stood behind John as he held his phone up to his ear. Grant didn’t know what Mike’s orders were but he was trying to listen. However, the man on the other end of the line was speaking too softly for him to hear a word. Damn!

John listened for a few moments, then threw the phone over his shoulder dismissively. It clattered to the floor. “Doesn’t matter,” he said without even turning around.

Grant looked down at the phone on the floor and felt his anxiety rise. This was highly unusual behavior for John. He practically lived for his phone especially since Hydra had come out of the shadows. It was how he gained information and gave orders. Throwing it away carelessly was a bad sign for Grant’s mission. He needed John to be in communication with other Hydra leaders.

Suddenly, John walked over to the doors to the lab and pulled one apart. How in the hell did he do that? Even more importantly, why? He could see Quinn and Raina in the lab, both of them watching John. Quinn looked disturbed. This is bad.

“Are you all right?” Grant asked John, stress making his voice higher than usual. How am I going to control an insane super soldier?

“What does it look like?” Garrett asked, a pleased smile on his face, as he carried the door over to the wall. “Never better, son.” Grant could remember when being called son by John was something that he craved but now it almost made him choke back vomit. John stepped back from the door. “I
“I need a nail,” he murmured. Then he yelled, “Get me a nail! A big one!”

Grant looked at John fearfully. This was spiraling out of control and he didn’t know what to do, what he even could do. Another minion got John his big nail and he immediately started writing on the glass with it. His writing was like nothing Grant had ever seen before. There were no letters, only shapes and lines. Wait! He had seen something like it before but he couldn’t exactly recall where. Grant knew that the memory would come to him later but now, things were getting too weird for him to worry about the details. He walked up beside John, hoping to distract him from his madness.

But John wasn’t fazed at all. He glanced briefly over at Grant as he continued to write on the door. “Just getting some ideas down,” he told him gleefully. Then he chuckled a bit. “I can’t keep everything in my head.”

“I’ve gotta be honest with you, John,” Grant told him. “Looks like you’re kind of losing it.”

Grant felt his control slip a bit. He didn’t know what to do and, for the first time in a long time, his personal and professional parts were both afraid and confused. Here was John, his pseudo-father, losing his mind. How was he supposed to cope with that? And here was Garrett, his SO and Hydra leader, going off-book. How could he complete his mission of taking down Hydra if he had to deal with a madman? Grant hoped that his barb about losing it would shake John up a bit, make him angry and at least wipe the insane grin off his face.

But it didn’t have the desired effect. John just laughed. “I’m alive for the first time, thanks to you. We took some hits along the way but we did it. We did it!” he said turning to look at Grant in satisfaction.

Grant could feel Mike’s gaze on him. He didn’t want credit for creating this John Garrett! No, this is not my fault! He had done everything he could to avoid giving him a workable formula but somehow he had still gotten one, thanks to Raina. The only difference was that what had healed Coulson and Skye had made John insane. This turn of events was now making Grant crazy but he needed to pull it together; he didn’t want Mike watching him fall apart. He thought Mike was already suspicious of him, so he needed to get things back on track.

Grant sighed as he watched John continue to make his lines and circles on the glass. “Can’t believe it,” he said to John with the barest trace of a smile. It was all he could manage feeling as sick as he was. “This is everything we’ve been working towards. Saving you.”

Yes, that was what this had been about all along. John had never cared for Hydra ideals; they were always a conduit to getting what he wanted for himself. And Grant had joined with him in that desire. He had never liked Hydra and had only gone along with them to gain John’s favor. The two of them had talked many times about how ridiculous many of the Hydra agents were with their stupid salutes, silly slogan, and slavish obedience to authority. There was even an element of disdain for their corrupt morality. After all, John had been a dedicated SHIELD agent at one time and believed the goal of protection was a worthy one. At least, he had until SHIELD decided not to protect him. Then his moral perspective changed but, every so often, a glimpse of the believer who had joined SHIELD initially came through.

Of course, Grant had realized months ago, years ago really, that Hydra was corrupt, flawed and evil. It had been his desperation to save John that had kept him working with them until he could stand it no longer. But even saving John had backfired on him and Grant was trying to avoid being strangled by the irony. The very thing that had kept him from bonding with other SHIELD agents, from having the life he desired – saving John – ended up being so horrible that he wished he had never worked for it in the first place. He had given up everything for nothing. The flawed formula
may have healed John’s body but it seemed like it was destroying not only his sanity but also his soul. Thus, the only thing Grant had left now was taking down Hydra.

Maybe if he mentioned Hydra, he could refocus John and get the needed intel. Then he could contact Fury and Hill and stop this madness. It would be over. Grant took a deep breath. “Our alliance with Hydra was always a means to that end, right?”

John looked over at him, still smiling. “Symbiotic,” he agreed. Then he returned to his writing.

“And here we are.” Grant lowered his voice and leaned in towards John. Maybe if he reminded him that their plan was not world domination, he would be willing to speculate on Hydra’s next task. “It’s not like we’re true believers, right?” Grant felt rather than saw Mike glance at him again. Whatever.

His desperation was getting to be so strong that he stopped caring about what Mike did or didn’t believe, what he would or wouldn’t do.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Grant continued in a louder voice. “I’ll go where you go. Having our soldiers in key positions in great, but…then what?” He looked around and lowered his voice again. “Are we really planning a coup?”

John looked over at him. “It’s more of an uprising,” he said urgently, breathlessly. “It’s become bigger than Hydra.” He appeared to be in a state of major excitement.

Grant was just confused. Bigger than Hydra? What was he supposed to do with that? His mission for Fury and Hill was taking down Hydra, nothing more. Once he did that, Grant wanted to return to his team and leave all this behind. He had absolutely no interest in whatever else John was planning. He’d given him too much already.

John must have sensed Grant’s reluctance because he suddenly left his door and moved over to him, grasping him by the shoulders and leaning in confidentially. Such a gesture would have made the old Grant stand tall with pride. Now it just made his skin crawl. “Ward, you’ve taken good care of me, gave me everything I wanted.” That’s what you think, John, but it isn’t true. “It’s time for you to decide what it is you want. I’ll see that you get it too, son.”

Grant admitted to himself that this was a great play on John’s part but it wasn’t going to work on him, not anymore. John couldn’t give him what he wanted because Grant had outgrown him. John had no understanding of love, friendship and teamwork, so the thing that Grant truly wanted – family – was the one thing John could never, ever, provide. As he smiled wanly at John’s maniacal grin, Grant knew that this was it; this was the turning point for their relationship. He was done working for John Garrett. All he could do now was learn what he could and minimize the damage.

“I can do anything now,” Garrett said in a low voice as he resumed drawing. Not if I have anything to say about it.

Grant continued to watch Garrett draw until he was finished and the glass was covered with geometrical figures. He suddenly remembered where he had seen the same kind of drawings. It had been during his mission for Akela Amador when, with Skye’s help, he had gone into a secret room in a Russian research facility. Grant hadn’t known then what the markings were and he didn’t know now. Somehow it seemed ominous that Amador’s handlers had wanted the very information that Garrett had drawn. How does he even know about it?

Garrett abruptly finished and threw down the nail. “Well! That was great! Don’t you think so?” he asked Mike. If his grin was anything to go by, Garrett didn’t seem at all put out that Mike didn’t reply. “I need to go consider what’s next,” he said as he walked in the direction of the Cage. Mike followed him.
Grant tamped down his feelings of foreboding and panic. That crazy grin was really wearing on him. Garrett looked like Jack Nicholson playing The Joker and Grant had enjoyed neither that movie nor that villain. If Garrett didn’t stop smiling soon, Grant was going to lose it. As it was, he felt like he was teetering on the edge. He didn’t know what to do, what his next move should be. He decided to confront Raina. *What the hell did she put into that formula?*

He found her in the lab where she was still standing with Quinn. Grant ignored the man and focused solely on Raina. “I need you to come with me,” he told her firmly.

Somewhat to his surprise, Raina simply agreed and started walking with him, a placid expression on her face. Quinn stayed behind and didn’t say a word. Perhaps he was too intimidated by this frightening turn of events to do anything but wait. Grant didn’t spare him one single thought; there were too many other things on his mind. Dealing with Quinn could wait for later.

“What can I do for you, Agent Ward?” Raina asked silkily. Grant decided that if he ever drew up a Shit List, Raina’s name would be near the top.

“Garrett seems off since he took your formula and I want you to do something about it. You were the one who designed the formula; figure out what’s wrong!” Grant said urgently.

“I don’t know what I can do,” she said looking up at him in the innocent *Who me?* kind of way that always made him want to strangle her. She was anything but innocent. “And the formula came from your team’s research, not my own.”

Yeah, he already knew that and the guilt was almost choking him. His scrubbing of the hard drive was intended to give her just enough information to believe everything was there but not enough to make a workable formula. Clearly, she was smarter than he thought and some of this felt like his fault. If only he could have erased the data entirely or changed the essential parts. But he hadn’t known enough biochemistry to do that. He’d needed his team (*pieces solving a puzzle*) but he’d had to go it alone. *Damn Fury to hell!* Fury was obsessed with secrecy and now Grant was paying the price. If only he had been able to share his mission with the team, none of this would have happened. FitzSimmons easily could have provided a fake formula.

“I’m saying, just talk to him. He says everything’s fine but he’s not acting that way.” They’d reached the outer hallway where the Cage was located. Mike was standing guard there. Both Grant and Raina stopped walking and faced each other. He gave Mike a brief appraising glance, then turned back to her. “I don’t know what’s going on with him and I don’t like it.”

Raina merely nodded and headed into the Cage. *That was too easy.* He looked at Mike again. Grant wished he could confide in Mike but there was no way that he could. It was too risky – he knew that Mike would do almost anything to save his son – but he did stare at him for a moment, trying to silently communicate that they were on the same side. Mike looked back expressionlessly. Grant gave up and turned to go. He had no idea what was coming next and he decided to consult with Fury and Hill if he could. Things were coming to a head.

After communicating briefly with Fury (who told him that he’d saved FitzSimmons), Grant went to his bunk and closed the door. He badly needed the quiet to calm himself. He wasn’t going to do anyone any favors being as anxious as he was. He closed his eyes, concentrating on slowing his heart rate and deepening his breathing. Grant tried to focus on calming images, like the ocean or the woods. Instead, all that came were images of what he was desperately afraid he’d lost: Skye, the team, himself as a hero or at least someone to be admired.

The images switched to how he’d hurt others. He saw Skye’s tears when she realized he was Hydra, FitzSimmons’ scared faces when they first saw him at the airfield, Coulson’s anger as he
backed out Lola, and the surprised look on Hand’s face when he shot her. And he hadn’t even seen May yet. He shuddered to think of her silent, tight-lipped rage. It was possible that none of them would forgive him. Maybe it wouldn’t matter that he was a triple and was working on the side of the angels. Maybe he would have nothing when this was all over. These thoughts weren’t helping but, for the first time in a long time, Grant couldn’t turn them off. He didn’t know what to do. He once again felt like that scared 15 year old who had just been brought into the visitors room to meet John Garrett.

Grant sat back on his bed as he felt the Bus land. He knew they had picked a spot fairly close to Cybertek so they could get there quickly. The plan called for Quinn to meet up with the military brass he’d been talking to about the supersoldiers and sell them on the idea. Garrett would come in to seal the deal for Hydra. Grant would gather the intel on who these guys were, what the deal was intended to be and then report back. Once Cybertek and the rogue military commanders were contained, Fury promised that he would be free to go.

But he wouldn’t be. The new slideshow flashed in his mind’s eye as he rested against the wall, fighting back the tears that wanted to fall. He saw himself in juvie, as scared as he’d ever been but trying to hide it. He saw himself desperately wanting to believe John’s version of the world and allowing him to break him out of detention. The pictures started going faster: being given Buddy, sitting in the rain, John promising tacos and bringing out a gun, Buddy dying, being told his emotions made him weak, John hitting him for a cover, John’s face when he was angry, Skye after she’d been shot, and finally, John’s maniacal grin.

Sure, maybe John had scooped him out of a hell but he hadn’t done it for Grant. He’d done it so that he could have a weapon he could control. He didn’t care in the least about Grant; he never had. With that flash of insight, it all became clear and Grant finally saw what his therapist had been trying to tell him all those months ago. He finally understood why Fury had insisted upon counseling. John had isolated him, fed him a steady diet of lies, and encouraged him to trust no one but John. Grant had missed out on most of his formal schooling, dating, friendship, laughter, stupid teenage antics, popular entertainment, and the feeling of being loved and cared for that every child deserved. John had shaped Grant into his weapon so thoroughly that when Grant finally wanted something for himself, he had almost been too scared to take it. Thank goodness he had and he silently thanked Fury and Hill for giving him a second chance.

But he would never be free of John if he just finished his mission and left. He needed to have it out with him, make a formal declaration of independence. Grant would never break out of his shackles if he didn’t. It was no longer enough to just undermine John in secret. No, he needed John to know that it was Grant Ward who had brought him down on the eve of his greatest triumph, who was no longer in any way his son, friend or even his coworker. He wanted John to feel the sting of betrayal just like Grant felt now that he knew the truth. And that time was coming.

There was a knock and Grant’s bunk door slid open. Mike Peterson stepped in and at first was silent, just taking in Grant’s position on the bed and his minimal furnishings. His face was unreadable. “Garrett’s ready to leave for Cybertek,” he told him. “Time to go.”

Grant merely nodded and followed Mike out of the plane. He felt calmer. It would soon be over.

The ride to Cybertek was mostly silent. Mike, of course, said nothing and even the usually talkative Garrett didn’t appear to have much to say. He just gazed around in wonder at everything, occasionally murmuring things that didn’t make sense, like “I know,” and “Who would have thought?” Grant had no idea who he was talking to, so he didn’t give a response. Apparently none was needed as Garrett kept nodding like he could hear voices in the wind. It was creepy but, Grant admitted to himself, better than having to hold a conversation.
Once they got to the compound, Garrett, Mike and Grant walked straight to the main room where Quinn was supposed to be making his sales pitch to the military brass. However, shortly before they got there, the sound of gunfire and explosions shook the place. Alarms started to blare. SHIELD had arrived. Grant felt his anxiety resurface. With all the chaos that was sure to occur with the coming fight, it was possible that his team might shoot first and ask questions later. But there was nothing he could do about that now.

When the three men walked into the room, it was immediately apparent that Quinn was having trouble appeasing the military brass. Grant couldn’t blame them for being confused and upset. They’d come for a weapons demonstration but were instead caught up in a war between Hydra and SHIELD. They had no idea what was going on and military types were not usually known for their love of surprises or their patience.

“Gentlemen, gentlemen, please. I beg you…” Quinn was saying. Grant guessed that they were threatening to leave. It didn’t matter to him what they did. He started memorizing faces, uniforms and medals so he could let Fury know who they were. Given the nature of their business with Cybertek, it was likely that they didn’t have governmental authority for what they were trying to do here.

“Don’t beg them, Quinn!” Garrett said in a loud voice as he entered the room. “You’re not a Rottweiler.” He turned toward the lead general. “We don’t need their scraps,” he said directly to him. Well, at least he stopped smiling.

“Who the hell is this?” the general asked Quinn.

“This is our strategy consultant, John Garrett,” he replied smoothly.

The general puffed up. “I want full disclosure right now or our boys will come in and shut you down! Why do I hear gunfire?” He was still speaking to Quinn, pretty much ignoring Garrett.

Garrett hadn’t moved a muscle; he just stood in front of the general with his arms crossed. Grant started to get a bad feeling about this. “You hear the dying breath of an old world, General, and a new world is coming,” Garrett said ominously as he stepped a foot closer to him. “I’ve tasted it on my tongue.”

Grant looked anxiously around him. He knew that he, Mike and the other Hydra agents could take all seven of the military guys in the room almost effortlessly but this was bad. These were some of the top leadership in the United States military and they would remember who was in this room and what it was they did. If SHIELD lost this fight, there might be no place for Grant to hide if things went south. And with the way Garrett was acting, he thought it likely that they would.

The general seemed unimpressed. “This is your strategy consultant?” he asked, his voice heavy with sarcasm. If the situation hadn’t been so terrible, Grant might have laughed. He also would have appreciated Quinn’s panicked expression.

“He’s…part time,” Quinn said, trying to save the situation.

“New strategy,” Garrett said, staring at the general. “You shut your mouth and give us everything we want.”

Grant saw some of the other military guys step forward. They clearly didn’t like the tone Garrett was taking with their leader. This was going to get out of hand and fast. He didn’t want to take them down but he really didn’t see what choice he had.
The general undoubtedly had no idea what he was dealing with. “You threaten a United States General and there are consequences,” he said pompously. He looked like a peacock who’d gotten his feathers ruffled. Even though Garrett had always been arrogant himself, arrogance on others never sat well with him. Oh shit!

“Oh, you feel powerful now, don’t you?” Garrett said in a honeyed voice. Grant was familiar with that voice. It boded ill for whomever Garrett was talking to and, in this case, it didn’t bode well for any of them. “But you’re all just slaves who will serve our future.”

The general looked like his blood pressure was shooting through the roof. “Listen, you crazy son of a bitch…”

Quinn stepped forward. Grant couldn’t believe that Quinn actually thought that he could defuse the situation but (even though he didn’t want to) he had to give him props for trying. “Gentlemen, perhaps a small demonstration will…”

Garrett turned to Quinn and said, “Yes! Oh, yes. A demonstration.”

Wow! Did that just work? Grant was prepared to feel a bit more charitably toward Quinn if he had actually headed off a disaster. Maybe he would move him below Raina on his Shit List. Garrett glanced briefly at Grant and he nodded his head, hoping that Garrett would stop his blustering and allow Quinn to do his job and provide a demonstration. Anything to head off an ugly confrontation.

But Garrett suddenly turned around and punched the general not just in the gut but through it. The other six military men stepped forward but were stopped by Hydra agents pulling guns. Garrett raised the general in the air, purely by the strength of where his hand was in his midsection. That had to be incredibly painful if the look on the general’s face was any indication. Grant was grateful he hadn’t eaten much.

“I’ve seen the future,” Garrett said calmly, as if he wasn’t holding a United States General by his internal organs, as if said general didn’t have blood gushing out of his mouth. “I’ve glimpsed it through the eyes of every creature – dead, living or yet to be. This is the beginning.”

Grant was terrified. He’d known that Garrett was exhibiting signs of madness but he had no idea it was this bad. Not only was he murdering a general in plain sight and for no good reason but he was talking creepy nonsense while he was doing it. How on earth am I going to stop him?

Garrett turned his hand and something crunched inside the General. He let out a gasp of pain and Quinn looked as though he was going to be sick. Garrett finally set down the General and pulled out his bloody hand. In it was one of the General’s ribs.

Grant finally found his voice. “The beginning of what, John?” he asked in a sickened voice.

Grant had seen a lot of horrible things in his career as a spy but this was among the worst. He was watching a man be dismantled piece by piece. And if Garrett could do that to someone as powerful as a U.S. General, what was to stop him from doing it to anyone and everyone?

“The end,” Garrett replied as he took the rib and slammed it down into the general’s brain.

The general collapsed on the floor, dead. Quinn turned and threw up into a corner. Everyone else seemed frozen in horror except Garrett. He bent down, wiped his bloody hand on the general’s uniform and stood back up, looking around at the others. He opened his mouth to speak but, before he could get a word out, Grant spoke up.

“John,” he said calmly. “I think they get the point. Why don’t you go get cleaned up? I’ll take care
of things here.” He briefly glanced at Mike and was relieved when he gave the tiniest of nods. Mike would handle Garrett for him.

Garrett just shrugged. “Of course,” he said jovially. “You always do.” He flashed his maniacal grin at the rest of the military brass. “Gentlemen,” he said just as if he were just leaving a party. Then he and Mike left the room.

Grant swallowed back the bile in his throat that had risen at the sight of the general’s body and considered what he needed to do. With SHIELD making an assault on the compound and Garrett still here, he thought it best to lock up the rest of the brass in the Bus to keep them safe. He could figure out what to do with them later. He gave his orders to the Hydra agents and, once he was convinced they were being followed, left with Quinn to return to the Bus. He would need to supervise all of this and then return to Garrett’s side. Grant had a feeling that the moment of reckoning would be soon.

Upon returning to the Bus, Quinn hurriedly loaded up one of the Cybertek vans with his stuff, clearly intent on getting the hell out of there. Grant watched him grimly, knowing that he still owed Quinn but that it would have to wait until later. He couldn’t do anything about it now. Then he saw Raina coming down the stairs, a suitcase in her head, also clearly planning on leaving. This time, Grant almost lost it. Here was the architect of Garrett’s transformation and she was just going to leave him to clean up her mess?

“You’re not going anywhere!” he said angrily as he grabbed her arm. Then he yanked the suitcase out of her hand and slammed it on the ground. “You think you can just leave?”

Raina hardly batted an eye at Grant’s rough treatment of her. She didn’t even look scared. “Garrett has no more use for me and I have work to do elsewhere.”

To hear her say Garrett’s name so calmly angered Grant even further. She was the cause of all of this! “What the hell did you say to Garrett?” he demanded.

Raina raised her chin. “I listened,” she told him.

“He’s psychotic! Did you notice that?” he yelled at her. “I just had to lock up six government officials because he butchered the seventh one! He completely lost it in there.”

“You’re wrong,” she told him firmly. “Garrett’s not lost, far from it. He’s connected now.”

It crossed Grant’s mind to wonder if she too was psychotic. Connected to what? “Don’t tell me you’re following him into this madness, his talk of evolution,” he sneered.

“I agree with him. You’re the one who follows him,” Raina retorted. Not any more. Grant tried to keep his face under control but he had doubts about how successful he was. All his coping skills seemed to be unraveling. Raina appeared to see the denial on his face because she added, “But in this case, you should. For the first time, you both need the same thing and so do I.”

She really is crazy. “What are you talking about? I need him to get his head on straight.”

“Skye. We need Skye. And that’s all you ever wanted, isn’t it?” Raina asked.

Grant stopped breathing for a moment. After all of his hard work, his struggle to remain impassive, Raina recognized what he truly wanted. She may not know about his triple status but she knew enough to realize he loved Skye and believed that he couldn’t have her. I was wrong when I told Fury that she is an interpersonal idiot; she’s seen through me this entire time. And what does she mean that we need Skye? For what? His fear shifted to Skye. If Raina thought that she needed her,
then Skye was in grave danger.

“Then the evolution he speaks of,” Raina continued. “She’ll be an important part of that. So go get her, Grant Ward.” She looked smugly at him, convinced that she had him figured out.

Grant needed more information, so he was going to have to calm down and get it out of her. He still had a role to play and it sounded like Skye’s life might depend upon it. “Get her for what?” he asked.

“The world is going to change,” she told him earnestly, moving closer to him, “and when it does, she could be yours.” Could she be any vaguer? He wanted to shake the information out of Raina but that wasn’t the way she worked. He needed to make her feel superior and want to show off.

He smirked at her and crossed his arms. “Wow. You really are crazy. Skye detests me,” he said angrily. “She thinks I’m a monster,” he continued, looking away. Unfortunately, he thought that was probably true but maybe it wouldn’t be forever. Hopefully she would forgive him. But he needed to goad Raina, make her want to show him what she knew.

“Are you?” she asked, getting closer to him still. “Is that your true nature or is that what Garrett made you to be?” If she was aware of his fear that Garrett made him into a monstrous weapon who no one could love, then Raina was even cleverer than he thought.

“I don’t know,” he almost whispered. And that was the crux of it. He didn’t know his true nature and he hated that she was right about that.

“Well, we know about Skye’s parents, about the darkness that lies inside her. I believe in a world where her true nature will reveal itself. And when that day comes,” she said as she bent down and got her suitcase, “maybe you two could be monsters together.” With that, Raina walked toward the Cybertek van, got in and drove off with Quinn.

Grant stood there for a moment longer, going over what she’d said. But then he shook himself internally and tried to refocus. He couldn’t worry about Skye right now. He would deal with all of that later, after the mission was completed. Right now, the military guys were locked in the Cage and guarded by several Hydra agents, so there was nothing left for him to do on the Bus. He needed to return to Cybertek.

Grant found Garrett and Mike standing on a balcony, serenely overlooking all the machinery below. He had no idea what the machinery was for and he didn’t care. He noticed that Garrett had cleaned the blood off of him and, for that, Grant was grateful. Blood didn’t usually bother him but he didn’t want to think about what had happened to the general. He was about at the end of his rope and didn’t want any distractions. Grant needed to end this, so he hoped to stir Garrett to action.

“The compound’s been hit,” Grant told him as he came into the room. “Raina and Quinn took off. We need to take action now. What are my orders?” Please, just tell me what you want to do so I can circumvent it and end this. I can’t take anymore!

“That’s up to you, son,” Garrett almost whispered. Grant wanted to shake him. I want to end it now, today! And stop calling me son!

“Wake up!” he yelled at Garrett. “Come back to reality, John! What do you need me to do?” Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Mike turn his head to watch them. Something was up with him.

“You’ve already done it,” Garrett smiled. Grant looked stricken. If Garrett wouldn’t let him know Hydra’s plans, he couldn’t finish this and he really didn’t think he could continue for much longer.
Garrett’s cellphone rang and he looked at the Caller ID. Grant leaned on the railing, trying to calm down.

“It’s your handler,” Garrett told Mike jovially. “Probably to tell me what the soldiers are seeing,” he commented as he answered the phone.

“Skye,” he said lightly as he turned toward Grant. What the hell is Skye doing on the phone? Mike also turned his head at Garrett’s statement. “You sound different on the phone…huskier,” Garrett said to her roguishly. Grant wanted to throw up. He didn’t want Garrett anywhere near Skye. He backed away a bit so that Garrett wouldn’t play with her just to tease him.

“No, I’m not too concerned,” Garrett said as he leaned on the rail. “You see, if anyone but the assigned handler gives a directive to one of my men, well, kaboom.”

Grant couldn’t hear what Skye was saying but he guessed that whatever she was discussing with Garrett was part of a larger plan. Coulson wouldn’t let her do it otherwise. Grant closed his eyes and hoped that the team knew what they were doing. He didn’t think he could stand it if any of them got hurt.

“Phil’s around?” Garrett asked excitedly. “Great! We actually have a lot to talk about.” Grant was annoyed. His nerves were screaming and Garrett was acting like he had all day to participate in a delightful conversation with a friend. Grant didn’t know just how long he could keep this up. Come on, Skye. End the damn call! Garrett gave Grant a mischievous grin as he continued, “Oh, and I wanted you to know, your scientist friends…they were brave until their last breath.”

Grant felt another wave of anger wash over him. He was deeply grateful that he had gotten the Science Twins out of harm’s way but it was just like Garrett to taunt Skye with their safety. Fury may not have been able to get in touch with the team after rescuing FitzSimmons, so it was possible that Skye didn’t know what had happened. Grant knew how much Skye loved Leo and Jemma, so if she didn’t know they were OK, then Garrett was mentally torturing her. Which, of course, was his intention.

Garrett hung up the phone and turned towards Grant. “Raina told me how special Skye is.” Oh shit! “I know you’ve seen that from the start. You want orders? Get her.”

Finally! Grant almost sighed with relief. This was it. “Thank you,” he said quietly with a small smile. Then he grabbed his gun and went off to find Skye.
The Return of the Supersoldiers

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Flashback

Grant had seen a change in May following the Welcome Wagon mission. Although it wasn’t completely obvious, to his well-trained eye it seemed as though she was letting down her guard just a bit. Fitz’s pranking was just the first. Skye woke up to a handlebar mustache on her face one morning (drawn in washable ink) and her resulting scream had been too much for Grant. He had broken down into a laughing fit, something he had never done before. He laughed so hard that even Skye joined in after a while.

Jemma too suffered a visit from the Prankster when she got sprayed with water from the kitchen sink. She was dripping with both water and indignation as the rest of the team burst into laughter at her expression. A quick investigation by Fitz discovered duct tape on the nozzle of the kitchen sink with just a little gap towards the front which directed the water at the unsuspecting person turning it on. Coulson’s turn came when he tried to cut into what he thought was a chocolate cake. He’d offered to cut everyone a piece but after grunting with effort a few times, he took a look at the “cake” (it turned out to be a piece of craft foam decorated with cake frosting and sprinkles) and joined in their laughter.

Given that he and May were the only ones who hadn’t been pranked yet, Grant knew that the others suspected him of engineering the pranks but, of course, he’d long ago guessed the truth. He figured that his turn was coming soon. In the meantime, he was enjoying a lighter May both in the bedroom and out of it. They’d even taken to sparring with each other on occasion, an activity that, prior to their dalliance, he would never have even dared suggest.

One typical morning found Grant was sparring with May in the cargo hold. Things were going pretty well. He’d avoided this amazing twirl she did (Wow!) and then blocked her kick and knocked her aside with a sideways shove. That earned him a glare. May then hit him in the chest and swept his legs. Suddenly, Grant found himself on the floor looking up at her. This didn’t happen to him often so he was impressed. He grinned ruefully.

“Nice feint,” he told her. He sat up on the mat.

May smiled with satisfaction. “I read your file. I know you favor your left.” She read my file?

“That’s in there?” Grant asked. Hmm.....that seemed awfully detailed but he wasn’t really worried. Garrett made certain to keep a lot of information out of his file and so had Fury. As Grant’s file was probably the thinnest in the agency, he was curious. “What else?”

“Nothing that’s news,” she said dismissively. “You don’t play well with others.” May extended her hand and helped pull him off the mat. As he stood up, she gave him a flirty look.

“I think I’ve proven that I can,” he replied, smiling back at her. “More than once.” May’s expression hardened. Oops. Had he said too much?

The truth was he wasn’t used to having an ongoing relationship (if he could even call it that), even a Friends with Benefits type of arrangement like he had with May. Grant hadn’t had the opportunity to date when he was younger and then hadn’t had the time or the permission when
he’d gotten older. Sure, he’d romanced high value targets and learned the tools of seduction – what spy didn’t? – but he’d never had anything real that was longer than an overnight. Much to his surprise, Grant discovered that he liked it. Sure, he knew it didn’t mean anything but it was fun and it was something different. He hadn’t a lot of different in his life either.

Grant’s relationship with May also made him realize that while he and May were both Specialists, they were quite dissimilar in what they did. Grant was a spy. He could bring on the physicality when necessary but, overall, his true gifts were in espionage – gathering intelligence, making people believe what he needed them to, uncovering secrets – and he accomplished those tasks in a variety of ways. Many of those methods involved him becoming whoever he needed to be. Grant was good at that.

May, however, appeared to land firmly in the “muscle” category of Specialist. She didn’t seem to use many tools besides intimidation and brute force to get information or pacify an asset. She got the job done but usually with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer. Grant preferred to use finesse when he could, so he had been pleased when May was gentle in the bedroom. He’d hoped that teasing her when they weren’t being physically intimate would lead to an additional lowering of her guard in other areas (maybe she’d even admit to being the Prankster) but clearly, that was not going to be the case.

“Not here,” she said tightly.

“Towel down,” Coulson said from the top of the stairs. Both Grant and May were startled at his presence, an unusual event for either of them and practically unheard of for both simultaneously. “I need you both in the Command Center in five.” He walked off down the hall.

May gave Grant a significant look. This did not bode well. Grant knew how she felt about Coulson. If she thought Coulson was upset with her or disapproving of their actions, then Grant had no doubt that their little arrangement would come to a screeching halt. He wasn’t sure how he’d feel about that. He hurried to get to the meeting.

The whole team listened to Coulson’s briefing about three Centipede soldiers breaking out Edison Poe, a former Marine and an expert in tactics and rapid response. Then he dropped the bombshell that Mike Peterson would be coming in as their backup. Grant was less than thrilled. Mike was a wild card. But he held off saying anything until after Coulson and May left.

He, Skye and FitzSimmons were standing around the holo-table reviewing the tape of Mike saving that woman from a burning building using his superpower. FitzSimmons were at one end while he and Skye stood at the other. This was usually their configuration and Grant liked it. He thought it suggested who each of them trusted.

“It’s not good,” Grant told them. “At all. The guy was a ticking time bomb. Literally.”

“HQ wouldn’t have sent him if he was still combustible,” Fitz argued. “They must have found a way to stabilize him somehow.”

“They stabilize his attitude?” Grant asked sarcastically. “Cause he was pretty hostile in Union Station.”

“It’s not like we haven’t opened our doors to other people,” Jemma said, carefully not looking at Skye, “people with questionable track records.”

Skye stared in dismay at Jemma but seemed to realize that she wasn’t being unkind. “Not cool but true,” she told her. “And don’t worry about Mike,” she said to Grant. “He’s a good guy.” He
sighed. *Typical Skye, so naïve.*

“Who’s been in the Centipede program,” Jemma retorted.

“Exactly. He can give us some superpower backup,” Skye said.

“Yeah,” Jemma conceded with a smile.

Grant was annoyed that Jemma had given in so quickly and was doubly irritated at Skye’s defense of Mike. “Just saying, this could easily go sideways. I mean, the last time we saw this guy, he was a raging homicidal maniac…” Grant looked up and saw FitzSimmons looking extremely uncomfortable, their gaze just behind his shoulder. Skye was suddenly finding the table very interesting. *Damn!*

“He’s standing right behind me, isn’t he?” Grant asked with a sinking feeling. He had no wish to hurt Mike’s feelings and maybe the good side of Mike, the one they’d seen right before Grant shot him, was really who he was. He’d just wanted the team to be prepared for whatever might happen but he knew that Mike at least deserved a chance.

“Mr. Peterson,” Coulson said cheerfully. “This is Agent Grant Ward. He’s the man who shot you at Union Station,” he concluded with a smile.

Grant turned around and gave Coulson an irritated look. He realized that Coulson thought this was funny but it wasn’t any way to introduce a teammate. Grant gave Mike a nod. Coulson wasn’t finished. “FitzSimmons designed the weapon he used,” he said pointing at them. They gave Mike a wave, Jemma wearing a pained smile on her face. “And I think you remember…” he pointed at Skye.

She seemed to share Coulson’s sense of humor because she finished, “Kidnap victim.”

Mike chuckled. “You joined SHIELD?” he asked incredulously.

“Yes,” she answered lightly. “Turns out, guys in suits,” she said looking first at Coulson and then at Grant, “not so bad.”

Mike put his hands in his suit pockets. “Look, I know Union Station could have gone another way. Another team might not have let me out of there alive. I owe you. All of you.”

Grant was impressed with his humble demeanor and he nodded. Maybe having Mike as a teammate wouldn’t be so bad.

“That’s bygones and water under a distant bridge far away,” Skye replied.

With the introductions over, they all got to work. Skye hadn’t found anything to let them know where to look for Po. Grant informed them that they’d recognized one of the Centipede soldiers, a guy by the name of Brian Hayward who’d served in Afghanistan and whose sister Laura was his only living relative. The plan called for Grant and Coulson to go talk to her and hopefully make her suspicious enough that she would contact Brian and they could track his location.

Grant was pleased to spend some time with Coulson. They hadn’t had a mission alone since they’d gone searching for Amador and he needed to continue working him as an asset. Grant had to give Garrett information about him so that Hydra’s plans would be set into motion. Once that occurred, he would contact Fury or Hill and report in on that. Sometimes, all the games he was playing made his head hurt but, so far, he could keep track.
Right now, his focus was Coulson. The two of them were dressed in their regulation suits and tooling down the road in Lola. It was a beautiful day for a ride even if the air was a bit brisk. Grant wondered if that was typical for Cleveland this time of year. He hadn’t had much occasion to hang out in Ohio.

“Psychology of Women: Unraveling the Female Psyche,” he read out loud from Laura’s course schedule. That sounded both interesting and helpful. Of course, Agent Ward needed to sound disdainful in order to get Coulson talking but Grant was a different story. He was so unschooled in the ways of women that any help he could get would be welcome. Then maybe he could figure out when he could and could not flirt with May and how to get closer to Skye.

“That’s an actual book?” Coulson asked with a disbelieving smile.

“It’s a whole course,” Grant replied with a smirk. “Hayward’s sister’s in there now.”

“A whole class,” Coulson said. “On women.” Grant shook his head and smirked again. Coulson was really eating this up. “Time was you just had to figure them out. Solving the puzzle was half the fun.”

“You solve a lot of puzzles in your day?” Grant asked.

Coulson gave him a smile, one that a lot of men gave when asked to reflect upon their lady loves. The kind of smile that spoke to fond memories and, true or not, a belief in their romantic abilities. “A few,” he replied. “Some more worth it than others.”

Grant kept his silence, knowing that Coulson would keep on talking. In fact, he was clearly dying to talk. This was almost too easy. He tried not to look superior.

“One was…especially rewarding,” Coulson continued.

“What happened?”

Coulson looked over at him, the smile gone. “I died,” he said sardonically.

Damn! That was a conversation killer. “Oh.” But maybe he could still get him to talk. “I guess she wasn’t Level 7, sir?”

“She was a cellist, second chair, Portland Symphony,” Coulson said. Grant smiled. He had him eating out of his hand again. “Saw her play whenever I was in town. Ever see a beautiful woman play the cello?”

Grant kept the smile pasted on his face and shook his head. He’d seen a lot of beautiful women do a lot of different things, most of them deadly. Watching one make fabulous music sounded like a great idea to him. Then again, it was amazing to watch a beautiful woman hack computer systems too.

Coulson smiled and shook his head. “It’s something else,” he said. I bet. “She laughed at my jokes too, which was a very nice bonus.”

Coulson’s jokes were a sore subject on the Bus because almost no one besides Coulson appreciated them. Skye could usually play it off and May wasn’t expected to laugh but the rest of them found his sense of humor a trial. If there was a woman out there who actually liked Coulson’s jokes, then it was clearly a match made in heaven!

“You know where she is now?” Grant asked.
“Of course I do,” Coulson said. He didn’t have an overtly sad look on his face but Grant could read him like a book. This man was still grieving the loss of the cellist. And it was sad. If he hadn’t been killed, then maybe the two of them could be together. That was a true tragedy and someone like Coulson, someone who was so kind to others, really deserved some happiness. All of a sudden, he felt his Agent Ward mask slip a bit and the Grant side take over.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Grant told him sincerely. And he was. Although he hadn’t had the experience himself, he suspected that losing someone who made you feel special could rip your heart out.

Coulson shrugged. “I was gone for months. The Avengers thought I was dead, so I had to keep that up. SHIELD protocol. It’s probably better this way.”

*For who?* Grant was an experienced agent and understood the need for keeping things quiet but sometimes the secrecy was a bit hard to take. This seemed like one of those times. What would be the harm in letting Coulson contact the woman he loved?

“Maybe if she’d been part of the Agency…” Grant started. He found himself wanting to fix this, to help the course of true love run smooth. Maybe if he could see it working for someone else, he could find it himself. Grant also wanted to believe that a relationship between two agents could be a good thing. At least some of the secrecy could be minimized and you’d have a lot in common. Not that he was thinking of anyone in particular of course.

“In my experience, that’s just asking for trouble,” Coulson said.

Grant nodded and quit talking. The subject had lost its’ fascination.

A short while later, Grant found himself standing around a highly populated area of campus, feeling incredibly out of place. All the students were wearing casual clothes, primarily consisting of denim, jackets and mid-length coats. Grant stood out like a sore thumb.

The guys just gave him a glance and walked on but the young women were giving him the once-over. A few had even come up to ask if they could help him find something (the look in their eyes suggested that they hoped that something was their dorm room). One bold young woman even went so far as to ask if he wanted to join her in her private study carrel. It was probably too much to hope for that Coulson wasn’t listening to all of this. Finally, after enduring 10-20 minutes of co-ed come-ons, Grant saw Laura Hayward walking in his direction.

“Laura Hayward?” he asked, approaching her.

If her expression was anything to go by, Laura was not immune to Grant’s charm either. “That’s me,” she replied with a huge smile. She stopped somewhat close to him.

“Sorry to bother you but I was hoping you could help me out,” he said in a friendly way, shoving his hands in his pockets.

Laura was clearly overjoyed. “I hope so too,” she said flirtatiously.

But her attitude rapidly shifted when he let her know that he was looking for her brother Brian. Laura was quick to deny that they were in touch but her whole demeanor changed from warm and friendly to ice cold. They’d hit a live one. Grant went through his spiel about the gaming commission but it was just to see it through. He could tell that she was hooked. Sure enough, she quickly called Brian and they were able to pinpoint his location in Oakland. He and Coulson raced back to the Bus so they could get to California as quickly as possible.

Once on the Bus, Grant was a bit disgruntled to find that FitzSimmons and Skye were spending a
lot of time with Mike. He tried not to let it bother him (after all, he was quite busy) but he had to admit that Mike’s presence disrupted the team dynamic they had going and he didn’t like it. He would have much preferred for HQ to send in a whole other backup team. Then he could at least have had other specialists to talk with and see what else was going on in SHIELD. The Bus tended to be a bit isolating at times which was difficult for someone who was supposed to be gaining intel. But no, they’d insisted on sending Mike.

Grant was in the cargo hold suiting up for their encounter with the Centipede soldiers when Mike stepped out in the new suit FitzSimmons made for him. Try as he might to deny it, Grant admitted that he was somewhat jealous, especially as it was clear that FitzSimmons (especially Jemma) were quite impressed with Mike. How quickly things change. They sure hadn’t been as enthralled with Mike the first time they’d met him and Grant himself had been disgusted!

Grant had been standing in front of Skye’s van at the front of Union Station and almost got hit by the van door when Mike kicked it open. Had the speeding door actually hit someone, it’s likely they would have been critically injured. That would have been especially true for the people who were closest to the van at the time: Grant and Coulson. However, despite Mike’s complete disregard for the safety of others, Grant still tried to talk him down.

He watched him take on several adult men after he ran into Union Station and then, when he had an opening, kicked his leg to get him down on the floor, put him in a headlock and tried to reason with him.

“Look,” he told Mike, “the stuff inside you is unstable. It’ll kill you and everyone in here.”

Mike wasn’t impressed. “Who’s going to miss us?” he snarled as he smashed Grant into the map stand. Then Mike body slammed him onto the marble floor. Grant groaned and continued laying there until Coulson helped him up. That was when May arrived and they realized that there was a third party who was also trying to capture Mike.

“You stay high, I’ll go low,” Coulson ordered Grant. “Only take the shot if you have to, Ward.”

Ward looked angrily in the direction Mike had gone. He couldn’t understand why Coulson was taking such great risks to help the guy when he was clearly unhinged and aggressive. There were too many people around, including their team, who would get hurt if this thing went south. He turned around and stormed toward the stairs.

“Ward!” Coulson called out to him.

“If I have to,” Grant answered grudgingly over his shoulder. He knew that Coulson meant well but he would do what he had to do to keep people safe.

No sooner had Grant gotten into position when he heard a gunshot and saw Mike’s body fall from the upper level and land on one of the kiosks. Grant was uncertain what to do. Most people would be killed from such a fall but Mike had Extremis in his system, so Grant remained prepared to take the shot. Sure enough, Mike came out of the wreckage and remained standing as Coulson walked over to him and laid down his gun.

“Is he insane?”

“Think that means anything?” Mike asked Coulson angrily. He looked straight up at Grant. “I know you got men everywhere waiting to put me down. I know how this plays out.”

“I don’t,” Coulson answered calmly.

Grant looked away from his scope for a second. In all the time he’d worked with Hydra, he’d never
once heard anyone, much less someone in command, admit that they didn’t know something. For that matter, he’d rarely heard it from higher level SHIELD agents either. Coulson was definitely unique. Grant was impressed but also wondered how wise such a course of action was.

“I know you’ve got poison in your system. I know it’s burning you up. Mike, the last guy who wore that exploded,” Coulson told him as they both gazed at the Centipede apparatus.

“I’m not like that other guy,” Mike said pleadingly. “I’m...it matters who I am...Inside, if I’m a good person, if I’m strong...”

Grant could tell that Mike was getting upset and things were likely to get out of control soon. He appreciated Coulson’s attempt to reason with the guy but if they were to keep everyone safe, they really needed to end it now. “I’ve got a clear shot,” he told Coulson. “Do you copy?”

Coulson didn’t respond to Grant; he kept his focus on Mike. “I know you’re strong,” he told him. “Your boy knows it. He needs you to let us help.”

“You took him!” Mike cried. “You took my wife, my job, my house.” He raised his arm and pointed to his Centipede equipment. “You think this is killing me?” Skye and May both ran in and stood behind Coulson but their presence didn’t faze Mike one bit. “All over, there’s people being pushed down, being robbed. One of them tries to stand up, you got to make an example out of him.”

Coulson seemed to be getting a bit fed up with Mike’s pity party. “You bring this building down on us, will that help them?” he asked a bit testily.

“That’s a lie!” Mike yelled. “All you do is lie! You said if we worked hard, if we did right, we’d have a place.” What is he talking about? Who said that? “You said it was enough to be a man. But there’s better than man. There’s gods. And the rest of us...what are we? They’re giants. We’re what they step on.”

Grant saw Coulson step a little closer to Mike and continue talking to him but he didn’t hear what they were saying because Fitz came running up to him, sweat pouring down his face and gasping from having run so hard. Clearly he and Jemma had just found something they thought would work. Better late than never! I guess Coulson’s little pep talk worked.

“Ward! We have a different kind of gun, one that will take him down but not kill him! Use this instead!” Fitz said breathlessly as he handed him a sleek looking rifle. Grant hurriedly made the switch and adjusted his aim. Mike’s face had been glowing on and off and he didn’t think that they had much time. Grant tuned back into the conversation.

“You’re right, Mike,” Coulson was saying. “It matters who you are.”

“I could, you know,” Mike said brokenly. “Be a hero.”

“I’m counting on it,” Coulson said.

Grant couldn’t wait any longer. He didn’t know when Mike was going to explode, so if he was going to take the shot, it had to be right then. He squeezed the trigger of Fitz’s new rifle. The shot hit Mike’s forehead and he toppled backwards onto the floor. Grant watched as Jemma ran to check Mike and, with her broad, relieved smile, signaled to everyone that he was still alive.

Coulson looked up at him and smiled. Grant smiled back. Although he didn’t really care for Mike, he clearly was a man in a tough situation and he didn’t deserve to die.

Watching Mike bask in FitzSimmons’ admiring gaze, it was evident that he was no longer that tortured man Grant had put down in Union Station. Now he was at peace with who he was and he
loved the suit.

“...quite smart,” Jemma said, smiling flirtatiously at Mike.

“How does it feel?” Fitz asked in a hushed voice.

“Feels good. Comfortable,” Mike replied. He started flexing. Grant could hardly stand it.

“Having powers is cheating,” Grant told him. He took a look at the suit and saw that, once again, FitzSimmons had done a spectacular job. What he wouldn’t give for a suit as functional and good-looking as what Mike had on. “But the suit’s pretty cool,” he said jealously. He tried not to throw up as FitzSimmons fawned all over him. They are so easy!

The plan involved having Grant and May go into the factory on one side with Mike and Coulson coming in the opposite direction. Grant tried not to roll his eyes at Coulson being convinced that Mike was all the extra firepower they needed. This was likely to backfire on them, especially since if they got the location right, they’d be dealing with three Centipede soldiers to their one. Grant knew from his experience with Mike just how difficult overcoming a supersoldier truly was. He and May would be lucky to make any kind of impact while Coulson would be hopelessly outmatched.

Sure enough, the fight was unfair from the minute the Centipede soldiers showed themselves. At first, Grant managed to hold his own by avoiding the soldier’s punches. The guys might be super-powered but they were slow and not as well-trained. However, even Grant couldn’t keep ducking and weaving for long and soon he found himself on the business end of a massive punch. May and Coulson also ended up on the floor while Mike was barely able to take out even one of the soldiers and, at least in Grant’s opinion, it was only because he got a lucky hit. If the other two soldiers hadn’t been ordered to leave after Brian Hayward went down, things might have gone badly for the four of them.

Grant thought that May would agree with his assessment and they could commiserate over a drink and when he saw her later in the lounge, she was clearly furious. The rest of the team was in the Lab with Mike but Coulson had ordered both Grant and May to take some down time. Grant chose to have a drink and was holding a beer, alternating between drinking it and holding it up to his bruised face when May stormed in. Grant mistakenly thought she was angry about their routing.

“I’ll pour you a Scotch,” he said, turning to do just that.

“Don’t ever do that again,” May said, getting into his face and punctuating each word with a silence in-between. If looks could kill, he would be dead.

He pulled the top off the Scotch bottle. What did I do? “Brandy then?” he asked in confusion.

“When we’re out in the field, your head needs to be on the op, not on me,” she told him.

Grant put the bottle down and made the letter T with his hands. Clearly she was upset about something more than the failed op but he had no clue. “Time out,” he said. “Still playing catch-up here. What are you talking about?”

“You. Taking a punch for me? I don’t need your protection,” May said.

Grant smiled. Seriously? That’s what this is about? “You think I don’t know that? I took that punch because you’re faster than me. You could do more good on your feet. It was tactical, not personal.”
May looked taken aback. “My mistake,” she said uncomfortably. Grant could tell that she was embarrassed. He needed to shut this down now.

“I am not some recruit who can’t separate church from state. I’m on the same page as you. So don’t flatter yourself,” he said as he grabbed his bottle and walked to his bunk.

But the truth was that he hadn’t been on the same page, not really. Grant had no illusions about what women could do. Unlike Garrett and some of the other male Specialists, he had a healthy respect for women’s deadly potential and their power. Grant had seen too many women demonstrate their prowess for him to be disdainful of their abilities. He’d been taken down by the Black Widow and knew that there were several other female Specialists, May among them, who could best him in a fair fight. So, he hadn’t intervened in May’s fight with the Centipede soldier because he didn’t think she could hold her own.

And he hadn’t taken the punch for May because they were having sex either. He wasn’t lying when he said it was a tactical decision. However, he hadn’t been telling the whole truth either because the decision had been partly personal. It wasn’t that Grant was in love with May; he most definitely wasn’t. Much to his surprise though, he was truly enjoying their time together and he realized that she made him feel wanted. And he needed that, especially now.

Ever since Mike Peterson had joined the team, Grant had been feeling less like an integral member. Everyone had their niche – Coulson was the leader, May the pilot, Skye handled computer issues, and FitzSimmons gave technical support. And although Grant could do a lot more than he was asked (6 languages people!), his main role on the team was as the muscle. And Mike had taken over that position, not only literally but figuratively. FitzSimmons seemed mesmerized by his physical capabilities and skills while Skye clearly liked him. She and Mike had a bond that Grant didn’t think he could compete with. Both of them had been captured by SHIELD and then chosen to become part of the organization. Plus, Skye seemed to really like Ace, Mike’s son and she’d been hanging out with Mike a lot. Since she had usually spent time with Grant before, he felt the loss of her companionship keenly.

But May didn’t seem as enthralled with Mike as the others did. Like Grant, she too seemed to have some reservations and only rarely spoke to Mike. She continued to treat Grant like he was a valued member of the team and he appreciated that. In other words, while she in no way made up for the others’ Mike-worship, at least Grant still had May’s attention. And, in an effort to keep that, he tried to make himself indispensable. That was the personal part of taking the punch. But he could never explain that to May, so he didn’t. Their relationship was much better off if May thought she’d been wrong about why he’d protected her.

Grant had just admitted to himself how he felt about Mike when he was called to a conference on what to do about him. Hydra had gotten close to Ace and wanted to trade Mike for his son. Typical Hydra. Grant was disgusted. This was exactly why he preferred SHIELD. For all their faults, they would never use a small boy in an effort to manipulate or dissect his father.

May wanted to be the one to make the exchange but Mike asked Coulson to escort him to meet Raina and return with Ace. After much discussion, the team decided that FitzSimmons would put a biological tracker on Mike and that they would get him back almost immediately. Grant’s job was to take out the supersoldiers with his sniper rifle once he had a good shot.

It sounded like a good plan in theory but Grant suspected that it wouldn’t be that easy. Hydra (not that the others knew it was them but he did) was too good for things to be disrupted so quickly. Sure enough, the plan imploded when Coulson was taken instead of Mike. Grant was confused at first and was going to still shoot the supersoldiers when May told him to stand down because
otherwise they would kill Coulson. With Coulson gone, May was definitely in charge, so all Grant
could do was watch helplessly as they dragged Coulson to the car. He knew that Garrett wanted to
analyze Coulson but he hadn’t realized that they would do it this way. All Grant had been told was
that Garrett wanted information but no bloodshed.

Suddenly, he saw Mike racing back toward Raina’s car when everything blew up. Then the car
exploded and a helicopter flew up from underneath the bridge. Grant knew what had happened.
Hydra was planning their getaway in a different medium than the team had planned for. Clever. He
readied his rifle, planning on taking at least one shot, when the helicopter started shooting at him.
Grant was slammed backwards when one of their bullets hit him in the shoulder.

Everything had been chaos after that. Grant briefly lost consciousness when his head hit the ground
after he’d been hit, so it took a while for the team to get to him. May had already called for backup
and advised them that they would wait at the scene for the additional SHIELD agents. While they
waited, FitzSimmons tried to do what they could for Grant, Skye comforted a terrified Ace and
May took a look around the explosion site. She found no evidence of any body whatsoever, a turn
of events that Grant found relatively hopeful. He was pretty certain that he’d seen Coulson in the
helicopter and, if Mike’s body hadn’t been uncovered, then there was the possibility that he’d
survived as well.

However, he’d gotten less hopeful with the arrival of backup and saw that Agent Victoria Hand
was in charge. While he appreciated her no-nonsense manner, she was cold and not prone to listen
to others. She was also big on protocol and liked holding numerous briefings. The team was going
to have a hard time transitioning to her style of leadership and, Grant admitted to himself, so would
he. There was something about her that rubbed him the wrong way.

In short order, two things of significance happened. The team caught Vanchat, a man who clearly
knew where the bodies were buried and then Hand decided to kick Skye off the Bus. Hand had
been giving another one of her briefings (and Grant thought Coulson was bad!) when the system
catched Skye trying to hack into the system. Hand immediately marched to Sky’s bunk and flung it
open, with Grant and May right behind her.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Hand demanded of Skye.

Skye didn’t look even the slightest bit intimidated and Grant was impressed. Hand could usually
make even Level One agents squirm. Instead, Skye just looked irritated. “The money trail’s our
key to finding Coulson. I just need to gain access to Vanchat’s financials and from there, I should
be able to trace Centipede’s payments and then hack into their account.”

Hand clearly didn’t find Skye’s confidence as impressive as Grant did. “I want you off this plane
immediately,” she said shortly.

Before he could consider the wisdom of what he was doing, Grant asked “What?”

Hand ignored him and then dismissed Skye’s pleading to help find Coulson. “You’re a
distraction,” she told her, “and you’re gone.”

Things were getting out of control and Grant thought the time had come to make a stand. He had to
have Coulson on board in order to complete his mission and Skye had the best chance of finding
him. Besides, there was no way he wanted Skye off the Bus.

“Agent Hand. I know Skye’s methods are unorthodox but she’s a member of this team. She can
help.” Skye looked at him in surprise. Does she really think I don’t value her expertise?
Hand again seemed unimpressed and she once again ignored him. *This is getting irritating.* “Agent May, your professional opinion. Will this girl be of any use to us on this plane?”

“No,” May replied. Both Grant and Skye turned to look at her. Grant was shocked that May would be so petty while Skye just looked hurt.

“Increase her restriction level, confiscate her laptop and phone, then have her delivered to Debrief,” Hand told her underlings.

Grant thought fast and formulated a somewhat dangerous plan. He looked first at Skye, then at May, hoping that this wouldn’t blow up in his face. “I’ll do it,” he told Hand. “I’m her SO.”

Hand nodded and then turned to consult with her agents. Grant went in the opposite direction towards Skye’s bunk with her close on his heels. She gathered the laptop and phone, put it in her backpack and followed him down the stairs and into the cargo hold. It was clear that she was extremely upset by what she perceived to be May’s betrayal.

“It’s clear that May has an axe to grind with me,” she told Grant, “but that was way out of line.”

Grant knew that he couldn’t let Skye be distracted, not when he needed her to focus on what she needed to do. “No one knows what’s in May’s head except May,” he said firmly. “Don’t worry. Coulson will make this right when he gets back.”

“I can find him, Ward,” Skye said in a low voice.

Grant looked over his shoulder to make certain they couldn’t be overheard. “I believe you,” he said in a near whisper. He wanted Skye to know that he saw her value as a team member. “I’ve seen firsthand what you can do, even without SHIELD resources.” He was going to say more but saw FitzSimmons approaching.

“Hang on, hang on,” Fitz said quietly to Skye.

Jemma came directly up to her, a paper sack in her hand. “We have something for you,” she told Skye in a low voice.

Skye looked confused. “You made me a sandwich?”

“Yes,” Jemma said unconvincingly. “It is that.”

“It’s a satellite phone, damper resistant,” Fitz put in. “You get one shot before your bracelet shuts it down.”

“So only call in case of emergency,” Jemma said intensely.

Skye was still confused. “What do I even need this for? I’m gonna be spending the next three days in a SHIELD broom closet being debriefed.”

*How has she not caught on yet?* “That’s right,” Grant said in a normal voice. *Time is wasting!* “A few agents are coming here to pick you up for debriefing…” He looked around again, leaned in and lowered his voice, “in exactly 12 minutes. Good luck.” Then he and FitzSimmons turned and went back into the bowels of the Bus. It was all he could do for Skye at the moment but there were other things he could accomplish while they waited for her to do her magic.

Grant knew that he could speed up the process of getting information from Vanchat, particularly since Hand’s people seemed to be getting nowhere. After a quick consultation with FitzSimmons,
he entered the Cage, determined to get answers and get his primary mission back on track. While he would have preferred that Vanchat talk without Grant having to resort to coercive techniques, it was amazing how much the fear of flying out of the plane loosened his tongue. Of course, Vanchat was never in any immediate danger. FitzSimmons would close the opening before he could be sucked out but Grant had no intention of letting him know that.

Despite being pleased to get the information, Agent Hand wasn’t impressed. She stopped Grant as he was leaving one of her many briefings. “First your friend Skye left the plane and never arrived for her debrief. Then Vanchat almost flies out of the interrogation room. Do we have a problem?”

“No, Agent Hand. Your man wasn’t getting answers, so I stepped in,” Grant said in a level tone.

“Without my permission,” she pointed out. Then she launched into a diatribe about the amount of resources SHIELD was expending to find Coulson and how everyone, especially Fury and Hill, wanted an update on his status. *Of course they do.* Grant found himself getting irritated. How could Hand not see the special nature of Phil Coulson? He exemplified SHIELD at its best. Was Hand just jealous? “Frankly, I don’t understand it,” Hand continued. “No single agent is that important.”

“Coulson is,” Grant told her. Then he stomped off to find May and figure out their next course of action. Hand clearly wasn’t going to get it done. He found May in the cockpit.

Grant sat down in the co-pilot’s seat and sighed.

“There a problem?” May asked calmly.

“Victoria Hand,” Grant answered. “We don’t exactly see eye to eye.”

“I’m sure she’s utilizing all of SHIELD’s resources to find Coulson,” May replied.

“Not all of them,” Grant said petulantly. His anger towards May for getting Skye kicked off of the Bus came rushing back to him. He glanced over at her placid face and wondered, not for the first time, what in the hell that had been about. “You know, it wouldn’t hurt to have Skye working an exploit. Why didn’t you stick up for her?”

“Excuse me?” May turned toward him, her voice deceptively soft.

“She has proven herself on multiple missions. She’s a part of this team,” Grant said, trying and failing to keep the irritation out of his voice. May looked forward, almost as if she couldn’t bear to look at him. “You let her get tossed.”

May turned back to face him again. “All I did was tell Hand the truth. Skye’s no use to us on this plane.”

“How can you say that?” Grant asked. He’d thought that May was coming around, that she was becoming a member of their Team Bus just like he had. Maybe he’d been wrong.

“She’s not,” May insisted. She looked dismissively over her shoulder. “Not with all these agents here, over her shoulder, monitoring her every move.”

*Ah. How could I not see that?* “You wanted her off the plane,” he said. *Man, I’m slow!*

“Outside the system,” May confirmed lightly. *She must think I’m an idiot.* “That’s how Skye works best.” There was a pause, then May faced forward and said, “You don’t have to assume the worst of me.”
Just then, Agent Hand’s voice came over the coms telling them to change their coordinates to the Mojave Desert, so Grant was saved from having to respond immediately. He was glad of this because he knew he needed time to reflect upon how he interacted with two of the most important women in his life right now. If both Skye and May thought that he believed the worst of them, then he clearly wasn’t doing a good job of communicating his feelings. He would need to work on that.

He was silent for a moment, then turned to face May. “I don’t assume the worst of you. I just didn’t see what you had in mind. But I should have and I’m sorry.”

May’s expression remained stony but he saw the tension leave her body. Yes, he definitely was going to need to work on reading her better. “Thank you,” she said quietly.

Grant got up to go but put his hand on her shoulder. “And for the record, I think the pranks are hilarious.” Before he left the cockpit, he saw the hint of a smile on her face.

About an hour before they were to land, the remaining members of Team Bus met in the Lab. There, FitzSimmons explained their most recent invention, the injector cuff that would incapacitate a supersoldier. Grant was a bit dubious about its utility (How am I going to get a supersoldier to stay still long enough for me to put it on?) but was grateful that he would have something to help him equal the odds. He wasn’t eager for another round of getting pummeled. Then Skye called and told them that she had a lead on where Centipede could be holding Coulson. That’s my girl!

The four of them went to Agent Hand to request permission to deviate from the planned mission. Per usual, Hand wasn’t impressed. “We’re about to launch a major assault on a Centipede lab and you want to take your team to the desert based on a hunch from Skye?” she asked dubiously as they all walked down the cargo ramp.

“It’s not a hunch,” Grant said wearily. Why does she keep underestimating us? Agent Hand whipped around and looked at him. Grant looked determinedly back at her.

“Skye followed the money from Vanchat back to Centipede,” Fitz told her.

“Turns out they recently purchased a small development less than 100 miles from here,” Jemma said.

“Well, that’s great news for their real estate portfolio,” Hand replied drily, “but we have confirmed activity at the lab. I’m taking a strike team to investigate. End of story.”

Grant was trying to keep a tight lid on his emotions but he wasn’t having much success. He was furious. How can she be so blind? If Agent Hand wouldn’t let them go, then he would go himself to join Skye. There was no way he was letting her walk into danger without him.

May seemed to agree. “So we split up,” she said steadily to Hand. “You take the strike team and go after Centipede. We’ll investigate Sky’s lead, see if Coulson is there.”

“You backed my decision to kick Skye off the plane,” Hand said.

“Seems like it worked out,” May said. Grant was surprised to see the slightest bit of a smirk there. Of all times for May to get expressive, this seemed like a bad choice. Hand was not going to respond well.

“Seems like you played me,” Hand fired back.

This was getting out of hand and they couldn’t afford the time. “Look, this isn’t personal,” Grant interjected. “But I am taking my team and we’re going to find Coulson.” Out of the corner of his
eye, he saw May turn towards him and smirk even more. *She must really dislike Hand!* “Send backup if you want,” he told Hand.

Grant was done with playing these games. He headed to the SUV to go. As he passed Hand, he saw a hint of a smile on her face. Maybe he wasn’t committing career suicide after all. *But, even if I am, we’re all in this together*, he thought as FitzSimmons and May got into the vehicle with him. He smiled slightly. This was one reason why he loved his team.

May drove like a bat out of hell to the coordinates Skye had given them. There was little conversation in the truck. Grant figured everyone was just as tense as he was about disobeying Hand and finding Coulson. Just as they pulled up into what looked like an abandoned Old West town, they saw Skye racing out from behind a building, a supersoldier hot on her tail.

“There’s nowhere to run!” the guy yelled just as May rammed the SUV full force into him. He fell onto the ground and didn’t move.

Everyone piled out of the truck and started looking around. Could this place be any creepier? There were empty building full of dusty furniture and weird dummies. It had to have been a training ground for a nuclear attack or something.

“Coulson’s got to be here somewhere!” Skye told them urgently. Oddly enough, she was dressed in a a black catsuit similar to what May always wore. It looked good on her but out of place. Grant preferred her in her regular casual clothes – he’d rather she be herself than a pale imitation of someone else – but he needed to focus. “We need to split up.”

“Or run,” Jemma said. She’d turned around and saw another supersoldier arrive.

Grant knew this was his responsibility. Besides, he was so full of irritation – for Hand, Hydra and himself – that he needed something to let off steam. A fight with a supersoldier should do it.

“I’ll take care of him,” he told the team.

“Are you sure?” May asked.

Grant pulled out the injector cuff and looked at it. *Time to try something new!* “I’ve got this,” he replied as he ran off to meet the guy. Behind him he heard the team run off to search for Coulson.

The fight went about the way he’d expected it to go. Grant was able to duck, weave and land a few punches but the supersoldier threw him into various surfaces, like a car, a fence and, of course, the ground. While Grant was rolling and staying away from the supersoldier’s fists, he was thinking furiously about how he could get the cuff on the guy. There was no way he was going to stay still for it or, once on, not immediately rip it off. Finally, Grant’s tactical brain came up with a solution.

Grant opened the cuff, grabbed the spike and stuffed it in the soldier’s mouth. Then he kicked him in the face to drive the spike home. If he hadn’t been panting so heavily, Grant might have cheered as he saw the telltale signs of the dendrotoxin spread across the guy’s face right before he fell to the ground. *Once again, FitzSimmons come through!*

“Now, Coulson. Where the hell are you?” Grant asked himself. He really needed to find the guy!

Apparently Skye and May found Coulson first. Grant ran into the room only to see all of the team there, helping Coulson up from what looked like a freaky MRI-type of machine. Raina was lying unconscious on the ground. Coulson looked banged up and shaky but otherwise unhurt.

“Nice of you to join us, Ward,” he said wryly.
A short while later, Grant waited in the Lab with the rest of the team. They were all watching while agents took Raina away and Hand and Coulson conversed in low tones. He would have loved to have heard what they were saying but knew that he’d pushed enough limits recently, so he needed to stay where he was. It would be a relief to see her go and after shaking hands with Coulson, off she went. He joined the rest of them as they all went out to join Coulson in the cargo bay.

Coulson smiled at all of them. “I just want to say,” he said quietly, “thank you.” He nodded as he looked at each of them directly. Grant didn’t know what to say, so he kept silent. Apparently no one else did either. True to form, Coulson recognized the dangers of excessive sentiment, so he said, “Now get back to work!”

Grant gave him a sincere smile when he heard that and leaned forward to shake his hand. Coulson knew all of them so well. He turned and went up the stairs to his bunk. He was doubly pleased as he heard Coulson remove Skye’s bracelet. That would make things easier and, quite frankly, he could use a little bit of easy.

Chapter End Notes

In case you hadn't noticed, I combined The Bridge and A Magical Place for this chapter. They aren't two of my favorite episodes and didn't have a lot of Grant in them (hmm....coincidence?), so I did the best I could. I hope you enjoy it!
Coming Out Party

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

After Grant left the machinery room, he paused for a moment, searching his mental map of the Cybertek manufacturing facility and thinking about what he wanted to do. When he’d first heard about Cybertek being a Hydra organization, he called up the blueprints and memorized the layout. This wasn’t standard operating procedure for either SHIELD or Hydra but Grant felt the need to be prepared. He had a feeling that intimately knowing the building would be critical to his mission’s success. Now that time had come and he was ready.

Skye called Garrett from the handler’s line, so she probably was in the Control Center. And since Grant would pass several rooms before getting there, this was an ideal time to cross off Hydra personnel along the way. After months of training, counseling, secrecy and betrayal, this was it. This would be Grant Ward’s coming out party.

In the first room along the corridor, Grant spotted Hydra Agent Robert Rickard and a group of about 20 people dressed in business casual clothing. Grant guessed that they were Cybertek employees, most likely there because of the Incentives program. Rickard had a gun and it looked like he was terrorizing them. Several of the women were sobbing and someone was already dead. A man’s body lay face down on the conference table, blood leaking out into an ever-growing pool. The other employees were giving the body a wide berth, bunching together in corners the furthest distance from him.

Grant sighed and shook his head. Rickard was once an exemplary SHIELD agent. In fact, Grant modeled his Boy Scout cover on Rickard’s behavior at the Academy. His study habits, training regimen and straight-arrow morality was legendary there. However, all of that changed several years post-Academy following a devastating mission in Rwanda. Grant didn’t know all of the details but what he’d heard was that SHIELD backed the wrong side and didn’t provide the support that was needed. As a result, hundreds of people were killed, and the agents on the ground, including Rickard, had been unfairly blamed for the disaster. It was at this low point that Rickard was approached by Hydra and convinced to join.

That was usually how Hydra recruited high level operatives. Foot soldiers were easy to get. Most of them were so irritated that SHIELD wouldn’t let them use violence as much as possible that they were easy pickings for Hydra, which had no such restrictions. But higher level agents were different; they needed persuading. Although there were other methods for gaining adherents (like brainwashing), Hydra generally waited until agents were disgusted with the status quo and then swooped in with their heady talk of safety, order, and the greater good. These agents were then sent on carefully chosen “missions” where they saw “SHIELD agents” fail while they succeeded due to Hydra’s orders. At some point, Grant realized that these missions were, in actuality, completely staged but he was so far in that it hadn’t mattered to him. But he remembered it.

Rickard apparently bought into Hydra’s ideals completely. While his outer Boy Scout demeanor didn’t change when surrounded by SHIELD agents, he transformed during Hydra missions. The change had been gradual though. Grant worked with him on several missions at the time Rickard was recruited and enjoyed it. Rickard had been polite but intense and wasn’t hesitant about speaking up when Hydra agents were going overboard with coercive tactics. It was Rickard’s insistence upon restraint and his disgust with the bloodthirsty nature of some of the Level One Hydra agents that pushed Grant to think about what was right and wrong. He even placed Rickard
one step below Garrett in how much he cared about his opinion.

But Rickard didn’t stay that way. Grant interacted with him on an intermittent basis and, with each subsequent mission, Rickard became a little less Boy Scout, a little more thug. He talked less about the greater good and more about order and control. He showed less interest in protecting innocents and gave more importance to doing whatever it took to accomplish their objective. By the time Grant worked with Rickard shortly after the Battle of New York, the transformation from S.H.I.E.L.D. to Hydra was complete. Rickard exemplified the saying, “If you lie down with dogs, you will get up with fleas.” And, more than anything else, it was this change in Rickard that prompted Grant to contact Maria Hill. He was afraid that he too would get fleas if he didn’t do something drastic.

And now, here he was, Grant’s worst nightmare come true. Rickard looked up and saw Grant watching him. His face went from angry to joyful in almost an instant. “Ward! Just who I need,” he said as he joined him in the doorway. “Can you tell these morons,” he sneered as he looked over at the frightened group, “that they need to calm down and follow my instructions? They think that we’re going to hurt their incentives.” Rickard’s face showed no sympathy or compassion as he glared at the group. His voice got even louder. “They’re right. We will take away their incentives if they don’t comply with our directives.”

Grant, already hopped up on anger from his encounter with Garrett, felt his fury grow but he clamped down on it. He couldn’t lose focus. He would give Rickard one chance and one chance only because he couldn’t spend too much time on this. He needed to get to Skye.

“Rickard,” Grant replied in a calm voice, “S.H.I.E.L.D. is attacking and you’re wasting your time on people who aren’t a threat. Why don’t you let them go and we’ll sort everything out later?”

Rickard’s expression went from smug to bewildered so quickly that it was almost humorous. “What are you talking about, Ward? We need these idiots to run the Centipede program.”

“I’m telling you to let them go,” Grant said in a hard voice as he looked directly in Rickard’s eyes. “I’m giving you one chance to do the right thing.”

Rickard’s expression shifted back to anger. “I’d heard you’d gone soft,” he said derisively, “but I had to see it to believe it.”

“Believe it,” Grant said as he shot him twice, once in each thigh. Rickard dropped to the floor. Grant immediately kicked his gun away from him, watching it skitter down the hallway, and then shoved his prone body to the side. He took a position on the opposite side of the doorway, carefully leaving a path big enough for people to walk through but small enough for him to observe Rickard, who was groaning with pain. Grant briefly glanced in the room and saw the people’s shocked faces.

“You’re going to be all right,” he said in a loud voice to the assembled group, “but you need to leave the building now. S.H.I.E.L.D. is coming and we will return your incentives to you unharmed.” No one moved. Grant was losing patience. “Go! Now!” he yelled at them and they all started to file out of the door, some running while others merely walking quickly. Good.

Rickard was still writhing on the floor but he appeared to be pushing away the pain, just as all Specialists were taught to do. He would be coming after Grant any second now. Grant needed to end this, one way or the other. He bent down. “Robert, I’m still giving you that one chance. Either I tie you up and allow S.H.I.E.L.D. to capture you or I kill you. Your choice.”

Rickard looked up at Grant and his eyes widened. “What happened to you, Ward? Garrett will kill you for this.”
“I don’t work for Garrett anymore and I couldn’t care less about Hydra. I’ve been a triple for SHIELD for months,” he informed Rickard with satisfaction. Damn, it feels good to say the truth out loud! No more hiding. “And if Garrett wants to kill me, he’s welcome to try.”

“Well then, I think we should give him that opportunity,” a rough new voice said from behind Grant as a gun nudged the back of his head. Uh oh. He’d been so occupied with monitoring the progress of the Cybertek employees and keeping Rickard from attacking that he hadn’t kept an eye on the hallway behind him. “Drop your gun and stand up slowly, Ward.”

Grant put his gun on the ground and rose carefully, shuffling a little to the side, so that he had his back to the hallway wall and could see both Rickard and the newcomer. He vowed that if he got out of this situation, he wouldn’t make the same mistake twice. Plus, he was edgy. He needed to get to Skye before Garrett did.

“Well, well, well,” the newcomer said nastily, “if it isn’t Grant Ward, Garrett’s golden boy. How the mighty have fallen.”

Grant rolled his eyes. He recognized George Fistal, a mid-level agent who had been around a long time. He was old school, a thug from before Alexander Pierce had risen to power and refined the agency. Fistal was from the days when broken bones were what got the job done versus the more sophisticated methods of brainwashing and truth serums. And he was dissatisfied with how little he’d advanced in Hydra over the years.

It was no secret that Fistal was envious of younger agents getting the plum assignments and the trust of the leadership. He’d always disparaged Grant whenever he could and complied as little as possible with his orders when they were doing missions together. Grant quickly considered the situation. Fistal had never been any more bothersome than a fly and his pettiness and envy could be used against him.

“At least I was mighty. Too bad you can’t say the same,” Grant taunted, putting on a superior expression. He was pleased to note that Fistal’s face turned red, his grip on his gun tightening. Anger was making Fistal lose focus, lessening his ability to accurately read the situation. “Do you think John will even know who you are when you turn me over to him?”

Fistal’s expression darkened and his whole body tensed. Good! That should make him less flexible and quick to react. “He’ll know who I am soon enough when I give him a traitor all trussed up like a chicken,” he said angrily.

Rickard moved with purpose toward the gun Fistal forced Grant to place on the floor. Grant quickly formed a plan because while Fistal had a gun, Rickard was the true threat. He dropped to the floor, swept Fistal’s legs out from under him (Thanks for the idea, May!), did an elbow strike into his gun arm and then rolled to grab the gun that had flown out of his hand. Grant stood up smoothly, aiming the gun at Rickard who was leaning against the wall pointing a gun at him. Both men ignored the man on the ground moaning with pain. He wouldn’t stay down for long but he wasn’t a priority.

Rickard shook his head and smiled, his face a mask of pain. Don’t make me kill you, Robert! “You always were amazing, Ward. Too bad you chose the wrong side,” he said. The smile dropped off his face and his eyes narrowed, clear indications that he was preparing to shoot. Then Rickard fell backwards on to the floor as Grant shot him right between the eyes.

Grant sighed. He hadn’t wanted to kill Rickard but once his body language turned deadly, Grant had to shoot first. Just then another shot rang out and Grant whipped around to see Fistal fall to the ground, a bullet wound in his chest and a wicked-looking knife still in his upraised hand. He had
been about to slice Grant right before Nick Fury shot him.

Grant took a deep breath and gave Fury’s hobo clothing a once-over before saying, “Am I ever glad to see you, Sir!”

“I’ll just bet you are,” Fury replied drily. “I thought you knew better than to turn your back on an enemy, Agent Ward.”

“I do,” Grant acknowledged, leaving out the part where Rickard had been the greater risk. Fury already knew that. Maria Hill had been Rickard’s SO, so Fury had seen first-hand just how dangerous he was. “But it’s been a long day and I’m tired.”

“Oh? Time was you wouldn’t admit to getting tired,” Fury said.

Grant could tell that Fury understood what he was saying but it wouldn’t hurt to confirm. He gave a ghost of a smile. “Yeah well, Garrett’s gone insane and I am sick to death of Hydra.” He paused a moment and gestured to the backpack Fury held. “After that, am I free to go, Sir?”

Fury nodded and said gently, “Yes, you are. You’ve done a hell of a job, Grant, and I know that it cost you.” He smiled and said in his usual brisk tone, “Now do this,” he held out the backpack for Grant to take, “and then go rejoin your team.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Grant said in relief, taking the backpack and putting it over his shoulder. “Can I ask you for a favor?” Fury raised his eyebrows questioningly. “I have to ensure Skye’s safety but, after that, I need to be the one to kill Garrett.”

“Garrett’s hurt a lot of people, Ward. Why should you get the privilege?” Fury asked.

“Because I finally understand why you made me go to counseling and what my counselor was trying to tell me. I finally get what John did to me, the years I lost and the kind of things I did while working for him,” Grant said passionately. “I need for John to know that I’m my own man now and that I’m the one who’s bringing him down.” Fury said nothing and Grant fought down a feeling of panic that he wasn’t going to get the closure he needed to move forward. “Please.”

Fury looked at Grant for a moment longer and then, just when Grant thought he’d have to beg, he nodded. “Just don’t take too long with Skye. I don’t know how long we can hold him.”

Grant smiled with relief. “Copy that, Sir,” he said as he scooped up Fistal’s knife and the gun that Rickard dropped. He took off running down the hall, stopping only long enough to grab Rickard’s gun from the hallway floor. I’m coming, Skye!

Grant darted into a small maintenance hallway right before the Control Center. He slipped off the backpack and started laying charges at several key junctures. His last act as a triple agent was blowing the main grid and the primary network of the Cybertek facility so that they could do no more work there. Grant smiled as he thought about the symbolism of what he was doing. His big middle finger to Hydra was making certain that they couldn’t make any more supersoldiers and his coming out party was going to include a big bang.
So, Poetgirl925 inspired me to try a little bit of world building, so all Hydra agents are actually ones from the Marvel comics. I hope you enjoy them.
**Flashback**

Things had been awkward on the Bus ever since they got Coulson back. For one thing, Coulson himself was different. After his initial “thank you” speech, he didn’t talk to or spend much time with the team. And one of the first things he did upon returning was give everyone a few days off. He insisted that they go to Yosemite National Park, a short hop from where they were in the Mojave Desert. Grant might have been puzzled by the choice of rest area had he not overhead Coulson telling May that he just needed a place that was completely opposite of a beach, a place where the open air would allow him to breathe. While Grant didn’t know all of the details of Coulson’s traumatic experiences, he was smart enough to piece together that Tahiti and Mojave – both sandy – were reinforcing Coulson’s unease.

Besides, Yosemite was awesome and Grant hadn’t had the opportunity to explore it. So, if Coulson wanted to spend a few days there, he was happy to do so. And this was a great chance to spend a little down time with Skye, in the guise of her SO of course. Grant informed her that while the others were taking their time off closer to the Bus, she and he would be hiking and camping together so that she could hone her outdoor survival skills. Skye seemed excited (although she got a little grumpy when she realized that her beloved electronics would not be included in their supplies) and off they went.

Despite the name she gave herself, Skye had always been more of an indoor person, so she was amazed by the beauty and wonder of the Yosemite area. She also was astonished by Grant’s knowledge of the outdoors: the varied uses of natural resources, how to find water, the quickest way to start a fire, the identification of smells and sounds, and recognition of minute changes in weather conditions. During the campfire their first night, she looked at him thoughtfully. Grant was leaning back against a log, staring into the fire. He was thinking about how different his life was the last time he did something like this.

“How does the T-1000 know so much about outdoor living? I wouldn’t have thought that was part of SHIELD training,” Skye commented. “If it is, then FitzSimmons were absent that day!” She was sitting cross-legged across from Grant and was slowly stirring a stick in the dirt right outside their fire.

Grant hesitated, wondering just how much he could share with her. He planned on telling her everything later but for now, he had to be careful. “SHIELD does teach some outdoor survival skills just in case agents get caught without backup or resources. But most of what I know comes from before I joined SHIELD. I spent a lot of time in the woods.” *There! Honest but vague.*

“Well, there’s no denying that it’s handy.” She paused long enough for Grant to think that the subject was closed but for now, he had to be careful. “SHIELD does teach some outdoor survival skills just in case agents get caught without backup or resources. But most of what I know comes from before I joined SHIELD. I spent a lot of time in the woods.” *Uh oh.* “You don’t talk a lot about your family,” she said quietly.

“I don’t have good memories of them, so I choose not to think about them if I can help it,” he replied. He hoped that would shut down the topic but, knowing Skye, she wasn’t going to let it go easily.
“I know,” she said quickly, “and I get that, I do, but some of your history is just so weird.”

“Oh? Like what?” Grant asked, feeling some trepidation with this topic. *What in the world is she talking about?*

“Like you had abusive parents and a mean older brother yet you love board games. The abuse and the games don’t really fit. You come from a wealthy family in Massachusetts but you spent a lot of time in the woods. I don’t know a lot of rich people but from what I read, their time outside is usually doing something that takes a lot of money, like golfing or trophy hunting. You’re highly regarded within SHIELD but you don’t play well with others. Aren’t rich people raised to be social? And you look like you do,” she blushed and ducked her head, “but you don’t date much.” She looked up at him again, somewhat anxious. “And I really don’t want to see your hate face Ward but, like I said, it’s weird.”

Grant was stunned. How had Skye gotten so much information about him? Sure, she was astute and had clearly paid a lot more attention to him than he realized but some of that knowledge was more than guesswork. He decided to take the fight to the enemy, so to speak.

He sat up quickly and gave Skye a direct stare. “How do you know all that? My file is classified.”

She seemed to shrink back a little and he immediately felt bad. Skye was just trying to get to know him and, if he was honest with himself, her deep interest was flattering. Grant was thrilled but Agent Ward was concerned. It could be dangerous for her if people found out she hacked into his file. SHIELD would not be amused and Hydra would be downright pissed off.

“I haven’t looked at your file,” Skye said urgently. She looked off into the wilderness. “I just asked around a bit when we were at the Hub.”

Grant sat back and relaxed. Her asking around was fine. Everyone expected rookies to want to know the gossip about their SOs. It was only trouble if she’d used her computer skills to find out more about him. He smiled a bit, trying to lower both Skye’s anxiety and her guard. Besides, he was pleased to know how much effort she’d put into getting to know him.

“OK. I’m sorry if I jumped to conclusions. But knowing you,” he grinned at her, “can you really blame me?” Skye laughed a little and Grant gave her an appraising look. “So, you’ve been asking around about me?” He smirked a bit.

Skye looked down, clearly embarrassed. *Good! “Don’t most rookies want to know about their SOs?”* she asked. *Nice try but no dice.* He could tell that her interest was more personal than professional.

“Sure,” he replied, nodding. “And since I realize that not everyone is as interesting as I am,” he grinned again when he saw Skye roll her eyes, “I’ll make you a deal. When you become a SHIELD agent for real, then we’ll swap stories. You tell me about your history and I’ll tell you about mine. Do we have a deal?”

Skye agreed and they’d gone to bed. Being back in the woods again had really sharpened Grant’s awareness of his feelings and he immediately regretted the fact that they were sharing a tent. The Bus had only had one tent, something he’d brought up with Skye before they left. He remembered with a smile her easy acceptance of this fact.

“We only have one tent. Are you going to be OK sharing it?” Grant had asked.

“Well, I’ll definitely feel safer with you close by. But if you snore or drool, I’m never going to let...
you live it down,” she’d replied.

Since he did neither, he wasn’t worried. But now he was concerned about their close proximity in the tent. Even before she’d admitted to asking around about him, Grant was well-versed enough with the female sex to know that Skye was interested in him. And of course he was definitely interested in her. However, with his dual missions ongoing, things needed to stay platonic. Besides, how much trouble would he be in with Coulson if the man discovered that Grant was sleeping first with May and then with Skye? So, the camping trip needed to remain professional but it was going to be tough.

They were both lying on the ground in their sleeping bags when Skye looked over at him, her expression unreadable in the dark, and said, “I’m glad we did this, Ward. I didn’t think it would be but this is fun. So, thanks.”

He smiled softly even though he didn’t think she could see it. “You’re welcome, Rookie, but don’t forget, we have another two days of it. We’ll see what you think then.” Grant couldn’t let down his guard for an instant because, if something happened between them, he didn’t think he was in enough control of himself to stop it.

“As long as I’m with you, I’m sure it will be great,” she replied easily and Grant shifted uncomfortably. They couldn’t go down this road, not yet. He had to nip this in the bud even though almost every cell in his body was screaming at him not to.

“Good night, Skye,” he said and then rolled over. He’d hoped that the clean mountain air and a day of hiking would put him directly to sleep but no such luck, not with Skye so damn close. Grant concentrated on her breathing and when he was pretty certain she was asleep, he rolled back to face her. It was all he could do not to touch her, to trace the features of her face, slide his hand over her thick hair. Not yet. That was the only thought that stayed his hand and allowed him to keep his distance. Someday. Soon.

The next two days were equally as good and Grant felt something shift in their relationship. They’d always bantered and argued with each other and they still did that but now there were other emotions at play. Instead of the underlying wariness that defined them since he first kidnapped her, there was a sense of trust and playfulness. In short, they were bonding. Exchanges that might have had a hurtful edge to them were now lighthearted.

“I can’t believe how many movies you’ve missed, Robot. Come on, please tell me that you’ve at least seen Terminator. I mean, he’s practically your first cousin!”

“I’m an intellectual. I read.”

“Whatever, dork.”

And there was the undercurrent of sexual tension. That had always been between them but now it was heightened. Grant had never flirted with anyone before and he wasn’t sure if that was what they were doing now but whatever it was, he was enjoying the hell out of it. He realized that he was getting very close to the line of being inappropriate in his authoritative role with Skye but it felt too good to stop and he decided that he’d worry about it once they returned to civilization. In many ways, it felt like they were on vacation from everything, even their usual selves.

When Skye fell over a log and got a few scrapes, Grant tried to help her push away the pain as he bandaged her up. “Distraction is key. So how can you do that?” he asked.

“Well, you could take your shirt off. That would definitely distract me.”
“Skye,” he said glancing up at her and smiling slightly.

“You asked.”

Their last night proved to be almost unbearable for Grant. The temperature had been dropping all day, so he was concerned that the night was going to be cold. They’d dressed warmly and had cushy sleeping bags but he suspected that it wasn’t going to be enough. And, if that was the case, it was going to be a long night.

Sure enough, even though they’d put on every piece of clothing they brought along, the shivering started shortly after they got into their sleeping bags. It was going to be a cold one. Grant was used to this kind of hardship but he worried about Skye, the indoor girl.

“Ward,” she said through chattering teeth, “I’m so cold. Please tell me that there’s some special SHIELD trick to make it warmer.”

“I wish there was Skye but I’m afraid we’re just going to have to tough it out,” he said, wanting to warm her up but knowing there were lines he couldn’t cross even if they were on vacation.

She was silent for a moment, her every shiver going through Grant like a knife.

It’s hell not being able to help her!

Then, she swallowed and said, “I know it’s probably against SHIELD protocol or whatever but I really need some of your body heat. Can we please share?”

Well, that was another thing entirely! If Skye was the one asking, then the lines could be damned. Grant quickly unzipped his bag just enough so Skye could slide in, then he rearranged her bag so that it was covering them. It was a tight fit with both of them in one bag and Grant realized that the only way it was going to work was if he put his arms around her and she fit into the curve of his body. Think of something else! Think of something else! She was so close, so soft and so warm that he almost gritted his teeth in frustration.

Their body heat warmed up the bag quickly and Skye stopped shivering. She snuggled further down into Grant. “Oh my god!” My sentiments exactly. “Thank you so much! I realize this is super awkward but I don’t care. I’m finally warm!” she told him with a smile.

He couldn’t help smiling back at her. Even though he was panicking at the thought of her recognizing just how attracted to her he was, this was the best he’d felt in quite some time. Even having sex with May couldn’t compare to how great simply holding Skye was.

“Try to get some sleep,” he said knowing damn well that he would be getting none. And he didn’t. But it was worth every missed minute.

The next morning, he was up before Skye, making breakfast and packing their things. When she finally got up, she seemed a bit shy – no direct eye contact, minimal conversation – but nothing all that out of the ordinary. Skye wasn’t a morning person and usually was quiet before she had her coffee. Grant was relieved. Maybe she hadn’t noticed anything inappropriate last night.

Once they headed back to the Bus, Grant couldn’t shake the feeling of returning to school after summer break. He almost wanted to whine to Coulson, “Just one more day?” but, of course, Agent Ward would never do that. So he gave Skye a slight smile and headed to his bunk for a much-needed shower and change of clothes.

After he was done washing Yosemite off of him, Grant was briefed by Coulson about their upcoming mission. Three cadets at the Science and Technology Division of the Academy had been swimming in the school pool after hours and were almost frozen by some new hi-tech device. It
was the team’s job to figure out what happened and why. Agent Weaver, Sci-Tech’s Director, specifically requested that the Science Twins consult on the case. And rightfully so, since it seemed like Fitz and Jemma knew immediately what had happened.

After Coulson gave Grant the mission details, he disappeared into his office. This was unusual. He generally preferred briefing everyone as a group but Grant noted again that Coulson hadn’t been the same since he was kidnapped and he really couldn’t blame him. Going through a re-examination of awful memories had to be terrible. It definitely wasn’t something that he ever wanted to go through. Grant decided to cut Coulson a little slack and take over as leader wherever he could.

That’s how he found himself talking with the younger members of the team about the upcoming mission over drinks and snacks in the kitchen area. Fitz was making tea for himself and Jemma. Skye was eating cereal and sitting next to Grant, who was leaning against one of the tables while he was looking at information on the tablet.

“The cadet could have died,” Jemma said after listening to Grant explain to Skye what happened. She and Fitz had already been briefed by Weaver.

“We drew up those concepts years ago,” Fitz said irritably as he poured tea into two mugs. “We didn’t know they’d be applied in that way.” Unlike Jemma, he didn’t seem to be taking personal responsibility for the incident.

“Is this the device they found in the frozen pool?” Skye asked, leaning over into Grant’s personal space to look at the picture on the tablet. He’d noticed that ever since they’d come back from Yosemite, she seemed much more comfortable touching him. Well, once you spend all night sleeping in each other’s arms, it’s kind of hard to go back. Not that he would want to; this was infinitely preferable. They just needed to be careful around Coulson and May because he didn’t want any questions or lectures.

“Correction: the instantly frozen indoor pool,” Skye continued. She appeared to be relishing the details. Grant reminded himself that every case so far had been something new for her. If his life had gone differently, he too might have been overwhelmed with wonder when he first joined SHIELD, a fact that he’d never let himself appreciate before. He’d missed so much. Damn Garrett and his family anyway! Focus!

“It seems like it was planted in the filter days before,” Grant commented, “like someone was waiting for those specific cadets.”

Fitz brought his and Jemma’s mugs over to the counter. “Well, as far as they can tell, the device uses a crystalline nucleation process she designed…” he tilted his head towards Jemma.

“…And a delivery mechanism he invented,” Jemma finished. Grant could see the guilt was eating at her. “That’s why we’re being asked to consult on the investigation.”

Skye looked up from her bowl at this. “So we’re going to the Academy?” she asked.

“Science and Technology division,” Grant clarified. “Cadets are pretty shaken up over what happened.” He glanced up at FitzSimmons who both looked grim. “Agent Weaver asked if you two could speak to the student body about potentiality, calm them down.”

“Of course,” Jemma replied wearily. “The talk. We’ve all heard the talk.”

“I haven’t,” Skye said.


“I guess you will,” Grant said lightly as he picked up his cup of coffee. Caffeine wasn’t something he often allowed himself to have but, as they were between missions at the moment, he thought he’d indulge himself.

“Well, I’ve heard a lot about the Academy,” Skye said to FitzSimmons playfully in a faux-British accent. They constantly teased her about not having attended and, after the Ghostly Menace mission in which pranks had played such a large role, she started getting up to speed on the fun parts of their schooling. “I’m excited to finally see it.” FitzSimmons both smiled faintly at her attempts to cheer them up.

“Me too,” Grant said. “Never been to Sci-Tech before.”

“Never? Huh,” Skye said, looking surprised. “The different SHIELD academies don’t interact?”

“Not much,” Grant replied calmly while Fitz scoffed. Jemma also gave a derisive smile. “Academy of Communications does but they’re the biggest and focused on data analysis.”

“By far the easiest to get into,” Jemma commented at the same time Fitz said, “Boring. That’s where you’d be, Skye.”

“Thanks,” she told him sardonically. Grant swallowed his grin.

“Operations is the most aggressive program,” he told her. He felt duty-bound to talk up his Academy, especially in the face of all the Sci-Tech fawning their visit was sure to inspire. “More people wash out of Operations than the other academies.”

“So which one’s the hardest to get into?” Skye asked wickedly. Jemma smiled sweetly at Grant who looked back at her without expression. “I’m picking up on the rivalry between Sciences and Operations.”

May took that moment to walk through the kitchen and Skye turned to include her in their conversation. Thank goodness they’re getting along better. Grant was grateful for the absence of tension as it made his life that much easier. “Are you and Coulson past all that,” Skye asked May, “or are you going to help Ward steal their mascot?”

Grant almost scoffed. Like he would be that juvenile. Wait. Do they have a mascot?

May stopped and turned to the group. “We’re not going,” she told them seriously. “After we drop you off, Coulson and I have other matters to attend to.” Then she left.

No one said anything at first. There was an odd feeling of having been scolded by Mom for just asking a question. Skye looked at Grant while Jemma and Fitz exchanged a glance. Then, almost as one, Skye and Grant moved closer to FitzSimmons so that they could all converse in lower tones.

“Coulson hasn’t come out of his office in a while,” Skye started. “Do you think he’s all right?”

“We saw him at a low,” Grant said in a whisper. “It’s not easy for anybody. Coulson’s tough as they come. He’ll be good. Just give him time,” he assured them. The last thing the team needed was for everyone to be on edge out of worry for their leader. His voice resumed its usual volume, “And while he takes that time, it’s on us to figure out what’s going on at the Academy.”

They nodded and left the kitchen to get ready. Later, all four of them found themselves on the grounds of Sci-Tech looking at the large SSR building stretching out in front of them. The slope of the ground made it so that FitzSimmons were standing a little bit above Skye and Grant, who had
chosen to wear his blue suit for the visit. When he’d come out to the cargo hold in it, he’d seen
Skye raise her eyebrows at him and give him the once-over. He grinned slightly and shook his
head. *The suit always works.*

Sci-Tech was a beautiful facility, lush and green, and the difference in FitzSimmons since they’d
gotten there was fairly amusing. Grant could have sworn that they’d both grown by at least several
inches just by setting foot on the grounds (or maybe it was because they were finally standing up
straight). Jemma had an arrogant smirk on her face ever since she’d gotten out of the car and Fitz
had taken on a Master of the Universe attitude. *It’s kind of endearing.*

“Is this where you got all those Ph.D.s?” Skye asked them.

“Oh, no,” Jemma replied condescendingly. “You need at least one to get through the door.” Grant
changed his mind about how endearing they were.

Fitz took a deep, cleansing breath. “Is Science and Technology what you imagined, Agent Ward?”

Grant didn’t even bother looking at him. If he did, he might have to take steps to wipe the
arrogance off his face. “Yep,” he replied shortly. *Time to take them down a peg.*

“No uniforms, no
rope course, no defined muscularity on anyone.” He ostentatiously glanced around at the milling
students, most of whom looked like the super nerds they were.

But Fitz wasn’t to be easily put off, especially not when standing in his place of superiority. “No
marching in place, no IQs in double digits.”

Grant felt himself tense but, when he sensed Skye trying not to laugh beside him, he relaxed a bit.
He recalled how angry Fitz had been on their South Ossetia trip because he believed Grant to be
the superior agent and how easily Grant had dressed him down after the Berserker incident by
making fun of his lack of physical prowess. Maybe he needed to give this to Fitz and acknowledge
his strengths for once.

A lovely and serene-looking woman drifted over to them. She smiled widely as she approached
FitzSimmons. “There they are,” she said. “So good to see you.” She shook each of their hands as
they took it in turns to flatter her on her appearance. Grant supposed it would be gauche to
compliment her intelligence instead. He suppressed a snicker at the thought.

She came over to him, her British accent in full bloom as she shook his hand and said, “Agent
Ward, pleasure to have you, Sir.”

“Agent Weaver,” he replied. “There’s a list of suspects?”

Weaver nodded. “Based on the level of intelligence it would take to put a device together like the
one we found, we’ve narrowed it down to the top 10% of our cadets. I’m worried there’s a bad
seed.”

Grant closed his eyes, trying to decide how much to tell Skye. *Ops and Sciences have differences
but both have to be careful about what we call ‘bad seeds,’ people who want to use the tools we
give them for…*

“‘Bad seed’ isn’t a SHIELD term, Ward,” Skye said, looking up at him with amusement. “It’s just
a term.” He looked at her with a blank expression and she grinned. She did so love getting one over
on him; they all did.

For his part, Grant was nonplussed. *Just a regular term?* That was one of those things he imagined
he’d missed during his isolated time with his family and the solitary days in the woods with Buddy.
But you’d think that, with as much trouble as he’d given his family, that he would have heard the term “bad seed” before now. And it suddenly occurred to him that, with his previous connection to Hydra, he could have qualified as a bad seed himself. The thought was disturbing and he was having enough of those today. Back to business.

He turned to Weaver, who was smiling at the ground. “I know you’ve already questioned the victim but I have a few questions I’d like to ask him myself.”

She nodded, her smile gone. “I’ll arrange for you to talk with Seth Dormer when he’s out of class,” she agreed. She turned brisk, “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’d like to get Agents Fitz and Simmons settled into the lecture hall.” The three of them took off down the hill on their way to the large building in front. Immediately, students flocked to them.


“I did,” Grant said smugly. No, he hadn’t, but he was glad that they were. They deserve it. And, besides, after the whole ‘bad seed’ debacle, he couldn’t let Skye think she knew more than he did. He was her SO after all. “Come on,” he said lightly. “While we have a minute, I think there’s something you’ll want to see.”

Skye smiled and followed him into the SSR building. FitzSimmons had gone into the lecture hall while Grant led her around to the front corridor. Right in the middle of the huge open space was a mini-wall with a list of names on it. He wondered if she knew what it was.

“Skye, The Wall of Valor,” Skye said. Grant felt oddly pleased, as if she passed one of his tests. He led her over to the Wall and stopped in front of it.

“So you’ve read about it?” he asked. Stupid question. It was Skye. If she was interested, of course she had. Plus, when she’d been trying to get back into his good graces after the whole Miles incident, she’d read a ton of SHIELD manuals. He suspected that at least one of them had mentioned the Wall.

She nodded. “Every SHIELD facility has a memorial to the agents lost in the line of duty,” she said looking at the Wall. Grant watched her, mesmerized by how much she was enraptured in the celebration of all he held so dear. “SHIELD’s history can be traced on walls like these,” Skye said as she walked even closer. “Huh,” she murmured as she touched one of the names. “Bucky Barnes.”

“Puts it in perspective, what we do,” he commented. And it did, especially for him and especially now. Seeing these names, it helped him harden his resolve to do the right thing because most of these people who had given their lives expected it of him. And so did the woman in front of him.

“Must make you guys proud, all this history. Just wish I was a part of it,” Skye said wistfully.

Grant said nothing and shook his head a little. If he had anything to say about it, she would be. He didn’t want to end up like Coulson, not even being able to tell the woman he loved that he was alive. Grant needed Skye to be a part of SHIELD so that they could at least have a chance to be together, if that was what she wanted.

Skye turned back to look at him and misunderstood his expression. “It’s not self-pity, really. I’m just saying everyone here has earned this. They deserve it. I hacked my way in. Feels like I cheated.”

Grant felt uncomfortable with her idealism and how down she was on herself. If you only knew
what’s really going on, how many people didn’t earn it. Even some of the people on the wall were cheats. He took a deep breath and moved to stand next to her. Skye was one of the most worthy people he knew, much worthier than he ever had been! He had to let her know how great she was! “All you need to join is a dedication to the greater good. Coulson saw that in you the moment he met you.” Skye looked grateful.

“Come on,” he said, wanting badly to take her hand but instead contenting himself with putting his hand briefly on her shoulder. “You have a lecture to attend.”

Grant walked Skye up to the lecture hall, watched her go in, and then stood on the balcony waiting for Weaver to bring him Seth Dormer. He was talking to Seth when he heard screams from inside the hall and the doors burst open. Several people ran out.

Grant grabbed one of the runners before she could leave. “What’s going on?” he asked her.

“It’s horrible!” she said tearfully. “One of the cadets got frozen; he’s a solid block of ice!”

Grant said, “Thanks” and took off running into the lecture hall. Clearly, his team needed him. Upon entering, he saw FitzSimmons near the bottom of the room standing next to what did indeed look like a block of ice. Grant, no stranger to ice sculptures from his days with the Family Ward, had the odd thought that the sculpture wasn’t even a very good one. Too fuzzy, too few defined features. He internally shook himself. He needed to focus. “Fitz, talk to me!”

Fitz was in the middle of trying to inject something into the frozen body. “Something’s doing this to him. Find it!” he said.

Grant immediately started checking underneath the seats where the student had been sitting. Just as he saw a blue and grey cylinder, Skye said, “Ward, there it is. Fitz, what now?”

“Smash the damn thing!” Fitz yelled.

Grant obediently stomped on the cylinder with his foot and hoped that whatever had happened to the student in the ice wouldn’t also happen to him. But sure enough, once the cylinder was destroyed, the ice around the boy cracked and fell off of him. He collapsed gasping into FitzSimmons’ arms. Best place for him.

“It’s OK. It’s OK. It’s over,” Fitz told him soothingly.

Suddenly, there was applause from the cadets all around them. Grant scanned the room and shook his head. Sci-Tech students were so weird. Either they thought that this had been part of the lecture or they wanted to express approval at FitzSimmons’ rescue. Either way, they were nothing like Operations students who would have been on their feet, looking to help however they could. Especially at times like this, Grant really missed the camaraderie and help of his fellow classmates.

Weaver lost no time in emptying the lecture hall and calling in security personnel to sweep the rest of the seats. Grant found himself admiring her calm resolve and ability to get things done. He understood why SHIELD put her in charge of the Sci-Tech Academy: she inspired confidence. After a few compassionate instructions, Weaver sent Donnie back to his room and came over to consult with the team. Fitz reported that there was no genetic material on the device and that it was made with rare and expensive components. Jemma pointed out that this went way beyond a freshman prank.

“Attempted murder,” Weaver agreed, sounding shocked and disappointed.

“So, Donnie was the intended target all along?” Grant asked. “He have anything in common with
the cadets at the pool?” He listened as Weaver explained that Donnie was young, highly intelligent and unpopular.

Skye seemed to react badly to the last piece of information and Grant had to admit that it stung him a little too. Although he hadn’t had the opportunity to finish his secondary education, he hadn’t been well-liked at either the private high school or the military school he attended before being swept up by Garrett. Back then, he cared about the lack of acceptance from his peers. A lot. But now, with age and experience, he knew just how little popularity meant. However, he also could appreciate just how hard it was to be rejected, to keep to yourself out of fear that once people knew the real you, they wouldn’t like you. Yeah, he could truly relate to that. Apparently, so could Skye.

“We were considering graduating him early and assigning him to the Sandbox,” Weaver continued.

“Wow! Well, he would love it there,” Jemma said in awe.

“But he doesn’t like it here,” Weaver sadly pointed out, “so I’m afraid he’ll wash out.”

“Maybe that was the idea,” Grant theorized. It seemed like he was playing the Coulson role in their investigation, so talking out loud felt right. So did assigning tasks, even if it was to the head of the Sci-Tech Academy. “Agent Weaver, keep working with Investigations, interviewing cadets, instructors.”

“Of course,” she said and left. Grant felt exhilarated. A high level SHIELD agent was taking orders from him! If the situation wasn’t so scary, this would be fun.

“And us?” Skye asked.

Sci-Tech nerds weren’t the only ones who were smart enough to figure things out. Grant intended to show them that he could too. “Their interviews won’t bear fruit,” he told the team. “We teach cadets to keep secrets. Where did you guys hang out when you wanted to get away from the faculty?” he asked FitzSimmons.

“Can we tell someone from Operations?” Jemma asked Fitz in a snarky manner. Now’s not the time, Jemma!

“Yes,” Grant said, trying to keep the irritation out of his tone. He didn’t succeed as well as he would have liked. “Because we need to conduct our own operation,” he told them as he led them out of the building. He wanted to get away from any listening ears.

“And when we get there?” Jemma asked him.

The four of them were heading down the stairs to the green grass, cadets streaming around them. Grant believed it was safe to talk; no one appeared to be interested in them at the moment.

“We mingle, low-key,” Grant replied. “You and Skye get comfortable with the students, see if you can get them gossiping. Skye looks young enough to blend in.”

For some reason, this seemed to irritate Skye. “You’re not exactly Old Man River. And Fitz looks younger than us,” she told him huffily. What is that about?

Fitz also appeared touchy about his age. “Time will come when you won’t make fun of me for that,” he said grumpily. “You’ll be jealous. You’ll be jealous, wrinkly old hags.”

Whatever. “I want Fitz to go talk to Donnie,” Grant said.
Fitz turned to Grant in surprise. “Sorry?”

“Donnie’s withdrawn, might know more than he’s letting on,” Grant explained. “You’re a hero here, Fitz. He looks up to you. Go hang out with him.” He thought back to Weaver’s description of Donnie as an unpopular loner, so different that no one could keep up with him. Grant knew what that was like and he felt sorry for the kid, especially since it seemed like someone was out to get him. Maybe they could at least give him some company. “Even if he has no clue who might be after him, he could use a friend.”

Both Jemma and Fitz reached the bottom of the stairs and stopped walking. Jemma smiled in satisfaction. “That is a wonderful idea.”

“Ward has them from time to time,” Fitz admitted. It was all Grant could do not to roll his eyes but he felt a little pleased too. He knew that the Science Twins valued him but it was rare that they admitted it. “I’ll meet you later,” Fitz said over his shoulder as he left.

Grant started to ask Jemma where the secret hang out was when the two women turned to him almost in unison, both smiling up at him. He closed his mouth.

“What’s going on?”

“What?” he asked, puzzled.

“Ah.

“It’s strategic.”

“Adorable,” Jemma said firmly.

Skye looked at him gleefully. “The Tin Man has a heart after all,” she said, tapping his heart.

Grant was secretly pleased but put on an irritated expression. No sense in letting them know how much he was enjoying this or he’d never hear the end of it. “So, where are we going?” he asked as he pushed past them. He heard Skye giggle as both women followed him.

“SHIELD keeps careful watch of everything within their walls,” Jemma explained to Skye as she led the way toward a building located in the quad. “So, in the late 60s, to escape the cameras and the prying eyes of the faculty, a few cadets started sneaking down to the boiler room to play cards, you know, exchange ideas.” She didn’t slow down as she entered a building and went down a darkened staircase.

“My kind of people,” Skye commented.

“Some amazing breakthroughs have come out of here.” Grant suspected that Jemma was truly enjoying herself. She got to lead and lecture at the same time. “So the tradition lives on.”

“Of cramming into the boiler room?” Skye asked sarcastically. Grant agreed with her. It didn’t sound like all that much fun to him. But then Jemma gave them both a droll look and opened a door labelled Maintenance. Immediately, Grant was almost overwhelmed with the sound of conversations and music.

“My kind of people,” Skye commented.

“Well, over the years, we’ve made a few improvements,” Jemma said proudly as they came out onto a balcony overlooking the main space. The first floor looked like it could have doubled for a bar scene in a Hollywood movie. There was a circular bar, a pool table, neon lights and tables scattered around the entire floor. The three of them just stopped and stared down at the incredibly social scene. Skye instantly started grinning and laughing. Grant had to admit that he was impressed.

“Do you have one of these at Operations?” Jemma asked him. He suspected that she already knew the answer but just wanted to rub it in.
Grant looked all around, trying to imagine his super-serious group of colleagues putting together something this amazing. “No,” he replied.

Jemma smiled. “Did not think so,” she said smugly.

“Drinks are on me,” Skye said delightedly as she led the way downstairs.

Once they hit the bottom floor, Jemma was immediately surrounded by cadets, all wanting to talk to their very own Sci-Tech celebrity. Grant gave her a significant look before she walked off with the group and she met his eyes and nodded. That left him alone with Skye who looked like Christmas had come early.

“Shall we?” she asked as she gestured toward the bar. The two of them leaned up against it, both of them looking around. The suit and his clearly defined muscularity were going to inhibit Grant’s ability to blend in; he looked exactly like the Operations agent he was. Skye, however, still had possibilities.

“You should go mingle,” he told her, waving his hand around at the students. He saw a group of girls standing in the corner. Perfect.

But Skye’s thoughts were going in a different direction. “I’m going to go talk to the bartender,” she replied. And she was off before he could tell her what a bad idea that was. The guy didn’t look like a nerd (Who wears a scruffy beard these days?) and he probably wouldn’t know anything.

Grant tried not to watch Skye flirt shamelessly with the bartender. She’s just getting information but that thought was harder to keep in mind when he saw her place her hand on the bartender’s arm and laugh uproariously at something he said. Finally, after what seemed like forever, the guy handed her two beers, the two of them laughed together again, and she walked – correction: strutted – back to Grant. He’d be willing to bet a lot that she hadn’t even paid for those beers. He moved the half empty beer bottle that he’d set on the bar as a drink wagon drove by.

“The things they come up with!”

“Bartender seemed chatty,” he commented to Skye, moving closer to her. It was loud in the room, so he totally needed to lean in.

“He’s in computer sciences,” she reported. “Didn’t take long to convince him I was a Level 7 CS operative. And guess where I am stationed. The Sandbox.”

“Good thinking,” he replied. He appreciated the look of confidence she had, so different from earlier when she was worried about hacking her way into SHIELD.

“I asked if any of the cadets had hopes of getting assigned there,” she continued. “Behind me. The curls.” Grant looked over and saw a curly-haired brunette shooting pool. “Callie Hannigan: ambitious, gunned hard for getting assigned to the Sandbox, and apparently, word’s gotten around, she just lost the top spot.”

Grant looked at Skye consideringly. “She was at the pool,” he told her.

“But didn’t want to go in,” Skye confirmed. Grant looked at her, nodded and smiled slightly. She’d come such a long way since they kidnapped her from her van. Look at her, gathering information like an agent! He was proud.

Grant walked over to the pool table. Skye found a small table close to the pool table and brought both of her beers with her. Shortly after she sat down, Jemma joined her. They watched as Grant worked his magic.
Callie had just finished a game, handily beating her opponent. Grant picked up a cue, chalked the tip and smoothly leaned against the pool table. “Nice game,” he told her. “Care to play another?”

Callie smiled at Grant and shrugged. “Loser buys the beer,” she told him.

He racked the balls and gestured for her to start. “Ladies first,” he said. Callie broke well and started sinking balls into pockets. Grant made sure that he looked impressed and occasionally gave her an engaging smile. During one such interaction, he happened to glance over at the table where Skye and Jemma sat tensely. Skye in particular looked unhappy and he swallowed his smirk. He hadn’t enjoyed watching her with the bartender either.

Turning his attention back the game, Grant saw Callie make a good play. *Time to kick things into high gear.* “Not a bad shot,” he commented.

Callie smiled. “You mean for a girl,” she replied. She bent to take another shot.

Grant masked his irritation. Why did everyone think that he didn’t appreciate women’s talents? He didn’t have that kind of a prejudice; he knew too many women who could outfight, outplay and outsmart him. “For anybody,” he said shortly.

“Elastic collision equations, contact point geometry, and practice,” she bragged, straightening up and looking over at him. Grant hid his disgust too. He didn’t admire the kind of interaction Callie clearly wanted. Truly talented people didn’t have to brag; their skills stood for themselves. She took another shot. “So, why is a guy from Operations hanging out in the Boiler Room anyway?”

Grant smiled, took a deep breath, and looked around the room as if he was about to impart a secret. He moved closer to Callie. She was really going to eat this up. “Looking for the smartest mind you have here to duck out, join my top shadow unit,” he said in a low, confidential tone. Her amazed look up at him almost made him smile. She was hooked. “Is that you?” he asked.

“Could be,” Callie replied in a hard voice. Grant could tell that she was putting on a tough girl act to try and impress him. Sci-Tech people really needed to learn more espionage skills. They were way too easy to fool and read. “Shadow unit doing what?”

Grant looked down and chalked his cue. “I’ve said too much already,” he said casually, knowing that the secrecy aspect would pull her even further in, “but that tech in the lecture hall, it was impressive. Whoever built that tech, I could see them moving to Level 6 within the year.” He looked over at her.

Callie appeared thoughtful. She grabbed the chalk right out of Grant’s hand and started chalking her cue. “Even though Donnie and Seth were hurt?” she asked.

“The boys survived,” Grant replied, blowing on the tip of his cue. She was about to spill something, he could feel it.

“Yeah,” Callie said dismissively, “Probably the best thing that’s happened to them all year.” She moved around to the end of the table to line up her next shot. She hit the cue ball but Grant leaned down and grabbed it. She looked up at him in surprise.

“Why don’t you tell me what you meant by that,” he said in a hard tone, giving her a direct stare. Callie had a startled and somewhat scared expression on her face. *Too easy.* He started walking towards her, “And I’ll not tell Agent Weaver how eager you were to jump rank over at Operations.”

Callie straightened up slowly, wary now 10 minutes after she should have been. However, Grant
was impressed that she didn’t back away even when he was almost right in her face. Most Sci-Tech students would have been against the wall when faced when a stern Grant Ward. “I’m just saying they got to meet Agent Fitz. They’ve been talking about it for weeks,” she said uncertainly.

“Weeks? We just came here…” His tactical mind raced. Something was not right. “Talking about it to whom?” Grant asked.

“Each other,” Callie replied, puzzled. She acted like he should know that and suddenly, the pieces fell into place. Donnie and Seth were behind the whole thing. He abruptly left Callie and went to confer urgently with Skye and Jemma.

Jemma immediately got on the phone with Fitz to tell him what they’d learned but when he realized that he’d helped Donnie solve his power problem, he hung up. Jemma hung up her phone in frustration but Grant felt a stir of panic. Fitz was going to do something stupid. “Let’s go,” he told Skye and Jemma as he took off running out of the Boiler Room.

Grant ran all the way to the dorms, shouting questions about where Donnie Gill’s room to a few startled cadets as he went. He took the stairs two at a time and burst into Donnie’s room. Fitz was just starting to sit up, holding the back of his head. Clearly the two boys had shot him with some sort of weapon.

“Are you OK?” he asked Fitz, helping him to his feet as Skye and Jemma ran into the room.

“Where are Donnie and Seth?” Skye asked.

“I don’t know,” Fitz said in an aggrieved fashion. Grant could tell that he felt guilty. Fitz looked over at the work table against the wall and walked over to it. “They took the device! We have to find them!”

“OK,” Grant said to calm everyone. “I’m going to coordinate a search effort with Agent Weaver. Standard procedure would be to set up a perimeter and search building to building, so that’s probably what we’ll do. I just had word from Coulson that they’re back, so you three head to the Bus and see what you can do from there.”

FitzSimmons and Skye returned to the Bus while Grant helped Weaver with her search. They had just consulted with some of the searchers and were moving onto another building when they noticed the ominous clouds forming in the sky. This isn’t good. He looked at Weaver. “We need to get everyone to a safe location. This storm is going to be a bad one.”

She nodded, the wind kicking up around them. “But where? The storms around here usually don’t come with such high winds,” Weaver said.

“What about the Boiler Room?” Grant asked her.

Weaver nodded and a ghost of a smile crossed her face. “I can’t believe they took someone from Operations there,” she said.

Getting all of the students into the Boiler Room in such a short amount of time was no easy feat but they managed it. He and Weaver were on the second floor, making sure that all the students were there and following orders. Grant could hear the sounds of ice pelting the building right before Coulson called him. “Ward, how are things on the ground?” Coulson asked.

“We’ve got most everyone safe in the Boiler Room,” he replied. The lights started flickering and the building shuddered. “How bad is this going to get?” Grant yelled in order to be heard.
“Bad. Can you reach the north campus parking garage?” Coulson asked. “We think Donnie Gill and his device may be trapped in the center of the storm.”

Grant left his position and ran toward the doors leading to the outside. “That’s not far from where I am. I can get there,” he assured Coulson. He sprinted to the doors, threw them open and saw what looked like a scene from *The Wizard of Oz*. The winds were so high that debris was moving through the air almost effortlessly. Grant immediately shut the door. There was nothing he could do. “Yeah, I can’t get there,” he told him.

He returned to Weaver and told her that they were going to have to ride it out. She just nodded and looked worried. Grant never enjoyed feeling helpless but there was nothing else he could do besides hope that the building could withstand an icy tornado. Fortunately, it could and 10 minutes later, the storm was over. The room was a mess from the crowd and all the things shaken from the walls but everyone was safe and unharmed.

Grant immediately went outside so that he could consult with Coulson about what happened and what he needed to do from here. As he helped assist Weaver in getting the cadets back to their dorms and assessing the damage, his thoughts stayed on Donnie Gill. Like Grant, Donnie wasn’t a bad seed but rather, had fallen under a bad influence in the form of Seth (Garrett) and Quinn (Hydra). The potential he had with his intelligence (ability) made him a target and led him to do evil things in the hope of a good outcome. Grant felt a strong kinship with Donnie and hoped that SHIELD would help and not harm the boy. But he kind of doubted it. Spy agencies weren’t known for their understanding and forgiveness.

Grant went to meet Skye in the parking lot (Coulson had signaled him that she was coming and wanted his help with something) and he thought once again about how fortunate he was that Fury and Hill had not only believed what he said but also believed in what he could do. They saw his true potential and were allowing him to act on it. For that, he would be forever grateful.

Grant’s musing stopped abruptly when he saw Skye coming toward him. She looked extremely upset but also had a determined look on her face. He was about to say something to her when she came up to him and hugged him fiercely. *Is she crying?*

He waited until she was through with the hug, then stepped back and bent down a little so he could look into her face, his hands on her shoulders. “What’s wrong?”

Skye shook her head and swiped at some tears still on her face. “Do you remember the deal we made on our camping trip, that once I become a real agent, we’ll swap personal histories?”

Grant nodded, “Of course.”

“Well, I’m keeping to my end of the deal,” she told him. “Until then, I told Coulson that I wanted a moment alone down here but I’d appreciate it if you came with me.”

In other words, she was upset because of something from her past but she wasn’t going to tell him until later. If the irony wasn’t so tragic, he could have smiled at how similar they were. Instead, he merely said, “I wouldn’t miss it. Where are we going?”

But he already knew. Something had changed in Skye since he last saw her, flush with confidence and excitement at being able to get information from a source. Now she seemed sad. They were back to the Wall of Valor, to the Skye who wanted desperately to belong but didn’t think that she did.

So he stood to the side of the room while she looked at the Wall, tears once again in evidence.
Skye touched one of the names reverently and Grant could stand it no longer. He slowly walked over, giving her plenty of time to tell him to stay away. When she didn’t, he put his arm around her. Skye leaned into Grant and neither of them said a word for a long time. Later, he would want more from their relationship but the idea that there would be more was enough for him at the moment.

Eventually Grant sensed that she was getting restless, so he said, “Come on, Skye. Let’s go home.” She nodded and they returned to the Bus and to the team.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you all enjoyed the camping in Yosemite. It was really fun imagining what it would have been like for them.
Incentives

Grant peered into the Control Center and saw Skye talking to a bearded, middle-aged man in a chair with a huge backpack strapped to his chest. The way the backpack was positioned made it look oddly like he was pregnant. Skye probably told the guy it was a bomb but Grant doubted that it was. Regardless of how angry she was at Hydra, Skye wasn’t a killer. He hesitated a moment, deciding the best way to approach her. After all, the last time he saw her, Skye had been furious with him. She might even believe he’s still working for Hydra.

“I will die before talking but there’s nothing to tell,” the man told her. Grant rolled his eyes. Typical. Does everyone have to be so dramatic? “There’s no way of controlling the soldiers unless there’s an actual handler at the machine.”

Grant smiled at that. When his big surprise went off, there would be no way of telling them to do anything. This would all be finished.

“I’m not interested in that,” Skye replied. What are you interested in, Skye? What is your mission? “I’m more interested in why you’re willing to die for Hydra,” she continued. “Are you a true believer? Is Hydra the plucky little family you never had? Or are you here for the Incentives Program?”

With those words, the man in the chair looked up at her. Ah. She’s after the incentives. He was about to enter the room when through his peripheral vision he noticed someone sneak in the far corner and head stealthily towards Skye. She was so focused on the man in the chair that she didn’t notice.

Damn it, Skye! How many times had he talked to her about maintaining situational awareness, especially when surrounded by enemies like she was now? Of course, he’d just been taken by surprise twice, so maybe he should cut her some slack. But when they got out of this, he’d definitely be having a conversation with her about it. Again. Grant waited, trying to figure out what was going on.

As the man got closer to Skye, Grant recognized him. It was Agent Elliot Kohl, a higher level Hydra operative who often worked closely with Garrett. Kohl wasn’t a true believer like Rickard but neither was he stupid like Fistal. He worked with Hydra because it gave him power and the opportunity to get rich. Grant wouldn’t be surprised if he had investments in Cybertek, thereby making him very motivated to shut down SHIELD’s attack. He suspected that Garrett sent Kohl to get the handler but he would take Skye as well. Two birds with one stone. Grant eased into the room, gun raised, trying to determine the best course of action. For now, he would stay hidden.

“Don’t worry,” Kohl said to the man as he continued walking towards them. Skye whipped around, a remote control in her hand but her gun still tucked into her pants. Grant cursed her lack of combat readiness skills and wondered where the rest of the team was. Why are they leaving her so unprotected? “She’s not going to kill you. Are you, sweetheart?”

“Who are you?” Skye demanded and Grant had to hand it to her. She didn’t even look scared. And she should have. Kohl was no one to mess with. Even Grant avoided tangling with him.

“Agent Elliot Kohl, at your service,” he replied mockingly, even doing a little bit of a bow although he never took his eyes off of her. Grant’s lips tightened. Kohl always was a show-off. He was now within a few feet of Skye. “And who might you be?”
Skye said nothing and Grant almost sighed in relief. At least she had that much caution. He didn’t want Kohl to know who she was. Then maybe he’d just take the handler and let her go.

“Wait a minute,” Kohl said, still in that mocking voice. “Could you possibly be the enchanting Agent Skye that Garrett is always talking about? Why, I believe you are. I’m delighted to make your acquaintance, my dear. Garrett will be so pleased that I found you.”

“You can tell Garrett to go to hell!” Skye replied in a hard tone. “And just what is it that you want?”

“Well, I need the handler, of course.” The man in the chair flinched. Clearly, he wasn’t a Hydra volunteer but a conscript. “The soldiers are doing fine by themselves at the moment but once they take out the rest of SHIELD, we need him to give orders to them again. They do so poorly without direction,” Kohl said with a fake-sad look. Grant gritted his teeth at Kohl’s tone with Skye. He was playing with her. This was bad.

“It’s a shame that you can’t have him then. And if you try to take him, I’ll set off the bomb,” Skye told him.

Kohl grinned and shook his head. Her threat didn’t scare him at all. “Oh my dear, you’re not going to kill us with the bomb. You’d go too. And what’s more, I don’t think there even is a bomb.”

He abruptly reached forward, yanking the remote out of her hand with his left hand while grabbing her with his right. With his arm around her neck, he examined the remote and smiled. “Just as I thought, a dummy switch,” Kohl gloated as he tossed it behind his back. The handler flinched when it hit the ground but it didn’t go off. Kohl looked up as four Hydra foot soldiers entered the room. “Get that backpack off him and take him,” he told them in a commanding voice, nodding at the handler in the chair. He smiled at Skye, “And I’ll take her.”

With that, Grant emerged from his hiding place and fired four shots in quick succession. All four Hydra grunts went down. Kohl whipped around to face him, careful to keep Skye’s body covering his own. Grant aimed his gun at Kohl, not allowing himself a glance at Skye. If he lost focus for even a second, they both would be dead.

Kohl didn’t seem bothered by Grant’s unexpected appearance or his clearing of the room. If anything, he seemed amused. “Ah, of course. Grant Ward. I take it that you’re the one responsible for all the dead Hydra agents down the hall?”

“That’s right,” Grant replied steadily. “And you’re going to be next if you don’t let her go.” He didn’t normally try to engage the bad guys in small talk but he needed to be careful with Kohl. Grant also needed some time to figure out how he could kill him because he most certainly could not leave him alive. Kohl would never leave him alone. If he’d had time, Grant could have considered the irony of having both SHIELD and Hydra operatives trying to kill him.

“I really kind of doubt it,” Kohl said casually. “Before we get into anything though, I must know: what’s your angle here? Are you trying to replace Garrett and bring in your own team? Because if that’s the case, I bow before your genius. I wish I’d thought of it myself!” His expression changed from gleeful to a fake concerned look, “Although I must warn you, I think Garrett’s going to be hard to kill.”

“I do plan on killing Garrett but not so I can take over Hydra. I’ve been working as a triple for SHIELD. Hydra has to go,” Grant replied. As before, he enjoyed saying the truth out loud and he hoped that Skye believed him.
Grant’s tactical brain was working in overdrive. He needed some way to throw Kohl off his game. He could surprise both Rickard and Fistal but Kohl was too sneaky for that; he would expect tricks. And Grant was concerned about his firepower potential. His own Glock was already out of rounds and he had no way of knowing how many were still in Rickard and Fistal’s guns. Crossing off Hydra agents had been worth it but it had really burned through his ammunition. And now he was running out of time. Wait, that’s it: time!


_What is his game? Why is he stalling?_ “It wasn’t easy,” Grant admitted, walking closer to Kohl and Skye. He desperately wanted to look at Skye and see how she was taking this conversation but that loss of focus was probably what Kohl was waiting for. “But having Hydra in control would be a disaster, so I did what I had to do.”

“What is his game? Why is he stalling?” Kohl asked with a sneer.

“Garrett always said you had a tender heart,” Kohl said with a sneer.

Grant gave him a mocking smile, “You say that like it’s a bad thing,” he said. _Any moment…_

Kohl looked startled. Perhaps he’d gotten so used to hearing Garrett state that caring was a weakness that he was truly shocked when someone believed otherwise. Or maybe he never had anyone to care about. Kohl opened his mouth to say something else when the charges Grant set exploded and the lights started flickering.

Skye didn’t hesitate. She elbowed Kohl in the stomach, pivoted, slammed her palm into his nose and then threw herself to the side. Grant fired at his heart but Kohl’s reflexive lean forward after Skye’s strike made Grant’s round hit his shoulder instead. Grant tried to fire again but his gun was out. _Damn it!_

He too threw himself to the side as Kohl started firing back at him. Luckily, Skye had enough sense to grab the handler and drag both of them behind the large desk so that they were out of harm’s way. This fight was now solely between Grant and Kohl. Grant grabbed his remaining gun and returned fire but soon that one was also out of rounds.

Kohl stopped firing and smiled. “What are you going to do now, Ward? You’re out of ammunition. Chasing you would be such a drag, so I promise that if you come out now, I’ll make it quick. Or, better yet, I’ll just take you to Garrett so you can have that heart to heart you so desperately desire.”

Grant started to move towards Kohl. Other than making sure she was out of the line of fire, he still hadn’t looked in Skye’s direction. He had to focus. But apparently she could see him and thought he was going to give himself up. “No, Ward! Don’t do it! I still have a gun!” Skye yelled.

Kohl turned in her direction and his smile widened. “Oh you do, do you, Agent Skye? Well now, we can’t have that,” he said as he started walking towards her. Clearly, since Grant was out of ammunition, he didn’t appear to consider him much of a threat. He probably also knew that if he had Skye, he had Grant over a barrel since he wouldn’t do anything to harm her.

_Never turn your back on an enemy._ Grant took Fistal’s wicked looking knife and threw it with all of his strength into the middle of Kohl’s back. If this had been the movies, he would have turned to look at Grant with surprise and then collapsed but this was real life. Instead, Kohl pitched forward onto his face and was still. Based on the angle of where the knife went in, Grant suspected that he’d punctured his heart. Even so, Grant crept cautiously towards him, kicked away the gun still in his hand and rolled the body over with his foot. It couldn’t turn all the way over because of the knife, so it just kind of rested against it. Kohl’s lifeless stare told him all he needed to know but, just as a precaution, he checked his vitals. Nothing. He’d always thought that Kohl’s cunning and
skill would keep him alive but apparently arrogance was his downfall. Good to know.

Grant sighed in relief and was almost knocked over as Skye threw herself at him. “Oh my god, Ward!” she sobbed as she hugged him tightly. “I thought that maniac was going to kill you!”

Grant smiled and enjoyed the feeling of holding Skye. At last! “I’m not that easy to kill,” he told her lightly as she leaned back to look into his face. He gently wiped the tears from her face. Then he leaned down, grabbed Kohl’s gun, took her by the hand and led her into a corner where they could survey the entire room. He didn’t intend for them to be taken by surprise.

Skye’s laugh at his statement turned into a hiccup as she struggled to control her emotions. “So you really are a triple agent?” she asked. Grant could tell that she had already decided that he was.

He nodded and smiled slightly, “I told you that someday you’d understand.” He shook his head because he hadn’t been able to resist using that line. Skye gave a small snort. “Yes, I’m a triple agent,” Grant continued, “and if you don’t believe me, you can ask Fury or Hill.”

“Oh, I believe you now but I totally didn’t when you had me handcuffed,” Skye began.

“Yeah, I kind of got that at the time,” he said with a grin at her.

Skye smiled back at him. “Well, you can’t blame me for not believing you! I had just discovered that my SO was Hydra and then I was kidnapped! How could I be sure that you were telling me the truth? I mean, come on Ward, that just didn’t seem likely.”

He nodded. The memory of that encounter, of her agreeing to give up the hard drive data in order to restart his heart, came crashing back and Grant almost couldn’t breathe. Skye had believed him a traitor, someone who betrayed the whole team, and she still negotiated for his life. She willingly gave up her one bargaining chip, the very thing that might have saved her own life once she was turned over to Garrett, and she did it for Grant. He didn’t think anyone had ever done something so brave and compassionate for him before.

The smile fell off of his face. “And yet you gave up valuable information to save my life even though you thought I was Hydra.”

Skye stopped smiling too and her expression turned serious. She reached up to touch Grant’s face. “No matter what you’d done, I couldn’t let you die. I owed you too much.”

Grant nodded. He understood about debts.

“Besides,” Skye continued, tearing up a little, and looking anywhere but at Grant’s face, “there was always the chance that you were telling the truth about being a triple or that we could somehow get you back on our side. If there was even a possibility, I was going to bet on you.”

Grant bowed his head and then looked up, used his hand to gently turn Skye head so she was facing him and gazed directly into her eyes. “Thank you.” There was a pause while they both looked at each other, the pull between them so strong that Grant was almost breathless again. He really needed to get to Garrett but he had to know. “But you figured out that I was telling the truth.”

Skye nodded. “It just didn’t add up. You only incapacitated Eric when you could have killed him. You let May leave the base. Agent Hand is still alive because you used an ICER on her. She believes that you just made a mistake and used the wrong gun but you don’t make mistakes like that. You took your sweet time helping Mike try to keep us from escaping in Lola and then all of your shots were way off. You’re too good for that to happen by accident. And then Maria Hill said that our orders were to bring you in alive and unharmed. If you were truly Hydra, why would she
care about your well-being? If you were a triple though, that would make sense.”

*Leave it to Skye to uncover the truth.* However, he realized that she was ignoring the biggest reason she had for believing him: she really and truly didn’t want him to be Hydra. Skye’s desire for him to be good was so strong that she was willing to take any evidence and twist it in his favor. It was lucky for both of them that she was correct in her assumptions but it was a dangerous game to play. And it was confirmation yet again that Garrett was right about caring for people. It could get you killed but, on the other hand, Grant didn’t want to live without it.

And he needed to start telling the people he cared about how he felt. Skye in particular had to be told, especially given what his next task was going to be. “It’s been hell not being able to be honest with you about who I am, what I’ve been doing and how I feel about you. And I don’t want to have this conversation with you here,” he glanced around at the empty room filled with dead bodies and the whiff of crushed souls, “but I need you to know that I want us to have a chance.” He stroked her face lightly and smiled.

Skye smiled up at him, tears in her eyes. “I want that too, Grant.”

He leaned down to kiss her when he heard a sound to his right. Grant looked up to see the handler scoot his chair so that he could see past the desk and peer around at them. “Hey!” he called. “This is really sweet but could you all have your reunion later? I’d like to get out of this thing before someone kills me.”

Damn! “Just a minute,” he told the handler. He looked down at Skye and ran his hand down her shoulder. It felt so wonderful knowing that he could touch her. “I need to go finish things with Garrett but, before I do, I wanted to let you know that FitzSimmons are ok. I know Garrett said something different but I was able to get them off the Bus before he could hurt them. They’re fine.”

Skye’s breath came out in a whoosh. “Oh, thank god,” she said with a smile. Then it faded from her face, “Be careful with Garrett. And, since you might die,” Skye added with a wicked smile, “what the hell.” She grabbed his collar, pulled his face down to hers, and kissed him with everything she had.

Grant took a quick glance around the room and, seeing no one but the handler (whom he ignored), he picked up Skye, pressed her against the wall, and kissed her back. Skye wrapped her legs around him and tangled her fingers in his hair. This wasn’t the short, chaste kiss they’d had in the supply closet at the Hub. No, this was the hot, heavy make-out session type of kiss, the kind they’d had at Providence base before everything went to hell. This was the kind of kiss that promised great things to come.

After several of the best kisses of his life, Grant put Skye down and took a step back even though almost everything in him wanted only to find an empty room and make love to her. He took a deep breath and tried to control his breathing. He chanced a look at Skye. She too was panting and looked at him with the most beautiful “come hither” look in her eye that he’d ever seen. Grant smiled and shook his head. *Later.* He picked up one of her hands and kissed the back of it. He inclined his head toward the handler and told her, “Go do what you need to do. I’ll see you soon.”

He took out Kohl’s gun and started to go when Skye grabbed his arm, preventing him from leaving. “I don’t think Coulson knows that you’re a triple,” she warned him. Grant nodded and turned to leave again when her hand tightened on his arm. “And you really need to be careful with May.”

“I’m guessing she doesn’t know I’m a triple either,” Grant said.
“Yeah but it’s more than just that,” Skye said slowly.

“OK,” Grant replied looking puzzled. “What else is it about?”

“Well, you slept with her and she’s really pissed off,” Skye answered. “And, by the way, when all this is over, we are going to talk about that.”

Grant gave her a slight smile of understanding and said, “OK.” That was one conversation he was not eager to have. He headed out the door with his gun raised when, from out of nowhere, May tackled him, knocking the gun out of his hand.

“Grant! May, no!” Skye screamed, starting toward the two of them.

“Skye, go! I’ll take care of this,” he shouted while rolling to avoid May’s punch. He leapt to his feet and, in-between gasps, told May, “We need to talk.”
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Flashback

For the first time in his life, Grant was truly a member of a team and he loved it. He was no longer just John Garrett’s Golden Boy – someone who worked and interacted almost solely with John – but someone who was an integral component of a group. His opinions were valued, his behaviors praised (or not) and his presence desired. In short, he mattered. To multiple people. So, to say that Grant was enjoying the team interconnection was putting it mildly.

The team was slowly developing a sense of unity with each mission but their time undermining Hand in order to get Coulson back really solidified their bond. However, the Academy mission (and whatever the hell Coulson and May had done) was different. Although Grant hoped that the mission at the Sci-Tech Academy would bring them all closer together, much to his dismay, it seemed to have the opposite effect. Instead of celebrating their success or commiserating their losses like they usually did, everyone seemed to put their heads down and just do work. May abruptly stopped pulling pranks, dinners together were rather solemn affairs, and game nights were almost a thing of the past. Grant hated it.

He knew that Fitz blamed himself for what happened to Donnie Gill because, if he hadn’t been his usual brilliant self and solved the power problem, the boys couldn’t have attempted the disastrous demonstration. Seth wouldn’t have died and Donnie would have had a chance at a semi-regular life. Both Fitz and Jemma tried to communicate with Donnie at the Sandbox but were denied access. As a result, Fitz sulked in the Lab and Jemma, worried about him, stayed with him. It was at times like these that Grant truly appreciated their bond for what it was: long-standing and solid as a rock. It was FitzSimmons against the world.

And then there was Coulson and May. Wherever they went and whatever they did while the rest of them were at the Academy brought them closer together too. They obviously had told Skye what happened but they gave nothing away to the rest of the team. And although FitzSimmons didn’t seem to care about being kept out of the loop, Grant did. A lot. He considered himself a senior member of the team – one who had proved his worth and discretion on numerous occasions – yet they were keeping information from him.

He tried to pry a little information out of May on the increasingly rare occasions when they had sex but it didn’t work. While she’d always been a little removed during their time together, now it almost was as if he wasn’t even in the room. Grant tried not to be hurt by this but he was. It wasn’t that he harbored romantic feelings for May, he didn’t. But he did consider them friends and colleagues and, quite frankly, she was acting like they were neither. Grant was no stranger to using people in order to get something from them (hell, that described most of his adult life) but this was the first time he felt like the shoe was on the other foot and he didn’t like it. Plus, he’d noticed that May and Coulson had become as thick as thieves, so just like he was with FitzSimmons, Grant was on the outside looking in with them too.

And then there was Skye. After their camping trip at Yosemite, the two of them had become even closer and he’d never felt as connected to anyone as he did with her when they were together at the Wall of Valor that last time. But things seemed to change after they returned to the Bus. While they still trained twice daily, the dynamic was different. Skye sometimes joked around and complained about her tough SO but mostly she paid attention and ended up mastering skills much faster than
before. And then, instead of spending her down time with Grant like she used to do, she devoted hours to her computer doggedly pursuing a lead that no one but Coulson seemed to know about. Even meals were either rushed or taken into her bunk so she could continue working.

One evening after watching Skye make a sandwich and pass him in the corridor without saying anything (he suspected she hadn’t even seen him), he realized that the team was fracturing. FitzSimmons were a unit, May and Coulson comprised another section and then there was Skye and Grant. Usually, they were together but now Skye seemed more aligned with May and Coulson, leaving him on his own.

The feeling of being lonely and left out was not one he enjoyed. It reminded him way too much of times spent with his family. Grant had always felt peripheral to the alignments the others shared: his parents, Thomas and their mother, Thomas and Rose, Christian and their father. He was just Grant, the forever middle child. And, of course in Wyoming, he was literally left out and alone. Being reminded of the feelings he’d had when he was young and powerless almost made him sick. If only he and Skye were their own unit (the way it should be), then he would be accepting of the change in dynamic. But with her doing things he didn’t know about, the whole situation stunk and Grant didn’t like it. He didn’t like it at all.

He got his first inkling of what was going on when Coulson called an emergency briefing in Mission Control. When Grant walked in, his lips tightened as he saw the face of Ian Quinn, billionaire extraordinaire, on the screen. Grant knew that Quinn was working with Garrett (although Quinn himself didn’t know the identity of the Clairvoyant) and he’d heard tales from his SO about Quinn’s smug arrogance, cowardice and weak personality. Grant despised him for that and he was angry about how Quinn had almost hurt Skye when they infiltrated his compound in Malta. So, to say he wasn’t thrilled to see the idiot’s face was an understatement.

“Ian Quinn,” Coulson said, walking into Mission Control with Skye. The rest of the team was already gathered around the table. Grant smothered a smile. This was vintage Coulson drama and he was glad to see him returning to form.

“You found him?” May asked.

“No, but we think we know how we can,” Coulson replied. Grant almost groaned. If they were going after Quinn, this was going to get tricky. And who is we? “Skye tracked down an invoice from one of his shell companies. He made a big purchase recently.” Ah.

“10 million dollars big,” Skye concurred.

“Any idea what it is?” Jemma asked.

“No clue,” Skye sighed, “but it was designed and built by Cybertek, Inc., a small firm that deals in advanced technology and research.”

“Which is where this gets interesting,” Coulson interjected. “They’ve hired a private security outfit to transport the purchase – former military, ex-mercs.”

“Lot of muscle to move one package,” Grant said thoughtfully.

“And they know SHIELD’s got eyes on Quinn,” Coulson said.

“Which is why they’re transporting it old-school,” Skye explained. Grant found it interesting that she was taking such a large role in the briefing. Clearly, this was what she had been doing while she was shutting herself away from the team. The familiar wave of irritation washed over him as he
realized that, even in his role as Skye’s SO, he had been left out in the cold. Shouldn’t he have been told what his rookie was doing? Shouldn’t he have been included?

“On a train, through the Italian countryside,” Coulson added, “from Verona to Zagreb – very rural, very isolated.”

“And you think Quinn’s on that train?” May asked.

This was weird too. May usually didn’t talk much during briefings, just absorbed the information and asked questions only if something was unclear. What’s going on?

“No, but I believe they’re delivering the item to Quinn himself. We got our intel from Italian authorities who’ve been monitoring the situation,” Coulson explained.

May jumped in again. “And they don’t mind us taking over the op?” Isn’t asking questions my job? The feeling of being shut out and sidelined by everyone returned in full force. It was not a great feeling.

“I asked very nicely,” Coulson said drily, a sure sign that he strong-armed the Italian authorities. Grant almost rolled his eyes. Local authorities rarely appreciated when larger agencies came in and took over. They felt like their contributions went unappreciated and they weren’t wrong. Grant couldn’t even count the number of times that SHIELD moved in, accomplished the objective, and then congratulated themselves on a job well-done, conveniently forgetting the groundwork laid by the locals. So, even asking nicely wasn’t likely to have appeased the Italian police, especially if they had been bought off by Cybertek. Given the amount of money involved in moving the package, corruption could never be discounted yet it seemed like Coulson hadn’t even considered this. If so, that was a major oversight.

“If everything goes as planned,” Coulson continued with curious intensity, “Cybertek’s security team won’t even know we were on the train.”

“So we’re going in undercover,” Grant said grimly. Wonderful.

He loved his team but most of them were not great at playing a part. Of course, he was a master at espionage (the best since Romanoff) but the rest were a mixed bag. Skye could play a role well as long as nothing went wrong but FitzSimmons just didn’t have the skill. Jemma was a horrible liar and improvisation wasn’t her strong suit. Fitz tended to get distracted and easily flustered if he had to develop a plan on the fly (although, Grant reminded himself, Fitz had done a bang-up job in South Ossetia). He actually wasn’t sure about May. She could either be marvelous or terrible at it. And Coulson could only play someone similar to himself. This has disaster written all over it.

May sighed. “I hate undercover,” she said in a resigned tone. At least they were on the same page about this.

Coulson gave them their assignments. May and Grant would tag the package, Skye and Fitz would handle communications while Jemma and Coulson would pose as father and daughter. At the last one, Grant had to cough to cover his almost-snort. Coulson had to hate pretending to be Jemma’s father. “Once we capture Quinn, we’ll be one step closer to the Clairvoyant,” Coulson continued, serenely ignoring Grant. And that answered the question about why Coulson was so intense. He wanted revenge.

He really couldn’t blame Coulson but this made things awkward. Grant knew that Garrett was the Clairvoyant but he didn’t truly know John’s plans and he wouldn’t until John revealed himself. That was when Grant would give the intel to Fury and Hill. Thus, observation was better for his
overarching mission but no, Coulson clearly wanted to mix it up with Quinn and Grant would be forced to go along. He shrugged internally. Until such time as his ultimate mission took priority, he would focus on playing for Team Bus and worry about the rest later.

The plan called for Grant and May to act like a married couple: the rich bitch wife with the beleaguered husband. It was surprisingly easy because, of course, bitch was right in the center of May’s skillset. Plus, she didn’t speak a word of Italian, so her silence needed to be explained. Grant would be the one doing the heavy lifting at first – in some ways literally as he would be carrying her bags – and commiserating in Italian with the porter. No problem. In fact, it was so easy that the two of them barely needed to prepare at all. The others were not as lucky. Grant smiled to himself as he overheard Jemma telling Fitz about her undercover story. Was Coulson ever going to be surprised!

Much to Grant’s relief, things initially went off without a hitch. Everyone managed to get on the train without incident and take up their places. He and May passed Skye and Fitz as they made their way to their compartment and everything seemed to be going well. Once the door closed, Grant tried to situate their luggage while May took off her coat to reveal a tight-fitting catsuit. When he looked up and saw May standing framed against the window, he had to admit that she looked extremely sexy. She also looked hot and uncomfortable.

It would never do to let her know his real thoughts (the two of them hardly ever commented on each other’s appearance or comfort level), so he contented himself with saying, “That looks cozy.”

May appeared to know what he was really thinking though because she looked down and smirked. She started pulling her hair back. “Once I’ve located the package, I’ll let you know where to place the tracker,” she told him.

Grant started getting undressed. Maybe I can finally get some information out of her. “Seem like things are getting personal?” he asked her.

May glanced up from dealing with her hair and gave him a look. Clearly she thought he was talking about the two of them.

“I’m talking about our operations,” Grant clarified with a smile. He did so love to tease her.

She smiled in understanding and said, “Ah.”

“Look, I know Coulson was put through hell,” Grant continued as he took off his tie, “but he hasn’t been the same since. I don’t know what he said to Skye but she’s different.” Grant tried to keep the anger and concern out of his voice. While he and May weren’t supposed to be personal, he knew that she still would not respond well to any indication that he cared about Skye as more than just a trainee. He found that contradiction kind of interesting.

“How so?” May asked quietly. She now had her back to him, so he couldn’t read her expression. He would need to be careful here.

“Driven, focused. And she was holed up for days trying to track down Quinn. It feels like Coulson’s got her on a warpath.” Grant thought he’d kept the resentment out of his tone but it was possible that he couldn’t disguise it. He didn’t want Skye anywhere near this mess and Coulson had placed her squarely in the middle of it. He took off his shirt. “Seems personal,” he finished.

“It is personal,” May agreed. Grant felt a moment of hope. Maybe she’s going to open up to me!

But then she continued, “The Clairvoyant had him tortured. Quinn’s the only person we know who’s connected to all this.” She turned to look at the full length mirror so she could adjust her
infrared goggles.

Grant almost sighed. *So close!* May was incredibly tight-lipped. But maybe he could get information from another direction. “We both know personal urges can adversely affect tactical decisions,” Grant said as he put on his new shirt.

He wondered if May would take the bait he was dangling in front of her. He knew that she believed she didn’t have personal urges but he was pretty certain she was in denial. Of course she had them. Everyone does. And he’d learned through therapy that denying those urges was much worse than freely expressing them. Denial could bring you to your knees. Grant knew that first-hand.

“That’s why I don’t have any. You should do the same.” Since she wasn’t looking at him, he was free to roll his eyes.

A year ago, he would have nodded in agreement and thought, *Whatever helps you sleep at night.* But now he knew that denial wasn’t a sleep aid as it tended to interrupt your sleep through insomnia and nightmares. And he imagined that denial was why the Cavalry was riding a desk for months after her traumatic experience. May’s time on the Bus had helped her come out of her emotional stupor, he was sure of it. She was becoming warmer towards the team and that was probably because she was letting some of those old feelings back in and remembering who she had been before The Incident. So, instead of being the cold fish she was when the team first got together, her caring nature came through, especially where Coulson was concerned. Grant believed that she was affected by him too; she just didn’t wish to believe herself to be involved even though she was. Maybe he should push her a little on this.

“Really?” he said a bit mockingly with a smile to lessen the bite. “You think Coulson will take that excuse if he finds out about us?” He kept buttoning his shirt, watching May to see the minute changes of expression he knew to search for whenever he wanted to know her feelings. She seemed calm but it was difficult to tell since she’d put on her dark goggles.

“What?? May turned to the window, pushed aside the blinds and opened it.

Grant stopped what he was doing. “Wait. You told him?”

“Yep,” May answered carelessly as she climbed out of the window.

When did she tell him and why am I just now being told about it?* For a moment, Grant felt a multitude of emotions: fear, resentment, relief, betrayal. He allowed himself one minute of feelings, then he ruthlessly shut them down. This could be a problem but it wasn’t one he was going to worry about right now because he had a job to do. So Grant looked into the mirror and focused on ensuring that his train porter uniform was perfect. Anything out of the ordinary would call attention to himself, the kiss of death for a spy. He put the remote device in his inside suit pocket and headed out into the corridor.

He started going towards the dining car but was almost immediately waved down by a blonde woman asking him in Italian for help with her luggage. Grant did his best to get out of it but ended up agreeing to help just to be done with her. However, the blonde woman ended up being way more of a complication than he’d anticipated. She clearly was an operative for Quinn and attacked Grant the moment he entered her compartment.

Fortunately, his good hearing and finely honed sense of danger gave him an advantage and she didn’t get the drop on him. Instead, the woman and another male operative both did their best to kill him (she succeeded in slashing his arm with a knife) but Grant eventually put them both out of
commission. Once the fight was over, he touched his comms unit again on the vain hope that somebody could hear him.

“Cybertek knew we were here,” he said and then leveled a vicious kick at the man who had gotten back up. The man dropped back to the floor and didn’t move again. “Anyone copy?” Grant asked in frustration. Nothing. “Damn it.”

Grant went back into the corridor and checked on his slashed sleeve. There was definitely blood, so people would notice. He placed his hand strategically over the wound and entered the passenger compartment. Jemma was sitting in her seat, alone.

He bent over her. “We’ve been made,” he told her urgently. “Comms are down. Where’s Coulson?”

Jemma looked shocked. She probably didn’t prepare for this. “He went to the dining car to find the package,” she told him quietly. “You’ve been hurt,” she said, reaching for his arm, “Let me take a look.” Grant appreciated her care for him but he needed to get her out of harm’s way.

“No now. Go to the luggage car,” he told her in a low tone. As he saw her scared face, he knew this was the right decision. “Lock yourself in with Fitz and Skye. Don’t come out until I get you. I’m gonna get Coulson.” Grant felt deep misgivings as he watched her run down the aisle (I knew this mission was a bad idea!) and started to go in the opposite direction when three security guys, including the head of security, stood and faced him as one. This is trouble! He turned and moved quickly away from them. They followed. Once he was clear of the passengers, he started running full out.

Grant ran into the empty dining car and saw Coulson standing near the back. “Ward!” he called, clearly surprised to see him.

“We’ve been made,” Grant warned him. Two security guys ran into the car after him. He saw that the head of security had something small and oblong in his hand. “Grenade! Coulson, we’ve got to jump!”

The two of them ran out of the open back door and jumped out onto the ground. Grant hit the ground hard and rolled, hoping that he hadn’t broken anything. He looked up just in time to see the security guy throw something at them. The device exploded and then the train just disappeared. Grant immediately got to his feet and ran over to the train tracks to see if the train had just traveled out of his immediate view. No. It was gone. What the hell?

“The train…It just…” he said.

“Yep. Vanished,” Coulson confirmed. Grant was glad he was there, if only so he wouldn’t feel like he was going crazy. “Which, I might add: not easy.”

“I told Simmons I’d come back for them,” he told Coulson. Grant didn’t want to acknowledge the heavy weight that was in his stomach at the idea of FitzSimmons and Skye on the train without him there to protect them.

Coulson seemed to understand. “May’s there. They’ll be OK,” he assured him.

Grant nodded and, for a few lovely seconds, felt better. But then he spied her infrared goggles and knew that she had gotten off the train with them. “No, she’s not,” he said, walking quickly over to where they were lying on the ground. He bent down to examine them, picked them up and showed them to Coulson, trying to quash the panic he was feeling at the thought of the most helpless
members of his team at risk. *And what the hell happened to May?*

Coulson paused for a moment and then pulled out his phone. “Is your phone working?” he asked Grant.

“No,” Grant said after looking at his. His tactical brain whirred and he remembered that they had a comms problem back on the train. “Cybertek must have taken out our electronics.”

Coulson picked up a device from the ground and wrapped it in his handkerchief. “Not a grenade, exactly,” he said wryly. “Might be some kind of cloaking mechanism.”

“Maybe it created some kind of portal,” Grant suggested, “jumped the train there.” He realized how stupid that sounded but, given his job, it was a real possibility. And Coulson clearly took it as such.

“Oh, let’s hope not,” Coulson replied. “I can’t deal with Asgard today.”

If the situation hadn’t been so dire, Grant would have laughed. He’d always appreciated Coulson’s dry sense of humor. It was so different from Garrett’s boisterous, mean-spirited, and egocentric wit. Coulson’s style was to invite people to laugh with him but, if they didn’t, it wasn’t a big deal. Garrett’s approach forced people to laugh because, if they didn’t, trouble was coming. That made his humor something to dread rather than enjoy.

“Cybertek knew we were coming,” Grant said in disbelief. “How?” If Garrett had listening devices on the Bus, he was so screwed.

“Could have been the Clairvoyant,” Coulson said. Grant devoutly hoped that wasn’t true and, quite honestly, he doubted that it was. Garrett’s way of doing things wasn’t usually that sneaky; he was a show-off. So, there had to be another explanation.

Both men turned as they heard and saw two cars driving straight toward them. “We’ve got to get back to the plane. Come on!” Coulson said as they ran into the foliage lining the tracks. Neither bothered to look back to see what the people in the cars would do once they stopped.

Once they got back to the Bus, they went directly to Mission Control and had a brief video conversation with Russo, the head of Italian security. He too had been compromised and reported that most of his men were dead. Coulson gave him the coordinates to the Bus and he told them he was on his way. Coulson gave Grant the grenade device and asked him to try and find out what it did.

Grant almost sighed. This definitely wasn’t his thing but he gamely took it to FitzSimmons’ holo-table and tried to figure it out. He did manage to find the On switch but after a while, all Grant knew was one thing: he was extremely grateful that neither FitzSimmons nor Skye were there because they would have been laughing their asses off at his inept attempts.

Coulson came in and tried to help. He didn’t have better luck and, after sufficiently embarrassing themselves, they both agreed to upload the specs of the device to HQ instead. While they had a few minutes, Grant figured that now was as good a time as any to talk with Coulson. After all, it was just the two of them.

“Oh. Uh. Sir?” Grant started, hating his life when Coulson turned to look at him. *How did I get here?* “This probably isn’t the best time, but what May told you…I would have preferred it to stay between me and her,” he finished quietly. Was that ever the truth! Now that he had a little time to be reflective, Grant realized that he was angry with May for telling Coulson without consulting him
first. Shouldn’t that have been a joint decision? Once again, he had been left out.

“Well, it,” Coulson said with a significant pause after the word it. *(If he’s trying to embarrass me, then mission accomplished)* “is happening on my Bus, amongst members of my team.”

“No,” Grant hastened to assure him, “we’ve never…done…it’s never happened on the Bus, Sir.” He did his best to maintain eye contact with Coulson but man, was it ever difficult. Grant had never talked much about sex with anyone. SHIELD agents rarely brought it up and Hydra agents liked to talk dirty, so Grant stayed away.

“You want to do this now? OK,” Coulson said. Grant nodded. Not really.

“What you’re doing is against protocol, so if you endanger an operation or if anyone gets hurt,” Grant looked down, “I’ll reassign you to Barrow, Alaska and you’ll spend the rest of your years pulling the night shift guarding Bionsky’s cryo-cell. Am I clear?”

Grant said nothing, his facial expression as blank as he could get it. He didn’t like having to talk about his sexual relationship with Coulson, particularly since he knew how close he was with May. But she had backed Grant into a corner by telling Coulson about them, so he had to bring it up. He also was annoyed by Coulson’s response to him because he was pretty positive – especially given May’s blasé attitude about it – that she hadn’t gotten the Barrow, Alaska threat. How fair is that? It wasn’t like he had been the one to initiate their relationship.

And then, Coulson thought he was so powerful. There was no way that an agent as skilled and valued as Grant would ever languish in Alaska, not unless he’d really screwed up. And although he’d never checked the manual, he suspected that having sex with a fellow agent was pretty far down on the list of transgressions. Now, working for Hydra might do it but Coulson didn’t know about that. So, most of Coulson’s speech was just hyperbole and possibly hurt feelings. Whatever. Not for the first time, he wondered just why it was that Coulson seemed to want to take care of everyone else on the Bus but him.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Coulson continued. “And if it’s really just sex, Ward, you should get more comfortable using the word.”

Grant looked down. Thanks, Dad, he thought resentfully but he had a point. This was another example of just how much he had lost by being in the woods during his teenage years. Grant hadn’t ever had friends, a parental figure or even a girlfriend to help him get comfortable with talking about sex. He’d have to work on that.

Both men looked up as they heard a truck pull up in front of the Bus. Russo had arrived. They left the Lab and went to meet him as he got out of his vehicle.

“Agent Coulson, it’s going to be all right,” he called to him. “We found your people. The train, it’s…” He stopped speaking suddenly as May came out of nowhere and threw a knife into his back. Blood dripped out of Russo’s mouth as he fell to the ground, a pained expression on his face. Grant glimpsed May standing behind him, looking both murderous and beaten up. What in the hell happened and where are our people?

“Wheels up in five,” she gritted out.

Grant shook off his confusion. “You OK?” he asked her with some urgency as he bent down to check on Russo. May really looked awful. Clearly, something had gone horribly wrong. “You were on the train when it disappeared.”

“May, Russo was…” Coulson started as she silently marched by him. “Explain yourself, please.”
She stopped. Grant stood up and joined Coulson. May switched her gaze from Coulson to him and then back again. “The train didn’t disappear. Russo sold us out.” She looked at Grant again, “Get the plane ready. I need a shower,” she said as she resumed walking into the bowels of the Bus.

Grant followed her. “You’re hurt,” he told her. “Let me stitch you up.” This was something he could do for her and he wanted to do it. He was feeling out of sorts. He was angry, embarrassed, worried and scared. Being able to do something about one of those emotions would soothe him.

“I said get the plane ready,” May all but shouted at him, not even slowing her stride. Grant got the message and stopped following her. OK. He didn’t understand why she seemed so angry at him, why she wouldn’t let him help. But if she wasn’t going to let him help her physically, the least he could do was help her professionally.

Grant quickly got the plane ready to go, then went to take his own shower and change clothes. Wearing his usual black tactical clothes felt good, comfortable, after the ridiculous porter’s uniform. After he was done changing, he monitored communications. When he got a communique from SHIELD, he tracked down Coulson and found him helping May in the Lab. Coulson was only smearing medicine on her wound and gently putting her tank top back in place but Grant felt like he was interrupting something incredibly personal. Hell, when he and May had been having sex, it hadn’t felt that intimate. So even when he thought he had something just for him, it wasn’t all it could be. Of course. Left out again.

Grant felt a moment of hurt but then tried to shake it off. He knew that May and Coulson had a history together – what that history was, he wasn’t truly certain – and that she had been angry and was lashing out earlier. He also was aware that he had deeper feelings for Skye, so he had no reason to get upset. However, he’d still hoped that, regardless of their physical interactions, at least he and May were friends. Maybe not. Or maybe Coulson and May were just better ones. That might explain Coulson’s irritation at Grant for having sex with her.

He came gingerly into the Lab. “We need to reroute the plane,” he told them quietly. Although May’s back was to him, he saw her freeze at the sound of his voice. Grant moved forward to where she could see him if she turned but she steadfastly refused to look at him. Clearly, things were much more personal than either one of them wanted. “We just got word from SHIELD that the train stopped suddenly in the Italian countryside.”


“We’ll find out soon. I’ll set the coordinates,” Grant replied. “Touchdown in 10.”

May finally moved. “I’ll come help,” she said.

“I got it,” Grant told her in a rougher voice than he would have liked as he left the room. He really didn’t want to mess with this right now, especially with as worried as he was about FitzSimmons and Skye.

The train turned out to be a roller coaster ride as they first thought they had no information on the rest of the team (down) but then found Simmons in the luggage compartment (up). She didn’t have any idea where Fitz and Skye were (down) but then the tracker Grant remembered to bring along started buzzing (up). “We’ve got a tracker activated, Sir!” he reported gleefully. Surely this meant that Fitz and Skye were alive and trying to let them know where they were. The four of them immediately ran out to the truck to follow the signal.

They raced through the Italian countryside at breakneck speed – Grant wasn’t sure he’d ever seen May drive so fast – until they arrived at a huge villa. The four of them got out of the truck and
carefully crept up to the gigantic house. Grant only had time to notice Fitz lying underneath one of the many cars when a man’s body flew out of the house windows and landed next to Fitz. The engineer slowly crawled out from under the vehicle and looked toward the house as gunshots went off.

*What in the hell is he doing?* Fitz had absolutely no common sense. He flinched at the sounds of gunfire but, for some reason, started running toward the house, no tactical awareness at all. When they got back to the Bus, Grant was going to have a firm talk with Fitz about combat situations. He sighed as he shot the man who was going to cross off Fitz a moment before it happened.

Coulson and Jemma raced into view. “Where’s Skye?” Coulson asked urgently while Jemma put her hand on Fitz’s shoulder.

“She, she didn’t want to let Quinn get away,” Fitz replied, breathing shakily.

Coulson turned to give Grant a significant look. Grant nodded and ran off to find Skye. *What was she thinking?* When he found her, he was going to give her so many punishment push-ups and pull-ups that she would hate him for weeks. Maybe he’d add a third daily training session too. Then she wouldn’t have the time or the energy to pull these ridiculous shenanigans.

Grant tried to find a soft entrance into the house but, finding none, just decided the hell with it. He returned to Coulson and they quickly agreed on a plan. Grant would burst into the front door, guns blazing, while Coulson would search for Quinn from the side. That’s exactly what they did but it was almost too easy, like it had been planned. Grant started feeling uneasy. Hydra wasn’t usually this lax about security. The guards were so surprised and his shots so accurate that they were all on the floor in no time. As soon as Grant came in, he saw Quinn start walking casually out of the entryway, completely unaffected by his guards dropping, until Coulson stuck a gun against his head. *Good!*

Grant didn’t stick around to watch Coulson interrogate Quinn though. If he had to listen to that guy’s posturing, he wasn’t sure he could control himself. Besides, he had to find Skye and his sense of unease was increasing. *What does Garrett have planned?* He stuck his head in a nearby room and saw Mike Peterson standing in the middle of a ring of bodies. Grant had been informed that Mike was alive but he wasn’t prepared for the damage the explosion had done to his body. But he couldn’t stop to chat. “Where’s Skye?” he demanded.

Mike slowly turned to face him, his expression filled with guilt and said, “Basement.” *Uh oh.*

Grant raced downstairs and rushed into the room at the bottom of the stairs. Skye was lying by the door, the trail of blood behind her a testament to her will to live. She was ghostly pale and the part of her shirt covering her stomach was completely red. There was dried blood around her mouth. Amazingly, she was still conscious and he immediately knelt beside her and gently took her hand.

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“Grant,” she whimpered.

“Oh my god, Skye,” he whispered. He then turned to the door and yelled in a voice that would wake the dead, “Simmons! Get down here, now!”

“Grant,” she sighed, looking into his eyes, her own filling with tears. “I knew you’d come.” It was all he could do to hold it together. He rearranged her body so that he was cradling her in his arms.

“You’re going to be all right, Skye. I’m here now. We’re going to take care of you,” he told her gently, stroking her face. “Just hang on.”
“I thought I could handle it,” she moaned, “but I couldn’t.”

“Don’t worry about that now. Just relax. I’ve got you,” Grant told her, not having any idea of what he should say. He just knew that he couldn’t bear the anguished look on her face.

Skye passed out just as Coulson and Simmons burst through the door. Grant suddenly felt as if he was outside his body, just looking down on the situation instead of participating in it. He heard himself say, “She’s been shot,” to Jemma. *I can’t lose Skye!*

Jemma knelt down beside him. “You’re keeping her upright, good.” She bent her head, examining her as best she could, then she looked up, her eyes wild. “Uh, she’s lost too much blood. I don’t…” Grant watched Jemma as she saw a chamber next to the wall and her expression hardened. “Put her in there!” she ordered.

All of a sudden, he was back in his own body, determined to protect Skye. “Do you even know what that thing is?” he asked Jemma frantically. He wasn’t going to do anything that would hurt Skye any further.

“It’s a hyperbaric chamber and I said put her in there now!” Jemma said firmly.

“Oh,” Grant heard May say. *When did she and Fitz arrive?* Grant stood up slowly with Skye in his arms, determined not to jostle her any more than he had to. She felt like she weighed nothing and, for some reason, that thought almost broke him. *I can’t lose Skye!*

Grant gently laid her on the table and Jemma slid it into the chamber. “I need to get her temperature down, Fitz!”

“Yeah, I got it. I got it,” Fitz replied, moving around to get something.

Grant had no idea what was going on. All he knew was that Skye’s face was incredibly still underneath the glass. He watched as May and Coulson shut the chamber door and heard the sound of air hissing but he couldn’t focus on what it all meant. For the first time in his life, his tactical brain wasn’t working. He couldn’t think straight.

He heard the sound of electronics beeping and, as if from a great distance, heard Fitz say, “Temperature dropping,” and Jemma confirm, “Pressure stabilizing.” The whole team was gathered around Skye’s chamber.

“Is it working?” May demanded. Silence.

“Is it working?” Coulson yelled. There was still silence as everyone focused on Skye.

Grant looked around at the faces frantically. He zeroed in on Jemma, whose hands were stained red with Skye’s blood. He probably had some on his too but he continued to stare at hers.

Jemma didn’t notice his attention since she was consumed with monitoring Skye. Finally, she said, “For now,” and Grant felt himself take his first deep breath since he found Skye on the floor. “We need to get her back to the Bus. I have better equipment there and can determine her needs,” Jemma continued.

“You tell us what you need us to do and we’ll do it,” Grant said. He didn’t care if he was overstepping his authority. This was Skye and he would move heaven and earth to heal her. As he gazed around the chamber at the faces of the rest of the team, he knew they were thinking the same thing. At least he wasn’t alone in this.
A short while later, they were standing in the Lab. Grant leaned on the Lab door, his arms crossed, as FitzSimmons and Coulson crowded around Skye’s chamber with May standing a bit behind them, probably keeping watch on the monitor showing Ian Quinn in the Cage. Grant couldn’t stand to be there and see her looking so still. *I can’t lose Skye!*

He listened intently as Jemma robotically explained the situation. “Her core temperature’s hovering around 44 degrees Fahrenheit. If we don’t bring her back up to temp in the next few hours, she could sustain permanent brain damage. We need to get her to a medical facility and fast. Until then, I’ll do everything I can to keep her alive. Excuse me.”

Grant watched almost in a panic as she left the room. Ever since Jemma had taken over Skye’s care, he’d been fixated on her face, almost as if the sight of her was sustaining him. With her gone, he didn’t know what to do. With no more noise to concentrate on, all he could hear was Skye saying, “Grant, I’d knew you’d come.”

He watched Coulson hover over the chamber and Grant glared as long as he could stand it. Then he stalked angrily out into the cargo hold, feeling completely inadequate and not knowing what to do with his pent-up rage. If he didn’t do something, he might explode. He saw the SUV and slammed his fist onto the hood. Pain immediately exploded into his body but Grant welcomed it because it gave him something else to focus on besides his swirling, impotent emotions. *Garrett had her shot! I couldn’t protect her! What will I do if she dies? I can’t lose Skye!* He grabbed hold of the SUV’s rail and held on with everything he had to keep from going crazy.

Almost instantly, May was there, placing her hand on his arm, trying to give him the comfort she’d refused to allow him to give her. “It’s not your fault,” she told him firmly. She slowly but gently threaded her fingers through his and he let her. He breathed in deeply. This helped.

He looked down at their joined hands and flashed back to him holding Skye’s hand as she lay in his arms. May’s hand was warm where Skye’s had been so very cold. “She never should have gone in there alone,” he told May.

And she shouldn’t have. If he had known what Coulson was planning beforehand, Grant could have come up with a better tactical strategy. If Garrett had clued him in on his reasons for targeting Skye, Grant could have talked him out of it. If Skye had just waited for him to go in with her, he could have taken out Quinn and prevented her from getting shot. If he hadn’t been left out at every turn, this wouldn’t have happened!

“Blaming yourself won’t help her,” May replied.

“I’m not blaming myself,” Grant told her.

And he wasn’t. The fault for Skye’s injuries rested squarely on the shoulders of Coulson and Garrett. If Coulson hadn’t infected Skye with his need for vengeance, she wouldn’t have felt like she had to do anything, including risk her own safety, to accomplish the mission. She would have waited with Fitz for the team to arrive and she never would have encountered Quinn.

And if Garrett hadn’t decided that Skye needed to be shot, she never would have been. The possible reasons Garrett might have had for giving the order to shoot her haunted him. What if he, Grant, was the reason Garrett had her shot? What if Garrett somehow realized that Skye held Grant’s heart and that she was an obstacle to complete control over his Golden Boy? Or what if he found out about Grant’s triple status and was punishing him for defecting to SHIELD? The truth was, Grant had no idea why Garrett had Skye shot and wondering about it was literally making him sick.
He watched May digest his statement and look startled. “Ward, this isn’t Coulson’s fault,” she started.

Of course she’ll take his side. May had been a part of Coulson’s plan from the very beginning and the two of them were close friends, much closer than she’d ever allow Grant to be. But, at this moment when his emotions were roiling through him, he just couldn’t take one more challenging thought. He couldn’t be angry with May, not right now, not with the one person who was offering him comfort when he truly needed it. Grant was aware that he would have to reconcile his relationship with May at some point but now was not the time.

He shook his head. “I don’t want to have this conversation with you,” he said, looking straight at her. Then he looked down at their joined hands. “I can’t,” he murmured.

She nodded. “Fine. Just don’t…” May paused and touched his arm. Grant realized that she was struggling for words and he looked over at her. “Don’t do anything you’ll regret,” she finished.

Good advice. He nodded, gently disengaged her hand, and left to go to his bunk. They’d be in Switzerland soon at the SHIELD facility that they hoped would be able to help Skye. He needed to pull it together so that when they arrived he would be prepared to do whatever he would be called upon to do.

Chapter End Notes

After rewatching this episode, I am forced to conclude that Skye was incredibly stupid. What in the world did she hope to accomplish by infiltrating Quinn’s house? She had no tactical objectives, no knowledge of what she was facing, and very little training upon which to rely for her own protection. Her only backup was Fitz and all she had for help was one night-night gun. I think Skye may have gotten cocky after her successful impersonation of May because this was very, very stupid. Why couldn’t they have just disabled the cars and waited outside? And Fitz totally should have known better. I think it was OOC for him to just accept her plan without protest.
Of all the team members, Grant knew that May was going to be the toughest sell and it wasn’t because their relationship had ended badly. No, it was because they’d had a relationship at all. By accepting Grant into her bed, whether she realized it or not, May had let him into her heart, even if it was just a little. She’d enjoyed being with him, she’d believed in him and, worst of all, she’d trusted him. And for someone who had been hurt as badly as she had been, that was huge. Grant realized all that after the Loralei situation but there was nothing he could do right then except regret it. And regret it he did. Damn, caring hurt!

In short order, she’d been hurt by the two people she was closest to on the Bus: Coulson by his inability to get over his anger at May spying on him and Grant by his betrayal. Coulson had hurt her by refusing to believe in her essential goodness and loyalty. Grant had hurt her by throwing her loyalty and caring back in her face. So the two of them dealt May a double whammy and, with the Hydra re-emergence as icing on the cake, she had to be emotionally spinning. May was a good person. She was tough, loyal, funny, smart, and cared fiercely for others. She didn’t deserve this.

As a result, Grant had been dreading encountering May, more so than any other member of the team. He knew that FitzSimmons’ and Skye’s desperate desire to believe in him would work in his favor, so while his conversations with them would be challenging, they were doable. And they had been. Grant suspected that Coulson would be a little tougher but that he too would want to believe in Grant. But May was different. She’d been so hurt by the way they’d broken up and his betrayal of SHIELD that it was likely she wouldn’t listen to anything he had to say. She wouldn’t want to believe him because the risk in doing so was way too great. So when May attacked him, Grant knew he was in trouble. And he had no idea how to get out of it.

That was why he immediately cursed himself for his weak, “We need to talk,” response to her attack. That wasn’t even going to come close to cutting it.

Sure enough, May’s response to his plea was to growl, “No talking,” as she kicked him through the door of a room that was under construction. Then she started pummeling him. Grant quickly found himself at a deep disadvantage because he wasn’t trying to fight her. He was trying to avoid her and that was much more difficult, especially for him. He wasn’t used to being passive in a fight; he was used to winning. However, he found himself with a major dilemma. If he wanted May to listen to what he had to say, he had to get her to quit fighting him. But if he started fighting back against her, she wouldn’t believe that he was on her side. So, all he could do was try to tire her out without getting too injured himself. **Awesome.**

May got on top of him and was punching him, so he finally headbutted her and threw her over his shoulder. She immediately leapt to her feet and ran over to the table saw. **Table saw? Wow! She really is pissed off!** He came up behind her and swept her feet out from underneath her. When she landed on the floor, he got on top of her and tried to pin her down, no easy task since she was squirming like an eel, using her legs and head to try and get him off her body.

“We really need to talk, Melinda!” Grant said. She stopped resisting for a moment when he said her first name but then started again. “Things aren’t what they seem.”

May finally succeeded in pushing him off of her and backed away, trying to catch her breath. “Oh? Are you talking about that triple nonsense again? I’m not Skye or FitzSimmons. I don’t believe in
fairy tales,” she said with a sneer. Then she ran straight at him.

Grant guessed May’s intention: she was going to try and kick him through the makeshift door behind him. He hesitated, letting her get close enough to him that her momentum would keep her going and then he leapt out of the way. She fell through the door and rolled upon impact. Grant positioned himself just slightly out of her reach, close enough so that he would be ready for whatever she chose to do but not so close that he seemed threatening. Surely she would soon be able to tell that he wasn’t trying to hurt her.

May once again leapt to her feet and came at him with a spinning kick. He leaned back out of the way and then shoved her to the side after he blocked her sideways punch. Grant could tell that she was waiting for him to initiate a punch or a kick and was getting irritated that he wouldn’t. May finally punched him in the ribcage and immediately dropped to the floor to try and sweep his legs out from under him. Grant anticipated the move and jumped back to his right so that he easily avoided her attempt. He thought of the sparring session in which she had tried that maneuver and it ended with him on the mat. He smiled briefly. How mad would she be if she realized that she was the one who taught me not to favor my left?

Grant took the advantage of her being closer to the floor to knock her on her back and pin her with his body again. “Melinda, I need for you to listen to what I have to say. Can you do that now?” he asked a glaring May. He risked using her first name again, something that he had almost never done, even when they were at their most intimate with each other. He hoped that would shake her up enough so that she would consider that possibly something was different and she should listen to him.

May stopped trying to throw him off, so he carefully eased away from her. He hoped that would engender some trust between them. To sweeten the pot, he held up his hands in a surrender gesture but still watched her warily. He would like for her to understand what was going on but he also needed to be uninjured in order to face Garrett. Clearly, caution was needed here.

May got up from the floor and stood her ground. “Fine. Talk. But if I don’t like what I hear, I’ll go back to kicking your ass.”

A part of Grant really wanted to snark at her by saying, You haven’t done a good job of that so far and I wasn’t even trying! but he didn’t. He wasn’t used to not being on the winning side and, quite frankly, this rankled a bit. But now was not the time to antagonize her, so he stayed quiet. He put down his hands and moved a bit closer to May. This was a conversation that needed to be conducted in softer voices. Yelling would make it seem more hostile.

“Thank you. I don’t blame you for not believing me but I truly am a triple. I was Hydra but when I saw how bad they truly were, I went to Maria Hill. She and Fury decided to let me atone for my sins by being a triple agent, so I’ve been one since before joining Coulson’s team. I realize that I’ve done some awful things to keep my cover. That’s the job. But I have always tried to protect the team.”

He decided that talking about their relationship right now wouldn’t be the wisest move. He first had to get her to trust him, even if it was just a little. Grant watched carefully as May digested what he said. He couldn’t let down his guard with her even for a moment; she was The Cavalry after all. But he thought he saw her relax her stance just a little.

“If you’ve always protected the team, then where are FitzSimmons?” she asked in a hard voice.

“I got them off the plane and they’re safe,” Grant replied.
She scoffed a bit. “How can I even possibly believe that you’re telling the truth?”

Grant nodded to acknowledge her point. If he was in her position, he wouldn’t believe him either. “You can’t. You’ll be able to talk with them later but all I can tell you right now is that I found a way to get them off the plane and Fury picked them up. They’re fine.”

“Wait! Fury’s alive?” May asked incredulously. Grant had forgotten that this wasn’t common knowledge.

“Yes,” he replied, smiling slightly at May. “Like us, he’s pretty hard to kill. And he’s here. The last I saw him, he was on his way to find Garrett. That’s where I was headed when you stopped me. Fury promised me that I could be the one to take Garrett down.”


“Because he and I have unfinished business,” Grant said in an angry tone.

May nodded and looked thoughtful. “So that’s why Fury insisted that you be the Specialist chosen for the team?”

“Yes. John wanted information on Coulson’s resurrection and Fury needed information about John’s plans.”

“And that’s why you used an ICER on Hand and let me walk away from Providence Base?”

“Yes.”

“And that explains why you had such bad aim when Coulson and Skye were escaping the Bus?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t Maria tell us about you?” May asked. It was a good question and, if he was honest, Grant was a bit put out that Maria didn’t tell them. It had made his job that much harder.

“I don’t know but my guess is that she was under orders to protect my cover. Until Fury got here, I still had to make John think I was working for him,” Grant explained.

He saw the beginnings of a smile on her face but then she frowned and shook her head. “None of this makes any difference, Ward. You still could be working for Hydra and are trying to throw me off track. Or you could be playing both sides against the middle.”

Good point. Grant felt a sense of hopelessness creep in because what May was saying was certainly plausible. In fact, if he was working for Hydra, making his SHIELD colleagues believe he was still on their side would be a smart play. That way he could align himself with whichever group won. So, even though Grant knew that he was working for SHIELD, he had no idea of how to convince May of that. Even if he showed her the bodies of the Hydra agents he’d just killed, there was no way to prove that he was the one who killed them. Perhaps honesty was the best policy in this situation.

“You’re right. Both of those scenarios are possible but they aren’t what I’m doing. I don’t know what else I can tell you to make you believe me other than ask you to go with me to see Fury. He’ll tell you that what I’ve been saying is the truth,” Grant told her with some sense of urgency. He hoped he wasn’t running out of time because he desperately needed to have it out with Garrett.

May nodded shortly. “Fine. We go find Fury. But you go first and at the first sign of you trying to
double-cross me, I will shoot you.”

Grant paused. “How do I know you won’t just shoot me anyway?” he asked suspiciously.

Normally, he wouldn’t believe her capable of that but, from what he’d seen of her today, she seemed angry enough to do anything. A table saw? He doubted anyone else would elicit that kind of wrath from her. How ironic that one of the things he had taken the most comfort in on the Bus – his relationship with May – may now be his undoing.

If Grant hadn’t had therapy, this would have confirmed for him that caring is a weakness. John was correct that caring made you vulnerable and vulnerability can lead to pain of both the emotional and physical varieties. But therapy helped Grant discover that it was this very vulnerability that allowed people to get to know you and love you. After all, it was Grant’s vulnerability, not his skills, that let his teammates know and care about the real Grant. It was his vulnerability, not his expertise, that led May to open her bed and her heart to him. And yes, while vulnerability was guiding May’s anger right now, if he could convince her to give him a chance, her vulnerability was also what would persuade her to believe his story. Her vulnerability wanted him to be on her side. He just needed to get there.

“You don’t,” she replied.

Grant paused but didn’t see any way around it. He shrugged. “OK. Fair enough.”

This was undoubtedly the best he was going to get from her right now and he really didn’t have the time to keep fighting on the off chance that he could change her mind. Once all of this was over, there were a lot of things that Grant wanted to do but at the top of the list was cussing out Maria Hill. This situation would have been so much easier had his team just known that he was a triple.

May pulled her gun and gestured for Grant to lead the way. He hesitated, pulling up the map of the Cybertek facility in his mind so that he could orient himself. Then he walked toward his left, opened the door, looked cautiously around and entered the hallway. May followed him, holding her gun at her side. She really didn’t trust him. In a way, he supposed it was flattering, that the Cavalry considered him to be such a threat that she wasn’t following her usual policy of just taking a gun if she needed one. And he understood the lack of trust – it was the smart call and, if the situation were reversed, it was exactly what he would do – but it still hurt.

Grant walked quickly down the hall, hoping that they wouldn’t meet anyone else from either SHIELD or Hydra. He didn’t think he had it in him to hold yet another emotionally-laden conversation with his SHIELD colleagues and encountering a Hydra agent would be dangerous. He suspected that his Black Shadow activities had been seen and reported by now, so he was most likely in the unenviable position of being hunted by both SHIELD and Hydra. Consequently, he eased past doorways, glancing inside just long enough to determine that there wasn’t a threat, and then quickly moving on. Fortunately, most of the rooms were empty. He guessed that most of the Cybertek employees left the building at the sound of gunfire and what agents remained were congregating in the main areas.

According to his internal map, they should be getting close to the room with all the machinery where he’d left Garrett. Has it really been less than an hour since I was last there? It felt like it had been weeks. Grant felt his anxiety rise. One way or another, it would soon be over. They came to another intersecting hallway and Grant heard the unmistakable sounds of people fighting. He peeked around the corner and saw Trip engaged in combat with Elsie Carson, a high level Hydra leader. Damn!

Carson was an oddity within the Hydra ranks. She was a female leader amid a sea of male ones and
she was a genuinely nice person, even a bit motherly. Carson took the time to get to know her subordinates and make certain they were well-rewarded financially when they succeeded. Grant could remember several times when she actually brought home-baked treats to agents prior to a mission. As a result, she inspired great loyalty, especially within the lower ranks.

Gazing at the scene before him, Grant felt torn. He wanted to help Trip but he didn’t want to hurt Carson either. Maybe I can do both. Before he could formulate a plan though, he saw a gaggle of Hydra foot soldiers across the hall turn the corner and start advancing on Trip. One raised his gun, aiming at Trip’s head.

No! Almost without thinking, Grant pulled his gun right as he turned the corner. As he did, he felt rather than saw May raise her gun towards him. He immediately rolled into a crouch to avoid her shot, came up on one knee and shot the Hydra agent who was threatening Trip in the head. He flinched as May’s shot grazed the top of his right shoulder. Damn! That hurts! May wasn’t fooling around but at least she wasn’t trying to kill him.

Trip and Carson both looked in Grant’s direction. Trip took the opportunity to dash into the room closest to him to get away from both Carson and the other Hydra agents. Grant risked a look over his shoulder and saw several SHIELD agents come into the hallway to engage Hydra. He could no longer see May. Believing that it was in his best interests to get away from two sets of agents who were most likely both trying to kill him, Grant followed Trip into the room. As he ran, he glimpsed Carson’s look of surprise turn into disappointment. Almost against his will, Grant felt a sense of regret that he couldn’t fight at her side. She was one of the few good things about Hydra and he would miss her.

Trip was taking cover behind a copy machine but had his gun trained on the door. Grant felt a moment’s unease as he ran in and realized that he had no idea what Trip would do. He was irritated that, after all of his hard work, he might get killed over a misunderstanding. I am going to freaking kill Maria Hill! He darted behind a filing cabinet.

“Thanks for the help out there, man,” he heard Trip say over the sound of gunfire. “I guess that triple thing really is true?”

“Believe it or not, it is. I was on my way to finish things with Garrett but I couldn’t let you down,” Grant replied.

“I appreciate it,” Trip said calmly. Grant hadn’t worked with Trip much but he was always amazed at how casual Trip appeared to be, even in tense situations. He seemed like a good guy. Maybe when this was all over, they could find a way to be friends. “Well, I’m going to get back out there,” Trip said as he stood up and headed toward the door.

“Hey!” Grant said as he poked his head around the cabinet to look at Trip. “That woman you were fighting just now?”

“Yeah?”

“Try to take her alive. I think she could be of use to SHIELD,” Grant said.

“No promises,” Trip replied as he looked cautiously into the hallway and then ran out.

Despite his noncommittal response, Grant suspected that Trip would at least try not to kill Carson. Unlike most specialists, Trip didn’t seem like he took killing people lightly. So, asking Trip to spare Carson was the best Grant could do for her. Besides, like him, she was a survivor. He hoped she would be all right.
Grant started to come out from behind the cabinet when three Hydra agents suddenly dashed into the room, every gun pointed right at Grant’s head. “Good to see you, Ward, you piece of shit,” one said.

He sighed. He knew this was it. Given his status as Garrett’s Golden Boy and keeping mostly to himself, Grant wasn’t popular with Hydra agents, especially low-level ones. He knew that they took his aloofness as elitism and were jealous of his skills, so to expect anything less than rough treatment at their hands was foolhardy. Unfortunately, he couldn’t fight his way out of this situation – not with three guns at his head – so he came out with his hands up over his head. The best he could hope for was a quick ending and even that was unlikely.

He was just opening his mouth to say something snarky (he’d be damned if he went out with a whimper) when three shots rang out. As the Hydra agents crumpled to the floor, he saw May standing behind them. What do you know? The Cavalry arrived in the nick of time. Grant smiled a bit and slowly put his hands down. “I take it this means that you believe me?” he asked.

May smirked. “Guess so,” she replied.

Just then, a bullet ricocheted into the room and embedded itself in May’s left calf. Without even a cry of pain, she dropped to the floor. Grant was just starting to go to her when another Hydra agent came into the room. They must know we’re in here. Without hesitating, Grant shot him in the neck and pulled May away from the door. He quickly removed a sock from one of the dead agents and tied it around May’s wound, staunching the flow of blood fairly easily. Thank goodness! It must not have gone that deep. He then helped her get into a sitting position behind a desk so that she had both cover and had a clear line of sight to the doorway.

“I have to go finish things with Garrett,” he said. He trusted that May would take care of anyone else coming through the door. “Are you all right? Can you handle things here?”

May nodded. “Go,” she said, pointing to the door with her head. Grant turned to leave. “And Ward?” He stopped and turned back around. “I’m glad you’re still on our side.”

Grant smiled briefly, hesitated and went back over to her. He knelt next to her so that they were on the same level. He ignored May’s wary look. “Me too. Listen, I want you to know that I wasn’t playing you and I’m grateful for what we had. Once this is all over, I hope we can be friends and colleagues again.”

He watched her face carefully and saw a look of surprise and something else – he couldn’t be sure but he thought it was pleasure – cross her face. Satisfied that they were, if not on the same page than at least in the same book, Grant turned on his heel and ran to the door. He peeked gingerly around the corner and saw that most of the remaining combatants – including Trip and Carson – were engaged in hand-to-hand fights rather than exchanging gunfire. Good. Grant dashed into the hallway and headed in a full out run to the end of it. He had to get to Garrett. Only then would it be over.

Chapter End Notes

I won’t lie: this one was tough. May is such a cipher that getting her voice right was very difficult. I hope I succeeded! I also made their fight a little more one-sided. Despite May’s legendary status, I just don’t see her winning against Grant who, in addition to being bigger and younger, has to be stronger. As with all the other named
Hydra villains, Elsie Carson exists in the MCU. She seems like an interesting character, so I couldn't resist putting her in. And I would have liked to have more Trip but there just wasn't time. I hope you enjoy his brief cameo.
The flight to the SHIELD Trauma Zentrum medical facility in Switzerland seemed interminable. After his outburst to May, Grant had gone to his bunk to shower and change into fresh clothes, ones that weren’t covered in Skye’s blood. But then he returned to the Lab determined to stand guard over her. His anger at Coulson made it difficult to be in the same room as him but since Coulson wasn’t leaving Skye’s side either, it was something he had to bear. Plus, when push came to shove, Grant knew that Garrett and Ian Quinn were the ones he was truly angry with. As foolhardy as Coulson had been with Skye’s safety, there was no way he wanted her to get hurt. So, Grant tolerated Coulson’s presence as best he could.

May’s voice came over the intercom, “We’ll be in Zurich in an hour.”

Coulson looked up from his seat by Skye’s chamber and glanced at Simmons. “I need to change out of these clothes,” he said in a hoarse voice gesturing at his bloody suit. He stood up and looked away as Simmons swallowed hard. “Let me know if there’s a change,” he murmured as he left the Lab.

Grant had been standing off to the side (having just completed his hourly circuit of the cargo hold and Lab) and watched Coulson leave with a feeling of urgency. For what seemed like the millionth time, he heard Skye saying, “Grant, I’d knew you’d come.”

Now!

He glanced over at FitzSimmons who appeared as though they were doing things but were, in actuality, doing absolutely nothing. Even Grant could tell that. He cleared his throat.

“Hey,” he said softly. Both Fitz and Jemma looked up at him, startled by the sound of his voice. Grant hadn’t said one word since his outburst at May hours ago. “Do you think I could have a few minutes alone with Skye? I’ll call you if there’s any change in her condition.”

Fitz immediately nodded and left the room, heading toward his bunk but Jemma hesitated a moment, looking up into Grant’s face. Whatever she saw there must have reassured her because she too nodded and left the Lab.

Grant stared at Skye’s still face and knew that, if anything happened to her, he needed to have told everything he wanted her to hear. He put his hand on the glass above her face and, not for the first time, wished desperately that he could touch her. The words he wanted to say to her should be accompanied by a stroke of her face or a squeeze of her hand. But this would have to do. Surely Skye would understand.

“I’m sorry I was such a jerk to you when you first came onto the Bus,” he began, talking softly. He definitely didn’t want the others to hear. “I’d never felt for anyone what I felt for you, even from the beginning, and I was scared of that. Of you. I didn’t think it mattered how I felt because I doubted anything would ever come of it. Or, even worse, something would and I’d lose you. Because I lose everyone I love.”

Grant heard a small sound and he jerked his head up, looking sharply around the Lab and the cargo hold with the trained eyes of a Specialist. Seeing nothing, he swallowed hard and willed the tears in his eyes to go away. He couldn’t let the others see him lose control. In fact, he shouldn’t be losing control at all. Satisfied that the sound was nothing more than the Bus shifting, he transferred his gaze back to Skye.
“I can’t lose you, Skye. I don’t care what I have to do. I’ll gladly pay any price just to see you smile again or hear you try to get out of doing pull-ups. So, I’ll do my part but you have to do yours too, sweetheart. You need to fight through this and get better. You can do it, I know you can. And if you do, I promise that I will let you know how I feel. If you don’t feel the same way, that’s fine, but at least you’ll know. Just please get better!” Grant’s voice broke slightly and he leaned his forehead against the glass, his eyes closed, wishing there was something else he could do.

He jumped a little when he suddenly felt a hand on his shoulder a minute later (I didn’t even hear anyone coming!), straightened up quickly and looked around to see Fitz standing there. “She’s going to be fine,” Fitz told him.

Grant was almost frightened by the intensity of his desire to believe him. “How do you know?”

“I just do,” Fitz replied. “Skye’s tough. She’ll get through this.”

Grant nodded and sat down hard in the chair Coulson had abandoned, his head in his hands. He didn’t know how much longer he could keep it together. He was almost glad when Coulson breezed back into the Lab a few minutes later and started issuing orders. Although Grant didn’t want to leave Skye, it was a relief to be able to actually do something, even if it was just making arrangements for Skye to be taken to the hospital and preparing the SUV for taking the team to the facility.

Time passed quickly and soon Grant found himself sitting in the hospital’s waiting room with the rest of the team. Originally it was just Grant, May and Fitz in the waiting room as Jemma and Coulson went back with Skye but soon they returned with virtually no news. Jemma sat next to Fitz while Coulson immediately got on the phone. May stood by the windows, looking out silently as they all listened to Coulson begging to speak to Fury.

“Why didn’t I stop her?” Fitz asked in a broken voice. Gone was the man so confident that Skye would be fine. Grant decided that he wanted that Fitz back. Since his own confidence was so shaky, he needed someone else to give him support.

Instead, he saw that Fitz had a grief-stricken expression and tears in his eyes. If he’d had a different life, Grant might have leaned over and put a hand on Fitz’s arm for support. As it was, he contented himself with just thinking about it and wishing, once again, that Skye was there. She was the only one on the team who would have provided warm affection. The rest of them couldn’t. How ironic that it was the orphan girl raised without love who was able to spread it so freely. Even Jemma just sat beside Fitz without touching him.

“I could have,” Fitz continued forlornly.

“As if you could stop Skye doing anything she’s set her mind to,” Jemma scoffed, not unkindly. Why doesn’t she tell him it’s not his fault!

“I shouldn’t have let her go after Quinn herself!” Fitz said. “What was I thinking?”

Grant could stand it no more. Fitz shouldn’t be berating himself or feeling any kind of guilt. And if no one else was going to tell Fitz it wasn’t his fault, then he was going to. “It’s not your fault,” he told him firmly, giving a dark glance at Coulson’s back. “She shouldn’t have been there. I’m her SO. It’s on me.” And you have no idea how true that statement is.

Although Grant didn’t know the real reason Garrett had Skye shot, all of the reasons he considered had to do with him. Garrett had found out about Grant’s feelings for Skye. He was punishing him for being a triple. Grant hadn’t given him the information he needed in a timely fashion. In every
single circumstance, it was Grant’s failings – his weakness – that led Garrett to target Skye. The idea that it was merely bad timing on Skye’s part or that Quinn was a psychopath didn’t even enter his mind.

As before, May didn’t seem to take it well when Grant blamed himself. “The one to blame is the man who shot her, Ian Quinn. He’s responsible,” May said in an angry and exasperated voice. She’d been silent ever since she and Grant had talked in the cargo hold hours earlier but he could tell that she was about ready to explode. He felt a wave of sadness wash over him as he realized that she was trying to protect him. If he hadn’t realized it earlier, he would have known for sure now that May cared a lot more than people thought she did. And, miracle of all miracles, one of the people The Cavalry truly cared about was him!

It was then that time started to drag. Jemma pulled out her iPad and started reading something on it. May finally sat down and stared at nothing. Coulson continued calling people but got nowhere. Fitz just sat in his corner of the couch looking miserable. Grant allowed himself the luxury of coffee and tried not to think about his guilt, his anger or his fear that he could lose the only woman he’d ever loved. He really tried not to think about what had happened the last time he’d gotten attached.

Instead, he started dreaming about what he would do when all of this was over, when they’d brought Hydra to their knees and he was free to do what he wished. At first, Grant pushed away any version in which Skye played a role but then he decided that, as long as he was dreaming, he might as well dream big. So he imagined all sorts of scenarios, everything from them being SHIELD Agents and running missions together to settling down to domestic bliss.

He smiled internally as he formed a mental image of Skye as a soccer mom. Somehow, he just couldn’t see Skye putting up with all the petty inanities that are so prevalent in suburbia (at least, so it seemed to Grant), so their domestic haven would be on the edge of all the IRS raids, corporate hacks, and cable outages that would be sure to ensue should anyone be so unwise as to cross their family. And they’d definitely have animals: at least two dogs and a cat. The cat could lie on the computer while Skye did her thing while Grant would spend time in the woods with the kids and the dogs. Maybe Skye would even join them on occasion.

However, all his dreams dissolved abruptly when the doctor came into the waiting room looking grim. Coulson immediately went to her while the rest of them stood up and gathered in a circle to hear the news. Everyone, even himself, was moving slowly almost as if they dreaded hearing what the doctor was going to say. Grant examined her face.

“How is she?” Coulson asked.

“Not good,” the doctor replied and then went on to explain how much damage the gunshots had done. Grant felt his heart sinking. He realized that he’d known how bad it was when he held Skye in his arms but he hadn’t allowed himself to acknowledge it. The doctor’s explanation forced him to admit it now. I can’t lose Skye!

Apparently Coulson felt the same way. “What’s next?” he asked urgently.

“We can keep her comfortable but you’ll need to make a decision about whether or not you want to keep her on life support.” Grant felt the beginnings of despair and had no idea what to do with those feelings. It was like he was drowning without any idea of how to swim. He focused on Coulson, his only life preserver, trying to push away the water – the wave of sadness threatening to engulf him – and keep breathing for as long as possible.

“You’re saying there’s nothing to be done?” Coulson asked in disbelief.
The doctor briefly closed her eyes. “I’m saying you need to call her family and get them here as soon as possible,” she replied.

Coulson looked down for a moment and then back up. “We’re her family,” he said.

Grant felt the rightness of this response in his bones. Yes, they were. Jemma and Fitz were her siblings, bickering and laughing the way that normal siblings did. May was her mother, making sure she was safe but never letting her get away with anything. Coulson was her father, teaching her the skills she needed to learn but pushing her to stretch her wings whenever possible. And then there was Grant. He may not have filled a regular familial role but she was his too. She was his soulmate. If she died, he would never be complete.

The doctor looked compassionately at all of them. “In that case, then I’m very sorry,” she said softly. Then she turned and left, no doubt hoping to get away from gloom that enveloped the team. Grant envied her ability to leave their sadness behind. He wished he could too.

May’s face transformed into something incredibly hard and she too left the room. In the tactical part of his brain that was still working, Grant thought, Quinn. But he was too overwhelmed by emotion to consciously process what that meant. Coulson looked around helplessly. FitzSimmons sat down on the couch, as far apart from each other as they could get. Grant became aware that his legs would no longer support his weight, so he sat down on the arm of the chair. I can’t lose Skye! What will I do without her?

Coulson bent down, as though he was going to get sick, then he straightened back up. He looked over at Grant, “Where did May go?”

Grant grasped at that thought like a dying man with his last gasp of air. If he could focus on what was going on with May, he wouldn’t have to think about Skye dying. He stood up. “I imagine she’s going back to the Bus to take care of Quinn. That’s what I would do,” he said.

“Then we need to get there. Fast,” Coulson replied. He and Grant both ran out of the room, not even bothering to speak to FitzSimmons.

Sure enough, May was whaling away on Quinn (Good!) when they opened the door to the Cage. Coulson made her stop but Grant just stood there, amazed, in the doorway. He’d never seen May in a rage before and it was truly a sight to behold. Even May’s battle in the church all those months ago wasn’t anything like this! The woman was as fierce of a warrior as he’d ever seen and, in her pounding on Quinn, he sensed the shadow of the Berserker staff.

He wondered why it was that he, the man who was losing the only woman he would ever love, was just standing there while May was trying to murder Skye’s killer. Why am I not in there helping her? But he knew why. He felt empty, like a shell of his former self. Emotions were draining him of his ability to focus and act. There you go, Garrett. Right again. Caring does make you weak. But he didn’t care. The decision was made. Grant already cared too deeply; there was no going back.

May stalked out of the Cage. No one went in to help Quinn. Instead, they all went to Coulson’s office. “He deserves to die, not her!” May said furiously the second they were all in the room.

“Agreed. But right now, Quinn doesn’t matter,” Coulson replied, sounding like he’d returned to normal. Grant immediately perked up. It was clear to him that Coulson had a plan, that he wasn’t just giving up on Skye. Was it possible that there was something they could do to save her? “Only Skye does and I need you to pilot the plane,” he told May.
May whipped her head around and approached Coulson angrily. “You heard what the doctor said,” she argued. Grant had never seen her so distraught.

Coulson’s expression didn’t change. “She said there was nothing more they could do for her. But there are doctors who brought me back from the dead. If they can do that, I’m betting they can save Skye.”

At that, Grant felt his spirits both lift and sink. Yes! Here it was, the information he’d been so desperately seeking for months now. Coulson was lifting the veil and, if Grant could give Garrett the information he wanted, then everything could move forward and then he, Fury and Hill could start dismantling Hydra piece by piece. But, if Skye getting shot was what moved events forward, then this was exactly what Garrett planned. So was Grant’s professional redemption to come at the cost of his personal hell, of Skye’s life?

Grant didn’t know what to think or what to do. He left Coulson’s office and found himself leaning over the table in the Command Center, the place he’d gone to tell HQ what they were doing. But before he started in on his tasks, he had to get himself together. He took a few slow deep breaths and came to a decision. All he would do right now would be to focus on the task at hand. He would follow Coulson’s orders to obtain the medical treatment Skye needed to survive. After that, he would take the next step. But for now, he simply needed to help the team get to Coulson’s doctors so that they could save Skye.

However, not all was smooth sailing. They had just loaded Skye onto the Bus in her medpod when he took the call from HQ ordering them to hand over Quinn. Grant knew that Coulson would be unhappy at the thought of losing his prisoner but, if Quinn’s transfer was what it took to get SHIELD HQ off their back, then that was what needed to happen. Besides, protocol dictated that justice and punishment had to be delivered by objective parties, not by the people who had been wronged. And since Quinn had wronged the team severely, perhaps it was best that his fate not be in their hands.

Grant considered what would happen as he set off down the hall to inform Coulson of the latest turn of events. Hydra never would have followed the objective justice line of reasoning. Whenever it was in their best interests or if they just didn’t care, they always allowed victims to enact vengeance. They believed that the threat of retaliation from the wronged forced people to comply more easily. Grant had watched this play out many times and often wondered about the wisdom of such a policy. As far as he could tell, all it really did was play into the darker nature of the people handing out the retribution. Clearly, SHIELD felt differently and, given his recent transfer of loyalty to SHIELD, he felt compelled to at least try things their way for a while and see what happened.

He came around the corner and walked down the hallway toward where Coulson was staring at Skye in her medpod. Grant tried not to glance at Skye. “HQ radioed in. They’ve ordered us to turn over Quinn for interrogation and transport to the Fridge,” he told Coulson. “Do you want me to arrange the transfer?”

Coulson looked up from the ground and gazed at Skye. “No,” he said.

Grant could barely look at Skye himself. He didn’t want to see her hooked up to all the wires and breathing equipment. Somehow it had been better when she’d been in the hyperbaric chamber, bloody but breathing on her own, unconscious but still with the semblance of hope.

“Quinn stays in our custody until I say otherwise,” Coulson continued quietly. He still hadn’t moved his gaze from Skye.
“Yes sir,” Grant replied equally as quietly. Standing outside of her medpod was almost like being in church. Loud voices just didn’t seem to be appropriate there; they would be disrespectful. Plus, given Coulson’s expression and his brazen defiance of SHIELD orders, Grant wondered if loud voices would cause him to crack. And he really needed Coulson to stay strong. His strength sometimes felt like it was the only thing keeping everyone together.

Yet Grant felt uneasy enough with Coulson’s insistence on Quinn’s presence on the Bus that he had to speak up. “Are you sure about this, defying a direct order? What are you planning on doing with Quinn anyway?”

“I’m not sure,” Coulson admitted. “All I know is that I can’t let him go until we know for sure that we can save Skye. He has to take responsibility for what he did.”

Grant nodded. He could deal with that for now. “Why are we taking her all the way to Bethesda?” he asked.

“It’s where my file says I was treated after New York,” Coulson answered.

“I understand. But what makes you think the doctors there will be able to do anything different? I know they saved you but…” Grant said urgently. He didn’t know why he was questioning Coulson’s orders, especially since it seemed as though he was finally going to get some answers about how Coulson survived. But why would the doctors in Bethesda be able to do more than the doctors in Switzerland? This seemed like a fool’s errand, moving Skye around in a plane with no one but Jemma able to help her (and even Jemma couldn’t do much), but Grant didn’t have anything better to suggest.

“They did a lot more than save me,” Coulson interrupted and his voice suddenly held a note of passion in it. He finally looked over at Grant. “It’s time you know the truth.”

And so Coulson told Grant about how he had been dead, that the doctors working with the TAHITI protocol had healed his heart and brought him back to life. Since Coulson didn’t really know all that much about what had happened to him, it wasn’t a long conversation but it was long enough for Grant to feel overwhelmed by everything he heard. What kind of power did these doctors have that they could bring people back to life? What could this discovery mean for the human race? He was under no illusions of what this knowledge could mean for Hydra in general and John in particular. But what did this mean for Grant? Should he tell John everything he knew and give him a chance to live? Or would Grant fail at the one mission he’d had for the last 15 years, keeping SHIELD’s secret but breaking John’s heart the way Loki had Coulson’s?

The magnitude of the decision he had to make almost crushed him. For the first time since it happened, Grant envied Skye’s situation. She had no decisions to make. She was just lying there, waiting for others to help her live or allow her to die. No one’s life was in her hands, not even her own. There was an amazing amount of freedom in that. But Grant couldn’t get out of his job that easily. And so he headed to the one place where he could clear his head and find some comfort. He went to the cockpit.

Grant found it somewhat hilarious that May was his best bet for someone who would listen, talk with him and maybe even help him feel better. But FitzSimmons had no conception of the gravity of the decisions that were weighing upon him (plus they had their own problems to deal with in trying to decipher Coulson’s medical file) and Coulson appeared almost ready to break. Skye, of course, was not an option. That left May.

Grant climbed into the copilot’s seat and sighed. May didn’t so much as even glance over at him but kept her eyes steady on the horizon. They had done this hundreds of times and Grant took
comfort in the familiarity of the routine. Then May raised her arm to flip a few switches and he saw the full extent of the damage she’d done to her hands with her attack on Quinn.

“Hurt much?” he asked her.

May glanced at her knuckles and flexed her hand briefly. “I’m fine,” she replied in typical Specialist mode.

Grant sighed again. Per usual, she wasn’t letting him in. They’d had sex numerous times, she’d seen him at an incredibly vulnerable time, and she’d demonstrated caring for her. What else did he have to do to get her to confide in him? To avoid that frustration, Grant decided to change the subject. “Coulson told me how long he was dead,” he said, looking over at her. May’s expression didn’t appear to change but he thought he saw the tiniest bit of apprehension. “But you already knew that, didn’t you?” May didn’t answer and she clearly wasn’t going to. He decided to change the subject again.

“I saw Skye…in the pod…,” he said trying desperately to keep his voice under control. Despite his best efforts, there was a little catch in his voice, “…machines filtering her blood, breathing for her.” Now he too kept his eyes on the horizon. If he met May’s eyes, if he saw even a hint of sympathy, he would lose it.

“I’m glad he’s doing this,” Grant continued. “Flying halfway around the world, hoping for a second miracle…for Skye.” He hadn’t meant to add that last little part or put emphasis on Skye’s name. No, Grant hadn’t meant to sound bitter, even for a second. Maybe May wouldn’t even catch it. But Grant did feel bitter. His own family wouldn’t walk around the block to save his life. Hell, they were eager to throw it away for him. Then Garrett constantly put Grant’s life in danger, seeming not to care much of the time if he lived or if he died. But then there had been Coulson. Grant had high hopes for Coulson.

Coulson was known throughout SHIELD as a man who cared for his team. Grant saw the truth of that in Coulson’s treatment of everyone but him. Half of the time Coulson didn’t even do him the courtesy of looking at him while he was talking. So, while Grant empathized with Coulson’s agony over Skye’s condition and his determination to do everything in his power to save her, there was a part of him – maybe a bigger part than he would even admit – that wondered if Coulson would do the same for him. If he had been the one shot by Quinn, would Grant be back in Zurich waiting to die alone while the rest of the team jetted off to their next adventure? Or would Skye be the one talking with May about how to save him? Grant honestly didn’t know which scenario would have occurred.

May turned to look at him, her expression softening. *Damn! Looks like she heard me.* “If Coulson thinks there’s a chance in a million to save Skye, to save any of us, he’d take it. He cares about all of us even if it seems like he favors the younger ones,” she responded gently. “People like us, we need people like him. So yeah, it makes sense for him to try and do the impossible. A lot more sense than the alternative,” she finished.

“You mean giving up?” he asked. He appreciated what May was trying to tell him even if he wasn’t certain he believed her.

“Or killing the man responsible,” she said in a hard voice. Grant realized that she regretted her impulsive reaction in beating Quinn. He wished there was some way that she would let him help her like she was trying to help him. But she rarely let him do anything for her.

“I did like seeing you go after Quinn,” he told her, nodding for emphasis. This was the best thing Grant could think of to do and was pleased when May smiled slightly. “You don’t open the blinds
like that very often,” he told her in response. Wasn’t that the truth! He wished that she would let him in, for both of their sakes. He was about to enlarge on that theme when he was interrupted by the radio crackling.

A female voice said, “SHIELD 616, this is Tower Michael Tango. You are in violation of SHIELD Directive 1297. Respond immediately.”

“Disobeying a direct order,” he mused. May looked over at Grant questioningly. “We didn’t hand Quinn over for interrogation.”

“Great,” she replied sarcastically. They both watched as two F-35s flanked the Bus.

“This is SHIELD 616. How do we proceed?” May asked grimly.

“Prepare to be boarded and relinquish command,” the voice told her. Grant and May both looked at each other and he knew they were wondering the same thing: What now?

Grant left the cockpit to inform Coulson of what was going on. “Really?” Coulson asked sarcastically. “All the war and chaos in the world and SHIELD sends a plane after us?”

“Three planes,” Grant corrected him. “A small transport to dock and a pair of F-35s to make sure we hand over Quinn.” As the two of them were walking down the hallway toward Mission Control, they heard the unmistakable sound of another plane latching onto the Bus.

“If they scratched my paint, I’m going to be pissed,” Coulson stated. Grant tried not to laugh. Leave it to Coulson to joke at a time like this.

“I’ll await your orders, Sir,” he told him. Coulson went up the stairs to meet the security team while Grant hung out around the bar and lounge. He felt restless, useless. He tried not to wonder what was going to happen from here. He didn’t have long to contemplate the alternatives though as he soon saw a good-looking black man walk confidently around the corner.

“Agent Grant Ward,” the man said with a smile.

“Trip,” Grant answered with his own smile.

Antoine Triplet had replaced Grant on Garrett’s team when he left to join Coulson. Although Garrett’s team held a few true SHIELD agents, most were Hydra. But while he couldn’t know for certain, Grant was pretty certain that Trip was not. For one thing, there was his family history to consider. Since his grandfather was a Howling Commando, the likelihood of his grandson betraying all he held dear was pretty low. Trip would have been raised on SHIELD for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Secondly, Trip seemed too confident, too whole, to have something that Hydra could exploit. Plus, Garrett seemed frustrated by his inability to get to Trip and for this alone, Grant liked him. Anyone who annoyed Garrett these days was someone Grant appreciated. Plus, he liked to believe that Trip was who Grant would have been had his family been normal and not the sociopaths they turned out to be. The two men shook hands and Trip let out a chuckle.

“Is Garrett upstairs?” Grant asked. This was unusual. Garrett wasn’t someone SHIELD would normally send to escort a prisoner to the Fridge. That was too low level for him. Something was up and Grant suspected that it had to do with Garrett wanting to be nearby to see the results of Skye being shot. Suddenly, he was furious.

“Yeah,” Trip replied. “You know, he still talks about that thousand yard shot you took in Bandung.” Grant thought it was an interesting opening line. Clearly there was some jealousy here, just like there was in Hydra, because of Grant’s Golden Boy status. All of a sudden, his rage
toward Garrett coalesced with his own jealousy toward Trip who was, after all, his own form of Golden Boy within SHIELD.

“It was two thousand,” he corrected watching Trip’s expression change a little. Damn straight! Grant crossed his arms in front of his chest. “So what are you doing here?”

Trip took that moment to look around and broke into another smile. “Man, this is like the Playboy jet,” he said, patting Grant on the arm in admiration. Although he was extremely irritated to be touched, Grant had to hand it to Trip. He made it seem like he was impressed by the plane – and he probably was – but this pose allowed him to touch Grant in a somewhat aggressive fashion without inviting reprisal while also directly ignoring his question. Maybe Garrett was rubbing off on him more than he thought.

“Mmhmm…” Grant responded warily. He was going somewhere with this and Grant would be damned if he would let him get away with it.

“I mean, a guy could get soft bunking in a space like this,” Trip continued walking around in a small circle in order to take it all in.

Grant almost scoffed out loud while he continued to stand in the same place with his arms still crossed. This was getting interesting. Is he actually thinking he can take me just because of the plane? He can’t really think I’ve gotten soft too.

“How did Coulson swing such a sweet ride?” Trip asked casually.

“He died,” Grant answered shortly with a hint of a smile. They were like two dogs sniffing each other.

Trip clasped his hands behind his back. “That’s tight,” he replied seriously. Grant considered the possibility that Trip really didn’t know what was going on. Trip continued, “You want to point me to the box you’re keeping Quinn? HQ ordered Garrett to haul his ass to the Fridge for questioning.” Grant looked down and thought about how he wanted to play this. Before he could answer though, Trip stopped and took a deep breath as something else caught his interest. “Is that a full bar?” he asked Grant with a knowing smile. Man, this guy is good at misdirection.

“You’re welcome to it,” Grant replied pointing over his shoulder at the bar, smiling briefly and walking closer to Trip. “But…uh…Quinn stays put til Coulson says otherwise.” Despite his disagreement with Coulson’s orders regarding Quinn, he definitely didn’t want Garrett to have him. No telling what he’d do with him. Grant positioned himself exactly where he started, with his arms crossed.

“Come on, man,” Trip cajoled, walking over and coming to a stop in front of Grant. “Garrett was your SO too, so you know how this works.”

Yeah, a hell of a lot more than you do. “Why don’t you remind me?” Grant asked somewhat threateningly. He really should get his emotions under control because he probably was going to need Trip on his side eventually but right now he was having trouble containing himself. Grant desperately wanted to not only put him in his place but also show Trip just why it was that Garrett still bragged about him.

“Garrett wants Quinn. It’s my job to make sure Garrett gets what he wants,” Trip said seriously. No, that’s my job; I just don’t want it anymore. “Now where is he?”

“Can’t help you with that,” Grant replied wishing he could mix it up a little with Trip. He was
interested to see what the other guy had going for him. Besides, he was tired of his needling.

Trip paused. “No worries,” he said calmly. “I’ll find Quinn myself. I’m sure he’s tucked between the Jacuzzi and the squash court.” He started to walk off.

Grant grabbed his arm. “Hey.”

Apparently that was exactly what Trip had been waiting for because he immediately swung on Grant who absorbed the blow, slammed Trip into the wall and knee'd him in the stomach. Trip responded with an elbow strike against Grant’s thigh which pushed him back. Trip used Grant’s stumble to try and punch him again. Grant ducked, pushed Trip toward the lounge chairs and hit him with a leaping punch, a move he’d learned from May. Grant quickly had Trip leaning over a chair ready to punch him into submission when, out of the corner of his eye, he saw two men walking down the corridor towards them.

“Agent Ward! Stand down!” he heard Coulson yell from around the corner.

Trip coughed and Grant stood back to let him up. He straightened up as he saw Coulson coming toward him with Garrett following slightly behind. If Grant hadn’t been breathing hard from his fight with Trip, the sight of John smirking at him would have been a lot more difficult to take. As it was, Grant swallowed hard and schooled his face into blankness. He couldn’t let John know his true feelings and that was going to be tough. John had been reading him since he was 15 years old and he was good at it. Trip was now standing beside Grant and massaging his throat resentfully. This day just keeps getting better and better.

“Agent Garrett and I have come to an agreement,” Coulson told them as Garrett looked at the two specialists appraisingly. Grant could have bet a million dollars he knew what John was thinking: his Golden Boy still had it. “He convinced HQ he could interrogate Quinn here on our plane as we continue to Bethesda.”

“Well, I’m a bit of a sweet talker when I need to be,” John said faux modestly glancing at Grant. If that isn’t the truth! And a liar. And a psychopath. “You wouldn’t believe what I could talk this son of a gun into,” he said proudly to Trip and Coulson.

It took every bit of Grant’s willpower to not react badly. It helped that he could hear Skye in his head say, “I just threw up a bit in my mouth.” He smiled fondly and shook his head at the thought, knowing John would think it was because of what he said.

Garrett moved toward him and Grant bit the inside of his cheek so that he wouldn’t move away from him or knock him out. He needed to get himself under control or this was never going to work. He had a job to do! “Good seeing you, son,” John said holding his hand out.

Grant smiled. “You too sir,” he said while shaking his outstretched hand. “And thank you.” Thank you for being here so I can keep an eye on you and report back to Fury and Hill. Thank you for allowing us to get on with the job of saving Skye. And I’ll be sure to thank you later for ordering her shot!

“Saving the girl’s top priority,” John replied with a knowing look at Grant, “and she might know something.” he finished, turning to look at Coulson. Grant had to hand it to him. Garrett was a consummate actor and a high class manipulator. Coulson clearly suspected nothing and the two of them went off down the hall, talking.

Grant watched them go and then turned to Trip. “Sorry about that. I had my orders.”
Trip shook his head and smiled, clearly not as put out as Grant would have been in his situation. *This guy is amazing!* “No worries. That’s the job. But damn, man! Maybe sometime you could show me how to do that jumping strike move you just used on me.”

Grant smiled briefly. “I will. It’s actually something I learned from The Cavalry,” he admitted. This had the triple bonus of making Grant look humble, giving credit where it was due and letting Trip know that his team was nothing to fool around with.

“The Cavalry’s on your team and you live on this plane?” Trip asked in an impressed voice. He smiled wider. “You be sure to let me know if you have an opening.”

Grant felt the smile fall off of his face as he remembered that one of the positions on their team was hovering close to a vacancy. Trip seemed to pick up on this as well because his expression turned serious. “I’m sorry about your teammate. Is there anything I can help with? I do have a bit of medical training.”

Grant shook his head, the sick feeling he’d had ever since Skye had been shot returning now that his adrenaline was gone. “Thanks. We have the best but Jemma might welcome fresh eyes. The medpod’s that way,” he told him, gesturing down the back hallway. Trip nodded and left.

Grant walked up to the front of the Bus, intent upon returning to the cockpit but encountered Garrett and Coulson coming out of the Cage. Coulson excused himself to talk with FitzSimmons, so John turned to Grant. He put his arm around him and said, “Walk with me.”

Grant nodded and made his expression blank again as he tried to keep himself from either screaming at or punching John. *How could he do this?* John occasionally would put his arm around Grant in a fatherly sort of way. Sometimes he did it to express approval but more often than not, the gesture preceded something he knew Grant wouldn’t like. It was during times like those that John’s arm around his shoulders felt like a weight upon his soul. Regardless of John’s intent right now, this clearly was one of those times.

The two walked toward the lounge where Grant and Trip had fought. “This sure is a cushy sort of plane,” John commented, looking around. Grant nodded and said nothing. He had no idea of where John was going with this, so until he did, silence was his best strategy. “I wish Fury would see his way clear to give me one but maybe you have to work with the Avengers to get on the list,” John said genially but Grant wasn’t fooled. John was seething that Fury gave something cool to someone else, yet another slight – and there were many, both real and imagined – that SHIELD forced him to accept.

“This is the type of fine living that could cause people to get soft, forget about the job they’re supposed to be doing, don’t you think?” John asked, looking over at Grant meaningfully.

Now it was Grant’s turn to seethe. So that was it. John thought that Grant’s luxury living quarters caused him not to do his job, to let John down. That also explained Trip’s insistence on the luxury of the plane. Clearly, John had talked him into taking his perspective. John was good at that. And that’s why Trip thought he stood a chance against Grant. As usual, John’s thinking was faulty. *No John, it’s not because I’ve gone soft but because I no longer believe in you.* But he couldn’t let on about his true feelings; he had to maintain his image as John’s sycophant. So he shook his head and looked seriously at Garrett.

“Not really. Some people are equally at home in any environment, hard or soft. Sometimes I even make things tough on myself just so I won’t lose my edge,” he replied, watching John closely. *Is he buying this?* When he saw that John was hovering on the edge of belief, Grant smiled slightly and went in for the kill. “Of course, not everyone is lucky enough to have had a great teacher.”
John sat back and relaxed, a smile on his face. *Bingo!* Ever since Grant had therapy, he’d marveled at how transparent John really was. He never could resist a compliment that seemed sincere, especially not from his Golden Boy. He never suspected that Grant did not include himself in that lucky category.

Grant sat back for a moment too and was relieved to see Coulson walking toward them. “New plan,” he told them. “FitzSimmons discovered that I wasn’t actually treated at Bethesda. So instead we’re going to where I was healed, some place called the Guest House. We’re meeting in the cargo hold in five minutes to prepare for our arrival.”

At the meeting, it was determined that Coulson, Garrett, Grant and Fitz would be the only ones going in. Trip would stay on board to help Jemma ready Skye for whatever needed to happen while May would monitor communications and keep the Bus prepared for take-off should they need to leave in a hurry. May stood listening to Coulson’s speech (“The Guest House is not a SHIELD facility. We don’t know who or what is in there. Be prepared for potential resistance.”) with an unhappy expression but there was nothing she could do. Grant nodded at her as he turned to go. This was it. They would either find something to help Skye or it was the end of the road. He didn’t even want to consider what that would mean.

The Guest House mission turned out to be almost a complete disaster. That “potential resistance” was one hell of an understatement as the Guest House guards refused to let them in despite their pleas for medical assistance and then, once they hacked their way in anyway, almost shot and killed them. The team was forced to kill the guards only to realize that, with both of them dead, they had no idea how to turn off the imminent Semtex explosion. And they couldn’t go out the way they came because the doors were tightly sealed.

“It’s some kind of emergency override,” Fitz explained calmly. Grant had to hand it to him. He’d come a long way from the guy who was freaking out in the cave on their first mission together. “Skye could probably get past it but I can’t hack the panel which means we’re trapped in here.”

The mention of Skye gave Grant a momentary pang. If she were here, they wouldn’t be in such danger. Hell, if she were able to be here, they wouldn’t be here at all. But the specter of Skye still loomed over him. If they couldn’t get something to help her and then get back to the Bus, all this would be for nothing.

Coulson turned to Garrett. “You’re the guy who taught Ward how to disarm nuclear bombs.” John and Grant turned to look at each other. “Figure out a way to get us out of here,” Coulson continued. He turned to Fitz. “Let’s go find the drug.”

Fitz and Coulson ran off down the hall while Grant and John looked at each other again. In that moment, Grant remembered why he had followed him, why he’d idolized and tried to please John. This was the man Grant wanted him to be, the man he thought he was for so long: the mentor who taught him to disarm bombs.

John gave Grant his usual cheery grin. “We’ve been in tighter places,” he assured him. “Let’s get to work.”

Against all odds, Grant found himself getting calmer. They were going to get out of this and everything would work out. He didn’t know if it was divine intervention that made him feel this way (he doubted it) or just the presence of his father figure, the one person who had made his life hell but also gave him someone to hold on to (figuratively not literally, yuck). The two of them started examining the room, looking for a detonator or another way to stop the timer. Finding neither, John suggested that they rig the doors with Semtex to at least give them a way out.
Garrett started placing Semtex around the door. “We’re down to five minutes,” he told Grant. “Go get Phil and that scientist and tell them that time’s up.”

Grant nodded and ran down the hall, trying his best to retrace their steps as quickly as possible. He saw a light flickering behind an open door and ran toward it. Sure enough, he found Coulson and Fitz beside a refrigerated cabinet, reaching in to grab something. Grant felt a moment of relief. If they found something, then maybe they could get there in time to save Skye.

“Time to go. We couldn’t stop it. Four minutes and counting,” he said urgently.

Fitz was lifting something out of a secure container. “Almost there,” Coulson told Grant.

He nodded and started looking around the room. He glanced up. “There’s Semtex right here as well.” The people who secured this place weren’t fooling around. They needed to go.

Fitz clearly hadn’t been paying any attention to him. “This is it – 325!!” he said excitedly. “This is the one we want,” he said, his eyes wide as he showed it to Coulson.

“We got to go. Get it up to Simmons,” Coulson replied.

“Yeah,” Fitz said over his shoulder as he ran toward the entrance.

Coulson looked up and seemed frozen. “Sir,” Grant said to him, trying to shake him out of his reluctance. They had to go!

Coulson didn’t even turn around to address him. “I’ll be right behind you. Go!”

Grant ran back to the entrance where John was busy finishing off placing the explosives and giving Fitz a mini-education about explosives in general. Damn if this mission wasn’t making him re-evaluate John the tiniest bit. This was what he loved about him: treating people like they were important while teaching them what he knew. John finished what he was doing, got up and went around the corner.

“Agent Ward. Would you do the honors?” he asked Grant.

Grant couldn’t help himself. He grinned. This was just like John, giving him the fun job. “Thought you’d never ask,” he replied.

He strode over to their corner, pulled out his gun, cocked it, pointed and fired. The ensuing explosion was minimal but it was enough to crack open the doors far enough for Grant and John to pull it apart and Fitz to slip through, grab his bag and start running.

Grant turned around and looked behind him. Nothing. “Coulson,” he said to John.

John also turned around to look. “Where the hell is he?” he asked. “Phil!” Nothing. John turned to Grant. “Go with Fitz. Make sure that drug gets to the girl.”

What? It wasn’t really like John to take big risks for someone else. What is he up to? “Agent Garrett,” Grant said firmly.

“Go! Save the girl!” John ordered.

Grant was beyond puzzled. He knew, almost without a shadow of a doubt, that Garrett had ordered Quinn to shoot Skye. So to now place his life in jeopardy without getting the payoff of that decision seemed extremely suspect. Is there something he’s hoping to find in here? But Grant
really didn’t have a choice, he had to do what John asked or everything would be for nothing. Besides, he really wanted to get back to Skye.

Grant raced back onto the Bus to see if this was going to do the trick and bring Skye back to him. He told May to get them off the ground before the ground dissolved and hoped that Coulson and Garrett would have enough sense to get out of the facility in time. He watched with trepidation as Jemma injected her with the GH-325 serum. If he could have, Grant would have crossed all his fingers and toes in the hopes that it would work. As it was, he sent a short plea to the universe and continued to watch along with the rest of the team. Soon everyone, even Coulson, Garrett and May, were in the medpod looking at Skye.

At first it seemed to be working as her heart rate went back up from where it had been flatlining but then she started to seize, her heart rate now going through the roof. Grant was almost beside himself. “Stop it,” he told Jemma. “How can we stop it? Skye!” No one seemed to know what to do and Grant felt just as helpless as he had back in the basement when he’d first discovered Skye lying on the floor.

But almost just as quickly as it began, Skye’s heart rate came down and her body relaxed. It seemed as if she was out of whatever woods she had been in. Does this mean that it worked?

“Could someone tell me what we just saw?” Grant asked in confusion.

Oddly enough, it was Trip who answered. “The girl’s a fighter,” he said in admiration. “What was that stuff you just gave her?”

Grant watched as Jemma and Coulson exchanged a panicked glance. There was no way John wasn’t going to see that. The man observed everything.

“I don’t know,” Jemma replied with tears running down her face. “All I know is that it worked.”

“You’re a real miracle worker,” Trip replied and this time it was apparent that his admiration was for Jemma.

Miracle. Yes, that was indeed the word for all of this. Grant didn’t know what was in the drug and he didn’t need to know. All he knew was that it looked like Skye was indeed going to get better and, after that, practically nothing else mattered. He suspected that John had found something in the Guest House but for once, he was content to let it go. If he had, John probably intended to use it for his personal gain and not as a weapon against SHIELD. Grant would report it to Fury and Hill but he wasn’t going to push John on it. So, he let them take Quinn and leave the Bus without mentioning anything to John. Hell, they barely had a goodbye much less anything resembling a conversation.

And so he began another vigil over Skye who, for the first time in days, was breathing on her own and for whom there was once again a future. Grant traded places with Coulson, sitting in her medpod and just watching her breathe, waiting for her to wake up. And as he sat there, he reflected that this vigil was so much better than the last one. He could touch her – hold her hand or brush her hair over her ears – and there wasn’t that constriction over his heart and lungs any longer. This time he knew that things would get better, that soon they would be able to be together if that is what Skye wanted. And this time, there were smiles instead of tears on the faces of his teammates.

Everyone was hopeful about what was to come. After all, they’d been through the worst already. Hadn’t they?
OK, once again, I have to saw major out of character behavior in this episode.
Although I changed this in my version, in canon, Grant questioned Coulson’s decision
to take Skye to Bethesda. That makes no sense because, both as someone who loved
Skye and as a spy, he should have wanted to explore every option available to save
her. Even if you take out his personal feelings, Grant was put on the team specifically
to find out what happened to Coulson. Then when he is finally getting information on
it, he doesn’t want to go? Weird. Anyway, I decided to skip the puzzling behavior and
go with what made sense.
Embracing the Future

Grant walked listlessly down a secure hallway, his arm being held firmly by a bored guard. He’d been in the Juvenile Secure Unit in Plymouth, Massachusetts for two days but this was his first visit from the outside. The visitors were probably his parents, here to tell him what a disappointment he was to them and how next they were going to make his life miserable. If it had been up to Grant, he wouldn’t even meet with them. What was the point?

Yet when he turned the corner and entered the visiting room, it wasn’t his parents but some middle-aged white guy in a turtleneck and leather jacket who stood up and asked, “Grant Ward?” When the guard gave him a little push and Grant shuffled over to him, the man continued, “My name’s John Garrett. The quartermaster at your military school’s an old buddy of mine,” he said with a smile.

As if Grant cared. When Garrett indicated that they should sit down, Grant continued to stare blankly at him and ignored the suggestion. Why bother? This clearly wouldn’t take long. If all the guy wanted to do was to impress Grant with who he knew, then he could just leave and let Grant get back to his brooding. He expected that this Garrett would get insulted or upset and either yell at him or leave in a huff – that’s what most of the adults Grant knew would do in the face of his recalcitrance – but this guy didn’t do that.

Instead, he kind of shrugged and went on talking. “He told me about a pissed off young cadet with off the chart eye-hand coordination who went AWOL, stole a car, drove over a thousand miles home only to try and burn the place down.”

Grant watched Garrett closely, waiting for the censure which was sure to come. He expected Garrett to express outrage over his actions, ask why he was such a screw-up and a disappointment to his wonderful family and question just who did he think he was. And if that was what this guy was going to do, then he could save it.

Grant knew quite well that he was a miserable excuse for a human being but he didn’t regret for one second trying to kill Christian and burn down the Ward family home. When Elizabeth had finally gotten in touch with him at his school and told him what was happening to her and to Thomas at home without him there, he didn’t hesitate. He had to protect his siblings and, given that he was likely to remain so far away, the only solution was to get rid of the problem. And that’s what he tried to do. His only regret was that he didn’t succeed. Grant didn’t even really care that he got caught and ended up in this hellhole. It didn’t matter what happened to him; it never had.

So, when Garrett smiled at him in a friendly fashion and said “I must say, I find a young man like that intriguing,” Grant was shocked. Who was this guy? He was the first person in a long while, perhaps ever, to express approval of Grant. So when Garrett gestured once again to sit at the nearby table, Grant obeyed.

“I’m curious,” Garrett said lightly as he sat down across from Grant. “Did you know your brother was in the house when you set it on fire?” He sipped his coffee, almost as if the answer didn’t mean much to him.

His studied nonchalance didn’t fool Grant for one second. Of course he cared. Maybe this guy would start yelling at him now. “No sir, I did not,” he lied steadily, looking Garrett straight in the eye. Grant had been a practiced liar for years now – he’d had to be to survive – and there was no way he was going to admit his intention to anyone. The only people who knew were the ones who didn’t have to ask.
Garrett put down his coffee and looked searchingly at Grant in an amused way. It couldn’t have been clearer that he didn’t believe him. “I was a pyro as a kid, too. Ended up making a pretty good living at it,” he told him in a proud tone. Grant didn’t say anything. What was this guy’s deal? Was he trying to get him to admit to his crimes? Well it wasn’t going to work.

“I’m here to make you a one-time offer, so listen up,” Garrett continued in a business-like fashion. He wasn’t smiling. “Your family’s lawyer’s gonna be here in about 20 minutes. Not only are your folks pressing charges against you for arson and attempted murder but your older brother’s petitioning the court to have you tried as an adult.”

Grant swallowed hard and looked down. Although he was trying to maintain his usual disinterested expression, for the first time since getting arrested, he was scared. He hadn’t believed that his family would throw him to the wolves; they couldn’t afford the negative publicity. He thought they’d make him stay in here for a few weeks and then return him to his military school, probably after a few beatings for good measure. Or maybe they’d pay extra for the school to physically discipline him. Whatever. He didn’t care.

But with the news that they weren’t going to get him out but would instead try to ensure he stayed in for as long as possible, Grant started feeling the beginnings of panic. Although he was strong enough, he was just one person and couldn’t fight against the gangs of boys he’d seen looking at him hungrily. Without any family support, he wouldn’t be able to financially satisfy the guards who were even now trying to blackmail him for basic privileges because of his name. And his agile mind already hated the enforced inactivity, limited educational resources, and mind-numbing boredom. As such, Grant couldn’t even imagine living in a hell like this for much longer. What would happen if he got convicted? And, with all of his family’s money and the overwhelming evidence against him? That was definitely going to happen. The feeling of being trapped started to close in on him. What could he do?

“Now,” Garrett continued, seemingly oblivious to Grant’s internal turmoil, “you can spend the next few years locked up in a cage blaming mommy and daddy and mean older brother for your problems or you can let me get you out of here and teach you how to be a man.”

Garret stopped talking and looked at Grant who was sitting frozen in terror. Was this guy serious? Could he really help him? It sounded too good to be true! And things that sounded too good to be true usually were.

Garrett leaned forward confidentially. “I work for a secret organization that’s always looking to recruit young men like you,” he explained.

That almost broke the spell Grant felt like he’d been under ever since he sat down at the table. Secret organization? One that wanted him? One that had enough power to take him away from juvie, military school and his family? That sounded ridiculous. Did Christian put this guy up to coming here and making Grant believe he could be helped only to pull it all away in a horrible prank? It sounded just like something he would do. Well, he wasn’t going to fall for it.

Grant smiled a bit, just to show Garrett that he wasn’t worried. “And why should I trust you?” he asked. He expected Garrett to fall all over himself giving reasons. If he did that, then Grant would shut him down, go back to his cell and take his chances. He wasn’t going to give any of them the satisfaction of playing him like a fool.

But once again, Garrett did the unexpected. He merely replied, “You shouldn’t. Don’t trust anybody, ever, especially me.” Garrett’s smile at the end of his statement made Grant’s derisive smirk fall away. Was this guy for real? Illogically, Garrett telling him that he shouldn’t be trusted made Grant believe that he could be.
“Let me be clear,” Garrett continued, not bothered at all by Grant’s stricken expression. “Going with me will be the hardest thing you’ve ever done. But, on the other hand, no one will ever screw with you again.”

It was like Garrett reached into his mind and saw just how huge a temptation that thought was. The idea that no one would ever physically, mentally or emotionally abuse him again? That Grant would no longer be at the mercy of all the bullies who permeated his life? That he could be powerful? Grant had wanted nothing else practically from the time he was born! He casually disregarded the first part of Garrett’s statement, that things would be hard. How hard could it be? He’d already been in military school and survived his family’s torments. After that, he could handle anything!

“Say yes,” Garrett urged. “It’ll be hard but fun,” he said, nodding to emphasize his point. Fun. Wow, that would be a novel experience; he was practically starved for fun. But something still held Grant’s tongue. What if this was all a joke? He was terrified of staying here and letting things be as they were but he was also scared to go with Garrett. He didn’t know anything about this guy or what he was offering!

Garrett looked at his watch. “Ten seconds and I walk out that door,” he told Grant calmly. Grant stared at him, his anxiety shooting through the roof. Garrett seemed to notice his dilemma. He leaned forward again and whispered, “Say yes.”

“Yes.” With that one word, Grant’s whole life changed, starting with that very second. When that “yes,” was barely even uttered, alarms blared and armed men dashed in, yelling for everyone to get on the ground. Grant was startled and looked at Garrett for guidance. Was he supposed to get down on the ground? Make a run for the door? What?

Garrett just drank his coffee and smiled. “I told you it was going to be fun.”

Fun. Sure. That definitely wasn’t the word Grant would use to describe his life since he said “yes” 15 years ago. Disciplined, challenging, lonely, goal-oriented. Those were all words that could accurately define his life but fun? No. Not until he’d joined Coulson’s team. There had been so many times during those 15 years in which he’d wondered what would have happened if he’d said no and stayed in juvie to take his chances with his family and the law. There had been so many times, especially when he started therapy, in which he’d wondered if Garrett had been telling him the truth or questioned why those five years in the woods had been necessary.

In the end, he’d had to conclude that it didn’t matter. Those events had happened, Grant had done the things he’d done, and no amount of questioning or regrets would change any of it. But now, as Grant was once again in a secure facility on his way to meet John Garrett and determine his future, he had a chance to change his destiny. Should he continue saying yes or was it time, at long last, to start saying no?

Grant rounded the corner at the end of the hallway and full-out sprinted until he came to the room where he last left Garrett almost an hour ago. Fury had promised to try and hold him for as long as they could, so hopefully there was still time for him to confront John. Grant stopped and bent down, his hand on the door handle, trying to control his breathing, nausea threatening to overtake him. This was it. This was his chance to tell John how angry he was at what he had turned him into. This was his opportunity to let John know that it was Grant – the boy who once would follow him anywhere, no matter how badly he’d treated him – who brought him down.

He started to pull open the door then hesitated, listening. He heard what sounded like a huge weapon go off (the resonance of it was different, almost metallic, like it was shooting pulses of energy instead of bullets) and bodies hitting the floor. Then a volley of gunshots rang out. Grant
felt panicky. What if he couldn’t ever tell John what he needed him to know? *If I’m ever going to heal and move forward, I need to do this!*

With that thought uppermost in his mind, he silently pulled open the door and gazed in on the scene in front of him. The bodies of supersoldiers littered the floor. Grant couldn’t tell if they were just unconscious or dead. Coulson and Fury were standing on an upper level, an alien-looking weapon on the floor in front of Coulson and a raised gun in Fury’s hand. Garrett was getting up from the floor, seemingly indifferent to the numerous bullet holes in his chest. And there was Mike standing nearby. He didn’t appear to be taking part in what was happening. Yet.

“Fury,” Garrett said almost gleefully. *So, still insane.* “Well, hell. When was the last time anyone saw a tag-team wrestling match with four dead guys?” he asked with a smile.

Despite himself, Grant paused a moment and thought about that. Coulson was the only one who had actually died. The rumors of the deaths of the others had only been greatly exaggerated. Well, he shouldn’t be surprised at John’s hyperbole. He was, after all, a master manipulator and that statement was intended to make them feel at least a little camaraderie or slow them down enough for him to gain the upper hand. *Fat chance.*

Coulson gazed unflinchingly at Garrett. “I only see one dead guy in here,” he said grimly.

That statement also gave Grant pause. Although he’d all but begged Fury to allow him to be the one to kill John, he didn’t know if he could actually do it. Now that John’s demise was possibly imminent, Grant knew that he didn’t really want it. He wanted John locked up and unable to hurt people, especially himself, and he wanted him to pay for his crimes but Grant couldn’t wish him gone forever. Even though he’d been terrible at it, John still had been his mentor, SO and father figure for the last 15 years. That meant something to Grant, even now, even when it probably meant nothing to John and never had.

But whatever was going to happen, he needed to get a move on. Coulson had just made it quite clear that he was ready for the ultimate fight. So, Grant walked further into the room, his gun lowered (clearly guns had no effect on John) and watched all eyes turn towards him.

John’s smile got even wider. “Oh, the power’s all on this side of the room, fellas,” he said to Fury and Coulson delightedly.

Coulson glared at Grant, then turned to Fury and said quietly, “He’s right.”

Fury looked at Coulson. “No he’s not,” he answered. Then he turned to Grant. “As promised, he’s all yours,” he said holstering his gun and waving his hand in an expansive gesture.

Grant ignored Coulson’s look of astonishment and swallowed hard as John turned to him with a puzzled expression. “What’s he talking about, son?”

He faced John directly, all the others in the room just fading away. Grant suddenly wished he’d had more time to prepare a speech. He was sure to mess this up! But then he allowed his anger with John to wash over him. How ironic that he was finally letting his emotions guide him, right in front of the man who tried to teach him for years to have none.

“What he’s talking about is that I’ve been a triple for SHIELD for months,” Grant told John angrily. “Hydra disgusts me, you disgust me, and, thanks to me and the intel I gave Fury, all your hopes and dreams, everything you’ve been working for, will amount to nothing! I’m no longer working for you and I’m sure as hell not your son!”
Grant had never seen John speechless before. No matter what happened, John always had a smarmy smile and a smart comeback. But not this time. John’s mouth gaped open and he looked almost like he wasn’t grasping what Grant had said. Clearly, the idea of Grant’s betrayal was one he’d never considered. If the situation hadn’t been so deadly serious, it would have been funny. And sad. And infuriating. He never believed I’d think for myself!

Grant walked closer to John knowing that this was a dangerous move – John could pick him up and break him in two whenever he wanted – but he didn’t care. He had to make John understand and this was likely to be his only chance. He had no idea of how long John would be in shock or when the other men in the room would make their move. Grant got close to John but still way out of arm’s reach. Grant may be crazy but he wasn’t insane; he left room for himself to maneuver.

“From the day we met, I did everything you asked. I lived all alone in the woods for five years! I never made any friends or had anything for myself. I did all the terrible things you asked me to do in the pathetic hope that you would care about me as much as I cared about you,” Grant said with deep bitterness. He noted John’s changing expression. He didn’t have much more time. “Your approval was all I ever wanted, John. But instead you used me, killed my dog, tried to kill me and almost killed the woman I love. So when I finally figured out that you were a psychopath, I went straight to Fury and got out. I no longer care about you, John, and I never cared about Hydra. The only thing I want from you now is to see how you handle defeat.”

“You,” John sneered, closing the distance between them. Like Grant, he completely ignored the other people in the room. At least he heard me. “I knew from the moment I broke you out of Juvie that you were weak. Always questioning, always soft, always wanting more.” He halted and a sickly smile spread over his face. Grant found this smile even more terrifying than a glare would have been. “I should have known that you wouldn’t have the guts to carry through with my grand vision. You never learned to think big, Grant. All you ever wanted was something so pathetically small that it’s almost not worth talking about. I’m changing the world but you only wanted love,” John said dismissively.

Once he finished talking, John watched with satisfaction as Grant bent over, hands on his knees, trying desperately not to hyperventilate. He glanced up, saw John roll his eyes and heard him say, “Just as I thought: weak,” in a dismissive tone. Then he turned away from him and walked closer to Fury and Coulson. “Gentlemen, where were we?” John asked in a genial tone. Evidently, he believed that he had demolished Grant’s will to rebel against him, just as he had hundreds of times before, and went back to dealing with the real threats in the room.

For a second, Grant believed that too. Everything he’d feared about himself – that no one cared, that all his sacrifices were for nothing, that he was weak – were laid bare in John’s speech. He wasn’t sure what to do. Maybe John was right and he really was weak.

He couldn’t kill John. He couldn’t even if he wanted to. Fury’s bullets barely got his attention and John was so strong now that Grant could no longer win a fight with him. He remembered with sickening clarity what John had done to the general. Grant glanced over and saw both Fury and Coulson just standing there, weapons lowered. They were of no help but out of the corner of his eye, he saw that Mike was priming the weapon in his arm. Really, Deathlok was their only hope. There was no longer any chance that they could take John alive; he was too powerful. All Grant could do now was distract John so that Mike could take his shot. He couldn’t save John anymore; now he had to save himself.

With that decision, instead of his entire life passing before his eyes, images of his friends – his family of choice – expressing their love for him flashed through his mind. There was Fitz clapping him on the shoulder, Jemma hugging him as they waited in the water to be picked up, May smiling
at him as they sparred, Coulson laughing with him over one of May’s pranks. And Skye was everywhere: teasing him, laughing with him, touching him affectionately, and passionately kissing him. John may never have cared about Grant but his team did. Maybe there would be even more people in the future, whole groups of people, who would enjoy his company and care about him. He wanted that, badly.

Grant abruptly straightened and once again walked forward to meet John. He got so close to him that John could easily tear out his rib, just like he did to that general, if the mood struck him. But Grant was done being scared. Surprised, John turned to look at Grant, leaving Deathlok squarely out of sight behind him.

“You talk about love like it’s a bad thing,” Grant said firmly to John. “And it’s you who never thought big. You think that killing people and blowing things up is changing the world?” Grant asked with a derisive laugh. “Please. All you’ve been doing is just moving things around. You may think that love is small but that’s only because you aren’t healthy enough to understand it. Who’s going to miss you when you’re gone, John? Because it sure as hell won’t be me!”

Grant had been watching John’s eyes and he saw almost the exact instant when the gleam of insanity entered them. John opened his mouth to say something just as he stretched out his arm to grab Grant. However, before he could, Coulson started speaking, “Ward’s right, John.” His attention caught, John spun to face Coulson while Grant imperceptibly stepped back a few paces. He needed to be out of the way when Deathlok fired.

“Fury tried a long time ago to teach you something you didn’t want to hear,” Coulson continued. “He always told us that one man can accomplish anything once he realizes he can be a part of something bigger. It seems like your protégé figured it out,” he said waving a hand to include Grant (who was continuing to take baby steps backward), “but then, unlike him, you’ve never been a great listener. You only think about yourself. That’s the difference between your side and our side and why we’re always gonna win.”

John still didn’t seem to get it. “What lesson, boys? Please, enlighten me.” He glanced at Mike and made a “kill them” motion to Deathlok.

Mike’s arm was raised and his weapon was clearly ready to fire. His expression changed quickly, almost too quickly for anyone but Grant – an expert in human expressions – to notice. Grant saw him go from numb to confused to – was that love? – to hatred. Then Deathlok bared his teeth, turned to John and fired, just a second after John turned to him in confusion, clearly wondering why he was aiming at him instead of his enemies. Mike’s rocket went straight into John’s chest, slamming him into some of the equipment across the room and burning a hole in his body.

John laid there for a second, looking smoky, burned and broken. It took all of Grant’s willpower not to go to him. Instead, he stood completely still while he watched John lift his head and say in a hoarse voice, “You can’t do this, Mike.” Against all odds, John’s expression got harder and he said in a firm voice, “I order you to stand down!”

Mike advanced slowly on him while John looked over at one of the downed supersoldiers whose gun was lying next to his body. “You must obey me!” John shouted as he started crawling slowly, painfully, toward the gun. “You need me to translate the words of creation!” Mike seemed unaffected by John’s words and Grant guessed that he knew that Ace was safe. He no longer had any incentive to side with Hydra.

John finally reached the gun and grabbed it as he said desperately, “You don’t want to do this, Mike!” Deathlok had finally arrived above Garrett and looked threateningly down at him. “Tell him, Grant!” John yelled.
Grant still couldn’t move and was having trouble breathing again but he managed to speak up, “It’s what I was trying to tell you, John. The power of love – Mike’s love for his son – surpasses everything, especially you.” He watched in horror, terror, and great sadness as Mike gritted his teeth and raised the cybernetic leg. “Goodbye, John.” Then Grant turned away as he heard a truly awful crunch and knew that Deathlok had crushed John’s skull. There would be no resurrection this time. John was dead.
Flashback

When Skye was still unconscious for most of the day, Grant sat with her for hours, holding her hand and just staring at her. He didn’t care that she hadn’t showered in days and was looking a little worse for wear around the edges. To him, she was beautiful. However, once she started being awake more often than not, Grant avoided the medpod where Skye was recovering because he didn’t want to get in the way. Plus, Simmons was acting very territorial, not allowing Skye to see many people and constantly taking her blood for samples (What is that about?), so it was hard to get near her even if he wanted to. And boy, did he want to!

So he kept hovering, looking in on her while she was asleep just to assure himself that she was still among the living. Her recovery was really nothing less than a miracle and sometimes it was hard to believe it was true. There was another reason why he stayed away. Grant was scared. The depth of his feelings for Skye while she was fighting for her life was something he had never experienced, not for anyone, and he really didn’t know how to deal with them. But he knew he couldn’t avoid her for long. Skye would not take that well.

He asked Jemma if she could let him know when Skye was awake again so that he could talk with her uninterrupted. Grant didn’t appreciate the gleam in Jemma’s eyes or that she gave the tiniest of smirks at his request but he ignored them. They were a small price to pay for seeing Skye and, even better, talking with her again. He’d really missed her inane chatter, contagious laugh and beautiful smile.

“Sure,” Jemma told him. “She’s awake now. Just let me make sure she’s doing well and take a little blood sample and then she’s all yours.”

Grant waited in the hall until he heard Jemma say exasperatedly, “Patient Skye is unruly. And stubborn.”

He figured Jemma was getting fed up with Skye’s constant pushback against her rules. He could relate. Whenever he got hurt, Jemma was a huge pain in the neck trying to get him to relax and heal. And, while he truly appreciated her care, sometimes it was a bit much. So, he rounded the corner and poked his head in uncertainly.

Seeing Skye and Jemma so focused on each other, he knocked on the door frame, smiled gently and said, “Hey. Is this a bad time?”

Jemma gave him a bit of a look but Grant only had eyes for Skye. He particularly enjoyed watching her expression light up at the sight of him and seeing how she struggled to sit up so that they could talk.

“It is if you’re here to bust me out,” Skye told him. Then she put on a horrible English accent and said, “The warden has extended house arrest.”

It was all Grant could do not to laugh at Jemma’s horrified expression. Even injured, Skye really excelled at pushing people’s buttons. “Oh, awful accent,” Jemma groaned as she left the medpod. Skye ran her hands over her face and said in an embarrassed tone, “I must look terrible!” She
briefly glanced up at Grant, looked down again and then sighed. “Simmons won’t even bring me a mirror.”

Grant was amused by this. His good looks ensured that women preened in front of him but he was surprised that Skye even thought about it. They’d seen each other in much worse conditions: dirty, sweaty, bloody. How could she even care about that? She was alive! The image of a blood-drenched Skye passing out in his arms drifted before his eyes. How could she not know how much better she looked now? But clearly she was in need of reassurance, something he was always so bad at. He crossed his arms in discomfort and leaned against the doorframe.

*Say something, idiot!* “I’ve seen worse,” he said and then groaned internally. *What a stupid thing to say!*


“No, I mean, you look better than when you were dying,” Grant explained matter-of-factly. This was terrible. Now she was going to believe that he didn’t think she was beautiful, as if she could ever look anything less to him.

Skye actually smiled and shook her head at that. “Swingin’ and a missin’ Ward,” she told him.

He sighed and decided to abandon all attempts at talking about the way she looked because that was certainly going nowhere. Grant gave Skye a genuine smile. “It’s great to see you,” he said, “better.”

Skye’s smile dropped off her face and she looked down, playing with a few of the wires attached to her. “It was so stupid to go in there alone,” she said seriously.

“Hey. There’s no point in doing that now.” Grant suddenly felt comfortable in the conversation, so he came a little closer and sat down on the stool beside her bed. She still was refusing to look at him. “You were brave. Thanks to you, every SHIELD agent in the country knows that Mike Peterson’s alive.”

“You tell them about his magic leg?” Skye asked, finally looking up.

“I didn’t call it that but yes,” Grant replied, smiling a little. *Typical Skye.* Then he became serious too. “Agent Garrett’s running point on Mike. Thinks he’s part of some project called Deathlok.”

Skye looked to the side, her expression grim. “He looked like death,” she muttered. “You should have…” She shook her head a little. “He wouldn’t even look at me. They did something to him. He needs help.”

“He’s past help,” Grant burst in. All the time he was sitting by Skye’s side, when he wasn’t thinking evil thoughts about Garrett, he was thinking bitter ones about Mike. Logically, Grant knew that Skye was right and that Mike needed help. He didn’t ask for any of this and, by the look of him, he was clearly suffering. However, he knew where Skye was and could have easily taken out Ian Quinn before he hurt her. And he hadn’t.

“He was there with you, Skye, could have protected you,” Grant continued angrily. His thoughts turned to Garrett and, unbeknownst to Skye, his next words were about John, not Mike. “He let this happen to you and I’ll never forgive that.”

Skye looked a little shocked at his outburst. Had he overdone it? Grant knew that he could be intense when he got upset. That’s one reason why he tried to contain his anger so often; he didn’t want it to get out of control. Besides, he knew how Skye felt about Mike.
“Well,” she finally managed, “I need to better protect myself. So, when Simmons gives the all-clear, we’ll start training?”

Grant smiled, deeply grateful for his unbelievable good luck. Not only was Skye back from the brink of death but he was going to get her back as a trainee too. They would be able to laugh, talk, train and spar like they used to. And now that both of them were accepting of the idea of being together – Grant was too well-versed in the ways of women not to notice the signs of someone liking him – it would be even more fun. He had a feeling that their training would become even more physical than it had before. He could hardly wait! But Skye needed to be fully healed before he would feel comfortable subjecting her to anything that would slow her progress.

“We’ll ease you back into it,” he said, smiling and looking down.

But to his surprise, Skye didn’t jump on that hesitancy. She was never one for pushing herself physically and had always taken whatever opportunity she could to get out of training. But now things were different and, if Grant was honest with himself, he’d seen it before. Whenever agents got shot, they either threw themselves back into training with a determination to never let it happen again or they got out of field work altogether. Damn, he should have been expecting this!

“No,” Skye said with an urgency that was atypical for her. “I want to train harder. Next time I don’t want to depend on some miracle drug to save me.”

As her words hung in the air, Grant scooted closer, both to her bed and to her side. Her eyes widened a little but, other than that, she showed no sign of noticing. “Skye, I want you to be able to protect yourself too,” Grant said gently. “But you have to understand that sometimes things happen. Every Specialist I know has been shot at least once, including me.” Skye looked confused and he rushed to reassure her. “I just don’t want you to think that you got shot because of your lack of training. What happened wasn’t your fault.”

“Well, I think that’s debatable but as long as you’re willing to train me harder, I’ll go with it,” Skye said with a smile.

“You can count on it,” Grant replied with a matching smile. Then the smile dropped off of his face as he leaned over and took her hand, one that had previously been messing with the wires connecting her to Simmons’ machines. “I missed you, Rookie. You really had me scared for a while.”

Skye looked shocked by Grant’s change of demeanor and his touch. Clearly she hadn’t been expecting this. He realized that his stumble about her appearance was much more typical of him than his gentleness. But Skye’s brush with death had changed him. Grant couldn’t fully declare himself, not yet, not until after he was free of Hydra and Fury’s expectations, but he could at least give her a hint of how he felt. Even if she didn’t feel the same way (and he was pretty sure that she did), Skye at least deserved to know that much.

For a moment, Skye was quiet, her eyes filling with tears as she looked into Grant’s eyes and tightened her fingers around his. “I was scared too,” she whispered, “but I knew you’d come to get me. You always do.”

There were so many things that he wanted to say in response. And I always will was on the tip of his tongue but Grant knew that he couldn’t say that. No SHIELD agent, no spy, could ever make such a promise because you didn’t know what the future would bring. He couldn’t even ensure that they would always be on the same team or in the same part of the world. And he for sure couldn’t profess his love, his longing for her or how much knowing her meant to him. This was not the time. If he got lucky, truly lucky, he would maybe get the opportunity to tell her later. But now he
had to focus on the task at hand: taking down Hydra.

Grant smiled slowly at Skye. “What do you think SOs are for?” he asked in a quiet voice.

He couldn’t tell her what was truly in his heart and he needed to lighten the moment but he also wanted her to at least suspect that he felt the same way. So, he squeezed her hand, brought it to his lips and kissed it. He swallowed his chuckle at the way Skye tried to cover her surprise. He knew he was acting very unlike himself. Grant could hear Simmons’ steps coming down the hall, so he laid her hand back on the bed and stood up.

“I’d better let you rest. I can hear Simmons coming to throw me out. But I’ll be back later,” Grant said. Skye said nothing, just looked at him. *That’s a first.* He stopped at the doorway and turned back to her. “By the way, you look beautiful,” he said and then practically ran down the hall away from the medpod, ignoring Jemma’s puzzled look at his hasty departure.

Grant was having a strange day. He went from having an intimate conversation with Skye to seeing a portal open from another world to being briefed by Thor’s Asgardian friend, Lady Sif, on an alien woman named Lorelei. Sif was a tall beautiful dark-haired woman with a no-nonsense look and commanding presence that Grant had to admit was impressive. And maybe he was partial to dark-haired women. They had to get through a bit of a rough patch with Coulson explaining to Sif why he was alive (*He didn’t tell the Avengers he was resurrected? That’s going to be an awkward conversation!* before they could begin. But Sif seemed to take it in stride. Grant could see why Thor both liked and trusted her.

“600 years ago, Lorelei used her powers to wreak havoc across the Nine Realms, to command armies, bring down kings, empires,” Sif said directly to Coulson in an urgent and hushed voice.

“What kind of powers we talking about?” Grant asked, also in a quiet voice. This didn’t seem the kind of briefing in which it was okay to be loud but he wanted to be included. “Speed? Strength?” Those would be challenging but the team managed to deal with those issues during their Berserker staff mission.

Sif shook her head. “Sorcery,” she replied. Grant raised his eyebrows. He wasn’t expecting that. His day just kept getting weirder and weirer. “She bends and shapes the wills of men to her own purpose.”

“Only men?” May asked. Grant looked suspiciously at her to see if he could detect a smirk. Nothing so far.

“Her powers don’t work on women?”

“No,” Sif replied decisively, walking closer to the rest of the team. She addressed May this time, “Men have an inherent weakness we do not share.”

Now there was a smirk on May’s face. *Damn!* “I can’t imagine what she’s talking about,” Fitz said quietly to Grant. He couldn’t tell if Fitz was being sarcastic or not, so he shook his head in agreement.

“The very sound of her voice can ensnare most,” Sif continued, looking at Fitz and Grant now. “For the rare man who can resist, it’s her voice joined by her touch that will overpower his will.”

*Huh.* Grant almost sneered when he thought about all the weak men who had fallen victim to this woman. They either hadn’t had his training or allowed their basest desires to get in the way of doing their job. He rarely let anything get in the way of what he needed to accomplish, so Grant doubted that he would be affected in the same way. Still, he was certain that Coulson would be careful and allow only Sif or female agents to be around this Lorelei who most likely was some
hideous female who could only get men to do her bidding because of her powers.

Grant transferred his attention back to Sif who was detailing how Lorelei could be captured via a necklace that stifled her voice. Coulson then ordered the team to start looking all over Nevada for signs of Lorelei’s presence. *If a woman who entraps men is around, it won’t be hard to find her.* And it wasn’t. The team barely had time to go over Fitz’s new weaponry (*I knew he could lose the ounce and find a better name!*) before they joined a SHIELD convoy already in transit.

The convoy rolled up to a biker bar called Rosie’s Desert Oasis, a rundown place located on a rarely used highway in Nowheresville, Nevada. It was in the center of all the weapons and bank heists pulled over in the last few hours and had the added bonus of a strong police presence. The entrance sported lots of motorcycles, an ancient RV and several state trooper vehicles. The troopers themselves were armed and leaning casually against their cars. They stood up and started walking toward Sif and SHIELD when they arrived.

Sif was first out of the car. She looked puzzled. “Lorelei’s tastes run toward palaces, castles,” she said drawing out her sword. “This is far more humble than her usual abode.”

“The draw wasn’t the location; it was the manpower,” Grant replied looking around. Based on the vehicles, he estimated that there were probably 30 to 50 men in and around the bar. Not a bad start for amassing an army, especially in this godforsaken place.

Coulson walked toward the state troopers. “How many men does she have in there?” he asked them. “Have you seen the suspect?”

“Yes we have,” an older trooper answered raising his weapon. *Uh oh. “And she’s beautiful.”* Grant managed to push Coulson out of the way several seconds before the guy fired. Coulson really took too many risks. *Wasn’t dying once enough for him?*

Both men rolled, pulled out their ICERs and hid behind a regular police car as a dozen shots rang out. May and the other SHIELD agents also ducked behind cars but Sif just raised her bullet-repelling shield, kind of like a Medieval Wonder Woman. *I’ve got to get myself one of those.* Coulson started shooting toward the front of the car while Grant shot toward the back.

“They’re on us from both sides,” he told Coulson in irritation. “Be hard to get off a clean shot.”

Coulson didn’t answer him directly. “Your Ladyship,” he called to Sif. “Can you give us a little cover?”

Sif merely nodded and kicked the old Gulf Airstream toward the state troopers, blocking their view. *Why didn’t she do that before?*

“Very literal interpretation,” Coulson said admiringly as he stood up. “Thank you!” he called to her as they shot the remaining men with Fitz’s new ICERs. Once he received the “All clear” from Grant, he started issuing orders. “Men, stay outside. Let Sif take Lorelei. Ward, head around back. Surround the building!”

Grant carefully eased into the back, looking wonderingly at all the old junk: gas pumps, bicycle frames, rusted motorcycles. *Why do people keep all this stuff?* He could hear the sounds of a huge fight coming from inside the bar. Suddenly, a biker guy popped up from behind an old oil drum and attacked him, making little contact except for knocking the ICER out of his hand. Grant whirled to face his opponent and could immediately tell that he posed little to no threat. *This will go a lot faster if this guy just backs down.* He doubted if he would though. His kind usually didn’t.
“Look,” Grant told him with a sigh. He even raised his hands in a no harm gesture to see if he could get this guy to stop fighting. “I’m sure you’re uh...a reasonable guy...” The biker swung at him, Grant ducked and punched him in the face while reading the name on his jacket, “…Rooster.” What a stupid name. “Rooster. Really?”

Rooster apparently didn’t take too kindly to Grant making fun of his name and swung. What does he expect with a name like that? Grant ducked again, punching him in the stomach and the face. Rooster then tried to use an old chain which Grant grabbed, pulled Rooster forward and proceeded to punch him out. Rooster fell into the dirt and was still. What an idiot! He picked up his ICER and then, hearing the sound of someone jumping off of the roof, whirled around, one knee on the ground, gun in firing position.

To his surprise, Grant saw a delicate, red-haired woman in biker leather on the ground. The two of them rose at the same time, almost in tandem. Is this Lorelei? She certainly wasn’t what he was expecting. This woman was not only beautiful but short. This is the woman Sif fears?

“You’re a fine warrior,” Lorelei told him, not an ounce of fear in her face even though he was holding a gun and towering over her. He had to admit that he was impressed with her audacity.

“I am,” Grant responded drily. “So put your hands behind your back and get on your knees.”

The woman smiled mockingly. “Men kneel before me,” she said arrogantly as she walked toward him. “I do not bow to them.” Lorelei was now almost in Grant’s personal space. He was both curious and unafraid, which was why he neither attempted to stop her nor stepped back.

He saw a shadow of a figure around the side of the building. “Gonna need some backup over here,” he called in a disgusted voice. Grant was disappointed. This was the great Lorelei that Sif was talking about? Sure, she was beautiful but the enslaving men with her voice? That was clearly a crock. But then he froze as Lorelei put her hand on his arm.

“That is not what you need,” she said to him in what could only be described as a magical voice. When Grant first heard Sif describe the effect Lorelei had on men, he imagined that if what she was saying was real, then it was probably painful, a rigid control of thoughts and limbs. If the men disobeyed, then they probably experienced some kind of electrical shock or burn or something equally as painful until they complied with her demands. He’d had so much pain in his life – both physical and emotional – that he both dreaded and shrugged off the idea of more. He’d survived worse. When Lorelei’s voice alone hadn’t affected him, Grant figured that he was immune. However, once she touched him, he felt different than he ever had before. Lorelei’s control was quite the opposite of the pain he’d been expecting. Instead, it felt like a wave of pleasurable sensation washed over him.

Resisting Lorelei was perhaps possible – he was still aware of his own voice of reason in the back of his head – but compliance brought that delightful feeling back ten-fold. It was like a drug that he was starting to crave after only a small hit. But Grant’s obedience was about more than just feeling good. It was what was familiar.

Grant had been trained to obey those older and stronger than him for most of his life. If there was anything he knew how to do and do well, it was follow orders. It was easy. But all that ease evaporated when he’d gone to Maria Hill and confessed because, after that, the SHIELD leadership (and his psychologist) expected him to think for himself. Instead of just listening and doing, Grant had to evaluate and choose. And while he knew it was good for him and it was what he needed to do in order to be a healthy adult, there was no denying that it was tough. There were no easy answers and this rankled. He’d lived in a black and white world for so long that existing in a gray
one was a daily challenge.

So when Lorelei touched him, not only did obeying make Grant feel wonderful physically but it was also emotionally fulfilling. This was another chance to give in, to return to that life of ease. And, to top it all off, here was this beautiful woman not only taking responsibility off of his shoulders but promising rewards if he gave her what she wanted. Given all that, Grant wasn’t at all surprised that most men succumbed to her power. Why wouldn’t they?

At her touch and the sound of her voice, Grant unwound his tense muscles and lowered his gun. He looked over his shoulder at the bar but saw no one. He could still hear the sounds of fighting from inside. Sif would soon take care of the bikers, so there wasn’t much time.

“We should probably go,” he told Lorelei, who just smiled at him and took his hand. He led her to what was probably Rooster’s motorcycle. Unlike most of the others he’d seen at the bar, this one was expensive and in great condition. It looked fast and fun and, with Lorelei with him, he could relax and just feel. Grant got in front while Lorelei climbed onto the back, her arms around his waist.

“Take me somewhere grand, deserving of a ruler, a queen,” she told him.

“I know just the place,” he replied with a smirk as the two rode off into the desert.

They made a short stop at one of his drop boxes to get cash, weapons and IDs but then quickly rode on toward Las Vegas. Grant was eager to get out of range of SHIELD satellites and into an urban environment so that they could get lost in the crowd. Plus, if she wanted palaces and castles, royalty and glitz, there was no better place. Lorelei seemed to agree as the two of them walked into the entrance of Caesar’s Palace and looked at the high ceilings, faux Greek statues and opulent decor. She raised her eyebrows and smirked.

“I am fortunate to have found you,” she told Grant as they walked through the slot machines on their way to the rooms. “You are quite resourceful.”

“Just well trained,” he replied non-chalantly.

Lorelei laughed. “No,” she chided. “You are worlds apart from those men in the desert.”

His inner self tried to fight the rush of pleasure that those words brought to him. And it wasn’t because of her voice or her touch this time. No, Grant was hungry for praise. He hadn’t had much of it in his life and he’d tried so hard. His tactical brain told him that he was smarter, stronger, faster and just better than most of the people he encountered but it was rare that others appeared to notice these qualities, even rarer for them to comment upon them. So to hear someone as powerful and well-traveled as Lorelei compliment him felt so wonderful. However, he tried to reign himself in. No good would come from believing her hype.

“I’m not an idiot,” Grant told her seriously. “I know you value me no more than those bikers back there. The truth is…I don’t care.”

Lorelei looked curiously at him. “Because of what you feel?” she asked.

Ah. Now that was the question, wasn’t it? What do I feel? Grant was pretty sure that he was in love with Skye but he didn’t know for certain. How could he when he’d never experienced romantic love from anyone before? And Skye herself was an enigma. He suspected that she cared for him but maybe it wasn’t what he thought. Maybe she, like so many others, was only interested in his face and body or what he could do for her within SHIELD. Grant couldn’t know for certain and, at
the moment, he couldn’t make himself care because nothing could match the feeling he had now with Lorelei.

“I’ve felt something before for someone on my team. It seems foolish now,” he confessed, stepping closer to her. “I would die for you. Any man would.”

She looked up into his face. “But I don’t want them,” she told him. “I want you. You’re stronger, a real man with the rage of a Berserker inside.”

At the mention of the Berserker though, something took hold. No! Grant could feel his inner self recoiling at the thought of having to go back to that dark place and use the strength that kind of rage gave him. He didn’t want that ever again! Lorelei appeared to sense something was off because she looked thoughtfully up at him. Maybe she could see in his eyes that he was pulling away from her because she got the same calculating look she had back at the biker bar just before she touched him.

“You will present me with an army,” she said in her magical voice, stroking his arm and smiling when he nodded slowly. “And I will give you a gift in return.”

Although it had taken him a while to get started (being alone in the woods for five years really limited your opportunities for partners), Grant was no stranger to sex. His good looks and incredible physique ensured that women approached him and made offers that, especially in his early days at the Academy, he hadn’t even wanted to refuse. Most ended up being one night stands but there were a few, like May, who shared his bed more than once. However, none of them were anything more than enjoyable physical releases; none came with emotional attachments. Given his stunted emotional development, Grant wouldn’t have even known what to do with the feelings of connection had he experienced them. And, of course, he constantly had to be on his guard lest Garrett get angry about any relationships he might have. Grant knew that his primary purpose was as Garrett’s right-hand man and that left no time for solid emotional bonds.

This wary outlook on sexual relationships served him in good stead when he became a Specialist and started going on assignments. Grant was not above using sex to gain information from assets and targets alike. It was fun, everyone enjoyed themselves, he didn’t have to fight his own urges, and he got the intel he needed. What was the problem? It was only after Grant started counseling that he began questioning if there was more to sex than the physical act itself. Before that, he’d dismissed the idea that a large component of sexual pleasure was in the mind and emotions. But his psychologist had laid the seeds and, once he joined Coulson’s team, they started taking root.

Once he began having sex with May, Grant started to understand the pull of a ‘friends with benefits’ type of arrangement. He still wasn’t emotionally attached but he began to appreciate the fun of talking before and after sex. He also liked building on the knowledge gained during one sexual interaction in order to enhance the pleasure of the next. And he welcomed the gentle aspects to his times with May that were usually missing when he was having sex with a stranger. And as he and Skye became closer, Grant really began suspecting that sex with someone you loved would be even better. That’s when he started fantasizing in earnest about a sexual relationship with Skye and his trysts with May decreased in frequency.

All of this passed through his mind when Lorelei intimidated that she wanted to reward him for his compliance and his abilities but he just didn’t care. The lure of the pleasurable sensation and her dominance was too strong. Grant inwardly shrugged. It would be just like it was back in his Academy days: fun but not meaningful. Besides, what choice did he have? He had no idea what would happen if he attempted disobedience and, so far, he hadn’t even tried.

The two of them burst into the suite, their hands all over each other. Once they were fully inside,
the door shut behind them, Lorelei pushed Grant and he was flung against the wall, hard. He was startled; this had never happened to him before. He had never been into any kind of rough sex and wasn’t sure that he wanted to start now. But how could he resist someone as strong as Lorelei? Before he could fully form his thoughts though, she jumped on him, wrapping her legs around his waist and kissing him all over.

“Come on,” she whispered in her magical voice as she ran her hands around Grant’s biceps and he was lost. The two of them staggered further into the room, undressing each other and eventually landing on the bed.

After it was over, Lorelei wrapped herself in a sheet and stood looking out of the window as Grant lay on the bed, putting his watch back on and just observing her. “When I first arrived here, I thought Earth left much to be desired. But from here, it’s quite beautiful. I’ve spent the last 600 years locked away in a dark, cold cell, my throat shackled, my voice silenced, torture.”

As she spoke, Grant got up from the bed, joined her at the window and put his arms around her. He couldn’t stand the thought of someone being locked away like that, completely and utterly alone. He was too familiar with how that kind of loneliness felt. And the idea of losing your voice was a scary one too. When he’d been in the woods, he’d used his voice a lot. He’d talk to Buddy and other creatures they saw, sing or recite poems he memorized (later he’d recite the SHIELD manual Garrett gave him to study) and he’d even laugh. He’d laugh at the antics of the woodland creatures or at the joy of accomplishing a particularly difficult physical feat. Grant couldn’t imagine the horror of not being able to communicate verbally. For the first time since she’d ensnared him, he felt something real for Lorelei: compassion.

“You never have to go back there,” he whispered to her, his entire being intent upon saving her from such a horrible fate.

“But Sif is on the hunt,” Lorelei said despairingly. She turned around to face Grant, looking beseechingly up into his eyes. “And she will not rest; she will not stop. And I will not know peace.”

“So we take her out of the equation. Eliminate the threat,” he told her wondering how exactly they were going to do that. He’d studied Thor’s exploits on Earth and knew how utterly powerful Asgardians were.

“The graves of Asgard’s enemies are littered with those who underestimated Sif.” She waited until Grant nodded. “Do not make the same mistake,” she warned him. “You do not know her.”

“No, I don’t,” Grant replied as he let go of Lorelei and turned away from the window. His tactical brain had shown him the way and they had plans to make. It wouldn’t be long before SHIELD discovered where they were. “But the people she’s working with now, I know them,” he said as he pulled out a gun from his duffel.

Taking over the Bus was child’s play. After Lorelei had ensnared Fitz, he’d trapped Skye and Jemma (who didn’t even appear to know that he had done so) and told them about the repaired necklace. Grant wanted to damage it irreparably immediately but Lorelei had a different plan. She thought it would be good bait for Sif, so of course, he acceded to her desires. Soon the two of them went up to the cockpit and prepared for take-off.

After they were certain Sif was on board, Grant took off, Lorelei at his side. It was always so beautiful in the sky. He got almost the same feeling of contentment and pleasure from flying that he did from Lorelei’s voice and touch. He hoped that Lorelei would feel the same way but she was eager to kill Sif. So, once they leveled off, she left the cockpit to make sure everything else was
going smoothly while Grant opened the airlock in the Cage. If all had gone according to plan, Fitz had locked Sif in there and she would shortly be sucked out into the atmosphere. Even an Asgardian would find it difficult to survive that and the necklace would be gone for good. Grant then set the autopilot and left the cockpit to assist Lorelei with anything she needed.

He’d originally exited the cockpit quickly but, as he got closer to where Lorelei was fighting with what could only be May, his steps slowed. He felt a curious reluctance to engage against May, his inner self screaming at him to do the right thing and help the team instead. But the pull of Lorelei was too strong and Grant walked slowly around the corner into the lounge area, knowing he probably would have to do something he didn’t want to do. May was on the ground, struggling to get up. Even though he wanted to give Lorelei what she wanted, he had no desire to hurt May. Grant had no idea of what to do though or even how to resist, so he concentrated on what Lorelei was saying.

“I will retrieve Sif’s sword,” she was telling May. “It will look better in my hand.” Grant walked around to Sif, a gun in his hand.

“Ward, you don’t want to do this,” May said to him, blood dripping from her lip. Grant heard his inner voice agreeing with his teammate but he did what he had always done in the past: he compartmentalized and ignored it.

“This was the plan,” he replied. “Cross off Sif, take the plane, eliminate anyone in our way.”

*Please don’t make me do this, May!* He raised the gun and pointed it directly at May. “Get out of her way,” he said in a threatening tone.

“It’s her plan, not yours,” she told him. “Fight it. I know you, you’re a fighter!”

Lorelei turned to Grant. “Is this her?” she asked him. Then she turned back to May and said mockingly, “The beautiful warrior with a heart of ice?” Grant would have given a lot not to see May’s look of distress and betrayal right then and he looked down. As she had before in Caesar’s Palace, Lorelei must have sensed his reluctance and internal strife because she suddenly turned back to Grant. She put her hand on his chest, gave him a lingering kiss and whispered in her magical voice, “Only you can do this!” Lorelei gave him a brief glance and then, satisfied with what she saw, turned back to May. “His heart now beats in concert with mine and mine alone,” she told her smugly.

May gave Grant a look that had his inner self burning with shame. He doubted he could keep a look of distress from crossing his face no matter what his body wanted but the gun he held on her remained steady. “No reason to make this about us,” May told him in a low, furious voice.

“Oh,” Lorelei said in her mocking tone. Grant was beginning to hate that sound. “He told me who he desired before me,” she said to May walking slowly toward her. “But, my dear, it wasn’t you.”

*Oh shit.* May turned to watch Lorelei walk away, then she and Grant faced each other once again. May’s expression promised pain.

The two of them stood that way, almost frozen, until he heard Fitz’s voice yell, “Ward! I think we have a big problem!” Grant lost focus for just a moment but it was long enough for May to seize the opportunity and attack. The two of them seemed to take turns punching, kicking and throwing each other around the lounge, evenly matched. One would take the lead for a moment until the other would do something to take it back until finally they found themselves lying next to each other on the ground with Grant’s gun pointed at May’s head. She raised her head slightly off the ground to look over at him.

“Sorry about this,” Grant said and fired. May’s head dropped back to the glass-littered carpet and
she was still. He waited until he saw the telltale blue vines snake up her face and gave a sigh of relief. Grant honestly didn’t know how he’d done it but somewhere along the way, he’d pulled out his ICER and used it instead of his deadly weapon. Lorelei!

Grant jumped to his feet but, as he did, he realized that far from being ashamed at failing Lorelei, he was relieved. He no longer felt that cool sensation of pleasure or the strong magnetic pull urging him to follow her plans. He was free. He heard a sound from behind him and turned to see Sif leading Lorelei, a golden metal collar and frame around her neck and lower face.

“I’m back,” he murmured quietly, almost to himself. Sif just nodded and continued leading Lorelei through the plane. For her part, Lorelei looked at Grant beseeching but, instead of feeling pity and a desire to help her, all he felt was disgust. He had turned on his team and almost killed Sif and May, all to help her accomplish her sick desire to rule Earth. Grant looked Lorelei straight in the eyes and then turned his back.

With Lorelei gone, he stood in the damaged lounge, feeling sick at heart. *What do I do now? How can I face the team?* The only person he could bear to see was Fitz because at least he understood what it felt like to fall under Lorelei’s spell. Maybe men really did have an inherent weakness in them but it didn’t matter. Everywhere he turned he felt weak: helpless to prevent Garrett from shooting Skye, unable to have real relationships, powerless to fight off the spell of an alien sorceress. *What use am I?*

Since he was such a failure, Grant supposed that he might as well face May and get it over with. Maybe she’d be willing to forgive after she beat him up. That always seemed to work with his family and Garrett. He’d heard her get up and go with Coulson to see Sif and Lorelei leave. After she was done there, he knew where she’d go. So, Grant went to the cockpit and just sat in the co-pilot’s seat, waiting. This was the one place he knew May would have to return to. Sure enough, she entered and stopped briefly upon seeing him. He knew that she was as reluctant as he was to have this conversation. May avoided looking at him and started flipping switches, even reaching over him at times. He knew that she wasn’t doing anything substantive but was instead trying to get out of talking with him.

He turned in his chair and sighed. “I figure…I let you punch me again, repeatedly, just why don’t you…”

“It’s fine,” she interrupted. Grant looked carefully at her face and body positioning. It was clearly anything but fine and he once again felt a sharp stab of regret. He also was deeply grateful that, when it had come down to it, he hadn’t been able to kill her.

“It’s not,” he said quietly, pleadingly, looking directly at her as she finally sat down in the pilot’s chair. “I never intended…” he started, looking away. *Why does this have to be so hard?* “I never wanted to hurt…”

May finally turned to look at him, a soft expression on her face. Grant was surprised. He’d expected hardness and anger, probably even violence, but not something that looked suspiciously like sympathy. “I know you didn’t,” she said softly, “and you’re right: it’s not fine.”

Grant felt the floor moving under him a bit even though he knew rationally that the plane wasn’t moving. He just felt so discombobulated with May’s reaction that his hold on reality was a bit flimsy at the moment. Why was she not hitting him? Why was she offering him compassion instead of the anger that he rightfully deserved? How was he supposed to respond to this? Grant just stared at May, having no idea of what was going on or what would happen next.

If possible, May’s expression softened even more as she observed his confusion and distress.
“What Lorelei did to you wasn’t your fault,” May said gently, “Sif said that she’s enslaved thousands of men, that almost no man is immune. So what you did while you were under her spell? Not. Your. Fault.”

Grant looked down and swallowed, still hesitant and unsure. He’d already offered to let her hit him, so this couldn’t be a trick to lower his guard. Did she really mean it? He looked back up at May, trying to read her. “But I almost killed you,” he whispered. “I definitely hurt you.”

May looked away and also swallowed hard. She turned back to Grant and he detected just the slightest bit of hardening in her expression. “Maybe we were fooling ourselves that we could be involved without it getting complicated.” She paused for a moment and smiled just the slightest bit. “And you didn’t kill me. I think even Lorelei was surprised by that.”

Grant nodded, thinking hard about what she’d just said. He was grateful beyond belief for her understanding. It didn’t make what had happened okay, just not so awful. He smiled a little too.

May’s face returned to her usual blank expression. “So are we done here?” she asked briskly.

He nodded and got up to go. Grant knew that he was pushing his luck but he just had to do something, so he placed his hand on her shoulder and said, “Thanks.” Then he left the cockpit and headed down to his bunk to take a shower.

A short while later, he went to visit Skye in the medpod. Jemma was nowhere to be seen and Grant knew that Fitz was in the kitchen eating. The two of them had briefly compared notes on what it had been like to be controlled by the beautiful sorceress, Fitz doing most of the talking. He told Grant that Coulson had knocked him out but that he had forgiven him for it. Grant nodded thoughtfully at this information. Did the end not always justify the means?

He rounded the corner to see Skye lying on the bed, typing away on her laptop. She abruptly closed it once she looked up and saw him standing in the doorway. She tilted her head and eyes toward the stool he’d used the last time he visited, so Grant took that an invitation and sat down.

“Tough day, huh?” Skye said in a sympathetic tone.

Grant nodded, looking down. Now that he was here, he had no idea of what to say. Going to visit Skye had sounded like such a good idea earlier and he had been desperate to see her after the day he’d had but he was embarrassed. How could he tell Skye that her SO, the guy she depended upon to save her no matter what, was weak, unable to defeat a sorceress? He was sure that Skye already knew that he’d tried to kill Sif and May.

“Hey,” Skye said after a moment of silence, grabbing his hand. Apparently she was not going to let him be embarrassed and awkward around her. Typical Skye. He glanced up at her touch. “No one blames you for what happened with Lorelei. You know that, right?”

“You all may not blame me but I certainly blame myself,” he said angrily, snatching back his hand from Skye’s grasp. He immediately missed the warmth and the contact but he couldn’t stand her being sweet to him, not when he didn’t deserve it. “I was so sure that I would be the exception, that I wouldn’t be affected by her powers, that I didn’t take the threat seriously. So I ended up nearly killing Sif and May and causing all sorts of damage to the Bus!” Grant abruptly stood up and started pacing around the room, no small feat given how small it was. “You all depend on me to keep you safe and I couldn’t even do that. Again!”

“Woah! Wait a minute,” Skye said, sitting up straight. She looked at him apprehensively, almost as if she was afraid he’d take off if she got off the bed. “I hope you’re not blaming yourself for my
getting shot or for Lorelei because neither one was something you could have prevented. Look, I blame myself enough for Quinn shooting me; I don’t think I can handle you blaming yourself too!”

Grant took a deep breath and nodded. “I know,” he said quietly. He glanced over at Skye and saw that she looked tired and stressed. She needed to rest and, knowing Skye, she wouldn’t do that if she thought he was upset. So, he went back over to the stool and sat down. “Maybe I’m not responsible for Quinn but I sure as hell could have done something about Lorelei.”

Skye eyed him anxiously but when she spoke, it was with a calm voice. “Like what?” she asked.

“Well, I could have fought her spell harder, not been such a pushover,” he replied angrily.

“From what Lady Sif told us before she left, it sounds like you weren’t a pushover at all. She said Lorelei admitted that you were tough. Grant, you were one of the rare men who made her use both her voice and her touch to capture you and she had to do it repeatedly because her spell kept wearing off. Men from all over the galaxy couldn’t do what you did!” Skye sat back and smiled, taking his hand again. “We don’t blame you for what you did; we’re proud of you. You’re one tough cookie, Grant Ward.”

Grant looked up at her and smiled a bit. Once again, he was so grateful to his team for making his experience just a little less awful. And here was Skye, using what little energy she had after almost dying to make him feel better. “I guess we have that in common then,” he told her.

Later, Coulson asked to talk with him in his office. Unlike some of the other times Grant had been in there, Coulson asked him to sit down and gave him his full attention. Like everyone else, Coulson reaffirmed his belief in Grant and the fact that no one blamed him for what happened. They debriefed and then Coulson said something quite shocking, something Grant had rarely heard any boss in Hydra or SHIELD say.

“Ward, you’ve gone through a big ordeal and I just want you to know that if you ever need to talk, I’m here.”

Grant just looked at him for a moment, trying to figure out what to say. His team’s reaction to his experience with Lorelei was somewhat overwhelming, especially as he’d expected it to be so much worse. “I appreciate that, sir. I just may do that,” he finally said as he stood up to go. Of course, he had no intention of ever utilizing Coulson’s kind offer but just the fact that he’d made it felt good.

As he made his way back to the bunk, Grant reflected that maybe, just maybe, his team was right and what had happened hadn’t been his fault. He’d done his best to resist and, in the end, he’d been able to do the right thing when it truly counted. He just hoped that he could continue to do that because bigger challenges were coming.

Chapter End Notes

So here it is: the Lorelei chapter. I hope you all like it! I know some of you were hoping that Grant wouldn't be forced to have sex with her or, failing that, would have someone talk with him about what happened. Unfortunately, I thought the two of them having sex was an important part of the story and I really couldn't see a conversation about it with a team member being authentic to the situation. I doubt Grant would bring it up and the only ones who suspected (May and Coulson) did their best with him. So, I hope it isn't too disappointing. On another note, I had forgotten Coulson's
sympathetic conversation with Sif about how she followed orders no matter the personal cost to her. It seemed like foreshadowing for Grant but alas, once again a breadcrumb without follow-through. Ah well, so goes the show.
Saying Goodbye

It was over. No more John, no more Hydra (hopefully) and no more being a triple. He was free. Grant had dreamed about this moment for so long, definitely since he’d become a triple for SHIELD, but also in a vague sense even before he knew he wanted out of Hydra. He’d wondered what it would be like not to have so many secrets, not to live constantly under orders and what it would feel like to get close to people. He was scared of that possibility, sure, but he desperately wanted it all the same. But now that this moment was finally here, he found that it was hollow. Grant didn’t know what came next or even what he was feeling.

*I’m free*, he kept telling himself on an endless loop ever since he’d heard John’s head crunch into the floor. But the sentiment didn’t seem to hold much meaning for him. What did freedom entail? Where would he go? Who would he be now? He’d been Garrett’s Golden Boy for so long that the thought of being anything else was a foreign one. *John didn’t really care about me. I should be happy that he’s dead.*

So, to celebrate that thought, Grant walked numbly over to a corner of the room, leaned against a wall and threw up everything in his stomach. It wasn’t much but the sound of his vomit splattering on the floor made him dry heave a few extra times. Grant had been no stranger to vomiting during his time in the woods. He’d learned lessons about how thoroughly he had to cook his meat or what kind of plants were acceptable to eat over and over again, especially in the early days. However, once he hit the Academy, he was so particular about what he ate that he hadn’t thrown up in a very long time. So, the sensation of this took him back to when he was 15 years old, the same age he’d been when he met John.

Grant’s eyes blurred as he considered that everything today kept leading back to John. His savior. His father figure. His abuser. Grant replayed John’s last statements to him, telling him that he was weak, soft and needy. Did he really care so little about me? Yes, John had called out to him in his final moments but that had only been to ask for help, to try and prolong the life that had been their driving mission for so many years. Grant remembered that Coulson had told John that he only cared about himself and, within the deepest parts of himself, Grant knew that was true. John had been pleased with Grant’s accomplishments but he had never truly cared about him. If Grant had somehow been unable to fulfill his goals, he would have been expendable. He’d already proven that.

Grant had followed someone incapable of caring in the desperate hope that John would somehow love him. How sickening. How weak. The arms that were holding him up against the wall started shaking and he looked down. He hadn’t had much of an appetite lately but whatever had been inside him was now on the floor. *Kind of like John’s head.* Grant felt an insane desire to laugh but quickly stifled it. He didn’t need Fury or Coulson thinking he was crazier than he actually was.

Grant wiped his mouth and moved some distance away from the vomit, while still leaning against the wall. He didn’t feel strong enough to be upright without support. He glanced around and saw that Coulson and Fury were talking with Mike but all Grant could hear was the sound of blood roaring in his ears. *15 years!* He’d been with Garrett for 15 years, taking his orders and trying to make him proud. And for what? Trying to get John to care about him had been a bust. Sure, he’d learned to be a bad-ass spy and he could definitely take care of himself but, other than that, what had he actually accomplished? Grant hadn’t dealt with his family, he hadn’t been able to save Buddy or John, and he had nothing for himself. As far as he knew, his actions as a triple – his attempts to bring down Hydra – may have even pushed away for good the people he loved the most. He again felt nauseous and swallowed back both his bile and his misgivings. Grant
straightened up and stopped leaning against the wall. *Time to be strong so that John*....

He caught another glimpse of John’s body. Grant suddenly felt dizzy and drained, so he sat down before he fell and gave into his fatigue. He brought his knees closer to his face, rested his arms on them and then lowered his forehead so that he would be looking at the floor if his eyes were still open. *I told John I didn’t care about him! But I do care and I let him down! He was right: I am weak. I care about someone who never cared about me.* His emotions were going around in rapid circles, almost like they were a Tilt-a-Whirl, moving from anger towards John and all he put him through to sadness at the futility of John’s search to save himself and Grant’s role in his demise and back to anger again. His thoughts were so exhausting and upsetting that it was all he could do not to start crying. Instead, he started counting his breaths, just like he’d learned to do a lifetime ago in a family in which tears never earned you sympathy, only more misery.

Suddenly Grant felt a shift in the room and he looked up to see Coulson, Fury and Mike standing in a circle around him. *Shit!* How had he, the agent who always preached about situational awareness, not heard them coming? What must they think of him now, looking as weak as he did? He quickly scrambled to his feet since remaining on the floor made him feel even smaller than he already felt. Were they here to render judgment on him for his failure to kill Garrett? He couldn’t read any of their expressions though and the thought of not knowing how they were feeling terrified him. Mike and Coulson might still believe that he was Hydra and be disgusted by him. But Fury, he knew that he wasn’t. If Nick Fury hadn’t been there, Grant didn’t know what he would have done, so his gaze settled on him.

“You did a good job, Grant, everything I asked you to do and more,” Fury said in the gentlest voice Grant had ever heard him use. *I must really be a mess!* Even Coulson glanced sideways at Fury, looking a little surprised. “As promised, you’re free to go.” After seeing Grant nod, Fury’s voice regained its usual stern tone, almost as if he was embarrassed for his brief lapse into humanity.

“You can rejoin your team, Agent Ward, but don’t expect any leeway on your final report. It’s due in a week.” Then he looked at both Mike and Coulson, “I’ll talk to both of you later after we’ve cleaned up a bit of this mess.” Then Fury abruptly turned and left, the door to the room slamming loudly in the silence his departure left.

Coulson turned to Mike, who was looking just as conflicted as Grant felt, and put his hand on his shoulder. “Go find Ace,” he told him. “We can figure all the rest of this out later. Your son needs you right now.”

Mike nodded and looked down, saying nothing. Then he started to turn toward the door but hesitated a moment, glancing quickly at Grant. “Thanks for the assist, Ward.”

Grant was stunned. Here was this man who had been badly injured, kidnapped, turned into a cyborg and forced to kill because people were holding his son hostage yet he’d taken the time to say something nice to Grant. He recalled how hostile he’d been to Mike when he’d first come on board the Bus, pleased to be part of the team and help out. Grant had been so jealous at the team’s easy acceptance of Mike that he’d been petty and unwelcoming. Now, in the face of Mike’s generosity, he was deeply ashamed and embarrassed by his past behavior.

Grant didn’t know how to let Mike know all of his thoughts, so he merely nodded and summoned up a ghost of a smile. “Having powers is still cheating,” he murmured to him. He appreciated hearing Mike’s chuckle as he exited the room.

Once again there was silence as the door slammed shut. *Now what?* Grant didn’t know what to do. Here he was, alone with Coulson, and both pleased and terrified by the opportunity. On the one hand, he was looking forward to the prospect of having Coulson realize that Grant truly was a
member of his team and had been working for SHIELD this entire time. Hopefully he would no longer face the look of disappointment and anger on Coulson’s face at the idea of someone he trusted betraying him. Maybe, like Fury, he would even tell him that he did a good job.

However, there was another possibility, and it was one that kept Grant’s eyes glued to the floor, too scared to look Coulson in the eye. Grant had lied to him, disobeyed his orders, killed SHIELD agents, kidnapped Skye and FitzSimmons, helped criminals like Ian Quinn escape the Fridge and, perhaps worst of all, shot up Lola. While Coulson couldn’t imprison Grant for his work as a triple, he was under no obligation to take him back on the team either. Maybe he never would be welcome back on the Bus and the thought of that frightened Grant more than he could even accept. For a moment, he flashed back to that moment in the Juvenile Center when Garrett told him that his parents were pressing charges and Christian wanted him tried as an adult. Just like it had then, the fear of the future left him speechless. Grant could feel his whole body shaking and he nothing more than to sit down again.

Grant was concentrating so hard on keeping himself upright that he was startled when Coulson abruptly sat down on the ground and leaned against the wall. “That was pretty intense,” Coulson said ruefully with a sigh. “I never thought I’d ever have to fight John Garrett.”

Grant sat down beside him and almost cried with the relief of no longer worrying that he would fall. Like Coulson, he too leaned against the wall but he still couldn’t look at him. “Yeah, me neither.”

And it was true. Never, even in his entire time as a triple, did Grant envision having to fight John. He had imagined a future in which he was free of John’s influence but it had never come at the cost of his life. He had seen himself visiting John in prison or corresponding with him should he have taken the easy way out and just left. But he had never seen a future in which he would either kill John himself or pave the way for someone else to do it. Yet that was what had happened today. He was grateful that Coulson hadn’t seen this coming either.

Coulson was silent for a long time. “So I guess you weren’t lying about being a triple,” he said finally.

Grant shook his head. “I’ve been working with Fury and Hill since before I joined your team,” he told him in a dull voice. He knew that Coulson had to believe him since Fury confirmed it but that still didn’t mean that he would allow him back on the team. Maybe he’d hurt them all too much. Why would they even want him? He was weak, unworthy. Even though he was no longer Hydra, he had been at one time.

“So Fury sent May to spy on me and Hill refused to let me know that you were a triple,” Coulson said in a disgruntled voice. “Typical SHIELD.”

“I wish Maria Hill had told you. It would have made things a lot easier,” Grant said resentfully. Although it helped to know that Coulson was irritated with her too, Grant still planned on having a very irate discussion with Hill when the time was right.

Coulson nodded thoughtfully and sat silently for an instant. Then, as if a thought just occurred to him, he snorted. “Was anyone working for me?” he asked without heat. He shook his head sheepishly. “I have to become more suspicious. Maybe I should check with Skye and Fitz to see if they’re working for Stark.”

In a different moment in time, Grant would have laughed. That was Coulson for you: finding the humor in every situation, no matter how bad. But this was too serious for Grant to laugh or even appreciate his wit. In fact, at this moment, he didn’t know if he would ever laugh again. All he
wanted to know now was whether or not he would get to go home. He had to make Coulson understand that he wanted that more than anything and that he wasn’t the enemy, not even close. But he didn’t have a clue how to start. What could he even say: “Sorry I threw you all under the Bus in order to complete my mission but hey, it wasn’t personal”? Yeah, that should do the trick.

But he had to say something, so Grant finally looked over at Coulson, his expression pleading. “At least we were all on the same side,” he managed to get out.

“That we were,” Coulson replied with a slight smile. He looked straight at Grant, not allowing him to drop his eyes. “Have you talked with any other members of the team?”

Grant tried to read him, uncertain if Coulson merely wanted information or if knew something Grant didn’t. But his expression was blank. Grant nodded. “I’ve talked with everyone, including FitzSimmons before they left the Bus. They all know about my triple status.”

“FitzSimmons?” Coulson asked in a worried tone. “They’re ok then?”

Grant nodded. “I did my best to get them to safety; Fury let me know that they were fine.”

Now it was Coulson’s turn to nod. “Well,” he said in a resumption of his usual brisk manner as he got to his feet, “we’ve got work to do. I’m sure we’ll have time to talk more later but for now, am I correct in assuming that you want your old bunk back on the Bus?”

Did he just say what I thought he did? For a moment, Grant just stared up at Coulson, waiting for the other shoe to drop, for him to say that no, the team no longer wanted him. When it became apparent that Coulson wasn’t joking, Grant said softly, “Yes, Sir. If you’re willing to allow me back on board, I would appreciate it. I even know where it’s parked.”

“Good. I didn’t look forward to searching for it. If we lose it one more time, Fury might take it back,” Coulson said, extending his hand to Grant who took it gratefully. Once he was on his feet, Coulson gave him a direct stare, the kind that always made Grant feel like Coulson was looking right through him, evaluating his worth. He tensed, waiting, but Coulson just smiled and put his hand on Grant’s arm.

Then the smile fell off Coulson’s face and his voice softened. “Grant, you devoted most of your life to a deranged narcissist who never gave a damn about anyone and now he’s dead. You’ve got the rest of your life to wrestle with the question of who you are without him. I imagine that it’s going to take some time for you to figure that out but I’m confident the results will be worth it. I look forward to getting to know the real Grant Ward.”

The real Grant Ward. Grant mulled that phrase over. He’d never thought of himself in exactly that way but Coulson was right. He’d been living in John’s shadow for 15 years, losing a lot of himself in the process. He’d started on the path of becoming who he was always meant to be when he went to Maria Hill but there was a lot more work to be done. Now, finally, he could start doing it. Grant said nothing but purposefully turned his back on John’s body. He looked Coulson straight in the eye. Surely it wasn’t going to be that easy. Nothing in his life ever was. He needed to stop being weak and face whatever he would have to endure.

“I’m very thankful for your understanding, Sir,” Grant started, looking at Coulson. “I know that I hurt the team but I am willing…”

“Agent Ward,” Coulson interrupted firmly. “We’re all professionals and you had a job to do. I may not approve of all of your methods but I sure as hell can’t deny the results,” he said waving his hand to include the entire room encompassing several unconscious supersoldiers and Garrett’s...
body. “I’d be a fool to turn away someone with your skills and besides, you’re a member of my team. If you want it, there will always be a place for you. We can figure out the rest later. Right now, I need you to help secure the Hydra prisoners the others probably have rounded up. Are you up for that?”

Really? That’s it? He couldn’t be this lucky. But Grant wasn’t one to look a gift horse in the mouth. “Yes, Sir! I think I know where some of them are,” he replied.

“After you,” Coulson said as he held out his arm gesturing for Grant to go first.

Grant started to leave the room but couldn’t resist turning around and looking at John’s body one last time. He knew it was a bad idea for Coulson to know just how much he was affected by John’s death but he couldn’t help himself. Yes, John had been a psychopath and had emotionally and physically abused Grant. But they’d also had fun times and John taught Grant almost everything he knew about being a spy. It was because of John that he was able to take care of himself and, by extension, others. Didn’t that count for something? He flinched when he felt Coulson put his hand on his shoulder but relaxed when he saw that he too was looking at John.

“He was my friend for many years and saved my life more than once,” Coulson said softly, still looking at John. “I wish things had ended differently.”

Grant nodded, then turned and led the way out of the room. Despite his almost overwhelming grief at what had just happened, he knew that now was not the time to indulge in feelings and he needed to leave his past behind him. So, Grant did what he always did: he compartmentalized and focused directly on the task at hand. Once out in the hall, he retraced his steps to where he’d last left Trip and May, hoping that he wasn’t going to have to deal with more fallen teammates. He really didn’t think he could handle much more grief.

True to Coulson’s theory about SHIELD’s dominance, once Grant rounded the corner of the hallway where he’d last seen SHIELD and Hydra battling it out, he saw a bunch of low-level Hydra agents standing in a row, their hands cuffed behind their backs. SHIELD agents were swarming around them. Other SHIELD agents were loading dead bodies onto stretchers and carrying them off to another location. Grant tried not to wonder how many of those bodies he’d known personally. Trip and May were at the end of the hall and, when Grant craned his neck to see who they were talking to, he gave a sigh of relief. So Trip did manage to save Elsie Carson. And while May was heavily favoring her right leg, she looked like she was managing quite well.

Coulson silently observed the hallway for a second, then he once again put his hand on Grant’s shoulder. Unfortunately, it was his right shoulder, the one May grazed with her shot, so he tried not to wince or pull away even though it hurt. Coulson must have understood though because he immediately removed his hand and shook his head slightly. He had always disapproved of Grant’s unwillingness to admit to pain and now, given the revelations about his time with Garrett, he was sure that Coulson was going to be even more of a stickler about him getting treatment and rest. Grant sighed internally but that too could wait.

“It looks like they have everything under control here,” Coulson said to Grant in a low tone. “I’m going to go meet with Fury. Help May and Trip with the prisoners. We’re going to need to transport them to the Hub. It’s my understanding that Victoria Hand is back in charge there.” He smirked a little. “I’m sure she’ll be glad to see you again.”

Saving Agent Hand and her guards from being shot and dumped in the ocean seemed like a lifetime ago. Grant knew from what Skye said that Hand didn’t believe that he was a triple agent but, with Fury and Hill confirming it, she would have to get with the program. Although he approved of Hand’s organizational skill and liked her no-nonsense command presence, he was less
than impressed with her management style and disliked how she’d treated the team during the two missions they’d worked with her. She’d been particularly insulting to Skye. Grant smirked a little too. He was going to enjoy watching her squirm when she had to admit that she’d been wrong about him.

Grant nodded shortly to Coulson to let him know that he understood and then set off down the hall toward Trip, May and Carson. So much had happened in such a short amount of time that Grant was shocked when some of the SHIELD agents let out yells of protest at seeing him walk about freely. Many of them drew their guns and pointed them at him. *Oops.* He’d forgotten that not everyone knew about his triple status.

Grant immediately raised his hands in a surrender gesture until May yelled in her most Cavalry voice, “Stand down! He’s one of ours!”

Her order didn’t immediately quell the sounds of protest. Although most of the agents lowered their guns, he could still hear muttering and saw unfriendly looks on many of their faces. Grant sighed. He was probably going to have to get used to this, at least for a while. But May wasn’t having any of it. She limped a little into the middle of the hallway so she could see most of the SHIELD agents.

“Agent Ward was a triple agent for SHIELD and is responsible for saving a lot of lives,” she said sternly. She looked around fiercely until all of the noise died down and then said in a low tone that somehow carried over the entire length of the silent hallway, “If any of you touch him, you’ll have to answer to me.” Then, almost as if she wasn’t worried about their response, she limped back over to Trip and Carson.

Grant’s steps hesitated and his heart skipped a beat. If he hadn’t been so well-trained, he would’ve stopped walking altogether. May not only believed him but was actually protecting him! He could barely process it. On top of everything else – his reunion with Skye, reconnecting with May, Trip and Coulson, John’s death and his freedom from Hydra bondage – her protection of him was almost too much. So, Grant took a deep breath and again focused on the task at hand. However, this was difficult because once the SHIELD agents stopped throwing him hostile looks, the Hydra agents started. *This is fun.*

“So you’re the one who’s been picking us off,” one said in a dark tone. “I guess Garrett’s Golden Boy isn’t so golden after all,” another said snidely. Grant could hear murmurs of, “Traitor!” from several others. He ignored them and kept walking, pleased to hear the commands of “Shut up!” coming from the various SHIELD agents dealing with the prisoners.

After what felt like the longest walk of his life, Grant finally reached Trip, May and Carson. He tried his best to ignore Carson’s expression of puzzled disbelief and instead focused on Trip who looked seriously at him.

“I take it from your presence here that Garrett is gone for good this time?” Trip asked.

Grant nodded. “He picked a fight with Deathlok and lost,” he told him.

“Wish I could’ve been there to see it,” Trip replied.

“No you don’t,” Grant said shortly. He turned to May, desperate for a change of subject. “Coulson told me to help you arrange for the prisoners to be transferred to the Hub. Apparently Agent Hand is back in charge there.”

May nodded. “Trip and I are going to confer with the other SHIELD agents and get the transfer
“It’s probably best if you stay here with her. When we return, we’ll get Skye and deal with the people in the Incentives program.”

Grant nodded, his heart finally finding something to fill it with joy. Skye. He desperately wanted to find her and talk with her now that he was free to be her teammate again. And, once they were back on the Bus, he really needed some alone time with her. He thought that his expression was as blank as it usually was but apparently he was wrong because he saw May smile faintly at him. Then she and Trip went further down the hall and left Grant alone with Carson. The joy slipped out of him almost as quickly as it came because he had been dreading this moment.

Carson turned to him, her face as blank as he wanted his to be. “So, Garrett’s dead,” she said deliberately, like she was just now believing it. “Was it always your plan to kill him?”

For some reason, this stung. “No,” he replied shortly, looking Carson straight in the eyes. “But given what he turned into, there was no other way to stop him.”

She nodded slowly, as if she was digesting the information. She pursed her lips. “I take it that you’re the one who killed all those Hydra agents, including Fistal, Rickard and Kohl.”

Grant nodded but said nothing. Where is she going with this? She obviously knew the answer, so it was like she was going down a roll call of his sins, trying to shame him for his misdeeds.

“Well,” Carson said with a sigh, “Fistal was no loss and Kohl I wish I’d killed myself but Rickard? I’m surprised you crossed him off. You two always seemed friendly.”

Grant felt a wave of anger wash over him. How dare she judge him! “I gave Rickard every chance but, in the end, it came down to him or me. I chose me because I’m a survivor. That’s what I do,” he told her shortly. “Besides, he was getting out of hand and you know it.”

“Yes,” she replied slowly. “That does happen sometimes.” She looked speculatively at Grant, like she was trying to figure out his motivations. “And how long have you been a triple agent?” Grant started to answer and she held up her cuffed hands – they’d actually been nice and cuffed her in front – to keep him from replying. “I know it hasn’t been that long because I know you Ward and the last time we worked together, you were Hydra through and through.”

This stung too but in a different way. Elsie Carson had been one of the few Hydra leaders who had been nice and she’d always been especially friendly to Grant, almost motherly in a way that he craved. However, if she thought he’d been Hydra, then she never knew him at all.

“You’re right. It hasn’t been that long, probably around a year.” He saw her expression lighten and knew that she hoped to turn him back. “But you’re wrong about me being Hydra. I was never loyal to Hydra. I was only loyal to Garrett and now he’s gone.”

She nodded slowly again and studied Grant keenly for a moment. “And you’re sorry about that, aren’t you?” she asked softly.

It was his turn to nod. “I wish there had been another way,” he acknowledged. It was a relief to say that out loud and Grant knew that Carson was the only person he could admit this to. His teammates would never understand his feelings toward John and, given his shaky status with them, he knew it would be wise to keep his grief and regret under wraps.

Grant could see that May and Trip were ending their conversation with the other agents, so he knew that he only had a few more minutes at most alone with Carson. He turned more fully towards her, preparing to tell her how much he’d appreciated her care and concern for him over the
years and advising her to work with SHIELD so that they would go easy on her. But just as he was
opening his mouth to utter those words, Grant realized that he couldn’t say them. As nice as Carson
had been to him, she was still a Hydra leader and would probably always have the best interests of
that organization at heart. He couldn’t change that. Grant’s time in Hydra was over and, in order to
move forward, he had to let them go, even the good parts. If word got out that he’d helped a Hydra
leader, things would not go well for him.

“Take care of yourself, Elsie,” he said to her just as May and Trip rejoined them. He turned to look
at them and he felt rather than saw Carson’s intense gaze upon his face. May frowned at her but
Grant acted oblivious to Carson’s attention. He hoped that SHIELD wouldn’t be too hard on her
but there was nothing else he could do. Carson too was now a part of his past.

Grant watched as the SHIELD agents started leading the Hydra prisoners down the hall. Most of
the dead bodies had been removed, so the hallway was emptying out. Trip took Carson by the arm
and followed the other prisoners. Grant watched silently until they had rounded the corner and
there was no one else present. He and May were the only two left. He looked at the empty hall for
a moment longer and then turned to May. She was smiling slightly at him.

“Let’s go find Skye,” she said.
Flashback

The Lorelei mission seemed to put a damper on the already drained team. Grant and May were tentative with each other; he recognized that they both were trying to find a way around the awkwardness of being colleagues who were once lovers. Grant had observed other agents in the same situation and knew that part of the success in rebuilding trust was merely time. So, both of them gave brief smiles and were carefully polite when they needed to interact. They even continued to spar, mostly in silence. It was exhausting.

FitzSimmons were acting different too but Grant realized that they had been pulling away from the team since Jemma had given Skye the GH-325. The duo closeted themselves in the Lab more than usual and gave each other significant looks during their increasingly brief interactions with the rest of the team. With Skye’s absence, May and Grant’s terse interactions and FitzSimmons rarely present, meal times became more of a chore, something to be avoided as much as possible. And without FitzSimmons’ usual chatter, Grant and Skye’s training or May’s pranks, the Bus itself was much quieter than usual. That too was exhausting.

Even though Coulson now spent a great deal of time in his office, apparently the low mood on the plane was not lost on him. He came into the kitchen area in the midst of one of the rare times when the whole team was eating together. Even Skye had been granted leave by Jemma to eat with everyone else and, had it not been for her conversation, the meal would have been eaten in silence. As it was, all talk immediately stopped when Coulson rounded the corner. Grant felt a pang of longing for the old days when they all ate, talked and laughed like a family.

Coulson leaned against the kitchen counter. “You all have been working incredibly hard without a break for a while now and I want you to know that SHIELD appreciates it,” he said grimly. Then he suddenly smiled. “And that’s why they have granted you all a full four days off, starting tomorrow. We’ll land in Germany soon and I don’t expect any of you back until Sunday evening.” With that surprising announcement, he ambled out of the kitchen, a smile still gracing his face. Five sets of eyes followed him.

Grant’s eyes widened as he processed his shock. He usually received at least some down time after completing a mission but giving time away merely because people were working hard was a foreign concept to him. He glanced quickly at May and saw that she too appeared somewhat surprised. Perhaps this was unusual for all specialists, not just for those existing solely for commands from Garrett and Hydra. FitzSimmons seemed to take this in stride as they just nodded and smiled in satisfaction. Grant kept himself from rolling his eyes with difficulty.

“Wow!” Skye said. Grant noted automatically that her usual animated enthusiasm was a bit muted and her eyes didn’t light up the way they usually did. “How cool is that?” she asked the table in general.

“I don’t know if it’s cool but it’s certainly wise,” Jemma replied. “After all, human beings aren’t robots…”

“At least most of us aren’t,” Skye interrupted, looking at Grant with a bit of her old sass and a wicked smile. Grant gave her a hint of a laugh and shook his head.

Jemma completely ignored all of this as she continued, “…and we all need down time in order to
do our best work. In fact, there is plenty of research to support the idea that creativity requires free time in which to consider new ideas…”

Grant tuned out the rest of her conversation as his eyes met Skye’s. Without even realizing how he knew, Grant could tell that she, like him, was remembering the last time the team had down time and the two of them had gone on their amazing camping trip. He also could tell that she was waiting for him to suggest another outing for them. Instead, he gave Skye a momentary smile, nodded to May and said, “I have paperwork to finish. I’ll talk to you all later,” and quickly left the table. He was in such a hurry to go that he didn’t notice the silence that descended on the group as he left.

Once Grant got back to his bunk, he sat back against the wall so that he could think. He was unbelievably tempted to devise a “training exercise” for the two of them (*The places I could show her in Germany!* but eventually conceded that he couldn’t risk the two of them going off alone. He and Skye had become far too close for things between them not to progress further if they had no duties or supervision. So, although he desperately wanted to be alone with her and allow the course of their relationship to flow smoothly, he decided to take off by himself for a few days. Telling her the news was going to be excruciating, so he held off and spent the rest of the evening reading a book in his bunk.

The next morning, Grant got up early. He quickly packed a bag for a few days, put it in the cargo hold for easy access, and headed to the Medpod where Skye was also packing.

“Hey,” Skye said when looked up and saw him hovering in the door. “Come to help me move?” she asked as a huge smile came over her face.

“Simmons actually released you?” Grant asked as he stepped inside the small pod. There wasn’t a lot of room to move around, so he leaned against the doorway and crossed his arms. He was a bit puzzled at Jemma’s decision because he knew that she kept taking blood samples, a sure sign that Skye’s recovery was still being monitored.

“Yep,” Skye replied breezily as she put her computer in her bag and kept looking around for other things she wanted back in her bunk. “Got the ‘all clear’ to resume my regular activities.”

Grant just smirked and raised his eyebrows.

“OK, OK,” Skye said as she sat on the bed in a huff. “I’m free to return to my bunk as long as I don’t overexert myself, lift any weight over 10 pounds, go off the Bus unattended, or fail to check in with her twice a day.”

A grumpy look crossed her face and it was all Grant could do not to laugh. She was clearly chafing under Simmons’ confinement but it was so wonderful that they were even having this conversation. He couldn’t imagine what would have happened had Skye not gotten better. “Well, at least you’ll get to sleep in your own bed tonight,” he told her.

Skye looked over at him and noticed his amused expression. “Don’t start,” she grumbled. But then her face lit up in a way that never boded well and she stood up to face him. *Uh oh.* “So I was thinking about our free weekend. If you have another training exercise planned, I’m more than fine with sleeping in another bed.”

Grant’s stomach dropped while he simultaneously marveled at the way Skye could effortlessly insert a double meaning into their conversations, all while keeping his expression as blank as possible. He couldn’t let her know just how much he wanted to be alone with her. He couldn’t afford to think about their camping trip or the possibilities another “training exercise” would bring
or he would lose focus. Now was definitely not the time for them to get romantically involved, no matter how much he (and it seemed she) wanted it. But how was he going to tell her? He was horrible at this stuff!

“No training exercise this time,” he said, glancing down so that he wouldn’t see her disappointment. Don’t be a coward! You’ve got to sell this! Look at her! So Grant looked back up at Skye and tried to ignore her hurt expression. “You still need your rest and I…” he faltered for a moment and, despite his best efforts, his eyes slid off to the side as he finished, “…I need some alone time. This last mission was tough.”

Grant had no idea of what to expect from Skye after admitting to needing time alone to regroup from Lorelei’s mind control. He imagined that she might be angry at him for blowing her off or perhaps she’d sneer at his weakness. So, when Skye walked into Grant’s personal space and gently took his hand from where it was lodged against his chest, his eyes automatically flew to hers in surprise, still frightened of what he would find.

The hurt that had been there was gone almost as if by magic. Skye smiled and squeezed his hand. “I know it was. Go do what you need to do,” she said in a low voice. She searched his eyes for a moment longer and her gaze lingered a bit on his lips before her smile broadened. Then Skye took a step back and dropped his hand. “Maybe we can get in some light training when you get back,” she said in her regular voice as she turned to get her bag.

At that, Grant almost threw caution to the wind. After watching Skye swallow her hurt in order to be kind to him, his self-control was hanging on by a thread. If only she knew just how much he wanted to do nothing but spend the next several days holding her hand, basking in her smile, and doing whatever else her recovery allowed. But he couldn’t. Not now. Later. And it was only the thought of later that kept him from tenderly putting her on the bed and climbing in after her. Instead, he replied, “You can count on it,” as the two of them left the Medpod and headed for the bunks.

When Skye turned toward the bunks, he said, “See you soon!” and headed off the plane. It took all of his willpower not to turn around and look at her but Grant knew that if he did, he would never leave. So he steeled his resolve, grabbed his bag and walked to the nearest train station.

Grant spent the next two days reading entertaining novels (Screw Garrett’s reading list!), hiking in the woods surrounding the city, and even sleeping as much as he could. He tried to avoid thinking about Lorelei or even Skye and just focused on clearing his mind. Grant could sense that things had been put into motion and that his skills and loyalty would soon be put to the test; he would need to be on top of his game. However, despite his resolve to concentrate solely on himself, he still headed back to the Bus a day earlier than he planned. The lure of Skye was too strong.

“Hey Rook,” he said when he found Skye in the Lounge reading. She abruptly dropped her book at the sound of his voice and he sighed heavily. Situational awareness, Skye! But then he grinned at her, “Ready to do some training?”

Skye swung her legs to put them on the floor, almost like she was ready to go, but then just looked up at him, her expression puzzled. “What are you doing back so soon? We weren’t expecting any of you until tomorrow evening.” Coulson had stayed on the Bus with her.

“You should know better than that,” Grant said with an attempt at casualness. “I’m your SO. I can’t let you start developing bad habits.” Skye opened her mouth to protest but closed it when she saw the paper bag he brought from behind his back. Her eyes widened as he opened the bag to show her the deep dish apple strudel inside. She looked up at him in bewilderment. Grant grinned and shrugged. “It’s a good thing that I’m still on vacation for another…” he consulted his watch, “…45
Grant ended up being on vacation for a lot longer than 45 minutes as he and Skye ate the strudel and talked about nothing. The two of them did train very, very lightly (mostly just stretches) but gave it up quickly once the others started arriving – also much earlier than expected – back on the Bus. The team decided to go out to dinner as a group and then put their much-neglected board games to use. Even May agreed to play Pictionary, demonstrating an incredible knack for drawing. She and Coulson easily defeated the other two teams. Much to his amusement, Grant and Fitz came in second because the two younger women were terrible artists. It was all he could do not to laugh when Fitz told a surly Jemma, “It’s OK, Simmons. You can’t be good at everything.”

Grant was extremely grateful for the team’s brief respite because almost immediately, things started heating up. The day after the team’s evening together, Coulson called both Grant and May into his office to catch them up on current events. Apparently Deathlok had attacked Garrett and Trip at a SHIELD safe house. Although he acted astonished by the news, Grant was actually expecting something of this sort. He hadn’t been told the details but he knew Garrett had set up events so that the hunt for the Clairvoyant would kick into high gear; the only thing he wasn’t expecting was the timing. Grant thought he would have more time. He felt a twinge of both panic and relief. He wanted more time with the team but, then again, he was more than ready for his assignment as a triple to be over. Sure enough, Coulson relayed Garrett’s suggestion about how to proceed with finding the Clairvoyant.

After Coulson briefed them, May headed to the cockpit to set the coordinates for the rendezvous with an aircraft carrier to pick up Agents Hand, Blake, Sitwell, Triplet and Garrett while Grant talked with Fitz about what equipment would be needed. Once that was accomplished, he convinced Skye to play a few rounds of Battleship. True to form, she won every time.

Coulson, Grant and May were all on hand to watch the five agents board the Bus. Grant was acutely aware of his mixed feelings as he watched Garrett swagger his way up the cargo ramp. On the one hand, this was how he enjoyed John the most: being on a mission, working together. There was no doubt that John was charismatic and Grant, even knowing his flaws, wasn’t immune. He could recall hundreds of missions – legitimate or otherwise – in which he’d relished John’s humor, devil-may-care attitude and amazing physical skill. He even got a kick out of watching John manipulate others into doing what he wanted, just as long as the end result wasn’t horrible. Grant even now felt the pull of John and rejoiced in seeing him again. On the other hand though, Grant knew this was all a ruse to fool SHIELD into believing that the Clairvoyant was real. It would be Grant’s job to kill the patsy and he dreaded what he had to do. That was the downside of knowing John Garrett: the price often was too high.

“How you doing, Ward?” Garrett asked him after everyone had greeted each other. “I heard you had an interesting encounter with an Asgardian,” he said with a leer.

Grant nodded. “I did,” he said unsmilingly.

“Hey Phil, you don’t mind if Ward and I hang out here in the cargo hold while the rest of you get strapped down elsewhere, do you? I’d like to hear some of the details about this Lorelei. She sounds like an incredible woman,” Garrett said jovially to Coulson.

“No, of course not,” Coulson replied. “Make yourself comfortable.” He waved his hand to include the cargo hold. May said, “Wheels up in 10,” and then they both headed to the cockpit.

Grant watched Agent Hand roll her eyes (at any other time, this probably would have amused him) and immediately take off for the lounge with Sitwell and Blake trailing behind. Trip shrugged and wandered off, probably to find Jemma, since he went toward the Lab instead of the Lounge. Fitz is
The two men watched everyone else leave in silence and then, once he was certain they were out of earshot, Garrett turned to Grant. He threw his arm around his shoulders. It was all Grant could do not to flinch or throw his arm off. Instead he looked around and gestured at two jump seats. Garrett removed his arm as they both sat and strapped in.

“So, the Asgardian mind-control trick didn’t put our mission at risk, did it?” Garrett asked Grant in a low tone.

Grant shook his head. “It doesn’t work like that. It was more that she told me what to do and I did it.” He felt like throwing up. He had just spent several days trying to forget about what happened only for John to bring it up and throw it in his face. Now all those feelings he’d worked so hard to excise were back in full force. What he wouldn’t give to see John under Lorelei’s control!

“So kind of like our relationship then,” John laughed. “Except I imagine there were things you did with her that you’ve never done with me.” He nudge him with his elbow.

Grant just looked at him in silence. Not even for the sake of his mission could he manage to laugh or smile about what had happened with Lorelei. It was too painful.

John’s face tightened at Grant’s stony face and he stopped laughing. He leaned forward, then adopted an expression of caring. John always did know how to read a room. “We’ve come a long way, Son, and we’re nearing the end. I just want to make certain that you’re not losing focus. I need you on your toes.”

Grant felt a fleeting moment of panic. What does he know? He thanked his lucky stars for all the work he’d put in over the years toward maintaining his blank expression. If he was going to survive this, he couldn’t give anything away. “What makes you think I’m not?” he shot back.

Garrett shrugged. “You’ve been different ever since you got on board this plane.” He looked thoughtfully at Grant. “Or maybe it’s more specific than that. I’ve noticed that your rookie has made a big impact on you. I get that you’re trying to feel her out, so to speak…” John stopped and gave Grant a wicked grin, “but you were supposed to maintain near zero contact, remember?”

Grant’s panic transformed into anger. As the Bus started its ascent, he felt like his anger was cresting right along with it. Of course he remembered! How could he forget, with John constantly forcing him to keep other people at arm’s length? Grant seethed as he recalled the trouble it caused whenever John found out about a dalliance with a woman or if someone got a little too close. It eventually became too much of a hassle to even try, so Grant shut himself off from others and they’d let him. He’d missed out on so much because of the “near zero contact” command and he was so over it. But he couldn’t let John see his true feelings, not yet.

Grant nodded slowly. “I remember,” he replied in a low tone. “Nothing has changed.”

“Good,” John said, clapping him on the back. “Just keep yourself sharp and don’t forget what we came here to do. There’ll be time for nookie later.” He smiled condescending at Grant. “Besides, didn’t you just have sex with a goddess? That should tide you over for a while.”

Grant merely nodded, unclicked his seatbelt and headed toward the Lounge. There was only so much Garrett he could stand.

Once the Bus hit 50,000 feet, all the upper level Agents met in the Lounge to discuss the plan of teaming up to contact various Clairvoyant potentials. Grant found the group’s positioning to be
interesting. Trip, John, Coulson, May and himself were facing the other three – Hand, Sitwell and Blake – the skeptics (or at least two of them were; Sitwell was clearly a believer of the worst sort). Coulson and Garrett took turns telling the others of the plan, that all of the higher level agents would team up to hunt down potential Clairvoyants – each team having only minimal information – with Skye being only person who knew the full scope of the mission.

As anticipated, Hand was snarky about Skye and it was all Grant could do not to respond in kind. But he couldn’t, especially not in light of Garrett’s recent concerns regarding his feelings about her. Hand clearly had no idea how gifted Skye was and it was just like her to stand behind protocol in order to mask her dislike. Her constant denigration of Skye confused him. Was it her Rising Tide background, her end-run around the system or just her personality that got Hand so bristly when it came to Skye?

“You do understand that this person you’re referring to, she’d need to be a SHIELD agent to be granted that level of access,” Hand said acerbically.

“I’m glad you brought that up.” Coulson said calmly. Grant and May shared a look; it was all he could do not to smile. Leave it to Coulson to finagle SHIELD into making Skye an agent.

When Skye got to the Lounge, May mysteriously disappeared while Coulson explained the op to her. She immediately one-upped everyone by offering the possibility of doing a double blind mission so that no one person (other than Skye herself) would know the specifics until they got where they were going. Grant smothered his smirk as he watched Hand tried to cover being impressed and Coulson hide his pride. Garrett didn’t even bother.

“I like how you think,” he told Skye with a charming grin. “I like how she thinks,” he said directly to Hand. Even though Grant knew that some of this was an act (one especially designed to irritate Hand), he still felt a rush of affection for John. This was the John Garrett he knew and loved. This charming, dedicated and tough agent was the person for whom he had wanted to work all these years. It was this person who had Trip wrapped around his finger, was friends with Coulson and was considered one of SHIELD’s top operatives.

“One question,” Skye said briskly, turning to Coulson. “How am I supposed to access all the classified files without someone in the room? I don’t have clearance.”

“Now you do,” Coulson replied with a smirk. He whipped out a SHIELD badge, smiled and said, “Welcome to SHIELD, Skye.”

Skye looked stunned and Grant noted with amusement that, for once, she was speechless. She turned as May came into the Lounge with FitzSimmons following behind her. All three were smiling at her. “I told them to come up,” May said, her smile filled with pride. Grant looked down, a smile on his face as well, as he reflected that this must be what it would feel like to be in a family that cared about each other.

Skye’s expression turned from surprise to delight as she looked around at the other agents. Blake just looked bored (When is that guy ever not a jerk?) while Hand had a small smile on her face. Perhaps she was won over? Both Garrett and Trip were smiling broadly, making up for the less than enthusiastic response from the other higher level agents.

“I…I…I don’t know what to say,” Skye said quietly. “Thank you.”

Grant tuned out Coulson’s response as the smile fell off of his face and he tightened his arms across his chest. All of a sudden, Skye’s elevation to SHIELD agent and the knowledge of what was coming made him regret how quickly his time on the Bus had gone. Would Skye need him as
her SO as much now that she was full-fledged member of SHIELD? There were protocols to be followed and other trainers who would be asked to work with her. It was no longer going to be just the two of them. Plus, the way this mission was going to go ensured that things would never be as they were with the team. Grant hadn’t appreciated until this moment how much he was going to hate that.

He suddenly realized that things were happening as everyone started scattering. May smiled again (Two genuinely warm smiles in five minutes from the Cavalry? This must be a record!) and patted Skye on the arm as she took off for the cockpit. FitzSimmons took it in turns to hug Skye and tell her congratulations. Finally, Grant and Skye were alone. He had no idea what to say. They’d worked so hard for this moment but, now that it was here, he wanted to go back to the beginning. He knew that it was a selfish thought and he was sincerely happy for Skye but things had been so much easier back then. Now they were going to get complicated.

Skye tore her gaze away from her badge to look at Grant, who took a step closer to her. “Couldn’t have done it without a great and very patient SO,” she said, looking up at him. How can she make even the simplest statement flirtatious? It made him both happy and sad. “Yeah, you could’ve,” he replied. And he meant it. Skye was an amazing woman who, once she set her mind on something, would accomplish it. Grant was glad that she appreciated his assistance but he sure as hell didn’t want her to think she owed him something, the way he’d believed for years that he’d owed Garrett. “I’m no clairvoyant but I do believe some things are meant to be.” He put his hand on her arm and started to leave.

Grant walked several feet down the hallway before he heard Skye running up behind him. She touched his arm as he turned to look at her. “Really,” she said, sincerity practically oozing from her. “Thank you. I…” she hesitated as she searched his expression. She swallowed hard. “I know how challenging I can be sometimes and I wanted you to know how much I appreciate all that you’ve done for me. I know we still have a long way to go until I’m fully trained but…”

Grant put his hand over hers and smiled warmly. “Skye,” he said to stop her rambling. “You’re welcome.”

She nodded, her smile lighting up her face, and gave him a hug. Knowing that everything was soon going to change, Grant pulled her close. This may be my last chance. Skye pulled back first, a puzzled look on her face which changed into a smile when she saw his grin. “I’ll see you later,” she said breathlessly as she ran down the hall. Grant watched her go, a smile lingering on his face, before he turned to go join the others.

Several hours later, he stepped into the Cage to find Skye sitting at the table, a row of cellphones in front of her. Grant sat down across from her and grinned as she started explaining how he would be given the name and profile of a potential Clairvoyant once he got within a mile of where the person was supposed to be.

Skye looked up and saw his grin. “What?” she asked.

“Nothing,” he replied. “It’s just that you look like a real agent.”

She grinned back. “Well, maybe that’s because I am a real agent.”

Grant nodded. “That must be it.” He stopped smiling and turned business-like. “So what else do I need to know?”

“Nothing. Your partner, Agent Triplet, will be given the set of coordinates to where your candidate
Grant sat back, crossed his arms and frowned. “You gave me Trip,” he said in a flat voice.

“Yeah,” Skye replied with a puzzled look. “What’s wrong with Trip? I thought you liked him. Although the pairings were supposed to be random, I cheated a little with you because I thought you might have some fun together.”

Grant was touched that Skye had tried to make him happy – at least as happy as he could get – and there wasn’t anything truly wrong with Trip. It was just that there was distinct tension between them and, right now, Grant would’ve preferred even Victoria Hand to someone he had to watch closely. He sighed deeply. There wasn’t anything he could do about it now and he didn’t want Skye to feel badly about doing something nice for him.

“Trip’s a good guy. We just got into a scuffle the last time he was here but I’m sure we’re both professional enough to be over it by now.” He smiled briefly at her. “Thanks for thinking of me.”

Unexpectedly, being with Trip on their mission was actually somewhat fun, at least at first. On the way to their coordinates, Trip entertained Grant with funny stories about his family and all the SHIELD superstars he’d known. In turn, Grant told some humorous anecdotes about his missions with Garrett and then some about the team. Trip especially enjoyed hearing about May’s pranks and responded by sharing some of his own. However, once they got closer to where they were supposed to be, Grant could feel the tension return. Some of it he attributed to the natural tension they both were feeling about the possibilities of what could occur (although he knew that nothing was going to happen with their guy since he wasn’t the pawn Garrett was using) but Grant guessed the rest of it had to do with Trip’s desire to show him what he could do, that he wasn’t just Grant’s substitute.

“So Garrett says your family is like a cable version of the Kennedys,” Trip said to Grant as they were walking along the fence leading up to Milton Keynes Prison in the United Kingdom. Grant was startled by the abrupt shift in topic (they had been discussing their training at the Academy) and turned to him in annoyance. Yeah, that makes them sound almost cool. If you only knew!

There was no way Garrett would have mentioned his family to Trip or to anyone else. He wouldn’t want people looking too hard at the way Grant separated from them. What is Trip’s game? “Huh. I doubt he said that,” Grant replied firmly as he sped up. Maybe if they walked fast, Trip wouldn’t want to chat.

Trip chuckled. “Fine. I did my own research. Had to, following in Golden Boy’s footsteps.”

Had to? Why? Was it possible that, as Grant surmised earlier, Trip was actually jealous of him? Trip, the grandson of a Howling Commando – a family revered within SHIELD – was trying to live up to Grant? If anything, he should be jealous of Trip and Grant was dismayed to realize that, in fact, he was. And he had been for a while. Perhaps if his own family had been anything close to Trip’s, he wouldn’t have ended up here, a triple agent, unable to get close to anyone. No, he would have been Trip, able to pursue a woman freely the way Trip was trying to get Jemma.

“There a point to this?” he asked, irritated both with himself and the situation.

“Just trying to keep things light,” Trip said.

“Cause that’s what we all need right now,” Grant said mainly just to needle him.

“You know, maybe it is,” Trip replied, seemingly unfazed by Grant’s goading.
Grant stopped walking. He recognized that here was an opportunity to sell his story. If he was going to get away with killing the Clairvoyant patsy, he needed for people to understand why. He had to play the agent out of control and Trip, part of SHIELD royalty, was the perfect person to help him whether he knew it or not.

“You want to keep it light? The Clairvoyant almost killed Skye,” he said shortly as he stopped walking and faced Trip.

“Yeah?” Trip asked, unimpressed. “Well, he did kill my partner, Dan Monroe. Great guy. Had a son. You know what it’s like telling a 6 year old that his dad isn’t coming home?” Grant felt some of his anger drain away. No, he didn’t know what that would be like and it sounded awful. Plus, when Trip found out that Garrett was the Clairvoyant and had offed members of his own team because they were getting too close, there would be hell to pay. “So, we find the Clairvoyant, you might want to stay out of my way.”

Grant shook his head. Trip was almost doing his work for him. “We’ve all got axes to grind,” he told him. “But we’re here to take him in, not out.” Hopefully Trip would remember this conversation and testify to it when it counted. He could claim that Grant had no intention of killing anyone but was instead going for the capture, even going so far as to try to persuade Trip to that course of action as well. Besides, killing the fake Clairvoyant was Grant’s job, not Trip’s. Not only was that the plan but he didn’t want Trip to live with the guilt once the truth came out and he realized he killed an innocent man.

Once Grant and Trip returned to the Bus, they found the hunt for the Clairvoyant in high gear. They’d all fixed upon Thomas Nash as who they needed to pursue and were racing to accomplish that goal. Grant tried his best to stay out of everyone’s way. He even managed to find some time to spend with Skye since neither of them had anything to do until they reached their destination, an unused race track in Pensacola, Florida. Grant could almost feel the noose tightening around his neck the closer they got to Nash. The Hydra train was hurtling down the track at high speed now. Who knew where it would lead.

Storming the race track was chaos. Although he knew that Mike had to put on a show in order to convince the SHIELD agents that he was trying to kill them, Grant had been an agent long enough to know that anything could and would happen in the field. He could just as easily get taken out by accident as by the enemy. So he tried to be particularly careful, especially whenever he got close enough to Deathlok to see him. Sure enough, he had a close call in which, had he not been on his toes, Deathlok could’ve killed him with one of his rockets. Damn!

The agents chased Deathlok all over the building until they all got word that Coulson and Garrett had Nash trapped in a downstairs basement. Grant entered the room, uncertain of what to expect. All he had been told was that, after hearing the code phrases, he needed to put Nash out of his misery, hopefully in such a way that he would be exonerated for it later. Ward had been killing people for far too long to get overly excited about the prospect of crossing off Nash but, for this mission, he was a bit tense knowing that Skye was listening. He didn’t want her to think of him any differently.

The whole set-up was creepy. Nash sat in a chair in the middle of the room in a hospital gown, apparently paralyzed and unable to even breathe on his own. The only things that moved were his eyes which looked kind of dull and unfocused. Even if he hadn’t known that Nash was a stalking horse for Garrett, Grant would’ve wondered just how it was that a person as limited as Nash could have done even half of what the Clairvoyant claimed. How is anyone buying this? I guess people truly do see what they expect to see. Nash was surrounded by lots of computer hardware and television screens. Some were monitoring his vital signs while others showed security feeds from
around the building. One close-captioned his words – communicated via a computerized voice – as they were broadcast over a loud speaker.

Grant knew that Garrett had the room wired for visuals and sound and that the words from “the Clairvoyant” were actually coming from a Hydra agent off-site who could see and hear what was going on. He felt a little bit of relief at seeing Nash. Not only did he deserve to be locked up because of past deeds but, given the guy’s physical state, it was clear that his quality of life was pretty low. *Maybe this kill won’t be as bad as some others.*

Grant had been ignoring what “the Clairvoyant” was saying as he looked around the room trying to figure out how best to stage his elimination. He hastily tuned back in when Garrett said the code phrase, “Let’s pack this freak off to the Fridge where he belongs.” Grant needed to be ready because, according to the plan, “Nash” was about to start saying things to get under Coulson’s skin.

“I will join Raina in your prison, Agent Coulson,” the computerized voice said, “but I will see you wherever you go, just like I saw Agent Ward holding a bleeding Skye in his arms in that basement in Italy.”

Grant’s head jerked up. He hadn’t been privy to what “Nash” was going to say but he knew that these words were meant for him just as much as they were for Coulson. Garrett was trying to tell him that he was aware of Grant’s feelings. These words had the dual purpose of testing Grant, perhaps even goading him, just as much as they were to provoke Coulson. He felt sick and wanted to run out of the room, find Skye, and leave all this behind. Instead, Grant eased his pistol out of its holster. The rifle would make too loud of a noise and too much of a mess. No one was watching so he kept it lowered at his side, waiting for the right moment.

“I saw how you watched her dying, knowing it was all your fault,” the voice continued. “I see you’re angry, head clouded with lies. You’ve been betrayed and now you fear what’s about to happen.”

Grant swallowed back bile knowing that, once again, the words had a twofold intent. Garrett was letting him know that after Grant betrayed Coulson, a man who valued loyalty above almost everything else, he would take it badly. Garrett was also telling Grant that he saw the fear of the future in him but that he must go through with the mission. In that moment, it took all of Grant’s discipline to not point his pistol at Garrett. It was only the thought of fulfilling his assignment, of taking down Hydra so that he and his team would be safe, that stayed his hand.

“Nothing’s about to happen,” Coulson replied. Grant had to give him credit for keeping his cool. This whole situation was getting on Grant’s nerves, even knowing just how fake it was. “Just more empty threats from you.”

“No. It is inevitable. A force beyond your comprehension is coming for you, you and Skye. She has something we want and she will die giving it to us. I have seen it.” Grant knew that the time was almost right. He raised his pistol.

Coulson suddenly got into Nash’s face and the dull eyes widened a bit. “Go to hell,” Coulson whispered to the man in the chair malevolently.

“No matter where I go or what you do to me, I will always…” Grant took the shot. He aimed the bullet directly at Nash’s heart and was to certain to keep a fierce look on his face as the computerized voice stopped talking. SHIELD had to believe that he shot impulsively. He slowly lowered his pistol as all the agents in the room turned their guns on him instead of Nash.
Coulson just looked at him, stunned. “What did you do?” he asked Grant.

Grant said nothing as he handed his pistol to May and all of Nash’s vital signs flatlined. Garrett turned to look at them. “He’s dead. It’s over,” he commented, a disgusted look on his face. Not for the first time, Grant found himself impressed by John’s acting abilities. Seriously, the man should have won an Oscar for his many performances.

May led Grant to one of the SHIELD vehicles. He was surprised that her grip on his arm was more light than rough and she hadn’t even cuffed him. “I probably wouldn’t have done it but good for you,” she told him in a low voice as she helped him into the backseat and shut the SUV door. He could tell that the other agents felt similarly by the sympathetic looks they were giving him. A few even risked approving nods. Although he knew how fake the situation truly was, he felt a rush of warmth and gratitude for his fellow SHIELD agents. They had his back. How could he have missed that over the years?

Grant maintained his lost expression as he surreptitiously watched John talk with Coulson a few feet away from the SUV in which he was sitting. Judging by their expressions, it appeared to be going well. He knew that Garrett was going to try to be the one to transport him to the Hub for debrief but he doubted that Coulson would go for it. He wasn’t sure what Coulson would say to him but he felt certain that he would want to the chance to discuss things before he allowed him to go in front of a review board. Coulson wouldn’t just throw Grant to the wolves. That wasn’t his style. He also knew that Garrett would be trying to talk Coulson into going easy on him. Sure enough, he caught John’s wink as he walked away.

Once they got back to the Bus, May put Grant in the Cage, something he was expecting. Her continued gentleness as she led him there and the brief pat on his arm as she turned to go were what surprised him. Once in the Cage, Grant couldn’t keep still. First, he paced up and down the confined space, knowing that there was a possibility he was being monitored. He didn’t really believe that would be the case but you never knew with Coulson, so he wasn’t going to take any chances. Eventually he tired of doing that and just leaned against the wall looking miserable. This wasn’t hard as he was, in fact, very unhappy. Hard times were coming and this was just the beginning.

Shortly into their flight, the door opened. Grant was surprised to see Skye walk in, a water bottle in her hand and a cautious expression on her face. He smiled a bit as he pushed off the wall. He wasn’t certain that he wanted to have a conversation with her right now although he was delighted to see her. How bad is this going to be?

“Thought you were Coulson,” he said as he moved toward her. Skye closed the door behind her, walked over to the table and handed him the water. Her expression hadn’t changed and she still hadn’t said a word. Words were usually Skye’s weapons of choice, so her silence was ominous.

“Thanks,” Grant said as he took it and sat down across from her. He tried not to sigh at the heaviness of the tension in the room. Now that he was directly facing Skye, he found it difficult to meet her gaze. Does she hate me now?

“Why’d you do it?” she asked him quietly.

“I lost it,” he said, looking down at the table. “I got angry.” He finally looked up, relieved to see that her expression was the smallest bit lighter. “He pushed all the right buttons.”

“Coulson said the mission was to capture, not to kill,” Skye replied, stressing the last two words. Grant really needed her to believe in what he did and, honestly, it wasn’t that hard. If he hadn’t known that Nash wasn’t the Clairvoyant, if he like everyone else believed that Nash wanted to
harm Skye, Grant might have killed him anyway. As it was, he had to avoid killing Garrett – the true culprit – for what he did.

Grant leaned toward Skye and said in a passionate whisper, “Think about what the Clairvoyant said, what he’s done. Think about the Centipede program, how he experimented on innocent people like Mike Peterson, how he kidnapped and tortured Coulson, how he ordered Quinn to shoot you.”

As Grant listed the litany of offenses the Clairvoyant committed, he felt the familiar anger toward Garrett wash over him. If only he didn’t have to find out what he was doing for Fury and Hill, Grant would’ve already made him pay for all of this. Instead, he had to compartmentalize and damn, was it ever challenging!

“And he wasn’t going to stop, Skye,” he continued. Grant took it as a small victory that Skye was no longer looking disapproving. She was listening, considering his words. Perhaps he hadn’t screwed everything up with her. “Not until you…” He stopped as he saw her discomfited expression. He needed to let her know that he would always keep her safe. “I wasn’t gonna let that happen.”

Skye looked down, her expression much lighter than when she’d first entered the room. He’d done it! He’d gotten her on his side! Grant internally breathed a sigh of relief. “So what happens now?” she asked glumly and he knew it was because she was worried about him.

“I face a SHIELD Review Board. Whatever the punishment, I’ll take it. I deserve it.” Grant looked away but still saw Skye’s confused face out of the corner of his eye. He knew that she didn’t yet understand that you can do the right thing but still need to do penance for it. “I hope she never truly gets how difficult being a spy truly is. “But I don’t regret what I’ve done.” He slowly shook his head for emphasis.

“You don’t?”

“No,” he said, turning his head to look her in the eye again. “Not if it means you’re safe. You and the rest of the team.”

Skye looked down again. “When I heard him saying that he was coming for me and that I would die, I was so scared,” she said in a low voice. She glanced up at Grant and he saw that she had tears in her eyes. “I know I shouldn’t be happy he’s dead but I am. I just don’t want to lose you over it.” A single tear ran down her cheek.

“Hey,” Grant said gently as he wiped the tear from her face. “I’m not gonna let that happen either. We’re a team.” He sat back in his chair, worried that if he didn’t, he might do something that would jeopardize everything. He gestured toward the door. “You should go before Coulson gets here. You know how he gets when he’s angry and this one’s going to be a doozy.”

Skye smiled a little, nodded, got up and headed toward the door. She stopped and then, without looking at him, said, “Thanks for always looking out for me.”

“Skye,” Grant said, wanting her to turn and look at him. When she did, he gave her a rueful smile. “It may get bad before it gets better. Have faith.”

She nodded again and then left. Grant remained in the chair to await the coming of Coulson. He figured it wouldn’t be long and that, once he did get there, it wouldn’t be pleasant. He had to be ready for that. Even with his preparation, Grant was surprised by the level of Coulson’s agitation when did burst into the room some time later.
“Sir, first off, I want to say,” Grant started but he was quickly interrupted.

Coulson shut the door and practically bounded over to him. “Save it! I don’t want your apologies. I don’t want your excuses.” *This is unexpected. What the hell’s happened?*

“I’m not making excuses,” Grant replied calmly, shaking his head.

“The only thing I want to know,” Coulson said, interrupting him again, “is whether you made the call yourself or did someone order you to do it?” *What?*

Grant looked surprised, not a huge struggle considering that he actually was. He sat back in his chair. “*What?*”

“Don’t play dumb, Agent Ward. Just answer the question!” Grant maintained his look of outrage. “Did someone order you to kill the Clairvoyant?” Coulson continued without giving Grant a chance to answer. *What is going on?*

Grant stood up and paced in an agitated fashion. “I wasn’t put on your plane so you could make me a better person, Coulson!” he yelled at him. Maybe if he took the fight into his territory, Coulson would back off. “You put me here to make the hard call and I made it.”

“That’s not what I asked you, Agent Ward.”

Grant tried again, this time getting into Coulson’s personal space. “I answered your question. I wasn’t working with anybody. I take full responsibility for my own actions!”

“Then why…” Coulson started but stopped abruptly when Skye opened the door. “*What?*” he snapped at her.

Skye looked harried. “We have a problem,” she gasped out. She and Grant looked at each other. Grant wasn’t certain but he thought her look was somewhat beseeching. In that moment, he would have given anything to go to her aid. Was he going to make a promise to keep her safe only to be unable to help her not an hour later, all because of, once again, Garrett’s plans? Coulson ran out, leaving Grant alone to stew. Because of the Cage’s sound-dampening qualities, he couldn’t even hear what was going on outside of it.

About five minutes after Skye came to get Coulson, the plane abruptly shifted and changed course. Grant was fortunate enough to be sitting when it happened because otherwise he would have been thrown to the very hard floor. *What the hell is going on?* But he thought he knew. Hydra was coming.
Permanent Wrinkles

“But the memories that hang heaviest are the easiest to recall. They hold in their creases the ability to change one's life, organically, forever. Even when you shake them out, they've left permanent wrinkles in the fabric of your soul.”

- Julie Gregory

Grant’s heart leapt when he heard May say, “Let’s go find Skye.” Not only was he going to get to see Skye in a few minutes but May even seemed ok with it. Sure, she’d appeared somewhat supportive when they were still on the Bus together but Grant didn’t know what she thought now. He grinned faintly as he reflected that he was much luckier than he deserved to be.

He and May set off down the hall which had recently been emptied of agents. Noting her limp, Grant fell a little behind so that May took the lead. Although he realized that she was perfectly capable of taking care of any threat from the front, it would be difficult for her to turn, so he needed to cover their rear. Her reaction times also might be a bit slow, a concern he would never express to her. May took great pride in being able to handle anything, even if that assessment was at times more ego than reality.

The hall was almost eerily quiet and even though they didn’t make much noise, their footsteps echoed just a bit. Although Grant knew it couldn’t be true, it seemed like he and May were the only two people in the building. As they walked carefully past rooms with open doors, Grant peeked in and saw bodies still lying on the floor where they’d dropped. These were the people he’d shot on his way to get Skye. Clearly SHIELD either didn’t know they were there or hadn’t had time to clean up. Grant was never one to admire his gruesome handiwork, so he didn’t look too long at any of the bodies.

Skye had tears in her eyes but looked furious. “You are a serial killer,” she hissed.

Unfortunately, one of the guards took mercy on them and let them in. Once they were inside the Fridge, of course Garrett couldn’t resist making made a stupid comment about Hydra and Grant was forced to shoot the two guards in the face. They slumped to the floor, two young men whose only crime was trying to do the right thing.

Grant stumbled a little but he quickly righted himself. What is happening to me? He concentrated on following May’s footsteps, his eyes fixed firmly on the back of her boots. He noticed that the heels were slightly scuffed, maybe even from the fight she had with him. May firmly believed in using her whole body in a fight. He thought back to when she taught him that when they sparred.

Grant shook his head to clear his thoughts and focus. He realized that his situational awareness was severely compromised but couldn’t find the energy to remedy it. He swallowed hard and just kept walking.


Grant fell back against the lab door, his right hand covering a small electrical device that was attached to his heart. It crackled with electricity and Grant made a horrible, pain-filled sound as he sank to the floor. Skye looked over at him desperately. “What…what did you do to him?” she asked Mike. She sounded on the edge of hysteria. “Stopped his heart,” Mike answered calmly.

Grant couldn’t understand why he kept having flashbacks to some of his more difficult moments.
He was used to being able to compartmentalize his feelings but somehow that just wasn’t working for him right now.

“Can’t choose to feel,” Skye told him. “Usually I can,” Grant retorted.

He reflected wryly that this wasn’t one of those usual moments. He hated times when the feelings came unbidden, when he had no control. It was during instances like this that he felt the weakest, that he hadn’t left behind forever the terrified boy standing at the well waiting for one brother to leave so he could save the other. Garrett had to teach him over and over how to compartmentalize, to let his emotions go, so why couldn’t he just learn already?

As he and May turned the corner toward part of the building Grant had yet to see, a feeling of fatigue so powerful that it almost brought him to his knees washed over him. He gasped a bit at the intensity of it, abruptly stopped walking and leaned up against a wall. His breathing started to become erratic, so Grant concentrated on doing some circular breathing: taking a slow breath in through the nose, holding it for a few seconds, then blowing it out through his mouth.

This was an old trick he’d learned from a kind neighbor years ago when he still lived with his family. He’d been sent to deliver some mail that had accidentally come to his house and Ms. Johnson made him stay and drink tea with her. During their talk, she’d taught him circular breathing. Although she’d never said anything about his family, Grant had a feeling that she knew things. The circular breathing had served him well throughout the years and he was forever grateful for both her kindness and her forethought in teaching it to him.

Grant’s breathing started calming down but he still felt shaky. He felt his frustration build as his body refused to do what his mind willed it to do.

“Just as I thought,” Garrett sneered, “weak.”

Grant waited for Jemma’s nod, told them “Good luck,” then turned and released the pod. He raised his hand in farewell as the pod moved away from the plane in preparation for the drop. He could see FitzSimmons frantically preparing for the landing.

“Goodbye, John,” he told him. Then Grant turned away as he heard a truly awful crunch and knew that Deathlok had crushed John’s skull.

Grant rested his head on the wall and shut his eyes.

When was the last time I slept? Or ate? He knew he could go without either for days but maybe not when he was also so emotionally compromised. He recalled his counselor telling him that carrying heavy emotions could be just as physically taxing as running a marathon. He hadn’t believed her at the time but apparently she was right.

It was too much to hope for that May wouldn’t notice his pause and, sure enough, she stopped walking, retraced her steps and looked searchingly at him. Grant lowered his head, trying to muster the strength to continue walking but also preventing himself from seeing what was sure to be derision on May’s face. He focused on his breathing again, this time taking deep breaths, hoping it would help. He felt May’s hand on his shoulder.

“You ok?” she asked in a gentle voice.

The sound of her voice took him aback. He’d expected her to think less of him because he was acting so weak but then he remembered all of the times on the Bus that she’d been so careful with him, times he certainly hadn’t deserved it. Grant almost laughed because, only a week ago, he’d been absolutely certain that he’d never hear that tone in her voice ever again. He ruthlessly
suppressed even a smile because somehow he knew that if he allowed himself to smile, he might start laughing and not stop. He hovered on the precipice of his emotions, something he’d rarely felt since joining SHIELD. **What’s wrong with me?**

Grant chanced a look at May. Just as he suspected and feared, she was wearing a soft expression, the same kind she’d worn when she held his hand after he slammed it on the SUV hood after Skye had been shot. He quickly looked away, down the hall, at the ceiling, anywhere but at May’s face. **Damn!** Where was the fierce warrior, the Cavalry who took no prisoners? He would give anything to see that side of her right now because he didn’t think he could take her being nice to him. Grant didn’t need coddling; he needed John’s brutal guidance to keep him in line, tough love that let him know he could survive no matter the cost.

“**Why didn’t you put him down?**” Garrett demanded, shaking him. “**Didn’t I tell you not to get attached? It only gets harder from here!**” Grant nodded miserably and looked down. “**I will do better sir,**” he told him. “**I hope so,**” John said as he shouldered his rifle and started walking to the truck. “**Weakness only gets you killed.**”

Preventing himself from giving into weakness was a lesson Garrett drilled into him relentlessly. John had even taught him what to do when he wasn’t there to help Grant guard against it. So, he now dutifully did what John trained him to do in his absence: he guided himself. Grant leaned his right shoulder hard into the wall so that the spot where May’s bullet grazed him would throb harder. The pain would focus him. Pain was something he understood, something that was familiar. Pain he could handle.

May’s hand on his arm tightened. “**Hey,**” she said in her no-nonsense voice yet there was still an undercurrent of gentleness. “**You don’t have to do that.**” Grant looked at her in surprise. “**You’re going to be ok.**”

Grant took a deep breath and nodded. “**You’re right. I’m fine. I just needed a minute,**” he said, the words almost automatic on his tongue. He straightened up so that he was no longer leaning. “**Let’s keep going.**”

May searched his expression, her hand still resting on his arm. She looked like she was going to say something else but instead nodded shortly, turned and started walking again. Grant let out a small sigh of relief. He didn’t know what was going on with him but all he wanted was to keep moving forward. The sooner they got where they were going, the sooner he could see Skye and the sooner he could rest.

May pushed through two heavy doors that were obviously usually locked from the outside. Almost immediately, the noise level went from almost silent to loud. The sounds of many people talking almost hit him in the face. This must be where Hydra kept the incentives. The hallway looked like a dormitory, with individual rooms and what looked to be bathrooms, a kitchen and a common area a little further down. Grant wasn’t surprised that Hydra tried to allow the incentives at least some semblance of normalcy. Contrary to popular belief, the organization wasn’t filled with monsters. Many Hydra operatives had once been SHIELD and believed in the protection of others. It wasn’t necessarily the end result that set them apart from SHIELD; it was the methods.

People were milling about everywhere. It was like a big party. There were lots of smiles, laughter and loud discussion. Some people were searching the individual rooms for loved ones while others were hugging, laughing and smiling at the significant others who had clearly been held captive. They ignored May and Grant who walked slowly down the hallway, dodging the small groups who apparently just halted where they were, oblivious to anyone else.

As he watched parents find children and sweep them into gigantic hugs, Grant felt grateful that he
was on the right side of this. He didn’t think he could have stood being the one responsible for keeping loving families apart. Loving families. Right. Grant almost sneered out loud. He didn’t even know what those looked like. The only family he’d ever known had been incredibly dysfunctional.

“Grant, help me! Please help me!” Thomas begged as he struggled to stay above the water in the deep well. Grant started to throw a rope down to him when Christian approached. “Not yet, Grant,” he told him. Christian got all the way in his face. “Not. Yet. Throw him the rope and I’ll throw you in there, too.”

Grant accidentally ran into a hugging mother and son pair. The two paid him no attention.

But he’d been part of another family too. One that was weird, sure, but it contained everything he thought healthy families should have: warmth, affection, laughter, and caring. Of course, his job had put a lot of strain on that little family but maybe, just maybe, they could rebuild. He was sure that he’d heard somewhere that families were supposed to forgive each other.

May kept walking down the hall as if she knew where she was going and Grant continued following her. He was grateful for their forward momentum because he felt awkward and out of place. It had been so long since he’d been among groups of people celebrating that he doubted he would know what to do. Up ahead, he could see Mike down on one knee hugging Ace with an older, female version of Mike Peterson looking on with an indulgent smile. That must be the aunt. Grant wondered if Ace had been frightened of Mike’s new appearance but, knowing Skye, she’d prepped him so that father and son could experience a positive reunion. He was glad of that. The two of them had been through so much. They deserved some happiness.

Grant’s eyes lingered on the Petersons for a while, a faint smile on his lips, until he felt an invisible pull off to the side. He looked over and saw Skye leaning against the wall in the corner off the hallway, also watching the Peterson reunion.

“Hoping for something and losing it hurts more than never hoping for anything,” Skye said bitterly. Grant leaned forward, grabbed the bag and looked directly into her eyes. “We won’t turn our back.” And he wouldn’t. Grant knew in that moment that, no matter what happened with SHIELD and Hydra, he would never leave Skye to fend for herself again. “Doesn’t matter,” she responded quickly. “I’ve made my choice. I want this. Bad.”

Skye looked up and met his eyes almost at the same time, her expression changing from a mere smile to what Grant thought might be something close to ecstasy. He hadn’t ever seen someone’s face light up so suddenly and completely, especially not when they were looking at him. It took all of his self-control not to turn around to see if someone else was behind him. He gave Skye a half-grin of his own. Even with as glad as he was to see her, that was all he had to give but it was enough.

Skye, never one to do anything in half measures, pushed off from the wall and ran towards Grant. She threw herself into his arms and started kissing him with everything she had. Grant staggered a bit at her onslaught but then found his footing and started kissing her back. He never knew that kissing could be like this. Sure, he and Skye had kissed several times by now but all of those embraces had been overshadowed by deadlines, secrets and an uncertain future that was hanging over their heads. They hadn’t known how the other truly felt about being together or if it was even possible. But now what had been maybe morphed into definitely.

After about a minute, Grant felt something wet drip down his face. He stopped kissing her and looked up. Skye was crying. He froze for a moment, then tenderly took her arm and led her over to the side so that they could have a confidential conversation. He hadn’t cared about everyone
seeing their kisses but hearing their words were a different matter. They were more private.

“Hey,” he said gently, brushing away a few of her tears, “what’s wrong? I’m not that bad of a kisser, am I?”

Skye laughed a little and shook her head. “No, it’s definitely not that. It’s just...we’ve all been through so much and I didn’t think that our luck would hold.” She reached up and caressed Grant’s cheek, her brown eyes big and glowing. Grant could live forever in those eyes but forced himself to pay attention to what she was saying. “I was so scared that you weren’t going to make it back.”

He grinned at her and lightly placed a piece of her hair behind her ears. Skye had been so busy that her ponytail was becoming sloppy. It was incredibly sexy. Grant gave into his temptation to caress her hair soothingly. Skye leaned into his touch, placing her forehead lightly on his chest.

“I keep telling you: I’m not that easy to kill. Should I be insulted by your lack of confidence in my abilities?” Grant asked.

But he understood. He’d watched other agents come off of big assignments – missions in which their lives were in danger and their fellow agents had been hurt or killed – and break down. It was the letting in of the emotions that they’d been too focused to feel earlier and the down side of an adrenaline high. Although he knew that his relationship with Skye was complicated, Grant suspected that her tears had more to do with the normal letdown than her fear of them as a couple. If that was all her tears were about, he wasn’t offended.

Skye leaned away from his chest, looked up at Grant’s face and huffed out another small laugh. “Of course not. I don’t call you the T-1000 for nothing!”

Grant pushed another strand of Skye’s hair behind her ear and dropped his smile. “I think you may have to revise that nickname,” he whispered as he kissed her softly and with as much emotion as he could put into it. He brought his hands up to frame her face for a moment and then let her go as he let his hands caress her neck and shoulders on the way down to his sides. He was rewarded by the sight of Skye’s eyes getting bigger and her sharp intake of breath. That ought to do it!

“You keep kissing me like that and I’ll call you anything you want!” she said a bit breathlessly.

“No, I’m good,” Skye told him as she came closer. “I want this.” She ran her hands along his arms and Grant continued to smile at her. Her touch felt so good. “And you? What do you want?” she asked seriously. “What I want,” he replied in the gentlest voice he’d ever used, “is to stay here with you and imagine the world outside doesn’t exist.”

Grant laughed a little at Skye’s response but then leaned against the wall and sank down onto the floor as the same feeling of fatigue from earlier slammed into him again. He really wished the stupid flashbacks would stop but he apparently was completely incapable of controlling them. He leaned his arms against his knees and bowed his head. He really didn’t want Skye to see him like this but there was nothing he could do to prevent it. Clearly, lack of control was the order of the day, at least for him.

Skye immediately kneeled next to him, a concerned look on her face. “Grant, what’s wrong? Are you hurt?” she asked him in an urgent tone.

“No, I’m fine,” he choked out, stricken to realize that he actually had tears in his eyes. Where did those come from? Grant couldn’t remember the last time it had been ok for him to cry and it certainly wasn’t now, not with Skye looking on.
May suddenly materialized next to him, knelt down, put Grant’s right arm over her shoulder and then stood up, bearing almost all of his weight. “He’s fine,” she told Skye in her no-nonsense voice. “He just needs to rest.”

Skye quickly nodded and put Grant’s other arm around her shoulders. He suddenly recalled the last time she had done that, when he had just beaten a dozen of the cult followers with the Berserker Staff. He’d been emotionally exhausted then too but that had been because of the Staff. What was his excuse now?

_This is humiliating!_ Grant was not used to help from others. His family rarely offered any and after he met John, help was a dream long past. And, of course, specialists generally eschewed help from others unless they were severely physically injured. Even then, if they could manage without help, they usually did. He jerked his arms off the shoulders of May and Skye.

“I can walk on my own,” he told them in a harsh tone. He purposefully kept his expression blank because he realized that they were only trying to help. But he really didn’t want their pity.

May scowled at him but, when she spoke, her voice was once again gentle. “You don’t have to do everything on your own anymore, Ward,” she told him. “Let us help.”

Skye slipped her hand into his and glanced up at him, her eyes once again big. “Please, Grant.”

He rolled his eyes. He wanted to give Skye anything she wanted but he just wasn’t ready to give into this demand. But Grant needed to give her, really both women, something. He realized with a start of surprise that both of them cared for him. He knew that Skye wouldn’t respond well to him shutting her out and he didn’t take May’s offer of help lightly either because he knew first-hand how closed off she could be.

He leaned against the wall for a moment. “I can walk on my own,” he said in a much gentler tone than he’d used the last time he spoke. “But I am willing to go back to the Bus and rest right now if you don’t need me for anything else.” He glanced at May. She sighed and shook her head.

Skye quickly said, “I’ll go with you. That way I can let the rest of the team know where it’s parked.”

Grant nodded and breathed deeply before pushing off from the wall. He avoided looking at either woman because he knew they both would be watching him like a hawk. While the attention was endearing, it was also irritating. They clearly were only doing it because they cared but it still made him uncomfortable. Being the center of attention was never a good thing in his world.

Skye kept hold of his hand as the two of them made their way through the throngs of laughing, hugging people. Grant sped up a bit to get past them as he knew that soon the crowd would get tired of the emotional reunion and start focusing on the _What now?_ question they all would have. He wanted to be far away when that started because tempers tended to get frayed during such moments and he just didn’t have it in him to deal with it.

In order to keep the moment from getting awkward, Grant asked Skye to tell him how they’d managed to get Mike on their side. Skye immediately launched into the story and Grant grinned a bit at her obvious pride that she was the one who was able to hack into Mike’s computer program and communicate with him surreptitiously. _That’s my girl!_

It didn’t take them long to get to the Bus. Skye wasted no time getting Grant to his room. He rolled his eyes at her insistence that he get into bed. He grinned to himself at her lingering kiss before she left to communicate with the others and start reclaiming the Bus as the team’s once again. Grant
forced himself not to think about how a still living Garrett had been on this very plane just several hours ago. Instead, he closed his eyes and started imagining how to disassemble and reassemble his favorite weapon. Soon he was asleep.

Grant was sitting in the Lounge area with Fitz, both of them pressing multiple buttons on the game controllers they held in their hands. The two of them were talking trash at each other but Fitz left to get some snacks. Grant rolled his eyes and shook his head and Fitz’s obsession with food. Where did the guy put it all?

Suddenly, the game on the screen changed abruptly. It shifted from a ruined planet with opposing armies that needed to be stopped to the well, deep in the woods a short distance from the Ward family home. The onscreen PLAYER 1 turned out to be a teenaged Grant, a first-person player whom the adult Grant could make move and talk. He maneuvered his player to the well and made him bend over the side so that he could look down into it. All he could see was water. Adult Grant sighed in relief because, at least in the game, there was no Thomas, no younger brother yelling for help. Instead, he sat up in surprise when another figure, a teenaged Christian, unexpectedly came up behind Player 1. Christian’s arms shot out and he pushed him over the side. Teenaged Grant promptly fell into the well with a huge splash. Adult Grant leapt to his feet as he pushed every button on the controller but he could do nothing – he had no plays, no powers – but watch, horrified, as his player hit his head on the way down and sank quietly under the water. GAME OVER! flashed onscreen.

The scene shifted to the front of the large Ward mansion. PLAYER 2 flashed onto the screen with an older yet still teenaged version of Grant making an appearance. Adult Grant manipulated his player into getting out of a beat-up old car, going around to the trunk and yanking out several cans of gasoline and a box of matches. Teenaged Grant looked up at the house, searching for something. He nodded with satisfaction when he saw movement at Christian’s window. Adult Grant had his player whisper, “Get out of this, you sadistic bastard,” to the shadowy figure of Christian. He then made the teenaged Grant start pouring gasoline all around the house, taking particular care to spill a lot beneath Christian’s window. The player then took a match, lit it, and threw it onto the gasoline. The liquid immediately caught fire and started raging all around the house. However, something went wrong. Teenaged Grant must have gotten some of the gasoline on his clothes and then caught a spark from the fire because he too burst into flame. Adult Grant again pushed every button but was powerless to do anything besides watch in dismay as GAME OVER! once more flashed on the screen.

The video game shifted several more times. Adult Grant controlled over his players right up until the very end when he could no longer affect the outcome; he could only watch in shock as the increasingly older onscreen versions of himself died. Player 3 was shot to death by a guard as he escaped with Garrett from juvenile detention. Player 4 froze while shivering next to Buddy in the woods. Player 5 was caught and tortured to death during a mission for Hydra. In each adaptation of the game, adult Grant had no way of controlling the ultimate outcome of his players, his past self. In each version, his player died.

Adult Grant had PLAYER 6 set the charges around the entry door to the Guest House. He enjoyed having his player and Garrett’s onscreen character banter with Fitz and Coulson. Adult Grant started to relax a bit as the characters of Fitz and Coulson escaped the underground facility and headed toward the Bus. Maybe things would be different in this version because no other character had ever died in the game, only Grant. Yet the Garrett character was still in the Guest House and the timer for the explosives was counting down. Adult Grant had his player help Garrett detonate the charges but nothing worked. Soon, just as before, control of his player was taken away from him. The Guest House blew up with both Player 6 and Garrett’s character still underground.
Grant quickly sat up, startled. To quote Fitz: What. The. Hell?
No Turning Back

Flashback

The plane evened out from its rapid course correction and Grant returned to contemplating his fate. Once the Bus got to wherever they were going, he felt certain that a division was coming. He had only been put on the team to find out what had brought Coulson back from the dead. Now that they knew what had happened (at least somewhat), Grant’s mission here was done. And with Hydra most likely coming out of the shadows, he was going to have to make an irretrievable split with the team. He didn’t know how it would happen – in fact, he didn’t even know why Hydra was showing itself now; he’d thought the plan was for much, much later – but he was sure it would. And when that occurred, he’d have to be ready.

However, within the dark quiet of the Cage, Grant finally admitted to himself that, not only was he not ready, he was severely emotionally compromised. He’d tried to prepare himself with his solitary sojourn in Germany but, once he’d rejoined the team, he’d become just as connected to them as he had been before. But I can’t stay, he argued with himself. Fury and Hill only allowed him his freedom because he was willing to be a triple. If he went back on that decision, he’d be put into prison and would end up separated from the team anyway. Rock, hard place: meet Grant Ward.

The opening of the door disturbed the spiral of his depressing thoughts. Grant looked up to see Coulson and Fitz carrying in an unconscious May. This is weird.

“What happened?” Grant asked. Maybe May had gotten hurt when the plane changed course so abruptly. It was then that he noticed her hands were bound. What the hell? The two men laid her down on the floor and Fitz rushed out.

“She’s a sleeper,” Coulson explained. He looked down at May’s inert form. “I mean, the other kind of sleeper.” Leave it to Coulson to make a joke even when things are tense. Grant almost shook his head but, given Coulson’s feelings toward him at the moment, stilled the impulse. During his time on the Bus, he had come to appreciate Coulson’s dry wit, especially when it was unexpected. It was so different from Garrett’s snide remarks and the self-aggrandizing statements that passed for humor. Coulson’s comments actually made people smile while Garrett’s were solely designed to make him look good. Grant returned his focus back to the situation at hand, especially since Coulson now seemed a lot less angry at him.

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“She’s a sleeper,” Coulson explained. He looked down at May’s inert form. “I mean, the other kind of sleeper.” Leave it to Coulson to make a joke even when things are tense. Grant almost shook his head but, given Coulson’s feelings toward him at the moment, stilled the impulse. During his time on the Bus, he had come to appreciate Coulson’s dry wit, especially when it was unexpected. It was so different from Garrett’s snide remarks and the self-aggrandizing statements that passed for humor. Coulson’s comments actually made people smile while Garrett’s were solely designed to make him look good. Grant returned his focus back to the situation at hand, especially since Coulson now seemed a lot less angry at him.

“What are you saying?” he asked him in confusion. What is going on?

“She’s been reporting on us this whole time,” Coulson said disgustedly as he went out the door. Clearly Coulson had transferred his anger and loathing from Grant to May. While this boded well for Grant, he was shocked and disbelieving. The Cavalry is a traitor?

Grant looked down at her. She was reporting on us? To whom? Although he didn’t know everyone who was Hydra, he would bet his life that May wasn’t one of them. Scenarios raced through his mind but eventually he gave them up, knowing that whatever answers he was going to get would have to wait until May woke up. He turned his chair towards her, crossed his arms across his chest and resigned himself to a medium-long wait. She’d clearly been taken out by an ICER and he was familiar with how long it took to recover from such a shot. He probably wouldn’t have to wait too long but right now any delay was excruciating. He hated waiting and time in the Cage tended to drag anyway.
Once May started to stir, Grant observed with surprise that she returned to consciousness like a civilian. Instead of waking up and slowly becoming aware of her surroundings before making a move like a specialist should, May opened her eyes, lifted her chest, saw that her hands were restrained and started breathing hard. *I guess everyone is really off their game right now and I’m at least partly responsible for that.* Grant knew that it would be better to let her get her bearings first before questioning her but he just couldn’t wait. He wanted answers now.

“Coulson said you’re an informant,” he told her in a quiet and dangerous voice soon after she opened her eyes. If May wasn’t Hydra and she was reporting on SHIELD, there was another player in the game and he needed to know who. “Want to elaborate on that?”

May grunted as she started lifting herself up from her prone position. “No, I don’t,” she replied shortly. *Typical.* Grant was amused to note that he probably would have been disappointed if she had answered differently. May was nothing if not predictable which was why her being an informant was so shocking. “Damn ICER,” she complained. “My head’s killing me”

Grant was unmoved by her physical distress. He needed information. “I deserve to know,” he said in a voice as intimate as he could make it. Maybe a reminder of their sexual history with one another would get her to talk.

“Don’t start with that,” she retorted with a momentary glare at him before looking away. “We do our jobs. End of story.” She looked at him again and he could tell that she was taking in his blank expression and hostile body language. “I can’t tell you any more until Fury gives the go-ahead.”

Grant smiled. She’d already given him more than he’d thought she would. Her reporting to Fury? That could be the truth. It was extremely likely that Fury would hedge his bets, especially with Grant being ex-Hydra, but it also was possible that she was making it up. What would she be reporting on? Grant felt secure enough in his espionage skills that he was certain there was nothing she could report about him. Was she reporting on FitzSimmons? That seemed ludicrous. Skye? Possible but doubtful. Coulson? Grant conceded that he was the most likely since their team had an unusual amount of freedom from protocol but May seemed so close to Coulson. He sighed internally and realized that there was no way for him to figure out the truth.

Grant then considered how closely his situation aligned with May’s. He too was hiding his true purpose, pretending to be the Boy Scout Agent but then reporting on the team to both Fury and John. However, it was Grant, not May, who had the highest scores since Romanoff and he still had trouble keeping his cover.

*Huh. May must be a lot better than I thought.* His ego was large enough to be irritated by the idea. Grant also realized just how delicious the irony of the whole situation truly was. Skye had been reporting to the Rising Tide, he to his handlers and May to hers. FitzSimmons had been incredibly secretive of late, so who knew what they were up to? Was Coulson the only one on board not reporting to someone in secret? He wanted to roll his eyes.

Spy agencies.

Suddenly he decided to play with May a little bit. If he couldn’t get any answers, then he could at least piss her off. *Hell, I don’t have anything else to do.* Besides, in a place deep inside of him, Grant was stunned to discover that he was angry that she’d played him and he wanted payback, however small. He’d thought he knew May. And yes, it was completely unfair for him to be upset with her given his own deception but no one ever said emotions were logical.

“You’re good,” he told her. “I mean, I’d always heard you were good but man…” He leaned forward, his arms leaning on his knees, his hands clasped. It was a position designed to project intimacy, of being on her side. “Playing us this whole time, conning me, Coulson.”
May gave him another glare. “I wasn’t playing anyone,” she said fiercely. “I had your backs.”

Did you really, Melinda? John always warned him not to trust anyone – by which he meant to trust no one but John – but Grant had started trusting May. Her priorities always seemed crystal clear, her behavior predictable. He felt his stomach sink as he grasped just how emotionally compromised he was. Despite his best efforts, he truly did trust the team to have his back. Grant counted on FitzSimmons to come up with amazing scientific gadgets and be there to patch him up. Grant had faith that Coulson would never leave them behind and that May would fight beside him. And he never doubted that Skye could hack her way into anything and provide emotional support. So yes, he trusted his team in ways he’d never trusted anyone else, not even John, Fury or Hill. Damn! The knowledge made him even angrier.

“And reported on us behind them,” Grant retorted in a low voice, leaning even further towards her. “You know, you always said to keep my emotions in check but this is some next level…”

“And you should have listened,” May interrupted angrily. Her words were clipped. “You killed a man in cold blood, let your emotions get the best of you.”

If you only knew! Grant fervently wished that had been the case, that he’d killed Nash because of his fear for Skye. He could’ve lived with that so much easier. What would the Cavalry do if she knew that he’d killed Nash to protect John Garrett and inform on Hydra? Would she be ok with that or would her disdain grow even larger? Regardless, he couldn’t let her know his true intentions or emotions. He had to keep his cover.

“It was to protect our team from a monster,” Grant said, raising his voice. He absolutely had to sell this point or it would all be for nothing. He was glad that May seemed to think he had shot Nash because he lost control. In some weird way, it meant that she was thinking the best of him. That was a new feeling and he felt himself warm back up to her. But then May threw him for a loop.

“It was to protect her,” she sneered.

Grant felt stricken and recoiled just a bit. This was not what he wanted. May was supposed to believe that he’d done it for the team, not for Skye specifically. Was it possible that May was actually jealous? He’d never in a million years considered that their sexual escapades meant anything to her on an emotional level. She’d kept telling him that it wasn’t personal, that her emotions weren’t involved, and he’d believed her. Even after Loralei ruined things between them, he’d thought that May’s problem with him desiring another was about her pride, not her feelings.

But now, in the heat of their argument, he started wondering if that were indeed true. He could almost hear his therapist pointing out that compartmentalizing feelings didn’t mean that you didn’t have them; it just meant that you were good at suppressing them. Like a slideshow in his mind, he saw May’s tenderness towards him during their first night together, her smiles when they sparred, her gentleness with him after Skye was shot and the most fleeting expression of hurt when Lorelei blurted out that he desired someone other than her. In a flash, Grant realized that he’d misjudged May. Badly.

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repaired your direct line. If you have the ability to make this right, then now’s the time ‘cause you can’t make it worse.” Grant almost snorted; you can always make things worse.

May looked down and slowly nodded. She got to her feet and held out her hands. “Are these really necessary?” she asked quietly.

Coulson didn’t bother to respond. He just grabbed her a bit roughly and started leading her towards the door. Before they got to the doorway, he faced Grant. “We need all hands on deck right now.” He turned his head to look at May. “Well, all trustworthy hands, that is,” he said nastily.

Grant was dismayed to hear Coulson mock May. Clearly he was taking May’s betrayal personally and was being a lot meaner to her than Grant had ever seen him be to the worst prisoners. Even Ian Quinn hadn’t been on the receiving end of the coldness Coulson was displaying now. Was this what was in store for Grant once his betrayal was discovered? The knots in his stomach tightened further.

Coulson turned back to Grant. “Someone tried to take out Garrett’s plane, so he rendezvoused with us and is in the lounge with Fitz and Skye trying to figure out our next move. They need your assistance.” Coulson led May out the door without waiting to see Grant acknowledge his order.

Grant nodded, once again feeling a bit shocked. How many more shocks were in store for him today? And who was trying to take out John? It didn’t make sense for Hydra to try to kill their own. SHIELD might attempt to cross Garrett off if they knew he was Hydra but that seemed doubtful. What is going on? He felt a chill of foreboding as he quickly put on his tactical gear. Things were about to get ugly, a fact that was quickly confirmed when he heard forces outside the Bus start taking out the plane’s weapons. He hurried out of the Cage.

Grant almost ran to the lounge where John, Skye and Fitz were leaning over one of the tables working on something together. “Sir!” he said urgently to John. “What is going on?”

John turned to look at him, his expression tense. “A whole lot,” he answered.

“What is shooting at us?” Grant asked forcefully. This wasn’t the way things were supposed to go. Clearly something was not right and if that was true, then his highest priority was to protect Skye. Ever since that night in the cargo hold when they’d talked about their pasts, Grant knew that Skye was first on his list, above SHIELD and certainly before Hydra. Yes, he intended to fulfill his mission for Fury but only if he knew that Skye was safe. In order to do any of that though, he needed for John to believe he was still on Hydra’s side. This was where the rubber met the road.

In the back of his mind, Grant reflected upon how odd it was that this was the first time his loyalty to Hydra over SHIELD had truly been tested. John had been careful to keep Grant in his pocket, mostly running solo missions or just with John so that he had minimal interaction with other Hydra members. The only real time Grant had been in the presence of a Hydra team was when he’d helped with training (Garrett had been out of the country on assignment during that time; Grant had made the decision to help on his own) and that had led to him confessing to Maria Hill. Whether John was hedging his bets or somehow knew that forcing Grant to choose between Hydra and SHIELD was a bad idea, he wasn’t sure. Regardless, he needed his game face on.

John grabbed Grant roughly by the shoulder and dragged him off to the side. “C’mere, let me catch you up.” Out of sight of the others, John gave him a significant look. “Apparently Agent Hand is the Clairvoyant, so chew on that first.” Grant could tell that John wanted to laugh. From John’s perspective, other than people trying to kill them, things couldn’t be going better.

Suddenly bullets started peppering the lounge area. Almost without thought, Grant lunged forward,
grabbed Skye and dove under the table, making sure that his body was shielding as much of hers as possible. He could deal with getting shot but he’d be damned if she got hurt in all of this! Fitz crouched down next to them while John sought shelter in the couch. Skye grabbed Grant’s shoulder, hanging on for dear life. After what seemed like an eternity, the shooting stopped but no one moved for a beat.

Skye looked up at Grant, her eyes full of fear. She searched his eyes for a moment, then a ghost of a smile spread across her face. “I guess I’m lucky that saving me is part of your job description,” she whispered to him.

Grant hesitated a moment before answering. He wanted to tell her that saving her was what he was born to do, that it wasn’t because of any job requirement but was instead a personal choice, one he’d make forever. But he was acutely aware of John above him, probably listening to every word. No need to put Skye even further on John’s radar.

“What kind of SO would I be if it wasn’t?” he replied lightly, tightening his hold on her just a little. Then, in a louder voice, he asked, “Is everyone all right? Fitz? Sir?”

“Right as rain up here,” John answered heartily at the same moment Fitz asked, “Why did they stop?”

“They’re probably getting ready to board us,” Coulson explained as he came into the room, unceremoniously pushing May ahead of him. She was holding her arm, so it looked like one of the bullets had found its target. “We just heard that Fury’s dead. (What? Please don’t let that be true!) If that’s the case and Agent Hand is now in charge, then she probably wants the Bus intact and us dead. Why don’t we see if we can prevent that last part from happening?”

John stood up, brushing the broken glass off of his shirt. “What do you suggest, Phil?”

Sometime later, the six of them glided silently through the halls of the Hub. It hadn’t been easy but they’d successfully held off their attackers until they’d come up with a workable plan for finding Simmons and battling Hydra, scrubbed the Bus, downloaded everything onto Skye’s hard drive, grabbed some weapons and exited through a hole Fitz burned through the belly of the plane.

John went first, followed by May, Coulson and Grant. His job was to make certain everything was safe and then help Fitz and Skye leave the Bus. Fitz jumped down lightly, more gracefully than Grant thought he would. Grant waited for Skye to emerge as the rest of them started slowly and silently down the hall. He glimpsed her taking a last look around the Bus before she replaced the grate and started lowering herself down. Grant grabbed her waist, allowing her to put all her weight onto him, then released his grip slightly so that she could slowly slide down his body to the floor. If the situation weren’t so tense, he’d have been turned on by the feeling of her every curve moving against him. As it was, the two of them shared a brief but intense look as they came face to face. He was careful to release Skye quickly once her she was solidly on the floor but he didn’t miss the fact that she was shaking.

She immediately started walking toward the others but he put his hand on her arm to slow her progress. “Are you ok?” Grant asked her quietly. Skye stopped walking, looked fleetingly into his eyes and then stared at the ground as she shook her head.

“This is all happening so fast,” she whispered, looking up at him in despair. “One minute I’m becoming an Agent, the next you and May are in trouble, Simmons is MIA and people are trying to kill us.” Skye took a deep breath. “I just got over almost being dead and I don’t ever want to do that again!”
Grant noticed that she had tears in her eyes and, almost against his will, he reached up to tenderly touch her face. “Hey,” he said gently, “I’m not going to let anything bad happen to you, I promise. I’ll be with you the entire time.”

Skye gave him a small smile and he knew that she realized, just as he did, how hollow his promise was. While he could do his best to keep her alive and uninjured, Grant was only human and the odds they were facing were pretty big. She grabbed his hand, squeezed it for a moment, then let it drop to his side.

“I know you won’t,” she said softly. She tilted her head down the hall toward where the others were turning the corner. “We’d better catch up.”

Grant nodded and started walking towards the others, keeping Skye somewhat in front of him so that he was bringing up the rear. She clearly was putting on a brave front and he loved her for it; he just wished he could do something to let her know how much he cared. Besides wanting to get his feelings out into the open, he needed to give her something she could carry with her when he was no longer with the team. While he was grateful that his part of the plan included being with Skye, he knew that once they accomplished their mission, he would have to leave.

John’s scheme called for both of them to maintain their covers as faithful SHIELD agents until Hydra took over the Hub and John could step forward as leader. But regardless of whether Hydra won this battle, whatever John did from here on out, Grant’s role was to be by his side, gathering intel, until such time as Fury – or Hill or whomever was in charge – told him it was enough. Grant refused to believe that both Fury and Hill were dead but, if they were, he would deal with that later. Right now, his mission was still in effect. That meant leaving Skye soon, so if now was all the time they would have together, he was determined to make the most of it.

He and Skye rounded the corner just as John asked Fitz what it was that made the hole in the Bus. “It’s called a Mouse Hole. Cuts through anything really,” Fitz told John proudly as they slowly made their way through the halls of the Hub. Grant grinned a little to himself and shook his head. Typical Fitz. He was always so pleased with his designs that it figured that he’d try to impress John even as they attempted to complete an almost impossible mission. “I designed it a year ago and submitted it for testing but it never reached distribution.”

“Top agents always hog the good stuff,” John replied.

Grant controlled a snort with difficulty. John certainly ought to know as he was always on the lookout for new tech and, once found, hoarded it greedily. If Grant had told him about Fitz’s abilities, that probably would’ve put him at risk for being kidnapped by Hydra. John was all about the tech. Suddenly, Grant was frightened for Fitz. It was unwise of him to boast about his skills. But there was nothing he could do about it at the moment.

The group reached the hallway where he and Skye needed to turn in order to head to the Nerve Center. Skye took the opportunity to give Grant the coveted hard drive from the Bus that had all their research on it (Grant could see John’s small smirk at this) while Coulson reminded them of their various missions and everyone went their separate ways. Grant was grateful for the split as he needed his focus to be solely on Skye.

“I never thought I’d end my first day as a SHIELD agent walking the halls of the Hub looking to take out other SHIELD agents!” Skye whispered as they hurried along. It didn’t escape his notice that she was no longer shaking or tearful. Adrenaline was a great thing.

Grant wished he could say that he’d never expected to go SHIELD hunting either but, of course, he couldn’t. This was always going to be a probability for him. “Don’t think about it that way,” he
advised her in his best SO fashion. “We’re just taking them down temporarily as we sort it all out.”

Skye shook her head in amusement as she reached their destination. “Leave it to the Robot to come up with a logical description of a potentially treasonous storming of the castle,” she replied with a flirty grin.

She jumped down into a janitorial closet and looked up, waiting for Grant to join her. He climbed down, landed as quietly as he could, made his way to the door and peeked out into the hallway. Skye crouched right next to him. There were too many guards. What now?

“Damn,” he said quietly.

“That processing center is at the end of that hall,” she reminded him. As if he needed the reminder. He nodded.

“Give me your ICER,” he ordered.

“What are you going to do?” Skye asked in bewilderment.

The SO part of Grant made a mental note that they would need to focus on strategy and tactics later in her training because, quite honestly, their plan of action seemed obvious. They needed to clear the guards from the hallway, so either they caused a distraction – which they were in no position to do – or they had to cross them all off. And since Grant could work better if he didn’t have to worry about Skye, he would have to take them all on alone.

“Pave the way for you,” Grant sighed. He didn’t think that this jived with his orders from either Hydra or Fury but he really didn’t see another solution.

“There are like a hundred guys out there,” she objected staring at him. He could almost see her thinking, “You’re good but you’re not that good.” He stifled the impulse to reiterate to her the importance of situational awareness. When will she start paying attention? That can save her life!

“Twelve,” Grant corrected. “Level 5 foot soldiers, basic armor package and no other way through. The others are depending on us,” he finished quietly.

“NO!” Skye whispered passionately, staring up at him, her eyes wide. “No, no, no, no, no. Are you crazy? We have to find another way. Sending you out there by yourself would be suicide!”

Grant turned to look at her directly. “Not if I don’t die,” he said. He was a little offended. Clearly, she had no idea just how good he was. He turned back around, “And if I do…”

“Whoa, slow down,” Skye interrupted. “There is no way I’m going to let you do this! Maybe I can…”

“Skye,” Grant said softly but firmly. “I’m doing this. No arguments,” he added, glancing at her stubborn expression. He reached over and gently tilted her face up. “But I want you to know that a lot of what I’ve done, I’ve done for you. There’s nothing I want more than to keep you safe.”

Skye looked taken aback but at least it was finally all out in the open. They’d been dancing around their feelings for weeks, probably months. She looked down and he thought in amusement that emotions were always the things that got her to shut up. He held out his hand for her ICER. She handed it to him reluctantly and they both stood up. Grant took a deep breath. It was time to go for broke. Why the hell not? He turned to Skye.

“If we make it out of this, maybe we can…grab a drink, you and me.”
Skye looked gobsmacked. If Grant wasn’t so sure of her feelings for him, he would’ve doubted his instincts. “Are you…?”

He didn’t let her finish; he needed her to understand, to know how long he’d wanted to be with her. “Remember in that bar in Dublin, you offered to… talk? I didn’t want to talk. I needed to keep things compartmentalized.”

“Like with May?” Skye asked in a snarky voice.

Grant scoffed and looked down. Damn! How did she find out about that? He smiled ruefully and shook his head. I’m never going to live that down.

“I’m not an idiot,” she said, practically rolling her eyes. “We live on the same plane together, for God’s sake.”

Grant refused to let himself get sidetracked. “Well, with her, I knew I could. With you… I didn’t want to risk it.” Boy, was that ever the truth! He vividly remembered being in Dublin, the pull he’d felt to talk with Skye and maybe allow it to lead to more. It had taken all of his willpower to walk away but he had. Now he no longer wanted to even try.

“I was offering to talk, Ward, not to have sex with you,” she answered with a knowing little smile.

He almost snorted. Who was she kidding? If he’d let things get intimate with her, he was almost positive that sex would’ve been in the cards. Skye was nothing if not impulsive and the sexual tension that night – just like right now – had been off the charts. But he couldn’t let on that he knew that; she might get offended and they needed to focus. Time was running out.

“I’m not saying that. I’m saying…. What the hell am I saying? “I want a chance to take you up on it. To have that talk.”

Grant stopped speaking before he went too far. He was a triple agent and the most dangerous part of his mission was still to come. Skye couldn’t know about him yet. Plus, she looked amazed at the mere suggestion of them talking; she might become catatonic if he proposed more. He looked down and shook his head again.

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Grant stopped speaking before he went too far. He was a triple agent and the most dangerous part of his mission was still to come. Skye couldn’t know about him yet. Plus, she looked amazed at the mere suggestion of them talking; she might become catatonic if he proposed more. He looked down and shook his head again. Say something! Time to play on her empathic side. He knew that Skye never could resist comforting people when they got down on themselves.

“Look, I know. I’m not that guy. I’m too locked down, too boring,” he began, looking at the floor. He gave her five seconds before she stopped him.

Skye didn’t even make it to three. “When we make it out of this, yes, let’s have a drink,” she whispered with a smile.

Grant smiled back and then turned toward the door. Time to get this show on the road! He was just gearing up to enter the hallway when he felt her hand on his arm, turning him to face her. Much to his surprise, Skye pulled on his tac vest to lower his lips to hers and then she kissed him. It was a relatively chaste kiss, much less than he wanted, but it was something. There was no going back from this – they both had committed to their feelings now – and the knowledge of this made it his turn to look gobsmacked. Grant had expected Skye to agree to a date but he’d never imagined that she’d kiss him! An unfamiliar feeling spread over him. Is this joy?

Apparently to Skye it looked like confusion. “You said you might die, so… what the hell?” she said with a smile, as if answering a question he’d asked. Maybe he had.

Grant laughed lightly but then got back to business. If he let himself dwell on what just happened, the two of them wouldn’t be leaving the closet for quite some time. He put his feelings in
lockdown, then said in his usual Agent Ward voice, “Lock the door behind me.”

Skye went around in front of him so she could open the door for him. Grant took a deep breath, readied his weapons and left the closet. *Time to be Superspy!*

The first nine guys went down easily under ICER fire. But the others – he must have been off on his count because there were definitely more than 12 total – required a punishing brawl. But the thing that had always distinguished Grant Ward from other agents – other than his incredible physical skill and tactical genius – was his persistence. He never gave up. And so, panting and bleeding, he emerged victorious and triumphantly returned to the janitorial closet to get Skye.

She was backing up from the door when he opened it (*Really, Skye? How would that help?*) but closed her eyes in relief upon seeing it was him. “Hey, you should really look up the word ‘boring’ in a dictionary,” she snarked.

Grant just raised his eyebrows, content that the task before him had been successfully accomplished and that Skye’s thoughts clearly were still on the possibility of them dating. “You ready to hack the system?” he asked.

Skye picked up her backpack, unzipped it to show him the explosives and said coyly, “Who said anything about hacking?”

He just grinned at her as the two of them set off down the hall to place the explosives. Skye glanced around at all the prone bodies and gave a low whistle.

“I can’t believe you took down all these guys by yourself,” she said, shaking her head in admiration.

“Skye, you keep saying things like that, I’m going to get a complex. I *am* a specialist and, not to brag, but I’m a pretty damn good one,” he replied a bit testily.

“Whatsoever you say, Superspy,” she retorted with a flirty smile. Her smile faded as she looked down a bit helplessly at the explosives in her backpack. “I just realized that I don’t have the first clue what to do with these,” she told him.

“Not to worry,” Grant said casually as he took the backpack from her and started placing the explosives in key areas. “Explosives are one of my specialties.”

“I’m beginning to think that everything is,” she mumbled. Grant just smiled.

After they were all placed and lit, the two of them went around the corner to wait. A muffled boom went off and the lights flickered. Skye took her fingers out of her ears. “Was that all of them?” she asked.

Grant peered carefully around the corner. *That doesn’t seem right.* He shook his head. “It wasn’t as big as I thought,” he started to say but was interrupted by a huge explosion. He grabbed Skye and for the second time that day, used his body to shield her from harm. After a minute with no additional explosions, he stood up and helped Skye to her feet.

She smiled a bit shakily. “After seeing you in action so much today, that drink may just be a letdown,” she said teasingly.

Grant laughed lightly. “Don’t count on it,” he replied. “Specialists have lots of skills.” He was pleased to see Skye raise her eyebrows. “Now, let’s go find the others.”
He and Skye found Coulson, May, Fitzsimmons (Good! Jemma’s all right!) and Trip in a nearby hallway. They were all just standing there monitoring a line of people who were being marched by under the watchful eye of guards. All of a sudden, Trip started going crazy, yelling and shouting curses. When Grant looked around to see what was causing the usually laidback Trip to lose his mind, he was shocked to see John in the line, looking a little worse for wear. How in the world had John gotten caught? He was usually so wily and careful. Grant almost sighed. Time for the Oscar performance, he thought in resignation as Coulson took him aside to tell him the bad news.

Skye stuck around after the others left to see to the prisoners or, in Coulson’s case, figure out what needed to happen from here. She watched him in silence as Grant leaned against the wall, trying to decide what his next move should be. I need to go be with John. His head knew it was the right decision but his heart wanted to stay with his team. Grant bowed his head just as Skye came up and hugged him.

“I’m sorry about Garrett,” she whispered.

Grant almost lost it at the sorrow in her voice. Skye had to be dealing with her own confusion and anger at the news that Garrett was the one who had her shot but instead, here she was, trying to comfort him. How could he not love this girl? But if he was going to rescue John in the hopes of completing his mission, he needed to go now before he lost the will.

Grant allowed himself to enjoy the feel of her against him just for a moment, then stepped back. “Thank you,” he told her softly. He couldn’t prevent himself from gently running his hand down her face. “I need to go deal with him directly. Go be with the others. I’ll see you soon.” And before she could say anything else that would make him hesitate, he turned and left.

Grant walked directly to Mission Control where he knew Hand and Coulson would be meeting. Sure enough, the room was empty except for the two of them. They were clearly strategizing. Hand had just finished saying, “And I’ll find Agent Garrett the smallest, darkest cell in the Icebox.” That was an opening if he’d ever heard one. Time for the second Oscar performance of the day.

“I’d like to turn the key on that cell myself,” Grant interrupted. “If you don’t mind, Sir,” he said quietly to Coulson. He knew enough about their psychology to realize that they would be sympathetic to feelings of betrayal and revenge. “He was my SO,” he said as he walked towards them. “I feel I…I should have known. It was my duty to…” he stammered. He hoped that his anger, uncertainty and hesitance would really sell it.

“No one knew,” Coulson interrupted. “I didn’t know. That’s how he beat us, by being a friend.”

“I spent years with that bastard,” Grant said heatedly. He shook his head in disgust. “Looked up to him.” His voice started breaking, so he took a beat to control it. The best lies were the ones that held some truth in them. “I want to see him suffer,” he said clearly.

Hand nodded. “Don’t mind the company. And I can always use a man of your skills.” She turned to Coulson. “Pick up the pieces here at the Hub if you can and, uh, only communicate using one of these.” She handed him a communications device. “You and I may be the highest ranking SHIELD agents who weren’t Hydra or dead. Not that that means anything now. All we have is each other. So stay in touch, Agent Coulson,” she said as she put out her hand to shake.

Coulson shook her hand. “I guess you can call me Phil,” he replied.

Grant walked to the plane with Agent Hand, following John and his two guards. He nodded at Coulson as he passed but couldn’t risk turning around to get another look. Grant knew it was likely
to be the last time he would see the man while they were still, at least ostensibly, on the same side. He dreaded seeing him after he knew that Grant had betrayed him, so he wanted to memorize Coulson’s expression of worry and care for him while he still could. Not for the first time that day, Grant felt sick at the thought of what was to come.

The beginning of the trip to the Fridge was quiet. Victoria Hand was with the pilot in the cockpit during take-off and, after giving Grant a few significant glances, John spent his time looking down. Grant suspected that he was just preserving his energy for when he would need it. John was nothing if not strategic. About halfway into the flight, Agent Hand came back into the cargo hold. Grant’s stomach tightened as he watched her look disdainfully at John.

“He’s not telling stories now, is he?” she said mockingly.

Grant masked his surprise. Surely Hand was too much of a professional to try anything on the plane. He’d originally imagined that he would be able to overpower her once they arrived at the Fridge and then just stick her in a cell for safekeeping but, in watching her now, he suddenly realized that he would have to take action soon. He unobtrusively got out his ICER, thanking his lucky stars that he’d thought to bring it. He really didn’t want to kill Victoria Hand. Fury and Hill were forgiving about a lot of things but he didn’t think either of them would look too kindly upon the death of such a high-ranking agent by his hand.

“You know what I’m thinking, Agent Garrett?” Hand said. “I’m thinking the Icebox or the Fridge is just a little too comfortable for you. Maybe we should put you a little deeper underground.” John turned his head slowly to look at her, his expression unchanged. “What do you think, Agent Ward? You shot the wrong Clairvoyant before. Care to shoot the right one?”

Grant said nothing as he tried to tamp down the anger her words stirred in his belly. It wasn’t bad enough for Hand to point out his error (from her perspective). Now she had to add another body to his count, one that was surely both illegal and against protocol? And, although she had no idea, she’d also just made saving her life a lot harder. The best laid plans. Grant looked at Hand and then glanced at John. He stood up, readied his weapon and then smoothly shot both guards and Hand with the ICER. He was careful to hold John’s gaze until the tell-tale blue vines were gone. John smiled at him and Grant nodded. It was done. Now all hell was going to break loose.
Letting Go of Old Hurts

Chapter Notes

This is my first attempt at writing a sex-ish scene, so please let me know what you think. It was originally intended to be the last chapter but it was getting too long, so there will be at least one more.

Grant abruptly sat up in bed, his heart racing wildly. What. The. Hell? The intense dream – the one in which every bad act in his life led to his death – was still uppermost in his mind. It was beyond disturbing and he had no clue as to its meaning. Did his unconscious mind want him dead? Did he deserve to lose everything because of some poor choices and unfortunate necessities?

Grant didn’t know what to think or do, so he returned to a trick that always helped him calm down. He started focusing on his surroundings: the tiny bunk, the medium-soft bed, his boxers (the only clothes he was wearing), the clouds outside his windows. Wait! Clouds? Yes, there were the telltale vibrations of the Bus as it flew through the sky. He was usually such a light sleeper that it was surprising he didn’t wake up when the plane took off. He put that thought away and instead concentrated on letting the blue sky, sunshine and clouds calm him down. Soon, the superficial breaths he’d taken upon waking evened out and Grant felt better. In fact, it was glorious to wake up without worrying about his next move or thinking about his next lie.

Suddenly, his door opened and Skye glided in, sitting down on his bunk and facing him. “You’re awake.”

Grant nodded. “How long was I out?”

“A few hours,” she told him. “You must’ve really needed the sleep.”

“Apparently I did.”

“How do you feel?” Skye asked him with a tender expression.

That’s the question, isn’t it? Grant didn’t know how he felt or even how he should feel. After living a double life for the past decade or so, he had no idea what being free felt like. But he knew that wasn’t really what Skye was asking. And physically he was ok.

“Better,” he replied.

Skye glanced down at his naked chest and smirked. With an impish grin on her lips and a sparkle in her eyes, she said, “I’d say that you’re more than better; you’re fine.”

Grant was about to protest that her words didn’t make sense when Skye made a shushing gesture and he swallowed whatever he was going to say. Besides, her focus was no longer on his face and he definitely wanted to see what she was going to do next. That was the one of the things he loved about her: he never knew what to expect. After orchestrating everything down to the smallest detail in his job as a spy, being pleasantly surprised by someone felt wonderful.

Skye stretched her hand out and started drawing her fingertips gently all along his skin, starting at his wrists and skating up along his arm, traveling across his shoulder and neck and then tracing the
features of his face. Everywhere she touched, she left goosebumps in her wake. After seeing her look of utter concentration, Grant closed his eyes, hoping that if he remained still, she wouldn’t stop. Her touch felt so incredibly good.

Grant was no stranger to sex but none of his experiences had ever been like this. Every one of his previous sexual encounters had been like a race, the goal solely to cross the finish line. Yes, there had been a few times in which both partners wanted each other to feel good instead of just looking out for their own pleasure but every interaction still had been purely physical. Grant couldn’t allow himself to get close to someone and his partners didn’t seem to want that either. Until now. This was different, very different. *This is fantastic!*

People usually wanted him for things – his tactical assessment, his physical skills, his body. But Skye didn’t seem to want anything from him in this moment other than for him to feel good. He wasn’t used to this level of care and it shook him to his core. He wasn’t used to being gentle and it was coming close to his core. *No one has ever done something like this for me before.* Grant opened his eyes, trying to will the tears away. He didn’t want to ruin things because he couldn’t keep control of himself. But Skye just glanced up and smiled warmly at him before returning her attention to his body.

The full force of his therapist’s admonitions that emotions weren’t a weakness hit him just then as he realized that not only did Skye not care if he was emotional, she probably preferred it. With that thought, Grant completely relaxed and allowed himself to fully be in the moment, to concentrate solely on what she was doing. He smiled a little as he appreciated how intimate this moment truly was. He’d never felt this warm and close to someone before and that included all of the women he’d had sex with. *So this is what sex is supposed to feel like!*

Skye’s exploration carried her to his other shoulder and arm but now she added a new twist. She brought his hand up to her mouth and started slowly sucking on his fingers, smiling slightly at his sudden intake of breath and twirling her tongue along each fingertip before moving on to the next. Grant felt the telltale tingling in his groin and was amazed at how easily her gentle touch and light sucking was turning him on. When she released his pinky finger, she looked up and met his eyes. Grant didn’t know what she saw in his expression but whatever it was had her smiling again as she brought up both hands to caress his face. He closed his eyes once more as he appreciated just how turned on he was, more than he’d ever been before. He didn’t want to move for fear of ruining the moment and it seemed like Skye was accepting of his stillness.

Grant opened his eyes when he felt her climb on top of him and position herself right where he wanted her to be: astride his erection. All that was between them were the sheets and his boxers. Grant didn’t know what to do. *Does she want me to strip or should I stay like this?* He wanted to do whatever she desired but he had no experience with a partner who wasn’t just chasing an orgasm. This was virgin territory for him and he was at a loss. Skye appeared to understand his dilemma though as she smiled at him and brought both of her hands down to gently graze his bare abdomen. Grant shuddered and her smile got even wider.

“Do you know how many times I saw you without your shirt on and wanted to do this?” she whispered without looking at him, her eyes focused on his body. Her fingertips traced each ridge of his abdominal muscles.

“No,” Grant said through his teeth, trying to suppress a groan as she shifted on top of him.

“I wanted to touch you every time I saw you working out or coming out of the shower or even when Simmons was patching you up, which is kind of bad I know but even injured, you looked incredibly hot. It was torture having to keep my hands to myself, especially since I never thought you’d be interested in me,” Skye explained in a low, husky voice.
Grant reached out to lift Skye’s face so that he could meet her eyes. “I was always interested in you,” he told her softly. “I just couldn’t do anything about it for a while.” He needed her to understand how he felt.

Her smile was blinding. “That’s good to know,” she replied as her eyes drifted back down to his body. Her fingertips traveled from his abdomen to his belly button and then up to circle his right nipple. She leaned down to gently suck on it, letting her tongue twirl around it in the same way she had his fingers. Skye glanced up at Grant and smiled wickedly when she heard his intake of breath and quiet groan.

He had just opened his mouth to tell her that she was killing him when she abruptly stilled and he realized that she was staring at the small scar over his heart. The smile dropped off of her face and she ran her fingers lightly over it, her eyes filling with tears. Grant waited for the inevitable flashback to occur, for him to remember the horror and fear he’d felt while lying on the floor of the Bus, his heart no longer beating, certain that he was about to die. The flashback didn’t come. Instead, all he saw was Skye’s face filled with sorrow and regret.

“Hey,” he said gently, leaning over to softly touch her face and smiling a bit. “I’m fine. It’s just a scratch.” He hoped that the reiteration of the same line he’d used over and over again would make her laugh, help her forget that awful moment. But it didn’t.

“No,” she replied firmly, her eyes meeting his, “it’s not. I almost got you killed because I didn’t trust you. You told me that you were a triple but, even after all we’d been through, I didn’t have enough faith to believe in you.” She dropped her gaze and paused for a moment before looking back up at him. “I was so angry at you for betraying us, for betraying me, that I wanted to hurt you. I even told Mike that I was ok with letting you suffer. But that whole time, you were doing your best to keep me safe. You even let me hate you.”

Grant tried to say something but Skye put her fingers against his lips to stop him. One tear slid down her cheek. “I know what you’re going to say Grant and it isn’t true. You try to pretend that you don’t care, that you aren’t affected, but you are, maybe too much. I am too; I just hide it differently. So I know that thinking I hated you hurt.”

Grant couldn’t stand seeing her in pain, so he tried once again. “Skye…”

She shook her head. “No, let me finish. Coulson, May and I were talking earlier about all the sacrifices you’ve had to make in order to finish this mission. You put your life in danger so many times.” She shook her head again. “I can’t even imagine how hard this must’ve been for you.” Another tear ran down her face. “After all you’ve done for me, all the times you’ve saved my life and kept me from getting hurt, I wish I had just trusted you the one time you asked.”

Grant looked away, unable to maintain eye contact because of his intense discomfort. He was ashamed that he actually found himself agreeing with her. He remembered his desperation in trying to get her to understand, to trust him, and his subsequent despair when it seemed like she preferred to deal with Mike rather than him. If only Skye had listened to him, he wouldn’t have yet another scar, yet another traumatic experience to haunt him. But how could he expect her to trust him when the whole point of being undercover was to get people to believe in his lies? It’s possible that had Skye not been so angry, Garrett would’ve become suspicious and the whole mission would’ve been put at risk. Grant kept his eyes fixed on the clouds as he battled his conflicting emotions. It wasn’t fair to expect her to trust me.

But Skye seemed determined not to let him be alone with his thoughts. She reached out and turned his face to hers. “I am so sorry that I hit you and that I’m the reason you have that scar. Can you forgive me?” Skye asked, her voice breaking.
Grant sat up further in his bed, wiped the tears from her face and grabbed both of her hands. He couldn’t believe that Skye was apologizing to him! He felt deeply uncomfortable with this because no one else had ever put his feelings ahead of theirs and he didn’t know how to respond. All he knew was that Skye was crying and he would do anything to make her pain go away.

“There’s nothing to forgive, Skye,” he said urgently. She had to understand. “SHIELD had just been attacked from the inside and I didn’t give you any reason to trust me. Even though I didn’t like it, I completely understood your anger and mistrust. I kidnapped you and put you in handcuffs. If anything, I should be the one asking for your forgiveness.”

Skye shook her head, pulling one of her hands out of his grasp so that she could caress his cheek again. “What you did was amazing and difficult and I’m sorry for anything I did that made it harder.” Grant started to reply but Skye once again put her fingers over his lips and looked at him seriously. “You are one of the strongest people I know but, I swear to God Grant Ward, if you try to minimize your injuries one more time, I will kill you. I know how to do that now.”

Grant couldn’t help but laugh at the sudden twist in the conversation. “Duly noted,” he told her softly. Then he stroked her face gently, lightly tracing the outline of her lips. Skye closed her eyes and sighed, clearly enjoying his touch. Grant picked up one of her hands, turned it over and kissed the inside of her wrist and kept holding it as he looked out of his window. “So, has Coulson told you where we’re going?” he asked in a regular voice.

Skye’s eyes popped open and she looked taken aback. “Umm….I don’t know if you’ve noticed but we’re kind of in the middle of something here,” she said, gesturing to his body and hers.

Grant shifted his weight more toward the edge of the bed, grinned and, with one fell swoop, grabbed Skye, lifted her up and placed her on the bed between his body and the wall. He then kissed her deeply, gently nipping at her lips and tangling his tongue with hers until they both were breathless. He sat up a bit, leaning on his elbow so that he could look down at her.

“Oh, I noticed,” he said, smiling seductively. “But I’ve never had sex on this plane and I don’t want to start now, especially with Coulson and May able to walk in on us at any minute.” He leaned down and kissed her again, thrilled with the idea that he could. “Besides,” he continued in a soft, husky voice, “when we make love, I don’t want to be cramped, quiet or rushed.”

Skye nodded as she swallowed hard. “Me neither,” she said in a whisper after nearly a minute of silence. Grant was amused at the idea that his kiss and his words had literally left her speechless. He kissed her lightly before getting up to put on his clothes. He was starving!

“Any idea where we’re headed?” he asked her as he started putting on the tac gear he’d placed in his drawers before he napped. Even in his exhaustion, he’d kept everything neat. He had a feeling that this was going to be a bone of contention with Skye (he’d seen both her van and her room) but if they still wanted to be together after emotional betrayal and literal heart-stopping trauma, they could handle anything.

Skye sat up and shook her head. “Coulson mentioned something about another secret base, this one called the Playground if you can believe it,” she snorted. “But I don’t know where it is.”

Grant nodded. “Do I have time to eat before we get there?”

Skye laughed, jumped off the bed and grabbed his hand, yanking him toward the door. “Come on, Turbo. I know just how you like your sandwich.”
Grant quickly exited his room and walked down the hall. He’d gotten up early to work out and shower so that he could get started on the day before anyone else besides May was up. He wanted to surprise Jemma with a big English breakfast in honor of her birthday: eggs, bacon, baked beans, sausage, grilled tomatoes, and fried bread. Grant was planning on throwing in a few blueberry muffins for Skye as well. Growing up in an orphanage didn’t provide many opportunities for sweet (read: nutritionally light) foods, so now she had a weakness for them.

After getting everything started in the kitchen, he smiled a little to himself. The last 10 days had been a revelation for him in many ways, some more unexpected than others. Like cooking. Grant hadn’t ever had much opportunity to mess about in the kitchen. It wasn’t something his family allowed him to do (that was menial work for servants) and outdoor living lent itself to only the basics. Once he joined SHIELD, his training and missions didn’t leave a lot of time for much that wasn’t essential. Garrett drilled it into him that food was only fuel; cooking and eating well (“Gourmand,” Garrett would drawl in a snooty voice) was for the weak. But, with all the down time they’d had lately, Grant started cooking more and discovered that, not only was he good at it, he loved it! Cooking had a neatness and precision that he enjoyed while also allowing opportunities for creativity. And the results were quite appreciated by the rest of the team.

“Wow!” Fitz exclaimed as he entered the kitchen area. Grant was amused to see that he actually had his nose in the air, like a dog on the trail of a fascinating scent. “I knew something smelled good but I never guessed it would be this elaborate!” He walked around, looking into the oven and peering in all the skillets going on the stove. Suddenly, the grin fell off of his face and Fitz whirled to face Grant accusingly. “Wait a minute, Ward! Is all this for Jemma’s birthday?”

“You’re in trouble,” Grant replied with a small smile. Fitz’s air of outrage was a bit funny, especially since he knew that the scientist would be eating at least half of the huge meal.

“But she’s going to love this!”

“I hope so,” Grant said slowly with a puzzled expression. “What’s wrong with that?”

“Because now whatever I get her will pale in comparison!” Fitz replied with a frown.

Grant stared at him, belatedly realizing that Fitz was truly upset. Overshadowing Fitz wasn’t something he’d considered when he’d decided to do this for Jemma. He’d just wanted to do something nice for her, especially when she’d been so gracious and forgiving towards him.

Flashback

Jemma’s face had been the first thing they’d seen once they’d landed the Bus and lowered the cargo bay doors. She’d clearly been waiting for them in the airplane hangar. Skye rushed forward to hug her as Grant, observing the abrasions covering both sides of her face, felt a wave of guilt like a punch to the stomach. He’d done his best for FitzSimmons in getting them off the Bus but was it enough? Fury told me they both were fine, so where’s Fitz? He hung back as Coulson, May and Trip all crowded around her. Grant felt sick as he noticed that Jemma’s smile looked a bit brave and forced.

“Where’s Fitz?” Skye asked Jemma in alarm. Her expression reflected Grant’s nausea. “Please tell
me he’s ok.”

“He’s alive,” Jemma replied shakily, “and the outlook is good.”

“What happened?” Coulson demanded. He whirled around to look at Grant accusingly, “You told us they were fine!”

Grant felt physically weak. He had no idea what was going on. “Fury told me they were,” he said helplessly.

“Sir, it wasn’t his fault,” Jemma interjected. “The medpod should have floated but, for some reason, it malfunctioned and we sank to the bottom of the ocean. That wasn’t the problem. The pod was watertight and it was actually quite peaceful in there waiting for Director Fury to find us. He was really very punctual in his arrival and even found some divers to help us get to the surface.”

“What went wrong?” May asked quietly.

“Well, the landing was a little bumpy.” Grant looked away as she talked. This is all my fault! “Fitz was so busy helping me get strapped in that he didn’t secure himself very well,” Jemma’s expression mirrored Grant’s guilt, “and he broke his arm when we hit the water. I was able to immobilize it but there wasn’t anything I could do for the pain. All the medications were still in the Lab. So, we suspect that Fitz held his breath during our ascent.”

Grant felt like all the air left his lungs in a whoosh. He knew what that meant, what could happen when you didn’t breathe while underwater. “Never hold your breath” is the cardinal rule of diving, something Fitz probably knew in theory but forgot when he was dealing with the pain of a broken arm. Pain Grant caused by releasing the medpod into the ocean. He bent over to put his hands on his knees as he struggled to get air into his lungs. Will I ever stop hurting the people I try to protect?

All of a sudden, he felt a hand on his arm trying to get him to straighten up. Grant figured it was Skye, so he was surprised when he saw Jemma’s face. “Breathe, Agent Ward,” she said in a gentle voice, a voice he and Skye had amused themselves with back on the Bus by calling it her Doctoring Voice – a phrase that never failed to annoy Jemma. (“That’s ridiculous! Voices aren’t related to people’s professions! I may speak more slowly and lower the decibels when I’m working with a patient but my voice is the same regardless of what I’m doing,” she’d told them in an exasperated tone.)

“Look in my eyes and match your breath to mine,” Jemma continued.

Grant followed her instructions and began breathing easier. He looked away in humiliation. I’m a specialist! I shouldn’t need help breathing for god’s sake! He risked a glimpse at her face and was shocked to see her smiling encouragingly at him. Grant knew that Jemma was a kind person but old habits like expecting mockery and censure for being “weak” die hard. Her hand was still on his arm and it felt good, solid, like it was grounding him to the moment. He turned his head back to face her.

Jemma shook her head a little, the smile now a reproachful one. “I know what you’re thinking,” she told him, “and you’re wrong.”

“Really,” he said doubtfully. Most people couldn’t get into his head. He’d trained hard to make it that way because hiding his thoughts was vital to his survival. Even Garrett had been wrong about him, much to his eventual detriment. So he doubted that Jemma could read him so easily.
“Really,” Jemma answered firmly.

She and Grant were now in something of a face-off broken only when Coulson called out in an irritated voice, “Can you tell those of us who don’t know what exactly he’s thinking?”

Jemma broke eye contact with Grant and turned to the rest of the group. “Of course, Sir,” she said briskly in her usual Simmons voice. “Agent Ward is thinking that Fitz’s condition is his fault, that he made a mistake when he released the medpod from the Bus. But he’s wrong,” Jemma said with a sidelong glance at Grant. “Garrett wanted us dead and it was the only way to save us. Director Fury captured some of Garrett’s men and they admitted that they had orders to shoot us in the head if Agent Ward didn’t get the job done.” She turned and looked at Grant directly again. “You saved our lives. Again. What happened to Fitz was just a horrible accident.”

“Am I the only person who doesn’t know what happened to Fitz?” Skye asked, looking around at the rest of the group. “Why is holding your breath so bad? He was underwater. That makes total sense to me.”

“You have to breathe so your body can function normally, even underwater,” Trip explained. “Even if you can’t take air in, you can let it out. If you don’t keep the air in your lungs moving somehow, bad things can happen.”

Jemma nodded. “Fitz developed an air embolism. We didn’t realize anything was wrong until he lost consciousness in the plane. Luckily, the medic on board figured it out quickly and we were able to get Fitz into a hyperbaric chamber immediately upon arriving here. That’s where he is now and all signs point to a complete recovery.”

Upon hearing this, Grant released a breath he hadn’t known he was holding. He noted that everyone else’s body postures also relaxed. *It’s good to be among family again.*

“That’s the second time one of our team’s been saved by a hyperbaric chamber. I guess we shouldn’t leave home without it,” Skye muttered.

“Agreed,” Coulson said briskly. “Speaking of home, what is this place?” he asked Jemma.

“Welcome to the Playground!” a new voice answered. The team turned almost as one to look at the newcomer standing just outside the Bus. Grant noticed that he wasn’t the only one who seemed surprised. There stood someone who looked almost exactly like Agent Eric Koenig, the agent he’d last seen ICERed and bound at Providence Base. *How’d he get here?* “Of course, it doesn’t have really a name because, technically, it doesn’t exist, it being a secret base and all.”

“But hey, it’s great to have company finally,” Billy said delightedly, “and I did not mind minding this place.” He bounded up the cargo ramp, took Coulson by the arm and led him away, talking a mile a minute about security, lanyards, and Fury.
The rest of the team stood still for a second, then May and Trip headed off the Bus. Skye whirled to face Grant, excitement on her face, but Jemma reached him first. She grabbed his arm and started leading him off the Bus in a manner reminiscent of Koenig and Coulson. “I’m sure you’d like to get settled but I think you should see Fitz first. He’s bored and has been asking for you,” she told him.

Grant nodded. “Of course.” He gave Skye an apologetic look as he allowed Jemma to guide him into the Playground. Skye merely shrugged in response to his look but Grant still felt bad about abandoning her, especially since her expression reminded him of a dog denied a wonderful treat. I’ll make it up to her later.

Present Day

Grant’s training in interpersonal relationships demanded that he try to keep the peace and give Fitz what he wanted. However, he also heard the voice of his therapist in his head (they’d resumed their sessions by video conference since he’d been at the Playground) reminding him that it was time he paid attention to what he wanted too. If he was honest with himself, this was the only gift Grant could think of to offer Jemma and he wanted to give it without feeling guilty for something that wasn’t his fault.

“Fitz, you know that she’ll love whatever you give her, especially if it’s something I can’t even pronounce,” Grant said with a smile.

Fitz just shook his head, looking very serious. “You don’t get it, Ward. I think she fancies you a bit and this…” he gestured toward the frying pans, the stacked dishes waiting to be placed on the table, and the blueberry muffins, “…is just going to make it worse.”

Grant felt the smile drop off of his face as he turned away from Fitz to attend to his meal. Could he be right? He almost snorted at the thought of Jemma being interested in him but then started actually considering the idea. He’d been treating her like a younger sister but he’d never mentioned that to her. All she would know was that Grant had been teasing and laughing with her when they played games, taking her side against Skye and Fitz in discussions, and trying to get her whatever she needed, just like he would with his own sister. And (he groaned internally at this thought), in an effort to take attention away from his budding romantic relationship with Skye, he’d been extra affectionate with Jemma. Given that he was Grant Ward and she was Jemma Simmons, this didn’t really amount to much – a shoulder bump here, a hand on the arm there – but it was enough physical contact that a reserved Brit might view it as more than it was. Uh oh.

He sighed and turned back to Fitz. “Maybe you’re right but there’s nothing I can do about it now. Fitz, do you remember what I told you when we were at Providence base?”

Fitz looked confused for a moment and then his brow cleared. “You told me that if there’s something I want to tell her, I shouldn’t wait.” He shook his head. “I thought you were crazy but, when we were in the medpod, I almost told Jemma how I felt. If Fury hadn’t shown up when he did, I probably would have.”

“I think that you still should,” a new voice said as Skye came down the stairs. Her glance immediately took in all the cooking and her eyes lit up when she saw the muffins. Grant frowned at her as she took one from the basket. “We are talking about you telling Simmons that you love her, right?”

Grant grinned as he turned back to his cooking. Leave it to Skye to spell out the obvious. His smile got even wider as he heard Fitz spluttering around a bit.
“Ward and I were just having a *private* conversation about something that happened earlier,” Fitz said pointedly.

“Oh relax. Everyone but Jemma knows you love her. Now help me set the table before I go and get the others,” Skye replied, not at all put off by his irritated tone.

The breakfast was a huge success. Skye managed to get May, Coulson, Trip and even Agent Koenig to the table before bringing Jemma in. The food had been delicious and plentiful and the light-hearted banter around the table reminded Grant of their meal times on the Bus. It definitely had been worth all his hard work. The only down side had been Jemma’s reaction. As the others started cleaning up, she took his arm and dragged him over to the side.

“Ward, thank you so much! This was such a brilliant surprise.” She shook her head with a blinding smile on her face. “Is there nothing you can’t do?” she asked as she reached up on tiptoe to plant a kiss on his cheek.

As Jemma went happily down the hall (her requests to help clean up having been immediately denied), Grant caught a glimpse of Fitz’s face. *Damn.*
This really wasn't where I expected this chapter to go, especially since the flashback is going to continue into the next chapter. Hopefully by then Grant and Skye will have cooperated and they will have some fun!

After the light and airiness of the Bus, Grant found the Playground to be dark and a bit eerie. He had never done well with enclosed spaces, an aversion that made him avoid the Vaults in the basement like the plague. Even when he was still living with his family, he’d always spent as much time outside as he could and this tendency to enjoy wide open spaces was only heightened after his time in the Wyoming wilderness. And although Grant was at home indoors, it was only outdoors that he truly came alive. That’s why his camping trip with Skye had been so wonderful.

Grant couldn’t imagine being shut up in one of those Vaults for any length of time, especially given the guilt he still harbored over John’s death and the SHIELD agents he killed in service to Hydra. While he knew that killing the Frankenstein monster John became was the right decision, he still felt responsible and horribly sad. After all, his sole reason for existing for 15 years had been saving John’s life and, in the end, he’d failed. The knowledge of his failure was causing a lot of nightmares and, if his team hadn’t been so supportive of him, it might have caused worse than that.

His therapist was very helpful but it was Skye who was a lifesaver for Grant. Despite everything, she’d still chosen to love him and actively wanted to be with him. She also knew enough about his situation to pull him back from the brink when he most needed it.

Flashback

After talking with Fitz, Grant exited the room housing the hyperbaric chamber somewhat in a daze. It took him a moment to realize that he didn’t know where he was going or even where he was supposed to be. As far as he knew, Coulson hadn’t assigned rooms, set briefings, or given orders of any kind since they’d arrived. Grant smiled a bit when he considered that, even though they’d left the Bus, everything was still up in the air. His smile faded when he realized that he had no idea what to do or where to go.

“Was talking to Fitz really that bad?” Skye asked, coming up behind him.

Grant almost jumped at her approach and then cursed himself for just how much his situational awareness was compromised. Get a grip, Ward! He whirled to face her. “No, of course not. I just…” he trailed off as he realized that he had no idea how to finish that sentence.

Somehow Skye seemed to understand what he couldn’t articulate. “Hey, let me show you something,” she said gently as she took his hand and led him down the hall. They passed a lot of different rooms with Skye stopping beside a few and murmuring descriptions. “That’s the Lab. Look how much bigger it is! I think FitzSimmons will really like it.” Grant was amused at Skye taking him on a mini-tour of the base. For being there only a short time, she seemed to know her way around and the SO in him was proud. She really used her time wisely.
“This is the gym. Now we won’t have to worry about running into SUVs or other equipment. And I hear there are actual weights and treadmills! No more making me run around the Bus,” she said with an impish grin.

“Don’t count on it,” Grant retorted. If he was still going to be Skye’s SO, he couldn’t afford the perception that he was allowing her to slack.

They kept walking down apparently endless corridors until they reached what seemed to be the furthest corner of the base. Skye opened the door to the last room in the hallway and pulled Grant in. “Ta da!” she sang, lifting both hands in a grand gesture.

Grant was confused. It was a bedroom, a fairly small one, but still much bigger than their bunks on the Bus. He didn’t see any reason for Skye to look so thrilled about it but, then again, maybe it was a big deal for her since she’d lived in a van prior to joining their team. He made a show of looking around.

“It’s nice,” he said in what he hoped was an impressed tone of voice.

Skye snorted and rolled her eyes. “Not the room, Robot. Note the location! I already claimed it with AC.”

“Skye, it’s the furthest bedroom from the transportation area and the common rooms. It’s going to take you a lot longer than anyone else to get around the base,” Grant explained patiently. She’s not thinking this through. “Are you sure you want this one?”

She leaned forward, took both of his hands and placed them on her waist. Then she gently grasped his face with her hands and gave him a lingering kiss. Skye drew back a little, just enough to look directly in his eyes. “I’m sure. This room is far enough away from everyone else that I have the freedom to do what I want, even if I’m loud,” she said in a husky voice. Oh. “It’s so remote that I can even pretend that the outside world doesn’t exist.”

Grant graced her with a slow smile. I’m the one not thinking this through. “You’re right. This room is perfect,” he whispered as he kissed her again.

Skye’s tongue swept into his mouth as she deepened the kiss. Almost in response, Grant twirled, picking her up and placing her on the dresser in one smooth motion. He was pleased that he didn’t have to bend as far and she could wrap her legs around his waist. Not for the first time, he considered what a pain their height difference could be, so he was grateful for the presence of the furniture. Skye stretched her neck to allow him greater access to her pulse point and Grant inwardly grinned when she shivered as he hit just the right area. His hand was moving towards the edge of her shirt when Skye suddenly leaned back.

“Slow down there, Turbo,” she said. Grant was pleased to notice that she was breathing just as hard as he was but he was confused.

“What’s wrong? Why are we stopping?” he asked her. He tried to keep the panic out of his voice because, while he knew that she probably had a good reason for interrupting their make-out, the pull of his history was strong.

People had always walked away from Grant and he was terrified that Skye would as well. He really didn’t want her to guess his fears though. If she wanted to leave – and as messed up as he believed himself to be, he thought she probably should – then he wanted her to be free to go without guilt. Skye was a caretaker but he didn’t want her to take care of him. Grant wanted her to choose to be with him, not feel obligated. However, while one part of him wanted what was best for her, the
other part didn’t know what he would do if she left.

“Hey, calm down,” Skye said softly, reaching up to stroke his face. *Damn, she noticed.* “I just didn’t want us to be…um…indisposed when we have to meet the rest of the team for a briefing in about an hour. After all,” she said in her normal voice, grinning wickedly at him, “we have so much further to walk than anyone else.” Grant shook his head in mock disgust but couldn’t help the grin that snuck over his face. “Besides, we still have to find you a room and I don’t want to mess up the surprise I have for you later.”

“Surprise?” Grant wasn’t sure how he felt about that. In his world, surprises were rarely good but, then again, he’d never been on the receiving end of a Skye surprise. Maybe those were different.

“Yep,” Skye said briskly as she jumped off the dresser. “And don’t even think of trying to weasel it out of me. My lips are sealed,” she said as she made a locking gesture at her lips.

Grant smiled as she grabbed his hand and led him back out of the room and down the hall in search of the perfect room of his own. He hoped that he wouldn’t be spending a lot of time there but appearances had to be maintained.

After finding Grant a room and letting him see enough of the base to get his bearings, she dragged him back to the Bus. Grant followed Skye curiously until they reached the lounge area – the site of his many Battleship losses – and she plopped down in one of the chairs. He sat down next to her wondering what she was up to.

“Now that we’re home and no one else is around, how was your meeting with Fitz? Was it hard?” Skye asked gently. Grant started to open his mouth and tell her it was fine when she frowned at him and held up one finger to shush him. “And don’t give me your usual bullshit, Grant Ward. I know you too well.”

Grant raised his eyebrows and made a skeptical face. “Oh, really? Just what is it that you think you know?” He actually felt torn. While he was grateful that Skye was making the effort to get to know the real Grant (and even seeming to like him!), telling an agent who was the best at espionage since Romanov that she knew him was a bit insulting.

“I know that it’s hard for you to do vulnerable, that you like pretending nothing affects you,” Skye retorted. “But I also know that you’re really just a squishy teddy bear.” An impish grin spread across her face, especially since she must have noticed the offended expression he had to be sporting. *Is she kidding?* The grin faded from her face. “Seriously Grant, being a hero doesn’t mean that you don’t have feelings; it just means that you do what has to be done in spite of them. And I’m pretty sure Garrett didn’t teach you that.”

Grant looked away as he felt tears prick at his eyes. The mention of Garrett in conjunction with the words hero and feelings was just too much. He didn’t feel like a hero and he damn sure didn’t want to deal with his feelings. Yet ever since he’d rejoined his team, Grant imagined that he’d been wearing his emotions on his sleeve, completely incapable of employing his usual brand of stoic deception. This left him feeling raw and exposed, two of his least favorite feelings. He took a deep breath and considered his response.

“I’m much too muscled to be a squishy teddy bear,” he said with a hint of a smile.

“Point taken,” Skye conceded as she gave him a matching smile and a quick squeeze of his bicep. Then the smile quickly disappeared. “But the other stuff is still true.”

His therapist used to say the same thing. Grant nodded. “You’re right and it’s something I need to
work on. So yes, it was difficult seeing Fitz. He didn’t blame me at all, he even thanked me for helping him and Simmons get off the plane but I still feel guilty.” He looked away from her steady gaze and out the window. It was disconcerting to see the hangar walls instead of the deep blue sky and fluffy clouds he was used to. “I feel guilty about a lot of things,” he admitted softly.

“I know the feeling,” Skye replied. Grant quickly turned his head back to look at her. She was looking steadily at him and he felt a sense of foreboding, sure that he wasn’t going to like what she said next. Skye was one of the warmest, most giving people he knew.

“What in the world does she have to feel guilty about?

“Yeah,” Skye continued, nodding. “Once I realized what was going on, I felt guilty about hurting you with Miles.” Grant just raised an eyebrow inquiringly. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to talk about this. “Come on, Grant,” she scoffed. “You can’t expect me to believe that you froze me out for so long just because I’d briefly betrayed the team. Clearly, I’d hit a nerve and it wasn’t just a professional one.”

He opened his mouth to say something, then closed it abruptly when he decided that he had nothing to say. Skye smirked a bit, then her smile faded.

“I feel guilty because it hurt you and it was completely unnecessary. If I’d known that I actually had a chance with you, I’d never have slept with Miles. But you were so emotionally closed off – and I get now why you were,” Skye hastened to add as she raised his hand to ward off his speech when Grant opened his mouth again, “that I never dreamed we could have something together.”

Grant shook his head, “Skye, I wish…” he started softly but she kept talking over him.

“And I feel incredibly guilty that, once I did know we could be together, I didn’t trust you enough to believe you when you asked me to,” she said as tears rose in her eyes.

“Skye, we’ve gone over that. There’s nothing for you to feel guilty about,” he started. She shouldn’t ever cry over me!

“We’ve also gone over how you did what you had to do to keep FitzSimmons safe,” Skye said as her voice started to rise, “yet you keep feeling guilty over that! How are my feelings any different?”

“Because you’re a good person!” Grant said in a tightly controlled voice. How can she not understand this?

“Why? Because you did what you had to do to survive? Because you hurt a few people in order to accomplish a mission that saved hundreds? Well, newsflash, Grant: we all did that! What makes you so bad?” Skye asked heatedly, leaning forward in her chair, almost invading his personal space.

Grant jumped out of his chair and started pacing in order to release some of his pent up energy. “Because I let Garrett die!” he yelled. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Skye looking shocked at his outburst. Might as well tell her everything. “No, it’s even worse than that. I made sure that Mike was able to kill him. The only person who ever cared about me, the only one willing to save me from hell, the person who gave me a future, and I couldn’t even…”

Suddenly, it was all too much. Grant felt something within him break as he sank down to the floor, letting the torrent of tears flow down his cheeks. He was so miserable that he didn’t even feel embarrassed when Skye’s arms came around him, rocking him slowly and silently, seemingly comfortable with his sobs. Garrett was gone and not only did Grant not save him but he was
instrumental in his death. Scenes from all the good times they’d had flashed through his brain: laughing together at John’s stories, his pride when Grant demonstrated his skills, all the times he’d called him son or bragged about him to colleagues. His mind ground to a halt when he remembered Garrett’s last pleading look at him. What have I done?

But then, almost unbidden, came images of the bad times with Garrett. Grant almost couldn’t breathe as he recalled his almost paralyzing fear when John left him in the woods, his terrible grief when Garrett shot Buddy, the punishments he gave when Grant didn’t learn something fast enough or didn’t perform a task exceptionally and Garrett’s utter disregard for the lives of the people Grant loved. I gave him over 15 years of my life. What kind of idiot does that?

As his emotions eased, Grant started taking deep breaths, trying to stem the flow of his grief. Before this, he wouldn’t have believed it possible, but Skye’s arms around him and her rhythmic movements actually helped him feel better. Huh.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, turning his head away from Skye so she couldn’t see his face. “You must think I’m crazy for crying over someone who was a monster!”

Skye kissed the top of his head, then murmured into his ear, “It’s all right, Grant. I may not have loved him but you did. I get it.” This too made him feel better and it was almost enough to get him to turn his head back to look at her but he couldn’t, not yet. Instead he focused on his breathing. “I may not have liked what Garrett did to you but because of him, we were able to meet. I am grateful to him for that,” Skye continued.

This time, Grant did turn his head and met her eyes. Skye gave him a small smile and shrugged. He gazed into her eyes in silence, the feeling of love so strong within him that he could practically feel it washing over him. He didn’t know how she’d done it but, even with the anger and loathing Skye had to feel toward Garrett, she’d still made it ok for Grant to grieve the loss of the complicated relationship he’d had with him. And even though Grant was embarrassed to have lost it in front of her, he felt lighter, like a burden had been lifted. The tightness in his chest that had been there since Mike killed Garrett was gone and he finally felt like he could breathe again. He leaned forward and kissed her hard, wanting Skye to feel every ounce of the love and passion he had for her.

Their kisses started getting heated and Grant felt like he never wanted to stop. He didn’t care if they stayed forever like this; this moment was all there was. However, Skye pulled back a little and rested her forehead against his, breathing hard like she’d just finished 10 minute speed drills. Then she pulled back even further and placed one hand gently against his cheek.

“Before we go any further, there’s something I really need to know,” she told him breathlessly. Uh oh. “Are you actually that bad at Battleship or did you just let me win?”

Grant sat back, leaned against the wall and laughed. Definitely wasn’t expecting that! Skye was really the limit but he understood that this was her way of getting them back on solid ground. Coulson wouldn’t be happy if they were late to his briefing. He got to his feet and held out his hand to help her up.

“You got me. It was all an elaborate plan to get you to make out with me on the floor of the Lounge. Nothing says romance quite like airplanes and board games.”

“Romance, huh?” Skye queried with a glint in her eye. “I like where your mind is, so hold that thought,” she said as she raced out of the Lounge and toward the bunks. Grant used that time to calm down and pull himself together. He’d had so many different feelings that day that he kind of had emotional whiplash, if that was even a thing.
Skye quickly emerged from the hallway, carrying a mysterious bag in her hand. “Don’t ask. It’s part of the surprise,” she said with a smile as she grabbed his hand and led the way off the Bus.

The two of them joined the rest of the team – minus Fitz – in the briefing room. They sat in chairs apart from each other. During their walk to the briefing room, they’d agreed that while they couldn’t exactly hide their relationship from the others, they shouldn’t advertise it either. And since, at least from Grant’s perspective, that would be doubly difficult if Skye was in close physical proximity, he chose to sit somewhere he couldn’t touch her.

“I hope you’ve all had time to settle in and find rooms,” Coulson said as he entered the room, closely followed by Agent Koenig. “The Playground is going to be our home base for a while, so get comfortable. Agent Koenig has agreed to forego the lanyard approval process as I’ve personally vouched for everyone around this table. And Fitz of course,” he added when he saw Jemma open her mouth to object. Grant was amused to note that Agent Koenig seemed less than pleased with that concession. “Agent Koenig has maintained the entire base’s inventory in an exemplary fashion,” Coulson nodded to Koenig whose frown turned into a surprised smile at the gesture, “so we’ll have all the equipment we’ll need for now. What we don’t have is people. That’s why our immediate mission is to need to find all the remaining SHIELD agents that we can and figure out ways to recruit more. We have a lot of work ahead of us but,” he suddenly smiled, “we’re not going to start it until tomorrow. You all have the night off, so get out of here and go have some fun!”

Grant was stunned. He definitely hadn’t anticipated this reprieve as he’d expected to work through the night picking up the pieces of SHIELD. *That’s what John would have done.* But Coulson was made of different stuff and Grant was suddenly hit by the memory of the last time off he’d had. He hadn’t been able to spend the time with Skye like he would’ve preferred but this time was different. He looked across the table to see her smiling at him.

She picked up the bag and tilted her head towards the door. Coulson and May were in deep conversation with Koenig and Jemma and Trip were already gone, so Skye sent Coulson a wave and went out the door. Grant followed, quickly catching up to her in the hallway. Skye glanced at him as she sped up her steps.

“While I probably won’t mind you being a slow poke at times,” she teased, “this isn’t one of them. Come on. We’ve got places to go!”

Grant followed her to an outer door, wondering where the Playground was located. He hadn't been paying attention to the skyline when they'd first arrived in the Bus. Skye handed him a brown leather jacket as she donned a black one before opening the door and heading out toward the SUVs parked close by. As he gazed at the mountains in the distance, Grant smiled as he realized that they were in Colorado, probably somewhere outside of Denver. It was a perfect place to hide a secret base and suddenly, the darkness of the facility made sense. It was hidden in a mountain. He hurried to catch up to Skye who hadn’t even broken stride when they left the building. She got into one of the SUVs and he quickly took the passenger side.

“So,” he asked as she started up the engine, “where are we going?”

Skye looked over at him and smiled as she backed the SUV out of the parking space. “I told you, it’s a surprise. But I don’t think you’ll have any complaints.”

Grant sat back in his seat and truly relaxed for the first time in what seemed like forever. “I’m sure I won’t,” he replied.
Grant pushed himself to take the top of the path at top speed. His feet pounded on the ground as tiny rocks and little pieces of dirt went flying behind him. The clean mountain air felt good, even as he was huffing and puffing, and he acknowledged to himself just how difficult living on a plane had been. Recycled and temperature regulated air, small spaces, minimal alone time and prepackaged food – he had disliked all of those things. He was grateful that part of his life seemed to be over, at least for now.

He stopped at the top of the hill and paced around for a few minutes, breathing hard. Only when his breath returned to normal did he allow himself to sit down on a rock overlooking an exquisite vista. Grant grinned to himself as he gazed at the view. *I am so lucky. This is totally worth it!* Most of his fellow agents did their exercise within the bowels of the Playground but Grant requested, and received, special permission to do his cardio outside. He found that he tolerated the dark and confined space of the base better when he spent some time outside every day. And most days around here were spectacular.

Sometimes Skye came with him – he’d never get over the irony of someone with an outdoors name being such an inside person – but today she’d had work to do, so he’d come up here on his own. Grant took some deep breaths, relishing the fresh feel of them, while going over the events of the last few days in his mind. Before he got into the more difficult events, he allowed himself a few moments to think of the good memories. He could feel his smile getting wider. *Skye. What in the world did I ever do to deserve her?*

**Flashback**

After he got in the car, Grant started to ask Skye what she thought about the briefing when she suddenly held up her hand.

“Huh uh,” she told him while concentrating on the road. “No work talk. We are officially off the clock.”

“OK,” Grant replied slowly. He consciously relaxed his shoulders as he considered the fact that most of what they had in common was work. “So where are we going?”

Skye smiled, her eyes still on the road. They’d turned onto a main highway off the mountain. Grant could see snow on the tops of some mountains although the area around the highway was green. “Nope, we’re not talking about that either.” She glanced over at him. “Be patient. You’ll see soon enough.”

“Skye,” Grant said exasperatedly, “if we’re not talking about work and we’re not discussing what we’re doing tonight, then what *do* you want to talk about?”

“You,” she replied looking sideways at him. Then, obviously seeing what had to be panic on his face, she hurried to add, “Not the big stuff. I already know the basics of how you grew up but while you were asleep right after we got you back, I realized that I don’t know much about *you.***

Grant was pleased by the “after we got you back” part of the sentence but also confused. If Skye already knew his background – and he trusted her skill with hacking enough to accept that she did
then what else was there? He crinkled his brow while he tried to come up with a way to tell her she was crazy without sounding like he meant it.

Skye, once again glancing over at him, grinned a little. “Look, I know that you like board games and the outdoors but that’s about it. What’s your favorite color? Do you have a favorite food? What book would you take to a desert island? Would you choose cats or dogs or are you one of those weird people who don’t like either? Do you prefer movies or television? What kind of music do you like? Political party? Boxers or briefs?” Grant raised his eyebrows at her. “Well, scratch that last one,” Skye said hastily, “but hopefully you get my drift. I want to know the real Grant Ward.”

Grant looked down at his hands, as looking at Skye suddenly became a bit too difficult. *The real Grant Ward? That’s a good question.* Skye definitely deserved to know who she was dating (if that’s what they actually were doing) but Grant didn’t know if he had any answers for her. Did he even know the real Grant Ward?

“Oh,” Skye said gently. “None of those were supposed to be trick questions. I just want to know who you are.”

“And you deserve to know that,” he replied softly as he looked into her eyes before she turned her attention back to the road, “it’s just that I’m not always sure who I am. You know how I grew up, so you also know that a lot of the time I was whoever I needed to be in the moment. That’s how I survived my family and, later, John. That’s how I survived being a specialist and a triple agent. There wasn’t a lot of time left over for discovering who I was and what I thought.” Grant looked out the window, away from Skye, feeling disgusted with himself. He’d always viewed his ability to be a chameleon as a plus but now it just seemed weak. *Maybe she shouldn’t get involved with me because who knows who I’ll be tomorrow.*

“Yeah, I totally get that,” Skye said, surprising Grant somewhat. He’d been so certain that she’d share his disgust. *I should’ve known better.* There was a reason they’d connected with each other so quickly and it wasn’t because they both were pretty. He turned to face her again. “That’s how I grew up too,” Skye continued, seemingly oblivious to his thoughts, “always trying to be what the other kids, the sisters who ran the orphanage and the foster families wanted me to be: the rebel, the good girl, the sweet girl who was grateful for everything. For a long time, I thought that if I just gave them the girl they wanted, then maybe they’d love me.” Her voice trembled a little even as she shook her head ruefully. Grant reached over and took her hand and Skye smiled a bit sadly.

“For a while, neither of them said anything, the rhythmic sounds of the road the only noise in the SUV. Grant tried to imagine what it must have been like to grow up the way Skye did, never knowing where she came from or where she belonged. It must have been lonely but a young Grant would have given a lot to have been left alone the way she had been, to have not known the monstrous nature of his family. Most of all, he would have given anything to have control over his own destiny, to decide whether or not to play a role. For Skye, it had been a choice. For him, it had been survival. He wasn’t certain that, even now, she understood that crucial difference between them.

“I had the opposite problem,” Grant admitted, trying hard to suppress the negative feelings the conversation was giving him. “I submerged the real me so much in whatever role I needed to play that I lost myself.”
Skye was quiet for a moment, then she squeezed his hand and smiled at him. “Well then, you’re in luck,” she said in a lofty voice, “because I happen to be excellent at discovering people’s true character.”

“Yeah, lucky me,” Grant said sarcastically even though he was secretly thrilled.

“Still wants to know who I am!”

They both laughed as Skye leaned forward to turn on the radio.

The rest of the car ride was taken up with arguing about songs on the radio and talking about various light-hearted topics. They discussed current events (other than SHIELD’s fall), Skye revealed the results of her search for the perfect romantic movie and Grant told some funny stories from his time at the SHIELD Academy. He was just wrapping up the tale of the time some of his fellow cadets convinced him to join them in putting on disguises and heading out to a club – the lead car hadn’t seen a dip in the road in time and achieved maximum velocity with the bumpy landing completely messing up their wigs, a sight which caused everyone in the second car to laugh uproariously – when Skye finally pulled into a parking lot. She finished laughing and turned off the engine simultaneously. Grant glanced around as Skye just looked triumphant.

“What is this place?” he asked. Even though they were in the center of a small downtown area, the building looked like it had once been a house. Whatever it had once been, it was now painted red, white, blue and orange and decorated with a distinctly Asian flare. If he had to guess, he’d say that it was intended to represent somewhere around Nepal.

“This is the Sherpa House Restaurant,” Skye told him, shrugging a little. “I saw it online and thought it might be fun for us to eat food that’s a bit different, for me at least. I know you’re quite the traveler.” Grant nodded but he didn’t really care where they were or what they did. He would have agreed to anything that made Skye’s eyes light up as much as they were now. “Besides,” she continued as she got out of the SUV and took his hand again, “I heard a rumor that it’s romantic.”

And it was. The lighting was low, seemingly lit mostly with candlelight, and the two of them had a great time sharing dishes and even feeding each other with both hands and utensils. Toward the end of dinner, Skye laughingly poked a piece of naan bread into his mouth. Instead of taking it and chewing like he had previously, Grant made a point of drawing her fingers into his mouth and sucking on them a little. His eyes met hers and she quit laughing. He gently took her hand and pressed a small kiss onto her palm and then on the inside of her wrist. Grant smiled imperceptibly as Skye swallowed hard.

Her eyes never left his as she said in a faint voice, “We should pay our bill.”

“Already done,” he said in a low tone, his gaze fixed on her face.

“Well, aren’t you a ninja,” Skye said, looking down and scooting back her chair so she could get up. “I never even saw you do it.”

Grant smiled as he helped her out of the chair, took her hand and started leading her out of the restaurant. He understood that she needed to break the tension between them and was grateful that she had, especially as he noticed that the other diners seemed a bit too interested in them. He understood that she needed to break the tension between them and was grateful that she had, especially as he noticed that the other diners seemed a bit too interested in them. He didn’t know what he would have done if she hadn’t. He found this thought a bit disturbing since he wasn’t really sure where Skye was with the two of them being together physically. Every time they’d tried doing something more than kiss lately, she’d called a halt. He was fine with doing whatever she wanted but he kind of needed to know so he could manage his expectations.

Once they exited the Sherpa House, Skye took the lead and headed toward the SUV. “This was just our first stop,” she told Grant with a grin. She merely laughed at his raised eyebrows. “Oh, our night is not even close to being over, not by a long shot!” That made sense. After all, there was still
the bag to consider. He couldn’t wait to find out what was in that.

It turned out that their next stop was the Four Seasons hotel in Denver. Grant turned to look at Skye in amazement when they pulled up to the valet. “The Four Seasons? Really? Isn’t this kind of expensive?”

Skye just rolled her eyes as she got out of the SUV, grabbed the bag and handed the keys to the valet. She put her arm through Grant’s and semi-pulled him into the lobby. “Seriously Grant?” she said in a whisper. “We all draw a salary but never go anywhere or spend our own money. Don’t you think we deserve at least one night of complete luxury?”

Grant just laughed. Skye may intellectually know how he was brought up but she clearly had no clue what being a Ward truly meant. This wasn’t his first Four Seasons stay, so he wasn’t nearly as charmed by the idea of being surrounded by wealth and comfort. But she was. He understood that, for someone who used to live in a van, this seemed like the height of luxury. But he didn’t care. This was her night and whatever made her happy, he would gladly do. He laughed again when Skye went to the reservations desk and checked in as Anna Strong.

“What’s so funny?” she asked as she came up to him with the key card and their bag.

Grant shook his head, still smiling. “Anna Strong, member of the Culper Spy Ring in the Revolutionary War?”

“Look at you, Mr. Educated,” Skye responded playfully. Grant inwardly grinned. He could tell she was impressed but also irritated that he knew her alias. Then she shrugged. “Given our work, it seemed fitting. Mata Hari or Ethel Rosenberg would be a little too obvious but, since this is Denver and not the east, they probably don’t know about Anna.” She glanced up at him wickedly. “A girl’s got to take her fun where she can find it.”

He swallowed hard as the two of them walked toward the elevators. “Absolutely.”

As they opened the door to their room, Grant marveled at how much Skye continued to be full of surprises. Their suite had four windows giving impressive views of the mountains and downtown Denver. The large LCD HDTV in the living room was set to a classical music station, there was a fire going in the fireplace while bottles of wine and champagne were chilling next to a private bar. On the dining room table sat a platter of fruit and assorted sweet breads next to a bowl of dipping chocolate. Clearly, she’d thought of everything. Grant guessed that he’d just been given at least a hint of how she wanted their evening to go and he smiled. The Four Seasons was shaping up to be vastly better now than it had ever been in the past.

“So,” Skye started after she put the bag down in the entryway. Grant shook his head. **Oh Skye, I still have so much left to teach you.** Professional spies never put obstacles in the path of a potential exit. “What do you think?”

Grant turned away from the view to look at an even better one. He smiled and strode forward to take her hand. “I think it’s perfect. Thank you for doing this.” Skye nodded and swallowed hard as he once again kissed her palm. “What would you like to do right now?”

She deliberately stepped back and turned toward the windows. “Well, since the sun’s setting, I think we should take some champagne out on the balcony and enjoy it.”

Grant smiled a little. “As you wish,” he murmured as he moved to the bar to uncork the bottle.

Skye whirled around almost faster than he’d ever seen her move before, her eyes wide. “You’ve seen *The Princess Bride*?” she demanded in an accusing voice. “I thought you never watched
movies!

He shrugged and concentrated on filling the glasses so he wouldn’t laugh. “Some movies are classics that you just can’t miss. Besides, I really liked the book.”

"It's a book too?" Skye asked, shaking her head slowly, a smile on her face, as she accepted a glass and moved toward the balcony doors. “You are full of surprises, Grant Ward.”

He pushed the doors aside and gestured for her to step out, a matching smile on his lips. “I may have a few more up my sleeve,” he said in a low voice.

“I’m counting on it,” she said as she lifted her glass up. “To us and to our night off,” she toasted.

He clinked glasses with her, drank deeply and sat down to admire the view. Grant rarely allowed himself to indulge in alcohol. It wasn’t that he didn’t enjoy it but Garrett had long ago drilled it into him how alcohol dulled the senses, impaired judgement, and was murder on the waistline. And Garrett certainly should have known, given just how much he enjoyed beer. But tonight, a little alcohol seemed like just the thing for Grant to turn off his brain and enjoy himself.

The two of them watched the sunset, drank champagne and talked more about light-hearted topics (about how Skye taught herself to code, some of what Grant had seen during his travels abroad). Through it all though, Grant was aware of a rising tension. Skye looked so beautiful sitting there in the dusk with the stars just starting to appear over the skyline. He remembered back when he’d first noticed how thick and lustrous her hair was and how luminous her dark eyes looked when she was passionate about something. He recalled how good her body felt against him when they were training and again when the two of them were in his bunk following his return to the team. As the conversational pauses got longer, Grant realized that the tension wasn’t just coming from him. She felt it too.

Suddenly, Skye got up and went over to his chair, extending her hand and pulling him up. She led the two of them over to the balcony edge and then turned to look up at him. Grant was speechless. He had the distinct feeling that this was the moment that would define their relationship. Unbidden, he remembered Skye punching the bag and talking about her past.

Hoping for something and losing it hurts more than never hoping for anything. He’d known then how true that statement was but he couldn’t keep himself from hoping for more from Skye. In fact, he’d never wanted anything more than he wanted her right now. He almost held his breath, wondering what she was going to say. Would she say what he wanted to hear or would it be another in a long line of disappointments?

Skye turned from the view and put her hands around his neck. “Grant, I wanted our first time together to be special.” She pulled his face towards her and kissed him deeply. Then she whispered, “Give me a minute, then meet me in the bedroom” and went back inside the suite.

So this is what it feels like to get everything you’ve ever wanted. Grant let himself savor that feeling. The alcohol helped to push away the thought that such a sentiment was dangerous and illusory. He went back into the suite, put the bottle and glasses on the bar and headed to the bedroom wondering what he would find.

What he discovered was Skye standing by the bed dressed in a sexy red teddy negligee trimmed in black lace. The colors perfectly set off her golden skin and dark hair. Grant stopped abruptly in the doorway and felt his mouth go dry. He suspected that his mouth had dropped open as well because somehow his brain wasn’t working very well. He’d seen plenty of beautiful women dressed in expensive and sexy lingerie but he’d never before had this reaction. Of course he’d enjoyed looking at them and having sex with them wasn’t difficult but there was just something about this
woman that made everything in his past pale in comparison. *I love her so damn much!* He struggled to keep his expression neutral and the tears from springing into his eyes. *Say something, idiot!*

“Where did you get that?” he choked out as he mentally kicked himself. *Of everything you could have said…*

Skye smiled wickedly and adjusted her stance just a bit, much to his approval. “I had the Four Seasons send it up with the food and drinks.” She raised her eyebrows, tilted her head and asked playfully, “Do you like it?”

“You know damn well that I do,” he said as he smiled and his feet finally propelled him into the room. “The Four Seasons just keeps getting better and better and you,” he said as he pulled her into his arms, “are driving me crazy.”

“Well, we can’t have that,” Skye murmured as she lifted her face to his. Their lips met in a searing kiss that seemed to last forever.

*Slow down, don’t rush, take your time.* He leaned back from her, took a breath and then gently started outlining her lips with his tongue. This led to a slow, sensual open-mouthed kiss in which he was determined to examine every millimeter of her mouth. However, Skye seemed to have other ideas as she pushed him away from her and then kept her hand on his chest.

“Just so you know,” Skye gasped (Grant grinned) as she flung her arm out to indicate the king-sized bed, “you can see that we have a huge bed, I paid the hotel extra to make sure we’re surrounded by empty rooms, and we have all night.” Grant crinkled his brow a bit. What is she talking about? “Don’t you remember? When we were on the Bus, you said that when we make love for the first time, you didn’t want to be cramped, quiet or rushed.”

Grant was in awe. Not only had she remembered his exact words but she’d gone to great lengths to make his wishes come true. He almost felt weak. *There’s no going back now!* He looked her in the eyes and brought his hand up to caress her face. “I don’t think I could love you any more than I do right now,” he whispered. Skye’s smile trembled a bit and he thought that he saw a hint of moisture in her eyes. *Nope, no tears tonight!* “And damn straight!” he said in his regular voice and started kissing her again.

He gently walked her backwards, kissing her the whole way, and guided her onto the bed, joining her in lying on top of the covers. He moved from kissing her mouth to breathing in her ear, and kissing her neck and collar bone. The whole time he concentrated – as much as he could given the amazing feel of her roving hands in his hair, down his arms and under his shirt – on listening to the sounds she was making. He intended on memorizing every sharp intake of breath, low moan, pant and murmur of “Yes!” or “There!” that he could. Grant gently removed the tenuous straps holding up the negligee, licking down and back up her arms as he did. Skye moaned loudly and he tugged a little on the material in order to get it off. It stayed stuck. Grant pulled a little harder and it moved half an inch. He tried again. Nothing.

Frustrated, he sat up and said, “How in the hell do you get this thing off?”

Looking a little mind-whacked, Skye laughed, leaned up from the bed and pulled the offending material over her head, tossing it onto the floor. She was now only wearing the tiny panties that came with the teddy. She raised her eyebrows. “Better?”

His eyes swept over her body, lingering on her breasts but then traveling back up to her eyes. *Her body is great but nothing can beat her face.* He smiled slightly and caressed her cheek lightly.
“Much,” he answered softly. Once again, he saw evidence of tears, so Grant went back to concentrating on making her body feel good. He circled each breast with his tongue and suckled first on one nipple and then the other before going back up to kiss her lips, ears and neck.

After one particularly loud moan, Skye gently pushed him back, smiled and said, “You have too many clothes on.” He started to take off his shirt but she stilled his hand. “Let me,” she said as she climbed on top of him (Oh god!). Grant was used to pushy women. Many of his sexual interactions were with women of experience who were determined to take just as much as they gave. But this was different, just like everything else had been with Skye. This wasn’t dominance; it was partnership.

She took off his shirt and then moved off of him in order to work on his belt buckle. He raised his hips to help her slide off his jeans and smiled when she simply tossed them over her shoulder, not even bothering to look where they fell. He stopped smiling when she ran her hands up his legs, lovingly fondled his penis and then climbed directly on top of it, rubbing her damp panties along his shaft as she hovered over his face.

“Grant,” she whispered, “you may not know who you are but I do.” Skye started nibbling on the pulse point at his neck. The sensation of her mouth on his skin combined with the rubbing of her panties and the words she was saying was so intense that it almost made him leap off the bed but he willed himself to remain. If foreplay is like this…!

“You’re smart,” Skye continued as she punctuated her words with a kiss on his chest, “compassionate,” she kissed further down his chest, “thoughtful,” another kiss, “wicked sexy,” she suckled his right nipple, “and you suck at Battleship,” she finished as she suckled his left nipple while giggling a little. Grant laughed too. Unfortunately, she was right and clearly, he was never going to live it down.

Skye climbed back up to the top of the bed and looked deeply into Grant’s eyes while she gently traced the features of his face. “You care,” she said quietly. “A lot. And that’s what made me fall in love with you.”

Grant tried his best to push away the swell of emotion that washed over him at the sound of her words – he certainly didn’t want to seem needy – but he couldn’t resist. All he managed was to keep the pleading out of his voice. “You love me?” he asked Skye in a whisper.

She stopped caressing his face, looked directly into his eyes, nodded and whispered back, “I do. I love you, Grant. More than you know.”

After that, there was no stopping him. He kissed her hard, flipped them over and started kissing, licking and sucking his way down Skye’s body. If the noises she was making were any indication, she vastly approved of this turn of events. Grant placed a small kiss on her pubic bone as he gently removed her panties and grinned to himself when he heard her sharp intake of breath. He then held her waist as he softly kissed the inside of first one inner thigh and then the other. He glanced up at her face as he felt her shiver a little, checking to make sure she wanted this, and was rewarded by her glowing eyes, small smile and a caress of his head. Game on.

Grant changed position so that he was hovering over her vagina and started breathing some warm breaths on her labia, not quite touching her. Skye moaned, so he moved on to softly kissing up one side, lightly touching her clit with his tongue and then kissing down the other side. Skye moaned louder, so he licked from the bottom of her vagina to the clit, rolling his tongue around it softly. Grant then wrapped his lips around her clit and sucked, humming a little as he did.

Skye grabbed onto the pillows and moved her hips around, whimpering a little. “More,” she moaned.
“As you wish,” Grant replied wickedly.

He inserted one finger into her canal and started experimenting to see how she liked it. Soon he added another digit, all while licking and sucking her clitoris. Grant circled his tongue clockwise and counter clockwise, then switched it up by flattening his tongue and moving it up and down, trying his best to stimulate all 8,000 nerve endings. By this time, Skye was moaning constantly and bucking her hips so hard that he had to hold her down with one hand so that she wouldn’t hit him in the head. Suddenly he felt her go rigid and his fingers started riding the first ripples of her orgasm. He kept his tongue lightly touching her clit, paying close attention to the sounds Skye was making so he would know when to stop.

“Oh my god!” she panted as her body finally relaxed. “Get up here!” she said, gesturing for him to join her, then turned on her side to face him as he did the same. “That was amazing! I… I never knew I could feel like that,” she admitted.

Grant ran his hand lightly down her cheek. “I’m glad it was satisfactory,” he said smiling a little and trying to keep the smugness from his voice. Any and all previous lovers of hers were clearly forgotten. “Are you still up for more or do you want to stop?”

“Are you kidding?” Skye asked incredulously, sitting up on her elbow so that she could look at him more fully. “If you can do that, then I definitely want to know what else you can do! Bring it on!”

So he did, for the rest of the night. The two of them had sex in different places, in different positions and with as many variations as possible until both of them were too sore to continue. Then they ate some of the fruit, sweetbreads and chocolate washed down with wine and cuddled in the hot water and soapy bubbles they put in the gigantic tub. Afterward, they crawled under the covers of the bed, reveling in the high thread count of the sheets, and slept, Skye cuddling against Grant’s body.

**Present Day**

Grant got up from the rock and shook himself a little, realizing just how caught up he’d gotten in reliving the best night of his life. Of course, the nights following it had been pretty great too as he and Skye made good use of her remote room. He grinned a little to himself as he recalled the numerous times she’d reminded him of his initial naïve assessment of its location (“I don’t know if we’re going to make it on time to DC’s briefing. It is really far!”). He also laughed when he recalled the great importance he’d attached to the mysterious bag she’d taken from the Bus when all it ended up containing was a change of clothes for each of them, another thing for Skye to make fun of him for. In the future though, he’d get his revenge by filling it with some surprises for her, ones that he doubted he’d live down for years. And with that satisfying thought, Grant headed back to the Playground.

**Chapter End Notes**

And there you have it: my first attempt at serious smut. It took me forever to write it but I hope it was fun.
The Playground

The months following the fall of SHIELD were hard ones but Grant was mostly happy. He could finally be genuine and no longer had to lie to Skye or his other teammates about who he was. That made his life much easier, especially as he found himself developing a sense of true belonging. Skye and his team liked *him*, flaws and all, not some character dreamed up by someone else. It also helped that some of the pressure was off. Grant no longer had to question whether every decision he made was vital to the mission and/or needed to be hidden. He could now express preferences and dislikes without fear of censure from a rigid family member or a manipulative mentor. For the first time in a long time, he was free.

However, life within SHIELD was not without problems. They were still dealing with the fall-out from the Hydra reveal, both practically and emotionally. Many missions felt repetitive as they spent a lot of time recapturing people and artifacts they’d thought were taken care of, resources – both financial and staffing – were in short supply, and relationships were tentative as they grappled with healing old wounds and reestablishing trust. The last was particularly challenging because of the very nature of SHIELD. Since it was a spy agency, SHIELD was centered around lies – both finding and telling them – but the organization was finally trying to reconcile how badly secrets had hurt them with how much they helped.

Grant grinned a little to himself as he thought back to a meeting with Fury his team had early in the rebuilding process. The whole team, including Trip and a still-recovering Fitz, were going to tour the Sandbox, a facility they recently won back from Hydra. The group needed to assess the strengths and weakness of the base and make a plan to return it to working order.

**Flashback**

The Bus was just about ready to take off when Coulson informed everyone of a mandatory meeting in the cargo hold. Fury wanted a few words before they left. The group assembled in a tight circle with Simmons and Grant supporting Fitz. Fury glanced intimidatingly around, his eyes lingering on each person before moving to the next. Suddenly, he smiled.

“The last few weeks have been difficult for everyone and I wanted you to know that I value your dedication and loyalty. As thanks, I’ve given each and every one of you a commendation and raise in pay.” Fury smiled slightly and held up his hand to stop the few muffled cheers the group gave at the news. “Don’t get too excited. A raise doesn’t mean much when your salaries were cut in half after Hydra emerged. Budget cuts.” He chuckled ruefully when the smiles dropped off their faces. “But we’re getting there. Your efforts won’t go unnoticed, so keep up the good work.” He nodded and then started to leave.

As Grant turned to head to the Lounge, he noticed that Coulson appeared unsatisfied with Fury’s speech. His eyes widened when Coulson put a hand on Fury’s arm, halting his progress off of the Bus. Fury’s decisions were rarely questioned and Grant had never seen anyone but Maria Hill even attempt it. *What’s going on?*

“Before you go,” Coulson told Fury firmly, “I want to make certain that everyone here,” he waved a hand to indicate the team, “is working only for me. If anyone is reporting back to you for whatever reason, I want to know about it now. No more secrets,” he finished in a determined voice.

Nick Fury just raised an eyebrow.
“I mean,” stuttered Coulson, “no more secrets within our team. Of course there will be secrets. About new missions. We’re a spy agency.” Grant wanted to laugh. Fury was indeed a master communicator and leader.

“Fair enough,” Fury replied shortly. He turned to face the team. “As of now, any mission or assignment you previously had from me or Assistant Director Hill can be shared with this team. Any information you gain about Director Coulson’s emotional state (he looked at May), the TAHITI drug (his eyes skimmed FitzSimmons and Trip), the Rising Tide (he glanced at Skye) or Hydra (he nodded at Grant) can be told to Agent Coulson. We clear?” After seeing everyone’s nod, Fury clapped a hand on Coulson’s shoulder and, disregarding his open-mouthed stare, turned and walked down the ramp.

There was a brief moment of silence as they all watched Fury exit the plane. Then everyone but Coulson and Skye began leaving to return to their respective places. Skye placed her hand on Grant’s arm. At his questioning look, she tilted her head in Coulson’s direction. He clearly wasn’t done with the conversation.

“Wait a minute,” Coulson said to the team before they dispersed to various areas of the Bus. “Do you mean to tell me that I was the only one not reporting in secret to Fury or some other group?”

“Hey, I just joined your team,” Trip said, putting his hands up in a defensive fashion. “The only reporting I did was to my commanding officer…..” He trailed off for a moment, “…who ended up being Hydra, so yeah, never mind. But does that mean all of you were reporting to other people?” he asked incredulously.

No one said anything. FitzSimmons both looked at their feet while Grant exchanged a glance with Skye. Only May seemed to know what to do. “Phil,” she said gently as she steered him toward his office. “That may have been how we started but that’s not where we are now.”

Given what Coulson said to him shortly after Garrett’s death – that he’d always have a place on the team – Grant suspected that his outrage was mostly for show. Just in case it wasn’t, he held his breath until he saw Coulson nod. He didn’t know what he’d do if Coulson suddenly decided to disband the team but it looked like May had everything under control. **Things are going to be ok.**

Trip left the cargo hold shaking his head and muttering under his breath about what he’d gotten himself into. Fitz gave Grant an affectionate whack on the shoulder (Grant glared at him even though he was secretly thrilled) as he and Jemma headed to their Lab. He glanced over at Skye only to find her smiling flirtatiously up at him. **Maybe better than ok.**

“So, when can we start training again, Agent Ward?” she asked with a sly grin.

He laughed. “Training. Is that what we’re calling it now?”

“Just keep it down!” Fitz called out from the Lab. Grant almost choked. “Really Jemma, I think I preferred Hydra Ward,” he heard Fitz continue in what he surely believed was a discreet voice. “At least he was quiet.”

“Oh I don’t know, Fitz. I think the change is quite welcome,” Jemma replied, looking directly at Grant and smiling. At least she understood that their conversation was being overheard.

Skye’s eyes lit up as she turned to face Grant. “Fitz has no idea what he’s talking about. I, for one, really like it when Agent Ward gets all chatty and vocal.” She grinned wickedly at him when she noted his blush. “Also,” she said in a low tone, “it kind of looks like I have some competition for your affections.”
Grant just smiled, grabbed her hand and led her down the hall. Once they were safely past the Lab, he leaned down and whispered in her ear, “Not even remotely possible.”

Present Day

The mission to assess the Sandbox was one of the last times the group worked together over the next several months. When they returned to the Playground, Coulson decided that they’d be able to cover more ground by splitting into teams. FitzSimmons were, of course, tasked with rebuilding SHIELD’s Science Division. Fitz’s injuries made it more difficult for him to work but Grant was pleased to note that he seemed to be improving rapidly. He helped Fitz’s recovery along as much as possible by resuming their poker games at least once a week. Trip usually joined them if he was on base.

Skye, May and Trip were ordered to retrieve as many SHIELD weapons, vehicles, equipment, artifacts and 0-8-4s as they could. Their team was often away from the Playground, which meant that Grant and Skye couldn’t see each other as often as they’d like. This especially was true since Grant often was off-base as well. Their differing schedules also meant that, while Grant was still technically Skye’s SO, he had to hand off her training to May or Trip when he wasn’t around. He hated the time away from her but admitted to himself that dividing her training duties did help keep their relationship low-key. However, Skye wasn’t always as cautious as she needed to be about advertising their relationship, especially when she was convinced he was going to do something dangerous.

The five younger members of Team Bus (how they now referred to themselves after graciously granting Trip honorary membership) were spending an enjoyable evening in the common area playing Scrabble. Grant had just beaten everyone handily.

Trip shook his head ruefully. “Man, is there anything you’re not good at?” he asked Grant.

“Nope,” Skye answered casually as she continued looking at the Scrabble board. Then, feeling the silence, she glanced up and saw all the faces looking at her in amazement. “What?”

“Never mind,” Grant replied hastily. “So, how’s the Science Division coming?” he asked FitzSimmons in a clear effort to change the subject.

He was quickly sorry he’d asked as FitzSimmons went on forever about their decreased budget and resources. Grant frowned as he watched Trip look at Jemma intensely, the two sitting very close together. Ever since Fitz had gotten stronger and hadn’t needed Jemma as much, Grant noticed that Jemma and Trip seemed thicker than thieves. He glanced at Fitz, sad to see that he was observing the interplay between them as well. He knows. Grant sighed. He couldn’t blame Jemma for liking Trip. The guy was extremely funny and charming, his laidback personality a perfect counterpoint for the uptight Brit. Nor could he fault Trip for falling for the beautiful, caring and brilliant scientist. I guess we can’t all get what we want. He glanced over at Skye who was pretending to be interested in FitzSimmons’ diatribe but was actually playing Candy Crush on her phone. Thank goodness I did!

Grant caught her eye and smiled slightly. Skye gave him a quizzical expression and he tilted his head minutely toward Jemma and Fitz. Her eyes shifted to the other three agents and she nodded in understanding. Grant’s smile widened. He loved that they were so in sync with each other now that they could have nonverbal conversations.

“Sounds like you two have your hands full,” Skye interrupted, after finishing up her game. “I’m sure it’s annoying trying to get AC to give you money but that’s nothing compared to having May in charge of your every waking minute!”
“No joke! That woman is intense!” Trip groaned.

He and Skye regaled the group with tales of some of the weird objects they’d tracked down then started complaining about May’s extreme schedule of training, missions and the dreaded paperwork. After a few minutes, Grant tuned them out, having already heard most of it from Skye. He refocused his attention back to the group though when he noticed Trip turn his head to look at him.

“So what does Coulson have you doing, man?” he asked Grant casually. “I’ve seen you bringing people in right and left.”

Grant took a sip of his beer and looked warily at Skye who was sitting on his right. She was kind of lying back on the couch, casually glancing at something on her phone, seemingly uninterested in the answer to Trip’s question. She looked pretty relaxed but Grant knew it wouldn’t last. He actually was kind of surprised that the two of them hadn’t talked about what he was doing before now but, given the short amount of time they’d had together lately, there had always been other things to do and discuss. Besides, he had an idea that Skye was trying not to think about what he could be doing. *She’s not going to like either of my missions.*

“Well,” he said slowly, glancing at Skye. “Since I’m more knowledgeable than most about Hydra’s recruiting techniques, Coulson has me bringing in SHIELD agents who were captured and turned by Hydra.”

Almost as if it were choreographed, FitzSimmons and Skye turned their heads to look at him as one. “What!” Skye yelped.

“That’s got to be incredibly dangerous, Agent Ward!” Jemma said, her eyes wide.

“By yourself?” Fitz asked incredulously.

Only Trip seemed relatively unaffected. “Cool,” he said, nodding and looking impressed, just as if Ward had just mentioned going backstage at a concert.

“That is so not cool!” Skye informed Trip in a heated voice, sending him a death glare. Then she whipped around to face Grant. “How can AC send you on missions like that? Doesn’t he know what Hydra would do to you if they caught you?”

Grant smirked uneasily, certain that this conversation was going to go in a direction he wasn’t going to like. *Maybe I can redirect it before it gets started.* “Hey, I keep telling you that I’m not that easy to capture or kill. Should I be insulted by your lack of confidence in my abilities?” He’d used that line on her many times to great effect but, going by her facial expression, this time she wasn’t having it.

“Oh no, you do not get to give me that excuse. You’re not infallible, Grant!” Skye said. Grant was startled to see that she was near tears.

“Skye’s right, Ward. We just got you back. We don’t want to lose you again, this time maybe for good,” Fitz interjected.

“I can’t believe Agent Coulson would be so cavalier about your safety,” Jemma added angrily.

Grant found himself torn between emotions. While he loved that FitzSimmons and Skye all cared enough to worry about him, this was his job, one he was really good at. So he was exasperated that no one but Trip seemed confident that he could do it.
“OK, everyone needs to calm down,” Grant said firmly. He saw Skye turn away from him, trying to hide her tears. “I appreciate that you’re worried but there’s really no need for concern. Agent Coulson is being cautious; there are all sorts of safe guards and backups in place when I’m out in the field. But I’m a Specialist and this is what Specialists do.” He reached over to put his hand on Skye’s arm only to have her shake it off. He sighed. *Looks like we’re in for another fun conversation.*

Trip glanced over at Skye and nodded imperceptibly at Grant. *Specialist solidarity. At least someone understands.* With an air of changing the subject, Trip said, “Was that Agent 33 I saw you bringing in earlier today?”

Grant nodded. “It took me a while but I finally caught Kara.” Skye still had her back to him but he noticed FitzSimmons’ puzzled looks. “Kara Palamas was one of our best agents before she got trapped by Hydra at one of our safe houses.”

“Man, I never thought I’d see the day Kara went over to the Dark Side,” Trip said. “That girl was fierce.”

“Believe me, she still is,” Grant replied emphatically. “Word is that she put up such a big fight against Hydra that they had to use the Faustus Method on her.”

“That’s tough,” Trip said, shaking his head sympathetically.

Jemma sat up with an animated expression. “The Faustus Method? I’ve read about that! Isn’t that when they compel people to follow their directives through hypnosis and mental reprogramming? They use a verbal code that activates the conditioning if the subject is being difficult.”

Grant nodded. “I’ve never seen it done but that’s what I heard. It’s a pretty time-consuming process, so they generally only use it on high-value targets who resist their usual recruiting incentives. Kara must’ve given them a run for their money.” He and Trip shared a proud look. “Is that what happened to you? Did they brainwash you into joining Hydra?” Fitz asked.

Suddenly, the mood in the room went from pleasant to tense. Silence settled on the group as everyone – including Skye who had turned back around, a worried expression on her face – looked at Grant. *I should’ve known this would come up eventually.* He shifted uncomfortably on the couch and ran his hand over his face. His past with Hydra was an open secret but it wasn’t something he’d talked about with most of the team, so it was only fair that they’d have questions. At the moment, only Skye and Coulson knew the details. And his therapist of course. She was encouraging him to talk about it more. *Maybe it’s time I followed her advice.* Of all people, Fitz deserved to know the truth. Grant felt Skye take his hand and he squeezed it gently in thanks.

“I wish I could say that’s what happened to me,” he started slowly in a regretful tone, “but I was never brainwashed. Everything I did, good and bad, I did of my own free will.” He saw Fitz’s face fall and knew that he’d hoped for a better explanation for Grant’s association with the evil group. “If it makes you feel any better, I was never loyal to Hydra; I was only loyal to Garrett.”

“Yeah, I get that one.” Trip said ruefully. “Garrett sure had a way with words. I hate to admit it but the guy was convincing. He had a lot of us fooled.”

While Grant was grateful for Trip’s support, he was also a bit insulted at the thought of him not being able to tell when John was lying. It was on the tip of his tongue to tell the group that he’d always known about Garrett’s plans, that he’d never been fooled, but decided he’d said enough. He really didn’t want them to look at him differently, not when he’d finally started earning back their trust. Besides, if his therapist was correct, Garrett did fool Grant, just in a different way. He felt
Skye squeezed his hand sympathetically.

“Kara Palamas,” Jemma said thoughtfully, her expression puzzled. “Why do I know that name?” Then her face cleared and she smiled teasingly at Grant. He tensed, struggling to keep his expression blank. *Damn!* “Weren’t the two of you an item once?”

Grant said nothing while he tried to figure out how he could explain what he and Kara had together. He didn’t want to lie but neither did he want Skye to get upset. He thought she might since she abruptly let go of his hand but he didn’t look over to check.

Once again Trip jumped in. “Girl, you don’t know what you’re talking about,” he told Jemma. “Ward was always too busy to have a girlfriend.” Grant exchanged another glance with Trip and gave him a nod. He was surprised that Trip was sticking up for him, particularly since they’d once competed for Garrett’s approval. Maybe they could become friends after all. *I’m going to have to buy him a beer soon.*

“Yeah,” Fitz interjected. “If his thing with Agent 33 was anything like what he had with Agent May, Skye has nothing to worry about.”

Trip choked and Jemma just smiled. Grant glared at Fitz in consternation, carefully avoiding any glance toward Skye. “Did everyone on the Bus know about that?” he asked exasperatedly.

“Yeah, and I did,” Fitz replied calmly, glancing at Jemma in satisfaction. “We are geniuses you know.”

“Yes, you and Agent May would both disappear at the same times and she was much more pleasant after one of your…interactions,” Jemma said cheerfully. “Fitz and I frequently commented upon it. You always seemed just as usual though.”

Now it was Grant’s turn to choke. *Time to end this.* He stood up. “Well, if we’ve finished talking about my sex life, I think it’s time I turned in for the night.” He forced himself to look at Skye, not sure what to do since they spent every night they could together. *What if she doesn’t want to go with me?*

Skye hadn’t moved from the couch but, much to his relief, she was grinning at him. “I always suspected you had a history, Robot, but it was fun watching you squirm. You go ahead and I’ll join you later.”

Grant nodded shortly, said goodnight to everyone and left the room. As he walked down the hall towards Skye’s room, he grimaced to himself. *I’m going to kill FitzSimmons!*

Several days later, Grant was on his way to Coulson’s office to discuss his upcoming mission. Skye, Trip and May were away on a mission to retake a Level 10 classified 0-8-4 from the government. They’d taken Agent Isabel Hartley and her team –Lance Hunter and another mercenary named Idaho – with them for assistance in finding what everyone suspected would be a needle in a haystack. Grant always tried not to worry whenever Skye was gone but sometimes it proved difficult. However, this mission seemed simple enough. After all, it was only a U.S. military installation. They could handle that in their sleep.

That’s why he was surprised when Hartley, Hunter and Skye hurriedly burst through the outer door, Hartley and Hunter looking like they’d been through the wringer and all of them appearing extremely upset. None of them saw Grant. They seemed intent on getting to Coulson’s office but then Hartley stopped Skye and physically turned her around.
“Uh uh. You need to go get checked out so we know what we’re dealing with. There’ll be time for you to talk to Coulson later.”

Skye appeared as though she wanted to argue but then looked down and sighed. “OK.” Hartley and Hunter continued towards Coulson’s office. Skye watched them go, then turned and saw Grant. Her expression softened as she went and gave him a hard hug.

Grant tried to control his anxiety. He stepped back from the hug and gave her a visual once-over. She looked fine but clearly, something was up. “Skye? What’s going on? Why do you need to get checked out? Are you ok?”

“I’m ok, Grant. Really. Why don’t you go hear Hartley and Hunter’s report and I’ll meet you later once Simmons has taken a look at me?” He must have looked reluctant because she put her hand on his arm and said firmly, “It’s just a precaution. I’m fine.” Then she turned on her heel and went off to the Lab.

She’s fine. She can take care of herself. Grant often talked himself out of hovering over Skye. He’d tried that early on in their time at the Playground and, once his ears stopped ringing from her lecture, admitted that Skye was correct that she was a capable and well-trained agent. Consequently, the best way he could both distract himself from her condition was to find out what had happened on the mission.

He hurried to Coulson’s office, not wanting to miss anything. He had just knocked on the door and was starting to enter when Trip and May came down the hall and followed him into the room. Hartley and Hunter were both standing alongside one wall. Grant was too experienced of an agent to ask where Idaho was.

Coulson nodded at the new arrivals. May and Trip moved to stand in front of the desk while Grant drifted off to the side. He wasn’t there to talk, just to listen.

“May, Trip, you got the quinjet. Good job. But I need to know what happened with the obelisk. Why don’t you start at the beginning?” he asked looking at May.

“Thanks to Trip,” May said nodding at him, “we had no trouble getting into the warehouse. But there were hundreds, probably thousands, of containers and boxes to search and it was taking too long. But then Skye said she heard something, almost like the 0-8-4 was calling to her.”

May’s voice had taken on a different tone, almost as if she was embarrassed by what she was saying. Hartley, Hunter and Trip all looked uncomfortable. Grant straightened. This doesn’t sound good.

“Calling to her?” Coulson queried.

“Yeah. It was weird,” Trip replied. “One minute she was searching the aisles like we all were, then she stopped dead, listened for a moment, and went straight to the box. She called out that she’d found it and everyone ran over to help.”

“That’s when Creel came out of nowhere. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say he came from the wall,” Hartley said in amazement. “He tried grabbing the box just as Skye was opening it and we started firing at him.”

“Except the bullets bounced off of him, just like they did at our undercover meeting with Browning,” Hunter interjected.

At hearing all of this, it took all of Grant’s self-control not to roll his eyes. Didn’t I tell them that
Creel could absorb any material? He’d thought that Coulson would use his information to improve upon the mission, not just leave his team in the dark to deal with someone who could literally become any material he wanted. They should’ve been prepared to fight with weapons other than guns.

“Something must’ve jogged the box because the 0-8-4 started to fall and Skye grabbed it to keep it from hitting the ground,” Hartley resumed. Grant frowned. As a trained agent, Skye should’ve known better than to touch an alien artifact with her bare hands. As her SO, he’d have to speak with her about that. “Nothing happened except that the markings on the item glowed yellow, so she swung it around to hit Creel. He seemed scared of it and ran away. That’s when the alarms went off and we left.”

“Trip and I got the quinjet,” May said, picking up the story smoothly (Grant smiled a bit at her euphemism for steal), “while Skye took off on a motorcycle to catch up with the SUV.”

“We were doing fine with the 0-8-4 until Creel reappeared in the middle of the road,” Hartley said. “Idaho didn’t have enough time to swerve, so we ended up hitting Creel and rolling the truck. I don’t know how Creel survived but he just got up and started walking toward us. Hunter and I fired at him but the bullets didn’t have any impact. Idaho…” her voice cracked and she stopped talking.

Hunter cast a quick glance at her and put his hand on her arm. “The 0-8-4 was in the front seat with Idaho. He must’ve thought that he could use it to scare off the creepy guy like Skye did at the warehouse. Instead…” Hunter’s voice trailed off and he seemed to shake himself. “The moment he grabbed it, this weird black substance started going up his arm and he was yelling that he couldn’t let go. The black stuff just kept going up his arm and around until it was coating his entire body,” his voice started trembling slightly, “and then he was dead. I didn’t know what to do but that Creel guy just leaned down and grabbed the 0-8-4 like it was nothing. It didn’t seem to affect him like it did Idaho.”

“Sir, he touched our tire,” Hartley told Coulson, her voice still sounding shaky, “and his hand and lower arm seemed to become rubber. That’s when he grabbed the 0-8-4 and ran off. We tried to help Idaho but…there was nothing we could do.” She paused to regain control of herself. No one said anything. “That was when Skye showed up. She was going to chase down Creel but when we heard sirens, she decided it was more important to get all of us far enough away so that the military couldn’t find us. Then we stole a car and headed back here.”

Coulson nodded. “Skye was correct to prioritize your safety and well-being. It wouldn’t be a good idea for any of our agents to get captured, especially not when we have the military and other government officials breathing down our necks.”

May looked like she was going to be sick but when she spoke, she sounded just like she always did. “Where’s Skye now?”

“I insisted that she go to the Lab to get checked out,” Hartley said. “I don’t know why that thing reacted so differently to her but I figured that we needed to know if she’s infected.”

“Infected?” Grant asked in an agitated voice, pushing off from the wall to go stand in the center of the room. It was the first time he’d spoken since entering the room. “Is what happened to Idaho going to happen to Skye?”

“We don’t know anything for sure. But so far, Simmons says she’s shown no signs of any negative effects,” Coulson told him calmly.

“So far? What do we even know about the 0-8-4?” Grant knew he was pushing things, especially
when he felt May’s hand on his arm, but he couldn’t help himself. He felt the beginnings of panic and tried to push it down. *Nothing can happen to Skye!*

“Yes, ‘so far’ is all we have to go on at the moment, Agent Ward. And we know virtually nothing about the 0-8-4; that’s why we were trying to procure it,” Coulson replied a bit testily. He eyed Grant for a moment. “Why don’t you go help Simmons try to figure some of this out? You and I can talk about your mission later.”

Grant nodded gratefully and quickly left the room. If Skye was in danger, he wanted to be close at hand. However, he stopped to take a deep breath first (*She’ll freak out if I’m upset*) and turned when he heard someone else leave Coulson’s office. It was May, her expression stormy.

She strode over to him, grabbed his arm and pulled him down the hall. “I’ll walk with you,” she said. He let himself be led without resistance.

“OK,” he murmured, mostly to himself. Whenever May was angry, it was best not to say much.

She guided him down the hall and around the corner then stopped abruptly. It was a good place to talk without being overheard. May faced him. “You need to be more careful about flaunting your relationship with Skye. I’m pretty sure that Coulson knows and is just turning a blind eye but if you push things, he could change his mind.”

Grant nodded thoughtfully. *Flaunt. That’s an interesting word.* He was pretty sure that he was being discreet but he couldn’t always count on Skye to do the same. And May was right that he’d overstepped some bounds in Coulson’s office but there clearly was more to her advice than that. She wouldn’t have left an important briefing just to warn him to be unobtrusive with his relationship. He looked at her carefully. *Is that possibly a crack in the Cavalry’s armor?*

“I appreciate the advice,” he said. May nodded shortly and started to leave, only turning back after Grant gently grabbed her arm. “Before you go, there’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you.”

May crossed her arms (*Not a good sign*) but he couldn’t stop now. “OK, talk.”

Grant looked her directly in the eyes – something he was not in the habit of doing much – but knew that it was now or never and she deserved this. “Melinda, I know we never really got a chance to talk about what happened between us…”

“Ward, I told you before that…” May interrupted in a tough voice but Grant kept on talking.

“…but I wanted you to know how important our relationship has been to me. You were kind when I really needed it and no one else could have given me what you did. Except for when you thought I was Hydra, you always had my back. I couldn’t have asked for a better colleague and friend. I hope that I can be the same for you. And I am truly sorry if my actions hurt you in any way because you deserve only good things.”

At first, May said nothing, just kept her eyes focused on Grant’s face. Then she smiled and said, “Thank you, Grant.”

As he watched her walk back toward Coulson’s office, Grant smiled too.
After the conclusion of Operation Handle – what Fitz called the mission to steal a quinjet (Grant groaned out loud when Fitz explained his reasoning, “Well, you can’t hold a shield without a handle”) – things started getting kind of weird around the Playground. Coulson appeared tired, withdrawn and distracted. May and Coulson were closeted together more frequently than usual and, even more odd, hardly ever let anyone else in on their consultations. This was unlike the usually talkative Coulson and Grant wasn’t the only one who seemed concerned about his mental health.

If that wasn’t bad enough, Fury sent orders for Agent Isabel Hartley to leave the Playground for the Hub so that she could assist Victoria Hand in running operational support. Hartley had been a popular addition to the Playground due to her dry wit, gift for telling stories, game-playing prowess and the ability to drink everyone else under the table (even, to his great dismay, Fitz). She had also taken over the title of Prankster in Chief, May having given up any competition in that area since she went back to being deeply serious.

One boring day was lightened considerably when Fitz’s screams – which soon took on legendary status – were heard across the base. Upon racing to the bathroom where Fitz stood in horror, everyone turned to see a particularly deranged-looking picture of Nicholas Cage staring out of the toilet lid with the words, “I’m watching you!” underneath. Grant turned to tell Fitz that everything was fine, it was only a joke, when Fitz asked in a strangled tone, “What. Is. That?” and, for some reason, that set Grant off. He couldn’t stop laughing and had to leave the room in order to calm down. He later returned to apologize to Fitz for not taking his fear seriously but even Fitz saw the humor and could be heard telling other coworkers the story later on in the day.

Trip had his turn with the Prankster when, during breakfast one morning, he could be heard shouting several times, “Toast! Medium!” Once he finished laughing, Mack informed Trip that, despite the sign saying, “Voice activated,” the toaster worked just like any other toaster. Even Hunter was not spared. One day he bit into what he thought was a caramel apple only to discover it was actually an onion. Skye laughed so hard at Hunter’s expression that the Coke she was drinking went up her nose. Her fellow agents didn’t dare try to prank Hartley herself because, if they did, they might find themselves the next object of her pranking. Besides, somehow she always found out about the prank before it happened, so it was kind of pointless.

For Grant, Isabel Hartley was like the fun older sister he’d always wanted. While he adored his actual older sister Elizabeth, she was never light-hearted, probably due to the horror show that was the Ward family. Izzy’s enthusiasm for games and good times, her delight in making people laugh and her special project of helping Grant loosen up made her a favorite. Add to that the knowledge that, as a senior SHIELD agent, she was the only other one who could’ve called Coulson on the carpet for his odd behavior, and her loss was keenly felt.

Hunter was noticeably bereft at Hartley’s leaving, especially since she’d been forced to leave in a hurry without having the chance to say a proper goodbye. Adding insult to injury and in what was surely a pointed commentary on Victoria Hand’s thoughts about mercenaries, Lance Hunter hadn’t been invited to join Hartley at the Hub. His angry yells at being told the news (“What do you mean I can’t go with her? Screw Victoria Hand, I thought we were a team!”) were heard across the Playground. Shortly afterward, he left the base and returned much later in the evening drunk as a skunk.
Upon seeing Hunter stumble into the kitchen seeking water, Coulson motioned Grant over. “I was going to ask Hunter to pack up all of Hartley’s things to be sent to her at the Hub but that might set him off again. Could you see that it gets done?”

Grant said, “Yes sir,” and, promptly the next day, found himself with the awkward task of packing up someone else’s belongings. Since Hartley was a Specialist like himself, she didn’t have much but what she did have was so reminiscent of her personality that it felt like losing her all over again. Realistically, he knew that she wasn’t dead and that he’d have the chance to see her again but their work was dangerous and nothing was certain. Besides, he missed her a lot. Next to Skye and Fitz, Grant felt closest to Izzy. Trip was becoming a good friend but both he and Grant were still working through the awkwardness of their initial competition and jealousy. Izzy, however, carried no prior baggage and she knew a lot about being undercover. She’d even been friends with Garrett. Thus, she was very accepting of Grant’s choices and the two had been talking a lot during their downtimes.

Grant had just finished closing the last box. He was sitting on the floor of her small room, lost in his thoughts, when he looked up and saw Hunter standing in the doorway watching him. Hunter looked serious and calm, even quiet, which was a change for him. And, for someone who’d been incredibly drunk the night before, he seemed remarkably free of a hangover. Grant was embarrassed to be seen looking sad, so he was unintentionally gruff with Hunter. “What do you want?”

Hunter said nothing at first, just glanced sadly around the room. “I had to do this for Idaho a few weeks back,” he told him.

Grant nodded slowly. There was really nothing to say to this but it seemed as though Hunter was expecting something from him. “Idaho was a big loss,” he commented, “but, unfortunately, that’s the risk we all take with this life.”

Hunter didn’t even seem to hear him. His eyes were unfocused for a second, then landed on Grant and sharpened. “I’ve been watching you on missions. You’ve got skills. The type that could earn you real money in the private sector.”

“As a mercenary? Yeah, I don’t think so,” Grant replied. As if I’d ever do this kind of work for anybody, just for a paycheck.

Hunter didn’t seem the least bit fazed by Grant’s disinterest, “We prefer the term ‘private military contractors.’ Don’t knock it. Everyone needs an exit strategy eventually.” Where’s he going with this?

“No me. SHIELD’s my life,” Grant replied. But, even as he said it, he wondered if that was still true. It certainly had been when he was working with Garrett and then as a triple. He’d had nothing else. But that was before he met Skye and developed feelings for her, before he could see a future for himself, one that didn’t involve dying at a young age.

Hunter scoffed, “SHIELD isn’t a life, mate. It’s just a job, means to an end. Remember that.”

Grant was about to say something sarcastic in return but then recalled some of the recent discussions he’d had with his counselor. They’d talked in depth about his dream on the Bus following the fight at Cybertek and they’d agreed that his unconscious mind wanted him to move forward. It was “GAME OVER” for the Grant who’d been controlled by others. All that was done, so it was time to let go of his past mistakes and become the man he wanted to be. It was time for him to have the life he wanted. He realized that Hunter had a point.
Grant nodded slowly and got up off the floor. “I will. Thanks.” *Maybe Hunter can become a friend too.* “I’m finished here. Care for a beer?”

Later, when Grant recounted the conversation to Skye, she seemed surprised that he hadn’t completely rejected the idea of an exit strategy. “I never thought I’d see the day when Grant Ward, SHIELD Agent Extraordinaire, considered leaving the reason for his existence,” she said with an indecipherable expression on her face.

Grant just smiled as he pulled her into a hug. “Things change,” he murmured into her hair, “especially reasons for existence.”

**Flashback**

After his talk with May, Grant headed to the Lab to check on Skye. He was relieved to see that she was talking animatedly with Jemma and didn’t look distressed. Nor was she covered in black goo. Instead, the two were laughing but, when she looked up and saw Grant heading toward her, Skye’s expression turned serious. She walked over to meet him.

“Is she OK?” Grant asked Jemma, looking over Skye’s head at the scientist.

“Umm…..standing right here, Grant,” Skye said, waving her arms to get his attention. “And I’m fine.”

“I know you think you are,” Grant replied a bit testily. “But I’m asking the person who has numerous advanced degrees and whose job it is to know the science behind the workings of the human body whether she agrees with you.”

Jemma had followed Skye over to the edge of the Lab and, clearly sensing Grant’s tension, put her hand on his arm. He felt himself relax a bit at her touch. He knew Jemma’s concerned look and there was no sign of it on her face.

“There’s no need to worry, Ward,” Jemma said soothingly. “I’ve run every test I can think of and Skye’s fine. Whatever the 0-8-4 is, it appears as though it didn’t affect her in the slightest.”

“Thank you,” Grant told her. As Jemma returned back to her lab, he reluctantly turned to face Skye’s stormy expression. “I wasn’t trying to ignore you, Skye, it’s just that you’re way too careless about your safety and I need to make certain that you’re fine.” He paused a moment to take a deep breath and control his voice. “You scared me. I don’t know what I’d do without you,” he finished in a gentle tone, stroking her cheek.

Skye’s expression softened immediately and she caught in his hand in her own. “I know. I feel the same way,” she said in a low tone. Then she smiled a little and glanced teasingly at him. “Just make sure you remember the easy way I handled this the next time I’m worried about you.”

Grant smiled back at her. “Duly noted.”

**Present Day**

When it was decided that May’s team would track down the Obelisk, Grant was relieved that he was included in the initial mission planning because that meant Coulson was finally taking Creel’s abilities seriously. And, although he didn’t tell anyone this (not even Skye), Grant was happy because his presence in the briefing indicated that Coulson valued his strategic thinking abilities. Grant knew from his therapy that needing validation was normal but he still felt a little funny about it. *Will I ever get over wanting Coulson’s approval?*
“Ward? Do you want to fill everyone in on Creel?” Coulson asked.

Grant nodded shortly and glanced around the room at the assembled team. “Creel was a boxer, nicknamed the Crusher. Turns out any opponent has a glass jaw when you have steel fists under your gloves. Once Creel touches a substance, he can absorb it and somehow consciously transform the molecules of his body into that substance. That’s why he was able to bounce off bullets, wreck the SUV and grab the obelisk without hurting himself. He wouldn’t tell us how he absorbs the substances but he enjoys the way it feels almost as much as he enjoys killing.”

“Awesome,” Skye groaned while Trip just shook his head in dismay.

May grimaced. “How do we find him?”

“When Hydra was communicating with SHIELD, we’d use white noise in the gaps between SHIELD’s quantum key distribution channels to hide messages. Those frequencies are still there. Since Hydra’s giving commands to Creel, we were able to tap into some of them. That’s how you found him at that bar,” Grant answered.

May nodded shortly. Even though she hadn’t said anything to him, Grant could see that May felt bad about not being able to help the waitress Creel killed and that she was unable to capture him. He wished he could tell her that it wasn’t her fault, that there was nothing that she could do, but it was useless. She wouldn’t believe him. Specialists often took responsibility for things that weren’t their fault. It was an occupational hazard, one he’d been working with his therapist to try and avoid.

“You got some good intel from the bar,” Grant told her. *Maybe that’ll help her feel better. “But this time, we got the information about Creel’s meet from Raina.”*

Coulson jumped in with the operational details. Although Grant tried to pay attention, he was distracted because he could feel Skye’s eyes on him. Raina was a sore subject between them. Grant had told Skye about Raina’s information about her father, that she most likely was in contact with him, but Skye was unreasonable where Raina was concerned. She still hadn’t forgiven her for what she’d done to Coulson when she put him in the memory machine or for her role in creating the monster Garrett became. Plus, she generally thought that Raina was full of shit. As a result, he and Skye tended to get into arguments whenever he brought her up.

*Skye needs to pay attention.* He glanced up at her and held her gaze, trying to remind her non-verbally that this wasn’t his fault, that she’d actually been in the room when Raina called Coulson. Grant tilted his head slightly and looked briefly at Coulson. Skye rolled her eyes but returned her attention to the briefing. His gaze fell on Trip who smirked a little and went back to listening to Coulson as well.

The briefing soon broke up and, after a perfunctory, “Be careful” to the team, Grant headed to his room to attend to other things. He wasn’t going on the mission mostly because it wasn’t deemed dangerous (it was more of a snatch and grab than it was a direct confrontation) and his task of late was working with Kara. His job with her was twofold: getting what information she could offer about Hydra and helping her heal. Given the recent revelation of Grant’s romantic interactions with Kara, Skye didn’t adore the idea of him spending so much time with her but she admitted that it was best that the person working with her was someone Kara trusted and who understood her situation.

Grant went to his room to change into gym clothes because he was going to spar with Kara. He’d found that she tended to relax more when they were doing something familiar and when she relaxed, she was more talkative. As he walked toward the gym, he saw Hunter approach the team.
They clearly were just about ready to leave. Grant internally groaned. He knew that Hunter had an axe to grind with Creel because of Idaho and would insist upon joining the team. Normally that wouldn’t be a problem. Hunter was good in a fight and he was both direct and funny. In fact, the more time Grant spent with him, the more he liked him. However, Hunter also could be emotional, especially when he believed justice was at stake. *He’s a wild card right now. Coulson really shouldn’t let him go.*

Grant slowed his steps as he passed the team just in time to hear Hunter state, “I’ll be good,” as he gave Coulson a mock three-fingered salute. “Scout’s Honor.”

He couldn’t resist. “You were never a Boy Scout,” Grant scoffed.

Hunter threw him a frustrated look and then turned back to Coulson. When Grant heard Hunter say, “Please, Sir. I owe Idaho one,” he knew Coulson would let him join the field team. He felt a moment’s unease but then shook it off. *This mission is pretty straightforward. How bad could he screw it up?*

He continued to the gym. Kara was already there warming up. She looked up when he entered the room, raised her eyebrows and then exaggeratedly consulted her watch. “The great Grant Ward… five minutes late! That’s not like you,” she said lightly. “Something must be up.”

Grant shrugged and got into sparring stance. “Nothing too big. I just got done with a briefing on the team’s interception of a meeting Carl Creel’s having with Hydra.” He blocked one of Kara’s kicks and countered with a punch. “You remember Creel, right?”

She nodded as she leaned back to avoid getting hit. “Yeah. I think Whitehall was having him track down some device that relates to some drawings that they’re kind of obsessed with. Creel’s kind of unstable at times, so they don’t use him that much. He’s a lot to handle. I hope they’re keeping a healthy distance.” Kara threw a quick jab.

Grant blocked her jab with his left arm and tried to hit her with his right elbow. Kara blocked it with her hand as his left fist swung around again. Kara ducked as he whirled. “The plan isn’t to engage,” Grant told her as they danced around each other. “It’s more about observing his contact and snatching the device.” He aimed a high kick which Kara blocked.

She threw a straight punch. Grant moved in to block and then grab both her arm and her shoulder so he could bring up his knee into her stomach. He halted the movement though so as not to hurt her. Kara smirked at him in appreciation as she backed away. Then she stopped cold, a look of distress crossing her face.

“What’s wrong?” Grant asked gently, approaching Kara slowly.

“Bakshi,” she whispered. “Bakshi’s his contact; he’s everyone’s contact.” She appeared to be getting more upset by the second. Her breathing increased and her eyes darted around the room.

“Kara, calm down. You’re safe here.” Grant said in a soothing tone as he held up his hands in a non-threatening gesture and edged closer to her. “Who’s Bakshi?”

“He’s Whitehall’s second in command. He’s the guy who brainwashed me, Grant!” she yelled, her breathing incredibly shallow. *Damn! She’s hyperventilating.* Then she fainted.

“Oh, Kara,” Grant said sadly. He really hated seeing her like this. The freak-outs were still common but at least they were less intense and less frequent. He gently picked her up and started carrying her bridal style to the Lab. Simmons was good with Kara when she woke up anxious and
disoriented. In fact, the two of them were developing quite a bond.

Grant handed her over to Simmons who promised to take good care of her. Grant smirked. Like that’s even in doubt. “I know you will,” he told her. Once his attention was off Kara, he overheard Fitz say excitedly, “Yeah! Yeah!”

“Everything OK over here?” Grant asked calmly. He tried not to excite Fitz too much, especially when he was already agitated. “You’re being kinda loud.”

“Ward! You remember the Overkill Device, the one we got on that…that…mission?” Fitz asked, looking relieved. Mack was standing nearby with an iPad, an eager look on his face.

“You mean our mission to South Ossetia?” Grant asked. When Fitz nodded, he continued, “Sure. That’s the device we were supposed to disable but ended up just taking with us.” Fitz nodded again, this time with an expectant look and Grant suddenly put two and two together. “The Overkill Device could help stop Creel!”

“Yes!” Fitz yelled while Mack said simultaneously, “That’s what we were thinking.”

“I’m pretty sure I know where we put it,” Grant said quickly. “I’m going to go grab it, then I’ll take it to Coulson in mission control. Good work, buddy!” he said as he patted Fitz on the back and took off at a run. His pleasure at Fitz’s ability to solve their problem warred with his dread that the team might need additional help in dealing with Creel.

Upon hearing about the potential of the Overkill Device, Coulson immediately ordered Grant to take it into the field for backup if needed. He looked regretful for a moment. “I’d take it myself but May would have my head.” Grant just nodded like he knew what that meant and headed out quickly.

He’d just parked the SUV and was walking quickly toward the meeting coordinates when he heard the sound of screams and saw people running away from the area. That doesn’t sound good. Grant broke into a run and informed Coulson of what he was seeing over the comms.

“Phil!” he heard May shout. “Hunter ICED both Skye and me and probably Trip too since we can’t raise him on comms. He’s going after Creel himself.”

“Ward, do you see Hunter anywhere?” Coulson asked.

“I see him,” Grant said grimly.

He’d followed the screams and went in the direction people were running away from. He turned the corner just in time to see an armor piercing round bounce harmlessly off Creel’s just-hardened skull. Creel looked around and immediately saw Hunter standing behind a hot dog cart with the rifle still in his hands, his mouth hanging open. He should’ve left the moment he took his shot. What an idiot. Creel leapt to his feet and took off after Hunter who threw down the rifle and was running for all he was worth. As he was tracking Hunter and Creel, Grant saw Raina in his peripheral vision smoothly pick up the obelisk and walk away. Make that two idiots.

Grant could have followed Raina but he knew Hunter was going to need his help, so he let her go. She would be a problem for another time. He gingerly approached the office building where Creel had just crashed through the glass door, rolling his eyes. Does everyone have to be so damned dramatic? Creel easily could’ve gone through the door and wouldn’t have lost more than a few seconds. His theatrical entrance just guaranteed an audience and eventual media attention. Looks like Hydra needs to train Creel to be more subtle. Of course, Hunter was little better with his stupid
plan to kill Creel (Why didn’t he just take the shot from where Trip was positioned? Or at least he
could have hidden better.) and his yelling once in the building but at least he’d been trying to do
the right thing and get people to safety.

Grant had just eased into the office building from the side when he saw Creel throw Hunter like a
ragdoll across the lobby. Creel raised his hand as he advanced towards him. Interestingly, the front
half of his arm was a weird black substance that Grant couldn’t identify. Is that the stuff that killed
Idaho? He felt a thrill of fear for Skye but then refocused his attention back on the situation at
hand.

“I’m not gonna sugarcoat it, pal. This is really gonna hurt!” Creel told a terrified Hunter who was
literally backed into a corner and struggling to his feet.

Grant couldn’t help nodding approvingly. When death comes, you look it in the face, on your feet
if possible. He hurriedly positioned himself behind Creel while the boxer’s attention was still on
Hunter and placed the Overkill Device on his back. Immediately, he could hear the sound of
energy crackling and the light on the device started flashing. Creel stopped advancing towards
Hunter and made a sound like he was in pain. His body suddenly started displaying different
substances, almost like his last few absorptions were phasing in and out. Creel fell to his knees and
the black substance crept up his whole body, overtaking his face. Then he was immobile, his body
still in the kneeling pose.

Hunter came out from the corner, looking at Creel in disbelief. “That’s exactly what happened to
Idaho,” he said quietly. “Somehow I doubt it’ll be the same though. This guy is totally weird.”

Grant looked over at Hunter and shook his head. “I knew you’d never been a Boy Scout,” he said.
He pointed a finger at him. “Don’t touch anything,” he admonished as he started reporting the
situation to Coulson. After receiving his orders to secure the scene and wait for the techs who
would come collect Creel, Grant looked up to see May, Skye and Trip converging on their position
in the building, all of them looking like thunder. He shook his head at Hunter and started laughing.
“I can’t believe you shot May. Trip will forgive you and Skye will get over it but May? You’re in
so much trouble!”

Hunter looked sheepishly at the team as they walked towards them. “Hey guys,” he said, withering
a bit under their glares. “I’m really sorry for shooting you. I just needed to make him (he nodded
his head at Creel) pay for what he did to Idaho. You understand. No hard feelings?”

Skye didn’t even glance at Hunter as she passed him to give Grant a hug but Trip shook his head.
“Man, that was seriously uncool. Is that a mercenary thing?” May also kept silent and just started
working the room as she talked with Coulson over the comms.

Hunter looked appealingly at Grant who smiled. “Remind me not to stand next to you whenever
May’s in the room.” When Hunter turned around, he and May shared an amused glance.

As is usual for spy work, the time period after the Statue Incident (Fitz’s name for Creel’s capture)
was a bit slow. Grant wondered what it would be like to have a career in which you always knew
what to expect. He’d never had a job in which every day was basically the same, maybe even a bit
boring. The closest he’d come was at the SHIELD Academy but even there, Operations students
were trained to be ready at a moment’s notice. Part of their education included being dropped in
rough environments and having to make their way back to campus. Exams were occasionally of the
pen and paper variety but most of them included a physically demanding component and an
integrated spycraft element. Of course, Grant was also working for Garrett and Hydra during that
time, so he’d had the added aspect of deep undercover work.
Grant and his counselor had been working through this part of being a SHIELD agent. Although she never said so directly, he understood that she questioned just how difficult the uncertainty and constant vigilance was on the psyche. He suspected that was why she was currently hammering home the importance of taking vacations and other time away from the agency. He shook his head remembering the lecture she’d given him on working regular hours when he could and not doing work when he could be bonding with his fellow agents. She’d only stopped once he agreed to try doing that.

When he shared that part of this therapy with Skye, she just looked smug. “It’s about time you joined the rest of the world, Robot,” was her only comment.

The need to join in with the downtime of others was uppermost in his mind when Grant came across Hunter, Mack, Trip and Skye all talking together one afternoon. He’d been passing by on his way to doing a weapons supply check when he overheard conversation in the Lounge. He knew that May and Coulson had just returned from a mission in which they obtained some painting, so they were busy doing paperwork and decompressing. As usual, it was hard to tell what exactly they were doing these days since they were closeted together so much. He again felt a pang for the absent Hartley. She would’ve gotten answers about what they were doing. He slowed down when he heard Hunter start talking.

“It didn’t work out because interspecies relationships are hard. I was a human where she was a demonic hell beast,” Hunter complained.

Grant smiled. Hunter’s antipathy for his ex-wife was legendary around SHIELD and Hunter rarely missed the opportunity to talk smack about her. He peeked around the corner into the room to see who else was listening. Mack and Fitz were sitting on opposite ends of the couch. Fitz had his feet up on the coffee table while Mack absentmindedly played with a soccer ball. Hunter was sitting in one of the single easy chairs, a beer on the table beside him. Skye leaned across the bar while Trip was mixing drinks next to her.

“He doesn’t like her,” Mack explained to Skye, rather unnecessarily in Grant’s view.

Trip seemed to share his opinion. “You don’t say,” he said drily as he poured vodka into a glass of what looked like cranberry juice. He then slid the glass over to Skye who nodded her thanks and took a sip.

“She’s pure evil,” Hunter insisted.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Skye said teasingly, glancing at Grant standing halfway hidden in the doorway. Caught, he had to come in with the rest of the group. He gripped Fitz’s shoulder as he passed, aware that he was quiet. “Exes sometimes have a way of coming back into your life even better than before. Maybe you should try it, Hunter.”

“He has, several times if memory serves,” Grant commented, coming up to the edge of the bar and leaning his elbows on it. He glanced over at Skye, grinned and winked. “Not everybody is as lucky as we are, sweetheart.”

“Man, you just had to go and ruin a good conversation,” Trip groaned while Mack threw the ball he’d been playing with at Grant. Skye laughed.

“Yes, that’s all well and good for the two of you but what I’m saying is that exes are usually like stones around your neck; they weigh you down,” Hunter continued with a dirty look at Grant.
“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” Skye said looking solely at Grant. He could see the desire in her eyes and his breath caught. Suddenly it was as if no one else was in the room. “I like the way my ex weighs me down.”

The air stilled, almost like it was in slow motion as Grant stared back at Skye, but then it sped back up and he was again conscious of the other men in the room.

He gave Skye a significant look, straightened and smirked as he looked around the room. “Well, guys, that’s my cue. I’ll be in my bunk.” And then he left.

As he headed out of the Lounge, Grant heard Fitz give a short laugh, Mack growl, Trip groan and Hunter say something obscene. He smiled when he heard Skye say, “Yeah, me too,” over the din, so he paused to wait for her as she quickly drained her cranberry vodka and hurried out of the door after him.

__________________________________________________________________________

The days at the Playground tended to go fairly smoothly. Grant rescued several other former SHIELD officers (none yet as far-gone as Kara had been) and continued to help Kara provide helpful intel while healing herself. When he’d captured her, she’d been wearing this fascinating and valuable mask, one that transformed her face into a replica of whomever she saw. Although the mask had several drawbacks (it could hold only three faces at a time and there was the risk of it shorting out while being worn – and FitzSimmons warned that particular drawback could have dire effects on the wearer), the team immediately saw how useful it could be on missions. Kara herself told several stories about times in which the mask allowed her to easily obtain entry into highly secure facilities. However, despite its’ potential advantages, the mask remained with FitzSimmons in the Lab until such time as Coulson deemed the mission dangerous enough to warrant its’ use.

Grant also spent as much time with Skye as he possibly could. He’d never had a long-term relationship – or even much of a relationship at all – so this was new to him. He didn’t know how such things progressed or what he was supposed to do to let Skye know how important she was to him. He also didn’t know what to do when the two of them had a serious argument. Prior to this, whenever Grant had gotten in conflict with another person, he’d just never talk to them again – his usual MO since he didn’t often stay in the same place for very long – or, if he had to see or work with them again, he’d inform them of his thoughts about what they’d both done wrong and what should be done better in the future. Emotions didn’t have any place in those discussions. However, Skye was very different and, since he cared a lot about what she thought, Grant was at a loss.

The two of them had recently gotten into a huge argument. It all started when they were talking about Kara and the brainwashing she’d endured with the Faustus Method. The more time he spent with Kara, the more she became an emotional minefield between he and Skye. But, in this instance, it wasn’t Kara who was the problem but the matter of brainwashing. Although Grant suspected that Garrett might have influenced him more than he realized – and his therapist was working hard to convince him of this – he still believed that everything he’d ever done was due to his own free will.

“Brainwashing is tough to deal with,” he’d mentioned to Skye one evening after a long session dealing with Kara’s struggles to remember who she was and what her own preferences were. Grant started getting undressed and glanced over at Skye.

She was already in bed, her laptop on her knees. He could tell that she wasn’t giving him her full attention since she was surfing the web. In fact, she didn’t even look up when she said casually, “As much as I get irritated with how much time you spend with Kara, I’m glad AC gave her someone who knows what brainwashing is like.”

Grant finished pulling his t-shirt on over his pajama pants (the Colorado nights were chilly or he...
would go shirtless) and looked over at her, a finger of dread licking at his stomach. “What do you
mean?”

Skye must have felt something change in the atmosphere because she suddenly looked up from her
screen, a puzzled expression on her face. “I meant that you know what it’s like to be brainwashed,”
she said.

Grant ignored the irritation he felt. “Skye,” he said calmly as he got into bed next to her, “we’ve
been over this. John may have manipulated me but I was never brainwashed.”

Skye closed her laptop, set it carefully on her bedside table and turned to face him. “I’ve been
researching real world brainwashing. Garrett might not have put you through the Faustus method,
Grant, but you were brainwashed.”

Grant felt a rising sense of panic and immediately tried to quash it. If even my mind is not my own,
then what do I have? How can anyone depend on me? He lied about your family wanting to send you to prison and then dropped you in the Wyoming wilderness. Where would you have gone?”

“Garrett was a master manipulator and he knew what he was doing. From what you’ve told me, he
went looking for you and then created a situation in which you were entirely dependent on him. He
lied about your family wanting to send you to prison and then dropped you in the Wyoming
wilderness. Where would you have gone?” Skye tried to put her hand on his arm but Grant shook it
off.

“I could’ve gotten a ride with some of the people who owned the cabins that were nearby. But I
chose on my own to stay and train with him. When I got to the SHIELD Academy, I could’ve
ignored John and gone there for real but I chose not to. John was like a father to me. Unlike my
biological father, he gave me the tools I needed to survive and protect myself. He never would’ve
done to me what Whitehall did to Kara! In fact, he told me himself that I shouldn’t trust him!”

Grant finished triumphantly.

“If what you’re saying is true, then why did I go to Maria Hill and agree to become a triple?”

“I’m not a psychologist, so I can’t answer that for sure but I suspect it’s because you had been
around other people long enough to gain some perspective. He couldn’t keep as tight of a grip on
you once you became an agent and you’re smart enough to start questioning things.” Skye looked
at him, a distressed expression on her face. “Haven’t you talked about this with your counselor?”

“Some,” he admitted, turning his head to he wouldn’t have to look at her. “She’s never said it
directly but I think she believes like you do.” Grant kept his eyes away from Skye’s, trying to get a
grip on his emotions. Time to man up! Get it over with. “If you really believe that’s what happened
to me, then why the hell are you with me? Why would you want someone so weak?”

Skye put her hand on his face and gently turned it back towards hers. “First of all, you’re not weak.
You’re one of the strongest people I know, a survivor, just like you’ve always been. What
happened to you wasn’t your fault. Most people would’ve crumbled but not you. You not only made something great of yourself but you try and help people – people like your Lost Girls.” What in the hell is she talking about? Skye smiled. “Your Lost Girls: May, Kara…and me.”

Grant smiled a little at the thought of May or Kara being his. “But Skye, if my mind is not my own…” he started.

“Your mind is your own,” she interrupted. “It always has been. It’s just that, for a while, the information you were putting into it was corrupted. If you put it in computer terms – and I usually do – you somehow were able to do a system reboot when you decided to become a triple for SHIELD. And now the information you’re putting into your mind is better and your calculations are clearer. But that doesn’t mean that you can’t understand what it’s like to put another person’s priorities ahead of your own, just like Kara does now.”

Grant nodded thoughtfully. He was relieved that Skye didn’t appear to look at him any differently but he couldn’t agree with her theory. Not yet at least. The sick feeling in his stomach wasn’t gone but it also wasn’t as strong as it had been. “OK, that all sounds good but I still don’t think I was brainwashed,” he told her.

“I get that you don’t see yourself as a victim,” Skye said a bit impatiently. “Who wants to do that? But that doesn’t mean that you have to deny the truth of what happened to you. I think you should talk more about this with your therapist. I mean, what do you hope to get by claiming that you weren’t brainwashed?”

Why is she getting upset? “I don’t hope for me. I hope for you,” he replied.

“Well, I hope for us. We’re in this together now, Grant,” she told him as she took his hand.

He reached up with the hand that wasn’t holding hers to trace her cheek. “I want you to be with someone who deserves you,” he said gently.

Skye suddenly snatched back her hand, leapt out of bed and stood there for a moment with her back turned, her whole body shaking. She then turned back around. “I’m sick of this!” she yelled at him. Grant felt his mouth drop open. “You keep putting me on a pedestal, like you’re this horrible person who isn’t worthy to even be in my presence and I’m some goddess who doesn’t have any faults! Well, fuck that! If we’re going to be together, it has to be real! You have to love me for who I am – flaws and all – just like I love you for who you are!”

“Skye…” Grant tried but she held up her hand to shush him. He wisely shut up.

“And have you ever even considered the idea that I don’t deserve you? You’re this amazing person who is good at almost everything you do and trying to live up to that is exhausting! I live in fear that one day you’ll figure out that I’m not good enough, that I can’t do all the physical things you can do, that I’m not as a good as a spy as you are. You’re James Bond and I’m…I’m…some Bond girl who gets killed by the end of the movie. Why do you think that I’ve been so jealous of Kara? She’s a much better match for you than I am and I’ve been deathly afraid that you’re going to figure that out!”

“Skye…”

“No Grant, let me finish. And as for you thinking that you’re weak because Garrett brainwashed you: that’s garbage. I get it. Out of everyone, I understand it the most because it could’ve happened to me too. What if, when I was a scared and lonely teenage girl living in my van, someone like Garrett came along and told me how great I was and showed me how to be a bad ass? Hell, if he
kept showing up and gave me just a little bit of praise, he wouldn’t have even had to drop me in a
Wyoming wilderness to get me to follow him. I would’ve done it in a heartbeat because, just like
you, I wanted a father, someone who would love me and be proud of me! So I get it!” She paused
for a moment and then said quietly, “You know what I don’t get?”

Grant looked at her warily, not sure if he was being given permission to speak. It seemed like she
was, so he proceeded carefully. “What?”

“I get the brainwashing; that part’s easy. Almost anyone would’ve been brainwashed in your
situation. What I don’t get is how you not only survived five years in the woods with only a dog
for company but how you became this fantastic person,” Skye said as she started tearing up.

Grant got out of bed and approached her slowly, giving her plenty of time to back away and reject
him if she was going to go. But she didn’t. So he gently pulled her into a hug. She hugged him back
tightly for a moment before leaning back to look up in his face.

“And you are, Grant. You’re amazing and fantastic and wonderful. Yes, you’ve done some horrible
things but, in spite of it all, you’re thoughtful, compassionate, funny, and you have a good heart.
How did you do that?” Skye whispered, leaning her forehead against his chest. Then she said in a
low tone, so low that he almost didn’t catch it, “And why did you choose me?”

Grant was at a loss. It was a lot to take in: that Skye didn’t feel worthy enough for him, she was
afraid he’d leave her for Kara, he’d really been brainwashed by John and he’d made Skye feel like
he loved her conditionally. What should I say?

He was silent for a moment, just stood there
hugging her, hoping that the sound of his heartbeat would be enough to soothe her while he
collected his thoughts. Since she didn’t remove herself from his embrace, it must’ve been.
Suddenly, the advice he’d been giving Kara came back to him. “Just pay attention to how you feel
and then express it,” he’d told her. I guess I should practice what I preach.

“Skye,” he started, slowly disengaging himself from her so that he could see her face. She swiped
some of the tears off her face as she looked up at him. “I can’t tell you how sorry I am that I made
you feel like you have to be perfect. Believe me, I love you no matter what; I always have. But if it
makes you feel better, I’ll start yelling at you more often.” Grant took Skye’s faint smile as
encouragement to continue. “And there is no way that I would ever leave you for Kara! She’s a
good friend and I enjoy working with her but, at the end of the day, it’s you I want to be with. It’s
always been you and, unless something major happens, it’s always going to be you. I hope you
know that.”

Skye nodded, the small smile still on her face. She’d stopped crying. “I know,” she told him
quietly, “I was just being stupid.” She paused for a moment. “Just for the record, I don’t want you
to stop being good at everything. I actually kind of dig it. It’s sexy.”

“Well, that’s good to hear but you know that I’m not good at everything. Just last week, I made
Mack cry when I broke one of his tools.”

Her laugh made him smile. “OK. I’ll give you that you’re not perfect,” Skye answered. She smiled
as she climbed back into bed then sighed theatrically. “I guess we’re stuck with each other,” she
told him as he got in on his side.

“Well, that’s good,” Grant said lightly. “Who else would have us?” Skye looked at him seriously
for a moment, then both of them broke into slightly hysterical laughter.

“Keep it down in there!” Fitz yelled as he walked by. The two of them quit laughing in shock at the
idea that someone could hear them, then started up again.
Once they stopped, Grant put his arm around her. “About the brainwashing thing, if you think it’s that important, I’ll talk more about it with my therapist.”

Skye gave him a quick kiss and snuggled in under his arm. “That’s all I can ask.”

Chapter End Notes

OK, this chapter spiraled way out of control with its length! The Skyeward fight kind of came out of nowhere, so please let me know if it seems in character. I just didn't want them to not have any problems or for Grant to be a Gary Stu.
After their fight about brainwashing, things between Grant and Skye seemed better, lighter somehow. The two of them laughed more when they were together. Grant took what she said to heart and started working on improving their relationship. He made a real effort to avoid thinking about her as perfect. He finally understood that putting her on a pedestal – even thinking she was perfect – was part of the black/white thinking pattern his therapist was always warning him against. Just like him (especially like him), Skye existed in the gray.

Grant also purposefully stopped trying to hide his mistakes, especially in front of Skye, so that she wouldn’t worry so much about being good enough for him. As if that’s even possible! This was a lot harder than he thought it would be since he’d been trained, practically since birth, to never allow himself to be in a helpless or uncomfortable position. Consequently, the first time he made a big mistake that he was willing to acknowledge, the anxiety was extremely intense.

Flashback

Grant walked cockily into the armory where Trip and Hunter were hard at work doing inventory and making certain that all the weapons were in perfect working order. Whenever missions came up, they didn’t always have time to check the weapons, so they needed to function immediately. It was an important task but also a tedious one. When Grant walked into the room, Trip and Hunter both looked up, their expressions indicating relief at the prospect of a break.

“Why are you looking so pleased with yourself, mate?” Hunter asked.

“No reason in particular…,” Grant replied with a shrug as he disassembled his weapon and put it in its correct place on the shelf. He let the silence hang in the air for moment. “…other than the fact that I just tagged and bagged Leroy Jackson.” He looked expectantly at Trip and couldn’t resist smirking when the other specialist’s puzzled expression turned to awe.

“Damn! You actually captured the Hammer?” Trip asked incredulously.

“What hammer? You mean like the one Thor uses?” Hunter questioned, looking confused. “Didn’t you just say you captured some guy named Leroy?”

Trip turned toward Hunter. “Leroy Jackson is called the Hammer because of his superhuman strength and some weird chain thing.” He looked over at Grant. “You really captured him?”

“Yep,” Grant said, grinning smugly. “I’m just that good.”

Hunter made a face. He hated it when Grant bragged about his skills, a fact which made Grant brag more in Hunter’s presence than he normally would. “Wait a minute. I thought you were only going after former SHIELD agents turned Hydra. This Hammer guy doesn’t sound the type.”

“He wasn’t ever SHIELD,” Trip explained. “Jackson was a convict who got superpowers during an escape from prison.” He shook his head in admiration, then looked at Grant. “Man, I’m gonna need some details.”

“Wish I could,” Grant said in a faux regretful tone, “but it’s classified. I wouldn’t want everyone to know the secret to my success.” He smiled slyly at the two men. “Enjoy inventory duty,” he said.
loftily as he swept his hand to encompass the entire armory room.

“That’s just mean,” Trip grumbled as he picked up his inventory list again. Hunter contented himself with rolling his eyes.

Smiling to himself, Grant started to leave the room. He was just playing with Trip and Hunter. He fully intended to give them the details to the story later when he could tell everyone at once. The truth was that it was entirely an accident that he managed to get Jackson and the story wasn’t even that exciting. He’d been engaged in searching an empty Hydra facility when he happened to look in a room where Jackson was sleeping. Either the convict went to the facility after Hydra abandoned it or no one bothered to tell him that they were leaving. Regardless of how he got there, Jackson was fast asleep when Grant discovered him. After seeing who he was (the chain was a dead giveaway), Grant merely shot him with an ICER and dragged him back to base. But leaving the details to Trip and Hunter’s imaginations for the moment was much more fun than the real story.

As he crossed the room, Grant neglected to see a wrench lying on the floor and stepped directly on it. The wrench flew backwards as he lost his balance, flailing his arms wildly in an attempt to keep himself upright. He was partially successful as he didn’t fall completely but instead landed on a box in an awkward position. There was dead silence for a moment as Grant slowly straightened himself but then the room exploded with laughter.

“Oh. My. God,” Hunter gasped, literally doubled over from laughter. “If this was what you meant earlier, then you really are that good!”

Trip actually had tears in his eyes. “If being a klutz is your secret, I can see why all your missions are classified,” he chortled as he leaned on a shelf for support.

For a moment, Grant was absolutely stunned. He’d never truly been aware of just how physically skilled and graceful he was. He rarely tripped or made a move that wasn’t deliberate, so this was very unusual for him. Grant’s face flamed as he fought to get his body back under control. His family would’ve shoved him over the rest of the way until he was lying on the ground while Garrett would’ve yelled and punished him for being clumsy. And an accident in the woods so far from medical help could mean the difference between life and death. At the thought of how helpless the stumble made him, Grant began panicking and his breathing accelerated. He subtly glanced over at Hunter and Trip hoping that they weren’t noticing his distress. That would make things even worse. *How do I get out of this?*

“What’s going on? You all are really loud in here.”

Grant looked up to see Fitz and Mack standing in the doorway. Both seemed amused but, once Fitz saw Grant, the smile slipped off his face as he walked quickly over to him. “You all right, Ward?” he asked, placing a hand on his arm.

Grant nodded, his eyes looking anywhere but at Fitz. *Can’t show weakness.* He desperately tried to control his breathing.

Fitz glanced around and, noticing the wrench, marched over to pick it up. His mouth in a thin line, he walked over to Trip and Hunter and slammed it on the boxes in front of them. Both men abruptly stopped laughing and looked at Fitz in shock.

“This was left on the floor and someone could’ve gotten hurt,” he said angrily. “You may think it’s funny but it’s really just careless.” Before the two men could even close their mouths, he stormed out of the room, grabbing Grant by the arm as he left and propelling him out the door. “Come on, Ward.”
Grant went willingly. As he left the room with Fitz, he thought of a quote by Linda Poindexter: “One small crack does not mean that you are broken, it means that you were put to the test and you didn’t fall apart.” He smiled grimly to himself. *I messed up but it was ok. And I didn’t fall apart.*

Later that night, as the team sat around exchanging stories, Grant had recovered enough to share details of both the Jackson capture and the armory incident. No one laughed harder than Skye and he had to tell himself that her reaction was a good thing. His smile was tight though.

“Fitz was a real hero,” Grant said ruefully as he leaned back on the couch. His smile, real this time, was directed at Fitz. “He not only chewed out Trip and Hunter for leaving the wrench there in the first place but also gave me a way to leave with at least a little of my dignity intact.”

Fitz merely raised his eyebrows and replied, “Well, someone has to look out for you, Ward.”

Skye sat up straight. “Hey!” she said indignantly.

“Don’t worry, Skye,” Jemma said soothingly. “Taking care of Ward is all of our jobs now.”

Grant could see Jemma smile at him through his peripheral vision as he suddenly found an interesting spot on the wall to examine. But his heart was singing.

Hunter leaned forward in his chair to look over at Grant and remarked in a bemused tone, “That’s the second time today I’ve seen him blush.”

Present Day

True to his promise to Skye, Grant talked more with his therapist about the brainwashing and read about it on his own time. It was a lot to consider. It was difficult to comprehend that so many of the decisions Grant thought he’d made on his own were instead due to direct manipulation by John and, before him, his family. However, Grant was pleased to discover that the one life-changing event that he did make all on his own – what his therapist called the Awakening – was his realization that he didn’t want Hydra to succeed. It was that decision which caused his thoughts and emotions to completely align with each other for the first time in a while. And it was that same decision which eventually led him to Skye and the Team, his family of choice.

After several months of hard emotional work, Grant felt almost ready to truly confront one part of his past. The other part of his past that he needed to deal with would come later. Although he was careful never to lie to Skye about his plans, he didn’t always tell her everything he was doing either. The time to tell the whole truth would come soon enough. Oddly enough, a disagreement with Skye moved him from almost ready to ready.

Grant had been off base for a trip to Monaco to capture Millie Collins, a former SHIELD agent who, in her undercover persona as the owner of a modeling business, operated among the elite. Hydra had turned Millie shortly after SHIELD’s fall and her presence at high class parties had made requesting donations and going undercover in that environment extremely difficult. Grant and Kara worked as a team for this mission, the first for Kara since having been deprogrammed. Her tension made what might usually be a routine assignment a nail biter but it went so smoothly that they found themselves coming home earlier than expected.

Grant was in the cockpit of the quinjet while Kara and Millie were below. He’d just radioed the Playground that they were about 20 minutes away from landing at the base. May’s voice came over the com system. “Ward, Skye’s on base right now. Do you want me to let her know your ETA?”
“Yes, that’d be great. Thanks,” he replied. Ever since their talk, May had been going out of her way to do nice things for him. He smiled to himself, figuring this was her way of showing that she too appreciated their friendship. He opened the plane’s internal com system. “Kara, wheels down in 20.”

“Thank god!” she replied fervently. Grant grinned to himself. Millie had been a handful.

As he landed the quinjet, Grant could see Trip standing off to the side of the hangar bay, clearly waiting for them to land so he could take charge of Millie. Next to him was Skye. She’d probably just taken a shower as her hair was wet and she was wearing the casual clothes Grant loved to see her in: yoga pants and a t-shirt. The maroon t-shirt really brought out her dark coloring and the entire ensemble reminded him of the first time they truly connected over a punching bag. He smiled to himself and hurriedly finished the post-landing checklist, eager to spend time with her.

He made it to the back of the plane just as the cargo ramp was being lowered. Grant wished he’d had time to change out of his impeccably tailored tuxedo before they landed but maybe he could swing by his room before he and Skye hung out. Kara, looking fabulous in a full length black halter dress with a dangerous slit up her leg, came up behind Grant with Millie firmly in hand.

Kara leaned in to Grant and whispered, “I know Millie’s been brainwashed but if I have to hear one more thing about high society, models or makeup, I’m going to scream!”

The two of them laughed together. The plane ride back had been challenging since Millie had seen fit to talk endlessly about all the models and society people she – but not they – were privileged to know and interact with. She’d even tried to convince them that if they let her go, she could transform both of them (especially Grant to whom she obviously was attracted) into successful models. Grant finally told her to shut up because he could see Kara was starting to get anxious and he was tired of hearing Millie blather on as well.

He took hold of Millie’s arm with one hand and put his other hand on Kara’s back, “I’ve got her from here,” he told Kara with an approving smile. “We’ll debrief later, so go rest. You did a great job tonight!”

Kara returned his smile and headed down the ramp. Grant looked over at Skye and was confused. Her expression had changed from excitement and lust to anger and despair. She briefly looked down at her clothes and then abruptly turned and left the hanger. Grant was still in charge of Millie and had to debrief Coulson, so he couldn’t immediately follow her.

Trip came walking up the ramp and took hold of Millie. “I’ve got her now. You probably need to talk to Coulson. Then, if I was you, I’d check in on your girl.”

“What happened? Why did she leave?” Grant didn’t usually ask advice from people but it was clear Trip knew something he didn’t.

“You’ll have to ask Skye but, if I had to guess, I’d say that she’s feeling under-dressed. You look like James Bond with two of his Bond girls while she thinks she’s not even in the movie,” Trip explained in a casual tone. That was one of the great things about Trip. He never seemed judgmental.

“That’s exactly what I was telling you earlier before I was so rudely dismissed,” Millie said arrogantly to Grant as Trip started walking her down the ramp. “You have great potential in society but you’re wasting it in an organization like SHIELD.”

Grant truly looked at her as she passed by, something he hadn’t done since the mission began.
Objectively, he realized that Millie was incredibly beautiful and she looked fabulous. Her blonde hair was pulled back with a diamond pin with the hairstyle highlighting her ice blue eyes and patrician features. Her cap sleeve full length straight deep red gown with the teardrop cut-out between her breasts emphasized her slim figure and luscious curves. She easily looked like she could be on a magazine cover and move in the kind of high society he’d been born into. All of a sudden, he realized why Skye was upset. How could an orphan in a van compete with this?

“Trust me, Millie. I was raised in society and you have nothing that I want,” Grant replied as he walked quickly past them in his haste to talk with Coulson and get to Skye.

Grant gave Coulson as short of a briefing as he could get away with and didn’t even stop to change as he went to Skye’s room. He could hear the sounds of her brooding (playing Janis Joplin’s *Another Piece of My Heart* on repeat) inside as he leaned on the doorway trying to figure out how he wanted to handle this. After a minute of thinking, he gave up and just knocked on her door. *I’ll figure it out once I hear what she has to say.*

Skye opened the door but didn’t smile when she saw it was him. She merely looked him up and down and sighed in a defeated sort of way. Her arm was still holding the doorframe, effectively barring Grant from entering the room.

He looked steadily at her and didn’t smile either. For the first time in a long time, he wasn’t feeling any panic at her rejection nor was he desperate to get back in her good graces. Grant was reminded of a quote by Louisa May Alcott: “I am not afraid of storms for I am learning how to sail my ship.” At the time, he’d taken her comment literally, that one needed physical skills in order to get a ship through stormy seas. But now he recognized that she meant mental skills and, to his surprise, he realized that he was there. It had taken hard work but he was, at last, pretty confident in their relationship and their ability to withstand arguments. And this time, the problem was Skye’s, not his. He’d done nothing wrong.

“You want to tell me what this is about or should I just go soak my head?” he asked with the merest hint of a smile.

Skye snorted and smiled a little too. The “go soak your head” was something she’d yelled at him, only half in jest, during their last tiff. She moved back and waved her arm to indicate an invitation to come in yet she still said nothing.

*So, she’s going to make me do all the work.* Grant sighed heavily – not even trying to be quiet about it – as he sat in her comfy loveseat. “Let me guess. You saw me with two beautiful women dressed to the nines and got insecure about how you measure up.” Skye crossed her arms and frowned as she sat on the arm of the small couch, as far away from him as she could get without making it into a huge thing. “How am I doing so far?”

“Not bad,” she replied grudgingly. “But it’s not just that. I mean, look at yourself, Grant! You look like you just got back from a GQ cover shoot and I look like…” Her voice trailed off.

“A girl who lives in a van,” he finished for her.

“Yeah,” Skye whispered. She sank down onto the cushion, her face turned away from him, her body language still simultaneously hostile and defeated.

Grant laughed a little and shook his head in disgust. “You know, I’m amazed at how such a smart woman can be so dumb at times,” he told her. He grinned when she looked over at him in anger. “I’m sorry but it’s true.”
“It’s not funny!”

“You’re right, it isn’t,” he said as the grin slid off of his face. “Skye, you just don’t get it, do you? You’ve heard how I grew up, the horrible way people from my childhood treated me. You know how John was the master of looking good while being bad. And when you were a hacker with the Rising Tide, you saw just how easily money and high society masked superficiality, greed and the worst of humanity. Yet you seem to think that’s all I want in a woman, or worse, that it’s who I am just because I look a certain way.”

“Grant, you know I don’t….” Skye started.

“No, let me finish. Do you know what I saw when I looked at you as I was coming off the quinjet?” He waited until he saw her shake her head, her eyes fully on his. Good, she’s paying attention. Maybe this time it’ll stick. “I saw the beautiful woman I love wearing this soft t-shirt that brings out the warmth of her skin, the thickness of her hair and the brightness of her eyes. The shirt’s great to touch and, as an added bonus, it’s easy to take off. I saw her wet hair that made me think naughty thoughts of her in the shower and how I wish I’d been there. And I saw these awesome form-fitting pants that remind me of the first time we truly connected and, again, are pretty easy to take off.” He saw the beginnings of a smile on her face. “But, most of all, I saw the woman who is smart as a whip, tough as nails, makes me laugh, cares about others and is really fun to be around. And, because she was a girl who lived in her van, she’s the only person who truly understands who I am and loves me for it.” Grant watched her look down and he leaned forward to gently brush a tear from her cheek. “That’s who I saw in the hangar bay and that’s who I love. So much,” he whispered in her ear before sitting back. She has to come to me this time.

Skye looked up, searching his face, her eyes still shimmering with unshed tears. She laughed a little and glanced away. “How do you always know just what to say?”

“I don’t, a fact I’m sure you’ll remind me of the next time we get in a fight. But just now, all I did was tell you what’s in my heart,” Grant admitted. He realized that, once again, his thoughts and emotions were completely aligned. That feels good. I can do this!

Skye kissed him deeply and, once they drew apart, he could see the impish glee in her expression. “Well, now that we got the drama portion of this evening out of the way, we can put this monkey suit to good use.” She tilted her head toward her closet. “Maybe I could dig up an elegant dress and we could both be models together.”

Grant grinned and shook his head. “I have a better idea. I can be James Bond,” he said, ignoring Skye’s rolling of her eyes, “and you can be Natalya Simonova, the woman whose computer skills helped Bond defeat the bad guys.”

Skye laughed out loud. “Look at you, Mr. Pop Culture! When have you been watching James Bond movies?”

Grant shrugged but was pleased by her delight. “Fitz and I saw a few of them recently. Q is his favorite character of course and…” Grant rolled his eyes, “he always wants to talk about the science behind the gadgets. I, however, am more interested in James Bond especially since, for some reason, people always compare me to him.”

Skye shook her head, grinning. “You don’t say. And? What have you learned?”

“That I need to get better with my quips. And that somehow my spy work is a lot more boring than his. But, then again, he doesn’t have an awesome female partner like I do,” he replied as he reached for her.
She snuggled against him and reached up to kiss him deeply again. “You’re always surprising me, Grant Ward,” she murmured. Then the evening finally started going the way he wanted it to.

The next morning, Grant told his therapist that since he handled his disagreement with Skye so well, he was ready to confront John. The two of them had been working toward this moment for months. Once Grant understood the point of the Awakening and could complete the process of thought/emotion alignment more and more frequently, they moved on to breaking the isolation of brainwashing. He’d started that process when he’d first gone to Maria Hill and confessed his Hydra status but he’d increased it in his therapy, his talks with Skye and by opening up to other members of Team Bus.

His therapist also gave Grant homework so that he could educate himself about the different types of abuse. Their initial discussion on the topic was one he wouldn’t soon forget. Like many people, Grant never realized just how subtle and insidious abuse could be. “Remember Grant,” his therapist warned him, “abusers communicate verbal abuse through many different means, not just words. They also use threatening behavior, emotional manipulation and a lack of personal boundaries.”

All of a sudden, John’s constant holding of Grant’s arm, the one-armed hugs and the slaps on the back took on a darker meaning. Grant had always seen them as the only kind of affection John could give but now he knew otherwise. That’s why he had instinctively disliked that kind of touch and started shying away from others touching him, in fear that they too would try to dominate him. He also saw Garrett’s lightning fast mood swings, the compliments paired with taunts about Grant’s weaknesses and his constant emphasis on trust for what they were: ways to play on Grant’s emotions so that he felt completely tied to John, ready to do whatever he asked despite the personal cost.

Once Grant and his therapist deemed him ready, they received permission from Coulson to visit John’s grave in Florida. John hadn’t had any family of his own, so due to his years of service to SHIELD (and despite his later partnership with Hydra), SHIELD paid for his burial. However, the organization didn’t want to go to a lot of expense, so they placed his remains in a cemetery close to where he died at Cybertek. That’s where Grant and his therapist were headed. Skye wanted desperately to go with them so she could be supportive but Grant insisted that he needed to do this on his own.

His therapist drove him to the cemetery but then let him walk to John’s grave on his own. She would be there for support if he needed it but whatever Grant needed to say was his alone. He felt anxious as he walked toward the marker for John, unsure of what he should say or if this was the right thing to do. I shouldn’t be this anxious to talk to a grave! He came up upon the stone that said:

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John Samael Garrett
March 13, 1964 - May 13, 2014
“In the long run, we shape our lives, and we shape ourselves.
The process never ends until we die.
And the choices we make are ultimately our own responsibility.”
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Grant stopped short in front of the stone. He wondered who had chosen the quotation. It seemed appropriate. Grant conceded that the quote was also a bit passive-aggressive but, then again, John had caused a lot of damage and SHIELD did pay for his burial. Maybe they were allowed their anger. And so am I.

As he continued to stare at the grave, flashes of his life with John blurred before his eyes. John
offering him a lifeline in juvie, abandoning him in the woods, teaching him spycraft, the gleam of pride in his eyes when Grant performed well, punishing him when he failed, the laughter they shared, John’s faux distress over Skye’s shooting and his plea to Grant as he lay dying. Time to get down to business.

“Hey John,” Grant started, feeling incredibly stupid. He glanced around surreptitiously to see if anyone was watching him but he was alone in the cemetery. “You probably figured out that I lied to you and not just because I was a triple. I lied to you when I told you that I no longer cared about you. I do. A lot.” Grant stopped, then whispered, “Too much.” He felt a wave of emotion flow over him and, once again checking to see that he was alone, continued, “I miss you. God help me, I know I shouldn’t, but I do.”

Grant stopped again, uncertain of what to say next. This whole exercise felt so overwhelming. His eyes roamed the empty cemetery, glancing over the trees, flowers, other grave stones, even the benches, finally coming back to rest on John’s epitaph. That quote from Eleanor Roosevelt applied not only to John. Grant thought of a quote by Stefan Molyneux that his therapist shared with him: “The acknowledgement of having suffered evil is the greatest step forward in mental health.” The two merged together in his head and suddenly he knew what needed to be said.

“Yes, I made my own choices and I accept my mistakes but damn it John, I deserved better than what you gave me! I thought you cared about me, that you were trying to help me become the best man I could be. But it was only ever a way to control me, a way to get someone to do your dirty work and watch out for you when you couldn’t. You kept me from feeling good about myself or being able to get closer to other people. And when I did that in spite of you, when I finally fell in love, you had her shot! I’ll never forgive you for that! You almost took the one chance of happiness I had away from me, just for your own selfish goals! And I hate you for killing Buddy too!”

Grant was panting now and he fought to get his breathing under control. He concentrated on the circular breathing technique he’d learned a lifetime ago, determined to see this through and say everything that was in his heart. I want to walk away from here a free man!

“You taught me to fear you,” he started again, calmer this time. “You used my vulnerability against me, hoping that my self-loathing would keep me in line. That worked for a while. But, in the end, I saw through you and I chose my own path. It’s taken a lot of work but now I trust myself. I have people who love me, not for what I can do for them but for who I am. I’m worth so much more than you ever wanted me to believe.”

The tears that he’d been holding back were at last unleashed and ran down his cheeks. Grant didn’t bother wiping them away because he realized that they were cleansing him, that this was – as his therapist always claimed – cathartic. The tears were his way of letting go of John. He knelt in front of the stone, sobbing unrestrainedly for a few minutes and then touched it gently as his tears lessened.

“I get it now,” Grant said quietly. “I see you for who you truly were. You didn’t treat me well but I know it’s because your life was ruled by fear. You were afraid to die because you hadn’t truly lived. And you were afraid of me too because my ‘weakness’ gave me a way to get the love you never had. I was the closest thing you ever had to family and you even fucked that up.” He paused for a moment, slowly stood and backed up slightly. “The truth is that I’m sorry for you. Your choices sucked. Mine did too for a while.”

Grant stood quietly, just looking at the stone for a few minutes. “I’m not coming back here to visit you, John. Not ever. I’m closing this chapter on my life. But I will take the last lesson you ever
gave me. I’ll make better choices. For both of us.” With that, he turned and walked away.
Unacceptable Risk

Several days later, Coulson held a briefing to provide selected personnel with an update on retrieval missions. All of Team Bus was there along with Mack, Hunter, Bobbi and a few others. Bobbi was a new addition to the Playground. Her mission as a mole inside Hydra came to an end a few days ago and she was readjusting to life as a SHIELD agent.

Bobbi’s on-again off-again relationship with Hunter was the stuff of legend in some SHIELD circles. Grant had heard the rumors but, prior to coming to the Playground, hadn’t paid much attention to them. However, since he’d become friends with Hunter, he’d thought more about it. Despite Hunter’s penchant for calling Bobbi names and complaining about her, it couldn’t be clearer that there were still feelings there, big ones. *No one spends that much time talking about someone they don’t feel strongly about.*

Sure enough, Grant walked into the lounge one day when the two of them were the only other occupants in the room. He’d heard the sounds of their arguing from the hallway but they shut up when he entered the room. He almost laughed out loud at their positioning. Although both had scowls on their faces, their bodies were overly close to each other and he could see the tension wafting off of them. He nodded to each of them and quickly grabbed a drink from the refrigerator and exited the room. Grant grinned to himself and wasn’t at all surprised to hear a sudden silence and then the sounds of a body being pressed against a wall as he headed toward his room.

“One of the weapons my team found a while back has been located again,” Coulson was saying when Grant tuned back into the briefing. A picture flashed onto the screen and everyone leaned forward to examine it. “We discovered this plasma particle beam in a cave in Peru,” Coulson explained. “It has very destructive capabilities and was unfortunately taken by Hydra when they overran the Fridge.”

Memories of the weapon flooded over Grant. He felt a wave of nostalgia as he remembered taking it from the wall of the cave as FitzSimmons squabbled and Skye floundered in her new role. That had been the first mission together for Team Bus, the first time he hadn’t been the whole solution but only a piece of the puzzle. That was also the first time he’d truly felt like he was part of a team. He felt Skye’s eyes on him and gave her a small smile. She remembered too.

But when he turned his attention back to the briefing, he felt a huge stab of guilt. John had known to look for the plasma particle beam because of Grant’s mission briefings to him. He’d gone almost straight to it when they took over the Fridge. Due to the weapon’s power to dissolve floors and walls, Grant had almost been responsible for letting Hydra get their hands on the gravitonium.

Coulson had just finished detailing the history and potential of the plasma particle beam. “According to our intelligence, the weapon has been found in a Hydra facility in Sokovia.” As several people opened their mouths to ask, Coulson pre-empted their question. “Not the one the Avengers liberated, another one. Apparently von Strucker and List were very busy while they were in the area,” he said in a dry tone. “Agent Morse and Hunter have been tasked with retrieving the weapon and the mission will commence early tomorrow. Due to the instability in the area and SHIELD’s shaky standing in Europe, tech support will mostly be run from here.” He glanced around the room quickly. “If there are no more questions, you’re all dismissed.”

Most of the people in the room stood up and headed toward the door. Grant stayed where he was and watched Coulson gather his materials and converse in a low tone with May. He saw Skye give him a quizzical look but she didn’t speak to him as she left the room. Soon Coulson, May and Grant were the only people remaining. Coulson seemed to sense this and looked at Grant.
“Yes, Agent Ward?”

Grant got up from his seat and sat on the table in front of where Coulson and May were standing. “Sir, I know that you’ve already chosen the team but I’d like to go with them. I have a history with this weapon and think I can be of use in locating it.”

Coulson appeared skeptical. “We’re running a skeleton crew for this mission on purpose. Because of the weapon’s power, it’s vital that it be a quiet smash and grab. What….”

“Why you?” May interrupted with a hard look at Grant.

Grant stood up and moved even closer to them so he could lower his voice. The door to the hallway had yet to be closed. “Because I’ve dealt with this weapon twice…” he could tell they weren’t convinced so he brought out his trump card, “…and because it’s my fault that Hydra has it in the first place. John only knew to look for it because I told him about it, so I see this as my responsibility.”

May crossed her arms, clearly unconvinced, but Grant could tell that Coulson was weakening. “He has a point, May, and Hunter and Morse can definitely use the assistance. They’re going to be in a tight place as it is with just the two of them.”

May looked at Coulson in outrage. “Phil, how can you even consider letting him go when it’s mainly out of misplaced guilt? You know how dangerous that is!”

“It’s not just guilt, it’s also experience, right Agent Ward?” Grant could tell that Coulson now wanted him to go because he knew that Morse and Hunter might be out of their depth.

Grant nodded eagerly. “Of course, Sir. I think I can really be of some assistance.”

May rolled her eyes at him. “Grant, you were a triple,” she said in a low voice. “It wasn’t your fault and you have nothing to prove. Morse and Hunter can handle this.”

“Melinda, I appreciate…” Grant started but Coulson put a hand on his arm and turned to May.

“Let’s do it this way. Morse will be in charge of the mission with Ward acting strictly as backup should they need it.” He turned back to Grant. “You are there to be helpful. That’s it. No risks.”

Grant nodded quickly. “Thank you, Sir. I’ll touch base with Morse to get my orders.” He hurriedly left the room before May could lodge any more objections. While he appreciated May’s care on his behalf, he really felt like he needed to do this. His only trepidation was in telling Skye and his therapist. He had a feeling that neither would be thrilled with his decision.

And they weren’t. Grant had plenty of time to reflect on just how unhappy they were with him as he piloted the quinjet into Sokovia airspace. His therapist had quietly told him that she thought this was a mistake and he needed to work through his feelings of guilt over what John and Hydra had him do. She even expressed concern about Grant’s willingness to take too many risks. Skye had not been as calm. Her objections had gotten quite loud, so much so that Hunter started teasing him about it once they left the base.

“And I thought Bob gets loud when she’s upset!” he told Grant quietly as they both sat in the cockpit. Bobbi was milling about in the back but could still probably hear them if she tried, hence the low tone. “If the strength of her lungs was any indication, I’d say that Skye was really upset.” Hunter leaned back in his seat. “I wouldn’t worry so much about you myself but hey, there’s no accounting for taste.”
Grant chuckled but then sobered up as he recalled Skye’s loud recriminations about how he needed to have his head checked and how stupid volunteering for dangerous missions was. “She’ll get over it once we get back,” he shrugged.

“Maybe,” Hunter said doubtfully. “We did hear the same yells, didn’t we?”

“I know I sure did,” Bobbi said ruefully from behind them.

* * * * *

The mission went south almost from the moment they arrived at the Hydra facility. The intel they’d gotten about the particle beam was that it – along with several other weapons taken from the Fridge – was being held in a secure room in the basement of the building which, oddly enough for a secret base, was smack in the middle of town. SHIELD analysts had determined that the building originally housed a government agency that, given the area’s instability and war, had fallen on hard times and was pushed out. Hydra then took it over and, in addition to civilian personnel like administrative staff and researchers, also installed close to 100 of its lower level foot soldiers.

The analysts suspected that, in addition to being a storehouse for the weapons, they also were involved in recruiting new personnel, inciting violence (in order to keep the area unstable) and running drugs. Apparently Hydra’s fight with SHIELD had left the coffers a bit empty, so they had to make money where they could. Given the high number of Hydra people on site, it was imperative that they not get caught because there was little chance of a rescue.

The plan called for Morse, Hunter and Ward to enter through the underground tunnels in place to help employees move from building to building without having to endure the bone-chilling cold weather in winter. SHIELD’s information was that very few Hydra people patrolled the tunnels since they were used so frequently. However, after the team’s first encounter with a group of five Hydra soldiers who were doing a roving patrol, Grant realized that their information was faulty, extremely faulty.

He, Bobbi and Hunter just looked at each other, their eyes wide, after having dispatched all five soldiers with ICERS. They’d barely managed to pull their bodies into a dark corner and crouch down themselves when several other people walked quickly by. The newcomers didn’t notice anything amiss but it was only a matter of time.

“That was close,” Hunter whispered as soon as the small group disappeared down the corridor. He looked directly at Bobbi. “Our luck isn’t going to last forever. What do you want to do?”

“Clearly, our intel is bad,” she murmured in a low tone. “This place is crawling with both Hydra and what looks like regular employees. We can’t move undetected. I hate to waste such a big trip but there’s no way of telling what else we’re going to find. For all we know, the weapon isn’t even here.” She paused a moment, obviously going over their options in her head. “We need to abort. We’ll get the analysts to gather more information and then we can return.”

Two more people came down the hall, talking loudly to each other. Grant ignored them to focus on the five Hydra soldiers they’d taken out. He really didn’t want to leave without the plasma particle beam weapon. There’s got to be a way we can still do this! He waited until the duo had cleared their area before speaking.

“Look, we didn’t come this far just to give up now! There is a way we can get into the secured room and at least see what’s there.” He glanced at his teammate’s faces. Hunter looked skeptical but Bobbi looked interested, so he directed his comments to her. “If we put on Hydra uniforms, it’s
unlikely that most of them will know the difference since there are so many of them.”

Bobbi nodded slowly, her eyes raking over the downed soldiers. Hunter also noticed. “Are you crazy?” he yelled in a whisper. “What happens if they do know the difference? We’re dealing with 100 to 1 odds or worse! Come on, Bob! Is one weapon really worth the risk?”

“It is to me,” Grant told him firmly. He looked back at Bobbi. “Are you with me or not?”

Bobbi waited until several more people passed through the corridor. “OK, this is what we’re going to do. You and Hunter suit up as Hydra and try to blend in. I’ll follow you as backup. They won’t be expecting someone not in uniform. If we can easily get into the weapons room, then we do it, grab what we can and get out. If we can’t, then we abort the mission immediately.”

Hunter let out an exasperated sigh but bent down to one of the shorter Hydra guards and started to undress him. Grant did the same with a larger soldier. As he was putting on the unconscious man’s uniform, Bobbi grabbed his arm lightly and looked at him directly with a no-nonsense expression. “I know this mission means a lot to you but our orders are to take no unnecessary risks.”

“Got it,” Grant replied, continuing to dress. And he did. He certainly had no desire to take unnecessary risks. But what other people deemed unnecessary, he saw as doable. John had always pushed him to take more risks than the others. “No risk, no reward” was a frequent motto alongside the ever-present, “If the job was easy, it wouldn’t be any fun.” While Grant always appreciated the caring behind Coulson’s caution, it also felt stifling at times. He’d been trained to be the whole solution and he had a feeling that this was going to be one of those times.

When both Grant and Hunter were completely dressed and armed with Hydra weapons, they eased their way into the corridor and started walking with purpose toward where the secure weapons room was supposed to be. Bobbi followed along, keeping to the shadows so as not to be seen. If she came to an area in which she couldn’t be invisible, she just walked quickly like a civilian employee and then melted back into the next available dark spot.

The corridor wound around several times before coming to a room that had two guards posted on either side. Grant didn’t hesitate in going up to it. Hunter took his cue but was a little more reluctant. Grant signed internally because they needed to look in sync. Hydra was nothing if not well-trained. *Mercenaries!* He made a quick assessment and then spoke to the younger of the two guards, “We have orders to bring one of the weapons to HQ upstairs,” he told him in Russian.

Sure enough, the older guard’s eyes went sideways to the younger one, mutely seeking what his superior would say. The younger guard nodded shortly, “Протокол фразы?” he asked.

“Viele Köpfe haben viele Zähne,” he answered with all the confidence he could muster. He almost sagged with relief when the guard nodded shortly and nodded to the older one to unlock the door.

Seriously? Many heads have lots of teeth? No wonder John mocked him.

He started to enter the room but stopped when the younger guard put a restraining hand on his arm. “Только один из вас может входить,” he said with a nod towards Hunter who had moved forward to enter the room with Grant. Oh shit! How do I tell him that only one of us can enter?
Thinking fast, Grant turned his body to block Hunter’s entrance and looked directly at him. “Оставайся здесь,” he said as firmly as he could, hoping that Hunter would understand that he was telling him to stay here. Grant smiled almost imperceptibly when Hunter nodded and stopped moving.

He quickly swung back toward the door and moved confidently inside, scanning around as quickly as he could. The inability to get more than one of them inside the room was a setback so he’d need to move rapidly. Grant was so engrossed with his mission that he only realized the younger guard had entered with him when the door shut. Grant whirled around and saw the grinning face of the Hydra soldier.

“Любой в этой комнате должно сопровождаться во все времена,” he told him. Clearly, Grant was not the first Hydra soldier not to know that anyone visiting the room must be accompanied at all times.

This was an unforeseen circumstance but, Grant reflected as he slowly choked the guard into unconsciousness, it wasn’t a deal breaker. He hoped that Bobbi and Hunter would have the foresight to incapacitate the other guard and put Hunter in his place but he couldn’t worry about that now. *One problem at a time.* Grant looked around a bit more slowly and spotted the plasma particle beam. He scooped it into his backpack and took a few more items he thought the space could accommodate. *No sense in leaving Hydra with anything useful!*

The door abruptly swung open and Bobbi leaned in. “Ward!” she hissed. “More Hydra personnel are on their way – we heard it over their comms system – so we have to go now!”

Grant took off his backpack and thrust it at Bobbi who gave him a confused look. “Give me your backpack!” She quickly shoved her backpack off her shoulder and exchanged it with Grant’s.

Her expression darkened when she realized that he was planning on filling it with more Hydra loot. “Ward! We don’t have time for that! We got what we wanted, so we need to go. Now!”

Hunter poked his head in too. “Bob! They’re almost on top of us, so if we’re to have any chance of leaving, we have to go this minute!”

Grant finished filling Bobbi’s backpack and handed it to Hunter. “Give me your backpack!”

Bobbi only had time to say, “Hunter, no!” before Hunter had already exchanged his as well. He looked at Grant. “Don’t be stupid, mate. Let’s go!”

Grant just shook his head. “You two go ahead. I’ll catch up in a minute. Go now!”

Bobbi sighed heavily but turned and ran into the hall. Grant heard Hunter leave with her. He didn’t worry about the two of them because he knew how good both of them were. He’d meet them at the rendezvous point. He returned to his work and had just finished putting the 3rd filled backpack on his pack when he heard what sounded like numerous guns lock on him. Grant turned slowly with his hands over his head and looked into the faces of twelve frowning Hydra soldiers. He sighed. *This isn’t going to be easy.*

Grant rolled his eyes as he held up his arms and relaxed his stance. “Why are you pointing your guns at me, imbeciles?” he asked in Russian with as irritated and superior of a tone as he could manage. “The infiltrators you're looking for went that way!” he continued, pointing in the opposite direction Bobbi and Hunter had gone.

The leader of the twelve looked at his second in command and tilted his head in the direction Grant
pointed. The second commander nodded and she and five of the soldiers ran off. After watching them go, the leader turned back to face Grant. “I have two questions,” he said in Russian. “What is the password and,” he gave a slow, evil smile, “why is the body of one of my comrades in the corner?”

Grant didn’t hesitate. If he’d been able to fake a password, he might have tried to finesse the body somehow but he had nothing. However, the leader had made a big mistake by giving him time to see that the jig was up. He grabbed two of the guns he had stashed on his back, fired both (two down!) and then leapt up to grab a pipe in the ceiling, thereby avoiding the gunshots of the four soldiers he hadn’t hit. Grant swung forward and landed feet first on a Hydra soldier (that’s three!), quickly yanking out his knife. The classic maneuver of punching one of the remaining guards while simultaneously kicking another one was cliché but it also worked. It was surprising that the soldiers hadn’t been trained to expect this but Grant was very glad they hadn’t. He executed another traditional move by grabbing the one he’d punched and snapping his neck. Four!

The remaining two guards started firing at him and, had Grant not needed to keep a close eye on his assailants, he might have rolled his eyes. Don’t they watch any movies? You never fire when your opponent has a human shield! Sure enough, the Hydra soldier’s shots hit the body he held close to him. Once the two realized they weren’t having any effect, they stopped firing. Grant took that opportunity to throw the body toward one as he charged the other and slit his throat. Five! The dead soldier’s gun was easily obtained and he whirled to shoot the sole remaining soldier while the poor guy was still struggling to get up. Done! Suddenly, everything got quiet, a sound that made Grant’s heart sing. He tried to control his breathing as he looked briefly around the room, counted seven bodies, and listened hard to see if the other six were returning.

There were no sounds of marching feet or alarms, so Grant gathered his own weapons plus a few others for good measure, then eased into the corridor. He took off at a quiet, controlled run, darting into dark corners if he heard anyone coming. After about two turns of the corridor, he heard the sound of multiple boots on the ground and squashed himself into a small junction. He was just in time as he watched the other six guards file through at a quick trot. It’s only a matter of time now! After the last soldier was out of sight, Grant broke into a sprint, dodging people instead of hiding, nodding to himself as the intruder alarm started blaring. He counted on the element of surprise to keep people out of his way until he reached the edges of the building.

Sure enough, Grant didn’t encounter any problems until he left the building. He ran full speed into the courtyard only to be brought up short when a metal cage descended upon him, trapping him in the center of the archway. Only a few steps separated him from the dark city street. Damn! So close! Grant ignored his sense of panic and instead concentrated on controlling his breathing and getting his bearings. Sometime soon he would get the chance to either talk his way out of this or escape but he had to be calm enough to do it. He heard the sounds of soldiers pouring out into the courtyard and turned in time to see the second in command signal her troops to come to a halt.

She smiled at Grant as she walked slowly over to the cage, her soldiers following and making a U-shape behind her. It wasn’t a nice smile. “So Mr. Spy,” she said to him in broken English as her eyes raked over him appreciatively, “you are crafty and skilled. Fortunately for you, your abilities are things that Hydra needs, so maybe you won’t be killed.” She spoke a few words of Russian into her comms unit. “Our commander is on his way. Then we will know how you will pay for what you did here tonight.”

Grant fought down the wave of panic that washed over him. Since von Strucker had never been a fan of John’s or of his, this encounter was unlikely to go well. He wouldn’t even be surprised if the German leader decided to kill him on sight. Skye! As soon as the thought of her passed through his mind, he immediately pushed it aside. He would lose it if he thought of her now.
Suddenly, he heard a high whine that increased in intensity ending with a large boom. Grant jumped backwards (as far back as the cage would allow) as a large chunk of the archway and the tail end of the cage exploded into dust. The plasma particle beam! He dashed through the opening in the cage while the soldiers unhurt by the explosion were still in shock. Running hard in the direction of the rendezvous, he saw the heel of what could only be Hunter’s boots as he turned a corner. Bobbi must be ahead of him. It amused him to know how much faster she was than Hunter. Grant also turned the corner and threw himself into a dark corner to evade the following soldiers who ran right past him.

A miniscule sigh of relief escape him as the sound of their boots faded into the stillness of the night air. He wasn’t out of the woods yet but he was almost to the safety of the rendezvous point. As he eased himself carefully back onto the street and headed toward the spot he was to meet Bobbi and Hunter, Grant was grateful that he would soon be home.

* * * * *

The trip back was long enough that Bobbi had been able to send her report to Coulson about what happened in Sokovia. Grant also sent a report but somehow he suspected that hers was a lot different from his.

“Tell Ward that I need to see him immediately upon landing!” Grant heard the clipped voice of Coulson from the back of the plane, an area he’d retreated to after being yelled at by Bobbi. He groaned and rolled his eyes. Oh great, another lecture! If Bobbi’s outrage and Hunter’s Greek chorus of agreement hadn’t been bad enough, he’d soon have to deal with an irate Coulson.

“You know you deserve it, Ward,” Bobbi singsonged from the pilot’s seat. One of the great things about Bobbi – really, about most specialists – was that she didn’t hold grudges and while her fuse might be short, it also burnt out quickly. Her anger with him was clearly spent, so it was safe to come up front with her.

“I can understand your anger as team leader,” Grant told her as he sat in the copilot’s chair (Hunter was rummaging around for something to eat), “but as a Specialist, are you telling me that you wouldn’t have done the same thing?”

Bobbi thought about it for a moment. “No,” she said thoughtfully, “I don’t think I would have. The risk was too great, especially for things that weren’t included in the mission objectives.”

“Not for you and Hunter,” he argued. “You both easily got out in time and even coming back for me didn’t put you in harm’s way.” And it hadn’t. They’d just set off the plasma particle beam from a bit of a distance and then started running once it stopped and they loaded it back up. Grant was responsible for getting himself clear once the cage was open.

Bobbi stopped looking out over the horizon and turned to face Grant. “You don’t understand what I’m saying. The risk wasn’t too great for us; the risk was too great for you.”

Is she serious? Grant said nothing, just contented himself with rolling his eyes at her.

Bobbi merely responded with a mysterious smile. “Wait and see. I think some other people might be able to explain it to you better than I can.” She gestured to the back of the plane. “You should try and get some sleep before we get back. I have a feeling you’re in for a long night.”

Grant thought she might have a point once he deplaned and saw the stormy faces of Coulson, May, Fitz and most especially Skye waiting for him. “In the briefing room!” Coulson barked as they all drifted in that direction. No one said anything to Grant but he saw the glares sent his way. What is
Once most of the team was seated – May was leaning against one of the walls, her arms crossed – Coulson swiveled in his chair to look at Grant. It took all of Grant’s willpower to keep his expression neutral. He felt like he was back at military school waiting for the commandant to hand out his punishment for disobeying orders. He sneaked a look at Skye out of the corner of his eye. She was looking at the briefing screen, clearly avoiding his gaze, her expression pinched. He swallowed the familiar sigh. *I’m in trouble with her too.*

“Agent Ward, we’ve all read the reports sent by Hunter, Agent Morse and yourself.” Despite himself, Grant was impressed with Coulson’s calm demeanor. He’d expected more yelling. “The contents of the backpacks are being analyzed as we speak and we’ll know more about them later. While we’re pleased with the end result of the mission, what we want to discuss is why you disobeyed orders and put yourself at extreme risk. You were specifically told that there was to be no risk and that this was to be a quiet mission. What part of that was unclear?”

“I understood the orders, Sir, and had every intention of obeying them,” Grant replied in a low, calm voice, as if he were trying to soothe an agitated animal. “But as you know, in the field sometimes unexpected situations require tactical decisions to be made on the spot. This was one of those times. Once I got into the weapons room, I saw numerous items – dangerous things, alien tech – that had been stolen from the Fridge. It seemed very unwise to leave them there when there was an opportunity to steal them back. I was very careful to ensure that both Hunter and Agent Morse were able to leave unchallenged but believed that I could successfully retrieve a few more items with only moderate risk to myself.”

“Moderate risk,” Skye scoffed in a scathing tone. She still had yet to look at Grant. He noticed that her arms were now crossed so tightly that she looked as though she was almost squeezing herself to death.

“I knew you shouldn’t have let him go,” May said dryly with a glare in Grant’s direction.

“With all due respect,” Grant said, unsuccessfully attempting to keep the frustration out of his voice, “I don’t understand the problem here. We got the plasma particle beam and a whole lot of other things that will either be useful to us or will prevent terrible things from happening. The mission was successful and everyone returned home safely.”

“Yeah but that almost wasn’t the case,” Fitz put in. Grant spared a glance at him, hoping he’d read his glare and know to be quiet. Apparently he didn’t care. “You got caught and if Bobbi hadn’t set off the plasma particle beam, you might be dead.”

“Or worse,” Trip muttered. Grant looked at him. *Et tu Brute?* Trip shrugged. “That particle beam could’ve taken you out too. I saw the specs of the cage and archway. You didn’t have a lot of room to maneuver.”

“Yes, but I’m not dead or worse. You all know that there is an element of risk to what we do, so why are you making an issue out of this?” Grant was honestly confused. He’d never had this kind of conversation when he was working with John. If anything, the reverse was true. If he didn’t put it all on the line, there usually was hell to pay.

“I think what your team is trying to say is that you take unacceptable risks,” Coulson started calmly but Grant’s frustration won out.

“Agent Morse and Hunter were always going to be fine,” he interrupted impatiently.
“He’s talking about you!” Skye said in what Grant thought to be a very loud voice. Some might even call it yelling. She finally was looking at him and he now wished she wasn’t. Her expression was terrible to behold. “What you’re too pigheaded to understand is that we’re all upset because you take too many risks with yourself! You always take such good care of everyone else but you don’t give a thought to how to take care of you!”

Grant took a deep breath. She was really being unreasonable; they all were. Maybe if I remain calm, they’ll understand my point. “Skye, specialists are trained to not take care of ourselves. Our jobs are to be shields for others. Protection is our highest duty.”

“That’s not true,” May said bluntly. “How can we protect others if we don’t take good care of ourselves?”

Grant snorted. This is really getting thick in here. “How can we protect others if we don’t put ourselves on the line? You agree with me, right Trip? Bobbi?”

Bobbi just smiled that mysterious smile and raised her eyebrows. He sighed exasperatedly as he could almost hear her say, “I told you that some other people would explain it to you better.”

“No, I don’t agree with you, Ward,” Trip replied. “Remember back at the Academy when they talked about the line between acceptable and unacceptable risk? If you cross it, you can put both the mission and yourself in danger.”

“The Academy instructors are just pencil pushers,” Grant replied in an annoyed tone. Why aren’t they getting this?

“They don’t understand what it’s like to be in the field, what it takes to get the job done. If I fail, if I don’t push myself, people die. And the mission wasn’t in danger!”

“What I think we’re trying to tell you…” Coulson started again.

“But you were!” Skye shrieked as she stood up, her whole body shaking. Whoa! He’d never seen her this angry, not even when she thought he was Hydra. “You were in danger, Grant! Von Strucker probably would’ve killed you when he showed up! We’re a team, a….a….family, all pieces of the puzzle! Do you know what happens to a puzzle when it doesn’t have all of its pieces? Do you know what happens to a team when one of its members is hurt?” Low blow, Skye. He remembered perfectly what it was like when first Skye and then Fitz were hurt.

“Do you know what happens to a family when one member is missing, Grant?” she continued, her eyes welling up and tears starting to course down her cheeks. “It falls apart,” she said in a quiet voice, starting to sob. Skye reached up to brush away the tears. “Working for SHIELD involves some risk, we all know that.” Her voice was stronger again. “But part of our job is to minimize risk, to others and to ourselves. All of us do that,” she said, swinging her arm wildly to include everyone else at the table, “but not you. You stretch the limits of risk when it comes to yourself. Every. Single. Time. Every mission you go on, we all wonder if you’re coming back. And it’s excruciating.”

She stopped, the tears starting again. Grant wanted desperately to comfort her but he knew that he couldn’t. He was glad when Trip reached up and placed a reassuring hand on her arm. “Hey, girl,” he murmured to her.

“No,” she said, yanking her arm out of his grasp. “No! I just can’t do this anymore!” She ran out of the room. Bobbi got up and went out after her.

The silence that followed Skye’s exit was deadly. Grant sat stupidly looking at the door. He felt lost and didn’t know what to do. Did she just leave me? He sat rooted to his chair as one by one,
everyone else filed out of the door until Grant was alone with Coulson. He suspected that Coulson had initiated the mass exodus so they could talk by themselves but, at the moment, he didn’t care. He didn’t care about anything.

Coulson moved over so he was sitting next to Grant. “Well, that was dramatic,” he said dryly.

With pure force of will, Grant wrenched his gaze from the door and turned to face Coulson. “Sir,” he started and then just stopped. He realized that he had no earthly idea of what to say.

“Let me guess,” Coulson said, seemingly unfazed by Grant’s silence. “Garrett always pushed you to go to the limit on missions, to disregard the personal cost to yourself. If you didn’t, he was…shall we say…disappointed in you. Am I right?”

Grant nodded miserably, looking down at his hands.

“I also was guilty of ignoring the toll missions took on you when we were on the Bus, wasn’t I?” Coulson asked.

Grant glanced up in surprise, startled by Coulson’s insightfulness. He said nothing though.

Coulson chuckled a little as he sat back in his chair. “Can’t say that May didn’t warn me. She was especially irritated by how dismissive I was of you when I found out about your affair with her. And she expounded at length upon my failure to take better care of you after Lorelei. As usual, she was right,” He looked quickly over at Grant. “But don’t tell her I told you so! I’d never hear the end of it.”

“Oh, of course, Sir,” Grant whispered, keeping his gaze fixed on the table. *Why do so few people ever care about me?*

“I don’t want you to think that it’s because I don’t care about you, Grant. I do. I think Garrett cared about you too…in his own way. No, as much as I hate to admit that I have anything in common with John Garrett, I’m afraid that we’re both guilty of seeing you only as strong.”

“I don’t understand,” Grant said hesitantly, looking at Coulson in confusion. “Isn’t that a good thing?” *Where is he going with this?*

“It’s only good if you remember that strong people aren’t strong all the time. And they shouldn’t be. We all need for people to care about us and for us to be selfish at times. There’s a balance. That’s where I messed up with you. Because of your background, you have a hard time letting anyone take care of you, so I didn’t insist upon it. And I should have, especially since there was at least one member of our team who really wanted to do it.”

Grant smiled faintly at the sly grin on Coulson’s face.

“I also should’ve demanded that you take time off and made certain that you were selfish once in a while. But I didn’t. I just assumed that you were fine and because that corresponded with my own needs, I let it go. But no more!” he said cheerfully as he stood up and clapped Grant on the back. “From now on, what is it that Simmons said? It’s all of our jobs to take care of you and I’m going to see that we do it.” Coulson walked toward the door, put his hand on the frame and turned back to look to Grant. “We’ll talk more about this later but, for now, I think you should get some rest.” Then he left.

Grant continued sitting in his chair for a while, then slowly got up and headed to his room. He had a lot to think about (*Skye just left me!*). He was hoping that he wouldn’t meet anyone along the way, so he almost groaned audibly when he saw Fitz waiting for him outside of his bunk.
“Fitz, now’s really not the time.” Grant continued walking into his room, uncaring if Fitz followed. He went over to his dresser and started taking off his tact suit. Fitz closed the door and then came around to stand by him. Grant let out a heavy sigh, not even caring if he hurt the engineer’s feelings. “Shouldn’t you be in the Lab examining the tech I retrieved? I know everyone’s mad at me but I would’ve thought that you of all people would be thrilled with what I brought back.”

“I am anxious to get started but I wanted to talk to you first,” Fitz replied. “I just wanted to make certain that you understood what we were upset about because it seemed like you didn’t.”

“Yeah, I get it, Fitz!” Grant responded, the anger making a return engagement. “Everyone is upset that I took unnecessary risks because they just can’t imagine that I might have known exactly what I was doing! I’m used to being the whole solution and I get the job done! Always! Yes, mistakes sometimes happen but I’m here. I’m fine! Why isn’t that enough?”

Fitz was silent for so long that Grant thought he might actually leave. He would’ve been more impatient if he hadn’t suspected that Fitz was struggling for words. “Ward, remember our mission together, to South Ossetia?” Fitz finally asked.

The calm way in which Fitz asked the question brought him up short. Grant could almost feel the anger draining out of him. He turned to face Fitz, leaving his back toward the door. “Remember it?” he asked incredulously. “How could I forget? That’s when you and I became brothers.”

Fitz nodded. “Yeah. I’m glad you see it that way.” His eyes flicked briefly toward the closed door but then returned to meet Grant’s. “After the alien virus infected Jemma and you jumped out after her, she said you were family. I didn’t get it, not until South Ossetia. That’s when you became family to me too.” He moved closer so that he could put his hand on Grant’s shoulder. “Family, true family, cares about each other. They don’t want bad things to happen to the people they love. That’s why when you put yourself at risk, especially when you don’t have to, it hurts.” Fitz gave Grant a direct stare. “Remember that,” he said firmly, then slapped him on the back as he left the room.

Grant swallowed hard. This family stuff is a killer. He turned around to say something to Fitz’s retreating back only to see Skye standing at the door. Fitz had already left the room. He stared at Skye, not knowing what to say, how to begin. Her expression was perplexing. He could detect anger, sadness, lust (What??!!) and something else, some emotion he couldn’t quite recognize. She slowly closed the door and turned the lock. When she turned back around to face him, her face was sad but resolute.

Watching her, Grant felt like he almost couldn’t breathe. So, this is it. I knew this day would come. He couldn’t blame her, not really, but damn, the thought of her leaving him hurt. His chest ached with the realization of his loss. He’d screwed up one too many times. The best thing he could do would be to make it easy for her. “Skye, I….”

“Do you know when I first realized I was falling in love with you?” she interrupted softly, taking him completely by surprise. She grabbed his hand and led him slowly toward the cushy armchair in his room.

This was the armchair she’d surprised him with during the first week they’d been at the Playground. “I know how much you like to read, so I figured why not do it in style?” she’d explained as she waved her hand to indicate the huge, comfortable and soft chair. “I made sure it was purple because you really need to have some color in here. Otherwise, you’ll just blend into the background,” she’d said, laughing at his amazed expression and glancing at all the black and white furniture and fixtures. Grant hadn’t known what to say (Where did she get this chair and how did she get it here?), so he’d just kissed her thoroughly in thanks. Since then, he couldn’t count the
number of times he’d relaxed in it and read everything from mission briefings and serious books to
the paperbacks and magazine articles Skye insisted he read. He loved that stupid chair. His heart
hurt at the thought that she would break up with him in it, irreparably ruining the positive
associations.

Skye gently pushed him down in the chair. Grant felt off kilter as he landed in it, not a feeling he
ever enjoyed. What’s going on? Perhaps he should answer her question. “No, I…”

He stopped talking abruptly when she climbed on top of him, putting her knees on either side of his
legs and leaning in close. “I thought you were hot when you were interrogating me after you
kidnapped me. Then I thought you were amazing when I saw you take out all those soldiers at the
cave in Peru. But it was when you told me that you were going to be my SO, that’s when I knew I
was falling for you,” she whispered, kissing the side of his neck lightly.

Grant’s senses were swimming. It seemed like she had no plans to break up with him, so he was
relieved. And the way she was kissing him was really turning him on. Then his mind actually
cought up with what she said. She started falling for him way back then, before he’d even started
being nice to her? That doesn’t make sense. “Why?” was the only word his befuddled mind could
get his lips to form.

“Well, I could see what it meant to you,” she breathed in his ear in a low voice, the warm air
causing his skin to tingle. Skye switched to the other side of his neck. “Grant, you try to be so
tough all the time but you’re not. You practically lit up like a Christmas tree when you saw I was
thrilled to have you as my SO.” She nibbled at his pulse point for a moment before moving her
mouth back up to his ear, her tongue tracing the outer rim. Grant caught his breath. “I knew then
that you were so much more than just a SHIELD agent, that you were someone who cared. A lot,”
she murmured in his ear. Skye leaned back a moment to look him directly in the eyes. “And when
you told me about your younger brother, how you had to learn to protect him, I was hooked.” Her
eyes shimmered with tears. “I knew then that I wanted to be with you.”

Grant simply stared at her. He had no idea that Skye could see through him so easily, that she
always had. Even back when he was trying his hardest to stay focused on his mission. How did I
miss that?

When the moment of silence had gone on a little too long, Skye smiled slightly, started running her
hands gently through his hair and asked casually, “Do you remember that day? It was when you
were trying to teach me to disarm someone.”

Grant snorted lightly. “Of course I remember! You were being difficult and then…” he trailed off
as he remembered how scared he was about Skye going into the compound on her own and how
angry he became when he saw Quinn’s men going after her. His mind raced ahead until he
remembered how, in the cargo hold with a punching bag, they’d finally, truly, connected. She’d
opened up to him about her past and he’d let his guard down long enough to assure her that
SHIELD cared. That’s when he’d admitted to himself that he cared too.

Skye watched his face intently, then nodded as she transferred her hands to the hem of his shirt so
that she could draw it up over his head. Her eyes lowered to his abs and she saw her glance
appreciatively over them. If Grant had been in a better emotional place, he’d have said with a
smirk, “Eyes up here, Skye,” but he didn’t have to. She quit her ogling and met his eyes again.

“I can’t believe you didn’t know why I was being difficult that day. I was getting ready to go on
this extremely dangerous mission and there we were, in close bodily contact with each other over
and over again. It was all I could do not to jump you right then and there.”
Grant felt like someone had hit him over the head. All his experience with women and he’d never even had an inkling that she was attracted to him in that moment! *I was such an idiot!* With a rush of insight though, he realized that he was being willfully obtuse back then because he was fighting his attraction to her. He couldn’t allow himself to act on his feelings. He had to ignore any sign that she wanted him if he was going to be able to get the job done. “Skye, I…”

“I’ve always loved your body,” Skye interrupted him as she started kissing down his chest. “When we were on the Bus, I would purposely stand by the bathroom door whenever I knew you in the shower, just so I could see you leave. That towel was a gift because you never left in anything else. If I couldn’t touch,” she said as she drew her fingers lightly around each erect nipple, “then I had to settle for just looking.” She leaned back to look at him again. “But not anymore. Now I’m free to touch whenever I want to.”

“You…certainly…are…” Grant managed to get out as Skye returned to his chest, this time lightly tracing each abdominal ridge, causing his stomach to tighten. He saw her smile at his involuntary shiver as she resumed kissing his chest. He moaned low in his throat as her tongue swirled around each nipple and then lightly sucked. “Oh. My. God,” he whispered. Skye and Grant had had sex numerous times since they became a couple and each time was great but there was something different about what was happening between them now. Somehow this was even more intense, more erotic, than anything that had occurred before. Grant didn’t know why, all he knew was that he didn’t want it to stop.

Skye stopped suckling him and started unbuckling Grant’s pants. “I’m sure you knew that I wanted to have sex with you at Providence.” She slipped the belt off the pants and dropped it on the floor. “We’d just gotten you back from the fight at the Fridge, we were mostly alone in a place with beds and you looked so incredibly sexy,” Skye continued as she unfastened his pants. Grant lifted his hips to help her push them off. She dropped them on the floor next to the belt and then looked into his eyes. “But it wasn’t until you saved me from that Hydra loser at Cybertek that I was desperate for you. I knew who you truly were then and I realized just how close I came to losing you completely.” Her hands were rubbing his bare legs now, back and forth.

Grant thought he was going to lose his mind. Skye was still completely dressed and he wanted to change that. However, this was her show and he was determined to let her take the lead. He owed her that and, besides, he’d never been sorry whenever she was in control. He quit breathing though when she suddenly stopped touching him and stood up. *Is this when she leaves me?*

Skye smirked a little, almost as if she could read his mind. She held his stare as she quickly unhooked her pants, took them off and dropped them on the floor next to Grant’s clothes. She then removed her shirt and climbed back on top of him, completely naked now, positioning her wet core directly astride his erection. Skye’s heat, so close to where he wanted her to be, almost shorted out his brain but he knew she wasn’t done with her conversation yet. If he knew Skye, all of this had a purpose.

“But as desperate as I was for you then, it’s nothing compared to how I feel about you now.” Skye reached down and gently guided him into her so that she totally enveloped him. Grant almost sighed in pleasure. “I love you, Grant. So. Much,” she said quietly as she slid along every inch of him in time with her words. “I don’t know what I’d do if anything happened to you.”

He immediately got where she was going with this but his brain was too overwhelmed by his emotions and their physicality to create a coherent response.

“Skye….” He started.

“I know that you haven’t had many people in your life who’ve truly cared about you,” she breathed
into his ear as she continued her slow push and drag. She kissed him gently, deeply, almost as if she wanted to prevent him answering. Then Skye pulled back and looked at him so directly that he could see the vulnerability in her eyes.

It was such an intense look that Grant almost wanted to look away, to avoid the powerful sense of intimacy she was creating. But he didn’t. This was his Skye and, whatever she wanted, he would give to her.

“But I do,” she continued in a whisper. “The Team does. We all love you. You’re a part of us now Grant, and without you, we’re not whole. Unacceptable risk means anything that’s going to get you hurt or not bring you home to us. To me.” The last two words were said so softly that Grant almost didn’t hear them. Then Skye stopped talking, her eyes filling with tears but her body still connecting intimately, rhythmically, with his. Her tears splashed down her face and onto his chest. She looked away, obviously holding in her sobs.

Grant almost couldn’t breathe. The gentle physicality of their actions combined with Skye’s emotional vulnerability and her clear love for him all served to overwhelm him. He suddenly understood what all of them, most especially Skye, were trying to tell him. They felt about him the way he felt about them. By dismissing their concerns, by running headfirst into needless danger, he’d hurt them in ways he hadn’t realized. It stops now.

He reached up to caress her face and brush away the tears. He smiled faintly at her and took a deep breath. “I hear you,” he told her softly, picking up one of her hands and kissing her palm gently. “I know, love. I feel that way too.” His heart stopped hurting and started to soar when Skye’s lips curved into a smile and she leaned over to kiss him again.

Later, when they were lying in his bed, Skye’s head nestled into his shoulder, Grant started to chuckle.

“What?” Skye looked at him like he was crazy.

“I just realized how much trouble I’m in,” Grant grinned at her. “Dare I say it? Now you know exactly what to do to get me to agree to anything you say.”

Skye patted his face condescendingly and gave him a lopsided smile as she turned over to get more comfortable in the bed. “Don’t be silly, babe. You always do anything I say.”

All he could do was nod. He was well and truly hooked.
The Ties That Bind

Grant’s days at the Playground got increasingly more fun in the weeks after what he christened the Debriefing from Hell. Of course, Skye called it Getting the Sense Knocked into You Meeting but he pretended he didn’t hear her whenever she said it. One of the definite upsides of the whole event was now the other guys on his team seemed to take it upon themselves to insist that he join them for beers or go out for a little fun.

Grant had never really had friends before. When he was growing up, the dynamics of the Ward family were such that he had to keep secrets and friends were never encouraged or welcomed at the house. He wasn’t at military school long enough to befriend anyone and, when he next had the opportunity at the Academy, he was again keeping secrets – really big ones – and couldn’t be honest with anyone about his past or who he was. But now, Grant was free to talk about his past, hear about the lives of others and even take good-natured ribbing about his relationship with Skye. He couldn’t believe how much he had been missing!

Shortly after the debriefing, he, Hunter, Mack and Fitz had gone out to a local pub to get a beer and commiserate over ex-girlfriends. As he’d come to expect, Hunter started everyone off with tales about his Hell Beast of an ex-wife but now that everyone knew it was Bobbi and the two of them were starting their dance again, his stories weren’t received in quite the same way.

Mack just shook his head and chuckled as Hunter started in on a story in which the two of them were screaming at each other in the hallway of the Hub when he’d visited the facility with Agent Hartley. “I don’t know, Hunter, it sure seems you and Bobbi enjoy taking pot shots at each other.”

“Pot shots? Like with guns?” Fitz asked in confusion.

“No, verbal ones,” Grant leaned over and told him in an undertone. Fitz nodded.

“In fact,” Mack continued, clearly on a mission to push Hunter’s buttons, “if I didn’t know better, I’d say that the jabs you take at each other are like some weird kind of foreplay.”

Hunter looked outraged but Grant could tell it was just for show. “That’s ridiculous! I’ll have you know that I’m something like catnip for women. I certainly don’t need a blonde she-devil yelling insults to get me hot, not when I could have my pick of fine young ladies who are impressed with what I have to offer.”

“Which is what exactly?” Grant decided to get in on the teasing. He watched in satisfaction as Hunter spluttered. “Maybe you just like a challenge. And if the sounds I was hearing in the kitchen the other day were any indication, I’d say that the two of you…challenge…each other quite…um…vigorously.”

Hunter sat back and took a long pull off his beer bottle. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, mate. Exes can be hell. Just ask Mack. He once had to pretend to like quinoa for a year.”

“Oh yeah, I remember that.” Mack smiled fondly, placing his forearms on the table and leaning forward confidentially. “The quinoa may not have been good but other things about Abby definitely were.”

Fitz leaned forward excitedly. “Abby? Are you talking about Agent Abigail Brand, the same one who’s friends with Director Fury and IronMan?”

“The very one,” Mack replied smoothly. “Why? Do you know her?”
Fitz sat back, suddenly looking glum. He took a sip of his whiskey. “No. I’ve never even met her but she’s like a hero to Jemma. She thinks she’s clever and has moxie.”

“Moxie?” Hunter asked. “What kind of a word is that?”

Grant frowned and tuned them out. He’d been enjoying the conversation but was getting concerned about Fitz. He’d seemed down of late and, now that Grant thought about it, he hadn’t seen Fitz with Jemma much recently. He recalled Jemma’s crush on him and then the charged byplay with Trip. He resolved to find out what was going on between the two scientists.

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After his “talk” with Skye (a memory which never ceased to make him smile), the two of them were getting along better than ever but she seemed to be moody at other times. Grant wasn’t sure what was wrong until after one of their missions. He’d just joined Skye and Trip in the Lounge for some downtime after they’d returned from a particularly challenging Smash and Grab mission.

“So, how’d it go?” he asked, sitting down on the couch next to Skye with his own bottle of beer after seeing that both of them were already on their second bottles. “I heard there were some complications.”

Trip snorted. “Complications?” A big grin spread across his face. “I guess you could say that.”

“Yeah,” Skye agreed, taking a big swig of her beer. “The intel on this one was all wrong. The plan was for us to get information on this big piece of alien tech from this local guy. You know the type, Grant. He sees himself as some sort of ladies man when he’s really just a loser.”

“You got that right,” Trip agreed, shaking his head. He and Skye exchanged grins.

Grant leaned back on the couch, sipping his beer and resting one arm along the edge behind Skye. He was enjoying both watching their camaraderie and listening to their story.

Skye turned to Grant to finish telling him the story. She was smiling but there was something in her eyes that made him feel on edge. “Anyway, the intel said that he liked Asian women, so our strategy was to send me in to butter him up for information over dinner and drinks and then, once he’d spilled his guts, leave him high and dry to go get the big ticket item.”

“So?” Grant asked, remaining relaxed. Skye would tell him what was wrong in her own time. “I’m not seeing the problem.”

Trip took a big drink of his beer and then put the bottle down on the table. “The problem was that the intel wasn’t specific enough. The guy likes Asian women all right but Skye here wasn’t the right type. If you can believe it, she was too young…” Trip shook his head in disbelief.

“And not Asian enough,” Skye finished, smiling tightly. “Can you imagine that? I don’t even know who my parents are but somehow this yahoo concludes that I’m only half Asian and, therefore, not up to his standards.”

Grant felt the smile slip off his face. Oh no. It’s the parent thing again. He was confused because, so far, this story didn’t seem all that funny and he felt helpless because he didn’t know what to do to make it better for her. Grant leaned forward, gently took Skye’s hand, kissed her palm and then wiggled his eyebrows at her. “You’re always up to my standards, baby,” he murmured in a lascivious voice, hoping it would make her laugh.

Sure enough, Skye’s smile eased into a grin while Trip groaned out loud. “You just had to go and
mess it up, didn’t you?”

“Always,” Grant replied easily, sitting back again. “So wait, if you couldn’t use Skye to get the information then…” his voice trailed off as he realized who they would’ve had to use instead. The entertained expressions on Trip and Skye’s faces confirmed his guess. “May?” Grant said incredulously, almost choking on his beer. “May had to go in and butter him up?” He tried imagining her using charm on some stupid mark and came up empty.

“Yep,” Skye said with a smile.

Trip leaned back against the couch, a pleased smile on his face. “It was a thing of beauty, man. I wish you’d been there to see it.”

“I do too,” Grant said fervently. He waited but neither Skye nor Trip said anything; they just sat grinning at each other. “So, don’t keep me in suspense. What happened?”

“Well, it started off fine. May looked great and the local guy was eating it up. But then…” Skye started giggling. Grant merely looked over at Trip and raised his eyebrows.

“Then the dude got the great idea to get closer and whisper sweet nothings into her ear. Unfortunately, it was the ear with the comms unit and, to keep him from getting suspicious, May had to pretend that she was hearing-impaired.” Trip started laughing too. “We were across the room at another table and the look on May’s face was something to see!”

Grant shook his head, grinning. “I can’t believe the two of you are still alive to tell this story.”

Fortunately,” Skye took over, “May hadn’t been talking much up until then, so it seemed to be going well until the guy started getting a bit handsy. I thought she was playing along and was getting him into the hallway to get the intel we needed but she just Cavalried him.” Skye shook her head. “She said she just couldn’t stand him anymore. So we left the local idiot in the bathroom, got our information another way and all of that ended up being for nothing.”

“Not for nothing,” Trip corrected, still smiling, “because I had one of the most enjoyable nights I’ve had in while.”

Skye glanced over at Grant, smiled wickedly and then said to Trip, “You need to get out more then. All of my nights are enjoyable.”

Grant laughed while Trip groaned. “I walked right into that one, didn’t I?”

Once they were alone later that evening, Grant pulled Skye down onto his lap and nuzzled her neck. “The mission didn’t really get you down that much, did it?” he murmured in her ear.

“Well, it wasn’t fun to be passed over for May…again…” Grant rolled his eyes as Skye mock glared at him, “but it’s not just that.”

He pulled back a little so he could see Skye’s face. “What is it then? You haven’t been yourself for days.”

“It’s Coulson. I’ve been watching him for months and I know he’s keeping something from me. He’s not exactly the sharing type these days and it’s not just because he’s Fury’s third in command. I think something’s wrong with him,” Skye said.

“Have you asked May about it?” Grant asked.
“Yeah. I asked her point blank if Coulson is okay and she said, ‘Of course,’” Skye replied, unconsciously imitating May’s serious expression and intonation.

Grant couldn’t help smiling a little at that. He examined Skye closely, trying not to let her see what he was doing. She hated it when she thought he was analyzing her, trying to find a way in. “It’s more than just Coulson though, isn’t it?” he asked.

Skye grimaced and then, after a while nodded, looking sad. She said nothing though.

“It’s your parents. You want to know where you come from.” Even though Grant was guessing, he knew this was it. She shifted uncomfortably on his lap but kept silent. “Are you finally ready to let me contact Raina about this?” Skye made another face. “You know that if you truly want answers, she’s the person we have to talk to.”

Skye was silent for a long moment. Then she sighed. “Yeah, I know. I’m just not ready yet but I have a feeling I will be soon.”

**Flashback**

Lazy Sunday afternoons were often spent in the gym working out. Grant had just finished doing a punching bag workout while Skye and Jemma were spotting each other with weights.

“Ah-choo!”

Skye handed off the weights to Jemma and quickly sat up, looking over at Grant. “What was that?”

Grant stopped unwrapping his hands. “I sneezed,” he said in astonishment. Both Skye and Jemma burst into giggles. Grant’s brow furrowed. “What’s so funny?”

“It’s….it’s…” Skye said, struggling to speak in-between giggles, “it’s just the way you said that, like you were so surprised.” She and Jemma literally had tears in their eyes they were laughing so hard. “It’s a sneeze; it happens all the time.”

Grant shrugged, returning to the unwrapping and putting them away in his bag. “I just don’t sneeze that much.”

Skye’s laughter petered out as she looked at him in consternation. “What do you mean you don’t sneeze that much? What about allergies?”

“Don’t have them,” Grant replied.

“What if you get something like dust or pepper in your nose?”

“Rarely happens.”

“Or,” Skye continued, “what about getting a cold or the flu?”

“I’m not very susceptible. I eat extremely well, get enough sleep, exercise and stay hydrated.” Skye narrowed her eyes at this and Grant realized that there may have been a tad bit of condescension in his tone.

She opened her mouth to say something else but, just as she did, he sneezed again. Her eyebrows went up. Jemma, who had been watching their byplay with interest, frowned and walked over to Grant, putting her hand on his forehead.

“It’s hard to tell because you’re so…sweaty,” she said, carefully not looking at the hard muscles...
displayed by his tank top (Was that a gulp? I thought we were past this!), “but I think you may have a fever.”

Grant refocused his attention on what she was saying. “What? No. I never get fevers.”

“I think you may have to revisit the meaning of the word never, Grant,” Skye said in a teasing voice as she went over to him and looked at him critically. Her grin turned into a frown similar to Jemma’s as she put her hand on his neck. “You do look more flushed than usual and you’re burning up.”

“I need for you to come to my lab, Ward,” Jemma said briskly in her much discussed Doctoring Voice.

Grant sighed heavily. They’re making something out of nothing. But there was no getting out of it, he could tell that just by glancing at the expressions on both women’s faces. “Fine. I’ll just take a quick shower, change clothes and meet you in the lab in 15 minutes,” he said to Jemma. Grant picked up his bag and started to leave. He was startled to feel a hand on his arm.

“No,” Jemma said firmly. “You will come to my lab now.” She gave Skye a significant look, then left the room, saying over her shoulder, “I’ll expect you there momentarily.”

Grant’s mouth fell open a bit as he sneaked a look at Skye who was grinning. Jemma had never spoken so firmly to him before; she was usually so accommodating and gentle. “Surely I can…” he started.


“Look, this is ridiculous. It’s just dusty in here.” He kept his expression blank, fervently hoping she wouldn’t throw his own words about rarely getting dust in his nose back at him. But Skye wasn’t to be sidetracked.

“Grant Douglas Ward, you are going to Jemma’s lab right this minute!”

“Oh, no!” Grant said, giving Skye a mock horrified look, “You used the dreaded full name. Whatever will I…” he broke off as he sneezed again and felt a wave of heat roll over him. He glanced up to see Skye’s knowing look. He sighed again. “Ok, I’m going.”

Jemma’s examination was brief and Grant was beginning to feel some hope that she would conclude that it was nothing. Illness is for wimps, not Specialists. But then she looked up from her computer pad, her expression grim. “It’s official. You have the flu.” Noting his expression, she finished hurriedly, “It’s nothing to worry about, of course, but you will have to drink lots of fluids and get plenty of rest.”

“Not a problem,” Skye said soothingly from beside Grant. She grabbed his hand, preparing to pull him along to his room but he resisted.

“It most certainly is a problem. I have several missions coming up that I can’t miss. Jemma, you’re just going to have to give me something so I can keep going. I don’t have time to be sick,” Grant said firmly.

“Oh yes you do,” Coulson said as he rounded the corner into the lab. Why is he here? “Dr. Simmons called me because, for some reason, she thought we might have difficulty convincing you to take care of yourself. So, until such time as she releases you from her care, you’re grounded.” Grant opened his mouth to say something but Coulson raised his hand. “And I don’t even want to hear the slightest hint of a rumor that you were anything but the most cooperative of
patients.” He turned on his heel and started to leave. When he was by the door, he said over his shoulder, “Get well soon!”

Skye looked triumphantly at Grant. “So babe, I guess the only question is: your bed or mine?”

Grant tried really hard to be a good patient, he did. He took every medication Jemma gave him, ate every drop of the soups Trip made him, obligingly drank water at least once an hour (although he balked at drinking orange juice – too much sugar! – he compromised by eating oranges) and only left his bed to go to the bathroom and shower. He didn’t even complain. That’s why he was surprised when Jemma sat down unceremoniously in his favorite chair after she’d finished playing a game of Scrabble with him.

“You’re clearly miserable, Ward. I don’t understand. I know you don’t feel well but it’s more than that. What’s going on?” she asked him.

“Specialists don’t get sick,” he began but she interrupted him.

“Of course they do. Bobbi had a bad cold just last week and May contracted strep throat two months ago. I think Trip…”

“Ok, fine,” Grant interrupted, “I don’t get sick. In fact, I do everything I can to keep from getting sick. When I get sick and can’t complete missions, people die.”

Jemma was silent for a moment after his outburst. “Well, you have quite the ego,” she finally said. “I hate to break it to you, Ward, but people die whether you get sick or not.”

He snorted. “That’s not what I meant.”

“I know what you meant. This is about Garrett, isn’t it?” Grant didn’t respond. “He didn’t want you to get sick because, if you did, you might not have been able to help him stay alive.” Still no response. “Well, that’s quite a selfish thing to want but of course selfishness is no surprise when it comes to John Garrett!”

“I know,” Grant agreed quietly.

“Well, here’s something else you should know. Everyone gets sick, Ward! It’s part of the human condition. And someone like you who is in constant contact with biological weapons and alien technology is at high risk for illness just is someone who runs himself practically into the ground the way you do. The real surprise is that you don’t get sick more often!”

Grant nodded thoughtfully.

Jemma stood up, went over to the bed and patted his arm. “Getting sick doesn’t mean you’re weak. It’s just your body’s way of telling you that something’s wrong and you need to address it. You should listen.” She headed for the door.

“Jemma!” Grant called after her.

She turned as she got to the hallway. “Yes?”

“Thanks.” She nodded and left just as Skye came into the room, carrying a tray filled with food.

“What’s going on?” Skye asked as she set down the tray and peered at him. “You look uncomfortable.”
“I should. I just got told off by Jemma Simmons.”

Skye grinned ruefully. “Welcome to the club.”

**Present Day**

Grant was reading in his chair (*How weird is it that I’m incredibly attached...to a chair!?*) when Skye suddenly burst into the room. Seeing how upset she was, he quickly moved towards her.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, slowly stroking her hair, hoping to soothe her. Grant couldn’t imagine what had upset her so much. As far as he knew, she’d just been in a briefing about the murders of eight members of the Navy anti-Hydra team. He hadn’t been invited to the briefing because it wasn’t part of his mission of rounding up former SHIELD agents turned Hydra or his other mission. Skye hadn’t known any of the men, so that couldn’t be it.

“I just had a really awful conversation with Coulson,” she told Grant with tears in her eyes. Of course, Coulson. He pulled over to his chair and gently tugged her down on top of him. Skye leaned her head on his shoulder.

He placed his head on top of hers and lightly rubbed his hands along her arms. “Tell me what happened.”

“You remember those designs, the ones Garrett was carving before he died?” Skye asked. Grant nodded, trying unsuccessfully not to think about John’s ravings and insane grin. “I told Coulson that none of my Rising Tide contacts had ever seen anything like it and asked him to give me his source for them so that I could follow up.”

Grant nodded again, puzzled. This sounded like routine stuff. “And?”

“He all but threatened me when I continued to ask,” Skye said indignantly. She suddenly shrunk down, like a deflated balloon. “I liked it better before, when he wasn’t so closed-off. I don’t know why he won’t confide in me,” she said sadly. She showed Grant her tablet with the picture of the markings. “He knows that we first saw this in Belarus and that the Bus was filled with these types of carvings when we got it back.”

“Yeah, Garrett was carving those all the time,” he said. This was not a good memory.

“Did he ever say what they were?” Skye asked, looking unnerved. Grant couldn’t blame her.

“No but he wasn’t making a lot of sense after he was injected with the GH formula.” He paused for a moment and then kissed her softly. “I can’t tell you how grateful I am that these carvings aren’t yours. Once Garrett started writing, he couldn’t stop. The writing was anywhere he could carve it. On the walls, on the floor.”

“Oh his desk,” Skye murmured, looking horror-struck.

“The Garrett I knew was long gone once the writing started,” Grant admitted. He felt sad. Even though he knew then and knew more now about how much Garrett abused him, he still keenly felt the loss of the man he thought he knew. He thought again of how demented John became after he took the formula. *And whatever took his place, I don’t think it was meant to survive.* But he couldn’t say that to Skye, not when she was so freaked out about Coulson.

Skye left Grant’s lap, went over to the desk and pulled out the painting Coulson and May had retrieved from the church. She sat down on the bed, pouring over the back of it where all the designs had been carved.
“I just wish I knew what this scribbling means,” she said in a low tone. She looked over at Grant. “Do you think I was wrong to press Coulson about it?”

He felt torn. On the one hand, he wanted Skye far from anything that drove John crazy and seemed to be dogging Coulson as well. However, he also knew Skye and, once she got hold of something, she wasn’t letting go, especially if it involved someone she cared about.

“Grant?” Skye said.

He realized that he hadn’t answered her and sighed heavily. “I think you should dig deeper. This thing isn’t going away.” Grant watched Skye nod thoughtfully and felt awful. This isn’t going anywhere good.

The next few days, Grant watched as Skye worked like a woman possessed. He made certain that he wasn’t sent on any missions (Sometimes this sick thing comes in handy!) so that he would be around if she needed him to brainstorm ideas or, most particularly, for after she confronted Coulson. He had a bad feeling that it wasn’t going to go well. Sure enough, once she told him that she was off to talk with Coulson, Grant immediately went to her room to await her return. He was so on edge that he couldn’t keep still and paced the length of the small room. Fortunately, he didn’t have to wait long.

“Coulson thinks I may be an alien!” Skye burst out the minute she entered her room and saw Grant.

“What?”

“I finally confronted him about the writing being his and he not only admitted it but said that he thought that both he and Garrett started carving because of a negative reaction to the GH formula.”

Grant’s mind raced. “But you were given some of the GH formula and you haven’t been carving.” An evil suspicion lodged itself in his brain. “Have you?”

“No!” Skye replied somewhat petulantly. “I would’ve told you if I had.” Grant sighed in relief even though Skye glared at him. “I made that exact same point to Coulson. He said that since I haven’t had the same reaction, the going theory is that it’s because I already have alien blood.”

He snorted. “That’s ridiculous, Skye. Coulson must be losing it.”

“Maybe not,” Skye said speculatively. She hesitated and then walked over to grab his arm. “Grant, if you know how to reach my father, I think it’s time that I do. He may have answers that I need to know.”

Grant just stared at her. Apparently Skye wasn’t dismissing the alien theory just yet and his tactical brain agreed. She was an 0-8-4 and they hadn’t yet figured out what that meant. But an alien! Skye…” he started gently but trailed off as he saw that she wasn’t listening. That was fair. He remembered how he reacted when he first heard things he didn’t want to hear, like the idea that Garrett brainwashed him. Sometimes you had to take time to process difficult information and he’d let her do whatever she needed to do, just like Skye always had for him.

Skye started pacing the room like Grant had earlier. “You said before that Raina was your source for the information about my father.” She stopped and looked over at him. “How do you know that she wasn’t playing you, that she didn’t find your weakness and then use it against you?”

Grant smiled faintly. “Skye, please. Best since Romanoff, remember?”

She shook her head and grinned back at him, just like he’d intended. “One day, you’re going to
He put his hands on Skye’s shoulders and looked in her eyes. “I’ll make the call. Raina will give us the answers you need.”

“How can you be sure?” Skye asked with a vulnerable look in her eyes.

“Because she’s been dying to spill the beans for ages. She won’t pass up this opportunity,” Grant said knowingly. He was pretty certain that he had Raina’s number. If not, there were other methods of persuasion he could try.

Skye sighed and sat down on her bed. “Oh, I almost forgot to tell you. Coulson said that since I hadn’t exhibited any symptoms like he and Garrett did, they had to monitor me – ‘passively observe’ is what he called it,” she snorted. “He denied putting cameras in my bunk but it sounds like they’ve been watching me closely.”

“Oh great,” Grant groaned. “I guess I should expect another ‘treat her right’ talk from Coulson. That first one was such fun.”

Skye just smiled serenely.

The next day, after gritting his teeth for a minute (Anything for Skye!), Ward called Raina with Skye sitting right next to him, listening to everything.

Raina answered immediately, almost like she was waiting for his call. “Agent Grant Ward, I was just thinking about you,” she said in a sing-song voice. “After our last conversation, I wondered how you would be getting along.”

“I imagine that you’re seeking information about Skye’s father. I want something in return.”

“Ah. That must mean that Skye forgave you your transgressions and now the two of you are... together,” Raina said in a tone that made Grant want to throttle her. He hated that he had to speak to her at all but, as usual, she knew what was going on. “Your timing is fortuitous.”

“Really. Why is that?”

“I can’t tell you over the phone. Why don’t we meet at a restaurant? We can eat good food and drink wine, almost like a date. It’ll be good to see you again and catch up.”

Grant rolled his eyes while Skye blanched. Raina, per usual, knew just what buttons to push. “Fine,” he sighed. “Just tell me when and where.” After confirming the details, Grant hung up and looked over at Skye. “This is going to work,” he told her.

Skye raised her eyebrows at him. “It had better. I don’t want to send my boyfriend into the tiger’s den for nothing.”

Grant shook his head as he got up. “I’ve been in worse places,” he scoffed as he went to find Trip. He was going to need backup.

The restaurant Raina chose was an Italian one with an extremely romantic atmosphere. Upon getting settled into a table near where Grant waited for Raina, Trip murmured into his comms,
“Are you sure Raina has the information we need?”

“Of course she does. Why do you ask?” Skye replied from the kitchen. She’d promised to stay hidden which was the only reason Grant allowed her to come.

Trip shook his head. “That woman is wily. I wouldn’t put it past her to try and hit on your man just to push your buttons. And if that’s what she wants to do, this is definitely the place.”

“Ha ha,” Grant replied sarcastically. He wouldn’t put it past Raina but he certainly hoped Trip was wrong. His misgivings increased when he saw Raina come into the room, clad in a lovely, tight and low-cut blue-flowered dress. He would never admit this to anyone but he found Raina to be quite sexy. If only she weren’t such a barracuda, he might consider setting her up with one of his friends, maybe Mack.

Raina slinked over to his table. “Agent Ward,” she purred as he stood up, pulled out her chair for her and scooted it in. “You’re looking quite…dashing.”

Grant tried not to roll his eyes at her flirting. He needed information, so he was going to do his best not to antagonize her. “Raina,” he responded as he poured wine for the two of them. “That’s quite a dress. Just say the word and I can line up a lot of guys who would really appreciate it.”

“I appreciate it now,” Trip said in a low voice.

Grant could hear Skye snort and shoved down his impulse to strangle both of them. This wasn’t amateur hour. He knew people tended to underestimate Raina but, despite her demure demeanor, she was rather dangerous.

“Oh, Agent Ward, you flatter me,” she said softly, peeking up at him from underneath her lashes. “I actually wore this dress for you. You’ve always been a man who can appreciate the…finer things…life has to offer.”

Grant almost groaned, hoping against hope that Skye wasn’t being taken in by Raina. He could tell exactly what she was up to. Whether or not she came here to deliver the information they were seeking, Raina clearly couldn’t keep herself from trying to sow discord between them. She knew damn well that Skye tended to be insecure about being an orphan of limited means, so she was playing that angle for all she was worth. For whatever reason, it was her idea of fun. But he didn’t want to give anything away, so he merely sat back and smiled charmingly at her. “You said that you have the information we need about the location of Skye’s father. What is it that you want in return?”

“Must we rush the meeting along? I was hoping we’d get a chance to talk, especially since we were so tense the last time we saw each other.” She leaned forward, exposing her cleavage should he take the bait and look. Grant could hear Trip clear his throat in his ear and was grateful. It kept him focused. “I must say,” Raina continued, “I didn’t see you being a triple agent. Clearly, I underestimated you. I’ll be sure not to make the same mistake this time around.”

“That’s good to know,” he said, noting her disappointment when he kept his eyes on her face. “But some things are still the same, my impatience for example.” He smiled winningly at her.

Raina propped her fist under her chin and looked at him coquettishly. “You really know how to make a girl feel special,” she complained sweetly.

“I’m sure Skye would agree,” he said easily. He heard Skye’s laugh in his ear. “Now, what is it you want?”
“You must believe me, Agent Ward, we want the same thing.”

“Unless it’s an end to this conversation, I’m pretty sure we don’t.” Grant replied. He was tired of her games and wanted to move things along. He wasn’t the only impatient one in the group and he didn’t want Skye to burst out of the kitchen. “For the last time, what is it that you want?”

Raina sat back, her smile gone. “From you? Nothing. But I will need to take Skye with me.”

Grant shook his head. “Do you really think that I’d ever let that happen?”

Raina shrugged delicately. “This is your meeting. You said that you wanted information about her father. All I’m suggesting is that I take her with me.”

“Where are you planning to take her?”

Raina picked up her wine and answered casually, “Somewhere she’s always wanted to go. To meet her dad.” She smiled sweetly and sipped her wine.

“So you’re what…working for Skye’s father now?”

“I’m just trying to make the best out of a difficult situation,” she replied firmly, looking straight into his eyes.

Grant’s head was spinning. Given how abruptly Raina dropped her flirty demeanor, she clearly was serious about this.

“Typical Raina.”

Grant felt a moment of unease. He didn’t know what Skye was thinking, what she’d be willing to do to get the answers she’d spent her whole life seeking. This was rapidly getting out of hand.

“No, by allowing Skye to find out who she really is. That’s what Skye’s been searching for her whole life. Ask her yourself, Agent Ward. She’s here, isn’t she…listening? Skye needs to know that her father loves her very much, that she was taken from him against his will, that he’s spent her entire life searching for her.”

Grant felt a moment of unease. He didn’t know what Skye was thinking, what she’d be willing to do to get the answers she’d spent her whole life seeking. This was rapidly getting out of hand. Typical Raina.

“I always thought that you were a good man, Agent Ward,” Raina continued. “No good man would intentionally keep a daughter from her father. And I know that you love Skye. Give Skye what she’s always wanted.”

Grant’s tactical brain quickly ran over their conversation. Raina was desperate which could only mean one thing: she was afraid for her life. “Who’s making you do this?” he asked in his best Agent Toolbag voice.

“All the pieces suddenly came together. “They want the Obelisk but you don’t have it. Skye’s father does.”

“He won’t stop until he gets her.”

“You’re scared of him and you don’t scare easily.” Grant wasn’t going to lie to himself. He’d enjoyed her fear once when he liberated her from a SHIELD cell and it was nice to see it again. Raina always was too confident for her own good.
“He’s a very dangerous man. You wouldn’t believe the stories,” Raina said.

On the surface, Grant remained unmoved. However, underneath, he was squirming. *What will this mean to Skye if her father is a monster?*

“Take me in,” Raina pleaded desperately, leaning forward, entreating Grant with her eyes. “Please!”

“Sorry,” he replied dismissively. “Not my call.”

“Once I walk out that door,” she said, enunciating clearly, “Whitehall will kill me.”

“Not my problem,” Grant said coldly. Raina started to speak again but he held up a finger to halt her speech. “However, it is possible” he dragged the word out slowly, “that we could make a deal.”

“What is it? I’ll do anything!”

“You tell me how to find Skye’s father and I’ll let my man Trip over there,” he pointed at Trip occupying a nearby table, “take you back to Agent Coulson. I know how much you like him,” Grant added with a nasty smile. “Maybe he can help you.”

“Fine! Anything, as long as I get some help.” Grant raised his eyebrows questioningly. “The address where he’s been staying is not far from here. It’s 405 Commerce Street, in the Warehouse District.”

“And here I was thinking that you chose this place for the ambiance. Imagine my disappointment,” Grant said mockingly.

Raina narrowed her eyes at him but said nothing.

He stood up and nodded at Trip, who immediately abandoned his table to come over to theirs. Raina stood up as well. “This had better not be a trap, Raina,” he said in a low voice.

“If it is, I guess you’ll know where to find me,” she said over her shoulder as Trip led her away.

Grant stood still for a moment, thinking, but then shook himself. Skye! He walked as quickly as he could toward the kitchen without calling attention to himself, already knowing that he’d be too late. Sure enough, Skye was nowhere to found. *Damn it, Skye!* Grant raced out of the back door of the kitchen and broke into a dead run toward the Warehouse District.

He slowed down and caught his breath as he searched for 405 amid all the other warehouses. The place had a run-down, seedy feel to it and he cursed Skye under his breath for not waiting for him. But, knowing how much she wanted to find his parents, he understood how important this was to her. He found 405 and slowly, quietly, eased through the door. The building was dark.

He found Skye standing in a dark room, her shaking flashlight focused on a picture of a good-looking young man holding a baby. The man in the picture looked happy, just the way a father should. He gently touched Skye’s arm. As her SO, Agent Ward wanted to scare her, teach her a lesson about going off on her own without backup and dropping any pretense at having situational awareness. However, as her boyfriend and lover, Grant knew that she was an emotional wreck and decided to go easy on her. The lecture could wait.

Skye whirled around to look at him, her face a mass of conflicting emotions.
“So Raina was telling the truth. He was here,” Grant said.

“Yeah,” Skye said quietly, her eyes filling with tears. “I just wanted a glimpse.”

Grant pulled her in for a hug. “I know you did, baby,” he said gently as Skye sobbed into his shoulder. He let her cry a bit, stroking her hair. He remembered like it was yesterday how Skye had held and rocked him when he had his breakdown over Garrett. *I’ll be damned if I won’t do the same for her!* Once her sobs subsided and she pulled back to face him, he said with a small smile, “You’re having one hell of a day, huh?”

She nodded wordlessly, once again looking down at the picture. For just a moment, Grant felt a flash of jealousy that family members would care so much about each other, even without truly knowing the other person. But he quickly shook off that thought and concentrated on Skye, gathering her close again. “It’s okay, babe. We’re going to find him.”

After she stopped crying, the two of them searched the rest of the warehouse. In one room, they found what looked like a makeshift emergency room. There was a surgical bed, bloody medical instruments and various pharmaceuticals strewn about.

“Looks like someone left in a hurry,” Grant commented.

Skye seemed to have other thoughts. She took in the room in one sweep and then asked in an excited voice, “Grant, do you think it’s possible that my father’s a doctor?”

*Whatever he is, I hope he won’t be a disappointment.* “I don’t know but we can ask him once we find him.”
The Playground was abuzz with talk about the attack on the United Nations. Although he was certain that their requests irritated Coulson, Grant was a bit amused at all the people confirming that it was not, in fact, a SHIELD operation. He and Trip even laughed about it together as they sat in the Lounge. Everyone else seemed to be running about with purpose but neither of the two specialists had been given an assignment yet. They’d both been in the business long enough to know that you take your down time when you can get it.

“It’s not that I don’t think SHIELD isn’t capable of it,” Grant said ruefully, shaking his head.

“I know. It’s more that it’s too public,” Trip agreed.

“Too unnecessary.”

“And it happened just as that general was going on and on about how SHIELD has been playing them,” Trip chuckled a little, also shaking his head. “That seems like a dead give-away.”

Grant quirked an eyebrow at him.

“Poor choice of words?” Trip grinned. “My bad.”

Skye dashed in, looking around frantically until she spotted them. “Coulson wants you two in his office. May, Bobbi and Hunter are already there. Some senator is going to make an announcement in a few minutes and AC needs all hands on deck.”

Grant avoided Skye’s eye as they all jogged to Coulson’s office. Somehow he knew where this was going and Skye was not going to be happy. None of them were, especially him. He’d been dreading this for months.

Flashback

Grant poked his head into Coulson’s office. “You wanted to see me, sir?”

Coulson nodded and gestured for him to enter, staring at something on his desk but as Grant came in, he looked up. “Close the door behind you,” Coulson said, giving him an intense stare.

Grant felt misgivings wash over him. When he’d gotten the summons to meet with Coulson, he’d been somewhat amused. He’d recently had to endure the ill-disguised fatherly talk about Skye and how he’d better not hurt her. Grant wasn’t worried at all about that. He knew he’d never willingly do anything to damage his relationship with Skye, so he was more concerned about the rules behind letting romantically involved agents work on the same team. While he and Skye weren’t technically on the same team anymore, they did work together and that used to be a big SHIELD no-no. He hadn’t forgotten Coulson’s no-nonsense dictate when he discovered Grant was having sex with May (What you’re doing is against protocol, so if you endanger an operation or if anyone gets hurt, I’ll reassign you to Barrow, Alaska and you’ll spend the rest of your years pulling the night shift guarding Blonsky’s cryo-cell. Am I clear?). So, he did feel some trepidation when Coulson started talking about his relationship with Skye. Thankfully, he just contented himself with some mild – laughable, in Grant’s estimation – threats about what he’d do if Skye got hurt and told him to be careful not to let their relationship affect the team’s dynamics and operations.

Grant originally thought that Coulson was just checking on things but now, given his serious expression, figured something more was up. In Grant’s world, surprises were never good, so he felt
himself on edge, even more so when Coulson came around his desk, sat on the edge of it and fixed Grant with a direct stare.

“I want you to know how valuable your contributions have been as late,” Coulson started after what seemed like an interminable amount of time spent staring at him. “Thanks to you and your... umm... rescues, SHIELD’s saved a ton of precious jet fuel because we haven’t let Hydra grab our talent. I’m damn grateful that we’re not losing our best and brightest to them.”

Grant nodded. “I’m pleased about that as well, sir.” Where is this going? He waited for Coulson to speak but the man was silent, looking down at the floor almost like he didn’t want to continue. Usually Grant was fine with silence but, with as on edge as he was, he finally couldn’t stand it any longer. “Is everything all right? Has something happened that I’m not aware of?”

Coulson looked up, startled. “Oh no, everything’s fine. Well, sort of. This is more of a pre-emptive strategy.” He sighed. “I’m just having a hard time with it because I’m about to ask a lot of you, more than is fair to be honest.”

Grant felt a moment of fear but then called upon his training and locked it down. Fear is the enemy. He’d deal with whatever came and wondering about it wouldn’t help. In his past life with John, Grant had been eager to prove himself, even going so far as to express excitement about upcoming challenges regardless of his internal reservations. But now things were different; he was different. He’d probably still do whatever was asked of him but Grant knew that he had nothing to prove. If the task proved too costly, he always had the choice to say no. Coulson knew that as well.

Coulson abruptly got off the desk and gestured over at the chairs, mutely asking Grant to sit. Well, this can’t be good. After both men were settled, Grant decided to grab the bull by the horns. “Sir, whatever this assignment is, just tell me. I can handle it.”

Coulson sighed again. “I know you can; it’s just that you shouldn’t have to.” He paused a moment, then seemed to steel himself to continue. “After the SHIELD fell, I managed to find out a lot more about your history, about your life before Garrett. Not everything was as it appeared to be, was it?”

Grant was confused. “You mean with my family?”

Coulson nodded, “Yes, with the Wards, the closest family we have to political royalty outside of the Kennedys. We’re all aware of who your family is, Grant. Not only are they respected but they’re pretty much loved.”

“Well,” Grant replied with a bitter smile, “every family has its secrets.”

Exactly. And that’s where you come in,” Coulson told him. “Your brother has been looking for you, for years in fact. I don’t know how he found out that you were working for SHIELD but once he became a senator, he tried to get access to SHIELD personnel files. We gave him some of the administrative files but never released any specialist information. Those files are so classified that even members of Congress can’t know about them. All he knows about you is that you’re part of our organization.” Coulson ignored Grant’s small – almost infinitesimal – sigh of relief. “It’s possible that he got wind of rumors about you being Hydra but we don’t believe he knows you were a triple agent.”

Grant tried to quell the sense of anger and fear that was fighting its way up his throat. There was the sound of rushing in his ears, a sensation he’d last had when he’d lit the match to set fire to his house. He was glad that Coulson insisted upon sitting down. He’d thought that he was liberated from Christian years ago but now it appeared as though he’d never be free. Grant looked away from Coulson, towards one of the windows, desperate to keep the other man from knowing just
how horrified he was by this conversation. He should’ve known better.

Coulson leaned forward and touched Grant lightly on the shoulder. It took every ounce of willpower Grant had not to flinch away from him but he still jerked a little, enough so that Coulson noticed.

“I can’t even begin to guess how difficult this is for you but I know enough to realize that asking you to deal with your brother is awful.” He smiled ruefully. “In fact, my ears are still ringing from the conversation I had with your psychologist about this. She’s completely against you having any dealings with Christian at all, not under any circumstances.” Coulson sat back in his chair, clearly letting Grant have some time to process what he’d said.

Grant sat still, letting the rushing sound die down before speaking. He’d recently started talking about his family in his counseling sessions. This was probably why his doctor had major reservations about any contact with the Wards in general and Christian in particular. But they had been working through some things, so maybe it was time to face this. He looked back at Coulson, startled to see the sad expression on his face. He took a deep breath. *I can do this!*

“Why do you even care about Christian?” he asked.

Coulson’s lips quirked in a semblance of a smile, reminding Grant that he wasn’t being forced to do anything. SHIELD wasn’t Hydra and Coulson wasn’t Garrett. He’d have a choice. Somehow, the knowledge that he had options made him feel lighter and made breathing easier.

“We have reason to believe that he’s a power player, particularly on the Senate Intelligence Committee which, until recently, was where we got a large portion of our funding. Christian came to our attention several years ago when he first got a seat on that committee. We monitor all the senators of course but he was different.”

“How so?” Grant asked.

“Well, for one thing, he seemed inordinately interested in whether or not you were working for us. Sadly, we didn’t understand the true reasons for his obsession until lately,” Coulson made an apologetic face, “so it’s possible that a little information about you got passed along to him.” At Grant’s look of panic, Coulson held up a restraining hand. “Don’t worry. We’re pretty certain that it was just rumors but, ever since the Fall, he’s been on the warpath against SHIELD, talking particularly about the kind of people we have working for us.”

“And you think his focus has to do with me.” *Typical Christian.*

“We’re not positive but, unless you can think of another reason, it makes sense.”

Grant let out his breath deliberately. “No, I agree. I’m a loose end, one of the few who knows the truth about our family.”

Coulson nodded. “If we have our psychology right, the other part he hates is that you’re a wild card. You’ve not only caused him to be vulnerable in the past but you could do it again in the future, both politically and personally. He can’t control you.”

Now it was Grant’s turn to nod thoughtfully. He smiled slowly. “No, he can’t. So, what is it you want me to do?”

“What we want from you is two-fold. First, we want all the information we can get on Christian Ward and on your parents. You’re in the best position to help us do that. Second, we want options on how best to deal with them. Christian’s been a thorn in SHIELD’s side ever since the Fall and it
looks like he’s planning on lowering the boom on us soon. We can’t let him do that, so we need to know how to stop him.” Coulson looked at Grant speculatively. “Let me be clear. I am asking you to do this. If you don’t want to or don’t believe that you can, then we’ll find another way. Frankly, it’s probably in your best interest that you don’t do this but the decision’s yours.”

Grant looked out the window again, mulling over the situation, his tactician’s brain whirring. He nodded to himself and then looked back at Coulson who clearly was on tenterhooks waiting for his response. His psychologist must’ve really ripped into him for Coulson to be this tentative. Grant smiled to himself. It was nice to know that people had his back. “No, I think it’s time that I deal with Christian once and for all. He gets joy from one thing: hurting people. Maybe putting an end to that can be part of my therapy.” He hesitated, wondering if he should bring this up but then realized that Coulson had probably already thought of this. “But you know that Skye is going to be furious.”

Coulson leaned forward, nodding. “That’s the other part that’s unfair. This mission has to be kept secret until such time as we need to bring in the team, so you can’t tell Skye. I know that’s going to make it worse when she does find out but it can’t be helped.”

If Grant was an impulsive person, he would’ve put a stop to his participation right there and then. The thought of Skye going ballistic wasn’t an appealing one but it was nothing compared to what she might do once she knew he’d been working on such a personally damaging mission and hadn’t told her. But this is something I need to do for me. Skye will understand.

He smiled a little. “I won’t tell her on one condition.

Coulson relaxed into his seat. “Name it.”

“When she does find out, you have to back me up.”

Coulson sat back up and made a face. “Really? You don’t think that’s something you’ll need to work through yourselves?”

Grant laughed. “That’s the condition.”

Present Day

Grant, Trip and Skye entered Coulson’s office just in time to hear the newscaster say, “We had the good fortune to catch up with Senator Christian Ward of Massachusetts who agreed to talk about what he’ll be discussing at the emergency meeting of the United Nations. Welcome, Senator. What are you planning on telling the U.N. tomorrow?”

The camera turned to a good-looking, authoritative man with dark hair, someone who looked a little like Grant. He was placed against a backdrop of the Washington, DC skyline to give his statements that much more weight. Underneath his face was his name, Sen. Christian Ward (R). Grant snorted. It never failed to amuse him that Christian would buck family tradition and be a Republican. Given his propensity for hurting people though, it made sense. Grant glanced over at Skye who was looking back at him with a shocked and worried expression. He shook his head at her and she returned her attention to the monitor.

“S.H.I.E.L.D is a terrorist organization and they should be treated as such!” Christian Ward said forcefully. “What I plan to do is lay out a proposal for a multi-national police force that will target those suspected of ties with S.H.I.E.L.D using any and all means necessary.”

The camera switched over to an older blonde man against a backdrop of what looked like European
homes. The words Julian Beckers, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Belgium were underneath the picture on the screen. “Anyone suspected of ties?” Beckers asked incredulously. “And who determines that? Belgium will never accept this proposal. It destroys the very idea of citizens’ rights!”

“Mr. Beckers,” Christian countered in a more conciliatory tone, “if you want to welcome SHIELD at your borders with open arms, be my guest, but,” his voice got more forceful again, “this infestation needs to be exterminated.” Grant tried not to scoff. Christian always was nothing if not dramatic.

Christian continued on in the same vein but Coulson turned away from the monitor, indicating that he was done with the news report and everyone else could be too.

“Wait,” Bobbi said to Grant with wide eyes, “is Senator Christian Ward your brother?”

“I’m afraid so,” Grant replied grimly.

“Guess being a douche-bag runs in the family,” Hunter said with a sly grin at Grant.

“Are you surprised?” Grant countered with a smile of his own.

“Your brother never cared about SHIELD before,” Trip said to him in a confused voice.

“Not openly,” Coulson corrected.

“General Talbot told me he was working with a senator who has deep pockets,” Hunter told the group. “Do we think it’s this bloke?”

“I do,” Coulson told them. He shut off Christian’s face and the screen changed into a map with what looked like close to 100 dots scattered across the globe. “Months rebuilding and this is SHIELD.” He gestured to the map in a frustrated manner. “Thanks to our Ward brother’s efforts, we have a lot more operatives out there than we would have but there’s still not enough. If Senator Ward’s proposal passes…”

“It’ll be a witch hunt,” Skye finished. Grant tried not to flinch at the sound of her voice. Her silence before this didn’t bode well for the future.

“Every military organization on the planet will have a license to kick our operatives’ doors down and shoot them on the spot. I can’t let that happen.” He glanced over at Skye and Grant tensed. Here it comes. “That’s why I’ve been working with Grant on a plan to deal with his family. We’re going to attempt negotiating with Senator Ward first but, if that doesn’t work, we’ll try other means.”

There was a tense silence. If Grant had to describe the feeling in the room, it would’ve been dismay. Then Skye swung around to look accusingly at Grant. “How. Long?” she asked in a low voice.

“Everyone else is dismissed,” Coulson said smoothly. Only someone who knew him well could’ve detected the undercurrent of stress in his tone.

The best Grant could say is that at least Skye waited until everyone else – some of them giving Grant sympathetic looks – exited the room. She gave the others a fleeting glance, then returned her attention to him. “How long have you been working on this plan?” Her tone sounded horrible, one he’d heard only when she realized he was Hydra.
He tried not to show how much it affected him by shrugging. “A few months,” he replied.

“Months? Months?! You’ve been working on how to deal with your bastard of a brother without telling me for months?” Skye’s voice got louder as she continued talking.

“Skye,” Coulson said in a calm tone, “we knew you’d be upset but this mission needed to be kept quiet until Senator Ward made his move. Grant was under orders not to tell you until now.”

Skye turned so fast to face Coulson that, if Grant hadn’t been watching her, he wouldn’t have believed it. “How could you ask him to do something like this? You know his history, you remember how much the Berzerker staff affected him because of what his brother did to him! What were you thinking?” she practically shrieked.

“I was thinking that Grant is not only the best person for this job but it might also give him back some control. Yes,” Coulson said, holding up a forestalling hand when Skye opened her mouth furiously, “I admit that I was thinking of SHIELD but I was also thinking about Grant.”

“Bullshit!” Skye yelled. Grant blinked, startled. He’d known that she was going to be angry but even he hadn’t predicted just how angry. He’d never heard her talk to Coulson in that tone or at that volume. “Whatever happened to it being all of our jobs to look out for him? Whatever happened to putting Grant’s well-being above the needs of a mission? Was all of that just words?”

“Hey,” Grant started but stopped when she whirled around to face him again. He’d never seen her so out of control.

“And YOU! How dare you not tell me about something this important to you! We’re supposed to be partners. Apparently that only matters to me!” Skye said, starting to cry.

“Hey,” Grant said in a firmer tone, stepping forward to put his hand on her arm, knowing that she’d just yank it away. She did but he couldn’t let this continue. “Skye, I get why you’re upset. I would be too if I were in your position. But you need to listen to me.”

“Why?” Skye was sobbing now, looking so miserable that Grant longed to put his arms around her to comfort her. But he didn’t because he knew it wouldn’t be well-received, not yet. He could see Coulson’s shocked expression out of the corner of his eye. I tried to warn him.

Grant stepped a little closer to Skye and caught her eye. “Because I love you,” he answered in a low voice, “and I can’t do this alone.”

Skye’s sobbing lessened a little with that. “Ok then. Talk.”

“We are partners and you know that matters more to me than I can say. But we both knew going into this that there are going to be some things, some missions, that we can’t talk about with each other. This is one of those missions.” Grant edged a little closer. “And yes, this has been incredibly difficult and there were so many times I wanted to talk with you about it but now I’m actually glad that I couldn’t.”

Skye looked up in surprise at this. Even Coulson looked puzzled. “Why would you not want to talk with me about this?” she asked incredulously.

“Because this was something I had to do on my own and if you had known about it, I would’ve laid that burden on your shoulders instead.” He glanced at Coulson standing off to the side, knowing that he probably wouldn’t like what Grant had to say next but it couldn’t be helped. “Yes, Coulson was unfair to ask me to do this and I had to double up on my counseling sessions as a result but, whether it was his intention or not, he turned out to be right. It did give me back some control and
facing Christian is something that I need to do.”

“Did your doctor think this was a good idea?” Skye had stopped crying now and was looking a bit calmer.

“No, she didn’t,” Grant braced for another explosion.

“Then why…”

He hurried to interrupt, “but here is one of the most crucial points about this. Coulson asked me to do this. He didn’t order me, he asked. I had the option to say no. In fact, he even told me this was something I probably shouldn’t do but that the choice was mine. So, this was something I chose to do and you know how important having control is to me.”

She nodded. “I do,” she admitted grudgingly.

Grant judged it to be the right time to move in for a hug and was relieved when Skye allowed it. He hugged her tightly for almost a full minute. “Thank you for looking out for me,” he whispered, “although maybe next time you could do it more quietly.”

Skye laughed against his neck. She pulled back a little from Grant so she could look over at Coulson. “I haven’t forgiven you yet but I am sorry that I yelled.”

He nodded. “I understand. There have been times when I’ve wanted to yell at myself for this. But you know Skye, Grant is tougher than he looks.”

Both he and Skye started laughing, probably at Grant’s offended expression.

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Senator Christian Ward strode purposefully into his office, briefing book in hand. Grant, waiting in the corner, wanted to snort. He never changes, always so sure of his own importance. Christian looked up, saw Grant, and paused in the act of putting the briefing book down on his desk. Grant took a moment to savor the look of surprise and fear on Christian’s face. That’s right, big brother. Reap what you sow.

“Excuse me,” Christian said after he recovered himself. “What are you doing here?”

“Hey big brother. Heard you were looking for me.” Grant spread his arms out wide. “Well, here I am.”

Christian appeared to be speechless. Grant didn’t bother hiding his smug smile. “Don’t worry,” he said easily, coming out of the shadows, “I haven’t been waiting long. Here, I mean, in this office,” he said, looking around at the bookshelves filled with the trappings of power. “I have been waiting a long time to see you in general though.” He stood in front of Christian’s desk, enjoying his wary expression and silence. This is better than I’d dreamed it would be! “I assume these are for your speech,” Grant said, waving around several pieces of paper. “Kind of old school, don’t you think, still using paper?” Christian said nothing. “Ah, never mind. That just made it easier for me to make a few changes. It’s funnier now. Humor never was your strength.”

Grant turned around, started walking around a little, wanting Christian to react. He quickly got his wish. He almost laughed at Christian’s frantic attempts to use the phone. What an amateur! You may have had the upper hand before, Christian, but you’re playing with the big boys now.

“So, tell me. Is my re-emergence why you’re trying to call whomever it is you’re trying to call?
Are you trying to call our parents perhaps? Do you need to let them know that I’ve finally been found?”

Christian just glared at him.

“All,” Grant said, pointing to the door, “your men won’t be checking on you, at least not for the next hour. You’ve requested some ‘me time’ and who can argue with that?”

Christian slammed down the phone in frustration. “What do you want?”

Grant sat down, making a show of getting comfortable. “Nothing much,” he replied casually, “just an opportunity to clear the air. The attack on the U.N. wasn’t SHIELD, it was Hydra, specifically a man named Daniel Whitehall.”

“Well, that’s interesting. I thought you were Hydra,” Christian said in a fake confused voice.

Grant leaned back in his chair, looking relaxed. “Now why would you think that, big brother? Have you been asking around about me?”

Christian tried to look unaffected. He shrugged. “I’m a United States Senator. We hear things.”

“Apparently not true things,” Grant said lightly, mainly just to irritate him, “because I’m not Hydra. I’m here for SHIELD.” Christian turned red with anger.

“Mission accomplished.”

“You didn’t come here to clear the air,” Christian said contemptuously. “You need something from me. And all this swaggering simply tells me you have nothing to offer in return.”

“Au contraire,” Grant responded in perfect French with a smile. “You should know me better than that.”

“And if I do somehow believe that you have something to offer, what do you want me to do? Go on record defending SHIELD, condemning Hydra?” Christian asked scornfully. “The American people are looking for a simple enemy, Grant. It’s what makes them feel safe.”

“Safe,” Grant said deliberately, drawing out his pronunciation. “That’s an interesting word. It means protected, not exposed to danger.” Grant gave Christian a considering look. “Being safe is something that’s important for kids, isn’t it? All kids should feel safe, especially in their own home. I certainly hope that your kids do.”

Christian reddened a little as he sat down heavily in his chair behind the desk. He gave Grant a mocking smile. “I wondered when we’d get around to that. It’s really too bad that Thomas never felt safe, especially when you were around. If that’s the kind of safety you provide with SHIELD, then you’ll excuse me for questioning whether that’s what’s best for our country.”

“Of course I’ll excuse you! After all, our parents certainly raised us to believe that the social niceties should be observed. So then you’ll have to excuse me from wondering just how safe our country is with leaders like you at the helm. I mean, isn’t it a little dangerous to have someone who makes decisions based on bribes or personal vendettas? Don’t you think we might all be safer if we have people who actually care about us in charge?” Grant sat back, watching with satisfaction how Christian’s expression went from smug to anger to fear. Why was I ever afraid of doing this? It’s so much fun!

“Are you threatening me, Grant?” Christian’s expression was one of incredulity. Clearly, he was having difficulty with the realization that the shoe was now on the other foot. His face changed and Grant braced himself. “After all we’ve been through together as brothers,” Christian said in a
warm, conciliatory tone, “after all we know about each other, this is how you treat me the first time
we’re together in years? I always told Thomas that you really did love him, that you loved all of us,
but just didn’t know how to express it. After all, we’re family.”

Wow! He’s good! How did I never see this before? “No, Christian. I’m not threatening you. Why
would I do that?” Grant sat back, smiled and made the “continue” gesture with his hands. “But
keep going. I’m enjoying this.”

“Enjoying what?” Christian looked both afraid and puzzled.

Grant’s grin widened. “Watching you work.”

“I’m…I’m trying to have an honest conversation.” Christian seemed like he was trying for a
sincere, maybe even humble, expression but couldn’t quite manage it. “Please, tell me. How am I
‘working’?”

“Changing tactics, using my name, mentioning Thomas…I used to fall for all of your tricks.” And
he had. What would my life have been like had I not been so easily manipulated?

Grant watched closely as Christian’s face twisted into desperation. “That is not how I think, Grant,
that’s how you think!”

Does Christian even realize what he’s doing or is this all just second nature to him?

“Not in practicality; he still needed to do what SHIELD needed him to do. But maybe it mattered in theory to Grant.

“And now you’re turning it back on me.” Grant paused, wanting to be certain that Christian heard
the next sentence. “You take after Mother.”

Christian reared back as though he’d been slapped. “I take after…?” He forcefully shook his head.
“No.” Suddenly, he got to his feet and started pacing behind his desk. Grant remained silent,
fascinated by Christian’s struggle. “No, I’m the one who’s different from Mom and Dad.” He
pointed at Grant. “You! You’re the one who takes after them. You always twist every act and
blame it on somebody else! Mom and Dad were terrible but they didn’t put the match in your hand
when you burnt down that damn house. And I didn’t squeeze the trigger when you killed all those
people.”

Grant felt the sting of the accusation. All the people he killed for SHIELD and Hydra did weigh on
him. But the difference was that other people were making the decision, not him. Grant himself
never killed anyone without orders and actually tried to spare people whenever possible. But I was
manipulated, first by you and our parents and then by Garrett. So yes, I am accountable. “No. It is
my fault. I let you all hollow me out, control me.”

Christian snorted and waved a dismissive hand. “Spare me the non-apology. I’m a Senator.”

“I take responsibility for my actions, Christian. Now it’s your turn.” Grant waved to the chair
behind the desk.

Christian sat, looking apprehensive. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“What it means is that you’re going to do exactly what I tell you or you will find out just how far
SHIELD is willing to go to make you accept responsibility. It also means that you’re going to set
up a family meeting.” Grant stood up, walked toward the door and then, as he opened it, turned and smiled. “The prodigal son has returned!”
As he knew she would be, Skye was waiting for him in his room when Grant returned from his meeting with Christian. She was sitting in his chair valiantly attempting to read something on her laptop but leapt to her feet when he entered the room.

“Sure took you long enough,” she grumbled even as she looked him over closely head to toe.

“I had to brief Coulson on the meeting first,” he shrugged. He removed all of his weapons and placed them in his bedside table before sitting in his favorite chair and pulling Skye down on top of him. “I’m fine, Skye. Really.”

Skye looked worriedly at him, gently running her hand through his hair. “Really? I mean, you don’t look upset but then letting him mess with your head doesn’t always show on first glance.”

“That’s because I’m not upset,” he said easily. He smiled at her. “I can hardly believe it myself but it was actually fun. Christian was just the same as he’s always been but I’m not. I’m no longer that weak boy who believed all his lies and was scared of getting beat up. This time, I was the one with all the power and he was the one running scared.”

She nodded, her expression thoughtful. “I get that. Sometimes I fantasize just how awesome it would be to go back and lord all my newfound knowledge and skills over the kids who were mean to me.” Her expression turned serious again. “I can’t imagine how awful it would’ve been if it had been my brother who was the asshole.”

Grant sighed, closed his eyes and relaxed into the chair. “Yeah. That was pretty messed up.” Skye kept stroking his hair and it felt really good.

She pulled back slightly to look him directly in the face. Grant’s eyes popped open. Whenever Skye did that, he knew she meant business. “You do know that you weren’t weak, right? You did what you had to do to survive…which you did.” She kissed him gently. “And I, for one, am very grateful that you did. I’m not the only one either.”

He smiled and met her eyes. “I’m getting there.” She leaned her head on his shoulder and snuggled under his arm. “After all,” he continued, “I can’t complain too much. Who ever thought I would end up with a terrific girlfriend, good friends and work that I love?”

Skye poked him in his stomach and he grinned. She just wants to touch my abs. “You’re lucky you put me first, Robot!”

He kissed the top of her head. “I always put you first, babe.” He felt more than saw her smile. The two of them just sat together contentedly, enjoying the feel of each other. Grant ran his hand up and down her arm. This is one thing I’ll never get tired of! After a while though, he heard Skye sigh and pulled back to look at her. “What’s wrong?”

She shook her head. “It’s nothing. You don’t need to worry right now…”

“Hey. I’m fine,” he insisted, emphasizing both words. “If you’re upset about something, then you need to tell me why.” He glanced at her stubborn expression, then sat back as if he didn’t care one way or the other. “At least, that’s what a terrific girlfriend would do.” He grinned as Skye punched him in the arm.

“OK, you got me.” She moved so that her back was resting against the armrest so they could face
each other. “I confronted Coulson about the carvings and he agreed to be honest with me.”

“Well, that’s good. Did he tell you anything?” Grant asked.

Skye nodded sadly. “He showed me his most recent carving. It’s just like everything else we’ve seen, including what we got in Belarus. I told him my theory that it’s a map.”

“Did he agree with you?”

She shrugged. “I don’t think he knows what to think but, Grant, get this! He actually said, ‘It wants us to know.’ I mean, how creepy is that? Who is ‘it’? Why does it want us to know anything? And if it wants us to know so badly, then it’s doing a horrible job of giving us information! Nothing I’ve been doing is working! I’ve been trying to match the writing to constellation maps, navigational charts, genome diagrams, and if it’s a map, it’s a map to nowhere!”

“You’re going to figure it out; you always do,” Grant said soothingly.

Skye jumped off of his lap and started pacing, holding up her hands to let him know that she wasn’t upset with him. “I know I will, given time. But that’s the one thing I don’t have! Coulson said that the urge to carve is coming more frequently, that he’s doing it daily…and nightly.” She turned to face Grant, tears in her eyes. “I’m scared, Grant.” She sat back down on his lap, burying herself in his embrace. “What if I can’t figure it out in time? What if he goes just as crazy as Garrett?”

Grant hugged her but said nothing. He’d never tell her this but he was worried about that too.

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Despite his fears for Coulson and his worry for Skye, Grant knew that he needed to concentrate on his own mission, so he did what he learned all those years to do: compartmentalize. SHIELD hadn’t forgotten about the deadly potential of the Obelisk and, although they believed that Skye’s father was now in possession of it, they needed to know more about what they were dealing with. During her time undercover, Bobbi discovered that Hydra did indeed have more information on the Obelisk but she wasn’t able to access it. Kara informed them that Sunil Bakshi, Whitehall’s second in command, was the person to speak with. As such, Grant’s mission was to do some horse trading with Bakshi using whatever means necessary.

This kind of spy work wasn’t Grant’s favorite. He vastly preferred going in and laying waste to a facility or sneaking out with information or an asset. That was fun and clear-cut. Those missions usually weren’t even morally suspect. But wheedling information out of an opponent – either by giving them something they wanted or through some kind of violence – was tricky, difficult and frequently ugly. That was the job though, so he learned to focus on the end while ignoring the means. Still, it didn’t mean that he looked forward to it.

Grant swallowed back his misgivings as he entered Goldbrix Tavern, a relatively upscale neighborhood dive bar. It was one he’d frequented a lot when he was with Hydra though it wasn’t a place that held many fond memories.

As Grant’s eyes adjusted to the dark interior, he saw that the bartender – a tall, burly baldheaded guy who looked like he was an enforcer for the mob – appeared to be the only person in the room. That Butch the bartender looked so much like what people expected him to be never failed to amuse Grant. While Hydra often operated like a mob, it was much more interested in world domination than mere wealth and Butch totally fit with that worldview. Those who knew him personally appreciated Butch’s vast array of knowledge on world history, political mechanisms and
psychological methods of persuasion. He also knew a great deal about the finer things in life and had enviable collections of great literature, excellent wine, art and music. Thus, his rough appearance and job as “bartender” were quite ironic.

True to form, Butch slammed down his newspaper when Grant walked in. Despite Butch’s more refined skills, he was dressed like a bartender in the usual t-shirt and vest. Grant smiled to himself. *Always playing the part.* “I’ll give you a choice,” Butch told him gruffly in a low voice. “Columbian necktie…” he leaned threateningly on the bar, “or bullet in the head.”

Grant looked down and chuckled like he found this amusing when he really thought it was stupid. Butch knew who he was; Grant knew who Butch was. The two of them had spent a number of hours together planning missions, playing chess and discussing history in various languages since Butch was a polyglot too. So the whole code word thing was ridiculous but Butch was rigidly insistent upon protocol and he wasn’t someone to be trifled with. Grant had watched him kill a man with literally just his thumb. “Bullet in the Head…on the rocks,” he answered casually, taking a seat at the bar.

Butch busied himself making the drink. *I wonder whether his skills have improved.* Grant recalled past visits in which Hydra newbies mistook Butch for a bartender and were regretful when they tasted the drinks he made for them. Grant suspected that Butch, secretly despising his role, purposefully refused to make good drinks, especially to those he didn’t like. A Bullet in the Head was different though. Since it was the code word for high level operatives, Butch made certain he knew how to make a good one. He finished mixing the drink, placed the glass on a napkin and glanced fully into Grant’s face. Grant forced himself not to tense up at his scrutiny. Although he was certain that a few Hydra leaders knew he was a triple, the mission depended upon most Hydra operatives not yet getting the word.


Grant said nothing, just tilted his glass in a toast and drank deeply. Talking was always a risk since even the smallest thing could trip you up. It never failed to amaze him just how many spies didn’t understand this most basic of rules. Conversation was how most intelligence operatives got their information but that went both ways; talking could just as easily trip you up. In this respect, living alone all those years in the woods served him well since Grant was more comfortable than most with silence. As such, it was an easy decision to talk as little as possible to Butch and hope that the other man would believe he was on a mission and not engage him.

As he finished his drink, the impact of all the hard liquor washed over him and he sent a thought of gratitude to John for his training in alcohol tolerance. Grant used to never appreciate hard liquor – he’d seen too much of the effect it had on his parents when he was a child – and he would’ve just given it a miss had it not been for John.

He remembered the first time John had offered him a drink of hard alcohol like it was yesterday. He and John regularly drank a few beers together but when John brought out some whiskey, Grant declined. “No, thanks. This…” he waved his hand around to indicate his campsite…, “may look easy but maintaining it’s a bitch. I can’t afford to drink. Besides, I saw what it did to my parents when they drank.”

John nodded seriously but, after Grant’s refusal, poured even more whiskey into the cup he’d taken out of his backpack. Grant figured it was for John, so he was surprised when John got out another cup, poured whiskey into it and then placed the first cup firmly in Grant’s hand. “People drink alcohol for a lot of reasons, son. Some drink for the escape but others use it for bonding or intimidation. If you refuse to drink or, worse, if you can’t hold your liquor, then a lot of doors are
going to close for you. I can’t afford that, so drink up!” John drank deeply out of his own cup and grinned when Grant coughed after trying to do the same. “Just think of this as your alcohol education: Drinking 101, a class they should – but never will – teach at the Academy.”

Back in those days, he’d done whatever John wanted him to do, so despite the horrible taste and the effect he knew it was going to have on him, Grant dutifully drank the whole glass. Thankfully, John was gone soon after leaving Grant free to throw up what he could and chase the taste out of his mouth with lots of water. After that, John brought more hard liquors and insisted that Grant build a tolerance to them. Although he hadn’t kept up with the alcohol “training” recently, he still thankfully had somewhat of a tolerance. So the Bullet in the Head went down as smoothly as it ever had and the effects on his skills would be minimal. As he finished, he heard through his comms Hunter tell May they had a problem. As expected, Bakshi hadn’t come alone.

Grant was grateful for Hunter’s warning though because it gave him a little bit of an edge by swiveling to face the door just as Bakshi entered surrounded by two of his goons. Just two? Why is Hunter so worried?

“Grant Ward,” Bakshi said, somewhat unnecessarily in Grant’s opinion. He knew who he was. He leaned slightly on the bar in an attempt to look casual. Bakshi quickly glanced around the empty bar and Grant kept himself from rolling his eyes with difficulty.

As if I’d plan an encounter in a crowded bar. Too many variables.

“I was disappointed to hear that we’d lost your services,” Bakshi continued, still standing in the entrance with a goon on either side. “Mr. Garrett spoke quite highly of you.” He walked over to Grant who quickly but calmly stood to meet him. To his surprise, Bakshi stuck out his hand and the two men shook hands, somewhat warily on Grant’s part.

This is going better than I’d thought. That meant he’d have to be extra careful because that’s usually when things went wrong. Especially since Bakshi had just outed him to Butch.

“Butch,” Bakshi said to the bartender, “I’d like a martini, dirty.” Grant concealed his smile, sure that Bakshi wasn’t going to like what he’d get. “Shall we sit to discuss our business?” Bakshi asked with a wave, indicating a small table in the middle of the bar.

Grant took the seat facing the door. Is Bakshi really this incompetent or is he trying to lower my guard? Another basic rule for spies is that you never sit with your back to an open space. However, since Bakshi had his goons, perhaps he believed that they’d warn him should danger arise. In Grant’s case, unless he knew his backup personally, he never relaxed his guard. You lived longer that way.

Butch silently brought over Bakshi’s drink and placed it on the table, no napkin this time. Bakshi raised his glass, took a sip, grimaced and put it down. Apparently Bakshi wasn’t at all popular with the rank and file. “Imagine my surprise when I received your call. I wasn’t even aware that phone was active. And while we knew that you were still active, we were under the impression that you’d rejoined SHIELD. Were we mistaken?”

“Nope, still with SHIELD.” Grant replied easily, leaning back in his chair. Let him sweat.

“Then why this meeting? In your phone call, you said we’d hear something to our advantage.” Bakshi picked up his drink, took a small sip and grimaced again. Clearly, he’d been trying to go for casual but forgot that the drink was bad. Grant was getting to him.

“And you will,” Grant said with a slight smile. “As you undoubtedly know, I rarely disappoint.” At Bakshi’s inclination of his head, he continued. “You have something that we want; we have something…or, more accurately, someone… you want. Perhaps we can trade.”
Bakshi smiled coldly. “Ah, you must have Raina.” Grant nodded. Offering to trade Raina for information gave him a little twinge of regret but not much. She was dangerous and responsible for a lot of people getting killed. Karma sometimes was a bitch. “But the problem is, Mr. Ward, we no longer need her. We’ve managed to acquire that which she had without her assistance. So, Raina is no longer of any use to us.” He waved his hand dismissively. “Do with her what you will.”

Damn! Only years of training in controlling his expression allowed Grant to remain expressionless. This was a blow. That must mean that Hydra has the obelisk! Skye’s father had it last, so he’s either captured or working with them. She’s going to hate that.

His tactical brain whirring furiously, Grant stopped thinking about Skye and came up with another plan.

He leaned forward. Both SHIELD and John taught him that using his physical bulk was a great intimidation tactic, especially for someone like Bakshi who was smaller than he was and probably not used to physical combat. This guy is a middle manager if I ever saw one! “Then I guess it’s a good thing that we have other information that we know you want. Since Strucker is overseas, I assume you report to Whitehall.” Bakshi nodded. “I want a meeting.”

Bakshi’s expression didn’t change. Clearly, he’d expected this. “As intriguing as that sounds, you must realize that Mr. Whitehall is a very busy man.”

Without even blinking or moving from his position, Grant leveled him with a direct stare. “Will his schedule open up if I can get you a face-to-face with Coulson?” Bakshi looked surprised. Gotcha! “Things aren’t always what they seem. I have to talk with Whitehall, so if Coulson is who you need in order to make that happen, then I’ll make sure you see him. Close enough…” Grant lifted his own freshened drink…, “to put a bullet in his head.” He drank deeply as he gazed in satisfaction at Bakshi’s evil grin. So predictable.

As Bakshi was obviously contemplating just how he could use Coulson to Hydra’s gain, Grant smoothly whipped out his ICER, fired three quick shots, then got up and slammed Bakshi in the throat with his elbow. The man gagged and went down, clutching his throat. Grant shook his head. You never let down your guard! He grabbed Bakshi and frog-marched him back into the bar’s storeroom, just in case anyone unexpectedly came in from the outside. He smiled when he saw a roll of masking tape and a marker. It’s the small things.

Grant was just finishing his third drink (water this time) when May, Trip, Hunter and Bobbi eased into the room, guns drawn. This time, he did give into the temptation of rolling his eyes. “Really? You thought I’d need all four of you for this? I’m hurt!”

Trip’s glance took in Butch slumped over across the bar, one Hydra goon draped across a table with the other laying on the floor and holstered his gun. “To be fair, we didn’t think that a Hydra leader would only bring two guys. Your rep must need some work.”

Hunter snickered.

“Speaking of Hydra leaders…,” May looked closely around the room, “where’s Bakshi?”

Grant tilted his head toward the back room. “In there.” He grinned as all four of them crowded around the man tied up in a chair with his chin drooping onto his chest.

Hunter raised Bakshi’s head and saw the words written on the masking tape covering his mouth. “For Coulson,” he read out loud. He looked back at Grant. “Cute, mate. Did you think that one up all by yourself?”

Grant shrugged. “I told him that he could have a face to face with Coulson. I have to take my fun
May stepped out of the storeroom and scanned the room again. “You three take them all back to base. I’ll catch up to you there.” She ignored their curious looks and went to take a seat at Grant’s table.

“Can I get you anything?” Grant asked, waving at the bar. He knew his way around alcohol and was somewhat eager to show off a bit. “I make a mean Brooklyn, Vieux Carré, Old Fashioned, or maybe you’d like a Last Word? I would offer a Bullet in the Head but that’s really more of a Hydra drink,” he said with a wink.

May smiled faintly and then her expression turned contemplative. “Bourbon, neat.”

Grant smoothly swung out of his chair and away from the table. “Coming right up!” He grabbed his empty water glass, stepping back as Trip and Hunter carried Butch from behind the bar. He ignored Hunter’s dirty look and his not quite under the breath muttering, “Why are we doing all the hard work while he gets to drink with the boss lady?”

Grant refilled his water, poured the Bourbon, then maneuvered his way back to May and set it down on top of a napkin. “Can I get you anything else? Pretzels perhaps?” he asked, just a shade louder in an effort to ensure that Hunter and Trip heard him. Hunter threw him another dirty look as he picked up the second Hydra goon’s legs while Trip contented himself with an eye roll as he grasped the guy underneath the armpits and started hauling him out the door. *Totally worth it.*

Grant smiled slightly as he sat down across from May.

“Thanks,” May said quietly, not acknowledging any of the alpha male byplay. She sipped her drink until Bobbi, Hunter and Trip left and the bar quieted down. Grant just sipped his water in silence. May never did things at random. She clearly wanted to talk, so he’d wait until she was ready to proceed.

May drained her glass, set it down on the table then looked directly at Grant. “I heard you had a talk with your brother. I wanted to make sure you were OK.”

Nothing May did really should surprise him anymore – she’d certainly proven to be a good friend to him of late – but she caught him off guard all the same. *She truly does care about me!* The thought made his heart lift. May was someone he admired, so to know she continued to care enough to check in on him made him feel good. He nodded. “I didn’t expect it to go as well as it did but Coulson was right. I needed to face him.”

“And now you’re meeting with your parents and Christian,” she said. “Are you sure that’s wise?”

He took a sip of his water and shrugged. “Wise or not, it has to be done. SHIELD really needs for the government pressure to let up and my family can help with that. I think I’m ready for it.”

May looked at him closely. “What if you’re not? At least tell me that you’re taking back-up.”

Grant shook his head. “We’re stretched too thin as it is. Coulson and Skye are busy with…other things…and this shouldn’t be too difficult. I’ve spent the last few weeks gathering information that I’m sure my family would prefer remain quiet. They won’t put up a fuss.”

May nodded slowly. She was silent for a moment then said, “These ‘other things’ that you mentioned. I take it Skye told you about Coulson’s carvings.”

*Uh oh.* Again, Grant’s training served him in good stead as his mind raced to figure out what to say. He certainly didn’t want Skye to get in trouble, so he surreptitiously analyzed May’s
expression. She had a great poker face – not unlike his own – but his training in body language had been much more intense than hers. His knowledge was long-standing and born of desperation and survival. As such, Grant was a master and he was pretty sure that he detected a crack in the armor. Unless he missed his guess, she needed to talk, badly. Skye wouldn’t get in any trouble for divulging information to Grant.

He nodded. “She’s been pretty upset lately, not only because Coulson’s hasn’t been himself but also – although she’d never admit it – because she doesn’t know what this means for her. She has the GH formula in her system too but, unlike everyone else who’s taken it, she hasn’t shown any symptoms. That has to make her think that the alien theory might actually have legs.”

May gazed at him seriously. “Is that what you think?” Grant shrugged and she cocked her head to the side. “That’s a pretty scary thought.”

Grant shook his head. “Not really. After all we’ve seen – Thor, Lady Sif, the Hulk, enhanced humans – being an alien, especially the kind of alien Skye would be, doesn’t seem so bad. I mean, this is Skye we’re talking about.” He paused, struggling for words. “From the moment I met her, I knew she was different, not because she was an alien but because she cared. And she’s better with computers than anyone else I’ve ever seen. If all that means she’s an alien, then so be it. I’ll take it. Whatever happens, Skye will be fine. I’ll make sure of it.”

May nodded. “You’re right. She’ll be fine.” She stopped, looking conflicted, like she wanted to say more but didn’t know how to bring it up.

He was pretty sure he knew what was bothering her. May’s tight bond with Coulson was well-known, especially to Grant. “You’re more worried about Coulson though, aren’t you?”

“It’s been getting worse,” she confided in a low voice, staring down at the table. “Coulson hasn’t been himself and he hasn’t been sleeping. The constant carving is getting to him. It’s gotten so bad that half the time I’m not sure what he’s going to do. The other half of the time I don’t know if what he’s doing is his decision or the result of something else driving him.” She paused, looking up at Grant. “That’s what happened to Garrett, isn’t it?”

He looked away. He never liked discussing what happened to John. The memory was still too painful. John had always had a wildness to him but after he took the GH formula, it became too much. The look of insanity in his eyes. The non-sequiturs and fantastical speech. His disregard for everyone. But for Grant, the worst part was his cruelty to him personally. John had been his father figure and only friend for years. To have John casually treat their relationship like it had been nothing was terrible and he didn’t like being reminded of it.

After several moments of silence, he turned back to look at May. He was grateful to see a glimmer of compassion in her eyes. She didn’t blame him for his feelings. “Yes, that’s exactly what happened. He started carving on every surface he could find, at all hours of the day and night. John was always rough around the edges but after he took the Formula, he started making decisions that made no sense or were destined to have bad outcomes.” He met her eyes directly and saw the fear. “It was like watching the John I’d known all those years slip away and there was nothing I could do.” He hesitated a moment, then steeled himself to say what she was afraid he would. “You’re going to have to watch him and, if necessary, make sure he can’t hurt others.”

May started to say something but Grant said softly, “Melinda,” and reached over to put his hand over hers. He knew how she was feeling and that nothing would be served by going over things both of them knew. “You saw the body of that general. You know what the stakes are. Don’t let it come to that.”
May looked over towards the bar, sniffed and then Grant saw her expression change, harden. She squeezed his hands briefly, then let them go. She was once more the Cavalry. She stood and pushed away from the table. “I’ll do what has to be done. For everyone.”

Grant stood too and went around the table. He put his hand on her arm, wondering if it was a wise gesture on his part but also knowing how much her gentleness had meant to him when he was the one in pain. “I know you will,” he said gently.

She merely nodded and walked toward the door. Right before she left, she turned her head a little to the side. “When do you meet with your parents?”

He was taken aback. He’d thought that, with all their discussion about Skye and Coulson, she’d forgotten all about his next mission. “Tomorrow morning.”

She nodded and went out the door.

Grant stood for a moment, looking at the empty space May left behind, then shook himself. He found a cardboard box in the storeroom, took it behind the bar, and started loading alcohol in it. He grabbed a bottle of red wine that he knew Skye liked, Scotch for Fitz, bourbon for May, tequila for Bobbi, beer for Hunter, vodka for Trip and rum for Jemma. He also loaded some champagne and a few more bottles of wine for Kara and Coulson. Maybe some would call it stealing but, to him, it was a mere pittance against all the harm Hydra had done to him. Grant took the box out to the car he’d parked around the corner and started to drive off but then something stopped him. He sat in the driver’s seat and let the memories wash over him.

**Flashback**

Grant was excited. John had been talking up the SHIELD Academy for years and now, finally, the time had come for him to go. He’d received his letter, packed his stuff and spent a month in a hotel preparing for the Academy by buying clothes, luggage, toiletries and everything else he’d need, letting his system adjust to eating prepared meals, learning how to drive through city streets (versus just tooling down a highway like he had before his woodland adventure) and catching up on popular culture. He was under strict instructions from John to learn how to be around humans again so he wouldn’t seem like a freak. Grant dutifully pushed away his grief over Buddy and tried not to wince at the constant of noise and glare of artificial light. Instead, he focused on watching television at night and analyzing live people during the day. He was determined not to let John down by acting like some weird feral child who didn’t know how to act. It worked.

The first six weeks of the Academy had been like a dream come true. He excelled in his classes, enjoyed the physical conditioning (really, it was a walk in the park for someone who’d been caring for himself outdoors for years) and even struck up some tentative friendships with other students. The female Academy students in particular seemed eager to get to know him and the sex was great. So far, he’d been a true gentleman by trying to share himself with as many women as possible but there was one woman whom he found himself thinking about a lot. There were also several guys who gravitated towards him and they were starting to form a regular group for meals, studying and fun. Grant had finally found his place.

Then he got a message from John that he needed Grant to meet him at a place called the Goldbrix Tavern in Boston during the first extended break cadets got from the Academy. He knew that John couldn’t be seen with him around SHIELD because the leadership frowned upon Supervising Officers training rookies they already knew. If they were to become a team later, they had to act like strangers now. Since they couldn’t communicate directly, Grant found himself missing John, so he was looking forward to the meeting. He eagerly made his arrangements and was a few minutes early for his Friday night rendezvous with John.
He entered the Tavern, ordered a drink and sat at a table by himself in the back. He spent the time just watching the crowded bar, wondering about the clientele. It was mostly men but they didn’t seem like the type you’d normally find in a neighborhood like this. The bartender was stereotypical – almost too much so – but everyone else seemed just a bit off. Grant was probably more attuned than most to the intricacies of human interaction, so not many people would catch what he was seeing, but the patrons were a bit too confident and arrogant with just a hint of cruelty to their veneer of civility. They also weren’t doing the usual bar activities, like playing pool or darts or watching sports. So, this is a Hydra bar. I wondered when John was going to introduce me.

Half an hour after their appointment rendezvous time, John strolled into the bar, telling stories over his shoulder to the gaggle of young men – about 20 of them – he brought with him. Grant tensed. This wasn’t the casual John who called him son, brought him tacos and seemed proud of him. This was his exacting Supervising Officer, Agent Garrett, who didn’t accept failure. Suddenly, this weekend away from the Academy didn’t seem like the fun time he’d envisioned. Moreover, Grant recognized many of the faces in the group Garrett brought. They were cadets in his class but none were people he’d interacted with much because he already didn’t like them.

What’s going on?

Grant wanted to leave but knew that would never be allowed. So he sat back and waited, trying to manage his anxiety.

Garrett saw Grant and started making his way towards him. “There he is! There’s my Golden Boy!” he said in a carrying voice. Much of the conversation throughout the bar dimmed as the crowd appeared to recognize Garrett and start listening to him. “This guy’s going to be the new face of Hydra, ladies and gents! He’s the one all the women want and all the men want to be! He’s going to do great things for our organization!”

Only his training kept Grant from fidgeting or changing expression. Even though the words were complimentary, he knew they were a trap. He just had to wait to find out what it was. None of it made sense. He’d thought that spies were supposed to be inconspicuous, so why was Garrett calling attention to Grant and his abilities?

Garrett finally reached his table. “Stand up, son! Let people get a good look at you!” Grant quickly stood, careful to hide his reluctance. Garrett insisted upon immediate obedience. “Everyone, this is Grant Ward, soon-to-be SHIELD Agent Extraordinaire. First he has to get through the Academy which, from what I’ve been hearing, he’s doing by making all of you…” he gestured to the group of cadets, “look bad.”

Grant scanned the sullen faces of his fellow cadets and felt his heart sink. He’d been ignored by these guys before they knew that he was John Garrett’s favorite, before they realized that he was destined to rise quickly through the ranks of Hydra by vaulting over them. But now that they knew who he was and hated him, it would be a problem. They’d be watching his every move, hoping he’d screw up, even trying to make that happen if they could. They’d report on his friends, girlfriends and anyone who came into close contact, probably getting them in trouble too. So this is Garrett’s play, his way of still keeping me alone in the woods. He felt a moment of fear at his disloyal thoughts. John was his savior, the guy who kept him from prison and without whom he’d be nothing. He owed him everything, even if it meant that his life was hard.

Garrett finally turned to address Grant directly. Seeing his harsh gaze, Grant felt his heart fall to his feet. This was the cold man who’d stranded Grant in the Wyoming wilderness, brought a gun instead of food, who’d killed Buddy to teach Grant a lesson instead of letting the dog live the rest of his life in peace. This was the man without mercy; there was no telling what he’d do. “Have I been getting good information? Are you outdoing all of your fellow cadets? Have you been embarrassing your comrades in arms?”
There was no good response. Garrett had specifically chosen and trained Grant to outperform everyone else. If he wasn’t, there would be hell to pay. However, he couldn’t admit to the Hydra cadets that this was what he was doing because they’d hate him all the more for his honesty. Garrett had him over a barrel and, by his cruel grin, he knew it.

Grant struggled to look humble. “I don’t know, Sir. I haven’t been keeping track of grades and rankings. I’ve just been doing is what every cadet is doing: trying my best.”

Garrett sneered at him. “Well, if that’s the case, let’s go see just how hard you all are trying and what you’ve learned. There’s a secluded parking lot in the back of this place beyond this door.” He pointed at the door behind Grant that featured an EXIT sign over it. “Butch here will let you all through. Why don’t you get started practicing your training maneuvers and I’ll be out in a few minutes to see your progress?”

Grant tried not to see the undisguised glee on the faces of the Hydra cadets because it wouldn’t help him steel his resolve. They all knew, just like he did, what was about to happen. The only question was how many he could take down before the rest ganged up on him and gave him a beating he wouldn’t forget. Despite his morbid thoughts, Grant smiled and said easily to Garrett, “Of course, Sir. We’ll look forward to hearing your feedback.” This is just a test. If I pass it, everything will get better. Then he walked quickly and confidently out the door.

Present Day

But it hadn’t been a test. Grant understood that now. It had merely been a way for Garrett to keep him compliant and ensure he remained isolated from his peers. Grant had taken down about 10 of the Hydra cadets before the rest piled on. Garrett had come out later than Grant hoped but he did put a stop to it before he got seriously hurt. Grant spent the rest of his “break” lying in a grungy hotel room bed, trying to heal as best he could before he had to return to the Academy. And though it almost killed him, he used the resulting sprains, cuts and bruises (the result of a “skiing accident”) as a way to distance himself from the rest of his Academy classmates. While Grant did attempt some superficial relationships a few times in the years following the Tavern beating (like Kara), he never again allowed himself to get close to anyone until he was assigned to the Bus. Thinking about it now filled him with rage.

He hadn’t realized it until now but he hated the Goldbrix Tavern with a passion. This was the place where his house of cards had come tumbling down. This was where he learned that he was truly a slave to Hydra, that no one and nothing could save him. The physical injuries from the Tavern beating healed relatively quickly but the emotional wounds became scars he was still dealing with. He had almost let them define him. But no more.

Grant parked the car directly in front of the Tavern. He got out, grabbed as many boxes as he could find from the store room and loaded them up with as much alcohol each could hold. He also threw in some straws, pretzels and swizzle sticks and any other small items that fit around the bottles. He placed them all in the car, then headed back in one last time. Grant stood there for a long moment, seeing the leering faces of the Hydra cadets, the studied indifference of Butch, and hearing the cruel laughter of all the Hydra operatives he’d met here over the years. He strode behind the bar, yanked out the bat he knew he would find there and started smashing bottles, every hit a blow to the past. When all the bottles were in pieces, he turned his attention to the mirror behind the bar until it too was in shards.

Grant walked out from behind the bar, lit a book of matches, and threw it into the pool of spilled alcohol. The fire spread quickly and Grant stood watching it in satisfaction, enjoying it, for a few seconds. Then he left the Tavern forever. He got in his car and started his drive back to the people
who celebrated his strengths rather than envying them, who worked to ensure his happiness even if it meant ignoring their own, back to the people who despite their own scars, wanted to make the world a better place. Grant drove back home.
Other than his therapist, Grant didn’t tell anyone about burning down the Tavern. He didn’t want them to worry. Honestly, he felt pretty good about what he’d done. He’d deprived Hydra of a resource and taken his revenge on the organization without anyone getting hurt. What was the harm? And, given his important meeting with his family the next day, it was essential that nothing distract him from what he needed to do.

His therapist didn’t have much to say other than mentioning the dangers involved in starting a fire in the middle of a city. Grant acknowledged that it could’ve been dangerous but, since he’d called the fire department immediately upon leaving the premises, only the Tavern had been burned. Reduced to ashes. Charred beyond all recognition. He hoped that would soon be a description of Hydra itself but he wasn’t naïve enough to truly believe that would happen. His therapist tried to remain serious but Grant could tell that she wanted to approve of his actions since she couldn’t quite keep a smile from passing her lips. But he understood she couldn’t responsibly encourage arson. As he left her office, he reflected that his current feeling of elation was one he could get used to.

He went to his room to finish packing for his trip to meet with his family. It had been arranged for them to meet in the Ward family home in Beacon Hill, so Grant was going to fly commercial to Boston. Despite all the time he’d spent on planes recently, flying with the public wasn’t something he’d done in a while and he was looking forward to spending a few hours reading or watching a movie. In previous years, he would’ve spent the time memorizing mission parameters or going over various scenarios but not on this flight. Instead, if possible, he was going to heed therapeutic advice and just relax. His only regret was that he’d be going alone. Coulson couldn’t spare anyone else and Grant didn’t ask for assistance.

As he opened his door, he smiled ruefully. “Hey Skye! Fancy meeting you here.”

She looked up from her computer and immediately jumped up to hug him. “Today is the day, huh? I just wanted to wish you good luck before you left.”

Grant chuckled and gave her a light kiss. “You do realize that you’re in this room so often someone might get the idea you’ve moved in.”

Skye pulled back, smiling. She returned to her computer, glancing at him with an impish expression. “Well, my room is pretty far away.”

He laughed. He was never going to live that one down. His suitcase was already sitting open on his bed, so he pulled a few items of clothing out from his drawers and started placing them in the pockets. “Where is everybody?”

Grant was purposefully keeping it light and appreciated that Skye was doing the same. That hadn’t been the case several days ago.

**Flashback**

Skye burst through his door just as Grant had gotten to the good part in his book. He looked up, surprised and somewhat irritated. He’d been looking forward to some down time. Skye was supposed to be in a meeting with Coulson, so he wasn’t expecting her for another hour at least and certainly not in this kind of mood. He kept himself from rolling his eyes with difficulty. *She’s always so dramatic!*
“Did you know that Coulson isn’t going to let me go with you on your family visit?” she demanded as she threw herself on the bed.

“I suspected he wouldn’t but he didn’t inform me of his decision. I’m sure he has his reasons.”

Skye snorted as she rolled over to prop up her head in her hands. “He said that we’re shorthanded and my computer skills are sorely needed, especially since I’ve been doing computer models of the carvings.”

“Makes sense.”

Grant almost groaned as she indignantly popped up to a sitting position. Clearly, his response hadn’t been wise. “No it does not make sense! I can easily do both. You shouldn’t be alone and I want to be there!” Skye’s eyes got that unfocused look that he’d come to associate with bad ideas. He looked down, ready to brace himself for whatever horrible suggestion she was sure to make. “Maybe Coulson doesn’t need to know that I’m gone. I could just…”

Grant looked up as her words trailed off and his eyes met Skye’s startled gaze. “Unless you don’t want me to go,” she said slowly. “That’s it, isn’t it? You don’t want me to go!”

How am I going to get out of this one? Grant took a deep breath, knowing that this was going to go nowhere good but that honesty was called for anyway. “No. I don’t want you to go.”

Skye just stared at him, hurt written all over her face. “Grant,” she said in a low voice. “I thought we were past this. We’re partners. That means that we share the good times and the bad, no matter how hard it is.”

He nodded. “I know. Just not this.”

“How not?” Skye jumped off the bed and leaned into him, her arms anchoring her balance over the chair. “If we’re truly partners in every sense of the word, then why would you leave me out just when I’m needed the most?”

He was silent for a moment, collecting his thoughts, trying to figure out how to say what he felt in a way she’d accept. But Skye was having none of it.

She jerked herself back and started pacing around the small room. “So I guess I’m the only who’s vulnerable in this relationship, huh? Whenever I’m dealing with a problem, I tell you but I’m not given the same level of trust. I told you when Coulson said that I’m part-alien, something that was embarrassing, I might add, but I still told you! When I started trying to find my dad, I asked for your help! Every time something bad happens to me, I include you but that’s just me. You’re the great Grant Ward, so you don’t need anybody!”

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“Skye…” His agitation caused him to get up and start walking too.

“No, save it, Grant! I keep pushing but you won’t give an inch. What do I have to do to show you that I’m on your side? Why won’t you let me in?”

Grant, frustrated at her lack of understanding, had been trying to be reasonable. But he felt the dam burst and whirled around to face her. “Not let you in?” he growled. “Skye, you’re in me so deep that I’ll never get you out. Never! Nobody has ever been so close or known me as well as you. And that’s pretty damn scary. What will I do if you leave?”

She started to say something but he held up his hand to stop her. “I know that you aren’t planning to go anywhere and that the fear is mine to deal with but I’m not there yet. That’s why I need for
you to stay here. I’m about to do something that I’ve dreamed of doing since I was a boy and I have to focus solely on that. The last time I tried dealing with my family, I ended up alone in the woods for five years! This time has to be different. It needs to go well, not only for SHIELD but also for me and for us. As much as I’d like for you to be there, I can’t afford it. I can’t be worrying about what you’ll do or how you’ll respond to my thoughts or feelings. I need for this to be 100% about me.”

The two of them stared at each other for a moment. Grant felt his anger burn itself out as he noticed Sky’s vulnerable expression and he reached over to stroke her face gently. “I promise that I’ll tell you everything when I get back. I know it’s not the same as you being there but it’s the best I can do right now.”

She nodded and looked up with tears in her eyes. “OK,” she whispered. “I can accept that.” She sniffed loudly and gave him a hint of a smile. “But we’re still going to work on that other stuff once you get back.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” he told her as he leaned in to kiss her. Skye returned his kiss hungrily. Soon, his book and their fight were completely forgotten.

**Present Day**

Skye rested against the headboard so she could watch him pack. “Let’s see. Almost everyone is planning on traveling soon, so most of them are doing last minute packing. May is staying behind so she can hold down the fort and Bobbi is preparing to interview Bakshi.”

Grant’s smile was sly. “I guess I don’t have to ask whether you got my present.”

Skye giggled. “Nope, we definitely got it. Coulson was extremely pleased, to say the least. Bakshi less so I assume.”

He shrugged. “Well, I promised him a face-to-face with Coulson. Probably not exactly what he had in mind.” Skye laughed. “My plan is to keep sending a few other gifts your way now and then.”

“Like a cat bringing in dead birds?” Skye replied, mock seriously. “No, thanks.”

Grant finished putting his clothes in and zipped up the case, placing it on the floor. “Just trying to be helpful.”

Skye got up from the bed and walked over to him, drawing her finger slowly down his chest. “I know some other ways you can be helpful and some other gifts that I might appreciate,” she whispered in his ear.

Grant swallowed hard. He fervently wished he wasn’t flying commercial so that he wasn’t on a deadline. He gently disengaged her hands and kissed her on the forehead. Skye sighed and smiled in a resigned sort of way.

“Skye, I know you’re worried about me but I’ll be fine. I’m more worried about you flying to Hawaii.” He frowned. “This map is dangerous and it’s brought nothing but misery to everyone who’s touched it. I don’t want you or anyone else getting hurt.”

She shook her head. “You’re never going to quit worrying about me, are you?”

“Nope.”

Skye looked thoughtful. “Yeah, I feel the same way about you. That would be great if we didn’t
lead such dangerous lives.” Her brow cleared. “Anyway, there’s nothing to worry about with this trip. It’s not so much a map as a blueprint. It’s a city. What city and where is what we’re going to Hawaii to figure out.”

“Well, I definitely won’t worry then,” Grant replied in a dry tone. “Those kinds of missions never go south.”

She shrugged. “Well, I’m more excited than scared. I’ve never been to Hawaii. And I’ve got a great team backing me up…although I’d feel better if you were going to be there.” She took his hand and squeezed.

He raised their hands to his lips and kissed the back of hers. “I am hard to replace,” he teased.

Grant leaned over, gave her a lingering kiss, then stepped back and grabbed his suitcase. “I have to go now, Skye. I have a few personal matters to attend to,” he said mockingly. Then he turned serious. “But I’ll be seeing you soon. I promise.”

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As the plane leveled out, Grant shifted in his seat. Given his bulk and where he was going, he’d chosen to purchase a first-class seat instead of coach. It both gave him more room and got him into the spirit of wealth. However, try as he might, he just couldn’t get comfortable. He hoped he wasn’t bothering his seatmate, a very attractive blonde woman. Since she’d been reading a thick novel ever since they boarded, she seemed unaware of him. He decided to forget about her for the time being and focus on himself. Every time he tried to relax though, unwelcome thoughts popped into his head. Instead of fighting them, he decided to follow his doctor’s advice and let them come.

He was sitting at the dining room table in his Grams’ house. He, Thomas and Elizabeth had arrived for their annual summer two-week stay at her house the night before. Christian was attending some leadership camp and wasn’t going to make it. Although he’d been careful, Grant was pretty sure that Grams had seen his bruises as he got ready for bed. She hadn’t said anything but her lips tightened and he could feel her eyes lingering on him as he walked down the hall to his room. When she sent Elizabeth and Thomas into town for a shopping trip the next day, he was convinced she’d noticed.

He sat on the edge of his chair as she busied herself in the kitchen getting cookies and milk. It was cliché but his Grams offered the treats both kindly and ironically. Whenever she needed to have a talk with any of the kids, cookies and milk was the routine. They all rolled their eyes at the custom but secretly loved it. This time was different though. This time Grant’s stomach was tied in such knots that he couldn’t even think of letting anything pass his lips without it making an unwelcome return.

After what seemed like forever, Grams came out of the kitchen and set the tray on the table. Much to his surprise, she didn’t insist upon him eating or drinking but merely sat down beside him and quietly took his hand. The two of them sat in silence like that for a while, neither making any further moves. Grant finally dared to look into Grams’ face and was startled to find that her eyes were full of tears. Seeing that he noticed her distress, she sighed and let go of his hand.

“Grant, I’m so sorry.” He made a protesting noise but she held up a quivering hand to shush him. “We both know what I’m talking about, so let’s not pretend.”

Seeing her sad face, Grant merely nodded and looked down. He had no idea where she was going with this. He was fairly certain that she’d seen the evidence of abuse on his body before but she’d never said anything.
“I’ve talked with your father about this more times than I can remember but he refuses to do anything about the way your mother and Christian treat you.” Grant looked up in astonishment. He had no idea that she’d ever tried to help him. “I would’ve talked with your mother and Christian too if I thought it would do any good. But I haven’t because I was afraid that it would just make things worse for you.”

Grant nodded. “It probably would. It’s OK, Grams. I can handle it. Everything’s fine.”

“No,” she said forcefully, “it’s not fine! And you shouldn’t have to handle it!” She took a deep breath and gently touched his cheek. “Grant, my lovely boy. I’ve tried everything I can think of to help. I would call the police but I think you’re old enough to realize that they’re in your father’s pocket. Money,” she said sadly looking around at all the expensive furnishings, “permits a great many things, good and bad. The police would do nothing and your parents would punish me by not letting me see you.”

He nodded again. “I know, Grams. I can take care of myself. Can I go now?” Grant was desperate to halt the conversation. He understood that no one could help him and her kindness made him want to cry. He didn’t want to do that, especially since it would only upset her.

A few tears slid down her cheeks. “I don’t want this conversation to upset you.” She sighed and smiled sadly. “But that’s probably inevitable. And I don’t want you to think that I’m asking for forgiveness for my powerlessness either. That’s for me to live with. I just wanted for you to know that I love and care about you, more than you know, and I’m going to ask your parents if you can spend more time with me. I also wanted to explain why I think they’re doing this. Sometimes it helps to understand.”

Grant looked away, studying the delicate wallpaper behind the china cabinet in an effort to keep his composure. In truth, he’d often wondered just why it was that his parents seemed to dislike him so much. He’d tried his best to be obedient and helpful but it never seemed to matter. Elizabeth, the oldest, they mostly ignored. He understood that his father regarded women as little more than annoyances and his mother just didn’t seem interested. Christian fared somewhat better with them. It was clear that they were grooming him for power but they never were kind or encouraging to him. For all that he was the Golden Boy, he, like Grant, endured their insults, slights and cruel speech. But they never physically abused Christian the way they did Grant. And, of course, Thomas was the favorite. He received all the hugs, cuddles, praise and pampering that the others didn’t and none of the abuse. Even Grant and Elizabeth were partial to him. Only Christian acted like he was the devil’s spawn. So yeah, maybe he wanted to hear what Grams thought.

He turned to meet Grams’ eyes. “What did I do to make them hate me so much?” he asked in a small voice.

She reached out to stroke his shoulder. “Nothing, sweet boy, absolutely nothing. How they treat you is because of them, not you. I never want you to forget that,” she said looking directly in his eyes. Grams smiled when Grant nodded. “Your mother never wanted children. If she hadn’t been born into a wealthy family, she probably never would have had them. That would’ve been best because I don’t think she has a nurturing bone in her whole body. But your grandfather wanted to align your mother’s family with ours in order to increase our influence. So your parents got married and, once married, they had to have heirs to the fortune. As a girl, Elizabeth couldn’t do much beyond marry well, so they ignore her and the task of carrying on the family inheritance falls to Christian. I warned them that all good leaders have compassion but,” Grams’ expression hardened, “just like in other things, they didn’t take my advice. Instead, they created a bully. You, they didn’t know what to do with.” Her expression turned wistful. “You were this beautiful baby and it was clear from the beginning that you were gifted both here,” she touched his temple, “and
here.” She gestured to indicate his whole body. Grant understood that she meant he was both smart and athletic. Grams smiled a little. “They don’t get that you’re gifted here too,” she said, touching his heart.

Grant looked wonderingly at Grams. “But if I’m so great, why are they mean to me? And why am I the only one they treat like that?”

“I know this is hard to understand. I don’t quite get it myself. The best that I can determine is that Elizabeth escaped because she’s a girl. Your father was raised to treat women with respect physically, so he won’t allow anyone to hit her. Christian is too much in the public eye. But you, with your physical abilities and intelligence, are someone they don’t understand, so they try to control you. Once Christian figured that out, he tried to win their favor by controlling you the same way. They let him because it’s easier than getting involved. And he’s their heir, so he comes first.”

Grant was still confused. “What about Thomas? How come they’re so nice to him?”

“I suspect that Thomas gets preferential treatment because he’s the baby and because he’s the spitting image of your mother’s brother, someone she adored before he died. Thomas is also an easy child to raise. He does whatever he’s asked and has a funny way about him that makes your mother feel good about herself. You, my beloved grandson,” Grams said, smiling fondly at Grant, “are curious about a great many things and you always want to explore and experiment.” Her smile faded. “Your parents can’t handle a child who’s gifted; they need children who are easily controlled.” She reached out and took his hand again. “No matter what your parents think, never forget that the fact that you’re so wonderful and different is a blessing. You’re not someone who should be controlled. Someday you’ll find people – a lot of people – who will understand. You just have to hold on until they do.”

The plane shook a little from turbulence, forcing him back into the present. Grant took a deep breath and willed away the tears in his eyes. He hadn’t thought about that conversation in years. During his time in the wilderness, he couldn’t allow himself the luxury of such thoughts because they’d bring him down. No, he had to focus first on survival and then on everything John was teaching him. That was when he first learned to compartmentalize.

He smiled to himself as he remembered just how deeply he’d been loved by his Grams. She had indeed persuaded his parents to let him spend more time with her and it had been his saving grace. She also was the one who convinced his parents that military school would be helpful. And it was, right up until the time he’d felt compelled to burn down their house. Grant wished Grams could’ve met Skye. She would’ve loved her and he had a feeling the two women would’ve gotten along just fine. He looked out the window at the clouds, remembering how Skye had said how beautiful the horizon was when they were flying together from Providence. They’d come a long way since then but she was right. It was beautiful. And peaceful. Grant sighed heavily.

His seatmate looked up from her book. “If the view’s that upsetting, you can just close the window,” she said with a smile.

Grant examined her closely without appearing to do so. Her long, blonde hair and ice-blue eyes complemented her patrician features and, from the way she sat in the seat, he suspected that she was tall. She wore minimal jewelry and makeup and her light blue suit showed just a hint of cleavage. The woman was stunning.

He smiled back. “It was a good sigh. But if the window being open bothers you, I can close it.”

She shrugged. “If you really don’t care…”
He closed the window and then turned back to her. “You don’t like to look out the window?”

“Oh, it’s not that. I just like to focus on what’s around me. Can’t see the world with your head in the clouds.”

He pointed at her book. “Can’t see it with your face in a book either.”

The woman smirked, ducking her head in acknowledgment. She placed a bookmark in the book and closed it. “It’s a long trip,” she replied flirtatiously, leaning a little towards Grant and looking deep into his eyes. “Plenty of time for everything.”

He nodded. “Well, you could just skip to the end.”

She raised her eyebrows and smiled slyly. “And miss all the good parts in-between?”

Grant chuckled. “You’re right. Sometimes the parts in-between are the best parts. I’ll leave you to it then.” He got his earbuds from the front pocket of the seat and put them on, ignoring the disappointed look on her face.

His seatmate went back to her book and, as Grant suspected, didn’t bother him for the rest of the flight. After the plane landed and the seatbelt sign was turned off, she gathered her belongings (he was right about her being tall) and gave him an impish grin. “Don’t leave your head in the clouds. That can be dangerous.” She waved and headed down the aisle.

Grant gathered his things and followed her somewhat slowly. He made a brief phone call and made a show of looking around for the baggage claim sign as they exited the gate. He didn’t want the woman to think that he was too eager. He spotted her several hundred feet in front of him, heading down the long hall to baggage claim. Fortunately, she seemed to be taking her time, even putting her small bag down as she filled her water bottle from a drinking fountain. Her slow journey made it easy for Grant to catch up and fall into step with her. The woman continued walking down the hallway but glanced over at him with a knowing smile.

He returned her smile and walked a little closer to her. “Were you serious about not wanting to miss the parts in-between?” he asked in a low voice. Given her height, he didn’t have to bend as low as he usually did to reach her ear.

Her smile became somewhat feral as she turned her head to meet his eyes. “Absolutely. What did you have in mind?”

Grant spied an out-of-order sign next to a men’s bathroom and tilted his head in that direction. “What about in there?”

The woman gave a brief glance around and, seeing no one in the vicinity of the restroom, said huskily, “Looks perfect.”

She grabbed his hand and led him into the bathroom. Once they rounded the curved wall and were away from public view, Grant pulled her to face him and began kissing her thoroughly. He backed them up until she slammed into the wall. He was a little surprised that she was returning his kisses just as fervently as he was giving them. He couldn’t deny that the whole situation gave him a little thrill, his elation from earlier in the day returning with a vengeance. Sometimes the universe makes things too easy.

The woman’s hands were everywhere. She ran her fingers through his hair, slipped her hands over his chest and tugged his t-shirt out of his jeans. When she started unbuckling his belt, Grant grabbed her hands, grinning at the woman’s puzzled look. He stepped back, grabbed her shoulders
and flipped her around, slamming her into the wall again, this time face first. She raised her arms to prevent her face from being smashed and he heard a satisfying clink as the knife fell from her right hand onto the floor.

He quickly kicked the knife away while roughly twisting both arms behind her back. Grant took the zip tie he had in his pocket and secured both of her hands with it, then flipped her back around to face him. The woman glared at him as he smiled and shook his head playfully. “I told you that you could just skip to the end.”

The glare was replaced a sheepish expression. “What gave me away?” she asked, still breathing hard. Grant figured that since she believed he wasn’t going to hurt her, she was back in her professional role and wanted to learn from her mistakes.

He shrugged, chuckling lightly. “Most of it was nothing that you did wrong. I expected Christian to try something and the plane was the best place to do it, so I made it easy for him. He had to know that there was no way I would travel under my own name, so I put my reservation under a name I knew he’d spot immediately: Thomas Wells. All I had to do was wait and see who turned up.”

“I didn’t come on too strong?” she asked.

“No, your approach was perfect. You were clear about your intentions without being overbearing and you backed off immediately when it looked like it wasn’t working. I am impressed. You can tell Christian I said that. I almost missed you.”

Her brow furrowed. “So what tipped you off then?”

“It was the book. You were on page 117 when the plane was boarding and you were on page 131 when we landed. That’s about two pages per hour. So either you’re a really slow reader or you’re working for Christian.” He paused. “And you were way too eager to get me alone. Most women are more cautious.”

The woman suddenly smiled mischievously. “You give yourself too little credit. A lot of women would take you up on that offer immediately. In fact, I delayed getting out my knife for longer than I should have.” Her smile widened. “You’re a good kisser. It’s too bad that we’re on opposite sides.”

Surprised, Grant laughed. “It is too bad that we’re on opposite sides. If you ever want to give up being a gun for hire, you should consider working for SHIELD. We could use someone like you.” He glanced at his watch, then grabbed her arm, dragging her down the curved wall leading to the public hallway. Grant peered around the corner and nodded to two men in dark suits who immediately headed towards them.

The woman looked a little alarmed. “Who are they?”

“That’s SHIELD. I called them when I got off the plane. Since I can’t have you following me or warning Christian, they’re going to take you for a while.” Grant winked at her as he handed her off to one of the SHIELD agents. “Ask them about job opportunities. We’ve recently had some openings.”

*****

Since Grant had several hours to kill before his meeting with his family, he drove the car SHIELD left for him north of Boston to Breakheart Reservation, about half an hour away from his parents’ home on the Charles River. Christian probably didn’t know about his five-year long camping trip,
so he wouldn’t expect Grant to be drawn to nature and wouldn’t look for him there. It also was a
perfect location for getting some of the down time he desperately needed (because he certainly
hadn’t gotten much on the plane) and it was sparsely populated by humans. He’d see or hear
someone coming from a long way off.

He hiked a few trails, then found a perfect place to sit and enjoy nature. Working for SHIELD
didn’t provide a lot of opportunities for restful sojourns in nature, so Grant jumped at the chance
whenever he could. Besides, he’d promised his therapist that he’d find some time before the
stressful family event. As he listened to the wind rustling through the leaves, he mulled over the
significance of his encounter with the hitwoman. Clearly, Christian believed Grant to be
susceptible to women, blonde ones specifically. Since Christian didn’t know his brother or his
preferences anymore (Grant grinned as he thought of his “type” – Kara, May, and Skye), that must
mean blonde women were one of Christian’s vulnerabilities. Grant could use that.

He also considered that, while good, the hitwoman wasn’t anywhere near Grant’s league. Despite
what he’d told her, he’d seen through her disguise almost immediately because she just didn’t act
like a businesswoman. Her behavior was too subtle, too self-effacing. There was none of the
assertiveness or self-important busyness (where was her laptop, briefcase, phone or paperwork?) he
associated with women who were successful in the boy’s club of corporate America. The
hitwoman was trying so hard to fly beneath the radar that she’d stuck out like a sore thumb. And
she’d been way too aware of Grant. Sure, that could be partially explained by sexual attraction but
her attention was too close even for that. She’d been alert to his every physical shift or change in
facial expression. And she was clearly waiting for him after they’d left the plane. He’d even seen
her sneak the knife out of her bag when she stopped at the water fountain. Given all that, Christian
obviously had little idea of the extent of Grant’s skills. He could use that too.

Grant smiled as he considered that, just like their encounter in Christian’s office, he was in the
power position. He held all the cards, not just with Christian but also with his parents. Grant had
concluded long ago that his parents were small-minded people who never should’ve had money or
power and definitely shouldn’t have had children. Unlike Christian, their abuse wasn’t well thought
out; it was impulsive. Grant had read once that physical punishment was more due to a lack of
creativity than an actual disciplinary strategy because it lacked long-term efficacy. Knowing his
parents, he believed that. Christian was the one he had to deal with and, this time, Grant was the
one to be feared. He’d never thought that would be the case.

“You have a call, Ward,” his roommate told him as he sat down on his bed.

Grant turned around and looked at him in astonishment. No one ever called him besides Elizabeth
and Thomas. He usually talked to them once a week and they weren’t due to talk again for another
several days. “What do you mean?”

His roommate sighed heavily. “There’s a telephone call waiting for you down in the Sargent’s
office. He said it was someone named Elizabeth and you need to hurry. It’s almost dinner time.”

Grant took off at a quick walk (running was never a good sign) to the main office. Once there, he
nodded politely to the secretary who pointed to the phone in the corner. He picked up the phone as
casually as he could. Rumors ran wild in military school and he didn’t want anything getting back
to his parents. “Cadet Ward speaking,” he said into the phone.

“Grant?” Elizabeth’s voice was calm but strained. “I’m sorry to call you like this but I needed to
talk to you. I don’t know what to do.”

“What’s going on?” Grant gritted his teeth. This could only mean that Christian was on a
rampage again.
“I came home from school for a few days and, I don’t know, maybe my being here unexpectedly set him off but Christian…he…” her voice broke. “Grant, he held a gun to Thomas' head and threatened to shoot him if he told Mother and Father about the girl Christian had over last night. I was out with friends but I think Thomas walked in on them having sex. Christian was livid. When I returned home, Christian’s lady friend and I actually had to pull him off of Thomas!”

Grant turned his body away from the secretary so she couldn’t see his face. “Is Thomas OK?” he asked in a whisper.

“He has a lot of cuts and bruises but overall he’s fine. You know how that goes. But Grant, I’ve never seen Christian so out of control! I was planning on going back to school today but now I don’t think I can. Mother and Father are out of town for the weekend and I don’t dare leave Thomas alone with Christian! I don’t know what to do. I can’t stay here forever!” She paused. “You’re the only one who could ever keep Christian in line. I thought you might have a better idea of how we can keep Thomas safe.”

Grant took some deep breaths and thought frantically about what he could do. This was exactly what Christian wanted. With both Elizabeth and Grant away from home, he was free to terrorize, hurt or even kill Thomas whenever he wanted and there was nothing they could do. One day, his beloved younger brother would just have an accident and he’d be dead. Thoughts of the well flashed into his mind and Grant swallowed back bile. He couldn’t allow Christian to hurt Thomas, not again. He had failed his beloved younger brother once but he wouldn’t fail him again. So, there was no other way around it. Christian would have to die.

“Elizabeth, here’s what we’re going to do,” he said in a low voice. He glanced over his shoulder at the secretary and saw with relief that she was talking on another line. “I’m coming home tonight. You need to take Thomas out, to the movies and ice cream or something, and stay away until I tell you it’s safe to come home.” There was silence on the other end of the phone. “Elizabeth? Are you still there?”

“I’m still here. Just…what are you going to do?” she asked in a small voice.

“I don’t know yet. But I’ll take care it. Just tell Thomas about the movie but, whatever you do, don’t let Christian know that I’m coming home or that you called me.”

Elizabeth gave a sigh of relief. “I knew you’d know what to do. You always do. Thank you, Grant. I’ll see you soon.”

Grant walked slowly back to his room, a plan forming in his head. He would eat a quick dinner at the mess hall so he would be seen. That way he wouldn’t be missed for hours until lights out. With any luck, he’d be home by the time they realized he was gone. He’d memorized where their English teacher kept his car keys, so all he had to do was steal his car and get on the highway. Grant knew the way home like the back of his hand, so navigation wouldn’t be a problem. And since he’d driven a few times with a friend who already had his license, the actual driving wouldn’t be an issue either. Grant tended to pick up physical tasks pretty easily.

The plan worked like clockwork and he was able to get to the Ward’s summer home shortly after dark. Fortunately, the house sat on a few acres of land dotted with trees, so their closest neighbors wouldn’t be able to see what was going on. Grant turned off the car’s headlights just as he turned into the driveway. He edged the car around the side so he could park it behind the gardening shed. Then he used a flashlight to find the matches and the gasoline he knew the gardener kept there for emergencies.

Grant crept around the shed and stood in front of the house for a few minutes trying to decide how
best to do this. He could see the light on in Christian’s room upstairs but otherwise the house was
dark. He considered confronting Christian before setting the fire but, if his plan didn’t work, he
was going to need some plausible deniability. Besides, he couldn’t let Christian talk him out of it or
injure himself in the fight that might ensue.

With that decision made, Grant eased into the house with a key he always kept at hand (his parents
had no idea he had one) and sneaked upstairs until he was outside Christian’s room on the third
floor of the house. He could hear a television droning in the background and the sound of
Christian turning the pages of a book. Satisfied that Christian was in his room, he started pouring
gasoline in a continuous trail from the front of Christian’s bedroom to the hallway on either side of
his door and then down the stairs. Grant didn’t want to leave him any room to escape. For good
measure, he tossed some gasoline in Father’s study off to the side of the front door.

He returned to the top of the stairs. This was going to be the tricky part but then Grant had always
lived life on the edge. If this killed him, so be it. He lit two whole books of matches. He threw one
book in the area by Christian’s room. It landed on the gasoline and the carpet immediately leapt
into flame. Grant held onto the other as he slid down the banister and threw the other book into
Father’s style just as he jumped off. Like it had upstairs, the matches lit up the gasoline and fire
exploded into being. He could hear Christian yelling. Grant rushed out the front door and didn’t
stop running until he’d reached the other side of their driveway. It was only then that he stopped to
admire his handiwork.

One third of the house looked to be on fire and he gazed at the flames in satisfaction. Christian
wasn’t athletic the way Grant was. There was no way he could climb onto the roof and run to the
other side of the house the way Grant could. Nor could he drop from three stories without killing
himself. Christian would be stuck in his inferno of a room and no one, not even the fire trucks he
heard coming, would be able to save him. Unfortunately for Grant, it hadn’t worked out that way.

The fire trucks got there quickly and were able to save some of the house. Believing Grant to be a
victim, the fire fighters quickly put him to the side which is where the police discovered him.
They’d arrived shortly after the fire trucks and, since Grant smelled overwhelmingly of gasoline
and had arrived in a stolen car that was still parked behind the shed, he was quickly arrested. It
hadn’t helped his case when Christian hobbled around the house.

He’d jumped out of his window and landed on a window box Elizabeth had built outside her
window. Since Grant had been at military school at the time, he didn’t know about it. The wooden
box broke Christian’s fall enough so that when he fell the rest of the way to the ground and onto
the bushes, he’d only suffered a broken ankle. The minute Christian saw him in police custody, he
started yelling about how Grant had tried to murder him. Grant yelled back about his abuse of
Thomas. It took four police officers to keep the two brothers from coming to blows.

His parents refused to come see him in jail or even provide him with a lawyer over the next 24
hours. Elizabeth and Thomas snuck in when a sympathetic guard looked the other way after she’d
bribed him with baked treats and a sob story. The two had cried over Grant’s predicament and
expressed guilt at their responsibility for his situation. That was the last time he saw them. Grant
was so emotionally drained after their emotional goodbye that he remained sullen and angry
throughout the rest of the booking process.

That was the emotional state he was in when John Garrett came to see him in juvenile detention
and told him that his family was going to throw the book at him. Although Grant now doubted
John’s truthfulness about what might’ve happened (there were other options, like appealing to his
Grams), he was under no illusions that his parents would’ve helped him. Christian in particular
would’ve tried to bury him, just like he was attempting to now. Their spitefulness was one reason
why Grant was willing to take John’s help and stay in the woods. At the time, he didn’t think he had anywhere else to go. But that was no longer the case.

Grant glanced at his watch, got up from where he was sitting and stretched. He was a long way from being the angry teenage boy who’d been sprung from detention by a Hydra agent. He was now an exceptionally intelligent and skilled man who had people who loved him and an employer who backed his every move. No matter what his parents and older brother thought, they were now the ones in the crosshairs, not Grant. Since the statute of limitations for arson in Massachusetts is six years, he’d been free of that accusation (he’d never gone to trial, so he’d never been convicted) after his first year at the Academy. Even if that hadn’t been the situation, SHIELD had wiped his record years ago.

So, for the first time in his life, Grant was the one they were going to fear. He was the one in control. The boy had, at long last, become the man. With that thought, he breathed in the smells of the woods one last time and headed to his car. He was ready to face his family.
Driving through the streets of Beacon Hill on his way to his parents’ house made Grant surprisingly nostalgic. Although the house the Ward family lived in now wasn’t, thankfully, the house in which he’d grown up, this was the same general area. While he’d never been happy with his family overall, Grant still had happy times, especially with Elizabeth and Thomas. He’d even had some casual friends who’d joined him on adventures in the neighborhood. One such adventure had involved sneaking into Cheers, the bar from the TV show which wasn’t far from their neighborhood. That had been fun. So it wasn’t the place that was bad, just his family.

Grant reached the correct address and parked in front of their enormous $7 million house on Chestnut Street (he’d looked up the appraised price). He was still early, so he had some time to sit there and listen in on Christian’s phone calls as he was driving to the house. The first one was pretty stereotypical, so that had to be the wife, Anna.

“I’m sorry, Hon,” Christian was saying regretfully. Grant rolled his eyes at the “Hon.” Even if he hadn’t been sure beforehand that Christian’s marriage was for show, the syrupy sweet endearment would’ve tipped him off. The only question was whether Anna believed it. “I’ll try to make it home this weekend but with the strategy meetings, it’s just…Okay. Love you.”

Christian’s “love you” was said in a flat tone. Anna didn’t sound like she was all that broken up by the prospect of a Christian-free weekend. Guess she doesn’t buy his act. Grant didn’t really blame her but he felt a bit sad. Not for the first time, he sent a thought of gratitude to the universe for helping him – however imperfectly – avoid having to live a life of wealth, power and privilege. Sure, there were a few perks from time to time but he’d take doing inventory and eating a sandwich with his SHIELD family any day over dining on gourmet food with his parents, Christian and the elite circles in which they moved. And he would always take his passionate relationship with Skye over the cold sham of a marriage that seemed characteristic of wealthy unions. Certainly his parents never seemed to enjoy each other’s company and now it seemed Christian and his wife were following that same dynamic.

Grant remained in his car, listening. He’d seen his mother peer quickly through the windows a few minutes ago. Watching him sit there without making a move to enter their house undoubtedly made his parents anxious, a state he was all too willing for them to experience. And he needed to know what was going on with Christian. If he was lying to Anna about his whereabouts over the weekend, his brother was up to something. He doubted that Christian had been informed that his amateurish attempt to kill Grant hadn’t worked, so it had to be something else nefarious.

Knowledge is power.

His patience was quickly rewarded as Christian waited all of five seconds before calling another woman. “It’s me,” he told her smugly. “Yep. Wide open. My family’s summer place.” His voice took on an intimate tone. Grant smiled as he imagined Skye pantomiming vomiting at this. “Did you get my present yet?” Christian laughed. “Of course it’s see-through. That’s the point.” Grant rolled his eyes again. Typical. A cheating politician was so cliché that he was almost disappointed in Christian. He expected better (or worse). Grant briefly pondered the idea of getting Skye some see-through lingerie but quickly discarded the thought. Skye would find it predictable and lacking in creativity. Regardless, his mind stayed stuck on the image of her in sexy clothing for a little while.
Grant could see Christian’s car turn the corner and he shook his head to clear his mind. He needed to focus. Christian finished his phone call. His black SUV slowed in front of his house to let Christian out, then sped off, presumably to park somewhere close. *We certainly can’t have a United State senator wasting his time on walking!* Grant waited a few minutes more, then got out of his car, crossed the street and rang the doorbell.

A small, dark-haired woman with heart-shaped features opened the door. She first looked impassively at Grant, then her brow furrowed and a puzzled expression crossed her face. A second later, her eyes widened and her mouth dropped. “Mr…..Mr…..Grant, is that you?” she asked disbelievingly.

Grant smiled fondly at her. “Yes, Galina, it’s me. It’s been a long time. How have you been?”

Galina had been with the Ward family for as long as Grant could remember. She ran the household while her husband Pyotr maintained the yard and vehicles and did any general maintenance that was required. The couple had always been kind to all the children in the house, but especially Grant. It was Galina who first taught him how to speak Russian.

Smiling through her tears, Galina ushered Grant into the house, then put her shaking hand gently on his cheek. “Я никогда не думал, что увижу тебя снова.” (*I never thought I’d see you again.*)

Grant took her hand, kissed the back of it, then continued holding it in front of him. “Я никогда не хотел возвращаться. Но, по крайней мере, это дает мне возможность рассказать вам и Петру, насколько вы были для меня важны. Ваша доброта означала больше, чем вы знаете.” (*I never wanted to return. But at least it gives me the chance to tell you and Pyotr how important you were to me. Your kindness meant more than you know.*)

Galina’s smile widened as her expression showed her delight that he remembered how to speak in her native tongue. The tears in her eyes shimmered as she grasped his other hand, pulled the joined arms apart and stepped back to observe all of Grant. “Ты превратился в красивого мужчину, все, что я всегда надеялся, что ты будешь.” (*You’ve grown into a handsome man, everything I always hoped you’d be.*)

He chuckled, trying desperately not to get caught up in the emotion of the moment. He needed to maintain his focus. “Спасибо тебе за все. Теперь, прежде чем они станут подозрительными, вы должны отвезти меня к родителям.” (*Thank you, for everything. Now, you’d better take me in to see my parents before they get suspicious.*)

Galina bowed her head in acquiescence and gestured for Grant to follow her down the hallway. He could see the kitchen in the back side of the house, right before the brown carpeted stairway that they climbed to get to the second floor. The staircase continued to the third floor (Grant knew that was where the bedrooms probably were located) but they stopped on the second and entered a formal sitting room where Cortland and Belinda Ward, Grant’s parents, were standing. It had been 15 years since Grant had seen them in person but, of course, he’d seen recent pictures so their appearance wasn’t a total surprise. But pictures didn’t do justice to the differences that 15 years had wrought in them.

Cort (as his friends called him) looked less like a powerful wielder of influence, ready to attack at any moment, than he did a banker whose biggest task all day was monitoring the stock market. Grant wondered at the difference in animation and emanation of power. *Was he always like this or has age softened him?* Cort’s physique was not as muscled, his hair more grey than dark, and there were lines on his face that Grant didn’t ever remember seeing before. Belinda was thicker around the middle than she had been 15 years ago but her expensive clothes hid it well. Her light blonde hair was pulled back into an elegant chignon and there were the telltale lines of age but the whiskey
colored eyes that she’d bequeathed to Grant were still as big and beautiful as ever. Unlike Cort, she seemed to radiate more power than ever. For the first time, Grant realized that she more than his father was the power behind the throne.

When he’d been climbing the stairs, he’d been able to hear the sound of his parents talking but they fell silent once he and Galina entered the room. They’d been facing each other but turned almost as one to greet him. Grant could tell that they were anxious but trying valiantly to pretend that they weren’t. Christian was nowhere to be seen.

“Mr. Grant,” Galina said as she gestured for him to enter, then she turned and left.

The room was deathly still for a moment, then his mother smiled and moved towards Grant, her hands outstretched as if to grasp his. “Grant!” She stopped a few feet away, letting her hands drop to her sides after noticing that he hadn’t extended his hands to take hers. “Look at you. It’s been so long, I barely recognize you!” She paused, her eyes raking him up and down, taking in his muscled exterior and the well-fitting yet casual clothes. Grant knew his lack of formal dress was sure to irritate them. After all, there were appearances to maintain. “Doesn’t he look great, Cort?” she asked over her shoulder.

Taking his cue, Grant’s father put on a smile and strode to where Belinda was standing. “He certainly does! He’s the very image of my father at that age.” He chuckled, shaking his head. “Looking as you do, I imagine that you get a lot of attention from the ladies, don’t you son?”

Grant’s facial expression hadn’t changed one iota from the blank mask he’d adopted when he came into the room. Cort had never called Grant son in private, only in public when it could give the impression that he was a warm and affectionate father. So, his use of the word now was manipulative. “Don’t call me son. You gave up that right 15 years ago when you left me to rot.”

His mother’s smile dropped off her face but she said nothing. They’d obviously decided that Cort would be the one to deal with Grant. His father’s face took on a grave expression, so classic that Grant wondered if he actually practiced it in the mirror. “Those were difficult times, Grant, and I can’t tell you how much we’ve regretted our actions over the years. But you’re mistaken in thinking that we were going to let you rot. We were just trying to teach you a lesson by letting you spend a few nights in that place. We were always going to help you. We were in the process of getting you a lawyer when you escaped from the facility.”

Grant struggled not to get sucked into their lies. They had to be absolute masters at it by now. After all, Christian first learned how to manipulate and abuse from them. His facial expression still hadn’t changed and, going by the way their eyes kept scanning his face, this bothered them. “And yet you never bothered to look for me. Or did I just miss the media circus that would’ve been sure to occur had the son of a prominent family been reported missing?”

He fought to keep his tone neutral and not sarcastic. He couldn’t let them know how this still upset him. At the time, Grant had no idea of what happened after John broke him out because they’d driven immediately to Wyoming. However, once Grant joined the Academy, he’d checked out the local newspapers and discovered that there’d never been even one word written about his escape.

“Yes, of course we looked for you!” Belinda exclaimed, inching a little closer to him. He guessed that she was dying to touch him, a simple way of getting people to listen and believe her sincerity. “We looked for you for years after that. We consulted the best detectives who advised us not to alert the media in case it caused the people who took you to harm you. We kept it quiet in order to keep you safe! You have no idea the nightmare we’ve lived, not knowing if you were alive or dead. You cannot imagine our relief when Christian discovered you were working for SHIELD!”
“I’m sure SHIELD would’ve let me know if you were trying to get in touch but I never heard a word. I guess your relief didn’t extend to seeing me in person,” Grant said steadily.

“Son…I mean Grant,” Cort said, stumbling over his mistake, “we agonized over what to do. We didn’t know what had happened to you or if you’d even be happy to see us. In the end, we decided that it was best if we let you come to us.” He smiled, in what Grant was sure he thought was a winning way. It probably worked well on titans of industry and politicians. “And here you are!” He gestured to the couches behind them. “Now, why don’t we sit and have a drink to celebrate. What can we get you?”

Grant nodded shortly and chose to sit in a single chair in the middle of the room with its back to the wall. He didn’t want anyone sitting close to him. And, since he didn’t know where Christian was, he needed to scan his surroundings. If ever there was a time for situational awareness, this was it. He was deep in the lion’s den. “Nothing for me, thank you.”

“Oh? What a shame,” his mother said lightly as she pressed a button on her watch. Grant guessed it informed Galina that she was needed. Both his parents sat down on an uncomfortable looking couch directly facing him. “I hope you don’t mind if we have a celebratory cocktail. After all, it isn’t every day that your long-lost son returns home.”

“No, I suppose not. Please, feel free to have as many as you like,” Grant responded drily. For his purposes, having his parents drinking would be helpful. He needed acquiescence and removing their usual filter would be good.

His mother gave him a sharp look just as Galina came into the room. “Did you need something, ma’am?”

“Oh yes, Galina. I’ll have a martini and Mr. Ward will have his usual Scotch and soda.” Belinda said regally.

Galina nodded, then hesitated and looked over at Grant. “А как насчет вас? Принести вам что-нибудь?” (What about you? Can I get you anything?)

He smiled at her. She always did have a rebellious streak. “Нет, ничего для меня, спасибо. И вы действительно не должны нажимать на них такие кнопки. Они уже на грани, заставив меня здесь.: (No, nothing for me, thanks. And you really shouldn’t push their buttons like this. They’re already on edge by having me here.) He noted his parents’ momentary frowns of displeasure at not knowing what was being said between Grant and Galina but they quickly put their pleasant expressions back on.

Belinda followed Galina’s progress out of the room, then turned to Grant. “How nice that you’ve kept up with the lessons Galina gave you all those years ago,” she said evenly. Grant smothered a grin. “I suspect that it’s one of those useless skills that people put on resumes or do you actually use it in your line of work?”

“I speak six languages and use all of them quite frequently,” he answered in the same tone.

“Well, that’s wonderful!” Cort said heartily. “I always said you had great potential!”

“Did you?” Grant asked. “You never said that me. The only person who ever encouraged me was Grams.”

Cort nodded, trying to look sentimental. “Mother always was an excellent judge of character.”

Grant hid his smile as he watched Belinda try to conceal her dislike of his grandmother. She was
well aware of how much Grams had disliked her. “She certainly was,” he said gaily, looking
directly at Belinda who flushed.

“But you’re wrong that we never encouraged you,” Cort continued earnestly. “Maybe we never
said it to you directly but you must remember all the special tutors we hired to help cultivate your
gifts.”

Grant shrugged and sat back in his chair. “I remember the tutors but what I recall is that they were
hired only for those times when Christian had beaten me so badly that I couldn’t go to school.” He
smiled nastily. “We couldn’t let people know that I was being abused. After all, appearances must
be maintained.”

There was a horrified silence as Galina came in to deliver the drinks. Grant supposed that this was
the first time something like this had been spoken aloud. It was easier to keep up the façade so long
as no one talked about what was actually going on. He wondered if his parents convinced
themselves of the lie or if they just didn’t care. Watching their faces, he guessed that their self-
delusion had only been strengthened throughout the years. That will make things easier.

Belinda’s face was stripped of expression as she took a sip of her martini. “You must be
misremembering what happened, Grant,” she said coldly. “You were a difficult child from the first
and…umm….unfortunate methods had to be taken in order to keep you in line but no one in this
house has ever been abused. That would be appalling!”

Grant nodded. “It really would be.” He paused just long enough to let them understand that he was
mocking them. “Speaking of appalling, shouldn’t Christian be making his entrance now?”

His father opened his mouth to speak but, as if on cue, Christian strolled into the room, drink in
hand, seemingly oblivious to the tense atmosphere. “Please excuse my tardiness but I had some
important business to complete. I hope I didn’t miss too much.” He sat down in a chair just to the
right of the couch where their parents were sitting.

“We were just discussing how our parents are abusive assholes but, as you mentioned the other
day, that’s not news to you. So, you didn’t miss much by finalizing your plans for the weekend
with your mistress.” It was all Grant could do to maintain his neutral expression as he observed
their outraged expressions. As Christian’s outrage morphed into fear and betrayal, Grant allowed
himself a small smile. Christian couldn’t engage Grant about spying on him without letting on that
he was indeed talking with his mistress, so Grant had him over a barrel. Grant’s smile let Christian
know that they both knew it.

Grant’s smile dropped off his face as he turned to face his parents. “Now that we’ve dispensed with
all the pleasantries, we need to talk about the issues I came here to discuss. The first item of
business has to do with SHIELD. I am tasked with asking each one of you to condemn Hydra and
support SHIELD with your money, connections, and statements to the media.”

His mother gave him a wintry smile. “And why would we do that? Your brother,” she waved her
drink in Christian’s general direction, “has gone on record labeling SHIELD as a terrorist
organization and vowing to destroy it. As his family, we must support him. And while we have no
love for Hydra, at least it hasn’t been receiving the negative press that SHIELD has.”

“I realize that but, as we established earlier, appearances can be deceiving.” Grant said slowly,
pausing to let the barb sink in. Cort flushed but Belinda didn’t break her gaze. “SHIELD both needs
and deserves your support. We’re hoping to get it voluntarily but, if necessary, I can give you other
reasons why you will do what I ask.”
“Let me get this straight,” Christian broke in, “are you blackmailing us? Cheating on my wife might be frowned upon but that’s not enough to make us do anything.”

Grant shook his head and smiled. “Blackmail is such an ugly word, Christian. I prefer to call it… leverage. And I’m not worried about your mistress. That’s your wife’s concern. I’d rather focus on things you definitely don’t want other people to know. You know, smallish things like embezzlement from a children’s charity,” Grant pointed to Belinda, “electoral fraud and voter suppression” he pointed to Cort, “and trading government funding for traditional weapons and alien artifacts,” he finished as he mockingly tipped a pretend hat to Christian. Silence swept over the room, leaving the distinct taste of dismay and ruin in the air. Grant leaned back in his chair, folded his arms, surveying his family’s distress with satisfaction. Who has the power now?

All the color had drained from Cort’s face. He took a sip of his drink from a shaking hand and placed it carefully on the table next to him. He leaned forward and asked in a low voice, “How could you possibly know all that?”


He turned to face her. “What’s the point in pretending, Belinda? It’s clear that Grant knows our worst secrets and he’s angry enough with us to use them. It’s time to cut our losses. We either agree to his terms or prepare for ruin.”

“Who ever thought you’d be the smart one in the family, Dad?” Grant asked sarcastically.

Christian smirked at Grant. “They always said the same thing about you.”

“Well, who could blame them?” Grant chuckled as he watched Christian realize what he’d said. Time to lower the boom. “But before we go any further, I haven’t even told you all of my demands. Those were just for SHIELD. My personal demands have to do with the monetary claims I have on the Ward family assets.” He paused to let them absorb that blow. “According to the terms of Grams’ will, I am entitled to 1/3 of her estate. Given that at the time of her death, her estate was worth $750 million, simple math dictates that $250 million of that is mine.”

“No, you need to wait,” Grant calmly interrupted. “Since I never showed up to claim my portion, you didn’t take the trouble of altering the will or making it difficult for me to obtain my share, so acceding to that demand should be simple. You do that or face going to court. Not only will all your ugly secrets come out but you’ll also lose the money anyway since my 1/3 share was Grams’ undisputed wish. So I think you’ll all easily agree to that.”

Cort looked at Belinda for an intense moment. Christian was apparently smart enough to remain quiet and let them have their silent discussion. After Belinda gave a short nod, Cort turned to Grant. “We will agree to that. I must say, I was never so surprised as the day I read her will. I have no idea why she decided to split her estate into thirds but you’re right. It was her last wish.”

“Now wait just a minute…” Christian spluttered.

“By the way, who could blame them?” Grant chortled as he watched Christian realize what he’d said. Time to lower the boom. “But before we go any further, I haven’t even told you of my demands. Those were just for SHIELD. My personal demands have to do with the monetary claims I have on the Ward family assets.” He paused to let them absorb that blow. “According to the terms of Grams’ will, I am entitled to 1/3 of her estate. Given that at the time of her death, her estate was worth $750 million, simple math dictates that $250 million of that is mine.”

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“If none of you have any clue as to why she gave me so much, then you didn’t know her at all.” He let that sink in. “But, like I said, that was the easy part. I also want a relationship with Elizabeth and Thomas and a large part of the Ward family assets” Grant paused yet again, this time to gather his courage. Other than Skye, no one in SHIELD knew about this part. This is my go for the gold moment! I can’t screw it up! He leaned forward. “Let’s cut to the chase here. For whatever reason, the three of you always hated me. I can’t claim to know why or convince you of how wrong you are. That’s not what I’m here to do. What SHIELD wants you do – to support them against Hydra – is the right thing to do for this country and for the world. I think you know that. What I want you to
do – to not interfere in any relationship I have with Elizabeth and Thomas and to cash me out of this
family, payment for my time and suffering if you will – is the right thing to do for me and for
them. I think you know that too. If you give me this, I’ll never darken your door again. I will truly
be gone from your lives. But if you don’t – and please believe me when I say a part of me wishes
that you won’t – then I will make your lives a living hell. I will destroy you and don’t think for a
minute that I can’t. Not only am I SHIELD but I’m a Specialist in SHIELD. There’s little I can’t do
and almost nothing I won’t.”

Once again, a dismayed silence punctuated the room. This time, it was different because it was
flavored with emotion other than fear. Grant was more than a little shocked by the fleeting looks of
shame and guilt from both Belinda and Cort. He’d always suspected that his father knew that the
way they treated Grant was wrong but he never imagined that his mother did too. Before he could
dwell too much on that, Christian’s apparent internal struggle caught Grant’s attention. He could
almost see how the fear was overtaken by anger in Christian’s effort to keep in control.

Christian’s sneer towards Grant was truly impressive. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. No
one hated you. That was one of the stories you told other people to get them to feel sorry for you.
Poor, misunderstood Grant. And Grams bought it hook, line and sinker.” He shook his head in
disgust. “If anything, we treated you better than you deserved given how awful you were to us.
You tried to burn me alive! And now you’re trying to blackmail us out of our hard-earned money
and reputations?” He sat back, crossed his arms and smirked. “You know what I think? I think that
SHIELD would never allow you to do anything to us, especially not with their reputation in such
serious trouble and with me being a sitting United States Senator. I even doubt how good you are
at your job. After all, look at where SHIELD is today. Everyone knows that an organization is only
as good as its employees.”

Grant gave a mirthless smile. He actually appreciated Christian’s efforts and would’ve been
disappointed with immediate capitulation. The fight makes victory all the sweeter. “Your political
training is serving you well, Christian. Those were some great alternative facts and truly masterful
pivoting. You’d be a great Senator if only you had a good moral compass.” He shrugged. “But I
guess you come by the lack of one honestly.” Grant waited for both his parents and Christian’s
offended expressions, then narrowed his gaze at Christian. “And if you doubt my skills big brother,
then by all means check in with the assassin you hired. Don’t be too surprised if you can’t get
through to her though.”

Christian’s look of fear in response to this was incredibly gratifying. Grant purposefully phrased it
so that it sounded like he killed the hitwoman. He wanted to tell Christian that the woman first
made out with him and then tried hitting on him once she was caught just to rub salt in the wound.
But he didn’t. He just wanted this done. He also needed to concentrate in order to catch the range
of expressions that were crossing his parents’ faces. He was expecting the rage and impotence but
was a bit surprised that they didn’t appear to know about Christian’s hitwoman. I guess that’s
something.

“And just so we’re clear, don’t even think about trying to peddle Christian’s sob story about me to
anyone else ever again. The man who helped me escape from juvy suspected that you might try to
make trouble for me, so he got all he could on you. I have everything from pictures of what I used
to look like after one of your ‘unfortunate methods’ of discipline to doctor’s reports and personal
statements from teachers and employees who were too scared then to come forward. If you ever lie
about me, I will ruin your reputations in no time flat. Child abusers are despised and you won’t be
any exception. My friend also gathered evidence of all the financial chicanery and shady dealings
you’d done up until the time I left. That doesn’t even include the new evidence of embezzlement,
 fraud and weapons trafficking that I have on you now. You think that SHIELD won’t let me do
anything to you? Trust me. They won’t be able to stop me.”
Dead silence. Then Belinda sighed. “Grant, you’ve given us a lot to think about in a short amount of time. Do you have specific offers, both from SHIELD and from you personally?”

Grant nodded. “I do.” He leaned over, rolled up his pants leg and took out a thin, flesh-toned cylinder. He unrolled it and took out two pieces of paper. He almost grinned at the expressions on their faces. *Let them see some of the spy stuff at work.* “As you might imagine, these are unofficial. One is from SHIELD. The other is from me detailing my monetary requests. It also contains a number of links to the evidence that I’ve gathered on you.” He gave a taunting half smile. “Just in case you doubt the veracity of my claims.”

He got up from his chair and handed them to Belinda. She took them and without even glancing at them, coolly met Grant’s eyes. “We’re going to need some time to go over these. What kind of deadline do we have for making a decision?”

“I can give you 20 minutes.” He tilted his head towards the window. “I’ll be right over there when you’re ready to talk.”

“Twenty minutes is an impossible amount of time in which to make such a huge decision!” Belinda snapped. “It’s traditional to give at least 24 hours and allow us time to discuss without being overheard.”

“Traditional isn’t how SHIELD does things. They need an answer quickly and so do I.” He put on a fake serious expression. “I’ll do my best not to listen.”

Belinda searched his face, probably trying to see if he could be bent to her will. She apparently decided that he couldn’t because she then gave Grant what he remembered as her public *You’ve made me very angry and I’ll deal with you later* look that promised pain and anguish. Grant was pleased to discover that he no longer experienced a shiver of dread at the sight of it. “Very well then. Please excuse us while we discuss.”

He nodded, ostentatiously set his watch and walked over to the window. It was far enough away that it would’ve been difficult to hear what they were saying had he not been able to listen to them through the tiny comms unit in his ear. At first, Grant let his mind wander a bit since they were just talking trash about him, expressing dismay at the position in which they found themselves and outrage at the amount he wanted. It wasn’t necessary for him to hear that. Besides, he was taping everything. If he went back over the tape later and found something he needed to address, he could.

While taking them down had been fun, it was also exhausting and Grant wished with every fiber of his being that it hadn’t been necessary. *It’s stupid but what I wouldn’t give for them to love me!* He tried not to dwell on the fact that not one of them had made a sincere effort to welcome him back into the fold or express true regret about what had transpired between them all those years ago. If ever Grant doubted that they hated him, he was assured of it now.

In an effort to temporarily remove himself from the situation, he glanced miserably out the window. *What is this?* Leaning against his car with their arms crossed were four people dressed in black. Each appeared casual but Grant detected combat readiness in their stances. He grinned and shook his head as he noted the rapt attention with which May, Bobbi, Trip and Kara gave to the house. Almost as one, they all looked up at him in the window. Trip saluted, Kara gave the OK sign and Bobbi did a thumbs up. May just nodded. All of a sudden, the fatigue and sense of despair that had been creeping into his soul faded and he was reminded that he was only dealing with his biological family. His real family, at least part of it, was outside leaning on his car. He smiled and tuned back into the discussions going on across the room.

“Mother, I really don’t see that we have any choice. Yes, it’s an insane amount of money and we’re
going to have to shift a lot of assets to get it. But with what he has on us, I’d definitely lose my Senate seat and we’d all either go to prison or be forced to spend almost all our fortune on lawyers to prevent it. Either way, our reputations would be ruined. I wouldn’t be surprised if Anna divorced me over this and then our connection to her family would be severed.”

Grant smirked as he reflected that the requested reversal of their attitude towards SHIELD was a no-brainer. It was the money that had them truly upset.

“I’m not surprised at your weakness, Christian,” Belinda sneered, “but think of Thomas and Elizabeth. One of his conditions was that we not be able to interfere in any relationship he has with them. Grant was always difficult and we have no idea of how much worse he is now. You said that you couldn’t get SHIELD to release any information about him to you. That must mean that he’s dangerous. What if he decided to hurt them or tell them lies about our family? We must be able to protect them.”

Grant grinned at Christian’s groan of disgust. “Why am I not surprised?” Christian asked Belinda in a disgusted tone. “It’s always about Thomas, isn’t it? Here we are, threatened with ruin by your middle son, and all you can think about is what will happen to Thomas if Grant so much as talks to him. Hell, maybe I should join Grant since doing everything you’ve ever asked me to do has never won me any favors from you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Christian! This is neither the time nor the place for this conversation!” Belinda said sharply.

“Mother, he has us on the ropes! Grant may be violent but he’s never been stupid. I believe him when he says he has information on us and is willing to use it and you should too. I’m not willing to roll the dice on this! You and Father might avoid prison because of your age and standing in the community but, as a Senator, they’d want to make an example out of me!”

“Weren’t you the one just 10 minutes ago who told Grant that he didn’t believe SHIELD would let him do anything to us?” Belinda hissed at Christian. “Or was that just for show?”

“Of course it was! Grant’s always been easily swayed and I didn’t think this time would be any different. Clearly I was mistaken,” Christian said. Grant smirked a little at this.

“I should’ve known you’d fold at the first sign of trouble,” Belinda said scornfully. “You wouldn’t have any spine at all if I didn’t glue one into you.”

“Mother…”

“Belinda, Christian’s right,” Cort interrupted in a low tone. “I don’t see that there’s much we can do. Grant’s deal doesn’t leave us with much but, at least this way, we have a chance to recoup our losses eventually. If we go to prison or get into a big legal battle, we’ll have nothing.” He paused and looked consideringly in Grant’s direction. “I don’t think we have to worry about Grant hurting Elizabeth and Thomas. They all seemed to get along fairly well before he left and they never seemed scared of him. If he wanted to hurt them, it seems like he’d come up with other means, like he has with us.”

Grant tried not to steam at this turn in the conversation. He would never willingly hurt his siblings. However, he did beat up Thomas from time to time because of Christian’s bullying, so perhaps he earned some of his mother’s ire over for that. And at least his father was sort of standing up for him for once.

Belinda looked closely at Cort and frowned. “It’s clear that I’m outvoted.” She shrugged. “Maybe
it’ll be worth it to get rid of Grant for once and for all. There also may be opportunities,” she
lowered her voice even further, “with Hydra and other allies to get back some of what we’re losing.
If the rumors are true, surely Hydra has no love for Grant.”

Thanks, Mom. Grant looked out of the window and smiled again at seeing his fellow Specialists.
They were here to support him. They had a million things to do but instead were choosing to stand
guard to make sure he was OK both physically and emotionally. Maybe they couldn’t totally make
up for his lousy parents but they still counted for a lot. He glanced at his watch. Time’s almost up.

“Why do you keep looking out the window?” Christian demanded. “What’s out there?”

“Nothing for you to worry about. I’ve just been signaling to my colleagues that things are going
well.”

“Right,” Christian said sarcastically, stomping over to the window and glancing out. Almost like
it’d been choreographed, all four Specialists waved at him. Christian paled and turned away,
hurrying back to his parents.

Grant tried not to smile. His watch beeped. He turned it off and looked back at the family members
he hoped never to see again. “Time’s up. SHIELD and I need an answer.” He waved his hand at
the couch, as if urging them to sit. “Please.”

Belinda looked at Cort and nodded. They all took their previous places as did Grant. “You’ve once
again put us in an impossible position,” Belinda started, holding her head high and speaking in
dignified tones, “but we nevertheless consent to SHIELD’s request and to yours. While we can
fulfill SHIELD’s requirements almost immediately, yours will take a little more time. We can’t just
hand over millions overnight.”

“Actually you can. My share of Grams’ estate is just sitting in an account in the Caymans, almost
like it’s waiting for me.” Grant tried not to smirk at their astonished faces. Clearly, they didn’t
think anyone knew about that account. “I’m not sure what you were going to do with it but it’s
easily transferable, something I expect you to do within an hour of my departure. However, you’re
correct that the rest of the money will take some time to gather since you’re going to have to
liquefy a lot of assets. Two weeks should give you ample time.”

Cort leaned forward and said, “Hold on a moment. You may be a man of many talents but I doubt
financial management is one of them. There’s no way that we can scrape together roughly ¾ of our
estate in such a short amount of time! There are people we must consult and sales to be arranged.
That can take months.” He looked sadly at Grant. “I know you’re angry with us, son. You have a
right to be. Our family didn’t always function as smoothly as it should have. And I realize that you
want to punish us for what happened in the past. Maybe we deserve it. But this isn’t the way.
Grams’ money is yours outright and we will, of course, give it to you immediately. But the rest? I
don’t think that making us poor will make you feel better and that’s certainly not what we want.
Your mother and I don’t want to buy you out of our family, not when we just got you back. We
want to see more of you, not less. Will you at least consider giving us six months in which to gather
the money? During that time, maybe we can try to heal old wounds and see whether we can move
forward as a family.” He paused and smiled warmly. “What do you say?”

Grant sat back and smiled. “The first thing I’d say is that the next time you make an impassioned
speech like that, you might want your co-conspirators to at least pretend like they agree with you.”

Cort’s smile dropped off of his face. “It was a nice speech, Dad – I’ll give you that – but if I
wanted bullshit, I’d take up cattle ranching. Mom can’t threaten to have me killed five minutes
before you talk about healing old wounds and then have me believe that you’re serious about
reconnecting.” If the moment weren’t so grim, the expression on Belinda’s face would’ve made
Grant laugh. Even Christian looked a little amused.

Cort’s face went ashen. “How did you…?”

“It doesn’t matter how I know, it just matters that I do.” Grant felt his control start to slip and his voice get louder. “But since you brought up family unity, let me tell you a little secret. If when Christian first told you about seeing me, any of you had been even the tiniest bit excited to see me or wondered how I’ve been over the years, I might’ve had second thoughts about making you suffer. I might’ve even tried to heal old wounds and see if we could be a family again. If you cared even one iota about me, your grand speech might’ve worked. But you don’t. Instead, Christian sent an assassin and Mom is right this second plotting how she can get Hydra to do your dirty work so that I’m dead and you get to keep the money.”

He took a deep breath and glanced toward the hallway. Galina was standing in the doorway with a tray of drinks, her face completely blank. “Would anyone care for more drinks?”

Belinda smoothed the glare from her face. “Yes, thank you Galina. That would be very welcome.”

Galina quietly handed out the drinks for Belinda, Cort and Christian. “Mr. Grant?” she asked, holding a glass of what looked like water.

He shook his head, smiling slightly. “No, thank you. Nothing for me.”

She inclined her head graciously and exited the room.

“I don’t think you all quite understand the position you’re in,” Grant started in a calmer tone. He was deeply grateful for Galina’s interruption because it allowed him to call to mind his training. “I spent all those years under your thumb but the worm has turned. I’m the one in control now. You will do what both SHIELD and I requested and you will do it in the timeframe that we’ve given you. No emotional appeals or negotiations will change that, so it’s in your best interest not to try. If I get too angry, I might ask for more.”

Cort leaned forward and opened his mouth as if to say something but then shut it. His face took on a puzzled expression as if he just realized that there was, at last, someone he couldn’t manipulate or control. He sat back on the couch.

Grant continued on as if he hadn’t noticed this. “If you fail SHIELD, they will come take you in the dead of night and leave you there to rot. They’ll make it look good, your colleagues and friends if you have them will think that you’re dead. But if you fail me – if you don’t give me the money I want or if you try to have me killed – then I will destroy you so completely that death might even look good. After I’ve taken everything, not just ¾ but everything down to your last penny, then I will make sure that everyone knows the cheating, fraudulent, abusive scum that you are. After I get finished with you, no one – and I do mean no one – will want to have anything to do with you. Being poor will seem like a picnic compared to the public humiliation and shunning that you’ll receive both in and out of prison. And don’t think for a second that I can’t or won’t do it.”

Once again, there was silence. They were all just looking at him with fear on their faces. There was no regret and there never would be. Grant, struggling for control again, recognized that it was time to leave. He stood, looking down at the people who’d caused him such misery for so long. “You know, the true tragedy here is that all I ever wanted was your love, all of you,” he said, looking over at Christian who flushed. “It’s such a small thing yet it’s also the only thing. But I’ve realized that the fault wasn’t mine, it was yours. I love and am loved by a lot of people – including the most wonderful woman in the world and those four people outside – and it’s glorious. I actually feel sorry for you that you’ll never understand what that’s like.”
Grant walked over to the doorway and looked back at his family, the people who’d occupied his heart and soul for way too long. No more. “If everything goes well, this will be our last meeting. Someone from SHIELD will get in touch with you about the specifics of your deal with them. I’ll expect Grams’ money within the hour and the rest of what we discussed in two weeks from today exactly. If that doesn’t happen, then you will see me again but I won’t be nearly as nice.”

He walked out into the hallway and nodded at Galina who was waiting to show him out. The two navigated the stairs in silence. Once they reached the front door, Grant turned to her. “Благодарим вас за показ уборщицы, где нужно сажать устройства для прослушивания. Тебе не нужно было это делать для меня. Я благодарен.” (Thank you for showing the cleaning crew where to plant the listening devices. You didn’t have to do that for me but I’m grateful.)

Galina smiled one and placed her hand gently on his cheek. “Ты всегда был моим фаворитом, и я ненавидел то, что они сделали с тобой. Я остался только тогда, чтобы сделать все, что мог. После того, как вы ушли, я остался для.” (You were always my favorite. I hated what they did to you. I only stayed back then so I could do what I could for you. After you left, I stayed for the other two.)

Grant smiled sadly. “Это не мое дело, но мне любопытно. Почему вы продолжаете оставаться? Вы должны знать, что они ужасные люди, не достойные вашего служения.” (It’s none of my business but I’m curious. Why do you continue to stay? You must know that they’re not worthy of your service.)

Tears filled her eyes and she looked down. “Мы с Петром ленились. Работа проста и хорошо оплачивается. Теперь мне стыдно.” (Pyotr and I got lazy. The work is easy and well paid. Now I am ashamed.)

He put his finger underneath her chin and gently tipped it up so she would look him in the face. “Вы не должны стыдиться. Их грехи не ваши. Вы и Петр - хорошие люди, которые заслуживают большой жизни. Хотя я не хочу, чтобы вы делали что-либо на моем счету, вы должны знать, что для них наступают трудные времена. Было бы лучше, если бы вы ушли.” (You shouldn’t be ashamed. Their sins aren’t yours. You and Pyotr are good people who deserve a great life. While I don’t want you to do anything on my account, you should know that hard times are coming for them. It might be best if you left.)

She smiled a bit tremulously and nodded. “Я подслушал кое-что из того, что они сделали, и увидел, как они к вам относятся. Тогда я знал, что нам пора идти.” (I overheard some of what they’ve done and saw how they treated you. It’s time for us to go.)

Grant smiled back at her. “Пожалуйста, будь на связи. Еще раз спасибо за все.” (Please keep in touch. Thanks again for everything.) He bent down to envelop Galina in a hug. She squeezed him hard and he could feel her shaking. Then she kissed him on the cheek and walked away. He opened the door and exited the house.

As the air from the outside hit him, Grant took a deep breath. He’d done it! He’d survived a meeting with his family and emerged the victor! Sure, there was still work to be done but he’d never have to have a solo face-to-face discussion like that ever again. He smiled as he walked toward his fellow Specialists who were still standing by his car. Once he got there, Kara gave him
a big hug while Bobbi patted him on the back and Trip stood there grinning.

“You ready to go home?” May asked in a no-nonsense voice.

Grant exchanged a long look with her. *Thank you.* “Definitely.”

Chapter End Notes

Whew! This was really a hard one since I had to imagine a backstory for each of them, get their dialogue right and figure out Grant's response to them. It was very, very tough. I hope it was worth all the agonizing!
Love, American Style

Grant followed the four specialists in his rental car, navigating the stoplights, turns and road congestion easily but carefully. True to his training, he tried to turn off his brain and focus solely on what was going on around him, not a difficult task in Boston traffic. The streets teemed with cars angling to get to their destination as quickly as possible and pedestrians who were either oblivious to or uncaring of the vehicles whizzing past them.

As challenging as the hubbub of Boston was, Grant still struggled to keep his focus where it belonged. His mind was itching to go over the meeting with family, what was said, what was agreed to and what still needed to occur. But he knew that much of John’s training was excellent. “Once you’ve completed a difficult mission, let your mind rest. You think too much. Let your body take over.” It was good advice, especially since so much had happened in such a small amount of time. There was a lot to process and now was not the moment.

The black four-door sedan containing his fellow specialists turned onto a much less traveled road. Grant heaved a sigh of relief and started his usual relaxation process in which he released the tension in each of his muscles one by one. He doubted he’d have much opportunity to do that on the plane. He looked ahead to where they were going but his attention was caught by the occupants of the car in front of him. Grant grinned as he watched Trip lower his window and surf the air with his arm. *I’ll bet May is loving that!* Then he saw Kara making goofy faces at him through the rear window.

He smiled. She’d come a long way since he’d brought her in from her last Hydra mission, fighting mad but also fearful and confused. Grant never wanted to see Kara like that again. He was deeply grateful that she was back to her former self. He’d always liked her easygoing nature and good sense of humor. Once upon a time, he’d even thought they’d make a match of it.

**Flashback**

Grant looked up from the small table by his bed. He was studying the blueprints of a facility they were supposed to be infiltrating the next day. Even though it was merely a training exercise — and a rather silly one at that — he wanted to be prepared. So he was burning the midnight oil. He was getting bored with the dull building plans (*No trick doors or basement entries where there shouldn’t be? Come on! At least try to give me a challenge!*) when he heard the first scrabbling sounds outside his window. Grant sighed. *She really shouldn’t.* He got up from the table, stretched his back and looked out his window. As he suspected, Kara was climbing the wall. She’d done it once before but that time she’d been part of a group that was using lead ropes to bounce from window to window, trying to get students to join them on the roof for a party.

At the sound of Grant’s bedroom window opening, Kara looked up, her focused expression changing from serious to impish in a flash. “Come on, Ward,” she said in a stage whisper. “Now that you know I’m here, give a girl a hand.”

Grant gave her his best exasperated look even though he was secretly pleased. All things Kara tended to do that to him. It had been a long, lonely two years at the Academy following Garrett’s stunt during his first year. True to John’s intentions, Grant hadn’t been able to make any friends or date much although one-night stands weren’t off the table as long as he was discreet. He didn’t even get to have much fun lest word get back to John and increase the risk of another Tavern beating. So he studied hard, excelled at his training and kept to himself. For the first two years, this was fine. Casual contact with other humans was enough to make things bearable because at least
he wasn’t alone like he had been previously. However, in his third year, Grant found that even his occasional interactions were no longer enough. That was when he met Kara.

Kara Palamas was a year behind Grant at the Academy and an instant hit with both students and faculty alike. Even Grant, as isolated as he was, started hearing stories about the beautiful, smart, talented and fun-loving Kara. Although she excelled in her classes and general training, she never lost an opportunity to make fun of the world of espionage or engage in playful pranks. At first, he was disdainful of the stories he’d hear of her spirited banter, light-hearted jokes and crazy escapades. He was more impressed with her academic and physical prowess but even the fact that she was skilled didn’t lessen his contempt until he had to work on an assignment with her. That changed everything.

Grant found that the two of them worked exceedingly well together and, perhaps even more important to the solitary cadet, Kara wasn’t put off by his reputation as a humorless lone wolf. She never failed to invite him to study sessions despite his constant refusals and continued her teasing way of interacting with him even though he didn’t respond in kind. Grant was used to women flirting with him to gain his attention so he knew that wasn’t what Kara was doing. No, she was bantering because it was fun, maybe even because she liked him as a person. That suspicion – that maybe someone really wanted him as a friend – was a balm to his lonesome soul. Grant had endured five years of solitary living and another two of being lonely amongst a crowd. He’d had enough.

One day, he could stand it no longer. The two of them had been assigned to work together on a project but Kara had gotten bored after an hour of solid work. In an effort to make him laugh, she performed a one-woman version of a two-person scene from a popular play by saying her lines in an exaggeratedly feminine voice then racing around behind Grant and doing his lines in a deep, expressionless voice that made the romantic tone of the scene ridiculous. He tried to maintain his poker face but, as he watched her antics, he felt the laughter bubbling up inside of him and just couldn’t hold it back any longer. Kara’s startled face as she heard his deep belly laugh made him laugh even harder. This feels good! When’s the last time I laughed like this? The realization that it had been so long since he’d truly laughed that he couldn’t even remember it brought him up short. Grant stopped laughing although a smile remained on his face.

Kara didn’t even try to hide her delighted smile as she peered into his face. “Well! Hello there, Grant Ward! It’s a pleasure to finally make your acquaintance.” Upon seeing Grant’s quizzical expression, she continued, “Everyone told me that it was impossible to get to know the real you because you never show emotion.” Her face took on a superior expression. “I just proved them wrong!”

Grant pretended to be insulted. “What do you mean? I show emotion all the time!”

“Pfft! Aggression during a training exercise doesn’t count,” she said as she waved her hand in a dismissive gesture. Her expression turned thoughtful. “Neither does excitement during sex.” Grant raised his eyebrows and Kara shrugged unconcernedly. “I’m guessing. There’ve been rumors.”

Grant gave her a wintry smile. “A gentleman never kisses and tells.”

Kara grimaced. “You got that right,” she said with feeling. Clearly she’d been kissed by many non-gentlemen.

“Well, as long as I’m showing emotion, I’ve got another one for you.” Now it was Kara’s turn to raise her eyebrows. “Curiosity. Why did you give yourself the nickname of Agent 33?”

Kara’s grin turned wicked. “I can’t believe you don’t know this story, Ward!” He shrugged and she
sighed. “Have you ever seen *Get Smart*?”

As it turned out, he had. During Grant’s early days at the Academy, before John ensured his isolation, his circle of friends had made a point of watching and making fun of the old spy show. He’d always shaken his head at the stupidity of the plots and the humor but enjoyed the camaraderie of his classmates. Grant nodded, looking puzzled. Where is she going with this? “Sure.”

“Well, Agent 99 was always a hero of mine. She’s practically the reason I joined the academy.”

“Okaaaayyyy….” Grant said slowly, not understanding what this had to do with her nickname.

Kara’s grin widened. “Agent 99 was so great that there’s no way that I can be even half the agent that she was. I can only hope for a third of her brilliance. So *voilà!* Agent 33.”

That did it. Almost against his will, Grant was so utterly charmed by the *joie de vivre* and determined silliness of Kara that he gave up fighting against her. Mostly. He still had to be wary of anything getting back to John but the two teamed up more on coursework and in partnered physical exercises. Whenever there was an opportunity for them to hang out without anyone else knowing, he’d take full advantage of it. Grant never told Kara the reason for his apparent change of heart or why they only hung out in secret but she seemed to accept the adjustment without question. That’s why he was comfortable helping her climb into his room.

Despite his exasperated look, he always planned on helping her but it didn’t hurt that Kara gave him her pleading puppy dog eyes. It was a long-standing joke between them now. Whenever she wanted him to do something and he balked, she’d give him the sad eyes and he’d cave. Somehow she always seemed to know when it was something Grant was reluctant to do versus something he absolutely could not, so the eyes weren’t abused. He gave her a small smile in response as he leaned down, grabbed her outstretched hand and pulled her the rest of the way into his room. Kara gracefully swung her legs over the windowsill, breathing somewhat hard.

Grant leaned back out of the window, searching for a rope or other equipment she used to get to his 3rd floor room. Finding nothing, he shut the window and turned to face Kara, a look of amazement fighting with concern on his face. “Did you just free climb the wall?”

Kara had been busy doing a slow circuit of Grant’s room, her eyes lingering a bit on his closet in which his clothes were neatly arranged. She turned to face him, shrugging, “It’s not that high.”

Grant had to will his mouth not to drop open. “Kara! I’m on the third floor! What would’ve happened if you’d slipped?”

She snorted. “Please.” She cocked her head to the side as she looked closely at him. “Could you have done it?”

Now it was his turn to snort derisively. “Of course.” The words were out of his mouth before he realized the implication. Grant rolled his eyes as Kara cocked her head the other direction and raised her eyebrows. “Ok, fine. Point made.” He paused, analyzing her body language. She seemed different, nervous and smelling faintly of alcohol. “What’s up?”

“Nothing much. I was just bored.” This time her shrug looked too casual, like it was forced. Her eyes once again roamed around his room.

*Something is definitely up.* Grant waited until her gaze was back on him, then raised his eyebrows in a silent query.
Kara took a step towards him and, to his surprise, gently took his hand. “Grant, do you ever think about me romantically?” Grant swallowed hard, struggling to maintain eye contact with her. That’s the first time she’s ever called me Grant. “I kept waiting for you to say something, do something, but you never did.” She looked down, her voice getting softer. “I tried to be patient because it seemed like you needed time to trust me.” She raised her eyes back to his. “But it’s been months.” Kara withdrew her hand from his and stroked his face. Grant wanted to cry. “We can still be friends if you don’t feel the same way but I just need to know.”

Grant was shaking. Over the years, he’d had as many sexual interactions as he could but none had been more than a physical release for him, a fun night in which he could please and be pleased. But he’d never, not even before he met John, had a sexual relationship in which there was emotional as well as physical intimacy. That’s one reason why he hadn’t made a move on Kara before. He honestly didn’t know what to do or how such a relationship would look. Grant also was wary because he couldn’t be completely honest with her or let any hint of a real relationship get back to Garrett. But, just as Kara had gotten under his guard before, he found himself wanting, even needing, to deepen his relationship with her now.

He closed his eyes, struggling against the onslaught of feeling. I shouldn’t do this to her. This can never be real! She deserves more, much more, than me! But damnit….! Grant opened his eyes and saw Kara’s disappointed expression, the lips that were usually curved in a laugh, quivering with emotion. And something in him broke. Not only did he not want to hurt her but he craved this too. So he lowered his head, kissed her with everything he had and let nature take its course.

The two were almost inseparable after that. Of course, Grant was still careful not to be seen together in public (which took some tricky lies to Kara about his family and privacy) but they spent all the time they could together. It was heaven. Or at least as close to it as he had ever gotten. Grant never forgot that there were a lot of things he couldn’t tell her, so many truths he kept secret. There also was the squiggling knowledge that it would have to end since he doubted that Kara would ever consent to join Hydra. But he made his peace with that, telling himself that the two of them would eventually be separated anyway because he was a year ahead of her at the Academy and SHIELD wasn’t going to assign them missions as a couple. So Grant continued to see her, thinking that he might as well get as much enjoyment as possible from the relationship while he could. That worked for a while. To his utter amazement, what ended their romance wasn’t Hydra but himself.

It started with small things. Kara came from a happy family, one that adored her. She assumed that he did as well, so she made little comments about the wondrous benefits of family, about great holidays and the warmth, trust and affection she had for them and they for her. While Grant was glad for her, he couldn’t relate and felt bad about that. He usually kept stories about his family to a minimum because he didn’t want her pity or her misunderstanding. Nor did he want to relive some of his worst memories. Grant did tell Kara some things about his family but didn’t care to elaborate especially when he could tell that she thought he was exaggerating. After all, his family was practically American royalty. How bad could they be?

Kara also didn’t seem to truly understand the dynamics of abuse and trauma or how people who experienced them tended to respond. Although Grant himself didn’t fully comprehend it either at the time, he knew enough to feel judged and defensive. He’d bite his tongue during class discussions on how to interview and profile both abusers and abused people. The instructors gave lip service to the possible psychological dynamics of those who experienced abuse and trauma (social isolation, withdrawal, difficulty with trust and intimacy, the desperate need to please) and even mentioned the biological outcomes (the paralyzing aspects of fear, exaggerated startle responses, hyperarousal) but his classmates didn’t seem to truly get it. He heard a lot of victim blaming going on, even from Kara. Whenever he’d bring it up to her, her response would be, “But that’s not you.”
Grant found himself feeling misunderstood, closed off and defensive. On top of all the things he couldn’t tell her about his professional life, some aspects of his personal life were off-limits too. This didn’t leave much for them to share and it definitely led to resentment from both of them. Their petty arguments started becoming more frequent. One day Grant was reading in his room when he heard Kara’s special knock. He sighed, realizing that he was actually dreading opening the door and spending time with her. What happened to all the fun we used to have? That’s when he knew that they would never work as a couple, that if they wanted to salvage their friendship, they needed to end things now.

Although she was upset, Kara took the breakup with as much grace as she could. Afterwards, Grant left her completely alone, hoping that she’d miss his friendship enough to resume at least that part of their relationship. After a full month of radio silence from her though, he despaired of ever regaining their friendship, kicking himself for ruining what was (besides John) the best relationship he’d ever had. Although he knew that he did the right thing for both of them, seeing Kara laugh and joke around with classmates both in and out of class while never giving him a second look was torture. Maybe I’m just not cut out for relationships of any kind. Maybe John was right and I can’t ever fall in love.

Grant was sitting at his desk, lost in thought instead of studying, when he heard Kara’s special knock. He leapt to his feet so fast he almost knocked over his chair. When he opened the door, there was Kara’s beautiful, laughing face, the one he’d missed so much. She shouldered her way into the room without waiting for an invitation, throwing herself on the bed. Grant turned but stood stupidly by the door, having no idea what he should do.

Kara looked over at him and grinned. “You were looking especially pathetic today in class. So I knew I had to come over and help you out of your misery over losing me. I mean, that’s what friends are for, right?” Grant almost went limp with relief.

And just like that, they were friends again. Kara was the only classmate and fellow SHIELD agent Grant kept up with after graduation. His decision to turn triple was, in part, due to concern for Kara. He’d heard Hydra agents comment on her skills and the need to sideline her way too often for him to feel comfortable. Kara needed to be protected. Grant knew almost immediately when she was taken by Hydra and worked diligently to find her and bring her back. His debt of gratitude for her friendship was also why he was incredibly dedicated to her training and recovery. He just wished Skye could understand that.

Grant knew that Skye was jealous of her but there was no need. Yes, he loved Kara but in a completely different way. If anything, Kara set the stage for him to fall in love with Skye. Kara showed him just how much fun relationships could be and allowed him the chance to loosen up and let another person see a little of the real Grant Ward. But it was Skye he loved because she was the only woman he’d ever met who completely understood him and loved him for who he was, not who she wanted him to be. The two of them just fit, like pieces of a puzzle.

Present Day

The black sedan pulled into a little-used airport specifically for small planes and Grant spied the quinjet resting peacefully in a small corner. May maneuvered their car right up to the Bus, jumped out and entered the ramp as soon as it was completely lowered. Grant reflected that the remote aircraft opener had always been convenient and, at times, life-saving. Coulson sure does love his toys.

He parked his rental car next to the specialists’ car and felt himself tense up again, sure that he would soon be giving a mission briefing or, at the very least, explaining what happened with his
parents and Christian. SHIELD agents in general were not known for their patience and that was doubly true for specialists. They only waited for information if they had to. Grant took the keys out of the ignition and held them in his hands as he closed his eyes, mentally gearing himself up for talking about the meeting. While the mindfulness he’d practiced on the way here had somewhat relaxed him, he was still exhausted. His eyes popped open when the car door was unceremoniously yanked open.

“Come on, Ward,” Trip said easily as he pulled on his arm to get him out of the car. “May’s waiting and you know how impatient she gets. Besides, the rest of us need to get back. Coulson didn’t exactly authorize us to give you backup.”

Grant nodded. He’d wondered about that. “Understood. I just have to…”

“I’ll take those,” Bobbi said to him as she yanked the car keys from his hand. She leaned over and pulled the lever to open the trunk and then straightened back up, smirking at him. Over her shoulder, Grant could see Kara taking his duffel from the truck. Bobbi glanced behind her, tilting her head towards Kara. “She’s got your bag and I’ve got your keys, Ward. All you need to do is get yourself on the Bus.”

Grant opened his mouth to object but closed it when he saw Trip smiling and shaking his head. He said to Grant in an undertone, “I’ve been on the losing end of an argument with those two and trust me, that’s a place you don’t want to be.” That’s for sure.

Grant glanced back at the two women and couldn’t help smiling at Kara’s glare and Bobbi’s pointed look at the Bus. He could almost hear his therapist’s admonition to let other people take care of him. “OK. I see that I’m outnumbered,” he said as he headed toward the Bus.

Once all the specialists were onboard, May fired up the engines. Grant started to head to the cargo hold where the jumpseats with seatbelts were but Kara had other ideas. She linked her arm with his, dragging him toward the lounge. “Let’s not stand on protocol, not when the boss isn’t around,” she told him. “I don’t know about you but I’m dying for one of those beers Bobbi brought along.”

Grant grinned and didn’t need to be told twice. The “safety first” aspect of many SHIELD missions was quite irritating, especially to specialists who put their lives on the line in much more dangerous situations. Specialists rarely got a chance to be on their own by themselves but, whenever they did, they disregarded many of the rules they didn’t believe should apply to them. His grin widened when he saw Bobbi and Trip sitting at one of the tables, beers beside them, dealing cards.

Bobbi looked up from her cards and waved a hand at the chair across from her, smiling cockily. “Hartley tells me that you’re quite a shark at poker. You mind demonstrating?”

“Not at all,” Grant smirked as he grabbed a beer and went to join his fellow specialists. This was shaping up to be a fun trip.

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From his co-pilot’s seat next to May, the first thing he saw as the Bus slowly lowered itself into the hangar was Skye sitting by the doorway, legs dangling from her perch on one of many crates stored in the area. Grant smiled as the wheels touched down and May lowered the gangway. I should’ve known she’d be waiting. He shook his head as he thought for the millionth time that he was luckier than he ever thought he’d be. Skye waved to him, the anxiety clear on her face, then jumped down and rushed over to stand as near to the plane as she could get.

Grant quickly made his way to the back but, due to his training to look after his team, hung back,
waiting for his fellow agents to disembark. Kara shook her head and smiled. “Go on, superstar,” she whispered in his ear as she shoved him toward the door. “Take your wins where you can get them.”

“Hey! That’s my line,” Grant replied over his shoulder as he leisurely walked off the plane and lifted Skye off her feet into a swinging embrace. Then, just because he could, Grant set her down, showily lowered her into a deep dip and kissed her thoroughly. When they came up for air, he laughed both at Skye’s shocked look and the loud whoops of his fellow specialists.

“Get a room,” Bobbi said in an amused tone as she passed them.

“Like you can talk,” Kara replied, following her into the larger base.

Skye took a step back and smiled up at Grant, the anxiety gone and her eyes practically glowing with happiness. “I take it that it went well.”

He nodded. “Better than I could’ve expected. Best of all, I may never have to see or talk to them ever again.”

“Well, that deserves a celebration!” Skye waved her hand magnanimously toward the hallway. “What do you say to stopping off to get a drink and then continuing on somewhere more private?”

He stroked her face gently. “I’d say, lead the way,” he muttered in a low tone. Although he was keeping it in check, Grant could barely contain his joy. Not only had he seen his family on his terms but he’d gotten more than he ever thought he’d have: good friends and the love of his life. He was almost giddy.

Grant was just about to say something along those lines when May brought him up short. “Coulson wants to see you in his office,” she told him as she too passed the couple on her way into the base.

The smile fell off of his face as he turned to watch her go.

Damn! Just when things were getting good.

Skye seemed to sense the abrupt change in his mood. “Hey,” she said gently as she grabbed his hand. “I’ll go with you. We can grab the drink after. I’m sure AC just wants an update.”

Grant nodded and allowed Skye to lead him down the hallway toward Coulson’s office. Best to get this over with.

Coulson smiled as Grant and Skye entered the room. “Ah. Congratulations, Ward! Some of your fellow specialists, who, by the way, never got permission to go with you…” Coulson started with a mock glare at Skye.

She immediately threw up her hands in a defensive gesture. “Don’t look at me, AC! I stayed right here like the good agent I am.” Grant snorted.

“…told me that your mission went well,” Coulson continued without missing a beat, “but I wanted to hear the details from you,” he finished as he leaned back against his desk.

Grant assumed his mission briefing position of hands clasped together behind his back while Skye leaned against the wall. “Yes, sir. Christian and my parents all agreed to the terms SHIELD gave them and are expecting to hear about the specifics whenever you want to make contact. They won’t give us any more trouble.”

“That’s good to hear,” Coulson said, nodding. “And although it’s none of my business, I know that
you were planning on talking to them about some personal requests as well. Did those also go well?"

Grant gave a half smile. He knew that his request for Gramzy’s money and reconnecting with other siblings was an open secret in the base. He’d keep some things to himself though. “Yes, sir. My parents agreed to let me reconnect with my sister and younger brother without interference and will give me the share of my grandmother’s estate that she left me.”

Coulson looked surprised. “I had no idea about the money. Given your family’s portfolio, that’s sure to be a large amount.”

“Yes, sir. It will be.”

Coulson gave a small laugh. “Well, when we run into budgetary problems, we’ll know who to call, won’t we?”

“I wouldn’t go that far, sir, but they seemed to understand that I deserved my fair share,” Grant replied, shooting Skye a significant look. She smirked.

Coulson’s expression turned serious. “I hope you know, Ward, that I deeply regretted having to ask you to revisit your family issues. I never like interfering in my agents’ personal lives. If there had been any other way, I would’ve taken it.”

“I know,” Grant replied, looking down. “I didn’t want to do it at first either but now I’m glad I did. I needed to exorcise some of my demons.”

Coulson puffed out a breath. “Well, I can’t tell you how relieved I am that it went well.”

“That makes two of us,” Skye interjected. She pushed herself off the wall so she could stand beside Grant. “Well, if that’s all you needed, we were just going to do some celebrating.” She ignored Coulson’s raised eyebrows in favor of looking up at Grant. “Are we free to go, AC?”

He nodded. “Far be it for me to stand in your way. Feel free to take the rest of the night off but don’t forget Skye that we leave for the Australian mission soon.”

Grant looked at her curiously. “I’ll fill you in later,” she told him as she shoved him a little towards the door. “Way to kill the mood, AC!” Skye said over her shoulder. “See you tomorrow.”

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Skye lay in bed on her side, tracing Grant’s profile as she got her breath back. They’d chosen to spend their free evening celebrating his successful mission in Skye’s room. There they were free to be as loud as they wanted. Grant smiled and closed his eyes as Skye ran her fingers slowly over his eyelids. He tensed as she ran fingertips over his ears, trying desperately not to laugh or give her the satisfaction of seeing him ticklish. He opened his eyes just in time to see Skye’s smirk. Busted.

“I hope you appreciate how hard it was for me to tell Trip and Bobbi no when they asked if I wanted to join them on their support mission,” she told him. I wondered when this was going to come up.

Both Trip and Bobbi warned him of Skye’s deep unhappiness at being excluded from the trip. Skye herself mentioned it in passing as she was in the midst of taking off his clothes but then she got busy with other things. Grant understood that to mean that she was upset and planned on discussing it but wanted to have her fun first. She probably eats her dessert first too.
Grant nodded. “I do,” he whispered. He stroked the full length of her arm lightly.

“And you know that the only reason I stayed away was because you asked me to.” He nodded again. “Because otherwise, I would’ve been there for you with bells on.”

Grant stopped his stroking and took her hand, kissing her palm while not breaking eye contact with her. “Skye, I know how much you wanted to be there. And I know how difficult it was for you not to be. But I couldn’t have done what I needed to do if at least some of my mind was on you which it always is whenever you’re around.”

Skye smiled and looked down. If Grant didn’t know her so well, he’d swear she was blushing.

He waited until she looked back up to continue. “And I hope that you appreciate that most of what I did today I did for us.”

She snorted. “Which part? The making out with a hired assassin or the blackmailing your family?”

Grant rolled his eyes. “You know the answer to that.”

Skye looked at him, her expression serious. “I do. And I appreciate it. I’m sorry that you had to deal with your family but I’m glad that we at least have some options.”

Grant sat up, letting the sheet fall to his waist, pulling Skye into his arms and resting his chin on her head. He didn’t want to explain to her the bad feeling he was getting about their upcoming missions to decipher the carvings and find Skye’s father. “Me too. I think we’re going to need them.”
In the Belly of the Beast

Grant strode confidently into Whitehall’s office. He was careful to make it seem like he was looking only ahead of him while using his peripheral vision to learn everything he could about the place. Just in case. The task helped calm him, assisting as his spycraft always did, in keeping his true feelings at bay. In this case, it was harder than usual because this was the man who deeply hurt Kara.

One of Whitehall’s minions gestured to the chair in front of Whitehall’s desk and Grant dutifully sat down in it, a smirk on his face. *Bring it, dude. When I get done, you’re going to be so dead.*

Unlike most villains Grant had encountered, Whitehall apparently knew the power of silence. Or maybe he just thought it made him more sinister. He sat there without speaking while his eyes raked across Grant’s face and body. Grant made sure to keep his smirk in place and it actually wasn’t that difficult. *He might think he’s a big deal but I’ve dealt with worse.*

“Agent Grant Ward,” Whitehall said at last, emphasizing each word. “I’ve heard a great deal about you…most of it positive.”

Grant inclined his head graciously and widened his smile. “I find that a bit surprising given the…nature…of my work.” It always amused him to mimic the cadence of his enemies’ speech. It made them feel like he could be trusted when he was really mocking and manipulating them.

Whitehall leaned back in his chair and smiled in a way he clearly thought was winning. Grant just wanted to smack him. “Ah, well. When you’ve lived as long as I have, you learn to see past the…shall we say…artifices that trip up so many people. And I for one can certainly…appreciate…the value of a good spy.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Grant replied. “So many people refuse to understand the…difficulties…involved in making the world a better place. It’s always gratifying to meet someone who grasps the idea that sometimes one must deal with…hardship.” *Is this guy for real? He’s eating this up!*

Whitehall nodded and tented his fingers in order to look thoughtful and serious. If the man weren’t so dangerous, Grant might have laughed at his theatrics. Do people really fall for this?

“T’m glad to hear that,” Grant replied. “So many people refuse to understand the…difficulties…involved in making the world a better place. It’s always gratifying to meet someone who grasps the idea that sometimes one must deal with…hardship.” *Is this guy for real? He’s eating this up!*

Whitehall nodded and tented his fingers in order to look thoughtful and serious. If the man weren’t so dangerous, Grant might have laughed at his theatrics. *Do people really fall for this?* “As a person who spent a considerable portion of his life incarcerated, I know how rare second chances are. If you’re given one, take it. The opportunity may be…fleeting, so it must be recognized and seized. Sometimes the solution takes days or weeks or years. But no matter the sacrifice, one must be willing to enjoy the trauma of shaking off all that you were to become something new…something better. Everyone deserves a second chance but few are willing to do what it takes to earn one.”

Although this whole meeting was ridiculous, it struck Grant that Whitehall was sharing some profound insights into second chances. If anyone knew about second chances, it was Grant. His window of opportunity to change his life had been short but he’d seized it. And there certainly was trauma involved in shaking off his old life. Whitehall made it sound so easy but it wasn’t. Grant often wondered just how long his old way of thinking and living would follow him around, messing up his future. He gave himself an internal smack, redirecting his attention back to Whitehall. *This is no time to lose focus!* “I completely understand. I think my skills could be of use to you. I know sacrifice, what it takes to…move forward…in life.”

“I have no doubt that’s true,” Whitehall said with a slight smile. He then activated a video on his computer screen.
Grant maintained his neutral, just this side of amused, expression as he watched the video of himself incarcerated in Vault D. The video showed him being told that he was being handed over to Christian, the same brother who’d abused him when he was younger and promised to take him to trial. He was talking with Coulson, trying to talk him out of letting that happen. *This is what could’ve happened to me if I hadn’t seized my second chance although Coulson’s team would never be that cruel.*

Whitehall mercifully cut off the video and looked over at Grant, real sympathy on his face. “My sources tell me that they kept you in that cell for weeks without natural light, music or even books. I am somewhat of an…expert…on incarceration and I can you that their treatment of you was barbaric. Even I, a Nazi, was treated better than that.”

Grant fought to keep the surprise off of his face. Whitehall had just shown true emotion! *Coulson sure knows how to fake a video!* He nodded slowly and said ruefully, “Justice frequently goes out the window when you’re dealing with strong emotion. There’s a reason why victims shouldn’t get to decide the punishment.”

“That is very true,” Whitehall responded with a return to his usual pompous tone. He got up from his chair and started moving toward an area behind Grant that looked like a small living room. It had one small couch, two armchairs, a coffee table and even a free-standing lamp. It looked very out of place in the warehouse environment. “If you would please move over here, Agent Ward, we’ll soon be joined by another member of our team.”

“Of course,” Grant said quietly. He internally shook his head when Whitehall took the center armchair leaving Grant able to sit facing the door. Of course, they were surrounded by his people but, as Grant himself could attest, you should never trust hired guns fully.

Whitehall leaned forward confidentially, “I probably should warn you that Dr. Johnson is a bit…unconventional…and emotional but his intelligence is first-rate.” *Bad-mouthing his people to an untested ally? How has this idiot gotten so far?*

Grant just nodded, then turned his attention to the man dressed somewhat casually – especially considering the formal way Whitehall dressed – and hurriedly entering the room in front of two guards. Clearly he wasn’t a trusted ally.

“Doctor. How nice to see you,” Whitehall said to the newcomer, waving his hand towards the couch closest to the door. “Please. Come. Sit.” Grant wondered at Whitehall’s change in speech patterns. He was being much more brisk with the doctor. “You’ve had a long night,” he said to him almost jovially.

The doctor didn’t seem appeased. “You should tell me when we’re having a meeting,” he said grumpily as he sat down. “I would’ve freshened up.” He looked at Grant suspiciously.

Whitehall appeared amused. “Mr. Ward here is something of an expert on SHIELD. And you, an expert on the obelisk. Together…” he turned his head to look at Grant, a pleased smile on his face, “I think there’s much we can achieve.”

*Time to get the doctor on my side.* “I was a member of Coulson’s team,” he told him. “Lived with them for months.”

The doctor’s expression changed subtly from suspicion to interest. “So you know the entire team.”

“Like family.” Grant replied quietly, intimately. He saw Whitehall’s pleased, almost proud, expression as he turned to look at the doctor. The doctor smiled slightly, so Grant continued.
“Heard you crossed Coulson. That can be rough.”

A wary look crossed the doctor’s face. “Oh, it wasn’t a complete loss.” His tone switched to one he undoubtedly used to teach students. “It’s always good to look your enemy right in the eye,” he said looking at Grant. Then he turned to meet Whitehall’s gaze.

It took a great deal of willpower for Grant not to roll his eyes. He didn’t think that Whitehall was intelligent or suspicious enough to catch the clear implication but it was a stupid move all the same. Why was he dealing with such amateurs again? Oh yeah. Skye.

Flashback

Cal walked hesitantly into the warehouse on 405 Commerce Street, the one he’d abandoned when Raina betrayed him and Skye came searching for her father. He stopped briefly upon seeing Grant sitting casually in what used to be his waiting room but then continued on into the room. He sat down beside Grant and looked at him searchingly.

“You’re Grant Ward,” he said abruptly.

“You’re well-informed,” Grant replied in the same tone but with a tilt of his head. Although he expected his identity to be known, as always happened when people knew who he was, he felt that thrill of fear that accompanied any loss of control in a field situation.

Cal smiled mirthlessly and turned his head toward the door, almost as if it was too painful to look directly at Grant. “When you’ve been searching for your daughter for years like I have, you want to know everything you possibly can. So when I found out she was with SHIELD…” his fists clinched, then he breathed deeply and let them go, “…I made it my business – some might even call it my obsession – to research the members of her team.” His gaze turned to Grant. “You were her Supervising Officer.”

“I was,” Grant replied easily. Where’s he going with this?

“You have a deeply interesting story,” he said slowly, leaning back in his chair. “You didn’t have a great family life, certainly not the kind of family my daughter would’ve had if she’d been allowed to grow up with her parents.” Cal’s eyes took on a faraway look, then a flash of pain crossed his face and his gaze once more fastened on Grant, who kept his expression blank, trying hard to disguise his increasing unease.

How does he know all this?

Cal’s expression shifted again, this time into what Grant thought was probably his doctor mode. He looked sympathetic. “Oh, I’m so sorry. I hope I’m not causing you pain by bringing up difficult memories like this. I certainly know how hard it is to move past grief and betrayal.”

Grant shifted minutely in his chair, disconcerted because suddenly he could see Skye in this man. She clearly had gotten her ability to read people’s emotions and her gift of compassion from him. He leaned back, feigning indifference. “No, it’s fine. Please, continue.”

“The stories they tell about you are legendary, about all the skills you have in the field, that it seems like you don’t have emotions but…” there was that searching gaze again “I don’t believe it. I think you’re compensating for what you lost or maybe even never had, something we all deserve.”

Grant was seriously unnerved now. Not only did Skye’s father have information he shouldn’t but he also saw past it to the heart of who Grant is. But more importantly, what was he going to do with the information? He called to mind his training, almost hearing John tell him Never let them
“Really?” he asked Cal in a bored tone. “And what is that?”

“Love,” Cal replied simply with a small smile. “Every child deserves to know love, Grant. Don’t you agree? My daughter, Daisy, has always had people who loved her….” his smile faded “…even if she didn’t know it.” Cal’s eyes cleared and his smile returned. “But she knows it now, with you. I was so glad to hear that she’d found someone who’d do anything for her. That’s what every father wants for his child: for her to find someone to love and who loves her back.”

Who is this guy? Grant could feel the ground shifting below his feet and he was unsure of what to do next. Whoever Skye’s father was, he knew way too much about Grant but he didn’t seem to want to do anything negative with the information. So why is he working with Hydra? And what does he want with Skye?

“Oh, I’m not crazy,” Cal said carelessly. “I just know what needs to be done in order for Daisy to truly know who she is. And because you love her, you’re going to want that for her too.”

Present Day
The longer they talked, the more Grant became convinced that Skye would want to meet her father. Cal was a bit strange but he seemed somewhat sweet and thoughtful. There was no doubt whatsoever that he loved Skye (his Daisy) and would do anything for her. Grant wasn’t sure about the destiny part but that decision would be up to Skye. All he needed to do was get her in a position to meet Cal and his job would be done. And although it made Grant feel incredibly guilty, he convinced Coulson to let him attempt a very difficult assignment purely because it would help him achieve his own goals.

As Grant descended into the Bus, he heard Trip talking with the group. “How the hell did they find us? We were cloaked.” He steeled himself for what needed to be done and sent a plea to the universe that Skye trusted him enough to go along with the plan. Grant refused to let himself consider the possibility that she would, once again, believe him to be a traitor.

“Raina’s tracker,” he answered, coming down the stairs. He would’ve given a lot not to see the looks of betrayal on Trip and Hunter. They don’t trust me. Of course, this situation wasn’t helping with that but still. They should know me better than this by now. “Old frequency SHIELD used during the Cold War. What can I say?” Grant asked with a little shrug. “I’m a history buff.”

He reached the bottom of the stairs and took note of all the guns aimed at him. The Hydra operatives followed him down the stairs keeping their weapons trained on the people he loved. Grant sighed audibly. Will this ever end? He faced Skye and May, hoping against hope that these two women he loved would believe in him. “Lower your weapons,” he told them softly. “Anyone shoots, the plane goes down. We all die.”

May hadn’t moved a muscle. “Maybe it’s worth it,” she said to Grant with a little smile. Although his expression stayed the same, his heart gave a little leap. Maybe she does trust me!

“Let’s not get carried away just yet,” Hunter responded with a slightly panicked look at May.

Grant glanced over his shoulder at Hunter, trying not to laugh. Leave it to Hunter to be the voice of reason. He then returned his gaze to Skye, trying to communicate with her non-verbally. It must have worked because she slowly lowered her gun. “First you give us Bakshi, now you’re back with Hydra? Pick a side, Ward.”

“Oh, I have,” he answered seriously. Hopefully you know what that side is. “Don’t worry.” At that, May lowered her gun too. Grant gave her just the smallest of nods as he turned to look at Raina. “Let’s go.”

Raina’s smile was faint. “With pleasure,” she said looking directly at Skye.

Grant turned back to Skye. “You too,” he said lightly.

Both Skye and May looked confused, glancing with wide eyes at each other. “What?”

“I made you a promise, Skye.” Grant moved slightly towards her, hoping his proximity would help soothe her. “I’m here to keep it.” Please know what I’m talking about! “You’re coming with us.”

He smiled slightly at her, winking so neither of the Hydra guards could see.

May gave him a significant look, then pointed her gun at him again. “The hell she is! She’s not going anywhere.”

Grant transferred his gaze to Skye who seemed to know what was expected. “May,” she said in a low voice.

He suddenly tired of the rigmarole. They either believed him or not, so time to end this before
someone got hurt. “She comes or the deal’s off,” he said in clipped tones to May.

“Shut up!” May replied. Grant almost sighed but instead just looked disgustedly at Agent Billy Koenig. If the situation weren’t so serious, Grant would’ve rolled his eyes. Koenig really needed to stick with lanyards. Of all the SHIELD people on the plane, Koenig was the only one who didn’t truly know Grant, so he was the wild card. That guy really shouldn’t be out in the field. I could kill him with just my thumb.

“May,” Skye insisted again, turning to look directly at her, “if I don’t go with him, he’s going to blow this plane to pieces.”

“They’re Hydra,” Trip said in a disgusted tone. “They’ll do it anyway.”

“You can’t trust him, Skye,” May said through her teeth.

“Yes, you can,” Grant said urgently as he moved even closer to her. “Skye, look at me.”

“Don’t talk to her,” May warned him.

Grant ignored her and waited until Skye turned her gaze on him. “Skye, I give you my word,” he explained patiently. “Come with me, we won’t fire a single shot. Everyone gets out alive.”

Since the Hydra operatives couldn’t see him directly, Grant chanced a look at Hunter who was standing to his side and met his eyes. He almost sagged with relief at the understanding that he saw there. Hunter got that Grant was letting the Hydra agents know what the orders were. Since he was essentially a business consultant and in no position to give them orders, he was influencing their behavior the only way he could.

Koenig snorted. “Like we should trust you. Once a Hydra agent, always a Hydra agent.”

Grant tamped down his frustration. He needed to shut down Billy and, from the little bit of information he had on him, he knew that needling him about his brothers was the best way to distract him. Grant turned around and glanced at Sam Koenig. “How many of you are there?” he asked in a mocking tone complete with a confused expression. Sure enough, Billy just gritted his teeth and remained silent.

“Skye…” May said in a cautious voice.

It took all of his willpower not to telegraph his gratitude when Skye turned to May and nodded.

“There’s no other way. You know that. Whatever happens, I can handle myself.” The two women shared a look, with May finally nodding at her to give permission. Skye dragged her gaze away from May, glared at Grant then shoved her gun – unnecessarily hard in his opinion – into his palm when he held out his hand for it. She shoved past him to get to the stairs.

“Oh Skye,” Raina said in a perky voice, “don’t forget your tablet. You know, the one with the map of the city on it.” She smiled as she turned to climb the stairs.

“Leave it to Raina to mess everything up!” She marched over to the bookshelf, grabbed the tablet and then stomped up the stairs. Grant risked one last look at May before he followed her. He gave her the slightest of smiles, hoping against hope that she believed in him. Then he turned and followed Skye and Raina up the stairs.

Once they were in the Hydra plane, Grant placed himself in the seat between the two women in the cargo hold. He had no idea whether the Hydra personnel would keep his word not to fire and there
was nothing he could do about it, so he assumed that they would and concentrated on trying to
communicate with Skye without Raina figuring out his true loyalties. He leaned over to check her
restraints, slightly brushing her leg with his fingers as he gave her the briefest of glances.

Skye moved her hands so she could grasp his pinky, squeezed once, then let go. She turned her
head to glare at him and said fiercely, “Don’t even try to talk to me, Ward! I may have to go with
you but I don’t have to like it.”

Grant nodded dejectedly. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Raina grin. Mission accomplished.
The three sat in silence until the plane landed. One of the Hydra operatives grabbed Raina by the
arm and led her into the building while another stopped by Grant’s side. “You know where to take
this one,” he said briefly before heading off the plane.

The moment they were alone, Grant grabbed Skye by the arm and whispered in her ear. “We don’t
have a lot of time and they have monitoring devices everywhere. So whatever I do, just play along.
Remember that I love you!”

Skye bit her lip as she nodded. Watching her fix a look of defiant resignation on her face almost
broke him. Grant remembered that look from when she first learned he was working with Hydra.
This time is different! She knows I’m just playing a role. He again steeled his resolve and started
walking her into the building. Time to get on with it.

They headed down a long staircase into the heart of the building with Skye walking slightly ahead.
Grant decided that keeping her focused on something besides her anxiety would be the best course
of action, so he led with something that had always grated on her: his cockiness. “Checking exits,
numbers of men, weapons inventory. I’m impressed. How’s your marksmanship?”

He couldn’t resist injecting a slight moment of lightheartedness into their interactions. He and May
had been having a mini-war over Skye’s training for weeks, with both competing for who was the
best SO. Skye wisely refused to pick a side even though Grant believed she would’ve picked him.
Since marksmanship was one of Grant’s many talents and he handily beat May in this category,
this was sure to rankle her a bit.

Sure enough, Skye threw him a disgusted look over her shoulder. “I don’t know. Hand me your
sidearm. Let’s find out.”

It took all of Grant’s self-control not to laugh and he squeezed her arm lightly so she’d look up and
see the twitch of his mouth. She’s really getting good with the one-liners! “Cool under pressure. I
see May’s teaching you control.”

“That’s one of our differences.” Skye said a bit louder than necessary. Grant figured she was
taunting the Hydra agents watching them. “In SHIELD they train you to control yourself. Hydra
wants to control everyone else.”

“I’m not loyal to Hydra,” Grant said in a disgusted tone as he led her up yet another series of stairs.
“My orders were to collect Raina. Bringing you along was your father’s idea.” They stopped
before a set of heavy wooden doors.

Skye whirled around to face him. “Maybe you don’t remember but we’ve played this game of
‘Let’s kidnap Skye’ before and it didn’t end well for you.”

Grant couldn’t help the look of anguish flit across his face. Given the softening of her expression,
Skye surely saw it. He knew that she was playing a part, doing what he’d told her to do, but it still
stung that she could call up that memory and use it against him so easily. He swallowed hard.
“That’s not my concern,” he said. Despite his best efforts, his voice was rough. Skye glanced down, no longer able to look him in the eyes.

Grant took the opportunity to cut off her restraints, brushing slightly against her hands. He walked around her to the door handles.

“Really? Then what is?” she demanded as she rubbed her sore wrists.

“Keeping my promise.” Grant opened the doors and watched Skye as she caught her first glimpse of her father. Cal had dressed up for once, sitting on the couch in a nice brown suit. He stood when he saw her. Skye, appearing as though she was in shock, hesitantly walked into the room. Grant’s heart went out to her, wishing he could’ve prepared her for this. “I’m sure you two have a lot of catching up to do,” he murmured.

Grant gave a significant look to Cal and then turned to look at Skye. Seeing her wide eyes and hearing her increased breathing made him ache to touch her, to offer her whatever comfort he could. Only the self-control of a lifetime kept him from reaching out to her. Instead, he waited until she looked at him. Grant hoped that she could read his love and dedication in his eyes. Then he went out and closed the door behind him.

Standing guard in front of the door, Grant was determined not to let anyone disturb Skye’s first meeting with her father. But then one of Whitehall’s primary aides came up to him and started to open the door. Grant moved in front of it.

“They’re not to be disturbed,” he told the aide softly. He’d found that using a softer tone was sometimes more threatening than being loud or stern.

Sure enough, the aide paled and said urgently, “I just need to tell Dr. Johnson that Dr. Whitehall wants to speak with him. He’s coming here now!”

Grant sighed. If Whitehall was headed their direction, there was nothing he could do. But there was no way in hell he was leaving here without Skye. He nodded and stepped out of the aide’s way, listening as the man said his brief sentence to Cal and Skye and then left the room.

Shortly afterward, Cal left the room alone and moved to stand beside Grant as they waited for the Hydra leader to arrive. Grant counted four Hydra foot soldiers plus the aide. Raina arrived before Whitehall, marching straight up to him, perhaps under the illusion that he had some kind of power, just like he did when Garrett was still alive.

“Is there a problem?” she demanded.

He contented himself with tilting his head toward the incoming Whitehall who arrived with an obviously brainwashed former SHIELD agent at his side. The man was carrying a big silver container but Grant didn’t speculate as to what was in it. Those sort of conjectures were pointless. He’d deal with the contents of the case when he had to. Grant did allow himself a moment of satisfaction though. If he hadn’t caught Kara, she would’ve been the agent at Whitehall’s side instead of Smith who possessed none of her skills. Grant was delighted to know that he’d weakened Whitehall’s security. It made the job he had to do now that much easier.

“Well, well,” Whitehall said silkily. “We’re here today…in part…because of the three of you.” He pointed at Grant. “You delivered Raina as you promised.” Grant bowed his head, a small smile on his lips. Idiot!

Whitehall wagged his finger at Raina like she was an errant child. “And I had my initial doubts
“about you, young lady,” he said in a jovial tone, “but you are slowly earning my trust.” Watching Raina’s careful and pained smile, Grant raised his eyebrows. Whitehall clearly had no idea who Raina was or what she could do. Whitehall walked closer to Cal. “And your knowledge of the Diviner,” he said in a hushed, almost awed tone, “has led us to this…historic moment. For that, I offer my gratitude.”

Cal said nothing but gave Whitehall a look of pure loathing. Over the course of his years as a spy, Grant had seen a lot of people look in anger, disgust and even hate towards others. But he’d rarely seen a look of this level of animosity. Wow! What did Whitehall do to him?

Whitehall seemed oblivious to it though, just as he had when Cal clearly labeled him as his enemy. “I just have one question,” Whitehall said as he returned to his original place. “How does she fit in?” He gestured to Skye who came into the hallway followed by two additional Hydra soldiers. Grant almost groaned. He was hoping that she’d have the sense to stay back in the room away from whatever fight was going to happen. But that wasn’t Skye.

What can I tell him that he’ll accept? “I needed insurance that SHIELD wouldn’t blow us out of the sky,” he said in a robotic, almost bored tone.

“But you also ordered that the SHIELD plane shouldn’t be shot down,” Whitehall retorted. “I had to counter that order myself.”

Grant’s heart dropped but he merely shrugged, like he couldn’t care less. For all of their sakes, it was imperative that Whitehall believe in him. Besides, he refused to believe that May couldn’t get the team out of danger. She was the best.

“I have a theory as to why she’s here,” Whitehall continued looking over at Skye. His momentary loss of focus on Grant allowed him to glance at Skye too. She appeared shocked at the news of them shooting down the Bus. Focus, Skye! He returned his gaze to Whitehall who was looking smug as he nodded to Smith.

Smith unlocked the container and opened the lid revealing the Obelisk or the Diviner as it was apparently called. He briefly closed his eyes in relief. Whatever happened, Skye would be safe. She’d already proven that she could handle the Diviner without anything bad happening to her. Grant met her eyes and gave a tiny nod. He could tell that she understood her power.

“I’d like you to pick it up,” Whitehall told her, cocking his head a little.

Skye’s expression turned defiant. “You first.” If the situation weren’t so dire, Grant would’ve laughed in delight at her attitude. I taught her well.

One of the Hydra soldiers cocked his gun and pointed it directly at her. She turned to look at him in disgust and then at Cal. Out of the corner of his eye, Grant see that Cal was holding something in his hand, most likely a weapon. Cal nodded at Skye and her lips tightened. Grant braced himself for action.

Skye abruptly turned and grabbed the Diviner out the box. The black object lit up with orange markings. Grant stared at Skye, willing her to do something. Almost as if she heard his silent plea, she stopped looking down at the glowing obelisk and thrust it onto the neck of the closest Hydra soldier. He screamed as he slowly turned to ash.

Cal shoved something into the neck of another Hydra soldier while Grant drew his gun. He pointed it first at the aide but then at Raina. Damn!
Whitehall seemed completely unfazed by what had just happened. He merely stepped closer to Skye and said earnestly, “I hope you’re as special as your mother.” What the hell does that mean? Whitehall smiled evilly while Skye looked terrified. Cal must’ve told her about her mother’s fate while they were visiting.

Whitehall backed away from Skye as Raina moved forward and took the Diviner from her, placing it back in its box. So Raina can touch it without incident too. Good to know. Skye didn’t look surprised by this either. If they ever got a moment alone, she was going to have to debrief him because there was a lot going on he didn’t know.

Smith, the aide, stalked over, giving Grant a superior look as he grabbed his gun. Never one to be intimidated, Grant offered a nasty smile in return. Garrett taught him long ago that defeat was largely a measure of perspective, that you never stopped trying. He’d find a way to turn this back into victory or die trying. First thing on the agenda was to start messing with the minds of your opponent. The aide seemed like an easy target.

“I’ll confess…I didn’t recognize you when you first barged into my office,” Whitehall said cheerfully to Cal.

Cal looked disgusted. “If my daughter wasn’t here,” he said in a low voice, “I would tear you and your men to pieces.” Smith transferred his aim to Cal.

Whitehall still seemed remarkably unaffected. “Well then, I’ll add that to the number of reasons I’m glad she’s here.” He smiled again and then turned to Grant. “You are the piece of the puzzle I can’t decipher. Why are you really here?”

Pieces of a puzzle. Why does that stupid phrase keep cropping up? Grant stopped glaring at Whitehall and said nothing. He again heard John’s voice in his ear: It’s not the knowing that upsets people; it’s the uncertainty. Hopefully, the lack of knowing Grant’s real agenda would throw him off his game long enough for them to get the upper hand. Out of the corner of his eye, Grant saw Raina turn to grin at him and knew the gig was up. Damn! This was payback time.

“Is it really that hard to see?” she asked in a mocking voice. “It’s love,” she said, glancing over at Skye who was looking sullenly at the floor.

But then, incredibly, Skye looked up at Grant, love in her eyes. Apparently she realized what he had, that there was no longer any need to pretend. Grant stared back at her, communicating silently all the adoration, love, hope and comfort he could. The two of them held each other’s gaze, words no longer necessary. They were so caught up in their soundless exchange that he only heard Raina’s continued explanation as if from a distance.

“Agent Ward believes if he helps Skye fulfill her destiny, the two of them will live happily ever after.” Raina’s words were meant to be sarcastic but there was an undertone of awe, even of jealousy, beneath them. Apparently, even Raina was affected by the display of their bond.

Whitehall was less impressed. “Awww….” he sneered at Grant. Then he looked at Skye. “It’s a pity that you won’t get to fulfill that destiny,” he turned back to Cal, “or that after all these years, you won’t get your vengeance for what I did to your wife.”

Grant almost shook his head. Even despite their current situation, taunting Cal didn’t seem like a wise thing to do. The Hydra soldier behind Cal crashed the butt of his weapon into Cal’s head and he went down like a rock. Skye looked down at Cal in horror and then, seeking reassurance, at Grant. He nodded slightly. It’ll be OK.
“Secure him!” Whitehall said to his guards in a firm voice. “Remain alert around Agent Ward. He’s a trained killer, one of the best.” He turned to look at Grant and said silkily, “I have a feeling that…in time…I can make you comply.”

Grant felt a thrill of fear race through him. He’d seen firsthand what brainwashing had done to Kara and, given his time with Garrett, he already knew he was susceptible. He never wanted to have his free will taken from him ever again. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw two Hydra soldiers grab Skye, who was struggling to get to him. So, both to comfort her and mess with Whitehall, he gave him his best *I’ll get you later* smirk. Then the guards grabbed him and marched him behind Skye.

The soldiers took both of them even further down into the building and into what looked like a kitchen. They secured each of them to chairs, on opposite sides of the room from each other. Grant rolled his eyes. *They couldn’t even give us the courtesy of being close together.* Additional soldiers brought in Cal and laid him on the floor. They then exited, leaving all of them to be guarded by Smith. Grant kept his smile to himself. *Big mistake.*

“So how did you decide to start working with Hydra?” he asked him in a laidback tone, as if they were people getting to know each other at a cocktail party instead of enemies. “You were SHIELD.”

“I didn’t have a purpose before,” Smith said, lowering his gun. Grant could detect the fervor of the brainwashed in him. *This, I can work with.* “I was lost. Now, I’m happy to comply.”

“So you’re loyal to Hydra.” He couldn’t keep the disgust from his voice.

“I’m loyal to Dr. Whitehall,” Smith corrected.

“There was a guy I used to be loyal to. He went completely insane.”

This seemed to upset Smith. Grant could relate. “Not another word.”

“Happy to comply.” Grant tossed his own words back to him, hoping that it would drive the smallest of wedges in Smith’s psyche but, unlike Kara, it appeared that his brainwashing was complete. *That’s unfortunate.*

Across the room, Grant could hear Cal waking up. Cal groaned, staggered to his feet and saw Skye sitting in front of him. “Did he hurt you?”

Skye shook her head, looking cautious since Whitehall had just entered the room and was approaching them.

“Oh good! You’re awake!” Whitehall said cheerfully to Cal. *Why is he always so cheerful with Cal? Is he that sadistic that he loves to rub Cal’s pain in his face?*

“I’ve waited years for this,” Cal growled as he lunged at Whitehall.

Instead of reaching him, Cal’s body froze up and he dropped to his knees. Grant looked over the counter separating him from the other two prisoners and saw Whitehall holding a small buzzer. The device must’ve been responsible for controlling Cal in some way. He strained against the restraints tying him to the chair. Smith merely tightened his stance, indicating that he was ready to fire should Grant make a threatening move.

Whitehall used his foot to knock Cal the rest of the way to the floor. Then he casually asked Skye, “Do you know what your mother’s special gift was?”
Skye looked at him defiantly. “No.”

“She didn’t age. At least, not like the rest of us.” He bent down to get on the same level as Skye. “I wonder if that’s your gift as well.” He reached over to tap her on the knee. Ignoring Smith, Grant struggled against his restraints again. No one gets to touch Skye without her consent! “Or if you’re special in another way. Discovery requires experimentation,” he said gleefully. He glanced down at Cal. “I killed your wife….and before I kill you, I want you to watch what I do to your daughter.”

Grant’s tactician brain was desperately whirring, trying to think of something, anything, that could save Skye. There was no way he would ever let that monster experiment on her! He’d die first. He was just preparing to lunge at Smith when there was the sound of gunshots in the outer building.

Whitehall whipped his head around and got up, striding towards the door. “Stay here!” he ordered the other Hydra soldier. “Yes, sir!” the guy answered as Whitehall and Smith left the room.

Grant almost sagged in relief. The three of us can take care of this idiot. The guy wasn’t even watching his prisoners, choosing instead to peer around the corner towards the sound of fighting. Grant leaned over to watch Cal struggling on the floor. Even in the short time he’d known him, Grant had an appreciation for Cal’s discipline. It’s only a matter of time.

“Hey,” he said to the guard. “Hear that? They’re coming for us.” The guy didn’t answer. “I saw how many guys you have on your side. You are sorely outnumbered my friend.” The guy came closer. Grant could almost smell the fear on him. “Tell you what. Let me go now. I’ll tell them to take it easy on you. Maybe cut off an ear, pop an eye.”

“Shut up,” the guard replied, his voice wavering just enough to be heard.

Grant looked over to the side. “Just trying to be helpful,” he shrugged. He turned back to look at the guard. “I’m a lot nicer than he’s gonna be,” he said just as Cal shocked the guard with whatever device Whitehall had been controlling him with. The guy started to fall, so Cal got an arm around his neck and jerked the guy’s body up, breaking his neck. The sound of bones crunching was unmistakable and Grant grimaced. I told him I’d be nicer.

He tracked the body falling to the ground beside him, then looked up at Cal. “You’re welcome. Now let’s get out of here.”

“Yeah! Me too! Come on!” Skye called.

Cal looked conflicted, shaking his head at Skye. “It’s safer here. And I’m about to do something to Whitehall.” He looked down at the dead guard. “I don’t want you to see me like that.” Waaaaayyyyy too late, buddy. Even Skye looked shocked by Cal’s words.

“I don’t mind,” Grant said quickly as Cal turned away, preparing to head for the door. He looked back, a puzzled expression on his face. “Seeing,” Grant clarified. “Hell, I’m happy to help,” he said with a winning smile. You need to let me out of here!

“No,” Cal said with a trace of his sweet smile. “I get to do this myself.” Then he turned and raced from the room.

“What?” Skye said in disbelief. “Hey!” she pulled at her restraints so much that she moved her chair across the floor. She looked over at Grant. “Now what? I can’t move a muscle.”

Without bothering to answer, Grant threw himself hard on the floor, counting on the concrete to break the wooden chair. Once he was no longer tied to the chair, he rolled as close to the dead Hydra guard as he could, grabbed his knife and cut himself free. Grant went immediately over to
Skye, intending to cut her free but the look on her face brought him up short. He tenderly stroked her cheek, brushing away the one lone tear running down her face.

“I’m so sorry that your family reunion didn’t go as planned. This isn’t what I wanted for you,” he whispered.

Skye nodded, looking down and breathing deeply as Grant cut her free. She didn’t even wait until her restraints were on the floor before launching herself into his arms. “Grant,” she sobbed into his shoulder as he held her as tightly as he could. They remained that way for at least a minute until the sound of gunfire made Skye quit crying and raise her head.

“We need to get out of here,” he told her. Grant tipped up her face to him. “Are you OK?” he asked gently.

Skye merely nodded.

“Good. Stay here while I check the door.” He ran to the entryway to the kitchen, peering out, hoping that the coast would be clear enough for them to leave. Grant whirled back around when he heard the sound of a gun being drawn and saw that Skye had relieved the dead Hydra guard of his weapon. The SO in him was proud but the boyfriend was terrified. “Skye…”

“No, Grant. I can’t just stay here when all our friends and…family…are out looking for us. We have to go help them!” Skye’s eyes were wild, her face still streaked with the tears she’d been shedding. She was clearly in no condition to fight.

He put out his hands in a placating motion, hoping against hope that this would be the one time she’d listen to reason. “OK baby, we will, I promise, but let’s just…”

Whatever he was going to say was cut off by another round of gunfire. Grant whirled to see where it was coming from, just in time to glimpse Skye darting into the hallway in his peripheral vision. “Dammit, Skye!” Grant yelled as he ran to catch up with her. Unfortunately, before he could determine which direction she went, he was slowed by a firefight with some of Whitehall’s men. Grant dispatched them easily (Really, Whitehall? Your men are a mess.) and jogged down an empty hallway, speeding up when he saw Cal walking easily toward the door that had been blown open, probably by SHIELD. It was clear that he was leaving the building.

“Cal!” What in the world? The father I met would never abandon Skye.

Cal halted his forward progression and turned around as if he had all the time in the world. He smiled. “Ah, Grant. Forgive me for not saying goodbye but I’m sure I’ll be seeing you soon.”

“You’re leaving?” he blurted in surprise. He was usually better at reading people than this.

Cal nodded. “What with all the chaos,” he waved his hands around, “my leaving seemed like the best plan. That way I can be there when Skye needs me.”

“What do you mean when she needs you?” Grant tamped down firmly on the panic he could feel rising in his chest. Clearly, he was not in the loop about something important. “What’s going on?” he asked urgently.

A look of surprise crossed Cal’s face. “I thought she’d told you!” Seeing Grant shake his head, he continued. “Skye’s headed down into the tunnels in order to see what she’ll become.” He smiled again. “Although transformation is always difficult, she knows that I’ll be there to help guide her through it.”
Grant stared at Cal, his brain struggling to process what was going on. *Skye. Tunnels. Transformation.* Without another word to Cal, Grant turned and started running. He had to get to Skye!

He ran at full speed through the now-empty hallways, hoping against hope that he wouldn’t be too late. He was desperate to find her but had no idea which way to go. Finally, he saw Coulson turning a corner and followed him into what looked like a boiler room.

“Coulson!” Grant called as he almost skidded to a stop in front of him. He saw that May too was there. “What’s going on? Where’s Skye?” he managed to say through his heavy breathing.

“I’m not sure what’s going on. All I know is that Skye followed Raina into the tunnels. I was just going to follow her…” he paused, looking Grant over, “but now I assume you’ll be going down after her instead.” Grant nodded.

May started putting on the rope harness in preparation of lowering him down into the depths. She smiled a little at him. “I’m sure Coulson will tell me the story later but you really have to stop going undercover.”

“So noted,” Grant replied as he started freefalling. Once he hit the ground, he quickly removed the harness, turned on his flashlight and started off down the creepy hallway. He came to a T-intersection and closed his eyes, hoping that he’d hear the sounds of Skye or Raina moving around. He suspected that wherever Raina was would be where Skye would be as well. Grant turned right, following the sounds of someone. When he got closer, he gritted his teeth when he determined that the person in question was neither woman but Trip, breathing hard.

“Trip. Have you seen Skye?”

“Man, what are you doing down here? I just now finished turning off all our explosives. Another few minutes and bam! We’re all toast.” He paused, regaining his breath. “Should I take it that you’re back on our side again?”

“Never left it,” Grant said impatiently. Now was not the time for explanations. He had the very bad feeling that time was short. “Have you seen Skye?”

Trip shook his head. “No. There wasn’t anyone back the way I came, so I’d suggest you search that direction.” He pointed back the way Grant had come.

Grant almost groaned. “Thanks. We’ll talk later.” He nodded to Trip, whirled and started running again. *Skye! Where are you?*

Grant felt a shifting in the floor at the same time he heard sounds like the very walls were moving. Up ahead, very faintly, he could see that the impossible was happening, that these huge, heavy, gigantic walls were closing in on themselves. That had to be where Skye was! He rushed in just ahead of the walls closing in the room. Sure enough, there were both Skye and Raina, standing around what looked like a dais with the obelisk in the center of it.

“No, Grant!” Skye said loudly. She grasped his arm urgently. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to get you.” He couldn’t understand why she was looking sadly at him. They were a team. Coming to get each other was what they always did.

The obelisk abruptly split into two, revealing several iridescently blue crystals inside. In fact there were so many crystals that it seemed unlikely that the slim obelisk could’ve contained them all. Grant couldn’t help but think that the crystals looked like the ones that formed Superman’s Fortress...
of Solitude. Somehow he didn’t think that these would be helpful.

Across the room, Raina looked like Christmas had come early, beaming and looking reverently at the crystals. Grant had never seen her so happy. *That can’t be good.*

“How do we stop it?” Grant asked hopelessly. He was already doubtful that they could. Yet they were beautiful and fascinating. Both he and Skye walked closer to the crystals, almost as if they were drawn to it.

“I don’t think we can,” Skye replied, not taking her eyes off the crystals.

“What’s supposed to happen?” Grant asked.

Raina looked like she was high on drugs. “Something beautiful,” she murmured rapturously.

A wave of energy suddenly blasted out of the crystals, pushing all of them back toward the walls. Raina grinned as she moved forward again. Then she began to be engulfed by the stony substance that had killed Idaho and so many others.

Grant couldn’t say that he felt too badly for Raina but he started to panic when the same substance began covering Skye. She looked down at herself and dropped her gun. “Oh God!” she said as the black ash started creeping up her legs. “Oh no!” she gasped. Then, when she realized that it was inevitable, she reached out her hand towards him. Skye just had time to yell, “Grant!” before the substance completely consumed her.

Grant didn’t know what to do. He backed away, loathe to touch her lest he crumble Skye into dust. *This wasn’t supposed to happen! This is not how it was supposed to end! I can’t live without Skye!* He started towards the crystals, determined to destroy them in a last attempt to save the woman he loved. Before he could get there, the crystals exploded, the force knocking Grant off his feet. He laid on the ground, breathing hard, wondering what would happen next. Almost as if someone answered him, the smoky substance started creeping up his body too. *Well, at least we’ll go out the same way.* Grant quit watching the substance and turned his head to look at Skye. He wanted his last sight to be of her. Then there was nothing.
Grant and Skye stood at the bottom of the rope, waiting impatiently for Trip and Mac to get to the surface and send the rope back down for them. They’d met up with the two men on their way to the opening where they’d gone down into the tunnels. When they first glimpsed the other two agents, Skye took one look at them and launched herself at Trip, hugging him fiercely.

“Whoa there, girl. Don’t take off my neck.” Trip smiled, winking at Grant over Skye’s shoulder. “Guess you found her,” he said easily.

“I did. Thanks.” Grant had always envied Trip’s casual manner even in the face of grave danger. Not only did it lead to people underestimating him – a valuable asset in the field – but he seemed so relaxed and happy most of the time. Grant wished he could do that too but he was just too serious and stiff. I need to work on that. His eyes turned to Mac who, although silent, appeared to be fine. “You two seem to be OK.”

Skye backed away from Trip only to grab Mac and pull him down for one of her firm hugs. Grant smiled to himself. Leave it to Skye to make everyone feel loved. He wished he could be as generous with his affection as she was but he had a long history of needing to be cautious to overcome. Besides, that would be weird with guys.

Trip came over to stand by Grant, smacking him lightly on the arm, as close to a hug as the two Specialists were going to get. “We’re fine. You have no idea how relieved I am to see you guys,” Trip murmured. He clearly didn’t want to upset Skye. “With the walls closing, that energy surge and the earthquakes, I wasn’t sure I’d ever see you two again.”

“I know the feeling.”

Trip nodded, glancing at Skye and Mac who’d finished their hug. Grant could also see the wheels turning as Trip observed their fatigue and withdrawn manner. “We should get going,” Trip said to the group. “Coulson’s probably having a cow wondering where we are.”

It wasn’t far from the truth. Grant could hear Coulson and May arguing as the group turned the last corner before the opening.

“Phil, you can’t go down there. We don’t know how stable those tunnels are.”

“We can’t just leave them, Melinda. The tunnels have been playing havoc with our communications, so we have no idea what’s happening. What if they’re injured and need our help?”

“They’re Specialists. They’ll find a way back. You stay here.” Grant raised his eyebrows at hearing May boss Coulson around. “I’m going to go get our infra-red scanners from the Bus. Maybe if we get closer to the source, there won’t be as much interference and we can determine their location.”

May barely had time to leave the room because just as soon as Trip yelled up to him and tugged on the rope, Coulson was yelling to her. “May! They’re OK!” He scanned the tunnel with his flashlight and saw all four agents looking back at him. “Everyone’s OK!”

Coulson and May made short work of getting everyone back to the surface. “Where’s Raina?” May demanded as soon as they were all back on solid ground. “We saw her go down with the obelisk.” She leaned over to glance down into the tunnel. “Is she still down there?”
“She didn’t come back up before us?” Skye questioned, looking around as though expecting Raina to leap out from a corner.

“No,” May replied. “Pretty sure I would’ve remembered that.”

“She’ll get out on her own,” Grant said dismissively, stopping himself from rolling his eyes. Raina always did a fine job of looking out for herself and this time would be no different. He had other things to worry about. “Is everyone else all right?”

“Everybody else is fine,” Coulson told them. “We’ve been worried about the four of you, especially once the earthquakes started. This place is clearly unstable. We need to get back to the Bus as soon as possible.” He glanced at Mac. “Good to have you back.”

“Glad to be back,” Mac said quietly. It seemed like he wanted to say more but then just looked down and kept his silence.

Grant looked at him, puzzled. As someone intimately familiar with the feeling, he could tell that Mac felt guilty. For what though, he had no idea. Clearly he’d missed a lot while undercover, so he looked forward to catching up. Grant was both dreading and anticipating the briefing that was sure to come once they got back on the Bus. Although he was eager to know what had happened since he’d been gone (and officially clear his name from his most recent double assignment), he wasn’t thrilled to tell SHIELD about their transformation. He needed more time to think about what had happened to them and what it all meant.

The six Agents left the boiler room quickly and headed outside. Grant fell back a little to walk with Skye who was quiet and withdrawn. He took her hand and squeezed it, expecting her to make eye contact. She didn’t. “Hey,” he said in a low voice, pausing until she finally glanced at him, “we’re going to figure this out.” Skye nodded but didn’t respond. Grant sighed. This was going to be difficult.

No one talked much on the way back to the Bus. Everyone seemed tired, freaked out or both. Grant used the time to think, his tactician’s brain whirring at top speed. I have to find a way to talk with Skye before we debrief. We need to be on the same page. He didn’t know how he was going to do that though. To ask for time alone with her would seem somewhat suspicious. He went over various scenarios in his head, rejecting each one as too shady or ridiculous.

As it turned out, he didn’t need to use any of them. Quite unwittingly, Jemma saved him. Once the Bus was in the air and headed back to the Playground, she and Coulson had a long talk about pathogens and contamination. It was decided that everyone who’d been affected by their time in the tunnels – Mac, Skye and Grant – needed to be in isolation until Jemma determined them to be safe.

“We don’t know what we’re dealing with here,” Coulson explained to Grant and Skye as he quarantined them in Skye’s old bedroom. Mac was being quarantined in the room once assigned to Fitz. “So until Jemma can run some tests and clear you for duty, we need to take precautions.”

Grant nodded seriously, twisting his expression into one of irritation when what he really wanted to do was sigh in relief. They’d have a chance to talk. Skye hadn’t spoken at all since her question about Raina, something Grant knew Coulson noticed because he kept glancing at her. “Call if you need anything,” he told them as he shut the door.

Skye immediately sat down on the edge her old bed (the room was so small that there was literally no other place to sit). Grant sat down next to her, determined to get her talking. He gently took her hand and turned to start the conversation when Skye suddenly burst into tears and leaned into him,
sobbing onto his shoulder. Grant was surprised. He hadn’t expected this but, recovering quickly, dropped her hand so he could put his arm around her shoulder.

“Shh…” he whispered as he held her protectively against his body. *This is a bad idea. She has to keep calm.* “Just listen to the sound of my heart.” Skye nodded. Grant felt some turbulence but overall she seemed to be holding it together. He let her cry for a few minutes, then started smoothing her hair. “Babe, I know it was rough going for a while but we’re going to be fine. You know that, right?” He wanted desperately to tell her that he’d never let anything happen to her but both of them knew that wasn’t true. Some things were beyond their control.

Skye raised her tear-stained face. “How can you be so sure, Grant? We don’t even know what we are anymore or what we can do. Nothing’s ever going to be the same again.” Her voice broke, then she sniffed, clearly trying to hold back the tears that were threatening to erupt. When he saw her swallow and then take a deep, calming breath, he couldn’t be prouder. *That’s my rookie.* She closed her eyes. “I really don’t want to see the look on everyone’s face when we tell them that I’m the one causing the earthquakes.”

“I don’t know. I’d kind of like to see the look on Hunter’s face.” He grinned at Skye but she didn’t take the bait.

She shook her head. “No. Don’t do that. Please don’t joke. I don’t think I can stand it.”

Grant’s smile slid off his face and he ducked his head so that he could look her in the eyes. “OK. I won’t.” She gave him a watery half-smile and Grant leaned his forehead against hers. He closed his eyes, remembering that terrible moment when he’d thought he’d lost her forever. Then he reined his emotions back in (*Now’s not the time, Ward*) and leaned back so they were once again face to face. They’d both had their moments of grief but they needed to start pulling it together so they could figure out a plan. *Time for us to start thinking like agents.* “Skye, I know you think what happened to us is horrible but it happened and we’re going to deal with it. We don’t yet know all we need to know, so it’s possible that these powers will be great…” he smiled slightly at her disbelieving expression, “…in time. But whatever they are, we need to start thinking about the positives. For one thing, nobody died.”

“You’re right. That would’ve made everything so much worse.”

“Plus our powers could prove to be assets.” Skye looked skeptical but she nodded. “And I’ve been thinking about what we should tell Coulson. I don’t think we should tell him about our powers.”

Grant held his breath, hoping that his bald pronouncement wouldn’t upset her enough to cause tremors.

“What?” Sure enough, turbulence started.

“Not yet anyway,” Grant amended, waiting until Skye turned to face him fully before continuing. He took a deep breath, hoping that she’d get the hint. She did, the turbulence almost immediately decreasing. “You were right when you said that we don’t know what we can do or how our gifts work. We need to figure that out, do some experimenting.” Skye opened her mouth to say something but Grant put his finger against her lips, lowering his voice even further so she had to strain to hear it. “You know how SHIELD feels about gifteds. Remember how they treated Scorch?” Skye bit her lip, nodding. “They’d do the same to us. We’d be put on the Index and given handlers. They’d never allow us to use our powers or live independently. Hell, I doubt they’d even let us continue to be together. I mean, one gifted is scary enough but two?” He shook his head. “There’s no way.”

Skye looked at him, her eyes wide, tears no longer in evidence. “What are we going to do? I can’t
just lie to Coulson or May.”

Grant took both her hands in his. “You’re going to have to.” Skye again opened her mouth to interrupt, so he rushed to finish. “I know it’s going to be difficult but we need to know what we’re dealing with before we let them in. As far as they’re concerned, all that happened in that room was the obelisk exploded and caused some earthquakes.”

Skye yanked her hands out of his and turned her face away from him. Grant didn’t know what to do. He hadn’t even considered the idea that Skye might disagree with him. Suddenly, she tugged on his arm, scooting both of them back further on the bed so that they were fully sitting on the bed, their backs against the wall. She halfway turned and placed her head against his chest, resting her ear next to his heart. Grant put his arm around her, hugging her close. “This is never going to work,” she murmured. “The minute they run tests on us, they’re going to know we’re different.”

“We don’t know that. But you’re probably right.” He sighed heavily. “I’ll think of something. All we can do for now is take it one step at a time.”

“How can you be so calm?” she demanded, lifting her head up to look into his eyes. “This is literally a life-changing event and you’re acting like we’re learning a new skill.”

Grant smiled. “In a way, it is a new skill.” Skye snorted. “I know you’re still new to this but this is exactly what Specialists are trained to do. We adapt to changing circumstances. And I’ve been adapting my entire life. You assess the situation, determine your options, and move forward with whatever’s going to help you survive. In this instance, it means keeping certain information to ourselves until we’re sure it’s safe to share.”

She snuggled back onto his chest. “I get it. Troubleshooting.”

He chuckled. “That’s certainly one way to put it.” Then his tactician’s brain started working the problem, creating and discarding every scenario he could conceive of until he found one he thought could work.

Fortune kept favoring him though as Coulson didn’t seem to be in any hurry to debrief them, so Grant’s problem-solving skills weren’t yet put to the test. Once the Bus touched down, he and Skye were ushered into a small room enclosed mostly in glass although there was one small area designated for privacy. Mac apparently had a different one down the hall.

“I know how much you two like to be together,” Coulson explained with a hint of a smile as he showed them their new temporary quarters, “so I decided not to separate you.” He paused. “Besides, there are only two contamination rooms.”

Both Grant and Skye laughed at the brief moment of levity in what had been an extremely long and traumatic day. After eating, showering and changing clothes, Skye immediately fell asleep. Grant, however, was way too tired to even consider it. He sat on the floor with his back against the wall watching her sleep on the bed. He’d been keeping his emotions under rigid control, wanting to be there for her. But now that she was resting, he was free to attend to himself. He closed his eyes, going back over everything that had happened since the moment the walls closed, shutting them in.

**Flashback**

Every Specialist is taught not to fear death. It’s an occupational hazard, something that isn’t unusual. It even borders on normal. They see death regularly, frequently cause it themselves and know that any day could be their last. Although every Specialist has enough arrogance to do the job, they’re also painfully aware that they could do everything right and death could come for them
anyway. All Specialists learn this lesson. However, what can never be taught is how it feels when you believe that you’re on the verge of death. Time loses its constancy and reality is turned on its head.

From the second the heavy walls sealed Grant, Skye and Raina into the circular room, time sped up, each event occurring at lightning speed. In what felt like an instant to Grant, the obelisk disclosed the inner crystals, the wave of energy erupted and the hard smoky substance covered Raina. Then everything slowed down, each movement happening slowly as though covered in molasses. Grant turned his head to look at Skye at half speed, intending to remark upon Raina’s predicament, only to glimpse the unknown element snaking its way up Skye’s body. It felt as if the universe was laughing at him, letting him get just a peek at what happiness looked like. Time fast-forwarded – he barely heard her last plea to him – and Skye was gone.

Time stopped. Grant froze in place, not knowing what he was supposed to do. Can Skye be saved? Why did Cal encourage her to do this if it meant her death? He heard the sound of his heartbeat in his ears and felt the utter silence around him. It was the stillness which ignited his grief. This wasn’t supposed to happen! This is not how it was supposed to end! I can’t live without Skye! He once again felt the numbness he last encountered when John was killed. The realization of when he’d last experienced shock shook him out of his daze and propelled him toward the crystals, determined to do something – anything! – that would bring Skye back.

And then the crystals exploded. Grant felt his body flying through the air – through molasses again – landing with a thud against one of the heavy walls. He laid on the ground, breathing hard, everything around him in sharp relief. He saw every detail, every crevice, in the statues of Raina and Skye. He could hear two men talking in the tunnels. He could feel the warmth emanating from the explosion and the vibrations in the air. He leaned up on his forearms, determined to get a better look. What’s happening to me? What’s going to happen next? As if in answer, Grant felt a pressure slowly, ever so slowly, creeping up his legs. He looked down, saw the grayish black element starting to coat his limbs and laughed.

I had to ask.

He always had to ask, even when he was younger and curiosity was going to bring pain. He just had to know. His questioning nature led him to his greatest achievements and it helped him survive. He wouldn’t have made it five years in the Wyoming wilderness had he not asked what would happen if he tried different things. It’s also what made him an exceptional Specialist. He always had questions that needed to be answered before he felt prepared. Are there any more exits, what if the patrol comes early, should I keep gloves on when touching the item? Grant asked them all. Grant’s questioning nature even led to his betrayal of John and Hydra because he started asking what would happen if Hydra won and did he want that. So even now, when facing his greatest grief and personal tragedy, he had to know. Until he didn’t. Once the gray matter started engulfing him, he stopped questioning and just let it happen.

Instead of struggling with the element, Grant relaxed against the wall. He knew it was useless to fight against whatever it was and wanted to use his remaining time well. He thought about those who’d loved him – Grams, Elizabeth and Thomas, Buddy, Kara, his Bus colleagues, and Skye, beautiful, funny, smart Skye – and decided that, all in all, it’d been a good life. Sure, he’d experienced a lot of hardship, far more than his fair share, but he’d also been loved, had fun and made a difference in the world. And he’d been in a relationship with Skye, not for as long as he should’ve, but long enough to know true joy. If they both had to go, then Grant was glad he could share this with her. At least we’ll both go out the same way. He felt utterly at peace as he quit watching the substance and turned his head to look at Skye. He wanted his last sight to be of her. There was a small smile on his face as the element covered his mouth and nose. His last thought was one of surprise and gratitude that it didn’t hurt. Then…nothing.
Suddenly, Grant found himself awake again. *What’s happening? Am I alive? Is this death?* He heard the sounds of small pieces of solid rock crumbling on the floor and felt a few shards of his own statue prison disintegrate when he experimentally pushed against his shell. He laughed a little to himself. *If I fight my way out of this, will I emerge as a butterfly?* Then everything exploded. Every single bit of his shell fell off of him and he was free.

Grant remained still, trying hard to get his bearings. Another one of John’s valuable teachings: *If you wake up and you don’t know where you are, take a moment to ground yourself and figure out what’s going on. Acting too quickly on minimal information can be a death sentence.* As good advice as that was, the current situation wasn’t making it easy. Grant realized that he was still in the underground chamber but between now and the time he’d been cocooned, the environment drastically changed. The ground was trembling and debris was falling everywhere, crushing all the flowers growing in the dirt. *That’s weird.* Looking around wildly, he saw Raina and Skye standing in the same positions they’d been when they’d been engulfed, their shells nowhere in sight. Both women looked exactly the same except for their expressions. They were freaking out.

“Oh my god!” Skye yelled as she weaved her way unsteadily towards him, tears of relief in her eyes. “Are you OK?”

Grant nodded, tentatively pushing up onto his arms, somehow expecting his body to hurt or be weaker, to have some evidence of his imprisonment. But there was nothing different that he could tell. The only thing that seemed off was how much warmer he was. He stood up, grabbing Skye’s outstretched hand, and started pulling her towards an opening in the wall. “We have to get out of here!” he yelled over the sounds of chaos.

She nodded, looking around at Raina. The other woman seemed disappointed, her expression more sad than afraid, but she too was making her way toward their exit point. The three of them made it into the hallway outside their chamber. Oddly, the quaking appeared to lessen although the ground still wasn’t stable. Raina leaned back against wall, catching her breath. Grant took the opportunity to run a practiced eye over Skye to see if she was truly unharmed. Satisfying himself that she was fine, he ran his hands gently over her hair and face and kissed her deeply.

“I thought I’d lost you back there,” he murmured when they came up for air, touching his forehead to Skye’s.

She smiled slightly, almost sadly. “For a moment there, you did,” she whispered back.

“No he didn’t,” Raina said to Skye. “You weren’t dead. None of us were.”

Grant felt an unpleasant jolt of awareness; he’d almost forgotten she was there. He transferred his gaze to Raina. Skye probably knew more than he did – hopefully Cal had imparted some knowledge about this – but Grant was puzzled. *None of this makes sense.* “Why aren’t we dead? Why didn’t we die like everyone else who touched that stuff?” He looked over at Skye, expecting her to answer but she looked just as confused as he felt. He noted that the quaking had completely stopped.

“Don’t you two know anything?” Raina asked disgustedly, pushing off from the wall and meeting them in the middle of the massive hallway. “‘That stuff’ as you call it is a Chrysalis. Only the Chosen emerge unharmed.” She must have registered their confusion because she sighed heavily. “We were transforming. That’s why we didn’t die. We’re special.” She looked Grant up and down, with a clear sense of appreciation and a hint of her old mocking smile. Skye bristled but Raina didn’t even glance her way. “I knew that both Skye and I were extraordinary but you Agent Ward, you are a surprise.”
He crossed his arms in front of his chest. “Yeah, I get that a lot,” he muttered almost under his breath.

Raina started to head off down the hall but Skye grabbed her arm, yanking her back around to face them. “Wait. I still don’t understand. What happened to us? How are we special?”

“That’s what I’d like to know too,” Raina said angrily, shaking off Skye’s hold on her arm. “My grandmother… You clearly have a gift,” she said accusingly to Skye, “but I don’t feel any different. After all the time I spent working for this moment, I didn’t get the answers I was searching for.”

She started to pace a little, seemingly unaware of the flowers appearing at her feet. “I was supposed to become something divine, something transcendent. My grandmother said I’d be an angel.” She stopped pacing and glared at Skye. “Maybe it’s because you were there. Maybe you received the gift meant for me.”

Skye practically snorted. “What gift, Raina? What gift do I have? The gift of always being in the wrong place at the wrong time? The gift of almost getting the people I love killed?”

Raina chuckled mirthlessly, shaking her head. “You truly are slow.” She glanced over at Grant. “I really don’t know what you see in her.” She crossed her arms and returned her attention to Skye. “The explosion. The shaking. All the raw power we could feel in the air. Does any of that ring a bell?”

“Yeah, it does,” Skye replied in an irritated tone. She was starting to lose her temper and Grant felt the slightest tremors underneath his feet. Oh shit. “We’re underground, Raina,” Skye continued, completely unaware of the increased shaking of the ground, “in a place that’s so unstable that we should be leaving as fast as we can instead of standing here talking to a crazy woman! I have no gift and you’re just as insane as you always were.” She grabbed Grant’s hand and tried to walk off down the hall but he refused to budge. She turned and looked questioningly at him. “Grant? We need to go before this whole place comes down around us!”

“Skye, wait a minute.” He could feel the tremors increase in power and frequency. He turned Skye a little to the side so his body was blocking her view of Raina, giving them at least the illusion of privacy. “Do you trust me?” he asked quietly.

“You know I do but we don’t have time…”

“Skye,” Grant looked directly into her eyes, trying his best to ignore the shaking around him. “Please. Trust me on this.” When he saw Skye nod reluctantly, he continued, “Just close your eyes and take five circular breaths. Concentrate only on your breathing.”

Skye gave him a look that let him know she thought he was crazy but did as he asked. She closed her eyes and he saw the intake of her first breath. Grant glanced around, noting that the shaking was starting to subside. Raina was still standing behind him, apparently interested in seeing what he was doing. Either that or she has nowhere else to go.

By the time Skye reached her fifth breath, all shaking and trembling had ceased. She opened her eyes, a bewildered expression crossing her face. “Grant, what’s going on? Am I the one who’s doing this?” she whispered.

Grant felt a mild tremor. He took Skye’s left hand with his own while he used his right hand to cup her face. “I think what Raina was trying to tell you is that your gift is the power to make things shake. I’m sure it’s more complicated than that but we’ll figure that out later. Right now, you need to remain calm. Your gift seems to be tied to your emotions, so you need to call to mind your training,” he gave her his best no-nonsense SO look, “and don’t get upset.”
She nodded and looked down. Grant could see her continuing her deep breaths. He whirled around to face Raina. “I wouldn’t be so sure that you didn’t get a gift too.” He stopped when he saw the puzzlement on her face and laughed. He couldn’t help it. “I’m sorry,” he said when she glared at him, “but it’s just so ironic. The whole time I’ve known you, you’ve been obsessed with flowered dresses. That’s why John nicknamed you Flowers. But now, when there are flowers literally at your feet, you don’t even notice them.”

Raina looked down, her eyes widening as she saw a row of flowers where she’d been walking, many of them trampled from her steps. “You think I’m doing this?” she whispered.

“Well, they sure weren’t here before. What’s your explanation? You’re the one who’s supposed to know so much more than we do,” Grant answered sarcastically. Raina was working his last nerve and there was only so much he could take.

Raina reached a hand out toward the flowers on the ground and some of them that were lying crushed suddenly straightened, looking just as fresh as they had before she’d stepped on them. “Flowers,” Raina said flatly. She looked accusingly at Skye and started advancing slowly towards her, flowers popping up in her wake. “I’m the one who’s spent her whole life researching this, doing whatever I could to get to this moment. I’m the one who endured working with absolute idiots in order to receive my reward.” She snorted. “Now that I’m finally here, I get flowers while you – a woman who knows absolutely nothing and never even wanted this – get the kind of power I can only dream of! How is that fair?”

She stopped in front of Skye. Grant tensed, not knowing what was about to happen, but glad that Skye hadn’t moved or flinched in the face of Raina’s approach. That’s my rookie! Skye looked calmly at Raina. “You’re right, Raina. I never wanted this. But if we’re going to talk about what’s fair,” her voice started rising, “how fair is it that you’ve killed people in search of your reward? Did they deserve that? Is it fair that they died just so you could play god? If me having this gift of… whatever it is…is the cost of keeping you from having the kind of power you always wanted, then I’m glad I was given it.”

Raina looked like she’d been slapped then her expression darkened and she turned away, striding off down the hall. Grant had just had enough time to relax his shoulders and let his eyes meet Skye’s when Raina suddenly whirled. Her hand shot out and several of the flowers in the ground started growing quickly, their stems lengthening and wrapping around Skye. The ground started shaking in earnest as the vines tightened around her neck.

No way in hell! Grant could feel himself burning with rage as Skye struggled to breathe. He tried desperately to break off the vines or at least loosen their hold. The vines tightened even further, impervious to the efforts of both Skye and Grant to get them off. This isn’t working! He looked down the hall at Raina whose smug expression infuriated him further. Skye’s face was turning blue and her breaths sounded further apart. Raina was too far ahead for him to reach her in time to save Skye.

Grant’s head felt like it was going to explode, his vision clouded with red. Although he’d always been a passionate person, other than the one time when he’d set his parent’s house on fire, he’d never let his temper loose. This felt different. This felt like an inferno of emotion that was way out of control. A wave of heat rolled over his body, blocking out everything except Raina. Then, almost as if his temper had tired itself out, everything swung back to normal.

Skye was bent over to her knees, taking great heaving breaths, vines roped loosely at her feet. The ground was no longer trembling but there were scorch marks in a neat row leading up to Raina, who stood there looking shocked. The flowers she’d left in her path had burned to a crisp but she
didn’t seem touched by whatever fire had burned the ground even though the seared earth stopped just at her feet. Raina looked up at Grant, her eyes wide and scared, then she ran, turning a corner at great speed that she was no longer in sight.

“What the hell just happened?” Grant demanded of Skye when she looked up at him, her breathing mostly normal.

She smiled faintly. “Well, I guess now we know what your gift is.” She shook her head and giggled, a bit hysterically. “Figures.”

Present Day

Grant smiled. Skye was right: it did figure. He’d always been interested in fires of any kind: small, big, hot, cold, the five classes of fires, firepower. It was probably what made him such a great marksman. Fire was fascinating and Grant couldn’t get enough of looking at it, studying it, even feeling it. He was mesmerized by how fire changes color depending on how hot it gets and which element is burning. He loved the sound of fire consuming whatever was in its path and adored the smell fire makes when heating leaves, food or different kinds of wood. Fire was his companion and his comfort. In the heat of his greatest anger, fire had been the weapon he’d used to get back at Christian. When he was alone in the woods, fire became his best defense against cold weather and starving. For Grant, fire meant life. So it made a lot of sense that fire would also be his gift.

He abruptly stopped smiling. As much as he loved fire, Grant also had a healthy respect for it. He knew firsthand how dangerous it could be and shuddered at the thought of being unable to control it. As far as he knew, it was pure luck that he hadn’t burned Raina right along with her damned flowers. Anthokinesis. Grant said the word aloud, letting it roll around his mouth. Words were another one of his gifts and comforts which is why he could read, write and speak six languages fluently. That’s what Raina’s gift was: anthokinesis or flower manipulation. So her gift conformed to who she was as a person as did his. And, if he thought about it, so did Skye’s.

Skye was a force of nature, someone who ran around creating chaos wherever she went. Her passion for answers and her ability to love often got her in trouble; both of her gifts served to shake things up. So it made sense for Skye’s gift to be related to power. Whatever the Chysalis was, apparently it could see into the hearts of those it entombed. With that thought, Grant felt a wave of fatigue rush over him and he climbed into bed next to Skye. He closed his eyes and tried deep, even breaths but sleep still wouldn’t come. There was too much to consider. Next to him, Skye moved restlessly, turning to face the glass wall. He was about to say something to her when he heard a sound outside of their room.

“I haven’t been able to sleep either,” Coulson said. Grant opened his eyes a fraction, just enough to see what was going on. Coulson was sitting slumped on a stool just outside their contamination room. His arms were crossed and he was dressed in the same clothes he’d been wearing in Puerto Rico. The only difference was some bandages across the cut in his forehead. Jemma had been hard at work taking care of the team.

Skye sat up and turned toward Coulson, carefully placing the sheets around Grant so as not to disturb him. “Every time I close my eyes, I see my dad, Whitehall and the tunnels,” she told Coulson, her voice breaking. “And now I’m stuck in this room with no privacy and no room to move. The only good thing about it is that Grant’s here with me. So thank you for that.”

Coulson stood up, moving closer to the glass. “I know it’s hard, Skye, but Jemma’s convinced that it’s necessary. It won’t be for long. Once medical clears you, we’ll get you and Ward out of there.” He smiled although it didn’t reach his eyes. “You’ll just be stuck underground like the rest of us.”
Skye tensed. “How is everyone doing? We worked so hard on this only to have it all come literally tumbling down around our ears.”

Coulson shrugged. Grant knew he was trying to keep it casual. For that, Grant was extremely grateful because Skye was way too keyed up. She needed to sleep. “Just trying to keep busy. Everyone deals with trauma in their own way. Sometimes it makes you just want to pack up and run.”

“Is that what you want to do – run?”

“Sometimes. You?”

Skye got up and started pacing the floor. “How long did it take Mack to get out of quarantine?” Interesting. She redirected him and didn’t answer the question.

“He cleared pretty quickly. Whatever took over his system is gone but he’s pretty shaken up.” Coulson paused, his expression compassionate. “Skye, I know it’s hard to make sense of all this but we’ll figure it out. The good news is that we don’t have to figure it out now. You need to sleep, then we’ll see about getting you cleared.” He gestured towards the bed. “Looks like Ward’s way ahead of you. You should join him.”

Skye nodded, sitting back down on the edge of the bed until Coulson left. “He doesn’t know you as well as I do,” she said to Grant, still facing where Coulson had been. Then she turned, a little smile on her face. “There’s no way SuperSpy would ever be asleep when people are talking around him.”

Grant smiled, putting his arm under the flat pillow in order to puff it up. “It’s a gift,” he said modestly. “Now, can you please lay back down so we both can go to sleep?”

Skye nodded, snuggling into Grant’s chest. “As you wish,” she whispered wickedly. Grant poked her in the back so she’d know he’d caught her *Princess Bride* reference but otherwise remained still until he heard the deep, rhythmic breathing that signaled her descent into sleep. He struggled to remain awake a while longer in order to come up with a plan but the hours of wakefulness and the spent adrenaline started dragging him under. Grant gave in, kissing Skye on her head before he too drifted into sleep.

The next day dragged as it became evident that they weren’t going to clear medical easily. Of course, part of the problem was that the team was too busy arguing and going after Hydra to work on getting them out of their imprisonment. They were nice enough to do some of their planning in front of the quarantine room so that he and Skye could participate but Grant felt curiously uninterested. While he was glad that SHIELD was going to try and cut off all of Hydra’s heads, he was much more interested in testing out his new powers and helping Skye figure out hers. But he couldn’t do that until they got out.

He also worried about Skye because she seemed constantly on the verge of tears. She even lost it after Bobbi kindly brought a quarantine survival kit. Then Grant had to hold her for an hour and whisper reassurances into her ear after Jemma came in with her ridiculous ranting about alien biology being a plague. Although he had no complaints – touching Skye was always wonderful – it wasn’t a good sign. The more he tried to talk Skye down, the angrier he got at Jemma for being so wrong and upsetting Skye. *How dare she talk like that about something she can’t possibly understand!* At first, he barely noticed the warming sensation but soon Grant could feel a distinct rise in his skin’s temperature.

Apparently Skye could too because she bolted out of his lap, looking at him with wide eyes. “You’re not going to…umm.…lose control, are you?” she asked very quietly. Grant shook his
head, immediately beginning the calming routine he used after high pressure missions. Some of the things on the shelves near them started shaking. A few items fell onto the floor but neither Skye nor Grant paid any attention. “Because I don’t know if you’ve noticed but there’s no place to hide in here. If things start…heating up…I’ve got no place to go.”

“I know,” he said through his teeth. “You’re not helping.”

Although she looked both offended and irritated, Skye was wise enough to back off and at least pretend to look through the magazines Bobbi brought. The shaking ceased. By the time she finished reading the first one – she’d gotten interested in several of the articles despite herself – Grant had calmed down. Skye noted his change as soon as their eyes met but neither of them said anything.

“Something wrong?” Jemma asked, startling both of them. She must’ve entered the room while he and Skye were conducting their staring contest. “You two look tense.”

“No, nothing’s wrong,” Skye muttered, breaking off her eye contact and looking everywhere but at Grant or Jemma. “We just want to get out of here.”

“Well then, it’s good that your long wait is over,” Fitz said, entering the lab with a medical tablet in his hands. Jemma whirled to face him which was just as well since Skye looked utterly surprised. Grant tried not to grit his teeth in frustration.

“I was anxious to double-check the results,” Fitz told Jemma. He handed the tablet to her so she could see for herself. “I was anxious to double-check the results,” Fitz told Jemma. He handed the tablet to her so she could see for herself. “Both Skye and Ward’s DNA are an exact match to what they were before. They’re clear.” Fitz looked back over at Grant and Skye, beaming at them, clearly pleased with himself.

Jemma sighed in relief, then lit up the room with her smile. “Thank God.”

Fitz’s smile dimmed as he noted Skye’s expression. He glanced over at Jemma. “Um Skye, is your bunk made?”

“What? Oh, yeah, I think it’s fine. I mean, I’ve usually been sleeping in Grant’s…”

“Well, mine is a mess,” Grant injected smoothly.

Fitz put his hands on his hips. “Uh, well, maybe you could get him some clean sheets,” he said to Jemma. She looked up at him, surprised. “They should probably sleep.”

Jemma turned back to Skye, smiling widely again. “Yes. You both deserve a good night’s rest.”

“Yeah, I mean I…” Fitz said hesitantly, gesturing widely with his hands. “and I would do it but the last time I was in there, there were lots of ladies’ things thrown about and there are just some things you don’t want to know about your best friends.” Despite himself, Grant almost smiled. Fitz’s doing a great job.

“Okay,” Jemma replied, rushing away, big smile still in place.

Once she was gone, Skye glanced accusingly at Grant who was leaning against the wall. “Oh, didn’t I tell you? Fitz and I had a chat while you were in the shower,” he said calmly. He really had intended to tell her about the plan but with Bobbi coming to visit and Jemma’s rant soon after, he’d never found the opportunity.

Fitz nodded, opening the door and coming into the room. He knelt down near their bed so he could pick up a few things that had fallen on the floor earlier. Skye backed up until she could sit on the bed above him. “What did you just do?” she asked, almost as if she were in a daze.
“I switched your blood results with your old samples.”

“The new samples are different?” Grant asked.

“Drastically. But until everyone around here calms down, I don’t think we should tell anybody. What with the way Simmons is acting. For now, we should just keep it between us,” Fitz said, waving his hand to include the three of them. “Keep you safe until we figure it out, OK?”

Skye nodded, a single tear rolling down her cheek. Grant started to move towards her but she got off the bed, almost falling into an embrace with Fitz, sobbing on his shoulder. Grant stopped, realizing that Skye needed comfort from someone who wasn’t him, from someone who wasn’t Inhuman the same way she was. Fitz was the perfect choice.

“It’s OK,” Fitz told Skye, gently petting her hair.

“This is all my fault,” she sobbed. “I could’ve stopped her. I let this happen and I’m so sorry.” Grant frowned, not realizing until just now that Skye had been carrying this guilt the entire time. *How did I miss that?*

“No, it’s OK,” Fitz murmured.

“No, everything’s my fault.” Skye paused, leaning back a bit from Fitz’s shoulder. “Jemma’s right. There’s something very wrong with me, with us.”

“No,” Fitz said immediately. “You’re just different now.” He paused, letting what he said sink in. Grant understood that Fitz was also talking about himself, about how different he’d been since his underwater accident. “You’re just different now and there’s nothing wrong with that.”

Grant sighed, grateful for Fitz’s friendship, but sad for Skye. He started picking up their things in preparation for the move to his room, a place he’d never cared much about before but now was desperate to see again. He glanced over at Fitz and Skye who were picking themselves up off the floor and realized, much to his chagrin, that this experience was much different for her than it was for him.

Grant had been an outcast his entire life; it was something he was used to. And while he’d recently found acceptance with his Bus colleagues, it was Skye who was his real home base. He could endure anything as long as the two of them were together. So him becoming Inhuman along with her wasn’t such a big deal. But it wasn’t the same for Skye. She’d finally found a family within SHIELD – a group of people who loved and cared for her – so to drive a wedge between them now was excruciating. That’s why Fitz’s comfort was so necessary. Grant hoped with all of his heart that the others would feel the same way but he had a bad feeling that it wouldn’t be the case.
Skye put her feet up on the dashboard and looked out of the car window, her impatience barely concealed. “I get that we’re going to the mountains…sort of,” she said as she looked around at the flat terrain, “but where are we going to stay?”

Grant sighed. The two of them had been driving in the SUV for hours. At first Skye had been fine with his explanation of going somewhere remote for the two of them to experiment with their gifts but now she was getting bored. She’d napped, listened to music, played on her phone and even watched a TV show on her computer. However, now that they were out of cell range, she was bored with her laptop and the scenery was dull, so she was ready for both action and answers.

“We’re getting close. I told you that I had somewhere for us to stay that didn’t involve camping.” He looked over at her and winked. “Although I must say, our last camping experience was pretty fun.”

She nodded, smiling at the memory. “Yeah it was. It was the first time I started thinking that maybe you were just as into me as I was you.”

“What gave you that idea? I thought I hid it pretty well.”

Skye pretended to consider this. “I suppose it was partly because you finally dropped your Agent Toolbag persona long enough to treat me like a person instead of a trainee…” she grinned wickedly, “but mostly it was because when we shared the sleeping bag, we were so close that I could feel everything – and I do mean everything – about you.”

Grant groaned good-naturedly. “I was afraid of that but there wasn’t anything I could do at the time. I kept hoping you were asleep.”

“Yeah, right. How could I sleep when I had such a beautiful hunk of man right next to me? One who was warm…,” she smiled slyly at him, “…impressive, and clearly had sexy thoughts on his mind. Sleep?” She snorted. “Not on your life! I mean, I am only human, Grant.”

Grant subtly held his breath, hoping that Skye’s mind wouldn’t go where he thought it would. Just as expected though, her teasing expression was replaced by the sad look he’d grown used to seeing the past couple of days. “We’re still human, Skye.”

“You can’t know that!”

Grant sighed. She’s right. “You’re right. I can’t. And maybe we aren’t. But I do know that it doesn’t matter.”

Skye stared at him. “What do you mean it doesn’t matter? Of course it matters!”

He shook his head. Why can she not see this? “Do you remember when Coulson told you that they thought you might have alien DNA because you weren’t affected by the GH formula?” He waited to continue until he saw her nod. “I decided way back then that it didn’t matter.” Still keeping his eyes on the road, Grant reached over to take Skye’s hand. “You’re one of the best people I know. And that’s going to be true whether you’re 100% human or have alien DNA.”

Skye turned her head away to look out the window. Grant suspected that it was to keep him from seeing her tear up. Sure enough, he saw her wipe away a few tears but then she turned back to face him, a soft smile on her face. “If you haven’t already won the Boyfriend of the Year Award, then
you’ve definitely catapulted to the top of the list with that one.” She shook her head, the smile dropping off her face. “Whatever did I do to deserve you, Grant Ward?”

Now it was Grant’s turn to look away. He wasn’t used to displays of great affection, especially not ones that were directed his way, and he didn’t know what to do. If he responded by listing her wonderful attributes, then it looked like he was sucking up or wasn’t sincere. But if he said nothing, then maybe Skye would think that he agreed with her when, in reality, nothing could be further from the truth. I don’t deserve her! Besides, he was driving, an activity that didn’t really lend itself to big emotional displays.

Grant chanced a look at Skye and saw the vulnerability on her face. “Hey,” he said gently, “it isn’t fair for you to say things like that when I have to keep driving. What do you say that we return to this conversation a little later when I can properly assure you of how I feel and show you just how worthy you are?”

“Deal.” She looked around at the scenery and grimaced. “Speaking of driving, are we going to be there any time soon? It feels like we’ve been driving forever and I can’t even remember the last time we saw another car.”

“Patience is a virtue,” Grant said loftily as he slowed the vehicle down and turned onto a side road, “but since you asked, we’re almost there. Just a little further.”

“What is this place we’re going to? It’s in the middle of nowhere. How did you even find it?”

“I didn’t. The place used to be John’s. He gave it to me a few years ago. He said it was because he knew how much I loved the peace out here but he probably just wanted a place that was off the books in case he needed it.” He glanced over just in time to see Skye’s look of disgust and smiled slightly. “If you can overlook how I got the house, I think you’re really going to like it.”

Twenty minutes later, Grant could see that he was right. They pulled up to the two-story house surrounded by miles of undisturbed wilderness, no neighbors in site, and Skye’s mouth dropped open. The view of the mountains was incredible but she seemed more interested in the house. While she could only see the outside, it was a place that screamed money and comfort with its aesthetically pleasing log structure, ornate door and wraparound balcony. “This is where we’ll be staying?” She turned to look at him reproachfully. “I thought for sure that we were going to be roughing it in some one-room cabin with no running water and only a fireplace for cooking food!”

Grant laughed. “I considered it but I didn’t want to be accused of not showing the woman I love a good time.” Skye punched him lightly in the arm, her entire face beaming. “Besides, this is one of my safe houses. If I ever needed to go on the run, there’s no reason why I couldn’t do it in comfort.” He pulled into the driveway and turned off the engine. He dangled the key to the house teasingly in front of Skye who promptly grabbed it and took off. That left him to unload the groceries and their minimal luggage but he didn’t mind. Skye’s happiness was all that mattered and she’d had little enough of that recently. Things at the Playground had been a mixed bag.

Flashback

After sleeping for 12 hours straight once they got out of the contamination unit, Grant woke and looked contentedly around the room. Skye was still lying next to him, fast asleep. If she hadn’t looked so peaceful, he might’ve considered waking her up. They hadn’t had time to properly express their relief to each other for their survival. Grant grinned a little as he imagined how it would go but his smile faded as he reminded himself of the challenges ahead. Skye wasn’t taking this well and Fitz, as helpful as he had been, had only bought them a little time. There will be a reckoning and it’s not going to be pretty.
Grant eased out of the bed, trying hard not to disturb Skye, so he could sit in his beloved chair and think. They desperately needed to experiment to see the power and limits of their gifts and learn how to control them. They also should research just what exactly SHIELD did with gifted people on the Index. He and Skye had to know what their options were. But the most important thing at the moment was for them to blend in with their teammates. Grant remembered the advice John hammered home to him right before he left to go to the Academy. Son, the easiest way for people to discover what you’re up to is for you to stick out. No one notices all the fish going with the flow. But they sure as hell pay attention to the one swimming upstream. Grant had perfected the art of blending in with his environment over the years. Mostly.

But Skye was a different story. With her youth, beauty, uncanny ability with computers and snarky attitude, she’d stood out from Day 1. It was different now, she was different, but what hadn’t changed was how much everyone noticed her. Now she loved and was loved by everyone on base, so much so that any small discrepancy in her attitude was going to be noticed. With all the pressure she’s under right now, maybe we should start small. He glanced over at her, his expression softening as he saw a small smile on her beautiful face. Almost as if she felt his stare, Skye opened her eyes, her gaze locking onto his.

She smiled lazily. “I should’ve known you’d be in your chair even though it’s…” She consulted the alarm clock, “…way too early. How did you ever get by without it?” And boom, just like that, her haunted look and dropped smile telegraphed that she remembered their circumstances. Was that a small tremor?

Grant pretended he didn’t notice. “Not easily,” he said lightly. “When you first got it for me, I thought you were crazy. But now I don’t want to go anywhere without it. I think I missed this chair more than I did some of our teammates. Hunter for sure.”

It did the trick. Skye laughed a little, sitting up in the bed and leaning against the wall. She immediately became serious again. “What do we do now?”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” he said leaning back in the chair in an effort to look casual. “I have some other ideas but first I think we need to socialize with our teammates. So…what about we make breakfast for them?”

Skye’s expression went blank. “You want me to cook? Voluntarily? Do you hate our teammates or do you just want them to hate us?”

Grant laughed. It was good to see Skye joking around. He stood up, going to the closet to dress in his usual black pants and t-shirt. “You’re right. That’s a horrible idea. Your cooking really would be a bridge too far.”

Skye threw a pillow at him. “Hey!”

Grant easily dodged the pillow, finished pulling his t-shirt over his head as he sat down on the bed and leaned in to give her a lingering kiss. He pulled back to tuck a piece of hair behind her ear. “I guess we should both stick with our strengths. I’ll do breakfast. You stay and rest.”

Skye nodded and smiled, exaggeratedly leaning back with her arms behind her head. “Don’t forget the muffins.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

*****
Grant stood in the kitchen enjoying the quiet before the morning rush. Everything was either baking, heating or already on the table and he had nothing to do for a brief moment. He’d chosen to make a cross-section of foods that everyone could enjoy: smoothies and oatmeal for May and Bobbi, pancakes for Kara and Mack, muffins and cherry turnovers for Skye and Hunter, hearty English food for Trip, Fitz and Jemma. Coulson generally ate a little of whatever was available.

Kara was the first one in the kitchen. She stopped dead at seeing Grant at the stove, flipping chocolate chip pancakes with syrup warming in a smaller pan next to him. Grant grinned as her mouth dropped open. He’d almost forgotten that Kara hadn’t been around the last time he went all out. It was pretty funny the way her glance slid from Grant to the table already set with plates, silverware and glasses for 11 people and back to Grant again.

“You made this breakfast? You. Mr. I-Barely-Eat-Anything-But-When-I-Do-It’s-So-Healthy-No-One-In-Their-Right-Mind-Would-Eat-It-Besides-Me?”

Grant leaned back on the stove, arms crossed. “What? I can’t grow and change? You wound me, Palamas.” He smirked at her, shrugging, before turning so he could flip the pancakes onto a platter. “I thought everyone could use a good breakfast.”

“Well, I don’t know about everyone else but I definitely can,” Trip jogged down the stairs and strolled into the kitchen, a delighted smile on his face. He gave Kara a playful shove on his way to the table. “Kara, stop hassling the man. He might think we don’t appreciate this and never do it again.” He sat down at the table and immediately poured himself a cup of coffee from the carafe sitting on the table.

Grant placed the pancake platter on the food board beside all the other delicious dishes he’d made, then glared at Trip. “Dude! I slaved over a hot stove all morning. The least you can do is serve yourself.”

Trip gave Grant a mock salute as he took a plate and got up. “Yeah, Trip,” Kara sing-songed. She looked at Grant standing there with his arms crossed, a mock serious expression on his face and her own expression turned sad. Grant cocked his head quizzically and was about to ask if she was OK, then he grunted when she threw her arms around his neck, squeezing him for all she was worth. “I thought we’d lost you,” she whispered.

Grant hugged her back. “You should know you can’t get rid of me that easily.”

“Isn’t that the truth,” Trip commented.

Kara leaned back, smiling up at Grant. “Well, I for one would like for that to not be put to the test so often. Do you think you can manage to stay out of trouble for a while?”

“No,” Trip said in concert with Fitz, who’d just come halfway down the stairs and was peering into the kitchen. His mouth also dropped open as he surveyed all the food. Grant smiled to himself. Mouths dropping open seemed to be a thing this morning. Without another word, Fitz backtracked up the stairs, poked his head into the hallway and yelled, “Jemma! You’d better get down here. Ward made breakfast again.”

“Hey!” Grant put his arm around Kara in a friendly manner. “I’ll have you know that I almost never get into any trouble I can’t handle.”

Trip just shook his head as he started eating his bacon. Fitz appeared to have already forgotten about everybody else as he was loading up a plate with enough food to feed an army. Kara’s smile turned into a frown as she put her hand against Grant’s forehead. “Are you sure you haven’t
overdone it? You’re burning up!”

*Uh oh.* “I’m fine. I’ve just been standing next to a hot stove all morning, remember?” He sneak a look at Jemma who had just entered the room, Bobbi following on her heels. The last thing he wanted was for Jemma to get interested in his temperature. *Time to redirect.* He gestured to the plates of food sitting on the sidebar. “Speaking of... you’d better eat while it’s hot and there’s some left. Once this crew gets through, you’ll have a hard time finding even crumbs.”

“That’s just because we’re neat,” Bobbi scoffed. Grant thought she might have had a bigger point had her plate not been so full.

Kara eyed Bobbi’s heaping plate. “Right. On it!” She grabbed a plate and quickly started filling it up.

Apparently, Fitz’s yell to Jemma had echoed down the hall because Hunter came skidding down the stairs, breathing hard. “Did I miss it or is there still food left?” he asked Bobbi. Her mouth was too full to answer, so she just waved at the food still sitting on the sideboard. Hunter grabbed a plate and moved quickly towards it. “Oh, thank god. When I heard Fitz yell at the doc lady, I thought everything would be gone.”

Grant surveyed the scene with satisfaction, watching as May, Coulson and Mac joined the group. The made the usual exclamations at how wonderful it all was. *This group really needs to get fed more often!* Only Skye was missing which, of course, didn’t go unnoticed. Grant was just wondering if he needed to go get her when she came down the stairs, a determined smile on her face.

She kissed Grant on the cheek, then checked out the minimal amount of food left. The sideboard looked like locusts had swept through. Almost all the plates were empty except for a few bits and pieces of pancakes, muffins, bacon, eggs, tomatoes and toast. She looked dejected. “I guess this is what I get for sleeping in, huh?”

A cacophony of voices replied to her simultaneously.

“I’m sorry, Skye. I didn’t realize you hadn’t eaten or I wouldn’t have taken so much,” Kara said regretfully.

“We can scrounge up some food for you.” Coulson answered, glancing around the table with a scowl.

Jemma took her dismay in a different direction. “Fitz! How could you eat so much when everyone hadn’t gotten some?”

Trip shook his head at her. “Girl, you know the rules: you snooze, you lose.”

Hunter snorted. “Why should we be responsible? You should talk to your boyfriend. If he was any good for you at all, he would’ve saved you some.” Bobbi looked approvingly in Hunter’s direction. He winked at her.

The whole table got silent with heads turning to look at Grant. Fitz was the only one to keep his concentration on the food, scraping up the last remnants on his plate like he wouldn’t eat again in days. Grant tried to maintain a glower but couldn’t keep it up long. “You’re not as dumb as you look, Hunter.” He walked to the other end of the kitchen and lifted the napkin that was covering a plate. Beneath it was a plate filled with food, especially of the sugary variety. He picked up the plate, locked eyes with Skye and handed it to her with a flourish and a bow. “There’s nothing I
wouldn’t do for you.”

There was a brief second of silence in the room, just enough time for Skye’s eyes to fill with tears. Then she quickly backed away, laughing as Grant ducked from the shower of pieces of muffin, toast, pancake, and fruit that rained down on him accompanied by a series of groans and shouts.

“I think I actually miss the prickly poop,” Coulson said in a tone of wonder.

“Have you done a physical on him recently?” Kara asked Jemma. “He may be broken.”

Jemma smiled at Grant. “I think it’s sweet. Other people should take note.”

Hunter rolled his eyes. “You’re making us all look bad, mate.”

“Oh my god, get a room,” Bobbi grumbled.

“They already have one. It hasn’t helped,” Mac responded.

Trip nodded and doffed an imaginary hat. “Nice.”

Grant watched Skye laugh at all the jokes and comments. Mission accomplished. This was a nice family they had. He smiled at the group and raised his voice loud enough to be heard, “I hope you all enjoyed yourselves because I’m not the one who’s cleaning this up!”

That had been fun but the rest of the day went downhill from there. Grant worked out by himself for a while then headed to his room to do the ever-present and ever-annoying paperwork. He shook his head in disgust. For an unofficial organization, they certainly like their after action reports! He looked up as Skye came into the room. She slowly unwound the wrapping around her hands, then went into the bathroom. Grant could hear the sound of water running, like she was washing her hands or face. He hastily put away his laptop. If Skye wasn’t talking, something was wrong.

Skye came out of the bathroom and noticed that Grant was looking at her expectantly. She crossed her arms. Uh oh.

“So Fitz interrupted my training with May today.”

Grant frowned in puzzlement. “Why would he do that?”

“He didn’t say anything in front of May but clearly it was because he thought I might need a break before I lost control. Did you tell him to do that?”

“No,” Grant said warily. “Did you need a break?”

“No!” Skye sat down on the bed in a huff. There was a slight tremor. “Maybe.” The tremor stopped. “Yes! I don’t know!” There was another tremor, a little stronger this time. Grant wanted to rush to her but stayed in his chair, steadily watching her. Skye got the hint and started her calming routine. After a minute or so, she looked at him, tears in her eyes. “Grant, I can’t keep living like this. I don’t know when I’m going to get upset and the not knowing is killing me! And hiding this from everyone is just making it worse.”

Grant was proud that she was holding it together even through her obvious distress. But she was right. Something needed to change. They’d just gone through an incredible ordeal and hadn’t had a moment in which to process it. Which is exactly why at the first opportunity he marched down to Coulson’s office, requested and received a week’s vacation from SHIELD for both of them. Grant knew exactly where they’d go.

**Present Day**
The next morning, the two of them loaded up their backpacks with food and water and drove out to a remote area. They left the car by the side of the road and hiked for 30 minutes to a place that was devoid of much besides grass, rocks and a small river. They certainly didn’t want to accidentally damage the car. It would be a very long walk back if they did.

Grant shrugged off his backpack and looked around. “This looks good. Do you remember what we practiced?” Skye nodded as she placed her backpack on the ground. Grant waved his hand around. “Then have at it.”

He watched as Skye closed her eyes, took a deep breath and then…nothing. She peeked at him, saw he was looking and quickly shut her eyes again. Another deep breath. Nothing. Grant walked silently to her side so that she gasped when she opened her eyes again and saw him right in front of her.

“Dammit, Grant! I hate it when you do that.” She looked at the dry grass. “How can you be that silent out here?”

“I’ve had practice.” Grant said shortly, crossing his arms in front of his chest. “What’s wrong?”

Skye glanced toward the mountains, embarrassed. “I don’t know. I guess I’m just scared. I’m not sure if I even want to know what I can do.” She met his eyes. “What if it’s horrible? What if I can’t ever control it?”

Grant sighed. 

Well, I royally messed that up! Some SO I am.

He took her hand and walked over to a large rock, sitting down on the flat expanse of it and leaning back against the vertical part of it. He pulled Skye down next to him. “Maybe we should start more slowly.” He smiled at her. “I just realized that I’ve never asked you anything about your gift. What does it feel like for you?”

Skye thought about it for a moment. “It’s intense. Like 1,000 bees are trapped inside of me. And I feel it, all the time.”

He nodded. “That’s how it is for me too. Except instead of bees, I feel like I have a sun inside of me.”

Skye’s eyes widened. “That sounds…uncomfortable.”

Grant gave her a hint of a smile. “Are the bees uncomfortable for you?”

She shrugged. “Not really. It’s more of an awareness than anything else. It was really weird at first but now I’ve kind of gotten used to it. What about you?”

“The same. The sun is always there but it isn’t like it’s burning me or making me too hot.” Grant paused, gathering his thoughts. He wanted to be sure he was expressing himself well. “I haven’t experimented with it much but it feels like if I focus on it, I can use it.”

Skye twisted around on the rock, pulling one leg up on the flat part and leaning her chin on her knee. “Is that what happened with Raina? You focused on the sun in you?”

“No. I didn’t realize that I’d changed then. All I knew was that she was killing you and I couldn’t make her stop. I got so angry…” His voice faded away as he thought back to that moment. He hadn’t wanted to kill Raina; he’d just wanted to her to quit hurting Skye. Maybe that’s why I didn’t really touch her.

Skye jumped to her feet and started pacing. “You know what the difference between us is? I can’t seem to control my power. You can, just like you can do practically everything. All I can do is feel
that buzzing. It’s always there and I can’t stop it.”

Grant chose to ignore the crack about being able to do everything. That was clearly a conversation they should have another time. *I need to get the focus back on Skye.* “That’s why we’re here. So you don’t have to stop it.”

“But I do have to! You’ve seen what I can do. I destroy everything around me.”

“I don’t think so. I did some research and I think that your gift is about more than just shaking things. There has to be a way that you’re able to do that. Every object in our universe gives off a vibration. Did you know that? Nothing rests – animals, trees, people, even these rocks. And you, I suspect that you have the ability to tap into those vibrations.” He noted her unimpressed look. “Don’t you see, Skye? Think of what you could do! But instead of figuring it out, you’re letting your fear inhibit you, constrain your energy.” He smiled at her. “That’s not the girl I kidnapped.”

Skye appeared unmoved by his attempts to tease her out of her distress. “My powers, you know that I can’t control them.”

Grant stood up. “Most gifts come with a price. I of all people should know that.” He glanced around at the Wyoming wilderness, thinking briefly about his time in the woods. It was here that he first learned control. *Somehow I need to teach Skye what I learned.* “But you could learn to manage them. That’s what we’re doing here, Skye. There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“You say that so easily. *You* weren’t the one who almost killed us all in the tunnels. *You* aren’t the one who keeps losing control and causing things to break.” She paused and he waited, knowing that this was a decision he couldn’t force her to make. Skye had to be ready. She blew out a slow breath, then looked up at Grant, an intensely vulnerable look in her eyes. “I can’t keep living like this, constantly afraid of what I’ll do. So…OK. Let’s see if you’re right.”

Grant let out the breath he’d been holding. *That’s my girl!* “We’ll start slowly, focus on fundamentals.” He gave her a brief smile. “I know how much you love that. Concentrate on the water. See if you can feel the vibrations in it.”

Skye closed her eyes. All of a sudden, a small column of water rose up from the riverbed in a zigzag pattern. *She’s doing it!* The water swirled a little in the air then dropped back into the river. Skye opened her eyes, a triumphant smile on her face. “You’re right. It is about the vibrations. I could feel them, manipulate them.” Grant tried valiantly to hide his satisfied smirk but knew by Skye’s narrowed eyes that he wasn’t entirely successful. “What’s next?”

Over the next few hours, he had Skye move up from rocks to small patches of land, even trying to move some air as well. Each time, Grant made certain that she was able to stop her gift herself, to exhibit control. That was essential, both to keep everyone safe and to help Skye feel good about what she could do.

The sun was nearing the middle of the sky when she demanded another water break. Skye took a big gulp of water and glared at Grant. “How long are we going to keep this up?”

“Until we can be sure that you have control over your gift. Come on Skye, you’ve only been at it a couple of hours. After lunch, it’ll be my turn.”

Skye looked at Grant speculatively, a gleam in her eye that made him uncomfortable. “I think I’ve mostly got it. Let’s eat lunch and then do you.”

Grant shifted uncomfortably. *Was that a double entendre?* He and Skye hadn’t had sex since
they’d transformed. First they were in the open contamination room, then they were too worried about losing control while in the Playground. The night before Grant had insisted upon an early bedtime so that they’d be fresh and ready for today. “You’re right. Let’s eat. I’m hungry!”

“Yeah. Me too,” Skye said casually with a slight grin. There was that expression again. Was that another double entendre? Grant felt off-kilter. He wasn’t used to not being able to read Skye. He started sweating even though the day was relatively cool. The two of them unpacked their lunches and started eating.

Skye looked around curiously. “It’s kind of barren around here. Is this what it was like when you lived here?”

Grant shook his head. “No. Wyoming has a lot of different topographies. The area I lived in was more like a forest. There were lots of beautiful trees and plenty of wildlife. People had cabins there for hunting, fishing and hiking.”

“Do you miss it?”

“Sometimes. I definitely miss the peace and quiet. And I miss seeing the beauty and feeling like I was a part of something much larger. Living at the Playground is tough because we never see the sun or the trees or feel the wind unless we leave. Some days it feels like we’re living in a tomb.” Grant stopped talking when he saw Skye look down and realized that she was feeling bad. “But there are a lot of things I don’t miss too. Eating was a constant source of stress and I was lonely a lot. I had Buddy,” Grant swallowed hard, “but, other than John, I didn’t have anyone who talked back to me.”

Skye’s hand slipped into his and he had to look away from her for a moment in order to compose himself. It never failed to surprise him how much emotion those memories could still stir up. Skye clearly wasn’t having it though. He could feel pleasurable chills as she started nibbling on his neck. “I was lonely too,” she murmured in his ear, “until you kidnapped me. Who knew that being yanked from my van and tossed onto an airplane was the best thing that would ever happen to me?”

Grant could feel his heart start beating faster and his skin heat up. He drew back, grabbing both of Skye’s hands in his own. “Uhh… I don’t know if this is such a good idea.” He looked around wildly. “I mean, we’re exposed here out in the open. I couldn’t protect you if someone caught us by surprise.”

At first Skye looked surprised by his hasty refusal but then a thundercloud passed over her face. She yanked her hands from his and backed up, climbing to her feet. “That’s just great, Grant! You keep saying that I’m still me, that the changes are good, but now you’re refusing to be with me?”

“No! I’ve tried several times in the last few days to get closer to you only to have you push me away. You keep telling me that it’s not a good time or that we don’t know when my powers will show up but now that we’re in the middle of nowhere in a place where you said I should let loose, you’re still telling me no!” Sky looked as though she might cry but there still hadn’t been any tremors. Despite the emotion of the moment, Grant was impressed with her control. “So which is it?” she demanded. “Either my powers are a problem or they’re not.”

Grant looked stricken as he got to his feet to start walking towards her. “They’re not.”

Skye kept backing up. “Do you not want to be with me because I’m different or is it,” she paused a moment, searching his face, “something else that’s holding you back?”
Grant stopped walking, not sure what was going on. His heart was still beating fast and he could feel the heat inflaming his body.

Skye stopped her backwards trajectory and stared at Grant as if she were going over something in her head. “That’s it, isn’t it?” she whispered. “It isn’t me. It’s you.” She started walking towards him, her expression filled with compassion and sorrow. Grant took a step back, feeling intensely vulnerable. He didn’t like the direction this conversation was going. “This whole time, you’ve been helping me with my transition. Who’s been helping you?”

He frowned, swallowing hard. “I don’t need any help. I’m your SO. I’m here for you, for whatever you need. You know that. And don’t be ridiculous. Of course I want to be with you. It just isn’t the right time or place.”

Skye kept walking towards him but slowly, as if she were trying not to startle a wild animal. “We’re here for each other.” She reached him and caressed his cheek tenderly. It took everything in Grant’s power not to cry. This woman! “I’m so sorry that I’ve been selfish. You’ve been helping me through everything while I’ve just been ignoring your struggle.”

“No, I…”

Skye gently pulled him down to sit beside her on the grass. Once he was sitting, she rose on her knees and straddled him so she could stroke his face and hair. “That’s the problem, isn’t it? You’re scared to have sex because you don’t know what will happen. You’ve been so busy helping me with my powers that you don’t know much about your own. Do you?”

He shrugged and looked away, trying to pass off his ignorance as something he planned. Grant hadn’t truly worried about his powers. They were always in the back of his mind but his attention had been solely on how to help Skye. Until he thought about having sex with her and started panicking.

“Hey.” She took his chin in her hand and lightly turned it so he was facing her again. “You’re my SO and I’ve loved every second of it. Well, maybe not the early mornings or the sit-ups but I enjoyed the time I got to spend with you. But maybe it’s time to revisit that. We’re a lot more than trainee and SO now. We’re partners. That means that you need me as much as I need you.”

“You don’t understand.” He shifted beneath her uncomfortably. “I’m the guy they send in to get the job done. Alone. And sure, being part of a team has been great but I help them, not the other way around. Whenever you need me, I’m there. I can figure out my stuff on my own. You don’t need to worry about it.”

Skye took a deep breath. “I get it. You’ve spent your whole life taking care of other people and old habits die hard. I thought you were getting used to having other people help you.” She looked down, embarrassed. “I know when all this alien stuff started happening and we started looking for my dad, you dropped everything to help me. And maybe being out here in this place where you on your own for years is messing with your head. But Grant, if we’re going to be together, you need… no, I need for you to let me help you.”

Grant’s head was buzzing. There was so much being thrown at him all at once: the idea that he and Skye should be on equal footing, that she needed him to let her help him, and then there was that insistent heat source inside of him. Not to mention how good it felt to have Skye on top of him. He took a deep breath, remembering that his therapist told him that he didn’t need to be strong all the time, that people would still love him even if he couldn’t do something or didn’t know all the answers. That’s a hard one. Skye shifted, taking him out of his thoughts.
“And what would really help me right now,” she whispered in his ear, “is for the incredibly hot man beneath me to let me kiss him. I’m literally burning with desire.”

Grant couldn’t help laughing. Skye was really the limit. But it isn’t that easy. He lifted her off of him and set her down gently beside him. Her lips tightened in anger but he shook his head. “If you really want me to let you in, then I need for you to not be distracted.” After her reluctant nod (was that a pout?), he continued. “You’re right, I’m scared to have sex with you. I don’t know what my powers are or even if I’m fully in control of them.” He paused, anguished. “What if in the heat of passion I burn you? I don’t know how this works. What if I overheat or shoot off fire or even explode? Fire is nothing to mess around with. I couldn’t live with myself if I hurt you.”

Skye stared at him, clearly mulling things over and Grant once again started to sweat. He hated not knowing what she was thinking. Finally, she nodded. “You know what’s funny? I had the same fears. I’ve been worried that maybe I’d shake you too hard and break you, kind of like Shaken Grant Syndrome. But you just looked so hot today,” she smiled slightly, “and it’s been so long for us that I didn’t want to wait.” She shrugged. “Maybe I’m affected by the environment too. Being out here with you has reminded me so much of our camping trip, of me wanting to jump your bones but knowing I couldn’t.”

Grant smiled a little too, shaking his head. “Skye…”

“But you’re right. Maybe it is too early for us to have sex. You need to be comfortable if we’re going to have any fun at all. So let’s do this. Let’s keep working on our powers and when we think we have them under control, we can try this again.”

Grant nodded, appreciating Skye’s understanding but frustrated with the situation. Letting her help me is going to take some getting used to. Plus, he really wanted to have sex with her. He suspected that relieving his sexual tension might make his powers easier to control. But that too would have to be tested.

After lunch, they started working on his power, making certain that they were close to the river at all times. They discovered that Grant had the power of fire manipulation. He could shoot out fire but also change the composition of it, even extinguish it altogether. He also could heat up air molecules and move small objects with them. Grant was pleased with his progress and with what he could do.

As the sun started setting, the temperature dropped and Skye shivered. “Brrr….I wasn’t prepared for this and we still have to walk back to the car,” she complained as they reloaded their backpacks and started the trek to the SUV.

Grant put his arm around her and pulled her close. He concentrated on purposefully stoking the fire inside him, just to see what would happen. He was hoping he could increase his body heat without damaging himself. This could be dangerous but what’s experimentation without risk?

Skye gasped as the heat surrounded his body. “Well, that’s a nifty trick. What other girl is lucky enough to have her own inferno to keep her warm?” She leaned back to look suspiciously at him. “This isn’t hurting you, is it?”

“Nope,” Grant smirked. “Just glad to be of service,” Maybe these powers aren’t so bad after all. When they got in the car, he focused on banking the internal fire and his body temperature cooled almost immediately.

That night, the two of them cooked dinner, watched a few episodes of their favorite TV series on DVD and then went to bed early. Both of them were extremely tired. The next day, Grant proposed
that the two of them stay around the house, practicing smaller tasks. Skye worked on blending a smoothie, gently moving grass and vibrating smaller items like rocks. She also tried to “shove” items away from her without damaging them. Grant concentrated on warming things like water and food, controlling his internal temperature, and lobbing small fireballs into a tub filled with water. He practiced starting a fire in the fireplace and changing its heat level from hotter to cooler. Once again, he was pleased with his progress and felt like he was getting the hang of it.

Toward the end of the day, he and Skye agreed to show the other what they could do. Grant decided to hold some of his skills back for a surprise later that night. It quickly became apparent that some of their powers could work well together. It all started with food. Of course. The two of them had been talking about what to do for dinner.

Skye looked mischievously at Grant. “You always do the cooking. How about letting me do it for a change?”

“Ummm….,” Grant hedged, trying to think of a nice way to say, “No way in hell! I prefer to avoid food poisoning!” without offending her. “You’ve had a long day. Why don’t you let me…”

Skye burst out laughing. “I wish you could see your face!”

Grant mock glared at her. “So you don’t want to cook?” He was relieved Skye wasn’t upset about his poor estimation of her cooking skills but wondered what she was up to.

“No, I do,” Skye said, gaining control of herself again. “I’ve figured out an easy way to make a vegetable soup.” She poured some pre-made vegetable broth into the blender, then added some Spice Seasoning and a whole carrot, an onion, and an entire stalk of celery.

“Skye, you really should…”

“Cool your jets there, Fire-Boy. I’m showing you something.” Grant watched closely as the vegetables started coming apart in the swirling broth without Skye ever having touched the blender controls. He glanced over at her smug expression. “Voila! Soup! The only thing we need to do now is heat it up.”

She started to get out a saucepan for the now-blended soup mix but Grant touched her arm, preventing her from getting it. “Allow me,” he told her with a smile.

Now it was Skye’s turn to watch in amazement as the soup mix still in the blender started simmering. “That’s awesome!” She got out two bowls and spoons for them but then whipped around, leaning back on the kitchen counter, her eyes alight with excitement. “Grant! If we can do something like this together, what else can we do?”

He mulled it over, his tactician’s brain whirring, starting to get enthusiastic at the possibilities. He grinned at her. “Looks like we have tomorrow’s training agenda.”

Surprised, Skye drew back to look at him. “You don’t want to do this right now? I thought you were always about doing now what I prefer to put off until tomorrow.”

“Nope,” Grant said lightly. “Some things are more important.” At Skye’s disbelieving look, he gave her a slow, seductive smile. “Don’t you think?”

Skye nodded enthusiastically. “Yes, I completely agree.” She grabbed the bowls again and went to pour the soup.

After dinner, the two of them chose to sit in front of the fire, just staring into its depths for a while.
Grant particularly was mesmerized, enjoying the differing hues of orange, yellow and red that he saw there. *Fire is so fascinating. I can’t believe how lucky I am to have it as my gift.* He looked over at Skye who seemed equally absorbed by the fire. *Doubly lucky.*

Grant leaned over and blew lightly into her ear. Skye shivered and grinned. She kept the smile on her face as he traced a small line down her arm. “I guess this means that you feel comfortable with your powers now.”

“Yes,” he whispered in her ear, smiling when she shivered again. “What about you?” He started nibbling on her neck.

Skye turned her head so she could kiss him deeply. “Well, if I can master soup,” she murmured as her hands ran down his chest so she could take off his shirt, “then surely I can handle you.”

Grant couldn’t help laughing as he lifted his arms to help her remove his shirt. Skye eyed his abs and chest appreciatively. “It’s been way too long, Fire-Boy,” she said as she pushed him backwards so that she could climb on top of him.

“Skye, now is really not the time to be calling me a boy.” He flipped them over so that he was on top and placed his hand between her legs. Skye’s eyes widened as she felt the heat even through her clothes. Grant smirked. “But the fire part is accurate.”

“Oh my god!” Skye swallowed hard as Grant started slowly pushing up her shirt, kissing every inch of skin as it was exposed. She tilted her body up to help him pull the shirt over her head and hurriedly unhooked her bra when he started skimming the edges of it with his tongue. Her loud moan reverberated in the living room when Grant lightly sucked on her left nipple, letting his powers heat up both his mouth and the hand that was gently swirling around the tip of her right one. She suddenly sat up, panting, her eyes wide. “Can you do that with…all…parts of your body?”

Grant nibbled at the area connecting her shoulder and her neck, then pulled back to meet her eyes, grinning wickedly. “I guess we’ll have to find out.” He gently pushed her back down and resumed his sucking and swirling. When she moaned again, he lifted his head, gave her a half smile and murmured, “I told you there would be benefits to these powers.”

Skye laughed shakily. Grant thought he detected a mild tremor. *Uh oh.* But he didn’t stop his activities because they needed to find out how this worked. “It’s OK baby, nothing to worry about, just concentrate on breathing,” he said in-between kissing a trail down her stomach, his hands working to undo her pants.

“Grant?”

He looked up. “Yeah?”

“Shut up!” His mouth fell open as he suddenly found himself gently moved to the side, his back against the couch. He’d barely felt a thing.

Skye sat up, shucked off her pants and started working on taking off his. He lifted his hips to help her wondering what she had in mind. Once they were off, his pants went skating quickly across the room. Grant barely had enough time to register that she’d just used her powers when she climbed on top of him, straddling completely naked. She kissed him with such passion that he was breathless.

“Two can play at that game,” she whispered as her hand trailed down his chest, a crazy feeling of
buzzing along with it. Grant was about to tell her that she shouldn’t mess around with people’s vibrations, that things could go horribly wrong, when her hand started stroking him and the buzzing was all-encompassing. He moaned loudly and Skye smiled in triumph. “Concentrate on breathing, my ass!”

Grant rolled his eyes and leaned back against the couch, enjoying the sensation of Skye’s hands and her body against his. He ran his fingers through her hair, loving the silky feeling of it, then moved down the rest of her body. Skye caught her breath when Grant slid a finger into her folds. He pumped his finger into her a few times, Skye’s body writhing on top of him. When he couldn’t bear it any longer, he unexpectedly picked her up and placed her on the couch, settling on top of her.

He shrugged at her questioning look. “We needed to get more comfortable.”

“Comfort’s….ummm…..good,” she half said half moaned as he slid inside of her. Grant concentrated on warming just particular parts of his body. In addition to bringing Skye pleasure, he wanted to know if he could do it. He was pleased to discover that he could and, if Skye’s sounds were any indication, she was enjoying it immensely. He rocked higher, changing the angle of entry slightly but keeping his thrusts at a moderate speed so that he could pay close attention to Skye’s responses. When Grant heard the sound of books falling on the floor and scooting across the room, he figured she was close to release, so he increased his pace, pressure and heat.

“Oh my god, Grant! YES!!”

Grant felt light-headed at the sensation of both the pulsing of her inner walls and the buzzing. She’s trying to kill me! There was the familiar tingling in his spine and then he experienced the most intense orgasm of his life. He thrust a few more times, then turned Skye sideways so that he could collapse onto the couch without having to withdraw from her warmth.

Still breathing hard, Skye moved one of the couch pillows underneath both of their heads and stroked his face gently. Grant was grateful that she didn’t add any buzzing. He didn’t know if he could take any more sensation, especially not with how good he felt at the moment. She smiled at him. “You were right.”

“I usually am,” Grant replied. He smiled back at Skye and tried to slow his breathing. “What was I right about this time?”

Skye was practically glowing. “These powers are awesome!”

*****

Grant laid back against the pillows, listening to the sound of Skye putting together a snack for the two of them. To no one’s surprise, they’d decided that vegetables soup simply wasn’t capable of sustaining them through several hours and multiple rounds of powerful, athletic sex. He grinned as he thought about all the different things they’d tried that night, then his smile faded as he analyzed the experience as an Agent rather than a person.

He’d always been able to bounce back quickly and he was in excellent shape but tonight had surpassed even the exploits of his youth. Grant had made good use of his time at the Academy with regards to sex. After all, he had a lot of years to make up for. He’d frequently gone a few rounds in a single night – occasionally with more than one partner – but he’d never done what he was able to do with Skye tonight. Not to mention that their encounters had been the most intense and rigorous sexual experiences of his life. Skye had seemed amazingly resilient too. Looks like our transition might be about more than just our powers.
All of a sudden, he heard a loud crack and the sound of glass breaking. Skye! As quick as lightning, Grant was out of bed, putting on a pair of boxers, and racing into the kitchen. He skidded to a stop when he saw Skye was standing in the kitchen, the remains of several plates and glasses scattered beneath her feet, staring at one of the strangest looking men Grant had ever seen. The man was tall and thin and appeared to have a flap of skin over his eyes. Skye seemed unharmed and the man wasn’t exhibiting any of the tension Grant associated with people wanting a fight. If anything, he gave the impression of being completely at ease.

He casually nodded at Grant’s entrance, almost as if he could see and they were being introduced for the first time. “I’m so sorry to interrupt your evening like this,” the man said calmly, “but we thought it was time that we had a talk.”
Unraveling

Skye wheeled the SUV around the corner into the Playground and smiled as the Bus came into view. Since Grant was in the passenger’s side relieved from any need to be alert, he’d been relaxed. In contrast to Skye’s reaction, he realized that seeing the plane – the place where he’d been the happiest – was actually making him tense. *Maybe I just don’t want to give up time alone with Skye.* But he didn’t truly believe that.

These were feelings he’d need to examine later, especially since May was heading towards them with a serious expression. He almost groaned out loud. *Welcome back!*

She nodded curtly. “Good timing, you two. Coulson wants all of us in his office for a briefing.”

Skye did groan out loud. “Can’t we at least drop our stuff off in our rooms first?”

May smiled slightly. “If you hurry.”

Grant grinned at Skye. “I’ll meet you there. Since you’ve got that long walk and all.” Skye just rolled her eyes.

Grant unceremoniously dumped his duffel in his closet then walked quickly to Coulson’s office. The need for punctuality was still strong and he had to admit to some curiosity. *What fresh new hell will it be today?* As he walked through the Playground halls, he tried to analyze if he felt any contentment about being back. *Not really.* Then again, analyzing his feelings about a place was a new experience for him. Agent Ward never considered his feelings; his only thoughts were about how best to get the job done. So maybe he was just out of practice.

When he turned into the office, he noted that everyone but Skye was already there. Coulson was busy doing something behind his desk and May was fiddling with the screen while everyone else stood or sat, awkwardly waiting. That felt weird. Even up to a few weeks ago, people would’ve been conversing in pairs or trios, so the silence felt oppressive. It had the aura of a briefing following a bad mission but, as far as he knew, nothing like that had occurred.

Kara was lounging in one of the chairs looking bored but sat up when Grant came in. “Hey! You’re back! How was your trip?”

“It was great.” Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Fitz furrow his brow. Grant could almost read the questions on his face. He found a free space of wall next to Trip to lean on.

“Can’t say I’m not jealous, man,” Trip drawled. “Are you well rested? Ready and raring to go for all the new missions we’re sure to get?”

Grant gave him a quick smile. “Yep. Slept in every morning and,” he shifted his eyes so that he could meet Fitz’s, “worked some things out. I think we’re both good to go.” Fitz smiled a little in response.

Skye skidded into the room, her entry quickly followed by the high decibel of Jemma’s voice saying, “Skye! You’re back!” as she rushed to throw her arms around the other woman. Skye staggered a little under the force of Jemma’s embrace. Jemma didn’t seem to notice. “You have no idea of the number of computer problems we had when you were gone. I mean, Fitz tried to fix them and he and Mack eventually figured them out but it took twice as long as it would’ve taken you!”
“Hey!” Mack said in mock outrage.

“Well, you know what I mean,” Jemma said, glancing at Mack in semi-apology. She turned back to Skye, opening her mouth to say something else but then stopped short. Jemma pulled back so that she could look Skye up and down more thoroughly. Grant only had a second to experience a shudder of discomfort before Jemma smiled and said approvingly, “Skye! You’re glowing!”

“What did you expect?” Bobbi asked. “She just spent an entire week with Ward. Alone.”

“I hope you packed a lot of protection, mate,” Hunter said to Grant. Skye blushed as Grant tried not to roll his eyes. Sometimes Hunter was truly the limit.

Coulson stood up from his chair and cleared his throat. Grant watched Skye smother a grin. Coulson always got uncomfortable whenever the subject of Grant and Skye’s sex life came up. “OK. Now that everyone’s here, we can get started. Some of you may know about current events but I need for everyone to be on the same page.” Grant smirked as he watched Coulson come out from behind the desk and lean on the front of it, something he’d labelled as Coulson’s Lecturing Position. “The good news is that Hydra’s coming out party didn’t go as well as they’d hoped. They managed to take down the Triskellion and capture some of our facilities but they didn’t get The Iliad.”

Grant straightened. That was indeed good news. However, Skye was clearly puzzled. “Like the book?” she asked. Grant was hit with another reminder of just how much she still didn’t know.

“No,” Coulson told her. “The Iliad is a ship, a big one. It was carrying very sensitive cargo, so when we didn’t hear from them, we assumed it either was sunk or in Hydra’s hands. Fortunately, neither is true. Not only is it intact but a number of high-ranking agents managed to get on board during the Hydra revolt including,” he nodded in FitzSimmons’ direction, “Agent Weaver from the Academy.”

Jemma’s eyes lit up. “Oh, this is fantastic news! When Trip and I went to the Academy to look for her and she wasn’t there, we feared the worst.”

“How did you find out?” Grant wanted to know.

Coulson smiled at Bobbi and Mack. “As it turns out, Commander Gonzalez wasn’t sure who could be trusted, so they laid low and he sent two of his best agents undercover to determine that I’m trustworthy. Thanks to Agents Morse and Mackenzie, he now believes that I am. Gonzalez got in touch yesterday.”

“Wait,” Skye said slowly. “So that means…”

“That we were undercover here,” Mack finished for her. “Yeah. But we were only following orders. It…”

“Wasn’t personal” Skye said in unison with him. She gave Grant a half smile. “Yeah. I get it.” Then she frowned. “Kind of.” Grant could almost read her mind. It seemed like Team Bus was constantly being spied upon from within. What Skye didn’t understand yet was that never being able to trust people completely was part of the job.

May crossed her arms, a sure sign that she was angry. “We may have some additional resources we didn’t know we had but Hydra still dealt us quite a blow.”

“Yes,” Coulson concurred. “We’re still considered a rogue agency, at least until we can convince General Talbot that we’re just as focused on law and order as we always were. That’s why Agent
Ward’s work on capturing Hydra agents remains so important.” Grant nodded. “That’s also why Agents MacKenzie, Morse and Hunter will focus on recapturing all the prisoners Hydra released. Once we get everyone back where they belong and return to investigating threats, it’s possible we may be able to regain some of our standing with the governments that were working with us before.”

“Working with us,” Bobbi said in a flat voice. “You mean funding us.”

Coulson nodded. “Yes, that’s definitely part of it. I won’t pretend that Hydra’s emergence hasn’t cost us a lot of money. Many of our previous funding sources stopped giving us money, so now we have to make do on less even though our needs are larger than ever. We’re going to have to get creative since we still have to rebuild facilities, replace our inventory of weapons and equipment and train new agents.”

The silence in the room was deep. Grant clearly wasn’t the only one in the room who hadn’t considered just how much Hydra had stolen from SHIELD as an institution.

“I get that money’s a problem,” Trip said slowly, “but so is personnel. You listed off a bunch of things that we need to do to get back up and running but how are we going to do that? We barely have enough agents as it is.”

Coulson nodded. “That’s why you, Skye and Agent Palamas will be in charge of recruitment. A number of SHIELD personnel escaped during the fight with Hydra and may not know that it’s safe to come back. We need you to find them. Agent Weaver’s taking care of general recruitment, just like she did when she the head of the Academy. We hope to get that program back up and running in the next six months.”

Jemma half raised her hand. “What will Fitz and I be doing, Sir?”

“You will be rebuilding the Science Division,” Coulson replied. She nodded and gave Fitz a small smile that he returned. Grant was glad to see it. He wasn’t sure what the situation was between them these days, particularly since Fitz had been so upset with Jemma’s anti-alien rant. Grant just hoped that her feelings weren’t going to be a problem for anyone, especially since he and Skye couldn’t keep their status as Inhumans secret much longer.

Coulson looked around at all their grim faces. “I know this news isn’t easy to hear. Our mission may seem daunting but I personally think it’s exciting. When Hydra came out from the shadows, it became clear that we had a lot of people working with us who were weighing us down and keeping us from being as great as we can be. But they’re gone, so now we have an opportunity to rebuild SHIELD better than it’s ever been before. We’ve put together an amazing team and I have faith in each one of you to get the job done.” He again scanned each of their faces. “That’s it for now. If anyone has questions about their assignments, please see me later.”

Despite his pep talk at the end, no one appeared energized as they quietly left Coulson’s office. FitzSimmons turned almost as one to head to their Lab and the others (except May who stayed back to talk with Coulson) went their own ways. Grant automatically fell in step with Skye as she walked back to her room. She looked sad. “You OK?”

She nodded. “I was just hoping that we’d be paired together for some missions. I feel a lot more confident than I did before we went on vacation but I’d feel better if I had you around for back-up.”

Grant was pleased that Skye’s verbal subterfuge skills had improved. There were times during their days on the Bus that he despaired of her doing anything besides telling it exactly like it was. “I’ve been thinking about that. Maybe we can make a point of training together off-base several times a
week, keep our skills from getting rusty.”

Skye smiled a little. “That sounds good.” Grant smiled back, feeling like that they had things under control.

The next few weeks were some of the best that Grant had experienced in SHIELD. For the first time, he was enjoying the rush of exhilaration and sense of satisfaction that being a good agent of SHIELD brought. Sure, he’d relished using his intelligence, physicality and unique skillset in the service of Hydra but it perpetually came with the price of pain, constant vigilance and the shame of hurting people he wished to help. With his loyalties torn and minimal comfort, Grant’s previous tenure as a Special Agent came with a lot of mixed feelings. All that was gone; the Black Shadow had faded away. Now he was free to delight in his missions and come away with the belief that he was, at last, one of the good guys.

Grant threw himself into his work with gusto. He and Skye agreed to keep their powers secret for a while longer, just until they could find the right time and the right way to tell Coulson. They continued to train together off-base as often as they could (Grant telling May some story about training while Skye whispered to Coulson about them needing to spend time together) and both of them felt increasingly confident in their abilities. Unfortunately Skye still had to keep her powers under wraps. Grant had more freedom.

Since his missions were generally solo, he found that he could use his fire powers as long as no one spotted them. The Hydra agents he captured may have wondered why they were suddenly entrapped by fire or how their clothes began smoking (causing most of them to panic) but they seemed to believe that SHIELD had developed some new fire-based weapons. They even said as much to Grant when he was taking them in but he never responded and never passed it on to Coulson. But he delighted in how easy and fun his missions were now.

He should’ve known it was too good to last. First came the news that, with the death of Whitehall and the capture of Bakshi, the remaining Hydra heads in the region were at war with each other. Coulson decided to use the opportunity to take them all out.

Grant first heard the update from Kara. The two of them were sitting on one of the couches in the lounge having a beer together after a long day. “Isn’t that great news?” Kara asked him after she’d explained the details of the mission.

He didn’t smile back at her and wondered about the sinking feeling in his stomach. “Let me get this straight. Bloom took out the Baroness, the Banker and the Sheik so he could take Whitehall’s place. Then Hunter killed Bloom. And now General Talbot has Bakshi in custody.” Grant sat back and took a sip of beer.

Kara nodded. “Yes. Maybe we’re finally rid of Hydra…” she noticed Grant’s skeptical expression, “…at least here in the States. I know Dr. List and Strucker are still alive but they’re mostly operating in Europe.”

Grant shook his head. “I don’t think Coulson thought this through. What we have now is a power vacuum and that’s never good.” He grinned slightly at her. “You remember what they said at the Academy about that?”

Kara rolled her eyes at him. “Grant, please. Of course I do. Agent Smith drilled it into our heads so much that I swear I dreamed about it.”

“Nature abhors a vacuum,” they both chanted in unison, laughing.
“So nature hates vacuuming,” Skye interrupted as she came down the stairs. “Big deal. So do I.”

Kara got up and grabbed a beer from the refrigerator, handing it to Skye after she sat down next to Grant. “Funny,” he replied, taking a sip of his beer. “Nature doesn’t like emptiness, so she’ll always exchange it for something else. The problem is that sometimes you don’t like the replacement.”

“And in the case of organizations and governments, sometimes the rush to fill the empty spot creates more chaos than you had before,” Kara added, plopping back down on the couch. “One of the many things we had drilled into us at the Academy was that one of the most dangerous times for a mission was during an unplanned transition of power.” She saw Skye’s puzzled expression. “We were just discussing the Hydra leader elimination.”

Skye nodded, slowly drinking her beer. “So you don’t think killing off the leadership was a good idea.”

“I do,” Kara said. “Grant doesn’t.”

Grant sighed heavily. “All we’ve done is cut off the top,” he grinned slightly, “the heads, if you will. Hydra’s body is still in place and can operate for a while without them. That’s why cutting off the heads of the mythical Hydra creature never worked. Hercules had to burn the neck in order for it to stick.”

Skye suddenly sat up to face Grant and put her hand on his knee. “You talking about Greek mythology is soooo hot!”

Kara just rolled her eyes. “Do I need to leave?”

Grant laughed. “Skye will behave. As I was saying,” he said with a mock stern look at Skye, “if we’d done a complete assault on the whole operation, then maybe we could’ve gotten some traction. But we didn’t, so someone is going to step up to take their place. And while Bloom, the Baroness, the Banker and the Sheik were bastards, at least they were known entities. We knew how they operated. We won’t know anything about the new person.”

“We’ll just do what we always do and research,” Skye said airily.

Grant noted Kara’s thoughtful expression. He resisted answering Skye right away to see if Kara would answer first. After all, she’d been in the Hydra belly more recently than he had. “The problem with that though is that Hydra’s notoriously secretive,” Kara said slowly. “The best way to get information is to hear it from someone in Hydra. And our best source of information…”

“…is no longer in our custody,” Grant finished for her. He saw Skye frown and hoped it wasn’t because he and Kara seemed to be in sync with each other. From his perspective, that was inevitable. They’d attended the Academy during the same time, were both specialists and had been in Hydra. There were a lot of similarities, so it was only natural that they’d think alike.

“Well, I’m sure that AC will figure it out,” Skye said with forced cheer. “He always does.”

But Grant wasn’t so sure. The takedown of the Hydra leadership seemed like an impulsive move on Coulson’s part, more a rookie mistake than a calculated decision. It wasn’t a good move in the best of circumstances and things definitely weren’t at their best right now. It almost seemed like Coulson had lost his famous level-headedness and was instead making decisions based on emotion. Grant wasn’t sure what this was going to mean but he was certain that it wouldn’t be anything good.
And if that wasn’t enough to worry him, Lady Sif arrived in Portugal and they all took off to help her. Grant groaned when he heard she was back. It wasn’t that he had anything against Sif per se but her last time on Earth didn’t end well for him and he had a feeling this trip wouldn’t do him any good either. His bad feeling intensified after he, Skye, Coulson and FitzSimmons analyzed the video of the unknown man’s fight with Sif. The man tossed Sif around like she was a rag doll, so clearly he was either alien or Inhuman. Neither boded well for the team.

Coulson immediately went into boss mode. “Once we land, Fitz, you go with Hunter and Mack, handle forensics.” He turned to Skye. “I need you and Ward to talk to witnesses in the area, see if we can track down where this guy went.”

Grant got up to go and Fitz crossed the room, preparing to leave, but both stopped when Jemma stood up straight and tall. At first, Grant was amused. Jemma really seemed to be taking her duties seriously. “Sir, the Science Division has loaded the team with heavier suppression artillery. After Raina’s vanishing act, we advise that when you find this…man…you contain him first, ask questions later. New ICERs are still in development.”

“Very good,” Coulson replied. “Keep me posted.”

New ICERs? Suddenly Grant felt a tingling at the back of his neck. Something about this wasn’t good.

Jemma smiled in satisfaction and started leaving the room. But Fitz hadn’t moved. He seemed puzzled. “New ICERs?” Grant’s bad feeling intensified, especially when he saw Skye move to join the Science Twins, a worried look on her face.

Jemma seemed flustered at Fitz’s question. “Oh, the mechanical design is still top notch but we’re looking into a more concentrated dendrotoxin formula.” Uh oh.

Fitz crossed his arms. “And wouldn’t that be dangerous?”

“But effective,” Jemma replied softly. Skye’s body language got even stiffer but Jemma didn’t seem to notice. “Given these elevated threats, we can’t risk it not being.” Jemma stepped around Fitz and left. Grant, Skye and Fitz just looked at each other. So Jemma hasn’t given up on her vendetta against gifteds. Good to know.

Grant slipped his hand into Skye’s. “Come on,” he told her quietly. “We’ve all got a job to do.” He nodded to Fitz as they walked away.

A short time later, Grant and Skye entered the hospital closest to the pier where the fight occurred on the assumption that the guy who’d been fighting with Sif might’ve been hurt and sought medical attention. The entry area had soft lighting from lamps, couches, big plants and a number of colorful flyers posted on the walls.

Skye looked around in amazement. “This is the coziest looking hospital I’ve ever seen.”

Grant smiled. “It’s nice, isn’t it?”

“So what’s our plan? Is Portuguese one of the six languages you speak?”

“Yes. Portuguese and Spanish are two of the most spoken languages in the world, so it makes sense for SHIELD operatives to speak it. You should learn it too.”

Skye shook her head. “English and computer are the only languages I need to know.”
Grant laughed. “Would it help convince you if I mentioned that Portugese is also part of the Romance languages?” He leaned closer to her and said in a low voice, “Você está muito bonita hoje. Fico feliz por estarmos trabalhando juntos nessa missão. Eu senti falta de estar com você.”

Skye looked up at him, the desire evident in her eyes. “You do know how sexy that makes you, right?” Grant grinned wickedly. “What did you say?”

He straightened back up and said in his normal voice, “If you learned Portugese, then you’d know.” He walked toward the reception desk which, with all the dark wood, cubbyholes and non-medical equipment, looked more like a hotel than a hospital. The attendant, with her nursing uniform and stethoscope, was the only jarring note.

Skye followed, hissing at him, “Are you seriously not going to tell me?”

The matronly attendant strode towards them briskly. “Can I help you?”

Grant smiled charmingly at her, leaning down on the desk in a friendly fashion. “Hi. I’m hoping you can help us. We’re looking into the incident at the pier this morning. I’m guessing you’re familiar with that?”

The woman’s expression became knowing and she nodded. “Oh yes, we heard about it.”

“We’re looking for anyone who may have been injured or may have seen this man.” Grant held up the digital notebook with the picture of the man fighting Sif.

The nurse looked closely at the picture. “Hmmmm….no, he does not look familiar to me. As far the injuries, I can ask around. The nurse who was working earlier took ill, so we are short-staffed. It may take a while.”

“OK. We’ll be here,” Skye replied.

She and Grant were both about to leave the desk when a young woman behind the attendant sat down in a chair by the nurse’s desk saying in Portugese, “You keep calling me that. Is that my name?” A nurse handed her a cup of coffee. The attendant glanced over her shoulder at the two women.

“Wait. Is that woman all right?” Grant asked. “What happened to her?” He and Skye exchanged significant looks.

The attendant appeared conflicted then said, “She was fine when she came to work this morning but now…” she waved her hand at the young woman, “…she doesn’t seem to know who she is. We don’t know what happened.”

“This seems like the same thing that happened to someone else who was involved in the incident at the pier. I know this sounds strange but would you let me talk with her? I might be able to help,” Grant said.

The attendant paused, then shrugged. “I don’t know if it would help but it doesn’t seem like it would hurt.” She gestured the two of them to a door leading to the interior of the office.

Grant drew up a chair across from the young woman with the memory problems and sat down on it. Skye hovered nearby, trying to keep out of the way. He said in Portugese, “My name is Grant. I know everything seems really scary right now but I need to ask you to tell me what you remember.” Unfortunately, just like Sif, the woman didn’t remember much but she was able to tell them when her colleagues discovered her which was just half an hour earlier.
“That probably means he’s still somewhere in the area, most likely still in the hospital,” Grant said to Skye as they left the nurse’s office. “Let’s have a look around.”

She nodded. “So I kinda see your point about speaking Portuguese. I don’t think you would’ve been able to get much out of her if you only spoke English.”

He noticed that she was looking a bit sad. “Maybe not but we all do the best we can with what skills we’ve got.” He paused. “What I said earlier was ‘You’re looking very beautiful today. I’m glad we’re working together on this mission. I’ve missed being with you.’”

Skye smiled and drew him down for a kiss. “Thank you,” she whispered. “And for the record, I’ve missed being with you too. I’d tell you that you’re always beautiful but I don’t want you to get a big head.” Grant laughed.

The two of them started looking down various halls and in a few rooms. Skye poked her head into a supply closet, then rejoined Grant at the end of the hall. “I already knew that you spoke Russian and Italian. Now I can add Spanish and Portuguese to the list. What other languages do you speak?”

“If I told you that, then there’d be no more mysteries for you to discover and you might leave me.” Grant grinned as Skye shoved him lightly. He got out his cellphone. “We’re not really getting anywhere. We should call Coulson and update him.”

Coulson answered immediately. “Ward? Anything?”

“Sir, we have evidence he’s here at the hospital. It’s a big place though. He might be hiding anywhere.”

“Well, we know he needs nitrogen and they use it in hospitals to power surgical equipment. Let’s start there,” Coulson ordered.

“Roger that,” Grant replied as he hung up. “We need to find the areas where they store nitrogen,” he told Skye.

“I just saw one close by.”

The two of them slowly opened the door, determined to take the man by surprise should he be in the room. Sure enough, the man – dressed in jeans and a hoodie, now with blue skin – was doing something with a nitrogen valve. His back was to them but he looked over his shoulder as Grant and Skye stepped further into the room. He turned to face them just as he clicked something onto his hoodie and his skin started turning pink again.

Grant got into a fighting stance, a fact clearly noticed by the alien since he said, “You do not want to fight me.”

“You’re right. I don’t want to.” This was the truth. He’d seen Sif’s fight against this guy and she’d gotten pummeled. Grant also didn’t want to fight because he realized that, with all the nitrogen gas around, he couldn’t use his powers. “But we do have some questions for you.”

The man didn’t seem inclined to be questioned though, so he threw the first punch at Grant instead. For a while, the two of them seemed evenly matched. Grant once more felt the euphoria of being stronger and faster than he’d been before he’d gone through the chrysalis. He even was able to throw the guy against the wall. But then the alien got his second wind and easily threw Grant across the room. Grant crashed into a table before slamming into the wall. He lay on the floor for a moment, wondering how hard he’d hit his head since the room seemed to be shaking.
He shook his head to get the shaking to stop but then realized that the room actually was shaking. Skye! He glanced over at her just in time to see the gun she was holding break apart in her hands, bullets scattering everywhere. A shelf fell on top of her. The alien took the opportunity to vault over the downed shelf and race out of the room. Grant got up as quickly as he could and made his way over to Skye. He was relieved to find that the shelf wasn’t very heavy, so he was able to quickly get it off of her.

“Are you OK?”

Skye looked at him, her eyes big in her face. “I’m fine,” she whispered shakily. “I just lost control.” Then she burst into tears.

Grant gathered her up in his arms and started rocking her like a baby. “It’s OK, sweetheart. You’re going to be fine.”

But he wasn’t as sure about that as he’d been before. If Skye couldn’t hold it together on stressful missions, then it looked as though they’d be telling Coulson sooner rather than later. Grant’s tactical brain led him to suspect that the news would go over better if they could show Coulson how their powers could be controlled and used to benefit missions. Having him see their powers go awry would be the worst possible way for him to find out. If they were in charge of the unveiling, then they could spin their secrecy as them just working to control their powers first. However, if Coulson found out by just seeing uncontrolled powers, then their silence looked like duplicity. Not ideal. If he could just get Skye to calm down, Grant could start working on a plan.

Much to his relief, Skye managed to pull it together enough so that she seemed calm enough once they got back to the Bus. Grant shook off Simmons’ desire to look him over (there was no way he was doing that!) and joined the debriefing with Skye, Coulson, and Sif in the lounge. He sat back and listened as they determined that the man was Kree and hypothesized that he might be on Earth to find the keys to something. Although Grant didn’t have any real reason to be at this meeting, there was no way he was letting Skye out of his sight, not while she was so upset.

That’s why he again found himself listening in at Coulson’s next meeting as they discovered that the Kree must be headed to Chaves, Portugal, a city that means “keys” in English. Grant was just starting to relax – there was nothing there that seemed harmful – when Coulson looked thoughtful.

“Oh shit!” Grant glanced at Skye and saw the same distressed expression on her face that he’d gotten used to seeing since they’d gone through the chrysalis. He debated what he should do. Joining Skye risked drawing unwanted attention but doing nothing meant she had to figure it out on her own.

Before he decided on a plan, Skye called out, “AC?” Coulson, May and Sif all turned around, puzzled looks on their faces. “I’d like to sit this one out, please.”

Coulson stepped closer, his confusion morphing into concern. “You all right?”

“Yeah,” Skye answered casually. “Just after my run-in with Blue Man Group, I still feel a little banged up and I’m just worried I’m not gonna be much help out there, so…”
“OK,” Coulson answered lightly. “Whenever you’re ready. Ward, are you all right to go?”

“Of course, Sir.” Grant stood up and joined the departing group. He’d thought about trying to stay on the Bus with Skye but, with her trying to make light of not going, that would be worse.

Apparently May wasn’t ready to let it go yet. As a SO, Grant didn’t really blame her. He probably would’ve done the same but for now, he was on tenterhooks waiting to see how Skye would manage it. There was too much pressure on her, so much so that he had no idea how she was going to handle things minute to minute. He could feel his anxiety ratchet up a notch but kept his face blank. Skye didn’t need to feed off his worry and the others definitely didn’t need to view his concern.

“Is it really about being hurt or is it about your nerves?” May asked.

Skye smiled. She looked just as nonchalant as Grant could’ve wanted. He almost breathed a sigh of relief. “I promise, it’s just about the guy making me see cartoon birdies all around my head. That’s it.”

“Have Simmons give you one more check while we’re gone” Coulson insisted. “Let’s make sure there’s nothing serious.”

Skye nodded. “OK.”

Coulson and May started walking away, talking about how exactly to find where the Kree was going. Grant noticed that Sif gave Skye a searching look before following Coulson. He too hung back for just a moment, giving her an encouraging smile, before leaving. He just hoped that she’d disregard Coulson’s order and spend her time meditating instead.

Grant was grateful that the mission itself wasn’t difficult. The Kree refused to come peacefully but was easily incapacitated with their new net gun. That was something to consider. Grant had previously thought that, with his new powers, he was pretty unstoppable but leave it to SHIELD (and maybe Hydra) to keep up with weaponry.

After Sif and Coulson’s talk with the Kree (whose name was Vin-tak) in The Cage, the alien became more cooperative. He gave Sif back her memories. Grant hoped he’d give the Portuguese nurse her memories back too. Vin-tak and Sif argued about how much the Kree and Asgardians dislike each other but then Vin-tak said something really interesting.

“Well then, if you know Kree history, perhaps you’ve heard the tale of terrigenesis.” Terrigenesis? That’s what Cal was always talking about.

“Of course,” Sif said arrogantly. “Ancient Kree descending on planets altering the inhabitants to fight their war.”

“And Earth was one of them.”

Sif explained. “Eons ago, the Kree waged a very long war. The casualties were high and they needed more soldiers.”

“You mean cannon fodder,” May added disgustedly.

“We needed killers,” Vin-tak said. “One vicious faction among the Kree genetically modified other creatures’ DNA. These modifications can be activated with terrigen crystals.”

No! During their time in Wyoming, Grant spent a lot of time wondering why he and Skye had
gotten powers. His favorite theory was that they’d been chosen to become superheroes, their bodies altered to help save people. Now it sounded like the opposite was true and fate was once again having a laugh at his expense. Once again, an evil organization was trying to use him badly and prevent Grant from being the hero he knew he could be. He immediately began his calming routine when he felt the heat within him start to build. Now would be the absolute worst time to show his powers.

“We know these torturous experiments failed,” Sif sneered.

“Not on Earth,” Vin-tak replied. “Here we had to shut them down. This faction had built a city. They brought with them the diviners which hold the crystals. Their plans were discovered and thwarted by the better of my kind putting an end to that dark chapter of our past.”

“Until now,” Skye murmured, looking freaked out.

*Oh shit!* Grant knew that if he was having problems, Skye would be having more but he couldn’t calm himself and look out for her too. He focused all his attention on dampening his internal fire.

“When I saw that an ancient signal had been triggered, I knew it had to be a diviner. If the Kree empire learned that these experiments were a success, they would be likely to renew them.”

“Why did you come here?” Skye asked him.

“These transformed beings are…abominations. I knew that I had to find the remainder of the diviners before another monstrosity occurred and erase any knowledge of it.”

“How many diviners are supposed to be in that crate?” May asked.

“Enough to create an army,” Vin-tak replied.

As if on cue, Simmons’ voice filled the silence that followed Vin-tak’s pronouncement. “Sir, the crate is empty.”

*Of course it is.* Grant shook his head in disgust. He should’ve expected this. *This is why Gordon wouldn’t answer our questions.*

**Flashback**

“We,” Skye repeated in a hard voice to the man who’d suddenly appeared in their house. She hadn’t moved a muscle since Grant ran into the kitchen. “Who’s we?”

The man smiled charmingly. “Please, allow me to back up. I didn’t handle this as well as I should have.”

Grant crossed his arms. “No kidding,” he muttered.

“It was rude of me to just appear in your kitchen. Normally I would use the front door but I was afraid that, being so far away from everything, I might’ve had difficulty being allowed inside.” He shrugged. “This just saved time.”

Skye’s mouth dropped open as the man sauntered over to the cabinet, got a glass, poured water from the faucet into it and casually drained it. Grant’s forbidding expression remained in place but he too was rather taken aback. This man moved like a sighted person and clearly had no fear of them. *Time for that to change.*
Grant shifted to the counter and leaned on it. His actions appeared casual although they were anything but. Putting something hard against his back was a sound tactical move since this guy apparently could travel through space and appear wherever but it was unlikely he could go through solid material. Grant also could use the surface to push off on if necessary, giving him extra momentum. However, most of all, he didn’t want the man to think he had the upper hand anymore, so being proactive instead of reactive was the smart move.

“Well, maybe you could use some of that extra time you just saved explaining who you are and what organization you represent,” Grant said in a light tone. Out of the corner of his eye (since his entire gaze was focused on the stranger), he saw Skye glance at him in confusion. Even though they were no longer SO and trainee, he wished he could tell her that this was Spycraft 101. *Always use a similar tone as your adversary. That way they’re lulled into complacency by thinking you’re on the same page when in reality they have no idea what’s going on in your head.*

“Oh of course. My apologies,” the man said with a slightly mocking bow. “My name is Gordon.”

Skye mimicked Grant’s actions and leaned casually against the counter. “Great. So you’re Gordon. Who is the rest of the ‘we’ you mentioned.”

Gordon moved his head around, almost as if he was glancing around the kitchen. “Would it be possible for us to move into the living room so we can sit down? I don’t mind standing if it makes you feel more at ease but I’m worried that I might accidentally step into the glass. I certainly don’t want to cause any more trouble than I already have.”

*Weird. It’s almost as if he can see.* Grant noted that Gordon still hadn’t answered Skye’s question even though she’d now asked it twice. It seemed clear that Gordon was going to deliver information in his own way and on his own time. He felt a twinge of admiration. Controlling the conversation, especially as easily as Gordon was doing it, was a skill they’d been taught at the Academy. Many of the cadets struggled to learn it, some never being able to master the skill, because it required quick thinking, a relaxed manner, and charm. Gordon was making it look effortless when it was anything but. *Well, two can play at that game.*

Grant smiled in a friendly way at Gordon. “I would apologize for my manners but you can hardly expect us to respond well to such an intrusion. But please…” he waved a hand toward the living room, “…after you.”

Gordon bowed his head slightly in thanks, then walked purposely to one of the comfy looking chairs. The open floor plan allowed Grant to track his path. *This guy must be able to see somehow.* He glanced over at Skye who was looking at him, her eyebrows raised, the slinky teddy she wore clinging to her curves. “Why don’t you get changed while I entertain our…guest?” She opened her mouth to object, so Grant held up a hand slightly. “And could you grab me a shirt and pair of sweats?”

To his relief, Skye simply nodded and left to go to the bedroom. Grant walked slowly into the living room, observing how Gordon appeared again to be looking around. He sat down in another one of the chairs. He would’ve liked to have sat on the couch with Skye but he needed to know that Gordon couldn’t suddenly appear next to him.

Gordon finished his perusal of the room, turning his head toward Grant. “Isn’t Skye going to be joining us? She’s going to want to hear what I have to say.”

“She’ll be down shortly. She just went to change. We weren’t expecting any…visitors.” Gordon nodded. “Tell me Gordon, how is it that you can see?”
Grant was hoping to catch Gordon off guard but Gordon merely smiled. “You’ve noticed that? It
takes most people a while to realize. I can’t see in the usual way of course, not the way you do. It’s
more of a sense, a forming of objects in my mind. The most frustrating thing, to me at least, is that
I can no longer see in color.”

Gordon was trying to distract him again. Most people would ponder the lack of color in his sight
but Grant remained on task. “So you were able to see normally at one time?”

“You are direct, aren’t you?” He paused, clearly waiting for Grant to respond. *Nope. My house, my
collection.* Gordon smiled slightly, as if acknowledging Grant’s win. “Yes, I was just as normal
as you were before undergoing the chrysalis. Fortunately for me, I had a lot of help after my
transformation.”

Skye came into the room, taking a seat on the couch after throwing Grant his requested clothes.
Grant tried not to sigh. *She should know better than to impede my vision or my hands when we’re
dealing with a potential enemy.* He admitted that Gordon was seeming less and less like a
dangerous adversary but they still needed to be cautious.

“Who helped you?” Skye asked. Grant took advantage of Gordon’s attention to Skye to quickly slip
on his shirt and sweatpants.

“The same person who should’ve been there to help you.” He leaned forward in his chair,
projecting sincerity in every action. “Your transformation was not supposed to happen the way it
did. Your father went rogue when he took it upon himself to change you. I can’t even imagine what
it must have been like to have gone through the mist unprepared.”

Skye looked down. “It’s been really hard.”

Grant bit back a curse. Skye should know better than to give a potential enemy any information he
could use against her. Not only that but she was allowing him to work her instead of getting
information from him. Not for the first time, Grant wanted to shake Coulson for his stupidity in the
way he went about integrating Skye into his team. Sure, she was highly intelligent and had worked
hard to learn what she could but there was still so much that she didn’t know. No amount of
brainpower or hard work could make up for the years of instruction and training the Academy
provided. Coulson was so invested in her value to the team that he’d overlooked the great deal of
risk she accepted merely by being in the field.

“I’m not surprised.” Gordon replied. “You don’t have the tools or the understanding that you need
just yet.”

*Uh oh. Skye! Don’t get lured in.* Grant could see how this line of discussion was like catnip to her.
She was so desperate for answers, so determined to figure out who she was, that she would
overlook any security issues for herself or for the agency. *Maybe I can head this off, retake control.*

“What did you mean when you said that Skye’s father had gone rogue?”

“The chrysalis is not a process to be used lightly or without permission. Cal knows this yet chose to
disregard it.”

He considered Gordon’s answer. “Permission? There are rules around using it?”

“Yes.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Grant saw Skye lean forward, on the edge of the couch. “You said we
don’t have the tools or the understanding. To do what?” *Damn it, Skye! I was just starting to get*
Grant couldn’t be certain but he thought he saw Gordon throw a small smirk in his direction before giving Skye his full attention. “To be who you were always meant to be. Without fear, without pain. We can offer that to you.”

“We? Who’s we?” Grant asked. Neither Skye nor Gordon even looked in his direction.

“How?” Skye asked. Grant almost groaned at the earnest expression on her face. There’s no stopping her now. He decided to sit back and see what happened.

“I’ll take you to a place where you can be with people like us,” Gordon told her.

Grant didn’t like the sound of that. Who are these people and what do they want? Why did Cal go rogue? Why didn’t they come to visit us sooner? Do they know why and how we’ve developed powers? He had so many questions, all destined not to be answered if the current conversation was any indication.

“Us?” Skye mulled that over for a moment, rising excitement in her eyes. “How many are there?”

“You can learn about yourself, your gift. You can be safe. But only if you want to come,” Gordon said.

Grant tried to keep his skepticism off his face and retain his usual neutral expression. But it was difficult, especially when Skye seemed almost entranced. Come on, Skye. We’ve already learned a lot on our own. Don’t give him the edge!

Almost as if she’d heard him, Skye glanced over at Grant. Her expression shifted to one of more caution. She sat back on the couch, her excitement dimmed.

Gordon sighed. Grant was sure that if he could have, he would’ve rolled his eyes. Even without eyesight, he could read the room. “When you’re ready, I’ll find you.”

Skye looked puzzled. “How will you find…?”

“Trust me, I’ll know,” Gordon replied. Then there was a blinding light and a crack and he was gone.

Both Skye and Grant remained in their seats, silent, refusing to look at each other. Grant was trying to contain his temper. He wanted to throw things and yell at her but he knew that wouldn’t be helpful. We were doing so well on our own, becoming even closer. But it wasn’t enough. They didn’t know anything about Gordon or the group he represented yet Skye had almost been willing to drop everything and leave with him. In fact, he wasn’t quite sure why she didn’t. The agitation rose within him and Grant knew he couldn’t keep still any longer. He rose, went into the kitchen and started cleaning up the mess Skye made when Gordon arrived.

After a few minutes, Skye came into the kitchen and started helping him. Grant briefly glanced at her and saw that she’d been crying. His anger lessened. This is hard on her. His anger came roaring back. But it’s hard on me too! If she hadn’t buttied in, I could’ve gotten some answers! He averted his eyes and concentrated on getting all the glass picked up. After he was done with the glass, Grant washed his hands and returned to the bedroom, leaving Skye to finish up.

He had just removed his clothes and gotten under the covers when Skye came into the bedroom. She stomped over to his side of the bed and stood there, her hands on her hips. “Are we never going to speak again or are you done pouting?”
Pouting?! Grant sat up quickly, his first instinct to lash out at her, but then decided to impose his own control. *I couldn’t control the last conversation but I damn sure will control this one!* Let her learn a thing or two; he still had things to teach. He leaned back against the bedboard, willing his heart rate to slow down.

“It sounds like you’re angry,” he said calmly.

“You’re damn right I’m angry!” she snapped. “You haven’t said one word to me since Gordon left. Are we going to pretend that it didn’t happen? We’ve been waiting for days to figure out what’s happening to us and just when it looks like we might get some answers, you stop talking!”

“You were doing enough talking for the both of us.”

“Is that why you’re mad? Because I took the lead for a change instead of just following you? Well, newsflash buddy, you’re not my SO anymore and you don’t know everything!”

Grant was surprised by the flare of hurt he felt at the SO crack. He’d thought that she’d severed their professional relationship so that they could strengthen their personal one, not so she could be free of him as a teacher. He hoped that he’d kept the emotion off of his face but, given the softening of Skye’s eyes, he probably hadn’t. He pushed down his anger with difficulty.

“No one wise ever thinks they know everything; there’s always more to learn.” Grant knew that would rattle Skye. Sure enough, her eyes narrowed and he felt a momentary thrill of satisfaction. “That’s what I thought we were here to do: learn more about our powers. Together. I even thought that we were succeeding.” A wave of bitterness washed over him, loosening some of his control. “But it wasn’t enough, was it, Skye? It never is with you. I’m never enough.”

Skye’s mouth dropped open, her eyes widening. She took a step towards him. “Grant. That’s not…”

Suddenly he could stand it no longer. He felt the heat building up in him and knew that he had to do something to contain it. Staying in bed was no longer an option, not if he wanted it to stay unburnt. Grant swung his legs over the side of the bed and stomped out of the bedroom, away from Skye, battling the inferno within him. *I can’t lose control!* He marched to the fireplace, still merrily burning away, and concentrated on making it slightly bigger and hotter and back down again. He could feel Skye come into the room but she wisely kept her distance and her silence, letting him work it out on his own. *Well, at least she’s learned something from me.*

After a few minutes, she spoke, this time in a much softer tone than before. “We were doing a great job on our own. That wasn’t what me talking with Gordon was about. I just need answers, ones we won’t find on our own. I had to know…”

“That’s the thing, Skye,” Grant interrupted, finally feeling somewhat in control but still angry. “It’s always about you. What about what I wanted, what I needed? I have powers too.” He turned to look at her, trying to keep his voice calm and his temper leashed. “You always rush forward, never stopping to think about what you’re doing or if there’s a better way.” Her mouth opened to answer but he rushed on. “And it clearly never occurred to you that maybe I wanted answers too but just was going about it differently, smarter.” He tried to ignore the hurt look on her face because if he thought for a second about her feelings, he wouldn’t be able to get his own out. “Did you stop and ask yourself why Gordon wasn’t answering your questions? You kept asking who he was working with, how many others there are, but he just changed the subject and you let him.”

“I…”
Grant walked a few steps towards her then stopped, wary of getting any closer. “You gave him information he could use against you. You let him work you and you completely ignored what I was doing. I may not be your SO anymore and you may not have to listen to me but that’s not how a team works. A team works together and you were clearly doing your own thing.”

Grant prepared himself for the onslaught of words Skye was sure to launch at him, his tactician’s brain already thinking of responses and examples to bolster his argument. That’s why he was so surprised when, after she’d stared blankly at him for a few moments, Skye’s expression softened and she crossed the distance between them so that she could stroke his cheek lightly and kiss him gently. Grant’s emotions shifted and he felt lost, uncertain about what was happening.

“You’re right,” Skye said softly, taking Grant’s hand and leading him to the couch so they could sit down, facing each other. “I was being selfish and impulsive and I wasn’t thinking at all like an agent.” She smiled slightly, squeezing the hand she was still holding. “I wasn’t even letting one of the smartest men I know do what he does best.”

“Skye…”

She put her finger to his lips. “I let you have your turn.” She waited until he nodded and made a “go on” gesture with his free hand. “I’ve been so scared, Grant. Ever since we got powers, I’m been so freaking terrified.” Her eyes filled with tears. “First I was worried that I was going to hurt someone. Now that I have some control, I’m scared that once the others know what I am, they’ll hate me. They’ll see me as a monster and no longer want me to stay. You heard Jemma; aliens need not apply. I searched for a family all my life and just when I find one, it turns out I might lose them. Where would I go then, especially given who I am now? Gordon gave me hope that I might not lose everything.” She looked down at their joined hands. “So I got carried away.”

Grant gently tilted her chin up so she could look him in the eyes. “Not that I think this would happen but if SHIELD did kick you out, do you really think you’d be alone? Our recent performance notwithstanding, we’re a team, Skye. Where you go, I go.” Grant glanced down, gathered his courage, then looked back up at her. “That is, if you want me to.”

Skye’s smile started small but quickly took over her whole face. She withdrew her hand from his and smacked him on the arm. “Oh my god, Robot! How could you ever think I wouldn’t want you?”

Grant smiled slightly, both relieved at her reaction and confused. “Well, when you start talking about SHIELD kicking you out without mentioning me, I started to wonder. We both have powers. Why would they keep me if they’re getting rid of you?”

“You know all the top people and, as you’re always reminding me, you’re the best since Romanoff. You could grow three heads and they’d still want you. Besides, SHIELD’s been your family for years. I’m kinda new.”

“You may be kinda new but you’re also kinda awesome.” He laughed when Skye rolled her eyes at him. “Baby, trust me when I tell you that SHIELD isn’t kicking either of us out. It may be hard at first but they’re going to recognize the benefits of having agents with powers. But if they don’t or we don’t want to stay, then we’ll leave. Together. You’re my family, Skye. I hope I’m yours too.”

“You are,” she replied softly.

“Good.” Grant stood up, holding out his hand to Skye. “Now, why don’t we go back to bed and I’ll demonstrate how I don’t need three heads to show you a good time.”
Present

Upon hearing Simmons’ pronouncement, Coulson and Skye stared at each other in dismay while Vin-tak looked down in horror. Grant’s tactician’s brain was racing. Does this mean that Gordon’s group has the rest of the diviners or does Hydra? Gordon didn’t make it sound as though they were even violent but we don’t really know yet. We need to get in touch with them to find out.

“My worst fear has come true,” Vin-tak said, interrupting Grant’s train of thought. “We must find the remaining diviners as well as anyone who’s transformed.”

“We drowned the temple where the diviners were activated, so that’s a plus,” Coulson replied. “And we do know the woman who was changed.”

Sif perked up immediately. “So someone was transformed. A Kree slave warrior created. Have you put it down?” What? This isn’t good. Grant started his calming routine again. If Skye and I can just get out of here without losing it, we have a chance to figure out what we’re going to do. We may have to contact Gordon sooner rather than later.

“No,” May replied. “She disappeared.”

“What do you know of her?” Sif asked.

Skye who was looking increasingly panicked and Grant could stand it no longer. He thought that he had himself somewhat under control, so he risked going to her. This can’t get out of control! He put his hand surreptitiously on her back, hoping it would soothe her but, given her stiff posture, he doubted she even felt it. He had a sinking feeling that this was going to be the moment where the others found out about her powers.

“We don’t know much about Raina’s transformation,” Coulson told Sif. “Skye and Ward witnessed it but didn’t see much.”

Sif faced them. “You were there. What did you see?”

Grant said, “Nothing” at the same time Skye answered, “I…I didn’t. I mean, n-nothing.”

“Were there others with you?” Vin-tak asked. “The changes may not be on the surface but buried inside.” Out of the corner of his eye, Grant saw water in a glass start shaking. Oh shit! He could tell that Skye could see it too. “You must understand. These creatures are weapons, …abominations… even if they don’t know it.”

Oh come on! Grant had had enough of Vin-tak’s stupid pronouncements. The guy doesn’t even seem all that smart. “How can you be sure that’s true? You just said that all this happened eons ago. What if the history books aren’t accurate and the modified humans evolved?”

Grant felt Skye shudder and the shaking in the room intensified. Now it was rattling dishes and the floor, playing havoc with the lights. Grant moved carefully so that he was standing beside Skye. He wanted to get in-between her and the others but knew that would look bad. He recognized that they’d passed the point of no return. It was no longer a matter of if she’d show her powers but for how long.

Sif looked suspicious. “Son of Coul. What is this?”

May’s suspicions seemed to have some focus to them. “Skye. You want to talk to us?” May asked in a voice used to soothe children and animals.
Coulson approached Skye. Grant tensed, ready for anything. “Skye,” Coulson said in a gentle voice. “What’s doing this?”

“I am!” Skye answered miserably.

Sif tried to grab her but Grant blocked her with his body, stepping in front of Skye to shield her. “Don’t!” he snarled.

Skye backed away, putting her head in her hands. She looked up at them all. Despite of all the tension and worry about what would happen next, Grant was lost in admiration. Skye looked like a goddess as she put her hands down, her hair flying from the vibrations as the glass in the windows and door behind her shattered. Grant rushed over and thrust her behind his back as he drew his weapon and aimed it at Sif and Vin-tak. To his surprise, both May and Coulson were right beside him.

“Hand her over,” Sif said in a dangerous voice. “I will take her to Asgard. It will be safer for all of you.”

“We will do no such thing,” Coulson said angrily.

“The weapon has been activated,” Vin-tak said. “It needs to be eliminated before it hurts someone.” It? Oh hell no!

“Skye is not a weapon,” Coulson insisted.

“Coulson, no one is saying Skye chose this but she is dangerous,” Sif replied.

“I don’t want to be this way,” Skye told her. What? No baby, don’t say that!

“Imagine what will happen if your powers grow,” Sif said to her urgently. “It may not stop at breaking glass. You could bring down buildings, tear continents apart.”

“I can get a handle on it,” Skye replied.

Grant was terrified that she might confide everything, about their extra training sessions and how they’d spent their time in Wyoming. All was not yet lost but it certainly would be should everyone to know that they’d been working on managing, not dampening, their powers. He was almost glad when Vin-tak spoke up again.

“That’s not what you were designed for. You were designed to destroy which is why you must be put down,” Vin-tak said as he moved towards her.

“Yeah, well, that sounds an awful lot like killing to me,” Fitz said as he appeared from behind the ruined window.

“This is not your concern,” Vin-tak said confusedly.

May grabbed Skye and shoved her through the door. “Skye! Let’s go!” Grant followed them, determined not to let them out of his sight. May seemed like an ally right now but there was no telling when that would change.

“Fitz! We need Bambino! You want her, you go through me!” Coulson yelled at Sif and Vin-tak.

May, Skye and Grant left the others behind as they raced down the hall together. As they passed the lab, Jemma came running out. “What’s going on?”
Grant didn’t feel like she deserved an answer but apparently Skye felt differently because she said, “Jemma, I am so sorry!” as they rushed by. Jemma just stared after them.

May guided them into Vault D, down the stairs and into the tiny cell. She pushed Skye onto the cot and activated the barrier. Grant grasped that she was offering Skye some protection but he couldn’t understand the endgame. There was no way this was going to work. But that was a problem for later. The biggest problem right now was that the rumbling still hadn’t stopped. Skye needed to calm down.

“Skye,” he said gently. “Look at me.” Her eyes, big and wild, swung to his and her panting slowed down. “Good. That’s good. Now try breathing with me. Listen to the sound of my voice. Breathe in through your nose. Breathe out through your mouth. That’s it. You can do this.”

The rumbling decreased in intensity and Grant felt a moment of triumph. May hadn’t said a word since they’d entered the vault. He was grateful that she was letting him handle Skye because he didn’t think she’d be very good at talking someone down from a panic attack and he needed her to manage everything else. Just when he thought they would get the shaking under control, the tip of a sword sliced through the barrier, almost poking May in the head.

“Agent May!” Sif yelled. “Release the girl!”

“May!” Skye gasped. “She’ll get through.” The rumbling started back in full force again.

“Ignore it,” May told her as she took up a fighting stance. “Just focus. Listen to Ward.”

Grant stroked Skye’s face in an effort to get her to concentrate on him again. “Skye. Just breathe. You can do this.”

“I can’t, Grant. I can’t make it stop,” Skye sobbed.

The barrier came down and Sif stepped into the cell. Grant stood in front of Skye, pulling his gun and aiming at Sif, ready to defend Skye any way he could. Even though no one seemed to remember that he too had been present during the chrysalis, that realization would come soon enough. So he might as well use his powers if he had to. May moved to stand beside him, hip to hip, creating a human shield.

As Sif stood just looking at them, probably planning her next move, Skye grabbed May’s ICER and shot herself, the blue streaks traveling up her face. The rumbling stopped.

“Skye!” May whispered as she moved to check on her. Grant kept his focus on Sif, not knowing what she would do but determined not to let her take Skye.

Once again, Sif looked freaked out. “She harmed herself!

Coulson ran into the room, his gun also trained on Sif. “Even though she knew it meant giving up her freedom,” he told her. Grant wasn’t willing to go that far. He suspected that Skye just wanted the shaking to stop and didn’t know what else to do. But Coulson’s interpretation of Skye’s actions seemed to be having an effect on Sif, so he let it stand.

“All to save the rest of you,” Sif whispered.

“Don’t you see? She wants to get better,” Coulson said. Grant glanced over at May and was heartened to see her leaning over Skye, one hand protectively on her shoulder. “If you take her away from the people she loves, she’ll only get worse.”
Sif nodded and Grant felt himself relax for the first time in hours. Bobbi burst into the room. “Sir! We just used the truncheon on the alien in an effort to subdue him and now he has no memories. He’s calm but is asking what he’s doing here. What should we do with him?”

Coulson looked at Sif, eyebrows raised in query. She sighed. “I will take him back to his planet.” She glanced back at Skye. “I do not believe it is wise to leave the girl here on Earth but since you are determined to help her and she wants to get better, I will.” She put her arm on Coulson’s shoulder. “Come, son of Coul. Let us make preparations for my departure.”

May stood up. “If you can take Skye back to her room, I’ll tell the others what’s happened.”

As he waited in her room for Skye to wake up, Grant wondered when it would occur to everyone that he too might have powers. He pondered the idea of telling them himself but decided to lay low for now. Skye needed him and dealing with everyone knowing about him would be a distraction. Besides, he had his hands full with Skye’s utter distress when she woke up that she might be putting her team in danger. Despite his best efforts, she made the decision to go live on the Bus in the Cage, just in case she couldn’t control her powers again. Grant tried to convince her that she didn’t have to go immediately but she shook him off and continued throwing her things in her duffel.

Before she left the room, she put her hand on his face. “I know you did your best for me in there but I’m too screwed up right now. I’ll talk to you later.”

Grant took a second to control his fuming. *If she thinks I’m just going to let her walk away…* He quickly went to his room, threw a few of his things in his duffel and started down the hallway to the Bus. He could see Skye stopped ahead of him, clearly listening to the conversation of their teammates cleaning up the lounge. Grant stopped too but far enough back that neither Skye nor the others could see him although he could see and hear them. The others clearly didn’t know that Skye was there either because they were having an argument about her.

“Skye should’ve just come clean,” Mack was saying to Fitz.

“What and risk being locked up, studied, or who knows what else?” Fitz asked angrily. “No, I wouldn’t let her.”

“Oh, you wouldn’t let her,” Jemma burst in. *Uh oh.* It sounded like Jemma discovered that Fitz knew and hid it from her. There was going to be hell to be for that.

“We could’ve handled her in a way that would’ve kept everyone safe,” Mack insisted. Grant almost lost his temper, already simmering, when he heard that.

“Handled her?”

Luckily, Fitz was taking care of it for him. “You would’ve handled her, like Skye’s something to be locked away in a cage somewhere,” Fitz yelled. “We should be protecting her.” *Damn straight.*

“No, Fitz,” Mack ground out. “We’re the ones that need protection from her.” He stopped talking, having just seen Skye listening to their conversation.

Skye’s back was to Grant so he couldn’t see her expression but he could guess. He was viciously pleased that, except for Fitz, the others seemed embarrassed. Skye quickly continued on to the Bus, even ignoring Fitz who ran out to try and talk with her.

Grant came up behind Fitz and put his hand on his shoulder. “Thanks, Fitz. You’re a real friend.”

Fitz turned to face Grant, tears in his eyes. “That was bad.” He paused and then lowered his voice. “Do they have any idea about you?”
Grant shook his head. “Not right now.”

Fitz glanced down the hall where Skye had gone. “Maybe you should keep it that way.”

Grant swung his duffel over his shoulder and gave Fitz a sad smile. “I’ll do my best.” Then he hurried after Skye.

When Grant entered the Cage, he saw Skye sitting on the cot crying softly. She looked up when he entered, her expression changing from fear to confusion. She wiped her eyes. “What are you doing here?”

Grant threw his duffel so that it landed near hers. “I told you before. Wherever you go, I go.”
Grant sat down next to Skye on the cot and drew her close. She immediately turned her head into his shoulder and sobbed unrestrainedly. Laying his head on top of hers, he willed himself not to fidget. He certainly didn’t want Skye to know how uncomfortable this made him. Grant hated seeing her cry, especially knowing there was nothing he could do. His therapist had drilled into him that not everything could be fixed. Sometimes you just have to let emotions run their course. So, as hard as it was for him to just hold her, he knew that the best thing he could offer was his presence.

As he was holding her, his mind refused to stay in the present. He automatically started mulling over the night’s events. Of all the scenarios he’d considered for how they’d announce their new powers, few had gone as badly as what happened. Skye’s powers had been uncontrolled and had almost led to a huge conflict and alien imprisonment. As bad as it was though, it still could’ve been worse. Skye was whole and unharmed and SHIELD hadn’t confined her. And they still didn’t know about Grant’s powers, a situation that would need to be addressed quickly.

After a few minutes, Skye stopped crying, her breathing evening out from her previous hiccupping sobs. Grant could feel the dampness she’d left behind but he disregarded the discomfort. Skye sighed and drew back so she could look at him. Her eyes were still wet and her lips turned up in a half-way smile as she dabbed at the wet spot. “Sorry about that,” she wryly. “Not that I don’t appreciate the gesture but you shouldn’t be here.” Her smile quickly turned morphed into an anguished expression. “I’m the one who can’t handle it. They don’t even know…”

“Skye,” Grant interrupted, leaning over her to gently tuck an errant piece of hair behind her ear. He brushed his fingers down her cheek, trying to mask his exasperation. As much as he loved Skye’s impulsiveness, it did get in the way of her strategic thinking at times. “Never forget that the Cage is wired for video and sound,” he whispered as he met her eyes. “We should talk privately. But not in here.”

Skye stared at him, her brow crinkling in astonishment. “But we’re agents! They wouldn’t do that to us,” she told him as if she were trying to convince him of something. Grant realized what a blow this was to her. Skye still trusted people, especially those she considered family. He didn’t know what to say. Grant was well practiced at having the others watch this tape, Grant wanted to send a message. “People fear what they don’t know. You’ve been with SHIELD long enough to realize that people will do whatever they think will make them safe, especially when it comes to gifteds.” He gestured towards the closed door. “Shall we?”

He shrugged, choosing his words carefully. Not only did he not want to hurt Skye further but, should the others watch this tape, Grant wanted to send a message. “People fear what they don’t know. You’ve been with SHIELD long enough to realize that people will do whatever they think will make them safe, especially when it comes to gifteds.” He gestured towards the closed door. “Shall we?”

Grant took her hand and led her reluctantly back through the Bus, trying not to let the memory of happier times distract him. Everywhere he looked though were reminders of their time as a team: playing Battleship, watching Fitz eat his weight in pretzels, laughing hysterically at May’s pranks. And if he was feeling that way, Skye must’ve been doubly affected. Grant quickened his pace until they got to his old bunk.

Skye looked around in confusion. “If the Cage is bugged, what makes you think this place isn’t?”

Good question. He smiled briefly as he shut the door behind them and stepped into the small room.
“Normally I’d be suspicious too but, given all the intrigue that’s happened on this plane of late, I swept it.”

Skye shook her head and sighed as she sat down on the bed, scooting back until she could lean against the wall, arms propped up on her knees. “Of course you did. If I manage to stay with SHIELD, am I going to get that jaded?”

Grant realized she was only half teasing. “Probably.” He sat down next to her and mimicked her posture. “OK, now we can talk.”

Skye’s eyes filled with tears and she looked down at her hands grasped tightly in her lap. “I’m so sorry. I don’t know what happened. One minute I was in complete control, then Vin-Tak started talking about us being weapons and I just lost it.” She took a deep breath and looked up at him, searching his face. “I really tried to listen to what you were saying about breathing, Grant, but I was so scared. Sif was talking about taking me to Asgard and Vin-tak was saying that we were abominations and…”

The plane rumbled slightly. Oh crap. Skye immediately stopped talking and did some deep breathing. Grant waited, relieved when the rumbling stopped. He hoped the rumbling wasn’t noticeable to anyone outside the plane because he didn’t want to be interrupted. He figured they were safe though. As small as the rumbling had been and with May and Coulson taking Sif and Vin-tak off base, it was unlikely anyone else noticed or would know what to do if they did.

“I freaked out,” Skye continued. “I didn’t know what to do. I still don’t.” She paused, taking another deep breath, checking her heart rate monitor watch to make sure it was low enough. Grant glanced at the watch quickly, trying to see the number without Skye noticing. He didn’t want her to think he was checking up on her. She needed to believe that he trusted her, especially now. Her eyes swung back to Grant, one tear slowly making its way down her cheek. “I’m sorry. Do they know about you?”

“Hey, stop apologizing,” Grant said tenderly, wiping away her tear. “Don’t…” He stopped, leaning his forehead against hers for a second. He drew back, smiling.

“Don’t what?” Skye asked. She frowned, her eyes narrowing suspiciously. “Why are you smiling?”

If things weren’t so serious, he might’ve laughed at her lightning fast emotional changes. It was just so Skye. “I’m smiling because I’m finally learning. I was about to tell you not to worry about me.” She opened her mouth to object but stopped when Grant held up his hand. “But then I realized that of course you’re going to worry about me, just like I worry about you. And that whether they know about me is a problem that we…” he waved his hand between the two of them, “…should discuss.”

Skye’s frown turned into a slight smile. “You are learning. There just may be hope for you yet.” The smile fell off her face. “So they don’t know about you?”

“Do you think they’d let me roam about freely if they did?”

She shrugged. “We’re in new territory here. I don’t know what they’ll do. I thought for sure that they’d either lock me up or throw me out when they discovered I have powers but so far they haven’t done anything but be supportive.”

Grant settled back against the wall again. “Not to be cynical but they just found out. I don’t think we can count on them being so easy-going once they’ve had some time to think about it. This is still SHIELD, the same organization that created the Index for gifted people.”
“Yeah but that was the old SHIELD, the one with a bunch of Hydra people in it,” Skye argued. “Maybe the new SHIELD will be different, more accepting.”

Grant snorted. “Don’t be naïve. You heard Mack and Jemma earlier. They’re scared of us and, quite frankly, they’re right to be.”

Skye’s brow furrowed. “Are you taking their side?” she asked incredulously.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Of course I’m not,” he snapped. Doesn’t she know me at all?

Grant took a deep breath, willing himself to calm down, to not give into the power of the fire inside him. Now wasn’t the time for recriminations. “Think about it for a minute,” he said in a softer tone. “We have powers – amazing, intense, strong powers – that they don’t. You can throw them into a wall and I can burn them without even breaking a sweat. If you were them, wouldn’t you be scared?”

Skye closed her eyes briefly, her shoulders sagging. “Yeah, OK. Point taken.” She paused. “But they know me. They have to know that I’d never hurt them.”

“They do know that but they also just saw you almost destroy the base. They’re not going to feel safe until they know you have your powers under control.”

She nodded. “Another fair point. You’re just full of them today,” she said in an irritated tone.

It was all Grant could do not to grin. He nodded, mock seriously. “Today and most days.”

That did the trick. Skye’s lips twitched. “So, Mr. I-Have-All-The-Answers-To-Everything, how do I show them that I do have control?”

Grant’s playfulness went away as quickly as it came because, much to his chagrin, he had no answers. He’d thought they’d been doing well with their training but clearly, it hadn’t worked for Skye when the rubber met the road. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“No, I don’t!” Once again, he stamped down on his anger, on the fire that threatened to consume him should he let it. He knew Skye was kind of teasing him but that she also was desperately hoping for a plan. And he was used to having them but this time, he had nothing, a situation he wasn’t used to. “I wish I did.” He paused, frustrated. “We need a place, a safe place, where you can continue exploring your powers and training with them. Somehow I doubt SHIELD is going to help you do that. They’re going to be all about shutting them down.”

Skye was quiet for a moment. “I think I have a solution. But you’re going to hate it.”

*****

Grant unpacked his duffel and placed it back into his closet. They’d decided that, for their plan to work, he had to seem completely caught off-guard about everything. So, despite his fervent desire to be right by Skye’s side, he had to let her handle things on her end for a while. Besides, he needed to concentrate on what he was going to do. His status as a gifted wasn’t going to remain secret for much longer. He threw himself into his beloved chair, willing himself to relax. Things might be about to get ugly. If that was true, then this was the calm before the storm. And as Grant knew only too well, you take your rest when you can.

He was still sitting there 15 minutes later, eyes closed and his head tilted back against the chair, when Kara knocked on his door, poking her head in. “Coulson and May just got back. We’re having an emergency meeting in 20 minutes.” She hesitated, then came into the room, closing the
door behind her. Grant’s eyebrows went up. Kara never came into his room uninvited, not since she’d returned to SHIELD. Unbidden, he thought of the numerous times she’d barged into his room at the Academy. But that was then.

Kara was clearly uncomfortable but the set of her lips was determined. She sat on the corner of the bed next to his chair. “Grant,” she said in a low voice, “we’ve been friends a long time and you’ve always had my back, even when I didn’t know it.” She noted his puzzled expression. “When I was with Hydra, some of them mentioned how you made sure they never hurt me,” she said quickly, as if she just wanted to get it over with.

Grant frowned in amazement. Hydra agents weren’t known for being sensitive nor did they ever want to give him credit for anything. “They said that?”

She rolled her eyes. “Ok. Fine. Not in so many words. What they actually said was that they were glad you’d kept them from hurting me because now my skills could benefit them.”

Grant smiled a little. Hydra’s self-interest made them predictable. “That sounds more like it.”

“Anyway,” she mockingly frowned at him as she drew out the word, “I want you to know that, whatever happens, you have my full support.”

Grant stared at her, a niggle of dread in his stomach. While he appreciated her declaration, the fact that she made it at all seemed ominous. “Thanks, I appreciate it.” She nodded, her eyes not leaving his face. He forced a smile, trying for light-hearted when he felt anything but. Kara seemed stressed and embarrassed, so he needed to do something to make it better. “Clearly you already know that you’ve always had my support. Good teammates are hard to find.”

She rolled her eyes, smiling a little. “You don’t even know the half of it.”

“Why are you telling me this? Has something happened?” Grant’s brain raced, trying to think what could’ve occurred in the time he spent with Skye on the Bus.

“No, nothing new.” She shrugged as she got up to go. “I don’t know. I just have a feeling that things are going to get bad. And as much as I love being a SHIELD agent, I know where my loyalties lie. Now so do you. See you in there!” Kara turned and left the room, not stopping to see how Grant was taking her declaration. If she had, she would’ve seen him smile.

*People can surprise you.* Then again, Kara being loyal wasn’t really a surprise. She was built that way. He was just lucky to be one of those she considered worthy.

Everyone but Coulson and May were in the conference room when he got there. Grant eyed the conference table, remembering without wanting to just how it had come to be. In the days following their arrival at the Playground, the team had complained mightily to Coulson about how uncomfortable they were meeting in his office. It was a cramped space and there was hardly any place to sit. This wasn’t an issue when the briefings were short but when they ran long which they tended to do on larger ops, the lack of chairs became an issue.

One day, Coulson came bounding in, a huge smile on his face. “Come look at what I got!” he told the team who happened to be together in the kitchen at the time. They’d dutifully followed him to one of the larger rooms and there, right in the middle, was an absolute monstrosity of a table. Grant actually heard May take an appalled breath when she saw it. The slab base was made of some cheap light cherry wood-like substance (“That’s a crime against nature,” Hunter muttered when he entered the room) and had 12 black and silver economy rolling chairs, five on each side plus one chair at each end.
Coulson grinned at all of them, like he’d just given them the best birthday present. “What do you think? You’ve all complained about not having anywhere to sit during briefings and now you do! Did you notice that there are enough chairs for everyone?”

“Do we have to sit in those chairs?” Fitz asked Jemma in a whisper.

“Shhh….,” Jemma replied.

“Wow, AC!” Skye said when she glimpsed the table. “Where’d you get it?” She had a brave smile on her face but Grant suspected that she really just wanted to laugh as she made a slow circle around the table. “Who ever thought there’d be a table this big! And boat-shaped too!”

Coulson just beamed proudly, never suspecting that the Team quickly named it The Monster and determined seating assignments based on who’d screwed up recently. The unlucky agent would be forced into sitting at the very end prior to the actual meeting while the others talked in whispers or pretended to echo their comments to the member being punished. It was all in fun though and feelings were never hurt.

The fun the team had with The Monster was uppermost in Grant’s mind as he observed the current seating arrangements. Bobbi, Hunter, Mack and Jemma were grouped at one end while Kara and Trip were sitting at the other. Fitz was across from them with empty chairs on either side. Without Jemma, he appeared very lonely.

The others haven’t forgiven him yet.

Grant sat down next to Fitz, observing the unfriendly glances being thrown in his direction. They haven’t forgiven me either.

No one could say for certain whether Grant knew about Skye’s powers but they’d evidently guessed correctly there was no way he couldn’t have known.

Fitz immediately leaned over and whispered, “How’s Skye doing?”

“Skye’s doing as well as can be expected given that some of her teammates don’t seem to have her back,” Grant answered in a regular voice, looking directly at Mack, Hunter, Bobbi and Jemma. He’d meant to answer in a low tone but his anger took him in another direction.

There was a shocked silence, then Hunter said, “That seems uncalled for, mate. All I wanted was to be informed.” He shook his head in disgust. “One of the biggest things I dislike about SHIELD is all the secrets.”

“I have nothing against Skye but my body was taken over by something in that same city. I turned into a monster. How do we know Skye hasn’t been taken over too?” Mack asked in a low voice, straining to contain his temper. If Grant had been in a different mindset, he’d have felt some sympathy for Mack who was obviously dealing with some PTSD from his experience in the alien city. But as it was, his emotional bandwidth was just wide enough for him to deal with Skye and himself.

Grant started to answer but Fitz beat him to it. “Because you’ve been around her and seen how she is,” he said angrily. “Mack, you couldn’t even speak when you were possessed; Skye wasn’t like that at all. She was just scared. You should’ve realized that it was different.”

“How could we realize that anything was different,” Jemma burst in, “when neither you nor Skye were honest with us? She didn’t say anything and you doctored her test results!” She looked at Grant disapprovingly. “I suppose you knew about this too,” she said in a scathing tone.

Grant was saved from answering by the entry of May and Coulson. May frowned at the obvious divisions within the team. “I could hear you all yelling down the hall.” She took a seat at the end of the table nearest Grant.
“Which is why I decided to call this meeting,” Coulson interjected smoothly, standing at the end of the table opposite May. “I realize that we all have a lot of feelings about the latest development regarding Skye. I think it will help if you hear some of the background. We still don’t know much but here’s what we do know. Vin-tak told us that eons ago, the Kree altered the DNA of some humans to transform them into powered people once they’d been triggered by the obelisk. These people were designed to be weapons in a Kree war but the program was halted before it got too far. Vin-tak came to retrieve the five obelisks that were supposed to be in that crate but they’re missing. Whitehall had one; we need to find the other four.”

“How are we supposed to find them?” Trip asked. He’d been very quiet earlier but Grant wasn’t certain what that meant. Trip seemed to live in the gray areas, so he was perfectly capable of supporting Kara while agreeing with the other side.

“I don’t know,” Coulson admitted. “This is a new situation for us. Maybe some clues will pop up later.”

“Why don’t we ask Skye? She should know, right?” Hunter asked.

Coulson shook his head. “I don’t think so. From what we can gather, Skye developed her powers after the obelisk exploded. Raina most likely has powers too but we don’t know what they are. We’re not even sure what Skye’s powers are other than making things shake.”

“Is Skye dangerous, Sir?” Bobbi asked.

“I don’t know, Agent Morse,” Coulson said sadly. “What I do know,” he said with his usual brisk tone, “is that she’s very scared and her biggest desire was to protect her team. She ICED herself to prevent Sif from hurting us and she voluntarily moved into the Cage on the Bus to minimize any danger to the base from her powers. So, while we have to put her on the Index, she’s still a SHIELD agent and will be treated as such.”

“Does she have to go on the Index?” Fitz asked. “I mean, Skye’s one of us.” He looked around the table for support. Trip and Kara nodded while the others either frowned or looked blank. “That doesn’t seem like the right thing to do.”

“I know, Fitz,” Coulson replied. “I feel the same way. But we can’t make exceptions for Skye just because we know her. We’re going to have to figure out a way to contain her powers, just like we do for every other gifted individual.”

Grant had kept his peace since Coulson began the meeting but inside he was steaming. He could hardly stand hearing them talk about Skye like she was a villain and the thought of putting her on the Index was awful. But now wasn’t the time to lose his temper. Not yet. He practiced taking a few deep breaths just to maintain his calm. He could feel Trip’s gaze on him.

Kara’s eyes flickered to Grant and then back to Coulson. “Maybe it’s time we revisit the Index,” she said. “That was something the old SHIELD did. Maybe the new SHIELD should take a different view on the treatment of gifteds.” Grant swallowed his smile. I can’t wait to tell Skye that she and Kara think a lot alike. Everyone turned almost as one to look at Kara. It was clear that her suggestion wasn’t popular.

“Like what?” Mack asked, a little aggressively in Grant’s view. “We can’t just let these people roam free without supervision or monitoring. What if they hurt people?”

“The Avengers don’t,” Trip commented. Kara didn’t seem surprised by his support, leaving Grant to wonder if the two of them had already talked this through. “What if most gifteds are like them?”
“Yeah,” Fitz put in earnestly. “We don’t monitor people with high intelligence or people whose skills could be used for nefarious purposes. Maybe we shouldn’t do that to gifted people either.”

“It’s a nice idea, Fitz,” May said in an even tone. “But Vin-tak said that their DNA was altered specifically so that the Kree could turn them into killers. We can’t let that kind of threat just walk around unmonitored.”

Grant barely refrained from rolling his eyes. “But that was eons ago and we haven’t heard much about powered people. Either there aren’t that many gifteds or the people who are powered aren’t killing. The truth is that we have no idea what they’re like or what they do with their powers. By treating them as a threat, we’re judging them before they’ve even had a chance to do anything. Is that the kind of message we want to send?”

“It’s true that we don’t really know what we’re dealing with here,” Coulson said thoughtfully. “But we can’t let people like Raina go free.”

“And I for one would like to know what I’m facing if I ever have to fight a gifted,” Bobbi argued. “If we know what powers are out there, then we can figure out some way to deal with them, like we did with Vin-tak.”

“Maybe we wouldn’t have to fight them. Did you ever consider that if we were more welcoming to gifteds, some of them might want to work for us?” Grant asked in an exasperated tone. “If SHIELD helped gifteds manage their powers instead of trying to contain them, maybe they wouldn’t be so hostile. I have yet to come across someone on the Index who wasn’t angry at SHIELD for putting them on there.”

“Plus, if the rumors about Strucker trying to create gifted people are true,” Kara added, “then having gifteds on our team might work in our favor.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Grant had been noticing Jemma fidgeting, as if she were getting more and more upset. So, he wasn’t surprised when she jumped in. “We’re discussing this as if we believe that this genetic modification will affect only a small number of people,” she said, looking directly at Coulson. “But what if it doesn’t? If we let powered people roam free and breed, then we might be looking at genetic modification on a much larger scale, kind of like an alien plague. Then we’d have enhanced people and non-enhanced people, maybe even a war between the two groups on our hands.” She turned to face the group arguing the opposite side. “SHIELD might not be sending the best message by containing gifteds before they hurt anyone but it’s still sound policy.”

There was a stunned silence following Jemma’s pronouncement. Even Bobbi, Hunter and Mack seemed to think she’d gone too far. Fitz leaned forward, an appalled expression on his face. “Jemma, you don’t mean that.”

“I do, Fitz, and you’d agree with me if you just thought it over. You’re thinking about Skye but not all gifteds are like her! And there’s a much deeper issue here. We have to protect ourselves!”

“Yeah Turbo,” Mack said. “Just think about what we saw Skye do yesterday. She’s on our side but what would happen if she wasn’t? She could take us all down.”

“This is getting us nowhere,” Coulson interrupted impatiently. “You’ve all raised some good points, ones we’re going to have to consider, but for now Skye is going on the Index. I know that feelings are running high,” he continued as he saw Grant open his mouth to speak, “but we need to cool off and get things back to normal before we make any permanent decisions.”
Grant had been getting angry before when everyone was arguing but now a sense of calm washed over him. There was no way around it. If he wanted any chance of remaining with SHIELD, he had to speak now. *It might even be kind of fun to see people’s reactions.*

“Agent Coulson, before we can get back to normal, there’s something else I need to report.”

Coulson just nodded, clearly not expecting a bombshell but Fitz whipped his head around to look at Grant, an expression of warning visible on his face. Kara also looked tense.

“I’m kind of surprised this hasn’t come up yet,” Grant said with a slight smile, “but Skye wasn’t the only one present when the obelisk exploded.”

“We haven’t forgotten that Raina was there,” May said. The “duh” was implied.

“So was I,” Grant replied, then waited to see who would break the dead silence that followed.

“Hang on,” Hunter said to no one in particular. Grant almost grinned.

*If I was a betting man, Hunter would’ve been my odds on favorite. “Is he saying what I think he’s saying?”*

“Ward, do you have powers?” Coulson asked haltingly, sitting down heavily in his chair.

“Yes,” Fitz said defiantly. “And given how you were talking about powered people, I’m glad I did. Ward seems just the same as he was before. In fact, none of you would’ve even known he had powers if he hadn’t just told you.”

“What can you do, Ward?” Trip asked. Unlike most of the others, he seemed curious rather than appalled.

“I can create and manipulate fire.” *Best to leave it vague.*

“That explains why so many of our Hydra prisoners mentioned some ‘new weapon’ they thought we had,” May said slowly. “You were using fire to capture them.”

“I was,” Grant said, trying not to sound arrogant. Given the sudden narrowing of May’s eyes, he suspected he hadn’t been too successful. “I never used it on our agents, only on theirs.”

“Hey!” Trip said, outraged. “Weren’t you the one telling Mike Peterson that having powers was cheating?”

Grant shrugged. “I changed my mind.” *I probably shouldn’t tell them that having powers can be a lot of fun.*

Coulson was frowning, clearly at a loss for what to do. “Why didn’t you tell us this before?”

Grant leaned forward in his chair, suddenly serious. “I didn’t tell you before because I was waiting until both Skye and I were in total control of our powers. For some reason,” he kept the sarcasm out of his tone with difficulty, “I didn’t think our new abilities would go over very well, so I wanted to show everyone that we could handle it.” He sat back. “Obviously, Skye’s having a lot more trouble with it than I am.”
“Why?” Trip asked. His expression was neutral and his tone was curious. Grant was having a hard time reading him. He was pretty certain that Kara and Trip had at least had a discussion about all of this prior to the meeting.

“I don’t know.” He shrugged. “Skye’s younger. She’s female. Her gift may be more intense than mine. Take your pick. If I had to guess though, I’d say that it’s because I’ve been a S.H.I.E.L.D agent for a long time and she hasn’t. I’m extremely well-trained and self-disciplined while Skye’s just learning those skills.”

“It’s because she’s female,” Kara snorted derisively. “I’m going to tell her you said that.”

Grant smiled slightly. “Go ahead.” The smile dropped off of his face. “It’ll give her something else to think about besides the betrayal of some of her teammates.”

Mack stood up, his face working angrily, leaning on the table directly facing Grant. “That’s the second time you’ve accused us of betraying her. How many times do we have to tell you? It’s not about Skye! It’s about her powers!” he yelled.

Grant struggled to remain sitting. He realized that the absolute worst thing he could do would be to lose control. Then he and Skye would really be in trouble. “But that’s the thing,” he replied calmly. “You’re trying to separate the powers from the person and you can’t. Our powers are part of who we are now. And from what I’ve been able to tell, the powers are even more deeply personal than that. There’s a reason why my gift is fire and Raina’s is flower manipulation. What our gift is and how we use it seems to depend on who we are.”

“Time to get them thinking more specific than general so they’re not as scared.”

“Mine is very controlled while Skye’s is all over the place. You all know us. Doesn’t that sound about right?”

Kara started laughing. “Oh my god, Grant! You’ve nailed it.”

Fitz’s eyes lit up and he sat forward in his chair, the scientist in him clearly stimulated by the idea of powers being linked to personality. “You’re right, Ward. That’s exactly how you and Skye are. Do you think that the genetic modification is linked to the biochemical impulses…”

“You know what Raina’s powers are?” May interrupted at the same time Hunter asked, “Flower manipulation? That sounds a bit wacky, doesn’t it?”

Grant sighed. “Yes, I know what Raina’s powers are or, at least, what I saw her do down in the tunnels.” He noticed Coulson’s disgruntled expression, so hurriedly finished, “And I didn’t tell you before because I wasn’t ready to admit that we all had powers. I’m telling you now.”

Coulson shook his head. “Flowers. Typical.” He looked around the room, seeing people in various states of emotion. He stood up, clearly in dictating mode again. “OK. Clearly there are things we need to discuss further but for now, I need everyone back at work. Dismissed.” Everyone slowly got out of their chairs and moved toward the door without talking. Grant didn’t even bother. He didn’t have to wait long before Coulson said, “Agent Ward, if you could stay a minute.”

He’d expected this, so he relaxed a bit. Grant was willing to tell Coulson some of what he knew but he wouldn’t tell him everything.

Flashback

As he waited in Central Park for Susan Scarbo, Grant reflected how interesting it was that while Hydra didn’t have too many higher level female operatives, he tended to be friendly with the ones that it did. He didn’t have the same kind of relationship with Susan that he’d had with Elsie Carson.
though; Susan was less a mother figure and more of a flirt. She also was a lot more dangerous. Before her turn to Hydra, she’d been a stage hypnotist and probably still used those skills on occasion. But never on him. Ever since Grant saved her foster daughter Sinthea from near death, Susan treated him as a friend. She’d even figured out he was a triple long before he went public and never betrayed his secret. Nevertheless, he knew it would be a mistake to trust her.

Susan strutted down the sidewalk, pulling a smile out of him despite himself. It was amusing to see the glances she received from women and men alike, probably due to her jet black hair, emerald green eyes and the way her amazing figure filled out her skintight royal blue v-neck sheath dress and grey boots. She’s lucky that Hydra never asked her to go undercover. There’s no way she could ever sink into a role or go incognito the way I’ve had to. But her look worked for her. When Susan got close to him, he started walking in the same direction. She fell into step with him and took his arm, like they were a couple out for a stroll.

“Ward,” she said in her patrician accent. Susan tried hard to erase her lower-class New Jersey heritage but Grant – actually born into the upper crust – could tell the difference. “You’re looking well.”

“Thanks. You too. That’s quite an ensemble you’re wearing. Really stands out.”

Susan smiled, shaking her head. “It might somewhere else but here in New York, I just blend in.” Grant had to admit that was probably true. It was her beauty that got her noticed. “Besides, you must admit that it’s a nice change from the solid black SHIELD forces you all to wear.” She gave a theatrical shudder. “If I didn’t already hate them, I’d have to start because of their crimes against fashion.”

Grant chuckled but quickly sobered up. Their meetings were always short. “You called. I take it you have some information for me.”

She shook her head teasingly. “It’s always straight to business with you. You’ve never mastered the art of small talk. No questions about Sinthea or how your old Hydra colleagues are getting along without you?” she asked him with a mocking smile.

Grant gave her his hate face, designed to scare even the most hardened criminals.

Susan merely shook her head, still smiling. “Have it your way,” she said lightly, then downshifted into her business attitude. “Raina got back on our radar recently. After Whitehall’s unfortunate demise, it seemed clear that Raina absconded with the obelisk,” she squeezed his arm lightly, “an object we want back by the way. We found her in the manufacturing district about a week ago. Our agents were about to capture her when the oddest thing happened. Whenever they got close to her, flowers started appearing out of nowhere, growing up around her, some of them trying to strangle our agents when they got too close.”

Grant pushed back the memory of Raina doing the same thing to Skye. “Did you capture her?” he asked, trying hard to keep his voice light. Raina getting captured would be a disaster. The less Hydra knows about gifteds, the better.

“No. Even with all the flowers – which is weird, right? This is New York City! – we were about to grab her when out of nowhere, this…this…blue light appeared, forming an impenetrable circle around her.” Susan pantomimed a dome shape. “We tried to get into it but it seemed like it was made of electricity or something. Bullets didn’t work and every time someone tried to touch it, they were electrocuted.”

“Ouch.”
Susan smacked Grant’s arm lightly. “Don’t make fun. It wasn’t so long ago that it would’ve been you trying to figure out a way into the circle.” True. “After the…light…surrounded Raina, a man in a trench coat appeared in the circle. He grabbed Raina, then the two of them disappeared and the circle shrank into nothing. We couldn’t find any trace of either of them anywhere. It was like he came and got her or something.” She shook her head. “I’ve seen a lot of strange things but that took the cake!”

Grant nodded thoughtfully. *That sounds like Gordon. Apparently he visits everyone who develops powers.* It wasn’t good that gifteds were on Hydra’s radar. “What does Hydra leadership make of it?”

Susan shrugged. “Clearly, there are powered people out there independent of the Avengers or the ones Strucker’s trying to make. So we want to capture them of course. The only problem is determining how.”

Grant frowned and kept himself from snorting with difficulty. *How typical. SHIELD wants to contain gifteds so they can’t hurt anyone while Hydra wants to use them. Neither option is great.* His tactical brain started running various scenarios until he realized that he’d been quiet for a while and Susan hadn’t said a word to disturb him. He glanced inconspicuously in her direction, catching her smile, a gentle one that was very unlike her. *Uh oh.* A wave of fatigue rolled over him and he wanted nothing more than to get answers for once. So he steered the two of them over to a park bench.

Susan’s eyebrows went up but she gracefully accepted the seat Grant waved toward. She looked at him, expectant. “Did you get tired?” she asked sarcastically. “It’s unlike you to leave yourself tactically exposed.”

Grant leaned back on the bench so that it looked to strangers that he and Susan were having a nice conversation. He looked casual even though he was feeling anything but. “I’m just tired of not knowing your motives. Ever since I saved Sinthea, you’ve been a friend. You never told anyone about me being a triple even though I know you knew and you’ve been feeding me information about captured SHIELD agents. I want to know why.”

Susan also arranged herself in a casual conversational pose. “I love Sinthea and you saved her at great risk to yourself. Is gratitude not a good enough reason?”

Grant noted that she hadn’t denied knowing about his triple status. “No. A lot of people would’ve tried to save Sinthea. What makes me so special?”

Susan leaned forward. “No, most Hydra agents would not have tried to save her,” she said intensely. “That’s always been the difference with you, Ward. You care about others and about doing the right thing. That’s why you never belonged with Hydra and why I never said anything about you being a triple. I wanted you to get out.”

*Will I ever not have to explain this?* “I was never with Hydra; I was only there for John.”

She nodded, leaning back again. “I know but I also know what he did to you to get you there. Despite my background in hypnosis, I don’t agree with using people controlled through brainwashing. That’s why I’ve been giving you information about the captured SHIELD agents. They need to be back where they belong.”

Grant was confused. “I thought you cared about Hydra.”

“I do. That’s why I don’t want brainwashed agents. The control isn’t perfect, so they have to
constantly be monitored. They often require refreshers. All this takes time and energy that could be better served somewhere else. We need Hydra agents who want to be there.” She leaned forward again. “I’m a true believer, Ward. You’ve never understood Hydra philosophy but that’s only because Garrett never taught you properly. Sometimes violence is needed in order to achieve the greater good.”

Grant wanted to roll his eyes but he didn’t dare. *Oh, here we go.* “And what is the greater good?”

“You may sneer at the phrase but, deep down, you want it too. The world’s a mess; you can’t deny this. All over the globe, people experience drought, hunger, and violence. And, in the midst of all this, we’re destroying the earth. There are other planets of course but none as wonderful as ours. Don’t you agree?”

Grant nodded cautiously. *Where’s she going with all this?* “I do. But how does Hydra intend to solve all that? All I ever heard them talk about was world domination.”

“Yes, exactly. The only way to bring about order is through control. We must first tear down the old world in order to build the new. Once we’ve established total control, then we can eradicate violence, implement population controls, feed the hungry and start repairing the planet.” She sat back and snorted in a genteel fashion. “People always think they want democracy but that’s been a mess. Just look at the world’s governments and tell me what a good job they’ve done.”

“But what about all the people who’ll get hurt in the process?” Grant asked, a little frightened by the fervor in her eyes.

Susan waved her hand dismissively. “Positive change always requires sacrifice.” She paused, then smiled at him. “You’re not convinced yet but you will be. Deep down, you know I’m right.” She stood up, gesturing at him to continue their walk. Grant joined her and they started walking again. “Just imagine a world in which you didn’t always have to be fighting. Think of all the fun you could have instead!” She laughed slightly and tucked her hand back in Grant’s arm. “Before that happens though, I have a few more captured SHIELD agents I need for you to rescue.”

Grant left Susan in the park and headed into the city. She’d given him the location of a Hydra op close by, one that included former SHIELD agent Valentina Allegra de Fontaine. Given this agent’s close relationship with Nick Fury, it seemed like a good idea to rescue her quickly. *No time like the present.* According to Susan, Valentina and some Hydra operatives were casing the Avenger’s Tower. They had intel that an international businessman who they planned on working with in some capacity was holding a high level meeting there. Susan was vague on specifics, probably because she didn’t want Grant to do anything other than rescue Valentina. *Hydra up to their old tricks but I’ve got a few surprises up my sleeve.*

He took the elevator to the top floor of the high rise opposite Avenger Tower. The building was nowhere nearly as tall as Avenger Tower (Grant shook his head over Tony Stark’s ego) but it was perfect for a sniper. One of Valentina’s notable skills was as a crack shot. Grant snuck onto the roof, quickly spotting her lying on the ground, her rifle and half her body resting on the raised edge as she stared into the sights. He eased over to the edge behind the door to the building so that Valentina couldn’t see him but he could see the entrance to Avenger’s Tower. There were several Hydra agents stationed around the door. Some were hiding in plain sight pretending to be regular people while others were partially concealed. Grant guessed that the plan called for Valentina to shoot close to the target on his way out of the building and the Hydra agents would capture the businessman in the ensuing chaos. *Simple yet effective. But still not going to happen.*

Grant concentrated hard on the area around the Tower entrance, allowing the flames inside of him to leach out onto the sidewalk and create miniscule fires. He was careful to keep the heat of the fire
low – the small flames produced were red – with most of it being just smoke. It took a minute or so but then people on the street started running away from the area. A Tower guard quickly opened one of the doors, leaned partially out onto the sidewalk, then raced back inside. That should do it. Whoever was in the Tower would be using a different exit. Grant turned his attention to Valentina, intending to subdue her while her attention was on the street. Unfortunately, she was on her feet facing him with a gun pointing at his heart.

“Well, well, well. If isn’t Grant Ward,” she said with a mocking smile, slowly walking towards him. Her sniper rifle was still perched at the edge of the building, so she must be using her personal handgun on him instead. “I’d heard that you were a triple agent. That must be confusing.” She cocked her head. “Are you here to kill me or join me?”

“Neither,” Grant replied calmly, standing his ground. While he kept the majority of his focus on her, he was also checking out the conditions on the roof, planning for what he needed to do. “I’m here to capture you. I’m sure Nick Fury would prefer you to be returned alive.”

Valentina’s smile faltered when Grant mentioned Fury and she halted her forward momentum. “Nick’s still alive?” she whispered, eyebrows raised in surprise. “I heard he was dead.”

Grant smiled, surprised that Valentina was making this so easy. Given her reputation, he thought she’d be a more difficult capture. Maybe Susan’s right and the brainwashing is wearing off. “You shouldn’t believe everything you hear. And you should know Director Fury better than that. He’s a hard man to kill.” He was watching her like a hawk and the second he saw her gun slightly waver, he lashed out with a vicious kick, knocking it from her hand.

Valentina’s expression changed instantly from surprise and sorrow to intense concentration. True to her training, she didn’t waste time following her gun’s path or trying to reach it. Instead, she went into a combat stance and launched a wicked right hook. Grant leaned away from her punch, easily dodging it. He dropped close to the ground, sweeping his leg behind hers. Valentina fell backwards, a look of utter surprise on her face. Another of her notable skills was martial arts. There was no way she should’ve been dropped so easily.

She turned her head towards him, clearly preparing to launch herself from the ground but needing to know where he was first. Grant wanted to get this done quickly – other Hydra agents were sure to be on their way – so he shot her with his ICER. Valentina’s head flopped back down on the ground. While he was busy placing her body over his shoulder, he allowed himself to smirk a bit. Valentina was legendary for her martial arts skills and he’d bested her without even breaking a sweat. These powers are awesome! Although he hadn’t told Skye yet, Grant realized a while ago that with his fire powers came superior strength, reaction time, stamina, and speed. As if to punctuate this thought, he almost casually threw a ring of fire around the three Hydra agents who rushed onto the roof as he made his way back into the building. He was in the building and on the second flight of stairs before they’d even had a chance to fire.

Later, he reflected that Susan had made a few good points. Grant had never been part of Hydra, agreeing with neither their goals nor their methods. Now he was wondering about SHIELD as well. And he was tired of fighting all the time. He’d been living and working in the spy field for over 15 years. What fun could I be having instead?

Present Day

Grant’s eyebrows went up when he saw May exit the door. He’d been certain Coulson would want her in on their talk. What am I in for?

Coulson sat down in the chair next to him, a thoughtful expression on his face. He leaned back and
looked consideringly at Grant. “How hypocritical would it be for me to say I wish you’d kept that quiet?”

Grant laughed. One of the things he liked best about Coulson was his ability to surprise him. He had to admit that he wasn’t expecting that. But he could certainly understand the sentiment. Grant having powers – ones he perfectly controlled and used in the service of SHIELD – upset the whole apple cart of the agency’s policy on gifteds. “I really threw a spanner into the works, didn’t I? But I couldn’t keep it a secret any longer and still have people to talk to me later.”

“I get that,” Coulson said, nodding. “I’ll be completely honest, Ward. It was a whole lot easier to know what to do with powered people when they were people like Raina, those who wanted to use their abilities for gain. But you and Skye? You’re a whole other ballgame.”

It was Grant’s turn to nod. He actually felt a little sorry for Coulson because there weren’t likely to be any good answers to this problem. Agent Ward realized the problems gifteds presented to SHIELD. He’d seen first-hand how quickly powers could go awry and he’d just witnessed the fear such power instilled, even in those who cared about you. People fear what they don’t know and then there was jealousy. It’s never fun to not be among the chosen. However, Grant saw the potential of recruiting gifteds into SHIELD and, on a personal level, understood just how painful being an outcast is.

“We are,” Grant admitted. “But I’ll say again, Sir, that the real problem here is that you know next to nothing about gifteds in general. Until you do, it’s going to be difficult to make good policy on us.” He sighed and softened his tone. “I understand why you wanted to put Skye on the Index. She’s a little scary right now since she doesn’t have a handle on her powers but it’s still a mistake. You know how she is. If she thinks she’s a disappointment or that people are going to abandon her, it’s just going to make things worse.” He sat back in his chair and crossed his arms. “And you really don’t want to put me on the Index. Leaving aside the fact that I easily control my powers without any outside intervention and am already in therapy, putting my name out there is going to bring a lot of unwanted attention, both to me and to SHIELD.”

Coulson flopped back into his chair, drumming his fingers on the table. “You make a good point. You’re way too volatile a presence in the community. And Skye is already really upset.” He sighed heavily. “But I also have a responsibility to ensure the safety of everyone in the base. Maybe the best thing would be…”

Grant never got to hear what Coulson thought should be done because a huge alarm went off. Both Coulson and Grant leapt to their feet as May came racing into the room.

“What’s happening?” Coulson demanded.

“We’re not certain,” May said. A lesser person might have been out of breath or looked anxious. but May was perfectly controlled. “A huge disturbance in the atmosphere just appeared inside the Bus, almost like a circle of electricity came into existence out of nowhere.”

“Skye!” Coulson gasped as he started running towards the Bus. Grant and May were close on his heels. Grant detected the slightest bit of worry on May’s face and reminded himself to look anxious as well. But he knew what they’d find when they got there. Skye would be gone. Gordon had come to get her.
Coulson and May ran top-speed onto the cargo bay of the Bus, Grant hot on their heels. As he ran, he debated whether it would be better for him to be in the lead – after all, he was both the fastest and the person most worried about Skye – but then decided it would be best to just follow the other two. He wanted to see what they would do, so he yanked out his ICER and adjusted his speed to match theirs.

The two senior agents also had their ICERS out, cautiously making their way into the interior of the plane. May immediately headed to the cockpit while Coulson warily glanced into the Cage, motioning Grant toward the common areas. Grant slowly searched the rest of the plane, putting on a good show, even though he knew Skye wasn’t there. If all had gone according to plan, Skye was already gone, teleported by Gordon to wherever the community of powered people lived.

Grant finished his slow circuit of the plane, returning to join May and Coulson in the Lounge. Neither of their ICERS was out, their stances indicating fatigue instead of combat readiness. He raised his eyebrows, his head tilted in a silent query. May shook her head. At this, Grant slowly holstered his ICER.

Coulson sighed, his shoulders slumping in defeat. “She’s gone,” he said in a voice of utter despair. Then he seemed to mentally shake himself. “OK.” His lips tightened with determination. “What do we know?”

May began issuing her report on the electrical disturbance that initially brought her running to get them but Grant barely paid attention, listening just enough to ask questions. Although he was faking his side of that conversation, his anxious expression was real. Though he’d reluctantly agreed with Skye that she should contact Gordon and hopefully find a safe place in which to learn about her powers, who knew if that was true? Grant didn’t know where she’d gone, whether she was safe, or when she was returning. He didn’t even have a way to contact her. He just had to put his trust in others, something he absolutely hated. He’d learned early in life that most people were not trustworthy and being a spy had only heightened that certainty.

If his own fears weren’t bad enough, Skye’s absence didn’t draw everyone together the way Grant hoped it would. The news that Skye disappeared under mysterious circumstances didn’t improve the team dynamics one bit. Bobbi, Hunter, Mack and Jemma seemed suspicious of her sudden absence and, although they never said anything directly to him, appeared convinced that Grant knew more than he was saying. Since that was the truth, he couldn’t really blame them but the cold shoulders were hard to bear. He dearly missed the warm family vibe they’d had prior to Puerto Rico. He also was beginning to get resentful of their refusal to adapt to what happened. It wasn’t like he and Skye intended to get powers. And it wasn’t like they could get rid of them either. But there seemed to be little he could do to change their minds.

Flashback

Two days after Skye’s disappearance, after yet another sleepless night in which he stewed over the slow disintegration of the team, Grant decided to once again cook a big breakfast for everyone. They’d always had such fun at these breakfasts and he hoped the subtle reminder of how they used to be might help them regain their camaraderie. He completed his morning routine early and began cooking immediately after. Once everything was going smoothly, Grant risked leaving the kitchen
unattended for a few minutes to knock on Fitz’s door.

It took two rounds of knocking before Grant heard Fitz yell in an irritated tone, “Just a minute! I’m coming!” There were sounds of shuffling feet and other noises indicative of Fitz heading towards the door (Did he just run into the wall?) until he finally opened the door and peered out at Grant, rubbing his eyes sleepily. “What’s up, Ward? Is something wrong? Do you need something?”

Grant leaned against the doorknob. “Everything’s fine. I made a big breakfast for everyone and I was hoping you’d round up the troops.”

Fitz’s eyes lit up, his need for sleep quickly overtaken by his desire for good food. “Oh yeah, definitely! We’ll be right down!”

Grant nodded and returned to the kitchen, thinking fond thoughts of the last team breakfast. He hoped this one would be as fun. He was just putting the finishing touches on the scrambled eggs when Kara came in followed closely by Trip. Grant’s welcoming smile froze when he noticed Kara closely observing his face. He suspected that the sleepless nights were taking a toll on his appearance and Kara was nothing if not observant.

“Not that I don’t appreciate the effort…a lot…” she said grabbing a plate and piling on pancakes, fruit and bacon, “but do you ever sleep?” She winked and grinned mischievously at Grant’s dire expression when she poured more syrup on her pancakes than he approved of.

He shrugged, his frown turning into a smile, as he leaned back against the stove. Leave it to Kara to worry about me. “I sleep enough. It’s not as if I need much beauty sleep.”

Kara stuck her tongue out at him.

“Girl, I don’t know why you’re complaining,” Trip said, reaching around her to pile eggs, roasted tomatoes and toast on his plate. “The early bird gets the worm or, in this case, the bacon.” He playfully grabbed a piece of bacon from Kara’s plate, then deftly leaned away from her halfhearted punch. He nodded at Grant, juggling both his plate and his coffee cup with ease. “This looks amazing and I for one definitely appreciate it.”

“I appreciate it too,” Coulson murmured as he entered the dining area, impeccably dressed as usual. Grant wondered if the man slept in his suits.

Kara glared at Trip’s back, rounding the table so she could sit directly across from him. “I already said I appreciated it. I just wondered how he was doing!”

“I’ve learned it’s best not to ask those kind of questions,” Coulson said to Kara in his deadpan voice as he examined the food offerings. Grant grinned to himself. Although it had taken him a while, he’d come to love Coulson’s dry wit.

May entered the room so silently that it was almost like she’d appeared from thin air. Is the woman part cat? In the space of a blink, she went from not being there to grabbing a cup of coffee and several servings of oatmeal. Grant learned from their prior experience together that May was not a morning person, so he accepted her nod of appreciation to him as her morning greeting. The thin line of her lips twitched a bit when Fitz could be heard yelling down the hall.

“You need to hurry Jemma or everything will be cold!” Fitz pounded down the stairs in a rush and quickly started loading a ton of food onto his plate.

“I think he meant gone,” Kara whispered to Trip who just shook his head, smiling.
“Make sure you leave food for the others, Fitz,” Grant reminded him gently, eying Fitz’s increasingly crowded plate. He paused, frowning. *Wait. Where are they? They’re usually here by now. “You did tell everyone about the breakfast, didn’t you?”*

Fitz kept his concentration on his plate. Grant noticed that he kept moving food around so that there would be space for more food to fill in the gaps. “Of course I did,” he said in an annoyed voice. “Bobbi wasn’t sure she’d make it but Hunter said he’d be here. You know he’d never miss good food. Mack didn’t answer his door.” Fitz’s frown deepened. “Jemma said she’d be here later.” He finished filling his plate and went to sit at the table without meeting Grant’s eyes.

Grant sighed. *This isn’t going to be as easy as I’d hoped. I never thought they’d miss home cooked food.* His musing was interrupted by Kara shoving him aside to get more pancakes and one of the two cherry turnovers. Since Skye wasn’t going to be there, he hadn’t made very many since Hunter was the only other person who usually indulged in the sweet treats. Grant’s mouth dropped open slightly. He’d never seen Kara eat so much before and she usually didn’t eat pastries.

Trip must’ve had a similar thought because he frowned at Kara’s plate when she returned to the table. “Mack and Hunter aren’t going to be very happy that you’ve eaten their food,” he warned.

Kara shrugged unconcernedly. “I like to live on the edge,” she said as she took a bite of the turnover. A few of the cherries spurted out of her mouth and onto her plate. She used her fork to gather them back in her mouth, only then looking up to catch Trip’s skeptical expression. “What? I do! It’s one of the reasons I became a specialist.” She glanced around, looking puzzled. “Isn’t that why everyone becomes a specialist?”

Grant crossed his arms in front of him. “You know why I became a specialist.”

She waved her hand dismissively in his direction. “You’re weird,” she told him. He grinned. She focused her gaze on Trip, perhaps figuring it was wiser to leave May out of the discussion. “Why did you become a specialist?”

“Family business,” he shot back, his face utterly devoid of expression.

Grant was taken up short by Trip’s answer. Of course, he’d heard a lot about Trip’s family but he’d rarely caught even glimpses of the legendary Howling Commando descendants. Grant had always been aware of his own unhappy heritage but he’d never given much thought as to what Trip’s family baggage might be. He’d always been jealous of Trip coming from a family that he could be proud of, who fought for what was good and right in the world and who at least sounded supportive. *Maybe Trip’s family expectations were difficult for him too.*

Fitz stopped shoveling food in his mouth. “This is very interesting,” he said after swallowing a huge bite and waving his fork in the air towards Kara and Trip. “At SciTech, the question of why people become specialists was one we contemplated a lot. A few times our instructors even pranked us by making it an extra credit question on exams. No one ever got the answer right of course because there just isn’t a proper formula or explanation as to what could cause people to be so…” he stopped abruptly as he noticed four sets of eyes glaring at him, “…awesome,” he finished lamely.

Grant couldn’t help it. He started laughing, pleased when Kara, Trip and Coulson joined in. May contented herself with a tight smile.

“If I’d known that this was going to be such a fun time, I’d have gotten here earlier,” Hunter said over the laughter as he grabbed a plate. He made his way down the food line, piling on food, until he came to the end and stopped short. “Hey! Who ate all the cherry turnovers? There’s only one
He stomped grumpily over to the table even though his plate was quite crowded, the remaining cherry turnover resting on top.

Grant rolled his eyes at Hunter’s antics (*Drama king!*) then sneaked a look at Kara who didn’t even bother to look guilty. If anything, she seemed a bit smug. “The early bird gets the worm,” she trilled merrily, looking slyly over at Trip, “or, in this case, the cherry turnovers.”

Trip just rolled his eyes and shook his head. “Where’s Bobbi?” he asked Hunter, ignoring the mercenary’s almost indecent enjoyment of his food. “If she doesn’t get here soon, she’ll miss out on all that… yummy… oatmeal she loves so much.”

Hunter finished chewing and wiped his mouth with his napkin. “Bob decided to skip breakfast and spar with Mack for a while. It’s better to do that on an empty stomach. Less mess.” He looked around when the room fell silent, indecision passing over his face. Hunter usually was clueless about social interactions but he clearly knew what was up this time. He said quickly, “But I passed Jemma in the hallway. I think she’s on her way down.”

But she never arrived. Grant dutifully nodded when Fitz tried to explain Jemma’s absence (“I forgot about an experiment she’s running that’s really time-sensitive. I know she’d rather be here!”). He nodded again when Coulson attempted to make him feel better (“They just need some time.”) but he realized that the split in the group might never be resolved. His resentment grew, especially since it was clear that Bobbi, Jemma and Mack weren’t even trying.

Present Day

*It’s been a month since Skye left.* Lying in bed after a long day spent trying to tire himself out, Grant turned over onto his back and tried to get that refrain out of his head. He’d been thinking it all day. The team was desperately trying to find her but wasn’t having any luck. Grant was worn out from pretending not to know how and why she left all while still helping them find any sign of her. He didn’t know what he’d do if they actually found something. Balancing the two competing interests was exhausting.

He looked at the ceiling, trying to compartmentalize his thoughts. He was used to keeping secrets – something he’d been doing his entire life – but this time was different. It’d been easy to hide things from those he despised. Christian and his parents hadn’t deserved to know what he was thinking and he’d never felt any loyalty to Hydra. Even when he’d turned triple, it hadn’t been that difficult to keep things from John. Garrett usually irritated Grant so much in the moment that keeping things back, doing things that corrected the wrongs caused by John, felt right. Now that Grant was only working for just SHIELD, his secrets supposedly only in service to them, he should’ve felt liberated. Yet now was when he was struggling the most. Grant smiled bitterly at the irony.

There were other factors in play, of course. In addition to helping with the search for Skye, he’d been dealing with the money he’d gotten from his family. The older Wards apparently believed Grant’s threats enough to follow through on their commitment to give him both his share of Gram’s fortune and ¾ of their own. *At least that’s one thing that went right.* But now he was stuck figuring out where the money would be safest and then making sure it got there. Back when he and Skye first conceived the plan to take most of the Ward family assets, they’d both assumed that she’d be there to handle the digital transactions. However, with her gone, Grant had to puzzle it out himself because he certainly couldn’t let on to SHIELD what he’d done or how much he was now worth.

Despite what he’d told his parents, Grant was fairly sure that SHIELD would frown on his methods of obtaining that money from his family. They were supposed to be the good guys, so his threat of blackmailing his family wouldn’t be accepted. That kind of thing was fine for foreign governments
or terrorist organizations but, on an individual level, SHIELD employees were expected to be clean. And he knew for certain that his large financial portfolio would be a problem, especially for a Specialist who was constantly out in the field. Being independently wealthy made you vulnerable, a possible target for people and organizations wanting to kidnap and blackmail you in order to get your money. As such, Grant was forced to keep his new financial situation a secret.

And then there had been his reunion with Thomas and Elizabeth, the only living members of the Ward family he still loved. Their meeting had been very emotionally satisfying – something he was sad he couldn’t have shared with Skye – but it had also been challenging since there were so many things he couldn’t tell them. He couldn’t share much of what had happened to him since escaping juvenile detention and could only give the barest of details about his current life. Grant couldn’t tell them the specifics of the Ward family’s change in financial situation nor could he even plan future meetings with them since he had no idea of his schedule. All the secrets weighed heavily on him because it meant he couldn’t share much of his life with them. Thomas and Elizabeth seemed to understand his limitations but Grant could see the hurt in their eyes every time he was forced to tell them that he couldn’t talk about something. So his siblings were reduced to just discussing their lives, leaving Grant feeling left out.

And all of those things were on top of the ache caused by the fracture in the team and his persistent worry about the long separation from Skye. Grant shifted his position, trying to get comfortable while the other side of his bed appeared to mock him with its emptiness. *I don’t even know for certain that she’s alive!* No sooner had that thought entered his head when it seemed like Skye’s voice answered him, “I’m alive, Grant and I’m fine. I have a lot to tell you.”

Grant sat up, alarmed. *Am I going crazy? I always thought it’d only be a matter of time before I started hearing voices in my head.*

Skye’s laughter reverberated in his head. “You’re not going crazy, Weirdo. You are hearing voices but they’re not imaginary. There are a lot of people here with gifts and one of them is a telepath. It took me a month to convince her to help me contact you.”

*Thank goodness! How are you? Where are you? Are they treating you OK?*

“How are you? Where are you? Are they treating you OK?”

“Slow your roll, Turbo. I’m fine. I don’t know exactly where we are but it’s so beautiful here. There are mountains everywhere! I can’t wait for you to see it! They’re helping me to control my powers. But Grant, the best part is that both my parents are here!”

*Both of your parents? You mean your mom is alive?*

“I know! It was a shock to me too but it’s been so amazing.” She paused. “Listen, I can’t wait to tell you everything but Halona, the telepath who’s helping me, is telling me that we need to go.”

*Wait!! When are you coming back? When can we talk again?*

“I don’t know, Grant. I’ll be in touch. I love you!” Then she was gone.

Although Grant tried to focus on the positive aspects of the encounter – he now knew that Skye was alive and well – he really hadn’t gotten much information. He still had no idea where she was, what she was doing or when, even if, she was coming back. Just like with everything Skye-related since they went through the Chrysalis, he could feel her slipping through his fingers.

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Things continued to go from bad to worse the next morning when Coulson called him into his
office. Grant thought they were going to go over his next mission to rescue former SHIELD agents captured by Hydra. However, upon entering Coulson’s office, he was taken aback by the presence of Mike Peterson. Grant hesitated slightly in his stride, a gesture so miniscule that only people who knew him incredibly well would be able to notice it. He’d always prided himself on being completely unflappable though, so even the tiniest tells irritated him. *Those are the mistakes that get you killed.*

Grant tried to cover it up by walking over to Mike who was standing by the window with his arms crossed, his face expressionless as his eyes started straight ahead. Grant slapped him on the shoulder in greeting. “Hey, Mike! Good to see you! How’s Ace?”

Mike nodded at him, his eyes flicking briefly to Grant’s face, and then back, his arms remaining crossed. “Ward. He’s good, thanks for asking.”

Grant marveled at the utter lack of expression on Mike’s face or in his voice. *And Skye calls me the Robot!* “What brings you here?” Grant asked. Mike just nodded in Coulson’s direction. Clearly, Mike was done talking.

As usual, Coulson was leaning on the front of his desk, his arms also crossed but in a much less rigid way than Mike. Seeing the contrast, Grant felt sad for Mike. He recalled the easy-going guy who was so pleased to be of assistance to the team back in their Bus days. It looked like that Mike was gone for good. “It’s time for us to go after the big fish: Strucker, List,” Coulson explained.

Grant nodded slowly, thinking hard. “I agree that we need to take them out but I’m not sure how. All my Hydra contacts know I’m with SHIELD.” Of course, that didn’t stop some of them – people like Susan Scarbo for instance – from helping him from time to time but what Coulson didn’t know wasn’t going to hurt him. Grant really couldn’t say what made him keep this information away from SHIELD; he just knew that he wanted to hold onto some things just for himself. Plus, there was no way someone like Susan would help him eliminate Strucker and List. “Besides, I only knew those guys by reputation. Never met either.”

“But I did,” Kara said, walking through the door. “That’s how I got a meeting with List. I know a guy who knows a guy.” She smiled mockingly at Grant, evidently thrilled that she’d been able to one-up him.

Normally Grant would’ve been impressed with Kara’s resourcefulness but not this time. This was too dangerous. He’d barely gotten her out of Hydra. He didn’t know if he could do it again. Grant’s expression tightened as he looked daggers at Kara. “No. We just got you back.” Kara glared at him as she crossed her arms tightly. Grant understood that his reaction was not helpful to her self-confidence but he didn’t care. He’d worry about her feelings later. He swung around to face Coulson. “No! There has to be another way. We can’t risk sending her back in!”

Coulson nodded in understanding, his face sad. Grant would’ve been reassured had that not been the exact same expression he’d sported when he asked Grant to deal with Christian. It was the expression that meant Coulson knew how high the price was going to be but the task still needed to be completed. That’s when Grant felt a frisson of fear for Kara. This was a done deal. Coulson wasn’t asking for his help with strategy; he only wanted his assistance with tactics.

“Believe me, I share your feelings, Agent Ward,” Coulson said calmly, doing nothing to alleviate Grant’s fears. “The last thing I want to do is send Agent Palamas back into the lion’s den but it’s the only way to gain access to these guys. We’ve taken every precaution to keep her safe. Hydra doesn’t know that we undid their brainwashing, so they’ll think she’s still on their side. And she won’t be alone. She’ll have her bodyguard with her.”
“That’d be me,” Mike put in. Kara threw him a grateful smile.

Grant kept himself from rolling his eyes with difficulty. Sure, Mike was a formidable opponent but he was also just one man against what was likely to be a small army. They had to be realistic. As Grant knew all too well, while arrogance was necessary to do the job, overconfidence could get you killed.

“We’ll monitor the entire meet through Mike’s eye-cam,” Coulson explained. “They’ll be on comms the whole time.” He sighed. “I know how you’re feeling, Ward, but there’s just isn’t any other way.”

Grant froze as he considered what this could mean. *First Jemma, then Skye, now Kara. Am I destined to lose all the women I love?* He was about to tell them that they could forget about his help, that he wasn’t going to be party to her destruction, when he chanced a look at Kara and saw the vulnerability she was trying so hard to hide from him. Grant remembered without even trying how much Kara had given him. He saw her swallowing her heartbreak in order to be his friend again and giving him the OK sign as she’d stood in support outside of his parent’s house. He could almost hear her saying, “I know where my loyalties lie.” Grant could always count on Kara to have his back, no matter what. *I can’t let her down.* He turned back to Coulson, studying him, reading his uptight body language. Coulson clearly understood how upset Grant was. *Good!* “What do you need me to do, Sir?”

Coulson relaxed imperceptibly, handing Grant the briefing file. “Agent Palamas already reached out to her contact. She was able to arrange a meeting with Dr. List, so we’re going to need you for back-up.”

Grant nodded, already hating this plan. But there was no way he was going to let Kara – or Mike for that matter – be out there on their own. That’s how he found himself on the quinjet several days later with Coulson, Fitz and Hunter watching online as Kara and Mike boarded List’s plane. Grant engaged in a few rounds of tactical breathing to lower his intense anxiety. *I can’t lose Kara!*

List bowed to Kara as she entered their onboard lounge area. “It’s good to see you alive and well, Agent 33.” Grant snorted. He hadn’t realized that this was the name Hydra used for her but it made sense. They didn’t care about Kara Palamas the person. All they cared about was her usefulness, so why use a name when they could use a number, one that she herself probably provided to them. *Typical.*

Kara extended her hand so that List could shake it. “Dr. List, a pleasure,” she murmured, a polite smile on her lips. “You’re a difficult man to find these days.”

List waved his hand toward the couch. “Please,” he said graciously as the two moved to sit down.

“Three men, heavily armed,” Hunter observed. “Bet there’s more where they came from.”

Grant rolled his eyes. “Yeah, thanks for that, Captain Obvious. Does it matter? That’s why we sent in a cyborg with rockets in his arm.” *Let’s see Coulson react to that!* If he had to participate in this insane mission, the least he could do was needle Coulson a bit.

Coulson stood with his arms crossed staring intently at the screen, tension practically radiating off him. “Don’t let him hear you say that. He prefers to be called a SHIELD agent….with rockets in his arm.”

Grant grinned. “Duly noted.”
They turned their attention back to the screen where List was talking. “Our world is much more complicated now after the tragic death of Dr. Whitehall,” List said with an admirable attempt at a sorrowful expression.

“It wasn’t that tragic,” Coulson interjected.

Grant chuckled in agreement. He knew for a fact that none of the Hydra leaders liked each other, so Whitehall’s death was more an inconvenience than anything else.

“And the ensuing bloodbath that it caused,” List finished.

Kara adopted a sad expression too. Grant held his breath, hoping that it was insincere. Better than anyone, Grant knew just how hard the death of Whitehall had hit Kara. Her grief over his death was one of the most difficult things for her to shake after she’d been deprogrammed. Grant understood the hold your brainwasher had on you. There were still days when he mourned the loss of John. Since she’d been under Whitehall’s control for only a short time, Kara’s attachment was more superficial than his so Grant hoped that she wasn’t triggered by this conversation.

“Tell me, Agent 33,” List continued after taking a sip of wine, “exactly how did you manage to escape unscathed?”

Uh oh.

Kara appeared unruffled, also taking a sip of her drink. “What are you implying, Doctor?” she asked smoothly.

“Well, most of Hydra’s leaders were wiped out in one fell swoop. But even though you were tasked with protecting them, you appear quite unharmed. I was just curious if you might know anyone involved.” Even through his fear for Kara, Grant had to admire List’s mastery of the art of subtle threats. *How Bond-level villain of him.*

Coulson’s expression tightened. “I hope Kara can hold up under questioning.”

Grant tried to keep his irritation off of his face. Yeah, me too.

This was exactly what he’d been afraid of but he also knew Kara’s strength of purpose. “She’s held up to worse than this,” he said loyally.

Onscreen, Kara smiled aggressively at List. She appeared utterly unconcerned by his threats. “You think I poisoned the Baroness? Killed Bloom?”

“Someone put a bullet in his head,” List replied peevishly.

“I assumed it was you…or Strucker,” Kara said calmly. “You had the most to gain and, look,” her arm waved expansively in List’s direction, “here you sit, alive and well, with more money and manpower than ever.” She took another sip of her drink.

Grant couldn’t help beaming with pride. “See,” he said to Coulson smugly, “told you she was good.”

Coulson just rolled his eyes. “Duly noted,” he replied with a slight smile.

“The truth is,” Kara continued, “I didn’t escape unscathed. I was captured by SHIELD. Mr. Peterson helped me escape.” She gestured towards Mike, his expression remaining neutral, giving no indication that he’d even heard her. “You do recognize him, don’t you? Well, you should. Hydra invested quite a bit of funds turning Mr. Peterson into the perfect killing machine, money well-spent I might add.”
“What’s she doing?” Hunter asked, his voice rising in tone.

Coulson didn’t seem bothered. “She’s gaining List’s trust,” he answered calmly.

“I know Strucker’s been experimenting on powered individuals,” Kara said with a sly look at Mike. “I believe that, with a compliance upgrade, Mr. Peterson would prove quite useful to him.”

List leaned forward in his chair, intrigued. You’ve got him, Kara! “You’re offering him….to me?”

“Consider it a sign of good faith,” Kara replied casually, leaning back in her chair and sipping her wine.

“Doctor! There’s been another incident,” a blonde computer technician interrupted. List immediately jumped out of his chair, with a hurried, “Excuse me,” to Kara. He leaned over the woman’s shoulder to look carefully at the screen. “We’re close.” He straightened up. “Put us in the air.” List turned back to Kara, an evil smile on his face. “And then, we’ll see quite how loyal you and your enhanced friend really are.”

Grant swallowed back his fear for his friends as he prepared the quinjet to follow List’s plane. His emotional state must’ve been more transparent then he thought because Fitz put his hand lightly on Grant’s shoulder. “They’ll be fine,” he told him. Grant just nodded, not trusting himself to speak lest he start yelling. She shouldn’t have to be doing this!

Although they’d kept monitoring Kara online, it’d been extremely dull ever since they got into the air. List had given Kara a few magazines and books to keep her occupied, then left the room for another part of the plane. Without Mike accompanying him, they had no idea what List was doing. After about an hour, List returned to the lounge just as the plane started decreasing in altitude. Fortunately, Kara was quick enough to ask the question they all had about why they weren’t headed to eastern Europe to see Strucker.

“Have you heard of quantum entanglement, Agent 33?” List asked without answering the question.

Kara crossed her arms. “No, I’m afraid not,” she said shortly.

“Well, we at Hydra, for the last several months actually, we have found incidents of photon intensity so great that particles can exist simultaneously in two spaces over great distances.” His face reflected an eerie excitement.

“But for something to be in two places concurrently…” Kara said musingly, clearly trying to keep up with the scientific theory.

“No, no, no,” List interrupted. “This is a quantum entanglement bridge. We think it was created by a powered person, one we intend to capture.”

Oh shit! He means Gordon! Grant kept his face expressionless and his flying straight even though he was freaking out internally.

“The teleporter!” Fitz burst out. He turned to Coulson. “They’re tracking the teleporter, the one that took Raina.” How in the hell did I not know that SHIELD knew that?

“Is that who took Skye?” Coulson wondered aloud.

Grant’s feeling of foreboding increased. If both Hydra and SHIELD were tracking Gordon, it was going to be even harder to get to Skye. And Gordon would be in even greater danger. As he felt his anxiety rise, Grant once again did some tactical breathing exercises. Worry about that later. I have
to concentrate on the mission!

After watching List’s plane land on top of a building in downtown Chicago, Grant maneuvered the quinjet, operating in Invisible Mode, next to it. While he, Hunter and Coulson were busy putting on protective gear, Fitz monitored Mike’s feed which showed them entering the building. Grant heard a gasp from behind him.

“Sir!” Fitz called to Coulson. “Skye! Skye’s here! 10th floor.”

Grant’s head whipped around so fast he actually felt a crick in his neck. Sure enough, there was Skye onscreen. *What the hell? What is she doing here?*

Coulson walked quickly to the monitor, glanced at Skye’s face, then looked Grant full in the face. “Don’t lose focus, Agent Ward! You keep Hydra off of us. I’ll find Skye,” he ordered.

Grant nodded but exchanged a look with Fitz before following Coulson and Hunter as they ran off the plane. *We’ll see.*

At first glance, the building looked to be abandoned, filled with grimy offices. Protocol dictated that they proceed with all due speed although they also needed to check each floor. SHIELD never enjoyed surprises. It almost killed Grant to be so cautious but he knew the rule was wise. What if there were Hydra agents on every floor or stockpiles of weapons waiting to be aimed? Yet with each level they descended, the more the risk appeared negligible. The stairwell was eerily quiet and each floor they checked looked caked with dust and other evidence of disuse. *What are they doing here?*

Once they reached the 10th floor, Coulson threw open the door as Hunter and Grant slid silently into the hallway. There was no one in sight but they could hear people around the corner. Hydra clearly thought they were alone. Coulson motioned for both Hunter and Grant to head in the direction of the noise. Around the corner were five Hydra operatives in full combat gear heading down the hallway. One of them must have heard a noise because he whirled around and fired at the SHIELD team. The others quickly followed suit, causing Grant to duck into a doorway to avoid getting hit. *Damn!*

Already on edge from not knowing what was going on with either Skye or Kara, Grant felt the fire within him starting to burn hotter, just begging to be released. *It’s time for SHIELD to see just how much of an asset I can be.* While Coulson and Hunter exchanged gunshots with Hydra, Grant holstered his gun and concentrated on heating their weapons. Within just a few seconds, the Hydra guys dropped their guns, yelling in pain and shaking their hands as though they’d been burnt. Grant grinned a little.

Hunter seemed to take this in stride, wasting no time in pressing their advantage. “On your knees!” he yelled as he emerged from a doorway behind Grant, gun raised. The Hydra grunts quickly obeyed as Grant knew they would. Although it was possible that the lower echelons of Hydra were true believers, they were much more likely to be in it for the paycheck and the perks. They weren’t interested in dying for the cause. After a quick look from Coulson, Hunter started tying the men up for later transport.

Coulson motioned to Grant to proceed to the next hallway. “Hunter’s got this under control. Let’s keep going.” The two men moved forward together, Grant silently wondering when Coulson would say anything about what just happened. He didn’t have long to wait. Coulson gave him a slight smile as the two of them turned the corner into another hallway, this one just as empty as the first one they’d encountered. “Impressive. I’m beginning to see what you mean about powered people
being helpful.”

Grant nodded just as the body of a young blonde man flew out of the empty room directly in front of them, landing with a crash and a groan against the wall. Mike followed him into the hall, holding onto his arm as if he were injured. “Who the hell’s that guy?” Grant asked.

Mike knelt on the floor, looking as if he was in pain and needed to rest. What is going on? “Don’t know,” Mike panted. “Packs a mean spark. I think he’s protecting Skye.” He gestured to the hallway behind him. “I think she went around that corner.”

At the mention of Skye, Grant didn’t even wait for Coulson’s order before he raced down the hallway, Coulson right behind him. They turned the corner only to be met with another empty hallway. It took every ounce of Grant’s self-control not to scream with frustration. Skye! Where are you? He was sharing a look of annoyance with Coulson when two Hydra operatives came up behind them. Almost as one, both Grant and Coulson started punching them, mostly to relieve frustration than for any other reason. Both Hydra operatives were so clearly undertrained that it almost felt like they weren’t trying. Where. Is. Skye? Grant asked himself in-between punches.

Just like she had before when he could hear her voice in his head, Skye appeared almost as if he had summoned her. This time though, he saw her beautiful face in his peripheral vision, looking puzzled as she saw both him and Coulson punching away. Grant quickly dealt his Hydra guy a knockout blow so he could head toward the woman he loved.

“Grant!” Skye yelled as she rushed towards him.

He smiled, eagerly anticipating their reunion when, out of nowhere, Gordon appeared, surrounded by blue lightning. “I need to get you out of here,” Grant heard him tell Skye.

She raised her hands in a wait gesture, yelling, “No, no, no! Not yet! Not Yet!” but Gordon ignored her. He threw up his arms to cover her when Cal came hurtling out of nowhere, jumping on the pair just as they winked out of sight.

“Don’t go!” Coulson yelled.

Grant stood there stupidly, not having said a word, just staring at the place where he’d last seen the woman he loved. What was she doing here? Why did Gordon take her? Is she being held hostage? He heard Coulson subdue his Hydra opponent, then come stand behind him.

“I had her,” he told Grant despairingly as he walked over the spot where Skye had last been. “Damn it! I had her!”

Grant didn’t let Coulson see him rolling his eyes. Right. You know nothing. His mind went back over the recent events and what it meant that Hydra was tracking Gordon’s movements. Hydra. Shit! Kara! Leaving Coulson without a word, Grant took off back around the corner to where they’d left Mike with the other guy. But there was no sign of them. All he found were Hydra prisoners with Hunter still guarding them. Grant heard Coulson join them, his panting giving his position away.

Grant turned to meet him, trying desperately not to let Coulson see his anger. “Deathlok’s down. We have no idea where Skye or Kara were taken. We’ve got powered people on-site. Hydra’s storming the building. We’re outmanned, outgunned and our only backup is Fitz.”

Coulson appeared to be having a little trouble processing it all. Grant couldn’t really blame him – dealing with powered people did take a little getting used to – but now was not the time to be slow.
“Can’t you deal with all the Hydra operatives?” he asked Grant. “You know, with your…powers?”

“Yes, I can, but I can’t guarantee that I won’t burn down the building along with them.” Grant gave Coulson a meaningful glance, hoping that he understood that this wasn’t something he wanted to do. He glanced over at Hunter who was limping over to join the conversation. Apparently he’d gotten hit during the fighting. Great. “Your call, boss.”

Coulson resumed his authoritative manner. “Let’s gather the prisoners and go. We’ll figure everything out once we return to base.”

Grant nodded, relieved that he wouldn’t have to concentrate on controlling his powers while battling his confusion over what was happening, his anger at what he saw as poor decisions from SHIELD and his worry about Skye, Kara and Mike. While there wasn’t a lot of room for hope, somehow Grant could feel that, after weeks of inaction, things were going to heat up.

Chapter End Notes

I must apologize for the long wait between chapters. Here in the United States, we had a little something called a midterm election and I was hard at work campaigning for my sister who was running for office (sadly, she lost). My motivation for writing has been somewhat lacking of late but I fully intend to finish this story. So thanks to everyone who has kept reading and stay tuned for more!
The quinjet soared through the air, gliding effortlessly through the clouds. Outside the plane, the atmosphere seemed peaceful. Inside, the mood was grim. The Hydra prisoners were sullen and uncommunicative, Hunter was in pain, Fitz and Coulson were frustrated and Grant’s emotions were in turmoil. Upon returning to the quinjet, Coulson and Fitz secured the prisoners while Grant fixed up Hunter’s leg as much as he could since no one else was even remotely qualified. Hunter grunted out a “Thanks, mate” but, other than that, nobody spoke. The loss of Kara and Mike was palpable, making even the very air seem heavy. Then there was the mystery of Skye’s sudden appearance and disappearance. No one knew what to make of that, not even Grant.

He quickly retreated to the cockpit to get them off the ground, deciding to stay there until they reached their destination. He hoped he could reach clarity within the silence. He could’ve put the plane on autopilot and gone back to be with the others but he chose to be alone with his thoughts. Flying always soothed him, the clear blue of the sky radiating serenity and providing glimpses of a world much bigger than his own. Grant also liked being able to guide the plane wherever he wanted to go; it was the ultimate feeling of control.

And control was what he desperately needed since this mission was causing emotional chaos. In the space of a few hours, his feelings bounced from one emotion to the next. He’d gone from feeling pride in Kara’s undercover skills to the excitement of using his powers in front of Coulson quickly followed by pleasure at seeing Skye to frustration at losing her. And all those emotions paled in comparison to the overarch of fear of not knowing where Kara & Mike had been taken or what was happening with them. Grant was used to maintaining as even a keel emotionally as possible (because his life often depended on it), so the emotional whiplash was challenging. He needed to get back on course. But that seemed to be just what he couldn’t do.

Flashes of Mike during his first mission with the Team filled his mind. How humble he’d been when he first came on board. He’d just overheard Grant talking trash about him but, instead of being irritated by it, he saw fit to thank him for their previous interaction. “Look, I know Union Station could have gone another way. Another team might not have let me out of there alive. I owe you. All of you.” Ever since that mission, Mike had been forced into difficult situations. He endured significant time away from Ace and suffered tremendous injuries. Yet he still persevered. Grant didn’t want anything bad to happen to him. Not again.

And Kara. Grant loved her deeply, not in a romantic sense, but as his first true friend. He couldn’t let her down. He wouldn’t. As flashes of their friendship raced by, Grant took a deep breath and literally shook his head. Thoughts of Kara and Mike were too scary right now, so his mind shied away from them. He needed to focus on something else. His mind automatically went to his favorite topic: Skye.

Although he’d initially been reassured by her telepathic contact with him, he now found it incredibly frustrating. Clearly a lot was happening to her that he knew nothing about. Her mother is alive. That in itself was a huge development, one that would send Skye spinning in ways he couldn’t understand. Family was important to her while he purposely had minimal contact with his own. Grant had only a sliver of knowledge about people who truly wanted you around, who would do anything, like Cal clearly had, to be reunited with you. He had a feeling that Skye – who’d grown up believing she was an orphan – was going to be shaken to her core by this new development. She might be entirely consumed with getting to know her parents. Where will that leave us? What if her parents don’t want her to have a morally bankrupt, duplicitous boyfriend with a dangerous job? He wouldn’t if he were them. In fact, even Grant wasn’t sure he was good
for Skye.

The questions kept coming. Where does her mother fit into the big picture? Why did everyone insist her mother was dead if it wasn’t true? Clearly she was a powered person, she had to be if she were in the community Gordon took Skye to visit. Does that mean powers are genetic? If so, who else in my family has them? And what if the powered community is so wonderful that Skye doesn’t want to return? That thought was so disturbing that his mind jumped in a new direction.

What was she doing in that building? After a month of having barely any contact, he’d seen Skye. She’d appeared surprised to see them, so her visit wasn’t timed to coincide with their presence. She’d started toward him, an expression of pleasure on her face, when Gordon took her away again. That part was the worst because he didn’t know what prompted Gordon’s actions. At least the last time had been planned and Skye had been a willing participant. This time, she’d protested and Grant had absolutely no say in what happened. Does that mean she’s a hostage? But then he recalled that Cal had gone with them. Grant had no idea what it meant that Cal’s presence was not intended but at least Skye had someone with her who loved her. Who would protect her at all costs. That was something.

Although there was another person in the building who also seemed to be protecting Skye. The blonde guy. Grant acknowledged to himself that he was jealous. Here was a young, good-looking guy who was a solid enough member of the powered community that he was sent to protect Skye. And he was strong enough to almost overcome Mike! What if Skye ends up preferring someone like the blonde guy, someone who isn’t an emotional robot? Once again, Grant’s brain stalled. He didn’t want to think about the idea that he wasn’t good for Skye, that he might need to let her go so she could live her life to the fullest. He didn’t want to be without her. Thankfully, the plane reached the airspace over the Playground and Grant had to concentrate on guiding the plane in, thereby putting a stop to his angst-filled thoughts.

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The conference room was full by the time a freshly showered Grant arrived. He knew he was pushing it by jumping in the shower before attending the briefing but he was desperate to erase the smell of sweat, burnt flesh and failure. Showering and donning fresh clothing helped Grant feel stronger, so he made the time and figured he’d deal with any unhappiness later. His therapist had been drilling into him the importance of self-care; he looked forward to telling her he was taking her advice. As he entered the room, Grant was both surprised and pleased to see Trip wave his hand toward the empty seat next to him at the table. He was saving him a seat! After thinking about it for a second though, he realized Trip’s strategy. Both of them were concerned for Kara and, if they had to defend her to the others, there was strength in numbers. Grant pulled out his chair silently, giving a nod to Trip as he sat down.

The room was abuzz with murmured conversations as everyone looked at an aerial map of what looked like a base on the screen. Grant glanced discreetly at the crowd. In addition to the usual team, he recognized some high level strategic planners, a few airplane technicians, and some others he couldn’t place. This is going to be big. Bobbi and May were standing on either side of the screen. Coulson was leaning against the side wall, scanning the room. When the door closed, Coulson seemed satisfied that everyone was there. “Agent May,” he directed softly. All conversation ceased.

May nodded at Coulson shortly. “According to our intel, Strucker and List have been running experiments on enhanced people. They’ve set up a base in the Arctic.”

Trip was sitting on the edge of his chair, a tense look on his face. Grant felt a pang looking at him.
Trip and Kara were close, so this had to be killing him just as it was Grant. “How was this intel obtained?” Trip asked May, a little louder and more forceful than he usually was.

She seemed to take his aggressive tone in stride. “We have an agent on the inside who fed us their location.”

Trip let out a sigh of relief and sat back in his chair. “So Kara’s still OK.”

Bobbi squirmed, just a little, but enough that it drew Grant’s eye towards her. “Something’s wrong. Agent Palamas seems fine at the moment but the intel didn’t come from her,” she said quietly.

The picture on the screen changed from the aerial map to two people, Kara and List, standing outside of a cell containing Mike. While he wasn’t onscreen, it had to be his mechanical eye that was recording them. Kara’s body language was relaxed while she waited for List to finish his telephone call.

List closed his phone, giving Kara a tight-lipped smile of satisfaction. “Well, Strucker’s most pleased with our progress and he’s very anxious to see these subjects with his own eyes.”

Kara’s eyes flitted from Mike to the left, probably to another cell. “They are an interesting contrast, these two,” she replied. She gestured towards Mike, not quite looking directly into his eye. Grant guessed that Kara was feeling guilty, so she purposefully was avoiding looking at Mike’s suffering. That was one of the hardest parts of being undercover: in order to accomplish the larger good, sometimes you had to let people get hurt. “This one, the one they call Deathlok, his modifications are mechanical, bestowed by science, by humans.”

List nodded importantly, as if he were a distinguished research scientist instead of a thug. “And the other?”

“His oddities are intrinsic, somehow bestowed upon him by nature,” Kara replied thoughtfully. Grant smiled to himself. The others might believe that Kara had returned to Hydra’s employ but her use of the word oddities convinced him that she was still undercover. She was playing a part, something she wouldn’t have to do if she’d gone back to the dark side. Besides, she knew about Mike’s video feed. If she were playing for Hydra’s team, she would’ve told them about it immediately instead of allowing him to send a signal to SHIELD.

“Yes, but knowing the difference is not the same thing as recreating it,” List murmured. “And to that end, I hope to…”

“To isolate the genetic component, yes. A comparison between the two could be invaluable.” Kara paused, then said in a lower voice, “Dr. Whitehall believed discovery requires experimentation.” Her voice almost broke on the last word and Grant realized she was afraid for Mike. *Keep in character, Kara! There’s nothing else you can do!*

“I do miss him,” List said, faking a sad expression. Grant saw Coulson roll his eyes.

“As do I,” Kara replied hesitatingly. “But the world moves on and we form new allegiances,” she continued with a resumption of her usual brisk tone.

List looked searchingly at her, almost as if he were testing her loyalty. “I’m very glad to hear that, especially as we proceed with the experimentation.”

The picture changed abruptly as Mike directed his gaze toward the ceiling. Some mechanical equipment was descending into his cell. It looked ominous. *Uh oh.*
“That’s a pulse generator!” Fitz called out excitedly. “It’s generally used for….” He trailed off as a chorus of “Shh!” drowned out his next words.

In the cell, Mike only had enough time to say, “Here we go,” in a dry voice before the pulse generator went off and his signal abruptly ended.

There was silence in the conference room as everyone digested what they’d just seen and heard. Once again, the tension in the air was palpable. Grant kept his thoughts and emotions in check, using the time to look around the room and observe the reactions of everyone else. He could tell that Trip was doing the same thing, the hallmark of a good specialist. The two men met each other’s eyes briefly. Trip slightly nodded at Grant, the understanding that both of them were going to protect Kara passing between them.

Coulson moved so that he was standing at the center of the room, every eye on him. “Based on what we’ve seen and heard from Agent Peterson’s video feed, we’ve decided to send in a small rescue team. We have a chance to hit Hydra…hard. They’re operating on powered people. We can shut that down and save lives.”

Grant could tell that a number of people in the room – Bobbi, Mack and Jemma among them – were not pleased with this idea. He tamped down his anger, actually curious about how they were going to express their displeasure without looking like bigots. Bobbi frowned, crossing her arms in front of her. “Is it wise to expend so many resources on such a dangerous mission?”

Ah, one of the classics: safety first.

“I take it from your expression you’re not dazzled by our strategy?” Coulson questioned dryly.

“I’m sure it’s a great plan, Sir, but have we considered what it could mean if Agent Palamas is no longer on our side?” Her eyes slid over to where Trip and Grant were sitting, then back to Coulson again. “We all saw how she encouraged List to experiment on Agent Peterson and the other prisoner. If she’s returned to working for Hydra, any rescue plan could go badly for us since she knows what we’re likely to do.”

Trip tensed but his tone was casual. “Girl, you know as well as I do that Kara had to play along. If she was even a little hesitant, List would’ve known that she was playing them.” He glared at Bobbi. “You of all people know how difficult it is to get Hydra to believe in you.”

Grant fought to keep the smirk off of his face. Well played, Trip.

Bobbi did not appear mollified. “With all due respect, Sir, you seem willing to put a lot of us at risk.”

“Why send a small infiltration unit?” Mack questioned from the back of the room. “Why not a full-on assault? Blow the base to particles.”

Fitz whipped around in his chair so that he could face Mack. “That would mean killing Mike, Kara and any other people they captured! You’re not seriously suggesting that, are you?”

“I’d rather not sacrifice the prisoners, so a rescue is ideal,” Coulson interrupted before Mack could respond. “We don’t even know how many people Hydra’s holding,”

Bobbi did not appear mollified. “With all due respect, Sir, you seem willing to put a lot of us at risk.”
“I wouldn’t worry, Agent Morse,” Coulson replied sarcastically. “I’ve already got my own people picked out.”

It was obvious that Bobbi didn’t like that answer but, given her earlier objections, she couldn’t now go back on them and insist on being included. A small rescue team. Grant hadn’t heard anything about a mission, so he wondered who was going to be on it. One thing was for sure: he had no intention of being left behind.

Bobbi resumed her business-like demeanor, pointing at the aerial map which was back on the screen, her fingers tracing all the white space surrounding the facility. “The base is in the Arctic circle with nothing around for miles,” she argued. “Hydra will see us coming.”

“Which is why it’s critical I take in a small team. We rescue the enhanced prisoners then disable the missile-defense system so that SHIELD jets can fly in safely to bomb the facility.”

“You really believe a small team can do this?” Hunter asked. He and many of the others seemed skeptical.

“My team can,” Coulson said confidently. Grant’s fear of being left behind dissolved as he realized exactly who the small team would include. There were only five people who had been with Coulson for over a year, living and working in an incredibly small space. There were only five people who’d completed some incredibly dangerous missions, ones that tested all of them to their limits. There were only five people Coulson trusted implicitly. And four of them were still on base.

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Grant’s sense of déjà vu was strong as he walked into the cargo hold of the Bus alongside Fitz, Jemma, May and Coulson. He smiled at Fitz, “Just like old times.” Coulson chuckled while Fitz replied, “Well, except for Skye. She should be here too.”

Fitz’s words were still hanging in the air when an electrical crackling sound could be heard in the Lounge area on the second level and flashes of blue lightning leaked out. Grant smiled, a feeling of relief washing over him. Skye.

None of the other team members were familiar with Gordon’s distinctive entrance, so Coulson and May both got out their guns and pointed them in the direction they thought might correspond to the noise. Coulson pointed left, May pointed right. Skye came around the corner from the upper deck, looking out over the group. She was dressed all in black, her hair hanging loose, looking so beautiful that all Grant could do for a moment was stare at her.

Fitz also looked stunned, his mouth hanging open. Jemma smiled in delight at Skye but then her expression shuttered and she looked at the floor.

Damn. She’s still mad.

Coulson turned towards Skye (he’d been facing in the opposite direction), lowering his gun. “Skye,” he breathed.

For her part, Skye appeared unfazed. “Hey guys,” she said calmly as she leaned on the railing.

Grant smirked at her, loving the smile she gave him in return. “This is great,” he said to the whole group. “We finally got the team back together.” Before anyone else moved, he dashed up the stairs, determined to get to Skye first. The team didn’t have a lot of time and he wanted to get at least one hug and kiss before the Science Twins started harassing Skye for details of her time away. He hit the top of the stairs, running full tilt at Skye, trying not to laugh at her wide-eyed look as he scooped her up, their faces inches apart. He carried her into the Lounge, away from prying eyes and set her down gently.
Grant wasted no time in fitting his lips over hers, relishing the feel of true relaxation – the first time in a month – as he once again held Skye in his arms. Their kiss was just as wonderful as it always was, full of love, passion and heat.

Skye leaned back, laughing. “Whoa! Down boy! Your lips are getting a little warm, don’t you think?”

“Don’t hate me because I’m hot,” Grant whispered before capturing her lips again. He needed to get in as many kisses as he could before the rest of the team arrived. He could already hear them coming up the stairs.

“Ewww….could you two stop that? Jemma and I have a lot of questions to ask Skye,” Fitz said as they came into the Lounge. As irritated as Grant was at the interruption, he knew it had to happen. He appreciated that the team must’ve hung back to give the newly reunited couple a few minutes alone.

May nodded to Skye as she walked past on her way to the cockpit. Coulson made a detour to give Skye a hug before saying, “Team meeting in 10 minutes,” and following May to the front of the Bus.

Despite never wanting to leave her side again and desperately wanting to know everything she’d experienced since she’d been away, Grant knew he had to focus on the mission. He sighed and gave Skye a kiss on the forehead. He looked into her eyes. “I have some things I need to do. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

She smiled at him, her hand lightly caressing his face as he turned away. Only Grant’s iron will and thoughts of Kara and Mike kept him from abandoning all his responsibilities and taking Skye somewhere they could be alone. As he left the Lounge, he could hear her saying to FitzSimmons, “Hey guys!”

Grant stowed gear and equipment in the cargo hold of the smaller quinjet so that they’d have protection from the cold weather and the ability to open a door into the base. He returned to the Mission Control area of the Bus as quickly as possible, wanting to spend as much time with Skye as he could before the needs of the mission took priority.

FitzSimmons and Skye were clustered on one side of the briefing room. He could hear them talking as he entered the area.

“How did you get the intel about the base?” Fitz asked.

“Can you control your powers?” Jemma asked.

Skye gave a light laugh. Grant knew that laugh. She’s overwhelmed. “I promise I will tell you guys everything; it’s a lot. But right now, shouldn’t we be concentrating on the mission?” she asked.

Grant silently came up behind Skye, putting his arms around her and leaning his chin on the top of her head. He knew how much she loved it; she said it made her feel secure. Sure enough, he could feel her body relax against him.

Jemma’s face fell, her anger at Skye’s reluctance to share obvious. Her glare included Grant too. “Well, we’re just so happy to see you and you’re being so secretive,” she snapped.

“No, I’m happy to see you too but..”

“Yeah, we’ve got a mission to do, not much time, blah blah blah blah blah,” Fitz said. He seemed oblivious to Jemma’s anger. Grant smiled ruefully. Fitz just summed up our entire
existence.

Coulson and May strode purposefully into the briefing room. Coulson approached the familiar table, leaning on it as he glanced at the younger members of the team. “We should review the op.”

Everyone unthinkingly took up their usual positions: May and Coulson on one side of the table, FitzSimmons and Skye on the other with Grant in the center, ready to present. Looking at their usual clustering, Grant felt a pang of nostalgia so intense that he almost winced.

Coulson nodded at him, smiling slightly. “It’s been a long time, hasn’t it?” he asked softly. Then the smile dropped off of his face. “Ward, bring us up to speed on Kara’s intel.”

“Kara’s intel?” Skye burst out. “Kara’s back with Hydra?” She looked wide-eyed at Grant who met her gaze steadily. He tried to push down the resentment he felt at her surprise. Of course she couldn’t know everything that occurred while she was gone but a small part of him felt like she should’ve tried harder to keep in contact. I really could’ve used her support with this.

“Yes, Kara is undercover with Hydra.” He sighed, not wanting to focus on that aspect of the mission. Grant turned to the screen so he wouldn’t have to look any of his team in the face. He still was scared that Kara might not be OK, that this mission might end in disaster, and he didn’t want any of them, especially Skye, to know that. “Kara’s using old Hydra text channels to provide us with intel…” he turned back around, starting to brief them on what was being communicated when he noticed the unhappy glances from May and Jemma directed mostly at Skye but somewhat towards him too.

What’s going on?

For the first time in his life, Grant’s thoughts couldn’t keep track with what he was supposed to be saying. “…although…much of it is…uh…”

Skye met Grant’s troubled gaze and nodded minutely. “Can we just address the elephant on the plane?” she asked Coulson. After his nod, she turned toward the group. “I know. This is weird. I should’ve told you all what was going on instead of just leaving. Mistakes were made.”

“By you,” Jemma murmured.

Skye acted like she hadn’t heard this. “And I know that the way I went about gaining control of my powers caused some of you to be hurt.”

“By you,” May said in a low voice. Grant made his face blank rather than showing his shock at May’s comment. She was hurt by Skye leaving? Or is she being protective of Coulson?

“I could try to explain to you all just how scared I was, how I was chased and almost killed by powerful aliens, and how I had no idea what to do with the powers I have,” Skye said in exasperation.

“We all have had bad things happen to us, Skye,” Jemma said angrily. “It didn’t make any of us just vanish one day, leaving no one to know what happened or where we’d gone!”

Grant felt his defensiveness rise. Jemma’s not being fair. What would she have done in that circumstance? “Well, we all have our own ways of coping, don’t we?” he interjected. “For example, you’ve been avoiding me and taking out your anger on Fitz.”

“Watch it, Ward,” Fitz warned. “Whatever happens between Jemma and me is not any of your business!”

Grant inclined his head towards Fitz, tacit acceptance of the point he’d just made. He agreed with him that the FitzSimmons relationship wasn’t any of his business but he was also tired of Jemma’s behavior, especially since she’d decided that now was a good time to attack Skye. “Look, I’m just
saying that we all made mistakes,” he began in a conciliatory tone but he could tell by Jemma’s body language that she wasn’t going to listen.

Sure enough, she whipped around to face Skye, her eyes full of tears. “You kept secrets and then you just left without a word! He’s probably known the whole time where you were, hasn’t he?” Jemma said, tilting her head in Grant’s direction. She paused, then said in a lower voice, “We were a team and a family and you and Ward betrayed us!”

Skye was never one to take accusations lying down, so you could’ve knocked Grant over with a feather when, instead of going on the defensive, she remained calm. “I know it must feel like that,” she said to Jemma gently. “It’s what I regret the most. My actions destroyed this,” she waved her arm in the general direction of the group, “the feeling of family we all have together. I’m keeping my fingers crossed that I won’t have to regret it forever because I hope that you’ll forgive me. But Jemma, I had to do something!”

“I hate to interrupt,” Coulson said. “I know that we really need to talk this all out family-style,” he gave a faint smile to Skye, “but we have to discuss the mission. Everyone ready?” They all nodded. “OK, two teams. Skye, Ward and Simmons on rescue and medical. Fitz and I will break into missile defense and gather intel. May’s with us for firepower.”

“Wait. You’re not on rescue?” Skye asked.

“Let me handle the job assignments,” he replied looking at her. Skye nodded and looked down. “The point is: there’re a lot of challenges ahead.” He looked around the room, making eye contact with each of them. “We don’t want to implode before we even get there. Grant, brief Skye on the plan. May, let us know when we need to get into position. FitzSimmons, you know your jobs.”

The group left the table and the interior of the Bus soon looked like a beehive with everyone buzzing around, fulfilling their appointed tasks. Even though they were heading toward an incredibly dangerous mission, Grant felt more relaxed than he had during the last several months as he and Skye even found a few minutes to sit together on the couches by the windows. At first, they discussed the mission so that she would be up to speed. But then Skye took his hand, lifting it so she could kiss his palm. “I’ve really missed you,” she said to him in a low voice. Grant’s smile was just starting to spread when alarm bells rang throughout the plane.

May’s voice came over the intercom. “We’ve been spotted. It’s time.”

The lovers leapt to their feet, their brief romantic interlude cut short, as they became intent on making last minute preparations. Grant and Coulson checked weapons and equipment. Fitz, Jemma and Skye were all running through the briefing room, grabbing things and stuffing them in their backpacks before they took their places in the cargo hold of the quinjet.

May was still at the controls of the plane. She was going to manually guide them to the ground. “I’ve got visuals on the target,” she said, her voice tense. “Buckle in. They’ve locked on.”

Grant felt his ears pop and his stomach heave as the Bus exploded around the quinjet. Since this was expected, Grant was surprised by the thrill of fear that hit him in the gut. He’d gotten so used to missions that nothing generally shook him but this felt different. I Can’t. Lose. It. He struggled to keep an expression of calm on his face, particularly since he could feel FitzSimmons’ and Skye’s panicked stares on his face. None of them had ever experienced something like this. If I look bored, they’ll be reassured. This was a lot harder to do than he expected though as the cargo hold shook heavily and the feeling of nausea intensified as they swirled and dropped toward the ground.
Jemma had her hands at her throat, clutching her seatbelt as if it could save her. Coulson too looked like he was hanging on to his seatbelt for dear life. “I’m starting to think this wasn’t a very good plan,” he shouted. Grant would’ve laughed had he had it in him to do so. “Is there anything you can do about the drop?” Coulson asked May.

“Not if we want Hydra to believe we’re debris,” she shouted back. Grant wished Coulson would leave May alone so she could concentrate on landing them safely.

Something in the ceiling broke and smoke gushed into the cargo hold. Fitz surely would’ve given them an explanation of what it was and why it was a dire sign but he had his eyes tightly closed.

“I’m really starting to wish I hadn’t eaten that Hot Pocket earlier,” Coulson said. Grant didn’t know if Coulson was trying to make the younger members of the team feel better or if his anxiety was causing him to run off at the mouth but, whatever the case, he just wanted him to shut up. If this was going to be how he died, he definitely didn’t want the last thing he heard to be Coulson talking about Hot Pockets. *Those things are gross.*

“Hold on,” May yelled from the cockpit. Grant couldn’t help rolling his eyes. *Does she really think we aren’t already?*

He heard both Jemma and Skye grunt as the quinjet hit the ground roughly, the falling debris that hit them making a huge clunk and causing the quinjet to lurch to the side. Once they stopped completely, everyone quickly removed their seatbelts, donned cold weather gear and grabbed their equipment. It was vital that they make their way to the base as quickly and quietly as possible before any Hydra personnel came out to examine the wreckage.

The wind was brutal and he could tell that everyone but him was suffering. Grant heated up his body temperature so that he could help his cold teammates warm up a bit, glad that he’d learned that trick early on. Skye was trudging along beside him. She looked down at the icy ground, her eyes widening as she saw some of the snow around Grant melting. She looked up at him with a grin, moving as close to him as she could get. She touched Jemma’s arm to get her attention, tilting her head towards Grant. The wind was so strong that no conversation was possible.

Grant wasn’t sure what Jemma would do, so he was a little surprised when she nodded and moved closer to him, walking just a little behind Skye. He felt May move in closer on his other side. Her situational awareness was legendary, so of course she would’ve seen what was happening before the others. She tapped Coulson on the shoulder. He looked back, his eyes focusing on Grant after May tilted her head towards him. He looked thoughtful for a moment but then shook his head, turning back around into the wind. Fitz also didn’t seem to want to take advantage of Grant’s heat. Both men stubbornly remained on the outside of the group. *Well, if they want to be cold, there’s not much I can do to help their fragile male egos. But it’s stupid.*

Early in his career, Grant developed a reputation for being a loner, someone who didn’t work well with others but was, instead, the whole solution. He was the agent who got the job done. Alone. He did, in fact, have great faith in his abilities and didn’t often trust others but the whole loner persona was a pose, designed to keep people at a distance so they didn’t find out about his work with Hydra. Double agents rarely can afford to get chatty or work closely with others lest they be unmasked or, as John Garrett discovered to his detriment, change their loyalties. The truth of the matter though was that Grant quickly learned that fragile egos had no place in the shadowy world of intelligence. Useless prejudices and stereotypes were a great way to get you killed. It was one of the first lessons he learned during his first undercover assignment in Russia.

*Flashback*
Although he’d been a dedicated polyglot throughout his time in the Academy, Grant hadn’t had a lot of opportunities to put his language skills to use on missions. Even Hydra seemed more interested in work in which everyone spoke English. That’s probably because not many true Hydra agents can speak other languages. His lip curled when he thought of agents like George Fistal trying to speak another language; that idiot could barely communicate in English! Consequently, Grant resigned himself to letting his language skills go to waste. That’s why he was so pleased to have been given an assignment in Russia, one in which he’d actually have to speak Russian.

Garrett smiled at Grant when telling him about the assignment. “Yeah. I thought you’d like this one. About time they gave you something that utilized your fancy speaking skills.”

In typical John fashion, his mission summary was brief. “The SHIELD higher-ups want you to go to Russia. Apparently,” he rolled his eyes, “Sofia Vasyuhin, the daughter of one of the Russian muckety-mucks in the Kremlin, has been passing information to us and now thinks she’s in danger. Your job is to get her out of there.”

The feral grin that Grant always associated with poor treatment of women passed over Garrett’s face. It was all Grant could do not to roll his eyes or look away. John always expected, even demanded, that Grant share in his emotions. “I bet she’s quite a beauty – the rich ones always are – and she’ll be so grateful for your help that she’ll keep you really warm at night in no time. Russian women don’t have the same hang-ups American women do.”

Grant nodded, smiling faintly. “I’ll be sure to check out that theory.” He hated always having to go along with whatever John was saying but if he didn’t, there’d be hell to pay. Fortunately, Garrett’s attention span was pretty short so he’d usually lose interest or forget and Grant wouldn’t be required to report back on any of the conquests or cruel behavior John suggested. The few times John had remembered to check, he’d just lied and John was never the wiser. Best since Romanoff, Grant thought with satisfaction.

“You do that,” John replied jovially. “Anyway Sergei, Sofia’s dad Feodor is having a party at his house near Lake Baikal. The good news is that the town has great beaches but the bad news is…”

“That it’s winter,” Grant said in disgust. Wouldn’t you know it? His first visit to Russia, at a resort town no less, and it had to be in winter. In eastern Siberia. Just my luck.

“Cheer up,” John said with a grin. “The food will be good although,” he considered this for a second, “given that it’s Russian, probably not. If you’re lucky, they’ll have caviar.” He shrugged and slapped Grant on the back, something Grant absolutely hated. But it wasn’t like he could tell John to stop. That would just guarantee that it’d happen more often. “At least the mission will be short and kind of dull. All you have to do is attend the party, steal the lovely Sofia away, then get her to the lake. A boat will take you across the lake to where SHIELD will have an airplane waiting to pick you up. Nice and simple.”

“That doesn’t sound too bad,” Grant replied cautiously. He was actually really excited but some instinct warned him against letting John know that. He certainly didn’t want John trying to throw extra obstacles in his way or giving him additional tasks just to make it “interesting.”

“It’ll be a cakewalk for you.” He tossed the mission briefing summary, a map of the area and the necessary identification paraphernalia on the table in front of Grant. His face turned dangerous. “But make sure you read this stuff thoroughly and know it inside and out. This mission may be easy but I need you ready to go to Germany the week after for Hydra. That mission will be way more important than this one. So no screw-ups!”

Grant almost scoffed. Since when do I screw up? He wisely avoided saying that to John though
because, knowing him, he’d find examples even if they were from years earlier or weren’t anyone else’s definition of a screw-up. So he merely nodded, then got to work. No one ever had to tell Grant to be over-prepared; that was his *modus operandi*. If he was going to be able to help John, he needed to ensure the safety of his cover and his person at all times. John’s life depended on it and that was something Grant was dead serious about.

It turned out that John was right about the mission being simple, at least at first. Grant gained entry into the party with ease and mingled with the guests effortlessly. It was his first time speaking Russian with native speakers and he was thrilled that he could keep up. Many of the guests didn’t even seem to realize that it wasn’t his first language. Grant was also pleasantly surprised to find that Sofia – who was indeed beautiful –was intelligent and had a wicked sense of humor. The two of them spent a lot of time at the party flirting outrageously with each other. While this was indeed the plan (Sofia was supposed to steal away from the party with her new conquest), it was fun and made the time pass quickly. *I could get used to this*, he thought as he sipped vodka, gazed into her laughing eyes and felt her hand trail up and down his arm.

Once the clock struck midnight, Sofia leaned toward him and said in a loud, drunken voice, “Sergei, don’t you think it’s time we found someplace a little more quiet? I want to show you my new tattoo. It’s not quite fit for public consumption.” Her smile was seductive and Grant saw several people around their table look at each other knowingly.

Grant immediately stood up. “Of course,” he said offering her his hand. “Who could refuse such an offer?”

He and Sofia said goodnight to their tablemates and quickly exited the house, making sure to stop often to kiss and look as though they couldn’t keep their hands off of each other. Earlier in the day, she’d stuffed her travel bag in the gardener’s shed, so that’s where they headed. Once they’d gotten past the guests and bodyguards, the two broke into a quick trot. It was cold and they had little time to waste.

Upon entering the shed, Grant got his first surprise of the mission. A tall, thin, muscular man with distinctive Russian features was leaning against the wall, clearly waiting for them with a wicked looking pistol in his hand. Grant’s heart sank as he saw the gun pointed straight at them. According to the mission parameters, travel clothes, money, official documents and some weapons were supposed to be hidden in the cabinet by the wall. Unfortunately, the man was standing right next to it and there was no way Grant could get past him in time to use them. He tensed, looking around wildly to see what else could be used as a weapon.

Sofia looked from one man to the other, her expression wary. “Wait Sergei,” she said to Grant in a low voice, grabbing his arm. “This is Alexei. He’s going with us.” She let go of Grant, crossed to the Russian man and stood on tiptoes so she could kiss him, the same kind of passionate kiss she’d given Grant just minutes earlier. *Huh. Beautiful, smart, funny and a good actress! Alexei’s a lucky man.* Then she turned back to Grant, Alexei’s hand resting on her shoulder protectively. Grant wondered just how much he knew about their shenanigans back at the party.

Alexei’s face was impassive. “We plan to get married once we’re in America,” he said to Grant in heavily accented English.

“Congratulations,” Grant replied in Russian as he brushed past the couple to get to his things. “We don’t have time for this. You need to change so we can get going.” He faced them as he started rapidly undressing – the shed was cold and there was no way he was turning his back on these two – while his tactician’s brain was whirring. There had been absolutely nothing in the mission briefing about a boyfriend and bringing along another person was going to make things difficult.
But he really didn’t see that he had a choice. They were operating on a deadline and if he tried to leave Alexei behind, he could tell that both Sofia and Alexei would object, thereby making them late in meeting the boat. That was unacceptable.

The three of them donned their winter gear and their backpacks, then made their way stealthily toward the lake. Their contact was right where he was supposed to be and quickly and efficiently got them across the water. They made good time in walking to the coordinates where the SHIELD plane was to meet them. Grant was just beginning to relax – once they boarded the plane, he was home free – when he saw the plane. Instead of the small jet the mission called for, the plane sitting there was only a two-seater. *What the hell?*

Seeing the group approach, the SHIELD pilot rushed over, pulling Grant aside. “Please excuse us for a minute,” Grant said politely and calmly to Sofia and Alexei. “The pilot needs to brief me on the rest of our mission.” Although this was clearly a snag in the plans, Grant made his voice as calm as possible, hoping they’d believe that everything was under control. He didn’t want them to worry. A worried asset tended to be a troublesome asset.

The two men walked a short distance away, far enough to be able to speak privately. *What now?* Grant kept his eye on Sofia and Alexei while glaring at the pilot. His expression must’ve reflected his irritation because the pilot was immediately apologetic. “I know this is not what you were expecting but it was all we could get. Our original plane had engine trouble and this was all we could find on such short notice.”

“So what are we supposed to do?” Grant hissed at him. Even though he was furious, he maintained a pleasant but serious expression so that he could nod and look reassuring whenever Sofia or Alexei looked over at them. Fortunately, the two seemed caught up in each other enough not to take too much notice of what was going on around them. Although Sofia was intelligent, he suspected that she wasn’t paying close attention to her surroundings. Grant had seen this before. Sometimes assets became so fearful that they stopped asking questions and started putting their faith solely in their handlers.

The guy shrugged. “You’re not going to like it. I was told that the woman is our priority, so she and I will fly away now and we’ll send someone back for you. Of course, we didn’t know anything about an extra person, so it might take longer to find a plane that can accommodate both of you during the next trip. I have a few blankets in the plane that I can leave you but that’s it.” The guy looked around at the desolate area and shivered. “There isn’t much cover around here and it’s damn cold. Hopefully you’re prepared for that.”

Grant gritted his teeth. “I guess we’ll have to be,” he said. *It’s going to be a long night.* He walked over to Sofia and Alexei while the pilot went into the plane to get the blankets.

“What’s going on, Sergei?” Sofia asked immediately. “This plane doesn’t look like it will take all of us.”

“You’re right. It won’t. There was a problem with our original plane, so there’s been a change of plans,” he told her, looking straight into her eyes and completely ignoring Alexei. Sofia was his mission, so she was the one he needed to convince. “You’re going to fly away right now and they’ll send someone back for Alexei and me.”

Sofia’s eyes widened and she looked around incredulously, just like the pilot had. “No, it’s too cold. You’ll freeze!” She turned to Alexei. “No! I won’t leave you!”

To Grant’s surprise, Alexei didn’t even blink an eye. He took Sofia’s hands in his. “What? So you’ll stay here and freeze with us?” He smiled slightly. “No. You’ll go and Sergei and I will be just fine. But if the plane’s warm, maybe you can leave your coat behind.”
Coming up behind them with several blankets in his hands, the pilot said, “I’ve kept it running, so it’s warm enough and, given this temperature, it’s probably a good idea. I’ll give you mine too.” He and Sofia both took off their coats and gave them to the other men. Grant tried not to be envious as Alexei put on Sofia’s heavy fur coat while he made do with the pilot’s thinner one. The pilot looked at Grant. “We need to get going.”

Grant nodded. “Let’s give these two a minute,” he said. “Get the plane ready for takeoff. I’ll make sure she gets on.” The pilot gave a short nod, then headed toward the plane. Grant took the opportunity to look around, scouting for places that would be out of the wind. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Sofia and Alexei hugging and felt a small pang. It would be nice to have someone love you like that. Alexei gave her a lingering kiss, looked into Sofia’s eyes and said, “Go!” She gave him a tremulous smile, nodded to Grant, then climbed into the plane. Shortly afterwards, the plane took off. The two men watched it go until it was no longer visible.

Alexei turned to Grant. “We have some work to do. The ridge we passed on our way here will offer the most protection against the wind.” Grant nodded and the two men set off. Neither spoke until they reached the area that seemed to be the most promising. Alexei looked around considerably. “This will do.” Grant was surprised when Alexei smiled slightly. “Now we need to make a cave out of the snow.”

Grant nodded again – the quicker they got this done, the better – and the two men got to work. As he pushed and shaped snow, it occurred to him that it was lucky for him that Sofia decided to bring Alexei along. The guy seemed to know what he was doing and Grant wasn’t sure he could’ve survived alone. Although the physical labor had him panting, Grant was starting to shiver. This was not a good sign but he knew it would be worse if he stopped. Whenever his body decided that the heat generated by his shivering was no longer working, moderate hypothermia would set in.

After about 45 minutes, Alexei touched his arm. “This is good. Now we get in. I hope you’re not claustrophobic.” They climbed into the makeshift cave, packed the snow firmly at the entrance and then looked at each other. It was a tight fit but Grant figured that was probably a good thing, that the close quarters might generate more heat. His shivering still hadn’t stopped but they were out of the wind and he felt a slight bit warmer.

Alexei started rummaging in his backpack, quickly pulling out a thermos. “We should drink this,” he told Grant. “It’ll keep us warm.”

“Are you crazy? Alcohol is absolutely the worst thing we could drink right now. It drops core body temperature.”

“Who said anything about alcohol?” Alexei asked, opening up the thermos. The rich, bitter smell of coffee beans filled the air. “This is coffee.”

Grant looked sheepish. “Sorry. I just thought…”

Alexei seemed amused. “Sergei, I’ve lived in Russia my entire life. I know a thing or two about dealing with cold weather. We Russians love our vodka but we’re not stupid.” He took a sip then handed the cup to Grant.

Grant sipped the coffee, relishing the feel of the hot liquid going down his throat. He hoped that his preoccupation with the hot drink would cover his embarrassment. He handed the cup back to the other man. “Thanks.”

Alexei nodded, looking at Grant thoughtfully. “The cave and the coffee were good, right?” He waited for Grant’s nod before continuing. “So maybe you’ll take my advice about something else,
something that will not be as comfortable."

Grant was puzzled but willing. Anything that would help keep them warm until the next plane came would be good. He nodded at Alexei. “Your suggestions have been good so far.” Alexei sighed. “We need to take off some of our clothes and huddle together under the blankets and clothing.”

*He’s got to be kidding!* Grant stared at him. “Alexei, you’re a good looking guy but Sofia might kill me and I don’t swing that way.”

The corners of Alexei’s mouth twitched a bit. “Skin-to-skin contact is one of the most effective ways to quickly stabilize and raise your body heat. We need to do something to keep warm or you won’t be alive for Sofia to kill.” He paused, his smile widening. “Would it help if I promised to keep my hands to myself?”

Grant stared at Alexei a moment longer, then sighed and started undressing. Soon the two of them were lying on top of coats and underneath blankets, skin-to-skin. Grant sighed again, trying to avoid looking into Alexei’s eyes. They’d agreed that they needed to be able see each other’s eyes in order to keep them both awake. Wouldn’t you know it? Mere hours after being kissed by a beautiful woman and here he was cuddling semi-naked in the snow with a man. He had to admit that the heat generated from their contact helped a lot but it was damn awkward. *Well, if the job was easy, it wouldn’t be any fun.*

The truth of the matter though was that Alexei turned out to be a literal life-saver. He’d gone from an unexpected annoyance to an intelligent and caring man with a good sense of humor and mad survival skills. Grant had severely underestimated him. And the skin-to-skin contact probably kept them alive. So while he would’ve preferred to be in such intimate quarters with a woman, a man got the job done just as well. Maybe John never would’ve put himself in such a vulnerable position with another man but Grant had no problem with it. Sometimes you had to forego the perfect in favor of the good.

**Present**

Luck seemed to be with them as they made it to the base in record time, probably due in no small part to Grant’s ability to keep most of them warm. Coulson and Fitz appeared to be stumbling a lot more than the rest of the team. May and Jemma had to help each of them up frequently. Thankfully, they soon were blowing open one of the side doors. Grant smirked to himself as Coulson and Fitz almost knocked the others over in their efforts to be first into the building. They all quickly entered, guns raised, sweeping the large entryway for any sign of Hydra agents.

“Clear,” May said. At her signal, they hurriedly divested themselves of their outerwear and put them in various corners. Part of Kara’s intel had been that the facility itself was quite warm, so bulky coats and gloves would just slow them down.

Coulson led the team down a narrow corridor, gun out. As they reached a t-intersection, they heard a grunt of pain and saw a body drop onto the floor partially obscuring the entry into the hallway. When Grant turned the corner into the hallway, there was Kara, standing there grinning mischievously with her hands up in the “I surrender” posture.

“What?” she asked innocently, raising her eyebrows. “I was being followed.” She threw herself into Grant’s arms.

He crushed her to him, oblivious to the stares of his teammates. “Kara, thank god,” he whispered. *She’s safe!*
She quickly stepped out of his embrace, laughing. “Careful there, Hot Stuff! I’m fine.” Grant grinned sheepishly. In his excitement, some of his heat must’ve leaked out. The smile dropped off of her face. “But Mike and the blonde guy aren’t. We need to hurry.”

“Is List still here?” Grant asked.

“Yes. In the Lab, along with the other prisoners.”

“And the Mainframe room?” Coulson asked.

“Down the hall, to the left,” Kara replied, tilting her head in that direction. She looked around at the group, apparently noticing Skye for the first time. “Skye! I didn’t know you were back! It’s good to see you!”

Skye nodded, her expression anxious. Grant remembered how she and Mike had always seemed close. And then there’s the blonde guy.

“Everyone clear on their team’s objective?” Coulson asked. The team nodded.

“If it’s OK, Sir, I’d like to be with Grant’s team,” Kara said.

Coulson looked at Skye. “Is that gonna be a problem?”

Skye snorted. “Hardly.” She hugged Kara. “It’s good to see you too!”

“Remember, just 30 minutes until the SHIELD jets arrive. Move.” The two groups separated, each going their separate ways. As Fitz started following May and Coulson to the left, Grant could’ve sworn he heard him whisper, “Be careful, Jemma.” What’s that about? The admonition felt ominous to Grant although he wasn’t sure why. Fitz could’ve just been letting Jemma know how much he cared but somehow, Grant didn’t think so. He put the little mystery out of his mind as he concentrated on the mission at hand.

Kara walked rapidly until they came to a door, a red light on the side indicating that there wasn’t going to be easy access to it. She waited for Grant to get into position before entering the code. When the light turned from red to green, Grant threw open the door, gun at the ready, but the room appeared to be empty. Skye and Jemma surged ahead of him into the room.

Almost at once, a Hydra agent in full combat gear started shooting at them. Not empty. As they all ducked to avoid getting hit, Grant heard someone yell, “Dr. List!” and then List respond, “Get me out of here!” as he ducked and ran through another doorway. Coward.

Grant was crouched next to Skye as they observed several Hydra operatives shooting at them. “Just like old times, huh?” he said sarcastically.

Skye gave him a sardonic grin. “Not exactly.” She emerged from their hiding place and ran around some equipment to get an unobstructed view of their enemies. She raised her hand and the two remaining Hydra men flew backwards across the room, crashing into tables and equipment before slamming into the wall.

Grant stood, trying to hide his proud smile. He didn’t want Skye to view him as condescending but was it ever good to see her back in control. And looking like a goddess. She smirked at him. “Damn!” he said as his smile broke through despite all of his efforts to hide it. The two just stood there smiling at each other.

“Ugh! You two are disgusting!” Jemma broke their spell as she went around them to move deeper
into the room, rolling her eyes as she went.

Kara’s comment, “Get a room!” sounded much friendlier. She followed Jemma over to a glass window looking into a cell.

Inside the cell was Mike Peterson, lying on a cot looking incredibly beat up. There was a bandage holding a container in place where his mechanical eye had been removed, his mechanical leg was gone and his arm with the rockets was just a mass of wires. He looked like he’d been salvaged for parts, probably at the price of considerable pain. The horror of his condition must’ve shown on everyone’s faces because Mike, sitting up slowly and with great effort, said, “It’s not as bad as it looks.” Is he kidding?

Jemma apparently disagreed with that assessment too. “Really?” she asked skeptically.

Mike sighed and shook his head. “Naw, it’s pretty bad.”

Skye’s face was a conflicting expression of tension and horror. “There was another guy in here,” she told Mike. “He had electrical powers.”

“Lincoln?”

“Yeah,” she breathed. Grant felt a flicker of jealousy but then let it go. Now’s not the time.

“They moved him just before you showed.” Mike looked seriously at Skye. “You need to hurry. The guy’s in pretty bad shape.” Skye’s eyes widened in horror, then whirled around and left, almost running down the hall. Grant wanted to go after her but knew he needed to stay here and help.

“We’re coming in,” Jemma told Mike.

Mike shook his head with a small smile. “I told Lincoln you all would be stupid enough to try and rescue us.”

Grant started looking around for a way into the cell, testing the glass to see if it was as impenetrable as he suspected it would be. Yep. He glanced at Kara who was looking at Mike like she was going to be sick.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered to Mike. “I didn’t know what else to do, how to save you.” Mike nodded but didn’t meet her eyes.

Grant understood how horrible she felt. After all, there had been plenty of people who had gotten hurt when he was undercover. Remorse wasn’t a luxury you had when the mission was ongoing though. That was a guilt you carried with you during down times. He met Kara’s eyes, eyebrows raised.

She nodded shortly. “Right. Around here,” she said as she guided them around the back of the cell and through another door. She again entered a passcode and threw open the door to the cell. Jemma immediately rushed in, kneeled in front of Mike and began examining him.

Grant was standing in the doorway, looking around to see if the room remained clear and trying to gain whatever intel he could in the process. He was also trying hard to listen for sounds of gunshots or rumblings but Jemma didn’t seem to appreciate his caution.

“Don’t just stand there like an idiot,” she all but hissed at him. “Go and find something we can carry him out on.” Grant nodded and left the cell.
As he walked away, he heard Mike say to Jemma, “Surprised you’d sign up for a mission with Ward involved.”

Grant couldn’t help stopping for a second to hear her reply. He desperately wanted to know what was going on in her head because she was acting so unlike the Jemma who’d been his teammate on the Bus, the one who had a small crush on him, the Jemma he thought he knew. “I saw an opportunity to do the right thing, so I took it,” she replied.

Grant gave a small sigh of relief. *Now that sounds like Jemma. Maybe she’ll come around.* He found a small room right next to the cells. It looked like it was a storage facility for medical equipment, perfect for his purposes. He started checking the gurney for a stiff board, anything they could use to carry Mike to the quinjet, when he heard a disturbance behind him.

He whipped around, relaxing when he saw that it was only Kara. “Mike and Lincoln aren’t the only prisoners here,” she said in an urgent tone. “Hydra’s been experimenting on other powered people. We should try to rescue them too.”

He nodded, thinking hard. *First things first.* “OK, let me find something for Mike before we go. Where are they being held?” Grant multi-tasked, listening to Kara detail the directions to the other holding site while still searching for anything he could use. The gurney was a bust (it wasn’t easily moved), so he began examining the cabinets behind it. As he struggled to separate a wide piece of shelving from its position, he told her, “We don’t have a lot of time. We’ll get this to Jemma so she can get Mike back to the quinjet, then you and I can go get the other powered prisoners.”

“Oh, no you won’t!” Grant whirled around, shocked to see Jemma standing in the doorway to the room, hands clenched at her sides. “You are not bringing more…more…dangerous people to our base, Grant Ward!”

He glanced over at Kara, handing her the shelving. “Get this to Mike,” he told her in a low voice. “I’ll handle this.”

She nodded, taking the shelving and glancing in consternation at Jemma as she left the room.

Grant advanced towards Jemma slowly, a bit confused. *Where is she going with this? Does she really think she can stop me?* “Jemma, you’re a doctor. Isn’t it your sworn duty to help people who need it?”

Jemma crossed her arms across her chest. “The operative word there being people,” she snarled. “We’re still people, just a little different. And those people need our help. That’s what SHIELD does; we save people. Do you really want to leave them to get blown up or, worse, experimented upon and suffering like Mike?”

She looked down at her feet. Grant hoped that she’d finally gotten some of her reason and good-heartedness back. *We don’t have much time!* He started to move past her when she grabbed his arm, her expression fierce. “I’m sorry for their suffering, no one deserves that, but I cannot allow a plague to eradicate the human race!” She reached in her pocket, drew out a small device and slapped it on his arm.

Grant immediately fell to the floor, his whole body jerking from what felt like thousands of volts of electricity coursing through it. His mind blanked, his whole being concentrated on how much pain he was in. Then, as suddenly as it began, it was over. Kara was kneeling next to him, the device in her hand. She must’ve taken it off of him. Jemma was still standing in the doorway, defiant.
Grant struggled to his feet, Kara gingerly supporting him, grimacing a little as her hands gripped his to pull him to his feet. *What’s wrong with her?* But he couldn’t focus on Kara. His mind was completely blown over what had just happened. “You just tried to incapacitate me,” he gasped, his hand waving in the direction of the device Kara was still holding.

“I did,” Jemma replied, her head high and her expression utterly without shame. Sweat was rolling down her face.

“We’re on the same team,” he said in disbelief. “What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking that I didn’t want you to bring even more…monsters…onto our base. I’m glad I did it and I’d do it again if I have to,” she said insolently. She wiped some of her sweat onto her pants but maintained her glare.

Grant took a deep breath, pulling himself to his full height. *I need to pull it together. We’re running out of time!*

He turned to Kara. “I’m going to get the other prisoners. Take Jemma, get Mike and head to the rendezvous point.”

Kara looked mutinous, sweat rolling down her face as well. “What about you? The last time I left you alone, she hurt you,” she said while scowling at Jemma. “The only reason I knew something was wrong was that it suddenly got a lot hotter in here.”

Ah. Grant suddenly understood the reason Kara couldn’t touch him easily and why she and Jemma were so sweaty. He must’ve unconsciously reacted to the tasing by heating up his body and everything else around him. *I’m sure that put Jemma’s mind at ease. “Don’t worry; I’ll be fine. I have a plan.”*

Still looking skeptical, Kara nodded. She gave Grant a quick hug then, with a forbidding expression, turned to Jemma. “Let’s go,” she said, roughly grabbing her arm.

“Jemma,” Grant said. *I can’t let this go without saying something.* The two women stopped, turning to face him. “I’m disappointed in you. I imagine Fitz will be too.” He watched her face freeze, then took off running, hoping Kara would be safe.

As he ran, he forced his mind to focus on the task ahead. As hard as it was, he couldn’t dwell on what just happened. Grant made the two left and three right turns Kara told him about. He stopped in front of yet another steel door, carefully entered the passcode, and threw it open, gun ready for whatever was waiting for him inside. The room was yet another cell. A Latino boy, probably in his mid-teens was sitting in the corner, his arms on top of his knees, his forehead lying on his arms. He looked up, a wary expression on his face, when Grant opened the door.

The other occupant, a Latina woman in her early 30s, was lying on a cot facing the door, similar to the one Mike had in his cell. She raised herself onto her elbows upon his entry but, instead of looking at Grant, she looked over at the young man. He looked steadily at Grant for a moment, then his face cleared. “He’s not here to hurt us,” he told her. *What the hell? How does he know that?*

The woman nodded, swinging herself carefully onto her feet. She clearly was injured. “Are you here to rescue us?” she asked in somewhat accented English as she started limping towards Grant. The boy also got to his feet, moving to the woman and helping her stand upright.

Grant nodded but got distracted when he heard the sounds of jets approaching. Alarms started going off. He eased into the room, “I am here to rescue you but we don’t have a lot of time,” he shouted over the loud noise. “Please, allow me…” he said reaching out a hand to the woman. She
grasped it gratefully. “Let’s just hope this works,” he muttered to himself. Grant raised his head and said as clearly and loudly as possible, “Gordon, help!”

He wasn’t sure how quickly Gordon would appear but knew, if they were all to get out of there alive, it would have to be almost immediately. Even over the alarms, the jets could be heard getting even closer. Within seconds, the whooshing sound and blue lights appeared right before Gordon came into view. Grant let out a sigh of relief. The woman leaned a little closer to Grant, her eyes wide; he could feel her shaking. The boy, however, was looking at Gordon with something like awe. “You rang?” Gordon said in a sarcastic tone.

“SHIELD jets are on the way to bomb this facility. If we don’t get out of here now, we’re all dead!” Grant said quickly, his eyes on Gordon’s face, willing him to recognize the danger. He could hear the jets and booted feet coming down the hall.

“Well then, we should go,” Gordon said casually. He smiled, as if he had all the time in the world. “Would you like to go home?” he asked Grant.

“Yes! Let’s go!” Grant practically yelled at him. This guy is nuts!

Gordon put his arms around all three of them. For a split second, Grant felt absurdly like he was giving them a group hug. Then, just as the sound of explosions could be heard and felt, the facility winked out of sight.

*****

Grant woke up like nothing had happened. Instead of his bed at the Playground or his bunk on the Bus, he was lying on what appeared to be a tilted massage table in a spacious, gently lit room filled with New Age-y candles, herbs and towels. He’d once accompanied Skye when she went to get a massage and the room she was in looked like this. Am I at a spa?

He started to get up but found he could only move his head and neck. He looked down at the rest of his body to see what was wrong. He was naked except for a white silk wrapping covering his genitals. That’s…disturbing. There were also tiny lighted needles placed at specific places up and down his body. They appeared to be sending out electrical signals but he could barely feel them. They weren’t painful but instead were oddly soothing. What’s going on? The last thing I remember was leaving the Hydra base.

Gordon’s face came into view. “Hey,” he said jovially but gently, “you’re in a safe place.”

“Where am I?” Grant asked a little desperately. He wasn’t used to being so confused and helpless. Sure, he’d been either confused or helpless multiple times in his life but rarely both at the same time. The last time he could remember was when he was 15 years old and thrown into the woods without explanation or assistance.

“You’re in Afterlife, the Inhuman community I told you about. This is where Skye was until recently,” Gordon told him. “You called for me, remember?”

“Of course I remember,” Grant snapped. Gordon always worked his last nerve and anxiety was making him irritable. “I also remember that you took your time getting us out of there and that I was with two other people.” He glanced around the room again. “Where are they?”

“Don’t worry,” Gordon replied in that annoying tone, as if Grant were an errant toddler who needed to be convinced to take a nap. “They’re in other rooms like this one.”

Grant nodded thoughtfully. Somehow it didn’t seem as though they’d just left the facility. His body
wasn’t running on adrenaline, sore or even that fatigued. He must’ve been here for a while. “How long have I been here?”

Gordon smiled. “Two days.”

“Two days?!” Grant felt his desperation return as he struggled again to sit up or move even one of his limbs. Skye and Kara are going to be worried sick. “I need to go! I need to let my team know I’m OK.” He stopped struggling because obviously that wasn’t going to work. He glanced over at Gordon’s amused expression and wanted to strangle him. Clearly, they’d done something to him to keep most of him immobile. “Why can’t I move? What are you doing to me?”

“We’re healing you,” a deep, rich female voice said.

Grant raised his head to see a tall, slender young Arab woman enter the room and close the door behind her. She had long, dark hair hanging free to the middle of her back, expressive dark eyes and an impish grin. She was, quite simply, one of the most beautiful women he’d ever seen in his life. If Gordon hadn’t been watching him so closely, Grant might’ve gulped.

“Leaving now wouldn’t exactly be…” she paused as she headed toward the table next to his head. It appeared to have some medical equipment on it although he couldn’t see what kind. She glanced at the equipment, then looked over at Grant, smiling. “You ever made microwave popcorn?” she asked.

He just stared at her. Is she crazy?

The woman didn’t seem at all bothered by his silence. “Leave it in too long and it’s charcoal. Take it out too soon and it’s a bag of kernels.” She looked over, taking in his puzzled expression. She laughed lightly. “That might be the worst analogy ever. Gordo, help me out here.”

The grin on Gordon’s face widened. “You’re on your own with this one,” he told her. He looked down at Grant, “I have to go now. You’re in very good hands.” He leaned closer. “But I guess I don’t have to tell you that,” he whispered.

Grant frowned as Gordon left the room.

The woman came to stand by his bedside, a small electronic tablet in her hand that she kept examining. Grant suspected that she was monitoring his vitals or something. “He’s been checking on you a lot since you got here.”

“Well, that’s comforting,” Grant said sarcastically. “Who are you?”

The woman’s expression shifted from puzzlement to apologetic. “Sorry. I thought…I’m Shabina, your transitioner.”

“Transitioner? What the hell is that?” he asked more sharply than he intended. Grant didn’t know if he liked the sound of that.

Shabina sighed. “Right. I keep forgetting that you’re new to this. Everyone who goes through Terrigenesis has a transitioner to help them.” She looked closely at him again, then seemed to make a decision. She sat in the chair by his bedside. “Let me start from the top. Imagine a thousand years of evolution taking place instantaneously. That’s what happened to you after the Mist.”

Grant sighed impatiently, trying not to let Shabina’s beauty affect him. “Yeah, oddly enough, I worked that out for myself before I even got here. So what are you doing to me now?”
She nodded, seemingly not in the least put out by his attitude. “These treatments – we’re helping
your body adjust properly to the change, transitioning you quickly and painlessly I hope.” She
smiled winningly at him and Grant felt a little weak.

He frowned, trying to hang onto his anger. “Well, that might’ve been helpful weeks ago when I
first went through the Mist but we’re way past that now.”

“We usually like to start the process right after the Mist but, in your case, that wasn’t an option.”
She stood up, her manner brisk. “So we’ll start from where you are and go from there.” Shabina
consulted the tablet in her hand. “I must admit though that, for a Latecomer, you are amazingly
well-adjusted and extremely…” her eyes raked his body up and down, “…fit.”

Grant felt a wave of heat pass over him and hoped it hadn’t been noticeable. Glancing at Shabina’s
amused expression, it definitely had been. Damn. “How long?” he asked abruptly. “When can I
go?”

“You have places to be, people to see?” she asked teasingly.

“Yes, I do. I need to let my team know that I’m OK. I also need to check on the other two people
who came here with me.”

“I can assure you that they’re fine, Grant, but you’ll be able to see them for yourself soon.” She
frowned and he tried to ignore how wonderfully she said his name. “As for contacting your team,
that’ll be up to Jiaying. She makes the rules.”

He nodded, remaining silent for a moment as Shabina checked her tablet and the other equipment.
Grant really wanted to know more about her but wasn’t sure how to go about it. “Is it considered
rude to ask what power you got after going through the Mist?”

Shabina laughed as she made an adjustment to her device. Then she sat back down in the chair
again. “This may sound a little weird but I’m a sharpshooter.”

“A sharpshooter? Like a sniper?” he asked, somewhat incredulously. She nodded. “No offense,
Shabina, but that seems more like a skill than a power. I was a crack shot even before I got
powers.”

Despite his tone, the smile on her face remained firmly in place. Seeing it, Grant’s irritation rose
even further. He was being rude and unpleasant yet nothing seemed to bother this woman. She
shrugged. “It may seem that way at first but I can hit a target with anything you give me: a
thumbtack, a piece of paper, even a popcorn kernel,” she said as she picked up a small kernel of
popped corn from a bowl on the table and flicked it at him. Sure enough, the kernel bounced off
the exact center of his forehead. She smirked and looked at him expectantly.

“Well. I can see how that could come in handy,” Grant said sarcastically. He really wanted to say
something that would rattle her cage. “You sure do seem to like popcorn, what with using it in
analogies and demonstrations. Is that a big thing here? Are we all required to eat it because that’s
going to be a problem for me. I prefer a low-carb diet. It keeps me extremely…fit.”

Shabina’s grin widened. “I should tell you that there is another power I was blessed with. My
name, Shabina, means “eye of the storm” and I guess the gods took that literally.” She stood up
and headed toward the door. “Just so you know, it’s almost impossible to upset me. See you soon!”
Grant could hear her laughing as she left the room. He smiled a little to himself. Being able to keep
your cool in tough situations, yeah, that truly is a superpower.
He laid his head back on the pillow, feeling uneasy. He really did need to contact Skye, Kara and SHIELD but he didn’t know how to do that yet. He admitted to having a certain curiosity about Afterlife even though it was probably going to be difficult. Grant always did better when he knew the rules and he had no idea what was expected here. It had been a long time since he’d felt that knot in his stomach, not since he was 15 years old and was thrown into an impossible situation. He was overwhelmed and had no idea what was going to happen next.
After lying immobilized on the table for another half hour, Grant felt like he was ready to kill someone and he wouldn’t be picky about who. He was a man of action; lying still unable to do anything was practically torture. Thoughts of what happened before he woke up passed through his mind: Skye’s desperation to get to Lincoln, Jemma’s betrayal, Gordon’s attempts at humor, Shabina’s refusal to tell him much of anything. With each thought, Grant could feel himself getting hotter. If he tried hard enough, he could practically see steam rising from his body.

*What if I just burn these stupid needles off?* He liked this idea – it would at least give him something to do – but quickly dismissed it as stupid since he had no clue what they were doing to his body. What if they scarred him? What if his heat set off a chain reaction that burned him internally or made it so the fire he generated affected him too? The last thing he needed was to severely injure himself in what might possibly be enemy territory. Grant snorted in exasperation before going through his calming routine. *Enforced passivity it is.*

Just as he was about to start yelling for someone, anyone, to come, Shabina returned. She entered the room silently and smiled warmly at Grant as she began taking the needles out of his skin. He prepared himself for the pain this was sure to cause but, much to his surprise, it didn’t hurt at all. If anything, the spots where the needles had been felt tingly, almost as if they had been invigorated. Shabina’s hands were warm on his skin and he tried hard to ignore how nice they felt on his body. Grant also refused to admit that she smelled good.

*What is wrong with me? I’m in love with Skye!*

Shabina finished taking out all the needles, put them in a box, and made some notes on the electronic tablet. She looked over at him. “You can get up now but you may want to wait until I’ve left the room. I don’t think that towel is very sturdy or…” she smiled wickedly, “very big.” She winked.

Grant just stared at her, nothing coming to mind in response. If Skye had said something like that (and she definitely would have), he could’ve replied, “I’ll show you big!” as he chased her around the room sans towel. But this was different, so he almost squirmed in silence as he waited for Shabina to leave.

If she noticed his discomfort, she didn’t show it. Shabina finished at the table and headed toward the door without even looking at him. “I’ll let you get dressed, then I’ll be back to show you around the place,” she said over her shoulder. The door shut behind her.

The moment she was gone, Grant stood, slowly testing his body to make sure the needles didn’t screw anything up. He even created some fire to see if his powers still worked. He stared at the ball of fire resting in the palm of his hand, mesmerized by the red, yellow and orange hues. *Fire is so beautiful.* It also was fascinating; he could stare at it for hours. Grant had spent a lot of time in the Wyoming woods staring into the campfires he built. He’d come to the conclusion that fire was somewhat of a metaphor for his life. It was beautiful and deadly – it could definitely cause injury and pain – but it also provided life-giving heat and burned away what needed to go. The fire he started at his family’s house had burned away his life with the Wards. Now his gift of fire had burnt away his life as a human. Grant felt deeply grateful that fire was his gift; he’d always loved it. He just hoped that it didn’t one day consume him.

He shook off his reflections and quickly got dressed. *Someone washed my clothes.* This was good because they’d been starting to smell. As he pulled on his shirt, Grant wandered over to examine the medical equipment. Much to his annoyance, Shabina hadn’t left anything of importance behind. The only things in the room were candles, towels, and lotions. *What is this place?*
He was just sniffing at a lotion when Shabina knocked on the door, poking her head in. The sight of Grant up and dressed was apparently invitation enough, so she came all the way into the room. “How are you feeling?”

Grant didn’t consider his answer much. *What does it matter?* He shrugged. “Kind of normal.”

Shabina smiled approvingly. “Normal’s good,” she said teasingly. When she didn’t get much of a response from him, her smile faded a bit. “We flushed your lymphatic and circulatory systems, so you’ll be weak for a few days, but…”

He nodded, barely paying attention. He felt fine. But then he almost heard his counselor’s voice telling him that his body’s needs were important too. *OK, I can do that.* He did a quick inventory, paying closer attention to how he truly felt. He discovered that there was some fatigue and a little bit of a shaky feeling. He noted Shabina’s worried look. *Maybe I should give her a little something.* “You’re telling me that I should take it easy for a few days.”

Shabina nodded, her smile returning to full wattage. “Yes, exactly.”

“I can do that but I need to get a message to my team.”

She shrugged nonchalantly. “Gordon’s the only one who can make contact with the outside world. We can talk to him when he gets back.”

Grant nodded, trying not to roll his eyes. *Of course I have to deal with Gordon. But there’s also Halona, the telepath.* He looked around. “Where exactly are we?”

“No one really knows.” Shabina perked up, dashing to the double doors. “The official name is Chinese. Lai Shi. It doesn’t exactly translate.” She threw open the doors, inhaled appreciatively and stepped onto a stone tiled balcony surrounded by trees and large flowers. There was a small railing that overlooked a large and beautiful mountain range. She waited for Grant to come out beside her, smiling at his awestruck expression. “We just call it Afterlife.”

Ever since he’d started being a triple agent, Grant’s counselor had been trying to get him to enjoy the moment. Hydra, and especially John, never wanted him to give in to human impulses or joy. They’d only wanted his skills, his robotic-like efficiency. His counselor wanted him to change that expectation. “Stop trying to assess every risk, plan for every contingency,” she’d tell him. “Enjoy the moment. Drink in the beauty of what you see. Appreciate what you feel.”

The first time she’d given those instructions, Grant rolled his eyes, even snorting a bit in disbelief. “I’m a spy,” he replied firmly. “My life could depend on those assessments and plans.”

“Yes, of course. But your job is being a spy. It isn’t who you are. There has to be a balance,” she’d retorted.

Grant hadn’t said anything at the time but her words stayed with him, took root in his soul. He started recalling his days in Wyoming when nature was a delight and the woods were home. Whenever possible, he started noticing not just the dangers but also the wonders. Grant usually had trouble with that since so much of his life was engaged in spycraft. Being with Skye had been helpful, especially when she first joined the team. However, he’d noticed that the more she trained to become an agent, the less joyful she became and the less beauty she noticed. Now, here in Afterlife, he suddenly felt free.

Instead of noting the exit routes and access points, Grant took his time looking at the multiple mountain peaks shrouded in mist. He appreciated the differing shades of blue within the range and
the peaceful snowcapped mountain tops. He breathed in the crisp, clean air and luxuriated in the cool wind flowing over his body. He imagined himself climbing the peaks, feeling the exhilaration that accompanies being one with nature. Satisfied with the mountains, Grant turned and relished the colorful contrast of the red flowers against the green trees that were resting aside the door.

Throughout his examination and the testing of his senses, Shabina just stood quietly, her expression showing her appreciation of his enjoyment. *Somehow she just seems to fit.* Her cocoa skin stood out against the blue and white of the sky and mountains. Grant felt a tinkling sense of danger, of letting his attraction to her get out of control. But even with that, the moment was wonderful. He felt alive in a way he hadn’t for some time.

There was a path off of the balcony leading to an entrance gate. Clearly, there was a whole town here he’d had yet to see. “After being motionless for so long,” he told Shabina with a mock glare, “I feel like action. Can we take a walk?”

She looked surprised. “Of course.” She gestured towards the path and the two of them set off walking.

They were silent for a while, Grant thinking over what he’d learned. “You say the name of this place is Chinese. Are we in China?”

Shabina shrugged. “No idea.”

Grant almost snorted as they passed some distinctly Asian-looking stone warriors. There were also several pagodas and a horse statue atop the entry gate. He found it rich that no one seemed to believe they were in China. Sure, there were other countries where they could be but, given the wide expanse of land, the mountains and the need for secrecy, China seemed like the best bet.

“Gordon’s the only one who knows where we are and he’s the only way in or out. It keeps us secret and safe from the outside world.”

“Or it keeps us prisoners.” They passed several people, some casually reading books while others were walking or just sitting in the sun. If these people were prisoners, they were happy ones.

Shabina smiled slightly. “You’re not very trusting, are you?”

“Let’s see…” Grant said, stroking his chin in mock contemplation. “I woke up naked on a table in a place no one can even point to on a map so…call me crazy. And no, I’m not very trusting. I’ve never had reason to be.”

Shabina suddenly stopped walking and turned to face him. She looked at him steadily for a moment, perhaps to see if he was joking. “That’s really sad, Grant,” she said gently. “Trusting people is the foundation of any good relationship. I hope that will change for you some day.”

Grant was startled by both her sincerity and her gentleness. He searched her face, attempting to find evidence that she was working him, trying to gain an advantage by playing on his emotions. But her deep brown eyes looked completely guileless. “Me too,” he whispered, then tried not kicking himself for his vulnerability. *Get it together, Ward! You have no idea what you’re up against!*

She smiled a little and started walking again. “Besides, you weren’t totally naked and you asked Gordon to bring you here. No one’s going to force you to stay. It’s not a bad place. The night life’s a little lacking…”

Looking around at the beautiful scenery and appreciating the quiet serenity of the place, Grant figured he could do without the frenetic nightlife people always seemed to think they wanted.
“So you live here?” he asked Shabina. They were passing through yet another gateway, this time surrounded by men in Samurai garb riding horse. Not China. Right. The path led along what seemed like a main street type of thoroughfare although this one was just wide enough for people to pass through. So far, he’d seen no evidence of any type of car or motorized vehicle. It looked like Gordon truly was the only mode of transportation. That felt dangerous. What will they do if something happens to him?

“No one lives here, not permanently. It’s more like a way station. I’m sure you’ve probably guessed that I’m from Egypt.” Grant nodded. That seemed evident from the first time he’d seen her and heard her speak. “There are people here from all over the world and we come for a lot of different reasons. I’m a geneticist. I’m brought here when I’m needed, to help people transition or when they believe something’s wrong. Some people come here when they need a safe place to stay.”

“Kind of like a homeless shelter?”

She waved her hand as though the name was displayed on a billboard or in lights. “Afterlife: A Home for Wayward Powered People.” She laughed. “Sure. Why not?”

Grant smiled too, appreciating how beautiful she looked when she laughed. He glanced around, becoming aware that people were staring at him, had been staring ever since they’d started walking. Never a good thing for a spy. “Umm….maybe I’m paranoid in addition to not being trusting but why is everyone staring at me?”

Shabina stopped walking as she turned to face Grant again. “Gordon didn’t explain?” she asked tentatively.

“I think it would be easier if you just assumed that Gordon’s explained nothing to me. What should he have explained?”

She sighed. “Having not one but three Latecomers – people who went through the Mist without being prepared – has never happened. Things here are usually done a certain way. These people you see around you are descendants, yes, but most of them are waiting to be chosen. They carry the genetic marker and have been brought here to be evaluated, cultured, and prepared for the change should they be selected but that only happens to one person every few years.”

Grant thought about Skye’s terror when she couldn’t control her powers and how the changes he and Skye had gone through transformed the team dynamic from comfort to chaos. He could well imagine that many people might not want that kind of life if they had a choice. For all he knew, Skye still didn’t. “They actually want to go through the Mist?”

Shabina nodded. “This tradition has been passed down through countless generations.”

“And we jumped the line.”

“And not only did you go through without permission or preparation but you did it old-school, with a diviner in a Kree temple. That hasn’t happened for thousands of years. You can see why these people might be a little envious…and scared.”

Grant tried not to feel defensive but it was difficult. He and Skye hadn’t known what would happen; they were lucky they hadn’t been killed. Why do people keep punishing us for that? “I didn’t ask for this,” he said sharply.

“I understand.” Her tone was gentle.
“You said three Latecomers: Skye, me, and…Raina? Raina’s here? Gordon brought her here?”

Shabina’s expression of wariness just confirmed his guess. She tried to pass it off though. “Gordon takes people everywhere. It’s his job to keep us safe. I promise, there is no one here who will harm you. You’re protected.”

Grant repressed a snort. *As if I need protecting. I’ll deal with Raina later.* But if there were only three Latecomers, then that meant the woman and the boy he’d taken from the Hydra facility were, or at least had been, part of this community too. *Time for some more answers.* “How many of us are there?”

“We don’t know. Not every descendant is found and not everyone who is chooses to come.”

He mulled over her answer. There could be a lot of people with the potential for powers out in the world. Similarly, if no one lived permanently at Afterlife (although that was ridiculous; some people clearly had to), then there were a lot of people with powers in the world too. Yet, until recently, SHIELD had never heard of them. That was interesting. “You said earlier that I could see the people who came here with me. Can I see them now?”

“Yes, of course. In fact, both of them asked to see you too.” She smiled. “I think they want to thank you for saving their lives.”

Grant nodded uncomfortably. He always hated it when people thanked him for just doing his job. They acted like it was a big deal when all he was doing was what he’d been trained to do. He wasn’t special.

Shabina looked at him curiously. “Why does that bother you? I’d imagine that would be one of the perks of being a protector.”

“I’m a spy, not a protector. And that’s why it bothers me, I guess. They’re getting my job description wrong.”

“And yet your name – Grant Ward – means Great Guard, or Protector.”

“That’s just a coincidence.” He almost launched into an explanation of how his family never thought anything good of him so there was no way his name was anything other than a fluke. But he kept silent, not wanting Shabina to think less of him.

Shabina said nothing but didn’t look convinced. She veered off the main path to head into one of the larger buildings. Grant guessed it functioned like a rec center. The large single room held a ping pong table, couches, a kitchen and tables dedicated to games and puzzles. There were probably 15 to 20 people milling around. He immediately spotted the woman he rescued sitting with a small group in one of the lounge areas. The boy looked like he was playing chess. “Hey! I thought you said you wouldn’t use your powers!” she said accusingly.

The boy’s eyes widened in denial. Having interrogated many liars (and being an accomplished one himself), Grant smiled slightly at the boy’s efforts to deceive his companion. The boy opened his mouth to continue his defense but, seeing Grant, moved toward him instead. “Elena!” he called, tilting his head at Grant.

Shabina abruptly stopped her conversation and got up from the couch slowly. While her leg seemed to be better than it was at the Hydra facility, it still appeared sore as she limped over to Grant and briefly grasped his hand.
“We wanted to thank you for saving our lives,” she told him in heavily accented English.

“Stop embarrassing him, Elena,” the boy said. He gazed intently at Grant. “I can feel your curiosity, so I’m guessing you want to know more about us. That’s Elena Rodriguez. She’s from Colombia and her power is speed although probably not at the moment. I’m Manuel de la Rocha from California. I’m an empath.”

Grant raised his eyebrows. He wasn’t sure he wanted someone rooting around in his mind.

Manuel grinned impishly. “I can’t read your mind, only your emotions and whether or not you’re lying.” At Grant’s skeptical look, he rolled his eyes. “It doesn’t take a mind reader to know what you were worried about. Most people freak out about the possibility of me knowing what they’re thinking, so I like to clear that up immediately.”

“Good thinking. How did you get captured by Hydra?”

Both Elena and Manuel looked uncomfortable. Elena glanced at Shabina who nodded slightly.

“We were on a mission in Bogota,” she told him. “The police were stockpiling guns and weapons to use against their own citizens. Our goal was to steal and destroy the weapons so we could keep the people safe. Unfortunately Hydra was there too.” Elena looked at a sheepish-looking Manuel. “Somehow they realized we had powers and captured us.”

“It was my fault,” Manuel burst in. “I was talking with the police sergeant, figuring out where they were storing everything. Hydra must’ve been watching me and realized that I could tell when the guy was scared or lying. So they grabbed me and put me in the back of this van. They didn’t know about Elena. She could’ve just left me and escaped.” He looked at Elena, a pleading expression on his face. “I would’ve been OK with that. I didn’t want you to get hurt, especially not because I was careless.”

Elena snorted. “I would never leave you behind.”

In observing Manuel’s guilty expression, Grant found himself feeling sorry for him. He remembered all too well what it was like to get cocky, to think you knew everything, only to have it all come crashing down around you. He also remembered what it was like for someone he cared about to get hurt.

Flashback

Graduating from the Academy was one of the happiest days of Grant’s life. He’d earned top scores in his classes, an achievement that did not go unnoticed by his teachers and classmates. He received more nods of approval and shook more hands than he’d thought possible. Even though Grant had kept a low profile around campus since his first year, on graduation day, his classmates overlooked his isolationist tendencies. Everywhere he went, people were smiling at him, congratulating him on his hard work and expressing confidence in his future success. Grant couldn’t remember a time when people had given him so much approval. He worked hard to keep it all in check, reminding himself frequently of his purpose.

But it was difficult. The rumor that he had the best espionage score after the Black Widow had circulated widely (while this was actually true, no one would confirm it), earning him envious and admiring looks wherever he went. His excellent scores in marksmanship, tactical planning and physical training were less well known but still frequently discussed among the newly graduated agents and the cadets. Kara was so happy for him that she looked fit to burst.

Of course, John was pleased by his abilities too – after all, they would be used to save his life – but
Grant could tell that he was also envious so they usually went unremarked. That’s one reason why Grant was happy that John couldn’t attend the graduation ceremony. He was on a mission for SHIELD and wouldn’t return for a few weeks. So Grant was free to enjoy his time in the sun until John returned and the real work began.

Part of his time in the sun included an easy assignment under the supervision of Agent Jessica Drew. Although he told no one lest it get back to John, Grant was thrilled to be working with Agent Drew even if it was just for one mission. In addition to being beautiful, Drew had the reputation of being excellent at her job while still being fun. Plus, as he discovered when she guest-taught the Ethics course at the Academy, she was a great mentor.

Unlike John who demanded both gratitude and credit for whatever successes Grant achieved, Drew was liberal with her praise and encouragement. She seemed to truly care that students and trainees learn and do well regardless of who was responsible for their achievements. While at the Academy, she’d watch some of the physical training sessions and even once showed Grant some moves. He was a quick learner and flipped her over onto the mat after being shown once. Grant quickly helped her up, wary of her reaction. John would’ve been angry at such a reversal, so Grant didn’t know how Drew would respond. He prepared himself for a tongue-lashing but was relieved and charmed when she’d laughed with delight and thanked him for being such an excellent student. Consequently, when Grant was asked if he’d be willing to take on an assignment with Agent Drew while he waited for John to return and “begin his training” (as far as SHIELD knew), he immediately said yes. Besides, the mission itself sounded simple. SHIELD had gotten intel that Asgardian weapons left behind by Loki during his time in Germany were being sold to a rich collector. Their task was to steal the weapons.

“This should be a walk in the park for us,” Agent Drew said cheerfully during the team’s initial meeting. The mission called for an extremely small team, so it was only Drew, Grant and Chris McCarthy, another new graduate of the Academy, in the conference room. “But it does require that all of us work smoothly together. Do you two know each other?” she asked, pointing from one man to the other.

Fortunately, Grant and Chris did know each other. Chris had been part of the group of friends Grant made when he first entered the Academy. He was a good guy, a serious and diligent student. Chris wasn’t the best but he worked hard and always tried to do the right thing. After the disaster at the Goldbrix Tavern, Grant was forced to distance himself from the group. Many of his former friends were resentful, imagining Grant a snob who considered himself too good to associate any more with the likes of them. The more Grant excelled in classes and physical training, the more they held onto that assumption. And while their collective cold shoulder made it easier to avoid them, it also hurt. Grant spent many a lonely night trying not to be resentful of what could have been.

But Chris wasn’t like the rest of the group. While he’d respected Grant’s wishes to be distant and never pushed for more interaction, Chris remained friendly. He smiled and said hello in the halls, willingly paired with Grant for assignments and was the first to applaud when Grant beat his sparring partner or won competitions. Kara suspected that Chris knew about her relationship with Grant but, true to form, never gossiped about it to the other students. Thus, Grant’s original assessment had been correct: Chris McCarthy truly was a good guy. That he was included in the team on Grant’s first assignment as a new agent was an added benefit.

“Oh course,” Grant told Drew. “Chris and I have known each other since our first week at the Academy.”

Chris nodded, smiling slightly at Grant but saying nothing.
“Well, good!” Drew said, looking pleased. “That will make things easier.” She shoved briefing notebooks across the table to each of them. “You can read about everything later but essentially, this mission is a Wink and Blink.”

What? Grant glanced fleetingly at Chris, reassured to see his own confusion mirrored in Chris’ expression.

Drew must’ve seen it too because she laughed lightly. “You’ve never heard of Wink and Blinks? Well, maybe the Academy is calling it something else these days. Anyway, Wink and Blinks are when one of us seduces our target,” she winked at Chris with an outrageous grin, “while the items in question disappear in the blink of an eye,” she waved her hands like a magician with a disappearing act, “never to be seen again.” She shrugged. “Wink and Blink.”

Chris laughed. “That makes a weird kind of sense. I suppose you’re the one doing the Winking?”

She sighed. “Fraid so. Sadly, our rich collector is heterosexual which means that I get to wear tight clothes and dodge wandering hands while you two get to do the fun stuff.”

Grant smiled at her dramatics. Briefings with John were always serious, the only laughter allowed was the kind that poked fun at someone else. This is fun! I’d rather do this than… Grant immediately locked down such disloyal thoughts. I owe John everything! Fun doesn’t matter, he needs me. Deep down though, he couldn’t help wishing that he could have a Supervising Officer like Jessica Drew. He had a feeling that his life would be a lot easier if that were the case.

“What kind of fun stuff?” Chris asked.

“I’m glad you asked. Since you, my friend,” she said pointing at Chris, “are good at stealth, you are going to find and take the weapons.” She slid some blueprints of what appeared to be a hotel and an individual hotel room across the table to him. “Memorize both of these and figure out where an old German dude would be most likely to hide the illegal alien weapons he just bought on the black market.” She turned to Grant. “Your job will be to provide security for Agent McCarthy and coordinate the team in general. I won’t need any security to take care of Herr Daddy Warbucks but I will need to know what the two of you are doing.” She smiled slightly. “I especially want to know the second I can ditch the idiot and go have some real fun.” Drew slid a blueprint of the hotel and a map of the city block surrounding the area to Grant. “Memorize these and decide where you will need to be to provide protection and back-up.”

Grant nodded, then waited for the usual emphasis on the importance of the mission and the admonition against screwing up before he could go study the plans independently.

But Drew wasn’t John, something that became crystal clear when she looked at them seriously and said, “Both of you were chosen because you’re excellent agents. I trust that things will go smoothly, so please do study the mission parameters before we meet again on Tuesday. But in the meantime, I also want you to go have some fun.” Drew glanced at both of them and, seeing what surely must’ve been shocked expressions on their faces, said teasingly, “Remember boys, we don’t live to work; we work to live. See you in two days!” Then she breezed out of the door, leaving Chris and Grant to stare at each other in disbelief.

Grant did take the time to hang out with Kara and a few other cadets and new agents. He had fun but the real reason he engaged socially was because he assumed Drew would check to see whether he followed her orders. John always did. He also threw himself into studying and memorizing the plans, using his skilled tactical brain to develop a defensive and offensive plan to protect his team. John always expected Grant to work independently – to be the whole solution – so whenever Drew asked him if she could help, he always turned her down. He suspected that she wasn’t as hardcore
as John but he still wanted her to see what he could do. Besides, this was an easy mission and his top scores showed he was one of the best. He shouldn’t need any assistance.

The team flew to Germany and set up shop at SHIELD headquarters in Frankfort. Their mission centered on the Althoff Hotel Am Schlossgarten in Stuttgart where Herr Alric Sauer, billionaire, would be staying while he bought illegal alien weapons. Drew would be keeping Herr Sauer busy in the hotel lounge while Chris would sneak into his hotel room, locate and obtain the weapons and leave, hopefully with no one the wiser. Grant would be stationed across the street with a sniper rifle, prepared to take out enemy combatants. SHIELD debated whether to fire stunning darts instead of bullets but ultimately decided that dead men tell no tales. Drew argued against this policy but got nowhere. Grant liked her all the more for her efforts.

The only problem was that no one seemed to know, or at least weren’t willing to tell the team, what the alien weapons actually were. So they were going in blind for what they were trying to acquire. Grant thought that this changed the mission from a walk in the park to at least moderately difficult but Chris didn’t share his worries.

“I’ll find them,” he told Drew and Grant confidently during their last meeting before the mission was to begin. At their disbelieving expressions, he added, “They’re alien technology. How hard can they be to spot?”

Grant wanted to scoff but didn’t want to undermine Chris’ confidence, especially since they were so close to the mission beginning. Drew seemed to have the same idea. She nodded, her whole body radiating confidence. “And at least we know that you’re looking for two of them. A hotel room is pretty small. There can’t be that many places to hide.”

Are they kidding? They could be hidden in a briefcase under the bed, in a hidden compartment in the kitchen, bathroom or closet, in the walls, in a special compartment in the entertainment center or the weapons could be small enough that they’re hard to see with the naked eye. But Grant kept his silence. The mission would either go smoothly or it wouldn’t. All he could do was his part.

Much to his surprise and relief, the mission did go smoothly, at least at first. Herr Sauer took an immediate liking to Drew, almost slobbering over her in his drunken and lecherous state. She practically had him eating out of her hand. Chris entered the hotel room with no problem, threw back the curtains for Grant and began his search. After 20 agonizing minutes, he found a hidden compartment in the wall of the living area. “Eureka!” he said softly into his comm unit as he lifted the briefcase carefully out of the alcove.

“What is it?” Drew asked loudly. “Oohhh….another vodka martini. You do seem to like those,” she said in a softer tone. Grant grinned to himself. The billionaire had been drinking heavily all night but her comment was a cover for her real question to Chris. The team was supposed to maintain radio silence unless they were in trouble but Drew, like Grant, was clearly curious as to what the weapons were.

Chris carefully unlocked the briefcase, tentatively lifting the top half in order to view the contents. Grant approved wholeheartedly of his restraint. While they needed to make certain they were getting what they were supposed to obtain, you never knew what kind of deadly security precautions people took. Apparently Herr Sauer was neither clever nor cautious. Typical. Based on his life experience, other than Tony Stark, Grant found that most people with wealth rarely deserved it. Chris gingerly lifted one of the weapons out of its case and briefly held it up to the window. “What is it?” he asked quietly before returning it to its protective case.

Grant immediately recognized it. Oh, yuck! “That’s Loki’s retinal scanning device.” His eyes hurt just thinking about it. Loki went to Stuttgart specifically to get the retinal scan of a German
scientist to help him steal the iridium needed to stabilize the Tesseract. He was stopped by the Avengers and apparently didn’t retrieve the scanning devices before being captured. Since many technological secrets were protected through retinal scanning these days, this was definitely a weapon that shouldn’t fall into the wrong hands.

“Well done! What a great acquisition!” Drew said loudly, once again speaking to the team. Then she murmured to Herr Sauer, “That’s the kind of business merger you don’t hear about every day.”

Grant grinned again. *Drew’s going to be glad to get out of here.* Chris closed the case and stood, preparing to leave. He was in the process of putting everything back the way he found it when Grant saw his face freeze. “Trouble,” Chris whispered, darting from the living area to the kitchen. In their mission planning, the team agreed that the kitchen provided more protection since it had a wider view of the room and offered more than one way out. It also was closer to the door.

Three large men dressed in black entered the hotel suite. Grant prepared to kill them with three quick shots. He squeezed the trigger. Glass shattered loudly as the lead attacker dropped to the floor. The second guy tripped over the prone body and rolled, throwing open the closet door in front of him. Grant’s view was obscured but he shot again where he thought the attackers would be. He heard a satisfying thud in his comms. *Two down. Where’s the other one?* His heart leaped when he heard a shot coming from the hotel room. *The entry to the kitchen is right in front of that damn closet.*

Grant saw Chris stagger, the right front side of his shirt turning red. He caught himself on the door of the refrigerator that he’d had the presence of mind to open before the guy shot at him. Grant pulled the trigger again, aiming exactly where he thought the remaining attacker might be. He didn’t breathe until he heard Chris groan, “Got him!”

Grant hurriedly began packing up his sniper rifle. “Chris,” he said, not bothering to keep quiet, “grab a towel from the bathroom to put on your wound and put on your coat to cover it up. Start making your way toward the north staircase as best you can. Drew and I are on our way.”

“Copy that,” Chris said. Grant glanced across the street to make sure Chris was following his instructions before grabbing his rifle case and dashing out of the door, taking the steps two at a time. He heard Drew in his ear. “Oh, I’ve had such a lovely time but I really must be going. No, please don’t get up; I’m just heading to my room. I look forward to seeing you tomorrow at lunch,” she said sweetly. Thirty seconds later, he heard, “I’ll be there in 10, Chris,” in her Agent Drew voice.

Grant raced across the street and hurried into the hotel lobby, immediately switching into a sedate pace to the north stairwell lest he raise eyebrows at his entrance. Once in the stairwell, he raced up two flights before seeing Drew, Chris’ left arm around her shoulder, helping him down the stairs. Grant immediately took Drew’s place. “I’m not wearing heels,” he said in answer to her outraged look. She paused, then nodded, leading the way down the remaining two flights before exiting the building onto the street. A black SHIELD SUV pulled in front of them just as they hit the street. The driver kept the vehicle running as Drew and Grant maneuvered Chris into the SUV and got in on either side of him. The door had barely closed before the SUV leapt into traffic, heading back to the mission control room they’d set up in Stuttgart.

Drew immediately got on her phone, telling SHIELD HQ what happened and requesting a medical team meet them at their room.

“It’s not that bad,” Chris said softly after she hung up, pulling aside his coat to look at the towel he had pressed on the wound. “I think the refrigerator door took the brunt of the bullet. I wouldn’t be surprised if this was just a flesh wound.” Chris seemed to be taking this in stride but Grant felt an
almost crippling wave of guilt and shame. He already knew it was bad but seeing up close what his failure had cost Chris was practically unbearable. How could I have let that happen?

“Keep the pressure on that wound,” Drew said firmly. She searched his expression, her own softening as she saw he was in pain. “I’d love to be able to give you something for the pain but I don’t dare do anything until our doctor sees you. We’ll be there in a minute.”

Chris nodded, closing his eyes and resting his head against the seat cushion. The rest of the trip passed in silence.

They got Chris onto the bed and retreated into the living area, leaving him with the SHIELD doctor and nurse who were moving quickly and efficiently to provide him with care. Once the door between the rooms shut, Drew turned to Grant. “What happened?” Grant looked her directly in the eyes. John had drilled it into him – sometimes painfully – that he must always face up to what he’d done and bear the consequences. There were no excuses, no extenuating circumstances that made failure acceptable. “This is my life on the line,” John always told him. Grant would nod, the guilt and shame of failing John making his mistakes that much worse. This time he’d failed Chris who got hurt because of Grant’s error and he’d disappointed someone he wanted to impress. It was unacceptable.

“I got too cocky,” Grant told her, his expression blank but his eyes never wavering from hers. “I didn’t account for the closet door in my planning, so when the second attacker threw it open, I couldn’t see where he was. I shot blindly and managed to kill him but not before he shot Agent McCarthy.” He stood even straighter. “I apologize for causing the failure of this mission due to my carelessness. I’m happy to pay for Agent McCarthy’s care and I’ll gladly accept any punishment you think is necessary.”

Drew stared at him, frowning in surprise. “Agent Ward, I’m sorry if you misunderstood my question. All I wanted to know was what happened; I wasn’t looking to blame anyone.” She paused to think. “If anything, the fault was mine for not going over the plans with you. Details like the closet aren’t things they teach you in school. That kind of knowledge comes with experience, something that I have and you don’t.” She shook her head, a rueful expression crossing her face. “You’re such a skilled agent that I forgot that you’re also a new graduate.” She touched him softly on the arm. Grant hoped she couldn’t feel him shaking but, given her expression, she probably could. “Please, let’s sit down.”

Grant sat down warily. He was confused. She should be yelling at me. “I appreciate your understanding but I still intend on paying for Agent McCarthy’s care.”

She shook her head. “SHIELD is responsible for our care whenever we get hurt on the job. Agent McCarthy will get the best care SHIELD can provide. No one’s asking for reimbursement from you or anyone else. Wherever did you get the idea that agents have financial responsibility for injuries?”

Uh oh. Grant thought quickly about how to respond. Under no circumstances could he let her know that this was something John had told him, had insisted upon, since day one of his training. “I don’t know. I just assumed…” He smiled, hoping to distract her. “I guess you’re right about me having a lot to learn.”

Drew frowned. “Grant,” she said slowly, “it’s almost like you want to take responsibility for everything, even for things that aren’t your fault. You seem to think that you should take all of the blame and none of the credit. Yes, Chris got shot due to a failure – primarily mine – in planning. But the fact that he’ll survive is completely due to you, to your skills as a sniper.”
“Yeah, I was wondering about that,” Chris said. He’d opened the door to the room and was standing in the doorway, apparently just listening to their conversation. He made his way slowly to the chair next to the couch, sitting down gingerly and smiling at them. He held up his hand to forestall their questions. “I’m going to be fine. It’s a little more than a flesh wound – which will be great for all the stories I’ll be telling about it in the future – but since the bullet just passed through, there isn’t much damage. I’ll be back to fighting shape in no time.” He looked Grant in the eye. “In the meantime, since I’m feeling no pain at the moment, I was wondering how in the hell you managed to drop that guy without being able to see him. You only took one shot.”

Grant shrugged, feeling uncomfortable. This isn’t the way this conversation should be going. When are they going to start yelling at me, pointing out everything I did wrong? “I just aimed for where I thought he’d be given the angle of the doorway and your wound.” There was a silence and Grant prepared himself for the anger that was sure to follow. How dare he make a guess when he should have known where to aim? He should have sprayed the area, leaving nothing to chance. A team member got hurt and there should be hell to pay. But Drew was just staring at him. Chris was too. “That’s amazing,” he told Grant, smiling. “I always knew being your friend would pay off.” He got shakily to his feet. “I’m going to go to bed now.”

Drew watched him go in silence, then glanced at Grant. “We probably all should get some sleep. We’ve got a big day tomorrow.” She put her hand on his arm again. Grant tried to ignore how good it felt. Other than Kara, there weren’t many people who touched him with gentleness. “I hope you think about what I said earlier. This mission succeeded largely due to you and I will certainly be telling HQ that. Whoever they assign to be your SO will be incredibly lucky to get you.”

Grant almost scoffed, biting his tongue to keep him from assuring her that John would have no such feeling. He deeply appreciated the kindness of his team today, their willingness to ignore his failings and their attempts to make him feel valued. But he would learn his lesson about being too cocky and overlooking details. After all, once John officially became his SO, there wouldn’t be any more teams. Grant would be the whole solution, the only one responsible for getting the job done. And if he was going to save John, there couldn’t be any mistakes.

Present Day

Grant looked at Manuel’s downcast face. “Don’t blame yourself so much. Both of you are alive. That’s what counts.”

“Yeah, thanks to you,” Manuel said sullenly, still looking down. “If you hadn’t shown up, we either would’ve been blown up or they’d have kept experimenting on us.”

Shabina reached over to tip Manuel’s face up to hers. “Hey,” she said gently, “we’ve already talked about this. Everyone makes mistakes. It’s how we learn. And the good part is that you’re both alive, safely back home and you brought us Grant.” She looked teasingly at him. “He may be difficult but I have no doubt that he’ll bring us nothing but good things.”

Grant smiled back at her, a bit uneasily. He hoped she was right but his track record wasn’t all that great.

In the quiet that followed Shabina’s statement, the telltale sound of Gordon arriving could be heard from the courtyard. A young man peered out the door, yelling over his shoulder to the rest of them, “Hey! Gordon’s back! It doesn’t look like he has our pizza yet but he brought back Lincoln and Skye!”

There was a disappointed murmur from the crowd – apparently they loved their pizza – but Grant found himself out in the courtyard before he’d even had time to think about it. Yes, there was Skye
hugging a beautiful Asian woman with scars all over her face while Lincoln and Gordon looked on. *Is that her mother?* He felt Shabina come up behind him. “That’s Jiaying,” she murmured in his ear. “She’s our leader.” *Skye’s mom is the leader of Afterlife?*

“Are you all right?” the woman asked Skye, pulling back to look at both her and Lincoln.

“Yeah,” Skye said quietly. Her face was serious.

Jiaying turned to Lincoln. “What happened?”

“A lot. But I’m OK,” he answered. He too looked extremely serious. What the hell is going on?

“A doctor at SHIELD patched him up,” Skye told her mother.

Grant could tell immediately that this didn’t go over well with Jiaying. Frankly, he couldn’t blame her. The physiology of powered people was so different that it was doubtful that Jemma – for she had to be the doctor Skye meant – could truly understand how to heal Lincoln. Sure enough, Jiaying said, “SHIELD?” in a tone that suggested something akin to a cockroach.

“We need to talk,” Skye said.

Jiaying hesitated, turning to Lincoln. “Go to the Recovery Room. Have one of ours take a look at you.” Lincoln nodded and set off down the path. Jiaying took Skye’s arm, leading her in the opposite direction. “Come, tell me everything,” she said.

Grant wanted to call out to Skye, to let her know he was there, but he hesitated. He didn’t want to interrupt the mother/daughter bonding time but, more than that, he didn’t know where he stood with Skye. Thoughts of how quickly Skye ran to Lincoln in the Hydra facility passed through his head and Shabina’s presence reminded him of his attraction to her.

Will Skye even be happy to see me?

Skye looked up and saw Grant standing outside of the building. Her expression immediately lit up. “Grant!” she yelled as she ran to throw herself into his arms. She hugged him hard for a few seconds, drawing back to look up at him, tears in her eyes. She gently put her hand on his cheek. “No one knew what happened to you at the Hydra base. I was hoping against hope that you were safe!” she whispered.

If they’d been alone, Grant would’ve wasted no time in kissing her. But because they had an audience, including Skye’s mother, he hesitated. He didn’t want to interrupt the mother/daughter bonding time but, more than that, he didn’t know where he stood with Skye. Thoughts of how quickly Skye ran to Lincoln in the Hydra facility passed through his head and Shabina’s presence reminded him of his attraction to her. *Will Skye even be happy to see me?*

She hiccupped a laugh and smiled back at him. “I would say that’s getting old but as long as you keep being hard to kill, I’m good.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Skye elbowed him, grabbing his hand as she turned to face Jiaying. “Mom, I’d like to introduce you to my boyfriend, Grant Ward.” She looked over at Grant. “I assume the two of you haven’t met yet.”

Taking his cue, Grant held out his hand to Jiaying. “No, not yet but I was hoping to meet you soon.”
Jiaying smiled at him easily. “Cal and Skye have both talked a lot about you. I’m pleased to meet you.” She glanced at Skye, her expression turning serious. “Skye, we still need to talk. I assume you’d like for Grant to go with us.”

“Yes.” She looked up at him. “You want to come with?”

He smiled slightly. “Do you even have to ask? Wherever you go, I go.”
As they walked hand in hand to a different part of the Inhuman village than Grant had seen before (although Skye seemed familiar with it), he raised her hand and kissed the back of it. Skye seemed somber. As he’d hoped, she smiled slightly at him. Grant would’ve liked to have had some time to talk with her before they had what was clearly going to be a Very Important Talk with her mother but apparently time was of the essence. He sighed. It seemed like forever since they’d had a chance to be alone. No one said anything until the three of them entered Jiaying’s office. Grant wasn’t pleased to see Lincoln already sitting in a chair in front of a huge wooden desk.

“Please everyone, have a seat,” Jiaying said. She headed for the chair behind the desk while Grant and Skye took chairs on either side of Lincoln. Although there was no way he could’ve known that Grant would be accompanying Skye (he hadn’t even been aware that Grant was in Afterlife), Lincoln obviously had positioned himself so that Skye would have to sit next to him. *Clever.*

A surge of jealousy hit him and Grant almost literally had to bite his tongue to keep from saying anything he might regret. *Now’s not the time.* He relaxed some once he noted that Lincoln’s presence barely made an impact on Skye.

Jiaying also seemed to take Lincoln’s presence in stride. “I take it that you’re OK?”

He nodded. “SHIELD actually took good care of me. Other than putting me on their Index, I had a good experience with them.” Grant bit back a smile at the surprised tone in Lincoln’s voice.

Jiaying, however, didn’t look convinced. “How’d that process go?”

“The Indexing?” Lincoln shrugged. “They just asked a lot of questions. They did keep a sample of my blood that they took when I was unconscious.”

“It’s protocol,” Skye said defensively. Grant scowled, remembering a time when she was completely against putting people on the Index. *How things change.*

Lincoln nodded. “Hydra said the same thing.”

Grant felt his emotions whiplashing because he went from frowning at Skye to wanting to laugh. *Lincoln isn’t wrong to see the similarities.*

Skye, however, didn’t share his perspective because she rounded on Lincoln, outraged. “SHIELD is nothing like Hydra! We’re just trying to keep people safe. Not all powered people are like us. Some of them want to use their powers for their own gain, so SHIELD is trying to make sure they don’t hurt anyone. Hydra only wants to experiment and use us as weapons.”

“You’re right about Hydra,” Lincoln replied calmly, “but I’m going to reserve judgment about SHIELD.”

“You’re wise to do so,” Jiaying said, looking more perturbed than Grant had seen her yet. Based on what he’d seen of her so far that day, she appeared incredibly calm, almost like she knew a secret the others didn’t. “Hydra may have given me these,” she said, gesturing to her scars, “but don’t forget that SHIELD took you and hid you from your family for decades,” she said to Skye.

Grant raised his eyebrows. He only knew a little bit of Skye’s family story from Cal and even that wasn’t much. He hadn’t had a chance to hear the full story of how Skye became lost to her family. How in the world had SHIELD gotten involved?
Skye looked sullen. “I haven’t forgotten anything. I just know Coulson and he would never do anything to hurt us.”

Jiaying’s expression turned blank, almost like she was preparing herself for pain. “Oh? And what does he suggest?”

Grant wanted to shift uncomfortably when he saw the intense expression on Skye’s face but years of experience forced him to keep still. This can’t be good. “I know you have no reason to trust SHIELD but please, just sit down with him. Coulson, he’s a good man. Besides Grant,” she said with a sidelong glance at him, “he’s the only person who’s ever tried to take care of me.” Grant tried not to smirk in Lincoln’s direction, especially when he saw Lincoln glance at him with curiosity. That’s right, buddy. Your few days with her don’t even come close to what we’ve shared. “And until now, Coulson’s the closest I’ve had to a parent.”

Jiaying looked down, a sad expression crossing her face. Grant, torn from his own thoughts, tried not to wince. He realized just how much that statement had to hurt her. Skye appeared to soften a little but she was on a mission and wouldn’t be sidetracked. Grant had seen this focus from her before and knew nothing would get in her way. “Please, Mom.”

Jiaying sighed, sitting back in her chair. She looked wistfully at Skye. “Sometimes I forget how young you are.”

Skye looked puzzled but Grant understood. For all Skye’s wisdom and experiences, she was still quite naïve and idealistic. She thought she could reconcile her two worlds if only she could get her mother and Coulson together for a meeting. While Grant had no doubt that both of the leaders who loved her would attend such a meeting – if only for Skye’s sake – it was unlikely to have the outcome she wanted. Skye hadn’t been in either world long enough to know the internal politics or the past experiences that shaped policy. All she knew was what she wanted.

After a long silence, Jiaying nodded. “OK, Skye, if that’s what you want, I’ll meet with this Coulson.”

Skye’s smile was so bright it could be seen all across China. “Thank you! I’ll get Gordon to take me back to SHIELD. He can give me the coordinates to Afterlife and I’ll come back with Coulson on the quinjet.”

“No!” Grant and Lincoln said simultaneously. They each glanced at the other in surprise. “You can’t let them come here,” Lincoln said to Jiaying at the same time Grant said to Skye, “You can’t bring them here.”

If the issue wasn’t so urgent, Grant would’ve laughed at Skye’s shocked face. He admitted to feeling a little stunned himself at how clearly in sync he and Lincoln were about this. “Why not?” Skye asked him.

Grant looked searchingly at Jiaying, who nodded. “Grant, I’d be interested to hear your perspective on this.”

“Because we’re not just dealing with Coulson,” he said to Skye. Then he turned to Jiaying. “If we give them the coordinates of Afterlife, not only will Coulson know where to find us but so will other leaders in SHIELD,” he looked back at Skye, “people like Nick Fury, Commander Gonzalez, maybe even General Talbot. And while we know what Coulson will do, we have no idea what the others would do with this information.” He looked back at Jiaying. “If Afterlife is to remain a sanctuary, a safe place for Inhumans, then we need to remain hidden.”
“Lincoln?”

He gave Grant a perplexed look before turning to his leader. “I agree completely with Agent Ward. While Coulson may be a good man who wants to do the right thing, we’d be at the mercy of the whole organization.” He sat back in his chair with a grim expression. “And we know from experience how that usually goes.”

Jiaying nodded. “I agree. Skye, please tell Coulson that I agree to meet him at a neutral site, one we both find acceptable. I’ll draw up a few suggestions and conditions for you to take to him when you go. But unless it’s urgent, I was hoping that you’d stay a little while and relax.” She smiled at her daughter. “Cal and I would like to spend some time with you and I suspect that Grant would as well. Is that possible?”

Skye smiled back. “Definitely.” She stood up, grabbing Grant’s hand and yanking him to the door. “Tell Dad that Grant and I will see both of you for dinner!” she said over her shoulder.

Skye pulled Grant towards a cottage that looked remarkably similar to his own except that it was in a different part of the village. She pulled open the door, practically pushing him inside. The room was smaller than their luxury suite at the Four Seasons but it had a homier feel to it. Grant looked around approvingly. “This is nice.”

Skye was quickly taking off her clothes. “Less talk, more sex,” she purred as she pulled him down for a kiss.

Grant tangled his hands in her hair, smiling to himself because she was no longer calling him Robot or T-1000. Damn straight! “As you wish,” he murmured as he took over the kiss, the warmth of her mouth beneath his sending his pulse through the roof. This was Skye, his Skye, from whom he’d been apart for so long!

Grant started undressing, feeling a bit reckless. He scattered his clothes on the floor like Skye always did instead of placing them carefully in a position that would allow him to quickly put them back on should the need arise. Skye raised her eyebrows at this unusual turn of events but said nothing.

She gave him another open-mouthed kiss, their tongues tangling briefly, before sliding down his body so she could worship his abs. Grant groaned and entwined his hands in her hair again when she started sucking his nipples. He absolutely loved when she circled her tongue around the hard buds, then lightly sucked. There was a corresponding tingling in his groin and butterflies in his stomach with every pull. Way too quickly, she moved on toward her real objective. “Hello lovely 6-Pack,” she crooned lovingly. “How I’ve missed you!”

Grant was about to laugh at her antics when she started licking his ab muscles, tracing each defined ridge with her tongue, her hand gliding even further down his body. She took his shaft and gently started caressing it. He no longer felt like laughing. “That feels so good,” he told her.

Skye looked up at him, smiled and winked, then continued her slide down, kissing every inch of skin the entire way. Grant could feel the inferno inside him respond to her touch, a flaming line following directly behind her kisses. His head swam as his senses became overwhelmed, trying to take in the simultaneous sensations of heat, moisture and pressure.

Skye didn’t seem aware of the fiery trail she was leaving in her wake, probably because she was engrossed with what she was doing. She sank to her knees and took as much of him as she could into her mouth. Grant’s eyes rolled back into his head, allowing himself to just enjoy the moment. He closed his eyes, shutting out everything but what Skye was doing to him. Her tongue swirling
Grant opened his eyes so he could watch what was happening. “Skye, you’re a goddess!” he said loudly at the combined sensory input of seeing and feeling Skye hollowing her cheeks and sucking firmly. Skye glanced up at him, smiling mischievously, probably because Grant generally wasn’t very noisy in bed. _That needs to change._ Clearly, she enjoyed knowing how she made him feel.

A wave of heat rolled over his entire body. Skye must’ve felt it too because she raised her eyebrows. Suddenly Grant could stand it no more. He lifted her in his arms, kissing her thoroughly as he carried her to the wall. He cradled her face as they kissed, his excitement rising. He hiked her against the wall, using his arms to position her exactly where he wanted her. Skye wrapped her legs and arms around him, tilting her head so that he could suckle her neck. Grant got the hint and started licking the spot he knew drove her crazy. He relished the sounds of pleasure she was making. “I’ve missed you so much, babe!” he said.

“I…can…tell,” she gasped out.

Grant reached around with one hand to roll her clit in his fingers, his other arm holding her in position. He grinned at Skye’s moan and at the wetness he found, her evident desire elevating his own. He loved how much he could turn her on. “You ready?” he whispered.

“Always,” she replied.

No sooner had she gotten the word out than he plunged into her, stroking hard and fast as he continued to kiss her neck, the inferno in himhot all over now. As usual, the feeling of being inside her was wonderful but this time felt different in a way he could barely define. And it wasn’t Skye who had changed; it was Grant. While sex always felt good – better than good with Skye – he consistently held back, placing his partner’s needs ahead of his own. But not this time. He was still paying attention to Skye of course but, as long as she seemed pleased with what was happening – and she certainly did if her moans and blissful expression were any indication – then this time he was directing his pleasure where he wanted to go, letting himself be as loud, enthusiastic and as uninhibited as he wanted to be.

Skye tightened her arms around his neck, her eyes tightly closed. Grant backed up just enough so that he could tilt Skye’s body backwards, giving him a deeper penetration. Her eyes popped open in surprise. “Oh. My. God!”

They maintained eye contact as their bodies joined together intimately and passionately. It was one of the most intense moments of Grant’s life. His body felt pleasantly warm, she felt slick and inviting and he could see in her eyes just how happy she was. Grant kept up the furious pace, the pressure building, until he felt Skye starting to shake, the cabin quaking along with her. He was deeply grateful that she was close to coming because he could feel his orgasm approaching fast and didn’t know how long he could hold it off.

Skye closed her eyes, an expression of ecstasy crossing her face. “Grant!” Skye yelled as both she and the cabin start pulsing rhythmically around him.

“Skye,” he groaned as he too savored the high of release, continuing to push into her through both of their aftershocks, decreasing in speed until he finally stopped. Grant pressed his forehead against hers, closing his eyes and waiting for his breathing to slow. Then he set her gently on the floor. He grinned slightly as she looked at him with wide eyes, her breathing still a bit labored.

“That…was…amazing! I mean, it’s always great but that…” she trailed off, apparently speechless for once.
“I know,” he replied, his smile widening.

“What’s gotten into you?”

Grant shrugged. “I guess I finally felt free.”

Skye’s smile spread slowly across her face. “If we get something to eat and relax for a bit, do you think you can feel free again in about, say, 20 minutes?”

He appeared to seriously consider this before grinning at her. “I think that can be arranged.”

Several hours later, after two additional rounds of lovemaking and some snuggling, they lay in bed talking as Skye gently traced circles on his chest and stomach. They’d caught each other up on what had happened while they were apart although Grant purposely left out some of his difficulties, especially the part about Jemma trying to hurt him. Skye was so relaxed and he didn’t want to ruin it.

He, however, was not as relaxed. As Grant listened to Skye’s story of her month without him, he couldn’t ignore his frustration at how big a part Lincoln played in her narrative. Lincoln was her transitioner, he’d showed her around the village and then helped her control her powers, just as Grant had initially in Wyoming. While Jiaying had been the one to help Skye fine-tune what she could do, Grant was frustrated that Skye seemed to be giving Lincoln a lot of the credit. Then it was about how Lincoln helped protect her from Hydra during her outing with Cal, her rescue of him in the Hydra facility and how she’d helped him heal at the Playground.

Grant kept reminding himself that he and Skye had just shared several hours of terrific sex, that they were finally back together and he’d had his own journey while they were apart but, despite his best efforts, his annoyance grew. He was so tired of being an afterthought.

Did she even think about me at all while she was gone?

Skye apparently didn’t notice anything amiss, yet another irritant. Grant was always so attuned to her every shift in emotion but she couldn’t see the obvious storm clouds brewing in him. He engaged his circular breathing, trying to keep the inferno at bay, but Skye didn’t even seem aware of that. Instead, she was deeply interested in Shabina even though Grant hadn’t revealed his attraction, only that she was his transitioner.

“Shabina was the one standing behind you when I first got here? The gorgeous one?” Skye’s face and tone were neutral but there was an undercurrent of jealousy.

“Yep, that was her,” he replied easily. He tried to be glad that she was jealous but it didn’t work. He found it rich that, with as much as Shye had talked about Lincoln, she was now fixated on someone Grant had taken great pains to barely mention. He easily recalled Shabina’s flirtatious manner and her constant focus on his physical and emotional needs. Why can’t Skye do that? He glanced over at her, frowning. “You’re not jealous are you? I thought we’d been over that.”

“We have, we have,” Skye said, not meeting his eyes, “but…”

So now I’m supposed to reassure her of my fidelity…again? Grant felt something crack inside him as anger and heat flooded his body. He sat up, ignoring her startled expression. “But what, Skye? Have I ever, even once, led you to believe that I wasn’t completely head over heels in love with you? Have I ever done anything besides be there for you? Even when you thought I was Hydra, you knew that I wanted you, that I’d do anything to be with you! It’s always been you, Skye! I’m constantly at your side. I’ve never left you, not voluntarily, not the way you…” he stopped, catching himself, not wanting to face the consequences of continuing.
Skye sat up in bed so that she could face him. “Not the way I what, Grant?” she asked calmly. She seemed more taken aback by his outburst than truly worried, something that only served to infuriate him further.

“Nothing!” he snapped as he got out of bed, hunting for his clothes and putting them on when he did find them. He was seriously regretting his impulsive flinging of them across the room. He felt diminished by having to search for his socks.

“It’s not nothing! You’re upset.”

“I’m not upset, I’m fine,” he practically snarled, realizing too late that his words would hold greater weight had he not been dressing so angrily that he tried to pull his head through his sleeve and if it hadn’t taken two tries to get his leg into his pants. The sparks flying off his hands as he pulled on his boots were probably another give away.

Grant walked to the door, intent on stomping out of the room but made the mistake of looking at Skye before he did. Her pained expression and the tears in her eyes caused his anger to deflate much like a balloon letting out its air. He sat down heavily on the edge of the bed. “OK.” He smiled slightly at her. “I may be a little upset.”

Skye didn’t smile back. “You think?” After a pause, she repeated, “Not the way I what, Grant?”

He sighed, scooting back up to the top of the bed so he could sit next to her. His counselor was always telling him that he had to communicate with other people even if it was to tell them that he was angry with them. She encouraged Grant to trust that the people he loved wouldn’t leave him, that they would actually want to hear what he had to say. Time to put that theory into action. He braced himself. “Not the way you left me.”

Her eyes widened. “What are you talking about? We both agreed that I needed to come here so they could teach me to control my powers! You knew I was coming back!”

“Did I? We never talked about it before you left. All I knew was that you were gone. Other than that one weird telepathic message, I didn’t know anything about where you were, what you were doing or…” Might as well get it all out now. “…who you were doing it with.”

Her mouth dropped open. “This is about Lincoln? You’re jealous?”

He shook his head. “This isn’t about Lincoln…per se. But he’s part of it. I had no way of getting in contact with you, I didn’t know what was happening with you and…,” he looked away for a moment to gain control his emotions. “…I had no way of telling you about what was going on with me. I may have missed a lot of your life in that month we spent apart but you missed a lot of mine too. People were angry that you left and some of them took it out on me. I thought I was done being undercover with them but then I had to pretend that I didn’t know why you’d left or where you’d gone. It was hard, Skye. I needed you and you weren’t there.”

Grant concealed his surprise, stunned by the words that had flowed out of him. Apparently he’d been suppressing his feelings for so long that he hadn’t even been honest with himself. But now that it was out, he realized just how difficult the lying for Skye had been. With the admission to the team of having his own powers, he’d thought that he could relax among his friends and colleagues, that he could finally be himself. But no, once again he’d had to hold back and pretend to have feelings that weren’t his own. Until this moment, he hadn’t realized just how much he’d hated that.

She reached up to caress his face. “I know, Grant. Being apart was hard on both of us.”
Grant gently removed her hand from his face and put it on the bed. “No, it wasn’t the same. You were off meeting your parents and learning how to control your powers. You needed to do those things and I’m glad you did! I am,” he insisted in response to her skeptical look. “But while I’m sure it probably was difficult for you at times, let’s not act like it wasn’t also exciting and emotionally fulfilling.”

Skye looked down, a sad expression on her face. “No, you’re right. I didn’t think about what you might’ve been going through.” She met his eyes. “You always seem so strong, so capable of handling anything that it didn’t occur to me that you might have needed me.”

Now it was Grant’s turn to look down, needing to gather his courage in order to continue the conversation. He could almost hear his counselor’s voice in his ear encouraging him to tell her all of it, to hold nothing back. OK. I can do this! He took a deep breath and looked in her eyes, wanting her to see the pain in his. “I couldn’t wait for you to get back but then the first time I saw you in that building, you were with Lincoln. The next time, you showed up only so you could help save Lincoln. I don’t know what was going on but, from where I’m sitting, neither time was about you coming back to be with me.” Suddenly the anger returned in a whoosh and he stood up, pacing the room in an effort not to release his inferno. “You left me, Skye, not only physically but emotionally! I wasn’t your first priority, he was! And I’m sick of it! Every single person I’ve ever loved has left me one way or another and now I have to add you to that list. Somehow I’m just never a priority….for anyone.”

Skye bit her lip as she stared at him in understanding, her eyes wide with dismay. “It wasn’t like that, Grant! It wasn’t! You never left my mind, not for one single second! Yes, I had things I needed to take care of before returning to SHIELD but I thought you were fine. You always are. I never imagined that the others would blame you for me taking off. I thought I was leaving you with family.”

Grant laughed bitterly. “Yeah, being with family rarely works out well for me. Bobbi and Mack barely spoke to me the entire month and Jemma took such good care of me that she actually tasered me at the Hydra facility. If Kara hadn’t been there, I don’t know what would’ve happened.”

Skye’s mouth dropped open. “Jemma did what?”

“She…tasered…me,” he said, enunciating each word like he was explaining it to someone slow. Grant knew he was being petty but he was beyond worrying about her feelings. “She was trying to keep me from saving the other powered people being held there – two people I did save, by the way – but I’m not so sure she wouldn’t have left me there had it been up to her.”

“Jemma wouldn’t hurt you, not permanently.”

“You didn’t see her, Skye. Fear can lead people to do horrible things.”

“I know but…”

“And then I got here, not knowing where I was or who these people were. I don’t know what they did to you but they had me strapped to a table with all these needles keeping me from moving. Alone and helpless aren’t really two of my favorite conditions! I could’ve used your help but you didn’t even think of coming here to look for me, did you?”

“Of course I did!” Skye said indignantly. “But I couldn’t leave….Lincoln,” she trailed off, looking at Grant in trepidation.

He smiled cynically. “You didn’t even know if I was dead or alive yet you stayed at the
Playground with him.” He stopped and stared at her for a moment, a dreadful realization causing the inferno in him to die down, leaving only emptiness behind. He said softly, “You didn’t even come here searching for me today. You just came to talk with your mom about a truce.”

Skye looked at him, the fear rising in her face. Grant wondered whether it was his soft voice or the look on his face that had her so scared. Was the utter loneliness he was feeling reflected there or had he reverted back to his blank expression? He hoped that she couldn’t read him because he didn’t think he could stand any more of this conversation. For his own sanity, he needed to go. Skye couldn’t ever leave it alone when someone she cared about was hurting, no matter where you fell in her level of importance.

Sure enough, she started scrambling out of bed so she could reach him. “No, my mom was only part of why I came. I also was looking for you!”

Grant backed away from her, holding up his hands to keep her at bay. “I wish I could believe that,” he whispered. Then he quickly exited the cottage, desperate to leave even as he felt the floor beneath him rumbling.

He walked blindly down a path, not knowing or caring where he was going. He felt like he couldn’t breathe but tried to push through what he guessed was a panic attack. He scoffed internally. Oh, great. If only John could see me now: once again made weak by love. When he actually started gasping for air, Grant stopped walking and bent over, hands on his knees, so he could try breathing normally. In. Out. In. Out. How could I be so stupid? He’d known that letting Skye so far into his heart was a risk, that if she ever left, it would tear him apart. But he hadn’t really had a choice. He’d fallen for her hard and, once he knew that she cared for him too, his fate was sealed. There was no going back.

In. Out. In. Out. What am I going to do? As he questioned how to help himself, it felt as if his body answered him. The lessons of a lifetime took over and Grant almost reflexively started compartmentalizing his feelings. He could hear his counselor telling him to allow himself to process his feelings, even the difficult ones, but right now, he just couldn’t. Just for a while, until I get to a safe place. Then I can let myself feel. In. Out. In. Out.

Once his breathing normalized, he straightened and started walking again, theorizing that if only he could get someplace without people, maybe then he could be at peace. With the cool air washing over him, he looked at the mountains in the distance and headed towards them instinctively, remembering when he’d first learned how to let nature heal his tumultuous emotions. Grant kept his eyes fixed firmly on the range, letting their majestic beauty cleanse his soul and the deep blue sky fill him with stillness. If a thought about Skye or SHIELD entered his mind, he purposely let it pass through, refusing to engage with it until he could do so safely and productively. Instead, he concentrated on his senses, noticing the bird song, the roar of the wind and the hue of the grass, trees and plants. This was his sanctuary, his safe place. I’m home.

After he’d been walking for a while, a wave of fatigue hit him and Grant searched for someplace he could rest. He’d burned off all the adrenaline from his fight with Skye and his flight from the village. I just need to get my second wind. But then what? The reality of his situation was that he’d walked off without any supplies or a way to leave Afterlife. He didn’t know where the community was located and any other civilization had to be miles away. He’d have to go back but he just didn’t have the heart for it at the moment. He found a small rock outcropping and sat, allowing himself to relax and just breathe.

After a few minutes, he knew it was OK for him to let out his feelings. In the past, he would’ve ignored them but his counselor had finally convinced him that emotions needed to be worked
through and allowed to breathe. If they weren’t, they’d just show up another way, usually in a manner most inconvenient. So Grant let the anger and sadness wash over him, building up the tension until he could no longer hold it in. He released the inferno and threw ball after ball of fire into the rocks, careful to avoid hitting anything flammable. Finally, when he was spent, he sank to his knees, allowing the tears to come.

There was no one here to impress or judge him; he was free to let it all out. Grant cried until he felt like he had nothing left. Instead of the emptiness he’d felt earlier though, the tears brought cleansing. Like the freshness of nature after a spring rain, Grant felt renewed, once again confident that he’d survive. He sat on the ground for a while longer, gathering his strength to get up and smiling to himself because, at long last, he’d started taking care of himself. *My counselor would be proud.*

He found a seat on the rocks, allowing the mountain range to heal his soul, until he heard the familiar crack of Gordon’s arrival. Grant turned his head just in time to see the blind man appear with Jiaying in his embrace. Gordon nodded at Grant then disappeared amid his usual blue lightning. Grant sighed, facing the mountain again, irritated that his solitude had been disrupted. He didn’t want to talk with anyone, most particularly Skye’s mother. She was sure to make him feel bad for upsetting her daughter.

Jiaying approached him slowly, a small smile on her face as she looked around. Grant shifted uneasily, watching as she took in all the scorch marks on the rocks. Her expression gave nothing away though as she sat on the rock next to him, facing the mountains just as he was. “I see you’ve found one of my favorite places. I often come here to reflect and meditate.”

He nodded, saying nothing. Should he apologize for scarring such a beautiful place with his heat and anger? Was she searching for an explanation? He didn’t know what to do. Grant didn’t want to be rude, especially to Skye’s mother and the woman who had the power to make him leave Afterlife, but he didn’t want to talk.

Much to his surprise, Jiaying didn’t seem like she expected a response. She remained silent too, closing her eyes. Her presence was soothing and Grant let himself relax. He’d wait for her to make the first move. After all, she specifically sought him out, so she must have an agenda. But the longer the silence stretched, the more it seemed as though she wasn’t here to talk, that she wasn’t intending to tell him he needed to make up with Skye or discuss what the Inhumans should do about SHIELD.

After a period of silence, Grant unexpectedly found himself wanting to talk, even eager to hear what she might have to say. Jiaying had an air of serenity about her, of someone who’d learned how to take difficult things in stride. As the leader of a group of powerful people, she surely had some wisdom to dispense.

“I guess Skye told you about the fight we had,” he started tentatively. *Let’s see what she does with that.*

Jiaying nodded. “She didn’t want to at first but she knew she needed help controlling her powers.” She smiled faintly. “For a while there, I thought she might bring down the whole village.”

*I’m glad she was upset.* Grant instantly felt guilty at this thought and then his inner Garrett piled on, insisting that he be accountable for everything. *I should’ve been there to help, especially since I was the one who upset her!*

Jiaying shook her head, almost as if she could hear his thoughts. “It isn’t your fault, Grant. Skye is responsible for her own emotions and reactions.”
A horrible suspicion stole over him. “You’re not an empath or a telepath, are you?”

She smiled, still not facing him. “No. My gift is advanced healing and cell regeneration. It’s what keeps me young even though I’m older than you might imagine.” She glanced over at him. “I don’t need to be an empath or a telepath to guess what’s going on with you. You’re exceptionally skilled at hiding your emotions, too skilled if you ask me. But I have a lot of life experience and it’s obvious that you love her deeply.”

He nodded. “I do.” Grant was going to stop there, give nothing away, but then he decided to go for broke. What do I have to lose? “I’m just not sure she feels the same way.”

“I can’t speak for Skye’s feelings, especially since I don’t know her as well as I’d like, but I can tell you that during her time here, she talked about you constantly. In fact, I feel as if I know you because she talked about you so much.” She smiled slightly. “I think it drove Lincoln crazy.”

Good! “I know Skye cares about me, just not enough to make me a priority.”

Jiaying was silent for a moment. “You haven’t had a lot of people in your life make you a priority, have you?” she asked softly.

Grant shook his head, the bleakness of that thought taking his breath away.

She cocked her head to the side. “Have you ever thought that it might not be as bad as it sounds?”

What? “I don’t know what you mean by that.”

“You’re an amazing person, Grant, much more amazing than you probably realize. In addition to your obvious gifts, you have an incredibly formidable will. You’re so strong, so capable and skilled, that no one has to worry about you. People haven’t made you a priority, not because they haven’t wanted to, but because they haven’t had to. It isn’t fair of course, because that often means your needs go unnoticed, but it doesn’t mean that you aren’t loved,” she smiled at him, “or even adored as the case may be.”

He was silent as he processed her words. “I have had someone tell me that before,” he admitted. He remembered Coulson’s apology after the Sokovia mission that had gone so wrong, his words echoing in Grant’s ear: “As much as I hate to admit that I have anything in common with John Garrett, I’m afraid that we’re both guilty of seeing you only as strong. We all need for people to care about us and for us to be selfish at times. There’s a balance. That’s where I messed up with you.”

“I’m guilty of it too,” Jiaying said regretfully, “with Cal. He’s so strong, so brilliant and focused, that I sometimes forget how much love and support he needs. I’ve leaned on him so often that I haven’t always given him the chance to lean on me.” She paused and smiled wistfully. “But he always forgives me for it.”

Grant remained silent. He wanted to forgive Skye but he didn’t know if it would be that easy. While he felt better hearing that she’d been on her mind during her stay at Afterlife, he didn’t know what to do with the thought that she hadn’t come looking for him.

Jiaying stood up. “Whatever happens between you and Skye is for the two of you to figure out. But regardless of what you decide, I want you to know that you’re free to stay here with us. You’ve already proven that you have our best interests at heart and I’m quite certain that we can use someone with your considerable talents.” She put her hand on his shoulder. “I’m going back now. You can stay here as long as you like but I will warn you that the nights get cold.” She smiled
slightly. “Although I guess that’s not such a big deal to you. But you might get hungry.” With a final squeeze, she turned and left, making her way up the path towards Afterlife.

Grant stayed for a short time after Jiaying left. He could feel the weather turning colder. While that didn’t bother him, the lure of a hot shower and a warm bed was strong. He also wanted to find some food. The snacks he’d had between rounds with Skye seemed like a long time ago. He walked briskly back. Still unwilling to think about Skye, he decided to turn his mind to the problem between Afterlife and SHIELD. Although he hoped that diplomacy would be useful, he didn’t have high hopes.

From his perspective, the two organizations were operating at cross purposes as far as the rights of powered people were concerned. SHIELD was convinced that tagging and restraining them was the best way to keep normal people safe. But from the perspective of Inhumans, that policy was designed solely for normals and was one that would turn powered people into second class citizens. It also didn’t take into account the rights of powered people to live freely and to be able to utilize their full potential. The policy would provoke resentment on the part of Inhumans and fear on the part of everyone else. In short, it was destined to fail one way or another. Sooner rather than later, Grant would be forced to make a choice.

Flashback

Grant was used to making hard decisions when there were obvious dilemmas – prison or Garrett, SHIELD or Hydra – but there were other times when it wasn’t as clear that there was a choice to be made. Putting powered people on the Index was one such situation. The Scorch case wasn’t the first time Grant had dealt with issues surrounding the Index. He first heard about the policy at the Academy during his ethics course. The instructor laid out SHIELD’s policy on gifteds then asked the cadets to write a paper on the pros and cons of it.

He was working on his paper when Kara knocked on his door. She’d come straight from her study group, one Grant never attended. She sneaked a look at his paper before throwing herself on his bed as usual. “If you’re working on the Index paper, you definitely should’ve come to study group tonight. It was all anyone could talk about.”

“That’s exactly why I didn’t go,” he retorted. His lack of attendance was a familiar argument between them. “Talking about it sounds like a huge waste of time. A study group should be more focused on, you know, studying.”

Kara rolled her eyes. “Yes, dad.” She grinned and sat up. “So what’s your take on it, O Brilliant One?”

Grant shifted in his chair. He didn’t want to tell Kara that he was struggling with the idea of the policy. The paper itself was easy to write. He’d heard about the pros of the Index from Garrett. John was of the opinion that gifted people absolutely needed to be monitored, that leaving them unchecked was inviting chaos because you could never be certain of their intentions. He also wanted to avoid having to fight them since he would obviously be at a disadvantage. John only objected to the Index because it was a SHIELD policy. He wanted Hydra to be able to monitor and, more specifically, utilize the talents of gifted people.

Grant had a different perspective. Given his intelligence and physical gifts, he knew what it felt like to be better than average and to have people be jealous of those abilities. He could well imagine what it would be like to be significantly different and have people scared of you. But he didn’t know how to tell Kara this without sounding arrogant.

He shrugged. “The pros for society are obvious but whenever you start putting people on lists, bad
things are bound to happen.”

Kara mulled this over, clearly interested. Grant hid a smile, sure that for all their discussion in study group, few really good points had been made. “What kind of bad things?”

“People with nefarious intent could get hold of the list and use it for evil.” Like Hydra. “Or people could realize that such a list creates a class-based structure which inevitably ends up making some people feel less than and others upset because their civil rights are being violated.”

She nodded encouragingly. “That makes sense.” Her willingness to go toe-to-toe with him intellectually was one reason he loved Kara. Too many of his fellow Operations cadets weren’t inclined to use their brains, being much more focused on the brawn part of the job. Grant occasionally wondered if he’d get along better with the SciTech people but a few uncomfortable run-ins with their cadets eventually led him to conclude that they were too nerdy.

“Such a system almost always leads to resentment and then you have two groups determined to fight it out. If powered people with significant advantages are on one side but we have the numbers on ours, then the battle’s going to get ugly. It just seems much more productive to have them be allies rather than enemies.” He leaned back in his chair. “Besides, I’d never want to be on the Index and have to go through everything that they have to do, would you?”

Kara got up and squeezed his shoulders in a friendly way, something that Grant always adored. “No, probably not!” She started towards the door but then turned back, a thought clearly having struck her. “I imagine you’re right about all this, Grant, but you know it doesn’t matter. SHIELD is all about enforcement. Diplomacy isn’t really their thing.”

That conversation with Kara was uppermost in his mind the first time he’d been tasked with an Index evaluation and assessment. No agent ever enjoyed these assignments because they tended to be challenging. Gifteds either feared their newfound powers or they enjoyed them and didn’t want to be prevented from using them. Either way, this meant that powered people often were defensive, uncooperative, impulsive and just plain difficult. That’s why the Index cases usually got sloughed off on newer agents.

Index cases also were disliked because protocol dictated that they involved two agents: one from Operations and one from Sci-Tech. The two specialties didn’t often work well together in the field, making these cases one of the few times that they were forced to team up. It took all of Grant’s willpower not to groan out loud when he met the new agent from Sci-Tech assigned to help him evaluate a woman named Tori Garner who was rumored to be able to talk to animals. Agent David Smith was Grant’s worst nightmare as he was somewhat socially awkward and appeared to be suspicious of anything that didn’t run on electricity. This is going to go well.

The mission parameters on Index cases called for starting with the easy stuff: holding interviews with people claiming to have information on the potential power. This meant that Grant talked with people while Smith analyzed their story for veracity and scientific explanations. Most Index cases were bogus caused by people trying to get away with something or playing a practical joke that went too far. Thus, it was important to determine whether there was a real need for concern. From the first though, Tori Garner’s power seemed real.

The interviewees all said the same thing: that animals started acting strangely around Tori, shaping their behavior to her will. She’d tell them to do something and they’d do it. There were stories of dogs and cats attacking their owners or random people on the street who had annoyed Tori. No one was seriously hurt since Tori appeared to request scary rather than serious attacks and the animals all stopped once she instructed them to. Pet store animals – rats, snakes, birds even fish – also behaved strangely at her request. They rolled over on command, made shapes with their bodies,
chirped in unison and swam in formation. It was eerie, made even spookier when Smith couldn’t seem to find any explanation for this phenomenon, scientific or otherwise.

Although Grant handled most of the human interactions, Smith frequently interrupted to ask what seemed like obscure, technical questions that made the interviewees nervous. He never explained anything, just hid behind his hand monitor as he punched in and analyzed the data. He’d also ask leading questions like whether people felt in fear for their lives or if they’d considered what else she could get animals to do. Grant repeatedly asked him to stop this line of questioning as it was clearly upsetting their interviewees who hadn’t thought of this before. Smith refused, telling Grant that he had to gather all the data in order to make an informed conclusion.

When the two were investigating the animals involved, Smith ran strange looking scanners all over and around them, causing the animals to freak out and have to be calmed down. Smith was obviously creating more chaos than necessary thereby doubling the workload for Grant since he was forced to put out more fires than he would have had he worked alone. Smith’s antagonistic behavior also caused problems during their interview with Tori.

Tori was an attractive woman in her late 20s who, by all accounts, was passionate about animals. She worked for the animal control unit in her town, a job that was helped by her ability to get animals to do what she wanted. She also volunteered at the local animal shelter and owned several pets. She was understandably nervous about being called into a local police station to be interviewed by SHIELD. Grant could tell that the police officers were suspicious of Smith and his doodads, an attitude which unfortunately rubbed off on Tori. The cold looks they gave her did nothing to soothe her nerves.

Even so, the interview started off smoothly enough with Grant calmly going over all that they’d learned about her gift. She admitted that she’d gotten the power after suffering a significant head injury following a horseback riding accident. Tori didn’t know how it worked in her brain, just that she could tell the animals what to do and they’d do it. She even easily agreed to give them a demonstration of her power outside the station by having a squirrel place a series of nuts so that they spelled out OK. She then had some birds dive bomb a passing rabbit. Grant watched in silence but Smith found it necessary to be as distracting as possible with his electronics. Tori began watching him nervously, wrapping her arms around her torso for comfort and licking her lips repeatedly. Grant sighed in frustration.

Once they returned to the interview room, Smith started asking questions in an unnecessarily demanding manner. “Why did you have the squirrel spell out OK?”

Tori glanced briefly at Grant before turning her gaze to Smith. “I thought it would be funny. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

Smith didn’t even look at her, focusing on his hand monitor instead. “What about the birds? Did you realize that the dive bombing is aggressive behavior?”

“I… I… I guess I did but I wasn’t going for that. I just knew you all needed to see something that they wouldn’t normally do themselves.” Her tortured gaze met Grant’s. “I wasn’t trying to do anything bad. I just wanted to give you what you asked to see.”

Grant nodded. “You did, Tori. We appreciate it,” he said in his best comforting manner.

“There are any number of behaviors you could’ve commanded the animals to do. Why did you choose the ones you did?” Smith asked.

“I… I don’t know. They were the first ones that came into my head.”
“Is it your intention to attack people or use your gift for your own advantage?” he asked expressionlessly.

“No!” Tori blurted out, then took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. “No. I realize that I used my power inappropriately and scared people but I see now how wrong that was.”

“That’s good to hear, Tori,” Grant started. He was trying his best to keep her calm and focused but it was increasingly difficult. “SHIELD just needs to know…”

“Have you ever tried using larger animals, like horses or cows, to run over people or cause a distraction?” Smith interrupted.

“No! I never want any animals to get hurt because of what I can do. I would never use them like that!”

Smith nodded shortly, then got up abruptly from his chair and waved the scanners all around Tori’s body. Her eyes widened, looking panicked, until Grant put a firm hand on Smith’s arm. “Why don’t you and I talk a minute in the hall?” he asked as pleasantly as he could.

The minute the door closed behind them, Smith asked, “Why did you stop my evaluation? I was almost done.”

“No, you are done. You were freaking her out in there! We’re trying to determine if she’s a threat or if she can be worked with. All you did was upset her.”

Smith met Grant’s eyes with as much expression as Grant had seen him use. “I was just doing my job.”

“Great! You’ve done it. What are your conclusions?”

“I’d prefer to give them to our superiors,” Smith said woodenly.

Grant quickly got another agent to babysit Tori while the two of them went to confer with the agents in charge. They’d already read the team’s preliminary reports but now wanted to hear the scientific analysis. Smith reported that her power seemed real and not the result of some trickery or obedience training. Their superiors decided that due to all the complaints they’d received as a result of the evaluation process, Tori was going to be referred to the Monitor Program.

Grant’s heart sank when he heard that. He did his best to convince them that much of the fear was due to Smith’s mishandling of the assessment but it didn’t work. They refused to believe that Tori was anything other than emotional and impulsive and therefore in need of closer monitoring. The only concession they gave was that Grant could meet with Tori without Smith before taking her to be processed.

Once he returned to the room, he started slow. Grant gave her his most charming smile, hoping it would ease some of the nervousness she felt. “Tori, we really appreciate how cooperative you’ve been with us. SHIELD is convinced that you can sway animals to your will. We’re just concerned about what you’ll do with that power.”

Tori shook her head, eyes widening in fear. “You’ve seen how harmless it is. I swear that SHIELD doesn’t have to worry about me.”

Grant sighed. “Your gift certainly can be harmless but it also could be used inappropriately. The problem is that you’ve already used it to scare people. No one’s gotten hurt and it’s SHIELD’s job to make sure it stays that way.”
Tori’s hands started to shake. “I only used my power to get people’s attention and encourage them to do the right thing! Those dogs and cats were being abused! I just gave them a voice, a way to show their owners that they needed to treat them right. And the people on the street were men harassing women! I wanted them to see what it felt like to be powerless so that maybe they’d rethink their behavior. No one got hurt! I wouldn’t do anything that would hurt anyone!”

“I get it, Tori. I believe you,” Grant replied, hating his job at the moment. And he did believe her. Her story matched perfectly with what others had told him, that she was using the animals to put a stop to cruel and abusive behavior. In fact, most of the people he interviewed were glad she’d used her power. The ones who weren’t were clearly the people she’d had the animals threaten. If the decision was up to him, he’d give her a severe warning and send her on her way with only monthly check-ins. “But people are scared and SHIELD can’t take the risk. Our protocol in these situations is to assign you a handler, someone from the agency who will be on site to monitor your situation and ensure that your gift doesn’t get out of control.”

“But I don’t need a handler!” Tori said, her voice rising. “I live in a small town! Everyone knows me. How am I supposed to work or date or have a life if I have some government official constantly following me around?” She stared at Grant pleadingly, her eyes welling up with tears. “You don’t understand. You live in the city where everyone’s a stranger. Small towns are different. People there view the government with suspicion and they’ll hate me for the constant reminder! They won’t call me to come get stray animals or let me work at the shelter. My gift won’t be cute or fun anymore, it’ll be a nuisance that I’ll never be able to forget or live down.” Her eyes swung wildly around the room, clearly working herself into a panic over what her life was about to become. Her gaze fastened on Grant. “Please! What if I just check in with someone every so often? Better yet, what if I just promise never to use my power again?”

“I’m sorry, Tori. I wish there was another option.” Tori started to cry, so Grant switched gears, putting his hands over hers. “Look, it won’t be as bad as you think it will. SHIELD doesn’t want to hurt you. We’re just trying to make sure everyone stays safe and that includes you. It’ll be fine.” He patted her awkwardly on the shoulder as she sobbed. “Why don’t I walk you over to processing and you can go over the details with them? You’ll see, your life won’t really change that much.”

But it had. And he had known it would. Even at the time, Grant realized just how much SHIELD had screwed up her life. If they had done the evaluation differently, her community wouldn’t have gotten so upset. It was their complaints that ensured Tori would be put on SHIELD’s Monitor Program. And if SHIELD had actually worked with her to find solutions that would be in her best interests, then she probably would’ve been fine. But she wasn’t.

Grant heard later that Tori had become an outcast in her small town, just as she feared, forcing her to relocate to a larger area. This led to her acting out and using her power to truly attack people. When her monitor attempted to rein her in by taking away her access to any animals outside of her home, Tori tried to escape. She was caught and placed in a SHIELD facility where she wasn’t allowed any contact with animals. The last he’d heard, she was depressed and refusing to eat. Grant felt horrible about the outcome of his first Index evaluation but quickly put it out of his mind. After all, SHIELD had to do something with powered people.

Present

Things were different now. When he’d done Tori’s Indexing, Grant was a new agent, determined to make John proud by doing the best job he could. He hadn’t even considered that there were choices he could’ve made that might’ve changed Tori’s life for the better. He could’ve asked for a new partner early in the process, one that didn’t ruffle so many feathers. He also could’ve advocated harder for a lesser restriction on Tori’s power. But he did neither, just followed along like the good
Agent he was. But once he was given powers – ones that were much stronger and deadlier than Tori’s – Grant realized just how much he’d screwed up. And he knew that bigger decisions were coming, ones that this time would be affecting his life.

But first he needed to deal with Skye. Grant had barely crossed the entryway when he saw Skye pacing nearby. He stopped, wondering what to do. He still had no idea about how they were going to fix this or if they even should.

Skye stopped mid stride when she saw him, her relief obvious. He could tell that she wanted to run to him but held back. He just stared, unwilling to speak first. This is her show.

“I was worried. It’s getting dark and I had no idea where you were,” she said tentatively.

“Your mom found me just fine.”

Skye looked surprised. “She did?” She paused, looking grumpy. “She didn’t tell me.”

Grant found this information interesting. Jiaying hadn’t come searching for him because Skye asked her to and she hadn’t reported on his whereabouts either. He glanced at Skye, noting her bloodshot eyes and unhappy expression. “I’m sorry I worried you,” he said gently. “I just needed some time by myself to think. I really am fine this time.” He started walking again, intent on getting some food and heading back to his cabin for a shower.

Skye grabbed his arm, searching his blank expression with wide eyes. “Are we really not going to talk about this?” Grant was silent, not knowing what he wanted to do. He didn’t think he had the strength for another knock down drag out argument with her. Skye wasn’t going to be put off though. “At least let me explain,” she insisted.

He could feel his resolve to be distant crumble. But maybe he could head her off before things got complicated again. “Look Skye, I get it,” he started in a soft voice. Anger would accomplish nothing and he was too drained to get worked up again. “I know you care about me. You just had a lot of things that had to be dealt with first.” He smiled slightly. “And I am kind of like a cat. I always land on my feet. So don’t worry. I’m not mad.”

Grant hoped that Skye would be relieved that he’d let her off the hook, that maybe she’d even let him go on his way after getting a promise to meet later. He should’ve known better. He looked at the ground after glimpsing the storm clouds swirling in her eyes and sighed. No such luck.

“Oh yes you are!” she said. She grabbed his hand, yanking him in the direction of her cabin. Apparently her tentativeness was gone. “Or if you truly aren’t, you should be!”

They walked the rest of the way there in silence. Grant had no idea where Skye was going with this. She once again practically shoved him into her cabin. The memories of her doing this only a few hours earlier and for different reasons threatened to overwhelm him. He sat down on the bed, wanting nothing more than for this conversation to be finished.

The door slammed behind him. He looked up to see Skye leaning her forehead against the door and doing her breathing routine. Grant was impressed that nothing was shaking. She whipped around. “I get enough bullshit from everyone else, so I certainly don’t need it from you!”

“What?” That was certainly not what he was expecting her to say.

“I really am fine this time. I know you care about me. I’m not mad,” she said, crossing her arms and repeating his words to her in a mocking voice. “Total. Bullshit. If, after everything we’ve been through, that’s what you truly think, then you’re not half as smart as you think you are, Grant.
Grant felt totally off-kilter, uncertain where she was going with this. And rather than dazzling her with some eloquent comeback about his intelligence, the best he could come up with was, “What?”

Skye stopped over to stand right in front of him, hands on her hips. “I love you! I have from practically the first moment we met and I’ve never stopped. I don’t think I ever will even though I’m kind of questioning that decision right now. It’s always been you, Grant.” Her voice softened. “You have no idea how truly awesome you are and how incredible being with you has been for me. I went from being this nobody, just a girl in a van without friends or family, to being in this fairy tale relationship with you. The fact that someone like you could love me, truly love me, has meant everything! Before I met you, no one cared all that much about me. But you…” her voice wavered as her eyes filled with tears, “…you’ve risked your life for me! And the best part is that, at the end of the day, I get to be with you. To laugh with you, talk with you, have fun with you, and…” she stepped closer to him, caressing his face gently, “have amazing sex with you. I know it’s totally cheesy for me to say but you complete me, Grant. I’m not whole without you.”

Grant was speechless, blown away by what she was saying and the obvious emotion in her eyes. He wanted to take her in his arms and dry her tears but something held him back. He believed her, he did, but he still didn’t know why she hadn’t come searching for him. He would’ve gone to the ends of the earth to find her.

Why didn’t she do that for me?

Skye moved closer, kneeling in between his legs and resting her arms on his legs as she looked into his face. “Yes, I was completely selfish when I got to Afterlife. I finally met my parents and was working on my powers and everything was all so new and exciting. But you were constantly on my mind! I wanted to tell you what I was learning and hear what you thought about Afterlife. I missed you so much that I bored everyone by talking about you all the time. That’s why Halona agreed to help me contact you. I said I would shut up if she’d just let me speak with you!”

He smiled faintly, remembering that weird telepathic conversation.

“You were right when you said that I was only thinking about me. I never dreamed that our team would make you feel bad or take their anger at me out on you. I thought that you’d be all right because you always are.” Skye looked down. “I forgot that I’d asked you to lean on me and let us truly be partners. Or maybe I just didn’t want to remember because it was easier for me at the time.” She looked back up at him. “I messed up and I’m truly sorry. You have no idea how sorry I am that I hurt you. But that doesn’t mean that I don’t love you or that I don’t want to take care of you. I do, Grant! I do want to take care of you; you don’t even know how much I want that! It’s just that I’m not very good at it all the time. I’m still that girl in the van who’s trying desperately to figure it all out.”

Grant brushed a piece of hair out of Skye’s face, deeply touched at everything she’d been saying. He wanted to kiss her, to forget about their whole stupid fight and be happy again. But she still had yet to answer that one question. *Why didn’t you come looking for me?*

Almost as if she read his mind, she reached up to run her fingers through his hair. Her mouth trembled. “I didn’t come looking for you immediately not because Lincoln needed me but because I messed up, Grant. I messed up big and I didn’t want to admit that to you,” she whispered. “But it’s not for the reason you think. When you didn’t come back from the mission, I was terrified. Kara said you had a plan to get off the Hydra base but she didn’t know what it was. I found Gordon’s energy signature at the base right before we bombed it, so I told myself that he got you out. I should’ve come here right then to make certain…” she looked away, tears streaming down her face. The cabin started to shake. “…but I couldn’t. If I came and you weren’t here, I didn’t think I
could stand it. I couldn’t let myself face the possibility that you might not have made it.” She turned back to look at him, almost like she was forcing herself to face him. “I was so scared that I’d be without you forever that I panicked. My life almost never goes the way I want it to, so I thought that if I pretended everything was OK, it would be. And it was! But if I’ve lost you because of my stupid fear, because I’m weak, then I don’t know what I’ll do. I can’t lose you, Grant! I can’t. Please say that I haven’t!” She threw herself against him, hugging him hard.

The cabin was shaking even more, probably because Skye was now crying in earnest. Grant could feel her sobbing against him, his shoulder getting soaked by her tears. He didn’t know what to do. She’d told him almost everything he wanted to hear: that she had wanted to be with him while she was gone, that she was ready to be his partner and let him lean on her once in a while, that she did prioritize him. The fear preventing her from coming to find him quickly was hard to hear but it wasn’t that bad. Skye had immediately discovered Gordon’s signature and, really, what other explanation could there have been for that?

Grant realized that he couldn’t expect everyone to respond to crises like he did. Few people had life experiences like Grant’s that made it imperative for them to face up to hard truths. Before joining SHIELD, Skye frequently survived her challenges by running away; that had never been an option for him. So it made sense that, when faced with a devastating emotional crisis, she’d reverted to tried and true methods of coping. He’d done the same just hours ago.

“Fear can lead people to do horrible things,” he’d told Skye earlier. And it was true. Grant’s whole life was evidence of that. His parents and Christian had abused him out of fear of not being able to control him. John had as well. Bobbi, Mack and Jemma had been unkind out of fear. But Skye’s fear was different. She had acted badly because she was afraid of losing him. That had never happened before. And while he didn’t like her paralysis of action, the motivating factor behind it was love. So what do I do now? As if in answer, he heard Jiaying’s wise, motherly voice whispering in his ear, “But he always forgives me for it.”

Grant smiled and let himself hug Skye back. “It’s OK, baby. We’re going to be fine,” he said as he kissed her head. And they would be. Forgiveness he could totally do.
Grant leaned back in his chair, letting out a moan of enjoyment. *I've missed this!* After Gordon dropped them off, he and Skye sneaked into the Playground with only Coulson and May aware of their presence. Skye immediately went into a closed door session with them about the upcoming meeting with the Inhumans but Grant begged off. He wanted to spend a little time by himself.

At first Skye was astonished. “Grant Ward, SHIELD Agent Extraordinaire, not wanting to be included in an important planning meeting?” She felt his forehead. “Are you ill?” Then, a suspicious look crossed her face and he forced himself not to squirm. “You just want to sit in your chair, don’t you?”

Caught, Grant shrugged and smiled. He figured silence would give him the most dignity. Skye rolled her eyes and flicked her wrist in a “Go on then” kind of way. Grant couldn’t leave fast enough. For once, he had no wish to be in a planning meeting.

After about 20 minutes of pure relaxation, he sighed in pleasure, opened his eyes and glanced around the room. It was still in the spartan-like state in which he’d left it, the chair the only splash of color in the room. The walls were a cold white, the bed standard military issue, and the floor a school cafeteria-like tile. He understood why the room was so bland but suddenly felt a strong yearning for warm wooden floors, a huge soft bed, and candles. *I must be getting soft.*

Grant’s mind went back to the last time he lived in physical comfortable for a long period. He’d gone straight from juvenile detention to the woods of Wyoming to the Academy and then to a whirlwind of assignments. Some, like his 16 months in Russia, were long-term but most were brief and almost none offered the homey creature comforts of Afterlife or of his chair. Both were things Skye had given him.

His mind focused on Skye, wondering what the future held for the two of them. SHIELD tended to be hell on relationships. Most of the Agents he knew were either divorced (Bobbi and May were perfect examples) or single. Even among the Avengers, only Hawkeye was able to sustain a relationship and have children, probably because his wife was a stay at home mom. What would happen to a couple where both partners worked in SHIELD? Grant doubted that they’d be allowed to go on a lot of missions together. He frowned, deciding such thoughts would be dealt with later.

Instead, he snuggled a little deeper into the depths of his chair, feeling a little guilty that he wasn’t in the meeting with Skye. He just wanted to rest though. *I’m tired.* The break neck pace of SHIELD, especially of late, was exhausting. Grant used to thrive on it but now it felt somewhat overwhelming. He thought back to what his counselor said when she was trying to convince him of the necessity of self care. “The human body isn’t designed to sustain high levels of stress and adrenaline for long. It needs significant periods of rest and relaxation in order to function efficiently.” *When’s the last time I had that?*

Grant had just closed his eyes again when there was a knock on his door. *News always travels like wildfire around here.* He smiled to himself, yelling “Come in!” He’d know Kara’s knock anywhere.

She bounded into the room, heading straight for him. Grant quickly stood up so he wouldn’t be bowled over by her enthusiastic hug. *Kara’s kind of like a dog. She’s my new Buddy.* As quickly as the thought came to him, he squashed it down so that Kara, who was unusually perceptive, wouldn’t figure it out. There would be hell to pay if she did. As it was, after she finished squeezing him hello, she shoveled him hard in the shoulder.
“Ow?”

“I can’t believe you didn’t come find me as soon as you got here! I had no idea whether you were alive or dead!” Kara said indignantly.

“Since you don’t seem all that surprised to see me, I’m guessing you had some idea I was alive,” Grant replied, sitting back down and ostentatiously rubbing his shoulder.

Kara sat on the bed across from him. “Well, you are Grant Ward. I haven’t seen anything that was able to keep you down yet.” He raised his eyebrow. “OK, just that one thing of Jemma’s. But you would’ve found a way to get out of that if I hadn’t been there.”

He cocked his head.

“You’re like a cat. You have nine lives and always land on your feet?” Kara tried again.

Grant remained silent and she sighed in an irritated fashion. “Fine! Skye told me before she left that she was pretty sure that the teleporter had gotten you off the base.”

He grinned. “Was that so hard?”

Kara laughed before her expression turned grave. “Seriously, I was really worried about you. If you had died and I just left you there…” her voice trailed off.

“Kara, I told you to go. If something had happened, it wouldn’t have been your fault.”

“Yeah, that would’ve made everything OK. Just as long as it wasn’t my fault.” She rolled her eyes at him. “I’d forgotten how stupid you can be sometimes. I never know when I should listen to you because you’re Grant Ward or when I shouldn’t because you’re Grant Ward.”

He smiled slightly and nodded, amused that Kara had combined a compliment and a concern all in one sentence. “I’m working on that.”

“Good. Anyway, I was kind of a mess when we got back and you weren’t here. That base was in the middle of the Arctic. There was nothing around for days! If you hadn’t told me you had a plan, I would’ve immediately assumed you were gone. As it was, I don’t know what I would’ve done had Skye not told me about that Gordon guy. And boy, you should’ve seen her! I thought Jemma was going to have to sedate her or something. She was an absolute wreck for a few hours until she found his signal.”

Grant smiled sadly. “She mentioned it.” He paused, hesitant to bring up the subject. But if he was going to talk about it with anyone, Kara was the one. After all, she’d been there when it happened. “Speaking of Jemma....”

Kara nodded knowingly. “I didn’t tell anyone about what she did. I mean, who would believe me? That woman looks like butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth! And I didn’t know if you wanted me to spill the beans or if you’d take care of it yourself when you got back.” Her expression darkened. “But I haven’t made it easy for her, especially when we were all so concerned about you. I kept saying things that made her think I was about to tell Coulson or, worse, May.” Kara smiled with satisfaction. “It’s gotten so bad that she practically jumps every time I come into a room or say
anything. I think she feels guilty.”

“She should.” Grant wasn’t sure what he wanted to do about Jemma. Before he and Skye became Inhuman, she was practically family and, if possible, he’d like to return to that. He’d have to play it by ear.

Kara nodded, looking at him piercingly. “Can I ask where you were or is it a big secret?”

“I was at an Inhuman community called Afterlife. It’s a place where people go to transition safely and learn about their powers.”

“That must’ve been weird,” Kara said, watching him closely.

Grant smiled slightly. “You don’t know the half of it. I think you’d like it though. It’s pretty fun and a lot of interesting people live there.”

“I can imagine.” She looked thoughtfully at him, almost warily. “So what are you going to do now?”

He leaned back in his chair, content to just chat. There was no place he had to be, no training regime he had to finish. *This is nice.* “Right this minute? Nothing. Skye’s in with Coulson and May arranging for a diplomatic meeting between the Inhumans and SHIELD. I’m sure both of us will be busy planning for that later.”

Kara looked like she wanted to say something else but then just nodded, smiling a little sadly. “Well, it’s good to have you back! I’ll let you enjoy your peace and quiet.” With a small wave, she left the room, leaving Grant to wonder just what it was she wanted to say. He decided to let it be and went back to relaxing.

Soon after, Skye burst into the room in typical Skye-fashion. “The meeting’s all set,” she announced before flopping dramatically on the bed. “Coulson, May and Gonzalez are going to meet my mom next week on Macquarie Island in Australia. SHIELD has a sparsely staffed research station there and it’s remote enough that almost no one will be the wiser about the meeting.”

Grant opened his eyes to glimpse Skye briefly before closing them again. “It’s good that they agreed on a secure location, one that isn’t easily accessible. Less chance of something going wrong or uninvited guests.”

“Yeah. That’s what we thought. No one wants Hydra to show up.”

“Did you discuss what’s going to be on the agenda? Although she didn’t say no specifically, you know that if they want Jiaying to put all of us on the Index, it isn’t going to happen.”

“They wouldn’t tell me what they’re going to talk about. It’s a good bet that what SHIELD should do with Inhumans will be at the top of the list though.” Grant opened one eye. Skye was laying on the bed, a thoughtful expression on her face.

“You’ve been pretty quiet on the topic. What do you think SHIELD should do with us? Should we go on the Index?” Grant opened both eyes, truly curious to hear Skye’s thoughts on the topic. He suspected that she hadn’t thought through all the ramifications yet but her immediate take on something was still valuable.

Skye was silent for a moment. “No…,” she said slowly, “I don’t think so. For one thing, there are way too many of us. SHIELD wouldn’t be able to keep up. But besides that, it isn’t fair to punish people before they’ve done anything just because they’re different.” She paused again. “And I
doubt many of us will agree to be Indexed, so that would present a problem right there.”

“Definitely,” he agreed. He was about to say something else when Skye interrupted him.

“If SHIELD’s smart, they’ll arrange some kind of allied relationship where a team of Inhumans works with SHIELD, maybe on a contract basis or something. Can you imagine how powerful we’d be with people like you, Lincoln and me working as a team?”

Grant shrugged off his momentary feelings of jealousy when she mentioned Lincoln. *I need to get over that. Lincoln is a good guy and a valuable resource.* “Who would be in control of that team though? I don’t see SHIELD being willing to let Inhumans run it themselves but I don’t see the Inhumans willing to be bossed around by SHIELD either.”

Skye nodded thoughtfully. “We’ll just have to cross our fingers and hope for the best. Maybe Coulson and my mom can work something out.”

He sat up. “Skye, I know you want this meeting to go well but I think you have to be prepared for it to be more difficult than you think it will be. I don’t think SHIELD is going to back down easily from putting us on the Index and Jiaying isn’t going to allow it. What are you going to do if they can’t reach an agreement?”

Skye shrugged, staring morosely at the bedspread. She looked so unhappy that Grant got up to embrace her. “Hey,” he said softly. “Things will work out one way or another. And whatever happens, we’re in this together.” She laid her head on his shoulder as he held her close. He didn’t believe that things would go the way she wanted them to but Grant did know that whatever happened the two of them would be OK. They’d gone through too much to let anything stop them now.

At dinner later that evening, Skye got her first taste of just how deep feelings were running. After welcoming Grant back to the base with the accompanying hugs, shoulder punches, jokes and “Glad you’re back!” with varying degrees of warmth, the group all sat down to eat. Grant shot a surreptitious glance at Jemma while they were loading their plates. She’d looked positively faint when she first saw Grant but gamely touched his shoulder in welcome before quickly walking away before they could speak. He sighed internally. *We’re going to need to talk later.*

“So Ward,” Trip said in-between bites of food, “are you going to tell us where you’ve been hiding since the Arctic mission? Some people were worried when you didn’t come back immediately,” he said, giving Kara a playful look, “but, as I always say, it’s hard to keep a good specialist down.”

“Kara worries too much,” Grant replied with a smile at Kara. She rolled her eyes at Grant then made a mock frowny face at Trip. “It was a bit dicey right before SHIELD bombed the place but I managed to hitch a ride to this community of Inhumans. The place is pretty isolated, so I had no way of communicating with anyone until Skye and Lincoln showed up.”

Trip nodded. “That sounds interesting.”

“It was.” Grant kept eating and didn’t elaborate further, waiting to see what would happen. Looking at some of the faces around the table, he figured the blow up would come sooner rather than later.

“I take it that’s the same place you were for the month you were missing,” Mack said calmly to Skye.

She looked startled, like she wasn’t expecting to be brought into the conversation. “Yeah. They helped me learn how to control my powers and I got to meet my mother for the first time.”
smiled in remembrance. “If you ever get the chance, I highly recommend having a dream of yours actually come true.”

The silence that followed was a stilted one until Fitz said, “That’s incredible, Skye.”

Skye nodded, her bright smile fading quickly once she looked around the table and saw several closed expressions.

“Does anyone else find it weird that Skye’s mom just happens to be the head of this community? I mean, talk about your coincidences,” Hunter said casually, still focused on his food.

“How,” Trip said in a scolding tone.

“What?” Hunter asked, looking all wide-eyed and innocent. “I’m just stating the obvious.”

Bobbi sat back from her plate. “Where exactly is this place and how many Inhumans – is that what we’re calling powered people now? – are there?”

“Inhumans is what people genetically changed by the Kree call themselves. People who get powers in other ways are different,” Coulson explained calmly. “The location and details of the community are still secret until such time as decisions are made.”

“But Skye and Ward know that information,” Hunter protested. “Why aren’t they spilling what they know?”

“Because our silence is one of the conditions under which this meeting will be held,” Grant answered in his clipped Agent Ward fashion. This wasn’t precisely true. Their silence was assumed by Jiaying for Afterlife’s safety but she hadn’t insisted upon it before they left. He just thought it sounded good enough to shut down any talk about their knowledge. Grant had no intention of divulging much of anything about Afterlife but wanted to give Skye some much-needed cover. He knew she would find it harder to keep things secret from her friends.

“Besides Hunter,” Skye said with a teasing grin, “this is one of those “need-to-know” kind of things. You know, just the sort of thing you love about SHIELD.”

Grant knew the minute the words left her lips that Skye’s attempt to joke was a mistake. She clearly hadn’t seen some of the team’s anger and distrust of powered people and didn’t realize just how high tempers were flaring these days. He wasn’t surprised when Mack frowned and leaned intently over the table but Grant could tell that Skye was.

“But that’s just it, Skye,” Mack said in a low tone. “We do need to know. Perhaps you’ve forgotten just how easily I was controlled in the temple or how much destruction you unleashed before you left. If any of these Inhumans have uncontrolled power or want to use their powers to do bad things, we’re in serious trouble. How can we defend ourselves if we know nothing about them?”

Skye’s mouth dropped open. “Why would you need to defend yourself? Inhumans aren’t like that, Mack! You’ve met Lincoln and you know Grant and me. We’re just like you except we have powers. Honestly,” she said as she took in Bobbi’s crossed arms, Mack’s angry expression and Hunter’s blank look, “I’m surprised that you all aren’t dancing in the streets. Just think about how much more Grant and I can add to the team now. Our powers will be an asset, not a liability. Hydra won’t know what hit them.” She attempted a smile. “We’re kind of like the Avengers.”

Grant almost groaned aloud at her mention of the Avengers. Skye still has so much to learn.

“Some of us believe that the Avengers have too much power.” Bobbi said heatedly, just as Grant
knew she would. Her antipathy towards the Avengers was well-known and she wasn’t alone in her feelings. “They’re not accountable to anyone, so it’s difficult to rein them in when they do things that cause a lot of destruction. Do the words Ultron and Sokovia ring a bell? And now you’re asking us to be OK with an entire community of people with powers! What happens when some or even just one of them gets out of control?”

“Not that it matters,” Kara put in, “but the Avengers aren’t Inhuman. Most of their powers come from human sources.”

“Which means they’re easier to stop,” Mack said. “Coulson just said that Inhuman powers come from their DNA. How are we supposed to fight against that?”

“Since we haven’t heard of Inhumans before now,” Grant pointed out, “I’d say that they do a good job of policing their own.”

“What happens when they don’t?” May asked. Grant was wondering when she’d speak up. “And some of us had heard of them before.” He looked at her grim expression in surprise. What does that mean? There’s clearly a story there.

“Then we put a plan in place for that eventuality,” Skye replied in an exasperated voice. “Look, this whole conversation is ridiculous. There are always going to be people who are dangerous for whatever reason. Hitler wasn’t Inhuman and he did a hell of a lot more damage than any of us have so far.”

“And by assuming that they’re going to be a problem before they are, you’re just creating a self-fulfilling prophesy,” Fitz added.

“I agree that it’ll be great to have Inhumans on our side,” Hunter said, neatly ignoring Bobbi’s glare. “But what happens if Hydra gets some of them on theirs? We know they’re already trying. Or what if the Inhumans decide that mere humans are inferior?”

“That hasn’t happened yet,” Skye replied. “Why would we start now?” Grant held his breath, hoping against hope that Skye wouldn’t attempt a joke about Hunter’s inferiority. Either she’d learned something about not using humor all the time or the joke didn’t occur to her because she kept her peace.

“If we treat Inhumans badly, we’re almost guaranteeing that they’ll side with Hydra,” Trip put in. “Then we really will have a problem.”

“OK, that’s enough,” Coulson said firmly. “SHIELD has yet to decide upon a policy for dealing with Inhumans. That’s what this meeting with Skye’s mother is all about.”

Grant glanced around the table, noting the stiff postures and tense expressions. He could almost feel his heart sinking as he realized how deep the division within the team was, how strongly fear had taken hold in some of his teammates. He glanced at Skye. She clearly noticed this too.

“Hey,” she said in a light voice designed to lift the mood. “we’ve all been through too much together to let something like this tear us apart. We’re all on the same side. Everything will be fine.”

Grant had difficulty keeping himself from rolling his eyes at Skye’s third tactical error. The girl was wicked smart with computers but still had a lot to learn about human interaction. Those team members upset about Inhumans weren’t going to be pacified with platitudes and pats on the head and they were going to be angry that she thought they would be.
Sure enough, Bobbi scooted back her chair from the table with a loud scrape that echoed in the silence of the room. “I know you mean well but things just aren’t that easy, Skye,” she said over her shoulder as she left the room.

“It sounds like we’ve got a lot of stuff to work out. Thanks for dinner,” Mack said stiffly as he got up from the table. He nodded at Grant. “I’m glad you’re back safe, Ward.” He exited the room quickly.

Grant didn’t have the heart to look at Skye as he patted her knee. He knew she’d be deeply wounded by the rejection of people she thought were her friends, even her family. He wanted her to know that he was still there. Grant glanced down the table to see Coulson calmly finishing his meal even though the tension in the room was thick. Coulson didn’t seem the least bit affected by two of his team members leaving in a huff. Skye, however, was just moving her food around on her plate.

Coulson dabbed his mouth with his napkin. “Well, that was dramatic and, to be honest, not the way I thought this dinner would go. Anyone else have anything to add?” No one said anything. “What about you, Hunter?”

Hunter looked up from his plate in surprise. “Not really. Bob and Mack made some good points but it’s a shame to let food go to waste.” He grabbed some extra rolls from the plate in the middle of the table. “Besides, this is SHIELD. We wouldn’t know what to do with ourselves if we all got along.”

“True story,” Trip commented nonchalantly. “I remember one time when…” and he launched into a funny story about a SHIELD team that ended up stuck in a remote area because they couldn’t stop fighting amongst each other long enough to fill the tank of their vehicle with gas.

Sure enough, the mood around the table lightened and the remaining team members all started talking easily among themselves. However, Grant knew this was just the beginning. Skye still looked upset and Jemma hadn’t said one word the entire dinner. And, even though everything in him resisted it, he knew that Bobbi’s objections had merit. He just had no idea of what to do about them. The kicker was that the Inhumans had good objections too.

**Flashback**

After they spent all night making up with each other, Skye and Grant agreed to stay at Afterlife longer than they’d originally intended. They spent the night there, slept in, and then arranged to have lunch with Cal and Jiaying before returning to the Playground to set up the meeting with SHIELD.

Instead of meeting at the mess hall, he and Skye went to yet another wooden hut, walking into a beautiful table set for four. Each place setting looked as if it could be found at a diplomatic dinner, consisting of fine china, crystal glasses and polished silverware. There were several bottles of wine on the table and a delicious looking salad in a big bowl in the center of the table. Grant sniffed in delight, sure that the wonderful smell wafting in the air could only be coming from the beautiful loaf of bread on the table, just waiting to be sliced and covered with the butter sitting in the dish next to it. Grant hid his smile. Afterlife was always filled with surprises. *If they can get pizza from Chicago, then of course they can get other things.*

Cal and Jiaying had been sitting next to each other, talking to each other in low tones but they broke off when Skye and Grant entered. Jiaying got up, immediately going to Grant while Cal headed straight for Skye.

Jiaying hugged him. “I see the two of you made up,” she whispered in his ear. “I thought that you
would.” She released him, smiling as she did. Then she turned to Skye, almost perfectly choreographed with Cal who’d finished hugging his daughter and now turned to Grant.

“Ah, Grant,” he said heartily, shaking his hand. Without releasing Grant’s hand, Cal leaned back a bit. “Why stand on ceremony when we’re practically family?” he boomed, pulling him into a brief bear hug. “I told you I’d be seeing you again soon.”

Grant felt just as off-kilter by Cal as he always did. His expression must’ve reflected this because he could see Skye trying not to laugh. “Cal. It’s good to see you again,” he stammered.

“And under better circumstances,” Cal agreed. He waved his hand towards the table. “Shall we?”

The four of them sat down. “Please, let’s start eating. I’m sure you’re both quite hungry,” Jiaying said with a small wink at Grant.

Grant quickly looked down, concentrating on spreading butter on the slice of bread Skye had just handed him. He’d felt so comfortable with Jiaying earlier but now it truly hit him that she was Skye’s mother. Although he’d met the parents of women he was seeing romantically before, it was always under the guise of his cover. It had never been real. Now that it was, he didn’t know how to act.

“Are you blushing?” Skye asked him delightedly. Grant tried to avoid seeing her broad grin.

“Daisy,” Cal said in an admonitory tone, “you really shouldn’t try to make Grant uncomfortable.”

“Oh my god! Did you just give me parenting advice?” Skye asked.

Grant couldn’t help it. He started to laugh. The idea of trying to impress Skye’s parents who barely knew her and who were about to start discussing international affairs that would affect billions of people was just too hilarious. *This whole thing is ridiculous!*

The other three quickly joined in and soon the hut rang with their laughter, the awkwardness successfully broken. The rest of the meal was enjoyable with everyone trying to stay on light topics. Jiaying shared a brief history of Afterlife while Cal recounted some of his funnier cases as a physician. Grant joined in with humorous anecdotes about his time at the Academy and weird missions. Skye talked about how she learned computers and some of the hilarious things she found when she hacked people’s accounts. Skye begged Jiaying and Cal to tell her the story of how they fell in love, then returned the favor when they asked how she and Grant had gotten together.

Grant was having fun, feeling for the first time ever that he was a part of a real family. Yes, the team on the Bus was his family too but this was different. Here were people who, no matter what, would always be a part of each other’s lives. He’d seen some cracks in his SHIELD family lately, leading him to wonder just how long they’d continue to be together. But this little unit, despite being filled with people who barely knew each other, felt permanent.

They’d just finished the last bit of chocolate souffle when Cal announced that it was time to be getting down to business. Grant sighed, knowing he was right but not wanting to give up the fun.

Jiaying fixed both Skye and Grant with her no-nonsense stare. “What do you plan to tell SHIELD about Afterlife?”

Skye shrugged. “I don’t know. So far I haven’t told them much of anything but that was only because we were busy.” She looked at Grant. “What should we tell them?”

“I think we should tell them what Afterlife is like without giving a lot of details, like where it is or
how many people are here,” he replied. “We need to give them a way to connect with Inhumans and realize that we’re just like them. We don’t want SHIELD to think of us as a threat. Talking about what daily life is like or what kind of people live here will help.”

“Hydra may view us as threatening but SHIELD isn’t like that,” Skye argued. “You and I are part of the team and they couldn’t have been nicer to Lincoln. Inhumans could be great assets! I mean, the Avengers are like celebrities within SHIELD and we’re kind of like them.”

“But Inhumans aren’t like the Avengers,” Jiaying put in gently. “For one thing, there are a lot more of us. And many wouldn’t be interested in working for SHIELD or even using their gifts to help others.”

“The Avengers are only welcome because they’re useful,” Cal said dismissively. “The second they stop being useful or start having their own agenda is the moment that the world becomes afraid of them.”

Jiaying frowned slightly at Cal, clearly not appreciating how abrupt he sounded. “Not everyone is as selfless or as brave as you, my daughter. What would happen to those Inhumans who don’t want to be used, who just want to be left alone?”

Skye looked down at her plate unhappily. “OK. We don’t give SHIELD any information about where Afterlife is located or tell them about anyone’s gifts. What do we tell them?” She looked at Grant. “You know we have to give them more than community sing-alongs and comfy cabins.”

Grant sighed. “Skye has a point,” he told her parents. “As Agent Ward, I’d never be satisfied with such minimal information. I’d want to know how many Inhumans there are, the discovery procedure for potentials, what the process is for transitioning, what kind of gifts they have, how people are trained to control their gifts, and how we monitor people with gifts who don’t want to be part of the Afterlife community. I’d especially want to know how the Inhuman community polices those who use their gifts inappropriately.”

“Those are all good questions,” Cal said, breaking the appalled silence that ad followed Grant’s statement. He took Jiaying’s hand. “It’s too bad that we’ll never give them any of that information.”

Jiaying squeezed Cal’s hand, smiling sadly at him. “We have to give them something, Cal. I’ll need to think about what information we’re willing to provide.” She looked at Skye. “I know you trust SHIELD but I’ve known groups like them before. I truly hope that they’re as good as you believe them to be. But if they’re not, they’ll want us to be afraid, to fracture. What they don’t realize is that we’re all tied together, a history that goes back thousands of years. They cannot take that away from us nor can they truly understand what that means. Inhumans have always lived in secrecy because to advertise our gifts was to bring hatred and pain down upon us. I will not allow our community to be endangered because SHIELD or Hydra or anyone else is afraid of what we can do. But perhaps there are compromises to be made.”

Grant glanced at Skye who remained silent after Jiaying’s pronouncement. Her expression was lost and his heart went out to her. He took her hand, lacing their fingers together, earning a small grateful smile from her. He faced Jiaying. “I know this isn’t easy but both Skye and I appreciate your willingness to be flexible.”

Jiaying nodded and the foursome quickly broke up so that Skye and Grant could return to SHIELD as soon as possible. The couple went back to their cabin so that they could make sure they didn’t forget anything, then the plan was for them to meet Gordon in front of the community center.
Grant watched Skye walk around checking the cabin, somewhat in a daze. After her third ineffectual circuit, he sat down on the bed and pulled her over to him. “Hey, having divided loyalties is hard,” he said gently. “If anyone knows that, it’s me.”

Skye burst into tears, sobbing into his shoulder. “I don’t know how you did it, Grant. It sucks so much!”

“I know, baby. I know.” He petted her hair soothingly.

She wiped away her tears and looked up at him. “How did you bear it? I don’t know what I’d do without you but you had no one.”

He shrugged, not wanting to revisit those awful lonely days. “I had faith it would work out. This will too. You’ll see.”

She nodded. They collected what stuff they were taking and went to meet Gordon and the other Inhumans who were seeing them off. As he and Skye hugged her parents goodbye, Grant fervently hoped that Jiaying’s years of experience would give her the wisdom to know what to do, how to make peace with SHIELD. Because he sure didn’t.

**Present**

After dinner, Skye and Grant went back to their room. Skye had moved all her possessions into Grant’s and they’d abandoned any pretense of not living together. There was no longer any point in denying it. Skye went to bed quickly. She was exhausted from days of broken sleep and her distress by the rift in the team. Grant cuddled with her, trying to give what physical comfort he could and stayed until her even breathing assured him that she was asleep. Unlike her, he was restless. He knew himself well enough to know that sleep was hours away, so he steeled his resolve and marched down to the Lab.

Sure enough, Jemma and Fitz were there, going over lab results, running samples and whatever else it was that they did. The rest of the Lab was empty, just as Grant hoped it would be. Apparently the Science Twins were the only ones crazy enough to keep such late hours.

Fitz looked up, his face breaking into a huge smile upon seeing Grant walking into the Lab. “Ward!” he said delightedly. “I can’t tell you how good it is to see you. Of course, I was never concerned. Jemma was worried about you but I knew you’d find a way out. You’re like a monkey: incredibly resourceful.”

“Why do people keep comparing me to animals? Kara says I’m like a cat.”

Fitz nodded thoughtfully. “Nine lives. Always land on your feet. Yeah, that makes more sense.”

Grant chuckled but sobered quickly. “Fitz, maybe you could give me a minute alone with Jemma.”

Fitz stared at Grant in suspicion, his frown deepening as he took in Jemma’s tense posture, wide eyes and scared expression. “Why? What’s going on?” He paused, his eyes swinging from Jemma to Grant then back to Jemma again. He turned to her accusingly. “You two have been weird with each other ever since Ward got back. Now that I think about it, you’ve been acting strange for a while. Did something happen on the Arctic mission that you didn’t tell me?”

Grant said nothing, raising his eyebrows inquiringly at Jemma. He was willing to have the conversation with or without Fitz present. He would leave it up to Jemma whether she wanted her best friend to know what she did.
Jemma looked agonized. “Fitz,” she said faintly.

“What is it, Jemma?” he said, taking in her tormented expression. “What did you do?”

“I… I… I…” she looked at the floor, but not before Grant saw her quivering lips and shamed expression. If the memory of what she’d done to him wasn’t so fresh, he would’ve felt sorry for her. When she looked back up, her face held the exact same resolve he’d seen during the Chitari mask mission when she learned she’d contracted the alien disease. She looked at Fitz, her eyes shimmering with tears. “When we were at the Arctic base, Ward wanted to go help some other Inhumans who were being held prisoner. In an effort to stop him, I tasered him with that mobile device you’ve been working on.”

Watching Jemma tell Fitz what she’d done, Grant didn’t know whether she was sorry or just afraid of Fitz’s reaction. It could go either way. He mentally crossed his fingers, hoping against hope that the Jemma he loved, the one he’d come to view as a little sister, was the one who would emerge.

Fitz’s mouth dropped open, a look of betrayal on his face. “Jemma!” he gasped. “But you came to your senses and helped him up so he could go get the other prisoners, right?” Grant could tell that Fitz was desperately trying to make this awful story better, to reconcile Jemma’s heinous behavior with the woman he loved. He understood the impulse, having done that for John more times than he could count.

Jemma shook her head. “No. Agent Palamas stopped me. She helped him up, not me. I was still angry.”

“But you could’ve killed him! You know that the testing on that device isn’t complete. I don’t even know the long-term damage that it could do. We don’t even have a name for it yet!”

“I know, Fitz! Don’t you think I know?” The tears started rolling down her face and, for the first time since he’d entered the room, Jemma’s eyes met Grant’s. “I’ve always been a woman of science, making decisions based on empirical evidence and logical conclusions. This is the first time I made judgments based solely on emotion, on fear,” she said, her voice breaking on the last word. Her face crumpled and she hunted around in her lab coat pockets for something, bringing out a handkerchief which she used to wipe away her tears.

Fitz started to put his arm around her but she pushed him away. “No, not right now,” she told him. She turned back to Grant. “I had no idea how susceptible to fear I was and I cannot even tell you how ashamed I am of what I did to you. I was so angry and afraid that I couldn’t even see straight. When you wanted to go help the other Inhuman prisoners, I didn’t see Agent Ward being heroic like he always is. I didn’t see the man who jumped out of the plane to save me or the man who helped us escape certain death from Hydra.” Her voice wavered a bit and she took a deep breath before continuing. “I saw the Agent Ward we thought was a traitor, trying to destroy everything we hold dear. And I hurt you. On purpose!” Jemma started crying in earnest. “I’m so sorry that I hurt you!”

Grant cautiously approached her, pulling her gently into a hug. Jemma threw her arms around him and sobbed unrestrainedly in his chest. Grant had a weird moment when he wondered if he’d ever have a dry shirt again. But then he glanced at Fitz over her head and forgot about his clothing problems. Fitz was looking stunned. The two men shared a wordless conversation and Grant gave a sigh of relief. *This is going to be OK.*

Jemma’s crying died down and she pulled away from Grant. “Oh, now I’ve made you into a mess,” she said distractedly, wiping ineffectively at his soaked shirt.
“It’s OK,” he told her with a smile.

“No, it isn’t,” she said seriously. “I have to tell Agent Palamas how grateful I am that she stopped me. And I have to tell Agent Coulson what I did, maybe even offer him my resignation for assaulting one of his agents while on a mission.”

“Jemma,” Grant said gently, “You should have a conversation with Kara. I think she’d appreciate that. But you don’t need to talk with Coulson and you certainly shouldn’t offer your resignation, not that he’d accept it if you did. You made a mistake, one I hope you won’t repeat.”

“You’re right, I won’t. I’ll make sure of it.” She looked at him with a sorrowful expression. “It’s part of my job to take care of you and I utterly failed. I hurt you.”

Grant smiled. “It’s fine. I forgive you. You shouldn’t worry about me so much. There’s a rumor going around that I’m just like a cat. I always land on my feet.”

Both Fitz and Jemma groaned. Grant kissed her on the forehead as Fitz moved in to put his arm around her. Jemma leaned her head on Fitz’s shoulder, looking exhausted by her storm of emotion. After the last few days he’d had, Grant could totally relate. He nodded at Fitz and left the Lab, happy that one thing at least had gone right. Now I can sleep.
May carefully lowered the quinjet onto tiny Macquarie Island. From the co-pilot’s seat, Grant looked out the window with interest. He’d spotted the massive penguin population when they first flew over the island in search of the closest place to land. The geologic rock formations also were fascinating. He questioned if there would be any time for exploring. *Probably not.* There usually wasn’t. He suddenly wondered just how many parts of the world he’d visited without truly experiencing them. The thought was disturbing. *What’s the point of traveling the world if you never get to do anything fun or interesting?*

As May set the plane down close to the main research building, Grant jerked his attention back to the task at hand. Macquarie Island was actually a great place for this meeting because of the remote nature of the research base. The island was secluded enough to not be an obvious choice for a meeting and small enough to have eyes on most of it. If Hydra did somehow find out about the negotiations and wanted to disrupt them, their approach would be seen immediately. The only thing SHIELD couldn’t control was the ocean. But since thinking about things he couldn’t manage was a waste of time (and one of the Top 10 Don’ts for specialists), Grant let it go.

He left the cockpit and joined the others in the cargo hold. SHIELD hadn’t brought along a lot of people. Grant suspected that Gonzales initially wanted a show of force but Coulson talked him into less overwhelming numbers. As such, their group contained only the two leaders, Skye and Grant as go-betweens, plus May, Bobbi, Trip and Kara for security. Skye privately expressed her reservations about Bobbi’s presence but Grant assured her it was for the best. The only way Bobbi was going to get more comfortable with Inhumans was to interact with them more. Hopefully, this would be a perfect opportunity.

Grant stopped for a minute to watch everyone collect their gear. Kara and Trip were talking animatedly about how cool the island was. Everyone else was quiet. Not for the first time, Grant wondered how two such gregarious and positive people ended up as specialists. Most were more like Bobbi and May: serious, introverted and cynical. His eyes landed on Skye and he wondered what kind of specialist she was going to be. While he wanted her to take her job seriously, he also hoped she wouldn’t lose her sense of humor, joy and wonder. He worried about that being a SHIELD agent might change her for the worse. Seeing that she was ready to leave the quinjet, Grant quickly gathered his gear and fell into step with her.

Skye gave him a brief smile, then moved down the ramp of the quinjet onto the island, looking at the snowy ground and dingy buildings sullenly. “I feel like we’re back at Providence,” she said grumpily. “Remote area, lots of snow.”

Grant looked around too. Sure, the island was cold but it was also different than most other places. He didn’t see a problem with it. He suspected that Skye was feeling the stress of the upcoming meeting and was remembering the last time she thought she lost everything. It wasn’t the island’s fault.

“Providence wasn’t on a beach surrounded by ocean on both sides and it didn’t have a bunch of penguins,” he pointed out. She shrugged. *OK then.* “But even if we were back there, I wouldn’t mind. Some good things happened at Providence.” He grinned at Skye’s outraged expression. “At least at first.”

“When did you become such a Pollyanna?” she asked with a frown.

His grin widened. “Since the woman I love told me she loved me back.”
Skye rolled her eyes but begrudgingly smiled up at him. **Mission accomplished.**

Trip brushed past them, shaking his head. “Ugh. Give it a rest, man,” he said to Grant. “You’ve already got her.”

Grant laughed. For some reason he couldn’t define, he felt exhilarated, like something wonderful was going to happen. He watched May fly the quinjet further away from them, toward the hills that looked out onto the coast. She was parking it there so that the plane wasn’t as vulnerable and she could spot any approach to where they were going to be.

He focused his attention on the research station compound, going over in his head the kind of challenges they might face. There were several large buildings in the area. Researchers, staff and their families lived in the residential buildings. Research was conducted in the largest building. The meeting building – where they were going to be – was smaller, consisting of a downstairs kitchen and recreation room and the upstairs individual cubicles and meeting rooms. Fortunately, this was the off season which meant that only a skeleton crew was around to take care of the facilities. SHIELD wouldn’t have to worry about civilians getting in the way.

Grant sped up so that he could open the door for the others. He winked outrageously at Kara as she passed through, receiving only a wan smile in return. The smile fell off of his face as he realized just how sad their last conversation had made her. The drive to please her, to be everything to everyone, was strong but Grant knew that this was not something he could fix for her.

She’ll see. Everything will be fine. He made a mental note to talk with her later. Bobbi gave him a curt nod but that was to be expected.

Once inside, Gonzales and Coulson headed to the conference room upstairs which had been designated as the negotiating area. Bobbi, Kara and Trip scouted the building to recheck the security protocols the advance team put in place. Skye and Grant went into one of the larger upstairs offices to wait for the Inhuman contingent. Gordon would be coming, of course, along with Jiaying, Lincoln, Shabina and an Inhuman woman named Alisha. Grant heard that she could divide herself into multiple people. While he didn’t want any trouble that would cause her to divide, he was interested in seeing what she could do. He mused over the possibilities of such a power.

Skye looked incredibly tense. “Are you OK?” Grant asked softly, standing behind her and lightly massaging her shoulders. He couldn’t imagine the stress she was under: an upcoming meeting between both of her families with the outcome deeply uncertain. One wrong move from either side could destroy her world. Again.

She shrugged, looking down. “I don’t even know what to hope for. What if they hate each other? What if Gonzales tries to capture them or the Inhumans use their powers against SHIELD?”

Grant pulled Skye back into his arms, placing his chin on her shoulder. “I don’t think either of those things are going to happen. SHIELD and Jiaying know the stakes here, both personally and politically. It’s in their best interests to find some common ground.” He paused, hoping desperately it was true. “But regardless of what happens, we’re going to be fine. You know that, right?”

Skye pulled out of his arms and turned to face him, a small smile on her lips. “Who are you and what have you done with my boyfriend, the Voice of Doom?”

“That guy was boring, so I turned him in for a new model,” he said, smiling. Then he shook his head. “Voice of Doom? Really? We need to work on your nicknames.” Grant pulled Skye close and kissed her passionately. He smirked when she stepped back, looking gobsmacked and breathless. “Personally, I’m hoping for something along the lines of Sex God or Awesome Ninja although I’d
take the Voice of *Reason* in a pinch.”

His words had the desired effect as Skye started laughing just as they heard the crack announcing Gordon’s arrival. The familiar blue light appeared and there was Gordon, surrounded by four Inhumans, each with a hand on him.

“Good to see you found the place,” Grant said teasingly to Gordon. He shook his hand while Skye was hugging her mother.

Gordon grinned. “We almost got stuck in the middle of a bunch of penguins but, other than that, it was surprisingly easy to find.”

“Let’s hope that’s not true,” Shabina said ruefully as she pulled Grant in for a hug. He winked at Skye over her shoulder hoping that her jealousy of Shabina was gone. Skye made a face at him but seemed fine. Grant was pleased to see that she made no effort to hug Lincoln. Instead she turned to Alisha, a beautiful woman with red hair.

“You must be Alisha. I’m Skye.” Alisha shook Skye’s hand, then turned slightly to welcome Grant into the circle. Her smile widened, her eyes raking him up and down in appreciation. Jiaying, Skye, Shabina and Lincoln all rolled their eyes, almost in unison. Grant’s smirk turned into a laugh when Skye said, “This is my boyfriend, Grant. He’s really not that hot.”

Gordon shook his head solemnly. “I don’t agree. I think he has a *fiery* personality.”

“It’s true,” Shabina said in a hushed tone. “I’ve heard that arguments with him can really get *heated*.”

“Yeah,” Lincoln said, deadpan. “And he does a mean Disco *Inferno*.” Lincoln grinned when Skye laughed and gave him a playful push. Grant decided that maybe he could like Lincoln.

Jiaying patted Grant’s arm, then gave Skye another hug. “It’s so good to see you!”

“Are you ready for this?” Skye asked, the smile falling from her face.

Jiaying nodded. “If nothing else, it should be interesting.” She gestured towards the door. “Perhaps we should get started.”

The Inhuman group made their way to the conference room. After introductions, Jiaying, Gordon, Coulson and Gonzales sat down at one of the tables. Everyone else fanned out, some leaving the room to do security sweeps, the rest trying their hardest to look like they weren’t listening.

Gonzales began the conversation. “Skye told me what Hydra did to you. It’s shameful.”

It was surprising to hear him start off this way and, for the first time, Grant felt a sliver of hope. If Gonzales, one of the toughest agents in SHIELD, had some empathy for what Inhumans had suffered, perhaps they would make some compromises.

Jiaying bowed her head in acceptance of his words. “If a long life has taught me anything, it’s that you can never truly be prepared for what people are capable of.” *Isn’t that the truth!*

Gonzales nodded. “Hydra took from me too.” He waved his cane to emphasize his leg injury. “We share the same scars but it’s important that you know that we are not them.”

This was a risky strategy. Grant understood Gonzales trying to find common ground but either he didn’t know exactly what Jiaying had suffered or somehow thought a hurt leg was equal to being
systematically dismantled and left for dead. If Grant had been in Jiaying’s place, he would’ve been offended. Jiaying’s inscrutable expression showed nothing of what she was feeling though.

“I have something for you.” Gonzales continued, handing her a small wooden box. “I know that Whitehall subjected you to unspeakable horrors, that he took everything from you.” That’s more like it. “A good man…,” Gonzales inclined his head towards Coulson, “…Phil Coulson, put a bullet in him.”

Jiaying nodded at Coulson before opening the box and taking out three metal disks. Each had Chinese writing on them and square cut-outs in the middle. All three disks were tied to each other. As she looked the disks over, her expression changed to amazement. “Where did you…” she gasped out.

Grant’s curiosity was piqued. He glanced at Skye and saw that she too was riveted by the scene. Whatever Gonzales found clearly held great meaning for Jiaying.

Gonzales smiled slightly. “SHIELD recovered it from Whitehall’s office after his death. I know that you were separated from your daughter.” He glanced quickly at Skye, whose gaze was still fastened on her mother. “I thought that might belong to her, a traditional Chinese gift to ward off evil spirits, isn’t it?”

Jiaying raised her eyes to Gonzales face in surprise. “I never got a chance to give it to her.” She looked at Skye, her eyes full of tears. “I kept hoping that, if she was alive, evil would never find her,” she whispered. “Not like it did me.” The silence in the room was so complete that you could hear a pin drop.

Grant looked down, blinking back tears. The love for Skye in Jiaying’s voice was incredibly powerful as was the melancholy undertone of “what if” in her statement. What if evil never had found Jiaying? What if Skye – Daisy – had been raised by Jiaying and Cal the way she should’ve been? Daisy would’ve always been loved, Jiaying never would’ve been tortured and Cal would’ve been the happy, loving family man he was meant to be. Grant’s thoughts turned to himself. What if his parents had loved him the way he should’ve been loved? Would they still be right for each other? He desperately wanted to look at Skye to see if she was thinking what he was but he resisted the impulse. This wasn’t about them; it was about Skye and her mother and he refused to intrude. They’d had enough taken from them.

“SHIELD has a very long and sometimes violent history with enhanced people,” Gonzales said after a respectful pause, “but the truth is, sometimes good people get powers and sometimes bad. We’re there to protect the public when it’s the latter.”

Jiaying put the disks back in the box and put it to the side. “And how would you like me to help you do that?” she asked in a strong voice.

Grant smiled slightly. They’d just witnessed Jiaying the mother and trauma survivor, turn back into Jiaying the leader. It was both startling and formidable.

“I would like to meet your people, learn about their powers,” Gonzales replied. “We’ll keep a record and if any ever try to do someone harm, we’ll be there to stop them. That’s why SHIELD exists.”

Grant unsuccessfully tried to push back his irritation. Why was it that Inhumans and powered people were the ones who had to be monitored? Millions of normal people did a lot greater damage but they got the benefit of the doubt. While the Agent in him understood SHIELD’s fear, the
Inhuman part was appalled. And although she kept a pretty good poker face, he could tell that Jiaying was horrified too.

She was silent for a moment, as if she was collecting her thoughts. “I’ve lived enough life to see countless people profiled for their differences. It’s amazing how many generations fall into the same trap. What is it that makes people feel they have the right to do that? Fear. That’s what it is.”

Grant worked to keep his expression neutral. He didn’t think that shouting, “That’s right!” would go over well.

Gonzales appeared unfazed. “SHIELD’s goal is to protect everyone,” he said stolidly.

Jiaying placed her hands flat on the table, probably to avoid clenching and unclenching her fists. Grant admired her self-control. Despite the intensity of the discussion and the strong emotions she had to be feeling, Jiaying’s placid expression and calm tone hadn’t changed at all. It had taken him years to master that and she seemed to do it effortlessly. “Fear drives us to do things we would otherwise never do. And it’s fear I hear in your voice, driving you to recreate the mistakes of the past. Why should my people suffer through SHIELD’s Indexing – that is what you call it, right? – in order to make your people feel better, especially when we both know that the fear will still be there?”

Gonzales leaned back in his chair, his expression also neutral. However, Grant could tell that he was taken aback by Jiaying’s response. He’d clearly expected her to bow quickly to the wishes of SHIELD and was most likely disturbed by her invocation of fear. Gonzales was ready for rational responses to logistical questions; he wasn’t prepared for a discussion about emotion particularly when it was about the feelings of his people. The silence stretched out longer than was comfortable.

Jiaying smiled softly. “You said that SHIELD’s goal is to protect everyone. That’s a worthy mission. How do you intend to protect Inhumans?” Grant wanted to applaud.

“Putting your people on the Index is about protecting them!” Gonzales perked up, pleased to return to a topic he felt confident in addressing. “If we know where they are and what they can do, then we can ensure that no one else tries to capture them or use them for their own purposes. If they come up on any other organization’s radar, we’ll know about it first and take steps to keep them safe.”

Jiaying looked at Gonzales steadily. “I accept that you have good intentions and that you truly believe in what you’re saying. Both you and Agent Coulson obviously are good men who want to do the right thing.” Gonzales smiled but Grant tensed, waiting for the other shoe to drop. “Let’s say that I consent to the Indexing of my people, that they all go on a list. What happens when one of your people leaks the list or sells it to the highest bidder? How safe will we be then?” Gonzales opened his mouth to start defending SHIELD but Jiaying held up her hand to stop him. “It’s recently been made public – but I’ve known this for years – that Hydra flourished inside of SHIELD for decades. How can we trust that something like that, even on a lesser scale, won’t happen again?”

Grant forced himself not to squirm in discomfort. The conversation wasn’t going in a positive direction. He was torn. Jiaying had some incredibly good points and he agreed with her that Inhumans should not go on the Index. It would be a disaster. But Agent Ward understood that SHIELD would never agree to just let them go without any kind of supervision or plan for how to manage them. He had no idea how the two groups were going to resolve this. If they didn’t, he wasn’t sure what would happen to the team. He avoided glancing at Skye. If he felt uncomfortable, she must be devastated and desperate.
Suddenly, May’s voice came over his coms. “All security teams, be prepared. Hydra is here.”

Grant felt himself shift into Agent Ward mode immediately. “I’m sorry to interrupt,” he said, walking closer to the negotiating table, “but May’s just informed us that Hydra is on their way.”

Jiaying immediately turned to Gordon. “You must go.” Gordon nodded once, then disappeared in a haze of blue light.

Grant nodded at her, pleased to see that he and Jiaying thought a lot alike. It was imperative that Gordon not get captured. “Trip,” he barked. “Stay with them,” he said gesturing to the three leaders still seated at the table. Seeing him nod, he added, “Skye, you’re with me.” He tapped his general coms unit. “Everyone, meet me at the top of the stairs.”

“May, what happened?” Skye asked as she and Grant strode down the hallway to the stairs.

“I’m not sure how they got here,” May snapped. “But it looks like you have about 50 Hydra agents heading towards your position. I’m firing up the quinjet but I won’t be able to get it into the air soon enough to prevent them from getting into the building.”

“Understood,” Grant replied. He approached the staircase, quickly scanning faces to ensure that all security teams were present. “May spotted at least 50 Hydra operatives heading our way but there are probably more,” he told them. “I’d expect around 100. For every Hydra agent you see, there’s at least another lurking around. Shabina, grab a high-powered rifle and get up on the roof. Take out as many as you can before they enter the building.” She nodded and immediately headed off down the hall. “Lincoln, position yourself just inside the front door. Electrify as many as you can when they enter. If we’re lucky, you’ll create a bottleneck with the bodies and slow down their entry into the building. Hopefully May will have the quinjet up and running by then and take out a lot before they can get in.” Lincoln nodded and ran down the stairs. “Everyone else, spread out and take defensive positions until we know how many Hydra people we’re dealing with. Any questions?” Silence. “OK, go!”

Everyone ran off except for Alisha. She gave Grant a sideways grin as her eyes became opaque. She shrugged each shoulder individually, creating an exact duplicate of herself each time. Another duplicate emerged from her back. Alisha winked at Grant, then turned to make eye contact with her three duplicates. She nodded, then each ran off in a different direction. Cool. Grant smiled at her before running to the top of the outside staircase. His firepower was better used outside and the cold didn’t affect him as much as it did everyone else.

From his position, he could see 15 Hydra agents racing towards the quinjet. Grant shot some fireballs at them and downed five but the others were too far ahead. “May,” he said into his coms unit. “I eliminated five but you still have ten heading your way.” If May could get the quinjet running quickly, she could take them down easily.

“Copy that,” she replied.

Since there was nothing more he could do to help her, Grant turned his attention to what was happening closer to the building. He could hear Shabina’s shots and watched as multiple Hydra agents dropped to the ground. He grinned. Damn! She was deadly. Since she and Lincoln were covering the front, Grant aimed fireballs at the Hydra agents approaching the back of the building but there didn’t seem to be that many. Puzzled, he scanned the horizon in front of him, counting 15 bodies on the ground. He whirled around. He saw only two Hydra operatives approaching the front of the building. Ominously, Shabina’s shooting had stopped. Grant quickly took out the two enemies. Including them, there were 20 bodies on the ground with what looked like five bodies piled in the doorway. If Grant’s estimate of 100 Hydra agents was correct, that left 45 still
unaccounted for. Where are all the other Hydra agents? He had the uncomfortable feeling that what he was seeing on the ground was Hydra’s bullet fodder.

He threw open the door to the building and raced inside. The halls were littered with the bodies of Hydra agents (he counted 29) but, to his immense relief, no SHIELD agents or Inhumans. His unease grew, however, when the rooms and the halls were empty. The negotiating room though was locked tight and he heard nothing from inside. Where is everyone? Grant backtracked, slowly approaching the staircase, listening hard. He could hear some scuffling sounds but couldn’t make out anything distinct. He slipped silently down the stairs and cautiously peered around the corner. His heart sank. Tied up in one corner at the far side of the large room was Shabina, Lincoln, Skye and Alisha. Bobbi and Kara were tied up in the other corner. He counted only six Hydra personnel. How in the hell did that happen? The Inhumans should’ve taken care of them easily.

He shrugged, knowing his fire power would make short work of them. He raised his hand to shoot off fire. Nothing. Grant tried again. When it didn’t work a second time, he ducked back around the corner searching for the heat source within him. Nothing. It was like the raging inferno inside him had just gone out.

“Ah, Grant Ward. Just now figuring it out, aren’t you,” called a female voice in a mocking tone. “You might as well come out in the open because there’s nothing else you can do. We’ve been waiting for you.”

Grant walked slowly out into the open, heading toward the kitchen bar. He wanted something solid behind him. The woman who’d called out to him was clearly in charge. She was Hispanic with large brown eyes. Grant smirked a bit. Just my type. She motioned for him to put down his gun. Feeling like he had no choice, Grant complied, kicking it over to her. Maybe if he seemed cooperative, she’d let down her guard.

His smile widened. “Waiting for me, were you?” He spread his hands out in an expansive gesture. “Well, here I am. What can I do for you?”

She smiled. It wasn’t a very nice smile. “You can join your colleagues,” she said, pointing toward the Inhuman corner. “Hydra has been wanting an Inhuman army for a long time and this little conference gave us just the opportunity we’ve been waiting for. Capturing some top-level SHIELD leaders and agents is just icing on the cake.” Her smile got bigger. “I’m sure they’ll be happy to comply in no time.”

Grant ruthlessly shut down his emotions. This was no time to worry about how Kara was dealing with the idea of getting brainwashed again or imagine how terrified Skye must be with the possibility of most of her family – both SHIELD and Inhuman – getting captured. He especially couldn’t pay attention to his own feelings of irritation or fear. Remain focused.

“You have me at a disadvantage,” he said with a flirtatious smile. He waited for her Duh! look before he continued. “You know my name but I don’t know yours.”

She chuckled lightly. “My name is Bacia.” She bowed mockingly. “We do need to observe the niceties if we’re going to be friends, don’t we? Now that we both know each other, I’m sure you’ll be quite happy to join us.” She waved toward the Inhuman group.

“Bacia. That’s an interesting name. And your offer is…shall we say...intriguing,” he said, giving her a mock thoughtful look. “But before I make my decision, I have to know: what did you do to my powers?” In addition to really wanting to know, Grant hoped that keeping her talking and distracted could give him the time he needed to turn this situation into a victory. That was Specialist Tricks 101.
She laughed. “Oh that,” she said, making a little It’s nothing gesture. “I’m Inhuman, just like you. And my power is to shut down all other Inhumans’ powers.” Her smile turned wicked. “I’m kind of a killjoy.”

“I’ll say,” Skye muttered from across the room. Grant stifled a laugh. Even facing defeat and ruin, Skye was a smart ass. That’s my girl!

Bacia frowned in Skye’s direction, then turned back to Grant. “Once their powers didn’t work anymore, it was easy enough to capture them. Only those two,” she pointed at Skye and Alisha, “knew how to fight effectively without them. But even they were easily overwhelmed by our numbers although your team took out way more of us than we thought you would.” Her expression brightened. “But no worries! We’re still going to get what we want.” She stepped closer to Grant, looking him up and down. “And if you come quietly, I’m sure there are ways we can…reward you.”

Skye snorted. Grant wanted to roll his eyes. It was always the same with Hydra. They weren’t loyal, so they thought that his loyalty was for sale too. He smiled at Bacia. “Tempting but no. If you want me, you’re going to have to come get me.”

She shrugged. “Have it your way.” She motioned the other Hydra operatives forward.

Here we go. As the five men closed in, Grant took a deep, slow breath. He could almost feel his heartrate slow and his blood pressure decrease. Adrenaline was good for a fight and he still had some coursing through his bloodstream. But to be strategic in how he fought required clarity and thoughtfulness, especially when there was only one of him against five of them. Six if you counted Bacia but she obviously wasn’t a combatant since she quickly took a position out of the line of fire. I’ll take care of her later. Grant quickly scanned the rec room and the kitchen, taking note of what was available. Then he smiled as evilly as he could at the approaching men. Psychological warfare wasn’t good for much when dealing with bottom feeders but if his intimidation tactics slowed even one of them down, it was helpful.

The first Hydra operative approached him directly, pulling out a gun, as another of them tried to slide behind him. Grant grabbed a glass from a silver tray sitting on the kitchen counter, throwing it in the face of the guy in front. He snatched the silver tray and, holding it in front of him to ward off shots, backed into the guy behind him, throwing his right elbow into his face. The face is one of the most sensitive parts of the body, especially for amateurs.

As the guy’s arm lowered, Grant picked it up and shot the gun still in the guy’s hand into the group approaching. The guy who’d taken the glass to the face dropped. One down. Grant yanked the guy behind him around, taking his gun and throwing him into the group, knocking down all but one. You shouldn’t be grouped together like bowling pins if you don’t want to get taken out all at once. Grant shot the guy still standing. That’s two. The guy fell to the floor, leaving an opening for Grant to throw his tray directly into the neck of a bald Hydra operative getting to his feet. That guy went back down but, since the others were getting up, Grant rolled over the pool table, desperate to find some kind of protection.

The Hydra goons approached, shooting over the top of the table. What idiots! Grant ducked lower and shot one of them in the knee from under the table. He rose slightly, his head just above the table top, so he could shoot the already hobbled operative in the hand and another in the face. Three down. He stood to his full height, prepared to pick them all off, and pulled the trigger. All he heard was a click. Damn! The gun’s empty! He looked at the lone Hydra guy still standing and shrugged. Grant’s casual attitude was enough to throw the operative off of his game because, instead of grabbing another gun, he threw a punch. Grant almost laughed. I can do this all day.
Grant slammed the goon face first onto the pool table, keeping a firm hold on his head as he kicked another Hydra operative – the bald one who’d gotten hit in the throat by the tray – in the chest. He went down for a third time. Grant jerked the other guy off the table, picked up a pool ball and smashed it into his head. *One more to go.* He grabbed a pool cue and used it to defend himself from the bald guy who’d gotten up yet again. *Impressive. Baldie actually has some stamina.* Interestingly, the guy held a wicked looking knife instead of a gun. Baldie circled Grant, slashing at him. Grant merely leaned away from his lunges, waiting until the moment that he could safely grab the guy’s knife arm, flip him onto a table and stab him in the throat. *Done!*

The whole fight had only taken a few minutes and Grant was barely breathing hard. He looked at Bacia, pleased to see that she wasn’t holding a weapon, not even the gun he’d kicked over to her. She’d obviously relied solely on her powers and the other Hydra operatives to keep her safe. He glanced at the Inhumans in the corner. *They all need better hand to hand combat skills.* More for the intimidation factor than for any other reason, he yanked the knife from the guy’s throat, wiped it on the man’s shirt, then flipped it over in his hand. Bacia simply stared at him, her mouth literally open in shock. He strode over to her, picking up his gun along the way and stopped right in front of her.

“I tend to think that my way is the best way,” he said with a smirk.

She backed up a few steps, an expression of amazement on her face. “But…you have no powers.”

“I’m still Grant Ward. That’s all the power I need.”

“Yeah, it is!” he heard Skye cheer.

Without any warning and using carefully controlled force, Grant smashed the butt of his gun into Bacia’s head. He wanted her unconscious, not dead. She crumpled in a heap. Immediately, Grant felt the reigniting of his inferno. He walked over to the Inhuman group, took a section of the rope into his palm and incinerated it. Then he did the same for the rope surrounding Bobbi and Kara.

Skye jumped into his arms. “I take it back. You are incredibly hot!” she whispered in his ear.

Grant laughed, putting her down and facing the entire group. “Is everyone OK?” At receiving nods all around (along with some sheepish looks), he replied, “So…take me to your leaders.”

After he gave specific instructions as to where they were to deploy, they all trooped quietly up to the negotiating room. They were hopeful that the Hydra agents inside didn’t have any eyes in the building and wouldn’t know they were coming. Grant silently melted the door handle and threw open the door. Similar to the scene downstairs, the four remaining Hydra operatives – the six bodies on the ground gave evidence of the major fight SHIELD waged – had the SHIELD agents tied up in one corner and Jiaying shackled in another.

Exactly as Grant instructed, Lincoln quickly assessed the room, then electrified the Hydra operatives with one simultaneous strike. Even before the Hydra agents hit the floor, the others rushed in to release their respective leaders from their bonds. Grant surveyed the room in satisfaction. *Not a bad day’s work.*

The telltale crack of Gordon’s arrival could be heard from the hallway. Soon he was striding towards the room, May close at his heels. Apparently Gordon had picked her up before returning to the building. As she told the room, she’d been able to take out the Hydra operatives trying to capture the quinjet, find the submarine they used to land most of their men and destroy the helicopter they’d used to drop in the rest.
After May finished talking, there was a brief silence. It was obvious that no one knew what to say. “Well,” Coulson finally said, “I think this calls for a break. Was that a kitchen I saw downstairs?”

The break lasted longer than Coulson originally intended but was put to good use. May supervised Alisha’s transporting of the captured Hydra agents to one of the residential buildings for safekeeping. Trip and Kara raided the kitchen and a grocery store (courtesy Gordon) in order to whip up some light snacks for the group. Afterwards, they played a game of pool. Kara wrinkled her nose and stuck her tongue out at Grant when she had to wash the blood off one of the balls. Skye and Jiaying sat by themselves, murmuring in low tones, the box with the metal disks between them. Grant introduced Lincoln and Shabina to Bobbi, guessing correctly that the three scientists would have a lot in common. He talked quietly with Coulson and Gonzales.

After a while, Jiaying stood up and said to the SHIELD leaders, “Well, gentlemen. Should we start again?”

They nodded and everyone got up to return to their official duties. Grant and Skye brought up the rear of the group going back to the negotiating room. Skye squeezed Grant’s hand and said in a low voice, “I hope the negotiating goes better this time. It felt like things were heading towards an impasse before.”

He smiled slightly. “Have faith. I think you just might be surprised.”

Skye gave him a look that implied he’d grown another head but didn’t respond.

Once everyone got settled in the room, Gonzales smiled at Jiaying ruefully. “While I wouldn’t recommend it in general, Hydra’s interruption did give us some additional time to think. Your point about SHIELD wanting to monitor Inhumans because of our fear of them was well-taken. You also were right about the potential for misuse of a list of Inhumans. At the same time, I hope that how Hydra was able to capture us – by utilizing an Inhuman – also made my point about the necessity for some sort of monitoring.”

Jiaying nodded, looking wary. “What do you suggest?”

“A compromise. Your community does the monitoring and SHIELD leaves you alone. In exchange, you agree to share any information we need to know and work with us whenever we need assistance on missions.”

Jiaying sat back in her chair, looking overwhelmed. She clearly wasn’t expecting the abrupt turnaround. Grant’s stomach tightened as he waited for her response. If she doesn’t go for this, we’re back to Square One. “How would this exchange work on our part?” she asked. “How would we know what information SHIELD needs? If some of us did agree to help you on missions, how would they fit into your team?”

“All good questions,” Gonzales said. “We’d station one or two of our best agents in your community as liaisons to SHIELD. They’d consult with SHIELD on the sharing of information and train any of your people willing to help us out.”

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A frown crossed Jiaying’s face. Grant didn’t blame her for being disturbed by the suggestion. Afterlife was a haven. Introducing unknown elements, people trained more for warfare than for peace who might not have the best interests of Inhumans at heart, was risky at best. “I’d insist on having control over any agents who’d be living with us. In order for us to trust them, they’d need to work for me and consult with SHIELD, not the other way around.”

Gonzales nodded. “I think that could be arranged.” Grant tried to squash the hope he felt rising in
his chest. *This might actually work!*

Jiaying sighed, clearly not loving the idea. “Did you have any agents in mind?”

“If he passes your approval, Agent Ward has already agreed to do this. And, if she’s willing, Agent Skye as well.”

The silence in the room was heavy. Grant ignored everyone else, looking only at Skye who, in turn, stared at him, a look of shock on her face. He could almost see her processing the idea as her eyes slowly filled with tears and a small smile appeared on her lips. Skye turned her gaze towards her mother.

The two women shared a look, then Jiaying turned back to Gonzales. “I’m sure we have a lot of details to work out but I think those two agents will be acceptable.”

**Flashback**

Kara sank onto the floor after one of their regular sparring sessions, drinking greedily from her water bottle. She watched as Grant entertained himself by heating up some of the equipment, even the punching bags. “You really like it, don’t you?” she asked.

Grant jerked his head up to face her. He’d been so engrossed with seeing how he could vary the temperature of the objects that he’d almost forgotten that Kara was still there. “Like what?” he asked, trying to look as if he hadn’t been startled. Kara’s superior expression let him know that she noticed.

“Powers,” she said exaggeratedly. “You really like having powers, don’t you?”

Grant sat down next to her, also drinking from his water bottle. He was reluctant to answer the question. He knew how he’d feel if the situation were reversed: envious and fearful. But this was Kara. They were always honest with each other. “Yeah, I do. I’ve always liked fire and being able to make it, even control it, is…”

“Pretty awesome,” she finished for him, smiling a little.

Grant chuckled. “Yeah. It really is.” The smile dropped off his face. “But it’s also a big responsibility. I can’t ever lose control which is hard sometimes. And then there’s dealing with how other people feel about the powers. Some people, like you and Trip, are really cool about it. But then there are others, like Mack and Bobbi, who barely even speak to me. It’s like I’m no longer one of them.”

Kara nodded thoughtfully. “I understand how they feel,” she said slowly. Grant tried not to take offense. Kara was being honest and she’d always had his back. “The idea of fighting someone who’s so much more powerful than you are is scary. I definitely get that. But they’re also being unfair to you and Skye. Neither of you asked for this and you’ve done nothing but try to be helpful since you transformed.”

“I understand how they feel too. But that doesn’t make it any easier to deal with.”

“No, I suppose not. I imagine it’s difficult to live around people who’re treating you like you don’t belong.” She paused. “So what are you going to do now?”

*She seems to be asking me that a lot lately.* “Now I’m going to take a shower and find some food.” He grinned at her. “You really took it out of me today.”
She shook her head. There was no answering smile. “That’s not what I mean.”

Grant raised his eyebrows. He had no idea where Kara was going with this but she was clearly troubled.

She heaved a frustrated sigh as if annoyed that Grant was being dense. “I mean are you staying with SHIELD or is this Afterlife place going to be your new home?”

Grant just stared at Kara, stunned by the question. The prospect of living at Afterlife was not one he’d considered. “I’ve never even thought about it.”

Kara looked at him skeptically. “Grant, I’m your best friend. I know you better than anyone and yes,” she forestalled his protest, “that includes Skye. Your head has been someplace other than SHIELD for a while now, even before you got powers.” Her eyes raked over his face, seeing something that brought tears to her own. Her smile was tremulous. “I do believe you’ve outgrown us.” Before he could offer an objection, she stood up and placed a warm hand on his shoulder, leaning close to speak softly in his ear. “You deserve to have a good life, Grant. Maybe it’s time to start living it.” She turned on her heel and quickly left the room.

Grant stayed on the mat, closing his eyes in order to mull over what she’d said. Kara was right that his head hadn’t been in the game since Hunter mentioned an exit strategy. Grant realized then that SHIELD was just what Hunter said it was: a job. Most people didn’t stay in the same job forever and he’d been either training for or being a spy since he was 15 years old. Working for SHIELD was difficult, all-consuming even, and didn’t allow for much relaxation or time in which to start a family. Grant admitted to himself that once he and Skye got together, he’d been considering a future in which there wasn’t constant danger or the continual stress of the world ending. Maybe it was time they discussed that.

Present

Skye and Grant sat on top of some rocks, looking down at the massive number of penguins lounging around on the shore. If the stars and the moon hadn’t given off enough light to see, it would’ve been difficult to detect the birds in the dark. The air was cold but, because of Grant’s hot nature, neither he nor Skye were uncomfortable. The negotiations had halted for the night and most of the other SHIELD agents were in bed either in the residential building’s guest rooms or in the quinjet. The Inhumans had left with Gordon so they could sleep in their own beds. After saying goodnight to everyone, Skye asked Grant if they could take a walk.

Grant took Skye’s hand in his own, kissed the back of it, then brought it to his chest. “It seems like negotiations went well.” At least, he hoped they did. In all honesty, he’d quit listening the second Jiaying agreed to let the two of them live at Afterlife.

“How long had you known about the possibility of consulting with SHIELD?” Skye asked.

Grant tried to judge if she was angry. “Umm…..let’s see. Well, if you consider that time Coulson said something about being a liaison or the time before that when Gonzales mentioned a compromise…” Grant grinned at Skye’s increasingly disgruntled expression. “…I’d guess I’d have to say about 30 minutes before they brought it up to Jiaying.”

He laughed when Skye yanked her hand out of his and shoved him off his rock. She grinned as she held her hand out to help him back up. “No, really. How did this happen?”

Grant resettled himself back on his rock. “For once, I think Hydra did something helpful. Our fight gave Gonzales and Coulson a chance to see just how helpful Inhumans could be. They also realized
how badly things could go if Inhumans were on the opposite side, something that could easily happen if they pissed off Jiaying and the Inhuman community. So, they knew they needed a compromise.” He shrugged, trying to look casual. “I just happened to make a few suggestions at exactly the right time.”

“You know,” Skye said thoughtfully, “I think your nickname could be the Voice of Reason.” She looked teasingly at Grant. “For the rest of today. There’s no way it’s lasting any longer than that.”

Grant laughed. “Duly noted.” The two of them lapsed into a comfortable silence, both looking out at the mass of penguins.

“And you’re totally OK with leaving SHIELD and working for my mother at Afterlife?”

“Yes.”

Skye was quiet again for a few minutes. Then she burst out, “You can see how I’m having a hard time believing that, right? I mean, you’re like the posterboy for superspies. If they held a contest for the most dedicated agent, you’d win the title, hands down. Come on, Grant. You’ve been SHIELD or SHIELD-adjacent since you were 15! Why do you want to do this?”

Grant bit back his smile at her verbal antics. SHIELD-adjacent? She was asking sincere questions but in her usual Skye way. He stared out at the penguins, trying to figure out how to explain his decision to her. “Until I went to Hill and Fury, I never allowed myself to think about the future beyond saving John’s life. He certainly didn’t want me to because it would take my attention away from him. And he was right. Because when I did finally start thinking about the future, I started wondering if letting Hydra win was a good thing, and it completely changed my perspective. But after I turned, I couldn’t conceive of anything past taking down Hydra. Not only did I need to be incredibly focused on the job at hand but I had no idea of what else I’d do, what else could be in store for me. The spy game was all I knew. Then I met you.”

He turned his gaze away from the penguins to look at Skye, wanting her to understand how much she meant to him. Her gaze was riveted on his. “When I fell in love with you, it changed everything. I started imagining a future that was different from what I was doing. I started wanting things I’d never thought possible. I even started thinking about myself as Grant, not Agent Ward, and I realized that I wanted more than a life with SHIELD could give. I thought my family’s money would be our way out, that we could just leave because we had enough to live on.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Skye asked.

Grant’s mouth twisted in a wry smile. “You were so happy being in SHIELD that I didn’t have the heart to even suggest it. I told myself that I could be happy with what we had. Being with you was the most important thing.” He caressed Skye’s cheek. “But then we transformed and found Afterlife and your parents and I started thinking about leaving again. But this time I realized that what I wanted had changed. I didn’t want to give up all our friends and family. I want to go on missions occasionally and continue making a difference in the world.”

Skye shook her head. “You really need to work on your communication skills. I had no idea you were thinking about any of this!”

“I know. I’m sorry. I wanted to talk with you about it but then something would happen or I’d change my mind again. It seemed unfair to bring you into a plan that I hadn’t even figured out.”

She smiled slightly. “I think I could’ve handled it.”
He nodded. “I’m sure you could’ve. It wasn’t you I was worried about; it was me. I was so confused. My whole life has been about what other people wanted; I had to learn how to want for myself. If I was going to do it right, I needed to be sure about what I wanted before I talked about it with you.”

“OK. I get that.”

“I kept thinking about different plans, going over what would work and what wouldn’t, just like we do for missions. Nothing seemed right until today when it occurred to me how we could have the best of both worlds. If we worked with Afterlife for SHIELD, then their problems of monitoring and training were solved and we could have a real life – we could even start a family if we wanted to – spend time with your parents, see all of our friends, and do work we love.”

“This all makes sense,” Skye replied, “but what if I don’t want to do that? What if I want to stay at SHIELD and continue working there? You had no right to make that decision for me!”

He smiled slightly. “I know. I didn’t. I told Coulson and Gonzales that I would be the liaison to SHIELD for Afterlife but whether you wanted to do it was up to you. It’s the perfect solution for me but you make the decisions about what you do.” His smile widened. “See? I have learned a thing or two about relationships.”

Skye didn’t return his smile. “I thought the most important thing was for us to be together? How would that even work if you’re at Afterlife while I’m at SHIELD?”

Grant’s expression turned serious. “Skye, after everything we’ve been through, there’s not a doubt in my mind that we’ll work it out. I don’t know the details yet but nothing is going to keep us apart.” He shrugged, smiling at her teasingly. “Gordon just may get a whole lot busier.” He took her hand and kissed her palm. “Does this mean that you don’t want to move to Afterlife with me?”

Skye looked at him searchingly. As he tried to read her expression, Grant felt a moment of panic. *Have I misread her?* He’d abide by whatever decision she made but, contrary to what he’d just told her, living apart would really be difficult. A slow smile crossed her face and Grant relaxed. He knew this was payback for not talking with her before about all of this. “No, Superspy, that isn’t what it means. Of course I want to move to Afterlife with you. As some ridiculous Voice of Reason once told me: wherever you go, I go.”
“Hi, honey. I’m home!” a singsong voice trilled.

Grant glanced up from chopping onions to see what he’d been waiting all week to see: Skye lounging against the doorframe, a grin on her face. Her black tac suit struck a discordant note in their light and airy kitchen but she was still a sight for sore eyes. He dropped the knife, wiped his hands on his shorts, and scooped her up in his embrace. Skye’s arms tightened around his neck as she whispered in his ear, “It’s so good to be back!”

Grant set her down, his smile as bright as hers. He did a quick visual examination, trying to hide his sigh of relief. *No visible injuries.*

“How do I pass inspection?” she asked teasingly.

He smirked at her. “With flying colors,” he whispered as he placed his lips on hers. The kiss quickly went from a chaste, close-mouthed *Welcome home* to a long, open-mouthed *I’ve really missed you* one from which they both emerged breathless.

Skye closed her eyes and leaned her forehead against his for a moment, a look of contentment on her face. Then she opened her eyes and stepped back. Grant grinned as he noticed her trying to subtly utilize the situational awareness skills he’d taught her all those years ago. She glanced at the stove where a delicious smell was emanating from a skillet. “Do we have time for a proper reunion?”

“Of course, just give me a second.” Grant quickly dumped the onions he’d been chopping into the sauce, stirred it a few times to incorporate the new ingredient, then washed his hands. *No one does a proper reunion with onion-y hands!* Skye giggled softly as he swept her off her feet and carried her into their bedroom. He gently put her on the bed, then checked his watch. He knew what she was really asking. “We should have enough time. There’s nothing that needs my immediate attention. If anything gets cold,” he smirked at her in a way he knew got her going, “I can always heat it back up.”

Skye hurriedly started shedding her weapons and the tight-fitting suit. She smiled wickedly at him. “I guess now might be a good time to mention that I’m pretty cold.”

“Music to my ears,” Grant responded with a wolfish grin. *This never gets old.* It had been a long journey to get there though, one he hadn’t been sure they’d ever reach.

**Flashback**

Grant stared at the place where Skye had been standing with Gordon just a moment ago. He relished the expression on her face, how she looked longingly at him, just before Gordon teleported the two of them to the Playground. While Grant’s heart knew that Skye loved him, his head needed the reminder every so often. *Doing this tag-team approach is so difficult!* Grant thanked his lucky stars that Skye wanted to be with him at Afterlife instead of doing her own thing at the Playground. He’s meant what he’d said about them working it out if she chose differently but he was glad they didn’t have to. The last month had proved how tough that kind of life would’ve been. Even now, when their separation was supposed to be short, neither wanted to be apart. Grant
sighed. *We’ve had enough of that. But this is our life.*

Setting up the Secret Warriors was taking a lot of upfront work. Before they could even officially assemble the Inhuman team, there were endless meetings, reams of paperwork and the usual equipment consolidation that had to be accomplished. Grant and Skye had been so busy that they hadn’t had much time to be together. When he thought back, Grant realized that they hadn’t spent more than a few overnights together during the last month. The ones they had managed to get had been spent at the base, which wasn’t nearly as fun as being at Afterlife. The Inhuman community offered less structure and greater privacy, so both of them felt freer there.

He could’ve gone back to the Playground with her this time. In fact, that’s what Skye preferred but he had other fish to fry. Grant shook off his melancholy and put on his game face, heading over to another cabin closer to his own. Despite his new official status in Afterlife, no one would tell him exactly where she was but, as he neared a cabin covered in flowers – both dead and alive – he knew this had to be where Raina resided. Surprisingly, the door was open. *That doesn’t seem like Raina.* The woman guarded her privacy as zealously as SHIELD guarded its secrets.

Grant crossed his arms and leaned against her doorway. He wanted to look both casual and intimidating. Raina was moving around in the bathroom, so he took the opportunity to look around her room. Just like the outside, flowers were everywhere. Some were in vases, carefully attended to but most were strewn about the ground. Many of these were withered or dead while others appeared stomped on or pulled up by the roots. He smiled slightly. *Her transition must not be going well.*

Raina came out of the bathroom and stopped short upon seeing Grant. He was amused to notice that she was no longer wearing a flowered dress but was instead garbed rather simply in black pants and a black shirt. “Ah, Agent Ward,” she said in a mocking tone as she sat on the bed facing him. “I wondered when you’d get around to visiting me.” She cocked her head. “Or is it just Grant Ward now?”

He smirked. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you in dark colors before. Is this a new look for you?” He made a show of looking around the room. “Black doesn’t seem like it goes very well with all these flowers.”

She frowned. “I felt a lot of shaking in the village last night. That must mean that dear Skye is here somewhere. Still not able to control her powers I guess.”

Grant’s smirk didn’t waver. *Typical Raina. Trying to get under everyone’s skin.* “What makes you think she wanted to control them? Sometimes they make things more…” his smile widened, “…exciting.” He was pleased when he saw her blanch. *Bingo!* He left the doorway and sat in the chair facing her bed, leaning back like this was a casual visit. He knew that would irritate her.

Raina sighed. “What do you want?”

“Why do I have to want anything? We’ve been through so much together and now, here we are, fellow Inhumans. I thought we could catch up.”

“Drop the bullshit, Ward. I don’t have time for it.” Her sharp tone could’ve cut glass. “I have to go and….play chess or something.”

“Not finding the Afterlife community to your liking then?” He paused, waiting for her to say something. She just stared stonily at him. When it was clear she wasn’t going to say anything, he continued. “How are your powers?”
That did it. Raina stood and started pacing the room, flowers popping up in her wake. She didn’t pay any attention to them, trampling many in her pacing. “These damn flowers are driving me crazy! I was supposed to be an angel, a being of unspeakable power, but all I get is this!” She waved her arm around the room. “I used to love flowers. I bought them whenever I could but now I hate them.”

“I don’t know,” Grant shrugged, once again making a show of looking around the room. “I’d say that the flowers give you a softer side. Given that you’re usually a selfish bitch, that should be an improvement.”

Raina’s expression darkened even though Grant’s tone had been light. “Oh, there are some darker aspects to them,” she said, waving her hand in his direction. The flowers on the floor behind her started lengthening and thickening, winding their way toward Grant. He watched them carefully and, just before they could touch him, flicked a wrist and they burned into ash.

Grant sent a line of fire right up to Raina’s feet, careful that none of it touched her. “You might want to be careful around me, Raina,” he warned, still in his light tone. “I’m sure you don’t want things to get…” He smirked. “…heated.”

He was expecting her to be angry or afraid, so he was surprised by her laugh. Raina sat down on the bed again, not even bothering to look at the fire by her feet. “Skye really hit the jackpot with you, didn’t she?” she said admiringly. “I should’ve scooped you up when you were with Hydra.”

“That was never an option you had. You would’ve had better luck with John.”

She grimaced. “That whack job? He was only a means to an end.” She looked piercingly at Grant. “So fine, you’ve demonstrated that you have way more power than I do. What do you want? You didn’t come here just to gloat.”

“You’re right. I didn’t. I came here to talk about your future.” He paused, making sure he had her attention. “The entire time I’ve known you, you’ve never been content, always wanting more. Usually you wanted things that were selfish and harmful to other people but they never made you happy, did they? I’d like to offer you something you might truly want.”

**Present**

“Oh,” Skye sighed as they lay in bed following their afternoon delight. Her head was nestled on his shoulder, his arm holding her close. “You have no idea how much I’ve been wanting this!” She lazily stroked her hand across his chest, skating over his 6-pack abs to draw circles around his nipples.

Grant frowned. “Was the mission difficult? Did something happen we didn’t plan for?”

“Chill, Turbo,” Skye said, putting her finger over his lips. “The mission went smoothly. It’s just that it was boring, so all I wanted was to be at home. I kept imagining all the things I could’ve been doing here instead of watching stupid pet tricks or listening to Lincoln talk about his latest dating disaster.”

Grant laughed. “Hey, don’t knock Lincoln’s stories. They’re entertaining.” He shook his head, smiling fondly. “But he does seem to know how to pick them though, doesn’t he?”

Skye just smiled, refusing to be pulled into that discussion. Much to everyone’s surprise, once Skye was no longer a bone of contention between them, Grant and Lincoln had become good friends. The two of them not only shared the same sense of humor but also thought the same way. They
often spent long hours hashing out mission and training plans together. They also played poker twice a month with Trip and Fitz. Skye loved the times when the game was held at their house because the four men often ended up getting silly, challenging each other not only in cards but also in stupid dares. She couldn’t get enough of participating in the “punishments” the losers had to endure. Grant, Lincoln and Trip once had to serenade her with their version of *Call Me Maybe*. Fitz recorded it on his phone, so there were still times when the video would randomly show up in Grant’s email. Another time Skye just watched as Lincoln, Trip and Fitz streaked around the entire outer perimeter of their house. She rolled her eyes while Grant laughed so hard he was crying.

“Did I miss much while I was gone?” she asked.

Grant pretended to consider this. “Well, your dad came over yesterday and Kara was here two days before that. I’m not sure if you know this but neither one of them is any good at making sandcastles,” he said in a disgusted tone. Skye just laughed. He shrugged. “But they made up for it. Cal told some really great stories and Kara made her famous paella.”

Skye groaned. “I can’t believe I missed that! I love Kara’s paella!”

“I know,” Grant said, kissing her gently on the nose. “That’s why I froze some for you.” Skye smiled. “I figured you’d kill me if I didn’t,” he teased.

She stuck out her tongue at him. “That’s it? That’s all that happened?”

“No, of course not. Lots of things happened. Like… I finished the front porch. All that’s left now is installing the porch swing.”

Skye’s eyes lit up and Grant smiled. He loved watching how much she adored having her own home. He understood what a luxury this was for her after spending her formative years and early adulthood in one temporary place after another. He was thrilled he could give her a place she could always call home.

After a year of living at Afterlife, the two of them decided they needed time to themselves. Grant used some of the money he’d gotten from his family to purchase a small island in the Caribbean. They planned out the kind of home they wanted (earthquake-proof with lots of light and open space and their front door only steps away from the ocean) and, with a lot of help from their friends, built it themselves. Ever since, their home became a favorite spot for their family and friends to visit. Grant’s favorite siblings, Thomas and Elizabeth, were frequent guests. He and Skye even constructed an extra building that served as a training site for the Secret Warriors.

Grant’s smile widened as he thought back to their journey. *I’m happier than I ever thought I’d be.* He had everything he’d ever wanted but it hadn’t been easy. Things were going smoothly now but that hadn’t always been the case, especially in the early days.

**Flashback**

The choice of which Inhumans should be invited to join the Secret Warriors was mostly an easy one. Lincoln, Shabina, and Alisha were no-brainers and all three were eager to enlist. Coulson’s team and Jiaying also agreed that Elena and Manual would be great additions although there were stipulations put on Manual’s involvement due to his youth (missions couldn’t interfere with his schooling and he had to sit out the dangerous ones). Joey Gutierrez, an Inhuman who could manipulate metal, joined too. Those were the uncomplicated decisions.

A lot of people fought against the inclusion of Raina in the Secret Warriors, most especially Skye and Coulson. Neither trusted her and Coulson – the memory of his torture at her hands still fresh –
was particularly hard to convince. Grant and Jiaying eventually won them over by pointing out that keeping her under supervision and giving her a purpose might help her change for the better. They ended up being right too, a fact Grant constantly had to bite his tongue from pointing out to Skye.

After the Raina battle, Grant was tempted to just forget about the final name on his list. He was tired and knew he’d get pushback from both SHIELD and Jiaying on this one but decided that doing the right thing outweighed his reluctance. After a lot of arguing, everyone agreed he could go visit her to see if she was even interested in being a Secret Warrior.

Grant pushed open the door to the cell-like room. While the facility wasn’t a prison per se, it still was confinement. The rooms had regular furniture, like chairs and beds, but there were no windows. There also wasn’t anything that could obviously be used to harm the occupant or their guests. Occupants were given therapy and medication, encouraged to do art work in the common space, exercised in the gym and took their meals in a supervised environment. It was a gilded cage but a cage nonetheless.

Grant winced when he realized that while he’d been in worse places, this place wasn’t a picnic. The occupant of the room was sitting on a chair, her head turned so that she was facing the blank wall. She was a lot thinner than she’d been the last time he’d seen her. The staff told him that she wasn’t extremely responsive when they tried to talk with her. Sure enough, she didn’t even move at the sound his entry. Grant was fairly certain she hadn’t been told he was coming, so she likely thought he was an orderly or medical professional. He sat on the sofa directly across for her so that they’d be facing each other when or if she bothered to turn around.

“Hey Tori, how are you?”

She slowly turned her head to look at him. Her expression was neutral but he spotted a trace of surprise in her eyes. “Who are you?” she asked in little more than a monotone.

While Grant knew their past would come up, he was hoping to avoid reminding her of his role in the destruction of her life for a bit longer. No such luck. “I’m Agent Grant Ward. I’m one of the agents who did your Index evaluation.”

Her eyes swept over his clothes. Instead of the regulation dark suit he’d worn when interacting with her the last time, he was now dressed in a black t-shirt and jeans. He’d carefully chosen his outfit to look as casual as he could for her while looking official for everyone else. It hadn’t been easy getting in to see her. Tori’s eyes traveled to his face and he saw the dawning recognition as she remembered what both of them had spent a lot of effort trying to forget.

“You’re the nice one.” Her expression hardened. “The one who told me things wouldn’t be as bad as I feared, that my life wouldn’t change that much.”

Grant nodded. “I did tell you those things. I’d hoped they’d be true but obviously,” he glanced around the spartan space, “they weren’t. I’m sorry.”

Tori got to her feet in a flash and loomed over him, her expression filled with fury. It took every ounce of Grant’s self-control not to move a muscle or even alter his placid expression. He couldn’t appear threatening or this would never work. “You’re sorry?! You, one of the guys who put me here? You’re sorry?”

“Yes, I am. I’m not going to tell you that the decision about what happened to you wasn’t mine or that I fought for you to have a different outcome. That would just insult you even those both of those things are true.” Grant watched her closely, seeing her body swell up in a blast of outrage. He calmly finished, “You have every right to be furious with me. What happened to you was a terrible
Tori opened her mouth then closed it again. Grant had surprised her with his acknowledgement of the harm he did to her. She gaped at him, backing up until she was sitting on the chair again. Her face held all the animation it was missing when he first entered the room but her eyes narrowed with suspicion. “Do you really mean that?”

“I do. That’s why I’m here. I’ve finally found a way to help you.”

She laughed scornfully. “How? Are you going to take away my powers? Turn back time? Or is it another facility, one that’s better than this?” She waved her hand to cover the room. “If that’s all you’ve got, then no thanks. That’s what they said before the last two moves and they were wrong both times.”

Grant felt a stab of guilt. What have we done to her? He leaned towards her. “Tori, I never liked the way SHIELD handled powered people but I didn’t have a way to do something about it until now. We finally got SHIELD to recognize that there are better ways to help people with powers. They put me in charge of a team of powered people who help SHIELD complete missions whenever we’re needed. The rest of the time, we train and we get to live in peace as long as we don’t hurt anyone. I’ve come to offer you a place on the team.”

Tori’s eyes never left his. “We. You said ‘as long as we don’t hurt anyone.’ You have powers too?”

“Yes, but my powers are different than yours. I’m what they call an Inhuman which means that my powers came internally from something in my DNA. You got your powers from an external source.”

“Does that matter?”

“Not in a practical sense but you have to know that – if you accept my offer – you’ll be the only team member who isn’t Inhuman. I don’t think it’ll be an issue but there might be people who have a problem with it. I’m not worried but I want you to have all the information upfront before you make your decision.”

Tori was silent for a minute, clearly mulling over what he’d said. He didn’t blame her; it was a lot to process. “Did you have your powers when you did my evaluation?”

“No. I had no idea I was an Inhuman until several months ago. While I never liked what we did to you, it was only once I got powers that I truly understood how terribly we treated you. That’s why I’m here now: to try and right that wrong.”

“If I agreed to be on this team and went with you, would I still have to live here?” Tori’s voice cracked on the last word. Grant did his best not to choke on his guilt.

“No. During the times when you’re not training or on missions, you’d be living in a community where everyone is like you, people with powers. There’ll be supervision, especially at first, but there aren’t any cells and you won’t be confined. One of the best parts is that instead of trying to prevent you from using your powers, in this community, you get help in developing and managing them.”

“Developing them?” Tori’s eyes got so wide that they seemed to take up her entire face. “Does that mean that I’d get to be around animals again?”

Grant smiled. This was the easy part. “Yep.”
Tori sat back in her chair, staring at Grant with an expression filled with both wonder and suspicion. “And you’re serious? This isn’t just some test to see if I’m content.”

“No, this is a real offer. If you’re willing to train with my team and complete missions for SHIELD as needed, then you can walk out of here with me today and get started.” In reality, all Grant was authorized to do was to gauge Tori’s level of interest but, seeing her now, he couldn’t offer her hope and then just leave. That would be cruel and he had a feeling that it would go badly. *I just hope Coulson sees it that way too.* Because, looking at Tori’s face, he knew she was going to say yes.

Coulson hadn’t been pleased and Grant had to do a lot of groveling to get back in his good graces but it had been worth it. Even Coulson admitted that later but only after Grant, Trip, Hunter and Fitz had taken him out drinking one night. Even though she wasn’t an Inhuman, Tori thrived at Afterlife. After a period of adjustment for everyone (the Inhumans had to accept that just because she wasn’t a Chosen One of the Kree didn’t mean she was less than), they discovered that Tori had a bubbly personality and was both helpful and fun. Plus, her powers meant that Afterlife residents could have pets because there was now a way to ensure their good behavior. Tori was tireless in working with both pet and owner to develop a strong bond and appropriate discipline (for both participants). As a result, she became a huge favorite in the community.

Tori was also incredibly valuable to the Secret Warriors. At first, several members of the team were skeptical that her powers would be useful on missions. However, that perception changed after an early mission went horribly wrong. The mission itself was a fairly easy one: break into a nuclear power plant during the night shift, steal their plans and materials for building an illegal bomb, and get out. There weren’t supposed to be many guards on site, so Grant and Skye decided to treat it more as a training exercise. Lincoln and Tori were there to get the work done while Elena, Tori and Raina were present for on-the-job training.

At first, everything went just as planned. There were only a few guards and they turned out to be easily distracted. Skye and Lincoln got what they needed with minimal disruption and the group started heading back to the rendezvous point quickly. They’d just cleared the plant perimeter when, before anyone knew what was happening, a Hydra team surrounded them. Elena was able to run into the surrounding woods but the rest of the group was captured. Since Skye, Lincoln and Raina were well-known to them, Hydra had created unique gloves for each of them to contain their powers. They had no idea who Tori was or what she could do. Skye heard the team leader suggest that she was a regular SHIELD agent along to protect SHIELD’s interests.

The four of them were bound with ropes, listening as the Hydra team discussed whether to take them back to Hydra or dispose of them. Skye told Grant later that she honestly thought that the four of them were going to die because the Hydra team seemed pretty harsh. She hoped Elena would just escape because there was no way she could rescue them without getting caught herself. While Skye stewed, Lincoln struggled and Raina tried to talk her way out of their dilemma, Tori closed her eyes, ignoring the Hydra guard taunting her about praying. Suddenly, a flock of birds swooped in, flying madly about the faces of the Hydra team. At the same moment, a group of rats swarmed the captured Warriors, quickly chewing through the rope. Once they were free, Elena darted in to remove Skye’s gloves. Without any constraint on her powers, Skye wasted no time in taking down the Hydra guards who were still busy dealing with the birds. The whole escape and reversal of fortunes had only taken a few minutes.

There were no more doubts about whether Tori deserved a spot on the team.

Present
Skye frowned as she watched Grant put his clothes back on. “Why are you getting up so soon? I could just stay here all day,” she said as she stretched luxuriously in bed.

He grinned. “No, you couldn’t. I’ll hand it to you though: you’ve done a great job of pretending that you don’t care. I’m impressed that you haven’t asked about them once but…” he checked his watch, “…you realize we don’t have much time left.”

“You know me so well,” Skye chuckled as she got out of bed.

“Damn straight. I’m going to go check on dinner while you get dressed.” He went back into the kitchen, satisfied that his spaghetti sauce was still simmering away. The kitchen smelled heavenly. Checking his watch again, Grant quickly got out some sliced apples and Cheerios to put on the table. He’d just put some sippy cups with water in front of two chairs when a beautiful dark-haired little girl with brown eyes came around the corner into the kitchen, raising her arms out to him. Grant smiled as he picked her up, knowing that she loved to be cuddled after waking from a nap.

“What’s up, Daisy-girl? Did you have a good naptime?” he asked as he carried her into the living room and sat in the corner of the sofa. Grant loved this quiet time with Daisy, as brief as it was. She usually was a tiny ball of energy, racing from one fun activity to the next, but she tended to be quiet and affectionate as she shook off the sleepiness of her nap.

“Yes, Daddy,” Daisy said as she burrowed further into his shoulder.

Grant looked up to see Skye tenderly watching the two of them. He knew she adored watching him with Daisy. After surviving the disaster that was his family and his work with Hydra, Grant hadn’t been certain he was cut out for fatherhood. And, although Jiaying assured them that Inhumans had been having families for generations, neither he nor Skye were certain about mixing their genes. They decided to wait to have children; there was no rush. Tori gave them a Labrador instead. Grant named him Pal.

After they’d moved to the island though, something changed. Perhaps it was the contentment they found or the enjoyment he got out of playing with the kids in Afterlife but Grant decided that he’d like to see what the whole parent thing was about. Skye quickly agreed and, much to their surprise, became pregnant on their very first try. Having Daisy was an adjustment. They had to start taking turns on missions so that both of them weren’t gone at the same time but it worked. To their delight, their family and friends adored spending time with Daisy, so they got frequent breaks from childcare. Jiaying and Cal were particularly attentive, sometimes aggressively so.

One day, Grant found himself out with Skye on the beach in front of their house. He looked at her in disbelief. “Did your parents just shoo us away?”

Skye nodded, amused. “Fraid so. I do believe we’re going to have to have another kid just to get some parenting time in.”

Grant laughed but soon after, they had Aidan. He grinned as the adorable dark-haired, blue-eyed two-year old dashed into the living room yelling, “Mama! Mama! Mama!” as loud as he could as he threw himself at Skye. Even Pal roused himself from his nap to come nuzzle Skye.

Daisy’s head popped up. “Mommy’s home?” Daddy was forgotten as she jumped from his lap to zip into Skye’s waiting arms.

Grant sighed contentedly as he watched the domestic scene. There was his wife, children and beloved dog, all of them living in their house on their island. He had work he enjoyed, friends he loved, a community where he belonged and time to indulge whatever passions he chose. Grant
thought back to when he envisioned himself as the Black Shadow, someone lurking around the corner, always mysterious but never fully known. That may have been the spy he was then: a miserable loner who carried around so much baggage that almost no one could get close. It didn’t have much resemblance to the spy he was now: a community leader with a loving family who depended on relationships to keep him safe the way he’d once depended on gadgets. And he wouldn’t have it any other way.

Chapter End Notes

Well. That's it. I can't believe it's over. I never set out to write such a long story but I'm glad I had the chance to change certain parts of Grant Ward's journey and give him the ending he deserved. I hope you enjoyed it too. Thanks so much to all of my readers and, most especially, to those kind enough to leave reviews. You all are the best!!

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