The Expectation of Joy

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**The Expectation of Joy**

by [MissMeggie](http://archiveofourown.org/)

**Summary**

After nearly six months alone on an alien planet Jemma comes back to earth and seeks comfort in the one man she shouldn't but that's her choice to make. Sometimes choices have unplanned consequences and this one will change the way Jemma views everything even herself. When the thing she expects is not what she gets, can she find perfection in the imperfect?

**Notes**

AN I own nothing, this is a smutty beginning but I swear plot follows. Please give it a try, I swear this is not what it seems at a glance and I'm super excited to explore this story line if you guys are willing to go with me! Thanks to my Betas Myranda and Pixie, this story has been bubbling in me for months now not only did you guys listen while I waffled on it, and thought it out. You helped make it better so thank you.
Grant keeps every single one of his safe houses heavily secured. When he gets a notification the security measures have been passed on one in particular, he pulls up the CCTV on his tablet to check things out.

Walking leisurely up to the door is none other than his ex-wife, lugging a heavy looking duffle on her delicate shoulder.

"Baby, what is up with you?" he wonders aloud.

He knows, from his source inside SHIELD, that Jemma had been freed from some kind of portal. All his source knows is Fitz thought it was a black hole, but little else. Grant's first reaction was to burn SHIELD down to get her back, but logic prevailed. If anyone was capable of finding where exactly the thing had flung Grant's wife, it was Fitz. He did think, for half a second, he was sure he was going to have to fix Coulson's little red wagon when he tried to end Fitz's mission. As turned out, Fitz was determined enough all his own. What he doesn't know is what would drive her to seek refuge in a place he knows she's fully aware he has full access to.

"Pickens," he summons as he zooms the tablet in on Jemma's face in the camera feed. She's exhausted; it shows in her eyes. As well, he's made her mad enough times to know the angry furrow between her brows spells trouble. "Fuel up the jet. I gotta go home for a bit." He heaves himself from the hotel room bed he'd been sprawled out on.

"Home Base sir?" the burly man steps up. The guy is built like a brick wall. The silent loyal type, Grant is keen to employ more men like him.

"No. Chicago." Pickens only raises an eye brow before doing as he's bid.

Grant keys in the security codes and stands before facial scanner, waiting for the beep that allows his entry. He's momentarily proud of Jemma for locking the doors behind her. Personal security and awareness had never been very high on Jemma's list.

He steps into the foyer, grinning widely, unable to resist calling out "Honey, I'm home!" The men pour in behind him, ready to go about their perimeter and security checks.

He hears stomping, and then she's standing in the door to the living room. She's wearing a hoodie with the Tardis across the front, soft ball shorts, and her Beaker house shoes. She holds a half full wine glass in her left hand. The hand still bare of its wedding band. No matter how many times he's sees it, how many times he's faced with the reality of where they are now, it's still hurts like hell.

"I thought you might show. I was hoping you would actually."

"Why? Why are we here, Jemma?"

She takes a gulp of her wine. She looks at him for a long second. Measuring him, deciding something.

"Would you believe I missed you? Missed this?" she gestures to their surroundings. Her eyes brim with tears. Normally he'd be uninclined to believe that, but Jemma hardly ever cried. It's the specialist's wife in her, trained not to show emotional weakness. Instead, her tears and the
absolutely torn expression on her face make him believe her.

She takes his silent appraisal as disbelief and continues making her point, unconscious of the tears dripping down her face.

"Maybe I missed making my own choices, not ones based on survival or what science demands of me! I miss simple choices," she confesses, wiping her tear-littered face on her sleeve.

"Baby, are you okay?" he approaches her hands up and slowly, like she was a skittish animal caught in a trap. He wants to free her but knows he needs to be gentle about it.

Her eyes go hard. "Oh for fuck's sake! Not you too!" She shakes her head and laughs bitterly. It's the one she uses when she feels fucked over.

"Why does everyone analyze every tear, every moment of stress, silence? I just want to spend five minutes not fucking thinking! Am I okay? Am I okay? I survived six months on a foreign planet! I'm fucking fantastic, all things considered!"

His men curl inward toward them, ready to protect him. He cast his eyes sideways at Pickens so they beg off. Jemma has a death grip on her wine glass, poised to defend herself, a stance built of habit and instinct even with eyes glassy from too much wine. That's definitely not her first glass, given all the F-bombs she's dropping.

He nods in acceptance. "Okay, baby, I won't analyze a thing. Can you tell me what it is you want? What you came home to do?"

Another planet. The thing had flung her onto a different planet. He can't think of what that means for them now. If she was capable of hurting him, time has proven she either would have already done it or simply doesn't want to do so. Now, he needs to get her out of that head space. He knows how to do it to, but he's going to make her put voice to her desires.

He steps up and, taking her wine glass, he steals a sip before sitting it aside on the cherry wood entry table.

Her hands now empty, she moves closer to him and places her hand on his chest, over his heart. Her mouth trembles as though she may cry again, and her fingertips tap out an unconscious S.O.S. on his chest. She inhales and exhales and for a moment he thinks she might retreat.

"I want to feel something other than lost and terrified. And I don't want to be coddled and wrapped in bubble wrap to do it. " She finally tears her gaze from his "Alice in Chains" t-shirt to look him in the eye. "I want to be treated like the woman I am, not the traumatized, helpless child SHIELD seems to think I am."

He slips his hand over hers. "Understandable. And I've always seen you as a woman first." He lifts her hand away from his chest and kisses her palm. There are callouses where once there was only soft skin. It's a novelty that makes wonder if her hands will feel different on him as a result.

"I sense a "but" in the near future."

He shrugs. "No buts, you want something from me, ask for it."

She waits a moment, seemingly in a stalemate with herself. She opens her mouth to speak but one of the men shifts his weight and the gun he's holding jostles, knocking Jemma from her thought. Her mouth snaps closed.
"Pickens, you and the rest of the team are dismissed."

"Sir, we haven't finished the sweep."

"It's not needed; SHIELD would have made their move by now. My wife requires privacy for this next bit of conversation. You are dismissed," he demands not looking away from Jemma.

She is technically still his wife, and since Skye erased their identities it isn't like she can even file for divorce. And if he's truthful with himself, he only refers to her as "ex" when he needed to ease his conscience about Kara.

"You still consider us married?" She says it as if she can read his mind.

"Does it matter?"

The door slips closed behind Pickens and the team.

He watches her and waits.

"I want you; specifically, I want to have sex with you," she says instead of answering the question.

He laughs. "You hate me and, well, you tried to kill me. Which I suppose I deserved from your point of view. We don't exactly have the best foundation to rebuild our relationship on."

She chews nervously at her bottom lip. It makes him want to kiss her. "I hate being numb more than I hate you," she admits. "Besides, we never really got around to break up sex. If you don't want this, I can simply find someone else to have sex with…"

"Do not say Fitz," he warns her dryly. She smiles slightly, and he's bolstered by it. He can get her back if he plays this right.

"But I don't want to have sex with someone else. I want what I feel when I have sex with you. If you'd rather we-"

He brushes the hair escaping her messy bun behind her ear. "I didn't say no, Jem. I just want to be sure you know full well who you are getting in bed with."

Her chin kicks up, defiantly. "I don't care about Hydra or SHIELD or what you've done right now. It's reckless as hell, but I want you. You are my choice. Now, do you need written consent, or are we getting naked?"

By way of answering, he grabs the hem of her hoodie and tugs her toward him. He kisses her with his eyes open. She might decide to shank him while he's distracted.

Her lips are as soft as they ever were. Her eyes flutter open and then she bites his bottom lip, hard. "If I was going to end your life I'd have already done so, which you know full well. Stop staring, Grant. It's off-putting."

He kisses her again, deeply. She tastes like red wine and just Jemma.

-/-/-

When she bit him, it seemed to flip Grant's switch, much to Jemma's pleasure. It feels like it used to feel. He explores her mouth and nips at her lips. It's a heady sensation to be so thoroughly kissed after forcing herself to stay the course for so long. She's missed the part of herself he brought out. A part long held in check by his attempt on her life. All that alone time shifted her perspective on
that. As much as she was loathe to admit it, she's missed him. Missed them. They had always been good together; no matter their issues, this part had been perfect.

She rips her mouth from his panting for air. "Bed, Grant. I don't want to shag in the foyer again, the floor is cold."

At the absence of her lips, he makes a growling sound. She tilts her head back, knowing what he wants. He trails biting, sucking kisses up her neck to that spot behind her ear. With each kiss, a lightning bolt slides up and down her spine. He moves to the other side to repeat the action.

When he sucks deeply at the hinge of her jaw, her insides turn to jelly and leave her clenching her thighs together in anticipation.

"Fuck. This is definitely a bad choice that feels good."

He chuckles darkly at that and yanks her off her feet. She wraps herself around him. They don't stop kissing even as he carries her down the hall. "

Take off your top," he commands. She breaks away enough to strip out of the heavy, dark blue hoodie and drop it to the floor. He loses his grip on his control a little at her easy acquiescence, and slams them into the wall outside her study.

"Sorry, did I hurt you?" he murmurs, kissing down her chest in apology. Ducking down, he kisses her breast and sucks her nipple into his mouth, laving it with his tongue and scraping with his teeth until it pebbles it into hardness. A stabbing heat shoots from her belly down to her core.

She throws her head back into the wall and cries out. She wants to keep him there forever, but he switches sides. The heat rises even more, her core tightening on nothing.

"Grant," she begs breathlessly.

He stops what he's doing and looks at her so intensely and tenderly her heart catches. She can't begin to guess at his play. Maybe there isn't one. Maybe she doesn't care if there is.

"What do you need, babe?"

The pet name makes her want to weep. There was a time not so long ago she thought she'd die without ever hearing another voice. She had no idea just how much missed the exact timbre of his until this moment.

He still reads her as well as he ever did, because he pulls her back to look at him. "Don't go there, Jem. Just tell me what you need. I've got you."

"Take me to bed," she pleads.

He takes her directly there, he drops her gently on to the mattress. He laughs his real laugh, loud and amused, when he goes to remove her Muppet-bedecked house slippers.

"They're my favorite! Don't be judgey," she explains.

His fingers trace the raised scar marring her shin. His eyes definitely have questions but all he says is,"I know."

He smiles at her seconds before hooking his fingers into the elastic band of her shorts. He pulls them down and off. His eyebrow raises at her absence of underwear, one of his old kinks she's
subconsciously fed into.

"You're still dressed. I like to touch you, that might be an issue," she points out while naked lying on top of the covers.

"I like when you touch me. Give me five seconds."

She watches him undress with amused eyes. There's only one time she'd seen him do so this fast. It was as he was heading for a shower after a week in an African desert whose exact location she didn't have clearance to know.

She's smiling at the memory; he's yanking down his jeans when he catches it.

"What, babe?" He asks. He's yet to take his eyes off her.

"Never knew you wanted me equally as much as you hate sand."

He nods. "That's accurate."

He loses the boxer briefs and in the seconds before he climbs on to the bed she notes the hard length of him. Her body flushes in anticipation.

He looms over her on the bed. He dips his head down to kiss her even as he spreads her open with his fingers. His thumb zeroes in on her clit, rubbing, circling and pressing as his fingers thrust inside her. It's a gentle, teasing rhythm meant to prepare her but it has been so long, he brings her off in about ninety seconds.

She arches up into him, clutching his shoulders and gasping into the kiss. The skin of his shoulder blade feels different, bumpy. Like new scar tissue. "Who shot you?"

"You'll just be mad it wasn't you." He shoves into her hard, severing her train of thought. He remains utterly still letting her adjust, waiting for her to let him know she's ready for him to move.

"Whoever patched you up? They did a shit job."

"You alienate your doctor wife and you can't be too picky," he says through gritted teeth. He kisses her and she gives the go ahead.

He moves fractionally, in and out, again and again. He keeps up the slow, rocking rhythm for what seems like ages. If there's one good thing she can say about Grant is that he has truly spectacular stamina. This time, her orgasm is slow to build and steady. She feels so stretched and full, she's almost over-sensitized. Her muscles ache from clinging to him. Sweat beings to sheen on her body as she tries to move in time with him, but he only holds her still and continues to fuck her as he pleases. Keeping her on edge. Holding her to his whims.

"Grant..." she whines as her orgasm builds but doesn't crest. He doesn't let her. "Harder, I won't disappear. For right now I'm yours alone." He keeps his face buried in her neck. "I'm not going to shag you then vanish into the night. Look at me."

He does as she asks. "I'm here. I chose this, so please, for fuck's sake, put your back into it, love." He smiles at like he used to, wide and free, and her heart aches of its own accord.

He pulls nearly entirely out before grabbing the head board of their four poster bed and pushing back in. She chokes on air. "Jesus Bloody Christ."
He knows her body more intimately than she knows her own. With each thrust he hits her g-spot. Once, twice, four times, and then six and she comes so hard she sees stars. Her body goes vice-like around him and she distinctly hears, "Fuck I love you," groaned into her hair.

They go at it twice more. The second time, he takes her once from behind quick and dirty until he leaves her screaming into the decorative pillows. The third time, though, she's sits n his lap in the center of the bed, facing him. This time, unlike the first two times, it feels like they're making love. She blames her confession, then, on the post-multiple orgasm haze.

"You're the reason I survived. I used everything you taught me. Everything I thought was useless, it saved me. You and Fitz. I know, I'm sorry, I broke the no saying Fitz's name while naked rule," She babbles. To make up for the slip, she presses a kiss to his shoulder.

She leans back so she can see his face.

"I'm glad you made it. I have never in all my life been so glad to see the angry eyebrows." He uses his thumb to flatten out said wrinkle. "I was prepared to motivate Coulson differently, even if it meant tipping my hand. I'm glad Fitz pulled it off."

She can't hide her confusion. What does helping the enemy get him? "Why would you do that? Ruin your strategy for me?"

"You're my girl. You're technically the enemy, currently, sure, but I love you. Do you believe me?"

"Does it matter?"

"More than I want it too." He kisses her chastely "Food or sleep?"

"Sleep, then food."

He lays them both back on the bed, pulling her to lay atop him. Between the measured cadence of his breathing and the deep steady beating of his heart beneath her ear paired with all the dopamine flooding her brain, she is finally pulled into the oblivion she always found in Grant.

-/-/-/-

She awakens tucked into the covers and completely alone. There is a little pink box emblazoned with the name of their favorite downtown bakery sitting atop the night stand along with a bright red post-it with the Hydra logo at the top.

She reads Grant's scratchy scrawl. "Reality called and I had to go. You can stay here in our bubble as long as you need. I left you the maple glazed donuts. Love you!- Grant:)"

No matter how mind-blowing the post-traumatic sex had been, she flat out refuses to be charmed by his sweetness in the harsh light of day, and the bloody octopus logo is a cold dose of reality. To be fair, he's not entirely evil so much as decidedly less moral than she is, and who is she to talk: she'd fucked him knowing who and what he was.

She serious considers staying in the bubble like he'd suggested, but she can't truly do that. Staying means forgiving herself for more this momentarily lapse and accepting she wants more than she can have. She packs her things and returns to SHIELD, a return to pretending she doesn't need Grant or the peace he can provide.

The fantasy of that only last two months. With missed menstrual cycles, unbaiting nausea, and six pregnancy tests, it all comes crashing down.
She's pregnant with Grant's child.

Bobbi is still sidelined by the injuries Grant gave her so has been relegated to the labs with Fitz indefinitely. It pains Jemma badly; she doesn't excuse Grant's actions, even if she does understand the way his mind works. That is what makes what she's about to ask for that much harder.

"Bobbi, I know you're busy, but at the earliest convenience I need a battery of blood work done. Andrew hasn't cleared me for lab work yet."

Bobbi looks away from whatever it is she's analyzing beneath the microscope. She looks at Jemma hard and critically. Jemma knows the instant the other woman puts two and two together, but still what she says still stings.

"You traitorous bitch. You can go to hell."

"I can explain, I-" Bobbi just walks out before she can even finish.

"You can explain what Jemma? What's happening? Leo asks as Daisy wanders in to investigate, having clearly been drawn by Bobbi's exit.

Jemma doesn't bother to beat around the bush. "I'm pregnant, and I need blood work done to make sure the alien world environment didn't affect my reproductive system or the fetus."

"It's Ward's isn't it?" Daisy says. She's not accusing, merely coldly factual.

"Does it matter?"

The room is so silent she can hear her own heart beating wildly. It undoubtedly matters a great deal.
Rather than face the recriminations of the team, Jemma decides to flee instead. Fighting with Bobbi will be easier than the silence she's currently immersed in. She turns on her heal and follows the direction the tall blonde took. Jemma finds her walking down the hall toward the firing range, which should - in all fairness - warn Jemma off. It doesn't.

"Fine, I'm a traitorous bitch who deserves seven different kinds of hell," she shouts at Bobbi's back, uncaring of who hears. "But not one of you asked why I turned to him, or really even so much as noticed that I did!"

Out of the corner of her eye, Jemma can see Daisy and Fitz peering through the glass lab doors. Bobbi keeps walking and Jemma keeps after her. She can hear Fitz and Skye murmuring to each other as they exit the lab and trace her footsteps.

Once in the soundproofed range, Bobbi swirls around. Her hands are tightened into fists at her sides, like she's afraid she'll hit Jemma.

"Fine, why?" Her voice is ice cold and if Jemma hadn't already faced the unfathomable, she might be afraid of one of her oldest friends. But it's nothing compared to the devastation of almost being killed by her own husband, or to be left to live and die on an alien planet. Nothing else can scare Jemma Simmons, not in this life time, and she will have her say.

She paces as she rants, knowing she must look crazy. It comes rushing out like lava meant to burn down her life and she's powerless to stop any of it. "That planet was dark all the time, I saw the sun once in six months and it only lasted for five minutes. It was a barren horrible place where I forged for every scrap of food including a weird sea slug and horrible tasting berries!" She stops in her tracks to look at Bobbi willing her friend to understand. "That's not the worst part though Bob. I was alone. I never saw a single soul. I had two things keeping me alive, Fitz's birthday video on my phone and Grant's voice in my head. It was all I had." She can hear Skye- Daisy- whoever she is now – suck in a breath.

Bobbi seems unmoved; she's looking at Jemma with eyes that seem not to recognize her.

"Jemma, move to lower elevation to find water. Tighten that knot over the spear. Don't hesitate, hesitation kills, Jem'. And do you have any fucking idea how frustrating it was to be as smart as I am and for it to take nearly eight hours to build a fire! Do you? I wanted to give up and just eat raw alien sushi until I remembered it took Grant twelve hours the first time he did it." She laughs tiredly, forcing away tears. "It took him twelve and I did it in eight, and all I could think was I can't wait to tell him, he'll be so jealous. That's where I was mentally, Bob. Talking to myself and pretending my traitor husband was walking me through survival skills so I wouldn't give up and let myself die."

"So what? You fucked him outta gratitude like some emotionally-stunted prostitute?" Jemma can't help the offended gasp that escapes her or the blinding anger that carries her forward into Bobbi's face. She doesn't touch her, but definitely "gets up in her grill" as Skye would say.

"Living on that godforsaken planet nearly broke me. I believed Fitz was never going find me, that I was going to die Bobbi alone in the dark. That I was never going to hear another voice or touch another person! And when you realize something like that, something in your soul snaps. I wanted two things: to talk to Fitz one last and to touch the man I've loved since I was twenty."
Jemma inhales raggedly. "And then, my phone battery died."

She pushes forward, finally able to say her piece. "Not all the reasoning in the world can change what you feel when you are that desperate! So yes, when the team in its all-knowing, well-meaning glory decided to isolate me further by analyzing my every breath and keeping me from lab work, I gravitated to the one man who wasn't going to give a fuck about what should be! He asked me what I needed and gave it to me; if that makes me wrong then I guess I am."

"And just like that, precious Jemma Simmons is absolved!" Bobbi spins around to leave and Jemma grabs her arm to stop her, only to be shoved forcefully away. She'd have fallen if May didn't reach out to catch her. In her anger, Jemma hadn't even noticed May's arrival but she's glad for it. The other woman's face is calmly neutral as she steadies Jemma on her feet.

Bobbi looks startled by her own actions. But Jemma isn't done.

"No, I'm not absolved of a damn thing. But neither are you. I may have broken certain parts of the friendship but so did you. Was no one going to tell me you sent Lance to kill him while I was on a different fucking planet? Or was I supposed to just guess when he ended up dead? And another thing! I've never once judged you for the toxicity you live in with Hunter; how dare you pass judgement on me!"

No one says anything, not even to let her know they will try to understand. No matter how hard she tries, she knows no explanation will ever be enough for them. She didn't expect to be enough, not really, but she had still hoped it would shift some perceptions, would make them understand her reasons if not her choices.

Bobbi is the only one still in fight mode. Fitz leans against the padded wall, arms crossed looking as tired as Jemma feels. May stands ready to protect her as if she is a baby duck about to eaten. Skye looks at her with such an odd mix of wonder and sorrow that Jemma has to force back the urge to cry.

Suddenly she's too tired to fight anymore. She turns abruptly and walks back into the lab. May's husband can sod off. She'll do the damn test herself.

-/-

She's trying to tighten the tourniquet band with one hand when Fitz comes in. "I know I'm an absolute shit at the stick, so to speak, but it's near impossible to do your own blood draw proper." He crosses to her.

He fixes the band and reaches for the needle and tubing attached to the large syringe. He swipes the bend of her elbow with a square of alcohol prep. There's a half beat of perfect silence and a shared look that lets Jemma know Fitz is here because he loves her. The gratitude she feels for it lifts some weight off her.

"You need gloves, Fitz." She whispers almost unwilling to break this moment.

"Pfft. I'm nae afraid of your germs, Simmons." She stares him down until he caves.

"Aren't you angry with me as well?" The needle stick stings. Fitz really is bad at this, but beggars and all that.

"Yes. I'm still mystified as to how you can love him, after everything, and I'm positive he's using you to his own end. But, unlike Bobbi, I don't much care what got you through it as long as you do get through it. If Ward helped you, if he made you feel…connected again, then so be it." He draws
the blood needed, then releases the band and slips out the needle in a surprisingly swift move.

"I've been helping Morse with the influx of inhumans when not looking for you," he explains without her having to ask. He grabs a cotton swab and presses it her skin. She bends up her arm on reflex.

"Thank you, Fitz." He ignores her gratitude.

"Did it help? Seeing him? Touching him? Did it make any difference?"

She takes a breath and looks at the ceiling she had forced herself not to over think this part. She looks Fitz in the eye. "I'm not really sure. I mean yes, at the time, he helped me to stop thinking and just feel. And I know that's so crass of me and…I was careless but as much as I hate the idea of hurting you, or Bob, with my actions I felt it was my own, and only course then bubble popped."

"Popped how?" She watches him inject the sample into individual testing tubes.

"You'll just be grossed out. "She hedges and Fitz only shrugs.

"You've been with Grant Ward in some way shape or form practically since we met. I'm used to it."

She scrubbed her hands restlessly down her face. When she closes her eyes, the memory of him taking her from behind pops into her vivid imagination, completely unbidden and entirely realistic. She can feel the weight of him pressing down on her, the tight grip of one hand holding hers, the other wrapped in her hair pulling her in for an awkwardly-angled kiss that left her neck aching days later.

She can still hear the dirty promises and sweet endearments pressed down into her skin in kisses murmured in tightly whispered Italian. It is so incredibly clear she has to clench her thighs together to ward off the wave of desire and the husky tone of his voice whispering her name.

"Earth to Jemma," Fitz calls out.

"Bloody hell…the together part was…" she drops her hands to her sides. "It was perfect, but in the aftermath, I just- he is who he is and though I understand his reasons for much of it, I don't agree with it. I remembered what it was like to love him and wanted it so badly, to be us again but what does it say about me if I can love a man like him?"

"It says you're human, and eventually everyone - myself included - will remember that once this all blows over."

"I'm having his child, Leo. Children do not 'blow over'."

"You're sure then? Of keeping it I mean? Ward finds out and…"

"That's a fight for another day Fitz. For now, I'm just too tired. I'm keeping it because it might be the only good thing gained from my time away. I can still love despite how broken Dr. Garner and you all believe I am."

"No one thinks you're broken Jem."

"I wish I believed that. Thank you for helping me Fitz."

After the blood sample, she goes to lie down. She's not sure if it was the fight with Bobbi or the baby flagging her energy but either way she's zapped. When she crawls into bed, the heavy coverlet
lays a comforting weight on her body, much like the gravity on what she calls the Darkness Planet. It lulls her into a not so rejuvenating nap.

It's a fitful respite at best. An almost kaleidoscope effect, it shifts from Grant to the bottom of the ocean to the alien planet, to the planet making her think Grant was there to kill her...again. When she's shaken awake, its three hours later and Bobbi looms over her.

"I'm not really the kind of woman who you should be standing over these days. Did you come to patch things up?" Jemma asks, shoving herself to sit up.

"No, I need more blood to re-run the tests. I don't think this disagreement is the kind of thing that you can sorry and stick a Band-Aid over and go on about your life with." She replied sitting her kit on the floor and perching on the bedside.

"Is something the matter with my baby?"

"Ward's spawn is fine, merely double checking Fitz's initial results."

"I'm sorry that my choice in bedfellow during one weak moment has changed your opinion of me or our friendship."

Bobbi shakes her head. "Of course you think it's about the sex."

"It's not? Our earlier argument certainly fooled me then."

"I'm your friend Jem! Or I thought I was and rather than come to me when you struggled adjust, you went to someone who tried to kill you!"

"I got him back for that!" she snarls back.

"He tortured me because his I accidentally put his girlfriend in the path of Hydra, you remember her right? Girl with half-scrambled brains and thought Ward walked on water. He tortured me for an accident Jem and you went willingly into his arms. You wanted to feel alive? I could have you helped you find a different way."

"How was I supposed explain what I needed when I barely understood it myself? It was never about feeling alive! I needed to be in control of something, even if it meant letting my control of my feelings left over for him slip. I needed to let go and I knew he'd let me and keep me safe."

She watches with a critical eye as Bobbi repeats the blood drawn markedly more gently than this conversation would merit.

"I'm not sure I can forgive you."

"It's a good thing I have no desire for forgiveness, then, I suppose. Contrary to what Hunter leads you to believe, you're not the center of the universe and I know you all want me to be sorry I didn't consider everyone's well-being during orgasm, but if you're allowed to send Lance to kill Ward based on your traumas, I get to be selfish in mine. I deserve to not have my every thought consumed by that place equally as much as you deserve your vengeance. And I will not allow any of you to guilt me or emotionally abuse me for my issues. I am not Grant, and I have not made Grant's choices. Don't you dare treat me like I have. I refuse to live like that."

"I'll have Daisy bring you a print out of the results. We're done here."

Bobbi turns to go.
"For the record, I didn't forget Kara," Jemma says. "It just didn't matter when it came down to it. She was no more taken into account by me than she was when you let her be collateral damage to Hydra." Bobbi glares at her but says nothing more as she exits.

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SHIELD is on a tight budget, still being a rogue agency of sorts. They can't expend money on offices for a part-time consultant, so they have marked off a little alcove of the common using sound-proofing shogi screens. It doesn't exactly lend itself to privacy. That's why, when Andrew asks the question, she remains silent and seriously considers lying.

He doesn't take her silence as answer. He repeats the question as though she is daft. "Why did you choose Ward for an escape?"

She sighs and looks at spot just over his shoulder. There is a crack in the brick and she idly starts wondering if everyone is right, and she is as cracked as that wall.

"Because he's selfish enough to take what he wants, damn the consequences and he has always wanted me. I needed that. To be wanted, desired, trusted to know my own mind, no questions asked."

Andrew leans up into her personal space when she refuses to meet his eyes. "And you think we don't trust you?"

"If you did, you wouldn't be profiling me, would you?" She counters archly. Something odd and wary flits through his usually friendly gaze.

"Your emotional well-being is important. I'm merely trying to ascertain why you - one of the most conscientious people I have ever met - chose to do something so reckless to achieve clarity."

"Call me a romantic but I wanted to be with the man I loved. I wanted to be the Jemma from before – before the Darkness Planet, before the fall, before everything went sideways. And I know you all think I'm horrible for setting aside his many flaws but you, more than anyone, should know what it is to be married to a specialist. They are never just one thing. So, there were unforeseen results of the…relationship. So what? There worse things to come from sex than a baby."

Andrew nods. The weird look is back for a few seconds. It makes her apprehensive. "So you plan on keeping it? No one would judge you if you didn't want the daily reminder of Grant or his duplicity."

"Grant wasn't overtly using me or lying to me," Jemma counters the whole idea of aborting her child makes her want to cry or vomit. The hormones raging through her system make it a toss-up of sorts. "I love this child, no matter what any of you think, "she says concretely.

"If your time on the dark planet makes the pregnancy untenable or something is amiss with the baby?"

"Then I will face the issue and solve it."

"What if there isn't a solution?"

"There is always a solution, Doctor," she reaffirms, refusing to live in hypotheticals. "The tests aren't back yet we shouldn't assume anything."

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That night she's nibbling on saltines and reading Jane Austen when someone knocks. "Come in! Oh Skye, I mean Daisy sorry… do come in."

"No worries Simmons, how you holding up?" Skye leans casually over the desk chair, giving Jemma a quick up down. "I get it you know, come hell or high water you love who you love. I mean look at me and Miles. Were we good for each other? Definitely not. But he understood me and being with him was easy, it felt good, and exciting and safe all at once."

"So, you don't think I should be drawn and quartered?"

"For good sex? Hell no! I mean it was good right? Worth it?" She wiggles her eyebrows suggestively and for the first time since leaving the "Grant Bubble", Jemma laughs for real. God, she loves Skye. Once she stopped laughing, she answers the question. "It was most enjoyable, thank you for the levity, Skye. I needed it. Are those the results?"

"Oh yeah," Skye hands her the envelope and, when Jemma draws her legs up, plops down at the end of the bed.

Jemma opens the envelope and reads it.

"What? Your face is doing a thing." Skye's voice sounds slightly distressed but Jemma can't focus on that: she's too busy reading and re-reading each line of her lab report.

"Simmons, what is it?"

"Something is off…" Jemma gets to her feet and rushes to the lab. She leaves Skye to eat her proverbial dust. She turns into the lab seeking out Fitz. "Fitz! My triple P-A levels and HCG levels are abnormal for the current gestational period."

Fitz pauses and looks over at her, soldering gun held aloft. "You're not far enough along for any of those tests Simmons. Aand I know what you're thinking ,but the abnormalities could be attributed any number of factors. I mean, say we got the genome isolator operational? Then what? The embryonic cell bodies aren't mature enough to test and get conclusive results."

"Something is wrong Fitz. I can feel it in my bones," she implores him.

"You're being paranoid; the levels are marginally differential at best.," Bobbi says walking around Jemma's lab as though she owns it. If Jemma wasn't so preoccupied, she'd be angry about it. "I doubled up on the test to be sure. If it is still hasn't leveled off in a month, I'll do more in-depth testing. I've already cleared it with Coulson."

"It's my baby!"

"You are my patient." She says with that utter calm only a specialist can perfect. It makes her think of Grant though she doesn't think Bobbi will appreciate the comparison.

"Nice to know you'll revisit the health of my child in a month when I have the tech and knowledge to handle it now." Jemma laughs bitterly. "Make all my choices for me again. See where that leads us all."

-/-/-

When she returns to her quarters she slams the door, which Jemma can admit is equal parts
satisfying and petulant. She crawls back into bed after having run to the lab in her pajamas. She curls herself into a protective ball, just like those endless nights on "the Darkness Planet."

Feeling defeated, she lets herself cry, as she has longed to do all day. Hell, if she's honest, she has wanted to cry since leaving Grant.

She cries herself out and is floating along the edges of sleep. The electric blanket warming her bones and her night light keeping her company standing vigil against the dark.

And just like on the darkness planet, she talks to him as though he is wrapped around her, lying next to her, breathing the same air. Curling protectively around her like a shell on a sea creature.

"I need someone to say it will all be okay," she says aloud.

She smiles, remembering Grant's favorite way to jab at her optimism. "The only thing more buoyant than your hope is the waters of the Dead Sea. It's fine baby, just breathe, it's fine. You can do this, one step at a time, moment by moment, test by test. You've got this, baby. You always rise above it all, Jem. Something could be wrong sure, but you work with fact not theory. Wait for the facts then take action. For now, just sleep and wait, baby."

She soon falls asleep dreaming of Grant and floating in the Dead Sea.

AN: I own nothing! If you enjoyed it please tell me! Thanks a million times over to my beta Myranda for all the hand holding, cheerleading and generally thoughtful comments!-MM
Grant grits his teeth at the knock on the door. His men know better than to interrupt him in meetings, especially with someone like Gideon Malick. Grant has a reputation to maintain.

"Enter." He watches as Pickens steps through the door wordlessly holding a tablet. "What?"

"You told me to come to you immediately with any new information regarding Mrs. Ward."

Grant glances over at Malick to find the older man seemingly appraising him. "Excuse me a moment."

"Every man has a master to whom he answers. By all means." The old man sips from his snifter of brandy. There is a high-handed, mocking tone to the other man's voice that Grant truly doesn't appreciate, but lets it go given more pressing matters. And Grant wouldn't call Jemma a master so much as his favorite vice. One of few he allows himself. Jemma and, well, fire. But Malick has no need to know either.

"Wait here," Grant says, not sparing Malick another glance as he steps away into the hall. The idea of Jemma has a lit a burning hunger in his gut. He's kept his desires to himself. No one knows how an ache has lived in the tips of his fingers with the need to touch these past five months.

He knew if he bided his time, if he just waited for the right opportunity to woo her, she'd come back. She'd given him that first inch, that first glimpse of hope. He'd take the mile eventually. That the eventuality might be in the present tense comes as a surprise, but not an unwelcome one.

"She wasn't exactly alone, sir." Pickens tacked on cryptically, handing Grant the tablet. In the black and white security footage of their front foyer of the home where he saw her last, Jemma sits shivering in the chair he uses to remove his work boots, soaked to the bone. Every so often her shoulders shake and not with cold. That's not the thing that catches him off guard though. The thing that makes his chest tight and his pulse race is the gentle roundness of her stomach. Jemma is pregnant.

He can't help the prideful little smirk from spreading across his face. He'd finally done it, he'd knocked her up. He puts that aside, though, to deal with his first concern. He takes out his burner phone and dials the landline from memory. Holding the phone between his shoulder and ear, he keeps his hands free to zoom the camera in on Jemma's face. Even in black and white, he can tell she's spent some time crying. There are streaks of mascara marring her cheeks. Jemma's head jerks up when the phone rings, but she doesn't move otherwise. "Come on baby, go answer it…" he coaxes as though she can hear him.
The phone rings and rings for a few more moments. Jemma seems to be puzzling something out, gnawing on her bottom lip worriedly.

"What have they done to her?" he says aloud. Her expression is closed off, as though she's awaiting battle or bad news. She's trying to protect herself from something. Pickens' voice breaks through his thoughts. Grant had completely forgotten Pickens' presence until then.

"Sir, I can have the asset brought in for debrief to see what he knows." Grant nods his approval and moves the camera feed to the kitchen to watch Jemma finally get up and answer the phone.

"Hello."

"Hey baby, whatcha doin'?" he says after her soft greeting.

"Hi. I didn't know where else to go." She cocks her head as though she's contemplating elaborating, but instead she takes a deep breath which gusts in his ear. It's okay; the last time they did this dance, things worked out well for him. He'll get whatever it is out of her, with just a little patient coaxing.

He watches as she anxiously wraps herself up in the old-fashioned curled phone cord. Jemma had gone through a flea market phase after the last unsuccessful attempts at getting pregnant, and the powder blue phone was an acquisition that had landed in their mish-mashly decorated home.

"I'm always glad when you come to me, baby. And I'm on my way. I can be there in 95 minutes. Get out of those wet clothes and shower; it'll make you feel better. We'll talk when I get there."

"Grant…"

"Stop twisting up in the phone cord, you'll trip." Her eyes whip over to the camera imbedded in the toaster. Jemma really is very scattered if she can't remember he can see her on cameras she'd fought him so valiantly against him placing. It had been a real barn burner. Not at all forgettable. SHIELD has her really frightened.

"I've no clothes." Her tone is almost ashamed and very, very tired.

He keeps up a comforting and almost conspiratorial inflection. He wants to make her smile and feel safe before he hangs up the phone to go to her. "My shirts are still in the top drawer, and you look really cute in rolled up sweats. I even keep that lavender soap you like so much. Go clean up and take a nap. I'll be home soon."

"You don't want to mention anything else?" There's a hint of worry there like she's afraid she'll be ambushed. It makes him angry at himself and at SHIELD.

"Making sure you don't catch your death is equally - if not more - important because of the child. See you in a bit Jem. Love you."

"So you keep saying." She sounds utterly unconvinced and disbelieving. He'll fix that sooner rather than later.

"And I mean it."

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When he and his team arrive, Grant finds Jemma sitting on the couch in one of his tee shirts, a pair of his boxer briefs and neon green socks of his that come up past her calf. She sits with her knees
drawn tightly to her chest, arms wrapped around them, her chin tucked down. The TV is on but she isn't watching so much as keeping it on for noise. The second he steps in the doorway, her eyes are on him.

"Were you going to tell me?" he asks finally, leaning casually on the door frame.

"You're a smart man, I assumed you'd figure it out. You do after all have a vendetta against eighty-five percent of SHIELD. I'm smart enough to know you've an inside man and you'd have known eventually."

He nods. "That's an accurate assessment. Still, finding out from a plant lacks the intimacy we were building."

"We had sex. We weren't – aren't - back together, Grant."

He pushes off the wall and crosses to her. "You're still in love with me," and continues before she can make an attempt to protest or deny. "You don't fuck people you don't love."

She scowls at his colorful language, and he laughs. He just can't help it. Her face always gives her away.

"Which works out," he adds nonchalantly, "considering I never stopped being in love with you."

"Kara-" she cuts herself off. There is an arrow of pain flitting through her eyes, but in the next second it's shuttered away.

"Kara was nice enough, and I cared for her, but she was what I thought I could have. She was a pleasant distraction when I lost hope of ever getting you back, and I was fond of her, but I love you. She was not and could not ever be you, even when she tried." Jemma stretches out her legs but says nothing in reply. If she has one, she doesn't want to share it. If she trusts him this little and came to him anyway…

"What'd the team do, babe?" The softly-spoken question has her looking up at him. There is so much pain there, in her eyes, that his heart aches.

"They hate me. Letting myself-being with you was a betrayal. They trust me even less than they did before. I betrayed them and I deserve – that doesn't matter. Grant, something is wrong. I know the planet did something to my body. They said we- that I - could never have children and yet I'm quite pregnant."

"Quite." He agrees, unwilling to hide his smug smirk.

"Oh stop it would you? I get it, your boys can swim."

Tarleton, who is standing on the perimeter of the room, snorts. Grant gives her a sharp glare and she quiets right away at the silent reprimand. He'd punish her for her insubordination if it hadn't caused the brief smile he saw cross his wife's face.

"As I was saying, something in that environment transformed my reproductive system. I don't know how, I just know it did."

He moves to sit on the couch beside her. "Okay." Her defensive body posture has disappeared. He inches closer to her on the couch. When she doesn't recoil, he reaches out, unable to contain the urge any longer, and places his hand on her belly.
"I'm the lesser of two evils, is that it?" he says dryly. Tears spring to her eyes. He's made a mistake, but has no idea what it is.

"You're a lot of things, Grant, but yes, sadly I've determined you're less dangerous than SHIELD is for us now." She places her shaking hand over his.

"I need your help. I think something is wrong with the baby. The team is acting weird, hiding things and trying to put things off on my pregnancy or PTSD from the Darkness Planet, but I know what I know. Grant, something is wrong, Garner wouldn't...."

She stands abruptly, but not to run. She retrieves her purse and fishes through it. He catches a glimpse of her boarding pass and files the information away for later. She comes back to stand before him and shoves a sheaf of papers under his nose.

He rifles through them as she begins to restlessly pace. Either she's forgotten his team was present at all or she doesn't care, but when baby gets in steamroller mode, he knows it's better just let her go.

"At first my sessions where almost always digging for info on the planet. Then I had sex with you, and it became all about my motivations. Was I merely reckless and uncaring for the others, did I have a death wish, did I simply love you?"

"And what conclusion did you reach?" he asks as he reads through what can only be described as hate mail, wrinkled as though it has been shoved under doors or her pillow.

"Bobbi will never forgive you. If you keep it, it will ruin your friendship."

"How do you expect Fitz to work with you if can see the man who gave him brain damage every time he looks at the spawn?"

There are weeks, if not months of them. At the bottom of the stack is a pamphlet for late-term abortion and a list of genetic issues the baby could have. The note stapled to the pamphlet with the SHIELD eagle at the top simply reads. "It's best for all involved."

"What the actual fuck?"

"That's why I'm here. Slowly but surely, Garner focused on the baby and pros and cons of keeping it. The more I pressed testing, trying to figure out what if anything might be amiss, the more he said the team could only ever see your influence in the baby. And the team kept giving me results with things missing and pretending like I'd forgotten or it had gotten missed or to trust them. But I know something is wrong, Grant, I simply need more conclusive testing than they've let me have."

The tears having made a resurgence and now drip down her face. Her voice shakes slightly, but her jaw is firm. "No matter the outcome, I won't terminate. I understand if you don't want to co-parent with me. I just need to know what if anything I'm dealing with. But please, just don't ask me to terminate our baby."

He crosses to her in three steps, catches her face in his hands to force her to look into his eyes, willing her to see the sincerity on his face. "I would never, babe. I promise. I'd never ask that of you. Do you understand me, Jemma? I don't care what the team or Garner thinks, they are wrong. Jemma, baby, I need you to know, that will not happen with me."

He wipes her tears as they fall in a continuous stream down her cheeks.

"I promise," he reiterates, kissing her cheeks in turn.
She hiccups, a pitiful broken sound, and he rubs her back in soothing circles.

"No one was happy for me," she confesses and he vows to maim them all on sight at the very least for the pain in her voice. He kisses her on the mouth and her hesitancy only lasts for a blink before she sinks into the kiss with satisfied little murmur, kissing him back. She tastes like home, fresh spent tears and his spearmint toothpaste. He's pulling her closer, nipping at her bottom lip, when Pickens clears his throat. Grant tears himself regretfully from Jemma.

"What? He barks impatiently. He is just going to have to teach his men the cost of interrupting his attention to Jemma when threat levels do not warrant it.

"Sir, we've detected SHIELD electronics in the local airspace. We need to exfil Mrs. Ward now, sir."

Or perhaps they do know what warrants interruption after all.

"It's Dr. Simmons-Ward, and I intend to stay here. This is our home and I have an OBGYN here."

"I get that you like what we've built here, baby, I do too. We worked hard to make this place home and I understand why you want to stay but SHIELD is already on there way here. My base is not as homey but it is safer, no harm will come to either of you. It's gated, and guarded by electronic and biometric means, guards, and attack dogs. I need you to do this part my way, Jemma."

"I don't like it."

"I don't need you to like it, baby, I just need it done. Safety first, sweetheart."

"Fine," she concedes. "But we're flying in my doctor."

"Deal." He grabs Jemma's handbag – the only thing she brought, which is a clear testament to her fear - and hustles her out the side entrance, up the fire escape and on to the helo-pad.

"Don't look down. I've got you," he shouts to her.

"After an invisible, Jedi-mind trick-using manifestation of death stalks you for six months, heights are a pittance in comparison, Grant," she shouts back.

He files that, too, away, because they are so very much talking that out when SHIELD with its covert, baby-hating agent is not on their asses.

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The flight back to his base passes mostly in silence until Jemma breaks it with a question.

"Our relationship and the safety of our child are not necessarily concordant, you know that, right?" She asks the question without sparing him a glance. Her expression has the placid quality it takes on when she finally reaches a conclusion. He's not one hundred percent certain but he can guess at her thoughts.

"Of course, but I also know that I love you. I intend to prove it to you. I'll earn you, the way I should've the first time, but you have to let me, Jem."

She reaches over wordlessly and takes his hand. He understands the enormity in the small gesture. She's giving him an in, a foot in the door a place to start.

Fresh.
Jemma is not exactly impressed with the dilapidated brick warehouse-style base. He can see that much on her face. Her eyebrows are doing their crinkly thing and nerves have her chewing her lip again.

"I know she doesn't look like much now, baby, but it's a work in progress. Starter base of sorts."

"You said it wasn't exactly home. You neglected to mention it heavily resembles a crack den." She steps carefully around a decaying hole in the flooring.

"It's got good bones, we knock out some walls and slap up some paint and it'll feel like ours in no time. Trust me, baby."

"Uh, huh. There's a hole in the floor, you might have termites or other rodents."

"I tossed somebody through it and left it as reminder. I'll fix it and call an exterminator to ease your mind. Any thing for you, baby." He ducks down and kisses her cheek. "Do you think you'll like Tarleton? I'm putting a detail on you, that's non-negotiable, but if you think you'll get along, I'll assign her to you."

"I suppose."

The first night she spends with him, Jemma sleeps in the spare room in the suite he's commandeered for himself. She drops off like a stone into an exhausted dreamless slumber, and the next few nights she's restless when he checks on her, but she sleeps through. The fourth night, she wakes in a screaming night terror.

Her night watchman, Taylor, hits her bedroom door at the same time Grant does. They both go crashing through, and Grant manages to get the light as he slams into the room.

Jemma is sitting up in bed, her sleep-glazed eyes unfocused. Her breath wheezes in and out unevenly. He sends Taylor back to his post with jerk of his head.

"Hey, baby," he says, lowering himself onto the bed. He carefully cups her face in his hands.

"Take a breath, Jem."

She follows his soft order. "It wasn't real," she assures herself.

"Nope, it wasn't. What did you dream, babe?"

She hesitates, but seems to decide there is no harm in telling him.

"There was this…presence on the planet, it gave suicidal hallucinations. It liked to use you to trick me, when I was there. Whether it's because I loved you or feared you trying to kill me again, I don't know, but it liked to use you when it came after me. I thought I was there again. I dreamed it had possession of the baby, I kept hearing it cry and then…you were there, or a hallucination of you, and you pitched the baby into a canyon and I woke up."

"Jemma…"

"I always knew it wasn't you, Grant, almost always. It had no life behind its eyes, no soul. It got smarter the more I resisted. When my phone died I almost gave in, I almost gave up because I
could see you and not hear you anymore." I stood there on the canyon edge, I…" She shakes her head and doesn't finish but filling in the blanks leaves a cold terror in his chest.

He breaks the little tense silence. "I'm glad you persevered, Jem."

"Will you lay with me? Please?"

"Of course." He wants to crawl in, to pull her to him, but he knows she's not ready for that yet. Instead, he lies down on top the covers. "Lights on?"

"Yes, please." After a few moments of watching her, she hesitantly speaks. "Did you know it only took me eight hours to start a stick fire?"

"I'm impressed," he says brushing, her hair out of her eyes. She leans into his touch for half a second and he has to crush the little flame of victory burning his chest before she catches it in his gaze.

"You're just saying that to hide your jealousy," she says sleepily.

He laughs, kissing her. "Might be a tad true. I am proud of you, though. So proud of you for surviving, baby."

From that night on, she shares his bed. And he slowly, carefully starts to reintroduce their intimacy.

On the fourteenth night, their good night kiss spins a bit out of control. He knows it's too soon, but his body gives over to his baser instincts and he can't bring himself to pull back when she's so receptive to him. He'd never been able to resist the softness off her skin, they way she'd go pliant and welcoming beneath him.

Until suddenly she turns unresponsive under him and stops kissing him back. Her eyes are empty and he knows she's definitely not fully present with him. It takes more restraint than SHIELD would ever credit him for, but he pulls out and rolls away from her. It breaks his heart, a little, at the long minute before she comes back to herself, and whatever else he feels, he knows it was right to stop.

"Grant?" Her face crumples.

"It's okay, baby, I knew it was too soon, I know when you are using sex as a distraction, but I just wanted you. It was selfish and I shouldn't have let us go so far."

She's silent for a long beat. "It's different now, because I chose you. Last time I did that, it almost got me killed. I always understood that because of the things, the direction Garrett gave you, that you were in awe of him. That you were faithful and loyal. I just didn't know it didn't extend to me until I was…" she swallows thickly and he wishes for the thousandth time or more that life had a do over button. "Until it was too late. I'm afraid, Grant. I'm afraid your loyalties will shift to what suits you, that it will be worse because it's not just me at risk anymore. I'm afraid you'll use the way I love you, the way I love the baby against me."

Thinking back to that day and the way he'd fucked his whole life over for Garrett makes a lump rise in his throat. He'd tried to forget the betrayal, confusion, and despair on Jemma's face that day, but he never could. It's burned into his memory, the mark of it darkening his soul further. If he's honest with himself, it's that look that drove him to try to move on with Kara, because he was so sure he'd never have a chance at her forgiveness, not when he couldn't even give himself his own.
The lump chokes off his air supply. "Pulling that lever and playing the odds with your life is the hardest thing I've ever done in my whole life." There's a reason he tries not to think of that awful day. It makes him weak. He can feel Garrett's shame descending on him now, but it's nothing compared with Jemma's righteous distrust. He stares at the ceiling and hopes Jemma can't see the few spare tears to escape and fall down on to his pillow. He can't remember the last time cried, but he can't let himself do so, even now.

He clears throat and firms his voice. "You can never fully understand how deeply I regret what happened, but it will never happen again." He turns over and faces her. She reaches over wordlessly and wipes away the lingering evidence of his tears. "I am who I am baby, and the thing I'm building has a purpose, but it will never be aimed at you or our child. I know you don't believe me, but my actions will prove it.

"And if I can't give you what you need?"

"Jemma, I thought I'd never get you in my life again as anything but an enemy. If all I ever get is friendship or the occasional kiss and hand holding, I'm good with it. I want more – I'm not going to lie about that – but I'll take what I can get. " To illustrate his point, he threads their fingers together.

-/-

He keeps his word in proving himself to Jemma. He takes her on dates and they cuddle on the couch while watching The Black List. They're in heated debate on whether or not Reddington is Lizzy's father but they're in totally agreement that Wressler is not so secretly in love with Keen.

They're making headway and he's more careful than ever to let things develop at her pace. She starts coming out of the lab - the lab he'd provided her with no requirement to design anything for him or for Hydra - to tell him the latest theory she has on how the planet changed her, at which point he usually nods and hums as though he has a clue about what she's sciencing on about, just like old times.

If he sneaks into her lab for stolen kisses throughout the day, the only witness is her day guard Tarleton. When he gets a little roughed up on mission and Jemma insists on treating his wounds herself, he can admit it makes him queerly happy. He's even loosened his reins a bit after the whole "having maternity clothes delivered to her" disaster. None of them had fit and Jemma swore he thought she resembled a walrus. He didn’t – how was he to know they weren't all one size fits all - but some battles he knows he'd never win. He let Tarleton take her shopping off base and to a movie without him, even though he'd prefer she stay where he can protect her.

It was worth it. Jemma had come back smiling so widely. He was hard pressed to not like Tarleton more. He's glad Jemma has a friend, which is why he lets it slide when he comes into the lab and finds Tarleton not standing at attention or even assisting Jemma with her lab cultures but instead reading a Cosmo article aloud.

"Uh, no way that's humanly possible, doc." She turns the magazine around and Jemma looks at something on the pages.

"Inhumanly, maybe?" she quips, before musing, "How would you keep your balance?" He's completely intrigued by Jemma's confusion – particularly given their less than vanilla history - but stays put by the door a few more seconds, enjoying her expression. "This one, though: totally doable, just don't turn to quickly…Are you and Pickens a thing?"

"Oh! God, NO." Tarleton laughs. "My boyfriend is under cover." She straightens when she catches sight of Grant. She narrows her dark eyes at him, trying to gauge if she is, in fact, in hot water.
Jemma is unfazed.

"Hey, baby, you look like sunshine," he compliments her bright yellow sundress. He crosses the room as she's shedding her gloves.

"Great! Now I resemble a supernova instead of a walrus."

He leans in and kisses her, running a hand idly down the curve of her belly. "I wasn't mentioning your roundness, simply your beauty. Though now that you mention it…" he teases.

"Sweet talker."

"Ready for your appointment, baby?" He grabs her hand, pulls her down a hall into an exam room. Tarleton proves her priorities when she follows to guard the door.

He'd flown Jemma's doctor in for monthly exams, and on her advice, they had waited a few extra weeks to make sure the amniocentesis was safest for the baby and Jem.

He had googled the procedure and, needless to say, WebMD was no comfort. At least he'll know what they're up against if Jemma is right and their baby does have a health problem. This test can tell them exactly which condition, disease, or syndrome their baby may have.

Jemma has changed into a paper hospital gown while he was lost in thought. She sits trembling on the table. He steps up behind where she sits and wraps her in his embrace. Gooseflesh dots her skin and he rubs his hands up and down her arms. He kisses the top of her head, inhaling her shampoo.

He can see her expression in a mirror mounted on door. She's trying mightily to stay strong. Her expression is dark and her voice shakes but she doesn't cry as she speaks. "I'm scared."

"Me too, baby. But we're a team. We always have been, despite it all. If we can get back together after everything between us, we can do anything." She gives him an airless laugh and tilts her head back for an upside down peck on the lips.

"Thank you for the vote of confidence, love."

"Any time." He kisses her again more firmly. "Love you."

The doctor enters before Jemma can answer in kind.

-/-/-/-

The specialists Grant brought in at the recommendation of Jemma's OBryn in is professional, thorough, and a quick worker.

A doctor does the ultrasound to guide the needle for the fluid withdrawal. It's the first time he's been able to be present for the ultrasound. The baby is on the screen, curled tightly up and sucking its thumb. The loud whooshing of the heartbeat fills the room. It makes his heart pinch with pride and sudden fear, at the realization it's a person in there. It's all blurry and cute and totally his.

"Grant, are you alright?"

"Is it okay? Healthy?" he asks to avoid the big doe eyes Jemma's giving him that see way too much.

"The fetus is small but well within range for gestational age. I think he or she will just take after their mother in stature," the doctor smiles.
"No Sasquatch baby! I bet that's a relief," Tarleton chimes in from the door.

Grant gives her a sharp look.

"Sarona!" Jemma chastises half-heartedly with a snorted laugh.

Grant watches them prep and numb Jemma for the test with minimal anxiety. It's when they pull out the syringe they'll be using that Grant's heart lodges itself in his throat. He's done his fair share of torturing, and if Jemma didn't look so nonplussed about the enormous needle, he'd accuse the doctors of making an attempt on his wife.

"You look the tiniest bit peaked, love, maybe you should turn away." Amusement dances in her eyes.

"No, you're the one having it done; I can support you without blacking out," he retorts, gripping her hand tightly.

She does all right through the initial stick. But as the needle goes deeper, Jemma whimpers. She has to stay still so he pushes his own discomfort away to lean down into her eye line. "Just look at me."

"It feels wrong…".

"Exhale baby, just breathe…I've got you. Focus on me. It's almost done…inhale and out…good job, baby." Jemma has death grip on his shirt collar but after five minutes walking her through some breathing exercises he'd learned from May after the Berserker incident, it's done and he's kissing her forehead.

"Let's never do that again," Jemma exhaled.

"Sounds good to me, baby." He kisses her again reassuringly as Pickens comes in to interrupt.

"Sir, Malick is getting antsy."

Jemma goes a little pale, clearly recognizing one of the oldest names to float around as a supposed Hydra head, but she kicks her chin up. "Go, the results take a bit. I'm fine. Just stay safe."

"It'll be quick, I promise. And I'll bring you fried rice from the Chinese joint you like for dinner."

"Okay." He lets go of the hand that had moved from his collar back to his palm, shoots her a smile, and is out the door.

When he returns, Chinese cartons and UPS delivery in hand, he finds Tarleton outside Jemma's lab with a tense expression on her face.

"She asked to be alone, sir."

He hands off the things he's holding and goes in right away. "Jem?" he calls out. He finds her sitting at her station, staring at a computer screen saver.

"Baby? Staring at the Hydra logo usually skeeves you out. You alright?"

"She has Trisomy twenty one, Grant."

"Uh…I don't…. that means?"
"Her twenty first chromosome has three copies, you're only meant to have two." She finally looks at him, her eyes blood shot from crying. "The baby, she has Down Syndrome."

It hits him like a punch to the solar plexus. He automatically thinks of a guy he went to high school with. Adam was sweet guy who loved Grant's car and giving people hugs in the hallways. He probably wasn't much older than ten years old, mentally-speaking. Grant hadn't thought of him in more than a decade, if that. The world is spinning too fast. He sinks down on stool and just tries to breathe. "Is she okay, otherwise?"

Jemma nods mutely. His thoughts feel a bit disconnected and he's not sure what to say at the moment. Jemma gets up and leaves him alone in her domain, giving him space to process.

Once he's composed enough, he fixes Jemma some hot apple cider - a current favorite - and opens the UPS box of things he'd had his inside man secretly mail off. He fishes out the worn-out Beaker house shoes and goes in search of Jemma. He finds her curled up in the center of the bed, turned to the wall where he can't see her face.

He sits the mug on the bedside table and climbs into the bed behind her fully-dressed. She's stiff against him, holding herself in check. He sets her shoes in front of her.

"Tracked down the Beaker boots for you, baby."

She turns in his arms and clings to him with seemingly every muscle in her body. She sobs so hard it shakes his body.

"Baby, you didn't do this."

"That planet...ruined me. I'm broken and my baby is broken."

"No one is broken, Jemma. It's just the way her DNA divided off. It happened on earth. You did nothing wrong."

"How do I- I don't even know - Where do we..." She breaks off, and he strokes her hair.

"One step at a time, baby, we just do our research and start."

"Her life will be harder than it should be."

"Yeah, life is hard period, baby. We just love her and it will all be fine. And baby, you know what we didn't talk about? We're having a little girl."

Jemma sniffles even as she nods against his chest. "It'll be okay?"

"Definitely, I promise. It's going to be okay, Jemma you'll take this in rebound and be the best mother."

"You don't know that."

"I believe it. You were meant to do this, babe. It'll be okay."

After a long silence where he's content to hold her, she finally pulls away from his chest just far enough that her voice isn't muffled. "Thank you for rescuing my slippers before Fitz burned them. I'm sorry I got snot on you."

"I've been covered in worse. Wanna eat Chinese and watch House M.D.?"
She shakes her head. "Just hold me?"

"Nothing I'd rather do."

It's the truth.
Jemma lay unmoving in bed. She recognizes the weighted down, disconnected feeling, the bone tiredness that always pulls down her eyelids for that it is. It's depression. She's depressed. Her whole world has changed with a single lab report.

She is lost and the only thing that keeps her from back sliding into her "Darkness Planet" thoughts is the way every so often "She" moves, shifts, and lays across Jemma's insides. "She" kicks at Jemma's bladder or seems to elbow her way between Jemma's lungs. So it's short breaths and frequent visits to the toilets, but Jemma is reminded by it that "She" is still in there. Kept safe within her.

Her thoughts turn to Grant. He's currently wrapped around them both, his arm protectively slung over her ever-widening belly. Their legs are tangled together and his chin is hooked onto her shoulder, nestled into the crook of her neck.

He is also snoring so loudly Jemma can barely think.

But God, she's glad to have this back. Grant means safety and home again. It's something she thought could never feel with him, if ever, but here they are by choice this time. His confidence in them, in himself, drives away the fear for a few moments until her brain takes over and nothing can quiet her mind when presented with the impossible.

And now she needs to pee. Lovely. That's just great, she just went a half hour ago.

Jemma tries to disentangle herself from Grant and proves unsuccessful when he tightens his grip like some cuddly species of anaconda.

"Grant, love, I need to use the loo. Let me up." He releases her and flops over to cuddle his pillow.

She gets up and relieves herself, but doesn't go back to bed. Instead, she goes into the kitchen to stand in the cooled air of the refrigerator. Hot flashes are a grade A bitch, she thinks as she's consuming her latest craving: cantaloupe drizzled with honey. It's a moment before she feels the eyes on her.

Her guard stands in the blueish light of the stove clock that reads 4:17 a.m.

"Taylor…" she says in surprise, then "Do you ever speak?" when he doesn't answer.

"Only when spoken to, Mrs. Ward."

"Dr. Simmons-Ward," she corrects absently. "That must get quite isolating." She forks up another chunk and bites into it. "Doesn't the silence become….that's it!" She sets her bowl of fruit down and jets off to her lab, leaving Taylor to clean up the kitchen and follow her.

She sets off to work immediately and doesn't look up for the next two hours. She half hears Sarona take over her shift, but keeps going.

"Hey, babe," Grant says right next to her ear, at which point Jemma screams like a banshee and
nearly jumps clean out of her stretch-marked skin.

"Grant!"

"Jemma!" he has the nerve to smile at her. "What?"

"You know how I feel about being snuck up on."

"And you know how I feel about you doing lab work without pants on."

She looks down. Bollocks. She's still in her bloody night shirt.

"But you don't see me throwing stones," he continues. He skims his hand up her bare thigh to tug down the hem of his Henley, uncaring of the extra eyes in the room. His hand is warm on her skin in the cold lab. He smirks at her and she tries like hell not to go gooey at the action. "What're you up to in here? You never came back to bed. I thought you fell in," he teases.

She grins up at him despite her best efforts. "Sadly, my arse is far too wide for that... That is not an invitation to grab it in disagreement!"

He ducks down to kiss her quickly, without moving his hand. "You're perfect. Now pretend I'm smarter than Fitz and explain what you're doing." She sits aside her disheveled and beloved note book, stuffed full with years of her notations and theories. She's beyond excited by the idea that her latest theory could change the world and she has to tell someone. It may as well be Grant, even if she needs to simplify the terminology.

When she turns back to him he has that uncomfortable look he gets when he's reminded she's smarter than him. He leans on her lab table, waiting patiently as she gathers her thoughts.

"I have a theory! The Terrigen adds DNA to the average human. Supplements it in the weak areas, if you will, thus making inhumans."

"Yeah, I got that much."

"I can reverse engineer it!"

"And now I don't follow." He crosses his arms as she paces by.

"If the Terrigen can add DNA, it can delete it, mask it, silence it, as well. I'd have to do some more tests, but I could - in theory only at this point - cure countless genetic conditions and diseases. Down's, Huntingtons's, dwarfism, cystic fi-"

Grant's expression darkens. "No."

She stops and spins back to him. "No? Grant! I can do what I set out to do in the first place, I can help people. I can help her."

"No. I won't let you do that," he says concretely.

"You won't let me heal my own child?" she replies, incredulous at his gall.

He physically imposes on her personal space, inches from her face. "Heal her? Do you even hear yourself? You want to expose her to Terrigen. In case you've forgotten, in all your scientifically-purposeful single-mindedness, but that fucking shit kills people. If it doesn't deem you worthy, it kills you! What if it deems neither of you worthy? What then?"
"Granted there are some holes, but being exposed to the Darkness Planet likely created antibodies we share-"

"I don't care!" he roars, cutting her off. She flinches away from him on reflex.

"I cannot for the fucking life of me understand why you would risk yourself and our baby over this bullshit," he hisses, "and you are fucked in the head if you think for a second I will let you even try. What the hell happened to you? Did I fuck you up or was it the planet? Was it SHIELD, did they actually drive you crazy?"

To set his point, he snatches her notebook of the table and drops it on a Bunsen burner she'd left lit. Jemma swallows a whimper as she steps over, trying to avoid thinking off all her history with Fitz burning to ash. She reaches into the flames to yank it back, yelping as she burns her hand. She drops the notebook to the floor, and her despair climbs at yet another thing she cannot save. Grant doesn't take notice or plainly doesn't care that her face crumples as she turns into a weeping mess before him or as Sarona rushes forward to stomp out the fire burning at his feet. Jemma can't bring herself to check to see if anything is salvageable, simply stares at it until Grant is there, forcing her to meet his eyes.

"We wanted a baby so goddamned bad, Jem. And now that she's not your idea of what should be, because she's not going to be a genius, that it is going to be real work, you think she's a problem to fix? You think that changing her on a fundamental level, as a person, is the solution? How is picking and choosing any better than aborting her? How is it less evil? Because as fucked up as I am Jem, I don't see how that's the answer. There are worse things than being disabled."

The silence rings in the room as he finishes. She stands there a good minute waiting for him to take that back, but he doesn't. And she can't say she doesn't concur with his assessment. She steps past him and walks out without a single word, no parting barb.

Jemma wonders if it's the desperation or perfectionism as Grant accused but she suddenly realizes she lost her humanity in somewhere along the way. It may never return. Jemma closes herself off in the spare room. Letting herself disassociate is safest for everyone. She plunges the room into darkness with the flip of a switch. She curls up on the bed and sobs harder than she cried when she accepted that she would never leave the Darkness Planet. Maybe never leaving would have been easier than the challenge she faces now. Certainly, Jemma thinks, everyone else would have been better off.

As if sensing Jemma's distress, "She" kicks at her mother's ribs. Jemma cries that much harder. Before the crying jag is over, Jemma is breathless and sick to her stomach. Through her despair, she can vaguely Grant pounding on the door she doesn't recall locking.

"Jemma! Jemma, I didn't mean it that way. Baby, come on! I just don't want you to do something you'll regret. I'll stand here all day, you know I will."

She doesn't reply. She can't move. She knows she is further inviting Grant's ire, but he wants to fight and she has none left in her. The hormones, emotions, and fears for her baby are all too much. She isn't angry at all, she's drained of all hope and has no head space left for him to occupy.

He stays there, true to his word. She can hear his boots shifting on the hardwood, or an exasperated sigh now and again. It is a long while before she hears his retreating steps.

"The boss went to get breakfast for the two of you. You must be hungry," Tarleton wheedles from the other side. When there's no response, she tries again. "Will you open the door for me, Doc? You're startin' to freak me out and pretty soon boss' patience is gonna run out." Tarleton's tone is
kind, Jemma thinks. But she probably has the same low opinion of Jemma as Grant. Rightly so, Jemma curls tighter into herself at the thought. She can't speak because there is less than nothing to say. Hasn't Grant said it all anyway? She's a terrible human being. A worse mother.

When Grant comes back with food and she doesn't open the door in acceptance and reconciliation, he loses his cool, just as Tarleton predicted.

"Really Jem? This is getting pathetically childish, come out of there now! Jemma we don't do this, this isn't who we are. Please, just open the door and talk to me, baby."

There is a long, incredibly tense silence.

"Fine, hard way it is then." Even though he'd promised to never hurt her again, something in the statement feels threatening and ominous. She doesn't move. She can take whatever he dishes out, it will be a welcome change compared to everything holding her underwater now.

Soon there is the squealing sound of drills and she can hear the screws fall from the door hinges to clatter to the floor. From her position on the bed, she can see him lift the door and slide it to the side.

"Hi baby. Can we talk?" He says it like he hadn't just lifted an oak door all on his own.

When he steps into the room she gets to her feet and, keeping her eyes glued to the floor, walks listlessly past him.

"Baby, come on." She journeys to the bathroom and he follows after her and watches as she pees.

"Are you part camel? Jesus, Jem." She goes to the sink and washes her hands and cleans up her face as best she can. "Come on, baby. That was funny!"

They just had the biggest fight of their entire marriage and he wants to joke around, lovely. Maybe Grant's as twisted as they all say, maybe she's just a husk to house his spawn to him after all. What littl was left of her heart is broken. The will not even another planet could break was shattered with a few scant and sharply worded sentences.

Jemma take her grilled chicken salad and truffle fries from where Grant had placed the take out on the floor. She returns to the spare bedroom and sits cross-legged at the center of the bed. She's not hungry but that doesn't matter. "She" Is what matters. Jemma tries not think about how gentle and patient Grant was last time they'd slept in this bed. How understanding he'd been had almost made her cry. It had reminded her Grant could be kind, but he can be harsh and unforgiving as well. Not that she believes he'll find any to give. Hell, she isn't even deserving of it.

"Jemma," he starts again.

"Boss, may I speak? As the Doc's friend for a moment?" Tarleton pulls him aside.

"Allowed."

He's framed in the door just slightly. She's never in ten years made him as mad as he looks now. They should check Grant's blood pressure. She would do it, but something tells her touching him now couldn't do any good.

"You should give her time," Sarona says. "I think that she was trying to cope with the baby's condition the only way she knew how, on an intellectual level. You've taken that from her."
"I'll take the whole fuckin' lab if-

"All due respect sir, that isn't going to help either of you. Give her some time to adjust and return to
this when she's ready."

"What makes you think you know my wife so well?"

"Two and half months of fourteen hour days, six days a week."

"Fine, you keep her company, I clearly can't get through at this point." He tosses up his hands in
defeated exasperation and stomps off.

"Burning her decades of work and research? Dick move, Boss." Tarleton calls to his back.
It's three days before she speaks to anyone She only moves if her body demands relief or
sustenance, other wise she doesn't leave the room.

"I'm just going to give Grant the baby and leave, it's what's best," she says aloud when she reaches
the choice she has been wrestling with.

Sarona's head snaps up. She's been sitting on the floor against the closed door, telling Jemma a
story about an ex and a mission in Peru. Jemma wasn't truly listening but Sarona had filled up the
silence with her usual happy chatter. Acting as if Jemma hadn't had a break down and gone
temporarily mute. Jemma kind of loves her for it. It's something Skye would do. It makes her feel
terrible and guilty all over again, but she doesn't have time to think on it as Sarona cuts through her
thoughts.

"The fuck it is. You are her Mama. No one else, Jemma."

"I don't deserve her."

"That's not true, Jemma, hon. People are fucked up and flawed and human. You are not
underserving of your baby, not at all. All mother's want good lives for their babies, you were just
trying to give her that. It was just an idea, you didn't act on anything. You wouldn't have not when
it came down to it."

"Grant hates me. I loathe myself. Dying would have been easier than feeling like this. Would have
been better. I shouldn't have come back."

"Jemma, honey...The boss loves you very freakin', obsessively much. Like I would be frightened
to be on the receiving end."

"It usually feels pretty alright. Or it did," she says, her voice sounding far away to her own ears.
"That's gone now."

Sarona has a big mouth because not three hours later, when she's picking at the sandwich she made,
Grant troops in, dress in muddy tac gear.

"Please say something to me, I'll take anything at this point, really."

"You're leaving muddy boot prints all over the kitchen floor."

He plops down in a ladder back chair. The wood creaks under his suddenly-added weight.

"So..." he says, yanking the laces loose on his combat boots awhile keeping his eyes on her. He's
still looking at her like he loves her. Or maybe he's just afraid she'll slit her wrists with a kitchen
knife, she can't be sure. "Why'd you go radio silent on us? I think I might know, but..." he starts pulling his right boot off. "I'm going to need you to say it. I'm not trying to fight, honestly. I just need to understand so that I can help in whatever way you need."

"You still want me?"

"Every day, forever." He moves on to the left boot and tosses both aside.

"Why? I'm awful. I'm a terrible person who...maybe I was better off on the Darkness Planet. I mean, what kind of mother tries to genetically-modify their child? I'll leave, just don't ever tell her I tried to change her, it's all I ask."

"What has you that scared, Jem?" He goes blurry as tears fill her eyes. "Babe..." he whispers as if she's hurt him. "Come here please..."

She takes a few steps to stand in front of him. He pulls her down to sit in his lap. He loops his arms around her, holding tightly to her. It's impossible to not feel some measure of comfort in his arms. "Nothing you can say will make me not love you."

She looks into his face and sees nothing but earnestness. She hopes to God that's real.

"I'm so afraid, all the time. And I've lived with it for so long that it's like an old friend. At first, I was afraid of what it meant to love you, then I was afraid of not having that love. You did the things you did, and I was afraid of Fitz never being himself again. I was afraid in Hydra. Then came the Planet and all of it's uniquely fear-inviting challenges and now there's this."

"Jem-"

"Let me finish, please," she says, strained; if she doesn't get it all out now she never will.

He brushes her hair back and nods in acceptance.

"As long as she's with me, inside, she's safe. Safe from a cruel world that's not made for her. As long as I carry her, she's free of your enemies and her challenges and I want to keep it that way for as long as I can. I wasn't trying fix her, I was just trying to ensure she has a good life, a life with more..."

"More what?"

"I don't know, Grant! I just know what is like to be different. It's isolating and hard. It's lonely and you can't understand what it's like to not ever feel understood. You're a physical representation of Hubbell bloody Gardiner! Everything comes easy to you. Every tiny thing from eating to talking to getting the world to see her as a full-fledged human being is going to be hard for her. Science is all I know, it's what I fell back on, but you're entirely right. I don't know how you want to proceed. I'll leave her with you and go back to Shield, if that's what you want or-"

She's stopped by Grant's tightening grip, keeping her from pulling away from him. "I want be with you, and I want to raise her with you. I want us to be a team. Not me, you and Hydra. Just me and you." By the time he's finished, he has has his hand slipped under her shirt rubbing the small of her back.

"I want you to know, I said the things I said out my own fears and concerns, because I wanted to shock you back to sense. I didn't mean you were a bad mother or that you were trying to harm the baby. And I'm truly sorry I burned your notes. It was petty of me and wrong. I'm sorry. I will always have your back, Jem. And I want you to be healthy. To be whole again."
"I need help, I think," Jemma admits. "To process everything not just with the baby, but with all of it. I don't trust anyone anymore, though, after Garner, and I don't- I can't do it alone."

"Do you trust me?"

"More than I have in a very long time."

"Do you trust that I'll keep you safe?"

Jemma nods, slowly.

"Then I'll pick out a therapist and I'll go with you to make sure you don't get emotionally-cornered or morally pigeonholed okay, babe?"

"Okay."

The tight grip he has on her seems to ease at her agreement. The hand at her back skims upward to catch her neck gently. He pulls her in for a kiss she expects to be completely possessive but is instead utterly tender, as if he expects her to disappear from his arms at any moment.

Grant chose a sleek-looking, dark haired woman named Dr. Elisson. She has no affiliation to either Hydra or SHIELD but has experience counseling some of the better known crime syndicate families. Their initial meeting was friendly and went fine enough that Jemma agreed to continue. She reads a to do list online before her first real appointment, wanting to be prepared.

She creates her goal list for her therapy sessions with a single item. The baby: Be a better mother, get and stay mentally healthy, accept things as they are.

Jemma hands the doctor the list, refusing to release Grant's hand.

"My self-loathing," Dr. Elisson reads. "Why I'm so damned sad/post-traumatic stress, coping with the baby being different and then… who's Eleanor?"

"That's what I wish to name the baby. She is my only goal. Grant edited my list."

"Grant," the doctor chides. "You're not here for you, you're here for her. Do not manipulate her again, understand? You cannot decide Jemma's feelings for her," she cuts him off before he can protest. "Yes, I understand that you are concerned, but you need to let your wife work through things – including making her own goals – in her own time."

"Thank you," Jemma says.

"Fine," Grant warns. "So long as Jemma's health and safety are not in jeopardy. And there's still no way we are naming her after Eleanor of Aquitaine, Jem."

"You shot down Peggy!" Jemma says. "As for Queen Eleanor, I admire her."

"She had terrible marriages with people she hated! She marched to battle to avoid one of them, Jemma!"

"Grant…"

"Why do admire her Jemma?" the doctor cuts in smoothly.
"She was brave, she took control of her life and had power in her own right."

"Do you see similarities in the two of you?"

"I used to," Jemma says.

"And now?"

It's a moment before she responds. "Now, there's nothing. I'm just here. And there's nothing to admire about me now."

"Why not?"

"When I was alone on the planet, I wished I wasn't alone. I wished Fitz was there, too, on that God awful place because I was lonely. What person wishes that on the person they love most in the world? Second most-" she cuts frantically.

"Baby, I know you love Fitz, it's fine," Grant soothes.

"You were alone, it's natural to want the comforts and people from home," Dr. Elisson points out. "What was being home like?"

Unbidden tears welled up in Jemma's eyes. "Breathe, Jemma," Grant kisses the back of her hand, grounding her.

"Punishment."

"For what?"

"Coming back different. Maybe… definitely for loving, I love Grant. It was a problem. It was immoral and wrong… and I paid—we paid." She sets her hand on her rounded tummy.

"And so Karma is punishing your baby? Is that what you feel?"

"Yes, well I wanted to change things so that she didn't pay for my choices but…"

"Do you think the other parents of special needs children did something to deserve the things that happened?"

"No, of course not!"

"Then what makes you different? Do you see the disconnect? Do me a favor, Grant. Tell me how you see Jemma."

"You are brave, you're tough, and smart. You are kind, baby. And I see your intentions now. You are not going to be punished by me, Shield, or bullshit karma. You're lonely, but I'm right here. I will not leave and you can't scare me off. I promise, I will always love you. I will even kidnap Fitz for you if you really need him in your corner."

"Really creepy grand gestures aside," the doctor cuts in, but knows better than to further analyze Grant, "does that sound like someone who's unworthy of love and deserves to be punished?"

"No."

"The next time you feel yourself starting to cycle through self-hating thoughts I want you to call me immediately. I also want to talk to your husband, and to try to believe the things he feels for you."
She nods at Grant. "Jemma, you're more like Aquitaine than you think."

When they reach the end of their time, Jemma feels a bit lighter, even as they fight about baby names the whole way home. It's enough that she isn't afraid to go back, to do the work to try to get herself back, piece by piece.

-/-/-

By the time Jemma is in her thirty-second week of pregnancy, if she isn't utterly miserable, she is undeniably horny. She refuses to let Grant know, because other than the halted attempt a few weeks after she ran from Shield, they haven't had sex since "She" was conceived.

Jemma doesn't exactly feel confident and she is definitely unsexy at this point.

Needs must, though, and so showers are when she satisfies her needs with a few particularly fond memories and an increasingly-awkward maneuvering. She must make some noise of displeasure - the angle and pressure are all wrong - because the next she knows, the shower door is opening and Grant is stepping in, concern etched on his face until he realizes exactly what she was doing.

Jemma cannot help but blush. She wasn't the "get yourself off" kind of girl before. She always heard her mother in her head, saying words like "dirty" and "improper" which defeated the whole purpose.

"I just I feel fat," she babbles in humiliation. "I'm sharing a body with someone, it's not sexy, I'm not sexy, I have stretch marks and enormous boobs and look like Moby Dick so…I was handling it so you wouldn't have to. I know I'm the least attractive I've ever been so if you could just pretend you never saw this and -"

"No fuckin' way, baby."

"Grant, I'm so embarrassed, please…"

He steps forward and she is temporarily distracted by the water spray hitting his bare chest. It trickles down his arms to dampen the front of his lounge pants. He's visibly hard. She blinks. That's an unexpected surprise.

He backs her against the cold white tile wall and replaces his hand with hers. There's a tense look on his face that damn near lights her insides on fire with want. It's half cockiness, half barely holding himself in control and it fans the flames of her desire higher. His fingers drive up into her, the force of it causing her to rock up onto the balls of her feet. It's everything she couldn't achieve herself.

"Fuck. Me. How do you even do that?" she cries reedily in disbelief.

"Do you right, you mean?" He laughs, leaning in to kiss her in the filthiest, best way possible. It's all teeth and tongue and fighting for dominance as he keeps driving her toward a peak with his fingers pushing inside her and his thumb circling her clit. "Devotion and observation is all it is, baby," he says against her mouth.

She kisses his him this time finishing with her teeth dragging at his bottom lip. "You don't have to, I understand-"

"Jemma, open your eyes and look at me."

"Jemma, open your eyes and look at me."

She does as he curtly demands. "Do you want this? Do you want me?"
"So much."

He flashes her a quick smile. "Good. I've wanted you for months."

"But-

"I think you are gorgeous…Don't believe me, huh?" He slows his pace and changes the pattern he draws on her clit. She's so close she bites her lips so hard it nearly breaks the skin. He reaches out and frees her lip from her teeth.

"You know your lips have always been my thing, please don't abuse them." He says softly and kisses her even more gently.

"Really? How did you manage to go so long without kissing me?"

"It was torture."

"I empathize fully with your plight at the moment."

He has her teetering so closely to the edge, all she can hear is her own ragged breathing and sounds of desperation. She can feel her core pulsing in time with her heart. He slips his hand from her body and she wants to weep for its absence. She allows for a pathetically-whined, "Please."

He kisses her hard. "Patience, baby."

He calmly leads her from the bathroom back to the bedroom. He takes her hand, leads her across the room with his thumb brushing across the top her hand. It's the only thing that slows her erratic adrenaline-rushed heart beat.

"Grant!" she hisses lowly.

"I sent everyone on the residential floor home for the day. You be as noisy as you like. In fact, please be obscenely loud. Eye contact or skin contact? You know what fuck it, you feel up to it, I'm good for both ways."

"What?" She is completely confused. She has no idea what he's talking about and she's too distracted with trying not to touch herself to care. She really only wants Grant's hands on her right now. Hers are just pale imitation.

"You'll see. Lie down." She wants him on top of her, inside her, kissing the breath from her. She'll do anything he asks of her at them moment. She does as he bids and watches as he shucks the wet sweat pants and…

"Fuck…"

"Thank you, baby…" He smirks at her while he yanks her down to the edge of the bed so her legs dangle off it. "Shove that girly pillow behind your back. I'm going to be awhile."

He kneels in the gap of her thighs. He kisses up her leg in scraping, biting kisses randomly placed. "Do you know what my new favorite thing is, babe? I love how thick your thighs have gotten." As if to accentuate his point, he bites sharply into her right thigh. It sends a jolt racing up into her core. She groans with pleasure and she can feel Grant's smug grin against her skin as he soothes away the sting of his bite with a kiss.

"Your hips are sexy too, it's not all delicate, pretty bone structure any more. Both work for me
though so don't worry over it later…” He anchors her leg over his shoulder and repeats the same electric bite to her other leg. "Now, I got somethin' to grab onto…”

He pins her hips to the bed using his forearm. And then he dips down.

She suddenly can't recall the last time he went down on her – or her own name - but it's like he's everywhere all at once, on her, inside her, pushing and pulling and sucking, alternating between soft licks and strong pulls on her clit, his teeth and beard scrape just enough…

"Ahhh…” The noise ends on a high keen. "Jesus Christ… fucking bloody fuck, I'm going to come…and I'm …please…” She knows she's making no sense but it feels like he's dragging this out to torture her soul. "Please let me come…”

He laughs and there's no sound, just the vibrations that trip their way from her cunt up her entire spine and she's flying apart like shattered glass, screaming, bucking her hips up, arching into the sensation.

"I love you." She croaks in the aftermath as he trails lazy kisses up her belly. He seems to pay special attention to the stretch marks tracking her abdomen like roads.

"Don't tell me those hideous lines are sexy," she says trailing her hand through his hair.

"They are…they mark that you chose me, you chose to have my baby. These will always stand as a monument to your choice. These little marks mean the both of you are mine. Forever." He kisses her softly and she can taste herself on his tongue. "I love you too, Jemma."

He pulls away just long enough to hitch her legs up around his waist and shove into her hard. The pace is slowly-measured, controlled. He braces his hands on either side of her head. "Believe me now? You're perfect to me, baby."

She pulls him down slightly to kiss him. She can't say what she feels for him in this moment so she pours it all into the kiss, it makes his careful cadence falter. And he speeds up just the slightest, driving them both up and over the edge.

"Next round, way longer, I promise. I missed you is all." He lies down and pulls her back up the bed with him.

"Any longer, you might kill me," she says when she catches her breath. "How'd you even know that position would work?"

"Siri," he says. "I know you like it when I do the research, baby."

She bites back a moan and he smirks.

"This was called modified missionary."

"It has a name?" she asks absently as he kisses her shoulder.

"Um hum…” He moves up kissing her neck. "I personally am looking very much forward to the police man. I have a whole little plot in my head. You were a very, very bad girl."

"Really now?" she laughs, but ends on a sigh as he hits a particular spot in her neck that melts any resolve she has, every time – not that she had any in this case.

"Hickeys and stretch marks, isn't that over kill?" She tries to sound angry but he's doing so many
delightful things it doesn't hit the mark. His hands are skimming up and down the arm she's not using as a pillow. Then he skates his fingertips across her belly to end between her legs. Cupping her with his hand, he probes so lightly she gasps. Grant is not often a gentle lover.

"Too much?"

"No, perfect." She grinds against his hand. This seems to flip a switch in Grant. He twists his free hand into her hair to tug her back for an awkwardly-angled kiss. The kiss is rough and at odds with every other soft motion. Until his hand moves down to her thigh, gripping it hard enough she knows she'll find his fingerprints later. He adjusts her leg up and back slightly. He presses into her inch by slow inch until he can go no farther. She feels stretched and full, the different angle giving her just the hint of pleasure that is no where near enough. Then he moves and a heat flows slowly through her, settling in her gut.

His movements are fractional and maddening. She grinds back impatiently while trying to twist to catch his lips. It steadily becomes a competition, thrust for thrust, kiss for kiss, tit for tat. Soon she is covered in love bites and beard burn around her shoulders. She begs, once again, for him to let her come as she feels light headed and achy.

He pushes himself up on one arm to look down at her. "Do you believe you're beautiful yet?"

"What Grant? Bloody hell, you want me to form thoughts right now?"

"Words…I am beautiful. I am worthy of love. Say it, or I can promise you, you won't be orgasming any where near soon…"

"I hate you, so much." He grips her hip and drives up and the change in slant steals her breath.

"I love you, baby. Now say it. Like you mean it.

"I am… oh my god, do that again. I am beautiful… what was that again… and worthy of love, now get me off, Grant, PLEASE."

He spreads her legs even further apart and pushes into her hard and fast, nibbling at her neck and whispering "Mine, mine, mine" in at least four different languages on a loop. For the first time in forever, his possessiveness makes her feel happy and safe. The tension builds to the point of pain and snaps like a rubber band when she finds release. She has forgotten everything but Grant's weight against her and the stuttering of his hips as he comes so deeply-planted inside. She'd get pregnant if she wasn't already.

"Holy fuckin' shit!" Grant swears tiredly.

He slips out of her and she rolled gingerly to face him. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. You were kinda fantastic yourself."

"No, Grant, thank you for making me feel so loved. That felt almost … worshipful."

"I need you to know that what I feel for you, it's not fleeting and temporary. It's forever. Through every stage, I love you in all forms you take, in every way I can, Jem. I can't always say it because talking isn't my thing, but I'll damn sure show you."

She smiles. "I love you too."

"I have something for you. Be back." He gets up completely naked and on jelly legs to go to his
sock drawer. He returns with a Tiffany blue box.

He sits it before her. "Open it."

She does; inside is a princess-cut diamond ring with smaller round, yellow diamonds all around the band. Then there's the wedding band. It's an antique if her thrift shop eye is any indication, with its twisted vines and tiny flowers decorated with sapphires.

"Grant…" She feels his weight shift back on to the bed.

"I know we haven't discussed things, but I'd really love for you to wear these. I want all those promises we made back again. We'll redo everything if you want, the whole ceremony but I figured this was a good way to show I mean it and give us a new start."

"They're beautiful, Grant."

"The band was my grandmother's. Thomas was less than happy to see me, but who gives a shit. The diamond is the one the real me wanted to give you all along. Expensive, flashy and totally my pick. Let the whole world see you were mine."

She smiles.

"As for the band, blue and yellow are the colors of the national Down Syndrome Foundation and the awareness ribbons."

"I love it…." She moves to put them on.

"Let me, please." She nods and he picks up the band first. "I promise to protect you with my life, To reflect back at you every beautiful thing you can't see in yourself. To tell you the truth, to strive daily to earn your respect, trust, and love. I vow with every part of me to love you more, and better, until I die." He slides the ring on and Jemma wipes the tears dripping down her cheeks.

He slides the other diamond on next while she composes herself.

"Wow," Jemma smiles tremulously. "Grant…"

Grant shrugged. "I mean what I say, thought I might as well use my own words, not the generic church words, this time."

"Well, they meant a lot." She held her rings up into the sunlight that streams through a gap in the curtains.

"They look really pretty on your hand."

"I'm going to need bigger gloves for the lab. The level of happiness that provides is incredibly shallow."

The rings are a heavy and unfamiliar weight on her hand but it's a very much welcome weight, made heavier with the promises he's made that she holds in her heart.
A Father's Joy

AN: I own nothing! Many thanks to the incomparable Myranda!

Sitting silently, holding her hand in the therapy sessions, Grant learns a great deal about Jemma and the experiences she had while they were apart. He listens for tones denoting fear or general worry, reading her every micro-expression. He also learns little details about the planet Jemma inhabited. Little details he'll use to lead Malick away from opening the portal and using his wife to do it. When the smartest, most logical woman on the Earth is scared senseless of whatever alien is held captive on Maveth, it's smart to heed her fears. Even though Malick will lose his life before Grant lets him touch her, It's still best Grant pay attention to Jemma's gut instinct.

He watches her every time SHIELD is mentioned, how her eyes go dark, sad, or even happy depending on the memory called upon or the person involved. He knows she's misses Fitz, like you'd miss breathing fresh air after being stuck in the Playground. He reminds himself to save special torture for Morse later; her behavior toward Jemma deserves nothing less. Hypocritical bitch. He may actually kidnap Fitz while he's at it. Sure, Jemma might be mad at first but her happiness at seeing him will eventually override the anger.

But today they aren't talking about Shield. This week's topic is the baby.

He and Jemma still haven't settled on a name, but he's letting it slide for now. He's just trying to reduce stress for Jemma. Maybe they'll know the baby's name once she gets here. Besides, as long as his surname is in there somewhere, Grant will be happy.

"Jemma, you've mentioned multiple times that, for you, the baby feels safest as long as she is being carried inside you. What are some things we can do now, to prepare for the baby is born and becomes a separate entity?" Dr. Elisson asks.

"I have her room ready. I've read every bit of research I can get my hands on. I suppose there's really nothing to convince me that I can do this, that I'll be any good at this, until I jump into it."

"What do you fear doing wrong?"

"I'm afraid that I'll fail to advocate for her properly. I fear the complications of Down Syndrome. I have no control over anything, I have no control over her health. Heart defects, childhood cancer are the big ones. I have no control over whether or not someone mistreats her, or calls her names."

"What does advocating for her mean to you Jemma?" His wife glances at him for reassurance that this is a safe place to be vulnerable and that he's right there to catch her if she crumbles. He squeezes her hand and she squares her shoulders.

"Seeing she has the best of everything and has all her needs met. That if she wants to do something, making sure that her path to do it is as free of obstacles as it can be. I want to be her champion; I want to stand in her corner always. I will protect her from anything that tries to hurt her. I may not be very good at any of it, but I want to do it. I want her to know I've got her. I'm afraid she won't ever know that."

"Why wouldn't she?"

"Because I won't be able to connect to her. We may be too different."

"And which relationship in your life told you that was going to be a factor?"
Jemma fidgets, twirling her wedding band with her thumb. It's a nervous tick Grant hasn't seen in ages. He's missed it. "My Mum. She loved me, but there was no connection between us, growing up. She didn't understand me."

"Hm. Do you feel connected to her now?"

"Yes."

"Then it only stands to reason that the connection between you and the baby will deepen once there is someone fully present with whom to connect. If you build the bond, Jemma, it will exist. As for her health, you'll have to take that as it comes, day by day. Just like a new project. I've absolutely no doubt you can and will advocate for her in whatever she faces. You can't be the kind of survivor you are and not have a lot of backbone."

When the session draws to a close, Grant puts "Ways to connect" on his to do list. Not for himself, but for Jemma. He doesn't think it will be an issue for him because you can't be a good spy without the ability to connect to others on all different levels. But Jemma lives in her head a lot. Parenting will be very hands on. He has no doubt once the baby is born things will snap into place for Jemma, even if she doesn't believe it herself yet: she adapts better than anyone he knows. All she needs is time and a little concrete proof that everything she wants is still possible. All she needs to feel reassured is an adjustment in perception, and he thinks he has just the thing in the works.

-/-/-

From the moment Jemma hits the thirty-six week mark, she does all she can to make the baby come.

Grant has accepted that his baby girl will join the world when she's good and ready. Jemma, however, has not recognized this as fact. It's not as if Grant doesn't empathize with Jemma's feelings. They are, after all, experiencing more than 110 degrees of incredibly dry August heat every day. Even at night, the temperature is in the eighties. To be totally honest, some of his men are starting to wilt with the heat, and none of them have the added pressure of growing a person.

He wouldn't have chosen one of the hottest regions in the continental U.S for his base had he known he was going to impregnate his wife in the near future. Eh, knowledge for next time.

He's kicked back on the chaise portion of the sectional and is reading recon reports from his Shield source while Jemma putters around. Jemma has being "nesting", as the books call it, for the better part of three days. She has cleaned every surface in their quarters at least twice. The smell of bleach is starting to cling to her. Needless to say, Grant is surprised when she stomps in, in full on pout mode. It's legitimately the cutest thing he's seen in weeks.

She sighs and gives him a halfhearted glare. "We have come to an impasse," she says dejectedly, gesturing at her stomach.

"Anything I can help clear up?" Grant sets aside his report. He stretches his arms out on the couch and waits for Jemma to come to him. She's been sort of anti-touch lately due to the heat and her 'enormity', as she calls it.

"I've decided I no longer desire to pregnant. Your child, however, is an immovable stubborn little bugger with no regard for her mother." Her scowl deepens and he fights a smile.

He laughs. "Did you just call the baby selfish?"

Jemma gives him just the edge of a smile. "It would seem she is her father's daughter."
"Come here."

"I mean, I practically live in the lavatory, in the tub or on the loo. I’ve tried every home remedy I can find on the internet, I’ve walked, I’ve eaten, I’ve climbed, lifted, pulled, and pushed things trying to get this baby out and she just won't budge," she rambles, walking over and standing before him. "I’m so damned hot my bones are going to liquefy at any second, I can't breathe because she has herself wedged weirdly yet again, my back hurts, and I haven't pooped since Tuesday!"

He's well aware of her efforts to bring on labor: three days ago, he'd asked if he could have a bite of her lunch and had gotten a mouthful of the spiciest curry to ever touch his lips. He could finally taste his food again this morning at breakfast. Jemma is impatient, to say the least.

Grant pulls Jemma onto the couch and, at his prompting, she lays down the couch part of the sectional with her head on his chest. He loops arm arm around her shoulders and uses his free hand to rub her back. "We could have sex. Maybe that'll get her jump-started."

"And maybe I could punch you. In the face," she dead pans and he has to hide his amused smile in the crown of her hair. He kisses the top of her head. Jemma will not find it funny at all, but - oddly - hearing her complain and pout makes him laugh and fall even deeper in love with her. He continues rubbing her back.

"Just relax, baby; she'll be here soon. Four more weeks and you're done, babe."

"That's a long time when we live in what could be termed as hell on earth."

"Next time, Alaska."

"What makes you think you'll be getting any ever again?"

"We have great sex."

She cuddles closer to him. "It is lovely sex quite often," she agrees sounding sleepy to his finely tuned ear. "What was the next name on your list?"

"Enyo."

"We're not naming her after the Greek goddess of war and that's final, Grant."

"What about Audrey."

"Maybe…what's it mean?"

"I don't know. I just thought that one was pretty."

She drifts off before they can go through more, nestled safely against him.

-/-

A week later, he's setting in on a meeting with Pickens and the mole he'd planted in SHIELD.

"Sir, Shield's director is trying to locate the source of the hate mail directed at Mrs. Ward. As far as I can tell, no one in the Playground had any idea it was going on. General suspicion lies with whoever their anti-inhuman leak is. Coulson is under the impression - as is everyone else - that the leak thinks the baby to be inhuman and wanted to exterminate it."
"It's Garner, then, he was most vocal in his support of termination," Jemma says and Grant's head snaps up quickly. Jemma never interrupts his office hours: either something went wrong in her lab or she is in labor. "Are they looking for me?" she continues, while he eyes her to see which case it is.

"Yes, Ma'am," says the mole. "Fitz is very nearly insubordinate in his desire to find you. Everyone assumes you're with Director Ward, though only Fitz and Morse seem alarmed at your choice."

She nods, suddenly hissing a breath through her teeth. She leans heavily on the door jamb. "If you'll kindly excuse my husband, boys, I believe I'm most definitely in labor."

"Sir?"

"You're temporarily in charge, Pickens."

"I will follow protocol until you return."

Grant gives a half nod to Pickens while standing and crossing directly to Jemma.

"I'm okay, it's okay. The contractions are not very frequent but they are gaining strength and length." She pats his chest and smiles up at him sweetly. "I'm going to need a lift to the hospital. I don't want to take from Yeager's time, though Tarleton mentioned-" her breathe backs up suddenly. She fists her hand up in the green button down shirt she'd insisted he buy because he 'needed more color in his life'. And, she later admitted, because she likes the way it fits him. Jemma moans in pain but finishes her sentence on a loud exhalation. "She mentioned she wanted to be there."

"Baby, when was your last contraction?"

"I'm not entirely certain, I know I had one on the stairs. Fifteen minutes, maybe."

"Why didn't you just take the elevator?"

"That's lazy…and walking moves things along."

"Baby…"

"Grant, go grab the bag from the bedroom closet and enact the security plans you created," she orders in her crisp "mind me because I'm Jemma" tone. "I want to get this circus over with, and I really don't want to have the staff have to clean up amniotic fluid."

"Okay." He kisses her forehead then her mouth. "Alright, let's do this." He does her bidding, but tugs her along with him, gently holding her hand in his. They have to stop twice for contractions.

The hospital is fifteen minutes north of their base at the speed Grant drive. They'll be there in two minutes by Grant's estimation, since they are turning on to Pine Street, when Jemma speaks again. "Grant."

"Yeah."

"I just wanted to say thank you for helping me get here today. I'm really getting excited and I wasn't sure that was going to happen until you promised me it would. And you've kept your word. So, thank you. Also, no matter the profanities I will undoubtedly spew and the mean things I'm likely to say before this is over, remember, I love you."

He raises the hand hasn't let go of since she came into his office and kisses the back of it. "Thank
you for letting me back in," he replies as the car pulls up before the hospital entrance and stops. He gets out and helps Jemma from the car.

Tarleton strides the through the automatic doors. "I've already got the doc checked in and the security team in place. Ready, doc?" Tarleton asks, turning to Jemma.

"As I'll ever be." She says bright and happily, but he can hear her apprehension behind it.

/Jemma changes into a hospital gown and lets Grant help her into the bed. He purposely stays in Jemma's orbit - well, within touching distance. It's half his own admittedly-obsessive need to protect his own and half knowing Jemma seems to draw strength and comfort from his nearness. He really likes the way it makes him feel. It validates everything he's done to regain her heart and confidence. No other man will share this experience with her. She's going to have his baby today.

"What're you thinking about, Grant?"

"Just how lucky I am." He watches as her brow tightens and another contraction starts.

"These things are starting to really smart," she says and he can hear the strain in her voice.

"Get the epidural now, Jemma, before it gets to the point you can't stand it, baby."

"No. I need to be alert and present." She grips his hand to vice-like tightness.

"Then just listen to my voice and focus on breathing, deep breaths, okay."

She nods. She takes a few breaths. "I need to move. Stillness intensifies it."

/Jemma starts off walking the L&D floor with him and Tarleton on either side. Her water breaks in a random hallway at 3:20 p.m.

"Well that's both gross and unfortunate," Jemma says dryly.

"You provided someone job security," Grant ducks down and plants a kiss on the side of her neck. "Don't worry about it."

"They'll want to check dilation now that my water's broken. Let's head back to the room."

It turns out Jemma is dilated to six centimeters, and still has a ways to go before delivering.

When Jemma is still unable to be still, they end up sort of shuffling around the room. Jemma leans on him heavily, shifting her weight from side to side. The only noise in the room is Jemma's low moans of pain and his reassurances, pitching his voice to try to be soothing and encouraging.

"Just so we're clear as of now," she says after a particularly hard contraction, "I regret ever having shagged you."

He tries and fails to keep the laughter from his voice. "Just think of that time on the balcony in San Tropez... you never regret good sex, not really."

"You self important wanker, if I didn't like you so much..."
"I love you, baby, you're doing so great."

"I am?"

"You are, you're almost there, Jem."

"This hurts so much worse than stitching myself up."

"Jemma, baby, you can take the medicine and relax. I'm not going to let anything happen to you."

"Promise?"

"I promise you, Jem."

"Threaten violence if you have too, just make sure I get the good stuff," she acquiesces.

They try to force him out of the room during the epidural but he flat out refuses to budge.

"Could you get me some ice chips, love?" Jemma tries to mediate. "I'm really thirsty. I'll be fine."

"Tarleton! Go get ice chips," Grant commands, watching the procedure. "I said I won't let anything happen to you and I meant it, baby."

"Then darling, please stop frightening the man inserting a needle into my spinal column."

Jemma whimpers at the lidocaine being administered, but then everything is in place and the drip ratio is set. Jemma is soon sagging with relief. Grant sits on the side of her bed. "Better, baby?"

"So much," she shoots him a big dopey grin. "I love you again."

"I love you, too." He picks up the bowl of ice chips Tarleton had covertly brought in. He spoons up a scoop and brings it to her mouth.

"I'm perfectly capable-"

"My job, in this situation, is to hold your hand, remind you to breathe, feed you ice chips and cut the cord. Please let me do my job."

"Only because you said please."

Grant feeds her the bite and leans into kiss her cold lips.

After eating about a third of the ice chips, the nurse comes into check her.

"You're at seven, you should get some sleep while you can, Mrs. Ward."

"Dr. Simmons-Ward."

Grant smirks at Jemma's retort. She turns on to her side and he plays with her hair and soothes her to sleep. As he watches her doze, he muses over how helpless he feels. He can't take this pain for her or make anyone pay for their actions and normally he would do those things without thought or question. He can't fight her body, though. Only he will ever know just how worried he is for Jemma's safety and health right now.

He'd read the books: the baby could get stuck, she could come out backward or upside down. Jemma could rupture or tear something and bleed to death. Then where would he be? He kisses the
back of the hand Jemma still has wrapped with his.

"Please let them survive," he whispers in prayer, even though God had stopped listening to Grant a life time ago.

Jemma sleeps fitfully for maybe two hours and then wakes up in a full-fledged panic. "I need to push, she's coming, Grant, I need to push."

"You're sure?"

"Grant, unless you want to catch her? You'll get someone. I need to push now!" He hits the nurses' call button on Jemma's bed. "Can I help you?"

"I need to bloody fucking push!" she snarls.

If he thought her pain was bad before, it's ten times worse when they stop the epidural so Jemma can feel to push. The first few, she's calm and mostly collected. That soon wears off.

She's red-faced, sweaty and screaming at him before long. With her hand curled in a death grip on the front collar of his shirt, she pulls him as close as he can get without being in the bed with her.

"It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, and I hate you but I don't, it's very confusing." 

"Jemma, just push, baby."

"I can't… not again. I thought it would help and it doesn't."

"You can, baby, I promise you, you can do this." He lets go of her for just a second to look beyond all the draping and medical lighting. He can see just a bit of inky black hair. "She's right there Jem, I can see her."

"He's right. Four more and she'll be here." The doctor says. "Now gimme the biggest push you got, Jemma," the doctor says, catching Jemma's eye. 

"1…2…3…"

Jemma screams very loudly.

"Try to remain quiet. Screaming wastes energy," a nurse informs them.

"Shut up, no one asked for your input," Grant growls back before continuing his count. "4…5…6…"

"Jemma I need you to stop, the head is out," the doctor says in a perfectly calm tone. She suctions out the airway and manipulates the baby's head to free her shoulders. "And now just a little push."

Jemma pushes and the baby slides out. The doctor lays the screaming little girl across Jemma's chest. Jemma laughs almost gleefully and all tension coiled in Grant eases away.

"Well hello, baby girl…shhh, it's alright." The baby's cries lessen as if Jemma's voice is soothing her. "Hi there my girl, aren't you lovely…nice to finally meet my little lung crusher."

Grant watches the two of them for a moment. Jemma chatters away and the baby quiets, looking up at Jemma blinking like she recognizes her mother's voice. Jemma is still holding onto Grant and she looks over at him encouragingly. "You can touch her Grant. She's fine, she's perfect."
He traces his thumb across eyebrows that match Jemma's, down the bridge of her tiny nose, up the line of her cheekbones that are identical to his.

Her upturned eyes are the only truly visible sign of Down Syndrome. It lends an ethereal quality to the baby's face. She's beautiful. Grant brushes his thumb back down her cheek and she looks him right in the eye before yawning.

In that moment, Grant feel something inside him catch and release all at once. He's never loved anyone, anywhere, as much as he loves her. Not even Jemma, and she was the one who gifted him with this miracle. It defies logic and words. He knows in no uncertain terms he would lay down his life for his child and tear apart anything that aimed to harm her. He finally knows, in the deepest part of his being, why he exists. It's to be her father.

He also realizes, with sudden clarity, he'd never done anything to warrant of his parents' abuse. They were the broken ones, not him. He'd never lay a finger on his girls.

"Would you like to cut the cord?" the doctor asks

"It won't hurt them, will it?"

"No, we just clamp it off and you snip, sir."

Grant cuts where they tell him too and then a nurse carries the baby off to clean her up and tend to her. He follows, drawn like a magnet. He looms unapologetically over the nurse holding her and casts glances back over at Jemma to reassure himself she's okay. The doctor is doing something but he's unsure what it is, exactly. Jemma looks irritated by it but not pained.

"She's delivering the placenta. It's rather unpleasant, you needn't look, love," she answers his silent question. Her voice is hoarse from screaming.

The nurses clean the baby up and do all of their testing and bloodwork.

"She has lower muscle tone but that's common for Down's babies," one of them offers brusquely.

"She has Down Syndrome, she isn't Down Syndrome itself. It's part of but not the whole of her being," Grant corrects before he can stop himself.

The woman stares but says nothing. Another nurse dresses the baby and wraps her tightly in a blanket. "You'll need to schedule her cardio ultrasound but, for now, she's fine. A healthy little girl. " The nurse plops the baby into his arms.

"Wha-uh no, I can't she's too tiny, she weighs less than a bag of flour. Just give her to Jemma." He tries to hand the baby back.

"Grant… darling." Jemma's tone is unabashedly amused. She's laughing at him.

"I don't know what I'm doing, Jemma!"

"Cradle her head in the bend of your elbow and hold her bum with your hand. Put your other hand under her back and cuddle her close to your chest…See?" Jemma says fondly when he does as instructed. "She feels safe."

"Okay, now what?"

"Come and sit with me," Jemma says as he walks slowly across the room.
He wants to tell her he'll just hand her the baby and sit in the chair next to her but when she makes room for them with a grimace of pain, he's hard pressed to deny her. As carefully as he can, he gets into the bed, the way one might climb into a shaky hammock. He doesn't want to wake the suddenly sleeping baby.

Jemma curls up against his side. She reaches over and fixes the girl's lavender beanie with a bow on the front. "I know her name."

"You do?" he peers at her.

"Eleanor Abigail Ward."

His face screws up.

"She gets your last name. Let me have Eleanor. She won't even be going by it. I thought she'd use the middle, Abigail."

"I can live with that."

"It means a father's joy," Jemma says softly. "Abby for short."

He's made through the entire experience without crying, but the added meaning Jemma gives to this moment with her pick for Abby's name is threatening to unravel him. Jemma knows Grant has had very little joy in life and she'd just given him endless literal joy. No one will ever take it from him. That means more than he can express verbally. So instead he shifts the baby just slightly to pull Jemma closer. Dipping his head, he kisses her, pouring all his unspoken feelings into the embrace. It's a long, slow-burning one that makes Jemma cup his jaw to hold him in places as she kisses him back.

He feels the curl of her smile on his lips and knows they have never been happier.

"What was that for?" she says when they finally break to breathe.

"Sometimes words will never be enough."

He ducks down and presses a kiss to Abby's soft little cheek. She growls at him; his beard must tickle.

"Welcome to the world, Abby Ward," he says to his perfect little girl.
Babies sleep a fucking ton. Logically, he knows that; he had, after all, read the books. But the reality is still surprising. He's sure Jemma would have some scientific answer for it but, honestly, it freaks him out. It's all Abby does. She's three days old and has only been awake for five hours of it total.

He likes sleeping - who doesn't – but it is so much and he can't help but wonder if it means something is wrong, if it has to do with the Down Syndrome.

He'd have asked if it is that or just a regular baby thing, but Jemma is really touchy when they attribute things to Abby's Down's.

Case and point? That first attempt at breastfeeding had not gone well. It had ended in tears for both his girls and when the lactation consultant had said: "Babies with Down Syndrome often have a difficult time latching on because their tongues don't always fit in their mouths and they have poor sucking reflexes."

Jemma had bit the woman's head off. "It's quite common for most babies, regardless of disability, to have issues breastfeeding. My daughter is fine, do you hear me, fine. All I need is a bottle and a breast pump and for you to get the hell out of my face!"

Grant is not surprised Jemma had reacted so severely because knowing that the obstacles are already starting for their little girl is especially daunting for Jemma. She'd admitted she thought she would struggle with this. But she Jemma keeps surprising herself.

He's proud of her. That lactation woman is no doubt the first of many who will fall at the hands of Jemma Simmons-Ward, Mama Bear.

Jemma is fine. He is the one who's terrified. Abby is so tiny. Every time he touches her, he's afraid he'll break her. There are so very many things that he cannot control: when she eats, if she eats at all, how she breathes. It turns out babies breathe in a terrifyingly shallow manner.

They have some fancy monitor in her crib to watch for signs of SIDS but he'd rather just keep his hand glued to her tiny chest. It makes him feel better when he can feel her lungs filling and emptying beneath his palm.

That first night in the hospital Jemma had asked, with some measure of amusement in her voice, "Are you going to sleep that way? Forever? She might become cross with you for having no concept of personal space eventually." She'd smiled at him indulgently.

"She'll live."

"I'll buy you a mirror to hold underneath her nose, love."

And when they drive home from the hospital, his thoughts are everywhere even as he's focused on the road.

What he keeps coming back to is whether Abby may have a fatal heart defect. Fear grips him at the thought either. A test will spell out that fate at the end of the week, but that seems so far away.

"Grant, darling. You can go more than two kilometers per hour," Jemma points out from where she sits in the backseat beside Abby's car seat. "Daddy usually drives as though hell hounds are chasing
him. You have turned him into a Grandmother and instilled more caution than Mommy could in almost ten years. Good on you, love bug."

"Ha ha, Jem," Grant grins at her in the rearview mirror.

"It's really very sweet, darling, but I believe a tumbleweed just passed us by." She smiles at him and he's glad for it. He thought she was going to have so much more hormonal imbalance and sadness over Abby's issues than she seems to be having.

Abby's snoring competes with Jemma's sniggering laughter over his turtle like mileage. He never considered his protective ness would take such a cautious turn but here they are, moving slower than molasses at Christmas. He'd be offended and self-conscious if it was anyone else laughing at him, but it's Jemma and it only stands to make him even happier. Because she sounds so goddamned happy, too.

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When they pull up to the base, he helps Jemma from the car. She moves gingerly, as if walking across ice. She's very clearly in pain, sucking air between her teeth with each tiny shift. He dumps their bags on one of the grunts.

"Can you get Abby for me?" she asks. He was planning on it anyway. There is no way she can pick up the carrier yet.

He pulls her into his side. Her arms immediately wrap around his waist and her head rests on his shoulder. The pride he feels is undeniably smug. "I got you, too, baby. Now how do I move this thing?"

"I knew you weren't paying attention to the demonstration." She stands on her tiptoes with a wince to drop a kiss on his mouth. "Just lift it out. You should hear a click."

He nods. "I was paying attention, just making sure you were. I mean the fire chief did speak in monotone." He lifts the car seat up and out.

"Ready for the grand tour, my Joy Bug?" Abby's only reply is a loud snuffling sound. "Or just continue sleeping, that's fine too."

They begin a painfully slow but short trek to the base's wide bay doors, meant for plane access.

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The doors barely close behind them as Tarleton rushes up. "Gimme, gimme, gimme, boss, please…." "Uh no, let's let that baby fever wear off a bit."

"Look at her little sleeper, she's a sock monkey," Sarona continues to coo over Abby.

"it reminded me of someone," Jemma replies in a distracted whisper as Grant sits the carrier down and Jemma picks Abby out of it. She unfurls in a deliberately slow manner from the squat position required to pick up Abby. She cradles Abby to her chest in move that already seems practiced and instinctual. With one arm resting under butt and the other hand cradling her head, they stay chest to chest as Jemma sways. Abby's hand is latched on to the collar of the Henley Jemma had stolen from him for its roominess.
Any worry he might feel over motherhood causing Jemma so much pain is overshadowed by pride and attraction. He knows it makes him a chauvinist to feel so proud that he'd made this happen, but he does feel that way. Add to that how Jemma is brimming with her own confidence pride and joy? He's totally done for. He never thought he'd think she was more attractive than when she wearing his clothes while working in the lab on the bus. He was wrong, wearing his clothes while holding his baby? Way, way hotter.

He reminds himself there are people present. Not that they wouldn't clear out on his order; however, Jemma is in no condition for the things he's thinking up, not yet anyway. "What?" Jemma asked catching his stare.

"You're pretty. I like looking at you," he says in return.

"Can I hold her, sir?" comes the booming but concise voice he knows.

"You too, Pickens?"

He shrugs looking over Tarelton's shoulder at Abby. "I like babies, sir."

"Let me guess, Taylor. You three?"

Taylor says nothing, though Grant is amused to see a flare of fear in his eyes before Taylor covers it up. At Grant's raised eyebrow, Taylor responds uncomfortably. "I will perform whatever duties Dr. Simmons-Ward requires of me."

"Thank you, Taylor. You needn't worry, Abby isn't troublesome," Jemma smiles at him reassuringly, holding the still sleeping Abby to her shoulder.

Abby does not always sleep, Grant finds. In fact, she stops sleeping at three AM that morning with plaintive wailing that causes an uncomfortable tightness in his chest. He hates to hear her cry. It physically pains him to think of her feeling unhappy or any form of discomfort.

"I've got it, go back to sleep. You have your meeting at six," Jemma says, getting to her feet and rounding to the end of the bed where Abby's bassinet is located.

He leans up to watch as Jemma bends to retrieve her. She inadvertently flashes him cleavage made heavier by lactation, highlighted by a low cut tank top she'd never wear out of anything but convenience. It makes him inconveniently hard. This is going to be a painfully long couple of weeks. He may literally die of frustration. For now, he steers his thoughts in a decidedly unsexy direction: briefings, deserts, forests, Fitz's attraction toward Jemma. Basically, he calls on anything he hates in order to take it down a notch. It works. Eventually.

"Hey now, love, I'm here..." Jemma soothes but Abby continues to cry. "It's really not as bad as that is it?" Abby cries on. "I see we've inherited your father's flare for dramatics." Jemma walks out on the room on the balls of her feet to maintain the bouncy stride that usually soothes Abby. He hasn't mastered it yet. Jemma has, and it seems to put her ass on display, not that he minds at all.

Jemma feeds Abby, burps her and changes her, makes sure Abby is warm enough, then cool enough fear it's the summer heat is upsetting Abby. She continues to cry, regardless of Jemma's efforts. She is near tears of her own, in either frustration or defeat.

"Can I give it a try?" Grant says, pulling himself from the bed.
"I think you'd better. At this point you can't do any worse than me," Jemma says morosely, handing him the baby,

"She's just being temperamental. You're doing fine, baby." He kisses Jemma's temple as he settles Abby against his bare chest. The nurses had said that skin-to-skin contact would soothe her as well as even out her respiration and heart rates. He gently pushes her knees up her chest, because they said the fetal position was comforting and reduced pain if her belly was bothering her.

With the hand not holding on her feet, he pets down her rather charming cowlick, rubs her back and pats her butt. After minute or two he restarts the circuit. He slows his breathing down using an old trick he used to stave off a panic attack when John first stranded him. Soon her breathing matches his. The pain pinching at his heart eases as her cries lessen to mewing irritation.

"What's wrong, bug? We'll fix it... shhh." Her head rests beside the beside the crook his neck and her arm jerks when he speaks from where it lies across his Adam's apple.

He looks up to find Jemma smiling fondly at them.

"Hey, baby."

"Hmm?"

"Come lay back down, I think she's mostly settled."

She crosses the bed to lie beside him. She loops her arms around his bicep and rest her chin on his shoulder, watching them.

"What?"

"I'm happy," She replies kissing his shoulder. He is, too. It's like this moment is evidence that everything in his life is finally finding it's place. He shifts a bit closer to kiss Jemma's forehead. He looks down into her eyes to echo her sentiments.

Abby whimpers before letting out an audible fart. She is obviously relieved and suddenly quiet.

"Did she just..." He makes an exploding noise.

"Yes..."Jemma smiles laughingly.

"She's a little moment ruiner," he comments.

"She's not so bad," Jemma retorts, wrinkling her nose up at him before leaning in to kiss him. He holds her still by cupping her chin in his hand. It's a soft kiss that is still edged in need. He kisses back harder, unable to help it. in the end she's clinging to him. Even with the addition of the baby, he will never get tired of how quickly things heat up between them. They simply adjust, never missing a beat. Jemma breaks away with regret in her eyes and the crescent print her of her nails dug into the inside of his biceps.

He tries to draw her back, chasing her lips with his. They land on her chin.

"Grant we can't..." she says in half-hearted chiding.

He shrugs. "Maybe not, but I can still want you."

There's this flash of disbelief but then it's wiped way by exhaustion. Before he can question her, she's running a hand down Abby's back and curling into him more closely. "We should sleep when
she does, darling. Or we'll never get any rest."

She's right, he knows. He files it away for later and closes his eyes.

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He goes into his meeting with Malick a little sleepy but very happy. Malick seem to appraise him. Grant knows that Gideon is from the same "happiness is weakness" school of thought as Garrett. Jemma has chipped away at that life lesson bit by bit over the years. Grant thinks you can have power and happiness. Maybe that's hubris, but all the same, he decides it's time for a change of the guard as he sits beneath Malick's critical gaze. His eyes flick across Grant's tired face.

"I hear congratulations are in order," he says placidly. "Fatherhood is an eye opener. Children expose our vulnerabilities and shortcomings in as many ways as they strengthen us. They often have the clearest perceptions of us."

Grant leans back deeper into his chair. "She's four days old, she is still seeing in black and white and she has no perceptions. I know exactly who I am, my daughter has no bearing on that."

Malick nods. "My only true regret is that I didn't have my wife longer. For Stephanie's sake."

Grant sees the barely-concealed threat for exactly what it is. He needs to move those godforsaken rocks again. Maybe he'll brick one of them up into the base of one of the Giza pyramids. It's not like anyone frequents the Egyptian base anyway.

He shrugs, projecting an unconcerned attitude. "Stephanie turned out alright." It's far from the truth. The woman was crazier than Garrett was post GH -325. Though Malick's speech about the effect of children may be of use. Grant is smart enough to know the man is projecting. Sure, Abby is his greatest weakness with Jemma not far behind, but Malick's is Stephanie. Grant will figure out how to exploit it eventually.

There is no point in pretending he won't. Whether it be for the safety of his girls or in the advancement of his organization. Hydra is Grant's, no matter what the booze-soaked bastard across from him thinks.

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Grant is incredibly proud of Jemma for deciding, without any prodding, to keep her appointments with Dr. Elisson. There is trust built between them so he's no longer needed in the room and, in an attempt to give Jemma the outlet she needs, he doesn't eavesdrop or read Elisson's notes. Not that she'd give him access to them in them in the first place, but it's not like he doesn't have the resources to get them if he wanted.

So he sits in the lobby. He usually uses the time to read reports from his teams, but Abby is sitting in her carrier in the chair next to him and he pretty much just stares at her because, come on, he made that and it's pretty. She's looking at the flower adorning her forehead, like she's trying figure out what that thing is.

"Does that hurt? She looks like she doesn't like it."

"Does what hurt, sir?" Tarleton asks, coming forward from where she's leaned on the wall beside the office door way. There is another guard on the right of the door. With Abby's arrival and the pending threat of Malick, he'd put an entire set of guards on Jemma, even when he's with her. Twelve in all. It's probably overkill but he'd rather be overly cautious than recklessly stupid. Only three are in the lobby. Two stay in each elevator and four cover the remaining floors.

"She does, darling. Or we'll never get any rest."

She's right, he knows. He files it away for later and closes his eyes.
Tarelton is the only one who really dares to speak to him when not directly spoken to. He'd put the fanatic ally loyal and slightly crazy, silent ones on Jemma. Which is fine. Tarleton is who he was addressing anyway.

He removes the flower-bedecked band. "This thing? What is this even? Why not just buy her a hat? I mean, her mother is English."

"Fair point, though you should probably put it back on her. Doc seemed very determined she would wear it."

"I've decided otherwise. "He tossing the thing in the nearest trash can while unbuckling Abby from the seat. He lifts her out to sit her in his lap, holding her in a sitting position. Her head bobbles a bit but she eventually blinks up at him as he steadies her as he holds her with his hand supporting her head. "Hi Bug! What's up, huh?" he asks and she yawns widely as if she's tired. "Look at you, sitting up... Yes! Hey sweetie! Who loves Daddy best?" He hears Tarleton snicker before he can formulate a proper response the office door is opening.

"Grant, would you come back please? Jemma and I were discussing some of her concerns and I think it is important you be aware of them."

"Sure." He cradles Abby protectively to his chest and gets carefully to his feet. He is less afraid of accidentally hurting her now, though it still lingers a bit. Even as handling her more over time works a bit like exposure therapy, he's still gentle and careful in all of his actions.

He walks into the office and finds Jemma clutching a cup of tea, her silver nails matching the metallic edged cup. She sits in the corner of the couch, so that she's protected. Her shoulders are tight as if she is waiting for something bad to happen and her eyes are undeniably tired.

He more or less assumes it has to do with Abby's sleepless nights or Jemma's apprehension over Abby's upcoming cardio appointment. She'd mentioned a few days ago and he wishes he could say he didn't share in her fears but he does. If only because he wonders how many lucky hands fate has left to deal out to him.

He doesn't want his luck to run out if his daughter's life lies in the balance. He shelves his own thoughts instead, focusing on Jemma. He sits down next to her and she takes Abby from him. "Where's her headband?"

"Abby and I are anti-pointless head decoration. We will be burning them in protest." He grins at her, stretching his arm across the back of the couch to toy with ends of her hair. She's been leaving it down more often. He really likes it. "What's up?"

"Jemma wants to start training, which wouldn't be a problem in itself if her reasons were less emotionally-destructive," Elisson says.

"I don't understand."

"I...I want to work out so that I'll feel more confident in your attraction to me."

"Jemma," Elisson prods.

"I neither feel attractive nor think you find me attractive. Was that clear enough?" she says to Elisson sharply.

He simply stares at her in stunned disbelief.
"You're serious?"

"I'm fat, and swollen, I'm losing my hair and my body parts are legitimately different. I'm not attractive right now. I'm sure you'd much prefer someone like Kara," she says without looking at him. Instead, she keeps her eyes on Abby as if to remind herself it was worth it.

"You're working on assumptions and the wrong ones at that. Look at me," he commands a little too harshly judging by the way her brow wrinkles.

"Look at me, please," he says more gently. "I prefer you to anyone ever, I still find you insanely attractive and I always will. It has been extremely difficult keeping my hands off you, but I did it so that you could determine the pace we went at, just as I have since we got back together. Just because you're in the driver's seat doesn't mean you're unattractive, it just means I'm waiting on you."

Her gaze skitters all around the room before landing back on him. "My body has still changed. And I have a hard time believing you wouldn't rather have someone who just snapped right back, someone who didn't have to work so hard at it. Someone who you shared your interests. Someone who could give you babies without having to go to a different planet first."

"So things are different, your body is different, you are different, I don't care! I don't care, Jemma! I love you. You and no one else. And I will spend every day convincing you of that, if I have to. I love that you disagree with practically everything I do. I love that you are smarter than me because you are the one thing that I have to work at... you're the one person who doesn't bow and scrape at my feet. I've always had to work to keep your attention and love it. Loving you keeps me as humble as I can be."

She opens her mouth to speak.

"Wait I'm not done. I loved your body before, and I happen to love your body the way it is now. I like the curves and softness. Maybe it makes me a caveman, but I love looking at you and knowing your body carried a child, my child. And for the record? I could have gotten Kara pregnant. I didn't want to. You're the only person I wanted to have my children even if it took going to another planet, even if I'm scared of losing the both of you, even if it's hard, even if you can't see it for yourself? It's always gonna be you."

"It has? It's always been me?"

Jemma seems uncertain of that and he understands. No matter how far gone their relationship had seemed, he'd still, on some level, been unfaithful. He was going to pay for it in countless ways for years to come, and the worst of it is that none of it will be Jemma making him atone for it. One of those ways was the pain on Jemma's face right now.

"Yes, baby, you're all that mattered at the end of the day. No matter how far apart we got, it was you."

"I still don't like my body."

"How much of the dislike is dependent on Grant after this conversation?" Elisson asked.

"Thirty to forty percent," Jemma confessed. "I'll work on it, I will, I just...doddering around my lab isn't going to help."

"Fair enough. I'm glad to hear that you are willing to put the work in, and I can give you some tools to help. We can start with self-affirmation, and getting that percent down to at least fifteen percent
in the next few weeks. You can work out, but only if you can affirm yourself in three different ways and find three different purposes that have nothing to do with Grant in relation to your body before you do it."

"Five percent, and she needs her physician's clearance."

"Grant!" Jemma says, exasperated.

"I'm not budging on this. You're going to see what I see before you go changing anything."

"And your husband is absolutely correct about clearance as well," Dr. Elisson, then carries on before Jemma can point out that Elisson is her doctor. "I'm the physician charged with your mental health. If you don't want to wait until your post-partum appointment, you can still consult the doctor about exercises you can do in the meantime."

"Ten percent," Jemma says finally. "And if the doctor clears me, I'll start off with self-defense or workouts that incorporate Abby."

He nods, knowing Jemma's perception of victory is important, too. Even as he vows to get that number to zero again.

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Grant has found something he hates more than the woods: pediatric hospitals. He hates this place and not just because of the overly bright, yellow duck wallpaper or because of the little toy station designed to distract kids during scary or painful procedures.

He wonders if these four walls and antiseptic scent will soon be synonymous with bad news. Babies who have Down syndrome have difficult lives to begin with. Those with heart defects have shorter and even more challenging lives. This is a fifty-fifty shot and to be frank, those odds make him about as comfortable as Coulson's mission-planning skills.

"What are you thinking?" He's knocked out of his reverie by Jemma, who is standing next to the exam table where Abby lies, Jemma undressing her for the three dimensional ultrasound.

"Do you think she's warm enough? I'm going to go make someone turn up the heat." He's moving for the door when she pins him in place with her gaze.

"Grant..." The look in her eyes is so kind that he feels exposed. "It's alright to feel afraid. I know SHIELD, your parents, Garrett most definitely tried to force that out of you, but it's normal. And I'm not going to judge you for it. I mean, I had a mental breakdown over all that we're facing so... no judgment here."

"I'm not afraid. Between the two of us, we can fix it if the results aren't good. You'll create some kind of heart patch if you need to. I know that. I just hope fate cuts her a break after everything. It took us damn near a decade to have her, that I can handle. Down Syndrome? No sweat. Knowing her own body could potentially kill her?" He shrugs. "I'm not good at helplessness. It makes me angry. I'm not afraid, I'm pissed."

That's a half-truth because he is petrified. But he just can't say that, not even to her. Even if she knows it's true anyway.

She gives him a sad little half smile. "Me too."

She reaches out with the hand not resting on Abby to squeeze his hand. Her wedding bands glint in
"Hello, I'm Doctor Kiesling." He looks like he's about twenty, if that, but Grant tries to remember his wife who had two PhDs by seventeen herself had researched every pediatric cardiologist in the nation deemed him the best. He shakes both their hands. "And this beauty must be Abby." He tickles her stomach and she coos at him. "Let's make sure your ticker works, huh?"

He asks a bunch of medical questions Grant has no hope of understanding. Jemma expertly answers them as the tech sets up the machine. She is beginning to look as worried as he feels, so he steps up and rubs his hand down her back. Her shoulders lower from their tensed position up around her ears and she leans into his hand a bit. Relaxing Jemma refocuses his attention and lets him shove down his fear while distracted by a different goal.

The doctor squirts some conductive gel on to Abby's chest and moves the paddle through it. The loud whooshing lub-dub of their baby's heart fills the room. It sounds normal to him, but he's not sure what he's listening for. Jemma's face is a mask of concentration and he realizes she's reading the scan herself.

When Abby begins to fuss he reaches down to soothe her by brushing her hair back from her face the way she likes. "It's okay, bug."

"It doesn't hurt... she's sleepy," Jemma says distractedly. She reaches out to keep Abby still without taking her eyes from the screen. He bends down to kiss Abby's forehead and shush her as Jemma mutters things like, "No septal, atrial or ventricular defects. No patent foramen ovales, circuitry and flow is normal. Arteries and vessels are normal." The doctor looks to her.

"She's a doctor," he points out.

"Not a medical doctor, a biochemist, but she looks fine. It's fine, right?" Jemma's voice takes on an apprehensive edge.

"I'm going to get a EKG to check electrical flow, but I can neither see or hear any defects."

Grant exhales a lung full of air he hadn't known he was holding.

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He's sparring with Pickens when Tarelton rushes in. It's been a month and change since the therapy session concerning Jemma's body image. There has been a totally different issue at hand for the past three weeks. Jemma's emotions had taken a sharp nose dive when Abby was around ten days old.

"Boss, Jem's having a level five meltdown over an ice cream commercial. I can't get her calmed down enough to explain."

Grant throws a punch which Pickens only dodges because Tarleton had distracted his boss.

"Is it worse than the scones thing?" Pickens asks and even Grant can admit the scones thing was bad even as it was funny. Jemma is great at many things, baking not being one of them, despite its scientific elements. Normally it is something she'd laugh off, but not in the midst of leveling off her post-partum hormones. Sure he'd nearly broken a few teeth and had to use his best boss glare to force them down people's throats, but it was worth it to get his wife to stop sobbing.

"Let's go," he sighs, Pickens and Tarleton both dogging his heels.
The baby blues have been hanging over Jemma. The doctor has been monitoring it, though so Grant's not as worried as he would be otherwise. She's been a little weepy – alright, a lot weepy - but there's been no severe depression. The doctor had recommended she go on birth control to right her hormones more quickly, but Jemma has been fighting it because she doesn't want anything to interfere with the natural process. Grant himself is undecided. On the one hand, it's Jemma's body and she should know best. On the other hand? Apparently now she's crying over an ice cream commercial.

He finds her lying on the couch, with Abby on the chaise cushion, her head resting on Jemma's stomach. When he walks into the room, Jemma is looking at Abby's hand wrapped around her index and middle fingers.

Jemma sniffs wetly, wiping her mascara stained cheeks with her free hand.

"Whatcha doin', girls?" he asks cautiously and Jemma moves her feet so he can sit down before putting her feet back in his lap.

"We're watching The Great British Off."

"Did your scone debacle get to you again?" he teases.

She shoots him a dirty look and kicked him in the thigh.

"Too soon for jokes, I'm sorry. Why're you crying, baby?" He runs his thumb along the sole of her foot.

"You'll just laugh," she rolls her eyes.

"I won't, I promise." He loops his fingers around her ankle before moving his hand up to squeeze her calf. If Abby wasn't currently lounging on her and blowing spit bubbles at the ceiling, he'd drag Jemma closer to him and into his lap. Even in floral yoga pants and a plain grey sweatshirt she looks good.

She cocks her head at him consideration. "A commercial made me cry." She pauses a moment. "It was about a diner waitress who sings on her breaks, perfectly innocuous right?" He nods. "And the guy she is interested in comes in and no matter what she sings about, he ignores her. Then she realizes he's deaf and learns to sign so he can know the words..."

He guesses you'd have to see the thing for yourself to fully get the emotional aspects if there really are any, but he gets it, if only because he'd read every book on biology he could get his hands on to better understand Jemma. Her sensitivity is disarming and admirable, even as it's humorous. Seriously, it's just ice cream. Though he's learned better than to say that.

"Okay," he replies, unsure of where this is headed besides straight back to tearfulness.

He's partly right. She does well up. "I want Abby to be loved like that. I want someone to love her so much that they learn new languages to relate to her, just to speak her name. I want her to feel understood, and seen for who she Is not her disability." She looks down at Abby and wipes her tears. "So, I cried because it reminded me how much I love her."

He smiles at her. "That just means you're a really good mother, Jem."

It's not just ice cream after all. He loves her so deeply for it.

/-/-/-/
A mission had gone a bit sideways today and he has some seriously bruised ribs and has to soak in
the bath as a result. Upside, he knows Rosalind Price's routines as well as a potential weakness to
use against Coulson. When the time proves right, Coulson will pay for the mistreatment of Jemma.

He hears the door click and looks up to find Jemma entering the room as if his thoughts had
conjured her.

"Hey," she whispers. She's wearing an insanely short silk robe the color of oxblood. He'd bought it
for her wistfully, never expecting her to wear it. Her love may lie with him but her allegiance is to
something of her own making, and the thing is Hydra red.

The front dips low over her cleavage, the hem just hits the tops of her thighs. He can see the
bottom curve of her ass plainly. She's gorgeous. When her hands twist nervously on the knot at her
waist that is once again trim, he realizes he hasn't spoken to her.

"Hey baby, you look gorgeous. Join me?"

She gives him just the edge of a smile. "Pickens said you were hurt. You should have gotten me
from the lab," she chastises.

"Get in and you can examine me yourself," he challenges.

When she drops the robe, his mouth goes drier than the desert they live in. She hasn't let him see
her naked since Abby's arrival ten very long weeks ago. She was always clothed in pieces that
revealed almost nothing. She ducks into the bathroom to change, even locking the door behind her,
and she always showers very early, making it a point to do it when he was asleep.

It was annoying: seeing Jemma naked is one of his favorite things, but he wanted her fully present
and completely confident in herself as well. And since she knows he can pick the lock in a
heartbeat, he hopes he's winning points for respecting her process.

When she said in therapy she feared he didn't find her attractive, he'd started his plan to dispel that
notion. He'd flirted with her pretty much non-stop, always making her blush at whatever dirty
implication he'd said in front of everyone. He'd made a point of touching her more often, taken
anything sexual right to the very edge, letting her see his every dirty intention.

Most of the baby weight has fallen away. While some might be attributed to her genetics, some he
thinks might be because the stress early in her pregnancy meant she didn't gain as healthy as she
might have in the first few months. Much of what remained had turned to muscle thanks to Pilates,
yoga, and martial arts she'd done with Tarleton. That last one he'd been a bit concerned about,
worrying she was pushing herself too hard to try to fit some non-existent body image she thought
he wanted from her, until Tarleton had quietly taken him aside to tell him that one had more to do
with her time on the planet. Her breasts are fuller, her stomach is nearly flat again, her hips are
curvier and thighs, while a bit thicker, are more defined.

Before, she was delicate and fined boned. She's still delicate next to him but she's no longer fragile.
Giving birth to Abby had redefined Jemma in a way nothing else would. She's taken back some of
the power Coulson, the team, and that planet had taken away, and some of the power Grant had
stolen with his betrayal, too.

"What?" she asks, stepping into the water. "If you don't want...I was sure though..." She turns away
to step out.

He runs his fingertips up her calf giving her pause. "I want you. You didn't misread things. I just
got caught up in the view.

She exhales a little relieved breath. She sinks down in the water straddling his lap in the gigantic claw foot tub, big enough to house five of his largest men. He'd had it specially made.

She loops her arms around his shoulders and tilts her head back, inspecting his face with superior scientist expression on her face. "You should tell me when you're hurt, I'm the smartest medic you have on staff and I know your history." The term "on staff" makes him grin like the Cheshire cat.

"Bruised ribs, it's basically a glorified paper cut," he counters.

"Still I find-":" He kisses her, half to shut her up and half because he can't hold back anymore. He hasn't seen her all day. He hasn't seen her like this since before Abby was born. She hums pleasantly, kissing him back, forcing him back against the porcelain of the tub. Her hands bracket either side of his head and he wraps an arm around her waist to draw her closer to him.

When they break apart out of sheer need for air, his lungs burn and his ribs ache but he's too intent on Jemma to care. He kisses down her chin and further down to the pulse point in her neck which races beneath his lips.

"Why now?" He nips at her clavicle.

"Finally felt like it, felt ready. And it's not like I'll ever be perfect again. I'll always look like I had a baby," she commiserates.

He stops in his hickey making process and backs away a bit to look at her. "To me? You are perfect."

"You just wanna get laid," she retorts.

"Well, yes, of course, but I'm still being honest."

He skims his hand down her back around her hip to rest on the curve of her thigh. When he returns to kissing her, her hands move into his hair to hold him place with a sharp little tug. He moves his hand from her thigh touch her, he keeps his thumb pressing into her clit lightly as he pushes in carefully with his fingers. All the books said there was a high probability she'd be more sensitive at first. The sounds aren't pained so he keeps going until she's pressing back into his hand with desperate whines as he drags his free hand through her hair. He watches her face as he works to get her off in short order. Silent pleasure takes her over, her eyes closing tightly as every muscle in her body tightens on a soundless cry.

She sags against him shuddering. She draws in quick breath.

"You okay?"

"Yes." She raises herself off his chest to watch his expression as she sinks down over him when he takes his hand away.

It's different. She feels tighter around him, though that might be illusion since it has been a while since he's had her. Either way, she's got the air in his lungs backing up. He snaps his hips upward on reflex and her cry this time is one of surprised pain.

He freezes. He will not hurt her. Not for anything, no matter how much he'd missed this way of relating to her. "Jemma."
She rests her forehead against his, to look into his eyes. "I'm fine, truly."

"I hurt you." He goes to lift her off of him, but she tightens her grip on his shoulders and shakes her head.

"It's a bit uncomfortable, not painful."

"Baby, that was not an uncomfortable sound. I hurt you."

"That can happen, after a baby. We'll just take it slow. Just give me a moment to adjust. Learn what feels good now." She stills. "Unless you don't want me."

"Jemma... God. I want you. But not if it hurts you."

"Grant, darling, just move when I tell you. I'm not made of glass, please don't treat me as if I am."

"If it's too much, too fast—"

"Shut up and move love. Slowly," she commands and he follows, unable to deny her.

He keeps his movements shallow and measured, watching for any sign he should stop. She kisses him so deeply it curls his insides, then he trails his lips down to kiss the crook of her neck to leave little nip marks just high enough to be noticeable. "More..." She begs lowly in his ear, sending a shiver down his spine. It's at odds with the hot water surrounding them.

He let her take control and it's a slow drawn out affair that was only matched by that first time when Jemma had needed to feel in control of her choices.

He gets lost in the feel of her skin, the rhythm of her body, the taste of her kiss. The orgasm crashes over him with a sharp quickness that catches him off guard. She soon follows, locked around him, her nails dug into his shoulders as she leaves behind her own marks of ownership. Not that he minds. He likes belonging to her and wearing her reminders. He's hers as much as she's his.

-/-/= He'd carried her from the bath, even as it pulled at his ribs, to collapse on to the bed for round two. Now they're recovering and she's lying on her stomach beside him, staring at the bruise marring his side.

"How'd you get that?"

"Reconnaissance went wrong," he confesses, walking his fingers up her spine.

"Hm, recon for what?"

He turns on his side and leans over to press his lips to her neck. "It'll only make you mad."

"I know full well to whom I'm married, Grant." She kisses his shoulder. "Stop babying me."

"I needed to know how to best hurt Coulson." He doesn't look at her, instead concentrates on moving her hair over her shoulder.

She nods. "And the rest of the team?" She doesn't give an inch, just watches him. "When we didn't allow you back on the team, you took it personally. I've always known that you really wanted us back. He told us not to trust you. He has to pay for that. It was never about Kara or me," she shrugs. "It's about how we hurt you and I'm sorry," she whispers.
He shakes his head. It's rare she's wrong, but in this case, she is. The team can do, say, or think whatever they want about him but they are not allowed to treat Jemma the way they did and get away with it.

"No. It's about how he allowed you be treated. He would have let you die on that planet if it wasn't for Fitz. When you came back, he treated you like a child and then judged you for your choices. Worse, he let them hate you and try to kill our child, all without punishment. He'll die for that, his life for almost costing Abby's, but he'll suffer for the other crimes first."

She bites her bottom lip, clearly thinking. "I'm not stupid enough to think I can talk you out of vengeance but..." She runs her fingers through his hair. "Do me a favor? Don't take the life of someone innocent to hurt him. Leave the cellist alone. She thinks he's dead and had no clue who he truly was. If you're going to victimize someone, at least make sure it's someone who knows fully just who they're in bed with."

"Anything else?" he asks, a little shocked.

"I'd rather you not kill anyone; if it can be avoided, please do, but if it can't? At least spare Fitz. He's already paid for loving me more than once. He followed me into the pod and right over the edge, then risked coming on to that planet to bring me back. This time, I chose you knowing it could mean my end. He's had no choice. Besides, he was good to me about still loving you. So was Skye. Daisy."

He's thinking that over when there's a buzz on the intercom they failed to set to Do Not Disturb.

"Jem? Pickens left his Peanut butter fudge ripple cheesecake in the fridge! Let's go finish it off. If you don't come on, I'll just feed it to Abby," Tarleton wheedles.

"Don't go..." He whines, pulling her to him.

She kisses him quickly. "I love you and all, but cheesecake is cheesecake."

"Oh alright. Bring me a piece." He lets her go, smacking her ass playfully.

"Maybe...what's in it for me?" He watches her dress.

He rolls over, cuddling her pillow. Her coconut soap and softly spicy perfume clings to it. "Orgasms." he says seriously. She snorts a laugh and pulls on pajama pants but keeps the robe on for a top. He's glad she's feeling good in her own skin again, though his men best keep their eyes off her.

He has no doubt she's going downstairs to gossip with Tarleton and hog Abby but he can't say he minds. She's more whole now than when she first came back to him, pregnant and afraid. Tarelton is part of that as is Abby.

She smiles at him. "Be back soonish." And she disappears out the door.

Today she is happy and so is he.

Nothing and no one will take it.

AN: I own nothing but Abby. Sorry this chapter took so long, I had writers block. If you've enjoyed it please tell me so. Much love to my Beta Myranda! Until next time folks!-MM
Many thanks to my ever helpful Myranda. Jemma's section is next. I own nothing but Abby. If you enjoy it let me know. I did a time jump for story purposes but will be going back to fill in the holes Abby is now two.

"According to the parameters you gave me, I have little to report," said Daisy, standing as she gesticulated at the screen in front of her. "But, I have been looking into other avenues. Shortly after the first video dropped and? By the way, just like Fitz and I said, proved Jemma and Abby's safety?"

Fitz nods at Daisy even as he side eyes the doubting Thomases of the room, even as Daisy starts to bring images up on the screen.

"Go on," Coulson says, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"While initially when I tried to back door their system, I failed, it seems Jemma made a slight "oopsie" and brought an un-Warded IPad. Ha! Un-Warded! See what I did there?"

When no one lightens up, Daisy sighs and continues. "Anyway, it looks like Jemma did an image dump on the unsecured iPad onto a cloud server, because my algorithm picked it up. I hacked the cloud – which I want to go on the record as saying I'm not totally comfortable with because it's invading our friend's privacy-

"Our friend who is currently living with the head of a massive criminal organization," Bobbi grinds out.

"Right, but still. It's mostly cutesy pictures of Abby, family shots and lots of mirror selfies, best guess because the mirror delights the baby. There are therapy videos as well, likely to keep Ward abreast to her progress when he's away. Putting it all together, I think Jemma bought the iPad to keep him company on a long-term mission."

"It's a surprise. That's why it hasn't been put the internet security yet. He's not gone yet," Fitz muses near the memorabilia wall in Coulson's office. "She must have gone to the store herself, managed to hide the purchase from whatever security you know he has on her. It's for a care package. Which means whatever he's about to do, she's worried."

"Which means whatever he's about to do," Coulson enunciates, "He's about to go on the move. We can use this."

-/-/

Grant's itching for a shower. Climbing a volcano is hard, and the sweat has dried on his skin in uncomfortable places. It's worth it, though. The rocks will hopefully never be found. So shower soon. But first, he wants to see his wife.

There's a song playing on Jemma's kitchen radio. He knows the song; he'd found it for when the PTSD got bad. Her playing it either means she's missed him or something has triggered her throughout her day, he'll have to ask her about it.

"Breathe. I'll still be here when you open your eyes," the duo sings softly. Other than the music, their home is silent. No babbling baby or humming Jemma. No murmur of Sarona talking Jemma through a panic. Nothing but the radio. Dinner is in the oven, he can smell it. It's lasagna. Lasagna
that's started to burn.

"Jemma! Tarleton! Abby!" he barks out, uneasiness coloring his tone. More silence.

He switches off the oven and the radio and the quiet becomes oppressive. His heart sinks.

"Jemma!" he calls urgently, making his way through their home.

As he turns into Abby's room, he wants to vomit. The signs of a struggle are unmistakable. Abby's rocking horse is over turned and missing a spindle, which Grant find across the room, bloodied on one end. As if it had been used as a weapon. Abby's toys still lie in the crib as if she was just playing with them.

This is on him. He had become too comfortable, maybe even a little lax in the past two years. SHEILD had made no moves prior to this but maybe they had waited for his guard to slip down. Or it could be Malick is trying to make a show of power. Maybe it is thousands of enemies, coming at him through his two most vulnerable and valuable points. There are way too options but at least he can eliminate one terrible one. Jemma hasn't left him. This is not the scene of her slipping out of his life again, her love for him in tatters.

She hasn't walked away from him, but he can't bear to think she and Abby might be lost to him anyway. This room is evidence of that.

Maybe he was mistaken in trying to give them normalcy. That flight of fancy could have brought harm down on them, and none of the maybes mattered because…

"They're gone," he says to Pickens who'd followed him in to see "is best girl."

Grant picks up Abby's discarded stuffed octopus. Jemma was mad when he'd bought it, but it was Abby's very favorite toy. She went everywhere with Opie at her side. "And it's my fault."

"We'll find them, sir," Pickens says, picking up the bloody spindle. Grant takes a breath, tamps down on his fear and rage. He doesn't have time for anything that won't get his daughter and his wife back.

"Get Keller in tech to enable their trackers," Grant commands. "You key in the access codes yourself. I don't trust anyone; this was an inside job. Run down our ranks and find the mole, and you bring them to me."

His orders complete, he turns to head to the the security sector to check the cameras. Even if its unlikely he'll find anything, the base is always busy, and someone should have seen something, but this is too clean like surveillance was cut out but he has to try.

He sends up a prayer that at least one of the girls' trackers is operational. It'll make that knock down, drag out fight with Jemma over piercing Abby ears to fit a chip behind the stud all the more worth it. Jemma's trackers are in her wedding bands, not that she has any idea. It's one of the few secrets he's kept from her in this new version of their marriage.

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There is a little buzz click sound and the power goes out in the SHIELD base. There is a half second of dead silence before the generators kick in and Daisy's net set up reboots.

"What was that?" Bobbi yells from the gym, over murmurs throughout the base.
"I don't know, I have to check feeds. It's not raining and Fitz should have fixed that anyway," Daisy says, worry in her voice. The only person with enough clout to do a systematical base wide reboot is Coulson, and even he wouldn't do it without warning. Everything resumes as people start milling about, trusting her to take care of the problem.

She works at it a few minutes, but then, over the low buzz of conversation, an eerie wail echoes around the base.

It takes only seconds before Daisy finds her on the feeds.

"Holy shit! Guys!" she shouts before taking off to make sure Abby doesn't crawl out of the hangar.

"Is that a baby crying? Lance asks, loitering in the kitchen doorway.

"Yes, and not just any baby. Its Abby."

His Lucky Charm-laden spoon freezes halfway to his mouth. "You mean murderous treasonous Ward and Jemma's Abby? That Abby?"

"Yes. Get Fitz and Bobbi! Meet us in the hangar. Tell Bobbi to bring her med kit!" Daisy throws behind her as she bolts to the hangar, leaving a stunned Hunter in her wake.

-/-/-

The core group, the ones who know Jemma, all crowd around Abby.

"None of the reasons she could be here after so long are good," Coulson voices what they're all thinking.

"He will come after her. It's only a matter of time," May follows.

"We need to give her back before he kills us all," Daisy returns. She squats down, inspecting the baby blanket Abby is clutching to her chest protectively. It looks like it's hardly ever washed and well used. She has on a shirt with little black hearts on it and jeans and moccasins. What looks like dried blood dots her shirt.

"No, Jemma is going to kill everyone for this first. If she's still alive," Fitz says morosely before perking up. "Unless Jemma sent her to us!"

At the mention of her mother, Abby perks up. When Jemma doesn't appear, her little chin trembles and she starts crying again.

"That's it, I'm picking her up. Look at her." Lance crouches to her level. "Hey love, it's okay."

When Abby crawls to him and pats the toe of his combat boot, he scoops her up. To everyone's surprise, she doesn't cry harder. Instead, the tears to abate after much calming and walking. Then Abby makes a sign, pauses to make another, then points to the flashlight on his TAC vest.

"She's asking for Jem, and Ward. She also wants your flashlight. She even said please," Bobbi translates.

Lance just looks at her, gob smacked.

"Well, give it to her so I can examine her while she's distracted," Bobbi gestures to them exasperatedly.
"Stealing people's babies is completely in Ward's wheelhouse; if he's not above it, he expects us not to be either. No avoiding the hunt down," Hunter muses. Abby begins to flick the flashlight on and off, sporadically shining it in his eyes. "It's like he taught her torture for toddlers. Easy, love, I'm going to go blind or have a seizure."

Abby only pauses to pat his hand before resuming playing with the light.

"Good news. The blood on her shirt isn't hers. She seems to be unharmed, if in need of a new diaper, and she …" Bobbi's brow creases as she attempts to recall the sign that Abby flashes. "Wants a bite? My ASL is rusty. I'd like to call in Clint. So she can communicate. Especially since the bad news is that the blood is Jemma's."

Coulson's face remains impassive as ever, though the rest of the group cringes visibly.

"We don't have anyone infiltrated at that base to call temporary cease fire, do we?" May asks. The silence speaks for itself.

"I'm going to go buy baby stuff. Get her some toys, too. Do you think she eats people food yet?" Daisy asks.

"She has teeth, Tremors, so most likely. My brother loved Cheetos. Puffy, only they're super soft," Mack says, having wandered in from the shop when everyone flooded the med bay.

"Um, I'm not feeding Cheetos to the daughter of Try-This- Gluten-Free- Muffin-Jemma, Mack."

"And let's not forget we need to make sure Garner stays secured in his cube, " Mack glances apologetically at May. "We know those messages that scared Jemma off were his, since he admitted he thinks this baby girl is an alien he needs to destroy."

Grant goes on the perimeter check himself after scouring every inch of the base to make sure it is done right. He cannot be still and wait in this instance. He has to move before he destroys everything in his path that is not his wife and daughter.

It's cold out here. He hopes they aren't cold. He hopes they aren't out here surrounded by emptiness and sand. He hopes that Jemma isn't in the midst of a mental break at the thought of being trapped in yet another desert.

He knows when the abduction had to have taken place due to the dinner Jemma had left half-finished on the stove. She's a stickler for Abby's routine, and morning staff trades off with evening at six. They had to have come out here on foot, on the back stairs. It isn't unguarded, obviously, but it isn't secure as other areas because it's well-hidden and not easily accessible.

Grant and his team run out past where footsteps or tire tracks would be visible. After a few miles, the dogs pick up a scent. It's not so far away that, if they managed to break free, Jemma couldn't make her way back, but the terrain would be a challenge to Jemma in the dark with Abby on her hip.

Grant sprints forward, tracking the dogs barking. There is an unmoving body crumpled like paper behind an out cropping of rocks settled in a little basin. Even in the dark, blood is visible. It's a woman, he can tell, but otherwise, in the dark and beaten as badly as she is, she's unrecognizable. For an agonizing moment, he can't breathe.
The cars behind the walking troop shine floodlights on the scene. He hardly hears Yeager's resigned "Sarona" before he's gesturing for a medic. Grant's too overwhelmed with relief that it's not Jemma. That feeling is soon chased by the fear that her fate could be worse.

Tarleton will not be waking anytime soon to tell them anything. Grant's about to put the fear of God into the tech department when his comm crackles to life.

"Sir, we picked up Eos and Nike's trackers only to have them drop off in northern Massachusetts. We've managed to get the signal back, but it keeps dipping in and out. Would you like to see it?" he asks.

"Be right there," Pickens answers before him.

"Send me reports on Tarleton's condition, get her to med. Stay with her, Yeagers. Jemma would want it that way. And if she wakes up, anything she says, I want reported immediately, no matter how inconsequential it seems. I will come to The Pit in a moment," he orders. stalking toward the tech department.

Northern Massachusetts. So it was Shield after all. They'd see the error of their ways soon enough. It's time for some new kids to take over their playground.

"Pickens."

"I know, Sir. The flight crew is getting my bird ready."

"Good. We'll hit tech first. I'm not going in blind."

-/-/-

This feels … wrong. There's no two ways around it. Locking a baby in a cage is wrong. It doesn't matter that everyone insists it's no different than a play pen and it's for Abby's own safety. Daisy has an overwhelming feeling that they are making a mistake. She steps into Vault D with Abby on her hip anyway, and engages the barrier.

Abby has vacillated from happy to inconsolable repeatedly, clearly waiting for her rescuers to come. Daisy has no doubt Ward is on his way. When he does show up, and she has no doubt he'll find them, he will be unbelievably and thoroughly furious not only to find his daughter in the hands of his sworn enemies but in the cage they once kept him in. To make matters worse, they've since discovered that the power outage fried the lock on Garner's pod and he's roaming free. Add to the fact that Jemma's missing and presumed hurt – by Ward's hand or another's, they have no way of knowing – and things couldn't get much worse.

It was Ward who'd lead them to Garner, or Lash, rather. It hadn't made much sense at the time, but then, consider Garner's reaction to Jemma's pregnancy (and God, does Daisy regret having missed seeing that for what it was) it's not a far stretch to think Ward may have been protecting Abby.

When the base shakes with an explosion that matches her own powers, Daisy knows their time is up. She hears Ward upstairs, knowing he's going after them single-mindedly. She doesn't know how many they'll lose to Ward, but she knows it's more than a few falling victim to him above her and Abby.

Daisy is their last line of defense.

-/-/-/-
The jet lands in a field not far from the Shield base.

"Sir, permission to speak freely?" Pickens asks, setting the plane into camouflage mode and switching to auto pilot so that when they step back on they can take off in a second flat.

Ward nods to him as he unstraps and is rushing to the rear exit.

"We need a plan, Sir. We must let cooler heads prevail here. We can't go in guns blazing. Dr. Simmons-Ward wouldn't want that."

"Getting my family back is my plan, Pickens. If Jemma wants to be mad at me for killing indiscriminately later, that's up to her. But I have to find her first. I can handle an angry wife."

It goes unsaid that what he can't handle, won't hand, is a dead wife.

Pickens nods. "Guns blazing it is, then, Sir."

-/-/-

Daisy had thought the noise level couldn't possibly increase but it has, exponentially. The hum-crack-sizzle of Lash using his powers is layered on top of the sounds of fierce fighting and pops of gunfire.

She edges her way as close to the entrance as she can, just in case. The barrier lights up like Christmas. She takes a step back, only half noticing Abby pulling up on to her feet on the edge of the mattress platform.

The fighting gets closer and louder. Abby free stands for a moment, then takes half a dozen steps to pat Daisy's thigh. Abby makes a whimpering sound follow by an impatient little grunt, which Daisy takes to mean she wants to be picked up. "Hang on, Baby," Daisy murmurs distractedly, hoping the fighting will subside soon.

-/-/-

When Hydra rushes the back entrance, Grant is hoping for an element of surprise, but there's no need for it. Mack is trying to fight a big blue grey creature. It takes a moment, but Grant realizes just who and what that is. After all, he'd fed it Inhumans to draw it out. Just because Jemma doesn't want Garner dead – and it is Garner, transformed - it doesn't mean Grant won't capture and torture him for all the vile things he'd done to his wife.

"Find the little zappy dude with the hero hair and force him overload the smurf's circuitry," Grant nods at the transformed Garner. "Then I want it brought in," he orders Pickens. "Taylor, with me. Ask everyone where my girls are once. They don't answer, kill them. I don't care who it is."

It goes quickly after that. He runs head on into Morse guarding Fitz's lab. They all must have orders from Coulson to kill him given the opening, but he doesn't give her one. He shoots her as she lunges for his gun, in the chest. If she dies, it will be slowly and painfully.

"You were a bitch to the wrong man's wife. Maybe now?" he steps on her wound, smiles as she screams in pain. "You'll know just how desperate she felt on that planet."

He strides over Morse and keeps going. She'll probably make it out of this mess – the wound's not that bad and the team will likely get to her. He doesn't care. He doesn't have time for her.

When Lance shoots him in the back yet again, he barely notices, pain pushed aside to forge ahead
to Fitz's lab. Where there is a Fitz, there's a Simmons-Ward not far behind.

Grant finds Fitz barricaded behind a holotable, typing furiously on a tablet.

"I'm still trying to locate her, Sir." Grant raises an eyebrow, then registers that Fitz has no idea his lab's been breached. Scientists.

"Not Coulson, buddy. Where are Jemma and Abby?"

Fitz peers up at Grant, the unspoken threat heavy in the air causing his fear to show plainly on his face.

"I told my men to kill on sight anyone who didn't answer the first query, so answer fast. Where are they?"

"Abby is in Vault D, with Daisy. Coulson and May are guarding the doors," Fitz says quickly. He knows there's no point in attempting to lie.

"Where's Jemma?"

"We don't know."

Grant cocks his gun, but Fitz, though clearly afraid, doesn't back down.

"Abby came to us alone. Maybe you should be asking yourself who you pissed off. Because we made the call to leave Jemma be. So you tell me, which of your many enemies has her?"

"It doesn't matter," Grant grinds out. It actually matters very much, but Fitz doesn't need to know. He slams the door behind him and rips out the wires to slow Fitz down as he makes his way down to Vault D.

-/-/-

When May and Coulson see him, they raise their guns. He holds up his hands as if to surrender, just to give his men time to catch up. He can talk his way into Coulson's good graces but May is willing and capable of killing him. He has to get to Abby but he needs his sniper in place as well.

"She's not my hostage. Jemma chose me. Day in day out, with all my flaws and missteps. I'm it for her and she's it for me. But the person we both love most is behind that door, and I will get to her or I will give my last breath trying."

Coulson stares him down.

"The road to hell Coulson…I will take all of you down with me, I swear on Abby's soul I will."

Coulson nods to May. "Unlock it."

She does without lowering her gun.

-/-/-

When he steps into the room, Abby is standing beside Daisy a tiny Shield t-shirt and her lace trimmed socks. Someone had given her a bath. Her hair is still wet.

"Da!" she shrieks excitedly. She toddles toward him on her own steam. His heart jumps in his chest as Daisy catches her, tugging her back when the barrier crackles to life.
"Hi Joy bug!" He smiles at her and shoves down all the anger, frustration, and terrors he's felt in the past twelve hours.

"How long has she been doing that?" he nods toward Abby, his voice as even as he can make it, but Daisy doesn't answer.

"It's okay. We're giving Ward his daughter back," Coulson says, lowering the force field.

"How long has she been doing that?" Grant repeats, because he can't not.

"Doing what?" Daisy says slowly, as though he's stupid.

"When I left the house yesterday morning she couldn't walk independently. When did she start?"

"Uh..." Daisy looked at him sheepishly. "A few minutes maybe? I didn't really notice."

"Great... you didn't notice that's...Jemma is going to cry," He mutters the last bit to himself. Nine months of immersive physical therapy and they'd missed her first steps.

"Uh, in case you didn't realize," Daisy bites back, "I was kinda busy what with our base being under attack."

Abby is trying to crawl to him and he cannot take another second of being apart from her. He scoops her up and holds her to his chest. He turns away from the team. They don't get to see him vulnerable, emotions passing over his face. Abby pats his shoulder dangerously close to the bullet hole. It hurts like a bitch but he doesn't stop her because she's practically vibrating with excitement - or relief - at seeing him. She lays her head on his shoulder, her right hand latched on the sleeve of his shirt.

"Da...Da...Da..." she whispers repeatedly, like she has to reassure herself he's real. He wants to kill someone.

"Hi Bug! It's okay, I got you now, it's alright," he soothes. She backs away to look at him, and he wonders when she acquired Jemma's critical thinking face.

"Ouch?" she asks. It comes out OH-Cha, but he knows what she's asking when her little eyebrows wing up. It's one of four words she can say confidently with no problem: Da... Ma...Ouch...and shit. He'd paid for that one.

"She can talk? She's been signing all day. We called in Barton," Daisy says.

"Of course you called in an Avenger rather than google baby ASL," Grant sneers. He doesn't bother to tell them she can speak very little and only around people she trusts. "The sign language is easier for her to process," he does add, unable to help himself from educating even in the middle of all this.

That's when Pickens comes in, weapon raised, and stands at his side.

"The Inhuman is secured, Sir. Doctor Ward-Simmons is definitely not here. Her tracking system still pings here. I reported to tech that we've procured Nike."

"Thank you."

Abby, who would typically bail off into Pickens arms, only waves at him and stays where she is.

"What do you mean secured the Inhuman?" May asks coming to stand beside Coulson.
"Your husband used his power emotionally abuse my wife. You think I'd stand for that? I shot Morse, too. Though Hunter shot me again so maybe, if you're lucky, the bitch won't die and you'll think we're even."

"Do have no remorse?" Daisy asks.

"I could lie, we both know I'm really good at it, but it isn't worth my time. You're going to help find Jemma or you're not, but either way, I'm walking out of here with my daughter and going after Jemma."

Silence hangs in the air.

"It's not about us," Fitz says, coming into the room slowly. "It's about Jemma. One of his enemies has her, and they likely don't value her like we do. What if they hurt her, kills her, because she is the only thing he loves more than power?"

"It's Jemma," Daisy adds. "We failed her. Even Bobbi still loves Jemma, no matter what Ward did to her."

"He killed Rosalind Price," Coulson snaps.

"You left my wife to rot on an uninhabitable planet and then let that asshole Garner drive her crazy! You're lucky I didn't do worse," Grant snarls back.

"He's Ward. He does bad things, we know that already. But I'm not going to leave Jemma to some asshole who stole her baby from her and took her God knows where to do God knows what to her. I'm in. I'll help you get her back," Daisy says.

"I went to another planet for her, I can bloody well work with Ward," Fitz chimes in.

"Muh! Muh!" Abby interrupts, smacking Grant in his shot shoulder again. Coulson smiles when Grant grimaces

"I'm going to find her, bug," he assures, kissing Abby's forehead.

"Fine. Let's getting started. Who do you think has her?" Coulson asks.

"I don't think. I know. It has to be Gideon Malick."
The Expectation Of Darkness

There is torture and violence throughout the chapter so be forewarned. If you like it let me know. Thank you Myranda for all your help this chapter. I own nothing.

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When she comes to, Jemma’s head is pounding in time with her heartbeat. She can barely open her left eye, but she doesn’t need to see to know her aching arm’s been twisted back and tied to a metal pillar attached to a thicker stone one. She has no idea where she is but it smells like wet newspaper and is bone chillingly cold. The darkness around her seems to coalesce. Fear slides down her spine. Darkness still gets to even after all this time, makes her chest tight in anxiety. She even sleeps with a night light when Grant is not beside her in bed. She goes through breathing exercises, imaging Sarona beside her, the steady cadence of her voice when she walks her through them.

Sarona…her heart aches at the thought of her friend. She’d fought so hard, that Jemma had wondered if she was still breathing when They’d dumped her in the desert a bloody unconscious mess.

She has to be okay, Jemma can’t accept anything else right now. Sarona is fine.

Still, nothing can prepare for the three men that step from the shadows into the space before her. Malick. Grant tries to keep lecherous power hungry old man away from her but she’d seen him leaving Grant’s office a few times. The man is deadly and elitist, she was never sure why he’d put up with Grant’s tiny under dog like faction until now.

Then there’s the inhuman he’s put as his second, the one whose powers are almost as terrifying as his undisguised sadism. And Cordon, who despite the lack of powers might be the most frightening yet. She can smell Malick’s leftover cigar smoke and the inhuman’s expensive cologne, a nauseating combination with the room’s odor, and hear nothing but the sound Cordon popping his chewing gum.

A spot light switches on, temporarily blinding her, but the light is no comfort. What’s coming for her is nothing good.

“Mrs. Ward, will you give me what I want or will I have to work for it?” Malick asks. That’s when she hears it begin to echo against the stone walls of the room. The warbling sound of her worst nightmare resurrected. The Monolith.

-/-/-

Both teams have reluctantly gathered in the med bay and it seems they are all staring at them like zoo animals. Okay, Bobbi is glowering from gurney beside him (and he has to wonder if he’d subconsciously done less damage than he could have because he knew Jemma wouldn’t really like it if he killed her) and Lance is straight up setting him on fire with his eyes but, still, there’s lots of staring.

Abby twists in his lap to see him. He needs to be still as Pickens digs the bullet from his shoulder. Jesus, Pickens is a shitty stand in for Jemma in this instance.

“I brought Opie with me for her, he’s in my jump seat,” Pickens says and Taylor sets off to get him.

Grant pulls Abby’s blanket up around her and settles her back into his chest kissing her on the top
of the head. He can smell mint and eucalyptus body wash. The fact that she doesn’t smell like his baby today makes him really, really angry. Not at Shield, exactly, but at the world. She should smell like the organic baby soap Jemma insists on buying and the lingering echo of Jemma’s perfume because she’s been safe in her mother’s arms.

“Please be still, Joy,” he pleads, trying to be patient with her.

She shakes her head and signs “No, thank you”. He can only laugh tiredly. Jemma has been working on manners with her. “Fair enough, baby.”

She wiggles again, and hits him with the edge of her blankie. It makes an odd clinking noise. Jemma had sewn a hidden compartment in it to hold an ID chip, and he reaches into the secret pocket. He is horrified when what he fishes out is Jemma’s wedding bands. The diamonds and sapphires glitter in his palm like a taunt.

“Damn…” Daisy whispers. There’s a look of having her hopes dashed on Daisy’s face, like she knows the presence of the ring is meant as a jab at him as well as making Jemma impossible to locate.

He shoves them in his jeans’ pocket. He’ll find her and he’ll put them back on her finger. He’ll make sure she’s safe.

Taylor returns with Abby’s octopus. When he hands it to her, she kisses it. “Your buddy is back! That’s good, huh?” The Shield agents are all glaring now, as if the toy had personally offended them. Which it probably had, but it wasn’t like he was going to buy his daughter an eagle.

“What makes you think Malick as her as opposed any of the other heads?”

“Because it turns out he wants something on that planet you almost stranded Jem on. Turns out it has some sort of creature on it, one the old Hydra families revere as a god. Legend has it, the Kree created him then couldn’t control him. They left him on Maveth once he’d levelled it.”

“And they took Jemma to do what? The portal collapsed. There’s nothing left,” Fitz points out.

Grant sighs. “Hydra has a second set of monolithic stones. Malick’s faction has been sending the creature “food” and trying to bring him to earth for centuries for some sort of world cleansing thing. Feels a little played out to me but whatever. Jem’s been there so…”

Grant sees the dawning horror in the eyes of his team and the Shield team alike.

“He wants to force her to retrieve the… the thing?” Daisy asks.

Grant shrugs. “I’ve been trying to find a way to destroy the stones without risking opening the portal since Jemma’s come back to me, but so far they’ve proven indestructible. All I could do was hide them and keep Malick away from my wife. But he must have found them.”

“Did he tell you he wanted to use Jemma?”

“Didn’t have too. I inferred. Look, Coulson, you don’t like me, I sure as f—frick…” May snorts back a rare laugh when he corrects his language. “Fact is, I don’t like you either but Jemma is terrified of that planet and that thing. I’m not letting her get sent back there. If that means I have work with you to get her back, fine.”

Bobbi pushes herself to sit up, wincing. “You put a secondary tracker on her? The rings were smart, by the way, I’ll give you that. Even after you stomped her heart, she left the first set on awhile, so I know that’s how you found us.”
“Abby was the secondary security. Tracker’s in her earrings. I didn’t think anyone would be this suicidally stupid, to separate my baby and wife.”

Hunter pushes off where he’s leaned on Bobbi’s bed. “Or it’s genius, depending on your viewpoint. Dividing your focus gives him more time to break Jemma down.”

-/-/-

Malick himself doesn’t really scare Jemma; he’s all bark and has others do his biting. The inhuman frightens her because she has no defense against what he does, but Cordon terrifies her because he’s so crazy and a sociopath. Grant won’t use him. He’s Malick’s henchman and his bloodlust is legendary in both Hydra and Shield. He once dissolved an enemy in sulfuric acid while they were still alive, or so the story goes.

Three nut jobs are holding her hostage and she has no idea where her baby is. Her beloved, sweetly innocent and utterly defenseless, Abby. Jemma is beyond screwed. Her only weapon is her silence on what they want, and she’ll hold it until they prove Abby is safe and alive.

“I’m never going to cooperate until I have proof of life concerning my daughter,” she hisses. “Otherwise, you may as well dig in for the long haul. I won’t give you anything. I am not the fragile flower I used to be, I’m a mother. I’m practically bulletproof.”

Cordon smacks her across the face. Her lip splits and blood fills her mouth. She spits it at him.

“Try harder, darling.” The fury in her eyes belies her dire state. “Now I’ll ask once more politely. Where is my child?” She lifts her chin defiantly at Malick. “Do you really want to test the woman Grant Ward considers his equal?”

Malick nods at the inhuman and pain jolts through her as her lungs compress from the inside, and she gasps but manages not to scream, though she knows it will be inevitable later. “You don’t have her do you? At my first volley, you’d have used her if you did.”

“That’s very presumptuous of you, Mrs. Ward.”

“It’s still the truth. It’s not Mrs. Ward, it’s Doctor Simmons-Ward. I’ve always been more than just his wife, and you’re going to see proof of that, despite what you throw at me. What you seem to have forgotten, however, is Grant is always my husband first. He’s going to find me, when he does it will not end well for you. So, your play. Where is Abby?”

“You are correct in that the girl is not here,” Malick concedes. “I sent her to Shield. I think that will distract your husband well enough, don’t you? Getting his heir back from his enemy will certainly take precedence over his wife, when new ones are so easy to acquire. You’ll be off planet by the time he even comes looking, or perhaps you’ll manage to hold out until he realizes he has no way to track you down. That all depends on your determination I suppose. But make no mistake. You will give me what I want.” He gives her a creepy little smile. He steps back and the inhuman and Cordon step forward.

Her stomach twists. But she raises her chin again, awaiting her fate.

-/-/-

Grant has taken many long flights over the course of his career, but none of them have felt as long as the one to get to Jemma. It had rankled, sharing information with Shield, but it was their combined intel that got them what he’s certain is Jemma’s location. Fitz had put the pieces together: Malick has a machine that can open the portal. Of course, the castle housing the engine is
Grant is letting other people pilot his plane, which is rare for him, but he needs to focus on Abby. Physically, she’s fine but emotionally she’s traumatized. She’s confused and terrified. She wants her mother. It doesn’t help that lately she’s been in a phase where she wants Jemma and only Jemma. He had been jealous at first, because he loved the way Abby lit up anytime he came into the room, but it soon wore away watching Jemma become the mother she longed to be. She was confident, gentle, patient, and genuinely crazy about Abby.

Grant was the protective one, and the fun one. Abby counted on Jemma for everyday life. Jemma was Abby’s safe haven. Abby is scared and wants Jemma and he doesn’t have her.

Abby’s tired but refusing to sleep. He’s bouncy walked at least five miles around the plane. She keeps rubbing her face on his chest, her cheek pressed to the soft cloth of his shirt, but won’t follow through and go down. Occasionally she picks her head up to make sure it’s still him holding her and he has to gently put her back to his shoulder.

“Taylor, keep an eye on the bunk door. I’m going to try laying down with her.”

He finds an empty room settles down on a bed with her laying her beside. He puts her closest to the wall so he can shield her if need be. “Alright, Joy Bug, we’re going to take a nap.” She blinks up at him with a long sigh. “You’re so sleepy, Abby, it’s not even funny.”

She picks up his hand, meaning she wants her back rubbed. Jemma called it her “pet me” command. He runs his hand down her back. “I’ve got you.”

His wedding band glints in the sunlight streaming through the cabin’s window. His chest seizes a little but he keeps up the soothing motion.

Exhaustion finally wins out and Abby crashes hard. He keeps his hand on her back. She’s half on him, half on the bed and she’s going to have a crick in her neck with the odd way her head is angled because she wanted to keep eyes on him. He doesn’t dare move her.

He lays there wide awake, head spinning and trying not to think about what’s happening Jemma. He knows it’s bad, and he can’t afford to think about how bad. Not when he has a rescue to make.

The torture starts off small, little burns here and there with a zippo lighter, shallow cuts that hurt like fuck but won’t kill her. Having needles driven beneath her nail beds hurts like hell but she’s had worse.

She shouldn’t taunt a man who delights in torturing people but she can’t stop herself. “That’s what you’re legendary for?”

The hit lands and rings more than a few of her bells. She can hear parts of her face crunch beneath his heavy fists. She wonders idly if this is how Grant’s workout bag feels. It crosses her mind that inanimate don’t have feelings and that she may lose her battle to wait it out sooner than she thinks if she isn’t careful. She has to hold out, until Grant comes for her or she succumbs to injury. She’d rather die than let whatever it is that lives on the Darkness planet into the world where it could hurt her friends, her family, her daughter. She shuts her eyes and braces for the next round of pain.
Fitz leans in the doorway. “She finally drop off? Little lass is beside herself, isn’t she?”

“She’s not the only one.”

“You know, I never faulted Jemma for loving you, not once. Everyone has their opinions about it, but you love who you love. And God knows I love her. I’ve wished she loved me instead before, and now more so than ever. She wouldn’t have Abby, but she wouldn’t have Hydra heads trying to kill her, either. If you love her half as much as she loves you, as much as you say you do, maybe you should consider a different career path.”

He tips his chin at Fitz. “Fair point, but Malick isn’t targeting her because of me. He wants her for the thing on Maveth.”

“And he would want her without you.”

“The only reason he let me in, was for my access to her, I think. I never thought I’d get her back at all and if it wasn’t for the team letting her getting stranded in the first place then shafting her the way they did, she’d never given me another chance. So thank you for that, but if this is on me, then it’s on you, too.”

Fitz sighs deeply but says nothing more.

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She has to grind a scream between her teeth and close her eyes to hold back the tears of pain as they slowly dislocate her joints at random. A shoulder, a knee, thumbs. The pain flows through her like wildfire, singeing her nerves.

She has to focus on something, anything else.

Even as the agony pulses through her she forces herself back in time.

She’s learned to read Grant, the real Grant, over time as his wife again. She knows something is wrong. She doesn’t have the faintest idea what it might be, but there have been rumblings of Malick trying to push him out the ranks. She’d overheard Yeagers and Sarona talking when they thought she was napping with Abby.

He’d left four days ago. The desperation in the last time they were together was unsettling in hindsight. When the sex was unusually intense but also more playful, as though he’s making an effort to keep things light so she won’t worry, she knows something is up.

She just knows, the same way she knows Abby will lose her balance trying to free stand for more than ten seconds and catches her baby before she falls.

Abby tips back into Jemma’s lap.

“That’s the way, my love,” Jemma says proudly. Abby tilts her head back and smiles up at her. “What? Huh? Did you fall?”

They both hear the beep click of the security door being bypassed at the same time. Jemma gasps in false surprise as she watches Abby light up. “Who could that be, Abs?”
As Grant turns the corner Abby shrieks and claps excitedly. She points to him.

“I see him, my love,” Jemma laughs. You’d think the guy had been gone three years instead of four days. Then again, her heart is speeding up too and she can’t keep the smile off her face.

“Hi ladies,” Grant greets them as he crosses the room and leans into kiss her and scoop up Abby. When his lips land of hers, the usually-pleasant tingle it causes is replaced by an explosion of pain.

Jemma is yanked back to the present. Her left leg is on fire and blood pours quite heavily from a wound on her thigh.

Malick holds up a still smoking gun. “I’m done letting Cordon play with Hive’s food, sweetheart. It’s time to feed the monster. Wrap that up,” he nods at the inhuman. “Can’t have her dying before we can give her to Him.”

“What will you tell Ward?” The inhuman wraps a filthy rag around her leg, pulling tight. Her throat is too raw for the noise she makes to be a scream.

“I won’t tell him anything. He’s an inconsequential player in the game now. Get her up.”

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When they land, he has to figure out how to extricate himself from his daughter’s anaconda-like grasp on him. No little girl should be this strong. He really doesn’t want to wake her but sees no other way around it since he has to move her. He lifts her off his chest but her hand stays firmly attached to his shirt.

“Please stay asleep. Please. Please don’t hulk out on me, Joy bug,” he whispers.

For a moment it seems his pleas will go answered as he gets her untangled from the cloth and back down to the bed. Unfortunately, she wakes up as he’s resettling her. “No, no, no.”

“What’s wrong?” Daisy asks, hovering near the door under Taylor’s glaring eye.

“She’s going to cry. Not a “you said no” whine, full on screaming the minute I leave her sight.”

Daisy nods, frowning as though she’s concentrating. “Bring her to where we’re gearing up. Barton’s nearly here, so he can keep her lines of communication covered. He and Hunter are staying here with Bobbi. She likes him as much as you hate him. He’ll be good to her. She might get mad, but Lance can deal with that when we head off.”

Grant still doesn’t move, reluctant to leave his daughter with the enemy. Daisy sighs.

“We’re the white hats, remember? We don’t hurt kids. Not even ones that belong to Hydra psychopaths.”

It’s a fair point, another of the ones he has to begrudgingly admit Shield keeps making. He doesn’t have to like it, but he knows Abby will be safe with Shield. It’s Jemma, now, who needs saving.

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Grant holds Abby until the last possible second.

“It’s going to be okay, Abby, I’m coming back. I’m gonna bring mama back, alright?” He kisses her on top of the head and breathes in her scent. The traces of the bath wash have faded and she
smells more like his baby again, and the missing floral waft of Jemma’s perfume is one he needs to rectify right away. He hands her to Hunter and dodges her reaches for him, even as it kills him a little bit inside.

“Her ASL is pretty good,” he looks Hunter in the eye. “She’s not potty-trained yet. We always speak as we sign so she picks up language. She sleeps with Opie and her blankie, she doesn’t like noise, orange juice gives her diaper rash, and she’s not a good sleeper. Laying down with her usually works for me, though if you can get Jemma’s gait down, that will put her down faster. She loves bananas, animal crackers, cheese, and oatmeal. She’s allergic to cats and blueberries.” He takes a deep breath, swallowing down the lump in his throat.

“And if Jemma and I—if this doesn’t go our way, give her to Sarona Tarelton or Jesse Pickens.”

Hunter nods, even as Daisy makes a strangled sound of surprise. Whatever she thinks of him, if there’s any chance she’s still alive, he’s not coming back without his wife. She has to be alive.

He kisses Abby one last time. “I love you, Joy Bug.”

The further he gets out of the plane, the louder her cries get. The sound follows him on to the jump jet, rattles him. He has to shake it off. For Abby and Jemma both.

-/-/-

If Abby’s screams of betrayal at his leaving had been soul shaking, Jemma’s of terror and pain echoing through the old stone castle are soul shattering. He can hear them breaking her. The castle is enormous and he hear her clear as a bell, raw sobs that tear at him even as they enrage him.

The blackness of his anger must show on his face because all color drains from Fitz’s.

“Which way is the portal?” Grant asks as they take up their old field positions like nothing has changed. Jemma was usually at his back, and her absence pains him more.

Daisy moves to lead the way, and it feels odd to have her back. They have to fight their way in. He barely realizes he’s killed three men and Fitz has shot one, too; one of the people Grant thought was one of his own.

The man is lucky he’s dead and so quickly; Grant would have made him feel Jemma’s pain ten times over.

They turn the final curve into the cavernous top floor room that holds the portal.

Jemma.

His eyes fall on her with relief. She’s alive. In obvious pain and danger, but she’s alive.

Cordon rushes him. Grant slits his throat in short order, the cut made easy with his rage at Malick for turning the sociopath on his wife. As much as he’d like to prolong the man’s death, Jemma’s rescue is the priority. He steps over the gurgling soon-to-be corpse, to advance on Malick, who has Jemma backed almost to the edge of the portal’s pit.

She’s got what looks to be a bleeding gunshot wound on one leg and they’ve beaten her so that once side of her face is deeply bruising already and her cheek is no doubt broken. One shoulder is out of place and he wouldn’t be surprised if other joints have been forcibly dislocated and there is blood crusted under broken nails.

When he advances on Malick, the team at his back, he means to sweep Jemma toward the safe side of the room before he takes out the Hydra head. There’s a factor he didn’t count on, however; Malick’s asshole inhuman is a telekinetic and knocks all three of them into the portal along with a decayed portion of wall.
They land with a thud on the other side, sand wafting up around them. Jemma lands atop him with a cry, and he does his best to keep her from feeling the impact. Malick rolls partway down an embankment of sand, managing to snag Grant’s ankle with an iron grip. The portal is shimmering as if it is about to close. He has no time to fight off Malick and get them back through. He forces Jemma onto her feet and flings her forward with all his strength to stumbles back through the portal.

It snaps soundly shut.

It really is dark as death on this planet, he thinks as he swears aloud. But Jemma isn’t stuck back here. She won’t face the darkness and despair again. That’s all that matters.
The Fragility of Peace

I own nada, Thanks Myranda for the edit. Happy Thanksgiving readers. If you like it tell me.

Surfacing from the portal is like coming up for air from the ocean floor: terrifying and heady. It's also goddamned painful, but that's just her injuries screaming at her. It hadn't hurt the first time, at least not like this. She lands on the stone floor like a half dead fish, flopping uselessly to try to get to her feet when Grant doesn't land beside her, pushing the pain aside.
"Grant!"

The portal snaps shut and her heart seizes in her chest.

All of the pain she'd shut out descends on her. The last thing she sees is Pickens filling her blurry vision.
"Ma'am…"

"Abby?" She thinks she manages to verbalize the question but can't be sure as her vision goes from blurry to blackness.

When she wakes again, she feels fuzzy and overmedicated, yet everything still hurts. She tries to sit up. Then Daisy is looming over her, pushing her back down into the mattress.

"Easy, Jem Jam."

"Where's Abby? Tell me..." Her throat is raw from screaming.

"She's okay, I promise. I'll get her, just stay put."

Daisy slips out and Bobbi comes in. Jemma searches for something to say to the person who was once a close friend. She finds nothing. Bobbi is unable to find anything either, it seems, as the silence stretches out and they look anywhere but at each other.

In agonizing minutes, Daisy returns with Abby. Daisy brings her over and sits her very gently in Jemma's lap."Be careful, okay, Abby? She's got some owies."

Jemma can't speak for the relieved tears clogging her throat and eyes. She cups Abby's face in face in her hands and kisses her forehead and cheeks, inhales her scent and holds her close.

Jemma sees the moment Abby realizes the bruised and battered woman holding her is her mother. Abby's chin wobbles and tears fill her eyes dripping down her fat little cheeks.
"Muh-Muh Hi! Muh Muh…."

Jemma's heart clenches with love and relief. "Hi Darling! Don't cry my love, it's alright! It's fine."

Abby puckers up kissing Jemma on the bottom lip. It stings where it lands on the split flesh but Jemma doesn't care. Jemma hugs Abby to her. Abby sniffles and Jemma begins out and out crying, having given up any hope of sucking it up. Daisy wipes her eyes and Bobbi turns away to compose herself.

"Da?" Abby asks, the question is muffled by Jemma's hospital gown.

"Is at work, He'll be back soon, okay?" Abby nods and cuddles back down on Jemma chest.
Jemma fades in and out of conscious with the help of the medications they have her on to deal with the pain and keep her from infection. She's knows there's something important she's forgetting in between bouts of wakefulness but coherent thought is starting to slip through her mind like water through fingers. Abby's weight on her chest is such a calm comfort that nothing seems to matter. She has Abby. Her daughter is safe. Jemma curls the arm not currently ruined around Abby protectively. She threads her fingers up through Abby's fine yet curly hair. Her sleep is the dreamless kind.

A shrill scream splits the air some hours later. Jemma reaches with her good hand and snaps up a scalpel from a nearby tray, whipping it into the hand of whoever is trying to take Abby from her again. It's Fitz.

"Stop," Jemma commands. The scalpel edge is pressed to fragile soft skin of someone's wrist.

"Jem, she's getting restless," comes Fitz's voice. "I was just going to put her in the next room before she tears out your I.V. tubing." Jemma begrudging releases the scalpel and lays it on her bedside table.

"No. She's fine." Jemma insists. "I need her with me, Leo." She pets a hand down Abby's face. "My love… It's fine." Abby starts signing. Jemma would smile at what she's saying but her whole face hurts.

"What's she saying?" Only Leo isn't asking her. Clint Barton is here. That's interesting. A quick, conspiratorial smile in Jemma's direction gives her a clue as to why they might have brought him.

"She says, 'I stay, science monkey'" Barton answers. Fitz looks mildly offended and mutters unkindly about Grant under his breath.

"Not the first time I've been called in as translator, but the first time for a kid. She's a proficient little thing, especially considering the communicative challenges she faces."

"Thank you," Jemma tucks Abby a little closer, wary in the midst of her old team. "I do speech and play therapy. Grant takes Physical because I have a harder time seeing her struggle. Though I do suppose Grant taught her some signs himself." She smiles crookedly. "I've never called Fitz a science monkey."

Barton smirks at Fitz, who still looks put out. "Do know where Grant is?" Jemma distractedly untangles Abby's fingers from her monitoring telemetry. "She can go with him."

Fitz shuffles his weight around and swallows uncomfortably.

"What, Fitz?"

"He's gone, Jem," he says gently. "He's on Maveth. He couldn't manage to get back across with you before it closed, remember?"

"You're lying."

"You know I'd never purposely hurt you like that."

Tears well in Jemma's eyes but she says nothing. Instead, she turns to curl back around Abby, ignoring all attempts to engage her until she's drifting back under the next wave of drugs.

The remains of SHIELD and Hydra in one room without killing one another is improbable, and yet
Daisy finds herself in the midst of that very situation. There are glares being traded on either side of the room, but they have declared a temporary cease fire until Jemma recovers. Everyone is on edge and untrusting but needs must, as they say.

"How long 'til the Doc is better and those holes in her memory shore themselves up?" the guy who looks like Ted Bundy had a baby with a Ken Doll asks. "Because I know I've told her three times where he's at and I've heard Taylor tell her twice. Let's face it, it's like kicking a puppy and none of us like doing it."

"Amnesia is common in someone exposed to prolonged anesthetic. It should fade in a day or two," Bobbi says.

"Unless she's trying to protect herself from emotional trauma. God knows the girl has had enough mental anguish for five life times," Daisy points out.

"Boss symbolizes security for her… always has," Taylor adds begrudgingly, as though he can't believe he's agreeing with a S.H.I.E.L.D agent. "It's not a stretch to think her mind refuses to even fathom a world where she doesn't have him." He flicks his long dark hair out of his face irritably, then he and Pickens share a look. "I'll call Ellison in, you get a line on Tarleton's condition. We're going to need her."

"Who's Tarleton?" Coulson asks.

"She's Jemma's personal body guard and best friend." Bobbi and Fitz both flinch at someone else being referred to as Jemma's best friend. "When she does figure out what happened to Director Ward?" Taylor continues. "The only person who has any chance of keeping Jemma in her sick bed and not going after him is Sarona."

Daisy, who seems to have adjusted better than the rest to the reluctant truce, raises her eyebrows at Taylor. "What are the odds that chance gets even smaller once she can stand of her own power?" Taylor just sighs.

Jemma sings made up songs, plays patty cake. She watches the "Dad Pad" they use to distract Abby when Grant is away on missions over and over. It doesn't do much good. Abby's still antsy. The team, whatever their thoughts on her new allegiances, does their best to help out. Daisy plays hide and seek with Abby around the med bay, and Lance lets her wrap him in ace bandages. Bobbi does peg board puzzles with her with uncharacteristic patience. May even hangs out and surprisingly takes her coloring as seriously as Abby does.

Bobbi brings them both dinner. Jemma has something resembling oatmeal while Abby has chicken strips, mashed potatoes and corn she throws at Coulson when she grows bored.

"She likes corn, wait for mashed peas night!" Jemma says watching as he picks kernels from his jacket pocket. She watches as Bobbi sets Abby on her feet after dinner, and tears up again when Abby not only stays on her feet but turns and walks toward Pickens' voice outside the door.

Jemma's breath catches. "We missed the first ones didn't we? She's so sure footed." Jemma smiles. "I'm prouder of her right now than I am any project I've ever taken on."

Abby toddles through the door to latch onto Pickens' pant leg. She watches as he picks her up.

"I'm sure Daisy will find the security footage of her first steps for you," Coulson says kindly, as though her child hadn't just thrown her dinner at him. Daisy nods vigorously and pulls out her tablet, likely to
start the scan right away.

Jemma swipes away a tear. "Thank you. And are you going to help me find Grant or need I do that for myself?"

Bobbi scoffs and Coulson scowls.

"You're in no shape to go looking for anyone," Daisy cuts in before anyone can make any declarations they can't take back. "Right now, you need to focus on healing. And I need to get this one into the bath."

Daisy isn't sure what she's expecting when she brings Abby back from her bath – a task she's pleased she's trusted with even over Jemma's new sidekicks - to give her to Jemma for whatever bedtime rituals they have. It's not for the icy silence that has existed between Jemma and Bobbi to have turned into screaming match only rivaled by their last one.

"What happened?" She asked the guard who hasn't left Jemma's side his arrival on base. Taylor, Daisy thinks might be his name.

"Honestly? I'm not sure. The blonde mentioned the director in a tone and there was some sniping, but then conversation turned to my little miss and it suddenly got loud."

"Shit!" she mutters, barreling in.

"Does who I screw really bloody matter that much to you? I was punished for it, for god's sake! You knew, you knew! My friend and my doctor and you said nothing for months on end, Bobbi. I know you did you can read a fucking lab report! You knew she had Down syndrome. And you said nothing! Let me sit in fear and stress and you didn't say a word." Jemma shrieks hands clinched like claws on the bed sheets.

"I was following orders," Bobbi retorts equally loudly.

"You wanted me to pay! And so I did." Angry tears glisten in Jemma's eyes.

"I didn't..." Bobbi whispers.

"Bullocks! You hate Grant and secretly you think I got what I deserved, being afraid to trust in anything, even my own shadow."

"You're right, I do hate him, but I wouldn't do that to you. Garner was your SHIELD-appointed shrink. He was your doctor too and he told us you were too fragile to handle the truth," Bobbi looks unflinchingly at Jemma.

Abby cuddles into Daisy's chest, covering her ears. "Could you guys cool it? You're scaring the peanut and she's had a tough few days."

Jemma looks to Abby both guiltily and wounded.

"She's telling the truth," Daisy says gently as she sets Abby in Jemma's arms. "We weren't... We didn't... Garner either edited or falsified his reports to make you seem unstable."

Jemma recoils in shock.

"I know you didn't deserve what was done to you," Bobbi admits. "But we honestly thought we were doing right by you, based on the information we'd been given. We didn't know he had his own agenda."

Daisy reaches a hand as if to squeeze Jemma's, but pulls back as though she isn't sure her comfort
would be accepted. "Garner is Inhuman. Only he exterminates other Inhumans. We' pieced a few
things together since you… left… and we think he believed Abby was the product of something on
the planet where you were stranded. That whatever presence you talked about hunting you made
her."

Jemma's mouth is open in stunned shock. Daisy stops hesitating and pats Jemma's good hand. "And
we know he sent you those hateful things. I found them. After. If we'd known, I swear…" Daisy
feels an ache akin to loss when she thinks back to going to get Jemma for a surprise baby shower
only to find her gone. In scouring Jemma's quarters for any sign of her friend, instead found the
evidence of hate that had clearly been shoved under her door. "I know you were scared and
devastated and turned to Grant. And he helped you," Daisy says more to Bobbi. "He was what you
needed and none of us can deny that. But I promise, Bobbi wasn't trying to hurt you."

"Okay," Jemma allows, curling in as though to defend herself. After a moment, she seems to gather
herself, and Daisy is pleased to see a note of her old strength, even under the bruises from the
torture Jemma has only recently. "I'm sorry he shot you," she says finally, extending the olive
branch.

Bobbi shrugs. "He left me alive, so maybe you've changed him a little too. Though he did shoot
Rosalind Price, so…"

"Ah, that's how he got those bruises then," Jemma doesn't seem fazed by the woman's death. She
get a a challenging look in her eyes instead. "And was she a good person?"

"She held Inhumans captive in tiny boxes. So no, not in my book." Daisy says pointedly. Bobbi
signs.

Jemma nods. "I know you won't like this, but I have to know when to pick my battles with Grant.
Garret broke him, twisted him and that can't just be undone. But he has a code. He believed
Coulson needed to pay for seeing me as expendable. But he did do his best, for me. I needed to
know he'd left you all alive and you are. And maybe we've all changed. The world isn't just black
and white." She pauses, petting Abby's wet hair down. "Pickens?!!"

"Yes, ma'am." He leans into the door way.

"Make sure the base is secure. We need to make there's a home to go back to before the Hydra
vultures dig their claws in. Get me and update on Sarona. And did you find Malick's mole?"
Pickens looks reluctant, but doesn't hesitate. "Zara Metapali. Abby's…"

"Speech therapist," Jemma finishes, a cold look coming over her face. "Don't kill her, leave her to
me," Jemma says.

"Yes , ma'am."

"We're going after Grant as soon as I can stand."

"Understood."

Everyone stares at her. "Needs must," Jemma says simply. "I've had to become … harder." The
look dissolves into fondness again as she pats Abby's bottom. "Daisy fixed you up, huh? I like your
feetie pjs, Abs."

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Jesse is guarding Jemma and Abby when the door scrapes open and Tarleton limps in. "What the
hell are you doing here?"
Her face is nearly unrecognizable under mottled bruises, but Tarleton won't be stopped. "She's my charge, and more than that, Jesse, she's my friend."

"Did Yeagers at least fly the jump jet for you?"

"Yeah, right," she scoffs. "I have some slight internal bruising, some busted up ribs and a concussion from being thrown into a wall. I'll live. And longer if I don't let Yeagers take the wheel."

"Boss is gone…sucked into the damn portal."

"You think he's alive?"

"Don't know. I hope so, for them. Because she's already said she's going after him and she's in worse shape than you are."

"He'll survive until she can get to him. You know he's too goddamn stubborn to die. He'll hate it for Abby's sake but he knows Jem's coming back for him."

He nods. "Go in. It'll help her to see you. Maybe she'll lay Abby in the playpen for you. I can't get her to let her get more than five feet away except at bath time."

Sarona nods back. "She fought like hell for her. And it's that fight that is going to get the Boss back. I'd hate to be whoever or whatever tries to stand in her way."
It's the darkest night Grant has ever seen, and he's seen pretty desolate ones in his time. He can't even see his hand in front of his eyes. That's why the punch that lands across his face knocks him off his feet.
It doesn't hurt and only serves to piss him the fuck off, and he was already livid beyond all comprehension.
He's going to kill Malick and he's going to enjoy it.
Once he pinpoints Malick's location using his other sense, he downs the other man and snaps his neck in short order. Grant had wanted to make the decrepit old bastard suffer, but survival demands his death be quicker.
Grant doesn't know where the supposed alien inhabitant of the planet is or how it works; Jemma had talked of a dark presence but had never laid eyes on the god Malick seemed to believe was waiting here. It doesn't matter; he can't waste time. He searches Malick's pockets and finds night vision goggles and a gun in an ankle holster. He takes both and leaves Malick to the vultures, if this planet even has them.
He has to push Jemma and Abby into the back of his mind in order to keep going. He's done it before and he'll likely do it again, but this time is by far the hardest to do because of the condition he left them both in.
He also knows Jemma will want to go after him. He's not really sure she should or if he wants her to, given the way things were left. Hydra will come after his in a power grab. He just hopes she'll stay with SHIELD, though he never thought he'd ever say that.

When Jemma wakes up, her head is finally clear. Abby lies in the pack-and-play next to her. She wonders who had the skill and guts to remove her from Jemma's side until she looks to her left. Sarona is sprawled across a chair, battered and bruised but sleeping soundly. All the fear she's held at bay about the condition of her friend over the past few days comes crashing down around her. Tears crowd her eyes and clog up her throat. Her breath hitches from trying to hold everything in.
At the sound Tarleton is on her feet and moving toward the bed. It takes her a little longer than usual but it's still fast by any standard. "You alright Doc? Any pain?" she begins, pushing the call button on Jemma's bed. "I'm going to get the blonde chick in here to help you."
"I'm fine. Are you okay?"
She smiles. "I've gotten worse injuries filing my nails."
"Sarona," Jemma says dryly. What is it with specialist minimizing their injuries?
Tarleton pauses in moving for the call button. Her tone is soft but dead serious. "Jemma, I know what I signed up for when I took your detail. I was always prepared to put my life before yoursm and I always will be."
"Why?"
"You earned my loyalty." She smiles sardonically, like she's is surprised it even needed to be said.
She picks lint off Jemma's blanket. "Boss' faction is fledging at best. We're all here because we wanna be. And we're not going anywhere."

Fitz builds her a leg cast using her own stem cells and nanites to speed up the healing process, and likely before she should, she is standing very carefully at the foot of Abby's porta crib, watching her play with her stacking blocks.
"Whatcha doing, Jem?" Daisy asks as she walks in. "Should you be standing?" Daisy asks, stooping to ruffle Abby's hair.
"I'm observing…and likely not, but I need to get to Grant and that means cutting corners."
Daisy flinches, but Jemma pretends not to notice. "Grant and I, we have this playful little tiff sometimes. He'll look at her and say, 'I made that and it's awesome.'". Jemma smiles at the
memory. "And I can't let his conceit stand, so I'll say that, technically speaking, in a literal sense, I made her and I've the stretch marks as proof. And it spins out from there and we eventually call it a draw and simply agree that she is in fact quite awe-inspiring. I need that stupid argument in my life and he's the only one I can have it with."

"Jemma..."

She sighs, turning stiffly toward her friend. "Daisy, I know you all hate him, I understand. If I'm honest, I hated him once, too. Maybe not as much as all of you, but I did. He's changed, though, and no one was more surprised by that than me. He's a good father, Daisy, and he makes me a better mother because without him, I've no balance." Her eyes well up and her voice hitches, but she carries on. "I'm too in my head about it. I go in circles without him. I know none of you want to help me bring him back, that's your right, but I'm going to ask you to open the portal anyway." She smiles as she watches Abby knock down her tower with a shriek of glee. "For her."

"Everyone could see he was obsessed with her, was it the good kind of obsessed or..." Daisy trails off, and Jemma can tell she doesn't want to bring something unhealthy back into Abby's life, she doesn't want someone like Cal for Jemma's daughter. As much as Daisy surely loves Cal, no one needs that kind of crazy.

"She's the only thing he's ever loved entirely without agenda."

"She wants me to open the portal," Daisy tells Coulson. She watches Abby bang his Captain America shield on the concrete floor repeatedly. The little girl just giggles when he admonishes her. Abby follows him around the base, clearly rattled by not being able to charm him as quick as the others. Coulson scowls at Abby but doesn't stop her this time.

"Can you stall her?"

"Not bloody likely, sir. She's already in there trying to walk." Fitz picks Abby up and trades her the shield for the pen in his pocket with an LED light-up tip. She kisses his cheek in thanks, signing "I love you."

"I love you, too. You're a great deal easier to impress than your mother."

Bobbi doesn't say anything, instead stands there looking torn.

"I say we leave the motherfucker there," Lance speaks up from near the door. "Hunter, little ears," May chastises, giving Abby a little smile.

"I hate to be the one to sing Ward's praises here, but maybe Jemma's right and he has changed. I mean the old Ward wouldn't have sacrificed himself in pursuit of anyone else's safety. Before, he would have viewed Jemma and Abby as property not people. He could have sent Abby back to whatever skeleton crew is left at his base but he didn't. He handed her to a man who had tried to kill him multiple times and went back for Jemma when he didn't even know her condition. It's not a complete turnaround by Jem's own admission, but it's a start," Daisy puts in.

"Please don't make me explain to my daughter why Daddy didn't come home," Jemma says quietly. No one had heard her approaching in the wheelchair. "She won't understand, not because she has Down syndrome but because she is a baby. With time? She may forget him, she may not. She still remembers the stay cat I used to feed. It got eaten by a coyote about a year ago." She takes a shaky breath. "And I don't want forgetting him to be an option. I'm willing to die trying to get him back if need be. I'm willingly to go back to the place that ripped me to shreds for him. I know what that hell does to person. I know what it will do to someone like Grant, someone who knows he's more bad than good. The longer he's there the longer it has use his demons to own him."

"I know none of you care really, but that thing almost convinced me to commit suicide? Ut will turn Grant into a hulled-out shell. I cannot stand by and allow that. I have to try to save him, and I might have a better chance if you'll assist me. I know it's asking a lot. But please. Help me get my husband back."

"I'm in," Morse says and everyone turns to stare at her. "Me not backing you helped to get us here. Even if I can't fix that, I can do this."

"I'm in, too even if opening that thing hurts like fucking hell, Daisy says. Jemma winces with clear guilt, and Daisy rushes to assuage it. "Besides, I like the niblet and she needs him."
If the others are more reluctant to fall into suit, it is a start. She has help. Jemma blinks back tears. She knows she has no time to cry when there's work to do.

It takes Jemma a couple weeks to get back up to fighting form – or at least some proximity to it in her state – and, in the mean time she falls back into the rhythm of the base. She fiddles in the lab with Fitz some in between physical therapy sessions and work outs with Tarleton. Abby, of course, trucks herself in and out of the lab as though she owns it. Fitz soon tires of shuffling her in and out of the lab and builds her a tiny containment pod that sits between their stations.

Melinda likes children, but they bring up too many demons so she typically avoids Abby. Then Abby wakes early one morning and is crying hard, and while Melinda knows where Jemma is, she also knows all of the things Jemma is trying to work out in her head. So she steels herself and goes to retrieve Abby. After a quick diaper change and an even quicker good morning cuddle, she carries Abby out to where she keeps her yoga mat to continue her tai chi routine. May finishes the set of movements and repeats it. With each sequence, Abby becomes more interested she watches with a careful intensity she could have inherited from either parent. After the third round, Abby stands and begins trying to mimic the action she sees performed. It's amusing and undeniably cute. Melinda catches herself smiling and taking her time even more with each movement to account for Abby. Once finished she scoops Abby up and sets off to vault D.

Melinda finds Jemma staring at the security feed of Ward's traitor in Vault D. "Decided how best to kill her yet?" She looks up at the sound of May's voice.
"Decapitation, I think. It's effective and to the point whilst making a point of what I'll do to traitors."
May hitches Abby higher on her hip. "That isn't you, Jemma."
"Yes, it very much is. Did you know I tried to disintegrate my own husband? In the end, I'm glad it didn't work because I didn't truly want him dead. I just wanted him to feel as betrayed as I did. But her? Her I want dead. She used my child, May, she used her disability, and she'll die for it."
"It won't give back what you've lost."
"I don't care. I can't risk anyone daring to try it again."
"And Andrew?"
"I'll make sure Garner is returned to you as unharmed as we can manage, because I care for you. And because I trust that you'll keep him from ever trying to hurt my daughter again."
Grant is only alive and moderately sane at this moment because of Jemma. He'd wandered in the dark for days, trying to find the little underground cave Jemma had mentioned finding by accident. The only light he ever sees is the muted and closed-off core of the planet. He scavenges, runs from the Thing. He survives, if only by the skin off his teeth. The Thing doesn't use apparitions of the girls to terrify him. He doesn't need them, Grant himself having provided it with a host.

Malick.

Jemma had wondered why it had never been corporeal. He knows the answer. The thing has a flare for dramatics though. It causes a sandstorm to announce its presence. Every. Single. Time. It doesn't try to kill him, though. It simply seems to be waiting him out. Perhaps It's waiting for Grant to die naturally. He can't be sure. Malick was old as shit, though, so that's gotta be annoying It. It's not trying break him, it's like It's waiting for the solitude and barren world surrounding him to do the hard work for It.

Grant pulls Jemma's rings and one of Abby's first socks from his pocket. He always carries Abby's sock as talisman. He keeps it on him as reminder of all he has and stands to lose. It's tiny, lacy, and decidedly girlish. He'd bought the pair in the gift shop because somehow baby socks never found their way into the go bag for the hospital. The fabric obviously no longer smells like Abby, but he keeps it anyway because it's hers and no one can use it to trace her back to his family to use against
him.
He no longer has any concept of time but he contents himself with what his daughter may be doing in this moment. Sleeping. Pouting until Jemma caves into her demands. Playing Opie or following Pickens around like a love-struck and disarmingly-cute duck. Just thinking of her face causes happiness to well up in him even now as he's starving, dirty, tired, and really fucking angry.

Jemma's rings taunt him as much as they help him. They'd never actually renewed their vows as planned. Life had happened and things were pushed back until the things he promised when he'd given her the rings stood as promise enough.
He regrets that now. He wished he'd given her something more to hang on to. He wishes he had more to hang on to. He wishes he wasn't here watching Jemma's usually sparkling rings become muted and dirty in this barely-there glow of the planet's only source of light.

Jemma sits rocking Abby to sleep and begins to drift off herself. Then she hears something in the room shift. When she opens her eyes, she finds Fitz in the doorway. "I made her something, since she has such a hard time sleeping. It's a projector, similar to the holotable. For now, it'll put the milky way on the ceiling but eventually I can put a holographic version of you beside the bed."

"Oh Fitz, that's a lovely idea. Thank you. It will come in handy as well if I don't return from Maveth."
"Jemma, you're going to come back."
"I might not, and I'm not sure leaving her is the right course of action but..."
"You're not sure you can face your child later on if you don't go after him. You can't desert him and you don't want go back to a life without him."
"When did life get so complicated, Fitz?"
He smiles at her. "When you got the bright idea we should go into field work and your husband thought Hydra made for a good life choice."
"Touché...take of her for me? She's a handful."
"Gladly."

It's longer than she would have wished, but as soon as they could manage it. Today, they go after Grant. They've tried to time it out so they land in same spot she did. It's the hardest math she's done in her life, trying to figure out interplanetary time differences and constellation patterns, but the portal is controlled by Maveth's portion of the galaxy and gravity ratios. She really hopes she hasn't cocked this up, but there is no way of knowing until they try.
"I'm really beginning to hate this castle."
That makes two of us, do,." Tarleton agrees as they lag behind a little. She's up and moving, too, but not exactly quickly. "Where's your head at? You ready to head back there?"
"Actually, I'm wishing I didn't love him quite so much. This is the one time hating him might help. I'm possibly abandoning my baby and heading to a planet that is intent on murdering anyone who inhabits it via starvation or madness... But I don't hate him anymore, maybe I never did. I really, really love him. So here we go."
"Point taken."
"He's going to kill me for even attempting this."
"He's totally going to lose his mind, but at least he'll have one left to lose if we succeed."

"I can't stay behind. Boss will kill me if I let his wife jump through a transmuted whatever the fuck that thing is without me," Pickens says.
"Well I'm not staying here either, where Jemma goes I follow." Tarleton adds in.
"I'll stay behind with the little miss," Taylor says.
Sarona scowls. "You don't even like babies, you're going to raise one?"
"I like Abby, I'd raise Abby up. Anyway, you're all coming back with the boss, so it's moot."

Jemma isn't sure how to do this. She'd considered leaving while Abby was asleep but that seemed cruel, given all the things her daughter had gone through recently. She takes Abby from Fitz and carries her over to the lifeless pit of Maveth stone and decides to be honest while putting it in terms a two-year-old might understand. "Okay Abs, you see that hole? Daddy fell down it and-

"Boom?" the baby asks.

"Yes, he fell and very likely went boom."

Abby nods approvingly, as she does when Jemma reads her a story.

"So I am going to go in the hole to find him and bring him home from work. Alright? So Mommy will bounce like Tigger into the hole, but I'll be back with Daddy." Fitz sniggers behind her. "So it's not my most scientific explanation. Bite me."

Until everything is a go, she holds Abby close, carding her fingers through Abby's dark curls. "It will all be fine," she says in low reassurance to herself as much as Abby.

When she gets the signal, Jemma presses kisses to Abby's temple and cheeks so many times the toddler begins to wriggle to free from her mother's affections. Jemma presses one last kiss to her forehead.

"I love you."

She hands Abby over without another word because if she turns back, she'll stay, and Grant needs her. She's not used to being the one who's needed. Grant loves her to be sure, and he's always wanted her but he's rarely needed her. Abby is the one thing that she needed more than Grant. Her daughter begins to whimper and Jemma so badly wants to turn around.

"I've got you, monkey. It will be just fine, honey," Fitz soothes her and the wrench on Jemma's heart decreases fractionally. "I'll bring you back, Jemma. Like I did before," he says. She nods as Morse and Tarleton step up beside her. They each take one of her hands. Bobbi squeezes tightly. Daisy begins trying to quake the rock in fits and starts. She stops and wipes her brow, then starts again. "It's like moving bedrock this time."

She continues and it warbles but doesn't open. She is bleeding from her nose and eyes before long. "Stop," Jemma says and feels something inside her die. Likely all the hope she'd rebuilt. "Stop. We'll find another way."

"I opened it once, I can do it again." Daisy raises her hands as though to try again. Jemma steps away from the rock and shakes her head, tears falling. "No, no. Something must have been miscalculated. You can't… I won't let you kill yourself for something that won't work. I've failed. I'm sorry, Abby. I'm sorry Grant."

She collapses in on herself then, numb.

"There has to be some reason for the dissonance," Fitz steps closer to her, still protectively clutching Abby. "Solar flares or some change in the planet you couldn't have accounted for. We'll figure it out."

His face is determined, and a tiny flare of hope lights in her heart. Jemma nods. She'll trust that Fitz is right, that there's a chance left, that she can still get her husband back from the place that nearly killed her.

AN: I OWN NOTHING MANY THANKS TO MY LOVELY BETA AS ALWAYS, DON'T HATE ME FOR THE CLIFF HANGER! IF YOU LIKED IT LET ME KNOW!
Jemma hasn't eaten, hasn't slept, or even seen Abby for more than a few minutes at a time, in days. She hasn't found the answer she's looking for either. Fitz had fallen back into working with her easy enough. In their time together he's learned to spot burnout. It's bearing down on her like a freight train. Her eyes are bloodshot and her hands tremble every so often. She keeps chewing her bottom lip when she's not chattering, mostly to herself, more frequently than before. Fitz doesn't fear the burnout. He fears the tears that will when she hits the proverbial wall. Tears were Ward's territory. He'd bullied them into normal things like eating, sleeping, and using the loo. But he also wiped the tears, kept Jemma from the worst of the edges. She'd held herself in check by sheer tenacity when they were apart, before the planet and everything that had changed, but Fitz doesn't know that she can tough it out much longer. The break is coming. It's just a matter of how soon.

Jemma feels like she's going to die, which is insane because logically she knows it's not happening in reality and yet…

The very last theory she has meets its bitter conclusion and she can't breathe. It's like the Hulk himself is sitting on her chest. Her vision grey's out and the world sways on its axis. Her heart is racing until she thinks it will burst in her chest from the strain. "There's no answer, Fitz!" She hear the panic in her voice. "I can't find it, I can't and he's going to die there!"

She's sobbing, now, ugly wounded sounds tearing from her throat. "I always find a way and I can't."

Fitz just stares in utter terror. She has melted down before but never this badly. "I can't breathe, Leo, I can't think…” Her hands claw at her chest, at her throat, but there's nothing there but her own panic.

At first she can hear Fitz speaking, though it is as if from far away. Vaguely, she hears Sarona try to track her through her breathing exercises but the numbness is starting to creep in. Next comes Daisy and Pickens, faces hovering over hers. Jemma tries to speak but she perhaps she doesn't make any sense as they only become more alarmed.

It's only when Bobbi pushes them away that manages to eke out a single world. "Help."

The kind understanding in Bobbi's eyes is a small comfort. There is a sharp stick in her arm and the world just stops.

Phil has never met anyone with more drive than Jemma Simmons. Ward, he tacks on mentally, remembering she's gone back to using that name. He's never met anyone smarter, more hopeful, or determined than she is - and he knows gods, a gamma irradiated genius, and biologically-enhanced solider.

"She won't be able to accept defeat. She won't move on keep going, not this time," Dr. Elisson says, coming to stand beside him at the foot of the bed.

"What makes you so sure?"

"I treat her. I know exactly what Grant means to her: how loving him, trusting him, and the faith he has in her has informed their relationship and, to large extent, has transformed her life." She crosses her arms. "She'll run herself into the ground to save him. Because he saved her." She keeps her eyes on Jemma.

He nods. "Anything else we can do to help her?"

"If you can't save him at all? Send her my way and keep Abby close by. She calms Jemma. Will give her purpose, something to live for."

There is one thing he can do. It's radical and might fail, but it's better than nothing. Even if it'll be a
damned hard sell.

When Jemma surfaces, it's slow and gentle as if she'd been given Propofol, but the headache taking root is from the night-night formula.

Oh god, she thinks as what got her here races back. He's gone. And it's her fault.

Coulson sits in an armchair holding Abby, reading a comic book in low tones. Abby holds the end of his tie in her fist as if she's prepared to force him to finish the story and not hurry away from her as he usually does.

"She finally broke you, huh?"
"Well I do like her. I just thought it best not to get too attached."
"And now you can because there's no Grant."

He makes a face that tells her that's mostly the truth.
"About that. I have a last ditch option."

"I don't see why they didn't just come to Avengers tower," Tony Stark says as they walk through the heart of the playground.

"Because a whole spy organization isn't going to stop and bow to your every whim, Stark," Steve Rogers retorts.

"It's a decent base," Romanov retorts as they're shown to a conference room.

"I'm Daisy Johnson, someone will be in shortly to download you on the mission. We're still waiting on Thor. And I can't believe I just said that." A baby shrieks happily somewhere in the distance.

"And I have to find my friend's kid before she makes off with every pen in Fitz's lab again."

After Thor arrives with a huge clash of thunder, Coulson picks up Abby and prepares to enter the room.

"This is manipulative."

"It completely is, but it will also work. Barton will do it, as he already likes Abby. Nat will do it because, as an orphan, she won't let Abby start on that track. Rogers just likes babies, but maybe we leave out who her father is. Banner is going to be dazzled by the whole other planet thing, Stark likes anything that makes him look good. Thor just likes you," May says.

"It's gonna work, DC, everyone loves babies," Daisy adds.

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When he walks in with Abby on his hip, he watches their collective expressions. Shock, distrust and disbelief. Barton's reaction had been similar when he'd first found out, but he'd been almost utilitarian about it since then.

He can tell Steve will not be. The Captain's whole body reads angry.

Abby is oblivious to the tension in the room and greets everyone with an eager "Hi" and waving almost manically in excitement.

"I'm not a hologram or a droid, nor am I a ghost or anything crazy like that. And I did in fact die, but Fury revived me – resurrected, really since it was days later - and swore me to secrecy. He tasked me with a new team, and here we are." Coulson is nothing if expedient.

"Why lie? Why not just say that to us?" Banner asked from where he's grumpily lounged beside Romanov.

"Technically, I didn't lie. This is the first we've been in contact, and after my rebirth, as it were? My death unified you all as a team. Fury feared undoing that. Eventually not telling you was just… easier. Safer." He sits Abby down on the conference table and she crawls straight for the phone in the middle of the table.

"Why are we here, then, and who's that?" Stark asked watching Abby press random numbers. She jabbers into the phone.

"Engineering," Fitz's voice fills the room.

She chatters into the receiver, and Fitz sighs audibly.

"Abby, hang up."

"No…," she whispers, which gets a smirk out of Barton
"Eleanor Abigail, I will tell your mother."

Barton gently pries the phone from Abby's hand to hang it up. He signs something and it's enough that Abby looks miffed but doesn't touch the phone again.

"What happened? When I left you assured me that Jemma was safe and that Abby would be left in good hands."

The Avengers heads whip around in concert as they turn to look to Barton, who shrugs. "My ex-wife called and asked for help. I was sworn to secrecy. Helping a little girl communicate was more important than, well, being petty over our team."

Romanov has been staring at Abby for the last ten minutes in a way that worries Coulson.

"Something wrong?" he ventures to ask her. Might as well get it out.

"That's Jemma Ward's baby. And if Jemma is here with her kid, in Shield or whatever is left of its hands, Grant Ward isn't far behind."

And the one lightbulb he didn't want to come on is shining brighter than Times Square.

"I don't understand, why are we here?" Rogers reiterates.

"Her parents are Grant and Jemma Ward. Arguably the second best spy in the world and the world's smartest biochemist. Except even though I'm fairly certain Jemma is the world's sweetest human being, Ward also happens to be one of the last remaining Hydra heads." Natasha says leaning back in her chair to eye him speculatively. "Let me guess. You want our help dealing with him permanently, and this is the bait for your trap."

"I am not comfortable using a child as weapon in your human war," Thor says, speaking for the first time.

"She isn't a weapon or bait, she's family." Coulson stuffs his hands in his pockets and waits a beat to let that sink in. Abby is important regardless of anything else, even his personal views on Grant Ward. Which are no more kind than Rogers, he's sure.

"I know this is going to sound insane, but no. The long and short of it is Ward is trapped on an alien planet called Maveth. For Jemma's and Abby's emotional health and happiness, we need to retrieve him. And I can't do that without using the Bifrost."

"I'm not helping you save a Nazi," Rogers states.

"Uh, me either," Stark adds in. "I don't know what Fury did to undead you, but it clearly scrambled your brains if you are asking the Avengers to retrieve a Nazi."

Jemma strides into the room, with more confidence than Coulson thinks she actually feels. She'd been waiting in the wings just in case. "He's no more a Nazi than Bucky Barnes is."

Stark smiles. "Now that took some balls." She doesn't acknowledge the compliment at all.

"Grant was indoctrinated into Hydra via manipulation and abuse that was damn near brainwashing. He was seventeen - a messed up kid looking for something to belong to when Garrett got his hooks in. Grant is a lot of things but he isn't that. A liar, a murderer, a user, yes, all by his own admission, but he changed. For his family, his Hydra is a pale imitation of what was. And I can cripple it. I will if you help me get my husband back."

"How do we know you're not on his side?" Stark asks.

"You don't. You'd have to take a chance."

"How do we know you can get him to disband? Granted, his faction is small by all accounts but it's a very organized one," Romanov asks. Jemma pins her with an unflinching stare Coulson has never seen from her before.

"Gideon Malick kidnapped our baby and tortured me, and any other heads would have stood by while it happened. If he's not done, then we'll be done." She sighs sadly. "You worked with him for the Istanbul and Galilee missions, didn't you? I'd just had back to back miscarriages. He couldn't hide how much that tore him apart and we both know it. You finally get thing you dream of, you don't toss it away. Hydra will end with Grant. You have my word."

"And if we still choose not to help you?" Steve just refuses to budge.

Jemma looks as though she's been slapped but raises her chin and squares her shoulders. "It's your choice, that much is true. Are you prepared to explain to my daughter when the time comes that, though you had a feasible way to rescue her father, you remained steadfast in abstaining from
offering aide? Are you prepared to make her understand that condemning someone she loves more than sunlight or air...or anything really, to death by slow starvation and isolation on an alien planet was better for the world? Because I'm not. and you will be the one answering for it. Rest assured in that."

She glares at him a moment, before moving down the length of the table toward her daughter. Steve looks over at the toddler who, instead of playing with the phone, has crawled over to closer inspect Tony. He looks back at her as though she's a bomb about to explode in his face. In a less tense situation, it would be hilarious.

Jemma goes over and picks Abby up. "Let's leave them to decide shall we, love? Can you tell Mr. Stark goodbye?"

Abby waves and cuddles into Jemma. As they walk to the door, Abby looks up at Jemma expectantly.

"Da bye byes?"

And, as she has at least four times every day for the past three weeks, Jemma answers patiently. "Da's still at work, love. We'll bring him home as soon as we possibly can."

/-/-

As they wait for the decision, Jemma tries yoga, sparring with Tarleton, and even working with Fitz to burn off some of the tension. None of it works, and even Abby is on edge. When she throws a fit because her apple juice is in a sippy and not a squeeze box, lying in middle of the kitchen floor emitting ear splitting wails, Jemma knows it's about Grant not juice.

Jemma can't hold back either and cries right along with her. It's counterproductive, she knows that, but it doesn't matter. She just wants Grant were here to say "Joy!" in that half-heartedly stern way, in the that startles Abby out of her fit and occasionally into a giggle. She just wants Grant here.

She gathers Abby into her arms with her back against the butcher-block island. Abby cries harder because she can't properly communicate and it frustrates her all the more.

"Baby, I know you want daddy, and your juice boxes, and your toys. I know, my darling. We're going home soon, I promise. Regardless of what happens, we're going back soon, my love."

Before long, Shield agents and her own Hydra gather around the periphery watching their collective melt down. Fitz is the only one brave enough to try to fix things.

"I feel like I'm back where I started, Fitz. And this time it's more than just me staring into the abyss. I failed him."

"You're not where you started. You command an entire group of people, and you're raising Abby. You basically told Captain bloody America to go fuck himself in the nicest possible way. The old Jemma would have never done that. Also, you could undoubtedly pass the field exam now."

Jemma gives a wet sniffle and a half startled laugh. "There is that."

/-/-

She peels herself up off the floor, fixes Abby her juice and snack, and sets about finding a way to locate Grant once they're on planet, refusing to acknowledge that they might not make it that far. She becomes so absorbed in her work that, if she hadn't have glanced up to check on Abby, she wouldn't have seen him.

"Captain...mister... I mean- "she stutters.

"Steve works fine. Do you see good in everything or just in your husband?"

"I try to find the silver lining in all things, though this is proving quite difficult."

"I can imagine. I'm told you were Coulson's brightest agent."

"I'm very smart, that is true, but love though knows nothing of intelligence or taking sides, or time for that matter. I won't ever stop trying because he is who I love."

"Coulson said you'd remind me of Peggy and he was right. We'll do it. Though I personally will see to the dismantling of his faction."

/-/-

Jemma doesn't care what restrictions they put on Grant as long as she gets him back. As the Avengers gather in her lab to hear her plans to find him, for the first time in the three months he's been gone, she finds herself hoping again.
"Now in the months I was on the planet I stumbled upon underground caves, almost like someone dug out bunkers. Perhaps they were, I don't know. Either way, I believe Grant will have found the ones I used based upon the details I had given him. I also believe he landed relatively close to where I did, based upon how many more times the inter-planetary solar activity of the monolith opened up in proximity to my camp than it did elsewhere. Opening the Bifrost should make it so we can all enter multiple times until we find him. Hopefully he'll be alive and I'm not recovering a body." She whispers the last part of the sentence afraid if she says it too loud it will happen. Most of the faces in the room are impassive or uncomfortable.

Sarona is the only one who looks as pained as she does. Pickens looks worried. Daisy just looks sad for her.

"The planet is a wasteland, it doesn't sustain human life for long periods." Thor points out.

"That's true, but I did survive six months and I don't have the survivalist training or field certifications Grant has, he survived five years in a the wilderness as teenager as Garrett's way of breaking him for indoctrination, He had nothing but wit and his dog for company, I have to believe he's fine physically, I need to be realistic sure but if anyone was going to make it a long stretch it'd be Grant." Jemma replies. Coulson looks a bit shocked at the information.

Thor glances down at Abby, who is sitting on his cape. "I have a tracking system so we may lessen the search, though it shall require the young one's blood."

He pauses, staring at Abby. "May I inquire as to why the young is insistent upon sitting atop my cape?"

Jemma can't stifle the laugh that bubbles up. "My husband pulls her around the living room on a blanket to play out her favorite part of Aladdin. I'm positive she believes you wish to play the part of the magic carpet."

He shrugs. "Lady Abigail of Midgard, you require an enchanted carriage of carpet?"

She grins up at him nodding enthusiastically.

"Very well, then." He bows deeply. He loops around the room with a hysterically-laughing Abby. Once, twice, three times.

"You're not getting your Asgardian back anytime soon." Romanov says with a snicker.

"Thor! We have to continue the meeting." Cap calls out.

"I know my around Maveth, the only obstacle will be the Kree-ordained god. He is no true deity, but shall be hard to kill due to the varied states in which he can exist. I cannot truly strategize until faced with it. I'd much rather play with the tiny Midgardian until my services are required."

"He's like an excitable puppy. I'm just going to go along and make sure he doesn't accidently break her," Tarleton announces. "Be back shortly, Doc."

"According to Thor, we only need a few drops her blood to enact the tracking device," Bruce Banner says casually.

"I'm not poking Jemma's baby with a needle. Jemma in Mummy mode truly scares me." Fitz says. Sarona ignores them both, scooping Abby up on the way. "Every year, we have to take her for checkups at the geneticist and various therapy branches. We also have to draw her blood to send to an oncologist. Childhood cancer is common in people living with Downs. That means Abby has to call upon her inner Eleanor of Aquitaine and tough it out. We got this, but we need the best fastest stick on your team. I distract, you draw. That's how it works."

"I'll go get Lincoln."

Jemma snatches Abby from Sarona and rounds on Fitz as he lays out the plan.

"I barely know the man and you want just me to just let him stick my baby, with needles, Fitz! With needles and she's already been traumatized by a kidnapping and now we're just going to let strangers stab her with things!"

She knows she's being difficult but she can't help it, she's exhausted and worried, and having to use Abby and play on her daughter's fears for this seems wrong.

"It's the quickest way to locate Ward on that planet. You have to be practical, Jem." Bobbi adds in
calmly. "And Lincoln is the best person to do this, since he has medical experience with civilians, not just hardened Shield agents."

Jemma's eyes brim with tears. "I'm so tired of our choices hurting her. I just want to be a good mother. I left here because it didn't feel safe, and went back to Grant knowing that it was basically a viper pit and if we pissed off the wrong sociopath we were leverage and nothing more. Now, I can't leave him there because we're a team. All we ever wanted was a family and to be better parents than we had!" She states, wiping her eyes using the corner of her jumper's sleeve. "We wipe tears not snot on sleeves, yes?" she tells Abby and Pickens gives them a fond smile.

"Or pants legs," he adds. "No one thinks you're a bad mother or wife. Hell, I'm pretty sure the Director has spent most days of the past two-and-half years pinching himself that you even considered going back to him. Including those days at the end of the pregnancy and post-partum where he was mostly afraid of you. Here's thing though, you two always make sure Abs is seen as normal, that she plays a part in things. This is Abby's part, Boss, and I swear on my mother if the guy misses and hurts her, I'll shoot him in the kneecaps," Pickens says.

The room turns to stares at him, mouths agape.

"What? I'm Grant Ward's second. I'm not a nice man."

Lincoln steps forward, completely ignoring the threat to his safety, which Jemma gives him points for.

"Jemma, I promise I'll be accurate and fast. I'll be done before she can even cry."

"Okay."

"Hi Abby! Nice to meet you, sweetheart. You wanna help me to help your daddy?" he asks making sure to sign help and father as he says it. She looks contemplative but says nothing.

"Okay, Daisy, when I say go, I want you to throw every single tissue in that box at her. Bobbi, when I place the needle, you draw."

He begins to sing a song about gummi bears very loudly and dances around. When he gets to a part where he makes popping sounds with his mouth, he hisses "Go!" as he inserts the needle. "Now, Bobbi."

"Don't cry Abby! There's no crying in Shield, kiddo!" Daisy says, tossing tissues at her and picking up Lincoln's tune.

He slides the needle out and releases the tourniquet. He grabs up a bandaid from her favorite television show Madeline and puts on her arm. "All done sweet Abby, good job. Sorry if it hurt."

When they all stare at him he says. "Trick from my Peds rotation. Distraction is best."

With Abby's blood safely procured for the directive device, they all suit up.

-/-

Grant knows he's hallucinating. He's starving and near death, and he knows that his mind is trying to comfort him toward the end.

Jemma stands with Abby on her hip. Jemma's belly is rounded quite obviously. Hell of a time for his subconscious to bring up the whole wanting more kids thing.

The apparitions of the girls don't speak, they just stare at him with smiles that soothe him.

"Always said your smile was brighter than sunshine, Joy."

Abby giggles, a weird, echoing sound. It's completely wrong. It's not his daughter's laugh.

"I should-I should just- I need to get up and forage. That thing is killing off every food source. It didn't starve you, Jem, because it had no use for your body. It wanted your mind, which I get, because smart is sexy. Malick's body is old. Mine? It's probably got a few decades to use me up," he tells apparition Jemma, who smiles at him warmly.

"I'm going to stop talking to myself and stand up now."

-/-

Jemma straps a dagger to her thigh and makes sure her shoulder holster is secure. She intends to pick Abby up and do the awful goodbye thing again, yet when she glances up, she finds her daughter across the room, staring up at Rogers in his suit with cowl still down.

He squats down and with an absolutely heart-stopping grin says, "Hey, Miss Abby."

"Hi!"
She points to his shield.
"You wanna see it?"

She reaches out and touches a dent marring the surface.
"That one is from a German fighter plane." She signs something.
"Pretty." Jemma translates lowly.

She can't wait to tell Grant about this. He'd love the irony of the conversation taking place and that his daughter thinks the second biggest symbol of his opposition is pretty.

She steps over and drops down beside them. "It's lovely, I agree. Can you come with me? You can see if Daisy will get Coulson's replica to play with okay? "Jemma holds out her hands to Abby. Daisy nods and sets off to get the shield for Abby. Jemma hopes it will distract Abby while she goes into the Bifrost.

She nods. Jemma picks her up and carries her over to Daisy, repeating their goodbye and explanation of where she's going on the walk over.

Daisy is staying behind. Due the force of her quaking, the monolith caused several mini strokes and she's still not recovered. She heals fast but not fast enough to come on this mission, which Jemma is oddly grateful for. She feels more at ease leaving her with Daisy. Someone Abby has grown to trust and like.

She kisses Abby and turns gathering her thoughts, then she steps quickly on to the Bi-frost. The last Jemma hears is Abby's laughter as she bangs the shield into the floor once again. Then, Abby's laugh is replaced by the howling, dirt ridden winds of Maveth.
Rescue

She had forgotten how overwhelmingly dark it was on Maveth, which is saying something about her progress. Once upon a very horrific time, she thought the blackness that engulfs this planet was going to burn itself into the depths of her memory and seep into her soul.

She can feel the panic beginning to rise, cinching in her diaphragm and sitting on her heart. She tries to close her eyes and think of the reason she’s here. Grant. Just Grant. None of that matters as the wind kicks up. It knows she’s here.

“The Kree being must know you are here,” Thor echoes her thoughts in a shout that rises up and over the howling wind.

As she is about to respond, she feels hands slide into both of hers.

“We got this, Jem,” Bobbi says, squeezing from her left side before dropping Jemma’s hand to resume her grip on her weapon.

“Take a breath and follow the demigod with the amped compass. It’ll be fine, Doc.”

She looks to Tarleton and, even through the dust and darkness, Jemma can see the kindness in Sarona’s eyes. “You aren’t alone.”

Jemma can only nod for fear of crying. She simply follows the quick and sure strides of the team Asgardian.

She can barely see Thor through the wind picking up and throwing sand in her face. With each step, it’s like the planet is pushing back with more and more force, trying to isolate her from the others. She grabs on to Thor’s cape to anchor herself, thinking briefly of Abby before shoving the thought away. She doesn’t want give thing any ammunition to use against her, and she’s never been able to convince herself it didn’t have access to her mind.

As they crest the hill between the wretched canyon and the encampment where she’d lived, she reaches back for Sarona. They create a human chain so as not to lose one another, and since she is the only one who won’t get lost. She knows exactly where she is, with or without the night vision goggles. She’s not sure why that makes tears sting her eyes, but she doesn’t have time to dwell. She has to get to Grant. He is the only thing that truly matters presently.

It all goes utterly still and silent out of nowhere.

“Why do I suddenly feel like we’re all fucked?” Stark asks as he flies just above the now nonexistent sandstorm. She wonders briefly how the different gravity affects his suit’s abilities, though dismisses the urge to voice the question. She’ll ask once Grant is safe back on earth.

“Probably because we are,” Cap retorts.

“We’re just out of the gravesite perimeter,” Jemma reports.

“This place has a graveyard?” Bobbi inquires.

“It’s more or less just remnants of It’s past victims…” Jemma’s night vision goggles catches a familiar glint. There, half buried in the sand, is a glock with a pearl inlay shield eagle on the protruding handle. She’d given to Grant two Christmases before the uprising. She didn’t even
know he still carried it. He must only do so out of sentimentality, given his loyalties.

She strides over, picking it up. “Let’s go before it circles back.” She commands fitting the gun into her waistband.

Thor nods at her, then his gaze hones as he picks up Grant’s trail, though he does not voice as much to avoid giving them away, only gestures pointedly.

“This is too easy,” Romanov says what the others appear to being thinking.

“It likes to play with its food first. We’re being baited,” Jemma says flatly. She had expected this part and it must show on her face because Morse gives her shoulder a squeeze. Barton nocks an arrow and Cap falls more deeply into his fighting stance at every pause.

Thor stops a few yards out. “There are no further traces of the Midgardian’s steps.”

“I see heat signatures below ground, just as The Crumpet predicted. Two separate ones. A big one and small one,” Stark adds in.

“That means he isn’t dead, thank God,” Jemma says rushing forward, before falling through the trap door in her haste to pull it open.

“I thought we were going for a subtle entrance, Simmons,” Coulson teases.

“Ow, I’d forgotten they do that. You should be able to use the ladder. There are usually manholes close by.”

Instead, Pickens and Tarleton don’t waste time. They jump down and tuck and roll to a stop beside her. Sarona holds out a hand, and Jemma uses it to pull herself to her feet.

“Grant! Grant, where are you?”

Pickens grabs her arm and flings her back behind him. “Just in case what we find isn’t good, alright, boss? Just let me go first. We already know that Thing is in there with him.”

She does as he asks, holding her breath until they turn the last corner. Grant is lying listlessly on an army cot in such bad shape it is barely standing. She rushes forward, despite what she told Pickens, knocking him to the side.

“Grant, my love, I’m here.”

He turns his head but doesn’t otherwise move. Not even to defend himself. She finds this unspeakably upsetting.

“Where’s Abby? Abby was just here.”

“Love, she’s fine. She’s on earth, I would never bring her here.” She reaches out to brush her fingers down his jaw. She needs to touch him. Giving into the urge is a mistake. He grabs her wrists and squeezes so tight she can feel the bones grinding.

“Grant.”

“It doesn’t get to touch me. Can’t fool me, appearing like my wife.”

“Grant!” she says again, sharply, hoping to snap him out of it. He’s got a pretty good grip on her, but she can see it’s taking all his strength. It breaks her heart.
“I’m real darling, I’m speaking, and you’re touching me. Not It.”

“Tried this trick before, taking on Jemma’s form…try to make me follow you right over a cliff.” He sounds exhausted. “Not going without a fight.”

“I know, my love, I know what It can do…and I know all the things you’re afraid of,” she replies gently, as he stands up fast and sways into her. He rights himself. She knows she should move to a safe distance, until he realizes it is truly her, but she can’t bear it, even if he hurts her, thinking she’s the monster she knows all too well.

“It’s Buddy all over again, trust in the thing I love to be enough or do what survival calls for. I survive.”

He looms over her an the hand not holding on to her goes up to linger at the base of her neck. Pickens creeps closer and Sarona takes up her fighting stance but she waves them off. There’s not much they can do; there are so many unknown variables: the planet itself, Grant’s sanity or lack thereof, his strength.

Jemma keeps up the calm tone. “Please trust me, Grant,” she pleads.

He only eyes her and squeezes her windpipe slightly as is he’s testing himself. She’s not sure what to expect next, but it isn’t the sound of a gunshot. The bullet passes so close to her temple she can feel the heat radiating off it just before it buries itself in Grant’s shoulder.

“Hallucinations can’t shoot you, Ward. Let go of your wife and let her take you home.” Jemma looks back to see Natasha lowering her SHIELD issue firearm, the first of the party to find their way down.

Grant releases her instantly, stumbling back with so much horror in his eyes Jemma’s eyes sting with tears. She steps toward him. When he shrinks back with dismay and a bit of fear in his eyes, Jemma knows what she must do, though the cave affords them no privacy.

“This one isn’t on you, Grant. This is different, I understand.” She doesn’t let him back away, holds his face in her hands and kisses him quickly. “It’s okay. I know you wouldn’t hurt me. This is on It. If anyone can comprehend that, it’s me. Just let me check the wound. And we’ll go.”

“It’s barely a flesh wound, I’m fine.” His voice is hoarse and betrays how weak he is. “All clear now.”

His eyes go misty as his hands find hers, press them to his chest. It makes her heart squeeze. He leans down to kiss her and she feels it clear to her toes, can’t help but pour every bit of relief and the grief of the weeks past into an embrace that draws out even though she knows they should be making their escape from the planet.

Coulson clears his throat as he straggles in. “People are very present,” he says. Grant ignores him and only lets her break away when it’s either that or anoxic brain injury.

“I thought you’d send a team, baby. I didn’t think you’d come yourself. Didn’t ever want you to come back here.” His voice is thick with emotion.

“Where else would I be? It’s you.” She smiles at him briefly.

The rest of their search party makes their way underground.

“Do I have time to dress his wounds? It can smell blood, and we already know It’s nearby,” she asks, looking to Cap.
“It’s occupied. Banner is hulked out up there. You got a few minutes.”

Grant laughs. “You’re remarkable, you know that Jem.”

“Thank you.”

“You know we’re talking about how you got them all here later, right?” he says lowly.

“Be still. You’re the worst patient no matter which planet we’re on.”

She patches up his shoulder quickly and efficiently, bundling anything bloody to leave behind to draw It from their trail. “Any other wounds? Don’t lie.” Nat snorts from behind them as if she knows they have this argument often.

“Bumps and bruises, Jem, I’m fine.”

They have to go back up and cross the graves of the fallen yet again to get to where Heimdall could open the Bifrost across a huge gulf of space to get Grant home.

The sand kicks back up as they make to escape. Jemma finds herself boxed in between Sarona and Grant. Grant is moving, but sluggishly. The way Pickens keeps himself in Grant’s orbit is concerning; clearly, she’s not the only one unsure of his footing, mentally speaking or otherwise.

Suddenly she can feel it, the old burn as the monster invades her consciousness, like clawing at the back of her brain. She alone isn’t affected either. It’s disorienting them all, in varying ways, and using their own fears.

Stark is pin wheeling across the inky black sky.

Romanov wanders off muttering something in Russian. She’s stopped by a hulked out Banner who drops her unceremoniously on the sand, “Stay!” he commands. “It’s not real, Natasha there’s no baby crying.” He says it kindly even though his voice is perpetually angry in this state.

Between screams of agony, Coulson whimpers. “It’s a magical place.” in a resigned litany.

Thor seems mostly unaffected, but there are great rolls of thunder as he grips the hammer.

Jemma can’t move. She’s trying, but she feels as though she is encased in concrete.

The first time, the monster had used Grant. She had relived the med pod falling and sinking to her death by Grant’s hand often, other times It had drawn out memories from her honeymoon or happier time. It had used Grant to fool her with love and fear in equal measure. Now it uses Abby.

It has been in Grant’s in head, because he uses that here. She can feel the way he loves as he does and instantly knows every reason he loves their daughter, loves her. Abby is directly tied to Grant’s humanity, the main reason he even attempts to be a good man, with Jemma herself coming in at a close second. It’s breathtaking and then it’s gone…

She feels empty as if it has never existed.

This has been Grant’s hell. Having his joy taken and returned only to repeat the twisted nightmare all over again. It leaves Jemma feeling unsteady, hopeful, and hulled out as she had felt with the miscarriages. Time seems to freeze. She has no idea how long she’s standing there and yet sitting in that bathroom stall at the Sandbox, all at once. She’s there, bleeding and pleading for Fitz to not
leave her alone like the first time, when Grant was away on a mission and everything had felt fine until it didn’t.

The pain and desolation is as real as it once was. She’s so scared, she wants Grant and this time he’s is right there at her fingertips but he’s as far away as if he was still an ocean away. Then Abby is leaving her, too. The memory of her being safe within Jemma is fading, the sound of her laugh is disappearing, the light of her gaze dimmed to nothing.

She’s screaming, she knows it, but can’t stop it. Abby isn’t his to take.

It’s cresting the hill in Malick’s body, head cocked at an odd angle. Malick’s dead eyes boring into her, owning her. It comes closer and closer, rolling toward her like a storm, like a caress. Focused solely on her.

The creature in Malick reaches for Grant. Before it can touch him, she slaps its hand away.

It’s a mistake, she knows it immediately. Grant was not the target, not when she so easily fends it off, twists It’s wrists into a good lock. She can hear the bones crunching. Yet It is completely unfazed, intent on her. As it scoops her off her feet by her throat, her grip still unbroken but unable to pull those cold hands away. Why do people insist on choking her repeatedly today?

“Hello, dear one. It’s been awhile, my pet.” His voice wavers as if he’s trying to master using it, and the old proper speech pattern he’s using doesn’t exactly fit Malick’s booming old money voice. Malick’s authoritativeness was never this commanding and authentic.

As she did with Grant, Natasha fires at it, and the others quickly follow suit. The bullets glance off. Thor’s hammer, too, is thrown aside with the force of the wind. She can hear them shouting, fighting to get closer, but her eyes stay on It.

“Should I borrow his form for you?” the monster nods toward Grant. “He’s weak, near death as is. It would be the work of a minute, darling.”

“Do not touch him!”

“No, I’ll do what?”

“I’ll leave again,” she spits out meaning it fully. “I’ll run, or I’ll end myself, but either way, you won’t be able to toy with me anymore.”

That stops him. She doesn’t know what she can bargain with, but she has to find something, at the very least to give the rescue team some opportunity to fight. From the corner of her eye, Jemma sees movement, and very deliberately doesn’t allow herself to look even when she recognizes the way Sarona moves.

Sarona must see an opening, though Jemma has no clue how her friend had gotten Cap’s Shield. The object flies through the air. It would have decapitated a mortal. It is not mortal. The monster catches it like a dog catching a treat.

Then he throws it back. Though Jemma can’t see, she can hear the squelching sound of the shield tearing through a body.

Sarona makes a breathless, sputtering sound.

No. No. No.
There is a roaring sound and first she thinks it might be in her mind until a green blur knocks her and It off of their feet. She flies and hits a rock formation, scrambling for purchase. She claws her way on her hands and knees to where Sarona lies dying. The shield had cut across her as easily as a knife through butter. It lays bloody in the sand like harbinger of death.

Pickens cradles Sarona’s head in his lap while Jemma tries to staunch the gaping wound.

“Did we bring the rapid heal kits I made? It will work, it has too… it will…” Jemma says resolutely.

“Jemma.” She wonders if she is imagining the shaking in Grant’s voice. “This is not a wound you walk away from.”

The color is leaching out of Sarona and she’s going an eerie green-white in the night vision goggles.

“No, I can do it, I just... need the kit…” Except she can’t. Jemma needs blood and light and tools. She needs hope and has none.

She’s sobbing and can barely see what’s in front of her, night vision goggles or no.

“I’m sorry….I’m sorry… I’m sorry…” she chants, moving the windswept hair off Sarona’s face. Jemma takes her friend’ face in her hands like Sarona’s done for her every time Jemma has had a panic attack.

“I’m right here…. Just look at me…its okay…” she breaks off with a wail as Sarona’s pulse stutters beneath her fingertips. “I’m not going anywhere, you are safe Sarona…”

“I love you. Run.” Sarona mouths the words, voice already stolen as the last of her strength leeches out of her.


It’s a futile plea. There is no life left in her friend.

For a solid thirty seconds, the planet is utterly silent but for Jemma’s tears and murmurs of Grant’s soft comforting. Then, Sarona’s eyes reopen.

For one all too short moment, Jemma thinks she’s getting a miracle. That hope is ruthlessly dashed. The eyes hold no life, only the unforgiving nothingness of it. Sarona’s hands reach to curl around Jemma’s wrist.

With a surge of strength that he probably couldn’t spare in his state, Grant snatches Jemma from his grip, sweeping her into his arms as he calls for the rest to do what Sarona had spent her last breath warning them to do. Everyone runs, and Jemma looks back helpless to watch as the monster reanimates her most trusted friend.

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Bobbi is first back through the portal, followed quickly by Coulson, Romanov, and Cap, who had taken point. Ward carries a screaming Jemma through, Pickens at his back and steadying him as he staggers but doesn’t put his wife down. Barton stumbles through next, pulling Stark, likely stunned if the state of his half operational suit is any indication. A bruised, bleeding, and naked Banner leans on Thor, having been the team’s last defense at keeping It from following them.

“Shit….” Daisy murmurs.
“She can say that word, perfectly.” Ward nods to Abby sleeping on her shoulder with a smile so exhausted it looks drunk. The smile is short lived and tight lipped. Jemma has stopped screaming, but sobs wrench her body. Daisy feels tears rise in sympathy in her own eyes.

“Where’s Tarleton?” Fitz whispers.

“Nowhere good,” Daisy guesses grimly.

Ward is swaying on his feet, but keeps hold of Jemma. He whispers something to her lowly, seems to repeat whatever it is a few times, like a mantra. He only stops when Jemma looks around, helplessly dazed.

“You can put me down, I’m alright…”

He kisses her temple and slides her gently onto her feet.

Jemma holds her hands out for Abby. Daisy looks at her warily. Jemma is clearly in shock and there’s blood on her TAC vest and down one sleeve.

“Daisy, I need to hold my baby.”

Daisy hands Abby over, staying close in case Jemma needs her help, so she nearly misses what happens next.

Ward looks over to Coulson. “I have no play here. I know you’re going to have me executed, or at the very least chain me like a dog in vault D again. I’m not stupid, my bill’s due. Just do two things for me please? Get Jemma’s therapist for her. Elisson has no loyalty to either organization. Pickens can get you the details. Jemma is going to need her after today, and since I know you won’t do it for me, do it for her.”

“And the other thing?”

“Let me hold my daughter one last time. Before you… do whatever you’re going to do.”

Coulson nods. “I called in the Avengers to rescue you. Killing you, as much as it may satisfy my own rage, isn’t Shield’s way. Or the Avengers for that matter. What we will do at this point is undecided. Go say hi to your kid. She’s missed you.”

It’s not good for her routine to wake Abby, but he can’t help himself, and he knows Jemma won’t hold it against him considering the circumstances. He needs to see the light in her eyes. It’s the one thing he’s held on to after so long in the dark.

Jemma doesn’t see him approach, not the way she’s holding Abby, pressing her lips into her daughter’s hair. He knows Jemma is walking herself through her self-relaxation techniques, staving off the panic and crash even as she silently cries.

“Hey, baby.”

The look Jemma gives him arrows through him worse than any torture he’s ever experienced. She gives him the best smile she can muster.

“Hey, darling, go on then…”

He reaches out, running his thumb down Abby’s cheek bone. This is how he wakes her up when he
comes home from a mission. He traces her face with his fingertips, so she comes awake gently. Sometimes it doesn’t work, sometimes she slaps his hand away irritably. This time, it’s like she was awaiting his return. With tired eyes she rubs, Abby raises her head off Jemma’s shoulder.

He can see the moment she realizes it’s him. It takes her a second –he looks so different between the beard and the malnutrition - but she eventually does. Making grabby hands at him, she literally swan dives into his arms with the trust only possessed by small children. Jemma steadies him as Abby giggles and hugs him, resting her head on his chest.

“Hi Da!” she greets. The interlopers mostly clear out or at the very least move to the edge of his periphery, and for that he’s glad. He’s trying to hold it together and is quickly losing the battle. He’d given up hope in his heart of hearts of ever getting this back, Abby in his arms and Jemma at his side. Safe and whole.

When Abby goes blurry at the edges, Jemma quickly wipes at his tears before they can really fall. He’ll blame the weakness on being sleep deprived, hungary and shell shocked, but he’ll know the truth is, he’s missed his kid and his wife.

“Hi Joy bug!” he says, clearing his throat of the lump forming. He kisses her temple, forehead and cheeks. She then puckers up and kisses him. She starts signing and points to his face.

“I know, my face is different huh? Do you like it?”

She signs “tickle” at him. “Okay, I’ll fix it.”

And she signs “friend…” and he thinks a sign that might mean cape, but he can’t be sure.

“I can’t tell what she’s trying to say, Jem.” He sinks down on to the floor with Abby in his lap. The gravity change is starting to get to him, and the sudden presence of light is causing a serious headache. He can’t concentrate. How did Jemma ever reacclimatize?

“She says,” Jemma drops down next to them, pressing a kiss into Abby’s hair and another to the corner of his mouth. “That she missed you, and the man in the cape is her friend. She means Thor. Our baby is friends with Thor.” Jemma gives him a watered-down laugh.

Abby chatters at him, slapping his chest for emphasis.

“Really? No way!” he replies, playing along. A shadow casts itself over them. He looks up to find Rogers and Coulson.

“Time’s up, I take it.” He kisses Jemma and Abby in turn. Jemma turns confused eyes at him as he tries to extricate himself from Abby. She releases a screech that usually signals a meltdown.

“His cell is already occupied,” Coulson says.

“Containment pod then,” Rogers returns. Jemma makes a sound like she’s stifling agony, and the Captain looks at her a long moment before turning back to Grant. He gingerly gives Abby to Jemma, kissing them a final time. He gets to his feet.

“Lead the way, Coulson.”

They cuff him and chain him with leg irons. He begs off Pickens with his eyes when he looks to make move. They begin cuffing his team as well, and Abby starts to lose it as Taylor puts up a fight. When she whimpers and pleads for “Rona” his heart seizes in his chest. Of course. Next to him and Jemma, both of whom are currently wrecked, Sarona means protection. It’d been too much
to hope Abby would let Sarona’s absence go unremarked.

He turns to walk away, belatedly remembering he has something that belongs to Jemma. When he reaches into his pocket, Nat levels her gun at him, and Barton follows suit.

“Just wanna give Jem back her wedding rings.” He holds them out, palm up.

“You managed to hang onto them?” Jemma’s tone is awed.

“Of course, the set was my talisman.’ He grins at her crookedly. As he approaches Jemma, Abby’s cries lessen. She thinks he’s returning to her.

The guns train on him, Jemma and Abby.

“Jesus, at least we don’t point guns at babies in Shield,” Daisy points out.

“Neither do we,” Cap says pointedly to Natasha and Clint, who lower their guns to waist level.

With Grant’s hands cuffed at his waist as they are, he can’t actually put the rings back on her hand as he wants to do. He can only drop them in her hand and watch her slide them on. She’s shaking.

“Come on, then,” Clint says pulling Grant away.

“Wait! Please, just wait a second,” Jemma pleads, voice breaking. “I just – wait.” Rogers and Barton pause, and she hands Abby off blindly to Fitz, who steps in as though he’s enough on her wavelength again to know she’s going to fling herself at Grant. The force of it knocks him back into Rogers.

“No,” she whispers hopelessly into his shoulder.

He leans back to catch her gaze. “Hey baby, it’s okay. My number is up, that’s all, I knew this was going to happen eventually. I got you back, and that put me ahead of what I deserved. Karma needed to even things out. My girls are safe, we’re both on earth, and that thing isn’t wearing me as a skin suit. I got to see my Joy bug one last time. I’m all good.”

“I’m not.”

Any other time he’d tease her for being petulant. This isn’t other times.

“I know, but you will be. It’s going to be okay, trust me one last time.”

Her face crumples as she starts to cry. She catches his face in her hands and kisses him. It’s a quick and tear-filled tender kiss that feels so much like a goodbye. Tears even burn his eyes.

When they break apart he whispers an “I love you” as they begin to frog march him away.

Abby senses something is well and truly off with things and begins to fuss. Jemma stands stock still crying. “It’s okay, baby, Abby needs you.

The last thing he sees as he turns the last corner is Daisy comforting his girls. She’s crying right along with them. And so, he realizes, is he.
“He’s not a psychopath. Narcissistic? Yes. But he has feelings, he has empathy. He loves quite deeply, in fact. He was fully prepared to die for Jemma and Abby. Part of that is the behavior he was conditioned for, but it was also love.”

“What are you saying?” Coulson asks Dr. Heller, the SHIELD psychiatrist who’d treated the likes of Natasha Romanov and Bucky Barnes, and seemed a fair candidate to assess Ward.

“He’s saying he isn’t evil, just supremely fucked up,” Nat answers.

“Thank you for that concise summation, as always, Natasha,” Dr. Heller rolls his eyes, but fondly. “What I’m saying is, Ward will always have predilection for violence, possessiveness, and manipulation, because he was effectively brainwashed on SHIELD’s watch and molded into John Garrett’s image. But that doesn’t mean he can’t be rehabilitated.”

Coulson just stares.

“Your personal history with the subject is coloring your ability to be objective,” Dr. Heller rebukes. There’s a collective gasp at that. “Child soldiers, given acceptance back into their communities, can recover.

“And yes, that is exactly what Grant Ward is – a teenager recruited by Garrett and used as a fighter, when he was still a child and easy to manipulate. Maybe SHIELD was blindsided by the Hydra thing, but his commanding officers certainly would have seen the signs in Ward’s relationship with Garrett, and failed to do anything about it so long as it served their purposes. In my professional opinion, I think SHIELD owes him a chance to reestablish himself as a contributing member of society, and, I think, he’s ready to try.”

“What makes you so sure?” May asks.

“Jemma,” Elisson chimes in plainly, as Heller himself had insisted she be called in to consult. “Grant is love- and approval-driven. It’s what motivated his previous alignments but, with Jemma, I have seen him consciously abstain from manipulation. He’s shared his trauma with her in order for her to process hers. It’s not all about him anymore.”

Elisson glares at Hunter when he audibly scoffs. “He procured her the help she needed, even though he clearly feared her healing would lead to her leaving,” she says pointedly. “And when they were in danger, he laid down all loyalties to get Jemma and Abby back. And from what Dr. Heller tells me, he’s made no plays to get out of the cell this time.”

“He’s still Hydra,” Cap points out.

“He was trying to move his branch out of that, actually” Daisy volunteers. “I’ve done some digging, and Hydra was simply a revenue source. He’s made no moves toward, she pauses to hand out copies of the file she had compiled, “any of Hydra’s mandates in the past three years. He’s moved mainly into mercenary work, and there’s no grand evil science stuff. Jem’s his science division.”

“Abby reformed some of his thought processes. Through her, he’s learned there aren’t conditions
on everything. She has no expectations, she loves him because he’s her Dad, flaws and all. He’s trying not to feed in to his weaknesses,” Elisson adds in.

“He did literally hand her to someone he openly hates, all because Abby liked him,” Morse points out, rolling her shoulder as if to remind herself of the bullet wound that had been there a few months ago.

“And there’s Jemma’s well-being to consider. There would obviously need be conditions to his release. Stringent ones. But without him?” Fitz says. “She just lost Tarleton. What happens next is going to be ugly regardless, but I think, it’s up to us to make it better or worse.”

“And,” he plows on, “even if Jemma hates when people account for Abby’s Down Syndrome first, it has to be a consideration. Because she may never have the emotional and mental tools set to deal with his absence.”

“I’d recommend starting by letting him see Abby and Jemma. I’ll observe further, put it in a report and you can make your choices,” Heller states.

There’s a lingering tension as everyone leaves Coulson’s office.

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The conditions are slightly better than the vault, at least. They’ve let him shower without cameras and Daisy brings him his meals.

“How’s Jemma?” he asks as soon as his former teammate steps to the doorway. “Is Abby sleeping better? New places are hard for her.”

Daisy actually smiles at him in what might be considered fondness. “Jemma is holding up. Abs is restless but that might be because it’s an underground base and she’s a baby.” She slides his tray into the food slot. “That pane behind you is a digital picture frame. I can load it with a picture of them if you want, just don’t smash yourself into it in attempt to die this time.”

“I’d like that. The digital picture thing, not the smashing.” He clears his throat. “‘Come and get your love’ by Redbone always puts Abby in a good mood. I don’t know why. Might need to remind Jemma, she’ll be too stressed to think of it right now.” Grant smiles despite everything. “Or take Abby outside. She loves being outside, one of the very few things she got from me. But watch her, she’ll put anything in her mouth. Eating Indian paint brush led to some interesting places.”

“Okay.”

“Jemma needs time. Don’t let push herself too hard. She works in order to shut stuff out. Just keep her company for me? That one baking show with the Brits makes her happy. Even if she can’t replicate their results to save her life. And fudge brownie ice cream after she cries helps. Usually.”

“Anything else?”

“There’s a tablet with a yellow cover on it, under my jump seat. Give that to Jemma. She’ll know the password.”

Daisy just looks at him.

“It’s her research notebook, or what I could salvage of it,” Grant concedes when it looks like she won’t make a move without more explanation. “We got in a fight that I regret. I burned it. I’ve been trying to fix it ever since. Saving me took Sarona from her. I can’t fix that, but I can fix this.”
Daisy just pauses a moment before she nods, then walks away.

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He doesn’t expect who comes in next. He hopes for her, sure, but he doesn’t expect her. Or rather, he expects S H I E L D to be keeping her under careful watch to make sure she can’t get anywhere near him.

Her hair is dirty, her eyes are red rimmed, and she’s wearing sweats that have seen better days. There’s also an-Abby sized fluorescent orange cheese handprint on her left boob.

Jemma clutches the tablet to her and looks at him desperately. All of it is distressing but… “You fed the baby Cheetos?” he asks incredulously. His wife thinks Whole Foods is heaven on earth. She doesn’t feed Abby Cheetos.

“Of course not, they’re full of actual petroleum.” He’s relieved to hear it, that’s she’s not so far gone. “It was Barton. He was rather charming, it was hard to maintain my anger. Worst of all, she likes them.”

He smiles fondly. “And you got suckered by Abby’s ‘I’m cute and you love me’ smile.”

She smiles back. “I did. I wonder whom she learned that from.”

“We are cute and you do love us,” he teases.

She laughs but it soon falls flat. “I built these pods with Fitz, to withstand Inhumans. They can also be dropped from great heights and reorient themselves using the gravitational pull in midair to land safely.”

Her tone is almost morose. It makes him ache with regret.

“Baby…”

“I know you’re sorry. I’m simply noting that Coulson has a rather mean-spirited penchant for irony, trapping you in one.”

“Metapali’s in Vault D. He isn’t that creative,” he replies dryly.

Her eyes fill with tears. “I can disable the pod. We could just take Abby and go. Rebuild our lives, away from S H I E L D away from Hydra. We can just go.”

“Deep down you don’t want to run Jem, that’s the pain talking.”

She laughs bitterly. “Maybe.”

“It’s going to be okay.”

“Sarona’s dead and I let them cage you again. In what world is that okay? In what universe is it okay to put someone who just survived a disaster in a cage? Mine was metaphorical. They did it again, except this time your cage is literal.” She sighs heavily and hiccups to hold back tears. “I just want our lives back.”

Her voice goes reedy and breaks as she cries in earnest now. He needs to hold her but can’t, the barrier keeping him from offering even a little comfort to his sobbing wife. the pain of it runs so deep it makes his bones hurt.
“Jemma, just look at me, baby. You know that a life on the run isn’t a life for Abby, and it sure as hell isn’t a life for you. If we have any chance of truly getting it all back, I have to play by Coulson’s rules this time. We can’t run. I won’t be selfish this time.”

“Promise me?”

He knows exactly what she means. She wants his promise that he’s not going to try to off himself. She’d probably be okay with him trying to con Coulson now…but it doesn’t mean he likes that his influence is changing Jemma even in the slightest of ways. “I promise.”

Daisy walks in through the bay doors outside his pod. Jemma’s too wrapped up in their conversation to notice her presence. It honestly makes Grant smile to know that, even in the worst of times, some things never change.

Jemma jumps when Daisy touches her shoulder. “Abby needs you, Fitz misplaced the octi. Home girl is melting down like Kim Kardashian.”

Jemma nods then looks to him.

“Be here when you get back, baby.” He jerks his head subtly at Daisy when Jemma glances down, and she takes the prompt to slip an arm around her friend.

Jemma sniffs and nods again. “Okay.” She holds up the tablet. “Thank you. Having this… Thank you. I love you.”

“I love you too, Jem.”

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Jemma returns to the common area of the base. She scoops up Abby and wraps her in her blankie. Abby wipes her tears and snotty nose on Jemma’s shoulder. She can’t find the urge to care.

Abby is red-faced and fairly inconsolable. Jemma puts a happy lilt into her voice. “Abby, look at Mama. Hey, sweetie, I will find him. Okay? Even if I have to dumpster dive again.”

“Why would you dumpster dive for a toy? Just get her a new one.” Lance pauses in getting a bottled water.

Jemma snorts a laugh despite herself. “You’re so adorably clueless.” She turns to Abby. “Where do we think Fitzy put him, Abs?”

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Coulson strolls by Grant’s pod and stares at him as if he’s a zoo attraction. It’s irritating to be sure, but it’s nothing he can’t handle. They’ve done this dance before and curiosity always gets the better of Coulson.

“What’s changed? You talked Jemma out of freeing you.”

“What you mean is, what’s my plan? What am I playing for? Might as well be direct.” Grant shrugs. “I was the best spy and specialist in your entire agency, barring maybe Romanov. If I’m making a play, you’re not going to know until I want you to. Though, I can tell you I have never in my life willingly walked into a cage. You’ve never had anything I needed until now.”

Coulson is baiting him, he knows that, but the silence is making him edgy after being so utterly alone for so long.
“Okay,” Grant says thoughtfully. “Jemma watches this show about a political fixer in DC. It’s soapy, farfetched. But I relate to the father figure. The guy is every bad thing you can be. He deserves to be taken out. No questions, no qualifiers, the guy needs to be dead. But no one ever bests him until they use his daughter’s life as leverage. The only thing that brings him to his knees is if someone might harm her.”

Coulson hums, though whether it is agreement or otherwise Grant can’t tell. He continues anyway.

“I used to think, that if anyone ever used my kid, I’d be angry simply because someone dared to touch what was mine. And that’s part of it, maybe, but it isn’t all of it. My actions – good, bad or indifferent - put us right here. My kid was in harm’s way because of my arrogance, because for me Hydra was a tool not a belief system and Malick knew that. Abby was leveraged, Jemma was leveraged, because I love them. Maybe Garrett was right and love is weakness.” Grant paces the small length of his cage, but doesn’t look at Coulson.

“But in a show of faith, I’m going to give you intel. No demands. I don’t expect to be let out, though I’d like to see Abby periodically. But the intel isn’t contingent on seeing her, and neither is seeing Jemma. Just take care of them. I think I can trust you’ll do that at least. Also, I’d appreciate if you’d judge my men based on their sins and not mine, and I’d rather Metapali never sees daylight again. And if you won’t do that for my sake, do it to keep Jemma from crossing a line she can’t come back from.”

“Sounds like a lot of contingents, Ward.”

“Not a one, just stating my preferences.”

“Then spit it out, Ward.”

“Sarona Tarleton was the daughter of one of the current pillars of AIM.”

Coulson actually blinks at that.

“George Tarleton. He went through a process similar the centipede soldiers, except in his case the procedure was merely meant to increase intelligence. It’s made him smarter than Fitz and Jemma combined. He has absolutely no moral code, none. He’d have killed Sarona himself if he thought it’d accrue him more power. He over threw the previous regime. Which is why I have been putting together the pieces to take him out at the knees.”

Coulson simply stares. “Wait, what?”

“His base is mid-level in size, but he has a lot of man power at his disposal. Also – and this is the fun part - telekinetic powers. He has a penchant for controlling things with engines. I didn’t have the men to overthrow him or the ability to counter his powers without involving Jemma, and I don’t put her in a situation where she’s doing Hydra business and compromising herself. You want her help removing him from power, you can ask her. It’s her choice.”

Coulson crosses his arms defensively as if even with a wall between them and every bit of power on his side, he still doesn’t trust the info. “Then how’d you fund Jemma’s science division?”

Grant smirks. He can’t help it. “I’m a Ward. Like I needed Hydra money to give my wife a lab to science in.”

“Say I believe you,” Coulson says slowly. “How do we find him?”
“Bangor, Maine. There’s a shell company. MODAK Industrial.”

Coulson turns to walk away, his brow furrowed as he clearly gives it some thought. Grant calls out to catch him before Coulson can make it out of earshot.

“Coulson did Abby find her octopus?”

He’s not trying to needle Coulson; he really just wants to know if his kid found her toy. Jemma won’t have an easy time of it if Octi doesn’t turn up. But it must not read that away, because Coulson stalks off.

-/-/-

“We’ve been asked to step in on this decision. Coulson is too emotionally involved to make the call himself or ask his team to do,” Captain America says, the Avengers gathered before him.

Romanov tips her chin at him. “Where do you stand on it?”

“You put rabid dogs down,” Cap retorts.

Romanov recoils before her face hardens, though Rogers doesn’t appear to notice.

“It’s clearly not as simple as that,” Banner says, shooting her a sympathetic look. “Otherwise Coulson wouldn’t have asked us to make the call. We do everyone a disservice if we don’t take all factors fully into account. The phycologist says…”

Stark interrupts, pulling up the file on his Holodex and reading from it. “‘Mr. Ward shows mental affectations of that of someone exposed to long term abuse, and a nearly omnipresent form a brainwashing. Mr. Ward was groomed and manipulated to become what he has. Given therapy and vastly different resources and influences, it my belief Mr. Ward can be rehabilitated.’”

Banner sighs. “It goes against my code to not offer aide if something can be done. I became a scientist for a reason.”

He looks to Stark who shrugs, seemingly carelessly. “I always root for the underdog.”

“We cannot free a sociopath,” Rogers grinds out.

“Would say that to Buck if he were here?” Nat asks and he flinches.

“That’s different.”

“Because he’s your friend? That guy is someone’s friend too. Someone’s father, best friend, husband, and - whether or not Coulson will admit it - he even means something to him. Is someone only redeemed in your book if the immediately show remorse? Or is he irredeemable because he signed on the dotted line? SHIELD knew his background and, trust me, they knew Garrett. Or do only ex-Russian assassins get a pass in your book?”

“No. He’s not. Someone gave me a chance to wipe out the red in my ledger.”

Steve flinches at that.

“Now look,” Romanov continues. “I’m not saying let the guy have free reign. I’m saying, you don’t know what it’s like to be molded by something evil, to kill to survive. To be in the service of something darker than you can fathom or being so young you think it’s the same as love and
approval. People like Ward and I, our slates can never be wiped completely clean and we know it. But all it takes is one person, one different. We have the power now, boys. We can feed the monster or the man.”

“I’m with Nat on this one,” Barton cuts in. “I think the kid was a trigger for change. I knew him before, and I saw them together. He loves his kid. He’s not going to jeopardize her any more, not after all this. As a father…you just can’t. The idea of your choices hurting them is paralyzing, and he sees where it’s gotten him.”

“He did give up Tarleton. The Intel proved real. Coulson sent a team out. We can use the guy.” Romanov tacks on.


“I do not want to clean up any Midgardian messes, so whatever best avoids that. As well, I would like to please the tiny Midgardian. I like her.”

“Really, whatever makes the baby happy?” Cap says, utterly mystified.

“Lady Abigail’s joy is infectious,” Thor defends, puffing up.


-/-/-

They transfer Grant from a containment pod back into vault D. He really wants to know if they ended Metapali for him, but he can’t seem blood thirsty right now. He thinks they might have seen something anyway when he sees Jemma carrying Abby down into the vault. He assumes it’s his last visit a final bit of mercy before he never sees them again. He keeps the pain off his face for Abby’s sake, though it’s a close thing.

His little girl clutches a book to her chest and almost leans out of Jemma’s arms in attempt to give hello kisses, as her habit demands.

“Hey, Joy bug.”

Grant blows her kisses hoping that will suffice, even if it’s very unlikely. Jemma sets Abby down and she promptly trucks it over to him on surprisingly sure feet. Once she gets something down, she masters it quickly.

Jemma barely snatches her back in time before the barrier snaps up.

“Da’s okay,” he explains so hopefully Jemma won’t face a meltdown. “But he’s on a sort of time out.”

Jemma lets out a bark of laughter. “I did some no, nos, but its getting worked out okay,” Grant signs. Abby’s shocked face makes him laugh even as tears sting his eyes. He’s cried more in the
last four days than he has in a decade. The only thing helps even remotely is Jemma seems to be on a bit more solid ground.

“Elisson said it would be good to give Abs back any normalcy I can. So I thought you could finish ‘Hop on Pop’ with her.”

She gives him a sparkling smile, and he’s buoyed by it.

“Well, we do need to find out if Pop survived all that hopping.” Grant jumps in place and Abby giggles as he knew she would.

“For the fortieth time,” he mutters lowly to Jemma. It’s Abby’s go to book right now, and he nearly has it memorized.

Jemma slides the book through the food slot she opens the barrier and they sit as closely together side by side as it will allow. It takes some cajoling, but they get Abby settle for cuddling with Jemma and occasionally patting his arm though the slot as he reads.

He’s almost to the end of the book before he knows it. He’s stalling. He and Jemma both know it. He bends to kiss Abby’s hand where she’s waving it through the hole in the barrier.

“Alright baby, wanna see how it ends?”

His voice might shake a bit but if this his last visit he’s going to soak her up like the sunshine.

He’s distracted from her answer as Coulson walks in with his team and the Avengers. They all file in with somber expressions, except for Thor who is making faces at Abby. Coulson sends the Asgardian a reprimanding look and he falls in line. It’d be comical if Grant wasn’t so sure the ax was about to fall. He hopes they think better of doing it when Jemma has the baby. Bad enough she has to hear it at all, but if she has to try and keep it together for Abby’s sake? He hopes Coulson hasn’t turned that cruel.

Jemma scoots closer to Grant and the wall hums to life. He doesn’t tell her to move, even as it stings and makes his world blurry. When Abby tries to cram herself through the food slot again, Coulson punches something into his tablet and makes a hole in the barrier.

“Might as well hold her before she wedges herself in a laser wall,” he says smiling down at Abby.

Grant is too stunned to say anything.

“We have a proposal for you,” Coulson says as Abby attaches herself to Grant’s chest. “We’re willing to free you but there are a few conditions. For the foreseeable future, you will be under constant surveillance. You will provide SHIELD and the Avengers any Intel they ask for. You will wear trackers at all times, trackers so precise we’ll know when you pee. You’ll disband your Hydra faction. You will live in a prepapproved neighborhood any employment you seek must be approved by SHIELD. You will attend therapy, multiple times week. If you violate any terms and conditions you will stand trial for any and all crimes you have committed over your career as a spy,” Coulson finishes.

Grant presses his lips into the crown of Abby’s head. “This was a smart move, Coulson. I’d agree to anything with her in my arms.”

“You make a move and I’ll come after you myself,” Rogers says.

He shrugs. “Truthfully, I was done the minute they were taken.”
Banner nods to Jemma. “She said as much.”

“One last thing.” Stark tacks on. “I’d like to offer you a job, Dr. Simmons-Ward.”


“I need someone to run my bio-engineering department. I only hire the best, and you’re it. Besides, I believe you should be judged by your own merits and not the faults of your husband.”

She looks to Grant.

“Don’t look at me, baby, that choice is all you. Otherwise, I agree to the terms.”

He directs the last bit to Coulson. Jemma nods and turns to Stark.

“I’d like to give you job offer some consideration,” she says slowly. “First, I need to get my family settled, make sure that Abby is going to adjust. I’ve never been away from her until Malick forced things.”

“I understand,” Stark says nonchalantly as he leads the way out the door. “Offers open. I’ll have Pepper send you the details. You’ll be hard pressed to resist, Doc. Pep’s an excellent negotiator.”

The Avengers file out, and Daisy finally lowers the barrier. Jemma’s through in seconds flat. She launches herself at the side that isn’t occupied holding Abby and hugs him so hard they all lose their balance and fall over. Grant can’t help the happy laughter that bubbles up out of him. They’re going to have their life together, one better than he could even have imagined. They’re going to get their ever after.

Chapter End Notes

AN: George Tarleton and MODAK belongs Marvel. However Sarona Cheree Tarleton belongs to me. I created her completely ignorant of the MODAK/George Tarelton until I went surfing Maravel Wiki for a proper villain. The commonality of their names and how nicely he fit my plot needs was a happy accident.

Killing of Sarona was a very painful yet needed thing as there needed to be proper sacrifices made to the planet and to the gravity of the rescue. if you enjoyed the chapter please let me know. This story will wrap up fairly soon as there is only one chapter left.-MM
The Reality of Joy

When they land and she realizes where they are, Grant is pretty sure the only time he has ever seen Jemma smile bigger was on their wedding day. It's impossible not to smile back at her in the face of all that joy as they stand on the helipad on top of their building, the one with the condo she’d hate to leave behind even as she fled from Garner. The Chicago wind and helicopter blades push them forward into the hall, then it is a few short minutes until they are before their own doorway. When they get inside she turns to him, Abby cradled in her arms.

“How’d you get them to approve this?” He shakes his head, as confused as she is, but then Daisy grins at her. “Fitz said this place means a lot to you.” She shrugs. “We swung it.”

Grant is pretty sure the only thing that keeps her from flinging her arms around Daisy is the sleeping Abby. As it is, tears fill her eyes and she leans into her former teammate as best she can.

The SHIELD team dropping them are efficient as they set up their home to keep an eye on him, as promised. They reengineer his camera systems to monitor him and completely revamp the security, Daisy taking the lead on the computer systems, muttering under her breath and, he assumes, taking note of anything left that might need dismantling.

He has absolutely no idea where his team is or what is still standing of his base, if anything. He doesn’t care. He’s got all that will ever matter at his side.

As the SHIELD team finally prepares to leave, Daisy secures his security bracelet, smirking as she locks it on his wrist.

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?” he grumbles, looking down at the band that is identical to the one she was forced to wear.

“The irony is not lost on me, I won’t lie.”

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After SHIELD leaves, he finds Jemma sitting on the couch staring off into space.

“Hey, stop it.”

She starts at his voice, her forehead wrinkling adorably in confusion.

“Stop waiting for the other shoe to drop.” He steps over Abby, awake now and unsure of this new place and therefore is refusing to leave her Mama’s side. He plops himself down beside Jemma. “Because even if it does eventually drop? It can’t be any worse than all the things we’ve already been through.”

“That is likely,” she leans into him as though bone weary, and he rubs a soothing hand up and down her arm. After a moment, she sighs, and it nearly sounds content. “Want to order pizza from Malnati’s?”

"Nah. Pisano's, definitely." He smiles. “Abby is going to pick the pepperonis off and hand them to us again, but sure, let’s order in.”

“It’s so quiet without the crew.” He hears what she isn’t saying. It’s too quiet without Tarleton.
And honestly, he has to agree.

“We’ll adjust.”

She leans up to kiss his cheek. “Deep dish?”

He nods wondering if all of this change will be too much to ask of her. First, she had to adjust to his team, his choices, his life. Now it’s all gone and they have to rebuild yet again. She stands to make the order, holding out her hand for his credit card, which he dutifully procures, hoping SHIELD will leave her with something. He watches her with careful eyes, making a silent vow to her that he will make it worth it for her.

They watch Abby warily explore until the pizza arrive, then they have dinner. Jemma laughs as, just as he predicted, Abby hands him her pepperoni slices with a huge smile on her face mumbling something that sounds suspiciously like “Take that.”

She also slams her sippy cup down on the table repeatedly.

“Thor.” Jemma explains the new behavior, then laughs again.

It’s the most beautiful sound he’s ever heard.

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He goes to shower and leaves Jemma to get Abby settled, their routine honed from the months he was lost to them on the planet. They’ll find a new rhythm to let him in, he knows, but there has been enough change foisted on Abby for one night, and she comes first.

He’s getting ready to shave when Jemma appears behind him in the mirror, the fog from the hot water still clouding the corners of the class.

“Hey… she down?” he catches her tired eyes in the reflection.

“For now. Though she may well end up in our bed.”

“That wouldn’t be the worst, though it does derail my carefully-laid plans.”

Her eyes light up, suddenly awake again at his suggestion. Jemma smiles at him and pushes off the door frame to cross to him. “Let me do that?” she nods the straight razor he’s holding up.

“Sure.”

She levers herself up onto the sink “Are we ditching the whole beard or just trimming up, like usual?”

“Trimming it up because the Joy Bug won’t recognize me without it. Besides,” he winks at her. “I know how much you like it.”

“You are so insufferably cocky,” she laughs, picking up the shaving soap and swirling the wet brush in it

She parts her knees and he steps into the gap so she can reach his face. He squeezes her upper thighs, exposed by the shorty shorts she bums around in, content for a moment to let her gently apply the lather, watching her face settle into serious focus as she begins to shape his beard. After a few strokes, he leans forward to kiss her, uncaring of his half-shaved face.
“Uh- uh.” She backs off. “I need you to be still and let me concentrate so I don’t cut you.”

He almost whines petulantly. Almost. They haven’t been together in months, literally.

“Good things come to those who wait.” She reads his mind. She grabs his chin to angle his face how she wants it and she sets to work.

She’s all critical eyes, precision, and rhythm. Scrape, scrape, rinse the blade. For a second he becomes lost in the monotony of it, in the scent of the soap and the warmth emanating from her body, so close to his again, finally.

Her next statement snaps him out of it.

“I’d understand if you decide you can’t do civilian life.”

She’s not looking at him, her eyes cast down. He can’t have that.

He catches her chin in his hand and tilts her face up so she meets his gaze, knows he means every word.

“I’d do anything if it means I get a life with you. You see you’re worth everything, right?”

Her lips trembles and he sees every self-doubt flicker across her face. “I don’t blame you for Sarona’s death, or for my ending up on the planet. I did that. I put my lot in with Malick and strung him along. I’m the reason all of this happened not you. And if nothing else, baby, it gave me clarity and perspective. I had no purpose within Hydra, ever. I was a cog in the wheel to them, with a healthy ambition and drive, sure, but that’s all. Hydra was a tool for my revenge.”

“And now?” she rinses the straight razor.

“Now I see that vengeance is empty. The only thing Hydra has ever done is take shit away from me.” Her brows quirk down at that. “Being alone for as long as I was, was both terrifying and enlightening. I have no idea how you survived it for that long.”

She shrugs. “I had to. If I let it win, then it would have had the power it craved and I… I just couldn’t do it. Also, I think Abby was meant to exist.”

He smiles. “So do I.”

They go back into a comfortable silence she finishes up and wipes his face clean and pats on the aftershave. “You feel like a new man?” she’s all bright happiness and sweetness, her hands warm on his cheeks. “I’ll cut your hair tomorrow if you li-“

He cuts her off, kissing her. She lingers a second before kissing him back, the pulls back. “If at any point this becomes sensory overload,” she says before he can chase her lips with his, “or you don’t want to be touched or if it’s too dark in here or just don’t want to for any reason, that’s okay, Grant. Just tell me and we’ll stop.”

“Jemma. I want this. I kissed you, baby.”

“I know, I just, I can remember the trepidation coming back, the fear that nothing is real, and I don’t want you to rush or be overwhelmed.”

He brushes her hair behind her ear and she leans into his touch. “I love you so damn much, I love that you care so much, but there is never going to be a time or a circumstance where I’m not going to want you.” She opens her mouth as though to counter, but he pushes on. “No matter what malevolent, otherworldly asshole tries to break me. I want you. Preferably now-ish, before Abby wakes up.”
She nods resolutely. She kisses him and it is a long, slow explorative affair. He likes it. He’d be perfectly happy to stay this way for the foreseeable future. Jemma’s face in his hands, her hair soft beneath his fingertips, and her eyelashes tickling his cheeks.

She tastes the same which grounds him in the moment. She is the feeling of home, and he can’t remember the last time he kissed her just to kiss her, with no rush or fears lingering on the edges. He likes it, plans to do it more often.

He could do this forever, but he could do other things too, wants her in ways he could only imagine while stuck on that planet, and she’s here with him now. He’s not going to waste this opportunity. Not going to waste another moment with her ever again.

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The fierceness of the kiss rolls over Jemma like fire, suffusing heat all over her body. What started off languid and sweet transforms into a desperate thing, all teeth and tongue. Grant moves lower, down her chin and throat. He strips her of the oversized Henley she is wearing to move across her shoulders. He bites at the swell of her breast and the edge of pain sings down into her core in the best way.

“Grant…” she whispers. They have barely even begun and she is completely ready to go. He moves lower and lower and he’s right there, helping her lift her hips so he can slide her shorts off her legs, a pleased note in his throat when he sees she hadn’t bothered with underwear beneath them.

He’s not messing around. He wants to get her off and makes quick work of it, not because he is in a hurry to get his, but simply because he knows her body so well. He pulls her to the very edge of the counter to swing her legs over his shoulders and brackets her hips. She is dependent on him for balance but she can’t make herself care as he licks insistently at her from stem to stern, one hand leaving her side so fingers can press in and out of her firmly. The first orgasm is soft and quick. He is apparently dissatisfied with that and keeps at it until a second one builds and rolls through her. By the third one, he is focused entirely on her clit, licking and sucking to the point she’s begging, for what she doesn’t know.

“Grant…” she pleads, breaking off on a sob as she tries to avoid waking Abby.

He backs off to answer her, his thumb making light circles on clit to keep her on edge.

“What, baby?” his voice rasps.

“I can’t…” she whines, tingling from her center to every cell of her body, it would seem.

“Yes, you can. Just come.”

She opens her eyes to look at him. The smile he gives her is criminal. “This is supposed to be about you,” she tells him. Because she’d wanted to be his port in the storm for once.

He shrugs carelessly. “It is. I’ve thought about doing this for months.” He presses down on her clit, making her thoughts fritz out. “Now, come,” he orders, ducking back down.

“So boss—“the force of her orgasm cuts her off as he sucks into her into his mouth at the same moment his fingers find her g-spot. Her whole world blurs out and narrows on the way he looks at her as she flies apart, gripping the sink and gasping out his name.

She’s basically a wet noodle after that, trembling with aftershocks in his arms as he carries her
toward their bed. She kisses his shoulders and neck, whatever part of him she can reach in her languid state. When she hits that one spot of his neck he freezes in place a moment, groaning out her name.

She must look fairly pleased with herself, because he answers the challenge. “I’m going to make you scream my name,” he promises.

“Abby,” she reminds him.

“Maybe just whisper it a lot.”

She laughs. “Alright.”

They finally reach the bed. He lays her down and follows, moving his body over hers.

“I want to be on top.” She freezes. “If that’s okay. You can tell me if it isn’t yet. Because of the planet.”

He lifts his fingers to her lips to stop her babbling and she presses a kiss to the tips. Smiling down at her and he flips them over, tacit permission to have things her way. She kisses him, a slip and retreat of teeth and tongue. Tasting herself on him is barbarically intoxicating.

Then it’s her turn to work her own way down his body, sucking an impressive hickey into the side of his neck that has him squeezing her thighs and growling in approval.

“Patience, darling,” she chides, moving lower still. Across his pecs and down his abs in a wonky line. When she nips at top of his pelvic bone, he gasps, bucking up beneath her. When she takes him into her mouth, she fears he may have stopped breathing, until he says her name between gritted teeth.

“Inside you,” he pleads after only a few moments, and she moves up, happy to oblige him.

He guides her down on to him and she sets a slow, rocking pace.

“So damn beautiful,” he murmurs, almost to himself.

“I love you.” She murmurs back, increasing the pace slightly, balancing her weight on his abs to better grind down.

“I love you, too. Faster, baby, please.”

She leans forward, picking up the pace, and then within seconds they come together. She does say his name, as promised, but it is muffled by his kiss.

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As she lies utterly wrung out across his chest, the enormity of everything they have withstood hits her. She begins to cry. Not quite weeping either: full on, body-wracking sobs. He plays with her hair and rubs her back like last time, except last time her breakdown wasn’t visible or audible it was simply her…choosing him.

He kisses the top of her head murmuring comforting nonsense and just waits.

Once she calms down, she speaks lowly. “I’m sorry, I hate being the silly git who cries after sex and yet here I am blubbering.”

“It’s okay.” He laughs just a bit. “The sex was good,” he teases, knowing full well that wasn’t why
she was crying, but that she’d rather process longer before discussing it.

“We should watch the video of Abby’s first steps. I waited for you.” As if Abby heard her name being spoken, a cry splits the air.

“Ugh, why doesn’t she just stab me in the heart. It’d be easier than the scared cry.”

“You’re just being dramatic. I’ll grab the iPad and change the sheets while you get her, since this is clearly where she’ll end up anyway.”

He watches as the beard burn on Jemma’s thighs disappears beneath pajama bottoms. He feels a little bit of barbaric pride at the sight. Before he can watch her put a shirt on Abby’s cries become more insistent and he’s forced to put on pants and go get her.

“I’ll be right there, Abs,” He calls out.

Jemma listens to them through the monitor with half an ear as she switches the bedding out.

“Hey Sweetie, I’m here…it’s okay, Bug. Did think you were alone? I’m sorry, it’s been a lot of new places at once, huh?”

“Da!”

“Joy! Don’t judge me; you have equally-severe bedhead going on.” Grant must make a face because Abby laughs, a high, tinkling, truly-amused sound.

-/-

After watching the security feed of Abby walking multiple times, the girls fall asleep side by side. Jemma is now spooned up against him as they lay beneath Jemma’s favorite cloud-print flannel sheets. She said that was all she could find he doesn’t believe her at all.

He doesn’t sleep, even as he knows he should. It’s half fear of what sleep may bring, and half wanting to remain in this moment. Still, he contents himself with watching his girls sleep. Jemma is curled against him, the hand not wrapped around their daughter reaching back to anchor on him, and Abby is snuggled up and latched into her. Her little fists are twisted into Jemma’s tank top. Abby snores soundly, completely at peace for the first time in months.

For the first time in months, too, Grant feels himself relaxing. He’ll sleep tomorrow. Tonight, he’ll hold onto this moment. Hold onto what he thought he’d lost forever.

-/-/-

Jemma spends her time trying to help him reacclimatize to life on earth and deal with the loss of Tarleton and her self-perceived guilt surrounding it. Except she’s not really dealing; she’s stuffing it down like she did when she was pregnant with Abby. She’s shutting him out on this and he knows why, but if he can’t reach her he can’t help her. Neither can Elisson, as she doesn’t practice in this area. They’re trying to find new care and a therapist that fits, but so far they’ve struck out, and it’s starting to show at more than the edges.

Depression is sucking Jemma back down and has been since they have been in civilian life. He’s trying to reach her, really he is, but other than sex and her holding him through the night there’s a wall up. She doesn’t want to burden him, he thinks, worried about his trauma over hers, and
nothing he can say or do on his own can get her past that. So when Daisy comes for her monthly “tech check”, he sucks up his pride to ask her for help.

“Listen, I need you to go be Jemma’s friend.”

“I am Jemma’s friend,” she says slowly, as though he’s stupid. She might mutter, “ass” under her breath, but he ignores it.

“No, I mean-” He sighs. “She does this thing when she’s freaked and doesn’t want to come to me with something. She shuts everything out and she’s doing that now. I don’t know if what’s bothering her is grieving Sarona or she’s spinning from having to uproot our lives.”

Daisy is nodding thoughtfully, so he carries on. “I think she doesn’t know who she can trust other than me, and she thinks I’m not an option and I can’t convince her otherwise. She needs someone to trust and she trusts you. Will you help her?”

“Darling, can you distract Abby long enough to make Doc McStuffins, Doc McStop?” Jemma asked coming into the foyer. “Oh! Hello, Daisy.”

“Yep, it’s that time again,” Daisy says breezily. “Come talk to me while I do the camera check? It will be an annoying children’s cartoon free zone…”

“Yes, please,” Jemma says, a bit of desperation in her voice. They need to find Abby a new obsession as fast. “Oh, and you really need to fix the swivel on the one in the hallway. Every time I get up to use the loo, it squeaks the time we fired the mis-calibrated night-night bullets on Grant.”

“I did not squeak. Your aim was off.”

Jemma just smirks at him.

-/-/-

Daisy stands, switching out the shifting mechanism on the camera. She’s been working in relative quiet, the odd hum of thought now and again as she dismantled the bottom of the camera. It’s a balm as Jemma relaxes in the lack of cartoon noise, but now that she’s nearing the end, her friend casually drops the questions Jemma should have expected were coming.

“So, Ward is all worried, says you seem a little … off. And I figure, the smartest person on pretty much the whole planet knows when she’s off and why.”

Jemma freezes, twisting her hands nervously as Daisy carried on. “So I’m asking, because we didn’t ask last time and relied on bad advice against our instincts and that blew up in our faces. I’m not doing that now, so what’s up?” she asks, glancing back at Jemma.

“I think I’m pregnant.”

It comes out in a rush of breath and crunched together syllables.

Daisy laughs gleefully. “You are not!” She gets down off the ladder and rushes over to throw her arms around Jemma and squeal at pitches only dogs can hear.

Something about being hugged so tightly set off the tears Jemma had been fighting all day.

“Yes, I’m happy,” Jemma wails.

“Then what? Does Ward know?” Daisy asks, somewhere between outright laughter and apprehension.

“No one was happy for me last time and I’m so worried and scared, and Grant is adjusting and my friend is gone and it’s a lot all at once. I’m just? Last time, I got really severe depression, and I …I don’t want to cock it all up again.”

Daisy just hugs her tighter, lets her get it all out. “I’m happy for you, Jem. And I promise, I was happy last time because it was something you wanted. It’s going to be fine. We’ll prepare for everything. Post-whatever depression or morning sickness. And Grant seems to be adjusting well enough. He’s going to be over the moon over this anyway.”

“You think?”

“I believe.” Daisy smiles at her. “That’s different.”

Jemma sighs heavily.

“And I know I’m not Sarona, but I’m here.”

“I just feel adrift and awful.” Tears spring to her eyes again. “She sacrificed herself for my crusade.”

“That’s what you do for something or someone you love. It’s what you’ll do for Abby and for Ward in a heartbeat. For SHIELD, for Fitz. And I know you wouldn’t change it. Hell, you’d do it again and so would she. And Jemma, try to remember Grant isn’t the only person left who loves you.” Daisy hugs her tightly again. “I’m going to throw you the biggest shower! How do you invite a demigod? Abs should have a play mate.”

Jemma laughs outright which was Daisy’s intention.

“I love you too, Daisy, and since Grant doesn’t know so mum is the word for now alright?”

“You’re going to tell him soon, though, right?” Daisy says, concern beneath her voice. “Not that I don’t like having something over him, but…”

“I will,” Jemma promises. “Soon. Once I know for sure.”

“Good,” Daisy nods. “Oh my God, this time we’re going to get to see you with your basketball belly! It’s going to be hilarious and I can’t wait!”

-/-

A few nights and a positive result on three sticks later bolster her, so she sets on telling Grant. There had always been music on in their house as it calms Jemma and quite simply made her happy. Recent events made it so their house was silent, and Grant had now taken it upon himself to turn the music back on. Bob Seager’s “Old Time Rock & Roll” blares from their kitchen, and she follows the sound from her study and finds Grant in the midst of a nice spin, his entirely unimpressed audience of one at his feet.

He pulls Abby to her feet, trying and failing to coax her into a sidestep. Grant had discovered during her PT that, though Abby can walk, sometimes her balance and endurance were iffy at best. Often, she would revert to crawling for ease and comfort. Dancing works as a creative form of
exercise that Abby likes and gets her on her feet. So they dance. A lot.

Abby is not biting on this sidestep though. Her tiny ponytail bops to the beat, though, and although she can’t see Abby’s face, Jemma knows her face lights up when the saxophone kicks in because Grant laughs, a loud a happy sound. Abby wiggles her hips and shakes her bum a little, but otherwise remains stationary.

When the song ends, Jemma asks from the periphery. “How would you feel about adding in another partner?”

“Sure baby, I can multitask. Come on, I started the pasta for you. It’s got a bit to go, so we can fit in another dance.”

“No, Grant, I don’t mean me I should have specified your partner won’t arrive for a bit. Months, in fact.”

His face quirks in confusion that is undeniably cute.

“Oh, goodness, do keep up, Grant,” she teases. “I’m pregnant.”

His face lights up with dawning realization, and he crosses to her in three smooth strides. He catches her face in his hands and kisses the stuffing out of her.

“Really?” he asks when he pulls away, and the rush from the kiss means it takes her a moment to remember what his question is about. When it does, the excitement in his tone makes a lump rise in her throat. She didn’t get this part last time.

“Yes, really,” she barely replies before he’s kissing her again.

“I love you…”

“I love you, too.” Jemma feels an insistent smack on her calf and looks down to Abby sitting at their feet, sucking her pacifier with an accusatory look in her eyes at being left out of something. Grant scoops her up, bouncing her joyfully as he removes her pacifier from her mouth.

“Can you say baby? Baby?”

“No, thank you,” she signs in return.

“Soon you’ll want to,” Grant says, using his free arm to tug Jemma back into him again. His hand grazes her soon-to-disappear waist reverently and she didn’t think she could be happier. But she can. They can.

They will.

She leans over to drop a kiss on Abby’s temple, then up to kiss her husband again. And if she bursts into tears at the overwhelming joy she feels, well, Abby and Grant will just have to get used to it, because she’s going to be all hormones for the next seven or eight months.

Grant drops a knowing kiss to her neck as he distracts Abby from thinking her mama is in distress.

“Dinner?” he asks casually. “Perhaps some weird toppings for your pasta now? Ketchup and chocolate? Peanuts and ice cream?”

“Not yet,” she laughs tearfully. “But probably soon, my love.”
“I can’t wait,” Grant says, a promise in his voice. And she believes. She has everything she ever wanted, everything that makes her happy.

She believes in happily ever after again. She knows she’s found it.

AN: I own nothing. All that remains is the epilogue. If you enjoyed this chapter let me know. Many thanks as always to Myranda.
Three years later…

Daisy isn’t sure what she expects when she pulls into the lot of the Chicagoland Park where they’re having the buddy walk, but it’s definitely not Grant Ward wearing a neon pink T-shirt with “Abby’s Advocate’s” written on the front and “Abby’s Daddy” emblazoned across the shoulders on the back.

“Pink?” she teases, getting out of her car.

“Shut up,” Grant says, but with no rancor. “Jem asked Abs what color she wanted her team shirts and here we are.”

He turns back to the sedan to continue helping the heavily-pregnant Jemma unload the vehicle.

“Darling, will you let me put sunblock on you, so I can get the girls to let me put on them?” Jemma says, going to take Frannie out of her car seat only to be intercepted by her husband.

“No heavy lifting, you know the rules.”

“Oh, honestly, Grant,” Jemma rolls her eyes fondly. “Hello Daisy.” She turns back to Grant. “Sunblock?”

“Sure, why not? Why do we need the stroller? It’s only a mile walk.” Grant mutters.

Daisy opens up the car to free Abby from her car seat. When the little girl sees her, she squeals “Day-ee!”

“Abby!” Daisy says with equal excitement, hugging Abby tightly a second before sitting on her light-up sneakered feet.

“What my Fit-Fit?”

“Fitz is on his way, Bug.” Daisy says laughing. She kisses Abby’s pigtailed head and watches as she takes off at dead run to Jemma’s side of the car, piggy tails and oversized bows flying.

“Eleanor Abigail!” Grant chides sharply as he lugs the double stroller out. “We don’t run in parking lots!”

Abby turns to him, shooting him a baleful look. She points to the bouncy castle.

“We will take you, but you still need to wait,” Grant says firmly.

“Come puts sunblock on first and wait for Fitz and everybody else, okay?” Jemma pleads as Ward hitches Francesca up as Jemma digs the lotion out of the diaper bag.

Frannie, as Ward calls her, looks nothing like him. She had inherited her paternal grandmother’s red hair but otherwise looks exactly like a miniature Jemma. Daisy watches as Jemma slathers each of them with sunscreen while both parents interact with the girls, listening intently even as Abby slips from sign language to English and back again, or nodding to Frannie’s gibberish.
They’re good parents. It makes Daisy glad she fought to let Ward stay free.

Everyone starts trickling in, much to the girls’ delight. Fitz arrives first and is enveloped into what could be considered tackle hugs.

“I just don’t get the appeal.” Ward says with a joking sigh.

“Well, love, they are Simmons women as well as Wards.” Jemma teases back.

“You are not funny.”

“I think I am quite hilarious.” She kisses his cheek and steps forward to hug Fitz.

“You’re not jealous anymore,” Daisy comments, surprised, stepping up beside him.

He shrugs. “I am, a little. Hard not to be jealous of that connection because I’ll never be able to give her that. She chose me though, so I’ll endure her connection with Fitz happily.”

Next Bobbi and Lance arrive. The chill between Bobbi and Jemma has thawed but never fully recovered to the point either of them would like. Daisy hopes doing this together will be another brick in the bridge they’re trying to build.

Then Tony and Pepper arrive, as Jemma had taken the job with Stark Industries after all, and Daisy suspects the soft-hearted Iron Man would have likely come out anyway. Rumor has it that Abby’s walk team has blown away all other teams in the way of monetary donations, mostly because Stark likes Abby as much as he likes to win.

Coulson arrives alone, as May is away on a mission, but she’s sent Coulson with a truly fantastic array of blue and yellow balloons for the girls. The whole team is represented. Daisy’s heart swells.

-/-/-

They register their team and hand out pink t-shirts. They take awkward group pictures as well goofy ones. There are a couple really good ones that Daisy plans to have framed for Jemma.

Then there are opening ceremonies and various speakers. Daisy is surprised when Jemma takes the stage.

“Hi! My name is Jemma Simmons-Ward and I’m here with my daughter Abby, who is five. I was asked by the Down’s mother-and-daughter class Abby I attend to address the new parents in the crowd.” She takes a breath. “First off let me say, all thoughts you’ve had, or are having? They’re normal and you are not bad for thinking them. The how will I ever connect, will they have a sense of purpose, will they always be my responsibility, will they live, will they have love, and can I do this? And so many more.

“I don’t have all the answers, but I will tell you ones I think I do have.” She smiles down to the crowd, her eyes easily finding her family. “Connecting is so much simpler than I ever thought it would be. Though realizing it didn’t come as quickly as the simplicity suggestions. Even me, with my three PHDs and a what my best friend fondly calls my obnoxiously big IQ, it took me almost a year to figure out the best way to connect with Abby wasn’t through any particular pursuit or routine or therapy. It was simply through love. Just love. Because love transcends all mentalities. I loved her, and in doing so, I found deeper parts of myself. I learned to see the world through her gaze.” She looks over to Ward, who sends her a reassuring wink. “We do connect, we have interesting conversations about what color she should paint the White House when she becomes
President—“

“Purple!” Abby shouts out.

“See! She is my late night TV-watching partner, and we have an unspoken agreement that if she doesn’t mention my eating her dad’s very particular brand of peanut butter, I don’t mention her sneaking the great Dane into her bedroom at 1 am. I no longer worry about building the connection because it is there, and always has been. She is mine and I am hers, and it’s all that matters.”

Jemma pauses to gather herself for a moment.

“I know Abby has purpose. It may not look like the world wants it to look, but Abby will always have purpose. She brings people together. She brought my family back together. She brings light, and joy wherever she goes. But more than that, Abby will choose her own path. Her purpose as she sees it. And, that’s something every parent shares in.

“Will she have love? Romantically speaking, I honestly don’t know. I hope so. I know it presents a different challenge, but I also know it is not impossible. I know it is something I hope for her. But I also know that she’s five years old, and that there’s plenty of time for her to grow and figure out if that is something she even wants. And regardless? She will know love. She already knows love. It shows in the tender patience her father has with her, or the way he hugs her every day when she get home from school. It shows in her interactions with her sisters. It shows in the people who have shown up for her here today.

“Will she always be my responsibility? I believe that our children are always our responsibility, that is our job as parents to make sure they can be the best people they can be for the world and in the world, that they can live the best lives they can. It’s likely that, for Abby, this might mean something different, that she may not be able to live independently from us as her parents or without other assistance. I don’t mind. I’m going to spend my life nurturing all my children and protecting them, as best I can, throughout life anyway, regardless of their abilities. Isn’t that what parenthood is?

Lastly, can you do it? I didn’t think I could and yet… here we are, five years later. Is it hard? Yes. Am I scared more often the average parent? Probably so, but it’s been the most awesome, terrifying, lovely, joyous experience of my life, to be her mother.

In the end, I promise, it isn’t as hard as you think it is going to be. Just... love your children. Ask them questions. Demand equality, and use your support system. Because who loves your child more deeply than you?” she took a breath. “That’s the b---best I have. Thank you.”

She gets down from the podium and stands in front of them, shifting nervously. “How was that?”

“Great, very eloquent babe.” Grant says, ducking to kiss her.

“Perfect,” Bobbi adds in, sounding truly sincere.

/-/-

They begin the walk together, knotted up in their pink bedecked group. All their conversation overlapps, but with Jemma being as pregnant as she is, soon falls behind so Daisy and Bobbi loop back around.

“You alright, Jem?”
She looks to Bobbi. “Fine, just weighing the merits of divorcing Grant for abandoning me.” She nods up ahead to Ward who is walking with Abby on his shoulders and talking intently with Fitz about something. Fitz is carting Frannie.

Bobbi doesn’t rise to the bait. “It’s only a mile. We got this. You got this.”

Jemma smiles. “Love you, Bob.” Daisy can tell she means it.

“I was going to tell you,” Daisy adds in, flanking Jemma’s other side. “I got cleared to yank the surveillance on Grant. I’ll be by tomorrow.”

“How’d you swing that?” Jemma asked.

“The girls are getting too big to be surveyed. And… he’s been solid. He’s come a long way and I’ve finally got the brass to acknowledge it.”

Jemma throws her arms around Daisy and they stand for a long moment in a hug. Longer than truly warranted, by the end.”

“Uh, Jem? You know you still have to finish the walk, right? Sooner you get moving, the sooner you can order Grant to massage your feet.

“Fine,” Jemma sighs.

At the end of the walk there are people lining the finish line to hug the participants.

Grant had put Abby down in the last leg to finish on her own, and she doesn’t walk, she runs for the finish, Grant trailing her at a clip. She is finally caught up in the arms of Coulson, who is waiting to hug her.

Daisy looks over to find Jemma watching with misty eyes as the girls and Grant join the hug line.

For the first time that day, she stops to consider what this day had meant for Jemma. All of the acceptance and love she’d lost returned to her. What it means that Abby and Francesca are not only here but they thrive. That Grant is as whole as he’ll ever be.

It makes Daisy choke up. To know what Jemma came through, rose above. That her friend survived it all to get here, at her happily ever after.

Chapter End Notes

AN: And that’s it guys, thank you all so much for reading. And to Myranda for being such a patient and encouraging editor.- I started this fic with one simple question. What happens when you give the smartest person in the room a disabled child? this is what happened. I had lots of big ideas not sure I got them all across but I tried and I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did. I do have a few more headcannons for this verse so there may be more in store, Also, if you wish to prompt me for more Abby work? You may find me @ Meghan84.tumblr.com Thanks again!-MM
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!