Parallel lines should never meet in a single point.

Parallel moments from Fitz's life in the real world and in the Framework. Exploring the influences that could lead to such drastically different outcomes and how AIDA could have perhaps manipulated and subverted his real life memories for her purposes.

Follows Fitz's journey from the moment in childhood where his real and Framework lives diverge - keep showing similar moments from his real life and his "Framework memories."

Warning: Framework Fitz was pretty evil, so his Framework moments are likely to be dark. I will put specific trigger warnings for each chapter as well.
New Starts

Chapter Summary

This chapter shows the moment of split when Fitz is 10-year old. In real life his father abandons him, while in the Framework he comes back for him.

Trigger warnings: verbal and physical abuse of a child.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Prologue

1995 - Glasgow

The class is utterly boring again. He has a hard time paying attention, so Leo’s eyes are wandering off from the face of Mrs Robertson, his math teacher, towards the window. He is thinking about his project at home and tries to figure out why his drone got off balance a few minutes after take-off.

“Leo, Leo.” He hears someone calling him. His exasperated math teacher is standing in front of his desk. “I would appreciate an answer, young man.” She says sternly.

“Yes, Mrs Robertson. Would you mind repeating the question, please?” he asks politely. His classmates start to stare and giggle. Leo ignores them.

“If only you paid attention, Leo. You have such potential.” sighs Mrs Robertson. “Could you please tell us what a parallel is?”

“Most certainly. Parallel lines are lines in a plane which do not meet, intersect or touch each other. They cannot share a single point.” he replies. “At least not in a Euclidean space.” he adds quickly.

Mrs Robertson looks at him with surprise. “I would like to talk to your parents, Leo.” she says after a moment of stunned silence.

Leo shrugs then nods, but he is worried. Dad has a tendency to get worked up after these meetings and that usually means more yelling. All Leo wants is to go home, hide in his room and figure out the balance problem of his flying Lego drone.

Chapter 1

1997-Glasgow
“Look at me when I’m talking to you, Leopold.” his father is angry now. Leo knows the signs; he is spinning out of control and there is no stopping. He keeps staring at his shoes trying to filter out the screaming. He is nervously fidgeting with a coupling that was in his hands when his father stormed into the room fuming.

“How could you be so stupid again? I have to sit through the smug headmistress’ speech about how my son let half the class copy his homework. That he is a bad influence on others. What’s wrong with you?”

Leo knows that it’s useless, but still he tries to defend himself. “Dad, I’m sorry, I was only trying to help Dave… He is my best friend.”

“Your best friend? You are too gullible… and cannot think for yourself.” He yells.

Leo drops the coupling, which falls to the ground with a loud clang. The sudden slap on his face is sharp and it burns his ears. He stagers back and tears start stinging his eyes. Not so much with pain, but with humiliation.

“What are you? A girl? How on earth did I end up with a worthless little wimp like you? This is your mother’s work and I don’t want anything to do with it.” yells his father. Leo’s mind shuts down. All he wishes is to be anywhere but here. All he wants is the screaming to stop.

“That’s enough, Alistair” he hears his mother’s soft voice interjecting. “Leave him alone.”

His father’s anger is instantly redirected at her. “Just stay out of this. Haven’t you done enough harm? Just look at him! A crying freak.”

“Stop!” she says now more forcefully.

Leo sees his father raising a fist, but then instead he storms down the stairs, his mother following.

Leo slides onto the floor with his back against the wall. He hugs tightly Chimp, the big, stuffed monkey that has been his companion since he got it for his second birthday and buries his face into its fluffy fur to muffle his sobs. He hears the echoes of his parents raised voices then he hears the front door slammed shut. Then silence.

The approaching footsteps belong to his mum. "He left?" Leo asks quietly as his mother sits next to him on the floor and wraps an arm around his shoulders. She nods.

"I'm so sorry, mum. I know it's my fault. I don't know how not to disappoint him." he mutters.

"Look at me, Leo. None of this is your fault. You are the most important to me in this world and I love you. We'll get through it together, I promise." she smiles at him and Leo sees the sadness in her eyes, but smiles back at her as a silent promise. His mother gently caresses his face and the burning feeling where his father has hit him slowly fades away.

Following day, in the Framework

The last bell of the day rings and Leo hurries through the school gates, anxious to slip away.
unnoticed from the group of bullies that tormented him on his way home for the last two weeks. He stops at the crosswalk as he hears the sirens of an ambulance. As the ambulance turns around the corner, it vanishes right before Leo's eyes. Instead, a cab is stopped now, just in front of him, the driver impatiently waiting for him to cross. Leopold shakes his head trying to make sense of what just happened.

Suddenly, he freezes when he sees his father approaching. *What is he doing here? He should be at work*, the boy thinks.

"Father… What.. erm" he stutters nervously.

"Come with me, Leopold." he says and leads him to his car. "Get in."

"Where are we going, Father?" he asks nervously.

"Look, son. I want to give you another chance. I have been thinking and I don't want to be responsible for wasting that potential of yours. We live in a hard world, and it is my job to make you into a man, into a survivor. I did not spend as much time with you as I should have, that's why you are becoming weak. This will change now. I discussed with your mother and she agrees it's best if you live with me for a while." he says. "It will be a fresh start for both of us. We'll have a new place to live, a new school that will bring the best out of you. You need to be taught hard work and respect."

Leopold tries to understand what his father is saying. "Is...is mum coming with us?" he stutters.

"Your mother and I have decided to separate, Leopold. It's what's best for everyone."

"Can I go and see her?" Leopold asks choking back the tears that are stinging his eye.

"Not now, at least not while we are getting used to our new lives. I already took your things to the new house" his father says and parks the car in front of a small brick house.

They enter and everything feels wrong. There are no pictures on the wall, no potted plants, there is no smell of supper cooking on the stove. It does not look like a home at all. Leopold follows his father to his new room. All the furniture is dark. His posters, some of his books and most of his toys are missing. Most painfully, Chimp is not there. He bites back the question, as he knows all too well his father's opinion as regards 10-year old boys sleeping with stuffed animals.

"Pack your things for school tomorrow, Leopold. I'll order us some food." he leaves the room.

Leopold collapses on the bed and buries his face in a pillow. Nothing about this feels right. He feels like throwing up, his breaths are shallow, his brain is not working and he is scared. He has a vague feeling of being trapped, but he doesn't exactly know where. He wants his mum more than anything in the world, but instead of crying, he just hugs his pillow tighter.

Chapter End Notes

Every time the Framework is reset, probably the people plugged in experience a "glitch" - and as Fitz was plugged in against his will, he probably experienced some physical discomfort.

I call Fitz in real life "Leo" throughout his childhood, which I think is what his mother
calls him.

In the Framework, everyone referred to him as Leopold.
Chapter Summary

Fitz tries to come to terms with his parents separation both in the real world and in the Framework.

Chapter Notes

Warning: Verbal and Physical abuse of a child.

The show has established that Fitz's father was physically abusive.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1997, Two weeks later

School has been boring as usual, but the day has been fruitful nonetheless. Leo is walking home briskly, excited about the new sketches he made during the day in his notebook. He is itching to start building small-scale models as soon as he gets home. He is taking stock in his head if all the parts needed are in his tinkering box. He’s so lost in thought that he almost gets run over by a car at the crosswalk.

When he gets home, something is strange. The first thing out of place is the smell of cigarette smoke. Then some things are missing from the living room: some pictures, an armchair, the TV. He finds his mum in the kitchen sitting at the counter with a glass of wine and a cigarette.

“Since when do you smoke, Mum?!?” a question and a disapproval. “What happened?”

“Leo, sit down.” his mum says. Her tone of voice sounds serious. “Your father was here earlier today. He took his things away. We are divorcing.”.

“It’s because of me, isn’t it?” Leo asks sadly. The house has been calmer without his father, but he cannot help missing him. He remembers the good times; wrestling on the floor, watching football together on the couch, getting his first electronic screwdriver, building things. There were good times, though lately more bad than good.

“Leo, I told you, it’s not because of you. We just... we didn’t get along much lately. We tried, but we could not work it out.” She is struggling to explain.

“I don’t think he ever liked me.” Leo says.

“He was so happy when you were born. We both were. It was the happiest day of my life.” she smiles at him. “He loves you in his own way, but it’s just... well, he doesn’t really know how to love someone well.”
“What do you mean, mum?” Leo asks. After all, he is only ten and this talk of love goes a bit over his head.

“For him, loving is all about control. But to really love somebody means you give them freedom, you give them a choice, even if that choice hurts you,” she says. “You’ll understand it a bit later. He believes in you, and he knows that you can do anything you set your mind on. But he has always wanted you to do it his way. Perhaps to be someone he could never be.”

“And you, mum? Who do you want me to be?” Leo asks quietly.

“I just want you to be you. My baby who is growing up way too fast and who is sleeping with a stuffed monkey, but talks to me about science and I realize I cannot follow.” his mum now hugs Leo with a tear in her eye.

“You know,” she changes the subject “I had a meeting with your headmaster today. He thinks that you should follow a special learning plan for gifted students. You could finish school faster, he says. Do you think you would like that? It may be more challenging, but the teachers seem to think it would be the right thing for you.”

Leo thinks for a moment. Hard work is not something he is used to, but he is intrigued. “So I could start studying physics and advanced maths now?”

“Yes, I think so.” her mum replies.

“I think I would like to try that.” Leo replies, excited.

“Good. We will meet them tomorrow to sort out your study plan. And if you don’t like it, you can still go back to your class.” she smiles.

1997, two weeks later inside the Framework

When the classes end, Leopold starts running down the street in the direction of his old house instead of going home. It has been two weeks since he went to live with his father and he hasn't heard from his mother since. He tried calling her one night but no one picked up the phone.

He is having a hard time getting used to the new private school; there is more discipline and rigid rules, his classmates are extremely competitive (mostly from hoity-toity families, he has no idea how his father can afford this place), and since he can outsmart them on almost all subjects with little effort, after two weeks, he already has a reputation and no friends. He misses his old life; he wants to ask his mother about going back to his old school, his old house. Most of all, he wants to know she is all right.

When he finally gets to the house, the window-panes are closed and the door is locked. He rings the bell, but doesn't expect an answer. He fishes out the key from his backpack and opens the front door. He feels a cold rush of air and can tell immediately that the heating has not been turned on for a while. He goes to his old bedroom, where he finds his tinkering box the way he had left it. Chimp is on his bed. After a moment of pause, he grabs the monkey and stuffs it in his rucksack. He goes to his parents' bedroom, and then rummages around the living room for possible clues, but to his frustration, he doesn't find anything. He opens the fridge door and sees the milk has gone off. Mum has not been here for at least a week. Empty handed, and not knowing what else to do, he tracks across the city to his new home.
When he enters the door, he finds his father sitting at the kitchen table - menacing. His eyes are cold as ice and although he is not yelling, Leopold feels his bubbling anger as he asks through gritted teeth:

"Where have you been, boy?"

Leopold considers for a moment coming up with a lie about a friend or an afterschool project, but finally opts to tell the truth: "I went to see Mother. But she was not there. I know you are hiding something from me, what aren't you telling me, Dad?"

"What you did was reckless and disrespectful and there will be consequences, boy. But at least you are not lying anymore. If you want to know what happened to your mother, fine, I will take you to her. But remember, everything I do, I do it in your best interest." he adds and grabs his coat.

After a long and silent car ride they arrive at a big, dark building, which looks like a prison from the outside.

"What is this place, Father?" Leo asks fearfully. Instead of replying, his father motions him to follow. They enter a dark reception area, with orderlies dressed in white. A guard stands in their way: "Visiting hours is only on the weekends." he says.

"My son needs to see his mother, right now. Can you get me the doctor on call?" Alistair Fitz asks. When the doctor arrives, they talk with his father in hushed voices and Leopold cannot make out what they say. He looks around and manages to read one of the staff badges "psychiatric hospital". Finally the doctor tells them to follow and shows them to a dark room.

Leopold sees his mother on a bed, but even though her eyes are open, there is no recognition in them, when he holds her hand.

"Mum, mum, it's me. It's Leo." he pleads, but there is no response, and his mother's hands feel cold and limp.

"She had to be sedated." explains the doctor. "She was hysterical again, out of control. She needs to stay with us to get better for a while."

Leo looks at his father. "I only wanted to spare you from this, Leopold. There is nothing for you to do here. Let's go home, son."

They drive back in silence, and Leopold closes his eyes pretending to be asleep. But still the pieces make no sense. Sure, his mother was unhappy, and his parents often fought bitterly, but there was never an indication that she was sick.

When they get back to their house, he mutters good night and starts to head to his room. He has no appetite.

"Stay, Leopold." his father commands and his voice chills him to the bone. "We still have to talk about actions and consequences. You chose to disobey me, you were reckless and disrespectful. You need to learn this, better sooner than later; your choices always have consequences in this world."

With this, he pulls off his belt. Leopold stares at him with disbelief. He cannot be serious, this cannot be happening. His father has hit him on rare occasions before, always in drunken rage. Not like this, deliberately, with purpose. He braces himself, resolved not to cry out, but the breath is still knocked out of him when the belt sharply connects with his back.
Chapter End Notes

When AIDA reset Fitz's life, she didn't only bring back his dad, he took away his mum. We don't really get an explanation of what happened to her, but clearly AIDA needed to poison that influence on Framework Fitz. This is my take on what may have happened.
“Mum, am I really odd?” Leo suddenly blurts out in the middle of the dinner.

“What brought this on, Leo?” his mother looks up surprised.

“It’s just something Amy said.” Leo has been helping Amy with math assignments and he thought they were friends. Her calling him names like odd, weird and dork confused him.

“You shouldn’t pay attention to any of that. The way I see it, you are extraordinary – not quite like the others. So yes, in a way it makes you odd. But in a good way.” his mum replies.

“I could pretend to be more normal, perhaps? I could make friends that way…” he looks at her.

“I’ve learnt the hard way that it is not a good idea to try to pretend something you are not.” she replies sadly.

“Is that what happened with you and father?” Leo can’t bite back the question.

“Maybe … lot’s of things happened between your father and me. I guess both of us saw what we wanted to see. Anyways, listen to me, you will find friends, true friends and they will see the real you and love you for it.” she says with conviction.

“Come on, mum, of course you would have to say that.” Leo retorts somewhat unconvinced.

“Just wait and you’ll see, smarty-pants.” she smiles at him. “Maybe you’ll get a chance already tomorrow. Mr Brown called me that he sent some of your latest sketches over to his old professor, a guy named Dr Clark. He was apparently quite impressed and offered to meet you at his engineering
lab. If you’re interested of course.”

“Really? I get to meet professor Clark? In his lab? Mum, he’s a robotics legend! He worked with the Stark industries.” Leo exclaims and jumps up so fast that he almost knocks the whole table over. His heart is racing with excitement, and he completely forgets about Amy and her stupid comments.

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Framework

“Leopold, you are doing it again.” his father’s displeased voice jolts Leopold out of his thought process. He tenses up. He has been trying very hard to please him and he was starting to get better it, at least it felt like it. He has learnt the hard way that life was easier if he kept on the good side of him.

“Father, I’m sorry?” he apologizes with a question as he has no idea what he was apologizing for.

“You are fidgeting again, son. No matter how smart you are, people will never respect you behave like an oddball. Projecting confidence and control at all times is half success. But what with your constant flapping, Dr Quin will think you’re weird. We are talking about your future. I pulled some strings to get you this interview, but if you can work with him, it can go a long way to get you through the right doors” his father reminds him.

“Yes, father, of course.” Leopold says and tries to focus on keeping his body still. Father is right, he has to get rid of the quirks, so people would respect him.

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“Do we have ice cream?” Leo asks, mouth still full of popcorn.

“Seriously, how much can you eat?” his mother teases.

“Well, let’s put it to the test with ice-cream. You know, I could design a much better superhero suit than that.” Leo says as he returns his attention to the movie.

“I’m sure you could. Is that what you would like to do?” his mother asks casually.

Leo has no idea what he wants to do - there are endless possibilities of cool things swirling at any moment in his fertile mind. “Well that, and maybe build an airplane. An incapacitator maybe? But you know, I also like maths and frankly quantum physics is just amazing. I’m so glad I ended up in with Professor Clark – he is the best really. He thinks I could finish my PhD in a few years working with him and in parallel get all the undergrad credits.”

“I don’t understand what’s the hurry. But if that’s what makes you happy, then I can’t wait to read you PhD on the quantum physics aspects of superhero suits.” she says.

“There is no such thing, mum.” Leo starts then catches himself… “I get it, you are joking. So, is there any ice cream?”
“What is this nonsense, Leopold?” his father asks, flipping through his notebook.

“Oh, they are just sketches of some ideas I had.” he replies shrugging. “I collect them in case they are of any use later.”

“I see that. I just don’t see how wasting your time with all these will get you ahead. You should really focus on the assignment Dr Quin gave you. What is it that you are working on again?” his father asks sternly.

“Well, it’s supposed to be secret, so I cannot tell you the details. But we are perfecting the delivery mechanism of a new weapon.” Leopold replies thinking that perhaps it will impress his father.

“And you should be concentrating on that instead of these.” Alistair Fitz gestures at the notebook and looks again frowning at a picture. “What is this supposed to be - some kind of body armour?”

“It’s a superhero suit, with a flexible polymer…” Leo starts nervously, as he knows quite well his father’s strong opinions on such things.

“Superhero? What a bloody waste of time, Leopold. How can you be so stupid wasting time on this? I thought you have smartened up, lad. You could be finishing your doctorate.” His father now is starting to get angry. “The real heroes of this world are men making the hard choices to protect people from aliens and freaks. You are meant to be one of them, but you need to leave these childish ideas of yours behind.”

“But, Father … “ he so badly wants to make him understand his fascination with powers.

“No buts. I only have your best interest in mind, don’t you give me the lip, boy.” his father is yelling now.

Leopold knows from experience that argument is futile.

“I want you to burn it.” his father commands.

“Excuse me?” Leopold asks horrified.

“The notebook. Burn it. We don’t want you distracted anymore with this child-play. I need to know you can do what needs to be done.” his father’s tone is harsh.

“Father, it could come handy at one point.” Leopold protests weakly.

Alistair Fitz stands up and towers threateningly over him. “This was not a request, son. You still live under my roof, I need to know that I can trust you to follow my instructions.”

“Yes father, of course.” his voice is barely a whisper. He takes the notebook and with trembling hands throws it on the fireplace. He watches with regret as the orange flames engulf it. It feels like not just the pages, but his dreams and aspirations have turned into smoke and ashes.
Leo wakes up in the hospital and finds his mother looking at him worried. He tries to sit up and remember how he got there, but he is almost blinded with a pounding headache.

“Ouch. What happened?” he asks.

“I should ask you that, Leo. I ended up getting a call in the middle of the night to come to the hospital because someone found my 15-year old son passed out on the street. Drunk. You could have frozen to death!” her blue eyes are clouded over with anger, she hardly ever yelled at him.

“I’m sorry, mum. I didn’t want to cause you worry.” Leo rakes his brain, trying to remember what happened. “I….I went to Karen’s party, she insisted. I didn’t really drink though. Only a small beer maybe.”

“Leo, you hang out with people who are much older than you, but you are still a child.” she says. “Mum, I’m not a…” he interrupts, but she holds up a finger and continues louder “I am still responsible for you. I let you go to the university and work in the lab, because I trust you not to do reckless things”

“They must have spiked my drink with something” Leo says. “I… I trusted Karen. I thought she was my friend, but I think it was a prank.”

“A very bad one.” his mother hisses. “Well, I am not saying not to trust people. Trust is a risk you take every day, if you want to have friends. And everyone deserves a second chance. But you need to choose well your friends and Karen apparently may not be the best choice. I am going to have a talk with Professor Clark. And Leo, no more parties for now, OK?”

“OK, mum. I didn’t really like it anyway. I much prefer watching Dr Who with you.” he smiles at her.

“Oh, don’t try to charm your way out of this, young man. I am still angry with you.” she says, but her eyes soften with affection.

Framework

He can’t believe Chris would do that. He asked him for advice on a battery problem he was having, and when Leopold figured it out, Chris went and took all the credit for it. And the bastard’s device got first place in the Quin enterprise competition, he fumes.

“What’s the sour face, lad?” his father asks. Leopold tells him the story. “The son-of-a-bitch betrayed me. He plagiarized MY idea and is now trouncing around the lab like god’s gift to science”

His father puts a hand on his, “Son, how many times did I tell you, to be betrayed…”

“… you have to have trust in the first place.” Leopold finishes.

“You see? Well, this is what I have been talking about. But if instead of trusting your old man, you
prefer to keep making your own dumb mistakes… well, I cannot stop you.” Of course, his father is right. Again.

“I’m sorry, I don’t want to disappoint you father. I thought we were all on the same team… “
Leopold sighs. He has been hoping to find some friends in Quin’s lab - he has never had a friend before.

“It’s time to learn a hard truth. This is an every-man-for-himself kind of world. I am the only one who is on your team. The others have interests. Sometimes aligned with yours, sometimes not. You need to learn to use them and not let them use you. But you should not trust anyone.” his father explains.

Leopold nods - everything his father has been telling him turned out to be right. He cannot trust these people, but he can show them. “I will beat him. After all, I have other ideas that will make his device look like a worthless toy.”

“That’s my son.” his father looks at him proudly and Leopold feels warmth spreading in his chest.

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Mother looks pale against the white sheet in the fluorescent light of the hospital, but she is awake.

“You gave me a fright, mum.” Leo holds her hands gently and smiles at her trying to hide how scared he feels. He and his mum - just the two of them was all the family he has ever known and the possibility of losing her terrifies him.

“It’s nothing, Leo. Just a nasty infection. I’ll be out of here in no time. No need to hover over me.” she replies weakly, but the familiar glimmer is back in her eyes.

“I don’t want to lose you, mum.” he says seriously. “The doctors seem to think you could have died.”

“Well, here I am. Not going to get rid of me so easy. I’m a tough bird, you know.” she jokes.

“Is this a joke to you? Aren’t you afraid? Of dying?” he asks quietly.

“It cannot be all bad. I suppose it’s a bit like life was before I was born. That wasn’t so bad? But of course, I want to live. I want to see you become a famous professor, and see a superhero fly around in the suit you built and I want to cry at your wedding, when you marry a lovely girl and I definitely want to spoil my grandchildren rotten.” Leo feels himself calming down – she always knows how to make him feel better. “Come on, worry-wort, head back to the lab, I’ll have a little nap.”

“OK, mum. Just get better. I’ll be back in the evening.” Leo kisses her on the cheek.

“I know you will, my little monkey.” he hears her whisper as he leaves.

Framework
It is a cold and wet day they bury his mother. Leopold is standing at the grave, trying to remember her, how she was before – before the hospital, before they moved out with father. The memories are like the rainbow, bright greens and violets, and smell like popcorn, pancakes and breakfast bacon, and they are glowing warm. These memories are now locked safely away, it has become too painful to look at them – especially compared to memories from the hospital: grey and white, smelling like disinfectant and distinctly cold.

He tries to recall the last time he went to see his mother – it must have been at least two months ago – but it became harder and harder to remember why he wanted to come in the first place. She was mostly heavily sedated, not able to carry a conversation. Two strangers staring at each other. His mother faded away in the hospital and was never herself again. The final step, the final betrayal was just a logical consequence. *What kind of mother abandons her child? Father was right, she was too weak, too fragile for this world. If she loved me, she would have found the strength to live on.***

Leopold keeps staring at the grave, realizing that he has cried all his tears for her a long time ago, until there was nothing left, but a mother-shaped hole.

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“I have someone to meet you here, Fitz” Professor Clark yells for him.

Leo Fitz, who in the lab prefers to go by the name Fitz these days, goes over to the little office in the corner of the lab, where a woman is sitting. She extends a hand to him and Fitz awkwardly shakes it. “I leave you two to it.” says Clark nodding at the woman as he leaves the office.

“Dr Fitz” *she clearly heard about his recently finished PhD, “my name is Agent Weaver.” Agent of what, am I in trouble?* is the first thought that crosses his mind.

“Have you heard of SHIELD, Dr Fitz?” she asks. Fitz nods. *Shield, Hydra, World War II, Peggy Carter. History was definitely not his favourite subject in school, but he isn’t a complete ignoramus.*

“We’ve had our eyes on you for a while.” she says.

“On me? Why on earth would…” Fitz asks. “Why would a secret spy organization have an eye for me?”

“That’s not all we do. We have a very strong science division. One, where only the best of the best can apply. SHIELD deals with aliens and powered people of course, and we research technology that comes with all that. What it can do and what we can do with it. It is cutting edge science. We trust that you would be the right person to make a contribution, if you are interested.”

Fitz thinks for a second. *Alien technology, superheroes, cutting edge. The woman is like a fairy godmother offering to fulfil his childhood dreams. Still, he has a hard time of picturing himself as agent of anything.*

“Professor Clark has worked with SHIELD for many years.” Agent Weaver adds. “Maybe he can talk to you a bit – well, most of it is classified.”

“If I say, yes, and mind you, I’d have to ask my mum, but if we say yes, what are the next steps?” Fitz asks.

“You will sign this non-disclosure agreement, and I will be happy to talk you through the rest and explain also what you can share with your mother. I have been doing this for a while now, and I am
certain that you would be a great fit for our agency. And what’s more, I think you will love it. It’s a match made in heaven.” Agent Weaver smiles.

Dr Leopold Fitz, agent of SHIELD. Actually, sounds quite right.

Framework

“Father, can I talk to you for a moment, please?” Leopold presses his hands together behind his back. He is nervous, but tries to remain still and to control the trembling of his voice just like his father taught him. “I had a visitor today with an interesting proposal.”

“What visitor?” his father asks suspiciously.

“An agent of SHIELD. She made me an offer to join their Academy, it sounded rather intriguing.” Leopold explains.

“Intriguing? Let me guess, they tried to spin your head with alien crap and superheroes. I told you, Leopold, to forget all these.” his father snaps back.

“Father, imagine the possibilities, the resources I could have, the scientific discoveries I could make.” Leopold insists.

“I said no. SHIELD is not the right place for you. Don’t you trust me? Haven’t everything I’ve done been in your best interest?” His father’s gaze is piercing - his voice is loaded with resentment. Leopold tries to look away. “No, look at me. You have been doing so well lately, finishing you PhD. You have earned the right to know, Leopold. SHIELD is not the right place for you, because our allegiance is with Hydra.”

“Hydra? You can’t be serious, Dad?!? They are a bunch of Nazis.” Leopold exclaims. The blow comes so sudden and so hard, he almost falls over. He hasn’t hit me lately, the thought flickers into his mind as he tastes blood.

“Lies, lies. There will be a war soon and sides will have to be taken. Hydra’s mission is to protect order, to protect humanity, not to try to please aliens and so-called enhanced lunatics. And I expect you to be on the right side of this war. Your brain will be a weapon and who knows, you could go far, very far in leadership. Hydra has taken care of us all these years and we owe them our loyalty, Leopold. You understand?”

Leopold stands there dumbfounded. The world is upside down. It has been like that for a long time, but his father has been a constant. He took care of him. He taught him how to be a man, a survivor. The man has earned a trust. “Of course, Father.” he says.

His father puts a hand on his shoulder and says almost gently “Good. I knew you wouldn’t let me down. The good news is that it doesn’t mean you don’t get to go to an academy…” he says with a wink.
Trying to explain some of the differences we see between Fitz and Framework Fitz:

Framework Fitz seems to be artificially still compared to real Fitz, who is bunches of nervous energy constantly moving his hands, bouncing on his feet.

In between, I imagine his life with his mum to be simple and rather joyful - she would be encouraging his curiosity and letting him take his decisions - by contrast his framework father (and remember this is an avatar created by AIDA) is working to reinforce the loops that will end up with him being isolated and jaded - ripe for being used by AIDA for her purposes.

His mother's suicide is implied in the story, but considering that she seems to have been removed from the picture, I think it's a rather plausible version.

As for the recruitment - in 4x21 Fitz and Ophelia talk about meeting on the first day of Academy. I think however it's not necessarily the SHIELD Academy, because:
- I don't think AIDA would let Fitz meet Jemma's avatar
- I don't think he is capable of switching sides - both real and framework Fitz is loyal to the point of blindness - it's his strength and weakness and it is consistent between the two worlds.

Based on this, the following options would be possible:

- He went to SHIELD Academy later than Jemma, possibly after Bahrain (2008) - so they never actually met
- He went into SHIELD academy, but as an undercover operative already loyal to Hydra and Ophelia made sure he wouldn't meet Jemma (this is the least likely in my view)
- He went to a Hydra academy, or another type of academy which served as a front for Hydra. It was implied that in the Framework Hydra and Shield were rival agencies for a while until after the Cambridge incident, when Hydra won the war for the public opinion. I find this option the most plausible - so in this story, Framework Fitz will attend a Hydra academy instead of the SHIELD one.
Fitz is exhausted. Still jet-legged after his move, he has spent the whole day unpacking his things, trying to find space for everything in his new room. It is small, but functional, and to his delight, it has a small inbuilt work-bench to fiddle with his designs.

The rumbling in his stomach reminds him that he is famished. He tries to find in the orientation leaflet (more like a handbook) how and where he is supposed to get dinner. Then he realizes, oh hell, almost forgot about the official welcome thingy. He wonders what he is supposed to wear for such an occasion. Jeans and a shirt with tie and his favourite grey cardigan will do, he decides. He ponders for a moment if it would be OK to skip it – he is not very good with strangers, after all - but it occurs to him that it may be a good thing to size up the competition. SHIELD is supposed to be the “top of the top” talent. Until this point he has never had a problem staying ahead, but every time he moves to a new place, he hears the familiar voice in his head telling him that he would not measure up.

He steps out of his dorm and follows the stream of cadets, as they all head towards the main hall. He enters the room and finds a spot next to the wall in the back. He hates introductory small talk and really, really sucks at it so he chooses to observe the room as his classmates start to mingle. Predictably, they are all older him, early to mid-twenties. Men and women, looking like adults, wearing smart clothes and carrying themselves with confidence. He is suddenly painfully aware of his baby face, his childish curls, his bony arms and legs that scream awkward teenager. He sinks further into the wall.

Then he spots her. Well, he spots a ponytail swinging at each step. She looks different; a girl, not a woman. She turns around as if she has felt his gaze, and they lock eyes for a moment. He quickly looks away, but from his peripheral vision he can see the girl marching towards him. She is wearing jeans with a white blouse and a preppy cardigan and lots of make-up with dark, bold colours that create a weird contrast to her rosy complexion – maybe she is trying to pass for older. But weird make-up aside, she is pretty. The girl now stands right in front of him “You must be the other young genius, Doctor Weaver mentioned.” Young genius – is she mocking me? Fitz furrows his eyebrows “I am Jemma Simmons, biochemist,” and she extends her hand. Fitz stares at it for a moment before shaking it “Uhhm, Leopold Fitz, engineering."

“Engineering? Then I guess we’ll have a couple of classes together this semester.” she smiles at him warmly. Wow, she has a beautiful smile. His mind draws a blank as to a witty reply, but luckily
she continues her enthusiastic chatter. “I can’t wait starting on xenobiology and advanced chemical engineering. Have you checked out the labs yet? The equipment is amazing – we had nothing like that in Cambridge.” she keeps on talking and Fitz continues to extract and store relevant pieces of information: the accent is clearly English, and she manages to drop her alma mater into her first sentence more or less – so a bit of a braggard. He realises that she stopped talking, so he figures it was his turn to say something. What was she talking about, again oh, yes, the labs…

“No, I haven’t seen much around yet, I just flew in last night.” he says.

“Oh, you’re from Scotland? I’m from Sheffield. It’s nice to bump into a fellow Brit.” she enthuses with a big smile. “So where did you go to school?”

“Glasgow with a couple of semesters in MIT.” he says. Fitz rakes his head for something smart to say, but he draws a complete blank. This is not good, he has to do a quick exit, and come up with a strategy. They will clearly get along, he’ll just have to come up with a game-plan to impress her. “I’m knackered, I think I’ll head back to the dorm…. See you around.”

“Not staying for the speeches?” she asks a bit annoyed.

Fitz shakes his head.

“See you around then, Leopold.” she says.

“Fitz.” He corrects her and his tone comes out a bit harsher than intended. “It’s Fitz.” he repeats more softly.

She shrugs. “Ok then, see you around Fitz.”

2004

Framework - Hydra Academy

Leopold Fitz takes another look in the mirror. He has done a good job with the ironing – not a crease. He ties his tie, just like his father has taught him; taking extra care to keep it at the right length. He tames his unruly hair with a generous helping of extra strong gel. He is rather pleased with his looks; professional. He puts on his black dress shoes and heads over to the welcome reception. He is nervous, but pushes away the feeling. He is determined to do well at the Academy and make his father proud. He has no doubts now that when he applies himself, he can do well at anything. It is much less scary than he expected it to be and he is quite thrilled when he learns that they will each get a dog to accompany them. Clearly, father was right again - this place is exactly what he needs.

He starts to mingle with the other cadets, trying to take mental notes of their background, specialty and see which ones could be his competition. He knows by now not to trust them, but he tries to get a feel of the group dynamics and how to fit in best.

Then he spots her. A silky brown hair that falls to her shoulders in exquisite waves, a spotless face as
if drawn by an artist with clever dark eyes, a wide smile revealing perfect, pearly white teeth. She is dressed in a smart suit that looks extremely sophisticated and professional, but at the same time accentuates every perfect curve in her body. Her long legs end in black stilettos.

She looks in his direction, catches his gaze and smiles. She says something to her entourage and walks straight up to him. “Enjoying the party?” she asks.

“I guess.” he replies curtly, suddenly not trusting himself to make sense.

“I’m Ophelia, I am pleased to meet you.” she extends her hand. A beautiful girl with a Shakespearian name – she is poetry.

“Dr Leopold Fitz.” he replies simply taking her cool, smooth hands into his somewhat sweaty palm.

“So, what are you a doctor of, Dr Fitz?” she asks playfully.

“Engineering, with a bit of quantum physics on the side.” he says. “I have been working with Dr Quin on weapons design.” he adds, trying to impress her.

“Sounds fascinating. I can’t wait to hear about it more, Dr Fitz.” her eyes shine like dark crystals.

“Leopold. Just call me Leopold.” he interrupts quickly. “So, what is your field, Ophelia?”

“It’s interdisciplinary in nature. My main interest here is strategy though, and IT, of course.” she is mysterious. “I guess, we will see each other at classes, Leopold.”

“I certainly do hope so, Ophelia.” he replies as he watches her re-enter the swirling crowd of cadets. *What just happened?* he wonders. It is a strange feeling, like an important piece of a puzzle just fell into place. Somehow it feels like a defining moment of his life. She is meant to be his – what? *Friend? Partner?* He shakes his head, this is ridiculous. Ophelia is clearly, well, *magnificent* is the word that pops into his mind. But he needs to concentrate on his studies and come out on top of his classes. To prove himself.

Chapter End Notes

Ophelia more or less admitted that she just inserted herself in the place of Jemma in Fitz’s memories. She clearly used the existing emotions that were already in place and planted the false memories on top of them, so all that emotional attachment would get channeled towards her instead. It also seems plausible to me that she "copied" existing experiences, but tried to give an "upgrade" at the same time - which would take out sometimes the random / messy elements out of a human interaction, which are the ones that make a memory vivid at the end of the day.

My personal guesses as to what academy Fitz attended in the Framework were discussed at the end of Chapter 3.
First experiments

Chapter Summary

Everyone needs to have a chem-lab fic and this is mine. One with Jemma, and of course AIDA doesn't want to be left out either.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

October 2004

Fitz hurries through the campus with a heavy backpack. It is a crisp morning, and he has still plenty of time, but he prefers to be the first one in the lab. So far, these paired projects have turned out to be a disappointment. He usually thought of a solution before they even started, and his lab partners were happy to agree with him and do the project as quickly as possible.

He is sure that it is going to be different with Simmons. She is incredibly smart and very opinionated – she is the only one to keep him on his toes. Their common classes tend to have some intense moments of intellectual sparring as their classmates, and sometimes even their professors stare in bewilderment. Luckily, he has no difficulty keeping up with her in math, and computer science, and he frankly doesn't give a damn about ridiculous classes like history of SHIELD. But he has the misfortune to be paired with her for the first time on her home turf, chemistry. It is going to be a bloody difficult job to impress her.

He races down the stairs to the little basement lab that was assigned to them. The door is locked. He hears footsteps and there she is, all flushed and a bit out of breath. “I had to run around a bit to locate the entry code,” she chirps entering the code. Then she looks him up and down and says, “Aren’t you the early bird.”

Fitz shrugs. “Couldn’t have you beat me to it.” Getting up early doesn't bother him, but it is not something he relishes either.

They enter the lab and rummage around for a while in silence, setting up the work place. Fitz notes with irritation that Simmons keeps rearranging the equipment. “Why do you do that?” he snaps finally. “What’s wrong with my system?”

“Well, it’s just that my system of arranging things is clearly better. If we don’t get organized now – look, just pay attention, ok? These containers are for biological and these are for the chemical compounds. We need to separate the materials already tested from the fresh samples.” she explains.

“You are obsessed with organization, why don’t we just start already?” Fitz says and he starts to shiver. “It’s bloody cold here.”

“Why don’t we get some tea before we start?” suggests Simmons. “But I’m telling you, we’ll need to create a system that we both follow.” She looks around the corner of the lab and puts on a kettle. She pulls out tea bags from her bag.
“Did you bring those?” Fitz asks.

“I’m good at preparation.” she says smugly. “You take yours with milk?”

“No, just sugar.”

They wrap their hands around their cups. Fitz takes a sip and it is exactly like the tea her mum used to make at home. He feels much warmer. “Thank you, Simmons. This is nice.”

“You are quite welcome.” she smiles and it feels like that smile lights up the lab. “So, about the project, I think I figured out how to approach it. We could start injecting the compound with a biological enzyme” starts Simmons, Fitz quickly nods “yeah, to make the material more versatile, makes sense” he says. She looks at him surprised. “You were thinking the same?”

“No, actually, I was going to suggest a different angle. How about leaving the compound alone, and concentrating on the molecular matrix? We could build a structure that can…” her eyes are locked into his as if she were trying to read the thoughts directly from his brain “change shape in reaction to the environment” they say at the same time. He bites his lips, and fervently hopes that she doesn’t think his idea is ridiculous. She keeps gazing at him as she turns the idea around her head, and he really wishes he could read her mind at that moment.

“That sounds very… original. Why not try both?” she asks. “Wouldn’t the matrix structure work better if the polymer was designed specifically with that purpose in mind? A material that is flexible but strong and can adapt perhaps in reaction to the shape of the matrix.” As she speaks, a loose strand of hair falls over her face. Fitz has to suppress the urge to tuck it behind her ears.

“OK. Let’s get started. I’ll run some computer simulations on the matrix. Why don’t you start working on the compound?” he suggests.

They start to work enthusiastically, and quickly fall into a fast-paced dance around the lab; each working at their posts running commentary on what they have found, taking occasional breaks to wander over to the other making helpful suggestions or poking holes in each other’s theories.

It is riveting. Fitz in all his years working in labs has never experienced this kind of flow of creativity. People usually struggled to follow his leaps, but Simmons catches any idea he throws at her effortlessly, puts a different twist on it and send it back to him opening the way to fresh ideas. Time just flows by.

They have been testing slightly different variations, trying to find the best material for the project, until Simmons suddenly exclaims with irritation “Fitz, did you just put the enzyme into the polymer blend that we already tested? Now this is all useless. Hours of work wasted. We have to start all over again.”

“Well, you did say to put in the yellow container.” protests Fitz

“Why would I say yellow? I explained exactly how the system works… You were just not paying attention clearly” she snaps “Next time why don’t you do it yourself” Fitz retorts angrily “I told you the system was important” “it’s your system, not mine” “then we have to create a new system” they both yell now over each other. This is turning into a disaster, Fitz thinks in panic.

Simmons takes a breath and blows it out slowly, “You know what, let’s take a break. I think I am hungry.” she says in a conciliatory voice.

“Now that you mention it, I’m famished. Let’s go grab something.” Fitz agrees quickly. Getting into a fight after such a good day is stupid.
“How time is it? Wow, it’s passed midnight. I don’t even think the mess hall is open anymore.” says Jemma.

“No, there is a little sandwich shop that’s open at all times.” Fitz notes with a self-conscious shrug. “I tend to get hungry at all hours.” They quickly tidy up the lab and head out.

They get their sandwiches (hers, turkey ham on a whole grain bun, his, a double-sized cheesesteak) and some cans in a paper bag. “Come, it’s mild, let’s eat outside.” suggests Simmons.

Fitz nods. “OK, I saw some benches over at the pond”. The sky is clear and the soft moonlight and the twinkling stars are reflected in the water. They sit down on a bench eating their sandwiches in comfortable silence.

“I used to gaze at the stars and thinking about going to space one day. You know, being an astronaut.” Simmons breaks the silence.

“Less messy than biochemistry” teases Fitz and she laughs.

“Do you think we will ever go to space?” Simmons asks now more seriously. Fitz notices the use of the plural pronoun. In a way it is ridiculous to think about them as a team already, but at the same time, even though they barely know each other, she feels instantly familiar.

“It’s perfectly possible. I mean so far SHIELD operates mostly on Earth. But you know, working with aliens and all, it’s not outside the realm of possibility.” he replies.

“Today, it feels like nothing’s outside the realm of possibility.” she smiles and his heart skips a beat.

“She must have feel it too – they are on the same wavelength.”

“True. We do make a good team, don’t we?” he grins back at her.

“That we do.” She nods, as they walk back to the dormitories together. “But that does not mean that I will not beat you for class rankings.” There she is back into her competitive self, again. Fitz has found it annoying before, but now, he recognizes it as part of her drive, and suddenly it is less irritating and more endearing.

He shrugs good-naturedly. “We’ll see.”

“Want to bet?” asks Simmons.

He laughs “What’s the stake?”

“How about the loser owes the winner three wishes? That means you will owe me three favours.”

“Like the genie? You rub my lamp”

“…I doubt any rubbing will be involved…and you are just trying to distract me.” she says. “So, game on?”

“Game on” Fitz shakes her hand. “At least you’ll keep me on my toes.” No one else here will.

“Count on it. Good night, Fitz. Let’s finish the project tomorrow.”

“Yeah, see you at the lab, Simmons, bright and early.” he waves.

Fitz can hardly sleep at night; his heart is beating happily at the prospect of having her as a friend, and his head is buzzing with new ideas. At the crack of dawn, he heads back to the lab. By the time,
Simmons arrives, he has run half a dozen of simulations, re-created the compound from the previous day and started tea. When she arrives, he hands her a steaming cup with a splash of milk.

“Wow, someone has been a busy bee this morning, thank you.” she takes the cup from his hand their fingers brushed lightly. The touch sends an electric jolt through his body.

“Come on, I think we have a winner, as far as the material is concerned…” he grins proudly.

Framework, Hydra Academy 10 years ago

Leopold Fitz is excited as he heads down to the lab after having taken his terrier out for a run. "Stay here, Chimp," he pats the dog head and closes the door. Spending a day together with Ophelia outside the confines of boring lecture halls and away from the prying eyes of others is an appealing idea. Ever since introduction day, she has stayed close. She usually sis next to him in class and they sometimes talk during the breaks. She is smart and funny and has been giving him promising smiles. And she is a good listener: she lets him ramble through his ideas, asking only pointed questions when he seems to lose track of a thought. It helps him focus.

In other ways, she is somewhat distracting. She carries around her beauty with confidence and knows how to emphasise all her many physical qualities. He has tried to be professional, after all he joined the Academy to achieve, to make his father proud, but 16-year old raging hormones are difficult to control.

“Good morning, Leopold.” she smiles brightly at him. “I hope you don’t mind, I got a head start on setting up the lab.

“Not at all, Ophelia. This way, we can really jump right in the middle of it.” he says noting that she laid out the equipment exactly the way he likes it. As if they had a psychic link.

“I was thinking how we could approach this tracking device. We know that there are differences between biological responses of typical humans and powered individuals. We could try to hone our device to search for such differences.”

“Brilliant. Nobody could crack this before. We could be the first, Leopold. Imagine the potential.” she says with enthusiasm. Then she notices his frown. “What is the problem?” she asked.

“That’s the problem, I am imagining it. We both know that not all enhanced people are dangerous. Identifying them could be wrong.” he says hesitantly.

“How could it be wrong? We are only talking of keeping an eye on them. What is the inconvenience of one measured against the lives of many? We are training to be Hydra to make the hard calls, Leopold. To protect billions. To make a safe world where we can save from harm the people we care about.” she says and puts her hand on his. Leopold catches his breath, her touch is electrifying.

“Yes, of course, you are right. Let’s get to work then.”
“Great, I know that we’ll make a great team.” Ophelia smiles.

They work in silence, but perfect harmony. As if Ophelia could read his thoughts, she always hands him exactly what he needs. Whenever Leopold gets stuck, she comes with helpful questions that somehow always get him through the stumbling block. Around midnight, they finally have a breakthrough on the design.

“Tomorrow I’ll build the small-scale models. This should get us straight to the top of the class.” Leopold grins satisfied.

“I believe the others won’t know what hit them. You must be hungry, Leopold. Let’s go eat something. I know a place, not far.” She leads him to the end of the gardens of the Academy, just outside the gates. There is a little café, with tables overlooking a beautiful reflecting pool. They sit at one of the tables, and the waiter places a candle on their table.

“I think this achievement is cause for celebration” says Ophelia. She whispers something to the waiter who comes back with two glasses of champagne.

“We are too young to drink” protests Leopold.

“Come on, it’s just you and me. To our great future as a team, Leopold. You know, I was waiting for something like this to happen all my life. To find someone who was at the same wavelength as me. Someone who understands me.”

“I feel the same, Ophelia.” he says and raises his glass. “To our team.” Suddenly, Fitz has the strongest feeling of déjà vu. *Come on, don’t be ridiculous*, he tells himself. Nevertheless, he can’t shake the feeling. *How could something feel so wrong and so right at the same time?* The night, the soft light of the night sky and the candle – it is all mesmerizing. Ophelia’s bright smile makes his heart skip. If he was honest with himself, he is a bit smitten by her.

Chapter End Notes

As usual, AIDA is trying to re-create the experience as closely as possible. But her "psychic link" is based on cheating.
Friday Night

Chapter Summary

Jemma shows up at Fitz’s dorm room, Ophelia pays a similar visit to Leopold.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

December 2004

Fitz has spent Friday night (and it is well past midnight) like any other 17-year old nerd – gaming. He has been sitting at his desk drinking chocolate milk and eating cookies (having had already gone through a box of pizza). It has been a particularly difficult week – holographic engineering was a killer, he has been paired on a robotics project with one of the most insufferable bullies of the class, and he has hardly seen Simmons the whole week. Ever since their successful chemistry lab they have been trying to get paired up on other projects too – they shared only about half of their classes – but it hasn’t always been successful. After a week of frustration, he has deserved a bit of mindless entertainment.

In the middle of a rather intense boss-fight, his concentration is interrupted by loud knocking. “Bloody hell” he let out a swear as his character foolishly died to the annoyance of the rest of his raiding party. He wonders who it could be in the middle of the night – he never really had visitors in his room even during the daytime let alone at night. Which is probably a good thing as his floor is permanently covered with piles of laundry, study papers and dirty cups.

He gets up with a sigh and opens the door to find a somewhat tipsy looking Jemma Simmons in a red party dress, soaking wet (he really tries hard not to stare as her hardened nipples poke through the thin material) and balancing on unsteady heels. Her hair is dripping with water making her black eyeliner a bit smudged. Fitz is speechless (whether it is from her turning up in his room in the middle of the night or the sight of her in a low-cut dress, is not entirely clear.)

“Can I come in?” she says, pushing past him without waiting for a reply and marching straight to his bed. “Hell, your room looks like a disaster zone” she comments.

Fitz figures it is his turn to say something clever at the unexpected turn of the evening. Luckily his finely-honed sarcasm is a deep well “Well, if I knew I was supposed to have refined company tonight, I would have surely cleaned up.” Nevertheless, he rounds up the laundry with his well-practiced soccer moves and kicks them into a corner. He also piles the empty pizza boxes into a neat looking tower. Satisfied with his cleaning effort he turns to her.

“What’s going on Simmons? Is everything ok?” While he considers her to be a friend and they had “work lunches” and “library study sessions” together, they haven’t yet got to the point where they would be hanging out in each other’s room in the middle of the night.

“Do you know Briggs? He’s second year. Well, he asked me out – and he is perfectly symmetrical and somewhat well-toned – so I figured what the hell?”
“He’s an idiot.” Fitz interjects.

“Well, yes, obviously he is.” she agrees. “He mixed up tyophane with a pyrrole – and I mean who does that.”

Fitz nods sympathetically.

“And that’s not the worst of it – we went for dinner and he put ketchup on his steak. I mean what a barbarian right? Then we go dancing – and he’s flirting with Hackett over my shoulders while at the same time pinching my bum.”

“That does sound quite inappropriate.” he manages to mutter trying very hard not to blush or in any way think about her butt or any other body parts – which he has only checked out discreetly before and found very cute.

“Obviously, I kneed him in the balls and left him there. I walked back to campus by myself in these contraptions which I swear are medieval torture devices and I got soaked.” Fitz swallows back the obvious question of why she walked to his room rather than her own in such circumstances, but the question must have been written over his face because she continues ranting in an annoyed tone “And in my righteous anger, I left my coat in the Boiler room and with it the key to my room. And obviously, I cannot face going back after my humiliation, plus I have blisters on my feet and it’s pouring outside.” she concludes her rant and looks at him.

“So you want me to go there, to get your keys?” he surmises.

“You are the only sensible person in this place and that would be awfully nice of you.” she smiles at him. “My dating life is a disaster you know. I’ll die a virgin.” she laments.

“Well, I sincerely doubt that. And maybe you should adjust your parameters when it comes to choosing your dates.” he says.

“I have a scientific system, Fitz…” she starts before noting his grin which makes her furrow her brows in annoyance “You are mocking my pain.”

“Life is pain, highness.” he quotes.

“Oh, shut up, Westley.” she snaps, then starts to chuckle. It somehow warms his heart that she was enough of a nerd to catch the quote immediately. Seems like science isn’t the only subject they would align on.

“As you wish.” Fitz says quietly looking at her as she gazes into his eyes – uncertain smiles on both their faces. Fitz imagines or sees (?) her moving a few millimetres closer and for a moment her red lips are tantalizingly near. He can smell the alcohol on her hot breath. He forces himself to step back – snogging a drunk friend showing up on his doorstep dripping from rain in the middle of the night is a terrible idea. His rapport with Simmons has been the best thing about the Academy so far – he would be a fool to risk it.

He puts on his raincoat “I’ll be back in a few minutes, make yourself comfortable, Buttercup – there are some towels in the drawer if you want to dry up a little and the kettle is on the side table.” he says in what he hopes is a perfectly nonchalant tone and steps out into the rain. He starts to run towards the Boiler-room.

By the time he gets back – his curly hair dripping with rain – he finds Jemma sitting cross-legged on his bed in his old Star Wars T-shirt and his monkey patterned pyjama bottoms. She has washed off her makeup and tied her hair in a messy pony tail. She is reading one of his comic books and Fitz for
a moment thinks that there is no sight more adorable in the entire world. She looks up and smiles at him gratefully. “Sorry, I was not poking around your room or anything, but you told me to get comfortable, and there weren’t any other clean things in the drawers.”

“That’s OK. It’s still pouring outside, might as well stay for a bit longer to warm up” he says and disappears in the bathroom to change his wet clothes. He re-emerges in sweatpants and a T-shirt and hands her a bottle of water and an aspirin. “Take this and drink up, looks like otherwise you might end up with a headache tomorrow.”

Uncharacteristically she doesn’t argue at all, she just takes the pill and gulps down some water then she smiles at him batting her eyelashes “Thanks, Fitz. I knew I could trust you to save me.” Fitz knows that she is still tipsy, but her words make him feel warm inside nevertheless. “So anyways, what were you doing awake in the middle of the night?” she asks him.

“Oh, nothing important. Playing video-games.” he says, suddenly embarrassed about his non-existent social life.

“You are such a nerd.” she says in a tone that make it sound like a compliment rather than admonishing.

“Well, yeah, but so are you. Quoting Princess Bride, sneaking around with my comic books – come on Jemma, we both know you can’t deny your true self. Embrace your inner nerd like me and you don’t have to suffer anymore from horrible dates.” he says mock dramatically, accompanying his monologue with exaggerated hand movements. It creates the desired effect as Jemma starts laughing.

“I’ll give it a thought. Though then we may both end up virgins for the rest of our lives.” *Not if I have anything to say about it*, thinks Fitz, then it occurs to him that if snogging your drunk friend was a bad idea, shagging her would be a mistake of catastrophic proportions. She clearly needs a trusted friend, not another drooling male trying to get into her – well his – hell, this was confusing – pants.

“Come on – we could play together. I can set you up with an account – I can create a new character just to play with you and we can go on adventures together. You can even be the tough guy, if you want.” he says.

She thinks for a moment and says “OK, show me.” And soon they are immersed in discussing how they could create the most compatible character pair with the desired skill set. She ends up melee while he is range damage and they spent the next few hours until dawn fighting mythical monsters in a dream world (*perfectly in sync, just like in the lab*), until they fall asleep next to each other on the bed.

When Fitz startles awake a few hours later as the morning light starts to seep through the window, he finds their limbs tangled together and sporting an embarrassing boner poking at her stomach. Luckily, she is still passed out, snoring lightly from the mixture of alcohol and tiredness. Fitz looks at her sleeping there all lovely for a moment imagining what it would be like to wake up to this sight every morning. He carefully slips out of bed, takes a shower (a cold one) and heads down to the bakery. She wakes up as he opens the door on his way back carrying coffee (he figures a tea would not have enough caffeine in her condition) and blueberry muffins. He smiles at her.

“Breakfast is ready.”

“You were right, I have a bit of a headache, but it’s bearable.” she says. “Oh, this is good” she sighs as she bites into a muffin and takes a sip of her coffee. “Thanks Fitz – I’m sorry that I… “
Fitz interrupts her “No, don’t be. Seriously. You are welcome, whenever. After all, we need to cultivate your inner nerd.”

She laughs. “It was fun, I’d like to do this again. Thank you.” She stands up and smiles “I guess, it’s time to do my walk of shame.”

“Hey, nothing to be ashamed of. Playing video games Friday night is a perfectly respectable activity.” he jokes.

“You know – Saturday is my laundry day, Fitz. Why don’t we meet at 10 in the laundry room?”

“Is this your not-so-subtle way of telling me that I need to clean up my room?” he asks in a teasing voice and for the first time in his life laundry sounds like a perfectly reasonable way of spending a Saturday morning.

“Well, if I’m going to spend more time here playing video games, you’ll need to step up the cleanliness. This place is a biohazard as it is.” she says. “I’ll give back your clothes later, OK?” she says and wrapping herself into her long coat as she heads back to her dorm balancing on her high heels which creates a bizarre contrast with the monkey pyjama bottoms sticking out from under the coat. Fitz stares long after her – his head light with a mix of giddiness and lack of sleep breathing in her scent lingering in the room.

Framework – Academy

Leopold paces up and down in his dorm room angrily, his puppy following anxiously in his heels. It is Friday night, his date hasn’t shown up and he feels like a loser spending the night all alone. Friday is about socializing, letting off steam, but most importantly about showing off one’s superior dating skills. True that he was is the youngest cadet, but he is also definitely the smartest and well, handsome enough – or so he has been told – so he cannot understand why Clara would back out of their date. He wonders if he could just make his way down to the bar by himself when his thoughts are interrupted by loud knocking. Chimp runs to the door, wagging his tail with excitement.

He opens the door and freezes for a moment. Ophelia stands on his doorstep soaked through, in a very sexy low-cut dress, long legs ending in a pair of back stilettos. Leopold swallows at the sight of her dress hugging her smoking-hot body and her nipples poking through the sheer silk material of her outfit.

“Leopold, thank God. Can I come in?” she asks in a panicked voice that makes him sick to the stomach with fear.

“Ophelia. What a surprise. Come in.” he manages and steps aside. He silently congratulates himself for having had enough foresight that he cleaned the room before. He is naturally messy, but his father has demanded neatness from him and it has become a habit.

She enters his room shaking with cold.

“What happened, Ophelia? Did someone hurt you?” he asks.

“Leopold, you wouldn’t believe. I went out with Briggs, and well, let’s just say it didn’t go too well.
I feel awful and so cold and I lost my keys. I just feel so stupid.” Ophelia says still shivering.

Leopold feels instantly protective of her – he wants to make her feel better. After all, not only is Ophelia one of the (if not the) most sought after girls in the Academy; smart, beautiful, refined, but also was also his only friend. Clara was a grey moth in comparison to this gorgeous butterfly.

Leopold takes out some towels and dry clothes from his drawers. “Ophelia dear, why don’t you dry up and I’ll make you a tea so you can get warm?” he asked.

“Thank you. I knew I could trust you. You’re the only one I trust here.” she says her eyes shimmering with emotion. Leopold feels a strange mixture of lust, friendship and protectiveness stir up inside him, at the place where his most deep-seated emotions seemed to rule. He gives Ophelia a reassuring smile and says “You can count on me. Always.”

Ophelia looks back at him with a triumphant glimmer in her eye, which he can't quite understand. “I’d better change.” she says and disappears in the bathroom. She re-emerges in the clothes he gave her – a clean white T-Shirt and grey sweatpants and he catches his breath, because she looks so innocent, like a long-forgotten friend from a childhood dream.

“You should stay perhaps, it’s still dreadful outside.” He offers cautiously, trying not to sound like he was coming on to her too hard.

“That would be great, Leopold. I’d like that very much.” she says sitting down on his bed. “Maybe we could watch something.”

“As you wish.” he says suddenly remembering lines from a movie his mother used to be so fond of. The echoes of a distant memory. He shuts it down before more could surface banishing it behind the wall he built in his mind. Any thought of his mother is dangerous, it still can drive him to tears and he does not want Ophelia think he is weak or emotional. She came to him for protection and comfort and like a real man, he will show her that she could always count on him.

Ophelia seems to be oblivious to the storm inside his mind as she sits cross-legged waiting patiently for him to choose a film.

They end up watching it on his laptop, sitting close together on his bed, their hips and shoulders lightly touching. They fall asleep together and when he wakes up in the morning, she is gone, only her tantalizing smell remaining on the pillow. He breathes in her scent getting a heady mixture of giddiness and lust. There is clearly something about Ophelia that makes her special somehow and he cannot push the feeling away that him and her simply belong together.

Chapter End Notes

I originally wanted to make FitzSimmons play Minecraft, but well, it's 2004 December, so obviously, they are playing WoW.

Also, well, if you don't know Princess Bride by heart, turn in your nerd card.

In the Framework, Ophelia tries to copy the memory, but it has less colour and details to it - she is latching onto the bits and pieces that she can dig out from Fitz's head. She also cannot quote Princess Bride which really should reveal her as an impostor, but Leopold is too horny to notice.
Secrets

Chapter Summary

Fitz / Leopold reveals a dark secret from his past to his best friend.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

SHIELD Academy

“The turn should be just up ahead, about 200 yards” Fitz points vaguely ahead, but all he sees is more trees. “I don’t understand, we should have passed the creek by now.”

“Fitz, are you sure that you put the right coordinates in?” Jemma asks exasperated. They have been walking for hours now, having been paired up for an orienteering field exercise, but it has become more and more obvious that they were hopelessly lost in the woods.

Fitz wonders what happened; usually he had no problem finding his way with or without maps – as an engineer, spatial thinking is one of his *fortes* and one of the few areas where he feels that he holds an edge over her best friend and main competitor. Which is why he has insisted on taking the map and the lead and why he kept going doggedly despite the mismatches between what he’s seen on the map and on the terrain. He has figured, as long as he kept the 25 degrees northeast direction they would get to the rendezvous point with no problems.

He keeps staring at the map in frustration and then he sees – what he should have seen in the first ten minutes – someone has switched their maps. Obviously, a prank – him and Simmons have not made many friends by outsmarting the class most of the time. Which is why the coordinates didn’t work. He feels his face flush with anger and shame.

“Damnit, I’m so stupid. I can’t believe this.” he exclaims and throws his compass into a shrub. He starts punching a tree trunk then hisses loudly on impact. Jemma looks at his outburst with eyes wide in shock. *Stupid, worthless boy. Not enough that you are a little moron, you’re hysterical, just like your mother.* He freezes in an instant, he hasn’t heard this voice in his head for a while now. He hangs his head ashamed.

“What’s going on, Fitz?” Jemma looks at him calmly.

He grimaces “I’m an idiot, that’s what.”

“Why?”

“I didn’t realize that someone switched our map – we have been following the wrong coordinates the whole time. And we are lost, and have no idea where we are. I’m sorry that I’m such a moron.” He sits on the ground hugging his knees.

“Was this someone idea of a prank? Seriously?” she asks kneeling next to him.
“I guess so. And if I weren’t a total dimwit, I would have realized it sooner.” he hisses.

“Fitz, just stop.” Jemma places her hand on his shoulder.

He focuses on the light touch until he feels more centered. He takes a deep breath. She really did not need to see him spin out of control, he thinks bitterly. He does not want her to think that he’s pathetic. “Sorry, sorry about the meltdown. You didn’t need to see that.”

“It’s OK, we all have our bad days. Remember, just the other day when I lost it over some switched up slides in the lab. That doesn’t make you a bad person.”

“Only a dumb one – like he always said…” Fitz mutters.

Simmons looks at him incredulously. “You are certainly not dumb. Who told you such thing?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Fitz waves.

“Yes, it does so I can go and put them in their place.” she fumes. Fitz looks at her fierce, little friend, who weighs less than 100 pounds even with her backpack on. He imagines her going up against the larger than life shadow looming in his memory. Still, a lump forms in his throat that she wants so badly to protect him.

“It was my dad. He used to call me worthless, dumb, little shit. I guess he was…” he fidgets nervously. She puts her hand on his knee.

“Fitz, look at me. Your dad sounds like a jerk. You are the smartest person I’ve met. And I will not have you or your father or anyone else talk like that about my best friend, who is a brilliant, kind and funny person.”

“Best friend?” he asks softly. His heart soars. He has never been anyone’s best friend before.

“Yes, you know you are.” She smiles at him warmly then continued in a snappy voice. “But don’t let it go to your head.”

He scoffs. “As if…” They sit in silence.

“Do you still see him? Your dad?”

Fitz shakes his head. “No. He stormed out of the house when I was 10. I haven’t seen him since.”

Jemma nods. “Good riddance, from the sound of it.”

Fitz shrugs. “I try not to think about it much.” He stands up with a sigh, then holds out his hand and to pull Jemma up. “Come it’s getting dark, we’ll need to find somewhere to spend the night, and in the morning, we’ll figure out where we are and how to get back.” Now that his moment of panic has passed, he can think more clearly again.

“Of course, we will. We have three PhDs between the two of us. We’ll figure out something.” Jemma agrees.

“Oh, so if we run into a mountain lion or a grizzly bear, you’ll whack it with your two PhDs? That’s your plan?” Fitz asks sarcastically.

Simmons frowns at him. “Don’t be ridiculous. We’ll find our way.”

“If we don’t die of exposure.” he grumbles.
“Fitz, it’s August.” Jemma rollesd her eyes.

“Or starve to death.” He sighs dramatically, his sentence punctuated by his growling stomach.

“I still have some energy bars.” Of course, Simmons always has an answer to everything.

They walk on in silence in the dusk, then Jemma suddenly yells triumphantly.

“Look Fitz, a storm shelter.” she points to a little wooden shack.

“Perfect.” He puts down his rucksack and sits down leaning his back against the wall.

Jemma starts to knock two rocks together.

“What do you think you are you doing, Simmons?”

“What does it look like I’m doing? I’m making fire.” she snaps back.

“What are you, a caveman?” “Certainly not a cave man. At most a cave woman” she argues. He rummages around his rucksack and pulls out a little gadget. “Here.”

“What is that?” Simmons asks.

“It’s my modified swiss army knife. It also has a built in lighter. I designed it when I was in scouts.”

“You went to scouts?” she asks sounding surprised.

“You can’t tell from my superior map reading skills?” he replies sarcastically.

“Knock it off, Fitz.” she says exasperated. "Ta-da” she looksde at him triumphantly as the fire lit up.

They split an energy bar in half and stare into the fire.

“Fitz, I don’t suppose your modified Swiss Army knife has a built-in sleeping bag?” Simmons asks yawning.

“No, but you can lie down in my lap.” She lays her head on his thighs with a contended sigh. “I’ll stay up, since it’s my fault we got lost.” he takes off his jacket and wraps it around her.

“You’ll be cold.”she protests sleepily. Between the fire and Jemma snuggling up to him, Fitz feels plenty of heat inside him.

“I’ll be fine. You forget I come from the rugged north.” he says and she chuckles.

“Wake me up, if you’ll get tired.”

“I won’t get tired.” he says. “Jemma, you know, you are my best friend too.”

“I know.” she murmurs half asleep.

Framework Academy

Leopold hurries excitedly through campus towards Ophelia’s place. Lately, her roommate has spent the weekends with her boyfriend, and that means she had their little kitchen all to herself. She has started to invite him over for Sunday breakfast – ostensibly for study sessions- which was fast
becoming his favourite part of the week. Ophelia is not only drop-dead gorgeous, but she is also an excellent cook, surprising him every time with a new, long-forgotten favourite.

He knocks and enters her room, carrying two cups of cappuccino he has picked up on the way. As he enters the smell of vanilla, strawberries and sugar hit his nose. Ophelia is in the kitchen in skinny jeans and a moss-green silk top that shows off her perfectly curved body. Her hair falls on her shoulders in soft waves.

“Smells wonderful like always, Ophelia.” he says and gives her the coffee their fingers brushing lightly.

“Thank you.” she smiles at him, and Leopold’s heart starts to beat a little faster. “Sit down, it’s almost ready.”

She pulls out plates and puts the French toast on it. She cuts it into two triangles, dusts it with powdered sugar and places a strawberry on each tip of the triangles. She puts the plate in front of him.

He looks at the plate for a moment and suddenly feels dizzy – his head spinning. He starts to breathe fast, his forehead is covered in cold sweat and it feels like his heart is going to jump out of his chest. A feeling of terror sweeps over him – like he is trapped in a nightmare.

“Leopold, what’s wrong?” Ophelia’s concerned face is a bit blurry.

“It’s nothing.” he mumbles, trying to hide his panic attack. He has had them a few times in the past, but he was too afraid of his father’s reaction, so he never told anyone about them. He is certainly not going to have a meltdown in front of the woman he is trying to woo. He concentrates on breathing. Finally, Ophelia’s face come into focus.

“You don’t like French toast?” she asks with a frown.

“No, it’s not that. I love it.” he replies with a smile.

“So, what’s wrong then? Why are you sad?” she asks.

“It’s just – this is exactly - how my mum used to make it. She even cut it into triangles like this. And I demanded a strawberry in each corner.” he says, his voice trembling a little.

“Oh. Interesting.” Ophelia notes. Then she looks at him with her dark eyes. “Where is she now?”

“She passed away some years ago.” Leopold replies.

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” Ophelia puts her hand on his shoulders. He feels calmer almost instantly. “Do you miss her?”

Leopold shakes his head slightly. “I don’t remember her so well. Just little fragments. The song she used to hum, how soft her hair was, the way she laughed, the foods she made.”

“Sounds like you do miss her.”

Leopold frowns “I guess so – mostly I just feel emptiness.”

“What happened to her?”

“She committed suicide, I think. I don’t ...– she was sick. And I thought she would get better, but she didn’t. She hardly recognized me in the hospital.” he says the pain evident in his voice “You know
I’ve never told you this story to anyone before.” he whispers.

“That’s awful, Leopold.” She looks at him with concern.

“Yes, it was.” he says, thinking back to the hospital, the funeral.

“I don’t understand how someone can do that. To abandon their child like that. It’s cowardice.” Ophelia sounds angry. “You are lucky your father wasn’t like that.”

“Yes, father… well, he isn’t always easy, but…I guess he did his best.” he looks at her. He almost blurts out how his father used to yell at him, even hit him, but then he swallows the comment. His father has stayed with him for better or worse, and clearly it must have been hard to do it all alone.

“It seems so. He made you the man you are, Leopold. Smart, strong and loyal.” She smiles at him holding his hand in hers. Her touch is cool, like holding a smooth metal object. “That’s why you are my best friend.” she says. Leopold feels deeply touched - he has never had a best friend to share his secrets with and the feeling makes his head spin.

“Ophelia, you are my best friend too – promise me you’ll never leave me.”

“I could never leave you, Leopold. And you won’t leave me either?” she asks, her voice shaking.

“No, of course not.” he says. “I would do anything for you, Ophelia.” he blurts out, not being able to control the enormity of his feeling for her.

“Anything?” she looks at him searchingly. Then she shakes her head slightly. “You can’t promise me that, Leopold. Not yet, anyways. I have been betrayed before by people I trusted.”

“I would never betray you. You must know that.” he says firmly. “Tell me what happened, Ophelia.” The thought that someone would ever want to hurt her is unbearable.

“I will tell you one day. But we have had enough sad talk for today.” she smiles. “Let’s finish breakfast and maybe we could go out for a walk, later.”

He focuses on his plate. The strawberries taste strangely bitter in his mouth.

Chapter End Notes

Leopold probably senses every once in a while that something is "off" in the Framework - when things are reset, or when Ophelia goes too far copying things from his past, triggering dormant memories. Having a panic attack at such moments and trying to hide it (considering the stigmatized mental illness of his Framework mother) makes it more difficult for him as time goes on to feel when something is off.

Ophelia keeps trying to insert herself into Jemma's place, but you'll notice, her emotions don't ebb and flow naturally like Jemma's and she certainly doesn't have her sense of humour.
Commencement

Chapter Summary

Fitz and Simmons decide to stay together after graduation, while in the Framework Ophelia convinces Leopold to join Hydra.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

SHIELD Academy - Just before graduation

Fitz can’t believe his eyes when he looks at the final scores and the class ranking. It isn’t the fact that he has done better than he thought and Simmons still beat him. What vexes him is the difference; a measly 0.5 points. Despite his bravado, he has been pretty sure all along that she would come out on top – she was a machine after all when it came to homework, but the fact that he got so close to besting her makes him rather annoyed. *Well, at least it was a respectable defeat,* he thinks.

He picks up some blueberry muffins from the cafeteria and heads over to her room. He barely knocks before she opens the door, as if she has been already standing there waiting for him.

“I guess, congratulations are in order, Simmons.” he smiles at her and holds out the blueberry muffins.

“Aren’t you chipper this morning for having lost our bet? Thanks for the breakfast, Fitz, but don’t think it’ll distract me enough to remember all the favours you owe me now.” she gloats a bit but he can tell her heart isn’t in it.

“Oh, I shudder at the thought what kind of torture you have in mind for me. Why aren’t you more chipper, having won and everything?” he jokes.

“You did brilliantly too, Fitz. Really it was mostly a draw.” she says. “Actually, I don’t think I could have done it without you, so thank you.” she surprises Fitz with a brisk hug. He closes his eyes feeling the brush of her soft hair against his face, smelling the familiar combination of her fruity shampoo and flowery perfume.

She hands him a cup of tea and they sit on the floor, their backs leaning against her bed to have their impromptu picnic.

“I’ve heard you got an offer from advanced weapons design.” she looks at him, an unspoken question in her eyes. Fitz nods. When he started SHIELD Academy, advanced weapons design was his dream; it was the SHIELD workshop that had access to the newest alien gadgets, it had first dips on materials and getting a place there was extremely competitive.

“Are you going to take it?” Fitz hears a slight tremor in her voice.

“Are you going to use one of the favours I owe you to stop me?” he asks teasingly, hoping that she won’t notice that he avoided answering the question.
She looks at him shocked. “No, I would never play with your career over a stupid bet. You must
know that.”

“Don’t worry, Simmons, I know. It was just a joke.” he says taking a big bite out of his muffins. He
tries to divert the subject. “So how many offers do you have?”

“Six in total. I have one from the Sandbox, one from the main xenobiology lab, advanced materials,
operations support – …”

“I think I have that one too…?” he says frowning. “But I suppose you will go for the xenobiology
one.” It was her favourite subject after all, and the main theme of one of her PhDs.

“But then I would be stationed at the Hub, and you would be at the Triskelion.” she looks at him
voicing the same doubts circling in his head too. He swallows.

“Yes, I suppose. We could still keep in touch and visit sometimes.” he says in a small voice, without
much conviction. Suddenly, advanced weapon design doesn’t look so appealing. He is fidgeting with
the paper bag that muffins were wrapped in, oblivious to the crinkling sound it makes until Jemma
glares at him. He puts down the paper bag with a grimace.

“It wouldn’t be the same.” she sighs.

Fitz can’t help but sigh too. “No, it wouldn’t. Which is a shame; I’ve done my best work with you.
I’d really like to see what we could do together in a real lab with real resources.”

“Exactly. I feel the same way.” she says and looked at him with a smile. He can see a plan forming
in her head as her expression changes. “Oh, we are so daft. Let’s go talk to Dr Weaver. I’m sure she
can help us go to the same place.”

“Even if it’s not our first choice?” he looks at her perplexed. He has not known anyone as
determined and purposeful as Simmons. To even consider not picking the absolutely most prestigious
spot offered to her is unthinkable.

“You are my first choice.” she says impulsively. He stares at her and she turns a bit pink, then starts
to stammer “…what I mean is… working with you is my first choice.” Fitz feels a lump forming in
his throat; they had been of course inseparable in the past years at the Academy, but he always
assumed that she would choose whichever path took her to the top of SHIELD science division,
where she clearly belonged.

He puts his hand on hers. “Good, because working with you is also my first choice.” he says with a
smile. They stay like that, holding hands for a moment.

They almost run all the way to Weaver’s office. She looks at them with barely concealed amusement
as they present – talking over each other agitated – their request.

“I cannot say, I’m surprised – well, I’m a bit puzzled it took you so long to come to me. But I agree
that your unique collaboration may be even of greater value to SHIELD than your separate talents. I
have an offer for both of you in the Sci-Ops field investigation technology lab. The head there is an
old friend of mine – they deal with a good range of things and I think it would be perfect place for
you to start if you want to stay together.” she hands them a folder with some paperwork. “You need
to make a decision though in a couple of days.”

Fitz doesn’t even have to look at the paperwork to know that he would take whatever Simmons
decided. They will stay together, he thinks with excitement as he looks in the smiling eyes of his best
friend.
“I’m proud of you, Leopold. Remember this day – you listened to me, you worked hard and now so many doors are open for you.” it is a heady feeling – his father has rarely said he was proud of him. When Leopold saw the results of the finals, and particularly that he finished top of his class, he wanted to call his dad immediately. It was after all his father’s dream for him.

“Thank you, father.” he says.

“Did you choose a place yet? You must have quite a few offers…”

“Indeed.” Leopold says. “Quin wants me back in his advanced weapons design division. It is the very best technologically speaking, and the money is nothing to sneeze at.” Leopold replies proudly.

“Probably not a bad choice. But remember, I can introduce you to some influential people in HYDRA; the organization is gaining influence now, people are starting to listen to us. You could do a lot of good here.” His father has been trying to convince him for months to join Hydra. Leopold still couldn’t silence a small inner voice telling him that his place is somewhere else.

“I’ll think about it, dad. I’ve got to go now, I’m meeting Ophelia.” he cuts the conversation short, not wanting to get into an argument with his father on such a good day.

“Oh, how are things with the lovely Ophelia?” His father perks up on the other end of the line.

“Fine, nothing special. We are just best friends.” Leopold replies.

“You got to make a move, son, soon. A fine lass like her will not be single forever. Listen to your old man.” His father has been nagging him about her for a while, but in truth, as much as he couldn’t deny that Ophelia was incredibly attractive, he feels also intimidated by her. He is not sure what he feels is love, but he knows with certainty that he would miss her terribly if they end up going separate ways after graduation. She is his only friend.

“I’ve got to go. Bye, dad.” Leopold hangs up. He feels a bit guilty about keeping secret the phone call he received from Agent Weaver in SHIELD. She tried to convince him about taking up a position in a SHIELD research facility. While his father is right about HYDRA becoming more influential, SHIELD still has the best resources and Leopold is both flattered and intrigued about the position. He just doesn't know how to tell his father. First, it is best to talk it over with Ophelia.

He arrives to Ophelia’s place with a couple of muffins and she invites him in with a smile. “Congratulations, Leopold. Your final results were truly brilliant.”

“Yours too, Ophelia. It was really just a small difference.” He smiles generously but is rather pleased with himself that he has managed to best her with a single point. He wants to impress her more than anything in the world.

“So how many offers do you have?” she asks him, handing him a cup of coffee.

“Six in total.” Leopold replies. “Can I tell you a secret though?” Ophelia nods. “SHIELD asked me to join their top research facility and that’s the one I think I’ll take. I just need to figure out how to tell my father.”
“Why would you think about SHIELD?” Ophelia asks, her voice sharp like a knife. Leopold is taken aback. Ophelia is usually very level, keeping her emotions under control. This is one of the qualities he admires about her the most. He still has trouble keeping his temper in check.

“You don’t think it’s a good idea.” he looks at her with a question in his eyes.

“I think it would be a mistake. SHIELD is not who you think they are.” she snaps. Then she adds, her voice barely a whisper. “Do you remember when I told you that some terrible things happened in my past?” She seems nervous, looking at her hands folded in her lap.

Leopold nods, his heart beating fast. “You never told me specifically what happened though.”

“I.. it’s painful to talk about it. I was kept against my will. Treated as a thing… well it was all connected to SHIELD.”

“Tell me what happened.” he asks her taking her smooth, cool hands in his palm. The thought that something horrible happened to Ophelia is unbearable. His mind races, imagining nightmarish things; her friend raped, beaten, kept as a prisoner.

“I cannot tell you everything yet, Leopold. Knowing too much could put your whole world in danger.” she says evasively. She raises his hand and holds it to her cheek. “Promise me you won’t work for SHIELD – I don’t want you to become like them.”

Leopold caresses gently her face with his thumb. “If it’s so important for you, Ophelia. I told father already that Quin offered me a position at advanced weapons design. It’s my second choice.”

Ophelia locks her eyes in his, then slowly turns her head breathing a light kiss into his palm. “Leopold, you are such a good friend. Truly, I feel like you are the only person in the entire world who cares about me, who I can trust. It is really a shame that I will not see you all the time anymore.”

“You could come to Quin’s Enterprises as well, couldn’t you?” he asks.

“I know what I want, Leopold. I belong in HYDRA; I’m meant to be a guardian of this world. To make sure everyone is safe.” she says with determination. “And I think if you came with me, together we could do great things. Amazing things.” she interlaces her fingers with his.

“You want me to?” he asks, suddenly feeling better about HYDRA. As a bonus, his father would be ecstatic. And if it didn’t work out, he could still choose Quin.

“I’ve always done my best work with you, Leopold.” she says and plants a kiss on his cheek. He takes in the scent of her hair; something fruity interlaced with a flowery overtone. She smells like the sweetest memory.

“I feel the same way, Ophelia.” he says and turns a bit pink. “It’s decided then.”

“You won’t regret it. The two of us will be an unstoppable force together. We will conquer HYDRA.” she looks at him with a triumphant smile.

Chapter End Notes

I think Framework Fitz must have had deeply ingrained feelings in his brain that would surface from time to time trying to steer him on a different path. I imagine, his
subconscious would initially rebel against the idea of joining HYDRA, but in times of doubt, his father and Ophelia was there to rein him back.

Ophelia probably still had the tenet about not lying and protecting the Framework. She tries to keep her dialogue to comply with the programming, but at the same time trying also to manipulate Fitz.
The Interview

Chapter Summary

Two interviews that change things.

“Come, hurry. We’ll be late from the interview.” Jemma's voice is full of excitement.

“What interview?” asks Fitz absentmindedly as he readjusts the gauge on his instrument. “I don’t remember anything about an interview. I really want to finish the calibration of this.”

“Have you forgotten? Agent Weaver told us about an opportunity. They are looking for scientists for a new mobile unit. We fit the bill. “ Jemma circles around to stand directly in front of him. Her closeness sends warm waves around his body. The low-key desire he has been feeling for his best friend is simultaneously the best and worst thing of his life that he tries to deny, ignore and conceal on a daily basis.

Fitz finally looks at her with a dramatic sigh. “But why, Simmons? Why would we leave Sci-Ops? And on top of it to join a mobile unit? Our night-night gun project is going so well. We have excellent equipment…”

“and endless red tape. Come on, Fitz” Jemma rolls her eyes and leans even closer. Fitz tries not to stare at her cleavage. “Don’t you want some adventure? Don't you ever want to see life outside of the lab?”

“Oh you mean to get outside of THIS spacious, cutting edge facility to get inside a cramped little lab with…” Fitz replies waving his hands around in exaggerated movements to show the size difference.

“…with me. You know, if we stay, sooner or later they’ll split us up. I heard they want to put you on weapons development full time." Fitz looks at her with surprise, but Jemma has always been more up-to-date on corridor rumours. "Let’s hear him out, Fitz. After all, Agent Coulson is a legend.” she smiles at him. Fitz could never resist her. Plus, he knows it would be a lost cause - Jemma is bloody persistent.

“Ok, fine. Just let’s get over with it quickly.” he grumpily agrees.

When they enter the meeting room, Agent Coulson is already waiting there. He has thinning hair and a gentle smile; he does not look like anything Fitz imagined a legendary, senior field agent. He reminds him of a kind school teacher.

“I’m Phil Coulson” he rises from his seat to shake their hands. “I’m very pleased to meet you Agent Simmons, Agent Fitz. Everyone, especially Agent Weaver speaks highly of you.”

"It's our pleasure, sir." Jemma replies. It has become a habit for her to be the spokesperson of their duo in such situations. Fitz is happy for her to take the lead - it is her project after all.

“So let's get right down to business: I am putting together a highly specialized unit and I think you two would be the perfect fit for it.” Coulson says.

"Could you tell a bit more about the mission of this unit, sir?" Jemma asks with a polite smile.
“How does being in the frontline of alien biology and technology sound to you?” the older man replies. Fitz perks up – *this was maybe something to consider.*

“How so?” he asks suspiciously.

“The unit is put together to track down powered individuals…”

“…for what purpose exactly, Agent Coulson?” Jemma interjects.

Coulson keeps glancing between them with an amused smile. “Ideally, we want to work with them. But if we cannot, we need to keep tabs on them to protect people if needed.”

“Why us? We have no field experience to speak of.” Fitz interjects. Jemma looks at him crossly, but he just shrugs whispering to her rather loudly “Well Simmons – it’s true.”

“I’ve read your personnel file. You are not only two of SHIELD’s brightest, but you both think outside the box. Together you make connections other people cannot. We need that kind of thinking on the field.” Coulson says calmly.

“But wouldn’t that be a waste of our talent, chasing after powered people?” Fitz asks drawing up his eyebrows a bit provocatively. He’s intrigued, but it never hurts to play hard to get.

Coulson keeps calm and looks at him with the same amused smile. “You will get the first-hand opportunity to study them, to come into contact with objects of unbelievable potential. Didn’t you file three weeks ago a request for a rare toxin? Have you gotten a reply yet?”

“How would you know that, sir?” they ask in unison.

“Like I said, I read your file. Your entire file. Also, I am level 10. I can offer you unfettered access and no red tape.” He replies simply.

“The no red tape part does sound good.” admits Fitz. He hates paperwork more than anything. It's a useless distraction to take him away from science.

“What about our lab?” Simmons asks.

“You would be free to equip it how you want. Whatever equipment you can fit on the Bus is yours.” Coulson nods then he turns to Fitz. "Agent Fitz, I heard you know a little something about airplanes. You could even make the tweaks and modifications you want on it. The only thing you are not allowed to touch is Lola.”

“Who is exactly Lola?” Fitz asks, intrigued. Modifying SHIELD airplanes sounds like entirely too much fun to pass up on.

“No, you have to come on board to know that.” Coulson replies mysteriously.

“And the rest of the team?” Jemma asks.

“We will start small – a specialist, a pilot, you two and myself. This is not a combat unit; more of a welcoming committee.”

"We haven’t said yes, yet.” Simmons protests.

“But you do want to, Dr Simmons. I got your interest, I can tell.” Coulson nods with a slightly smug expression on his face. "So we have a deal then?"
“Would you mind giving us a minute, sir?” asks Simmons sweetly and pulls Fitz out to the corridor. She grabs Fitz’s hand excited. “Fitz, this is it. I feel it. It’s the perfect opportunity for us to see the world. We would be fools to pass this one up. Think about it, alien materials and biology, all ours to discover without endless paperwork. And we can keep working together.”

“What about the night-night pistol?” Fitz asks, still not completely convinced.

“We can finish it on the Bus.” Jemma replies. “Come on, it will be an adventure. And if we regret it, I'm sure we’ll find other offers easily.”

“Mark my words, Simmons, we WILL regret it.” Fitz replies, but inside he feels excited – a lab of their own sounds heavenly – but at the same time he has a looming feeling of doom he cannot quite shake.

"You don’t have to come..." she looks at him dejectedly. Fitz may be uncertain about the assignment, but there is one thing in his life he knows with perfect clarity: he and Simmons are destined to stay side-by-side. He gives her a lopsided grin.

"And let you get into God knows what kind of trouble by yourself? No, if you go, I'm coming with you. All I'm saying is; we will regret this."

“Thank you, Fitz. I really think it will be good for us.” she smiles and places a quick peck on his cheek. They both turn a bit pink as they look at each other fondly. Fitz quickly looks away, studying his sneakers as if the mysteries of the world would be revealed through them.  They go back to the room to Coulson who is patiently waiting for them.

"We have a deal, sir." Jemma announces triumphantly.

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Framework

Leopold works frantically trying to identify the bug in the surveillance drones. The work order came down - as always - with extreme short deadlines and high pressure. He has managed to build a reputation as a fixer; someone HYDRA could always count on to perform a miracle. And whenever he has become stuck, Ophelia had the uncanny ability to pinpoint the issue and help him deliver the project just on time, without any hiccups.

She has worked her way up to lead the strategic planning of the lab; designing the projects. Leopold quickly has become the de facto head of the lab, and he has been running it with precision and a single-minded determination to deliver everything on time. His colleagues looked up at him with a mixture of fear, jealousy and respect; he was quick to find any fault in their work and ruthless when it came to exposing it. This led to him being isolated from the social life; spending most of his precious little free time with his father and with Ophelia, who has remained his only friend. Every day, he stayed long past everyone in the lab and started before anyone arrived.

He has been working on a new simulation to identify the problem, when he hears the familiar click-clack of Ophelia’s high heels and feels her scent before she opened the door.
“What are you working on so late?” she asks with a smile.

“Someone, in charge of planning is giving me impossible deadlines.” he quips back, but is pleased to see her nonetheless. A hot flush of desire spreads over him – she is wearing a tight, form-fitting dark grey suit with a low-cut white shirt and black stilettos. Leopold swallows hard as she stands in front of him leaning over the lab table, revealing the curve of her perfect breasts encased in a lacy bra.

She puts her hand on his and said playfully “My deadlines are serving you rather well, Leopold. You have a reputation now as the miracle-worker Doctor. In fact, that’s why I came to see you. Malick asked to meet you.” Leopold wonders what the head of HYDRA would want from him.

“What does he want from me?” he asks out loud.

“I think he has plans for you – well, for both of us really. Maybe it’s time to stop following orders and take our place among the real players.” she says, but all Leopold can see are her thick eye-lashes over her sparkling eyes.

“I’m quite comfortable here in my lab, Ophelia. I think this is where I do my best work. I’d much rather leave the politics to Malick…” he caresses her hand with his thumb “or you. Clearly, you relish it.”

“I do.” Ophelia says, her eyes half-closed in a lusty look. “Still, I think you should hear him out.” She leans closer, her breath impossibly hot against his ears “And there is no one else I’d rather work with on this, but you, Leopold. You are the only one I trust.” She stands up. “You’ll be there? 8 o’clock in the morning.”

“If it’s important to you, I’ll be there.” he replies a bit breathless as Ophelia turns and walks out the lab, hips swaying alluringly at each step.

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Ophelia is waiting for him outside of Malick’s office, when Leopold appears dressed in his best suit, impeccably pressed white shirt with cuff-links and a dark tie. Ophelia looks over him appreciatively “You clean up rather nice, Leopold.” she smiles suggestively and his blood starts to boil. He is ready to do anything to impress this girl.

They enter into Malick’s office together. The head of HYDRA stands at the window, taking in the impressive view from the Triskelion looming over the city. He turns gesturing them to take a seat.

“Doctor Fitz, Ophelia dear here has sang your praises. I think it is time for a talent like you to come into the spotlight.” he says. “It is time to show the world what kind of a man you are.”

“Sir” Leopold interjects hesitantly “I’m a scientist and my place is in the lab.”

“Maybe in conventional times.” nods Malick. “But we live in unconventional times. Do I need to remind you of the Cambridge incident? The innocent lives we lost? It could have been any of us or those close to us. We need minds like yours on the field. We need to be able to counter the inhuman threat.”

Leopold nods “What do you have in mind?”
“Each inhuman has its own peculiar skill set. I need you to work on solutions that will neutralize these so we can capture them and eliminate the threat to our society. This is what people want from HYDRA – safety, security and you are just the person to give it to them, Doctor Fitz.” Malick looks at him intensely then glances to the side “Or so Ophelia tells me.”

Leopold is not convinced that his talents would be best utilized by chasing down inhumans. But he doesn't want to disappoint Ophelia either. Malick sees the hesitation in his eyes. "Unless you are afraid, of course..."

"I am not afraid" Leopold says immediately, his voice sounding almost hostile. He is suddenly terrified that Ophelia might think him a coward. He says “Whatever you need, sir. I will be happy to do my part.”

Malick’s smile widens. “I hoped you would say that. You have a bright future here, Doctor. But people need to look up to you and you need field experience for that. I think ultimately you won’t regret this decision.” they shake hands.

As they leave the room, Ophelia stops him on the corridor. “I’m so proud of you, Leopold. I think this is the right move, for both of us.” she leans closer and places a quick kiss on his cheek. He closes his eyes and an uncannily strange feeling comes over him, like he already has lived this moment before. A peck on the cheek that changed his life forever.
Fitz feels restless and has a conversation with May after the events in The Hub.

Leopold is out on the field and freezes for a moment, which is an almost deadly mistake.

Fitz and killing in and outside the Framework.

Triggers: Gun, Gun violence, killing, Ophelia and Fitz friendship

After tossing and turning for hours, both exhausted and wired, Fitz decides that it is pointless to keep staring at the ceiling. Instead, he gets up and walks through dark plane, trying carefully not to step into shards of glass still covering the floor. He heads for the little kitchen corner to fix himself a tea.

As he sits at the counter staring into the darkness, the whole day comes rushing back. Everything feels surreal; his whole world is upside down. His head is spinning as details and emotions come back in flashes: first the standoff with May, and his stomach squeezes again with fear and shock, then Garret’s miraculous appearance – oh, he was so overjoyed to see him again, well, at least until he turned out to be a HYDRA-traitor bastard. He’s tasting again the bitter taste of adrenaline in his mouth as he thinks back staring into the guns of a firing-squad, so sure he was about to die – he can almost feel the salty echoes of the tears of distress running down his cheek.

The HYDRA coup of SHIELD blindsided all of them and Fitz still cannot wrap his head around it; the organization that has been his home since he was 16 is on the edge of disappearing. He is worried about the future – not that he would not find work – but he cannot help wondering what it means for him and Jemma. She has been by his side for the past years, most of his adult life – her presence has become a part of him and he cannot and certainly does not want to imagine life without her. Cold panic spreads through his body – what if they have to go separate ways? Maybe – maybe it is time to tell her the truth. But then again, it may ruin everything.

May walks into the kitchen in workout clothes. Her eyes widen a bit as she spots him sitting in the corner. She nods, and then silently makes herself a tea. Fitz watches her poised, fluid movements. He is unsure how to relate to her now - after all, she has betrayed Coulson, but also put herself on the line for them, again. The sides and battle-lines were blurry.

“You mind?” she asks quietly and Fitz just shrugs. May clearly takes it as an encouragement and sits down across from him. For a while, they are sitting in silence – and it is difficult to out-silence May, but Fitz is determined to wait for her to speak first.

“Coulson wants the Bus fixed, by the end of the day.” she says matter-of-factly.

Fitz scoffs: “Of course. There is damage from the bomb – and the maintenance crew turned out to be Hydra, but sure, if you give me a minute, I’ll fix it all up…” – his voice is dripping with sarcasm, he almost knocks his cup down as his hands are trembling slightly.

“Are you OK?” May asks, her voice concerned.

“Yes, I’m OK. Just couldn’t sleep. It was a hectic day, is all.” his own voice sounds strained.
May nods, sipping her tea slowly. She looks at him: “You know that I’d never hurt you, Fitz, right? I just tried to protect Fury’s secret.”

Fitz swallows hard at the mention of the memory.

“I’m sorry that I shot at you.” May adds.

“It’s OK. You did what you thought was best.” he says finally, accepting her apology.

“And thank you for saving my life.” she adds with a thin smile. Fitz feels the bile in his stomach as the moment comes rushing back, the chaos of the fight, the gun in front of him, the cold feel of the metal as he pulled the trigger and how easy it was – like a video game. You push a button and you take out a nameless enemy.

“I – we are a team. And you do that every day for us.” his voice is barely above a whisper.

“It was the first time you killed someone, wasn’t it?” May’s watchful eyes unnerve him, as always. She is an enigma that he finds unsettling.

Fitz nods. “I – I can’t stop wondering who he was, how he ended up where he did. I keep asking myself if he had family waiting for him.” he finally manages to put a finger on what is bothering him.

“How do you get used to it?” he asks May.

“You don’t. I don’t think we are ever supposed to get used to it.”

“But if it feels like this every time – how can you…?” he looks at her.

“You learn to live with it – but the doubt never goes away. It shouldn’t ever get easy. You do what feels right in the moment, but the doubt will stay.” she says, standing up.

She looks back at him. “So, what should I tell Coulson? Can you do it?”

Fitz thinks for a moment. If Coulson wants to take the Bus out, maybe he has a plan. As long as the Bus is there – he and Jemma have a place. He feels suddenly better. Everything is wrong right now, and most of those things he cannot fix. But the plane, yes – he can fix the plane. “The cargo ramp will be tricky, but yes, I think so.”

“Good.” May says as he leaves the kitchen.

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Field assignments were 95% boredom, 5% fear. Leopold prefers the quiet of the lab, but Malick insisted, Ophelia insisted and his father insisted. He has to earn respect through proving himself, which is how he finds himself on another dark corner, facing another dangerous inhuman.

“Just take the shot, Leopold!” his father yells. Leopold raises his weapon and aims trying to calm the trembling in his hand. He pulls the trigger and the inhuman falls to the ground, but so does his father, clutching his side. Leopold rushes to him and lets out a sigh of relief when he feels a pulse. “Get an ambulance!” he screams and just keeps holding his father’s hand and watches his pale face until he hears the blaring sirens through the thick fog. He rides with him to the hospital, fear tightening his chest – it is his fault that his father is hurt.
Leopold watches helplessly as they push him into an operating room, his favourite white dress-shirt soaked with blood.

He paces up and down on the corridor until he sees Ophelia appear. She is out of breath, and she embraces him, her soft hair brushing up against his face. “I came as soon as I heard.” she says. “How is he?”

“I don’t know.” he says, eyes downcast. “It was my fault, Ophelia. I...I - he told me to shoot and I hesitated.”

Ophelia puts a hand on his shoulder. "Leopold."

They are interrupted by a doctor: “Are you a relative?” he asks.

Leopold steps in front of him trying to calm his nerves. “I am his son.”

“Your father will be OK.” the doctor says and Leopold lets out a relieved sigh. “You can go talk to him now.”

He enters the room and Alistair Fitz is as pale as the sheets on his bed. The monitors are beeping around him. Leopold thinks about how close he was to losing the only family he has.

Leopold rushes next to him and grabs his hand, “Father, I’m so sorry.” he pleads.

His father’s icy blue eyes are fixated on him. As he speaks, his voice is raspy, and he is struggling with each breath. “Remember this feeling son. You should never hesitate. When it comes down to saving your own – you should never hesitate.”

“I won’t.” Leopold says and blood is rushing to his face. He feels admonished, like a child again. Father is displeased – and with good reason.

“Don’t let me down again, son.” his father says, his voice is stern now.

“I won’t, father, I promise.” Leopold whispers as he feels Ophelia’s hand on his shoulder, her touch calming the storm inside, filling him with conviction and purpose.

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