Happy Accidents; Or, a Tale of Love, Science, and Everything in Between
by bookishandbossy

Summary

Hypothesis: If the lady scientist (and perpetual spinster) Jemma Simmons meets the gentlemen inventor (and eligible duke) Leopold Fitz in a library, then adventure, scandal, copious amounts of scones, and (much to her surprise) even romance will ensue.

Notes

Proofread, edited, and generally whipped into shape by the lovely notapepper!

If this AU makes you curious about the wider world of steampunk, I highly recommend the works of Gail Carriger, which inspired me while I was writing this fic!
Crumpets and Courtesies

From an early age, Miss Jemma Simmons had been taught to always assess a situation in a calm, scientific manner. Her father had been a successful businessman, granted a peerage for his services to the crown in developing airship technology, and he'd appointed a long string of tutors for his eldest daughter, all of them devout believers in the Steam Revolution. Now, standing in the middle of a crowded ballroom in a distinctly unflattering dress, Jemma shut her eyes and imagined the voice of her favorite tutor, clever Miss Lovelace. *We always begin with a hypothesis, Miss Simmons. Very well, Jemma thought. Hypothesis: If she spent any more time in this room, then she would faint from a unique combination of boredom, heat, and the meant-to-be-cutting comments about that “odd Simmons girl.”*

Jemma's eighth and last Season would be over in two months, one week, and five days and then at twenty-seven, much to her delight and her mother's horror, she would officially be on the shelf. It had been obvious from the moment she made her debut: the men of high society were more interested in demure English roses than thorny lady scientists and she was not at all interested in men who spent their time yearning for the days when they rode around the manor and shouted commands from the back of their horses. It had been quite a simple deduction in the end. Her family's—if she was being honest, her mother's—social ambitions prevented her from marrying someone of a lower class who might appreciate her for the ideas she could bring to a partnership. Her own dignity prevented her from marrying some older noble who wanted her to provide children, or one of the young rakes who owed debts to her father. Finally, her own extensive reading had convinced her that love matches were a rarity for those who were actually sought after, practically nonexistent for those who weren’t, and extremely unlikely to ever happen to her. Her father would leave her a comfortable inheritance in his will, enough to live modestly on her own. So therefore, she wouldn't marry.

Easy as two plus two, she'd told herself. She'd seen enough unhappy marriages in the past eight years to convince herself that she wasn't missing much, to get used to the idea of a life spent by herself. Not by herself, she corrected. She quite liked the idea of being an eccentric spinster aunt, the kind who bought extravagant presents for her nieces and nephews and said outrageous things in the middle of family dinners. The kind of woman who did what she wanted. Leaning against the wall of the ballroom, Jemma sighed in frustration. Outside the drawing rooms and country manors of society, she knew that women were running their own businesses, publishing novels, campaigning for social causes, reporting for newspapers—she’d even read about a woman running for Parliament. But inside, everything was invitations to tea and the new fashions for gloves and things men had decided were suitable for women.

*Focus, Jemma. How can you test your hypothesis?* Option one: Stay in the ballroom, attempting to make conversation with the other wallflowers, until she actually did faint from boredom. Option two: Dance with one of the elderly suitors that her mother kept presenting her with until she had to fake a faint to avoid their lecherous glances. Clearly, what she truly needed was a new hypothesis. *Hypothesis: If she found a library, then she would be saved.* She set off across the ballroom and finally spotted a set of heavy oak doors after dodging waltzing couples, butler mechanicals carrying trays through the crowd, and the floating gas lanterns that were the latest fashion. *Hypothesis: If heavy oak doors are spotted, then a library is imminent.*

Ten minutes later, she was curled up in a window seat with Mr. Darwin's most recent treatise and three trays of food. Butler mechanicals kept on trundling through the library with refreshments—it must have been some kind of glitch in the clockwork—and she was happily buttering her second crumpet when the doors swung open, a shadow fell across the carpet, and a distinctly Scottish voice
declared that she was stealing his crumpets.

“I was certainly not. First of all, there was absolutely no indication that the crumpets had been claimed. Second of all, you would have had to be here to actually claim them. And third of all—” she sprang up from her seat to face the voice and her protests died away. *Hypothesis: If she had never seen the color blue before, then she could have believed it only existed in his eyes.*
"How do you think the crumpets got in here?" he demanded. "I rigged the butler mechanicals to come through the library and put food in here. I had an escape plan and everything." He was practically pouting, planting himself in the doorway and crossing his arms over his waistcoat, and she found herself torn between finding it ridiculous and adorable.

"And you were going to eat all of that by yourself?" she arched an eyebrow.

"Yes." he mumbled, having the grace to look sheepish.

"Well, the library's big enough for two people. I won't bother you if you don't bother me. And don't even think about eating the ginger cake." she added quickly when she saw him eying the tray.

Jemma flounced back to her window seat, picked up her book, and furiously tried to concentrate. But he kept on stealing curious glances at her with those blue eyes and she kept on looking back. Those awful, wonderful blue eyes, she thought, and promptly wondered what was wrong with her. She had never been the kind of girl who waxed poetic about anything that wasn't under a microscope, and certainly not about grumpy Scottish lords who thought they could get away with claiming entire libraries. She raised her book higher, reading the same sentence for the twelfth time.

"What are you hiding from?" he asked abruptly.

"Who says I'm hiding? Maybe I just like libraries." she said at first. Then he started looking at her. And kept on looking. And looking until she sighed and put her book down. "Maybe—just maybe—I was avoiding my mother. And boredom. And another hour of standing against the wall listening to the same pieces of gossip over and over and knowing that no one's going to ask me to dance. What about you?"

"The Season is entering its final months and the debutantes are out in full force...did you see the article in last month's Tatler? London's Top Ten Eligible Bachelors?" he winced. All of a sudden she recognized him—there had been a quite elegant etching of him alongside the article. Leopold Fitz, Duke of Hamilton, owner of vast estates in Scotland, well-known inventor, and number nine on the Tatler's list of eligible bachelors.

"My younger sister read it aloud to all of us, but I don't quite remember your section of the article. How did it go again?" She tilted her head to one side and gave him her best innocent smile.

"I only have it memorized because people kept quoting it at me. My sisters found it quite amusing," he said grimly and shut his eyes, tipped his head back, and let his voice go up an octave or two into a perfect impression of Lady Featherstone, the Tatler columnist famous for assessing each season's new crop of bachelors like a herd of cattle. "Number nine: Leopold Fitz, Duke of Hamilton. Dear reader, you may question the placement of Lord Fitz upon this list, especially considering this season's plentiful array of such charming young bachelors as the dashing Lord Aston and the delightfully rakish Lord Martin, who are indeed never seen apart." He switched back to his normal voice. "The reason that they're never seen apart is that they're conducting a torrid affair while they build steam cars. Sometimes even on the cars." Fitz quickly changed back to Lady Featherstone. "His Scottish temperament is well known, after the unfortunate croquet game at Lady Chesterton's garden party, and rumors of his unusual tastes in the bedroom have spread far and wide. Yet I would urge aspiring debutantes to consider his own brand of prickly charm, his renowned intelligence, and extensive estates and fortune, and to remember that the unusual may become most pleasant. The
perfect choice for an adventurous and enterprising young lady, ready to take on the role of the beauty that tamed the beast.”

“Quite the ringing endorsement. What did happen at that croquet game?” Jemma leaned forward, book forgotten. Yes, she admitted, he was too grumpy to be charming, his hair too messy to be handsome, and although he was presumably quite clever, she’d seen little evidence of it yet. In short, he was absolutely none of the things that she ought to like. But the duke was something so much better: he was *interesting*, with his tinkering with butler mechanicals and his strikingly accurate impressions and his stubborn way of looking at people. (And the blue eyes that she was most definitely not thinking about.)

“Lord Cavanaugh was too busy flirting with Lady Grace to take his turn in croquet. I politely waited for nearly twenty minutes, like any gentleman would, so then I finally took his turn for him and sent his ball flying into the lake. Along with three wickets, four mallets, and the refreshment table. I'd been developing a new, more effective, steam-powered mallet,” he explained. “It needed a practical trial, so I brought a prototype along to the party in the hope that I'd be able to work out some of the problems. Unfortunately, the prototype is now at the bottom of Lady Chesterton's lake.”

“Do you still have the blueprints? If you sent them to me, I might be able to spot some of the problems,” she offered.

“Why should I send you my blueprints when I don't even know your name?” he said and crossed his arms over his waistcoat (a shade of blue that matched the eyes she was decidedly not noticing) again, clearly waiting for something. “That was supposed to be a clever ploy to get you to tell me your name, since a formal introduction would be a bit odd now,” he muttered.

“Miss Jemma Simmons, daughter of Edward Simmons, Baron of Stafford as decreed by her Majesty Queen Victoria for his services in designing the royal airship fleet.” Jemma straightened her spine and stood up, dusting off her skirts. Her family's title might be only a few years old, their lands practically non-existent, and their money new in every way, but they'd earned it honestly and they'd worked at filling their coffers while the heirs to ancient titles gambled their fortunes away. “If you're going to look down your nose at me, now would be the time to do it.”

“I...I quite admire your father's work actually. I've found his studies on alternative materials for the frames of airships to be astute, forward-thinking, and thrifty.” He dropped down into a surprisingly elegant bow. “Leopold Fitz, eleventh Duke of Hamilton. But if you start calling me Your Grace, I'll start scowling, so you'd better call me Fitz.”

“Fitz.” She tested out the sound of it on her tongue. Short f, sharp t, drawling z, and it rolled off her tongue like she'd been saying it for years. “So how long were you planning on occupying the library?”

“Until everyone forgets about that article,” he replied. “I actually had to bribe the editor a shocking amount not to put me higher on the list when the rumors didn't work.”

“So are any of them true?” Now, when she thought about it, some of the rumors that had gone around about him were quite scandalous. She blushed, recalling the memorable tea when one of her more daring fellow debutantes had recounted her supposed encounters with Fitz in a carriage, conservatory, and, most memorably, in the antechamber of a men's fencing club at midnight.

“The truth is a complicated thing.” Fitz shrugged and her heart sank for no reason at all when she remembered the most common rumor of all: that he hadn't married because he preferred men to women. It was simply ridiculous, that everything should suddenly dim a little because of a simple rumor about a man she had just met. If it happened to be true, she would simply accept the fact, wish
him happiness, and continue with what could quite probably be a lovely friendship. If it happened to be false...she didn't expect anything like that from him, and so it would be of no consequence. Absolutely none at all.

“*I suppose it is.*” She nodded and a stiff silence fell between them until he blurted out something, too fast for her to properly hear it. “*Sorry?*”

“I've just realized that I read some of your articles. In the journal of the British Royal Society of Biologists? They were quite good,” he offered and eagerly crossed to sit by her. “I was actually wondering if you might tell me more about your work on amphibians...” All of a sudden, everything made sense between them again and she plunged into a detailed explanation of her work, sensing that for once someone might be able to keep up with her. Fitz proved himself to be a perfect listener, leaping in to ask questions at the right moments, following her train of thought from point to point without her ever needing to stop to catch him up, and following up on the ends of her sentences as if he knew perfectly what she was going to say next. When she finally stopped speaking, she was pink-cheeked from breathlessness and brimming over with excitement. She would have to look up some of the studies he'd mentioned, cross-check some of her evidence, and-- “*I've got a sea serpent in my loch,*” he added casually and her mind jerked to a halt.


“According to my tenants, yes. I've yet to see it myself.”

“What did they say its skin looked like? Did it have scales or smoother skin? What color was it? Do you think it could have been related to those giant skeletons that were discovered near Bristol?” Her questions spilled out faster than he could answer them until she finally stopped, blushing again (when had she become the kind of woman who blushed?), and blurted out an apology. “People are always telling me that I ask too many questions.”

“No need to apologize. I think that you ask the exact right amount of questions,” he said firmly “I'm giving a house party in a few weeks and I know that we just met, but I'd quite like you to come—we could investigate the mysterious serpent if you like?”

“It would be my pleasure.” Jemma dropped a polite curtsy and tried to remember her manners and keep the unladylike grin off her face.

“I should probably get back before my sisters come looking for me. I'll send an invitation round in the morning?” Fitz had a distinctly ungentlemanly grin on his face too, like a little boy who'd found a new friend in the nursery, she thought. He turned to go to the door and he was nearly there before he dashed back, grabbed her hand, and kissed it. “*Sorry, I nearly forgot my manners,*” he gasped out. “It was—it was quite wonderful to meet you, Miss Simmons.” He was gone before she could say anything back, but the imprint of his mouth on the back of her hand lingered for the rest of the night.
The calling cards began to arrive the next morning, each carried by a different clockwork animal, along with the usual bouquets for her younger sisters, the twenty-year-old twins Violet and Lily. Birds that puffed out steam as they carried roses in their beaks, little clockwork dogs with irises between their paws, iron horses draped with carnations, all of them bearing neatly embossed cards. As the rest of her family gushed over the “darling creatures”, Jemma sat politely on the sofa, her heavy skirts draped around her, and calculated how much longer she’d have to stay before she could make her excuses and slip away to the attic room she’d converted into her laboratory. She had a system for these mornings—a slight nod every two and a half minutes, a thoughtful hmmm every four, and a comment about how delightful the flowers were every ten. She was almost due for a nod when there was a loud metallic crash and the butler Jenkins appeared in the doorway bearing something long, thin, and scaly. “What on earth is that?” someone exclaimed.

“T’m not sure, ma’am, but it appears to be for Miss Simmons.” Jenkins deposited the object in her lap and Jemma peered down at it.

“It’s a sea serpent, of course,” she replied, tilting it towards the light. The scales gleamed green, then blue, then silver and when she stroked along its spine, the serpent flicked a metal tongue out, two cream-colored cards resting on the fork of the tongue. One was an engraved invitation and the other one a note in messy, slanted handwriting.

Miss Simmons,

The usual custom when making the acquaintance of a lady is to send her flowers, but I thought you’d like the serpent better. He can fit a surprising number of things in his stomach, from collecting dishes to sandwiches, will change the color of his scales according to the temperature, and can tell time surprisingly well. I hope that you’ll find him useful. The invitation itself is a little gaudy, in the hope that your parents will be impressed and allow themselves to visit the manor of a notoriously grumpy Scot. (Do mention to your father that I’ve recently purchased a small airship and to your mother that I’ve invited several men ranked higher than me in that awful article.) To the beginning of a new friendship.

Yours, Leopold Fitz, Duke of Hamilton

“It’s from Fitz.”

“Jemma, when you say Fitz, you don’t mean Duke Leopold Fitz, do you?” her mother asked cautiously and sidled over to the couch. “Holder of seven incredibly lucrative patents, heir to a four-hundred-year title, and number nine on the Tatler’s list of London’s Top Ten Eligible Bachelors?” If her mother’s voice got any higher, their windows would start to shatter, Jemma thought. She wondered precisely what frequency it would have to reach in order to-- “Jemma!”

“There's no need to shout. Yes, it was that Duke Fitz. Yes, I met him last night, quite by accident actually. And no, I’m not about to become the next Duchess of Hamilton,” she said crossly.

Hypothesis: If a lady begins to utter the name of a duke within her mother's hearing, then she will have sent out the wedding invitations by the time her daughter finishes saying the name. “We're friends, that's all, and he wants us all to come to his house party.”

“One doesn't accidentally make the acquaintance of an eligible duke. It's simply not the thing to be done.” Half of her family was gathered around her now, admiring the serpent and peering hopefully at the two cards as her mother went on. “One plots and plans and buys new dresses and engineers casual encounters until he falls at your feet with a proposal.”
“Well, no matter what I ought to have done, I did it and now he's sent us an invitation to his house party. As an act of friendship, like the friends we are,” she added, hoping to calm her family, but it was lost in the general hubbub around the invitation. Her mother was squealing with delight, Violet and Lily were asking her how many of the rumors were true in a scandalized whisper and stroking the sea serpent, and herolder brother James was asking her about the rumors in a stern voice, over-protective ever since she was six and fell out of a tree trying to collect birds' nests. The family dog took the opportunity to bark loudly and dance around the rug and her six-month-old nephew Henry started crying, despite her sister-in-law Kate's best efforts to simultaneously soothe him and tell Jemma that she knew Fitz's sisters and they said he was simply wonderful. Jemma herself desperately fought the urge to laugh. She loved her family best like this, when they were in a constant state of chaos, where the person who was able to shout the loudest and rush around the fastest won. It reminded her of when she was very young, when her father's business was still up-and-coming and they'd poured every last penny into it. Her parents hadn't been able to afford a nanny so they'd brought her and James everywhere with them. It had been a childhood filled with sights and sounds and rushing from place to place and all sorts of things that weren't considered proper for children, from the muddy airship fields, where her father's pilots snuck them bits of toffee, to high-stakes business dinners where she and James quietly played under the table and distracted the guests so her father could take a look at their finance statements. It had been wonderful.

But then came the fortune, and the peerage, and the society gossips who were ready to criticize their every move. Her mother had become anxious about her daughters' social prospects, especially after Violet and Lily were born, and in due time Jemma had been laced into a series of sailor frocks and taught how to waltz, curtsy, embroider, and watercolor. She had executed a charming, very accurate series of watercolors of slime molds, embroidered the circulatory system of a frog, and learned to waltz without stepping on her partners' feet more than five times, and been a mildly spectacular social disappointment. A few months into her first Season, when it became clear that she would be a perpetual wallflower, her mother had redoubled her efforts at protecting the family from scorn and they became ever more prim and proper. Still, her family forgot all the etiquette that they'd learned from time to time, like now, as they swarmed around her and started planning for the house party. “It's not for weeks yet,” she said, laughing.

“But you'll want to have some new dresses made,” Violet put in. “Do you think he might like you in blue?”

“Jemma looks much better in green,” Lily argued. “A green walking suit with black accents that she could wear out on romantic walks with the duke—you really do look quite nice when you have some color in your face, Jemma, and all that collecting rocks and bugs should have made you an excellent walker.”

“I told you already that we're only friends. You don't buy new dresses to go see friends,” Jemma said firmly, though she was already remembering some of the people Fitz had been linked with in the gossip columns, men and women both. They'd looked good in green, hadn't they? The furious debate was finally interrupted by a loud cough from Jenkins, standing in the doorway with another basket of calling cards and a politely horrified expression on his face. Their butler was probably the most proper of all of them, complete with years of service to other noble families, a look that could freeze a footman in his tracks, and a framed certificate from Mr. Bushwick's Academy of Butlering. (The only diploma her family owned so far was James', which Oxford had only handed over under duress and out of a wish to get him out of there as quickly as possible after he'd set off fireworks in the middle of a literature lecture.) Jemma suspected sometimes if Jenkins had been in charge of the family's social campaign, at least one of her siblings would have been married into the royal family before the age of twenty one.

“Lady Skye to see you, madam,” Jenkins announced, proffering the scalloped calling card, and the
entire parlor silenced instantly. Lady Skye had been the season's best known and universally adored debutante. She was the daughter of Lord Philip Coulson, the queen's spymaster and most trusted minister, and, according to the most recent rumor, a beautiful Chinese princess who had forsaken an arranged match to run away with Lord Coulson. (Of course, rumor paid no mind to what had happened to the princess afterward.) She had provided fodder for the town gossips for weeks, especially since Lord Triplett, war hero and heir to fourteen Caribbean islands, had claimed her for a shocking five dances at the first ball of the season. She'd made the prime minister laugh, she'd flirted with every eligible bachelor and maintained a spotless reputation, and best of all, the queen herself had attended Lady Skye's dinner party and gone so far as to compliment the cakes. She had been declared the absolute cream of society from the moment of her debut: pedigreed, wealthy, sought after by every hostess in town and in short, the kind of person who was extremely unlikely to appear in the parlor of the nouveau riche. *Hypothesis: If Lady Skye Coulson came to call on the Simmons family, then the four horsemen of the apocalypse would be close behind.*

Yet, there she was, wearing a stunning pink gown with her hair pulled back in an elegant French twist, no sign of the apocalypse behind her, and politely not making any comment about the shocked expressions on several family members' faces. Her mother was the first to recover, inviting their guest to sit down on the most comfortable sofa and promptly ordering tea. Gunpowder, of course. Lady Skye had declared that she adored gunpowder tea at a party five weeks ago and so of course, anybody who was anybody had immediately rushed out to purchase it. Some daring society hostess had even gone to Miss Melinda May, Lord Coulson's second-in-command and rumored former pirate queen, for advice on which stores Lady Skye frequented for her tea. In Jemma's favorite story, Miss May had responded that Lady Skye's favorite brand of tea had been smuggled in through an elaborate network involving tunnels under the English Channel, a high-speed train across the Siberian tundra, and Burmese star sapphires and if they cared to replicate that, they would be welcome to do so. After hearing that story half a dozen times, Jemma's mother had politely declined and made do with a rather excellent blend from one of her father's Chinese contacts.

An excellent blend which Lady Skye was currently sipping and making small talk over while Violet and Lily shot incredulous looks at each other behind her back, her mother tried to keep herself from crying with joy, and the dog proved himself to be the most sociable member of the Simmons family. He had curled up on Lady Skye's lap and was gazing up at her with open adoration when she scratched behind his ears. “You'll never be able to stop petting him now,” Jemma said. “He's decided that you're his new favorite person and if you ever dare stop, he'll start whining.”

“I don't mind. I never had any pets growing up so now I've acquired the awful habit of fawning over other people's. Lady Chesterton was quite scandalized when I picked up the gardener's little muddy dog at her garden party. I didn't care to explain to her that I'd been covered in far worse.” Something flashed across her face and Jemma remembered that no one had met Lady Skye before the age of twelve, when Lord Coulson had returned from a voyage to China with a new daughter, and wondered for a moment what her childhood might have been like before her arrival in England. Then Lady Skye laughed at the memory, bestowing a dazzling smile upon the entire room, and it seemed impossible that she had ever been anything other than perfectly poised.

“The same garden party of the infamous croquet incident?” she asked.

“You've met Fitz, then! Isn't he wonderfully odd?”

“I suppose he is.” Jemma couldn't help smiling at the thought of Fitz the night before, staring aghast at her when he saw someone else eating his crumpets.

“Did you know that he tried to retrieve his prototype from the lake after it had gone in? Waded in and ruined his trousers before our hostess sent her footmen to drag him out and prevent any more
scandal. I could have told him that it wasn't going to work but then my specialty is communications
and his is more technical.”

“Your specialty?” Jemma inquired.

“Our interests,” Lady Skye said hastily. “My father's gotten me quite interested in aetherograph
technology. Did you know that there’s a new aetherograph model in development where you can
hear the voice of the person who's sent you a message? Quite a fascinating idea in theory, if not
always the best in practice.” It was only later, when Jemma looked back on the afternoon, that she
realized the aetherograph had been a perfectly executed distraction. From there, they’d gone on to the
translation errors that aetherographs were notorious for, the time Jemma had snuck in to her father's
research department, the most recent installment of Mr. Dickens' new serial, the upcoming week of
balls, and the sheer absurdity of being expected to have a new gown for each one. They’d made
plans to have tea at Selfridges next Sunday, exchanged their favorite Austen novels, and promised to
call each other by their Christian names by the time Lady Skye swept out the door in a flurry of pink
skirts and promises to see them at the house party, if she didn't call on them beforehand. Jemma felt a
little like she'd been hit by a train, but in a friendly way.

“She's a lovely girl. A good friend to have, with all her connections if the duke doesn't work out,”
Mrs. Simmons said, coming to sit by Jemma after Skye's departure.

“I can have a friend without calculating the social advantages, Mama. I'm on the verge of being off
the marriage market, and I think that I'd much prefer a real friend to a husband.” She barely held
back the question hovering on the tip of her tongue. Why are you so determined to marry me off?

“I just worry about your future, Jemma. I don't want you to be living off your brother's charity when
your father's gone. I know that nothing's entailed and that your father's promised to leave you an
allowance but—did you ever hear the story of how I met your father?” Her mother didn't wait for an
answer, just went on. “When my father died, my brother inherited it all. He wasn't inclined to spend
any money on a London Season for me, so I went to work as a governess in Liverpool. Your father
nearly ran over me with one of the new steam cars he was testing when we first met.”

“And now you're a lady of the realm. If I do marry, I hope that it'll be as happy an accident as yours
was. If I don't marry, then I don't marry. Easy as that,” she said patiently and stood up, gathering her
skirts in one hand and making her farewells. Their social hour was over and she could finally retreat
to her laboratory, and the delicate substance she had been brewing.

“I do hope that your happy accident involves the duke, Jemma,” her mother called after her.

“So do we all, Mama. So do we all.” Jemma muttered.
“We're almost there, Jemma!” Someone, probably one of the twins, was bouncing up and down and shaking her awake. They had boarded the train at King’s Cross that morning, since they'd been carrying too much luggage to take an airship, and she'd fallen asleep somewhere in Yorkshire, exhausted after days of packing and repacking. Fitz had gone back to Scotland to prepare for the house party, but he'd sent her three letters, a book, and a bunch of pansies (I'm sure you'll do something clever with these, the note had read) in the past two weeks. Of course, her family had taken this to mean that their engagement was imminent and had insisted on her bringing what they deemed to be her most flattering outfits. All three trunks of them.

They emerged on the platform in the brisk Scottish air, dragging their luggage on a trolley behind them, and looked around to find themselves in what Lily and Violet immediately dubbed the middle of nowhere. Green hills rolled on for miles and miles, dotted with purple heather, and the sun glinted off a lake in the distance. “A sunny day in Scotland,” a familiar voice declared. “It's an official miracle.”

The Lady Skye was standing on the platform by a stack of monogrammed trunks, carrying a white lace parasol, wearing a rather daring blue traveling gown, and drawing the attention of everyone around her. “Jemma!” she squealed and raced down the platform, throwing her arms around Jemma. “I haven't seen you in ages.” It had only been three days but, much to her surprise, Jemma found that it felt rather nice to be bowled over with friendship.

“Geologic ages,” Jemma teased. “I don't see any sign of a manor—has Fitz been experimenting with cloaking devices now?”

“I wouldn’t put it past him. But the castle's miles off, due west and right by the loch. Can you see it?” Skye spun her parasol in a circle until there was a faint click and she pointed off into the distance with it. There must have been a compass embedded in the handle, Jemma thought, one of the many clever little devices that passed across Lord Coulson's desk. She squinted in the direction Skye had indicated until she finally spotted a mass of dark stones perched at the very end of the lake. She could make out a tower or ten, some outer walls, some inner walls, acres of outbuildings, a keep that looked vaguely medieval...just how long had Fitz's family held the dukedom for? “We'll be taking the steam cars there. Share with me and we can gossip the whole way there? I've got cakes from the train,” Skye added.

“No chaperone to share with?” Most eligible young ladies were accompanied by a staid older woman dressed in a sensible array of browns, wielding a large black umbrella, and reading an improving text while ensuring that her charge was the talk of the town and averting even the smallest whiff of scandal. Jemma had managed to jettison her own chaperone after four seasons had passed and it became evident that she was never going to be caught in a compromising situation on a balcony. Or in a greenhouse, or a garden, or a library, or a billiards room, or anywhere, really.

“I'm more than capable of defending my own reputation. And my father's sending a bodyguard along in a few days, after he's assessed the threat level. Enemies of the realm that might be lurking around, Scottish lords who think that they can win independence by kidnapping the spymaster's daughter.” Skye did something with her shoulders that in a less titled lady could have been called a shrug. “If anyone attempts to kidnap me, they'll encounter an unpleasant surprise.” Her hands tightened around the lacy parasol and Jemma could have sworn that she saw the gleam of a spike.

“Who was it that decided we needed chaperones anyway?” Jemma wondered. “Who could have possibly been foolish enough to think that women are helpless until they're married or reach the age
of thirty? If anyone ever needed a chaperone in my family, it would be my older brother. I told you about when he let a miniature steam dragon loose in Hyde Park, didn't I?"

"Men." Skye rolled her eyes and linked her arm through Jemma's. "Yet I suppose we must like some of them. You like Fitz, don't you?"

"We're friends!" Jemma exclaimed. "Nothing more, nothing less."

"Methinks the lady doth protest too much," Skye whispered mischievously, steering Jemma over to the fleet of steam cars. "Well, if we're not going to gossip shamelessly about our host, I simply must know what you thought of Wuthering Heights. There was a bit too much brooding for my taste, but I still made a bet with Lord Triplett that everyone will be reading it in a month's time. I even let myself be spotted reading it in the park to make sure that I won." The two girls climbed into one of the steam cars, a porter hefting the luggage into the back, and leaned back as the car began to trundle across the moors. Skye tilted her face back towards the sun, lace parasol abandoned on the seat beside her, and practically purred with contentment.

"No one ever scolded you about getting suntanned, did they?" Jemma said with a faint tinge of jealousy. Her pale skin burned almost as soon as she stepped outside and she'd spent much of her childhood being wrestled into floppy straw hats and dragging enormous parasols around behind her. Now, remembering, she sighed and opened up her practical blue parasol, casting a foot-long radius of shade around them.

"You could fit an entire picnic under that," Skye remarked. "Have you ever tried?"

"Only on family occasions," Jemma launched into a story about the memorable picnic when she'd fallen in the lake trying to collect algae and been dragged out with a net, and they fell into easy conversation for the rest of the ride. All conversation stopped, however, when they caught sight of the castle. It was a glorious mess, Georgian columns on top of spiky Gothic halls on top of stocky medieval towers, and dark stone sprawling out across the green of the heath. The sunlight glinted off a series of greenhouses, a small village was nestled into the valley across from the castle, and what looked like Fitz's entire household and half the village was gathered on the front steps of the castle. Much to Jemma's disappointment, Fitz wasn't wearing a kilt.

He was grinning madly at the sight of her and Skye, though, and bounded over to their steam car before the footman could even open the door. Fitz handed them both down himself and out of the corner of her eye, Jemma thought that she saw Skye slip him a piece of paper emblazoned with what might have been the royal seal. How odd.

"Miss Simmons, Lady Skye." He bowed to them both and tried his best to maintain a dignified tone. "I'm so glad that you were able to attend."

"I wouldn't have missed it for the world. A house party given by the best-known duke in Scotland and announced out of the blue two weeks ago. Is there going to be another mystery for us all to solve, Fitz?" Skye asked and turned to Jemma. "Last Season, he threw a house party where we all had to solve a murder. A fake one, of course. I wasn't out yet, but I begged and begged until my father let me go."

"The butler didn't do it," Fitz said smugly.

"It was the second under-gardener, in the library, with the candlestick." Skye started to tug Jemma up the steps. "Fitz has a whole line of people to greet and if we're quick, we can get a tour of the house from the butler himself and not the under-butler. Just wait till you see the armory." Jemma glanced back over her shoulder to wave at Fitz and got a quick smile before he turned back to greet an extremely handsome (if slightly scruffy) dark-haired gentlemen, who she recognized as Lord Banner. Famed scientist, although notoriously difficult to work with, close friends with the wealthy American
inventor Mr. Stark, as yet unmarried and, Jemma remembered with a sinking heart, one of the people who had been linked with Fitz in gossip columns. There was an odd tightening in her stomach and a series of uncharitable thoughts about Lord Banner's crumpled purple and green cravat hovering in her mind that someone less educated might have called jealousy. She'd simply wished for a few more minutes to discuss the sea serpent with Fitz, that was all. If she was jealous, it was only of the time he'd given someone else, and Jemma tried her best to put it from her mind as she followed Skye into the entrance hall.

Hamilton House had housed the Dukes of Hamilton for hundreds of years, and each duke had been determined to leave his own mark on the house. So one had installed the heavy oak doors, another the stained glass window on the landing, yet another had insisted on draping the walls with the hand-woven carpets he had brought back from Turkey. A duke with a passion for gardening had inexplicably installed a small glassed-in courtyard in the middle of the hall and filled it with potted plants and a fountain covered with cavorting Cupids. Another duke, an amateur archaeologist, had lined the corridors with scantily-clad Greek statues, the most shocking ones strategically covered with lengths of tartan. And Jemma was willing to bet that it had been Fitz who had put a miniature model of a steam engine on display and installed the elaborate water clock in the courtyard fountain. The model steam engine, judging from the way it puffed and whirred, might have even been operational.

“It only gets worse from here,” Skye said. “Secret passages, cabinets of curios, stairs that lead to nowhere, artifacts that crumble if you so much as look at them, some very naughty Roman frescos brought back by Fitz's grandfather that have to be covered up whenever company comes...This whole place is a tall tale waiting to happen.”

“I think it's wonderful,” Jemma breathed and resolved to go searching for the library and the famous Hamilton collection of taxonomies as soon as possible. However, it was hours before she had a minute to herself, after endless rounds of unpacking and tea and being given three different opinions from three different family members on what she should wear down to dinner. She’d meant to ask Fitz at dinner, especially after she found she’d been seated only two seats down from him, but somehow they ended up plunging into a spirited debate on the possible qualities and uses of a new mineral that had been discovered in the Caribbean. She argued that they needed to test it in small, controlled quantities first while he was all in favor of using it to build some (theoretically) harmless device—he'd been working on a dish-washing device-- and test it in a remote corner of the moors. It was when Fitz was using his cutlery to construct a replica of the device that she realized exactly what she liked most about him. Most of her life seemed to have been spent waiting for others to catch up with her but Fitz matched her move for move and word for word until she was never quite sure who was meant to be catching up with who. Or if they even needed to catch up at all.

The ladies and the gentlemen were shuttled off to separate rooms after dinner, the women to eat tiny berry tarts, elaborately frosted cakes, and fluffy meringues and sip tea and the men to drink brandy and eat whatever was considered a manly dessert. She was curled up in a corner, readying herself for another endless round of making polite conversation about the Scottish weather, when salvation appeared in the form of a footman bearing a note on a silver tray in Fitz's messy scrawl. Meet me in the library as soon as you get this. Up the third staircase, tap three times on the painting of the first Duke and it'll swing open into a hallway, second door on the left. Jemma made her excuses as quickly as humanly possible and sprinted up the stairs without caring who saw her. Fitz was waiting in the library, absorbed in a heap of books as one of the new electric lamps threw the planes of his face into sharp relief and highlighted his quite wonderful—no, it was a perfectly ordinary mouth, she reminded herself. He leaped up at the sound of the door and books went flying off his lap. “Jemma!” he said excitedly. “Don't mind the books—I really need to find a new cataloging system anyway. I didn't expect you so soon and so I was reading, since according to my calculations, it takes at least five minutes to extricate oneself from an after-dinner gossip session. I had to start hinting that
something was going to explode and that started the innuendos and once you get a bunch of lords started, you never can--” He stopped, blinked, looked at her again. “Anyway, hello.”

“Hello,” she smiled back. “I left as soon as I got your note. Everyone probably thinks that we’re having a secret rendezvous.”

“It wouldn’t be a house party without a scandal. But hopefully ours will be the discovery of a real sea serpent,” he replied, then seemed to realize what he’d just said and anxiously raked a hand through his curls. “Miss Simmons, this—I—I’m not damaging your reputation, am I? I didn’t think before I sent that note and I’m terribly sorry if I’ve caused any rumors. I never meant to start anything.” Of course he hadn’t.

“Rumors don’t get started about me,” she said briskly and crossed to sit in an armchair beside him. “Is there any record of the sightings of the serpent?” He dug out a teetering pile of leather folders, each labeled in his handwriting, and passed her half. They spent the next hour sorting through muddled accounts from drunk revelers, enthusiastically detailed, if anatomically improbable, accounts from amateur scientists, and drawings that appeared to depict everything from a fire-breathing dragon to a series of squiggles to a rather slinky mermaid. The sea serpent had evidently been part of the mythology of Hamilton House for decades, as nursemaids threatened their charges with the big snake that came for naughty children and old grandfathers claimed that in their day, the serpent came up out of the lake to defeat the duke’s enemies. One slightly unhinged member of the Fitz family had even camped out on the side of the loch for days attempting to call the serpent to him, tame it, and ride upon its back. But something was different about the serpent sightings in the past two years. They were more frequent and they came from respected, decidedly sober members of the village community. Even the village mayor had reported seeing a strange silver serpent that surfaced and spat boiling water at him. The serpent, if it really did exist, appeared to be becoming hostile and Jemma couldn’t fathom why.

“For years, everyone said that it was perfectly harmless,” Fitz muttered. “And now it's hissing and lunging at people and everyone's been avoiding the shore of the loch. Do you think that someone might have harmed it and now it's afraid? Mythical creatures, if it is a real mythical creature, don’t change their entire behavior pattern all of a sudden.”

“Fitz, what if it’s not the behavior that’s changed? What if it’s a different serpent?” She’d realized it the second after he’d stopped talking, like he’d triggered the thought in her head.

“Brilliant! I knew there was a reason I liked you.” He leaned over to glance at the report she’d been examining and practically sprawled across the arm of her chair, curly hair and surprisingly broad shoulders filling up her sightline. “What do you think? Want to investigate on Saturday?”

“Don’t you have a murder mystery planned? We'd be dusting potential murder weapons for fingerprints by Saturday,” she teased.

“That was last year. This year, we’re going to put on an amateur theatrical—I’m in charge of special effects.” He sounded positively offended that anyone would dare accuse him of repeating a party theme. “Besides, no one will notice if we sneak off for a while. We can even bring some of the folders along with us to the village fair tomorrow and see if it might be dangerous.” He sounded much too excited about the serpent potentially being dangerous and they would be the talk of the fair if they spent the entire time researching, but he was gesturing wildly and practically bouncing out of his chair with excitement and his eyes were shining and she couldn’t say no. They spent the next few minutes planning as she made endless lists that he protested they didn’t need until she remembered how suddenly she’d left and the looks she’d get when she returned.

“I should probably get back before my mother has a fit,” Jemma said eventually, slowly rising from
her chair. “Till tomorrow, Mr. Fitz?”

“Till tomorrow, Miss Simmons.”
The next day was Wednesday and Fitz escorted her down to the village fair. The other guests kept on sneaking glances at her hand resting on his arm like it belonged there but they ignored each and every glance as they examined different species of heather on the walk down. She pressed samples between the pages of the latest French novel Skye had bequeathed her and when she ran out of pages, he volunteered his thick leather-bound scientific journal for the task. They found a spot underneath a tree and spread out with the reports, sharing one notebook between them. To keep their research in one place, he said, but she suspected he just liked tugging the notebook back and forth whenever one of them had a good idea. At first, they'd tried to take turns properly—one page for her neat copperplate script, one page for his messy hand and quick sketches. Then she'd started writing notes in his margins and he'd added little instructive sketches at the bottom of her pages, and so they'd played tug-of-war with the notebook like they were still children ever since.

“Hand it over,” she demanded. “You've had it for ages.” She had a rather fascinating theory about the serpent's scales that she wanted to get down before he thought of it first.

“Fine.” Was he pouting? He was definitely pouting at her. She flipped it open to their current page, and there was a sketch of them. Her grasping the notebook triumphantly and him giving her a despairing look and dreaming of food, meat pies and cakes dancing around his head in the drawing.

“Is that your way of saying you're hungry?” she sighed in mock-exasperation and flung her hand out toward the village fair. “Go forth and fetch us pastries, Duke Fitz. A noble quest to slay the dragon and win honor all through the land.”

“Do I get a reward? The keys to the kingdom, the heart of the fair maiden?” he asks, mock-serious.

“You get food. Now go!” Jemma sent him off, still giggling when he'd disappeared into the distance. She hadn't thought that she was the kind of the girl who giggled but something about this whole house party, about Fitz made everything seem like it only existed in that moment, like the here and now was the only thing she had to worry about. Sitting in the bright sunshine, feeling the rough bark of the tree against her back and hearing the whirring and chiming of the carousel Fitz had designed especially for the fair, she felt wonderfully carefree. Why not giggle, if she felt like it? Why not find out all the different things she could be?

Her sisters arrived as soon as Fitz was out of sight, flanking her on either side so quickly that she suspected they'd been watching from a distance. Probably on her mother's instructions. “So has he proposed yet?” Lily demanded.

“Obviously, he hasn't,” Violet interrupted, “No ring, see? Honestly, Lily. But has he shown any signs of proposing, Jemma? Talking about his surname, or picking out jewelry, or complimenting you...or anything, really. You have to give us something to brag about, Jemma.”

“No, nothing like that. I'm perfectly sure that he thinks of me as nothing more than a friend,” Jemma repeated and sighed. She loved her sisters, truly she did, but listening had never been their strong suit. She'd told them over and over since the day of the invitation that there was nothing between her and Fitz but the more she said it, the less they seemed to believe it. She would have to find whoever had been buying them paperback romances and give that person a stern scolding when she got home.

“I told you that she should have worn the green,” Lily sang out. Thankfully, Fitz appeared before her sisters could get into a full-fledged argument on the state of her wardrobe and proceeded to charm them both, producing endless amounts of food from a wicker hamper, listening to each and every
story about the first ball they'd attended, taking all their teasing in good stride, and even promising to see if he could design an escape-proof collar for their new pet kitten. By the end of the day, her family was half in love with him, even if she wasn't.

On Thursday, it rained and after everyone spent a good hour complaining loudly about the weather, Fitz began to organize rehearsals for the theatrical. Skye was cast as the lead part, of course, that of a fair damsel imprisoned in a tower who climbed down on a rope made of sheets, went on a series of epic quests, and rescued a prince, predictably played by Lord Triplett, from a dragon. “It's the modern age,” Fitz said when anyone asked why the prince wasn't rescuing the princess, “And I think that the lady Skye is more than capable of rescuing herself. Lord Banner was cast as the dragon, wryly remarking that he certainly wouldn't have any problem channeling dragon-like rage, the remainder of the party were to play various knights, courtiers, goblins, and loyal sidekicks, and those who claimed that they preferred not to act would be featured in musical interludes. Jemma, after a few quiet words with Fitz and just the slightest hint of a pout, had been declared the stage manager and put in charge of organization. “You don't like acting?” he asked beforehand, sliding in beside her on what she'd deemed to be the sofa of stage managerial power.

“I'm an awful liar, including acting,” she shrugged. “Luckily, I happen to be an excellent list-maker.”

“Good. I happen to have a quite long list of stage properties we'll need to construct the tower. If it's built correctly, it should gently lower Skye down on her own. If built wrongly...well, we'll have Trip there to catch her just in case.” He flipped his notebook out to show her his latest sketches and she immediately started correcting them, smile creeping across her face as he grumbled that she was entirely too fond of telling him he was wrong.

“Well, if you weren't wrong quite so often...” She arched a single eyebrow at him and returned to her work. He was opening his mouth to reply when they were interrupted by an indignant young lady convinced that she had been wronged by being asked to play a tree and Fitz had to explain that the trees had a quite nice eleven o'clock number. There was a flood of people with questions after that, sweeping both of them away from each other, but when she glanced back over at him, he still looked up from where he was engrossed in conversation with Lord Banner to shoot her a broad smile and gesture to the note that had popped up on the arm of her chair. Research tonight? , it read, P.S. Do you like my inter-chair delivery system? It took me ages to install all the tubes beneath the floor.

Of course, she wrote back and his grin got even wider when the piece of paper popped up on his chair a minute later.

On Friday everyone played croquet and she was horribly competitive. Fitz called her ruthless after she'd sent her opponents' balls into the lake three times in a row, and she replied that he was the one who'd been trying to gain an illicit advantage with a steam-powered mallet. “My prototype is still at the bottom of the lake,” he sulked.

“But you've built another one, haven't you?” Jemma guessed as she happily sent another croquet ball flying into a tree. Her ability to get her own ball through the wickets was rather lacking, so she'd decided that the winning strategy would simply be to eliminate everyone else, as she did have quite the talent for sending croquet balls into lakes, up trees, and down mole-holes.

“I would never even think of testing it at my own party,” he said primly and shifted his mallet behind his back, trying to hide the clouds of steam puffing out of it. “I'd shock all the proper young ladies.”

“Where are the proper young ladies anyway?” she asked. Normally, Fitz would have been surrounded by a moderately sized swarm of eligible young ladies dressed in their best walking gowns and draped against trees in fetching poses. Some of the more cunning debutantes had even read up on the latest scientific journals and come armed with an array of articles on new engine
models and theories of physics. And, as she remembered seeing at a ball a few months ago, the most
daring among them whispered things in his ear that made Fitz turn a fascinating shade of pink and
reply with something that made them turn even pinker. But at the house party, she'd been able to
spend hours with Fitz without so much as a flirty glance thrown his way or an ambitious mother
mentioning her daughter's talent at embroidery.

“They've found better prey. Besides, everyone assumes that we're...that I'm...that you've staked your
claim on me, so to speak.” He was turning that fascinating shade of pink again and refusing to meet
her eyes.

“So they've been interpreting friendship as claim-staking of some kind. That's quite silly,”

Hypothesis: if he was turning a shade of pink, then she was rapidly approaching a charming shade
of lobster red. “But at least it's giving us time to investigate the serpent. I'm sure that the swarm will
return as soon as the house party is over and we show absolutely no sign of being engaged. Then
you'll be a proper eligible bachelor again.”

“I don't want to be eligible, Miss Simmons.” he grumbled. “I'd rather spend a winter in Antarctica
than go through another Season.”

“The solution's quite simple then: get married.” she replied and swung at the ball so vigorously that
her mallet split in two, an action which had absolutely nothing to do with the thought of Fitz getting
married.

On Saturday, she woke early to meet Fitz by the lake and crept out before any member of her family
could realize where she was going and argue over whether charming smiles or eyelash fluttering
would be more useful in ensnaring the duke. He was waiting by the loch, wearing a long tartan scarf
and steadily eating pastries from a huge wicker basket, and he didn't appear to have slept any more
than five hours, from the dark circles under his eyes and the scowl on his face. “Mornings are a
bloody nuisance,” he mumbled when he spotted her. “Why did we ever invent them?”

“It's a natural cycle, Fitz. The earth rotates on its axis as it goes around the sun, going from shadow
to light to shadow.” she replied brightly. “If you'd like to discuss our concept of time, then perhaps
we should begin in ancient Mesopotamia—I've read a fascinating volume on the subject.”

“Why are you so cheerful? It's not normal,” he said, making a low-pitched grumbly noise that
reminded her of an irate baby bear.

“Sea serpents, of course. Shall we?” She gestured toward the small wooden boat bobbing on the
shore of the loch, painted in a cheerful tartan print. The family print, she supposed. It seemed to be
scattered everywhere on the estate—running along the edges of the curtains, stamped on the china,
woven into the carpets, wrapped around Fitz's neck in his scarf, and apparently, now on their boats.
She probably should have considered it beyond the bounds of proper taste, but instead she thought it
was charming. Fitz must have been rubbing off on her.

“We shall. After you, my lady?” He extended his arm to help her into the boat and started pushing
buttons and fiddling with levers once she'd settled herself on the bench, arranging her mass of skirts
around her. “I've tried to put an engine in the boat but it's a little temperamental,” Fitz explained and
pulled down hard on a lever. Nothing happened. He tried again, then once more. Nothing continued
to happen. Finally, he sighed and reached under the front bench to produce four wooden oars. “The
contingency plan.”

They rowed out to the middle of the loch together, the only sound the splash of the oars in the water
and Fitz's low mutter as he tried to diagnose why the engine hadn't worked. The water was still and
peaceful, no sign of a sea serpent anywhere, and Jemma tentatively splashed the water. Not so much
as a fish appeared. “Do you think we need to set a bait for it?” she mused. “I've got a package of fish that I talked the cook into giving me.”

“Right now we need to stay very still. Look.” he whispered. There was something rising up from the water, something long and slithery and silver and rapidly approaching them. The sun glinted off its silver scales like they were metal and—they were metal, Jemma realized. The entire serpent was a giant clockwork creature, from its gleaming copper eyes to its long fangs to its scaly tail, and she could hear the ticking of its clockwork heart. As it got closer, lashing the water about with its tail, she glimpsed some kind of symbol emblazoned on its side, a many-armed creature with a bulbous head. She turned to Fitz to ask if he thought it was an octopus too only to find that he'd turned deathly pale and couldn't take his eyes off the creature.

“Jemma, we need to get back to shore. Now.”
Fitz started paddling frantically towards the shore but the serpent hissed and flicked its tail out to coil around their small boat, holding it fast in place. Jemma lashed out with the paddle, hoping to find a vulnerable spot on the creature, only to hear the completely ineffectual sound of wood splintering against metal. It did seem to succeed in infuriating the creature however, which reared up and bared its fangs at them, making Jemma wonder if serpents made out of metal still had poisonous fangs. Oddly enough, though, she thought that she could live without making that particular scientific discovery.

Fitz was scrambling around the bottom of the boat now as he pulled open the cover of the control panel to reveal a mess of cogs and gears that he poked and prodded at. “What are you doing?” Jemma shouted over the serpent's hissing and tried to keep her eyes on it, brandishing her other paddle. If she went for its eyes, she calculated, maybe she could manage to shatter some of the clockwork that controlled the creature and damage it enough for the tail to loosen its grip on the boat.

“When I built this thing, I added a self-defense system in. Never thought I'd have to use it, so I haven't tested it out but if we can just unblock this, it might be able to work. If it does work,” he added and thrust his hand into the gears, fumbling around for anything caught there.

“If you keep your hand in there, it'll get crushed,” she snapped and yanked him backwards. “Use one of my hairpins instead.” Jemma tugged an entire handful of long, pointed pins out of her hair, sending it cascading around her shoulders, and for a minute Fitz stood there stock-still, his eyes fixed on her with the kind of look she'd only previously seen him give sticky toffee puddings and particularly detailed pieces of machinery, like he wanted to memorize her and take her apart all at once. Or maybe she was just imagining things, she told herself. The terrifying mechanical beast bearing down on them was much more likely to cause that kind of glazed look than the sight of her hair. Fitz wasn't even interested in women's hair, anyway. Or anything non-platonic about women. And speculating about her friend's attitude towards her hair, when he had never shown the slightest sign of wanting to be anything more than her friend, was not the kind of thing that sensible young women did when in quite-possibly mortal peril. “Fitz,” she said and that seemed to snap him out of his trance—he grabbed the hairpins from her hand and went to work. “How long do you think you need?”

“However long it takes,” he called from under the bench, already absorbed in the clockwork. Jemma sighed, rolled her eyes, and raised one of their remaining paddles, feinting to the left. The serpent fell for it, lunging wildly to the left, and the tip of its tail uncurled from the boat. Its head swung around, looking for the paddle that had mysteriously vanished, and Jemma braced herself against the bench in anticipation of a strike. If it turned its head just a little more...just a little bit more...and there! She drove the paddle up and into the serpent's eye, jamming it into the space behind scales where she could see some of the clockwork just as Fitz withdrew the hairpin and shouted in triumph. Steam started to puff out of the creature's head and it made a series of high-pitched hisses—she must have hit an important part of the clockwork.

“Your turn,” she mouthed at Fitz.

“Happy to oblige.” He flipped a switch and a panel of the boat slid open to reveal a small squat cannon. “Let's find out what it does!” Fitz shouted excitedly and set the gears into motion. There was a loud crack and the cannon fired a white bolt of energy straight at the writhing creature, which reeled back. The cannon fired again and its tail suddenly went limp and dropped away from the boat. Once more, and the entire creature went still. A third and final time and the clockwork fell silent as,
with a final puff of smoke and a low whine, the creature came spiraling apart. Scales peeled themselves off, gears quickly sank, and their boat shot off towards the shore. Now that the engine had begun to work, it didn’t appear to be inclined to stop and it made for the shore at full speed, sending both Fitz and Jemma flying out of the boat as it slammed into the shore. Luckily, Jemma landed on soft green grass. Unluckily, Fitz landed on top of her. At first she simply couldn’t breathe because he’d knocked the air out of her when they landed. Then she started to register how he felt against her—warm and solid and pressed up against every inch of her, his knee pinned between her legs and his blue eyes staring down into hers, close enough that she could see the darker ring of blue at their edges. His breath was warm against her cheek and suddenly it was hard to breathe for a different reason entirely. Almost unconsciously, she arched up against him and for a moment he was right there to meet her, his hand curling around her hip and his lips brushing the edge of the cheek.

He rolled off of her a second longer than he should have with a long and garbled apology and a flushed face that lasted for even longer. Yet that moment was long enough for her to memorize the way he felt pressed against her. Angles and curves, heat that she felt through layers of skirts and petticoats, something entirely new and strange that she desperately wanted to feel again. It took her a moment to recover and by the time she gathered her wits and stood up, Fitz was yards away, pulling his coat around him and decidedly not looking at her. “So do you want to explain what that was about?”

“I’m awfully sorry, Miss Simmons. I can assure you that I didn’t mean to react--”

“About the serpent. The symbol on its side. You looked like you knew what it meant.” She took a careful step towards him. “Why would someone put a mechanical sea serpent in your loch?”

“It's a warning for me and it's nothing that you're involved in. Nothing that you want to get involved in,” he added quickly and kept his eyes fixed on the ground.

“You don't know that—I fought that thing with you, Fitz. I think I deserve to know what's going on.” She crossed her arms across her chest and stepped closer, silently willing him to look up at her. His breathing was still uneven—the battle with the serpent must have affected him more than she'd thought, she realized, and gentled her voice accordingly. “I promise that you can trust me.”

“It's not that. It's that I could never forgive myself if I put an innocent woman in danger. Especially if it was you.” He hugged her then, so fast that he was stepping away before she registered the feeling of his arms around her. “I think that you might be my best friend, Miss Simmons, and I refuse to let anything bad happen to you. And I am still escorting you to dinner tonight.” He dipped down into an elaborate bow, his mouth still set in a stubborn line; turned on his heel, and walked up the hill in his best dignified lord-of-the-manor fashion. The effect was only slightly ruined by the rock he tripped over.

Jemma didn't say anything more about the serpent for the next few days. Or rather, she didn't say anything about the serpent to Fitz. He clearly wasn't going to tell her anything, so she decided to resort to more covert methods. She even had a procedure, like for every other experiment. Step 1: See who Fitz talked to the most, and who he talked to alone. Step 2: Identify the weak link. Step 3: Corner them and wheedle the meaning of the octopus out of them. Step 4: Inevitable triumph.

In her soft indoor slippers, she was able to move quite quietly and so when she came upon Fitz and Skye the next afternoon, they didn't even turn at the soft swish of her skirts. Jemma quickly flattened herself against the wall and crept against it until she reached one of the alcoves housing a suit of armor, ducking behind the suit of armor and peering over the helm to see them better. Fitz was pacing back and forth and waving his hands around frantically while Skye perched on the edge of a chaise longue, perfectly composed and calm. She leaned her head against her hand, eyes scanning
over a piece of paper, and periodically glanced up to shush Fitz when his voice got too loud. Jemma could only hear bits and pieces of their conversation. He wanted to dredge the lake for bits of the serpent and analyze it. Skye wanted to let it be until she talked to someone named Morse. They both wanted her father to get there as soon as he could. When they left, Jemma slumped against the wall of the alcove and let herself sulk. All of this meant something, but she hadn't heard enough to find out what. And her cornering options appeared to be severely limited. Fitz was too stubborn, Skye simply too good at distracting her, Miss May (who she was sure had to be involved in this too) too terrifying, and Lord Coulson too...Lord Coulson-y.

There had to be someone who Fitz talked to, someone who he told everything, but who wasn’t involved in Fitz and Skye’s secrets. So someone who only Fitz talked to and who she could wear down. Someone who might be just the littlest bit angry with Fitz. **Hypothesis: If there was such a thing as a perfect target, then Lord Banner might just be it.**
Lord Banner was easy to keep track of, with his distinctive green waistcoats and his way of stomping through the corridors of the house. His temper was quite notorious among the members of the ton, as were his extravagant apologies immediately after he lost his temper. A noted society hostess had once remarked that it seemed as if there were two Lord Banners: the charming, if slightly rumpled, leading scientist and “the other man” who smashed vases and made cutting comments. Jemma had heard from that same hostess that he and Fitz had had an infamous falling out seven months ago and although they appeared to have made up, rumor had it that the memory was still fresh in Lord Banner's mind. Surely she could use that fight, whatever it had been about, to her advantage.

Another day of watching finally yielded results when she saw Fitz wander into the second library and Lord Banner follow shortly after, with a determined look upon his face. Jemma slipped in before the door had closed and concealed herself behind a pair of sturdy oak bookshelves. She'd even selected a soft brown gown that morning, for the purposes of better camouflage. Fitz was pretending to be absorbed in a book—she recognized that look of fake concentration, his eyebrows pulled together too sharply to be accidental—and sending sideways wary looks at Lord Banner as he pulled out a chair and sat down across from Fitz. "Fitz," Lord Banner attempted. No response. He tapped on the cover of Fitz's book. Still no response. "Leo," Lord Banner said and tugged the book down.

"Bruce." Fitz flipped the book back up.

"I'm not going away, you know." Lord Banner said patiently, leaning back in his chair.

"I'm busy. Very busy. Reading about--" Fitz peered around the corner of his book to read the title. "Reading about mushrooms. And I already received quite an extensive lecture from Skye, so I'm not in need of one from you."

"How do you know that Skye told me? She'd probably be breaking all kinds of regulations to tell me, since I'm not even a member of the British branch of the Initiative." The capital letter practically spoke itself.

"So you've joined the American branch now?" There was a long, awkward silence until Lord Banner straightened his cravat, leaned forward in his chair, opened his mouth, and closed it again. He tried again, thought better of it, and finally tried a third time.

"I'm not part of any branch. I still stand by what I told you in November, but that doesn't mean I forfeited the right to ask you what the hell you were thinking when you went after a mechanical sea serpent that the Order had planted in your loch? Why do you persist in leading such an alarmingly dangerous lifestyle and driving everyone in your life mad?" Lord Banner tugged frantically at his cravat with one hand and slammed the other down on the table. "This is exactly why we broke it off, Leo, because I couldn't spend another day wondering what new ways you'd devised to irritate the Evil League of Evil—and I know that's not their name, thank you very much—invent devices that tend to blow up in your face, and generally endanger yourself every hour on the half hour!"

"We broke it off because seven months ago, you hopped on the first airship to America to chase after a genius billionaire playboy philanthropist," Fitz snapped back, finally abandoning his book. "It couldn't have been more obvious than if you'd floated a giant sign over London reading Leopold Fitz, I am leaving you for an uncouth, if brilliant, American in twelve-foot-high letters."
“Us breaking it off doesn't mean that I stopped worrying about you. I'd have to be bloody insane to stop worrying about you—you're the kind of person who requires regularly scheduled worry sessions. I have it penciled in my calendar for every Tuesday at 2pm.”

“That's perfectly ridiculous. I expected that I'd get Tuesdays and Thursdays at the very least,” Fitz said haughtily. But a tiny smile was creeping across his face and, her ear pressed against the bookcase, Jemma suspected that he was softening. Too bad, she thought. Some scheming part of her had hoped for a truly spectacular fight, one that would leave Lord Banner in a raging, secret-spilling mood. And maybe, just maybe, that part of her had been jealous too.

Lord Banner took a deep breath and leaned across the table. “I do want to be friends, Leo. Can you believe that?”

“I still think that I'm entitled to at least another month of sulking,” Fitz grumbled. “But yes, I do. You know that I do.”

“You're madly in love and happier from ever, from all accounts of it. You are absolutely not entitled to sulk.” Lord Banner rolled his eyes towards the ceiling, imploring the crystal chandeliers for help. “And I'm still mad at you for being a reckless idiot. Just so we're clear on that.”

“I'm not in love!” Fitz squawked and stood up. Jemma barely restrained her giggle—she hadn't known that his voice went that high. “Even if I were in love, I would retain the right to sulk because...doesn't feel the same.” His voice was muffled as he ducked under the table to retrieve another stack of books and Jemma found herself leaning in to hear better despite her best intentions. Fitz's personal life was none of her business, particularly his love life, and now was certainly not the time to test out the ear trumpet prototype lurking in a neatly labeled box two shelves down and one to the left of her. “Not that kind of girl...never even tried to proposition me.” Fitz was talking audibly again and she peered between two shelves to spot his long legs (and rather nice bum) sticking out from underneath the table. “And I've been propositioned quite a bit, by the most unlikely people, I'll have you know. It's not that I'm unproposition-able...simply not interested in that kind of thing, she said so herself. There's nothing—no chasing, no courtship—going on there.”

“She might not be chasing, but you're definitely caught,” Lord Banner chuckled as Fitz shot him another glare and exited the library with an exasperated sigh and a stack of books. “And I noticed that you didn't promise me to stay out of trouble either!” he shouted after Fitz and slumped back in the armchair, muttering something about scientists with hero complexes and how he'd thought he was free and clear, and then someone thought he could invent a blasted metal suit and on and on in a distinctly grumpy manner. Jemma gave him a minute more to brood before stepping out, marching over to Lord Banner, and planting herself in front of him.

“I'm not going away until you tell me about Fitz's secret society,” she said firmly.

“No idea what you're talking about. Where would you ever get an idea like that?” Lord Banner said brusquely and fixed his eyes on hers, attempting to stare her down. Unfortunately for Lord Banner, Jemma had spent much of her early childhood engaged in staring contests with her older brother. She won every time.

“My winning streak currently stands at 263 and counting,” she told him. “I also have scones, a copy of Mr. Thackeray's Vanity Fair, and a rare and unusual neurotoxin hidden on my person. What do you have, Lord Banner?”

“I have an awful reputation. Making Miss Cavendish cry when I forgot to ask her to dance, breaking all manner of expensive things in the middle of arguments.”
"I don't cry that easily and anything of value that you could break in here is far too heavy for you to lift. I checked in advance." Jemma tilted her chin up in defiance and gave him a glare that at twelve had once made three grown men cry. "All I want is to know what Fitz has gotten himself entangled in, and why he won't tell me about it. No nefarious purposes." Lord Banner stayed silent and they continued to stare at each other. Five minutes later, after a few mutually agreed upon breaks for blinking, she decided to redouble her efforts and started tapping her foot rhythmically against the floor. Lord Banner visibly twitched but remained silent. Another five minutes passed, and she started humming. Jemma had been told repeatedly that she lacked any sense of pitch, and she slowly increased her volume as the minutes ticked by. Lord Banner was now fidgeting uncomfortably in his chair yet he still refused to speak. Clearly, it was time to unleash her penultimate weapon. "I really didn't want to do this," Jemma told him.

And with that, she pulled a scone from her pocket and proceeded to eat it slowly and messily, scattering crumbs across the expanse of the table, crunching as loudly as it was possible to crunch on a scone, and all the while humming a medley of the latest music hall songs, horribly off key. Lord Banner finally snapped when she hit the ninth tower of "The Twelve Towers of Bray". "It started about a year and a half ago, when Lord Coulson and Secretary Fury got together for lunch. Someone should have stopped them before we all got entangled in this hero business," Lord Banner blurted out.

"Stopped them from doing what?" Jemma leaned forward, still holding his gaze.

"It's called the Initiative for Scientific Progress, Prosperity, and Peace over here. The Americans are simply calling it the Avengers Initiative, though I have no earthly idea what they're planning to avenge. I'm sure they'll find something: Americans are quite skilled at inventing things to avenge. Anyway, it's meant to do what the title says. Work for scientific advances and peaceful progress, starting on both sides of the Atlantic and then spreading to the Continent. The French are trying to start up a branch, though I've heard they've become mired in arguments about cheese," he replied.

"Then what does the octopus mean? Fitz turned white when he saw it on the serpent." "The Order of the Octopus has been trying to recruit him for years. To invent evil devices for them and such." Lord Banner said vaguely. "First they tried bribes and incentives but he wasn't tempted in the slightest. Then they moved on to trying to get close to his family members and his sisters weren't having any of that. So now it looks like they've progressed to direct threats. The serpent was meant to be a warning that they're watching him. At least, that's what I think." he added quickly. "I was never a member of the Order—tired of assuming that we always know best—and so that's really all I know, since Fitz stopped talking to me for a while. Because of the Initiative, and the Airship Incident, and the fact that he's the most stubborn human I've--"

"Excuse me, Lord Banner." Jemma interrupted, rising to her feet and sweeping him an elegant curtsy. "Thank you very much for your help but I have a pressing social engagement with Lady Skye. I wish you luck with your...philanthropist," she added as she headed out the door. "Really I do."

Skye was holding court in the front parlor, surrounded by ladies and gentlemen hanging on her every word, but when she saw Jemma, she immediately rose, made a polite excuse, and steered Jemma outside into the garden with alacrity. "Who did you weasel the secret out of?" Skye asked urgently, her head bent toward Jemma's like they were exchanging nothing more than pieces of idle gossip.

"Lord Banner."

"Well done. So are you planning to blackmail us all with this knowledge for your own private laboratory?" Skye threw her head back and laughed charmingly for the onlookers, her eyes pure
steel.

“Quite the contrary. I want to be a part of it.”

Chapter End Notes

I'll be traveling without much Internet access for the next week, so I'll be posting one chapter, which will go up on Saturday. Hopefully the content will make up for the wait. :)

There was a pause that felt endless as Skye stopped walking and turned to Jemma, head tilted to one side and lips curved in a perfectly pleasant smile. An outsider would have thought that the Lady Skye had just heard something utterly delightful and was formulating a witty response, but Jemma imagined that she could glimpse the calculations going on behind Skye's brown eyes. Finally, she smiled, linked her arm through Jemma's again, and tugged her behind a hedge. “Are you sure, Jemma?” she asked solemnly. “It's not exactly a safe hobby. You've seen the consequences for Fitz firsthand.”

“You seem to be doing all right,” Jemma replied sharply.

“I've also been trained for years. It's not that I don't think you can do it,” Skye added hastily. “It's just that I can't understand why you're so eager to throw yourself headlong into danger—once you're in the Initiative, there's no getting out. There'll be a target on your back for the rest of your life if you're ever found out. Are you really sure you want that?”

“For most of my life, I've been Miss Jemma Simmons, daughter of Edward Simmons, sister of James Simmons, and nothing more. Nothing of my own. But with this I have the chance to be something that's uniquely myself. A scientist, an inventor, a woman who does what she wants and helps the world doing it,” Jemma blurted out, struggling to find the right words. “I need to be needed—to be wanted—for what I am rather than for the men I'm related to. Please tell me that you understand that, Skye. Please.”

“Of course I do,” Skye whispered. “I'll talk to May and my father about it—there'll be an awful amount of paperwork for a secret society, just so you know. It's really quite inefficient. I keep on telling my father that if we found a way to store large quantities of information in small form, if we could code it somehow...Anyway, I'll speak to them as soon as I can. You have my word, Jemma.” Skye swooped in to hug her, throwing her arms around Jemma so tightly that Jemma was sure she heard a rib crack and crushing the delicate silk of her dress. “You know that I like you for what you are, don't you?” Skye mumbled into her shoulder. “And so does Fitz.”

“Let's not talk about Fitz,” Jemma mumbled back. If Skye kept on hugging her tightly enough, she'd probably fracture Jemma's windpipe and then she could have a convenient excuse to not talk about Fitz. She'd been purposefully avoiding thinking about what she'd overheard in the library, afraid that once she let herself analyze his conversation with Lord Banner, she'd descend into a hopeless spiral of blue eyes and sandy curls, and analyze everything from the state of his waistcoat to his choice of prepositions for a double meaning. And when there were secrets to be found out and evil leagues to be defeated, sighing over a man seemed like the height of foolishness.

“Did that mean 'let's not talk about Fitz' or 'I desperately need to talk about Fitz but I don't want to want to talk about him'? What has he done this time?” Skye tugged Jemma down on a bench.

“Lord Banner said that Fitz was in love. And he's not. Even if he did happen to be in love, it wouldn't be with me. Men don't fall for me, Skye—it's a simple fact of my life. And even if by some fatal coincidence he happened to be in love with me, he hasn't shown the least inclination to do anything about it. Meanwhile, the gossip mill just keeps on churning out an endless succession of inane stories about us, and my mother remains convinced that he's going to propose, and everyone ignores the fact that he's never shown the slightest sign of even noticing that I'm a girl and no one has ever bothered to ask me how I feel about all of it. Never mind that I have no earthly idea how I feel about it.” Much to her horror, Jemma found that she couldn't stop talking once she'd started, as everything that she'd shoved to the back of her mind since meeting Fitz came pouring out in an
endless stream of words. The only words she couldn't seem to find were the words for what she wanted from Fitz, if she did want it, and she talked in stops and starts, tripping over her tongue in a way that she hadn't done for years. Finally, Jemma buried her head in her hands and moaned in frustration. "I feel like I'm in the schoolroom again, learning the alphabet piece by piece, and like I haven't gotten to all the letters yet, like I'm trying to spell with only A-L."

"Then just wait until you get M through Z. I think that Fitz will still be there when you're done.” Skye handed Jemma her handkerchief, slowly rubbing circles on her back. “I'll be here for while you're still deciding what you want: you can talk in circles at me for hours and I won't mind a bit.”

“How did you get to be so sure of it all?” Jemma snorted. “Did you get some secret handbook on flirtation when you turned eighteen?”

“I read lots of scandalous French novels. Sometimes quite informative and sometimes quite likely to lead one astray. If you'd like to laugh at my expense, I have masses of amusing anecdotes,” Skye offered. “When I was eighteen, I appeared on Fitz's doorstep and asked him to debauch me. He refused very politely, of course, and explained to me that not only did he think of me as a friend, but he'd rather like to not be murdered in his bed by my father. I tried with two other lords, both of them reputed rakes, and they gave me a remarkably long list of the consequences my father had promised for anyone who attempted to debauch me. He had copies of it posted in every men's club in London.” Jemma giggled and Skye looked extremely proud of herself. “See, no matter what you do, I promise that you will never feel like the most foolish person in the room, since the odds are very good that I will have done something much sillier.”

“That's nonsense. When you consider how many people follow you wherever you go, there's bound to be someone sillier than you around. I can name at least three people in the parlor worthy of that title,” Jemma said.

“But are they silly on such a spectacular scale as me?” Skye asked dramatically. “Clearly, I am the silliest. And just to prove it, I believe that we now need to have an entirely frivolous conversation about ball gowns until you are smiling properly and all talk about evil leagues is indefinitely postponed. Would that be all right?”

“Oddly enough, I think that would be perfect.” It was nearly time to dress for dinner when Jemma finally got back to her room, after a solid forty-five minutes more of talking with Skye until Lord Triplett swept Skye away (Initiative business, he claimed), another thirty minutes of fending off the questions of various eager debutantes who wanted to know what Lady Skye was wearing for the ball the following evening, and a good hour being pestered by her sisters. There was a bunch of flowers lying on her bed, fresh-picked lady's slippers, bluebells, and morning glories tied together with a blue ribbon and four hothouse roses in a vase on her bedside table, two tinted burgundy and two tinted lavender. A note stuck out of the vase, her name scrawled across the front, and Jemma sank down on her bed to read it, dinner outfit entirely forgotten.

**Dear Jem—Miss Simmons**

*I'm sorry for not telling you about the Initiative and for keeping a “panoply of secrets” from you. No more, I promise. I've had quite a few people chasing after me, and not in the usual way, for the past few years, and I didn't want to get you tangled up in it when you've been such a good friend to me. (I would like it to be noted that I was sorry before Skye came and gave me a thorough talking-to.) You'll be a brilliant addition to the team—probably even more brilliant than me. Jemma laughed, imagining the grimace on his face as he wrote it. I drew up the seating plans so you're next to me at dinner again and so if you've accepted my apology, you can choose to talk to me and save me from the scintillating conversation of Lord Lydon. (Skye flirted with him for about five minutes before she found someone more interesting and now he thinks that I can tell him what went wrong.) I hope to*
“Do you apologize to all your friends with flowers?” Jemma asked him at dinner. “I noticed the bluebells—for humility?”

“Only the ones I like. I was making metal flowers for you, but they were taking too long to cool. You'll get them later.” Fitz scowled into his soup. Later Skye would tell her that he'd spent the better part of two days working on the set of a dozen perfectly wrought metal roses, each one tinted a soft pink, that appeared beside her teacup the next afternoon. “Did you notice any of the other flowers?”

“Yes, they were all lovely,” she said absently. “Are the rumors that you’ve commissioned a fountain that flows with chocolate instead of water for the ball true? And before you answer, you ought to remember that you promised me no more secrets.” He groaned, she grinned wickedly, and she forgot all about researching the meaning of the other flowers he'd sent her.

The next evening, Jemma was glaring at her reflection in the mirror and wondering exactly what her mother had told the dressmaker when she had commissioned Jemma's new ball gown. She didn't think the bodice was supposed to be this tight, or dip quite this low, and she was almost sure that the previous dress had had proper sleeves, not flimsy pieces of fabric that hovered around her shoulders. This was the kind of dress meant to entrap eligible young bachelors, not the kind of dress meant to keep her warm during a Scottish Highland night, and she intended to give her family a piece of her mind when the ball was over.

“Jemma?” Skye knocked sharply on her door, opening it a second later. “Are you ready to go?”

“Do I have to?” Jemma's voice was unusually high as she slumped against her wardrobe and she had the strong suspicion that she was pouting. Objectively, she recognized that the gown was beautiful, an exquisitely made blue confection trimmed with lace, but she had the sinking feeling that she looked ridiculous in it. She had a long and unhappy history with ball gowns-- three ripped, two soaked in mulled wine, one ruined by a tray of strawberry tarts that went flying, and each and every one remarkably unflattering. Really, she thought, the best course of action would be to remain in her room before she ruined this very expensive gown (or before she spilled out of the bodice and scandalized everyone). However, her attempts to explain all of this to Skye were ruined by a loud, unladylike whistle.

“You look absolutely ravishing. In every sense of the word.” Skye circled Jemma, nodding in approval. “Fitz and Antoine should be here any minute now.”

“It's Antoine now?”

“He's part of the Initiative, too. Nothing untoward about it,” Skye protested and turned faintly pink. “I might be in the midst of convincing him to debauch me but it's a very delicate process and if you tell my father anything about it— Lord Triplett!” In less than half a minute, Skye managed to pull Jemma into the hallway, drape herself fetchingly against a statue, arrange Jemma beside her in a manner that somehow showed them both off, flutter her eyelashes and pout sultrily. Lord Triplett never had a chance.

“Lady Skye,” Lord Triplett bent over her hand to kiss it and lingered for five seconds longer than was proper. Jemma glanced over at Fitz, ready to mouth something sarcastic at him, only to hear him swallow loudly and to see an odd expression come across his face.

“Fitz, are you choking?” she asked, concerned. His hands flapped helplessly about. “Was that
supposed to be the international choking distress signal?”

“No, no, definitely not choking.” He swallowed again, hard. “I wouldn’t be able to talk if I was choking. Honestly. There was just...er, there was just...there was some dust. In my eyes. And in my throat. From the tapestries.”

“Are you all right? Would you like me to check anything?” Jemma crossed to him, trying to see if there was anything caught in his eyes, and he backed away quite rapidly, eyes fixed on a point above her head. “Fitz, you really ought to have the tapestries properly beaten on a regular basis. I’d be happy to help with it.” He went into a sudden coughing spasm and all three of them looked at him, still puzzled. Then Skye started smirking and whispered something in Lord Triplett’s ear, who promptly started smirking too, snatched a full tray of champagne from a passing footman, and pressed it on Fitz. Fitz downed three glasses of champagne before he could talk again, Skye had progressed to full on giggling, and Jemma seemed to be the only one who remained puzzled. “How are you feeling?” she asked tentatively.

“Fine, just fine. Champagne?” he said quickly and offered the tray to her. “To new partnerships,” he toasted, lifting the glass towards her.

“New partnerships,” they all echoed and each reached for their next glass. In between the first glass and the second, it had been decided that they were all going to have to get politely drunk in order to get through the evening and to successfully evade their four separate sets of relatives (Skye’s idea, probably). The tray was soon empty, as was Fitz’s concealed flask of whiskey, and all four of them were past tipsy by the time they entered the ballroom. Skye leaned heavily against Lord Triplett—Trip, Jemma corrected, he’d told them to call him that—as he stared down at her with a mixture of confusion and adoration, and steadfastly tried to avoid looking down her dress.

“He likes her,” Jemma said loudly to Fitz. “He really likes her. I deduced it.”

“Everyone knows that, Jemma. Tha’s not proper scientific deduction.” He rolled his eyes at her and looped his arm around her waist to steady her.

“You don’t drink very much at parties, do you?”

“There usually isn’t much champagne in libraries. But you spend half your time at parties in libraries too, so you don’t drink very much, so you ought to be just as affected as I am,” she reasoned triumphantly.

“But you forget that I’m Scottish. We don’t get affected. It’s i’ our blood. My great-great-great—I don’t remember how many greats grandfather was famous for leading armies against the English after drinking down a bottle of whiskey. He did once attempt to lead an army of sheep into battle,” Fitz mused.

“We compete over everything, don’t we?” Jemma said happily. “I love being us.” She tipped her head onto his shoulder and gazed up at him, too tipsy to notice the way that he breathed in sharply as her hair spilled over his shoulders, already falling out of its complicated bun, and her hand slid over the fabric of his waistcoat looking for purchase. Her high-heeled shoes were about an inch too high and Fitz wonderfully solid as he supported her against his side and they watched the dancers whirl around the ballroom. Skye and Trip were at the center of it all, looking surprisingly graceful and laughing up at each other.

“Dance with me?” Fitz blurted out and tugged her towards the center of the ballroom. “A good host always dances with his guests.”

“I’m an awful dancer,” she warned him.
“So am I.” Neither of them were lying. In the two dances that they danced together, she stepped on his feet seven times, he nearly elbowed her in the face, her shoes lost their buckles, and his cravat was knocked hopelessly askew. The other dancers barely refrained from glaring at them until Fitz finally gave up and led her out on to the terrace. “I’ve decided that one of the great advantages of throwing your own parties is that no one is allowed to tell you that you’re a terrible dancer. They’ll gossip about it mercilessly once you’re out of the room but while you’re there, everyone is forbidden from saying anything,” he said smugly.

“You don’t throw many parties?”

“Not as many as I should. My sisters are always bothering me to throw more, find a bride, carry on the ancient line…” he trailed off, staring out at the loch. “My parents always threw wonderful parties. I used to watch them from upstairs when I was younger or from the loch. There’s quite a nice view from the shore--you can see all the lights, and the people dancing, and the people sneaking off for secret rendezvous in the bushes. You can even go swimming if it’s warm enough during the summer.”

“Let’s go then. Let’s go swimming,” she repeated. Now that she’d had the idea, it seemed perfect. She was still overheated from the crowded ballroom and so was he, from the way he kept on tugging at his shirt and cravat. “It’s the summer and it’s a party and it’s warm and...why not? Come swimming with me, Fitz.”

“I don’t think that swimming and champagne mix very well,” he mumbled.

“Then we don’t have to actually go in the water. We can sit on the bank and look at the stars and not be bored. Please, Fitz. I saw my mother heading over before we left.” She grabbed both his hands and gave him her best imitation of the pleading look she’d seen Skye use so many times: eyes wide as she could stretch them and biting her lower lip.

“All right,” Fitz swallowed hard again and Jemma wondered if he was going to do this sort of thing all the time now. He’d have to get an awful lot of dust in his throat, she thought, and giggled. “You win.” He scooped her up and lifted her over the terrace, scrambling over after her and chasing her down the hill towards the loch. He narrowly avoided tripping over her shoes, abandoned halfway down the hill in her mad dash, and shouted something after her about Cinderella tendencies. Jemma perched on a rock by the shore, fuzzily remembering that she ought to keep her dress away from the dirt, and inched over to make room for Fitz.

“I still want to go swimming,” she announced after a while, when she’d grown tired of staring up at the stars, and fumbled at the back of her dress. “Help me with this? There’s tiny hooks all down the back. It’s a most impractical design, you know.” She had to say his name several times before he finally got up and started slowly undoing the hooks on the back of her dress. It was an elaborate, drawn-out process made even longer by the fact that his hands trembled around every fifth hook (she’d counted) but his hands were warm and she leaned back into him.

“Jemma, stop fidgeting. I canna get all of them if you keep on moving,” his voice sounded a little rougher than usual, his brogue more pronounced, and with a sigh, she resigned herself to standing still. That voice clearly meant business. What kind of business, she had no idea. “What do you want me to do about the corset?”

“Unlace it with your eyes closed?” she asked hopefully. The chemise underneath was quite thin and she crossed her arms over her chest in a sudden fit of self-consciousness.

“I can barely see as it is,” he grumbled. “What if I keep my eyes half closed? I swear that I won’t try to see anything.”
“Fine,” she huffed and guided his hand up to the laces of her corset. “It’s your turn next, though your clothes are probably a lot easier to get off. Unfair, that.” Fitz undid the laces of her corset with a surprising swiftness that made her suspect he’d undone quite a few, and then turned to his own clothes. She tried not to look, she really did, but she couldn’t help peeking as she waded into the loch. He must have been lifting some kind of heavy equipment to build all those prototypes, because his stomach and shoulders were nicely muscled, slim enough so he didn’t tower over her but bulky enough that he could probably—a cold wave of water hit her and she yelped, turning to see Fitz standing there and not even having the decency to look guilty about it. She splashed him back, viciously.

They were both soaked through when they heard voices. One of them was the unmistakable nasal tones of Lady Brice, the ton’s best known gossip, the other was the slightly less nasal tones of the ton’s second best known gossip, and both were rapidly approaching the loch. Jemma and Fitz glanced around wildly, looking for a bush or a large rock or anything sufficient to conceal two people who were most decidedly not supposed to be swimming half-clothed in the loch at midnight, but the shore was completely clear, the largest object the stone they had both been sitting on. The voices were coming down the slope, still shielded by a few trees, and Fitz tried to shove her behind the stone to no avail. Her feet stuck out, her head peeped out from behind the top of the stone, and their clothes were still scattered around the shore. “My mother’s going to murder me,” Jemma breathed.

“Your father’s going to murder me. God, how could I have been such an idiot?” Fitz paced up and down the shore, running his hands through his curls. “It’ll be all over the house once they spot us. I’m so sorry, Jemma. I promised you that I wouldn’t ruin your reputation and now I--” The light glinted off something and he stopped suddenly, pulling her out from behind the boulder. “Jemma, do you trust me?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I’m about to do something that may either be quite stupid or quite brilliant, but either way I’ll need you to trust me and go along with whatever I say. I swear that I won’t take advantage of you, no matter what, and--” The voices were getting closer. “Here, just wear this.” Fitz threw his coat around her and slipped something onto her finger. She glanced down to see a ring and looked to him, confused but the two ladies had arrived by then, goggle-eyed and looking appropriately scandalized.

“Lord Fitz, Miss Simmons,” Lady Brice said, already smirking with the anticipation of the juicy gossip to come.

“Lady Brice,” Fitz nodded to her. “You’ll have the good luck to be one of the first to hear the happy news.” He took Jemma’s hand in his and dropped a kiss on her cheek, holding up her hand to display it to Lady Brice. “We’re engaged.”
“Engaged!” Lady Brice exclaimed, eyebrow raising to her forehead. “Let me offer you my congratulations and--”

“It’s not a surprise, Gertrude,” the other lady volunteered. “He’s been glued to her side for the past two weeks. Anyone could have seen it coming from a mile away. Even Lord Carraway predicted it and he’s been blind for years.”

“I was pretending to be surprised to be polite, Charlotte,” Lady Brice hissed. “That’s what one does.”

“Anyway, engaged. Ring on finger, lifelong commitment, all of that. Nothing improper going on here,” Fitz said brightly. “We are heading back to the party, with our clothes back on, to spread the good news so you don’t have to. Come along, darling.” And with that, he practically dislocated Jemma’s arm as he speedily towed her up back the hill, through a back entrance, up the stairs, down the hallway, up another flight of stairs, and into his room. If it had been a different kind of day, she would have looked around in wonder, investigating the blueprints on his desk or carefully poking his prototypes and seeing how nervous she could make him. But instead there was a ring on her finger and a knot of nerves permanently lodged under her collarbone, and when she opened her mouth to speak, all that came out was a high-pitched shriek.

“Leopold Fitz, what on earth were you thinking when you told them that we were engaged?” She barely resisted the urge to grab him by the lapels of the shirt he’d managed to pull on during their dash up the hill, shake him until the buttons on his shirt came skidding off, press him up against the wall, and demand--a proper explanation. A proper explanation was definitely what she was demanding.

“That’s what happens when two people are caught in a compromising situation. If they’re not already engaged, then there’ll be a ring on the woman’s finger faster than a Patas monkey can speed across the plains; their parents will swing between being scandalized and being delighted; and someone will be whispered about at parties for years to come. Usually the woman, because rumors didn’t get started about me until that incident at Ascot and all it takes for a woman’s reputation to be questioned is for her to dance more than twice with the same gentleman. And I refuse to let anyone make jokes at your expense, Jemma, or think that you’re being taken advantage of,” he said stubbornly. “It was the only thing to do, and so I did it.”

“You could have asked me. I believe that that’s the way proposals are ordinarily supposed to be conducted,” Jemma hissed. Not that she would know.

“There wasn’t exactly time to ask!” He pulled his vest out of the pile of clothes they’d carried uphill and began furiously doing the buttons up again, his fingers skidding over the buttons as he grabbed at them. Both of them had been too anxious to leave the loch behind to get properly dressed, him in his half-undone shirt and trousers and her wearing his tailcoat fastened over her chemise, and now their clothes lay in a tangled heap over an armchair. If someone found them now, they’d be in yet another compromising situation, Jemma reflected. Funny, how they seemed to fall into compromising situations without her ever actually being compromised.

“So my reputation’s saved. What do we do now? How is one supposed to break a fake engagement?”

“I don’t know. It’s not like I’ve done this before. I don’t go around proposing marriage every other
week.” Fitz started pacing the room, hands tugging on his hair almost automatically, and didn’t seem to notice that his shirt was still flapping open. Jemma decided not to say anything and positioned herself for a better view. Her interest was purely scientific, of course. The only unclothed men she’d ever seen were in anatomy textbooks and sculpture galleries and she felt that it was quite essential for her to see one up close in order to further her scientific understanding. Fitz might not have been a perfect specimen, but she was sure that she could still learn quite a lot from observing him. “Lady Brice will have told the entire party by now, so no one’s going to forget about it anytime soon...you could break it off, claim that I did something awful, and keep your dignity...what awful thing could I do?”

“I don’t know, Fitz. I don’t have any experience with being engaged, either. I’ve never been so much as kissed,” she sighed and covered her mouth a second too late when she realized what she’d said. Some of the champagne must have still been in her system, or she’d never have let that slip. Thankfully, Fitz barely appeared to have heard her, as he merely paused in his pacing for a moment, tapping one finger against a bookshelf and still keeping his back to her. He went back to his muttering a minute later without making a comment and Jemma breathed a sigh of relief. He must not have heard.

She finally flopped down into an armchair and buried her face against the side of the chair, the night and the cold and the alcohol catching up to her all at once. He crossed to her almost instantly when he heard her muffled moan. “Jemma, are you all right?” he asked and knelt by the chair, propping his head on the arm and reaching up to wind his fingers with his. “It’ll work out in the end, I swear. We're a pair of geniuses and together we ought to be able to do almost anything...together we ought to be able to do almost anything,” he repeated slowly. “Jemma, what if our engagement wasn’t fake?”

“What?” Suddenly she was wide awake again, and incredibly conscious of the warmth of her hand in his, of his eyes fixed on her, and, most of all, of the ring on her left hand that he hadn't asked her to give back.

“We've already gotten ourselves into this, and our chances of getting out of it are extremely slim. And if we did, it wouldn't be easy. It'd be messy and it'd be painful and it's very likely that we'd lose each other and I can't stand the thought of that. We both need to get married and who better to marry than your best friend?” He took a deep breath. “It can be a marriage of companionship, of friendship. I'll never touch you unless you want me to.”


“We would cross that bridge when we came to it. I can be...um, I could make it quite pleasant for you.” He blushed a deep shade of pink. “But that wouldn't have to happen for years and years. And in the years between, we could invent new devices for the Initiative and go on mad adventures hunting more mythical creatures and do science until we’d mapped out the universe together. You're my best friend in the world and honestly, there's no one I'd rather spend the rest of my life with than you. Marry me, Jemma, and I promise that we'll always be better together than apart.”

Her mind was a whirl but one thing was absolutely clear. Right then, at twenty minutes past one in the morning, in a red plush armchair, with Duke Leopold Fitz kneeling in front of her and staring up at her with improbably blue eyes, was one of those moments that divide lives into Before and After. She should have been thinking about financial security and scientific discovery, making all sorts of practical calculations, and yet the only thought in her mind was that spending the rest of her life with her best friend was all she wanted. For the first time in her life, Jemma Simmons couldn't even think of a hypothesis to test and it only scared her a little bit.
“All right,” she whispered.

“All right? Does that translate to yes?”

“Yes, it does. And yes, I'll marry you.” Nearly half a minute passed before he realized that she'd said yes, then his eyes went delightfully wide and he sprang to his feet and swept her up into a fierce hug that left her quite breathless, half because of the smile on his face and half because he was squeezing all the air out of her lungs. “Everyone's going to want to know how I caught such an eligible bachelor,” she gasped out.

“Your dancing skills, of course. Hey!” he protested when she snaked her hands around his back to tickle him in retaliation. “That's not the kind of thing you do to your fiance. You're going to have to let me win at chess now, you know?”

“You couldn't win even if I let you,” Jemma smirked, happy to fall back into their regular banter, and burst out into laughter when Fitz found the ticklish spot at the base of her spine. “You don't play fair,” she said in between fits of giggles and tried to wriggle out of his arms.

“I give as good as I get. That's what happens when you grow up with three older sisters. I can't wait for you to meet them—I think that they're going to love you. My oldest sister actually promised to burn the family ginger cake recipe if I brought back some meek and mild debutante who nodded along with everything that I said.” Fitz shuddered at the memory.

“So part of the reason you want to marry me is because you're terrified of your older sisters and you think that I can stand up to them for you?” Jemma said and twisted out of his arms to protect herself from future tickling ambushes, still giggling occasionally and somehow still holding on to his hands.

“That's what I'm going to tell everyone. Also that you're witty and kind and brilliant and spectacularly pretty and will keep me sharp when I'm a grumpy old man. All of that,” Fitz squeezed her hands tightly and she felt an odd swooping sensation in the pit of her stomach. “You can feel free to shower compliments on me now.”

“You'll have to wait for tomorrow. I'm too sleepy for compliments,” she yawned and pitched forward against him, nearly toppling them both backwards into the armchair. Luckily, he caught her and set her upright, promptly backing away only for her to grab on to his forearms and yawn again. “I think that I'm late-night drunk, Fitz. Not on the champagne, but on the...everything.”

“If you are, then I must be too. I think that it's time for both of us to go to bed and for me to get my coat back. I know a secret passage where no one will see us, originally built to connect the rooms of the Fifth Duke and his mistress. I don't know why they put you in there,” he hurried to explain and let her go to present her with the pile of her clothes. “Absolutely no idea.”

“Lead the way,” she said and linked her arm with his.

Jemma woke up the next morning to excited screams and four women bouncing on her bed. Her mother was fanning herself to keep from fainting away with joy, her sisters were not-so-gently poking her to wake her and bombard her with questions, and Skye was grinning at her like the cat that got the cream. “The duke, Jemma! The duke!” her mother squeaked and yanked the covers away the instant that she saw Jemma's eyes open. “Why didn't you tell me as soon as it happened? I had to hear it from Lady Brice and she left out all kinds of important details.”

“They were probably looking for some privacy, Mama,” Violet said and wagged her eyebrows up and down. Skye must have taught her that trick, Jemma thought, and groaned inwardly at the thought of what else Skye might have told her younger sisters, and of the chorus of innuendos that was likely
to come next. She would even be the one blamed for corrupting them, as no one ever seemed to suspect Skye of anything.

“The ring doesn't even have a diamond in it,” Lily said, frowning. “Is he going to buy you a bigger one?”

“I'm sure he'll buy her whatever she wants but that ring's better than any diamond,” Skye replied fiercely and scooted over to sit beside Jemma on the bed. “It's been in his family for centuries and it was originally given to them by King James I of Scotland as a token of appreciation for their loyalty to him. Ever since then, the dukes have given it to their wives as a sign of their loyalty and their commitment. People even used to believe that it had magical properties, blessing marriages and binding people to each other.”

“A heirloom from the Duke of Hamilton,” her mother whispered in awe. “However did you manage it, Jemma?”

“I'm not marrying him because he's the duke. I'm marrying him because he's Fitz,” Jemma said grumpily and propped herself up against the pillows, hoping to dodge her mother's question. But her family was not to be deterred, asking her if she had taken their advice to get herself into distress somehow or if she had mentioned her skills at household management, and wondering, despite how much they loved her, exactly how their spinsterish, scientific Jemma had caught eligible bachelor number nine on the Tatler's list. Jemma bit her tongue and refrained from pointing out that Fitz was just as odd as she was and that no one had ever considered that to be an obstacle to him marrying.

“He wants to marry her because he recognizes a good thing when he sees it. She's the only person who's smarter than him and he has a theory that together they'll be twice as smart,” Skye put in. “He also wants to carry her off and do wicked things to her until she screams his name, so--”

“Skye!” Jemma squeaked. Her mother's eyebrows looked like they were about to leap off her forehead but her sisters looked intrigued and her mother quickly hurried them out of the room, promising to see Jemma at breakfast, before Skye could go into further detail.

“Easiest way to clear a room for a private conversation,” Skye said smugly and arranged herself more comfortably on Jemma's bed, crossing her legs beneath her and stealing one of the pillows. “I knew that you and Fitz were up to something when you vanished from the ballroom, but I thought that it would take at least another two weeks for him to work up the courage to propose to you. We even had a wager going at the Initiative—I now owe May five pounds and I hope that you feel adequate regret. But truly, Jemma, I am so happy for you and--”

“He didn't propose!” Jemma burst out. “Well, at least he didn't at first. We'd had too much champagne and we went swimming in the loch and...things happened.”

“Indecent things?” Skye seemed far too interested in her friends' personal lives than any proper young lady should be.

“Not indecent things. Honestly, we're--”

“Just friends, I know. I can even do a passable imitation of your voice when you say it. What really happened, Jemma?” Skye asked and reached over to give Jemma a quick sideways hug. “Whatever it is, you can tell me.” And that was all Jemma needed. Everything came spilling out: first the basic facts of what had happened by the loch, which Lady Brice had already spread far and wide; and then what had happened before they heard Lady Brice, the things she'd thought and that she hadn't been willing to admit even to herself. The giddiness and the way she'd felt looking at him; how if she thought too much about it, it made her head spin. Then she went on to tell Skye about the late-night
conversation in his room, leaving out absolutely nothing. Skye just sat and let her talk, listening to
every last word, and Jemma thought that it was the longest time she'd ever seen Skye go without
making a clever comment. When she finally finished, Skye reached over to hug her and didn't let go
for a full minute.

“Jemma, you know that he cares deeply for you, don't you?” Skye said slowly. “I don't know in
what way, you don't know in what way, he might not even know in what way, but he does. And I
do know that there's almost nothing in the world that can make Leo Fitz do something he doesn't
want to do, stubborn Scottish bastard that he is. He wants to marry you. Does that count for
something?”

“I suppose it does. He's my best friend--besides you, of course,” Jemma added quickly. “Most
women my age would be overjoyed to be marrying at all, even if they weren't marrying their best
friend. Only some days I look at him and I want something more than that. I don't think that I could
bear it...if I offered more to him and he rejected me.”

“So wait for him to offer it to you. If it happens, it happens and I have a feeling that eventually it will.
In the unlikely event that it doesn't, you'll have married your best friend and the two of you will
spend your days happily blowing things up and helping the rest of us save the world.” Skye said.
She had a talent for making things sound so simple, Jemma decided. She must have gotten it from
her father, famous for solving international crises with two sentences and an offer of tea, or from
Melinda May, famous for solving international crises with a well-placed roundhouse kick. But
feelings weren't the same thing as scientific theories and she tried to tell Skye that.

Skye tilted her head to the side, said that she understood, and promptly told Jemma to get out of bed
and get dressed. “Everything's uncertain these days,” she said firmly. “That doesn't have to be a bad
thing. But if you don't go downstairs and start accepting everyone's congratulations, you'll never
know.” Skye swung herself off the bed and went rummaging through Jemma's wardrobe, eventually
holding out a light blue morning gown. “Ready to face the world as Miss Jemma Simmons, Fitz's
fiancée?”

“Not really,” Jemma admitted and hugged the remaining pillow to herself.

“Well, one day you will be.” Skye said firmly and opened the curtains, letting the morning light flood
into the room. Skye was helping her do up the back of her gown when a knock came on the door. It
was Fitz, wearing a waistcoat that very nearly matched the color of her gown and twisting his hands
together nervously.

“Miss Simm—Jemma, may I escort you down to breakfast?” he asked and held out his arm. His blue
eyes met her brown ones and she imaged that she could read reassurance in them. We're in this
together, whatever happens next.

“You may,” she replied and took it. And so, arm in arm, they went down the stairs together and into
the great After of the night before.
The next few hours all blurred together into an endless round of congratulations and accepting compliments from the dozens of people now all angling for an invitation to her wedding. Then Jemma was whisked off for a meeting with Watson, the dignified family butler who had organized every Hamilton wedding for the past thirty years and who held very strong opinions on color schemes and vintages of champagne. After that, the announcement came that his sisters were arriving in the morning and she nearly choked on half a scone, then gulped down her entire cup of tea so she wouldn't have to say anything. All in all, it was late afternoon by the time she finally got a minute alone with Fitz, after he announced that they needed to talk privately and dragged her off to the library, to the polite gasps of everyone around them.

“They think that I'm seducing you, so we have a few minutes,” Fitz declared and pulled out a chair for her. “Tell me what's bothering you, Jemma.”

“Nothing's bothering me. I'm just exhausted—I thought that once you were engaged, all the hard work was over,” she mumbled and sank down into the chair, covering her eyes with one hand so he couldn't look at her. She had always been a terrible liar.

“Is it my sisters? I already told you that they'll love you. They like pretending to be terrifying and imposing creatures, but once you get some tea and a few pieces of sticky toffee pudding into them, their true, hopelessly sentimental natures will be revealed and they'll start cooing about how lovely you are—you can even tell them no if you don't want them to be bridesmaids.” Fitz tentatively reached over to put his hand on top of hers. “Words aren't always my strong suit and I don't know what to say to fix whatever it is that's bothering you, but if you tell me what you need to make this work for us, Jemma, I'll do it.”

“Tell me if you're still in love with Lord Banner. Is that why you're marrying me, to one-up him?” she asked quietly, and slowly lowered her hands to her lap to look at him. “I eavesdropped on the two of you talking in the library, which I probably shouldn't have done, but...I'm not a replacement for anyone, Fitz, and I won't let you make me into one.”

“Jemma, I stopped being in love with Lord Banner five months, two weeks, four days, and six hours ago, when I woke up and remembered that there was more to the world than a badly dressed gentlemen scientist with a terrible temper. I've been angry at him, true, and I've sulked about it because I like people making a fuss over me, but I am certainly not in love with him anymore. And you are not a replacement, or a prize, or anything but yourself. And I happen to think that you're quite wonderful—it's not every day that you find a girl who's willing to take out a serpent's eye with a wooden paddle, can diagnose any disease in less than a minute flat, and, if in the right mood, is even willing to share her crumpets.” He stopped pacing and came towards her chair, flopping at her feet and leaning against the arm. “Please believe me, Jemma.”

“Make fun of Lord Banner's cravat first and then I'll think about believing you,” she said, unable to help the smile creeping across her face, and primly adjusted herself in her chair. “You should probably get off the floor first. If you stay down there any longer, your shirt will be past salvation, we'll have to tear it to pieces, and there'll be a whole new round of rumors.”

“Lord Banner's cravat is a crime against nature, especially since I think that shade of purple doesn't even exist in nature. It is continually half-knotted, usually flapping about, and I once saw it blow
straight up into his face so he tripped and fell into a ha-ha. Half the county heard his cry of ha-ha. Satisfactory?” After her nod, Fitz fell flat on the floor and grinned up at her with an air of smug satisfaction. “However, I have no intention of moving off this floor, as I happen to quite like it. I commissioned the carpet myself.”

“You're incorrigible.”

“You're incorrigibler.” He rolled over and propped himself up on both arms, staring up at her intently in a way that made her draw in a sharp breath and set off that increasingly familiar swooping feeling in her stomach. “Jemma, you have to know that I--”

“Hurry up, lovebirds.” The doors to the library swung open, revealing Skye silhouetted in the doorway and bouncing on the balls of her feet, and Fitz immediately sprang up from the floor. “My father's here, and we have to confer on how best to defeat evil. There's been some new developments, and no one is happy about them,” she said in a piercing whisper.

“So I'm allowed to come along now?” Jemma asked pointedly.

“Normally there would be all sorts of background checks, and lie detector tests, and piles of forms to fill out. Paperwork is the second great love of my father's life,” Skye explained. “But since you're marrying Fitz, and he's vouching for you, and matters are escalating in an alarming fashion, and we're in rather desperate need of a biologist, it's been decided that paperwork is allowed to fall by the wayside a little. We're meeting in the blue morning room and we're waiting on you.”

“Shall we?” Fitz extended his arm to her and Jemma realized with a start that this was simply how it would be from then on, Fitz beside her wherever they went together. Her life would be governed by an entirely new set of rules once Fitz's ring went on her finger, and while she wasn't entirely pleased at the thought of another round of lessons in etiquette, she rather liked the thought of having Fitz there to help her learn them. Or break them.

They went together into the morning room to find four people assembled there around the breakfast table, buttering their scones and looking perfectly innocent. Lord Coulson was seated at the head of the table and, seeing him in person, Jemma was surprised at how unassuming he seemed. A middle-aged man, steadily balding, moderately tall, and impeccably dressed in a simple black suit, he appeared to be nothing more than a doting father as he beamed up at his daughter. It was near impossible to picture him as the same man who was infamous for presenting various ambassadors with ships packed full of their spies and with passage back to their home countries on those same ships. Reputable sources had it that he considered any spies foolish enough to get caught a personal insult to his organization.

Miss Melinda May sat on Lord Coulson's right-hand side, hair scraped back into an elegant bun and wearing a black day dress and a too-wide smile that verged on becoming a grimace. “She hates undercover,” Skye whispered in Jemma’s ear as she went to sit down. “She once told me that she uses etiquette books for target practice, and she even let me join in once.” When Jemma looked at Miss May more closely, she noticed the way that the older woman's eyes constantly scanned the room, checking that each exit was free and the tiny, wickedly sharp daggers serving as hair pins.

The third person seated at the table was Trip, who gave Jemma a bright smile as her mouth dropped open in surprise and offered up the basket of pastries to her with the hand that wasn’t holding Skye’s. “Good morning, Miss Simmons. I don’t believe that I’ve offered you congratulations on your engagement yet. Duke Fitz is a lucky man,” Trip said cheerfully and continued holding Skye’s hand, seemingly impervious to the glares that Lord Coulson was aiming his way.

“Don’t get married, Leopold,” the stubbled, scowling man on Trip’s other side muttered. It took
Jemma a minute to place him and then she recognized that particular scowl: Sir Lance Hunter, knighted for the kind of services to the crown that took place in dark alleyways in the dead of night. “You start off thinking that it’s going to be all flowers and smiles and breakfast in bed, and then you realize that you’ve shackled yourself to a demonic hell-beast.”

“The demonic hell-beast sent us another report from inside the Order, one that urgently requires our attention,” Lord Coulson interrupted. “Fitz, Miss Simmons, sit please.” Jemma took a seat beside Fitz and accepted the scone that Trip handed to her as he leaned over the still-scowling Hunter.

“Who’s the demonic hell-beast?” Jemma whispered to Fitz.

“Miss Bobbi Morse, one of our best agents and his ex-wife. Haven’t you ever heard the story of the Hunter divorce?” he murmured back and Jemma’s lips parted in a silent O. Everyone had heard the story of the Hunter divorce, from the pickpockets in the streets to the Queen herself. It had involved four public screaming arguments in the midst of a ball, three priceless Chinese vases shattered to bits, two indecent trysts in a gazebo, and one husband tossed out in the middle of the street from a moving carriage. The trial itself had dragged on for years and provided employment for a veritable army of lawyers. “She’s been undercover in the Order for six months now, and she sends us reams of useful information,” Fitz went on. “Agent Morse was the one who told us that the Order planned to blow up the National Gallery.”

“I don’t see how blowing up the National Gallery relates to world domination,” Jemma pointed out and stifled a little gasp at the thought of it gone. She’d spent many a pleasant afternoon strolling through the museum, delightedly pointing out the anatomical inaccuracies in some of the paintings, shielding her sister’s eyes from the more daring Italian portraits, and spending hours attempting to decipher the meaning of each and every object in Holbein’s Ambassadors. (The distorted skull was her special favorite.)

“Destruction, sowing chaos and confusion. Or maybe they simply have a strong hatred for the art of the Italian Renaissance. Evil tends not to have much of a sense of taste,” Fitz shrugged and Jemma realized that he was close enough that his shoulder brushed hers as he did, his head leaning towards hers and his breath ghosting across her ear. She could hardly help the shudder that ran through her.

“Lord Fitz, Miss Simmons,” Coulson’s voice interrupted from the head of the table. “If I could have your attention please?” They jumped apart almost instantly, like naughty schoolchildren caught sneaking sweets, and inched their chairs away from another. “As I was saying, Agent Morse has continued to do an outstanding job in securing vital information about the inner workings of the Order of the Octopus. They’ve been having technological difficulties, particularly after her discreet sabotage, and they appear to have decided to redouble their efforts to recruit Fitz to their side. They’ve given up on the incentives—”

“Pity, that. They sent me some rather nice bags of cash, which someone made me return,” Fitz added as Lord Coulson sighed loudly.

“And so they’ve moved on to the threats. There was a mechanical in your loch, yes?” Coulson asked as he skimmed the report. “Have you managed to recover any of the pieces of your serpent?”

“We’ve dredged a few. I’m planning to examine them to see where the Order might have gotten that kind of advanced technology from and to see if there’s anything we can borrow from it. I think I might be able to make mechanical bugs that can spy on them much more subtly than that serpent did on me,” Fitz said excitedly.

“He’s going to let me examine his serpent too,” Jemma said matter-of-factly. “I’ve been dying to get my hands on it.” Skye and Trip exploded into laughter, Fitz swallowed down an entire goblet of
juice in one gulp and started coughing until Trip had to pound him on the back, Hunter managed to scowl and laugh at the same time, Lord Coulson slowly beat his forehead against the table, and May even cracked a small smile.

“This is how I’m meant to defeat evil,” Lord Coulson muttered. “And I never even got the genuine Steve Rogers signature that Nick promised me.”

“It’s nothing compared to Persia, Phil,” May said, extracting the report from beneath his head and tilted her head to one side to look at them all. They went silent immediately. “So Fitzsimmons will examine the serpent and see if they can identify its source, Trip and Skye will track down and eliminate the source once we know what it is, Lance will devise the security plan for the wedding—”

“My wedding doesn’t need a security plan!” Fitz protested.

“If I say it does, then it does. I’m not letting the Order of the Octopus steal your wedding cake,” May said and glanced down at the report again. “Coulson will consult with the Americans to see if they can lend us some manpower and activate his massive spy networks, and I will be suddenly called away on an urgent mission and stop pretending that we’re here for a social visit.” They all remained silent, rooted in their chairs around the table and their eyes fixed on her face. “You’re free to go now.” Everyone scattered immediately, Jemma taking Fitz’s arm and letting him tug her back to the library.

“Fitz, aren’t you worried about the Order? It sounds like they’ve been rather persistent,” Jemma hissed as they rushed along the corridor.

“We handled their serpent together. If anyone tries to steal our wedding cake, I trust that you’ll glare at them until they go away,” Fitz said and swung the doors of the library open. “Besides, May and Coulson will have everything managed once Coulson finishes despairing.”

“Did you hear what she called us?” Jemma ran a finger along the shelves, searching on the books on the physiology of snakes. Whoever had created that creature had to have borrowed something from basic biology, and hopefully that structure would help them piece the snake back together.

“What, Fitzsimmons?” he asked absentely, already absent-mindedly flipping through a volume the size of his head.

“I quite liked the sound of it.”

Chapter End Notes

A ha-ha is a hill that slopes sharply downward into a vertical wall, meant to restrict access to a garden (and keep livestock off it) without blocking the view. It got its name from people's cry of surprise when they came upon it.
Engagements and Efforts

It was decided that they would go back down to London for the wedding, which was to take place in a few weeks’ time with enormous amounts of pomp and ceremony. The modiste had already taken an airship up to Scotland on two separate occasions to take Jemma’s measurements and begin to fit her wedding dress, and was threatening to leave off the French lace if she had to bring all her supplies on board an airship again. Apparently, the crew had asked her to leave her pincushion behind for fear of it puncturing the gas chambers of the ship and there had been a major incident brewing until they decided to keep the pincushion in isolation.

Moreover, the high society magazines sent requests for interviews twice daily; there’d been a veritable deluge of aetherographs from friends in London eager to know precisely how Fitz and Jemma’s engagement had come about; the chef in Hamilton House was insisting on an elaborate process of cake testing; and the brief spell of good Highland weather had quickly passed. So the house party was declared an immense success and everyone packed their trunks and headed south.

Fitz had wanted them to go down to London together, in the new airship he'd purchased, and continue work on the mechanical bugs he was convinced would be his next great invention. He wanted to call them the S.P.Y.D.E.R.S., though he had no earthly idea what each initial would stand for and even less of an idea of how to make them record what they heard and retain it for longer than five seconds. He had eventually managed to make them stop going in circles, with Jemma’s help, and according to Fitz, the leisurely flight would be the perfect opportunity for them to work out some of the bugs’ oddities. Only when she had proposed it to her mother, it had been deemed most improper and Jemma had gone so far as to draw up a brilliant plan consisting of telling her mother that she had already been in Fitz’s rooms without a chaperone, letting her mother draw her own conclusions and faint, and then sneaking onto the airship with Fitz while everyone else was occupied trying to revive her mother. (Un) fortunately, Skye had pointed out that Fitz’s airship was incredibly distinctive, with the family crest and the monkey emblazoned on the side, and that her mother would probably be after Jemma as soon as she revived, not to mention the new round of gossip that would promptly start.

So instead, she shared a compartment with Skye, where they read and talked and ate six different kinds of cake on the ride back down. People kept on flitting in and out of the compartment—her sisters showing both of them dress patterns and asking for advice, Lord Coulson alternately going through a towering stack of report and asking Skye what she’d like for her birthday party (and not even blinking when she requested fireworks, a three-foot-tall cake, and a carousel), Trip reading the newest Dickens installment aloud to them with different voices for each character, and even Melinda May, doing one of her security checks throughout the train. “I don’t have the best history with trains,” was all May said by way of explanation when Skye pleaded with her to stay for a cup of tea.

Skye promptly started recounting the story of May’s famous sea-train heist, from her days as a pirate queen, and as Jemma oohed and aahed all the way through, feet curled up beneath her on the sofa and balancing a cup of tea, she realized that she quite liked being surrounded by people. Her kind of people, who talked about anything and everything and didn’t mind looking a little foolish (or more than a little foolish, as Lord Coulson started to lecture them about their diet of cake) in front of each other. She’d always thought that she preferred being by herself, as long as she had a well-equipped lab and a well-stocked library, but having friends, especially friends like Skye, was turning out to be a marvelous experience. Jemma simply wasn’t bored anymore, hadn’t been since the moment she met Fitz. “Meeting all of you is the second best thing that’s happened because of meeting Fitz,” she announced suddenly, in the middle of Trip doing his best impression of Miss Havisham.
“Only the second best?” Skye said and pouted at her. “Do I dare ask what the first best is?”

“Getting access to Fitz’s library, of course,” Jemma replied. “You’ve seen his first editions.”

“Have I?” Skye was smirking at her again, with what seemed to be her new default expression whenever Jemma talked about Fitz.

“I thought we banned the smirking,” Jemma complained.

“We definitely banned the smirking,” Trip said from the corner. “Skye just managed to get herself an exemption.”

“I always do.”

Fitz was waiting on the platform when their train arrived at King’s Cross, half smug that he had arrived there before them and half sulky that he had had to wait. When Jemma pointed out that he could have gone on to Hamilton House, he replied that a gentleman never let his fiancee arrive unescorted and insisted on having his personal porter mechanical carry her bags. It was only after he’d deposited her inside her house that she realized he’d been watching the streets all the way there, looking for members of the Order. There were many more of the Order in London, he’d told her, and in Morse’s latest report, she’d warned them that there were whispers about Jemma becoming a new target. Nothing appeared to be set in stone as of yet—the members of the Order apparently spent much of their time arguing about which evil plots to set in motion, using a vastly complicated series of parliamentary procedures—but Fitz had decided that they ought to be on the lookout anyway.

“You’re stuck with me,” he told her during the carriage ride, in a tone that brooked no argument, and true to his word, he was by her side almost constantly for the weeks before the wedding. When the Simmons family was “at home”, he was the first person to call on them and the last to leave, sitting on their sofa besides Jemma for endless rounds of tea and courtesies. He always ate all the crumpets, slathering them with butter and jam, but as long as he left her the ginger cake, Jemma didn’t complain. The rest of her family was too enamored of “the duke”, as they insisted on calling him (despite his repeated requests for them to call him Fitz), to ever accuse him of crumpet thievery. When her mother granted him permission, he took her out driving in the park in his new steam carriage or shopping on Regent Street, which really meant visiting every bookstore in London and making Fitz carry her packages, or, on one memorable occasion, meeting Skye and Trip for afternoon tea. People kept on turning around to look at them, and at the sheer number of sandwiches Fitz was consuming, until eventually they had to place a row of potted plants in front of their table. “I have this new smoke bomb designed to clear rooms,” Fitz said hopefully. “It could be in the name of scientific experimentation?”

“Absolutely not, Fitz.” That was Jemma.

“I’d like my banana toffee pie to not taste of smoke, thank you very much.” That was Skye.

“Coulson would probably cover for us if we turned in the proper paperwork” That was Trip, who immediately stopped talking when the girls glared at him. “It was just an idea!”

“It was a good idea--Trip’s my new favorite,” Fitz informed them.

“Nonsense. I’m always your favorite.” Jemma said briskly and impulsively leaned over to kiss his cheek, feeling a sudden wave of affection for him, pout and pile of sandwiches and all, and ignoring the looks that Trip and Skye shot them.

At balls, they vanished together to do research in libraries and once or twice, they snuck out the back
door to go to Hamilton House and work on the S.P.Y.D.E.R.S., which still weren’t recording properly, although they’d proven unexpectedly good at making tea. No one batted an eye whenever they made their inevitable exit from the ballroom, accustomed to couples sneaking off into the shrubbery, and, convenient though it was, Jemma couldn’t help asking Fitz if it bothered him.

“Why would it bother me?” he said and shrugged, lifting another leather-bound volume off the shelf. “It excuses us from all sorts of boring things. Just imagine, we could be dancing a remarkably painful waltz right now instead of reading about thermodynamics. I even brought along my portable set of screwdrivers--”

“It doesn’t bother you that everyone thinks we’re…” She waved her hands between us in a gesture meant to approximate passionate seduction and that probably just looked like she was swatting at a fly instead.

“That everyone thinks my beautiful fiancée is letting me ravish her in a variety of inventive and wicked ways? Not at all. I can occasionally be vain, Jemma,” he said lightly, then stopped suddenly and turned to look at her. If she hadn’t known better, she would have sworn that he looked almost guilty. “Does it bother you? If it does, I’m sure we can find another way to conduct our research or we can--”

“No, I...it doesn’t...it’s perfectly fine. I’ve never paid much mind to what people say about me anyway.” And that was that.

The only place where Fitz wasn’t allowed to go with her was to the innumerable fittings for her wedding dress, as Skye had insisted that it would be terrible luck if he saw Jemma in it before the day of the wedding. So it was during another of the innumerable dress fittings that a sheepish-looking Lord Banner appeared in the dressmaker’s salon bearing an early wedding present while Skye and Jemma were in the middle of being offered champagne. “I thought that I should give it to you rather than Fitz,” he explained, “I’m still not sure whether he’s done being angry at me after I teased him about you.”

“We sent you an invitation to the wedding, didn’t we? If you’re invited, I’m sure that you’re forgiven.” Jemma said hastily, unsure what to say to him, or what to do, or how he’d even known that she had a fitting today.

“You did. This is awkward, isn’t it?” Lord Banner said bluntly, pulling on his already disheveled cravat. “I’m sorry. Lord Coulson told me that the Lady Skye would be accompanying you today--I suspect that he’s trying to recruit me for the Initiative again-- and I thought that I could offer my congratulations and a wedding present and maybe not get any drinks tossed in my face.”

“Fitz threw a drink at you?”

“Five drinks in my face, four ornaments that I gave him broken, three failed prototypes smashed on the floor, two shirts ruined, and one very expensive vase shattered to smithereens. Fitz and I weren’t...we were a volatile combination and we didn’t always bring out the best in each other,” Lord Banner admitted as he sank down on a sofa, twisting his hands together unhappily. Then something occurred to him and he looked up and leaned forward, suddenly smiling. “You know, when I saw him for the first time after the Airship Incident, at that house party, he looked happier, calmer than I’d ever seen him. That was when I found out he’d met you. I really do mean my congratulations, Miss Simmons. I think you’ve been wonderful for him and I hope that he’s been good for you too.”

“Thank you,” she murmured as she felt Skye fidgeting beside her. The other girl was clearly yearning to say something and gulping down tea to prevent herself from doing so.
“You make a lovely couple,” Lord Banner added and an awkward silence fell. He appeared to be on the verge of devising more compliments when, thankfully, the dressmaker’s assistant appeared to call Jemma in for her fitting and he quickly made his excuses and wished them a good day. Skye looked as if she wanted very badly to say something but Jemma was whisked off to the dressing room before Skye could utter more than a syllable and she sighed in relief as attendants scurried around her. She didn’t feel up to one of Skye’s cross-examinations, not with her mind muddled yet again. Yes, she was good for Fitz. And he was good for her too, making her laugh, making her triple-check all her facts. He was the only person she’d ever met who matched up with her at every moment, rough edges and all. That was what friends did, wasn’t it? What they were supposed to be?

The wedding came before she expected it. One moment it seemed like the wedding was weeks away, and the next she was standing in the foyer of St. Paul’s five minutes before the ceremony was due to start, wearing a white dress and pearls and gasping for breath. “Jemma, are you all right?” Skye asked, hovering around her anxiously. “Remember that you have to breathe in order to get married.”

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to do!” Jemma wailed. “There aren’t any textbooks on getting married. What if I mess up the entire ceremony?”

“It’s almost impossible to mess up the ceremony. You walk down the aisle, you say “I do”, Fitz says it back and puts the ring on your finger, he kisses you, and just like that, you’re married and everyone goes off to the wedding breakfast and gets splendidly drunk,” Skye said.

“He’s going to kiss me? I’ve never been kissed, Skye,” Jemma hissed. “What if I move my mouth wrong and hit him in the teeth? Or what if we bump noses? What if it’s the worst kiss in the history of kisses?”

“Nothing like that’s going to happen,” Skye sighed and guided her over to sit down on a bench. “Just breathe, Jemma.”

“But I don’t know what to do!” Jemma repeated, her voice increasingly high-pitched, and barely resisted the urge to knot her hands in the (very expensive) silk of her dress or tug at her (also very expensive) veil.

“It’s a natural instinct, I promise that you--Trip!” Skye spotted him heading into the church, finishing up the last of his groomsmen duties, and frantically grabbed him. “Trip, you need to kiss Jemma.”

“Isn’t Fitz the one who’s been kissing Jemma?” Trip asked, clearly confused.

“No, he hasn’t. She’s never been kissed and so now she’s panicking and she needs to know what to do. So go on, kiss her,” Skye gestured between the two of them. “And do it quickly.”

“A gentleman never kisses another man’s fiancee. Especially when that man is Fitz and is capable of sending all sort of vicious mechanicals after me,” Trip said in a politely horrified tone.


“Wha--” That was all Jemma managed to get out before Skye pulled her to her feet and kissed her firmly on the lips. It was over before she could form any useful hypotheses, and all she had time to register was that she hoped kissing Fitz wouldn’t be quite so startling. Then the church bells were pealing out and Trip was solemnly wishing her good luck and Skye was fussing over the orange blossoms in her hair and all she could think as the chapel doors swung open was that there was nothing to do but go forward. Forward into a bright June morning filled with the scent of roses and a world of possibility and forward towards her best friend waiting for her at the end of the aisle.
Later, when Jemma tried to remember her wedding, all she could recollect were bits and pieces. The weight of her train behind her as she walked down the aisle and the swish of her skirts against the floor, the only thing she could hear besides her mother’s audible sobs from the pews as her father gave two manly sniffs into a handkerchief. Glancing up at the vaulted ceiling of the church as they knelt in front of the minister, feeling Fitz reach over to hold her hand and stifling her laughter when he glanced up at the ceiling too, curious to see what she was looking at. He dropped the ring, of course, and Trip cheered and claimed that it was good luck. While everyone else was cheering along with Trip, Fitz managed to drop the ring again and she realized that he was just as nervous as she was.

The echo of their vows in the church and her surprise when she didn’t stumble over them. Most of all, she remembered the kiss at the end of the ceremony: his lips sure on hers, his hand coming up to tangle in her veil, and the way he leaned his forehead against hers after he pulled back, beaming at her and letting his hand rest on her cheek before they turned to face everyone’s cheers. For a moment, she thought he was going to kiss her again and for a moment, she wanted him to.

They barely ate anything at their own wedding breakfast. Anyone who was anyone came over to offer their congratulations, inevitably when Fitz was about to lift a forkful of food to his mouth, and he would have to put his fork back down to make small talk. Jemma had to slip him scones under the table to keep him from severely insulting the Dowager Duchess of Devon. Fitz even looked envious of Hunter, who was skulking around the perimeter of the wedding and doing his best impersonation of an unsavoury character in order to ward the real ones off.

What finally cheered Fitz up, however, was when Lord Banner and Mr. Stark came over to present them with a stack of the latest scientific journals from America and one of Stark Industries’ latest prototypes. They chatted with the two men about Mr. Darwin’s new paper for a good ten minutes, and Jemma observed with pleasure that Lord Banner seemed to be smiling for once.

Mr. Stark was horribly cocky, remarkably sarcastic, and unmistakably American. But he was also quite brilliant and he advised Fitz and Jemma on their S.P.Y.D.E.R.S and he gave Lord Banner disgustedly soppy looks when he thought no one was looking and whispered comments about Lord Banner being the only person who spoke his kind of English that Jemma thought were rather adorable. So she decided that she could like them for now. The entire American branch of the Initiative seemed to have come over--later she’d find out that Coulson had requested their presence--and they all swarmed over to offer their congratulations once Mr. Stark gave the word. There were at least seven or eight of them, all loud and enthusiastic and slightly chaotic. Still, Jemma was determined to keep each and every one of the Americans straight.

There was Captain Rogers, blond and blue-eyed and impressively muscled, who shyly called her ma’am and whose eyes shone with pride when he talked about his work in the abolitionist movement. He was flanked on either side by a tiny red-headed woman--Miss Romanoff, former Russian assassin, Jemma remembered--who he couldn’t help beaming at and by a scruffy dark-haired man who kept on glancing around the party nervously. The man had gone to fight in the Crimean War, Captain Rogers told them quietly, and been captured by the Russians and only found his way back recently. They’d all nodded, understanding, and Jemma had advised them on the quietest corners of the house, where Mr. Barnes could retreat with a slice of cake. He’d done just that, arm linked with the dark-haired girl who was Miss Foster’s assistant, and Captain Rogers and Miss Romanoff drifted off to consult with Lord Coulson and May. “Time to sign those trading cards,” Miss Romanoff said with a wicked grin.
“Trading cards?”

“They made trading cards for several of the leading speakers in the movement,” Captain Rogers explained sheepishly. “Lord Coulson collects them and he’s been wanting my signature.”

“They’ll be announcing their engagement any day now,” Miss Romanoff mock-whispered and when Captain Rogers sighed at her, she simply laughed and kissed him, ignoring the stares of polite society and winding his hand through hers to lead them over to Lord Coulson, who appeared about to faint with joy, and May, who simply raised a hand in greeting.

“She’ll get into a knife-throwing competition with May before the breakfast is over. Do you have any paintings that you don’t like?” A blond man leaned against the table, bow at his feet. Clint Barton, she thought, the archer from the wild, wild West with a cowboy’s name and a tumbler of Scotch that he’d magically procured before five o’clock and that Fitz seemed very interested in.

“There’s a few ugly ones of cherubs and our supposed ancestors and such,” Jemma volunteered. “But unfortunately, my mother has decided that they happen to be family heirlooms.”

“Ancestors must be paid all due reverence,” a loud voice boomed out and they turned to see yet another blond, muscle-bound man (honestly, was that a requirement for joining the American branch of the Initiative?) bounding over to them with a large goblet and a brunette woman affectionately rolling her eyes at him. His name was Thor, he was a pioneer carpenter from Minnesota, the goblet was their wedding gift, “for the days of feasting still to come”, and the woman was Miss Jane Foster, noted scientist and one of Jemma’s girlhood heroes. She could have talked to Miss Foster all day, trading theories and discussing experiments, and she very nearly did, until the wedding breakfast (now more of a luncheon and slipping into an afternoon tea) ended and Fitz was only able to drag her away with the promise that they would call upon Miss Foster the following morning.

It was past supper-time by the time the last guest left and all Jemma’s trunks had been loaded into the steam carriage that would take them to Hamilton House, as the breakfast had been held at the Simmons home. They planned to stay in London for the next few weeks, continuing to investigate the Order, and then retreat to the country as the season ended. Fitz had already apologized profusely for their lack of a honeymoon, and offered to take her to Paris as soon as the Order stopped trying to take over the world. Jemma had made him put it down in writing, and include a clause about eating macarons every day. Really, though, she didn’t mind staying in London, not when there were evildoers to chase and inventions to refine. She just didn’t plan on telling him that.

She fell asleep on his shoulder in the carriage on the way to Hamilton House, exhausted from the wedding and only waking up when she felt herself being lifted up. “Fitz, what are you doing?” she mumbled and pressed her face more firmly into his chest. “Why are we moving?”

“I’m carrying you over the threshold. It’s tradition. And you have a lot of clothes,” he said and wrapped her skirts around one wrist. “I’m going to trip over them if I’m not careful.”

“I’m a girl. Besides, aren’t you supposed to be familiar with ladies’ clothing? All the rendezvous in carriages and fencing clubs and conservatories and...am I forgetting anywhere?”

“A boat once and the libraries, of course, and--” Fitz stopped abruptly. “If you really want to hear all the sordid details, you can ask me any question you want later. My sisters are here and now is not the time.” Jemma twisted her head around and opened her eyes to see three women with Fitz’s curly hair and an entire army of servants waiting on the steps of Hamilton House.

“How long can you carry me for?” she asked and smiled sweetly up at him.
“I guess we’re about to find out.” Quite a while, as it turned out, since Fitz was stopped on every step up to Hamilton House by people offering their congratulations and introducing themselves to Jemma. She simply smiled and waved, feeling a little like the queen, and didn’t even grumble when Fitz unceremoniously dumped her on her feet just inside the threshold. “You’re heavy,” he whispered.

“Am not.” She twirled in a circle, taking in the massive skylight that illuminated the foyer and the paintings lining the walls and suddenly realizing that this was her house now too. If it hadn’t been for the way she swayed on her feet and the massive yawn she gave out, she would have gone exploring almost immediately but Fitz’s sisters spotted her fatigue and insisted instead on showing her to her rooms and on helping her unpack her trunks.

“Jemma, you know that you have nothing to worry about, don’t you?” His eldest sister Fiona said, sitting on the massive bed beside Jemma and patting her arm in what she supposed was meant to be a comforting manner. “Your mother explained everything to you? In quite gruesome terms, probably--it’s much nicer than mothers always make it out to be, so you know--but she explained the basics of it all? What goes where?”

“I’ve read plenty of books on the subject,” Jemma interrupted and flushed a deep red. Her mother had indeed attempted to give her a lecture on wifely duties, which Jemma had sat through politely for ten minutes of circumlocutions until she lost her patience and finally explained that as a scientist, she was well acquainted with basic anatomy and biology. Despite the fact that the mere thought of it still made her blush.

“All right,” Fiona said slowly. “But it’s important that you know that you can come to us with any kind of questions at all. We’ve all heard the rumors about our brother, as awkward as it may be to--”

“I really don’t think that’ll be necessary.” She could feel the blush spreading now, down her neck and to the tips of her ears.

“Well, we did buy you something for your wedding night. Every bride should feel special,” Margaret, the second-eldest sister, added and presented Jemma with a neatly wrapped package. “Go on, open it.” Jemma carefully undid the paper to reveal a nightgown, if she could really call it that. She didn’t think that nightgowns were supposed to have this little fabric. Or this much lace, in places that nightgowns were supposed to cover. But she remembered her manners and smiled as she held it up to herself, Fitz’s sisters cooing approvingly.

They finally left in a flurry of last-minute pieces of advice, which Jemma resolutely tried to block out, and heavily loaded comments about how much they were looking forward to becoming aunts. Jemma promptly stuffed the lace...thing in the bottom of one of her drawers and went in search of her plain white cotton nightgown.

Sighing, she finally selected the least scandalous of the lot, a pale pink affair that (very nearly) covered her knees, only exposed the top half of her cleavage, and finally curled up under the covers, pulling them over her head and snuggling down into the feather mattress. She was on the edge of sleep when she heard the door creak open and soft footsteps that sounded like Fitz’s approach the bed. “Are you awake, Jemma?” he whispered tentatively, and reached a hand out to pat the lump under the covers that was her.

“Now I am,” she muttered.

“Sorry, I just thought that I should probably stay in here tonight. Fewer questions that way,” he explained. “If we don’t sleep in the same room tonight, the servants will start talking and then they’ll tell my sisters, and then they’ll summon you for a talk.”
“They already did,” Jemma propped herself up against the pillows, awake again, and Fitz’s eyes went wide.

“Jemma, what is that?”

“Someone stole my usual nightgowns and this was the least scandalous one I could find.” She hugged a pillow close to her chest, suddenly aware that the covers had fallen to her waist, and intently traced the pattern of the comforter with one finger to avoid looking at him. “You should have seen the one that your sisters gave me.”

“I suspect that I would faint dead away if I saw what my sisters gave you. You don’t mind me staying in here? I can stay on the sofa if that makes you feel more comfortable,” he offered. “We don’t have to do anything that you don’t want to do.”

“I know that,” she said slowly. “But you should stay--you’re nice and warm.”

“Married less than a day and you’re already using me as a heat source,” Fitz mumbled as he climbed in. Jemma didn’t bother to dignify that with a response, simply sliding down with a thump to burrow under the covers. Fitz had claimed that Hamilton House was kept warm with steam heat but it appeared to not be working in her bedroom that night and she soon found herself shivering again, despite the heat that Fitz radiated from his side of the massive bed. It took five minutes of being curled into a ball and her teeth starting to chatter for her to give in and demand that he share his warmth properly with her. In the end, she reached for him almost instinctively, with a mumbled “come here” and a tug on his wrist, and he scrambled across the bed like he’d been waiting for her to say it. Fitz pulled her snugly against him, burying his face in the curve of her neck and shoulder and draping one arm over her so his hand rested against her stomach and twined with hers.

The last thing she felt before she fell asleep was the press of Fitz’s lips against her neck, so light and so sweet that she thought she’d dreamt it.
Libraries and Liking

They were woken in the middle of the night by a frantic pounding on their door, the sudden appearance of Melinda May at the foot of their bed, and the deeply apologetic butler trailing behind her. Fitz woke first, disentangling himself from her slowly and sliding to the edge of the bed as he glanced around the room and took in the chaos that had suddenly engulfed it. All that Jemma registered, however, was that her heat source had suddenly vanished and she whined as she reached out to pull him back to her. “Why did you move, Leo?” she mumbled, pouting at him. “You’re not allowed to move.”

“How did you move, Leo?” she mumbled, pouting at him. “You’re not allowed to move.”

“This is the middle of the night,” she muttered darkly from beneath the pillow. He pulled the covers halfway down in an attempt to wake her up, remembered what she was wearing, and rapidly pulled them back up, blushing all the way. Finally, Fitz settled for poking her until she threw one of the pillows at him, peeked over the edge of the bed and realized that their company was Melinda May, and instantly sat upright, pulling the covers to her and suddenly very wide awake. “Good evening,” Jemma squeaked politely.

“Good evening,” May replied, inclining her head towards them with a faint smile. “I’m sorry for waking you up. Of course, we all assumed that you would still be awake and otherwise occupied—Skye, Trip, and Hunter actually had a betting pool going. I’m not sure who wins in this case.”

“Really? How long did they think I could--ow! What did you do that for?” Fitz rubbed his arm where Jemma had pinched it.

“Really? How long did they think I could--ow! What did you do that for?” Fitz rubbed his arm where Jemma had pinched it.

“What happened?” Jemma asked May. Fitz was plainly too preoccupied with his male pride to be of much use. She’d read something in an anatomy textbook about recovery times in between rounds of sexual congress (the proper scientific term, no need to blush about it) and been quite amazed by the length of the average, wondering just how energetic the activity had to be in order to require such a long time. Probably the kind of scientific observations that she shouldn’t share with Fitz.

“One of Fitz’s prototypes was stolen from the exhibition hall of the Royal Society of Engineers, about two hours ago. We’re fairly sure that the Order was behind it, considering that only the one prototype was taken and that they left this note behind.” May handed a crumpled piece of paper to Fitz, a simple message printed on it in block letters. IF YOU WANT IT BACK, YOU’LL HAVE TO GET IT YOURSELF, YOUR GRACE.

“Fuckin’ hell,” Fitz swore. “What did they take? And why the blazes didn’t the society have a proper security system? I offered to design one for them but no, they—”

“The portable device that cuts through walls. You called it the Rodent Tunnel, I think? Agent Morse is on the case and if she can locate it, she’s sure that she can steal it back. Was there any kind of safety mechanism on the device?” May said calmly. Much too calmly. Fitz was still uttering a long string of curses under his breath and frantically tugging on his hair, the mad scientist look that Jemma was beginning to recognize clearly written across his face until she wrapped his hands in hers and calmly told him to answer May’s question.

“There’s a safety catch so it doesn’t go off accidentally, of course. And the device doesn’t exactly work all of the time. It works about...13.573% of the time, if I had to guess at it,” Fitz added. “I don’t know how well it’ll work—or if it’ll even work at all—without me there to tinker with it.”
“Coulson will be happy to hear that. Should we tell Agent Morse that she can simply destroy it on sight, then, before they find a way to make it work fifteen percent of the time?”

“It took me ages to construct that prototype. I’d like it back, thank you very much,” Fitz said indignantly. “Once Jemma and I finish work on the S.P.Y.D.E.R.S., we’ll even have a proper way of tracking the Order, and we can find out where they’re keeping it. They’ll probably be moving it around, of course, hoping to keep me confused—”

“Is there any other news from the Initiative?” Jemma cut him off before he could start drawing diagrams. Fitz had told her once that he had had an enormous chalkboard installed in his bedroom and if she squinted, she could just catch a glimpse of it through the open door connecting their rooms. He’d be dragging her off to write down action plans on it any minute now.

“That’s all for tonight. We’ll keep you updated.” May was gone as quietly as she’d arrived, slipping out their window in a flash of black tactical gear. Fitz climbed out of bed as soon as she was out of sight, wearing a slightly too-big set of the new cotton pajamas that officers had begun to bring back from India. Of course, his pajamas came in the now-familiar family tartan.

“Fitz, what are you doing?” Jemma sighed.

“Working on the S.P.Y.D.E.R.S., obviously. We’ve got at least six and a half hours before anyone expects us to be anywhere—come on!” He was practically bouncing on the balls of his feet. Apparently, Leo Fitz was one of those middle-of-the-night people, the sort who treated the sun like a dangerous foe. His opposition to mornings almost made sense now.

“Sleep, Fitz,” she groaned.

“Science, Jemma.” How was she supposed to argue with that? But as she climbed out of bed, Fitz began to turn bright pink and immediately dropped his eyes to the floor. “You might want to put a dressing gown on,” he choked out. “I can’t, um...you’re very...you’ll get cold if you don’t wear anything else.” The next day, when she accused Skye of interfering with her trousseau and told her about Fitz’s reaction, Skye simply smiled innocently and giggled into her tea for the next half hour.

They worked furiously on the S.P.Y.D.E.R.S. for the next month, staying in London long past the fashionable time to be gone. At first, their days were filled with an endless round of social calls and dinner parties and garden parties and every kind of party that the ton could devise, as the Season drew to a close. Jemma even devised a new system of getting through the hours without having to really listen. If it sounded like gossip, she would politely gasp; if it sounded like politics, she would “hmmm” and “ahhh” her way through it; and if anyone asked her when they could expect to see an heir to the dukedom, she would blush and look down.

Slowly, however, society began to depart for the fresh air of the countryside and, much to Fitz’s relief, they were left in peace to work in the lab. The main members of the Initiative remained in London as well, and Trip and Skye, occasionally dragging a grumpy Lance Hunter behind them, were constantly finding excuses to drop by. Skye brought along enormous numbers of reports from Coulson’s spy network and read through them in the lab, summarizing them in one of her ever-present red notebooks and making note of potential new recruits. “I told you that my speciality is Communications,” she explained to Jemma with a smile. “No one ever suspects a debutante. Men simply don’t think that they’re being cross-examined when it’s being done by a pretty young woman.”

“She has wonderful instincts,” Trip added, leaning over to glance at Skye’s work and twining his fingers with her free hand. “Skye was the one who found at least half of our new recruits this year.”
“Practice makes perfect. My instincts weren’t always that good,” Skye said casually but Jemma saw a shadow momentarily flash across her face, her eyes dropping to the ground and her mouth twisting in pain. Trip must have seen it too, because he moved closer to Skye on the sofa, letting her rest her head on his shoulder and lifting their joined hands to kiss hers. Skye tugged him down for a proper kiss and Jemma turned away to give them a moment of privacy, only to find Fitz staring straight at her, a new heat in his eyes. She couldn’t meet his gaze for longer than a moment before she turned away, mumbled something about finding a new set of test tubes, and hurried to the opposite side of the room, the moment over before it even started.

The next morning, however, as Anna, the ladies’ maid hired for her just after the wedding, was helping her dress, Jemma waved away the offer of a corset (they made it awfully hard to rush around the lab) and Anna couldn’t hide her smirk. Honestly, had Skye taught the whole household that infuriatingly suggestive smirk?

“Of course, ma’am. The duke prefers you without a corset, doesn’t he?” Anna leaned in, ready for a satisfying piece of gossip. “It certainly makes things easier. I remember when I was first married—I could hardly sit down from all the—”

“Oh no, nothing like that. It’s simply easier to move around the house without one,” Jemma stammered out and desperately wished for somewhere to hide.

“I see. Well, some men like the challenge too, like unwrapping a lovely present…” Anna trailed off on seeing Jemma’s blush. “Well, you and the duke make a lovely couple. Very discreet too. The staff does appreciate that. The housekeeper told me once that the previous duke, Fitz’s father, and his wife conceived at least two of their children in the vestibule.”

“Yes, that’s us. Very discreet,” Jemma nodded fervently.

“You’re very quiet too. Quite remarkable, that,” Anna added and Jemma thought that she detected a hint of suspicion in her tone and quickly racked her brain for any anatomical detail she could provide to make their story convincing. She’d read textbooks, of course, she had some idea of how everything was supposed to go. Maybe if she just listed off muscles, Anna would let her be.

“Fitz has been working on the soundproofing. It’s a great advantage, having an engineer for a husband,” Jemma chirped. “Such a wonderful sartorius and so much...tone. Just toned everywhere. You can practically see the tone of his member.” It looked like Anna was trying not to laugh as she bobbed a curtsy and left, and Jemma found herself wondering if she could melt through the floor if she concentrated hard enough.

Fitz’s sisters arrived an hour later and requested her presence, and only her presence, in the drawing room. They must have had some sort of notification system: any sign that something was wrong in their baby brother’s marriage, and notes instantly flew from sister to sister, calling them to assemble. Jemma hastily had herself laced into her corset, changed her simple linen gown for something more suited to receive guests, and went downstairs to face her doom. All three of them were arrayed along the sofa, waiting for her, and the door had barely shut behind the butler when Fiona went in for the kill.

“Jemma, dear, we’ve been given to understand that you and Fitz have yet to consummate your marriage,” Fiona said crisply and arched one eyebrow, setting her tea cup down on its saucer with a decisive clink. “The news came from a most reliable source and, surprised though we were to hear it, we thought that we ought to come here at once. Is it that your textbooks were inaccurate?”

“Or is it simply bridal nerves?” Margaret put in.
“Or is it that he can’t…” Aileen, the third sister, waved her hand in the general direction of “up” to the scandalized whispers of the other two.

“Honestly, Aileen. The Fitz men are well noted for their conjugal abilities. It’s even recorded in the family chronicles,” Fiona whispered.

“No, no, it’s none of that,” Jemma blurted out. “I’m sure that everything is perfectly functional down there. We’re just...we’re not...we’re waiting for the right moment! Tea?” She poured tea into their already-full cups, stuffed three cakes into her mouth, and prayed that no one would ask her just what the right moment was. His sisters left soon after, but the damage was already done. More and more, Jemma found that she couldn’t stop looking at Fitz.

She’d always found him attractive, she finally admitted to herself. The blue eyes, the messy hair, the little-boy-lost look coupled with those occasional wicked smiles. But she’d remembered the rumors and kept her hands to herself, not that she would have known what to do with them in any case, and they had a friendship, a partnership, like no other. And when she remembered that their friendship was supposed to be more than enough, everything was fine. But then she’d watch his hands tinkering with the clockwork of the S.P.Y.D.E.R.S., and wonder what those hands would feel like against her skin, or hear him say her name, and wonder if she could make him moan it instead. Then she’d start constructing elaborate (and possibly inaccurate) scenarios and her mind would drift off, and he’d poke her to bring her back to him, and she’d start imagining them together all over again.

“It’s all their fault!” she wailed to Skye a few days later. “Everyone talking about consummations and those nightgowns--I’m still mad at you about those, by the way--and all those knowing glances...And now I can’t stop thinking about it! I was always able to stop before. There’s no scientific reason for why I shouldn’t be able to stop.”

“So you were having those kinds of thoughts before?” Skye muttered something under her breath that sounded like “I knew it” before making a sympathetic sound and patting Jemma on the arm. “You could always just make an advance, you know? See how he responds?”

“I know. But Skye, I’m terrified,” she confessed. “That he’ll reject me, that I’ll do something right, that we’ll lose what we already have because of it.”

“Beginning something new is always scary. I know what it’s like--Jemma, did you ever hear about what happened to me two years ago?” At Jemma’s shake of her head, Skye went on. “It was before I made my debut, when my instincts weren’t always the best. I met this man--no one that you know--and he told me that he cared about me and I believed him. I didn’t know any better, I suppose. Now, if I looked in his eyes, I would be able to see that there was nothing there. I was on the verge of running away with him when he kidnapped me. He was a member of an anarchist group, one of the violent ones, and they were hoping to wring concessions from my father by threatening to kill me. May came to rescue me, of course, and she started training me afterward.” Jemma reached across the couch then, and hugged Skye fiercely.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered to Skye. “Are you sure you don’t want to tell me who he is? Fitz and I have come up with this nasty new neurotoxin dispersal system.”

“I’m sure. I appreciate the offer, though,” Skye sniffed. “Anyway, the point I’m trying to make is that I was scared of romance, even of flirtation, for the longest time after that. I didn’t think I could trust anyone and sometimes I still think that, sometimes I’m still scared. But Trip knows that, he understands that life is uncertain, and he’s willing to take everything as slowly or as quickly as I want. And Fitz would be the same way too, with you. I think that sometimes we need to be scared in order to be brave. And you’re one of the bravest people I’ve ever met.” Jemma hugged her again at that. “I said something clichéd and sentimental just then, didn’t I?” Skye groaned.
“You said the exact right thing,” Jemma said firmly. There was a long pause, during which Jemma fidgeted helplessly on the sofa, took a bite of a sandwich, put it down, and finally leapt up, unable to wait a minute longer. “I’m awfully sorry to leave you like this, but there’s something I have to do right now.” Jemma dashed from the room, promising to tell Skye what happened later, and raced up the stairs. He wasn’t in the lab, or the billiards room, or in his room, or the kitchen, or any of the places that he usually frequented. Jemma dashed down another hallway and found herself in front of the double doors of the library. Of course. Everything had started in a library and now, in another library, a new kind of something was about to start.

“Fitz?” she called, pushing open the doors.

“In here! What is it, Jemma?” He was standing over by one of the shelves, holding a book in one hand as the afternoon light streamed in behind him, so bright that he was nothing more than a silhouette. She had to go closer in order to see him properly, so close that her skirts brushed against his trousers, and he gulped audibly, staring down at her. “Hello,” he breathed.

“Hello,” she replied, rising up on the tips of her toes. Hypothesis: If she didn’t kiss Leo Fitz now, she might never know what it felt like. So Jemma summoned up all her courage and, leaning forward, pressed her lips to his.
Fitz kissed her back almost instantly, muttering something that sounded like “finally” against her lips before snaking one arm around her waist, using it to pull her closer to him, and dedicating himself to kissing her in earnest. The book he had been holding fell to the floor with a soft thump, and his other hand went up to bury itself in her hair, pulling out all her pins until her hair fell around her shoulders and his hand skimmed along the edge of her cheek and jaw. She leaned into his touch like a cat, and tried to catalog all the different sensations coming at her: the warmth and steadiness of the hand at her waist, the other hand now cupping her face, the way that he varied the pressure of his mouth on hers, soft and hard and light and heavy all at once. Then he slipped his tongue into her mouth, letting it slick against hers, and bit down lightly on her bottom lip, and she gave up any kind of analytical thinking.

Jemma moaned against his mouth, loudly, and he only kissed her more fervently in response, spinning her around and pressing her against the walls of books. The leather-bound spines were digging into her back and she thought that she heard the distant sound of a crash. But Fitz was kissing along the line of her neck now, nipping and sucking and sweeping his tongue over her pulse point, humming with approval at the noises she made low in her throat, and as long as he kept on doing that, the library could collapse around them and she wouldn’t care. He flicked open the first button of her high-necked dress, pressing kisses along her collarbone, and she sighed with satisfaction.

“So you do like women,” she murmured, half to herself, and suddenly there was cold air at her neck where Fitz’s mouth had been before. He pulled away and stared down at her, blue eyes clouded and unfocused, and Jemma pouted at him. “Why did you stop kissing me?” she whispered and leaned forward to drag a hand through his curls and tug his head down to hers. “Careful, or there’ll dreadful consequences.”

“Jemma, there is nothing I want more than to keep on kissing you. And as soon as you tell me what you meant earlier, I promise I will.” He reached up to disentangle her hand from his hair and wrapped it in both of his, voice low and soft. “Why would you think that I don’t like women, particularly when they happen to be you? Particularly when I’ve spent the past month tripping over my own two feet whenever you appear in anything remotely enticing and looking at you for far longer than was ever proper?”

“Society likes to gossip,” Jemma shrugged. “And the most common rumor about you was that you preferred men to women. After I found out that you had been involved with Lord Banner, I thought…”

“I like both men and women,” Fitz said calmly. “Simple as that. It took me a while to figure out when I was younger, but then I realized that I just liked people. Someone’s quick wit, another person’s smile. But the most important thing is that out of everyone I’ve met, I like you best of all. I meant every word of the vows I said a month ago and there’s no one else for me—there hasn’t been since the moment I met you and I can’t imagine ever wanting anyone else. Can you believe that?”

“How long?” she asked and let herself lean forward against him. She couldn’t stop touching him now that she was allowed to, like a child on Christmas morning unwrapping a new toy, and although her mind was still in a whirl, one emotion was slowly floating to the surface: overwhelming, dizzying joy. He was still here, he wanted her, he cared about her—*he might even love you*, a voice whispered in the back of her head—and as she smiled back to him, she could feel them slipping into a new version of their old back-and-forth. “How long have you wanted to kiss me for?” she repeated,
leaning close enough to ghost her lips across his.

“I think I’ve wanted to kiss you since that first night in the library, when I saw you there stealing my crumpets and being utterly unashamed of it. However, I realized that I wanted to kiss you on the lake, when we were in the middle of fighting that serpent, when I should have been analyzing variables and repairing the boat’s engine, and when I all could think about was the way that you looked with your hair down. But you were completely oblivious to everything I tried and so I resigned myself to a lifetime of pining and to a rather spectacular friendship,” he told her, sighing dramatically.

“You didn’t even notice that I was female half the time!” she accused playfully.

“No, I did. Trust me, Jemma, I definitely did. For instance, right now I am extremely aware that you’re a woman. If you’d like, I’d be happy to demonstrate just how aware I am.” He kissed one corner of her mouth, then the other, then pulled away before kissing her properly. Jemma barely kept herself from whining.

“No fair,” she complained and pulled him towards her, slanting her mouth against his with a sigh. When she finally pulled away, his cravat was half undone and he had that dazed look on his face again. Jemma decided that it was the time to pounce. “So, if that rumor was half true, what other ones are true?”

“Quite a few,” Fitz muttered, starting to blush. “Which ones have you heard?”

“Tying up Lady Douglas with silk ropes and having your wicked way with her?” Jemma tilted her head and grinned mischievously at him. Seeing Fitz flustered was even more delightful now.

“True, although that was entirely by the lady’s own request. She even provided the ropes.”

“You are awfully fond of being bossy,” Jemma paused for a moment, considering what else to ask him. “What about the seduction in a moving carriage?”

“True,” he admitted and winced at the memory. “Not exactly comfortable.”

“In a rowboat?”

“True.”

“In the billiards room?”

“Also true.”

“In the middle of an opera?”

“Once again, true,” Still blushing, he shifted from foot to foot. “But I’m done with all of that, Jemma, if that’s what you want. We’ll do as much as you want, wherever you want, in as proper a location as you want.”

“Who ever said I was interested in being proper?” she said, grinning at him, and slid her hands up his chest to undo his cravat and toss it to the floor.

“Minx,” he groaned. “You’re going to be the death of me, you know.” As he spoke, he scooped her up and carried her over to the window seat, settling her on his lap in a swirl of skirts. “And there’s only one solution for that.”
“Oh really?”

“Clearly, I’m going to have to kiss you for the entire afternoon. Nothing else that I can do in the face of your feminine wiles,” he informed her.

“So why are you still--” Fitz finally cut her off with a kiss and she nearly purred with satisfaction, letting him press her back against the window and slipping one hand around his waist to tug a handful of his shirt out of his trousers. Jemma quite liked the look of a disheveled Fitz, she decided, and she promptly dedicated herself to achieving that goal.

In the corner of her eye, Jemma saw the library doors swing open behind them as a maid with a feather duster entered, promptly dropped her duster in surprise, punched the air delightedly, and backed into the hallway, beaming at Fitz and Jemma all the way. The news would be all over the house by teatime, Jemma reflected, and yet as Fitz kissed her again, she couldn’t bring herself to care at all.

“Jemma, you need to come right now!” Fitz shouted two weeks later, bracing himself against a table in their lab.

“I’m trying my best,” she hissed. “You could help me, you know.”

“I happen to be rather occupied at the moment. Just hurry up before something explodes.”

“The S.P.Y.D.E.R.S. aren’t going to explode, Fitz. The new chemical that I added to their fluid should take care of the steam problem. Have you conducted any tests or are you just standing there staring at them in fear?” Jemma picked her way across the lab and cursed her heavy skirts for the twentieth time that week.

They’d finally managed to make the S.P.Y.D.E.R.S. retain what they recorded and now all that was to left was to make them look more like ordinary spiders. The devices may have been able to brew a nice cup of Darjeeling with the steam they emitted, but any household spider spitting steam would surely make the Order suspect something. Jemma stooped down to examine one of the S.P.Y.D.E.R.S. and squinted at its shell. It didn’t appear to be steaming any longer...She waited five minutes, then another five for good measure, and the S.P.Y.D.E.R. continued to look perfectly ordinary. Black, fuzzy, and sure to pass under the notice of any members of the Order of the Octopus, unless they happened to be extraordinarily arachnophobic. “It worked!” she exclaimed, turning to face Fitz, who was still clinging to the table like a life raft. “I told you that it would. We should be able to send them off to Coulson tomorrow.”

“Have I ever told you that you’re brilliant? When you’re not in danger of blowing things up?” He slowly relaxed his grip on the table and stepped forward to wrap an arm around her waist

“Not today,” she said and stretched up to press her lips to that one spot on his neck that made him hiss, feeling his pulse accelerate as she worked her way up his neck and along his jawline. In the past few days, she’d discovered that she loved making Fitz wait, seeing him screw his eyes shut and concentrate on breathing, hands clenched at his sides as he waited for the right moment to touch her. His breathing would get more and more uneven as she went on, his chest rising and falling rapidly, then he’d start making low noises in the back of his throat and letting his hands skim over her, and finally he’d decide that he couldn’t wait one minute longer and kiss her like she was food and he was starving. His mouth would come down on hers, his tongue parting her lips, and his hands would...Fitz groaned, bringing her back to the present, and she realized that she’d stopped kissing him.

“Come back,” he murmured. “Where do you go when you drift off like that?”

“With you, of course,” she whispered against his skin and settled her lips on his. It began slowly, soft
sighs of kisses with just the slightest hint of tongue and teeth. Then, feeling bold, she nipped at his bottom lip and flicked her tongue over the bite, and his reaction was everything she’d hoped for. It was like flicking a switch, she thought idly, as she felt him gasp against her mouth and lift her up to settle her on the table, letting her legs wrap around his hips as best as they could with her skirts in the way. She’d spent the past two weeks mapping him out, learning how he’d sigh at the press of her mouth and hands in one spot and practically growl at another, and she thought that Leopold Fitz was the most fascinating creature she’d ever had the chance to analyze.

His heat seeped into her through their clothes as she pressed herself more tightly against him, angles and curves tangled as close together as they could be. His hands in her hair (he’d pulled all the pins out, per usual), her hands yanking at his shirt and in his curls, her chest pressed to his, his lips everywhere they could reach, and not for the first time, Jemma cursed her cumbersome dresses.

“You wear too many layers,” he grumbled, brushing aside the lace at her neck to suck at her pulse point and practically growling when the stiff lace scratched across his cheek.

“My thoughts exactly,” she whispered. “Want to take some of them off?”

“Jemma,” he pulled away then, just to look at her, and let his hands slide down to rest on her hips. “You’re sure?”

“Not that, not yet...You said that there were other things we could do--I’d like to find out what those are. In the name of scientific experimentation,” she took a deep breath and, feeling quite daring, went on. “We can even make it a game--one piece of my clothing for one piece of yours?” After a long pause, Fitz simply nodded, leaned forward to kiss her once more, and undid his cravat, letting it drop to the floor. “Cheat,” she teased and kicked off her low-heeled shoes.

“Not a cheat,” he replied and began to unbutton his cuffs and waistcoat, so slowly and deliberately that Jemma wanted to scream. Three minutes ago, he’d barely been able to breathe, pressed against her, and now he was flicking the buttons on his cuffs open like they had all the time in the world. Two could play at this game, she decided, and, narrowing her eyes at him, she left her hands drift upward to the long row of black buttons that marched down her bodice. She undid one, then another, and Fitz’s hands fumbled over his own buttons.

“Go on,” she said and arched an eyebrow at him. “Unless you need me to come and help you?”

“Tempting...very, very tempting,” Fitz shrugged his waistcoat off over his shoulders, letting it drop to the floor alongside his cravat, and took a longer look at her dress. “But I think you might be the one who needs help.”

“Nonsense.” Her hands may have stumbled a little on the buttons, but she met his eyes all the way through. Her bodice dropped to the floor, followed by his shirt and her full skirt and corset cover. She stepped forward to rest her palms against his chest, tracing the lines of the muscles there with the tips of her fingers, and he pressed kisses to her hands when she was done. “Can you...” she gestured to the laces in the back and to the fastenings of her layers of petticoats. He’d undone her corset once before, by the lake, but this time his hands lingered over every lace as he leaned forward to press an open-mouthed kiss to the back of her neck, scraping against her skin with his teeth and making her shiver. Jemma let herself go boneless against him and tipped her head back so he could kiss more of her neck, sighing in happiness.

It was easier for them to talk without words sometimes, she thought, not because she didn’t know how she felt (she thought), but because she didn’t know what the right words were. So instead she could sigh and gasp how much she cared against his skin and his hands would say the same right back to her. And right then, as he undid the final fastenings and spun her to face him, she had to
catch her breath at the look in his eyes.

“You’re beautiful, Jemma,” he breathed. “I know that you don’t always think you are, but please God, believe me. You’re beautiful and some days I look at you and I can’t even think straight. Will you believe that?” She didn’t reply, just pulled him to her and kissed him until they were both dizzy with it. “Was that a yes?” he gasped out, smiling impossibly wide at her.

“Maybe,” she said and smiled even wider back.

“So, since telling you didn’t work.” Fitz brushed her hair aside to kiss her throat. “I guess that I’ll just have to.” Another line of kisses along her shoulders. “Show you.” His mouth moved down to close over one breast, his hands moving even lower, searing her through the thin fabric of her chemise. “You wear too many clothes,” he said, grinning wickedly up at her.

“That’s not--ahhh--not my…not my…” There was something she was going to say, if only could remember what it was. And then he was tugging the last scraps of fabric over her head and every move his hands made felt like it would be stamped on her forever and she thought that she wouldn’t mind that at all. He sucked at one nipple and she actually whimpered, letting her body fall back against the table.

“You might want to lie down for what’s going to happen next,” he whispered, sliding down to kiss down her stomach and kneel before her. “It’s going to be awfully hard to stand before I’m done.”

“I--I can stand,” she managed, sensing the challenge in his voice.

He kissed the soft skin of her inner thigh, moved to the left, licked.

She didn’t stay standing for much longer.
“You didn’t!” Skye exclaimed, arm linked in Jemma’s as they strolled through the small park.

“Shhh,” Jemma hissed, glancing around. They’d chosen this particular park for its tendency to be deserted during the summer months, and for the distinct lack of hedges for people to hide behind and eavesdrop. “As a matter of fact, we did. In the lab.”

“You do realize that you’ve now rendered me incapable of looking at any table in that room without being mentally scarred?” Skye teased. “But really, congratulations on your debauchery and ravishment. Is congratulations the sort of thing that you say upon occasions like these? My etiquette book didn’t cover it. I can’t imagine why.”

“You can congratulate me if you like, though you might like to save them for when we...when I’ve been thoroughly debauched. Order a cake to be sent to the house, send a card,” Jemma said lightly. “Now I’m giving you ideas, aren’t I?”

“Like I didn’t already have them. But, tell me, what was it like?” Skye lowered her voice, suddenly stopping on the path to turn to face Jemma and leaned forward eagerly, practically bouncing on the balls of her feet.

“It was wonderful,” Jemma sighed. Skye leaned even further forward, expecting more, and finally reeled backward, pouting and disappointed, when Jemma stayed silent.

“For science, Jemma. Won’t you tell me more for the sake of science?” Skye implored, then switched to a different tactic. “You are older and wiser, and therefore it’s your duty to educate me.” Jemma was about to give in and say more when two men burst in through the gate of the park, pulling swords out of their canes and heading straight for Skye and Jemma.

“They’re not even trying to be subtle about it,” Jemma muttered. “How very impolite of them.”

“Never mind politeness! Run!” Skye grabbed her arm and they bolted off the path for the nearest gate. But their layers of skirts tangled around their ankles and slowed them down, and when Jemma glanced back, she could see the two men rapidly gaining on them. She kicked off her boots and reached down to grab them, reasoning that she could use the heel as a weapon if it came to that. The men were close enough that she could glimpse the silver octopus on the hilt of one man’s sword cane—subtlety really wasn’t the Order’s strong suit, was it? Finally, the two girls turned to face the men, Skye holding her parasol in front of them like a shield.

“That lacy thing’s not going to do anything, milady,” one of the men sneered. “No father or husband to save you here.”

“Who said I needed anyone to save me?” Skye flipped a switch on the parasol and a wickedly sharp spike slid out. She lunged at the man who had threatened her almost immediately, slicing into his arm with the spike as he attempted to duck, and withdrew a small dagger from her reticule as she attacked again. Skye settled down into a low fighting crouch and they warily circled each other, the Order member looking at the parasol with a great deal more of fear. The other man tried to grab Jemma, evidently thinking her a weaker target, but Jemma dodged him, whirling away and hearing something rip as the hem of her dress caught under his boot.

She brandished the shoe in front of her and swung it at the man’s head. It only grazed alongside his temple but Jemma was nothing if not determined. She tried to remember what May had taught her, in one of the brief training sessions that the older woman had insisted on. Go for the sensitive areas:
eyes, nose, groin, kneecaps, shins. The man grabbed for her again, going for her arms and attempting to bind them together with a cord from his pocket, and she headbutted him as she kicked at his kneecap. There was a crunch that sounded like bone, the man grabbed at his nose, now gushing blood, and swore, and Jemma grinned in triumph. She swung her shoe at his head again and he went down, unconscious.

She glanced over at Skye, who had managed to reduce the other Order member to a quivering heap on the ground, and the other girl simply jerked her head towards the gate. Then the second wave arrived, at least five more men pouring through the gate. Skye flipped another switch on her parasol and it started to emit a noxious yellow mist. “Where did you get that?” Jemma shouted.

“Fitz made it for me, of course. About a year ago.” Skye spun the parasol around and Jemma realized that the fabric of the parasol was reinforced with steel. “I promised my father that I’d take it everywhere I went. Unfortunately, he wouldn’t let Fitz see if he could make it fly, and I forgot my supply of tranquilizing darts, so I think we’re going to have some trouble getting out of this.”

“Luckily, I brought extras.” A blond woman dropped from the sky in front of them and Jemma briefly wondered if she was an angel. “Bobbi Morse, agent of the Initiative, lady of the realm, and about to abandon my cover in order to help you save yourselves.”

“We’re very grateful,” Jemma whispered, eyes wide in awe. Miss Morse had literally descended from the heavens (or from a miniature airship painted grey to camouflage itself with the London sky, Jemma saw when she glanced up), wearing black combat gear that looked wonderfully comfortable, and was currently flipping two nunchucks in a menacing way. She had to restrain the urge to start taking notes on how to achieve that particular level of awe-inspiring elegance and intimidation. She could have at least two case studies, with Miss Morse and Melinda May, and perhaps she could even look at Skye, as an example of passing their knowledge forward...Jemma was already plotting out the data points when Skye poked her and she remembered that she was supposed to be defending herself. She raised her trusty shoe, Skye hit a button that made the spike extend even further, and Miss Morse ran forward into the fray. Two members of the Order hit the ground before they even saw her coming.

Miss Morse shouted orders, telling Skye and Jemma to stand back to back, and she dove into the fight, attacking the first wave of Order members. Anyone who managed to slip by was left for Skye and Jemma to deal with, as they exhausted the parasol’s arsenal and made good use of Jemma’s boots. Finally, over a dozen men lay unconscious around Miss Morse and, as she rose with a perfectly timed hair flip, she didn’t even appear to have broken a sweat. Jemma’s jaw nearly dropped with the force of how impressed she was.

She peppered Miss Morse with questions all through the carriage ride back to Hamilton House, asking about her training, her background, how she knew which move to use next in a fight, and Miss Morse-- “call me Bobbi”—answered each one with aplomb. By the time they arrived at the house, Jemma had invited her in for tea and, although Miss M--Bobbi had needed to report to Coulson and had regretfully declined, she had promised to return the following day. Somewhere in the back of her head, she sensed that she was still slightly terrified from what had happened, from the fact that the Order had apparently put both her and Skye on their list of targets, but she couldn’t let herself think about whether they might try to kidnap her again, or how, or when it could be happen. Instead, she refocused her energy into scientific experiments, and questionings, and new friendship, and when she entered the hall of Hamilton House, she was very nearly calm.

Then Fitz came catapulting down the stairs. “Jemma, you were supposed to be back ages ago! What happened to you?” He stopped stock-still on the bottom stair, cataloging her falling-down hair, her blood-streaked and hopelessly ripped gown, and her stocking feet, and then he closed the rest of the
distance between them to sweep her up and hold her tight.

“It was the Order,” she said into his shoulder. “They came after me and Skye in the park. I’m fine, don’t worry. We were able to fight the first few off and then Bobbi came to dispatch the rest. Her cover’s broken now, so I suppose that’ll be a problem to be addressed at the next--”

“The rest? How many did they send?” He was stroking her hair with one hand, but she could feel the other clenched into a fist where it rested on her hip.

“About a dozen, I think. It was all so surreal, I don’t remember as much as I should. I’m sure I’ll remember more later, when Lord Coulson wants my account of what happened. It was just so strange, really,” she mused. “I suppose that they thought kidnapping me would give them leverage over you?”

“Yes, it appears that they did.” Fitz drew away from her, mouth pulled tight and hands curled at his sides, fury building in his eyes. “Would you excuse me for a minute, Jemma? And tell me, which of our wedding presents did you like the least?”

“Those awful yellow vases, I would say. Why…” The question died in her throat as Fitz strode into the next room. An enormous crash followed, then another, then the sounds of something shattering into a million tiny pieces and a long string of Scottish curses. Jemma’s mouth dropped open in a silent O. She’d met airship pilots who would have blushed at some of those words. When Fitz reemerged, there was blood smeared across his knuckles and he was breathing heavily, his waistcoat half unbuttoned and his hair sticking straight up.

Half of Jemma wanted to bandage up his hand and the other half wanted to kiss him. So, of course, she kissed him, hard and fast and all at once, her hands sliding up his chest to unbutton the rest of his waistcoat before they settled in his hair to hold him properly in place. She licked and bit and stole his breath from his throat and when she finally pulled away, she found that she couldn’t go far. “I’m all right, you know,” she whispered into his mouth. “I know you are. But you could have been kidnapped or hurt or even worse,” His hands crept around her waist to hold her more tightly against him and skimmed up and down, checking for bruises. “And the thought of that terrifies me and makes me furious all at once. I’m sorry about the vases--I just…” He kissed her again, mouth warm and firm on hers, and pulled the final few pins out of her hair as he deepened their kiss, letting it fall like a shield around them. They were both struggling to breathe when he pulled away.

“I know. I told you that I never liked those vases anyway,” she said, brushing her lips over his cheek, then his jaw, then his neck, before stretching back up to kiss his mouth again. She went to work on the buttons of his shirt and let her hands slide across his stomach, simply needing to touch him and finding that the more she did, the more she wanted. The adrenaline from the fight was still running in her veins, she realized, making her heart beat faster, her breathing speed up, and her hands pull more urgently at his shirt. It was some kind of physical reaction, one whose name was rapidly escaping her mind as Fitz kissed her more urgently, nipping at her mouth.

Fitz tugged at her dress with equal enthusiasm, sending buttons flying across the room with a series of tiny pops, and as she heard something rip, Jemma reasoned that the dress was half ruined already and simply shoved his shirt off his shoulders without undoing the last button. The button came pinging off and the shirt split along the seams and Jemma grinned. Now something of his was ripped too.

They stumbled into a wall, still kissing, and she let Fitz lift her up against it and slide his hands up her thighs as she rolled her hips against his. She attacked his trousers, scowling at the buttons, and he drew back with a gasp when she slipped her hand inside. “You’re sure, Jemma?” he whispered,
voice rough.

“Surer than I’ve ever been. After what happened today, I...I don’t want to leave anything undone,” she replied firmly and let out a squeak when he suddenly lifted her off the wall and began to carry her up the stairs, continuing to press kisses to her neck. “What are you doing?”

“I can’t very well ravish my wife for the first time in the hallway, can I?”

“But the bedroom’s so far,” She pouted up at him.

“I promise you, I’ll make the time fly by.” And, leaning down to kiss her like there was nothing else in the world he’d rather do (and somehow managing not to trip) he did.
Afterwards, she curled herself around him, resting her head on his chest and reaching up to kiss him sleepily, and he looked at her like he’d never seen anything so wonderful. He twisted his fingers through her hair and pulled her on top of him, murmuring her praise against her lips, and Jemma thought she might die from happiness. “Have I ever told you how much I like your hair down?” he asked absently.

“No, but, considering that you pull all my pins out first thing, I can hypothesize that you do,” she teased, nuzzling into the curve of his neck and making him laugh uncontrollably as she found yet another ticklish spot.

“I do, I do very much. I used to look at you with your hair down and imagine that it looked a little like you might look in bed. Of course, now I know that the reality is much better,” he said smugly.

“I’m a fast learner,” she whispered and nipped at his ear. Then her competitive side kicked in and she propped herself up over him, fixing him with her best penetrating glare. “So, tell me, how do I compare?”

“There is no comparison,” he said simply.

“But I don’t know any complicated tricks and I’m not very flexible and I--”

“But you’re you, and that makes all the difference. Jemma, I...I...” He sighed and kissed her instead of finishing his sentence. “So you liked it? It didn’t hurt too much?”

“It hurt a little at first, mostly because it was so strange, I think,” she admitted. “But after it stopped hurting, it was wonderful. And I think, for the sake of science,” she said and moved to straddle him properly. “We should try again,” A kiss on his shoulder. “To see if everything I’ve been told about the second time being better than the first is true.” Another kiss.

“If it’s for science, how can I possibly say no?” Fitz suddenly flipped her over, pinning her beneath him and making her giggle, and as he worked his way over her body, he pulled the sheets up over them, blocking out the outside world until it narrowed down to him and her and the afternoon sunlight streaming through the white sheets onto them, dazzling her eyes and turning the whole world into blazing light.

When Jemma woke up next, she reached for Fitz only to find a crumpled piece of paper resting on the pillow beside her head, her name scrawled across the front.

_Jemma_, it read

_I am so, so sorry. They threatened you again and I had no choice but to go with them. Please stay strong while I am gone and be brave. Even if our fears are of something as small as a spider, they will master us if we let them. I love you. (I couldn’t tell you so please, like always, let me show you.) --Fitz_

Jemma did what any sensible woman would do upon learning that her husband had been kidnapped by the forces of evil: she rang for the butler. He appeared almost instantly, barely batting an eye at the fact that she was wrapped in sheets, and politely asked her what she required. “Contact the Lady Skye, Miss Morse, Miss May, and Lord Coulson immediately. Tell them that it’s an emergency,” she said, hoping that she managed to look commanding in a sheet.

By the time the Initiative arrived, Jemma had dressed, retrieved a full array of weapons from the
armory hidden down the secret passageway located behind the tapestry portraying the first Duke’s
defeat of an English force, pinned a giant map of London to the wall and circled seventeen different
potential locations for the Order’s headquarters, screamed in frustration only twice, and ordered tea.
Finally, she had to sink down on the sofa, out of things to do, and list off all the periodic elements to
keep herself from imagining each and every thing that the Order might be doing to Fitz, and what she
would do to them once she caught up with them.

Skye arrived first, stopping stock-still in the doorway at the sight of Jemma’s pale face and trembling
hands, and knew what had happened before Jemma said a word. “When did they take him?” she
asked quietly, going to sit by Jemma on the sofa.

“It can’t have been more than an hour or two, but I’m not sure. When I fell asleep, he was there and
then when I woke up, he was gone—he left a note, if you’d like to see it,” Jemma offered and folded
her hands in her lap to keep them from shaking more. “I believe that the Order may have planted
someone in the house, who let them in and gave them the opportunity to…to coerce Fitz into going
with them.”

“We’ll send for the staff to see if anyone’s missing,” Lord Coulson said from the doorway and came
into the room to give Jemma an awkward sideways hug. May was half a step behind, quietly
nodding at Jemma and giving the map pinned to the wall an assessing glare. Jemma found her calm
(and the curved sword slung through her belt) strangely reassuring. “I promise you that we’ll get him
back, Jemma,” Coulson added. “I’m so sorry that we didn’t catch this threat before.”

“I know that we will. No one kidnaps my husband and gets away with it.” Jemma lifted her chin a
little higher and tried to summon up the dignity of a duchess. “I would have gone after him myself if
you hadn’t arrived as soon as you did.”

“I don’t doubt it,” May muttered, then turned to Jemma and Skye. “Trip’s down in the kitchens
questioning the staff. Everyone likes him so, if we’re lucky, the mole won’t catch on to what he’s
doing before it’s too late.”

“Trip’s here?” Skye half rose from her seat. Lord Coulson cleared his throat, loudly. Skye ignored
him and took a step towards the door. Lord Coulson cleared his throat once again, even more loudly.
“Can I fetch you a cup of tea, Papa? Your throat sounds awfully dry,” Skye said innocently, giving
him a winning smile.

“You can stay right here. And you’ll stay right here until Lord Triplett and I have a very serious talk.
One that involves words like intentions and respectability and boundaries and—”

“Don’t get married, Skye,” Hunter materialized, already leaning against the doorway and in his usual
permanent sulk. The scowl seemed to be even deeper than usual, and Jemma was willing to bet that he’d
already heard that Bobbi was back. Then she noticed the book of poetry sticking out of his
pocket and she was even more willing to bet that he’d already argued with Bobbi, and promptly
begged her to take him back a minute later. She’d read the testimonies in the Hunter case, just like
everyone else. “Run off and live in sin until someone drags you back and drags you before the priest.
Then you can argue that you were seduced by witchcraft, and the priest will tell you that no one even
believes in—”

“While we’ve been bantering, Fitz remains in the clutches of evil,” Jemma interrupted dryly. “We
can talk about Skye’s honor once we’ve rescued him, yes?” She looked around the room, giving
each and every person what she hoped was an intimidating glare, and waited until they nodded in
acquiescence. “Good. Now the key thing to do is to locate the Order’s headquarters.” She crossed to
the map and tapped on it with a long pointer. “I assume that they’ve taken Fitz there, to force him to
fix the prototype that they stole a month ago. I’ve marked seventeen different locations where he
“Jemma, are you sure that Fitz wrote this note?” Skye asked, frowning down at the paper Jemma had handed her earlier. “This one sentence doesn’t sound like him--the bit about fears and spiders. I thought that you loved all kinds of creepy crawly things?”

“No, I’m not afraid of spiders at all. I don’t know why he mentioned them…” If anything, he was the one afraid of spiders. He’d screamed like a small child when one had crawled onto their workbench in the midst of recalibrating the S.P.Y.D.E.R.S.’ sensors. The S.P.Y.D.E.R.S….It hit her then. “Fitz must have taken one of the S.P.Y.D.E.R.S. with him,” she breathed. “If he’s managed to switch it on and release it, we might be able to eavesdrop on the Order from within their headquarters.”

“And they’ll conveniently mention their fashionable Mayfair address?” Hunter grumbled from his prime lurking position by the door.

“If you’re not going to be helpful, you can go bring the S.P.Y.D.E.R.S. downstairs. They’re in the second red leather trunk to the left, they’re heavy, and you have muscles.” Hunter showed no signs of moving and Jemma crossed her arms across her chest, foot tapping against the floor. “I know at least eight ways of making you move, four of which include neurotoxins, one of which requires a rather nasty method of hypnotism, one of which involves electric shocks, and two of which exploit your long-standing fear of small fluffy creatures. Want to find out which one I’d try first?” Hunter was out of the room before the end of her sentence and everyone else in the room stared at her with a mixture of fear and awe.

“You went straight for the small fluffy creatures. How unladylike,” Skye remarked, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

“Unladylike is what will get Fitz back. Any news from Trip?” Jemma replied. As if they’d summoned him, that was when Trip burst through the doorway, dragging a rumpled-looking footman behind him with a triumphant look on his face. “Is that the Order’s informant?” she asked.

“I’m sorry, milady,” the footman stammered. “I didn’t know that they would kidnap the Duke--I thought that they’d steal one of those gadgets the Duke is always working on. Not that that’s all right,” he hastily added at a cough from the butler, who’d followed Trip up the stairs. “They told me that there was a nice sum in it for me and they didn’t seem that evil and so I--”

“Did they ever tell you to meet them anywhere? Take you anywhere that looked like a command center?” Jemma said sharply.

“No, milady. They approached me for the first time outside the house and after that, we just met in the park down the street. Sometimes I would leave reports in a knothole in an old oak tree?” the footman offered hopefully.

“Too low in the Order’s hierarchy to know anything useful, then,” Jemma muttered to herself, then turned to face the footman. “You can pack your things and go. If my husband is alive and unharmed when I get him back, I’ll even think about having the butler write you a half-decent reference.” The footman scuttled out the door and there was a series of heavy thumps down the stairs as the butler followed closely behind him to see him out. Another heavy thump followed, accompanied by a low grumble, and Lance came into sight with the trunk, carrying it on his back and looking rather unhappy about it.

He set it down in the middle of the parlor but Jemma shooed him away before he could start undoing the locks and straps. She and Fitz had keyed the locks on the trunk to their voice patterns and
fingerprints, with nasty consequences for anyone else who attempted to unlock it. (She was fairly sure that a first attempt only merited the lock burning the person touching it. It got worse if anyone went on.) So she carefully pressed her hand and spoke her name into the keyhole, and the trunk swung open, revealing six S.P.Y.D.E.R.S. and an empty space where the seventh, and smallest, should have been. “Quick, we need to wind them all up and connect them. Everyone that can should start unwinding the cables and wires.” Jemma carefully lifted each one out and arranged them on the carpet.

Each S.P.Y.D.E.R. had its own key and Jemma carefully wound each one, sighing in relief when she saw the gears begin to whir silently. Skye brought over the cables from the unwinding assembly line that May had organized and they slowly began to click each piece into place. A half hour later, after several false starts and five cups of tea, the devices were all connected and Jemma reached over to flip the final switch, the one that would (in theory) allow each S.P.Y.D.E.R. to transmit information to the others. Everyone fell silent as she did, crouching close to the devices to see if they could hear anything. A minute passed, then two, and Skye was reaching over for Jemma with a sympathetic look when a hissing sound issued from one of the S.P.Y.D.E.R.S. Everyone exclaimed in excitement, then fell silent when Jemma hushed them, and leaned even closer. Trip got hopelessly tangled in Skye’s skirts, Lord Coulson nearly toppled over, and May went into some kind of yoga pose. An unfamiliar voice emitted from the S.P.Y.D.E.R.S., faint and tinny, and Jemma made a note to work on the volume if--when--Fitz came back.

“It’s your prototype, Your Dukeness,” The voice evidently thought that it had said something quite clever. “You should know how to get it working.”

“Well, it’s a flawed prototype. I couldn’t even make it work before, when I wasn’t being held against my will in a most unfashionable part of town and denied tea--what makes you think I can make it work now?” That was Fitz, using the special exasperated voice he reserved for the particularly thick.

“It’s unfashionable. Start crossing out areas of the map,” Jemma hissed and Trip went to work.

“Do I need to remind you that we have people watching your wife?” A third voice, cold and clipped.

“I’m well aware of that,” Fitz sighed, the sound hissing through the speakers. “If you get me proper supplies, I’ll see what I can do.”

“Jemma, give me the control pad,” Skye demanded. “I think I might be able to determine their location if they keep on talking.” Fitz’s voice was reeling off a long list of tools as Skye’s hands flew frantically over the keys of the control pad and Jemma paced the length of the parlor. What if Skye couldn’t do anything? Or what if the S.P.Y.D.E.R. stopped working before she could? And Fitz remained trapped in an-- “Just a few moments longer...yes, keep on talking...talk to me some more...almost there. Found it!” Skye exclaimed triumphantly. “That really is an unfashionable address. I was barely aware it could even be an address.”

“Where is it, Skye?” Coulson finally asked.

“The Order’s secret hideout appears to be buried underneath Hampstead Heath,” Skye said. “They’re practically in the suburbs.”

“Well then,” Jemma took a deep breath. “Let’s storm the suburbs.”
Revenge and Rescues

They were armed and ready just before midnight. Coulson would remain behind at Hamilton House to run mission control and handle the situation diplomatically if anything went wrong, his protests silenced after Skye and May brought up his war injuries. May and Skye would be leading the main strike force, with Hunter as backup, and distract the Order, hopefully destroying most of their headquarters along the way, while Jemma, Bobbi, and Trip slipped in through the back entrance and grabbed Fitz. “We can kill eight birds with one stone,” May said with a quiet smile and it took them all a minute to realize that she’d made a joke.

“Are we bringing the S.P.Y.D.E.R.S. along with us?” Bobbi asked, buckling on her tactical gear. “They seem a little delicate to bring into the field.”

“They’re tougher than they look. Like their creators,” Jemma added quietly. “I’d like to bring one or two of them, to plant on important members of the Order and track them if anyone gets away. The S.P.Y.D.E.R.S. should also react when they get close to each other, so hopefully that’ll give us a clue as to where they’re hiding Fitz. Was Skye able to find any kind of blueprints?”

“Unfortunately, no,” Trip called from where he was standing by Skye’s shoulder, watching her glare at files with an adoring look on his face. “Apparently, one isn’t required to register with the municipal authority when building evil lairs.”

“I can’t imagine why,” Hunter grumbled as he strapped an assortment of spiky weapons to his body. He’d taken a particular liking to the medieval morning star that the second Duke of Hamilton had once slaughtered an entire herd of sheep with during a drunken spree, despite the rust flaking off one or two of the spikes.

“Aren’t you just a ray of sunshine,” Bobbi said sweetly. Hunter was about to reply, working his mouth into one of his signature scowls, when May simply glared at him and his mouth shut with an audible snap.

In their corner, Skye and Trip could barely keep themselves from laughing, and Jemma had to remind herself that they were, in fact, a group of highly trained operatives who knew what they were doing.

They set out for Hampstead Heath in the steam carriages, May, Skye, and Hunter strategizing and arming themselves in one while Bobbi tried to give Jemma a crash course on the art of being covert and Trip experimented with different ways of carrying the spare S.P.Y.D.E.R.S. underneath his protective gear. They’d agreed that Jemma would be holding one, to see if it could help them find Fitz, if he’d kept the S.P.Y.D.E.R. with him and not sent it off to do surveillance, if they really did shoot out false spider silk when they got close to each other, if--Jemma forced herself to take a deep breath and listen to Bobbi.

“Trip will have our backs, and I’ll be going in front to pick off any guards that they might have lurking around,” Bobbi said calmly. “All you have to do is focus on finding where Fitz is, and we’ll help you get him out. Even if you do run into any nefarious Order members, I know that you’re capable of dealing with them. I remember spotting at least one of them skulking around with a severely broken nose when I arrived.”

“A good knowledge of anatomy has its advantages,” Jemma shrugged and buried her hands in her divided skirts. Skye had loaned her a pair for the mission, insisting that it would help her move more easily, and she was considering never giving them back. Really, it was ridiculous that women’s clothing rendered them unable to move quickly, and quite unfair that men got to wear trousers with convenient buttons--she was even rambling inside her head now, which meant things were truly dire. She groaned and considering burying her face in the upholstery of the carriage, but Bobbi and Trip were already giving her sympathetic looks and she was determined to avoid being the damsel in
They arrived on the heath in the dead of night, the steam carriages barely making a sound, and crept over the terrain looking for irregularities, any odd bumps or breaks in the grass that might indicate an entrance. Luckily, odd bumps were plentiful. Unluckily, they all proved to merely be odd bumps, except for the one ant hill that Hunter managed to overturn and that decided to take their revenge by crawling over his boots as he stood there and mouthed a long string of curses. The grass was all the same color, the next five bumps didn’t have secret trapdoors hidden underneath them, and Skye finally leaned back against a tree in exasperation and gave the heath the kind of look that made seasoned rakes scurry away and curl up into a ball to make themselves smaller. As if in response, the tree slid to the left, nearly taking Skye with it and revealing a series of steps cut into the ground. “Do you think it’s the front or back entrance?” Skye asked as she peered into the hole. “On the one hand, the steps have tiny octopuses carved into them. On the other, those are tiny steps.”

“Whatever it is, we’re going in,” May said, then turned to Jemma, Bobbi, and Trip. “Go in about five minutes after we do and go straight for the lowest levels. That’s where they’re most likely to keep their prisoners.” They nodded in agreement and May started down the steps, Skye following her and Hunter bringing up the rear and twirling the morning star in a menacing fashion. There was a faint yelp from the bottom of the stairs, a thump or two, and then silence. Jemma couldn’t resist peeking down to see two Order guards lying unconscious at the bottom of the staircase.

The next five minutes were the longest of her life. Trip kept time on his watch while Bobbi idly twirled her batons and Jemma paced, wearing a visible path into the heath with her boot heels, until the time was finally up and they ventured down the stairs. Flaming torches lined the walls, illuminating the stone octopuses carved into the walls and the warnings likely graffitied by generations of young Order members. Abandon hope all ye who enter here, and all that kind of nonsense. The octopus theme continued once they arrived at the bottom of the stairs, with an octopus-shaped umbrella stand standing beside an oak calling card table covered with black calling cards. They were meant to indicate which members of the Order were currently in, Jemma supposed, unsuble as the black calling cards may have been. At least, they attempted to keep up common courtesy. She dropped her own on the table as they passed, with a slight modification—instead of her usual name and title, she’d printed Give me back my husband in neat script across the card.

They crept along the corridor, flattening themselves against the wall and hoping that their black clothes blended into the wallpaper, and descended another set of stairs. Voices drifted from a conference room to their right, light spilling out of the corridor from the half-open door, and Jemma glanced over at Trip with alarm in her eyes. “What if they see us?” she mouthed at him.

“My grandfather was one of the leaders of the slave revolutions,” Trip whispered back and held up a round, shiny object. “He taught me a few of his tricks.” Trip rolled the object towards the open door, where the voices were now fiercely debating what to do about the fact that their guards were rapidly disappearing and not coming to any conclusions, and it exploded into a giant cloud of black smoke. Bobbi looked faintly disappointed that she hadn’t gotten to use her batons, Jemma was wondering how to make the smoke bombs even smokier, and for a split second, Trip was the only one heading for the next flight of stairs. Jemma nearly dropped the S.P.Y.D.E.R. trying to catch up, extremely grateful for the fall-proof coating she had insisted on.

Somewhere around the fourth flight of stairs, the S.P.Y.D.E.R. hissed, puffing out steam, shooting out a fine strand of silk, and making Jemma exclaim with delight. “We’re getting closer!” she whispered to Bobbi. “How many flights of stairs does an evil lair need?”

“Too many,” Bobbi replied and casually knocked out the guard stationed at the bottom of the stairs. “It somehow plays out into their plan for world domination. I tried to get a look at the blueprints for
this place once, but they just had octopuses drawn all over them.” As she finished speaking, she took
down another guard with one baton and muttered something about amateurs.

“Why did they decided on octopuses, anyway?” Jemma mused.

“If a head is cut off, two more will take its place. It’s their motto.” Another guard hit the floor.

“But octopuses don’t do that!” Jemma protested, greatly offended. “What kind of evil organization
doesn’t adhere to scientific accuracy?”

“The kind that uses scones for knife throwing practice. Waste of perfectly good afternoon tea,”
Bobbi said. Another pair of Order agents passed, and they all fell silent as Bobbi and Trip sent two
tranquilizer darts flying into the back of the enemy agents’ necks. They had to go down three more
stairs, and pass through a training room filled with top hats, a pitifully small library, and a
laboratory scattered with broken parts, before they reached the bottom floor. A long line of locked
doors stretched down the corridor as far as they could see, each bearing a placard engraved with a
long nonsensical string of letters and numbers.

“If you get the guards, I can start unlocking the doors,” Jemma said and pulled a leather pouch from
the hidden pockets of her skirts. “Fitz and I were working on a very efficient set of lock picks on the
side.” Bobbi and Trip fell upon the guards, who were busy playing an elaborate game of dice and
swigging ale, and Jemma sprinted ahead.

There must be some sort of code to the placards on the
doors, she thought, something that let them know which prisoner was where, especially since no
light filtered in through the barred windows.

She set one steam-powered lock pick in each of the first
three doors and stepped back to survey the codes as the lock picks whirred away, stopping and
starting. Their efficiency wasn’t quite up to par yet, but they should serve to release anyone else the
Order had imprisoned unjustly, if Fitz’s cell didn’t happen to be one of the first ones. One of the
doors sprung open to reveal a rumpled looking man, who snapped to attention rather quickly when
Trip caught sight of him and tossed him a ring of keys from the guard’s belt. “How many are down
here?” Jemma asked him, crossing rapidly to where he stood in front of the cell.

“Only three that I know of. They brought in another man yesterday, but I didn’t get a good look at
where they put him,” the man replied. “They keep all the doors locked to keep us confused as to
who’s where, but we’ve been using Morse code to talk to each other through the walls, so I know
where the other three are at least.”

“Get the others and get out. I can take care of the man from yesterday,” Jemma ordered. The former
prisoner took off for the end of the hallway and started unlocking more doors, shepherding two more
men and a woman towards the stairs. Jemma sighed in relief--she’d expected the Order to be keeping
many more prisoners. (But then, perhaps she shouldn’t have expected so much of an evil
organization that kept its’ members calling cards by the door.)

It took her two minutes to crack the code, a relatively uncomplicated arrangement of last names and
mathematical formulas, and another minute to calculate that the seventh door on the left must be
Fitz’s. She set to work on it almost immediately, picking the lock by hand rather than using the
occasionally temperamental steam lock picks. Jemma had dedicated her entire twelfth summer to
learning how to pick locks and the knack came back to her quickly as the tumblers fell into place
with a series of soft clicks. Finally, finally, the door swung open to reveal Fitz curled in the corner,
clothes rumpled and arm flung across his face.

She sprinted into the room and shook him fiercely, but nothing happened. They might have knocked
him unconscious, she thought with a jolt of panic. He could have hit the stone floor and gotten a
concussion and...she shook him even harder. Nothing continued to happen. She shouted into his ear
and he twitched, then slumped back into sleep. So, whispering an apology in advance, she drew
back her hand and slapped him hard across the face. His eyes flew open and he beamed at the sight of her. “Jemma,” he said hazily. “My Jemma. I knew that you’d--knew that you’d--” His eyes fluttered shut again.

“No, no, no! Fitz!” she shouted. “Stay awake--I need you to stay with me.”

“M’trying, Jemma. They made me drink something, tasted awful.” He wrinkled up his nose. “But I...so sleepy...don’t want.”

“Yes, you do want,” Jemma snapped. “I really don’t want to slap you again, but I will if I have to.”

“M’sorry. I can stand, see,” he struggled to his feet, swaying with his eyes still closed. “I can move...I think...they didn’t bother chaining me up, didn’t think I had any chance of escaping. Ha!” He swayed to one side, and Jemma slipped an arm under his shoulders. He wasn’t that heavy, maybe she could…

“Jemma, do you have Fitz?” Bobbi called from down the hall. “They triggered some kind of alarm and they’re flooding the entire compound. It’s only an inch or so of water so far, but it’s rising rapidly and we need to get out now.”

“I have him!” There was nothing for it. She would have to carry him until the drug was out of his system and he could stand by himself. So Jemma hoisted him over her shoulder and began to wade through the water towards the steps.

Later, she would realize that that was the moment she knew she loved him. Going up endless series of steps, the water swirling around her feet and creeping up her legs, his elbows digging into her back, feeling like the rest of her life would be climbing up stairs and yet when she got to the top, she knew that she would do it all over again if she had to, to get Fitz back.

They left the Order’s headquarters half burned and half flooded and a group of Order members neatly tied up and left for the police behind them. When Coulson received the report from the scene, according to Scotland Yard, the only things left intact had been the calling cards on the table, Jemma’s resting neatly on top. Jemma grinned in triumph when she heard it.

A doctor was waiting at the house for Fitz, but Jemma still insisted on accompanying the entire entourage of doctors and nurses upstairs and watching their every move, ready to pounce if anyone so much as tied a bandage wrong. Skye finally convinced her to change into a dressing gown and nightgown for the rest of the night, promising that she could stay in sight of Fitz as she changed, and she eventually fell asleep in the giant leather wing chair by his bed somewhere around four in the morning, after the doctor announced that Fitz would recover and took his leave.

Jemma woke up to morning light and Fitz saying her name.
“You came to get me,” he said happily, half to himself. “I knew you would.”

“Of course I did,” she mumbled sleepily. “I love you.”

“You love me?” His voice went embarrassingly high as he said it and Jemma jerked awake. “Thank you. I mean--I love you, too. I loved you first, actually, and I thought that you’d never--you love me?”

“I love you. Very, very much.” She went to kneel by the bed, kissing him before he could say anything else. He sighed with satisfaction as she pulled back, and then yelped as she hit him with a pillow. “And that’s for telling me you loved me in a note!”

“I happened to be being kidnapped. It was a bit of a now-or-never situation,” he protested. “I almost said it before but then--anyway, I love you. Come here?” He cupped her face with one hand and kissed her again. “I love you.” Fitz tugged her onto the bed to curl up beside him, extracting one arm from his blankets to go around her waist. “I love you.” Another kiss, biting down gently on her lower lip this time. “I love you.” His hands wove through her hair to pull her closer. “I lo--” She cut him off with a firm kiss and pulled back the blankets to crawl on top of him properly, swinging one leg over to straddle him and watching his eyes widen in surprise.

“I know,” she whispered into his ear. “And I happen to be madly in love with you too, so you’re a very lucky man, Leopold Fitz.”

“I have a hypothesis,” he announced. “It’s that you’re about to seduce your poor, weak husband a day after he was imprisoned in a dank underground lair by the forces of evil.” He looked absolutely delighted about it.

“Former forces of evil,” she corrected absently, tugging at the buttons of his pajama shirt. “And I think that we should test your hypothesis. For science.”

“Science is, er...science is very important.” He nodded eagerly.

“I might also be using my feminine wiles to get a proper honeymoon out of you,” she informed him. “You’ll be so overcome with happiness that you’ll have to take me to Paris for the next month.”

“Paris, then Peru. Monkeys,” he added by way of explanation and reached up to undo the ties of her dressing gown, eyes going even wider when he saw the green nightgown she was wearing underneath it. “I didn’t know that that existed. I’m very happy that I do now.” She just gave him a mischievous grin and leaned down to kiss him, long and deep, as she tugged him up to pull his shirt off his shoulders and send it sailing across the room.

“All the monkeys in the world, I promise,” she said, feeling her heart swell with the promise of everything that was to come. They would have macarons and monkeys and long hours spent blowing things up in the lab and libraries to hide in and days and days to spend in bed together and occasional instances of saving the world on their off days. “So are you ready for the next adventure, Leo?”

“Always, Jemma.”
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