**Coming to Terms**

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**Summary**

AU: What would season two be like if one thing changed?

Five unsaid words change the course of events in ways neither Fitz nor Simmons could predict. Alliances shift, mistakes are made, and both agents will have to figure out how to cope with the fallout. But, at the very least, they have each other.

**Notes**

I use a lot of dialogue from episode 1x22 and season two, so credit goes to the AoS writers for those parts.
"One breath? But there's two of us."

"Yeah, I've done the math," Fitz sighs. "That's why you're taking it; you're a better swimmer, anyway."

Simmons looks back at him, horrified.

"No."

"Jemma."

"No," she repeats, "I'm not leaving you here, that's ridiculous. We need a new plan!"

A small smile plays on her lips, like she thinks it's a joke. Like there's hope for them.

"No, we're not discussing it, okay? You're taking it. End of story."

Jemma's smile fades as her eyes search his.

"I couldn't live if you didn't," he explains.

"Well, I feel the same way. There has to be another way!"

"You're taking it."

"Why-why would you make me do this? You're my best friend in the world!"

She's raising her voice now, half-pleading, half-scolding.

He opens his mouth, and there's a moment when it's all going to spill out, when he's going to finally tell her that she's his everything. But he clamps his mouth shut until it passes.

"Yeah, and I've got a broken arm, Jemma."

He can't look at her now, taking a deep breath and hearing her do the same as the truth sinks in. He doesn't know if hiding his feelings makes him a hero or a coward, but he knows they'll be no use to anyone when he's gone.

"I couldn't find a way to save myself." He looks up and finds her eyes. "So please, let me save you."

She's reaching for him now, wrapping herself around him and sobbing like he's already lost, and soon, he will be.

"It's okay," he says.

"No."

Suddenly her hands are on his face, and she's kissing him, going right to left, and for a second he thinks that it's a miracle, that she's going to save him from the words held hostage in his throat. But when she misses his lips, he knows he was right to keep them secret.

"Jemma, come on, we have to hurry up."
"No. No!"
She's sobbing on his shoulder, and he hates himself for what he's about to do, but he has to do it.
"Take it, Jemma."
"No."
"Take it."
"No!"
"Take it."

When she pulls away from him, her sobs soften, and he knows that she's seeing what he's seeing. She's looking at the same variables, and eventually, she'll have to come to his conclusion.

He reaches back to press the power button, and as the water rushes in to claim him, he spends his last moments taking her in.

"Fitz, can you even hear me?"
Her heart breaks one more time as he looks at her, confused.

"Of, of . . ."
"Of course you can," she finishes, and he nods. "Sorry," she says, remembering herself, "I know I'm supposed to wait for you to ask me for the words."

"It's . . . okay," he assures her, putting his hand over hers.
She smiles at him.

Maybe he can only get a word or two out at a time, but he's here, and he's breathing. These are miracles in themselves, and Jemma won't let herself take it for granted. After nine days of fearing that her best friend would never wake up, and another week terrified that he'd never be the same, she's decided that everything is going to be okay. She's getting her best friend back.

And if she works really hard, it will be like nothing changed at all.
"I was just trying to point out that, despite your frustrations, you're actually progressing quite nicely."

"How . . ." he stammers, "how w-would . . ."
She knows the words he's looking for, but this time, she holds her tongue.

He sputters for a few more moments before looking to her in desperation.

"How would I know?"
Fitz nods.

"Well," Jemma continues, "your primary physician left me some very helpful and detailed instructions for your care, and I took the liberty of creating a projected timetable for your recovery. You're already ahead of schedule. You'll be right as rain in no time."
He smiles at her in a way that makes her doubt that he's really catching on to what she's saying, and
she feels her heart grow heavy with guilt.

"Simmons?"

Jemma turns to the voice that is coming from the doorway to find a very somber Trip.

"They need you in the lab. Some problem with setting up the new equipment."

"Right, of course." Jemma takes a deep breath as she turns back to Fitz, pushing away the guilt that's
still growing. "I'll be right back, okay? And we can work on some speech therapy?"

She squeezes his hand when he nods at her, trying to tell him that this is only temporary, that soon,
he'll be out of this hospital bed and in the lab with her. She looks in his eyes, and thinks that she sees
some understanding beneath the sorrow.

What she doesn't see is the way Fitz's fist tightens around his sheets as he watches Jemma grin at
Trip, then follow him down the hallway.

"So, you're a speech therapist now?" Trip teases.

"Well, I'd like to bring in someone with real expertise, but our resources are quite limited at the
moment." She gives Trip a look. "You should know, seeing as you're his physical therapist."

"Ah, well I guess I'm lucky then, since I only have one new job to pick up. How many are you
working on?"

Jemma sighs. "That's not important."

She catches Trip's sly glance as they arrive at the lab.

"You're not in this alone. You know that, right?"

Trip seems content with the smile and nod she gives him, nodding back before going his own way.
Jemma slaps on an even bigger smile as she enters the lab.

It's later, after Fitz is dreaming and she finally has a moment to herself, that she allows the tears to fall
down her cheeks and drip onto his. She lets her fingers comb through his tight curls just once before
she places a tender kiss on his forehead and goes off to her room to sleep.
The first time Fitz enters the new lab, arm now free from its cast, she has to restrain herself from actually jumping for joy. Just two months ago, he was in a coma, and now? Now he's walking on his own, speaking (almost) complete sentences, and he's been cleared to go back to work. Jemma feels overwhelmed with pride as she recalls the weeks of work they both put in to get him this far.

Of course, her joy fades precisely five minutes later when a frustrated Fitz slams his fist on the workbench in frustration. She's there in an instant, calming him down, telling him that it's going to be alright. It scares her a little when he does this, because he's so irritable these days, but she reminds herself that this is yet another symptom of his injury, and that even at his worst moments, she can still make him smile.

When he's finally settled in, and she's convinced him to do some slow, easy work for his first day, she sees the spark of light in his eyes, and she beams at him.

When Fitz finally walks into the lab on his own two feet, he tells himself that it's supposed to feel like coming home.

And it does, a little. But he knows that has very little to do with this big, unfamiliar place and a lot to do with the way a certain biochemist is smiling at him. So he chokes back his reticence and does what he can to keep her smiling.

As hard as the past two months have been, they've also been filled with her. And maybe he's being selfish, but he's not ready to let go of her just yet. If they were going back to the Bus, that'd be one thing. But this new lab isn't theirs, and he's going to have to learn how to not have her all to himself.

Sometimes he tells himself that if he'd just been braver, if he'd told her how he felt, that maybe she would truly be his. But it only takes him a moment to snap back to reality, to see the way she doesn't look at him, and tell himself that he's beyond lucky just to have her as a friend. He'll have to learn to be content with that.

But now his hand is not working the way it used to, and when he drops a component onto the floor, the frustration overtakes him. He's worked so hard, so hard, and this is supposed to be easy. It used to be easy. And if he hadn't let Ward pull the wool over his eyes, this would still be easy.

When he feels her hands on his shoulders, the anger retreats. She's there with him, still by his side, and that's enough. He takes a deep breath and he listens to the magic in her words, aware of the way they keep the darkness at bay. He can do anything as long as she believes in him, and she does. Ward may have taken away a part of him, but the most important piece was always her.

He follows the doctor's orders, as usual, and settles into a task that he mastered even before he joined SHIELD. But he keeps her words in his head, reminding himself that he's had an injury, and this is all part of the healing process. He has to give his brain time to rewire itself, find new connections.

If only his patience wasn't stuck at the bottom of the sea.
Simmons watches the surface of the tea ripple as she cools it, and when her tongue confirms that it's at just the right temperature, she returns her eyes to the man she hates.

She's been watching him for weeks now, ever since she found out that the man who tried to destroy her life is now living in their basement. She's keeping track of the patterns in his behavior, still trying to puzzle out how he always seems to know exactly what time it is. Soon, she'll figure out why he continues to keep himself in shape, and why he seems to think that he's ever getting out of his cell.

It's true that Fitz's recovery is going well, but somehow it's all getting harder. He's walking, but he's not laughing. He's working, but he's not innovating. As much as she hates to admit it, his recovery is not as far ahead of average as it once was. She's starting to think that the Fitz she knew will never come back. She might never again see the boyish smile, or the awkward enthusiasm, and she's only starting to realize how precious those are to her. And yes, he's alive, and he's healing, but she can no longer escape the fear that there may be a problem that the two of them can't solve.

So, she spends an hour every morning watching and hating Ward over tea. When the tea is gone, and she's completed her log, the tears come. These aren't the tears she cried when she realized that Fitz couldn't swim up to the surface with her, or the tears that came when she first saw Fitz in a hospital bed. These are hot tears, and they contain the rage that she'll have to hide the moment she leaves this room. They're cleansing tears, like a daily baptism, purging all the anger and frustration so she can be free of it for a few more hours.

It's not fair, she knows, that the good man is the one who's struggling. Ward, despite his initial attempts at self-harm, is as healthy as he's ever been. Both men were agents of SHIELD, and both risked their life to save hers. But Ward did it to manipulate her, and Fitz... well, she's still not sure about that one.

Of course, she knows that his arm was broken; Fitz reminds her of the fact whenever she brings it up, and truly, anyone can see the logic behind giving her the last breath. But no matter how many times she goes over it, there's something about it that doesn't quite seem right and she must be missing something. But she's certain that Fitz did what he did, not because it was logical, but because that's what Fitz does. When the water rushed in, and she dragged him up to the surface, she was doing the same. They were two best friends saving each other.

And a friend as good as Fitz, a man as good as Fitz, deserves much, much better than this.

She hears the muted beep of an alarm go off, and she realizes that her tears have dried, and it's time to get on with her day. After all, it's about time for the rest of the Playground to start waking up.

She stops by Fitz's room, as usual, just to see if he's alright. Most days she doesn't knock on the door, because it's easy enough to tell how he's doing by the amount of banging coming from inside. Today, it's also accompanied by a fair amount of cursing.

She knocks softly. "Fitz?"

He opens the door and regards her silently for a moment as he finishes fiddling with his tie.

"How is it that you..." his eyes pinch shut as he searches for the words, "you always show up right when I'm... right when I'm..."

She waits patiently for the signal, relieved when he finally gives it to her.

"At the end of your rope?"

Fitz shrugs. "Close enough."
He gives her a small smile, which she finds contagious, and she shrugs as well.

"Do you need any help?"

"No, I think I've . . . I think I've . . . I'm ready to go."

"You missed a spot," she observes, indicating the small patch of stubble just above the corner of his mouth. Of course, it's not the first time he's had trouble reaching it, nor the first time she's pointed it out.

"I'm still having trouble with . . . with these sh-shaking hands. You want to try?"

The last part comes with a teasing smile.

"I guess not," she admits.

"Right then. Off to the lab?"

"Off to the lab."

(It makes her feel good to be so helpful, and when she's with him, the anger stays away. It comes back, of course, when she's alone, when she's getting ready for bed and going over everything she's done that day, or when she looks at old pictures of them. She feels the heat swell in her heart, crying out that it should have been her, or there should have been another way. If they'd had better materials to work with, if they hadn't been ninety feet deep, if she'd realized what Fitz was planning . . .

If, if, if.)

When they get to the lab, Simmons notices somebody new. Somebody who just happens to be the size of two people.

"The name's Mack," he greets, putting out a hand to shake hers, then Fitz's. Simmons quickly takes in his well-defined muscles and feels her heart start to race. She feels like a school girl.

"I'm one of the new mechanics here. Coulson wanted to see if I could help with the cloaking."

"The cloaking is . . . is coming along just fine, thank you very much," says Fitz. It takes Jemma a second to recognize his tone.

"Oh, you know engineers, how protective they can be of their work," she explains, adding a chuckle. She's about to keep going, but Fitz elbows her.

Mack raises an eyebrow. "Seems like he's not too protective around you."

"Yeah, well, Fitz and I, we've been working together for years. It took me ages to crack this one." She points a thumb at her partner, who does not seem humored.

Neither does Mack.

"I see. In that case, I'd better get back to the garage. But you'll call if you need help?"

Jemma finds herself saying, "Oh yes, we will!" in a rather suggestive tone at the same time Fitz says, "I doubt we'll need any, thanks."

The very moment that Mack is gone, they look at each other, and Jemma can't abide Fitz's glare.
"That's the cloaking technology for the plane," she says, directing him away from herself and towards the projects he's been working on, hoping he won't see her blush. "How's it coming?"

He looks at his models, then back at her, and back at the models again.

"Good," he picks up his notes and thumbs through them, "slower than I'd like; I've hit a few bumps, but it's . . . I'm close. And I don't need him mucking it up."

"Fitz," she soothes, "he's trying to help."

"I know, I know." He puts his notes down. "But I also know how important cloaking is, okay? So, I just need everybody to be . . ." he stops, repeating the last phrase a few times before Jemma chimes in.

"Patient."

"Yes!"

He slams a hand down on the workbench and turns away from her, but she knows better than to take his outburst personally. As he grips the table with two hands, she comes up behind him and puts a hand on each of his shoulders.

"You've got to be patient with yourself, Fitz. You're almost there!"

She makes sure to put extra cheer in her voice to compensate for the doubt that she can't ignore, and how hard it is to see him like this.

"Yeah," he says, reaching up to cover one of her hands with his, "I'm almost there."

"Fitzsimmons?"

Fitz jumps up and away from her when Skye's voice comes from behind them, like they've been caught doing something unseemly. But Skye's just there to give them a message from Coulson, and she's clearly uncomfortable. Once Skye hands off the tablet with their orders, she leaves without a goodbye. Fitz starts to mutter under his breath, and she knows that she'll have to have another talk with Skye about the way she treats Fitz, but for now she tells him that it's okay, that they'll work on this new problem together and solve it in no time.

"It's fine, Jemma," he grumbles, "it's just that Coulson needs cloaking, and I don't have time to waste on other . . . other projects right now."

"Well, if you don't want Mack's help, how about mine?"

She smiles as she offers the compromise, and once again, his frustration fades.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'd like that," he answers.

When she looks through his notes, she immediately recognizes that he's really just having trouble calculating the refractive index of the Bus's hull. It takes her about an hour to help him complete it and present their findings to Coulson.

When the work day is done, Jemma insists on celebrating Fitz's victory, claiming that she has some beer stashed away in her room for an occasion such as this. Fitz basks in the pride in her eyes and the warmth in her smile, allowing it to wash away his sense of failure. Sure, they did crack cloaking, but it wasn't a new discovery, or even an actual invention. This was Fitz struggling for weeks to replicate
someone else's work. Before the pod, he would have been able to finish the project on his own, in much less time. Now, he's practically useless without Jemma.

He feels her tug at his jumper, coaxing him out of the lab, and his negative thoughts vanish once again. He thinks back to the shy boy he used to be before he knew her, and realizes that not much has actually changed. He has always been useless without Jemma Simmons.

They're still on their way to her room, but Fitz is already drunk on her enthusiasm, on the way she goes on and on listing all the things SHIELD can do with cloaking technology. It takes him a while to notice that they're taking a rather strange route, but when they just so happen to pass by the new garage, where Mack just so happens to be working on a car while wearing a tank top, the mystery is solved.

This man, who they just barely met, is standing in what used to be their lab. She should be outraged, not salivating over him. Fitz clenches his fists so tightly that his knuckles turn white.

All this time, he's been trying to get better. For her. But he looks at his own weak arms, comparing them to the gigantic biceps of this nosey newcomer, and realizes one more time that nothing he could do would ever be enough.

He takes a breath in and out as he watches Jemma go up to talk to him, his whole body now shaking with rage at the universe that made him this way.

*It's not fair, it's not fair.*

*It's not fair.*

**Chapter End Notes**

The stubble above Fitz's lip is a shout out to my adorable, wonderful grandpa, who just can't seem to get that one spot since he developed dementia. I figure that he and Fitz dress the same, so . . .
I've been on the fence about the rating for this one, and after looking at the plot points, I've decided to up the rating to T because of Ward and other action sequences similar to that in the show. I just thought I'd mention it because ratings are often upped for ~other~ reasons, and I don't want to set those kinds of expectations for this story. :) It's a pretty cautious T.

"I bet they're shattered by the fact that we cracked the cloaking device," Fitz sneers, sending a suspicious glance at the other scientists.

This is a new side of him that has emerged recently, and Jemma finds it somewhat disturbing. She hoped that helping him finish his project would give him a much-needed boost in confidence, but instead, he's developing a very puzzling us-versus-them mentality.

"Don't be silly, Fitz. Everyone here knows how valuable you are to the team."

She says it softly, in the voice that she's cultivated just for him, but it doesn't have the potency it used to.

"Well, they avoid me like the plague," he snaps, pushing his chair away from him as he walks away from her. She gets up to follow him.

"They do not. They're . . . they just have their own problems right now."

"Oh yeah? What problems?"

She understands that he's not talking about the scientists anymore, and she has to stop herself from telling him about Ward and all the other things that Coulson has ordered her to keep from him.

"Fitz," she admonishes, still collecting her thoughts, "we're in the process of rebuilding a secret organization from scratch. While the world hunts us, by the way. Not an easy task."

"Well, I . . . I . . ." he looks away from her, downcast. "I guess you . . . you have a point . . . there."

"Fitz, you've just made an amazing contribution to our work here. Because of you, we have so many more options for field missions, and they're much safer, by the way."

"Because of us," he corrects, and when she looks at him, he's pinching the bridge of his nose. "Because of what we did."

She shrugs. "Yeah, well I only helped a little. You had most of it done before I even got a look at it."

She hears him sigh.

"That's not the point," he says.
She's not sure what the point is, and she knows better than to ask. Does he regret letting her help him with what boiled down to a math problem? Or is he saying that because she stuck her finger in it, no one will give him any credit?

"No one needs to know that I was involved, if that helps." The words stab her in the heart, but it's better than watching him struggle.

"No, Jemma." He raises his hands to his head, then pulls at his hair. "It's not you. It's not your fault. You're . . . it's them."

"Them," she deadpans.

"Yes!"

She'd do a little more prodding, but she has a feeling that even if he knew what he meant, he wouldn't be able to express it just yet. So, she says some soothing words, and calmly directs him to his next (not as urgent) project. As she watches him settle in, the worry resurfaces, and she decides that there has to be something more she can do. But first, she'll have to figure out what's wrong.

Every time he sees her now, he's imagining her with that mechanic, all starry-eyed, acting like Fitz isn't even there.

He hates himself for snapping at her, though, because it's not her fault, and she deserves better. All of the patience he's had these past few months has been borrowed from her, and she's been so selfless to help him. He wonders if that's the problem after all, if she's started to see him as a patient rather than a friend. He shouldn't let her see him so angry. He should figure out a way to help her, too, to take care of her the way she's done for him.

He lets a breath in and out and vows to change his ways, to do whatever it takes to keep her close. He'd give up all hope of being with her, if it meant that he could at least be her equal again.

He thinks about praying, but it's been so long that he's not sure how.

So he decides, then and there, to make a pact with the universe. If he can be as selfless as she is, and learn to be at peace when Jemma is interested in other men, then the universe will reward him by letting him heal completely.

Hopefully, this time, the universe will play by the rules.

"I know what you're going to say, Simmons, alright?"

Simmons folds her arms expectantly. "And what's that?"

"You're going to say that Fitz is lonely, but he's not. He has you."

Skye rolls her eyes and leans back in her seat, absently stabbing at her lunch with her fork.

"He needs more than just me, Skye. He feels like everyone else is against him."

Skye shoots Simmons a look. "Yeah, well that's not true. It's just . . ." Skye purses her lips, looking towards the ceiling. "He's changed, you know? He's not the same anymore, and when I think of . . . you know, what happened . . ."

"Yes, I do." Simmons feels her fingers clutch around her butter knife. "It happened to me, too."
"That's not what I mean, and you know it. Fitz, he's so angry all the time. At everything. It's like you can't tell what'll set him off next." Skye breathes out what must be a sigh of frustration as she takes a bite of her chicken.

"He's not like that at all! He gets disheartened, of course, from time to time, but that's hardly incomprehensible considering the stress he's under, and how difficult even the simplest of tasks are for him."

Simmons takes a breath, trying to clear out the anger that's starting to boil in her lungs. She looks back at Skye to find that her friend is watching her.

"You really have no idea, do you?"

Simmons does not answer, deciding that she doesn't especially like the insinuating tone of Skye's question.

"No one has told you? Not even Coulson?"

Simmons knits her brow in confusion. "Coulson? Fitz just solved our cloaking problem, so I fail to see why Coulson, or anybody for that matter—"

"He's different when he's with you," Skye interjects.

It takes a moment or two for the words to sink in.

"Excuse me?"

Skye swallows another bite. "You calm him down, make him almost bearable." She shakes a finger at Simmons. "But only almost. When you're not there, he's just a cannon waiting to go off. And May's got me so focused on training that I just, I don't have the energy, you know? I still can't figure out how you handle him."

Simmons takes a breath in and out.

"I don't handle him, Skye," she says, keeping her voice even. "I'm his friend. What if I—"

"So am I!" Skye sets down her fork to pinch the bridge of her nose. "Simmons, you know how much I love Fitz. I just . . . he gets set off, and I don't blame him, of course, but all I can think about is why Fitz is like that. And who made him like that. It's come to the point where every time I see Fitz—"

"All you see is Ward."

"Yeah, exactly. And I just can't handle that right now, okay? If I didn't care about him so much, it wouldn't be this hard."

Simmons forces a smile and a nod, but as the subject shifts to small talk, it occurs to Jemma that Skye's argument is that she loves Fitz too much to be near him, and that hardly makes sense at all.

Still, when she looks back at all of Fitz and Skye's interactions at the Playground (the ones she witnessed, at least), she can start to see how Skye's words fit her actions, and the realization is painfully overwhelming. She doesn't want to think about the connections between Skye, Fitz, and Ward. She doesn't want to think about her timetable, or how she's failing Fitz. What she could use, she decides, is a distraction. And she knows just where to find one.
I realized while writing this that I'm apparently determined to make Jemma have lunch as often as possible with as many people as possible. I BROTP Jemma with lunch, science, and fire extinguishers. :)

Chapter End Notes
Fitz finds himself staring at a piece of metal, and he wonders what he's supposed to do with it.

"Do you want to check the resonant frequencies, so I can determine what properties we're dealing with?"

He knows that he shouldn't be angry, that she's just trying to help, so he takes a breath to clear his head.

"I've been trying."

"But you haven't been able to isolated the—"

"No, I haven't been able to isolate the . . . the um . . ."

He's flushed with embarrassment as he realizes that he's trying to finish her sentences, and he can't. He snaps his fingers as his brain scans for the words. He's been doing so well recently; he should know what to say, but at times like these, the words slip through his fingers.

"Rate of oscillation," Simmons offers.

"Yes! I was about to say that, actually. And no, I haven't, because it keeps, um . . ." His frustration grows when there's yet another sentence that he can't finish, and he finds himself bouncing on his toes, but it doesn't help. "What's the word again, give me the word?"

Jemma sighs. "Fluctuating."

"Yes. Good. Fine. Thanks. I'll have it sorted in a bit, just be a little, uh, patient."

Fitz walks away from her, picking up a pen to jot some notes down.

"Fitz, if the rate of oscillation is fluctuating . . ."

He flips a page, trying desperately to ignore her, but she puts a hand on his shoulder and ducks down into his field of vision. She stands back up, and his eyes can't help but follow her.

"If it's fluctuating, that doesn't mean you did it wrong; maybe there's something odd about the metal." She reaches for his notes, and he gives them to her without a thought, but when she rests her hand on his shoulder, he has to try thinking.

"Occam's razor, Jemma. In this case, the simplest explanation—"

"The simplest explanation is that there's something wrong with the metal," she counters. "Because I know for a fact that there's nothing wrong with you. Not really."

She catches his eyes again, seemingly determined to hold his gaze with hers. He sees the love in her eyes, which isn't the kind from his dreams, but he drowns in it, all the same.

"Any update on the metal we found?"
May's voice brings him back to reality, and his pact, and he springs apart from Jemma like she's hot iron. He hopes that they'll both read it as surprise.

"Yeah. Yup, yup," he stammers, then realizes that she'll want information he doesn't have. "Um, no, actually, no. I'm just having a bit of trouble identifying the . . ." He looks at Simmons, then looks away. He's calmer now, he should be able to find the word. "A bit of trouble . . . I'm having a bit of trouble identifying the . . . material."

"Okay."

Fitz sees May trade a look with Simmons.

"Yeah, s-so this is the same lead that we use in our bullets, but there's something . . ." He's about to say that the metal is odd, like Simmons said, but a red liquid starts leaking out of the sample, and Fitz is pretty sure that he's losing his mind. "Bleeding, uh . . . uh, okay that's . . . are you . . . can you see that?"

When his squeamishness makes him step back, Simmons leans in.

"It looks like flesh," she observes, and when he dares to peek, he sees that the entire piece of metal has indeed transformed into what appears to be human tissue.

"Yeah, I see it," May agrees, "it's blood."

Fitz lets out a lungful of air in relief.

"Good. I mean, that's . . . what? That's weird."

May looks up at him. "Can you figure out whose blood?"

He's not entirely sure, but before he knows it, Simmons affirms that they can, and he's nodding his agreement. When May shoots him a concerned look, Simmons assures her that everything is under control, and May nods before leaving them alone.

"What was that all about?" Jemma asks when May is out of earshot.

Fitz pinches his eyes shut. "You read the same studies I did. Actually, you read them to me. One of the possible side effects for . . . for hypoxia . . . hypoxia is . . ."

"Hallucinations? Fitz, have you had any hallucinatory experiences before?"

"No."

"Then what are you so worried about?"

When his eyes open and find hers, he sees that love again, but her confidence seems a bit shaken. He tears his eyes away.

"I don't know, it's just, I've been better with words lately, but today . . ."

He hears her sigh. "Today, you came across something you didn't immediately understand, and you assumed that the problem was you. You need to have more faith in yourself, Fitz!"

She smiles at him, and he can't help but smile back, can't help but feel her warmth envelop him, can't help but fall in love with her just a little more.
"How do you know so much?"

He asks because out of all of the words he could have been searching for, she chose "fluctuating" and "hallucinations" as if she plucked them right out of his brain.

Jemma's smile widens as she puts a hand on each of his shoulders and leans in.

"I know you, Fitz."

Her eyes are boring into his, and she's close enough that he could just lean forward and kiss her, but he knows that's not what she means, and he has the sudden desire to light himself on fire.

When she lets go with a gentle squeeze and prods him to help her analyze the DNA, he decides that he needs to renegotiate with the universe.

When the DNA analysis is complete, and she learns the name of Carl Creel, Jemma looks over and finds Fitz smiling at her. Whatever it was that happened earlier, it seems to be over, and he's almost like himself again. She finds herself aching for these moments, which come far too rarely and are far too brief. She thinks about what Skye said, finally ready to start contemplating what Fitz must be like when she's not around. Is he really healing as much as she thinks, or is he putting on a show to spare her feelings?

But no, she's with him for the majority of his waking hours. She's sure that there's no way he could keep an act up that long.

She looks back at him, at the smile that is almost innocent, and she doesn't know what more she can do to help him, but she has to do something. How far is she willing to go? What is she willing to give up?

She wonders if she'd be able to give up what she loves most. Would she be able to stop being a scientist, for him? Would she leave SHIELD?

She's surprised to learn that she'd do it in a heartbeat.

"Why are they going the biochemical route?"

Coulson assigned the task of stopping Creel to well, not them, for reasons Fitz would rather not think about. It's insulting, really, since Simmons (with his help) was to one to realize that Creel can absorb the properties of any matter he touches, and that the sample of lead that started bleeding was actually a piece of Creel's flesh reverting to its original form.

Simmons scolds him when she discovers that he's taken the latest DNA results from someone else's printer, but it doesn't stop her from reading it over his shoulder.

"Using an adenovirus vector to counter Creel's ability?" She scoffs.

"Yeah, well it's pointless, really, because the injected, um . . ."

He suddenly realizes that Jemma is standing really, really close to him.

"Injected vector will never bind to his cellular membranes."

"Yeah," he says, trying to focus on the problem, "so, well then, they'd have to find a way to de . . . stabilize-"
"The molecular structure of Creel's epidermal cells, yeah."

She leans in even closer to read the papers he's holding, and, overcome with panic, he drops them to the floor. Jemma tells him it's okay, but then she bends over to pick them up for him, and this is decidedly not okay. He tries to look away, to distract himself, and his frantic mind fixates on something he just said.

"Destabilize," he repeats, feeling a thought start to bubble up in this brain. He hears Simmons shuffle about below him and he redoubles his efforts to not look down.

"Oh, I . . ." Don't look down, don't look down. "I didn't solve this today."

"Who are you talking to?" Fitz turns to find that Mack has just entered the lab, holding an oily rag.

"Me!"

Simmons pops up as she answers, grinning.

"Oh, Simmons!" Mack seems very unsettled. "I didn't see you there."

"Well, here I am!"

"Yeah. I, uh, see that."

Simmons laughs, like it's a joke, but Fitz is not amused.

"What do you want?"

"Ah," Mack seems more comfortable when he starts talking directly to Fitz, "for cloaking, were you thinking of putting it under avionics, or . . ."

"Enough about cloaking," Fitz growls, "I'm busy. We're busy. With something."

Between Mack's infuriating presence, Jemma's open ogling, and his uncontrollable jealousy, Fitz barely has enough room in his brain to string two words together. What was the word he needed to remember? Destabilize. Destabilize.

"It sounds like you're just blowing me off." Mack casts a suspicious glance at Simmons, who handed Fitz the papers and now seems to be taking a three hundred and sixty-degree tour of the mechanic. "You two want to be alone, that's cool."

"Yes we would, thank you."

"Fitz!"

"Hey Simmons, do you think I could have a word with Fitz? I think he's having trouble focusing on me."

Simmons gives a cheesy smile and mumbles something about the impossibility of that assertion before leaving them alone. When she's gone, Fitz shifts his gaze to Mack.

"You're a bit blunt, aren't you?"

"I call 'em like I see 'em."

Fitz thinks he hears her come back, and when he looks for her, Mack snaps his fingers.
"Whoa, Fitz! Your mind go wandering again?"

"What? No."

Mack indicates the DNA results. "What do you got there?"

"Uh, this . . . this is just, um . . ."

There's a part of him that says that he should give the packet to Mack, because what harm could it do, and another part that is repeating destabilize, destabilize. And there's a third part, a very confusing one, that actually likes the way Mack doesn't treat him like a child. Perhaps there's a fourth part that wonders where Jemma is off to.

"Does it have to do with stopping Creel?"

"Yeah, I think, I think that we're . . ." Four parts of his brain are fighting for space, and his head hurts. "I, uh, I have . . ." He hands the research to Mack. "I . . . I didn't solve this today."

Mack looks at the research, then over to Fitz. "You think you can?"

Fitz has managed to calm himself to a point where he can actually function, because Mack not only figured out that Fitz solved this problem a while back (if only Fitz had known), but he helped him figure out which of his old designs would be able to take down Creel. Now, they're putting a prototype together, and though it feels strange to be working without Jemma, it also feels good, like he can stand on his own two feet. And he hasn't thrown anything yet, which is a plus.

"The sound waves disrupted the molecular . . . um, the molecular." He taps the back of his fingers against Mack's arm to beg for the words, but Mack shakes his head. "Well, you should understand. You modified it."

Mack smiles. "You know how some guys can play a tune by ear?" Fitz nods. "Well, I need sheet music." Mack chuckles at his own joke. "The original one," he says, continuing to inspect the prototype, "you built this with Agent Simmons?"

"Yeah," Fitz answers carefully, "what about Simmons?"

"I heard you two are pretty tight."

"Yeah."

Fitz braces for impact.

"Look, I know she's a good partner, and I think she's cool, but she's been hanging around the garage a lot lately, and I was hoping you could help me tell her to stop."

Fitz's eyes dart around to make sure she is, in fact, not standing behind him. "Excuse me?"

"Yeah, you know how you said earlier that I'm a little blunt?" Fitz nods. "Well, I've learned the hard way that sometimes it doesn't go over so well with women. So I thought, since you know her so well, you could help me out."

"You don't like her?"

"Well, you know, she seems nice, but she's been just coming by and staring at me? Most of the time she doesn't say anything, but when she does, it's very uncomfortable. For everybody."
All of a sudden, it clicks for Fitz, and he winces. Any jealousy he is feeling is flushed out by pure panic. This is the Academy all over again. And SciOps. And the Bus, actually.

"She, uh, she doesn't mean it. She just, well, thinks that she's better at flirting than she really is. She thinks she's being subtle."

Mack frowns.

"She calls that flirting, huh? If it weren't so awkward, I'd consider it sexual harassment."

"Well, you haven't asked her to, uh, to stop, yeah?" Fitz feels a twinge of fear before he sees Mack shake his head. "It's not sexual harassment unless she does it after you tell her to stop."

"You've been down this road before?"

"No," Fitz lies, "just seen a lot of those, um, mandatory videos? But you don't have to worry. I can handle it."

Fitz tries to push away the memory of that first guy in the Academy, who pretended that his one true passion was collecting milk bottles. Fitz is proud of the fact that, to this day, Jemma still believes that she's the one who ended it.

"You sure that you want to break the news? I was going to do it; I just wanted some pointers."

"No, it'll be better coming from me. Trust me on this one."

"Yeah, okay." Mack clears his throat. "Looks like I should show this prototype to Coulson."

Fitz is confused by the abrupt departure, but it all makes sense when he sees Simmons walking through the door. It's a good thing that she's so beautiful, he thinks. Beautiful people can get away with murder.

Jemma stands beside him, watching the mechanic walk away.

"Mack certainly has an impressive physique, wouldn't you say?" He sees her look at him in his peripheral vision, but he refuses to look back. "It's true; look at him," she continues. "He's quite a lot of a man."

He's tempted to tell her to bugger off, but he holds his tongue.

"Yeah, he's nice," Fitz says instead, "but he doesn't understand how sound waves work."

Jemma turns to him, her forehead wrinkled in apparent confusion. "What do you mean?"

"I was trying to explain how the . . . device worked, and he said he doesn't understand the science as much as he understands how to build it. Don't you find that odd?"

He watches the attraction leave Jemma's body like a shed snakeskin. He hopes he hasn't done Mack too much of a disservice.

"Oh, well," Jemma replies, a bit crestfallen, "I suppose not everyone has the same interests that we do."

"Yeah," Fitz agrees, "I guess not."
It's much later when Simmons takes a moment to go into the garage again, telling herself that her demeanor should give Mack all the signals he'll need to know that it's over.

Of course, she'd prefer not to be here at all, but Skye's words won't get out of her head, and she has to collect more data.

"Hey there, Mack. Sorry to bother you."

His back is turned to her (which, admittedly, is shaped quite nicely). She realizes that he's just performing routine maintenance on one of the Jeeps, and she feels a bit silly. He's definitely not her type, yet she was so easily fooled.

"Hey, Simmons. Can I help you?"

She wants to kick herself when it becomes obvious that she really is bothering him.

"I, uh, I was hoping I could talk to you about Fitz, for a moment."

He turns to look at her. "Fitz?"

She inspects the ceiling. "Yes, Fitz. He said you were a great help with stopping Creel. And usually, he and I work on those sorts of projects together, but when I left the room, one of the other scientists wanted my help with something, and then someone else needed my opinion on another project, and by the time I made it back to Fitz, you two were done."

She takes a breath, only now realizing now awkward she's being.

"Sounds like you're in high demand," says Mack.

"Well, I wouldn't say that, it's just, you know, there are limited resources here, and not many people have the experience I—" She's babbling, and she switches gears. "Anyway, you spent a lot of time with Fitz, and I was just wondering how he's doing."

Mack raises an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"Well," Simmons explains, pulling at her fingers, "I've been told that he, uh, that he acts differently when he's around me, and obviously I can't see what he's like when I'm not there."

"Hmm. And you need to know all this because he's your patient."

It takes Simmons a moment to process his statement-that-should-be-a-question.

"Well, no, he's not my patient, actually. He's my best friend. I'm helping him."

Mack chuckles. "You two are best friends? You're sure that's all you are?"

Simmons blinks. "Yes."

"'Cause I see the way you look at him, like you're molding a piece of clay that's not really cooperating. And then I see the way he looks at you, like he's a fish that thinks he's stupid because he can't climb trees."

Simmons blinks again. Her mouth opens, then closes, then opens again.

"Fitz has brain damage."
"Yes, I know."

"It's called cerebral hypoxia. It's caused by a lack of oxygen to the brain."

"Sounds about right."

"Many patients with . . . with cerebral hypoxia experience frustration during recovery, since they have to re-learn things, such as how to complete simple tasks."

"Is that so?"

She doesn't like the way he's looking at her, like he thinks he understands, even though he says that he doesn't. He doesn't understand. Why can't she make him understand?

"Yes, well Fitz . . . he, uh, he has never been known for his patience to begin with, but he's . . . made great strides towards his recovery, even if he doesn't see it. And, at least, from what I can tell, that frustration is starting to fade. He's speaking more fluently, and he's keeping his temper under control, but it's because he's working hard. He's focusing. When he gets distracted, his frustration returns, and it's like he hasn't . . . I just, I need to know what's happening so I can better understand how to help him, is all."

She hears Mack sigh, and the way he looks at her makes her think that not only is she not interested in the man, but she just doesn't like him.

"Look, I haven't spent all that much time with Fitz, but I really don't think you should worry."

"Well, I . . . huh?"

He actually smiles at her.

"I think he's doing okay. If he's frustrated, it's just because he's pushing himself to be better. For you."

Simmons shakes her head. "It's not about me."

Mack gives a mirthless laugh. "Simmons, if there's one thing I know about Fitz, it's that everything in his world is about you."

She scoffs. "What is that supposed to mean?"

He raises an eyebrow at her. "He's in love with you."

A numbness blankets itself around her as the words shock her to her very core.

"What?"

"It's kinda sad, you know? I've seen his work, and I know that he has trouble getting the words out sometimes, but if he wanted, he could be bigger than all of this. He could start his own company and give Stark a run for his money." Mack sighed. "He has the brains and the talent. He just doesn't believe in himself."

She's still in a daze, still repeating the words over and over again in her head, but the last sentence draws her out of it.

"He believes in himself. He has an ego bigger than the Bus, or at least he did, before he was injured."
Mack folds his arms. "Are you sure about that? Or was he just trying to convince you, and himself, that he was worth something?" Mack shrugs. "Nah, the only thing he really believes in is you."

Her head is spinning, and she feels the need to sit down as things start to whirl into place. She's worked so hard for so long, but it's like her brick house has turned into cards. What if she's been hurting him instead of helping him? What if . . .

"Whoa, Simmons, are you okay? I didn't mean—"

Before she knows it, he's steadying her, and she's telling him that she's not feeling well. There's a part of her that sees the irony in this situation, in the actions that would have been romantic just yesterday, in a different context. But mostly she can feel the queasiness in her stomach as Mack's words overwhelm her.

She recovers out of sheer stubbornness, waving Mack away. When she gets back to her room and she flops down on her bed, the tears come in full force.

Chapter End Notes

Shout out to Einstein for the fish and trees quote!
For the first time in her life, Jemma Simmons is late to work.

When she finally opens the double doors of their new lab at precisely twenty-three minutes past the hour, Fitz runs over to her.

"Are you okay? Can I get you something?"

He had been waiting for her, debating between assembling his newest gadget or banging on her door. When she waves off his concerns, he thinks that maybe he did the right thing. If she's annoyed at him now, how much worse would it be if he invaded her privacy?

"Did, uh, did you have a late night?"

Simmons gives him a somewhat tired glare, then starts her work without answering. He decides that she must have gone out drinking with Skye, and figures that it's best to give her space. Staying away from Jemma, however, proves so distracting that he doesn't have any time to be upset about Skye excluding him yet again.

He finds himself gravitating towards her, wondering what she's working on, annoyed that she hasn't asked him to help.

"Fitz?"

The glare she shoots him makes him take a step back and mumble an apology. She sighs and rolls her eyes at him.

"Fitz, I'm trying to work here."

"I know, I'm just... are you sure that you don't..."

Her expression softens, and he's not quite sure what to make of it.

"No, I don't need your help, thanks. I'm just, I'm not feeling well, I guess. Sorry if I'm a bit grumpy."

A silence forms between them as Fitz considers his options.

"Tea?" he eventually asks.

Jemma gives him a nod. "Tea."

He makes tea for her, but it doesn't seem to affect her mood. Instead, he finds that she only manages to make a little progress on her project before she documents her findings and leaves for an early lunch.

She doesn't come back.

She's late the next few days, and she continues to leave early, and he's going out of his mind trying to figure out what's going on. If she had a death in the family, surely she would have told him, right? Or
somebody would have, at least. It seems like the kind of news that Coulson would give them together.

He walks by the entrance to her room one more time, and when he hears crying coming from inside, he knocks.

"Go away, Fitz. I'm sorry."

Fitz takes off his tie. The next day, he doesn't feel the need to put one on.

"Simmons?"

She leans against the door frame in a way that, she hopes, looks casual.

"Uh, I was hoping you'd have a minute, sir."

Coulson looks up from a pile of paperwork.

"Something wrong in the lab?"

"Not really, sir."

She's worried that he's going to tell her to leave, but he takes a good look at her, then waves her in.

"So, what is this about?"

He's distracted, poring over reports, and answering feels a bit awkward.

"Well, I uh, I was wondering if you still needed my help for any of the . . . of the . . ." She wrings her hands. ". . . undercover operations?"

She has his attention now, but she suddenly doesn't want it.

"Simmons," he asks in his calm, patient voice, "are you asking me to send you away?"

"What?" She tries to laugh, but even she can tell that it sounds fake. "No, no of course not, why would I? I just . . . know that there's a lot of work to be done in that, uh, area, and I wanted to see if you required my services."

Coulson stares at her for a moment.

"How is Fitz doing?"

"Uh, well, he's fine. Good. He's still . . . on the mend, as you know."

"The last report I read said that he's almost back to full capacity."

"Well, yes, he is."

"But you're still itching to leave."

Simmons opens her mouth to speak, then closes it.

"Sir, it's just that earlier, we had discussed . . ."

"A few months ago," he interjects, "I told you that I had an undercover op that required a scientist. It
was one op, Simmons. And when you asked me to let you stay and help Fitz, I sent someone else."

Simmons sighs. "Agent Carré, yes."

"In fact, I believe that you were the one who gave me Carré's name. You said she'd get better results."

"She is a better liar, sir."

"Yes, you said that, too. And I believe that I said it was more important to have someone that I trust."

Simmons watches her fidgeting hands.

"So, since I do trust you," Coulson continues, "I'm going to ask you a question, and have faith that you will answer me honestly."

Simmons flicks her eyes up, then back down. "Yes, sir."

"What's happening between you and Fitz?"

She scoffs, but she's sure she's not convincing.

"Between Fitz and I? We're right as rain. Everything is going very smoothly."

Coulson appears unmoved. "Really? Because the work I've seen from you this week seems like a waste of your talents."

His words feel like an electric shock, and she feels the heat in her face.

"Well, sir, I . . ."

"Whoa, it's okay, Simmons. Everybody has an off week sometimes, and you've been working at full speed ever since you got here. Everybody gets hit by the recoil eventually."

She takes a breath. "Oh, sir, you don't need to worry. I mean, it's been a tad difficult, true, but . . ." She looks up and catches the look in his eyes. "You weren't saying all that out of concern for my feelings, were you?"

He smiles at her. "Of course I'm concerned. Unfortunately, I also have an organization to rebuild, and you are a very important part of that. I need you doing your job."

"And what, act like nothing's bothering me? I can't do that."

"You don't have to. I'll give you a few days of leave. If you need a little slack so you can get back to speed, I'll cut you some. But when you're done, I'm counting on you to be back in the lab like usual. Does that sound good to you?"

She smiles as she nods. "Yes, sir. Can I just go straight away, or . . ."

"I'll handle Fitz. Go pack your things. I'll tell May to give you a lift; don't go too far."

"Yes, sir."

Fitz is about to fall asleep at the briefing when he hears Coulson say Donnie Gill's name. He rubs his cheeks to wake himself up, and feels the stubble that's grown in Jemma's absence.
"Most likely scenario?" Coulson pulls up a video on the screen. "Hydra's looking for another weapon. From what we've been able to piece together, Donnie Gill had limited powers when he entered the Sandbox, but-

"While there," May continues, "he was taught to control, amplify those powers."

"Lovely," Hunter interjects, "and who, exactly, do we have to thank for that? SHIELD or Hydra?"

"Your guess is as good as ours," says Coulson. "Hydra had scientists embedded at the base. Explains how they took it so quickly."

Mack folds his arms. "A friend of mine was stationed there. He said it got bad fast."

"Is that when Gill escaped?" asks Trip.

"I don't know. What I do know is Creel wasn't an isolated incident. I've been told Gill's next on Hydra's wish list."

"Told by who?" Fitz asks. He feels something in his gut that he does not like.

"I have a source," says Coulson.

"A source you trust?" Trip asks.

"Yes," Coulson answers. "Now, I want us to bring Gill in before Hydra gets their hands on him. Fitz, you knew him better than any of us. Got anything to help us narrow the search?"

Fitz looks around, alarmed when every eye is suddenly trained on him. He feels his heart beat faster. They expect him to fail. Why did they bring him to the briefing if they expect him to fail?

"Um," he starts, "well, the la- the last time I saw him, he was um . . ."

He's panicking, which he knows is only making things worse, but this is what happens when she's not here. She's not here, and he doesn't even know where she is. Where is she?

He still can't find the words, but Mack chimes in.

"Uh, angry? On drugs? Uh, friendly, sleeping—"

"Yeah!"

"Sleeping?"

"No," Fitz corrects, "what, well, the one, the . . . go back one?"

"Friendly?"

"Friendly! Um, uh . . ." He's racking his brains, but they're watching him, and Mack isn't Jemma. Finally, it clicks. "Oh, he had trouble making friends."

May sighs at him. "Anything else?"

"I don't know, maybe ask Jemma if you have a contact number for her."

"Okay," Coulson says, "and if you think of anything . . ."

"Yeah, we'll work on it," Mack promises.
"May," Coulson directs, "you lead the search to find Gill. Let me know when you have something."

May starts to ask people to scan satellite feeds when Fitz interjects.

"Shouldn't Skye be here?"

May looks at him for a long moment.

"She's working another angle."

Skye seems to be conveniently absent from every briefing that Fitz is invited to, and Fitz has to remind himself to breathe.

A week ago, he would have been able to do this. He can do this. She's taught him how to do this. But she left, and suddenly he's back at square one.

Fitz knows that he's always been useless without Jemma Simmons. Now he doesn't have her, and he doesn't even know why.

Later, when May's satellite search bears fruit, she calls another meeting in the briefing room. Fitz only finds out about it because the kitchen happens to be adjacent (and the briefing room is really the mess hall). He knows that they weren't planning on inviting him when Skye walks through the door. They talk about Donnie, but they don't address him. Never mind that Donnie used to worship Fitz. Never mind that Fitz used to matter.

When Trip says he can have wheels up in fifteen, Fitz knows that he should demand to go with them, but what's the point? Doesn't everyone leave?

"Excuse me," says Hunter, "but Gill wasn't hard to track. If Hydra are looking, they'll find him."

"The . . . asset said Hydra would be ready to take him out if they couldn't capture or recruit him," adds Skye.

It's kind of strange that Skye has an asset, come to think of it. She really doesn't know that many people inside SHIELD, and a member of the Rising Tide would be a friend, not an asset. What's even stranger is the way Skye talks about her mystery source like it hurts to say the words.

"Which is why we have to beat them to it," May says.

"We'll coordinate from the Bus," Coulson says, "down to fourteen minutes. We'll pick up Simmons on the way. Let's get moving."

Fitz can't help but shudder when he hears her name. If they can pick her up on the way, then she must be close. Why didn't she . . .

"They're taking the Bus," Mack says, "you know what that means? It means we get the night off. Koenig's on assignment, and won't be hogging the XBox." He and Fitz exchange a look, and Mack sighs. "Hey man, why aren't you happier about this?"

"'Cause I should be going. I mean, I . . . I knew him. And if Je- Simmons is going to be there, who's going to . . ."

Protect her. Help her. Stand next to her. Assuming he is still capable of any of those things.

"Hey, no need to feel bad about it. It is what it is."
But he can't stop puzzling it out until something clicks.

"Skye's asset," he muses, "now Donnie. They're . . . they're keeping things from me."

"Yeah, they're keeping you from an icy death. That's it. Come on, now. Don't start getting paranoid on me."

But Fitz can't stop the wheels from turning, can't stop himself from wandering down the restricted corridor, can't stop himself from thinking that she must have been keeping it from him, too.

When he stops in front of Vault D, it's like he can hear her voice, telling him not to go in there. He knows what she'd say, that he's barely holding it together, and they're keeping things from him for a reason.

But they're still keeping things from him, and he wants the truth.

And she's not here.

Chapter End Notes

Agent Carré is that female scientist in the background of that one episode. Yes, THAT one. The first one you thought of.
Simmons squeezes her eyes shut and tells herself that it's almost over, that the mission was successful, and that the prospect of seeing Fitz again shouldn't make her queasy.

Maybe it's the movements of the Bus that's making her queasy. She's not used to it now.

She sits next the boy who might not be a boy anymore, and he looks even worse off than she is. She's glad that she was able to be there, to give Donnie a familiar face to speak to, even if she only repeated the things that Coulson whispered in her ear. If she hadn't been there, Donnie might have frozen May or Hunter.

Or Skye might have had to shoot him.

And worse, she would have spent another moment in the prison that own her mind has become these days. It's much better to be out here, saving people. It's like it used to be.

"So, when we land, Fitz will be there?"

She cards her fingers through her newly-cut hair, and nods.

"Will he . . . do you think that he'll want to see me? After everything?"

She takes in the worry and guilt written on Donnie's face.

"I think you'll find that Fitz is very forgiving."

Fitz. She could go to the other side of the world, and he'd still be with her. He's in the hull of the plane and the look of desperation in Donnie's eyes. Fitz is mostly to blame for the success of the mission, come to think of it. He still has her back, even when she runs away.

Maybe he'll forgive her and Donnie. But maybe he shouldn't.

She wants to ask where Fitz got the intel that saved them, but she doesn't have to, because Coulson walks in and puts a tablet in her hands.

"This is need to know," he says, before nodding at Donnie and leaving. The look in the director's eyes tells her that Fitz is in this, too. She makes her excuses and makes her way towards her old bunk.

"I'm not joining SHIELD," Donnie calls after her.

"Don't worry, Donnie," she answers, "no one is going to force you to do anything."

She hits a button, and tablet wakes up, showing Ward's face and the back of a man who could only be her best friend. She has to fight the urge to run.

When she's tucked safely in her old bed, Jemma holds the tablet in her hands, wishing that she could drop it and forget all about Ward. She hasn't been able to face him recently, not even through the video feed, and the last thing that she wants to find out is what he does alone in a room with Fitz. She feels a stab of guilt, and she knows that she has to watch it anyway.

She needs to know what she's done to him.
So, she takes a deep breath and pushes play, watching the way Fitz steps back when we sees that it's Ward behind the barrier, like he's backing away from a crouching lion. She notices that Fitz isn't wearing a tie, and she can't remember the last time she's seen him without one. And why hasn't he shaved?

"I imagine you've got a lot to say to me," says Ward.

It hurts to see Fitz stagger back, bending over to catch his breath.

"Look, despite . . . all of this," Ward says as Fitz stumbles into a chair, "it's really good to see you."

Yes, she thinks, *this is how he works*. Ward is already playing a game he's won before.

"Fitz?"

The engineer is doubled over, digging into his eyes with the heels of his hands like the sound of Ward's voice is earsplitting.

"Fitz? Do y—"

"Stop! Stop talking," Fitz commands, "stop."

She can see the way Ward puts up his hands in surrender, but Fitz can't even look at him. When Fitz raises his head, first clenching a fist, then pinching the bridge of his nose. His breathing is still heavy. Jemma can't help but graze a finger over the screen, wishing she could somehow give him comfort in his distress, but it's too late now.

"I didn't want to hurt you. I tried to avoid it," Ward lies. Jemma has to remember to steady her own breathing.

"You tried to kill us," Fitz says.

"No. I tried to save you. Garrett ordered me to kill you and Simmons. He expected me to put a bullet in your head. But I couldn't."

Ward's voice is soft, and she can see what he's doing. Fitz is unmoved.

"I gave you a fighting chance to find a way out, like you always do. Like you did."

Jemma scoffs at that, feeling the tears that are coming. They were lucky that the impact didn't snap their necks. They were lucky that they had the supplies to get through the glass. And in the end, they weren't lucky at all, because Fitz . . . Fitz is still . . .

"Save me," Fitz deadpans. She can't look at the anguish in his eyes, can't listen to the pain in his voice, but she knows that she has to. "Do- do you, do you, do you know what they, um . . ."

He's fighting for the words, and she wants to race into the vault right now, run down those stairs, and hold him. She wants to shield him from the monster. She wants to . . .

"What y- oh. Okay." He picks up the controls to the cell. "I . . . you know I have trouble with . . . words, so, um, it's probably best that I show you."

"Show me what?"

Jemma hates that voice, the timbre that's supposed to make Fitz feel like he's talking to an approving
big brother. Did Ward read his file? Does he know about Fitz's family? Or did he know enough by the way Fitz used to idolize him?

"Hypoxia!" Fitz answers. "Found that one. That's what you did to me."

Fitz adjusts the controls, and suddenly Ward has trouble breathing.

"Fitz? What are you doing?"

"I'm showing you," Fitz warns, holding up the control pad like a banner, "what it's like. When you're deprived, uh . . ."

Jemma's hand slaps over her mouth, and she can't believe that she's watching a Fitz who is so beaten, so defeated, and so, so desperate.

"O-oxygen!" Fitz continues, finding the word. "B- uh, the brain cells. They, they rea- they react first. They die. Three minutes and damage is permanent.

No, Fitz. No, no, no!

Ward is gasping for breath, and that does not worry her, but she knows that if Fitz kills him, Fitz will lose another part of himself, and she can't bear it.

"Where's Skye?"

Of course he'd ask for Skye.

"Gone! They're all gone, Jem- they all left me!"

"Simmons left too? Is it because she knows? You told her?"

Fitz blinks and shakes his head. "N-no, they, they're after Donnie. And I should be there. With him. But I can't be, because of you, because of what you did to me, I'm damaged!"

"Donnie," Ward gasps, "Donnie, Donnie Gill? That's, that's why Simmons was . . ."

"No! I'm not a, uh, I don't, I don't, uh, I don't answer, uh . . ."

"Fitz, listen to me." Ward is frantic now. Pleading. "Jemma will die if you don't listen!"

Fitz stares at Ward for a second before he returns the oxygen to normal levels.

She stops the video, pausing on Fitz's determined eyes. If Ward hadn't mentioned her name, what would he have done? How far would he have gone?

Tears are falling on the screen, but Jemma's jaw stays firm. Fitz is angry, and in pain, but he's not a killer. Despite everything he's still not . . . he's never . . .

Despite everything that happened to him, Fitz is still Fitz.

And, now that she thinks about it, they weren't lucky. She was lucky. She was lucky that Fitz was there, to guide her past Garrett's men and into the storage pod, to strap the both of them in place so they survived the fall, to set up a beacon for Fury to find. Without Fitz, she'd have a bullet through her brain, or she'd be at the bottom of the ocean with a broken neck.

Fitz, who thinks that she ran away from him, and is right. Fitz, who thinks that he's defective, and is
dead wrong.

She shoves the tablet aside, unable to even look at the still image of Ward, unable to think that she was gone when Fitz needed her the most. This was something they should have faced together.

And, yet again, she failed him.

Of course, there's a part of her that knows that she needed a break, that a few days of sipping tea in a miserable used book store was a lot more productive than being in a fetal position on her bed, sobbing. But how can she ever face Fitz again?

She's beyond nervous when they finally land at the Playground, but the hangar door opens, and there he is. A jolt goes through her body as she moves to run to him, but Donnie brushes past her, and she halts.

"Fitz!"

Donnie is running towards Fitz, but Fitz barely seems to notice him when she catches his eye and smiles. There's a heaviness about him, but he gives half a smile back before Donnie reaches him.

"Hey, Donnie," Fitz says, "good to see you in one piece."

Donnie reaches out to a hand, and Fitz takes it in both of his.

He's all apologies, this used-to-be engineer. He starts going on about the past, but Fitz waves it off. Jemma watches them talk, not missing the glances he sends her way every so often. Her fingers trace the hem of her sleeve as she waits.

They're still talking when Fitz pulls his hand back, leaving Donnie visibly startled.

"Sorry," says Fitz, stretching his bad hand, "I got in an accident since the last time you saw me. I'm a little, uh, different."

Donnie ducks his head and gives a mirthless chuckle.

"Me, too."

She watches as Fitz takes a deep, shaky breath and gives a solemn nod. It looks like he's about to say something when May walks past Jemma and approaches Donnie, offering to show him to his room. When they leave, Jemma finally has her opening.

She wants run, but she's not sure if she wants to run toward Fitz or away, so she ends up taking slow, careful steps to meet him. They stand there for a second in uncomfortable silence until she pulls him into a hug, and things feel better.

"You're prickly," she says when his stubble grazes her cheek. It's a silly word to use, but she can't think of a better one, and when she pulls back to see the look in his eyes, she doesn't really care.

Fitz doesn't say anything; he just holds her gaze like he can't believe she's real. She's trying to figure out what to say first when she has the sudden urge to stand on her toes and kiss him.

*Oh, no.*
Jemma is back, and apparently, she doesn't hate him. That's good, right?

Fitz wants to say that she seems happy to be back, but there's a sadness in her eyes that he doesn't quite understand. He's not sure if he's happy, either. After all, she did just run off and leave him to wonder what happened to her. But the nine worst days of his life are finally over.

He wonders if there's something she was going to say to him when she got back, and he likes to replay the memory of the way she leaned forward, just a little, before Coulson appeared and ordered Fitz to follow him back to his office. There was something there, he thinks. Something he's missing.

He muses over it a little before he hears the double doors open, and he watches her walk into the lab like she doesn't quite belong there. The idea of Jemma Simmons not belonging in a lab, in any lab, is about as strange as Jemma leaving without saying goodbye. Yet, here they are.

She's early today, which Fitz finds very comforting. But there's a part of him, the part that still stings, that tells him that if she left once, she'll leave again. It tells him that if she left, it means that he's even more broken than he thought he was.

Maybe their destiny is to be apart and in pieces.

He rubs his hands over his stubble and tries to push those thoughts away. She's here. He can't be like that when she's here.

"How are your parents?" he asks. He hopes the smile on his face looks natural.

She stares at him for a second, as if considering whether to answer the question at all. Then he sees her shrug.

"What do you mean?"

Fitz furrows his brow. "D-didn't you go see them?"

Her eyes watch her feet.

"No, actually."

"Oh."

He wants to ask her where she was, but if she wasn't with her parents, then nobody was seriously ill at home. And if she didn't have to leave because of some kind of emergency . . .

"You cut your hair," he blurts, just to stop himself from thinking. He watches as she tucks a strand behind her ear.

"Oh, yes. I'm not sure if I care for it, to be honest. What do you think?"


She shakes her head at him.
"Thanks, Fitz."

They go through the rest of the morning trying their best to avoid any subject besides work and the weather.

"Gotta say, Simmons, I love the hair. It's a very mature look for you."

Jemma smiles at Skye in thanks as she swallows a bite of her salad.

"I needed a change," she explains.

"Yeah, I know what you mean," Skye says, "I just didn't realize it was that bad."

"What was bad?"

"You and Fitz. So, are you going to tell me what he did to drive you off the edge, or am I gonna have to guess?"

"What he did?" Simmons puts her fork down in disbelief. "He didn't do anything."

"C'mon, Simmons, do you really expect me to believe that? A haircut like that is an obvious cry for help. Why do you think I got bangs?"

Simmons regards her friend for a moment, taking in not only her hair, but her all-black clothes and too-serious demeanor. So many things have changed for all of them.

"I like your hair."

"Thanks. But you're not answering the question."

Jemma moves her salad around her plate.

"He didn't do anything, Skye. I just, it all caught up with me, I guess. Somebody said something, and I had to take some time to process it, that's all."

Skye narrows her gaze. "Somebody. Not Fitz."

Jemma nods. "How was he, by the way?" Jemma's dying to know, but she also wants to distract Skye from asking more questions. Skye responds with a look of confusion.

"Wait, you mean Coulson didn't tell you what he did?"

Jemma blinks. "Well, I saw the tape of him and Ward . . ."

"Fitz and Ward? He went to see Ward?"

"Yes, of course. That's how he found out that Donnie was Hydra."

"Oh, wow." Skye brings the heel of her palm to her forehead and squeezes her eyes shut. "Okay. You and I are definitely discussing that. In detail. But first, you need to know what happened when you were gone."

"What do you mean?"

Skye shakes her head.
"He just . . . he fell apart, Simmons. He wouldn't even leave his room. For days. I don't even think he left for meals. In the end, we could only convince him to leave by inviting him to briefings. Good thing Mack was here, or we wouldn't have even been able to do that."

Simmons takes a second to let the new information sink in.

"Mack?"

Skye nods, and Jemma wonders why that man has to have his hands in everything.

"Yeah, he has a way with Fitz, you know? Fitz listens to him."

"Why, what happened when you asked him?"

Skye's eyes were suddenly trained on her meal.

"I . . . didn't try. No one did, except Mack."

"Skye."

"Hey, we've already talked about this." Skye raises her hands in surrender. "Fitz just blows up at me."

Jemma rolls her eyes. "He used to blow up. He's come so far since then, and I can't believe you can't see that." She takes a breath in and out, trying to contain the rage that is boiling within her. "Do you have any idea how much it hurts him that you barely even speak to him anymore? It's all he talks about these days!"

"Hey, whoa. Simmons, I didn't mean . . ."

"He saved my life, Skye. Without him, we never would have been able to get Donnie back here alive. Why can't you see that? If you're such a good friend, why can't you just talk to him?"

Skye is still stammering excuses when Jemma huffs out of the room, but the further Jemma goes, the easier it is to ignore her.

When she leaves the mess hall, she realizes that she's not sure where she wants to go. Certainly not to the lab, not until she's figured out what it all means. Did Coulson's promise to "handle Fitz" simply mean not telling Fitz anything at all? And why didn't any of his friends step up to fill her shoes in her absence? Surely, if he'd injured an arm or a leg instead of his brain, their attitude would be different. And if she'd known that this would happen, she never would have left.

"So this is your new lab, huh?"

Fitz is initially nervous when Donnie starts poking around, but when he sees that the former cadet knows what not to touch, he relaxes a bit.

"Well, it's . . . not my lab, but yeah. It's okay,"

"Okay? I can't stop thinking of all the cool stuff I could do with equipment like this."

Fitz smiles. "You wouldn't just have to, uh, think about it if . . . if you decided to join SHIELD."

Donnie looks back at him, his face falling.
"I dunno, man. I'm only here so Hydra won't get me, and if you knew the things I had to do . . ."

"I had to kill someone once." The words come out of Fitz's mouth before he can stop them. Donnie's eyebrows quirk up.

"When Hydra took over SHIELD, Simmons was at the, uh, the Hub without the team."

"So what, you went in guns blazing?"

"Oh, no. Not like that. There was just a moment when I . . . when I saw that someone was about to shoot May, so I, uh, shot him first."

"Why have I never heard this story?"

Fitz looks back to the lab doors, and finds Skye leaning on the door frame.

"You, uh, y-you were uh, with Ward, I uh, think."

Donnie looks at Fitz, then Skye, then excuses himself. Skye walks into the lab to let Donnie pass.

"You really did that? Saved May?"

Fitz gulps. "Um, yeah. I guess so."

He watches as Skye turns to the direction Donnie went, waiting until he's out of earshot to speak.

"I almost killed him, you know. I was just about to pull the trigger when I got the order to stand down. I hear I've got you and your chat with Ward to thank for that."

Fitz shrugs. "Who told you that?"

"Simmons, of course."

Fitz's mouth goes dry. "S-simmons? Told you?"

"Yeah." Skye's forehead wrinkles in apparent confusion. "I was just at lunch with her, and . . . anyway are you okay? Because I've been down in the vault, and I swear, each time I see him, he just gets creepier."

"Well . . . well, I . . ." If Jemma knows about Ward, then she's either already seen the video feed, or she'll find it, and if she sees that feed, she'll never forgive him for what he did. "I'm n-not going back down there any time soon, that's for sure."

"Hey," Skye says, reaching forward to grab his arm, "that was a very brave thing, what you did. I just wanted you to know that. And I wanted to say thanks."

Fitz tries to nod graciously, but he's so blown away by the fact that Skye is treating him like a person that he can do nothing but watch her as she says goodbye and leaves. When she exits, he finds Jemma peering at him through the window. He smiles at her, and even as she smiles in return, Fitz wonders if Jemma will leave again. He wonders if she's still gone, and there's nothing he can do to get her back.

Simmons feels an unpleasant sensation rise in her stomach as she watches Skye talk to Fitz. It's strange, because she can't count the times she's seen them talk, and she never felt like this. Does it have something to do with the way she almost kissed Fitz yesterday? How did things change so
quickly?

It's not like she's never thought about Fitz like that. She'd never admit it, of course, but a person can't spend years side by side with a member of the opposite sex without wondering once or twice. And, for Jemma, the wondering had, at certain points in their relationship, developed into a full-blown crush. A crush which she, of course, suppressed at all costs for a variety of very rational and practical reasons.

She counts them on her fingers, trying to find a causal relationship between them. The first one was those few weeks before she actually knew him, after his prototype got the highest marks in their applied physics class. She didn't even realize how obsessed she was until her roommate pointed it out to her.

And when did that end? Oh, yes. When she actually met him for the first time, and he acted like she didn't exist.

She goes through them all, until she gets to the last, which happened sometime after they first discovered that Coulson was still alive. No, she corrects herself. It happened before that. It started when he agreed to go into the field with her. They were sitting on the couch in her old apartment, and he grabbed her hand to tell her that if she was going out there, he was too. She still remembers the electric charge that seemed to pass from his fingers to hers. She spent over a month in something of a daze, trying to channel her giddiness into enthusiasm for her work.

But when had it ended?

Oh, right. When she'd seen his attempts at flirting with Skye.

And now, here they are. Fitz and Skye.

She should be happy. After all, she's the one who told Skye to talk to him. But it seems that her gut is refusing to be rational at the moment. She thinks of Mack's words, the ones that shocked her to the core, and wonders if she should have given them as much weight as she did. Surely, if Fitz had a crush on Skye then, there's no reason why that crush couldn't be rekindled now. Actually, in that light, Fitz’s obsession with Skye's lack of attention makes a lot of sense.

When Skye leaves, and Fitz smiles at her, she smiles back, hoping that her doubt isn't written on her face. She considers going back to work, but she's not quite ready yet. So, she goes wandering. She stops for a moment when she realizes her feet have taken her to the Bus's hangar. She doesn't want to be here, but she can't back down now. After all Mack has done in the past few weeks, from playing video games with Fitz to simply talking to him, Simmons feels an obligation to give acknowledgement to the one person who didn't hurt Fitz. Besides, she has some questions.

She pauses for a minute before starting her approach, waiting for the nerves to settle.

"It's funny," she says, stepping into the garage, "this is where we used to keep the hazardous biological materials."

It's not much of a joke, and he only gives her a weak smile.

"I guess not everything changes, huh? What can I do for you?"

Simmons swallows.

"I just wanted to thank you. For helping Fitz. Well, for . . . for being his friend."
When his actual friends wouldn't even speak to him, she adds on silently.

Mack returns his attention to the motorcycle he's working on.

"I don't help him. He doesn't need any. You know that guy you're wishing he would be? I never met him. I only know this guy and, uh, yeah, I mean, he's a little weird, but uh, but I like him."

Simmons is taken aback. How could he possibly think . . .

"I don't want him to be anybody but himself."

Mack stops tinkering to look at her.

"Are you sure about that?"

"Yes."

"'Cause it seems to me that when you found out how he feels, you bailed."

Simmons feels the tears form in her eyes, and she expects them to be fueled by anger, but instead they reflect a deep emptiness that she didn't realize she had. Maybe she just can't stomach the idea of being mad at everyone.

"That's not what's happening."

It's the only thing she can think to say, because he doesn't get it, and she can't explain it to him. He doesn't know Fitz, not really, and if he's trying to say that she should be pleased with Fitz's pain, he's mistaken. The very thought of it exhausts her.

"Look," Mack offers, "I know you two have a connection. And from what I've seen, the only thing that makes him better is you."

Simmons blinks. "Excuse me?"

She looks at Mack, but finds no clue as to what he means.

"Well, you know that he loves you."

"So you said, but . . ."

"So, he's at his best when he's with you. You make him feel safe."

It takes a beat or two for her to digest the words.

"But you . . . when we talked, you said it was sad."

Mack's forehead creases. "What was sad?"

"You said . . . you said that he loved me, and it was holding him back. That if it weren't for me, he'd be competing with Stark."

Mack looks positively offended. "What? I didn't say that. I was just saying that he has that potential, but he doesn't think he does. He thinks he's worthless without you."

She gives a mirthless chuckle. "Fitz doesn't . . . he did perfectly fine, before he met me."

"Somehow, I doubt that."
They share a look, and Mack shrugs.

"Look, I'm not saying that you have any kind of responsibility here. You're a good friend; I can see that. And I can understand if you needed a break. But I think that if you saw it a little differently, things would be a lot easier."

Simmons scoffs. "What does that mean?"

"It means," Mack answers, leaning in, "that if people stop treating him like he's broken, maybe he won't be broken anymore. It's not that it's your fault; it's just you're looking at it from the wrong angle."

Simmons folds her arms. "So, Fitz doesn't need help, but I do?"

Mack nods. "Exactly."

She takes him in, from his broad shoulders to his knowing expression.

"And what makes you such an expert on these matters?"

He shrugs again, "I have an autistic little brother."

Jemma feels her jaw go slack.

"He's high functioning," Mack continues, "but he has trouble expressing himself, and it can be a little frustrating for him. And yeah, we had to, uh, teach him how to talk and act around people, but I learned that if you let him know that he's in a safe place, and you just let Alastair be Alastair, things start to work themselves out."

"I . . ." Jemma starts, "I didn't know."

Mack chuckles. "Yeah, well it doesn't really come up all that much. And it's not like it's a tragedy. Alastair isn't broken. He's Alastair. He sees the world differently than I do. That's not such a bad thing."

Jemma doesn't know how to respond, and really, this is not the first time. But as the words sink in, she wonders what it would feel like to have so much to say and no way to say it.

___________________________

The idea of Jemma coming back to the lab grates on Fitz's nerves, and he tries not to think about the fact that she may have witnessed him torturing Ward. He still doesn't know what came over him, only that he had this overwhelming need to be understood, and the next thing he knew, Ward was gasping for breath.

Fitz sits in his chair, thinking about golden rules and Geneva conventions. Has he become the exact thing they're fighting against? Has he become like . . .

He grips the armrests of his chair, and all he can do is try to breathe and imagine what his mum would say if she could see him now, if she could see what he's done. He'd spent a lifetime listening to her ramble on about forgiveness, about loving your enemies and doing good to those who hate you. How many times had she pulled him down on his knees and prompted a young Fitz to pray for . . . to pray for him? After everything?

That's what Marjorie Fitz would be doing right now, if she knew. She would pray for the soul of a son that might already be long past saving.
He's pulled out of his thoughts when he hears Jemma enter the lab, and he tries to smile at her. She doesn't need to know that he's had trouble sleeping. She doesn't need to know that her lab partner told the director of SHIELD that he isn't a killer, and then told a reclaimed Hydra agent that he is.

He isn't a killer, though. He didn't want to kill when he did, and when he wanted to, he didn't. His mum would know the difference, wouldn't she?

She would, he ultimately decides. She would.

"I was just thinking about Donnie," she says without preamble. Fitz blinks at her.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Do you remember that diagnostic suit we made for Mike Peterson?"

Fitz nods, remembering both the polymer blend (with ten layers of treated, composite material) and the way Simmons salivated over the man who wore it.

"Do you think we could modify it to monitor his brain chemistry? If we had an idea of how his brain reacts to stimuli, maybe we could:"

"Find a way to counteract the brainwashing? That's brilliant!"

The fog over Fitz clears as he jumps out of his chair, already scratching his head to coax his brain into motion. Could they find a way to do it without a headpiece? The ideas are coming quickly, and he has to grab his legal pad and jot things down before they disappear. He feels Simmons look over his shoulder, and he knows she must be surprised to see that he's not writing words, exactly. Words are too hard to reach, and he doesn't have the time. He can see what he wants to do, though, so he's sketching it out wildly. His designs are so sloppy that he knows they won't make any sense to her, but she doesn't say anything. He looks up and recognizes the smile that's playing on her lips. She's just observing.

With that realization, his worry is satisfied, his brain has more room to think, and it's only a matter of minutes before he's fleshed out a solid idea. It takes a while to explain it to her, of course, but there's something different in the air this time. She seems to have a kind of hesitant patience, and that in itself is just as soothing as the hand placed gently on his arm.

The process goes from an idea to reality, as he pulls up the old designs, she points out the needed adjustments, and he adjusts for her. Within a few hours, they have a solid proposal for Coulson, and Jemma is running off to show it to him.

As Fitz watches her go, he realizes that he's smiling. How did she turn everything around so quickly? And how did . . . well, it wasn't like before, but how did it feel so good to work with her?

And if she can work with him like that when she knows about Ward, what does it all mean?

So many questions.

Chapter End Notes

What kind of person names their child Alphonse? And why doesn't Alphonse just go by Al? Well, the answer is simple: Mack's parents named all of their kids Al- names:
Alphonse, Alastair, Alice, Albert, Alaina, Albus, and Aladdin. :)}
Hypotheses

As Simmons watches her instruments measure Donnie for his suit, her thoughts drift back to the starstruck cadet she met not too long ago. She can still see a little of that young boy in him, especially when he looks over at Fitz in what is clearly hero worship. Donnie doesn't look at her that way, of course, seeing as she's the one who couldn't save his only friend.

Maybe that's not it. Maybe he's forgiven her by now. Maybe he never blamed her in the first place. In any case, Donnie clearly prefers Fitz's company to anyone else's, and this is something that Donnie and Jemma have in common.

She can't think of Donnie without thinking of the Academy, and she really can't think about the Academy without thinking about Fitz. Fitz was different back then. Quiet. Surly, some might say. Definitely antisocial. She chuckles to herself at the thought of him, scowling at the world even while he was pursuing the opportunity of a lifetime.

It's funny how quickly their lives began to weave together, especially considering that they barely tolerated each other before becoming friends. Their relationship went from infatuation to irritation to intimacy in a few short months. By the time the year was over, and they approached graduation, he was such an integral part of her Academy experience that to Jemma, Fitz and SHIELD seemed to be one and the same.

She remembers the way she felt on graduation day, that strange sense of anticipation mixed with fear. Looking back, she's not sure what she was really afraid of. Except, perhaps, change.

But she sat there among rows of graduating cadets, and when Maria Hill asked them to stand, Simmons turned to look at him. They were supposed to be seated in alphabetical order, of course, but no one stopped her when she fell in line behind him, and no one stopped her from putting her hand in his.

It was silly, really, because it was the moment where they were about to get everything they'd ever dreamed of, everything they'd ever worked for, and yet the moment just before the oath was terrifying. If Fitz hadn't been there . . . well it's a good thing he was.

She knew the words of the oath, of course. They were written in her orientation packet, and quoted often by professors. But when she was about to say the words herself, the enormity of her chosen life hit her all at once. It seemed like a huge weight that she was called to bear.

She knew, from meeting Professor Vaughn and his colleagues, that a SHIELD scientist could never truly retire. If she ever became as successful as she intended, she would be far too valuable, and far too easy a target. This was a commitment that would span the rest of her natural life, and she made it at the age of eighteen.

So, she held on to Fitz, and they spoke the words together:

"I, Jemma Simmons, do solemnly swear to serve when everything else fails. To be humanity's last line of defense. To be the shield."

She didn't let go of Fitz's hand when they sat back down, or even when they arose again to queue. She only let go of him when she went up to the stage to receive her SHIELD badge, and even when she held it in her hands, she turned to watch Fitz get his. They were inextricably linked, Fitz and SHIELD. When she made a vow to one, hadn't she made a vow to the other?
And what if the words had been different? What if Hill had switched out "serve" for "love?" What if she spoke of honoring and cherishing instead of defending?

What if instead of being the shield, Jemma had vowed to be a wife?

(And, really, is a badge that different from a ring?)

These are the things she thinks about as Fitz receives the measurements and races to enter them into the 3D printer, brimming with an enthusiasm that, according to Agent Weaver, was something of Jemma's that rubbed off on him.

And, after a decade of friendship and partnership, are thoughts of rings and vows so very premature? She tells herself that if she's trying to figure out what she wants to do with the butterflies in her chest, she needs to weigh her options carefully. After all, there really are only two kinds of relationships: those that work out, and those that don't. It seems like it would take some kind of miracle to end up in the former, and if she ended up in the latter? Would she ever heal from a wound that severe?

She really should squash these reemerging feelings, but she feels like her heel snagged on a crack in the sidewalk and somehow opened up a chasm. She is on the verge of falling into the deep.

"And then Simmons and I will have to run some preliminary scans to establish a . . . to establish a . . ."

At the mention of her name, Jemma is pulled back into reality. "Baseline," she finishes.

"Yeah, a baseline."

His eyes flick over to her, and she makes an attempt at keeping her composure.

"And once we have that, we can expose you to different stimuli and see how you respond," she adds. "Sound good?"

Donnie nods.

Really, she decides, this is silly. She knew from day one that joining SHIELD would mean being married to her work. Any romantic relationships would add unnecessary complications to her life, since dating within SHIELD was discouraged, and dating outside of it was an absolute nightmare. How could she give her heart to someone she could never be truly honest with? How would she meet anyone who wasn't SHIELD, anyway? It's much better to stick to science and saving lives.

Unless . . .

What if he did feel the same way? He likely doesn't love her; Mack must have been exaggerating. But what if Fitz has also been battling a recurring crush? Maybe they would both be fighting off this need for affection for the rest of their lives. And if they both happened to feel the same way at the same time, would it be such a crime to explore the possibility? Because, if by some miracle, if it happened to work out . . .

Could it work out?

She bites her lip and smiles at him as he adjusts the controls, and even when he sputters a bit in the attempt to answer Donnie's question. She's past the point of denying that her feelings are even stronger this time around, and that it's quite possible that something has to be done about it.

But, of course, there are too many uncertainties. And in the face of uncertainty, a person such as
Jemma turns to science.

Yes, she decides. Science has the answer.

Fitz is a little unnerved at the way that Jemma keeps looking at him. She has to know, right? There's no way she would be watching him like that if she didn't know. He almost wants to just ask her about it, right in front of Donnie, but he's never initiated a conflict with Simmons, and he's not going to start now. So, he tries to focus on the suit that is now ready for Donnie to try on. Fitz hands it to Donnie, who nods and goes off to change, leaving him alone with her.

He finds himself looking at her, and they just stare at each other for a few seconds before she breaks eye contact.

"Are you sure you don't want to add a headpiece?" she asks. "It would certainly help with ballistics protection."

"Well, I think it would get too warm. Besides, it would look ridiculous." He's pretending to tap at controls on his pad just to have an excuse not to look at her.

"Not on you."

He looks up. "What?"

"Everything looks good on you," she says, looking at her shoes. And is it a trick of the light, or are her cheeks pink?

"Oh. Thanks."

It's such a strange thing for her to say that he has no idea how to proceed, so he just asks her what she thinks they'll really be able to do with the data they'll get from the suit. She blinks a few times before answering, and they're still discussing it when Donnie comes back.

"Feels like a good fit," he says.

Fitz is suddenly afraid that he's going to see a repeat of Jemma with Mike Peterson, but she only gives a casual glance at Donnie before returning to a culture that needs to be checked on. He realizes how paranoid he's being, and he wants to kick himself. Donnie is barely legal, and he's just coming out of a series of traumatic experiences. She wouldn't prey on that.

Fitz is so deep in thought that he's startled when Coulson appears in the lab.

"Donnie," the director says, "I'm putting together an op, and I thought you'd like to join in. Do you think you're up for it?"

Donnie looks shocked. "Sir? I'm not a SHIELD agent, and Hydra—"

"We've come across some reports of an item that needs to be acquired. It's a short mission; you won't even have to leave the Bus. I just need an engineer on hand in case things go south. We'll be back before you know it. Besides, I thought you might want to get a taste of the action around here, see if you might want to change your mind."

Before Fitz can say anything, he watches Donnie agree to the mission, and then he and Jemma are alone in the lab again.

"But, I'm an engineer," Fitz whispers.
Before Jemma can think of something to say, Donnie and Coulson have left, and, if she has to make a guess, May is already in the cockpit waiting to take off. At least, she tells herself, Donnie left wearing the suit, and the mission will expose him to enough variables that, if all goes well, should lead to some fantastic data. She looks over to Fitz, and waits for him to look back at her. When he does, there is only silence between them.

They only stand there for a few moments before Hunter comes back, telling them to keep the comm channel open, Coulson's orders. It seems to Jemma that Fitz is not entirely thrilled with Coulson's orders today.

"I'm an engineer," he finally says. "I'm an engineer."

"I know you are, Fitz. If it helps, they didn't ask me to go, either."

She finds herself drifting over to him, and soon her hand is on his back in what she hopes is a comforting gesture.

"Maybe it's a punishment." he breathes.

Jemma has to think about this for a moment.

"Punishment? For what?"

He folds his arms. "You know what."

Jemma furrows her brow. "No, I don't think I do."

When he turns to her, the tears are already forming in his eyes, and the sight of it is shattering her heart.

"You . . . you saw what I did to Ward, didn't you?"

It comes out as a plea, and she finds herself staring at him, so surprised by his words that she has to take a moment to get over the shock.

"So you did see it, then?" He meets her eyes. She looks away and sighs.

"I would have done worse," she says. "I would have killed him, for what he did to you. I've been thinking about it for months now, planning various ways of doing it. I wanted to tell you, of course, but-

"Coulson ordered you not to."

"Right."

They stare at each other for a second, and Jemma notices that though he still hasn't gone back to shaving, his stubble has a curious effect on the rest of his face. He looks older, somehow. More mature, perhaps. When he puts his hands on his lower back, he pulls the fabric of his shirt taught, and she wonders when his torso became so, well, attractive. She has a sudden urge to hug him, but decides against it.

"So you're not . . . you don't . . ." Fitz trails off, giving her a questioning look.

"I don't think ill of you, if that's what you mean."
"Are you, are you sure?"

She closes her eyes for a moment. "Yes." When she opens them, she finds him gaping at her, and there's a flutter in her chest. "Maybe it's awful of me, I don't know, but what I do know is that you're a good person, Fitz. And much braver than I was. I couldn't even face him."

He looks at her for a minute, then nods, as if to himself.

"I still think, I mean, I shouldn't . . . I shouldn't have . . ."

They both jump when Skye's voice comes through a loudspeaker, complaining about how Hunter is yet again tasked with seducing a mark.

("Hey," Hunter shoots back, "I can't help it if it comes so easy for me. Besides, you get to drive a moped.")

Jemma looks to Fitz, and they wordlessly return to their work.

As she surveys her equipment, she sneaks a look back at him, getting the feeling that he's still simmering, and at some point, he'll burst.

It takes him a few hours, when the mission is well underway and somebody makes a remark to Donnie about how, "once Fitzsimmons figures out the brain stuff, you can consider yourself a full-fledged member of the team."

When Fitz stalks off, Jemma is torn between running after him and using the time alone to let out a very ladylike scream. She knows that something has to be done, at least. All she has to do, she tells herself, is take a deep breath and come up with a plan. When she has one, she makes her way to Fitz's room where the door is ajar, and she wonders if he's expecting her. She leans against the door frame, watching him sulk in a chair at his desk.

"Look at Donnie," Fitz sneers, "going on missions. Well, it looks like we've got a new golden boy."

"New?" Simmons dares to smile back at him, even though he can't see it. "As opposed to the original?"

"Yes!" Fitz answers. "Me. And I've been sidelined."

She'd been worried that his paranoia had reached a new low. Now she sees that it has, but that he's also right. Not that she'll tell him that, of course. She goes to sit on his bed, putting herself directly in his line of sight.

"No! Well, I mean, maybe, but in the way that a player is sidelined due to injury in a football match."

She smiles, pleased that she's been able to put a positive spin on it, with a sports metaphor. Fitz appears unmoved.

"Football, or American football? Because a head trauma joke right now, Jemma, that's in severely poor taste. Even for you."

Jemma rolls her eyes at him and scoffs.

"And I see the way they look at me," he whispers, "Especially when they keep on asking about the . . ." He snaps his fingers, asking for the word.

"Brainwashing."
"Yeah!"

"No, they're just anxious about it. They know we just started."

"Yeah, well I might not seem like the genius I used to be, but I still have ideas."

She gives him a sad smile.

"Yeah."

"I'm just having a hard time . . . I'm just having . . . I'm just having . . ." He gives the signal again.

"Expressing them."

"Yeah! And that doesn't mean that they have to treat me like . . ."

He trails off again, but this time, she can tell that it's not that he can't find the words. It's that it hurts too much to say them.

"Like what, Fitz?"

"Treat me like I'm gonna break. It's distracting." He stands up, gesturing to her. "And, you know, talking to you is the only time I feel clear. And calm. Like I might actually get better."

Her heart breaks once again, because he can't see what she sees in him. She stands up and puts a tender hand on each shoulder.

"You are getting better. Every day. I see it, they see it, and soon you'll see it yourself."

"Yeah."

She's close enough to see the dark flecks in his eyes, to examine the way his brow furrows in frustration. He has no idea how much good is in him, and how much she needs him to be good. How much she just needs him. As she looks at him, she again has the incomprehensible desire to stand on her toes and kiss him.

So, she does.
Predictions

It's not much of a kiss, really. She only presses her lips gently against his before she withdraws, holding his eyes with hers, feeling the ghost of his presence on her mouth. He looks as confounded as she feels, but as she sorts through her feelings, she recognizes that the kiss comes from a desire to give him something. And there's something she is seeking in return, something she doesn't have just yet.

Tears fill her eyes as she realizes that what she truly wants is a piece of him, and she wants even more for him to have a piece of her. Just a small one. Just a tiny speck of her that no one else gets, that no one else sees. That was what she conveyed by joining her lips with his, and now that speck is on his tongue. He seems to be chewing it, digesting it.

"What was that?"

He must be in shock when he says it, or rather, when he whispers it to her.

"I don't know."

Her hands start to retreat from his shoulders, but he presses a hand over hers to stop her. It's strange, the way she relishes and dreads the contact. She's spent years inside her own head, contained within her own body, safe behind clearly-defined boundaries. But she wants to open a door for him. Just a small one. Just to see what he'll do with it.

"Oh," Fitz says, looking away from her. "Was it a . . . was it a mistake?"

She knows she should answer, but she can only watch him.

"A mistake then," he concludes, nodding to himself. His hand slips off of hers and it's like a piece of her was ripped away. She catches his withdrawing hand, lacing their fingers together. She's trying to find the words to fix this problem, or at least explain it, but words are too blunt, and too narrow.

So, she kisses him again.

Maybe he's having some sort of a stroke, because he swears that Jemma Simmons, Double Ph. D., Agent of SHIELD, just kissed him. On the mouth. Twice! On purpose?

Does this mean that he can kiss her back? He looks into her hazel eyes and knows that with Jemma, he is to proceed with extreme caution. But he also knows that her lips are soft and that they feel wonderful against his. He wants to know what other things feel like. There are a thousand things he's been trying not to tell her, but suddenly he wants her to make him tell her everything.

He pauses, though, trying to puzzle her out, because just this morning he thought she was ashamed of him, and now she's kissing him, but she doesn't seem happy about it.

It's when he decides to be reckless and give her a real kiss that he hears Donnie screaming his name. They exchange a look before racing back to the lab.

"Donnie, what is it?"

He realizes that his question came out as a shriek, and he's still catching his breath as he feels Jemma's presence next to him. He was just about to . . . he could still . . . focus!
"I don't know! The, uh, the uh . . ."

"The cargo hold ramp just went up," he hears Mack interject, "emergency exits are locking up all over the plane." Fitz looks over to Simmons, but she's already pulling up schematics on a nearby computer. "The equalization stabilizers—they're fried. The bus thinks we made a water landing; we're sealed in. There's no way out."

"Uh, who's doing this?" asks Hunter.

"We're the only ones on the Bus," says Skye. "This is all happening automatically."

"Fitz, help!" Donnie pleads. "I don't . . . I don't know what to . . ."

Fitz feels the panic rise in his chest as he looks at the schematics, then at Simmons' expectant face.

"Uh . . ." Focus. "I think I know. Somebody . . . you-you've been-"

"Sabotaged," finishes Simmons.

"Yeah. This is based on SHIELD equ- tech! It means that the plane is . . . the plane will . . ." A large crashing sound comes through the comms. "That."

"The plane will explode?" asks Skye.

"Soon," Fitz answers.

"No, it won't," interjects Simmons, "we're going to fix this. Right, Fitz?"

"Yeah," he answers, swallowing. "Yeah, we will."

He's so panicked that he can barely explain what is happening to the Bus, trying to see it in his mind and make it come out his mouth, but she's right beside him, filling in the words he can't find. He thinks about what he said to her before, about the calm that he feels around her (she makes him panicked, too, but she doesn't need to know that yet). He tries to forget about the kisses for the moment and focus on her, and how much faith is in her smile, and he manages to direct the team to fix the various parts of the Bus that are going boom. At the end, he wipes the sweat from his forehead as Hunter promises to buy him a beer. But his attention is on Simmons, who tugs at his arm.

"You did it, Fitz," she whispers.

Fitz can only look at her and think of all the things he hasn't done.

"We did it," he manages to say.

It looks like she's about to say something, but then they hear a scuffling through the loudspeaker, and Skye yells something Fitz doesn't understand. It takes him a moment before he realizes that it's Donnie trying to run. Simmons tells them not to attack him, after all, she's seen what he can do when he's upset. He thinks he hears Donnie mutter an apology before Donnie pulls his earpiece out.

The mood in the lab after Donnie's disappearance is, well, not good. Jemma watches Fitz as he rakes his hands through his hair, and she has no idea what to do except reach out and squeeze his shoulder with all the affection she can convey. Why does everything happen at the very worst time? Of course, she reminds herself, there's never a good time for this sort of thing.

She waits for him to calm down a bit, telling him that it's not his fault, but thinking that he's not really
believing it. The kisses, it seems, are not enough, and she honestly has no idea how to follow them up. In her experience, it's the man who does these sort of things, but she has a feeling that it won't work that way with Fitz. Maybe that's a good thing, though. The men in her romantic life (the interesting ones, at least) have generally been much older and bigger than she is, and frankly, their enthusiasm was always frightening. Especially at the Academy, where, after some trail and error, she learned to cling to Fitz like he was a talisman. She loosened her grip on him as she got older, sure, but did she ever really let go?

Well, she decides, it's besides the point. What she needs to do now is wait for him to process what happened, help him along if she can. After that, maybe she can explain herself a little, give him another little piece of herself, in another way. She's sure that if she does that, he'll give her something, too. At the very least, she's certain that she'll finally have some idea of how he feels about her.

"He left the suit."

"What?"

Fitz has found the tablet with Donnie's data, but he looks up at her when she approaches.

"He left it on the Bus. I was thinking we could use it to . . . to, uh . . ."

"Track him? Is that really what's best? He was in hiding before we found him, Fitz. Maybe he wants to stay off the radar."

"Well, yes, but," Fitz says, scrubbing his face with his hands, "Jemma, it was up to me to convince him to stay with us. We need people like him, and he needs . . . he needs our, our protection. And I failed him. Coulson was right to leave me behind."

She's shaking her head before he even finishes. "No, Fitz. Donnie made a choice. Maybe, in the future, he'll make another one. Maybe he'll come back to us."

She wants to reach out and run her hands through his hair, but she settles for taking a chair and sitting next to him, taking a moment to study him. She knows he feels defeated, but in her eyes, he looks . . . strong. After all, it takes a certain kind of strength to feel this deeply. If only there was a way to get him to see it.

"Do you ever think about the time we spent in the ocean?" she finally says. "In that storage pod?"

Fitz ducks his head.

"It was the worst moment of my life, Jemma. I don't want to think about it."

"No, that's not what I meant, I mean before that. When we were just down there, together."

He looks up. "Do you mean the bit where we were just hanging out at the bottom of the ocean because we were betrayed by our friend and protector? Yeah, we should do that more often."

She rolls her eyes at him.

"Fitz."

"What?"

"For a while there, we thought that there wasn't a way out, and we were just going to die like that."
And I remember just sitting at the window, hoping some kind of fish would swim by or something." She sighs. "Of course, at ninety feet deep, we were still in the epipelagic zone. We would have had to be at least in the mesopelagic or bathypelagic zones to see anything really interesting. Assuming we could see them, since there's no sunlight that far down."

He huffs. "Pity we weren't thrown in the Mariana Trench."

She wants to admonish him again, but decides instead to ignore the bitterness in his tone.

"Anyway, I was trying to keep my hopes up, even though all I could think about was death. And at some point, I asked you about dying, and you said it wouldn't be so bad, because the world was okay before you were born, so it would be fine without you."

A silence grows between them, as the very thought of a Fitz-less world creates a deep melancholy that starts to sink into Jemma's heart.

"Yes," Fitz finally says. "Those were my mother's words, and you made jokes about it."

She sighs, knowing that he's only pretending to be mad at her.

"Well, I have a habit of saying things in bad taste, apparently. Anyway, I've been thinking about it, and I think your mother was wrong."

He folds his arms. "Yes, Simmons. Please explain in detail how the woman who gave birth to me is so intrinsically flawed."

She rolls her eyes at him, though this time it's aimed more at herself than at Fitz. How is she possibly making this worse? At least he's not stuttering.

"Fitz, what I'm trying to say is that the world wouldn't be okay if you were gone. Think of all of the things you've accomplished! Think of all the life-saving inventions you've made!" She turns to him. "Did you know that Fury kept a mousehole device with him, and that he used it to escape from Hydra? You saved his life! You saved all of SHIELD, really. Without you, he might not have survived long enough to pass the reigns on to Coulson. And I, of course, would be stuck in some lab somewhere, yearning to see the world, but too afraid to go anywhere, because I'd have no one to share it with."

She bumps his shoulder with hers, and she hopes that he'll smile. Well, really, she's not sure what she's hoping for, but a smile will do. Instead, he looks down again, and a part of her sinks with him.

"You would have found somebody else. Somebody better."

She feels her heart clench. "No, Fitz, I wouldn't. I'm odd, and awkward."

"You're adorable."

"I'm intense. Most people can only take me in small doses. And they certainly can't handle me when I go into one of my science tirades. Even Skye thinks I'm a freak sometimes."

Unexpected tears form in her eyes, not necessarily because of Skye, but because she's having flashbacks to big rooms filled with chemistry sets and devoid of people. She's thinking of her pink party dress, and all the times she watched the other little girls huddle together on the opposite end of the room. It's silly, because her life has been wonderful, really. Extraordinary. But so often, it has been so very lonely. How would she have survived without Fitz?
"Hey."

He wraps his arms around her just as she's about to explode, containing her combustion until she's only sobbing harmlessly against his shoulder. Years of carefully buried sorrow are now overwhelming her, shooting out pain in waves, and she can't help but relive so many moments of being left out, or misunderstood, or mocked. These are things that so very rarely bubble up to conscious thought that Jemma thought the wounds healed long ago. Why do they suddenly open and bleed? She finds herself clutching at him, bringing him closer and feeling that he could never be close enough. She feels a frantic need to press all of his blood, flesh, and bones into hers, destroying both of them and giving birth to one, whole being.

She wants to set fire to the everything in their past and rise with him, newborn in the ashes.

In the end, she just wants him. Every single part of him.

"Jemma," he soothes, and whatever has come over her starts to subside. It seems to be a flash fire that has run its course. She pulls herself back into the present, into the boundaries of reality. "I'm sorry," she says, "I didn't mean to make this about me. I was just trying to tell you—"

"Shhh, it's okay."

His words are soft, and the pressure of his arms against her is just right.

"Fitz, you're so important. No matter what Coulson does."

She's close enough to hear his heartbeat, to feel the way his breath hitches.

"So are you, Jemma."

"Yes, but you are. You are."

"Okay."

"No, Fitz—"

"It's okay, Jemma. I'm important. You've convinced me."

His deadpan delivery coaxes a laugh out of her somehow, and he laughs, too. Then, they sit there in silence, holding on to each other until her tears have dried, and her breathing has returned to normal.

"You okay?"

Jemma nods, pulling out of his embrace.

"I'm not sure what that was."

Fitz lets out a thoughtful hum. "I like to think of Newton's third law of motion. That every action—"

"Has an equal and opposite reaction," Jemma finishes. They smile at each other, and the moment lingers, expanding into a small infinity.

"I've spent months watching things push at you, Jemma," says Fitz. "It seems only fair that you should be able to push back every so often."

With that, Fitz mumbles something about dinner, leaving her to wonder if she succeeded or failed.
No, she definitely failed.

_Ugh!_

Time for another approach.

---

Fitz lies awake in his bunk, enjoying the quiet that won't last long, as the team is due to arrive soon. So many things have happened in such a short time that he hardly knows what to make of it all. Jemma kissed him, Donnie worshipped him, Coulson rejected him, Jemma kissed him, Donnie ran away from him, and _Jemma kissed him_. It couldn't be because she likes him, could it? He's trying to piece it together, but the day has jumbled together, bits of it molding together into an incomprehensible mess. It was right after the team left, wasn't it? When he was venting to her? He feels a stab of fear as he realizes the possibility that she kissed him out of pity. He grabs his pillow and pulls it over his face to muffle a groan.

It was just a peck, he tells himself. Well, it was two pecks, really, but to some people that didn't mean anything. To some people, that's just saying hello. And he can't forget the showering of kisses she gave him in the pod that meant something quite different. Besides, he failed both Coulson and Donnie. No one else wanted him around. Why would she?

He learns, though, that maybe somebody did want him close, because there's a presence in his doorway.

He doesn't have to look up to know that it's not Jemma.

"Hunter wanted me to bring this to you," Skye says, walking forward to sit on the edge of his bed and hand him a beer. Fitz holds it in his hand, focusing on the coolness and remembering the process that created the condensation that drips down his thumb.

"Hey, you okay?"

He looks up at her, then back at the small drop of water that is finding its way down his skin to drip onto his sleeve. Some things are predictable, he reminds himself. A cold beer will make warm air condense into water droplets. Add enough cold beers to Fitz's system, and he'll get drunk.

Take away the beers and add one kiss from Jemma Simmons, and the effects are largely the same.

He looks at Skye, then at the bottle in his hands, and reasons that there still some things about this world that can surprise him. And if he can be so amazed by a hacker and a mercenary, is it so impossible to think that there are mysteries brewing behind the eyes of a certain biochemist?

Or that maybe he still has things to learn about himself?

"Yeah," Fitz hears himself say, "or, at least, I think I'm getting there."
Simmons finds herself in Coulson's office yet again, and she drums her fingers on his desk nervously as she waits for him to finish reviewing her report.

"Well," he eventually says, closing the folder to look at her, "I have to say, it looks like the data you collected on Gill is rather sparse." He ducks his head for a moment before looking back at her. "Go ahead and say it, Simmons."

"Sir?"

Coulson doesn't answer as much as give her a knowing look, and she waits a second to give him a chance to change his mind, but he doesn't.

"Sending Donnie on that mission was ill-advised, sir. You should have sent Fitz." She feels her lungs fill with relief even as she sends a wary glance Coulson's way. She's surprised to see him nodding.

"It seemed like a good call at the time, getting him out on an easy mission like that, where he'd have a chance to bond with other agents. Hydra is so intent on using him for his powers. I wanted to show him that he was more than that." He shakes his head. "Of course, if I'd known that someone was going to impersonate May and sabotage the Bus, I'd have planned the op differently. Very differently."

Simmons nods, but the drumming on the table becomes more intense, and she won't meet his gaze.

"Is there something else?"

"Well, sir..." Her eyes flick up to his, then back down. "About Fitz."

"What about Fitz?"

"Well, you see, he's doing really well, you know, and with Donnie here, he was doing even better. And Donnie's not the only one who... who misplaced his trust in the search for acceptance."

Coulson sighs. "I know."

"So, I think that when he wasn't chosen to go on the mission..."

"He took that as a sign that I don't have faith in him," Coulson finishes.

"Something like that, yeah." She folds her hands in her lap. "He's ready to go back in the field again. Has been for a while, I think."

"And that's your medical opinion?"

She nods again. "Yes, sir."

"And are you sure that's what he wants?"

She looks up at the ceiling, then in the director's eyes, and eventually gives out a sigh. "I'm afraid I have no idea what he wants."
Fitz is almost certain that no amount of tea is going to be strong enough to keep him awake today. Still, he can never really know until he tries. He's pretty sure that the coffee in the Playground is awful, anyway. He hasn't tried it, but he's noticed that May won't go anywhere near the stuff.

He needs to be awake, because at some point, Jemma will come walking through those doors. And when she does, he's going to need to be ready to talk to her. Not about the kisses, of course. He's sure he would melt into the floor before any words could come out. No, he needs to apologize for . . . well, everything that happened yesterday. He lost sleep analyzing yesterday's behavior, and he's decided that he shouldn't have been so frustrated, or angry, or needy. Not around her. Not when she has her own problems.

And she clearly does have her own problems, because she's late again. And as awkward as it's going to be to face her after she kissed him, he really will run to her room and bang on her door if she doesn't show up in the next five minutes.

_Ugh_, he thinks, dragging his fingers through his hair. He's spent hours thinking about all of this, and it still doesn't make any sense.

"Good morning, Fitz!"

He spins around to see her smiling at him, but he thinks that perhaps her smile is too wide, and her eyes are too bright. She's hiding something from him; he can feel it. He can see it, actually, in the way that she clutches at the fabric she's holding in her hands.

"Jemma! What, uh, what have you got there?"

She stares at him for a moment before following his gaze to her own hands.

"Oh! This is the, uh, the suit you made. Donnie's suit."

"Oh."

"Yeah." She looks up at him, then down at the suit. "Coulson wanted to meet with me in his office to discuss the data we collected, and he returned this to me. To us." She pauses, then takes a few hesitant steps before offering the suit to him. "I think he wanted to talk to both of us, but it was early, and he didn't want to wake you."

It takes Fitz a second before he realizes that she's still holding the suit out in the air, and he hasn't taken it yet. He swipes it out of her hands.

"Oh, good. I mean, I was wondering where you were." He can't look at her, so he inspects the suit instead. "It looks like it's in good shape." He dares to take a quick look at her. "I'm surprised, considering the hurry he was in to take it off."

"Yes, that was quite dreadful, wasn't it? Hang on . . . does that mean that he ran out of the bus and into the world . . . naked?"

His eyes finally meets hers, and he knows that the blush on his cheeks must match his own. He has to clear his throat.

"Um, well, no. Skye said that he was wearing a jumper and jeans when he left."

"So, _your_ clothes."
He's not sure why he's smiling, but at least she is, too.

"What? I mean, how . . . uh, how do you know that?"

He hears her chuckle. "Oh, Fitz. As if I haven't memorized all your outfits already. That's what you're wearing right now!"

His hands find their way to his waist, pulling at the fabric there. "Well, I . . ."

"It's a good look for you, of course. Always has been, especially with that . . ." Her hand starts to reach out toward what he thinks is his face, but she pulls it back and clears her throat. "I mean, did you leave any clothes behind in your old bunk?"

He has to think about it, but it's hard when she looks at him in a way that he can't quite decipher. "Oh, uh, maybe? When I woke up, everything was already moved into my new room, so I'm not sure. There are a few things that I haven't been able to find lately."

"Ah," she says, "that must be it. Skye did all the packing, so I can't say I'm surprised."

"Skye did it?"

She cocks her head at him. "Of course. Is something wrong?"

"Oh, no. It's just, I thought you did it." For some reason, his palms are sweating. "Because, you know, if I have to have a girl fondling my underthings, I'd want it to be you."

It's not until Jemma's jaw drops that he realizes what he's just said, and mother of all things, if there were any moment when he could spontaneously combust, why couldn't it be now? And did he just tell her that he wants her to . . . oh no. No. NO. This is not happening. This is not . . .

They stare at each other for a moment, Jemma still gaping and Fitz desperately trying to explode into a million pieces before he sees the way the light falls on her face and some insanity tries to make him leap forward and kiss her.

"Fitz?"

They both turn their heads to find Coulson standing in the doorway. "Can I have a word, please?"

He turns to Jemma and finds that she turned to him at the same time.

"Yes, sir. Of course."

He takes a peek to see the way Simmons is still staring at him before he follows Coulson into the hallway.

"I believe that you're familiar with Agent Carré?"

"Hmm?"

Fitz looks back again when he closes the double doors behind him, catches Jemma's eye, and almost walks into a wall. He shakes his head.

"Agent Carré. You know her?"

"Oh! Yes, sir. She's a biologist. Worked with Simmons, mostly."
Coulson looks over to him and nods. "There's been a situation, and I need an engineer to help make use of the quinjet we've acquired. Think you're up to it?"

Fitz's mouth hangs open for a bit as they round a corner.

"Of course, sir."

The very existence of the mission is technically need-to-know, so Simmons technically shouldn't be standing right outside the quinjet waiting for Fitz. Yet, here she is, and it's all she can do to avoid wringing the small package in her hands. She looks down, and the little label with his name is still intact. Trip has already made his way towards the cockpit, giving her a curious glance as he passed her, so as soon as Fitz arrives, they'll be off.

She's squirming as she waits, going over her plans again and again, because she wasn't supposed to put them into motion just yet. It was supposed to be at least a week or two before it got to this stage.

She goes over her mental checklist one more time, and decides that she's done the best she could under these circumstances. She'll just have to see how it goes.

When he finally appears, she doesn't miss the way he lights up when he sees her. Within a moment, he's racing towards her, stopping just a foot away like he ran into a force field. He tugs at his ear.

"Are you, are you coming with us?"

Simmons stares at him for a beat. "Oh! No, I just . . . wanted to see you off. Give you this."

"That's what I was trying to do, say goodbye," he says, looking at her, rather than the package she's putting in his arms, "and I couldn't find you, and then I . . . Jemma?" He's opened the wrapping now, and he lets the paper fall to the floor as he examines the dark fabric. "Donnie's suit?"

"I checked the measurements, and you are a bit bigger than he is, but I thought that it would stretch enough to fit you. Don't you think?"

He looks up to her, then back to the suit. "Yes, but I don't—"

"I want you to wear it."

"What?"

She swallows. "I want you to wear it."

He lets go of a sleeve to scratch his head. "I heard you, but—"

"We need more data. A control subject."

"Yes, but—"

"And you're going to be in a similar environment."

"Jemma."

"I want you to be safe!"

She's not sure why she felt the need to yell the last sentence at him. If anything, she's just confused him even more. He blinks back at her, as if he's afraid to speak.
"I'm sorry, Fitz. I . . . it's state-of-the-art ballistics protection, and we need the data. Please, Fitz. Just wear it, okay?"

Fitz shifts, his discomfort obvious, but she sees a smile start at the corner of his mouth.

"You, uh, you want me to be safe?"

She feels an urge to reach out, to touch him, and finds that her hand is on his forearm.

"Fitz, just put it on. Please?"

He seems mesmerized with the grip of her hand, watching it for a second before looking back at her.

"Sure, Jemma. I'll wear it."

When Trip ducks out of the hangar to tell Fitz they needed to leave right away, the specialist finds them grinning at each other like idiots.

It's not until they've taken off that Simmons gives in to the urge to tug at the black fabric hidden underneath her clothes.

"You ready for this, Fitz? You've been briefed?"

"I've been briefed, yeah."

He's still pulling the suit on, and he's too pleased with the way it fits him (and the fact that it is a thing touched by Jemma) to be too nervous about the mission. After all, what's so terrifying about infiltrating a Hydra facility for an emergency extraction?

Oh, right. Everything.

It's when they land on a rooftop that a question flits through Fitz's mind: since he knows what the danger is going in, he's trained for it, and he has a major brain injury, will he really be the ideal control subject for this experiment? But he doesn't have that much time to think about it, because Trip draws his gun and goes for the access door, and Fitz grabs his equipment to follow behind.

When Trip gets the all clear, Fitz blows the door open, and they both duck inside. The white walls and florescent lighting throw Fitz for a bit. It's almost . . . normal. Of course, when they turn a corner and Trip has to take out two guards, it becomes a more deadly kind of normal.

"You memorized the schematics?"

"Yeah, just get me through . . ." He points toward the southwest corner. "That way. Two floors down."

Trip shakes his head. "We should have made contact by now."

They make it down two flights of stairs before Trip has to shoot another guard, and Fitz doesn't want to ask where all the security has gone. He just wants to get the intel and get out of there. But it's only a few more turns before they make it to the server room.

"How much time do you need?"

Fitz is already kneeling by the servers and opening his case. "I've got it down to three minutes, twenty seconds."
He hears Trip let out a sigh. "Sorry man, but that's not good enough."

"No, that's with my bad hand. With both, I can do it. Definitely."

He's already working, but he feels a ray of sunshine coming from Trip's general direction. He's got everything he needs in under sixty seconds.

"Alright, let's go!"

They pick up their pace on the way out, but Fitz is keeping up. He still has to catch his breath when they stop, though.

"Where are they?" Trip asks, and Fitz is about to ask who exactly he means when he sees a tall woman in a red coat coming straight for them. Or, at least, she's trying to, but she's carrying Agent Carré bridal style, and Carré is kicking.

"Trip!"

Before the words leave his mouth, he feels Trip's arm sweep him to the side as the specialist moves forward. The woman drops Carré down and produces two silver batons. She raises them in the air, spins, and then slams them down on the two Hydra agents that appear behind her. With a few quick strikes, she's slammed one goon through a glass window, and the other lands on the floor and slides to a stop right at Fitz's feet.

"About time you showed up," says Trip, grinning. Fitz is starting to think that his briefing left out a few salient details.

"What," he says, "is happening."

The woman doesn't answer Fitz, instead grabbing Carré by the arms and pulling her down the hallway.

"No!" Carré screams, "I won't leave him! I won't!"

"There was a curve ball," the stranger says to Trip, "if you take her, I'll cover you."

Trip just nods before he takes Carré into his arms, then flings her over his shoulder and walks towards to exit.

"C'mon, Fitz!"

"Oh! Right."

Fitz scrambles to catch up to Trip, but he turns back when he hears gasping, and he sees a balding, middle-aged man struggle to come toward them.

"Kenneth!" Carré screams, "Kenneth, don't let them take me! I want to be with you!"

Fitz looks from Carré, still dangling over Trip's shoulder, to the overweight bureaucrat that the stranger takes out with one blow.

"HIM?"

"Ugh!" The woman complains, "mine is heavier!"

"At least he's quiet," Trip chuckles. When a few more guards come around the corner, Trip nods at
Fitz, who throws a smoke bomb, and the five of them manage to get into the quinjet a few moments later.

"No, no, no!" Carré yells when Trip dumps her in the quinjet floor, "I love him! You can't take me away, I love him!"

"That's why we're taking him with us," Trip explains as he produces an ICER and throws it to the stranger, who shoots Carré twice. "Welcome back, Agent Carré," he says, taking his place in the cockpit with a smile.

"Watch out!"

Fitz throws himself against the wall when he realizes that the man named Kenneth is reaching for him, but the stranger shoots him with the ICER before he gets far.

"Uh, I don't want to sound ungrateful, because I am," Fitz chokes out, still trying to catch his breath, "but who are you?"

The woman offers a hand, and he shakes it. "Bobbi Morse. Coulson sent me in to infiltrate Hydra, keep an eye on her." She nods towards Carré.

"And you didn't notice that she was being seduced by this . . ." He waves a hand in Kenneth's general direction and grimaces.

"Trust me, no one saw that coming."

Fitz hears a noise from the cockpit that can only be described as a guffaw.

It's past Jemma's usual bedtime, but it's not like she can sleep until Fitz comes back, anyway. So she pulls up the data that she's getting from Fitz's suit one last time, and is pleased to see that his vitals are steady. She wishes she could say the same about herself.

She's there when the quinjet lands, and she wrings her hands as she waits. Trip comes out first, holding onto what appears to be Carré's arms as support personnel rush forward with a stretcher. It seems that a tall woman is holding onto Carré's feet, and when the incapacitated agent is safely on the stretcher, Trip and the woman disappear into the quinjet to emerge with a middle-aged man. When they put the man on the second stretcher, the woman dusts off her hands, then folds her arms as the man gets carted away.

"Fitz!"

She only catches a glimpse of his profile before she lunges forward, slinging her arms around his neck as he ducks out into the open. When she realizes how close they are, she freezes, finding herself in a terrifying (and thrilling) place.

"I'm fine, Jemma."

She loves the sparkle in this blue eyes, and the way his brogue curls around her name. Before she can stop herself, she's lifting herself on her toes to kiss him once more.

But, before she reaches him, he pulls her in for a hug, and she ends up smushing her lips awkwardly against his neck. He pulls back before she knows it, and he's not looking at her. He's looking at the she-Hulk that came back with him.
"Her name is Bobbi," he says with a smile on his lips. "She's amazing."

Jemma looks the woman over and quickly disagrees.

Chapter End Notes

I had a hard time naming Agent Carré, but I ended up naming her after Mathilde Carré, a WWII double agent. Her story is [here](#). In previous drafts, Carré was named after June Tull, an English woman who married a German POW while he was still a prisoner. It's an interesting story; [check it out](#)!
"Why are you looking at him like he made out with your sister?"

Jemma turns to where Skye is leaning against the wall. She's somewhat impressed to see Skye awake this early.

"Come again?"

Skye nods toward where Fitz and Bobbi are talking, "Simmons, if looks could kill, Fitz would be toast."

"That's ridiculous. Fitz hasn't even met my family."

Skye groans and pushes against the wall to stand up straight. "You know that's not what I mean."

She comes up until she's side by side with Simmons, then nudges her in the shoulder. "What's wrong?"

Simmons looks at Fitz again, and she hopes that Skye doesn't hear the small sigh that escapes her.

"Nothing's wrong. I just need to talk to Fitz. And this Agent Morse character—"

"Character?"

Simmons clears her throat. "Agent Morse is taking up Fitz's time. That's all."

She's not looking at Skye, but she can imagine Skye's smile. "Wow. So you manage Fitz's social calendar now, huh? I guess we'll have to cancel that movie night we were going to have."

Simmons whips her head to Skye. "Movie night?"

"Yeah, Fitz talked me into watching *Paranormal Activity*, but you know . . . Simmons?"

Simmons realized that she's staring off at Fitz again. "Hm?"

"You wanna to join us?"

"Oh, no thanks. I wouldn't want to intrude."

Skye shoots Simmons a look. "How could you possibly be intruding? You and Fitz are practically conjoined twins. Besides, when you're not there, he talks about you so much that you might as well be."

A question forms on Simmons lips, but she's distracted by Hunter, of all people, who grunts at Morse and Fitz as he stomps by.

"They used to be married, did you know that?"

Simmons turns back to Skye. "Morse and Hunter?"

"Yeah, she's the demonic ex he always tells stories about. So many things make sense now."

Simmons frowns. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, you know how it is," Skye explains, flipping her hair over her shoulder, "Boy meets Girl, Boy
falls in love with Girl, Boy loses Girl, and Boy chases after every other girl within a twenty-mile radius to prove to himself that he's over Girl."

Simmons shakes her head. "I'm not following."

"Okay, well you know how he's been throwing himself at all those women?" She waits for a second until Simmons nods. "You see, they got divorced, but he never got over her. And sometimes when people want someone they're not supposed to want, they try to distract themselves by going after someone who is slightly more attainable. Someone who won't stick." Skye smirks. "That's what he's been doing this whole time. And he can't shut up about her, which just proves how right I am."

At that very moment, Mack walks in to talk to Morse and Fitz, and suddenly the place feels a little crowded. Simmons mumbles something about analyzing data and leaves.

But she can't, of course, go to the lab without first passing by Fitz's bunk, which she, obviously, can easily slip into and find the comb that, as usual, is sitting on his dresser.

Really, it's all in the name of science.

"Morning Fitz!"

She must have been really engrossed in whatever sample she has under her microscope, because she jumps when Fitz walks in. He doesn't miss the way she puts her body between him and the microscope, and he has other concerns right now, but something's off with her, and it's distracting.

"Hey."

He's standing in the middle of the lab, staring at her, and she seems just as on edge as he is. She draws his attention to the hard drive in his hands.

"Is that the . . . data that you stole?"

He sees the smile that plays on her lips, and, despite everything, he can't help but wonder if she's imagining him jumping out of that quinjet, clad in tactical gear and brandishing his equipment case. Maybe that's the reason her hands curl around the edge of the lab table. Fitz clears his throat, remembering the drive he's holding.

"Coulson asked me to search it for anything related to the attacks. Um, I was hoping you could help. That is, if you're not too . . ."

They both start to speak at once, words half-formed as they stumble over each other.

"Yeah, if you need m-my help," she finally says, walking over to him, "I suppose I've got some time."

"Well, unfortunately, the drive was damaged during our escape," he explains, but now she's close enough to let him look into her hazel eyes, and his jaw goes slack. He swallows. "We'll, uh, we'll have to repair it to access any of its in-intel."

"What?" he asks.
She snaps her mouth shut. "Just, um, you look different, that's all."

He looks down at himself and back at her, because he's the same as he's been since she came back.

"Oh."

"Not bad different," she corrects, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear and dropping her eyes to his lips, "just . . ."

He cuts her off by surging forward and capturing her lips with his, kissing her tenderly, desperately as he cups her waist to draw her closer. A thought in the back of his mind tells him that this is wrong, that they have work to do, and maybe she doesn't even want this. But when she starts kissing him back, and when she starts to put her fingers through the hair at the base of his neck, all other thoughts leave him.

It's when she puts a hand on his chest and pushes him away, hard, that reality crashes back on him.

"Wait a minute," she says, trying to catch her breath, "you said there were attacks?"

He gapes at her for a second before swallowing. "Uh, yeah. Yeah." He cards his fingers through his hair, closing his eyes. "At the UN. Hydra made it look like it was us." When he opens his eyes again, there she is, watching him, and the distance between them seems so wrong. It's her worried eyes that keep him where he is. "The weapon they used, it was, uh, it was biological."

"And the drive is damaged?"

"What? Oh, yes. Shouldn't be h-, um, difficult to fix. I was able to get a lot of the data off their servers, so we should be able to see what tech they're using, and what their next move is."

She nods emphatically. "Good. That's, uh, that's good, so we . . . we should get straight to work, then."

With that, she walks past him and toward his desk, but he thinks he sees the hint of a blush on her cheeks as she passes him.

Jemma Simmons has absolutely no idea what is happening.

Well, she knows exactly what's going on with Hydra and the UN. The data Fitz stole included lists of Hydra's undercover agents, and Julien Beckers, Belgium's Minister of Foreign Affairs, is named among them. There are a lot of other things hidden in those files, but for now, this is enough to save the day. Once again, Fitz is a hero.

Once again, everything is Fitz.

She still has more tests to run, and more data to compile before she can reach any sort of conclusion, and now she must factor in not only the texture of his lips, but also the surprising softness of his hair. And there are so many other factors, two of which are now storming down the corridor. The glass is muffling the noise, so she can hear the tone rather than the actual words Bobbi and Hunter are spitting at each other, but hurt and anger radiate off the both of them. She takes a deep breath and holds it until they're out of sight. Whatever happens between her and Fitz, it can't turn into that.

And if, for whatever reason, Fitz stopped standing next to her, or stopped being her . . . whatever he is, she wouldn't know what to do with herself. But how can she go back to what they were before, now that he gave her a piece of himself? How can she just pretend that she doesn't want more? That
she doesn't want all of him?

It's going to take a while before she'll get any results from the samples she's analyzing, so she decides to take a stroll through the corridors, going the opposite direction that Hunter and Morse were headed. So many things have changed in such a short time, and how is she supposed to know what to make of it all? How is she supposed to even put it all in a category? But, once again, her thoughts go back to that kiss, which was much better than the kisses she gave him, and far and beyond the best (real) first kiss she's ever had. Not that she hasn't been kissed with more passion (she has, and it was often too much for her liking), or even skill (though she didn't give Fitz enough time to give her a proper demonstration). She's not sure what it is. But she wonders if a kiss like that would have taken place before her world fell apart. This is a new Fitz after all, and she feels so silly knowing that she used to pine over the Fitz that was. He would have been too terrified to kiss her on the Bus (and rightly so; she likely would have slapped him), or at SciOps, or anywhere other than this new home they made from scraps. Maybe it's the falling apart that made all the difference. Maybe it was Fitz pulling himself together that made him stronger, more confident, and, she admits, incredibly attractive.

Things have changed, surely, but she's starting to believe that the changes and challenges night not be all bad.

"Simmons!"

She turns her head to find Trip coming toward her. "Hey, Simmons. Koenig wants your help with something, you wanna follow me?"

When she nods, he gives her a somewhat exasperated smile before leading her to the area that is connected to the orientation room with one-way mirror. Koenig (she's not sure which Koenig) smiles in greeting before returning his attention to his clipboard. She looks through the window and sees that Carré is being grilled by another Koenig.

"Agent Simmons, thanks for coming," says Koenig One. "We're trying to gauge Agent Carré's loyalty to SHIELD upon her return. I'm hoping you can provide us with some added insight, seeing as you used to work with her and all."

Simmons thinks that she would much rather take a blood sample, or perhaps some biofeedback readings, but she nods at the Koenig and resigns herself to analyzing the behavior of a person she barely knows based on cues from body language. This is an area at which she does not excel, but she'll try her best. Maybe they'll let her take a peek at the data from the lie detector once the orientation is finished.

On the other side of the glass, Carré grits her teeth and stares Koenig Two down.

"Look, you can tell me whatever you want," she seethes, "I was in Hydra; I know what they do. But I don't care anymore, alright? I know Kenneth has made his mistakes, but you're not going to change the way I feel about him."

Simmons feels a shiver run down her spine. Kenneth Turgeon's personnel file was one of the first things she and Fitz found in their search through the stolen data. Just yesterday, the man Carré is protecting was spearheading a project to create a weapon with the potential to kill millions, if not billions of people.

It's frightening to think of the sensitive information Carré would have access to—the location of the Playground, the projects she worked on, and even the identities of most of the agents SHIELD has left. Not to mention that she helped with Fitz's treatment! How hard would it be for Hydra to devise a
Leopold Fitz has casually decided never to enter the lab again.

At first, he didn't have enough spare gray matter to comprehend anything other than the feel of Jemma against him and the impending doom of Hydra's unknown plans. But after he reported his findings to Coulson and the adrenaline stopped pumping, he realized that he kissed the woman he loves, and she pushed him away.

And really, how could he have been so stupid? He's known her longer than she's been a legal adult. A darkness settles in his heart as he compares himself to Mack and Mike Peterson. Fitz is doing so well these days, but he's not them, and he's still not back to being who he was. He's not even sure that he wants to be the old Fitz anymore. As strange as it sounds, he likes himself now. He can see his own progress and his own strength.

But does she? Or is she still looking at her charts, still holding him to a standard he can never reach?

No, he'll give her some space. Let her sort it all out. She likes sorting things. Clearly, she's reached some kind of tipping point, and she's finally processing all the grief he's caused her. That's the only explanation he can think of to account for this odd behavior.

But as he walks through the still corridors, he hears footsteps that he knows all too well, and his plan for avoiding Simmons is over before it's begun. She puts a hand on his arm to stop him.

"They're letting Ward go," she says.

The words are so unexpected that he has none to give in response. His mouth opens and closes, but in the end, he just waits for her to make it make sense.

"They're not letting him go, really," she continues. "They're just transferring him to his brother so he can stand trial. Coulson made some deal." She folds her arms. "Why does that make me so sad? I hate him."

Fitz has to think for a moment. "I guess knowing we can control him makes it easier."

She likes control. Well, not being in control, necessarily. She likes knowing that things are well in hand, and there hasn't been much of that lately.

"I'm such a coward," she whispers, and he quirks an eyebrow at her.

"I don't know about that," he counters, "I saw you jump onto a live grenade once." That makes her smile, and it's a small smile, but it's catching. "You're the bravest person I know."

If anyone's a coward, he reasons, it's the man who kissed a woman and tried to hide from her. He dares to put his hand over hers, but before he can, she takes it away.

"Come on," she says, "let's at least see him off."
He thinks she means that they're going to where he will be put into an armored truck, but instead she leads him to where Skye is. When she puts a supportive hand on Skye's back, he understands why. But Skye gives an apologetic smile and takes a step away, and they both give her the space she needs. He knows that Ward and Skye have been playing a dangerous game, and if she needs a moment to adjust to the fact that the game is over, Fitz will let her have it. So, he and Jemma stand together, and after a few moments, her fingers twine with his.

He looks down at the hand that he is now holding, then up to meet the eyes that are looking back at him. He wonders what she's thinking, and he's just about to ask when there's a commotion in the hallway, and they rush to see what it is. Skye stands in front of him, and Jemma is next to her, leaning on the doorframe, but still holding his hand. They watch in determined silence as Coulson comes into view, leading a gruesome parade. Behind Coulson, Ward is surrounded by armed guards, but neither their weapons nor Ward's handcuffs keep Fitz from feeling small. He squeezes Jemma's hand and feels her squeeze back.

The traitor doesn't seem to mind his circumstances much until he sees his prey.

"Skye," he calls, and Fitz finds his soft tone both familiar and nauseating. Before he can react, Jemma surges forward, and he's afraid that she's going to attack him. Instead, she puts herself between Ward and Skye.

"If I ever see you again," Jemma warns, "I'll kill you."

He's never seen this side of her, never heard her voice come out in daggers of ice, but then they've never faced a danger like this one. She's never stood toe-to-toe with pure evil before. And here she is, standing in front of a fire-breathing dragon and promising to slay him. That's my girl, he thinks, though she isn't his. That's my girl.

When Ward is out of sight, Jemma lets her hand slip out of his, and in unison, she puts a hand on Skye's arm while Fitz puts a hand on Skye's back. It's good for him to remember that he and Jemma aren't the only ones fighting hard battles. When Skye lets out a, "Thanks, guys," he and Jemma share a smile. For just a moment, it seems like all the darkness has been dispelled, and everything is how it should be.

They stand there for a while, in a small huddle, until Skye makes her excuses and leaves. As they watch her go, Jemma's hand comes to rest on his forearm. She turns to him with a heavy look in her eyes and says, "Remember how it used to be? Before all this? Before we knew about Ward?"

He swallows, because his mouth has gone dry. He tries not to think about before. He tries, because he spent months cursing the person he became after, and only recently has he started to think that After Fitz might be an okay guy, after all.

With careful consideration, he says, "It's never going to be like that again. I'm . . ." He trails off, unable to tell her the awful truth, pushing away the realization that if she doesn't want the man he is now, he's going to have to find a way to let her go. No, he tries to think of something, anything else. "Of course, if you're feeling . . . if you're feeling, um, if you miss the old days . . ." He steps away from her, searching the room so he doesn't have to look at her face. "Well, I don't see one here, but I'm sure we can find a fire extinguisher somewhere."

When he has the courage to look back at her, he sees her regarding him carefully. He freezes, having no idea what to do until she closes the space between them, kisses him on the cheek, and leaves.

He stares after her, long after she's gone, wondering what she sees when she looks at him. Of course, she's his best friend, his hero, who not only plucked him out of the bottom of the ocean, but also kept
him afloat amidst the treacherous waves of his recovery. And, somehow, he has to find a way to be as brave as she is. If he wants to know how she really sees him, he's going to have to ask her. He'll just have to play it cool while he figures out how.

But first, tea.
Jemma dry washes her hands as she looks over the results of all the tests she's been running, and feels a kind of anxiety grip her heart as she realizes that it's exactly what she expected. Shouldn't she be happy about this? But no, instead she feels the need to sit down, take a breath, and digest the fact that all her work has lead to this one terrifying moment. Her brain doesn't really have the processing power to handle what needs to happen after this moment.

After all, it's late, and between what's been going on with Hydra, the UN, and Ward, emotions have just been all over the place.

Not to mention the variety of interpersonal interactions that have made her question pretty much everything.

Which is why she needs to take emotion out of the picture. She needs to think about this logically. Like the scientist she is. She looks over the results again, finding that the adrenaline subsides when she treats this like it's work. If she imagines that the presentation she's creating is for Coulson, it becomes doable. Her work is thorough, and by the time she has her speech memorized, she looks up and finds that the lab is as silent as a graveyard. Which is what she wanted in the first place, but when she looks at the clock and realizes that it's that late, she starts to worry that she's missed her chance. There's no telling what could happen in the morning.

But when she goes to the mess hall, there he is. She breathes a sigh of relief.

"Fitz!"

He looks up from his tea to blink at her.

"Simmons?"

His expression is far from encouraging (he almost looks nervous), but she tries to take it in stride, making her smile that much wider. She tells him that she needs help with a lab problem, and within moments he is walking down the hall with her, and she is managing not to blurt everything out. She's even keeping her hands from shaking.

"I think we'll need to look through more of the backlogged files tomorrow," Fitz says, and she is so caught up in her own thoughts that it takes her a second to realize what he means. "Hopefully we can at least get enough intel to balance out what Carré gave them."

"Oh," she says, reminding herself to breathe, "Koenig thinks Carré got pulled out before she gave up anything of value."

"Well, we still need to sort through the files. Do you have any idea what we might find? Maybe more about that weapon they used?"

Jemma sighs. "I definitely want to figure out how it works. We didn't get a chance to look at it with everything that's going on."

"Yeah," agrees Fitz as he rubs his jaw, "and who knows how many they made. We'll need to find an, um, a way to-"
"Counteract the bombs, yes." As they enter the lab, Jemma tries to lock the double door with as much subtlety as she can manage, reminding her that this is just a presentation, just a scientific discussion, and there is really no reason to be so nervous about it. "I'd like to direct your attention to the holotable now, please."

Fitz follows her direction without question, and everything is going according to plan, so the innocent and expectant look on her best friend's face shouldn't rattle her nerves. She defended her thesis at sixteen in front of a board full of grumpy old men. She can certainly hold her own against one.

"So," she starts, "I'm sure you're wondering why I've brought you here today."

Fitz furrows his brow. "I work here. With you."

Jemma clears her throat, "Yes, of course, but I'm sure you're wondering why I've asked you to be here so late," she swallows, "outside of usual lab hours. Usually we're only here when there's some type of emergency, but first and foremost, I want to assure you that this is not the case."

She dares to look up at him and thinks that maybe her practiced hand gestures might be too dramatic for the occasion. She takes another breath and goes back to the speech.

"Anyway, I've analyzed your DNA, and I've discovered that you have an above-average amount of vasopressin receptors." She pulls up the data on the holotable, training her eyes on the graphs even though she can feel him looking at her.

"You analyzed . . . what?"

"Vasopressin receptors. The most recent studies on human pair bonding link them to fidelity in men."

She quickly pulls up the study to show him, but a peek at his expression tells her that this is may not be a satisfactory answer.

"You're using neurobiology to calculate how likely I am to cheat on a girl," he deadpans.

"Yes! Well, that's not all. In male prairie voles, more receptors means that the vole is more apt towards choosing a female to bond with. Did you know that they mate for life? It's fascinating, really."

When Fitz stands up and starts pacing, she starts worrying her bottom lip.

"Okay, but why are you even . . ." He raises his hands in apparent exasperation. "I mean, what does this have to . . ."

"In females," she continues, ignoring his question entirely, "the corresponding hormone is oxytocin, but there hasn't been much research on the genetic side of that, so I can't really use a DNA sample to produce similar results, but with the data I received from the suits . . ."

He stops pacing. "Suits . . . plural?"

"Yes. I made another one based off of the designs."

"My designs."

"Well, they're both of ours, really."

"Yes, but why . . ." He pinches the bridge of his nose. "Why didn't you tell me?"
“Oh, well I didn’t want you to know.”

She waits for him to respond, but he doesn’t, and if she lets this silence continue, she’ll eventually have to look at him.

“Anyway, I made specific modifications to both suits so that it could track even more biological factors, like the presence of certain bonding chemicals.”

“Bonding chemicals.”

“Yes. There’s oxytocin and vasopressin, which I’ve already mentioned—they are linked to attachment. But there’s also testosterone and estrogen, which are involved in sexual attraction. And then we have dopamine, norepinephrine and serotonin, which are involved in emotional attraction. I’ve modified the suits to monitor all of these variables.”

The sound that escapes Fitz’s lips is something like a confused moan.

“So, here’s all the data I’ve collected on you just yesterday.”

She pulls up several graphs and charts that show the changes in his biological indicators over time.

“Jemma, no.”

“Hmm?”

“Jemma, you should have . . . this is private.”

She ignores the impulse to turn and cock her head at him. “I know. That’s why I waited until now, when nobody would be around. Don’t worry, Fitz. This is just between us.”

“That’s not what I—”

“And here’s the data I’ve collected from myself.”

Her heart is pounding, and her palms are sweating, but she pulls up the charts and graphs that correspond with his and lines them up so the timecodes match.

“You wore the other suit?”

“Of course I did. Though, now that I think of it, I probably should have created a third suit for a control subject.” A wave of panic hits her as she realizes that the science might not be as sound as she thought. What if . . . no, she’s gotten this far. She’ll just present her findings, and if there are any holes in her research, she can count on Fitz to point them out. “So, I checked these against my bloodwork from my last physical, and my oxytocin levels are elevated. Do you see here?” She points to a portion of the graph. “Eleven thirty-two AM? That’s when we were saying goodbye to each other before you left for your mission. Do you see these spikes? Everything seems to be elevated, even heart rate. The levels wax and wane as the day goes on, of course, as we are each exposed to different stimuli.”

“What happened here?”

Fitz points to a large spike around three fifty-two PM.

“Oh, that’s when we were going through some old files and I realized that they were signed by Peggy Carter. It’s amazing, Fitz. I’ll have to show you.”
“Oh,” he says. She hears him fidget. “But you were talking about dopamine-“

“And serotonin. And the rest, of course. Well, I’d like to bring your attention . . . here. Ten twenty-five PM.”

“That’s about when I got back.”

“Right. And you, well, we greeted each other. Huge spike, as you can see. But what’s interesting is that the magnitude of the spike is about the same in both of us. And that, overall, our baseline levels are much higher than they were a year ago. But, most importantly, all of our levels are elevating at about the same rate.”

“Jemma,” he whispers, turning to her, “are you saying that you’re in love with me?”

She can’t look at him, because her heart is beating even faster, and she’s starting to shake, but she has to hold it together. The data. Talk about the data.

“Well, really, the data shows that we’re in love with each other.”

“Yes, but are you in love with me?”

She’s trying to figure out a way to skirt the question when suddenly his hands are on her shoulders, gently pulling her to face him.

“Well, the science clearly shows—“

“Forget about the science,” Fitz says, and she can hear herself gasp, “just tell me if you’re doing all this as an elaborate way to tell me how you feel about me.”

“Well . . .” His eyes are so blue and her mouth is getting drier by the minute. “I was . . . I was trying to show you.”

“Show me.”

“Yes.”

“But you are in love with me?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.”

Jemma swallows. “But Fitz, there’s so much more than that. We’re very well-suited for each other, as you know, but the data indicates that an attempt at pair bonding would be very successful.”

Fitz blinks, then pulls away from her. “Hang on, do you mean marriage?”

“Uh, well, not today. That’s not . . . you shouldn’t . . . I mean, in the future. Because, you know, it’s a big risk, but if there’s a high probability of a successful outcome, then the risk is worth it, don’t you think? I mean, well, we’re best friends, as well as professional partners, and it would be silly to gamble away something that precious on a whim, but I think-”

“We should? Jemma.”

Her heart sinks.
“What?” She takes a deep breath. “Don’t you . . . haven’t you considered—“

“Have you considered me? This?” He points to his head. “You know as well as I do that my progress started tapering off months ago. The aphasia, the lack of coordination—that’s not going away. I’ve been . . . I’ve been trying to find the courage to tell you.”

She looks him over, noticing that his breathing is heavy and his bad hand is shaking. She takes it in hers.

“You’re doing fine now.”

She strokes his hand with her thumb, and it feels like the bravest thing she’s ever done. The shaking subsides.

"Jemma, the person I was before . . . I’m not going to be him again.”

She’s watching their hands, and a small part of her is wondering what data the suits would collect if they were wearing them now, but most of her is trying to find the words. This may be the most important moment in her life, or at least the most important since she formally joined SHIELD, and she can’t blow it now. It takes her a few moments, but eventually she just decides to let down her barriers and trust that her truth will be safe with him.

“Fitz, I . . . I didn’t love him.” She raises her eyes to his. “I mean, I did, but not like . . . well, maybe I could have, but I didn’t. I mean, sure, you’ve changed, but so have I, and . . . and I hate that this happened to you. I hate it more than anything, but really, it happened to us, and if it made me . . . made me see you, you know, then I guess it means that good things can come out of the worst circumstances.”

She finishes rambling when she hears a rattling behind her, and it takes her a terrified second to realize that Skye is trying to get through the doors Jemma locked. She mumbles apologies as she races to let Skye in.

She's afraid that Skye's going to ask why the door was locked, but the hacker only wants to tell Fitz that *Paranormal Activity* will have to wait, considering, well, everything. Fitz barely has time to agree before she walks off, and Jemma can almost see the dark cloud that follows Skye down the hallway. When Jemma looks over to Fitz, she can see how concerned he is.

She's only gotten through the first half of her presentation, but she got to the most important points, didn't she? And they seemed to have been positively received.

Besides, it's been a long day for everybody.

A wave of exhaustion overtakes her, and she fails at stifling a yawn. When Fitz gives her a questioning look, she says, "I think we should go to bed. No! That's not what I meant!" He smiles, and her cheeks grow warm, "I mean, you know, in our own beds. Separately. And then tomorrow, we can talk more?"

"Yeah," Fitz says, fighting a blush of his own, "I'd like that."

She watches him leave, knowing that Skye will have Fitz's shoulder to cry on for as long as she needs it. Jemma didn't think it was possible, but she's falling deeper by the minute.

Fitz’s fist hovers over the door to Jemma’s bunk as he listens for tale-tell noises from within. The Playground is unusually quiet this morning, and though the sounds of birds singing don't actually
penetrate the reinforced walls of their underground bunker, there is a rather odd tune playing from
the general direction of Coulson's office that gives a very similar effect. The air feels cleaner, now
that the monster in the basement has been expelled, and some other things have been set free. And,
on the other side of this very door, there lives a girl who loves him.

He rubs a hand over his now-smooth face, straightens his tie, and knocks.

No response.

He stands there, stupefied for a second, when he hears footsteps coming his way.

"Oh, there you are!"

Jemma closes the space between them in a moment, but before he can react, she takes his arm. He
looks down at her hand, then up at Jemma's worried expression.

"Is something wrong?"

Jemma looks behind her, as if she's afraid of being overheard. "Ward escaped," she finally says, and
Fitz feels the world spin around him. He puts a hand over hers to steady himself.

"Esc-escaped? He had armed guards!"

"I know." Jemma lowers her gaze, taking in a deep breath. "I'm still not sure how he managed to
break free from the restraints. Carpometacarpal joint dislocation, maybe? I just . . . ."

"Hey," he says, daring to cup her cheek with his free hand, "hey, it's okay."

"It's not okay, Fitz," she counters, but she leans into his touch, anyway. "They've sent half the
Playground out after him—May, Trip, everybody."

"Bobbi, too?"

He's not sure why she frowns at the question. "I would assume so. Why?"

Fitz shrugs. "Nothing. I had an idea for an improvement in her weaponry. She likes to use these, uh,
batons? And I was thinking that if we . . . ." He realizes that she's folding her arms and scowling. He
withdraws his hand. "What?"

"I don't see why this is a relevant topic of conversation."

Fitz stares at her for a stunned second before answering. "Well, I was hoping to take a look before
she had to go out in the field, I guess. Put some tech in them. But, you know, she'll probably fine,
anyway. She's more than a match for Ward." He cocks his head at her. "They'll get him, Jemma. Don't worry."

She shakes her head. "Fitz, that's not . . . I mean it is, but . . . ." When she trails off and avoid her gaze,
he puts a hesitant hand on her shoulder. It takes her a moment to look back up at him.

He's sure that she's about to say something when Skye and Coulson walk down the hallway with
determined faces. They barely seem to notice him or Jemma as they pass. Once they're out of sight, Jemma turns to him.

"Do you think she's alright?"

He's so busy trying to figure out how this all fits that it takes him a second to recognize that she asked
him a question.

"Oh, yeah, I'd say so. She wanted him to be gone as much of the rest of us. It's not like, uh, like she
was in love with him, or anything."

It's not until Jemma purses her lips that he realizes what he just said.

"Fitz," she starts, eye watching her feet, "I was wondering . . . well, I guess I . . . I didn't finish
presenting my findings."

Fitz furrows his brow. "Findings? Oh. Findings." He adjusts his tie. "Yes, I was hoping, uh, you said
we would talk?"

She gives him a strained smile. "Yes, well, I still have some graphs to show you."

"Graphs?" He shakes his head. "Jemma." He squeezes her shoulder, and she meets his eyes.

They stare at each other before she breaks eye contact and sighs. "I don't know how to do this." She
rolls her eyes. "I just, I love you, Leopold Fitz. I love you, alright?"

His jaw drops, and he stands stunned for a moment, but then his mouth melts into a smile, and his
whole body relaxes. "Okay," he says. He takes one of her hands and kisses it gently. "Okay, Jemma
Simmons."

She seems to take him in, like she's never seen him before, and honestly, he's never seen a light burn
in her eyes quite like this. He loses himself in it for a moment, and for the first time since he gave her
that one last breath, he feels like he's actually breathing.

"So," he says, shyly tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, "what do we do now? If you . . . if we,
know, feel like this, and we want to . . . feel like this, doesn't that make us a couple? A romantic
couple?"

She considers it. "Well, yes, but you . . ." She trails off, shaking her head. "Yes. Yes, of course we
are."

He furrows his brow. "So you're my girlfriend."

It's more of a question than a statement, and Fitz can tell by the look in her eyes that the whole idea
of him actually having a girlfriend is as weird to her as it is to him. Still, she seems to be able to get
her head around it.

"Yes," she answers with a nod.

"And I'm your boyfriend."

"Obviously."

"Well, I just wanted to be sure." He finds himself nodding, too. "I've never been a boyfriend before;
I'm not sure how this all works."

A smile curls around her lips, and she steps forward to lace her fingers through his.

"Well, we usually figure things out together, don't we?"

He looks down at their hands, and back at her. "Yeah."
"Yeah." She looks up into his eyes, and he finds that the labels they've just applied to themselves seem so small. "You're still my best friend in the world," she says. He cups her cheek.

"Yeah, and you're more than that, Jemma."

He untangles their fingers so he can cup her other cheek, taking a breathless moment to admire the loving face he holds in his hands. He leans forward to plant a trail of kisses from ear to ear, going left to right with a tenderness that he hopes conveys the words he doesn't quite have yet. He wants to tell her that he loves every piece of her, every particle, and soon he feels a tug on his tie as Jemma gently pulls his lips down to hers. This is the way it should have gone before, the way it always should have been. His lips were made to graze hers, to smile at her touch and the knowledge that he is finally hers. When they break for air, she rests her foreheads against his.

"Fitz?"

"Hmm?"

"You're more than that, too."

When Mack helps Fitz heave the corpse onto Jemma's examination table, Fitz looks around and is somewhat distressed when he can't find her.

"How'd you two manage to acquire a body?" asks Skye. She stands next to Coulson, and both of them have folded arms and weary looks.

"Corpsey diem. Seize the dead." He raises his voice as he delivers the joke, because it took him the whole trip to think of that one, and she has to be around somewhere.

"Like I told my man here," says Mack, "you want something in life, you've gotta grab it and walk out like you own it."

Fitz stifles a laugh, because that's precisely what they did (minus a few gory details he'd prefer not to think of), when he hears a voice behind him.

"Is that all it takes?"

He turns to the voice, and there she is, examining something at a workspace behind him.

"Really?" Her tone is as bright as her smile. "Because I always thought if you wanted something in life, you had to work hard and earn it." She walks toward the corpse, putting a hand on Fitz's shoulder to place a kiss on his cheek as she passes him. "Give me some room, please."

Mack and Fitz are backing up without argument when Skye says, "What just happened?"

Fitz sighs. "She needs room to work, Skye. It's standard—"

"That is so not what I meant!" Skye's conspiratorial eyes go from Jemma to Fitz and back again. "Did something happen between you two?"

It's at this very moment the it registers to Fitz that Jemma kissed him in public, which is wonderful, but also creates a whole set of problems he isn't quite ready to deal with.

"Wait a minute," Skye continues, "is this why you two locked yourselves in the lab last night?" She slaps a hand over her mouth. "Were you about to . . ."
"Um," he stammers. "Well, er . . ."

"I, uh . . ." says Jemma.

"It's not—"

"Really, it's—"

"Um—"

"Time!" Coulson commands, and they both clamp their mouths shut as Jemma slips her hand in Fitz's. "If you two have something to tell me," the director continues eyeing their twined hands, "you can meet me in my office. Later. Right now, Simmons has a corpse to examine."

"Right!" exclaims Jemma.

"So, I'll just . . . I'll just go . . . then."

"Oh no, Fitz! You don't have to—"

"It's a corpse, Jemma."

"Oh! Right."

He has enough courage to return her peck on the cheek before he scampers off, grinning like a fox in a hen house.

"You know, you've still never said it."

They're sitting together on the floor of the lab, though Jemma is not sure why. It seems that helping the director of SHIELD use Hydra tech to find his lost memories is fairly draining. Next to her, Fitz pinches the bridge of his nose.

"I already told him; you just didn't hear me."

She whips her head to face him. "Who?" She watches as he furrows his brow at her.

"Mack. I told Mack that the alien DNA didn't make Coulson crazy." He rolls his eyes, and she can tell he's about to start grumbling, so she puts a hand on his thigh to stop him.

"No, that's not what I meant."

She watches as his gaze tracks her hand, staring at it for a moment before he puts his hand over hers. It's a simple gesture; one he's done so many times since SHIELD fell, but now it has a new meaning for them. She can't hold back her smile, despite everything. She has to force herself to continue her train of thought.

"Fitz, I told you what you mean to me."

He nods. "Yes, and so did I."

She purses her lips. "No, you didn't. Not in those words, specifically."

"What words?" His expression turns quizzical once again. "You mean the stuff about dopamine? You're the biochemist."
She wants to correct him, but opts to stare him down until his eyes grow wide, and he says, "Oh, you mean those words." She nods encouragingly.

Fitz lets out a sigh, then clears his throat with a flourish. "Jemma Simmons," he says, "you are worth drowning for." When she scrunches her nose, he tries again. "Jemma Simmons, you are the sun shining in the east. And you should kill the moon, or something." He smiles when she giggles, clearly pleased with himself. When she nudges him with her elbow, his face becomes serious, and his takes one of her hands in both of his.

"Jemma Simmons, I love you."

He says it with such adorable sincerity that she can't help but grab at his tie for the umpteenth time and draw him into a kiss. She smiles against his lips, and when his hand is at the nape of her neck, and hers clutch at his shirt, she thinks that this is a miracle worth waiting for, worth working for, and certainly worth dying for. Not too long ago, she was willing to give up everything, and now she has everything. And sure, some things outside this lab might still be falling apart, but what does that matter? She has Fitz.

She has Fitz.

"Finally," she breathes.

Chapter End Notes

I didn’t really do research on the science mentioned here as much as I poked Google with a stick until it spat out something I could use to sound plausible(ish?). But here's the article on prairie voles.

Also, you may have noticed that Fitz rather mangles a quote from Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" here. I kinda like Fitz's version better. ;)

We've made it to the end! Thank you so much for reading and commenting!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!