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<td>Alternate Universe - James Bond Fusion, Fake/Pretend Relationship, S.T.R.I.K.E. is the British S.H.I.E.L.D., Jemma is tough as nails, Jemma is badass, Ward is evil and a bit crazy, train job, Jemma is a super spy, Fitz is like Q, Major Character Injury, but this is still less angsty and most of my stuff, agency becomes compromised, Like they do, Shy awkward Fitz, Awkward Flirting, hiding out from the bad guys, Car Chases, bombs going off, Awkward Crush, Awkward Sexual Situations, Awkward Conversations, yeah damn, this is just, Awkwardness, to the nth degree, Nightmares, domesticity during hideout phase, Fitz invents cool stuff, Hydra wants it, Hydra Grant Ward, getting caught by the baddies, getting tied up together, Cool gadgets, because it wouldn't be bond-esque without cool gadgets, Truth Serum, yes the truth serum is real, recovering from memory loss, From Sex to Love, Explicit Sexual Content, eventually, Not Actually Unrequited Love, Sexual Tension, it'll get plenty smutty after all the adorable awkwardness, and the cuteness, Dancing, Formalwear, Baccarat, World Travel, Hunting down the bad guys, everyone has a crush on Jemma, Big Damn Heroes, it's a thing, platonically sharing a bed, is very hard...er...difficult, some slight ex-Skyeward, current Daisy/Trip, Jemma trying to suck Fitz's face off, French kissing in France, because you must</td>
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**My Word Is My Bond**

by Madalayna

Summary

When Hydra wants what S.T.R.I.K.E. scientist Leo Fitz has invented, they'll go out of their way to get it. S.T.R.I.K.E. Specialist Jemma Simmons is called upon to protect him from the plans of Hydra's new leader and former S.T.R.I.K.E./S.H.I.E.L.D. liaison, Grant Ward. James Bond AU where Jemma Simmons is Bond and Leo Fitz is Q.
I KNOW! I have so many WIPs but this one is killing me. It wants out now. I must obey. I am a slave to my muse. Don't worry, I'll finish everything...eventually. I'm a good gal like that.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Jemma stands at the railing of the mezzanine looking down over the concourse of Paddington Station. If she turns slightly, she can see into the the more intimate seating area of the Lawn where the exchange will soon be made. The information dealer, Vanchat, is already sitting at one of the small tables there, reading a newspaper while he waits.

She presses her finger into her ear, trying to adjust her comms device. There’s been enough static on the line to be detrimental to the mission. The techs back at HQ are working on it but it still has her very worried. So far, however, she’s been able to clear most of it up with a bit of hands-on fiddling.

Jemma can hear some of the other agents chattering on the line. Mostly, Daisy Johnson and her sometime partner, Antoine “Trip” Triplett. Both of them are S.H.I.E.L.D. agents, allowed onto the mission by S.T.R.I.K.E. Director Anne Weaver as a courtesy. It’s their intel that’d informed them Vanchat had somehow obtained and offered sale of classified S.T.R.I.K.E. intel.

The highest bidder is apparently none other than Hydra’s new leader Grant Ward.

Over a year ago now, she’d thought of Ward as a friend, even trusted him to have her back on missions. He’d been the S.H.I.E.L.D. liaison to Britain’s own counter intelligence agency, S.T.R.I.K.E. She and Ward had supported each other and even undertaken countless missions together in protection of their respective countries. That was until he was revealed to be an undercover agent for the international terror organization known as Hydra. Evidently, he’d been actively recruiting double agents in both S.H.I.E.L.D. and S.T.R.I.K.E. for years. The sordid affair had forced a major review of every single agent over the last year and caused a major upheaval and house cleaning within the agency.

Ward had escaped S.T.R.I.K.E. despite Jemma’s direct involvement in trying to prevent that from happening. Upon his return to Hydra, he’d killed the former leader Daniel Whitehall and taken his place. Jemma finds herself unable to feel too sorry for that turn of events considering the state of some of the agents who’d been returned from Whitehall’s vicious and depraved clutches.

Still, if she ever sees Grant Ward again—she’ll kill him.

“Where is Bakshi?” she whispers, counting on the comm to pick up her hushed tone despite the mild static.

"No sighting," the team leader out on the street confirms in her ear, though the static seems to be getting worse.

Sunil Bakshi had been Whitehall’s right-hand man but quickly shifted his loyalties to Ward after the coup.

Three years ago, Jemma had managed to turn Bakshi, getting him to give Hydra intel over to S.T.R.I.K.E. She’d used artifice at first and later, blackmail, by using evidence that could prove to Whitehall he’d been betraying him. Fortunately for Bakshi, Ward never learned of his secret status as a turncoat. She hopes to use her blackmail material to force Bakshi’s hand once again and make him give up the information Vanchat had stolen. She also intends to capture Vanchat and discover his information source.

That’s when she sees him—not Bakshi—but Grant Ward.

He’s strolling through the concourse as easy as you please before he heads over to meet Vanchat at
his table. His hair is shorter and his beard longer but he’s unmistakable. He wears an old army duffel coat and ratty jeans. If it’s meant to be a disguise, it’s a terrible one.

“It’s Ward, not Bakshi. I repeat, Ward is here,” she says into her comm but all she hears in response is heavy static which is exactly what’d been happening off and on for an hour. “Damnit.”

She heads down the escalator, surreptitiously unsnapping the strap on the holster under her jacket. She looks around for Ward’s guards, members of her S.T.R.I.K.E. team or even Daisy and Trip. She sees no one out of the ordinary and that in itself feels wrong. Why would Ward come without guards?

Stepping off the escalator, she rounds toward the Lawn. She can hear the sharp clatter of people eating as knives and forks scrape across plates, the low idle of their chit chat and the occasional child crying out or item being loudly dropped.

She closes the distance, hoping her team will spring to action.

“Ward is here,” she repeats in a whisper but, still, she only hears static. Jemma just hopes they can hear her even if she can’t hear them.

Ward is sitting with his back to her and she finds this strange. He knows better than to leave himself open to attack or ambush. To her surprise, he turns, smiling broadly.

“Agent Simmons!” he says, holding out a hand as if she might shake it. In fact, her hands are trembling with contempt and disgust.

“Ward, I’m bringing you in,” she says simply, but she can hear the hatred in her own tone.

He begins to laugh then. It’s full-throated and rich—to her ear, it nearly sounds real.

“Oh, Agent Simmons. I don’t think I feel like going anywhere with you,” he says in a mockingly juvenile tone.

“I don’t—“ But she halts her response when Ward lifts his hand to reveal a dead man’s switch, his thumb resting against it lightly. He pulls aside his coat and reveals a terrifying amount of C-4 strapped to his torso. She looks over at all the families and chatting people, completely oblivious to the possible doom in their midst.

“So, Agent Simmons, I suppose the choice is ultimately yours,” he says, the smile creeping back across his face. “Do we all go boom, or do I walk out of here with what I came for?”

“My team—“

“Is dead,” he finishes. “My men have taken them out by now. I could have them take you out too but I just feel like that’s a bit unsportsmanlike, don’t you?”

“You’re insane,” she says, unable to stop herself.

His lips draw down into a sneer for a fraction of a second before his smile returns. He seems to contemplate for a moment, nodding slightly. “Could be, agent. Then again, did an insane man just beat you at your own game?”

“Apparently so,” she answers frostily.

His smile grows impossibly wider. “Well, I have to be going now,” he says casually, looking back to
Vanchat.

She watches as Vanchat slides something small across the table over to Ward’s hand—possibly a memory stick.

He stands, as does Vanchat but Ward lingers, waiting as the other man passes her. She grits her teeth when the bastard gives her a gleeful smirk on his way out.

Watching Ward as he stands near the table looking contemplative, hoping to delay him so more S.T.R.I.K.E. teams might arrive, she plays to his vanity and says, "That was quite clever, Ward. Jamming the comms off and on so I wouldn't be suspicious when they went down."

He smiles charmingly again. "Thanks. I thought so. I'm glad you appreciated it, actually. I don't go to that much trouble for just anyone. But I know how smart you are, Simmons."

"You'll never be able to use that particular trick again, of course," she says, probably a bit too archly.

His pleasant smile dissolves into an unattractive sneer as Ward makes his way toward her. Holding up the memory stick right in front of her, easily within reach but for the C-4, he says, "I won't need to."

He continues walking but then stops suddenly just beside her, facing the opposite direction toward the concourse. She holds her breath as he stares out at the masses of people behind her heading for their trains and going about their lives.

He quietly whispers, “It was your fault, you know. If only you’d listened to me. It didn’t have to go down that way.” Looking off in the distance, he shakes his head sadly, and then keeps going, passing by her as he heads for the concourse.

She spins around, staring after him helplessly, her fingers tightening on the nonexistent gun she wants in her hand just now.

Ward gives her a jaunty salute with thumb and forefinger splayed as he passes through the large glass doors and back out onto the street.

Pressing her finger into her ear she harshly whispers, “Come in! HQ? Daisy? Trip? Team leader? Tac Team Six? Goddamnit!”

The static goes on for a moment longer before she finally hears Weaver’s voice, “I’m sorry, agent. Tac Team Six has been eliminated. Agents Johnson and Triplett aren’t responding but their vitals appear strong. They’re still in their observation position.”

Jemma sprints for the escalator, headed for the spot above the platform where Daisy and Trip were keeping watch in case Ward tried to escape by train. She discovers them both unconscious, checking them over she finds strong pulses and normal pupillary responses. Other than being unconscious, they seem otherwise completely unharmed. She reports back to HQ but then stays with them until the medics arrive. As the two are taken out to a waiting S.T.R.I.K.E. van, she heads down to street level, climbing into an idling SUV.

Back at HQ, swiftly bypassing the spluttering secretary sitting at his desk in the anteroom, Jemma barges through the double doors of Weaver’s office only to find S.H.I.E.L.D. Director Melinda May there with her. She sits across the desk from Weaver, who stands instantly as Jemma enters.

Weaver’s secretary follows Jemma in, stammering incoherently. “I—I tried Dir—“
“That’s fine, Agent Hunter,” Weaver says, holding up a hand.

“Yes, ma’am,” he says and turns, going out and closing the door behind him.

Angry, Jemma ignores May and addresses herself to Weaver. “I’m just supposed to believe that Ward happened to know S.T.R.I.K.E. would be there? That he just happened to know where our agents were and that Daisy and Trip would be there as well?”

Weaver crosses her arms over her chest, her expression inscrutable.

“No,” May says, turning and answering for Weaver. “You’d be very foolish if you did. We think there might be another bad seed within S.H.I.E.L.D. We tried to keep Daisy and Trip’s involvement under wraps but we’re worried there’s a leak.”

“He knew—“

“Yes, he knows exactly how we do things. Once he knew about the mission, it wouldn’t have been difficult for him to determine our strategies,” Weaver reasons.

Jemma nods. “What’s the plan now? Do we know what he took?”

“We have a good idea,” Weaver says. “At the time, it was decided that the risk of losing the information was low and it would be best-used as bait to capture Ward.”

“Well, that plan certainly backfired,” Jemma says, unapologetically sarcastic.

“We’ll need to move the asset,” Weaver says flatly, ignoring her sarcasm, her gaze piercing into Jemma cruelly. “I’ve chosen a safe house that I think will be acceptable.” She hesitates, meeting Jemma’s eyes. “I’d like you to take care of the operation.”

“What?!” Jemma cries in disbelief. “No!” She stops, takes a breath, and then looks at Weaver again, gritting out, “That’s not appropriate.”

“There’s no one better suited,” Weaver says, taking her seat again and shuffling some files across her desk. Jemma recognizes her curt manner as the one Weaver uses when her mind is made up. “To protect or even to help with—“ she pauses, pressing her lips into a hard, thin line, “the other things.”

“I can’t,” Jemma says, not liking the weak, breathy quality of her own tone.

“I’m afraid I need someone I can trust,” Weaver says, her tone business-like but the slightly imploring look on her face makes for such a contrast to the rest of her demeanor, Jemma finds it disconcerting. Without waiting for an answer, Weaver continues, “The asset is safe for now but you’ll be here by nine o’clock to meet before heading to the safe house.”

“Meet,” Jemma scoffs. “Right,” she starts to say more but then just shakes her head. Knowing she’s lost the battle, she turns abruptly and heads out of the office.

Passing by Hunter’s desk, she can’t miss the way he gazes after her and she sighs. “Sorry, Agent Simmons. Y’know about the—” he says to her back, but she doesn’t stop.

She heads for the medical wing to check on Daisy and Trip. Stepping out of the lift, she goes immediately to the critical care unit. It’d been over a year since she’s been here. She spots the pair through the circular glass window set into the door. They’re laughing and chatting in side-by-side beds and neither of them looks at all like they’ve just been rendered unconscious.
“You two look to be feeling better than the last time I saw you,” Jemma says after she pushes through the door.

They both look up, smiles still lingering on their faces.

“Hey,” Daisy says cheerily, then seeming to correct herself, she clears her throat and continues in a more sober tone, “Sorry about your tac team, Simmons. I heard the news.”

Jemma just nods, then tries to plaster a smile on her face. “But you’re feeling well?”

They both nod. “I think we’re doin’ pretty well considering,” Trip acknowledges. “I don’t even know what happened. One minute I was watching the trains, the next I was in the van staring up at the ceiling. It was crazy.”

“I’ll just speak to the doctor and see what he says. I’ll check on you again soon,” Jemma says, they both nod and she heads back out to find him.

She catches Dr. Streiten in his office. “Excuse me, doctor,” she says, tapping on his open door.

“Oh, yes, Agent Simmons,” he says. “Can I help you?”

“Yes, I was just checking up on Daisy and Trip. What happened to them exactly?”

“Well,” he begins, looking contemplative, “It seems it was a form of dendrotoxin.”

Jemma gasps at the implication. “But how?” She doesn't understand how Hydra could have access to that tech.

Streiten doesn't quite understand her meaning and shrugs. “I have no idea. Whatever method of assimilation was used, it’s untraceable. It might’ve been injected or even inhaled for all I know. I just found the remnants of it in their systems.”

“How long will you keep them?”

“Overnight,” he says with another shrug. “Just for observation. They’re perfectly fine.”

“Thank you, doctor.”

She chats with Trip and Daisy on auto-pilot for a few minutes before she heads home, far more exhausted by the confrontation with Ward than any physical exertion. Seeing Ward had really made her feel quite foul. He's like some sort of disease, popping up when and where she least expects him.

Trying to ignore her worry about tomorrow, she instead focuses on what'd gone wrong on this mission.

Ward could’ve been given the heads up about their sting operation by a S.H.I.E.L.D. informer or possibly even by a latent operative still ensconced within S.T.R.I.K.E. It’s a disturbing thought but there’s not much she can do without evidence. May seems to think her agency is responsible and Jemma has no reason to doubt her for now. It’s a working theory.

The more disturbing idea for her at the moment is that Ward has somehow gotten a hold of S.T.R.I.K.E.’s dendrotoxin formula. Perhaps even their delivery device.

Jemma had begun her career as a scientist but within only months of her arrival at S.T.R.I.K.E. Academy, she’d been handpicked by Weaver to become one of the new breed of specialist she’d been championing at the time—the intelligent intelligence agent.
Weaver had been looking for brilliant recruits who also possessed the capacity to be trained as specialists. She wanted recruits who were more knowledgeable, flexible, creative and had the ability to actively solve problems on the fly. Weaver used them to create a new breed of deadly, independent operative able to think on their feet and take matters of great importance into their own hands when necessary. The program had been a great success, elevating Weaver to the position of director and increasing the positive outcomes of their operations with far less collateral damage.

Along with six others, Jemma became one of the new elite. They were used for deep covers, high-risk missions, kill orders and matters of national security. Their team had certainly always had their uses. Jemma is the only one remaining of the original seven from the program, codenamed Paragon. The other six had all been killed in action.

Dendrotoxin had been Jemma’s creation back when she’d been nothing more than a green student-scientist hoping one day to become a field agent and never even dreaming of being a highly-trained specialist.

A fellow student, Leo Fitz had been the one who created the delivery mechanism. She’d found him to be the cleverest and, by far, the most interesting person in the school but they’d only barely begun working together before she’d been recruited to Paragon.

Fitz was so brilliant in fact that—within two years of them graduating their respective programs—he was made head of S.T.R.I.K.E.’s Science and Technology division. As head of Sci-Tech, he’d provided her with the tools of her trade—weapons and tech—machines and devices of his own design, many of which had saved her life over the years.

She’d always had a special affinity for him, though they were more likely to argue science than to have a traditional conversation. Still, from their earliest days at the Academy, she’d always admired his creativity and genius. Of all the students she’d worked with, he was ever the only one who could keep up with her.

She’d noticed early on the sweet admiration with which he looked on her and—more so than anyone else—his praise meant more to her because she had the utmost respect for his opinion. She valued it above all others.

Over the next six years, however, she’d seen his warm glow of admiration for her change slowly to the sharp glint of infatuation. His fancy revealing itself in the slow path of his eyes over her and the dazed look of adoration with which he often gazed at her.

To her dismay, two years ago, he’d stammered out a haltingly babbled request for a proper date. Jemma, never one to suppress her appetite when it came to the opposite gender, froze, stunned by his request. However, it was only because she knew her desires generally had little to do with the type of feelings that he seemed to harbor for her.

Still, she’d felt trapped by his appeal—unable to say no for fear of injuring his feelings and damaging their working relationship, but also knowing she didn’t have the stability in her life to commit to a serious relationship. She’d blurted out acceptance only because, in her mind, she’d somehow hoped she might end his misery with a bit of casual sex. Which she was by no means opposed to.

It turned out to have been a terrible mistake. She’d realized it immediately as he kissed her goodnight with all the passionate feeling that she knew she didn’t have for him—could never allow herself to have. There was no place for it in her life at that time and she didn’t want to hurt him by letting things go any further.

As much as it had pained her, she’d politely refused all his subsequent offers to take her out until
he’d finally grown sullen, even cold to her attempts to renew their friendship. He grew sarcastic and bordered on impolite at first, and yet, somehow that outcome seemed better than the alternative. Hurting him in that small way seemed far better than letting him become attached only to lose her to her work. Ending his infatuation was right, she convinced herself, because then at least he could move on and find someone he could share something real with, something that might last. She believed it was what he deserved.

Six months on from their failed date, he began to respond to her gentle prompts and playful jokes; his coldness receded and he warmed to her again. She was glad but concerned that he still hadn’t moved on and found someone more suitable. She soon became aware of the reason. He was clearly still mooning after her, even though he no longer made any requests, seemingly resigned to his unrequited fate. Though she tried to ignore it and continue to hope he would resolve to end his feelings, she still caught the occasional dull glimmer of longing in the bright blue of his shy glances.

His starry-eyed romanticism was all too apparent to her, until the day it ended far too abruptly.
Let Us Not Burden Our Remembrance

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the slow going, guys. My muse seems to be off on a boozzer in Azerbaijan or somethin’. Once it returns from whither it has gone, I shall attack my WIPs with great fortitude. Please forgive my fickle muse. It rarely lets me down except for the occasional indulgence of an extended bender, generally to return with a renewed vigor and vengeance. I suppose it has to get my new ideas from somewhere. I imagine it roaming about to chat in bars with strange and interesting characters, finding new and better ways to tell my stories. *fingers crossed it'll be back soon from the latest gathering expedition*

“Don’t come any closer, Simmons!” Ward yells across the anteroom. But his voice is raised only to be heard across the distance, his tone is perfectly modulated. It's cold as ice as he holds the gun to Fitz’s head.

Poor Fitz, his eyes are wide as she’s ever seen them and terrified beyond belief. “Just back off and I’m promising you that he’s gonna be absolutely fine. We just need a little bit of information from him and I’ll see he gets right back to you, just as he is.”

“Not a chance,” Jemma says, her tone harsh and her pistol already leveled at Ward. But he’s using Fitz as a human shield and she can’t quite bear to risk the shot at this distance.

She takes a tentative step forward but Ward raises his brows and presses his pistol hard enough to Fitz’s temple to make him gasp in pain. She sees his tormented expression, the fear in his blue eyes and his shaking hands—her jaw tightens with determination.

“C’mon, Simmons,” Ward tries to reason, his tone growing conciliatory as he loosens his free arm around Fitz’s neck. Then he smiles the same charming smile he’s had for her since the day they met three years ago and it makes Jemma want to be sick. “I’m giving you my word,” Ward says with some imitation of sincerity but it only raises her anger.

“Your word isn’t worth a bloody damn now, is it, Ward?” she spits ferociously. “Let him go. Now.”

Ward’s eyes betray him slightly then, dropping in thought as if he might be considering doing as she says. But, then, he begins to shake his head fiercely. His voice is small, barely loud enough to hear, as he says, “I can’t, Simmons. They’ll kill me.”

She cocks her head to the side, knowing that Ward will take her threat seriously when she tells him, “You know you can take me at my word, don’t you, Ward? I don’t make promises lightly but I’ll make you this one: If you hurt him in the slightest—I will kill you. Let him go right now and you might just get out of this without me trying to kill you.”

His mask cracking slightly, Ward’s frustration bleeds through as he kicks back at the exit door behind him. Lights are flashing red all around its perimeter due to the security lock and that, along with the alarm that blares every ten seconds or so, has been giving the proceedings a more than hectic feel. Jemma ignores it, lets the background fall away, including the sound of more agents grouping behind her readying for the standoff—additional agents notwithstanding, Jemma is the one
in charge.

Ward meets her eyes across the thirty-odd foot distance between them. “Open the door, Simmons—or you’re giving me no choice. If I come back empty-handed, I’m as good as dead.”

“You’re as good as dead if you don’t let him go now,” she shouts, but it’s for effect as much as anything. She keeps her anger under tight control as she tries to aim for a spot that won’t endanger Fitz.

Ward shakes his head slowly. “Can’t do it, Simmons. Just can’t do that. But I promise you that I’ll get him back here. I don’t want anything to happen to him either.”

She ignores the watery look in Ward’s manipulative eyes and says, “There’s no way I’m letting you take him, Ward. None.” She glances at Fitz’s terrified face and just manages to catch a slight glimpse of his slack-jawed admiration for her.

“I’m not giving you another choice,” Ward says, fury just under the surface of his words now. “It’s him or me. That’s what you’re making it. That’s the only choice you’re leaving me even though you know I’ll choose me. Now let us both go or I’ll shoot him in the fucking skull.” He taps the gun against the side of Fitz’s head. She hears the crack and though it isn’t hard enough to do any damage, Fitz flinches away sharply. The cold, hard stare Ward gives her with his challenging words is almost enough to make her shudder.

Pressing the barrel once more to a spot just over Fitz’s ear, Ward gives her a meaningful look and then slowly tightens his finger on the trigger. The odd grimace on Ward's face appears slightly mad.

Jemma points her pistol to the ceiling and holds up her hands in surrender. “Fine,” she says, trying to make it sound good. “You give me your word that you’ll return him unharmed. Tell me when?”

Ward looks relieved as he says, “Twenty-four hours is all I need. I'll deliver him right to your doorstep tomorrow by three. I give you my word as a soldier.”

She keeps her face impassive, despite the ridiculousness of his promise.

“And if he gives you nothing? You are promising not to harm him after all. How will you get the information?” she asks reasonably. She ignores Fitz’s wide eyes and brows drawn in horror and incredulity.

“Don’t worry, Simmons,” Ward assures, his former smug air returning, “Fitz will never be able to resist QNB-T16. You know that it’s the top-shelf martini of Sodium Pentothal derivatives. He’ll be just fine with me. Safe as houses.”

She nods and gives a signal to the guard behind the bulletproof glass of the security booth. He waves back at her, though the poor older man looks more terrified than Fitz after Ward had emptied a full clip at him attempting to get through the glass and open the door. The thick plexiglass is nearly opaque with all the cracks and lines that spiral outward from the many gouges carved into it by Ward's bullets.

The red lights cease their flashing and the door behind Ward opens. Instantly, he smiles confidently, beginning to back through as he glances behind him to check for obstacles and threats. Ward pulls Fitz along by the neck, keeping him where he’ll block Jemma’s line of sight. But while Ward is distracted behind him, she rushes forward, aiming for the exposed spot just under his raised right arm that’s left unprotected by his bulletproof vest.

She fires off four successive shots—but then hears a fifth ring out.
The next part seems to happen in slow motion.

The first thing is Ward’s wide, startled eyes when a spray of bright red blood hits him across the face as he starts to fall backward away from Fitz. Then there's the sight of Fitz’s unfocused, heavy-lidded eyes as he begins falling to the side, hitting the ground like a dead weight.

Riding the adrenaline rush, Ward skitters away toward the exit, holding his side as Jemma continues on to where Fitz has fallen. Ward manages to get his feet under him, nearly falling, before he finally manages to push out through the heavy doors.

All Jemma can do is fire off a few more rounds at him, missing entirely, before she’s falling to her knees at Fitz’s side. A pool of red is slowly expanding over the white marble floor, soaking the knees of her trousers.

Her eyes rove over the damage: blood, hair, bone—brain. Her heart stops.

“NO!” Jemma screams, sitting up in bed with her arms outstretched.

As awareness comes back to her, the sheen of sweat on her skin makes her shiver in the cool air of her room. She wraps her arms around herself for comfort as much as protection from the chill. Raising her knees, she drops her head down to rest there until she can take control of her ragged breathing.

She glances at the clock and sees that it’s not yet five in the morning. Knowing she’ll never go back to sleep, she doesn’t bother to try, instead, getting up to begin her routine jogging and calisthenics.

Once finished, she showers and dresses in a simple navy, knee-length pencil skirt and matching blazer, her shoulder holster underneath keeps her pistol tucked securely under her arm.

Still too early, she cleans her twenty-two caliber pistol and puts it in a thigh holster that easily conceals the small weapon along her leg while still keeping the slim line of her skirt. She packs a small bag for her imminent journey and waits anxiously for the clock to advance.

She isn’t looking forward to this meeting with Weaver but, even more than that, she’s dreading what comes after. Over the last year, she’d molded her guilt over what happened to Fitz into anger at Ward. Razor-sharp and laser-focused, she’s been using it to hunt the traitor, her former friend. Yesterday’s disaster of a mission was nearly the closest she’s gotten which, when all is said and done, seems rather pathetic. Still, now with Ward threatening S.T.R.I.K.E. again, she wants to be in the field hunting him down, not babysitting the asset for Weaver.

The time finally comes for her to head to HQ and she mentally steels herself for what will come next.

She strolls into the anteroom of Weaver’s office, dropping her bag just inside the door.

“Hello, Agent Hunter,” she says, trying to keep her tone from being overly flirtatious even though she’s forced to admit to being flattered by his frequent attention.

He looks stunned to see her even though he must’ve been expecting her for the meeting with Weaver. She can’t help but note how his gaze lingers over her legs and along the bare expanse of her neck as he drags his headset backward off his crown and runs a hand over his dark, close-cropped hair to tidy it. She’s not often found to be wearing a skirt to the office unless, like today, there are only meetings. As a specialist, it’s highly impractical for her to wear them at any other time but whenever she does, Hunter notices.
“Hello, there, Agent Simmons. Lovely ensemble you’ve chosen there,” he says, infusing his tone with a syrupy suggestiveness as he grins quite charmingly. “And how’re you this fine morning?”

“I’m alright, I suppose,” she says, not finding it in herself to lie knowing that it will soon be required once she takes possession of the asset. Hunter looks sympathetic but she finds herself shaken by it. His look picks distractingly at the thin skin of her composure for some reason, so she quickly adds, “Is Director Weaver ready for me yet?”

“She said she’d buzz,” he says as he begins to shake his head slowly. “Not down for the new mission, then?” he questions with a quirked brow.

She shrugs and, for a diversion against this conversation she’d inadvertently begun, she leans against his desk then slides her rear up onto it in a half-sit braced with one foot still on the floor. He leans back, placing his hands on the arms of his chair, seemingly admiring his new view.

“I’m not much for babysitting,” she says, leaning forward conspiratorially as she smiles a bit more invitingly.

“Mm,” he agrees, “I can’t say I blame you, not when Ward’s still out there—the bloody traitorous bastard.”

Jemma smiles at his vehemence. Hunter hadn’t even been with S.T.R.I.K.E. at the time. He’s a recent SAS acquisition but he has a bit of an attitude problem, according to rumor, and Weaver had made him her personal secretary to teach him a lesson.

“You’ve got quite the mouth, haven’t you?” Jemma asks coquettishly.

“You’ve no idea,” he agrees, leaning forward and resting his chin in his hand.

Suddenly, an overly-loud buzzer goes off on his desk, startling both of them. She slides off the desk almost guiltily and Hunter quickly picks up his headset and slips it back on. Jemma can just barely hear Weaver’s ghostly voice through the headset but not quite make out her words.

“Yes, ma’am,” Hunter says into the microphone. “She’s right here. I’ll send ’er in.”

He smiles apologetically and sweeps his hands toward the large double doors. She gives him a resigned quirk of her lips and pushes inside.

Fitz is fairly certain Weaver had just asked him something but at the sight of a breathtaking woman sweeping into the room as if she owns the place, he’s rather forgotten what the question was.

“I’m sorry?” Fitz asks, turning his head only slightly toward Weaver again. She’s sitting on the other side of the desk, but he isn’t quite able to tear his gaze away from the stunning brunette standing just inside the doorway behind him.

“Agent Leopold Fitz,” Weaver says, by way of introduction, “this is Agent Jemma Simmons. She’s the specialist who’ll be making certain you’re quite well looked after until we manage to sort this business with Hydra.”

“She’s the—we’re goin’ to—but wait now. What? She and I are goin’ to…” But he can’t quite remember what his thought was going to be as Agent Simmons smiles bemusedly at his stammering.

Her smile is like the sun, he decides. Glowing and warm, it somehow fills him with life and reason to draw air into his lungs.
He starts abruptly. What is the matter with him for chrissake? And where in the holy hell'd that bit of rubbish come from? Christ almighty, he must be losing what’s left of his bloody marbles! He tries to shake off the odd thoughts about the (unquestionably gorgeous but completely unknown) Agent Simmons who will evidently be babysitting him and likely thinking he’s some damn jessy who can’t take care of himself. Bloody hell and fuck!

He clears his throat. “It’s nice to meet you, Si—er, Agent Simmons.”

“We’ve met, actually,” she says, with another small smile that makes his chest swell uncomfortably. “Back at the Academy—but only briefly.”

“Oh, I apologize. I didn’t realize,” he says, knowing he’ll have to go through the entire bloody explanation about his injury once again and hating it. Now this lovely woman will look at him like some sort of brain-damaged charity case just like all the others around here. “I’m afraid I’ve had an injury,” he begins, ”and there are a number of things I’m not able to remember. The doctors say I might get a bit more back but it’s been a year now and at this stage it looks to be permanent.”

“I’m very sorry, Agent Fitz.” She nods soberly. “Truly.”

“Not to worry,” he says in attempt to lighten the mood once more. “It appears I’m able to recall a good deal of the knowledge I’ve gained over the years, just not how I might’ve acquired it. All I need to access the information is something like a key. It’s not always so simple but, for instance: if someone brings up atomistic attributes, suddenly they might just come to me even though I’ve no clue where I’ve learned them from.” He can’t help smiling back at her as her lips quirk into a grin.

“They used to do atomistic attribute drills,” she takes a small breath, ”back at the Academy,” she finishes and then her tongue peeks out to wet her full, red lips. He swallows sharply and sits up straighter in his seat.

“Oh?” he says, leaning toward her in his chair, wondering if he might be recalling something. “Were you—I mean, did we know each other well at all?” Then it occurs to him that she’s a specialist, not a scientist. “I—oh, that’s—but you weren’t at Sci-Tech, were you? You were Ops, I s’pose.” He shakes his head at his silly assumption. She’d said they met, not knew one another but somehow she seems so familiar to him. He can’t help but think there’s something more about her that he should remember.

“Oh, not at first,” she says, “I began as a scientist before I was recruited to Ops.”

“Really?” He finds this fascinating since he’d once wanted to become a field agent—or so he recalls, that bit’s still quite hazy however. “I didn’t know they recruited out of Sci-Tech.”

She shakes her head, glancing to the floor. “It’s a special program. Not many qualify.”

“Indeed,” Weaver says, breaking the spell that he and Simmons are alone. He’d somehow nearly forgotten the director’s presence. Simmons steps further into the office but remains standing to the side of Weaver’s desk, forming a rough triangle, and forcing him to glance back and forth between them like some sort of conversational tennis match. “Agent Simmons is a highly-skilled and trustworthy asset, Agent Fitz. She’ll keep you quite safe.”

“I only hope it isn’t too dull for you,” he tells Simmons sympathetically.

She cocks her head slightly and says, “I’m quite sure that won’t be an issue.”

He can’t help the smile that curves his lips then. However, trying to shake off his swell of irrational happiness at her answer, he goes on, “Anyway, I think, once we get through this bump in the road,
safe to say that, eventually—I mean, it’s quite likely at least—that I’ll be able to get back to my job again despite my slightly shoddy bit of wirin’. He taps his temple in jest but Simmons doesn’t respond as he’d thought she would; her mouth draws down in a slight frown at his self-deprecating humor.

“Yes,” Weaver cuts in, her tone formal, “We’re all looking forward to that day, Agent Fitz.” She looks to Simmons. “I’ve made arrangements for you two at The Resort.” This name rings no bells for Fitz and so he just continues to listen as Weaver goes on. “I’m hoping we can have things sorted by the end of the week and then you and Agent Fitz can return. He’s been getting regular treatments with Dr. Streiten to help improve his amnesia.”

Agent Simmons looks uncomfortable, as she asks, “How extensive is the memory loss? Has there been any recall from before the, eh, accident?” Though she’d seemed to respond to Weaver, Simmons’ eyes seek out his, waiting for an answer.

He glances at Weaver and when she only looks back, he says, a bit overly cheerfully, “I’ve got back a good bit of my childhood. Though nothin’ much beyond age twelve or so. It’s all a bit fuzzy from then. Apparently, I was at, ehm, M.I.T. soon after that.”

“So, you can’t recall the breakthrough that’s got Hydra so keen on you?” Simmons asks, one brow raised in question.

He sighs, these are the questions he gets on practically on a weekly basis. However, Dr. Streiten has told him (as well as all the other S.T.R.I.K.E. and even S.H.I.E.L.D. doctors) that without the key to that information, there’s no way for him to access it. Though they’ve tried hypnosis, a couple of drugs and even an unfamiliar machine a bit like an MRI where he’d laid with his head stuck inside. They hadn’t told him what it was meant to do exactly but it hadn't worked in any case. None of it had helped. Weaver and even a couple of the government higher-ups have all questioned him but Streiten seems more pragmatic—saying only that it'll come or it won’t. He’d just been suggesting to Weaver that if he could only get back to working full-time, perhaps he might come up with the idea again. It’s still his brain after all and, excepting his memory issues, it seems to function well enough. He knows what he's looking for after all, just not the specific formula.

He shakes his head minutely at Simmons, slightly uncomfortable at being forced to make the admission. Somehow it feels like losing. “No,” then, he quickly adds, “I mean, not as yet. But I think it’ll likely come back to me—one way or another.”

She smiles tightly and looks back to Weaver.

“Yes. Well,” Weaver says, ”Agent Fitz, why don’t you go and speak with the quartermaster about what might be needed? I think one of the new SUVs is in order. Tell him I've authorized it.”

Recognizing the clear dismissal from Weaver, he nods and gets up from his chair. “Thank you,” he says to the director, though he’s not sure why exactly. For keeping him safe? For assigning him the most beautiful woman he can ever remember seeing in his life to guard him for however long this fiasco takes? Yeah. Probably that one. He tips his head to Agent Simmons as he passes and, though he knows he'll see her again very soon, he can't stop himself from giving her one last parting glance as he passes through the big double doors.
My Word is my BOND

A Fitz-Simmons fanfic by Madaleyna
“What the bloody hell do you expect me to do?” Jemma says to Weaver once the door shuts behind Fitz and her tone is harsh but still quite tightly controlled.

Weaver looks unimpressed by her outburst and, instead of answering, indicates Jemma should take one of the chairs in front of her desk. She sits down in the one Fitz had just vacated and finds it still warm with his lingering body heat.

“Look, Jemma, I understand how you feel,” Weaver begins, “I’ve been there myself. But blaming yourself for what happened to Agent Fitz isn’t going to help him. Nor is it going to help us find Ward. All you can do now is protect him. You understand more clearly than most just what the consequences will be if Hydra ends up with what’s in Agent Fitz’s head.”

She sighs and then looks up at Weaver. “You have other agents who can do that just as effectively as I can. I’d be of better use out there in the field tracking down Ward,” Jemma says earnestly.

“Oh, Jemma,” Weaver says, nodding toward the door where Fitz had just gone out. “I know that you and Agent Fitz had,” she flutters her hand through the air vaguely, “some sort of relationship that went beyond that of mere colleagues.”

“What?” she splutters. “No, we didn’t. I mean, he, eh, well, he may have wanted that but—it never—we never—” She stops herself from more embarrassing rambling, bringing a hand up to partially cover her face. “It was nothing,” she finally says firmly.

“Jemma,” Weaver says in a tone one might use to chastise a child. “Everyone knew he adored you. Well, perhaps everyone but you.” Jemma looks up sharply but Weaver doesn’t give her an opportunity to rebut her words. “I don’t really care what the circumstances were. All I care about is getting that formula out of his head. We’ve tried everything—tech, drugs, medical intervention, psychological techniques. We’ve even had him working on a limited basis with Agent Gill trying to recreate the formula but nothing has even come close to unlocking his breakthrough. If you can help him do that, then that is your real mission, agent. Until we can get Ward, accessing that formula is the only thing that will keep him safe. Once we have it, his value to Hydra is negligible.”

Jemma can’t ignore the way Weaver uses her designation to reinforce her subordinate position. Being the last of the original Paragon team has afforded her quite a bit of latitude over the last couple of years but it still remains: she’s a cog in this system like anyone else, subject to the needs of the organization and, in this case, possibly the entire world.

So, this is the real reason Weaver had chosen her for this mission. Clearly, she believes Jemma has some weighted significance in Fitz’s mind. But that’s the problem isn’t it? She’s nothing to him now—just an infatuation that came to nothing.

“He doesn’t even remember me,” Jemma says hollowly. “I don’t see how this will possibly help anything. Streiten says he may never remember.”

Weaver shrugs grandly, her arms coming up. “As I said, agent, we’ve tried everything else. Do your best to jog his memory as well as you can. You’re able to speak the language of science with him as easily as anyone could. You’ve known him a long time as well—longer than any of his other friends. Be his friend again.”

Jemma nods her head minutely, feeling it drooping lower but unable to raise it fully again. She feels...
exhausted and there are hot tears behind her eyes but she’d sooner die than let Weaver see her weep.

Swallowing down her emotional reaction, she clears her throat and sits up straight in her chair. “For the record, I don’t think this will help. I think you’re wasting my talents on this when I could be hunting for Ward.”

Weaver leans into her chair more fully, looking relaxed as she drops back against the headrest and the hint of a smile is almost indiscernible at the edges of her lips. “Noted. Goodbye, agent. I’ll be in contact.”

Jemma stands and walks from the office without looking back. She manages a nod to Hunter, who watches her leave appreciatively as she stoops to pick up her small duffle from beside the door.

“Good luck, Agent Simmons,” he calls after her.

Fitz closes up another case and adds it to the growing pile next to the large rollup door. It’s currently open to reveal the new Range Rover SUV Weaver had ordered sitting just outside.

He stands to his full height and stiffens when he sees Agent Simmons walking into the lab. She’s even more beautiful than he remembers from the five minutes conversation they’d had earlier. However, she looks as though whatever she and Weaver had spoken about hadn’t exactly filled her with warm and fuzzy feelings. He wonders if it’s just having to babysit him that’s upsetting her or something more. She’d been gracious enough earlier but perhaps it was just a front.

Once she gets within range he says, “I’ve just been getting us a few things. Some is just standard issue gear but I’ve thrown in a few party favors that might be a bit of fun.”

She looks at the large pile of cases on the floor and she frowns. “I don’t think—”

“You might think we won’t need them but what if we do!?” he says over what he somehow knows is going to be an objection. He notes the one small bag in her hand and he cringes inwardly at his own large suitcase at the bottom of the pile.

“Agent Fitz,” she begins in an overly formal tone, “The entire point of this exercise is to prevent you from ending up in a situation where any of,” she waves vaguely over the pile, her expression condescending enough to make him wince, “this might be needed.”

If her intent is to cow him, somehow her attitude only serves to irk him. “And what if Ward finds us, what then?” he asks, just barely keeping his fear and frustration under the surface. He can’t escape his feelings of helplessness and somehow the tech at least makes him feel like he could do something. He has no clue what but, well, bloody something.

She sighs and says, “Fitz, I know you’re concerned but that’s not going to happen.”

He can’t help the little thrill that runs though him at her calling him not "Agent Fitz" but just "Fitz". Nonetheless, he can see he needs a different approach to convince her. Opening his arms, he asks, “Just tell me this, what harm can it do to bring them along?”

She looks at the pile and back to him. “Are—well, but, eh, we should just—well, I…” Looking supremely annoyed and making his heart drop down somewhere into his gut, she finally sighs and says, “You can just load all that in yourself then.” She turns her back and proceeds to open the rear door to throw her small duffel inside.

“Of course!” he cries, slightly horrified she would think he’d expect her to help. (His mum would kill
him for such a thing.) Nevertheless, he suddenly finds himself feeling irrationally happy at her agreement and then also deeply disturbed that he’s somehow lost her respect already.

While he begins loading the cases into the boot of the SUV, Donnie Gill, the new head of Sci-Tech division, comes back from the chemlab with his assistant Seth in tow. Though he still has no recollection of it—from what he’s been told—Donnie had once been Fitz's own assistant much as Seth is now Donnie's.

“Agent Simmons,” Donnie says, holding his hand out to her. “I haven’t seen you since that Budapest mission.”

“Agent Gill,” she says, shaking his hand firmly. “Well, I suppose I’ve been doing a bit more investigation than actual field ops lately.”

“You remember my assistant, Seth,” Donnie says, indicating the other man with a gesture over his shoulder.

Though Fitz hates to admit it, Donnie and Seth look less like agents for a super-secret spy organization and much more like boys to him. Though from what he’s been told he’d been younger than Donnie when he’d taken over as head of Sci-Tech division.

“You have everything you need, Agent Fitz?” Donnie asks.

He sees the discomfort in the younger man’s eyes, the not-knowing-how-to-act because Fitz can’t remember him. He wonders if they’d been friends or if they’d been merely colleagues. Fitz has no memory of being anyone’s superior and not really even of being friends with anyone (not since Kyle Mcallister in the second grade) though he’d met a few supposed ‘friends’ in the last year, he always sees the same unease in their eyes, like he’s a problem they wish would go away.

“Yeah, thanks, er, Donnie,” he says, though he feels a bit self-conscious calling him that. However, he’d been clear that it’s what Fitz had called him before and he wanted him to continue. He likes Donnie and he really hopes he was a decent person to work for and not a complete tosser.

Seth finishes helping Fitz load up the SUV and, after shaking first his and then Donnie’s hands, he gets into the SUV on the passenger side since Agent Simmons had already settled into the driver’s seat. He doesn’t really mind, except it makes him feel even more useless than he already does.

As soon as Fitz gets in, there’s a loud beeping and a pleasant, disembodied female voice says, “Voice analysis required for authorization.” A display immediately pops up on the windscreen, voice recognition audio wave forms, just waiting for him to respond.

“Ehm, Agent Leopold Fitz?” he says uncertainly, though almost instantly things start coming back to him about the design of the SUV. He thinks he must’ve worked on the AI and at least supervised a good deal of the tech.

“Confirmed. Welcome, Agent Fitz,” the voice replies. His S.T.R.I.K.E. identification is immediately displayed and placed in the corner of the screen along with Agent Simmons’, listing them as the only occupants.

“Thanks,” he says mostly out of habit. Suddenly realizing who he’s talking to, he instantly looks to Simmons only to catch something like a side-long look of suppressed mockery.

He grits his teeth in embarrassment. He supposes courtesy is quite wasted on computers, even AI this advanced, and he feels rather a fool. Seems he’s off to a fantastic start with getting Agent Simmons to like him. If anything, it seems he’s working toward making her loathe him altogether or at least
find him a total prat.

“Calculate optimum route to secure location: The Resort,” Simmons says smoothly.

“Route calculated. Travel time is two hours and twenty-seven minutes,” the voice answers. The amount of time instantly fills him with anxiety. How the hell is he going to fill so much uncomfortable silence? He can already feel it in the air between them. It’s nearly suffocating.

“Manual drive,” Simmons says, putting the SUV in gear.

Fitz watches as the computer goes into passive security mode, reading license plates and scanning faces as they drive toward the exit. They both show their IDs to the guard at the gate and he lets them through.

“I s’pose you’re up on all the advances with this new model?” he asks, just to break the silence which feels like sandpaper on his nerves. Rough and unpleasant is what this trips seems to be shaping up to be. He can't even imagine what it'll be like to share the safe house with her. At least they should be able to hide in different rooms anyway. Avoidance is always a good tactic.

“Of course,” she says, her tone slightly cool as if she doesn’t want to chat, (unless it’s his imagination but somehow he doesn’t think so).

“Yeah? So, you keep up with the science then, even though you’re not in Sci-Tech any longer? What was your PhD in?” He can’t seem to stop himself from talking. How many embarrassing questions can he rattle off in two and a half hours? Jesus. This is going to be a long ride.

“I have two actually but, really, I consider myself a biochemist,” she says but her words are short, her tones sound forced as if she’s mildly offended by his questions.

“Oh, yeah? You ever miss it?” he asks, only because he can’t imagine a life without science as an integral part of it and, evidently, can’t shut off his stupid gob.

She looks thoughtful for a moment but says nothing. He just about decides she’s not likely to answer when she finally says a quiet, “Sometimes.”

Silence reigns for a few minutes while he struggles to let well enough alone and watches the streets of London go by.

“We've really upgraded the armor on these vehicles now, you know?” he asks, cringing at his inability to just bloody well shut the buggering fuck up.

“You remember?” she asks curiously, barely glancing over at him.

In profile, he can’t help noticing her full lips. She’s wearing red lipstick too. A very nice color and quite sexy—and if he keeps staring she’ll definitely notice. So he should certainly not continue. He absolutely should look away from her gorgeous brown eyes as well. They have the smallest hint of green at the edges. Also, under her makeup he notes that she’s got quite a lot of freckles. She glances over, catching him slack-jawed, and he looks away immediately, suddenly remembering that she’d asked him a question.

“Well, er, yeah. Ehm, pretty much as soon as the, ehm, AI asked for voice recognition, it, eh, started comin’ back to me,” he stutters like a twat.

“But you’ve never been able to remember anything about your breakthrough?” she asks, blessedly ignoring his stammering idiocy.
He laughs at that. “I love it when everyone calls it that,” he says, still burbling with an occasional chuckle. It always seems the understatement of all time to him.

“Well,” she says, keeping her eyes on the road. “That’s what it is, isn’t it?”

“If I can just get it back, that technology could change the world, Agent Simmons,” he explains honestly. Although he really tries to keep out any hint of ego because he really has a difficult time feeling pride for something he can’t remember or recreate at present but still he can hardly fathom it—scrawny, outcast Leo Fitz from Glasgow might’ve invented the technology that could save the human race from itself. If only he could bloody well remember it, that is.

He sees her slight smirk and a bit of an eye roll. Fabulous, now she thinks he’s some arrogant arsehole.

“I don’t mean it like that,” he says quickly. “I only meant, what could be done with the technology is amazin’. Think of it, Simmons. We could all have flyin’ cars and they’d be safer than anythin’ we have now. Planes could fly without pilots and it would completely eliminate crashes. Buildin’s could be designed completely differently because the lifts could take you anywhere, horizontal, vertical—hell, diagonal! Imagine that! Think of all the ways we could generate energy—wind farms that run themselves indefinitely. Unlimited clean energy forever. Eternal batteries. And the computer technology—Christ—it would change overnight! It would be unrecognizable in two years. Imagine never needin’ to charge your phone or your computer again. It could be just—I dunno, amazin’ seems inadequate, Sim—er, Agent Simmons. A whole new world, really.” He hesitates, realizing he’s been running his gob endlessly in his need to explain himself. He’s completely in his head until he glances over and realizes her expression is odd—not impressed as he’d hoped but almost upset.

“Yes, I appreciate your passion and desire to change the world, agent, but if Hydra gets their hands on it, think of the other side of that coin. Weapons technology—and even warfare itself—would be revolutionized as well. EM weapons could be so focused they could kill only people, leaving the infrastructure fully intact. The holders of such weapons would rule. They could disable any technology at will. How could we even fight them? They could even sell their inventions based on the tech and finance their terror operations until they might, in essence, run the world. It could be horrific.”

Her words shake him to the core. He’s had few illusions about what Hydra might want to do with his formula for a superconducting material that functions at room temperature but the things she mentions are beyond his imaginings. Yet he knows they’re all real possibilities that crueler minds than his would undoubtedly make a reality. He also knows that once Hydra has the information, they’ll have to make sure they’re the only ones to have the knowledge. So if they do catch him, he’s dead no matter what they might say.

He looks at his hands, clasped together lightly in his lap. “I’d never let that happen,” he says quietly. “I—I’d—well, I’d kill myself before I’d let them have it.”

Completely oblivious to the road, she stares over at him, her face looking almost stricken. Then she seems to realize that they’re in the middle of a busy London street and she looks immediately back to the road. He sees her jaw tighten with tension.

He has no idea what any of it means. Had he shocked her with his declaration? Did she not believe him? He means every word. He’d rather die than be responsible for that world. Maybe she even sees him as someone who doesn’t appreciate his second chance at life? Or perhaps she sees him as full of bravado?

All he really knows for certain is that Agent Simmons seems to treat him with either coolness or
something like disdain. Obviously, she hates him or what he represents. Not that it matters much anyway. She’s far too beautiful and too brilliant and too—well, bloody heroic. At least, if the stories he’s heard are true. She’d never be interested in him even if he weren’t brain damaged and completely unable to speak to a woman. He’s just not made of the right materials for someone like her.

“Agent Fitz,” Simmons says, “Don’t—“

But he never gets to hear what she’s about to say because another SUV suddenly slams into their side.
We Have Seen Better Days

Chapter Notes

And action! It's a long 'un. So, this also includes the weirdest Fitz-Simmons fight I've ever written. Enjoy?

Fitz vaguely hears someone speaking but it’s incoherent, he opens his eyes to the sight of white powder drifting down through the sunlight that cascades through the windscreen. He pushes down on the two airbags that are still partially inflated and pressing against him uncomfortably. There’s a feeling of tightness in his chest that’ll likely become soreness once the adrenaline wears off. He shakes his head to clear it but instantly regrets that decision and groans when his neck complains bitterly.

They’d just been in a bloody car crash. Jesus.

The impact had pushed them to the edge of the intersection and he can see the other SUV out his side window. There are two men inside, both of whom look alert but slightly dazed. Though his and Simmons’ vehicle is relatively undamaged due to the enhanced armor, the front of the other SUV is a shattered ruin.

He looks over to Agent Simmons who appears to have a small cut in her hairline that’s bleeding rather profusely—much to his dismay. Other than that, she seems very awake and quite agitated while she holds up her mobile phone as if trying to get a better signal. He gets out a handkerchief from his pocket and holds it out to her.

“Goddamnit!” she shouts, dropping her phone onto the dash before snatching the square of fabric from his hand and then using it to roughly wipe her face of blood before pressing it to the cut.

“The, ehm, AI,” he says hesitantly, slightly concerned about her burst of anger. “Please open a secure line to S.T.R.I.K.E. HQ,” he says, pointing toward the windscreen and nodding hopefully at Simmons.

“I already tried that! The array must be damaged,” she tells him, her tone clearly indicating she’s some particularly offensive variety of imbecile.

The secure line icon appears but, just as it looks to be going through, the screen flashes red and the AI pleasantly announces, “I’m sorry. It appears the communications signal is being jammed.”

Simmons’ eyes go wider than they already were and Fitz instantly recognizes that this is new and much more terrifying information than she’d had previously.

Immediately she says, “Get us out of here!”

No sooner has the SUV started to move—metal-on-metal grinding as it tries to separate from the other SUV—when another vehicle comes from up the street, blocking their exit as it backs in front of them. It’s a cargo lorry with the large, rear roller-door open. It looks as if it could easily fit their entire car inside. As several men appear and begin to lower the ramp, Fitz realizes that’s likely the plan. Another vehicle, a cement lorry, immediately pulls in behind them.
“They’re goin’ to push us inside!” he says. “Lock wheels!” He hears the echoing of the wheel locks engaging beneath them.

“Vertical flight mode, NOW!” Simmons calls.

Fitz hears the system starting up, a sort of whirring hum.

That’s when another vehicle crashes into Simmons’ side, rocking the entire SUV sideways and making his stomach lurch. Fitz manages to hang on and not bash his head against the window which, all things considered, is really about the last thing he needs at the moment—well, that, and getting captured by Hydra.

Once he gets his bearings back, Fitz realizes the whirring hum is stuttering to a halt and the windscreen soon flashes with ‘system error’.

He turns toward Simmons but, looking past her out the window, he catches sight of the driver of the second SUV—it’s Grant Ward. He doesn’t remember him from life but he’s seen quite a few photographs. The manic smile on the man’s face makes him look frighteningly mad.

The cement lorry’s engine revs as it begins to push them up the ramp.

“Reboot system for vertical takeoff!” Simmons says as the locked wheels begin to scream in protest.

“Wait! Cancel takeoff,” Fitz calls, giving Simmons a significant look. “That’ll take too long and it’ll bring the whole system down. We need another plan.”

“What about the artillery?” she says immediately.

He shakes his head. “What’re we goin’ to aim for? Not to mention, it’ll destroy the armor and make it easier for them to get inside.”

“They’re going to get inside no matter what we do,” she warns. “The sat uplink!” She directs the order to the AI, “Open sat uplink feed directly to HQ.”

“I’m sorry,” the AI says, “system not functioning.”

“NO!” Simmons cries, her mask cracking for the first time. For some reason, this is when the fear sinks in for Fitz. If she’s frightened, they must be buggered.

Despite the wheel locks, they’re still being slowly pushed up along the ramp. Fitz looks into the lorry and, by some odd coincidence, it’s a model he’s familiar with though he has no idea why. Not that the reason is particularly important at present.

“I’ve got an idea,” he says. “Just, ehm, can you let me take the wheel?”

Simmons gives him an appraising look for a moment but then her face softens and, with surprising confidence, she says, “Alright, Fitz.” His stomach flutters slightly at the use of his name but he forces the reaction aside.

If he weren’t terrified—and they weren’t near to being captured by an international terrorist organization that wants to use his invention to take over the world (which will all ultimately lead to both of their deaths and most probably many others)—he’d likely have been quite embarrassed as he and Simmons awkwardly switch seats.

The interior of the SUV is designed for utility, security and—if need be—combat and, although it
has the appearance of luxury, all the technical accoutrements are not very forgiving in terms of allowing for a spacious design. As they struggle clumsily to get by one another, for a moment, she’s basically in his lap. So while she tries to move her leg to the side and he tries to help shift her with his hands at her waist, she momentarily grinds her arse properly down into his crotch. Which, it must be said, is so very, very unhelpful at the present. Fortunately for his sanity (and likely his dignity), he’s far too distracted by his imminent torture and death to get terribly excited about Simmons’ perfect bottom. Though he already knows that thoughts of it will be back to haunt him later.

By now, they’re perhaps close to three-quarters of the way up the ramp, the wheel locks still squealing and complaining as they’re pushed along. He glances over to see Ward leaning against the side of his ruined SUV but there’s a new look on his face now. In place of his mentally unbalanced grin, this expression has become more a mixture of curiosity and rage which, it must be said, is still less than comforting. Clearly, Ward knows they’re up to something and Fitz only hopes he doesn’t know what. Not that he could likely stop them in any case.

“Buckle in,” he tells Simmons. To the AI, he says, “On my mark, disengage wheel locks and engage rear thrust at fifty percent. Confirm command.”

“Command confirmed,” the AI says, its pleasant tone completely incongruous to the situation.

He glances over at Simmons, now re-buckled, as she looks back at him with a mixture of apprehension and what he desperately hopes is at least a bare hint of respect.

“I’ve got to aim us and time it exactly right,” he says, gripping the wheel tightly in his anxiety. “We’re about to become a giant batterin’ ram.”

This’ll either be brilliant or end with them both getting killed. If he hits the wrong bit of the structure on the inside of the lorry, they’ll not likely be going anywhere except a shallow grave courtesy of Hydra.

Fitz turns the steering wheel, knowing the tires will follow once the locks are disengaged. He aims the car for the spot he wants to hit. They’re nearly to the top of the ramp now.

“In three…two…one…mark.”

The SUV shoots forward, just missing one of the support struts, it dents the wall but doesn’t go through as he’d thought it would. They bounce back jarringly and he realizes instantly that the walls must be reinforced. Fuck! Ward is much cleverer than he’d given him credit for.

“Oh, no. I’m sorry, Simmons,” he moans, glancing over at her. She looks stunned at first but then her jaw tightens and somehow he knows it’s with determination. “Oh god, engage thrusters at one hundred percent!” Metal shrieks as the side-wall of the lorry begins to bulge outward but he can hear the front of the SUV buckling under the strain despite the armor and he sees small cracks beginning to form in the windscreen as the vehicle pushes against the reinforced metal. He glances in the mirror and men with guns are gathering behind them, some aiming their pistols at them but others just standing there in astonishment.

“Engage countermeasure,” Simmons shouts and the gun in the center console pops out, much to Fitz’s surprise. She aims at the wall ahead and fires a grenade. It blasts through the windscreen, sending a gust of hot, acrid air back through the large new hole in the windscreen right into his face. Smoke and the scent of heated metal follow. Then, with one final scream of protesting metal, the SUV lurches forward and out of the lorry as they fly through the air toward the ground. Bits of flaming insulation and ragged sheets of metal come with them. When they hit the ground at speed, he can barely keep them on the road.
“Rear thrusters off!” he shouts only because of the rushing sound in his ears which he’s fairly certain is just a physiological response to his frayed nerves though the grenade launcher going off near his head is another possible culprit.

“Look out!” Simmons cries as the car wobbles and veers horribly to the side causing him to scrape past several parked vehicles at the side of the road.

He’s afraid to see the reading on the speedometer as they fly past buildings and parked cars, occasionally whipping around a moving vehicle as he tries to slow them to something approaching not-death-defying. He can only thank heaven it’s not rush hour.

“Holy hell,” he mutters as he turns onto a larger thoroughfare and toward what he hopes is safety. The gaping hole in the windscreen is doing nothing to keep them inconspicuous however.

“Can vertical flight mode be restored?” Simmons asks, sounding much more like herself now. At least, what little of herself he’s become familiar with so far.

“Vertical flight mode is unavailable without system reboot,” the AI informs them.

Simmons slams her fist down on the dash, which immediately makes Fitz even more nervous since he knows exactly what’s in there as well.

“Are they followin’ us?” he asks, though he keeps checking the mirrors every ten seconds in any case. He hasn’t seen either of the SUVs though the one that’d initially hit them seemed fairly inoperable. Ward’s, however, looked to be quite capable of giving chase. He mentally thanks Director Weaver for the use of the new SUV otherwise they’d never have made it.

“I don’t see them but the question remains: how did they find us in the first place?” She gives him a significant look. “Until we know that, we can’t assume they won’t be able to find us again.”

“You’re talkin’ about a double agent, yeah? A leak in the agency? Feedin’ our location to Hydra?” he asks in disbelief.

She nods then looks out the window. “Where are you headed?” she asks suddenly.

“I’ve no clue! I’m just drivin’,” he admits. Then something occurs to him. “The AI! That’s how they know. If someone gave them the security code for this vehicle, they can track us at any time!”

“We need to get rid of this car!” Simmons says.

“We’ve got to get back to HQ!” Fitz says simultaneously.

“We can’t go back until we know who’s against us, Fitz,” she says softly, surprising him with what seems like understanding in her tone.

“Why not?!” he cries, his voice too loud and too high with the adrenaline still coursing through him.

The idea of being on their own out here is terrifying. Besides, if there’s only one double agent what’s the worst that could happen if they go back to HQ? There are loads of agents there to protect them. Then he realizes that any of those agents could be the counter-spy and all they’d need to do is get close enough—just as Ward had. He glances at Simmons and, though he’s only known her a very short time, he already believes he can trust her. If she’d wanted him captured by Hydra, he already would be. Fitz knows how to play the odds and Simmons is clearly his safest bet.

She opens her mouth to argue with his previous question but he preempts her: “Okay, I know.
You’re right. We can’t go back.”

She looks momentarily startled but recovers quickly. “We’ll need to steal another car then.”

“Steal? What?!”

Simmons soon finds what she deems a suitable vehicle in a quiet residential area. It’s a fairly recent-model Vauxhall which she asks him to change the number plates on as she hot wires it.

He only just stops himself from mentioning how lucky it is he’d brought his tools. It seems ungracious even if she had been dismissive of his efforts to bring what he thought they might need in the event of an emergency—which they were clearly in the middle of. Actually, he’s not sure if ’emergency’ really covers this particular operation. Crisis? Calamity? Disaster? Catastrophe? Bollixed up shitstorm of a clusterfucked train smash?

He finishes attaching the last of the plates and, as he gets up from the ground, he can’t help but notice Simmons’ bare legs stretched out from the driver’s seat while she leans down beneath the steering wheel. Her skirt’s ridden up so high his face grows hot and he feels his heart beginning to pound in his ears again. Tearing his eyes away, he heads to the SUV and begins unloading their things and transferring them into the much smaller boot of the Vauxhall.

“What are you doing?” Simmons asks loudly at his elbow, nearly making him drop the case he’s placing into the boot of the now-idling car.

“Gettin’ our things!” he says, unable to hide his annoyance but really only because he’s embarrassed at being startled.

“We’ll never have room for all of that,” she says with a dismissive wave of her hand.

Bloody hell, already she’s back to hating him intensely. Evidently, he can’t do anything properly—even save their lives. Though, he supposes she’d helped a bit.

“I’m sure I can fit it—“

But he doesn’t finish when Simmons abruptly and rather savagely shoves him toward the far side of the car away from the street. She slams the boot of the Vauxhall as she comes after him just when he hears the sound of a vehicle approaching. Pushing him roughly down by the shoulders, Simmons flattens him to the ground with her knee digging into his back and all he can really think about is how startled he is by how strong she is for her size and the way she’s able to manhandle him like some pathetic weakling. He’s never been terribly large but she’s just bloody tiny.

The approaching car slows and he hears a door open then the sounds of someone getting out. The engine idles on as he hears light footsteps on the pavement.

Simmons pops up with a gun she’d pulled from god knows where and he hears a bullet ping off the Vauxhall before Simmons fires back several shots. His heart is racing as he hears a distinctly male cry, then she looks down at him and grinds out, “Get in the car now and keep your head down!”

He doesn’t wait for further instructions. He scrambles to the door and wrenches it open, clambering up into the seat of the idling car while trying to keep his head low. He presses himself into the passenger seat, flinching with every shot, terrified for Simmons each time the sound of gunfire rings out. She sends off a few more rounds before sliding in after him, thankfully unscathed. She pops the clutch and then tears away, the tires squealing at the sudden friction.
“They’ll just follow, won’t they?” he asks, glancing back over his shoulder to see if the idling SUV is already after them.

“I shot out two of their tires,” she says evenly with no hint of pride. “We’ll have to ditch this car too however—inconvenient but necessary now. It appears they were inspecting the SUV before they discovered our presence and—though not definitive proof—I think it’s a working theory that they were able to track our SUV.”

He can hardly believe her calm in the face of all these life-or-death situations. It seems completely second nature to her. He’s quite certain that this is all very unfamiliar to him however. He has no memories of what to do once his adrenaline gets going and his heart begins pounding like a hummingbird’s on methamphetamines.

“What are we goin’ to do?” he asks suddenly because he feels like his mind is refusing to take another step in any direction. He isn’t even sure what they need. Now that HQ isn’t safe, the bloody inaptly named safe house likely isn’t safe—where the hell would they be safe? He realizes he might be panicking a bit and he tries to calm his breathing.

“There’s a storage locker at the train station. I’ve got cash, passports, IDs, anything we need. I can work up something for you as well. Then we get out of the city. I’ll report to Weaver once we’re somewhere safe,” she says, her voice firm and sure.

Just knowing there’s some sort of plan makes him feel a bit better but he needs specifics. “So we steal another car, go get whatever’s in your locker and then we head—where exactly?”

Simmons laughs, just a bit of a chuckle but it worries him instantly. “It’s not quite as easy as all that,” she says, glancing over with a small smile lingering over her lips.

Momentarily distracted by her beauty again, he almost loses his train of thought. “Wait. What? Why isn’t it that easy?” It hadn’t sounded that easy to begin with.

“Because Ward is too clever for that,” she says. “He’ll be expecting us to leave London. We’ll have to be smarter than he is, Fitz.”

“Course. That makes sense, I s’pose,” he says, somewhat daunted. “So what’s the first step?”

“Did you get my bag from the SUV?” she asks, her brows quirking up questioningly.

“Ehm, well, I hadn’t gotten to that yet when—you know,” he says, inwardly wincing and feeling awful he’d lost her things. Hoping it might console her, he adds, “I didn’t get mine either.”

“How much cash have you got?” she asks, not looking away from the road this time.

He pulls his wallet out to check. “Around sixty pounds or so…”

Simmons’ first response is to roll her eyes. “We’ll get a room for the night and get to my locker in the morning. I need to think of a plan to avoid Ward and his goons and it might take some doing.”

Fitz is left to imagine what sort of plan she might come up with to avoid Hydra but he’s slightly distracted by what sort of ‘room’ they would end up in for sixty pounds, not to mention, exactly how embarrassing it’s going to be to share said room with Simmons.

They drive around for some time, stopping only to change the plates on the Vauxhall once again. Simmons says it’s to see if Hydra has another way of tracking them. “Better to know now rather than later,” she warns.
They speak little, though some of the discomfort is gone from between them. Occasionally, Fitz glances over at her thoughtful face and wonders if she's making plans in her mind or just enjoying the fact that he's finally figured out how to keep his mouth shut.

After it’s grown rather dark and Fitz a bit sleepy, she pulls the Vauxhall into a space at a carpark in Peckham.

“Really?” he questions in disbelief. “We’re stayin’ here—the dodgiest bit of London imaginable?”

“The car will be gone by tomorrow,” she says with a shrug. “We’re also not terribly far from where we need to be in the morning.”

“Right, right. Yeah, okay. Fine.” He sighs, then mumbles, ”Assumin' we've not been murdered by then.”

Ignoring his petulance, with a slight quirk of her lips, she says, “Best get anything you want to keep from your horde of toys.”

“Oh, bloody hell,” he mutters, knowing there’s no way he can carry everything.

He empties two of the cases of padding and loads them up with everything he can fit inside them. The standard ops kit has a sweep for detecting tracking devices and he goes over both himself and Simmons one more time, then the cases and all the equipment he brings just to be on the safe side. The sweeps all come up clean and he carefully packs the device into a case with the other items. He takes off his tie and carefully wraps a few of the smaller, more delicate bits of tech, adding them in where he hopes to avoid them being smashed. Finally, he puts his special specs in his inner jacket pocket and gets Simmons to carry the case containing his laptop computer.

“That’s it, I think,” he says, holding one case in each hand.

“Indeed,” she agrees with a slight curve to her lips that could even be considered a smile. “You appeared to do quite well. I don’t think there’s much left for the thugs to get, certainly nothing to further their lives of crime.” Without waiting for a response, she heads off in what seems a random direction.

His stomach flip-flops at the compliment. “Thanks,” he manages, biting the insides of his lips so he won’t smile too much as he follows her down the sidewalk.

“Shame about our luggage though,” she says over her shoulder, and his stomach clenches. He’s still mortified he’d not gotten her things first. He tries to remind himself that this is all new to him despite his job of technically being a spy. Not only is his memory shoddy, he’d never been a field operative anyway. Still, it’s small comfort when it seems so clear how much his attempts to help disappoint her.

They walk for a half hour or so, Fitz’s arms growing exhausted with the heavy cases, before she stops in front of a truly sad, run-down building. It’s rather ironically called “The Majestic Hotel”. The irony, however, seems to be quite lost on whoever owns the awful pile of shite.

“This place looks crap,” he whispers to Simmons, noting a few rough sleepers and a couple of young men hanging about in the shadows.

“Well,” she says, with a sigh, “carry more cash next time.”

“There better not be a bloody next time,” he says feeling rather annoyed with her suddenly. “It’s not like I was plannin’ on any of this happenin’, you know? If I had, I might’ve remembered to get few
extra pounds from the cash machine. Not that my memory is terribly reliable but I seem to recall you were the one who said nothin’ like this was goin’ to happen in the first place!”

“I know,” she says quietly, looking away, and he instantly regrets his outburst.

“M’sorry, Simmons. This isn’t your fault. I’m bein’ an arse,” he says without hesitation, searching her profile for a sign that she accepts his apology.

He sees her lips tighten briefly but then she just heads through the double doors into the dingy motel. He trails after her, pushing through with his shoulder.

He meets her at the desk which is secured by a plexiglass barrier completely surrounding everything above the level of the countertop. Behind it sits an older, white-haired gentleman with a full scraggle of beard watching a fuzzy telly that still seems to have rabbit ears of all things.

He gets up, placing his hands on the desk before him. Fitz sees he’s wearing a worn, crooked name tag that says “Robert”.

“A room for you an’ th’ missus?” Robert asks, addressing him despite the fact Simmons is standing directly in front of the small holes used to speak through the thick plexiglass.

“Oh, we’re—“ Fitz starts when Simmons elbows him surreptitiously in the side.

“Yes, please,” she says while he struggles not to mutter out some profanity over his now aching rib.

Robert gives them a knowing smirk and turns the registry toward them, sliding it through the thin slot between the plexiglass and the counter. “Double er king? An’ if ya don’t mind signin’ in, eh?”

“Double, and of course,” Simmons says, signing something completely illegible to Fitz’s eyes.

“’At’ll be sixty pound, then,” Robert says, looking pointedly at Fitz.

“Excuse me,” Simmons says, her tone one Fitz wouldn’t like to haggle with, “your sign outside says fifty pounds for a double.”

“Oi, did I say sixty pound? Sorry, miss. Meant fifty, o’ course,” he says without a hint of true apology and now fairly leering at Simmons.

Fitz starts to put the cases down to get out his wallet when Simmons reaches under his jacket into his back pocket herself, nearly making him jump. She slips his wallet out and, careful to keep the contents from view, she fishes around then hands the dirty bastard fifty. He trades her an old brass key through the slot in return.

“Up ’em stairs an’ t’ lef’, lucky number seb’n. ’Ave a righ’ lovely evenin’ now,” Robert says, his tone dripping with innuendo.

Once they get up the stairs, Fitz can’t stop himself from whispering, “What was up with that cheeky old bugger?”

“He thought I was a prostitute,” she says. "Likely one who deals with," she looks at the two silver cases Fitz is carrying. "special interests." She says the last bit seemingly without a hint of feeling on the subject of some old geezer thinking she’s a sort of kinky dominatrix.

Fitz’s mouth, on the other hand, drops open in shock and he can’t quite get it closed again until Simmons finally stabs the key into the door to their room and gets the stiff old lock to turn. Stepping
inside, she flicks on the light switch and the overhead fixture proceeds to flicker several times before deciding to give out a fairly steady glow.

Fitz follows her inside, setting the cases down and shaking the stiffness out of his arms so he can close the door behind him—which he instantly regrets. The paint is so old that it’s gone rather gummy and his fingers come away sticky.

“Ugh!” he cries, holding his hand out away from his reasonably clean clothes. Jesus, he really hopes it’s the paint. “This is the mankiest, most revolting excuse for a room I’ve ever seen!”

Simmons says nothing, just sits down on the narrow double bed after putting his laptop on the one wobbly table in the room. He looks around and all he can see is that everything is ancient or filthy—or both.

“Now what do we do?” he asks, instantly feeling heat rise to his cheeks. After the awful suggestiveness of the clerk, the last thing they need is him doing the same, even unintentionally. “I mean….” but he’s not quite sure what he means exactly. “S’just this place is miserable and—christ, I don’t know.”

He looks at his watch and sees it’d gotten rather late while they’d driven around waiting to see if the Hydra goons would track them down. He shivers at the idea that Ward could just be waiting until they’re not expecting an ambush.

“It’s the adrenaline,” Simmons says softly. “It takes some time to come back down when you aren’t used to it.” She holds up his wallet which she hadn't given back yet. “I think we might have enough for a couple of fish suppers. I saw a shop down the block.”

“I’m not hungry,” he says, his stomach reeling at the idea of food from this bit of London. He tries to get his jacket off without touching it with his sticky hand.

“Really?” she asks, her voice somewhat disbelieving.

He looks at her, his brows drawing down, unsure what to make of her tone. “Go ahead, if you’re up for it. I’m fine though.”

She shrugs. “I’m alright. If you’re, well, certain.”

He nods, laying his jacket on the tattered remains of what was once a chair. The poor thing’s stuffing is now poking out of multiple large holes in the cruddy green fabric. He heads into the toilet to wash his hands, finding the only soap to be a browned hunk left over from ages past. He isn’t sure if he might catch something from it so he scrubs his hand with only water until the sticky feeling goes away. He looks in the shower and backs away in horror.

When he comes out, Simmons is still sitting at the foot of the bed, sweeping her hand over the, undoubtedly grimy, red duvet.

“My turn?” she asks, looking up.

“Oh. Yeah, s'pose so,” he says uneasily. “Are you ready to—er, ehm, sleep?”

“Might as well,” she says, sighing. Then she gets up and goes into the filthy toilet, leaving him there to stare at the narrow bed. Shite, bugger and bollocks.

Does she expect him to sleep on the disgusting floor? Or—his face grows warm at the thought—does she expect him to share the little bed? It’s small enough that he can’t quite see how they’ll
manage it without touching. He hears her moving around in the toilet and guiltily looks down at himself, worried for his only set of, still relatively clean, clothes.

He huffs out a sigh and strips out of his button-down, shoes and trousers, adding them all to the chair with his jacket. He looks at himself again, now right down to his pants and vest top but it isn’t that bad, he decides.

Peeling the vile duvet off, he gives the bedding a couple of fluttering tosses into the air to clear it of anything untoward before slipping between the, rather questionably clean, sheets. He tries to appear casual, even confident, placing his hands behind his head as he lays there on his back. Jesus, this is ridiculous, he decides, shifting around several times before settling back to his original position with hands behind his head again.

When the door to the toilet opens, he only has a moment to look over before she flicks off the main light in the room—but it’s enough.

She stands in the doorway in nothing but her bra and knickers—black lace and quite see-through. Despite the short span in real time, it seems he has ages to note the outline of her nipples through the lace and the dark triangle of hair beneath her knickers before the light goes out. She still has the light on inside the toilet, leaving her backlit, which is just as tantalizing. The silhouette of her breasts, her small waist and bloody gorgeous rounded bum as she turns back from her lean in for the light switch are just as incredible. He knows he shouldn’t be looking but—fuck if he can help himself. She might’ve warned him to shut his eyes or, well, something. He feels like a bloody teenager suddenly as his face burns with embarrassment and his cock goes half-hard.

Simmons comes over to the bed and the way she walks is unhurried, self-possessed—and somehow with her, he believes it. It’s nothing like the act he’s put on to fake some semblance of manly confidence. Her self-assurance is genuine and—he has no doubt—well-earned.

She slips under the sheet with her back to him and she’s so close, he feels her body heat. Then her bum brushes against the side of his thigh and he sucks in a breath. Holy god, this is going to be the longest night of his life.

He wants to turn away but somehow that feels cowardly or perhaps even a bit like turning his back on the enemy. Realistically, she’s most definitely not his enemy. In fact, she feels like the closest thing he has to a friend just now. Nevertheless, the fact remains that she apparently dislikes him. So instead of facing away, he turns on his side toward her while keeping as much space between them as possible, even though it’s only a few centimeters. He doesn’t know what to do with his hands, afraid he’ll accidentally touch her, and finally he just presses them tightly along his body, hoping they won’t go wandering in the night.

“Let’s talk,” she says, but her tone is not what he’d expect from such a declaration. It’s not upset or scared, it’s far more enticing.

He’s not sure how to respond to the incongruity, so he merely hums his agreement because—it’s true, they might’ve died.

She shifts her hips, pressing back as if she’s uncomfortable (which she may well be on the horrid, lumpy mattress), but she doesn’t quite touch him this time.

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“Are you familiar with misattribution of arousal?” she asks.

He blushes hotly because he certainly is familiar with it, he remembers completely as soon as she says it.
“It’s been well-studied and, I daresay, scientifically proven that ‘highly emotional’ situations can cause one to become sexually attracted to someone you experience such situations with. The raised heart-rate and other physiological reactions to fear-induced stress are quite similar to those experienced during sexual attraction. That, along with the clearly-proven correlation between death and reproductive urges, might have two people who’ve just had a harrowing near-death experience quite stimulated.”

He opens his mouth to respond even though he has no clue what he might say but when nothing comes to him, he snaps it closed again.

He’s suddenly not sure what’s happening. Is she actually bloody well coming on to him? Her tone seems seductive but she does hate him after all. He absolutely must be misinterpreting. He’s not even sure if he likes her. Not that he dislikes her in any way, in fact, she seems bloody brilliant—but he hardly knows her at all really. She’s quite likely the most beautiful woman he can ever remember seeing but, still, she doesn’t exactly seem to enjoy his company much.

She wiggles again and, he realizes suddenly, rubs her thighs together before pushing her hips back just slightly. It causes her bum to just barely come in contact with the fronts of his legs and to his shock, his right hand where it's pressed along his thigh. It takes a surprising amount of effort not to turn his wrist and passively let the pert roundness fill his hand.

Slowly, she rolls toward him, her hand coming up to touch the center of his chest. His breath catches in his throat and his brain seems to forget how to form words. For some unknown reason, he opens his mouth to say something again—anything, really—though he's completely uncertain what might pop out. A few ideas from the inviting to the indignant fly through his head but nothing makes it as far as his lips.

He feels her heated, regular breaths against his throat and, even in the dark, he knows he could kiss her right now with just the slightest movement of his head. But his nerve fails him as fear of how this exquisite woman could devastate him starts to fill him up. He just lay there frozen, with her hot breath on his neck while her fingers flex lightly against his chest—and does absolutely nothing.

He knows he’s not a virgin; he has some very vague memories of women but they’re insubstantial, almost as if they happened to someone else. Now that his only remaining deficiency is his memory, he’s considered and rejected the idea of attempting to date anyone yet. Because—though he still hopes he might yet recover further—the truth he has to face is that he may never get any better. This could be all he’ll ever recall from his past life and that would mean that the next woman he sleeps with, in a way, will be very much like the first time for him. He finds it a terrifying and simultaneously exhilarating thought. He really wants it to mean something because another inkling he has is that he’s never been involved in anything like a real relationship. He doesn’t believe he’s ever had anyone who really loved him that he loved just as much. He isn’t completely sure what his past love life entailed exactly but one thing he’s fairly sure of is that he’s never shared that elusive connection of being in love—properly, mutually in love with anyone—whether that was due to his own mistakes or by chance, he can’t say. One thing he is certain of, however, is that he longs for it. Desperately, he wants to live through this so he might have something that special with another person. In fact, he doesn’t know if there’s anything he wouldn't give if only someone could love him like that—a woman he feels that much love for in return.

At his conspicuous lack of response, Simmons' hand slips from his chest and, without further comment, she turns away again.

Immediately, he feels a sudden tightness in his chest, a terrible fear that he’s just made a dreadful, life-altering mistake.
Fuck. What an idiot he is.

But just when he thinks of touching her, seeing if he can keep the moment from slipping though his fingers, he remembers how gorgeous she is—how confident, capable, brave, noble even. She’s so far above him and clearly so much more amazing than anyone he’s ever likely to get—and keep. And, of course, she doesn’t really want him anyway. Evidently, she only wants someone to scratch an itch after their ‘harrowing’ experience and it likely makes no difference to her if it’s him in the dark or just someone else.

“Best not to touch me while I’m sleeping,” she says without turning to face him again. Her tone is full of something now—something he really doesn’t understand.

“What?” he says, incredulous. “I’d never—“

“I didn’t mean that,” she says. “I only meant, I might break your nose and ask questions later if you wake me.”

“You must be jokin’,” he says, still stunned and not even sure what’d just happened now. Had she really just propositioned him or had he only read too much into her words, her slight touches? “I’m not sure how you expect we won’t make contact at all in this pathetic excuse for a bed. Do you want me to—”

“No. It—it’ll probably be fine,” she stammers, her voice unsteady as she interrupts him.

He isn’t sure if he likes the idea of his nose probably not being broken but somehow it feels wrong to give way now. Like he’ll lose ground in this subtle battle of wills she’d begun for some unknown reason.
My Word is my BOND
A Fitz-Simmons Fanfic
By Madalayna
I haven't seen the new Bond film but the fact it's out has me inspired.

As Jemma presses her head into the mouldering pillow, she bites the inside of her lip hard enough to just taste coppery blood. She hadn’t calculated exactly how much this mission would hurt, though she’d certainly guessed that it would be significant.

For this entire last year, she’d forced herself to stay away from Fitz. She'd dreaded the possibility of seeing him again and certainly hadn’t wanted this mission. All because the thing she really never, ever wanted was to feel the pain of his inability to remember her again. She missed him and it hurt deeply that she was gone from his mind as if she’d never existed there.

Jemma knows Weaver has hopes that the emotional connection she and Fitz once shared might help his memory. However, she’d already warned Weaver that Fitz wouldn’t—no, couldn't—remember her. Jemma had seen the scans after his injury, there are portions of his right temporal lobe that are just too damaged. Fortunately, his hippocampus—where long-term memories are stored—remained completely unharmed by the bullet. And although Jemma's heard of cases where memories are slowly transferred back to the healing temporal lobe, once again becoming available for recall, it’s certainly a very rare exception. The best-case scenario has always been for him to have a spontaneous recovery of his memories but the likelihood of that is even less than a slower recollection of his past.

After the shooting, Jemma had written Weaver a report on memory recall after traumatic brain injury. Jemma had even looked into cases involving a connection between strong emotion and memory recall. She'd discovered some very rare cases where spontaneous recovery of most—or even all—of the lost memory had been achieved merely by stimulating strong emotions in the subjects—generally linked to a person or a place. Weaver had read the report and was now clearly grasping at straws. Though that method of recovery is a very long-shot, perhaps somewhere in the back of her mind, Jemma had hoped that he would have some emotional attachment to their relationship. She’d fancifully wondered if he might somehow find his way back at least to his memories of even her. She realizes now just what a silly, unrealistic idea it is.

After Ward shot Fitz, she’d waited by his bedside for nine days until he’d finally woken. Even after three surgeries performed by one of the finest neurosurgeons in the UK, he’d opened his eyes and hadn’t known her at all. Right from the moment the bullet had penetrated his skull, she was nothing more to Fitz than a stranger. Though she’s incredibly grateful that he came through it all alive and would be able to recover to a normal life, she saw Ward’s bullet as having killed the version of her that lived in Fitz’s mind. At the time, she’d been so guilt-ridden over his injury, she hadn’t wanted to reacquaint herself with Fitz. However, she’d still worked tirelessly with Streiten to figure out some way to get his memories back. However, after a few weeks of intensive research and a few innovative therapy suggestions, ultimately, she’d decided that perhaps it was better for Fitz in a way—kinder for them both—that he no longer knew her. So she’d left his treatment in Streiten’s capable hands. It was her fault after all, that his memory was shattered and his life changed, therefore wasn’t it better that he start fresh with someone he could find happiness with one day?
Before the shooting, Jemma had truly wanted nothing more than for him to end his infatuation, forget her, and find someone else but being near him now, feeling the close and intimate pain that he no longer cares for her or even wishes for anything at all between them is almost the mental equivalent of a sudden sharp blow.

She feels utterly selfish and so very vulnerable after making her desire to be with him known. All the while, she'd been fully aware of the fact that she meant nothing more to him but some vague object of desire even though he means so much more to her. That fresh jab of pain spurred her to act when she saw him so obviously struggling, mired in lust, with his eyes roving hungrily over her as he watched her from the bed. She wanted desperately to feel him reciprocate even the purely carnal side of her feelings for him, even if their deeper connection only ultimately meant something to her. She couldn’t see the harm to him and she hoped to soothe her own ache a little. But now it looks quite certain he has no interest in her, not after his clear dismissal of her rather overt seduction attempt.

Not wanting to think anymore about Fitz shifting uneasily behind her, she attempts to deliberate on who at S.T.R.I.K.E. has the knowledge, means and opportunity to leak the security code for their SUV. It’s now clear to her that—whether Director May is right and S.H.I.E.L.D. is currently compromised or not—Director Weaver has almost certainly got a traitor on her hands within S.T.R.I.K.E.

Jemma’s list of suspects isn’t long. Donnie Gill and/or his assistant Seth Dormer are the two most obvious candidates. However, Jemma also happens to know that nothing now goes across Weaver’s desk without passing Lance Hunter’s eyes. Being a recent acquisition is rather suspicious, not to mention, she has no actual idea how he’d ended up as Weaver’s personal secretary. It’d come out like a bit of a joke at first, something about his poor attitude. However, it’s been several months now and she wonders if he hadn’t managed to manipulate his way into the position for this very purpose. Jemma hates to consider the possibility, but she also happens to know that Donnie Gill has a rather large crush on Daisy Johnson. She and Trip were still in the infirmary when Jemma had left with Fitz and the idea that Daisy could be manipulating Donnie for information is one she can’t ignore when Director May herself believes her organization to be compromised.

Weaver had said she needed someone she could trust and now Jemma realizes that the director must’ve suspected something more than she told Jemma of at the time. Knowing Weaver as she does, she can only assume the director had been doing her best to protect Fitz even if she didn’t share the full details with Jemma. Certainly Weaver must never have imagined S.T.R.I.K.E. being further compromised as it now appears to be.

Jemma is rather proud of how Fitz had handled himself. If not for his strategy of ramming their way out of the lorry, they might’ve been forced into her more desperate attempt to shoot their way out—which was a significantly higher risk plan.

Feeling Fitz’s wakeful, uneven breathing and his nearly palpable discomfort behind her, she’s unable to keep her thoughts off him any longer.

She berates herself for being so blatant in her overtures. It was so foolish and impetuous but all day she’d seen his lingering yet bashful looks of appreciation and the startlingly powerful heat of desire flashing in his eyes as he tried and failed to keep his yearnings hidden. She knew from the moment she walked into Weaver’s office how drawn he was to her. It’s part of her training to use all her advantages, including those of her own inherent attractiveness to the opposite sex in order to manipulate targets. To see such cues is second nature to her now. However, with Fitz, she’s seen these looks from him before and—she must admit, at least to herself—she had quite hoped to see them again. She finds it difficult to tamp down her disappointment that it seems likely it will never come to pass.
She really hadn’t expected their attraction to be so strong right from the beginning of their reacquaintance. It hadn’t been that way when they met at the Academy. His infatuation had been slow to build. This time, as he looked at her, she almost felt as if he left burning hot trails along her skin as his brilliant blue eyes raked over her legs or paused to study her lips. It had all affected her more than she might’ve dreamed—certainly far more than she should’ve allowed it to. She was able to admit to herself in the aftermath of their escape that she wanted him. He wanted her as well—she was sure of that—and yet, for some reason of his own, he’d been unresponsive to her advances.

However, the reason doesn’t matter to her now, only the result—it has to be over between them now. It seems fitting to her somehow that he’d rejected her. Fitz may not know of her responsibility for his condition but it seems right to her that he would refuse. In that way, even unknowingly, he was justly punishing her for her mistake. It was a selfish impulse anyway. She hadn’t been thinking, only reacting, and it was wrong to draw him into her orbit again. Now she’ll let go and that will be the proper, far more professional, thing to do. Of course it will. Anything else is ridiculous.

As soon as she can get him somewhere safe and get a call in to Weaver at HQ, it will all go away. He will have more significant protection and then she and Fitz will likely never see one another again. Jemma has pondered leaving S.T.R.I.K.E. a number of times in the last year and the only thing stopping her was Ward—but once she catches him (which she will do, one way or another), she thinks the timing will finally be right. And Fitz will be free to live his life then. He can find someone special to him and be happy.

She knows now that it had been a lie she’d told herself a year and a half ago when she and Fitz’d had their ill-fated first and last date.

After the sweetly planned meal and stargazing he’d taken her for, they’d chatted pleasantly in his car for several minutes before he’d walked her to the door of her flat. Pausing just outside, Fitz telling her some amusing anecdote from the lab, he’d suddenly halted mid-sentence and, his voice a bit reedy, blurted, “Would it be alright if I kissed you goodnight?” He burst out with it so quickly it took a moment for her brain to translate his rapid-fire request. He’d only stared at her, seemingly stunned at his own boldness, with his sweet, wide-eyed, expectant face full of fear that she would reject him.

She’d already been planning to invite him inside, believing a few weeks of detached but enthusiastic shagging might see him clear of his infatuation. She’d believed his feelings to be a mere fancy that had dragged on after too many years of frustrated un consummated flirtation. Thus motivated, she’d smiled seductively and told him she’d like it very much if he did.

He hadn’t awkwardly pulled her into his arms as she’d expected, instead, he’d rather shyly cupped her cheek and tenderly stroked over it with a thumb. Then, pressing his lips very gently to hers, he’d caressed her mouth with such care and feeling it had taken her breath away. As he leaned away, his eyes had searched hers with such earnestness that her heart had begun to flutter.

“Was that alright?” he’d asked.

Overcome with a sudden flush of her own desire, Jemma had grasped his lapels and kissed him again in answer. He’d pressed her back against the door and returned it with such fire and desperate passion that she’d been ready to drag him inside with her.

Then, against her lips, he’d murmured, “God, Jemma, I love you,” and, mentally, she’d frozen. Her lips grew mechanical and he’d pulled away, his expression questioning and worried.

She’d forced a smile and said, “That was lovely but it’s quite late.” She ran a hand up onto his shoulder and smiled again tightly. “Goodnight, Fitz.”
It had all been too perfect, their entire date—from what he'd said, to all the choices he’d made to induce her. Then, he’d let slip his true feelings and that had made her afraid—not only for his feelings being damaged but, also—her own. She feared loving someone so completely as she knew she likely could with Fitz—or at least that Fitz from before. She knew him so well and they shared such an inexplicable bond. She knew that, with him, she might’ve had something real. It terrified her to the point of pushing him away. He was the closest thing she’d ever had to a true friend, and he could’ve been so much more than that, if only she’d allowed herself the freedom.

Instead, she’d shut herself into her usual box of rules. Romantic attachments have always been messy and a bit disastrous for her. As a result, she’d always tried to keep things casual with her lovers, making it easy to cast them off if they grew too enamored though more often than not, they'd fallen away themselves which left her quite unperturbed. Knowing herself as she did, she’d feared ruining everything with Fitz—hurting him terribly. He was someone she couldn’t toss aside when she began to feel stifled or overwhelmed, nor could she treat him with the indifference that caused many of her suitors to drift off unnoticed. So she’d pushed him away to prevent a deeper pain and hoped he’d forget.

Now, she thinks she should’ve given them a chance.

She has little to worry about now, however, because this new Fitz obviously doesn't want her—no longer loves her of course. Still, she finds herself yearning for him—for the Fitz she’d known for nearly ten years. Admittedly, he is still himself, only subtly changed. The largest change to their relationship being that he no longer knows or cares for her. But all day, she’d found herself searching for the familiar, loving look in his eyes that she remembers—only to discover it’s been replaced by a timid hunger instead. She’d spurned that look of sweet adoration back then but now she longs to see it more than anything. It’s not there though and so she’d sought to sate his hunger and indulge herself in nostalgia.

It's just as well, she decides, she still has no place for him in her world full of danger and death. Then she realizes that this, too, is a lie she’s been telling herself over and over. Because once he'd been hurt, he'd clearly left a Fitz-sized hole in her heart. A year hadn’t seen her able to fill it with anything other than guilt and sadness but, now, more than ever, she only wants to fit him back into the empty space—his place. It’s too dangerous, she tries to remind herself. Ward is out there and until he’s dead, Fitz will be in danger. And as much as she would like to believe that she will leave S.T.R.I.K.E. when this is over, she knows that the life of a spy always draws you back. So many of her fellow specialists have left over the years only to return when the pleasures of a simple, normal life lose their appeal. As they always do once danger has become a part of your everyday world.

Nonetheless, it seems certain Fitz no longer wants any place at all in her life or her heart and the only thing she can think of to fill the gaping hollow within herself is her revenge—against Grant Ward.

Fitz wakes to the sound of the taps as the pipes clatter and clank inside the wall behind his head. He looks to the side where his hand is splayed across the empty bed and realizes Agent Simmons is gone.

He sits up, the dingy sheet falling away just as the door to the toilet opens and Simmons comes out, dressed again, and looking surprisingly refreshed compared to yesterday following their drama.

“Good. You’re awake,” she says which seems rather unnecessary. “I'm desperate for tea. Shall I leave you to it while I get us something to start the day?” she asks rather cheerfully.

He shrugs, not quite sure how to act after last night. He’s still not sure he has it right in his head. But if he’s not mad yet, she’d thrown out a bit of a shag as an end to their traumatic day and he’d lain
there paralyzed like a thick-headed knob. What a stupid wanker he is. (Most probably quite literally now.)

“Ehm, yeah, I s’pose.”

“I’ll be back in a tick,” she says and heads out the door.

He stares after her for a moment before getting up and attempting to get himself something close to freshened up in the horribly filthy toilet. He’s just tying his laces when she comes back in with two cups and a paper sack of something.

“Here,” she says, handing him a cup and the sack.

He finds his tea sweet, just how he likes, and the bag holds two ham and cheese pastries. He takes one out and tries to hand the rest back.

“I’ve had mine,” she says, holding up a hand and then taking a sip of her tea.

“Oh. Thanks,” he says, hearing the anxious hesitance in his own voice.

He tries to distract himself from his discomfort by making a job of eating one of the pastries. Simmons sits casually in the torn chair, her legs crossed out in front of her as she sips her tea. He absolutely keeps his eyes angled to the floor to avoid staring at her prominently-displayed, very gorgeous legs. Fortunately, his stomach seems to wake up as he swallows down the food she’d kindly gotten him and he focuses on making quick work of both before Simmons begins to speak again.

“Ward is going to have men at the train stations and the airports,” she begins, her tone and manner all-business. “We need a distraction of some sort.”

“Can’t we just have someone else get your things?” he wonders aloud.

“Someone unrelated to S.T.R.I.K.E. whom we also trust with our lives?” she asks, her lips slightly curled and one brow cocked sarcastically.

“Well, when you put it like that…” he says dispiritedly. “But, ehm, what if it was someone—I don’t know—neutral? Someone who isn’t involved at all and their only stake in it is, er, payment?” He grimaces at her expression which seems to grow to distaste at the mention of money. “I only meant, if they don’t know why they’re doin’ it and you offered them a bit of compensation—“

“I understand the concept,” she interrupts his rambling. “I’m only concerned that someone interested in nothing but gain might make off with what we need and leave us in the lurch.”

“Well,” he says, “Not everyone is so greedy.”

“And exactly who fits that description?” she asks, both brows rising in question as she takes another casual sip of her tea.

“A kid?” he prompts.

“You’re suggesting we put a child in danger?” she asks in disbelief.

“What?! No! Of course not! Why would they be in danger any more than anyone else at the train station? The men who’re after us wouldn’t have any clue they were helpin’ us. They’re lookin’ for us to leave, yeah? Not gettin’ anythin’ from a storage locker anyway, right?”
“True, I suppose,” she agrees, looking more contemplative. “I saw some boys outside in the alley.”

“How old?” he asks, trying to remember what age he’d been when ten or twenty pounds had seemed like an incredible fortune to him.

“Eleven, twelve, perhaps?”

“I think that’d probably do it,” he says.

“Well, I think we can likely come up with a plan to keep it quite safe in any case. However, first we need to get another car,” she says.

He sighs. “I don’t like this stealin’ cars, even if they are insured,” he says dubiously.

“Oh, I didn’t mean steal,” she says.

“Oh?”

Fitz feels like he’s just along for the ride, or perhaps like her personal assistant as he carries the cases full of tech while Jemma first speaks to the three boys in the alleyway, getting them to agree to meet them a good distance from the train station in an hour. She then leads him for twenty long minutes, walking so quickly he has a difficult time keeping up while carrying the heavy cases. He’s sheened with perspiration by the time they arrive at an un-manned garage that she immediately opens with a key-code. Once inside, they take the lift up to the top floor and the open roof of the concrete structure.

“Here we are,” she says a bit surprisingly cheerfully as she walks toward a vehicle safely encased in a properly fitted cover. She begins stripping the canvas off to reveal an impeccably preserved, classic silver Aston Martin.

“Is that—yours?” he asks, thinking almost ashamedly of his little economy Citroen back in the parking lot at HQ.

“Unofficially,” she agrees as she pulls a key case from somewhere in the undercarriage. She opens the boot and gestures for him to put the cases inside.

“This certainly isn’t a bit conspicuous at all,” he can’t help but point out drily as he carefully places them down into the boot, wedging them between some other cases and pulling a bit of the tarp over the top.

“We’re not going to be that close, after all. And it’s not as if they’re looking for 1960s model Aston Martin’s in any case. I’d also rather not make for our new destination in a stolen vehicle if it can be helped,” she says, her tone a bit chiding. She opens the door and slips into the driver’s seat.

“I s’pose,” he concedes doubtfully, dropping into the passenger’s seat beside her. “What is our new destination?” he asks curiously.

“You’ll soon see,” she answers mysteriously.

He can’t say he appreciates the way she treats him as if he isn’t really a part of it all. Like he can’t help or do anything of use. It’s his plan they’re using to retrieve her items from her locker after all. He’d gotten them out of that sticky situation yesterday as well (with a bit of her help but still). It’s not as if he isn’t an agent of S.T.R.I.K.E. Maybe he’s not a specialist like herself but he’s capable, intelligent and, if not exactly quite courageous, still certainly not a coward. Why should he be
excluded from the plans? It affects him as much as her—more so really. He’s the one Hydra wants after all.

“Why won’t you tell me?” he asks, his tone angrier than he intends.

She gives him a sidelong glance as they fly around the winding path out of the garage quickly enough to make the tires squeal slightly.

“It’s not important yet,” she says.

“But I’d like to know.”

She glances at him again, her look inscrutable, then she sighs. “There’s a safe house. No one at S.T.R.I.K.E. knows about it. I just want to be on the cautious side after yesterday’s disaster.”

“So, we’re goin’ to hide out again? Tha’s the new plan?”

“Until I can report to Weaver and figure out something to draw out the Hydra informer inside S.T.R.I.K.E. Preferably in a way that draws Ward out as well,” she answers.

As they speed toward the train station, he can’t help but think it all sounds too simple. Does she really believe that it will be? Then again, not everything can go wrong all the time, can it?
They park a good ten minutes walk from the train station. Simmons, despite her shorter legs, walks quickly enough to have Fitz doing his best not to gasp as he tries to keep up. When they come to the narrow street where they’re meant to meet the boys, they find it empty.

“How much did you tell them?” Fitz asks after they wait for nearly ten minutes.

“Fifty pounds each,” she says, keeping an eye on the station, only a little more than two blocks away now.

“Fifty!” he says, completely stunned by the amount. “They probably thought you were havin’ them on. Why would you say fifty?”

Simmons looks back at him, frowning slightly. “Well, they haven’t exactly got much. They’re living in quite a state of—“

“They won’t get anything if they don’t show up,” he interrupts. Her frown deepens. “Listen, I know you were tryin’ to be kind but you might’ve given them whatever you liked once the job was done. But they’ve likely never even seen fifty pounds in their lives much less—“

“I’m so sorry,” she says, reaching out a hand to just barely graze his arm above the wrist, her expression having changed now to something more akin to sympathy.

“What?” he questions, squeezing his brows together in puzzlement. “Because they haven’t shown up?”

“No,” she says, shaking her head slightly. “I didn’t realize you—well, that you, eh—it sounds as though you grew up in similar, um—circumstances.”

His face reddens at her having so easily figured him out. “My dad died, so it was just me an’ my mum,” he says, feeling like he should explain for some reason. “It was fine. My mum did her best. I was lucky, really. I got a scholarship an’ all that.” He shrugs, not quite able to maintain eye contact.

“It sounds as though you and your mum both did your best,” she says, and he feels her hand slide over his arm warmly. His belly flutters at the contact and her sudden show of compassion fills him with an odd hope that perhaps she doesn’t dislike him as much as he’d feared.

He knows it’s mad to think that she would want anything from him beyond an apparent post-adrenaline-high fueled shag—at least, in the area of what he could offer her as a potential love interest. She’s far too beautiful to consider anyone as ordinary as him worthy of any longer term plan, surely. Her brilliance, already quite apparent to him, appears rather formidable and he’s fairly certain he’s barely scratched the surface there. Whether he has or no, he can't recall meeting any woman who could come even this close to matching him in intelligence. Not that his cleverness is likely to induce her because even before his amnesia—back when he’d been at his peak of genius—all he can see he might’ve offered her is the ability to talk science. Well, realistically, that requires no
deeper feelings other than a mutual desire to discuss it. He’s very certain his romantic inexperience would leave him quite lacking in the necessary tools to keep someone like her interested for more than some glad-we-didn’t-die, celebratory romp. If he hadn’t frozen up like an idiot and taken her up on her offer, then she’d likely have been rather disappointed anyway. He’s surely no expert on sex anymore than love, he’s quite certain of it.

His thoughts are interrupted by three boys riding up on bicycles. Though all are scrawny, the biggest boy looks healthy enough, with curls black as soot, another has a coarse brown mop, and the smallest boy has sandy hair and eyes a shocking blue.

The three of them look him over suspiciously before the largest—the apparent leader—says, “‘Who’s ‘e, then?’”

“This is my friend,” Simmons tells him, lowering herself slightly to his level when he climbs off his bike.

The kid rolls his eyes and scoffs back at his two friends. “Mean yer boyfriend, more like,” he says with a smirk at Simmons.

“No we’re only friends,” Fitz tells him, bending down with his hands braced on his thighs. “What’re your names?”

The big kid answers for all of them. He points at the brunette, “That’s my brother, Low-J. I’m Shank and this, here,” he points to the sandy-haired, smallest boy, “is The Doctor.”

Fitz stops himself from shaking his head at such names, deciding that in anyway disparaging their likely proud and long-though-upon monikers only stood to damage their tenuous partnership with the boys.

So instead he asks, “Like Doctor Who?”

“Well, yeah,” Shank says as if Fitz were an idiot.

“It my favorite as well,” he tells them. Nostalgically adding, “I was quite fond of David Tennant’s Doctor.”

“Tennant was a tosser,” the little sandy-haired Doctor says, scrunching up his face derisively.

Fitz sees Simmons trying not to laugh out of the corner of his eye. “Oh, yeah? Well, who do you like then?”

“Eccleston was pretty badass but Matt Smith was th’ best Doctor,” the little Doctor pipes up.

“Alright, I can’t completely disagree. But Tennant’s from Scotland and I can’t abandon my countryman,” Fitz says agreeably, seeing Simmons smiling over at him now.

“What about Capaldi?” the Doctor asks curiously. “He’s a Scot an’ they even let ’em use his real accent.”

“Well,” Fitz says hesitantly. “I’ve not seen him yet. I’ve been a bit out of the loop for the last year or so. I’m sure he’s brilliant though.”

“Well,” Simmons says, getting their attention back. “What say you head over and get my bag for me?”
The three boys gather round as Simmons hands the key to Shank and tells them the locker number.

“Why’s it y’can’t get it y’self again?” Shank asks quietly, squeezing the little red key into his fist.

Simmons looks over to Fitz, her eyes a bit hesitant.

“A not-terribly-nice person is tryin’ to get it away from her,” Fitz says. “But he’ll only know it when he sees one of us. So you’re quite safe in takin’ it for us. He’ll never know you’ve helped us at all.”

Shank nods. “Alright. We’ll get yer bag for you.” He meets Simmons’ eyes warily. “Fifty quid each, yeah?”

Simmons nods firmly. “Absolutely. Fifty apiece.”

Shank gets back on his bike and, pausing just before pushing off, he looks back to Simmons, and says, “I’d forget the fifty if you’d give us a look at yer baps.” Without waiting on an answer, he zips off behind his friends and Fitz can hear them all cackling wildly.

Fitz swallows hard, his face heating up, as he tries not to remember the tantalizing sight from the night before. Even though they’d been encased in see-through fabric, they were obviously rather marvelous. He couldn’t blame the kid really.

“No, quite right,” Simmons says, looking Fitz squarely in the eye, her mouth tight with displeasure, “They seem completely unaffected by the greed of the world.”

“They’re just bein’ boys,” he says weakly. “Horrible boys,” he mutters to himself.

After twenty uncomfortable minutes of waiting—their backs pressed against the cold concrete of some old building as Simmons peeks around the corner—Fitz is startled out of a bit of a daydream when she abruptly draws her gun out.

“What is it?” he calls out unthinkingly.

She gives him a scornful look and shushes him before angling the gun to the sky and peering around the corner warily. Fitz feels sweat begin to pop out on his brow. Lord, what now? Is all he can think as he contemplates another shootout.

He doesn’t have to wait long to find out before he hears a child’s tears from around the corner. He creeps up behind Simmons so he can see. The Doctor—bike missing and scrubbing a forearm over his face to dry his tears—walks slowly up to meet them.

Simmons holds her pistol behind her back as she bends down to the still-sobbing boy.

“What’s happened?” she asks, putting a hand on his shoulder.

“Shank,” he says. “Took it. Said you’ve likely got diamonds an’ such inside. I told ‘em not to take it and when I said I’d tell, ‘e took my ruddy bike.”

Simmons sighs with relief. “C’mon, then. Where are they at?”

“Haven’t they probably taken the money and dumped the rest by now?” Fitz can’t help but ask, grimacing at the prospect. He wants to kick himself now for his bloody foolish idea.

“It’s secure enough,” she answers, heading off for the car with the Doctor in tow. “They’ll need tools.”
Fitz trails behind, listening to the quiet conversation she has with the boy and cursing himself for another bollixed up plan. Couldn’t anything go right?

Much to Fitz and the Doctor’s dismay as they cringe back, Simmons kicks open the door of the garage in Peckham (in heels no less) where the Doctor’s told them that Low-J and Shank hang out. Fitz thinks he hears the sound of a power drill inside. Walking boldly into the room, Simmons stands up tall (as she can), poking her fists up onto her hips in a eerily heroic pose.

Nodding her head toward Shank and Low-J, she says, “I’ll have that bag now, thanks.”

“You little snitch,” Shank shouts at the Doctor, dropping the dying power drill, as Fitz escorts the small boy in behind Simmons. “We coulda been rich, you bloody wanker.”

“What’s in that bag is worth more than money to me,” Simmons says, “I need it to catch a very bad man.”

“You’re not police,” Shank deduces, spitting the words out like a threat.

“I’m not,” Simmons agrees easily, taking a step forward. “You’re still going to give me my bag.”

Shank gives her a long look and, evidently not liking what he sees, he pushes the bag toward her off the bench he’d had it on while he tried to drill out the lock. He turns and starts to make a run for it along with Low-J.

“I guess you’ll not be wanting your fifty pounds then?” Simmons says, picking up the bag. “Assuming my key still works, of course.”

Shank and Low-J freeze in place.

Simmons pulls a key from her jacket pocket and fumbles with the lock for a moment. Fitz hears it when it pops open. She unzips the bag and brings out two bills, then extends her hand into the open air before her.

Halfway across the room, Shank glances to Low-J and they both exchange a look before they seem to reach a silent agreement. Coming forward, they reach for the fifty pound notes but Simmons pulls her hand back at the last moment. “Even if you don’t keep your word—I certainly do. Now where’s your friend’s bike?”

Shank, looking almost ashamed, points to the corner of the room and a stack of all three bikes.

She holds out the notes again. “There you go.” They each take their notes and back away, still rather shamefaced.

Simmons turns and holds out a bill to the little Doctor.

The boy shakes his head. “Sorry, miss. For the extra trouble,” he says.

She crouches down, pressing the bill into his hand. “You did the right thing. Now you take what you’ve fairly earned.”

“Thank you, miss,” the Doctor says, his face reddening. Fitz almost misses it when Simmons surreptitiously tucks a neat fold of bills into the boy's front pocket.

“Off you go, then. All of you,” Simmons says, standing and hoisting the bag onto her shoulder.
As they walk back out to the Aston Martin, well hidden in the alleyway, Fitz can’t help but say, “That was more than kind, Simmons. You did a good thing there, I think.”

“Get in the car,” she says a bit exasperatedly, tossing the bag into the back seat.

As they speed off, Fitz can’t quite think how to break the uncomfortable silence. His adrenaline is still high from all their activities and his leg drums restlessly, heel bouncing off the floor with unspent energy.

“Off to the safe house now, eh?” he finally says when nothing else more brilliant occurs to him—some genius.

Simmons grunts a sort of affirmative.

Trying again, he runs a hand lovingly over the leather dash and asks, “Why a classic Aston Martin?”

Simmons doesn’t answer, he thinks perhaps she’s had enough of speaking for now, when she suddenly says, “It was my father’s.”

“Oh? He gave it to you?” he wonders aloud.

“He left it to me,” she corrects somberly, eyes never leaving the road.

“Oh.” His brain feeling like a lump suddenly when he can’t think what to say. Then it occurs to him, the thing all the aunties and cousins told him. “I’m sorry, Simmons.”

She shakes her head, face creasing in protest. “It’s been years.”

“For me too. It still hurts though. And I barely remember my dad,” he says softly. Simmons makes a sort of restrained exhale and, for a moment, he thinks he’s made her cry.

But then she says, “She’s called Iris. My father’s choice.”

“The car?” he questions, surprised. “It’s named after a girl?”

“No, actually,” Simmons says, lips quirking into a grin. “She’s named after a Greek goddess.”

Fitz stifles a laugh at anyone naming a car after a goddess. She’s a nice car—but still.

“She was a messenger,” Simmons says, “and she punished anyone who perjured themselves by putting them to sleep with water from the River Styx. She traveled across the world from one end to the other at the speed of the wind. Her husband was the god of the west wind actually. He was called Zephyr. And her son was Pothos, the god of—” Her face goes blank as she stares at the road ahead.

“Of?” Fitz prompts, interested and knowing nothing whatever about Greek mythology.

Simmons bites her lip and, glancing at him from the corner of her eye, says, “Longing.” She lets out a small dry chuckle and goes quiet again. When he just thinks she won’t speak again, she adds, “Iridium is also named after the goddess Iris.”

“The second densest element,” Fitz suddenly recalls.

“Well, not completely officially,” Simmons says. “There’s been some debate still. Calculations involving the lattices show Iridium is actually denser.”

“Are you sayin’ your car is dense?” Fitz asks with a chuckle.
Simmons smirks over at him, and says, “Well, she certainly is a tough old girl.”

“Iridium becomes a superconductor at temperatures below point one four Kelvin,” Fitz says, his brows creasing at the sudden recollection.

“Were you working with Iridium?” Simmons asks curiously, glancing over.

“Ehm, no. I don’t believe so. I was workin’ with metallic hydrogen. It’s incredibly difficult to control and I was tryin’ different molecules that might stabilize the formula. I still don’t know which it was that made the breakthrough. The notes were destroyed when—y’know, during the, eh, accident. And I just—I can’t remember.” Squeezing his eyes shut—overcome with feeling a failure for his plan-gone-wrong to get Simmons’ bag. His inability to recall the information that could end this whole fiasco filling him with a sudden violent rage, he slaps himself hard across the face and kicks out at the floorboards of the car. “Damnit! Why can’t I bloody well remember!? This would all be over if I could only just fucking remember!”

Simmons seems surprisingly unruffled by his outburst but she pulls into a side-street and turns off the car in any case.

“I’m sorry,” he says immediately, scrubbing his hands over his face and trying to regain some control. He lets his hands drop back flat against his thighs with a frustrated slap. “I shouldn’t have done that—I’m sorry.”

He feels Simmons’ hand as it covers his where it rests near his knee. Warm, slim digits slide into the valleys of his knuckles then onward, the tips of her fingers just barely curling over his index finger. She says nothing, just leaves her hand there—not quite catching hold but somehow grounding him to some long-held pain and disappointment in himself. He doesn’t know why exactly but her small bit of kindness is what does him in. Tears begin to slip slowly over his cheeks and—feeling such a weak and ridiculous fool—he pulls away from her gentle grasp so he can cover his face up with both hands.

“Can you just go on?” he begs, waving a hand toward the road as the tears continue unabated—much to his horror. “Just—please?”

Then he feels her hand on his shoulder. He wants to reach out; take hold and make some connection but he doesn’t want her to feel sorry for him—not her. God, why couldn’t it be anyone but her?

She squeezes his shoulder and then her fingers travel upward, digging furrows into his hair. Her fingertips massage his scalp tenderly and, somehow, this doesn’t feel like pity any longer. He leans his head into her palm, his eyes slipping shut, and his silent tears slowly subside. She grazes ever so slightly with the tips of her nails, her thumb gliding over the shell of his ear, until his breathing goes back to normal and—so softly he almost doesn’t feel it—she gracefully slips her fingers free again.

A moment later, the car rumbles to life and then they’re off again—the road out of London eaten up beneath Iris’ wheels as swiftly as the wind.
As they fly down the motorway, Jemma isn’t sure if Fitz is really sleeping or if he’s only pretending. His moments of seeming peace are broken by periods of restless shifting but then his breathing will even out again and he’ll seem to rest once more. Following his emotional outburst, he’d kept his head turned resolutely to the window either in embarrassment or possibly mental exhaustion.

She has to remind herself that he isn’t used to this much strain. He’s used to the lab—well, now he likely isn’t even used to that any longer. He’s been on medical leave for not quite a year. Weaver said she’s had him back in the lab working with Donnie on a limited basis but that’s really not the same. Before the shooting, he’d been the head of Sci-Tech with all the pressures and responsibilities that went with it. Their current situation is so much more than he’s likely ever had to face before or is presumably even able to process just now.

Making her way through town, Jemma parks the car, watching Fitz for a few moments to see if he stirs. When he makes no movement, his breathing quite even, she tucks some of her cash into a pocket and heads for a couple of shops to purchase some very much needed supplies.

When she returns forty-five minutes later, Fitz is leaning against the boot of the car with his arms crossed over his chest.

“Thought you’d abandoned me,” he says, his tone a bit gruff, though he presses his lips together in an attempt at a smile. She isn’t certain if he’s actually upset about being left or if he’s still embarrassed over his emotional outpouring.

“Do you mind?” she asks, holding out the car key even though it’s difficult laden with so many packages.

He looks torn on whether to help her or just take the key and open the boot for her. He sighs, taking the keys as well as two of the larger packages from her. Then he opens the boot with his free hand and helps her stow all her purchases inside.

“Where are we?” he asks as they both climb back into Iris.

“Bristol,” she says, heading for the nearby safe house with the scent of the salty ocean in her nostrils.

Once they arrive, Fitz helps her carry everything inside—all without speaking. His sudden lack of chatter has her strangely on-edge as they unload everything onto the kitchen counter.

Pointing down the hallway, she says, “There’s a guest room just there. That’ll be yours. I’ve gotten you a few things as well.” She begins unpacking everything, a couple days worth of food, toiletries for them both, as well as a few things she’d gotten for Fitz to wear until they can get back to London and relative normalcy.

She puts all the things she’d gotten Fitz back into one of the sacks and holds it out to him.
“You bought me clothes?” he questions, looking into the bag. “Pants? You got me bloody pants?” He looks up at her, his expression equal parts affronted and incredulous.

“I just guessed at the sizes,” she says, dismissing his tone. “I hope everything fits.”

“Why wouldn’t you just wake me?” he asks, but he sounds suddenly less upset and more subdued.

“You seemed as though you needed the rest,” she says evasively. “If I’ve forgotten anything then we can go back to the shops tomorrow if you like.”

He scoffs, opening his mouth as though he might continue his querulousness but then he just says, “Thanks.” He turns on his heel and heads back toward the guest room, closing the door with what definitely seems a bit more force than strictly necessary.

After she showers and changes, Jemma makes tea and starts something for supper—steak, potatoes and green salad. She fixes a plate for Fitz at the small dining table and tentatively knocks on his door.

“Fitz?” she calls out softly when he doesn’t immediately answer.

The door opens, his face appearing in the gap. “Yeah?” His expression is less than welcoming.

“I’ve made us some food, eh, if you’re hungry, that is?” she says, gnawing her lower lip.

He seems to debate for a moment, then says, “Yeah. Okay.”

Following her out to the kitchen, she notes he’d showered and changed into the jeans and one of the button-downs she’d gotten him. He sits at the small dining table in front of the plate she’d made him and, without even waiting for her to settle in her seat, he cuts into the steak and begins to wolf it down enthusiastically.

Swallowing down a bite, still sounding distant, he says, “It’s good. Thanks.”

She nods, taking her own small bite.

“So, what’s the new plan then?” he asks between mouthfuls.

“Tomorrow, I’ll call Weaver at HQ and get us an extraction plan. We can’t hole up here forever,” she says. She meant it lightly but his expression appears overly serious in response.

“Why not?” he asks with little enthusiasm, as if he knows he won’t like the answer. “Why can’t we stay here until it all blows over?”

“I’ve got to find Ward,” she says vehemently. “He’s the issue. If not for Ward, none of this—” but she sees already she’s gotten too zealous by the look in his eyes. “Ward is running Hydra,” she continues, her tone more controlled, “Without him, they won’t likely come after you. His reasons are —”

“Personal?” Fitz guesses. “I’m a loose end to him, no doubt.” His tone is somewhat bitter. He chews contemplatively for a moment then says, “But Hydra will likely still want the formula if they can get it.” He looks at her intently, a very slight smile barely curving his lips at the corners. “Still, why does it have to be you to find him? If that’s really the case, why’re you the one here protectin’ me?”

Wiping her mouth delicately, she shrugs noncommittally. “Weaver said she needed someone she could trust. Perhaps she knew something like this was going to happen? Or knew there was a potential mole within S.T.R.I.K.E.?”
“Then wouldn’t she need you here until they capture Ward?” he asks, pushing the salad around on his plate disinterestedly.

She takes a bite of potato and chews it slowly. “I’m better equipped to handle him,” she finally says without meeting his eyes.


“For certain he’s absolutely a traitor—to S.T.R.I.K.E. and even his own organization S.H.I.E.L.D. But also a manipulating liar and very much a danger to any person who comes near him. I doubt anyone would miss him if he were gone from the world. When I think of all the agents he’s,“ she can’t help but meet Fitz’s forthright gaze as she finishes, “hurt—and killed. I just want him dead.”

“You mean, you want to kill him,” he surmises, laying his cutlery down on his plate, then dropping his hands down into his lap.

Jemma can’t quite draw breath for a moment at his perceptiveness. She wouldn't have chosen to tell Fitz that but she does want to be the one to kill Ward. She wants it so much it’s a hot pain deep in her belly. She doesn't see the point in lying about it. She even wonders if Fitz might like to be the one. He’d been hurt far worse than she had after all.

“Yes,” she admits, meeting his eyes boldly as she says it.

“You know he’s the one who shot me of course. I mean, don’t you? Tha’s why my memory is damaged,” he questions, far too casually.

“Of course, I know,” she answers. There’s no point in lying about that. And she isn’t sure she could bring herself to do it anyway. “I’ve read your file.”

He nods uneasily, running a finger over his ear where she knows the scar from his wound is, now unseen beneath his thick close-cropped hair. “If anyone should want to kill him,” he says, “you’d think it was me.”

Jemma nods, taking another potato onto her fork but not eating it, just holding it there over her plate as she watches him.

“I don’t though,” he says, looking up to meet her eyes. “I think he was doin’ his job—however terrible that may’ve been. Perhaps he thinks what he was doin’ is right somehow? Maybe he thinks he’s the good guy? I don’t know, he might even be mad? In any case, I don’t want to kill him. I don’t want to be as bad as he is.”

“You think it’s unfair to kill him?” she questions, unable to keep the frown from her lips. “You might be in the wrong line of work, you know?”

“I don’t think it’s wrong—not if he’s tryin’ to kill you or someone else. Tha’s preventin’ a murder but—to kill him just to kill him, when you could just arrest him? Yeah, tha’s wrong. Tha’s as bad as what he does. Judge, jury and executioner?” he shakes his head, “I don’t believe in that.”

“My father was a High Court Judge,” Jemma says tightly. “One thing I learned from him is that you’d be surprised just how often that’s exactly what should be done.”

“How did he die?” Fitz asks quietly, again far too astute.

“Heart attack,” she lies, meeting his eyes for added believability.
“Did he, then?” he questions, his tone odd. “My dad—he got cancer. Took a long time. Horrible, really. At least it was quick, your dad.”

“At least you got to say goodbye,” she says, dropping her gaze to the floor, pushing away the tears forming at the backs of her eyes.

Then she feels Fitz’s hand on hers where it rests on the table but she pulls it away as if he’d scorched her.

“Someone killed him, didn’t they?” he asks softly. “Was it a criminal?”

“What?” she asks sharply, upset at hearing the truth but also wondering if, somehow, he might’ve remembered. “Why would you ask that?”

“You’re not the only one who’s able to see things, Simmons,” he says, his eyes are sympathetic and so very, very blue. “Jemma.”

Abruptly, she gets to her feet. “I’m going to bed. Goodnight.”

She doesn’t bother with the clearing up. She just heads to her room, somehow managing not to run, and shuts the door behind her. Pressing her back against the wood, she tries to stifle the tears that begin slipping down her cheeks.

She’d hoped he was remembering.

Back when they’d been at S.T.R.I.K.E. Academy is when it had happened—her father’s death. Some petty thief had killed her father in reprisal for his meager two-year prison sentence. She and Fitz were already partners, working together on their dendrotoxin formula and his so-called Night-Night Gun. The news of her father’s death had been delivered by Agent Weaver herself.

“I’m so sorry, cadet,” Weaver said, eyes full of compassion.

“Thank you for giving me the news yourself,” Jemma told her, clinging onto her tenuous emotional control with nothing but sheer will.

“Of course. Let me know if there’s anything I can do,” Weaver said and then turned to leave the lab.

It was late and, working on their project, she and Fitz had been the only two students left.

Fitz hovered near her left arm, uncertain what to do. Jemma knew that if she let go now, she might not be able to stop, not for a long while. She stood there, breathing roughly, staring straight ahead because the pain in her heart was so great that it seemed the least disturbance would shake loose her tears, releasing the agony she was trying to hold inside—it was almost as if she were paralyzed with sorrow.

Then he’d slipped his hand in hers where it hung frozen at her side. Just that. Such a small thing but it broke the spell and—no longer able to accommodate the rapidly blooming grief inside—she’d collapsed, tears streaming, as she fell into Fitz’s embrace. It was small consolation, but she’d been right—she wasn’t able to stop her tears for quite some time. Fitz had held her wrapped up in his arms nearly all night as she sobbed. Utterly devastated, one round of tears blended into the next until she couldn’t tell the difference.

Sometime around dawn, her tears had tapered, and she got up from her bed to look out her dorm room window at the rising sun.
Yawning, stepping up beside her, Fitz looked out at the gold glow, and said, “What if I get us tea? Some breakfast?”

Jemma turned abruptly and hugged him. “Fitz, you’re my best friend,” she said, grateful for him—his kindness, his comfort, his devoted friendship.

But when she pulled back his expression wasn’t what she’d though it would be. As he smiled back at her, his face was filled with a strange mix of elation tinged heavily with disappointment. His happiness at her declaration clearly soured by something she didn’t understand. At the time, she’d only been confused but, later, after his infatuation began, she’d wondered if, even then, he’d had some thin hope that she might see him in another light.

Only two weeks later, Weaver had offered Jemma the opportunity to join Project Paragon. She might not have considered it before her father’s death but she’d been so full of rage and despair that leaving behind what she and Fitz shared—science, discovery and creation—had seemed a small thing in that moment when she’d made her choice. Weaver had sold Paragon as a way for her to change the world for the better—a sure way to make her mark. She’d seen it as an opportunity to prevent further injustice such as what happened to her father.

Fitz had expressed a great deal of discontent when Jemma told him of her transfer to Paragon but—perhaps because he knew she was still grieving—he’d kept his particular thoughts to himself. They hadn’t seen one another again until several years later when he’d been made head of Sci-Tech division and they began working together again—though not as they once had when science had been their synergy. Science was the glue which first bound them together and the strength of that bond had lasted through the years they’d missed each other. When he began providing her weapons and defenses for her missions, she felt proud of him, all his achievements. He even seemed to take quite an interest in her career as well. Occasionally rather worriedly, as he provided her with special devices and prototypes he thought she might use on her missions. It soon set off an odd flirtation that continued to grow in the intervening years, culminating in the turning point of their first and last romantic date.

When their lives first diverged, Jemma began to realize gradually just how much she might’ve given up—even if she couldn’t admit it to herself until much later. Her world began to be made up of nothing but pitfall after pitfall. She leapt from one crisis to another, discovering only evil and creating nothing but death. Fitz became the one bright spot in her life until he’d tried for something more between them. In the past year, she’d finally considered how—if only she’d stayed with Fitz in the lab—they might’ve shared a life together of science, creation, and even perhaps love.

But it was too late for any of that now. All that mattered from this point on was keeping Fitz safe—and killing that bastard Ward.
To Live Afresh

Chapter Notes

Happy Thanksgiving tomorrow, fellow Americans. For the rest of you, um, Happy Thursday! Possibly Friday? I hope you enjoy this new chapter!

Sometime later, feeling restless and unable to settle, Jemma leaves the safety of her room. Thinking Fitz must’ve finally gone to bed, she wants to do the clearing up. She hopes having something to do will take the edge off her tightly-wound emotions.

But when she goes to the kitchen, she finds all the dishes cleaned and drying in the rack. Then, hearing a bit of a clamor from the parlor, she looks to see that the door to Fitz’s room is still open. She debates whether she should just leave well enough alone for tonight or go see what in the world he’s doing to make all that racket.

Poking her head round the corner, she peers into the room to find Fitz fussing in the hearth. Making an awful clatter with sticks of kindling and crushed newspaper, he curses under his breath while arranging them with the care of someone building a house of cards.

“Come on,” he mutters, finally striking a match and holding it to the corner of the crumpled paper. The paper catches for a moment then sputters out to a line of glowing ember. “Bloody hell,” he breathes out, turning away from the fireplace abruptly. It’s unexpected enough that she has no time to hide herself around the corner and they lock eyes immediately.

“Thought you were sleepin’,” he says flatly, dropping his gaze timidly to the floor. Cocking a thumb behind him, he adds, “Was just tryin’ to make a fire. S’bloody freezin’ in here, y’know? I could’ve used a jumper or somethin’.” He crosses his arms across his chest, flexing his fingers over his biceps, and then shrugs his shoulders almost sullenly.

“Sorry,” Jemma says, looking down guiltily at her own warm jumper. “Would you like me to…” She points briefly at the fireplace, her brows rising in question.

“I can’t get it to go,” he says, looking away rather embarrassedly, the tips of his ears just tinged pink.

“Did you open the flue?” she asks, worrying at what response he might give. She hates to ask, he almost certainly had, but there are only so many things that could go wrong in building a fire.

His eyes grow wider for a moment, but then he just looks rather quietly humiliated. “No, didn’t think of it,” he says. “I’ve never actually made a fire like this before.”

“Just open the lever,” she says encouragingly. “Then it should light.” He turns back, finding the lever to open the flue. “About halfway,” she says helpfully.

He doesn’t respond except to twist the lever to the halfway point. Then he strikes another match, holding it to the paper again and watching as it blazes up.

“See,” she says, “That’s all right then.”

He glances at her over his shoulder, smiling tightly. “Thanks.”
“I’ll make some tea. It’ll warm you up until the fire starts to give off some warmth.”

She goes back to the kitchen and starts the electric kettle going while she sets up the cups and gets the milk and sugar out as well as making up a plateful of biscuits.

She turns into the parlor carrying the tea tray but finds Fitz prodding the kindling in the hearth a bit desperately as the fire seems to be dying back down again.

“What in the name of all that’s holy is wrong with this thing?” he says to himself quietly, not yet aware of her return.

Trying to suppress a laugh, she clears her throat instead. He turns, looking both irritated and ashamed of his inability to get the fire going.

“I s’pose I did somethin’ wrong again,” he says, sighing heavily.

“It just got stifled,” she says, sitting down on the sofa with her cup of tea. “It happens sometimes when the wind comes down the chimney or the wood shifts just wrong. Go ahead and try again.”

“How do you know so much about this place anyway? Have you stayed here before?” he asks, raking the partially burnt kindling to one side with the poker and grabbing for more newspaper pages to crumple up.

“Many times. It’s my house after all,” she says matter-of-factly, taking a sip of her tea.

He looks at her, brows knitting together and rising slightly, in surprise or confusion, she isn’t sure. “I thought it seemed a bit cozy for a safe house but how do they not know about it at S.T.R.I.K.E.? Seems they know everythin’ I own down to the last can of soup,” he says, stacking the kindling carefully over the paper again.

“It’s not in my name,” she says with a shrug. “I like to be prepared for all eventualities and even I need to feel safe sometimes.” She watches him setting up the kindling and offers, “Perhaps put one of the larger sticks of wood on top, don’t you think? On an angle?”

“I’ll take all the help I can get at this stage,” he says, looking back at her over his shoulder with a mildly wry grin. He finishes his arranging and touches a match to the paper once more. “Here goes,” he adds dubiously.

The paper takes off and soon has the kindling half consumed. He puts another large stick of wood on top of the first and then adds another two for good measure before closing the grate.

“See, you’ve done it,” she says, smiling warmly.

He glances back at her bashfully yet rather sweetly triumphant as he gets up from his crouch by the hearth.

Jemma can’t quite keep her eyes from the spectacle of his pleasantly rounded bum in the jeans she’d gotten him as he stands. She feels slight heat rise to her cheeks and forces her eyes onto her teacup and the milky brown liquid within.

Fitz sits on the sofa, leaving only a bit of space between them, and takes the cup of tea she’d made him with two biscuits.

“Thanks,” he says, popping an entire biscuit into his mouth and chewing contentedly. He takes a sip of tea and then shivers. “That’s quite nice tea. It’s still a bit nippy in here though,” he explains with a
shrug, biting into his second biscuit. “How long’s it take for this place to heat up?”

“Eh, it takes a bit for it to get comfortable,” Jemma says. Setting down her cup and turning, she takes a throw from the back of the sofa. As she holds it out, he reaches for it, but she’s struck with a sudden irrepressible desire to make some physical connection with him and she leans forward to drape it around his shoulders, tucking a corner around his arm rather intimately.

Catching his darkened gaze, she sees his pupils are wide with only a thin rim of blue at the edge. His desire for her is suddenly very apparent and she fancies she can almost feel the radiating heat of his lustful thoughts coming off him in waves. She wonders idly if he might be imagining kissing her or pressing her down into the sofa and having her right there. Immediately, she drops her eyes, taking up her cup from the table and swallowing down a hurried sip.

“We can get you a jumper tomorrow when we go into town,” she says into her tea.

“So, ehm,” he says, clearing his throat roughly while dragging his gaze away from her and back to the fire, “You’re plannin’ to call HQ? Isn’t that a bit dangerous when we already know there’s a double agent?”

“Somewhat,” she agrees. “But Director Weaver has to be made aware she has a traitor within S.T.R.I.K.E. We can’t let them remain, putting our lives and the lives of other agents in danger.” Jemma lets her gaze travel back to Fitz’s hands as he holds his tea—his thin, delicate fingers gripping the handle and his index finger tracing over the rim.

“You’ll tell Weaver where we are and get us an extraction plan but how will she be certain not to include the double agent?” he asks dubiously.

“Weaver will be cautious. As will I. We’ll also find out what’s happened in our absence. Perhaps she’s figured out who it is on her own already? She knows we’ve gone off book by now certainly.” Jemma says, hoping it might be true. The sooner the double agent is located, the sooner she can be back on her own—hunting Ward.

Fitz nods, finishing his biscuit and dusting the crumbs from his fingers before brushing over the appealing contours of his lips. Jemma lets her eyes linger far too long on his tender, pink mouth. Knowing she shouldn’t, she allows her gaze to wander over to the stubbled cut of his jaw and, losing the power to stop herself, she freely roves over his symmetrical features, enthralled by what she sees. She’s always thought him handsome and suddenly she can’t help but appreciate his masculine brow beneath the pleasing shape of his hairline with its widow’s peak, his pale blue eyes delineated by the dark outline surrounding his iris, and his smooth pallid skin. She remembers the soft feel of his cheek beneath her fingertips from so long ago as he’d kissed her.

“We’ll head out in the mornin’, I s’pose?” he asks, shaking Jemma’s eyes loose from their preoccupation when he glances over at her.

“Yes,” she agrees, staring guiltily into the dregs of her tea. “We should bring everything we need with us on the off chance we can’t return. I’ll get you one of my extra cases to pack your new things in.” Trying to turn her thoughts away from her own lustful thoughts of what she’d like to do just now, she remembers a question she’d thought of asking him earlier. “I don’t suppose you can redirect a mobile signal to another tower with that laptop of yours, can you?”

Fitz’s lips stretch briefly into a grimace. “Ehm, not really, no. I could probably make it take slightly longer for them to figure out where the signal is comin’ from but I couldn’t redirect it. Not with just my laptop. I’d need access to S.T.R.I.K.E. servers and resources. I’m not quite that clever.”
Jemma shakes her head. “I didn’t really think it was possible but I thought I’d ask,” she says, then drains her cup and places it back on the tray. “I’ll get you that case. We should head out sooner rather than later. Is eight o’clock too early?”

He shakes his head. “No, tha’s fine. I’ll, ehm, I’ll be ready.”

Jemma goes to get one of her extra cases and sets it just inside the door to Fitz’s room.

Going back out of the hall, she finds him in the kitchen already washing out their cups.

“Thank you for doing the clearing up earlier but you don’t need to do that,” she says, feeling strangely disconcerted by his doing her dishes.

“S’alright,” he says. “My mum made sure I could wash a dish.” He smiles over at her across the kitchen, his eyes crinkling at the corners in amusement, and she feels her heartbeat quicken.

“I’ve left the case in your room,” she says hurriedly, suddenly feeling too warm, and far too tempted. “I’ll just be getting off to bed then.” She squints her eyes and presses her lips tight at her own choice of words. “Er, I’ll see you at eight.” Much better. “Goodnight.” Brilliant.

Shutting herself back in her room, she sighs with relief. She needs to put an end to her impossible feelings. Despite his body’s instinctive physiologic response to her own symmetry and pleasing waist-to-hip ratio, he clearly still has no desire for anything between them. Not that it matters, she really does need to focus on the mission and keeping him safe, not the inconsequential stirrings of her own libido.

Taking down another case, she starts adding to it all the things she might need in the event things go south tomorrow. She realizes that she can’t continue on this way with Fitz, as she packs her toiletries, adding two of her favorite perfumes. It’s just too incredibly ridiculous, she thinks, as she carefully folds in her favorite French lingerie. Only one more day and then things could go back to normal. She nods to herself as she adds a couple of dresses to the mix of professional skirts, tops and pantsuits. Fitz would be secreted away somewhere safe and she would be hot on Ward’s trail again. All would be right with the world.

The next morning, Jemma comes out of her room at seven. She makes tea, eggs, toast and bacon, but sees no sign of Fitz. At five minutes to eight, she’s just about ready to knock on his door when he staggers out of his room, rubbing at his bleary eyes and with the back of his shirt collar stuck up at a slight angle.

He sits down and she takes the plate she’d made him out of the warm oven and sets it before him. She pours him some tea, watching as he shovels the breakfast into his mouth at record speed before gulping down his tea.

Once he finishes, she clears his plate, cleans it, then comes to pour them each another cup of tea, automatically setting the sugar bowl in front of him.

“Thanks very much,” he says, heaping two spoonfuls in. “Everythin’ was delicious.” He checks his watch. “Sorry, I’m late. I set the alarm but I slept right through. I’ve never been much for mornin’s.”

“It’s not an issue.” She takes a swallow of her tea and eyes his crooked collar. “You’re a bit off—“ she says, pointing to his neck.

He reaches up and smoothes down the points, evidently not feeling that the problem is farther back.
“May I?” she asks, setting her cup down and meeting his eyes with her brows raised questioningly.

He nods rather shyly, suddenly finding the bottom of his teacup quite fascinating.

She stands and folds the collar down properly, smoothing it out slowly. Her fingertips just brush over his skin at the neckline of his collar and she feels him shiver under her hand.

Taking a deep breath, she resists the urge to press a kiss to his skin just where the little tail of his hairline drops down in the center of his neck.

“There,” she says instead, smoothing the fabric one last time. “All proper now.”

“Thanks,” he says, his tone slightly subdued again. Then he clears his throat rather roughly. “So, ehm, we're off now?”

“Yes,” she says, her voice rising slightly too high. “Yes, let’s head off, shall we?”

Fitz gets a bit confused when they continue on through Bristol without stopping, Simmons speeding along the M4.

“Ehm,” he says uncertainly as he watches the last bit of Bristol go by, “I thought we were headin’ into town.”

“Oh, different town,” Simmons says, her foot impossibly mashing down even further on the accelerator. “We’re heading into Cardiff. Better safe than sorry.”

“Ah,” he says, unsure what response he wants to give. Annoyance, that she couldn’t even tell him that small detail, or indifference, which has been serving him no better in dealing with his feelings.

As she smoothed his collar earlier, he had to suppress an urge to reach back and take her hand. Not that the concept had worked out well the previous evening.

He’d felt they were making some sort of connection as they spoke over supper. Things between them seemed rather easier when he steered clear of more difficult topics like how they might get out of this mess. He couldn’t see a clear way out of this for himself and relying on others to keep him safe didn’t sit well in his mind. He wanted to be able to act, to contribute in some way to his own survival. Simmons’s insistence on keeping him in the dark on her plans was only serving to further frustrate him.

Her imperative that she needed to kill Ward herself with the purported goal of ending the danger for him seemed like skewed logic. Hydra would only get a new leader who wanted the information locked inside his head. He understood her feelings about Ward even if he didn’t necessarily agree with her intended course of action. He felt the impulse but his intellect rebelled against the concept of killing someone as mere reprisal. He wondered if she would really do it, or if it was only her anger speaking rather than her logical mind.

Another difficult topic he hadn’t meant to dredge up was the murder of Simmons’s father. Somehow, it had been so very obvious to him that she was lying about his death. Her reactions were too pained, too raw, and he just knew that something terrible had happened to him. He’d evidently guessed correctly but it’d been a step too far. She’d retreated to her room and he’d been convinced that he’d put her off him again completely. He hadn’t thought he’d see her again until morning but then she’d come out again during his feud with the fireplace.

He could’ve sworn that when she’d wrapped the blanket around his shoulders that she was giving
him a rather suggestive look. Her gaze had been shifting between his eyes and his lips as if in invitation to kiss her but he was still terrified of getting involved with her in that way. She’d made it clear she only wanted someone to get her off in a brisk sweaty encounter that meant nothing more than bodies meeting in the right places. He was afraid to even contemplate that she might not end up finding it terribly magical if it all fell down on his end. Having no clear recollection of any previous encounters he’d had, he still couldn’t even be certain whether muscle memory might kick in at some stage or if he’d end up living on in her mind as her most disappointing shag ever.

Even so, he feels like a complete idiot for rejecting her, however passive it might’ve been. It seems unlikely she’d renew her offer. Though from the way she’d looked at him last night, he thought there was a chance she’d still go for him. The impulse to kiss her had been almost unbearable as they sat there by the golden glow of the fire but he just couldn’t bring himself to do it.

Though he isn’t even sure what he’s waiting for exactly. It’s not as if true love is likely waiting around for him just ahead in life. He might even die before this mess with Ward and Hydra is over. More than likely all that awaited him if he survived were awkward attempts to date a co-worker, clumsily trying to meet women at the local pub near his flat or some horrific set-up by a well-meaning, if questionable, acquaintance or—heaven forbid—his mum.

Then here’s Simmons—a completely gorgeous and brilliant woman in every regard—freely offering him something so very personal and yet all she intends is a meaningless tangle in her bed. Even as it happened, he would know just how empty it was; how she wanted nothing deeper from him than the jab of his cock getting her off. Then having to face the pain when she later rejects him as wrong for her in some inexplicable way that he’ll never be able to understand. Perhaps his subconscious is just telling him that, even if the sex all went perfectly, he could never survive being with someone so fantastic only to have it be over in only a day or two. Having that hastily bitten off morsel of intimacy with her and yet knowing it couldn’t but leave a bitter aftertaste.

He can’t let anything happen because what he really needs is for her to see something in him that arouses not only her body but her heart and her mind. He wants her pulse to quicken the way his does whenever she speaks, or looks at him as if he were the only person in the world. He wants to captivate her interest as she has done to him. There has to be at least a chance that she might care for him, however small. Just some little sign that she could see them together for longer than a night. Then he could imagine it being worth the risk—the tremendous potential heartbreak. Going for broke when he might secure the affections of the most extraordinary woman he’s likely ever known—would likely ever know—well, that makes a bit of sense at least.

Not that he really believes it will happen. After all, he’s nothing to her—she’s bloody gorgeous, incredibly clever and a proper secret agent. He’s only a brain-damaged engineer playing at espionage and mostly just hoping he might avoid screaming like a girl before his stint with this cloak-and-dagger business is over.

It isn’t long before they arrive in Cardiff and she stakes out a couple of stores that sell mobiles before she finds one without security cameras. She insists he wait in the car while she goes inside, returning having purchased six disposable phones. He wonders why they need so many but he’s afraid of sounding like a fool so he doesn’t ask. He’s supposed to be a spy himself after all. However, much of his memory of such things is nothing but a blur with only the occasional relevant bit of information popping into his head from heaven knew where. Somehow he doubts he’s ever experienced or even helped an agent prepare for a mission quite like this. Deep cover and negative support missions aren’t really his area of expertise in any case since his division basically is the support.

Simmons hands him one of the mobiles and asks him to set it up for use. When he hands it back few
minutes later, she dials in a number so quickly he can barely see her fingers fly over the keypad.

“Agent Jemma Simmons. Secure line for the director,” she says, then a pause. Fitz knows they’re setting up the voice recognition software on the line. “M40071407PA. Status: urgent.” She goes quiet for a long moment and then, “Director Weaver.”

Fitz nearly sighs with relief. For some reason, just knowing they’ve made contact lets him feel less like they’re all on their own out here even though there’s still no actual rescue plan.

“Yes,” Simmons is saying, “Ward might still have ties with Johnson. If not Hunter then who else can it be but Gill or Dormer?” She sounds irritated, as if she doesn’t like what Weaver is saying. “He’s the most obvious choice for giving out the tracking number for our SUV. Hunter is possible but, I agree, less likely. Yes, I suppose someone else in Sci-Tech could be the culprit. This is getting a bit academic however, we need to get the asset under cover now. No—but—why would—how can I —” Simmons goes silent and he can just hear the echo of Weaver’s quick words through the small earpiece for a long moment. “Alright. We’re in Bristol.” Simmons gives her the address and then adds, “I hope you’re right,” before ending the call.

Through the open window of the car, Simmons chucks the mobile she’d just used into a nearby skip.

Then, handing him another plastic-encased phone, she says, “Can you set this one working for me?”

He nods once but takes in a little breath when she pulls in her lower lip and it slides back out glistening. “Course,” he says slightly breathlessly and clears his throat before he tears into the package using the little penknife on his keyring. “Are they coming? Is anythin’ wrong?”

The car rumbles to life again and she sets off. “Yes, they’re coming and, no, there’s nothing wrong. However, I think we can stop and get you that jumper now.”

“Shouldn’t we get back though?” he questions, still fighting the bedeviled plastic as they zoom down a side-street. “Aren’t they comin’ for us straightaway?”

“Not for a bit yet,” she says, smiling over at him. “And who knows the next time you’ll have a chance to find something decent? It’s not like you’ll be going back to your flat anytime soon.”

He nods, still somewhat dubious. It seems an odd time for hitting the shops. She seems to know her way around and when she suggests a couple of places, he only shrugs and agrees easily.

The men’s clothing shop is not like any he can recall seeing before. It’s a wide open space with gleaming stark white walls and floors. All the clothes are set up along the edges of the shop except for the occasional strategically placed display. There are several bright, primary-colored sofas in the middle of the room and Simmons immediately goes to sit down on the cherry-red one.

She looks perfectly at home in the posh shop. Simmons is really quite stylish, he must admit, in a gray wool skirt and matching blazer with just a thin strip of cobalt blouse visible down the front. She sits with her back very straight, crossing her ankles demurely, and takes out the new mobile he’d set up and begins browsing on the screen.

Noticing the young, dark-haired sales clerk eyeing him inscrutably from behind the counter, Fitz quickly chooses a gray cardigan while Simmons continues to peruse the mobile.

“Oh, I think this should do,” he says to her, feeling awkward not having any cash to pay for his own clothing.

“Can I help you, sir?” the sales clerk says at his back, making him start embarrassingly.
He tries to save face by turning abruptly. “Just this,” Fitz says, holding up the cardigan, trying to keep the annoyance from his face. “This’ll be all, I think.”

“Oh, actually,” Simmons says, looking up from the phone, “I think he’ll need a decent coat as well—wool. Navy, I’d say.”

“Very good, miss,” the sales clerk says, traipsing off to find him a coat.

“Why do I need a coat now?” Fitz asks in a harsh whisper.

“Just in case,” she says, cocking a brow at him. It almost looks as though she were daring him to argue. And somehow just the fact that she’s putting it forth as some sort of challenge makes him want to protest. However, he can’t really see the point. He’d lost all his own things and it’s only a coat after all—what if it rained?

The sales clerk—whose name tag reads, "Gareth"—returns with a longish navy topcoat. “Our finest cashmere,” he says as he helps Fitz on with it.

“Cashmere?” Fitz says, finding the price tag and feeling his stomach lurch at the amount. “I don’t think—"

“It’s perfect,” Simmons says happily, pressing a finger to her lips. Clearly addressing Gareth, she says, “I’m thinking perhaps a few more pairs of trousers maybe a suit or two as well—blue and also black, I think—perhaps charcoal? You can show us what you have to go with them.”

“Yes, miss,” Gareth says, a genuine grin now curving his lips.

“What the hell?” Fitz says once Gareth disappears into the back. “You said a cardigan, then a coat, but what do I need with a new bloody wardrobe?”

Simmons shrugs elusively. Leaning farther back on the sofa, she casually crosses her legs out in front of her and he can’t help but watch as the side-split of her skirt rides up past her knees. Jesus, she has gorgeous legs.

Fitz remembers that he’d been annoyed a moment ago and says, “Well?”

“Just trying to be prepared,” she says and smiles sweetly.

“For what?” he asks suspiciously.

“Any eventuality,” she says, still giving away nothing.

“But, even so,” he says, his tone calmer, “it’s not as though I’ll need anythin’ this, I don’t know, swish. This place costs a bloody fortune.”

Uncrossing her legs slowly, letting one slide down over the other, she stands and takes the four steps to close the distance between them. Still wearing the navy topcoat, Fitz’s mouth gapes uselessly when she runs her fingers up his chest over the cashmere and under the lapel of the coat rather provocatively.

Looking at him from beneath her lashes, she says, “I think you look quite nice.” She turns her head, glancing around the shop briefly. “I like their things. I think they’re lovely. Don’t you?”

Fitz feels like his tongue goes numb suddenly. What are words? He sucks in a breath and says, “Nice, yeah. S’good.”
Simmons’s smile grows and she rubs her thumb over the lapel of the coat before leaning in rather intimately. He can feel the coolness of her breath on his face as she says, “I’m glad you like it. It’s my treat.” She leans toward him even more and, for one panicked moment, he thinks she’s going to kiss him—but then she turns abruptly and goes back to sit on the red sofa.

Suddenly, he isn’t sure if he’s relieved or stung by an unpleasant jolt of rejection—then he realizes it’s both actually. But he doesn’t have long to contemplate before Gareth is back with an entire rack of clothing. He then proceeds to hold one pair of trousers at a time up to Fitz’s waist, evidently all for Simmons’s benefit. She confirms or rejects several pairs with nothing more than a nod and a smile before Fitz is given an armload to try on in the dressing room.

He’s just gotten the first pair on when Gareth knocks, causing the thin dressing-room door to bang in its frame and nearly making Fitz jump again.

“Yeah?” he asks hesitantly.

Gareth hands him an armload of tops over the door and he takes them clumsily, dropping several in the process. “I’m quite certain your—er, friend would be very happy to view the results, sir.”

“Thanks,” Fitz says, letting his irritation show through more than he intends.

“Very good, sir,” Gareth says curtly, making Fitz feel thoroughly guilty. The kid just wants to sell his wares, he tries to remind himself—probably works on commission or something.

Fitz tucks one of the button-downs into the trousers he has on and, feeling strange because he isn’t sure he’d even like to do this if they were actually a couple, he goes out and presents himself to Simmons.

She puts the phone face-down on the sofa and gives him her full attention. Bringing her finger to her lips, she quickly has it clamped between her teeth as she gazes at him contemplatively. He feels slight heat burning at the tips of his ears as she appraises him. Then Simmons smiles rather playfully and, removing her finger from between her teeth, turns it in the air.

“C’mon,” he says, his face flushing to the neckline of the new top. “Don’t be ridiculous. I’m not a bloody model.”

She pushes out her bottom lip in a just-barely-there pout. He isn’t sure why—it’s not as if he knows her well at all—but it seems out of character somehow. Pouting to get her way? It doesn’t fit with what he knows of her so far. Nonetheless, he’s not sure what else to do with her’s and Gareth’s unwavering eyes both on him so expectantly. He grits his teeth and turns in a quick spin.

He sees Simmons exchange a look with Gareth and she grins broadly. “I think those are quite lovely,” she says, cocking her head as if she’s still contemplating, then meeting his eyes in a way he can only describe as coquettish. “It’ll do very nicely.”

He tries on several more things as her behavior grows more flirtatious—teasing him, licking her lips and touching her throat. Drawing his eyes to her, while she seems to say all the things he wants to hear with her eyes. Her approval bolsters him to flirt back outrageously, to the music of her laughter and the beautiful sight of her smiles just for him.

He goes so far as to playfully sit down beside her and say, “I can’t go on. I’m absolutely shattered. Maybe after a bit of a sleep.”

She slips a hand over his shoulder and whispers in his ear—the first tiny breath of air making him shiver before she says, “I think it’s time to go, don’t you?”
Not certain what she might mean, he nervously nods his agreement.

Changing back into his original clothes in the dressing room, he comes out to find Simmons already at the register with Gareth. The clerk’s grin is almost beatific now as he rings up items until Fitz wants to be sick from the number on the screen. He feels horribly ashamed of the armloads of packages he and even Gareth helpfully tote out to Iris behind Simmons. As they place the packages into the back seat, Fitz wonders idly what Gareth must think of him as he let Simmons buy him extravagant things. That he’s Simmons’s—what? Husband? Seems unlikely. Boyfriend on the dole? Potentially. Her kept man? That idea makes him want to laugh. He isn’t exactly Richard Gere.

Simmons drives rather cautiously as they head out of town, taking a long, circuitous route out of Cardiff.

Fitz feels rather remorseful of his own lack of restraint in flirting with Simmons in the shop. He might be giving her the wrong impression. Perhaps she’s only attempting to test his willingness for just what she’d previously offered? He doesn’t even want to think of how difficult it would be to say no to that it be necessary. He’s forced to admit to himself that he’s quite smitten. There’s something about her, more than beauty, more than intelligence—something indefinable—a certain charm or vulnerability that has him completely at her mercy.

Finally, when they make it to the bridge back to Bristol, she says, "Get down."

"Why?" he says, looking around but seeing nothing unusual.

"Just in case," she says ominously, gesturing for him to get down urgently.

He takes her at her word and has no clue what to say as they fly back toward Bristol. He wants to say something clever, or at least something interesting, but nothing comes to mind until they’re nearly back and he notices that they’re going a different way than how they’d come. He assumes it’s a safety precaution. He realizes much later than he should that they’ve come up on the place from behind as Simmons stops the car on a roadside cliff overlooking her house. They’re at least three kilometers away but even from here, Fitz can see the black SUVs and distinctively non-S.T.R.I.K.E. personnel.

“What does it mean?” he asks immediately. “Weaver—“

“It’s her plan,” Simmons say vacantly. “She said she’d draw Ward out with the location then extract him onsite. But if Ward isn’t there, she can’t take out the Hydra agents without blowing her one ace—that she knows there’s a mole to leak information through.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me?” he asks angrily, tears of frustration burning behind his eyes. “Why the dog and pony show at the shop? You think I can’t handle it? That I can’t take the pressure? I’m an agent of S.T.R.I.K.E. just as you are. I can handle it. Stop treatin’ me like a bloody child!” He finishes with much more gust than he’d begun but Simmons doesn’t look away from his angry glare, just stares him down until he finally has to drop his eyes away because hers feel like they’re burning twin holes into his soul.

“I only wanted to save you the worry,” she says finally, almost defeatedly, then sighs deeply. “I’m sorry if I’ve been underestimating you, Fitz. It won’t happen again.”

He feels most of his anger burn away at hearing her unexpected apology—though not his humiliation at realizing her dallying might only have been to keep him occupied in the shop.

He’s just about to say he’s sorry for losing his temper when, without looking at him, she says, “I trust
you, Fitz. I’d trust you with my life. I’ve never felt that way before—not with anyone.”

He doesn’t know what to say to such a thing. He suspects there must be some secret agent code of conduct for how to deal with a confession of trusting someone with your life but if he’d ever known it, then it’s now lost to the great vacuum of his amnesia. Instead, he’s filled with something far more terrifying than how to respond to heartfelt confessions of trust—hope. He finds himself full of hope that somehow Simmons might find him more than just an asset to protect or someone to have it off with but that she might genuinely be feeling something deeper for him.

“What now?” he asks, watching Simmons’s expression go from stony to thoughtful.

“Somewhere else,” she says, nudging the steering wheel around and pressing Iris’s accelerator to the floor. They head off away from her home and back in the general direction of London. It isn’t long before Fitz realizes that they’re headed for Swindon. It seems to make sense but at the same time, are they just going to keep on running? With Weaver making plans and the two of them dodging and hoping that eventually one of the plans will end in Ward’s capture and not their deaths?

Simmons parks the car at a moderate looking hotel—nothing horrid but not very posh either. He watches her check in with a fake credit card issued to Jenna Whitman. He wonders if she’d chosen the name herself or if someone else had done it for her.

Simmons leaves her case by the door and sits down in the one chair in the hotel room. She brings a hand up to her forehead and rubs aggressively.

“So we’ll find out a new plan now? From HQ?” he asks, unsure why she hasn’t called Weaver already.

“Not yet,” she says. “I need to think first.”

“How to resolve this,” she say a bit mysteriously. “I’m going to need your help, I think.”

Flush with hope and recklessness, he immediately says, “Yeah, whatever I can do to help.”

She smiles up at him warmly, her eyes seeming brighter somehow. “That’s good, Fitz.” Standing, she takes a step toward him, then reaches forward and takes his hand, squeezing it lightly as she meets his eyes. “I’m so very glad I can count on you.”

Without planning it—in a move that feels less like choice and more like gravity—he takes the last step toward her and meets her mouth in an awkward, messy kiss. He only just finds her lips, having to slide sideways to correct his aim and, for one incredible moment, he feels her lips draw against his. Then he feels her hand pressing on his chest—firm and unequivocal in her rejection.

He withdraws instantly, taking a stumbling step back until he hits the dresser. He grabs onto it, his knuckles going white, because he needs something to keep him from running out the door and never looking back.

“I’m sorry,” he gasps out. “I’d never—I just—I thought—I mean, you said after highly emotional situations—“ But he can’t bring himself to finish the thought because it’s a terrible excuse, that wasn’t what he’d really been after at all. He’d thought she was feeling something more and he’d apparently guessed wrong.

He brings his fingers up to cover his lips, trying to remember the soft, incredible feel of her mouth
against his and that moment when he’d thought she was responding. He’s completely horrified that
the one time he could ever remember having done anything bold—of course—it’d been the wrong
thing to do. He just wishes he could disappear, shrink into nothingness, and never be seen again.
What the hell had he been thinking?

He meets her eyes finally, terrified of what he’ll find there and, instead of anger or any kind of upset,
he sees only pity—and that just happens to be the worst thing he can imagine.
Whose Kiss Stings Unbearably

Chapter Notes

So, this goes back in time slightly so that you can experience that kiss from Jemma's point-of-view.

We owe that lovely chapter title to Sylvia Plath from her poem "Mystic". I found it extremely fitting.

“Yeah, whatever I can do to help.”

At Fitz’s eager declaration, Jemma’s chest immediately swells with some surge of feeling that she really doesn’t want to put a name to—not when things are going all to hell and it feels like events are slipping so far out of her control. And certainly not when she and Fitz will so soon have to part.

Weaver’s plan to draw out Ward hadn’t worked, just as Jemma knew it wouldn’t. He’s far too clever for that—even if he is a bit mad in her opinion. Now Jemma's home is forfeit and she doesn’t understand why Weaver won’t just bloody well listen to her. Jemma is the one who’s been hunting Ward for almost a year and this, after all, is precisely the type of mission she specializes in. Although not normally with an asset—with Fitz—like a millstone around her neck. Jemma is afraid to do what she knows she must when he might be put at risk. However, with the director unwilling to take him back until S.T.R.I.K.E. is cleared of compromised agents, she's really leaving Jemma with no choice.

She couldn’t bring herself to tell Fitz how close they’d been to being caught by Hydra agents in Cardiff. She’d seen the town begin to fill with them as she drove them back toward the safe house. Jemma had been afraid Ward would block the bridge back to Bristol and she’d been tempted to go the long way round but, not wanting to alert Fitz to their peril and seeing no one suspicious, she’d raced onto the bridge. She was relieved as they crossed over, still no sign of anything untoward, but then she’d seen several unmarked SUVs pull into place just behind them, blocking the bridge from further access. Ward’s men had missed them by mere moments. One or two minutes later and Fitz might’ve been in Hydra’s hands—in Ward’s hands. She can only assume that Ward’s source within S.T.R.I.K.E. was able to provide the location of the tower her new mobile had accessed in Cardiff. She will have to be much more careful from now on.

As she smiles, looking up into Fitz’s deep blue eyes, there’s a lightness in her that she hasn’t felt for such a long time. Not since before he’d been hurt—but she doesn’t want to think about before, all the missed opportunities, things between them that are now so impossible.

She’s quite impressed by Fitz’s bravery and willingness to help her resolve their situation despite the potential dangers. It’s not what he’s been used to and she hadn’t expected for him to agree so easily.

“That’s good, Fitz,” she tells him and, just wanting to connect with him and somehow show him how proud she is of him, she gets up from her chair and takes his hand, giving it a little squeeze. “I’m very glad I can count on you.”

There’s something in his eyes, a sudden flash of impetuousness she catches sight of an instant before he acts. It's not enough to prepare her as Fitz lunges forward with an awkward step and his lips meet hers crookedly in a sloppy attempt at a kiss. Immediately, he corrects his aim and his lips begin to
work against hers.

Closing her eyes, she feels the lightness in her chest expanding outward, beyond her body, so vast she feels insignificant by comparison. She wants to reach up, weave her fingers into his hair and kiss him back with everything in her being but these feelings inside her are too immense—fierce and uncontrollable. These unnameable things she feels are in direct opposition to her discipline, her caution.

She remembers that this isn’t what she’d intended for the two of them to be. She’d offered him this only to feed her own mawkishness not inflame the stirrings of her heart. He’s meant for something better—someone else who can make him happy. Because she’s certain that she can’t make him happy, she can only get him hurt. If she’d continued to try and distract him with her reckless trifling any longer in the shop, then he might’ve died today. She’d nearly gotten him killed—once again.

Quite suddenly, she panics, desperately fighting the urge to let her lips find a natural rhythm with his —instead, she pushes at his chest.

He responds instantly, almost as if he’d been burned by the touch of her palm against him. She realizes it’s nearly the same gesture she’d used in trying to seduce him only two nights ago.

He takes a staggering step, hitting the dresser with his hip and then he clutches onto the faux-wood like a lifeline. He brings a hand up to touch his lips but his expression is so utterly mortified that she instantly feels tears burning hotly behind her eyes for him.

“I’m sorry!” he says raggedly, not meeting her eyes. “I’d never—I just—I thought—I mean, you said that after highly emotional situations—“ But he can’t seem to finish and his eyes appear desperate as they dart about the room seemingly searching for somewhere to flee. It’s almost like he’s gone into some emotional form of fight or flight mode—and he most definitely wants to get the hell out of Dodge, er, Swindon.

Jemma manages to hold back the tears aching to spill from her eyes, though still distressed that she’s made him feel this way in her unexpected moment of apprehension. She’d felt the panic rising from her diaphragm and she’d acted on it, even though that is very, very unlike her. Dodging enemy bullets, racing a target down the Autobahn and jumping out of planes with questionably-loaded parachutes were fairly regular occurrences in her life and her pulse never rose over ninety when they happened. But, with Fitz’s lips laboring to arouse her, she’d suddenly just wanted things to stop because it was all too much; in that moment, reigning in those unbound feelings became so much more important than anything else.

However, she never would want Fitz to feel as if he’d done something wrong or she were rejecting him—but now she’d utterly ruined the moment. She shivers then at the idea of where they might’ve been now if only she hadn’t balked. Eyeing the bed, desire filling her, she looks over at Fitz but can only note with dismay his wide-eyed, humiliated expression, his hand hovering over his mouth in horror—and suddenly she’s not confident she can bring the situation back from such extremity.

“It’s all right, Fitz,” she says, settling for an attempt at assuaging his upset. She reaches up to touch his arm but then thinks better of it and, not wanting to spook him, she pulls back, giving him a reassuring smile instead. She tries to keep her tone soft and soothing. “It wasn’t an unreasonable assumption. I’m not at all upset. Please—don’t feel badly. It was, eh, unexpected but quite nice.” He darts a skeptical glance her way, though she can see his eyes still burn with shame. She almost believes she can discern his self-castigations as they pass through his mind and over his features.

It pains her that she’d done this to him and she only wants to make it better but she isn’t sure how. Knowing the timing is now wrong for an attempt to turn things back where he’d intended—not with
the way he’s obviously feeling—the only other thing her mind can focus on is the job.

“Just—we need to figure out what we’re going to do now, Fitz. Our current situation won’t be solved as easily as I’d thought with only a call to HQ. Things are growing more dangerous. The timing is just—“

“Not right,” he finishes, some of the wildness leaving his eyes at the mention of the mission. She can still see that they are red-rimmed and watery, as if he might suddenly burst into a fit of crying—he doesn’t, however. He cradles the back of his neck anxiously and sniffs back the wet undercurrent as he begins to pace. She’d feared he would retreat, perhaps into the loo (at least, she would hope, since she would feel compelled to stop him if he tried to leave the room). Instead, he asks, “So what are we goin’ to do?”

“I don’t know yet, do I?” she says with just a touch of playfulness, trying to lighten the mood in the room, despite the mix of convoluted feelings swirling around just beneath her own breast.

Her pulse is still beating wildly from the haphazard kiss he’d given her but that’s nothing to the longings he’s stirred up, not only in her body, but now in her heart once more. What she wants at the moment, is to push him down on the bed, shag him senseless and not think about the tangled web of feelings inside herself right now. But he looks so upset still as he paces back and forth, his fingers going from scratching at the scruffy underside of his jaw to tangling in the hair at his crown, all while making every effort not to even look at the bed—which is really quite a feat considering how much of the room it takes.

Trying to still her hunger for him, she reminds herself of the fact that Ward is still out there—still far too cunning and ready for her—always a step ahead. She really does need to be rather clever now as well and not let herself get mired down in sentiment and hormones. What they need to do is find Ward first, before he finds them again. And they’ll have to do it all without any help from S.T.R.I.K.E.

“How long are we goin’ to have to stay on the run?” Fitz asks pleadingly.

He sounds scared now and she wonders if he’d merely been interested in an escape from his fear and anxiety. After all, he’d suggested with his words that his seduction attempt was something casual, following another ‘emotional situation’. The idea appeals to her, a diversion to take away the inner turmoil, something to make both of them feel good. Perhaps a distraction isn’t—but no, not until things settle between them again and she bloody well knows what they’re going to do next at the least. She only knows one thing for sure.

“We need to go after Ward,” she says quickly, ignoring his previous question that she really has no answer to.

Jemma hadn’t been aware his features could look any more surprised than how she’d already seen them but his mouth gapes open at her words, his eyes go even wider and his brows seem to reach their limit in height.

“What?” he asks, tone full of incredulity. He follows it by barking out a harsh laugh. “What d’you even mean? Go after Ward? I’m s’posed to be runnin’ away from bloody Ward!”

“We need to track him down and take care of the situation ourselves. We can’t go back to S.T.R.I.K.E., not with a double agent for Hydra embedded there. We also can’t just keep running indefinitely. We have no support out here and the money is only going to last so long. He’ll find us, Fitz.” She licks her lips and watches as he unconsciously mimics her action, his eyes glued to her mouth. “We also need to protect all the innocent people who will be hurt by Ward if we’re not
intelligent about this. People like yourself. We’re agents of S.T.R.I.K.E. and that’s what we do, protect the innocent.” His expression is somewhat vague and she adds, "Isn't that right, Fitz?"

Still trying to tear his eyes from her lips, he begins to nod slowly. “Yeah, of course. You’re right,” he says, almost to himself. Looking up to meet her eyes for the first time since she'd pushed him away, he asks, “So, what’s the first step?

“Daisy Johnson,” she says, just thinking out loud but, as soon as she says it, she realizes it makes the most logical sense. “She’s the prime suspect at the moment. Donnie Gill could be compromised and under her direction. I’m familiar with her movements and I think we can likely pick her up fairly easily.”

“Pick her up?” he questions, brow creasing in confusion.

Jemma feels almost ashamed, as if she’s somehow corrupting him, when she clarifies, “Kidnap her. Question her. Get some new information. If we’re lucky, perhaps Ward’s location.”

He gapes at her in stunned amazement. “And, this is something you’ve done, ehm, before? Kidnappin’?”

She nods soberly. “Many times.”

“What then?” Fitz asks, his expression still one of shock.

“Then, we see what shakes loose.”

Fitz takes an extra-long turn in the toilet once Simmons finishes washing up. He’s so terribly embarrassed over his foolish, clumsy attempt at a pass. She’d seemed so seductive back at the shop, even at the safe house, and then she’d told him that she trusts him with her life—him, Leo Fitz, with her life.

He isn’t certain what to make of her sudden rejection, whether it’s definitive or, as she said, merely a timing issue. He doesn’t know what’s wrong with him that he’d wait until the timing is so poor. And then to just—he sighs. What a bloody twat he is.

In his mind, he’d been planning to do something else, to ask her if she would go out with him, perhaps when this is all over. But then he remembered her overture from the other night, how it felt so powerful and passionate, then he’d thought—but had he really been thinking at all? In the moment, it felt inevitable that they would kiss and when she’d pushed him away, he’d been shocked at the unexpectedness as much as he’d been humiliated to be so incredibly wrong in his assessment of her. It occurred to him then that she’s a deep-cover agent and perhaps she often had to play parts and maybe she’d even been playing one with him—just keeping him busy but never really feeling any of the emotion she displayed. He finds that he really doesn't want to believe that but he isn't sure it's not just wishful thinking.

Attempting to avoid further disgrace, hoping Simmons will fall asleep before he finishes, he spends a long time showering, brushing his teeth and then looking at himself disappointedly in the mirror before he finally turns to go out.

Taking the door handle in his grip, he looks down at his thin frame in new pajama bottoms and vest top and thinks, well, at least this time he has pajamas and not just his pants. He runs a hand over his stomach and thinks how ridiculous it is that Simmons would really be interested in him anyway. After all, he’s not exactly a prime specimen compared to the other specialists she’s used to working with—and probably doing other things with. Things he really bloody well doesn’t want to consider.
for a number of reasons. It’s idiotic for him to think she might find herself interested in him in the
long term anyway.

When he finally opens the door, Simmons is already in bed. Much to his surprise, she’s nearly in the
middle, as if she couldn’t choose a side. It seems to him that she’d want to be as far away from him as
possible. Luckily, this bed is much larger than the last one they’d been forced to share and even with
her taking up so much space, he shouldn’t have trouble keeping away. Nevertheless, he still looks
over at the small sofa in the room but realizes he’d be doubled up on the thing. He suddenly sees
Simmons’ eyes shine in the dim light from the small lamp on the desk and realizes she’s still awake.
She blinks at him, almost in surprise, when she catches him looking at the sofa. He turns his gaze
guiltily to the floor and hurries around the bed, casting one last fond glance at the tiny sofa.

Simmons is faced away as he slips between the crisp, cool and, thankfully, very-much-cleaner-than-
last-time sheets and debates for a moment before settling on his back. Feeling too vulnerable to turn
away from her again after his pathetic, inexpert, stab-in-the-dark come-on, he settles in and stares up
at the ceiling wondering if he’ll be able to sleep at all.

Before he understands what’s happening, Simmons slides herself closer, her body heat skimming
along his side. She turns toward him, dragging her hand up his chest enticingly and then hooking her
index finger over the neck of his vest top.

“I’ve been waiting,” she says in a hushed but sultry undertone. His heart, already beating faster at her
touch, instantly feels like a pounding drum inside his chest as she adds, “I think it’s the right time
finally.” He feels her hot breath on his neck but he’s frozen again, unable to respond, not that he
knows quite what to do anyway. Good god, but she turns on a bloody dime though. “If you’re still
up for it—Fitz.”

The words aren’t particularly provocative to him but the way she says it—his name—has him
wanting nothing more than to turn into her embrace, press his lips to hers and pull her even closer,
but he feels a rising panic in his gut. The worry that she’s only trying to use him to scratch that
frustrating itch she seems to have but only on her own terms.

She slides against him, running her knee up over the fronts of his legs. Completely uncontrollably,
his cock comes to life, hardening as he imagines he can feel the humid heat between her legs against
his thigh, even through the cotton of his pajama bottoms.

He’s afraid to stop her for fear she’ll only roll away distantly, leaving him wondering again, as she
had two nights ago but he also isn’t sure if he shouldn’t just ignore his anxiety and, well, go with it.
He can smell the flowery scent of her shampoo as she presses herself more closely along his side and
feel the tantalizing softness of her yielding breasts against his arm. He can tell that the slippery satin
of her nightie is the only thing between them. He clenches his fist at his side in frustration at his own
inability to make a choice. He wants to, there’s no question at all, but there seem to be so many
reasons not to. He doesn’t want to make things difficult between them, they probably should focus
on the mission actually, but neither of those matter as much as the idea that she doesn’t really care
one way or the other about him.

Her heated breath puffs out against his neck again as she uses the finger hooked into his neckline to
pull it down, giving her full access to his throat but she hesitates at his lack of response. Other than
the fact that his breathing has grown quick and ragged, all he's done is lay there like a git.

“What’s wrong?” she asks, and he feels like a proper idiot. What is wrong with him that he can’t just
accept what he’d essentially bloody well asked for? “Is this situation not emotional enough for you?”
she asks coyly, before her lips finally come into contact with the skin of his neck.
But her words make him stiffen and she pulls back immediately.

“What?” he asks, dismayed. He feels his own face scrunch up in anxiety. It seems as though she’s only confirming his fears suddenly.

Now he’s almost sure she’s doing this out of her so-called "misattribution of arousal". Then he wonders if it isn't only pity over his botched bid to tempt her earlier—that thought is almost nauseating actually. He thinks of her declaration—that she trusts him with her life—and he wonders if it could even be possible that she really does feel something for him now. Suddenly, it doesn’t seem very likely somehow.

He hears her take in a sudden sharp breath as if she might say something but she doesn't immediately respond.

“I think misattribute is quite appropriate,” he says, surprising himself. “All that adrenaline likely just makes it far too easy to let your mind wander where it shouldn’t—to whom it shouldn't. You're right, Simmons, we should likely just focus on the mission.” His words are harsh but he knows now for certain that he doesn’t want those other things—no pity, not some false attraction—he just wants a chance if they do this, some sort of shot at something more between them than just this. “That'll be better for everyone,” he pauses for a moment, looking down but he can’t see her eyes at such a steep angle. “Don’t you agree?”

She lets out a startled huff of air onto the spot under his jaw where she’d been about to press her lips again. He feels the neck of his vest top snap back in place as she lets it go. Then, wordlessly, her limbs withdraw from around him and she flops to her back with far less grace than he’s seen from her before.

He feels his heart drop into his stomach. Vaguely, he’d hoped she would disagree, say that he really is someone she might want to be with. That, if he let his mind wander to her, it isn’t wrong because she might care for him. Clearly, however, she doesn’t feel that way.

She continues not to answer and, stubbornly clinging to hope, he says again, “Don’t you agree, Simmons? That it’s—”

“I’m so sorry,” she interrupts, drawing an arm up over her eyes and going silent again. He’s just about to ask the question one last, desperate time, when she adds, “I never meant for you to be hurt.”

He hears the words but what registers far more is her tone of voice—she sounds almost as if she were about to cry. Agent Jemma Simmons—super-spy who shoots out tires, kills Hydra bad guys, is kind to children and offers him a casual shag after a harrowing experience—about to cry. He feels the small hope he’s had bloom at the realization that she’s truly disappointed at his reaction—as if she really does care. It suddenly occurs to him that her slowly dissipating attitude of dislike towards him for the last few days might only be her tough outer shell and the way she tries to keep herself from being hurt. He should know, he does nearly the same thing himself. It hadn’t occurred to him that she could even be hurt emotionally before now, as if she were some superhuman who’s emotions are somehow protected from harm. What an idiot he is.

He turns toward her. “Is that what’s best for everyone?” he asks quickly, before he loses his nerve. He brings his knuckles up to glide lightly along her side, over the sleek satin of her gown. He has to suppress a shiver at the sensation of heat and her incredible softness beneath the fabric.

She pulls her arm away from her eyes and, for a long moment, looks at him in the pale light from that last lit lamp in the room. “I’m sure you’re right,” she says, turning away abruptly. His hand slips over to her back and he pulls it away.
Despite her stung reaction, he still feels that new, stronger hope burning an aching hole in his heart—a convenient niche in which to store his growing feelings for her. He hadn’t even meant to offend her, only keep himself from being hurt, and yet he had done that to her. Why else would his words have that effect, unless she cares or is, at the very least, beginning to?

He turns away from her, nearly unaware that his feelings of extreme vulnerability have suddenly left him—somehow his realization subconsciously leveling the playing field in his mind. There’s a chance now, he decides. And, really, that’s all he needs. He can make bombs from household products after all, how difficult could it be to help along a small chemical reaction between two human beings? She’s made her desire to shag him clear enough, now if he can only impress her with who he really is—well, as much as he knows who he really is now.

In some ways, he’s still nearly a blank slate. Still, she’d been a scientist and science is, almost regrettably, what he remembers most. It saddens him that it seems likely that was all his life had consisted of—work and nothing personal to balance it out. Simmons, however, seems much the same and he suddenly wonders if it’s just all part of the spy game. He doesn’t want that life though; he wants someone to share himself with who is capable of understanding and who seems worth the effort of discovering fully themselves.

He has no idea why he’s set his mind on Simmons. She seems so far out of his league yet he feels the connection to her burning in his veins. He can almost believe now that she feels the same but is perhaps unaccustomed to such feelings. He is as well, but he wants to experience it—being in love with someone. He wonders if her life has left her afraid to allow such ties in favor of impersonal encounters that give little more than physical satisfaction. If that’s her modus operandi, it sounds a lonely life to him and he’s quite certain that it’s nothing he could tolerate. There’s at least one thing he’s learned about himself in the last year—he’s all or nothing.

Fitz bubbles up from unconsciousness to the feeling of someone shaking his shoulder and he grunts out some sort of plea to let him sleep a bit longer. It feels far too early.

More shaking, then he opens his eyes to see that it’s still quite dark and Simmons is standing over him already dressed for the day but not in her usual pantsuit or—his personal preference, not that it really matters—a professional skirt and blazer set. Instead, she’s wearing black jeans and a black top with a black coat over the top. For some reason, it seems an ominous start to the day.

“We need to go,” she says, not really looking at him in the darkened room. Her eyes just barely glint in the glare coming from the open door to the toilet.

Thoughts and plans from the previous night come back to him as he stretches his arms up over his head. He sits up abruptly at the memory of their questionable plan, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. “We’re really doin’ that? Kidnappin’ someone?”

“I can’t see we have any other choice,” she says firmly, the muscle in her jaw tense and set with determination.

“An’ you need my help?” he asks, hoping to prompt more of his role out of her than he had the night before.

“Yes,” she says, looking at him finally. “It won’t be dangerous but I need a distraction.”

“I’m the, ehm, the distraction?” he asks nervously.

She nods, glancing over to the door of the hotel room. Fitz sees many of the bags and packages from
the day before and he feels guilty again suddenly.

“I’ve brought in some of your new things. Just wear what you might wear to the office,” she says.

Though Simmons hadn’t given him many options, Fitz is able to pick out something quite smart that’s somewhat similar to what he might wear to the office. Though he doesn’t look, he feels her eyes on him as she sits in the lone chair in the room while he chooses. He doesn’t even feel like her eyes leave his back as he collects everything and goes to the toilet so he can get tidied up and dressed.

Quite soon, they’re on their way back toward London, with Fitz trying desperately to think of something to say about the previous night (or anything, really, that might break the uncomfortable silence). Coming up blank, instead, he stares ahead at the damp roadway. Once in awhile, he glances over at Simmons as she drives, one hand on the wheel and one occasionally tucking some loose hair back over her ear. He can’t tell if she’s angry, embarrassed, or just hurt and, though she’s back to treating him rather coolly once again, she’s not at all uncivil—she even got him something nice to eat and both of them tea.

As they speed along in Iris, now quite close to central London, Simmons finally breaks the awkward stand off by telling him, “I’ll drop you in front of S.H.I.E.L.D. HQ. You don’t know her but Daisy certainly knows who you are, as well as the importance you have to Ward and Hydra. Just hang about in front of the building and she’ll see you when she comes out—shouldn’t be long. I’m sure she’ll speak to you when she sees you’re alone and unprotected. She’ll assume something’s happened. Just keep her talking but don’t let her take you anywhere. I’ll be close. Got it?”

“But, ehm, what will I say?” he asks, rubbing a hand through the several days worth of scruff under his chin and remembering he really needs a new razor.

“Not the truth,” she says sternly. “Make something up. Tell her I’m dead. Run with it.”

He nods vigorously. Making things up shouldn’t be difficult. He could do that.

Simmons drives them past the nondescript business building that she tells him is S.H.I.E.L.D. HQ. He wrinkles his nose, sneering at the commonplace look of it. At least S.T.R.I.K.E. HQ has some dignity to it, he thinks idly, as he stares up at what could be the bland main offices of a telecom company.

Ultimately, she drops him off four blocks from the place and, despite the overcast day, during his walk back he grows hot and sweaty under his layers and the navy topcoat Simmons had chosen for him. However, he figures it only adds to his frantic air as he mills about in front of the building.

It takes perhaps fifteen or twenty minutes of people passing him by, paying him no attention, before a girl with long dark hair and wearing a leather jacket exits the building. He thinks at first that she’ll pass him by as all the rest have, but she seems to do a double-take and then stops short before closing the distance between them urgently.

“Agent Fitz?” she says, her eyes a bit wide and concerned. “I’m Agent Daisy Johnson with S.H.I.E.L.D. What’re you doing here? Last I heard, you were with Agent Simmons. Where is she?”

“Dead!” he says, throwing his hands in the air. “I’m lucky I got away! I don’t know who to trust. She gave me your name before…” he looks down at his feet, managing a small—but quite convincing (he thinks) hitch in his breath. “They shot her in the bloody face.”

“Who did?!” she gasps out, bringing a hand to cover her mouth in shock. “Ward? Was it Ward?”
“I don’t know,” he says, probably a bit too dramatically as he covers his face with a hand. Not wanting to get too specific lest she catch him in a lie, he continues, “Just men. It was dark. She told me to run. She let me escape but I saw from the shadows—what they did.” What the hell is taking Simmons so bloody long? He feels like he’s just wiggling on the line.

“We’ve gotta get you out of here,” Agent Johnson says, taking him by the elbow and trying to guide him, but he whirls away from her hold.

“S.T.R.I.K.E. is compromised. How do I know I can trust you?” he asks, eyeing her warily for effect.

“I only want to help,” she says, holding up her hands placatingly. “Let me help you, Agent Fitz.”

“Maybe you just want to deliver me to your buddy Ward?” he questions, attempting to add a note of bitterness to his voice as he tries to get more into the part.

“Ward is not my buddy. I can promise you that, Agent Fitz,” she says in a way that makes him really want to believe her.

“Yeah?” he questions, losing the thread of his act and suddenly not sure where to go with it but the steady flow of adrenaline racing though his veins brings new thoughts flying though his mind. “Simmons really has, er, had a grudge. Did he betray you as well?” he asks, thankful he’d caught his slip as he tries to sound sympathetic to her feelings of betrayal. Though he doesn’t know Agent Johnson, she sounds sincere to him—though she is still a spy so he’ll take it with a grain of salt. Nevertheless, he can’t help but wonder if her obvious rancor over Ward is personal or just frustratingly close to home.

“Ward is evil,” she says through gritted teeth. “He betrayed all of S.H.I.E.L.D. and S.T.R.I.K.E., too.” She doesn’t give away what he’d really been asking—not that he’d expected her to. She meets Fitz’s eyes with something like contrition and adds, “I’m sorry that I didn’t see it sooner. I might’ve saved you a lot of pain.” She looks away again, eyes glossy. “And a whole lot of other people.”

Just then, Simmons seems to come from nowhere. Agent Johnson gasps in pain as Simmons jabs her in the side with something.

“Scream or alert anyone to your distress and I push the plunger,” Simmons says, her voice somehow the coldest Fitz has ever heard it. “I think you know exactly what I’m capable of, Daisy.”

Johnson nods, her eyes darting to the place where the syringe is stuck into her side. Simmons reaches under Johnson’s coat and removes her gun, tucking it into the waistband of her own jeans and pulling the fabric of her top over it.

With her black coat draped over her arm, it looks rather like Simmons just has a very friendly arm around the other woman’s waist. Taking hold of Johnson’s bicep with her free hand, she gives her a hard jostle forward. “Walk,” Simmons orders.

Fitz swallows hard, suddenly feeling almost frightened of the woman he’d thought he might possibly, maybe, could be potentially falling in love with. The realization that he’s only known her four days suddenly hits him. He doesn’t know why but it seems like so much longer to him. Watching Simmons truly in her element though, he understands now that he really doesn’t know her at all.

The woman in question gives him a steely look that makes him immediately fall in line on the other side of Johnson. The three of them cluster together and head, surprisingly calmly, for a block or so in
the direction Simmons leads them. She conducts them to a large black sedan parked in an alleyway.

“Keep a lookout,” Simmons whisper-shouts at him as she places a zip tie on Agent Johnson’s wrists and tightens it until the other woman hisses in pain, making Fitz grimace in sympathy.

Simmons opens the boot and Johnson says, “Oh, Jesus, Jemma. Not the goddamn trunk.” At which point, Simmons depresses the plunger on the syringe and manages to guide Johnson into the boot as she collapses in a heap.

“It was a sedative?” Fitz hears himself ask stupidly as Simmons tightens another tie to bind Johnson’s ankles.

“Of course, it was only a sedative. I need her to give us information, don’t I?” Simmons says as if he were a blithering idiot.

“What if she’d refused to come?” he wonders aloud.

Simmons gives him a withering look. “We’d have had a really difficult time of it, wouldn’t we? Now get in.”

His mind reels at the fact that they’d just kidnapped an Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D. from in front of their own headquarters as he makes his way around to the passenger door and gets into the car.

“Where are we goin’?” he asks as Simmons drives off. “Did you steal this car as well?”

He can almost feel it when she rolls her eyes. “Yes, I’ve stolen it and it doesn’t matter where we’re going, Fitz. Just a place I know of where we can speak with her uninterrupted.”

“But…” he says, not wanting to finish the next question but he has to ask it. “You’re not—You won’t hurt her?”

Simmons finally looks over, meeting his eyes but the usual warmth of her brown eyes is gone and they appear hard and cold in a way he hasn’t seen before—it makes him suppress a shudder.

“I think it’s best you wait in the car,” she says simply.

He shakes his head. “I won’t. Whatever you’re plannin’, if it’s meant for my benefit, then I’m goin’ to be there for it.”

Simmons doesn’t respond except to continue driving. He doesn’t think she’ll say anything at all, but when they finally pull into an empty gravel car park near some run-down warehouses, she shuts off the car and turns to face him. “Fitz.”

He’d been staring resolutely ahead as she drove but, at her saying his name, he turns to face her, trying to prepare himself for whatever objection she might raise.

“I will do anything and everything that I must to keep you safe,” she says, her eyes virtually blazing with sincerity. “I don’t want to hurt Daisy but if she’s a part of this—working with Ward—I won’t hesitate to do what I must to get that information. If that—if it makes you uncomfortable, please, just wait here.” He sees something like a plea in her eyes and the hard glint he’d seen earlier is gone, her genuine warmth having returned. Despite the harsh reality of her words, he finds his gaze lingering over her full, pink lips.

Dragging his eyes away sharply, without meaning to say it, he finds himself asking, “Why do you care so much what happens to me? If you’re concerned with the formula needin’ to be recreated,
don’t worry, someone’ll figure it out again sooner or later.”

She seems taken aback at the question, her expression strangely going from the clear, unaffected confidence he’s used to seeing, into something pinched and creased with insecurity.

She looks down and chokes out, “I don’t know what you mean, it’s my job to keep you safe. I don’t care about the formula.”

“So, you don’t care, then?” he reasons, the hope in him quavering as he waits for some further answer.

She looks up instantly, almost appearing startled as she meets his eyes again for a moment, but then she sighs heavily, almost defeatedly. “Of course I care, Fitz. You’ve been through so much.” He almost thinks he hears her voice falter slightly, then she finishes, “I’ll do all I can to keep you from more hurt and pain.”

It’s not quite the declaration he’d hoped for but he doesn’t want to push and it’s more than enough to keep his hope alive.

“I’ll go in,” he says resolutely.

“And if I ask you to go?” she questions, her expression expectant.

He shakes his head. “If people are goin’ to be hurt because of me, I can’t pretend it hasn’t happened.”

“It’s not because of you, Fitz,” she says, with some immediacy. “It’s because of that bastard Ward. This is all his doing—not yours.”

She reaches out to touch his hand but quickly starts to draw it back before she quite makes contact. On impulse, he reaches out and catches her hand before she can take it back fully. To his relief, she doesn’t pull away and he slides a thumb in a slow circle over the tender skin at the back of her hand.

“Thanks for sayin’ it but I can’t quite agree,” he says, not able to meet her eyes. Instead, he watches the slow slide of his thumb over her soft skin. “I wish I could feel like none of this was on me but if I hadn’t invented that damned molecular formula—”

“Don’t ever blame yourself for that!” she says, too loud in the small space, making him look up at her sudden vehemence. More quietly, squeezing his fingers almost imperceptibly, she continues, “Science is neither right nor wrong. It’s only those, like Ward, who would do terrible things with it. It’s him, Fitz, not you. Please, don’t think that.”

She squeezes his fingers again more firmly and he suddenly wants nothing more than to kiss her. However, his last blundering attempt at a snog had met with far less-than-spectacular results. In fact, "catastrophically cocked-up failure” might be closer to the truth in actuality. No, he’d definitely not try that again. Not unless she shows some clear sign that it’s decidedly a welcome development.

Knowing he can’t so easily accept her assertion of all this really not being his fault, yet wanting to give her something, he says, “I’ll try, Simmons. However, I’m fairly certain blamin' myself, right or wrong, is a not-so-easily-forgotten lifestyle choice.”

He glances up to meet her eyes and they’re suddenly quite full of feeling. However, not really an expert on reading raw emotion, he doesn’t recognize anything clearly beyond a hint of amusement at his self-deprecating joke. Her cheeks are attractively flushed, while her rich brown eyes appear to glimmer even with no other light but the cloudy, dull sky outside casting its hazy grayness in through
the car windows. It’s almost as if she’s projecting some inner radiance—as silly as that sounds even in his own head yet it seems no less true as he gazes into her depths.

She smiles brilliantly at him for the first time that day and then shifts forward slightly toward him over the console between them. His heart speeds and he wonders, is this the sign he’s waiting for? Is she telling him that she’s interested again? His pulse begins to pound in his ears as he ponders the fullness of her slightly parted lips and the warmth of her fingers still held in his. She clutches his hand more tightly and he realizes that, if he only leans forward a few more inches, they’ll be close enough for their lips to meet. He leans forward experimentally and he’s surprised when she does as well, attempting to meet him halfway. Close enough to feel her breath ghosting over his face, he swallows hard and—

“HEY! GODDAMNIT!” Johnson shouts from inside the boot, accompanied by a loud, repetitive banging that makes Fitz flinch embarrassingly away from the sudden sound.

Simmons smiles more broadly, showing her teeth, as Johnson keeps up the racket, shouting and carrying on while Fitz takes a calming breath.

Squeezing his fingers one last time and then letting his hand go—as if it were just another day at the office—Simmons points back over her shoulder and says, “I’d better get that.”
Fitz opens the boot of the stolen car while Simmons holds her gun out before her, aiming at the trussed and helpless Agent Johnson inside. He can’t quite believe it’s necessary though. Then again, Johnson is also a specialist and they have just drugged and kidnapped her—he can see where she’d likely be feeling a mite tetchy. He really has absolutely no desire to see how she works out her unpleasant feelings.

Despite the open boot, Johnson is still struggling against her bonds, kicking out with her secured legs at the inside of the car. Her mouth, however, is completely unrestrained and Fitz feels oddly embarrassed by the string of curses that pours from the woman’s lips. It’s nothing he hasn’t said in his own head but he doesn’t often let them slip out unchecked—certainly not to this extent.

His mum had always told him that profanity is a clear sign of lack of imagination. He’d listened, even if he hadn’t exactly agreed. There’s nothing wrong with his imagination and the obscenities that fly through his head seem to have little relevance.

“FUCK YOU, JEMMA,” Johnson finally spits. “You know I can’t stand it in the fucking trunk!”

“And I’m sure you would’ve behaved like a perfect angel if I’d let you sit up front,” Simmons says almost placatingly.

Johnson looks away petulantly, clearly conceding the point.

“If you’ll behave now, Fitz will cut the tie on your ankles and we’ll take a little walk. Agreed?” Simmons asks, her tone eminently reasonable.

Johnson looks quite sullen for a long moment but finally nods.

Fitz takes out his keyring and, using his sharp little pocket knife, he leans in to cut the tie on Johnson’s ankles.

“That was some nice acting by the way,” she says with a smile while his head is nearly in the boot with her. “You sure fooled me.”

Fitz is instantly flooded with guilt. She’d just been telling him outside S.H.I.E.L.D. HQ how much she regretted not being able to spot Ward’s falseness.

“I’m sorry! I—“

“Get out, Daisy,” Simmons interrupts him.

“Right,” Johnson says with a sigh, rolling onto her stomach and bending herself in the middle. Unable to use her arms, she attempts to get to her knees, and ends up resembling nothing so much as a very large inchworm.
It looks so pathetic, Fitz gives Simmons a significant look. Still holding the gun on her, Simmons presses her lips together and then nods at the struggling Agent Johnson.

Fitz reaches in and touches her shoulder. “Let me help you?”

“That’d be great,” she says with no small amount of sarcasm in her tone.

She rolls to her back again and he hauls her up by the arm once he pulls her feet out, letting gravity help her slide the rest of the way down to the ground.

“What’s this about, anyway?” she asks when Simmons gestures toward the nearest warehouse with a sweep of her free hand.

“Ward,” Simmons says simply.

“What? Whaddya mean?” Johnson asks. Fitz can see the fear and worry on her face clearly and he wonders suddenly if she does know something—or if she’s just frightened of Simmons.

“I want to find him,” Simmons says as they pass through the door into the warehouse. Johnson goes in first, Fitz after her and Simmons trails behind with the gun—which is now angled toward the ground at least.

“So do I!” Johnson cries, spinning around to face them now they’re all inside. “Jemma, you don’t really think I know where he is, do you?”

“It’s a possibility,” Simmons says, though her voice sounds uncertain to Fitz’s ear.

“Why would you think that, Jemma? You know how much I hate Ward! You—of all people—know how he tricked me!” She sounds almost desperate.

“I seem to recall, at the time, Daisy, that you said it was the best sex of your life,” Simmons says casually, without a hint of feeling or even of teasing—she sounds completely serious.

Fitz sees tears glimmer in Johnson’s eyes and he suddenly feels ill. It sounds as though Simmons and Johnson had been friends and now she’s using confidential information to accuse her former friend. If Johnson is innocent, she doesn’t deserve any of this and his stomach roils at that idea.

Sniffing back her tears, Johnson looks defiantly at him and then Simmons before she says, “Yeah, suppose it was. Couldn’t trust a word out of his mouth but hips don’t lie, I guess.”

Despite the attempt at a joke that simultaneously causes Fitz’s ears to warm and makes him want to be sick, the room is deadly silent.

“Or perhaps you think you love Ward?” Simmons says, breaking the awkward hush that had fallen, but her derision is clear from her tone and sudden sneer.

“You know that was before I met Trip,” Johnson says, “You know that, Jemma. Trip is—” She seems about to say something more but stops herself.

Simmons waits to see if the other woman will continue but when she doesn’t, Simmons says, “Perhaps you would do anything for Ward—even forgive him his crimes?” Fitz can’t help noticing how she watches Johnson’s face very closely. All he can see is how upset the other agent is, he can’t discern any dishonesty.

“I’ll never forgive him,” Johnson spits back at her, angry now. “He took from me. And I know…”
she glances at Fitz for a moment and then back to Simmons, “I know he took from you, too, Jemma.” She looks at Fitz again. “From both of you.”

Simmons looks at Fitz worriedly for a moment, though he can’t reason why, then she levels the gun at Johnson again. “Tell me, are you in contact with Ward? Or have you been in contact with Donnie Gill? I need answers, Daisy. If you’re really still...” she seems to swallow past a tightness in her throat, “a friend, then help me. I need to find Ward or we’re going to die out here.”

Fitz really hopes Simmons’ last words are just for effect. He really doesn’t want to die. He’d almost died once and he just doesn’t recall anything pleasant at all from the experience.

“Jemma,” Johnson says, her tone suddenly pleading. “I promise you. I don’t know where Ward is. I’m not helping him. I would never, ever help him. Please, believe me.”

Simmons pauses for a moment, her expression softening but then Fitz sees her mouth go hard again. “What about Donnie? When was the last time you were in contact with him?” Her voice is terrifyingly cold.

“Donnie?” she questions, shaking her head. “I don’t know. I haven’t talked to him in awhile. Why?”

“You didn’t see him when you were in the infirmary at S.T.R.I.K.E.?” Simmons asks skeptically.

“He didn’t visit you? You didn’t meet with him or his assistant Seth Dormer?”

Johnson shakes her head vigorously. “No. Why would I?”

“He’s always been fond of you...” Simmons says mysteriously. “You know what I’m speaking about,” she adds, and it sounds ominously like a warning.

Johnson nods. “I know but I didn’t want that getting...” her eyes dart to Fitz again, “you know — worse.”

“You’re not being very helpful,” Simmons says, a touch of flippancy to her words suddenly. “What does Director May say about Ward now?”

Johnson sighs. “We’ve still got shoot-to-kill orders. And...” she hesitates, looking up to meet Simmons’ eyes. “Okay, I might have a lead for you. I was going to follow it up myself but I just got a new assignment and I’m supposed to ship out tonight. I’ll give it to you but it’s all I have. Deal?”

Simmons chews her lower lip for a moment and then says, “Agreed. Give me the lead and I’ll sedate you, cut your restraint and leave you here. Acceptable?”

Johnson nods, looking down almost sadly. “It’s Vanchat—he’s in London again. He might be here to sell Ward new information. He’s staying at the Four Seasons under the name Mercher. I don’t know what room. I didn’t get that far. It’s all I have.”

Simmons doesn’t look incredibly thrilled with the lead. She motions toward the floor with the gun as she says, “Sit down.”

Johnson somewhat awkwardly sits down cross-legged on the dusty floor of the warehouse with her arms still restrained behind her back.

Continuing to hold the gun on her, Simmons pulls a syringe and single-use alcohol swab from her jacket and holds them out to Fitz. “Give her this.”

“Me?” he says, his voice breaking and making him grimace sheepishly.
“I’ll cover her,” Simmons says shortly, ignoring his nerves.

He takes the syringe from her but then stares at it for a moment. Injecting people with foreign substances is not really what he’d signed up for. Needles and blood are definitely not his area.

Looking at the other woman, Simmons says, “It’s a larger dose than I gave you before. You’ll be out for several hours. Long enough for us to get what we need from Vanchat. If Ward knows I’m coming for him now, I suppose I’ll know where you really stand—or with whom.”

Johnson’s eyes look watery as Fitz steps closer with the syringe. “I know why you’re doing this, Jemma,” she says, glancing up at him and then back to Jemma again. “And I won’t hold it against you. I think I get it.”

“Well, for what it’s worth,” Simmons says, “If you are lying, you’ve got me fooled as well. I’m very sorry but I had to be sure.”

Fitz kneels down, pushing up Johnson’s sleeve and running the alcohol swab over her skin.

She nods solemnly back at Simmons, letting out a short dry chuckle. “You, me and, um…” she darts a quick glance up at Fitz again and almost self-consciously adds, “well, you know, men.” She smiles thinly if a bit ruefully up at Simmons. “Neither one of us ever had it easy there—did we?”

He can’t help but look back over his shoulder at Simmons to gauge her expression at such a comment. She pulls her lips into a hard-pressed smile and says, “Yes, I suppose we didn’t. Sleep well, Daisy.”

Fitz grits his teeth and shoves the needle in, attempting to depress the plunger slowly. Johnson goes almost immediately limp and he has to catch her so she doesn’t fall back onto the hard concrete. He lays her down gently before giving Simmons a meaningful look over his shoulder. At her nod, he uses his pocket knife to cut the restraint on the other woman's wrists.

“Now what?” he asks, fearing he already knows the answer.

“The Four Seasons, of course,” Simmons says with a startlingly wide smile.

The car is filled with not-quite-comfortable silence during the drive back to where Iris is parked in another alleyway not far from the first. Though Simmons darts an occasional welcoming glance in his direction, Fitz can think of nothing to say as his nerves over what they might have to do next make him feel slightly nauseated. Despite that, he knows that they need to stick together. He isn't sure why he believes that so completely but it's more than just an idea to him suddenly, it's more like a conviction.

On arriving, Simmons pulls ahead of Iris but then wipes down the sedan thoroughly before they abandon it. As they both climb back into the Aston Martin, Fitz is surprised when they each heave their own separate sighs of relief.

“Eh, Fitz?” Simmons says, having not yet started the car.

“What is it?” he asks, anxiety over what she might say suddenly making his tone sharper than he intends.

“I, well—I need to change,” she says, looking almost apologetic as she moves her hands to indicate her black-clad torso. “This really isn’t Four Seasons attire.”
Not understanding why she needs to tell him this, he stares back at her blankly. “Yeah?”

“I’m going to do that in the car. I didn’t want to make you, er, uncomfortable,” she says, raising her brows expectantly.

His brain seems to suspend abstract thought over the concept and he can think of nothing more eloquent to say than, “Oh.”

As she sits there, cocking her head to the side slightly in anticipation of his further response, it finally hits him. He scrambles out of the car immediately while Simmons gets out more moderately to pull clothes from her case inside the boot.

“Keep an eye out,” Simmons says as she gets back into the car. He can’t quite determine if it’s his imagination or not but the way she says it really sounds as though she’s flirting again.

He stands with his back to the car door, peering toward either end of the alleyway but all he can really think of is the fact that Simmons is, at minimum, partially unclothed right behind him. Which, he realizes in hindsight, is a really terrible thing to think on because—Christ—just the memory of how she looks that way is enough make him need to start extracting square roots applying Newton’s method. He’d had all of thirty seconds seeing her in her incredibly sexy lingerie that first night and it was both far too much and not nearly enough. He’s suddenly unsure if the maths are going to be enough.

Then he hears the window coming down behind him. “Alright,” Simmons calls to him.

He turns and gets in, then scrubs his hands over his face as he tries to force his brain back to order.

“Eh, would you mind terribly?” Simmons says, pivoting away from him in her seat. It only takes him half a second to see that the back of her dress is completely open, exposing a good deal of bare skin. The surprise of it causes him to take far too long a moment before he comprehends that she wants him to zip the dress for her.

As he reaches for the tab nervously, he can’t stop himself from taking in the long scar that runs down her spine. It’s at least eight inches, maybe more, but it’s pale, completely healed and therefore likely an old injury. It starts somewhere between her shoulder blades beneath her bra and disappears into the line of her knickers. He’s certainly no expert but it could be from a scoliosis correction or it might be a spinal injury of some sort that required surgical repair.

He decides not to ask since she must know he can see it, yet still, she hasn’t volunteered any information on her own. Finally managing to get the zip going after a bit of fumbling, dragging it up tooth by tooth, he notes that her scar becomes completely hidden beneath the fabric of her dress. It strangely makes him wonder if it bothers her, if she sees it as a fault or a weakness that should be kept secret. All her skin that he’s seen so far is unmarred but for this one thin scar—and he’s seen quite a lot, though admittedly not all. Still, it seems good fortune if she’s never had any other injuries—even especially considering her work—either that or she’s just that good at it.

“There,” he says as he lets the tab go, having done the zip all the way to the top.

The act felt oddly personal considering the bizarre line they’ve been riding—so close to being extremely intimate and yet almost clinical in the way Simmons has gone about it. He tries to picture her letting herself go, allowing herself to become affectionate, impassioned, even tender.

Unbidden, he imagines sliding his tongue along the shallow groove of her spine, over her hidden scar, and he knows then that he won’t be able to stop thinking of it now. He feels quite a freak
realizing that he’s more than a bit turned on by her only imperfection and he wonders if there’s a name for that particular brand of perversion. Maybe it’s just that everything about Simmons seems exciting to him? Then again, perhaps it’s that having that one little defect makes her seem more human somehow—and, to his mind, far more beautiful.

“Thank you,” she says, turning back and smiling over at him. His cheeks flare with heat as if she could somehow know what he’s been thinking of.

Without meaning to, he becomes enthralled as she shrugs on a blazer that perfectly matches her dress. She pulls her hair from beneath the collar and then arranges it carefully over her shoulders as she looks in the rearview mirror. Finally, she takes out a tube of lipstick from her small handbag and precisely colors her lips a deep scarlet. He realizes too late that he’s been staring the entire time and he can only hope she hasn’t noticed his rapt attention focused on her like a lech.

Running her tongue over her freshly colored lips, she glances at him with her eyes half-lidded and, swallowing convulsively, he starts to cough. He just manages to note a small, shrewd smile before she replaces it with an expression of concern. He holds up a hand to her and his coughing soon eases.

She gives him a significant look and he nods back. “Yeah, I’m fine. Go.”

“And we’re off, then,” she says, starting the car and heading toward the great unknown—the next stage of their self-imposed mission.

As Jemma speeds toward the Four Seasons Hotel, she tries to come up with a plan for what to do when they get there but her mind keeps going back to Daisy.

Jemma doesn’t know if she can trust Daisy—though she wants to. She knows it’s a risk to leave her alive but she just couldn’t convince herself to use the syringe in her other pocket—not when she isn’t certain.

She remembers how in love Daisy seemed at first when she and Ward had first grown close. Jemma’s tried to put herself in Daisy’s shoes, wondered at how one deals with betrayal from the person you’re most intimate with—that you trust above all others.

She looks over at Fitz in the passenger seat and he looks anxious and fidgety, thumping his heel on the floor and clenching and unclenching his fingers in the fabric of his trousers over his knees. Reaching toward him, she places a hand over the top of his to still his restless movements and he looks almost stunned as he glances back at her.

“It’ll be fine,” she says. “Don’t worry, Fitz.”

“M’not worried. Not at all,” he says almost crossly. He straightens his shoulders and takes in a deep breath that expands his chest, then he smooths out the fabric at his knees, and says, “What d’you need me to do this time?”

Keeping her eyes on the road, she shakes her head. “I don’t need your help this time.”

He scoffs. “C’mon, Simmons. You know now I can help you,” he says, sounding offended yet just a touch pleading.

“No.” She says it far more harshly than she means to.

He winces slightly at her tone but immediately plows ahead with his next argument. “And what if it’s
a trap? What if Ward knows you, or even Daisy, will go to any lengths to find him, even down to going after Vanchat?"

"At least you’ll be out of it then," she says instantly. "You’ll still be safe."

"How the hell am I goin’ t’be safe without you?" The earnestness in his voice is enough to make her look away from the road because she so needs to see his face. "Weaver’s plans are shite, S.T.R.I.K.E. is compromised, S.H.I.E.L.D. is likely compromised—who exactly is goin’ to keep me alive if Ward gets to you?" His expression is one-part fear and two-parts determination.

"I—" she begins, but has no idea how to finish the sentence.

"Just let me help you. It’s the best way for us to get through this—*together*. You also said you weren’t goin’ to underestimate me again,” he reminds her, his tone is clear and unwavering—resolve winning out over his fears rather apparently.

"Yes." She hears herself say the word but it goes against everything in her to do it. She’s supposed to protect him, not put him in more dangerous situations. However, he has a point, should she die, she really isn’t certain what will happen to him. Better to lessen the chance she might die. She tries to find the flaw in that logic because she's somehow sure there is one but it won’t come to her. “Alright. We’ll go in together.”

He grins rather guilelessly at his victory.

“I can probably hack their system and get his room number for you,” he says, still grinning.

“It’s not necessary,” she says, “Not everything requires gadgets, Fitz. Sometimes low-tech methods are the best.”

“Oh. Okay," he says, his smile slipping away slightly. "I mean, if you’re *certain*.

“We’ll need some things from the field kit, however,” she says. “We’ll likely have to break into his room.”

Fitz’s smile falters completely then. “Break into—ehm, okay. Yeah. I can get us in the door easy enough there. Well, unless you’ve got a low-tech way to break electronic locks?” He smirks at her playfully.

“No. I’ll leave that part to you,” she says, glancing over and quirking her lips in amusement.


“I don’t think we’ll need any sedative for Vanchat,” she says, keeping her eyes stubbornly on the road.

“Why not?” He sounds almost alarmed suddenly.

“He won’t give up his information as easily as Daisy did,” she says, worrying that he’ll argue.

“Oh." He looks away, out at the city street going by.

“He’s a very bad man, Fitz,” she says, her voice strained. “He’s a blackmarket information dealer. Hydra is his number one client. Don’t worry about Vanchat.”

“I’m not worried about him, Simmons,” he says mysteriously, without even a glance in her direction. She wants to ask him who, then, he’s worried about but they’re already within a few short
blocks of the hotel and she pulls into an empty parking space.

Getting out, she goes around to the boot and, shoving aside Fitz’s tech cases, she finds her leather valise buried beneath her other cases (the ones she hopes she won’t need to open). With a surreptitious glance at their surroundings and finding no one close by, she begins putting the things she’ll need inside her bag. Fitz opens up both of his own cases and begins rooting through his tech. He takes out a small device that just looks very like a mobile phone.

“What’s that?” she asks.

“New electronic lock-pick,” he says. “It’ll get us into any door here.”

She nods. “The old one was twice that size. Is that—“

“Mine?” he finishes. “Yeah, one of the little projects I’ve been workin’ on while I tried to get my memories back. It’ll pretty much get you through any door now. I’ve even got software for breakin’ security-encrypted electronic locks now. It can beat nearly any algorithm.”

“Impressive,” she says, feeling oddly proud that he’s been working and producing such useful tech even now.

He slips the device into his pocket before taking out a pair of spectacles from a small case which he slips into his inner jacket pocket. Then he gingerly unwraps some very small items lodged in his tie that he’d been wearing that first day and she sees instantly that they’re comms devices, one for each of them.

“Those are on a S.T.R.I.K.E. frequency,” she reminds him. “We can’t use them.”

“They were on a S.T.R.I.K.E. frequency,” he says as he hands her one. “Now they’re on our frequency. It’s really only a precaution, in case we get separated.”

Jemma smiles at him warmly as she slips the comm earpiece comfortably into her ear. “You’re brilliant, you know?”

He shrugs and runs a hand up the back of his neck while his ears blaze at the compliment. “Well, ehm, thanks, Simmons.” He gazes at her longingly for a moment and it startles her. It’s the look he’d had—before. The adoring look that she’s been yearning to see. But as quickly as it had appeared, it’s gone again, and she’s left wondering if she’d even seen it at all.

“We’d best get going,” she says, slamming the boot and straightening her blazer.

“Yes, of course,” he says, smiling agreeably. "Are you goin' to clue me in to your clever plan?"

"You're going to have to learn to improvise," she says with a slightly sympathetic smile. "You asked me not to underestimate you and I'm trusting that you can do this. This is what undercover work entails—frequently going into a situation and not knowing how it will turn out. It's just the way it's done, I'm afraid. You'll have to be ready to follow my lead regardless of what I say or do because plans change rather unexpectedly, even frequently."

He appears rather doubtful but he still nods rapidly. "Yeah, okay. I can do that. I'll do whatever you need me to."

As they approach the large glass and steel archway of the hotel entrance, she pauses, and says, “Can you hold my hand, please?”
“What?” he asks, voice going up a half an octave in surprise.

“It’s just—our actions will be considered less suspicious,” she tries to explain. “People generally trust those who are most relatable to themselves. We won’t be recognized as guests by the staff but if we proceed confidently with an apparent agenda and provide an appropriate impression, then we won’t be questioned. This type of work is very much about being congruous with your surroundings, Fitz.”

“But couldn’t we be, y’know, business colleagues?” he asks, his brows drawing together dubiously as he points to her leather valise.

Slightly stung, she hides it with a sigh. “Fine. It would be better if you had a briefcase as well but needs must, I suppose. Put on your specs as well. They have cameras inside the hotel and the less they can capture of your face, the better.”

He takes them out of his inner pocket and puts them on. “Good?”

She nods curtly, not even wanting to admit to herself just how good. She tugs the front of his charcoal suit jacket straight and sweeps her fingers over his shoulder as if removing some small bit of debris. He looks down re-adjusting the front of his jacket and glancing nervously at his shoulder.

Biting her lower lip, she sighs again and says, “Just make sure you follow my lead, alright?”

“Of course, I will,” he says, looking mildly offended she’d even implied the possibility of him not doing so.

Squaring her shoulders, she heads in quickly, attempting to put on her part and create a significant air of authority about herself. Fitz hurries to catch up but his manner is far more nervous and she fears he might not be able to pull off the necessary subterfuge.

She makes for the front desk straight away. The clerk, a slightly balding man in his forties with a neatly trimmed mustache and impeccable suit, gives her the detached gaze common to his breed of upscale service personnel. His name tag reads, “Hugh.”

“May I help you, madam?”

“I have no idea, really,” she says crisply. “I suppose it depends on your level of competence—Hugh.”

He stiffens instantly but forces his façade back in place quicker than she would’ve given him credit for. His tone is quite frosty as he says, “Well, I’ll certainly do my best, madam.”

“My assistant, James, and I—” she gestures toward Fitz.

“Hello,” Fitz says in a friendly tone that is appropriate enough to relieve a little of her worry about his espionage skills.

“We have a meeting with Mr. Mercher. Unfortunately, my assistant’s incompetence has led him to misplace Mr. Mercher’s room number. Can you please call up to him for me?”

“Certainly, madam,” Hugh says disinterestedly.

“Fantastic,” she says, letting sarcasm infuse the word.

Hugh blinks at her with slight contempt and a commiserating glance in Fitz’s direction. She grows slightly more confident in Fitz’s acting ability as he smiles back at the clerk a bit sympathetically.
As Hugh checks his computer screen, Jemma gives Fitz a slight nudge toward the desk.

“Sorry for the bother,” Fitz says to Hugh, slipping his hand along the side of his neck. “I’m always forgettin’ somethin’.”

Hugh glances up, giving Fitz a subtle once over and, though Jemma is sure that Fitz doesn’t notice, she certainly does.

“I’m not sure how long our meeting will last,” Jemma says, looking at Hugh. “Is there someone who might be able to help James with booking us a nearby table for lunch?” She looks around behind her vaguely. "Concierge?"

“I’m certain that can be arranged, madam,” Hugh says, taking another subtle look at Fitz before he picks up the phone.

“I’ll send him down a bit later to make the arrangements. Who should he speak to?” she asks, raising a questioning brow.

“I can take care of that for you both, madam,” he says, smiling toward Fitz who returns a warm smile of his own, completely oblivious to the subtext.

Holding the phone to his ear, Hugh stands at attention while he waits for Vanchat to answer. After a moment, he begins to look slightly dismayed.

Hanging up the phone, he says, “I’m sorry, madam, he’s not answering the line. Perhaps you’d like to leave a message?”

Jemma looks to Fitz, scoffing in disbelief. “Please don’t tell me you’ve gotten the time wrong as well!” She puts her hands on her hips and scoffs again in indignation. “I’m trying to recall why I haven’t fired you yet.”

Fitz looks as concerned as if none of what she was saying were an act at all. “My glowin’ personality?” He chuckles nervously but it fades out as Jemma crosses her arms over her chest. His look of worry quickly returns. “No, no, I’m certain it’s the correct time. Perhaps it’s, ehm, Mr. Mercher?” he says a bit tentatively. He looks to Hugh and asks, “I don’t s’pose I could just pop up and knock?” Out of the side of her eye, Jemma catches Fitz grimacing while he points subtly to her and gives Hugh a pleading look.

“I’m very sorry,” Hugh says, his supremely apologetic expression clearly aimed at Fitz. “But the Four Seasons just doesn’t give out the room numbers of our guests.”

“No, no. Of course not,” Fitz says dejectedly. “I’m sorry,” he says, looking at Jemma. “I was sure it was the right time. Really.”

“I could send a porter up to knock, I suppose,” Hugh says, looking between the two of them.

“Yeah?” Fitz enthuses, he looks to Jemma and she smiles. He instantly continues, “That would be just great! Thanks very much, Hugh.”

Hugh waves a porter over and goes to the far edge of the long desk to speak to him. She listens but Hugh is far enough away and conscientious enough to whisper. She nudges Fitz over toward the edge of the desk and watches as he thanks Hugh profusely. She just catches sight of him shaking the hand of the porter as well while Hugh looks on with a dreamy smile. She takes the opportunity to whip the computer monitor around just enough for her eyes to lock on the room number they need before she spins it back.
Jemma heads over to a seating area and a couple of minutes later Fitz joins her.

“That was bloody nerve wracking,” he whispers as he picks up a magazine.

“How long would it take you to hack the system?” she asks him under her breath.

“Dunno. Two hours?” he mumbles, raising his brows contemplatively. “Maybe only one if their security is crap.”

“This has taken…” she checks her watch, “twelve minutes, so far,” she says, cocking her head smugly.

Fitz flaps his magazine open and raises it to the level of his face, effectively blocking her out of his line of sight but she only smirks to herself.

A little more than five minutes later the porter returns. Jemma's been watching for him and she bumps Fitz's shin gently with the toe of her pump. He glances up from his magazine and she nods for them to return.

“No answer, I'm afraid,” Hugh says, almost sadly as they step up to the desk.

“I'm just sure it's the right time,” Fitz insists vehemently as she'd quietly prompted him to say on the way over.

“Would you care to leave a note then, madam?” Hugh asks, glancing again at Fitz, his inclination growing a bit more brazen.

“I would,” she says. “And I believe we'll wait in the restaurant for a bit in case he's merely late.”

Hugh slides a stack of notepaper, an envelope and a pen toward her across the red marble desk.

She scribbles a vague message about meeting tomorrow. Leaving the note unsigned, she folds it, then slips it into the envelope and seals it. Handing it to Hugh, she says, “Please send for us if he arrives. Thank you for your very competent help.” She gives Fitz an unpleasant glare of contempt and he appears appropriately chastised.

Hugh gives her a slight but graceful bow of his head. “Thank you, madam. And please,” he looks directly at Fitz, “don't hesitate if there’s anything at all I can do for you—for either of you. I'm completely at your service.” He leans forward, placing his hands on the counter and gives Fitz a last covetous look. "Goodbye."

“Thanks. Bye,” Fitz says, a slight crease forming in the center of his forehead suddenly but Jemma hurries him away with a little push to his shoulder blade, urging him in the direction of the restaurant.

Once they’re out of sight of Hugh and the desk, she veers toward the lifts. She presses the call button and, when it arrives, they climb inside.

“See, now we know the room number and that Vanchat is likely away,” she tells Fitz. “Sometimes low-tech methods are simply better.”

Fitz scoffs slightly but doesn’t reply, crossing his arms over his chest. After a moment of looking up at the floor numbers changing, uncrossing his arms and bringing a hand up to rub a finger behind his ear, he says, “So, ehm, was that clerk—Hugh—was he—” He pauses for a moment then shakes his head. “Know what? Never mind. Forget it.”
“You mean, was he flirting with you?” she asks, trying to suppress a smirk and only managing to be moderately successful.

Fitz grimaces slightly. “Yeah, that.”

She nods. “Yes, he was. It was all to our advantage, however.”

“Great,” he says, though his tone is less than cheerful at the idea. “I mean, well, I’m not—I mean, it’s absolutely fine. But it’s just—you know, I don’t, ehm—well, I’m not—”

“Gay?” she finishes for him. “Yes, I think I got that message yesterday—when you kissed me,” she adds, and it comes out far more seductively than she intends.

“Right,” he says, suddenly unable to meet her eyes before he pinches the bridge of his nose as if he were getting a headache.

The lift grinds to a halt and Jemma steps out. When he lingers in the lift, still rubbing at his forehead, she says, “Come on, Fitz.”

He steps out, still not quite looking at her.

“This way,” she tells him, heading in the direction of the room they’re looking for.

He follows her more quickly now and, arriving at the room, she says, “Alright, it’s your turn to show me how superior your tech is—how rapidly can get this door open?”

“Christ, Simmons, don’t you know anything about not puttin’ pressure on a man?” he says, and then blushes furiously. “I mean, ehm—just give me a moment, won’t you?”

He takes out his lock-breaking device and, slipping a card with wires running from it into the keycard slot, he taps furiously on the device. Unfortunately, Jemma hears someone coming down the hall and she’s not sure if it’s a maid, a guest, a porter coming to slip her note under Vanchat’s door, or even Vanchat himself but she only has a moment to think.

“Someone’s coming!” she hisses close to Fitz’s shoulder.

He whirls toward her, his eyes wide and frightened. “What? Who?”

Jemma looks down at the coil of wires going from his device to the door and, knowing there isn’t time, she drops her valise, and says, “Just—oh, just follow me.”

Then she pushes him against the door lock to hide the tangle of wires and traps the device in his hand between their bodies, effectively hiding all the evidence.

Jemma can hear the moment the footsteps come around the corner of the hallway. Fitz goes stiff against her when she kisses his neck and runs her hands over his chest. He doesn’t understand but Jemma knows that it provides an excellent reason for whomever came around the corner to avert their eyes.

“Where’s your key, baby,” she says in an American accent, kissing his neck again and running one hand up to tease along his scruffy jawline with her fingertips.

Unfortunately, Fitz appears to be completely frozen again, as he always seems to become at her touch. She hums questioningly and then nips his skin just over the stiff collar of his button-down. He lets out a half-moan half-whimper of complete lust but she has no idea if he’s finally gotten on board
with their act or if he’s truly responding to her now.

“It—it’s in m—my pocket,” he stutters, sounding almost breathless.

“You have so many,” she says in her put-on accent, giggling effervescently and then tucking her hand into one of his front jacket pockets.

Jemma tries to look around and see who’s coming down the long hallway but that’s when Fitz decides to tilt his head down to kiss her neck just below her ear, making her gasp.

“Wrong one,” he says flirtatiously, and Jemma shivers, letting her head fall to the side so he has more room to work his mouth over her neck.

“What about this one?” she says, reaching one hand to check his other jacket pocket and burrowing into his curls with the other as he kisses up and down her neck lingeringly twice more.

“Nope,” he says playfully. She feels the tip of his tongue dart out to blaze a tingling trail down her throat to her collarbone and incredible heat instantly floods outward from low in her belly.

Somehow, she manages to drag her head to the side enough so she might be able to see whoever is coming down the hallway. Trying to prepare herself in case it’s Vanchat, who could easily recognize her if he sees her face, she unsnaps the holster under her jacket.

Glancing toward the sound of the footsteps, Jemma sees that it’s not Vanchat at all, but a maid. The older woman is carrying a full bucket and a mop as she makes her slow way down the hall with her burden.

Now obliged to carry on their act until she’s out of range, Jemma leans up and drags the edges of her teeth along Fitz’s jaw, feeling the sharp tingle of his whiskers against her lips. He lets out a sustained gasp that makes her breath catch in her throat.

Still holding the lock-breaking device in one hand, mashed against their bellies, it keeps a frustrating distance between them. He uses his one free hand to bring around her waist, tugging her closer until their chests are pressed closely together while he continues to tease the tender skin just under her jaw. Knowing in the logical part of her mind that she’s getting carried away, that this isn’t the time and things are still uncertain, she still can’t stop herself from allowing her feelings move her. For the first time in her life, she doesn’t care about the consequences and she takes his arm pulling her hard against him as explicit encouragement.

What about this one?” Jemma asks, slipping her hand into the front pocket of his trousers. She doesn’t actually come in contact, but she can feel the heat of his erection millimeters from her fingertips before he catches her wrist.

“No,” he says, voice ragged and breath tremulous, as he gently draws her hand away. “It’s just here.”

The maid’s back is now to them as she continues on her way down the hall and Fitz turns abruptly toward the door, facing so his body effectively hides the tech and what he’s doing should the maid glance back at them.

A moment later the lock clicks open and Fitz pushes inside. Picking up her valise from where she’d haphazardly dropped it, Jemma follows him in—worrying now over what his reaction to her sudden fit of abandon will be. She tries to prepare herself for any sort of response from angry to standoffish.

However, she doesn’t expect it at all when he turns and says, “So, we’re in, now what?”
Simmons’ expression appears uncharacteristically lost as she stands there holding her valise before her almost defensively. Upon entering, she’d smoothly drawn her gun, checking the room for a hidden Vanchat. Finding no one, only his scattered travel gear, now she just holds the pistol limply at her side.

“What should we do now, Simmons?” he asks urgently, his anxiety level causing perspiration to prickle out along the skin of his forehead and upper lip. “What’s the plan?”

At his words, she seems to get her bearings suddenly and, glancing around the room, says, “Look for his computer. Any sort of data storage. Anything at all that might help us find Ward. Don’t make a mess of it or he’ll run as soon as he opens the door. Just put everything back as you found it.”

He nods quickly, mind already working, beginning to calculate where he might hide those things Simmons wants him to find. He makes a point of thoroughly checking all the small places someone might hide a memory stick or small data card—taped under tables or inside drawers, hidden in Vanchat’s shaving kit or in the lining of his luggage. Simmons searches as well; with tools from her valise she carefully opens up the alarm clock and the desk phone then searches the entire mattress by feel. But neither of them find any sign of a computer or any data storage by well over two hours later. They carefully put the room back as they work and, by the time they finish, it looks just the same as when they’d begun—which is, in itself, its own form of unsatisfying when they have nothing to show for their efforts.

Fitz raises his eyebrows and takes in a breath in readiness to ask her, once again, what they should do now.

However, before he can even speak, she sits down on the side of the bed facing the door, and says, “Now we wait.”

He sits at the foot of the bed and, even with not quite a meter of space between them, it’s as if she’s drawing him closer. Like a magnet, he feels pulled toward her physical presence. He can’t get his brain to stop replaying their tryst in the hallway—the feel of her lips working over his neck or her teeth rasping over his stubble and her hands caressing his chest. How it had all provoked him to throw caution to the wind and kiss her tender throat as well. In theory, it was all part of the game after all, wasn’t it? His mind kept on repeat his lips gliding over the delicate skin along her jaw and how he’d nearly directed his trail of kisses to her gorgeous shapely lips. But at the last moment, he’d decided it was too much temptation.

Even now, hours later, he can’t get the fantastic taste of her skin off his mind. He can’t even describe it really, it just is the most incredible, intoxicating thing he’s ever experienced. He understands that it was a necessary ruse—evidently—but it doesn’t stop him from longing for it to be real or for them to be real. He remembers her thigh slipping over his legs, the incredible heat in between radiating against him. As much as these thoughts are driving him mad, the though that somehow this
gorgeous, amazing woman might see in him something worth having is almost the more stimulating idea. He just wishes he knew how to make it happen.

He drops his head into his hands in frustration, suddenly feeling the specs he’d nearly forgotten were on his face.

At nearly the same moment, he hears Simmons sigh from where she sits holding her gun resting on her knee as she watches the door intently.

He tenses when she unexpectedly says, “Fitz—“

But then there’s a noise in the hallway outside the room and they both stiffen, attention focusing on the sound outside and what its source might be. Fortunately, Fitz remembers his specs again, he hits the backscatter button on the side of the frames just as Simmons stands and waves a furious hand at him, urging him toward the en suite bathroom.

He gets up, heading in that direction but, finding the ghostly outline of a man just outside the room’s door, he sees the man is heavily laden with weapons. There’s a gun under his jacket and another in an ankle holster as well as a literal knife in his boot. He pulls the gun from under his jacket and holds it at waist-height before slipping a keycard from his pocket.

Fitz turns and half-mouths, half-hisses at Simmons, “Must be him, he’s very armed.” He feels an awful fear deep in his belly, like a thousand bees buzzing though his insides. He tries to remind himself that Simmons can take care of herself, probably more so if she isn’t fretting about him being an idiot and getting shot.

She nods at his information, waving him toward the toilet more vigorously. Wanting to be certain Simmons isn’t worrying for him so she can focus on her task, he quickens his step into the other room and out of direct harm, or so he hopes. Simmons puts her back to the wall next to the bed where she’ll be hidden from sight of anyone coming through the door.

There’s an electronic beep from the keycard being inserted before the silhouetted figure comes hesitantly inside. Fitz suddenly wishes he’d given Simmons his specs because he’s bloody useless. He doesn’t even have a gun.

The door swings shut behind the glowing figure as Fitz watches him stalk slowly into the room. Moving extremely warily, the man is nearly even with Simmons’ hiding spot. He sees the man getting ready to peer around the corner where she’s hiding with his gun aimed right where Simmons will soon be directly in the line of sight. Anxiety buzzing through him, knowing it may infuriate her, Fitz still can’t stop himself from flipping on the faucet as a distraction.

The man immediately looks in the direction of the sound and Fitz watches in terror as Simmons pops out from around the corner directly in front of the man. She brings the butt of her pistol down on his forearm so sharply that he yelps and drops his gun to the floor where it bounces toward the door of the toilet.

Fitz turns off the backscatter and comes out from the safety of the other room. Somehow, the man doesn’t even look worried or surprised as Simmons keeps her gun leveled intimidatingly at his head. Fitz picks up the man’s fallen nine-millimeter, checks the safety and then tucks it into the back of his trousers.

“Vanchat,” Simmons says, voice full of antipathy.

“Agent Simmons,” he says, tipping his head in greeting as he raises his hands in the air before him
almost casually. “How are you doing? I got your note. I was somehow certain it was one of my
competitors. I’ve just gotten so complacent these days under Hydra’s protection. I almost forgot that
they have enemies as well,” he finishes with an aggravating grin.

“Who’s your friend?” Vanchat asks Simmons, nodding toward Fitz as he stands there watching the
exchange mutely.

Simmons cocks her head toward Vanchat and Fitz walks up to the other man, trying to appear
confident—and larger. He goes down on one knee to remove the smaller caliber pistol and great
bloody combat knife concealed in Vanchat’s elaborately-tooled cowboy boot. The knife is sheathed
in leather but is nearly as long as Fitz’s forearm and he cringes internally at the thought of what the
man uses it for.

As Fitz steps away, tucking the small pistol into his jacket, he has no clue what to do with the huge
knife so he just holds it, wondering where he might fit it away somewhere.

“Vanchat, this can go one of two ways,” Simmons says threateningly. “You can tell me where I can
find Ward right now or I can have a bit of fun with you first.”

“What sort of fun?” he asks, giving her a purposefully lascivious leer.

Fitz grimaces involuntarily but she only smiles. “My favorite kind for men like you.”

She reaches over and pulls the combat knife out of its sheath, leaving Fitz stunned and holding the bit
of leather clutched in his hand. Without removing the gun from his head, Simmons runs the knife
along the front of Vanchat’s top. Fitz winces when she manages to catch a button on the edge of the
blade. The knife is so sharp, the button doesn’t even pop off, just falls nearly straight to the floor after
the fluid cut.

That is when Vanchat looks worried for the first time, his eyes never leaving the blade of his knife as
Simmons strokes over him with it, almost lovingly, only occasionally increasing the pressure until he
gasps in fear. Then she presses the knife into his belly just slightly more than before and Vanchat
whimpers. Fitz sees a bloom of bright-red blood soaking into the other man’s white button-down and
he has to swallow back the bile rising in his throat.

“I–I can’t,” Vanchat says, nearly desperate, eyes locked onto the blade still. “Ward, he’s not exactly
what you’d call forgiving. You can cut me if you want but he’ll bloody well kill me. He’d likely
have Bakshi work on me first. He was Whitehall’s apprentice and you know what he was capable
of.” He shakes his head again. “Go ahead and arrest me. I’m not betraying Ward.”

“I was afraid you might feel that way. I don’t like being underestimated,” Simmons says, her lip
curved in contempt. “You clearly seem to be laboring under the false belief that I won’t kill you.”

He scoffs. “You’re an agent of S.T.R.I.K.E., you can’t just kill me.”

She leans just a tiny bit closer and smiles wolfishly. Her tone is quietly menacing, as she says, “I’m
so far off-book, Vanchat, I think I might’ve lost the plot. There’s no going back for me now.”

His eyes go a bit wider as he seems to reassess her but he quickly shakes his head again and croaks,
“I can’t.”

Fitz isn’t sure what to make of her vicious threats. Cracking Vanchat certainly seems a difficult
enough prospect but Fitz finds himself rather intimidated by her subdued yet ferocious manner. Even
if it’s all an act, it’s convincing enough to be powerfully frightening. Though, he supposes that’s
likely exactly what’s needed.
"I guess we get to do this the very fun way then," Simmons says. "Fitz, my valise?"

He sees it on the floor by the wall and he picks it up, bringing it hurriedly back to her. She hands him the knife which he reinserts into its sheath and then drops into the valise, feeling oddly like he doesn’t want to touch it any more than necessary.

“There are restraints in there. Bind his hands, please,” she says almost conversationally.

Fitz digs through the other items of unclear purpose until he finds the restraints. He slips them over the other man's wrists and pulls them tight. Simmons steps up and pulls them even tighter until Vanchat gasps.

“Perfect,” she says in a very pleased way. Then, she jabs the gun into the center of Vanchat’s back and coldly says, “Walk.”

She guides him to the door and motions for Fitz to open it. He peeks out into the hallway and, seeing no signs of life, he nods back at Simmons in the room.

“Make a noise and you won’t have to worry about Ward at all,” she threatens Vanchat. “We’ll go to the stairwell, Fitz.”

He walks directly beside Vanchat in case he tries to run, keeping him heading toward the stairwell exit. Fortunately, it’s only a couple of doors down. Fitz goes first, with Simmons prodding Vanchat though the door after him.

“Up,” she says simply.

Fitz heads up the stairs, Vanchat follows him and Simmons holds the gun on him from behind. Almost immediately, Fitz begins to sweat even more profusely beneath his layers even though the stairwell is cool. He’s not sure if it’s the exertion or pure nervous agitation at the circumstances, though he hopes it’s not the exercise because he’s somewhat recently taken up running. Dr. Streiten had suggested it as a way to help with his negative feelings and he’d like to think he’s gotten at least somewhat more fit as a result.

“How far?” he calls back to Simmons after three flights.

“To the top, we’re nearly there now,” she says.

Fitz hears the footsteps falter behind him and he turns to see that Vanchat has turned, now apparently attempting to stare Simmons down. Fitz reaches under his jacket and takes the grip of Vanchat’s nine-millimeter in his hand just in case it's needed.

“Don’t test me,” Simmons says crisply, looking so very small to Fitz as she stands several steps lower than Vanchat. She angles the gun lower, toward the other man’s legs. “I’ll take off both your kneecaps and drag you the last flight if I have to. Don’t fuck about.” She flicks her eyes upward, looking exasperated.

Fitz is startled when he utters his own—quite involuntary—swear under his breath. He finds it disturbing that he isn’t certain if he’s more turned on or terrified at the moment.

Darting each of them an expression of hate so sincere that it seems like it should easily be capable of killing, Vanchat turns and begins taking the steps one at a time again.

Fitz has to break the lock on the door to the roof but it goes even faster this time and he’s soon pushing it open to step out into the damp outside world. The sky is still gray and it’s beginning to
drizzle so lightly that it’s more like fog than rain.

Simmons urges Vanchat over to the corner of the building. “Sit,” she orders him as if he were a dog. Vanchat, however, follows the command with a similar obedience. Fitz assumes her little pep talk had done the trick.

Handing him her valise while she covers Vanchat with her gun, Simmons says, “Fitz, can you restrain his ankles now, please?”

He digs through the contents until he finds another restraint which he uses on Vanchat’s ankles. The look of contempt on the man’s face as he does it makes him shudder with revulsion.

Simmons hands him an end of rope from inside her valise. He’d had no clue why it would be in there but he takes it, as she says, “Can you go tie that around something secure?”

Not sure what her game is, but still trusting she knows her business, he takes the end and ties it securely to some piping coming from the water filtration system.

When he returns, Simmons has replaced her gun in its holster and is tying the other end of the rope to a thicker secondary ankle restraint she’d gotten from her bag and placed on Vanchat. Fitz is suddenly worried at what she might do, even though he absolutely wants to trust her. He realizes this may be a brutal ruse to convince Vanchat he has no alternative but to give up all his intel. Or, Simmons might be planning on killing him as she’d already told Fitz that she planned to kill Ward. He doesn’t believe it’s necessary to kill anyone and he certainly doesn’t want to see it happen. More than that, Fitz doesn’t want to believe Simmons is capable of it—at least not for petty reasons like revenge.

“Simmons?” he questions, fear gripping him as she takes Vanchat under the arm. “What—"

“Give me a hand,” she interrupts him after attempting to lift the other man and not quite managing it.

Fitz hesitates, not sure what she intends to do but, knowing now would be the worst time to ask, he moves to Vanchat’s other side and grasps under his arm.

“What’re you doing?” Vanchat asks, looking wildly back and forth between the two of them as they drag him back toward the edge in tandem. When there’s no answer forthcoming, he digs his heels into the gravel of the roof, trying to slow their progress.

Simmons lifts and, feeling helplessly unable to demur, Fitz does as well as they move Vanchat backward toward the corner of the roof and the drop beyond.

“Simmons?” Fitz questions again, hoping for some slight reassurance once they get to the nearly meter high ledge with an eleven story drop on the other side.

She gives him an encouraging smile over the top of their hostage’s head. Although his heart feels as if it’s beating nearly out of his chest, Fitz helps her hike Vanchat up onto the ledge.

“Last chance, Vanchat,” Simmons says almost kindly. “Give me something. Ward’s location or anything that will get me closer to him.” She reaches out and pats his arm, brushing some of the gravel dust from his expensive suit. “It’s really not that difficult.”

Vanchat glances over his shoulder at the drop beyond and, looking at Fitz’s sweaty, nervous face, then over to Simmons, he seems to make a judgement. “No. I can’t—"

But he never finishes as Simmons gives him a great push and he falls screaming over the edge.
Fitz turns away instantly, unable to look, but he quickly hears the snap when the rope draws taut. Lord, he only hopes his knots are tight enough to hold.

“You bitch!” he hears Vanchat scream up at them—or, he supposes, more specifically, at Simmons. He sounds to be in obvious pain and Fitz tries to remind himself that the man is likely directly responsible for dozens if not hundreds of deaths—indirectly, who knew?

“Oh, be nice,” Simmons calls back flippantly, sitting down on the ledge and looking backward over her shoulder at Vanchat. “It’s not as if I didn’t warn you.”

“I’m not telling you a goddamn thing, you crazy bint!” Vanchat calls up before groaning in pain. Fitz attempts not to think of the potential physical damage, instead, he tries repeating an internal mantra of: bad guy, bad guy, bad guy.

Fitz finally works himself up to looking over the edge and sees Vanchat dangling there by his feet against the side of the building. They’re on the corner away from the windows so it’s not likely anyone inside the hotel will see him lolling there upside down. However, even though they’re on an interior corner most protected from the street, someone could walk by any moment below and see what’s going on. Even someone in the hotel across the way might easily see a person dangling from the roof and call the emergency services. They need to leave—and quickly.

Simmons takes the combat knife out of her valise and, separating it from the sheath, she runs a single stroke over the rope which is the only thing keeping Vanchat from falling to his death. Fitz watches as the many small threads that make up the rope are cut and begin to fray.

“Oh, Vanchat,” Simmons says, “you should try not to be so vulgar. It’s just not very polite at all.” She runs the knife over the rope again and Fitz hears some of the fibers tear a bit.

“What are you doing!” Vanchat shouts, bucking his body slightly but only managing to make himself slap into the side of the building again.

“I’m having a bit of fun, just like I told you,” Simmons says, grinning down at him rather maniacally. “You could end my fun right now if you just gave me that little bit of information I’ve asked you for.”

She runs the sharp blade over the rapidly fraying fibers again. This time, the rope makes a very audible ripping sound.

“I think your time is up, Vanchat,” she says, bringing the knife close to the rope again.

Fitz is just about to reach his hand out to stop her when Vanchat shouts, “Alright! I’ll tell you! Stop! Please, I’ll tell you everything I know!”

“Please do,” Simmons says, moving the knife away again, crossing her legs casually as if she’s ready for a nice chat.

“Pull me up!” Vanchat shouts.

“Not until I’m certain I like what you say,” she tells him archly.

“I don’t know where Ward is! I swear, but—I know something else—someone who’s going to meet with him! You’ll get it, just get me up!”

“Who is this illustrious person?” Simmons asks but her voice is once again cool despite her words.
“Ian Quinn! He’s financing Hydra these days! C’mon, please! I’ll tell you the rest if you just let me up now!”

“Where are they meeting?” she asks, the hard glint that scares Fitz so much returning to her eyes.

“I don’t know!” he shouts. “I only know where Quinn is headed and that he’s supposed to meet Ward for an information exchange. I just sold him the information. He’s on his way to Paris right now and then I don’t know! He only said he’ll meet Ward in a few days! That’s all I know! Please! Pull me up!”

“What was the information you sold to Quinn?” she asks, tapping the handle of the knife threateningly against the concrete of the ledge.

“It was some new weapon! A gun, I think! That’s really all I know! Now get me the bloody hell up!” he nearly shrieks.

“One last thing, Vanchat. Who’s your source within S.T.R.I.K.E. for all this classified information you’ve been selling lately?” Simmons asks, sounding almost disinterested though Fitz knows that can’t be the case at all.

Vanchat doesn’t answer for a moment but when Simmons brings the blade close to the rope again, he shouts, “Alright! It’s all done by drops! I don’t know who it is! I get messages telling me where the drops will be! That’s all! I swear to you! Bloody hell, you psychotic woman, let me up!”

“Well, that was far more helpful than I thought you would be. Thank you for your cooperation with S.T.R.I.K.E., Mr. Vanchat,” Simmons says, glancing at Fitz almost mischievously as she says it. He swallows hard and tries not to look as horrified as he feels.

“Come on, Fitz,” she says then, tugging at his sleeve as she turns and picks up her valise, dropping the knife back inside.

“But—what about—“ He points back toward Vanchat.

“They’ll be here for him in a moment. We don’t have time now to hang about trying to haul him up. Don’t be silly,” she says with a small laugh before turning back toward the exit.

He feels an irrational sting from that throwaway comment and little laugh but he chooses to ignore it. “He might fall by the time someone gets here.”

She turns back, her face growing serious again. “Oh, Fitz. Fine. I’ll call emergency services myself as well as Interpol to pick him up on espionage charges. Will that satisfy you?”

He looks at the rope and sees that the fraying has completely stopped. As much as he wants to be stubborn, he can’t let himself be so nonsensical as to allow them to get caught just to save a criminal who is clearly remorseless and responsible for many innocent deaths. However, none of this sits well. It all feels like an unpleasant stone in the pit of his stomach.

“Fine. Let’s go,” he says, heading for the door.

They hurry down one flight of stairs with Simmons calling emergency services on the way. She makes a second call to some “friend” at Interpol and then they exit the stairwell to head for the lift. Having left a message for her “friend”, she wipes down the mobile and tosses it into a rubbish bin outside the lift just before the doors slide shut.

On the ride down, Simmons examines herself in the somewhat-reflective wall inside the lift, though
it’s barely more effective than a bronze-age mirror. Brushing herself off, patting her rain-misted hair back in place and adjusting her clothes, she rapidly has herself back to being completely presentable. When she looks over at him, her eyes grow almost imperceptibly larger. She immediately takes a small packet from her valise and holds it out to him.

“You’re—” She gestures to his face with her other hand, making a circular motion as she grimaces slightly.

“Sweatin’ like a Scot at a charity auction?” he says, in a lame attempt at a joke, hoping to lighten his own dark mood. Somehow it doesn’t make him feel at all better though.

Simmons only quirks her lips but holds the packet higher.

Taking it from her and tearing into it, he continues, “Or, I s’pose, in this case, at the scene of an attempted—“ He looks up sharply, realizing what he’d been about to say.

Simmons only looks back at him calmly, no suggestion of what she might be thinking on her face—no hint of the upset he’d feared.

Rather than foolishly apologize for what he hadn’t said, he pushes his specs up on top of his head and quickly uses the wet wipe she’d given him to mop his face clean.

“You seem prepared for anythin’,” he says, scrubbing his hands as well. “Better?” he asks her, looking at himself in the mirrored surface of the wall and smashing down his damp hair somewhat.

“Good enough,” she says coolly, plucking the leftover rubbish from his fingers and dropping it into her bag. “I excel at preparation.”

He sighs, bringing his specs back down to sit on his face and tries to think how to fix this latest cock-up with Simmons. He hadn’t actually said it but she knows what he would’ve said and he had upset her evidently.

The doors open before he gets any good ideas on what to say and they head out through the lobby.

Hugh is still at the front desk and he waves just slightly as they pass. “Meeting went well?” he calls after Fitz.

“Great!” he calls back, trying to force a smile to his lips. “Thanks very much!”

Without looking, he gives a bit of a wave in return but, having to walk very quickly to keep up with Simmons (despite her shorter legs), he never even manages to look again. However, he’s quite glad for Simmons’ pace, because it’s only a matter of minutes before they’re back at Iris. A rescue tender passes by them with its siren on and flashing lights whirling as he gets in the car.

He realizes too late that Simmons is still outside, back to the door, pulling another mobile phone from her bag and making a call. He can’t hear what she’s saying and, though they’re not on smooth terms at the moment thanks in part to his idiot gob, he finds he still trusts her completely—at least where his safety is concerned. Hanging up from her call, she walks to a nearby bin and throws the phone away. Coming back to the Aston Martin, she throws her valise into the back seat and gets in. Then, bringing Iris to life, she pulls out of the parking space, making a very illegal turn to head the opposite direction away from the fuss at the hotel.

Tense, as he watches more service vehicles pass, Fitz finally sighs with relief once they turn onto the A24. He just allows himself to relax and enjoy the absence of fearing-he-might-die as it washes through him.
“Where’re we—”

“Newhaven,” she answers before he can even get the question out.


“Because that’s where we take the ferry to Dieppe,” she answers smoothly again. “Also, near where I happen to know a forger who can fix up one of my passports to suit you.”

Fitz scoffs. “Probably does rubbish work as well.” He chuckles slightly. “I can’t believe this. You’re goin’ to have to hire a forger to fix a passport for me when I could do that sort of work in my sleep if I only had S.T.R.I.K.E. resources.”

“Well, you don’t.” Her voice comes out so sharply that he actually flinches, blinking back at her spasmodically.

“Simmons,” he begins, knowing she must still be upset that he’s not exactly thrilled with her methods when they nearly result in a death. “I’m—“

“Stop,” she says, tone unwavering and not exactly unthreatening.

“Please, I just want to—“

She looks over at him and the grim set of her mouth and the hard look in her eyes is enough to make him go quiet again. He can only sigh while watching her uneasily out of the side of his eye.

By an hour later, the silence between them has become a botheration plucking incessantly on the string of his last nerve and he’s about to try speaking to her again when she pulls into the car park for a dodgy-looking block of flats.

“Wait here,” she tells him, not even pausing for his response before getting out and heading off without him.

She opens the boot and, though he wants to get out and say something, he’s too disturbed by her behavior to actually do so. Instead, he waits.

An hour and a half later, he sees Simmons heading back out to the car. By now, it’s starting to get dark and his mood isn’t much better. She slides smoothly into the car and lays a British passport on his thigh. He just catches it before it slips to the floor. He opens it up and and a driving license falls out. He sees immediately that the workmanship isn’t actually as awful as he’d feared. He checks the name, scoffing when he sees that it reads: James Macbeth.

“Very funny, Simmons. Really, that’s just hilarious,” he says, glancing over to gauge her feelings on the subject.

“Seemed appropriate,” she says, not laughing or even smirking, instead she appears to be fuming just below the surface. “It was either that or perhaps the name of a venerated saint, don’t you think?”

“Are you seriously mad at me?” he asks, surprised at his own gust of anger. “Just because I’m not overjoyed at the idea of killin’ anyone?”

“I did not, nor was I planning on killing him,” she says, letting her own irritation surge to the surface.

“How would I know?” he asks, “You certainly seem to have your mind set on killin’ Ward! You told me that yourself!”
“Ward is different,” she says coldly, looking away out the window. But suddenly flush with another burst of indignation, she looks back to meet his eyes, and adds, “But it’s best you leave behind your idealism if you want to help get yourself out of this mess we’re in. There’s no honor among criminals and they certainly won’t hesitate to kill you or I.”

“But,” he begins, suddenly near-desperate to get his point across to her, “we can be better than them. We don’t have to go down to their level. That’s why we’re the good guys.”

A startling laughter bursts from her suddenly; it bubbles out of her in—what sounds like—genuine amusement. “Your naïveté is really quite adorable. I’m not sure you’re cut out for what’s coming, Fitz. Perhaps we need to think about another way to keep you hidden while I go it alone the rest of the way.”

Fitz feels his chest tighten in fear. Somehow, he knows that if he agrees to that, Simmons will die. He doesn’t question his instinct because, without memories to back up much of what he feels, he’s learned in the last year to trust his gut and worry about logic later.

“No,” he says, in the most forceful, unyielding tone he can muster as he shakes his head slowly. “I wouldn’t let you.”

For a moment, she looks like she might laugh again but it dies in her throat and dissolves from her features before it even begins. As she looks over at him, her face seems to suddenly slacken, going from the hard, angry tension she’s worn ever since the lift to merely relaxing into exhaustion.

“Fine,” she says softly, then lets out a long deliberate sigh.

Before he has a chance to say more, she turns the key and Iris growls to life. He has no idea what to say to her anyway now that his own momentary rush of outrage has petered out. It was gone almost the instant she’d relented. He’s not sure where all this leaves them now.

He’s certain that he’s somehow hurt her but he has absolutely no idea how to fix it.

Chapter End Notes

Just thought I’d let you know that I’m like ninety-eight percent Scottish and there might actually be something to the genetics of frugality. Y’know, in case you were wondering. So, my "Scots are cheap" gag is very much self-directed.

Also, yes, he says the line from "Many Heads, One Tale" because I love the idea of different versions of them saying the same thing in alternate universes. I mean, they are still supposed to be themselves after all.
Angst, anyone?

The chapter title is in reference to the goddess Iris, btw. She is the goddess of the sea, sky and underworld—very much metaphorically what this chapter is about. Love from the heavens, death in the underworld—well, and the sea, which is literally what happens in the chapter.

In a mute cease-fire from their earlier argument, Jemma drives them to the harbor in Newhaven. During the trip, Fitz seems to waver between two points: one moment sullen, slapping his new passport against his thigh irritatedly, and the next has him opening and closing his mouth convulsively, as if he’s trying to work out how to say something to her. He never quite figures it out, evidently, and she isn’t sure what to say herself, not after her spiteful bit of frippery with the name in his passport.

Once they arrive, she takes them along the edge of the port searching for any sign of trouble or potential Hydra skullduggery. Ultimately, she decides things appear the right combination of lively enough and yet too dull to be in any way threatening. She’d believed this to be the least likely way Ward would suspect her of leaving the country but somehow she’s barely able to feel gratified at being right.

Finally pulling into the car park, she urges Fitz to wait in the car again, much to his continued annoyance, as she heads to the port office to buy their ferry tickets. As she stands before the bored ticket agent, she debates internally on the arrangements. The boat trip goes overnight and, though she knows it’s certainly safer for them to stay together, she finds she doesn’t want to face being in the same room with him tonight, the weight of his judgement is too much for her, and she purchases two small cabins.

The last thing she wants to feel is his continued disappointment in her after she’d only done her job. His clear disapproval seemed to be coming off of him in palpable waves at the hotel. Though she is absolutely convinced she was only doing what needed to be done, his condemnation is still hurtful. Fitz’s esteem had once been the only that mattered to her beyond that of her own father.

But getting the information from Vanchat had to be her primary focus in that moment, absolutely her only concern, and not whether Fitz lost respect for her in some way. Because without that intel they would’ve been just as exposed as before they’d kidnapped Daisy—possibly more so, if Jemma ended up being wrong about her friend. She couldn’t let Fitz’s childlike personal ideals and feelings affect her actions—not with so much at stake. It isn’t as if Jemma had truly intended for Vanchat fall—at least not with Fitz there watching her.

It’s strange how similar Fitz is to his former self and yet different in subtle ways. Though he’s always seemed very open and sincere to her, now he is so much more innocent—seemingly unaware of how the world works and how he fits into it. It’s an emotional regression perhaps, after losing so much knowledge to his memory loss. All gone were many of the acquired coping skills and painful admonitions, so many valuable lessons learned through the events of his life’s experience. It all brought him back to a simpler morality, no doubt, and a more unsophisticated way of thinking. In all
probability, his feelings were likely less clouded as well, more childish and transparent.

Fitz is back to watching her in an expectant silence once she returns to the car with their tickets, but she still doesn’t know what to say to him. How to prepare him for the ugliness of humanity that he seems not to acknowledge or potentially understand any longer. She thinks the old Fitz would’ve understood the necessity of her approach. Then again, she remembers how he had sometimes grimaced at the explanations she gave for her technological needs. She’d thought him squeamish about the physical unpleasantness but, in hindsight, she wonders if perhaps he’d hidden his moral qualms from her as well.

She pulls Iris down the ramp and onto the ferry with Fitz staring vacantly out the window surveying their progress.

She’s upset with herself far more than she ever could be with Fitz. She never should’ve allowed him to come along with her to the hotel in the first place. She hadn’t listened to her instincts; which is strange because she always listens to her instincts—had learned to do so when she first began in the Paragon program—but something about Fitz throws her off. She should’ve easily guessed from their conversation that evening in Bristol how he would balk at her proven methods.

Jemma almost wonders if she’d done it on purpose—let Fitz see her for who she really is—the better to ensure that things can never go too far between them. Perhaps even drive a permanent wedge between them. She’s stunned when her throat tightens at the dismaying thought but she swallows past it. Even if that shouldn’t come to pass, certainly it would lessen temptation, which is well enough. Such entanglements as she’d toyed with may potentially make things more dangerous now that their association seems apt to last longer than the three or four days she’d planned on.

As unlikely as it seems to have been, she still isn’t sure if she’d really seen some flash of that familiar look of adoration in his eyes earlier. However, she knows she shouldn’t risk provoking his attachment to her again regardless. Likely, they really shouldn’t venture into any amorous encounters. Not that he seems interested in any case—despite her prior knowledge and his amusing protestations to establish his status as a confirmed heterosexual.

As Iris comes to a stop at the far end of the car deck, she shuts off the engine and allows herself a nervous glance over at Fitz. The look in his eyes tells her he still wants to tell her something but she finds herself quite anxious over what it might be.

“We should get our things,” she tells him quickly.

He opens his mouth, closes it, opens it again and then his eyes fall defeatedly to where he’s wringing his fingers together. “Yeah. Okay,” he agrees.

Once they get their luggage, she leads them to their side-by-side rooms for the night.

“Here,” she says, giving him his cabin assignment. And more sternly continues, “Don’t open this door for anyone but me. I’ll get you anything you need. If you’d like something or if there’s any trouble, knock on the wall. Once, loudly, for an emergency and three more quietly for anything else. Understood?”

He opens his mouth to respond but, again, closes it, and merely nods. Then he steps into his room and closes the door without uttering a word. Hearing the lock click, she heads to her own room next door, huffing a relieved sigh tinged with self-reproach.

Fitz looks at the two single bunks in his cabin and instantly realizes that Simmons must want to be
away from him if she can’t even bear to sleep in the same room suddenly. They’ve slept in the same bed together and, though he can understand her not wanting to repeat that experience again, now being unwilling to even be in a room alone with him somehow cuts deeper than he would’ve thought.

He's been trying to think how to apologize further for his thoughtlessness. He has no wish to alienate her or hurt her in any way. Still, he can't exactly let everything go unsaid when he isn't certain if her actions are motivated by something more than only the desire to see justice done. That leaves him unsure how to express his concerns yet upset at thinking that he's inadvertently misjudged her and bruised her feelings in some awful, unforgivable way.

He explores his little cabin a bit—it has a closet to store away his things, a desk near the door and a small shower/toilet cubicle that nearly makes him claustrophobic. Nevertheless, feeling quite rank after their earlier exertions—though admittedly, his emotional acrobatics are the far more likely culprit for his odious state—he decides he’d best have a good wash and perhaps it might soothe his upset as well.

As he cleanses the day from himself, he muses that the small shower stall leaves much to be desired. However, if this little Hydra-prompted jaunt has taught him anything so far, it’s to be grateful for small favors—at least the bloody minuscule thing is clean enough and not likely to make him back away in horror. He’d feared that grotty hotel room from the first night might give him a disease or perhaps lice. He seems to’ve gotten out of it unscathed—at least physically. He’s not sure if he’ll ever mentally recover from seeing Simmons in her lingerie however.

Now everything is bollixed up between them again. (Is it even “again” or just “as usual” at this stage?) He wonders how they’ll even work together after this one though. Forget him figuring out how to get through her over-rationalizing so he might somehow begin to work his way into her heart. The more he thinks on it, the more it seems a hopeless cause. Simmons’ heart—he fears—she may have locked away where he’ll never be able to touch it. Not that it matters, they’re too different and clearly wrong for each other. He’s happiest in the lab, not out here knocking about baddies—not that he even could—and evidently just watching her do such things is enough to turn him green and set his moral compass to spinning wildly.

Before he met her, he’d been longing for a quiet life to spend with someone he could love and, although he has to admit to being a bit excited by stretching himself in ways he’d only ever dreamed of, he realizes that this still isn’t a good life for him—well, certainly not all the time, in any case. Simmons seems able to close off her feelings in a way he can’t even fathom, much less, duplicate. And even though she’d been a biochemist, she seems to prefer to be in the center of the action, swaying the outcomes and fighting for her cause. As incredibly hot as he finds that, he still can’t see how he might fit into her life or why she would even want to make room for him there in the first place. He’s nothing, really—he’s just a plain, admittedly genius but amnesiac engineer, with a hot temper and no social skills to speak of, especially when it comes to women—and, still, just an asset to her, no doubt.

As he’s rinsing out his hair, he hears a knock on the door of his cabin. Guessing it’s Simmons, he’s torn between leaping out or finishing what he’s doing. Ultimately, he tries to get all the soap out of his hair before hops out, at least. Then he hears another, more urgent, series of knocks.

Attempting to towel off quickly, he curses under his breath and calls, “Just a second!”

He pulls a vest top over his head and it sticks to his still-wet skin uncomfortably. Groaning at the idea of trying to pull on his pajama bottoms over even wetter skin, he grits his teeth and wraps the towel around his waist instead.
He just remembers to look through the viewer before he opens the door to find a very worried-looking Simmons on the other side, just raising her hand to knock again.

Pulling the door open, leaving her standing with fist poised, he says, “What’s the matter?”

“Oh,” she says, dropping her arm quickly as she takes in his state of undress and still dripping wet hair. “I’m sorry. Just—you didn’t answer right away.”

“Havin’ a wash,” he says, cocking a thumb behind him unnecessarily at the open door of the tiny bath as it breathes its humidity out into the room. “What, ehm—” But he stops when she holds out her other hand toward him with what he suddenly recognizes is a plate of food. “That’s brilliant!” he says, suddenly forgetting about their spat and grinning as he takes it from her. He steps back and sets it on the small desk just to the side before turning back to her again. “Thanks for that, Simmons.”

She shakes her head, looking to the floor and waving off his gratitude. “You’ve got to eat something.”

“Did you—” He pauses, wondering if it’s really even worth the risk of rejection now. But despite his earlier assertions to himself of how they can’t be meant for more than a superficial connection, he feels that strange gravitational draw toward her again, pulling him inexplicably further into her orbit. “Would, ehm, you want to come in for a bit?”

Her eyes flick down to his towel-clad lower half and he mimics her without even meaning to. Suddenly looking down at himself nervously, he clutches at the hastily tucked ends of his towel, and then reaches up to run an anxious hand over the back of his head, only to find his hair still sodden and dripping down his back. “Ehm, I mean, in a bit—just give me a moment to finish up. If you want to, that is.” He tries not to look very hopeful despite the swell of optimism rising up in his chest at the fact she hadn’t yet refused.

He thinks at first she’ll say no when her gaze stays on the floor for a few seconds too long, but then her eyes gravitate back up to his and she says, “Alright. I—well, I have something to speak to you about anyway.”

His belly goes suddenly taut, sucking an over-loud gasp of air into his chest, as he’s gripped with anxiety by her words. He can’t help but wonder and fear what new awful thing they’ll soon be in the midst of.

“Is–is everythin’ okay?” he can’t help asking.

Immediately, she smiles reassuringly and says, “It’s about what to do next.” Somehow the idea is less than comforting.

Giving him a serious, significant look to indicate they shouldn’t speak about it just now, she emphasizes by glancing down the hallway where a couple is walking toward them arm-in-arm and chatting together quite happily. Fitz notices they look a similar age to he and Simmons and they seem rather obviously in love. He swallows past the sudden lump in his throat.

“Right,” he agrees, looking back at Simmons and trying to ignore the sentimental tug in his chest over the sight. “Give me five, then?”

She nods but he waits until she turns toward her room before he closes and locks the door again.

By the time she gets back, he’s done his best with his damp hair, cleaned his teeth vigorously and thrown on jeans and a jumper. After checking the viewer, he opens the door at her second knock and finds her holding a newspaper as well as her own plate of food.
She’s also changed into more casual clothes, a pair of jogging bottoms, exercise top and has pulled her hair into a loose ponytail. For some reason, he finds her even more attractive this way. It’s as if they’re good friends (or even more than that) readying to have a meal with one another rather than spies who need to figure out their next dangerous move. He finds the idea of them having a casual night in together infinitely appealing but he tries not to let his mind wander in such directions—not just now.

“Thought we could eat together, at any rate,” she says almost shyly, lifting her plate a bit higher and smiling.

“Why not?” he agrees, opening the door wide to allow her inside.

They end up sitting on opposite bunks, but they’re so close their knees nearly touch in the small cabin. Simmons sets the newspaper beside her and Fitz can’t help but look at it nervously as they both begin to tuck into their food.

After a few bites, no longer able to take the tension, he points to the paper and asks, “What’s that about, then?”

Her lips press into a very thin smile that reminds him that they’re still not on quite the best of terms before she picks up the paper and folds it open to a particular page.

“This is Ian Quinn,” she says, pointing to a large photo of a man leaving, what looks to be, a hotel and getting into a black limousine.

Fitz sets down his plate beside him and takes the paper from her when she holds it out to him. Instantly, he realizes the writing is in French and he glances up at her, giving her an apologetic smile, he says, “I’m afraid I can’t read it.”

“Doesn’t matter,” she says, after swallowing down a bite of her food. Pointing to the date at the top of the page, she eagerly adds, “That’s from today. So he’s very likely still in Paris, clearly staying at the George Cinq and we can follow him wherever he’s heading to meet Ward.”

“What if he’s left Paris by the time we get there?” Fitz asks, hating to burst her sudden bubble of enthusiasm.

She shrugs. “We work the hotel staff most likely. Quinn may have left a way to get in touch for whomever he was meeting with in Paris. Let’s cross those bridges when we come to them, however. No use planning for all eventualities, not until they happen.”

Fitz nods, taking a bite of his food and chewing thoughtfully. “You realize, that’s the opposite of how I’m used to doin’ things in the lab, of course.”

She smiles, dark eyes drifting up to his from under her lashes. “True,” she concedes. “You’d want to consider all possibilities, insomuch as you could, before beginning an experiment. This is the real world, however, Fitz. There are simply too many variables.”

“Him already bein’ gone seems a pretty likely one though,” he says with a slight, apologetic shrug.

“Agreed,” she replies. “Also, the most easily dealt with but I need the specifics to formulate a plan.”

“Seems to me, you do well flyin’ by the seat of your pants, in any case,” he says, feeling a touch of heat come to his ears at the mental image of said seat.

“You’re quite a natural at it, so it would seem,” she says without looking up from her plate. “It took
years for me to be so convincing.”

“Really?” he questions dubiously, his chest swelling at her compliment, nevertheless. “Y’know, you’re quite fantastic at it now. I was actually very much in awe. I think it’d take quite a lot more gettin’ used to for me, however.”

“I was very impressed,” she says, finally looking up to meet his gaze again, the sincerity in her beautiful brown eyes hitting him square in the chest. Setting her plate aside, she draws in a sudden little breath before she says, “I’m very sorry, Fitz.”

“What?” he says, not sure what she’s apologizing for.

“You couldn’t have known what I was planning—how I intended to intimidate Vanchat. It’s beyond your experience,” she says. “It wasn’t fair of me to get upset with you when I didn’t give you enough information. I’ll try not to let it happen again. That said, things sometimes move quite quickly, doing what we do.”

Feeling guilty for his own behavior toward her, he looks to the floor and, shaking his head, he says, “I’m sorry as well. I should’ve trusted you more. I’ll try not to hesitate in future.” He glances up and sees her smiling wanly. Dropping his eyes again, he says, “I do trust you, you know that, don’t you?”

“Fitz—” she says softly, then pausing until he lifts his eyes to hers again. “We do need to trust each other in order to work together—for this partnership that we’ve begun to proceed, even succeed. Maybe I’ve left you with the idea that I’m careless with violence or merciless in some way but, I assure you, I’m no proponent of creating havoc for its own sake. I only want to keep people safe—in this case, you. Killing Vanchat would’ve done nothing to accomplish that goal over merely having him arrested.” She darts her eyes away dismayingly, as she adds, “Ward, however, is another story.”

“I don’t think that I would call anythin’ you do ‘careless’. Quite the opposite, really,” he says honestly. “And ‘merciless’ isn’t anythin’ I’d ever use to describe you but I still don’t quite understand why you think killin’ Ward will keep me safe.”

“If Ward were simply arrested, he’d be back out again and straight into his seat of power before the day was done with no way to find him again. Were he, er, crossed out, the power vacuum it leaves may give you enough time to recreate your formula and distribute it,” she explains, her tone somewhat worryingly impassioned. “If you’re not able to recreate it, maybe the entire concept will seem no more than a pipe dream to Hydra’s new leader. I think Ward’s desire to find you is predicated at least as much on his former personal relationship with you as it is on his belief in your ability to recall the information he wants. I’m not certain he hasn’t gone slightly mental, to be perfectly honest. In any case, it will also give Director Weaver the time she needs to clear S.T.R.I.K.E. of any and all double agents. You’ll be in a much safer position overall if Ward is, well, eliminated.”

He nods, finding no fault with her logic but still feeling the idea of her killing anyone at all, even Ward, sticking in his throat uncomfortably.

“And you’ll be free of all this humdrum babysittin’ of endangered assets,” he jokes, trying to lighten the mood.

He glances up to gauge her response but she doesn’t look up from her plate. Keeping her expression very much unreadable and her tone professional, she says, “It’s my job. I’ll continue to do what I must to keep you safe for as long as it’s needed.”
“Does it ever bother you? Killin’?” he asks impulsively, regretting it instantly when she looks up sharply.

Clearly, she hadn’t anticipated the question but her eyes soften slightly and, with a grim set to her mouth, she says, “Of course it does.” She seems about to say more but then just shakes her head and puts her plate aside.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t’ve asked,” he says, wishing he could give himself a good smack upside the head for his thoughtlessness.

“I think if it didn’t at least give you pause each time, you’d be just as much a monster as Ward,” she says softly, almost breathily. “But I have to consider the potential damage each villain could cause—to the world, to the people I’m protecting, people—” her eyes flick upward, meeting his only briefly, “that I care about.”

Inexplicably, he wants to go to her then. The urge to touch her is almost overwhelming as she suddenly appears so vulnerable and exposed. He wants to reassure her that he understands, that he’ll support her, no matter the situation—but without warning, she stands.

“I’ll leave you to it now,” she says, collecting her plate. “You should really try to get some rest. I don’t know how things will go from here and you should always sleep when you have the opportunity.” She walks to the door, glancing back once as she goes through, adding, “Goodnight, Fitz.”

He gets up and bolts the door behind her, then presses his back to the cold metal, trying not to feel the overwhelming sadness that grips him in that moment. Just when he thinks she might feel something, invariably, she becomes distant again. He wonders if any of it is real or just in his head. If the growing affection he senses in her is truly happening or his own wishful thinking. He believes in his heart that it is real.

He can’t help but wonder if it's only fear of trusting or being close to anyone that prevents her from letting herself go, or if she worries about letting her emotions have too much sway when things are so dangerous just now. Perhaps, because of this life she’s chosen, she always disregards her own feelings? It would make sense, after all. How could you do the things she does with such detachment unless the apathy is, at least in part, real? It would have to be cultivated over time to prevent the inevitable regret one would feel over ending so many lives that would now never have a chance at redemption. Then, add to that, to suppress your natural instinct to avoid all these situations that might result in your own death.

He's astonished to suddenly find how absolutely terrified he is of losing her now in all this mayhem with the potential for death seeming so horrifyingly imminent. He’s overcome with the idea that he can feel so much for her after such a short time. It hasn’t even been a week, can he really be falling in love with her so quickly?

As if in answer to his question, he realizes that he still feels that strange pull toward her, the enormity of it irresistible, even a room away. It’s as if they’ve somehow become joined, entwined, bonded in some way—their atoms blending until they could eventually become inseparable. It’s as if he can feel her now, a dull ache in his heart that swells to a painful twinge when they’re separated.

He knows there’s nothing scientific at all about how he feels but, somehow, it doesn’t make him waver in his belief that all of it is real. His emotions are something he can’t help but listen to, not when it seems sometimes like they’re all he has to go on now that his memories are gone. Memories seem ephemeral to him since his injury, while emotions, the solid foundation underneath.
Jemma presses her back to the inside of the door to her cabin, suppressing the urge to go back and tell Fitz everything. How she’s the one responsible for his injury, his incredible brain becoming damaged. That they’d known one another, been great friends and, once, almost lovers. The only thing stopping her is knowing that she has to keep him safe and she doesn’t honestly know what he would do if he knew all that she has to tell. Keeping him safe has to come far above the priorities of her heart because anything else is just selfish.

As she sat there, watching while he tried to empathize and understand her motives and emotions, rather than feeling scrutinized, she’d felt cared for and even—as silly as it seems—loved. Instead of becoming upset or offended, she’d felt overwhelmed by her love for him. She’d somehow forgotten his great capacity for empathy and his incredible selflessness. She remembers how he'd held her through the long night when her father had died. She’d been so grateful yet she’d been too young to understand just how rare and wonderful he was then.

She absolutely understands now and she knows that love is what she feels for him. Even without his memories, she knows that he's the same. Stripped down to essentials perhaps but still the Fitz she’s always cared about, and loves. Really, she’s known from the moment he kissed her a year and a half ago that she loved him—she just never wanted to acknowledge it when it seemed so hopelessly impossible. She never wanted to use that precious word, not even in her own head, for fear it would make it that much more difficult to ignore. Not that it matters, particularly now, because Fitz doesn’t love her any longer—Ward had seen to that. In fact, she understands that Fitz may now see her as only a killer—an assassin—and one who harbors no regrets. The truth is, he’s right after a fashion, she would never have regrets about killing Ward, not with all he’d done.

All her regrets have everything to do with Fitz and nothing to do with any of the evil she’s eliminated from the world. She suffers for the good Fitz might’ve done with his formula and other things he might’ve created, and—selfishly—for the good he might’ve done her, had they been together. She wonders if there was ever a way she might've made him happy too. She'd never let herself consider the possibility long enough to think of it. Still, regrets do nothing but cause one to stagnate, mired down in sorrow over what will never be. Moving forward is the only way for her—it always has been.

Jemma knows she should look at Fitz as the road behind her and not what’s ahead. She understands, too, that she shouldn’t want Fitz to care for her again and, intellectually, she doesn’t—it’s completely for the best. She knows this absolutely. However, in her heart, she still longs for it—for him. It grows worse by the day, along with the pain of knowing it can never happen, especially when he has no interest for her in that way, despite his kindness toward her.

Knowing what a silly daydream it is, still, she wishes she could find the crook in her life's road that would take her to him again. Back to a time when he was whole and able to remember her as he used to, then they could leave behind all these hazardous pitfalls—monsters and lies. They might run away together, get lost in the world—fly at the speed of the west wind and anyone who dared hinder them would find the sleep of death their only reward.
In the morning, Jemma wakes before first light to the feeling of the ferry’s engines grinding to a halt as they come into port in Dieppe. She gets dressed and repacks quickly before knocking on Fitz’s door.

It takes several tries but at least this time she realizes it’s just his usual difficulty waking that’s causing the delay—unlike the previous day, when she’d caught him getting out of the shower. She tries unsuccessfully to push those images from her mind. The way his damp vest top had molded itself to the underlying shape of his chest, how little beads of water had dripped from his curly hair to run over the smooth skin of his neck and, especially, how his sodden towel had clung to his hips while she couldn’t help but imagine his nakedness beneath.

She nearly starts when Fitz blearily peeks out at her through a narrow gap in the doorway. “Time to go?” he asks, stifling a yawn.

“As quickly as you can manage. I’ll be back for you in ten minutes,” she says, turning and heading down the hallway, dragging her trolley case behind her.

Putting her bag in the car, she stops for tea and pastries on the way back. Fitz pulls the door open at her first knock, dragging his own case out behind him as they head for the car.

“Thanks, Simmons,” he says between chewing as he finishes a pastry while they walk.

Fortunately, they’d been one of the first cars to board, giving them the ability to leave as soon as the ferry anchors and the ramp is lowered for debarkation.

When they pull up to the booth at the exit gate, Jemma holds out her false Interpol travel passport to the customs officer. He appears slightly taken aback at the unusual document and he glances from the photo on the booklet to Jemma’s face several times. However, seemingly satisfied with her, he then looks pointedly at Fitz.

“Je suis pressé, s’il vous plaît,” Jemma tells him, raising her brows expectantly.

“Et lui?” he asks, flicking a finger at Fitz.

“Give me your passport, please, James,” she says, only slightly pointedly, and he pulls it smoothly from the inside pocket of his jacket.
“Qui est-il alors?” he asks, nodding at Fitz.

“Spectateur,” she says, with a slight shrug. “Il ne aime pas à voler.”

The customs man shrugs back and hands her the documents before opening the gate so they can leave the port.

“Bienvenue à Dieppe, mademoiselle,” he says, with a nod.

“Merci beaucoup. Bonne journée!” she says, with a slight wave.

Once they get a block or so away, Fitz looks around at the receding booth and says, “That’s very nerve-rackin’ when you can’t understand what’s bein’ said.”

Jemma can’t quite stifle the little laugh that works its way from her throat. “Er, sorry,” she says, resisting the urge to laugh at the slight indignant crimp that forms between Fitz’s brows in response. “But, well, it just couldn’t be helped.”


“Well, now it’s just a couple of hours to Paris,” she says, hoping to ease some of his worry for a bit anyway.

“Right. Okay,” he agrees, still looking more than a bit nervous. “Then the hotel, I s’pose. See if Quinn is still there.”

“Yes,” she says, glancing over at his hands and how he’s twisting his long fingers together restlessly. “And, if not, find out where he’s heading.”

Jemma doesn’t want him to fret for two straight hours and, for distraction, she asks, “What is it you recall, Fitz? From your life before? Any memories—or, I suppose, flashes, even, from your time at S.T.R.I.K.E.? Perhaps just your friends or,” she shrugs lightly, “or, I suppose, girl friends.” He glances at her in surprise and she quickly amends, “If you’re comfortable, that is!” He clears his throat, somehow looking even more anxious and, immediately, she backpedals, saying, “I’m sorry. We—well, we don’t have to speak about that. Forget I asked that.” Shaking her head slightly, she scoffs at herself internally. Immediately, she begins chastising herself and wondering what in the cosmos might’ve made such a question seem a good idea.

“Ehm, no. No, I mean, there’s not much to tell, really,” he says, his surprise turning into something else she can’t quite identify. “I don’t remember much, actually. I have a few photos in a box. A few girls—er, ehm, women, I mean. I only know where one of them is now. I’ve not spoken to her though. I—ehm, I dunno, I could just tell, I guess, that it wasn’t all that serious.” He shrugs, glancing out the window. When he looks back, he says, “Tha’s all. I don’t remember much about workin’ at S.T.R.I.K.E. at all. A few fragments here and there have come to me but only the work. No people. I think I was very much alone.” He grimaces at his own words and his face suddenly colors in embarrassment. “That sounded very self-pityin’ but tha’s not what I meant, exactly. I only wanted to say that I don’t think I really tried to connect with people for some reason. I’m not certain it wasn’t only because I was so wrapped up in the work, but I’m certain I kept a bit of a distance in any case. It’s not really a memory though, so much as just a feelin’.”

“Perhaps someone hurt you?” Jemma says, prodding her own wound viciously. “A friend, maybe?”

“Givin’ me such extensive trust issues as to never want to be close to anyone again?” he says,
grinning at the apparent absurdity. “Not likely.”

Jemma tries to shove down her feelings of guilt even though they seem as if they’re clambering their way into her throat. “I’m sorry that you felt that way, that you had to keep your distance from everyone.”

“Not your fault,” he says forcefully. “It’s certain I did it myself, whatever the reason. I remember when I was in second grade, my best friend—Kyle Mcalister—he moved away and I never did make another friend like that. Not by the time I was twelve anyway, when my memory kicks off. My mum doesn’t remember anyone else either.” He grins suddenly as if remembering something. “Well, that’s not entirely true—she said somethin’ about a girl that I mentioned a few times at the Academy.” Jemma stiffens involuntarily, her knuckles going white on the steering wheel. “She couldn’t recall her name but Mum said I spoke about her several times in the first few months—smart, kind, quite pretty—and then, I guess, she must’ve left. I don’t know. Mum said I stopped speaking about her altogether. And, apparently, I don’t have any friends to ask about her from that time. Files are all redacted as well. Dunno why. Anyway, I s’pose I must’ve had a bit of an infatuation.” He glances over uneasily but then smiles broadly. “Think she’s the one who broke my heart? Made me hate relationships?”

Jemma takes a very deep breath and smiles. “I suppose we’ll never know.”

She can’t bring herself to say anything more after that, for fear she’ll break into unruly tears. So, instead, she keeps her eyes on the road, nodding or smiling at the right places, as Fitz ends up telling her more about superconductors and the mathematics of their properties than she would ever reasonably need to know.

When they finally pull up a few blocks from the George V Hotel, Jemma says, “Perhaps now might be a good time for your hacking skills?”

He raises his brows in surprise.

“There’s a cafe over there with wifi,” she points out less than half a block away. She reaches into her handbag and pulls out a few folded bills, handing them to Fitz. “See if you can get into the hotel’s system and find out if Quinn is still there. I’ll watch you from here.”

“Oh, ehm, you could come as well…” he suggests, smiling very innocently.

Hating to deny him, still, she shakes her head. “It’s suspicious. You, intently set on your laptop when someone’s there with you. It’ll look wrong. We can’t alert Quinn or his guards to our presence.”

“His guards?” Fitz questions, sounding rather shocked.

Looking over at him, again tearing her eyes from the hotel entrance across the street, she says, “Fitz, he’s just going to lead us to Ward. His guards don’t matter. And if it becomes an issue, I’ll deal with it.”

He nods vigorously, looking somewhat intimidated, yet his cheeks are flushed and his pupils large, reducing his pale blue irises to thin rims of brilliant color surrounding a sea of black. It occurs to her suddenly that he finds her fierceness arousing and her skin prickles at the thought while she suppresses a shiver.

“Alright,” he agrees easily. “I’ll, ehm, just go see what I can manage, then.”

She tosses him the keys from the ignition and he gets out, going around to open the boot to take out his laptop computer case. He hands her back the keys, giving her one last enticing smile as she takes
them from his hand and then he heads for the cafe.

Shaking off her distracting flutterings, trying not to stare at Fitz’s receding back as he walks, instead, she forces herself to keep a vigilant watch on the entrance to the hotel. It’s still early yet and she hopes Quinn will come out soon and alert them to his continued presence in Paris.

Not quite an hour later, Fitz saunters back to the car with his laptop. Dropping into the passenger seat, he grins smugly and says, “Got it! Not even an hour and their security was quite…”

His voice dies away because, just then, Jemma looks sharply over to where Quinn is coming out of the hotel. He gets into a black limousine that’d pulled up several minutes ago. She notes that, along with Quinn, are a driver and two burly guards.

“That’s him, there;” she says, anticipation making her heart thrum in readiness. “We can follow him now."

When she glances back, Fitz’s expression is all wilted disappointment. “So much for that, I s’pose,” he says dispiritedly, rapping on his laptop case with his knuckles.

Smiling reassuringly, she pats his knee, feeling him jolt at the contact. Shaking off his startle at her touch, she forces another smile and says, “You’ve done really well, Fitz. Don’t let this bit of good luck affect your confidence.”

He looks mildly pleased at the compliment but his eyes go wide when Jemma shoots out into traffic, not wanting to lose sight of Quinn’s limo yet needing to keep a bit of distance now because of their distinctive vehicle. Paris traffic, however, is uncooperative at best and a downright obstacle at worst.

As they follow at a varying but always discreet distance, Jemma soon realizes that they’re likely headed for the train station. Quickly, she tries to formulate a plan in her mind.

“Fitz?” she says expectantly.

He tears his eyes away from Quinn’s limo to look over at her, his brows raised in question. “Yes?”

“How would you feel about tailing Quinn into the train station and finding out where he’s headed?” she asks, attempting a smile that feels more like a grimace.

She can see his mind working out the details of her question and he quickly says, “Yeah. Sure, I can do that. How do I find you afterward?”

“Put in your comm,” she says, watching as his eyes widen and he begins shaking his head at himself for not thinking of it. “That way I can talk you through any issues and we’ll decide on the best place to meet once you find out where he’s going. Take your luggage when I drop you off, so you won’t look suspicious.”

“Okay,” he agrees, looking slightly more nervous than embarrassed suddenly. “Anything else?”

“Don’t get caught.”

After she drops Fitz off not terribly far behind Quinn, she pulls Iris into the nearby car park. Listening to Fitz mutter to himself on her comm. She tries to keep her attention on him should he need her, while still trying to shift around some of the things she suspects she’ll need on the trip. Ultimately, she manages to get everything that seems necessary into her trolley case and one of Fitz’s steel tech cases.
Then, over the comm, she hears him saying, “Oh, sorry! I can’t—ehm, I’m just—I’m waitin’ for my, eh, my, eh, my, er, girl—ahem—friend. She’s—well, ehm, she should’ve been here by now. I’ll just go to the back of the queue, then, shall I?”

Jemma can’t help squeezing her eyes closed in sympathetic embarrassment for him. Poor thing. She wonders if it’d been the concept itself that gave him pause or that he knew she could hear.

“Lisbon, Simmons. He’s got tickets for him and his two goons for Lisbon at twelve-thirty,” Fitz harshly half-whispers through her comm.

“Allright,” she says, checking her watch and heading for the station entrance at a good clip. “Get back in the queue for the tickets, I’ll be there shortly.”

By the time she arrives, Fitz is nearly to the front of the queue again and she comes up beside him.

“We’re next,” he says, looking rather relieved to see her as she sets down the steel case she’s carrying. However, he looks oddly worried when she takes his arm, pulling an odd face that’s part-puzzlement and part-fear.

“I think we’d better go with wife,” she whispers, showing him her new passport in the name of Macbeth. “It’s a good photo, isn’t it?” she asks in a saccharine tone and just a tad too loudly so the ticket agent might hear.

Fitz swallows audibly and, in a small voice, says, “You always look, y’know, good.”

Leaning up to kiss his cheek, she feels him fighting the urge to shrink away from her lips. She tries not to feel the sharp slithery claws of hurt that rip through her insides at knowing he can hardly bear for her to touch him this way. Clearly, despite his obvious attraction to her, he feels the need to continually fight his libido—likely in response to his intellectual disapproval of her. Instantly, she regrets this new undercover set-up but the only way out of it now would be to miss the train and follow along on a later one with a different false passport. It’s too dangerous to risk. They can’t lose Quinn.

“Two on the twelve-thirty to Lisbon, please,” she says, once they reach the booth.

“I found her!” Fitz happily tells the large, frowning agent, and then laughs heartily. “My, ehm, my—well, ehm…my—”

“Wife?” Jemma offers, giving him a very mildly disapproving look.

The ticket agent’s brows rise slightly as he looks from one of them to the other.

“It’s our honeymoon,” Jemma says with a smile, sliding her passport under the glass partition then giving Fitz a bump with her shoulder.

“Yes! Yes, it is,” he agrees, pulling his passport out and laying it beside hers.

“You would like dzee couchette, no?” the ticket agent asks, with a slight quirk of his brows that suggests some doubt.

“Oh, right,” Jemma says, just realizing they wouldn’t be taking one of the high-speed trains but, in fact, a night train. “Of course, we would. A double, please.” She makes an attempt to look exceedingly pleased at the arrangement, even though she’s anything but.

Immediately, she hears Fitz’s loud swallow beside her once again.
She quickly slides her new fake credit card toward the ticket agent under the partition. He prints their tickets and slides them back—along with their passports, her card and the receipt for Jemma to sign.

The agent then looks pointedly at Fitz and says, “Bonne chance!”

“Er, thanks,” Fitz says with a slight frown, picking up most of their luggage and leaving Jemma with only her trolley case to wheel along once she slides the signed receipt back through the gap.

“Merci,” she says with a toothy smile in a further attempt to sell their less-than-satisfactory effort at a cover.

The ticket agent sighs apathetically and gives her a vague little wave. “Bon voyage.”

As she and Fitz hasten along with their luggage, she leans in and whispers, “We need to keep our eyes on Quinn as often as possible. There’s only one stop at around six o’clock and we’ll need to be certain he doesn’t get off the train there. We also need to attempt to keep from being noticed, at least in a questionable way that might put him on guard. Quinn and his men are, no doubt, looking for anyone suspicious.”

Fitz only nods as they hurry to catch the train—it’s already past twelve o’clock.

Once they arrive, with only a few minutes to spare, a porter shows them to their couchette compartment. Currently, it only consists of two bench seats facing one another, a small table, an excruciatingly small loo to one side and a minuscule closet on the other.

While Jemma tips the porter and closes the door behind him, Fitz looks almost peaked as he stares into the tiny loo which barely has enough room to turn around in—and that’s if you’re in the shower stall.

Setting down her handbag on the tiny table, knowing she’ll have to address the elephant in the couchette, she decides that now is better than later. “Fitz?”

Just after she says it, the train jerks to a start, the unsteadiness making both of them reach out to brace themselves on the nearest surface. The train, already beginning to move more smoothly, speeds up, only giving a tiny jostle now and again.

Taking his hand from the wall where he’d steadied himself, Fitz closes the tiny closet where he’d just hung his jacket and turns to face her. “Yes, Simmons?”

At first, she sighs at his fearful look of expectation, then realizes that perhaps this time it’s finally warranted. She sits down on one of the bench seats and gestures for him to sit on the other. He hesitantly takes the offered seat, managing to look somehow even more worried. She decides that if she kept him hanging much longer, he’d likely break out in a sweat.

“I’m very sorry about this arrangement now, Fitz,” she says, her tone entirely professional, “I’d intended it as something of a backup but it seemed right for the train situation. Unfortunately, I didn’t take into account the nature—well, the—” she waves around the room, “how far it would have to go. This is the sort of op you generally would only go on with a fellow agent you trusted completely—”

“I trust you completely,” he interrupts, his face less fearful and more confident suddenly.

“I appreciate that but, Fitz, I meant—well, you flinched when I kissed your cheek. I think I should just watch Quinn alone. We shouldn’t try to play act this when you’re obviously so uncomfortable with me physically.”
His face had grown more indignant as she spoke. “I’m not uncomfortable—well, exactly,” he amends. “I just—well, I just wasn’t expectin’ that. You told me you thought I was quite good at the actin’ bit, why don’t you give me a chance to try?”

She gives him a mildly placating look. “We can’t take the risk of alerting Quinn to our presence. There are no chances this time. There’s no mucking it up because then we’re either made or dead.”

“We’re not in front of Quinn now,” he says rather smoothly. “We could…” he shrugs, tipping his head to the side, “practice?”

Jemma isn’t certain if she wants to laugh or cry in frustration suddenly, yet somehow her anger wins out in the end. “Are you saying you want to practice having me touch you so you don’t leap out of your skin each time?”

He looks uncertain for the first time since he’d said he trusted her. “Well, ehm, I don’t think that’s quite an accurate way of puttin’ it. I definitely don’t ‘leap out of my skin’,” he says, the complaint apparent in his tone.

“How would you put it, then?” she asks, feeling confused and still a little angry.

He rubs at a spot just over his eyebrow with his index finger, his eyes squinting and his mouth crimping with indecision before he begins, “Well, Simmons, you’re, ehm—well, you’re quite, eh, y’know, attractive and—it makes it ha—er, difficult to—” He sighs loudly, it’s an odd and rather sudden release of tension but then he breaks out in a small gale of laughter. Slightly unnerved by the display, she’s just about to question what he might find amusing about what little he’d said, when he uses both hands to cover over his face, drawing them down over his heavily-whiskered chin before he lets them fall back to his lap. Clearing his throat, schooling his features, he looks up and meets her eyes more boldly than he usually would. “You’re bloody gorgeous, okay?” he says finally. “It’s not easy to…” He rolls his hand through the air. “Y’know what I mean?”

Jemma believes she knows exactly what Fitz is attempting to say—very inarticulately—that he’s quite attracted to her. However, this isn’t something she’s ever questioned. She’s known it from the moment they saw each other in Weaver’s office. It still doesn’t change the fact that he’s apparently not at all interested in what he’s alluding to and that it, evidently, fills him with discomfort. She can only infer that something else about her curbs him from acting on his desires—she doesn’t bother trying to guess what that might be. Nonetheless, she can’t help wondering why he would now make an offer to “practice” becoming more comfortable with her physically when she’d just given him a perfectly reasonable out. Unless he’s changed his mind again, as he apparently had in Swindon.

“It won’t work. You’ll never be comfortable,” she tells him, making her face appear very serious. She watches his mouth fall open in an indignant ‘O’. “You’re far too jumpy. I make you nervous,” she adds with a sly, challenging smile.

“I’m not bloody jumpy!” he complains, stopping himself when he seems to cringe at his own childish tone. He clears his throat again and more gravely adds, “I can do this.”

“Really?” she questions, switching over to sit beside him on the opposite bench seat, leaving only a few centimeters of space between them.

He swallows convulsively and then closes the gap between them in a single, hasty scooch, until the length of their thighs are pressed together.

She tilts her head in acknowledgement of his advance.
In answer, she places her hand in the middle of his thigh and feels the muscle jump and twitch in response. She looks up, meeting his eyes, and quirking her lips, she says, “That response will get us killed.”

He shakes his head, clearly full of self-reproach.

“Fitz,” she says, waiting until he stops his internal rant and looks at her. “This isn’t for everyone.”

“I can do it,” he says with more quiet vehemence than she would’ve expected from him.

“You have no idea what we might be called upon to do,” she says, smiling playfully. “Public displays of affection, properly applied, can make a target avoid looking directly at you. Improperly applied, it can even be an appropriate distraction. Familiar casual touching, more intimate handling, even hugging or...” She squeezes his thigh under her fingers and, again, he jumps. “—kissing.”

She says it expecting an immediate frightened response from him but he only looks back at her—almost defiantly.

Then he nods. “Part of the job,” he says, but there’s almost an underlying taunt in his words and a heat in his eyes that sets an equal blaze going in another part of her anatomy altogether. “I just need a bit of practice—I s’pose.”

“Indeed,” she says, her voice breathy even to her own ears. “You’ll have to prove to me you can do it without blowing our cover.”

He reaches out and tucks a few loose strands of hair over her ear. “Whatever it takes,” he agrees stubbornly.

She slides her hand further up his thigh but, this time, he doesn’t flinch at all. Moving her hand to his chest, she slides it up over his pectoral muscle and onto his shoulder. Again, he doesn’t move, merely looking down at her with interest.

She quirks a challenging brow and turns into him, wrapping her arms about his middle and resting her head on his shoulder, the tip of her nose brushing his throat. He stiffens almost imperceptibly but recovers quickly, wrapping his arms around her shoulders and pulling her closer against his chest. Inhaling his pleasant scent, she tries not to let herself get overly wrapped up in this game. It’s a pleasant torture, but a torture nonetheless.

With her warm breath going out along his neck, her nose edging just above his collar, she says, “Well done, Fitz.” She’s impressed when he doesn’t go rigid or shiver at the sensations. “Actually, I should be calling you ‘James’,” she says, “or—I don’t know—what about ‘Jamie’?”

Feeling him take a deep breath, his chest expanding against her, his tone is little more than a sigh as he says, “Yeah, if you like.”

Sliding her hand upward again, she explores the feel of him, enjoying the shape of his body through his button-down—the ridged plane of his ribs, the curve of his muscle where it meets beneath his arm and his collarbone as she runs her thumb over the line of it. She breathes only slightly rapidly as she does this but her hot breath creates an intimate humidity in the space where the collar of his button-down parts to reveal skin. Her fingers glide along that opening at his collar, tugging at the fabric, touching skin. Then skimming up his neck and into his hair, there, she digs little furrows into his dense curls. She runs her fingers higher until she can crush the longer springy locks at his crown into her fist and this is when she brings her lips against his throat.

His head rolls to the side and his fingers clench in the fabric of her top just behind her shoulder.
blades. He makes a slight humming noise as she moves a bit higher, darting her tongue out to taste his skin. Her lips travel over his jugular, feeling his pulse beating wildly under her lips. She drags the edges of her teeth against the spot just below his ear and he lets out a long breathy moan.

Feeling almost completely lost in him already, she presses a kiss to the tender skin of his cheek and whispers, “Fitz.”

Realizing her mistake—this is play acting now and he’s meant to be ‘Jamie’—she pulls back slightly to gauge his expression. Feeling suddenly insecure, she looks to meet his eyes but they’re resolutely closed. At her pause, however, sea-gray begins to peek through as he opens them again until his soulful eyes are finally peering at her hopefully. At the sight of the very slight smile on the edges of his well-shaped lips, she slides her hand down to caress his cheek, thumbing over his stubble, and feeling oddly free now that she’s able to touch him so openly.

Though it seems highly unlikely that kissing will be needed for this cover, she can’t deny that she wants to taste those lips and feel them against her own again. Already, however, she has to wonder how much she’s going to pay for it later in sorrow. But as the little smile on his lips grows, Jemma suddenly finds that she doesn’t care at all about later—only right now. Squeezing her fingers just a bit tighter in his hair, she applies the slightest pressure to urge him to meet her as she leans toward his lips. In the moment, she feels pulled by forces beyond her willingness to understand and, as unfamiliar as it is, she doesn’t question why she lets herself go.

When she’s certain that she feels him moving closer, Jemma closes her eyes, waiting the last few seconds in a haze of anticipation.

Warm and supple against her own, his lips begin to brush over hers tenderly—and it’s just as sweet as she remembers. Drawing her lower lip between his, she teases his upper with the tip of her tongue and finds the taste of him heady in her mouth, almost familiar. Then, as his tongue glides along her lower lip, she leans closer, parting her lips and deepening their connection. Wrapping her other arm about his neck, burying more fingers in his hair, already her body wants to close the remaining distance between them. But it’s too much, she knows, and instead she relaxes against his torso, feeling his rapid breaths mimicking her own as their chests move together, for the moment, in unison.

Delving past her lips as she opens to him, his tongue slips tantalizingly against hers—just barely caressing, almost teasing, along her own. His hand glides up over her neck, fingers sliding into her hair, caressing her very tenderly as he cradles the back of her head. She hears herself moan against his lips as she tilts her head, desperately trying to find more of him. Thoughtlessly, she wants to surrender to this infinite feeling within her and let him take her over yet further—completely. The heat at her core is already at a startling peak and, though she knows she can’t, Jemma so wants to slide her leg across his thighs until she’s in his lap. There, they could shed their clothes and she might feel their bodies moving together, pleasing one another, until she forgets about anything beyond this little room—beyond Fitz.

But, too soon, he withdraws, ending her pleasant daydream, as his tongue leaves her and his lips retreat gently from hers. He pulls just far enough away that he can look at her as he says, “Was that alright?”

With the precise words he used and the same expression that he’d worn a year and a half ago, he knocks the wind from her. Immediately, she bites her lower lip so it won’t quiver and she chokes out, “Of course.”

“I’ve passed your test, then?” he asks, with a quick grin that leaves her feeling completely empty inside.
Pressing her lips into a thin smile, she separates their entwined bodies, even taking his wrists to 

Fitz’s grin falters just slightly as she gets up from beside him but she forces herself to smile more 
sincerely. Then he seems rather invigorated by it all, clapping his hands together and saying, “Should 
we go find him now?”

“Yes, but in a moment,” she says. "I’ll be right out.” She points to the door of the tiny loo and his 
face slackens in sudden understanding before he nods vigorously. She rifles quickly through her case 
and takes out her makeup bag as well as choosing a new, more appropriate, outfit.

Once safely inside the undersized room, she throws down her things haphazardly into the sink. Then 
Jemma quickly presses both hands over her mouth while still trying to hold back the silent tears that 
slide over her cheeks.

Man, I wish my passport photo looked this good.
French convo translated!
Jemma: I’m in a hurry, please.
Customs man: What about him?
She gives him Fitz’s fake passport.
Customs man: Who is he?
Jemma: Witness. He doesn’t like to fly.
Customs man: Welcome to Dieppe, miss.
Jemma: Thank you. Good day!

*That is all from Google translate. If you know French and that's an awful translation, please drop me a comment and I will fix it!*